

THE WAY

A Catholic Journey Through the Acts of the Apostles

Fourteen Sessions for Young Adults • An Inductive Study

“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 of the Apostles 1:8

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Participant Take-Home sheets (one per session, distributed after each session) are provided as a separate merged booklet and as individual files.

Using This Guide

What This Study Is

The Way is a fourteen-session inductive journey through the entire Acts of the Apostles for young adults, built on the conviction that the group should discover the text's treasures rather than be lectured about them. Each 90-minute session follows a Win, Build, Send arc: open questions that gather hearts, guided inductive discovery in the text, and a commissioning into the week. All Scripture quotations follow the Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition (RSV2CE); have enough Bibles at the table for everyone.

How Each Session Is Built

Every session has three parts. The Leader Preparation Guide is yours alone: the Discovery Aim and Catholic Touchstone, background, Old Testament roots, three Voices of the Church, Catechism connections, the Thread Watch, session goals, and a time note with pre-chosen cuts if the evening runs long. The Discussion Guide is the script for the table: numbered questions, each followed by a shaded ANSWER box, which you share only after the group has genuinely worked the question. Resist the urge to rescue silence too quickly; discovery lives in the pause. The Leader Reference Card lists every passage used, in order, so you can flag your Bible before anyone arrives.

The Steelman Rule

At key moments the guide builds the strongest possible Protestant reading of a text, at full strength and with full respect, before pressing it from the text itself. This is deliberate formation: young adults will meet these arguments from roommates and coworkers, and they deserve to meet them first at a Catholic table, in their best form, with honest answers, honest concessions where the Church has not defined, and real charity toward those who hold them. Never let the steelman become a strawman; read it as if a beloved Protestant friend were sitting at the table, because one day, one will be.

The Threads

Four threads run the length of the study and resolve at planted moments: a movement's search for its name, a map given in the study's first hour, a silent tally about one apostle, and a phrase about bread. The Thread Watch in each Leader Guide tells you exactly what to mark and what to keep secret. Guard the secrets; the payoffs depend on them. In Session 1, each participant writes a sealed guess on their first Take-Home sheet; it is opened in Session 14, and the whole study shakes hands with itself. Remind the group in week 13 to bring Take-Home 1 back.

The Take-Home Sheets

Each session has a two-page participant Take-Home, distributed only AFTER the session ends: a What We Found recap, that session's three Voices of the Church, the Live It This Week assignments, the memory verse, the reading for next week, and Catechism references. They contain no spoilers for future sessions, so they are safe to hand out freely, and they are designed so that a participant who misses a week can catch the heart of it in five minutes.

A Word to the Leader

You are about to walk twenty-eight chapters with a group of young adults, from an upper room in Jerusalem to a hired house in Rome, and the same Spirit who filled the first room fills yours. Prepare each session in prayer, preferably before the Blessed Sacrament; nothing in these pages works without Him, and nothing in His hands fails. The book you are teaching has no final chapter. Teach it accordingly.

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

THE WAY, SESSION 2

Cut to the Heart

The Acts of the Apostles 2:1-47, Pentecost, Peter's Sermon, and the First Day of the Church

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants discover that Pentecost is not a bolt from the blue but the deliberate fulfillment of two Old Testament scenes, Sinai and Babel, and that when three thousand hearts are cut and cry out "what shall we do?", the apostolic answer is sacramental: repent and be baptized. The group then finds, in Acts 2:42, the four marks of Catholic life already present on the Church's first day.

Catholic Touchstone. Baptism and the shape of the Mass. Peter's answer in Acts 2:38 joins baptism to the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is exactly what the Church means by baptismal regeneration (CCC 1226-1227). And Luke's summary of the newborn Church's life, the apostles' teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers (2:42), is recognizably the structure of the Mass: Liturgy of the Word, communion of the Church, Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the prayers. The Catechism cites 2:42 for exactly this continuity (CCC 1342, 2624); the four-part mapping onto the Mass is the Church's cherished way of reading her own birth certificate. The Church did not drift into her worship over centuries. She was born with its seed.

What You Need to Know

Pentecost was already a feast before it was Christian. It is the Feast of Weeks, fifty days after Passover, a pilgrimage feast, which is why devout Jews "from every nation under heaven" are in Jerusalem (2:5). Jewish tradition came to associate this feast with the giving of the Law at Sinai, which came in the third month after the Exodus (Exodus 19:1). That association is explicit in later rabbinic sources; second temple texts already tie the Feast of Weeks to covenant renewal, so the connection may well have been in the air in the first century, but say it the way question 2 says it: clearly attested later, quite possibly current earlier. Hold that connection lightly in your pocket; the group will unlock it in question 3, and it opens the most stunning discovery of the night.

Read the signs as theophany, not decoration: a sound like a mighty wind, tongues as of fire. At Sinai there was fire, smoke, and the sound of a trumpet as God descended (Exodus 19:16-18). Wind and fire are how Scripture describes God arriving. Luke is announcing a new Sinai, and what is given this time is not law on stone but the Spirit on hearts, precisely what Jeremiah 31:33 and Ezekiel 36:26-27 promised.

The languages point backward too, to Babel (Genesis 11), where one proud people was scattered into many tongues. At Pentecost, many tongues are gathered into one people. The curse runs in reverse. The Fathers loved this symmetry, and your group can find it themselves.

Peter's sermon (2:14-36) is the Church's first homily, and its method matters as much as its content: he interprets the event by Scripture (Joel 2), preaches Christ crucified and risen (Psalm 16), and lands on His Lordship (Psalm 110). Notice who preaches: Peter, standing "with the eleven" (2:14), Matthias included, the restored Twelve speaking as one body through one voice.

The response verse (2:37) gives the session its title: "they were cut to the heart" and ask the question every evangelist prays to hear, "Brethren, what shall we do?" Sit with the fact that Peter does not say "accept Jesus into your heart" or "pray this prayer." He says repent and be baptized, and the promise is "to you and to your children" (2:39). Prepare the steelman chain on 2:38 carefully; it is the doctrinal center of the session.

Verses 42-47 describe the first parish: teaching, communion, breaking of bread, prayers, awe, generosity, daily temple worship, homes, and "the Lord added to their number day by day." Growth is the Lord's verb, not a program.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Exodus 19:16-18 and Exodus 32:25-28. Sinai: fire, smoke, trumpet-blast, and the descent of God, followed by Israel's fall into idolatry with the golden calf, after which about three thousand men died (32:28). On the day the Law was given, three thousand died. On the day the Spirit was given, three thousand were baptized and lived (Acts 2:41). St. Paul's line becomes almost a caption for Pentecost: "the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). Do not reveal this. Let the group find the number.

Genesis 11:1-9. Babel: one language becomes many, and humanity is scattered in judgment on its pride. Pentecost is Babel in reverse: many languages, one Gospel, one new people gathered. The Church is God's answer to the scattering of the nations.

Joel 2:28-32. Peter's own key: "in the last days I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." Note the breadth, sons and daughters, young and old, servants both men and women. The Spirit is not for a caste.

Psalm 16:8-11. David's confidence that God will not give him up to Sheol or let His godly one see the Pit. Note the wording before the session: the psalm in your Bible speaks of the godly one and the Pit, while Peter, quoting the Greek version the crowd used, speaks of God's Holy One not seeing corruption (Acts 2:25-28). Peter's argument runs on that Greek wording. Peter's argument is simple and bold: David died and is buried, so David spoke of Someone else, and "this Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses" (2:32).

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 271, on Pentecost (5th century)

St. Augustine preached that at Babel pride scattered one tongue into many, and at Pentecost humility gathered many tongues into one. He told his people that the Church, speaking every language across the world, is herself the continuing miracle of Pentecost: whoever holds to her unity now speaks, in a sense, in the tongues of all nations.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Justin Martyr, First Apology, 67 (2nd century, written around AD 155)

Describing Sunday worship for the Roman emperor barely a century after Pentecost, St. Justin lays out the sequence: the memoirs of the apostles and the prophets are read, the presider instructs, all rise for common prayers, then bread and wine are brought, thanks is given, and the gifts over which thanks has been given are distributed to all present. It is the pattern of Acts 2:42, and it is recognizably the Mass.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lectures (4th century)

Instructing the newly baptized, St. Cyril taught that in baptism we truly die and are truly born again: we go down into the water bearing our sins and come up alive, having received the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, just as Peter promised the crowd at Pentecost. For Cyril, Acts 2:38 is not a figure of speech. It is what happened to you at the font.

Catechism Connection

CCC 731-732. On Pentecost the Paschal mystery is fully accomplished and the Holy Trinity is fully revealed; the Spirit poured out inaugurates the age of the Church.

CCC 1226-1227. From the day of Pentecost the Church has celebrated and administered holy Baptism; Peter's words in Acts 2:38 join baptism, forgiveness, and the gift of the Spirit. Baptism truly incorporates us into Christ.

CCC 1342. From the beginning the Church has been faithful to the Lord's command; the Catechism quotes Acts 2:42 and 2:46 as the description of that fidelity, centered on the breaking of bread.

CCC 2624. In the first community of Jerusalem, believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers: the prayer of the Church, founded on apostolic faith and nourished by the Eucharist.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 1, The Name. Still no name. Luke calls them "all who believed" (2:44). Keep the question alive without pressing it.

Thread 2, The Map. Firmly in Jerusalem, but notice the guest list in 2:9-11: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Rome, Egypt, Arabia. The end of the earth has come to Jerusalem before Jerusalem goes to the end of the earth. The map is already stirring.

Thread 3, Peter First. Peter preaches the Church's first sermon, standing with the eleven. Add it to the tally without comment.

Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread (new, plant tonight). The phrase appears twice in this chapter (2:42, 2:46). Tell the group only this: Luke uses this exact phrase very deliberately, he has used it before at a famous supper, and they should mark every time it appears. It will matter enormously later in the study. Do not say more.

Session Goals

1. Participants discover the Sinai background of Pentecost, including the three thousand of Exodus 32, and can articulate the reversal: the Law written on stone killed, the Spirit poured on hearts gives life.
2. Participants discover the Babel reversal and can explain what it says about the Church's catholicity.
3. Participants can trace the logic of Peter's sermon from Joel to Psalm 16 to the Resurrection.
4. Participants can state what Peter actually commands in 2:38, walk through the strongest Protestant objections to baptismal regeneration, and answer them from the text.
5. Participants can identify the four marks of Acts 2:42 and locate each one in the Mass.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on tongues, (3) compress question 6 (Psalm 16) into a 60 second explanation. Do not cut question 3 (the three thousand) or the steelman chain on 2:38; they are the spine of the session.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit. You descended in wind and fire on the first disciples and turned a locked room into a launching point. Descend on us tonight. Give us ears to hear this chapter as if for the first time, hearts soft enough to be cut, and courage to answer the question the crowd asked: what shall we do? Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. What is the most memorable birthday or beginning you have ever witnessed, of anything: a child, a business, a parish, a team? What made it unforgettable?
2. Have you ever heard something that "cut you to the heart," words that changed your direction on the spot? What gave those words their power?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 2:1-4. List the physical signs Luke describes. Where in the Old Testament has God descended with fire and overwhelming sound before? What kind of event is Luke telling us this is?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A sound from heaven like a mighty rushing wind, and tongues as of fire resting on each one. This is the language of theophany, God arriving in person, and its closest ancestor is Sinai: fire, smoke, trumpet-blast, and a mountain trembling as God descended to give the Law (Exodus 19:16-18). Luke is announcing a new Sinai. Something is being given to constitute a people, and this time it is not commandments on stone but the Spirit of God on human hearts, exactly as Jeremiah 31:33 and Ezekiel 36:26-27 had promised.

2. Pentecost already existed; it is the Jewish Feast of Weeks, fifty days after Passover, and Jewish tradition, clearly attested in later rabbinic sources and quite possibly current earlier, connected it to the giving of the Law at Sinai. So on the feast that came to be kept as Sinai's anniversary, God pours out the Spirit. Why does that timing matter? What is God saying by His calendar?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

God is deliberately superimposing the two events. At Sinai, the covenant was given externally, written on tablets. At Pentecost, the promised new covenant arrives, written on hearts by the Spirit. The Church is the new Israel constituted at the new Sinai. Nothing about this day is improvised; it was scheduled from Exodus.

3. Live discovery. There is a dark detail in the original Sinai story that Luke expects careful readers to remember. Turn to Exodus 32:25-28 and read what happened just after the Law was given. Now look at Acts 2:41. What do you find?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

After the golden calf, about three thousand men fell in one day. At Pentecost, about three thousand souls were baptized in one day. Readers across the centuries have seen in these numbers a deliberate reversal, and it is hard to blame them. On the day the Law came, three thousand died. On the day the Spirit came, three thousand came to life. St. Paul gives us the caption: "the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6).

This is one of the most breathtaking hidden symmetries in the New Testament, and your group just found it with their own hands.

4. Second discovery. Read Genesis 11:1-9, the tower of Babel. Now reread Acts 2:5-11. What is God undoing at Pentecost?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

At Babel, one proud humanity grasping at heaven was scattered into many languages. At Pentecost, people of many languages each hear one Gospel and are gathered into one people. The scattering runs in reverse. This is why the Church is *catholic* from her first day: the crowd that heard, and the three thousand baptized out of it, were Jews and proselytes drawn from Parthia, Media, Elam, Rome, Egypt, and Arabia, the whole diaspora gathered into one place and one Gospel. The nations themselves are not inside yet; Acts 10 is still coming. But they are already standing at the door, and Luke wants you to notice that the guest list at the Church's birth was written in every language on earth. God's answer to the fracturing of the human race is the Church.

5. Read Acts 2:14-21. Notice who stands up, and with whom. Then look at how Peter explains what the crowd is seeing. What is his method?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Peter stands "with the eleven," the restored Twelve of Session 1, one body speaking through one voice, and it is Peter's voice. His method is to interpret the event by Scripture: this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel. The Church's first sermon is a Bible study. And notice Joel's breadth: sons and daughters, young men and old men, menservants and maidservants. The Spirit is poured on all flesh, not on an elite.

6. Read Acts 2:22-32. Peter quotes Psalm 16. Your Bible will read that God will not let His godly one see the Pit; Peter quotes the Greek version the crowd knew, which speaks of God's Holy One not seeing corruption. That is the wording his whole case rests on. Follow Peter's logic like a lawyer: how does he get from that psalm to the Resurrection?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

David died, was buried, and his tomb is still in town; everyone in the crowd could walk to it. So David cannot have been speaking of himself. He spoke as a prophet of his descendant, the Messiah, whose flesh would not see corruption. Then the punchline: "This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses" (2:32). The argument moves from Scripture to empty tomb to living witnesses, the same chain the Church still stands on.

7. Read Acts 2:36-39. The crowd is cut to the heart and asks the perfect question: "Brethren, what shall we do?" Write down exactly what Peter commands, and exactly what he promises, word for word from verse 38 and 39.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Commands: repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ. Promises: for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. And the scope: "the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off." Baptism is not presented as a symbol performed after salvation; it is the divinely appointed answer to "what shall we do," carrying forgiveness and the Spirit.

Build the steelman. Present the strongest Evangelical reading of 2:38, fairly and at full strength. It runs like this: baptism is a public sign of a conversion that has already happened inwardly through faith. "For the forgiveness of sins" can be read as "because of" forgiveness already received, the way a man is arrested "for" a crime already committed. Add the grammatical point careful Evangelical readers press: *repent* is plural, addressed to the whole crowd, while *be baptized* is singular, each one, and elsewhere Acts attaches forgiveness simply to repentance and faith (3:19; 10:43; 13:38-39) without pausing over water. The thief on the cross was saved with no baptism at all (Luke 23:43). And in Acts 10, Cornelius receives the Holy Spirit *before* baptism, which shows God gives the Spirit through faith, not through water. Salvation is by grace through faith, not by ritual. Let this argument stand at its full height before pressing.

8. Press question one. Read 2:38 again in its plainest sense. If Luke had wanted to say baptism actually confers forgiveness and the Spirit, what would the verse need to say differently? And who else in the New Testament comments on what baptism does? Look up 1 Peter 3:21.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Nothing; the verse already says it as plainly as Greek can. Repent and be baptized *for the forgiveness of your sins*, and you *shall receive* the gift of the Holy Spirit: the same construction used of Christ's blood poured out "for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28), where nobody argues it means "because sins were already forgiven." The grammar cuts the other way too: the singular *be baptized every one of you* attaches the command, and the promised forgiveness, to each individual precisely; and the same Acts that links forgiveness to repentant faith shows those very believers baptized on the spot, three thousand of them by nightfall (2:41) and Cornelius's household within the visit (10:48), because in Luke's world faith and its sacrament were never rivals. And the best commentator on Peter's sermon is Peter: "Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you" (1 Peter 3:21), where he immediately adds that it saves not as a mere washing of the body but through the resurrection of Christ, an appeal to God from a clean conscience. That is precisely the Catholic view: the water has no magic of its own; Christ's resurrection works through it (CCC 1227).

9. Press question two. What about the thief on the cross, and Cornelius receiving the Spirit before baptism in Acts 10? Do those cases break the rule?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

They show that God is not imprisoned by His own sacraments, which the Church has always taught: the thief on the cross is the classic case discussed under what the Church calls baptism of desire, and Cornelius's case was God's dramatic public verdict that Gentiles were to be admitted. But notice what happens next in Acts 10: Peter does not say "they have the Spirit, water would be redundant." He commands them to be baptized at once (10:47-48). If baptism were an optional symbol, that command makes no sense. God can act outside the sacraments; we are not authorized to. The consistent apostolic pattern in Acts is belief followed immediately, sometimes at midnight (16:33), by water. And an honest historical note for your group: the reading of baptism as a merely symbolic sign is a latecomer. It appears as a developed position only in the sixteenth century, with Zwingli and the radical reformers. Before that, the Fathers of East and West, and the medieval doctors after them, read Acts 2:38 the way it sounds, as water that actually does something; baptismal regeneration is about as close to a settled consensus as the Christian tradition ever produces. That does not settle the question by itself, but it does set the burden: a reading of this verse that no recognized Christian teacher held for roughly fifteen centuries has a great deal of explaining to do.

10. Read Acts 2:42 slowly, and list the four things the first Christians devoted themselves to. Now think through this Sunday's Mass from the opening procession to the dismissal. Where does each of the four appear?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The apostles' teaching: the Liturgy of the Word, where the apostolic writings are read and preached. The fellowship (*koinōnia*): the gathered communion of the Church, one body, expressed in the offering and the shared life it funds. The breaking of bread: the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and mark that phrase; Luke has used it before, at Emmaus, where the risen Jesus "was known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35). The prayers: the Church's structured, corporate prayer, from the Gloria to the Our Father. The four marks of Acts 2:42 are not a lost primitive simplicity that liturgy later buried. They are the skeleton of the Mass, visible on the Church's first day (CCC 1342).

DIG DEEPER: WHAT ABOUT THE TONGUES?

The tongues of Pentecost were understood human languages: Parthians and Egyptians each heard the mighty works of God in his own native speech (2:8-11). Many interpreters distinguish this from the prayer-tongues Paul regulates in 1 Corinthians 14. At Pentecost the miracle is comprehension, because the point is Babel reversed: the Gospel is for every nation in its own tongue, which is why the Church has never stopped carrying the Gospel into new languages, translating the Scriptures, preaching, and teaching the faith in the tongues of the nations.

DIG DEEPER: THEY KEPT GOING TO THE TEMPLE

Notice 2:46: the first Christians attended the temple together *and* broke bread in their homes. They did not experience the old worship and the new as enemies; the new grew from within the old, until the Eucharist stood revealed as the sacrifice toward which the temple always pointed. Keep this in mind when the temple authorities begin to push back in the coming chapters.

Send (15 minutes)

1. The crowd's question, "what shall we do?", is the sound of a heart that has been cut open by truth spoken plainly. Who in your life might be one honest conversation away from asking that question, and what is one plain, non-argumentative sentence of witness you could actually say to them?
2. "The Lord added to their number day by day" (2:47). Growth was the Lord's work; devotion was theirs. Of the four devotions in 2:42, which is weakest in your own life right now, and what is one concrete step this week?

Live It This Week

Go to Mass this week with Acts 2:42 written on a card or in your phone. Your one assignment: find all four marks. Note the moment the apostles' teaching is proclaimed, the moment the fellowship is visible, the moment the bread is broken, and the prayers you pray with the whole Church. Afterward, write one sentence: which of the four moved you most, and why? Bring your sentence next week. You will never again be able to say the early Church worshiped simply and we complicated it; you will have seen the first parish alive in your own.

Closing Prayer

Father, on Pentecost you gave the Law a heart and the world a Church. Cut us to the heart as you cut that crowd. Renew in us the grace of our baptism, deepen our devotion to the teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of the bread, and the prayers, and add to your Church day by day those who are being saved, beginning with the people we love. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." (Acts 2:42)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 2, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 2:1-4 (wind and fire)
2. Acts 2:5-13 (the nations hear)
3. Acts 2:14-36 (Peter's sermon)
4. Acts 2:37-41 (cut to the heart; the three thousand)
5. Acts 2:42-47 (the first parish)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

6. Exodus 19:16-18 (Sinai theophany)
7. Exodus 32:25-28 (the three thousand who fell)
8. Genesis 11:1-9 (Babel)
9. Joel 2:28-32 (the Spirit on all flesh)
10. Psalm 16:8-11 (the godly one and the Pit; quoted in Greek form at Acts 2:25-28)
11. Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:26-27 (the new covenant heart)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

12. 2 Corinthians 3:6 (the Spirit gives life)
13. Matthew 26:28 (blood poured out for forgiveness)
14. 1 Peter 3:21 (baptism now saves you)
15. Luke 23:43 (the thief); Acts 10:44-48 (Cornelius); Acts 16:33 (midnight baptism)
16. Luke 24:30-35 (known in the breaking of the bread)
17. 1 Corinthians 14 (tongues at Corinth, Dig Deeper)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

18. CCC 731-732; CCC 1226-1227; CCC 1342; CCC 2624

THE WAY, SESSION 3

What I Have I Give You

The Acts of the Apostles 3:1-4:31, The Beautiful Gate, the Name, and the Boldness of Common Men

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants discover that the first miracle Luke narrates in detail is a portrait of the Church's whole mission: Peter has no silver or gold, but he has Christ, and he gives Him, in Christ's name, with his own hand. The group then wrestles honestly with Acts 4:12, salvation in no other name, and discovers where Christian boldness actually comes from: not credentials, but having been with Jesus and having prayed for courage.

Catholic Touchstone. Christ acts through His ministers. Peter is emphatic that the healing is not his own power or piety (3:12); it is the name of Jesus, and faith in that name, that made the man strong (3:16). Yet Christ chose to heal through Peter's word and Peter's grasping hand (3:7). This is the sacramental pattern: God's power, man's instrument. It is why a priest can say "I absolve you" and it is Christ who absolves (CCC 1421, 1441), and why the exclusive claim of Acts 4:12 and the Church's mediating ministry are not rivals but the same truth seen from two sides.

What You Need to Know

The scene is precise: the ninth hour, three in the afternoon, the hour of the evening sacrifice, and the hour at which Christ died (Luke 23:44-46). Peter and John are going up to the temple *to pray*; this first detailed miracle of the Church happens on the way to liturgy. The man lame from birth is laid daily at the gate called Beautiful, close enough to worship to beg from it, never able to enter into it fully.

Watch the choreography of 3:4-8. Peter fixes his eyes on him and says "Look at us," demanding personal encounter before anything else. Then the line that names this session: "I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." And Peter does not merely speak; he takes the man by the right hand and raises him up. Word plus touch plus name: the sacramental pattern in miniature.

The healed man goes into the temple "walking and leaping and praising God" (3:8). The word *leaping* is a deliberate flag. Isaiah 35:6 promised that when God Himself comes to save, "then shall the lame man leap like a hart." Luke is not quoting Isaiah outright; he is alluding to it, and the allusion is hard to miss. He is running the checklist of the messianic age past us and marking it fulfilled. Let the group find Isaiah themselves in question 3.

Peter's second sermon (3:12-26) deflects all credit, indicts the crowd honestly ("you denied the Holy and Righteous One"), softens with mercy ("you acted in ignorance"), and calls for repentance so that "times of refreshing" may come. He cites Deuteronomy 18, the prophet like Moses, and Genesis 22, the blessing of all families of the earth through Abraham's seed, preaching Christ from the whole of Israel's story.

Chapter 4 brings the first arrest. Before the Sanhedrin, the same court that condemned Jesus months earlier, Peter, "filled with the Holy Spirit," preaches Psalm 118 (the rejected stone) to the builders who rejected it, and declares that there is salvation in no one else (4:12). The council's diagnosis of the apostles is one of the great backhanded compliments in Scripture: uneducated, common men, "and they recognized that they had been with Jesus" (4:13). Prepare the steelman on 4:12; modern Protestant apologists use this verse against Catholic practice, and your group should meet that argument at full strength.

Do not rush the ending (4:23-31). Released under threats, the community prays with one accord, quoting Psalm 2, and asks not for safety but for boldness, and the place is shaken. Boldness (*parrësia*) is a gift obtained by prayer, which is the session's final and most practical discovery.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Isaiah 35:5-6. The signs of God coming to save His people: blind eyes opened, deaf ears unstopped, "then shall the lame man leap like a hart." The healed beggar leaping in the temple is Isaiah 35 performed live. The messianic age has begun, and the Church is where its signs now appear.

Deuteronomy 18:15-19. The prophet like Moses to whom Israel must listen. Peter cites it directly (3:22-23): Jesus is the new and greater Moses, and heeding Him is not optional.

Genesis 22:18. In Abraham's seed all the families of the earth will be blessed. Peter cites it (3:25) and aims it at his hearers: you are the sons of the covenant, and the blessing has arrived; receive it first.

Psalms 118:22. The stone the builders rejected has become the head of the corner. Peter quotes it to the builders themselves (4:11), the council that rejected Christ. The psalm sung by pilgrims entering the temple becomes the indictment of the temple's own custodians.

Psalms 2:1-2. Why do the nations rage and the rulers take counsel against the Lord and His Anointed? The praying Church quotes it (4:25-26) and recognizes her own moment inside it: Herod, Pilate, Gentiles, and Israel gathered against Jesus, and now against His Body. Persecution does not surprise the Church; the psalter predicted it.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Bede the Venerable, Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles (8th century)

St. Bede reads the man lame from birth as an image of fallen humanity: laid daily at the door of worship yet unable to walk into it by his own strength, until he is raised by the hand of the Church acting in the name of Christ. What silver and gold could never do for him, the Name does, and his leaping becomes the joy of every soul lifted by grace into the liturgy it could only watch before.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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

Chrysostom lingers on the council's astonishment at uneducated, common men. The apostles' power, he says, was not eloquence or rank but the evidence that they had been with Jesus: boldness joined to gentleness, conviction without contempt. He tells his hearers that the same company is available to them, for the man who is much with Christ in prayer will not be able to stay timid about Him in public.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyprian of Carthage, On the Lord's Prayer (3rd century)

St. Cyprian taught that God, who made us one, hears best the prayer of the Church at unity with itself: we say Our Father, not My Father, because our prayer is public and common, offered as one body. The believers of Acts 4 lifting their voices together with one accord, and the room shaking, is for Cyprian the picture of what united prayer is and does.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1421. The Lord Jesus, physician of our souls and bodies, who forgave sins and healed the paralytic, has willed that His Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, His work of healing and salvation, even among her own members.

CCC 2666. The name of Jesus contains the presence it signifies; to invoke His holy name is the simplest way of praying always. The name that made a lame man walk is the name the Church still breathes.

CCC 775-776. The Church is the universal sacrament of salvation, the sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men (CCC 775), the instrument Christ uses for the salvation of all (CCC 776). Salvation is in no other name, and the Church is that Name's chosen instrument in the world.

CCC 425. The transmission of the faith is aglow with the joy of witnesses who cannot keep silent; the Catechism quotes Acts 4:20, "we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 1, The Name. A twist tonight: the movement still has no name, but *the* Name dominates both chapters. "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (3:6); "by what name did you do this?" (4:7); "no other name under heaven" (4:12). Note the irony aloud only if the group notices it: the community without a name carries the only Name that saves.

Thread 2, The Map. Still Jerusalem, now specifically the temple itself. The Gospel is confronting the old center before it moves outward.

Thread 3, Peter First. Peter speaks at the gate, in the portico, and before the council. The tally grows; keep it silent.

Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread. Quiet this session. Let it rest.

Session Goals

1. Participants can describe the healing at the Beautiful Gate as the pattern of the Church's mission: giving Christ, in His name, by word and touch.
2. Participants discover Isaiah 35 behind the leaping man and can explain what the healing announces about the messianic age.
3. Participants can articulate how Acts 4:12 is fully Catholic, and answer the strongest Protestant use of the verse against the intercession of the saints.
4. Participants can explain where the apostles' boldness came from, and what the community prayed for under threat.
5. Participants each identify one concrete act of giving Christ and one prayer for boldness for the coming week.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on the ninth hour, (3) compress question 5 (Deuteronomy 18 and Genesis 22) into a brief summary. Do not cut the steelman on 4:12 or the closing prayer scene (4:23-31).

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, your Name is power and your Name is mercy. We have no silver or gold worth bringing you, but you ask only that we look at you and be raised. Fix our eyes on you tonight. Heal what in us has been lame from birth, and when you have set us on our feet, give us the boldness of men who have been with you. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Tell us about a time someone gave you something money could not buy, presence, time, forgiveness, a second chance. What did it do to you?
2. Where do you feel least qualified to represent your faith, and what would need to change for you to speak anyway?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 3:1-3. Collect the details Luke gives us: the time, the destination, the man, his position. What do you notice about where this man spends his life?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

It is the ninth hour, three in the afternoon, the hour of the evening sacrifice and the hour Jesus died (Luke 23:44-46). Peter and John are on their way to pray; the Church's first narrated miracle happens en route to liturgy. The man, lame from birth, is laid daily at the gate called Beautiful: at the very threshold of worship, close enough to beg from it, never able to walk into it. He is a picture of every soul stuck at the door of the sacred, and he has been there so long that everyone has stopped seeing him.

2. Read Acts 3:4-8 slowly. Walk through exactly what Peter does, step by step. What are the components of this healing, and what does Peter's famous line in verse 6 teach the Church about her real treasure?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Peter fixes his eyes on the man and demands encounter: "Look at us." Then the word: "I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Then the touch: he takes him by the right hand and raises him up. Word, name, and touch together. The healing is not itself a sacrament, but it shows the logic the sacraments will follow: divine power conveyed through perceptible signs, audible words joined to physical gesture (CCC 1084). And verse 6 is the Church's permanent bank statement. Her treasure has never been silver and gold, and whenever she has acted as if it were, she has healed no one. What she has is Christ, and what she has she gives.

3. Live discovery. Luke says the man went into the temple "walking and leaping and praising God." *Leaping* is an odd, specific word. Turn to Isaiah 35:4-6 and read it aloud. What is Luke telling us happened at that gate?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Isaiah promised that when God Himself comes to save, the blind will see, the deaf hear, "then shall the lame man leap like a hart." The leaping beggar is Isaiah 35 fulfilled in front of eyewitnesses. Luke seems to be marking the checklist of the messianic age: God has come to save, and the signs of His age now appear through

His Church. The man does not just walk; he leaps, because Scripture said he would.

4. Read Acts 3:11-16. The crowd stares at Peter. What does Peter immediately correct, and what does he say actually healed the man? Why does that distinction matter so much?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Peter refuses the credit on the spot: "why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?" The healer is the God of Abraham glorifying His servant Jesus; the instrument is faith in His name. Yet notice that God chose to work through Peter's voice and Peter's hand. Both truths stand together: the power is entirely Christ's, and Christ delights to exercise it through His ministers. This is the logic of the whole sacramental order. When a priest says "I absolve you," it is Christ who absolves (CCC 1421, 1441); when Peter says "walk," it is Christ who raises. The minister who forgets this becomes a fraud; the Church that remembers it becomes Christ's own hands.

5. Read Acts 3:17-26. Peter indicts the crowd and then immediately opens a door. What does he cite from Moses and from Abraham, and what tone do you hear in this sermon?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He tells the truth without flinching, "you denied the Holy and Righteous One," then softens it with mercy, "you acted in ignorance," and preaches Christ from their own story: the prophet like Moses whom Israel must heed (Deuteronomy 18:15-19), and the seed of Abraham through whom all families of the earth are blessed (Genesis 22:18), adding that they, the sons of the covenant, are first in line for the blessing. The tone is a model for every hard conversation about faith: total honesty about sin, total confidence in mercy, and the offer made first to the very people who did the wounding.

6. Read Acts 4:1-12. Peter stands before the Sanhedrin, the court that condemned Jesus months before. He quotes Psalm 118:22 to them. Look up the psalm. Why is this quotation almost unbearably pointed?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Psalm 118 was sung by pilgrims entering the temple: "the stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner." Peter stands in front of the builders, the custodians of the temple, and tells them they are the ones the psalm meant. They rejected the stone; God has made Him the cornerstone of a new temple. And then the verse this session turns on: "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (4:12).

Build the steelman. Acts 4:12 is a verse Protestant apologists frequently aim at Catholic practice, and the argument deserves its full strength: if salvation is in no other name, why does the Catholic Church surround the faithful with other names, Mary, the saints, priests, the Church herself? Does asking Mary to intercede, or confessing to a priest, or calling the Church necessary, not quietly add other names to the one Name? Scripture says there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). The Reformation's charge is that Catholicism, whatever it says officially, functionally dilutes the sufficiency of Christ. Let the group feel the force of that before answering.

7. Press question one. Stay inside tonight's own chapter. When the lame man was healed by no other name than Jesus, whose voice and whose hand did that Name use? What does this scene itself teach about how the one Name works?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Peter's voice and Peter's hand. The exclusivity of the Name and the instrumentality of Christ's servants appear in the same scene, taught by the same apostle. The one saving Name chose, from this first narrated miracle, to operate through members of Christ's Body. So the Catholic claim is not that there are other names beside Jesus; it is that Jesus wields His one Name through His Church. The Church is not a rival mediator but the instrument of the one Mediator (CCC 776). If mediated grace compromised Christ, Acts 3 would be a compromise of Christ.

8. Press question two. Then what about asking the saints to pray for us? Read James 5:16 and 1 Timothy 2:1-5 together, carefully, in context. What is Paul actually saying about the one mediator, and what does he ask for two verses earlier?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Two verses before naming the one mediator, Paul *commands* intercession: supplications, prayers, and intercessions for all men. He does not see asking others to pray as competition with Christ's mediation; he sees it as participation in it. James says the prayer of a righteous man has great power. Asking St. Mary or St. Peter to pray for us is the same act as asking a friend at this table to pray for us, directed to members of the Body who are more alive, not less, for being with Christ (cf. Mark 12:27). All intercession, on earth or in heaven, is a share in the one mediation of Christ and draws all its power from it. The saints are not other names under heaven; they are trophies of the one Name, and their prayer is that Name's own overflow. An honest note: Catholics can and sometimes do practice devotion badly, and where devotion obscures Christ instead of magnifying Him, the Protestant instinct is warning us of something real. The answer to bad devotion is true devotion, not no devotion.

9. Read Acts 4:13-22. What is the council's actual assessment of Peter and John, and what is the one explanation they land on? What does verse 20 tell us witness feels like from the inside?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Uneducated, common men, *agrammatoi*, no rabbinic training, no status, and the council is left with one explanation: "they recognized that they had been with Jesus." That is the entire secret of Christian boldness, then and now. Credentials did not produce it and threats could not remove it. And from the inside, witness is not a duty but a pressure of joy: "we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (4:20), a verse the Catechism holds up as the very spirit of handing on the faith (CCC 425).

10. Read Acts 4:23-31, the first communal prayer Luke records after an apostolic arrest. They quote Psalm 2. What do they ask God for, and what, tellingly, do they not ask for?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

They do not ask for safety, for the threats to be lifted, or for their enemies to be scattered. They locate their moment inside Psalm 2, rulers raging against the Lord's Anointed, and then ask, above all, for one thing (alongside healing signs to accompany it, 4:30): "grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness," with healing and signs to accompany it. And the place is shaken, and they are all filled with the Holy Spirit. Boldness, *parrësia*, is not a personality type. It is a grace, and it is obtained by the united prayer of the Church.

Anyone here can ask for it.

DIG DEEPER: THE NINTH HOUR

Three in the afternoon was the hour of the *Tamid*, the daily evening sacrifice, and the hour at which Jesus gave up His spirit (Luke 23:44-46). Luke, always precise with time, sets this first narrated miracle at the hour of sacrifice. The Church commends Divine Mercy devotion at this hour: the Divine Mercy devotion prays at three o'clock precisely because it is the hour mercy was won.

DIG DEEPER: SOLOMON'S PORTICO

The colonnade where the crowd gathers (3:11) was where Jesus Himself walked and taught at the feast of the Dedication (John 10:23). The apostles preach Christ on Christ's own ground, and the early chapters of Acts will return there (5:12). The continuity is deliberate: same courts, same message, new voices.

Send (15 minutes)

1. "I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have." What do you actually have to give this week, and who at your own Beautiful Gate, someone you pass so often you have stopped seeing them, needs it?
2. The council explained the apostles with one phrase: they had been with Jesus. If someone audited your last seven days, what evidence would they find that you had been with Jesus, and what is one change that would strengthen the evidence?

Live It This Week

Two assignments, both small and both real. First, pray for boldness by name: choose the one situation in your life where you consistently go quiet about your faith, and every day this week pray the Church's prayer from Acts 4:29, "Lord, grant to your servant to speak your word with all boldness," naming that situation out loud. Second, give what you have: one act this week of giving Christ rather than things, and the simplest form is an offer to pray with someone, not just for them, on the spot, briefly, by name. It will feel like stepping off a ledge. That feeling is the beginning of *parrësia*.

Closing Prayer

Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, look upon our timidity and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness. We have looked at you tonight; now raise us to our feet. Stretch out your hand to heal, and make our ordinary lives the evidence that we have been with Jesus. Through the same Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 3, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 3:1-10 (the Beautiful Gate)
2. Acts 3:11-26 (Peter in Solomon's Portico)
3. Acts 4:1-12 (arrest; no other name)
4. Acts 4:13-22 (uneducated, common men)
5. Acts 4:23-31 (the prayer for boldness)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

6. Isaiah 35:4-6 (the lame man shall leap)
7. Deuteronomy 18:15-19 (the prophet like Moses)
8. Genesis 22:18 (blessing for all families)
9. Psalm 118:22 (the rejected stone)
10. Psalm 2:1-2 (rulers against the Anointed)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

11. Luke 23:44-46 (the ninth hour)
12. John 10:23; Acts 5:12 (Solomon's Portico)
13. 1 Timothy 2:1-5 (intercession and the one mediator)
14. James 5:16 (the prayer of a righteous man)
15. Mark 12:27 (God of the living)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

16. CCC 1421; CCC 1441; CCC 2666; CCC 775-776; CCC 425

THE WAY, SESSION 4

We Must Obey God Rather Than Men

The Acts of the Apostles 5:1-6:7, Ananias and Sapphira, Gamaliel, and the Laying On of Hands

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants wrestle honestly with the hardest scene in early Acts, the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira, and discover what it reveals: the Church is holy ground, lying to her leaders is lying to the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit is God. They then watch the Church survive both persecution from outside and grumbling from inside, and discover in Acts 6 the pattern by which the Church has handed on ministry ever since: prayer and the laying on of hands.

Catholic Touchstone. Holy Orders and the roots of the diaconate. Faced with her first recorded internal dispute, the Church does not merely write a policy; the apostles establish the Seven with prayer and the laying on of hands, the gesture Scripture uses for conferring office, and the Church's tradition has long seen here the antecedent of the diaconate (Luke never uses the word deacon in the passage; that reading belongs to the Tradition). The apostles set spiritual criteria ("full of the Spirit and of wisdom," 6:3), and confer it by prayer and the laying on of hands (6:6), the same gesture by which Moses commissioned Joshua (Numbers 27:18-23; Deuteronomy 34:9). With the Fathers, the Church has long read Acts 6 as the scriptural seed and paradigm of the diaconate, though Luke never gives the Seven the title deacon. For the Church's doctrine of the diaconate itself, deacons upon whom hands are imposed for a ministry of service, see CCC 1569-1571. A secondary touchstone hides in 5:3-4: "you have not lied to men but to God." Lying to the Holy Spirit is lying to God; the Fathers heard in Peter's sentence a plain testimony to the divinity of the Spirit.

What You Need to Know

Handle Ananias and Sapphira with care; someone in your group will find this story disturbing, and they should not be shamed for it. Get the facts straight first: their sin was not keeping money. Peter says explicitly that the property was theirs and, after the sale, the money remained at their disposal (5:4). The sin was the lie: performing total generosity while secretly withholding, purchasing a reputation for holiness with counterfeit coin, and doing it, as Peter says, not to men but to God.

The scene has a deliberate Old Testament shadow: Achan (Joshua 7), who secretly kept what was devoted to God at the very threshold of the conquest and brought death into the camp. Israel's new beginnings are consistently guarded with severity: Nadab and Abihu at the birth of the priesthood (Leviticus 10), Achan at the entry to the land, Ananias at the birth of the Church. The pastoral Dig Deeper box addresses the why; prepare it well, because the question will come.

The second arrest (5:17-42) escalates everything: an angel opens the prison, the apostles return to the temple at daybreak, and Peter delivers the line that names this session: "We must obey God rather than men" (5:29). Note carefully what this principle is and is not. It is spoken by men who submit to lawful authority everywhere else, who do not flee, riot, or curse the court, and who leave the council rejoicing to be counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name (5:41). Christian civil disobedience is narrow, reverent, and joyful, and it applies when authority commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands (CCC 2242).

Gamaliel's intervention (5:34-39) is a gift of history: one of the most respected rabbis of his generation counsels patience, naming failed messianic movements that scattered when their leaders died, and concludes that if this movement is of God, "you will not be able to overthrow them." Luke lets a Pharisee state the book's thesis. And keep in your pocket a detail for the Dig Deeper: Gamaliel had a student named Saul (Acts 22:3).

Acts 6:1-7 gives the Church's first internal conflict, an ethnic and practical one: the Greek-speaking widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. Watch the apostles' response closely with your group. They neither ignore the complaint nor abandon their own calling to fix it personally. They create a new ministry, delegate real authority, and confer it by prayer and the laying on of hands, the gesture the Church reads as the

sacramental conferral of office (CCC 1569). All seven chosen men bear Greek names, which strongly suggests that the apostles drew the Seven from the very community that had been overlooked (names alone are not proof; Andrew and Philip among the Twelve bore Greek names too), so that the aggrieved are the ones set apart to serve, and one of them, Nicolaus, is a proselyte of Antioch, a small geographic seed worth noticing silently. The result: "the word of God increased," and even many priests became obedient to the faith (6:7).

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Joshua 7:1-26. Achan takes devoted things and hides them in his tent at the very start of the conquest; the sin of one man secretly poisons the camp of all. In this pattern of concealed sin at a holy beginning, Ananias stands in the place of the new Israel: a hidden theft of what was performed as devoted, at the community's fragile beginning. Let the group discover this parallel themselves in question 3.

Leviticus 10:1-3. Nadab and Abihu offer unholy fire at the very inauguration of the priesthood and die before the Lord, and Moses' verdict stands over both stories: "I will show myself holy among those who are near me." Thresholds of God's new beginnings are guarded, because what is being founded must not be founded on falsehood.

Numbers 27:18-23 and Deuteronomy 34:9. Moses, at God's command, takes Joshua, a man "in whom is the spirit," lays his hands on him before the congregation, and commissions him, and Deuteronomy concludes that Joshua was "full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands upon him." Hold the exact words: *full of the spirit of wisdom, laid his hands*. Acts 6:3 and 6:6 repeat them almost verbatim. Ordination by the laying on of hands is not a Church invention; it is Israel's own grammar for the transfer of office and grace, and the group will find it live in question 8.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Trallians, 3 (written around AD 107)

Barely two generations after Acts 6, St. Ignatius, bishop of the very Antioch named in this chapter, writes that the Church is recognized by her threefold ministry: let all revere the deacons as Jesus Christ, the bishop as a type of the Father, and the presbyters as the council of God, for without these, he says, there is no Church. What Acts 6 plants, Ignatius already treats as the settled structure of the churches he writes to across Syria and Asia Minor on his road to martyrdom.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Basil the Great, On the Holy Spirit (4th century)

Defending the divinity of the Holy Spirit, St. Basil reasons from Peter's own words to Ananias: to lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie not to men but to God. The Spirit, Basil argues, is therefore not a creature or a force but is Himself God, to be worshiped and glorified with the Father and the Son, exactly as the Church confesses in the Creed.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles, Homily 14 (4th century)

On the choosing of the Seven, Chrysostom marvels at the wisdom of the arrangement: the apostles do not dictate names but set the criteria and invite the community to present men full of the Spirit, and then make the appointment their own through prayer and the laying on of hands. Authority and communion cooperate, the complaint of the overlooked is honored, and the ministry of the word loses nothing while the ministry of tables gains everything.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1569-1571. At a lower level of the hierarchy are deacons, upon whom hands are imposed for a ministry of service; strengthened by sacramental grace, they serve the People of God in the liturgy, the word, and charity. The Latin Church restored the permanent diaconate after the Second Vatican Council.

CCC 1554. The divinely instituted ecclesiastical ministry is exercised in three degrees: bishops, presbyters, and deacons, an ordering already called by these names in the earliest centuries.

CCC 685. To believe in the Holy Spirit is to profess that the Spirit is one of the persons of the Holy Trinity, consubstantial with the Father and the Son, adored and glorified with them.

CCC 827 and 2242. All members of the Church, including her ministers, must acknowledge themselves sinners; the Church is holy while clasping sinners to her bosom. And the citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow directives of civil authority contrary to the moral order: "we must obey God rather than men." The Catechism quotes Acts 5:29 directly.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 1, The Name. The apostles leave the council "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name" (5:41). The movement itself is still nameless, but its members now suffer for the Name they carry. The irony sharpens; do not resolve it.

Thread 2, The Map. Still Jerusalem, but two hairline cracks appear tonight: Greek-speaking Jews inside the community (6:1), and Nicolaus, "a proselyte of Antioch" (6:5). File the word Antioch away silently. It will matter more than anyone at the table suspects.

Thread 3, Peter First. Peter confronts Ananias, answers the council for the apostles, and the sick are laid out so that even his shadow might fall on them, and all are healed (5:15-16). The tally grows; keep it wordless.

Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread. Quiet again this session, though note that the crisis of chapter 6 erupts precisely around the community's daily table. The Church's tables are never trivial.

Session Goals

1. Participants can state precisely what the sin of Ananias and Sapphira was and was not, and articulate what the episode teaches about the holiness of the Church and the divinity of the Holy Spirit.
2. Participants discover the Achan parallel and can explain why God guards the solemn beginnings of His works with severity.
3. Participants can explain what "we must obey God rather than men" does and does not authorize, and describe the apostles' demeanor under unjust authority.
4. Participants discover the Moses and Joshua background of the laying on of hands and can walk through Acts 6 as the pattern of ordination, answering the strongest congregationalist reading of the chapter.
5. Participants each commit to one act of hidden generosity and one examination of honesty before God this week.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on Gamaliel's student, (3) compress question 6 (the escape and return) into a summary sentence. Do not cut the pastoral Dig Deeper on why God acted severely, and do not cut the steelman chain on Acts 6; they carry the session's honesty and its touchstone.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of life, you search hearts and you cannot be deceived. Make us honest tonight: honest about our sins, honest in our generosity, honest in our worship. Give your Church shepherds and servants full of the Spirit and of wisdom, and give each of us the courage to obey God rather than men, with joy and without bitterness. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Where in ordinary life do people polish their image most, resumes, social media, small talk after Mass? Why is the gap between image and reality so tempting to all of us?
2. Have you ever watched an organization handle its first real internal conflict? What separated the ones that grew stronger from the ones that fractured?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 4:32-37, the verses just before tonight's chapter, and meet Barnabas. What is the community's practice with possessions, and what does Barnabas do?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The believers are of one heart and soul, no one claims private ownership over against the needy, and those who own land or houses sell them freely and lay the proceeds at the apostles' feet, where distribution is made as any have need. Barnabas, "son of encouragement," sells a field and brings the money openly and honestly. Luke sets him up deliberately as the true coin against which the counterfeit of chapter 5 will be measured. Note also where the money is laid: at the apostles' feet. The community's charity flows through the apostolic office.

2. Now read Acts 5:1-11 carefully. Before reacting, be lawyers about the facts. According to Peter's own words in verse 4, what exactly was Ananias free to do? So what precisely was the sin?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Peter is explicit: while the property remained unsold it was Ananias's own, and after the sale the money was still at his disposal. No rule required him to give anything. The sin was the lie: keeping back part of the proceeds while presenting the gift as the whole, buying the reputation of a Barnabas at a discount. And Peter names the true offended party twice: "you have not lied to men but to God"; they "agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord." The sin is sacrilege, a performed holiness offered as counterfeit on holy ground.

3. Live discovery. This scene has an Old Testament twin: a hidden theft of what was devoted to God, at the fragile beginning of a new era, judged with death. Turn to Joshua 7 and skim verses 1, 10-13, and 19-26. What parallels do you find, and what do both stories say about beginnings?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Achan, at the very start of the conquest, secretly keeps devoted things and hides them in his tent, and the hidden sin of one man defeats the whole camp at Ai until it is exposed. Ananias stands where Achan stood, a concealed sin at a holy beginning; the analogy is about hiddenness at the threshold, not vowed property, for Peter is explicit that the money remained at Ananias's own disposal: same concealment before God, same

fragile threshold moment, same exposure, same severity. Add Nadab and Abihu at the birth of the priesthood (Leviticus 10:1-3) and a pattern emerges: God guards the decisive beginnings of His works, the inauguration of the priesthood, the entry into the land, the birth of the Church, because what is being founded must not be founded on a lie. The severity is not God losing His temper; it is God teaching, once, unforgettably, at the foundation, that His Church is holy ground and His Spirit cannot be play-acted before.

4. Look again at Peter's two sentences in 5:3-4: lying "to the Holy Spirit" is lying "not to men but to God." The Fathers treasured this verse. What does Peter's grammar quietly confess about who the Holy Spirit is?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

That the Holy Spirit is God. Peter equates lying to the Spirit with lying to God as a simple identity, not an analogy. St. Basil the Great built part of his defense of the Spirit's divinity on exactly this verse. The Spirit who filled the Church at Pentecost is not an energy or an influence but the third divine Person, consubstantial with the Father and the Son (CCC 685), which is precisely why deceiving Him is not a management problem but sacrilege.

5. Read Acts 5:12-16. Describe what life around the apostles looks like now, down to the strangest detail Luke includes.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Signs and wonders multiply, the community meets in Solomon's Portico, none of the outsiders dare join them casually yet the people hold them in honor, multitudes of both men and women are added, and the sick are laid in the streets so that at least Peter's *shadow* might fall on them as he passes. Luke reports the people's instinct, that even Peter's shadow might reach them, and then reports the result, that they were all healed (5:16). Later he says it plainly of the handkerchiefs that had touched Paul (19:12). Grace is scandalously comfortable working through matter and through men, which is the sacramental principle in its boldest form, and a quiet preview of why Catholics have never been embarrassed by relics.

6. Read Acts 5:17-32. The apostles are jailed, freed by an angel, and found at daybreak doing the one thing they were forbidden to do, in the most public place possible. When the council demands an answer, what is Peter's principle in verse 29, and what, judging by the apostles' whole behavior, does that principle not mean?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"We must obey God rather than men." And notice its narrowness: the apostles do not riot, flee the city, curse the court, or reject the council's legitimacy in general. They disobey the one command that directly contradicts Christ's command to preach, they show up openly to accept the consequences, and they answer with respect and with the Gospel. This is the Church's charter for conscience: lawful authority binds, except where it commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands (CCC 2242). It is a scalpel, not a sledgehammer, and it is wielded with reverence and joy rather than rage.

7. Read Acts 5:33-42. Who is Gamaliel, what is his counsel, and how do the apostles leave the council after being beaten?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Gamaliel is among the most honored rabbis of his generation, and his counsel is patience: other movements, Theudas and Judas the Galilean, collapsed when their founders died; if this undertaking is of men it will fail, "but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them." Luke lets a Pharisee state the thesis of the whole book, and twenty centuries later Gamaliel's test has returned its verdict. The apostles, beaten and dismissed, leave *rejoicing* that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name, and they do not stop teaching for a single day. Joy under persecution is the Church's oldest apologetic.

8. Read Acts 6:1-6. The Church faces her first internal crisis: Greek-speaking widows overlooked in the daily distribution. Walk through the apostles' solution step by step. Then, live discovery: turn to Numbers 27:18-23 and Deuteronomy 34:9, the commissioning of Joshua. What exact phrases do the two scenes share?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The apostles take the complaint seriously, refuse to abandon prayer and the ministry of the word, and create a new office: the community presents seven men of good repute, "full of the Spirit and of wisdom," and the apostles pray and lay their hands on them. Now the discovery: Joshua is a man "in whom is the spirit"; Moses lays his hands on him before the congregation and gives him a commission; and Deuteronomy concludes that Joshua was "full of the spirit of wisdom, *for Moses had laid his hands upon him.*" Full of the spirit and wisdom; the laying on of hands; office conferred before the assembly. Acts 6 is speaking Israel's ancient grammar of ordination. The gesture is not decorative; in Scripture it transfers office and confers grace, which is exactly what the Church means by the sacrament of Holy Orders (CCC 1554, 1569).

Build the steelman. A serious Protestant reading of Acts 6, common in congregationalist traditions, runs like this: the congregation, not the apostles, chooses the seven; the men are appointed to wait on tables, a practical task, not a sacred office; the word deacon (*diakonos*) never even appears in the chapter; and the laying on of hands is simply a public blessing, as it is when the church at Antioch sends off Paul and Barnabas (13:3). On this reading, Acts 6 shows bottom-up church governance solving a logistics problem, not the birth of an ordained clergy. State it fairly and let it stand before pressing.

9. Press question one. Look at who does what in 6:3 and 6:6. Who defines the office, sets the criteria, and confers the appointment, and who proposes the men? Then look at what Stephen and Philip immediately do in chapters 6 through 8. Does "waiting on tables" describe their ministry?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The community proposes; the apostles dispose. The apostles create the office, set spiritual rather than merely practical criteria, and confer the appointment themselves by prayer and the laying on of hands. Communion and hierarchy cooperate, but the conferral is apostolic. And the Seven immediately overflow the job description: Stephen works great wonders and preaches the longest sermon in Acts; Philip evangelizes Samaria and baptizes the Ethiopian official. Men appointed to distribute food received, with the laying on of hands, grace for far more, which is what the Church means when she calls the diaconate a sacramental office and not a task force (CCC 1570). An honest hedge for your group: Luke never uses the noun *diakonos* here, and the Church does not hang the doctrine on one chapter alone; she reads Acts 6 together with the unbroken witness of the Fathers, and within about seventy years St. Ignatius of Antioch describes deacons, presbyters, and bishops as the recognized structure of the churches everywhere he writes.

10. Read Acts 6:7, one verse, slowly. What three things does Luke report, and which of the three is most startling?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The word of God increased, the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and "a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith." The last is the shock: temple priests, men whose livelihood and identity were bound to the old sacrifices, submitting to the Gospel in large numbers. The Church that guards her holiness (chapter 5) and orders her ministry (chapter 6) does not shrink; she becomes credible to the hardest audience in the city. Integrity and structure are not obstacles to growth. In Acts, they are its engine.

DIG DEEPER: WHY DID GOD ACT SO SEVERELY?

Say it plainly for your group: this story is supposed to be disturbing, and Luke reports that "great fear came upon the whole church" (5:11), the first time Luke uses the word *church* (*ekklēsia*) in Acts, as if the community only fully knows what it is when it learns what it must not do. God's severity here is rare, foundational, and pedagogical, like Nadab and Abihu and like Achan: at the threshold of a new covenant, God teaches once and unforgettably that His presence is real and cannot be gamed.

Two honest balances. First, Scripture does not tell us Ananias and Sapphira were damned; God's judgment on their bodies is recorded, His verdict on their souls is not, and the Church has never presumed it. Second, the ordinary economy for lies against God is not sudden death but the confessional, which exists precisely so that what killed Ananias, hidden sin performed as holiness, can be spoken aloud and forgiven. The severity of Acts 5 is the exception that teaches; the mercy of absolution is the rule that heals.

DIG DEEPER: GAMALIEL HAD A STUDENT

The rabbi who counseled the council to wait and see had a brilliant pupil from Tarsus. Saul was "brought up at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3), and in two chapters he will be guarding the coats at a stoning. The teacher advised patience with the Church; the student tried to destroy it, and then became its greatest missionary. Keep the name in your pocket and say nothing yet.

Send (15 minutes)

1. Ananias fell through the gap between his image and his reality. Where is that gap widest in your own life right now, and what would it cost to close it?
2. The apostles rejoiced to suffer dishonor for the Name. What is the closest you have come to paying a social price for your faith, and did you experience anything like their joy? What would have to change in your prayer for that joy to become possible?

Live It This Week

Two assignments aimed at the two halves of tonight. First, hidden generosity: do one genuinely generous thing this week that no one will ever know about, no mention, no post, no hint, the exact inversion of Ananias, giving that is entirely real and entirely unseen (Matthew 6:3-4). Second, honesty before God: make one careful examination of conscience this week focused on a single question, where am I performing a holiness I am not living? And if something surfaces that has been hidden a long time, take it to Confession, where what destroyed Ananias is spoken aloud and destroyed instead.

Closing Prayer

Father of truth, nothing in us is hidden from you, and still you invite us near. Strip us of every performance, teach us the generosity that seeks no witness, and make your Church holy from her foundations. Give us servants full of the Spirit and of wisdom, give us the joy of the apostles under trial, and when obedience to you costs us the approval of men, let us pay gladly. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 4, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 4:32-37 (Barnabas, the true coin)
2. Acts 5:1-11 (Ananias and Sapphira)
3. Acts 5:12-16 (signs; Peter's shadow)
4. Acts 5:17-32 (arrest, escape, obey God rather than men)
5. Acts 5:33-42 (Gamaliel; rejoicing under dishonor)
6. Acts 6:1-7 (the Seven; the laying on of hands; the priests believe)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

7. Joshua 7:1, 10-13, 19-26 (Achan)
8. Leviticus 10:1-3 (Nadab and Abihu)
9. Numbers 27:18-23 (Moses commissions Joshua)
10. Deuteronomy 34:9 (full of the spirit of wisdom; hands laid)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

11. Acts 22:3 (Saul at the feet of Gamaliel, Dig Deeper)
12. Acts 19:12 (handkerchiefs from Paul)
13. Acts 13:3 (hands laid at Antioch, steelman)
14. Matthew 6:3-4 (giving in secret)
15. Acts 6:8-8:40 preview (Stephen and Philip exceed the tables)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

16. CCC 1554; CCC 1569-1571; CCC 685; CCC 827; CCC 2242

THE WAY, SESSION 5

I See the Heavens Opened

The Acts of the Apostles 6:8-8:3, Stephen, the First Martyr, and the Prayer That Won a Persecutor

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants discover that Stephen's long speech is not a history lecture but a prosecution brief with two arguments woven through Israel's whole story: God has never been confined to one land or one building, and Israel has always rejected the deliverers God sent, at first. They then watch the first martyr die in deliberate conformity to his Master, prayer answering prayer, and discover what the Fathers dared to see in his final prayer: a fruit the Church still lives on.

Catholic Touchstone. Martyrdom and the power of intercession. Stephen, a deacon ordained in last session's chapter, becomes the protomartyr, and martyrdom is the supreme witness to the truth of the faith, borne even unto death (CCC 2473). His dying prayers repeat his Lord's from the cross, and Augustine and Fulgentius both saw Paul's conversion as a fruit of that intercession for his killers, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (7:60), offered over the young man minding the coats. St. Augustine preached the equation plainly: if Stephen had not prayed, the Church would not have Paul.

What You Need to Know

Stephen's speech is the longest in Acts, and many readers get lost in it, so give your group the key before they enter: it is a defense speech that becomes an indictment. Stephen is charged with speaking against the temple and the law (6:13-14). Instead of denying it, he retells Israel's story to prove two theses. First, God's presence has never been confined to the holy land or a building: He appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia, to Joseph in Egypt, to Moses in Midian at a bush of all things, and traveled with Israel in a tent. Second, Israel has consistently rejected the men God sent to save her, on the first encounter: Joseph sold by his brothers, Moses refused ("who made you a ruler and a judge?") before being sent back as ruler and deliverer. The pattern aims at one conclusion, which Stephen finally states out loud: you have now rejected and murdered the Righteous One Himself (7:52).

Note where Stephen becomes most delicate and most dangerous: the temple (7:44-50). The tabernacle was made at God's command, after God's own pattern; Solomon built the house; "yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands," and Stephen seals it with Isaiah 66:1-2. Prepare the steelman here, because this text is regularly aimed at Catholic churches and tabernacles, and the honest answer is rich.

Luke frames Stephen with Jesus deliberately, and your group should find the parallels themselves: a trial before the council, false witnesses, a charge about destroying the temple, a Son of Man saying, a dying surrender of spirit, a dying plea for the killers' forgiveness, and burial by devout men. The disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when fully taught will be like his teacher (Luke 6:40). Stephen is the first fully taught man in Acts.

The vision (7:55-56) deserves slow attention: Stephen sees the Son of Man *standing* at God's right hand, the one New Testament passage that explicitly depicts Jesus standing at God's right hand after the Ascension. The Dig Deeper box explores why. And do not let the group miss verse 58: the witnesses lay their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul, who approves of the killing (8:1). The scattering that follows carries the seed of Sessions 6 and 7: "they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria" (8:1), the exact second circle of Acts 1:8. Persecution does not stop the map; it advances it.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Genesis 37 and 45 (Joseph). Rejected and sold by his brothers, exalted among the Gentiles, and revealed to his brothers *the second time* as their savior (7:13). Stephen's first case study in the rejected deliverer, and a

quiet portrait of Christ: rejected by His own, exalted among the nations, to be recognized by Israel at the second encounter.

Exodus 2-3 (Moses). Refused by his own people on the first attempt ("who made you a ruler and a judge over us?"), then sent back by God as exactly that, "ruler and deliverer" (7:35). Stephen also quotes Deuteronomy 18:15, the prophet like Moses, tying his speech to Peter's sermon from Session 3.

Isaiah 66:1-2. "Heaven is my throne, and earth my footstool; what house will you build for me?" Stephen's clinching citation, and words spoken over the temple by Israel's own prophet, not by Stephen. The critique of presumption about God's house is not Stephen's innovation; it is Israel's own Scripture.

Daniel 7:13-14, again. Stephen sees "the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." This is the third time our study has stood before Daniel's throne vision, after the Ascension in Session 1 and Peter's Psalm 110 in Session 2. The enthroned Son of Man is not an idea for Stephen. He is looking at Him.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon on St. Stephen (5th century)

Preaching on the feast of Stephen, St. Augustine drew a straight line from the martyr's last prayer to the Church's greatest missionary: if Stephen had not prayed, the Church would not have Paul. The stones that struck Stephen were answered by the intercession he offered while they struck, and Augustine bids us see Paul's whole apostolate as the fruit of a dying man's prayer for his enemies.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Fulgentius of Ruspe, Sermon on St. Stephen (6th century, read in the Liturgy of the Hours for December 26)

St. Fulgentius says that love was Stephen's weapon, and by it he was everywhere victorious: love of God that did not yield to the raging council, and love of neighbor that interceded for the very men stoning him. Stephen went first, slain by the stones of Saul's helpers, and Paul followed after, helped on his way by Stephen's prayer, so that now, Fulgentius delights to say, the two rejoice together where there is no envy.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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

Chrysostom pauses over the detail Luke plants before the speech has even begun: the whole council looked hard at Stephen and saw his face "like the face of an angel" (6:15). Grace shone in the martyr's very countenance, and the men who would soon gnash their teeth at him (7:54) had to look at it first. Take from that what this guide asks you to take: rage can counterfeit conviction, but it cannot counterfeit peace, and the serenity of the martyr is the Spirit's own signature on his testimony.

Catechism Connection

CCC 2473-2474. Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith; the martyr bears witness to Christ, who died and rose, to whom he is united by charity, enduring death through an act of fortitude. The Church has painstakingly collected the records of the martyrs from the beginning.

CCC 2844. Christian prayer extends to the forgiveness of enemies; the martyrs of yesterday and today bear this witness to Jesus. Forgiveness is the fundamental condition of the reconciliation of the children of God with their Father.

CCC 659-664, revisited. Stephen's vision confirms what we discovered in Session 1: the Ascension placed the Son of Man at the right hand of God in Daniel's sense, reigning. The first martyr dies gazing at the enthronement the first session discovered.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 1, The Name. Hold steady. Something happens to this thread in two sessions that you must not spoil. Tonight the movement is still nameless, and its first member dies for the Name he confesses.

Thread 2, The Map. The hinge turns tonight: "they were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria" (8:1). Read Acts 1:8 aloud beside it and let the group see the second circle open, driven not by a mission strategy but by persecution. God steers even the storm.

Thread 3, Peter First. Notably quiet tonight: for the first time, the stage belongs to someone outside the Twelve, a deacon ordained last session. Note the silence in your own preparation; the structure of chapter 6 is already bearing fruit beyond the apostles.

Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread. Quiet. Let it rest.

New name to file: Saul. Introduced with terrible economy at 7:58 and 8:1-3, consenting, coat-minding, then ravaging the church house by house. Say nothing about his future. If anyone connects him to Gamaliel's student from last session's Dig Deeper, smile and move on.

Session Goals

1. Participants can state the two theses of Stephen's speech and trace each through his Joseph and Moses case studies.
2. Participants discover the deliberate parallels between Stephen's death and Christ's, and can articulate martyrdom as conformity to Christ.
3. Participants can answer the strongest use of Acts 7:48 against Catholic churches, tabernacles, and the Eucharistic presence.
4. Participants discover the causal line the Fathers drew from Stephen's dying intercession to Saul, and can explain what it teaches about praying for enemies.
5. Participants each name one persecutor or difficult person for whom they will pray daily this week.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. The speech is long; do not read all of Acts 7 aloud in the meeting. Assign the survey reading as marked in question 2 and trust the take-home reading they did this week. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on the church in the wilderness, (3) compress question 3 (Joseph) and let question 4 (Moses) carry the rejected-deliverer pattern alone. Do not cut the steelman or questions 8 through 10; the death scene is the session.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, you gave your first martyr a face like an angel and a heart that prayed for his killers while they killed him. Open the heavens over this table tonight. Teach us Israel's story as Stephen told it, give us his sight, and if we cannot yet love our enemies, give us at least the desire to pray for them. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Who is the most peaceful person you have ever seen under pressure, and what did their calm do to everyone around them?
2. Have you ever rejected something or someone at first that you later recognized as exactly what you needed? What blinded you the first time?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 6:8-15. What is Stephen doing when the trouble starts, what are the charges against him, and what one detail does Luke give us about his face? Where have we heard charges like these before?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Stephen, full of grace and power, is working wonders and winning disputes; his opponents, unable to withstand his wisdom and the Spirit, arrange false witnesses. The charges: he speaks against this holy place and the law, and claims Jesus will destroy the temple and change the customs. These are almost exactly the false charges brought against Jesus (Mark 14:57-58). And in the middle of it, the council sees his face "like the face of an angel": the serenity of a man full of the Spirit, which no amount of rage can counterfeit. Luke is already telling us this trial will run parallel to another one.

2. Stephen answers with the longest speech in Acts, a guided tour of Israel's story. Here is the key before we enter: it is a defense that becomes an indictment, built on two repeated arguments. As we survey it, hunt for them. Skim Acts 7:2-8 (Abraham) and 7:9-16 (Joseph) now. Where is God when He appears to Abraham? What happens to Joseph, and when do his brothers finally recognize him?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

God appears to Abraham in Mesopotamia, before he ever set foot in the holy land, and Abraham dies owning not a foot of it. Joseph is rejected and sold by his own brothers, and God is "with him" in Egypt, of all places, exalting him among the Gentiles; his brothers recognize him only "at the second visit" (7:13). Both of Stephen's theses are already running: God's presence is not confined to the land or any building, and the deliverer is rejected by his own at the first encounter, recognized at the second. Keep both running as the speech continues.

3. Read Acts 7:23-29 and 7:35-38, the Moses section. How is Moses received the first time he tries to help his people, and how does Stephen describe his second coming to them? What title does Stephen quote from Deuteronomy?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The first time, Moses is refused: "who made you a ruler and a judge over us?" Forty years later God sends him

back as exactly that, "ruler and deliverer," by the hand of the angel in the bush. Stephen then quotes Deuteronomy 18:15, the prophet like Moses whom God will raise up, the same text Peter preached in Session 3. The pattern has a name now: Israel rejects her God-sent deliverer at the first encounter and receives him at the second. Stephen is one step from saying the quiet part aloud: you have just done it again, to the Deliverer Himself.

4. Read Acts 7:44-50. Stephen finally reaches the temple, the subject of the charges. Trace his logic: tent, house, and then the Isaiah quotation. What exactly is Stephen saying about the temple, and what is he not saying?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He honors the tabernacle as made at God's command, after the pattern God showed Moses, and he reports Solomon's house without a word against it. Then the turn: "yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands," sealed with Isaiah 66:1-2, heaven is my throne, earth my footstool, what house will you build for me? Stephen is not condemning the temple God commanded; he is condemning the presumption that God is contained by it, owned through it, or bound to defend it regardless of Israel's heart. Isaiah said it about the very house God had commanded, and Israel kept the words in her own Scripture. The building was always a gift and a sign, never a cage for God or a talisman for men.

Build the steelman. This text has a long career in arguments against Catholicism, and the strong form deserves a fair hearing: if "the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands," what are Catholics doing building sanctuaries, consecrating altars, and above all keeping a tabernacle with a burning lamp and claiming that Christ is *there*, localized, in the Blessed Sacrament? Does not the Catholic tabernacle repeat the exact mistake Stephen died correcting, shrinking the God whom heaven cannot contain into a gold box? Jesus Himself said true worshipers worship in spirit and truth (John 4:21-24). Let the objection stand at full strength before pressing.

5. Press question one. Solomon himself, dedicating the first temple, faced this exact question. Read 1 Kings 8:10-11 and 8:27-30. How does Solomon hold together "heaven cannot contain you" with "my eyes will be open toward this house"? What does that tell us about how Israel always understood God's dwelling?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Solomon says both truths in one breath: "heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house," and yet he begs God to set His name and His eyes there and to hear the prayers offered toward it, and he prays it in a house God had already filled with His glory, the cloud so thick the priests could not stand to minister (8:10-11). Israel never believed the temple contained God the way a jar contains water; she believed God freely chose to be *findable* there, really present in a place, without ceasing to fill heaven and earth. Presence by gift, not by containment. Stephen's target is the presumption that reverses the gift into a possession, not the gift itself, which God commanded.

6. Press question two. Now bring the question forward. Read John 1:14 and John 2:19-21. What did God do with the whole logic of the tabernacle in the Incarnation, and what does that mean for the Catholic tabernacle?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," and John's verb is literally *tabernacled* among us; and Jesus called His own body the temple. God's definitive answer to "what house will you build for me?" was to build one Himself, out of our humanity. A real, substantial, sacramental presence is not paganism; it is the

Incarnation's own logic, God freely making Himself findable in our world without ceasing to be infinite. And note precisely what the Church does and does not claim. She does not claim that Christ is shut into the tabernacle the way a body fills a space; that is the objector's word, "localized," and it is not ours. Christ is present by way of substance, whole and entire under the sacramental signs, whole under each species and whole in every fragment, which is exactly why He is not divided by being present on ten thousand altars at once. He is not contained; He is given. The Eucharistic presence continues exactly that logic: not the Church trapping God in a box, but God extending the gift of His findable presence, under signs He chose, until He comes. The lamp by the tabernacle confesses the same two truths Solomon did: heaven cannot contain Him, and He is here. An honest concession completes the answer: Stephen's warning still binds Catholics. Any church, devotion, or tabernacle treated as a talisman while the heart resists the Holy Spirit falls under his indictment, as Israel's temple did (Jeremiah 7:4-11). The cure for superstition is not absence but reverence.

7. Read Acts 7:51-53, the moment the defense becomes the verdict. What does Stephen finally accuse the council of, and how does his accusation complete the pattern his whole speech was building?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"You stiff-necked people... you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you." Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who announced the Righteous One, "whom you have now betrayed and murdered." The Joseph pattern and the Moses pattern land on the present tense: Israel has rejected the Deliverer at the first encounter. And remember where the pattern points: the rejected one is recognized at the second visit. Stephen's indictment carries, hidden inside it, Israel's hope.

8. Read Acts 7:54-56. As the council rages, what does Stephen see, and what does he say? One detail of his vision is described this way nowhere else in the New Testament. Find it.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Full of the Holy Spirit, he gazes into heaven and sees the glory of God, and Jesus at God's right hand, and he announces it by fusing Daniel's Son of Man (Daniel 7:13-14) with the Psalm's right hand (Psalm 110:1): "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." The unique detail: Jesus is *standing*. This is the one New Testament passage that explicitly shows Him standing at the right hand of God; everywhere else that scene is described, He is seated, enthroned. (Revelation does see the Lamb standing, Revelation 5:6 and 14:1, but never at the right hand.) For His first martyr, the King rises. The Dig Deeper box gathers the traditional readings of why, but let the group feel it first: the court below condemns Stephen; the Judge above stands for him.

9. Live discovery. Read Acts 7:57-60, then turn back to Luke 23:34 and 23:46. Set Stephen's two dying sentences beside his Master's. What do you find, and what is the one difference?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Jesus: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit," and "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." Stephen: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit," and "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." The martyr dies in striking verbal and spiritual conformity to his Master. Martyrdom is the supreme witness given to the truth of the faith, borne even unto death (CCC 2473), and here you can watch that witness take the shape of the disciple fully taught who has become like his teacher (Luke 6:40): not merely dying for Christ but dying like Him. The two prayers are parallel rather than identical, and the differences are worth naming. Jesus commits His spirit to the Father; Stephen asks *Jesus* to receive his. Jesus asks the Father to forgive; Stephen asks the Lord not to

hold the sin against them. The deepest change is the address. The first martyr's last breath is a prayer addressed to Christ as God. And Luke adds the gentlest verb in the chapter: "he fell asleep." For those in Christ, even a death by stoning has become sleep.

10. Look hard at Acts 7:58 and 8:1-3. Who is standing at the edge of this scene, what is his role, and what does he do next? Now hold this man in one hand and Stephen's final prayer in the other. What did the Fathers of the Church dare to conclude?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A young man named Saul, minding the witnesses' garments, consenting to the death, and then ravaging the church house by house, dragging off men and women to prison. The Fathers put the two facts together and drew the line without blinking: Stephen prayed, "do not hold this sin against them," and the most visible sinner present became the apostle to the nations. As St. Augustine preached, if Stephen had not prayed, the Church would not have Paul. Intercession for enemies is not a beautiful sentiment; in Acts it is the most consequential prayer in the book. And notice the last verse of the scene (8:1): the persecution scatters the believers throughout Judea and Samaria, the exact second circle of Acts 1:8. The blood of the first martyr does not halt the mission. It ships it.

DIG DEEPER: WHY IS JESUS STANDING?

Christian tradition offers converging answers, all worth savoring. Jesus stands as a witness rises in court: the earthly tribunal condemns Stephen, and the heavenly Advocate rises to testify for him (cf. Luke 12:8, "every one who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God"). He stands as one rises to welcome an arriving guest: the King on His feet to receive the first of the martyrs home. And He stands as a champion stirred to act, the Head who feels the wounds of His members. Every reading says the same thing: heaven is not neutral about what happens to Christ's witnesses.

DIG DEEPER: THE CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS

In 7:38 Stephen calls Israel at Sinai "the *ekklēsia* in the wilderness," the assembly, the same word the New Testament uses for the Church. The people of God gathered at the mountain, receiving living oracles through a mediator, is already, in seed, what Pentecost brought to flower. The Church did not begin as a rupture with Israel; she is Israel's own assembly, gathered now around the prophet like Moses.

Send (15 minutes)

1. Stephen prayed aloud for his killers, in the moment, at full cost. Who is your Saul, the person who has genuinely wounded you or who most opposes your faith? Are you willing to pray for that person daily this week, by name, using Stephen's own words?
2. The council could not answer Stephen's peace. When people watch you under pressure, criticism, or unfair treatment, what do they see, and what would need to change in your prayer for them to see "the face of an angel"?

Live It This Week

One assignment, and it is the hardest one this study will ever give you. Choose your Saul: the person who has hurt you, mocked your faith, or stands furthest from God among the people you know. Every day this week, pray Stephen's prayer for that person by name: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them," adding one sentence asking God to do for them what He did for the coat-minder. Do not tell them. Do not expect to feel warm. Stephen felt stones. Pray anyway, and let Augustine's arithmetic encourage you: one dying man's prayer for his enemies gave the Church thirteen epistles and half the book of Acts. Heaven has done more with less.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, receive our spirits as you received Stephen's: our fears, our grudges, our unfinished forgiveness. Give us love as our weapon, gentleness as our argument, and the stubborn hope that the people who wound your Church today may be her apostles tomorrow. St. Stephen, first of the martyrs, pray for us, and pray for those we named tonight. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"And he knelt down and cried with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.'" (Acts 7:60)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 5, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 6:8-15 (charges; the face of an angel)
2. Acts 7:2-8 (Abraham); 7:9-16 (Joseph); 7:23-29, 35-38 (Moses)
3. Acts 7:44-50 (tent, house, Isaiah 66)
4. Acts 7:51-53 (the indictment)
5. Acts 7:54-60 (the vision and the stoning)
6. Acts 8:1-3 (Saul; the scattering)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

7. Genesis 37; 45 (Joseph rejected, then recognized)
8. Exodus 2:11-15; 3:1-10 (Moses refused, then sent)
9. Deuteronomy 18:15 (the prophet like Moses)
10. Isaiah 66:1-2 (heaven is my throne)
11. 1 Kings 8:10-11, 27-30 (the glory fills the house; Solomon's both-and)
12. Jeremiah 7:4-11 (the temple as talisman)
13. Daniel 7:13-14 (the Son of Man, third visit)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

14. Mark 14:57-58 (false witnesses against Jesus)
15. John 1:14; 2:19-21 (the Word tabernacled; the temple of His body)
16. John 4:21-24 (spirit and truth, steelman)
17. Luke 23:34, 46; Luke 6:40; Luke 12:8 (the Master's dying words; the fully taught disciple; the Son of Man acknowledges)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

18. CCC 2473-2474; CCC 2844; CCC 659-664

THE WAY, SESSION 6

How Can I, Unless Someone Guides Me?

The Acts of the Apostles 8:4-40, Samaria, the Laying On of Hands, and the Man in the Chariot

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants watch the Gospel cross its first great frontier, into Samaria, carried by a deacon, and discover two patterns that mark the Catholic Church to this day: baptism completed by the apostolic laying on of hands that confers the Spirit, and Scripture read with a guide sent by God, inside the communion of the Church, ending in sacrament. The Ethiopian's honest question gives the session, and half of Catholic teaching on Scripture, its voice: "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

Catholic Touchstone. Confirmation. The Samaritans believe and are baptized by Philip, yet the Spirit "had not yet fallen on any of them" (8:16), so the apostles send Peter and John, who pray and lay hands on them, and they receive the Holy Spirit (8:17). The Catechism points to this very passage as the origin of the sacrament of Confirmation, the imposition of hands that completes baptismal grace (CCC 1288, 1315, which quotes Acts 8:14-17 directly). A distinct rite, given here through the apostles' own hands, conferring the Spirit: the anatomy of Confirmation, visible in the Church's first missionary generation.

What You Need to Know

Know the wound before you teach the healing. In the Judean telling, Samaritans descended from northern tribes intermingled with peoples resettled by Assyria after 722 BC (2 Kings 17); they worshiped on Mount Gerizim with their own version of the Torah. The Samaritans told a different story about themselves, tracing their line to the northern tribes and their sanctuary to the older and rightful one, so the history is more tangled than either side's polemic allows. What is not in doubt is the estrangement by Jesus' day: some Jewish travelers between Galilee and Judea crossed the Jordan to skirt Samaria, though others went straight through, John records that Jews had no dealings with Samaritans, and "Samaritan" could be thrown as an insult (John 8:48). When Philip preaches Christ there and the city receives it with joy, an eight-century schism is being healed. This is the second circle of Acts 1:8 opening on schedule, and it was persecution that opened it.

Philip is the deacon of Session 4, not the apostle: one of the Seven, set apart by prayer and the laying on of hands to serve tables, now evangelizing a region. Acts never calls the Seven deacons, but the Church has read them as the seed of the diaconate from very early on, and here that structure is already doing what the Church has always seen ordination do: conferring grace that overflows the job description.

The Samaritan sequence (8:14-17) needs careful, honest handling. The Samaritans truly believed and were validly baptized; Luke is emphatic. Yet something remained to be given, and it required the apostles themselves to travel from Jerusalem, pray, and lay on hands. Why did God withhold the Spirit's descent until Peter and John arrived? A reading with deep roots among the Fathers and modern commentators offers the most persuasive account, though Luke himself does not tell us God's reason: at the healing of a schism centuries old, God ensured that Samaria was visibly and sacramentally joined to the apostolic Church, not planted as a rival. One Church, one imposition of hands, no second Gerizim. And in that providential delay, the Church has long recognized the seed of the distinct rite she calls Confirmation.

Simon Magus (8:9-24) gives the Church a word: simony, the attempt to buy or sell sacred power (CCC 2121 cites this passage). Notice what his sin proves: Simon, a professional wonder-worker, watched the apostles' hands and concluded they possessed something real, objective, and transferable, so real he tried to purchase the ability to confer it. Nobody offers money for a metaphor; Simon's sin is its own backhanded testimony that something objective was being given through those hands.

The Ethiopian (8:26-40) is one of the most carefully drawn characters in Acts: a court official of the Candace, treasurer of a kingdom, devout enough to travel perhaps a thousand miles to worship in Jerusalem, wealthy enough to own an Isaiah scroll, literate enough to read it aloud in his chariot. He is the best-case reader of

Scripture in the ancient world. And when Philip, sent by an angel and prompted by the Spirit, asks whether he understands, this best-case reader gives the answer that inspired Scripture itself preserves: "How can I, unless someone guides me?" Prepare the steelman here; this scene speaks directly to the sufficiency-of-private-interpretation debate, and it ends, as Catholic reading of Scripture always ends, in a sacrament: "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?"

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

2 Kings 17:24-34. The origin of the Samaritans: Assyria resettles the northern land with foreign peoples who mix the worship of the Lord with their own gods. Centuries of estrangement begin here, and end, in joy, in Acts 8.

Isaiah 53:7-8. The passage open on the eunuch's lap: the sheep led to the slaughter, silent before its shearers, whose life is taken up from the earth. The suffering Servant is the exact text from which Philip, "beginning with this scripture, told him the good news of Jesus" (8:35). Evangelization has a canonical starting point.

Isaiah 56:3-7. Three chapters after the Servant song, Isaiah makes two promises: the foreigner who joins himself to the Lord will not be separated, and the *eunuch* who holds fast the covenant will receive, within God's house, "a monument and a name better than sons and daughters." Deuteronomy 23:1 had barred eunuchs from the assembly; Isaiah promised the bar would fall. The man in the chariot is a foreigner, and Luke calls him a eunuch, a word that can denote physical condition or simply a court official. If the condition was physical, Deuteronomy 23:1 stood against him at the Temple, and he is reading, without knowing it, the scroll that promises to lift the bar. Acts does not narrate his treatment in Jerusalem, so hold that lightly and let the canonical connection do the work. Let the group discover this; it is the tenderest find of the night.

Psalms 68:31 and Zephaniah 3:10. "Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands to God"; "from beyond the rivers of Ethiopia my suppliants... shall bring my offering." The prophets saw the chariot coming.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyril of Jerusalem, Mystagogical Catecheses (4th century)

Teaching the newly confirmed, St. Cyril explains that as Christ was anointed with the Holy Spirit after His baptism in the Jordan, so the baptized are anointed and sealed, receiving the same Spirit to strengthen them for battle. What the apostles gave by the laying on of hands, the Church continues to give, and Cyril insists the gift is not symbolic: the Spirit Himself is conferred, equipping the Christian as an athlete of Christ.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Jerome, Letter 53, to Paulinus (4th century)

Urging Paulinus to study Scripture seriously, St. Jerome points to the Ethiopian: a devout man, reading the very words of God in his chariot, holding the book and yet not knowing Him whom the book proclaimed, until Philip was sent to open the sealed text and show him Jesus. Jerome's moral is double: never presume to master Scripture without a teacher, and never doubt that the humble reader who asks for a guide will be given one.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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

St. Irenaeus recalls the eunuch as a model of readiness: already devout, already searching the prophets, he needed only to be shown that the One foretold had come, and he believed and was baptized without delay.

Irenaeus adds that this man was afterward sent into the regions of Ethiopia to preach the faith he had himself received.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1288. From the time of the apostles, the imposition of hands conferring the gift of the Spirit has been recognized by Catholic tradition as the origin of the sacrament of Confirmation, which perpetuates the grace of Pentecost in the Church.

CCC 1315. The Catechism opens its In Brief summary of Confirmation by quoting Acts 8:14-17 in full: Peter and John laying hands on the baptized Samaritans, who then received the Holy Spirit. The effects of Confirmation are treated at CCC 1302-1305.

CCC 112-114. Scripture must be read within the living Tradition of the whole Church and according to the analogy of faith; the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word.

CCC 2121. Simony, named for Simon the magician, is the buying or selling of spiritual things; it is impossible to appropriate to oneself spiritual goods and behave toward them as their owner.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 1, The Name. One session away. Guard it absolutely tonight; no hints.

Thread 2, The Map. Tonight the second circle of Acts 1:8 opens formally: Samaria receives the word, and a man from the edge of the known world, which is what Ethiopia meant to a Mediterranean reader, drives the Gospel south. Point at the map verse and let the group mark the progress themselves.

Thread 3, Peter First. When Samaria believes, it is Peter and John whom the apostles send, and Peter who confronts Simon. Even off-stage, the pattern holds. Tally silently.

Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread. Quiet. Note privately that the eunuch's story runs word to water: Scripture opened, then immediately a sacrament. The rhythm of Word and Sacrament is becoming the book's heartbeat.

Session Goals

1. Participants can explain the Samaritan schism and what its healing in Acts 8 reveals about the unity of the Church.
2. Participants can walk through Acts 8:14-17 and articulate why the Church sees the origin of Confirmation there, including an honest account of why the Spirit's descent awaited the apostles.
3. Participants can define simony and explain what Simon's offer inadvertently proves about apostolic power.
4. Participants discover Isaiah 56 behind the eunuch and can present the Catholic understanding of reading Scripture with the Church, answering the strongest case for the sufficiency of private interpretation.
5. Participants each commit to one act of guided Scripture reading and one Philip question this week.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on Simon in later tradition, (3) compress question 2 (the Samaritan schism background) into your own 90 second summary. Do not cut questions 4 and 5 (Confirmation) or the eunuch sequence; they are the twin hearts of the session.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of life, you drove the scattered Church into Samaria and sent Philip running to a chariot. Send us tonight. Open the Scriptures to us as Philip opened Isaiah, seal in us the gift we received at Confirmation, and make us guides for someone who is reading the words of God alone. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Tell us about a teacher, coach, or guide who unlocked something you could never have unlocked alone. What did they do that a book could not?
2. Have you ever seen an old feud or family rift actually heal? What did it take?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 8:4-8. Who carries the Gospel out of Jerusalem, and under what circumstances? What is surprising about both the messenger and the destination?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Not the apostles, who remained in Jerusalem (8:1), but the scattered ordinary believers, "those who were scattered went about preaching the word," and at their head Philip, the deacon ordained to serve tables in Session 4. The destination is the shock: Samaria, the despised rival, the eight-hundred-year wound. Persecution meant to crush the Church becomes the delivery system of Acts 1:8's second circle, and the office created for a food dispute becomes the spearhead of world evangelization. God wastes nothing, including His enemies' plans.

2. Some history so we feel the weight: read 2 Kings 17:24-29 for the Samaritans' origin, and recall John 4:9, "Jews have no dealings with Samaritans." Given centuries of hatred, what does "there was much joy in that city" (8:8) actually mean?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

It means a schism older than Rome itself is being healed. The Samaritans were the half-brothers, the wrong-mountain worshipers, the people Jews crossed rivers to avoid. Jesus had already planted the seed there, at a well, with a woman (John 4). Now the city that heard "salvation is from the Jews" receives salvation from a Jew, with joy. The Gospel's first frontier crossing is not to strangers but to estranged family, which is usually the harder mission, and the one closest to home for most of us.

3. Read Acts 8:9-13. Who is Simon, what was his standing in the city, and what happens to him? Take Luke at his word in verse 13.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A magician who had long amazed the city, called by the people "the power of God which is called Great," a man accustomed to being the show. And Luke says plainly: Simon himself believed, was baptized, and continued with Philip, amazed in his turn. Take it at face value; his baptism was real. What follows is the story of a real convert whose old operating system, power as commodity, reasserts itself, which makes him a warning for the baptized, not a caricature of outsiders.

4. Now the touchstone. Read Acts 8:14-17 slowly, twice. List what the Samaritans already had, what they lacked, who was sent, and what the apostles did. What is odd here, and what does the Church see in it?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

They had: genuine faith and valid baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus. They lacked: the Spirit's descent, "for it had not yet fallen on any of them." The apostles at Jerusalem sent Peter and John, who prayed for them and laid their hands on them, "and they received the Holy Spirit." The oddity is the gap: baptism real, something further still to be given, and given by a distinct rite, the imposition of apostolic hands. The Church has always recognized here the origin of Confirmation, the sacrament that completes baptismal grace with the strengthening gift of the Spirit (CCC 1288), and the Catechism gives this exact passage pride of place, quoting it to open the In Brief summary that closes its treatment of the sacrament (CCC 1315), with the effects of Confirmation set out at CCC 1302-1305. Baptism and Confirmation appear in Scripture the way they appear in the Church: distinct, ordered, and both necessary to full Christian initiation.

5. Press the honest question your group is already thinking: why would God withhold the Spirit's descent until two apostles walked up from Jerusalem? Think about what was at stake in this particular city.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Samaria's whole pathology was the rival shrine: same Scriptures, separate mountain, parallel worship, permanent schism. If Samaritan Christianity had begun as a self-contained movement, church history would have opened with a second Gerizim. Luke never states God's reason, so the Church reasons from what God actually did. The most persuasive reading, and the one with the deepest roots in the tradition, is that at this one hinge God visibly bound the new community to the apostolic college: the Spirit fell through Peter and John's hands so that no one, Samaritan or Jew, could doubt that there is one Church, apostolic in its very plumbing. Offer this to the group as the best explanation of the delay, not as something Scripture states outright. The delay is not a defect in Philip's baptism; it is a providential lesson in unity, and the sacrament it displays, hands laid on the baptized to confer the Spirit, is still tied to that apostolic ministry: in the Latin Church the bishop is the ordinary minister of Confirmation, and priests confirm when the law or a faculty provides, as at the initiation of adults and in danger of death, while in the Eastern Catholic Churches the priest ordinarily chrismates with myron blessed by the bishop. Either way the line runs back to Peter and John on that mission to Samaria.

6. Read Acts 8:18-24. What does Simon want, what does he offer, and what does Peter answer? And here is the backhanded question: what does Simon's offer prove he had observed?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Simon offers money for the power to confer the Spirit by laying on hands, and Peter's answer is volcanic: "Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!" The Church took her word for this sin, simony, from his name (CCC 2121). But notice what the professional wonder-worker's offer concedes: Simon watched the apostles' hands and concluded that something real, objective, and transferable was happening, so real that it was worth capital. Nobody bids on a metaphor. The would-be buyer of apostolic power is its first unintended witness, and a baptized one at that, which is precisely why he stands as a warning to insiders rather than a caricature of outsiders. And note Peter's remedy: repent, and pray for forgiveness, the door left open even for Simon.

7. Read Acts 8:26-31. Assemble the Ethiopian's resume: his office, his devotion, his journey, his book, his activity in the chariot. Is this a careless or ignorant reader? Then weigh his answer to Philip's question.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Court official of the Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of all her treasure; devout enough to travel perhaps a thousand miles to worship in Jerusalem; wealthy enough to own an Isaiah scroll and educated enough to read it aloud. He is the best-case private reader of Scripture in the ancient world: sincere, humble, prayerful, literate, and holding the actual text of God's word. And when asked whether he understands what he is reading, this best-case reader answers, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" Inspired Scripture itself records the verdict: even the ideal reader needs a guide. And heaven agrees, because God's response to this man's hunger was not a private flash of illumination; it was to dispatch a guide, by angel and Spirit, from inside the apostolic Church.

Build the steelman. The Reformation doctrine of Scripture's perspicuity deserves its strongest voice, and its strongest voice is a careful one. The classic Reformed confessions do not claim that every passage is equally plain or equally clear to everyone. They claim that everything necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation is set forth so clearly somewhere in Scripture that the unlearned as well as the learned, making due use of the ordinary means and helped by the Holy Spirit, can reach a sufficient understanding of it, and that no infallible magisterium is required for this. Note carefully that ordinary means includes preaching and teachers; the Protestant claim is against an infallible interpreting authority, not against instruction. The Bereans were praised precisely for testing apostolic preaching against the Scriptures for themselves (Acts 17:11). All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17). God's word is a lamp to my feet (Psalm 119:105), not a locked box requiring a Roman key, and history shows what happens when a clerical class controls the Book. If ordinary believers cannot understand the Bible, why did God write it to them? Let that case stand tall before pressing.

8. Press question one. Notice first what the Catholic claim is not, and then let this very scene define what it is. Does Philip take the scroll away from the eunuch, or open it to him? And where does the guided reading immediately lead (8:35-38)?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The Catholic claim has never been that laymen should not read Scripture; the Church begs them to (and question 9 will concede what Catholics must concede). The claim is about the *sufficiency of the solitary reader*, and this scene tests it perfectly. Philip does not confiscate the scroll; he opens it, "beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus." The guide multiplies the reader's access instead of replacing it. And press the steelman's own concession: if ordinary means are needed, the question is no longer whether a reader needs help but which help God actually authorizes, and in this scene He authorizes a man sent from inside the apostolic Church. And watch where interpretation inside the Church lands: not in a viewpoint but in a sacrament, "See, here is water! What is to prevent my being baptized?" Scripture read with the Church runs down to the water; that is the Catholic rhythm of Word and Sacrament in a single afternoon. Add the apostles' own testimony about the solitary reader: Peter warns that in Paul's letters are things hard to understand, which the untaught twist to their destruction, and that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because prophecy never came by human impulse but from men moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 3:16; 1:20-21). Be precise with that second one: Peter's immediate point is that Scripture's origin is not private, and the Church draws the consequence that a word which did not come privately is not read rightly in private either. Do not present it as a bare prohibition on private reading; the origin clause is what gives it force. The Bereans, for their part, examined the Scriptures *with the apostle Paul preaching in the room*, which is

guided reading, not solo reading; their nobility was eagerness, not independence.

9. Press question two, and make the honest concessions. What must Catholics grant to the Protestant instinct here, and what does the Church actually ask of Catholic readers of Scripture?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Grant freely: Scripture's central message is luminous, and souls have been converted by a Gideon Bible in a motel drawer; God is not handcuffed to catechists. Grant too that Catholics have sometimes lived as if the Bible were clergy property. That is our failure to own, not the Church's teaching. And the Church's own recent teaching runs hard the other way: the Second Vatican Council directed that easy access to Sacred Scripture be provided for all the Christian faithful, and exhorted all Christians to frequent reading of the Scriptures, since in St. Jerome's words "ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ" (Dei Verbum 22, 25). What the Church asks is not less reading but accompanied reading: Scripture within the living Tradition that produced its canon, with the analogy of faith as the guardrail (CCC 112-114). The eunuch's humility, not his scroll ownership, is the model: the reader who asks for a guide is the reader God sends Philip to.

10. Live discovery, and the tenderest one tonight. The eunuch is reading Isaiah 53. Turn just three chapters forward and read Isaiah 56:3-7, remembering Deuteronomy 23:1, which barred eunuchs from the assembly of the Lord. What is this man holding in his hands, and what does his baptism mean?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

If his condition was physical (the word can also denote a court official), Deuteronomy would have excluded him from the assembly, and he may well have met some version of that exclusion in Jerusalem, a worshiper kept at the margins. And the scroll on his lap promises, three chapters past the passage he was puzzling over, that the day is coming when the eunuch who holds fast the covenant will receive in God's house "a monument and a name better than sons and daughters, an everlasting name which shall not be cut off," and the foreigner will be joyful in a house of prayer for all peoples. He is holding his own invitation and cannot read the address until Philip shows him the Host who wrote it. His baptism in roadside water reads as Isaiah 56 coming true: the first man baptized after the Samaritans is a foreign eunuch, the double exclusion doubly welcomed. "And he went on his way rejoicing" (8:39), carrying the Gospel toward the end of the earth, exactly as the map verse promised.

DIG DEEPER: SIMON MAGUS AFTERWARD

Early Christian writers remembered Simon darkly: St. Irenaeus and St. Justin Martyr, himself a Samaritan, describe him as the fountainhead of Gnostic sects, and later legends multiplied around his name. Scripture itself leaves him at Peter's call to repentance and his shaken plea, "Pray for me to the Lord" (8:24), and there the honest reader must leave him too: a baptized man at a crossroads, his ending unrecorded. The certainty he left behind is the word simony and its lesson: grace has no price because it has an infinite one, already paid.

DIG DEEPER: THE ROAD SOUTH

Ancient tradition, reported by Irenaeus and cherished by the Ethiopian church to this day, holds that the eunuch carried the Gospel home and became its first herald in his own land. Ethiopia's Christian roots are among the oldest on earth, and Psalm 68:31 stood over them from the beginning: "Ethiopia shall stretch out her

hands to God." One roadside catechesis, one baptism, one rejoicing traveler: the arithmetic of evangelization has never required large numbers, only obedient guides.

Send (15 minutes)

1. Philip heard a strange prompt, "go to a desert road at noon," and obeyed at a run. What is the nearest thing to a chariot in your life right now, a person or situation you sense a nudge toward and keep explaining away?
2. The eunuch's greatness was a humble question. Where in your faith are you pretending to understand more than you do, and who could you actually ask?

Live It This Week

Two assignments in the spirit of the chariot. First, read guided: take next week's chapter, Acts 9:1-31, and read it once with a Catholic guide at your elbow, the notes of a Catholic study Bible or a trusted Catholic commentary, deliberately practicing accompanied reading. Notice at least one thing the guide showed you that you would have driven past alone. Second, ask a Philip question: once this week, gently ask someone in your life, "What do you actually make of God these days?", and then do what Philip did first in the chariot: listen. You are not assigned to win an argument. You are assigned to sit down beside someone.

Closing Prayer

Father, your Spirit caught up Philip and your providence stationed a chariot on a desert road. Nothing in our week is outside that providence. Seal in us the gift of Confirmation, make us humble enough to ask for guides and generous enough to become them, and let everyone we meet go on their way rejoicing. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture he told him the good news of Jesus." (Acts 8:35)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 6, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 8:4-8 (Philip in Samaria)
2. Acts 8:9-13 (Simon believes)
3. Acts 8:14-17 (the apostles' hands; the Spirit)
4. Acts 8:18-24 (simony)
5. Acts 8:26-40 (the Ethiopian)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

6. 2 Kings 17:24-29 (origin of the Samaritans)
7. Isaiah 53:7-8 (the passage in the chariot)
8. Isaiah 56:3-7 (the eunuch's promise)
9. Deuteronomy 23:1 (the old exclusion)
10. Psalm 68:31; Zephaniah 3:10 (Ethiopia foreseen)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

11. Acts 8:1 (the scattering); Acts 1:8 (the map)
12. John 4:1-42; John 4:9; John 8:48 (Jesus and Samaria)
13. Acts 17:11 (the Bereans, steelman)
14. 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Psalm 119:105 (steelman)
15. 2 Peter 1:20; 3:16 (hard to understand; twisted)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

16. CCC 1288; CCC 1315; CCC 112-114; CCC 2121; Dei Verbum 22, 25

THE WAY, SESSION 7

Why Do You Persecute Me?

*The Acts of the Apostles 9:1-31, The Damascus Road, the Body of Christ, and the Name We Have
Been Waiting For*

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants watch the Church's fiercest enemy become her greatest missionary, and discover two things in the wreckage on the Damascus road: that the risen Jesus so identifies with His Church that persecuting her is persecuting Him, "why do you persecute *me*?", and that even the man called directly by heaven is sent to the Church, to a nobody named Ananias, for his sight, his baptism, and his commission. Tonight is also the night a six-session question gets its answer: the movement finally has a name, and it is the name on the cover of this study.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church is the Body of Christ. Saul, so far as the record tells us, never met Jesus of Nazareth; he struck at Christians. Yet the voice from heaven says "me." The whole Catholic doctrine of the Mystical Body, and Paul's own later theology of it (1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Colossians 1:24), germinates in that single pronoun (CCC 787-795). St. Augustine gave the doctrine its classic name, the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ, Head and members: the Head in heaven cried out for His members on earth. And the secondary touchstone follows immediately: Christ, who could have completed Saul's conversion Himself on the spot, instead routes his healing, his baptism, and his instructions through the hands of an ordinary disciple. Even Paul receives grace the way everyone does: through the Church.

What You Need to Know

Open with the threat level. Saul is not a heckler; he is "breathing threats and murder," armed with extradition letters from the high priest, expanding the persecution internationally to Damascus, about 135 miles north. Luke has shown us his resume in installments: coat-minder at Stephen's stoning (7:58), approving of the death (8:1), ravaging the church house by house (8:3). The Church's situation, humanly speaking, is about to get much worse.

The encounter itself (9:3-9) is a theophany in the full Old Testament sense: light from heaven, a voice, the terrified question "Who are you, Lord?" And notice the doubled name, "Saul, Saul," the form God's calls have always taken: "Abraham, Abraham" at Moriah, "Moses, Moses" at the bush, "Samuel, Samuel" in the night. Luke's Jewish readers would hear the pattern instantly: this is a prophetic call narrative, and the God issuing the call identifies Himself as Jesus of Nazareth.

The center of gravity is the pronoun. Saul has never laid a hand on Jesus; Jesus has been ascended for perhaps two or three years. Yet: "why do you persecute *me*?... I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Not "my followers," not "my movement." *Me*. The theology Saul will spend his life writing, the Church as Christ's own Body, is handed to him in his first second of Christian existence, as an accusation. Give this pronoun a full question; it is the touchstone.

Then watch what Jesus does not do. He does not catechize Saul on the road or baptize him with a word (a direct commission will come too, as Paul recounts in Acts 26:16-18, but not the sacraments). He says: "rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do" (9:6). Three days blind and fasting, Saul's personal triduum, and then the Lord sends Ananias, a disciple otherwise unknown to history, whose hands restore Saul's sight, whose ministry fills him with the Holy Spirit, and whose baptism washes his sins away (9:17-18; Ananias's own words at 22:16: "Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins"). Prepare the steelman here: Paul's conversion is the favorite Protestant paradigm of unmediated salvation, and the text itself is the answer.

Do not miss verse 2, and do not let the group miss it, though you must not flag it in advance: Saul asks for letters against "any belonging to **the Way**." Six sessions of waiting end here. The movement's first recorded name is not Christians, not the church of the Nazarene, but the Way, *hē hodos*. Let a participant catch it;

someone will, because it is the title of the booklet in their hands. The Thread Watch section tells you how to land the moment and where the thread goes next.

The aftermath matters as much as the flash: Saul preaching in Damascus to general astonishment, the plot against his life, the escape in a basket, and Jerusalem's entirely reasonable terror of him, until Barnabas, the true coin of Session 4, personally vouches for him before the apostles (9:26-27). Every convert needs an Ananias to receive him and a Barnabas to vouch for him; ask your group who played those roles for them, and for whom they will play them.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Exodus 3:1-6. The burning bush: divine light, the doubled name "Moses, Moses," the self-identification of God, and a commission the man feels unequal to. The Damascus road is a call narrative in the Sinai family, and Saul, the expert Pharisee, would have known exactly what genre he was suddenly living in.

Genesis 22:11; 1 Samuel 3:10. "Abraham, Abraham"; "Samuel, Samuel." The doubled vocative is the grammar of God's most solemn personal calls. "Saul, Saul" places this Pharisee, mid-atrocity, in the lineage of the patriarchs and prophets, which is itself a mercy: the voice that stops him is the voice that has always called Israel's servants.

Jeremiah 1:5 and Isaiah 49:1, 6. The prophet consecrated from the womb, appointed a light to the nations, that salvation may reach to the end of the earth. Paul will later describe his own call in exactly these terms (Galatians 1:15), and the Lord's word to Ananias, "a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel" (9:15), is Isaiah 49 given a passport.

Jonah 1:17. Three days in darkness before a mission to the feared enemy. Christian readers have long seen in Saul's three days without sight, neither eating nor drinking, a burial with Christ before rising in the water, and Jesus Himself named the three day pattern "the sign of Jonah" (Matthew 12:40). Let the group find the number and its meaning.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine of Hippo, Expositions of the Psalms and Sermons on the Conversion of St. Paul (5th century)

St. Augustine never tired of the pronoun. The Head, he preached, was in heaven, untouchable, yet He cried "why do you persecute me?" because the Head cries out for His members: when the body is trodden on, the tongue says "you are stepping on me," though no one touched the tongue. Christ and His Church are the whole Christ, totus Christus, one person mystically, and whoever strikes the least believer strikes Him.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom, Homilies in Praise of St. Paul (De laudibus sancti Pauli), Antioch, 4th century

Chrysostom, who loved Paul above all the saints, marvels that grace took the Church's most violent enemy at the peak of his fury and made of him her most tireless servant, and that Paul cooperated so totally that he outworked them all. The wolf, he says, was turned into more than a shepherd: into a man who wore his chains as ornaments and carried the Name to nation after nation. No sinner, Chrysostom concludes, may despair after Damascus, and no saint may boast.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Bede the Venerable, Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles (8th century)

St. Bede lingers on the Lord's strange economy: Christ, appearing in glory, could have taught Saul everything on the road, yet He sent him into the city to receive the word, the Spirit, and baptism through Ananias. The Lord so honors the ministry He has placed in His Church, Bede says, that even one called by a voice from heaven is perfected through the hands of a fellow servant, that the proud might learn that no one is Christian alone.

Catechism Connection

CCC 787-789. Christ and His Church form one body; the comparison of the Church with the body casts light on the intimate bond between Christ and His Church: He is the Head, we are the members, one mystic person.

CCC 795. The Catechism crowns the doctrine with Augustine's own word: Christ and the Church together are the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ, and quotes St. Joan of Arc's luminous simplification: "About Jesus Christ and the Church, I simply know they are just one thing."

CCC 1263. By baptism all sins are forgiven, original sin and all personal sins; nothing remains that would impede entry into the Kingdom. Ananias's words to Saul, rise, be baptized, wash away your sins, are the sacrament speaking plainly.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 1, The Name: RESOLUTION TONIGHT. Acts 9:2: Saul seeks letters against "any belonging to the Way." Six sessions of a nameless movement end in the mouth of its persecutor. Do not announce it; question 2 walks the group into the verse and lets someone at the table catch the words on their own booklet cover. When they do, give the moment room, then open the meaning: Jesus said "I am the way" (John 14:6); Isaiah cried "prepare the way of the Lord" (40:3), the verse the Baptist wore; and a way is not a theory you hold but a road you walk, a whole manner of life. Then tell them the thread is not finished: this name will appear five more times in Acts (19:9; 19:23; 22:4; 24:14; 24:22), always at charged moments, and the study's final session holds one last secret about how Luke ends the whole book. Say no more than that.

Thread 2, The Map. Damascus is outside the holy land: the Gospel's collision with Saul happens on the road *between* circles, and his commission aims at "Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel" (9:15). The third circle, the end of the earth, has just been assigned its courier.

Thread 3, Peter First. Quiet tonight, but note 9:26-28: even Saul, called by Christ Himself, is brought to the apostles in Jerusalem to be received. Luke keeps tying the spread of the Gospel to apostolic communion, and here he does it with his hardest case: even the man called by Christ on the road is not left to stand on his own testimony, but is brought to the Twelve and received. The thread resumes loudly next session.

Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread. A whisper: Saul's fast ends, "he took food and was strengthened" (9:19), among the disciples, after baptism. Say nothing; just notice the rhythm settling in.

Session Goals

1. Participants can explain the pronoun of 9:4-5 and articulate the doctrine of the Mystical Body it contains, in Augustine's *totus Christus* terms.
2. Participants discover the call-narrative pattern (doubled name, light, commission) and the Jonah pattern in Saul's three days.

3. Participants can answer the strongest Protestant use of Paul's conversion as a paradigm of unmediated, churchless salvation, from the text of Acts 9 itself.
4. Participants catch and can explain the movement's first name, the Way, and what it says about Christianity as a manner of life.
5. Participants each identify their Saul (continuing last week's prayer), their Ananias, and one person for whom they can be a Barnabas.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on the three accounts, (3) compress question 8 (the basket and Barnabas) into a summary. Do not cut question 2 (the Name resolution), question 4 (the pronoun), or the steelman; they are the session.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, you stopped a man in the middle of his worst plan and called him by name, twice, the way you called Abraham and Moses and Samuel. Call us tonight. Show us where we have been kicking against the goads, heal what we cannot see, and send us an Ananias when we are blind and a Barnabas when no one trusts us yet. You are the Way; make us people who belong to you. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. What is the biggest turnaround you have ever personally witnessed in someone, and what did the people around them do while it was happening: help, hinder, or refuse to believe it?
2. Have you ever been absolutely certain you were right and later discovered you were fighting against the very thing you should have been serving? What finally opened your eyes?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 9:1-2. Assemble the threat: what is Saul doing, with whose authority, aimed at whom, and how far is he willing to travel? What does this tell us about the Church's situation, humanly speaking?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Still breathing threats and murder, Saul obtains extradition letters from the high priest to the synagogues of Damascus, 135 miles away, to drag believers, "men or women," back to Jerusalem in bonds. The persecution is going international, led by its most gifted and most sincere zealot. Humanly speaking, the Church's darkest figure is about to expand his reach, and no strategy meeting in Jerusalem has an answer for him. Heaven does.

2. Stay in verse 2 one more moment and read it word for word. Luke tells us what Saul's arrest warrants actually called the people he was hunting. What is it, and why should everyone at this table check the cover of their booklet?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"Any belonging to the Way." Six sessions ago we noticed something odd: this movement had no name, and we agreed to watch for what the world would end up calling it. Here it is, and its first appearance in Scripture is in a persecutor's paperwork: the Way, *hē hodos*. Not a philosophy, a school, or a party: a road. Jesus had said "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6); Isaiah had cried "prepare the way of the Lord" (40:3); and the name confesses what Christianity is, a whole manner of life that is walked, not merely a set of opinions that is held. You cannot belong to a lecture. You can belong to a Way. And keep watching: Luke will use this name five more times before his book ends, always at moments of pressure, and it has one more secret to give up in our final session together.

3. Read Acts 9:3-6. Notice how the voice addresses Saul, and remember your Old Testament: where else does God call someone by a doubled name? What kind of scene is Saul suddenly inside of?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"Saul, Saul": the doubled vocative of God's most solemn calls: "Abraham, Abraham" at Moriah (Genesis 22:11), "Moses, Moses" at the burning bush (Exodus 3:4), "Samuel, Samuel" in the night (1 Samuel 3:10), each with

light or fire or the temple near. Saul the trained Pharisee knows this grammar cold; he is inside a prophetic call narrative, the genre reserved for God commissioning His servants, and the terror of it is who issues the call: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." The crucified man Saul's theology had ruled out is speaking from the glory of God.

4. Now the pronoun that changes everything. Saul has never met Jesus of Nazareth, who ascended before Saul ever raised a hand against the Church. Yet the voice says, "why do you persecute *me*?" Not my followers. Me. What is Jesus revealing about His relationship to the people Saul has been dragging to prison, and where will Saul, as Paul, take this single pronoun?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

That the Church is not Christ's fan club but Christ's Body: so united to Him that her wounds are His wounds and touching her is touching Him. St. Augustine gave the doctrine its name, the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ, Head and members: the Head in heaven cried out because His members on earth were being trodden on, as the tongue cries "you are stepping on me" when the foot is crushed. Saul will spend his life unpacking his first second of Christian revelation: one body with many members, "you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:12-27); "in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the church" (Colossians 1:24). The Catechism seals it with St. Joan of Arc: about Jesus Christ and the Church, "I simply know they are just one thing" (CCC 795). Every consequence of Catholic ecclesiology, that the Church is more than an institution, that harming her members is sacrilege, that Christ is truly met in her, is folded inside the pronoun that knocked Saul to the ground.

5. Read Acts 9:8-9, slowly. Count the days, and note what Saul does and does not do. Where in Scripture have we seen three days of darkness before a new mission, and what is happening to Saul in that house on Straight Street?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Three days without sight, neither eating nor drinking. Jonah spent three days and three nights in the fish before his mission to the enemy city he despised (Jonah 1:17), the pattern Jesus called "the sign of Jonah" and applied to His own three days in the earth (Matthew 12:40). Acts tells us only the fast and the blindness, but the shape is one Christians have read the same way for centuries: a personal triduum, the old man, Saul the persecutor, in the tomb, fasting and praying in the dark, waiting to rise. Luke will time the rising precisely: sight, the Spirit, and baptism arrive together, through a pair of very ordinary hands.

6. Read Acts 9:10-19. Who is Ananias, what does the Lord ask of him, how does he initially respond, and what happens through his hands? List everything Saul receives, and from whom.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A disciple at Damascus, otherwise unknown to history, no office named, no resume given (Acts calls him only a disciple; whether he held any office we are never told). The Lord asks him to go lay hands on the most feared man in the Christian world, and Ananias answers with the most relatable prayer in Acts: Lord, I have heard about this man. He goes anyway, and his first word to the terrorist is "Brother Saul." Through Ananias's hands Saul receives his sight, is filled with the Holy Spirit, and is baptized, and Ananias's own words, reported by Paul later, name what the water did: "Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name" (22:16). The greatest theologian in Christian history was healed, welcomed, and, on the strength of Ananias's own

words at 22:16, washed by a disciple with no office recorded, whose only stated qualification was obedience.

Build the steelman. Paul's conversion is a favorite Protestant paradigm of direct, unmediated salvation: Christ Himself saves a man on a road, no priest, no sacrament, no institution in sight, and Paul himself insists on it: "the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel, for I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ," and he "did not confer with flesh and blood" (Galatians 1:11-12, 16). If the apostle to the nations needed no Church to be saved, why does anyone? Salvation is a direct encounter between the soul and Christ; everything else is scaffolding. Then put it in its strongest and most careful form, the one a well catechized Lutheran or Reformed Christian would actually make, which is not that the Church is dispensable. It is this: Saul is justified on the road, by grace, through faith, in the moment he calls Jesus Lord; Ananias follows three days later. What Ananias brings therefore signs, seals and publicly confirms a salvation already given, and Acts 9 by itself does not show that the water and the hands caused it. Nothing in the chapter says Saul was unsaved between the light and the laying on of hands. State it at full strength; it is a serious argument with a real Pauline text behind it.

7. Press question one. Stay strictly inside Acts 9. Jesus is standing in glory, speaking audibly, with Saul's total attention. List what Jesus could have done on the road, and what He actually chose to do instead. Then reconcile Galatians 1 with the scene it describes.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He could have catechized Saul on the spot, conferred the Spirit with a word, declared his sins forgiven, and commissioned him directly; He is God, mid-theophany. What He actually says is: "rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do." The healing, the Spirit, the washing of sins, and the instructions are all deliberately routed through the Church, through Ananias's hands and Ananias's baptism, and Saul's mission is publicly owned in communion with the apostles: Barnabas brings him to them on his first visit to Jerusalem (9:27), and years later Paul says he went up again and laid his gospel before them "lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain" (Galatians 2:2), and received from James and Cephas and John "the right hand of fellowship" (Galatians 2:9). Paul is emphatic that they added nothing to his gospel (Galatians 2:6); what he sought and received was communion, not a license. Galatians 1 answers a different question: the *source and authority* of Paul's gospel, which came from Christ, not from human invention. The *means* of his cleansing and incorporation were sacramental and ecclesial, and the same Paul says so: be baptized and wash away your sins. And to the careful form of the objection: Luke does not narrate a Saul who is complete on the road and merely ratified in the city. He narrates a Saul who is told he will be told what to do, who is left blind and fasting, and whose sight, Spirit and washing all arrive together through a man sent to him. Whatever happened on the road, heaven treated it as unfinished until Damascus. The one convert in history who least needed the Church's mediation, by the Protestant reading, is the convert whose mediation Luke documents most carefully. If Damascus proves anything, it proves that heaven itself refuses to bypass the Body it just finished defending with the pronoun me.

8. Read Acts 9:20-30. Trace Saul's first steps as a believer: what does he do immediately, what does it cost, and who takes the risk that makes his acceptance in Jerusalem possible? Read verse 27 with Session 4 in mind.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He proclaims Jesus in the synagogues "immediately," confounding Damascus; the hunters become the hunted, and he escapes the city in a basket through the wall, the great persecutor smuggled out like contraband. In Jerusalem the disciples are afraid of him, entirely reasonably, and the deadlock is broken by one man: Barnabas, the son of encouragement whose honest generosity opened Session 4, personally takes him, brings

him to the apostles, and vouches for the reality of the road and the boldness at Damascus. Every convert needs both figures this chapter gives us: an Ananias willing to say "brother" first, and a Barnabas willing to stake his own credibility on someone's new beginning. The Church grows on people who take those risks.

9. Read Acts 9:15-16 and 9:31. What does the Lord tell Ananias that Saul's future holds, and how does Luke close this section of the story? Measure verse 31 against verse 1.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"A chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name." The call and the cost are issued together; the Name he persecuted becomes the Name he will carry and suffer for, to the third circle of the map. And then Luke's summary verse: the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up, walking in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit, and multiplied. The chapter that opened with the Church's worst enemy breathing murder closes with the Church at peace, because God did not merely stop the enemy. He hired him.

DIG DEEPER: WHY DOES LUKE TELL THIS STORY THREE TIMES?

Acts recounts the Damascus road three times: here in chapter 9, and twice from Paul's own mouth, before the Jerusalem mob (22) and before King Agrippa (26). Luke, the most economical of writers, spends his ink where the weight is: the conversion of Paul is, after the Resurrection and Pentecost, the hinge of his whole two-volume work, the event that carries the Gospel to the end of the earth. The repetitions also model something: Paul's testimony flexes for each audience, Hebrew details for the mob, prophetic vocation for the king, one story told three ways. Every believer should be able to do the same with theirs.

DIG DEEPER: THE STREET CALLED STRAIGHT

Luke gives an address: the house of Judas on Straight Street (9:11), a street Damascus still preserves under its traditional identification with the Roman Via Recta. The Lord of the theophany speaks in street addresses; grace is never generic. Somewhere on an ordinary street this week is the person God intends to reach through an ordinary disciple, and He knows the house number.

Send (15 minutes)

1. Ananias's first word to his persecutor was "Brother." Who has God placed in your path that you have written off, and what would be your version of walking to Straight Street?
2. Barnabas risked his reputation to vouch for a convert nobody trusted. Who around you, new to faith, returning to the Church, or carrying a past, needs someone to publicly stand with them, and will you?

Live It This Week

Keep praying for your Saul from last week, by name, daily; you now know what those prayers can purchase. Then add the two roles this chapter modeled. Be an Ananias once: one concrete act of welcome toward someone you have feared, resented, or avoided, beginning, if you can manage it, with the word brother or sister. And be a Barnabas once: one act of vouching, publicly including, introducing, or standing beside someone who is new, returning, or distrusted. Do both quietly. Damascus teaches that the hinge moments of

Church history run through people whose names almost nobody remembers, and whose obedience God never forgets.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you are the Way, and by your mercy we belong to you. Thank you for every Ananias who called us brother and every Barnabas who believed in us early. Make our hardest cases your chosen instruments, teach us that every wound to your Church is a wound to you, and lead us on the road until we see you face to face. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel.'" (Acts 9:15)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 7, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 9:1-2 (the letters; the Way)
2. Acts 9:3-9 (the theophany; three days)
3. Acts 9:10-19 (Ananias)
4. Acts 9:20-30 (Damascus, the basket, Barnabas)
5. Acts 9:31 (the summary of peace)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

6. Exodus 3:1-6 (the bush; Moses, Moses)
7. Genesis 22:11; 1 Samuel 3:10 (the doubled call)
8. Jonah 1:17 (three days and nights in the fish)
9. Jeremiah 1:5; Isaiah 49:1, 6 (called from the womb; light to the nations)
10. Isaiah 40:3 (prepare the way of the Lord)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

11. Acts 7:58; 8:1-3 (Saul's resume)
12. John 14:6 (I am the way)
13. Matthew 12:40 (the sign of Jonah)
14. Acts 22:3-16; 26:9-18 (Paul's retellings; 22:16, wash away your sins)
15. Galatians 1:11-16; 2:1-2 (steelman and its answer)
16. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Colossians 1:24 (the Body)
17. Acts 19:9; 19:23; 22:4; 24:14; 24:22 (the Way, future sightings)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

18. CCC 787-789; CCC 795; CCC 1263

THE WAY, SESSION 8

What God Has Cleansed

The Acts of the Apostles 9:32-11:30, Peter's Keys, the House of Cornelius, and a New Name at Antioch

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants watch God engineer the most consequential turn in Church history, the admission of the Gentiles, with double visions, perfect timing, and a Pentecost of His own choosing, and discover that He routed the whole revolution through one particular man: Peter. The group also finds two buried treasures: that Peter, son of Jonah, receives his call to the Gentiles in Joppa, the very port from which Jonah fled the same mission, and that the disciples' second name in Acts, Christians, is coined at Antioch, the city this study has been quietly planting since Session 4.

Catholic Touchstone. The keys in action. Jesus gave Peter the keys of the kingdom (Matthew 16:18-19), and Acts 10 and 11 show him using them: heaven's vision comes to Peter, the Gentile door is unlocked by Peter's word, the Spirit falls while Peter preaches, baptism is commanded by Peter, and when Jerusalem objects, Peter's testimony silences the objection (11:18). Years later, at the Council, Peter himself will state it as settled fact: God chose "that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe" (15:7). The Church's catholicity, her opening to every nation (CCC 831), received its decisive, publicly ratified opening through the Petrine office, even as scattered believers were already daring to preach to Greeks at Antioch (11:19-21).

What You Need to Know

The section opens with Peter on tour (9:32-43), and Luke builds his credentials with two miracles that deliberately echo his Master's: Aeneas the paralytic told to rise, and Tabitha raised from death with the mourners put outside and a word spoken to the corpse, the near-twin of Jesus raising Jairus's daughter, where "Talitha cumi" becomes, one letter apart, "Tabitha, rise." Elisha received his master's spirit in Session 1's typology; here is the receipt: the Master's own works flowing through His apostle's hands.

Then the detail that unlocks the whole section, which your group must find themselves: Peter lodges *in Joppa*, with Simon a tanner (9:43). Joppa is the port from which Jonah fled rather than carry God's word to the Gentiles (Jonah 1:3). And Peter's patronymic, given by Jesus in the very sentence that gave him the keys, is *Bar-Jona*, son of Jonah (Matthew 16:17). The son of Jonah, standing in Jonah's port, is about to be asked to do the thing Jonah refused. This time he goes. Do not reveal it; question 3 walks them into it.

The Cornelius narrative (10:1-48) is the longest single story in Acts, told and then retold in chapter 11, which is Luke's way of underlining. Note the double vision structure: God prepares Cornelius by an angel and Peter by the sheet, timing the messengers' knock to the instant of Peter's puzzlement. Nobody freelances here; heaven choreographs both sides. Cornelius is a God-fearer, devout, generous, and prayerful, and the angel's words deserve a Dig Deeper: his prayers and alms "have ascended as a memorial before God" (10:4), the vocabulary of the temple's memorial offering (Leviticus 2:2). God receives the devotion of a man not yet baptized as a fragrant sacrifice, and answers it by sending, not private illumination, but Peter.

The vision of the sheet (10:9-16) uses the food laws of Leviticus 11 as a living parable. Peter's threefold refusal, "No, Lord," is answered by the session's title verse: "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." Peter himself interprets the vision for us, and the group should catch that he does not interpret it as being about menus: "God has shown me that I should not call any *man* common or unclean" (10:28). The kosher laws had served as Israel's daily-rehearsed separation from the nations; with the nations now being called in, the sign yields to the thing signified.

The climax (10:44-48) is the Gentile Pentecost: the Spirit falls on all who hear, with tongues, *while Peter is still speaking*, and before baptism. Prepare the steelman here; this is the strongest sacraments-optional text in Acts, and Peter's own response is the answer. Chapter 11 then shows the revolution ratified: Peter recounts

everything to the circumcision party, ending with the unanswerable question, "who was I that I could withstand God?", and Jerusalem glorifies God: "then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life" (11:18).

Finally Antioch (11:19-30): the scattered believers preach to Greeks, a great number turn, Jerusalem sends Barnabas, Barnabas fetches Saul from Tarsus, and for a whole year they teach the church there. And Luke drops his quiet thunderbolt: "in Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians" (11:26). The Name thread gains a second name, and the city Session 4 planted through Nicolaus the proselyte becomes the launch pad of everything that follows.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Jonah 1:1-3. The prophet commanded to carry God's word to the great Gentile city flees "to Joppa" and boards a ship away. Acts reverses the scene at the same dock: Simon Bar-Jona, son of Jonah, lodged in Joppa, receives the Gentile summons and goes. Where the first Jonah ran from Gentile mercy, the son of Jonah walks into it, because he follows a greater Jonah who spent three days in the deep for the world (Matthew 12:40-41).

Leviticus 11. The clean and unclean animals, Israel's daily rehearsed distinction from the nations, the pedagogy of separation. The sheet of Acts 10 gathers every category and hands Peter the new lesson: the separation has served its purpose; the nations are being called.

Leviticus 2:2, 9. The memorial portion of the grain offering, burned so its fragrance ascends before the Lord. The angel tells Cornelius his prayers and alms have ascended "as a memorial before God": the devotion of a Gentile seeker described in the temple's own sacrificial vocabulary.

1 Kings 17:17-24 and 2 Kings 4:32-37. Elijah and Elisha each raise a dead child in an upper room, alone with the body, with prayer. Peter with Tabitha, everyone put outside, kneeling in prayer, then the word to the corpse, stands deliberately in their line, and in his Master's (Mark 5:40-41). The prophetic mantle of Session 1 keeps proving itself in the apostle's hands, an echo rather than a replacement: the works are still the Master's, done by a servant in His name.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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

Chrysostom stands in awe of the choreography of Acts 10: an angel to Cornelius at one hour, a vision to Peter at another, the messengers reaching the gate at the very moment of Peter's perplexity, the Spirit commanding him downstairs. Nothing is left to chance, he says, so that neither Peter could doubt he was sent nor Cornelius that he was received; when God opens a door this large, He turns every hinge Himself.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Smyrnaeans, 8 (written around AD 107)

From the very city where the disciples were first called Christians, its second-generation bishop gave the Church her other great adjective: wherever Jesus Christ is, St. Ignatius wrote, there is the Catholic Church, the first surviving use of the phrase. The community named at Antioch for belonging to Christ was, within two generations, teaching the world that Christ's Church is *katholikos*, universal, exactly what the house of Cornelius had proven.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine of Hippo, On Baptism and Sermons (5th century)

St. Augustine returns often to Cornelius: a man whose prayers and alms God accepted before baptism, and who nevertheless was not left where he was, but was sent Peter, was taught, and was baptized. God's grace ran ahead of the sacrament, Augustine says, precisely in order to lead him to the sacrament; heaven honored the seeker by incorporating him, not by exempting him.

Catechism Connection

CCC 831. The Church is catholic because Christ has sent her to the whole human race: all men are called to belong to the new People of God, which is to be gathered from every nation.

CCC 552-553. Christ gave Peter the keys of the kingdom, the power to bind and loose, an authority to open the doors of the kingdom. Acts 10 and 11 are the keys turning in history's largest lock.

CCC 781-782. God has willed to save men not merely as individuals but as a people, the new People of God, whose destiny is the Kingdom and whose members come from every nation under heaven.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 1, The Name: second beat tonight. "In Antioch the disciples were for the first time called Christians" (11:26). Let the group meet it in the text, then set the two names side by side: the Way, the insiders' name for a life walked, and Christians, likely an outsiders' label, perhaps even a mocking one, partisans of this Christ, that the believers wore until it became glory (1 Peter 4:16). Both names confess the same thing from two directions: these people belong to Christ, body and road. The thread still holds one final secret for Session 14.

Thread 2, The Map. The coastal plain (Lydda, Joppa, Caesarea) and then the leap to Antioch, the third city of the Roman Empire. The end of the earth now has a forward operating base, and Session 4's quiet plant, Nicolaus the proselyte of Antioch, has flowered. If anyone remembers him, enjoy the moment.

Thread 3, Peter First: the crescendo. Count tonight's tally aloud in your preparation: Peter heals Aeneas, raises Tabitha, receives the vision, opens the Gentile door, commands the baptism of the first uncircumcised Gentile household, and single-handedly carries the ratification at Jerusalem. This is the thread's loudest session. It has one more note to play, and then it will resolve. Say nothing yet.

Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread. Quiet, but notice its shadow: the whole crisis of these chapters is table fellowship, "you went to uncircumcised men and ate with them" (11:3). Whom the Church eats with is never a small question in Acts. File that away.

Session Goals

1. Participants discover the Jonah and Joppa reversal and can explain what it reveals about Peter's Gentile commission.
2. Participants can walk through the double-vision structure of Acts 10 and articulate what the sheet vision did and did not mean, using Peter's own interpretation.
3. Participants can explain the Gentile Pentecost, answer the strongest sacraments-optional reading of 10:44-48, and state why Peter commands baptism anyway.

4. Participants can trace the keys of Matthew 16 through Acts 10 and 11 and explain why the Gentile door opened through Peter.
5. Participants each name one category of person they treat as common or unclean, and commit to one act of table fellowship across that line.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. This is a long stretch of text; trust the week's take-home reading and read aloud only the marked verses. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on Simon the tanner, (3) compress question 1 (Aeneas and Tabitha) to your own 90 second summary. Do not cut question 3 (Jonah), the steelman, or question 9 (Antioch and the name).

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father of all nations, you heard the prayers of a Roman soldier and sent him the fisherman who held your keys. Nothing in your Church has ever been an accident. Teach us tonight what you taught Peter on the rooftop: that no one you have cleansed may be called common by us. Widen our hearts to the width of your Church, and set our table the size of yours. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Tell us about a time you were completely wrong about a person or a group of people. What finally corrected you, and how did it feel while it was happening?
2. Has God ever seemed to arrange a coincidence in your life, timing too perfect to be chance? What happened?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 9:32-43, Peter's two miracles and where they leave him lodging. Listen for echoes: how does Peter raise Tabitha, and where have we seen this scene, almost word for word, before? Look up Mark 5:40-41.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Aeneas, paralyzed eight years, is told "Jesus Christ heals you; rise," and rises. Then Tabitha: Peter puts all the mourners outside, kneels in prayer, turns to the body, and says "Tabitha, rise." In Mark 5, Jesus puts the mourners outside, takes the girl's hand, and says "Talitha cumi," little girl, rise, one letter away from Tabitha. Behind both stand Elijah and Elisha, each raising a dead child alone in an upper room. Session 1 promised that the ascended Master's spirit would rest on the apostles He left behind, Elisha-style; here is the receipt. The Master's own works, in the Master's own manner, through the hands of His apostle, who acts in His name and never in His place.

2. Read Acts 10:1-8. Build Cornelius's file: rank, character, practices, and what the angel tells him about his prayers and alms. What is striking about how God treats the devotion of a man who is not yet a Christian, and what does God tell him to do about it?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A centurion of the Italian Cohort, a Gentile officer of the occupying army, and yet devout, God-fearing with all his household, generous in alms, constant in prayer. The angel's words are temple words: your prayers and alms "have ascended as a memorial before God," the vocabulary of the memorial offering whose fragrance rises from the altar (Leviticus 2:2). God receives a pre-convert's sincere devotion as sacrifice. And notice what God does with it: He does not say "you are fine as you are," nor does He catechize Cornelius by private revelation. He gives him an address, and sends him to fetch Peter. Grace honors the seeker by leading him to the Church.

3. Live discovery, and it is a great one. Note carefully where Peter is staying (9:43 and 10:5). Now turn to Jonah 1:1-3 and read it. Then look up Matthew 16:17 and notice Peter's full patronymic. What has Scripture built here?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Peter is lodging in Joppa, and Joppa is the port where Jonah, commanded to carry God's word to the great

Gentile city, went down to the docks and fled in the opposite direction. And Peter's formal name, spoken by Jesus in the very breath that gave him the keys, is Simon Bar-Jona: son of Jonah. The son of Jonah, standing in Jonah's port, receives Jonah's assignment, God's word to the Gentiles, and this time he goes. The first Jonah ran from Nineveh's mercy; the new Jonah walks to Caesarea, because between them stands the greater Jonah who spent three days in the deep for the life of the world (Matthew 12:40-41). Whether Luke planned the echo or Providence did, the canon buried this in plain sight and waited two thousand years for your table to find it.

4. Read Acts 10:9-16, the vision of the sheet. What does Peter see, what is he commanded, how does he respond, and how many times does it happen? Then jump ahead to 10:28 and let Peter himself tell us what the vision meant.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A great sheet let down by four corners, holding every kind of creature, clean and unclean mixed together, and a voice: "Rise, Peter; kill and eat." Peter refuses, "No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean," and the voice answers with the verse this session is named for: "What God has cleansed, you must not call common." Three times, and the thing is taken up to heaven. And Peter's own interpretation is not about food: "God has shown me that I should not call any *man* common or unclean." The kosher laws had been Israel's daily-rehearsed separation from the nations, a pedagogy of holiness. With the nations themselves now being gathered in, the sign gives way to the thing it guarded. The sheet holds people.

5. Read Acts 10:24-35. Watch two moments of body language: what does Cornelius do when Peter enters, and how does Peter respond? Then weigh Peter's opening line in verses 34-35. What has Peter understood?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Cornelius falls at Peter's feet to worship, and Peter lifts him up: "Stand up; I too am a man." The keeper of the keys refuses veneration that belongs to God alone, a line the Church's true shepherds have held ever since. Then Peter opens: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." Not that all religions are the same, for Peter immediately preaches Christ crucified and risen as the appointed judge and the only source of forgiveness (10:36-43); rather, that no nation, race, or bloodline is disqualified from that one Gospel. The door has no ethnic lock.

6. Read Acts 10:44-48, the climax. What happens while Peter is still speaking, how do the circumcised believers react, and what is Peter's immediate command? Get the sequence exactly.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The Holy Spirit falls on all who hear the word, with tongues and praise, exactly as at Pentecost, and the circumcised believers are amazed "because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles." Peter's response is not "well, that settles it, no rites needed." It is: "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. The Spirit's fall makes baptism urgent, not optional.

Build the steelman. Here is the strongest sacraments-optional argument in the New Testament, and it deserves full voice: at the house of Cornelius, the Spirit is given before and without baptism, through faith in the preached word alone. Peter himself later describes it exactly that way: God "cleansed their hearts by faith" (15:9) and gave them the Spirit just as He gave it to the apostles. If God grants the Spirit, cleansing, and

acceptance on faith alone, prior to any sacrament, then baptism must be a subsequent public testimony, not a means of grace. The order at Caesarea is the true order: faith, salvation, then symbol. Let it stand tall.

7. Press the steelman. First, what is unrepeatable and deliberately abnormal about this event, by the account of Acts itself? Compare 11:15-17 and 15:8. Second, what does Peter's command in 10:48 prove about how he understood what had just happened?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Acts itself flags this event as a one-time divine signature. Peter says the Spirit fell on them "just as on us *at the beginning*" (11:15), reaching back to Pentecost itself, not to the ordinary experience of the thousands baptized since; and at the Council he calls it God "bearing witness" to the Gentiles (15:8). The visible, audible outpouring was God's public notarization of a decision no human authority would otherwise have dared: full Gentile admission. That is why it echoed Pentecost so unmistakably that Peter could say "just as on us at the beginning" (11:15), so Jerusalem could not deny it, and it is why the pattern never becomes the norm; Acts shows the sovereign Spirit varying His timing (at Samaria the gift waited on the apostles' hands after baptism), while baptism itself is never optional in any of the accounts. Second, Peter's instant command to baptize is the decisive tell: if the Spirit's fall rendered baptism a mere afterthought, the one man present with the keys drew the opposite conclusion, that nothing now could *forbid the water*. God's freedom to act ahead of His sacraments, which the Church has always confessed, establishes His sovereignty, not our exemption; the Giver may anticipate His own gifts, but the command to be baptized still stands over every believer, and Peter issued it to Cornelius on the spot.

8. Read Acts 11:1-18. Peter returns to criticism, not applause. What exactly is the accusation in verse 3, how does Peter answer, and what closes the debate? Then step back: through whom, start to finish, has this entire revolution run, and why does that matter?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The accusation is about the table: "you went to uncircumcised men and ate with them." Peter answers not with an argument but with testimony, retelling the whole sequence, and ends with the unanswerable question: "If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us... who was I that I could withstand God?" And they were silenced, and glorified God: "Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life." Now the wide-angle view: the vision came to Peter, the door was opened by Peter, baptism was commanded by Peter, and ratification was carried by Peter's witness. Jesus had given this one man the keys of the kingdom (Matthew 16:18-19; CCC 552-553), and Acts 10 and 11 are those keys turning in the largest lock in history. God could have begun the Gentile mission anywhere; He began it through the office He had built for exactly such doors. Even Paul, apostle to the Gentiles, walks through a door Peter unlocked, and Peter will say so, in so many words, at the Council (15:7).

9. Read Acts 11:19-26. Trace how the church at Antioch is born, who is sent to it, whom Barnabas goes and finds, and what the disciples are called there for the first time. Two threads of our study meet in this paragraph; name them.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The believers scattered after Stephen preach in Antioch, some daring to preach to Greeks, and a great number turn to the Lord. Jerusalem sends Barnabas, the vouching man of Sessions 4 and 7, who rejoices, and then travels to Tarsus to hunt down one man: Saul, sent home to Tarsus in chapter 9 and laboring in obscurity since (Galatians 1:21). For a whole year they teach the church at Antioch together, and there "the disciples were for the first time called Christians." Two threads meet: the Name, which now has its second form, the outsiders'

label, belonging to Christ, worn until it became glory (1 Peter 4:16), alongside the insiders' Way; and the Map, since Antioch, planted in our study back when Nicolaus "a proselyte of Antioch" was ordained in Session 4, now stands ready as the launch pad for the end of the earth. Nothing Luke plants fails to flower.

- 10.** Read Acts 11:27-30. How does the young church at Antioch respond to the prophecy of famine, and what does the direction of the gift tell us about what these two communities, Jewish and Gentile, have become to each other?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Every one according to his ability, the Gentile-heavy church at Antioch sends relief to the brethren in Judea, by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. The mother church that sent them the Gospel receives back bread in her hunger. This is communion made visible: not two peoples with a treaty, but one Body circulating its life, spiritual goods flowing outward from Jerusalem, material goods flowing back (exactly the exchange Paul will later describe in Romans 15:27). The chapter that began with a fight about eating together ends with the Gentiles feeding Jerusalem.

DIG DEEPER: SIMON THE TANNER

Peter's Joppa address is itself a quiet sermon: he lodges "with one Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside" (10:6). Tanning, the handling of animal carcasses, rendered a man ritually suspect, and later rabbinic sources treated the trade with disdain. Before the sheet ever descended, Peter was already lodging under a roof that polite piety avoided, grace loosening the ground ahead of the earthquake. God rarely springs His revolutions on unprepared hearts; He had been widening Peter by inches.

DIG DEEPER: WHO COINED THE WORD CHRISTIAN?

The form of the word, Christianoi, follows the Latin pattern for partisans of a leader, Herodianoi, Caesariani, which suggests it was coined by outsiders in Antioch, possibly as bureaucratic shorthand, possibly as mockery: the Christ-people. It appears only three times in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16), once in Luke's narration here, once on King Agrippa's unbelieving lips (26:28), and in Peter's letter as a name worth suffering under without shame. The Church did what she has often done with the world's labels: wore it until it shone. Within two generations, St. Ignatius of this same Antioch was writing that wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church, and praying that he might not merely be called a Christian but be found one.

Send (15 minutes)

1. Peter needed a threefold vision to stop calling certain people common. Be honest at whatever depth you can: what category of person functions as unclean for you, the ones you would not eat with? What would your rooftop correction look like?
2. Cornelius's prayers and alms ascended before he knew Christ, and God's answer was to connect him to the Church. Who in your life is a Cornelius, sincerely seeking, generous, praying to a God they barely know? What would it mean for you to be their Peter?

Live It This Week

One assignment with two halves, both at a table. First, cross a line: identify the category of person you named in the Send question and take one concrete step of fellowship across it this week, a shared meal or coffee if at all possible, since the table was the whole scandal of Acts 11:3, an unhurried conversation if not. Second, feed a Cornelius: pray daily for the seeker you named, and take one step toward connecting them with the Church, an invitation, an introduction, a book placed in their hands. God honored a Gentile soldier's prayers by sending him a guide with keys; He still prefers to answer seekers through people.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you gave Peter the keys and then taught him which doors they were for. Cleanse our sight until we see no one as common, set our tables the width of your Church, and make us guides for every Cornelius whose prayers are already rising past us to your throne. You are Lord of all; be Lord of our guest lists. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"What God has cleansed, you must not call common." (Acts 10:15)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 8, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 9:32-43 (Aeneas; Tabitha; Joppa)
2. Acts 10:1-8 (Cornelius; the memorial)
3. Acts 10:9-23 (the sheet)
4. Acts 10:24-43 (no partiality; the sermon)
5. Acts 10:44-48 (the Gentile Pentecost)
6. Acts 11:1-18 (the ratification)
7. Acts 11:19-30 (Antioch; Christians; the famine relief)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

8. Jonah 1:1-3 (fleeing from Joppa)
9. Leviticus 11 (clean and unclean, background)
10. Leviticus 2:2, 9 (the memorial offering)
11. 1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:32-37 (Elijah and Elisha raise the dead)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

12. Matthew 16:17-19 (Bar-Jona; the keys)
13. Matthew 12:40-41 (the greater Jonah)
14. Mark 5:40-41 (Talitha cumi)
15. Acts 15:7-9 (Peter's later summary; cleansed by faith)
16. 1 Peter 4:16 (suffering as a Christian)
17. Romans 15:27 (the exchange of goods)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

18. CCC 831; CCC 552-553; CCC 781-782

THE WAY, SESSION 9

Set Apart for Me

The Acts of the Apostles 12:1-13:52, A Passover Rescue, a Worshiping Church, and the First Sending

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants discover that Luke has written Peter's prison rescue as a personal Exodus, at Passover, with the details of Exodus 12 deliberately replayed, and that the Church's answer to state violence was earnest, communal, almost comically human prayer. They then watch the world mission begin, not in a strategy meeting but in the liturgy: while the church at Antioch was worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke, and the greatest missionary movement in history was sent with fasting, prayer, and the laying on of hands.

Catholic Touchstone. Mission is born from liturgy. Luke's word in 13:2 rewards attention: while they were *leitourgountōn*, worshiping or ministering to the Lord, the root from which liturgy takes its name, the Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul." The Church did not interrupt her worship to plan a mission; the mission rose out of the worship, and was conferred the way the Church confers office, with fasting, prayer, and the laying on of hands (13:3; compare 6:6; Acts 14:23 pairs the same prayer and fasting with the appointing of elders). Everything the Church does for the world flows from what she does before God (CCC 1074, 849). A second touchstone shadows the first: the cost and the keeping of the apostles, James executed, Peter rescued, teaching the hard truth that God's faithfulness is not a safety guarantee, and the Church lives on both martyrdom and deliverance.

What You Need to Know

Chapter 12 opens with a shock the study has been braced for since Session 1: Herod Agrippa kills James the brother of John, the first of the Twelve to die. Recall your own Session 1 material: Judas's defection vacated an office that had to be filled; James dies faithful *in* his office, and Acts records no replacement, which fits the distinction your group discovered in the Matthias steelman. If anyone at the table remembers, honor it; the study's earliest hard question just became pastoral reality.

Then the arrest of Peter, and Luke stamps the date on it twice: "during the days of Unleavened Bread," intending to bring him out "after the Passover" (12:3-4). Read the rescue with Exodus 12 open in your mind, because the echoes are too many to be accidental, and question 3 will let the group discover it: the angel of the Lord comes by night, light shines in the cell, a blow and "Get up quickly," the chains fall, and then the angel's strange wardrobe instructions, "dress yourself and put on your sandals... wrap your mantle around you," the very posture Israel was commanded for the first Passover, loins girded, sandals on feet, ready to walk out of the house of bondage in haste (Exodus 12:11). Peter passes the guards, the iron gate opens of its own accord, and his own verdict names the genre: "the Lord... rescued me from the hand of Herod" (12:11), as Israel was delivered "from the hand of Pharaoh" (Exodus 18:10). A one-man Exodus, told in Passover season with Passover colors.

Do not rush the comedy and the humanity of 12:12-17: the church praying earnestly, the maid Rhoda so overjoyed she leaves Peter standing in the street, the intercessors telling her she is mad, insisting it must be "his angel," while the answer to their prayers keeps knocking. Luke is gentle with them, and so should we be: this is what real intercession looks like, fervent, persistent, and astonished when it works. And note Peter's exit line, "Tell this to James and to the brethren," then "he departed and went to another place" (12:17). This is very nearly Peter's exit from the book; he will speak once more, decisively, and the Thread Watch tells you how to hold that.

Herod's end (12:20-23) is the anti-Exodus and the anti-Peter: in royal robes that Josephus says shimmered with silver, accepting the crowd's cry that his is the voice of a god, he is struck by the same "angel of the Lord" that struck Peter's chains, and dies eaten by worms, the death of the arrogant Antiochus in 2 Maccabees 9:9.

Set the two strikings side by side for your group: the angel's blow wakes the humble man into freedom and fells the proud man into the grave. And then Luke's laconic scoreboard: "But the word of God grew and multiplied" (12:24). Herods die; the Word compounds.

Chapter 13 pivots the entire book. At Antioch, in worship and fasting, the Spirit sets apart Barnabas and Saul; the church fasts, prays, lays on hands, and sends. On Cyprus, the magician Elymas opposes them before the proconsul Sergius Paulus, and Luke quietly makes the switch that will hold for the rest of the book: "Saul, who is also called Paul" (13:9). At Pisidian Antioch, Paul delivers his first recorded sermon, a synagogue survey of Israel's story that lands on David's promised heir, the Resurrection by Psalm 16 (Peter's own Pentecost text, the new preacher singing the Church's one song), and a ringing offer: "through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses" (13:38-39). Prepare the steelman there. The session closes with rejection by the synagogue leadership, the deliberate turn to the Gentiles under Isaiah 49:6, and a sentence to savor: "the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit" (13:52), written about people freshly run out of town.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Exodus 12:11 and 18:10. The Passover posture, girded, sandaled, staff in hand, eating in haste, ready for God's midnight deliverance; and Jethro's blessing, "Blessed be the Lord, who has delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians and out of the hand of Pharaoh." Peter's rescue replays both: the angel's dress code and the escape by night, and Peter's own words, "rescued me from the hand of Herod." The God of the Exodus has not changed His methods or His holiday.

2 Maccabees 9:5-9. Antiochus Epiphanes, the persecutor who claimed divine honors, struck by God and devoured by worms while still alive. Herod Agrippa dies the same textbook death of blasphemous pride. Luke's first readers knew the pattern: heaven has a standard sentence for kings who accept worship.

Psalms 2:7; Psalm 16:10; Isaiah 55:3. The spine of Paul's sermon at Pisidian Antioch: the begotten Son, the Holy One who will not see corruption, the sure mercies of David. Paul preaches the Resurrection from the same psalter Peter used at Pentecost; the Church has one message in every mouth.

Isaiah 49:6. "I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth." Paul and Barnabas take the Servant's own commission as their marching orders (13:47), and note the reach of the phrase: the uttermost parts of the earth, the third circle of the map verse, now formally underway.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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

Chrysostom sets the scene of chapter 12 as a contest of weapons: Herod has soldiers, four squads of them, two chains, and an execution date; the Church has earnest prayer. And the prayer, he says, proved stronger than the iron, unlocking chains, gates, and the sentence of death itself. He will not let his hearers miss the lesson: the Church's power has never been in her numbers or her friends at court, but in her knees.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Leo the Great, Sermons on the Apostles Peter and Paul (5th century)

St. Leo preached that the chains of Peter were more precious to the Church than any triumph, for in them the weakness of man and the power of Christ were displayed together: the prince of the apostles kept for further labors, delivered not for his own comfort but for the flock's sake. What Herod intended as a spectacle of the

Church's end became the proof of her Keeper, who knows both when to crown His servants with martyrdom, as James, and when to send His angel, as Peter.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Bede the Venerable, Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles (8th century)

St. Bede reads Peter's rescue through Passover eyes: as Israel, girded and sandaled, was led out of Egypt by night, so Peter, bidden to bind on his sandals and wrap his cloak, is led out of prison at the very season of Unleavened Bread. In the first apostle's deliverance, Bede says, every Christian may read his own: roused by grace, loosed from chains he could not break, and walked past every guard by a light the sleeping world never saw.

Catechism Connection

CCC 849-850. The Church is missionary by her very nature, born of the Son's and the Spirit's own mission; the missionary mandate is rooted in God's eternal love, and mission is the deepest identity of the Church, not a department of her.

CCC 1070. The word liturgy means the participation of the People of God in the work of God; in the liturgy Christ continues the work of our redemption. Acts 13:2, where the Spirit speaks while the church is liturgizing, lets us watch that truth in action: God's work in worship overflowing into God's work in the world.

CCC 2636. The first Christian communities lived intercession intensely, the prayer of the Church for all men and for those who bring the Gospel; Acts 12, the whole church praying earnestly while Peter sleeps between soldiers, is intercession's family portrait.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 1, The Name. Quiet tonight, but a personal name changes: "Saul, who is also called Paul" (13:9), and Luke never looks back. Not a conversion name, despite the legend; Saul was his Hebrew name, Paul (Latin Paullus) his Greco-Roman one, and as the mission turns toward the Roman world, Luke switches registers. The Dig Deeper covers it if asked.

Thread 2, The Map. The third circle formally launches: Antioch to Cyprus to Asia Minor, and the missionaries claim Isaiah 49:6 as their charter, salvation "to the uttermost parts of the earth," the very phrase of Acts 1:8. Mark the moment on your map verse with the group.

Thread 3, Peter First: the penultimate note. Peter is rescued, reports, and "went to another place" (12:17), and the book's spotlight passes to Paul. Do not resolve the thread tonight. Tell the group only that Peter has one more scene, and when it comes they should listen to every word, because the thread will resolve inside it. Next session.

Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread. Still resting. Two sessions from now it wakes.

Also mark: Acts records no replacement for James, which fits the distinction the group reached in Session 1's hardest discussion, though the silence alone does not prove it, and John Mark, who turns back at Perga (13:13), is a name to file for next session; his story is not over.

Session Goals

1. Participants discover the Exodus and Passover pattern in Peter's rescue and can explain what Luke means by telling it that way.
2. Participants can articulate the twin mystery of James executed and Peter delivered, and what it teaches about providence, martyrdom, and prayer.
3. Participants can explain from 13:1-3 that the world mission was born in the liturgy and conferred with fasting, prayer, and hands, and why that pattern still governs the Church.
4. Participants can trace Paul's Pisidian sermon, engage the strongest faith-alone reading of 13:38-39, and state the Catholic teaching on justification accurately and irenically.
5. Participants each commit to one act of intercession with others and one deliberate connection of their work to the liturgy this week.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on the name change, (3) compress question 6 (Cyprus and Elymas) into a bridge sentence. Do not cut the Exodus discovery, the liturgy question, or the steelman; they are the session's spine.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord of the Passover, you sent your angel by night for Peter as you came by night for Israel, and your Church prayed while the world slept. Teach us that kind of prayer tonight. Speak to us as we worship you, as you spoke at Antioch, and if you are setting any of us apart for work we have not imagined, give us the grace to hear it and the courage to be sent. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Tell us about a prayer that was answered in a way that genuinely startled you. Did you believe it at first, or were you a Rhoda-doubter about your own answered prayer?
2. Where were you when you received the biggest assignment of your life, and did the setting seem worthy of the moment?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 12:1-5. Two apostles, two fates: what happens to James, what is planned for Peter, and what is the church's one recorded response? Then remember Session 1: what did we conclude about why Judas was replaced, and what does the Church do about James's empty seat?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Herod kills James the brother of John with the sword, the first of the Twelve to die, and seeing that it pleased the crowd, arrests Peter, intending a show trial after Passover. The church's one weapon: "earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church." And the seat of James is never filled. Acts gives no reason in so many words, but the shape matches our first session's hardest discussion: Judas lost his office by defection and it was filled; James dies faithful in his, and the foundational Twelve are left complete. What the apostles hand on is not membership in the Twelve but the office of oversight, and the Church, even in grief, does not confuse the two.

2. Sit with the hard question before the rescue makes everything feel better: James is executed and Peter is delivered, both apostles, both faithful, and the same praying Church that begged for Peter (12:5) surely wept for James. What does this chapter refuse to let us believe about God's protection, and what does it insist we believe instead?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

It refuses the prosperity reading: faithfulness is not a force field, and the Church's earliest chapters already hold both a martyrdom and a miracle in the same paragraph. It insists on something sturdier: that God is sovereign over both outcomes, that James's death and Peter's deliverance each served the same kingdom, and that the Church's calling is to pray earnestly without dictating the ending. As St. Leo preached, the Lord knows when to crown a servant with martyrdom, as James, and when to send the angel, as Peter. The Church lives on both, and honors both: and within about a century the church of Smyrna was keeping the anniversary of its martyred bishop Polycarp as a victory feast, the seed of every saint's day since.

3. Live discovery, the big one tonight. First note the date stamps in 12:3-4: what season is it? Now read Acts 12:6-11 slowly, listing the details: who comes, what happens in the cell, and, strangest of all, what does the

angel tell Peter to put on? Then turn to Exodus 12:11 and read Israel's dress code for the first Passover, and Exodus 18:10 for how Israel's rescue was described. What has Luke built?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

It is Passover, "the days of Unleavened Bread." The angel of the Lord comes by night, light shines in the darkness of the cell, a blow to the side and "Get up quickly," and the chains fall off. Then the wardrobe: "dress yourself and put on your sandals... wrap your mantle around you and follow me," precisely the posture God commanded Israel for Passover night, loins girded, sandals on feet, ready to leave the house of bondage in haste. Peter walks past two guard posts, the iron gate opens of its own accord, and his own verdict names the pattern: "the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod," as Israel was delivered "from the hand of Pharaoh." Luke has written Peter a personal Exodus, staged in the very season of Unleavened Bread. The God who brought Israel out by night still keeps the feast, and every baptized person at this table can read their own story in it: roused by grace, loosed from chains we could not break, and led out past guards we never saw.

4. Read Acts 12:12-17 and permit yourselves to laugh. Describe the scene at Mary's house: what is the church doing, what does Rhoda do, and how do the intercessors respond to the answer to their own prayers? What is Luke teaching us, gently, about real intercession?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The church is gathered at night, praying earnestly, and when Peter knocks, the maid Rhoda is so overjoyed she leaves him standing in the street and runs to announce him; the prayer meeting tells her she is mad, then theorizes that "it is his angel," anything but the plain answer knocking at the gate, while Peter keeps knocking. Luke's gentleness is the lesson: this fervent, faithful, astonished, imperfect assembly is what real intercession looks like. God does not wait for flawless faith to answer earnest prayer; He answers the praying Church she actually is, doubts and all, and then stands at the door until she opens it. If you have ever been surprised by your own answered prayer, you are in apostolic company.

5. Read Acts 12:20-24. Describe Herod's last scene, and set it beside Peter's rescue: the same phrase, "the angel of the Lord," appears in both. What is the contrast, and how does Luke close the chapter?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Herod, arrayed in royal robes (woven of silver cloth, Josephus remembers), delivers an oration, and the crowd cries, "The voice of a god, and not of man!" He accepts the worship, "and immediately an angel of the Lord smote him, because he did not give God the glory," and he dies eaten by worms, the textbook death of the blaspheming persecutor Antiochus (2 Maccabees 9). The same angelic blow that woke the humble fisherman into freedom fells the proud king into the grave; heaven's strike is one power with two effects, depending entirely on the man it lands on. And then Luke's serene scoreboard, one of the great sentences of Acts: "But the word of God grew and multiplied." Kings who fight the Word get chapters; the Word gets the book.

6. Read Acts 13:1-3, slowly; this may be the most consequential paragraph in the second half of Acts. What is the church at Antioch doing when the Spirit speaks, what does the Spirit say, and by what actions is the mission conferred? Where have we seen those actions before?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

They are "worshiping the Lord and fasting," and Luke's Greek verb is *leitourgountōn*, worshiping or

ministering to the Lord, the very root of our word liturgy, and the Church has always heard its liturgical resonance. In the middle of the liturgy the Spirit says, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them," and the church fasts, prays, lays hands on them, and sends them. The gesture is the one we discovered in Session 4: the laying on of hands that conferred the diaconate, the grammar of Moses commissioning Joshua. The greatest missionary expansion in human history was not planned in a meeting; it was received in worship and conferred like an ordination. This is the Church's permanent physics: mission flows from liturgy (CCC 1074, which calls the liturgy the font from which all the Church's power flows; compare CCC 1070), because the Church is missionary in her very nature (CCC 849), and what she carries to the world she must first receive at the altar. A church that stops worshiping will soon have nothing to send.

7. Read Acts 13:16-39, Paul's first recorded sermon, skimming the historical survey and slowing at verses 26-39. What is the shape of the sermon, which psalm does Paul share with Peter's Pentecost preaching, and what exactly does Paul claim in verses 38-39?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The shape is Israel's whole story aimed at one point: from the exodus through the judges to David, then straight from David to David's promised heir, Jesus, His unjust death, and God raising Him, argued from Psalm 2:7, Isaiah 55:3, and Psalm 16:10, the very "no corruption" text Peter preached at Pentecost. Different apostle, same psalter, one Gospel. Then the offer: "through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses." The word translated freed is justified: Paul's great theme, sounding in his first sermon.

Build the steelman. Here is the Reformation's home text, and it deserves its full voice: Paul says plainly that everyone who *believes* is justified from what the law of Moses could never justify. Not everyone who believes and is baptized, not everyone who believes and does works: everyone who believes. Justification is by faith, apart from law-keeping, sacraments, and merit, received the moment a sinner trusts Christ; Luther called this article the one by which the Church stands or falls, and he found it here and in Romans. (State it fairly across traditions: Lutherans themselves confess Baptism as a true means of grace; the sharpest form of this objection is the broader Evangelical one.) If Rome adds conditions, rites, and cooperation to what Paul attaches to faith alone, has Rome not changed the Gospel Paul preached at Pisidian Antioch? Let it stand at full strength.

8. Press the steelman, and begin with an honest surprise: how much of that argument does the Catholic Church actually affirm? Then locate the real disagreement, and test the "alone" against Paul's own story and this very chapter.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Begin with the agreement, because it is vast and Catholics often do not know it: the Church teaches that justification comes from the grace of God, is received through faith, and cannot be merited by any human work; the Council of Trent itself declared that nothing preceding justification, neither faith nor works, merits the grace of justification, and the Catechism teaches that justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith, and flows wholly from God's merciful initiative (CCC 1987-1996, especially 1992). In 1999 the Catholic Church and the Lutheran World Federation jointly declared that a consensus exists on the basic truths of justification: by grace alone, through faith, apart from any merit of ours. So the steelman's core, grace not law, faith not earning, is Catholic doctrine. The real disagreement is the word alone and what faith is: whether justifying faith is trust that merely credits Christ's righteousness to us externally, or the living faith that works through love (Galatians 5:6) by which God truly transforms us, and whether the sacraments God attached to faith are its instruments or its rivals. Test it against Paul himself: the man preaching "every one that believes is

justified" is the man whose own sins were washed away in baptism at Ananias's word (22:16), who will teach that we were buried with Christ in baptism (Romans 6:3-4), and who never once uses the phrase "faith alone," whose single appearance in all of Scripture belongs to James: "a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24), meaning dead faith saves no one. And in this very chapter, the contrast to believing is not working but *thrusting the word aside* and judging oneself unworthy of eternal life (13:46): a real human act of refusal, implying a real human act of welcome. Faith justifies; and faith, in Paul's own life and letters, was never alone: it arrived wet from the font and immediately went to work in love.

9. Read Acts 13:44-52. What happens when nearly the whole city gathers, how do Paul and Barnabas answer the opposition, and what Old Testament commission do they claim for themselves? Then savor the final verse of the chapter: who is filled with what, and under what circumstances?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Jealousy meets the crowds, and the missionaries answer with a hinge sentence: it was necessary that the word be spoken to you first; since you thrust it aside, "behold, we turn to the Gentiles," and they claim Isaiah 49:6 as their standing orders: "I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth," the Servant's own commission, and the exact reach of Acts 1:8's third circle. The Gentiles rejoice, the word spreads through the whole region, the missionaries are driven out of the district, and they shake the dust from their feet, as the Lord instructed (Luke 9:5). And then the last verse, written about the freshly expelled: "the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit." Joy in Acts is not circumstantial; it is Pentecostal. Persecution can take the missionaries' city; it cannot touch their fuel.

DIG DEEPER: SAUL WHO IS ALSO CALLED PAUL

Contrary to the beloved legend, Scripture never says Saul's name was changed at conversion; he is Saul for years afterward. "Saul, who is also called Paul" (13:9) simply unveils his second, Greco-Roman name, Paul (Latin Paullus), the sort of double naming common among diaspora Jews, and Luke switches to it permanently at the exact moment the mission turns toward the Roman world and its first named convert of rank, the proconsul Sergius Paulus. The lesson is missionary, not mystical: the apostle leads with the name his hearers can receive. Meeting people where they are begins as shallow as a syllable.

DIG DEEPER: JOHN MARK TURNS BACK

A quiet verse to file: "John left them and returned to Jerusalem" (13:13). John Mark, Barnabas's young cousin, quits the mission at Perga, and Luke offers no reason. Remember his name; this small failure will detonate a painful scene between two saints before our study is done, and God will write something unexpectedly beautiful over the whole affair. Say nothing more to the group yet.

Send (15 minutes)

1. The mission was received in worship: the Spirit spoke while the church was liturgizing and fasting. When was the last time you brought a real decision into the liturgy, laid it before the altar, and genuinely listened? What decision would you bring this week?

- 2.** The church prayed earnestly for Peter while doubting the answer would come, and God answered anyway. Who needs the Mary's-house treatment from this group, sustained, communal, earnest prayer, starting tonight?

Live It This Week

Two assignments, one vertical and one horizontal. First, put a decision on the altar: choose the most consequential open question in your life right now and carry it deliberately into the liturgy, one Mass or holy hour this week attended specifically to lay it before the Lord, with a small fast beforehand if health permits, since fasting and worship were the posture in which Antioch heard the Spirit. Do not demand an answer; practice the listening. Second, build a Mary's house: agree as a group on one person or intention that needs earnest intercession, and commit to praying for it daily until next session, together in spirit if not in one room. Expect to be as surprised as Rhoda.

Closing Prayer

Holy Spirit, you spoke at Antioch while your people worshiped, and you have never stopped speaking there. Set apart in us whatever you have marked for your work. Give us the earnest prayer of Mary's house, the girded readiness of Passover night, and the joy that filled the expelled missionaries, and let your word grow and multiply through our small obediences. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth."
(Acts 13:47)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 9, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 12:1-5 (James; Peter arrested; the praying church)
2. Acts 12:6-11 (the Passover rescue)
3. Acts 12:12-17 (Rhoda; Peter departs)
4. Acts 12:20-24 (Herod's end; the word grows)
5. Acts 13:1-3 (the liturgy; set apart)
6. Acts 13:4-12 (Cyprus; Saul also called Paul)
7. Acts 13:16-41 (the Pisidian sermon)
8. Acts 13:44-52 (the turn to the Gentiles; joy)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

9. Exodus 12:11 (the Passover posture)
10. Exodus 18:10 (out of the hand of Pharaoh)
11. 2 Maccabees 9:5-9 (the death of Antiochus)
12. Psalm 2:7; Psalm 16:10; Isaiah 55:3 (the sermon's spine)
13. Isaiah 49:6 (light for the Gentiles)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

14. Acts 6:6 (the laying on of hands); Acts 14:23 (elders appointed with prayer and fasting)
15. Acts 22:16; Romans 6:3-4 (Paul and baptism)
16. Galatians 5:6; James 2:24 (faith working through love; not by faith alone)
17. Luke 9:5 (shaking the dust)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

18. CCC 849-850; CCC 1070; CCC 1074; CCC 2636; CCC 1987-1996; Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (1999)

THE WAY, SESSION 10

It Has Seemed Good to the Holy Spirit and to Us

The Acts of the Apostles 14:1-15:41, Presbyters in Every Church, and the Council of Jerusalem

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants watch the Church face her first doctrinal crisis, a dispute over the necessity of circumcision in which both sides could quote Scripture, and discover how it was actually settled: not by dueling proof texts and not by private judgment, but by a council of the apostles and presbyters, opened decisively by Peter, confirmed from Scripture by James, and issued as a decree binding on churches the council members had never visited, in words no merely human assembly would dare: "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." Tonight the Peter First thread, counted silently since Session 1, is finally resolved, and a question left open on the Mount of Olives in Session 1 receives its answer from the prophet Amos.

Catholic Touchstone. The living Magisterium. Acts 15 is the charter scene of everything the Church means by teaching authority: a question Scripture alone had not settled, brought to the apostles and presbyters gathered in council; debate; Peter's word ending the debate; a decision promulgated to all the churches and received as the Spirit's own judgment (CCC 85-87, 890-891). The delivery receipt is in the next chapter: Paul and Timothy delivered "the decisions (dogmata) which had been reached by the apostles and elders," and the churches were strengthened and grew (16:4-5). A secondary touchstone arrives quietly in 14:23: the missionaries "appointed elders (presbyterous) in every church, with prayer and fasting," the office from which the English word priest descends, installed as standard equipment in every new community. The succession discovered in Session 1 is now shipping with every church plant.

What You Need to Know

Chapter 14 carries the first journey to its finish, and its center is Lystra. Watch the whiplash: Paul heals a man crippled from birth (deliberately echoing Peter's Beautiful Gate miracle, Luke pairing his two heroes again), the pagan crowd decides Barnabas is Zeus and Paul is Hermes and drags out oxen and garlands for sacrifice, the apostles tear their garments in horror, and shortly afterward the same crowd, turned by agitators, stones Paul and drags him out of the city, supposing him dead (14:19). Deified by the crowd, stoned by the crowd. And do not miss who is doing the being-stoned: the man who guarded the coats at Stephen's stoning now receives Stephen's death and survives it, rising and walking straight back into the city. If your group remembers Session 5's assignment, the moment will land with weight. Paul's summary on the return leg becomes the study's realism verse: "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (14:22).

Then 14:23, one verse your group must not blink past: in every church, elders appointed, with prayer and fasting, the same solemn conferral as Acts 6 and 13. The word is *presbyteroi*, and the anglicized descent runs *presbyteros* to *prester* to *priest*. Whatever else a first missionary journey planted, it planted solemnly conferred office, with prayer and fasting, in every single congregation before moving on. The Church has never known a churchmanship without it.

Chapter 15 is the summit of the book's ecclesiology, and you should teach it as such. Get the crisis precise: men from Judea are teaching, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved" (15:1). This is not a squabble over customs; it is a rival gospel with excellent proof texts, and question 5's steelman will arm the Judaizers properly, because honesty requires it: Genesis 17 calls circumcision an *everlasting* covenant, and the Gentile God-fearers in the Old Testament were expected to be circumcised to eat the Passover (Exodus 12:48). The Judaizers were not villains twirling mustaches; they were Bible readers with the stronger-looking verses. That is precisely what makes the council's method the lesson.

Walk the council's anatomy with care (15:6-29): the apostles and the elders gather; there is *much debate*, the Church does not fear argument; then Peter rises, recalls that God chose "that by my mouth" the Gentiles should first hear (the Cornelius keys of Session 8, cashed at full value), declares that hearts are cleansed by faith and

that no unbearable yoke may be laid on the disciples, "and all the assembly kept silence" (15:12). Peter's word stills the assembly (15:12); what follows, Barnabas and Paul's testimony and James's confirming judgment, builds on it rather than reopening it. James, the local bishop of Jerusalem, seconds from Scripture, citing Amos 9:11-12, and proposes the pastoral provisions; the whole church concurs; and the letter goes out with the sentence that gives this session its name. Note the letter's reach: addressed to churches in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, communities most council members had never seen, and delivered as binding (16:4). A local meeting does not bind strangers; a council of the apostolic Church does.

The Amos citation is this session's buried treasure and the payoff of the study's very first night. James quotes the promise that God will rebuild "the dwelling (tent) of David, which has fallen," *so that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name*. In Session 1, the disciples asked, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?", and we noticed Jesus corrected the timetable, not the hope. Here is the answer, ten chapters later, from the council floor: the kingdom is being restored, the fallen tent of David is being rebuilt, and the proof is Gentiles streaming in to seek the Lord, exactly as Amos said the rebuilt Davidic kingdom would draw them. The Church of the apostles is the restored kingdom of David, and the Gentile mission is not a detour from Israel's hope but its cash value. An honesty note for your preparation: James quotes Amos in its Greek (Septuagint) form, whose wording ("the rest of men may seek") differs from the Hebrew ("they may possess the remnant of Edom"); the apostles freely cited the Greek Old Testament as Scripture, a small window into how the written word lives inside the believing community.

Finally, do not sanitize 15:36-41: Paul and Barnabas, fresh from saving the Church's unity, fall into a contention so sharp over John Mark that they separate. The Dig Deeper handles it honestly, and the epilogue is grace itself: two mission teams sail instead of one, Mark is restored (Paul himself will one day write, "he is very useful in serving me," 2 Timothy 4:11), and the deserter of Perga becomes, by the Church's constant tradition, the Evangelist Mark. God writes straight with crooked saints.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Genesis 17:9-14. Circumcision commanded to Abraham as "an everlasting covenant," with the uncircumcised man cut off from his people. The Judaizers' charter text, and it must be given its full weight for the council's resolution to mean anything.

Exodus 12:48. The sojourner who would keep the Passover must be circumcised first: the Old Testament's own on-ramp for Gentiles ran through circumcision. The Judaizers were arguing precedent.

Amos 9:11-12. The fallen tent of David rebuilt, that the rest of men and all the Gentiles called by God's name may seek the Lord. James's clincher: the in-gathering of uncircumcised Gentiles is not an anomaly to be regularized but the promised sign that David's kingdom is being restored in the Messiah. Session 1's kingdom question finds its answer here.

Leviticus 17-18. On an influential reading, the background of the council's four abstentions (idol offerings, blood, things strangled, unchastity): the holiness laws that Israel's own Torah applied to the *stranger who sojourns among you*. On that reading the council did not invent a compromise; it reached for Torah's own category for Gentiles dwelling amid Israel, making shared tables possible between Jewish and Gentile believers. The Dig Deeper unpacks it.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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

Chrysostom lingers on the order of the council: there was much questioning, for the Church does not fear

debate, and then Peter rose first, as ever, and after he had spoken from what God wrought through him, all the multitude kept silence. James, says Chrysostom, held the rule of the church at Jerusalem and so speaks last and frames the decree; each office kept its place, and the Spirit spoke through their harmony.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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

St. Irenaeus, arguing that the true faith is found where the apostles' teaching is preserved, recalls the council at Jerusalem and its letter, and points to the apostles' own decision not to burden the Gentiles with the law as evidence that the apostles preached one Gospel with one voice. For Irenaeus the council stands as proof that Christ's Church can discern the truth together and declare it, which is why he can appeal to it against those who claim the apostles taught something other than what the churches hold.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium*, 23 (5th century)

St. Vincent taught that the Church's understanding of doctrine truly grows, but as a body grows, the same in every part though larger and stronger, always in the same sense and the same meaning. The council of Jerusalem fits his principle like a glove: nothing of the Gospel was changed when the Gentiles were freed from circumcision; rather the Church, guided by the Spirit, came to see what the Gospel had contained from the beginning, and declared it so that the faithful might hold it with certainty.

Catechism Connection

CCC 85-87. The task of authentically interpreting the Word of God has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone, exercised in the name of Jesus Christ: the Magisterium, which is not superior to the Word but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on.

CCC 890-891. The pastors of the Church enjoy, in service of the faithful, the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals under defined conditions; the supreme exercise belongs to the Pope and to ecumenical councils united with him. Acts 15 is not yet an ecumenical council in the Catechism's technical sense, but the Church has always seen in it the seed: Peter and the gathered apostolic college deciding with the Holy Spirit.

CCC 1536 and 1554, in passing. The ordained priesthood: the word presbyter, planted in every church in Acts 14:23, remains the name of the second degree of Holy Orders, and the office travels wherever the Church does.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 3, Peter First: RESOLUTION TONIGHT. Since Session 1 you have kept a silent tally. Tonight, after question 6, spend it all at once. Walk the group back through it: who stood up to fill Judas's office (1:15), who preached Pentecost (2:14), who worked the first miracle (3:6), who answered the Sanhedrin (4:8), who exercised the first discipline (5:3), whose shadow healed (5:15), who opened Samaria with John (8:14), who raised Tabitha (9:40), who opened the Gentile door (10), who carried its ratification (11), and who now rises at the council so that the whole assembly falls silent (15:7-12). Then name what the tally is: not a claim asserted but a pattern displayed. Luke never argues for Petrine primacy; he simply reports the Church, and in the Church, at every hinge, Peter is first, and communion holds around him. And savor Peter's last recorded words in Acts: "we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (15:11). The

first Pope's farewell line in this book is salvation by grace. Tell your group to remember that sentence the next time anyone says Rome and grace are strangers.

Thread 2, The Map. The first journey completes its loop and the council clears the road: the Gospel may now run to the end of the earth unencumbered. The great obstacle to circle three was never distance; it was the question this council settled.

Thread 1, The Name and Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread. Both resting. The bread thread wakes soon; be ready.

Payoff registered tonight: Session 1's kingdom question (1:6) is answered by James's Amos citation. Make sure the group feels the arc close; it is the longest payoff in the study so far.

Session Goals

1. Participants can recount Lystra, including the Stephen-reversal of Paul's stoning, and state the realism of 14:22.
2. Participants can explain the significance of presbyters appointed in every church with prayer and fasting.
3. Participants can state the Judaizer position at full scriptural strength and explain why proof-texting alone could not settle the crisis.
4. Participants can walk the anatomy of the council, Peter's decisive word, James's confirmation, the binding decree, and articulate what the Church means by the living Magisterium.
5. Participants discover the Amos payoff of Session 1's kingdom question, and can explain the Church as the restored kingdom of David.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on the four abstentions, (3) compress question 2 (Lystra's whiplash) into a two minute retelling. Do not cut the steelman, the council anatomy, the Peter First resolution, or the Amos payoff; tonight is the study's ecclesiological summit and these four are the summit ridge.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Come, Holy Spirit, who presided at Jerusalem when the apostles and elders gathered, and taught your Church to say, it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. Preside at this table tonight. Give us the council's honesty in debate, its silence before Peter's witness, its obedience to Scripture, and its joy in the decree. Guard your Church's shepherds, and make us docile without being dull, and questioning without being proud. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Tell us about a disagreement in a family, parish, or workplace where both sides had genuinely good arguments. How was it finally settled, or was it?
2. Have you ever been wildly overpraised and harshly criticized by the same people? What did the whiplash teach you about crowds, and about yourself?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 14:8-18, the scene at Lystra. What miracle opens it, what do the crowds conclude, and how do Paul and Barnabas react? Notice whose earlier miracle this one deliberately mirrors.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A man crippled from birth, who has never walked, hears Paul, is seen to have faith, and at the command "stand upright on your feet" springs up and walks: Luke has given Paul a twin of Peter's Beautiful Gate healing from Session 3, pairing his two heroes stroke for stroke. The pagan crowd reaches for the only categories it has: Barnabas is Zeus, Paul is Hermes, and the priest of Zeus arrives with oxen and garlands for sacrifice. The apostles tear their garments, the Jewish gesture of horror at blasphemy, and cry, "We also are men, of like nature with you," turning the moment into a sermon on the living God who made heaven and earth. Like Peter lifting Cornelius from his knees in Session 8, the pattern holds: the true apostle refuses worship on reflex. Any minister who enjoys the pedestal has already fallen off it.

2. Read Acts 14:19-22. What do the same crowds do to Paul shortly afterward, and what makes this particular suffering, for this particular man, one of the most striking reversals in the New Testament? Recall Session 5. Then weigh Paul's summary sentence in verse 22.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Agitators turn the crowd, and the man they garlanded as Hermes is stoned and dragged out of the city, presumed dead. Now the reversal: Paul is the man who stood at Stephen's stoning holding the coats, consenting. He now receives the very death he once stood consenting over, minding the coats, and survives it, and his response is to get up and walk back into the city, then continue the mission the next day. The coat-minder has become the stoned man, and Stephen's prayer keeps compounding interest. Paul's own summary, spoken while strengthening the new disciples with fresh bruises on him: "through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." No prosperity gospel survives contact with Acts 14. The kingdom's road is real, and it is a road, which is why the movement is called the Way and not the Shortcut.

3. Read Acts 14:23, one verse, slowly. What do Paul and Barnabas install in every church before leaving, by what means, and why should the vocabulary interest a Catholic? Connect the gesture to what we have seen twice before.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord." Elders is presbyterous, presbyters, the very word that wore down through the centuries into the English word priest, and the office is conferred the way we have twice watched office conferred: the solemnity of prayer and fasting that accompanied the Seven in Session 4 and the sending in Session 9. Before the first missionary journey ends, solemnly conferred pastoral office is standard equipment in every single congregation planted, however young, however remote. Church without presbyters was not a primitive stage later corrupted into clergy; it is a thing the apostles refused to leave behind them even once. The succession we discovered on the study's first night now ships with every church plant, and it still does: every parish you have ever entered came furnished the same way.

4. Read Acts 15:1-5. State the crisis precisely: who arrives at Antioch, what exactly do they teach, and why is verse 1 not a quarrel about customs but a rival gospel? How does the church at Antioch respond procedurally, and what does that response already teach?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Men from Judea teach the brethren: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." The stakes are total: this adds a condition to salvation itself, which makes it a different gospel, and Paul and Barnabas engage them in no small dissension. And then the procedure, which is half the lesson: Antioch does not settle it locally by vote, and Paul, apostle by direct revelation, does not settle it by fiat. They are sent up to Jerusalem, "to the apostles and the elders about this question." When the Gospel itself is disputed, the instinct of the apostolic Church is to go to the apostolic center. The very road to the council is already a doctrine of the Church.

Build the steelman, and tonight we build it for the losing side, because honesty demands it. The Judaizers had Scripture, and not weak Scripture. God told Abraham that circumcision is "an everlasting covenant" in your flesh, and that the uncircumcised male "shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (Genesis 17:13-14). Everlasting: God's own word. The Torah's own on-ramp for Gentiles who wished to join Israel's worship ran through circumcision (Exodus 12:48). Jesus was circumcised, circumcised His whole life, and said not an iota would pass from the law (Matthew 5:18). Abraham believed *and* was circumcised; why should Gentile believers be exempt from what Scripture never revokes? Notice what you cannot do with this argument: you cannot defeat it by slapping a counter-verse on the table, because the Judaizers will slap Genesis 17 right back, and the word everlasting does not blink. Both sides have texts. Sit in that deadlock for a moment, honestly, and then ask the only question that matters: how does the apostolic Church actually break it?

5. Now read the council's anatomy: Acts 15:6-12. Who gathers, what happens first, who rises to speak, what does he claim and conclude, and what is the assembly's response when he finishes? Listen especially for which past event Peter cashes in, and for his final sentence.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The apostles and the elders gather, and there is *much debate*: the Church does not fear argument, and the council is no rubber stamp. Then Peter rises, and cashes the check written in Session 8: "in the early days God

made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe," God bearing witness by giving them the Spirit, cleansing their hearts by faith. Why then tempt God by yoking the disciples with what "neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear"? And his last recorded sentence in the entire book of Acts: "But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." And all the assembly kept silence. The debate is over when Peter finishes; what follows, testimony and James's judgment, confirms rather than contests. The first Pope's farewell words in Acts are salvation by grace, a sentence worth keeping loaded for anyone who claims Rome and grace are strangers.

6. Live discovery, and the longest payoff in our study. Read Acts 15:13-18, James's speech, and then turn to Amos 9:11-12. What does the prophet promise will be rebuilt, and with what result among the nations? Now reach all the way back to our first session: what did the disciples ask Jesus on the Mount of Olives in Acts 1:6, and what have we just learned is the answer?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

James confirms Peter ("Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles") and seconds him from the prophets: God will rebuild "the dwelling of David, which has fallen," the tent of David, the Davidic kingdom, *so that the rest of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name*. On the study's first night the disciples asked, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?", and we noticed Jesus corrected their timetable but never denied their hope. Here, ten chapters later, is the answer from the council floor: the kingdom of David is being restored, and the proof is standing in the room: Gentiles streaming in to seek the Lord, exactly the sign Amos attached to the rebuilt tent. The Church of the apostles, with the son of David enthroned (Session 1's Daniel 7) and His officers seated in council, is the restored Davidic kingdom in seed and beginning (CCC 541, 669), present now and awaiting its fullness, and the Gentile mission is not a detour from Israel's hope but its arrival. One honest footnote worthy of this table: James quotes Amos in its Greek Septuagint form, whose wording differs from the Hebrew, and the apostles received and used that Greek Old Testament as Scripture: a small standing witness that the Bible has always lived inside the believing community that canonizes, translates, and reads it.

7. Read Acts 15:22-29, the decree itself, and 16:4-5, its delivery. Weigh the famous sentence of verse 28 word by word. What is the council claiming about its own decision, whom does the decision bind, and what happens in the churches that receive it?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things." No merely human meeting talks like that. The council yokes its own judgment to the Spirit's in a single clause, and then binds churches its members had never visited: the letter goes to Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, and Paul delivers "the decisions (the Greek is dogmata) which had been reached by the apostles and elders" to towns the council never saw, "for observance" (16:4). And the churches, so ordered, are not crushed but *strengthened in the faith, and increased in numbers daily* (16:5). This is the charter of what the Church calls the living Magisterium (CCC 85-87): when the deposit of faith is disputed, the Church of the apostles can gather, discern, and declare, and her declaration carries the Spirit's own authority, which is why an honest reader must face the council's method. Scripture was quoted at Jerusalem, but Scripture alone had not settled the question, because both sides had texts; what settled it was Scripture read inside the apostolic Church, by the apostolic office, with the Spirit's assistance. Sola scriptura's true test case is not a verse; it is this chapter, and the chapter answers with a council. And an honest concession travels with the claim: councils since have sometimes been messy, contentious, and slow, exactly like this one, much debate and all. The promise was never tidiness. It was truth.

8. One more honest press, because a thoughtful Protestant will raise it: "But James settled it with Scripture, with Amos; so Scripture was the final authority after all." Test that reading against the order of events and against what the decree actually contains.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Look at the order: the debate was ended by Peter's testimony of God's acts, before James spoke a word; the assembly's silence falls at 15:12, and James, rendering the presiding local judgment ("my judgment is," 15:19), confirms from Scripture a verdict already reached and gives it pastoral form, which is exactly the Catholic grammar: the Magisterium never contradicts Scripture and always demonstrates from it, but the *judgment* of which reading is true belongs to the apostolic office, since Scripture was on the table for both sides all along, and Genesis 17 did not stop saying everlasting. Look also at what the decree contains: four practical abstentions (idol food, blood, things strangled, unchastity) found in no prophecy and derived by pastoral judgment from Torah's laws for sojourners, provisions the council had authority to impose and the later Church had authority to adapt. A text cannot do that; only a living authority can. The council honored Scripture supremely, by settling what it means, and that act of settling is precisely the thing sola scriptura cannot supply and Acts 15 supplies in front of witnesses.

9. Read Acts 15:36-41 without flinching. What do Paul and Barnabas quarrel over, how badly does it end, and what does God quietly do with the wreckage? Trace John Mark's story to its end, with 2 Timothy 4:11 in hand.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Planning the second journey, Barnabas wants to bring John Mark; Paul refuses to take the man who deserted them at Perga; and there arose "a sharp contention, so that they separated," the son of encouragement sailing for Cyprus with Mark, Paul choosing Silas for the mainland. Luke reports it without varnish: two saints, fresh from saving the Church's doctrinal unity, fail to preserve their own partnership. And God's arithmetic with the wreckage: two mission teams now sail instead of one; Barnabas's patience remakes Mark, so thoroughly that years later Paul himself writes from prison, "Get Mark and bring him with you; for he is very useful in serving me" (2 Timothy 4:11); and the deserter of Perga becomes, by early tradition (Papias, preserved in Eusebius), the Evangelist Mark, whose Gospel echoes Peter's preaching. Sanctity does not exempt saints from conflict, and conflict does not exempt God from providence. Somebody at this table needs to know both halves of that sentence, and needs a Barnabas's patience, or needs to receive it.

DIG DEEPER: THE FOUR ABSTENTIONS

Why idol offerings, blood, things strangled, and unchastity? By an influential reading, these track the holiness laws that Leviticus 17-18 applied to "the stranger who sojourns among you": the Torah's own minimum for Gentiles living amid Israel. The council's genius is pastoral: Gentiles are not bound to circumcision and the law, and Jewish and Gentile believers must still be able to share one table, so the Gentiles are asked to forgo the practices most viscerally intolerable to their Jewish brethren, most of them tied to pagan temple culture. The provisions about food were pastoral discipline for that hour rather than perpetual law, and their lapse was already being discussed in St. Augustine's day; the prohibition of unchastity was moral and permanent. The council knew the difference, which is itself a lesson in how the Church reads her own decrees.

DIG DEEPER: WHIPLASH AT LYSTRA, AND A BOY WHO WATCHED

One more Lystra note for the file: on the return visit in the next chapter, Paul will meet a young disciple from this very town named Timothy (16:1), whose grandmother Lois and mother Eunice believed (2 Timothy 1:5). Which means the boy who became Paul's beloved son in the faith may well have first encountered the apostle as the man who was stoned in his hometown and got back up. Sometimes the most eloquent sermon a town ever hears is simply watching what a Christian does after the stones.

Send (15 minutes)

1. The council's method was debate without fear, then docility without resentment. Which half is harder for you: honest argument inside the Church, or genuine obedience once she has spoken? Where in your life right now does the harder half apply?
2. Barnabas staked his ministry, twice, on men others had written off, Saul in Session 7 and Mark tonight, and both bets became authors of the New Testament. Who is the written-off person in your world, and what would a Barnabas-sized investment in them look like?

Live It This Week

Two assignments from the council floor. First, pray for the successors: every day this week, pray by name for the Holy Father and for your own bishop, the living heirs of the men who gathered in Acts 15, asking for them exactly what the council displayed: courage in debate, fidelity to the deposit, and the Spirit's assistance in judgment. Second, read one conciliar page: find Dei Verbum, the Second Vatican Council's constitution on divine revelation, and read just paragraph 10, three minutes at most, where Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterium are described as so linked that none stands without the others. You have now watched that paragraph happen live in Acts 15; go see how the Church herself describes what you watched. Bring one sentence of reaction next week.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you promised the Spirit would guide your Church into all truth, and at Jerusalem you kept the promise in front of witnesses. Keep it still. Give your Church councils when she needs them, shepherds worth their silence, and children docile enough to be strengthened by her decrees and honest enough to bring her their hardest questions. Rebuild the tent of David in every heart at this table, and gather the nations in. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things." (Acts 15:28)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 10, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 14:8-18 (Lystra: Zeus and Hermes)
2. Acts 14:19-23 (the stoning; tribulations; presbyters in every church)
3. Acts 15:1-5 (the crisis and the road to Jerusalem)
4. Acts 15:6-12 (much debate; Peter; the silence)
5. Acts 15:13-21 (James and Amos)
6. Acts 15:22-29 (the decree)
7. Acts 15:36-41 (the sharp contention)
8. Acts 16:4-5 (the dogmata delivered; the churches grow)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

9. Genesis 17:9-14 (the everlasting covenant, steelman)
10. Exodus 12:48 (circumcision and the Passover sojourner, steelman)
11. Amos 9:11-12 (the tent of David rebuilt)
12. Leviticus 17-18 (the sojourner laws behind the abstentions)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

13. Matthew 5:18 (not an iota, steelman)
14. Acts 1:6 (the kingdom question, payoff)
15. Acts 3:1-10 (Peter's twin miracle); Acts 7:58 (the coats, reversal)
16. Acts 16:1; 2 Timothy 1:5; 2 Timothy 4:11 (Timothy; Mark restored)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

17. CCC 85-87; CCC 890-891; CCC 1536, 1554; Dei Verbum 10

THE WAY, SESSION 11

What Must I Do to Be Saved?

The Acts of the Apostles 16:1-17:34, Europe, the Household of God, and the Unknown God of Athens

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants watch the Spirit steer the Gospel onto a new continent by closing doors and sending a dream, and then meet the first European converts: a businesswoman whose heart the Lord opened, and a jailer who asks the most important question in the world and receives the full apostolic answer, faith, baptism, and his whole household with him. In Athens, they discover how the Church speaks to a culture that does not know her Scriptures: by finding the altars it has already built to the God it does not know.

Catholic Touchstone. The household of faith and the baptism of households. Three times in these chapters and their neighborhood, whole houses enter the Church together: Lydia "was baptized, with her household" (16:15); the jailer "was baptized at once, with all his family" (16:33); Crispus believed "together with all his household" (18:8). The Catechism points to exactly these texts when it teaches that infants may well have been baptized from the beginning (CCC 1252), because the covenant God has always dealt in households: the promise at Pentecost was "to you and to your children" (2:39), and Israel's male infants received the covenant sign at eight days old, carried in by the household they were born to (Genesis 17:9-14). Prepare the steelman; the credobaptist reading is serious and deserves its full strength.

What You Need to Know

Chapter 16 opens with two navigational surprises. First, Timothy: Paul, fresh from the council that freed Gentiles from circumcision, has Timothy circumcised (16:3), because his mother was Jewish and, in Luke's own words, because of the Jews in those places; an uncircumcised son of a Jewish mother would in all likelihood have found synagogue doors closed to him on the mission; while in Galatians Paul refuses to circumcise Titus, a pure Gentile, on principle (Galatians 2:3-5). Same apostle, opposite decisions, one distinction: where circumcision was demanded as necessary for salvation, Paul would not yield an inch; where it merely removed an obstacle to mission, he yielded freely. The Dig Deeper covers it; it is a masterclass in the difference between principle and pastoral strategy.

Second, the closed doors: forbidden by the Spirit to speak in Asia, not allowed into Bithynia (16:6-7), the mission is funneled to the coast at Troas, where a vision in the night, a man of Macedonia pleading "come over and help us," pulls the Gospel across the Aegean into Europe. Note the quiet grammar change at 16:10: "we sought to go on into Macedonia." The author has joined the story; the author, by the Church's constant attribution Luke himself, boards at Troas. And note the method of discernment your group should catch: the Spirit guided as much by closed doors as by open ones.

Philippi gives Luke his favorite kind of triptych: three converts who could not be less alike. Lydia, a prosperous dealer in purple goods, at a riverside prayer meeting, of whom Luke writes one of the most quietly anti-Pelagian sentences in Scripture: "The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul" (16:14). Grace precedes; even the listening is a gift. Then the slave girl with the spirit of divination, freed by an exorcism that costs her owners their revenue stream, the first time in Acts the Gospel collides with someone's business model, and not the last. Then the jailer: earthquake at midnight while Paul and Silas sing hymns, the drawn sword, Paul's shout, and the question that gives this session its title: "Men, what must I do to be saved?" Get the full answer into your group's hands: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household," followed within the hour by the word of the Lord spoken to all in his house, baptism "at once, with all his family," washed wounds, a shared table, and rejoicing "with all his household" (16:31-34). Faith and baptism arrive together, at midnight, as a household event.

Chapter 17 runs through Thessalonica and Beroea, where the noble Bereans receive the word with eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily against the apostolic preaching they are receiving, the guided reading of

Session 6 in action, and lands at Athens. The Areopagus speech (17:22-31) is the Church's founding document for engaging a culture that does not know the Bible: Paul does not open with Moses. He opens with their own altar "to an unknown god," quotes their own poets, the line "in him we live and move and have our being," traditionally attributed to Epimenides of Crete, and "for we are indeed his offspring," from Aratus, *Phaenomena* 5, and builds from creation and providence, exactly the natural theology of *Wisdom* 13, toward the one non-negotiable summit: repentance, the appointed Man, and the resurrection from the dead. At the resurrection the audience splits, some mock, some delay, and some believe, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris. Prepare your group for the realism: even a perfect sermon converts some, not all, and Paul walks on.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Genesis 17:9-14. The covenant embraced households: male infants entered by circumcision at eight days old, carried into covenant by the household they were born to. This is the ground of the Catholic covenantal argument: a Jewish convert hearing "you and your household" would most likely have assumed the children were included unless he was told otherwise, and on that reading the burden of the silence falls on exclusion rather than inclusion. Present it to your group as an argument from covenant precedent, not as something *Genesis* 17 or *Acts* 16 proves outright.

Wisdom 13:1-9. The deuterocanonical backbone of the Areopagus method: from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator, and those who studied the world yet failed to find its Author are without excuse, though they sought Him. Paul's speech in Athens, and his letter to Rome (*Romans* 1:19-20), both walk *Wisdom*'s path: creation is a book pagans can read.

Isaiah 42:5. "Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens... who gives breath to the people upon it": the creed of the Creator that Paul preaches on Mars Hill, to people who had never opened *Isaiah*, in their own philosophical dialect.

Psalms 146:6 and the songs at midnight. Paul and Silas, bleeding in the stocks, sing hymns at midnight and the prisoners listen. Israel has always sung in the dark, and the God who "gives songs in the night" (*Job* 35:10) answers this one with an earthquake that opens doors, the second divinely burst prison of our study, and this time the jailer, not the prisoner, is the one set free.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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

Chrysostom pauses over Lydia: the Lord opened her heart, he notes, yet she gave heed; grace did not force the door but unlocked it, and her freedom walked through. And he delights in what opened-hearted faith immediately does: she constrains the missionaries to her house, for a heart God has opened opens its home. Hospitality, for Chrysostom, is faith's first reflex.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyprian of Carthage, *Letter 64, to Fidus* (written AD 253)

When a country bishop asked whether baptism should wait until an infant's eighth day, after the pattern of circumcision, St. Cyprian answered with the judgment of a council of sixty-six bishops: do not wait even that long. The mercy and grace of God, they ruled, is to be denied to no one born of man, and if the worst of adult sinners may be baptized, how much more the newborn, who has not sinned at all except in Adam. For Cyprian and his sixty-six bishops in AD 253, the live question was not whether to baptize infants but whether to wait

even eight days.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Justin Martyr, Second Apology (2nd century)

St. Justin, the philosopher-convert, taught that seeds of the divine Word were scattered among the pagans, so that whatever has been said truly by anyone, poets and philosophers included, belongs to us Christians, since they spoke by the seed of the same Logos who became flesh. What Paul did at Athens, claiming the pagans' own altar and their own poets for Christ, Justin turned into the Church's standing method with every culture she has ever met.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1252. The practice of infant baptism is an immemorial tradition of the Church, explicitly attested from the second century; it is quite possible that from the beginning of the apostolic preaching, when whole households received baptism, infants may also have been baptized.

CCC 27-28. The desire for God is written in the human heart; in many ways throughout history, in their religions and philosophies, men have given expression to their quest for God, gropings which the Catechism describes with Paul's Areopagus words: that men should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him.

CCC 843. The Church regards whatever goodness and truth is found among the nations as a preparation for the Gospel, given by Him who enlightens all men. Paul treated Athens' gropings, altar included, as exactly such a preparation.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 2, The Map. A continent falls tonight: the vision at Troas carries the Gospel from Asia into Europe, and the Gospel's long road into Europe runs through that dream. Mark it on the map verse with the group.

Thread 1, The Name. Resting, but coiled: it returns next session with three sightings in quick succession. Say nothing.

Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread. One session from resolution. Notice privately that the jailer's conversion ends at a table, "he set food before them" (16:34), and keep your powder dry.

Also mark: the pronoun shift at 16:10, "we sought to go," where Luke steps into his own narrative. From Troas onward, portions of Acts are eyewitness memoir. The physician has joined the Way.

Session Goals

1. Participants can explain the Spirit's guidance by closed doors and the significance of the Macedonian crossing.
2. Participants can articulate what "the Lord opened her heart" teaches about grace preceding faith.
3. Participants can walk through the jailer's conversion and present the Catholic case for household and infant baptism, answering the credobaptist steelman honestly.

4. Participants can describe Paul's Areopagus method, its Wisdom 13 roots, and its non-negotiable summit.
5. Participants each commit to one household practice of faith and one Athens-style bridge into a secular relationship this week.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on Timothy's circumcision, (3) compress question 3 (the slave girl) into a bridge sentence. Do not cut the jailer sequence with its steelman, or the Areopagus questions.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord of open doors and closed ones, you steered your apostles by both, and you have steered every one of us to this table tonight. Open our hearts as you opened Lydia's, teach our households your praise, and give us songs for our midnights. And when we stand before the altars our neighbors have built to gods they do not know, give us Paul's courage and Paul's courtesy. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Tell us about a door that closed in your life that you later thanked God for. When did you realize the closed door was guidance?
2. What faith practices, if any, did you inherit from your household growing up, and which ones do you most want to pass on?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 16:6-10. How does the Spirit guide the mission in these verses, and what changes in Luke's grammar at verse 10? What do both details teach about discernment?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Twice the guidance is negative: forbidden to speak in Asia, not allowed into Bithynia, until the missionaries are funneled to the coast, and only then comes the positive sign, the night vision of the Macedonian pleading, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." God steers by closed doors as truly as by open ones, and the team concludes, seeking confirmation together, that God has called them. And at verse 10 the pronouns change: "we sought to go." the author, whom the Church has always known as Luke, has joined the company at Troas; from here, stretches of Acts read as eyewitness memoir. The crossing that follows carries the Gospel onto the continent of Europe, and the Gospel's long road into Europe runs through that one night's dream.

2. Read Acts 16:11-15, the first convert on European soil. Who is Lydia, where is she found, and, most important, read verse 14 word for word: what happens before she gives heed to Paul, and who does it? What does her response to baptism immediately look like?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A dealer in purple goods from Thyatira, a woman of means, found at a riverside place of prayer on the sabbath, a worshiper of God already. And the sentence to underline for life: "The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul." Grace comes first: as she listens, God opens her heart, and the opened heart freely gives heed. This is the Church's whole teaching on grace in one clause, no one argues, studies, or wills their way to God without God first unlocking the door from the inside (CCC 2670 and the ancient prayer, no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit). And note her baptism: "she was baptized, with her household," the first of tonight's household formulas, and her opened heart immediately opens her home, constraining the missionaries to stay. Grace makes hosts.

3. Read Acts 16:16-24. What ends Paul and Silas in prison, and be precise: what exactly did the exorcism cost, and whom? What pattern does this begin in Acts?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

A slave girl with a spirit of divination, whose owners profit from her fortune-telling, follows the missionaries for days; Paul, annoyed, commands the spirit out in the name of Jesus Christ. Her deliverance is her owners' loss: "when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone," they drag Paul and Silas to the magistrates on trumped-up charges, and the apostles are beaten with rods and locked in the inner prison, feet in stocks. This is the first time in Acts the Gospel collides head-on with somebody's business model, and it will not be the last; watch for Ephesus. When Christ frees people, the industries built on their bondage do not send thank-you notes.

4. Read Acts 16:25-34 slowly; it may be the most beautiful conversion scene in Acts. Set the stage at midnight, then walk the sequence: the question, the answer, and everything that happens "at once." List each element of the jailer's conversion in order.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Midnight: Paul and Silas, backs raw, singing hymns while the prisoners listen, and God answers the song with an earthquake that opens every door and looses every chain. The jailer, facing execution for escaped prisoners, draws his sword; Paul's shout saves the man's life before saving his soul: "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." Trembling, he asks the question every evangelist prays for: "Men, what must I do to be saved?" And the full apostolic answer unfolds in sequence: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household"; then the word of the Lord is spoken to him *with all that were in his house*; then, the same hour of the night, he washes their wounds "and he was baptized at once, with all his family"; then a table is set, food before them, "and he rejoiced with all his household that he had believed in God." Faith, catechesis, baptism, mercy given and received, a shared table, and joy, an entire household passing from death to life between midnight and dawn. Notice that no one in this scene treats baptism as a follow-up to salvation to be scheduled later; the question was "what must I do to be saved," and the water arrived the same hour.

Build the steelman. The credobaptist case is serious and deserves its strongest form: baptism in the New Testament always follows personal, professed faith. "Believe in the Lord Jesus" is the command; every named baptized individual in Acts is a believer; there is not one explicit infant baptism recorded in all of Scripture; and "household" texts prove nothing, since Luke says the word was spoken "to all in his house" and the whole household "rejoiced," activities infants cannot do, so these households may simply have contained no small children. Baptizing those who cannot believe empties baptism of the very faith it signifies. An honest Catholic should feel the force of this before answering.

5. Press the steelman. First, ask what a first-century Jewish hearer would have assumed when told "you and your household" would be saved, given how God's covenant had included children for two thousand years. Then weigh the silence: which reading actually bears the burden of proof? And what does the earliest traceable practice of the Church show?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Start where the first hearers stood: for two millennia, God's covenant had dealt in households, with male infants entering by circumcision at eight days old, within the household's covenant (Genesis 17); Peter's Pentecost promise ran "to you and to your children" (2:39); and Paul calls baptism "the circumcision of Christ" (Colossians 2:11-12). A Jewish convert told "you and your household" would assume the children in, unless explicitly told otherwise, so, the Catholic covenantal argument runs, the silence cuts against exclusion: Scripture never records an infant baptized, but never records one refused or deferred either, and in a covenant people who had always included their babies, shutting them out is the innovation that would have needed

announcing. Concede honestly what must be conceded: no verse says "and they baptized the infants," and the Church does not pretend otherwise; the Catechism itself says only that infants "may also have been baptized" in those households (CCC 1252). What settles the question is the same thing that settled Acts 15: Scripture read within the living Tradition, and here the Tradition speaks early and without a dissenting voice: by AD 253, the only question sixty-six bishops in council could find to debate was whether baptism must wait until day eight, and St. Cyprian's answer was not to wait at all. If the apostles' churches had practiced believers-only baptism, someone, somewhere, would have protested its abandonment; the nearest thing on record, Tertullian's counsel around AD 200 to delay baptizing little children, presupposes the very practice he wanted slowed. And the deepest reason is the Gospel itself: baptizing an infant, who can offer God nothing, not even a profession, is the purest possible display of what tonight's riverside taught us, that the Lord opens hearts before they can even give heed. Grace goes first. Infant baptism is Lydia's verse in liturgical form.

6. Read Acts 17:10-12 on the Bereans, briefly, with Session 6 in mind. What made them "more noble," exactly, and what was the setting of their daily Scripture examination?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

They received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so, and many believed. Their nobility was eagerness joined to diligence, not independence: they examined the Scriptures daily against the apostle's preaching, testing his claims by the prophets while sitting under his instruction, guided reading exactly as the Ethiopian practiced it. The Berean is the patron of the Catholic in the pew with a study Bible open, checking the readings, hungry and teachable at once.

7. Read Acts 17:22-28, the opening of the Areopagus address. Where does Paul begin with an audience that has never read Moses, what does he quote, and what is he assuming about pagan culture? For the roots of this method, read Wisdom 13:1-5.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He begins with their own city: "I perceive that in every way you are very religious," and their own altar, "to an unknown god. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you." Then creation and providence, the Lord of heaven and earth who needs no temples and gives all men life and breath, who made every nation from one man and set the times and boundaries "that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him." And then, astonishingly, he quotes their own poets as witnesses: "in him we live and move and have our being," a line the tradition assigns to Epimenides of Crete, and "for we are indeed his offspring," from Aratus. Luke himself says only "some of your poets" (17:28). The method is Wisdom 13 made missionary: creation is a book the nations can read, and their gropings toward God, altars, poems, philosophies, are preparations for the Gospel, not merely errors to be bulldozed (CCC 27-28, 843). Paul treats Athens the way St. Justin later formalized it: whatever has been said truly by anyone belongs to Christ, because every seed of truth was sown by the Word who became flesh. The Church has planted her missions, culture after culture, with exactly this trowel.

8. Read Acts 17:29-34, the speech's summit and its results. Where does Paul stop building bridges, what does he refuse to soften, and how does the audience split? What does this teach about faithful evangelization and its scorecard?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The bridge-building ends at repentance and resurrection: God "commands all men everywhere to repent," for He has fixed a day of judgment by a Man He appointed, "and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead." To Greek ears, the resurrection of a body was an absurdity much of philosophy refused to digest, and Paul preaches it anyway, undiluted, because a Gospel adapted all the way down is no longer the Gospel. The audience splits three ways: some mocked, some said "we will hear you again," and some joined him and believed, among them Dionysius the Areopagite, a member of the court itself, and a woman named Damaris. There is the honest scorecard of even perfect evangelization: mockery, delay, and faith, side by side. Paul's method bends everything to the audience except the message's summit, and his peace does not depend on the percentage. Neither should ours.

DIG DEEPER: WHY CIRCUMCISE TIMOTHY AFTER THE COUNCIL?

Acts 16:3 startles careful readers: Paul, carrying the very decree that freed Gentiles from circumcision, circumcises Timothy. The key is Timothy's mother: Jewish, which by the reckoning of the day made Timothy a Jew living uncircumcised, a standing obstacle that, in all likelihood, would have barred synagogue doors on the mission. Titus, a pure Gentile, Paul refused to circumcise even under pressure (Galatians 2:3-5), because there it was demanded as necessary for salvation. Same apostle, opposite calls, one razor-sharp distinction: where a practice is imposed as required for salvation, resist to the last inch; where it is merely a bridge for the Gospel, become all things to all men (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). Knowing which situation you are in is half of pastoral wisdom.

DIG DEEPER: ROMAN CITIZEN, PUBLIC APOLOGY

After the illegal beating, Paul refuses to slip quietly out of Philippi: "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens... let them come themselves and take us out" (16:37), and the alarmed magistrates do. This is not wounded pride. Paul is establishing, on the public record, that the Church in Philippi was founded by men vindicated under Roman law, plausibly a deliberate shield for the fragile congregation he is leaving behind, including Lydia's household and the jailer's. Prudent use of one's rights in defense of the vulnerable is not worldliness; it is shepherding.

Send (15 minutes)

1. The jailer's household was converted through the head of the house asking one honest question. What is the current spiritual temperature of your household, and what one practice, grace before meals, a blessing at bedtime, a weekly rosary decade, could you realistically institute this week?
2. Name the most secular person you genuinely like. What is their "altar to an unknown god," the true thing they already love, justice, beauty, honesty, wonder, that could be your Areopagus bridge?

Live It This Week

Two assignments, one for your house and one for your city. First, the household practice: institute the one practice you named in the Send question, and hold it every day this week, however brief; households are converted by rhythms more than by arguments, and yours is the first Macedonia you have been called to. Second, the Athens bridge: with the secular friend you named, have one conversation this week that begins where Paul began, on their altar, asking sincerely about the true thing they love, and listening for the unknown God behind it. Do not force the summit; just walk partway up the hill together. The Spirit finished the sermon for Paul, and He has not retired.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, you opened Lydia's heart, you sang through your servants at midnight, and Athens worshiped, without knowing it, the God you have made known. Open our households to your praise and our neighbors to your name. Give us the jailer's honest question and the jailer's speed to the water, and let every closed door in our lives be your steering hand. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"And they said, 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.'" (Acts 16:31)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 11, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 16:1-5 (Timothy); 16:6-10 (closed doors; the vision; the we-passages begin)
2. Acts 16:11-15 (Lydia)
3. Acts 16:16-24 (the slave girl; prison)
4. Acts 16:25-34 (the jailer's household)
5. Acts 16:35-40 (the citizens' apology)
6. Acts 17:10-12 (the Bereans)
7. Acts 17:22-34 (the Areopagus)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

8. Genesis 17:9-14 (households in covenant)
9. Wisdom 13:1-9 (knowing God from creation)
10. Isaiah 42:5 (the Creator's creed)
11. Job 35:10 (songs in the night)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

12. Acts 2:39 (to you and your children); Acts 18:8 (Crispus's household); 1 Corinthians 1:16 (Stephanas's household)
13. Colossians 2:11-12 (the circumcision of Christ)
14. Galatians 2:3-5; 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 (Titus; all things to all men)
15. Romans 1:19-20 (creation's witness)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

16. CCC 1252; CCC 27-28; CCC 843; CCC 2670

THE WAY, SESSION 12

I Have Many People in This City

The Acts of the Apostles 18:1-19:41, Corinth, Ephesus, and the God Who Works Through Matter

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Participants meet the Church's working ecosystem in the two great pagan metropolises: a tentmaking apostle sustained by a night vision, a married couple who catechize an eloquent preacher over dinner, and believers who had only John's baptism completed with Christian baptism and apostolic hands. In Ephesus they discover the God who is unembarrassed to work through matter, handkerchiefs from Paul's skin, and trace that scandalous generosity back through Peter's shadow, the hem of Christ's garment, and the bones of Elisha, into the Church's teaching on sacramentals and relics.

Catholic Touchstone. Sacramentals, relics, and the sacramental principle. "God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them" (19:11-12). Luke reports it without embarrassment, because Scripture has never been embarrassed by grace through matter: a dead man revived at the touch of Elisha's bones (2 Kings 13:21), the woman healed touching Christ's garment (Mark 5:27-30), the sick laid where Peter's shadow might pass (5:15). The Church's sacramentals and her veneration of relics stand in exactly this line (CCC 1667-1670, 1674), and the sons of Sceva, in this same chapter, mark the counterfeit the Church herself condemns: holy things used as magic (CCC 2111). The chapter contains both the doctrine and its abuse, labeled.

What You Need to Know

Corinth first: a boomtown of commerce and vice, the last city a strategist would pick for a church. Paul arrives alone, afraid by his own admission (1 Corinthians 2:3), and God gives him three anchors: work, companions, and a word. The work is tentmaking with Aquila and Priscilla, a Jewish couple expelled from Rome under Claudius; the apostle to the nations pays his own way at a workbench, and the Church has honored the dignity of labor ever since. The word comes by night: "Do not be afraid... for I am with you... for I have many people in this city" (18:9-10). Sit with that sentence and its Old Testament twin, which the group will discover: Elijah, despairing in hostile territory, told by God of seven thousand hidden faithful he could not see (1 Kings 19:18). God counts people who have not yet believed as already His; Paul stays eighteen months on the strength of the census heaven had already taken. Note also Crispus, the synagogue ruler, who believed "together with all his household" (18:8), tonight's quiet echo of last session's touchstone, and Gallio the proconsul, whose refusal to hear the case (18:12-17) gives the Way a favorable ruling and years of shelter in Corinth, and whose name, carved on a stone at Delphi, fixes his proconsulship to about AD 51-52 and gives Paul's Corinthian ministry, and with it the chronology of his letters and journeys, its single most important approximate anchor in the calendar.

Then Apollos (18:24-28), one of the most instructive minor characters in Scripture: eloquent, mighty in the Scriptures, fervent in spirit, accurate as far as he goes, and incomplete, knowing only the baptism of John. Watch what the Church's ecosystem does with him: Priscilla and Aquila, a lay married couple, tentmakers, hear him, take him aside privately, "and expounded to him the way of God more accurately" (18:26). Note Luke's phrase: *the way of God*. The eloquent man lets himself be catechized over what was probably dinner, by a woman and her husband, and emerges a champion who "powerfully confuted the Jews in public." Humble teachability plus private, charitable correction: the Church's quality control, working exactly as designed.

Ephesus opens with a scene that consolidates two earlier touchstones (19:1-7): Paul finds about twelve disciples who, like Apollos, know only John's baptism, and have not so much as heard of the Holy Spirit. Paul's diagnosis distinguishes precisely: John's baptism was repentance *in preparation*; Christian baptism is into the Lord Jesus. They are baptized, Paul lays his hands on them, and the Spirit comes. Preparation is not possession, sincerity is not sacrament, and the Session 6 pattern, water and apostolic hands, holds. The Church has never treated the sacraments as interchangeable with good intentions, because Acts does not.

Then the Ephesian crescendo: two years of daily teaching in the hall of Tyrannus until "all the residents of Asia heard the word" (19:10); the extraordinary miracles through cloth from Paul's body; the sons of Sceva, freelance exorcists wielding the name of Jesus "whom Paul preaches" as an incantation, overpowered by the demoniac with the most darkly comic line in Acts: "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" (19:15); the great bonfire of magic books, fifty thousand pieces of silver, tens of thousands of days' wages, burned by their own owners as the cost of a clean break (19:19); and Luke's scoreboard: "So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily" (19:20). Finally the riot: Demetrius the silversmith, who sees the Gospel threatening his shrine trade, packages his profit motive as piety, and two hours of "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" fill the theater. For the second time in our study, the Gospel's collision with a business model produces a mob; grace is bad for the bondage economy. Note the Way's two sightings in this chapter for the Thread Watch, and prepare the steelman on relics with special care: it is the touchstone, and the sons of Sceva are your gift, because the chapter itself supplies the distinction between sacrament and sorcery.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

2 Kings 13:20-21. A burial interrupted by raiders; the corpse thrown hastily into Elisha's grave; "and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood on his feet." The Old Testament's own relic miracle: God's power still working through the body of His holy one, even in death. The handkerchiefs of Ephesus have a pedigree, and the group should find it themselves.

2 Kings 2:8, 13-14. Elisha strikes the Jordan with Elijah's fallen mantle and the waters part: the master's cloak carrying the master's grace into the successor's hand. Cloth, in the economy of the prophets, was never just cloth.

1 Kings 19:14-18. Elijah at Horeb, certain he alone is left, answered by God's hidden census: "I will leave seven thousand in Israel... that have not bowed to Baal." The Lord's night word to Paul in Corinth, "I have many people in this city," is the same divine arithmetic: God's people in a place are more numerous than His prophet's despair can count, and some of them have not yet believed.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Jerome, *Against Vigilantius* (written AD 406)

When Vigilantius sneered at the honor paid to the martyrs' remains, St. Jerome answered for the whole Church: we do not worship relics, we do not adore the sun or moon or angels or the bones of any man; we honor the relics of the martyrs in order to adore Him whose martyrs they are, honoring the servants so that the honor may flow to the Lord. The distinction Vigilantius could not see, between veneration and worship, the Church has never lost.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, Book 22 (5th century)

St. Augustine devotes pages of his greatest work to cataloguing miracles he could verify in his own diocese, many wrought at the shrine of the relics of St. Stephen, the martyr of our fifth session, healings of the blind, the dying, the dead raised, documented with names and witnesses. The God who healed through handkerchiefs from Paul, Augustine testifies, was still healing through the bones of Stephen in Africa, and the Church kept records.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom, Homily on the words, Salute Priscilla and Aquila (4th century)

Chrysostom preached an entire homily on this couple, marveling that tentmakers instructed the eloquent Apollos, and that Paul names Priscilla first. Their workshop was a church, he says, and their marriage a school of virtue; let no one plead ordinary life as an excuse, for the catechists of this chapter held needles, not offices.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1667-1670. Sacramentals are sacred signs instituted by the Church which prepare us to receive the fruit of the sacraments and sanctify different circumstances of life; they work not as magic but through the Church's intercession and the disposition of faith.

CCC 1674. The religious sense of the Christian people has always found expression in forms of piety surrounding the Church's sacramental life, among which the Catechism names the veneration of relics.

CCC 2111. Superstition is the deviation of religious feeling: to attribute the efficacy of prayers or sacramental signs to their mere external performance, apart from the interior dispositions they demand, is to fall into superstition. The sons of Sceva are its patron cautionary tale.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 1, The Name: three sightings tonight. Priscilla and Aquila expound to Apollos "the way of God more accurately" (18:26); at Ephesus some "spoke evil of the Way before the congregation" (19:9); and the riot is "no little stir concerning the Way" (19:23). Have the group mark each aloud as they appear; the name is now how Luke refers to the whole movement under pressure. Three sightings remain: one next session, two in the finale, where the thread gives up its last secret.

Thread 2, The Map. Corinth and Ephesus: the commercial and religious capitals of the Aegean world, held for eighteen months and over two years respectively. The Gospel is no longer visiting the Gentile world; it is moving in.

Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread. Resolution next session. Absolute silence tonight.

Callback registered: Crispus's household (18:8) quietly seconds last session's touchstone, and Gallio's dismissal builds the legal shelter Paul's citizenship began constructing in Philippi.

Session Goals

1. Participants discover the Elijah-at-Horeb pattern behind the Lord's night word in Corinth and can articulate its hope for evangelizing hard places.
2. Participants can describe the Apollos pattern of humble teachability and private, charitable correction.
3. Participants can explain the distinction between John's baptism and Christian baptism, and why sincerity does not substitute for sacrament.
4. Participants discover Elisha's bones behind the Ephesian handkerchiefs and can present the Catholic teaching on sacramentals and relics, answering the superstition charge with the chapter's own sons-of-Sceva distinction.
5. Participants each commit to praying for their city with God's census in mind, and to one rightly ordered use of a sacramental at home.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on Gallio's stone, (3) compress question 7 (the book burning and riot) into a vivid two minute retelling. Do not cut the Corinth night word, the Apollos scene, or the relics steelman.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord of the city, you had many people in Corinth before Corinth knew it, and you have many in our city tonight. Give us your census-taker's hope. Make our homes workshops of catechesis like Priscilla's, our corrections private and kind, our devotions clean of all superstition, and our grip on everything that competes with you loose enough to burn. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Who gave you the most valuable correction of your life, and what made you able to receive it?
2. Is there a physical object connected to your faith or your family, a rosary, a Bible, a grandmother's crucifix, that genuinely matters to you? Why do objects carry so much?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 18:1-11. Assemble Paul's situation in Corinth: his trade, his companions, his fears (Paul himself admits them in 1 Corinthians 2:3), and the night vision. Then, live discovery: read 1 Kings 19:14-18, Elijah at Horeb. What is the Lord's answer to both discouraged servants, and what staggering claim hides in "I have many people in this city"?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Paul arrives alone in a boomtown of commerce and vice, works leather with Aquila and Priscilla, refugees from Claudius's expulsion of Jews from Rome, and by his own later admission was there "in weakness and in much fear and trembling." The Lord's night word gives him three anchors: do not be afraid, I am with you, and the astonishing third: "I have many people in this city." Elijah at Horeb, certain he alone was left, received the same correction: God had seven thousand hidden faithful the prophet could not see. And notice the tense in Corinth: God speaks of people in Corinth as *His* before Paul has met them, a promise most readers hear as heaven counting those who will yet believe. Paul stays eighteen months on the strength of heaven's census. Every discouraged evangelist, every parent praying for a child, every catechist in a hard parish should carry this sentence: God's people in your city outnumber your despair, and some of them have not believed yet.

2. Read Acts 18:8 and 18:12-17. Two quick observations: how does Crispus believe, echoing last session, and what does the proconsul Gallio's ruling accomplish for the young Church, whether Gallio cares or not?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Crispus, the synagogue ruler, believed "together with all his household," the third household of our study, quietly seconding last session's touchstone. And Gallio, brother of the philosopher Seneca, throws the case out: if this were crime he would hear it, but questions about words and names and Jewish law are not Rome's business. His bored dismissal means that here, at least, Rome treats the Way as an internal matter of Judaism, no crime to try, and Paul preaches on for many months under that shade. God can use a proconsul's indifference as effectively as an angel; providence does not require its instruments to be devout.

3. Read Acts 18:24-28, the education of Apollos. Build his resume, name precisely what he lacked, and then watch the correction: who does it, how, where, and what does Apollos become? Catch the phrase Luke uses for what they taught him.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Apollos of Alexandria: eloquent, well versed in the Scriptures, instructed in the way of the Lord, fervent in spirit, speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, and knowing only the baptism of John, a brilliant man with a gap. The correction is a miniature of the Church working perfectly: Priscilla and Aquila, lay tentmakers, a married couple, hear him, take him aside privately, no public humiliation, no letter-writing campaign, "and expounded to him the way of God more accurately." Mark Luke's phrase: the way of God, our thread brushing past. And mark the order of the names: Priscilla first, a detail many readers take as a sign of her prominence in the couple's shared teaching of the most eloquent preacher of the age. Apollos receives it humbly and emerges a champion, powerfully confuting opponents in public, "showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus." Two lessons, both rare: the greatness of correcting privately and charitably, and the greater greatness of being correctable. The Church's quality control has always run on both.

4. Read Acts 19:1-7. What do the twelve Ephesian disciples lack, how does Paul diagnose it, and what two actions complete them? Distinguish precisely between John's baptism and Christian baptism, and connect the scene to Session 6.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Disciples, sincere ones, who have not so much as heard that there is a Holy Spirit, because they received only John's baptism. Paul's diagnosis distinguishes exactly: John's was a baptism of repentance, preparation, pointing forward to the one coming after; Christian baptism is *into the Lord Jesus* and confers what John's only promised. So they are baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus, and Paul lays his hands upon them, and the Holy Spirit comes: water and apostolic hands, the Session 6 pattern intact at the other end of the map. The standing lesson: sincerity is not sacrament, and preparation is not possession. Devout intentions, even devout rites, do not substitute for the actual means Christ instituted, which is why the Church has never treated "I mean well" and "I am baptized and confirmed" as interchangeable sentences.

5. Read Acts 19:8-12. Describe Paul's Ephesian operation and then the extraordinary miracles of verses 11-12, exactly as Luke reports them. Now, live discovery: read 2 Kings 13:20-21, and recall Peter's shadow (5:15) and the touch of Christ's garment (Mark 5:27-30). What pattern runs through all four scenes, and what does it reveal about how God likes to work?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Two years of daily dialogues in the hall of Tyrannus until all Asia hears the word, and alongside the preaching: "God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them." Now the pedigree: a corpse flung into Elisha's grave revived the instant it touched the prophet's bones; a hemorrhaging woman was healed touching Jesus' garment, and He perceived that power had gone out of Him (Mark 5:30); the sick of Jerusalem were laid where Peter's shadow might fall. Four scenes, one pattern: the God who became flesh is unembarrassed to work through matter, and God freely chooses to keep working through the bodies and even the belongings of His holy ones. Note Luke's careful grammar: *God* did the miracles, by the hands of Paul; the cloth conveys, it does not contain. This is the sacramental principle in its boldest form, and it is the entire logic of the Church's sacramentals and her veneration of relics (CCC 1667-1670, 1674): grace, sovereign and free, delighting to travel through the physical, because the Word became physical.

Build the steelman. The Protestant objection here is old, serious, and partly aimed at real abuses: the handkerchief miracles were unique apostolic signs authenticating the first preaching, not a warrant for a

permanent religion of objects. Venerating bones, touching cloths to tombs, wearing medals, this is the pagan instinct in Christian dress, treating created things as batteries of divine power, exactly the magic mindset Scripture condemns. Dead men's bones defile (Numbers 19:11, 16); honor paid before relics slides, in practice, into worship; and church history's relic trade, forgeries, and superstitions prove where the road leads. Did not this very chapter show freelancers treating the holy name itself as an incantation, and being thrashed for it? Let the objection stand at full strength, because the answer is standing in the same chapter.

6. Press the steelman using the chapter's own contrast case. Read Acts 19:13-17, the sons of Sceva. What exactly are they doing with the name of Jesus, how does it differ from what God was doing through Paul's handkerchiefs, and what does the difference teach? Then make the honest concessions the objection has earned.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The sons of Sceva wield the holy name as a technique: "I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul preaches," a formula borrowed secondhand, without faith, without communion with Christ or His Church, power sought apart from the Person. And the demon's reply is the whole theology of the scene: "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" Hell recognizes relationship and mocks recitation. There is the exact line the Church herself draws: the handkerchiefs healed because *God* chose to work miracles through the body of His servant; the incantation failed because it grasped at holiness as a technique, without faith or communion. What the objector calls the Catholic position, attributing efficacy to external performance apart from interior disposition, the Catechism condemns by name as superstition (CCC 2111); the Church codified the objection into her own law. Now the honest concessions, owed and paid: relic abuses, forgeries, and trafficking really happened, and the Council of Trent legislated against them while retaining the principle, reform of abuse rather than amputation of truth, the Church's constant surgical rule. And the deepest answer is the Incarnation itself: a religion whose God took a body, healed by touch and spittle and hem, and left His Church bread that is His Body, cannot be a religion embarrassed by matter. St. Jerome said it for all time: we honor the servants so that the honor flows to the Lord. The bones of the martyrs are not batteries. They are trophies, and the power is His.

7. Read Acts 19:18-20 and 19:23-29, 32. Two economic scenes: what do the new believers burn, at what cost, and who starts the riot, for what stated and actual reasons? What does this chapter teach about conversion and cost?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The believers who had practiced magic bring their own books and burn them publicly: fifty thousand pieces of silver, tens of thousands of days' wages, torched by their owners, no one demanded it; repentance did. And Luke's scoreboard follows immediately: "So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily." Then Demetrius the silversmith, who sees the Gospel threatening his Artemis-shrine trade, convenes his trade and performs the oldest rhetorical trick on record: he opens with the profit motive, "from this business we have our wealth," and closes wrapped in piety, the temple of the great goddess may be counted as nothing. Two hours of "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" fill the theater, and Luke adds the driest line in Acts: most of them did not know why they had come together. For the second time in our study, Philippi's slave girl being the first, the Gospel's collision with a business model produces a mob. Real conversion has a price tag, sometimes fifty thousand silver pieces of your own past, and real evangelization will eventually inconvenience someone's revenue. A Gospel that costs nothing and threatens no one's idols is not the one that prevailed mightily in Ephesus.

DIG DEEPER: THE STONE THAT DATES THE NEW TESTAMENT

Gallio's year as proconsul of Achaia is fixed by an inscription found at Delphi quoting the emperor Claudius,

commonly dated to AD 51-52. Since Paul stood before Gallio's judgment seat in Corinth, that stone gives this chapter, and with it Paul's letters and journeys, their most important approximate anchor in the calendar. Luke's narrative touches verifiable history at dozens of such points, names, titles, harbors, magistracies, and archaeology has repeatedly vindicated his precision. The faith of the Way rests on things that happened, in cities that can be excavated, before officials whose terms can be dated.

DIG DEEPER: PRISCILLA FIRST

Of the six times the couple is named in the New Testament, Priscilla is named before her husband in four, including the catechesis of Apollos, an arrangement counter-cultural enough that many scholars take it to reflect her real prominence as a teacher. The Church's first recorded adult-formation instructor of a future Christian leader was a laywoman with a needle trade, working alongside her husband, in their home. Chrysostom preached a whole homily in their honor. Every couple that has ever hosted a Bible study, this table included, works in their line.

Send (15 minutes)

1. "I have many people in this city." Do you actually believe that about your city, your workplace, your extended family? What would change in how you speak and pray if you assumed God's census is larger than your evidence?
2. The Ephesian converts burned what competed with Christ, at enormous cost, by their own hands. What in your life belongs on that fire, and what has kept the match unstruck?

Live It This Week

Three small assignments, one for each city of the heart. For Corinth: pray for your own city daily this week using the Lord's own sentence, "You have many people in this city," naming your parish, your street, your workplace, and asking to be led to one of His uncounted ones. For Ephesus: choose one sacramental in your home, holy water at the door, a blessed crucifix, a rosary, and use it once this week *rightly*: with a deliberate prayer, as the Church intends, grace through the sign and never the sign as machinery. For the workshop of Priscilla: if a correction has been sitting undelivered in your heart for someone you love, deliver it this week her way: privately, charitably, and over food if you can manage it.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, known by name in heaven and hell alike, keep our religion clean: no superstition, no magic, no performance, only faith in you who love to work through water and oil and bread and the bodies of your saints. Give us Corinthian courage for hard cities, Apollos's teachable heart, and the Ephesians' arithmetic, that counted fifty thousand pieces of silver a fair price for a clean break. You have many people in our city; introduce us. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you... for I have many people in this city.'" (Acts 18:9-10)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 12, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 18:1-11 (Corinth; the night vision)
2. Acts 18:8; 18:12-17 (Crispus; Gallio)
3. Acts 18:24-28 (Apollos)
4. Acts 19:1-7 (John's baptism completed)
5. Acts 19:8-12 (Tyrannus; the handkerchiefs)
6. Acts 19:13-20 (the sons of Sceva; the bonfire)
7. Acts 19:23-41 (the riot of the silversmiths)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

8. 1 Kings 19:14-18 (the hidden seven thousand)
9. 2 Kings 13:20-21 (Elisha's bones)
10. 2 Kings 2:8, 13-14 (Elijah's mantle)
11. Numbers 19:11, 16 (a dead body, and bones, defile; steelman)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

12. 1 Corinthians 2:3 (fear and trembling in Corinth)
13. Acts 5:15 (Peter's shadow); Mark 5:27-30 (the garment)
14. Acts 18:26; 19:9; 19:23 (the Way, three sightings)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

15. CCC 1667-1670; CCC 1674; CCC 2111

THE WAY, SESSION 13

On the First Day of the Week

The Acts of the Apostles 20:1-23:35, The Bread at Troas, the Shepherds of Miletus, and the Road to Jerusalem

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Tonight a thread planted in Session 2 resolves: at Troas, Luke shows us why the Church gathers, "on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread" (20:7), the earliest window in Scripture onto the Sunday Eucharist, complete with readings that run long, a young man who falls asleep, a death, a resurrection, and the bread broken before dawn. Participants then hear Paul's only recorded sermon to Christians, the Miletus farewell, where presbyters are called overseers and commanded to shepherd the church of God obtained with His own blood, and they discover that Luke has quietly shaped Paul's final journey to Jerusalem as an imitation of his Master's.

Catholic Touchstone. The Sunday Eucharist. The Catechism quotes Acts 20:7 directly: it was above all on the first day of the week that the Christians met to break bread, and the Church has never ceased to do so (CCC 1343, 2177). The assembly's stated purpose at Troas is the bread, and Paul's company stayed seven days in the city, a week that ends precisely at that first-day gathering (20:6-7). A second touchstone stands at Miletus: the presbyters of Ephesus (20:17) are addressed as overseers, *episkopoi*, made so "by the Holy Spirit," and commanded to shepherd, *poimainein*, "the church of God which he obtained with his own blood" (20:28). Presbyter, bishop, shepherd: the vocabulary of the ordained office gathered into one verse, with the Spirit as its author and the blood of God as its price.

What You Need to Know

Set the Troas scene precisely (20:6-12), because every detail preaches. Paul's company sails after the days of Unleavened Bread and stays in Troas seven days, a week that lands them on "the first day of the week," when the community was "gathered together to break bread." Note the purpose clause: not gathered, and incidentally eating, but gathered *to* break bread; the Eucharist is the reason for the assembly. Note the day: the first day, the day of the Resurrection, already emerging as the Christian gathering day (compare 1 Corinthians 16:2), soon to be called the Lord's Day (Revelation 1:10). Note the shape: Paul "talked with them," prolonging his speech until midnight, and *then* the bread was broken; word first, then sacrament, the same two-course structure as Emmaus, Acts 2:42, and every Mass since. And note Eutychus: the young man in the third-story window, sinking into sleep as the homily enters its fourth hour, falling to his death, and raised when Paul goes down and falls upon him, embracing him, the posture of Elijah and Elisha raising the dead (1 Kings 17:21; 2 Kings 4:34), before returning upstairs to break the bread and continue until dawn. Death and resurrection inside the Sunday assembly, with the Eucharist at the center: the scene is a homily on what every Mass is. Allow the humor too; Eutychus is the unofficial patron of everyone who has ever dozed in a pew, and Luke, who was in the room (this is a *we*-passage), tells it with a physician's precision and a friend's smile.

Prepare the steelman with care: the low-church reading that "breaking bread" means ordinary fellowship meals, nothing liturgical. It has real evidence, and question 4 gives it full voice before the press.

The Miletus address (20:17-38) is unique: Paul's only recorded sermon to already-believing Christians, his pastoral last will. He summons "the elders (presbyterous) of the church" of Ephesus and, in the course of one speech, calls these same men "overseers" (episkopous) appointed "by the Holy Spirit," and commands them "to shepherd (poimainein) the church of God which he obtained with his own blood." Three of the Church's great pastoral titles on one set of shoulders, which is exactly what we would expect at this early hour: the ministries are real and conferred, and the titles are still settling into the three distinct degrees that St. Ignatius will describe within two generations. Be honest about that development and unbothered by it. The Catechism teaches the three degrees of Holy Orders, bishop, priest and deacon (CCC 1554), and the permanence of the apostles' pastoral office in the order of bishops (CCC 861-862); how quickly the titles themselves settled is a historical question, and Session 4's Ignatius voice is our earliest clear witness to the settled three. Note also the

wolves: "fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock, and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things" (20:29-30). Paul's realism about future corruption inside the Church, spoken to ordained men, is Scripture's own answer to anyone scandalized that shepherds can fail; the Chief Shepherd predicted it through Paul and commanded vigilance, not naivete. And treasure verse 35: Paul quotes a saying of the Lord Jesus found in no Gospel, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," an *agraphon*, a word of Christ preserved by oral tradition alone, quietly proving that the apostolic memory of Jesus always exceeded what was written down (the Dig Deeper handles it; John 21:25 agrees).

Then the road to Jerusalem (21:1-23:35), and here give your group the key: Luke's telling of Paul's final journey echoes his Master's, parallel upon parallel, and most readers find the design deliberate. The parallels accumulate: a resolute journey to Jerusalem against all pleading; prophecies of suffering along the way (Agabus binding his own hands and feet with Paul's belt, a prophetic sign-act straight from the school of Jeremiah and Ezekiel); Paul's Gethsemane answer, "I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus," met by the disciples' surrender, "The will of the Lord be done" (21:13-14); seizure in the temple by a mob; the crowd's cry "Away with him!" (21:36), all but the very shout raised against Jesus, "Away with this man" (Luke 23:18); a hearing before the Sanhedrin; a blow to the face at the high priest's order (23:2; compare John 18:22); and handover to Gentile custody. The disciple is walking his Master's road, which is what the Way has meant all along. Note the Name's sighting at 22:4, Paul confessing "I persecuted this Way to the death," and note 23:11: the Lord standing by Paul at night with the sentence that steers the rest of the book: "as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome." The word must, *dei*, is Luke's word for divine necessity. Rome is no longer an itinerary; it is a decree.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

1 Kings 17:21 and 2 Kings 4:32-35. Elijah stretches himself upon the widow's dead son; Elisha lies upon the Shunammite's boy, mouth to mouth, eyes to eyes, hands to hands, and the child revives. Paul at Troas "went down and fell upon him and embracing him" raises Eutychus in the prophets' own posture. The mantle of Session 1 is still working.

Genesis 1:3-5 and the first day. Light was created on the first day of the week; on the first day the Light rose from the tomb. The Church's transfer of her assembly to Sunday was not calendar drift but theology: every Sunday is a little Easter, the eighth day, the first morning of the new creation (CCC 2174).

Jeremiah 13:1-11; 19:1-13; Ezekiel 4-5. The prophets' sign-acts: a ruined loincloth, a smashed jar, a model siege, truth performed in objects before it is spoken. Agabus binding himself with Paul's belt (21:11) is a late masterpiece of the genre, and marks the prophetic office alive and well inside the Church.

Psalms 118:22, again. The rejected stone. Paul before the Sanhedrin, struck on the mouth at the high priest's order, stands where his Master stood, and where Peter stood in Session 3, quoting this psalm to this court. The builders are still rejecting; the cornerstone still holds.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Magnesians, 9 (written around AD 107)

St. Ignatius describes the first Christians, converts from Judaism among them, as no longer keeping the sabbath but living in accordance with the Lord's Day, on which also our life rose again through Him and His death. Within living memory of the apostles, the first day of the week, the day of Troas, was already the Church's day, defined by the Resurrection and kept by the assembly.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, IV.18 and V.2 (2nd century)

Defending the goodness of creation against the Gnostics, St. Irenaeus pointed to the altar: our teaching agrees with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our teaching, for we offer to God the bread and cup, and having received the Word of God they become the Eucharist, the body and blood of Christ. For Irenaeus, what the Church does on the first day of the week is her doctrine made visible; the bread broken at Troas was already her creed.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Rule* (6th century)

St. Gregory, writing the manual that formed Western bishops for a millennium, took Miletus as his charter: the shepherd must keep watch, for the wolves Paul foretold do come, and they come from outside and from within. Let the ruler of souls be near to each in compassion and above all in contemplation, remembering whose blood purchased the flock he tends; for he watches over what God valued at the price of Himself.

Catechism Connection

CCC 1343. It was above all on the first day of the week, Sunday, the day of Jesus' resurrection, that the Christians met to break bread; the Catechism quotes Acts 20:7 and adds that from that time on, down to our own day, the celebration of the Eucharist has been continued, so that today we encounter it everywhere in the Church with the same fundamental structure.

CCC 2174-2175. Jesus rose from the dead on the first day of the week; Sunday, the eighth day, symbolizes the new creation ushered in by Christ's Resurrection, and for Christians it has become the first of all days, the Lord's Day, fulfilling and surpassing the sabbath.

CCC 861-862. The apostles appointed successors and left them their teaching authority and their place of shepherding; as the office the Lord gave Peter is permanent, so too the apostles' office of shepherding the Church is permanently exercised by the order of bishops, assisted by priests. Miletus is that handover audible: the Holy Spirit has made you overseers; shepherd the church of God.

Thread Watch

THREAD WATCH

Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread: RESOLUTION TONIGHT. Walk the group back through the sightings before revealing the summit: the phrase entered our study at the Last Supper's table (Luke 22:19), flamed at Emmaus, "he was known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35), anchored the Church's first day (Acts 2:42, 46), and has waited eleven sessions. Tonight it resolves: the Church gathers on the first day of the week *to break bread*, and the Catechism cites this very verse as the earliest portrait of the Sunday Eucharist, celebrated from that day to this with the same fundamental structure (CCC 1343). When the group sees it, say the quiet part plainly: you have kept this appointment yourselves every Sunday of your lives. The thread has one soft coda in the final session; watch for a meal on a ship.

Thread 1, The Name. One sighting tonight: Paul before the mob, "I persecuted this Way to the death" (22:4), the persecutor's word from Session 7 now on the penitent's lips. Two sightings remain, both next session, where the thread finishes.

Thread 2, The Map. The pivot of the book's final act: "you must bear witness also at Rome" (23:11). The word

must be Luke's divine-necessity word. The end of the earth now has a street address.

Also mark: Luke shapes Paul's journey as an imitation of Christ's Passion; let the group discover the "Away with him!" parallel in question 8 rather than hearing it from you.

Session Goals

1. Participants can describe the Troas assembly and articulate why the Church reads Acts 20:7 as the earliest window onto the Sunday Eucharist, answering the ordinary-meal steelman honestly.
2. Participants discover the Elijah-Elisha posture in the raising of Eutychus.
3. Participants can explain the office vocabulary of Acts 20:28 and Paul's realism about wolves, within and without.
4. Participants discover the Passion parallels in Paul's journey to Jerusalem and can articulate discipleship as walking the Master's road.
5. Participants each recommit concretely to the Sunday Eucharist and to one act flowing from the agraphon of 20:35.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes: Win 15, Build 55, Send 15, prayer and memory verse 5. The text span is the study's largest; trust the take-home reading and move by scenes. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on Paul's vow sponsorship, (3) compress question 7 (Agabus) into the reading of 21:10-14 with one sentence of comment. Do not cut Troas, the steelman, Miletus, or the Passion-parallel discovery.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus, risen on the first day of the week, your Church has gathered to break the bread on that day from Troas until this morning, and she will gather until you come. Make our Sundays what that upper room was: your word until we ache, your bread before the dawn, and your power to raise what has fallen out the window. And as you set your face toward Jerusalem, teach us to set ours, saying with your servants, the will of the Lord be done. Amen.

Win (15 minutes)

1. Be honest: what is your actual relationship with Sunday Mass right now, anchor, obligation, habit, struggle, joy? No wrong answers tonight; the text is going to work on all of them.
2. Have you ever had to say a real goodbye to people you had poured yourself into, a job, a parish, a town? What did you most want them to remember?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 20:6-8 slowly and gather the facts of the Troas assembly like a detective: what day, what stated purpose, how long did Paul wait in town, what time does the meeting run to, and what small detail about the room does Luke, who was there, remember? What does each detail tell us?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The day: "the first day of the week," the Resurrection's day, already taking shape as the assembly's own day (compare 1 Corinthians 16:2, collections "on the first day of every week," and Revelation 1:10, "the Lord's day"). The purpose: they "were gathered together to break bread", a purpose clause; the bread is why the assembly exists. The wait: Paul stayed in Troas seven days (20:6), which means the apostle, racing to reach Jerusalem by Pentecost, stayed a full week that ended at the first-day gathering, a stay hard to explain if the assembly did not matter; you do not schedule around a snack. The hour: the speech runs to midnight, for these are, in all likelihood, working people gathering after dark on what was, in the empire, an ordinary workday. And the eyewitness detail: "there were many lamps in the upper room," an eyewitness's remembered warmth from someone who sat in that light. Word running long, then the bread: the two-course shape of Emmaus, of Acts 2:42, and of this Sunday's Mass.

2. Read Acts 20:9-12, the Eutychus incident, and permit the humor before the awe. What happens to the young man, and then, live discovery: read 1 Kings 17:21 and 2 Kings 4:34. What is Paul's exact posture in raising him, and where does it come from? And what does Paul do immediately after the raising?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Eutychus, a young man on the third-floor window sill, sinks into deep sleep "as Paul talked still longer," the most relatable clause in Acts, falls, and is taken up dead; Luke the physician pronounces it plainly. Paul goes down, "fell upon him, and embracing him" declares life in him: the posture of Elijah stretched upon the widow's son and Elisha lying upon the Shunammite's boy, the prophets' own body-to-body raising of the dead. The Elijah-Elisha mantle we discovered in Session 1 is still draped over the apostles at the study's far end. And then the detail that interprets everything: Paul goes back upstairs, breaks the bread, eats, and converses until dawn, and only then departs, and they take the lad away alive, "and were not a little comforted." Death entered the Sunday assembly and resurrection answered it, with the Eucharist at the center: which is a photograph of

what every Mass is, the Resurrection's day, the Resurrection's meal, and the dead raised in the middle of it. Eutychus, patron of all who have dozed in a pew, got the best possible wake-up.

Build the steelman. The low-church reading of "breaking bread" is serious and has real texts: the phrase can describe ordinary meals, and does, in this very book. The first believers broke bread "in their homes" and "partook of food with glad and generous hearts" (2:46), most naturally read there as ordinary meals; and in the final chapter Paul will take bread, give thanks, and break it on a ship's deck among pagan sailors and soldiers (27:35), which no one calls a Mass. On this reading, Troas is a farewell fellowship supper with a long guest speaker, and reading the medieval Mass back into it is anachronism: no altar, no priest-language, no institution words, just Christians sharing food and teaching. The simplest reading is the plainest: they had a meal. Let it stand at its full strength.

3. Press the steelman. Concede what must be conceded about the phrase, then weigh what governs its meaning here: Luke's own charged usage across his two volumes, the purpose clause and the day, and the commentary Paul himself wrote to Corinth in this very period. What settles it?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Concede freely: the bare phrase can mean an ordinary meal, and at 27:35 it does; context governs, and the Church has never claimed every broken loaf in Scripture is a Host. But look at what governs this context. First, Luke's own resonance: he is the evangelist who wrote "he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it... Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19), and "he was known to them in the breaking of the bread" (Luke 24:35), and who listed the breaking of bread among the Church's four constitutive devotions (2:42); when Luke says the assembly *gathered for the purpose of* breaking bread, on the Resurrection's own day, he is spending vocabulary he has been charging for two volumes. Second, the fixed day and the budgeted week: a fellowship potluck does not dictate an apostle's travel itinerary; a fixed liturgical assembly does. Third, and decisively, the commentary: writing to Corinth in exactly these years, Paul says "the bread which we break, is it not a participation (koinōnia) in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16), and describes the assembly's supper as "the Lord's supper," eaten worthily or to judgment (1 Corinthians 11:20-29). The man presiding at Troas has told us in writing what he believed the broken bread to be. And the unbroken receipt: the Didache and St. Justin (our Session 2 voice) describe the same first-day assembly, word then Eucharist, within decades. The Catechism cites Acts 20:7 for exactly this claim and no more: the Sunday Eucharist, celebrated from that day to this, with the same fundamental structure (CCC 1343). Not a medieval Mass read backward; a first-century Mass read forward.

4. Read Acts 20:17-28, the opening of the Miletus farewell, and do some vocabulary work on verse 28. Whom did Paul summon in verse 17, what are those same men called in verse 28, who made them so, what verb are they commanded, and what price tag does Paul put on the flock?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He summoned "the elders (presbyterous) of the church." In verse 28 those same presbyters are called, in Luke's Greek, episkopoi, overseers (the RSV2CE renders it guardians), the word that becomes bishop, made so "by the Holy Spirit," not by election or talent, and commanded "to shepherd (poimainein) the church of God which he obtained with his own blood." Presbyter, overseer, shepherd: the whole vocabulary of the ordained pastoral office, gathered on one set of shoulders, authored by the Spirit, and priced: the flock cost the blood of God. An honest note your group deserves: at this early hour the titles overlap on the same men, and the three distinct degrees, bishop, priest, deacon, settle into their permanent form within two generations, exactly as St. Ignatius described in Session 4; the ministries are apostolic, the terminology took a generation or two to crystallize (St.

Ignatius is our earliest witness to the settled three), and the Catechism teaches the three degrees and the succession (CCC 1554, 861-862). What never varies is the structure of the sentence: the Spirit appoints, the appointed shepherd, and the sheep belong to Another. Every pastor who forgets whose blood bought the flock has already begun to fail it.

5. Read Acts 20:29-35. What does Paul predict will happen to this flock, and from where? What does he hold up as his own example, and what treasure is buried in verse 35? Check your Gospels: where else does Jesus say this sentence?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Fierce wolves will come in among them, not sparing the flock, "and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things." Paul's realism is total: corruption will come from outside and from inside, among the ordained themselves, and his command is vigilance, be alert, remembering his three years of tears. This is Scripture's own answer to every scandal that has ever shaken the Church: the Chief Shepherd predicted failed shepherds through Paul, in the ordination charter itself, and commanded watchfulness rather than promised immunity. Then the example: these hands ministered to my necessities, coveting no one's silver; and the treasure: "remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" Search all four Gospels; the sentence is not there. It is an agraphon, a word of Christ found in no Gospel, carried by the living memory of the apostles until Luke set it down here, and quoted by Paul as the Lord's own teaching. The Dig Deeper finishes the thought, and it is worth finishing.

6. Read Acts 20:36-38. Describe the goodbye. What does this scene tell us about what apostolic authority actually felt like to the people under it?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

He knelt down and prayed with them all, and they all wept, embracing Paul and kissing him, "sorrowing most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they should see his face no more," and they brought him to the ship. That is what three years of true shepherding purchases: not fear, not deference, but grief at parting. Authority in the Church, exercised as Christ designed it, is experienced by the flock as love; when it is experienced chiefly as power, something has already gone wrong that Miletus measures.

7. Read Acts 21:10-14, the prophecy of Agabus. What does he do with Paul's belt, in what prophetic tradition does the gesture stand, and weigh the exchange that follows: what do the disciples beg, what does Paul answer, and how does the argument end?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Agabus binds his own feet and hands with Paul's belt: "So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt." It is a prophetic sign-act in the classical line of Jeremiah's ruined loincloth and Ezekiel's model siege, truth performed in an object, and it certifies that the prophetic office is alive inside the Church. The disciples, Luke among them ("we... begged him not to go up"), plead with tears; Paul answers with his Gethsemane: "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." Note the Name. And the argument ends the only way arguments with God's will can: "The will of the Lord be done," the community praying its Master's own Gethsemane sentence over its apostle. Discernment sometimes means the prophecy is true *and* the journey is still God's will; Agabus foretold the binding, and the binding was the road to Rome.

8. Live discovery, the widest one tonight. Luke has been quietly shaping Paul's whole final journey on a pattern. Read Acts 21:30-36, noting the crowd's exact cry in verse 36, then read Luke 23:18. Then scan this list as a group and test it: resolute journey to Jerusalem against all pleading; prophecies of suffering en route; "the will of the Lord be done"; seized in the temple; the mob's cry; hearings before the Sanhedrin and Gentile governors; struck on the face at the high priest's order (23:2; compare John 18:22). Whose road is Paul walking, and why has Luke built it this way?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

"Away with him!", the mob's cry against Paul (21:36), all but repeats the shout Luke recorded against Jesus, "Away with this man" (23:18). Line by line, Paul's last journey retraces his Master's: the set face toward Jerusalem, the foretold sufferings, the Gethsemane surrender, the temple seizure, the Sanhedrin, the slap, the Gentile custody. Luke is not being repetitive; he is being theological. This is what the Way *is*: a road already walked by the Master, on which the disciple's sufferings are not detours but conformity, "a servant is not greater than his master" (John 15:20). The man who watched Stephen die like Jesus in Session 5 is now living the pattern himself, and Luke is teaching every reader the same expectation: to belong to the Way is to walk this shape of road, in whatever size God tailors it. Then read the night word that ends the section (23:11): the Lord stands by Paul: "Take courage, for as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome." The word must is divine necessity. The Passion-shaped road has a destination, and its name is Rome.

DIG DEEPER: THE UNWRITTEN WORD

"It is more blessed to give than to receive" appears in no Gospel; it reached Miletus by the apostles' living memory, and reaches us because Luke wrote that memory down, an agraphon, an unwritten saying of the Lord. St. John admits the category with a smile: the world itself could not contain the books if all Jesus did were written (John 21:25), and St. Paul commands the Thessalonians to hold fast the traditions taught "either by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Thessalonians 2:15). The written Gospels are the inspired heart of the apostolic witness, never its outer boundary; the same living Tradition that carried this sentence carried the canon that tells us which Gospels are Gospels. Acts 20:35 is a one-verse case for why Scripture and Tradition were never rivals: one stream, two channels, as Dei Verbum 9 teaches.

DIG DEEPER: PAUL IN THE TEMPLE, SPONSORING VOWS

Days before his arrest, Paul, at James's counsel, pays the expenses of four men completing a vow (widely understood as Nazirite-related) and purifies himself in the temple (21:23-26). The apostle of freedom from the law worships freely within it: for Paul, Israel's observances were never poison, only not salvation, and he remained a Torah-honoring Jew wherever it did not compromise the Gospel (recall Timothy's circumcision, Session 11). The irony is fierce: he is seized in the very act of temple piety, on the false charge of defiling the temple. Faithfulness offers no immunity from slander; it never has.

Send (15 minutes)

1. Troas has now shown you what Sunday is: the Resurrection's day, gathered for the purpose of the bread. Compare that to the honest answer you gave in the first Win question. What would it take for your Sunday to become Troas, in preparation, in attention, in priority?

2. Paul could say at Miletus, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." Where in your relationships are you currently shrinking, softening or omitting some part of the truth in love? What would unshrinking look like this month?

Live It This Week

Two assignments, one for Sunday and one for the week. First, keep Troas: attend this Sunday's Mass as the Troas assembly kept theirs, deliberately gathered *to break bread*: arrive early enough to be recollected, follow the two-course shape you now know by heart, word then bread, and receive, if you are properly disposed, with the thought that the same fundamental structure has run unbroken from that lamplit upper room to your parish (CCC 1343). If it has been a long time since Confession, let this be the week; Troas deserves a clean heart. Second, live the agraphon: perform one act this week that is pure giving, time, money, or labor, with no possibility of return, done in memory of the unwritten word: it is more blessed to give than to receive. Say the sentence to yourself as you do it. You will be quoting Jesus by heart, from the Church's memory, exactly as Paul did.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, who rose on the first day and fed your Church at Troas through the bread Paul broke before the dawn, keep us faithful to your day and your table until you come. Give your shepherds the heart of Miletus, watchful, tearful, and generous; give us the courage of the road to Jerusalem; and when your will crosses our pleading, teach us to say together: the will of the Lord be done. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"...remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" (Acts 20:35)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 13, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 20:6-12 (Troas: the first day, the bread, Eutychus)
2. Acts 20:17-38 (the Miletus farewell)
3. Acts 21:10-14 (Agabus; the will of the Lord)
4. Acts 21:23-26 (the vow sponsorship, Dig Deeper)
5. Acts 21:30-36 (the temple seizure; Away with him)
6. Acts 22:4 (the Way, sighting)
7. Acts 23:1-11 (the Sanhedrin; the night word: Rome)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

8. 1 Kings 17:21; 2 Kings 4:32-35 (the prophets' raising posture)
9. Genesis 1:3-5 (the first day)
10. Jeremiah 13:1-11; Ezekiel 4-5 (prophetic sign-acts)
11. Psalm 118:22 (the rejected stone, recalled)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

12. Luke 22:19; Luke 24:35; Acts 2:42, 46 (the bread thread's sightings)
13. 1 Corinthians 10:16; 11:20-29; 16:2 (Paul's own commentary; the first day)
14. Revelation 1:10 (the Lord's day)
15. Acts 27:35 (the ship's meal, steelman and coda)
16. Luke 23:18; John 18:22; John 15:20 (the Passion parallels)
17. John 21:25; 2 Thessalonians 2:15 (the unwritten word)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

18. CCC 1343; CCC 2174-2175; CCC 861-862; CCC 1554; Dei Verbum 9

THE WAY, SESSION 14

And So We Came to Rome

The Acts of the Apostles 24:1-28:31, The Storm, the City, the Sealed Guesses, and the Last Word of the Book

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. Tonight everything lands. Participants hear Paul confess the study's title before a Roman governor, "according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers" (24:14); they ride the great storm and discover a reverse Jonah and a meal painted in Eucharistic colors; they open the sealed guesses written fourteen weeks ago and measure them against Luke's actual ending; and they discover the secret the title has been keeping all study long: the final word of the book of Acts, in Luke's Greek, is a single adverb, *akōlytōs*, unhindered. The book does not end. It stops mid-stride, because its true subject is not Paul but the Word, and the Word is still running, through this room.

Catholic Touchstone. The Church of Rome, sealed in the blood of Peter and Paul. Luke ends his book with Paul preaching in Rome; the Church's earliest voices, St. Clement within one generation remembering Peter and Paul as the martyred examples of his own age, St. Ignatius within two assuming their authority over the Roman church, St. Irenaeus within three naming Rome the church founded and organized by the two most glorious apostles (Against Heresies III.3.2), converge on Rome as the place both crowned their witness, and that the church founded at Rome by the two most glorious apostles holds a preeminence with which every church must agree (Irenaeus, Against Heresies III.3.2; CCC 834). The steelman engages the sharpest objection honestly: Acts never places Peter in Rome, and the answer, drawn from Tradition's earliest and unanimous testimony, becomes the study's final full-circle lesson: Scripture and Tradition were never rivals, and the book that ends unhindered hands the reader to the living Church that carries it.

What You Need to Know

The trial chapters (24-26) can be surveyed rather than trudged; give your group the through-line. Before Felix, the professional orator Tertullus indicts Paul as "a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes," and Paul answers with the confession that crowns our master thread: "this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law or written in the prophets" (24:14). Weigh that sentence with the group: the Way is not a breakaway sect but Israel's own faith arrived at its promised destination, the hope of the resurrection (24:15). Felix, remarkably, "had a rather accurate knowledge of the Way" (24:22), the thread's final sighting, and trembles under Paul's preaching on justice, self-control, and judgment, then delays two years hoping for a bribe: the tragedy of the almost-moved. Festus inherits the case; Paul, facing a rigged change of venue, plays the citizen's ace: "I appeal to Caesar" (25:11), and the divine necessity of 23:11 acquires legal machinery. Before Agrippa, Paul retells Damascus a third time, aims the Gospel directly at the king, "do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe," and receives history's most famous almost: "In a short time you think to make me a Christian!" (26:28). Agrippa's verdict, "this man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar" (26:32), is Luke's legal exoneration of the Way, and heaven's irony: Paul's chains are the ticket God booked him to Rome.

The voyage and shipwreck (27) is the longest single narrative in Acts, a we-passage of stunning nautical precision, and it is theology in the form of a sea story. Give your group the inverse-Jonah key and let them find it: in Session 8 we discovered Peter as the son of Jonah who, unlike Jonah, obeyed. Tonight the pattern completes: Jonah, the prophet fleeing God's call, brought the storm upon his ship and had to be thrown out for the crew to live; Paul, the prophet obeying God's call, is the reason the whole ship lives: "God has granted you all those who sail with you" (27:24). One prophet's disobedience sank a ship; one prophet's obedience becomes salvation for 276 souls. And in the storm's fourteenth night, mark the meal (27:33-36): Paul "took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat," took, gave thanks, broke, ate: verbs every reader of Luke knows from the Last Supper and Emmaus, colors deliberately close even where the scenes differ. Handle it with our honest hedge: this is not a Mass, celebrated among pagan sailors, and Luke knows it;

but Luke chose these verbs, and he had charged them for two volumes. It is the Breaking of the Bread thread's soft coda: hope served at table in the middle of the storm, and "then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves." Every detail preaches: the anchors, the daybreak, not a hair perishing (27:34, the Lord's own promise, Luke 21:18), all souls saved on planks and pieces of the ship.

Malta (28:1-10) gives the viper that cannot harm and the healing of Publius's father, and then the arrival: brethren from Rome walk out thirty and forty miles along the Appian Way to meet Paul at the Forum of Appius and Three Taverns, "and Paul thanked God and took courage" (28:15). The apostle who has survived stoning, shipwreck, and five trials takes courage from a welcoming committee; even Paul ran on the encouragement of ordinary believers. Then Rome: two years in his own hired dwelling, welcoming all, "preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered" (28:30-31). And there Luke stops. No verdict, no martyrdom, no ending, and the final word of the Greek text is the adverb *akōlytōs*, unhindered. Structure the evening so the sealed guesses are opened BEFORE you study 28:30-31; the leader instructions in the Thread Watch give the ritual. The payoff of the whole study lives in that last word, and in why Luke chose to stop mid-stride: because the story he is telling has no ending yet. The reader is in it.

One honest preparation note: Paul's final scene quotes Isaiah 6:9-10, the hardening text, over the divided response of Rome's Jewish leaders, and adds that this salvation has been sent to the Gentiles (28:25-28). Teach it with the balance Paul himself keeps: some were convinced (28:24), the quotation is Israel's own prophet diagnosing a recurring blindness, not a verdict on a race, and Paul, who had written only a few years before this that all Israel will be saved and that God's gifts and call are irrevocable (Romans 11:26-29), never stopped going to the synagogue first. The door Israel's leaders closed in city after city is a door God has never closed.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Jonah 1:4-15, completing Session 8's discovery. The disobedient prophet endangers his ship; the sea is stilled only when he is cast out. Paul is Jonah reversed: the obedient prophet aboard whose ship all are spared for his sake. The study's Jonah frame closes: from the son of Jonah at Joppa to the anti-Jonah in the storm, Acts is the book of prophets who finally said yes to the Gentiles.

Psalms 107:23-30. Some went down to the sea in ships; they reeled and staggered like drunken men, at their wits' end; then they cried to the Lord, and he brought them to their desired haven. The storm chapter is this psalm narrated, and the desired haven, for this ship, was always Rome.

Isaiah 6:9-10. The commission-and-hardening text Paul quotes over Rome's divided synagogue leaders, as Jesus quoted it before him (Luke 8:10). Israel's own prophet, diagnosing Israel's recurring deafness, in the mouth of Israel's most zealous son, who never stopped believing the deafness was temporary (Romans 11).

Isaiah 40:3, one last time. Prepare the way of the Lord. The name the study has carried since a persecutor's paperwork in Session 7 was always Isaiah's road-building cry. The Way that began as a wilderness highway for God's arrival has become, by the book's end, a Roman road running out of the capital to every nation on earth, with no ending punctuation.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Clement of Rome, Letter to the Corinthians, 5 (written around AD 96)

Writing from Rome within living memory, Clement holds up "the greatest and most righteous pillars" of the generation just past: Peter, who after many labors thus bore his witness and went to his appointed place of glory, and Paul, who taught righteousness to the whole world, reached the limits of the West, and bore his witness before the rulers. Clement holds them up as the great examples of his own generation, witnesses whose

deaths the Roman church remembered as her own; his letter is the earliest thread in the tradition that both apostles crowned their witness at Rome.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, Book III, 3.2 (2nd century)

St. Irenaeus points every seeker of the true faith to "the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul," whose faith comes down through the succession of her bishops, whom he then lists by name from the apostles to his own day. With this church, on account of its preeminent authority, every church must agree. The book of Acts ends at Rome; Irenaeus explains what God had planted there.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*, the final homily (4th century)

Preaching on the abrupt ending, Chrysostom says the author brings his narrative to this point and leaves the hearer thirsting, so that thereafter he supplies the rest by himself; for what needed to be shown was shown, that the word of God was not bound. The ending, for Chrysostom, is not missing; it is delegated. Luke stops writing so that the Church, and the reader, may continue doing.

Catechism Connection

CCC 834. Particular churches are fully catholic through communion with the Church of Rome, "which presides in charity," in St. Ignatius of Antioch's phrase; for with this church, by reason of its preeminence, the whole Church must be in agreement, quoting St. Irenaeus.

CCC 302-303. Creation has its own goodness but did not spring forth complete; God guides it toward its perfection by His providence, the dispositions by which He conducts all things with wisdom and love, down to a shipwreck's planks and a viper's harmless bite. The solicitude of providence is concrete and immediate; the storm chapter is its case study.

CCC 2, in closing. Those who with God's help have welcomed Christ's call have been impelled in every age to hand on the faith, so that the Church, going forth to the ends of the earth, might do what the apostles did. The Catechism's second paragraph is Acts 29, and it has your group's names in it.

Thread Watch and the Rituals of the Final Night

THREAD WATCH

THE SEALED GUESSES: open them at the marked moment, question 6, BEFORE studying 28:30-31. Have everyone bring Take-Home 1. Go around the table: each person reads their fourteen-week-old guess aloud, unedited, about where and how Luke would end the story. Enjoy them; honor the good ones. Most will have guessed Rome; almost none will have guessed the actual shape of the ending, no verdict, no death, no ending at all. Then, and only then, read 28:30-31 together and open the akōlytōs discovery in question 7. The gap between every guess and Luke's choice IS the lesson.

Thread 1, The Name: final resolution. Two last sightings tonight, 24:14 (Paul's great confession, "according to the Way... I worship the God of our fathers") and 24:22 (Felix's accurate knowledge). After the akōlytōs discovery, close the thread with the full arc: nameless movement (Sessions 1-6), named by a persecutor's

warrant (Session 7), doubled at Antioch (Session 8), confessed before governors (tonight), and finally revealed as a road with no final period, because a way, unlike a wall, goes on. The study's title was always the book's thesis.

Thread 2, The Map: resolution. Jerusalem (1-7), Judea and Samaria (8-12), the end of the earth (13-28), and the group should see the last irony: Rome is not the end of the earth; Rome is where all roads BEGIN. Paul intends Spain (Romans 15:24). Acts 1:8 remains an unfinished sentence, on purpose.

Thread 4, The Breaking of the Bread: soft coda. The storm meal (27:35), the fourfold action among pagans, hope served at table. Mark it, hedge it honestly, and let it glow.

Callbacks to land tonight: Gamaliel's test from Session 4 ("if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them") receives its verdict in the word *akōlytōs*; and Stephen's prayer from Session 5 finishes its work with Paul preaching in Rome.

Session Goals

1. Participants can articulate Paul's confession of the Way as Israel's own faith fulfilled, and trace the master thread's full arc.
2. Participants discover the reverse-Jonah pattern and the Eucharistic colors of the storm meal, with honest hedging.
3. Participants can engage the strongest objection to Peter's Roman ministry and answer it from the earliest Tradition, articulating the Scripture-and-Tradition lesson it teaches.
4. Participants open their sealed guesses, discover the *akōlytōs* ending, and can explain why Luke ends mid-stride.
5. Participants each write their own Acts 29 sentence and commit to a concrete next step beyond this study.

Time Note

Planned for 90 minutes, and the final night runs long by nature; protect the ending. Win 10, Build 55, the sealed-guess ritual and *akōlytōs* 10 of those, Send 15, closing commissioning and prayer 10. If running long, cut in this order: (1) the second Win question, (2) the Dig Deeper on the viper, (3) compress questions 1 and 2 (the trials) into a single guided retelling. Cut NOTHING from question 5 onward; the last thirty minutes are the study's destination.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you told your servant by night, you must bear witness also at Rome, and neither storm nor snake nor Caesar could amend the sentence. We began this study fourteen weeks ago as watchers of your Way; bring us tonight to its unfinished ending, and write us into it. Open what we sealed, resolve what you planted, and send us out unhindered. Amen.

Win (10 minutes)

1. Fourteen weeks ago you wrote a sealed guess about how this story ends. Without opening it yet: do you remember what you wrote, and would you still bet on it?
2. What is the best non-ending you know, a story, a series, a life chapter, that stopped without resolving, and why did it work?

Build (55 minutes)

1. Read Acts 24:10-16, Paul before Governor Felix, listening hard at verse 14 for a phrase this study has been tracking since a persecutor's arrest warrants. What does Paul admit, what does he deny, and what is he claiming about the relationship between the Way and Israel's faith? Then read 24:22 and 24:24-27 for Felix's tragedy.

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The prosecution calls it "the sect of the Nazarenes"; Paul answers: "this I admit to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law or written in the prophets," with hope in the resurrection. The Way's final confessions, here and in Felix's own "rather accurate knowledge of the Way" (24:22), stake the claim the whole book has argued: the Way is not a breakaway sect but Israel's own faith arrived at its destination, the tent of David rebuilt, exactly as the council found in Session 10. And Felix: he trembles as Paul argues justice, self-control, and coming judgment, and answers with the saddest sentence in the trials: "Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity I will summon you," hoping meanwhile for a bribe, for two years. Alarm without surrender: the tragedy of the almost-moved, and a mirror worth a moment of honest silence at any table.

2. Survey Acts 25:9-12 and 26:24-32: the appeal to Caesar, and the scene before King Agrippa. What legal move does Paul make and why, what does he aim directly at the king, and what double verdict closes the hearings, Agrippa's about Paul, and heaven's about Rome?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Facing Festus's offer of a rigged venue change to Jerusalem, the road that had already bred one forty-man ambush plot (23:12-15), Paul plays the citizen's ace: "I appeal to Caesar," and the divine necessity of 23:11, you must witness at Rome, acquires imperial machinery; God routes His decree through Roman law. Before Agrippa, Paul retells Damascus a third time and then aims point-blank: "King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe," and receives history's most famous almost: "In a short time you think to make me a Christian!" Festus calls Paul mad; Paul answers with sober courtesy and a wish that everyone hearing him were as he is, "except for these chains." And the double verdict: Agrippa rules that "this man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar", Luke's formal legal exoneration of the Way, innocent before every tribunal, and heaven's quieter verdict beneath it: the chains Paul could have escaped are the ticket

God booked him to Rome. Providence sometimes travels as an unfavorable procedural outcome.

3. Read Acts 27:13-26, the storm at its worst, and then the live discovery that completes a find from Session 8. Read Jonah 1:4-15 beside it. In Session 8 we found Peter, the son of Jonah, obeying at Jonah's own port. What is the relationship between Jonah's ship and Paul's, and what does the completed pattern say about the whole book of Acts?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Jonah, the prophet fleeing God's call to the Gentiles, brought the storm upon his ship, and the sea was stilled only when he was thrown out of it; one man's disobedience nearly drowned the crew. Paul is Jonah inverted: the prophet obeying God's call to the Gentiles, aboard whose doomed ship an angel speaks the reversal: "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and lo, God has granted you all those who sail with you." The disobedient prophet had to leave the ship for the sailors to live; the obedient prophet's presence is why all 276 live. And the completed frame reads the whole book: Acts opened its Gentile mission with the son of Jonah saying yes at Joppa, and closes its travels with the anti-Jonah whose yes becomes salvation for everyone aboard. Acts is the book of Jonah run in reverse: the prophets of the new Israel finally said yes to the nations, and the ship of the Church has been carrying pagans safely through storms ever since.

4. Read Acts 27:33-38, the meal in the storm's fourteenth night, and listen to the verbs with two volumes of Luke in your ears. What exactly does Paul do with the bread, where has Luke used this sequence before, what happens to the 276 aboard, and, honestly now, what is this scene and what is it not?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Before dawn, after fourteen foodless days of terror, Paul urges them all to eat, promises that not a hair will perish from any head (his Master's own promise, Luke 21:18), and then: he "took bread, and giving thanks to God in the presence of all he broke it and began to eat." Took, gave thanks, broke: the sequence every reader of Luke knows from the Last Supper (22:19) and Emmaus (24:30); the wording varies scene to scene, but the family resemblance is unmistakable. "Then they all were encouraged and ate some food themselves," and every soul is saved. Now the honest hedge our study always keeps: this is not a Mass; it is an ordinary meal among pagan sailors and soldiers, and Luke knows the difference, which is precisely why his verb choice matters. The colors are Eucharistic, and after two volumes of charging those verbs Luke is unlikely to have reached for them by accident: hope served at table in the middle of the storm, courage entering through bread broken with thanksgiving, all aboard saved by dawn. It is the Breaking of the Bread thread's soft coda, and a portrait every Catholic recognizes: what the Church does in every storm is exactly this, and at her altar, the colors are not borrowed.

5. Read Acts 28:11-16, the arrival. Who comes out to meet Paul, how far do they walk, and what is the effect on the apostle? Then read Luke's quiet sentence at 28:14 aloud and let it land: how long has this book been walking toward those six words?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

The brethren of Rome, hearing he is coming, walk out along the Appian Way to meet him, some forty miles to the Forum of Appius, others thirty to Three Taverns, "and on seeing them Paul thanked God and took courage." The man who has out-argued philosophers, survived stoning and shipwreck, and stared down governors, is refueled by a welcoming committee of ordinary Christians who walked two days to hug him. Even apostles run

on encouragement; never underestimate the ministry of showing up. And then Luke's six quiet words, twenty-eight chapters in the making: "And so we came to Rome." The decree of 23:11 has landed; the third circle of Acts 1:8 has its beachhead in the capital of the world.

Build the steelman, our last one, and it is the sharpest arrow in the anti-Roman quiver. Acts ends in Rome, and Peter is nowhere in it. Luke never places Peter in Rome; no verse of Scripture does. Paul writes his letter TO Rome greeting twenty-six people by name, and never mentions Peter, unthinkable if Peter were the city's bishop; and Paul states his policy of not building on another man's foundation (Romans 15:20), yet plans to visit Rome. If the papacy's cornerstone claim, Peter's ministry and martyrdom at Rome, were true, Scripture had a dozen opportunities to say so and says nothing. The Roman primacy, the objection concludes, rests on later legend, not on the Word of God. Let it stand at its full height; it deserves a real answer, and the answer will teach the study's final lesson.

6. **PAUSE THE PRESS.** Before answering the steelman, the table has an appointment fourteen weeks old. Bring out Take-Home 1 and open the sealed guesses: each person reads aloud, unedited, where and how they predicted Luke would end this story. Honor the near-hits. Then, together, read the actual ending, Acts 28:30-31, and sit in the gap. What did Luke give us, and what did he conspicuously refuse to give us?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Two whole years, his own hired dwelling, welcoming all who came, "preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered." And that is all. No trial before Nero, no verdict, no martyrdom, no death scene for the book's hero, no ending. Most guesses tonight said Rome, and Rome was right; almost no one guessed that Luke, with the greatest ending in the world available to him, Paul's glorious martyrdom, would end without writing an ending at all. The refusal is the message, and one more discovery will unlock it.

7. The last discovery of the study, and the secret your booklet's cover has kept for fourteen weeks. In Luke's Greek, the very last word of the book of Acts, the word on which two volumes and fifty-two chapters come to rest, is the adverb *akōlytōs*: unhindered. Weigh everything against it: Paul wears his chain (28:20) as the word is written. Who, then, is unhindered? What is the book of Acts actually about, and why is there no ending?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Paul is hindered: in Roman custody, wearing "this chain" (28:20), his appeal pending before Caesar. The Word is not. "The word of God is not fettered," Paul himself wrote from a later chain (2 Timothy 2:9), and Luke ends his book on the adverb that proves it: unhindered. The hero of Acts was never Peter, and never Paul; from the first verse it was the risen Christ, acting by His Spirit through His Body, and His action has no final chapter to report because it had not ended when Luke's ink ran out, and it has not ended now. Gamaliel's test from Session 4 receives its one-word verdict: if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow it: *akōlytōs*. Stephen's prayer from Session 5 finishes its work in a hired house in Rome. And the title of the movement tells you why there is no ending: a wall has an end; a Way goes on. Luke stops mid-stride because the reader is standing on the road: Acts 29 is not missing; it is the history of the Church, and it has been in progress for twenty centuries, and it includes, as of fourteen weeks ago, this table. The book ends unhindered because it hands you the pen.

8. Now the steelman's answer, and the study's final full-circle lesson. Scripture never places Peter in Rome. What does the earliest Tradition say, how early, and how unanimously? Weigh 1 Peter 5:13 and Romans 15:20 honestly on the way. And why is this question the perfect ending for THIS study?

ANSWER, SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION

Take the evidence in order. Scripture whispers: Peter exits Acts "to another place" (12:17), unnamed, and writes his first letter from "she who is at Babylon" (1 Peter 5:13), Babylon, which interpreters ancient and modern overwhelmingly read as Rome (Revelation 17-18 trades in the same code), with Mark, whom Tradition places at Rome writing Peter's preaching, at his side. And Romans 15:20 at least blunts the objection, circumstantially: Paul's policy of not building on another man's foundation is precisely why he had only written to Rome and not planted it; someone else's foundation was already there, and Romans never names its founder while greeting twenty-six residents, an odd silence if the church had simply self-assembled; this is circumstantial rather than proof, and the real weight rests on Tradition. Then Tradition speaks, early and local, and antiquity preserves no rival claim: Clement of Rome, writing from that church about AD 96, within one generation, sets Peter and Paul before his readers as the greatest and most righteous pillars of the generation just past, apostles who bore their witness and contended unto death, and then joins to them a great multitude of the elect who suffered, in his words, among us; Clement never names the city for the apostles, but the letter is Rome's own, and the generation whose sufferings it recounts is Rome's own; Ignatius, about 107, writes to the Romans, "I do not command you as Peter and Paul did," a sentence with no meaning unless both had exercised authority there; Irenaeus, about 180, names the Roman church as founded by Peter and Paul and lists her bishops from them to his day; and beneath St. Peter's Basilica, excavation uncovered the early memorial (the tropaion the priest Gaius mentioned around AD 200) at the spot the Roman church venerated as his grave. No other city ever claimed Peter's tomb, and no ancient writer records a competing tradition. Now the final lesson, and it is the whole study in one question: how do we know Peter died at Rome? The same way we know which four Gospels are Gospels, the same way the eunuch understood Isaiah, the same way the council settled circumcision, and the same way the agraphon of Miletus reached us: Scripture and Tradition, one deposit in two channels, carried by the living apostolic Church (Dei Verbum 9-10; CCC 834). The objection assumes the very thing Acts spent twenty-eight chapters correcting, that the written word travels alone. It never has. It travels on the Way, in the Church, unhindered.

DIG DEEPER: THE VIPER OF MALTA

Shipwrecked, soaked, and gathering firewood, Paul is struck by a viper; the islanders wait for him to swell up and drop, conclude first that he is a murderer pursued by Justice, then, when nothing happens, that he is a god (28:3-6), the Lystra whiplash replayed in miniature. Luke's dry comedy carries an echo readers have always heard: the Lord's word about treading on serpents unharmed (Luke 10:19), and a lesson about crowds that our study has met three times: public opinion is a weathervane, not a verdict. Paul shakes the snake into the fire and goes on to heal the island. So should we all.

DIG DEEPER: WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

The Church's tradition completes what Luke declined to write: Ancient tradition holds that Paul, released after these two years, traveled again (the Pastoral Letters presume it, and Clement says he reached "the limits of the West," perhaps his intended Spain, Romans 15:24), that he was rearrested in Nero's persecution and beheaded at Rome, as a citizen, around AD 67 by traditional reckoning, near the date of Peter's crucifixion, head-down by ancient account, on the Vatican hill. The Church keeps their one feast together on June 29, and their two basilicas anchor the city. If Luke wrote after these events, he knew the outline and left it out anyway; if before, Providence arranged the same lesson: the book was never about how the messengers died, but about how the

message did not.

Send (15 minutes)

1. Fourteen weeks. Fourteen sessions. One question to answer aloud, each of you: what is the single discovery from this study that you will still be carrying a year from now, and why that one?
2. Acts 29 is unwritten and you are in it. Complete this sentence, honestly and concretely, and be ready to say it aloud at the commissioning: "I believe the Spirit is sending me to ____." A person, a ministry, a change, a next study, a vocation question. Write it before you speak it.

Live It This Week, and Beyond

Four final assignments, the study's commissioning. First, finish before the Lord: sometime in the next seven days, make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, alone, and thank Him for fourteen weeks on the Way, bringing your Acts 29 sentence with you and saying it to Him; the study that began in an upper room waiting for the Spirit should end before the tabernacle where the unhindered Word keeps His address. Second, give the study away: choose one discovery, the three thousand, the son of Jonah, the last word of Acts, whichever one lit you up, and tell it to one person outside this group within the week; the Way spreads at the speed of one told story. Third, keep Sunday as Troas kept it, permanently (CCC 2177-2178); that resolution should not end with the study. Fourth, do not scatter: agree tonight, as a group, on what comes next, another study, a service commitment, a monthly reunion at someone's table, because the believers of Acts devoted themselves to the fellowship, and fourteen weeks have made this table one. The book has no ending. Neither should this.

Closing Commissioning and Prayer

Leader: have the group stand. Each person speaks their Acts 29 sentence aloud: "I believe the Spirit is sending me to..." After each, the group responds together: "The will of the Lord be done." When all have spoken, pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, you are the Way, and by your mercy we belong to you. Fourteen weeks ago we sealed our guesses about how your story ends, and tonight you have shown us the truth: it has not ended, and we are in it. Send us as you sent them: from the upper room, through the water, to the breaking of the bread, out every gate the Spirit opens, past every hindrance. Saint Peter, hold the keys for us. Saint Paul, teach us to run. Saint Stephen, pray for our enemies until they are our brothers. Mary, Queen of Apostles, stay in the upper room with us always. And may the word of God, in this room and from it, grow, and multiply, and run to the end of the earth, openly, and unhindered. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

"...preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered." (Acts 28:31)

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 14, in order of appearance. Flag these before the session.

PRIMARY TEXT

1. Acts 24:10-16, 22-27 (Felix; the Way's confession and final sighting)
2. Acts 25:9-12 (the appeal to Caesar)
3. Acts 26:24-32 (Agrippa; the almost)
4. Acts 27:13-26 (the storm; the angel's word)
5. Acts 27:33-38 (the meal in the storm)
6. Acts 28:1-10 (Malta; the viper)
7. Acts 28:11-16 (the Appian Way; and so we came to Rome)
8. Acts 28:17-28 (the synagogue leaders; Isaiah 6)
9. Acts 28:30-31 (the ending; akōlytōs)

OLD TESTAMENT DISCOVERY PASSAGES

10. Jonah 1:4-15 (the reverse-Jonah discovery)
11. Psalm 107:23-30 (the storm psalm)
12. Isaiah 6:9-10 (the hardening text)
13. Isaiah 40:3 (prepare the way, the title's root)

NEW TESTAMENT CROSS REFERENCES

14. Luke 21:18 (not a hair); Luke 22:19; 24:30 (the fourfold action); Luke 10:19 (serpents)
15. Acts 12:17 (another place); 1 Peter 5:13 (Babylon); Revelation 17-18 (the code)
16. Romans 15:20, 24; Romans 11:26-29 (another's foundation; Spain; irrevocable gifts)
17. 2 Timothy 2:9 (the word is not fettered)
18. Acts 1:8; Acts 23:11 (the map; the decree)

CHURCH DOCUMENTS

19. CCC 834; CCC 302-303; CCC 2; Dei Verbum 9-10