

The Acts of the Apostles and Early Church

ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

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Read Chapters 1 - 3

Question: "Who were the twelve (12) disciples / apostles of Jesus Christ?"

Answer: The word “disciple” refers to a learner or follower. The word “apostle” means “one who is sent out.” While Jesus was on earth, His twelve followers were called disciples. The twelve disciples followed Jesus Christ, learned from Him, and were trained by Him. After His resurrection and ascension, Jesus sent the disciples out to be His witnesses ([Matthew 28:18-20](#); [Acts 1:8](#)). They were then referred to as the twelve apostles. However, even when Jesus was still on earth, the terms “disciples” and “apostles” were used somewhat interchangeably.

The original twelve disciples/apostles are listed in [Matthew 10:2-4](#), “These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon (who is called Peter) and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus;

Simon the Zealot and Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Him.” The Bible also lists the twelve disciples/apostles in [Mark 3:16-19](#) and [Luke 6:13-16](#). A comparison of the three passages shows a couple of minor differences in the names. It seems that Thaddaeus was also known as “Judas, son of James” ([Luke 6:16](#)) and Lebbaeus ([Matthew 10:3](#)). Simon the Zealot was also known as Simon the Canaanite ([Mark 3:18](#)). Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus, was replaced in the twelve apostles by Matthias (see [Acts 1:20-26](#)). Some Bible teachers view Matthias as an “invalid” apostle and believe that Paul was God's choice to replace Judas Iscariot as the twelfth apostle.

More on Disciples and Apostles

The Dilemma: You're vaguely worried about a pop quiz at the Pearly Gates.

People You Can Impress: well, Jesus, obviously

The Quick Trick: Unless Jesus Christ himself has named you an apostle, discipleship is really the best you can hope for.

The twelve disciples/apostles were ordinary men whom God used in an extraordinary manner. Among the twelve were fishermen, a tax collector, and a revolutionary. The Gospels record the constant failings, struggles, and doubts of these twelve men who followed Jesus Christ. After witnessing Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven, the Holy Spirit transformed the disciples/apostles into powerful men of God who turned the world upside down ([Acts 17:6](#)). What was the change? The twelve apostles/disciples had “been with Jesus” ([Acts 4:13](#)). May the same be said of us

- The Explanation:
The words are often used interchangeably, but they don't quite share a meaning. All Christians are (or at least ought to be) disciples of Christ, because they follow his teachings. (*Disciple* comes from the Latin *discipulus*, which means “pupil.”) But very, very few Christians have ever been full-on apostles, because “apostle” is a title that only Jesus himself could give someone. If a disciple is a pupil, then an apostle is something of a traveling salesman (its Greek root word technically means “delegate,” but “traveling salesman” is funnier). The 12 disciples officially became Jesus' delegates when he personally sent them out into the world to preach and heal.

- Over the years, many people have claimed that Jesus named them apostles (see, for instance, David Koresh), and many evangelical Christian groups believe that *all* their members are apostles who've been dispatched by Jesus—which is why they often show up on your doorstep. But all Christians agree that there have been at least 13 apostles: the 12 ODs (that is, Original Disciples) and the apostle Paul, who met Jesus after his resurrection.

The 12: A Quick Rundown

Simon called Peter: Fisherman who left his nets to follow Jesus; became the first pope; probably crucified around 64 CE.

Andrew: Peter's brother; didn't get to be pope, but probably did get crucified (on an X-shaped cross, now known as a St. Andrew's Cross and seen on the flag of Scotland).

James: Known as "St. James the Greater"; one of the first to follow Jesus; wasn't crucified, but was martyred by the sword.

John: Possibly the author of The Gospel According to John and The Book of Revelation to John; he was the rare disciple who lived to old age.

Philip: Not widely mentioned in the Gospels, Philip reportedly died during a crucifixion even though a miraculous earthquake shook him loose from the cross.

Bartholomew: Pals with Philip, Bartholomew (according to tradition) was flayed alive in Armenia and then crucified upside down.

Matthew: Known as "the tax collector" and the author of The Gospel According to Matthew, tradition holds that Matthew was martyred in either Ethiopia or Parthia.

Thomas: The Thomas behind "Doubting Thomas," he is supposed to have been the first missionary to India. Martyred, naturally.

James: Known by the unfortunate moniker "James the Lesser" and barely mentioned in the gospels, although he may have written the under read Book of James. Probably martyred.

Simon: Commonly referred to as "Simon the Zealot," he was reportedly put to death by a saw.

Judas Iscariot: Most likely betrayed Jesus for 30 lousy pieces of silver, and ended up killing himself.

The Other Judas: So many people got Judas Thaddeus confused with the-Judas-

who-betrayed-Jesus that veneration of Thaddeus came to be known as a “lost cause.” Thaddeus is now the patron saint of lost causes. Martyred.

Acts 4 - Peter and John Face the Sanhedrin

Peter preaches to the Jewish leaders.

(1-4) The arrest of Peter and John.

a. The captain of the temple refers to the “police force” of the temple precincts: The captain, together with the priests and the Sadducees, all came together to arrest Peter and John.

b. The Sadducees *would* be greatly disturbed that Peter and John preached in Jesus the resurrection from the dead; they did not believe in the afterlife or resurrection at all.

c. They put them into custody until the next day because it was illegal under Jewish law to have a trial by night, though this is what the Jewish rulers did to Jesus.

From the Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 4.1: “Judgments about money may be commenced in the day and concluded in the night, but judgments about life must be begun in the day and concluded in the day” (cited in Williams).

ii. There was nothing wrong in the way that the Jewish leaders were investigating the matter; it was their responsibility to do so. What they did after they found out the facts was wrong.

d. The number of the men came to be about five thousand: Despite the opposition coming against the gospel, the number of Christians keeps increasing, growing to 5,000 from 3,000 at last count (Acts 2:41). Opposition did not slow the church down at all.

i. In the Western world, Christians rarely face persecution. Satan instead has attacked us with worldliness, selfish pride, a need for acceptance, and status. The martyr can impress unbelievers with his courage and faith; the self-centered, compromising Christian is despised by the world.

(5-7) Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin.

- a. These Jewish rulers are the same ones who recently condemned Jesus to death. Peter and John, standing before the Jewish rulers, must have thought that the trial of Jesus was going to happen all over again and they would be crucified like their Master, but it didn't seem to matter.
- a. The ideas behind by what power and by what name are virtually the same. In their thinking, the power resided in the name, because the name represented the character of the person.

(8-12) Peter boldly preaches to the Jewish leaders.

He is instantly filled with the Spirit again, evident by his supernatural boldness and ability to speak directly to the heart of the matter.

i. The filling of the Holy Spirit Peter experienced in Acts 2:4 (along with other disciples) was not a one-time event; it was something God wanted to keep doing in their lives.

b. The tone of Peter's reply - especially when he says "If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man" - shows that he is not intimidated by this court, though humanly speaking, he should be intimidated by the same court that sent Jesus to crucifixion.

- i. For a good deed: Peter's logic is piercing - why are we on trial for a good deed?

By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth: Peter preaches Jesus, the Jesus *they* crucified, the Jesus God raised from the dead, the Jesus who healed this man.

d. This is the 'stone which was rejected by you builders': The quotation from Psalm 118:22 is appropriate. Jesus was rejected by men but exalted by His Father.

e. Peter doesn't merely proclaim Jesus as *a way* of salvation, but as the *only way* of salvation. The idea that there is no salvation in any other, and that there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved is an offensive one in our pluralistic, eclectic age; but it is the plain teaching of the Bible.

Controversial Thought for Christians Today:

Does this mean that everyone must make a personal decision for Jesus Christ? What about the infant who dies? What about the person who has never heard about Jesus? God will deal with them fairly and justly, and those who are saved will be saved by the work of Jesus done on their behalf, even if they lacked a full knowledge of Jesus. But what about you?

B. The Jewish rulers react to Peter's sermon.

1. (13) What they saw in Peter and John's character.

a. They were uneducated and untrained men: Indeed, Peter and John were Galilean fishermen with no formal education, but they had the one essential qualification for ministry - they had been with Jesus.

i. It was as if the Sanhedrin said, "These guys are just like Jesus! We thought we solved the Jesus problem when we crucified Him, but now it is worse than ever!"

ii. People *should* go to Jesus directly, but often they won't. The only Jesus they are going to see is what shines through us. We must work to make the fact that we have been with Jesus as obvious in our lives as it was in theirs.

b. They saw the boldness of Peter and John: Because they had been with Jesus, they are naturally bold. When you are a servant of the all-powerful God, what do you fear from the courts of man?

i. "A few men unarmed, furnished with no garrisons, do show forth more power in their voice alone, than all the world, by raging against them." (Calvin)

c. "It is particularly striking that neither on this nor on any subsequent occasion . . . did the Sanhedrin take any serious action to disprove the apostles' central affirmation - the resurrection of Jesus. Had it seemed possible to refute them on this point, how readily would the Sanhedrin seized the opportunity! Had they succeeded, how quickly and completely the new movement would have collapsed!"

(14) What they saw in the man who was healed.

a. They could say nothing against it: This miracle was examined by doubters and stood up as a genuine miracle. This was not a case where the healing was "lost" in a few hours, as some claim happens today.

b. Previously, this man was completely lame, having to be carried wherever he went (Acts 3:2), and now he was completely healed. This contrasts many who get up out of wheelchairs at modern "healing services" yet come with a limited ability to walk, but are able for a few moments to walk much better because of the hype, emotion, and adrenaline. Yet they tragically leave the arena in the wheelchair, having "lost" their healing.

(15-18) Taking counsel, the Jewish leaders command Peter and John to stop preaching Jesus.

a. They conferred among themselves: How did Luke ever find out what the Sanhedrin discussed among themselves? Undoubtedly, because member of that Sanhedrin later became a Christian: Saul of Tarsus.

b. We cannot deny it: The corruption of their hearts is plain. They acknowledge that a miracle has genuinely happened, yet they refuse to submit to the God who worked the miracle.

c. So that it spreads no further among the people: Their fear of the preaching of Jesus was rooted in their own sinful self-interest, not in any desire to protect the people.

d. How did Luke know the private discussions of the Sanhedrin? In all likelihood, there was a dynamic, brilliant young rabbi present among the Sanhedrin named Saul of Tarsus who later reported all this to Luke.

i. Even though Saul himself did not know it, God was working in his heart through Peter and John. They had no idea they were preaching to a future apostle and the greatest missionary the church would ever see. We have no idea how greatly God can use us!

4. (19-20) Peter and John respond to the command to stop preaching Jesus.

a. Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge: It is self-evident that they should listen to God instead of man. Peter makes an effective appeal to this truth.

b. We cannot but speak: Peter and John *must* speak of the things which they had seen and heard. They had to, not only because of the inner compulsion of the Holy Spirit, but also because of the command of Jesus: *You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem* (Acts 1:8)

c. They did not originate this message; they merely speak the things which we have seen and heard, as reliable eyewitnesses.

5. (21-22) Peter and John are released with threats of future punishment.

a. Finding no way of punishing them, because of the people: The Jewish leaders were completely unmoved by an obvious miracle from God, yet they would respond to public opinion. This proves they cared far more about man's opinion than God's opinion.

b. They all glorified God for what had been done: This whole situation started out looking pretty bad. Peter and John were on trial before the same court that sent Jesus to Pilate for crucifixion. Satan meant it all for great evil, but before it is all over, see what God did:

i. Two thousand more people come to believe on Jesus.

- ii. Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit again.
- iii. Peter gets to preach Jesus to the leaders of the Jews.
- iv. Hostile examiners confirm a miraculous healing.
- v. The enemies of Jesus are confused.
- vi. Peter and John are bolder for Jesus than ever before.
- vii. God is glorified.

The early church prays for boldness.

1. (23-24) Introduction: They acknowledge their God.

They reported all that the chief priests and elders had said: We can just picture Peter and John saying, "They let us tell them about Jesus! They realized we were like Jesus! They told us not to tell others about Jesus!"

b. They raised their voice: They prayed *vocally*. It is certainly possible to pray silently in our minds, but we can focus our thoughts more effectively when we speak out our prayers.

- i. It isn't that they all prayed, speaking at the same time. One person prayed, and all agreed with that one, so that they were really praying with one voice (voice is in the singular).
- ii. "With one accord they lift up their voice to God. This does not mean that they all prayed at once. That would have been confusion. Disorder in meetings, a number of people talking at the same time in a boisterous way with outward demonstrations, is an evidence that the Holy Spirit is not leading, for God is not a God of disorder." (Gaebelein)

With one accord: They prayed in *unity*. There was no strife or contention among them. There wasn't one group saying, "we should pray for this" and another saying, "we should pray for that." They had the same mind when they prayed.

d. Lord, You are God: They begin by reminding themselves who they are praying to. They are praying to the Lord of all creation, the God of all power.

i. This word Lord is not the usual word for “Lord” in the New Testament; it is the Greek word *despotes*. It was a word used of a slave owner or ruler who has power that cannot be questioned. They prayed with power and confidence because they knew God was in control.

ii. When we pray, we often forget just who it is we are praying to, or worse yet, we pray to an imaginary God of our own ideas. The disciples had power in prayer because they knew *who they were praying to*.

2. (25-28) They pray in light of the Scriptures.

a. By the mouth of Your servant David have said: Peter, speaking for all the disciples (remember they were praying *with one accord*), recognized that words of the Old Testament (Psalm 2 to be exact) were really the words of God. God was speaking by the mouth of [His] servant David.

b. Why did Peter quote Psalm 2 here? Because he and the other disciples understand what is happening to them by seeing what the Bible says about it. From Psalm 2, they understand that they should expect this sort of opposition and not be troubled because of it.

i. When we pray, we must see our circumstances in light of God’s Word. For example, when we are in conflict, perhaps we need to know *we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age*. (Ephesians 6:12)

ii. Seeing our circumstances in light of God’s Word also means seeing when there is a sin problem. Then, we should say with the Psalmist, *When I kept it all inside, my bones turned to powder, my words became daylong groans. The pressure never let up; all the juices of my life dried up*. (Psalm 32:3-4, Peterson). Perhaps we are in the same place the Psalmist was, in sin and needing to confess and get right with God.

iii. We also use Scripture in prayer to pray the promises of God. When we need strength, we can pray according to Ephesians 3:16: *That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man*. God’s Word will speak to our situation!

Because they saw their circumstances in light of God's Word, they could recognize that the wrath of man never operated outside of the sphere of God's control; these enemies of Jesus could only do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done.

i. This brings real peace, knowing that whatever comes my way has passed through God's hand first, and He will not allow even the most wicked acts of men to result in permanent damage.

3. (29-30) They ask for more boldness, more power, and (essentially) more trouble!

a. Grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word: This request is consumed with God's cause and glory, not the comfort and advancement of the disciples. They ask for things that will lead to *more* confrontation, not less!

b. By stretching out Your hand to heal: They do not ask to do miracles themselves. They understand that Jesus heals by His hand, only He does it from heaven through His people.

i. It is a snare to long to be used to do miraculous things. It is often rooted in the pride that wants everyone to see just how greatly God can use *me*. I should be delighted in the power of God, not because He has used *me* to display it.

(31) Their prayer is answered.

a. The place where they were assembled together was shaken: They were given an earthquake as a unique emblem of God's pleasure. We don't know the extent of the shaking; it may have been confined to the house itself.

i. This earthquake is recorded in Acts 4:31. Someone pointed out that the significant 1994 Northridge earthquake happened at 4:31 in the morning!

b. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit: They are filled with the Holy Spirit, *again*.

i. The idea that we are “Spirit filled” only at an experience known as the “Baptism of the Holy Spirit” is wrong, though there may be a wonderful and first yielding to the Spirit’s power. We must be continually filled with the Holy Spirit, and make our “immersion” in Him a constant experience.

c. They received the boldness they asked for. “The word *boldness* means lucid and daring statement. In the Greek the word is *parresia*, ‘telling it all.’” (Ogilvie)

i. What we need to be doing is *telling it all*. When we try to “hide” some of God’s work in our lives from others, we aren’t walking in the boldness Jesus would have us walk in.

ii. Their boldness was a gift from God, received through prayer. It was not something that they tried to work up in themselves.

D. The sharing heart of the early church.

1. (32) Their attitude towards each other and towards material possessions.

a. Those who believed were of one heart and one soul; neither did anyone say that any of things he possessed was his own: Because of their unity, they regarded *people* more important than *things*.

b. They had all things in common: They recognized God’s ownership of everything; it all belonged to God and His people.

c. All things in common: Was this an early form of communism? There is a contrast between communism and *koinonia*. “Communism says, ‘What is yours is mine; I’ll take it.’ *Koinonia* says, ‘What is mine is yours, I’ll share it.’” (LaSor)

i. “The Greek here does not mean that everyone sold their property at once. Rather, from time to time this was done as the Lord brought needs to their attention.” (Horton)

d. Some people think that this radical sharing of possessions among the early church was a mistake. They say it was based on the wrong idea that Jesus was returning immediately, and that it led to much poverty in the Jerusalem church later on.

(33) The effective witness of the apostles.

a. With great power: This is both the result and the root of the attitude in the previous verse. Acts 4:32 shows they were putting God first, people second, and material things a distant third.

b. Gave witness to the resurrection: Notice again the central place the resurrection of Jesus holds in the message of the first Christians. They preached a resurrected Jesus.

c. Great grace was upon them all. Grace is God's favor, His smile from heaven, and it was upon them all. God's favor was evident everywhere.

(34-37) Examples of early giving.

a. All who were possessors of lands or houses sold them: This radical giving was absolutely necessary to meet the needs of this rapidly growing church. Remember, many of these Jerusalem Christians came as "refugees" from abroad, having responded to the gospel on Pentecost.

b. All who were possessors of lands: People didn't wait for someone else to give. When a need arose, they gave of their own possessions to help someone else.

i. Unfortunately, this generosity of the early Christians soon began to be abused, and Paul had to give strict instructions to the churches on who should be helped and how.

ii. Paul's directions are that the church must discern who the truly needy are (1 Timothy 5:3). If one can work to support himself, he is not truly needy and must provide for his own needs (2 Thessalonians 3:10-12, 1 Timothy 5:8, 1 Thessalonians 4:11). If family can support a needy person, the church should not support them (1 Timothy 5:3-4). Those who are supported by the church must make some return to the church body (1 Timothy 5:5, 10). It is right for the church to examine moral conduct before giving support (1 Timothy 5:9-13). And the support of the church should be for the most basic necessities of living (1 Timothy 6:8).

b. Joses, who was also named Barnabas: One man named Barnabas was a notable example of this giving spirit.

ACTS 5 Coming NEXT!

