

Lesson One: In the Beginning

Part I: Preparation

Bible Passage: Acts 2

Key Verse: In the last days, it will be, God declares that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams (Acts 2: 17).

Summary: The day of Pentecost was a traditional Jewish harvest festival (described in Leviticus 23:15-21), but the first Pentecost after Jesus' death and resurrection came to mean something entirely new to the Christian church. On the day that the Holy Spirit manifested itself in citizens of many different countries, the followers of Jesus came to understand that the Good News of Jesus Christ was available to everyone.

The catalyst for the creation of Christian Peacemaker Teams was a keynote address delivered by Ron Sider at the Mennonite World Conference in 1984. In this address, he described his vision of thousands of Christians intervening nonviolently in violent conflicts. Christian Peacemaker Teams began (more or less) in 1986. While it drew upon traditional Anabaptist forms of nonresistance and on the traditions of anti-war and social justice movements of the past, it also began something new and different: an unabashedly Christian organization, rooted in scripture and Anabaptist theology, ready to put its volunteers' lives on the line to deter violence.

Study

JERUSALEM 1 A.D. (Volume I Luke; Volume II Acts) – The book of Luke-Acts is about a fourth of the New Testament – larger than all the letters of Paul combined. The two-volume set probably got split up when the early Church saw that the first volume of Luke-Acts followed the same basic outline as Matthew and Mark and contained many of the same teachings. Early New Testament editors thus grouped it with the other two synoptic gospels. However, when one reads Luke and Acts together, the work of a single author is apparent, both in style and themes. Both regard Christianity as a religion open to Gentiles and Jews alike. Both emphasize the power of the Holy Spirit in the ministries of Jesus and the apostles. Both show bias for the poor and stress the importance of stewardship. Both note the part played by women in the community of believers and give more attention to subjects such as prayer and grace than do the other Gospels.

ACTS 2: The first chapter of Acts ties up loose ends from the first volume (the Gospel of Luke) by depicting Jesus' ascension and describing how the disciples selected Matthias to replace the traitor Judas. Acts 2 marks the real beginning of the church, or "The Way," as the early church referred to itself (Acts 9:2, 19:9). The promise of baptism "with the Holy Spirit and with fire" in Luke 3:16 is fulfilled as a mighty wind rushes into the room and tongues of fire appear over each disciple. As the disciples begin to speak of the "mighty works of God" in the languages of the whole known world, a pattern emerges that will be repeated throughout Acts: the working of the Spirit provokes questions, bewilderment and scorn. Some believe because of the Spirit's power and some choose to mock those whom the Holy Spirit empowers.

This empowerment is especially striking in Peter, the coward, who said, "Woman, I do not know him," in the first volume of Luke-Acts (22:57). Peter is "the first, the very first, to lift up his voice and proclaim openly the word that only a few weeks before he could not speak, even to a serving woman at midnight" (Willimon, p. 31). Lesson Three will give more examples of Peter's newfound courage.

William H. Willimon notes that if a contemporary religious leader were writing Acts, the story might end with Peter's sermon and the 3,000 souls saved because of it. But Luke, he notes, swiftly puts that enthusiasm to practical uses. The new believers 1) devote themselves to the apostles' teaching; 2) commit themselves to a fellowship that involves selling all their goods and distributing them equally (Luke

19:8, Acts 2:42-47); 3) break bread together at a table where all are considered equals (Luke 15:2); and 4) pray together.

STRASBOURG 1984 A.D.: “Nonviolent resistance to tyrants, oppressors and brutal invaders is not for fools or cowards. It demands courage and daring of the highest order. It requires discipline, training and a willingness to face death. It produces collective pride in the group or society that successfully . . . stands together and overcomes a brutal enemy.

“Are there tough, brave volunteers for that kind of costly, demanding battle? Would the people be there if the Christian church – and people of other faiths as well – called for a vast multiplication of our efforts in nonviolent alternatives to war? Would the scholars and trainers emerge if we doubled and then quadrupled our study and training centers on nonviolence? Would the nonviolent troops be available to be trained by the thousands and then tens of thousands to form disciplined Christian peacemaker teams ready to walk into the face of danger and death in loving confrontation of injustice and oppression?” (Sider, Ronald J.; *Non-Violence: The Invincible Weapon?*; Dallas: Word Publishing. Originally published under the title *Exploring the Limits of Non-Violence* by Hodder & Stoughton in 1988.)

JoAnne Kauffman, who later became a full-time Christian Peacemaker Corps member, was thirteen when she heard Ron Sider speak these words at the Mennonite World Conference in Strasbourg, France in 1984 .

“I remember a sense of being spellbound – that the whole auditorium was caught in time,” she writes. “Sometimes I am a witness to an idea or event so holy and so powerfully truth-speaking that all I can do is listen with every cell of my body as shivers run up and down my spine. This was one of those times – perhaps the first that I remember with my adult self.”

Sider’s call for a Christian peace army inspired other listeners, at least three of whom became CPTers in the 1990’s. However, Sider’s presentation inspired negative criticism, just as Peter’s proclamation did. Detractors criticized it as being unrealistic, dangerous and “humanistic” – an effort to bring about something by human efforts rather than relying on God.

Despite these criticisms, a group of Mennonite and Church of the Brethren leaders – using Sider’s speech as a springboard and building on Anabaptist traditions – established Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) in 1986.

Director Gene Stoltzfus writes, “CPT came into being fundamentally because none of the existing [church] agencies felt called or able to engage in active peacemaking – meaning direct support for nonviolent forms of struggle, activism and public witness.”

Thus, CPT began as an experimental peacemaking ministry – rooted in traditional Anabaptist theology – but prepared to engage in visible forms of social activism. Following Christ’s example, CPT has sought to promote justice in all relationships and to take practical steps toward loving the enemy as commanded in Scripture.

In 1990, CPT sent its first delegations to Iraq in an effort to help prevent the Gulf War and to the Oka Indian reservation in Quebec to intervene in the standoff between the Mohawks and Quebec provincial police. As a part of the witness in Iraq, CPT also sponsored Oil Free Sunday in an attempt to connect the churches’ peace position to the imminent war over oil. Approximately 40 percent of Mennonite and Brethren churches participated in some way.

In April, 1992, as the sentencing for the Rodney King trial approached, Mennonite churches in the Los Angeles area called CPT and requested that it send a delegation to south Los Angeles, because the situation there was about to “explode.” Gene Stoltzfus explained that a delegation took nearly two months to put together. After the Los Angeles riots, members of the CPT Steering Committee felt that CPT needed to have a full-time Christian Peacemaker Corps ready to move immediately into a conflict situation. The first training of full-time Corps members and Reservists took place in October 1993.

Another important connection between Acts 2 and CPT involves the importance of fellowship. CPT has always sent teams that operate on principles of consensus to crisis areas. While bad team dynamics can hinder its work, more often team life encourages, supports and inspires CPT workers. Typically CPTers suffer from less depression and loneliness than do volunteers for other Non-governmental Organizations (NGO's) who live and work by themselves.

Sidebars

1) *The beginning of the South Dakota Project:* In 1999 a delegation of First Nations Mennonites from North America came to visit the team in Hebron and learn about what CPT was doing to address the issues relating to Israeli confiscation of Palestinian land. Delegation members asked the team why they had come half way around to world to address issues of land confiscation when the state of South Dakota was confiscating land from the Lakota, Dakota and Nakota people.

Several months later, a group of Lakotas began an encampment on La Framboise Island near Pierre, SD. The island was a part of the 92,000 acres at risk for confiscation – land twice promised to the First Nations in treaties with the United States government. Mennonite Central Committee worker, Harley Eagle, called the CPT Chicago office in March 1999 and said that the situation called for international observers to prevent another incident similar to what happened at Wounded Knee in 1973. *[Federal officials attacked a group of American Indian Movement (AIM) members there and two of these officials were shot. Two of the AIM members were later acquitted for reasons of self-defense. Leonard Peltier remains in jail. Amnesty International regards him as a political prisoner.]* CPT responded to the invitation by sending a team to La Framboise Island in March 1999 that stayed for seven months.

2) “To those in the church today who regard the Spirit as an exotic phenomenon of mainly interior and purely personal significance, the story of the Spirit’s descent at Pentecost offers a rebuke. Luke goes to great pains to insist that this outpouring of the Spirit is anything but interior. Everything is wind and fire, loud talk, buzzing confusion and public debate. The Spirit is the power which enables the church to “go public” with its good news, to attract a crowd, and as we shall see in the next section to have something to say worth hearing. A new wind is set loose upon the earth, provoking a storm of wrath and confusion for some, a fresh breath of hope and empowerment for others” (Willimon, p. 33).

Part II: Session

Focus (10 minutes)

Option A: What are some momentous occasions in your life that marked the beginning of something new and different – a time when you thought, “My life will never be the same after today?” Examples could include one’s wedding or one’s baptism. If your group is larger than twelve people, divide into groups of four to five people to share these stories of beginnings.

Option B: Answer as best you can the following questions: What was the exact date that you became an adult? What was the exact date that your denomination began? Your church’s mission agency? Relief and Development agency? How do the answers to these questions provide context for the question of when the first-century church began and Christian Peacemaker Teams began?

Transition: Radical change can happen in both incremental and catastrophic ways. The dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki instantly created a world living in fear of nuclear annihilation. The struggles against colonialism and for civil rights in India, the southern United States and South Africa took decades (and in some cases are still ongoing). After the experience of the Pentecost, the first Christians expected Jesus to return soon and establish the Kingdom of God, a new Jerusalem in which there would be no mourning or suffering. Two-thousand years later, Christians still wait in expectation of Jesus’ return, and the world is full of suffering on a massive scale. Yet the first-century church still serves as a model for contemporary Christians – a living out of the possible, a commitment to behave in ways that God expects citizens of the Kingdom to behave.

Engage the Text (20 minutes)

Divide into two groups, with one group reading through the Sider text and one group reading through Acts 2. Select one or two passages of concepts from each that would help complete the sentence, "Wouldn't it be amazing if. . ." [e.g., "Wouldn't it be amazing if Christians actually held all their possessions in common?" "Wouldn't it be amazing if the majority of Christian pacifists had as much willingness to die for their beliefs as soldiers do?"]

Respond (15 minutes)

Imagine that you are a person who was present at the Pentecost, heard Peter's speech and became a believer. You hope that Jesus will return soon and restore the kingdom of Israel, but you also take seriously Jesus' words in Acts 1:7 that no one knows when this restoration will take place.

Now imagine that a time machine has transported you and the rest of the members of your group from the first century to the 21st century. Divide into two groups, with one group being the first-century Christians and the other group being themselves. The first century Christians should ask the 21st century Christians questions about the church and how it has changed over the last couple millennia. How do the first century Christians among you feel about the state of Christianity 2000 years later? If they had known the state of the church in the 21st century, would that have affected their decision to become Christians in the first century?

Now ask the first century Christians to imagine their church fifteen years after the Pentecost. Jesus has not returned, but a new leader of the Church, Paul, encourages them to keep hoping for this return, and furthermore has expanded the faith to include Gentiles, which is causing all sorts of friction. How do you feel about these changes? Has the initial enthusiasm of the Pentecost stayed with you or worn off? What sorts of plans are you making for the future?

Note that CPT, depending on when you date its beginning, has existed for only seventeen years. What are some positive and negative projections of what it could become in the next fifteen years? The next hundred? What are some positive ways in which CPT might become obsolete?

Closing (5 minutes)

Close in a prayer of thanks for new beginnings and for Jesus to guide both the Church and CPT until the coming of the Kingdom.

Part III: Leader Guidelines

Items Needed and Advance Preparation

If possible, read the entire book of Acts and a copy of Sider's entire 1984 keynote address (available at <http://www.cpt.org/sider.php>). Highlight those parts of Acts and Sider's speech that seem most attuned to each other.

Resources

William H. Willimon; *Acts*; Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988.

Tips for Leading

Although the lessons in this unit will compare Christian Peacemaker Teams to the church in its earliest years, tell the members of the group that CPT does not equate itself with the church. These lessons are intended to evaluate how the Holy Spirit has worked within CPT and what might happen in the future. CPT workers consider the first Christians to be models of bravery and openness to God and wish to follow their examples.

For Next Session

Review the three CPT stories in the text and be prepared to paraphrase what happened, especially what "Nonviolent Accompaniment" made possible for the Palestinians and Colombians with whom CPT worked.