

# **ACTS TO ACTION**

## **THE NEW TESTAMENT'S GUIDE TO EVANGELISM AND MISSION**

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AFTERWORD**

**FORWARD MOVEMENT  
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# INTRODUCTION

## SUSAN BROWN SNOOK

It is a difficult time for the church. Social forces have impacted believers in such a way that it's not clear how the community of faith can continue. The institutions that have held the church together are breaking apart, and people have scattered, unsure of their next step, uncertain whether the gospel will survive into the next generation.

The Christian church in the twenty-first century? No. This is the scenario facing the followers of the Way in Jerusalem, 40 CE. These early followers of Jesus encounter seemingly insurmountable obstacles: persecution, uncertainty, doubt, and fear. Yet empowered by the Holy Spirit, the handful of early followers share the good news of Jesus Christ far and wide. These few faithful followers start a worldwide movement, one of hope and joy and the promise of abundant life.

The description of those early days in the church might sound familiar to us. The Episcopal Church and indeed most mainline denominations in North America face some grim realities: Attendance is declining, sometimes precipitously, our membership is aging, and many of our financial resources are drying up. The population of North America is growing rapidly while many of our churches

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are shrinking, demographically looking less and less like the surrounding neighborhoods. We flounder, not sure how to reach the people God loves so dearly. Yet there is great hope and possibility. We believe that the gospel, the good news of Christ, is a vital message for all to hear. God's love for us is so intense that it led Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to come into this world and live and die for us; it is a love so unconquerable that God raised Jesus from the dead; a love so eternal that God sent the Holy Spirit to us so that God's love would grow and spread throughout the world. This love is worth sharing with those around us. But how do we accomplish this mission when our church structures seem to be faltering, when we are unsure of a way forward, when we don't always understand the good news of God in Christ ourselves?

We can look for answers through the spiritual disciplines all Christians are called to: prayer, scripture reading, worship, giving, serving others, and discernment of our mission in community. We can also look to the 2,000-year story of the church to see how God has led Christians on this path before. And when we do, we find that the followers of the Way have confronted similar challenges from the very beginning. We find their story—and our story—in the New Testament Book of Acts.

As Acts opens, the resurrected Jesus speaks his last words to his friends before he ascends into heaven. These words in Acts 1:8 are in a sense the mission statement for the entire Book of Acts, a foreshadowing of how the story of the church will unfold. Jesus says, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all

Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” This mission statement draws a picture of concentric circles: Jerusalem at the center, the familiar country of Judea surrounding it, the unfamiliar enemy territory of Samaria beyond that, and the unknown wilds of the ends of the earth extending to the entire known world and beyond. This is an overwhelming mission, but Jesus doesn’t think small. The Holy Spirit comes with power, and the gospel is going to spread.

The apostles create an organization in Jerusalem, one with assigned roles and delegation of responsibilities to deacons and others. This method of organization has been highly successful, baptizing thousands of people who are inspired by the story of Jesus. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the apostles preach in the temple and gather large crowds of believers. The whole structure is growing, reaching new people and seeming to portend a great revival in religious life in Jerusalem. Then, just before Acts Chapter 8, the crisis comes. Stephen speaks out of turn, insisting that the older temple organization is not necessary. Stephen is killed for his words, and a persecution begins. The fledgling institution is destroyed and scattered, and no one knows what to do next.

No one, that is, except the Holy Spirit. Where human plans fail, God is doing something new. It turns out the very persecution that scatters the believers and destroys their institutions becomes the seed of new life in unexpected places and ways. The twelve apostles have assumed that the main life of the church will always continue in Jerusalem, headquartered in the temple. But the Holy Spirit flings the church out into new and

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frightening places: Samaria and the road to Gaza and a place called Azotus. The Ethiopian eunuch becomes a Christian and heads back home, carrying the gospel with him to a place the apostles would surely think of as “the ends of the earth.” Baptism happens in a puddle of water alongside a road, instead of in a carefully planned liturgical ceremony.

Sharing the gospel of Christ rarely happens in a smooth, graceful progression. The apostles have successes and setbacks. They work wondrous miracles and make rookie mistakes. They struggle with each other over different interpretations of their mission, and they struggle to follow the lead of the Spirit in fits and starts. They fail to take literally the mandate from Jesus to go to “the ends of the earth,” and they stay in Jerusalem where they are comfortable—until they just can’t stay there anymore.

These early followers face the same challenges that we do today. Like the first apostles, we know how to be the church in the familiar surroundings of our own temples, our own “Jeruselems.” What we’re not sure of is how to be the church outside our walls, even in the familiar “Judeas” of our neighborhoods and among people similar to us. We’re even less sure of how to interact with our unfamiliar neighbors, the “Samaritans” who might be of different races or social classes or political outlooks or life experiences or religious (or non-religious) backgrounds. Yet, we are called to reach them. We must reach them if our churches are to thrive, but we don’t know how. We are indeed in the midst of being scattered, flung headlong into a new world.

Acts Chapter 8, the story of how the first disciples respond to challenges similar to ours, provides rich and fertile ground for us to discover how to meet today's crises. This book studies the events of Acts 8 and explores how we might apply its lessons to the life and mission of our churches today. Many of the contributors to this book are members of the Acts 8 Movement, a group of Episcopalians dedicated to mission, evangelism, and discerning the call of the Holy Spirit in our church today. The Acts 8 Movement was established before the Episcopal Church's 2012 General Convention by Scott Gunn, Tom Ferguson, and me to be an advocate for change in the church.<sup>1</sup> Since 2012, Acts 8 has continued to grow and evolve as a loosely organized yet passionate group of advocates for evangelism and prayer in the Episcopal Church.

Out of our zeal for sharing the good news of Christ, we offer this book, which explores the lessons of Acts Chapter 8 and offers them as a model for church mission today. We hope the book is used by individuals and in group study; discussion questions and practical exercises can help individuals and congregations discover how to answer their calling from the Holy Spirit. The book is divided into four sections, based on the four fascinating stories we find in Acts Chapter 8. At the beginning of each section, we explore in greater depth the scriptural story. Then building upon these stories, we look at essential elements of church mission in the twenty-first century.

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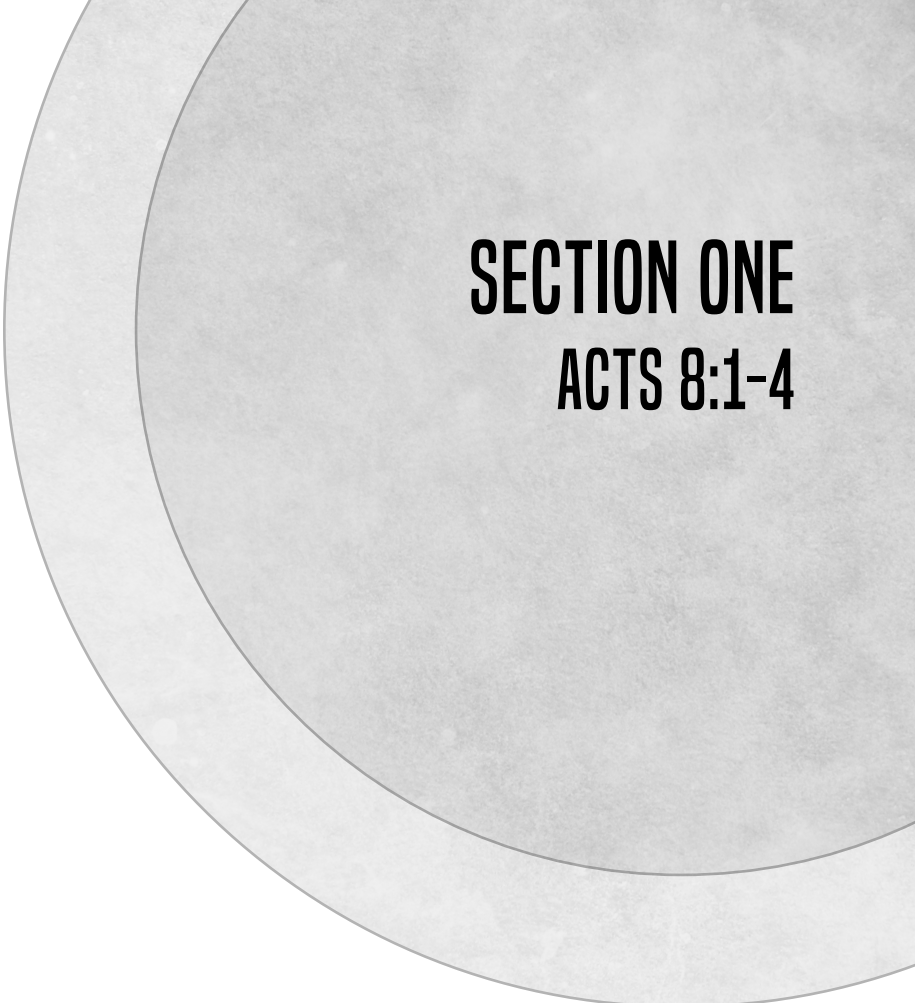
<sup>1</sup>Read the original blog posts announcing this new movement: <http://www.acts8movement.org/founding-blog-posts/>.



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The first section looks at the change that comes to the church as a result of the persecution of Stephen and how this change brings new focus to the proclamation of the gospel. Then we explore Philip's trip to Samaria and how his proclamation opposes evil and brings joy. The third section concentrates on the curious story of Simon the Magus, with lessons about the changes that come to us in repentance and the power of prayer. In the last section, we hear the beautiful story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, which reminds us of how to read scripture and how to work to understand our own communities.

Ultimately, these stories in Acts Chapter 8 share a common thread of relational evangelism and beg the question: How do we share the good news of Christ that we have experienced with the people we meet in the course of our ordinary lives? Every congregation must confront this vital question as we consider how to accomplish the mission that Jesus still gives us: to be his witnesses in our churches and in our neighborhoods, among people we know and trust, among people who are different and strange to us, and ultimately, to the ends of the earth.



# SECTION ONE

## ACTS 8:1-4

*And Saul approved of their killing him. That day a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria. Devout men buried Stephen and made loud lamentation over him. But Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison. Now those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word.*

# THE STORY

BRENDAN O'SULLIVAN-HALE  
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The eighth chapter in the Acts of the Apostles could be summed up in a phrase from Lin-Manuel Miranda's musical *Hamilton*: "This is not a moment; it's the movement." At the beginning of the chapter, those who have placed their hope in a light shining in the darkness are themselves on the verge of being snuffed out. By the end of the chapter, the faith has escaped the confines of Jerusalem, carried out into cities and the wilderness alike by Christians with hearts enflamed by the Spirit.

The Book of Acts was written by Luke as the second volume of a series. The first volume, the familiar and beloved Gospel of Luke, tells the story of Jesus' life, from birth to resurrection. The second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, picks up where the Gospel of Luke leaves off, with the resurrected Jesus about to ascend into heaven. From this point, the followers of Jesus have to learn how to be the church and carry on Christ's mission without his physical presence. They start out in Jerusalem and organize a successful missional community there. But at the end of Chapter 7, Stephen is stoned to death, and at the beginning of Chapter 8, a persecution against the church in Jerusalem scatters the followers of Jesus into the countryside.

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The first few verses of Acts Chapter 8 are a geographic pivot as definitive as the change in direction toward Jerusalem in Luke's account of the Transfiguration. After teaching his disciples that "those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it" (Luke 9:24), Jesus ascends a nearby mountain to show Peter, James, and John his divine authority in the event we know as the Transfiguration. From that moment on, each step Jesus and his disciples take is in the direction of Jerusalem and toward the cross.

The death of Stephen recalls the Transfiguration, only the geographic direction is reversed. Testifying before the high priest, Stephen's face "was like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). In the moment before the assembled crowd seizes him, "he sees the heavens opened" (Acts 7:56). Finally, turning his spirit over to Christ as stones rain down on him, Stephen cries out for the forgiveness of his murderers, showing himself transformed through the imitation of his Lord.

From the moment of Stephen's transfiguration, the steps of Christ's followers move away from Jerusalem and out into the wider world, as most of the Christians flee Saul's persecution. Human nature would lead many of us to flee Saul's rampage against Christians and start over elsewhere, quietly, not making a fuss or causing a commotion in our new town. But these Christians go from place to place, boldly telling the story of their faith to everyone who will listen. Saul's attempt at shutting down the practicing believers backfires spectacularly, as his tactics inadvertently encourage the spread of Christianity beyond Jerusalem.

But not everyone leaves Jerusalem. The apostles stay behind for reasons that are unknown to us. Immediately before the Ascension, Jesus instructs them “not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4). Still, they are clearly aware that the gospel promise is to go well beyond Jerusalem. Pentecost brings the gift of the Holy Spirit to the apostles, but some of the crowd sneers and assumes they are drunk. Peter urges the crowds to repent and be baptized, assuring them that the promise of forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit is “for you, for your children, and for all who are far away” (Acts 2:39).

For whatever reason, a new set of believers who have never personally met Jesus are the ones to carry the message out of Jerusalem and into the world. Perhaps, having been companions of Jesus, the apostles lack the imagination and vision for how to build the church without his physical presence and guidance. When Thomas doubts the resurrection without physical proof, Jesus answers: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet come to believe” (John 20:29). These early Christians spread their faith with no proof of the resurrection other than their own transformed lives. Why do those who have never known Jesus in person carry the church’s mission forward? Maybe they are the only ones who can imagine the way forward being passed from person to person, sparked by the Holy Spirit. Their way focuses not on direct experience of the physical incarnation of Christ but on his message: the gospel and its power to transform us all.