

Church Life During New Testament Times



SABBATH—JULY 14

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Acts 2:42–46; Acts 4:34, 35; Acts 3:12–26; Acts 4:1–18; Acts 5:1–11; Acts 5:34–39.

MEMORY VERSE: “Day after day they went to the house of God together. In their houses they ate their food together. Their hearts were happy. They gave thanks to God and all the people respected them. The Lord added to the group each day those [people] who were being saved from the punishment of sin” (Acts 2:46, 47, NLV).



What do Jesus' followers do when they think Jesus is about to come back? They sell everything they own and help the poor.

THE FIRST CHRISTIANS believe that Jesus will come back soon. Jesus' followers ask Him when His kingdom will start (Acts 1:6–8). Jesus' answer makes them think that His kingdom will start when the Holy Spirit comes and when the church finishes sharing the Good News about Jesus with all the people on the earth. That is why Jesus' believers think that the time for God's kingdom to come starts at Pentecost. Pentecost is the time when God pours His Holy Spirit on the church. Then the church shares the Good News with everyone on the earth. True, Jesus' followers do not go to everyone on the earth. The people on the earth come to the apostles. The apostles are the men Jesus chose to lead His church.

What do believers do when they think Jesus is about to come back? They sell everything they own. They study about Jesus and help the poor. Then problems start in the church. Also, people outside the church attack it. God works hard to hold His church together. Because of God's help, the faith of God's people during this time stays strong.

TEACHING AND FRIENDSHIP IN THE CHURCH (Acts 2:44, 45)

First, Luke says that God pours His Holy Spirit on His church. Then Luke talks about everyday life in the church in Jerusalem. Luke tells us that the believers do four things: (1) they “spent their time listening to the teaching of the apostles [leaders and teachers].” (2) “They [the believers] shared everything with each other.” (3) “They ate together” and (4) “prayed together” (Acts 2:42, ERV). In Acts 2:45, Luke says the believers teach in the temple in Jerusalem. But they eat and pray together in each other’s homes.

The believers study very carefully the truths about Jesus that they learn from the apostles. The Holy Spirit fills the believers with excitement. They want to learn everything from the apostles. Many miracles help the new believers accept the apostles’ teachings as truth (Acts 2:43).

Deep spiritual friendships between believers also show their deep love for God. The believers are always together in the temple or in each other’s homes. They share meals together. They celebrate the Lord’s Supper together. They pray together (Acts 2:42, 46). By these daily celebrations, the first Christians show that they believe Jesus will come back soon. Then they will be together with Jesus again in His kingdom (Matthew 26:29).

Believers’ homes are a very important part of church life. Yes, the believers continue to go to the temple to worship. On Sabbaths, these Jewish Christians go with other Jews to synagogues (James 2:2). Synagogues are Jewish “churches” or places of worship. But true Christian worship happens in the believers’ homes in New Testament times.

Read Acts 2:44, 45 and Acts 4:34, 35. What is an important part of Christian friendship in New Testament times?

The Jewish believers think the end of time is very near. So, they decide that the things they own are not very important. They share their things with the very poor members in the church. The Jewish believers have faith that Jesus will take care of their needs (Luke 22:29, 30). Sharing helps the believers feel close to each other. They love each other as a family. They are an example of Christian sharing.

In what ways do you share the things God gives you?



Sharing helps the believers feel close to each other.

PETER AND JOHN HEAL A MAN WHO CANNOT WALK (Acts 3:12–26)

In Acts 3:1, Peter and John go to the temple at 3:00 P.M. That is the time for daily prayer. In Acts 3:1, we learn something important about Peter and John. Peter and John do not go to the temple at this time only to teach or to make new believers. Peter and John go to the temple at 3:00 P.M. every day because they never stop following the Jewish ways of life (Acts 20:16; Acts 21:17–26). There, at the temple, Peter and John do a wonderful miracle (Acts 3:1–10). This miracle gives Peter the chance to preach another sermon about Jesus.

Read Acts 3:12–26. As these verses show us, what are some of the most important ideas in Peter’s sermon?

The first Christians preached about five ideas: (1) Jesus suffered for our sins. He is the Messiah. The Messiah is the Savior that God chose to free His people from sin (Acts 3:18). (2) God woke Jesus up from the dead and brought Him back to life (Acts 3:15). (3) Jesus went to heaven, where God honored Him (Acts 3:13). (4) Jesus will come again (Acts 3:20). (5) We must turn away from sin so that He can forgive us (Acts 3:19).

In many ways, we preach this same message today. Of course, the time and place that we live in today is different from the time of the apostles. The apostles were leaders and teachers. Jesus chose the apostles to lead the church after He went to heaven. The apostles continued to live a Jewish way of life after they accepted Jesus. So, the Jews who accepted Jesus only had to change from following the Old Agreement with God to following His New Agreement. As Christians, these Jewish believers needed to accept Jesus as Savior. They also needed to experience the new birth.

We now live in a different time and place from the first Jewish believers in Jesus. But our message is almost the same as theirs: (1) Jesus died for our sins. (2) He woke up from the dead and came back to life. (3) He will come back again. Jesus alone can save us. That is why we must make Jesus the center of our preaching about the Three Angels’ Messages in Revelation 14. We must preach that Jesus died on the cross. We must preach that He woke up from the dead. And we must preach that He will be coming back soon.



We must make Jesus the center of our preaching about the Three Angels’ Messages in Revelation 14.

ATTACKS ON GOD'S CHURCH (Acts 4:1–18)

Jesus' followers preach the Good News about Jesus to the Jews in Jerusalem. Their preaching is a big success. Many Jews accept Jesus and join the new church. The new church grows very fast. The leaders of the Jewish temple get angry when they see the church's success. The top leader of the Jerusalem temple is the high priest. The high priest is the religious leader for all the Jewish people. The high priest and most of his helpers are Sadducees. The Sadducees are a Jewish religious group. They do not believe that God will wake up the dead. So, they get very upset when Peter and John teach that God woke Jesus up from the dead. The temple soldiers arrest Peter and John. The next day, the soldiers bring Peter and John to the high priest and the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:1–7). The Sanhedrin is the group of religious leaders for the Jews.

Read the story in Acts 4:1–18. How does Peter answer the religious leaders in this story? What does Peter say that makes the religious leaders so afraid?

Peter says things that make the Jewish leaders afraid they will lose their power. Peter tells the leaders that he healed the crippled man in the Name of Jesus. Peter also tells them that only Jesus can save us. Peter and John stand bravely before the most powerful Jewish rulers. But Peter and John serve a power that is higher than the Sanhedrin. Peter and John are only fishermen from Galilee. They did not study in the Jewish schools. But they speak with courage and power. The leaders do not understand that this power is from the Holy Spirit. The Spirit fills Peter and John just as Jesus promised (Matthew 10:16–20).

The religious leaders cannot say that Peter and John did not heal the crippled man. After all, the crippled man is walking around. Everyone can see him! So, the rulers tell Peter and John to stop preaching. The rulers are afraid of the believers' message and their new religion. Peter's words to the leaders shine the same as jewels: " 'What do you think is right? What [does] God want? Should we obey you or God? We cannot be quiet. We must tell people about what we have seen and heard' " (Acts 4:19, 20, ERV).



The temple soldiers arrest Peter and John.

ANANIAS AND SAPPHIRA (Acts 5:1–11)

The first Christians are very unselfish and giving. They give all they own to the church to give to the poor. But no member is forced by any of the church leaders to give. New believers do not need to give their things to the church before they can join. But there are many examples of people who give because they want to. These examples of unselfish giving make the whole church want to give too. One example is Barnabas (Acts 4:35, 37). We learn more about him later in Acts.

But there are also examples of selfishness in the church that happen at the same time that the Jewish leaders begin to attack the church. These selfish examples have the power to cause terrible harm to the growing church. In fact, these things have the power to split the church apart.

Read the story in Acts 5:1–11. What lessons does this story teach us?



God does not punish our sins right away. That should show us how kind He is (2 Peter 3:9).

Ananias and Sapphira try to keep the money for themselves. But that is not the real problem. The real problem is that they lie to the church. Ananias and Sapphira’s sin is planned. Peter says to Sapphira, “ ‘How could you two have talked together about lying to the Holy Spirit?’ ” (Acts 5:9, NLV). Ananias and Sapphira do not need to sell their land and give the money to the church. But they chose to sell it. Maybe the real reason they sell it is to look good in the eyes of the church leaders.

This explanation may help us understand why God punishes Ananias and Sapphira in such an awful way. Their actions are a bad example to other believers. Their actions show the church that loyalty to God is not important.

Ananias and Sapphira sin. God may choose not to punish sin right away as He chose to do with Ananias and Sapphira. But sin is always awful in God’s eyes (Ezekiel 18:20; Romans 6:23). The fact that God does not punish our sins right away should show us that He is very kind (2 Peter 3:9).

How can we be careful not to “test the Spirit of the Lord” (Acts 5:9, ERV) as Ananias and Sapphira did?

THE SECOND ARREST (Acts 5:34–39)

God uses the first church leaders to do many things. He uses them to judge Ananias and Sapphira, as we learned yesterday. God also uses the church leaders to show His mercy and love to sinners. The church leaders do many healing miracles (Acts 5:12–16). These miracles show that God’s Spirit worked with the church. People even believe that Peter’s shadow can heal people! Luke does not say that Peter’s shadow really heals people. But people think so. Sometimes people believe false ideas about God’s miracles. But God continues to work in these people’s lives. God continues to give them His grace. Grace is God’s gift of mercy, forgiveness, and power over sin.

The Holy Spirit fills the church leaders more and more. Another name for these church leaders is apostles. The apostles were the men Jesus chose to lead and teach the church after He went to heaven. The more the Holy Spirit fills the apostles, then the more miracles the apostles can do. The Jewish religious leaders get very jealous of the apostles and their power from God. So, the Jewish leaders arrest the apostles a second time (Acts 5:17, 18). But the apostles escape. Their escape is a miracle too (Acts 5:19–24). Then Peter makes a brave speech. He says that Christians should “ ‘obey God, not men [people]!’ ” (Acts 5:29, ICB). Then many of the Jewish leaders started to think that maybe God gave His power to the apostles.

Read Acts 5:34–39. As these verses show us, how does Gamaliel convince the leaders not to kill the apostles?

Many Jews respect Gamaliel. He reminds the Jewish leaders about two other groups in Jewish history. Those groups gathered many followers and caused trouble. But in the end, the leaders of these groups were killed. Those groups ended when the leaders died. So, Gamaliel says, if the Christian religion was started only by humans, then the new religion will soon end. But if the Christian religion was from God, then nothing can stop it. So, the Jewish rulers listen to Gamaliel and let the apostles go. But they beat the apostles first. Then the Jewish leaders tell them to stop preaching about Jesus.

As this story shows us, how does good advice help us?



People even believe that Peter’s shadow can heal people!

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: “We are managers of God’s gifts to us. He gives us His gifts to serve His church. Jesus left us in charge of these gifts after He went back to heaven. Jesus expects us to watch and wait for Him to come back to earth. So, we must be loyal managers of everything that God trusts us with.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies [messages] for the Church*, volume 8, page 37, adapted.

“God’s people need to understand that the promises they make to God are very holy. People do not think they need to keep their promises to God the way they keep their promises to other people. But are our promises to God less holy and legal? True, our promises to God are not written down in legal contracts. We do not break our country’s laws if we refuse to keep our promise to God. But will a Christian refuse to do what he has promised? No legal contract we sign is more important than any promise we make to God.”—Ellen G. White Comments [thoughts], *The SDA Bible Commentary [explanation]*, volume 6, page 1056, adapted.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- ① Jesus leaves two important gifts for His followers. The first gift is His promise that He will come back soon. The second gift is the work that Jesus gave His followers to tell everyone on the earth the Good News that He saves them. How does Jesus’ promise and the work He gave us help us serve God more fully while we preach the Good News to everyone?
- ② Someone said: “We should be ready for Jesus to come back today. Until then, we should continue working for Him every day with all our might.” Why is this thought wise and important? How should this wisdom lead us as we do God’s work?
- ③ Why must Jesus’ life, death, and His waking up from the dead be at the center of everything we teach about Him?
- ④ Is it easy for us to know what really is in the hearts of people? What does the story of Ananias and Sapphira teach us?



“Jesus expects us to watch and wait for Him to come back to earth.”
—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies [messages] for the Church*, volume 8, page 37, adapted.