

The Church in the New Testament, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: The Birth of the Church

Acts 2:36–47

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Acts 2 is the birthday of the Lord's church, and this opening lesson lays the foundation for everything that follows. Set the scene for the class: the crucified and risen Jesus has ascended, the apostles have waited in Jerusalem as He commanded, and on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit is poured out. Peter stands and preaches the first gospel sermon, and by its end thousands are asking what they must do. Help the class feel that the church did not slowly evolve, nor was it invented by men in a later century. It was established by God on this day, exactly as the prophets foretold (Isaiah 2:2–3; Daniel 2:44; Mark 9:1). What we read here is the pattern, not a passing phase.

The heaviest doctrinal weight in the lesson falls on verse 38, and it deserves a clear, confident hand. When the convicted crowd cries out, "What shall we do?" Peter does not answer "nothing, simply believe," nor "pray a prayer of acceptance." He answers, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." The word rendered "for" points forward, toward the blessing to be received (in order to obtain forgiveness), not backward to a pardon already granted. Guard the class against two errors at once: the popular teaching that baptism is only an outward symbol added after one is already saved, and any notion that the water itself washes away sin apart from faith and the blood of Christ. Baptism is the appointed moment when a penitent believer, trusting the death and resurrection of Jesus, contacts His blood and is added by the Lord to His body (Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27; Acts 22:16). Note also verse 36: Jesus is Lord and Christ now, reigning at God's right hand. Keep the class anchored there, and resist any drift toward a future earthly, political kingdom.

Yet this lesson aims at more than getting the plan of salvation right on paper. In its closing verses it holds up a mirror. It asks every believer in the room to measure his own life, and the life of this congregation, against the portrait of Acts 2:42–47: devotion to the apostles' teaching, real fellowship, the Lord's Supper, and prayer. The goal is that the class leaves not only clear about how the church began, but freshly resolved to be that kind of church, and that anyone present who has never obeyed the gospel as those three thousand did would feel the same question pressing on his own heart: "What shall we do?"

Question 1

Student Question:

In verse 36, Peter declares that God has made Jesus “both Lord and Christ.” Why is this declaration the foundation of the church, and what does it mean for Jesus to hold both titles?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Let the class see that Peter’s whole sermon has been building to this one sentence. Everything before it (the prophecy of Joel, the life and miracles of Jesus, His death by wicked hands, His resurrection, His exaltation) drives toward the verdict of verse 36: “God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” The church is not built on a program, a personality, or a set of good values. It is built on a Person and a confession about Him (Matthew 16:16–18).

The two titles carry the weight. “Christ” (Messiah, the Anointed One) means Jesus is the promised King of David’s line, the fulfillment of every hope Israel had carried for centuries. “Lord” (kurios) means He is the rightful sovereign, seated now at the right hand of God, ruling over all. To confess Jesus as Lord and Christ is to surrender to His authority, not merely to admire His teaching. That is why this declaration, and the response it demands, gives the church its very identity.

Draw out the pointed edge of “whom you crucified.” The One now reigning is the One they had rejected. This is grace with a summons in it. The King they had put to death is offering them pardon, and the only fitting response is to bow.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Jesus as Lord and Christ is the foundational confession of the church (Matthew 16:16–18; Romans 10:9–10)
- “Lord” means present, reigning authority; Christ is King now, not a king-in-waiting for a future earthly throne (Acts 2:34–36; Colossians 1:13)
- The kingdom and the church are established together at Pentecost, in fulfillment of prophecy (Daniel 2:44; Mark 9:1)
- Confessing Jesus as Lord requires submission, not mere admiration

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between calling Jesus a good teacher and confessing Him as Lord?
- If Jesus is already reigning as King, how should that change the way we pray and the way we live this week?
- Why do you think Peter tied “Lord and Christ” so directly to “whom you crucified”?

Question 2

Student Question:

In verse 37, the crowd is “cut to the heart” and asks, “What shall we do?” What produced this response, and what does it teach about the role of the gospel message in bringing people to repentance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice what pierced them: not a manipulative appeal or an emotional technique, but the plain preaching of the facts about Jesus. Faith comes by hearing the word of Christ (Romans 10:17), and here the word does its work. They are “cut to the heart,” a phrase of deep conviction, because they have realized that the One they helped crucify is Lord and Christ.

Their question is itself a lesson. Conviction does not stop at feeling; it asks, “What shall we do?” Genuine godly sorrow moves toward action (2 Corinthians 7:10). This cuts against the idea that a person is saved the instant he feels sorry or simply believes. These believers already accepted Peter’s message, and yet they were not told they were saved. They were told there was something they must do.

Help the teacher use this as a gentle corrective to “faith only.” Belief was present, conviction was present, and still the apostle gives a command to obey. The gospel is good news to be believed and a King to be obeyed.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith is produced by hearing the gospel, not by a direct, word-less operation of the Spirit (Romans 10:17)
- Conviction of sin is the Spirit’s work through the preached Word
- Godly sorrow leads to a change of life, not merely to remorse (2 Corinthians 7:10)
- The believing, convicted crowd was still commanded to act, which speaks against salvation by “faith only”

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it significant that these people believed and were convicted, yet still asked what they must do?
- When was the last time God’s Word truly “cut you to the heart,” and what did you do about it?
- How can we let Scripture, rather than pressure or emotion, do the convicting when we share the gospel?

Question 3

Student Question:

In verse 38, Peter commands, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” What is the relationship between repentance, baptism, and the forgiveness of sins in this verse?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heart of the lesson, so slow down here. Peter answers the great question with two commands and one promised result. Repent, and be baptized, for the forgiveness of your sins. Repentance is the turning of the whole person away from sin and toward God. Baptism is the immersion of the penitent believer into Christ. The little word “for” binds them to the result: forgiveness. The plain sense is that they were to repent and be baptized in order to receive the remission of their sins, not because their sins had already been remitted.

Guard two boundaries with care. First, this is not water working like magic apart from faith; the whole sermon assumes faith in the risen Lord, and it is the blood of Christ, not the water, that cleanses (Ephesians 1:7; 1 Peter 3:21). Second, this is not a mere symbol tacked on after salvation. The passage everywhere presented in the New Testament ties baptism to the moment of forgiveness and of being clothed with Christ (Acts 22:16; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27). Baptism is where believing, repentant faith lays hold of the blood of Christ.

Encourage the teacher to let the text carry the weight, gently and without argument. When someone objects that baptism is a “work” that earns salvation, answer with the passage itself: it is a command to be obeyed by faith, a burial and resurrection in which God does the saving (Colossians 2:12). We are not earning anything; we are submitting to what the Lord appointed.

Finally, keep repentance and baptism together. Baptism without repentance is only a bath; repentance that refuses baptism has not yet obeyed the command. The Lord joined them, and so should we.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Baptism is “for” (in order to receive) the forgiveness of sins, not because sins are already forgiven (Acts 2:38; 22:16)
- It is the blood of Christ that cleanses; the water is the appointed place where faith contacts that blood (Ephesians 1:7; 1 Peter 3:21)
- Baptism is a burial and resurrection in which God saves, not a meritorious work that earns salvation (Romans 6:3–4; Colossians 2:12)
- Repentance and baptism belong together; neither stands alone
- This answer to “what shall we do?” stands against salvation by “faith only” or by a “sinner’s prayer”

Discussion Prompts

- How would you kindly answer a friend who says baptism is only an outward symbol of a salvation already received?

- Why does it matter that repentance and baptism are commanded together rather than separately?
- If baptism is where we contact the blood of Christ, how should that shape the way we remember and value our own baptism?

Question 4

Student Question:

Peter also promises “the gift of the Holy Spirit” in verse 38. What does this gift refer to, and how should we understand that in light of the rest of the New Testament?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Help the class read this promise in its plain covenant sense. To every penitent, baptized believer God promises the gift of the Holy Spirit. The New Testament teaches that the Spirit dwells in the faithful Christian (Romans 8:9–11; 1 Corinthians 6:19), sealing us and working in us to make us more like Christ. This is a blessing of the New Covenant that belongs to ordinary Christians, not only to apostles.

Distinguish this from the miraculous, sign gifts. The apostles received a special measure of the Spirit’s power for confirming the Word (Acts 2:1–4; Hebrews 2:3–4), and such gifts were given for a time and for a purpose. We should not expect present-day new revelation, tongues, or miraculous signs, nor should we look for the Spirit to lead us apart from the completed Word. The Spirit sanctifies the Christian, and He does so through the truth God has already revealed (John 17:17; 2 Timothy 3:16–17).

Keep the emphasis pastoral and reassuring. The indwelling Spirit is not a feeling to chase but a Person and a promise to rest in. He strengthens us, helps us pray, and produces His fruit as we walk with God through His Word (Galatians 5:22–25).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gift of the Spirit is the indwelling of the Spirit given to every faithful Christian (Romans 8:9–11; 1 Corinthians 6:19)
- It is distinct from the miraculous sign gifts, which confirmed the Word and belonged to the apostolic age (Hebrews 2:3–4)
- The Spirit sanctifies through the revealed Word, not through new revelation (John 17:17; 2 Timothy 3:16–17)
- The indwelling Spirit is a promise to rest in, not an experience to chase

Discussion Prompts

- What difference does it make in daily life to believe that God’s Spirit dwells in you?
- How does the Spirit work to change us, and what part does Scripture play in that work?

- Why is it important to distinguish the Spirit's indwelling from claims of modern miracles or new revelation?

Question 5

Student Question:

Verse 39 says the promise is “for you and for your children and for all who are far off.” What does this teach about the scope of the gospel invitation?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Widen the class's vision with Peter here. The promise reaches “you” (the Jews gathered that day), “your children” (the generations to come), and “all who are far off” (the Gentiles, and by extension the whole world). What began in Jerusalem was always meant for the nations, the very blessing promised to Abraham that all families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:3; Galatians 3:8).

The closing phrase, “as many as the Lord our God will call,” deserves a careful word. God's call is not a secret, selective summons issued to a chosen few. God calls people through the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:14). The invitation is genuine and universal, and human beings are truly able to respond. This guards the class against the Calvinistic idea that God has unconditionally chosen only some and left the rest without a real offer.

Let the breadth of this promise fuel evangelism. No one is beyond its reach, not the next generation, not the person who feels far from God, not the stranger across the world. The same gospel that saved three thousand that day is for everyone we will meet.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The gospel promise is for all people, in every generation and place (Acts 2:39; Galatians 3:8)
- God calls people to salvation through the gospel, not by a secret, irresistible summons (2 Thessalonians 2:14)
- The invitation is genuine and universal, and people are truly able to respond (against unconditional election)
- The worldwide scope of the promise is a call to evangelism

Discussion Prompts

- Who are the “far off” people in your life that this promise includes?
- How does knowing the gospel call is for everyone shape the way you view your neighbors and coworkers?
- What keeps us from believing the promise is really for our own children and grandchildren, and how do we act on it?

Question 6

Student Question:

According to verse 41, those who “received his word were baptized.” What does this sequence—hearing, receiving, and being baptized—teach about how people become a part of the body of Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Trace the order plainly, because the order matters. They heard the word, they received (welcomed, believed, and obeyed) the word, and they were baptized. This is the consistent pattern of conversion in Acts: the word is preached, faith is born, and the believer is baptized (Acts 8:12; 8:35–38; 16:14–15; 18:8). No one is baptized who has not first heard and believed.

This is why we do not baptize those who cannot yet hear and receive the word. Baptism is for penitent believers who welcome the message, which is why the New Testament knows nothing of infant baptism. It is also why baptism is not a private, mystical act but the response of a heart that has embraced the gospel.

Point the class to the beautiful result of verse 41: “there were added that day about three thousand souls.” They were not merely added to a membership roll; they were added by the Lord to the saved. Coming to Christ and coming into His church are, in Scripture, the same movement.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Conversion follows a consistent order: hear, believe and receive the word, be baptized (Acts 8:12, 35–38; 18:8)
- Baptism is for penitent believers who welcome the word, which excludes infant baptism
- Those baptized were “added,” showing that entering Christ and entering His church are one act
- Becoming part of the body is God’s doing in response to an obedient faith

Discussion Prompts

- Why is the order (hearing and receiving the word before baptism) important?
- How does this passage help us explain why we baptize believers rather than infants?
- What does it mean to you that the Lord Himself “added” these people, rather than they joined on their own terms?

Question 7**Student Question:**

Verse 42 describes four practices the early church devoted themselves to: the apostles’ teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers. Why is each of these essential, and what happens when any of them is neglected?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here the passage turns from how the church began to how the church lived, and it gives us a pattern to keep. The word “devoted” is strong; these were not occasional activities but steady commitments. Take each in turn. The apostles’ teaching is the revealed Word, our authority and food (this is why a congregation that drifts from sound teaching drifts from Christ). Fellowship is the shared life and partnership of the saved, bearing one another’s burdens. The breaking of bread, in this context of worship, points to the Lord’s Supper, the weekly remembrance of His death (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26). Prayers are the church’s dependence on God, together and continually.

Ask the class to feel the balance of the four. Where teaching is neglected, error creeps in. Where fellowship is neglected, members grow isolated and cold. Where the Lord’s Supper is neglected or treated lightly, the church forgets the cross that made it. Where prayer is neglected, the church begins to trust its own strength. The health of a congregation can be measured by these four.

Keep this from becoming a mere checklist. The early church did not devote itself to activities for their own sake, but to the Lord through them. The aim is a people whose shared life is shaped, week by week, around the Word, one another, the Table, and the throne of grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The apostles’ teaching is the church’s authority; faithfulness requires holding to the revealed pattern (Acts 2:42; 2 Timothy 1:13)
- The breaking of bread here points to the Lord’s Supper, observed on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26)
- Fellowship is the shared life and mutual care of the saved
- Prayer is the church’s continual dependence on God
- Neglecting any of the four weakens the whole congregation

Discussion Prompts

- Which of these four is easiest for you personally, and which is hardest?
- How does our congregation reflect these four devotions, and where might we need renewed attention?
- Why do you think the Lord’s Supper was a regular part of the church’s gathering from the very beginning?

Question 8

Student Question:

Verses 44–45 describe believers sharing possessions and meeting needs. What motivated this generosity, and what does it teach about the nature of Christian community?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Help the class read this rightly. The believers “had all things in common” and sold possessions to meet real needs among them. This was not a law imposed on the church, nor a program of forced, communal ownership; later the New Testament still assumes Christians own property and give as they purpose in their hearts (Acts 5:4; 2 Corinthians 9:7). What we see here is love overflowing, hearts so gripped by grace that they held their possessions loosely and their brethren dearly.

The motive is the key. These were new creatures who now belonged to one another in Christ, and their generosity was the natural fruit of that new family bond. When someone lacked, it was unthinkable that a brother would look away. Genuine fellowship reaches the wallet.

Draw the application gently but honestly. The same Spirit and the same gospel should still loosen our grip on things and open our eyes to needs around us. The nature of Christian community is not merely shared meetings but shared life, including shared burdens.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The sharing was voluntary and love-driven, not a binding rule of communal ownership (Acts 5:4; 2 Corinthians 9:7)
- New Testament giving is purposed, cheerful, and free, not compelled
- Genuine fellowship includes practical, material care for one another
- Generosity is the fruit of a heart changed by grace

Discussion Prompts

- What does it look like, in practical terms, to hold our possessions loosely today?
- How can our congregation know and meet real needs among us without embarrassment or neglect?
- Where is God inviting you to let fellowship reach your time, home, or wallet?

Question 9

Student Question:

Verse 47 says the Lord was “adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.” When we say that God adds people to the church, to what are we referring? The local congregation or the universal body of Christ? Is it important to note the difference?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This verse gives us one of the clearest windows into the nature of the church, so let the class linger. Notice who does the adding: “the Lord added.” No one votes a person into the body of Christ, and no one joins it on his own terms. When a person is saved, God Himself places him in

the universal church, the whole body of the saved of every time and place (1 Corinthians 12:13; Ephesians 1:22–23).

This is where the distinction the student question raises really matters. In Scripture “church” is used two ways: the universal body of all the saved, and a particular local congregation. God adds the saved to the universal body at the moment of their salvation. They then identify and work with a local congregation (as these three thousand assembled in Jerusalem, Acts 2:42–46). Keeping this clear guards us against thinking salvation is a matter of joining a denomination or a human organization, when it is first a matter of being added by the Lord to Christ Himself.

Let this humble and reassure the class. We do not build the church by clever methods; the Lord adds the saved. Our task is to preach the gospel faithfully and to be the kind of congregation into which the newly saved can be received and nurtured.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Lord Himself adds the saved to the church; membership in the body is His doing, not man’s (Acts 2:47; 1 Corinthians 12:13)
- “Church” refers both to the universal body of all the saved and to a local congregation
- A person is added to the universal body at salvation, then works with a local congregation
- Salvation is being added by the Lord to Christ, not joining a human or denominational organization

Discussion Prompts

- Why does it matter that the Lord, not a church or a person, adds the saved to the body?
- How does the difference between the universal church and the local congregation help us understand our own membership?
- If God is the one adding the saved, what does that say about how we should welcome and nurture new Christians?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking at Acts 2:36–47 as a whole, what pattern does this passage establish for the church’s identity, worship, and mission?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Bring the lesson home by stepping back to see the whole. In these verses we watch the church come into being and immediately begin to live, and what we see is a pattern, not an accident. Its identity rests on Jesus as Lord and Christ and on people saved by an obedient faith. Its worship centers on the apostles’ teaching, the Lord’s Supper, and prayer. Its mission is the ongoing proclamation of the gospel, through which the Lord keeps adding the saved.

Encourage the class to embrace the pattern as a gift, not a burden. We are not free to reinvent the church according to the tastes of the age. God showed us in Acts 2 what His church is and how it lives, and our aim is faithful restoration of that pattern, in doctrine, in worship, and in daily life.

End with the mirror of verses 42–47. The question is not only “Did I understand how the church began?” but “Am I part of it, and does my congregation look like it?” That is the target this lesson has been moving toward from the first verse.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The church’s identity is grounded in Jesus as Lord and Christ and in salvation by an obedient faith
- Its worship follows the apostolic pattern: the Word, the Lord’s Supper, and prayer (Acts 2:42; 20:7)
- Its mission is the continual preaching of the gospel through which the Lord adds the saved
- We seek to restore the New Testament pattern rather than reinvent the church to fit the age

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of the Acts 2 pattern most challenges the way churches often operate today?
- In one sentence, how would you describe the church’s identity, worship, and mission from this passage?
- Name one specific way Jesus is calling you, through this lesson, to be more fully part of His church.