

Gift of a Promise: His Word and His Body

Lesson 5

Unit Two

Beyond the Gospels: A Story Through Acts and Letters

Here I Am, Lord

⁴Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

⁵It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

⁶Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.

⁷It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

I Corinthians 13:4-7

A Reliable Source



Have you ever had to write a research paper for a class project? If so, you know that a key to a good grade is using many different types of reliable resource books. You would want to select from sources that provide in-depth insight to your subject matter and perhaps even sources that inspire you. The books of the New Testament are those sources for the Christian faith.

The Gospels lay the groundwork for understanding the message and the mission of Jesus.

The Book of Acts was written by the author of the Gospel of Luke. It shows the Holy Spirit at work in the growth of the early Christian communities,

particularly through the efforts of two of its most important missionaries, Peter and Paul.

We Gather...We Send!

Identify what Jesus instructed the apostles to do, in the order in which it is recorded in

Acts 1: 1-5

1. Not to _____ but to wait for _____
2. John _____ but you will be _____



Read Acts 1:6-25 and identify the order in which the events happened.

- a. You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. ___
- b. Two men in white asked them why they were standing up looking into heaven. ___

- c. They went back to Jerusalem and went to the room where they were staying. ___
- d. They asked the Lord if he would restore the Kingdom to Israel. ___
- e. They select another apostle to take Judas' place by casting lots. ___
- f. Jesus told them they would receive power from the Holy Spirit. ___
- g. They told them that Jesus would come back in the same way that they saw him go to heaven. ___
- h. Jesus was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. ___

Read Acts 2: 1-13. Identify 5 important events that took place:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

One very important fact that we read in Acts 1:15 is that Jesus told the Apostles to **“remain in Jerusalem and stay together”**! When we go to church, we gather to worship, share in Jesus Christ through Holy Communion, and become one with our fellow worshippers. Then we kiss the Gospel book and go out into the world.

First we *gather* and once we are strong enough for the journey, we are *sent*!

The Cross offers us a good visual reminder. The parallel arms of the Cross symbolize our communion with one another. The vertical bar of the Cross connects us with God, through the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.



This is the story of Pentecost. In Genesis 11 we find the famous account of the arrogant people who tried to build the tower of Babel to reach up to heaven. God confused their languages so they could not understand one another which made building impossible. The story of Pentecost is just the reverse! As the Holy Spirit descended upon the apostles they received a harvest of courage, confidence, and zeal to go out into the world and tell everyone the Good News—that we are saved because of what Jesus did. Amazingly enough, everyone, no matter where they came from, could understand the apostles' message.

Pentecost is considered the birthday of the Christian Church. In the Armenian Church, we celebrate this Feast Day ten days after the Ascension of Christ and fifty days after Easter. What makes this feast so important is that it continues to be the feast that celebrates the unity of all Christians. In the Unites States alone, the Gospel is preached in more than a hundred different languages to people of many different cultures. In the Armenian Church, the Holy Badarak is celebrated in classical Armenian, but the Bible and sermon are preached in the everyday language of that church's parishioners.

The Good News Spreads

The First 30 Years

With the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost the waiting is over! The apostles and disciples become the new Church full of life and power, completely different from their former fearful selves. And the change is permanent. Right at this point Peter gives a very moving speech and more than 3,000 people were baptized. This was a joyous occasion for the new community—their lives change. They gather and share everything they have. In fact, before these new followers were called ‘Christians’ they were referred to as followers of “the Way.”



Acts 2: 42-47. This is a famous description of the first church community ever! *What were they doing?*

The Good News Faces Tough Opposition!

Despite the fact that the apostles were spreading the Good News, healing people and taking care of those in need, their message faced great opposition. Their teachings, which were centered on Jesus’ resurrection, deeply disturbed the Pharisees and Sadducees. It was like the days of Jesus in Galilee all over again. The apostles were frequently arrested, questioned and imprisoned and it did not stop there. It was not long before the first Martyr Stephen, gave his life for the faith.

Persecution spread but instead of silencing the movement it only broadened the church’s outreach. The apostles continued to travel from place to place baptizing, teaching, and appointing leaders for the newly-established communities.



A World of Letters

However, these new young communities would soon face internal struggles because problems would arise within the community as well as persecution from outside. Where would they find the guidance and encouragement they needed? It was via the epistles or letters that people received guidance and comfort from the apostles. The first letter thought to be written was St. Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians, dated around A.D. 51. It is thought to be the oldest book in the New Testament.

The letters or ‘Epistles’ make up about two-thirds of the New Testament. They were written in response to people’s needs and questions, as well as to encourage them when they were facing persecution. The theme was always the same; remain strong and true to the teachings of the Jesus; take care of one another and continue to spread the Good News. Soon these letters were shared among communities. Today we read these same letters and for the same reasons: to answer moral questions and encourage us to stay strong in the faith.

From James 1:19

¹⁹My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...

What might have been happening in this community for James to say this?

From 1 Thessalonians 4: 13-18

(the set reading for the Armenian burial service)

¹³Brothers and sisters, we do not want you to be uninformed about those who sleep in death, so that you do not grieve like the rest of mankind, who have no hope. ¹⁴For we believe that Jesus died and rose

again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. ¹⁵According to the Lord's word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. ¹⁶For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. ¹⁸Therefore encourage one another with these words.

you were writing them a letter of encouragement as a disciple of Jesus?



To what question do you think this advice responded?

What advice would you want to give *your* parish if

Our Armenian Way

Each one of us faces difficult challenges during our life journey. Even when we are trying to live right it seems like life is falling apart. This is what the early Christians felt as they were being persecuted and killed by the Romans who were threatened by their faith. They needed a big dose of HOPE!

Our Armenian ancestors were also persecuted for their faith. They were driven from their homeland, marched through the Syrian desert and, like the early Christians, many gave their lives rather than give up their faith.

The Book of Revelation was the very last book to enter the canon of the New Testament, that is, the official list of all the books included in the New Testament. As a result, we do not read it during our worship services as we do the Gospels, Acts, and the Letters. It is filled with strange symbols, coded language, and images that seem like science fiction. But the meaning of it all is that no matter how scary and difficult life gets, there is a happy, hopeful ending because God is victorious over evil.

Many people today try to interpret the Book of Revelation according to signs of the time to predict when the world will end. However, our Church does not make this claim. What She believes and teaches is that this book of Scripture brings us hope in proclaiming God's ultimate triumph over evil in history and to live according to God's plan so that you are ready when it does happen. For Jesus said... *"But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone."* Matthew 24:36

The Armenian Church teaches us to be ready by

- Not being lukewarm about our faith
- Remembering that Jesus is the beginning and end of the universe and history
- In all things, trusting God and having hope
- Knowing in our hearts that a new heaven and earth is waiting for us



9. Complete the lesson by reading **Our Armenian Way**. Conclude with “Let us remember our opening words from Scripture, the famous love passages from 1 Corinthians 13, especially, ‘And now these three remain; faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.’ Amen.” 5 min.

Unit Two: Gift of a Promise: His Word and His Body

Session 5: Beyond the Gospels: A Story Through Acts and Letters

Key Concepts

1. The events of Ascension and Pentecost laid the foundation for Christian discipleship.
2. The early centuries after Christ were times of great growth and great trial for believers.
3. The Church expanded into the wider world, including Armenia.
4. The Epistles served as support and advice.
5. The Book of Revelation was written as a source of encouragement and hope.

Objectives

During this session students will

1. Participate in a reflection exercise on characteristics of love (I Cor. 13: 4-7).
2. Analyze the Ascension and Pentecost as depicted in Acts 1 and 2.
3. Examine the characteristics of the first church community as portrayed in Acts 2: 42-47.
4. Explore how the apostles continued to teach and encourage the early Church communities through written communication.
5. Read about the Book of Revelation and learn about its place in the teaching of the Armenian Church.

Materials Needed

Reflection question strips (from the back of this manual; use as many as needed for your class; see procedure #1) in a paper bag.

Procedure

1. As students arrive, have them reach into the paper bag for a reflection question making sure that you have one for each student. Read I Corinthians 13: 4-7 in **Here I Am, Lord** and then give them five minutes to respond to the reflection suggestions. (If a student cannot really relate to the question he or she picked, have them choose another.) Share answers. Conclude with: “Now, dear Lord, give us the love to share in the ways we have described.” 15 min.
2. Read **A Reliable Source**. Read Acts 1:1-5 and respond to the questions asked in **We Gather...We Send!** Answers: Leave Jerusalem; the Holy Spirit; baptized with water; baptized with the Holy Spirit. Continue reading Acts 1:6-25 and identify the order of events: Answers: a. 3, b. 5, c. 7, d. 1, e. 8, f. 2, g. 6, h. 4.
3. Read Acts 2:1-13 and as a class identify five important events that took place in this episode. Answers:
 1. They were all together.
 2. A sound like a violent wind came & filled the house that they were in.
 3. Tongues of fire rested on each of them & they were filled with the Holy Spirit.
 4. They began to speak in different languages.
 5. Visitors heard the message in their own language.Continue to read about the events of Pentecost. 20 min.
4. Teach **The Good News Spreads – The First 30 Years**. Read Acts 2:42-47 and respond to the question. (They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to sharing meals, to prayer; the apostles performed many wonders and signs and the people were filled with awe; they were together; shared everything; they sold what they had and gave to those who were in need; they met daily; happily shared meals in their homes; praised God and enjoyed the favor of all people; *and their numbers grew*.) Conclude that people *flocked* to a faith where all of this was happening. Tell students: “We’ll be returning to this description later on this year in some more detail.” 5 min.
5. Teach **The Good News Faces Tough Opposition** and **A World of Letters**. Read the two brief excerpts and answer

the questions together. Guidelines for the reading from James: the community may have been disagreeing in loud, argumentative fashion, disrespectful to one another; for Thessalonians: questions about what happens after we die and should Christians grieve for their dead since they will live on in heaven. Discuss freely the final question.

6. Read **Our Armenian Way** and conclude class by calling on a volunteer to read Revelation 21: 1-4. 20 min.

Unit Two: Gift of a Promise: His Word and His Body

Session 6: In A Nutshell

Key Concepts

1. The earliest statements of faith were made by the apostles as eyewitnesses to Jesus' life and teaching.
2. As the believing community grew and evolved, these developed into summary statements of faith and finally the universally accepted Nicene Creed.

Objectives

During this session students will

1. Discuss the Armenian baptismal creed.
2. Participate in a Bible study on apostolic (Mark, Peter, and Paul) statements of faith.
3. Read about the first council in Jerusalem and the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea.
4. Examine the Nicene Creed with the help of a webbing exercise.
5. Reflect on its meaning by considering the Creed in their own words.

Materials Needed

Divine Liturgy books

Procedure

1. Begin class by praying the baptismal creed together. After the prayer, explain to students that this was inspired by the abbreviated creed recited by all those gathered at an Armenian baptism. Discuss briefly by asking: "Since the baby being baptized clearly cannot participate in this recitation why have the parents, the godparents, and all the witnesses recite it? (Because these are the members of the believing community who pledge to help bring up the child as a Christian.) "Even though the Nicene Creed we recite every Sunday in church is much longer, what is the basic belief we are expressing in this summary?" (Have students recall as much as they can without looking at text.) 10 min.
2. Segue with: "We can see in the words and acts of Jesus' closest followers – his disciples – how this faith, the faith we now can recite in a formulated Creed, was beginning to be shaped. These people were the first 'witnesses.' What is a witness (wait for answer, and then confirm that a witness has seen something with his or her own eyes)?" Let's look into some of these first statements of faith together. It wasn't easy to openly declare these. Let's see why." Read **They Can't Be Silenced!** and **Who were the Sadducees and Pharisees?** 5 min.
3. Have students read the verses in Mark in **Eyewitness News**. (Answers: 1. He appeared to Mary Magdalene 2. He appeared to two disciples 3. He appeared to eleven disciples.) Continue reading what Peter proclaimed in Acts 4:1-12. (Answers: 1. That Jesus was crucified 2. He rose from the dead 3. This truth is the cornerstone of faith.) For Acts 5:27-39, accept answers but conclude that Gamaliel was probably a good man who felt that the truth would prevail no matter what the Sanhedrin would do. It turned out he was right!
4. Continue with 1 Corinthians 15: 3-11. (Answers: 1. Christ died for our sins 2. Christ was buried 3. Christ rose on the third day.) Identify that these three facts are the essential statements of faith in the Creed we proclaim each time we gather for Badarak. 20 min.