

The Acts of People

Making Bible People More “Personal”

by Ronald G. Davis

Although the fifth book of the New Testament is usually called “The Acts of the Apostles,” Acts is a book about people: men and women, slave and free, Greek and Barbarian, Jew and Gentile, noble and ignoble. Acts is a book about people who came face-to-face with the gospel of Jesus Christ. The issue in every such encounter was “Will the gospel be allowed to demonstrate its power, or will it be met and resisted by the force of personal will?”

A study of Acts ought to fortify the Christian’s confidence in the gospel’s power to change lives. The gospel is “the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). The occasions when the gospel is resisted reflects on the will of the person involved, not on the character of the gospel. Students of the book of Acts should walk away from their study confident that the gospel preached, taught, and modeled can work with any person—regardless of social status, religious background, or ethnic heritage.

The teacher of Acts will want to personalize the studies—that is, to make the people of the first century alive and as real as family members and neighbors. Two approaches to making that happen follow. One we will call Label Makers; the other we will call Dramatic Interviews.

Label Makers

Consider some of the significant individuals in the book of Acts: Peter, Stephen, Philip, the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul/Paul, Barnabas, Cornelius, Lydia, the Philippian jailer, and the Ephesian elders. For each one there is a collection of labels that fits him or her to a tee. Developing such a list of labels—some obvious, some not so obvious—is a worthwhile activity for any class. The teacher has two sources for such a list: 1) make the list himself and introduce it to the students for their consideration and explanation, or 2) have the class itself develop the list.

Look at this list of characteristics for the Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8:26-39: *man, Ethiopian, eunuch, outsider, alien, African, steward, powerful, responsible, literate, treasurer, worshipful, committed, wealthy, humble, hospitable, listener, servant, curious, concerned, responsive, obedient, joyful, confused, open, rider, opportunist, mutilated.*

And consider this list for the Philippian jailer of chapter 16: *callous, obedient, careful, thorough, diligent, wise, responsible, loyal, opportunistic, fatherly, kind, joyful, hospitable, Roman, scared, homeowner, believer.*

Can you explain all the labels suggested? Can your students? Can you add to the lists? Can your students?

As a teacher, if you have compiled your own list, you could show all the contents at once and ask your class to identify the reason each term would be appropriate; or you could read/write one word at a time, followed by the same call for student response. If you ask the class to devise the list, consider displaying a large cutout of a person on the wall and then asking class members to approach and write their labels on the cutout. (Label the cutout across the head with the name of the person under consideration.) Some will enjoy the graffiti nature of this activity, and having the cutout on the wall for a week or two may help the students remember the study and its applications to their lives.

Another approach to developing such a list is to give each student a three-by-five index card or a half-sheet of paper and ask each to write down three words that could be used to describe the person who is the subject of the study. Cornelius, the centurion, is the subject of Acts 10. Have students read the entire account; then give them this statement to complete by using three one-word responses: "Cornelius was (a/an). . . ." (The optional *a/an* gives the students the opportunity to complete the statement with either an adjective [devout, wise, etc.] or a noun [soldier, leader, officer, etc.]).

After three or four minutes, ask students to read "the one word on your list that you doubt anyone else has" or, "the one word on your list that you think most people included." After a word is read, ask for a show of hands of others who included the same word. This will allow a comparison and contrast of lists and will provide a thorough description/characterization of Cornelius. Labels a teacher might expect to hear most often include *God-fearing, Roman, devout, centurion, generous, prayer*; labels that might appear on a few lists include *expectant, kind, hospitable, baptized, listener, afraid, well-to-do*. For those words that no other class member included, ask the reader to explain his choice. In most such activities, some students will include words the teacher has never considered, and usually they will have interesting and even insightful

explanations for the choices.

For some individuals and classes, preparing an acrostic using the key character's name is an enjoyable and profitable "label-making" activity. Such a longer name as Cornelius lends itself to acrostic-making. Consider: **C**ommander, **O**bedient, **R**espected, **N**otable, **E**xpectant, **L**oving, **I**talian, **U**nusual, **S**pirit-filled. Shorter names or titles may lend themselves to sentence acrostics. Consider the Ephesian elders of Acts 20:17-32: **E**phesian **l**eaders **d**earely **e**ncouraged (by) **r**eminding **s**ervant.

Dramatic Interviews

A dramatic or dramatized interview presents an up-close-and-personal look at a particular biblical person. A "pretender" (actor/actress) is called on to answer questions about the person being represented—questions with factual responses based on history, geography, culture, and the biblical record, and questions with only speculative responses (though even those responses should have some reasonableness to them). A few props or a bit of costuming can be used, but neither needs to be present for the activity to be effective.

The teacher can play the role of the one interviewed, the interviewer, or neither. Such interviews can be carefully "scripted" or almost spontaneous. Each approach offers some legitimate learning opportunities for the class. The interviews can be conducted in a one-on-one, "TV newsmagazine" setting or in a "press conference" arrangement. The latter offers more student involvement; the former may be "safer" and more controlled.

Stephen could serve as the ideal subject of a dramatic interview. If a teacher recruits another person to be Stephen, the actor can be interviewed with such questions as these: (1) Stephen, could you describe the situation that led to your being selected to help with the ministry to the widows? (2) What are some of the "great wonders and signs" you were able to do? (3) Why did the Jews begin to argue with you? (4) How could they accuse you of speaking words of blasphemy against Moses and against God? What had you been saying that led them to make such a charge? (5) When you were on trial before the Sanhedrin, how was your experience there similar to Jesus' experience? (6) Your summary of the Old Testament, moving from Abraham through the prophets, is a marvelously concise history. How did you learn that history so well? (7) Briefly describe your vision of the heavenly throne room. What sort of encouragement was that to you? (8) Stephen, give our class one final word of encouragement. What do you think we most need to hear? (Note that whoever participates in this interview will need to be familiar with the entire account of Stephen as recorded in Acts 6 and 7.)

If the teacher decides to let the class, or a representative group of four to six, do the interviewing, he can prepare and assign questions to each member of the group, he can recruit his panel early and ask them to develop their own questions, or the questions can be worded spontaneously by the members after a brief introduction by the teacher. If the individual playing the role of the Bible person wants to be more confident in responding during the interview, the questions should be pre-arranged, with a copy given to the individual before class. But if that person is willing, spontaneous and unknown questions will probably elicit a more interesting response.

“Getting to Know You”

The words of an older popular song, “Getting to know you; getting to know all about you,” state a worthy goal for a study of the book of Acts. Getting to know the people there, learning that they were real people struggling to stay faithful to Christ in an amoral or even immoral culture, and sensing their deep faith and commitment to the gospel—achieving these goals will make the time you spend in class a valuable one for your adult students.

Probably every member of your adult class has experienced a period of doubt and discouragement. (Some may be experiencing such a time right now.) To study the book of Acts is to study those individuals who are now among “such a great cloud of witnesses” and whose example can encourage us to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus” (Hebrews 12:1, 2). By getting to know them, we can run our race with greater confidence.