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# Evangelism: Studies in the book of Acts

## Leaders Guide



*“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

*Acts 1:8*



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# Acts

## Preparing the understanding for mission

### Study 1 | Acts 1:1-8

#### INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK

The book of Acts was written by Luke, one of the companions of Paul. Most scholars believe he wrote the book no later than about 60 A.D., since there is no mention of the Neronian persecution of Christians (64 A.D.) in which Paul and Peter were executed. So Luke wrote about 30 years after the death of Jesus. Luke wrote the account for "*Theophilus*", who we guess by his title ("*most excellent*") was a Roman official and a convert ("*what you have been taught*").

The Bible gives us four different descriptions of Jesus' life, but only one of the early church. But the author, Luke, was more than a historian. He was also a teacher. His great theme is not simply the history of the early church, but the history of the *mission* of the early church. He does not give us a complete description of all the dimensions of the life of the primitive church. He is primarily interested in showing us the spread of Christianity — how it broke through barriers of all sorts to change lives, families, cities, peoples. So Luke a) uses real history, to b) teach us about being men and women *in mission*. Therefore, when we look at the introductory words of Acts, we should study these two issues. First, Luke claims to be giving a historical account — not a fabricated or fanciful series of stories. Second, Luke immediately shows us how Jesus prepared the first disciples for mission before he sent them out. No one doubts that the "*former book*" of Acts 1:1 is the gospel according to Luke. They are so closely tied that some have called them "Luke-Acts". In order to understand their character and purpose, it is important to read the two introductions together.

#### **1. Read Luke 1:1-4. How do these words help assure us of the historical accuracy of the events of the book of Acts (and the gospel of Luke)?**

Luke 1:1-4 is a remarkable claim of careful historical research. How did Luke come to know the events of Jesus' life ("the things that have been fulfilled among us") Luke 1:1 and "*all that Jesus began to do and teach*" Acts 1:1). He says there were three stages. First, there were "*eyewitnesses*" who carefully guarded and "*handed down*" (Luke 1:2) the accounts. So here Luke acknowledges his dependence on eyewitnesses (as any historian would). Second, Luke was not the only one to make an orderly *account* from this eyewitness material. He says that "*many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things*" (Luke 1:1). So by the time Luke was writing, 25-30 years after Jesus' death, there were already other written records of Jesus' life. Third, Luke claims that "*I myself carefully investigated everything from the beginning... that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*" (Luke 1:3-4). Luke is here claiming that he did not rely on one eyewitness (say, the account of one of the apostles), but that he compared all his sources and "*carefully investigated*" them. This would have been quite

possible for Luke, who personally knew many of the apostles and hundreds of other eyewitnesses. He would have been in a position to check the accounts through interviews with many others. Also, as a doctor, he was an educated person. The Greek of the book of Acts is stylish and that of a cultured person of the time.

Luke here tells us his method. He used both historical accounts and eyewitness material, which he carefully compared with one another and investigated with his own personal research. His goal was so that readers would “*know the certainty*” of the events they had learned about. Luke is then making a very direct claim to painstaking historical accuracy in both his account of Jesus’ life, and of the early church.

This puts the reader in a very interesting bind. It means that we cannot read Luke or Acts and say, “these are legends that grew up about Jesus and the apostles — some of them are true, but many of them are embellished.” Luke’s claim means that we must either assume he is writing accurate history or that he is writing an extremely deliberate set of lies, foisted on the public to promote this religion. Luke’s language is not that of a compiler of stories and myths. He most emphatically denies that he was doing that. He says he wrote nothing down unless it was historically checked and certain. So if the incidents he described never happened, then he is very deliberately lying about them. In that case, we should not believe anything he says at all. But if Luke and Acts were really deliberate lies, written just 30 years after the events, how could Christianity have made such progress when literally thousands of people were still alive who had seen and heard Jesus speak and do miracles? And how do we account for the remarkable accuracy (as we will see as the weeks go by) of Luke’s knowledge of geography and the culture of the towns that he says he visited with Paul. Such knowledge indicates that he really was along on these trips and that he really saw personally many of the things that transpired.

So the introductions of Luke give us a lot of confidence that we can believe what we are reading.

**2. 1:1. What does v.1 tell us about Luke’s theme or subject for the Book of Acts? How does this theme contrast Christianity from other faiths?**

The purpose of Acts’ composition is revealed when Luke describes his gospel, his first volume, as “*about all that Jesus began to do and to teach*” (Acts 1:1). If we reflect we will see that, if “Luke” is about what Jesus began to do and teach, then “Acts” is about what Jesus continues to do and teach. Therefore, Luke does not think of “Luke” as about Jesus and “Acts” as about the church. Both books are about Jesus — first his ministry on earth, exercised personally, and second his ministry from heaven, exercised through his representatives.

Supporting this view is the fact that Luke repeats the Ascension. In his gospel, it ends the book (Lukd 24:51), but it begins the book of Acts. The ascended Christ now continues his ministry in the world through his church. So, some think that the best title for Acts would be "The Ministry of the Ascended Christ through His Church".

"Luke's first two verses are, therefore, extremely significant. It is no exaggeration to say that they set Christianity apart from all other religions. These regard their founder as having completed his ministry during his lifetime; Luke says Jesus only began his... after his resurrection, ascension, and gift of the Spirit he continued his work, first and foremost through the the ministry of his chosen apostles and subsequently through the post-apostolic church of every period and place. This then is the kind of Jesus Christ we believe in: he is both the historical Jesus who lived and the contemporary Jesus who lives."

– John Stott, *The Message of Acts* (The Bible Speaks Today) IVP Press, 1990.

**3. 1:3-8. Why do you think Jesus prepares the apostles' minds (v.3) before he sends them power (v.4)? What was it about (cf. Luke 24:44-49)? What does the apostles' question reveal about their understanding of the kingdom? How does Jesus correct and inform their understanding?**

We are told here that Jesus put the apostles through a period of training and instruction (v.3) before he sent them the power of the Spirit (v.8). It is often forgotten that the intensive training occurred before the power of Pentacost arrived. Many people think that all the church needs is more of the Spirit, but the Bible never pits learning against power, truth against the spirit. Worship is always in spirit and truth (John 4:24). In fact, there is no Spirit power without truth, for the job of the Spirit is to take truths about Jesus and make them vivid, glorious and affecting to our hearts. ("The Spirit of truth... will glorify me by taking of mine and making it known to you." John 16:13-14). The Spirit gives us power by making the truth of God shine and empower us. ("He may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation... that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope... the power..." Eph.1:17-19. "He may strengthen you with power through his Spirit... that you may have power to grasp...how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ." Eph.3:16-18). We can think of the Spirit as "fire", but the truth of God's word as "firewood". Without both wood and fire, you don't have a fire!

This principle is particularly obvious in Paul's statement that the gospel is the power of God (Rom.1:17). It does not just bring the power of God; it is the power of God. The Spirit's power does not work apart from the truth. It is only as the truth "enlightens" the heart and as it "grasps" us that the Spirit gives us the power and love and confidence for being witnesses. One of the pre-requisites for dynamic mission, then, is a deep and rich understanding of the Scripture.



What did this instruction consist of? What was this advanced training, done now so the disciples could understand the big picture? We get a glimpse of this advanced training in Luke 24:44-49, and it is tantalizing. First he showed them how all the Bible was really about him — the Law, Prophets, and Psalms (Luke 24:44-45). In other words, he gave them the ultimate “Bible survey” and showed them the interpretive key to all the Scriptures. He *“opened their mind to understand the Scripture”*. That is amazing. It cannot mean that they simply surveyed the contents of each book and learned all the stories in a mechanical way. It means they learned what every part of the Bible *means*, how every part points to Christ. Second, Jesus showed them how to preach the gospel out of the Bible (Luke 24:46-49), how to call people to repentance and grace. He showed them how exactly *“to be witnesses to these things”* so that people find *“forgiveness.”* He showed them how to present and apply the truth of the Bible. In other words, Jesus gave the disciples the definitive training in Bible, theology, and ministry!

However, one theme of Jesus that Luke mentions here in Acts is that Jesus taught them about *“the kingdom of God”* (v.3). It was obviously very important for them to understand the nature of the kingdom. This must not have been an easy lesson to grasp. The question in v.6 reveals that the apostles were rather confused about it until the end. John Calvin points out that *“there are as many errors in this question as words”*! There are at least three mistakes: a) The verb *“restore”* shows that they think they are still expecting Jesus to bring a political, earthly kingdom, a powerful nation that would stand for righteousness against the unrighteousness of the other nations. b) The noun *“Israel”* showed they were expecting Christ’s salvation to belong primarily to one race and culture. They were still thinking about how God established his kingdom in the Old Testament — as a distinct culture and nation-state. c) The phrase *“at this time”* shows that they did not understand that the kingdom was coming in two stages — one at Jesus’ first coming, and the second at Jesus’ second coming.

#### **4. 1:2-8. What things are given to the apostles uniquely and what things are given to the us along with the apostles?**

v.2 shows us that Jesus did not go to heaven until he had concluded a specific ministry to his apostles.

*a) What is unique about the apostles? The first three things that Jesus gives them in this passage are unique gifts.*

First, they were *“chosen”* apostles (v.2). This word means that they were *“appointed”* or *“designated”* to their office. Later in 1:24 the word is used again to when they choose a successor to Judas *“Lord... show us which of these two you have chosen”*. So an apostle was not an officer elected by the

people (as in Acts 6:1-16) or appointed by any human being (as in I Tim.3:1ff.) or self-appointed by any person. Elders, deacons, teachers, even prophets are either elected or appointed (or the person becomes 'aware' of a prophetic gift and begins to exercise it — see I Cor.14:37). But the apostolic office is unique. Apostles are directly appointed by Christ — personally, visibly.

Second, Jesus *“showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive”*. (v.3). Jesus appeared to others after his resurrection, but he appeared far more often to the apostles. They received a massive set of immediate and powerful *“proofs”* of Jesus' reality. They clearly had *“advantages”* that no other Christian has ever had. They were being prepared to face terrible odds and persecutions, and they had to be rock solid in their confidence that Jesus was risen. And so they received this amazing input.

Third, Jesus *“gave them instructions through the Holy Spirit”* (v.2). For forty days Jesus was giving them instruction. All the teachings we have from Jesus in the gospels was given when the apostles were somewhat clueless to Jesus' mission! Now he gives them this advanced training — which we discussed above under the last question. We today have no other sources of that 40-Day training material except what we have in the New Testament from the apostles and their followers. That is why the authority of the Bible is unique. The apostolic teachings in the New Testament are based on that amazing, ultimate course of study.

It is important to read Galatians 1 and 2 in light of Acts 1:2-3. Paul was also made an apostle, and in order to make good his right to the title, Paul shows how a) The risen Christ directly designated him through a visible visit to him, b) he got the same visible proof that Jesus was alive through that visit, and c) the gospel he preached was given directly to him from Jesus.

*b) The last thing two things that Jesus gave to the apostles are given to those around them.*

First, they are given the *“Great Commission”* to *“be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (v.8). In light of the first three *“unique”* gifts, we must conclude that the apostles were able to fulfill this commission at a level that the rest of us could not. But it is clear from the rest of the book of Acts that this commission is given to all Christians. See for example Acts 8:4 — *“Those who were scattered [all except the apostles — see v.2] preached the word wherever they went.”* So Jesus Christ makes his church a people-in-mission. The Latin word *missio* means *“sent”*. Mission and witness is not an aspect of our existence as the church. We exist to be witnesses.

Second, he promises that they will *“be baptized with the Holy Spirit”* (v.5). When this baptism of the Spirit did come, we see that it fell not just on the apostles but on every believer (at that time, all 120 Christians — v.15). This is expected, if we look carefully at the Great Commission. All those bearing witness for Christ must first *“receive power when the Holy Spirit comes...”* (v.8). So if all Christians are commissioned as witnesses, then all of them would have to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. The reverse would be true as well — the fact that the Spirit falls on every Christian in Acts 2 proves that the commission of Acts 1:6-8 was given to all believers.

**5. In what way is the apostolic ministry continuing in the church and in what way is it not? In what ways does this distinction influence the way we apply the book of Acts to ourselves today?**

The gifts we do not share with the apostles have to do with the unquestioned, unconditioned authority of their teaching. Paul the apostle makes a telling statement in I Corinthians. *“If anybody thinks he is a prophet or spiritually gifted, let him acknowledge that what I am writing is the Lord’s command. If he ignored this, he himself will be ignored.”* (I Cor. 14:37-38) Immediately before this statement he is telling the church that they must “judge (evaluate) the prophets.” That is, when anyone speaks or prophecies in their worship services or assemblies, the church must decide if their words are true or not. How? Paul says that his apostolic teaching is the standard. It is interesting that he insists that he is not to be evaluated! His teaching is not checked, for it is received as if it is *“the Lord’s command.”* But anyone else at all — even a prophet — is not to be accepted without being judged according to apostolic truth. Paul does this again in a letter to the Thessalonians. *“If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”* (II Thess.3:14-15)

This means that the teaching authority of the apostles was unique. Their teaching now is only available in the Scripture. No one else can possibly contradict it, or even add to it, for no one else has ever had these three unique gifts. Anyone for example, who says, “well, the Bible teaches this, but now we know better” is assuming an apostolic ministry that they have no right to. In fact, if someone even begins to insist they have revelations of God that are to be unquestioned — even if they don’t contradict the Scripture — they are assuming an apostolic ministry that they have no right to. For example, if a Christian says to you, “God told me that you must marry Ms. or Mr. X.”, and if that Christian regards this as not advice or wisdom to be weighed, but a command from God, then they are taking on themselves the kind of authority Paul and the other apostles exercised (I Cor.14:37-38). But they don’t have the three unique gifts that go with that authority. They did not have 40 days of direct instruction by the risen Lord. So today, the Bible must stand in judgement over any insights and knowledge of spiritual things that we have. Their writings are the foundation of the church (Eph.2:20). The apostolic teaching ministry still continues, but through the Scriptures, not through authoritative individuals.

On the other hand, the gifts we do share with the apostles have to do with the power and effectiveness of their evangelism, through word and deed. As we go through the book of Acts, we will see that usually the name "apostle" is reserved for the Twelve, as opposed to the rest of us, but sometimes the name "apostle" is given to others, such as Barnabus (Acts 14:14). Why? The word "apostle" means "the sent ones". The apostolic ministry as power-filled witnesses and representatives of Christ is given to all of us along with the apostles, for while the three gifts equipping the apostles for a teaching ministry were given to them alone, the two gifts equipping the apostles for an evangelistic ministry were given to all those around them.

We must remember that these two ministries overlap in the lives of the Twelve, and therefore we do not necessarily expect visible tongues of flame, etc., when we seek power to be witnesses. But the fact remains that we are all called as "apostles" (as some say — not with a capital 'A', but with a lower case 'a'.) We are all called to be men and women-in-mission, empowered for witness.

This distinction (between how the apostolic ministry does yet does not continue in the church) means that applying the book of Acts to our own time can be tricky at points. We cannot simply read anything the early church did (since its elders were apostles) and just assume we should do it the exact same way. Our own churches are not led by apostles, and therefore we have to be careful not to simply try to copy everything the early church did.

It will be important to keep a balance in mind. On the one hand, the apostolic ministry of teaching and authority no longer resides in individual leaders of the church, on the other hand the command of witness and the promise of the Spirit was sent to all Christians. This means that there are two opposite dangers to avoid in reading the book of Acts. On the one hand, we must not forget that there is some distance between us and them. On the other hand, we must not put too much distance between ourselves and them. Let me be specific. Many in the charismatic movement have read Acts as if the apostles' ministry was not unique, and as a result they assume that we must copy everything they did exactly. On the other hand, many people who dislike the charismatic movement have overreacted to their emphasis on experience and power. They do not want to see that the power of the Spirit and the barrier-breaking effectiveness of witness is still available to us. Indeed, we should be convicted if we do not see people coming to Christ constantly, and if we don't see the power of the Spirit in our assemblies, and if we don't find our hearts bound together in supernatural love, and so on.

So how should we interpret the book of Acts? With humility. We must not use it to bludgeon people with: "this church isn't Spirit-filled unless we have all the miracles we see in the book of Acts!" On the other hand, we must not avoid the clear picture of a vital, living church. We must measure ourselves by it and seek God's help to be all he wants the church to be.

## WEEK 1 PROJECT — DISCUSSION

*[Leaders should lead the group through this overview of the whole course and allow them to ask questions. Then use the discussion questions at the end for sharing.]*

The purpose of this course is to prepare your mind and heart to be effective witnesses for Christ's kingdom in the world — in a small group community. The basis for this course is a study of the book of Acts, which is a source for all the principles we need to be witnesses.

In Acts 1 and 2 we see that Jesus prepared both the understandings and the whole lives of his disciples before he sent them out. He gave them both truth and power. But notice that this preparation came in the context of community. They did not learn and grow into "sentness" as individuals. They received both the necessary truth and power in community. Your small group community will be the setting for you to prepare yourselves for the same great experience and service.

As we study Acts 1 and 2, we will learn how to prepare one's life for God to use. As we study Acts 3-7 we will learn how to grasp and share the gospel itself. As we study Acts 8-12 we will learn how people come to Christ and are changed through conversion. As we look at Acts 13-17 we will learn how to answer objections and how to make a case for the truth of Christianity. Finally, in Acts 18-19 we will learn about different strategies and means for sharing our faith with others. When you get to this point (in March), your group will choose a way of outreach to do together, and you will spend 2-3 months putting your learning into practice, and then supporting and supervising one another as you reach out.

The following is an outline and schedule.

**October      Preparing your Life for evangelism**

- Week Oct 7 Acts 1:1-8: Preparing the Understanding for Mission  
(Intro to Course)
- Oct 14 Acts 1:6-26: Preparing the Life for Mission  
(Building a "Altar" for a Life God Can Use)
- Oct 21 Acts 2:1-36: The Power Arrives  
(The Power of the Holy Spirit)
- Oct 28 Acts 2:37-47: The New Community  
(The Power of the Gospel)

**November      Presenting the Gospel**

- Week Nov 4 Acts 3:1-26: Peter Presents the Gospel  
(Sharing a Testimony)
- Nov 11 Acts 4:1-31: Peter Defends the Gospel  
(A Gospel Outline)
- Nov 18 Acts 4:32-6:7: Counter-Attack  
(Gaining Confidence)
- Nov 25 Acts 6:8-7:60: Stephen Presents the Gospel  
(“Oikos” Evangelism)

**December      Leading People to Faith**

- Week Dec 2 Acts 8:1-40: The Ethiopian’s Conversion  
(Special Joint Meeting: Joyful Boldness)
- Dec 9 Acts 9:1-43: Paul’s Conversion  
(A Gospel Outline: II)
- Dec 16 Acts 10:1-11:18: Cornelius’ Conversion  
(Understanding Conversion)

**Jan-Feb      Persuading People to Believe**

- Week Jan 6 Acts 11:19-12:24: New Mission Breakthrough  
(What is Apologetics?)
- Jan 13 Acts 12:25-13:52: Paul Presents the Gospel  
(Soundbyte Apologetics)
- Jan 20 Acts 14:1-28: The Gospel for Pagans  
(A Case for Christianity: I)
- Jan 27 Acts 15:1-16:5: Clarifying the Gospel  
(A Case for Christianity: II)
- Feb 3 Acts 16:5-40: Three Surprising Conversions  
(Process Apologetics)
- Feb 10 Acts 17:1-34: The Gospel for Intellectuals  
(Helps and Hints for Handling Objections)

**Feb-March      Learning Strategies for Outreach**

Week Feb 17 Acts 18:1-28: Mission to Corinth  
(Special Joint Meeting: Home Outreach Buffets)

Feb 24 Acts 19:1-22: Mission to Ephesus: I  
(Strategy 2: Discovering Series)

Mar 3 Acts 19:23-41: Mission to Ephesus: II  
(Strategy 3-4: Open Group. Oikos Intentional.)

Mar 10 Acts 17-19: Review: Paul's Strategies  
(Strategy 5-6: Worship/Events. Service Projects.)

**March-May      Choosing Strategies and Reaching Out**

Remember, your group will choose a strategy together. Nothing will be forced upon you. Whether you are "outgoing" or shy — there is a method that fits you.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Share either one positive experience or one negative experience you've had in witnessing to your faith. What one or two important things can be learned about sharing faith from these incidents.**
  
- 2. Share the two biggest obstacles for you with regards to witness.**







# Acts

## Preparing the life for mission

### Study 2 | Acts 1:8-2:12

#### 1. 1:9. Why do the angels tell the disciples not to “stand... looking into the sky”? What should the ascension mean to them and us?

In vv.9-11, the apostles saw Jesus’ ascension. The ascension of Christ is so important that it is the only incident in Jesus’ life that Luke repeats — he puts it at the end of his gospel and the beginning of the book of Acts. The angels gently rebuke the apostles — they are not supposed to “*stand here looking into the sky*” (v.11). What does that mean? Some think that they were trying to discourage the disciples from trying to guess when he was coming back. But their statement “*this same Jesus will return*” is not concerned with timing at all. Why do they assure the disciples that he is still the “*same*” and is coming back?

It would have been very natural for the apostles to be immediately in great distress — assuming that they had lost Jesus, that he was now absent from them, and thus they were bereft. But the angels assure them that Jesus, though in one sense gone, is in another sense still with them. On the one hand, he is “*taken from you*”, yet they stress that he is “*the same*” — he has not transformed into some other form. He is still personal and human, though glorified. He is still their leader. And therefore, they tell them to stop “*standing*”, stop being inactive.

We have to link these verses with what we saw last week Luke said in his introduction. Luke considered the book of Acts the continuing ministry of Jesus through his apostles. In v.1, he refers to his gospel volume as being about “*all Jesus began to do and teach*”. Thus Luke sees the ascension as the way in which Jesus continues to minister, but now from his place in heaven he can do it through all of his people everywhere.

In summary. The apostles were momentarily frozen into inaction by a sense that they had lost Jesus. They are assured that the ascended Jesus is still quite the same — he is still their personal leader and savior. The ascension means “get busy”! It means we have more confidence and excitement than ever — for now our Lord is “at large” in the universe, working through us until we return.

#### 2. Jesus told them to not begin their mission until they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (1:4-5). What do they do to prepare for this gift in 1:13-14?

First, they prayed (vv.14). The characteristics of this prayer are only shared briefly, but several characteristics are evident in the concise description. a) This was *corporate* prayer. They did not just pray as individuals, but they came together to “*all*” pray in a whole group. They prayed with others. b) This was *united* prayer, which goes beyond the mere fact that it was corporate. “*Joined... together*” translates one of Luke’s favorite words — *homothymadon*,

which can mean coming to consensus (cf. Acts 15:25). In prayer they came to deeper unity of thought and mind and heart as they prayed. They came to agreement as they prayed. c) This was *prevailing* prayer. They prayed “*constantly*” which means to be very persistent and diligent. It doesn’t tell us how frequently or how long they prayed together — there is no mention of hours. But the impact of the phrase is to convey that they spend vast tracts of time together in prayer.

### 3. What do they do to prepare for this gift in 1:15-26?

They chose new leadership (vv.15-26). Many questions are raised by this passage, and we must not be too distracted by the details so as to miss the general principle it teaches. But first, here are the two details that we must notice:

The first detail is the death of Judas. Peter refers to the death of Judas, and Luke’s aside about the circumstances of Judas’ death seem to contradict what Matthew says about it. Matthew 27:3-5 states that Judas hung himself, but Luke here says that he died through a fall (Acts 1:18-19). Some see this as a contradiction. But it does not need to be read this way. If a man had hung himself and he had not been found quickly, his body would have been quite bloated and decayed and, if cut down, could have fallen and ruptured in a gory mess. That would certainly be reason enough for the name “Field of Blood” to be attached to the place. The other detail is the manner through which a new apostle is chosen to replace Judas. They drew lots. Many have pointed out that this was before Pentacost, and after the giving of the Spirit to the church there was no record of this kind of decision-making again, even when great decisions are made (cf. Acts 6:1-6; Acts 13: 1-3; Acts 15:6-21). It is important to note Peter’s remark that an apostle is to be chosen by the Lord, not by the disciples (v.24), and so the drawing of lots was a way to let Jesus make the final choice. There have been those who have felt that the choosing of Matthias was illegitimate, and that Paul was God’s choice to “complete” the Twelve. But there is no comment in the text that indicates that.

The principles that are often lost in discussion of these two details are very significant: a) First, they prepared for their mission by waiting on God to raise up gifted and godly leaders. This was the other thing, besides prayer, which can be said to be a key for “revival”, for a spiritual empowering for mission. God works through leaders, so they went about seeking those he had appointed. b) Second, they sought them by studying the Scriptures (v.20) with regard to the leadership position, by prayer (v.24), and by group discussion and wisdom (v.23 — proposing two men). This is therefore strong testimony about the importance of raising up leaders for God to use, and the “delicacy” of the process. It takes a balance of hard-nosed study and thinking together with a prayerful dependence on God’s leading.

**4. Compare and contrast this incident in Acts 2:1-4 with Acts 4:31; 7:55; 13:9; Luke 1:41, 67; 3:21-22; 4:1. In what ways is Pentacost unique, and in what ways is it repeatable?**

It is again very easy to get distracted by the three unusual phenomena of the Day of Pentecost. They are a) a mighty sound like a violent wind (v.2), b) visible tongues of fire over each person (v.3), c) and speaking in other tongues (v.4) which each member of the multi-ethnic audience could understand in his or her native language (v.6). But the two central characteristics of Pentacost that is repeated are these: a) they were *“filled with the Holy Spirit”* (v.4), and therefore b) they *“began to speak (v.4)... declaring the wonders of God (v.11)”* so effectively that the crowd was *“amazed... and asked, ‘what does this mean?’”*

If we look at Luke’s descriptions of the “fullness of the Spirit” in his gospel, we see Elizabeth (Luke 1:41) and her husband Zechariah (Luke 1:67) becoming filled with the Holy Spirit. In both cases they immediately begin to declare the redemptive works of God with joy and power. [This is identical to Acts 2:11, for the *“wonders”* that the apostles declare is the word *megaleia* — “the mega-deeds of God”. They are talking about the redemptive acts of God in history — the gospel.] Next in the gospel of Luke we see the Spirit descending on Jesus (3:21) so that he too goes off *“full of the Holy Spirit”*. In Jesus’ case, there are two characteristics. First, he received with the Spirit a strong assurance of his sonship and the Father’s love for him: *“You are my Son, whom I love”*. Second, he received the Spirit in order to endure a major confrontation with Satan, which he met by declaring the Word of God (see Luke 4:1-13). [Note: Maybe he received the Spirit so he could confront Satan. But maybe he got confronted by Satan because he had received the Spirit. Probably, both are true!] Again, we see that the fullness of the Spirit equipped Jesus to declare the Word of God.

Then we look at the three incidents in Acts after Pentecost. The incident in Acts 4:31 is like Pentacost in that there is a period of prevailing prayer and an *“earthquake”* (which is parallel to the violent wind sound) but unlike Pentacost in that there were no tongues of fire or speaking in tongues. What does occur again is a *“boldness”* (an assurance, like that which Jesus received) and the ability to *“speak the word of God”*. It is also notable that this experience of fullness came in the face of a persecution and confrontation. The incident of Acts 7:55-56 is an experience of fullness for Stephen. Again, it is in the face of persecution, it equips him for verbal witness of the gospel, and it consists of an assurance of Jesus standing for him. The incident in Acts 13:9 seems almost routine by comparison. Yet again we see a man (Paul) being filled with the Spirit and assurance for a verbal witness in the face of opposition.

In summary, what do all these incidents have in common? 1) We see that the “fullness of the Spirit” Luke speaks of is episodic. It does not occur continuously. Paul was “filled with the Spirit” in order to speak to the sorcerer. That means it came upon him, and later left. 2) We see that the “fullness” is repeatable. It may happen frequently or infrequently. 3) We see that the

“fullness” always consists of a) a powerful assurance that God loves us and is with us, and b) an ability to effectively witness. The fullness is “assurance for service”. 4) Finally, we see that the “fullness” seems sometimes to be connected to a) prevailing prayer, and b) persecution or confrontation and temptation.

What do these incidents not have in common? Though speaking in tongues is attached to the experience of fullness of the Spirit in Acts 2:4, and also in Acts 10:46 and Acts 19:6, tongues is not connected in these other incidents. Also, miraculous and extraordinary phenomenon like earthquakes, wind-sounds, and fire are not necessary. So we cannot agree with some that speaking in tongues is the necessary or even the normal sign of the fullness of the Spirit.

The unique phenomena of Pentacost show that in some ways it was unique and unrepeatable. Jesus gave his Spirit to his church on that day as the newly ascended Lord. Now he proceeds to minister in the world through his Spirit-filled church. Perhaps, we can even say that it was on that day that the church was “baptized with the Holy Spirit”. Jesus had promised in Acts 1:5 that Pentacost would be Spirit-baptism. On that day, it says that they were “filled with the Spirit”. But then the repeatable series of “Spirit-filled” experiences is not called “Spirit-baptisms”. Rather, the baptism of the Spirit was their once and for all inauguration into a new realm of spiritual experience. In the repeated episodes of spirit-filledness the disciples were drawing on their Spirit-baptism. So in one sense, Pentacost was a once for all crossing into a new realm and era. In another way, it was repeatable. In the same way, we are baptized once with the Spirit (I Cor.12:13) when we enter the Body of Christ at conversion. But the baptism of the Spirit now provides us with potential for multiple and deepening experiences of assurance and power.

#### **5. What is the significance of the multi-lingual proclamation of the gospel on the day of Pentacost? Why do you think God did it that way?**

Discussions of the nature of “glossolalia” (speaking in tongues) must not distract us from the main point of this miracle. On the first day of any church, a very important decision has to be made. What language (and therefore what culture) will the church conduct its worship and business in? When Redeemer Church held its first service, it did so in English, which automatically made ministry to other people (who did not speak English) of secondary importance for the church. Well, on the first day of Jesus’ church, he refused to choose one language or one culture to minister in! If the apostles had spoken in Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek — the signal would have been set that the gospel was primarily for just one people group. But the Lord on Pentacost shows the world that the gospel is for every tongue, tribe, people, and nation. The first “worship service” is multi-lingual, multi-cultural, multi-racial in the extreme.

Pentacost means that the unity of the Spirit transcends all racial, national, and linguistic barriers. For centuries, commentators have noted that Acts 2 is a reversal of the curse of Babel. Acts 2 provides a "Table of the Nations" as does Genesis 10. But in Acts 2, a miracle of blessing brings people together through understanding despite linguistic barriers. While in Genesis 11, a miracle of cursing breaks people apart through division despite original linguistic sameness. In Genesis 11, the people of the earth unite to "make a name for themselves" (v.4), and this leads to the disunity of racial and cultural alienation. In Acts 2, when people unite "to call on the name of the Lord" (Acts 2:21) and the result is racial and cultural healing.

The practical ramifications for the church have never been completely worked out. The next few chapters of Acts will show that the disciples themselves did not understand the implications. They continued to erect racial barriers between Christians. What Pentacost means is that the church must work to the greatest degree possible to show unity of Christians across racial barriers. It is a mark of the Spirit-filled church that people get along inside the church who could not get along outside of it.

## WEEK 2 PROJECT — BUILDING A LIFE ALTAR

Read silently and mark “!” - for something that helped you  
 “?” -for something that raised a question

**The Ascension and the Power of the Spirit**

Jesus would not let the disciples leave Jerusalem to be his witnesses until they received *“the gift”*, the power of the Holy Spirit (1:4,8). What did they have to wait for? Why couldn't the Spirit be given to them immediately? Because Jesus had to ascend to the right hand of the Father. It is from there, from the right hand of God, that Jesus pours out the Spirit. See Peter's sermon in Acts 2:33. *“Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.”* The Spirit was not given in this major way until Christ assumed his place as our Priest and King before the Father. John 16:7 – *Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.*) Pentacost happens when Jesus goes to the right hand of the Father.

Therefore, Pentacost and the Ascension are one time events. Yet there is a repeatable aspect to them. There is still a connection between seeing the ascended Christ and experiencing the power of the Spirit. When Stephen was dragged before a human court, he was condemned unjustly and was about to be executed. But he was *“filled with the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 7:55). How so? We are told, *“full of the Holy Spirit he looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ‘Look’ he said, ‘I see heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!’ At this they covered their ears, and yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him... While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed... ‘Lord do not hold this sin against them.”*

What happened? **The sight of Jesus at the right hand of God filled him with the Holy Spirit.** Why? Jesus was “standing” at God's right hand. This refers to his work as our Advocate (1 John 2:1 – *we have an advocate with the Father, one who speaks in our defense — Jesus Christ the Righteous One. He is the propitiation for our sins.*) At the very moment that an earthly court was condemning him, he realized that the heavenly court was commending him. In other words, the “fullness” he experienced was an experience of the gospel. At that moment, he got an extremely vivid, powerful sight of what he already knew intellectually — that in Christ we are beautiful in God's sight and free from condemnation (Col.1:23). But the Spirit took that intellectual concept and electrified his entire soul and mind and heart and imagination with it. At that moment, the verdict there (at the throne of God) became so real and overwhelming to him that the verdict here (in the earthly kangaroo court) became inconsequential. He faced his accusers with not just boldness, but even with a calmness and joy, and forgiveness.

Now it cannot be coincidence that Pentacost is so connected to the Ascension. It means that *to the degree that we have an awareness of Jesus as our advocate, as being our righteousness and holiness before the Father, to the degree that we understand our position in him before God, to that degree we will have courage, love, and power.* When we ask for the fullness of the Spirit, we do not just sit and wait for a zap. Rather we go to the truth and pray it into our souls until the Spirit comes and sets it on fire. That tends to happen not just as the result of faithful “waiting on him” in prayer, but also when we attempt to share our faith with others. Then the Holy Spirit may to one degree or another, make the truth “catch on fire” in us, filling us with the same assurance he gave Jesus, that we are his beloved children (Luke 3:21-22).

To ask for the fullness of the Spirit for witness is to grasp and thrill under the gospel and all it teaches.

### **The Nature of Spiritual Experience**

We see then that we cannot divorce Word from Spirit or pit them against each other. Spirit-filledness is for the purpose of speaking effectively. On the other hand, Spirit-filledness is actually “truth beginning to shine” in the soul. It arises from meditation and prayer and reflection over the truths of the Word.

In Ephesians 1:17 Paul prays for the Ephesians and asks that the *Spirit of wisdom and revelation will enlighten the eyes of your heart* in order that the Ephesians might *know the hope to which he has called you, and the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.* Does he think the Ephesians don’t know that they have this hope and inheritance? No, of course they know it intellectually. But Paul here says that the fullness of the Spirit “enlightens the eyes of the heart” and shows us the “glory” and “riches” of it all. In Eph.3:18ff. Paul shows the nature of spiritual experience again. He says that the Spirit’s job is to *strengthen in the inner being so that we might receive power to grasp... how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God.* This is the fullness of the Spirit! It is to take truths that we know — like the love of Christ — and meditate on them, seeking the Spirit’s help, until we find ourselves with the “power to grasp” and we find the dimensions of his love simply overwhelm our mind and heart and fill us up.

This is Paul’s prayer for his people. This is what happened to Stephen. This is what happens at every place that “the fullness of the Spirit” is mentioned. The truth begins to shine out, we hear God saying, “you are my beloved”, and it revolutionizes us, making us effective as ambassadors of his kingdom.



### The Church Builds an Altar

A good image for seeking the fullness of the Spirit is the concept of “building a life altar”. In the Old Testament, an altar was built and a sacrifice placed on it, and then God sent his fire to burn up the sacrifice (I Kings 18). This is a great illustration of the dynamics of personal revival and spiritual renewal. Paul uses it when he tells us to “make our selves a living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1ff.) We cannot create spiritual renewal — only God can send the “fire”. We can only prepare the altar and the sacrifice. Then God can send the Holy Spirit.

If we look at Acts 1 we see Jesus helping the disciples to build an altar. There are four parts at least:

1. A renewed church is **vision-driven**. In Acts 1:6-8 Jesus repairs their faulty vision of what he is going to do in the world. They were looking for a political campaign, and he tells them about the nature of the kingdom, which will spread through his disciples as they become his witnesses and ambassadors. The vision is that we through out words will bring people under the kingship of Christ which will heal and repair all things.
2. A renewed church is **gospel-driven**. In Acts 1:9-11 Jesus ascends to heaven and the angels tell the disciples that now the knowledge of his ascension should empower them. Refer to the above incident with Stephen. It is only as we “preach the gospel to ourselves” about our standing in Christ that the Holy Spirit takes that truth and catches it on fire in our hearts, creating times of amazing assurance which equips us for service.
3. A renewed church is **prayer-driven**. In Acts 1:14 we see the disciples uniting in corporate, prevailing prayer. It is only in prayer and through prayer that the Holy Spirit takes up the vision and the gospel and makes them fiery realities in the centers of our being.
4. A renewed church is **leader-driven**. In Acts 1:15ff. we see the disciples asking for God to raise up leaders. Personal and corporate revivals occur through leaders which God identifies and equips.

### The Christian Builds an Altar

How can an individual Christian, then “build an altar”, seeking more of the power of the Spirit so that you can be more useful to God?

1. *Preparing to be an ambassador.* A “witness for the kingdom” is an ambassador, a representative of the King. At what major points does your life fail to represent Christ? Think of your relationships. Think of your work-life. Think of your relationships to family members. Think of habitual sins of omission or commission.

2. *Preaching the gospel to yourself.* At what points do you fail to believe your standing in Christ? How will you deepen your understanding of these truths? How will you study the basics?
3. *Prayer.* Study the prayer of Acts 4:23ff. Notice that they did not pray for protection or any thing tangible. They asked only for a sense of God's presence and reality. How will you make your prayer life more centered on seeking God and his kingdom (rather than centered on your needs and problems)?
4. *Leaders.* How will you find accountability and relationships to others in the body who are more mature than you, from whom you can learn?

**Make a Plan**

1. Obedience issues. Practical things I will start to do or stop doing to be a better ambassador.
2. Gospel and Prayer issues: Practical things I will do to more diligently seek his presence in prayer and study.
3. Leadership issues: Practical things I will do to become more accountable to others for building "my altar". Practical ways I will be more networked into the Body.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Discuss those things in the reading that most helped you — things you marked with an '!'**
- 2. Discuss those things in the reading that raised questions — things you marked with a '?'**
- 3. How could you group as a group “build an altar” along the lines of Acts 1 so as to be more useful to God?**
- 4. What one or two practical things will you do in order to “build an altar” and seek the fullness of the Spirit?**





# Acts

## The power arrives

### Study 3 | Acts 2:5-39

#### 1. vv.5-13 What evidence is there that this was a worship service that the crowd came to? What is the significance of that fact for us today?

When the Spirit falls on the disciples, a crowd gathers (v.5) to listen to the disciples praising God publically (“we hear them declaring the wonders of God!”). The word “declare” is just a common Greek word for “speaking”. It’s possible to read this as referring simply to a sermon or message, but that is not likely. Notice that they say “we hear them declaring the wonders of God”. If the disciples were all talking about the wonders of God, it is not likely that the audience was hearing a single long monologue from anyone, but rather multiple declarations — perhaps prayers, Scripture readings and exhortations, expressions of adoration and thanksgiving. Also, they were declaring the “wonders of God”, a term that seem to convey praise.

So what we have here is a worship service “before the nations”. Both Jew and Gentile were present (v.11 – *both Jews and converts*) and people from virtually every nationality around the Medinterranean (v.5). Edmund Clowney has said, “the gospel message is celebration before it is communication” (*The Pastor-Evangelist*, p.23). God continually called his people in the Old Testament to “world-winning worship”, to worship and declare his glory before the nations. In Psalm 105:1 believers are told to “make known among the nations what he has done”. But how? “Sing to him, praise him; tell of his wonderful deeds” (105:2). Believers in the Old Testament are told to invite the nations in to worship and declare the gospel to them there (Ps.47:1; 100:1-5; cf. Ps.117). In general, that did not happen in the Old Testament. Now, here in Acts 2:11 we have an exact fulfillment of Psalm 105:2.

What is the significance of this for us, practically? Too often we make a distinction between evangelism and worship. We think that a worship service is only for believers and an evangelistic service is only for unbelievers. But here we see that we should be careful to worship in such a way that non-Christians can be present. We should be certain that our worship has an impact on them. (See the next question, and look back to the text of Acts 2, to get into more details about how we make worship “accessible” for non-Christians.) If we want to have an impact on our non-Christian friends we should try to bring them to worship. We should not separate worship from evangelism. Why? If the goal of our evangelism is simply to get people to “convert”, then all we need to do is transmit information to them. But if the goal of our evangelism is to turn a person into a praising Christian — someone who has been transformed by worshipping God with all the heart and life — then we should show them the gospel in the context of the praising people of God.

**2. vv.5-11. What are the marks of the kind of corporate worship that makes a strong evangelistic impact? vv.12-13. What kind of impact did this first corporate celebration have on the audience?**

There are three marks of this first worship service, which had such an impact on the non-believers who came to it.

a) First, it was “contextualized”. “*We hear them... in our own tongues.*” (v.11). This means, of course, that through a miracle of God, every person was able to hear the Word of God in their own “heart language”. Most of the people who were there in Jerusalem, from so many different nations, were able to communicate through the international *lingua franca* of koine Greek and so on. But God arranged it so that they heard the message of salvation in their own native language, the language they did their thinking and loving in. Obviously, we cannot expect this miracle today. But it shows the critical importance of adapting our worship to the culture of the people we are seeking to serve. We cannot here get into the subject of what parts of Biblical worship are unchangeable “givens”, and what is adaptable. The general “elements” of Biblical worship are fairly simple and obvious — prayers of praise, petition, and confession, teaching the Word, congregational singing, giving of gifts, making of promises. But the way in which these things are done is highly adaptable to the culture. We must connect with people’s minds and hearts. We must use language and concepts that they can relate to.

b) Second, it was “gospel-centered”. “...the wonders of God”. The NIV translation is maybe not the best. The word translated “wonders” is *megaleia*, which literally means the “mega-works”. This means that the disciples were basing all their worship not so much on general principles of the Bible, but on the saving actions of God in history. The mega-works of God include what he has done to save us. It refers to the Incarnation, the Atonement, the Resurrection. What makes Christianity different from other religions is this very issue. Other religions teach principles of living as the things that save us. Christianity teaches that it was God’s actions in history that save us — principles of living are just the results of salvation. We live in particular ways because we are saved, not in order to become saved. Therefore, the central and primary message of Christianity is not information about what we do, but about what He did. His wonderful, mega-works. Other religions center on the rules and regulations and disciplines. Now we see that this first worship service was centered on the gospel. So too, we must be careful to not let our worship services center too much or too often on less central matters.

c) Third, it seems clear that there was a sense of the presence of God that all could feel. “*a sound like the blowing of a violent wind*” (v.2) had occurred. That is a “theophany” — a visible manifestation of the presence of God. In Acts 4:31 it took the form of an earthquake. But a sense of his presence does not need to have a miraculous manifestation to be felt. An important parallel passage to Acts 2 is I Cor.14:24-25. There Paul says that it is expected that there will be both “*unbelievers*” and “*seekers*” in worship service. He

envisions that *“the secrets of his heart will be revealed, and so falling on his face, he will worship God, exclaiming, ‘God is really among you’* “. Thus Paul shows us that the unbeliever can sense God’s presence, and that it can be a very convicting and convincing experience. Obviously, because this was the day of Pentacost, the worship leaders were anointed and spoke with joy, power, love, and spiritual reality. That is the third, very important mark of worship which has an evangelistic impact.

What impact does this worship have on the listeners? There are two very different reactions. First, some people were both *“amazed”* (a positive word — meaning *“impressed”*) and *“perplexed”* (a negative word — meaning *“troubled”*). They were under conviction. And they ask for more information. *“What does this mean?”* (v.11). They want to know what this is *“all about”*? They have come to the place where they want fairly complete explanation and defense of the gospel. Their interest is high; they sense the relevance of this for themselves. On the other hand, some others mock the whole affair and say, *“these people are drunk”* (v.12). These unbelievers came to worship on the Day of Pentacost (worship doesn’t get better than that) and they still refused to believe—they even were highly scornful and derisive. It is maybe comforting to realize that you just can’t please some people! It means that any declaration of the wonders of God, no matter how anointed and how effective, will not penetrate the hearts of everyone. In fact, this probably shows that the better and more effective the witness, the more polarization will occur. Some people will be brought in, while others will get harder in their hearts.

**3. vv.14-36. What does Peter say in response to this first question? This is a gospel presentation — outline its basic points. What kind of impact does this first gospel presentation have on the audience?**

Peter now becomes the spokesperson for all the disciples. Some have asked *“what is this all about?”* It is his job to give an overview of the gospel.

a) vv.14-21. First, Peter begins by talking about the phenomenon that the crowd is noticing — the tongues speaking and the anointed utterance of the disciples. He starts, *“these men are not drunk”* (v.15). Notice, therefore, that his presentation is not so *“canned”* that he ignores the burning issues of his listeners. His point #1 is their point #1. He starts where they are — he begins by addressing an issue that they are interested in. In this case, Peter starts by quoting from the prophet Joel. Again, we see that he appeals to authorities that the listeners hold to. He knows that, since most of them are Jews and Gentile converts of the diaspora that they will know the prophets. In this first segment, he points out that Joel had predicted a future era in which the Holy Spirit would be poured out, not just on certain leaders like Moses and David, but on everyone, so that the power of the Spirit for ministry and service would be pervasive. He tells them that this is what they now see.



b) Second, Peter shows that the ministry of Christ is what has inaugurated the era of the Spirit. And he covers the following:

1. v.22. Jesus' life and ministry. Jesus was a great teacher and a worker of miracles. Peter is brief because, with these hearers anyway, this was not in doubt. (*"as you yourselves know"*) Today, people are very much in doubt as to whether Jesus did the miracles and made the claims that the Bible says he did. But Peter's crowd knew all this for themselves.
2. v.23. Jesus' death. Jesus was put to death on the cross. Peter does not say much about how this accomplished salvation — he does not talk about substitution or ransom at this point. But he says it was *by God's set purpose and foreknowledge*. So he is saying that through the cross, God's saving purposes were worked out and came to fruition. The important point here is that Peter reminds them that *"you... put him to death"*. This is what most likely "cuts" them to the heart later (v.37).
3. v.24-32. Jesus' resurrection. Jesus has been risen from the dead. In this presentation, Peter spends much more time on the resurrection than on the atonement. He shows that the resurrection was predicted by the Old Testament (v.25), and personally witnessed by the apostles (v.32). Peter therefore stresses the historical character and evidence for the resurrection. He evidently believed that the key issue for this crowd was to accept the fact that Jesus was no longer dead.
4. v.33-36. Jesus exaltation. With another Old Testament quote, Peter lastly tells his hearers that Christ is at the right hand of God, where he is not ruling as Lord of all.

In summary, Peter focuses on two historical events — Christ's death and resurrection. And he appeals to two witnesses — the prophets (Biblical evidence) and the apostles (historical evidence). As we can see, Peter's gospel presentation is simply showing people the life and work of Christ. And also, we see that Peter weaves "apologetics" (evidence) into his gospel presentation.

What kind of impact does this presentation have on the crowd? We are told that they were *"cut to the heart"*. This means that they saw the deep personal relevance, and that they were convicted of their need. Why were they "cut to the heart"? Probably because Paul makes a second reference (see v.22) to the fact that *"you crucified"* him (v.36). We have to look beyond the immediate circumstances to the principle here. Surely, since most of the crowd were people coming to Jerusalem from far away (2:5) and since Jesus had been crucified many weeks ago now, Peter cannot mean that many of the people listening had had a part in literally crucifying Jesus. This is not an anti-Semitic text saying that "the Jews killed Jesus". Rather, this is part of the gospel message for every human being. Until we see that our sins cost Jesus his life, that we were the cause of his death — we will not be "cut to the heart".

Once they are “cut to the heart”, they ask “*what shall we do?*” The first question (v.12) was a request for information. They wanted an overview of the gospel. The second question (v.37) is really a request for personal counsel. They want to know what to do about their sin. Peter’s response to the first question is to explain what the gospel is. Peter’s response to the second question is to explain how to receive Christ. I will call it “Counseling into Christ”. It is Peter’s counsel for seekers on how to connect with Jesus.

**4. vv.37-40. What does Peter say in response to this second question? This is a description of how to receive Christ — outline its basic points. What kind of impact does this have on the audience?**

Peter calls on them to do two things. First, he tells them to “*repent*”. The Greek word *metanoia* means a complete change of mind. It is much more than being “sorry” for something. It means to completely change your approach, your foundation, your mind. Necessarily involved in “repentance” is “faith”. Peter does not tell them to “believe in Jesus”, but we know that they did (v.44 calls them “*believers*”). It is impossible to really repent without believing, for to turn from sin and the old way of thinking entails turning to God and a new way of thinking. You can’t “change your mind” about Jesus without doing both together. We will see that in the future, the apostles “counsel into Christ” by sometimes saying “repent and believe” or just “believe” or (here) just “repent”. But the two are always connected, even when not stated.

The second thing he tells them is to “*be baptized*”. This was a remarkable thing to ask of Jews. Jews believed Gentile converts needed to be baptized, because they saw the Gentiles as being spiritually unclean. Now Peter says that every one who wishes to be a Christian needs to be baptized — and to do it in the name of the one that previously had been rejected. That would be a public sign in the strongest terms that they had repented — had completely changed their minds about who Jesus was. It is important to realize why in this situation Peter would lift up baptism as being so important as a sign of their repentance.

Some churches have taken Acts 2:38 as being a complete guide to salvation. Since Peter says that they must be repent and be baptized, it is inferred that water baptism is necessary to receive forgiveness of sins. The problem with this interpretation is that it makes Acts 2:38 contradict all of Romans and Galatians, where Paul adamantly insists that no act of obedience receives salvation — only faith in Christ does. So how do we understand Acts 2:38 so that it does not undermine all that the rest of the NT tells us? We must see that Peter is saying that repentance (and its flip side, faith) are signified in baptism. If we didn’t have the rest of the New Testament, it could be very possible to conclude that Peter is saying that repentance/faith and baptism are both pre-requisites or receptors of salvation. But we do have the rest of the

New Testament. Also, if we realize the context and the situation on that day, we can see why Peter would have so strongly pressed them to be baptized immediately as a sign that they as Jews had completely changed their minds about Christ.

Also, Peter tells them that if they repent/believe — they will receive two promises. They will receive “*forgiveness of sins*” and “*the gift of the Holy Spirit*”. This is a great summary of what it means to become a Christian. When we become a Christian, there is something legal that happens outside of us — we are accepted as sinless and perfect, our record being pardoned and covered. Secondly, there is something that happens within us — we get the new life, a new power and Spirit directly from God that then grows in us.

In summary.

“Here then is... the message. Two events (Christ’s death and resurrection) as attested by two witnesses ([the Bible and historical witnesses to resurrection]), on the basis of which God makes two promises (forgiveness and the Spirit), on two conditions (repentance and faith)... We have no liberty to amputate this apostolic gospel...”

– John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p. 81.

#### **5. What do we learn from this passage about the witness you should have as an individual Christian? The witness we should have as a church?**

There are many things that participants will probably notice — far more than we can enumerate here. Here are some of the many possibilities.

As individuals:

We need to allow people to come in a process. There were three stages here. First, the seekers had interest created (“what do these things mean”?) Only when that happened were they open, second, to a full gospel presentation. And even that was fairly general. And only when they came under personal conviction (“what should we do?”) is direct statement made on how they can become Christians.

We need to know the Bible. We need to know the evidence for the gospel.

We need to really know where the listeners “are” religiously. Peter appealed at several points to “what they themselves knew”. We need to know what they do believe — what their worldview is, and so on. We have to spend a lot of time listening to be able to “scratch where they itch”.

We need to have a joy and power about us, which is what attracted the crowd to the disciples in the first place.

As a church:

Churches need to have "evangelistic worship" which a) knocks non-believers out of their complacency, b) gives some basics of the truth, c) shows the personal relevance of the truth to human life, d) gains credibility for the gospel.

Churches need to have "after meetings". Since you can't lay out the "big picture" of the gospel and Christian truth in every worship service, we need to do what Peter does. After each service, some people will want to know "what these things mean". And there should be classes or meetings where we show why we believe and what the truth is. We need to show how it all fits together.

Churches need to have people who are skilled in "counseling into Christ". After the after meetings and services, there will be people who need personal counsel about how to take hold on Christ. We need to provide counsel for them.

## WEEK 3 PROJECT —

## THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

**Introduction: The Holy Spirit's Coming**

Before His death, Jesus told all those who were *spiritually* thirsty to come to Him and drink. He promised that rivers of living waters would flow out of them, speaking symbolically of the Holy Spirit who hadn't been given, because Jesus had not yet been glorified (John 7:37-39). Jesus later said it was for our good that He was going away and He promised to send *the Counselor, the Spirit of truth*, to guide us into all truth and to tell us what is yet to come (John 16:7,13). Then, Christ's last words before His ascension assured believers that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came, that would result in their being bold witnesses of His death and resurrection (Acts 1:8). Pentecost was fifty days after Christ was resurrected and just 10 days after His ascension. It is here, in Acts 2:1-36, that we see Jesus' promises about the Holy Spirit fulfilled. On that day all the Christians were filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter was empowered to explain what was happening. He describes David's prediction of Christ's resurrection and exaltation as fulfillment of prophecy and God's foreordained plan. And he points to the gift of the Holy Spirit as proof of Christ's Lordship.

Today we have the gospels, the book of Acts and the epistles to teach us about the Holy Spirit's ministry in our lives and in the life of Christ's church. We are inseparably linked to this *Person* as believers, yet many believers are confused about or ignorant of His ministry in our lives. Ask yourself — "Theoretically, if the Holy Spirit left my life today, would it make any difference in the way I respond to things?" (Leader: 10 min. #I; 10 min. #IIA; 10 min. #IIB; 15 min. for prayer.

**I. The Holy Spirit's Ministry**

A. The Holy Spirit came to *convict the world* of sin, righteousness and judgment, according to John 16:8-11. What has been *the world's response*, from Old Testament times until now, according to **Acts 7:51-53**?

B. Assign these verses. Discuss how the Holy Spirit relate to *all believers*.

1. **I Corin. 6:19, 20**

2. **Eph. 1:13**

3. **Rom. 8: 11, 16 & 26**

4. In I Corin. 12:7-13 we see that there is both diversity and unity in the body of Christ, for the common good. Everyone profits as the spiritual gifts are exercised that the Holy Spirit bestowed. He gives 'severally, as He wills, we receive.

- C. Once we better understand the theology of God's Spirit at work in the church and in us, what should be the implications in our walk with God and the life of the church?

## II. How Christians relate to the Holy Spirit

- A. What potential *problems* are exposed in the following verses?

1. **Eph. 4:30** (What *solutions* are offered in v.31,32?)
2. **I Thes. 5:19** (What *solutions* are offered in verses 20-24?)
3. **Gal. 5:17** (What *solutions* are offered in verses 16,18 & 25?)
4. I John 1:5-10 once again shows us problems, or *hindrances*, that can keep us from the Spirit's fullness. How can these verses help us follow through on obeying the solutions offered in the verses above *and what's at stake if we don't?*

- B. Eph. 5:18 is a command for believers to be filled with the Holy Spirit. **It's not an option**, but He doesn't tell us to do something beyond our grasp. Eph. 5:19-21 and Col. 3:15,16 describe evidences of the Spirit's fullness in our hearts and in the church. We speak to one another with songs, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music in our hearts to the Lord, being thankful for everything and submitting ourselves one to another. Do you see the Spirit's fullness being manifested in our church?

## III. Pray together about:

- A. Where you need deeper understanding, confessing obstacles to obedience in your walk and your desire to experience the Spirit's work in yourself and in our church.
- B. **ALTAR Accountability.** In the whole group, or in smaller groups of 2 or 3, share how you are doing in the 3-5 things that you resolved to do in order to 'build an altar' and have a life more useful to God'.



# Acts

## The new community

### Study 4 | Acts 2:40-47

#### INTRODUCTION

This short section is the classic text describing the very earliest church and how it lived its life corporately. It is extremely concise but also extremely complete. John Stott writes: *“It is incorrect to call the Day of Pentecost ‘the birthday of the church’. For the church as the people of God goes back at least 4,000 years to Abraham. What happened at Pentecost was that... God’s people became the Spirit-filled body of Christ.”* (*The Message of Acts*, p.81) Thus this picture of the church is also a picture of what the church becomes when the power of the Spirit is in evidence. During times of spiritual revival and renewal, the church can return to some degree to this form. People studying this text seriously can discover an almost endless stream of important insights as to how Christians should live together in community. The “answers” given below are relatively brief. Be sure to let the group work and give multiple answers to each study question.

- 1. vv.40-41. Why do you think Peter tells them to save themselves from “this generation”? What does this statement imply about the church, and about becoming a Christian?**

Peter urges that his hearers *“save themselves from this corrupt generation”* (v.40). A “generation” is a whole culture. Today there is lots of recognition that each generation has its own common characteristics of mind and thinking and behavior. There is the “depression generation” and the “Baby Boomers” and “Generation X” — each have their own mindset. Peter recognizes that his hearers are not just individual sinners, but they participate in the whole mindset and world view of their culture and generation. Therefore, Peter tells them that now the main determinant of their mind and heart will no longer be the spirit and thought of their peers and society, but the spirit and truth of God. This means that to become a Christian changes the way one looks at everything — it leads to a radically examined life. It means that the gospel and truth of God will lead me to look at all my relationships, my family, my work in the world, my racial and cultural identity — all in a new light.

This also means that the church itself is a “new generation” — a whole new people, a counter-culture. In it, our economic, racial, social, psychological relationships are all distinct and different from those in the surrounding culture. The church is not simply an aggregation of individuals who are saved, but it is a “pilot plant” of what humanity would look like under the Lordship of Christ. We are to show the world a whole new way of being human.



**2. vv.42-47. Make a list of the characteristics and functions of the early church which are evident in this passage.**

This list can be broken down in many ways. I will make a longer list here — it helps to see the richness of the passage. Then in the next study questions, we will try to organize the characteristics and ministries under four headings. For now — just brainstorm. Here are a series of insights. There are surely others.

- a) The church trained and educated its members. (*“devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching”* v.42a).
- b) The church brought its members together constantly — *“every day”* (v.46)! They couldn’t stay away from each other.
- c) The church moved members into relationships of mutual support and fellowship (*“they were together”* v.44a; *“the fellowship”* v.42b).
- d) The church had both small group meetings (*“they broke bread in their homes”* v.46b) and large group meetings (*“continued to meet together in the temple courts”* v.46a).
- e) The church practiced the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper constantly. (The term *“the breaking of bread”* in v.42 and v.46 is thought by most scholars to be a description of a meal together at which the Lord’s Supper was observed. The key indicator that this is the meaning of the phrase is the word *“the”* before the *“breaking of bread”*.)
- f) The church spent much time in group prayer (*“devoted themselves... to prayer”* v.42d) which occurred, evidently in both homes and large public gatherings.
- g) The church practiced radical stewardship, economic sharing and *“mercy ministry”* at least within the community. People got practical financial and material help for their needs (*“Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.”* v.45).
- h) There were deeds of power which accompanied and verified the truth of the apostles’ preaching (*“many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles”* v.43.)
- i) There was a general spirit of joy (*“glad and sincere hearts”* v.46) and praise (*“praising God”* v.47a) which permeated every meeting at every level.
- j) This community life was extraordinarily attractive to outsiders (*“enjoying the favor of all the people”* v.47).
- k) The church was evangelistically effective in the extreme, with new conversions everyday. (*“The Lord added... daily those who were being saved.”* v.47)

- l) Conversions were not seen individualistically. When a person was saved, they were “*added to their number*” (v.47) — they were incorporated into a deep relationship to the church body, not just to the Lord.

### 3. What do we learn here about the church’s a) ministry of learning and b) ministry of fellowship?

a) Ministry of learning: (1) It was intense. “*Devoted themselves*” (v.42) means that there was a high commitment to learning. Spirit-filledness is not set over against the intellect! (2) It was complete centered on the “*apostolic teaching*”. It was not learning in general, but rather the study of God’s revelation as it came through the apostles. Today, of course, the apostles’ teaching is in the Scriptures. (3) It was accompanied by “*apologetics*”. They were not just taught what to believe but given evidence for why to believe it. This point is missed unless we realize that v.43 is not an isolated statement — it follows v.42. The apostles teaching (v.42) was validated and verified by their miracles and wonders (v.43). These miracles were not naked displays of power, but were *signs*. Heb.2:3-4 show us that the purpose of miracles in the early church was to show listeners the truth of the gospel message the apostles brought. A survey of the Bible reveals that miracles are not distributed randomly and evenly throughout history, but they come in clusters, when God sends a new set of messengers into the world with a new stage of revelation. (Thus there are only three “ages” of miracles — Moses and the Exodus, Elijah and the prophets before the exile, and Jesus and the apostles.) Since we are not apostles, it is not likely that there will be the same number and kind of miracles today as then. But we must realize that the principle of v.43 was that people were shown evidence of the truth of apostolic teaching, so they would devote themselves to it.

b) Ministry of fellowship: (1) It also was intense (“*they devoted themselves... to fellowship*” v.42). It was therefore not something that just happened. They worked at it. This implies accountability with one another, a sense of responsibility to care and support and guide each other. (2) It was daily (“*every day*” v.46). They did not just see each other on Sundays, but were involved in each other’s daily lives. (3) It was economic as well as “*spiritual*”. (“*had everything in common*” v.44). They recognized not only that other brothers and sisters had a claim on their time and heart but also on their resources. (4) It was very small group/house church based. (“*They broke bread in their homes*” v.46). If we put this together with statements like Acts 20:20 and greetings to “*the church that meets in their house*” in I Cor. 16:9 and elsewhere — we can see the importance of small group community in the early church. They had regular meetings where this same set of ministries — learning, loving, worshipping — was conducted at the mini-level, so as to supplement what was happening at the “maxi” large group level. (5) It was extremely sensitive. They knew immediately who had “*need*” (v.44).

**4. What do we learn here about the church's a) ministry of worship and b) ministry of witness and service?**

a) Ministry of Worship: (1) It had corporate form. In v.42, Paul literally says that *"they devoted themselves to the breaking of the bread and the prayers"*. This is almost certainly a reference to 'liturgy' — to the service of the Lord's supper and to a discipline of praying called "the prayers. It was not random. There was an order to it. (2) It had both an informal and formal aspect. It happened both in homes and in the temple courts (v.46). This surely means that there was both informal worship in the small group, and more formal worship in the large group. [Note: It is unlikely that Christians continued to offer sacrifices at the temple, but they evidently continued to go to the prayer services and they supplemented the worship there with their own meetings in the courts.] (3) It was both joyful and reverent. Notice that in the small group worship, the emphasis is more on joy and gladness (v.46) but in the large group, there is an emphasis on awe (v.43). This means that both awe/reverence, and joyous praise are to be the marks of our worship.

b) Ministry of Witness through Word and Deed: (1) It was dynamic. There were conversions *"daily"* v.47. (2) It was based on demonstration through community. One reason that people were saved is that the love and note of *praising* was highly attractive to *"all the people"* (v.47). This cannot mean that every non-Christian loved the early church — there was plenty of persecution. But it meant that, overall, the early church demonstrated the gospel in its community in such a way that was irresistible to outside observers. (3) It integrated both word and deed. v.44 seems to indicate that the economic sharing was mainly practiced within and among Christians. But we know the early church did not confine its deed ministry only to Christians. Paul says in Galatians 6:10 that Christians *"do good to all, especially the household of faith"*. Their sharing was heavier inside the community, but their generosity went outside the church as well. [Note: We can't read v.44 as forbidding private property to individuals. The Bible elsewhere makes it clear that private property is valid. This is therefore a voluntary, informal, but powerful sharing fueled by love not rules. (cf. Peter's rebuke to Ananias in Acts 5:4). Different Christian communities have voluntarily practiced this in different creative ways, some much more structured than others.] (4) It was very church-centered. When a person was saved, he or she was *"added to their number"* (v.47) and incorporated into the church. Today many people are converted through ministries that have little relationship to local churches, and the converts also have little relationship to a congregation. That was not the case in the early church.

**The five ministries of the early church are also five “vital signs” of a Spirit-filled community.**

- A. Ministry of learning in the truth. (1st sign: Theological depth)**
- B. Ministry of loving in the fellowship. (2nd sign: Intimate relationships)**
- C. Ministry of worship in the Spirit. (3rd sign: Joyous worship)**
- D. Ministry of witness through words. (4th sign: Relentless evangelism)**
- E. Ministry of service through deeds. (5th sign: Sacrificial service)**

**5. Consider your own small group. How can it better manifest these ‘vital signs’? Consider your local church. How can it better manifest these ‘vital signs’?**

The discussion will of course be different for every small group. In general, the same “vital signs” should exist at the small group level as well as the large group level. But consider this. No one small group and no one local congregation represents the whole Body of Christ. We know that spiritual gifts differ (I Cor. 12-14). Therefore, it is not likely that any one grouping of Christians will be able to do all of these five things equally well or intensely. It is right and fair for a particular group to major in Bible study, so its time for fellowship, worship, and witness is lessened. Other groups might major in fellowship/accountability, giving less time to study, and so on. But no group should completely ignore any of these vital signs, if it wants to stay vital!

The same is true for local churches. Virtually every church will be stronger at some of these functions because of the gifts and calling of the leaders. But we cannot ignore any of them. How do you think Redeemer does at this? If there are members of other churches in your group, let them use this grid to understand the strengths and weaknesses of those churches. Don’t let this become a gripe session, however. Use this outline to pray for the churches and to consider ways to help them grow up into the New Testament pattern.

## WEEK 4 PROJECT — THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

### Introduction

In Acts 2:37, we see an example of the Spirit convicting the world of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:8-11) as Peter spoke to the crowd at Pentecost. He was preaching the gospel boldly. We can too. (Leader: Look up each verse under I - 10 minutes, II - 15 minutes, III -10 minutes and discuss the questions. Pace yourself to leave 10 to 15 minutes to read number IV and pray.)

### I. Understanding where the power lies

- A. **Romans 1:16** – What are we told about the gospel? How does this verse challenge our attitude about witnessing and to whom we witness?
- B. **I Corin. 1:17,18 & 22-24** – What was Paul's central message to the Greeks at Corinth, in spite of their intellects, morals and philosophies?
- C. **I Corin. 2:1-5** – How did Paul proclaim the gospel that he said he was not ashamed of and what comfort does this offer to us?

### II. Accepting the ministry God gave us.

- A. **II Corin. 5:17-20** – What is God's messenger called? What specifically does he do? Where does he get his authority? What does God's messenger talk about? What's the message? How would you define 'reconcile'? In this passage, who is reaching out to whom?
- B. Who have you had an opportunity to share this message with lately and how did they respond?

**III. Because of the power of the Holy Spirit and the power of the gospel, the lives of many people were touched. We should be able to experience increasing confidence in communicating the gospel, as we continue to contemplate what it means to build an altar, make sacrifices to the Lord, and trust the Holy Spirit to let the fire fall into our hearts as we live for Him in word and deed.**

- A. **PRAY FOR OPPORTUNITIES this week** to practice being a minister of reconciliation. It is the God empowered ministry that has been given to each believer! Accept it joyfully.
- B. **ALTAR Accountability.** During closing time of sharing and prayer — in the larger group, or in smaller groups of 2 or 3, ask each other and share: “How are you doing with the 3-5 things that you resolved to do in order to “build and altar” and have a life more useful to God?”



# Acts

## Peter presents the Gospel

### Study 5 | Acts 3:1-26

#### 1. What is striking about the healing of the crippled man? What does it tell us about how God works in our lives?

Luke wrote that many signs and wonders were done by the apostles (2:43), and now he provides an example. Some things to notice about the incident.

- It demonstrates the historicity of what happened. The comment “*At three in the afternoon*” (v.2) is a detail that is the mark of an eyewitness account. Legends do not contain such unnecessary details.
- It demonstrates the power of God. The physical ailment was not a passing injury, but was congenital, severe and permanent “*a man crippled from birth*”. (v.2)
- It demonstrates that the Messiah has come. This is a fulfilled prophecy. Isaiah said that when the Messiah came “*Then will the lame leap like a deer*” (Is.35:6), and that is what this man does — “*walking and jumping*” v.8. The “jumping” is a vivid, wonderful picture, and it is another mark of an eyewitness account detail.
- It demonstrates a first principle of God’s work — that divine power comes in the act of faith, not before. Peter takes the crippled man “*by the right hand*” and “*helped him up*” but it was not until he got up that his “*feet and ankles become strong*”. It is interesting to notice that he did not feel the power before he got up, but as he did. He had to agree to try to stand before God’s healing worked. Even so it is often the case that the sense of God’s strength comes to us as we obey, not before we obey.
- It demonstrates a second principle of God’s work — that usually we begin by seeking far less than God wants to give us. All the man wanted was money (v.3), but he got physical healing (v.8) and probably salvation (4:14 indicates that the man now took up with the company of disciples). Even so, a person ordinarily goes to God just for help with a problem or strength in time of need or forgiveness for a particular sin — but when we come to the real God he ends up making far greater changes in our lives than we ever envisioned.

“Imagine yourself a living house. [You ask God to make some repairs.] At first... he is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on... But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is he up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of... You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace.”

– (C.S.Lewis, *Mere Christianity* Book IV, chap 9)



- Lastly, this demonstrates that God uses changed lives to draw others to hear the gospel. It was because of the clear change in the man's life (v.10) that a crowd gathered and was open to hearing the gospel (v.11-12).

**2. What essential facts does Peter tell them about Jesus? What three kinds of evidence does he give for these facts (apart from his citation of Scripture)?**

Peter provides a fairly comprehensive view of the person and work of Jesus. First, the person of Christ. He points to Jesus' divinity, when he calls him "*the Holy and Righteous One*" (v.14). Second, he points to Jesus' suffering and death "*saying that his Christ would suffer*" (v.18). Third, he declares that Jesus was raised from the dead (v.15) and is coming again to renew the world (v.20-22), and it is because he is alive that he can send his power into our lives (v.16).

The evidence he gives is both objective and subjective. Objectively, Peter says, "*we are witnesses of this*" (v.15), namely of the physical resurrection. This is testimony of a historical event — eyewitness accounts. So Peter does not make a purely emotional or pragmatic appeal; he does not say, "I know he's risen because he lives within my heart". But on the other hand, Peter does appeal to subjective evidence. He points to changed lives. "*It is Jesus' name and the faith that comes through him that has given this complete healing to him, as you can all see.*" (v.16) Evidence of changed lives or healing can not all by itself prove that Jesus is real, on the other hand, objective arguments do not persuade the whole person. A combination of both is needed.

**3. How does Peter prove from the Bible that Jesus is the Messiah? Where did Peter learn all this? What is the importance of seeing the centrality of Christ in the Old Testament?**

Peter's exposition of the Old Testament is startlingly Christo-centric. He says that God had spoken about Jesus through "*all the prophets*" (v.18). He says that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the "suffering servant" prophecies (v.13, 18 — cf. Isaiah 53), and is the fulfillment of the prediction of a "final prophet" by Moses (v.22-23—cf. Deut.18:15, 18, 19), and is the Davidic King (v.24 and Acts 2:30 — cf. Ps.132:11) and is the promised "seed" of Abraham (v.25-26 — cf. Gen.12:3 and 22:18). This is really an astounding view. Peter shows that every major figure (David, Moses, Abraham) was really a "type" or foreshadowing of Christ. Christ is the ultimate prophet, the greater Moses, bringing us the truth in a way that no one else could. Christ is the ultimate king, the greater David, delivering us and ruling us in a way that no one else could. And Christ is the ultimate universal blessing for the world, the child of Abraham through whom every nation would find salvation (v.25).

Of course the Holy Spirit would have been prompting Peter in an unusual way, since he was an apostle. But his amazing grasp of the Old Testament reveals that the risen Jesus must have trained his disciples extremely well in the Bible and theology. We actually get a picture of the "curriculum" that Jesus went

through with his disciples for those forty days in Luke 24:44-49. *“He said to them... ‘Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms’ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.”* This was the main thing Jesus did — show them how literally everything in the Old Testament — the law, the psalms, the history, every prophet, priest, king, and hero — was “really” about him.

What is the importance of seeing Christ in the Old Testament? If we do not see Jesus behind everything in the Bible, then we will read every character as only moral examples, and they will load us with guilt! But they are not just that. They are pictures of our Savior — and when we see them as that, we learn hope and how God’s grace works, and we are then motivated (out of that hope and grace) to live as we should. For example, if David, in fighting Goliath was just our moral example, then it is a rather crushing one. David teaches us that we should take on great tasks without fear. A hard example to follow! But if David points to Christ, we see that David was the champion — the one who fought representatively for the people, so that his victory was their victory. He risked his life, and saved the whole people. That points us to Jesus, who gave his life, and saved the whole people. As our representative, his victory is our victory. Then David becomes first a picture of our salvation by grace. It also helps us understand why God could keep using him despite his failures! It was for the sake of his greater Son that God could use David as a mini-champion. Then, strengthened by this vivid and affecting new picture of the gospel, we can turn to David as our example. He was the anointed redeemer, and through the true anointed Redeemer, we too can take risks, trust God, and save others.

**4. a) How does Peter tell his listeners they must do to receive Christ? Compare it with what he told his listeners in Acts 2. b) What does he say will be the results of receiving Christ?**

a) The heart of what Peter invites his listeners to do is in v.19 — and there he mentions two things. He says that first, they must *repent*. Refer to the discussion in Week 3 of Acts 2:38. “Repentance” (*metanoia*) means more than sorrow over sins — it means literally “a change of mind”. Repentance is to change one’s whole approach to God. It means to approach God on the basis of and through Jesus’ work and record, not on the basis of and through our work and record. The second thing they must do is “*turn to God*”. This is another way of saying “believe”, and it is an excellent way to avoid a common mistake. Just as many people think of “repentance” as just sorrow over sin, many think of “believing” as intellectual agreement. But to saving faith is not to simply agree that Jesus died, but to actually go to God in reliance on the basis of Jesus death. Saving faith is a real “turning” and thus a going to God to seek him, know him, love him, and serve him.

Therefore, as we said under Acts 2:38 — true repentance and true faith can never stand alone. To repent is to turn away from one way and thus turn toward another way. So repentance = “turning away from” and faith = “turning

toward" and repentance/faith are simply two sides of the same coin. True repentance cannot exist without faith and vica versa. In order to see this, compare three places where Peter tells people how to receive Christ. (Acts 2:38 and Acts 16:31 are both responses to the same direct question — "what shall we do?")

Acts 2:38 – *"Repent and be baptized in the name of Christ for the forgiveness of sins"*

Acts 3:19 – *"Repent and turn to God"*

Acts 16:31 – *"Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved..."*

Notice that Peter says in one place "repent and turn", but another place "believe", indicating that turning from and toward is always involved in saving faith. (Also, we should notice that Peter does not insist on water baptism in Acts 3 and Acts 16, which is evidence that Peter was using baptism as a "syndoché" figure of speech in which a physical act represents a spiritual act.)

b) Peter promises three things as results of receiving Christ. First, he promises that *your sins will be wiped out* (v.19b). The Greek word used here is *exaleipho*, which means to wash off and obliterate without a trace. It means our sins are gone to God, as if they had never been committed. Second, he promises that *times of refreshing will come from the Lord* (v.19c). The Greek word *anapsyxis* means relief or re-energysing. It means that God will not simply wipe away our sins legally, but he will infuse his Spirit and power in us actually. Notice, in relation to this second item, that Peter says Christ "*blesses*" us by "*turning you from your wicked ways*" (v.26). So again we see that God's blessing is not simply forgiveness, but a changed life. He will change our character, heart, and behavior with an infusion of his power. "Wiping out of sins" is always accompanied by joy of heart ("refreshment") and change of life "turn from wicked ways". Thirdly, he promises that Jesus will return *to restore everything, as he promised long ago* (v.20). This means that Christians do not only hope for their individual, personal restoration of soul. We also can look forward to the complete restoration of the universe — materially, so that all sickness, death, disease and decay will be healed, and spiritually, so that all confusion, evil, hate, and sin will be healed. The Greek word for "restoration" means literally "regeneration". In other words, through Jesus, not just people will be born again, but all of nature itself will be born again! So the Christian is not only concerned with helping people be spiritually healed, but we are also concerned with facilitating psychological, social, and physical healing as well.

### 5. Summarize what can we learn about evangelism and witness from Peter

There are many things that could be said here. Any group of students will probably find endless insights. Here are just a few.

- a. Peter capitalizes on opportunities for witness whenever he smells “openness”. He sees here that the people are amazed at the healing, so he uses their interest as a bridge into the gospel. In Acts 2 he did the same thing with the Pentecostal worship. Granted that these are very spectacular, but the principle is a universal. We too must look for times of openness, when a listener’s interest in spiritual issues is piqued either by trouble in their own lives, or an inexplicable influence of God in someone they know, and so on.
- b. Peter adapts to his audience. He identifies with the Jews, calling them “*brothers*” v.17, and using the Scriptures extensively, since the Bible was the recognized authority for them. In the same way, we must be careful to know the people we are trying to reach, to share life with them as much as possible, and to appeal to persons and authorities that they respect in order to make our case for the gospel.
- c. Peter shows a combination of respect/sympathy balanced with directness/force. Notice in v.17 he takes a soft tone — “*Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders...*” This is quite profound — he shows respect for their doubts! He shows that he knows how easy it was to be led astray, and how difficult it is to keep informed enough to make a right decision in matters of Christ. On the other hand, he does not say that, because they were ignorant, that therefore they are not guilty or responsible for their unbelief. He still calls them to repent (v.19) — so that means that they are not innocent. And he is extremely categorical when he says, “*anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people*” (v.23). So Peter shows both a gentleness and a directness.

## WEEK 5 PROJECT — SHARING A TESTIMONY

I. The Story of **your spiritual journey**. Have you experienced salvation? If so, you have a message. **Read I Peter 3:15**. Let's consider what we need to know to be ready:

A. Write *one word* best describing **your life** during each of the three phases of your spiritual journey to knowing Christ. Then, share them, by category, without comment.

1) Before \_\_\_\_\_

2) How \_\_\_\_\_

3) After \_\_\_\_\_

B. Record *3 phrases or words* that describe different attitudes, circumstances or actions you had before you came to know Christ, then share them.

1)

2)

3)

C. How would you summarize your differences and what you had in common?

II. The story of **Jesus Christ's spiritual journey**. **Read Romans 10:14-17**

A. **How** did you hear the gospel (who, where, when)? Consider finding a way this week to thank that person for influencing you to give your life to Christ. It might encourage them!

B. **What** did you understand about the claims of Jesus Christ? *This is the part of your testimony that must be clear and about HIM, not you!*

III. Proclaiming His praises! **Read Isaiah 52:7**. "In biblical times, there was no CNN to take people into the battle zone via television. Instead, messengers ran from the war zones to inform anxious family members and friends of the outcome of the battles. In this passage the message is one of **victory**, **"Your God reigns!"** (*The Treasures of Encouragement* Sharon Betters)

A. Ps.66:16 says, **"Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what He has done for me."**

1. What is an area where you have seen **change in your life** because of Jesus? A true testimony relates to personal experience.
  2. How has God **comforted** you through relational conflict, deep loss, illness, financial or job pressures? You have a message!
- B. This is how we can preach without 'preaching'! We can cultivate the habit of seeing ALL of life as an opportunity to express gratitude to God! No child of God is exempt from this type of 'preaching' ministry'.

IV. **Read Jer. 20:9. Pray** for our testimonies to **burst forth from an inward fire!** We ARE to **preach the gospel, without 'preaching' and talk about Jesus!** An energizing power is given by the Holy Spirit to cleansed, trusting hearts. So confess your sins for continual cleansing and consider this quote by Michael Green: **'EVANGELISM IS OVERFLOW!'**



# Acts

## Peter defends the Gospel

### Study 6 | Acts 4:1-31

#### INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTERS 4 – 7

The first three chapters of Acts show us the enormous power and resources given to the church. First there is the intensive 40-day training of the foundational leaders — the apostles — by the risen Christ. Then there is the giving of the Holy Spirit. Finally we have a picture in Acts 2:42ff. of the tremendous love and joy experienced by the early church. All is well. But now in Acts 4-7 there is an unbroken record of persecution and opposition and hostility toward the church. *“If the chief actor in the story of Acts 1 and 2 is the Holy Spirit, [now] the chief actor... almost seems to be Satan. True he is identified only once by name, but his activity may be discerned throughout.”* (Stott, p.88).

#### INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTER 4

Who are the Sadducees who make such trouble for the early church both in chapter 4:1 and in chapter 5:17? These men were not just another party of the Pharisees — they were something very different. In fact, it would not be too far afield to say that the Sadducees were the “liberals” and the Pharisees the “conservatives”. Theologically, the Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection or life after death, and they also did not look for a Messiah. They thought the Messianic age had begun when the Maccabees led a revolution many years before. In other words, they saw the kingdom of God in strictly earthly, political, humanistic terms. Since they did not look for an afterlife, they concentrated on doing well in this life, and they cooperated with the Romans and took high positions in the colonial government. On the other hand, the Pharisees were a party strong among the *“teachers of the law”*. They were very legalistically conservative, and much more middle class than the Sadducees. They did not approve of cooperation with the Romans, they did believe the Bible very literally and hoped both a Messiah and for an afterlife.

#### **1. What do we learn about unbelief from the reaction of the Sadducees, rulers, elders, and teachers of the law in contrast to the reaction of the people?**

First, we learn that persecution of Christians is at least expected, and probably inevitable. Two passages that confirm this (but are very distressing!) are II Timothy 3: 12, and Matthew 5:10-12. Paul writes, *“You know all about... the persecutions that I endured. Indeed, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”* Jesus’ last two beatitudes (out of nine) are for those who are persecuted. He writes, *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake... Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me...”* Jesus’ beatitudes are all descriptions of Christians. (We are all supposed to be “pure in heart”, “merciful”, “peacemakers”.) Thus both Paul and Jesus teach that Christians will be persecuted.



Second, this description of persecution must be put alongside Acts 2:47 that the early Christians “enjoyed the favor of all the people” and Acts 4:22 that “all the people were praising God for what had happened” and that “many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about 5,000” (4:4). In other words, as a church they were both suffering sharp persecution and enjoying enormous popularity and broad-based support. They were both attractive and growing, yet hated and attacked. This description of the early church cuts us two ways. If on the one hand, we experience no attacks or persecution for our faith, it means we simply are being cowards. We are not taking risks in our witness, we are not being bold. On the other hand, if we experience attacks without a concomitant fruitfulness and attractiveness (i.e. if we get lots of persecution and no affirmation), it may mean that we are being persecuted for being harsh or insensitive or strident. Jesus said we would only be blessed if we were persecuted “for righteousness’ sake”. It is quite possible (indeed, it is very normal) for Christians to be persecuted not for their faith, but for their discourtesy, insensitivity, and lack of warmth and respect in their dealings with others. Insensitive, harsh Christians will have persecution but not praise. Cowardly Christians will have praise but not persecution. Most Christians (whose walk with God is weak) actually get neither! But Christians who are closest to Jesus will get both, as he did.

There is at least one other thing we learn about the persecution and unbelief. It is extremely interesting to see that the liberal Sadducees and the conservative teachers of the law (Pharisees) are completely united in their opposition to the gospel. They had almost nothing in common intellectually. Their own positions were diametrically opposed, and they were hostile to each other. Yet now they are in unity in their hatred of Christianity. This tells us that unbelief is not, at bottom, an intelligent thing — it is a visceral thing. People are hostile to Christianity for completely different, contradictory reasons. (e.g. Some say its too hard, others that it is too easy. Some say it puts too much emphasis on the moral law, some say it does not put enough.) People will grab hold on any intellectual argument possible to defend themselves from the claims of Christ. For that is the real problem — Christ’s exclusive claims (see Acts 4:12) intimidate everyone.

**2. What is particularly troubling to the leaders about the apostles (v.7, 13-14), and what link is there between this distress and their rejection of the gospel message?**

Their concern is “by what power or what name did you do this?” and that the preachers of the gospel are “unschooled, ordinary men” (v.13). What is particularly troubling to the leaders is that the apostles have presumed to be public teachers of religion and morals without the proper credentials. That is highly, highly offensive to them. This is not just a perception of these ancient groups of people. In general, the upper middle class and upper classes put far

more weight on degrees and professional accreditation than do the masses of working people. This is because people who have “made it” have gone to great efforts to attend the right schools and win the proper credentials. They tend to feel superior to the masses of people who are below them. In their world-view, pedigrees and achievement are everything. Thus they look at the disciples, “ordinary men” and they see losers in the great competitive game of life. So they say, in v.7 “*who do you think you are, to be teaching people about religion? We have earned that right — you have not.*” The gospel assaults their whole meritocratic way of thinking about life.

But even more troubling to them is the fact that these “ordinary men” are both courageous/confident and highly dynamic and effective. They are especially amazed at the *courage* of Peter and John. How could people without the pedigree and credentials have this confidence? They were “*astonished*” that they had it. They had not earned it (as they had) — so how could they have it? But the reason they were astonished was because they did not grasp the gospel. The gospel is that one’s past record is never pristine (it is full of selfishness, pride and sin) and that therefore “ordinary men” can be saved and chosen and gifted by God for service. Peter and John have this confidence because they have received their position with God and their position in his service all by grace.

So we learn that, in general, the powerful and influential are more confused and threatened by the gospel than the masses of people. In people of influence and status, there is a particularly strong resistance to the idea that we are saved sheerly by grace.

### **3. vv.8-12. What evidence and arguments are used by Peter in his defense? What is the leaders’ response?**

The leaders are concerned about this enormous challenge to their authority. Here are uncredentialed men proclaiming the sovereignty of a man (Jesus) that the religious leaders rejected and put to death. If the people keep listening to this, the leaders’ power is over. So they attack Peter’s right to be publically “*teaching the people*” (v.2) and challenging their authority as the gatekeepers of public religious discourse. So they ask “*by what power or what name do you do this?*” Peter responds shrewdly and boldly.

First, Peter focuses on the healing of the crippled man, which he calls “*an act of kindness*”. The very fact and presence of the healed man, of course, is evidence that some kind of enormous power and authority was present in the apostles. So by lifting up the healed cripple, they are saying, “well, we obviously do have power to do what we are doing, so it’s just a matter of determining its source.” Second, Peter provides that source. “*it is by the name of Jesus... that this man stands healed*” (v.10). Again, this is hard to refute. Jesus had been doing these completely authenticated miracles all over Palestine.

But third, Peter boldly and smartly describes this Jesus immediately as the one *“whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead”*. This is brilliant. Peter is saying that, since Jesus is still healing (as he used to), that means that he is not dead. Then, he moves from defense and goes over into attack. He says, “He is alive though you killed the source of this great healing power, Jesus.” Finally, Peter quickly says that this one man’s physical cure through Christ is a picture of the salvation from sin offered to all through Christ. *“Salvation is found in no one else”* (4:12).

So his argument goes like this: “1) You can’t deny that we do have power and authority, or this man would not be healed. 2) The power comes from Jesus, who you know did this all the time. 3) And if he is still healing today, that shows that he is still alive, despite your efforts to destroy him. 4) And he offers not just physical healing but spiritual healing. The one who can heal like that, can save you. How will you escape if you reject him again?”

Needless to say, this is as brilliant as it is bold. It is the result of the Holy Spirit (4:8). Despite its extremely sharp attack on the leaders, they were too astounded by its brilliance and courage to even get angry (4:13). Peter’s argument all turned on the healed man, and the leaders were thus unable to refute it (4:14).

#### **4. vv.23-31. What are the marks the prayer which brings down such power into the disciples?**

First, there is a connection of their heart weaknesses with the attributes of God. There is a great deal of time spent reflecting on and praising God for his greatness and power. They especially concentrate on his *“Sovereignty”* and control of all things (v.24). In other words, they do not simply ask for boldness (v.29), but they actually heal themselves of their fear by meditating on the attribute of God most antithetical to their fear. This is an extremely important insight. It means we are not just to ask God to take away our worry, but we should meditate and “pray in” his wisdom. We should not just ask God for more confidence, but we should meditate and “pray in” his grace and love. We should not just ask God for more self-control, but we should meditate and “pray in” his holiness. We are to heal our hearts by praying his specific attributes into ourselves.

Second, there is a connection of their ministry situation (*“threats”* v.29, cf. v.18), with promises and statements in the Scripture. They go to Psalm 2 and remember David’s words that the world leaders will be hostile to the Messiah (vv.25-26). They then think of what Herod and Pilate did and what the disciples themselves are facing now at the hands of civil rulers (v.26). But then, in v.28, they realize that *“they [the rulers] did what your power and will had decided beforehand would happen.”* This realization is an enormous source of power. The connection of their current situation with the Bible and with the sovereignty of God shows them that the murder of Jesus Christ did not display

human power but divine power! Through their process of prayer, they realize that the same court that killed Christ has now released them, because everything is totally under God's control. They have nothing to worry about — whether they are killed or protected. Either way, God is going to love and honor and use them, and they are going to triumph with him. You can see as they pray, the boldness and power growing.

Third, therefore, we see that there is no request for protection! They do not ask that their lives and families and wealth be protected. (Now this does not mean that those are improper petitions. It just means they were not primary — they are not the real problem.) They make just two requests. First, they ask for boldness (v.38) to articulate the gospel message. Second, they ask for God to continue to show evidence that their message is his word (v.39). So all they ask for is to continue their ministry. They ask not for miracles of vengeance on the rulers — but for continued miracles of mercy, people healed and converted.

So here are some of the marks of this prayer. 1) It is corporate — they prayed "together" v.23. 2) It was more absorbed in praise and worship to God for who he is, than in our human requests and needs. 3) It was full of Scripture, using the promises and declarations of the Word to guide their prayer. 4) It was a process. They came to realizations and new unity as they prayed. God worked with them during the time of prayer. 5) It sought the presence and glory of God, not just a change in circumstances.

**5. Summarize. What do we learn about witness and ministry from this entire passage? Examine your hearts and our church in light of it.**

The following are only a few insights we can glean:

- a) Persecution is expected if we are doing our jobs. (v.1-3)
- b) Conversions and growth is expected if we are doing our jobs (v.4)
- c) Civil disobedience may be necessary if we are doing our jobs (v.19). This is by no means common. But Peter here clearly says that, if Christians are commanded to do something that God has forbidden, or forbidden to do something that God has commanded, we are to obey God and not civil authorities.
- d) Experience and knowledge of Christ is an inner dynamic for our witness (v.20). We should not be witnessing out of duty and drudgery, but because of what we have seen and heard.
- e) Christian leaders must be extremely well trained in the Word, and must be extremely strong and godly in character (vv.8-12), but they do not necessarily have to have what the world considers strong credentials and pedigrees (v.13-14). We should choose our leaders by recognizing God's anointing of them, not the human establishment's attitude toward them.

- f) For vital witnesses we need continual, repeated “Pentecosts”, in which we seek God’s presence corporately and find it afresh (vv.23-31).
- g) We should spend far more time in adoration and awe and worship of God. It is through the worship that the disciples received the main thing they need — joyful confidence (v.23-31). They did not pray for protection, but for the reality of God’s power. So we learn: we do not so much need a change in our circumstances as a change in our hearts.

## WEEK 6 PROJECT —

## THE CONTENT OF THE GOSPEL: PART 1

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you  
 "?" -for something that raised a question

If a Christian is going to share the faith, it is necessary to have in your head both an outline of the gospel and a summary of the gospel.

In The Content of the Gospel: Part II (before Christmas) we will provide a single outline that can be memorized. Today, we discuss the need for a "gospel summary".

**WHAT — is an outline of the gospel and a summary of the gospel?**

An outline of the gospel is a framework on which you can hang all the relevant information about Christ so that a listener can believe and receive him. A gospel outline is an "accordion" in that it can be shared fairly briefly, but could also be expanded very fully, depending on the circumstances.

1. The "two diagnostic" questions of Evangelism Explosion, (see D.James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion*)
2. The "Four Spiritual Laws" of Campus Crusade, (see numerous Crusade publications)
3. The "Bridge Illustration" of Navigators, (see in Hybels, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*)
4. See a less well-known but fine presentation by John Guest called "A Faith That Can Be Yours", (*in Risking Faith*)

A summary of the gospel really needs to be brief — it should 30 seconds to a minute in length at the most. It is much shorter than the full presentation that needs to be given to someone who is very ready to believe.

**WHEN — use a gospel summary or outline?**

An outline of the gospel should be used when a listener is genuinely interested in knowing what the Christian faith is about, and how to become a Christian. A summary of the gospel is not sufficient for a person who wants to become a Christian. Rather, it is for the early stages of a conversation or a relationship with a non-Christian. Its purpose is to get the basic idea of the gospel out on the table. Mainly, it is to distinguish Christianity from mere "religion and morality", and to give a gripping definition of sin and grace.

The goal of the brief summary is to get the non-Christian to reveal his or her particular problems with the gospel, the personal barriers against faith. Then, these barriers can be worked through. After they have been, you can provide a gospel outline that more fully explains the faith. The reason we provide a "brief" summary of the gospel is so that, eventually, your sharing of the faith will be very directed at the person's particular and specific issues. If you provide first a longer outline of the gospel, you probably will be "scratching where the person is not itching" and thus (perhaps) you may bore them.

### **HOW — to use a gospel summary.**

Here are several examples. You may prefer to write your own.

**Do-Done** summary (see example in Bill Hybels, *Becoming a Contagious Christian*).

**"Do"**. All forms of religion, (formal or informal), are spelled D-O, because they tell us we have to perform good works and obey moral and religious laws in order to find God, to achieve forgiveness, nirvana, or peace. But you can never be sure you have done enough. "Done". But Christianity is spelled D-O-N-E because God sent his son to earth to live the life we should live, and die on the cross to pay the debt we should pay for wrongs we've done. Buddha said "Strive w/out ceasing"; Jesus said "It is finished". (John 19:30)

To become a Christian is to turn from "do" to "done" by asking God to accept you for Jesus' sake and commit to live for him.

**Sin-Salvation** summary (based on a paragraph in John Stott's *The Cross of Christ*):

**Sin** is us substituting ourselves for God, putting ourselves where only God deserves to be — in charge of our lives.

**Salvation** is God substituting himself for us, putting himself where only we deserve to be — dying on the cross. Read II Cor.5:21.

To become a Christian is first to admit the **problem**: that you have been substituting yourself for God either by religion (trying to be your own savior by obedience to moral standards) or by irreligion (trying to be your own lord by disobedience to moral standards). And second to accept the **solution**: asking God to accept you for Jesus' sake and know that you are loved and accepted because of his record, not yours.

*Slavery-Freedom summary (see [What Does It Mean To Know God?](#))*

**Slavery.** *We were built to live for God supremely, but instead we live for love, work, achievement or morality to give us meaning and worth. Thus every person, religious or un- is worshipping something to get your worth. But these things enslave us with guilt (if we fail to attain them) or anger (if someone blocks them from us) or fear (if they are threatened) or drivenness (since we must have them). Sin is worshipping anything but Jesus — and the wages of sin is slavery. **Freedom.** *As a fish is only free in water, we are only free when serving Jesus supremely. For he is the only source of meaning that we cannot lose (freeing us from fear and anger) and that is a free gift (freeing us from guilt and drivenness). Read Matt.11:28-30. His "yoke" is the only one that does not enslave.**

**Law-Love** summary.

**Law.** *Some see God as simply Judge who demands we be moral and righteous. If God is not a Judge there is no hope for the world — how else will wrong be punished?*

**Love.** *Some see God as simply a Father who loves us and doesn't want to punish. If God is not a Father there is no hope for us — how else can we be forgiven?*

**Problem.** *God is both. If a father was also a judge, and a guilty child was brought before him, he could not just acquit. How can God's Law and Love must be reconciled?*

**Solution.** *When God sent his Son to die in our place, the judge was judged. On the cross God's justice and his love was satisfied at once, "that God might be both just and justifier [judge and father] of those who believe" (Rom.3:26).*



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. Discuss those things in the reading that most helped you — things you marked with an '!'**
- 2. Discuss those things in the reading that raised questions — things you marked with an '?'**
- 3. Which gospel summary is the most helpful to you? Why?**
- 4. Do you have a summary that you have heard or that you use that is not represented here? Share it.**





# Acts

## Counter-attack

### Study 7 | Acts 4:32-6:7

#### INTRODUCTION

The forces opposing the church now come and launch three different attacks. We see one in 5:1-12, a second in 5:17-42, and a third in 6:1-6. But the Spirit enables the Christians to make an effective defense in each case.

#### 1. 4:32-37. How does v.31 lead to v.32? In what ways does the filling of the Holy Spirit and boldness (v.31) relate to the radical sharing of material possessions?

First, we must understand the basic mark of Spirit-filledness is "boldness", as 4:31 tells us. Why is that? Read Romans 8:15-16. There we are shown that the Spirit's work is to oppose a "spirit of fear". If the Holy Spirit is the opposite of fearfulness, the mark of Spirit-filledness would of course be fearlessness. But specifically how does the Holy Spirit make us fearless? Romans 8:15-16 tells us that the Spirit assures us of our being children of God. (In the same way, the Spirit assured and empowered Jesus for ministry at his baptism, saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.") This then is the nature of Spirit-boldness. It is a deep assurance of the Father's love for us personally through Christ.

Second, we must see that there were not one but two forms that this Spirit-boldness took in the life of the early church.

- A. First, of course is boldness in word. This we see in v.31. Despite the threat of official persecution, they "*spoke the word of God boldly*". They were not afraid of the risks involved with such speaking. Such risks included social marginalization, imprisonment, and even death.
- B. Second, however is boldness in deed. This we see in v.32-36, though usually the connection between v.31 and these verses is missed. (We need to remember that when Luke wrote his material, there were no chapters or verses or headings — all such divisions were added later.) Luke clearly sees the lifestyle of radical giving and sharing of wealth as proceeding from the filling of the Holy Spirit.

This sheds much light on how the Bible sees our attitude to possessions. A lack of generosity is not so much caused by stinginess as by fearfulness. The more the Christians were assured of God's love for them — the more spiritually secure and confident and fearless they became in that assurance — the more generous they became. They opened their homes and purses to others. This is an extremely important insight. Most people do not come close to the Biblical guideline on giving (10% of income or a "tithe" — Mal.3:8-10, Luke 11:42), but the main reason is *cowardice*, a lack of courage. The early church was not afraid of the risks involved in this kind of giving. The risks include a) a lack of a personal financial "cushion" for your own emergencies, b) the possibility of your gifts being used improperly or at least ineffectively, c) and less disposable income for your own comforts and pleasures as they arise.

So the generosity and sharing of v.32 is directly caused by the Spirit-filling of v.31. In fact, we can use v.32 as a sign of the fullness of the Spirit. If your own life is not characterized by a new and surprising (even to you!) generosity, then the assuring work of the Spirit is not very strong in you.

Note to leaders: Someone may point to the phrase "*no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared...*" (v.32) and ask if this wasn't a form of communalism or communism. (They may point it out with pleasure or with distress, depending on their politics!) Point out that in v.32 it says they did not "*call*" anything their own — this refers to an attitude, not a legal or even ecclesiastical regulation. It means that each person's heart became so generous that he or she thought of the whole church as having a claim on the personal wealth that God had given him or her. It does not mean that church members surrendered all funds into a common pool automatically. (Even v.34 says only that the apostles received major gifts "*from time to time*".) As evidence of this, cf. Acts 5:4, below, where Peter tells Ananias that he was neither obliged to sell his land nor, when he sold it, give all the proceeds to the church. Though this indicates that the early church was not any formal kind of communism or socialism, we must not minimize the fact that their love made them almost *de facto* communalists. Their life together was intimate in the extreme.

**2. 4:32-33 and 6:6-7. How do we see word-witness relate to deed-witness in the life of the early church? What implications does this have for your own witness here and now?**

Verse 33, which speaks of the "*great power*" of the apostle's preaching Christ's resurrection, follows immediately upon the v.32 statement of economic sharing, and it is followed by still more description of the early church's generosity in v.34-37. Why does Luke insert this statement about "word-witness" in the midst of this description of the church's communal life? Luke is saying that the power of the apostles' preaching was both backed by and enhanced by the practical sharing of the Christian community. In other words, the apostles *talked* about the power of Christ's resurrection with arguments and evidences, while the community *embodied* and demonstrated the reality of Christ's resurrection with newness of heart, life, and relationships.

In chapter 6 we see the very same thing. Several men are chosen to lead the church's ministry to poor widows (see below for more information). This ministry was one of the church's ministry of practical giving and service to the material needs of people. As soon as this ministry is strengthened in 6:1-6, Luke adds, "*so the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly*" (v.7). Luke is again pointing out the extremely close connection between deed-ministry and word-ministry. The word "*so*" at the beginning of v.7 shows that the numerical growth — the evangelistic effectiveness — of the church was given a huge boost by the ministry to the poor widows. Again we see that the practical actions of Christians for people in need demonstrated the truth and power of the gospel. Therefore more people believed it.

It is a most interesting thing to notice that, once the "deacons" were working with the poor, many of the new converts to Christianity were priests (v.7) Why? Some have remembered that the Old Testament gave the priests the duty of distributing resources to the poor. Maybe Jewish priests, seeing the church's work with the poor, got very convicted! The church was embodying the caring, priestly heart that God had required of his people Israel.

The relationship between word and deed is therefore extremely close and "works both ways". On the one hand, the preaching of the Word produces faith (Rom.10:16-18) which in turn produces good deeds toward people in need (James 2:1-23), since the gospel of salvation through grace alone humbles us and makes us kind toward the poor (II Cor.8:8-9). But on the other hand, practical ministry to the material needs of people are evidences which God uses to open the hearts of people to the gospel (Acts 4:32-33, 6:6-7; John 13:35, I John 3:17-18). So word ministry leads to deed ministry and deed ministry leads to word ministry. Word and deed must never be separated in the Christian life from one another (Is.1:13-15, 17)

**3. 5:1-12. What was the sin of Ananias and Sapphira? Why was it so serious and so seriously dealt with? How can we a) fall into a similar trap, and b) avoid it?**

Luke contrasts Barnabus, who sold some property and donated the proceeds (4:36) with Ananias and Sapphira, who did the same (5:1-12). On the outside, the two actions were the same, yet Barnabus is commended while Ananias' act is condemned and solemnly judged. Why the difference? At first sight, it would seem that the sin was that *"he kept back part of the money for himself"* (v.2). But Peter later on says that he was under no obligation to either sell the property nor to donate all the proceeds. *"Didn't it [the land] belong to you... and after it sold, was not the money at your disposal?"* (v.4). These are rhetorical questions. Thus Peter is saying that there were no requirements, either to sell the land nor to give all the money. All these actions were voluntary.

So what was the problem? Peter says that it was because (he says twice) *"you lied"* (v.3 and 4). In other words, they posed as if they were giving the whole price of the land. They wanted the credit and the honor in the community of being sacrificial givers — but they did not want to pay the (literal) cost for it. In short, Ananias and Sapphira's motive for giving was not God's honor but their honor, and it was not concern to benefit the poor, but concern to benefit themselves. Their sin was hypocrisy, false piety — a lack of integrity.

Why did Ananias and Sapphira die? Some people try to "get God off the hook" by proposing that they only died a natural death, from the physiological stress that a profoundly guilty conscience can create. (Lie detectors really detect the physical stress that comes from guilt.) Ananias and Sapphira therefore may have died from strokes or heart attacks that came from the shame and guilt of public exposure. (If they were elderly or infirm, this is extremely possible.) Now this explanation is quite possible, but it does not "get God off the hook"! Even if

the causes were natural, not miraculous, the fact that both husband and wife succumbed in this manner was a clear sign to the church that this was God's judgement (v.11). God's judgement is not "either/or". We do not ask: "did they die of stroke/heart attack due to stress or was it the judgement of God." Apparently, it was both.

Why was this sin seen as so serious? Remember what it was — hypocrisy. Throughout all the centuries nothing has hurt the work and witness of the church more than this. There is no more common complaint than "there are so many hypocrites in the church". G.K.Chesterton was reputed to have said, "the greatest argument against the truth of Christianity is the lives of Christians." That is absolutely true. Even the most convinced Christians are often cast into doubt by the thought: "if the gospel is true — how can so many supposed Christians be so dishonest and cruel?"

Therefore, the sin of Ananias and Sapphira is the most devastating sin to the Christian church. Murder, embezzlement, adultery, etc. are relatively less harmful to the gospel, because they are very visible, and when a person is guilty of such a sin, there is exposure and usually expulsion. But Ananias and Sapphira were guilty of spiritual pride, and were using Christianity as a way to get a reputation for being moral and spiritual "pillars". They had obviously missed the gospel's message of free grace to unworthy sinners. Thus their Christianity was really a way for them to earn their reputation and sense of worth through spiritual achievements. They would have perhaps risen up into places of leadership in the church. They would have made the church a proud, smug, legalistic place. Yes, the sin was enormously dangerous.

This may be the reason that Peter says that this was a "*lie to the Holy Spirit*" (v.3, 4). Obviously, no one consciously believes that you can deceive God, so Ananias was not making a deliberate effort to do so. But Peter is saying that to try to deceive the church *is* to try to deceive the Holy Spirit. Lying and hypocrisy means the death of the radically loving, supernatural, spiritual community which was being so powerfully used to spread the gospel (4:32-37). To try to *use* the people of God rather than *serve* the people of God is really an effort to use and deceive the work of the Holy Spirit. It is a stab at the heart of God.

How can we fall into this same trap? Probably, the "sin under the sin" of Ananias and Sapphira was that they were using God to get a righteous reputation, rather than serving God out of gratitude for his giving them the righteousness of Christ. In other words, they were Christian Pharisees, using religion to look and feel superior to others. They "missed" the humbling gospel of grace. But that is reading a bit between the lines. The basic sin of Ananias and Sapphira was to present themselves as something they were not. They posed as spiritual giants, when they were actually struggling with pride and materialism. If they had come in to the church and gotten up and confessed their struggle with sin (even after they had done this swindle), then they would have been honest with the Holy Spirit (whose mission in the world is to convict of sin, John 16:8). The real sin of hypocrisy is a refusal to live in honest

repentance. So in the church today, there is no sin that completely breaks fellowship, ruins the church's witness, and destroys your relationship with God — except the refusal to repent! (As we said above, even robbery and adultery cannot in any final way destroy our relationships with God and others — only a refusal to honestly repent can do that.) So we fall into the same trap when we allow sin to continue in our lives, but outside we tell no one, make ourselves accountable to no one, and we live and minister in the church as if there are no problems.

How can we avoid the trap? Informally, we must be accountable. We must tell some other Christians about "besetting" temptations and habitual sins and we must be honest with them and let them "hold our feet to the fire". But formally, we must let this incident remind us of the importance of church discipline. This does not teach that people who sin are to be killed! It teaches that we need our churches to hold its members accountable, and to confront them when necessary, as Peter does here. Why? Hypocrisy in the church undermines the work of the Holy Spirit enormously. But let us notice that "church discipline" does not mean that we confront every Christian about every sin. Since we are all sinners — that would leave no time for anything else in the church. Rather, we are to confront people who are refusing to repent, for spiritual hypocrisy. Paul tells us that, when we do this, we are to do it with extreme gentleness (Gal.6:1-3). The open, strong public rebuke by Peter here in Acts 5 is something of a special case. Peter is given supernatural knowledge of Ananias' action and motive, and the two deaths are very severe. Probably this event was unusual because the entire Christian church in the world consisted of one congregation, and so God was taking special care with it!

**4. 5:12-42. Survey this long passage and make a list of the characteristics of a spiritually vital church.**

The following list is just illustrative. There are many things to observe.

- a. v.13. On the one hand, a vital church alienates people. The early church was somewhat intimidating and unnerving to some people. *No one else dared join them.* In light of the next verses, we know that this did not mean that they did not add new people. It means that the presence of God in their meetings was both attractive and frightening for some.
- b. v.13. On the other hand, a vital church is highly respected by unbelievers. *Though they were highly regarded by the people.* John Stott believes that this paradoxical principle is normal for spiritually alive churches:

"On the one hand an awestruck reserve... on the other great missionary successes. This paradoxical situation has often recurred since then. The presence of the living God, whether manifest through preaching or miracles or both, is alarming to some and appealing to others. Some are frightened away, while others are drawn to faith." Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p.113.



- c. v.14. A vital church grows rapidly. *More and more... were added to their number.* The rate of numerical church growth varies widely depending on the work of the Spirit and the spiritual receptivity of the people and place. But new people will be converted.
- d. v.15-16. A vital church has people bringing their friends to Christ. *People brought the sick...* is said twice. People brought their friends with needs to the church. Now in the early church we see an unusual amount of miraculous healing going on. As we noted before, miracles do not occur throughout the Bible uniformly. They come in clusters and a special times. We cannot insist that miracles is a necessary sign of vitality. Why? As we can see from here, and from texts like Hebrews 2:3-4, miracles were only a means to an end — the end being the converting of people to faith in the gospel. If we see people coming to Christ in droves — coming to get help and have their lives changed by the gospel — then it would be foolish to long for more miracles! To focus on miracles too much is to miss the principle in these verses — friends bringing friends to the church! That is a sign of a vital community.
- e. v.17-24. A vital church gets persecuted. Not only will some people be uncomfortable with the church (v.13), but some people will be openly hostile. If we get no persecution at all, we are probably not living consistent and courageous Christian lives. (cf. II Tim.3:12)
- f. v.41. A vital church suffers with joy. Many troubles will happen to us whether we are Christians or not. But Christians meet sufferings, especially persecutions, with joy.

**5. 6:1-6. What does this passage teach us about the marks of a vital church?**

- a) The local church is supposed to minister in deed as well as word. (See question #2). Verse 1 speaks of the *"daily distribution"*. In the Greek, the verse literally says, *"the daily diakonia"*. The word "diakonia" means "practical service", and it is the word from which we derive our word "deacon". "Diakonia" was a Greek word that meant to "wait on tables" and to feed people. We see then that the early church did not only have a *ministry of the Word* (v.2), but a ministry of service, feeding people who were hungry. This ministry is important enough to have its own leaders and officers. These leaders are put *"over"* this ministry (v.3). Thus we see a vital church has a balance of word and deed.

- b) The leaders delegate! The apostles see that they cannot "do it all". We have to remember that these are the apostles of Jesus — uniquely empowered and gifted. But they have to decide what to concentrate on (v.4). In the church, we cannot expect the clergy to do it all. And we ourselves must determine our calling and concentrate on it. In a vital church, the whole Body of Christ is involved in ministry.
- c) The vital church selects its leaders, not on the basis of popularity, but on the basis of spiritual maturity. These seven men were "*full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom*" (v.3). The people elected the men (v.5) but the apostles ordained them (v.6). This means that in a vital church there is a "balance" between the will of the congregation and the screening of the officers of the church.
- d) The vital church has both the problems and the wisdom to handle "diversity". The reason for the problem was that two ethnic groups inside the church were not getting along (v.1). The Greek speakers felt that they were being discriminated against. Instead of telling them to be quiet, the apostles knew that the situation took more attention and care than they could provide, and so they created a board (some would say that it was the first board of "deacons") to work for reconciliation between culturally diverse people. Scholars notice that some of the leaders' names were Hebrew and some were Greek. Thus the apostles were "sensitive" to the need for Greek-speakers to rise up in leadership, if all the ethnic groups were to feel well served. So today, if we are sharing the faith well, our churches will become culturally diverse. If minorities within the church feel they are being overlooked, we should not ask them to "be quiet", but should listen to them. Most important is to encourage members of the different groups to rise up into leadership.

**Conclusion:** The forces opposed to the church had three weapons. First, there was hypocrisy inside the church (5:1-12). Second, there was persecution from outside the church (5:17-42). Third, there was division and "burn out" going on within the ministry of the church (6:1-7). The Spirit helps the church face each one. It faced hypocrisy with discipline, it faced persecution with boldness, and it faced burn out/division with creative new lay ministry structures. Thus the gospel marches on!

## WEEK 7 PROJECT — GAINING CONFIDENCE

**Ice Breaker:** What is the key ingredient in gaining confidence in lifestyle evangelism?

I. **Let's review** what we've learned through our study in Acts and our projects that should help us develop confidence in being our King's representatives:

**A. The Power of the Holy Spirit** – Read Romans 8:6 & 11

1. What are several examples we've seen in Acts that have demonstrated "the power of the Holy Spirit" being unleashed in ordinary men?
2. What would keep you from experiencing this confidence? How can we get the truths about the Holy Spirit in Scripture to help us gain confidence seeking to represent Christ to others in both word and deed?

**B. The Power of the Gospel** – Read I Corin. 1:17,18

1. What are several examples of the Gospel's power we've seen in Acts?
2. What would keep us from taking steps to witness if we believe A & B? How can we get these truths to motivate us into action?

**C. Sharing a Testimony** – We shared with one another words, phrases and sentences describing our spiritual journeys to faith in Jesus Christ, using the simple outline of **before, how & after**. Has anyone done this lately? (1 or 2 share)

**D. The Content of the Gospel**

1. What example of *an outline* of the Gospel have we seen in our Acts study? Have you shared an outline of the Gospel lately? (1 or 2 share)
2. A *summary* of the Gospel is for the early stages of conversion, giving the basic idea of the gospel, defining sin and grace, and exposing faith barriers. Have you tried using one of the examples? (1 or 2 share)

**II. Gaining confidence in lifestyle evangelism will come with practice.** As you are a "doer of the Word and not a hearer only," you will find yourself gaining confidence. Obedience to the light you've been given on a subject will always result in strengthened faith and confidence in God working *through you* with the Holy Spirit's power.

**A. Pray for an opportunity** to share your testimony (or part of it), an outline of the Gospel (using a booklet or the Scriptures), or a summary of the Gospel (like: Do-Done, Sin-Salvation, Slavery-Freedom, Law-Love, Problem-Solution).

**B. Take the initiative to do this.** The Spirit empowers obedience. *Expect* God to answer your prayer and honor your obedience and the desire to see others know Christ. The fire will fall on the altar of a pure, obedient, faith-filled, praying heart!



# Acts

## Stephen presents the Gospel

### Study 8 | Acts 6:7 - 7:60

#### INTRODUCTION

Acts 6:8 - 7:60 is the story of Stephen. This man marks the beginning of a new chapter in the history of the church. Up until now we have seen only the history of the Jerusalem church, a church which is almost entirely Jewish. The day of Pentecost clearly demonstrated God's intention that the gospel go to all peoples and that the church consist of every tongue, tribe, people, and nation (Rev.5:9). Beginning with Stephen, God prepares the young church for global outreach. Stephen's message shows an awareness that the gospel is for all, and his death begins a persecution which God designs to force Christianity out into all the world. Stephen's message and death also has a great impact on Saul (the future St. Paul), who would be the spear head of God's world-wide outreach.

- 1. 6:8-15. What does this passage tell us about why Stephen's ministry was so effective? Which of his characteristics do you lack? What can you do to grow in that area?**

The outstanding features of his ministry were:

- First, he had a firm and clear grasp of the gospel of grace. We can especially see this from the accusation, *"This fellow never stops speaking... against the law."* (v.13) This shows that he was proclaiming that we are saved by grace, not keeping the law.
- Second, he had remarkable skill in sharing this gospel. We are told that his opponents *"could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke"* (v.10). This certainly means that in open, public discussions or debate, Stephen always "won" for two reasons. On the one hand his reasoning and answers were compelling (*"the wisdom"*). On the other hand there was a spirit of confidence and power about him that all could see (*"the Spirit by whom he spoke"*). This means that our non-verbal presence (tone of joy, boldness, yet loving sensitivity) is as important as our verbal presentation (logic, illustration, brevity, clarity).
- Third, there was a unique blend and balance of two seemingly opposite qualities — he was full of both *"grace and power"* (v.8). This is striking because they are characteristics that seem opposed to each other. A person who is very "gracious" or who is said to be marked by "grace" is compassionate, sensitive, and peaceful. On the other hand, a person who is "powerful" is forceful, bold, forthright, direct. How can these two things go together? Stephen has the Spirit (6:6) of Christ, who is both a Lion and a Lamb (Rev.5:5-6). Only the gospel can produce humble-boldness. Why? If we are saved by our works, we can either be bold, but not humble (if we are living up to our standards) — or we can be

humble, but not bold (if we have been failing our standards). But the gospel tells us we are helpless sinners (creating a humility that does not go away) but we are completely accepted in Christ (creating a boldness that does not go away). Thus it produces both grace and power.

In short, Stephen not only knew the gospel, but the unique character that the gospel produces shone out in his very persona and demeanor when he spoke. Thus we see that before his final sermon, *"his face was like the face of an angel"*. (v.15) He was a man who was just overflowing with God. He was "full". Whenever he spoke, his joy and deep sense of the gospel's richness was obvious to anyone looking at him.

**2. 6:13-14. Summarize Stephen's message from his accusers. How does the gospel change the way we look at the temple and the law? Why is it significant that the future apostle Paul listened to this Stephanic gospel presentation (8:1)?**

The charge against Stephen was that he was preaching that Jesus made the temple obsolete, and that Jesus also made the law of Moses obsolete. Clearly this was alarming to the religious leaders of Israel.

Now Jesus most definitely taught that he made both the temple and the law of Moses obsolete. He claimed to replace the temple (John 2:18-19), and this was one of the accusations that led to his execution (Mark 14:58). When he died, God ripped the veil in the temple to show that Jesus was right (Mark 15:38). Jesus also said that the Mosaic ceremonial laws were obsolete in him. The dietary laws and the various customs that made someone "clean" for entering the temple were merely symbolic methods to show worshippers that they needed spiritual cleansing in order to go in to a holy God. But Jesus said that these external rituals could not make someone clean (Mark 7:1-20). But it is Jesus who makes us "clean" and fit for God by his works and efforts, not by ours (John 1:12).

In Peter's preaching of the gospel, up until now, this theme of works-versus-faith has been muted. Stephen evidently pressed home that Jesus *is* our temple and Jesus *is* our "cleanness" before God. Jesus had fulfilled the law, so we were not now saved through law-keeping. *"What Jesus taught, then, was that the temple and the law would be superceded... that they would find their God-intended fulfilment in him... Jesus was the replacement of the temple and the fulfillment of the law."* (Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p.129.) This kind of language is always interpreted as law-lessness by religious people when they first hear it. No wonder it got Stephen killed.

It is interesting that Stephen's face shone radiantly (6:15) just as Moses' face shone when he came down from Mt.Sinai with the law (Exodus 34:29). Was this God's way to show that Stephen's message of the gospel was not

dishonoring to the law but the very message of God? Is it possible that Paul had Stephen and Moses in mind when he said that the giving of the law came with such glory that no one could look upon Moses' brightness (II Cor.3:7-8) but that the gospel message brings an even greater radiance (II Cor.3:9-11)?

The themes that Stephen hits upon were brought to tremendous development in the ministry of Paul. His gospel presentation heavily depends on these ideas—far more than the writings of John or Peter, for example. Probably, the young "Saul", though he gave consent to Stephen's death (8:1), never forgot that sermon. It sank deep into his heart. Stephen had a very short ministry, but through his impact on Paul, he has influenced millions. So we must remember, as we minister, that we might be the instrument of reaching someone who will be much more productive for Christ than we. Yes, reaching just one person might be the main thing we do for the kingdom in our entire lifetime! But with God's help and wisdom, it will be enough.

**3. 7:1-50. How does Stephen's very long speech answer the original question (v.1)? How does each section about Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Solomon advance his basic argument? How does he adapt his argument to the premises and nature of his audience?**

Stephen's speech is very long, and at first glance, most of it does not seem to be answering the question! The question is: "are these charges true — do you teach that the temple is unnecessary?" (7:1; cf. 6:13-14). But the basic argument of Stephen is this. *God is a living god, not restrained or confined to a building. His glory presence is available without traveling to Jerusalem to a building. God is not in a box! God is on the move!* The ancient preacher John Chrysostom understood Stephen to be teaching that *"the holy place is wherever God may be"* (cited in Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p.138. The structure of Stephen's speech is as follows, and he makes this argument at each place.

v.2-8 Covers Abraham up to the Patriarchal Age. Long before there was a Holy Place or a temple, God visited Abraham in a pagan land and sent him out. He finally brought him to the land of Israel, but he never received *"even a foot of ground"* (v.5) there. God was not confined to Israel.

v.9-19 Covers Joseph up to the exodus. Joseph was sold into slavery in a pagan land, but again *"God was with him"* (v.9). God is not confined to Israel.

v.20-43 Covers Moses and the wilderness wanderings. God comes to Moses on *"holy ground"* (v.33), though it is outside of Palestine. God is not confined to Israel.

v.44-50 Covers the history of the tabernacle and temple from Moses to David and through Solomon. When Moses builds the tabernacle, it is only



an image of a pattern Moses saw on Mt.Sinai (v.44). When Solomon finally built a house for God, God warned that he was not actually confined to any "house made by men". Stephen cites Isaiah 66:1,2 in this regard. There God forcefully says that he is not confined to Israel, and that his "face" is available without going to the temple.

Stephen begins by addressing them as "brothers and fathers" (v.2) and by identifying heavily with them, speaking of "our father Abraham", and so on. And as we read this long speech, we can't help but notice that there is no reference to Jesus at all until the very, very end. (See below.) Stephen is seeking to use, not Jesus' teaching, but the very teaching of the Old Testament itself to show that the temple must point beyond itself. He shows that for Abraham, for Moses, and for others, it was possible to come into the presence of God. He refers to the "pattern" Moses saw. He quotes Isaiah. In other words, he seeks to say, "your own authorities, your own prophets and law — show that the temple-building is not the ultimate way to meet God. It is only a copy of a pattern. It is only an object lesson to teach us. It is not final." He uses only the authorities they subscribe to. It is powerful as an argument! It shows why Stephen was unbeatable in a debate (6:10).

**4. 7:37-43. How do these verses address the place of the law in Israel? 7:51-53  
How does this charge follow from his whole speech?**

7:39-43. Stephen's accusers had accused him of "speaking against the law" (6:13), and here we see his defense. He is saying, "I do not disregard the law — it is you who do so." Here in v.38 Stephen shows that he believes Moses is divinely called and brought God's words of truth to us. But then Stephen shows that from the very beginning, Israel has failed to obey the law. This happened under Aaron (v.40-42), and continued under the prophets who condemned Israel for their continued disobedience to the law. (In vv.42-43 he quotes Amos.) But Stephen shows from the entire history of Israel that every prophet and leader was persecuted by their own people — Joseph, Moses, David. So there is no way that Israel is going to be saved by obeying the law!

Finally, the devastating charge of vv.51-53 brings the whole argument down to one point, and lays it directly on the heads of the hearers. He says that their concern for external ritual (like circumcision) is vain, because they are uncircumcised in their hearts — they need, therefore, a new birth. And the evidence is that they have rejected and persecuted Jesus just like all the others. This shows that they cannot possibly obey the law (v.53) unless they get new hearts (v.51). A whole different way of salvation must be found.

It is very possible that the name for Jesus is chosen carefully, in line with the speech's argument. Jesus is called the *Righteous One*, because he is the fulfiller of the law who thus opens the way into God. He is the fulfiller of both the law and the temple.

**5. 7:54-8:1. What happens to Stephen to prepare him for death so well? Why does it lead to courage and forgiveness (v.60)? How can we know more of this ourselves?**

**Leader's note:** we touched on this experience of Stephen in the project in Week 2. We connected it to Pentacost.

When Stephen was dragged before a human court, he was condemned unjustly and was about to be executed. But he was *"filled with the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 7:55). What happened? He saw *"Jesus, standing at the right hand of God"* (v.56). What was the significance of that? There are other places in the Bible where Jesus is seen seated at the right hand of God (Hebrews 1:3), with "sitting" representing a finished work. But here Jesus is standing. The best guess is that this refers to his work as our Intercessor (Heb.7:25). The Bible speaks of his intercessory work as an ongoing work, in which he stands before the Father as our representative, so that we are regarded by God in him. Compare I John 2:1 – *we have an advocate with the Father, one who speaks in our defense — Jesus Christ the Righteous One. He is the propitiation for our sins.* F.F. Bruce says, *"Stephen has been confessing Christ before men, and now he sees Christ confessing his servant before God."* (Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, p. 168.

Therefore, at the very moment that an earthly court was condemning him, Stephen realized that the heavenly court was commending him. In other words, the "fullness of the Spirit" that he experienced was an experience of the gospel. At that moment, he got an extremely vivid, powerful sight of what he already knew intellectually — that in Christ we are beautiful in God's sight and free from condemnation (Col.1:23). But the Spirit took that intellectual concept and electrified his entire soul and mind and heart and imagination with it. At that moment, the verdict there (at the throne of God) became so real and overwhelming to him that the verdict here (in the earthly kangaroo court) became inconsequential. He faced his accusers with not just boldness, but even with a calmness and joy (v.56), and forgiveness (v.60).

To the degree we are aware of Jesus' work as our advocate, as our righteousness before the Father, we will have courage, love and power.

How can we know more of this ourselves? There are many answers that will depend on a person's specific circumstances. But Stephen had these conditions. First, he was being daring in witness. God gave him this help because he had stepped out for Christ. Second, he knew the Scripture — he was soaked in it. Third, he "looked" to heaven (v.55). Did he look because he saw something, or did he see something because he had looked?? We have to take time to really cry out to God to send the Spirit so that the things we know intellectually become things that we spiritually "see".

## WEEK 8 PROJECT — “OIKOS” EVANGELISM: I

Read silently and mark “!” - for something that helped you  
 “?” -for something that raised a question

**The Main Method of Evangelism**

In the book of Acts, especially in the chapters 10 and following, the “main method” of evangelism of the early church emerges. It is not a program or a well-oiled scheme — it is what we will call “*oikos evangelism*”.

“Oikos” is the Greek word for “household”, but we must be careful not to read into this term our own concept of the nuclear family. A Graeco-Roman household contained not only several generations of the same family, but also included servants, the families of servants, friends, and even business associates. Essentially, new believers shared their faith with other members of their “oikos”, and thus people came to faith through web networks of relationships.

Not only church history, but modern research has shown that the vast majority of persons come to faith through the witness of a friend, relative, or associate — not through massive programs or campaigns.

**Biblical examples**

*“The following day [Peter] arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them, and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him...”*

Acts 10:24

*“On the Sabbath, we went outside the city gate to the river... We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. One of those listening was Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth from the city of Thyatira... The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message. When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. ‘If you consider me a believer in the Lord,’ she said, ‘come stay at my house’.”*

Acts 16:13-15

*“He then brought them out and asked, ‘Sirs, what must I do to be saved?’ They replied, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved — you and all your household.’ Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.”*

Acts 16:30-34

*"The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, 'We have found the Messiah' (that is, the Christ)... Philip found Nathanael and told him, 'We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote - Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.'"*

John 1:41,45

*"As he walked along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow me', Jesus told him, and Levi got up and followed him. While Jesus was having dinner at Levi's house, many tax collectors and 'sinners' were eating with him and his disciples, for there were many who followed him."*

Mark 2:14,15

### **Principles**

1. Definition. In Manhattan, there are not so many *oikos*'s which consist of large extended families. Nonetheless, everyone has an "oikos". Notice that Levi (Matthew) the tax collector had a household that consisted mainly of business associates rather than relatives.

An "oikos" is a web of common kinship affinity (relatives), geographical affinity (neighbors), vocational affinity (co-workers), associational affinities (special interest colleagues), and plain friends.

2. Advantages. "Oikos" evangelism is the most personally demanding of all the methods of evangelism, because it requires primarily that you be a changed person, transformed by the gospel. Your life is the main attractor and the main evidence for the truth of the faith. In "oikos" evangelism, your life is under observation by those who don't believe. You can't run and you can't hide! If your character is flawed (or even unexceptional), you won't be effective.

"Oikos" evangelism is therefore very non-manipulative. The person outside the faith is, in a sense, "in the driver's seat". He or she gets to raise questions and determines at what speed the process proceeds. There is no "canned" presentation. He or she also has a personal knowledge of the evangelist, and thus gets a very good and fair view of what Christianity is all about and how it works in someone's life.

In short, all the "advantages" of oikos evangelism are for the unbeliever, not the believer. No wonder it is so effective!

3. Pre-requisites. Essentially, the pre-requisite is that the gospel change us. Until that happens, we will be ineffective witnesses. First the joyful effects of the gospel in our own lives must give us an enormous energy for witness. How can we keep our mouths closed about such a wonder? If that energy is not there, we must repent and seek God until it flows. But second, the humbling nature of the gospel must lead us to approach non-believers without superiority and with lots of respect. Since we are saved only by God's grace and not our

goodness, we expect to often find wisdom and compassion in non-Christians which at many points may exceed ours. Is that humility and respect there? If not, we will be ineffective. Third, the love experience of the gospel must remove from us the fear of others' disapproval. Is this boldness increasing? If not, we must repent and reflect on the gospel and God's acceptance with us until this fear diminishes.

These three character qualities are absolutely necessary. Put another way, if you are not effective in reaching others for Christ, it is because of a lack of joy, a lack of humility and gentleness, or a lack of boldness. Which is it?

If the gospel fills us with joy, humility, and confidence, then we will not treat non-Christians as "evangelism cases" — people that we relate to, talk to, and care for only in order to win them over to our side. That is to objectify and dehumanize them, and, ironically, it is unwinsome. We should not love people in order to evangelize them. Rather, we should evangelize them in order to love them. The more these dynamics are present in our lives the more we will draw in new people like a magnet (Acts 2:47).

4. Planning. In this week's project, we will only talk about the first step in an "oikos" evangelism plan — choosing 4 people to begin to pray for. Make a list of 4 people that fit these qualifications: a) We hit it off well together. b) We share some common interests. c) This person would probably enjoy our church or small group. d) This person is open to me.

Make the list:

Now begin praying for them, and begin thinking of ways to strengthen your relationship with them.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What most helped you in the reading? What questions did it raise?**
2. **Which of the three pre-requisites for witness do you most need? How did Stephen show all three in his life (Acts 6:8-15; 7:54ff)?**
3. **Share your list of 4 people with someone in the group and pray for the other person's "oikos" by name as well as your own.**



# Acts

## The ministry of Philip

### Study 9 | Acts 8:1-40

- 1. 8:1-4. What are the results of the execution of Stephen and the persecution that it brought? (Have you seen God work good things through a disaster?) How does this result fit in with Stephen's message?**

There is a three fold "cause and effect" chain in these verses. First, "on that day", Stephen's death, caused "a great persecution" (v.1a). Second, the persecution caused "all except the apostles" to be "scattered" (v.1b) Third, the dispersion caused "those... scattered" to "preach the word wherever they went." (v.4). The death led to persecution. The persecution led to scattering. The scattering led to increased ministry. Those who wanted to stamp out the church only served to spread it tremendously.

Even though Jesus told the disciples that the gospel was for every nation and people (1:8), and even though Pentacost brought them a miracle in which the gospel was proclaimed in the languages of all the nations (Acts 2:4-11), the early Christians were only spreading the gospel among their own people. (A quick look at Acts 2, the confrontation of Paul and Peter, shows how difficult it is for even the strongest believers — e.g. Peter — to understand that the gospel is for all, not just for "our kind of people".) We have seen that Stephen seemed to be the first Christian leader to grasp that the gospel has a radical missionary energy to it. He realized that the gospel of Jesus means that God's presence is not tied to one land or people. Stephen was the first "martyr", but now we see that the immediate results of his death is the very accomplishment of his message! "All except the apostles were scattered... throughout Samaria... Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went." (8:1,4).

Amazingly, God had to use a persecution to get the early Christians to do what he had told them from the beginning that he wanted them to do. (Samaria was Gentile territory.) And he used Stephen — his death was by no means in vain. See what God can do through one fully yielded to His service — and what God can do through (what appears on the surface to be) a "disaster". In the history of the church, there have been other notable examples of this. One of the most famous was the expulsion of all missionaries from China after the Communist takeover in the 1949. It seemed to be a disaster. But the result was a) many of the expelled missionaries went to other parts of Asia, and so spread the faith in unreache places, and b) Chinese lay leaders took over the Chinese church and, since they were indigenous to the people, the church exploded in size and vitality over the last few decades. It is now 30 to 40 times larger than it was 40 years ago. Both the missionaries and the Chinese Christians had become complacent.

But personal "disasters" are also ways for the gospel to spread in our lives. See Romans 8:28, and Hebrews 12:1-18. In some ways, the worst thing for the spread of the gospel is success and a comfortable life!



**2. 8:1-4. Who is doing the preaching of the word in these verses and what is the significance of that?**

One of the most significant little phrases in the book of Acts is in v.4 *“they who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”* Who was scattered? Not the apostles — they stayed in Jerusalem (v.1). *“All were scattered except the apostles”* (v.1) It was everyone else, the “laypeople”, not the clergy, who were scattered. And the Greek word rendered by the NIV translation as *“preached the word”* is the Greek word *evangelizomai*, the word “evangelize”. This then is how Christianity in 300 years spread from this little handful of people into every nook and cranny of the Roman empire, until it even converted the leadership and made that old pagan culture into a Christian society. Why did Christianity triumph in a world of dozens and dozens of competing religions and philosophies with far more and far more influential adherents? Every Christian evangelized wherever they went.

Apparently, when the Christians were all together under the powerful and gifted leadership of the apostles, they had been fairly passive in their ministry. They had simply brought their friends to hear the “great preaching” at the church in Jerusalem. But when they were scattered, away from their leaders, they gathered up the courage to communicate themselves what they had learned. The result was that, though they were probably less eloquent than the apostles, they were in the end more effective. Why? Because lay people (being 100 times more numerous than “professionals”) can reach more folk, and because a lay person’s testimony often has a more authentic ring to the listener than a well-polished articulate speech.

This is one of the key practical differences between the other faiths and religions and Christianity. It was not the job of the clergy to do evangelism. They did it to model and encourage the people, who had the main task of “preaching the good news”.

**3. 8:5-25. What was so amazing about Philip’s act of going to Samaria? What were the elements in his effective ministry? What would be the equivalent of his bold ministry action today?**

You don’t have to much reading in the New Testament to know that the Jews and the Samaritans hated one another fiercely. It was a bitter ethnic rivalry on the order of the most terrible conflicts we have in various parts of the world today (Beirut, Belfast, S.Africa, etc.) When Assyria conquered the northern tribes of Israel (which had Samaria as its capital) most of the people were deported. The Assyrian government then repopulated Samaria with foreigners, who intermarried with the Jews who were left. The result was what the nation of Judah saw as a “mongel” race. The Samaritans built their own temple on Mt. Gerizim and repudiated most of the Old Testament Scripture, so the Jews saw them also as heretics. Thus the hostility between Jew and Samaritan was far worse than relationships with the Greeks or Romans or any other pagans. Cf. John 4:9, where the writer simply observes that *“Jews do not associate with Samaritans”*.

But here we are told that Philip went to preach the gospel to a city in Samaria. He did urban ministry ("*a city*") among the most despised people group that he as a Jew could know ("*Samaria*"). What does that tell us? It means that the gospel had changed Philip's whole way of looking at the world. He did not feel superior any more to the Samaritans. Before the gospel came to him, Philip would have regarded the Samaritans as to hopeless and too evil for salvation. Now the gospel has shown him that a) everyone is as hopeless apart from the gospel, and b) everyone is evil and lost apart from the gospel and c) therefore, no one is really more hopeless and evil than anyone else and so d) anyone can be saved and changed and incorporated into the family of God.

What were the elements in his ministry? Philip did two things, and then two things resulted. First, Philip came with words. He "*proclaimed the Christ*" (v.5) which showed that he did not come teaching morality and religion in general, but the gospel in particular. Christianity IS Jesus. It is making Jesus your Everything. Second, Philip came with deeds. He healed sick people and cast out demons (v.7). What were the results? First, Philip's deeds made the crowd pay close attention to Philip's words (v.6). That is a very interesting statement. Philip demonstrated the power of the gospel by changing lives, and as a result, the crowd listened to his words. Finally, then, the ultimate result was that "*there was great joy in that city*". (v.8) The spiritual and physical healing lifted the whole city into a state of joy.

These statements are so simple that we may overlook the wisdom herein. The only way we will see a movement of God that lifts our whole city is if there is a combination of word and deed. We must not be too distracted by the fact that Philip's "deed-ministry" was miraculous. We have several times discussed the fact that we should neither insist that all miracles have ceased, nor insist that the church exhibit the same kinds and number of miracles at every time and place. The fact was the Philip say physical misery around him and worked on it ("healed the sick"). Also he saw spiritual bondage and healed it ("cast our demons"). They the crowds flocked to and listened to the preaching. In the same way, the people of a city need to see a) Christians having compassion on the physically suffering (e.g. the poor, the dying, the orphans, etc.) and they need to see b) the changed lives of people who through Christ have been delivered from psychological and spiritual bondage. Then they will listen to the gospel *en masse*.

What would be the equivalent for us today, to do Philip's kind of ministry? Well, for everyone it would be different, somewhat. It depends on who you are. The most obvious equivalents to Philip's ministry would be when, for example, blacks and whites share leadership in a church in South Africa, or when Ulster Scots and Irish blue collar workers share the leadership of a church in Belfast. But a milder form of this would be when middle class people from American suburbia move into New York City and minister there with love and respect for all the different types of people around them. In any case, to do "Philip" ministry in a city, you must: a) combine word ministry with deed ministry, and b) combine intellectual argument with demonstration of personal changed lives.

**4. 8:9-25. Did Simon really believe (cf.v.13 with v.21-23)? What was Simon's main problem? How can we avoid his mistake? Do you think he repented?**

Verse 13 says that "Simon believed and was baptized", yet Peter says later that his heart is "not right with God" (v.21), which means that he is not a Christian. Some would say that Simon had been converted, but had fallen away from grace, had lost his salvation. But Peter's words in verse 23, "For I see you are (lit.) in the gall of bitterness and captive to sin" has the sense of "now I perceive your true state". The best way, then to read v.13, is the Simon intellectually was convinced of the truth of Christ, but there was no real change of heart, no new birth.

Why? Verse 19 shows that his interest was "this ability". He saw the power to heal people physically and spiritually, and he wanted that power for himself. He had been a magician, and the work of a magician is to have power. Now in the gospel he saw a greater power, and he just wanted this for himself, too. In other words, Simon's fundamental and basic heart attitude had not changed at all. He had just gotten into Christianity because he hoped to use it as a more effective way to rise up and get power over people. He was still, in a sense, trying to save himself and keep control of his life. The way he had always done that was through gaining power over people. Now he wanted to do this through this new religion.

This is subtle and a great warning to us all. Some of us feel that we need approval in order to have happiness and value. So we may appear to "convert", but we may be getting into Christianity just to get this nice group of people to love and approve of us. So our real "salvation" is not Christ, but the approval of other Christians. There has been no real heart change, no real abandoning of our good works for faith in Christ's work for us. We are just doing the old self-salvation in a new way. Or, here's another example, closer to Simon's pattern. Some of us feel that we need power over others in order to have happiness and value. We may always feel that we need to be running things, be telling others what to do. So we may appear to "convert", but we may be getting into Christianity just because we see a new place where we can run things and pontificate and tell people how they ought to live. So our real "salvation" is not Christ, but power over others. There has been no real heart change, no real abandoning of our good works for faith in Christ's work for us. We are just doing the old self-salvation in a new way.

So this mistake of Simon is much easier to do than you think! It is being done in the church all the time!

Did he repent? We cannot be sure, from his reply in v.24, but John Stott does not think his reply indicates that he did.

“Simon’s response to Peter’s rebuke is not encouraging. He showed no sign of repentance... Instead of praying for forgiveness... What really concerned him was not that he might receive God’s pardon, but only that he might escape God’s judgment... Simon’s tears [may] have been tears of remorse or rage, but not of repentance.” Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p.151.

In other words, Simon seems only concerned that he might be hurt, not that he has hurt God. That is not a good sign!

**5. 8:14-17. This is a highly unusual and puzzling passage, and people have been debating it for years. Let’s be guided by this note from John Stott.**

I think Professor Howard Marshall is right to call verse 16 — ‘the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon them; they had simply been baptized into the name of Christ’ — ‘perhaps the more extraordinary statement in Acts’. For Peter promised the Spirit to those who repented and were baptized (Acts 2:38). How then could the Samaritans been baptized and not received the Spirit?... Now when [Luke] describes the Samaritans as not having received the Spirit, but as having ‘simply’ (NIV) or ‘only’ (RSV) been baptized into Christ... only implies that the two things were expected or accustomed to go together... Luke implies that there was something distinctly odd about their separation. It was because of this irregularity... that two senior apostles [Peter and John] came down hot-foot to Jerusalem to remedy the situation... The most natural explanation of the delayed gift of the Spirit is that this was the first occasion on which the gospel had been proclaimed not only outside Jerusalem but inside Samaria... The delay was only temporary, until the apostles had come down to investigate, had endorsed Philip’s bold policy of Samaritan evangelism, had prayed for the converts... and had thus given a public sign to the whole church, as well as to the Samaritan converts themselves, that they were bona fide Christians, to be incorporated into the redeemed community on precisely the same terms as Jewish converts.

– John Stott, p.157-158.

**6. 8:26-40. What do we learn about sharing our faith from the story of the Ethiopian’ conversion?**

We need to know several things about the Ethiopian. First, “Ethiopia” in those days corresponded to the Upper Nile region from Aswan to Khartoum. The Ethiopian was a eunuch, a person castrated in his youth, so that he could work in the royal court with out distraction. (This was fairly common at the time among men who were going to be groomed for administrative leadership.) This man was a black African, and a high official. He “*had gone to the temple to worship*”, which means that he was a believer or at least a seeker after the God of the Bible. However, we can doubt that he got a warm reception there, for the Old Testament forbid eunuchs from going into the presence of God (Deut.23:1).

Why was the Ethiopian reading the Isaiah scroll? (v.28) It is possible that he was doing so because in Isaiah 56:3-4 the prophet predicts a time in which eunuchs will be accepted by God into his courts and into his family. Philip finds

him reading one of the Servant Songs of Isaiah about the Messiah to come, from Isaiah 53:7-8. He explains the gospel of Jesus on the basis of this passage. The Ethiopian responds in joy. Perhaps he now sees how eunuchs can be given *"an everlasting name that will not be cut off"* (Is.56:4). He sees that, through this Messiah, we can live on, even if we do not have children. He responds in joyful faith.

What do we learn about evangelism? First, God guides us into "divine appointments" (v.26). We need to look around us, for the people God brings into our paths are people we are to share our faith with. Second, we must not be put off from talking to someone who is extremely different from us. Obviously, an African official was very different than a Jewish commoner! Yet God can use us in the lives of people who are utterly different. Third, we must not be prejudiced. Isn't it amazing that one of the first conversion stories we have in Acts is the story of a Jew leading a black man to Christ? In Christ, these divisions dissolve. Philip did not let prejudice keep him from being a warm, respectful witness. Fourth, Philip started by asking a question. Instead of giving a "canned" presentation, he discovered what was on the eunuch's mind and heart. Philip essentially asked him "what is your point of interest and need right now? What is your main question?" Philip did not answer questions that the eunuch was not asking! He made sure to present the gospel as an answer to the particular concerns of this man. Fifth, Philip evangelized through a small group Bible study! So often, this works well. It is natural, it gives the Christian the "backing" of the Bible's authority, so it is clear that the gospel is not just something you have made up. Often this is one of the best ways to share your faith — to have both Christians and non-Christians discussing a passage of the Bible. Sixth, Philip did not just talk in general terms, but he helped the eunuch to the point of decision. The only reason the eunuch would have asked for baptism (v.36), is if Philip had been explaining it to him. We must encourage people to a point of decision.

Keep in mind that Philip was a public speaker (8:4), and not everyone can do that. But here we see Philip evangelizing in a way we all can do.

## CONVERSION PROJECT

Read and mark "!" - for something that helped you  
 "?" -for something that raised a question

Christianity without conversion is no longer Christianity, because conversion means turning to God. It involves forsaking sin, with its self-deifying attitudes and self-serving conduct, and turning to Christ, whose death on the cross is the basis for God's offer of mercy and forgiveness. Jesus was judged in our place so God could extend his righteousness to us.

– David Wells, *Turning to God*, p.27

In most translations of the Bible, the word "conversion" appears very seldom. But that does not mean that conversion is not absolutely central to Christianity. Rather, the New Testament writers use many different words to describe the process.

The Book of Acts records the conversion of Paul three times (9:5ff., 22:6ff., 26:12ff.). In addition, it tells us of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:25ff.), of Cornelius, (10:44ff.), and of the Philippian jailer (16:29ff.). But moreover, it records Paul telling us that all the Gentiles who were entering the church were entering by "*conversion*" (Acts 15:3). Thus the book of Acts shows the indispensibility of conversion to being a Christian.

But what *is* conversion? It is common to use terms like "converted" "born again" "believed" "received Christ" all interchangeably. But the Bible makes some important distinctions.

To "become a Christian" is both "Conversion" and "Regeneration". They are two sides of the same coin, and cannot be separated, yet they must be distinguished. One is something God does and one is something we do. The first is the theological, the other is behavioral. The theological element (what we are in Christ — regeneration) is the same for all, but the behavioral (what we do — turning) is the different for all. Regeneration is an act of God at a single and specific point in time (though we may not be conscious of exactly when that point has occurred). Turning is a process of ours, which may be dramatic or gradual, depending on many factors.

An "insider" to Christianity (i.e. a child raised in a Christian home) may find conversion so natural that he or she cannot pinpoint the time of the change at all. (Some churches create venues for children to "give their lives to Christ", to help them pinpoint their conversions. But usually the process is extremely gradual. There may be several preparatory steps in which God "illuminates" the youth through the Holy Spirit, providing pieces of the gospel, until it "comes

together” for them after a number of years. On the other hand, an “outsider” to Christianity (i.e. a person raised Jewish or Muslim or secular) may have much more of a “Damascus Road” (i.e. Pauline) conversion experience. So the theological side of conversion is always identical — regeneration. But the behavioral side of conversion is always different, depending on culture, personality, and prior world-view.

### A. Regeneration

This is a work of God in which the power and holiness of God enters our hearts in the form of the Holy Spirit. This is so radical a reality that it is called “partaking of the divine nature” (II Peter 1:4), becoming a whole new creation (II Cor.5:17; Gal.6:15), being born again (John 3:3). In Titus, Paul says, “*he saved us... not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.*” (Titus 3:5-7). What the Holy Spirit does is called “regeneration” (*paliggenesias*), which is the same word as “rebirth” (*gennetha anothen* — “born from above”). We have a new “genesis”, we are born again. See also I John 2:29, 3:9-10; I Peter 1:3,2, 2:2; James 1:18).

### B. Conversion

The New Testament uses the word *epistrepho*, to “turn” as the word for conversion. Almost always, the word is used as an intransitive verb — it is what we do. (On the other hand, “regeneration” or “rebirth” is what is done to us.) Just as we cannot enter the kingdom of God without being born again (John 3:3), we also cannot enter the kingdom of God unless we convert (Matt.18:3). Everyone must convert, whether Jew (Acts 3:19; 9:35) or Gentile (Acts 11:21; 14:15).

Because the word for conversion is “turning”, there are therefore two parts to conversion — turning away from and turning toward. Thus the Thessalonians turned from idols and turned to the living God (I Thess.1:9). These two aspects are *metanoia*, repentance (turning away) and *pistis*, faith (turning toward). We are only converted as we turn away from sin and self-salvation, and to faith in Christ and his salvation.

### Summary:

Now we can see that, though it is fair and right to use the word “conversion” to refer to both rebirth and converting, and it is fair to use the word “reborn” to refer to both rebirth and converting, that they are two aspects of the same thing. John brings them together when he says: *To all who received him, who believed in his name (conversion), he gave full rights as children of God, who are born not of nature or of the will of man, but of the will of God (rebirth).* John 1:12-13. Rebirth/conversion is also called a change of ownership (Rom.6:17-18), a change from darkness to light (Acts 25:18; II Cor.4:6; I Pet. 2:9), a change from death to life (John 5:24; Eph.2:1-6).

So — we can outline “becoming a Christian” like this:

**Rebirth** (what God does)

**Conversion** (what we do)

**Repent** (turn from self-salvation and serving self)

**Faith** (turn to Christ salvation and serving him)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **What helped you most?**
2. **What questions were raised?**
3. **How does this shed light on your own conversion experience?**





# Acts

## The conversion of Saul

### Study 10 | Acts 9:1-31

#### 1. v.1-2. How do these verses shed light on John 6:44 and John 15:16? How is this an encouragement to us doing evangelism?

In John 6:44 Jesus says, *"No one can come to me unless the Father draws him."* In John 15:16 Jesus speaks to his disciples and says, *"you have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and appointed you to go and bear fruit"*. One thing is certain from these texts. We do not, initially, "seek" God, unless first God comes and seeks us. The Bible says that in our natural state: *"No one seeks for God"* (Rom.3:11). That is categorical. Since no human being will naturally seek for God, those who are seeking do so because God has been at work on them. He opens our hearts (Acts 16:14). We only love him because he first loves us (I John 4:10, 19). Throughout the years, Christians have differed over whether this "seeking grace" from God is resistible or not. Those who believe in predestination say "no" and those who do not believe in predestination say "yes". But there is agreement that we cannot turn to God unless he comes to us first.

These two verses illustrate this very well. Saul was completely hostile to the gospel and the church. He was not "open" or "seeking" at all. Because the Christians had "dispersed" away from Jerusalem because of the persecution (Acts 8:1-4), Saul was now willing to travel to neighboring cities to find Christians and to bring them home for punishment (v.2). So his opposition to the gospel was fanatical. Thus his conversion is proof of the power of God's sovereign grace to bring people up short and take the scales off their eyes. C.S.Lewis, in his account of his conversion, likens God to a fisherman after his fish, or to a cat after his mouse, or to a pack of hounds after his fox, or to a divine chess player putting him into checkmate. (See *Surprised by Joy*, last chapter)

When we are sharing our faith, we must keep Saul in mind. First, we must not think much in terms of people who are very "likely" to become Christians versus others who are very "unlikely". There are plenty of people who seem very wild, very hostile, and very "far" from the faith, and it is typical for Christians to think that their case is spiritually hopeless. We do not even consider trying to share the faith with them. And, in addition, Saul represents a particular kind of non-Christian that often intimidates Christians. He was brilliant, a leader, a member of the "elite", and highly educated. Believers often either despise or fear the many non-believers in those ranks. But this incident proves that everyone is equally "unlikely" to believe (since every conversion is a miracle) and therefore, everyone is equally "likely" to believe. Have hope for everyone.

**2. v.3-4. Compare this account of Jesus first words to a fuller account in Acts 26:13-14. What indication is there that Saul's conversion was not as "sudden" as it seems? What could these "goads" have been? What were the "goads" Jesus used on you?**

In Saul's account of his conversion experience in Acts 26, he mentions that Jesus said to him, *"It is hard for you to kick against the goads"* (26:14). "Goads" were sharp sticks used by farmers to get animals to obey their commands and move along in the prescribed way. If an animal kicked against the goads, of course, they hurt worse than if they had obeyed. But what were these "goads" of Saul's of which Jesus spoke?

Although the specifics were only speculation, in general the reference to "goads" must mean that Saul was actually wrestling with doubts and conviction about Christianity. In fact, his fanatical opposition to Christianity evidently was his effort to silence his ambivalence. What might some of these goads have been? Well, Romans 7:7ff indicates that Saul had come under tremendous conviction that he could not fulfill the law of God. In particular, the tenth commandment "thou shalt not covet" convicted him. He says that one day this commandment came "alive" to him (he realized what it demanded) and it "slew" him (he was devastated). Here he was, a Pharisee with great pride in his ability to satisfy the law, and he realized that the law demanded a kind of inner peace and contentment that he did not have (*"not covet"*). So, on the basis of Romans 7:7ff, we see that he already was having some severe spiritual problems in the area of his conscience. No wonder he was so vigorously persecuting Christians, as a way to eliminate his self-doubts.

But then there was Stephen. We know that Saul had heard Stephen's speech, which indicated that Jesus came to replace the temple (as the final atonement) and to fulfill the law. Saul had seen the amazing joy and love in Stephen's face (6:15; 7:58-60). If Saul had been under deep conviction of his moral inadequacy (Rom.7) and heard Stephen's proclamation of a whole new way to God (Acts 7), then he would certainly have been deeply "pricked" and troubled. These were Jesus' "goads" in his mind and conscience.

So Saul's conversion was not as instantaneous as it might appear. Jesus had been drawing him with his grace very gradually, and the dramatic "Damascus Road" experience brought it to a head. So conversion virtually always has a divine preparation.

**3. vv.3-9. Some have said that Saul's conversion is a very strong piece of evidence for the supernatural origins of Christianity. How would that be so? (Compre 9:1-9 with Acts 22:3-16 and 26:9-18).**

It is evident from the Book of Acts, Saul often told the story of his Damascus Road conversion — he does so in Acts 22:3-16 and 26:9-18. In every one of the three accounts of his experience, his travelling companions are specifically

mentioned, and what they heard and saw is specifically mentioned as well. Each account mentions that he had “*companions*” who also saw the light (see Acts 22:9), and heard the voice (see Acts 9:7), and fell to the ground from amazement at the phenomena (Acts 26:14). Yet, though they heard the “*sound*” (9:7) they could not make out specific words (22:9), and though they saw the light (22:9), they could not make out a specific figure (9:7).

Why were these companions so critical, and why did Saul always include exactly what they experienced and what they did not? Saul was an extremely public figure, and his conversion would have created an extremely unpleasant situation for the opponents of Christianity. When he immediately began to publically proclaim that he had met the risen Christ on the Damascus Road (Acts 9:27), there would have been an enormous desire on the part of the religious authorities to disprove his story. Obviously (from Saul’s subsequent career), they could not. He publically mentioned the fact that he had witnesses to his encounter — and he would only do that if it bolstered his case and if they were available for cross-examination. So Saul’s conversion was another empirical, historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

#### **4. v.4-5. What is the significance of Jesus’ statement that Saul is persecuting Him? (How is a convicting statement? How is it an encouraging statement?)**

Jesus statement that Saul is “*persecuting... Jesus*” is surprising, since Saul thought he was persecuting a heretical Jewish sect. That is the reason that, when the voice says, “*why are you persecuting me?*”, Saul understandably asks “*But who are you? I’m not persecuting you!*” There are at least two implications.

First, though we are seldom conscious of the fact, we are all enemies of God, hostile and “*persecutors*” of God, until we are reconciled to him through the gospel. Paul says in no uncertain terms that we are all the Lord’s enemies (Rom.5:10; Col.1:21). Our problem is not just that we are failing God, but that we are fighting God. Our natural state is not just that we break the rules and fall short of being good, but that we resent God’s control over our lives, and we set ourselves up as our own saviour and lord, and we resist his exertion of his power over us. Evidently, Paul never forgot this lesson, because in Romans 5 and 8 and Ephesians 2 and elsewhere, he insists that even very religious people who seek to obey the Bible are enemies of God, as long as they seek to save themselves by their goodness and holiness. They are trying to be their own Saviors, and they thus feel continually angry at God for not giving them their “*due*” in life. Spiritually, we are hostile and we attack God.

So “*why do you persecute me*” is, on the one hand, very bad news.

But second, on the other hand, it is very good news. For Jesus is saying that he so identifies with his people that he sees anyone assaulting us as assaulting him. This has many wonderful implications, but we will mention only three

here. a) First, it shows that to become a Christian is not just to join a club, but to be grafted into a Body, the Body of Christ. When we get the Holy Spirit, which is the Spirit of Christ, that unites us to all other Christians by a unique, spiritual, living link (I Cor.12:13) b) Second, it shows that Jesus does protect us. He takes any assaults on us personally. We must be careful not to assume that this means we are exempt from harm! The book of Acts shows that Christians are tortured and die. But this means that Jesus is always present with us to “sanctify our distress to us” (e.g. II Cor.1:3-11; 4:16-18), and that he sometimes does deliver us from imminent danger (Acts 12:1ff.) c) Third, it hints that not only is Jesus identified with us, but that we are identified with Jesus. In other words, because he is loved by the Father and because he is at the right hand of the Father — then we are loved by the Father and we are at the right hand of the Father (Eph.2:6-8).

**5. v.10-31. What are the results of Saul’s conversion evident in these verses? In other words, what changes do we see?**

First, v.9 and v.11 together show that Saul was fasting and praying. This was not intermittent, periodic prayer, but very concentrated and prevailing prayer. So the first change is a new relationship God himself.

“Not that he had never fasted and prayed before... But now through Jesus and his cross Saul had been reconciled to God, and consequently enjoyed a new and immediate access to the Father... What was the content of his prayers? We can guess that he prayed for the forgiveness of all his sins, especially his self-righteousness... for wisdom to know what God wanted him to do now... No doubt also his prayers included worship, as he poured out his soul in praise that God should have had mercy on him.”

– John Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p.175

Second, he had a new relationship to the church. Ananias rightly is shocked and incredulous that Saul could really be a Christian (v.13-14). But he does go to Saul and immediately calls him “*Brother*” (v.17). We should not overlook the significance of this. Saul doubtlessly had killed people that Ananias had known and loved. Yet the gospel destroys the old ties and identities, and now that Saul is Christian, he is Ananias’ brother! We see that Saul, both in Damascus and in Jerusalem, seeks out “*the disciples*” (v.19, 26), even when both churches were very wary of him and reticent to embrace him, (It is understandable that the Christians might have suspected his conversion to be a ruse to get inside the Christian community for the purpose of more devastating persecution.

So we see that conversion fundamentally changes our closest associations. Our new “family” becomes other Christians, regardless of our past record, regardless of class and national distinctions.

Third, we see that Saul has a new sense of obligation for the world. He risks his life immediately by proclaiming the gospel publically. He has a new sense of his responsibility, since he has powerful gifts of knowledge and articulation. His sense of this responsibility was so strong that he was willing to risk his own suffering and death.

## WEEK 10 PROJECT — JOYFUL BOLDNESS

**Introduction:** We tend to talk boldly about the things that bring us the greatest joy. Our job, a wedding, a child's birth, or something new. So it shouldn't surprise us that boldness in witnessing should follow a personal, intimate, joyful encounter with the living God.

**I. Read John 1:35-42.**

- A. Why was Andrew *joyful*?
- B. How did Andrew demonstrate his joy and *boldness*?
- C. What resources do we have that Andrew didn't have that should foster joyful boldness in our witness to others?
- D. How do we allow ourselves to be robbed of joyfulness or boldness?

**II. The following verses describe the *spiritual boldness (confidence)* God wants us to experience in two other areas of our lives. What is the source of confidence in each situation... and what are the results?**

- A. Heb. 4:16 and 10:19; Eph. 3:12
- B. I John 4:13-19

**III. Ps. 35:9 says, "...my soul will rejoice in the Lord and delight in his salvation". But in Ps. 51:12 David pleaded, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation..." Which best describes where you are *experientially* right now with the Lord? Why?**

**IV. Suggested action points**

- A. **Remember your conversion.** Meditate on the things that brought joy to your heart when you first knew Jesus Christ personally. What were a few?
- B. Acts 4:29 assures us we should **pray for boldness:** "Lord... enable your servant to speak your word with great boldness." Are you willing to pray that? Continue to pray for the four people you recorded in a recent project. Have you seen God at work in any of their lives yet?
- C. **Believe** that God wants you to be joyful and bold in prayer, witnessing and on the day of judgment as you stand before Him, relying on the Father's Savior's and Spirit's love for you. **Conclude your discussion with prayer for one another... personal requests and also reflecting on what you've shared about joyful boldness in your lives. Don't miss it!**







# Acts

## The conversion of Cornelius

Study 11 | Acts 9:32 - 11:18

### INTRODUCTION

In the very beginning of the church, Jesus shows clearly that he wanted the gospel to go to into every culture and national grouping of people. During the post-resurrection apostolic training period, he said, *"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."* (1:8). On Pentacost, the Holy Spirit came down and initiated, in a sense, the first worship service of the empowered New Testament church. And that first service was multi-lingual and the audience was multi-cultural. Despite all these clear signals from God, the early church was almost exclusively Jewish, and even the apostles were slow to see that Gentiles were to be included in the church as equals.

Beginning in Acts 7, Luke shows how God took off the church's "cultural blinders". First, Stephen as a teacher seemed to grasp better than others that the gospel had to go to all peoples and all nations. Second, the persecution in Jerusalem scattered Christians and some went to preach in Samaria (cf. 1:6). Phillip led and Ethiopian to Christ (Acts 8). Third, God calls Paul to himself in Acts 9, and Paul of course was to be the main instrument of God's mission to the Gentiles. Now in Acts 9:32-11:18 Luke turns to Peter. *"Both [Paul and Peter] had a key role to play in liberating the gospel from its Jewish clothing and opening the kingdom of God to the Gentiles."* (Stott, p.181) Whereas Paul had to be converted to Christ, Peter still needed to be converted in his thinking — to see that implications of the gospel of grace for the breaking down of cultural and racial barriers between people. So the "conversion" of Peter is as important as the conversion of Cornelius in these chapters.

#### **1. 9:32-42. Why do you think Luke includes these two miracles as an introduction to the longer account of Cornelius' conversion?**

This is a valid question, because all indications are that the apostles did *"many miraculous signs and wonders"* (2:43). So if acts were many and varied, why did Luke select these two to reintroduce us to Peter (who has been missing from the narrative since the middle of chapter 5).

These two miracles are nearly exact parallels to two of Jesus' miracles, and they are even similar to the kind of miracles that authenticated the ministries of Elijah and Elisha (cf. I Kings 17:17-24; II Kings 4:32-37). The word "authenticated" is the key. For Paul himself pointed to his miracles as being *"the things that mark an apostle"* (II Cor.12:12). Paul was saying here that his miracles were done upon the same pattern and with the same power as Jesus' miracles — and this authenticated him as an apostle whose message was one of divine revelation. Luke then is probably showing us these two miracles not only because they are wonderful and encouraging, but because they show that God was with him and that he was a true apostle. This would then set the reader up to see his pronouncement about the salvation of the Genitiles (in Acts 10-11) as authoritative.

The first miracle, the healing of Aeneas the paralytic, is very reminiscent of Jesus healing of the paralytic in Capernaum (Mark 2:1-12; Matt.9:1-8). Jesus says, *"Get up, take your mat..."* (Matt.9:6) and Peter says, *"Get up and tidy up your mat..."* (9:34) On the other hand, the raising of Tabitha is also extremely reminiscent of Jesus' raising of Jairus' daughter from the dead in Mark 5. For there Jesus said, *"Talitha (little girl), get up"* (Mark 5:41), and here Peter says, *"Tabitha, get up"* (9:40). These parallels to Jesus' miracles are too strong to be accidents. Luke chose them because they show (as Peter himself says in 9:34) that Jesus himself is healing people through Peter (cf. *"Aeneas... Jesus heals you"*). Notice also that before he heals Tabitha *"he got down on his knees and prayed."* (9:40) Both incidents show that he is not healing in his own power (as Jesus did) but is relying on the pattern and power of Christ himself.

**2. 10:1-8, 22, 34-35. Cornelius is an example of a "good man" without the gospel. What do these verses teach us about such a person?**

Cornelius was one of those Gentiles called in the NT "God-fearers" (see Acts 13:16, 26). Who were they?

"A proselyte was a Gentile who undertook to keep the Jewish law in its entirety and was admitted into full fellowship with the people of Israel by a three-fold rite: (1) circumcision for male proselytes, (2) a purificatory self-baptism in the presence of witnesses, and (3) the offering of a sacrifice... Many Gentiles in those days, while not prepared to enter the Jewish community as full proselytes, were attracted by the simple monotheism of Jewish... worship and by the ethical standards of the Jewish way of life..."

(F.F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, p.64, 216)

First, Cornelius respected God.

Even if you don't know this background information, we can see infer from the text that Cornelius, a) prayed to the one God of Israel (v.2 – *"prayed to God regularly*, b) obeyed the general moral law of God (though not all the OT ceremonial regulations) (v.22 – *"righteous"*; v.35 – *"do what is right"*), and c) was kind to the poor (v.2 – *"gave generously to those in need"*). In sum, he both respected and prayed to God in general, and lived a moral life in general. He was by no means a Christian, having heard nothing yet about Jesus Christ. He was also not a Jew, though from the Jews he has probably learned things about God that he accepted and honored. Rather he was the classic "good non-Christian" who honored God in a general way and lived an exemplary, just and generous life.

Second, God respected Cornelius!

Two statements are very strong, even startling. First, v.4 – *"your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering — [mnemosynon] — before God."* The Greek word is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to refer to the burnt offering (cf. Lev.2:2), which was not a sacrifice for sin, but an offering of gratitude to God. Second, in v.35, Peter says (referring

to Cornelius) “[God] accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right”. This means that Cornelius “lived up to the light that he had” — i.e. what he did know about God he honored. All he knew was that God was great and worthy of obedience and respect and gratitude. So he gave it. And God in turn shows Cornelius a certain regard.

The nature of this “regard” is extremely interesting, and we must adopt a very carefully balanced approach here. Some read the word “accept” as meaning that people like Cornelius are saved — accepted in the full sense of being “justified” (Rom.3:21ff). But that not only contradicts the rest of the Bible, but the rest of Acts (see 4:12) and even the rest of this story — for if Cornelius is saved, why does Peter need to come to him and preach the gospel to him? On the other hand, many Christians seem to regard all non-Christians as equally despicable. Here, however we see God showing some kind of regard and respect for a man who does not have enough spiritual knowledge to be saved, but who is honoring all the spiritual knowledge he has. Therefore, Cornelius is a “seeker” (cf. I Cor.14:24, where “one who does not understand” means “a seeker after more knowledge; an inquirer”).

#### Third, nevertheless Cornelius was not saved.

Cornelius, despite all his goodness and desire for God, did not have “life”. 11:18 tells us that only after hearing the gospel was he granted life — i.e. eternal life. Before, he was a “nice” person, not a “new” person. In order to get life, he needed to do two things. First, he had to repent (11:18). Obviously, if he scrupulously obeyed God’s law, then he would have repented for sins often before. So what is this repentance that he was now, for the first time granted? He repented not just of his sins but of his best deeds — he repented of “working” for his salvation (Rom.4:5). Second, he had to believe in Jesus Christ, his person and work (Acts 15:7). Only then was he “saved” (11:14), have his sins forgiven (10:43) and receive the Holy Spirit (10:45).

#### Conclusion

Some might say that anyone who has this kind of heart goodness and desire for God is always a “pre-Christian” — someone who God is preparing and who inevitably will become a Christian. That is very possible — but this passage does not say that. What it does say is that, a) first, no matter how good and wonderful a person is, he or she cannot be forgiven and fully accepted without the gospel and the new birth. We cannot expect people to be saved without the preached word of Christ. If Cornelius needed to be saved — everyone does! But it also teaches us that b) second, we must show great respect for non-Christians who obviously are capable of a great deal of moral and spiritual wisdom. Some theologians would say that we should realize that God gives a lot of “common grace” — that he gives a lot of moral sense and wisdom and virtue to people apart from faith in Jesus Christ. And we should recognize such people. God obviously prefers righteousness to unrighteousness and sincerity to insincerity in everyone. But we should not on the other hand forget that we

need “special grace”, the revelation of Jesus Christ, if we are to become members of God’s family. So this passage should not influence us to stop evangelizing the nations, but it should bring us to do so with a great deal of civility and respect and honor for those like Cornelius.

### 3. 10:9-23. How does break down Peter’s racial/cultural prejudices?

The fact that God has to send multiple, strong, obviously-supernatural signs to Peter, in order to get him to even visit a Gentile — shows how strong racial prejudices were and how wide was the chasm between Jew and Gentile.

“It is difficult for us to grasp the impassable gulf which yawned in those days between the Jews on the one hand and the Gentiles on the other. Not that the Old Testament countenanced such a divide... it affirmed that God had a purpose for [the Gentiles]. By choosing and blessing [the Jews] he intended to bless all the families of the earth (Gen.12:1-4)... The tragedy was that Israel twisted this doctrine of election into one of favoritism, became filled with racial pride and hatred, despised the Gentiles as ‘dogs’, and developed traditions that kept them apart. No orthodox Jew would ever enter the home of a Gentile...all familiar intercourse with Gentiles was forbidden...”

(Stott, p.185)

The Jewish ceremonial laws of clean and unclean foods and garments and practices were God’s “visual aid” to demonstrate that people were sinful, that they could not just “come in” to God’s presence, that he was a Holy God, and that people needed to keep separate from sin and evil. In fact, the clean-unclean laws are really impossible to keep completely — which was also God’s way of showing people that they could never cleanse themselves from sin. But over the centuries, the clean-unclean laws were twisted into a way of works-righteousness and as a way to keep separate from other nations! As a result of all this, God has to send three great “hammer blows” to even get Peter to go to Cornelius.

First, the vision God sends is of a sheet containing a mixture of animals, many of which were unclean. (The laws of clean and unclean animals are laid down in Leviticus 11. Because the sheet contained “*all kinds*” (v.12) of animals, the command to “*kill and eat*” (v.13) was to contradict the OT ceremonial law. This would have deeply offended Peter’s conscience and disgusted him emotionally. He says so in v.14. But three times God repeats that “*do not call anything impure that God has made clean*” (v.15-16). The vision alone is insufficient to help Peter. He doesn’t get it (v.17).

Second, God the Spirit directly commands him to go with the men who are about to appear at his door (v.19-20). Third, he hears from the men that an angel had appeared to a Gentile centurion, Cornelius, directing him to summons Peter. Only these three things together were sufficient to even get Peter to go to the house of an unclean Gentile.

**4. 10:34-48. How does v.34-35 (and his presentation of the gospel) show that Peter understands now the meaning of the vision? What is the meaning of the vision?**

God is saying in the vision: “even those things that are defiled and unfit for my presence I can make clean and fit for my presence. There is no being that I cannot make clean.” The key word is “*make*”. Peter had assumed that some things just were inherently clean and other things just inherently unclean. God is introducing a new concept — that salvation is not a matter of pedigree or even of achievement, but is the result of the action of God. So nothing is inherently and permanently unclean. The Gentiles, who were ceremonially unclean, were like the the unclean animals in the sheet, mixed in with the “clean” animals, who represented the Jews. When God cleanses someone from sin, then they are equal with anyone else and should all be in association together. “*Now I realize... God does not show favoritism*” (10:34) means “now I see that external criteria such as appearance, race, nationality, class, gender make not a whit of difference for whether I am loved and justified by God”. (Peter, obviously, knows this at one level — it’s the gospel! But at another level he had not applied it to his habitual attitude toward Gentiles.) The religion of good works will definitely give some people the right to feel superior to others. But the gospel of grace means that no saved person can feel superior to any other saved person — because we are all saved by grace alone.

We looked at 10:34-35 above and said that this cannot mean that Cornelius (and other good, God-respecting people) are saved apart from Christ. Indeed, Peter shows him that only through Christ will his sins be forgiven (10:43). But v.34-35 means that Peter finally sees that nationality and race makes no difference. John Stott puts the meaning of v.34-35 perfectly:

“‘No favoritism’... [means] that Cornelius’ Gentile nationality was acceptable so that he did not have to become a Jew, not that his own righteousness was adequate so that he had no need to become a Christian. For God is not indifferent to religions, but indifferent to nations.”

The presentation of the gospel that Peter gives is significant in that it is virtually the same as his gospel preaching to Jews (cf. his sermons in Acts 2 and 3). This does not mean that we do not adapt our gospel communication to our audience. There is much evidence that Paul did so in the rest of the book of Acts. But in this instance the substantial sameness of the presentation shows that the same gospel is to come to all peoples.

**5. 10:44-11:18. What is the final (the fourth) sign given by God to Peter that the gospel is for the Gentiles? How do our converts teach us — ad Cornelius taught Peter?**

We said that the first three signs to Peter were the vision, the direct voice of the spirit, and the message from the angel to Cornelius. Now finally, Peter sees with his very eyes, the signs of Spirit-fullness come upon the Gentiles who believed (v.44-47). We are told that he was not even finished with his sermon (v.44) when those who *“heard the message”* (i.e. who believed) received the spirit. We know from the rest of the book of Acts that not everyone who received an anointing from the Holy Spirit speaks in tongues (see 4:31 for example). But in this case, God evidently wanted to show Peter beyond a doubt that the Gentiles were full members in the church, so he sent the spirit in such a way that it resembled the Day of Pentacost. Thus Peter says, *“the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning”* (11:15). In other words, this was a Gentile Pentecost. Just as on the original Pentecost God had given special dramatic manifestations to assure everyone of his purpose, so he sent the Spirit in a powerful way here. Cornelius and the household experienced tremendous joy and love and power, and they began to praise God and articulate his glory — it was like Acts 2. Of course, not everyone gets converted like this! (Many people get converted very quietly. It is often not even possible until later to know that you were converted at a particular time.) But God sent this power to deliver the last “hammer blow” to the stubbornness and doubt of Peter.

One of the lessons we learn here is that we must not only teach our converts, but learn from them. Clearly, Peter was as affected by Cornelius as Cornelius by Peter! And that is a wonder that is often seen. If we win a person to Christ, often that person will teach us many things. a) Often the person shows us how little faith we have — especially if the new convert is someone we consider a “hard case”. When such come to Christ, it really humbles us that we had such low expectations. b) Often the person can also show us new things about the faith, especially if the person is of a different culture or personality from ours. New converts can often see things in the Bible we have been blind to, because their experience and background leads them to ask God questions that we aren’t even asking. The Peter-Cornelius story means we must not be too authoritarian or proud, but should be open and willing to learn from new believers.

## CONVERSION: PART II PROJECT

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you  
"?" -for something that raised a question

### THE GOSPEL AND THE "SEEKER"

In I Corinthians 14:24 Paul describes a person who comes to a worship service "who does not understand" — literally a "seeker". We have seen Cornelius is a "seeker" who God acknowledges and sincere (Acts 10:1-4). Though they may be very good persons, they still need to be brought to "repentance unto life" (Acts 11:14). How can we help a person who is "on the verge" — who seems to want to come to Christ. Here are some helps on helping such persons:

Principles for applying the gospel to seekers

The following is a paraphrase of a lecture in an out of print book by a Presbyterian minister of the early 19th century. William Sprague, Lectures on Revival, Lecture 6

#### 1. Determine the amount of knowledge and the amount of feeling.

- if he is long on feeling and short on knowledge, your course of action is fairly simple. He may be ripe for conversion. Present the truths of the gospel in a balanced, full way. You may be bold to press for a commitment. If he will not, discover at what point he has trouble. Review the outline briefly, asking, "Do you understand and agree that first, \_\_\_\_\_, and second, \_\_\_\_\_..."
- if he is long on knowledge and short on feeling, you may need to elaborate the gospel presentation with vivid illustrations and pointed applications.. Show him that Christianity is not an academic matter, not a matter of weaving a web of intricate thought-forms. Say, as Whitefield, *"It is one thing to assent with your mouth, and another thing to believe from the heart. If you have really done that, a truth affects you mind, will, and emotions. Have you ever been saddened by your sins? Have you cried out to God that you need a saviour? Has the mercy of God in Christ seemed precious to you?"* [Caution: Keep in mind the words of Thomas Watson — *"But wouldest thou know when thou hast been humbled enough for sin? When thou are willing to let go thy sins. The gold has lain long enough in the furnace when the dross is purged out; so, when the love of sin is purged out, a soul is humbled enough, what needs more? If a needle has let out the abscess, what needs a lance? Be no more cruel to thyself than God would have thee."* – from A Body of Divinity, p. 451



**2. Impress on the awakened sinner the need to come to God on gospel terms immediately.**

- God owns you. Every day you rule your own life you become more and more guilty.
- The concern you have now is the gracious influence of the spirit of God. If you decide to come to God at your own convenience, you are mocking God. He is too great for you to snap your fingers when you are ready. Who is King around here? You are in great danger of losing the openness of heart you have now. Do you think you can repent any time you wish? No! Repentance is a gift from God, which he is offering you now. You must take it or risk becoming too hard to care. Then you will be lost forever. Don't delay. Even a passing conversation with a friend can drive away your convictions. Act now.

**3. Beware of a spirit of self-righteousness.**

- When a man is first awakened to his need, he usually sets out on a furious effort to please God through his efforts (church attendance, prayer, obeying the law). Warn him of this.
- Say, "Don't stop striving to please God, but do it in the spirit of the new covenant, not the covenant of works. There is no actual saving value in your strivings, only gratitude value (saying "thank you" for a full salvation). Until you accept this and fall down helpless at the feet of Christ's mercy and are willing to accept the free gift of eternal life, you cannot be saved."
- Warn him that he can assent to justification by faith in the abstract and still try to catch God's eye with his efforts, so he must examine his heart.

**4. Beware of making comfort your ultimate end instead of giving God his due.**

- If you see yourself as a sufferer looking for relief primarily, you will never find peace. God is no sugar daddy to be used by you to secure your own happiness. Say to him: "Blessed are they which hunger and thirst after — what? Blessedness? No! Righteousness! Happy are they which don't seek happiness, but rather to give God his due. Happiness never comes to those who seek it directly. You are a sinner, in need of pardon. Give God what you owe: repentance, faith, obedience. Your troubles will take care of themselves. Until you have grasped this in your heart, you'll not have peace."

**5. If, after sharing the gospel, the person is not ready to repent and believe, yet is still awakened, advise this:**

- Spend a lot of time reading good books, the Bible, and in prayer. Coming to church meetings and so on is good, but no substitute. It is too easy to derive your spirituality from the environment. Also, many well-meaning counselors may be confusing. Talk often with one or two spiritual advisors and with the Lord
- Read the intriguing sermon by Lloyd-Jones on Mark 8:22,26 — "Men as Trees, Walking" in *Spiritual Depression: Causes and Cures*. He tells about people who are in a similar condition to the blind man. They seemed to have been touched by Jesus — they see things they couldn't see before, yet things are still not in focus. What did the blind man do? He was honest. He did not say, "I see fine!" He admitted his condition and Jesus touched him again. So tell Jesus what you see and what you don't see. Ask him to touch you some more until you see clearly.
- But above all, stress that these means of study and prayer are only means to the end. They cannot merit anything from God. They are only ways to enable God to work in you.

**Common objections or problems posed by seekers**

**1. "I just can't believe"** What you are describing is simply the settled distaste every natural heart has to God. Don't make an excuse for it. In yourself, you are unable to believe, but the Holy Spirit has already come to your aid. If you see what you have to do and wish that you could do it, then that is evidence of the Holy Spirit's work. (You give yourself too much credit! You couldn't see all these things unless the Spirit was already at work! Don't despair.) Now, as long as this divine aid is offered to you, you must act. Don't wait for some kind of psychological sense of certainty; faith is acting on what you know to be true.

Paul says: "We walk by faith, not by sight". See? He doesn't pit faith against reason, he pits faith against feelings and appearances. Do you see what you must do? Then repent, trust, obey Christ. How can you stand on this plea of inability? That is an abstract question, and it is a sinful refusal.

**2. "I've tried all you've said to do, but it hasn't worked."** [Evaluate: Either he hasn't 'tried' properly, or he has a false understanding of what 'worked' means.] What do you mean by 'worked'? Did you expect a certain feeling? Did you expect your problems to go away. Faith is acting on what you know to be true, despite how things feel or appear ("We walk by faith, not by sight".) Imagine that a doctor tells you, "You are dying because of all the fat and starch you are eating; if you stop eating steak and potatoes, your body will begin to strengthen". The first time someone beside you eats a big steak dinner, won't it smell great? It doesn't smell dangerous and deadly. Now if you exercise faith, you follow what you know to be true (this food is poison to me), or you can

follow your appetites, senses, and feelings. What if you exercise faith? Will it immediately feel wonderful? NO! Your stomach will growl and you will feel unsatisfied. It is only as you practice faith over time that the healing and health (that is, the good feeling and visible effects) will come. So it is with saving faith. You may not at first experience anything remarkable. Nor will all your problems be solved. But your standing with God is changed, and eventually, the effects will flow out into your whole life. Phil. 2:12-14 tells us that the strength and life of God comes as you obey him. He works as we work.

How have you been trying? Perhaps you have been striving in a spirit of self-righteousness (see above). Perhaps you have been striving in a spirit of bargaining with God, instead of approaching him as a sovereign king (see above). ("I'll do this and that if God will do this and that". Instead say, "I owe God everything, and he owes me nothing; I'll gladly do whatever he bids me WITHOUT CONDITIONS". If you have put conditions on your seeking him, he will not meet you.) [Bottom line.] I'm sorry you have been frustrated in your seeking God, and I cannot know your heart or God's heart enough to tell you why you haven't felt that you've connected with him. But I do know this. You haven't got the option of giving up. His disciples said to Jesus, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You [alone] have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68). What is your alternative? You have none. If you keep seeking, Jesus says that no one who comes to him will he cast out (John 6:37). On the other hand, if you stop seeking him, you will certainly perish.

**3. "I just don't have any sorrow for sin or desire for God."** [He may be the victim of having heard long, lurid testimonies which convinced him that he too must have an extended period of self-loathing and weeping over his sin.] It is not Biblical to require everyone to have equally long, vivid, and horrible sorrow over sin. Look at Matthew, Zaccheus, the Phillipian jailer, and Lydia (Luke 19:9; Acts 16:14, etc.) There is no indication that they spent time in terror and horror. They were called abruptly and they came. Look at Jesus invitation to the Laodiceans (Rev. 3:15-20). He invites the lukewarm, self-deluded people to open to him so he can fellowship with him. They were not put through some long time of conviction.

Listen! If your house had caught on fire, how alarmed would you have to feel about it in order to be saved? Just enough to get out! It doesn't matter whether you leave crying 'Oh! My house, my house' or not. It doesn't matter if you are in a panic or just a bit upset. THE ONLY GOOD YOUR EMOTIONS AND FEAR ARE IS TO GET YOU TO LEAVE. The only good conviction of sin is to get you to repent and humble yourself under the mighty hand of your king. So submit! Don't wait to feel a certain way. [Ultimately, anyone who is concerned about lack of sorrow and feeling is caught in a self-righteous spirit. He hopes to please God with his pious feelings. Don't allow this. Confront him.]

**4. "I'm too bad/depressed."** Look how far Jesus came to save sinners! Are you worse than Paul? (I Tim. 1:15) Jesus loves to save sinners; he delights to do it. (Luke 15:7; Is. 53:11; Zeph.3:16-17). The Bible says God is "mighty to save"; are you saying that He is not strong enough to deal with your sins? Are you mightier than God? [Again, remember that this complaint is often a subtle form of self-righteousness. The man thinks he is unworthy. Then he is assuming his worthiness is the necessary basis for coming to Christ.]

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. What did you find most interesting/helpful?**
- 2. What questions did this raise?**
- 3. Is there anything here you wish you knew when you were a young Christian?**



# Acts

## New mission breakthrough

Study 12 | Acts 11:19 - 12:24

### INTRODUCTION

The city of Antioch was the third largest city of the Roman Empire (after Rome and Alexandria) and the capital of Syria. It was unusually multi-cultural and cosmopolitan, even for a large city. The city officials encouraged immigration, and offered Jews full citizenship. Thus there were very large, vital communities of Jews, Greeks, Romans, Asians, and Africans. This city becomes the site of the next new breakthrough in the Christian mission.

- 1. 11:19-24. What was the distinctive feature of gospel communication at Antioch? How do you think their preaching would have been different from the preaching of Peter that we have seen? What were the results of this ministry?**

The earliest evangelists in Antioch were “mavericks”, since most of the missionaries gave the Christian message “*only to Jews*” (v.19). But several daring pioneers preached to Greeks “*the good news about the Lord Jesus Christ*” (v.20). This was distinctive, because it had never been done on any kind of scale before. Of course, Peter had just seen with his own eyes God convert a Gentile centurion and his family. But no one had acted on this strategically yet — no one had taken the gospel to the Gentiles. And when Phillip preached to the Samaritans (8:4-6), that too was a bold move. But the Samaritans were very close cousins of the Jews (despite the animosity between them). The Samaritans were racially mixed — half-Jews. And they shared with the Jews a belief in the God of the Bible, and in a coming Messiah (see F.F.Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, p.177). At Antioch, however, the gospel is taken to sheer pagans, as a group, for the first time.

This would have meant a very new approach to articulating the message. Jesus could not have been proclaimed as the Hope of Israel, as Peter had done. We are not given any details, but they called him “*Lord*”, the Greek *kurios* (v.20). Many Greeks and pagans at that time were flocking to “mystery religions” which sought to connect devotees to a divine *kurios* who could guarantee salvation and immortality. Now Jesus was being proclaimed as that Lord (see Bruce, p.177).

The results of this ministry were swift and significant. Instead of an isolated Ethiopian or Roman centurion, now the Gentiles were coming to faith on a large scale. “*The Lord’s hand was with them*” (v.22) — this means that there was a greater response to the gospel than was usual. God’s power was especially evident. “*A great number of people believed and turned to the Lord*” (v.22).

**2. 11:22-26. What were the reasons that Barnabus was sent? What were the elements of his ministry — and the results of it?**

There were probably two reasons that Barnabus was sent (v.22). The first reason is in v.23a — to look for “*evidence of the grace of God*”. This was essentially a quality control. Certainly some of the people who sent Barnabus for this purpose were suspicious and negative about this astounding “*innovation*”. The Jerusalem Christians could not believe in the authenticity of this new work without one of their own “*signing off on it*”. Nevertheless, it is good to have such accountability for missionaries and new works. The second reason for Barnabus’ visit is in v.23b — to “*encourage... them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts*”. Young Christians and churches do not just need evaluation and accountability. They also need the encouragement and affirmation of wise and mature leaders. In summary, the components of his ministry were a) evaluation and accreditation (v.23a), and b) joyous (“*glad*”) affirmation and encouragement teaching (v.23b).

The results of this visit were far-reaching. On the one hand he did see that this was a real work of God. (This “*evidence*” that he discovered would have included things like: changed character, genuine worship, and a grasp on the doctrines of grace.) And so the first effect of his ministry was on the whole church at large. If he had been a narrow minded man, he could have turned the rest of the church against this new form of gospel communication and mission. It could have split the young church very easily. But God had seen to it that the emissary sent from Jerusalem at this extremely crucial moment was a wise and generous man. The second result of his visit was on the Antioch church itself. His joy was obvious, and he began a teaching ministry that was not as much prophetic (challenging, convicting) as priestly (encouraging, confirming). Since he called them to “*remain*” true to the Lord, that meant he was telling them that they had found the Lord and were following truly. Now he gave them pointers in how to continue on in their path of discipleship. If we look at the sentence carefully, we see that his “*encouragement*” (Grk. *parakaleo*) produced “*remaining true*”. In other words, his encouragement produced endurance in them.

The result of this priestly ministry is very striking. v.24 says that “*and a great number of people were brought to the Lord*”. This is a new influx of new converts — not the same as the first wave of v.21 — which is the result of Barnabus’ ministry. It is intriguing, since Barnabus did not do an evangelistic ministry — his work was directed to encouraging and stirring up the joy and love of the new believers. So how could all the new converts be the result of his ministry? The only answer is that his work of encouraging and supporting gave the new believers the stimulus to continue their friendship evangelism. Here then we see the “*clergy*” training the lay people and the lay people doing the evangelism.

We've seen the first two elements in Barnabus' ministry: accountability/evaluation and encouragement/motivation. But in vv.25-26 we see that Barnabus did a third thing — he built a ministry team and developed new leadership. It is a sign of his remarkable humility that Barnabus would want to share his ministry with Saul (St.Paul). Remember that Barnabus was the only mature leader in Antioch, surrounded by hoardes of adoring new believers, and his minstry was bearing enormous fruit. Instead of consolidating his own pre-eminence, Barnabus seeks out Saul, a man he knows is multi-gifted and extremely talented — more talented (as history proved) than Barnabus himself. But Barnabus knows that the ministry will not multiply if he holds on to it and becomes a "bottleneck", so he seeks out a man who will outshine him.

Why did Barnabus seek out Saul? Surely he knew of his talent, and also of his cosmopolitan education and breadth of experience — he was a natural for a sophisticated, multi-ethnic city. But Barnabus may have known also of Paul's original calling to go to the Gentiles (9:15,27). At any rate, Barnabus is a great model to us of ministry. He humbly shares his ministry with potential leaders. He does not work alone but in a team. He does not hold on to ministry but raises up new leaders and gives his responsibilities away.

**3. 11:19-30. Look at the whole history of the young church in Antioch. Mark the number of stages in its development and name each one.**

First, there was the cross-cultural and courageous preaching of the gospel by the Cypriot and Cyrene missionaries (v.20). They sowed the "good news".

Second, God responded and his hand (power) caused many to believe: *"the Lord's hand was with them, and a great number... believed and turned"* (v.21).

Third, the new converts are quickly examined and encouraged/confirmed by Barnabus. They get lots of affirmation. (v.22-24).

Fourth, the encouraged converts leads to a greater dynamic of evangelism, and lots more people come to faith (v.24).

Fifth, a team ministry of in depth training and discipleship and leadership development is begun by Barnabus and Saul. (For Saul, this is his own advanced training.) This lasts one year (v.25-26).

Finally, the young church begins to help its mother church and begins to serve and minister in deed (v.27-30) and eventually in word (by sending out Saul and Barnabus to plant new churches (13:1ff.) Notice that one of the first signs of vitality is, again, financial generosity! (cf. Acts 4:31-37).



**4. Why do you think that Christians weren't called "Christians" until Antioch (v.26)? Why do you think the Antioch church was so successful in showing the power of the gospel?**

The Antioch church was the first place that the gospel had created a truly new humanity out of many different nationalities. Before, when the outside world saw a group of Christians meeting together, they only saw Jews, and they figured that this was just some variety of Judaism. It is also true that, if the outside world had only seen Greeks together or Romans worshipping together, then it would have figured that it was just some variety of Greek religion or Roman religion. The world believes that religion is just a function of your culture, family, or class. But when they saw something absolutely new — people coming to faith across cultural and racial and class boundaries — then they realized that this was something unique and different. The multi-cultural shape of the Antioch church seriously undermined the popular skepticism that believed all religion to be just a part of one's culture. (e.g. "I'm Catholic because I'm Italian, I'm Presbyterian because I'm Scottish, I'm Muslim because I'm Bosnian")

There was no more powerful witness to the unique power of Christianity than its "inclusiveness". A historian explains why this made Christianity stand out from all other religions of the time:

"A fourth reason for Christianity's success is to be found in its inclusiveness. More than any of its competitors it attracted all races and classes... Judaism never quite escaped from its racial bonds... Christianity however gloried in its appeal to Jew and Gentile, Greek and barbarian. The philosophies never really won the allegiance of the masses... they appealed primarily to the educated... Christianity, however... drew the lowly and unlettered... yet also developed a philosophy which commanded the respect of many of the learned... Christianity, too, was for both sexes, whereas two of its main rivals were primarily for men. The Church welcomed both rich and poor. In contrast with it, the mystery cults were usually for people of means: initiation into them was expensive... No other [religion] took in so many groups and strata of society... The query must be raised of why this comprehensiveness came to be. It was not in Judaism. Why did it appear in Christianity?"

– K.S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* vol.1 (Harper and Row, 1937).

This may be a reason why the Antioch church and the multi-cultural congregations of the Graeco-Roman cities grew even more rapidly than the Jewish churches. Barriers that separated people (normally) did not just come down as a result of the gospel preaching, but the broken barriers were actually a major part of the gospel communication. They shocked onlookers — no other religion had produced it. How could this religion, then, be seen as simply the power-grab move of a particular culture or strata of society? It could not. That is why only in Antioch were believers called "Christians" and only there did the world realize something remarkable had been unleashed in the empire.

**Follow up question: Answer Latourette’s question. What does the gospel have (that other religions don’t) that leads to breaking of social barriers? Have you seen evidence of this power first hand?**

Refer to the study of Act 2 for insights. Other religions believe in justification by works — and thus they encourage people to have pride in their cultures and customs. But the gospel teaches that we are sinners saved by grace alone. It undermines the need to look down on other cultures, it humbles us, and it keeps us from turning our cultural customs into absolutes. There are many ways that the gospel undermines social barriers, race- and class- pride. Think of more!

**5. 12:1-24. What does the incident about Peter teach us about prayer?**

v.5 tells us about prayer’s character — it must be *earnest* and corporate. The word for “earnestly” can be translated “agonized”. It is the strongest word possible — it means intensity of feeling, of thinking, and of will.

v.6-11 tells us about prayer’s power over obstacles — Peter was a) chained, b) between two soldiers, c) then guarded by two sets of sentries, d) finally locked in behind an iron gate. Prayer cut through them all.

v.12-17 tells us about how little we believe in the power of prayer. Even the people whose prayers were strong enough for God to work did not have enough faith to believe they were answered. Do we believe that intercessory prayer has this kind of power? Cf. II Cor.1:8-11; Eph.3:20,21).

## ENCOURAGEMENT PROJECT

Read and mark                    “!” - for something that helped you  
     “?” -for something that raised a question

**Introduction**

Acts 11:19ff shows the importance of the ministry of encouragement. vv.22-24 virtually glows as we read it. Clearly, Barnabus’ ministry of encouragement was enormously powerful in the history of the church. We tend to underestimate the importance of this work. Barnabus’ ministry is “sandwiched” between the ministry of evangelism and of training/discipleship. It is a crying need of new Christians in particular, and it is like the “oil” in the church’s “engine” — it is a vital spiritual lubricant. Without it, we burn up and burn out.

**Definition**

The very name “Barnabus” means “son of consolation”. Encouragement is not the same as discipling and teaching. It is not the same as evangelism. It is affirming, confirming, supporting, coaching, consoling, cheering. It doesn’t seem to take as much knowledge or skill as evangelism or discipling *per se*, but here we see the power. Without encouragement, we will never do the work of evangelism and discipling that we need to do.

The very Greek word translated “encouragement” is “*para-kaleo*” which literally means “to call alongside”. It means to come near, to identify closely, to motivate and build confidence and create endurance in another person. To encourage is not to say, “get going” or “do what I have done” but “let’s get going”. An encourager is good at putting him or herself in another’s shoes. It is often used as a synonym for “counseling” in the New Testament.

In some of these passages *parakaleo* is translated “exhort”, but it is always exhorting with a strong proportion of comfort and affirmation.) Encouragers are patient (I Thess.5:4) gentle, affectionate (I Thess.2:7-11), positive and non-argumentative (II Tim.2:24-26), and is more effective when using the Bible skillfully (Rom.15:4; II Tim.4:1-4).

**Place**

Encouragement is especially important for newer believers, which we see both here and in Acts 14:21-22, where again we see that encouragement is something done for young converts after they have heard the good news.

Encouragement is also something necessary for those going through difficult times (II Cor.1:-9; Acts 14:22-23).

Sometimes even people who are being disobedient respond better to encouragement (II Thess.3:11-13; Heb.3:13) than to warning.

**Responsibility**

So often our problems are aggravated because we do not have encouragers in our lives. Sometimes we don't get encouragement because we are too proud to seek it or let people know we need it. Other times we are afraid that if we share our weakness we will get warning instead of encouragement. We have to be willing, however to meet and make ourselves vulnerable to others (James 5:16; Heb.10:24-25), in order to receive encouragement from God through other brothers and sisters.

It is also our duty to look around us and notice who needs encouragement. On the one hand, all Christians are to encourage each other (Heb.3:13; 10:24-25), and therefore we must always be on the look out. But some people have a gift of this — it is listed as a spiritual gift in Romans 12:8. One sign that you are good at this is that people tend to want to open up to you about their problems. Consider ways that you could make better use of this gift. The church needs more Barnabuses!

## APPLICATION QUESTIONS

**Think of other marks and characteristics of an encourager.**

**Is the ministry of encouragement something you particularly need right now?**

**Is it something that you could give to someone in need right now?**



# Acts

## Paul presents the Gospel

Study 13 | Acts 12:25 - 13:52

### INTRODUCTION

Luke shows us that the gospel is a living thing. Often called *“the word of God”*, Luke depicts it as growing and multiplying under its own power (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). Luke has been outlining how the gospel has been flowing and progressing according to the pattern Jesus laid down in Acts 1:8. There he directed the apostles to go *“Jerusalem... Samaria... the ends of the earth”*. In Acts 2-6 we saw the gospel spreading like lightning in Jerusalem (*“so the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly”* 6:7). That was the first stage. Then in Acts 7-8 we saw the gospel begin breaking through both human cultures and the disciples’ expectations. First, through the deacon-evangelists, Stephen (by his theology and death) and Phillip (by his mission to Samaria) we saw the gospel break out of Jerusalem into its first new cultures — the Samaritans and the Ethiopian. In Acts 10-12, through the conversion of Cornelius and the great new church in Antioch, we saw the gospel show its power not only to enter any and every culture and class, but to also unite Christians with a bond deeper than any human distinction. For the first time, the world was seeing a religion that is truly super-natural and trans-cultural. To become a Christian a Greek does not have to become a Jew, a plebian does not have to become patrician or vica versa. For Christianity is not the product of national and cultural consciousness — rather it is the shaper of consciousness. Acts 7-12 then was the second stage, in which the gospel spread across all cultures, and thus we read at the end of this period (*“But the word of God continued to increase and spread”* 12:24).

Now the stage is set for the final stage. *“All the time the action has been limited to the Palestinian and Syrian mainland. Nobody has yet caught the vision of taking the good news to the nations overseas.”* (Stott, p.215) The gospel has spread across cultures, but now it is about to explode geographically. It has become clear that it can transform anyone, and so the stage is set for the gospel’s spread *“to the ends of the earth”*. It begins with the church of Antioch. Paul and Barnabus had taken an offering to Jerusalem (11:29) and now had returned (12:25)

- 1. vv.1-3. This body became the first missionary-sending body in history. What led them to this? Notice the role of a) their leadership make-up, b) their routines, c) the Holy Spirit.**

Antioch first missionary sending church in Christian history. The evangelistic efforts in Samaria and Antioch were not strategically planned by the Jerusalem church. In both cases, Christians fleeing persecution simply shared their faith through friendship with the people around them in their new cities (see 8:1-4 and 11:19-20). How did the church in Antioch receive the insight to begin the worldwide missionary project?

a) Their leadership make-up. The church at Antioch had a council of leaders (evidently functioning something like a board of elders) who were “*prophets and teachers*”. (Luke does not tell us if all were prophet/teachers or if some were one and some the other. Nor does he define either here! Pity.) What is remarkable is the diverse range of human stations from which these men are drawn. Barnabus was a Cypriot Jew (4:36). Simeon was called “*Niger*” which means “the black”, almost certainly indicating that he was black African. Lucian was from “*Cyrene*” which was in North Africa. He may have been black, but most of the people of North Africa at that time were not. He was probably one of the original Cyrenian evangelists who came to Antioch in the first place (11:20). Manaen was either a foster-brother or relative of Herod Antipas, and thus was of royal, upper class status. And then there was Saul, who was a Jew and, essentially, an “academic” — a professor. The leadership of the church reflected the multi-class and -cultural membership of the church.

Experience tells us that such a group would not have always seen eye-to-eye! (Consider how Peter — a Jew with little sophistication, and Paul — a Jew with great education and sophistication — had conflicts due to differences in background.) Yet the leaders in such a diverse body would have continually cross-pollinated each other’s consciousness, so that they would have all been far more aware of the needs and opportunities of the whole Mediterranean world than any homogeneous leadership team. In general, a group of very different people who can agree on common goals is a far more creative body than one made of similar people. The concept of strategic missions was born in such a group. It figures.

b) Their routines. Luke indicates that the Antioch church did not come to the concept of strategic missions as a result of their seeking it directly. v.2 says, “*while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting*”. The most natural reading of these words is that they were not in a special season of prayer, nor were they specifically and deliberately planning for missions. Rather they were going about their routine work of worship and seeking God’s presence. (Who was praying? v.1 refers to the whole church along with the leaders, so it is probable that this prayer time was not just for the 5 prophet/teachers. Though we cannot be completely sure.)

What do we learn from this? Surely, we cannot infer from this that special seasons of prayer or deliberate planning is wrong! Rather, what we learn is that what would seem like “special” prayer for us was clearly “routine” for the Antiochan church! Periods of intense worship, fasting, and seeking God’s presence were just normal for them. And it shows us that this is the kind of church that God reveals himself to.

c) The Holy Spirit. Luke leaves us in the dark as to exactly how the Holy Spirit showed the church that he wanted Paul and Barnabus to become missionaries. This is very frustrating, of course! Did God send a prophecy through a member of the church (cf.11:28)? Was it an idea that came to some of them while they prayed and after deliberation decided the Holy Spirit was leading them to do

this as a body (cf. 15:28 with 15:1-22)? The Holy Spirit spoke to the church in both ways. The fact that Luke leaves us in the dark means that it is not necessary for us to know the method. In fact, by omitting the specific, he may be better teaching us that God will lead his church if we are seeking him in that way.

It is also important to notice that the Holy Spirit does not give many details! *"Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."* (v.2) The message does not indicate exactly what countries to go to nor what methods to use. This means that it was only shown to the church to send the two missionaries out, but not to tell them exactly what to do. It takes a sense of adventure to follow the Holy Spirit's calling. He does not show you the whole map, but takes you one step at a time.

Finally, notice that prayer was not only the cause of the word from the Lord, but it was the result. Possibly, during the meeting one or more people received the insight that Saul and Barnabas should be sent to plant new churches in other countries. In response to this insight, we see in v.3 we see that they again fasted and prayed some more. Why? They did so until they *"placed their hands on them"*. The laying on of hands is always a way of identifying with someone, saying "we are with you, part of you, agreeing with you." What this meant was that the whole church was confirming and agreeing that the Holy Spirit had truly called them. So, in response to the Spirit's leading some members, the whole group prayed and confirmed it.

## 2. vv.1-3. What can we learn from this incident for our own churches today?

John Stott has great way of summarizing what happened here. *"In our anxiety to do justice to the Holy Spirit's initiative, we should not depict the church's role as having been entirely passive... This balance will be a healthy corrective to opposite extremes. The first is the tendency to individualism, by which a Christian claims direct personal guidance by the Spirit without reference to the church. The second is the tendency to institutionalism, by which all decision-making is done by the church without reference to the Spirit... Personal choice... is safe and healthy only in relation to the Spirit and the church"*.

Thus we learn that, on the one hand, we are not to be self-accredited, saying, "God told me this" before we get confirmation from other Christians. On the other hand, we are not to turn our church into a bureaucracy, where decisions are made through mechanical processes only. We must seek to hear the Holy Spirit in the community, together. Then we must seek confirmation of what we have heard in the community, together. This is the way we balance and avoid individualism and institutionalism.

In v.2 we see that the leaders (and probably the people) prayed and sought God intensely, and were open to God's leading at such times. The leaders did not simply hold meetings together; they worshipped together. That guards against



institutionalism. In v.3 we see the leaders (and probably the people) prayed some more in response to God's leading and finally reached consensus that this strategy was the right thing to do. That guards against individualism.

**3. vv.6-12. Why was Paul so forceful with Elymas? Why was the miraculous judgement on Elymas appropriate?**

Paul's condemnation was very severe. He plays on the Elymas' proper name, "Bar-Jesus" which means "son of salvation", and says, "*you are a child of the devil*" v.10 (i.e. not of salvation). The miraculous judgement was that he was struck blind. Luke uses two words — "*mist and darkness*" — that at the time were medical terms for the loss of sight (Stott, p.220). Paul explains that the blindness is "*for a time*". Paul's forcefulness seems linked to a) the public nature of Elymas's opposition to the gospel, and b) the openness of the proconsul Sergius Paulus to the gospel. Paul discerned the official was "on the fence" and therefore acted decisively.

The judgement sign is "apt" — it is no mere stroke of vengeance by God or Paul. It is appropriate in two ways. First, it had instructive or revelational value. It was a perfect illustration that if we forfeit and deny the light (the truth) that we do have, we will become spiritually blind and confused. Surely Paul remembered vividly what it meant to be struck blind by God, as a sign to show him his spiritual blindness (Acts 9). In other words, nothing was happening to Elymas that had not happened to Paul! Second, the judgment had possible redemptive value. The blindness was temporary, not permanent. If Elymas "got the point" as Paul did, it could be the way for him to find God.

In the same way, we must be willing to speak out clearly, especially when there is a public opposition to the gospel that is spiritually harming a potentially open person. But despite the apparent sharpness of the rebuke, we should follow Paul's pattern of being "appropriate" in our opposition. In other words, we should be opposing people only in order to redeem them.

**4. vv.13-41. Read Paul's gospel presentation. What can you tell from the address about its intended audience? How does he make the case that Christianity is true in vv.16-25 and 31? What does he say the heart of Christianity is in vv.26-37? How does he call upon them to respond in vv.38-41?**

Some have pointed out that each presentation of the gospel in Acts has four basic components: a) the gospel *witnesses* (its case for credibility), b) the gospel *promises* (its relevance for our needs), c) the gospel events (its message of what Jesus has done), d) the gospel *conditions* (how to appropriate it for oneself). Luke provides three summaries of Paul's gospel preaching. Here in Acts 13, we see him communicating to Jews and Gentile God-fearers. In

Acts 14, we hear his message to non-educated pagans, and in Acts 17, we read a digest of a sermon to philosophers and educated pagans. It is instructive to see the different ways that the capacities and beliefs of his audience shapes the way Paul both presents and argues for the gospel.

#### The audience.

In any synagogue outside of Judea there would have been a combination of Jews and Gentile "God-fearers", some of whom had been circumcised and were full converts to Judaism, and others of which (like Cornelius) had adopted monotheism and Biblical morality in general ways, but had not converted. His audience is explicitly named in v.16. But it is easily deduced by the very way that the gospel is presented and defended. Anyone in the synagogue respected the authority of the Jewish Scriptures, the Bible (Old Testament). That is particularly evident in vv.16-25, his opening "argument". In vv.16-25, Paul makes his case for the truth of Christianity, and throughout he assumes that his audience already trusts the Bible. So all his arguments come from the Scripture.

#### The gospel witnesses.

Paul makes his case for Christianity by appealing a) to two recognized authorities (the Scripture and John the Baptist), and b) to eye-witness evidence. Throughout vv.16-25 Paul makes his case for Christianity by stressing how God has always taken the initiative of grace in the history of his relationship with his people. God "*chose*" the Jewish patriarchs (v.17). He stayed with them, but only because he patiently "*endured*" them (v.18). He "*gave*" them all their leaders and deliverers — first Moses (unnamed but alluded to in v.17), then the judges, prophets, and kings (v.20), especially David, the greatest deliverer of all. All through this summary of Israel's history, he shows that God's favor has never been earned, has always been graciously given, and has always been mediated through great leaders who saved the people by God's gracious power. This is a complete denial that salvation can be by goodness and morality and religiousness. When he gets to David, he immediately jumps to Jesus and points to him as David's son (v.23), the "*promised*" One that had been foretold. Then he finally notes that John the Baptist accredited Jesus as the Messiah.

In all of this, Paul is appealing to authorities that his hearers respected. He uses these authorities to remind them that we need to be saved by grace through great deliverers who God sends, and then reminds them that the Bible has predicted a final, great Savior, who John the Baptist recognized as Jesus. Finally, in v.31, he refers to the eyewitnesses to the resurrection of Christ (as Peter always did). So Paul's case for the gospel is: a) Jesus life and death fits the Scripture's prediction of the Messiah, b) the greatest prophet, John the Baptist, recognized Jesus as the Messiah, and c) we have evidence for the reality and truth of the bodily resurrection of Christ. It is important to see that the apostles' never proclaimed the gospel by saying, "just believe because I told you so" or "just believe because it will feel wonderful". They made a reasonable argument for the truth of the gospel.

The content of the gospel.

Now in vv.26-37 Paul shows that “Christianity is Christ”. The focus is not on his teaching but on he himself — his person, life, death, and resurrection. Paul shares the death (vv.27-29) and the resurrection (vv.30-32) of Christ. Paul first shows that Jesus was sentenced for sins he did not commit (“*though they found no... grounds, they... had him executed*” v.28). The reference to Jesus dying “*on a tree*” is a connection to the Old Testament statement that a tree was a place of divine curse (Deut.27:26. cf.Gal.3:10). Thus he was the innocent person suffering a curse for the guilty. Then he was buried but raised. Paul again makes a case that the resurrection of David’s descendant was predicted in Ps.2:7, Isaiah 55:3, and Ps.16:10 where David says that God will not let “the holy one” decay. “How can that be, since David *did* decay??” asks Paul. He reasons “therefore it must be that the Messiah from David’s line would be raised and never see decay” (v.36-37) So the heart of the gospel message is not that a teacher has come to show us how to save ourselves, but that a Savior has come to die and be raised for us.

The commitment to the gospel.

Paul now gives the hearers a choice that is very characteristic of Paul’s later writings (Romans and Galatians). He says that in Jesus we can receive “*forgiveness of sins*” which is available for “*everyone who believes*” (v.38-39). Then he introduces his famous word “*justification*” and insists that through belief in the life and death of Christ for us, we can be “justified”, i.e. made “just” or righteous before God. This is more than simple forgiveness — it means to be in a state of approval and honor. It means to be considered, simply — righteousness and blameless. Then Paul brings warning. He says that by obeying “*the law of Moses*” we cannot be justified from our sins and made right with God (v.39) and finally ends with a blunt statement that those who scoff at the great thing God has done in Christ will perish (v.41).

In many ways this is a more developed gospel presentation that we have seen in Peter’s early presentations. Here we begin to get insights into how Jesus’ work saves us and what happens to us when we believe. And yet it is the very same gospel outline that we have seen in every “sermon” since Pentacost. There is the gospel content (death and resurrection of Christ), the gospel case (the Scripture and the eyewitnesses), the gospel conditions (repentance and faith). Then for those who accept these, there is the gospel promises (forgiveness and justification). John Stott writes:

“Paul is [here] addressing Galatians. Only a few months later he will be writing his letter to the Galatians. It is very striking that he brings together here... five of the great words that will be the foundation stones of his gospel... having referred to Jesus death on the tree (29 cf.Gal.3:10-13), he goes on to speak of sin (38), faith, justification (39) and grace (43).

**5. vv.42-52. a) Why do the ones that reject the gospel do so? b) Why do the ones who accept the gospel do so?**

a) Why the gospel is rejected.

The historical specifics of this situation are these. Both Jews and Gentiles initially responded favorably to the gospel (v.42), but as the gospel took hold in the city, the Jewish members of the synagogue began to turn away from the Christian message (v.45). Why? "Jealousy" says Luke. We can remember that Paul's message in the synagogue was mainly to Jews, talking about "our fathers" (v.17) and showing Jesus to be the Christ of Israel. So that presentation showed that the history of the Jewish people was central to God's saving purposes for the world. That is very honoring and flattering to the Jewish people, and was surely a cause of rejoicing. But the following Sabbath it began to dawn on the Jewish listeners that the Christian message is this: though salvation has come through ethnic Israel, it is now for the whole world and all peoples. That was too much for them to take. (Consider how long it took for the rest of the apostles to understand it!)

This explains the specific reasons for the rejection of the gospel, in this case. But there is a deeper spiritual principle going on. Paul says to them, "you... do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life" (v.46). Paul is not saying that he considers them unworthy of eternal life. (That would contradict his teaching elsewhere, namely that no one merits eternal life.) He says they don't "consider themselves" worthy of it. The phrase is an ironic twist. The Jews found the freeness of the gospel — its offer to all, good and bad, religious and pagan — insulting. The gospel demands that recipients of eternal life admit that they are not worthy of it, whatever their record. But the Jews in Pisidian Antioch considered themselves too worthy to receive eternal life! One of the ironies of the gospel is that the only way to be worthy (or "fit" for it), is to admit you are completely unworthy (or unfit for it). Since Antiochan Jews considered themselves worthy of eternal life, they were not worthy of eternal life.

This is a universal condition and principle. The gospel is so absolutely free that, as one writer put it: "all you need is need; all you need is nothing." But that is the very sticking point for people. If we cannot admit our need and unworthiness, then we cannot receive eternal life.

b) Why the gospel is accepted.

Though human beings must accept responsibility for rejecting the gospel when they do so, they cannot take responsibility for accepting it when they do so. vv.48 tells us why some people responded to the gospel while others did not. "When the Gentiles heard this... all who were appointed for eternal life believed." It does not say that "all who believed were appointed for eternal life", but "all who were appointed for eternal life believed." This categorically says that, if we respond positively to the gospel it is because there was a prior "appointment" give to us. We see a similar statement in Acts 16:14 – "One of those listening was a woman named Lydia... The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message". John Stott writes:

“Some commentators, offended by what they have regarded as an extreme predestinarianism in this phrase, have tried in various ways to soften it. But the Greek verb *tasso* means to ‘ordain’ (AV, RSV), sometimes in the sense of ‘to assign someone to a certain classification’. F.F. Bruce refers to the papyrus evidence that it means ‘inscribe’ or ‘enrol’ in which case it is a reference to the ‘Book of Life’. Certainly those who have believed in Jesus and received eternal life from him all ascribe the credit to God’s grace, not to their own merit. The converse is not so, however. It is significant that in this very passage, those who rejected the gospel are regarded as having done so deliberately, because they did not ‘consider themselves worthy of eternal life’ (46).

(Stott, p. 227-228)

Many questions arise about “predestination”, but it is best to simply rest in the helpful and clear facts given here. When we reject the gospel, it is done so freely. We are not forced to do so — we are responsible for what we have done. But if anyone accepts the gospel, it is because God has been at work overcoming our freely chosen hostility (cf. John 6:44). Thus after we believe we have no one to praise but God (cf. I Cor. 1:26-31).

## THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

Read silently and mark "!" - for something that helped you  
 "?" -for something that raised a question

How can we communicate the gospel to someone so that they can receive Christ and become children of God (John 1:12-13)?

### **The character of the gospel in the book of Acts**

The gospel is the essential Christian message. In the book of Acts we see the apostles delivering it in every place and setting. It is called "*the gospel*" (Acts 14:7,21;16:10), "*the gospel of God's grace*" (Acts 20:24), "*the word of his grace*" (Acts 20:32), "*the good news about the Lord Jesus*" (Acts 11:20), "*the message of the gospel*" (Acts 15:7), "*the message of his grace*" (Acts 14:3), "*the message of his salvation*" (Acts 13:26), or even just "*the message*" (Acts 11:19. cf. Acts 2:41;4:4;10:44:17:11). What do we learn from these descriptions in Acts?

First, we learn that the gospel is not so simple and rigidly fixed that it is presented identically in every setting. A survey of gospel speeches in the book of Acts shows what great variety in presentations there were. The gospel is adapted differently to different audiences.

Yet, second, we see, that this is a very definite and limited body of knowledge with a set content. Thus the writer refers to *the word*, *the message*. We see from the accounts in Acts that it can be expounded in a single talk. It can be "received" (Acts 8:14;17:11). We are told that when Cornelius' household "*received*" the message (11:1), the Holy Spirit fell on them (10:44). This shows that the gospel is not "everything in the Bible", but a set of core truths which, when understood and received, saves us.

Third, we see that when the gospel is summed up in one or two words, it is usually said to be about "*salvation*", "*grace*" or "*the Lord Jesus Christ*". Thus we see the essential message is that through Jesus we are saved by grace.

Does is the gospel "elementary" truths as opposed to "advanced" truths? No. The gospel does not relate so much to the rest of Christian truth as the first step relates to a staircase, but rather as the heart relates to the rest of the circulatory system (or as the brain relates to the nervous system). The rest of Christian truth is just an unfolding of the gospel — it is the working out of its implications and ramifications, intellectually, spiritually, behaviorally.

### **An overview of the gospel in the book of Acts**

Despite the significant adaptations, depending upon the audience, each gospel presentation has several core components. John Stott breaks them down into four basics, and calls them the gospel "events, witnesses, promises, conditions" (See J.Stott, *The Message of Acts*, p.79-81). Over and over again, the apostles talk about "gospel events" (Jesus' death and resurrection for our

sins), “gospel promises” (objective pardon for sins and subjective freedom and joy), “gospel witnesses” (the testimony of the Bible and the eyewitnesses to the resurrection), and “gospel conditions” (the requirements of repentance and faith).

These do not come in the same order or in the same terms, and it is very important to notice that. This means that we are free to juxtapose these in the best way to reach people in our particular time and place. But these components are always there. We will reorganize the outline and give new names.

## THEORETICAL OUTLINE

### “Why should I believe?”

#### **The Case**

**Relevance** (“gospel promises”) We show the listeners that the gospel answers their deepest problems and issues. They should receive it because they need it.

**Credibility** (“gospel witnesses”) We show the listeners that the gospel is supported by strong evidence. They should receive it because it is true.

### “What must I believe?”

**The Content** (“gospel events”) The heart of the gospel.

**Sin and self-salvation.** We show the listeners that they are under the guilt and power of sin, which leads them to seek to be their own savior and lord.

**Grace and Christ’s salvation.** We show the listeners how Jesus life, death, and resurrection in our place saves us and opens the way to God.

### “How can I believe?”

**The Commitment** (“gospel conditions”)

**Turning.** We show the listeners that they must turn away from their former life and honor Christ as Lord.

**Trusting.** We show the listeners that they must trust cease self-salvation activity and trust Christ as Savior.

## PRACTICAL OUTLINE

We see in the book of Acts that changes in the audience most effect how the “case” part of the gospel is presented. The Case part of the gospel addresses the basic question, “why should I believe this?” As we outlined it, there are two very important and fairly different lines of argument for Christianity. First, people should believe because they need it, it is relevant to them. It meets the deepest aspirations of the human heart, and solves the most basic problems of the human condition. But second, people should believe because it is true, regardless of what they believe. It is the most rational way to account for the world and life we see. To sum up — “why should we believe?” Because it is both subjectively true (the relevance case) and objectively true (the credibility case).

As important as these two “cases” are, they are rather different. Some people and groups have an acute consciousness of subjective needs, and they will be extremely sensitive to hearing more of the relevance-case. Others may have low awareness of any subjective needs, and they must be pressed to see the objective truth of Christianity, whether they like it or not! Which of these should come first? We see Paul talking to religious educated people in Pisidian Antioch, and there the credibility case (Acts 13:16-31) came before relevance case (Acts 13:38-39). But in Lystra, when Paul was speaking to uneducated pagans, the appeal and relevance case (Acts 14:15a) comes before the credibility case (Acts 14:15b-17). How do we do it today? Obviously, we need to be flexible, but here is a good procedure for our time and place.

### **Step #1 – Case for relevance** *Answers: “Why do I need this?”*

First, we discern the person’s own “themes of relevance” — basic aspirations/hopes and fears/struggles. Then we ask how their basic beliefs about God and the world are helping them face these things.

### **Step #2 – Brief content** *Answers: “What is the Christian message?”*

Second, we supply a brief gospel summary but geared to show how it meets the needs of the listeners, their “themes of relevance”. This is a “brief summary of the gospel” (see previous document) which is not designed to explain the whole.



**Step #3 – Case for credibility** *Answers: “How can you know it’s true?”*

Third, we begin to answer more intellectual objections. The brief summary lets them set the agenda, so you do not answer questions they aren’t asking. Sometimes there is a return to “relevance”, with questions about “how does it work for you?”

**Step #4 – Full content** *Answers: “What must I believe?”*

Fourth, we return and unpack the gospel, this time explaining the two basic points more fully — who we are (the character of sin), and who he is and what he has done (the character of God, Christ, and grace). Sometimes this leads back to step 3 again!

**Step #5 – Commitment** *Answers: “How can I believe — make it mine?”*

Fifth, we explain how to appropriate the work of Christ, so that the gospel promises (named under “the case for relevance”) become ours. This always has two parts — both turning and trusting, repenting and resting, making him Lord and Savior.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**
- 2. What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**
- 3. What does your own experience of witnessing in New York City lead you to think about the “Practical Outline”? Is this a good order?**
- 4. Have you used the “Brief Summary of the Gospel” from a former week? What are the questions you are getting in response to it?**





# Acts

## The Gospel for pagans

### Study 14 | Acts 14:1-28

#### INTRODUCTION

Paul and Barnabus now travel to Iconium, about 100 miles southeast of Pisidian Antioch. Here we begin to see a key pattern of Pauline ministry. He always chose the largest and most strategic cities in any new region. He would begin a work and from there work outward. Iconium was a prosperous commercial city on a major east-west trade route. (Today it is called Konya, Turkey's fourth largest urban area.) Lystra, for example, was a smaller town and it had a less educated and sophisticated population.

#### **1 vv.1-7. What were the three main stages of the work at Iconium? What lessons do we learn for our own ministry?**

v.1 – In the first stage of the work, Paul and Barnabus go “*as usual*” into the Jewish synagogue to preach the gospel. They were so effective that many believed, both Jew and Gentile. We can expect that the gospel message would have been similar to the one Paul delivered in chapter 13, assuming the Bible as an authority and assuming an acquaintance with Biblical themes and morality.

vv.2-5 – In the second stage of the work, they preached outside of the synagogue, in the face of strong opposition, during a period of rising tensions and animosities. On the one hand their ministry was characterized by: a) preaching a “*message of his grace*” (i.e.the gospel), which was b) very bold, c) accompanied by authenticating miracles, d) over a significant period of time. On the other hand, a group of Jews from the synagogue stirred up increasing opposition during this whole stretch, until finally there was a plot to kill them the missionaries.

vv.6-7 – Having already planted a church in Iconium, Paul and Barnabus now removed to the nearby cities of Lystra and Derbe. As mentioned in the introduction, these were smaller places, and lacked the sophistication of the big metropolis. “*The local Lycaonians were largely uneducated, even illiterate.*” (Stott, p.230).

Some of the lessons we can learn: a) In general, the greater the effectiveness of a ministry the greater the resistance and opposition. We see a note in v.1 about how Paul and Barnabus were especially effective in their ministry in Iconium. Thus the reaction is swift and severe. We cannot infer that this is an absolute rule, but it fits as a general principle. b) Our words must be backed up with deeds. Because of the opposition, God gave the missionaries an especially effective ministry of miracles (v.3) which were ordinarily healings. In the same way, we must be able to show the power of Christ to heal and help people. Changed lives and ministries to psychological, social, and material needs — these all “back up” the preaching of the gospel and authenticate it. c) In

general, we see that miracles in the Bible are not random magic tricks, but always closely connected to authenticating the preaching of the word in a new region or place. It means that we should not expect to see miracles distributed everywhere and anywhere in the Christian church. d) We see that the gospel is essentially a "message of grace" (v.3). e) Even when the opposition seems to have stopped a ministry, God uses events to spread the gospel into new places (v.6-7).

**2. vv.8-15a. What does the crowd's reaction to the healing of the crippled man tell us about them?**

Educated people have a tendency to be skeptical of miracles, the supernatural, and religion, so often the uneducated have a great deal of belief and even obsession with such things. (This reminds us of C.S.Lewis' warning that there are too opposite errors to be made about demons — to disbelieve in them entirely, or to have an unhealthy fascination and over-interest in them. We could call one super-stition ["over-belief"] and one sub-stition ["under-belief"].

The crowd's reaction is extreme and fanatical. They cry out in Lyconian (v.11), meaning that these are not the leading Roman citizens (who would have spoken Latin) nor are they educated people (who would have spoken some kind of Greek, the language of cosmopolitan culture). These are "common people", and the miracle creates a sensation. They quickly assume that Paul and Barnabus are gods come to earth. "Local legend told of earlier occasions when the gods had come down to them in the likeness of men... Ovid tells a story of... Philemon and Baucis who entertained Zeus and Hermes unaware and were rewarded..." (F.F.Bruce, p.291). Having heard legends such as this, the people wanted the rewards that would result in honoring gods in their midst.

All this shows that these were not educated, secularized pagans, but common, semi-literate, superstitious pagans. Thus when we see Paul's gospel presentation, we will be able to contrast it to that of his presentation to religious and educated people in the synagogue (Acts 13:16ff.)

Note: It is likely that Paul and Barnabus did not understand at first that the crowd thought they were gods, because they cried out in Lycaonian (v.11), a dialect with which they were probably unfamiliar. That explains why the talk had progressed to the offering of sacrifices to them (v.13) before they seemed to realize what was happening (v.14-15a).

**3. vv.15-17. Though this is a brief summary of Paul's talk, compare it to the talk in Acts 13:16ff. How is it different from that talk and why? To what kind of person would Paul bring such a message today?**

First, they were different in the citations of authority for its argument or "case". In Acts 13 he appealed to two authorities recognized by the audience: the Scripture and John the Baptist. But in Acts 14, these pagans do not know or trust the Hebrew Bible. So Paul appeals to what they can see about the natural world around them. First he points to the greatness of creation to show them that this indicates a Creator God (*"God, who made the heaven and earth and sea and everything in them"* – v.16). Then he points to the greatness of "providence", how in the midst of the immense forces of nature, they nevertheless are given food and "joy" — they are given what is necessary for life. In other words, Paul does not reason from the Scripture (called "special revelation" by the theologians), but from what people can see about the nature of the world and life (called "general" revelation). Essentially, Paul reasons like this: "Look at this and this and that about the world and your life. I can account for them — these things are there because there is a God who made and manages everything in the universe."

Second, they were different in the emphasis and time spent on points of gospel content. It is hard to miss that the Acts 13 speech talked little about the nature of God and much about the person and work of Christ. In Acts 14 all the stress is on the nature of God. Paul shows that there are not many gods — each of whom has limited regions and specific ranges of power — but only one God who made everything (v.15), and who has absolute power over everything (v.17). This "abstract" of the speech shows that Paul did allude to Christ, when he said, *"in the past, he let all nations go their own way"* (v.16). This means that now something momentous has occurred. In 17:30-31, we see Paul saying, *"in the past, God overlooked such ignorance... but now he commands all people everywhere to repent... by the man he has appointed."* Just as in Acts 17, he probably spoke about one who God had sent into this world. In summary, Paul in Acts 13 could assume that they knew who God was in general, and he could focus on the features of Jesus. But in Acts 14, has to spend more time laying a foundation of the nature of God, and gives less time to develop the work of Christ.

Third, they were different in the specifics of the final appeal. In Acts 13, the people are told to stop relying on the law for their justification with God, and look to the work of Christ (13:39). This is "the gospel for moral people". Paul is saying, "sin makes you imperfect, unjustified — receive Jesus for forgiveness." In Acts 14, however, the people are told to stop worshipping *"worthless things"* (v.15), or idols. The word translated *"worthless"* means "vain, ineffective". The people are told to stop serving false gods that cannot satisfy. This is "the gospel for immoral people". Paul is saying, "sin makes you a slave, in bondage and unfulfilled — receive Christ for reality and freedom." Paul

characterizes God as “*living*” (v.15) as opposed to the deadness of their false gods; he identifies God as the source of “*joy*” (v.17) as opposed to the vanity of their false gods.

To whom would Paul make such a talk today? It would be appropriate for very irreligious people, and especially the more immoral and less educated types. Why? a) Such people cannot be talked to from the Scripture, b) they are very aware of being in bondage to various false gods (through addictions, habits they cannot break, etc.), c) and they need to have God pointed to as more powerful than their bondages (v.15) and as the source of the joy they seek (v.17). With secular people we have to begin with “where people are” — to find out what we see about the world and life that they “see” too. For example, secular people “see” that human beings have value, but they cannot account for it, unless they acknowledge God as the source of it. In other words, we will have to reason as Paul did. We may start with the human longing for love and community, for personal significance and meaning, for freedom. In any case, we will then point to Christ who is both the explanation and the solution for everything we see.

**4. vv.15-17. How is the talk in Acts 13:16ff the same as the speech to the Lycoanians? What can we learn from the comparison and contrast of the two speeches?**

John Stott says that every gospel presentation in Acts has four parts: gospel events (what happened), gospel promises (what they bring), gospel witnesses (why its true), and gospel conditions (what to do). In some sense, Paul adapts everyone of the four parts according to the capacities of the audience. But in particular, the “gospel witnesses” are the most affected and changed by the change in listener. The authorities appealed to and the arguments in Acts 13 and 14 are completely different. There is no reference to Scripture in Acts 14 at all.

However, though couched in different language, the core of the gospel is very evident in both speeches. Both tell about a God who is powerful and good (13:16-22; 14:17). Both tell the hearers that they are trying to save themselves and in the wrong way. (The religious try to justify themselves with the law — 13:39, while the pagans worship false gods and idols — 14:15.) Both tell the hearers that God has done something in history to change how we approach him (13:23; 14:16). Both tell the hearers to turn from the old way and turn to God through the new. In short, the gospel is about how all human beings seek to save themselves, but how the true God sent Jesus into the world to save us instead.

Paul does not “change” the gospel, but only “adapts it”. And this is the very key to effective ministry. If we never adapt the gospel, we will be completely ineffective. Like Paul, we must deeply discern the particular beliefs, hopes, aspirations, fears, prejudices, and wisdom of others or we our gospel communication will seriously miss the mark. But if we change or lose the basics of the gospel, we will also be completely ineffective. Like Paul, we must not shrink from declaring that there is only one true God, that every single person (no matter how nice and good) is sinfully trying to be his or her own Lord and Savior, that Jesus was really divine and human, that he died in our place and was raised bodily from the dead. These basic truths and “events” are non-negotiable. To alter or omit any of them leads to the loss of distinctive Christianity.

**5. vv.21-28. Make a list of all the principles of “follow-up” and ministry that Paul and Barnabus followed after the many were converted. Were you properly “followed up”? Do you properly “follow up”?**

When Paul and Barnabus saw a large crowd of new converts (v.21) they followed a very careful pattern to establish these people in the faith and get them on a path to growth.

a) First, they retraced their steps to the cities of that region and laid down a layer of “*encouragement*” (v.22). Remember how Barnabus did this to the new converts at Syrian Antioch in Acts 12. This encouraging is here given some content. They told them, “*it is through many hardships that we enter the kingdom of God*” (v.23). We said in a previous study that “encouraging” is more like counseling than teaching. Here we see Paul obviously talking about his own severe sufferings of which all the new converts were aware. He had been stoned and left for dead (v.19); he was in constant danger. But Paul explained how such sufferings only brought the kingly power of Christ more into his life (v.22; cf. II Cor.1:3ff.; 4:16-18). This personal sharing prepared the converts for endurance. He gave them a theology of suffering and a model for it. No one is ready for the Christian life without these!

b) Second, they did not only do this “counseling”, but they were “*strengthening the disciples... to remain true to the faith.*” (v.22) Several other places in the Bible, this term — “the faith” — is used to show that there was a set and recognizable body of basic beliefs that the new converts were being schooled in. The apostolic faith as passed on and taught to each new believer.

c) Third, Paul and Barnabus “*appointed elders for each church...*” (v.23). This means two things:



- (1) They gave the new churches leadership teams. They identified persons among the new converts who had leadership gifts, and they set them apart and gave them authority in the new churches. Notice that they appointed elders — *plural*. They did not set up individuals, but teams of pastors. The team approach to leadership is a very good quality control. Instead of some individuals with all the power, leaders could hold each other accountable. From I Timothy 3 and Titus 1, we know that these teams were likely to have included elders, deacons, and deaconesses—some of which part-time and others full-time. (This likely differed with the size of the congregation.)
  - (2) They entrusted the churches to God. This shows a remarkable amount of trust by the missionaries in the new Christians and especially in God. They “*committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.*” (v.23) Thus Paul and Barnabus showed a willingness to lose personal control of the churches. They did not hold on to their power.
- d) Fourth, Paul and Barnabus returned to their sponsoring church in Antioch, where they reported and encouraged them greatly with the news (v.26-28).

## THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

### Part II – CASE FOR RELEVANCE

Read silently and mark “!” - for something that helped you  
 “?” -for something that raised a question

How can we communicate the gospel to someone so that they can receive Christ and become children of God (John 1:12-13)? First, we make a “case for relevance” — we discern the person’s own “themes of relevance” — basic aspirations/hopes and fears/struggles. Then we ask how their basic beliefs about God and the world are helping them face these things.

### BRIDGE BUILDING

#### 1. *Building trust.*

According to Aristotle, persuasive people combine three different factors in themselves. “*Logos*” means they are able to demonstrate clear and persuasive reasons for what they believe. They show how their minds were changed. But on its own, “Logos” will not persuade, since is rationality is only one aspect of human nature. “*Pathos*” means they show are able to demonstrate both a passion and a compassion as they communicate what they believe. Thus they demonstrate how their hearts were changed. Finally, “*Ethos*” means that they are able to demonstrate attitudes and a lifestyle consistent with what they believe. They show how their life was changed. Persuasion involves appeals to reason, emotion, and experience. Persuasive people earn trust by their thoughtfulness, warmth, and integrity.

Thus the Christian develops redemptive relationships of active listening, service, authenticity and consistency. This takes time but it creates openness to the message when it comes from you. Through discussions and interaction, the Christian discerns “themes of relevance” (see below) — things that are burning issues for the non-Christian.

#### 2. *Identifying themes of relevance.*

A theme of relevance is some true concern or conviction which arises from the person’s creation in the image of God. The Christian makes contact with the knowledge of God which every non-Christian has (Rom.1:18-21). Apologetics recognizes that non-Christians do know the truth about God, but it is intellectually and emotionally repressed. he Christian makes contact with the image of God which every non-Christian has (Gen.1:27). Apologetics recognizes that non-Christians’ deepest longings demonstrate the absence of God in a

heart that was designed for him. We were created to be rational, relational, creative, eternal. And a person fears death, treats love as a reality, and longs for justice and freedom even when his/her world view can neither explain or satisfy those impulses.

What are examples of “themes of relevance”? These are the person’s greatest hopes, fears, aspirations. There are two basic categories of them. There are Life Priorities, and Life Problems. Life Priorities include *Major job and vocational issues* (“My job isn’t fulfilling, I don’t know if I want to spend my life on this”); *Overall life goals* (“In my life I want to accomplish...”); *Heroes and ideas* (“The person/idea that influences me most...”); *Analysis of world problems* (“I think the problem with our society is...”); *Love and marriage* (“Marriage isn’t for me...”). Life Problems include *Guilt or anger about the past* (“I regret... I have trouble with”); *Anxiety and fears about the future* (“I am very worried about...”); *Boredom or frustration with the present* (“Nothing tastes...”) *Ethical dilemmas* (“I don’t know what the right thing to do is...”)

### **3. Identifying belief position**

A “belief position” is what the person consciously believes about theological and religious issues. This includes what they believe about God, about Jesus, about life after death, about human nature, and so on. But a person’s essential belief position can be ascertained by looking at these basic questions. *God’s nature*. (“I think God is...”) *Human nature*. (“What I think is basically wrong with people... (or) what I think is the reason most people are unhappy...”) *Moral order*. (“I think that the way to determine right and wrong is...”) *Spiritual meaning*. (“I think what would ultimately fulfill me...”)

You will discover two basic kinds of non-believers — those who subscribe to the basic beliefs of the Christian faith, but have not understood or “grasped” the gospel. They are trying to save themselves by being good. These people are not very secular, and generally you can simply demonstrate the case for relevance with a personal testimony, and go immediately to the full content of the gospel (there is seldom a need to make a case for credibility). But in NYC, most people will be more secular, and will reject most or all basic Christian doctrines. Therefore you need to identify their belief position, and make the case for relevance as in #4 below.

### **4. Arousing interest.**

#### **a. Show tension between their theme and their belief.**

The fundamental way to arouse interest in the gospel is to show a person a tension between their themes of relevance (which reveals their primal understanding that there is a God) and their belief position (which expresses their conscious denial of the Biblical God.)

**b. Relate a brief presentation of the gospel to their theme.**

Once you have pointed out some tension between the person's concern or conviction and his or her belief position, make a brief presentation of the gospel in such a way that shows how it addresses the person's "theme".

The following example shows how this works. It is adapted from account of a conversation between Becky Pippert (BP) with a black female law student (LS) on a bus in Salem, Oregon. (in *Out of the Salt Shaker*, IVP, 1979, p.160ff.)

Becky meets LS on the bus and introduces the subject of heroes.

**LS:** "I guess Karl Marx is my hero." [Editor's note: Remember, this was 1979!]

**BP:** "What makes him your hero?"

**LS:** "I think his ideas were great — they haven't always been carried out rightly of course."

**BP:** "But what exactly is so great about his ideas?"

**LS:** "He's my hero because of his passionate regard for the oppressed"

**BP:** "I agree with that concern, but... I know Marx holds no belief in God."

**LS:** "Yes... he sees the universe as godless, and we have meaning only in a corporate sense of class. We are not significant as individuals."

**BP:** "Yet you admire his regard for the oppressed even though they are ultimately insignificant. It seems strange to value people so highly when they are random products of a universe. Why not manipulate them as you please?"

**LS:** "I couldn't do that... I guess if my natural response is to feel [individuals] are significant then I need a philosophic system that says the same things... But I believe we are basically good. If we could just live in a classless society, we would be free of the things that weigh us down..."

**BP:** "Listen, I know a guy who is one of the worst racists...if he lived with you for fifty years in your classless society, he would still think 'nigger'. How can Marx wipe out the ugliness and hatred of a bigot?"

**LS:** [Eyes glaring] "We've been trying to change that for centuries... And all the rules and laws in the world can't... make you love me."

**BP:** "Look, you tell me you know individuals are significant, and you need a system that says so. Now you're saying that the real evil comes from within us. For external rules or laws can curb but cannot transform behavior. So you need a system that regards evil as internal and a solution that transforms radically not curbs superficially. Right?... Well, that's the very kind of system I've found."

**LS:** "Hey, what kind of revolution are you into?"

(Pippert) "When I told her I followed Jesus, I think I had better not quote her exact words of response! But after she recovered from her shock she asked me how I knew it was true. For the rest of our trip she asked me to defend Christianity. She listened intently, and when we arrived she said, 'I'd like to get together again... When I went home this weekend my younger sister came to see me, too. Then she told me she'd become a Christian. I told her it was anti-intellectual and unsubstantiated. In a furor I packed my bags, walked out saying I never wanted to discuss it again. And here I got on a bus and sat down next to you.' We do indeed worship the Hound of Heaven."

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**
- 2. What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**
- 3. Think of one key relationship you have with a non-Christian. Which of the three factors in "building trust" do you most need to work on, if you are to be a more effective witness?**
- 4. How does Becky Pippert uncover a "theme of relevance" for the law student? How does she uncover her "belief position"? How does she show the contradiction between the two? How does she adapt her gospel presentation to the theme of relevance?**





# Acts

## Clarifying the Gospel

Study 15 | Acts 15:1 - 16:5

### INTRODUCTION

We have seen how step by step the Gentiles had been brought into the church. At first there were isolated cases, like the conversion of the African official (Acts 8) and the Roman centurion (Acts 10-11). Then began the movement of the Spirit in Syrian Antioch (Acts 11-12) which resulted in the first multi-ethnic church (Acts 13:1). As a result, the Antiochan church launched the first strategic mission to the Gentile when it sent Saul and Barnabus out as missionaries (Acts 13:3). Gradually the (originally) Jewish Christian church came to see the Lord's hand in the inclusion of the "nations" into the church. It was widely understood that the Gentiles were also capable of "repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18). Inevitably, however, a controversy arose about how the new Gentile converts were to be incorporated into the church.

- 1. a) Did the "some men" in vv.1-5 represent the apostles' position in Jerusalem?  
b) Why were they contending that the Gentile converts of Paul were not obeying the law of Moses? (Were they breaking the 10 commandment?)**

a) It is important to read v.1 (*some men came down from Judea*) with v.24. There the official letter from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem says, "*some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you*". So, though these were men from the Jerusalem church where Peter and James presided (and even Paul refers to them as "*men from James*" Gal.2:12), these teachers did not represent the settled or official position of the apostles.

b) These teachers insisted that all the new Gentile converts had to be circumcized and adopt all the "*custom*" and "*the law of Moses*". To our ears, this sounds rather strange. Surely the new Antiochan believers discipled by Paul and Barnabus were taught to obey the 10 commandments given to Moses. Surely they were surely not lying and committing adultery at will. So why would these Judean teachers be concerned that the Gentile Christians weren't obeying Moses?

When they refer to circumcision and the law of Moses, they are not thinking so much of what we might call the moral principles of the Old Testament, but rather the ceremonial regulations. These regulations were very detailed prescriptions about food, dress, and other practices that the Mosaic law (Exodus thru Deuteronomy) said made one "clean" and "acceptable" for God's presence in the tabernacle worship. Unlike the basic moral principles (e.g. "do not kill" "do not steal") which set the adherent apart *ethically* from non-adherents, the ceremonial regulations set the adherent apart *culturally* from non-adherents. These regulations determined what and how you ate, how you dressed, and so on.



What was the purpose of the “Mosaic ceremonial regulations”? In Old Testament times, the ceremonial law was a way for the Jews to show their distinctness as the people of God. (It helped them marry within the believing community, making it much harder to fall in love with an unbeliever.) Also, it was also a way for God to show those who approached that they had to be clean and holy and pure, and that atonement and cleansing had to be effected for them to enter his presence. However, these regulations themselves were never meant to be ways to literally make one pure and acceptable to God. *“...the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings — external regulations applying until the time of the new order.”* (Heb.9:9-10; cf. Col.2:16). In other words, these ceremonial laws have not been so much abrogated as fulfilled. They are fulfilled in Christ — it is Christ that makes us clean (cf. Mark 7).

So, though it was understandable, it was mistaken for the Jews to come to see their cultural separation as spiritual separation and purity. These teachers continued to believe that this cultural change was necessary for all Christians.

**2. Read 13:42-48. How is this the background for the crisis of chapter 15? What was different about the Gentiles Paul preached to in the synagogue (v.43) and the Gentiles who Paul turned to in v.46b? Why and how did Paul’s ministry arouse such opposition from some Jewish Christians (15:1-2)?**

Jewish Christians had been taught all their lives that Gentiles were “unclean” and that Jews alone were the people of God. But God sent repeated messages, recounted in Acts 8 through 14, that Gentiles could be saved too, and made members of the people of God through Christ. As we can see by the response of the apostles in Acts 8:17, 11:18, 12:22, this general concept was accepted by Jewish Christians. But as we can see from 13:26, 46, most early Gentile Christian converts were already Jewish converts. In other words, they had already adopted many of the Jewish cultural customs (which Jews had come to connect with spiritual purity and cleanness). The cultural differences then, between Jewish and Gentile “God-fearers” were muted.

However, when the Jews refused to let Paul preach at the synagogue, Paul announced that he was therefore turning to preach directly to the Gentiles (13:46). That meant that Paul would not only be preaching to Gentile converts to Judaism, but to cultural pagans. Now many of the new Gentile converts were received into the church by baptism, without becoming first Jewish converts by circumcision. The cultural differences between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians now were sharp. They ate and dressed and lived very differently. Many Gentile cultural practices were highly offensive to Jewish believers (and we can surmise that Jewish believers looked very straight-laced and narrow to Gentiles).

This created a huge crisis for the church. John Stott puts it succinctly:

It was one thing for the Jerusalem leaders to give their approval to the conversion of the Gentiles, but could they approve of... commitment to the Messiah without inclusion in Judaism? Was their vision big enough to see the gospel of Christ not as a reform movement within Judaism but as good news for the whole world, and the church of Christ... as the international family of God? These were the revolutionary questions...

(Stott, p.241)

In other words, the opponents of Paul were saying, "not all Jewish persons are Christians, but all Christians must also be Jewish." Paul was saying that the gospel is for every culture.

### **3. vv.7-11. Of what three facts does Peter remind the Council, and what conclusions does he draw from them?**

First, he notes that God had chosen to speak the gospel to the Gentiles through Peter (v.7). This is doubtless the incident of Cornelius. Peter's story--including the vision, the messengers from Cornelius, and the voice from God were strong evidence that God wanted the Gentiles to hear the gospel.

b) Second, he notes that the Gentiles clearly had received the Holy Spirit (v.8). This means that the same grasp of the gospel, the same experiences of God's presence, the same transformations of character (note: *purified their hearts by faith* v.9) have all been observed in the Gentile converts. This is a powerful point. Even without circumcision, the Holy Spirit very visibly was doing the work of change and sanctification on the Gentiles.

c) Third, he notes that the Jews had never been able to live up to the ceremonial law of Moses. *...a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear* (v.10). Here is a clear admission that the Jews themselves have never been able to live up to the standards of the Mosaic regulations. This point is powerful. He is saying, "how can you demand that they be saved through obeying these rules when neither we nor our ancestors were ever able to do it?"

His conclusion is incisive. From the third point, v.10, he concludes that "we Jews", if we are saved, are saved apart from obeying the law. From the second and first point he concludes that the Gentiles are being saved apart from obeying the law. Therefore — *"it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved, just as they are."* (v.11)

**Application question: How is this problem of culture a continual one for the Christian church, even when the particular issue is not Jewish-Gentile tensions?**

Richard Lovelace (in *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life*) explains that, whenever the Christian church loses its orientation to the gospel of grace (and subtly falls back into a view that we are saved by our performance), there is a tendency to grab hold of cultural distinctions and endow them with spiritual value.

“[When] the church had lost track of an important element in the saving work of Christ and was teaching that believers are justified not by faith but by being sanctified... as a result it became very easy for the church to revert to an Old Covenant lifestyle... Uneasiness about justification [by grace alone] produced a flowering of asceticism reflecting an unconscious need for lists of clean and unclean activities and a rebirth of Pharisaism. Hard-line fundamentalists like Tertullian ruled out many intellectual activities: the theater (because of its origins in pagan worship), dancing (because it might inflame ill-controlled sexual passions), and cosmetics (if God meant you to smell like a flower, he would have given you a crop of them on your head).

...Thus [those] who are not secure in Christ cast about for spiritual life preservers with which to support their confidence, and in their frantic search they not only cling to the shreds of ability and righteousness they find in themselves, but they fix upon their race, their membership in a party, their familiar social and ecclesiastical patterns, and their culture as means of self-recommendation. The culture is put on as if it were armor against self-doubt, but it becomes a mental straightjacket which cleaves to the flesh and can never be removed except through comprehensive faith in the saving work of Christ. Once faith is exercised, a Christian is free to be enculturated, to wear his culture like a comfortable suit of clothes. He can shift to other cultural clothing temporarily if he wishes to do so, as Paul suggests in 1 Cor. 9:19-23, and he is released to admire and appreciate the differing expressions of Christ shining out through other cultures.

(Lovelace, p.190-191,198)

There are innumerable ways in which we see our cultural distinctives as a kind of spiritual righteousness. Those of us from more punctual cultures may disdain cultures which are more relationally-centered than task-centered. Those of us from more emotive cultures may disdain cultures where people are more emotionally reserved and cognitive. It is easy to look down at someone else's taste in music. On the “mission field” it has been very common for Anglo-European Christian evangelists to insist on a way to organize churches or conduct worship that is inappropriate to the new culture. The number of examples are endless. It is endemic for older churches and older Christians to impose upon newer churches/believers those patterns that are not essential to Biblical faith, but rather are cultural accretions promoted to a place of spiritual principle.

**4. vv.12-21. a) How does James solve the problem theologically? How does he solve it practically? b) Read vv.22-35. What does this entire debate and event teach us about what to do when Christians differ?**

a) James' solution.

In vv.14-18 James solves the theological conundrum. His method is to look at experience (v.14 – *Simon has described how God... took from the Gentiles a people for himself*) and correlating it with the Scripture. He quotes Amos 9:11-12. This is a remarkable prophecy in which Amos refers to the prophecy given to David himself by Nathan in II Sam.7. There he tells David that he will not build God a house, but his son will do so. Though at some points in the prophecy, that is referring to Solomon who will build a literal temple (II Sam.7:14), yet he also refers to a son who will reign forever and build a house that is eternal (II Sam.7:13,15-16). This is descendant in the Greater David, the Messiah (Psalm 110). Amos then picks this theme up and talks about a future time in which David's "house" and "tent" will be rebuilt by that greater David, yet at that time he says "remnant" a portion of the Gentiles "*who bear my name*" will seek the Lord.

James now sees that, clearly, the Gentiles will be considered part of David's house, not through the law of Moses, but through the Davidic Christ. The inclusion of the Gentiles is therefore not an afterthought or a begrudging concession or a plan revision — but it was foretold by the prophets. James sees a) a correlation between the experience of the church (v.12-14) and the theology of the Word, and he sees b) a correlation between the teaching of the NT apostles (Simon v.14) and the OT prophets (Amos v.15). That, for James, is conclusive.

In vv.19-21 James comes up with a practical compromise that takes into consideration the interests of both Jewish and Gentile Christian. He lays down a principle, "*we should not make it hard for the Gentiles who are turning to God*" v.19. That is important for all ministry. It is hard enough to believe the gospel — we should not insist that people become just "like us" as well, in order to become Christians! Yet, he points out that the teaching of Moses is extremely widespread, and the feelings about these cultural practices goes very deep (v.21). Therefore, though Gentiles are not bound by moral principle to adhere to ceremonial regulations (and therefore they do not have to be circumcised and take on the Mosaic law), James asks them out of love to abstain from four practices which were particularly repugnant to Jewish people.

Those four things include one item that is poses problems for interpreters. The first three are: to abstain from eating meat offered in idol ceremonies, from eating meat of stangled animals, and from eating bloody meat. These three matters are clearly items of the ceremonial law, not of abiding moral principle. But James includes "*sexual immorality*" as well, and Greek word *Porneia* translated here usually means sex-outside-of-marriage. But since the other items are clearly matters of the Levitical ceremonial law, most commentators (see Stott, p.248-250 and Bruce, p.311) think James is referring here to the Levitical marriage laws, not the seventh commandment ("Thou shalt not

commit adultery"). Those Levitical marriage laws (called "the laws of consanguinity and affinity" in Leviticus 18) forbid marriage between people of close blood relationship. These laws were much more particular than normal pagan customs, and James was asking them to abide by them.

In sum, *"the abstinence here recommended must here be understood... not as an essential Christian duty, but as a concession to the consciences of others."* (Stott, p.250)

b) What we learn about differences of opinion today.

First, we learn that church councils — meetings of church leaders — do have the right and authority to regulate belief and behavior. The letter they send is not just advice, but a judgment.

Second, we learn that we need to give in on some issues, namely those issues that are "cultural". We must not elevate customs and traditions that are not Biblical to the level of absolute principle.

Third, we learn that we are not to give in on the gospel. Underneath this controversy, the gospel of grace was at stake. On that concept there cannot be any compromise.

Fourth, we see that the Holy Spirit does not just lead through miraculous revelations. The council clearly prayed, studied the Bible, and debated. Then they wrote, *"it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us"* (v.28)! They saw the Holy Spirit guiding them through the conversation-debating-discussing — consensus-building.

**5. 16:1-5. Is Paul's behavior with Timothy seem in tension with his uncompromising stand in 15:1-5? What does this teach us about where to contend and where to compromise?**

Paul's behavior here shows the same balance between truth and love exhibited by the Council. The Council had spoken the truth about gospel freedom, yet demanded loving consideration from the Gentile converts for Jewish Christian sensibilities. So here we see that, though Paul would not compromise on the gospel, he was extremely concerned to maintain Jewish-Gentile unity. It was important the the church stay multi-cultural and in order to do that, he did not see it as unprincipled for Timothy to adapt to Jewish cultural practices out of consideration for the people they were seeking to reach and have fellowship with.

This is no contradiction. See the comments by Lovelace above. When the conscience is freed from self-justification by the gospel, it makes us very culturally flexible. We must firmly contend for the gospel, but it is that very gospel that makes us pliant and open about most everything else!

*"Paul was a reed in non-essentials — an iron pillar in essentials."* (John Newton)

## THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

### Part III – A – CONTENT: INTRODUCTION

Read silently and mark “!” - for something that helped you  
 “?” -for something that raised a question

#### Introduction

I would like to offer two somewhat different ways to present the gospel to someone else. Though we may be tempted to choose one or the other based on which one “grabs” us the most, we should rather choose one or the other on based on the needs of the person we are addressing.

#### A spiritual divide

The basic difference between people I meet today has to do with why they may think that they need the gospel. People from traditional cultures and mindsets tend to a) have a belief in God, and b) have a strong sense of moral absolutes and the obligation to be “good”. These folk respond well to a presentation that says, “Sin keeps you from ever being as good as you need to be, and it therefore separates you from God.” People with more secular and “post-modern” mindsets tend to a) have only a vague belief in the divine if at all and, b) have little sense of moral absolutes. Therefore, they feel the obligation to be free and true to their own selves and dreams. These folk respond well to a presentation that says, “Sin keeps you from being free as you need to be, and therefore it enslaves and de-humanizes you.”

Let me summarize the difference in another way:

The way to show the traditional persons their need for the gospel is by saying, “your sin makes you imperfect! You can’t be righteous enough.” (Imperfection is the duty-worshipper’s horror. So you are threatening them.) But the way to show more deeply secularized persons their need for the gospel, you say, “your sin makes you a slave! You are actually being religious, though you don't know it — trying to be righteous in a destructive way”. (Slavery is the choice — worshipper’s horror. So you are threatenging them.) Both approaches are true, Biblically, of course. But each assumes a piece of common grace, a certain insight about truth. The older cultures saw duty as the key of salvation. The gospel says: “but you AREN'T living up to your duty unless you come to God through the finished work of X.” The newer culture sees freedom as the key of salvation. The gospel says: “but your AREN'T free unless you come to God thro finished work of X.” Now in both situations, we must be careful. The gospel is *not* a new way to fulfill duty — it is a whole new kind of life. And the gospel is not a new way to find happiness — it is a whole new kind of life. In former times, when churches were so filled with people who were traditional, we had to avoid preaching any “salvation through duty”. Now churches are so filled with people who are therapized to seek fulfillment, we must avoid preaching any “salvation thro discovery”.

**Who are the two kinds of people?**

Every person must be considered on a case by case basis. But here are some ideas.

The first set of people tend to include: people who are older, who are from strong Catholic or religious Jewish backgrounds, who are from conservative evangelical/Pentacostal Protestant backgrounds, people from the southern U.S., and first generation immigrants from non-European countries. The second set of people tend to include: people who are younger, who are from nominal/weak Catholic or non-religious Jewish backgrounds, who are from liberal mainline Protestant backgrounds, people from the western and northeastern U.S., and Europeans.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

**1. What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**

**2. What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**







# Acts

## Three surprising conversions

### Study 16 | Acts 16:5-40

#### INTRODUCTION

Now begins what many consider Paul's greatest missionary journey — his evangelization of the chief cities of three important Roman provinces, Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia. Here we see very clear how urban-centric Paul's missionary strategy was. He won each province by ignoring the countryside and by focusing on its capital, planting the church within it. This is often called his "second missionary journey", since he had returned to Antioch, his sending church, at the end of Acts 14. In this chapter we see Paul going to the three major Macedonian cities — Phillippi, Thessalonica, and Berea. Another important background note is to observe the beginning of the "we" passages of Acts. We are told that Paul and Barnabus had parted company at the end of Acts 15. Paul set out with Silas (15:40) and others Luke calls "companions" (16:6). This company is called "they" up until 16:8, until they come to Troas. Then, very suddenly, this group is called "we" beginning in 16:10. This means that Luke himself joined the group, and all that occurs in the next few passages is an eyewitness account.

- 1. vv.1, 6-10. Trace these moves on a map to see how unusual a route this is. a) On the basis of other passages in Acts, what are the possible ways that the Holy Spirit may have been guiding them away from these provinces? b) What does this incident tell us about how God will guide us?**

a) How may the Holy Spirit have been leading them?

It can be seen from a glance of the map that Paul and company returned to the region where they had worked on the first missionary journey — the area of Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, and Derbe (cf.16:1). It was only natural to assume that they would proceed to Asia, Mysia, or Bithynia, which are all just north of that area. Yet, by some unnamed method, they were "kept by the Holy Spirit" from preaching in those regions. It is very striking to look at the map, for they had to journey a very long way before they were allowed to stop and minister anywhere. They traveled and traveled — but "muzzled" from saying anything or doing anything of an evangelistic nature.

How did the Holy Spirit dissuade them? It is important to look back at how the very varied ways that the Holy Spirit guides in the book of Acts. Sometimes, he speaks through a revelation to an individual (Acts 11:28) other times he works through the very mundane and unremarkable process of debate and study and group consensus building (Acts 15; cf.15:28). One time the Spirit seemed to lead the group to a conclusion not through group debate but through group prayer (Acts 13:1-3). Therefore, we cannot be sure what means the Holy Spirit used to keep the missionaries from preaching. It could have been a) through an outward circumstance such as an illness or a legal ban (which Luke attributes to

the providential plan of the Spirit), or b) through an inward circumstance such as thinking and analysis or conviction in prayer, or c) through a corporate circumstance such as a lack of agreement within the group to embark on a local mission, or d) through a miraculous circumstance such as a prophecy or dream or vision. All of these methods are used by the Holy Spirit in other parts of the book of Acts. However, it is reasonable to conclude, since the particular circumstance is not mentioned, that the Holy Spirit's guidance was ordinary, not extraordinary. Usually, when there was a miracle or vision, Luke notes and describes it.

Finally, Paul has a dream of a man of Macedonia calling him to come preach there.

b) What does this teach us?

First, we learn that God may guide us for a long time sending us only "no's" without any "yes's" at all. When we are in the midst of all these "closed doors", we can feel like God has abandoned us, but when we look at the big picture, we can see that a "no" is as much an act of guidance as a "yes". If this team had stopped at any of these provinces, there might never have been the books of I and II Thessalonians, I and II Corinthians, or Ephesians! Also, the pronoun change (from "they" to "we") indicates that they picked up Luke at Troas. Luke was highly aware that if they had followed their plan, he would never have joined up with them. Sum: *God's guidance is negative as well as positive — it consists of closed doors as well as open ones.*

Second, guidance is never passively received — it always entails wrestling with the evidence and using your mind and making a choice. Notice that, even after the dream, the team had to "*conclude*" that God had called them to preach in Macedonia. This is the Greek word *syμβιβάζω* which means to literally "put the pieces of a puzzle together". These verses show us, probably, some guidance that was very ordinary and one piece (the dream) that was very extraordinary. But it still involved thinking, analyzing, and decision making together. Sum: *God's guidance is rational as well as circumstantial.* It is not a matter of "guessing" God's will, but of making a wise decision.

Third, guidance is corporate. In every case, the verbs are plural. "The Holy Spirit would not let *them* in", and "*we* concluded that God was calling us". We are not to seek God's will in isolation from the counsel of others.

Fourth, guidance is gradual. It is possible to go a very long time without seeing where you are going! When Paul and his companions finally arrived at Troas, at the "Dardanelles", the gateway to Greece, they had come an extremely long way by an extremely circuitous route. They had traveled the entire length of Asia Minor without anything to show for their effort! They had planted no churches and had made no converts. Imagine their perplexity. Surely we can relate to this. There are times in our lives where it looks like we are getting nothing done, or where it looks like our time and efforts are being completely wasted. But guidance is gradual. It is like a mountainous road, on which you

often labor hard, doubling back and seeming to get nowhere, until you come to some vantage point where you can see the “big” picture and see how much progress you’ve made and where you are going.

**2. vv.11-15. What are we told about Lydia? How did she come to faith? What signs are we given that Lydia was truly converted?**

Note: “*a place of prayer... on the Sabbath*” indicates that these were Jews and God-fearing Gentiles who met weekly for worship, but that there were not enough of them to have an official synagogue. So what Paul and his friends went to was, essentially, a synagogue service of teaching/discussion of God’s Word.

First, we learn that Lydia was a businesswoman, a dealer in dyed cloth. She came from Thyatira, a place that was very well known for its dyes (an ancient inscription in that place refers to a guild or association of dyers that was centered in that city). Lydia was either a dyer herself or a trader who used her links to her home city. Second, we learn that she was a “*worshipper of God*” (v.14). She was already a convert to Judaism, who respected the Old Testament Scriptures and who worshipped the one true God.

Here in v.14 we have a classic statement of how people become Christians. “*Whose heart the Lord opened to give heed to the things that were spoken by Paul*” (ASV) On the one hand, God did not call Lydia directly, but only through the audible preaching of the gospel by a human being. On the other hand, neither Paul’s words nor Lydia’s heart were capable in themselves of making any connection. Her response was only possible because her heart was opened by God. Without that intervention, the listeners’ hearts are closed, and the speakers words are ineffective against that closedness. This fits in with Acts 13:44, where we are told that “*as many as were appointed to eternal life believed*” — not that “*as many as believed were appointed to eternal life*”. It is the same here. Lydia’s heart was not opened because she responded to the gospel — she responded to the gospel because her heart was opened.

The evidence that she was converted was at least threefold. a) She believed the gospel — “*responded to Paul’s message*” (v.14). In other words, she found the gospel coherent, attractive, convicting. b) She brought her family to the Lord. We are told she was baptized together with *the members of her household* (v.15). The word *oikos* (household) we have seen was a far-reaching word. It certainly meant her servants and her children — and the word also was used to indicate infants. If Lydia was married, it would have included her husband. It may mean, though we cannot be sure, that she led other adult members of her household network to Christ as well. c) She made her home a ministry center. She invited the missionary team to live and operate out of her home. Doubtless it became a housechurch. Once the heart is opened to God, your resources — your wallet, possessions, and home — are open as well.

**3. vv.16-19. Contrast the pre-Christian spiritual state of the slave-girl with that of Lydia. Contrast the ministry of Paul to Lydia with that of Paul to the slave-girl. What is Luke trying to show us?**

The contrast between the very mainstream figure of Lydia and the extremely exotic figure of the slave girl could not be greater. *“They differ so much from one another that [Luke] might be thought to have deliberately selected them in order to show how the saving name of Jesus proved its power in the lives of the most diverse types...”* (Bruce, p.332). Who was the girl? The NIV says she *“had a spirit by which she predicted the future”* (v.16). But the Greek says, literally that she *“had the spirit of python”*. In ancient Greek culture, a *“pythoness”* was a person who was believed to be possessed by the spirit of the python which guarded the mythic temple of Apollo and the Delphic oracle. The Greeks called these people *“ventriloquists”* (see Bruce, p.332 n.35), because they uncontrollably made clairvoyant predictions and proclaimed prophecies and gnomic utterances in all sorts of strange and foreign voices. Since the society of that time considered them inspired by Apollo and the python, many people came to the masters of this slave girl and paid money to ask her questions and have her make her statements to them (*“she earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling”* v.16). Instead of having any pity on her for her bizarre behavior and obvious torment, they used her to make money.

So the contrast between Lydia and the slave girl cannot be greater. Lydia is a very respectable business woman, a pillar of the community; but the slave girl is scarcely a member of human community at all. She is almost literally a piece of property in a freak show. Lydia is a very moral and religious person who loved and knew the Bible; but the slave girl is completely alienated from any moral sense or knowledge of the truth. Lydia has much to be proud of; but the slave girl is a completely marginalized non-person, without a shred of dignity. Lydia has a moderate amount of power, both social and economic; but the slave girl is completely powerless, without even any self-control. All this is to show, as F. F. Bruce said, that the gospel can address and transform absolutely any condition. It is not only for the cultured and the able, nor is it only for the helpless and the broken.

The contrast extends to how Paul ministers to the two women. When Luke calls her a *“pythoness”*, he is not buying in to all the superstition and mythology, but he (and Paul) does recognize her as being demon possessed young girl, controlled by unseen masters and exploited by her human masters. With one stroke he breaks the power that both have over her. How?

Over a period of days we are told that Paul grew *“troubled”* (v.18), which probably means that he became deeply grieved and distressed for her. Finally, he publically challenged the demonic spirit in the name of Jesus, and it came out of her. Even her masters saw that she had new peace of mind. She had become calm and *“normal”* and they were howling mad!

Lydia had come to Christ very quietly, but the slave girl very noisily! Lydia had come to Christ in a Bible study, stressing how Christ fulfills the law and prophets; but the slave girl was brought to Christ through a power encounter. To Lydia, Jesus was presented as the Messiah of Israel; to the slave girl, he was presented as the bondage-breaker, the all-powerful liberator. What does this show us? The fact is that that Jesus is also the liberator for Lydia, and he is also the fulfiller of the law for the slave-girl — but in their initial encounter, each was confronted with a different feature of Jesus manifold glory. So we need to be flexible when presenting the gospel. We must consider how different a person's problems, needs, and issues can be!

Again we see that the gospel is as much for moral and "nice" people as for broken and addicted people.

**4. vv.19-40. a) What led the jailer to believe? b) Compare his pre-Christian spiritual condition with that of Lydia and the Pythoness. c) How does Paul lead him to Christ? d) Why does Paul insist on a public apology v.37?**

We have to gloss over the way that Paul and Silas found themselves in jail. The owners of the slave-girl were not interested at all in the fact that she was now liberated and at peace — they were just furious that their income from her was gone. They cleverly hid their true anger with Paul and Silas, and tried to arouse the populace's racist attitudes by talking about these "Jews" who were polluting the culture of "us Romans". Without any trial, the crowd began to beat them and the magistrates imprisoned them. Then follows the memorable account of the conversion of the Phillipian jailer. What led him to faith?

a) What led him to seek Christ?

First, he must have been astounded that Paul and Silas, who would have been bruised and bleeding, were *praying and singing hymns to God at midnight* (v.25) (It is hard not to think about Elihu's assertion that God gives us "songs in the night" Job 35:10!) So the Phillipian jailer, and all the prisoners (v.25) had a look at the way Christianity fortifies you to face the worst that life can send. Second, when the earthquake came, giving all the prisoners access to freedom, the jailer was shocked to find that Paul and Silas had restrained all the inmates. By doing so, they had saved his life. This act of service to him (and respect for the law) humbled him, and the view of their influence and leadership (over the prisoners) probably awed him as well. This led him to ask emotionally, "*what must I do to be saved*"? In sum: a) he was impressed with the character of Christians, and b) he was dramatically helped in a crisis by Christians.

b) Compare his pre-Christian spiritual condition.

The jailer was in many ways "in the middle" between the conditions of Lydia and the Pythoness. He was not a moral, Bible honoring person, but neither was he a person completely out of control and broken. Unlike Lydia, he did not come calmly and gently during a Bible study, knowing what he was doing. But

neither was he confronted and pursued by the evangelists in a forceful way. It is doubtful that he knew exactly what he was asking for when asked “what must I do to be saved?” He could not have known very much about what “salvation” would mean (unlike Lydia). He was probably just deeply aware that these men had a power and character and peace that he completely lacked. He was probably asking: “what do you have that makes you so? without it, I can’t survive!”

c) How Paul led him to Christ.

First, Paul summarized the gospel: “*believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your family*” v.31. (Paul does not mean that “if you believe, your family will be automatically saved”, but “this is the way to be saved — not just for you, but for your whole family.) But this summary was not enough. Second, Paul “*then... spoke the word of the Lord to him...*” (v.32). This shows that a brief gospel summary is not enough. People need to know what “believe” means, what “the Lord Jesus Christ”. Third, Paul rather quickly insisted that this gospel instruction be done in a group! He asked the jailer to gather the family around him to hear the word. This is wise in so many ways. If an individual converts without the rest of his/her family, it can lead to division and alienation within the family. Also, it shows how people tend to come to Christ through natural relationship networks, not “cold turkey” evangelism. Fourth, they were baptized when they believed (v.33). Some other places in the New Testament indicate that the early church gave extensive instruction to converts before they were baptized — so no particular amount of time between belief and baptism can be said to be the “Biblical” one. It depended on the situation. Here Paul thought it important to let the people show their commitment to Christ in a concrete way very quickly. He leads them to closure, to “nailing it down”. The results was wonderful *joy* (v.34).

d) The public apology.

It is not like Paul to be a self-promoter or to try to humiliate an opponent. Rather, “*this may have been extremely important for the freedom of the church he left behind*” (Triton, quoted by Stott, p.268). It was illegal to beat and imprison a Roman citizen without a trial. The magistrates knew now that Paul could appeal and create great trouble for them. By showing them this power he had over them, he was probably guaranteeing that his new church at Philippi would not be harassed.

**5. Surely there were many conversions at Philippi. Why do you think Luke chose three such disparate people to profile for readers?**

As John Stott says, “*racially, socially, and psychologically they were worlds apart. Yet all three were changed by the same gospel and were welcomed into the same church.*” (p.268). Review the differences. a) Racially — Lydia was a foreigner from Asia Minor, the slave-girl probably native Greek, and the jailer

probably a Roman. b) Socially — Lydia was probably wealthy, the slave girl was a non-person socially, and the jailer was a middle class civil servant. c) Psychologically/mentally — Lydia was very wise and “pulled together”, the slave-girl was deranged, while the jailer was probably a retired soldier, a common “working man”. d) “Felt needs” — Lydia’s was probably more intellectual, responding to a general dissatisfaction with her view of the world and meaning in life (after all, she had everything else — self-control, success, a family). And Paul responded with a gentle discussion. The slave-girl’s need was deep and emotional. She was an addict with a completely broken life. And Paul responded with a word of command. The jailer’s sense of need was more acute than Lydia’s and yet less so than the slave-girl’s. He seemed to realize that “he didn’t have what it takes” to face life. And Paul responded to this man of action (probably not an intellectual) with a fairly direct presentation and then he called him to a decision.

What is most surprising (and maybe very deliberate) is that these three persons were the three persons that were the very opposite of what a Jewish male like Paul would have been. In fact, every Jewish head of a house would rise in the morning and thank God (in a very typical and common prayer) that he was not born a Gentile, a woman, or a slave. Yet here were these three kinds of people all now united with Paul as brothers and sisters, and now the new foundation of the new church! It is noteworthy that Luke ends the story referring to all the new Christians as their “*brethren*” (v.40). How important it is to show the world that through Christ people can become brothers and sisters who, outside the church, cannot even get along.



## THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

### Part III – B – CONTENT: PRESENTATION #1

Read silently and mark “!” - for something that helped you  
“?” -for something that raised a question

As we said last week in the introduction, there are two basic kinds of person to share the faith with in our western society today — persons with a more traditional world view, and persons with a more deeply secular world view. Therefore we provide two ways to present the gospel, one for each kind of person. They differ mainly in how they demonstrate the hearer's need for Christ, in how they present the guilt and danger of sin. Presentation #1 (this week's project), called “*Sin as Separation*”, is for people of a more traditional mindset. These are people with a) a belief in God and b) a definite sense of obligation to absolute moral standards. Presentation #2 (next week's project), called “*Sin as Slavery*”, is for people of a more deeply secular mindset. They are people with a) no belief in a personal God and/or b) little concept of any absolute moral standards.

#### The “Brief Summaries” and the Extended Gospel Presentations

How do these two extended gospel presentations provided in weeks 16 and 17 relate to the “Brief Gospel Summaries” of week 6? The “Separation” presentation is an extension of the “Law-Love” summary of the gospel provided in the Week 6 project. The “Slavery” presentation is an extension of the “Slavery-Freedom” summary of the gospel provided in Week 6. These two summaries take different perspectives on the subject of sin, and therefore are slanted toward one kind of listener or the other. The other two summaries, “Do-Done” and “Sin-Salvation”, would fit with presentations either way, since they both focus not so much on our need, but on how salvation is accomplished by Christ.

The following is very extensive. I will provide an “easy outline” and summary later.

### PRESENTATION #1 (Sin as Separation)

#### Pre-Presentation

Refer to previous material on building trust, finding themes of relevance, and sharing a gospel summary. The following assumes that this presentation is not an abrupt or an inappropriate changing of the subject.

**Opening question: “WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND TO BE THE GENERAL REQUIREMENTS FOR BEING ACCEPTED BY GOD OR FOR ADMISSION TO HEAVEN?”**

This question serves two purposes. First, it is a “qualifier”, since it confirms or denies your assumption that this person has definite concept of God and moral absolutes (and is thus best helped with the “Separation” approach). The person’s answer may reveal that they are not sure there is a God, or do not believe in an afterlife of rewards based on moral behavior. They may say things like: “well, I think when we die, that’s it.” or “I think if there is a God, God is just the power of love and life” or “I think God accepts everyone” or “I think after death we all just get absorbed into God, the light” or “if there is a God and heaven, it will just depend if you followed your own beliefs very fervently”. In some cases, they may be very turned off or so confused by the question that they simply do not answer it. All these responses indicate that the person would be more helped by the “Slavery” presentation.

Second, this question identifies the person’s “salvation system”. It reveals if they believe in a “good works” system or a “grace” system for approaching God. These are the only two possible answers, though there are a great variety of forms. National surveys show that 35% of Americans, when asked this questions and given 7 possible answers, choose “because I have confessed my sins and accepted Christ as my Savior” (G.Barna, *Evangelism That Works*, p.45n). The large majority of responses to this question then are “works” answers. Examples are: “you have to — be a decent person” “follow the golden rule” “obey the 10 commandments” “go to church” “follow the example of Jesus” “it doesn’t matter what you believe as long as you are a loving person”. Often they may give a vague answer such as “you have to ask God for forgiveness”. But always probe for the real foundation for their hope. Ask “but why would he forgive someone for sin?” Often they will say, “because we are very sorry for them and really want to do better” or “because God is very loving”. All these show a lack understanding that we are separated from God by our sin and no amount of good works or good intentions can bridge the gap. A “grace” answer does not have to be perfectly precise, but must show that the perso knows they are too weak to live up to God’s standards, that they separated from God and are accepted only by mercy through Jesus.

**Note 1:** Sometimes people say they believe in God and heaven, but when you get into your discussion, you will find they insist that everyone and anyone is saved or loved by God, no matter what. Essentially, they have no sense of obligation to be good. (You may ask: “do you really mean *everyone* is accepted? Even genocidal dictators?” They may back off then, and you find that they do believe in moral standards, just very low ones!) People who insist on this kind of universalism or relativism (despite seeming to have a definite belief in God) are candidates for Presentation #2--Sin as slavery.

**Note 2:** People with a Catholic backgrounds need to realize that some Protestants seem at first sight to believe in a “grace system” but really do not. People from conservative Protestant churches may give a general answer like:

“you have to believe that Jesus died for you” or “make a decision for Jesus”. But if you ask, “why does that get you in?” you may find that they really believe they have to love and follow Jesus as a way to be good enough for God. Many people with Protestant backgrounds have what’s been called a “sincerity covenant” — they try to live the best they sincerely can and Jesus makes up the rest with this forgiveness. That is salvation by a “works-and-a-little-grace” system. On the other hand, people with a Protestant background need to realize that some Catholics seem at first sight to believe in a “works system” but really do not. Catholics who believe they are saved from first to last by grace will take hold and receive that grace by taking the Sacraments (of baptism and the Lord’s Supper). That does not mean that they are relying on their works for salvation. In the final analysis, however, most people with Protestant and Catholic backgrounds are trying to go to God on a “works system”. They all need the gospel.

This question and approach is not new. D.James Kennedy made it popular in his book *Evangelism Explosion*, but evangelists have been using it for literally centuries. Here is an example of how the British pastor Charles Spurgeon shared the gospel in the mid-19th century with a “waterman”, a ferry operator. This does not provide a good example of the language we should use, but it illustrates how the principles of the gospel have been used across time and culture.

Spurgeon: “Have you, my friend, a good hope of heaven if you should die?”

Waterman: “Well, sire, I think as how I have.”

S: Pray tell me, then, what your hope is, for no man need ever be ashamed of a good hope.

W: Well sir, ...I don’t know that anybody ever saw me drunk...I do think as how I am as good as most folk that I know.

S: Oh dear! Oh dear! Is that all you have to trust to? [“The waterman then told me that he was charitable as well, and I told him that I was glad to hear it, but I did not see how his good conduct could carry him to heaven. He asked why.”]

S: You have sometimes sinned in your life, have you not?

W: Yes, sir, that I have, many a time.

S: On what ground, then, do you think that your sins will be forgiven?

W: Well, sir, I have been very sorry for them, and I think they are all gone—they don’t trouble me now.

S: Now, my friend, suppose you were to go and get into debt with the grocer where you deal, and you should say to her, ‘Look here, missus, you have a

long score against me, I am sorry to say that I cannot pay you for all those goods that I have had; but I'll tell you what I will do, I'll do. I'll never get into your debt any more.' She would very soon tell you that was not her style of doing business; and do you suppose that is the way in which you can treat the great God? He is going to strike out you past sins because you say you will not go on sinning against Him?

W: Well, sir, I should like to know how my sins are to be forgiven...

S: ["Then I told him, as plainly as I could, how the Lord Jesus had taken the place of sinners, and how those who trusted in Him, and rested on His blood and righteousness, would find pardon and peace."] Charles Spurgeon, *Autobiography: The Early Years*, pp.373-375

**Follow-up questions: (If a "works" answer) "COULD I SHARE WITH YOU A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE, HOW YOU CAN KNOW GOD'S LOVE AND ACCEPTANCE AS A FREE GIFT, NOT ON THE BASIS OF (WHAT THEY JUST SAID)?"** This gets permission to do the presentation. It has the integrity to say upfront that you are disagreeing with them, but the extremely positive expression "as a free gift" is usually winsome and elicits an affirmative answer. Go to the Presentation below.

**(If a "grace" answer) "ARE YOU CONFIDENT THAT, IF YOU WERE TO DIE TONIGHT, YOU WOULD DEFINITELY GO TO HEAVEN?"** This is called the "assurance" question". Though they may have given the "right" answer, and have an intellectual grasp of the gospel, this question helps reveal whether or not they have appropriated it for themselves. If they gave a grace answer and a "yes" answer to assurance, then as far as you can tell (without knowing them better), they are professing Christians. But if the person gives a "no" answer to assurance, it could be that they realize that they have never made the commitment themselves. Or it could mean that they have done this, but their lives and lifestyle has contradicted Christianity. In that case, they have a bad conscience which blocks their assurance. In all cases, you need to go to the part of the presentation that has to do with "Commitment" which we cover in a subsequent week.

## Presentation

### A. Sin

Read or quote Luke 10:25-27. **"ALL THE MORAL LAWS OF CHRISTIANITY AND OTHER RELIGIONS AND EVEN COMMON SENSE BOIL DOWN TO TWO MORAL PRINCIPLES: 1) LOVE GOD WITH ALL YOUR BEING, AND 2) LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOU WANT TO BE LOVED."**

This really is common sense. First, if God really made us and keeps us alive every second, then we belong completely to him and we owe him everything. (Anything you create yourself is yours to do with what you will.) Second, the “golden rule” for loving others is something absolutely imprinted on us. You don’t have to teach it to children, they know it instinctively before they can barely talk (e.g. “I gave you my toy, you give me yours.”)

Read or quote I Corinthians 13:4-8a (to “*Love never fails*”). **“LOOK AT THE SECOND PRINCIPLE FIRST. PAUL SAYS THAT REAL LOVE ALWAYS FORGIVES, SERVES, AND ENDURES BECAUSE IT SHOULD BE UNCONDITIONAL. THAT IS HOW WE ALL WANT TO BE LOVED. YET WE DO NOT COME EVEN CLOSE TO GIVING OTHERS WHAT WE DEMAND OURSELVES.”** What is ‘unconditional love’? It is loving people not for what they give you, but for simply for they themselves. If that was the case, then your love would never give up on them — there would be no conditions that it required. That is how we all want to be loved. We want to know that others love us, and not the things we are providing them. Yet we fail to do to others what we want from them. We do give up on people when they stop being kind and useful to us. **“THE GOLDEN RULE MEANS WE SHOULD MEET THE NEEDS OF OTHERS WITH THE SAME SPEED, JOY, AND RELENTLESSNESS WHICH WE USE TO MEET OUR OWN”**. It does not take much reflection to see that the golden rule is absolutely right, we owe it, yet it is impossible to keep.

Read or quote Exodus 20:3. **“LOOK AT THE FIRST PRINCIPLE. GOD SIMPLY ASKS THAT THERE BE NOTHING MORE IMPORTANT TO YOUR THINKING, FEELING, AND BEHAVIOR THAN HE IS.”** When Jesus said, “*Love him with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind*” he was only being reasonable. If we owe God absolutely everything, then we should not love anything more than him, nor depend on anything more than him. But do we come close? Use the test of your thoughts. When you have nothing else that you have to think of, what do you enjoy dwelling on? Is it God, or are there other things more absorbing and enjoyable. Of course, everyone on the earth does not find that God is the most important thing to their hearts. To put God first is absolutely right, we owe it, yet it is impossible to do.

Read or quote Romans 3:10. **“THE BIBLE IS CATEGORICAL THAT ‘NO ONE IS RIGHTEOUS — NO, NOT ONE’. NO ONE COMES CLOSE TO OBEYING THE MOST REASONABLE AND COMMON SENSE MORAL PRINCIPLES.”** Of course, some people are far more moral and decent than others, but Christianity says that is to only compare less unrighteous people to more unrighteous. Compared to what we all owe God and our neighbor, we all fail. For example, imagine if you asked three swimmers to swim from Hawaii to California. One cannot swim and drowns in a few yards; one is a good swimmer and drowns in four miles; one is a great swimmer and drowns in a hundred miles. Though one is many times better than the rest, they are all incapable of swimming to California, and they are all equally dead.

**B. God. "CHRISTIANITY TELLS US 2 BASIC THINGS ABOUT THE NATURE OF GOD" — 1) Read or quote Psalm 11:7 GOD LOVES JUSTICE AND THEREFORE CANNOT ACCEPT EVIL OR SIN AT ALL.** We all long for justice. If a man in a car was to back into your car and damage it, you would not be satisfied if he only said, "I'm sorry". You would want nothing short of justice. But God loves justice far more than we do; he is absolutely just and holy and cannot accept wrongdoing at all. **2) Read or quote I John 4:8. "GOD IS LOVE, AND HE SEEKS THE GOOD EVEN OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE DISOBEYED AND OPPOSED HIM."** It is perhaps too easy and popular today to believe that God is love. He is a God who wants to forgive and restore.

Transition: **BUT FORGIVING US IS, IN A SENSE, THE BIGGEST PROBLEM GOD HAS EVER FACED.**" These two "sides" of his nature create a dilemma, a great problem.

**3) Read or quote Exodus 34:5-7. GOD LOVES US AND DOES NOT WANT TO PUNISH US, BUT IS JUST AND MUST PUNISH SIN.** When God revealed himself to Moses on Mt. Sinai he made a startling statement. He said that he was abounding in love and forgiveness, "yet" he will always punish wrongdoing. It seems impossible that God could be both. **"IT SEEMS HE CAN EITHER HE CAN LOVE US, AND NOT LOVE JUSTICE, OR HE CAN LOVE JUSTICE AND THEN NOT LOVE US — BUT HE CANNOT LOVE BOTH."** What a problem. If he does not love justice perfectly, what hope is there for the world? But if he *does* love us perfectly, what hope is there for us? Imagine an illustration. If a father was also a judge, and his guilty child was brought before him, he could not just acquit his child. He could either do what he wanted to do as a judge, or what he wanted to do as a father, but not both.

### **C. Christ.**

1) Read or quote Acts 20:28. **GOD HIMSELF CAME TO EARTH IN HUMAN FORM AS JESUS CHRIST.** This text tells us that it was God's own blood shed for us. God became human and vulnerable and subject to death. **2) Read or quote I Peter 2:22. JESUS WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO EVER HAD A PERFECT RECORD — LOVING GOD AND HIS NEIGHBOR.** He lived the life we should have lived. **3) Read or quote II Corinthians 5:21. BUT ON THE CROSS THERE WAS A GREAT TRANSFER — HE IS TREATED AS OUR BAD RECORD DESERVES, SO THAT WE CAN BE TREATED AS HIS PERFECT RECORD DESERVES.** Look at the verse. It says that Jesus was "made... to be sin". Since Jesus did not actually become selfish, cruel, etc. on the cross, that means that he was treated as if he were sinful — he became "legally" sinful and liable for our sins. But it says that now it is possible for us to "become the righteousness of God". Since Jesus "became sin" by being treated as sinful, so we can "become righteous", be treated as perfectly righteous. He is treated as if our record is his, so we can be treated as if his record is ours. **THE GOSPEL IS: GOD TREATS BELIEVING SINNERS AS THOUGH THEY HAD LIVED THE LIFE JESUS LIVED AND DIED THE DEATH JESUS DIED.**

**4)** Read or quote Romans 3:26. This is the solution to the dilemma. The love of God fulfilled the law of God — in Christ on the cross. When Christ was punished, both his love for us and his love for justice were satisfied in one stroke *“that God might be both just and justifier [judge and father] of those who believe”* (Rom.3:26). **BECOMING A CHRISTIAN IS NOT ME DEVELOPING A RIGHTEOUS RECORD THROUGH MORAL EFFORT AND GIVING IT TO GOD; IT IS GOD DEVELOPING A RIGHTEOUS RECORD THROUGH CHRIST AND GIVING IT TO US.** A visual illustration to use at this point. Take a book: “this is our record, full of sins”. Take a blank white card or piece of paper: “this is Christ’s record, perfect, a ticket into the presence of God”. Put one in this hand and one in the other. Then switch them. “He gets our record, and sinks under it; we get his record and rise with it.”

#### **D. Faith.**

**1)** Read or quote John 1:12-13. **BECOMING A CHRISTIAN NOT TRYING HARDER, BUT RECEIVING A STATUS — “RIGHTS AS CHILDREN OF GOD”.** Notice that becoming a Christian is like being adopted. Adopting children is a legal act. In one moment, the children automatically become your heirs. So becoming a Christian is receiving this new status, being heirs of God’s love and life. **IT IS RECEIVED BY “BELIEVING” — BY FAITH.** **2) WHAT SAVING FAITH IS NOT.** Read or quote James 2:19. **MORE THAN INTELLECTUAL BELIEF.** The demons believed Jesus lived and died for sin, but they are not his children! Saving faith is not less than intellectual belief — you must have that — but it is more. Read or quote Phil.3:8-9. **MORE THAN TRUST FOR HELP AND STRENGTH.** It is possible to pray to God and trust in him for strength and protection, but still be trusting in your-*self* for salvation. Remember your answer to my first question: you said you thought it was possible to find God through (what they said). So you see, you may trust God for many things, but you are trusting yourself for your salvation.

**3) WHAT SAVING FAITH IS.** Read or quote Romans 4:5 (also refer back to Phil.3:8,9) **REAL FAITH IS REMOVING YOUR SAVING FAITH FROM WHERE IT IS NOW, AND PUTTING IT ON JESUS CHRIST.** **a) REPENT — NOT JUST FOR SINS, BUT FOR TRYING TO BE YOUR OWN LORD AND SAVIOR.** Paul says that first you must “not work”: that means that you must see that you cannot earn God’s favor with any moral effort, not even with efforts to develop a penitent, surrendered, sincere heart. You must admit that it can only be received. **b) BELIEVE — NOT JUST IN JESUS IN GENERAL, BUT IN JESUS AS YOUR NEW RIGHTEOUSNESS BEFORE GOD.** Then Paul says you must “trust God who justifies the wicked”. That means you ask God to accept (justify) you solely for the sake of what Christ did for you. You say: “Lord, I know that right now I am ‘wicked’, but I can be just and acceptable through Christ. Receive me because of him.” Refer back to John 1:12-13. The moment you do this, you not only receive “rights” as children, but you are “born of God” — God’s spirit comes in and begins to renew you.

**IS NOT TRYING HARD TO QUALIFY FOR GOD, BUT ADMITTING THAT YOU CANNOT**

First, of all — I have good news — better you have — but first, a much higher view of the law. Golden rule. I Cor.13 — go and do that! Do you?





# Acts

## The Gospel for intellectuals

### Study 17 | Acts 17:1-34

- 1. vv.1-9. If Paul's great burden is to win the Gentiles (cf. Eph.3:8) why does he always first go to the synagogue in any town? What are the implications for our own efforts to spread the gospel?**

Luke tells us that Paul's "custom" (v.2) was to go to a synagogue first in any town. Why did he do so, if his great burden was to evangelize the Gentiles (cf. Ephesians 3:8)? As is made clear in v.4, some Jews were converted through the synagogue-mission, but in contrast "a large number of God-fearing Greeks" believed. By now a very strong pattern is emerging. As in Pisidian Antioch and Phillipi, it is the God-fearing Gentiles who are the key. They are more receptive than the Jews and the pagan Gentiles. On the one hand they seem to have been more spiritually open to the message of grace than were the Jews. On the other hand, their belief in the God of the Bible made them more open to calls to surrender and obedience than were the pagans.

Therefore, the moral, Bible-believing Gentiles were the strategic key to church planting for Paul. Why? First, because they were, humanly speaking, "easier" to share the faith with than others, and second, because they had extensive personal relationships and connections to both believing Jews and pagan Gentiles.

But we also see in this passage that the Jews of the synagogue of Berea were atypical. In that city, unlike nearly all the other towns, there were "many" Jews who believed and only "a number" of Gentiles. (v.12) The situation was reversed.

What do we learn for ourselves? First there is a basic theological principle. This shows us first that God not only prepares individuals for the gospel (cf. Lydia, Acts 16:14), but also prepares groups of people and kinds of people. The ways he can do so are extremely diverse; he can bring psychological and sociological factors to bear on a community. We Westerners are very individualistic, and we are surprised to see that God often tends to "run in families" and communities of people.

Second, there is a very important practical principle of balance given us here. On the one hand, we see that it is not wrong to concentrate our own ministry efforts on a particular group or kind of person; it is not wrong to give a priority (as Paul did) to a certain segment of the population. On the other hand, it is clear both here (v.4) and in former missions (from Antioch, Acts 13:1 all the way back to the day of Pentecost) that the church's mission is inclusive, and that every church should aim to be as diverse as possible. Paul gave priority to reaching the God-fearing Gentiles, yet only as the strategic entry point for reaching the whole city. He did not concentrate on one group because he liked them better than others. And if he had become disdainful and rigid in his approach (e.g. if he had begun to neglect Jews in his work), he would never have been ready for the wonderful "surprise" of Berea.

**2. vv.1-9. What was Paul's basic strategy in Thessalonica and Berea? What was the reaction to it and why?**

The strategy Paul used follows the pattern we have seen before. In one sense, this shows us his pattern with Bible-believers. On three Sabbaths he went to the synagogue and did intensive Bible study with the hearers. His evangelism was heavily based on the Bible, but it was not just monologue. In Thessalonica, he "reasoned" "explained" "persuaded", and in Berea he led the hearers to carefully "examine" the Scripture. This means that Paul did not preach in an authoritarian "don't ask me any questions" mode. There was give-and-take, a willingness to field questions, an effort to help the listeners discover truth for themselves. His line of reasoning and teaching had to do with proving from the Old Testament writings that Jesus was the promised Messiah. This is of course what Christ himself did in Luke 24:13-27 and Luke 24:44 and following.

In another sense, we see Paul's pattern with every audience. First he makes the case for why they should believe (v.2-3a) by appealing to an authority they trust (the Bible). Second, he lays out what they should believe in v.3b by "*proclaiming*" Christ. Having "proved" Christ, he then "proclaimed" Christ, laying out, probably, the story of his life and work. Third, he called them to commitment (v.4). These three basic stages we have called "case, content, commitment", but here the three are represented by three verbs that all begin with "p": "proving, proclaiming, persuading".

The negative reaction to Paul's preaching has a two-fold source: one psychological and one political. The psychological one is "*jealousy*" (v.5), which can be best understood against the background of the earlier chapters of Acts. The Jews were accustomed to seeing themselves as having a privileged position due to their faithfulness to the law and their history. The gospel, however "levels" and brings everyone into the kingdom on an equal footing. We must be careful not to think that 1st century Jews were unique in this! Throughout history, the most moral and respectable and community "pillars" have had a) a high regard for religion in general, but b) a deep distaste for the gospel of grace.

The political issue is intriguing. The opponents claim that Paul's gospel was seditious. They heard Paul speak of Jesus' being a king and of Jesus coming kingdom, therefore, they accused him publically of defying the power of Caesar in the name of another sovereign (v.7). Commentators point out that in the sentence "*they have caused trouble all over the world*" (v.6) the Greek word translated "caused trouble" is *anastatoo*, which means "incited revolution" (see how it is translated in 21:38). The perceptiveness of this charge lies in the fact that the gospel of Jesus Christ does undermine and relativize the Christian's loyalty to any political regime. Therefore, it was a dangerous accusation because it was half-true. John Stott writes:

“The ambiguity of Christian teaching in this area remains. On the one hand, as Christian people, we are called to be conscientious and law-abiding citizens, not revolutionaries. On the other hand, the kingship of Jesus has unavoidable political implications, since, as his loyal subjects, we must refuse to give any ruler or ideology our supreme homage and total obedience which are due to him alone.” (p.273)

**Introduction to the Athenian mission:** The city of Athens was the intellectual capital of the Graeco-Roman world. Before the rise of the Roman empire, it was the leading political and cultural center of the Greek world. After it was conquered by Rome, remained the center of learning for the whole Empire. In this passage we meet the Stoics and the Epicureans, representing two schools of philosophy of that time. The Epicureans did not deny the existence of the gods, but they considered them completely remote from the world and life. Therefore, they saw history as being random, and life as being without any meaning. After death there was nothing. As a result, this philosophy counseled that people should pursue whatever brought them pleasure and fulfillment. They saw no need to do anything that entailed discomfort, pain, or self-denial. The Stoics believed in God as the world spirit (a form of “pantheism”) which fixed the fate of everyone and everything. They counseled the pursuit not of pleasure but of duty, and to courageously accept and face whatever that fate was. Paul’s mission to Athens is instructive because it shows how he approaches the pagan “cultural elites” of his day (who were not very different from our own). The “Areopagus” was a council of the greatest philosophers, opinion-leaders, and influence-brokers. It was roughly like the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. It did not have governing authority, but it controlled matters of religion and culture.

### 3. v.16-21. From what motives did Paul operate (what did he see and feel when he first saw Athens)? What can we learn from his example?

1. First, what Paul saw. Paul walked about the city of Athens, which was full of architectural marvels, but he looked at it with spiritually sensitive eyes. He was struck by how filled the town was with idols. He was, in a sense, seeing the town through God’s eyes, because the Greek word (see below) that describes his reaction to idolatry (“*greatly distressed*”) is the same one used to describe God’s reaction to idolatry in (Is.65:2-3). In other words, Paul tended to look at life through a Biblical “filter”. He was so sensitive to God’s Word and thus to God’s attitudes and ways and heart that he could not help participating in God’s response.

What do we learn? (a) First, we learn that we also should try to look at our city through God’s eyes. It is too easy to become indifferent to the familiar. We need to imagine how the love and holiness of God would react to the things around us — then our heart will function like his. (b) Another thing we learn is that we too should become acquainted with the idols of our city. We will not be

able to share the gospel effectively unless we know the false “gods” of the people we are trying to reach. For example, there is an old saying about three cities of the Northeastern U.S. “In Boston, they ask ‘what does he know?’ in New York, they ask ‘how much does he make?’ but in Philadelphia, they ask, ‘what family is he from?’” This quip (attributed to Mark Twain) is really an analysis of each city’s particular idols: education, wealth, family pedigree. The idol of one city is not the idol of another. (c) Third, we should not be surprised that this intellectual centers is absolutely filled with idols (v.36) and religiosity (v.22). This is always the case. The people who seem on the surface to be the most unbelieving are always very religious after all. Idolatry is promoting created things, goals, relationships, pursuits into absolute and ultimate values and then replacing God with them or worshipping God in accordance with them. Anyone seeking to address the unbelieving elites of any time or place must identify their idols, which will be the major barrier to belief in God.

2. Second, what Paul felt. We saw that he was “*greatly distressed*” (v.16) by the rampant idolatry. The Greek word is *paroxymo*; it describes a deep mixture of both anger and sorrow. You don’t have to know the Greek word to see that Paul was driven to bold witness by a very complex feeling. It was not simply anger-disgust on the one hand. If he was only infuriated by their rebellion, he would have simply washed his hands of the place in disgust, or preached with such condescension and disdain that they would have given him no hearing. However, that is not what he did. It says he “*reasoned*” (v.17) which means he did not simply “declare”, but entered into an engaged give-and-take dialogue with people. He did not simply declare their judgement and condemnation. We also see his gentleness in the way he gives them credit, almost a compliment, for their religious activity: “*I see that in every way you are very religious*” (v.22) His discourse is very civil.

However, on the other hand, his feeling was not simply one of compassion and mercy. Idolatry *outraged* him. In his speech he accuses these highly sophisticated and intellectual people of “*ignorance*” (v.29) — nothing could have been more insulting to them! And then he declares the final judgement of God (v.31). So Paul’s feelings that drove him were “complex”. Why? On the one hand, he saw the idolatry in the perspective of God’s holiness as rebellion — and thus he was outraged and indignant. But on the other hand, he saw the idolatry in the perspective of God’s love as slavery — and thus he was moved with compassion for the people who were enslaved in ignorance and darkness.

What do we learn? Paul felt outrage because of the holiness of God and compassion because of the love of God. If either of these kinds of feelings are missing from our witness, our effectiveness will suffer greatly. We will either be people characterized by force and authority in our tone OR by warmth and affection in our tone — but not both. Paul evidently was characterized by both. The two “sides” of God’s nature (his holy law and his love), and the two “sides” of the gospel (that we are hopeless sinners and loved children) together should create this “complex” feeling in us. As John Stott wrote:

“We do not speak like Paul because we do not feel like Paul because we do not see like Paul. That was the order: he saw, he felt, he spoke. It all began with his eyes. When Paul walked around Athens, he did not just ‘notice’ the idols. The Greek verb used three times (16,22,23) is either theoreo or anatheoreo and means... to ‘consider’. So he looked and looked and thought and thought until the fires... were kindled within...” (Stott, p.290-291)

**4. a) What can we tell about how Paul reasoned in the marketplace? (vv.17-18) b) How does he gain the interest of his hearers in vv.22-23?**

a) We are not told many details about what Paul said in the marketplace, we are only told that he spoke about two things: a) the good news about Jesus, and b) the resurrection. This gives us some idea about how he “reasoned” there. He did not argue that Jesus was the Messiah promised in the Scripture. Instead, he argued first, for the deity of Christ and second, for the historicity of the resurrection. One does not have to assume the infallibility of the Bible to argue for those things. A popular modern example of the former is to look at how C.S.Lewis argued that Jesus is either “liar, lunatic, or the Lord”. There are many popular examples of the latter, that point to the many eyewitness accounts of individuals who saw the risen Christ. So here we get a very brief but telling idea of what Paul pressed on people in the agora.

b) Paul first gains interest by making a very courteous remark about the Athenians religiosity. He saves his strong words about the “dark” side of this religiousness — namely the idolatry — for later. He leads off by collecting the good things he can say and the sincere compliments he can pay and using them in the introduction. A compliment aimed your way is always interesting to you! Second, Paul makes use of an altar built “to an unknown God” (v.23). This is another important element of gaining interest — it is moving from the familiar to the unfamiliar. Paul begins with something they know about, something familiar to them, something they themselves do. Third, Paul very subtly appeals to the Athenians admission of ignorance about the divine. Some people have insisted that, when Paul refers to this “Unknown God” altar, that he is affirming that all religions really worship the same true God. This cannot be the case, since later in the sermon Paul tells them to turn to Christ or be judged! Rather, Paul sees the altar as the Athenians acknowledgement of the limitations of their religion. The reason they made such an altar was because they had a deep sense that they were missing something in their religion, that they had not really broken through. Paul is saying, “That God that you know you have missed, that you have not been able to discover — He is the one I will reveal to you today.” It’s a brilliant approach.

**5. a) What six principles (at least) does Paul lay out to show them who the true God is? (vv.24-31) b) Some people have criticized this sermon as not being Christ-centered enough. How would you answer that? c) How does Paul's message fit this audience (refer to the introduction to the Athenian mission)?**

a) Paul has to distinguish the true God from the polytheistic gods and idols of the Greek pantheon. He does so by telling them five things about God:

(1) That God is the Creator of the world (v.24). *"who made the world and everything in it"*. This is a very different that the limited gods of the Greeks (many of whom were born and created themselves), and from the all-pervasive God of eastern religions, who is identical with the life force in all things. Rather this is a God who existed before the world and brought it into being.

(2) That God is therefore transcendent and not dependent on us or the world or anything in it (v.25). *"He is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything"*. Again, this contrasts God with idols, and the Greek gods, who need our worship. This is Paul's warning that the true God cannot be "domesticated" as idols can. In a real sense, God cannot be placated or manipulated, because he needs nothing.

(3) On the other hand, that God is also Lord of history. (v.26) *"He determined the times set for them and the exact places that they should live."* and very involved with us (v.28) *"For in him we live and move and have our being"*. Though God is transcendent, Paul says he is not remote, but is behind all the circumstances of history and is very near and involved with us.

(4) That God, that God made us for fellowship with him. (v.27) *"God did this so that men would seek him... and find him."* God wants us to seek him and find him. This is a tremendous statement. Paul is indicating that though God does not need our obedience, he desires to have a relationship with us. This is not like the western gods who only want loyalty, not loving communion; this is not like the eastern "pantheistic" god who can only be sensed and experienced but which is not personal and cannot be spoken to. This is a personal yet all-powerful God. This also implies a very high view of human beings!

(5) That God cannot be worshipped by idols and images. (v.29) Now Paul draws one of his first implications. If God is this great, then he shapes us and we worship him as he wants it to be done. We must not shape him and worship him as we want it to be done. He argues that "we are his offspring" — he created us. How is it then that so many people try to create their own religion? We must remember that modern people are very much in the same tradition as those who made their own statues to worship. Today it is common to hear people say, "I like to think of God as", or "everyone has to determine what God is for him or herself". That is idolatry. Of what value would a God be who you shaped yourself? That is Paul's argument. It still works.



(6) That God has made Jesus Christ Judge of the whole world. (v.30-31).

Finally Paul says, up until the first coming of Christ, God has not visited judgement on idolatry as he will in the future. *"In the past, God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent"*. Finally, Paul comes to Christ. He says that the resurrection proves that he will return to judge the world.

b) Some people are disappointed that this sermon is not more Christ-centered. But we must remember that Paul had already laid the groundwork in the marketplace about the deity of Christ and the historicity of the resurrection. In other words, he had spoken of the person and work of Christ, but the Athenians did not have a Biblical conception of a transcendent-yet-involved God, a holy-yet-loving God. Without that view of God, the person and work of Christ makes no sense. Now, finally, he connects this God to the career of Jesus. Paul has shown that there is a God of love who seeks our fellowship (v.27), yet a God of justice who must punish us (v.30-31) for trying to manipulate him and rebel against him through idolatry (v.24-25,29). Only if they understand this, does the deity of Christ (that God himself has come to save us) and the work of Christ (the death and resurrection) make any sense. For the work of Christ alone resolves the great tension between the justice of God (he must punish sin) and the graciousness of God (he wants to forgive and restore us to himself). The work of Christ satisfies the justice of God with the love of God.

But why does Paul not spell this out? Why does he not spend more time on Christ in the speech? Here are three possible answers. First, since we know that Luke's record of sermons are always summary-outlines, we may surmise that Paul provided more discussion about the work and especially the death of Christ. But second, it is also possible that the narrative shows us that Paul did not really finish his speech, that it came to an abrupt ending before he could have made further points. *"When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered"* (v.32). A third possibility is that Paul simply knew that he had to lay a groundwork first, and he did not try to say everything at once. He began with the doctrine of God. It is true that there were not a lot of converts (v.33), but that does not mean that Paul made any mistakes in his communication.

c) We have been noting all along how Paul's message fit the audience. They lacked a Biblical doctrine of God, so he had to work on that first before the facts about Christ could make sense to them. We should also notice that the "two sides" of God's nature that Paul taught cut against both the Epicureans and the Stoics views. The Epicureans saw the gods as personal, but remote and uninvolved with human affairs. They were "happy hedonists", teaching that life consisted of following your desires. The Stoics on the other hand saw God as a kind of life force controlling everything, but not a personal being to know and obey. They were pessimists, teaching that life consisted of following your duty. To the Epicureans, Paul said, "God is near and he is a Judge — you cannot do anything you want!" To the Stoics, Paul said: "God is personal and Savior — you can know hope and freedom!" He was telling the Epicureans not to make an idol of pleasure, and he was telling the Stoics not to make an idol of duty.



## THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

### Part III – A – CONTENT: PRESENTATION #2

Read silently and mark “!” - for something that helped you  
“?” -for something that raised a question

The following is very extensive. I will provide an “easy outline” and summary later.

#### PRESENTATION #1 (Sin as Separation)

##### Pre-Presentation

Refer to presentation #1 on “Pre-Presentation” and to the “Content: Introduction” on discerning whether a person would be helped by the following approach or not.

Opening question: **“WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND TO BE THE MOST IMPORTANT THING A PERSON NEEDS (OR YOU NEED) IN ORDER TO BE HAPPY AND FULFILLED?”** This question is an extremely direct way to find a “theme of relevance” as described in Part II. “Relevance”. A more indirect approach might be preferable. The purpose of this question or its like is to find what the person thinks is real meaning in life. They are likely to give a fairly general, impersonal answer, like “find what they really want to accomplish in life and do it” or “find people who love and accept you for who you are”. You should follow that up with genuinely interested queries to explain, like: **“HOW MANY PEOPLE REACH THAT, DO YOU THINK?” “WHY OR WHY NOT?” “HOW EASY OR HARD ARE YOU FINDING IT?”** Just as, in Presentation #1, it is important to understand their answer, in order to refer back to it later, so it is here.

Follow-up question: **“COULD I SHARE WITH YOU A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE, THAT THE MOST FUNDAMENTAL HUMAN NEED IS NOT JUST (WHAT THEY JUST SAID) BUT TO KNOW AND EXPERIENCE GOD PERSONALLY, AND HOW THAT IS POSSIBLE?”** This gets permission to do the presentation. It has the integrity to say upfront that you are disagreeing with them, but the extremely positive expression “know and experience God” is usually winsome and elicits an affirmative answer. Go to the Presentation below.

**Presentation****A. The problem — Slavery.**

**1) NOBODY IS BORN WITH A SENSE OF WORTH OR VALUE IN THEMSELVES.** All persons need to establish a sense of worth or value — nobody is born just having it. And we cannot just give it to ourselves — we must have the love and approval of others. Now there are innumerable ways we seek this sense of worth — career, possessions, appearance, love, peer groups, achievement, good causes, moral character, family, personal “bests”, certain kinds of relationships — or a combination of a several. A very liberal person will have a different path by which to prove him or herself than a very conservative person. But we all have a path. This means two things —

**2) THAT EVEN THE MOST IRRELIGIOUS ARE REALLY WORSHIPPING**

**SOMETHING.** Whatever thing or things from which we choose to derive our value become the ultimate meaning in our lives. Whatever is ultimate serves as a ‘god’ and a ‘righteousness’ even if we don’t think in those terms. These things control and disappoint us if we find them, and devastate us if we lose them. For example, they enslave us with guilt and self-hatred (if we fail to attain them) or with anger and resentment (if someone blocks them from us) or with fear and anxiety (if they are threatened) or at least with drivenness (since we must have them). In other words, we are not free. Whatever is the most important thing in life for us controls us. We do not control ourselves.

**3) THAT EVEN THE MOST RELIGIOUS, ARE NOT REALLY WORSHIPPING GOD.**

There are plenty of religious and moral people in the world. But they are not fundamentally different from the irreligious people, because they too are trying to prove themselves through their performance in order to establish their value and worth. They may use religion and morality to do it. They may look to God as Helper, Teacher, and Example, but their moral performance is serving as their Savior. They are just as guilty and self-hating if they fail it, just as angry and resentful if someone blocks it, just as fearful and anxious if something threatens it, just as driven “to be good”. So there is no really fundamental difference between religious and irreligious people.

**B. The Solution — Redemption.**

The word “redemption” literally means — “bought out of slavery”. Jesus came not primarily to be our Helper, Teacher, or Example, but as our Savior. We must see:

**1) WE ARE LIBERATED NOT SO MUCH THROUGH THE TEACHING, AS THROUGH THE WORK OF CHRIST.** Our deep sense that we need to be good and loving to others is not mistaken, but we will never earn our sense of worth by trying to love others. No one has ever “done unto others as we would have them do unto us”. We will always fail. Jesus, came not primarily as example, but as a substitute. He came to live the life we should have lived and die the death we should have died (as penalty for our failures).

**2) WE ARE LIBERATED NOT BY GIVING A WORTHY RECORD TO GOD, BUT BY RECEIVING A WORTHY RECORD FROM GOD.** When we believe, we get Christ's spotless record, and therefore the rights that go with it. It is transferred — and then we are worth what Christ is worth. The Bible calls this worthiness our "righteousness". We all make something our righteousness. But Jesus' free righteousness is the only true righteousness. It is the only one that is perfect, can stand up to any circumstance or human failure.

**3) WE ARE LIBERATED BECAUSE JESUS IS THE ONLY GOD WHO DOES NOT ENSLAVE.** As a fish is only free in water, we are only free when serving Jesus supremely. For he is the only source of meaning that we cannot lose (freeing us from fear and anger) and that is a free gift (freeing us from guilt and drivenness). He is the only God who can forgive — none of the other ones can or will. Read or quote Matt.11:28-30. His "yoke" is the only one that does not enslave.

### **C. The Reception — Adoption.**

How do we "receive" this record?

**1) CHANGE NOT THE AMOUNT BUT THE DEPTH OF YOUR REPENTANCE.** You have to "repent", but the repentance that receives Christ is not so much being sorry for specific sins (though it is that), but it is admitting that your main sin is your efforts of self-salvation, at trying to be your own Savior. Don't just repent of sins, but of the self-righteousness under all you do, bad and good. Repent not just for doing wrong, but for the reason you did right!

**2) CHANGE NOT THE AMOUNT, BUT THE OBJECT OF YOUR FAITH.** You have to "believe", but the belief that receives Christ is not so much subscribing to a set of doctrines about Christ (though it is that), but transferring your trust from your own works and record to Christ's work and record.

Read or recite John 1:12-13.

**3) ASK DIRECTLY FOR A NEW FAMILY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, FOR JESUS' SAKE.** Imagine you worked for a very rich man. Your relationship depended on your performance week by week. But then imagine that this man adopted you. Suddenly the relationship would become loving and intimate, and his wealth would all be yours automatically, and it would not come to you on the basis of your performance, but on the basis of the legal relationship. That's what it means to become a Christian. Pray: "Lord, if I have never done so before, I thank you for the magnificent, sufficient sacrifice of your Son for me, and I ask you to receive and adopt me as your child, not because of anything I have done, but because of what Christ has done for me."

**D. The New Life of Growth.**

This new life of freedom grows over time. How?

**1) THROUGH CONTINUAL REPENTANCE FOR RESIDUAL SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS.**

A new quality of life results as you learn to joyfully repent for remaining “idols”, left-over systems of self-salvation. Under every problem there is something more important than Jesus that is operating as our functional righteousness and worth.

**2) THROUGH A GROWING EXPERIENCE OF GRATEFUL LOVE.** A new quality of life results as you lose the old motivation of selfish fear (“slave” mentality) and become empowered by the new dynamic of grateful love (“child of God” mentality). Without an experience of grace, all our good deeds are essentially self-interested, impersonal, and conditional. But the gospel moves us to love and serve God for who he is in himself.



# Acts

## Mission to Corinth

### Study 18 | Acts 18:1-28

#### INTRODUCTION

The city of Corinth was at the very narrow bridge of land (only 3 and a half miles wide) that connected the Peloponnese peninsula with the mainland of Greece to the north. It not only was at the center of the north-south trade route, but also of the east-west route. Goods could be brought to a port just to the east of Corinth and transported over land a few miles to a port to the west — this saved a 200 mile journey by ship around the south of the peninsula. As result, Corinth was a major commercial and finance center. Like many urban centers based on business and wealth — Corinth became famous for a degree of corruption and immorality that was remarkable even for the ancient world. In classical Greek *korintheazdo* (literally, to “Corintheanize”) became a synonym for fornication. At the center of Corinth was the temple of Aphrodite, which employed thousands of female slave/priestesses who roamed the city as prostitutes.

These cities were immense, especially by the standards of the time. In 1850 there were only four cities in the world with over 1,000,000 inhabitants, yet in Paul’s day, we believe that Ephesus was over a half a million, Corinth nearly 750,000, and Rome over a million. To put things in perspective, it may be helpful to think of Athens as the intellectual center of the empire (like Boston in the U.S.), of Corinth as the commercial center (like New York City), of Ephesus as the popular culture/occult center (like Los Angeles), and of Rome as the political power center (like Washington, DC).

- 1. Compare Paul’s choice of ministry sites with 16:12, and what you recall from the rest of the book of Acts. What kinds of places does he give priority? Why? What impact should that have on Christians today?**

What kinds of places? Paul’s pattern is extremely clear. In Acts 16:9-10, Paul is called in a dream to preach in Macedonia. In 16:12 we are told that he went then to Phillipi. Why? Because it was “*the leading city of that district of Macedonia*”. By going to Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Paul is choosing to go the biggest and most influential cities in every location. When he was done planting a church in a major city, he left the region, considering his work finished there. It is clear that Paul’s mission was almost completely an urban ministry. He concentrated completely on cities and passed over the countryside and smaller towns.

Why? The conscious reasons Paul had for going to cities is a bit speculative, but we have a degree of certainty about at least one. Paul had learned that the most strategic and receptive population to the gospel were the “God-fearers”, Gentiles who had come to believe in the God of the Hebrew Bible. On the one hand, they were more open than many Jews to the gospel, because they did not have their moral pride. On the other hand, they were more open than many

Gentile pagans, because they had the basics of a true understanding of the nature of God as holy and gracious. And when God-fearers became Christians, they were natural “relational bridges” to the broader Gentile population. To find synagogues and Jews and God-fearers, Paul had to go to the cities.

Others have pointed out the tremendous advantages of evangelism in the city over towns and country. 1) City people are less conservative and set in their ways, and therefore are more open to new ideas like the gospel. 2) City people are more mobile and therefore converts in the city soon becomes little core groups in new cities, creating natural bridges for ministry. 3) City people are diverse culturally and racially, and therefore conversions in a city bring the gospel quickly into dozens of new language groups and cultural groupings. 4) Cities are the seat of media, learning, and culture, and therefore converts in the city have influence over the whole society (while converts in small towns only have influence in small towns). Wayne Meeks, historian at Yale, says that by 300 A.D. half of the populations of the cities of the Roman Empire were Christian, though the countryside was pagan. But, as we know, “as the city goes, so goes society”, so the Roman world very quickly became a Christian civilization.

What does it mean for us? It means that, in general, the most strategic place for Christians to live and work and minister is large cities. This is not a law for everyone, just a general truth for the church at large. John Stott puts it rather pointedly:

“In 1850 there were only four ‘world class cities’ of more than a million inhabitants; in 1980 there were 225, and by the year 2,000 there may be 500. In 1980, 40% of the world’s population are city-dwellers; by the end of the century the ratio will be more like one-half... On the one hand, there is an urgent need for Christian planners and architects, local government politicians, urban specialists, developers and community social workers, who will work for justice, peace, freedom and beauty in the city. On the other, Christians need to move into the cities, and experience the pains and pressures of living there, in order to win city-dwellers for Christ. Commuter Christianity (living in salubrious suburbia and commuting to an urban church) is not substitute for incarnational involvement.”

≠ Stott, p.292-293

**2. vv.1-18. Notice the distinct stages in the Corinthian mission. What were they? What led to each move to a new stage? What obstacles did he meet at each stage, how did he respond each time, and how did God respond each time?**

The first stage could be called the “tentmaking” phase from vv.1-4. During this time, Paul was not in full-time ministry. He worked at a craft and only did ministry in the synagogue on the Sabbath, evangelizing Jews and God-fearers (v.4). The reasons for tent-making included a simple need for funds, as v.5 shows. But Paul’s additional reasons for tentmaking in some situations he

notes in Acts 20:33-34 (to avoid any appearance of greed) and in I Thess. 2:9 (to avoid burdening the people he is trying to reach). Obstacle: During this time the ministry moved slowly, as is obvious from the lack response, negative or positive. Paul did not have a lot of time to give, and he had little in the way of fellowship and partnership. How did he respond? Note the word “*trying*” in v.4. He simply persisted faithfully at the same approach. God’s encouragement: But God sends help in the form of fellowship.

The second stage began when Silas and Timothy came from Macedonia (and Phillipi). This led to Paul going “full time” — “*Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying...*” What led to this great move forward? Probably three things. a) The encouragement of fellowship — having his friends and fellow workers with him, b) the help of a financial gift (which is not mentioned here, but is noted in Phil.4:14ff. and II Cor.11:8-9), and c) probably the good news about how the converts were flourishing in the new churches Paul had left behind (see I Thess.3:6). This is a great testimony to the importance of fellowship and sharing of love, burdens, and resources for the spread of the gospel. Obstacle: Though as usual, some Jews believed, Jewish leaders rose up to oppose Paul’s preaching (v.6). How did he respond? This time he changed venues and approaches completely. God’s encouragement: And God then blesses this new method richly.

The third stage began when he moved from the public ministry in the synagogue to a private home. Titius Justus was a “God-fearer” (v.7). Paul began meetings in his home, very much like home outreach meetings have been conducted over the years — ministering to the friends and relatives and neighbors of the householder. This approach was very fruitful (v.8), and there was a great evangelistic harvest of new converts. Obstacle: Interestingly enough, a new “obstacle” appears here (we will look more at it under the next question). Paul seems to need a special vision because he was experiencing an unusual amount of fear and discouragement. God’s encouragement: God’s vision is a personal counseling session for Paul.

The fourth stage appears to be a long-term discipling ministry. v.11 tells us that Paul stayed a year and a half “*teaching them the word of God*”. This means that Paul did a very long term educational ministry, grounding all the new converts in the Word. This is an unusually long time for Paul to stay. Some of the reason for this may have been due to the unusually dark spiritual atmosphere in Corinth, and, perhaps, the need for Paul to “heal” from a dark spiritual depression of his own. (See the next question). Obstacle: The Jewish leaders decide to make a formal attack on Paul, charging him before the proconsul with disobeying the Roman law. God’s encouragement: Gallio’s retort that this had to do with “*your own law*” (v.15) was a great success for Paul. Why? Judaism was a religion legally approved and protected in the Roman Empire. (“*Judaism was a religio licita, [an authorized religion], but Paul’s Jewish opponents refused to recognize the gospel he preached as having anything to do with their ancestral faith... it was, they urged, a religio illicita.*” (F.F.Bruce)



The Jews were trying to make a case that Paul was teaching a new religion that was not authorized, but Gallio clearly rules that this was an “intramural” debate: *“it involves questions about words and names and your own law — settle the matter yourselves.”* (v.15) This extended to Christianity the Roman protection given to Judaism, marking it as a close “cousin” or outgrowth of Judaism. This was a triumph for the Christians, and that is why we read that, as a result of this incident, Paul remained in Corinth for some time (v.18).

**Note:** v.17 is a bit confusing, because we are not sure who “*they all*” refers to. But it probably means the a mob of Gentile onlookers turned and beat the synagogue head. This is, sadly, a typical example of ethnic hostilities in general and the anti-Semitism in particular. The mob took the opportunity of a negative ruling against the Jews to vent their hatred, and Gallio looked the other way.

**3. vv.8-11. What is surprising about the emotional condition of Paul in v.9 in light of v.8? Should it be surprising? Why would Paul find ministry in Corinth so difficult (cf. I Cor.2:2-3)? How does God respond to him?**

What is surprising? Should it be? In v.8 there is a huge influx of new converts after a long time of patient but unfruitful work (v.4). We would expect that Paul would be a) confident and b) encouraged. Instead, v.9 indicates that he was so a) afraid and b) discouraged that he was ready to give up and quit. This seems to be counter-intuitive, but this rings very true to experience. (And it is one of the reasons that we know Luke could not have made this up!) Many people who have experienced great periods of success (especially “spiritual success”) after a dry period often find that they do not respond emotionally with joy but with depression. Even Jesus, after the “high” of his baptism and the manifestation of the open heavens — was immediately set upon by the devil in the wilderness. This is not at all an unusual order of things.

Why would Paul have been discouraged? The fear does seem unusual, because Paul has faced even greater physical danger elsewhere. There are at least two reasons that Paul could have experienced such discouragement in the wake of the conversions. First, of all, Paul tells us in I Cor.2:2-3 that he came to Corinth in an unusual amount of “*fear and trembling*”. This was probably because of the reputation Corinth had for spiritual darkness. Like New York City, it was filled with very proud, confident, tough, hard, sophisticated, and immoral people who were quite proud of being everything on that list! There was no place in the Empire, not even Rome, where there was more bald-faced corruption. Second, the long period of unfruitful ministry, maybe combined with the long months and years of Paul’s missionary journeys, may have led him to a “burn out” moment. Often, though overwork, a person becomes drained of any real satisfaction in what he or she is doing. Often when “success” comes, the person suddenly realizes that he/she is too tired, numb, and hardened to enjoy it. Of course, there may have been other reasons that Luke does not let us in on.

How does God respond to him? God's vision is a kind of counseling session, an encouragement. And before anyone thinks "I wish I had that kind of help from God" we should realize that God's message is almost completely just the repeating of promises already in the Old Testament. "Do not be afraid" and "I am with you" are continually being said to his people by the Lord. (For example, look up Gen.26:24; Jer.1:8ff). This means that God can speak to us in the same encouraging way when he takes Scriptural promises and, through the Spirit, makes them "come alive" as if they were being spoken just to us. In other words, Paul is exhorted by the Word of God in his moment of crisis. See Heb.12:5-6 to see how the Scripture continues to be a way for God to exhort and counsel us.

**4. Collect and list all the ways that God's help and encouragement comes to us. What can we learn from a) Paul's actions and b) God's directions (in v.9-10) about how we can receive God's help ourselves?**

God's help comes in at least these forms:

a) First, it can come through Christian friends and fellowship (v.5) Even the St. Paul, arguably the greatest Christian leader and preacher who ever lived besides the Lord himself, could not "pull off" the Corinthian mission all by himself, without co-workers, fellowship, emotional and financial support. Some of us face problems and refuse to get human help, rationalizing that "I should be able to face this just with God", but in reality there is a cowardice or a pride that makes us try to go it alone. This text shows us that one of the main ways God gives us what we need is through other Christians. We must not tell God what channels he is allowed to send his help!

b) Second, it can come through the Spirit working through the Word. (v.9-10) Many of us need a "word of exhortation" from God at certain times. We have just said that we must not cut ourselves off from community, but now we see we must also "get alone with God" and put in the time in prayer and reflection necessary for him to comfort us.

c) Third, it can come through "providential" protection and success. Just as God opened people's hearts (v.8) and guided Gallio's thoughts (v.15). This is usually the main and first way that we expect and want God's help! We want him to reach down and change other people's minds and hearts. We want him to overrule circumstances and make history go in a particular way. But we should remember that he did not do that for Paul right away (v.4) and in many ways, we have no control over this particular means. Rather, we should go to Christian friends, and to God in prayer, a) and b) above. We do have control over that.

From Paul's actions in vv. 1-18 we learn:

a) Sometimes the only way through obstacles (as in the first stage of mission, vv.1-4) is faithfulness, patient "plodding" along, and waiting on God for relief, but b) other times (as in the second stage, vv.5-8) it is best to be aggressive and take a whole different approach! Some will be confused and say, "but how do you know which situation is which?" That of course takes wisdom, but it also takes the confidence that comes from meditating on the promises and directions of God in v.9-10. In other words, we should not be paralyzed with fear, when we consider whether to "patiently plod" or change directions. We make our decision even if we are not sure, because we remember what this whole passage has taught us, namely, that God is supervising things and will help us, though that help can come in all sorts of times and all sorts of shapes.

From God's directions in v.9-10 we learn:

God first of all tells Paul: do not be afraid". How can that be a command? It is best not to think of this as a separate command from what follows. You do not have to try to directly stop yourself from feeling the feeling of fear. Rather, we should understand that God is saying, "you will not be afraid if you do the following things". What are those things? He tells Paul to:

a) Do something. "*Keep on speaking*". Here is a command to do an act of the will. God is telling Paul to open his mouth and share the gospel despite his fears.

b) Remember something. There are two things that God calls Paul to remember if he is to get his courage back: (1) "*For I am with you*". The word "for" means that Paul is not simply to speak out, but to speak out remembering and meditating on the fact that God is with him. Of course, the very experience of the vision brought Paul a vivid sense of God's presense. So we are to take this as a direction to seek a sense of God's presense.(2) Secondly, he says "*no one is going to attack and harm you*" which is a reminder that God is lord of history and nothing will happen that is not for God's glory and Paul's benefit — this a Romans 8:28 sort of assurance. Notice how later in the chapter Paul attributes everything that happens to "*God's will*" (see 18:21), and how Luke offhandedly remarks that people only believe or are converted "*by grace.*" (18:27)

c) See something. "*I have many people in this city*". This is the most remarkable direction of all. Paul is told not to look at Corinth as full of enemies, but full of friends. God is saying that he has many people he intends to call to himself, and Paul is to see the city through God's eyes — filled with potential and future children of God. God wants to use Paul and protect Paul for their sake. So should we look at our city!

**Introduction to the the end of the second missionary journey:**

vv.18-23 is a very compact, condensed summary of the latter part and conclusion of Paul's "second missionary journey". Don't spend much time on v.18! No one is really sure what the vow was nor even who it was that made it. The main matter of importance is our introduction to the formidable Christian leader, Apollos.

**5. vv.24-28. What can we learn for our own effectiveness in ministry from Apollos? From Priscilla and Aquila?**

a) Apollos is admired by Paul for being both *learned* and with *a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures*. (v.24) Too often, those have been seen as opposites. "Learned" means "broadly educated and knowledgeable". Apollos was very much a man of the world — he did not only read or study books and thinkers who agreed with true religion. On the other hand, he had a mastery of the Bible. This is a balance we need.

b) Apollos also combined *great fervor* with teaching about Jesus *accurately* (v.25). This too is something of a rare combination. Many Christians who put emphasis on doctrinal accuracy and cognition are lacking in spiritual and emotional fervor, warmth and action. Our churches are very often divided into "teaching" churches on the one hand, where education is important but worship/prayer/witnessing is stagnant, or fervent, emotional churches which are just the reverse. But Apollos combined both the ardor and the order of the gospel.

c) Apollos finally, was a teachable man. We don't know exactly at what points he understood the Christian faith and at what point he didn't. On the one hand, Luke says that he taught about Jesus accurately (v.25), but he knew only John the Baptist's teaching and baptism and therefore needed to know the way of God "*more accurately*" (v.26). We know that John the Baptist pointed to Jesus, and therefore Apollos, having learned about the Messiah through John's disciples would have known much, but not all he needed to understand. At any rate, Apollos was a man of superior intellectual ability. (We know this because he was a superb public debater, impossible to defeat — see v.28). Apollos was clearly the superior personality and far more gifted than Priscilla and Aquila. Yet despite the fact that he surpassed them in most areas, he was willing to listen to two Christian brethren who knew better than he at certain specific points. This is remarkable and rare. It is so hard to listen to people that the world has told you is beneath you. We have to let the gospel mold our relationships, not the world's proud standards, or we won't listen to people who seem to be less accomplished and talented than we are. (One other thing — notice that Apollos received instruction from a woman — not a normal state of affairs in those days.)

d) We need to infer that Priscilla and Aquila were both bold and gentle in their approach. They spoke to him privately, in their home, rather than confronting him in a public place (v.26). There's the gentleness. Yet it took real boldness to speak to such a formidable preacher about anything in his preaching.

## THE GOSPEL: A USER'S GUIDE

### **Part IV – A – THE CASE FOR CREDIBILITY: WHY BOTHER WITH BELIEF?**

Read silently and mark “!” - for something that helped you  
“?” -for something that raised a question

The following is part of a series of sheets to give and discuss with friends who don't believe the Christian faith. You can choose the parts that fit the questions that they have, or you can go through them in order. Read each one and answer the following questions at the end.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. What in the reading was most illuminating or helpful? Why?**
- 2. What in the reading puzzles you or leads you to want more information?**
- 3. How do you think non-believing people would respond? What would be helpful to them? What might not be helpful?**
- 4. Would you consider lending one or more of these to a non-believing friend and asking for their reaction and then sharing their reaction next week with the group?**

## WHY BELIEVE THE CHRISTIAN FAITH?

It is very difficult to examine the Christian faith rationally and with a measure of objectivity. We come to the evidence with a myriad of biases for and against it. For example, most of us have met religious hypocrites, which make us question the validity of the churches they belong to or the faith they espouse. Also we have seen that many sincere believers have committed terrible injustices and have held back social and scientific progress in the name of God. On the opposite side, many of us have been raised in families and cultures in which there is a great deal of social support and even pressure on us to believe. Or we may fall in love with someone who has strong faith. Though all of these factors are very influential emotionally, not one of them really proves or disproves Christianity at all. What all this shows us that coming to solid, relatively unbiased conclusions won't be easy.

To help with the process, we have developed this series of brief guides which acquaint you with the essential issues and essential rational bases for the Christian faith, all in an order that we hope will be helpful. The outline:

### **A. Why to Bother with Belief**

*Answers:* "I don't see why to begin a serious examination of the Christian faith. I'm content where I am."

### **B. How to Believe in Anything**

*Answers:* "How can we go about determining if Christianity or any religion is true?"

Big objection #1 – "Why should I believe if you can't prove God?"

### **C. Why to Believe in God**

*Answers:* "How do we know there is a God?"

Big objection #2 – "I can't believe in God when there is so much evil and suffering."

### **D. Why to Believe in Christ**

*Answers:* "How do we know that claims about Christ are true?"

Big objection #3 – "I can't believe that good people are lost just because they don't believe in Jesus."

## A. WHY BOTHER WITH BELIEF?

The following sheets are pointed conversation guides designed for use for people who want to know if it rationally justified to believe the Christian faith. The question is: "how do we know if Christianity is true or not?"

There are plenty of people who would reply that they don't even see the need to get started with such an examination. Two reasons often given go something like this:

**1. "Many people are religious because they have a personal need for it; it may be right for them, but I don't feel any particular need."**

Of course, (as Freud and others have pointed out), many people do believe in Christianity, not for rational reasons, but simply because human beings have an emotional need to think that there is a heavenly Father that cares for us. On the other hand, we should also admit that many people do not believe in Christianity, not for rational reasons, but simply because human beings have an emotional need to think that we are free to live as we like, without the interference of a heavenly King. Aldous Huxley freely admitted this:

"I had motives for not wanting the world to have meaning; consequently I was able without much difficulty to find satisfying reasons for this assumption. The philosopher who finds no meaning in this world is not concerned exclusively with a problem in pure metaphysics. He is also concerned to prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do... for myself, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation, sexual and political."

Imagine this. A case comes to a judge which involves a company in which she has a huge financial investment. What does the judge do? She will decline to sit in judgment on the case. She cannot trust herself to rule objectively, for the result of the ruling will effect her financially. Now when seekers after truth read the case for Christianity, they know that if it be true, they would "lose control" of their lives. For example (ala Huxley), they won't be able to sleep with whomever they wish. It will be just as hard to judge objectively.

The honest observer should realize that every person has as strong a set of emotional reasons against believing in God as for it. So what do we conclude? Persons who have a strong sense that "I have a personal need God" should not just go ahead and believe. They should undertake a careful examination of the arguments and evidence, assuming they won't really want to be rational, checking and re-checking it all diligently. But on the other hand, persons who have a strong sense that "I don't have a personal need for God" should also not just go acquiesce in that indifference. They too should undertake a careful examination of the arguments and evidence, assuming they won't really want to be rational, checking and re-checking it all diligently. That's what the honest

judge would have to do if she simply had to sit in judgement on her case. Have you ever taken a long, hard look at the evidence? This is your chance. Why not?

**2. “But I doubt that it’s possible to know anything about these things for sure. It would be much better for the world if we suspended judgement”**

It is good to begin the examination of the Christian faith with a healthy skepticism. It is either lazy or arrogant to be too quickly convinced by an argument. A fair-minded and humble skepticism honestly admits that it does not know the truth of an issue, but then it also admits that someone else may know it. However, many go beyond this to “total skepticism” and say, “no one can know about religious truth”. This is, I contend, not a tenable position.

All the proponents of religions say: “our knowledge is certain; we are right about religion and you others are wrong.” Many modern people find this repugnant. But when they say, “no one can know” to the religious, they are saying: “our knowledge that you cannot be certain is certain; we are right about religion and you are others are wrong.” “Total skeptics” claim of certainty at the very instant they say certainty is impossible; they do what they forbid. To illustrate what is happening, consider a very popular parable:

“Six blind men examined an elephant. One at the trunk said ‘an elephant is thin and flexible like a snake’; one at the leg said, ‘an elephant is thick and inflexible like a tree’; one felt the body and said, ‘an elephant is impossible to get your arms around’. They argued, but were all correct — and incorrect. None could see the whole. So with religions. All are partly right, but none see the whole picture.”

The philosopher Michael Polanyi has pointed out that you can only tell this story if *you* assume that you see the whole elephant! There is an appearance of humility in claiming that “no one can know” truth about God, but where do you get a vantage point so superior to that of every religion in the world that you are able to be certain that they are all partial?” Muslims claim superior knowledge from the Qu’ran and Christians from the Bible. But “total skeptics” insist that there is no such source, then nonetheless operates as if they have it!

“Total skeptics” turn their skepticism toward other people’s religious faith, but not toward their own. “But I have no religious faith — I suspend judgement”, you may protest. But you have not suspended judgement about God at all. (No one can.) You won’t admit the religious faith positions that are at the heart of your religious doubts. 1st, you’ve assumed an almost God-like knowledge of the human situation, that there is no truth about God. This is a much harder position to defend than the traditional religions’ claims of revelation. They say, “God told us this.” But the total skeptic says, “I just know this myself about ultimate reality”. Then 2nd, you’ve ordered your life, and its decisions based on this position. You are not suspended — you are believing and committed.



In light of this, I propose that no one insist that “I have suspended judgement, and no one can know any religious truth”. That is really just a way to avoid testing your position over against other religions. If I asked you, “how do you prove your conviction that we cannot know God?” would you know how to respond? It is unfair to ask some to rationally justify their religious views if you can’t justify yours. Therefore, I hope you’ll continue to look at the Christian faith, now that the idea of “total skepticism” is somewhat unmasked.

### **3. “It doesn’t matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere and are a good person.”**

This is to say, “it is simply not important to determine whether this or that claim about God or Christ is true or not. In the end, it doesn’t make any difference. What does matter is how you live and how you treat people.” Here are two responses.

First, in most areas of life, sincerity is not enough. Take politics for example. Certainly we know that at the extremes of the political spectrum, people have very strong, sincere beliefs. Do we think that those beliefs will make no difference to our society, as long as they are sincere? And consider medicine. Medical professionals used to do bloodletting in order to help sick people recover. They did so sincerely. Do we think those beliefs made no difference to the patients, as long as they were honestly and fervently held? In all these areas, we know that we need to not only be sincere in our beliefs, but right. Why would we then assume that religious beliefs cannot be wrong and cannot have consequences? Why is the religious realm so different? And if we are honest, we all believe that some religious beliefs are wrong. For example, there have been (and still are) people who sincerely thought that child sacrifice was a way to appease the gods. Do you think those beliefs are all right? If not, they we should admit that we do need criteria for judging beliefs. What are those criteria? That is all we are asking you to consider. (It comes up in the next sheet.)

Second, as we just hinted, belief does matter, very much, with regard to how you live. Doing good, or doing anything at all, proceeds from what we believe about the nature of life and about the right and wrong ways to live it. For example, you say that it is important to be a good person. But that is not a scientific fact. Why be moral and good? Whatever answer you give to that question will be a belief — about the nature of persons or life or the world or reality. For example, the signers of the famous “Humanist Manifestoes I and II” say all individual human beings have a “preciousness and dignity”. This view of humanity is certainly not a scientific fact. It is a faith position, held despite their conviction (also a matter of faith) that the natural world is all there is (“any new discoveries... will but enlarge our knowledge of the natural”). All our actions in the world are based on judgements about the nature of life, and since we have to live and make decisions, we cannot suspend judgement on these matters.

So in the end, it does matter what we believe, and we cannot avoid “believing”. It is not a question of whether to exercise faith or not, but what kind of faith we are exercising. But are we examining those beliefs?

Pascal’s famous “wager” in his *Pensees* went something like the following. Each of us is either betting that there is a God, or betting that there is no God, and there is no way to “stay from from the track” — no middle ground. We have committed, we have bet our lives and our eternal destiny one way or the other. This argument does not prove that atheism is irrational, only that indifference is! If you don’t believe, it should not be a choice made only because you are too busy to look, or too disdainful to examine the evidence, or because you “don’t think it matters”. Come and examine these issues.