

Exploring the Word of God: Acts of the Apostles

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CONTENTS

Introduction to the book of Acts	1
The church in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria	7
The church begins in Jerusalem	7
Preface, initial events, and waiting in Jerusalem: chapter 1	7
Preparation for the gospel.....	10
Acts 2: The church begins on Pentecost	27
Growth and persecution in Jerusalem	46
Healing and persecution (3:1-4:31).....	46
Chapter 3	46
Chapter 4	58
The church in Jerusalem.....	64
Sharing and correction in the church (4:32-5:11).....	67
More healing and persecution (5:12-42)	76
The church spreads to Judea and Samaria.....	85
The seven Greek-speaking leaders (6:1-7).....	85
Stephen's arrest and martyrdom	91
His arrest: chapter 6.....	91
His speech and martyrdom: chapter 7	95
The ministry of Philip in Samaria and Judea: chapter 8.....	112
Christianity spreads to Gentiles	125
The conversion and call of Saul (9:1-30)	125
Peter preaches in Judea (9:31-10:48)	138
The gospel goes to Cornelius (Acts 10).....	142
Chapter 10	142
Chapter 11:1-18	157

Jewish and Gentile Christians in Antioch (11:19-30).....	160
Herod and the church: chapter 12.....	169
Saul’s first evangelistic trip.....	180
Bar-Jesus blinded on Cyprus (12:25-13:13).....	180
Pisidian Antioch (13:14-52).....	187
Iconium, Lystra, and return (14:1-28).....	198
The Jerusalem conference formalizes the status of Gentiles.....	207
Christians and the Law of Moses: A Study of Acts 15.....	223
Decree of the Council: The Literary Flow of Acts 15.....	227
Decree of the Council: The Purpose of the Decree.....	233
Paul’s second evangelistic journey, in Europe.....	241
Paul, Silas and Timothy in Asia Minor (15:36-16:8).....	241
Philippi and imprisonment (16:9-40).....	248
Thessalonica and persecution (17:1-15).....	259
Paul preaches in Athens (17:16-34).....	264
Corinth and return to Antioch in Syria (18:1-22).....	275
Paul’s third evangelistic journey, centered in Ephesus.....	285
Paul to Ephesus, Antioch, Galatia and Phrygia (18:18-23).....	285
Chapter 19.....	289
Macedonia and Greece (20:1-6).....	303
Troas and speech at Miletus (20:7-38).....	306
Paul preaches the gospel in prison.....	315
Journey to Caesarea and Jerusalem (21:1-16).....	315
Arrest in Jerusalem.....	319
James’ plan and Roman custody (21:17-36).....	319
Paul’s speech and Roman “protection” (21:37-22:29).....	326
Paul’s speech to the Jewish leaders (22:30-23:10).....	336
An assassination plot and transfer to Caesarea (23:11-35).....	341
Paul in Caesarea.....	348
Trial before Felix (24:1-27).....	348
Trial before Festus (25:1-22).....	359
Speech before Agrippa (25:23-26:32).....	365
Journey to Rome.....	378
The voyage and shipwreck (27:1-28:10).....	378
Ministry in Rome (28:11-30).....	390
About the Authors.....	394
About the Publisher.....	395
Grace Communion Seminary.....	397

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ACTS

What's in a name?

The traditional name for this book is “Acts of the Apostles,” but a more accurate name might be “A Few Acts of a Few of the Apostles.” Peter and Paul are particularly prominent; the other apostles play little or no role. The book describes some developments in detail, but sometimes skips several years at a time.

“Acts of the Risen Jesus” might also be an appropriate name for this book. Luke tells us that his first book (the Gospel of Luke) was “about all that Jesus *began* to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven” (Acts 1:1-2). Acts is the second volume of Luke’s history-writing project; it is about what Jesus did *after* his ascension into heaven – he directed and taught the apostles through the Holy Spirit.

As Jesus had promised (John 16:7, 13), he sent the Spirit to guide the apostles after he returned to heaven. Since this book frequently reminds us that the actions of the apostles were inspired and guided by God’s Spirit, “Acts of the Holy Spirit” has also been suggested as a descriptive title.

Outline

The first part of this book is about Peter, and the second part is about Paul. This two-fold division is one of the simplest ways to divide the book of Acts, but its focus on two men tends to cover up some important aspects of Luke’s story. Peter’s ministry and Paul’s are not separate stories – they are related to each other, and they overlap in several chapters in the center of Acts.

Some commentators have outlined the book geographically, using a formula Jesus gave his disciples: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and

in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Although Luke begins the story in Jerusalem, he does not stick to a precise geographical sequence. Philip’s work in Samaria (Acts 8:5-25) is described before Peter’s work in Judea (Acts 9:32-43). Later, the story moves back and forth from Antioch to Jerusalem, from Europe back to Asia, back to Jerusalem, etc. And the book ends with Paul in Rome, which was the center of the Empire, not “the ends of the earth” (although many scholars have suggested that Rome would indeed be counted as “the ends of the earth” to anyone who grew up in Galilee).

Geography is important to Luke, but it is not the only important framework for his story about the earliest years of Christianity. Luke also has *ethnic* interests – he especially wants to explain how Christianity moved from its Jewish foundations to spread to the Gentile world.

Acts can be divided into five major sections that combine some of Luke’s emphases, as shown in the table below.

part	major personalities	geographical regions	ethnic groups
1	Peter and John	Jerusalem	Jews
2	Greek-speaking Jews: Philip and Stephen	Jerusalem, Samaria and Judea	Jews, Samaritans and an Ethiopian eunuch
3	Paul and Peter	Damascus, Judea, Antioch, Jerusalem and Asia	Jews, God-fearing Gentiles and pagans
4	Paul the missionary	Europe and Asia Minor	Gentiles and Jews
5	Paul the prisoner	Jerusalem, Caesarea and Rome	Gentile rulers, Gentiles and Jews

How to read this book

Acts tells the story of how Christianity began and spread. No history book ever has enough space to tell *all* the facts. The historian must select the facts that are most important and the events that played critical roles in the development of later situations. The historian must interpret the facts and present them in an organized way. Luke does this well. With literary skill, he gives numerous details and interesting personality sketches that help us understand what happened.

Luke is probably writing in the manner of the Greek historians Xenophon and Plutarch. What this means is that a selection of the hero’s acts..., historical vignettes which set forth the hero’s character,

are his major concern. The Book of Acts, then, is not a mere chronicle of events, but a portrayal of the kinds of people and kinds of things that were taking place in the early church. [William H. Baker, “Acts,” *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, edited by Walter Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 884.]

Luke tells us what happened, but he rarely indicates what should happen today. For example, he tells us that seven men were chosen to wait on tables (Acts 6:1-6), but he does not tell us whether churches should follow that example today. This book is descriptive, not prescriptive – it is history, not law.

Luke, in addition to being a historian, is also a Christian teacher writing about his own faith. In the introduction to his first volume of history, he says that one of his purposes is to help readers understand the truthfulness of the Christian faith (Luke 1:4). Similarly, Luke has selected events in church history that help show Christian doctrine and practice; he has quietly omitted facts that might confuse the reader. Regarding circumcision, for example, he says there was a heated debate (Acts 15:2), but he reports the arguments of only one side of the controversy. What Luke writes is true – it is historically accurate – but it is also theologically selective.

Ancient histories often included speeches. There are 18 speeches in Acts. Many of them record the basic message of the early church. Just as Acts 1:8 gives a rough geographical preview of the book of Acts, Luke 24 gives us a preview of the theological message: “This is what is written [in the Scriptures]: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised” [the Holy Spirit]” (Luke 24:46-49).

Several speeches or sermons in Acts contain similar concise descriptions of the gospel. They argue that Jesus is the Messiah, that he fulfilled Old Testament prophecies, that God raised him from the dead and that he is the answer to Jewish and Gentile hopes. Speeches are better at communicating these ideas than a historical description could be. As we read these speeches, we can learn important truths, not just ancient history.

Learning about God

Unlike most history books, Acts is filled with references to God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The story simply wouldn’t have been possible without God. He started it, motivated it and gave it direction, energy,

purpose, message and protection. Luke does not give us a systematic description of God, but he describes what God did with the church.

The word “God” appears more than 160 times in the book. He is the Creator, the God of the Old Testament, who speaks through the Scriptures. He is praised, worshiped, obeyed and prayed to. Luke tells us repeatedly that God sent Jesus Christ, raised him from the dead, glorified him and gave him authority. God is the One who calls people to repentance, who gives the Holy Spirit, who directs the mission. It is his work – the message is about “the kingdom of God,” “the word of God,” the gospel of “the grace of God.”

“Lord” appears about 110 times, usually referring to Jesus. (“Jesus” appears 68 times, often in the combination “Lord Jesus”). Luke rarely uses the term “Son” (four times), just as he only rarely uses “Father” (three times). His choice of words probably reflects the needs of his Gentile readers. We are told that “the Lord” did the works of the apostles, that they preached his name, that he appeared in visions to direct the work, and that he was prayed to. Just as the gospel was called the word of God, it is also called “the word of the Lord.” Those who repented and believed were “added to the Lord.”

Luke uses “Christ” only 31 times. In Paul’s letters, and in modern Christianity, “Christ” is often treated as part of Jesus’ name: “Jesus Christ.” Luke, however, often uses “Christ” in its original meaning, Messiah: “Jesus is *the* Christ.” (The Greek word *Christos* means “anointed,” just as the Hebrew word *Mashiyach* [Messiah] does). Luke sometimes uses “Christ” as a name, too, as in the combination “the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Luke tells us much about the Holy Spirit. Although Acts contains only 13 percent of the words of the New Testament, it contains 23 percent of the occurrences of the word “Spirit.” In the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is active – speaking and directing the work; the Spirit is the power by which the apostles testified that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 1:8).

Other topics

While Luke tells the story of the spread of the Christian gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, he is also able to achieve some additional purposes. One major goal is to explain why Christianity was becoming more Gentile than Jewish. Luke stresses the connection that Christianity has with Jews and with the Old Testament, and explains how God and the risen Jesus directed that the message extend to all nations, as the Old Testament had predicted. Jesus fulfills the hopes and needs of Gentiles as well as of Jews.

Luke seems to have a political objective, too – to show that Christianity was not a threat to the Roman government. Although riots sometimes broke

out when the gospel was preached, Luke notes that the problems were caused by Jews or Gentiles, not the Christian preachers. Christianity was rooted in Judaism, which was a legal religion. Roman officials repeatedly find Paul innocent of wrong-doing, and they allow the gospel to continue to be preached.

Luke also defends Paul against accusations that he was preaching against Judaism. Although Gentile believers did not have to “must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5), Paul did not teach Jews to abandon their traditions. He participated in Jewish rituals both in Ephesus and in Jerusalem. Luke shows us that Paul had been *forced* to preach to Gentiles – Jesus miraculously called him and commissioned him; the Antioch church sent him out; the apostle Peter preached to Gentiles before Paul did; Paul preached to Jews first and to Gentiles only after Jews rejected the gospel.

In practical matters of Christian life, Luke emphasizes repentance, faith, baptism and forgiveness of sins. He emphasizes that the Holy Spirit gives believers courage to faithfully witness to Jesus Christ in the face of persecution. He also stresses prayer – asking God for help, and thanking him for his deliverance.

What this book means for you

Acts has both history and faith. Historically, the book serves as a vital link between the Gospels and the epistles. It bridges the gap between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. In the Gospels, Jesus is preaching; in the epistles, Jesus is being preached. The book of Acts explains how the messenger became the center of the message.

This is particularly important when we read the epistles of Paul, because, without the book of Acts, we would not know who Paul was or how he entered the picture or what motivated him to preach to Gentiles or why he wrote to such far-flung regions.

Luke’s picture of Paul is not in perfect agreement with Paul’s self-description. Luke describes Paul as a bold orator; Paul sometimes describes himself as a poor speaker. Both writers have more important purposes than merely to focus on a personal description. Both writers can be correct. Although some scholars emphasize the differences and claim that Luke’s account is wrong, other scholars explain differences as literary matters without rejecting the accuracy of either writer.

Luke gives us glimpses into the personalities of Peter, John and James, who wrote other New Testament books. He shows us the remarkable transformation that the Holy Spirit produced in Peter, who went from

denying Jesus three times to boldly defying the Jewish leaders and telling them to their faces that he would continue to preach about Jesus. The sudden boldness of the apostles is testimony that God raised Jesus from the dead and gave these fishermen dramatic conviction and power.

Luke also records the persecutions of Peter, the martyrdoms of Stephen and James, the stonings and beatings and imprisonments of Paul. Whether they lived or died, captive or free, these Christians were led by the Holy Spirit to testify that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior.

The book of Acts may be read for history, and it may also be read to strengthen our faith and commitment to Jesus Christ. As we read, we can put ourselves in the apostles' sandals, to feel their boldness in preaching the gospel and their fears when facing persecution. We can marvel that the apostles, right after being flogged, were "rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name [of Jesus]" (Acts 5:41). And by reading about their faith and perseverance, we can be a little more emboldened to face our own crises with the help of the same Holy Spirit.

THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM, JUDEA AND SAMARIA (ACTS 1–8)

THE DEDICATIONS OF LUKE AND ACTS

(Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2)

Luke began his book, which we call the “Acts of the Apostles” or simply “Acts,” by continuing his story where he ended it in the Gospel. Luke’s Gospel had described Jesus’ work in Galilee, Judea and especially Jerusalem. It ended, as did the other three Gospels, with Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Acts continues the story. It describes the growth of the church and the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to important cities of the Roman Empire, and then Rome itself.

Luke was one of the few writers to explain why he wrote his works, and this helps us to know what his purposes were. Knowing his aims makes us better able to understand Acts. To perceive Luke’s aims and what he hoped to accomplish in Acts, we must go back to his dedication at the beginning of his Gospel (Luke 1:1-4). There Luke told us that during his research and gathering of material for Acts he personally and “carefully investigated everything from the beginning” (verse 3).

Thus, he could “write an orderly account” of what he knew about the Christian movement. What Luke wrote was not made up out of his own imagination nor based on his personal opinion. Acts was based on information “handed down” to him from “those who from the first were eyewitnesses” (verse 2). This means we can have confidence that what Luke wrote in his Gospel and Acts was correct. However, he felt free to omit information that did not support his purpose.

Luke-Acts was written as a two-part work. This is implied in the first verse of Acts when Luke again addresses Theophilus and speaks of his “former book,” that is, his Gospel (1:1). Luke-Acts is dedicated to an individual, whom Luke calls “most excellent Theophilus” (Luke 1:3). The phrase means “your excellency,” and could refer to a prominent official in government service. Luke uses the same Greek word to refer to the Roman governors Felix and Festus (23:26; 24:3; 26:25). However, the title was also used as a form of polite address, as a courtesy. It would be something like our “Dear Sir” or “Dear Madam,” with which letters are sometimes opened.

Some commentators have also suggested that “Theophilus,” which means “Friend of God” or “Loved of God,” is a symbolic name, meant to represent a class of people, the church perhaps. In this view, Luke would be addressing

his work to the “Honored Christian Reader.” More likely, however, Theophilus was a real person, with a name that others also had in ancient times.

It was not uncommon for writers to dedicate their books to distinguished persons. We have the example of the Jewish historian Josephus (A.D. 37-c.100), who dedicated his two-part work, *Against Apion*, to an individual named Epaphroditus. Josephus introduced his first volume by addressing him as: “Epaphroditus, most excellent of men” (1:1). [In citations from Josephus, the first number will refer to his book number and the second to the numbers used in the Greek text, which also appear in some English translations.] The second book of *Against Apion* begins with these words: “By means of the former volume, my most honored Epaphroditus, I have demonstrated our antiquity...” (2:1). Here we see opening words that are strikingly similar to Luke’s dedication.

It would help us to know some things about Theophilus in order to better grasp what Acts is about. We might want to know some of the following: What was the relationship of Theophilus to the church? Was Theophilus new in the faith, or was he interested in becoming a Christian? Did Theophilus live in Rome or in some other city?

Luke’s dedication to his Gospel implies that Theophilus may have been interested in discipleship, or was already a Christian. There, Luke told Theophilus that he wrote Luke-Acts for him, “so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4). F.F. Bruce painted the following fairly reasonable portrait of Theophilus:

It is quite probable that Theophilus was a representative member of the intelligent middle-class public at Rome whom Luke wished to win over to a less prejudiced and more favorable opinion of Christianity than that which was current among them...Theophilus had already learned something about the rise and progress of Christianity, and Luke’s aim was to put him in possession of more accurate information than he already had. [F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Rev. ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 29.]

We would like to know who Theophilus was and the specific questions in his mind. This would help us better understand Luke’s purposes for writing, and how we are to understand the book. We can infer some things about Theophilus, as the above shows, but unfortunately only in a general way. Judging by the content of Acts, Luke wrote to give Theophilus a reliable

account of the beginning and growth of Christianity around the Empire. That's why he chose to describe only limited aspects of the gospel's progress and the Christian movement's growth.

However, Luke probably had a much wider readership in view than just Theophilus. The fact that both the Gospel and Acts have survived indicates that the two volumes were copied, widely distributed in the churches, and publicly read. Luke's approach of writing to a single individual but having a broad reading audience in view was common during the times. We saw that Josephus, for example, wrote his work *Against Apion* to one individual. Yet, clearly he expected that his defense of the Jewish religion would be widely circulated. Luke must have also expected that his two-volume work would be used to instruct Christians throughout the Roman Empire about the growth of the church.

What was Luke trying to get across to his readers in Acts? At the beginning of Acts, Luke tells us that the purpose of his first book was to write "about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven" (1:1-2). While not explicitly stated, Luke's purpose in Acts seems to be to show the *continuing work* of Jesus, carried out by the power of the Holy Spirit through the church. In short, Luke is saying that Jesus is alive, and his life and work proceed in the church – and in greater power.

In the words of David Williams, "Luke's thesis is this: Jesus remains active, though the manner of his working has changed. Now, no longer in the flesh, he continues 'to do and to teach' through his 'body' the church...This is the story of Acts." [David J. Williams, *Acts*, New International Bible Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 19.] Luke's general purpose would have been to confirm what Theophilus knew about this continuing work, and to instruct him in an organized manner about the details he did not know. The objective would have been to confirm the faith of Theophilus in the work of Christ.

But what was Luke's *specific* purpose? Commentators have put forth many proposals. Almost certainly, Luke had more than one purpose in writing. Thus it would not be wise to lock onto one aim, and claim that this was the purpose. By a careful study of the contents of Luke-Acts, we can fix fairly well what information Luke wanted to convey to his readers. This will become clear as we make our way through the book. For the moment, we can briefly look at some broad strokes Luke painted for us in Acts:

- He described the spread of the gospel message in certain areas of the Roman Empire.
- Luke paid particular attention to explaining how the ministry of Paul

related to that of Peter and the church at Jerusalem.

- He also dealt with the relationship of the Christian church and its mission to the work of Jesus.
- At the same time, Luke discussed the connection between Judaism and the church, as well as the church's relations with the government of Rome.

By the time Luke wrote (conservative estimates vary between A.D. 62 and 85) the apostles Peter and Paul had been martyred by the Roman government. Christians may have been accused of being bad citizens, whose beliefs worked against the best interests of the state. Perhaps they were even accused of being enemies of the Empire. We know that Christians were often accused of anti-government behavior by the Jews, most of whom had rejected the gospel.

When Luke wrote, Christians were being spoken against as both government subversives and perverters of the Jewish religion. Questions may have arisen in people's minds about whether Christianity was a legitimate religion or a dangerous sect. A recent convert or one interested in becoming a disciple – such as Theophilus – would have been challenged by such questions. He needed to know the truth about such accusations, to have the record set straight. In fact, all recent converts (or interested parties) may have wondered why Christians were so despised.

Luke's work would have helped Christians answer these questions for themselves – and to have answers for “outsiders” as well. Acts may have even served the church as an apologetic document that set the record straight about the major accusations it faced.

PREPARATION FOR THE GOSPEL (ACTS 1:3-26)

Jesus lives (1:3)

In Acts, Luke emphasizes the *living* Christ. He is the one who guides the growth of the church and directs the spread of the gospel across the Roman Empire. The resurrection was the hope of Israel, something that Peter and Paul stressed in their sermons to the Jews. (And, of course, it is also the hope of the church.) For these reasons, the resurrection of Jesus, and his exaltation, take center stage in Acts.

Jesus gave “many convincing proofs” that he was alive – he appeared to the disciples over a period of 40 days (1:3). (This occurred within the seven weeks between Passover, when Jesus was crucified, and Pentecost, when the

Spirit came with power.) The number 40 recalls the 40 days during which Moses received instruction on Mount Sinai. But here it is Jesus who gives the instructions, this time from the Mount of Olives (1:12).

Moses had been given the first covenant for ancient Israel to have. Now, the apostles are given the program for the renewal of Israel – to preach the gospel of salvation to the world and to teach disciples. Both aims are to be accomplished through the Holy Spirit.

During the 40 days of appearances, the apostles saw a Jesus who was alive, but who had been dead. They were left with an unshakable faith in Jesus as one who could deliver the goods of salvation, so to speak. He was their Savior, and the Savior of the world. Of this they were fully and irrevocably convinced.

Luke does not ignore the meaning of Jesus' death, but he does not stress it in the way Paul does in his letters. Luke was more interested in showing that the work of the church was empowered by the living Christ through the Holy Spirit. Its missionary work was not a human-directed movement. It was based on a divine commission, and divinely empowered.

The kingdom of God (1:3)

During the 40 days during which Jesus appeared to the disciples, he “spoke about the kingdom of God.” We know from the Gospels that this was the substance of his message throughout his ministry. [Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:14-15; Luke 4:43; John 3:5.] During his appearances to his disciples, he clarified the meaning of the kingdom in the light of his ministry of salvation. The kingdom message now had a different thrust, a different emphasis. The witnesses preached Jesus as the resurrected and living Savior (2:24, 31-33). He was the representative of God's kingdom doing a “kingdom work” through his church.

The apostles and evangelists continued to preach the revitalized theme of the kingdom. [See Acts 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31.] It was a convenient way to summarize, particularly to Jews, that all the promises to the patriarchs had been fulfilled. The kingdom of God had come with power in the person of the resurrected Son of God (Romans 1:1-4). It came not to save the Jews from the heel of the Roman Empire, but to save them from a far worse oppression: sin and death.

In Acts, Luke also stressed that Jesus' rule (hence, his kingdom) was coming in the life of the church – and in the preaching of the gospel. When Jesus preached those messages described in the Gospel of Luke, he was proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom of God. The book of Acts is simply

an extension of Jesus' work. It details the spreading of the good news by the witnesses.

Wait for the promised gift (1:4-5)

The first task of the disciples is to “wait for the gift my Father promised” (1:4). The apostles are not to leave Jerusalem. They are not to preach anything, nor undertake any missionary program for the moment. They are to wait for the Holy Spirit to begin the work. This command in Acts is repeated by Luke from his Gospel (24:49). This underscores the importance of the Holy Spirit to the success of the New Testament gospel mission. Luke is telling us the Spirit is essential to the advance of the good news.

As we proceed through the book of Acts, we will notice that the Holy Spirit plays an important role in every advance of the gospel. Luke's point is that the success of the Christian mission is not due to the efforts of charismatic men and women. The gospel will be proclaimed and the church will develop because God willed it, Jesus Christ directed it and the Holy Spirit carried it out. It is a Trinitarian mission.

Throughout Luke's narrative, the Holy Spirit is the impelling force behind the mission program of the church. The agenda for disseminating the message of salvation – from Jerusalem to Rome – is orchestrated by the Holy Spirit. So important is the Spirit in the life of the church, that Luke's work has sometimes been called the “Acts of the Holy Spirit.” William Barclay wrote:

The Holy Spirit was the source of all guidance. The Spirit moves Philip to make contact with the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:29); prepares Peter for the coming of the emissaries of Cornelius (Acts 10:19); orders Peter to go without hesitation with these emissaries (Acts 11:12); orders the setting apart of Paul and Barnabas for the momentous step of taking the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 13:2,4); guides the decisions of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:28); guides Paul past Asia, Mysia and Bithynia, down into Troas and thence to Europe (Acts 16:6); tells Paul what awaits him in Jerusalem (Acts 20:23). [William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, revised edition, The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 19.]

Five circumstances are described in Acts during which a dramatic outpouring of the Holy Spirit on believers occurs. [Acts 2:1-4; 4:28-31; 8:15-17; 10:44; 19:6.] In fact, the first 13 chapters of Acts contain more than 40 references to the Holy Spirit. In the entire book, the Holy Spirit is mentioned over 60 times. The leaders of the church are people of the Spirit (6:3; 7:55;

11:24). The Spirit helps and guides the entire church on a daily basis (1:8; 4:31; 13:9).

Here in the first chapter, the Spirit is mentioned four times (verses 2, 5, 8, 16). The point is clear. The story Luke is about to tell regarding the church and its mission is under the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. The message is that the same Holy Spirit who came upon Jesus at his baptism also empowers the church so it can continue Jesus' work on earth.

The book is about the continuing work of Jesus Christ through his church, through the Holy Spirit. Luke's Gospel tells us about "all that Jesus *began* to do and teach"; this implies that Acts is about the *continuing* work of Jesus (1:1). After all, it is the risen Jesus who instructs the disciples to wait for the Spirit.

Jesus does not disappear from the pages of Acts – his name appears 86 times in Luke and 68 times in Acts. In large portions of Acts, the Holy Spirit is not mentioned at all, or only in passing. It is the Lord Jesus (not the Spirit) who stood near Paul to tell him he would testify in Rome (23:11). Jesus also appeared to Paul in Corinth, to assure him that he should not be afraid but keep on speaking (18:9). Sometimes angels delivered messages to the missionaries or instructions were mediated by prophets. [Acts 5:19; 8:26; 27:23; 11:28; 20:11.]

In Luke's theology, God, Jesus and the Spirit are easily interchangeable. In one place, the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of Jesus (16:7).

Restore the kingdom now? (1:6)

The apostles still thought that Jesus was soon "going to restore the kingdom to Israel" (1:6). They seemed to be viewing the kingdom of God as a restored national Israel. This idea of Israel as the people of God was deeply imbedded in the Hebrew Scriptures. They spoke, for example, of a people God had chosen "out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession" (Deuteronomy 7:6).

There was a Jewish expectation that when Israel was restored to national glory, the Holy Spirit would again become active (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 11:19). After all, the prophets of old had promised that in the last days the fortunes of Israel would be restored and God would pour out his Spirit on all people (Joel 2:28-3:1). In Acts 2, Peter quotes Joel's prophecy and says it is being fulfilled at the time (2:16-17).

The disciples thought that Jesus would restore the glory of Israel. They "had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). They had left everything to follow Jesus, thinking he would give them

positions of great authority in that kingdom (Mark 10:35-37; Luke 22:24-30). Naturally, they were profoundly shocked and discouraged when Jesus was executed, but they had then been energized by his resurrection. Now, in his post-resurrection appearances he was speaking of the disciples being baptized with the Holy Spirit of power (1:5, 8). Since this was a sign of the new age, it must have awakened in them the hope that the messianic age had come.

We can see something of the disciples' sense of agitated excitement in the way they ask Jesus about the restoration of Israel. They don't ask whether this restoration will occur. Rather, they wonder, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (1:6).

Not for you to know (1:7)

Jesus gave the disciples an indefinite answer to the question. He told them it wasn't for them to know "the times or dates" of any restoration in a national or political sense (1:7). That had been his teaching earlier when the disciples asked about the sign of the end of the age (Matthew 24:3). He stated that no one could know when this would happen. Neither the angels nor Jesus knew the answer to the question! (verse 36, with Mark 13:32).

Interestingly, Luke did not include Jesus' answer to the "when" question in his Gospel accounts (17:22-37 or 21:5-36). Rather, he held off describing what was apparently Jesus' teaching until this place in Acts. Jesus' reply to the "when" question underscores a great lesson for all Christians. We should not be concerned about when "the end" might come, for there is no way for us to know. We cannot search the Scriptures to find the answer because God is keeping that knowledge to himself.

On the other hand, Jesus was not denying that some day there would be a restoration of Israel. In fact, the entire world is to be renewed. But God's purpose for Israel and the world in a political sense is not our concern. The apostles and evangelists were simply to proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. Whether the news was accepted was not their concern.

There is probably a reason why Luke discussed the question of the Messiah's return. By the time he wrote Acts, it must have been clear that the most of the Jews were *not* responding to the gospel message. (Neither was the Gentile world to any spectacular degree.) The Jews were the chief and continuing opponents of the Christians. The government of Rome had also become the enemy of the church. Terrible tragedies had struck the Jews, perhaps including the destruction of Jerusalem. But "the end" had not come. The church may have been wondering when it would occur. Was it upon the world now?

Luke was saying to the church: Don't concern yourself with the "when"

of it, but continue to live your Christian lives and do the work of God. The church should not speculate about prophecies – we should simply preach the power of the risen Christ to bring salvation to the world.

You are my witnesses (1:8)

The disciples' task was to witness to Jesus from Jerusalem "to the ends of the earth" (1:8). This mandate to witness is another theme of Acts. [Acts 1:22; 2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 7:58; 10:39, 41; 13:31; 22:15, 22; 26:16.] It becomes the programmatic statement for the book as a whole.

Luke announced this theme ("you will be my witnesses") at the beginning of Acts as a mandate of the risen Jesus. By doing this, he revealed this to be his main interest in writing the book. Luke tied this programmatic prophecy to his statement in Luke 24:48: "You are witnesses of these things" to all nations. "These things" refers to the preaching of repentance and forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus (verse 47).

To the ends of the earth (1:8)

The message of salvation offered through Christ to all people was to be declared first in Jerusalem. Then it would go throughout Judea and then to Samaria, which was a "near-Jewish" state. Finally, the witness would go throughout the Roman world. F.F. Bruce says,

The geographical terms of verse 8 provide a sort of "Index of Contents" for Acts,.... "In Jerusalem" covers the first seven chapters, "in all Judaea and Samaria" covers 8:1 to 11:18, and the remainder of the book traces the progress of the gospel outside the frontiers of the Holy Land until at last it reaches Rome. [Bruce, 37.]

The expression "to the ends of the earth" needs some clarification (1:8). First, when Jesus gave the apostles this mandate, they probably took it to mean they should witness to the Jews of the Diaspora, scattered throughout the Roman Empire. It's clear from Acts that it did not occur to them to preach directly to the Gentiles. Not until later, and with some difficulty, did they understand the full extent of Jesus' international program of salvation.

Second, there is no indication that the apostles preached the word in China, or West Africa, or in the New World. Their work, so far as we know, seems to have been generally limited to the Roman Empire, and perhaps areas adjacent to it (such as Mesopotamia). Then, in what sense did they witness "to the ends of the earth"? It has been suggested that the phrase refers to the city of Rome. That is where Luke ends his book, so there may be something to the idea.

In the *Psalms of Solomon*, a writing possibly composed by devout Jews in the first century B.C., the expression refers to Rome. [Ps. Sol. 8:15.] The circumstance described there was the Roman general Pompey attacking the disobedient people of Jerusalem “from the end of the earth,” that is from Rome. To an ancient Jew, Rome seemed to be at the ends of the earth. But to a Greek-speaking person, after a hundred years of being governed by Rome, it would not seem so far away.

The expression “ends of the earth” can also mean “everywhere.” The Greek rhetorician Dio Chrysostom (c. A.D. 40-c.112) was told to go “to the uttermost parts of the earth.” [Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 13:9.] In context, this refers to all places. The phrase “the ends of the earth” occurs in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, in Isaiah 49:6. Paul quoted this verse to demonstrate that his mission was to carry the message of “salvation to the ends of the earth” (13:46-47).

In whatever way the term is defined, it’s clear that Jesus’ mandate had universal scope. The gospel was to be spread far and wide. This is something the band of missionaries learned about only in stages.

Jesus’ ascension (1:9)

After giving his mandate to the apostles to be his witnesses, Jesus ascended from the earth and disappeared into a cloud. The sight of Jesus being enveloped in the cloud is reminiscent of the Shekinah of God. This was the symbol of the glorious divine presence among God’s people in the Old Testament, particularly in the tabernacle. [Exodus 13:21; 16:10; 24:16; 25:8; 40:34-38.]

Luke here gives the fullest New Testament account of Jesus’ ascension. It is mentioned briefly in only two other places (Mark 16:19 [Mark 16:19 is believed by most textual experts to be a later addition. It is not included in the oldest manuscripts.] ; Luke 24:51). Of course, the *fact* of the ascension is implied throughout the New Testament. Christ is frequently described as being at the right hand of God. [Acts 2:33; 3:21; John 6:62; Ephesians 4:8-10; 1 Thessalonians 1:10; 1 Peter 3:23; Hebrews 4:14; 9:24; Revelation 5:6.]

The point is that the witnesses and the church knew that Jesus had been exalted as Savior and ruler over the affairs of humanity. He was also the guide of the apostles’ missionary program (Ephesians 1:19-22; Philippians 2:9-10). The activity of preaching rested not on a dead man but on the living presence of an exalted Savior.

While Jesus was lifted up and the disciples observed this as a fact, we must remember that God and Christ are not “up there” somewhere. God is

“everywhere.” The idea of heaven as the place of God’s abode “above” the earth is a metaphor to describe his transcendent reality. Christ ascending in a cloud showed the disciples that he was being exalted to be in the presence of God in glory.

Jesus to return with clouds (1:10-11)

The disciples were astonished at the sight of Jesus’ rising – “looking intently up into the sky” (1:10). Suddenly, two angelic figures appeared in human form. (See Luke 24:4 for a comparable appearance of angels.) They chided the disciples for standing there, gaping at the sight of their rising Savior. (We no doubt would have been gaping as well!) They informed the disciples that Jesus would “come back in the same way” that they had seen him go up.

This is one of several scattered New Testament references to what is called the Parousia, after the Greek word that means the arrival or presence of someone. The word is used as a technical term for the coming of Christ in glory. Most commonly, the Parousia is known as the Second Coming of Christ at the end of this age. The circumstances of Jesus’ return are most completely described in Matthew’s Gospel (24:3-25:46). [See also Mark 13:3-37; Luke 21:7-36; 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10.]

A Sabbath day’s walk (1:12)

After this extraordinary experience of watching Jesus’ ascension, the apostolic band returned to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. Luke described the distance between the two places as a “Sabbath’s day walk from the city” (1:12). This was the extent to which a pious Jew was allowed to travel on the Sabbath. The Mishnah, an early 3rd-century compendium of rabbinic regulations, tells us that Sabbath travel was limited to 2,000 cubits. [Mishnah, *Sotab* 5:3.] This is about a kilometer, or two-thirds of a mile, although there is some question on the exact measurement of a cubit. Estimates from one half to three quarters of a mile are given for the length of a “Sabbath’s day walk.”

Luke’s use of this strictly Jewish idiom shows his intimate knowledge of local customs. It suggests that Luke received his information about Jesus’ ascension from Jerusalem-area sources. His information could have come from one of the apostles, or from someone who wrote down what the apostles had said about the ascension.

The upstairs room (1:13)

Upon returning to Jerusalem the disciples entered a house and “went upstairs to the room where they were staying” (1:13). This upper room [In ancient architecture, where interior walls were often made of stones, the largest room in a building was almost always on the top floor. If it were on the bottom floor, the interior walls on the floor above would place too much weight on the ceiling timbers.] may have been a well-known place to early Christians. Perhaps it was the place where Jesus and his disciples kept the Passover before his crucifixion (Mark 14:12-16). (Mark uses a different Greek word for “room.”) Some commentators speculate this could also have been the same room where Jesus appeared to some of his disciples after his resurrection (Luke 24:33-43; John 20:19, 26). Others infer that this room was in the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark. A house church was later located in the home of Mark’s mother (12:12).

Of course, none of these ideas can be proven. However, it is interesting to note that this is one of several times in Acts that Luke mentions specific locations in which the social life of the church was centered. Not only is it interesting local color, it is again evidence that Luke had done some solid research before writing Acts.

The apostolic group (1:13-15)

Luke next describes the people who met or stayed in the upper room. This was the primary nucleus of people who had been witnesses to Jesus’ death and resurrection. Luke had already listed the names of the Twelve in his Gospel (Luke 6:14-16), whom he said Jesus designated as apostles (verse



13). He lists their names again (Acts 1:13), but omits Judas Iscariot, who had died. Luke moved John from fourth position to second, perhaps because only he and Peter have any active role in Acts.

The Eleven were central witnesses to Jesus' death and resurrection. In both his Gospel and Acts, Luke limited the title "apostle" to Twelve disciples. On only one occasion did he call anyone else an apostle (Barnabas and Paul), and in an indirect way (see 14:4, 14).

Luke also mentioned the names of several others besides the Eleven who were meeting together. The group included some women, one of whom was Mary the mother of Jesus. "The women" (1:14) were those who followed Jesus during his ministry and death (Luke 8:2-3; 23:49; and 23:55-24:10). No doubt Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James were part of the female contingent, whom Luke mentioned in his Gospel (24:10). But this is the last time that Luke mentioned the women or the mother of Jesus, who presumably lived with the apostle John and his family (John 19:26-27).

The brothers of Jesus were also part of the apostolic group. The reference to Jesus' brothers is interesting because of their apparently abrupt change in attitude toward Jesus. During his ministry they thought he was crazy, or even demon-possessed (Mark 3:21-35; John 7:2-10). What changed their minds? The answer may be found in Paul's writings. Paul recounted an appearance of the risen Christ to James (1 Corinthians 15:7) that Luke doesn't mention. This would have happened soon after the resurrection, most probably during the 40 days of Jesus' appearances. Presumably, the other brothers, James (or Joseph), Judas (or Jude), and Simon (Matthew 13:55-56; Mark 6:3) came to believe in Jesus through similar circumstances.

James is important to Luke's story, as this half-brother of Jesus would soon occupy a position of leadership in the Jerusalem church (12:17; 15:13-21; 21:18). It appears that the other half-brothers continued to have influence in the apostolic church as well (1 Corinthians 9:5). The Jude who wrote the epistle called himself the brother of James. He is traditionally understood to be the half-brother of Jesus called Judas, or Jude.

According to Luke, there were about 120 believers who met together in Jerusalem before the day of Pentecost (1:15). [His use of "about" here and elsewhere in Acts tells us he was dealing with real numbers, not symbolic numbers. See Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:7, 36; 10:3; 13:18, 20; 19:7, 34.] Among the 120 must have been the disciple Cleopas and his companion, to whom Christ appeared on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Luke also mentioned two other disciples, Justus and Matthias (1:23). They must have been members of the group of 120 as well.

Jewish law required that there be 120 males before a synagogue could have its own council. Only then could a congregation elect members to its own ruling body. This may have been Luke's implied claim that the Christian disciples formed a legitimate and legal community within Judaism. (The importance of this will become clear as we study Acts.)

There was an exception to the Jewish stipulation. In the church, women were counted as part of the legal community, and Luke later mentioned additional women in the church (5:14; 8:3, 12; 9:2; 12:12; 16:33; 17:4, 12; 22:4). At its very beginning, the community of believers was one that broke restrictive social barriers. It exemplified what Paul said: In Christ there is neither male nor female (Galatians 3:28).

This group of 120 was only part of a still larger contingent of believers. Paul wrote that on one occasion after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to "more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time" (1 Corinthians 15:6), and most of them were still alive when Paul wrote, some two decades later. This suggests a larger pre-Pentecost nucleus in the church than the 120 people meeting in Jerusalem. Commentators speculate that most of these other believers were in Galilee, with the number "about a hundred and twenty" (1:15) referring only to those in Jerusalem.

Since Luke was not concerned with the church or evangelism in Galilee, it is easy to forget that there were also many disciples in that area. Luke mentions that there were churches in Galilee, but he does not give us any details, and he doesn't describe any missionary activity in the area (9:31).

Constantly in prayer (1:14)

The group of 120 in Galilee was said to be "joined together constantly in prayer" (1:14). Besides waiting for spiritual empowerment, the only other activity the witnesses undertook until Pentecost was to worship God.

In Acts, Luke often mentioned prayer as one of his sub-themes. His point was that the people of God do not rush out in frantic human activity – they look to the leading of the Holy Spirit, and they seek that leadership through prayer. Often, such prayer results in a powerful response from God. [Acts 1:24-26; 4:31; 9:40; 10:19, 31; 12:5, 12; 22:10; 27:23-25.] Prayer is a key to the forward motion of God's purpose.

The death of Judas (1:16-19)

Luke next recounts a situation in which the disciples sought Christ's leadership through prayer. It had to do with an important matter for the church and its gospel-preaching initiatives. The situation that the disciples felt needed to be resolved was finding a replacement for Judas, the disciple

who betrayed Jesus. Luke took considerable space to tell the story. It was also the only incident he described between Jesus' ascension and the events of Pentecost day. He apparently thought the episode was important.

Peter described Judas' betrayal of Christ and his gruesome death. Such details remind us that the church is never perfect. From the beginning, there was a traitor in the ranks of the disciples. But even more ironic was that Peter, the leader of the church who rose to condemn Judas, was himself tainted. William Willimon reminds us that the first speech given after Jesus' resurrection

is made by the one who also fled in the darkness and loudly denied his Lord when confronted by the maid (Luke 22:56-62). Infidelity first occurs among those who presume to lead... No scorn for later despisers of the gospel, no judgment upon later infidels, can match the sober, gruesomely detailed picture of the end of Judas or the irony that the one who speaks of Judas did himself deny and curse his own Master. The church meets no failure or deceit in the world that it has not first encountered in itself – even among those who founded and led the very first congregation. [William Willimon, *Acts* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1988), 25.]

We should also understand that what Peter said here was only a summary, as are all the speeches in Acts. We are not reading word-for-word accounts of the speeches. They were not taken down in short-hand or recorded for posterity. And at least some of the speeches were probably spoken in Aramaic, the common tongue of this region. Luke wrote in Greek to a later community of believers in other areas, to people who did not know Aramaic.

In Acts 1, for example, Peter spoke as though he were quoting from the Greek version of the Old Testament. He even translated the Aramaic "Akeldama," explaining it meant Field of Blood (1:19). Presumably, the original disciples were quite aware of the meaning of the word "Akeldama" and the circumstances surrounding the death of Judas. They needed no explanation or translation. Luke added these for the benefit of his Greek readers, who did not know the original circumstances.

The point is we shouldn't particularly concern ourselves with whether Peter, or the other speakers in Acts, spoke their lines in the exact words Luke put in their mouths. Luke is giving us the main idea of each speech in a paraphrased form.

We should also explain that Acts contains many unresolved questions of

a historical and technical nature. There is, for example, the question of how Judas died. Did he hang himself as Matthew indicated (27:5)? Or did he die as Acts described it – because “he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out” (1:18)? This difference has intrigued commentators for centuries. It is considered, as one commentary expresses it, to be “the most intractable contradiction in the New Testament.” [Longenecker, 263.]

It is possible that both Matthew and Acts are correct. Judas may have tried to hang himself, but the rope broke, the knot slipped or the branch may have broken. He then could have fallen, perhaps onto jagged rocks below, which punctured his body. Or Judas died by hanging himself. But later his decomposing and swollen body fell (due to one of the factors mentioned above). The “bursting open” would have occurred when he hit the ground. We may never know. The differences in the accounts may be explained by each author’s intent. Matthew may have been content to simply report Judas’ death. Luke wanted to stress the gruesome and tragic end of someone who had sold out his Savior, and his own opportunity to be among the Twelve.

The point is that Luke’s account is terse at many points. We do not have enough information to resolve what appear to be a number of difficulties. We should not assume, however, that Luke was wrong or that he had contradicted himself or others. We do not have enough information to conclude that. For more information, see www.gci.org/bible/luke/orderly.

Why Judas was replaced (1:20)

The disciples felt it was important that the number of apostles be restored to its original number of twelve. Thus, a replacement had to be found for Judas. This became the first official action of the embryonic Christian community. Peter’s speech is set off by two forms of the Greek word *dei*, which means “it is necessary” (1:16, 21). It was necessary for someone like Judas to be a betrayer in order to fulfill prophecy (1:16) and it was necessary to choose a replacement for him (1:21). Thus, both acts – the defection as well as the replacement of Judas – were divine necessities. And both were foretold in what Luke defined as Scripture.

In his speech, Peter cited two verses from the book of Psalms (69:25 and 109:8) to demonstrate this point (1:20). Peter referred to these verses as “the Scripture.” He said they had their origin in “the Holy Spirit” as the Spirit “spoke long ago through David concerning Judas” (1:16). Thus, Peter drew attention to the divine authorship of Scripture. David was merely a mouthpiece for God. Luke showed that both Peter (3:18, 21; 4:25) and Paul believed that the Scriptures were God-breathed (28:25).

Luke also showed that while Scripture was divinely inspired, the apostles had the spiritual wisdom and authority to use it creatively. We can see this in Peter's handling of the Old Testament. Peter quoted Psalm 69:25 in the following way, saying it referred to Judas: "May his place be deserted..." (1:20). But the reading was an adapted form of the original, and it came from the Greek version, not the Hebrew. In the Hebrew version, David was referring to his enemies (plural), saying: "May their place be deserted, let there be no one to dwell in their tents." Thus, "their" in the original became "his" in Acts. What originally referred to "tents" became "place" in the sense of office or position.

What had occurred was the following. The disciples had concluded that a replacement for Judas had to be made to preserve the group of the Twelve. Having so understood, they found a confirmation in two texts from the Psalms. But even here, they had to adapt the wording to fit the new circumstance. David Williams anticipates our reaction by saying,

Such adaptation, whether it be Peter's or Luke's, may strike us as taking undue liberties with the text. But it was believed that all Scripture pointed to Christ or to the events attending his coming and that it was legitimate, therefore, to draw out the meaning in this way. Thus the psalmist's imprecation against his enemies became a prophecy of Judas' desertion. [Williams, 32.]

The apostles freely "proof-texted" Hebrew scriptural material because Jesus had explained that it pointed to him and his work. Luke made an issue of this in the final chapter of his Gospel (24:25-27, 44). Jesus must have explained Psalm 69 as being a block of scripture that referred to his work. Parts of it were regularly applied to Jesus by the New Testament church. We find Psalm 69 used in John's (John 2:17; 15:25) and Paul's writings (Romans 15:3; 11:9-10) to refer to Jesus.

We might wonder why the apostles were so sure that a replacement had to be made for Judas. This question arises since the risen Christ did not seem to give them explicit instructions on the matter. Jesus had told the apostles that they would "sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:30). Since Judas had defected, it would have seemed necessary that a replacement was needed to bring up the number of apostles to the full complement of 12. This was important because the church saw itself as God's method of re-forming his people. The church had inherited the mission of ancient Israel to bring the knowledge of God to its own people, as well as to the nations (Deuteronomy 4:5-8). Thus, it needed 12

leaders to take the gospel message to the scattered Jews, constituted as the 12 tribes (Acts 26:7; James 1:1).

There was also a cultural reason for having 12 foundational leaders. It had to do with the fact that the church was born, operated and continued to live within the Jewish community for many decades. The church presented itself to the Jewish nation as the culmination of Israel's hope. It was the spiritual remnant of Judaism that had recognized and accepted Israel's Messiah. For any such people there was an organizational and symbolic requirement surrounding the number 12. Richard Longenecker explains it:

The “remnant theology” of Late Judaism made it mandatory that any group that presented itself as “the righteous remnant” of the nation, and had the responsibility of calling the nation to repentance and preparing it for God's glory, must represent itself as the true Israel, not only in its proclamation, but also in its symbolism. [Longenecker, 264.]

As a parallel to the 12 tribes of Israel, such a group would need to have 12 leaders guiding the community. That this was a pervasive expectation is shown by the fact that the Qumran disciples had a quorum of 12 spiritual leaders.

Qualifications for an apostle (1:21-22)

To head the Jewish Christian community as an apostle, a leader had to have some specific qualifications. He had to have been associated with the band of disciples from the time of John the Baptist to Jesus' ascension (1:22). This person would have known the details of Jesus' message because he had heard it personally from him. Secondly, this person must have been a witness to the resurrected Christ, so he could guarantee that it actually happened.

“Apostle” was not an ecclesiastical title to be given freely to anyone who accepted the faith or even spread the message of the gospel. It was based on special qualifications necessary for a unique job – the original preaching of Jesus as resurrected Lord and Savior. In short, says William Willimon, “The apostolic circle is drawn only from eyewitnesses who can give a reliable account of the Jesus-event.” [Willimon, 24.]

Others could preach and teach the gospel message, but they were not part of the special group of apostles called the Twelve. From this, we see that there is no need for an office of apostolic succession. The task of the Twelve was unique, as was their number. The reason Judas had to be replaced was that he defected, not that he died. This is shown by the fact that when James the son of Zebedee was executed some two decades after Jesus' resurrection,

the church did not replace him with another person chosen as apostle.

The apostle Paul was a special case. He was not part of the group of disciples who were with Jesus throughout his ministry. Nor did he see the resurrected Christ in the 40 days after his resurrection. However, Paul did list himself as one to whom Jesus appeared (1 Corinthians 15:8). Though he may have been “the least of the apostles,” he was one of them (verse 9). Paul frequently referred to his apostleship in his letters (Romans 11:13; 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:9; Galatians 1:1). But Paul came later to the faith and apostleship, as “one abnormally born” (1 Corinthians 15:8). He was an apostle, but not one of the Twelve. His insistence on equality with the Twelve came neither in opposition to them nor on any need to be included within their number.

Matthias chosen by lot (1:23-26)

Paul was not the person who replaced Judas. Two other disciples had the qualifications to be an apostle, Joseph Barsabbas (Justus) and Matthias, and they were proposed by the 120 for the vacated office. Only one could be chosen. It was not enough simply to have the right qualifications. One had to be chosen by the Lord as well. After all, it had been Jesus who had appointed the original Twelve. Thus, the disciples now prayed, asking the Lord to make the selection (1:25). Then they “cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias” (1:26).

The practice of casting lots seems strange to us, more like playing dice or gambling. Nevertheless, the practice of casting lots to determine God’s choice was traditional in Israel. [Some examples where lots were used: Leviticus 16:8; Numbers 26:55; 33:54; Joshua 14:2; 19:1-40; Judges 20:9; Proverbs 18:18; Isaiah 14:41; Micah 2:5; Jonah 1:7-8.] The practice is illustrated by Proverbs 16:33: “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.” It was a common practice in that culture to cast lots in order to determine a course of action (John 19:24). Even the priestly duties in the temple were settled in this manner (Luke 1:9). Thus, Peter and the rest were acting like typical Jews of the time.

However, we should note that there is no further New Testament example of the use of lots to determine God’s will or direction. Thereafter, the Holy Spirit directly leads the church to the proper course of action. Also, we should focus on who used lots in this case, and to determine what. First, it was not individual Christians but the apostles who cast the lots. And the lots were used to determine a course for *the church*. They were not used to determine what individual disciples were to do in their private lives. Acts does

not teach Christians to use lots to determine the decisions they need to take in their everyday lives.

The precise method by which lots were cast is unknown. Perhaps two stones with names (or designations of persons or courses of action) were shaken together in a container, until one dropped out. Whatever the method, the disciples cast lots and in this way Matthias was designated as the replacement for Judas (1:26). The church then waited for the day of Pentecost.

ACTS 2: THE CHURCH BEGINS ON PENTECOST

The Day of Pentecost (2:1)

The day called “Pentecost” is named after the Greek word *pentekostos*, which means “fiftieth.” It was the only Old Testament festival determined by counting. On the day after the Sabbath after Passover, the ancient Israelites selected a sheaf of the first grain that had been harvested in the spring. This grain became an offering, and the priest waved it “before the LORD” (Leviticus 23:11-12). Pentecost was observed in ancient Israel on the 50th day after this (verse 15). Since seven weeks elapsed between the day of the first grain offering and the beginning of Pentecost, this holy day was sometimes called the Feast of Weeks. [Exodus 34:22; Leviticus 23:15; Numbers 28:26; Deuteronomy 16:9-12.]

The grain was harvested after the token of the first gleanings of the grain was given as an offering. Since the counting of Pentecost was tied to this event and it came at the end of the spring grain harvest, Pentecost was sometimes called the Feast of the Harvest and Day of First Fruits (Exodus 23:16; Numbers 28:26).

Judaism came to regard Pentecost as the anniversary of the giving of the old covenant and law at Mount Sinai (Exodus 20–24). It is not surprising, then, that Pentecost would have a symbolic meaning for the church. It was the day when God once again manifested himself in a unique way, signaling a new relationship between God and his people. As William Neil summarizes it:

Pentecost had also come to signify for Jews the commemoration of the giving of the Law at Sinai fifty days after the Exodus Passover. For Luke this, too, would be seen as having a Christian fulfillment in the giving of the Spirit fifty days after the Christian Exodus Passover, the Crucifixion and Resurrection. [E. William Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), page 72].

The Spirit coming in human minds was a kind of “second giving of the law”; the Spirit replaced the law as the guide for God’s people. It was, in Paul’s expression, “the law of the Spirit who gives life,” which came through the new righteousness that is in Christ (Romans 8:1-2). The Spirit-filled church made possible by Pentecost existed in some continuity with Israel. But there was a distinction as well between the age of Torah (law) and the

age of Spirit, between old and new Israel. The law had no power to bring anyone into true communion with God, because it could not be followed in faith, being “weakened by the flesh” (verse 3). A new covenant was required, in which “the Spirit of Christ” (verse 9) was made available to sinning humans.

In the Pentecost experience, the Spirit becomes, in Paul’s words, “the righteousness of God has been made known...apart from the law...to which the Law and Prophets testify” (Romans 3:21). The Holy Spirit is given by God as a gift of faith to those who believe in Jesus Christ (verse 22). This makes it possible for humans to experience oneness with God through the connecting link of spiritual love. As Paul wrote, “God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Romans 5:5).

The old Jewish faith had been Torah- or law-centered, modeled after the requirements of the Mosaic covenant. The new faith was Christ-centered and Spirit-directed – with a new covenant of the Spirit. Pentecost, as the festival of first-fruits, would be an appropriate occasion for the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. On this day, the “first-fruits” of disciples would be transformed by the Spirit as a token or representative offering, giving evidence that one day all the nations would seek God, and his truth would cover the earth (Isaiah 2:2-3, 11:9).

A sound like a violent wind (2:2)

On that extraordinary first New Testament Pentecost, the disciples were gathered in “one place” (2:2). Some think they were in the temple. The disciples were frequently at the temple during these days, praising God (Luke 24:53), and this would certainly be a good place to attract a large crowd. However, there is no other indication that the disciples were in the temple. The place may have been the same upper room where the disciples met together, or some other location (Acts 1:13). Wherever it was that the disciples were gathered, they began to experience powerful miracles.

First was the sound of a hurricane-like wind (Greek, *pneuma*) (2:3). Both the Hebrew word *ruach* and the Greek *pneuma* can mean either wind or spirit (the context determines this). The wind was a physical manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit. The wind symbolized the Spirit of God, even as did the dove that alighted on Christ at his baptism (John 1:32; 3:8). The sound of a strong wind is also reminiscent of Old Testament theophanies in which God manifested himself (Ezekiel 13:13). The audience on Pentecost morning probably readily connected the sound of the wind to the thunder and trumpet sounds that accompanied God’s presence in the giving of the Ten

Commandments (Exodus 20:18). The loud sound of this wind also had a practical result: It attracted God-fearing Jews who were curious as to what was happening.

Tongues of fire (2:3)

The Jews were doubly awed by a second sign that reaffirmed the presence of the Holy Spirit. “They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them” (2:3). They appeared to be individual “tongues,” not that each tongue was divided or forked. Fire was another symbol of the divine presence. Yahweh appeared to Moses in flames coming from a bush (Exodus 3:2-5). Fire was a frequent feature of Old Testament theophanies, especially those surrounding the Exodus and the giving of the law. [Exodus 13:21-22; 14:24; 19:18; 24:17; Deuteronomy 4:12, 24, 33; 5:4; 10:4.]

John the Baptist had spoken of the Messiah carrying out a baptism of the Holy Spirit (hence, “wind”) and fire (Luke 3:16). For the disciples as well, these signs were instructive. They understood that Jesus Christ was bringing to fruition something he had promised (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-5, 8).

Filled with the Holy Spirit (2:4)

These two signs – the wind and fire – were the outward demonstration of what was happening inside the disciples. “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit” (2:4). The church – the Israel of the Spirit – was born through the Holy Spirit, and the disciples were spiritually transformed. All Christians continue to participate in the internal transformation that Pentecost symbolizes. We are baptized with the Holy Spirit upon conversion. [Acts 2:38; 9:17; 11:17; 19:2; Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:2; Ephesians 1:13; Titus 3:5; Hebrews 6:4; 1 John 3:24.]

Speak in various languages (2:4, 6-12)

On that first Pentecost a third manifestation of the Spirit’s presence occurred. The disciples began to speak in other languages (“tongues”), “as the Spirit enabled them” (2:4). Simple Galileans appeared to have sudden skill in most of the languages spoken in that region of the world. The supernatural aspect of this was not lost on the hearers, who were “utterly amazed” (2:7). More than this, each person in the crowd heard the disciples speaking in his own *native* language (2:8). The Greek literally means, “We are hearing in our own language in which we were born.” The various local languages of these Jews’ original homelands were being spoken.

But why speak in local languages? Many Jews spoke Aramaic, especially if

they had settled in Judea. But even if they were from the Dispersion, they probably spoke the one language almost everyone could speak – Greek. Luke’s account makes it clear that the “tongues” were real languages, and they could be understood. What the listeners needed was not an interpretation of the words, but an explanation of the sound of wind, the fire, and why various languages were being spoken by ordinary Galileans.

The basic purpose of the miracle of languages was not simply to communicate. Greek would have been sufficient for that purpose. The miracles, including the speaking in languages, were meant to get the attention of the crowd and have them wonder what was happening. They certainly accomplished that. As the perplexed Jews themselves asked, “What does this mean?” (2:12).

Jews from every nation (2:5, 8-11)

Before Peter explains the events of the day, let us look at the international flavor of the crowd that had gathered. Luke tells us there were “God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven” staying in Jerusalem (2:5). Among the crowd there were also converts or “proselytes” from paganism to Judaism (2:11). The multitude was made up of devout Jews and proselytes, who were in Jerusalem to worship God during the festival of Pentecost.

One authority estimated that over 100,000 people attended Passover in Jesus’ day. Josephus wrote of the large crowds in Jerusalem for this feast. [Josephus, *Antiquities* 14:337; 17:254; Wars 1:253; 2:42-43.] Jews would come to the city from throughout the Roman Empire, and from eastern kingdoms. The number of visitors at Pentecost was probably smaller, although still substantial. Philo (20 B.C.–A.D. 50), a Jewish philosopher from Egypt who lived at the same time as Jesus and Paul, said that there were “vast numbers of Jews scattered over every city of Asia and Syria.” [Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 245.] He claimed that there were about a million Jews in Egypt, though historians think his figure is inflated. But no one doubts that the Jewish population of Alexandria was large. [Philo, *Flaccus* 43, 55.]

Luke’s list of countries from which Jews had come is interesting. Why only 15 countries, why those in particular, and why the order he listed them in? The answers are not clear. But some things about the list can be inferred. Luke’s list begins with three countries east of the Roman Empire – Parthia, Media and Elam, in the area of modern Iran. Luke then moves westward to Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) and Judea. He then mentions various provinces in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) – Cappadocia, Pontus, Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia. Next, Luke skips to North Africa – to Egypt, Libya and Cyrene.

Luke also mentions “visitors from Rome,” which included Jews and converts (2:11). This may have something to do with Luke’s desire to show the gospel message penetrating Rome, capital of the Empire. Some of these visitors who were in Jerusalem on Pentecost may have returned to form the nucleus of the church in Rome. As we shall see, the gospel message reached Rome years before Paul did. Rome had a large Jewish population. One scholar estimated it at about 40,000, though there is no way to be sure. The spread of Christian teaching in the synagogues of Rome by the “visitors” may have led to riots, perhaps about A.D. 50. This may be what caused the Roman emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54) to issue an edict calling for the expulsion of all Jews from Rome (Acts 18:2).

After mentioning the Roman Jews, Luke ends his list with references to people from the Mediterranean island of Crete, and then Arabs. It has been called an odd list with a number of countries given in a strange order. We can infer that this list was meant to indicate that people from all over the Roman world, and parts east, were at Jerusalem. If these people were pilgrims and returned to their native lands, they would have told people about the Pentecost event far and wide.

The appearance of Judea – and its location in the list – is especially odd (2:9). As one commentator points out, this “involves the curious anomaly of inhabitants of Judea being amazed to hear the apostles speak in their own language.” [Longenecker, 273.] A number of solutions have been offered. One is that Judea as the land of the Jews was prophetically held to stretch from the Euphrates River to the Egyptian border. That is, it would represent the territory once controlled by Kings David and Solomon. This would explain Judea’s place in the list and why Syria is not mentioned. Such “Judeans” would have spoken a number of local dialects in a vast territory. However, it is unlikely that Luke’s readers would have this in mind.

There is also a question as to whether these Jews were pilgrims or had moved to *live* in Jerusalem. Some scholars see these Jews as pilgrims who had traveled to Jerusalem for the Pentecost festival. However, other scholars say they were permanent residents of Jerusalem. They had returned to the home country, much as Jews in modern times have returned to Israel. Longenecker writes,

Contrary to many who have assumed that the Jews mentioned here were pilgrims to Jerusalem coming for the Pentecost festival, it is more probable that they were residents of Jerusalem who had returned from the Diaspora lands...at some earlier time to settle down in the homeland. [Ibid., 272.]

The existence of a permanent mixed Jewish population in Jerusalem is supported by Acts 6:9. Also, the contrast between “visitors from Rome” (2:10) and those staying or “dwelling” in Jerusalem strengthens the point that most of those in the list had become permanent residents of Jerusalem. Whatever the situation, Luke’s point is clear. The miraculous coming of the Holy Spirit was witnessed in Jerusalem by Jews from all over the world. Many of these individuals from far-flung international areas believed the gospel and received the Spirit. They were later scattered because of persecution and “preached the word wherever they went” (8:1, 4).

They are not drunk (2:13-15)

As the disciples rose to speak, it was clear that not everyone in the crowd was impressed by the miracles and signs. Luke tells us, “Some...made fun of them and said, ‘They have had too much wine’” (2:13). So Peter began his speech to the astonished Jews by insisting that the disciples weren’t drunk. It was 9:00 a.m., too early to be drinking, and much too early to be drunk. Those speaking in languages were not filled with wine, but with the Holy Spirit.

Peter’s speech (2:17-39)

Peter explained what the events really meant. His speech takes up much of the remainder of this chapter. He made a powerful and courageous witness to Christ as the promised Messiah. Just a few weeks earlier, this same Peter had denied his Savior with oaths and curses (Matthew 26:72, 74). “Woman, I don’t know him,” Peter had insisted to a servant girl who recognized him as a disciple (Luke 22:57). Yet now, Peter was the first to shout aloud that he not only knew this man, he was a witness to all that Jesus had said and done. The Holy Spirit had breathed new courage into a once disheartened and discouraged disciple (Luke 24:21).

Peter presents evidence that Jesus is the promised Messiah. He includes references to the Hebrew prophet Joel and a “father” of the nation, King David. In this context, devout Jews would have carefully listened to what Peter had to say about them. Peter appeals to the Hebrew Scriptures as the word of God. He insists that this Pentecost event is a fulfillment of prophecy. Peter also asserts that Jesus is referred to in the Hebrew Scriptures that spoke of a coming Messiah.

Peter also appeals to the audience’s own experience. If these Jews had been in Jerusalem since before Passover – and especially if they lived in the city – they would have known of Jesus’ miraculous works, and especially the circumstances surrounding his death. Finally, Peter appeals to himself and the other apostles as being qualified to give eyewitness testimony of Jesus’

resurrection. After this, Peter exhorted the Jews to repent, literally, to have a change of mind, by accepting Jesus as the promised Messiah.

This was the apostolic message in its most basic form. It was composed of six themes, which are found repeatedly in Peter's sermons in the first chapters of Acts:

- The age of fulfillment prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures has come to pass. The kingdom of God is imminent, indeed, is here.
- The ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus has made all this possible, and is proved from the Scriptures.
- As a result of his exaltation, Christ is at God's right hand, as the messianic head of a spiritual Israel.
- The sign of Christ's power and guidance is the presence of the Holy Spirit in that new congregation or church of Israel.
- The consummation of the messianic age is imminent, and will be brought about by Christ's return.
- The proper response to this information is repentance and baptism. God forgives sins, gives the Holy Spirit, and makes salvation possible.

Peter's speeches in Acts were styled and shaped by Luke, who was writing in accordance with the standards of historical writing in his day. But Luke did not invent the speeches out of his own imagination – they reflect the basic elements of the gospel message that Peter and the other apostles and evangelists carried far and wide. What we have in Acts 2 is only a brief synopsis of what must have been said by Peter during this occasion. Even Luke tells us that Peter warned the crowd “with many other words,” words Luke has not given us (2:40).

The prophecy of Joel (2:16-18)

As we look carefully at Peter's speech, we are surprised at what it says. The first thing we notice is that Luke has used the Septuagint version of the Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament in quoting Joel 2:28-32. The Septuagint was a Greek translation that Jewish scholars created in the 3rd century B.C. for the many Jews who could not understand Hebrew. This version (from the Latin, *septuaginta*, which means 70) is commonly referred to by the Roman numerals for 70, LXX. The number derives from a story that 70 or 72 Jewish scholars did all the work.

The Septuagint is important for several reasons. Rather than any Hebrew version, it was the Bible of the early church.

It was not secondary to any other scripture; it was Scripture. When

a New Testament writer allegedly urged his audience to consider that all scripture given by divine “inspiration” is also profitable for doctrine, it was to the LXX not the Hebrew that attention was being called. [Melvin K.H. Peters, “Septuagint,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, volume 5 (ed. David Noel Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992; now published by Yale University Press), 1102.]

This is clear from Peter’s citation of the prophet Joel (2:17-21), which agrees in most details with the LXX. However, there are some alterations in the text, and these show us something important about how the church used and regarded the Old Testament. The LXX of Joel 2:28 reads, “It shall come to pass *afterward*, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh.” The Greek of the LXX is *meta tauta*, or the indefinite “after these things.” However, in Acts the Greek expression has been changed to *en tais eschatais hemeraiis*, which means the very specific “in the last days.” Thus, Peter (and/or Luke) has grounded the event of Pentecost at a specific time in history – as part of the end times or last days of God’s redemptive program. The indefinite feel of the old has been made more specific in the new.

For the New Testament writers, the “last days” began with Christ’s appearance on earth and would end with the events of his reappearance and the consummation. Peter clearly regarded Joel’s prophecy as applying to the last days, and he claimed that his hearers were living in those days, when God’s final act of salvation had begun. He was saying to the Jews, in the words of William Barclay, “For generations you have dreamed of the Day of God, the Day when God would break into history. Now, in Jesus, that Day has come.” [Barclay, 25.]

When Peter spoke these words, he probably didn’t realize how many years would pass between Christ’s two appearances. Not until decades later did the passage of time force the apostles and the church to deal with the question of how long it would be (2 Peter 3:3-9; Revelation 6:9-11). When Luke wrote, the question of when Christ would return may have been a major issue. Even near the end of his life, Peter thought, “The end of all things is near” (1 Peter 4:7). The book of 2 Peter had to defend the promise of Jesus’ return because so many decades had elapsed since the resurrection without his reappearance (2 Peter 3:3-10).

The first part of Joel’s prophecy that Peter quoted bore directly on the events of Pentecost. Joel had spoken of a time when God said, “I will pour out my Spirit on all people” (2:17). This had happened at Pentecost. The Age of the Spirit had begun.

Wonders in heaven (2:19-20)

In verses 19 and 20 Peter quoted parts of Joel’s prophecy that spoke of the heavenly signs that would accompany the pouring out of God’s Spirit. These signs were to occur “before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord” (2:20). In Peter’s mind all the events between Jesus’ earthly ministry and return were telescoped into a short time. We can infer from other information in the New Testament that he regarded the heavenly wonders to be just around the corner. The darkening of the sun (and perhaps a red moon) on the Passover of Jesus’ death may have reverberated in Peter’s mind (Luke 23:44). Perhaps he (and others) considered those events as harbingers of what Joel spoke about – the coming of the day of the Lord.

Jesus is the Messiah (2:21-24)

With a tone of urgency, Peter ended Joel’s prophecy by asserting that this is a time to recognize the Messiah, and put one’s faith in him. Everyone who would be willing to do so, said Joel, would be saved (2:21).

Up to this point, Peter has argued that the Jews should recognize the miraculous phenomena as manifestations of the Spirit, signaling an end-time age of the Spirit. Peter says that Joel’s prophecy applies to his day, but he has not yet offered an extended argument that Jesus is the Messiah. But now Peter begins to insist that the ministry of Jesus validated him as the Messiah. He addresses his listeners as people of Israel – as those who claim to be God’s people. If they are God’s people, Peter is saying, they will recognize the work of Jesus as having been described in their Scriptures.

We have arrived at Peter’s main theme, the chief focus of the church’s witness: the proclamation of Jesus as Lord and Messiah. In the speeches of Acts, this is usually done by the witness (such as Peter) giving an account of the ministry and death of Jesus. There is usually an assertion that he was unjustly murdered, and he has been raised from the dead. The Old Testament is usually cited to show that what happened to Jesus was what the Scriptures said would happen to the Messiah.

Here Peter insists that Jesus “was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs” (2:22). These mighty works were evidence that God was working through Jesus among the people. This line of reasoning continues to be an important part of the witness to Jesus as the Messiah.

Peter maintains that what might have appeared to be the weakness of God – Jesus’ crucifixion – took place according to “God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge” (2:23). In Paul’s words, what people might have regarded as weakness turned out to be “the power of God that brings salvation to

everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). Peter explains to his listeners that in putting Jesus to death, the Jews actually fulfilled God’s plan. The sufferings and resurrection of Jesus were foretold in the prophetic writings.

The Messiah in Psalm 16 (2:25-33)

Peter then quotes a psalm of David as a proof-text that the Messiah’s resurrection was foretold in Scripture. Peter is building his case on a number of widely shared beliefs. The Jews believed that the psalms were written by David. They saw David as God’s “anointed” king. They saw that God had promised what appeared to be an eternal kingship to David through his descendants. Thus, what was said in the Psalms by David could refer to him or to his descendants – and one descendant in particular, the Messiah. Peter’s citation of Psalm 16:8-11 was an exact quote from the LXX (where it is Psalm 15). But he read it messianically, referring to Christ rather than to David.

Psalm 16 speaks of one who will not “see decay” nor be abandoned to the grave (2:27). This person is always in the presence of God (2:25, 28). Peter asserts that these statements could not apply to David. He stresses what all his listeners knew – that David was dead and buried. His tomb, a landmark in the area, could be seen and touched (2:29). David died (was abandoned to the grave) and his body decomposed. Psalm 16:8-11 must therefore apply to the messianic *successor* of David, not David himself. But since David was a prophet, it should not be considered a strange thing that he could foresee the future (2:30). [Luke repeatedly notes that the author of the Psalms is a prophet. See Luke 20:41-42; 24:44; Acts 1:16, 20; 4:25; 13:33-36.]

Peter argued that David’s prophetic words were fulfilled in Jesus, and the apostles were witnesses of that fact. The conclusion was obvious: Jesus is the expected Messiah of Scripture (2:32-33). Peter then referred to what the listeners “now see and hear” – that is, the theophany of Pentecost exhibited in the wind, the fire, and the languages (2:33). What they saw and heard was “proof” that the Holy Spirit was available.

Messianic Psalm 110 (2:34-36)

Peter cited a second proof-text, Psalm 110:1, quoted from the Greek version, where it is Psalm 109. “The Lord said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’” (2:34-35). This verse was difficult to understand. Its explanation depended on how one understood who “my Lord” was, the one to whom “the Lord” promised a place at his right hand. This scripture from Psalm 110 had figured in a controversy between Jesus and the Sadducees (Luke 20:41-44). The proper identification of the “Lords” was the key to the text.

Possibly this psalm originally referred to one of the kings of David's line, perhaps at his enthronement. In that context, "the Lord" would be Yahweh, and "my lord" is the king. The promise to make this king's enemies his footstool would be a promise of divine favor for a successful reign. But Jesus, as we know from all three Synoptic Gospels, interpreted Psalm 110:1 in a messianic sense, as applying to himself (Mark 12:35-37). Jesus probably used the Psalm to refute narrow views of the Messiah, that he would be only a human king of David's line.

Following Jesus, Peter insisted that the "Lord" to whom the invitation was addressed (to sit at his right hand) was the Messiah. David did not figure in the account at all, in its messianic sense. After all, he did not ascend to heaven to sit at God's right hand. Peter stressed that what was in view was the unique son of David, Jesus. The text spoke of a heavenly enthronement, not one on earth. Indeed, Jesus had predicted to the Jewish leaders, "The Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God" (Luke 22:69).

Peter had already asserted that David could not have been speaking about himself, for he died, was buried and suffered decay. Nor was there any evidence that he had ascended to heaven (2:34). What David did know was that God had promised to put one of his descendants on the throne (2:30). The descendant about whom David must have been prophesying was the risen and resurrected Christ. Peter's conclusion is: The Messiah is addressed by God as David's Lord and invited to sit at God's right hand.

The New Testament writers often used Psalm 110:1 to say that Jesus was exalted to "the right hand of God." [Matthew 22:44; 26:64; Mark 12:36; 14:62; 16:19; Romans 8:34; 1 Corinthians 15:25; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:22; 1 Peter 3:22.] The New Testament quotes this verse more often than any other Old Testament verse.

In his speech, Peter uses four points to argue that Jesus is the Messiah:

- His personal witness,
- The miraculous events of Pentecost,
- Information about Jesus that the audience had, and,
- Scriptural proof texts.

Peter concludes the body of his speech with the point he made throughout the speech: Jesus is Lord and Messiah (2:36). This became an oft-repeated apostolic creed. [Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3; Philippians 2:11.]

The call to repent (2:37-38)

Many of Peter's listeners had a deep emotional reaction. The responsive Jewish listeners were "cut to the heart" (2:37). The enormity of what had

happened crashed into their consciousness. The man they had spit on and crucified was their Messiah, and he was now sitting in power at God's right hand. Moved by the Holy Spirit and their own participation in the persecution and death of Jesus, they were humbled and teachable. It was natural for them to ask, in wonderment and trepidation: "What shall we do?" (2:37).

Peter's reply is the point the entire account in Acts 2 moves toward: "Repent and be baptized...for the forgiveness of your sins" (2:38). His speech and stir-to-action conclusion fulfills Jesus' prophecy in the last chapter of Luke. There, Jesus had promised: "repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). Now, repentance had been taught in his name.

The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*. It appears frequently in the New Testament as a way to describe conversion. Repentance is a central focus in Acts. [Acts 3:19; 5:31; 8:22; 11:18; 13:24; 17:30; 19:4; 20:21; 26:20.] It literally means a change of mind, a change of heart, a spiritual about-face in one's life that will be shown by a change in what one does. That change occurs in relationship to the true God. Repentance is not just a feeling of remorse, or a once-in-a-lifetime emotional experience. Nor is it simply a change in behavior. It is a change of mind that leads to a change of behavior. It is a turning away from a life lived in contradiction to God and a turning to him in faith. The aim of repentance is that we should accept what God has intended for us.

Repentance and conversion have a "from" and "to" movement. One goes *from* an old way of thinking in which God is denied, ignored, resented, or viewed as harsh. One goes *to* a new life based on loyalty *to* and faith in the Creator who wants to save us rather than punish us. To repent is to be "turned around," remolded and transformed – converted. It involves a faith relationship with Jesus Christ.

At the beginning of the New Testament church we find something unexpected being taught about repentance. In his first public sermon, Peter poses repentance and conversion – turning to God – in a surprising way. Peter *does not tell* these Jews that they had to change their lives in terms of obeying the Law or Torah. The people listening to Peter are described as "God-fearing Jews" who already worshiped and obeyed God (2:5; 5:9). They are presented as blameless in keeping the laws. These Jews did not need to repent of what we commonly think of as law-breaking. As devout Jews, they had been careful to keep the law.

Then to what is Peter referring when he tells these people to repent? Peter

tells them to repent by asking them to enter a new relationship with Jesus as their resurrected Savior. The context makes Peter's purpose clear. He begins by pointing the people to Jesus, whom they had rejected and their leaders had killed (2:22). Throughout the sermon, Peter hammers away at a single point: Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior, and people must put their faith in him. This turning to Jesus in faith is summarized as a simple charge: "Repent and be baptized" (2:38).

What are these Jews to repent of? It is their *rejection of Jesus as Messiah and Savior!* In the context of Peter's sermon, "to repent" means to *change one's mind about Jesus* – to experience him – to accept him as Savior – to place total faith in him. For these Jews, repentance and conversion did not necessarily involve a change of worship practices. In fact, Jewish followers of Jesus continued to worship at synagogue and temple – and they maintained their ancestral traditions. But it did require a new faith toward God and his Messiah.

Repentance and faith are two aspects of the same change of orientation that occurs in converted humans. As we're told in Acts 20:21, through the words of Paul, one "must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus." While we are commanded by God to repent (17:30), to have our sins forgiven (2:38), and to have faith – humanly speaking, we are incapable of doing any of these things. These are all gifts of God that are bestowed on us through Jesus Christ our Savior. Ultimately, faith and repentance and forgiveness are also gifts of God. [Ephesians 2:8; Acts 5:31; 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25.]

The need for baptism (2:38)

Peter also speaks of an important act that is associated with receiving the empowering Holy Spirit. That was water baptism, which is an external token of belief in Jesus as Savior. Peter urges his audience to be baptized, and he promises them the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:38). Throughout Acts, when people express faith in Jesus, they are then baptized.

Baptism in water continued to be the visible sign by which those who believed the gospel, repented of their sins, and acknowledged Jesus as Lord were publicly incorporated into the Spirit-baptized fellowship of the new people of God. [Bruce, 70.]

The Jews were already familiar with baptism as a ritual required for people who wanted to have their sins forgiven. John the Baptist baptized people who repented (Matthew 3:6, 11; Luke 3:7, 16). Even Jesus insisted on being baptized (Matthew 3:15). But, beginning at Pentecost, there are two new features about baptism. First, it is administered in Jesus' name. It requires

faith in Jesus as Savior. Second, it is associated with the Holy Spirit.

However, Acts does not demonstrate a clear-cut sequence of, 1. Water baptism, 2. Laying on of hands, 3. Spirit baptism – as if baptism itself (and laying on of hands) had some inherent spiritual power as actions with guaranteed results. Baptism is not magic, but a formal and symbolic statement of one’s intentions – an outward rite. Luke seems to go out of his way to show that there is no formula or fixed sequence of acts involved in receiving the Spirit. Cornelius and his family received the Spirit *before* they were baptized (10:44-48). Some disciples of John the Baptist who had been baptized still had not received the Holy Spirit, perhaps years later (19:1-7). Not until Paul laid his hands on these individuals, did they receive the Spirit. And in the baptism of 3,000 people described in Acts 2, Luke did not mention any “laying on of hands.”

Luke does not give us a clear-cut pattern of how and when the Spirit is given. However, baptism and receiving the Holy Spirit *are* associated together. What we see is that water baptism is an important ritual in which the individual makes public a confession in Jesus. The laying on of hands signals the acceptance of that individual by the community of believers.

In the name of Jesus (2:38-39)

Believers should be baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ” (2:38). The “name” refers not to a special pronunciation of consonants and vowels, but to Jesus himself – his person, his power and his presence. This phrase “in the name of Jesus” recurs throughout Acts in many circumstances. It denotes the power and authority through which the church carries out its activities. [See Acts 3:6, 16; 4:10, 12, 17-18, 30; 5:28, 40-41; 8:12; 9:16, 21, 27, 28; 15:26; 16:18; 19:13, 17; 21:13; 22:16; 26:9.]

In baptism, it was customary to make an outward confession of Jesus as Lord and Savior. [Acts 8:37; 11:17; 16:31; Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3; Philippians 2:11.] The phrase “in the name of Jesus” is an expression of faith, as well as a commitment to Jesus, in all that this might entail. The desire to repent and commit, along with willingness to make a public statement of both through baptism, is associated with a person experiencing the gift of the Holy Spirit.

We should distinguish the gift of the Spirit from the *gifts* of the Spirit. Gifts of the Spirit are various spiritual abilities given to people in the church, to be used for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:1-11). The *gift* of the Holy Spirit, however, is the Spirit himself, given to all who have faith in Jesus. This Spirit ministers all aspects of God’s salvation to all believers. By this gift, all are Spirit-baptized into one body, the church (verse 13).

In all cases, this baptism is dependent on God’s will – “all whom the Lord our God will call” (2:39). Luke indicates that any conversions that occur are not the result of human programs or energy. They depend on the calling of God, as Jesus had stated (John 6:44).

“Be saved” (2:40-41)

Peter’s speech ends with the wonderful promise that his listeners would receive God’s Spirit and become part of the people of God. Luke summarizes Peter’s plea with a sentence: “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation” (2:40). Peter’s phrase is actually in the passive tense, “be saved,” but most English translations obscure this important fact. We cannot “save ourselves,” whether by repentance or any other action. Salvation is an act of God, not something we can do on our own. Grammarians call this “the divine passive,” with God understood to be the one doing the work. A better translation is, “Let God save you from this corrupt generation.” He does the work, if we do not reject his call.

The thought of verse 40 (“be saved”) picks up the sense of Joel’s prophecy mentioned in verse 21: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” Peter is not telling his listeners to “do” something, except to respond to what God has already done. He is telling them to take advantage of the promise offered to them by accepting Jesus as the promised Messiah. They were to “be saved” from a corrupt generation in Jerusalem and Judea by becoming part of a remnant people accepted by God.

Eternal salvation was the main issue, but those who accepted Peter’s call to repent could also be “saved” (if they lived long enough) from the nation’s terrible future. Jerusalem and Judea were heading toward the destructive Jewish-Roman war of 66-70 A.D. Those who had faith in Jesus could escape what was coming upon the nation (Luke 21:20-24, with Matthew 24:15-18; Mark 13:14-16).

About 3,000 people accepted Peter’s challenge to be baptized that Pentecost day. (We don’t know how many refused and mocked.) From this single apostolic sermon on one day, more people became disciples of Jesus than during the entire time of Jesus’ public ministry. The promise of Jesus, that his disciples would perform greater works than he had, was true (John 14:12).

Fellowship of believers (2:42-43)

Luke next describes the communal life of the first Jewish converts in Jerusalem: They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, were in fellowship with each other, ate together, and prayed (2:42). Let’s examine

briefly each of these characteristics.

The disciples devoted themselves to the “apostles’ teaching.” The apostles had no particular credentials as teachers in terms of being recognized religious authorities. None of the apostles had any formal religious training. They had been fishermen, tax collectors and ordinary citizens. Yet, it was clear to the believers that the apostles had come in the power and authority of Jesus. They had the experience of being with Jesus and being taught by him directly. For these reasons, the new converts were careful to listen to and put into practice the apostles’ teachings.

The believers devoted themselves to “fellowship.” The use of the definite article in Greek, “the fellowship,” implies that the account has reference to some type of specific gathering. While Jesus must have been the focus of these meetings, the Jerusalem disciples no doubt maintained something of the flavor of their Jewish roots.

The believers in Jerusalem were devoted to prayer (2:42). Once again, the definite article and the plural (“the prayers”) suggest that Luke is referring to specific prayers or times of prayer. The apostles attended Jewish prayer services in the temple (3:1) and the converts met in the temple (2:46). It wouldn’t be surprising if their prayers followed Jewish models, although the content would be different because such prayers would often concern Jesus and be offered in his name. Prayer is a regular feature of Luke’s narrative. [See the following examples: Acts 1:14, 24; 2:42; 4:24-31; 6:4, 6; 9:40; 10:2, 4, 9, 31; 11:5; 12:5; 13:3; 14:23; 16:25; 22:17; 28:8.]

Breaking of bread

The other activity the disciples devoted themselves to was “the breaking of bread” (2:42). There has been much controversy about what Luke had in mind here. Some commentators interpret the “breaking of bread” as nothing more than an ordinary meal. Others see the disciples as engaging in a Jewish fellowship meal. This is a reasonable deduction, since these believers were Jews and would have adapted customs natural to them. All meals had religious significance for Jews. Meals began with a prayer of thanksgiving and included a ceremonial breaking of bread. It’s reasonable to suppose that these Jews, now following Jesus, would have continued and extended the meaning of their communal meal.

The apostles would have taught these disciples that Jesus broke bread and gave thanks at meals. More specifically, Jesus’ breaking of the bread at the last supper would have taken on great significance (Luke 24:35). Some biblical scholars therefore see this as the first love or agape feast (Jude 12).

Some call the reference to the breaking of bread the beginning of the regular observance of the Lord's Supper. They point to the use of the definite article in "the bread" as an indication that a particular meal was in view here.

When Luke uses the expression "the breaking of bread" he sometimes means the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19). But on other occasions "the breaking of bread" seems to refer to an ordinary meal. [Luke 24:30, 35; Acts 20:11; 27:35.] There is logic in seeing this communal "breaking of bread" as a meal that had religious significance in terms of its connection to Jesus. Luke emphasized the association between meals and Jesus' presence in his Gospel (Luke 24:41-42; Acts 1:4; 10:41).

William Willimon perhaps gives us the best way to view this controversial topic of "the breaking of the bread":

The gathering of the fellowship at the table is another tangible, visible expression of the work of the Spirit among the new community. Go through the Gospel of Luke and note all occasions when "he was at table with them." Each dinner-time episode in Luke is a time of fellowship, revelation, and controversy. . . . Eating together is a mark of unity, solidarity, and deep friendship, a visible sign that social barriers which once plagued these people have broken down. Whether this "breaking of bread" is a reference to our Eucharist or Lord's Supper is a matter of debate. Probably, Peter's church of Luke's day would not know our distinction between the church *merely* breaking bread and the church breaking bread as a sacramental religious activity. In good Jewish fashion, when the blessing is said at the table, the table becomes a holy place and eating together a sacred activity. . . . Perhaps every meal for the church was experienced as an anticipation of the Messianic banquet, a foretaste of Jesus' promise that his followers would "eat and drink at my table in my kingdom" (Luke 22:30). [Willimon, 41.]

All things in common (2:44-45)

Luke next describes how the community of believers in Jerusalem "had everything in common" (2:44). He gives more details in 4:32-5:11, and it will be discussed more when we reach that section. Suffice it to say here that the statement has led to some misleading views of what Christian communities should be like. Luke was not telling us that the church should practice "Christian communism." Luke was describing a voluntary sharing of some possessions, on an as-needed basis (2:45). This will become clear as we study this and other passages related to the issue. Having "everything in common"

was an ideal practiced by this close-knit church in this one city, under extraordinary times. Acts is history, not law. It is not presenting us with a practice that should be normalized for the church as a whole.

We should not assume that all of the Jerusalem Christians were required to sell all of their goods and pool their resources. For one thing, the selling of goods is done voluntarily – otherwise the generous gift of Barnabas (4:36-37) would not be worthy of note. In addition, Luke depicts the selling of possessions to meet community needs an ongoing process rather than as a one-time total divestment. He envisions a community where everyone is concerned about everyone else and willing to part with their possessions on behalf of others when the need requires. The ideal *is* repeated in Acts, on an even grander scale. When a famine spreads throughout the world and Palestine is hit especially hard, the church in Antioch of Syria makes provisions to help its suffering neighbors in Jerusalem (11:27-30). [Mark Allan Powell, *What Are They Saying About Acts?* (New York: Paulist, 1991), page 78.]

The Greek phrase Luke used here, *apanta koina* (“everything in common”) may allude to the Hellenistic idea that “friends hold all things in common.” The phrase was widely used as a feature of utopian or ideal societies. [Plato, *Republic* 449C.]

Luke wrote to Theophilus, who was probably a thoroughly Hellenized Roman. To such a person, Luke would have been saying that the Holy Spirit had made possible a reality that approached the highest and most ideal aspirations of the philosophers. At the same time, this group of Christians “who had everything in common” matched the idealism of Jewish communal groups. The Essenes, for example, practiced a form of communal ownership of property and goods. [Philo, *Every Good Man is Free* 12.75, 85-87.]

The Jerusalem disciples, living a quasi-communal lifestyle, also strove to fulfill the promise of Moses. Israel had been promised that if the nation obeyed God, there would be no poor, because he would bless them (Deuteronomy 15:4-5). As the “righteous remnant” in Christ, these Jewish disciples may have wanted to see this condition of life fulfilled within their group. What we have then is an idealistic group of Jewish Christians attempting to live an ideal life of sharing and giving. But it was not quite what it seemed, as we shall see later. Nor was it a lifestyle mandated for all Christians in all places at all times. Even as an ideal in this one place, it faltered and led to controversy (5:1-11; 6:1-6; 11:29), something we will take up in later chapters.

In the temple courts (2:46)

This group of enthusiastic Jerusalem Christians met in the temple courts every day (2:46; see also 3:11 and 5:12). By telling us about this, Luke is showing that they continued to follow their accustomed forms of Jewish worship. The part of the temple area they met in was Solomon's colonnade, on the east side of the outer court.

As Jews who were Christians and also Christians who were Jews, they not only considered Jerusalem to be their city but continued to regard the temple as their sanctuary and the Law as their law. Evidently they thought of themselves as the faithful remnant within Israel for whose sake all the institutions and customs of the nation existed. [Longenecker, 291.]

At the same time, "they broke bread in their homes and ate together" (2:46). The converts seemed to spend a good deal of time each day in social interaction. Those who live frenetic lives in modern Western society can only wonder at how they found time to fellowship so frequently. The fact that they ate in *each other's homes* indicates that these disciples did not sell everything they owned and give all the proceeds to a communal pool. They still owned their own homes.

The original group of 3,000 increased each day as "the Lord added to their number" those who were being saved (2:47). God's calling is instrumental in bringing people to Christ, and Luke was careful to point this out. He maintained this viewpoint on conversion throughout Acts (2:39, 47; 5:14; 11:24). The church today, in all its evangelistic and discipling programs, should remember this.

ACTS 3: THE JERUSALEM MINISTRY OF PETER AND JOHN (ACTS 3:1-4:22)

HEALING AND PERSECUTION

Peter and John (3:1)

Acts 3 describes the dramatic healing of a beggar. How soon after Pentecost this occurred is not clear. Days, weeks or months may have elapsed. The story begins with the indefinite, “One day...” This chapter describes the preaching of the gospel in Jerusalem (specifically, at the temple) by Peter and John, two of the church’s leaders. What Luke wrote is important because it shows us how the apostles preached the gospel.

Luke began his story by referring to John (presumably the son of Zebedee) as teaching alongside Peter. We do not know why Luke mentioned him, for he had no active role in Luke’s story. John was the silent partner in this story, as well as on one other occasion where his name appeared (8:14-17). Some scholars suggest that Luke referred to two apostles witnessing together for “legal” purposes, following the biblical pattern that two witnesses were needed to establish a matter. [Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; Matthew 18:15; 1 Timothy 5:19.]

We are not sure why Luke included John, or why he left out the others. But his stress on Peter is clear. Luke’s account is, in some ways, a “Tale of Two Apostles” – the acts of Peter, and then those of Paul. (Of course, the real “actor” is the Holy Spirit, who guides the church and its preaching.)

Praying in the temple (3:1)

In chapter 3, Luke described Peter and John going to the temple for a formal prayer time. It was the ninth hour of the day, about 3:00 p.m. Devout Jews observed three times of prayer at the temple – at 9:00 a.m., at noon, and at 3:00 p.m. The special feature of the first and last prayer time was the offering of the morning and evening sacrifices (Exodus 29:38-42; Numbers 28:1-8). The Jewish historian Josephus gives an example of how important these daily sacrifices were for the Jews. They continued to be offered even when food was scarce when the Romans besieged the city during the Jewish War of A.D. 66-70. [Josephus, *Antiquities* 14:65.]

The fact that the apostles went to the temple to pray at these times indicates that they were continuing to follow Jewish forms of worship and Jewish customs. The apostles remained at the heart of Jewish national life, where they could reach people with the gospel message.

Crippled beggar (3:2-6)

“Many wonders and miraculous signs [were] performed by the apostles” (Acts 2:43). The healing of the beggar was a striking exhibit of this apostolic power. A man crippled from his birth, a beggar, regularly asked for charity at the temple gate called Beautiful. Scholars are not sure which gate this was, as neither the Talmud nor Josephus mention a “Beautiful Gate.”

Among Jews of the time, almsgiving was considered an act that gained a person religious merit. Giving to the poor was emphasized in the rabbinic tradition and in Jewish writings such as the book of Tobit (4:7-11; 12:8-9). In line with this tradition, Jews coming to the temple would often give people a coin or two. Beggars stationed themselves in strategic positions to receive some of these alms.

So, as Peter and John approached the gate, this beggar asked them for money. But Peter spoke to him, saying, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk” (3:6). Peter didn’t mean he had absolutely no money – as though he didn’t have access to a single coin. Rather, he was stressing the much greater value of God’s healing.

Peter was also making a statement about the role of the messianic community in the world. Its main mission was to enable humans to partake of the *spiritual* gifts God gives. “A crippled man asks for alms but the community which holds all goods in common has little silver or gold to offer him. Temporary modest financial gain and charitable handouts are not what this community is primarily about.” [Willimon, 44.]

We shouldn’t assume that it is useless to give financial help to the poor and needy. The church can make available the knowledge of spiritual salvation *and* provide material help where possible and appropriate.

Healing in Jesus’ name (3:6-11)

When Peter offered the beggar healing in Jesus’ name, he was instantly made whole and he jumped to his feet. Think of the impact this had on any Jews who saw what had happened. There was no denying that a miracle had occurred. This man had been born lame. No doubt he had begged at the gate for many years and was a known figure. Now, he was up and jumping about.

To emphasize how dramatic this healing was, Luke piled detail upon detail of the beggar’s condition and activity upon being healed. The man’s feet and ankles became strong (3:7). Then he jumped to his feet and began to walk (3:8). Next, the beggar went into the temple, walking and jumping, praising God (3:8-9). (No doubt, there was much about the story to excite Luke, a

physician.)

The beggar had been healed at Peter's initiative, who invoked the name of Jesus. The power of the risen Christ was with him, and when he called on "the name," God healed the man. Luke used the phrase, "the name of Jesus" several times in this and the next chapter to show the source of the apostles' power (3:6, 16, 4:10, 18, 30). Luke used this story to show an important connection between Jesus and the apostles: because the apostles teach in Jesus' name, they also have the same power to heal as he did. That they continued the teaching ministry of Jesus is evidence that they continued the healing ministry as well. The same power was at work.

This point can be seen in the similar words used to describe Peter's healing and when Jesus healed a paralyzed man in Capernaum. [Matthew 9:2-8; Mark 2:3-12; Luke 5:17-26.] There, as here in Acts, the paralyzed man was told to rise, and he jumped to his feet and went home praising God. Everyone who had seen the miracle was amazed and filled with awe (Luke 5:26). In the same way, the people who saw the beggar healed and praising God, were filled with wonder and amazement (Acts 3:10).

The Capernaum miracle gave Jesus public confirmation of his authority to forgive sins as well as to heal the sick. When the apostles healed the lame beggar at the temple gate, they were seen as having the same spiritual authority and power as Jesus. Those who had seen the healing of the beggar – and who had spiritual eyes to see – understood that something of the kingdom of God was being revealed. Isaiah had spoken of the messianic age when "the lame [will] leap like a deer" (Isaiah 35:6). Those at the Beautiful gate had seen the prophecy come to pass.

Peter's sermon (3:12-26)

The healing of the beggar created a commotion as people rushed to Peter and John in Solomon's Colonnade (3:11). The outer court of the temple, called the Court of the Gentiles, was surrounded by porticoes. Solomon's Colonnade ran along the eastern portion of the outer court. The colonnades or porticos were busy places. Religious teachers debated, and taught their pupils in its shade (Luke 2:46; 19:47; John 10:23). Merchants and money changers conducted business there (Luke 19:45; John 2:14-16). The early church met and taught there (2:46; 5:12; 42).

As the crowd converged on Solomon's Colonnade, Peter had an opportunity to preach the gospel. Luke recounted his words in what turned out to be another major presentation of the gospel, similar in content and style to Peter's Pentecost sermon (2:14-41). Both sermons focused on the

proclamation of Jesus Christ as Savior. Here, Peter stressed the role of Jesus as both Isaiah's Suffering Servant and Moses' "prophet to come" whom Israel was to obey.

The particular interest of this sermon lies in the way in which it gives further teaching about the person of Jesus, describing him as God's servant, the Holy and Righteous One, the Author of life and the prophet like Moses. This indicates that a considerable amount of thinking about Jesus, based on study of the Old Testament, was taking place. [I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), page 90.]

In this speech, Peter stressed the Jews' rejection of Jesus and his vindication by God. Peter again called for repentance in terms of accepting Jesus as Messiah. At the heart of the speech was the important point that a new reality had entered the world. The presence of the Spirit of God, through the name of Jesus, was beginning to work in new and powerful ways in the lives of ordinary human beings. Luke probably intended his report of Peter's sermon here and at Pentecost to be examples of how the faith was typically proclaimed to Jews, both as to content and approach.

God of Abraham (3:12-13)

With the healed beggar still holding him, Peter began speaking to the crowd. The first matter he dealt with was the surprise of the onlookers. It was essential that they understood by whose power this healed beggar was standing. The healing was caused by the power of Jesus, the one whom God had chosen and glorified (3:13). To place this event within the context of the Jews' belief system, Peter referred to God as "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers" (3:13).

By beginning his speech with the greeting, "Fellow Israelites," and referring to God in the way he did, Peter was attempting to speak from the Jews' point of view. He was also making an important point about Jesus. This man whom they ignorantly crucified was intimately associated with God and the fathers of the nation in an important way.

To say that God was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was to refer to a time-honored way by which Jews spoke of God. Indeed, God had introduced himself to Moses at the burning bush as the God of the fathers (Exodus 3:6, 15; 4:5). It underscored the Jewish nation's self-identification as the people of God from ancient times. This formulaic way of speaking about God was seen throughout the Old Testament, and emphasized Israel as a sanctified nation (1 Kings 18:36; 1 Chronicles 29:18). By New Testament

times the phrase “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” connected the glory of ancient Israel to the Jews’ concept of themselves as God’s remnant people (Mark 12:26; Acts 7:32).

“God’s Servant” (3:13)

Peter called Jesus “God’s servant,” echoing the theme of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant (Isaiah 42-53). The most direct part of that prophecy in Isaiah began with the words, “My servant...will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted” (52:13). Jesus’ title as “Servant” is only here (3:13, 26) and in one other place in Acts (4:27, 30). But the Servant Songs of Isaiah, especially the section 52:13-53:12, had a great influence on the New Testament. The New Testament contains a number of quotations from these songs. [Matthew 8:17; 12: 18-21; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; Acts 8:32; Romans 10:16; 15:21.] Allusions to “Servant” theology, as well as its influence, are also frequently seen. [Mark 10:45; 14:24; Luke 22:37; John 12:38; Acts 8:32; Romans 4:25; 5:19; 8:3, 32-34; 1 Corinthians 15:3; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 9:28; 1 Peter 2:21-25; 3:18.]

For the first Christians no Old Testament passage was more significant than Isaiah 52:13-53:12 (cf. Acts 8:32). In its words they saw not only the meaning of the Crucifixion as being within the plan of God, but also found there the foundation for a doctrine of Atonement through the death of Christ and a promise of Christ’s vindication beyond the Cross. [Neil, 85.]

They wanted Barabbas (3:13-14)

The Servant described by Isaiah had been handed over by the Jewish people to be killed by Pilate (Luke 23:1-25). Pilate, representing a pagan government, wanted to let Jesus go free. Luke set up Peter’s point by citing this fact in his Gospel. On three occasions, Luke mentioned Pilate wanting to release Jesus (Luke 23: 4, 16, 22), all against the clamor of God’s own people.

The Jews demanded that another prisoner, a murderer, should be released to them (3:14). This man, Barabbas, was identified by Luke as a rebel who had been imprisoned for rioting and murder (Luke 23:18-19, 25). So there was a bitter irony in Jesus’ crucifixion. A criminal was given freedom, but the man who wanted to bring the nation spiritual freedom was executed. Jesus’ death became a supreme travesty of humanity’s injustice and spiritual blindness. In contrast to the murderer Barabbas, Jesus was “the Holy and Righteous One” (verse 14). Both titles are used of Jesus in the New

Testament. [The “Holy One” is found in Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34 John 6:69; 1 John 2:20; Revelation 3:7 and the “Righteous One” is in Acts 7:52; 22:14; 1 John 2:1.]

God raised him up

Continuing with his sermon, Peter said his hearers had disowned Jesus and “killed the author of life.” But “God raised him from the dead” (3:15). The Greek word translated “author” has a range of meanings, including leader, founder, cause, originator, pioneer. Jesus is the *founder* of eternal life in the sense that he is its giver (John 10:28; 1 John 1:4). He is also the *leader* in that he has paved the way by being the first-born of many who will follow him in resurrection (Romans 8:29). Ultimately, Jesus is the source and perfecter of salvation, the *pioneer* who paved the way and accomplished the task (Hebrews 2:10; 5:9; 12:2).

By virtue of his resurrection, Jesus is the “firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20). Thus, Jesus is representative of the total harvest. His resurrection was the beginning of the entire episode. Jesus’ rising to life is part of the same event as the general resurrection of believers, though the two are separated in time.

We are witnesses (3:15-16)

In his sermon, Peter proclaimed that he and John were witnesses to Jesus’ resurrection. Peter then pointed to an example of God’s power to “raise up.” It was the crippled beggar standing right beside them (3:16). The one who was raised to eternal life, Jesus, had “completely healed” the beggar (3:16). Peter insisted that the cripple had been cured on the grounds of “faith in the name of Jesus” (3:16).

There is a question regarding the nature of the faith Peter referred to. According to Luke’s account, the beggar did not show any particular “faith.” He had simply asked Peter and John for money. The possibility of his being healed apparently didn’t enter his mind. Seemingly, God bestowed a gracious gift on the man through the two apostles, apart from any work of faith on his part. Once the beggar saw what happened to him, he believed not only in his healing but understood the *source* of his healing. It was God whom the beggar praised for his good fortune (3:8).

However, the beggar’s faith was expressed only *after* the miracle occurred. His healing was by grace – a totally unmerited gift – given to the man apart from his expressing any faith beforehand. If anything, it was Peter’s faith that made the healing possible. He had walked up to the beggar and said, “In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk” (3:6). There is another dimension of

faith that helps us understand what Peter meant when he said the beggar had been healed by faith. The believer's faith does not originate from within the person but comes from the gift that God provides (Romans 4:17; 11:29; Ephesians 1:18-20; 2 Timothy 1:9).

Acted in ignorance (3:17)

As Peter continued speaking, he softened his earlier, more strident rhetoric. Before, he accused his listeners of being murderers. On this occasion, he had a more conciliatory tone. Peter said, "I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders" (3:17). Peter had declared God's judgment on his compatriots for crucifying the One who had been designated Savior. Here, he stressed God's foreknowledge of what they would do to Jesus. The "killers" were merely God's instruments. In the spirit of Jesus, Peter offered God's mercy to them (Luke 23:34).

The mood has changed from devastating reproof to pleading conciliation. Peter was no longer interested in bringing an accusation against the Jews for their crime. Rather, he hoped his listeners would act on the hopeful message of salvation God was making available to his people Israel. Peter was being charitable to his listeners and their leaders. This is especially evident when we compare this with John's matter-of-fact condemnation of the people who were responsible for having Jesus crucified (John 9:41; 15:22).

It may be thought that Peter's words were surprisingly lenient to people like Caiaphas and the other chief priests, whose determination to have Jesus put to death is underscored in all the Gospels. Nevertheless, here is the proclamation of a divine amnesty, offering a free pardon to all who took part in Jesus' death, if only they acknowledge their error, confess their sin, and turn to God in repentance. [Bruce, 83.]

Sufferings foretold (3:18, 21)

Continuing his sermon, Peter mentioned a second mitigating factor regarding his listeners' guilt in the murder of Jesus. Not only did they act in ignorance (3:17), it had been foretold beforehand that Jesus had to suffer at their hands. God was guiding events so that the predictions about the Messiah suffering persecution and martyrdom would be carried out (3:18). God had willed the Servant's shameful crucifixion (3:21). The Messiah was to suffer and die. This was precisely why the vast majority of Jews would not accept Jesus as Messiah. Jesus of Nazareth had been executed as a common criminal. In the eyes of the Jews, he was under the curse of the Law

(Deuteronomy 21:33; Galatians 3:13). Thus, they reasoned, he could not have been their Messiah.

Peter was claiming that the reverse was true. It was only *because* Jesus was crucified that he qualified to be the Savior. He was saying that the witness of the prophets, when properly understood, focused on the Messiah's suffering. Of course, the Scriptures don't specifically say that it was the Messiah who would suffer. (*Messiah* is actually a rare word in the Old Testament.) Isaiah spoke of the Servant (not the Messiah) as the one who would suffer and die for the sins of others. It is not clear that the Jews understood the Servant and the Messiah to be one and the same. This perhaps was where faith entered. One had to accept Jesus' own claim that his messianic mission was fulfilled in terms of the Servant sufferer.

Nevertheless, Peter claimed that "all the prophets" contain promises of the Messiah's suffering (3:24). Today, we are unable to find references, literally, in *all* the prophets to a suffering Messiah. On the other hand, there are passages in several prophets and Psalms that could be taken to refer to a suffering Messiah. [Psalm 22, 69; Jeremiah 11:19; Zechariah 13:7; Daniel 9:26.] We can probably understand "all the prophets" in a collective sense. What is written down from one or a few prophets can be attributed to all of them as a class.

Repent and turn to God (3:19)

Throughout his sermon, Peter insisted that Jesus is Savior. He suffered according to God's plan and the prophets had foretold his suffering. The apostles had seen Jesus' death and resurrection. At least some of the audience would have heard Jesus teach and heal – and seen him die. Given these facts, Peter preached that only one reaction from the audience is appropriate. Luke summarized it in a sentence: "Repent...and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out" (3:19).

The meaning of "repent" here (as in Peter's first sermon) must be seen in context. He was speaking to devout Jews who prayed at the temple and kept the Law. For them, repentance was not so much turning away from a sin-filled life. In general, these Jews would have already been following the principles of a good life, based on the Law. What "repent" almost certainly wouldn't have meant to the Jews was their need to turn away from idols to serve God. Pagan Gentile converts would have to take this step, as they did in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 1:9) and Lystra (14:15). The Jews, however, abhorred idolatry, and they worshipped the one true God.

Nonetheless, Peter did speak here of repentance as a turning to God

(1:19). The reason is because all have sinned and come short of the glory of God – Jew and Gentile alike (Romans 3:23). All people must turn to God, even those who have understood and tried to follow the Holy Scriptures (Acts 26:20). To experience reconciliation with God, everyone needs forgiveness, repentance, and the Holy Spirit.

For this audience, “repentance” would mean turning to God by *accepting Jesus as Lord*, and as the Messiah whom God had chosen (9:35; 11:27). When people acknowledge the Savior, they acknowledge the *need* for being saved from a condition of sinfulness. Jesus had already paid for their sins, but they would not *experience* his forgiveness unless they turned to God (3:19).

Times of refreshing

Peter associated the forgiveness of sins with the “times of refreshing” to come (3:19). This is a unique phrase in the New Testament. It has generally been thought to refer to Jesus’ return at a time of general salvation (1:7). Jesus must remain in heaven until that time, that is, “until the time comes for God to restore everything” (3:21). Luke here used his characteristic word *dei* to show the compelling need for different aspects of God’s plan. *Dei* means “it is necessary.” Jesus *must* remain in heaven simply because that is what God has decreed as part of his purpose for humanity.

Peter associated this time of restoration with the future rebirth of Israel, as described in the Old Testament. In many Old Testament prophecies, this rebirth was placed in the context of the Messiah’s coming. In terms of a New Testament understanding, the restoration would occur at the “second coming” of the Messiah in the last days – and then “everything” would be restored.

In one sense, however, the time of renewal began with Jesus’ earthly ministry, and with John the Baptist. [Malachi 4:5; Mark 9:12-13; Matthew 11:7, 14; 17:11-13.] The kingdom of God was with human beings in the presence of the incarnate Jesus. Something of a “restoration” or rebirth is occurring in the world right now. This is the spiritual rebirth or conversion of people through the Holy Spirit, as they are brought into his body, the church. But the “restitution” or “refreshing” that Peter spoke about is something that occurs at Jesus’ return. This was announced by “his holy prophets.” Until this time, when all the enemies of God are overthrown, Jesus must remain in heaven – at God’s right hand, to use another metaphor (1 Corinthians 15:24-28).

Peter seemed to connect Jesus’ return (the refreshing) to his listeners’ repentance, as though one depends on the other (3:19). But this is trying to

force precision out of words that were not meant to provide a precise timetable or causal relationship. Some have suggested that if Christians fail to spread the message of salvation and people refuse to respond to the gospel, then God cannot send Jesus a second time. This would make humans, not God, sovereign. It presupposes that God cannot get his message to the world or accepted unless enough people are interesting in disseminating it – or responding to it.

The book of Revelation, written at the close of the apostolic era, takes a different viewpoint. It describes conditions of the end-time in apocalyptic format. This book insists that Jesus' return will occur even though the entire world is hostile to God. Indeed, Jesus' return will be necessary to eliminate this hostility, as well as the world's rejection of the gospel message. There is no bold talk in Revelation about the church spreading the gospel. Humans will not necessarily even be required to spread the message, for a supernatural messenger of God ("an angel") will preach the gospel to the world (Revelation 14:6-7). In short, God does not need humans; humans need God.

What Peter probably meant was that his listeners should repent so that the "times of refreshing" could come to *them*. They will experience this refreshing for themselves when they repent and sense the forgiveness and acceptance of God. When God will send Jesus a second time is a secret he alone holds. When he decrees it is time, Jesus will return and "restore everything" (3:21).

A prophet like Moses (3:22-23)

Peter continued to plead with his hearers to respond to his challenge and repent. He used another proof-text from the Hebrew Scriptures to show that the prophets spoke of a Messiah to come, whom Peter said is Jesus. This time Peter cited the words of Moses. They must hear *his* words about Jesus, Peter insists, because Moses, one of their fathers, said God would raise up a prophet like him and "you must listen to everything he tells you" (3:22). If that prophet was not heeded, those rejecting him would no longer be considered to be part of God's people (3:23).

While conciliatory, Peter's speech here contained a threat. Would they listen to the prophet of whom Peter was speaking and accept Jesus? Or would they reject him a second time? If they spurned him, they would forfeit their privileges.

In his sermon, Peter used Moses' prophetic reference to the prophet whom the nation should one day obey (Deuteronomy 18:15, 18-19), and applied it to Jesus. If some Jews did not identify "the Prophet" with the

Messiah, they did associate his appearance with the messianic age (John 1:20-21; 7:40-41). Many Jews accepted this prophecy as pointing to an individual, a second Moses, who would stand as a mediator between Israel and God. Peter was using a widely accepted text that pointed to the Messiah – or spoke directly of him. Peter was saying that Moses backed up his exhortation: don't reject Jesus, because he is the prophet that must be listened to (3:23).

Foretold since Samuel (3:24)

Peter next appealed to all the prophets “beginning with Samuel” as having “foretold these days” (3:24). He reminded the people that every past spiritual luminary whom they considered to have spoken God's word, pointed to Jesus as being the Messiah. They each prefigured him in a partial way, and all their functions were performed in the fullest way by Jesus.

Peter had already referred to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and then to Moses, Israel's first and greatest prophet. Now, he told them that every prophet spoke of Jesus. The Hebrew Scriptures as a whole bear testimony to Jesus, and his listeners should accept this.

The reference to Samuel foretelling the message is difficult to understand. We have only a few words of Samuel recorded in the Old Testament, and they don't seem to refer to the Messiah. Perhaps Samuel's prophecies of David's kingdom [1 Samuel 16:13; 13:13-14; 15:27-29; 28:17.] were thought to refer to the messianic rule of his descendant (the Messiah), although they are indirect. Peter could have also referred to Nathan's prophecy, which spoke of the establishment of the kingdom by a son who would come from David (2 Samuel 7:12-16). It spoke of a human being, Solomon. However, elements of the prophecy could be interpreted as having messianic meaning.

Heirs of the covenant (3:25)

Peter then spoke in hopeful tones to his Jewish listeners. He said they were the heirs of the prophets and the covenant about which he had been talking. In line with their status as God's people Israel, Jesus was sent to them first (3:25). Peter cast his appeal in terms of the promise to Abraham, quoting Genesis 22:18 and 26:4. There the Scripture spoke of a future descendant of Abraham in messianic terms: “Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed” (3:25).

Peter insisted that the promise to Abraham – one of their revered fathers – was fulfilled in the Messiah, that is, in Jesus. The prophecy implied that the Jews would be only the *first* to receive the message of salvation. But the prophecy speaks of “all peoples” and not just Jews as being blessed.

How clearly did Peter understand that the gospel would go to *all nations*?

It's doubtful that at the time Peter understood the scope of God's international plan. He later had to learn through a vision and by personal experience that God was giving salvation to non-Jews. At best, says Howard Marshall, "The reference to the Gentiles is at this stage a quiet hint." [Marshall, 96.]

Of course, Peter would not be emphasizing a work to the Gentiles before a Jewish crowd. To do so would not have been taken lightly by his listeners, as Paul later discovered (22:21-22).

ACTS 4: THE JERUSALEM MINISTRY OF PETER AND JOHN, CONTINUED

Sadducees vs. apostles (4:1-2)

Luke now begins to develop an important theme of Acts: the reason for and extent of the Jewish opposition to the gospel message. He tells how the apostles and evangelists who preached about Christ came into conflict with the Jewish religious leaders, first in Jerusalem and then in other major cities of the Roman Empire. As chapter 4 begins, a group of priests and Sadducees enter the scene and interrupt Peter's speech. (John is mentioned six times in this chapter as participating in the events, but Luke doesn't record a word of what John said.)

The religious leaders are accompanied by "the captain of the temple guard," and probably some of his policemen (4:1). The captain and his officers (who were Levites) patrolled the temple grounds and kept order in the temple precincts. For example, they would make sure that no Gentile entered the parts of the temple forbidden to Gentiles. They guarded the temple gates and treasures. The captain, a priest, was an influential person and was next in rank to the high priest. [Josephus, *Wars* 2:409-10; 6:294.]

The Sadducees, one of the sects or divisions of Judaism, are mentioned three times in Acts (4:1; 5:17; 23:6-8). Most of the high priestly families belonged to this religious party. Every high priest from the reign of Herod until the war of A.D. 66-70 were Sadducees. The high priests held their position by the permission of the Roman government, and they benefited from the status quo. Hence they collaborated with the Roman authorities, and were opposed to any religious or national movement that might threaten their position (John 11:47-48). They were descended from the Hasmoneans [The Hasmoneans were Jewish priest-kings who successfully rebelled against the Seleucid Empire and ruled an independent Jewish kingdom 140-63 B.C.] , and looked back to them as the family who inaugurated the Messianic Age. [*Jubilees* 23:23-30; 31:9-20; 1 Maccabees 14:4-15, 41.]

The Sadducees claimed to be guardians of orthodoxy and they opposed innovative teachings. They refused to speculate about angels or demons, and refused to accept the doctrine of the resurrection (Mark 12:18; Luke 20:27; Acts 23:8). Josephus gives us important details about how this sect's theology differed from that of the Pharisees. [Josephus, *Wars* 2:119, 164-166; *Antiquities* 13:171-173, 297-298; 18:11, 16-17. There is no surviving evidence from the Sadducees themselves about their beliefs; they were apparently all killed in the Jewish War of A.D. 66-70.]

Apostles imprisoned

Given the position and beliefs of the Sadducees, it's easy to understand why they opposed Jesus and brought about his death. They wrongly perceived him as a revolutionary who would bring reprisals from Rome on the religious leaders and the nation (John 11:48). Not only that, Jesus seemed to be encouraging a fundamental change in the function of the temple (Luke 19:45-48; John 4:21, 23). The Sadducees thought they had gotten rid of Jesus by having him crucified. But here were his followers – the apostles – teaching about Jesus and the resurrection of the dead (4:2). It's no wonder the Sadducees are exasperated.

For one thing, the apostles are “teaching the people.” The Sadducees thought that teaching should be done only by people who were specially trained and authorized. In their eyes, the apostles are teaching a heresy (the resurrection). To make matters worse, Peter and John are encouraging people to become followers of Jesus, whom the leaders had only recently succeeded in getting out of the way.

To put a stop to this situation, the Sadducees order the temple police to seize Peter and John. The Roman government allowed the Jews limited jurisdiction over temple matters, and this included imprisoning and punishing people who violate its regulations. Because it was late in the day (4:3), the fate of the apostles could not be immediately decided, so they were held in the jail administered by the temple police. In spite of being interrupted in their preaching, the apostles' message found fertile ground, and many believed the message about Jesus. Luke says “the number of men who believed grew to about five thousand” (4:4).

Luke probably does not mean that 5,000 men were converted that day. Rather, Luke is saying that the believers now totaled about 5,000 men. [Luke used the Greek word *andron*, which refers specifically to adult males, as opposed to *anthropon*, which would mean “people.”] The congregation would have included several thousand women and children, too (see Matthew 14:21), perhaps totaling about 20,000. Some commentators say that this figure seems to be way out of proportion to the population of Jerusalem at the time. Estimates of Jerusalem's population range between 25,000 and 250,000. [Josephus claimed it was over 2.5 million, but this is thought to be far too high (*Wars* 2:280-283; 6:420-427).]

It's doubtful that we can fix Jerusalem's population with any certainty. Doubting Luke's figure on the basis of dubious population estimates seems pointless. Perhaps Jerusalem's population was larger than suspected, or a larger portion of the city was converted than assumed. It's also possible that

Luke's estimate of the number of believers included the country districts and surrounding villages.

Sanhedrin meets (4:5-6)

The next day, the council of Jewish religious and civic elders met to decide what to do with Peter and John (4:5). The Sadducees may have been the official rulers over Jewish affairs, but they were a minority party. They could govern only through the Sanhedrin (*synedrion*, "council"), the supreme court and senate. Though the Sadducees made up the majority on the council, Josephus tells us they often had to defer to Pharisaic opinion. [Josephus, *Antiquities* 18:16-17; Acts 5:34.] That's because the Sadducees were disliked by the common people, while the Pharisees were held in high regard.

The Sanhedrin was composed of three groups of people. The first were the rulers, the high priests. The second were the elders, men of high community standing. The third group was composed of teachers of the law, usually Pharisees or scribes. The Sanhedrin had 71 members. It included the high priest and 70 other influential members of the Jewish religious community. The Sanhedrin had jurisdiction in cases involving matters relevant to Jewish affairs. Where capital punishment was to be administered, the Sanhedrin was required to receive the permission of the Roman procurator (John 18:31).

Luke makes the point that the Sadducean element that was about to condemn the apostles was heavily represented in the Sanhedrin. The early opponents to the gospel message came mainly from the priestly and Sadducean ranks (5:26). Annas the high priest was there, as well as Caiaphas, John, Alexander and other men of the high priest's family (4:6). Annas was high priest for nine years, from A.D. 6-15. He continued to have great influence for many years after his years in office were over. The New Testament writers show him to be the real power behind the scenes (Luke 3:2; John 18:13-24).

Caiaphas was the son-in-law of Annas. He was high priest for 18 years (A.D. 18-36). He had the title of high priest when the events of Acts 4 took place. But Annas was of such influence that he seemed to be making the important decisions. Annas, though he did not then have the title of high priest, may have (as the head of the family) retained the presidency of the Sanhedrin. The ruling high priest was usually the president. [Acts 5:17; 7:1; 9:1; 22:5; 23:2, 4; 24:1.] Whatever the case, Luke calls Annas the high priest, perhaps in the sense of a high priest emeritus (4:6). Annas is making the decisions the high priest would make, at least as Sanhedrin president. Now, he and the other Sanhedrin members are about to judge the apostles.

By what power? (4:7)

As people interested in political power, it is not strange that the Sanhedrin members ask Peter and John: “By what power or what name did you do this?” (4:7). In other words, “Who said you could do this – who is your leader?”

The apostles are faced with the same issue as Jesus had been. Jesus had also been teaching at the temple when he was confronted by the same general group of chief priests and teachers of the law. They had asked Jesus: “Tell us by what authority you are doing these things...” (Luke 20:1-2). Now, months later, the priests and teachers are faced with “the Jesus question” all over again, even though the ringleader had been killed.

The Sanhedrin is not too pleased with the apostles, but on what grounds are they to punish Peter and John? They can’t accuse the apostles of faking a healing. The evidence of the lame man jumping and leaping is incontrovertible. He is known by everyone, for he was over 40 years old, and had been begging at the temple for many years (4:22). His sudden loss of lameness can’t be explained away as a delusion or secret healing process. Perhaps the apostles have an unlawful agenda in mind (Deuteronomy 13:1-5). Perhaps they are healing through the power of the devil. This is what Jesus was accused of doing (Luke 11:14-20). Thus, the Sanhedrin’s question: “By what power or what name did you do this?” (4:7).

There is an irony in the apostles’ arrest. Peter and John are arrested for teaching about Jesus’ resurrection, but they are questioned about the healing. The Sanhedrin did not want to discuss the resurrection of Jesus, partly because Pharisees were a significant minority of the Sanhedrin, and they believed in a resurrection. Although they did not believe that Jesus had been resurrected, they couldn’t disprove it. Too many strange events surrounding Jesus’ life and death – including the empty tomb – would be sure to come up if they opened up this can of worms. F.F. Bruce wrote:

It is particularly striking that neither on this nor on any subsequent occasion did the authorities take any serious action to disprove the apostles’ central affirmation – the resurrection of Jesus. Had it seemed possible to refute them on this point, how eagerly would the opportunity have been seized!... The body of Jesus had vanished so completely that all the resources at their command could not produce it. The disappearance of his body, to be sure, was far from proving his resurrection, but the production of his body would have effectively disproved it. [Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International

Commentary on the New Testament (Rev. ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 96.]

Healed by the name of Jesus (4:8-10)

Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, answers the Sanhedrin's questions and accusations by facing the council with the reality of a glorified Christ. This recalls Jesus' saying, that when they are brought before kings and governors, he will give them a wisdom none of their adversaries can gainsay (Luke 21:12-15).

Peter denies that he and John perform magic, or that they are involved with evil spirits, or that the cure was a hoax. The man was healed by the "name of Jesus Christ," pure and simple (4:10). Peter pulls no punches, and he accuses the leaders of being responsible for Jesus' death. He again insists that Jesus had been resurrected, and it is through his power that the lame beggar was healed. In short, Peter's speech became another declaration of Jesus' messiahship.

The "stone" rejected (4:11-12)

Peter next cites an Old Testament scripture as a "proof-text" that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Jesus is "the stone you builders rejected..." (Psalm 118:22). Jesus used the same scripture to refer to his messiahship (Mark 12:10-11; Luke 20:17-18), setting the example for the apostles. This stone motif is used in other New Testament writings as well. [Romans 9:33; 1 Corinthians 3:11; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:4-8.]

In its original setting in Psalm 118, the "rejected stone" may have referred to Israel, hated by the nations but chosen by God. The builders who rejected the stone as unfit would most likely be other nations who built their own empires and worshipped their own gods. But Jesus, and Peter here in Acts, brands the Jewish religious leaders as "the builders." They had built their own religious structures, beliefs and empire, and now they were rejecting the truth about salvation and the One who brought its message, Jesus.

"The cornerstone" is more literally in Greek "head of [the] corner," *kephale gonias*. It refers to the capstone or keystone that joins the sides of an arch at the top. This stone is essential for holding the arch together, and is placed at its highest point and head. This capstone or "cornerstone" is essential for completing the arch. Just as there is only one capstone in an arch, Jesus Christ is the unique person who makes salvation possible. Apart from Jesus, there is no spiritual building, or church, because there is no salvation. "Salvation is found in no one else," insisted Peter, "for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (4:12).

Unschooling apostles (4:13-14)

Peter is using some masterful biblical argumentation, usually reserved for trained rabbis. The Sanhedrin is astonished by this because the apostles are “unschooled, ordinary men” (4:13). People expressed the same surprise about Jesus: “How did this man get such learning without having been taught?” (John 7:15). The Jewish leaders don’t necessarily regard Peter and John as ignorant and illiterate. The apostles are considered “unschooled” *in terms of rabbinic training*, that is, without professional qualifications. They are “ordinary” (Greek, *idiotai*) in the sense of being “commoners” or “laymen,” or “untrained” in matters of Jewish law. The religious leaders fault *the people* for their lack of expertise and understanding of Torah (which ironically means that their *teachers* were failing to do their job). In one case, the Pharisees said of those ordinary folks who believed in Christ: “this mob that knows nothing of the law – there is a curse on them” (John 7:49).

Meanwhile, the Sanhedrin is getting nowhere with Peter and John. In fact, the council members are to some degree on the defensive. The apostles are using sophisticated rabbinic reasoning to force a consideration of Jesus as Messiah. How like Jesus they seemed in their ability to parry questions and avoid traps! It dawned on the council that the apostles must have learned the “tricks” of argumentation from their teacher – and so they take note “that these men had been with Jesus” (4:13).

The council has another problem: That healed beggar is still there. But why is he there the next day? Had he been arrested? Did he want to be a witness for the apostles? Luke doesn’t tell us. Whatever the case, the beggar’s presence is evidence of Jesus’ healing power. In a similar situation, Jesus had healed a man who had been born blind. His very presence reminded the religious community that Jesus had a power that could not be denied (John 9). Now another man born with an infirmity is healed. And he is here, still a witness. How could the Sanhedrin punish the apostles when the proof of Jesus’ power is plainly in their presence?

The Sanhedrin confers (4:15-18)

The Sanhedrin members withdraw into a private session to hammer out a plan regarding the apostles. They see the quandary they are in, and admit that Peter and John “have performed a notable sign, and we cannot deny it” (4:16).

Some readers today wonder, How did Luke find out what happened in the private meeting? When 70 people are at the meeting, it is difficult to keep the proceedings a secret – someone is going to talk about it, and eventually one of those people “in the know” became a Christian. Perhaps the drift of

the discussion was inferred from what the council said when Peter and John were brought back. Perhaps Saul (Paul) himself was at the council, and he could have told Luke what happened. It seems that John himself had friends in the high priestly family, and he could have also learned what happened. There are many ways for “secret” information to be made public.

The apostles claim that Jesus was resurrected from the dead, and this has been publicly confirmed by the healing of the lame man. The healing was done in Jesus’ name, and obviously a dead man cannot do anything. The Sanhedrin members ask themselves, in perplexity: “What are we going to do with these men?” (4:16).

Warned not to speak (4:17-22)

The council decides to warn the apostles not to speak about Jesus again. If Peter and John do so, they will be in violation of the law. The council is providing itself with a legal basis for further action – and it will soon be needed, as we discover in the next chapter. Even now, it must be obvious to the Sanhedrin that the apostles will not go away quietly. When the council calls them in and commands them “not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus,” they are rebuffed (4:18). Peter and John tell the Sanhedrin that they will obey God, not the Sanhedrin. They will continue to witness to Jesus.

This brings more threats from the Sanhedrin, but they can’t punish the apostles because the people are praising God for a miracle. This same council of chief priests and elders had faced a similar problem in the case of Jesus. They couldn’t punish him openly, for as they said, “There may be a riot among the people” (Matthew 26:5).

THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM (ACTS 4:23-5:16)

The believers’ prayer (4:23)

So far in Acts, Luke has described Peter’s preaching to the Jews of Jerusalem. Luke now shifts his focus to give us a glimpse of the apostles’ relationship to the Jerusalem church. We see a praying and giving church, full of faith. The apostles (Peter particularly) come in the power of God, performing miraculous signs and wonders.

The next section begins in 4:23 with Peter and John being released by the Sanhedrin. The two apostles then return to the church and tell the congregation about their persecution. The response of the church is to pray about the crisis (4:24). They perceive the danger to themselves, and to their mission of spreading the gospel. The believers realize that they cannot face the power of the Sanhedrin on their own. So they put their faith in God as

the Sovereign Lord and the Creator of all. This is how they address him in their communal prayer. The disciples appeal to his power to deliver the church, much in the way that King Hezekiah prayed for the deliverance of Jerusalem (Isaiah 37:16-20).

David's prayer in Psalm 2 (Acts 4:25-27)

Luke provides a summary of how the church prayed. The congregation offers their prayer based on Psalm 2:1-2. The first thing we notice about the prayer is that God is said to have spoken it “by the Holy Spirit through the mouth” of David (Acts 4:25). David may have written the words, Luke was saying, but they were guided by the Holy Spirit.

The church understands that the threats of the council are not directed against them personally. That's clear from their appeal to Psalm 2, which speaks of nations and kings plotting against God and his Anointed One. The Jewish persecution of the apostles was actually aimed at God and his Messiah. Psalm 2 refers to the Messiah, the Anointed One. There is some indication that by Jesus' day this psalm was being interpreted by Jews as referring to a coming deliverer from David's line. The church applied the psalm to those who had conspired against Jesus, who was God's Anointed One (4:25-26 with 4:27). For the church, the unholy conspiracy involved in Jesus' crucifixion consisted of Herod (“kings of the earth”), Pilate (“the rulers”), the Romans (“the nations”), and the people of Israel in Jerusalem (“the peoples”).

This is what is called a “pesher” (from Hebrew *peser*, “interpretation”). We know from the Dead Sea Scrolls the pesher method of interpreting Scripture was used in the Qumran community. The interpreter takes a text such as Psalm 2:1-2, which in context refers to ancient times, and identifies it with a contemporary figure and/or situation. He said, in effect, “This is the event and the people this scripture is referring to.”

This method of interpretation was common within Judaism during Jesus' day, and was used by the early church. It was based on the belief that Scripture, reflecting God's purpose and mind, had cosmic significance for all times and circumstances. It assumes that the original writers (usually prophets) did not understand the full significance of what they wrote about because they were far removed from the events to which their writings referred (1 Peter 1:10-12). The real meanings hidden in the text can be unraveled only by a divinely inspired person (or group) living in the time of the actual events. (Some modern interpreters do something similar, trying to identify contemporary events with various biblical prophecies; the result is almost always wrong.)

Prayer for boldness (4:28-30)

In this case, the church is saying that Jesus' death and the persecution of God's people were foretold in Scripture. Thus, it is happening with the knowledge of God, who decided beforehand that these things would occur (4:28).

The Jerusalem church's prayer has a selfless aspect. They do not ask for relief from persecution nor judgment against their oppressors. Rather, the church wants to be given *boldness* to preach the gospel. They ask God to continue to heal, and perform miraculous signs and wonders, so the gospel will have attentive ears (4:29). Of course, the signs and wonders are to occur "through the name of...Jesus" (4:30). In Acts, all things are done through "the name." The gospel is fearlessly preached (9:27), people are baptized (8:16), sins are forgiven (10:43) and demons are cast out (16:18) – all in Jesus' name.

The idiom "name of Jesus Christ" is Luke's expression of the presence of Christ, but not in any magical way. Rather, the preached word unleashes the power of the resurrected Christ so that the gap between the earthly Jesus and the resurrected Lord is bridged by the Spirit. [William Willimon, *Acts: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), page 13.]

In this instance, God answers the church's prayer with resounding certainty. Their meeting place shakes as with an earthquake (4:31). Quakes often marked the sign of God's presence in Scripture. [Acts 16:26; Exodus 19:18; Psalm 114:7; Isaiah 6:4; Ezekiel 38:19; Joel 3:16; Amos 9:5; Haggai 2:6.] In this case, God is signifying that his presence will be with the believers as they fulfill the commission to preach the gospel of salvation. God answers the Jerusalem church's prayer for boldness by filling them with the Holy Spirit. The disciples already had the Holy Spirit as a life-changing force. But now they receive a special gift of confidence to proclaim the word of God with added conviction.

SHARING AND CORRECTION IN THE CHURCH (4:32-5:11)

Believers share possessions (4:32-35)

Luke next returns to a subject he introduced earlier (2:44-45) – the sharing of possessions among the believers. In the community of believers at Jerusalem “no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had” (4:32). Earlier we were told that the believers “had everything in common” (2:44). They sold possessions and goods, giving “to anyone who had need” (2:45). In this snapshot of church life, Luke illustrates the nature and extent of the Jerusalem believers’ concern for one another.

Luke illustrates the relationship of gospel-preaching to giving by inserting verse 33 into the middle of the discussion about the believers’ shared possessions. This verse speaks of the great power by which the apostles testified to the resurrection of Christ. It might appear to be misplaced, since it discusses a different topic, but it isn’t.

Luke indicates that most wealthy believers had a remarkably selfless attitude toward their possessions. They regard their estates as being at the disposal of the community when necessary. No doubt even those of limited means gave what they could to assist less fortunate brothers and sisters. Because of this attitude, “there were no needy persons among” the church members at Jerusalem (4:34).

“From time to time” – when the occasion warranted it – affluent members “who owned land or houses” would sell pieces of property and give the money to the apostles (4:35). The apostles in turn “distributed to anyone who had need.” This donating of resources to a common church fund was voluntary. The practice, in various forms, was known among other Jews, especially the Essene sect. Josephus points out that the Essenes required their members to have all property in common – at least as an idealized principle. He wrote that, “It is a law among them [the Essenes], that those who come to them must let what they have be common to the whole order – insomuch, that among them all there is no appearance of poverty or excess of riches, but every one’s possessions are intermingled with every other’s possessions.” [Josephus, *Wars* 2:122.]

The Jerusalem believers are generous in sharing what they have with other members. However, their sharing is on a voluntary basis; it is not “Christian communism.” There is probably a cultural-religious reason why the Jerusalem community has a common fund to help the needy. At this early

date, the believers seem to consider themselves as a righteous remnant within Israel. They hold firmly to their national religious practices and institutions, and they feel strongly about certain promises in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Torah they read, “There need be no poor people among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you” (Deuteronomy 15:4).

Other Jewish religious groups, such as the Essenes, also thought of themselves in terms of a remnant. They, too, expressed their spiritual oneness by sharing their goods. The Jerusalem church is following cultural norms in sharing their goods on a voluntary basis.

Perhaps more importantly, the church knows of Jesus’ command that mutual love should be its distinctive characteristic (John 13:34-35, 15:12). Thus, the believers feel a deep responsibility to care for the physical needs of their spiritual brothers and sisters. This continued to be a concern of the church (Galatians 2:9-10). The early church apparently expected Jesus to return soon. They probably thought that the gospel would be preached to all the Jews around the Roman world in a matter of years, perhaps only one or two decades. Then, “the end” would come. The disciples are therefore not concerned about their long-range needs. The kingdom of God is coming soon, and personal resources are to be used now instead of being stored up.

However, the ideal of generosity that the Jerusalem church attempts to reach in the sharing of goods is soon interrupted. God allows a persecution to come on this congregation that causes its members to be scattered throughout Judea and Samaria (8:1). And as it turns out, perhaps some members gave too much too quickly, resulting in an impoverished Jerusalem church. We get indications from Acts and Paul’s writings that the believers in Jerusalem were quite poor in later years. [Acts 11:27-30; 24:17; Romans 15:26; Galatians 2:10.] This is not to belittle what they did, and in fact their selflessness was no doubt pleasing to God. The later poverty of the Jerusalem church became a blessing to people who were able to help them (2 Corinthians 9:11). True discipleship is sometimes very costly.

We should not picture all Jerusalem church members as placing all their property in a common fund. This congregation did not form a communal society that required all possessions to be put in a common pot. Donations were given on a *voluntary* basis. The church members lived in their own homes (2:46; 12:12), and thus would have their own household possessions. They were married and had families (1 Corinthians 9:5; Acts 5:1-11). The well-to-do among the Jerusalem church “from *time to time*” sold property (4:34). They did not simply sell everything and pool all the money. Rather, they sold it off

piece by piece, as needed. They continued to live in their own houses but were willing to give to the community when needs arose.

Barnabas sells a field (4:36-37)

Luke next introduces a man named Joseph, a Levite (4:36). He was named Barnabas by the apostles, which Luke says means “Son of Encouragement.” The problem is that the word *Barnabas* actually means something like “Son of Nebo” (Bar-nabas). Luke’s interpretation of the name has been translated as “Son of exhortation,” or “of consolation” or “of encouragement.” “Son of Encouragement” certainly fits the character of Barnabas (9:27; 11:23; 12:25; 15:37).

The family of Barnabas originally came from Cyprus, and he may have owned property on the island, but he has close ties to Judea. John Mark is his cousin (Colossians 4:10), and he apparently lives with his mother in her home in Jerusalem (12:12). Barnabas will be an important figure in Luke’s story of the church’s expansion. He appears to be a link between the Jewish and Gentile worlds. [Acts 9:27; 11:22-30; 13:1-14:28; 15:2-4, 12, 22, 36-41; 1 Corinthians 9:6.] Barnabas is introduced here for two reasons. We are alerted to his future role in the spread of the gospel. He is also a fitting example of how the Jerusalem believers share their possessions.

Barnabas “sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles’ feet” (4:37). He is held up for special commendation in this regard, showing that the selling of property and donating the proceeds was voluntary. It was not required of all church members. Barnabas will later play a key role in mediating between a zealous Paul and a skeptical Jerusalem church that does not trust him (9:25). He will also be sent as an emissary to look into matters in the Antioch church. There he will put the stamp of approval for the preaching the gospel to Gentiles in Antioch (9:22-23). Luke assures his readers that Barnabas is submissive to the Twelve, and he can be trusted.

Ananias and Sapphira (5:1)

In chapter 4, Luke painted an idealistic portrait of the Jerusalem church as a congregation of faithful (4:23-31) and loving (4:32-35) believers. He cited the example of Barnabas, who epitomized both the love and faith of this congregation (4:36-37). But Luke wants to give his readers a more complete view of the situation in the church. In the beginning of chapter 5 Luke provides an example that showed the church to be less-than-perfect.

Luke recounts what must have been a well-known but tragic story of Ananias and his wife Sapphira, who lied to the Holy Spirit (5:3). The story (5:1-11) actually continues Luke’s account of how the believers shared their

possessions, which he ended with the example of a generous Barnabas. But in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, we see another side of the church.

What Luke did was present two cases that stand in opposition to each other. Barnabas is a concerned, faithful and a true disciple; Ananias and Sapphira are selfish, faithless liars. The incident shows that the church, even in its earliest days, was not a community of perfect people. Perhaps Luke tells this story to warn his readers not to overestimate the spiritual perfection of the first believers. The example also serves as a warning to the church. The best-intentioned good works of human beings – which the generous giving illustrated – can have unintended negative side effects. In short, the church is always an imperfect, sinning body that daily needs the forgiveness of Jesus Christ.

Kept part of the money (5:2-4)

The problem of Ananias and Sapphira is that they wanted to receive a reputation for a greater personal sacrifice than they actually made. The church's well-intentioned sharing of goods probably led to a considerable amount of subtle pressure on members to make donations. Perhaps Ananias and Sapphira got caught up in a band-wagon effect. The couple wanted to appear as outstanding church members, but they didn't want to part with their possessions. In order to have both, they pretended to give the full price of the sale of their property to the apostles. But they secretly kept part of the money for themselves. Thus, they tried to deceive the community.

Before we go on, Luke allows us to once more understand that the Jerusalem church was not practicing mandatory communism. Peter tells Ananias: "Didn't it [the land] belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal?" (5:4). Ananias was perfectly free to keep or sell his property as he thought fit. If he sold his property, he could have kept all the money for himself. The sin of Ananias was not in keeping his money, but in lying to the community, and hence, to the Holy Spirit.

The sin of which Ananias was guilty was hypocrisy, a sin which received from Jesus the most scathing condemnation. Ananias was under no obligation to sell his land at all, or to hand over the proceeds, but having done both he alleged that all the money he had obtained was now being given magnanimously for the relief of the poorer members of the community, whereas in fact he had slyly retrained part of it for his own use. His wife as a party to the fraud. [E. William Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), page 94.]

Luke tells us that Ananias with the full knowledge of his wife was keeping “part of the money for himself” (5:2). The verb translated “kept back” (Greek, *nosphizein*) occurs rarely in the New Testament (Acts 5:2, 3; Titus 2:10). But its meaning is clear. The Septuagint uses the same root verb to describe Achan’s stealing part of the plunder from Jericho. God said that the spoils were sacred and should be placed into the treasury (Joshua 6:18-19; 7:1, 11). By taking some of the plunder for himself, Achan had acted unfaithfully – and had stolen and lied.

Perhaps Luke purposely uses the same verb (*nosphizein*) to describe the action of Ananias, so that readers who know the Old Testament examples would make the comparison and learn the lesson. William Neil writes, “The story of Ananias is to the book of Acts what the story of Achan is to the book of Joshua. In both narratives an act of deceit interrupts the victorious progress of the people of God.” [Ibid.]

Both incidents draw an immediate and extreme judgment of God. The advance of ancient Israel was stopped by Achan’s sin. Now the sin of Ananias threatens to stop the progress of the gospel and destroy the integrity of the community.

The Jerusalem church clearly sees the lesson in the death of Ananias and Sapphira (5:11). It is richly schooled in the Holy Scriptures and would immediately see the connection between Ananias and Achan. In each case, the sin must be removed so the community can move forward. There are differences between the two accounts, and we should not press the analogy too far. For example, Achan confessed his bad deed (Joshua 7:19) and was stoned to death (verse 25). Neither was true in the case of Ananias.

Lied to the Holy Spirit (5:3-4)

Somehow Peter learns that Ananias kept part of the money, even though he claims to have given all of it. Peter then confronts Ananias with his deceit. On one level, Peter is shown as having power to see into human hearts. He is able to perceive Ananias’ motivation. In the same way, Peter later perceives that Simon the Samaritan was full of bitterness (8:23). Luke is portraying the apostles as having the same ability as Jesus to grasp what humans are thinking in terms of whether their thoughts are godly or satanic. In his Gospel, Luke points out Jesus’ ability in this regard on several occasions. [Luke 5:22; 7:39-40; 9:46-47; 24:37-38.]

However, we shouldn’t overstate Peter’s omniscience. It’s possible that others in the church had learned about the deceit of Ananias and Sapphira, and Peter learned about it from them. After checking out the allegation and

being sure of its truthfulness, he confronts first Ananias and then Sapphira with the deceit.

Ananias' deceit is the result of Satan filling his heart (5:3). Luke had previously described the betrayal of Jesus by Judas as Satan entering his heart (Luke 22:3). The couple's fraudulent action was also defined as lying to and testing the Holy Spirit (5:3), perhaps in the sense of seeing how much they could get away with. Similarly, the ancient Israelites in the wilderness were guilty of trying to test God (Exodus 17:2; Deuteronomy 6:16). To lie to the Spirit is the same as lying to God and the risen Christ. Peter says that Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit (5:3) and to God (5:4), and this is the same as testing "the Spirit of *the Lord*" (5:9). The three are equated as being one and the same: God, Spirit, and the Lord – Father, Spirit, and the Son.

Throughout Acts, Luke emphasizes that the Holy Spirit is guiding the new church at every turn. But Ananias and Sapphira's lie and greed threaten to undercut this. God therefore shows that the Holy Spirit is present with the church, and that this has solemn implications for the disciples. Christians are warned to be careful in how they relate to the Holy Spirit. They can "grieve the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 4:30) and "do not quench the Spirit" (1 Thessalonians 5:19). These are sins that should be avoided. They are sins for which Christians find forgiveness in Christ, but we should not minimize such affronts to the Spirit. They are serious.

As in the case of Judas, we are not in a position to judge the ultimate fate of Ananias and Sapphira. Perhaps this incident shows God's supreme judgment on the couple in this life, a tragic discipline, but not a final condemnation (1 Corinthians 5:5; 11:30). The life of the couple is taken, but we do not know whether they rejected salvation itself. The lesson for us is simply that we should not challenge or test God.

While the real sin of Ananias and Sapphira is lying to the Holy Spirit, it is over financial issues that the problem comes to a head. The story is about money and greed. Luke often deals with economic issues and how they relate to the Christian. It is Luke who gives us parables that deal with the proper use of money. They include the parables of the Debtors (Luke 7:41-43); the Good Samaritan (10:29-37); the Rich Fool (12:16-21); the Unjust Steward (16:1-8); the Rich Man and Lazarus (16:19-31); and the Pounds (19:11-27). Luke writes of the rich young nobleman who chooses riches over Jesus (Luke 18:18-23) and the widow who donates to God all that she had to live on (Luke 21:1-4).

Later, Luke notes that a riot occurs after Paul's preaching interferes with some business interests (19:21-41). Simon the Samaritan reveals his true heart

when he tries to buy the Spirit with money (8:9-24). In Macedonia, Paul and Silas are thrown in jail after depriving some slave owners of their means of livelihood (16:16-34). He is kept in jail because Felix wants a bribe (24:26).

Ananias and Sapphira die (5:5-10)

The story of Ananias and Sapphira ends on a tragic note. As soon as Peter finishes telling Ananias the enormity of his sin, Ananias dies (5:5). While Luke doesn't say that God struck him down, this is what the context implies. The death of Ananias is meant to be seen as a divine judgment on his sin of lying to the Spirit. Luke does not say the sentence of death came from Peter, as some claim. Luke wants us to see his death not as the judgment of Peter, but of God. Peter probably intends to rebuke Ananias for his terrible sin, and hope for his repentance. Peter is probably as shocked as we are that Ananias drops dead before his eyes. "Great fear seized all who heard what had happened" (5:5) – and that probably includes Peter.

Immediately after Ananias dies, his body is wrapped and buried. His wife Sapphira, unaware of what happened to her husband, arrives about three hours later, and is confronted by Peter. He questions her about the amount of the proceeds of the sale, no doubt hoping that she will be honest. But when he asks her whether she and her husband sold the land for the amount they had handed over, she says yes (5:8). She repeats her husband's falsehood. Peter, knowing God's judgment on Ananias, probably feels confident that the same one awaits Sapphira. He tells her that the men who buried her husband would also carry her out (5:9), and Sapphira dies (5:10).

The account of this couple's death, especially that of Sapphira, has puzzled and even offended many commentators.

The problem is partially solved if we do not read into the story things that are not there. The situation was likely the following. Peter learns from someone in the community that Ananias and Sapphira are trying to pass off part of the sale price as the whole amount. Ananias and Sapphira may have told someone of this, or it may have been obvious to someone who knew about real estate values in the area.

Peter does not necessarily need any special knowledge in the matter. After finding out the truth of the accusation, he is naturally indignant about this attempted deception, which blights the community spirit. As a spiritual leader, he goes to Ananias to reprove him for lying, in effect, to the Holy Spirit. There is no indication that Peter intends to pronounce a curse of death on him. He is probably as stunned as anyone else when Ananias drops dead after the rebuke. However, the lesson is not lost on Peter. He surmises that

God caused this, and he concludes that the same judgment will befall Sapphira, a co-conspirator. Her only hope is to admit the truth, but when she does not, Peter says that she will experience the same result as her husband. Peter simply tells her what her fate will be, and she dies. Peter is not personally handing out a curse of death to either husband or wife. Ananias and Sapphira die because God, not Peter, causes it.

From time to time in the Old Testament, God acts to carry out a sudden sentence of death on various individuals. A man named Uzzah is killed for violating the law about touching the ark (2 Samuel 6:3-7). Two sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, are struck down for offering strange fire in the tabernacle (Leviticus 10:3). Even their father Aaron is told not to mourn for them. We are used to God dealing sharply with the sinful and rebellious Israelites. But we may be shocked that Ananias and Sapphira are struck down so abruptly and with finality. Perhaps we can understand why this happened if we remember the context of the times. The New Testament church began with the unmistakable power of God's Spirit. The fledgling community is barely getting off the ground when its integrity is threatened by selfish deceit. It needs to learn that sin is no trifling matter. How can the church be an example of godliness and good works, if greed and lying are allowed to run rampant in the community?

The way Ananias and Sapphira attempted to reach their goals was so diametrically opposed to the whole thrust of the gospel that to allow it to go unchallenged would have set the entire mission of the church off course. Like the act of Achan, this episode was pivotal in the life and mission of God's people, for the whole enterprise was threatened at its start. [Ibid.]

The death of Ananias and Sapphira serves as a powerful example of the presence of God in the community of believers. "Great fear seized all who heard what had happened" (5:5). After this, no one would be tempted to gain a reputation for generosity by lying about it – although before this, the temptation was probably not unique to Ananias and Sapphira.

Hebrews tells us that while God is infinite love and has tremendous patience, he also judges his people (Hebrews 10:31). As another example, Paul tells the Corinthians to excommunicate a man who was having sexual relations with his stepmother. The hope was that he would repent (which he did) and re-enter the community of the saints (1 Corinthians 5:5).

Ananias and Sapphira are killed because they do not repent. They are given an opportunity to tell Peter the correct amount of the sale. But they

persist in their lie. But the account says nothing of the couple's future salvation. We have no way to answer the question of their fate except to say it is in God's hands.

The church of God (5:11)

When Sapphira dies, the meaning of God's judgment on this couple is not lost on the church. Luke again writes of the effect of the tragic event, saying, "Great fear seized the whole church" (5:11). Here, in the context of a crisis in the Christian community in Jerusalem, Luke uses the Greek word *ekklēsia* ("church") for the first time to designate the congregation of God's people. From here on out, Luke uses it to define both the universal body of Christian believers and local congregations. The same usage occurs in Paul's epistles. [Acts 7:38; 8:1; 9:31; 11:22; 13:1; 14:23; 15:22, 41; 16:5; 19:32, 40; 20:28. For examples from Paul, see 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1, and many others.]

The Jews used *ekklēsia* to refer to the assembly of Israel, the nation that was called God's people. [See the Septuagint in such places as Deuteronomy 9:10; Joshua 9:2; and Psalm 21:22.] The Jews were using the Greek *synagoge* (14:1) to define their meetings and the place in which they met, so that was not a good word for Christians to use in defining their group. *Ekklesia*, meaning an assembly, was a logical choice to define those who are called to be a new people of God.

In a secular sense, *ekklēsia* referred to the citizen-assembly of a Greek city. In the Christian context it denotes the assembly of believers in Jesus. The term has something of the old and the new about it. The use of *ekklēsia* indicates the early Christians' sense of continuity with old Israel, as a people of God. However, the Christians were a new people of God – those who had accepted Jesus as Israel's long-awaited Messiah.

Unfortunately, the word "church" has come to have connotations that *ekklēsia* did not. We speak of "going to church," when in biblical usage, it is the "church" that comes together to a place of worship. *Ekklesia* referred to the people who meet together, not the place in which they meet. In some ways, "congregation" would be a better translation. It would make it clear that what is in view is an assembly of believers, not a place or a legal organization.

MORE HEALING AND PERSECUTION (ACTS 5:12-42)

Signs and wonders (5:12)

Verses 12–16 contain another of Luke’s summary statements about the spreading of the gospel and growth of the church. Here we catch a cameo-like glimpse of the power of the apostles and the growing community of believers in Jerusalem. Luke writes that “the apostles performed many signs and wonders among the people” (5:12). Earlier, the church prayed that God would show his power among the people in healings, signs and wonders (4:30). This section tells us God answered that prayer.

The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira were also examples of supernatural signs. As the miracles of healing were a positive sign that the kingdom of God had arrived, so the miraculous nature of Ananias and Sapphira’s death was a negative sign of the same reality. The healing miracles were so stunning that sick people who simply lay under Peter’s shadow were cured (5:15). Jesus had said the apostles would do greater works than he did, and his prophecy was coming true.

Later, Luke writes that God did “extraordinary miracles through Paul” (19:11). Pieces of cloth that had been touched by Paul would be taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured. Luke is telling his readers that like Jesus, the apostles are able to heal sufferers at a distance (Matthew 8:5-13; Mark 7:24-30). It was an extraordinary time in the church when God’s power was dramatically and openly felt. Paul’s letters confirm this fact, that God’s overwhelming power was at work in the young church. [1 Corinthians 2:4-5; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Galatians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 1:5; and also Hebrews 2:3-4.]

The church grows (5:13-16)

Meanwhile, as the apostles perform miracles and spread the gospel, the church regularly meets in Solomon’s Colonnade, which was part of the temple complex. The church is held in such reverence and awe because of the miracles that “no one else dared join them” (5:13). They did not want to pretend to believe unless they actually did. The expression in Greek translated “no one else” or “the rest” seems to have been a technical term for non-believers (Luke 8:10; 1 Thessalonians 4:13; 5:6). That may be its sense here. However, in verse 14, Luke says, “More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number.”

On the surface, this seems to be a contradiction. Were no others joining

the Christian community, or were more being added? What these two verses probably mean is that unbelieving Jews in general were so frightened by the supernatural power of the apostles that they stayed away from the Christians and didn't bother them. William Barclay has an interesting translation of verse 13 that catches this sense of things: "Of the others no one dared to meddle with them." The death of Ananias and Sapphira had caused great fear. It and the other miracles served to keep unbelievers and persecutors at arm's length. However, for those individuals whose minds were open to the Holy Spirit, such miraculous occurrences would have been magnets drawing them to the Christian community in Jerusalem.

Luke tells us that the reach of the church and gospel message is spreading to the towns surrounding Jerusalem (5:16). This is a new feature of the mission. The way is being prepared for the gospel to advance into all Judea. The work of God is becoming more powerful and spreading. However, the effectiveness of the apostles' witness, both in word and deed, impels the Jewish religious authorities to once more take action against them.

Arrested and freed (5:17-20)

While most non-believing Jews are afraid to meddle with the Christian community in Jerusalem, the religious leaders are finally driven to action. The church is having success after success, and the high priest and his associates – who were Sadducees – felt threatened. Luke writes that they are "filled with jealousy" (5:17-18). Because of this, the Sanhedrin arrests the apostles and puts them in jail. It appears that all the apostles are involved this time, not just Peter and John. The temple authorities issue no warning, as they did to Peter and John. They simply round them up and throw them into the guardroom, probably in the temple precincts. In essence, the apostles are punished for disobeying the order not to preach in Jesus' name.

But then another miracle occurs. During the night an angel opens the doors of the jail (5:19). Angels often appear in Luke and Acts, acting as intermediaries between humans and God. [See Luke 1:11, 26; 2:9, 13; 22:43; 24:23; Acts 8:26; 10:3, 7, 22; 11:13; 12:7-15, 23; 27:23.] In this case, all the apostles are released through divine intervention. Later in Acts we will see even more dramatic prison miracles, involving Peter (12:6-11) and Paul (16:26-31).

Here the angel tells the apostles to go to the temple courts and continue preaching "about this new life" (5:20). The message the apostles preached includes the resurrection – the new and eternal life made possible by Jesus. The resurrection is the capstone message of the good news (1 Corinthians

15:1-20). The “new life” can also refer to the new life that Christians experience after conversion. Paul explains that believers are baptized into Jesus’ death, and are figuratively buried with him in death. But they are also raised with Christ that they “may live a new life” (Romans 6:4).

Freed by an angel

At daybreak, probably as devout Jews begin to gather for the morning sacrifice and morning prayers, the apostles come into the temple precincts, and they teach the people about Jesus and salvation. Later in the morning, the high priest calls together the Sanhedrin, in order to judge and assign punishment on the apostles. Temple police officers are sent to the jail to bring the apostles to the trial. They are shocked to find that the prisoners are missing even though the jail is fully secured. The officers return to the chief priests with the news of the apostles’ escape. While the Sanhedrin is considering these puzzling developments, someone rushes into the assembly and says, “The men you put in jail are standing in the temple courts teaching the people” (5:25).

The situation, while deadly serious, is filled with comedic potential. Luke exploited the irony and humor of the situation, which is evident in his narrative.

With the comic speed of an old “Keystone Cops” movie, an angel sets the apostles free, and by daybreak they are back making trouble at the temple. Then follows an even more comic shuttling back and forth from council to jail, back to the council, with the discovery of the apostles busy at the temple, teaching. [Willimon, 56.]

Brought to the Sanhedrin (5:26-28)

The captain of the temple police and his officers now go to fetch the apostles as they are preaching to the people. No force is used, because the Sanhedrin is afraid the people would stone its members if they arrest the apostles (5:26). The apostles comply with the order and do not resist (Luke 22:50). After they are brought before the Sanhedrin, the high priest berates them for teaching in Jesus’ name at the temple. The leaders are especially concerned that they are being singled out as responsible for the death of Jesus. They say that the apostles are “determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood” (5:28). They clearly fear a violent insurrection against them.

By accusing the Jewish leaders of murdering the Messiah, whom God had then raised from the dead, the Christians were in effect publicly calling for divine retribution. The Jewish leaders regarded the

death of Jesus as the result of the legal trial of a malefactor; the Christians were making it out to be an act of murder, and thus claiming that the Jewish leaders were guilty men. [I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), page 119.]

While the apostles are placing accountability on those with whom it obviously lies – the Sanhedrin – they are not interested in pointing the finger of blame. They are preaching the forgiveness of sin, not condemnation. We should note that the high priest cannot bring himself to use Jesus’ name. Rather, he contemptuously refers to “this man’s blood” (5:28). Earlier, he avoided using Jesus’ name by using the phrase “in this name.” The disdain and hatred for Jesus ran deep.

The charge answered (5:29-32)

The apostles then respond to the Sanhedrin’s threat. In a brief summary of their defense, Luke describes Peter as the spokesman for the others. Nonetheless, all the apostles agree with the argument. They assert that they should obey God rather than human beings (5:29). Since God commanded them to preach about the work of Jesus, that’s what they are going to do. Peter and John had affirmed this principle at their first trial, that they are constrained to obey God over human authorities (4:19). Now all the apostles take the same stand.

They were eyewitnesses of Jesus’ resurrection and glorification (2 Peter 1:16-18). Now they are obligated to testify that the one they heard, saw and touched is the Word of life (John 1:1-2). “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (4:20).

Hanged on a “tree” (5:30)

Peter begins the apostles’ defense by asserting that the God of Israel “raised Jesus from the dead” (5:30). The phrase “from the dead” is not in the Greek – the Greek text simply says that God raised Jesus. Peter may be referring to Jesus’ exaltation (5:31). That is, Peter would be saying that the very person the Jews rejected and killed is the person God brought onto the stage of history to fulfill the role of Messiah. God “raised up” or chose Jesus to accomplish his purpose. In any case, the resurrection was the focal point of God’s purpose. God had to raise Jesus from death in order to “raise him” to glory and exaltation. The resurrection is the divine vindication of Jesus. This contrasts with his rejection by humans, epitomized by the crucifixion (2:23; 3:14; 4:10).

In Greek, Peter refers to a “tree” (*xylon*) to describe Jesus’ crucifixion

(5:30). But this doesn't mean Jesus was crucified on a living tree. Luke tells us that the cross was carried through the streets of Jerusalem (Luke 23:26). In Jesus' day, the Greek word *xylon* was used for objects made from wood, including poles. Luke uses *xylon* in referring to the clubs carried by those arresting Jesus (Luke 22:52) and the wooden stocks into which Paul was placed (Acts 16:24). A few times in the New Testament, as here in verse 30, *xylon* is also used for the cross of Jesus (10:39; 13:29; Galatians 3:13; 1 Peter 2:24).

The phrase "hanged on a tree" comes from Deuteronomy 21:22-23. In the law of ancient Israel, a person guilty of a capital offense was put to death by stoning. Any such executed criminal was considered to be under God's curse. After his execution, the condemned person's body was hung on a tree during the day, but buried before nightfall. What Peter is saying is that the Jews had inflicted the greatest disgrace on Jesus. They condemned him to death with a capital offense, and then crucified him as a heinous criminal. Paul discusses this paradox of God's chosen vessel being placed under a divine curse to die for the sins of humanity (Galatians 3:10-14, with reference to Deuteronomy 21:22-23).

By using the phrase "hanged on a tree" in this context, Peter highlights the contrast between the people's rejection of Jesus and God's glorification of the One accounted as accused. "God exalted him [Jesus] to his own right hand as Prince and Savior," said Peter (5:31). Paradoxically, Jesus' rejection and death (and resurrection) is what makes it possible to "bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins" (5:31). Thus, salvation is being offered to the very people who "hanged Jesus on a tree."

Prince and Savior (5:31)

This is the first time in Acts that the title "Savior" (Greek, *soter*) is used of Jesus. It is used only once more in Acts (13:23) and a few times in the Gospels. Although the title is common now, it is used less than 20 times in the rest of the New Testament. There is no question, however, that God's plan of salvation works through Jesus Christ as Savior (Philippians 3:20; 2 Peter 1:1; 1 John 4:14). As Peter stressed earlier, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). In these early sections Luke often reminds his readers that the promise of salvation was made to Israel (1:6; 2:36; 4:10, 27; 5:21). In keeping with God's promises, the offer of salvation went to the Jews first.

Peter made an important observation about salvation in his summary

defense. Repentance and forgiveness of sins are *given* by God (5:31). Human beings, on their own, cannot decide to repent and then present themselves as fulfilling the requirements for salvation. To repent involves having a “new mind” that connects with God’s thoughts. This is something that must be given by God, and it is given through the Holy Spirit (Hebrews 8:10).

Those who obey him (5:32)

Peter and the apostles say they are witnesses of these wonderful truths about salvation (5:32). Another witness is the Holy Spirit, “whom God has given to those who obey him” (5:32). When taken out of context, this verse might seem to teach that obedience must come first and is a requirement for receiving the Holy Spirit. However, the New Testament teaches that the Holy Spirit is a gift, not a payment for work.

True obedience to God, which comes from a relationship of trust, is internal and is made possible by the Holy Spirit. Thus, the Holy Spirit must come *before* faith and obedience can occur. We are saved through faith, not because of what we do (Romans 3:21-26; Ephesians 2:8). Faith goes hand in hand with an obedient, submissive spirit. But complete obedience – which would include sinlessness – is not the actual state of any human being, except Jesus.

Peter is not making a timeless or general statement about the cause-and-effect relationship of the Holy Spirit, faith and obedience. The context makes his point clear. The Sanhedrin is challenging the apostles’ claim to be speaking for God. To the council, the apostles are rogues and revolutionaries, the leaders of a purely human movement who are trying to make the executed Jesus a martyr. The apostles counter the accusation by saying the Sanhedrin is the one resisting the purpose of God (5:30-31). The disciples insist that their witness to Christ is given under the direction of a divine witness (5:32). Apart from the Holy Spirit’s presence in their preaching, the apostles’ witness could fall only on deaf ears, as the attitude of the council itself revealed. Human testimony can have the desired effect on listeners only if the Holy Spirit is operating as a “witness” in the message and in the mind of the hearer.

Here, Peter is reaffirming that the Holy Spirit is revealing and guaranteeing the truth of the apostolic message. Peter points out that God’s Spirit is “given to those who obey him” (5:32) – in other words, the Holy Spirit has already been given to the people who *are obeying* him – that is, the apostles. Peter is asserting that the apostles truly have the Holy Spirit. This is not saying anything about *why* or *when* the Holy Spirit is given.

Peter says that he and the other apostles are obeying God rather than

human beings (5:29). How are they doing so? By being witnesses to Jesus and preaching in his name! Peter is saying that this fact – that they are obeying God by preaching – is evidence of their having the Holy Spirit. Peter is emphasizing in verse 32 that he and the other apostles are obedient to the command of God to preach the gospel (1:8; 5:20). The specific obedience Peter refers to is that of being Jesus’ witnesses, and he is declaring that their witness is corroborated by the Holy Spirit.

The fact that the apostles are witnessing to Christ is evidence that the Holy Spirit is with them – and not with the Sanhedrin, despite their claim to speak for God. In short, the Holy Spirit is given to those who, after being commanded to do so, obey God in faithfully preaching about Jesus Christ. The true representatives of God are the ones who are obeying him.

Gamaliel the Pharisee (5:33-34)

The Jewish leaders are told that they were responsible for the death of Jesus, whom God had exalted. Peter insists that it is the apostles who are being led by God’s Holy Spirit, and obedient to God. The implications are that the religious leaders are disobedient to God, have rejected his purpose for humanity, and have rejected their own Savior. Most of the Sanhedrin officials are angry after this accusation, and they are about to condemn the apostles to death. (Rome had not given the Sanhedrin the authority to inflict capital punishment, but the Sanhedrin could find a way around that, just as they had done with Jesus.)

But a man named Gamaliel stands up to speak, and what he says changes the council’s mind and saves the apostles. This member of the Pharisee sect was an extremely respected teacher of the law. He was a grandson of Hillel, who founded one school of the Pharisees. Later, Luke notes that Gamaliel had been Paul’s teacher (22:3). Gamaliel was so respected among pious Jews that he was given the title Rabban, which means “our teacher.” This was a higher title than even Rab (“teacher”) or Rabbi (“my teacher”). *The Mishnah*, a book composed of materials attributed to Jewish teachers from 50 B.C. to A.D. 200, says of him: “When Rabban Gamaliel the Elder died, the glory of the Torah came to an end, and cleanness and separateness perished.” [*Sotah* 9.15.]

Although the Sadducean leaders of the Sanhedrin want to sentence the apostles to death, they cannot take action without the support of so prominent a religious leader as Gamaliel. Though the Pharisees are in the minority in the Sanhedrin, they command much more public support than the Sadducees. For this reason, the Sanhedrin cannot disregard the opinion of a Pharisee, especially one of Gamaliel’s stature.

Counsel of moderation (5:35-39)

Gamaliel tells the council to reconsider its desire to have the apostles executed (5:35) and to let them go (5:38). If their movement is of purely human origin, it will fail, said Gamaliel. But if it came from a divine source, he said, “You will only find yourselves fighting against God” (5:39).

Gamaliel refers to two Jewish revolutionaries – Theudas and Judas – who were killed by the Romans, and their followers scattered (5:36-37). His implication is that if the Christian movement is another attempted revolution, the Roman military will kill its leaders and crush the movement. The Jewish leaders don’t need to get involved in something that might backfire on them.

At first glance, it seems strange that a member of the Pharisee sect would counsel leniency for Jesus’ disciples. After all, the Pharisees were frequent debate opponents of Jesus, as Luke noted in his Gospel. [Luke 5:21, 30; 7:30; 11:37-12:1; 15:2; 16:14-15; 18:9-14.] Jesus often criticized them for their hypocritical behavior. Also, Gamaliel must have been on the council when it condemned Jesus and handed him over to the Roman authority for crucifixion (Luke 22:66-23:25; Matthew 27:62). There is no indication that Gamaliel defended Jesus. Why come to the defense of his followers now?

Some commentators point out that Jesus was not necessarily hated by all the Pharisees. He was often invited to their homes for a meal (Luke 7:36; 11:37; 14:1). Jesus appeared to have some support among this sect, as the case of Nicodemus indicates (John 3:1; 7:50; 19:39). Later, many of the Pharisees became Christians (Acts 15:5; 23:6). While Pharisees would have been on the Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus, the Gospels do not name Gamaliel specifically, so we do not know how Gamaliel felt about Jesus and what the Sanhedrin did with Jesus. Thus, many commentators are led to a favorable view of Gamaliel’s counsel to free the apostles. William Neil says:

Apart from his liberal leanings, which would encourage his tolerance of the Nazarenes [i.e., Christians] as law-abiding and faithful Jews, Gamaliel would be naturally more sympathetic than were the Sadducees to preachers of the Resurrection. [Neil, 99.]

The leader of the Christians – Jesus – had already been executed, just like the leaders of the two movements to which Gamaliel referred, Theudas and Judas. Gamaliel’s inference was that the Christians are already a doomed movement because their leader, Jesus, is dead. The apostles will soon follow. Why get involved in a religious argument that could have bad political consequences for Jews?

Apostles rejoice (5:40-41)

Whatever point of view Gamaliel may have held toward the apostles, his intervention results in their freedom. But first they are flogged and again ordered not to speak in Jesus' name (5:40). The apostles probably receive a severe beating of 39 lashes. The Mishnah describes this punishment, based on Deuteronomy 25:2-3. [*Makkot* 3:10-15a.] The whipping could be administered by the Sanhedrin or the officials of a local synagogue if it was determined that Jewish law had been violated. Paul would later feel the sting of such a flogging on five occasions (2 Corinthians 11:24).

The apostles rejoice in their punishment, for they think of themselves as being "counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (5:41). Jesus counseled his disciples to rejoice when persecuted for his name (Matthew 5:11). The apostles Peter and Paul, having suffered much persecution themselves, could from personal experience tell Christians to rejoice even though they are persecuted (Romans 5:3; 2 Corinthians 6:10; 1 Peter 1:6; 4:13). Such situations as this one described by Luke provide Christians with examples of the spiritual rejoicing they can have even under persecution.

Finally, Luke reports that the apostles are obedient to the angelic message to preach the gospel. They disregard the warning of the Sanhedrin not to teach and "they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah" (5:42).

THE CHURCH SPREADS TO JUDEA AND SAMARIA

THE SEVEN GREEK-SPEAKING LEADERS (6:1-7)

Hebraic and Grecian Jews (6:1)

Luke turns away from the conflict between the Sanhedrin and the church leaders to introduce two groups within the Jerusalem church. They were the “Grecian” Jews (Greek, *Hellenistai*, or “Hellenists”) and “Hebraic” Jews. We may be surprised that subgroups exist within the first church. But these groups are crucial to the story of Acts. It’s important we identify these Hebraic and Hellenistic Jews, for it will help us understand the situation of the Jerusalem church, and how the gospel message is being preached.

Most commentators divide the Grecian and Hebraic Jews along linguistic and geographic lines. The Hellenistic Jews are those who speak mainly Greek, and formerly lived outside of Judea and Galilee. But they had settled in Jerusalem – retired, as it were, to the homeland. Nevertheless, they still have affinities with lands of the Jewish dispersion from which they came. The Hebraic Jews are those who speak mainly Aramaic, and were born in Jerusalem or Judea. A parallel in modern Jerusalem would be the distinction between Jews who were born in the land of Israel (*sabras*) and those who migrated to Israel from other nations. The Hellenistic Jews in the church probably attended Greek-speaking synagogues before they became Christians. The Hebraic Christians attended synagogues in which Aramaic was used.

Defining these two groups solely by their language and place of birth lacks some precision. Paul called himself a “Hebrew of Hebrews” (Philippians 3:5) and classed himself among the *Hebraioi* (2 Corinthians 11:22). But he was fluent in Greek and came from Tarsus in Asia Minor, not Jerusalem. In that sense, Paul was a Hellenist who spoke Aramaic like a native. While Paul had been born a Diaspora Jew, it’s probable that he lived since his youth in Jerusalem, where he was immersed in Judaism.

Clearly, we must go further when trying to understand the difference between Hebraic and Hellenistic Jews. Some commentators feel that the Hellenistic Jews are more devoted to the ancestral religion and culture than the Aramaic-speaking Jews. Why would they have returned to Judea, whose culture and economy were less attractive than those of other regions of the Roman Empire?

Further, we can probably assume that Diaspora Jews who settled in

Jerusalem may have been looked upon with dislike and suspicion by the natives. The immigrants would have had different languages (Greek and native tongues), values and culture. We can see this suspicion and resentment in many nations today by native-born people against immigrants.

As the church in Jerusalem grew larger, more and more Hebraic and Grecian Jews came into the church, and some of the prejudices between the two groups carried over into the church. As the case of Ananias and Sapphira showed, all was not well with everyone in the church. One of the difficulties is that the Greek-speaking Jews feel that they are being discriminated against in the Jerusalem church. Perhaps the slight is not intentional, but it is nonetheless felt. Luke implies that the Hellenists are a somewhat neglected minority, and for a time, not well served.

Widows neglected (6:1)

The problem is that the Hellenistic widows of the Jerusalem church are “being overlooked in the daily distribution of food” (6:1). That is, the church apparently has an organized charity, such as a daily “soup kitchen” for the needy, including widows. But the immigrant widows are not getting an equal share. This is a blight on the church. Both the Torah and the example of Jesus mandate that the community pay special attention to helping widows. [Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:29; 16:11, 14; 24:17, 19-21; 26:12-13.] The law even specifies a curse for those who neglect the poor (Deuteronomy 27:19).

The prophets stress the responsibility of “doing justice” for widows. [Malachi 3:5; Isaiah 1:17, 23; 10:2; Jeremiah 5:28; 7:6; 23:3; Ezekiel 22:7; Psalm 93:6.] In the New Testament, the epistle of James reflects the importance of such justice, insisting that true religion includes looking after orphans and widows in their distress (1:27). Mechanisms for aiding widows had long been promoted in Judaism. Jews had developed a system of aid to the poor and those in need. Religious communities such as the Essenes had a kind of social security system that provided for members’ needs. But here Christians are neglecting their own.

As in the case of Ananias and Sapphira, this neglect of church widows is no incidental problem. Although Luke presents the situation without condemnation, the affront threatens the spiritual integrity of the Christian community. It’s possible that the inequity in the distribution of food was merely the surface issue. This may be part of a larger conflict between two groups who had different cultural backgrounds. (We will eventually see doctrinal differences become more evident between the two groups.)

Earlier, we saw the Christian community taking care of the needy.

Believers were freely sharing their possessions with the less fortunate among them (2:44-45; 5:32, 34-35). But as the church grows, so does the number of widows who need help. To make matters worse, widows from the Diaspora would probably be especially in need. They would be less likely to have relatives nearby to help them. And if they do not speak the local language very well, they may be missing out on some of the information.

They are the ones with the most need, but the church is neglecting them. Almost certainly, discrimination is involved in the inequity, but Luke tends to downplay controversies in favor of showing how problems were resolved. The distribution of food is probably in the hands of the Hebrews, and they unthinkingly take care of their own, and the Greek-speaking widows cannot communicate their needs to the people doing the distribution.

Ultimately, the apostles are responsible, because they administer the common fund (4:34-35), but they have more work than they can handle. Since they are Hebrews, it is easy for them to be unaware that the Greek-speaking widows are being neglected. As soon as they learn that the immigrant widows are being neglected, they immediately take steps to correct the problem.

“Choose seven men” (6:2-6)

When the neglect comes to light, the Twelve gather the church together and tell the members that the apostles can no longer manage the food distribution program. They simply lack the time to do it right. The apostles are too occupied with evangelism to “wait on tables” (6:2). They ask the group to choose seven men to handle the daily distribution. The apostles will turn the responsibility of the “soup kitchen” over to them (verse 3).

The apostles do not ignore the problem, nor chastise the widows for complaining. Nor do they try to hold on to this important responsibility, because they can do it only if they neglect their duty to preach. Members of the Jerusalem congregation are therefore asked to choose seven people who can take over the social-service work of the church.

The Twelve obviously have great stature and power in the church community and could have chosen the leaders on their own. But on this critical decision they are willing to give up their authority and ask the community to decide. The apostles turn the authority for working out the solution of the problem to those who feel it most acutely, for they are probably the best ones to solve it.

The apostles give requirements: The men are to have both *wisdom* and the *Spirit*, or we might say, a wisdom inspired by the Holy Spirit (6:3). Clearly, the

apostles are no longer jockeying for power, as when they were unconverted (Luke 22:24; Matthew 20:20-28). The seven men chosen are Stephen, Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicholas, a Gentile convert to Judaism from Antioch (6:5). The men have Greek names, and it is likely that they all come from the Hellenistic wing of the Jerusalem church (though many Judean Jews also have Greek names).

Stephen and Philip (6:5)

Stephen, introduced here almost as an aside, will become an important figure in Luke's story. (Luke often casually introduces important characters a short time *before* they become important.) His activities in the next chapter link the Jerusalem church to the Christian movement beyond Judea. He is a pivotal character whose death ends Luke's story of the Jerusalem church. Luke mentions Stephen later in Acts, and his book shows how Stephen provides a turning point for the spread of the gospel (11:19; 22:20). In particular, Stephen's speech is the catalyst that sparks a great persecution. This causes Christians to flee to other areas, bringing the gospel with them (8:2). What looked like bad news at first, turned out to be good in the long run.

Of the other six people Luke mentions, only Philip plays a further role in Luke's account. It is an important one. Philip became a prophet-evangelist. Luke shows him doing signs and miracles (8:6, 13) and being empowered by the Spirit to preach the gospel (8:29, 39). His seven daughters prophesy (21:9). Philip carries the gospel to Samaria (8:5); proclaims salvation to the Ethiopian (8:29); and takes the message along the Judean coast from Azotus to Caesarea (8:40). Some years later on his final trip to Jerusalem, Paul visits Philip in Caesarea (21:8). It's possible that Philip was one of Luke's sources for the story of Acts, especially for the events narrated in chapters 6-8.

The interesting thing about Nicolaus, the last-mentioned of the seven, is that he is a convert (proselyte) to Judaism from paganism. Only full converts are called proselytes. They are instructed in Judaism, baptized and circumcised. The God-fearers only worship and study in the synagogues; they are not circumcised. Luke notes that Nicolas comes from Antioch in Syria. This is the first reference to the city that will soon become the launching-point for the Gentile mission. And the church already has a leader who is Gentile by blood.

Laying on of hands (6:6)

The church community as a whole, or perhaps the Hellenistic part, selects the men it wants to handle the daily distribution. They are taken to the

apostles, who officially place them in office. The apostles give a community prayer and “laid their hands on them” (6:6). This is the first mention of this practice in Acts. In Acts it accompanies several events – baptism (8:17, 19; 19:6); healings (9:12, 17; 28:8) and a commission to ministry (13:3). The practice has ties with the Old Testament, where the laying on of hands is mentioned in a variety of contexts. [Genesis 48:13-20; Exodus 29:10; Leviticus 1:4, 3:2; 4:4; 16:21; Numbers 27:23.] In general, it symbolizes a conferring of office and responsibility (Numbers 8:10). In the Old Testament, it was the community of Israel that placed hands on the individual, though it would have been physically impossible for the entire community to do it. People *representing* the community laid on their hands. The same thing is true in Acts as the apostles lay hands on the seven men on behalf of the whole community. This ritual signals that the church as a whole approves the men to supervise the daily distribution.

It is not quite as clear as NIV makes out who prayed and laid their hands on them. If the grammatical agreements of the Greek are any guide, then it was done by the whole church acting “in the presence of the apostles”.... By this act the people made them their representatives, as the Israelites had once made Levites their representatives by laying hands on them (Numbers 27:18; Deuteronomy 34:9). [David J. Williams, *Acts*. New International Bible Commentary. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson, 1990), page 123.]

It is often assumed that the Seven are appointed to the office of deacon. However, Luke does not refer to them by this term. He uses the ordinary verb for service, *diakoneo*, but not the noun *diakonos*. When Philip is described by a title, he is called “Philip the evangelist” (21:8), not “Philip the deacon.” (The first New Testament mention of *deacons* is in Romans 16:1 and Philippians 1:1.)

Actually, the Seven are not given a title – they are in a service role. Their responsibility is similar to what deacons later did (1 Timothy 3:8-13), but over time, it becomes apparent that these men are appointed by God to serve in a special ministry. Stephen and Philip, the two of the Seven about which we know something, seem to have no further connection to the daily distribution or “waiting on tables.” They are prophets who preach the word, do signs and wonders, and extend the work of the apostles.

They are formally named as the Seven (Acts 21:8), even as the original apostles are called the Twelve. In effect, the office of the Seven is as unique as that of the original apostles.

Jerusalem church grows (6:7)

Luke ends the account of the Seven with a summary statement of the progress of the gospel and church: “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (6:7). This is one of Luke’s regular pauses to summarize the state of the church’s growth in Jerusalem (2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14). Six of these general reports have been noted in Acts, each one showing a further outreach of the gospel from Jerusalem. [Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31.]

The events of the first panel probably take place in the first year or so after Jesus’ resurrection. The second panel occurs in the mid-thirties A.D. The second panel (6:8-9:30) focuses on the work of three Hellenists whose ministries were essential for spreading the gospel beyond Jerusalem – Stephen, Philip, and Saul (Paul). Stephen had a brief career. He was martyred after giving a scathing speech to Jews who were members of one or more Hellenistic synagogues in Jerusalem.

Luke records only a brief ministry for Philip in Samaria and the coastal area of Judea. However, he probably continued to preach, and is still part of the community about 20 years later (21:8-9). Also in the second panel, Luke records Saul’s conversion and early ministry. He is, in a sense, the third “Hellenist.” (Though Saul is a Hebraic Jew in some respects, he is also a man of the Diaspora and the Greek world.)

In the second panel, Luke’s interest moves from Peter and the Twelve to focus more on the Hellenistic Seven and Paul. The church in Jerusalem has expanded among Jews who are connected with the world at large – the Hellenists. They may be “Hellenists” because of one or more characteristics – language, place of birth, custom or psychological orientation. This means that the preaching of the gospel has begun to go beyond the traditional preoccupations of Jewish culture – its land (especially Jerusalem), the temple and the Law.

The church has resolved some of its major potential problems – especially injustice and disunity. Now, in a spirit of prayer and with the power of the Holy Spirit, it is ready to move on – “So the word of God spread” (6:7).

Luke informs his readers that a large number of priests are converted and become part of the church (6:7). One commentator estimates that as many as 8,000 priests and 10,000 Levites serve at the temple. We should distinguish these ordinary priests from the high priestly families. The working priests are a marginalized group – far removed from the world of the enormously wealthy high priestly families – and perhaps even disaffected from them. [Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:181; *Wars* 2:409-410.] It is from the ranks of the common priests that many were converted to faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

STEPHEN'S ARREST AND MARTYRDOM

HIS ARREST (Acts 6)

The preaching of Stephen (6:8-10)

Luke next turns to give an account of Stephen's ministry. The apostles are teaching mainly at the temple, and in front of the Sanhedrin. Now we see a subtle shift in audience, as a leader of the Hellenistic Christian community brings the gospel to the Greek-speaking *synagogues* in Jerusalem. In particular, he evangelizes among members of the "Synagogue of the Freedmen," composed of Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria in North Africa and from provinces in Asia Minor – Cilicia and Asia (6:9).

"Freedmen" were former slaves (or their children) who had been emancipated by their owners. During Pompey's conquest of Judea in 63 B.C., for example, many Jews were taken captive to Rome, and many others probably ended up being sent to various parts of the Empire. Many of these slaves were later freed. The descendants of such slaves, the Jewish freedmen, begin to argue with Stephen. But they cannot "stand up against the wisdom the Spirit gave him as he spoke" (6:10). Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit would teach them what to say when they came to trial (Luke 12:12). They will be given "words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict" (Luke 21:15). Luke shows that another prophecy had come to pass.

Stephen speaks as a prophet, as one of the witnesses predicted by Jesus. He is filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom (6:5, 10; 7:55) and he does "great wonders and signs." These are the marks of a prophet. [Acts 2:19, 22, 43; 4:16, 22, 30; 5:12.] Stephen is "full of God's grace and power" (6:8). The comparison with the apostles, who also spoke "with great power," is clear (4:33). Stephen speaks with the same spiritual might as the apostles, and should be recognized as one who brings a true gospel message.

False accusations (6:11-14)

After hearing Stephen speak, Jews from the Synagogue of Freedmen organize a smear campaign. They persuade some people to say, "We have heard Stephen speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God" (6:11). To blaspheme or slander Moses is to say something thought to be disrespectful about the Torah, "the law of Moses." What Stephen is probably doing is challenging the centrality of the law in God's plan of salvation – he is saying that Jesus, not the law, is the center of God's plan.

To “speak blasphemous words against Moses” refers to contempt for the temple and its rituals. By saying that salvation comes through Christ, Stephen seems to say that the system of worship centered on the Jerusalem temple is not needed. But the temple is the foundation and focus of Jewish national life, worship and salvation. This does not set well with a pious Jewish group that centers its religious life around its institutions. The temple is the very reason these people had moved to Jerusalem.

The Synagogue of Freedmen take their campaign of slander to the streets, to the city fathers and religious leaders. With mounting support in their favor, the Freedmen are emboldened to grab Stephen and drag him before the Sanhedrin. They bring false witnesses who lay an ominous charge against Stephen: “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law” (6:13). Similar charges are later leveled against Paul (21:20-21, 28; 24:7; 25:8).

Stephen is charged with religious innovation. The witnesses claim: “We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us” (6:14). Although Luke says this accusation comes from false witnesses, there is truth in what they are saying. Even if Stephen was not preaching it, they were able to see that if what Stephen is preaching is true, then it does render the temple and the ancestral customs obsolete.

Temple obsolete (6:11-14)

Jesus did predict the destruction of the temple (Luke 21:5), and that people did not need to worship there (John 4:21). Jesus is God’s replacement for the temple – a hard saying for unconverted Jews (Mark 14:58; 15:19; John 2:19). God is not to be found in a place, or a system of worship, or a time. Rather, he lives within all believers, wherever they were, through the Spirit.

Jesus declared the temple to be obsolete as a place where one must go to worship and have sin atoned. True spiritual cleansing comes through Jesus’ death and resurrection. [Mark 15:38; John 4:21; Ephesians 2:20; Hebrews 10:20; 1 Peter 2:5.] Stephen is probably echoing these thoughts, insisting that with the coming of Christ the temple order is finished. The book of Hebrews explains this, and discusses the same general points Stephen probably makes. As F.F. Bruce says, “In a number of respects Stephen blazes a trail later followed by the writer to the Hebrews.” [Bruce, 132.]

If the book of Hebrews contains the kinds of spiritual realities Stephen is speaking about, it’s not surprising that the Jews are angry at him. In their view, these ideas support the notion that he is speaking against Moses and God.

Stephen had a vision of a world for Christ. To the Jews two things were specially precious – the Temple, where alone sacrifice would be offered and God could be truly worshipped, and the Law which could never be changed. Stephen, however, said that the Temple must pass away, that the Law was but a stage toward the gospel and that Christianity must go out to the whole wide world. [William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, revised edition, The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), page 53.]

We have no account of Stephen’s preaching to the Greek-speaking Jews, so we don’t know exactly what he told them. But we can infer the drift of his teaching from the criticisms leveled against him, and from his later speech before the Aramaic-speaking Sanhedrin. With such volatile issues at stake, the antagonistic Freedmen merely needed to put a subtle but deadly twist on what Stephen is saying. There is no need for wholesale fabrication.

Stephen’s speech is unusual in that it attacks the very basis of Jewish life, something that the Twelve, so far as we can tell from Acts, don’t do. They don’t minimize the temple – they worship there, as does most of the church (2:46; 3:1; 5:13). But Stephen is doing more than insisting that Jews must accept Jesus as Messiah. He is telling them that their faith in the law and temple is misplaced and of no particular value.

Stephen’s frontal attack on Jewish institutions has far-reaching repercussions for the church in Jerusalem. His speech alienates the Jewish community from the church, and unites its disparate parties against the believers. The entire city of Jerusalem is infuriated (6:12).

The chief-priestly party knew that they need have no fear of popular disapproval this time in prosecuting a leading member of the Nazarene community; on the contrary, the people would support and indeed demand the severest sanctions of the law against the man. [Bruce, 126.]

From the Sanhedrin to “the man on the street,” it turned into enemies those who had until now at least tolerated the believers. This in turn removed the one thing that had restrained the Sanhedrin from a thoroughgoing persecution of the believers, namely, their popularity (cf. 2:47; 5:13, 26). [Williams, 125.]

Facing the Sanhedrin (6:15)

Chapter 6 describes the background of Stephen’s missionary work, which leads to his arrest. The next chapter, the longest in Acts, is devoted to

Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin. Taken together, the two chapters complete Luke's discussion of the preaching of the gospel in Jerusalem and his description of the church in the city. After this, Luke begins reporting on the church's expansion beyond Jerusalem.

The last verse of chapter 6 sets the stage for Stephen's long speech before the Sanhedrin. Luke says that to the Sanhedrin members Stephen appeared to have "the face of an angel" (6:15). Luke probably means to tell us that Stephen is being led by the Holy Spirit (6:3, 5), and that the speech we will read is inspired by God. The high priest asks Stephen if the charges brought against him are true (7:1). This high priest was probably Caiaphas, who held office until A.D. 36. As president of the Sanhedrin, he was the chief judge in Jewish trials.

ACTS 7: STEPHEN'S SPEECH TO THE JEWISH LEADERS

Stephen's response is the longest speech in Acts. His speech can be divided into segments that cover different aspects of Israel's history:

- Abraham's calling (7:2-8);
- the Patriarchs in Egypt (7:9-16);
- life of Moses (7:17-36);
- Moses and Israel in the wilderness (7:37-43);
- and the Tabernacle of Testimony (7:44-50).

Stephen concludes with a stinging rebuke of the Sanhedrin (7:51-53). As good debaters often do, Stephen avoids answering the high priest's question. He does not even directly address the accusation that he had slandered Moses and God.

Stephen responds to the accusation that he is a renegade Jew, and by extension, that the Messianic church is composed of apostate Jews. He does this by asserting that Israelite history (from the call of Abraham to the building of Solomon's temple) proves that his listeners are the real defectors from God. Stephen is on the offense, not trying to win any favors!

Stephen points out that throughout Jewish history, God raised up leaders to deliver the people, but the Israelites rejected those leaders, including Moses (7:35). They erroneously believed that they were in God's presence as long as they worshiped in the temple. But God's presence in the original moveable sanctuary, the tabernacle, did not keep the Israelites from idolatry (7:39-42). The Jews are mistaken if they think that God dwells in the nation simply because the temple is in Jerusalem (7:44-50).

Stephen turns the accusation on its head. It is not he, but the Jewish leaders, who are violating Moses and his law. Stephen makes his point by mentioning Abraham as the progenitor of God's nation. He is asking: Who really represents Abraham's people? Certainly it is not his listeners, the descendants of Israel, a nation that continually rejects Moses and God. Rather, God's (Abraham's) people are those who accept "the Righteous One" and follow the Holy Spirit (7:51-52).

The facts of Israel's history that Stephen recites were familiar to his listeners. Jewish rabbis, pundits and teachers often recite elements of the story of Israel to support some particular understanding of it. Thus, Stephen's listeners are quite aware of his point in retelling the biblical story. What is radically different about the content of Stephen's speech is its insistence that

the Jews are *not* truly obedient to God! He is swimming in dangerous waters, for this accusation goes against the popular Jewish understanding of themselves as God's people. Stephen's speech drills home one main point: those who claim to be the people of God have never obeyed in faith. His listeners always reject the saving message of God.

Stephen's speech differs sharply from previous speeches in Acts. He is the first Christian speaker to challenge Jewish institutions, the law and the temple. In this speech he also challenges the Jews, not only as those who rejected their Messiah, but as a people who have failed to respond to God throughout their history. In short, those who think they are a people of God, are not his people.

Commentators also see Stephen as "the first to challenge Christianity's dependence on Jewish institutions." [Neil, 116.] Before Stephen, the church assumed itself to be merely an extension of the Jewish nation, a kind of righteous remnant within it, to bring Israel *back* to a worship of God. Stephen shocks his listeners by saying Israel, as a whole, had never truly worshiped God to begin with.

Staggering implications (7:7)

Before Stephen, the church thought of Jesus simply as the Jewish Messiah. After Stephen, it became clearer that he is the Savior of all peoples, not just of the Jews. The implications are staggering. Stephen's speech suggests a world mission not just to scattered Jews, but to all ethnic groups.

Stephen's speech indicates that the church should think about turning away from Jerusalem and the temple. It is time to evangelize other places besides Jerusalem – and this is exactly what will soon be done (8:1). Stephen's speech implies that Jewish institutions are of no value in themselves. They need to be left behind or seen in a new spiritual light. Most of all, the church is not just an extension of a righteous remnant *within* Judaism. It actually forms a new people of the Spirit.

There is an interesting aspect to Stephen's speech that implies that evangelization and theology must move beyond Jerusalem. He shows that God's activity in saving Israel occurred *outside* of Jerusalem and Judea. God appeared to Abraham while he was in Mesopotamia and Haran (7:2, 4). God rescued Joseph while he was in Egypt (7:10). Moses was called in Midian, near Mount Sinai (7:30). Israel was saved while in Egypt and protected in the wilderness (7:36). In Stephen's examples, God's work and calling took place outside of the promised land. He met his people, not just in a temple in Jerusalem, but anywhere he pleased. From this it can be surmised that God

is an international God interested in all people. The point is that God's presence and calling are not restricted to the land of Israel, or to one ethnic group, or a temple.

Stephen is arguing against a superstitious veneration of the temple and of Jerusalem. God's saving activity can take place anywhere. Thus, the church should be looking for a people (wherever they may be) who are willing to be submissive to the lead of the Holy Spirit.

Stephen's speech must be seen against the backdrop of the currently esteemed institutions in Judaism. Stephen's speech alerts his hearers to a deception about these venerated institutions. The Jews believe that God is present with them – with their group – because he is present in their land, their law and their temple. Yet, they were neglecting to look at themselves – that God needs to be in their thoughts and actions, wherever they are.

Stephen is not denouncing the law or the land, not even the temple. (He argues that the ancient Israelites were wrong to reject Moses.) Rather, Stephen is chastising his hearers for missing the obvious: they are sinners (as their fathers were) and need a Savior. By discussing Israel's sinful history, Stephen demonstrates that the Jews need a Savior. There's a great message in Stephen's sermon for all generations. As Christians we must not put faith in our group, our beliefs or institutions. Otherwise, we may forget that, as sinners, we also need a living Savior. Nor should we assume that God is only with us, and is not working anywhere else. Stephen is pointing out that we all need to put our faith in the Righteous One.

However, it is curious that Stephen does not mention the name of Christ in his speech, nor his resurrection (but we should also note that Stephen did not get a chance to finish his speech). This is in contrast to previous speeches in Acts, which focus on a glorified Jesus. Just before his speech was cut short by the angry mob, he condemned his listeners for betraying and murdering "the Righteous One," foretold in their own Scriptures (7:52) – a clear reference to the death of the Messiah.

Perhaps if Stephen could continue talking, he would focus on the resurrected and ascended Christ. But even without this emphasis, it is still clear where Stephen is going. Jewish faith in itself – and its institutions – as defining the people of God needs to be radically altered to make Jesus the center of worship.

Abraham (7:2-8)

Stephen begins his history of Israel at its most fundamental place, with God's call of Abraham. One of Stephen's objectives is to show that God

does not live in the Jerusalem temple (7:48). So here he says that the “God of glory” appeared to Abraham – not in Jerusalem, but in pagan Mesopotamia (modern Iraq and northeastern Syria).

The Jews associate the glory of God – the Shekinah – with the moveable tabernacle in the wilderness (Exodus 25:8; 40:34-38), and later the temple (Ezekiel 43:2, 4). So right at the beginning of his speech Stephen establishes that God needs neither tent nor temple to work with human beings. God’s self-revelation is not limited to the land of the Jews, certainly not to Jerusalem and the temple. Stephen draws his listeners to the important actor in the story – God.

Stephen respectfully calls the Sanhedrin members “brothers and fathers” (7:2). He also refers to Abraham as “our father.” For the moment, Stephen is framing the debate in the context of a family quarrel. Stephen places himself at one with the Sanhedrin throughout the speech by using this terminology (7:11, 12, 19, 38, 44, 45). Not until the end of his speech, when he delivers a final stinging rebuke, does he say “*your* fathers,” this time referring to Israelites throughout the ages, not the patriarchs.

Some questions (7:2-8)

Commentators pose some questions about the biblical quotations, numbers and chronology in Stephen’s speech. The difficulties are technical and do not affect the main thrust of the speech, or its important points. We will consider briefly some of the questions. These can point to a possible solution of the others.

One of these questions concerns the place of Abraham’s calling. Stephen states that God’s glory appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran (7:2). (Abraham’s family originally came from the Mesopotamian city of Ur.) The story of Abraham’s call in Genesis 11:27-5 seems to contradict Acts and implies that God’s call was given in Haran, not in Mesopotamia. However, Abraham’s call occurred in Ur as much as it did in Haran, and other Old Testament passages verify this. [Genesis 15:7; Joshua 24:3; Nehemiah 9:7.] Jewish tradition also agreed on this. [Philo, *On Abraham* 70-72; Josephus, *Antiquities* 1:154-157.] Abraham’s original call came in the city of Ur. After he moved to Haran, Abraham received a similar divine message.

Another difficulty in Stephen’s speech concerns numbers. He says that the Israelites were mistreated and enslaved in Egypt for 400 years (7:6). His phraseology seems to be taken from Genesis 15:14, which concurs on the number as being 400 years. However, according to Exodus 12:40, Israel’s

sojourning in Egypt lasted 430 years. Both Genesis and Stephen are using 400 as a round number, not a precise span. For the purpose of Stephen's speech, a round number is all that is needed. The period Israel spent in Egypt was actually shorter. Galatians 3:16-17 says that 430 years ran from the original covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:3, 7; 13:15) to the giving of the law after the Exodus. Abraham and his descendants were strangers in the land for 430 years, and most of that time period was characterized by mistreatment.

Joseph (7:9-16)

Though the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and his sons – are all mentioned by Stephen, Joseph is the real focus of the story. Joseph's ten older brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. But later Joseph became the prime minister of the nation. Meanwhile, a famine occurred in Egypt and Canaan. Joseph had stored enough food during the seven years of bounteous crops to see Egypt through the famine. Canaan was not so fortunate. Jacob and his brothers went to Egypt to buy food.

Joseph is the key to this part of Stephen's story. Earlier, Stephen painted Abraham as a man willing to answer the call of God and go where he was instructed. In the same way, Stephen shows Joseph to be a man of faith. And it is through faith that "God was with him and rescued him from all his troubles" (7:9-10). In the account of Abraham, Stephen shows God acting outside of the Holy Land, in Haran. Now he makes the point that God was with Joseph and his brothers in Egypt, again outside the Promised Land. Indeed, the name "Egypt" is repeated six times for emphasis in verses 9-16. Stephen is trying to make a point.

God did not save Jacob and his sons from famine in their new homeland. Rather, they had to go to Egypt – where Joseph was rescued by God – in order to get food. Then, the entire family settled *outside of* Canaan, in a particularly fruitful part of Egypt. There they all died. Stephen is continuing to exploit the account of Israel's history to show that God saves people outside of Judea and Jerusalem. The point is that God can work with individuals anywhere he chooses, and in whatever way he chooses.

Commentators also see parallels in the story of Joseph and the story of Jesus. Joseph is rejected by his brothers, just as Jesus is rejected by his own people (John 1:11). Joseph is thrown into a pit (the grave?) but God rescues him out of it. Though he is rejected by his own, strangers receive him (the Gentiles). Finally, Joseph is raised up to be the ruler, even as Christ has been glorified by God with all power over the nations.

The two visits (7:11-13)

Stephen even exploits the double visit of Jacob and his sons to Egypt to buy food. The brothers did not recognize Joseph on the first visit, an aspect of the story Stephen's listeners would be aware of. "Although Joseph recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him" (Genesis 42:8). However, "On their second visit, Joseph told his brothers who he was" (7:13). It is only because Joseph made himself known to them – and which made it possible for them to recognize him – could they be saved. Likewise, Jesus was rejected on his "first visit" in the incarnation. But there is an opportunity to recognize and accept him now on his "second visit" through the preaching of the church.

In Stephen's story the inability of Israel to recognize God's servant on the first visit was true for Joseph, Moses and the Righteous One (Jesus). This drives home the point that the Jews did not recognize their saviors.

More questions (7:14-15)

As in the Abraham panel, there are some technical difficulties in the Joseph story as well. For one, Stephen says that the number of people who went to Egypt was 75 (7:14). However, the figure in Genesis 46:27 is given as 70 – 66 individuals plus Jacob, Joseph and Joseph's two sons born in Egypt. Of course, when we say Genesis 46:27 gives the number as 70 (see also Exodus 1:5), we are referring to English translations, which are based on the Hebrew Masoretic [The Masoretes were Jewish scholars who copied the Hebrew Scriptures in the Middle Ages.] textual tradition.

However, the Septuagint *Greek* version of Genesis 46:27 (sometimes called "the Bible of the early Christian church") gives the number of people going down to Egypt as 75. It arrives at this figure by omitting Jacob and Joseph but including *nine* sons of Joseph in the total. Exodus 2:1 in this version also has the number 75. Stephen, a Greek-speaking Hellenist, was almost certainly following the text of the Septuagint version.

Buried in Abraham's tomb (7:16)

A second problem in this section concerns the place of burial of Abraham and his descendants. Stephen says that Jacob "and our fathers" are buried in a tomb in Shechem, which Abraham purchased from the sons of Hamor (7:16). However, the story is more complicated in the Old Testament. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were buried in the cave of Machpelah near Hebron, a plot Abraham had purchased from Ephron the Hittite (Genesis 23:1-20; 49:29-32; 50:13), and which is in Judea. Joseph, on the other hand,

was buried at Shechem (Joshua 24:32) in a plot Jacob had purchased from the sons of Hamor (Genesis 33:18-20 with Joshua 24:32).

It has been suggested that Stephen is simply condensing the two accounts of burial property purchases, one near Hebron and the other in Shechem. He did a similar thing in describing the two calls of Abraham at Ur and Haran as one. A variant explanation is that Stephen may be following a tradition that makes Shechem the burial place for the entire family.

However, Stephen may have an important purpose in singling out Shechem as the burial place. He is giving a speech to the leading Jews of Jerusalem, who hold their land in great esteem. But Stephen points out that the patriarchs are buried in Shechem, in the territory of the Samaritans. If the patriarchs allowed themselves to be buried in Shechem – and proper burial was important to Jews – it implies again that God can work anywhere. The point is, one need not be buried on “holy ground” to be resurrected to life. Perhaps we can also see in the mention of Samaritan territory a clue to the coming evangelization of Samaria (8:5-25).

Moses (7:20-43)

Stephen now turns to the story of Moses. This is the longest and most complex of the sections on Israel’s history. Moses’ life is discussed in three parts, each totaling 40 years (7:20-29; 30-35; 36-43). What is striking is the disproportionate emphasis on Moses. By comparison there are only two references to the Messiah, and those only in an indirect way. The Messiah is called the Prophet-like-Moses (from Deuteronomy 18:15) and the Righteous One, but not directly as either Christ or Jesus (7:37; 52).

There is a good reason for Stephen’s emphasis on Moses. He was accused of blasphemy against Moses” and saying that Jesus would “change the customs Moses handed down to us” (6:11, 14). In the speech, Stephen turns the accusation against those who had accused him. It is not he but the nation of Israel that is in rebellion against Moses, and they have been throughout their history (7:9, 35, 39, 51, 52).

Luke alerted us to the theme that a prophet like Moses would one day appear, when he earlier captured a point Peter made in the temple courts (3:22). Peter said that the Jews’ appointed Messiah ascended until the time when God would restore all things. At that juncture Peter referred to Moses’ statement that God will raise up a prophet like him from among the people – and that he must be listened to. Now Stephen reminds his hearers that Moses prophesied of the coming of a prophet like himself. Thus, they ought not reject outright the claims that Jesus fulfills the requirements.

As in the case of Joseph, Moses becomes a prototype of Christ in Luke's account. As Moses narrowly escaped death at the hands of Pharaoh (7:21), the infant Jesus was saved from Herod. Moses was "no ordinary child" (7:20). So was Jesus (Luke 2:52). Moses grew in wisdom and stature (7:22). So did Jesus (Luke 2:52). Moses was mighty in word and deed. Luke says the same thing of Jesus (Luke 24:19). Moses urged two fighting Israelites to make peace (7:26). The theme of peace was characteristic of Jesus' ministry (Luke 1:79; 2:14, 29; Acts 10:36). And, most directly, Moses is said to be a type of the Prophet-Messiah (Acts 7:37).

Stephen says that Moses "thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not" (7:25). This Moses-rejection theme is strong in Stephen's speech (7:23-29; 35). Like Moses, Jesus was sent to save his own people, but they rejected him. Stephen chastises the Sanhedrin for rejecting the Righteous One (Jesus) in the same way that their ancestors failed to recognize who Moses was (7:52).

Luke would undoubtedly expect his Christian readers to see here a parallel between Moses and Jesus as the saviors of God's people, whether or not Stephen's hearers would catch the point: the behavior of the Jews in refusing to recognize Jesus as Savior was of a piece with their earlier rejection of Moses (7:52). [Marshall, 140.]

In his speech, Stephen emphasizes Israel's rejection of God, of the law, and especially their Messiah. Thus, he draws a strong parallel between Israel's treatment of Moses and the Jews' treatment of Jesus. Stephen will drive this point home in a final, scathing indictment of the Sanhedrin (7:51-53). Stephen emphasizes that God's redemptive power was given to his people outside of Judea. In the Moses section this point is driven home by a repetition of non-Holy Land locations in which God interacted with Moses. God raised up Moses in Egypt (7:17-22); he provided for the rejected Moses in Midian (7:29); he commissioned Moses in the desert near Mount Sinai (7:30-34). God pronounced Mount Sinai to be "holy ground." Even though it is the most important place of Old Testament revelation, Sinai is outside the Holy Land. It has no sanctity of its own (7:30-34).

Stephen notes that Moses was sent back to Egypt – not Israel – to do God's will. God delivered his people within this pagan nation as well as at the Red Sea and the wilderness (7:35-36).

As Abraham was called out of the world – out of Ur and Haran – Moses had to flee Egypt to Midian. In a second step, he left Midian, and finally was called out of Egypt with the children of Israel. Stephen is making the point

that these men were ready to answer the call to come out of their society and follow God. Is Stephen giving the assembled Sanhedrin a hint that they must think about coming out of their society, which was centered on the temple and the law?

Stephen and the law (7:38-43)

Stephen describes Moses as one to whom an angel spoke on Mount Sinai, and who “received living words to pass on to us” (7:38). Here he counters the charge that he blasphemed Moses and spoke against the law. In effect, he turned the community’s Scriptures upon itself. Stephen speaks in warm tones of Moses as the mediator between God and his people, “the assembly [Greek, *ekklesia*, which usually means “church”] in the wilderness” (7:38). Christian readers would probably see a parallel between the wandering of Israel in the desert and their own pilgrimage with Jesus through life (Hebrews 12:18-24).

Stephen then points out that Moses “received living words to pass on to us” (7:38). By calling the words “living,” he implies that they have relevance for him and his audience. However, since Moses himself pointed to Someone beyond himself who *must* be listened to, God’s revelation and work cannot be limited to the law Moses had given the nation (John 1:17). There is additional revelation from God that the people must not reject.

Then comes the turning point in Stephen’s speech. He says of Israel’s reaction to Moses’ teaching and law: “Our ancestors refused to obey him” (7:39). Stephen’s hearers claimed he had blasphemed the law (and, hence, Moses), claiming it was done away by Jesus. Ironically, Stephen retorted, his hearers belong to a nation that had rejected the law from the beginning, and the Prophet when he came. Stephen then catalogues a litany of disobedient acts by the nation in the wilderness. They rejected Moses (hence God) and made an idol – the golden calf – and worshipped it. In their hearts they turned back to Egypt. Thus, “God turned away from them and gave them over to the worship of the sun, moon and stars” (7:42). Stephen quotes Amos 5:25-27 to support his assertion that this particularly detestable form of idolatry caused God to, in effect, to hide himself from Israel.

Stephen deals with the question: with whom is God working? The Jews may offer sacrifices and offerings at the temple, and even consider it as the place of God’s presence. They may venerate the law and be quite zealous for it. But it may be that the Jews are not really acting like God’s people after all. And if they are not, they like ancient Israel may be sent into “exile beyond Babylon” (7:43).

What is it about Moses they reject? Most importantly, they are not

listening to the Prophet (Messiah) Moses said *must* be listened to. Both the Hebrew text and the Septuagint have “Damascus” and not “Babylon” in Amos 5:27, a scripture Stephen quoted in 7:43. Probably the reason Stephen took this liberty with the text is that the Babylonian exile meant more to his hearers, since that is the one the Jews went into and returned from. This use of Scripture reminds us the Bible is a living book, and must be made relevant to the needs of all generations. Babylon was the place “beyond Damascus” that Amos had prophesied.

Stephen is saying that if they do not listen to the Prophet, they will suffer a fate worse than the Babylonian captivity. And as Luke’s readers may know, the Jews by and large do reject Jesus, and a worse fate does befall them. After a ravaging four-year war with the Romans, Jerusalem was captured, and the temple destroyed in A.D. 70, never to be rebuilt.

Tabernacle/temple (7:44-45)

In verse 44 Stephen begins to discuss the “tabernacle of the covenant law,” the movable center of worship the Israelites used in the wilderness. He only briefly mentions Solomon’s temple. The tabernacle was the center and focus of worship in Israel from the time it was made at the beginning of the wilderness wandering until King Solomon’s reign. David wanted to provide a permanent dwelling place for the tabernacle’s furniture, the ark in particular, in Jerusalem (Psalm 132:5). David expressed his desire to build a temple, and the prophet Nathan thought it a good idea (2 Samuel 7:1-3).

However, the word of the Lord came to Nathan with a different message for David regarding a permanent temple. Nathan was told by God to pass the message on to David that he didn’t need a permanent house from which to manifest his glory: “I have not dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place with a tent as my dwelling” (verse 6). It would seem that God did not particularly *want* a house built in his honor. Instead, God told David that God would build David a “house” – a dynasty (verse 13).

The point of Stephen’s discourse on the tabernacle seems to be that God was better served when his presence was revealed by means of a moveable structure. This would have reduced the tendency to institutionalize worship. It underscores Stephen’s contention that the Jews need to reorient their faith from a temple to the Messiah.

After tacitly praising the tabernacle era, Stephen proceeds to criticize the Jewish idea of the temple as the high point of their religion. He says of the temple, “The Most High does not live in houses made by human hands” (7:48). To paraphrase his thought, Stephen was saying, “Don’t think that God

lives in monuments erected by human beings.” (Paul said the same thing about pagan temples. In Acts 17:24, he said to his audience in Athens: “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.” Jews frequently criticized pagans for their hand-made idols, and Stephen is using the very same word to point out that their temple is also made by human hands.)

But the Jews made the temple their own private preserve. This had the effect in their minds of making God something of a caged bird, whose working was limited to Jerusalem, its institutions, land and people. That would mean that the only way a person could be saved is to become a Jew. But that effectively halts the advance of God’s universal purpose to work with all nations. There is a lesson here for all churches – with their own temples, churches, basilicas, holy places, systems of worship, theology and credos. God can work outside of established religions. He works wherever and however he pleases, and we must not limit him in our minds.

Concession or command? (7:44-50)

The prophets long ago warned the people against a false confidence in the temple and the rituals surrounding it. It was a mistake to think that because God “lived” in the temple, a sinning nation would automatically be preserved (Isaiah 1:10-17; Jeremiah 7:1-34). Stephen seems to imply that the temple was more of a concession on God’s part to human desire, than his real purpose. This criticizing attitude toward the temple is new in this early stage of the church. Earlier, Luke had gone out of his way to show the apostles and the church worshipping at the temple.

A parallel situation to the building of the temple might be Israel’s desire to have a king. God allowed it, and he even chose Israel’s kings, but he was displeased by the situation (1 Samuel 8:1-21). Once the institution was in place, God worked with it, and even spoke of preserving it. But a king brought all the evils of a state apparatus and bureaucracy. It created a government insensitive to the needs of the people and trusting in itself rather than God. Humanity’s experience with all sorts of governments through the ages underscores the validity of the point.

In the same way, the stationary temple created an ossified religious government in Jerusalem, and gave rise to an inflexible state of mind. The temple became the domain of a political-religious machine that took advantage of its people. An unpretentious and mobile tabernacle around which worship was based would have made it more difficult to centralize religious power. A tabernacle that moved from place to place would also remind people that God is not limited to one location. Ironically, this was

what Solomon himself said when he dedicated the original temple (1 Kings 8:27), and so did the prophet Isaiah later on (66:1). God is too big to be squeezed into a building. But the point was soon forgotten.

Stephen is re-echoing the thought, plainly saying to the Sanhedrin that temple worship can create a narrow view of God's salvation, thus limiting his purpose.

The Temple which should have become their greatest blessing was in fact their greatest curse; they had come to worship it instead of worshipping God. They had finished up with a Jewish God who lived in Jerusalem rather than a God of all men whose dwelling was the whole universe. [Barclay, 60.]

Yet, the glory of the Lord had been in Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8:10). Had Stephen gone too far in his criticism of the temple?

God can be found and worshipped anywhere on the earth, not just in the Jerusalem temple. The logical conclusion is that people of God can be found and have a relationship with him at the "place" where *they* were, not in a restricted "place," such as a temple. Jesus stated this principle when he said a time was coming when people would no longer worship the Father in Jerusalem. They would worship him anywhere they happened to be, and do it "in the Spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). One does not need to be in a special place at a special time in special circumstances to worship God. Since the Holy Spirit is given to whomsoever is called and responds to God in faith, there is "a new understanding of 'the holy place' in terms of a community (rather than a physical shrine)" (Williams, page 136).

Thus, it is the people of God themselves who constitute "the temple" where God lives through the Holy Spirit. They are "members of his household," and in Christ they "become a holy temple" (Ephesians 2:19-21). Paul alludes to this principle on several occasions, and it seems to have been the common understanding of the church that it was "God's temple" (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; 2 Corinthians 6:16). Perhaps Stephen was about to go on to describe what was implied by his criticism of the temple. That is, God's presence is not in the temple, but he is "dwelling" among people who put their faith in the Righteous One – Jesus.

Stephen's indictment (7:51-53)

Stephen seems to break off suddenly from his cataloguing of Israel's history. He suddenly begins a blistering attack on his hearers. Commentators speculate that Steven's blunt criticism of the temple may have created a violent clamor in the audience. The commotion in the Sanhedrin may have

caused Stephen to break off from his speech, and strongly censure his listeners.

If Stephen had continued his speech, he may have made his point about the temple more clear, and further clarified just who God's people are. This would have propelled him forward to the usual appeal: accept the resurrected and glorified Christ as Messiah. But Stephen's speech took a turn into direct denunciation. There is no more talk about the faithful patriarchs being "our fathers." Now, Stephen talks about his hearers' ancestors, the sinning Israelites (7:51).

Stephen insists that the Sanhedrin's refusal to acknowledge Jesus – and his murder – reflected the council's negative attitude towards God's messengers throughout Israel's history. Though Joseph was to be his brothers' deliverer, they hated him. Moses, who led the emancipation of Israel, was repudiated by the people. The prophets who announced the coming of the Righteous One – and who urged the nation toward faith in God – had been killed by their ancestors (Matthew 23:29-37). Luke had established this point in his Gospel.

Stephen says that his listeners are like their fathers in every way. Sin, rebellion against God, and rejection of his purpose characterizes Israel's history – and the Sanhedrin's. The council members are stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! (7:51). The Sanhedrin know exactly what Stephen means by this. Such words were often used by God in characterizing Israel's attitude toward him. [Exodus 33:3, 5; 34:9; Leviticus 26:41; Deuteronomy 9:6, 13; 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4; 9:6.] The speech is a bitter and abrupt denunciation of the leaders' rebellion. His listeners resist the Holy Spirit. They betrayed and murdered the Righteous One, of whom Moses spoke. *They* are not keeping the law that came from God through angels.

Paul later notes a similar rejection of God's calling by the Jews. He described the churches in Judea as suffering from the Jews "who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to everyone in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last" (1 Thessalonians 2:15-16).

Stephen is stoned (7:54-58)

Stephen places the death of Jesus squarely on the shoulders of the Sanhedrin, the spiritual leaders of the nation (Luke 24:20; Acts 4:10; 5:30). (Peter had been more charitable, saying in Acts 3:17 that the people killed

their Savior in ignorance.) The Sanhedrin's response to Stephen's speech is rage. When they hear Stephen's condemnation, they are "furious and gnashed their teeth at him" (7:54). Then comes the *coup de grace*. At the height of the Sanhedrin's wrath, Stephen, "full of the Holy Spirit" (7:55), has a vision of the glory of God, and Jesus standing at his right hand.

Just a few years earlier, Jesus stood in front of this same group. The high priest asked Jesus if he were the Messiah. Jesus answered: "I am...and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62). This image of Jesus at God's right hand is based on Psalm 110:1, a verse frequently used to support Jesus' Messiahship, particularly his resurrection and glorification (Luke 20:42; Acts 2:34; 5:31). In Acts 7:55 Jesus is said to be standing rather than sitting. Both were metaphors for being in the presence of God (Zechariah 3:1-8; Isaiah 6:1). But why is he standing? Elsewhere in the New Testament Jesus is sitting (Acts 2:34; Mark 16:19; Hebrews 1:3, 13).

This is also the only time that the phrase "the son of Man" appears in the New Testament outside the Gospels, the only time it is spoken by a disciple. It has its roots in Daniel 7:13. The title is probably meant to convey the fact that Stephen saw Jesus in his role as the spurned Messiah. He was to suffer and be rejected by the Sanhedrin – the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law (Luke 9:22).

This probably explains why the Son of man was seen standing, rather than sitting at God's right hand (2:34). He is standing as an advocate to plead Stephen's cause before God and to welcome him into God's presence. [Marshall, 149.]

Stephen's vision confirms Jesus' claim, which the Sanhedrin must have remembered. The Jewish council is being condemned for having rejected their Savior, and having him executed. When Jesus originally told the council that they would see him at God's right hand, it reacted by saying that Jesus had blasphemed and should be put to death (verse 64). Stephen is now making the same claim for Jesus as Jesus had made for himself. This brings the council to a frenzied hatred. Stephen is judged to be blaspheming, and the penalty for blasphemy was stoning to death (Deuteronomy 13:6).

F.F. Bruce wrote, "Unless the judges were prepared to admit that their former decision was tragically mistaken, they had no option but to find Stephen guilty of blasphemy as well." [Bruce, 155.] Luke's account indicates that the Sanhedrin is turning into a vicious mob. "Yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone

him” (7:57-58). Stephen becomes the first martyr to die for the name of Jesus.

There is no formal trial. A Roman form of execution was not used – Stephen is stoned. Even with a trial and guilty verdict, Rome has not given the Sanhedrin any right to put people to death for this offense, and they are supposed to confer with the Roman authority regarding capital punishment cases (John 18:31). This shows the intense anger of the Sanhedrin – they were so angry that they did not follow proper procedures.

Would the Sanhedrin get into difficulty with the Roman authority for overstepping its legal jurisdiction? Perhaps conditions were such in Judea that Roman power was weak or ineffectual at the time. Josephus describes a similar situation in which the high priest Ananus killed James in A.D. 62, the leader of the Jerusalem church congregation. [Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:200-203; and see Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23.16.] This may have occurred after the procurator of Judea, Festus, died and before Albinus arrived to assume his jurisdiction.

In the same way, some commentators conjecture that Stephen’s martyrdom may have occurred in the mid-30s, during the final years of Pilate’s governorship over Judea, when his power was growing weaker. Whatever the situation or reason, it appears that the Sanhedrin stoned Stephen to death, usurping Roman law, and got away with it.

Many Christians once held a belief that *all* Jews were responsible for killing Christ, and thus were guilty of his death. This is a gross misunderstanding. It could equally be said that the Jews and Romans were representing all humanity, and that *all* humans are guilty of his death. The martyrdom of Jews in numerous pogroms since Christ – often with the church’s complicity – is a blight on Christianity. While Stephen’s speech is “anti-Jewish” in the sense that it condemns the Jewish leaders who were present, it should not be misconstrued as a polemic against all Jews. That is not what Stephen had in mind, as the next verses show. Almost all the early Christians, including Stephen, *were* Jews. When *they* use the term “Jews,” it is obvious that they do not mean *all* Jews. But when non-Jewish people use the term “Jews,” it is not obvious, and needs to be clarified.

“Lord, please forgive them” (7:59-60)

As he lay dying, Stephen asks that the risen Jesus receive his spirit, and that his killers be forgiven. Stephen is following his Savior, who also asks forgiveness for his executioners (Luke 23:34). Stephen shows the same spirit of faith and forgiveness as characterized Jesus. Stephen accepts Jesus’ bid to come and follow him to the ultimate degree. The way Luke crafts the story

of Stephen, he emerges as a type of Christ. Detail after detail in Stephen's sermon and death remind us of the life and particularly the last days and death of Jesus.

The same power and prophetic spirit that characterize Jesus is at work in his disciples. As he was dying on the cross, Jesus said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). But Stephen commits his spirit to Jesus directly. That is a striking difference. Words applied to the Father are now addressed to the Son. For the early church, Jesus was in the role of God, in the sense of being the one who saves us. Even at this early date in its history, the church already had a "high" Christology.

Final thoughts

When Luke writes the book of Acts, somewhere between A.D. 62 and 85, it is becoming increasingly evident that the Jews will not be converted en masse. In fact, Jews continue to be the greatest persecutors of the church. If Luke writes after A.D. 70, then the temple no longer exists. Decades had elapsed, but Jesus neither returned to save the Jews (and the world), nor to glorify his church. No doubt there is great disappointment and wonderment in the church over these matters. The example of Stephen provides a ready case to illustrate the point that the Christian's duty is to serve God and have faith in Christ. Stephen also provides an example of Luke's main thesis in Acts. The growth of the church and the spread of the gospel is not the work of human beings. Rather, both increase because the Holy Spirit is at work among his people.



The apostles and the Jerusalem church thought that Stephen was a good choice to be a widows' helper and to take care of daily assistance (i.e., wait on tables). But he ends up doing nothing of the sort, so far as we can tell. Almost by accident and through the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit, Stephen jumps to the fore in understanding the deepest implications of the gospel message. (Meanwhile, another widow's helper – Philip – does some of the most amazing miracles in Jesus' name. He, rather than the Twelve, pushes the gospel out beyond Jerusalem to Samaria and the coast of Judea.)

The example of Stephen and Philip is Luke's way of saying that the story

is not about the work of super-star favorites, nor of planned programs. The Holy Spirit is leading the way, opening new vistas of spiritual understanding, thrusting the gospel into new geographical areas. At best, God's human servants are struggling to keep up the pace. We see this almost amusing pattern throughout the book of Acts.

Stephen's speech breaks new ground in the church's understanding of the role of Old Testament tradition for the church. Even though Stephen upholds the validity of Jewish law and worship, he marginalizes it by implying that neither land, law nor the temple are the center of worship. Christ is the center. In fact, Stephen says the Jews have never kept the law (in its real intent) and always resist the Holy Spirit. They did not have the right "mind" to be the people of God, since they lack the Holy Spirit. (Only the *new* congregation of Israel – the church – had been given the Spirit. At this point is it thoroughly Jewish as well, but that will soon change.)

Stephen carries the message of good news to new levels of understanding as far as what makes any people a people of God. His message also contains the seeds for understanding that Israel's forms of worship were just that – passing forms of worship. In Christ, a radical reinterpretation of worship, of God's presence, of his purpose with the human family and so on is needed. The Twelve have so far not said anything about the worship of the Jews as needing a radical transformation. They go to the temple and make it their center of worship, implying its institutions are to continue. They assume the Jews as an ethnic group are the people of God. The only problem is that they were guilty of rejecting and killing their Messiah.

Stephen's speech presages some dramatic changes in the worship of God. The book of Hebrews, a fundamental assessment of these changes, is a fuller statement of what Stephen pointed to. Ironically, Stephen leaped ahead of the apostles in understanding. Perhaps he did not really foresee all that he pointed to, but we have no way of knowing. Just as the resurrection of Jesus vindicated his message and ministry, the martyrdom of Stephen, and his vision of the risen Jesus, vindicates the accuracy of Stephen's understanding of the law.

The death of Stephen provides Luke with an important literary transition. With Stephen's death and his re-evaluation of Jewish faith, the story of the Jerusalem church is complete. Luke has shown how the apostles and others were witnesses in Jerusalem. Now it is time for Luke to show the gospel radiating out to "Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8).

ACTS 8: THE CHURCH EXPANDS INTO JUDEA, GALILEE AND SAMARIA

A young man named Saul (8:1)

Luke next introduces the man who will soon become the main character of Acts. He is Saul, later called by his Latin name Paul. (We will call him “Paul” from here on out.) Paul was born in Tarsus, a city in eastern Asia Minor (21:39). He was the son of an orthodox Jewish father – a “Hebrew of Hebrews” [Some commentators suggest that “Hebrew of the Hebrews” means that Paul grew up in Judea, speaking Aramaic like a native.] (Philippians 3:5) and was “a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees” (Acts 23:6).

Paul was trained in a Jerusalem rabbinic school under the respected teacher Gamaliel “in the law of our ancestors” – that is, the ancestral Jewish faith (22:3). He was a brilliant and dedicated student. He would later say of these early years of learning: “I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers” (Galatians 1:14).

Technically, Paul is a Hellenistic or Grecian Jew, like Stephen. He knows Greek culture, and is as comfortable in the Hellenistic world as he is in strict Judaism. But he is also part of the Jewish world in Jerusalem, speaking Aramaic like a native. He may have been in the Hellenistic Jewish “Synagogue of Freedmen,” where he heard Stephen speak. Like many Freedmen, Paul was more fanatically Jewish than many Jews native to Jerusalem. Paul may be a member of the Sanhedrin, or perhaps a younger assistant, and if so, he heard Stephen speak before it.

What effect do Stephen’s accusations have on Paul? Paul is suddenly confronted with an incisive attack on the traditions he venerates. He realizes Stephen is no ignorant Galilean. Here is a member of the Nazarean sect who is challenging the very basis of Judaism. There is only one thing to do, and that is to eliminate the threat. Along with the rest of the Sanhedrin, Paul can only cover his ears (7:57) and attack the messenger, Stephen. The Sanhedrin drags Stephen outside the city walls. As they are about to stone Stephen, they take off their outer garments and place them “at the feet” of Paul (7:58), who gives his approval to Stephen’s death (7:60). (It’s intriguing to think that Paul himself may be Luke’s source for the summary of Stephen’s speech, as well as the story of his stoning.)

Luke’s phrase “at his feet” may signify that Paul is a leader of the opposition to Stephen. Perhaps he is instrumental in rushing Stephen and dragging him outside of the city to a place of stoning. Luke uses the

expression “at the feet” three times in the story of church members selling their property and bringing the money to the apostles (4:35, 37 and 5:2). There it is clear that the expression is meant to convey the apostles’ leadership.

Luke says Paul “approved of their killing him” (8:1). How we see Paul’s role depends to some degree on how we understand this phrase. Is he merely agreeing with the stoning, or is he in some sense sanctioning, or even motivating it? If Luke uses the expression “at his feet” in the same way here as earlier, it makes Paul more than an uninvolved onlooker. That is, people placing their clothes at Paul’s feet would be offering a gesture to him – recognizing his authority. Paul, then, may be one of the instigators of Stephen’s murder. That he had a leadership role in the Jewish community seems to be corroborated by the fact that he becomes the point man in the persecution of Christians immediately following Stephen’s death (8:3; 9:1-2; 22:4-5).

Whatever Paul’s role, there is no mistaking that he becomes a driving force in persecuting the church in Jerusalem, and in other cities such as Damascus. The havoc he inflicts on the church would disturb him greatly for the rest of his life (Acts 22:20; 1 Timothy 1:13). Paul is here called a “young man” (7:58), but the expression doesn’t help us fix his age very narrowly. It could refer to someone between his mid-20s and 40. Josephus applies the term to Herod Agrippa when he was about 40. [*Antiquities* 18:197.]

Persecutes the church (8:1-4)

On the very day of Stephen’s death and burial, “A great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem” (8:1). This is Luke’s first use of the word “persecution,” and for the first time, rank-and-file believers are affected. Stephen’s death is not an isolated act of violence. A storm of persecution breaks out against the church in Jerusalem and increases in its fury. The prime agent in this campaign of persecution is Paul. Luke says, “Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison” (8:3). This is a vicious pogrom of intimidation against the Jerusalem church, and Luke tells us Paul “began to destroy the church” (8:3).

Paul was a zealot for Judaism, as he later admits. The proof of his zeal is that he violently persecutes the church (Philippians 3:6; Galatians 1:13, 22). He probably believes that the new faith is a dangerous distortion of the ancestral traditions he believes in – a distortion that endangers the nation’s favor with God. In later years, Paul refers to his devastation of the church as

a shameful period in his life (1 Corinthians 15:9; 1 Timothy 1:13). But that understanding comes later, after he is confronted by the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

Though Luke doesn't say, it is possible that the persecution is directed specifically against Hellenistic Jewish Christians, and those who share Stephen's views, those who downplay the importance of the temple. At least, the Hellenistic believers are the ones whose work Luke now begins to describe (8:4; 11:19). This point is indicated by the fact that the apostles, who seem supportive of Jewish institutions such as the temple, are not forced to flee Jerusalem (8:1). Also, we find disciples in Jerusalem a short time later (9:26). This round of persecution apparently doesn't last long. Luke soon notes that the church throughout Judea, Samaria, and Galilee is living in peace (9:31). Later we will see that the church in Jerusalem is flourishing under the leadership of James. He is called James the Just, and is known for his piety and respect for Jewish institutions. (But even he will be martyred under the urging of the high priest in A.D. 62.)

Church scatters (8:1, 4)

For the present, those of the Jerusalem church who are successfully hunted down are persecuted, beaten and imprisoned – and possibly killed. Others see what is coming and flee throughout the province of Judea and Samaria (8:1). This flight of church members actually causes the gospel to spread more widely. “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went” (8:4). Later in Acts, we learn that people are traveling as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, “spreading the word only among Jews” (11:19). The law of unintended results begins to operate against Saul and the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem. William Willimon writes:

Earlier, it had been predicted that the gospel would be taken by witnesses into “all Judea and Samaria” (1:8). Little did the followers know then that the impetus for this far-flung evangelism would be persecution! These refugees, scattered like seed, take root elsewhere and bear fruit. God is able to use even persecution of his own people to work his purposes. [William Willimon, *Acts* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1988), 65]

Philip preaches the gospel (8:5)

The first seven chapters of Acts deal with mission work among Jews in Jerusalem. Luke is now finished with this part of the story, and he begins to

describe gospel outreach activities further afield. He mentions that the scattered members of the Jerusalem church flee to other parts of the province of Judea, preaching the gospel as they go (8:1, 4). However, Luke gives no further details about the evangelization of Judea, nor does he mention anything about the churches in other cities of this province. (He is also silent about the work and church in Galilee.)

Rather, Luke turns his attention to Samaria, where scattered members of the Jerusalem church also evangelize. They apparently know that Jesus' earlier ban on the disciples entering any city of the Samaritans (Matthew 10:5) has been lifted. Samaria was once the capital of the northern ten-tribed House of Israel, which separated from Judah after Solomon died. In the eighth century B.C., the northern kingdom was invaded by Assyrians. Samaria was destroyed and many of the people were deported to other parts of the Assyrian empire (2 Kings 17:17:5-6). The area of Samaria was resettled by peoples from other parts of the empire. The story of this resettlement is told in 2 Kings 17, beginning with verse 24. And in the intervening 700 years, many other peoples moved in and out of the area.

The antagonism between Samaritans and Jews is centuries old, and in some ways it dates back to the Assyrian resettlement. It was intensified when the Samaritans opposed the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple in the fifth century B.C. [Ezra 4:1-16; Nehemiah 2:10; 4:1-8; 6:1-14; 13:4-8.] This caused an unhealed and bitter hatred between Jews and Samaritans that grew more intense through the passage of time. The Samaritans built a temple on their own sacred hill, Gerizim. [Josephus, *Antiquities* 11:310, 322-24, 246.] The Jews under the Hasmonean ruler John Hyrcanus I (134-104 B.C.) destroyed this temple when they conquered Samaria in the second century B.C. and added this territory to their realm.

But in 63 B.C. the Romans conquered the Jewish kingdom. The Samaritans were liberated from Judean domination, but the unfriendly relations between the two peoples continued.

For Jews to enter Samaria to evangelize the people and bring them into fellowship with Jewish Christians is a bold step indeed. Yet, there they go!

Mission to Samaria (8:5)

While Luke wants his readers to understand that a number of believers from Jerusalem evangelize Samaria, he describes only the work of Philip. He begins with a simple summary of his activities: "Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Messiah there" (8:5).

There is some disagreement as to which city Luke has in mind. Some

commentators think it is the capital city of the province. In Old Testament times it was called Samaria, but Herod the Great had rebuilt it, naming it Sebaste. Others believe that Luke has Shechem in mind, because it is the leading Samaritan city. [Josephus, *Antiquities* 11:340.] Some think the Samaritan city of Gitta is the one Philip goes to. According to Justin Martyr, Gitta was the home town of Simon Magus. [*Apology* 1.26.] Another candidate for the site of Philip's original evangelization of Samaria is Sychar, a twin city of Shechem. It is near Shechem and is the site of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman, and many people there believed that Jesus is the Messiah (John 4:5).

Proclaims Christ (8:5-8)

At first glance, we might assume the mission to Samaria is the first step in the evangelization of Gentiles. However, Jews consider the Samaritans more as schismatics than as Gentiles. (Samaritans kept the laws that distinguished Jews from Gentiles. We will later see that Peter had no problem in going to the Samaritans, but he needs a mind-changing vision before he visits a Gentile.) To put it another way, the Samaritans are viewed as "half-breeds," both religiously and racially, by the Jews. But they were thought of more as heretics from the faith rather than outright pagans.

The Samaritans themselves claimed to belong to the true stock of Israel and to be worshippers of Yahweh; they observed the Sabbath, and practiced circumcision. But they had their own temple on Mount Gerizim, and recognized only the Pentateuch as holy Scripture. They were therefore regarded by the Jews as heretics and schismatics rather than as heathens. [E. William Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), page 120.]

The Samaritans, like the Jews, expect a deliverer to come, a hope based on Deuteronomy 18:15. Jews call him the Messiah; Samaritans call him the *Tabeb*, or restorer. John alludes to this Samaritan belief in the story of Jesus' encounter with a woman of Samaria (John 4:25).

It's surprising that any Jew is willing to go to Samaria to preach the gospel. Jews have no dealings with Samaritans (John 4:9). The hostility between the two groups is highlighted in the Gospel of John. When Jesus' Jewish critics curse him, they can think of no more vile epithet than to call him a Samaritan (John 8:48). Samaritans are hostile to Jews, as well. Luke records an incident that shows their hostility. The Samaritans of a small village refuse to welcome Jesus and his disciples simply because they are traveling to Jerusalem (Luke 9:52-56).

Yet, the two peoples do have much in common. The Jerusalem missionaries such as Philip can build on the common hope of a coming Messianic restorer. Since the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) are holy to the Samaritans, Stephen can speak of the Messiah as the second Moses. That is precisely what he does. In his preaching, Philip builds on the common hope for a coming Savior when he proclaims Christ (8:5).

Philip, a Hellenistic Jew, also finds himself on common ground with the Samaritans because he, too, is an outcast from Jerusalem. News about the persecution suffered by the Christian Hellenistic Jews has probably reached Samaria, making the Samaritans more disposed to receive the missionaries. If the *apostles* went to Samaria, associated as they are with Jerusalem and Judaism, their attempts to evangelize might be snubbed. But now, Jews who are also rejected by Judaism (as the Samaritans are) are coming to Samaria. Thus, they share a status out of which a common bond can be forged. God works in mysterious ways!

But we do not want to ascribe the success of the mission to Samaria solely to sociological factors. In the final analysis, Philip's message finds fertile ground because of the work of the Holy Spirit. Luke writes that when the Samaritans see the miracles, "they all paid close attention to what he said" (8:6). As at Pentecost, it is God's power that gets the attention of people so that some might become receptive to the gospel message. Luke is telling his readers that Philip's work is to be seen in continuity with that of Jesus. Like Philip, Jesus performed miraculous works, expelling demons and healing the sick. [Luke 4:33, 36; 6:18; 7:21; 8:2, 29; 9:42; 11:24.]

The work of the Hellenistic Jews (such as Philip) constitutes a new advance of the gospel and the church. But it occurs in Samaria, a quasi-Jewish environment. A dispossessed group, but within the boundaries of ancient Israel, is experiencing the outreach of Christ through the church. However, a mission to pagan Gentiles is yet to occur.

Simon the great power (8:9-13)

Luke intertwines his story of the Samaritan mission with that of a famous local religious personality named Simon, generally called Simon Magus or Simon the Sorcerer (Magician). He looms large in the writings of second-century Christians as the first heretic, troubler of the church, and founder of Gnostic Christianity. The early Christian theologian Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202), bishop of Lyons, France, calls Simon the originator of a number of heresies. [*Against Heresies* 1:23.] Justin Martyr, a native of Samaria who died around A.D. 165, says that his countrymen revered Simon as "the first god" or God

above all. [*Apology* 1:26.] Luke notes a similar belief about Simon, saying he is known as “the Great Power” (8:10). According to Justin, Simon goes to Rome during the reign of emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54), where his feats of magic bring him great honor.

Exactly how the Simon of Acts 8 is related to Simon Magus of later legend is not clear. So much myth has gathered around his name that it is difficult to assess his real importance. If the Simon of Acts 8 is Simon Magus, and he is anywhere near as prominent as later writers say he is, then Luke may have good reason to include him in his account. By the time Luke writes, Simon and/or his followers may be well-known opponents of the church. Simon may even be claiming to be part of the church, teaching in its name. After all, “Simon himself believed and was baptized” (8:13). Luke may want to make clear to his readers that Simon has no relationship with the Christian community, nor does he have the approval of the apostles and Holy Spirit – despite the fact that he (or his followers) claim Christian roots.

Peter and John go to Samaria (8:14)

The overwhelming success of the mission to Samaria soon reaches the ears of the apostles in Jerusalem. Peter and John are sent to Samaria as emissaries of the Jerusalem church (8:14). There are several reasons why the apostles go to Samaria. For one, it is a mission of goodwill – to show that the church is one body. By sending the apostles to Samaria, the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem are demonstrating their brotherly bond with the Samaritan disciples. The Jerusalem church also needs to satisfy itself of the genuineness of the Samaritan conversions. Once they do so, there will be no question of the mother church accepting these new converts.

By going to Samaria, Peter and John are also confirming the validity of the Hellenistic Christians’ ministry of evangelization. During the early years of the church, the apostles seem to exercise a general supervision over the progress of the gospel in general (11:22). But we should also note the collegial method of decision-making at Jerusalem. It is the *church* that sends the apostles to Samaria (8:14).

Samaritans receive the Spirit (8:15-17)

When the Samaritans are baptized in Jesus’ name (8:12, 16), there is no visible evidence that they receive the Holy Spirit. Only after the apostles pray for the Samaritan disciples and lay hands on them, does God give visible evidence of the Spirit (8:17).

Why this delay? Luke does not hint at any deficiency in the Samaritan believers’ faith. Philip does not perceive any, and neither do the apostles. Nor

do the apostles need to enlighten the Samaritans any further about the faith. (On the other hand, it must be pointed out that Simon's sin is not evident right away, either – it becomes known when he tries to buy the power to give the Holy Spirit.)

An important point may be behind the delay in the evidence of the Holy Spirit for the Samaritan believers. Luke may be implying that the Samaritans need to be brought into the church as a whole, not just into its Hellenistic branch. This does not mean that converts can receive the Holy Spirit only through the apostles. Ananias, with no known ministerial function (and certainly not an apostle), is the human instrument through which the Holy Spirit is given to Paul (9:17). Luke may be trying to show that God wants a link established between Jerusalem and the new venture in Samaria. So God seems to delay the Spirit until the Jerusalem apostles validate the Samaritans' conversion so they might become fully incorporated into the community of believers.

If the Spirit came on the Samaritans immediately upon their baptism, perhaps they would remain under suspicion by the mother church in Jerusalem. But when two apostles of high standing in the church validate the Samaritans' conversion, and show that God fully accepts this despised ethnic group, they will also be fully accepted by believers in Jerusalem. Since the apostles are the instruments through whom the Holy Spirit comes, something of a Samaritan "Pentecost" occurs (8:15-17), giving further proof that God is working among the Samaritans. The conclusion is inescapable: God loves Samaritans in the same way that he does Jews.

How do people know that the Samaritans receive the Spirit? Luke's story assumes it can be known, but he doesn't say how. Some speculate that the original Pentecost charismatic gifts occur again, such as speaking in other languages. For example, Simon "sees" something when the Spirit is given, and we might wonder what visible manifestation Simon reacts to (8:18). But Luke gives no indication that charismatic gifts are manifested every time converts receive the Spirit. Luke makes no mention of any such gifts in this account. Perhaps the Samaritan converts outwardly exhibit a sense of spiritual joy, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). Luke and Paul both indicate in their writings that in some cases the evidence of *joy* can signal the presence of the Spirit (13:52; 16:34; 1 Thessalonians 1:6).

In this case, the Holy Spirit is given only after the laying on of hands. However, we should not assume that this is a requirement in all cases. For example, Luke does not say that the believers converted on Pentecost had hands laid on them (by the apostles or anyone else) before receiving the Spirit

(2:38-42). The laying on of hands is also not mentioned in Luke's account of the household of Cornelius receiving the Spirit (10:44-48). The point is that believing in Christ and being baptized is the fundamental path to "receiving" the Spirit, not laying on of hands. F.F. Bruce writes, "In general, it seems to be assumed throughout the New Testament that those who believe and are baptized have also the Spirit of God." [F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Rev. ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), page 169.]

The laying on of hands, however, is an important outward symbol of acceptance. The person doing the action represents the community, which extends its acceptance of the people who are putting their faith in Christ. The ceremony is also a symbol of the transfer of God's power, through the church, to an individual. The laying on of hands is used in various situations in the early church, and so it is today. The apostles pray and lay hands on the Seven, ordaining them to a particular task (6:6). Paul lays his hands on the father of Publius and heals him (28:8). And it is done here so the Samaritans will receive the Spirit.

The elapsed time between the Samaritan's baptism and receiving of the Spirit has given rise to two widely held beliefs in the Christian world. One is the doctrine of "confirmation" and the other is "the baptism of the Spirit" as a second work of grace after conversion. In some Christian circles a person is baptized, perhaps during infancy, and later in life is "confirmed" in the church by a profession of faith. In a few other denominations, a person may be regarded as converted but later be "confirmed" by exhibiting a special outward manifestation of charismatic gifts.

Nothing of either idea is suggested in Acts 8. The delay in God's granting the Holy Spirit is simply due to a special situation, as discussed above. It is important that the Samaritan believers be accepted as full converts in the church community, and this requires the involvement of the apostles. Also, the Samaritans are baptized as adults, and they receive the Spirit within days or weeks. Luke does not mention any accompanying charismatic gifts, such as glossolalia, as occurring here. Thus, no doctrinal innovations are intimated in Luke 8, and none should be drawn out of the account.

Simon tries to buy the Spirit (8:18-24)

Luke next takes up the story of Peter's encounter with Simon, who tries to buy the power to distribute the Holy Spirit. "Give me also this ability," he asks, "so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit" (8:19). Simon had no appreciation for the *inward* operation of the Spirit. He

thinks the apostles are using a magic technique worth purchasing, one that will bring him more prestige and power.

Peter flatly rejects Simon's offer. He says that Simon has "no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God" (8:21). Peter gives Simon a scathing rebuke about his spiritual blindness. The Phillips translation catches the sense of his dire reprimand: "To hell with you and your money!" (8:20). While this is a strong curse, Peter also urges Simon to repent and seek forgiveness because he is "full of bitterness and captive to sin" (8:23).

But Simon doesn't understand, and has his mind only on physical consequences. "Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me," he answers (8:24), and that's the last we hear of him in Acts, or anywhere else in the New Testament. Luke concludes the story of the church's mission to Samaria with a single-sentence summary that hints at a much larger mission in the territory. Peter and John preach the gospel "in many Samaritan villages," and then return to Jerusalem (8:25).

An angel directs Philip to Gaza (8:26)

Philip's role in Samaria may be over, but he is about to play another important part in spreading of the gospel. An angelic messenger appears to Philip and instructs him: "Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza" (8:26). Commentators point out that when Luke wants to stress the presence and activity of God, he often uses an expression like "the angel of the Lord" (as he does in 8:26) rather than "the Spirit of the Lord." [Some examples are in Luke 1:11, 13, 26, 28; 2:9, 13; 22:43; Acts 5:19; 7:30, 35, 38; 8:26; 10:3, 7, 22; 11:13; 12:7, 11, 23; 27:23.] Used here, the expression is a vivid way of describing Philip's divine guidance.

This is another opportunity for Luke to stress that the evangelistic work of the church is initiated by God, who sends his divine messenger to Philip. Whatever mission work Philip is about to do is not based on a program the church has thought out. After all, in this case, what would be the point of traveling to a "desert road" that leads to Gaza, and preach the gospel there?

But that's what Philip is told to do – go down the road that leads to the edge of the desert. (The road from Jerusalem to Gaza is 50 miles long, and leads to the main coastal trade route going to Egypt.) Commentators point out that the word "desert" in Luke's account can refer either to Gaza or to the road. Most likely the former is in view here. Apparently, the old town of Gaza is referred to as "Desert Gaza," in distinction to a newer town named

Gaza. This is the southernmost of the five main Philistine cities in southwestern Judea. It is also the last settlement before a traveler encounters the barren desert stretching to Egypt.

The Ethiopian official (8:27-28)

As Philip travels the road to “Desert Gaza,” he meets an Ethiopian eunuch. This man is what we might call the Secretary of the Treasury or the Chancellor Exchequer for Kandake, the Ethiopian queen (8:27). As a minister of finance, he is an important official in the queen’s “cabinet.” The Ethiopians are Nubians, living in Southern Egypt and the Sudan, between modern Aswan and Khartoum. (The modern nation of Ethiopia is further south.) Kandake is a dynastic title, such as Pharaoh, not a personal name. All Ethiopian queens have that name. According to ancient writers, the Nubian king is said to be too holy to become involved with profane matters of state, [Strabo, *Geography* 17.1.54; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 6.186.] so the mother of the king rules on behalf of her son.

Luke says of Kandake’s eunuch that he went “to Jerusalem to worship” (8:27). Though he is probably a Gentile, he is most likely a proselyte or “God-fearer.” This is indicated by the fact that the eunuch makes a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and is now studying the book of Isaiah. (It would be difficult for a non-Jew to get a copy of the Isaiah scroll, but a minister of finance would no doubt have more ability than the average Gentile.)

Israel’s law excludes the sexually deformed from being able to “enter the assembly of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 23:1), and eunuchs were not allowed in the innermost court of the temple. Yet, Isaiah predicts a time when this ban will be removed (56:3-5). It’s not clear how first-century Judaism regards eunuchs, and whether they are allowed even in the outermost courts. Some commentators feel that Luke does not mean to say that the Ethiopian is truly a “eunuch.”

Other commentators disagree. They point out that both the word “eunuch” and “official” describe the Ethiopian in the same verse (8:27). If “eunuch” simply means “official” here, then Luke would be redundant. Because Luke used both terms in the same sentence, it seems he intends us to understand that the Ethiopian is sexually mutilated, or a eunuch. In ancient times it was common for male servants of a queen to be eunuchs.

Eunuch baptized (8:29-38)

As Philip, at the behest of the Spirit, runs up to the Ethiopian eunuch’s chariot, he hears him reading from the book of Isaiah (8:32-33). It is hardly an accident that at the precise moment of Philip’s arrival the Ethiopian is

reading a passage that makes him open to the good news about Jesus. The Ethiopian is reading from the Suffering Servant section in Isaiah 53. As Philip approaches the chariot, the eunuch asks him whether the prophet is talking about himself or someone else (8:34).

Philip immediately takes advantage of this God-given opportunity. “Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus” (8:35). Jesus quoted from Isaiah 53, saying it would be fulfilled in his death (Luke 22:37). Now, Philip is preaching the same message. Philip, like Peter, apparently tells the eunuch that anyone who accepts Jesus as Messiah should be baptized for the remission of sins, and will be filled with the Holy Spirit (2:38). Thus, when somewhere along the road the Ethiopian sees water (a rarity in this area, except for the Mediterranean Sea), he asks for baptism.

The eunuch halts his chariot, goes to the water and both of them go “down into the water and Philip baptized him” (8:38). The phrase “went down into” implies that the baptism was done by immersion. Jesus himself was baptized this way (Mark 1:9-10). The fact that the official goes “on his way rejoicing” indicates that he has received the Holy Spirit (8:39). Luke often sees joy as a response to God’s work in the world. [Luke 1:14, 28; 2:10; 6:23; 8:13; 10:17, 20; 13:17; 15:5, 7, 10, 32; 19:6, 37; 24:41, 52.]

Africa has now been reached by the gospel in the person of the Ethiopian eunuch. In him, the prophecy of Psalm 68:31 is beginning to be fulfilled: “Ethiopia [Cush] will quickly stretch out her hands to God” (New King James Version).

Most modern translations omit verse 37 from the text and place it in a footnote, because the oldest manuscripts do not have this verse. The verse reads: “Philip said, ‘If you believe with all your heart, you may.’ The eunuch answered, ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’” The verse simply makes explicit something that the other verses imply; it seems that an early scribe thought it should be more explicit, added it to the text, and many copyists followed suit.

The evangelization and baptism of a high-ranking Ethiopian represents another step in the advance of the gospel from its Jewish origins to a wider Gentile world. However, the church is still far from engaging in a full-bore missions effort directly to pagan Gentiles.

Angel takes Philip away (8:39)

Having fulfilled his role with the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip is suddenly snatched away by “the Spirit of the Lord” (8:39). The story of the eunuch’s

conversion ends where it began, with God's presence and direct intervention. Luke is again making the point that the gospel is being preached and people are being converted at God's direction, not by human desire.

The presence of the gospel out here in the desert of Gaza with this Ethiopian of somewhat murky physical, religious, and ethnic status can only be attributed to the constant prodding of the Spirit. If the good news is being preached out there, it is the work of God, not of people. No triumphal, crusading enthusiasm has motivated the church up to this point, no mushy all embracing desire to be inclusive of everyone and everything. Rather, in being obedient to the Spirit, preachers like Philip find themselves in the oddest of situations with the most surprising sorts of people. [Willimon, *Acts*, page 72.]

Philip preaches along the coast (8:40)

Luke next recounts Philip's sudden appearance at the coastal town of Azotus. Philip travels in the area, "preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea" (8:40). Azotus is the old Philistine city of Ashdod, about 20 miles north of Gaza. Philip works his way north along the coastal road that runs through the coastal plain. He apparently preaches the gospel in such coastal cities as Lydda, Joppa, Jamnia and Antipatris. He probably spends considerable time in each town. What we have in Luke's brief notation is a missionary journey of substantial duration. Luke passes over in only one sentence the details of what may have been a months-long work.

Philip's final destination is Caesarea, which is either where he lived or later settled. After arriving in Caesarea, he disappears from Luke's account for 20 years. He reappears as Paul's host in chapter 21. By this time he is the father of four daughters, all four of whom prophesy (21:8-9).

Philip may have been Luke's source for much of the information in Acts 8. Luke is with Paul when they stay with Philip's family in Caesarea before the final Jerusalem visit (21:8). He would have ample opportunity to discuss the events described in chapter 8. If Luke gathers his material at a later time, he could still interview one or more of Philip's daughters about the early days of the church.

CHRISTIANITY SPREADS TO THE GENTILES

ACTS 9: THE CONVERSION AND CALL OF SAUL

Persecution threatened in other cities (9:1-2)

Luke's account now switches to describe the conversion of Paul, who will dominate the rest of Acts. While making Paul the focus of his interest, Luke never loses sight of the fact that the Holy Spirit, and hence God, is the true center of his story.

Luke begins his description of Paul's conversion in chapter 9 by continuing the story of his persecution of the church. "Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples," says Luke of Paul's campaign of persecution against the church in Jerusalem (9:1).

Paul even travels to other towns, Damascus in particular, in order to round up Christians. As he later tells King Agrippa, "I even hunted them down in foreign cities" (26:11). To Paul, stamping out the Christians is a necessary part of doing God's will. They are teaching a blasphemous heresy that threatens the people of God (the Jews) and the sanctity of the law and temple. It is surely God's will that such people should be silenced.

Paul can justify his actions against the church by looking to the heroes of Israel's history. Phinehas killed an Israelite man and Midianite woman who were defying the law of God (Numbers 25:6-15). Elijah killed the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:40). Mattathias, the father of the Maccabees, used violence to root out the enemies of God and apostates among the people (1 Maccabees 2:1-28, 42-48).

Thus it is that Paul sets out toward Damascus with the zeal of an avenging prophet. He has letters from the high priest with authority to extradite any Christians he finds in the synagogues of Damascus. Paul will capture them and return them to Jerusalem for trial and punishment (9:2). Most likely those being hunted down are the Hellenistic Christians who fled Jerusalem, not those who lived permanently in Damascus. So far as we know, the high priest has no direct authority over the latter, since they are not in his immediate jurisdiction.

Later, Paul explains that the entire council signed the order of extradition he was given (22:5). Luke is pointing out that the Jewish leaders continue to be in the forefront of trying to eradicate the new sect of Jesus believers. Some questions have arisen over exactly what powers of extradition the letters from

the high priest gave Paul. Two centuries earlier, Rome had decreed that Jews who fled to Egypt could be extradited to Jerusalem (1 Maccabees 15:15-24). They were then to be punished according to Jewish law.

Whether this authority to extradite exists in the time of Paul is not known. It's possible the high priest still holds the power of extradition from the Roman authorities. If not, the Sanhedrin may be relying on its clout with local synagogues to cooperate in this matter. The political situation in Judea is unstable, with the Roman governor not wanting to intervene in "Jewish matters." Thus, the council may hope to punish as many Christians as possible without the advance knowledge or intervention of the Roman authority.

"The way" (9:2)

In his account, Luke refers to the threatened Christian community as "the Way" (9:2). It seems to be a name by which the church identifies itself. Luke uses the term several times in Acts (19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). The name recalls the words of Jesus when he said, "I am the way" (John 14:6). The Qumran community also refers to its mode of life as "the way." To them "the way" points to the community's strict obedience to the Law of Moses. However, the Christians stress faith in the salvation brought by Jesus, who was "the Way."

It's easy to see why the word "way" or "road" is a Christian metaphor for "manner of life." It has to do with the believers' understanding that a person needs to walk in the path of God's salvation, in obedience and faith to him. Opponents, of course, think that the church is walking the wrong path. Outsiders refer to the church not as "the Way" but as "the sect of the Nazarenes" (24:5, 14; 28:22).

Interestingly, the church does not seem to refer to itself as "Christian" very often. The term was coined at Syrian Antioch (11:26), by outsiders, and the name appears only twice more in the New Testament (Acts 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16). "Christian" is at first an outsider name for the disciples, not one the community uses for itself.

On the road to Damascus (9:3)

When Luke turns to Paul's conversion experience, he places him on the highway, near Damascus. Paul has traveled about 150 miles (242 kilometers) from Jerusalem. Damascus is one of the cities of the Decapolis, which is a league of self-governing cities in eastern Syria and the area east of the Jordan river (Matthew 4:25; Mark 7:31). Damascus is a thriving commercial center, part of the Roman province of Syria since 64 B.C. The city has a large

Nabatean Arab population, a fact that might figure later into this part of Paul's life. (The Nabatean kingdom stretched from the desert southward to the Red Sea, and its capital was Petra.) Damascus also has a large Jewish population. Josephus says that 10,500 Jews were killed in the city when the Jewish-Roman war broke out in A.D. 66. [*Wars* 2:561; 7:368.]

The moment of encounter (9:3)

Acts 9 gives us the first of three accounts of Paul's conversion. The story is also told as part of Paul's speech before a Jerusalem crowd (22:5-16) and his testimony before Agrippa and Festus (26:12-18). This is one of the most significant events in the early church's history, and it's not surprising that Luke gives us three versions of it. Paul himself writes of the importance of his encounter with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road: "God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me" (Galatians 1:15-16).

The three accounts of Paul's conversion in Acts show some minor variations, mostly in what each adds or omits from the basic story. We'll refer to a few of these differences (which don't affect the main story) as we make our way through the account here in chapter 9, and also when we discuss chapters 22 and 26. [A comparison of these three accounts is posted at www.gci.org/acts/harmony.]

As Luke's story begins, Paul is nearing Damascus when a light suddenly flashes around him. The shock causes him to fall to the ground. That's when he hears a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (9:4). The men traveling with him, perhaps temple police, stand speechless, as "they heard the sound [Greek, *phōnē*] but did not see anyone" (9:7). Luke doesn't indicate whether Paul's companions saw the light, but they did not see Christ manifested (9:7).

In the other accounts later in Acts, we find that the bright light flashed, not at night, but at high noon. To Paul it is brighter than the sun, which makes it all the more surprising (26:13). In Acts 22, Paul says the men with him see the light, which chapter 9 doesn't mention. In this later account, Paul says that the men do not hear the sound, presumably meaning that they do not "understand the voice," as the NIV puts it (22:9). The Greek word *phōnē* can mean either "sound" or "speech." What apparently happens in this case is that the whole group hears a sound but only Paul understands it as spoken words. Similarly, the group sees the light but only Paul perceives the risen Jesus.

“Why do you persecute me?”

The voice addresses Paul in Aramaic, something we learn from Paul’s account of the event given before Agrippa (26:14). (Is it because this is the language Jesus spoke, or the one Paul spoke as a first language?) “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” the voice asks (9:4). The double name is used for emphasis, and is found in other stories of divine calling, including Abraham’s, Jacob’s and Moses’ (Genesis 22:11; 46:2; Exodus 3:4).

Paul is confused. He doesn’t see himself as persecuting God. Paul thinks he is doing God a service, defending his way against the apostate Christians. Saul then asks, “Who are you, Lord?” Saul doesn’t yet know it is Jesus. He seems to understand his vision as a revelation from God. As the account shows, Paul is open to God’s self-revelation, even though he is unaware of his purpose.

The figure standing before Paul shocks him greatly when he answers, “I am Jesus” (9:5). It is not directly stated in this verse that Paul actually *sees* the risen Christ, but only that he hears his voice. But it is confirmed soon afterwards, when Luke introduces Ananias (9:17) and Barnabas (9:27) into the account. Ananias refers to “Jesus, who appeared to you” (9:17). It’s clearly stated in the versions of this event Paul gives to Agrippa (26:16) and a Jewish crowd (22:14) that he sees Christ.

When the risen Christ tells Paul he has been persecuting him, he is making an important point. Paul is not rejecting human beings, but by his actions, he is rejecting Christ himself (Luke 10:16). In persecuting the church Paul is persecuting the body of which Jesus is the head. [Romans 12:4, 5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-17; Ephesians 5:30; Colossians 1:18.] Christ and his church are one, and he has a tangible presence on earth through his believers. Paul learns that these Nazarenes – these followers of Jesus whom he despises – are not confused heretics. They, rather than he and the Sanhedrin, are the people of God, and Paul is the one who is confused.

This Messiah, the glorified Christ, has now appeared to Paul himself. Paul later stresses the importance of this revelation. He sees the risen and glorified Christ, and this is as real as Christ’s appearances to his disciples after the resurrection. [1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:8-9; Galatians 1:11-12, 15-17.] It is a proof of Paul’s apostleship and of his witness to Christ and the gospel.

Saul taken to Damascus (9:7-9)

The stunned and shaken Paul struggles to his feet, but he has been blinded by the light (9:8). The men with Paul recover their composure and escort him to a house in Damascus. For the next three days the blind Paul fasts, no doubt meditating on the meaning of his encounter with Jesus.

In Luke's account in chapter 9, there is no indication that Paul is told anything else about his future commission by the risen Christ on the Damascus road. The later account in Acts 22:10 supports this. There, Paul says he is told to get up and go into Damascus. "There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do," said Jesus. That's where a man named Ananias enters the stage. The account in Acts 26, however, telescopes the entire incident as though all of Paul's instruction comes at the time he is struck down (26:18). Paul's commission to the Gentiles is stated in the following words: "to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (26:18).

Ananias has a vision (9:10-12)

Luke now introduces Ananias as the person through whom God will restore sight to Paul and explain his future. Ananias is a Jewish believer in Jesus who lives in Damascus. Paul calls him "a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there" (22:12). Ananias has a vision from God in which he is told to go to the house of a man named Judas who lives on Straight Street in Damascus (9:11). This street is still one of the main thoroughfares of Damascus, the *Darb al-Mustaqim*. Tradition says that Judas' house is at its west end.

Ananias is told that he will find Paul in this house, and he will be praying. Luke portrays Paul as a man of prayer (16:25; 20:36; 22:17) even as Jesus was in his earthly ministry. [Luke 3:21; 6:12; 9:18, 28; 11:1; 22:41.] Luke also emphasizes that the church itself is a praying body. At crucial points in their personal lives and in the life of the church, the disciples pray for God's guidance and intervention. [Acts 10:2, 9; 13:2-3; 14:23; 20:36; 21:5; 28:8.]

Afraid of Paul (9:13-16)

Ananias is quite hesitant about going to meet Paul. He has heard reports about him and knows that he came to Damascus with authority from the chief priests to arrest Christians. Ananias refers to the Christians as "saints" (*hagioi*). This is the first time Luke uses the term in describing the church community (also in 9:41 and 26:10). The saints or holy ones are those whom God sets apart for his service. All Christians are saints. They are not "saints" because of their own goodness but because of what God does to them, making them his own. Christians are commonly called saints in the New Testament, especially in Paul's letters. [See, for example, Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 6:1; 2 Corinthians 1:1; 8:4; and Ephesians 1:1.] Even though Paul has persecuted the saints, the Lord insists that Ananias visit Paul. Ananias is

told: “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel” (9:15).

Once Paul receives his commission, he continues to regard himself as someone who has been “set apart for the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1). [See also Galatians 1:15-16 and Ephesians 3:7-9 for Paul’s understanding of his distinctive election to special service.] Paul’s threefold witness before Gentiles, kings and the people of Israel amounts to a programmatic prophecy for his life’s mission. Luke describes Paul’s work in Acts in terms of this commission. Paul will take the gospel to the Gentiles (13:46-47) and defend himself before kings such as Agrippa, and even Caesar (26:2-23; 25:12). Paul will also preach to the “people of Israel” (9:15). At almost every turn Paul begins his preaching in the Jewish synagogue (14:1; 17:2; 18:19). However, while Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles and Peter to the Jews (“the circumcision”), we must not draw too hard a line on this division of labor. After all, Peter opens the way to the Gentile world by preaching the gospel to the Gentile Cornelius. And Paul regularly preaches to Jews.

Paul’s calling will not be filled with personal glory, however. He is forewarned that he will have a life of pain and distress. In the words of Jesus, delivered to Paul through Ananias: “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name” (9:16).

Ananias visits Paul

With this understanding about Paul’s future role, Ananias goes to the house of Judas, meets Paul, and places his hands on him. He says: “Brother Saul, the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (9:17). By laying his hands on Paul and calling him brother, Ananias is welcoming him into the community of believers. Immediately, something falls from Paul’s eyes, and he can see again. Ananias now leaves the story as mysteriously as he enters it.

In Acts 22, Luke gives a fuller account of Ananias’ part in the conversion. There, he describes Paul’s commission in these words: “The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth” (22:14). The title “the Righteous One” refers to the Messiah. This is the title Stephen uses in his Sanhedrin speech when he accuses the council of rejecting their Messiah (7:52). Paul, who may have heard the speech, is now faced with accepting the One he rejected, and whose messenger he approved of killing.

Ananias also tells Paul that he will be a witness to all people of what he has seen and heard. Finally, Ananias tells Paul: “Now what are you waiting

for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name” (22:16). Paul responds immediately. He is “baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength” (9:18-19). Though Luke doesn’t directly say so, Paul receives the Holy Spirit. That, after all, is a major reason why Ananias is sent to Paul – to lay his hands on him so he might receive the Spirit (9:17). “That Saul should have received the filling of the Spirit through the imposition of the hands of such an obscure disciple as Ananias shows clearly that Luke did not reckon the imposition of *apostolic* hands to be necessary for this.” [Bruce, 188.]

Paul’s early preaching

After spending a few days with the disciples in Damascus, Paul begins “to preach in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God” (9:20). The fact that Paul wastes no time in beginning his witness demonstrates that he is to perform a vital mission. But we should note that he preaches to Jews, not Gentiles. Paul almost always begins his preaching in a synagogue. He goes to a synagogue first, and then moves to other places only after he is rejected and expelled. [Acts 13:5, 13-16; 14:1; 16:13, 16; 17:1; 18:4, 19; 19:8; 28:17.]

The substance of Paul’s initial preaching is a basic and simple gospel of Jesus’ Messiahship, as understood by the church. Jesus died and was resurrected. He fulfilled the role of the hoped-for Messiah, and Jews should put their faith in him because he represents salvation for his hearers. Luke says that Paul preaches that “Jesus is the Son of God” (9:20), without explaining how this term is understood; this is the only time in Acts that this title appears. In his own writings, Paul uses the title “Son of God” and “Son” 15 times. These are scattered throughout several of his epistles. [Some examples are Romans 1:3-4; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 2 Corinthians 1:19; Galatians 2:20.]

Paul is now preaching the very things about Jesus that he persecuted others for saying. Naturally, the unconverted Jews are astonished at the almost unbelievable turnaround in Paul’s attitude toward Jesus and the church. The man who was the sworn enemy of the Christians is now preaching Jesus. Luke records the bewilderment of those who hear him: “Isn’t he the man who raised havoc in Jerusalem among those who call on this name? And hasn’t he come here to take them as prisoners to the chief priests?” (9:21).

But Paul grows more powerful in his preaching and baffles “the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah” (9:22). The verb “proving” used here literally means “placing together,” “bringing together,” or “comparing.” That is, Paul is placing Old Testament references to the

Messiah with each other – and alongside their fulfillment in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. This placing together is meant to lead Jews to see Jesus as the one who fulfilled what the Scriptures say about their hoped-for Messiah.

Paul escapes (9:23-25)

It is only a matter of time before Paul becomes the target of persecution. Luke tells us that after Paul preaches for “many days” in Damascus, the Jews conspire to kill him (9:23). Paul somehow learns of the plot, but getting out of the city will be difficult. Jewish spies are watching the city gates night and day in hopes of spotting Paul and killing him. But the disciples devise a plan of escape. “His followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall” (9:25; see also 2 Corinthians 11:33). Houses were often part of the city wall, and their upper-floor windows opened to the outside of the city. This is apparently what Luke means by “an opening in the wall” (9:25). Note that Paul now has “followers” – he had become a leader in the Damascene Christian community and probably led a number of people to faith in Jesus.

Paul’s preaching in Damascus and his escape take place “after many days had gone by” (9:23). In Galatians, Paul gives a more exact time, saying the escape and his first trip to Jerusalem occur three years after his conversion (1:18). Paul also adds something to Luke’s story of his escape in another letter. The extra details show the extent of the conspiracy against him. He said that “the governor under King Aretas” had Damascus guarded (2 Corinthians 11:32-33). This means that the Jews of Damascus are in league with a pagan political ruler in trying to track down Paul, just as the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem allied with pagan rulers in the crucifixion of Jesus. After his escape, Paul returns to Jerusalem.

Preaching in Arabia?

The king Paul mentions is Aretas IV (9 B.C.-A.D. 40), the ruler of the Nabatean kingdom, or “Arabia.” Paul’s mention of King Aretas is important because of what it tells us about his movements during the three years between his conversion and first trip to Jerusalem. From Luke’s account in Acts 9 it appears that Paul stays the entire three years in Damascus, preaching in the synagogues, before his escape to Jerusalem. But according to Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he goes “into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus” (1:17). Since Aretas was king of “Arabia,” we may have a reason why the king’s representative in Damascus is involved in the plot to arrest and execute Paul. Why would a Nabatean king and his agent be involved in a plot against Paul? That is to say, why would an Arab ally himself with Jews over matters of interest only to Judaism?

Before we answer that question, we should acknowledge that it's not clear what a representative of Aretas is doing in Damascus. Is he resident in Damascus to look after the interests of Arabs living there under Roman rule? Or is Damascus at this time under the control of Nabatea? Whatever the situation, the Nabatean official has some kind of jurisdiction and political power in Damascus. Commentators speculate that the reason he goes after Paul is tied to the reason Paul goes to Arabia. They surmise that Paul does not go to Arabia with the purpose of being in a solitary desert place so he can reflect on the meaning of his new life. Rather, Paul goes to Arabia to preach the gospel in its cities and town. Thus, he is fulfilling his commission to preach to the Gentiles.

Paul's preaching would cause him to run afoul of the authorities and King Aretas. Thus, the king might instruct his agent in Damascus to enter an alliance with the Jews, since both of them want Paul out of the way. Aretas would cause his police and military to cooperate with the Jews, and together they would patrol the gates and city in hopes of capturing Paul.

It is commonly supposed that Paul's sojourn in Arabia had the nature of a religious retreat: that he sought the solitude of the desert – perhaps even going to Mount Horeb as Moses and Elijah had done – in order to commune with God and think out all the implications of his new life, without disturbance. But the context in which he tells of his going to Arabia, immediately after receiving his commission to proclaim Christ among the Gentiles, suggests that he went there to preach the gospel. The hostile interest which the Nabatean authorities took in him implies that he had done something to annoy them – something more than withdrawal to the desert for solitary contemplation. [Bruce, 192.]

Of course, this scenario is only a possible reconstruction of the situation. Luke doesn't give us enough details (and neither does Paul) to reach a definite conclusion. Luke is more interested in showing the genuineness of Paul's conversion and how God leads him to fulfill his commission to preach the gospel. To summarize, we can reconstruct the three years of Paul's life between his conversion and first visit to Jerusalem in the following way:

- Paul is converted in Damascus (9:1-19);
- he preaches in the synagogues of Damascus for a short time immediately following his conversion (9:19-22);
- he then goes on a prolonged trip into Arabia with the purpose of preaching to Gentiles (Galatians 1:17);
- he returns to Damascus and for the rest of the three-year period, and

again preaches in the synagogues there (9:23-25);

- Jews and agents of the Nabatean king try to find and arrest Paul;
- Paul escapes from Damascus and travels to Jerusalem.

The accounts of this period of Paul's life in Acts, 2 Corinthians and Galatians agree in important essentials. The accounts in the epistles add some details to Acts and omit others. The accounts are complementary and not contradictory. Luke's work is historically accurate – an independent account, not simply copied from Galatians or 2 Corinthians. The different purposes of Luke and Paul affect the selection and shaping of the facts of the Damascus-Arabia episode. In Galatians, Paul's primary concern is to establish the fact of his apostolic authority as coming directly from Christ (Galatians 1:11-12). The details of his Damascus and Arabian missionary activities are irrelevant, though he mentions them in passing.

Luke is also interested in the nature of Paul's conversion and commission. However, his concern centers more on how the gospel message spreads from Jerusalem, around the eastern end of the Empire, and then to Rome. He doesn't mention Paul's excursion into Arabia because it veers off the main geographical movement of the gospel that Luke wants to highlight. (For the same reason, Luke says nothing of the church's mission to Galilee.)

Church suspicious (9:26)

When Paul arrives in Jerusalem, he finds that the church members are gravely suspicious of him. How can it be otherwise? The church still remembers, even after three years, how Paul dragged its members off to prison and had them flogged and beaten. Paul puts the feelings of the church regarding his turnaround in these words: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy" (Galatians 1:23). The church cannot deny Paul is preaching Christ, but perhaps they are not quite sure of his motives.

Still, some commentators are puzzled as to why the rank and file of the church should still be so distrustful of Paul. Surely, they heard of his dramatic conversion, his preaching activity and the persecution he suffered. Perhaps the church thinks that Paul's "conversion" is only part of an elaborate plot, a scheme to penetrate its ranks to ferret out believers for punishment. Whatever the case, Luke tells us the disciples don't believe he has really converted (9:26).

There's an indication that even the apostles are somewhat apprehensive. That may seem surprising, but none of them know Paul personally, except as a fanatic enemy (Galatians 1:17). The apostles may wonder why Paul, if he is really converted, did not contact them or the Jerusalem church for three years.

Paul in Jerusalem (9:27)

Barnabas, whom Luke introduced earlier (4:36-37), now comes on the scene and saves the day for Paul. He brings Paul to the apostles and recounts to them his conversion and preaching in Damascus (9:27). One might wonder why Barnabas is the only person willing to vouch for Paul and take a chance in accepting him as a true believer. Whatever the reasons, Barnabas' action is certainly in keeping with his character. [Acts 4:36-37; 11:22-30; 13:1-14:28; 15:2-4, 12, 22.] He seems to be a good judge of a person's true self. Ironically, Barnabas will later show the same kind of take-a-chance generosity to Mark (15:37-40), whom Paul will reject as an unworthy ministerial aide. In the end, Paul will see that Barnabas was right in giving Mark another opportunity to minister (2 Timothy 4:11).

Barnabas brought Paul “to the apostles,” a phrase that at first look seems to refer to all of them (9:27). However, Paul says that on this occasion he stays with Peter for 15 days and “saw none of the other apostles – only James, the Lord’s brother” (Gal 1:19). Luke is apparently using a generalizing term. If someone sees Peter and James, the leading apostles, it is as though the person sees them all. If those two accept you, then the others will as well.



Luke says that during this visit to Jerusalem Paul “stayed with them and moved about freely in Jerusalem” (9:27). Paul says in Galatians that he stayed with Peter, and saw James. Perhaps he also stayed with James for a time. This might account for Luke’s assertion that “Saul stayed with *them*.” We can take this as Luke’s use of another generalizing plural. We don’t know how long Paul stays in Jerusalem, but his visit probably amounts to weeks, not months. During part of his visit, Paul might also stay at his sister’s house in the city (23:16). That he sees none of the other apostles need not seem strange. They may be doing evangelistic work elsewhere.

In Galatians Paul makes another statement about his visit that seems to contradict what Luke writes. In his epistle, Paul writes that he is “personally unknown to the churches of Judea” (Galatians 1:22). Yet, Luke says Paul

preached in public, moved about freely, and had meetings with Peter and James – even staying with Peter. The answer may be that Paul confines his public appearances to debates with the Jewish Hellenists in Jerusalem. Although Galatians says Paul does not meet with the disciples in the churches around Judea, it does not say he doesn't meet any of the *Jerusalem* believers. The answer may be that Paul's stay is confined to Jerusalem; he is therefore not known to Christian communities scattered about Judea. Because of the disciples' suspicion and fear of Paul, they probably would not make any effort to see him anyway.

Speaks boldly (9:28-29)

During his stay in Jerusalem Paul speaks “boldly in the name of the Lord” (9:28). He debates with the Grecian or Hellenistic Jews. This is the same group to whom Stephen preached, and which ultimately led to Stephen's arrest, trial and death. In a sense, Paul is taking up the work Stephen began. In a bit of irony, Paul ends up at odds with the same group he represented, or even led, in its conflict with Stephen. Paul's appearance before the Hellenists is actually a witness against them. One of their own – the most zealous one – had made a total about-face regarding Jesus. This dramatic change in Paul should alert the Hellenists to take another look at the facts about Jesus. But their minds are closed. Paul soon finds himself in the same difficulty as Stephen was in. Luke says tersely that the Hellenistic Jews “tried to kill him” (9:29).

Paul goes to Tarsus (9:30)

The Jerusalem church apparently does not want another round of persecution, such as what followed Stephen's battle with the Grecian Jews. (We see from Acts 9:26 that the church, probably composed of Hebraic Jews, is still operating in Jerusalem.) When the disciples learn of the plot against Paul, they quickly escort him to Caesarea. He is put on a ship and sent home to Tarsus (9:30). On the surface, this would seem to be a rebuff to Paul. Granted, the church is concerned for his safety, as well as their own. Paul is someone who always takes advantage of a preaching opportunity regardless of any death threats. On the surface, it seems as though the church is telling Paul to “get out of town before sunset.”

We will learn later that Paul may be a “problem” to the Jerusalem church. The reason is because it wants to maintain good relations with the orthodox Jewish population in the city. But Paul is so hated by the Jews that his mere appearance in Jerusalem stirs up strife, for himself and potentially for the church. That is not to say the church would railroad Paul out of the city

against his wishes. There is a more compelling reason for Paul's departure, one Luke doesn't mention in Acts 9. However, he does mention it in Paul's speech before a crowd of Jerusalem Jews. In his defense at the time, Paul speaks of an occasion when he was in the temple praying, and he has a vision. Paul sees the Lord saying to him, "Quick!...Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me" (22:18).

Paul tries to argue, saying that his turn-around conversion is so dramatic that it will cause the Jews to listen. But the Lord tells him again to leave Jerusalem: "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles" (22:21). It can be inferred that the time of this vision is just before his hasty departure from Jerusalem (22:17). Paul's quick exodus to Tarsus is based on a heavenly mandate, to which he is obedient.

Luke does not say anything about Paul's long stay in Tarsus. He draws a curtain over Paul's life for what may be as long as ten years. Paul refers to this interval only in passing. He says that after leaving Jerusalem he goes to Syria and Cilicia (Galatians 1:21, 23). More specifically, he is referring to Antioch in Syria and Tarsus in Cilicia. Tarsus is the leading city of Cilicia, and Paul's hometown. It came under Roman control in 64 B.C., but is still a free city. Some estimate the population of the city in Roman times to be close to half a million. The historian-geographer Strabo says Tarsus is a leading center of philosophy, rhetoric and law. [*Geography* 14.5.13.] Tarsus is also an important center of Stoic philosophy, so Paul would be familiar with the leading Stoics and their beliefs. We will see later that he can quote from Stoic poets.

Later, when Barnabas needs assistance in building the church in the Antioch area, he goes to Tarsus to find Paul, and brings him to Antioch (11:25-26). From then on, Paul becomes the central focus of Acts.

PETER PREACHES IN JUDEA (ACTS 9:31-10:48)

Church grows (9:31)

Luke's first panel of material ended with a summary statement about the church and the progress of the gospel in Jerusalem (6:7). The second panel, in keeping with the programmatic prophecy given by Jesus (1:8), describes missionary work in Samaria, as well as parts of Judea. Luke ends the second panel with the following summary statement: "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, and it increased in numbers" (9:31).

Luke here gives the first and only indication that the church has spread to Galilee. But he gives no details about the Christian mission there, and writes little about the work in greater Judea. Yet, Luke's brief summary statement tells us that the gospel is spreading and the church is thriving.

Peter heals Aeneas in Lydda (9:32-35)

Luke again takes up the story of Peter's evangelistic work. He had left him in Jerusalem, after his tour with John through the Samaritan villages (8:25). We now find Peter on an evangelistic campaign in Judea (9:32). Philip has passed throughout the area of coastal Judea preaching the gospel on his way from Azotus to Caesarea (8:40). Peter may be following up Philip's Judean missionary trip, even as he did for Philip's work in Samaria.

Luke begins the account of Peter's circuit around Judea with his trip to Lydda to "visit the saints," that is, the believers (9:32). This is the Old Testament Lod. [1 Chronicles 8:12; Ezra 2:33; Nehemiah 11:35.] Lydda is about 25 miles (40 kilometers) northwest of Jerusalem, at the edge of the central highlands. It sits astride two important highways. One runs from Egypt to Syria and the other from Joppa (on the coast) to Jerusalem.

In Lydda, Peter encounters a man named Aeneas who has been paralyzed and bedridden for eight years. Upon meeting him, Peter says, "Jesus Christ heals you," and Aeneas immediately gets up and walks (9:34). Word quickly spreads of Aeneas' healing, and it has a powerful influence on the community. With some exaggeration, Luke writes: "All those who lived in Lydda and Sharon saw him and turned to the Lord" (9:35).

Raised from the dead (9:36)

Peter next goes to Joppa (modern Jaffa, or Yafo). It is 35 miles (56 kilometers) northwest of Jerusalem, 10-12 miles northwest of Lydda. Today,

Jaffa is part of greater Tel-Aviv. Joppa is the only natural harbor on the Mediterranean between Egypt and Ptolemais (Acco), to the north. Thus, it serves as a seaport for Jerusalem. Herod the Great built the artificial harbor of Caesarea Maritima, 30 miles north of Joppa, which is an important seaport in the first century, too.

Luke takes up the story of a much-loved disciple who lives in Joppa. In Aramaic her name is Tabitha, and in Greek, Dorcas (both names mean “gazelle”). Luke says she is a person “who was always doing good and helping the poor” (9:36). But suddenly Tabitha dies, and the church in Joppa is mourning its loss of a much-appreciated and needed servant.

When the church hears that Peter is nearby in Lydda, they send two men to urge him to come to see what he can do. When Peter arrives at Joppa, he is taken to the house where Tabitha is lying in preparation for her burial. Here all the widows are gathered. They are crying and showing Peter the clothing that Tabitha made for the poor. Peter goes upstairs where her body lays. He sends everyone out of the room, and kneels and prays. Finally, turning to the dead woman, he says, “Tabitha, get up” (9:40). He takes Tabitha’s hand, helps her to her feet and presents her to the others.

There are similarities between this account and the raising of Jairus’ daughter by Jesus (Mark 5:21-24; Luke 8:49-56). Some of the similarities include:

- the use of messengers to call the person who will raise the dead,
- the milling about of crying bystanders,
- the excluding of outsiders from the room,
- the call to the dead person to rise,
- the taking of the revived individual by the hand.

The most striking similarity is that both Jesus and Peter issued a command for the dead person to rise, a short sentence in each case. Jesus had said, “Talitha...get up!” (Mark 5:41), whereas Peter cried: “Tabitha, get up” (9:40).

The parallel between Mark’s account of the raising of Jairus’ daughter and Peter’s raising of Tabitha is striking. Interestingly, Luke uses a different construction for Christ’s command (Luke 8:54), one that does not parallel his phrasing of Peter’s command to Tabitha. This suggests that Luke is not aware of the similarity. Yet, it is there nonetheless.

Both the raising of Tabitha and the healing of Aeneas mirror similar miraculous works performed by Jesus (Luke 5:17-26; 7:11-16). The accounts in Acts 9 also remind us of the power to heal and to raise the dead exhibited by Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:32:37). Taken together, these biblical accounts show God as one who continues to work through his

servants – be they prophets or apostles or his own Son – to show his saving power. God brings his power to bear on behalf of the less-advantaged people of the world. Among those whom he liberates from death and sickness are widows like Dorcas and the poor and disenfranchised who have no one on whom they can rely.

Simon the tanner (9:43)

Almost as a footnote, Luke mentions that Peter stays in Joppa “for some time with a tanner named Simon” (9:43). The rabbis considered tanning an unclean trade [*Mishnah, Ketubot* 7.10.] because a tanner’s work often required contact with unclean animals. [The skins of clean animals were apparently not unclean. Scribes often wrote the Scriptures on parchment, which is the stretched-thin skin of a dead animal.] This suggests that Peter is not overly scrupulous in observing some of the Jewish ceremonial traditions. Yet, he professes to be careful not to eat meats considered ceremonially unclean (10:4).

Peter seems to have an open mind regarding Jewish beliefs and practices; this prepares us for what will come shortly. He will be tested in the next chapter on matters “clean and unclean,” but from a much broader perspective.

As an aside, we should note Luke’s tendency to provide details that do not add anything pertinent to the account. But such details do underscore the historical accuracy of Luke’s writing. Specifically, Johannes Munck observes that “it is characteristic of Luke in Acts that he gives an accurate address” for a number of places in which Paul lives or works during his life. [Johannes Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1967; now published by Yale University Press), 88.]

Luke thus shows his attention to detail and to giving accurate information even on what might seem to be unimportant matters. In this case, we are told that the Simon with whom Paul stayed was a tanner, and he had a house by the sea. Luke also notes that Paul stays in Judas’ house in the street called Straight in Damascus (9:11). In Corinth Paul preaches in the house of Justus who lives next to the synagogue (18:17). At Ephesus, Paul teaches in the School of Tyrannus (19:9). [See also 16:14; 17:5-7; 18:2-3; 21:8, 16; 28:7.]

With this short section, Luke informs his readers that the gospel has been preached in the province of Judea by the apostles, at least by Peter (after Philip did so). Now, the story of the gospel in Judea has been told. Peter, the servant of God, has entered the cities of the Plain of Sharon, and has done wonders in the name of Jesus Christ. Many see his work, give God thanks

and are converted.

The Christian mission within the Jewish nation has widened from southern Judea to northern Judea. The reader is now prepared for the next leap of the gospel message that must be taken. The good news must be preached to Gentiles, and in areas beyond Judea.

ACTS 10: THE GOSPEL GOES TO CORNELIUS

The Gentile challenge

Luke now begins to tell the story of a fundamental turning point in the history of the early church. For the first time Gentiles will be *directly* evangelized and admitted into fellowship with Jewish Christians. As a result, the church will not remain just an offshoot of an ethnic religion (Judaism). It will become a universal body embracing people from every nation and race.

Luke takes great pains to show that this change in the church is the result of God's will and guidance. It does not come about through some human-devised program. This section shows that God, through the Holy Spirit, is bringing the Gentiles into his spiritual body, the church. We will see this in verse after verse describing the account of Cornelius' conversion as a supernatural operation of God. [Acts 10:3, 11-16, 19-20, 22b, 30-33, 44-46; 11:5-10, 12-13, 15-17.]

At the beginning of his two-part work, Luke alerts his readers to the promise that Jesus would be a "light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32). Quoting from Isaiah the prophet, Luke repeats the promise that through Jesus "all people will see God's salvation" (Luke 3:6). Luke also tells us that Paul will carry Christ's name to the Gentiles (9:15). (Ironically, God will open the church's door to the Gentiles through Peter, not Paul.)

But up to this time, the barrier between Jew and Gentile has not been breached, though on several occasions it has been nudged. When the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch (probably already a proselyte or God-fearer) are converted, for example, almost certainly the issue of the church's attitude to non-Jews comes up. The controversy over the Gentiles is probably avoided only because the Ethiopian lives far away and the Samaritans probably fellowship among themselves in their own congregations. And they are considered "half-Jews" anyway. Thus, the issue of Gentiles directly mingling with Jews can be sidestepped until chapter 10.

But to have Gentiles evangelized directly and in large numbers, and then to have them fellowship with Jews, is another matter. Jews will be coming into contact with people who are considered impure, and whose food is regarded as unclean. Gentiles will not be living in conformity with Mosaic law. For example, they don't circumcise their children.

Of even greater concern is that Gentiles are idolaters, worshipping many false gods. Granted, they might become converted. But what will be the shape of their day-to-day religious practices? Will they corrupt and contaminate the practices Jews hold sacred? Such issues will soon become major concerns, dividing the church for decades to come.

Meanwhile, the range of the Christian evangelistic program has been steadily broadening – pushing out from Jews in Jerusalem, to Jews throughout Judea, to the Samaritans, to African proselytes. Now the time has come to crash through the “wall of partition.” The gospel is taken directly to Gentiles, and questions about their eligibility to be among the people of God have to be dealt with head on.

A test case

A test case is needed to show God’s will in this matter: Can Gentiles become Christians, and what is the path toward their becoming disciples? As it turns out, God uses the Roman centurion Cornelius, his family and friends to break down the barrier to the Gentile world. The space Luke devotes to the conversion of Cornelius reveals how controversial it is in the church, and how important it is to the story of the spread of the gospel. Entire sections in chapters 10, 11 and 15 deal with the crisis precipitated by Cornelius’ conversion. Three times in these chapters Luke discusses the conversion of Cornelius and its implication for the church. Luke narrates the original story of the event in 10:1-48. He discusses it again, along with the controversy it engenders, in 11:1-18. Then, for a third time, he summarizes the story of Cornelius’ conversion in 15:6-11.

The story of Cornelius, which ends with Peter’s speech to the assembly at Jerusalem, is the longest narrative in Acts... Judged solely on the basis of the amount of space Luke gives to the story, we know that we are dealing with a crucial concern of Acts, a pivot for the entire book, a turning point in the long drama of redemption. [Willimon, 95.]

Breakthrough at Caesarea (10:1)

Caesarea is the setting for the conversion of Cornelius. It is an apt place for the calling of the first Gentiles to fellowship with Jewish Christians. The city is in the center of the coastal Plain of Sharon, about 65 miles (105 kilometers) northwest of Jerusalem. Herod the Great built some magnificent projects here, including an amphitheater, an aqueduct and a superb port. A garrison of soldiers protects the city, harbor and water facilities. The military guard includes the Italian Regiment, of which Cornelius is a centurion.

In this period, Caesarea serves as the capital of the Roman province of Judea. It is the residence of the Roman procurator (23:23-24). Josephus says that the population is primarily Gentile. [*Wars* 3:409.] However, Caesarea also has a large minority of Jews. The two groups brawled on a regular basis. [*Antiquities* 20:173-178.]

Philip probably preached to the Jews of Caesarea (8:40). Paul stopped there on his way to Tarsus (9:30), but there's no indication that he preached in the area. Now, Peter on his own missionary journey has gone as far as Joppa, 30 miles south of Caesarea.

Centurion Cornelius (10:1-2)

Cornelius, the hero of the story, is identified as an army man, a centurion in the Italian Regiment or "cohort." A centurion is a noncommissioned officer who worked his way up through the ranks to take command of a group of soldiers within a Roman legion. (A comparable rank in the American military would be captain, and in the British army, a company sergeant-major.) When a cohort is at full strength, a centurion is in command of 100 men. William Barclay gives the following description of Rome's military units:

In the Roman military set-up there was first of all the *legion*. It was a force of six thousand men and therefore was roughly equal to a division. In every legion there were ten *cohorts*. A cohort therefore had six hundred men and comes near to being the equivalent of a battalion. The cohort was divided into *centuries* and over each century there was a *centurion*. The century is therefore roughly the equivalent of a company. [William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, revised edition, The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), page 79.]

The above applies to regular legions of the Roman army. However, it is likely that there are no such legions in Judea between A.D. 6 and 66. Roman governors in Judea have *auxiliary* forces, and the cohorts have smaller numbers. The Italian Cohort (Regiment) to which Cornelius belongs would be an auxiliary unit. The historian Polybius describes the qualifications of a centurion: "Centurions are required not to be bold and adventurous so much as good leaders, of stead and prudent mind, not prone to take the offensive or start fighting wantonly, but able when overwhelmed and hard-pressed to stand fast and die at their post." [*History* 6.24.]

Cornelius may be a descendant of one of the freedman of a man named Cornelius Sulla, who liberated 10,000 slaves in 82 B.C. According to common practice, the freed slaves took their patron's name. Centurions are generally pictured in a favorable light by Luke. The first Gentile with whom Jesus came into contact, so far as we know, is a centurion stationed in Capernaum. He is pictured as exhibiting extraordinary faith in Jesus (Luke 7:1-10). The centurion at Jesus' crucifixion also recognizes something special in him (Luke

23:47). Later, another centurion, Julius, shows kindness to Paul and spares his life (27:1, 3, 43).

Devout and God-fearing (10:2)

Luke describes Cornelius and his family as “devout and God-fearing” (10:2). The description of Cornelius as “a righteous and God-fearing man” best sums up his spiritual qualities (10:22). We might call him a “deeply religious man.” He worships the God of Israel, attends the synagogue, and lives according to many of the standards of the Torah. He is a Gentile (10:28) but is “respected by all the Jewish people” (10:22). He prays at the designated hours of Jewish prayer (10:30), gives “gifts to the poor” (10:4) and is devout (10:2). But he is not a proselyte – he isn’t circumcised (11:3).

Luke describes the piety of Cornelius in traditional Jewish terms as one who engages in prayer and almsgiving (Tobit 12:8-10). Specifically, he gives alms “to the people.” Luke uses the term “the people” to indicate the nation of Israel, or the Jews. This suggests that Cornelius helps Jews, as does the centurion of Luke 7:5. We may say of him with F. F. Bruce, “He had every qualification, short of circumcision, which could satisfy Jewish requirements.” [203.]

While it’s not clear that the Jews have a technical designation such as “God-fearers” for people like Cornelius, it’s clear that there are many such Gentiles scattered throughout the Roman Empire. They along with full proselytes are found worshipping in synagogues in which Paul preaches. They ultimately constitute an important part of the church (13:14, 26, 48).

We notice too that his family, and even his military aide (10:8) are also said to be devout people. In that society, the entire household, including servants, usually adopt the patriarch’s religion. Cornelius would influence them by his example. This fact, along with his reputation for good works (10:22), indicates that Cornelius is an older man who has been in Caesarea for some years. He may even be a semi-retired army officer.

Cornelius has a vision (10:3-8)

The fateful time of Cornelius’ calling is at hand. It begins on a certain day about three o’clock in the afternoon, one of the statutory Jewish hours of prayer (3:1). Cornelius is praying at this time (10:30). He has a vision in which a messenger from God, an angel, said: “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God” (10:4).

The angel speaks in the language of sacrifice used in Jewish circles. The “memorial offering” mentioned here alludes to the Old Testament flour offerings made from grain that were to be burned “as a memorial portion”

(Leviticus 2:2). [The Greek word for “memorial” in Acts 10:4 was the same one the Greek Septuagint used in Leviticus 2:2.] This offering was burned on the altar and “an aroma pleasing to the Lord” went up to God (Leviticus 2:2).

Like the aroma of the sacrifice, the scent of Cornelius’ prayers and gifts is going “up” to God. God is signaling his pleasure with Cornelius, and he is ready to reveal his salvation to him. In preparation for this, the angel tells Cornelius to send men to Joppa to ask Peter to come to his home. Cornelius calls two servants and a military aide, a devout man, and dispatches them to Joppa (11:7-8).

Peter’s vision (10:9-16)

The scene in Luke’s drama switches to Peter, who is praying on the roof of Simon the Tanner’s house. The roof is a convenient place to get away from activity in the house. The time is around noon, the sixth hour, by the ancient method of reckoning. Noon is also one of the three appointed times for Jewish public prayer (Daniel 6:10; Psalm 55:17).

During the time of prayer, Peter becomes hungry and asks someone in the house for something to eat. While the meal is being prepared, he falls into a trance (10:11-12). Peter sees a large sheet held up by its four corners being let down to the ground. Inside the sheet he sees various four-footed animals, reptiles and birds. The three categories of living things Peter sees correspond roughly with the three divisions given in Genesis 6:20: animals, creatures that move along the ground and birds.



A voice tells Peter to get up and eat. But Peter replies, “Surely not, Lord!...I have never eaten anything impure or unclean” (10:14). Peter’s strong negative – “Surely not, Lord!” recalls the prophet Ezekiel’s horror when he is told by the Lord to use human excrement as fuel for baking bread. He said: “Not so, Sovereign Lord!... No impure meat has ever entered my mouth” (Ezekiel 4:14).

We saw earlier that Peter is not overly scrupulous in observing certain Jewish regulations. He stays at the house of a leather worker, who would come in contact with dead animals. Perhaps he even works with unclean animals (9:43). But Peter does apparently follow the Jewish dietary laws based on the Torah. He knows from Leviticus 11:47 that a Jew needs to “distinguish between the unclean and the clean, between living creatures that may be eaten and those that may not be eaten.”

However, the sheet contains “all kinds” of living things. Luke’s account implies it includes animals traditionally acceptable to eat as well as those forbidden by old covenant law. Perhaps Peter sees the living things he recognized as unclean touching the edible ones, thus tainting them.

The Jews’ adherence to the dietary laws profoundly affect their relations with Gentiles. Food laws have the effect of keeping the people separated from each other. A Jew visiting a Gentile can’t be sure he will be served “clean” food, or that the food is prepared according to the requirements of the law, or whether it has been tainted by an idol. To eat with Gentiles is to risk defilement, and this is a strong inducement for Jews not to fellowship with them. Since food is at the center of social life, it is the thing that perhaps more than anything else creates a barrier between Jews and Gentiles. And as an ideal, Jews have no dealings with Gentiles. Food regulations are a point of heated debate in the church. [Romans 14:1-8, 17; Corinthians 8:1-13; Galatians 2:11-14.]

It’s not surprising, then, that Peter is confused by the next statement of the voice in his vision. When he refuses to eat, a voice says: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (11:15). This happens three times, perhaps with the sheet being lowered each time, accompanied by a command to eat and not to call anything unclean that God had cleansed.

Pondering the vision (10:17-23)

Peter is puzzled about the meaning of the vision, with its strange mixture of animals, and the odd commands (10:17). While Peter is mulling over what he has seen, the emissaries from Cornelius arrive at Simon’s home. They stop at the gate, shouting to the occupants, asking whether Peter is staying there

(9:17). This little scene with Gentiles calling out from beyond the gate reflects exactly the situation the vision is meant to correct.

Devout non-Jews such as those who came from Cornelius probably understand that Jews do not want any close association with Gentiles. Thus, it would be rude for them to come to the door of a Jew's home, with the desire of being allowed inside. But at the same time as the exchange at the gate, the Holy Spirit says to Peter: "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them" (10:20). The fact of the Spirit having to encourage Peter not to be hesitant reveals his reluctance to associate with Gentiles.

By now, however, Peter begins to suspect that God is making some purpose known to him, so he invites the men into the house as his guests (10:23). (No doubt, this occurs with the tanner's permission, since Peter himself is a guest.) The men explain they are here at the request of Cornelius, emphasizing that he is "a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people" (10:22). More than this, they say that Cornelius has not decided on his own to contact Peter, but an angel from God told him to do so.

Contingent goes to Caesarea (10:23)

Peter must now be doubly impressed that something of importance – something inspired by the Holy Spirit – is happening with the Gentile Cornelius. He wholeheartedly agrees to go with the men. The next day Peter starts out for Caesarea, 30 miles away. He takes some of the disciples living in Joppa with him. We learn later that the contingent consists of six people (11:12). They are identified as "circumcised believers," which is to say they are Jewish Christians who follow the traditions of the Torah (10:45). In retrospect, this proves a wise move, as Peter will later be severely criticized by the Jerusalem church for meeting with Cornelius (11:3). The six will be important witnesses to the operation of the Holy Spirit in this momentous event.

Peter meets Cornelius (10:24-26)

Meanwhile, Cornelius has called together his relatives and close friends (10:24). Earlier, Luke described his household as "devout and God-fearing" (10:2). Later, all of Cornelius' family will share in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and be baptized (10:44, 48).

Peter arrives at the residence of Cornelius, and goes in (10:25). A momentous milestone lies hidden here. Peter, in contradiction to all that Judaism stands for, enters the house of a Gentile. The church will never be

the same again. Cornelius meets Peter and falls at his feet in reverence (10:25). It's understandable why he reacts this way. Having an angel specifically tell him to send for Peter could make him think there is something holy or supernatural about the apostle.

Also, perhaps something of Cornelius' former superstitious background is manifesting itself, in which humans are sometimes thought to be gods. Paul and Barnabas are similarly thought of and worshipped by the pagan Gentiles of Lystra (14:15). Peter, of course, will have none of this, and makes Cornelius stand up. Then he sets the record straight about who he is. Luke's simple phrase from Peter's words says it all: "I am only a man myself" (10:26).

Call no one impure (10:27-33)

Peter goes inside the house and begins to explain to the group why he, a Jew, is here in the home of a Gentile. He admits that it is against Jewish law for Jews to associate with or even visit Gentiles (10:28). (The "no contact rule" was probably the *hoped-for* Jewish position. There are provisions in Jewish law that allow business partnerships with Gentiles. But any contacts, of either a business or social nature, make a Jew ceremonially unclean.)

Various Jewish religious groups debate the degree of separation a Jew needs to maintain vis á vis Gentiles in order to remain loyal to the regulations of the Torah. Some groups, such as the Essenes, seem to maintain an almost complete separation. The Pharisees are more moderate in such matters, and the common folk the least observant. Peter is probably on the more liberal end of the spectrum regarding the wall of separation. (Fishermen are used to handling dead animals and unclean animals.) Yet, he is having great difficulty understanding the new direction the church is to be taking (even with the leading of the Holy Spirit).

By now Peter is clear about what God is trying to teach him. He tells the people assembled in Cornelius' home: "God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean" (10:28).

After Peter explains to his audience why he is in the house of a Gentile, he says to Cornelius: "May I ask why you sent for me?" (10:29). Cornelius then describes the details of the vision he received. He explains that an angel ("a man in shining clothes") told him he was chosen to receive God's grace (10:30-31). Cornelius describes how he was commanded by the angel to send for Peter.

Cornelius appreciates Peter having come to see him, a Gentile. The whole group is now ready to hear him. Cornelius says, "We are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell

us” (10:33). In the second telling of the Cornelius event, Luke makes it clear that Cornelius already knows why Peter is coming to see him. The angel told Cornelius that Peter “will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved” (11:14). Cornelius is expecting the gospel of salvation.

Peter’s speech (10:34-43)

Peter begins to speak to the group about the importance of Jesus’ work in repentance and conversion. This speech is similar in content to the one he gave on Pentecost (2:14-40). As with all the sermons and speeches in Acts, we are here reading only a summary of what Peter says. No doubt Peter’s message contains examples that illustrate his main points. Peter probably includes illustrations of Jesus’ healing and power, similar to those found in the Gospels.

The speech follows a familiar pattern, which we now expect from Luke’s summaries. In this case, Peter begins by describing John the Baptist’s mission, and then the work of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem. The speech moves into a discussion of the crucifixion and resurrection. Peter says that the apostles are witnesses to these facts, and are commanded to preach the gospel of peace. He also talks about the judgment to come, but especially that “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (10:43).

This speech probably represents a summary of the standard apostolic preaching to Jews and Gentiles attending synagogues who are familiar with the Old Testament message. The Synoptic Gospels follow this general pattern in presenting their material on Jesus’ ministry. (Acts gives us only two examples of the form of apostolic preaching to purely pagan audiences. One is at Lystra (14:14-18) and the other at Athens (17:23-31). In such cases, the speaker needs to explain who the one true God is before moving on to his purpose in Jesus Christ.)

As devout people, Cornelius and the others are familiar with the Jewish Scriptures, the hope of a Messiah and the kingdom of God. They may well be aware that a man named Jesus performed miracles, attracted a following, and was killed. Peter suggests that they know something of “the message God sent to the people of Israel” and “the good news of peace through Jesus Christ” (10:36-37). In several ways, then, Cornelius and his family are prepared for what Peter is telling them.

Accepts people of every nation (10:34-35)

Peter begins his speech with the point that there are no impure or unclean people in God’s eyes in terms of their receiving salvation. God “accepts from

every nation the one who fears him and does what is right” (10:35). Peter himself is being educated on this point, as well as his audience. He is summarizing his own experience of God during the past few days, since seeing the vision of the animals.

Peter’s words – “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism” (11:34) – registers his own surprise at the new understanding he has just received, and which he can now pass on to others. The light is dawning in Peter’s mind that people are not acceptable to God simply because they are members of a particular nation, a nation that seeks to express its uniqueness in protective rituals. God accepts anyone “who fears him and does what is right” (19:35), that is, in simple terms, all who trust in him.

God’s choice of a people who experience his saving grace – whether the nation of Israel or individuals for salvation – rests on his unmerited act of grace. This includes receiving the Holy Spirit now and eternal life in the future. However, such grace, if it is accepted, calls forth a response of obedient service and faith toward God. That is, the people of God respect him and “do what is right.”

The prophets said that grace would one day be extended to all nations. For example, Isaiah spoke of a time when God would call Egyptians and Assyrians (two dreaded enemies of ancient Israel) as his people, along with the Israelites (19:25). But somehow God’s purpose was forgotten by the Jews who returned to Judea in the 6th century B.C. after their nation had been defeated by the Babylonians and sent into captivity. Upon their return, the Jews felt the need to protect their identity as Torah torchbearers against idol-worshipping Gentile paganism. Thus, the notion developed that Gentiles could become part of the people of God (whether nation or church) only if they first became law-observant, God-fearing Jews.

Good news of peace (10:36)

But now a new thing is happening: the “good news of peace through Jesus Christ” (10:36) – and it is being sent to Gentiles directly. The apostle Paul explains this peace as a two-fold endeavor. God’s purpose is to “create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace” (Ephesians 2:15). The gospel of salvation is meant to break down the enmity and differences between Jews and Gentiles, creating a single new people of the Spirit. Thus, spiritually speaking, there is no such thing as a “Jew” and a “Gentile.” They are all one in Christ (Galatians 3:28).

Jesus’ gospel of peace is meant “to reconcile both of them to God through

the cross” (Ephesians 2:16). Thus, Jesus’ work establishes peace between humans and God, and between one branch of humans and all others. As Paul explains it, Jesus “came and preached peace to you who were far away [Gentiles] and peace to those who were near [Jews]” (verse 17).

“We are witnesses” (10:37-43)

Of course, Cornelius and his family do not yet fully understand what the good news of peace means to them specifically, as Gentiles. Peter is here to relate the meaning of the gospel to their lives – that they can share in the promise of salvation.

Though Peter assumes that his hearers already know something about this ministry through living in Palestine, he proceeds to summarize it in greater detail than anywhere else in his recorded preaching. In scope and emphasis, the account is much like the portrayal of Jesus’ ministry in Mark’s Gospel. [ibid., 393.]

Since Peter has been one of the witnesses of everything Jesus did in Jerusalem, Judea and Galilee (10:39), his hearers can be confident in what he says. The task of witnessing includes giving the meaning of Jesus’ work during his ministry (10:39) and explaining the significance of his death and resurrection (10:41). Peter begins his accounting of Jesus’ ministry by first referring to the work of John the Baptist. Luke consistently makes John’s work of baptism as the turning point in God’s purpose with humanity, and the beginning point of Jesus’ ministry (Luke 3:3; 16:16; Acts 1:22).

Peter characterizes that ministry in terms of Jesus doing good and healing all who are under the power of the devil (10:38). The work of the Holy Spirit is central to Acts, and Luke here shows that the liberating works of Jesus are possible because God has anointed him with the power of the Spirit (10:38). Peter goes on to explain that the glorified Jesus has been given the authority to judge both the living and the dead. However, he doesn’t emphasize condemnation. Rather, as Hebrews tells us, Peter speaks of Jesus as the “author” of salvation and as a merciful and faithful high priest who makes “atonement for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2:10, 17).

Peter presumably cites texts from the Old Testament as evidence, because he insists that “all the prophets testify about him” (10:43). And what they testify explains in what way Jesus is the judge of both living and dead: “That everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (10:43).

Holy Spirit poured out (10:44-46)

As Peter is making this point, something extraordinary interrupts his talk. Everyone listening to his message suddenly receives the Holy Spirit (10:44). (In Peter's later summary of what happens, he said the interruption occurs, "As I began to speak..." (11:15). When Peter makes the point that Jesus is the one who forgives sins, he has said all that is necessary.)

When the group hears Peter talking about faith in Christ, they believed the message. They have faith – accepting their need for Jesus as Savior. Cornelius and his family (and presumably the others present) are devout and God-fearing people. They are praying people, ones who do good to others. But they had not received the Holy Spirit, which is the "sign" of those who are God's people. When they respond positively to the news that Jesus Christ is their Savior and the hope of the world, they receive the Holy Spirit. Their allegiance is no longer in their own religious work, but in Jesus as their Savior. This change comes only when Cornelius and the others are confronted with making a choice about Jesus Christ.

How do Peter and the others know that Cornelius' group have received the Holy Spirit? It is evident by a miraculous sign – "they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God" (10:46). In fact, the Spirit comes on these people in more or less the same way as he did upon the Jewish converts at Pentecost. For this reason, this event is sometimes called "the Gentile Pentecost."

It is not possible to mistake this momentous event. "Just as the first Jewish believers had received the Spirit and praised God in other tongues on the day of Pentecost, so now these Gentiles received the identical gift of God." [I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Tyndale New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans: 1996), 194.] The Holy Spirit is given only to those who believe in Jesus (Acts 11:17; Galatians 3:2). It is an irrefutable sign that God accepts these Gentiles. Cornelius and the others respond to Peter's message in faith and God accepts them, sealing them as his people with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The six Jewish believers are astonished at this turn of events – "that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles" (10:45). But there is no refuting what occurs before their eyes – or in this case, their ears. The Jewish Christians know the Spirit has been given to the group because they "heard them speaking in tongues and praising God" (10:46).

The gift of tongues at Pentecost was speaking in various human languages. Here it is not so clear what is in view. If the group is speaking in other languages, which ones are they speaking in, and how would the Jewish

observers know? Perhaps what is being described here are ecstatic utterances of a sort that are understood as praise to God. This may be, at least in part, the “tongues” that Paul describes. [1 Corinthians 12:7-11, 28; 13:1; 14:1-28.] In any case, these miraculous tongues and praises are given for the sake of the Jewish believers who came with Peter. They will later verify Peter’s contention before a board of Jerusalem believers that God accepts Gentiles into the church.

They were baptized (10:47-48)

Cornelius and the others believe and receive the Spirit, but they are not yet baptized. Baptism is a rite that symbolizes an individual’s having been cleansed of sin and “resurrected” to newness of life. It can also function as a sign to the believer that he or she has been received into the community of believers.

We should be careful about thinking in terms of a formula as though a person receives the Holy Spirit only *after* being baptized. This is obviously not the case here, as everyone receives the Holy Spirit before being baptized. However, baptism is an important ceremony to the individual’s Christian life in the same way that a marriage ceremony is a vital beginning point of a marriage. (But the ceremony doesn’t *cause* the marriage.) Although people are saved by faith, not baptism, the New Testament pattern is that all who have faith are also baptized in water.

With this in mind, when Peter sees that the group has already received the Holy Spirit, he says, “Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water” (10:47). He then orders that they should be baptized in Jesus’ name, in effect saying he (and the church) accept what God has already done.

A new direction

We should state once again what the Cornelius event means to the church. Not only can Gentiles be accepted into the church as Gentiles, it means that they can also be directly evangelized. They can become disciples in every sense of the word without having to become fully observant Jews. The Spirit baptizes people, whether they are Jews or Gentiles, into one body, the Israel of God (1 Corinthians 12:13).

The Jewish believers seem to understand this – that God accepts the Gentiles as they are. This is indicated in the fact that no one seems to suggest that Cornelius should be circumcised. However, the issue of circumcision for Gentile believers plagues the church for decades to come. As well, the

question of whether Gentiles should live like Jews in such things as their eating habits will also continue to trouble the church.

Cornelius does not ask to be baptized. Nor does the church (Peter) ask him if he is interested in fellowshiping with the body of believers, hoping for a later conversion. From start to finish, God is operating his salvation upon Cornelius, who has little role in this part of the story except to accept what God is doing. William H. Willimon correctly says:

Cornelius is surprisingly passive in this story, as if he is someone who is being swept along, carried by events and reacting to actions quite beyond his power to initiate or control. This is the way it is with repentance. It is more than a decision we make ('since *I* gave *my* life to Christ'; 'since I took Jesus as *my* personal Savior') or some good deed we offer to God; repentance is the joyful human response to God's offer of himself to us. [100.]

In fact, all conversion accounts in Acts begin with God's initiative through the Holy Spirit. God is always pictured as the One who begins and completes the process of repentance.

God is the chief actor in all Lukan accounts of conversion. Even the smallest details are attributed to the working of God. Conversion is not the result of skillful leadership by the community or even of persuasive preaching or biblical interpretation. In many accounts, such as those of Philip's work with the Ethiopian, the mysterious hand of God directs everything. In other stories, such as the story of Peter and Cornelius, the church must be dragged kicking and screaming into the movements of God. Manipulation, strategic planning, calculating efforts by the community aimed at church growth are utterly absent. Even our much beloved modern notions of "free will" and personal choice and decision appear to play little role in conversion in Acts. Conversion is a surprising, unexpected act of divine grace. [Ibid., 104.]

Luke's story is about how the gospel reaches Rome, and Cornelius plays no further role in that story. He leaves Luke's account as abruptly as Ananias does. Johannes Munck observes that "the narrative about Cornelius seems, from an historical point of view, to be left hanging in midair as a detached fragment." [Munck, 107.]

We would like to know more about Cornelius' subsequent history. How does he live out his life as a Christian? Does he continue to serve in the military? Does he get caught up in the church's squabble over whether

Gentiles should live like Jews, and what is his reaction? But Luke tells us nothing further about Cornelius, except that Peter stays with him for some time (10:48). Then the apostle goes to Jerusalem to answer his critics, and Cornelius becomes lost in the mist of history.

Luke has interests other than recounting the converted life of Cornelius. He wants to tell the story of how God opens salvation to the Gentiles. Once he tells that tale, Luke moves on to narrate other events that show the growth of the church, and the gospel being preached further afield.

ACTS 11: PETER TELLS THE STORY AGAIN

The Gentile challenge

The conversion of Cornelius is a milestone in the church's history. However, it doesn't settle the troubling issues of the proper relationship of Jews to Gentiles within the body of believers. In fact, the church throughout Judea is soon buzzing with the tale that Peter met with and baptized Cornelius. Luke writes of the controversy: "The apostles and believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So that when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the uncircumcised believers criticized him and said, 'You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them'" (11:1-3).

Luke makes a distinction between "the apostles and believers" (11:1) who hear about what Peter did and "the circumcised believers" who criticize them. This implies that the apostles and leaders of the Jerusalem church, as well as some believers in Judea, don't have a problem with Peter's actions in Caesarea. It is other circumcised believers of Jerusalem who think that Peter violated Judaistic regulations pertaining to the separation of Jews from Gentiles. (That is not to suggest that there is a formal "circumcision party" in the church at this time, though apparently there will be one later.)

The circumcised believers apparently do not criticize Peter for baptizing Cornelius. Rather, Peter is challenged because he enters the house where uncircumcised people are, and eats with them. (That he eats there is not directly stated by Luke but is inferred from Peter staying at Cornelius' home for some days.)

Peter's opponents are accusing him of abandoning his sacred Jewish heritage by associating with and eating with uncircumcised Gentiles. Some think he is putting the identity of the church community at risk. Thinking in terms of the Jewish paradigm of Israel as God's holy nation, some emphasize that the church is a holy people. It is to be separate from the pollution of the world, including fraternizing with Gentiles. But now the church is tainted because one of its leaders violated ritual separation.

There may be another, more practical concern as well. The Hellenistic believers were persecuted and driven out of Jerusalem for their attacks on the foundations of Judaistic piety. Now Peter, a leading apostle, has disregarded the sacred and traditional laws of separation in order to associate with a Gentile. This may lead the Sanhedrin to persecute the remaining, and more conservative, Jewish converts in Jerusalem.

Peter explains his actions (11:4-17)

Peter needs to explain why he met with Cornelius and baptized him. He goes before the “circumcised believers” of Jerusalem (not the apostles!) and there “told them the whole story” (11:4). That is, he recites the events related to Cornelius’ conversion in sequence, step by step. In giving us a summary of what Peter says, Luke repeats, to a large degree, the material he includes in chapter 10. We need not tell the entire story again, though there are a couple of new pieces of information that should be mentioned.

Peter refers to the six circumcised disciples who go to Caesarea with him, and who also enter the home of Cornelius (11:12). The fact that he brings these six men with him to Jerusalem suggests that he expects to be challenged. These six men are important witnesses to what happened. They are circumcised believers, and hence their credentials as pious Jews (as well as Christians) should carry weight with the church in Jerusalem.

The six saw Cornelius and the other Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit (10:45). Thus, they are witnesses to the fact that God put his stamp of approval on the whole occasion. More than this, the six believers also enter Cornelius’ home, and eat with him. They are more than witnesses for the truth of Peter’s story. These pious and observant Jewish Christians are also implicated in Peter’s actions at the house of Cornelius. Since they are respected members of the circumcision, the fact that they are willing to be “tainted” by being in a Gentile’s presence would help counter the objections being raised. Peter did not act alone.

More important, however, is that Peter can appeal to God as the One who orchestrated the meeting with Cornelius. Thus, Peter concludes his defense by saying, “If God gave them [the Cornelius group] the same gift he gave us...who was I to think that I could stand in God’s way?” (11:17). The important phrase here is “same gift.” The Gentiles experienced something similar in all essentials to that of the original Jewish disciples at Pentecost (2:1-5). That being so, they should have an equal membership in the body of Christ.

Peter argues that he went to the home of Cornelius, baptized him, and then fellowshiped with the group in response to God’s action. He didn’t do this simply on his own initiative or to play fast and loose with tradition. There has been a divine motivation in all this, beginning with his vision on the roof of Simon the tanner’s house.

For the moment, the Jerusalem disciples are satisfied with Peter’s explanation. “They had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life’” (11:18).

On the surface, this appears to be the end of any controversy regarding the Gentiles. But that is not the case, as we shall see later in Acts.

Controversy continues

The conservative Jewish Christians acknowledge that Gentiles can receive the Holy Spirit before living the Jewish life. After all, Peter and the six witnesses show, through the miracles involved in the conversion of Cornelius, that God is behind the salvation of Gentiles. Perhaps they allow that Peter, in this extraordinary circumstance, needed to fellowship with uncircumcised Gentiles.

However, some in the church will claim that Gentiles should, after conversion, begin to fulfill all the requirements of the Torah, such as circumcision. Only after doing so can they be saved. No doubt, the more “zealous” [Zealous for the law, that is – not zealous for grace.] members of the Jerusalem church point out that many problems will be created in allowing formerly pagan Gentiles to fellowship with observant Jews. The Gentiles will ritually “defile” the Christian Jews and will then make it difficult for them to fellowship with non-Christian Jews.

The Jerusalem believers might also be concerned about the results if a large number of Gentiles become part of the church. What will that do to the standing of the church in Jerusalem? After all, the church is being closely watched by the Jewish leaders to see if it is upholding the standards of Judaistic worship. Any suspicion about the church fraternizing with Gentiles will create suspicion and rancor in the Jewish community. This will be a problem in other cities with a large Jewish population in which large-scale Gentile evangelization and conversion occur.

These issues are not solved nor even taken up by the Jerusalem church at this time. However, the questions will continue to linger – until the apostles find it necessary to call an unprecedented council (Acts 15). Meanwhile, the Jerusalem congregation struggles to remain acceptable to the Jewish authorities. If they fail in this regard, they will suffer the fate of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians who were persecuted and expelled (8:1).

Such fears may cause the Jerusalem mother church to acknowledge James as its leader, rather than any of the apostles. (The apostles probably agree that such a course is best, and in any case they soon have to leave the city.) James is known to be a scrupulous practitioner of the Torah, for which he is called “James the Just,” or “James the Righteous.” He enjoys a good reputation with the Jewish community. This will help diffuse any potential crisis with the Sanhedrin over the “Gentile question.”

JEWISH AND GENTILE CHRISTIANS IN ANTIOCH (ACTS 11:19-30)

Preaching expands (11:19)

Regardless of doubts and questions by some of the members, the Jerusalem mother congregation confirms Peter's action in baptizing the first Gentiles living in Judea. More importantly, God is showing his will that Gentiles should receive salvation and become part of the spiritual community, the church.

The stage is now set for Gentile evangelization. Luke is ready to launch into the main theme of his book, which is to show the expansion of gospel and the church throughout the Roman world. Luke leaves Peter in Jerusalem, to whom he will return in chapter 12 and then again briefly in chapter 15. After that, we won't hear of him again, and Luke will focus on Paul.

Antioch (11:20)

Luke begins his story of the Gentile mission by recounting the proclamation of the gospel by Hellenistic Jews in Syrian Antioch. This city will soon become the staging area and springboard for missionary activity to other parts of the Roman Empire. It will also serve as kind of second headquarters area for the growing church. Antioch, the largest city of Syria, is on the Orontes River, about 300 miles north of Jerusalem and 20 miles inland from the Mediterranean. We should not confuse the ancient province of Syria with modern Syria, though the two overlap. The region of ancient Antioch is now in the southeastern corner of Turkey, and the Turkish city is called Antakya.

Josephus calls Antioch "the third city in the habitable earth that was under the Roman empire." [*Wars* 3:29.] Antioch has between 500,000 and 800,000 people. Only Rome and Alexandria are larger. According to Josephus, the city has a particularly large Jewish population. [*Ibid.*, 7:43.] Antioch is the capital of the Roman province of Syria. It is also an important commercial and economic center. The agricultural produce of the hinterland, and of the East, is shipped through Antioch, and then to destinations around the Mediterranean. Culturally, first-century Antioch is a melting pot of Greek, Roman, Semitic, Arabic and Persian influences. The city is also known for its loose morals.

The church in Antioch

When Luke opens his narrative, a flourishing church community in Antioch already exists. It will play a prominent part in his history of the

gospel. No other city apart from Jerusalem appears as frequently in Luke's story. For now, he portrays it as the church where the mission to the Gentiles in general begins (11:19-26). Antioch will soon become a mission-sponsoring church, sending Paul and Barnabas on tours of evangelism (13:1-3). Paul will use Antioch as his home base of operations.

The debate over Gentile religious life-styles will also come to a head in this city (14:26-15:2). A crisis will occur in Antioch over table fellowship when Peter refuses to eat with Gentiles after "certain men came from James" (Galatians 2:12). Luke, more interested in the unity of the church, does not mention this divisive event. It is in Antioch that Paul and Barnabas will separate their missions (15:36-40). The final time we will hear about Antioch is when Paul visits the church before beginning his final evangelistic tour (18:22).

Scattered Jews preach (11:19-21)

Luke introduces his Antioch story by referring back to "those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed" (11:19, referring to 8:1). Earlier, he mentioned these Hellenistic Jews as people who "preached the word wherever they went" (8:4). We've already learned that they went throughout Judea and Samaria (8:1). Now we discover that they are as far as Phoenicia (north of Caesarea), the island of Cyprus, and Antioch (11:19).

These exiled Jews from Jerusalem living in the areas Luke mentions preached the gospel, but only to other Jews (11:19). These individuals are pushing out beyond the areas where Peter and Philip have done missionary work – but not yet to Gentiles.

But then some Christian Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene come to Antioch and they begin to speak "to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus" (11:20). Unfortunately, the Greek text is somewhat unclear at this point. Some manuscripts have the word *Hellenas* ("Greeks"), but others read *Hellenistas*, which could mean "Grecian Jews." However, the context indicates that these are Gentile Greeks and not Hellenistic Jews who are being evangelized. It would make little sense for Luke to say that the Antiochian Christians preach at first only to Jews (11:19), but then begin to speak to other "Jews" (11:20). Almost all of the Jews in Cyprus and Antioch are Hellenistic Jews. The Gentiles being reached here are most likely Gentiles who already have an interest in Judaism, for they would be more likely to have social contacts with these traveling Jews.

Cyprus and Cyrene (11:20)

Luke mentions in particular that the Jews preaching to Greeks are from Cyprus and Cyrene. Cyprus is an island in the eastern Mediterranean, near Antioch. Cyrene is in North Africa, in the territory included in Libya today. Jews from Cyrene are among those who had opposed Stephen (6:9). The Cyrenian Christian Jews may have come directly from Cyrene to Antioch. Or they may have been living in Jerusalem, and were converted after Stephen's death. Perhaps the Lucian of Cyrene that Luke mentions later is one of these missionaries (13:1). Barnabas may also be one of these pioneers, as he came originally from Cyprus (4:36).

We don't know what causes these individuals at Antioch to begin preaching the gospel to Gentiles. Luke presents the situation casually, as though no controversy occurs over it. It may be a gradual development, since Gentiles often attend synagogues. Or these dispersed Christian Jews may know about the conversion of Cornelius, and take it as a precedent, which it is. They preach a message about Jesus *as Lord*, rather than announcing him as the Messiah. Or in Luke's words, they tell "the good news about the Lord Jesus" (11:21). The word "Lord" is more meaningful in Hellenistic culture; the word "Messiah" would appeal less to a Gentile audience.

The apostles are not in the forefront of missionary activity to non-Jews, just as they were not the leaders in Samaria. Although these people were probably leaders in the church at the time, they are nameless and unknown to us. They begin the process of widespread Gentile evangelization. Another decisive moment in the history of the apostolic church is occurring without the presence of the apostles.

He [Luke] emphasizes the part played by anonymous believers in spreading Christianity. Without detracting from the massive contribution of Paul or ignoring the significant roles of Peter and Philip, Luke makes it plain, as he has already done in the case of the [Judean] Christian communities, that so also, farther afield in Phoenicia and Cyprus, the gospel was first proclaimed by men whose names have not been recorded. [Neil, 143.]

Reacting to the urging of the Spirit, these unnamed Christians reap the harvest God provides. Luke tells us "the Lord's hand was with them" as they preached (11:21). The Holy Spirit validates their testimony, and as a result "a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord" (11:21).

Barnabas is sent to Antioch (11:22)

It isn't long before the church at Jerusalem hears about the large number of Gentile converts in Antioch. They decide to dispatch a delegation to check on the situation, as they did in the case of the Samaritan conversions (8:14). Perhaps some in Jerusalem are fearful that the evangelistic program is out of control. There may be a fear that if Gentiles come into the church in large numbers, they may overwhelm the Jewish cultural heritage. The issue of whether Gentile converts have to become practicing Jews has not yet been solved. This, too, may be a concern.

Jerusalem's reaction is not necessarily hostile or fearful. Peter and John were sent to the Samaritans to establish a relationship with the Christians in Samaria. What they did was positive, in that the two apostles put a stamp of approval on the evangelization of Samaria, and drew Christian Jews and Samaritans more closely together. Jerusalem is still the residence of the Twelve (8:1). They are looked upon as those who are specially called and empowered to lead the church. Thus, it is natural for Jerusalem to act as overseer.

The man chosen to represent Jerusalem in Antioch is Barnabas, a Jew from Cyprus. Earlier, Luke mentioned that he has an outstanding reputation for piety and generosity among the believers at Jerusalem, and that he is respectful of the apostolic leadership (4:36-37). Thus the apostles can have total confidence in his analysis of the situation in Antioch. At the same time, Barnabas is a Jew from the Dispersion in Cyprus. He is a compatriot of people who established the church at Antioch (11:20). He can act as the link between the Hebrew and Hellenistic elements in the church. Thus, on two counts, Barnabas is the right choice to head the delegation.

Preaching is encouraged (11:23-24)

Barnabas has the nickname "Son of Encouragement" (4:36). He certainly lives up to his name in evaluating the progress of the gospel at Antioch. Luke says that when Barnabas sees "what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them" (11:23). How Barnabas knows the grace of God is working is not stated. Presumably the fact that so many Gentiles are accepting Jesus as Savior is considered proof in itself. Perhaps the evidence is in changed lives, or in a display of the gifts of the Spirit. Barnabas doesn't find any defects in the new converts' faith or theology. He simply encourages both missionaries and converts "to remain true to the Lord" (11:23).

While Luke doesn't make an issue of it, the arrival of Barnabas in Antioch could have resulted in a crisis for the church. If he reacted negatively to the

Gentile conversions, then the advance of the gospel at Antioch, and Paul's future work, could have been derailed. But Barnabas is specially equipped to be able to see the hand of God at work in Antioch. He is, as Luke paints him, "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith" (11:24). Thus, he has the spiritual insight to recognize where and how God is working.

Barnabas brings Saul to Antioch (11:25)

Luke has said nothing about Paul's whereabouts or work since he left Caesarea for his hometown of Tarsus (9:30). Though Luke does not mention it, Paul has probably been preaching the gospel message in his home area of Syria and Cilicia (Galatians 1:21), just as he had preached near Damascus (Acts 9:22). During these blank years, which some commentators say is nearly a decade, the Jerusalem church hears a report about his preaching. Paul summarizes their reaction in these words: "The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy" (Galatians 1:23-24).

The Jerusalem church and apostles praise God for the progress of the gospel, but apparently they make no effort to contact Paul. In the same way, there is no indication that Paul has any association with the church at Antioch, though Tarsus is not that far away from Antioch. What is he doing then, and where is he?

During Barnabas' stay in Tarsus, there are large-scale conversions at Antioch (11:24), just as there were before his arrival (11:21). The extent of Barnabas' ministry is expanding so rapidly that he needs a co-worker. Barnabas is convinced that Paul will be the perfect choice to help evangelize Antioch. He already acted as Paul's patron when he encouraged the Jerusalem church to accept him (9:27). Now, Barnabas again becomes Paul's advocate. He goes to Tarsus looking for Paul, and finds him (11:25). The two of them return to Antioch, and teach large numbers of people for a year.

There's one small point of interest that we should notice in connection with Paul's rising star. In Acts 11:25 and in some succeeding passages, Luke mentions Barnabas first and Paul second (12:25; 13:1, 2, 7). But soon, he will shift the order, putting Paul first (13:43). However, Luke will again place Barnabas first (14:14; 15:12, 25), though Paul will be in first position at times (13:46, 50; 14:20; 15:2, 22, 35). Luke balances the relationship. Each is listed in first position eight times.

They are called Christians (11:26)

During the time of church expansion at Antioch, outsiders begin to call the disciples by the term "Christian" (11:26). In the Greek noun form it is

Cristiano. This is a way of verbally identifying a follower of a group. For example, those of the party of Herod are *Herodiano*. The *Caesariani* are those who belong to the party of Caesar. Members of one of the major Jewish religious sects are the *Pharisaio*.

“Christian” is not a term the disciples generally use for themselves. They prefer such names as “brothers,” “disciples,” or “saints.” The two other occurrences of the word “Christian” in the Bible are references to the church made by outsiders such as Agrippa (Acts 26:28) and persecutors in general (1 Peter 4:16).

The use of the name “Christian” by outsiders may indicate that people in Antioch realize that the church is not just another sect of Judaism – it includes Gentiles as well. This realization is risky to the church. As long as it is seen as another variant of Judaism, the church is better able to obtain protection from Rome as a *religio licita* – a legal religion. Judaism has long enjoyed such protection, and it would be helpful for the church to continue to claim that umbrella for itself.

Of course, there is a continuity between Judaism and the church. Both believe in the one God of Israel; both claim the same Holy Scriptures; both espouse a similar moral code. (Even today we speak of the “Judeo-Christian” ethic.) The decisive difference, of course, is that the church places its faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah and the author of salvation. Outsiders would see a practical difference, too: Jews tended to keep to themselves, whereas the Christians were eating with Gentiles (Galatians 2:12).

Prophets from Jerusalem (11:27)

Luke now breaks off his discussion of the church’s mission in Antioch to tell his readers about some church prophets who come from Jerusalem. However, he mentions only a single prophecy by a man named Agabus.

Prophets are important in the early church. Luke mentions them several times in Acts (13:1; 15:32; 21:9-10). Paul lists prophets as belonging to a God-ordained function in the church (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11). The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and he ranks the latter next after apostles (Ephesians 2:20). He also recognizes prophets as having an important charismatic function (1 Corinthians 14:29-33; Ephesians 3:5).

Prophets in the Old Testament had a dual function, to foretell and to forth-tell. In speaking forth, they foretold the future and/or told God’s will. Agabus apparently is known for his foretelling, that is, his predictions. We shall hear from him again later in Acts (21:10).

Agabus tells of famine (11:28)

At Antioch, Agabus prophesies “through the Spirit” that a severe famine will spread over the entire Roman world (11:28). Luke wants his readers to understand that Agabus’ prediction is not a hoax. The Holy Spirit inspires him, and thus his prophecy has important meaning for the church. Agabus apparently doesn’t say exactly when the famine will occur. But Luke, writing many years after the event, inserts the parenthetical statement that, “This happened during the reign of Claudius” (11:28). Emperor Claudius rules from A.D. 41-54.

In speaking of a severe famine that will spread over the entire “Roman world,” Luke uses the Greek word *oikoumene*. It literally means the “inhabited world,” and is commonly used to refer to the Roman Empire, in Latin the *orbis terrarum*. We have no record of a *single* famine ravaging the whole empire in the time of Claudius. However, there is good supporting evidence from secular historians that extensive famines did occur throughout his reign. Agabus may mean that a series of famines in various parts of the empire would strike at different times. Taken together, the Roman Empire as a whole suffers from famine.

A number of Roman historians refer to various crop failures and famine conditions during the reign of Claudius. [Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* 18.2; Tacitus, *Annals* 12.43; Dio Cassius, *History of Rome* 60.11; Orosius, *History* 7.6.17.] Josephus writes of a severe famine that hits Judea in what is thought to be about A.D. 45-47. [*Antiquities* 20:49-53, 101; 3:320-321.]

F.F. Bruce says, “We know from other sources that Claudius’s principate was marked by a succession of bad harvests and consequent scarcity in various parts of the empire – in Rome, Greece, and Egypt as well as in Judaea.” [230.] This includes famine conditions in Rome itself at the beginning of Claudius’ rule, in Egypt during his fifth year, throughout Greece in his eighth or ninth year, and in Rome again between his ninth and eleventh year. Suetonius speaks of “a series of droughts” that cause “a scarcity of grain” that hits Rome especially hard. [*Claudius* 18.2.]

Josephus tells the story of Helena, queen-mother of the territory of Adiabene, and a Jewish proselyte. [*Antiquities* 20:49-53.] During a severe famine in Judea, she purchases grain in Egypt and figs in Cyprus. Helena has these transported to Jerusalem for distribution to the famine-stricken population. Meanwhile, her son King Izates sends a large sum of money to the Jerusalem authorities to be used for famine relief. Josephus said this famine occurs during the rule of Cuspius Fadus and Tiberius Julius Alexander. [Ibid., 20:101.] That would be between A.D. 44 and 48.

Disciples help other believers (11:29)

Just as queen Helena and her son Izates helped the Jews in Jerusalem, the disciples at Antioch organize a relief fund for the mother-church. Luke says, “As each one was able, [they] decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea” (11:29). The members apparently contribute money and goods to this special fund. In a later collection, organized by Paul for the churches in Judea, he advises that the Greeks should “set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income” (1 Corinthians 16:2).

Luke’s mention of the relief fund for Judea ends the section on Antioch. It may seem to be an abrupt conclusion, but it is a fitting one. In the words of William Willimon, “The new congregation in Antioch – composed of gentiles who a short time before were considered questionable subjects for the gospel – responds generously to the appeal for help in Judea.” [108.] Thus, the Gentile and Hellenistic Christians of Antioch prove their faith and love (and their unity with the mother church) by sharing their material possessions with those less fortunate. While less dramatic than the story of the Jerusalem Christians sharing their goods (2:44-45 and 4:32-37), this also illustrates the continuing church practice to aid its poor.

The church, under the encouragement of its leading apostles, will “continue to remember the poor,” something that Paul says he is “eager to do” (Galatians 2:10). Paul will call his own future multi-church relief fund a “contribution for the poor among the Lord’s people in Jerusalem” (Romans 15:25-31, with 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 and 2 Corinthians 8-9).

It seems that the Jerusalem church is living on the edge of destitution. Its more wealthy members may have been the Hellenists who fled the city. The early practice of selling personal property to contribute to the common fund may have reduced the economic strength of the church community. Thus, it is ill-prepared to cope with a famine that strains its resources to the breaking point. But the brothers and sisters in Antioch save the day.

Gift is sent to elders (11:30)

Once the relief fund is collected, Barnabas and Paul carry it to the elders in Jerusalem for disposition (11:30). This is the first time “elders” are mentioned in the church at Jerusalem, and they now seem to have charge of the relief fund. Earlier, the apostles delegated this responsibility to people who were known as the “Seven” (6:1-6). Perhaps some of them, as well as others, became known as “elders.” Apparently, elders are leaders appointed to serve in the churches (14:23; 20:17). They seem to function just below the apostles (15:4, 6, 22; 16:4; 21:18).

Perhaps more than coincidentally, “elders” is the name given to leaders of Jewish synagogues. With the influence of Judaism strong in the early church, it’s possible that the early church is following the Jewish form of organization, at least to some degree.

Paul’s trip to Jerusalem (11:30)

Paul brings the relief fund to Jerusalem; this brings up the question of the relationship of this visit to the two visits he mentions in Galatians (1:18; 2:1). Most commentators correlate the first visit of Galatians with the one of Acts 9:26-29, and that is not a problem. The real question revolves around the second visit of Galatians 2:1-10, the one he makes 14 years after his conversion. Often, this is identified with Paul’s trip to attend the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15.

Others, however, feel that this visit correlates better with the famine-relief visit here in Acts 11. If that be the case, then Paul’s comment that he goes to Jerusalem “in response to a revelation” (Galatians 2:2) is explained by Acts 11:28. The revelation is Agabus’ prophecy of famines around the Empire. That means that Paul’s visit to Jerusalem in Acts 15 is a third visit to the city, one he doesn’t mention in Galatians. (Perhaps Galatians was written before he went to Jerusalem for the Acts 15 council.)

ACTS 12: HEROD AND THE CHURCH

PETER FREED FROM PRISON

About this time (12:1)

Luke next turns his attention to an important episode of persecution against the Jerusalem church, which results in one item of sad news, and another of joy. He relates the death of the apostle James (the brother of John) (12:2), Peter's arrest and miraculous escape from prison (12:3-19), and the death of Herod (12:19-23). As we shall see, the three events form one unit with a special message for readers.

These things apparently happen during the same general period of time as the growth of the church in Antioch (11:19-26), and before Paul's trip to Jerusalem (11:27-30). Using secular records, historians place Herod's death (12:20-23) in A.D. 44, while Paul's visit to Jerusalem (11:30) may be two years later. Therefore, in recording the events of chapter 12, Luke backtracks, going behind the story of the Antioch church and Paul's trip to Jerusalem.

The persecution of James and Peter may be connected to bringing Cornelius into the church fellowship. Hence, chapter 12 describes events beginning sometime soon after Peter's defense of his visit to Cornelius in front of the Jerusalem church (11:1-18).

Herod the king

Luke begins his account of persecution against the Jerusalem church by writing: "It was about this time King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them" (12:1). The King Herod mentioned here is the grandson of "Herod the Great," who ruled Judea before Jesus' birth (Luke 1:5), tried to kill the infant Jesus (Matthew 2), and died in 4 B.C. He was a Jew of Idumaeans (Edomite) descent on his father's side. He refurbished the Jerusalem temple and built a splendid complex around it. [Herod was a brutal and self-aggrandizing ruler. His building projects included the temple in Jerusalem, the artificial harbor at Caesarea Maritima, and pagan temples in other cities.]

The second Herod prominent in the biblical account is "Herod the Tetrarch," or Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee and Perea. He pops in and out of Luke's account throughout Jesus' life. [Luke 3:1, 19; 8:3; 9:7-9; 13:31; 23:7-15; Acts 4:27.] He is the Herod who executes John the Baptist and meets Jesus just before his crucifixion. The Romans depose him in A.D. 39.

The King Herod of Acts 12 is more precisely called "Herod Agrippa I."

He dies in A.D. 44, as Luke will soon describe. Over time, various emperors give him more territories to rule, and his kingdom becomes larger than his grandfather's. Herod Agrippa I is a descendant of the Jewish Hasmonean dynasty through his grandmother Mariamne. The Hasmoneans, also called Maccabees, were a family of high priests and kings who descended from Hashmon. They ruled Judea between 165 and 37 B.C.

Apostles are persecuted

Probably in the early spring of A.D. 43, or perhaps 44, Herod begins to persecute the church, particularly in Jerusalem. It appears that this time the apostles and leaders of the church are the intended victims. Rome holds Herod responsible for keeping peace in his territories. Almost certainly, then, he does not undertake the persecution without a reason, or apart from the desires of the Jewish authorities and populace in general.

The persecution of the apostles signals a change in the attitude of the Jewish community in Jerusalem and Judea. Earlier, after Stephen's death, the Hellenistic Christian Jews were singled out for persecution. However, the apostles and Hebraic Jewish Christians were apparently not persecuted or suppressed (8:1). The apostles were still respected by the people since they remained observant Jews (3:1). Their miraculous works caused the populace to hold them in awe as God's instruments for good (3:9; 5:13). The Pharisees were cautious about persecuting the apostles (5:34-39); only the Sadducee-dominated Sanhedrin had threatened them.

What turns the people of Jerusalem and Judea against the apostles? The answer may lie with Peter's evangelizing work. First, he teaches among the despised Samaritans. Worse still, he fellowships with and baptizes the Gentile Cornelius, without requiring that he live as a Jew. We know that the church in Jerusalem quickly hears about Peter eating with "uncircumcised men," referring to Cornelius and those with him (11:3). He is severely criticized even by the Jewish Christians; the scandal is presumably much greater for unconverted Jews. The rumor quickly spreads that Peter allows "unclean" Gentiles to taint the community of Israel.

People may see Peter, and by implication the other apostles, as abandoning the Torah and committing a terrible offense against the community. The Jewish leaders enlist the help of Herod to rid the land of the heretic Peter and his co-workers. Peter's action has the potential to cause riots in Jerusalem, creating a problem for Herod, who is accountable to Rome for revolts and disturbances within his jurisdiction. He may feel threatened politically by the results of Peter's action, because the Jews are making an issue of it.

James, the brother of John (12:2)

To deal with the problem, Herod Agrippa I arrests some of the church leaders at Jerusalem. He singles out James, the brother of John, and has him killed. When the Jews voice their pleasure at this, Herod imprisons Peter, intending to put him on trial after Passover (12:3-4). It's not clear why James is singled out first. Perhaps as one of the "sons of thunder" he thundered out a Stephen-like defense of Peter's action before Jewish groups. Perhaps he is chosen as an object lesson to the others. It is obvious that Herod means business, and that Peter will die, too, unless God intervenes.

Herod wants to get into the good graces of his Jewish subjects. He knows that they hate him and his family, so he takes whatever opportunity he can find to gain their cooperation. In Jerusalem, Herod even acts the part of an observant Jew. Now, a new ploy is available. Executing the leaders of the heretical Christian community will (he hopes) make his subjects more favorably disposed toward him.

In his short reign of three years (A.D. 41-4) he sought to counter the distaste on the part of the Jewish religious leaders for his Roman background and Edomite ancestry by his sedulous observance of Jewish customs and support of the Jewish faith; it was, no doubt, as part of this policy that he sought to win general approval by this attack on the Nazarenes [the Christians]. [E. William Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), page 148.]

By beheading James, Herod is making a gesture of solidarity with the Jewish majority. It is a public relations ploy to demonstrate his loyalty to Judaism.

Peter is jailed (12:3-4)

The seven days of the festival of Unleavened Bread are just beginning when Peter is arrested (12:3). (Luke also refers to the entire festival as the "Passover" in 12:4.) Peter remains in jail until the festival is over. Herod intends to put Peter on trial and then execute him. But he waits until the festival ends because a public execution during the sacred season would offend the people. We remember that the chief priests didn't want to arrest and execute Jesus during the festival of Unleavened Bread "or the people may riot" (Mark 14:2).

Ironically, Peter's imprisonment comes during Passover, the feast of unleavened bread, the great and festive day of deliverance from

Egyptian slavery. This day finds Peter languishing in bondage, not celebrating liberation. The people who once saw God deliver them from slavery now make prisoners of their own kin during the feast of liberation – a bitter irony Luke does not want us to miss. [William Willimon, *Acts* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1988), 112.]

Church prays earnestly (12:5)

While Peter is in prison, the church is “earnestly praying to God for him” (12:5). Here and throughout Acts Luke points out to his readers that prayer is central to the life of the church. In this case, the Jerusalem church is facing a life-threatening crisis. There is no doubt as to what Herod, and the Sanhedrin with him, are intending to do. The goal is to eliminate the leaders of the church and persecute the believers who accept Gentiles.

The church has no weapons against the forces arrayed against it. Their only recourse is to depend on God to make his will known, with the hope that Peter will be rescued and the church saved. Meanwhile, the apostle is languishing in the dungeon. Herod takes every precaution to make sure that Peter does not escape – he may know about Peter’s former escape (5:19-24).

Peter is probably in the Antonia fortress, the military barracks where Paul is later confined (21:31-23:32). The fortress overlooks the temple. Peter is guarded by four squads of four soldiers each, probably on a rotating basis. He sleeps bound with two chains between two soldiers, with sentries standing guard at the entrance of his cell. Luke notes that Peter is sleeping peacefully on the eve of his trial and execution (12:6). He has faith in his Savior that whatever happens to him, his life is safe in Christ. Perhaps he also remembers that Jesus said he would live to old age (John 21:18).

Peter escapes (12:7-10)

Suddenly, an angel appears, and Peter’s cell is lit up. The angel nudges him sharply and he wakes up. “Quick, get up!” the angel demands (12:7). The angel tells Peter to put on his day clothes and wrap his outer garment around him. He follows the angel out of the prison. On the way out, they pass two guard posts, and as they approach the prison gate, it opens by itself. Peter is now in the city streets of Jerusalem, and the angel leaves him.

Peter is still in a daze, half asleep, thinking that his experience with the angel is simply a vivid dream. One can understand Peter’s confusion, as everything that is happening is in all respects contrary to normal. Finally, Peter “comes to himself” and realizes the dream-like scene is real. Luke records Peter’s thoughts as he walks along the quiet streets: “Now I know

without a doubt the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were hoping would happen" (12:11).

The power of the resurrected Jesus is working mightily in his apostles and church. We may wonder why God allows Peter to escape but James to die. There is no easy answer except that they are among the mysteries of God. It has always been that way among God's people. God rescues some of his servants to do his work and others are killed while doing it (Hebrews 11:32-37). In Peter's case, God steps in and saves him (and with him, the rest of the Jerusalem church). Whatever plans Herod and the Sanhedrin may have to destroy the community of believers is stopped for the moment. As we shall soon see, the power behind the plot, Herod, will soon be eliminated.

Mary, mother of Mark (12:12)

After his release, Peter heads for the place where a house-church of the Jerusalem congregation is meeting. This one is in the home of Mary, the mother of Mark (12:12). (The fact that she is mentioned as the head of the household indicates that she is a widow.) This is apparently a sizable home, for "many people" gathered there (12:12). Mary has at least one house servant, Rhoda. Obviously, the faithful Christian Jews did not sell all their possessions to donate to the common fund (2:44-45; 4:32-35). Donations are made on an as-needed basis and do not necessarily involve selling everything one owns. The fact that Mary keeps this home turns out to be a great and continuing benefit to the church in that it has a private place to meet.

As for Mary's son, he has both a Jewish name (John) and a Roman one (Mark, or Marcus), as do various other characters in Acts, including Paul (1:23; 13:9). John Mark will become an important figure in Luke's story. He will accompany Barnabas and Paul to Antioch after they complete their relief-mission to Jerusalem (12:25). Then, he will accompany the pair on their first missionary journey (13:5). However, for some reason, Mark will abandon the mission and return to Jerusalem (13:13). This will result in a contentious split between Barnabas and Paul (15:37-39). In later years, both Paul and Peter will mention a person named Mark as a co-worker in their missionary work (2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 24; 1 Peter 5:12). He is thought to be the Mark mentioned here.

Post-apostolic Christian writers refer to Mark as "the interpreter of Peter" and the founder of the church in Alexandria. Eusebius (c. A.D. 260-339), bishop of Caesarea, regarded by his contemporaries as the greatest Christian scholar of his time and "the father of church history," recounts a number of

traditions about Mark. Among other things, he is called “the companion” and “interpreter” of Peter, as well as the writer of a Gospel at Rome. [Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.15-16; 3.39; 5.8; 6.14.]

Church astonished (12:13-17)

When Peter knocks on the outer entrance of Mary’s house, the servant Rhoda answers. She recognizes Peter’s voice and is so overjoyed that she forgets to open the door. Rhoda runs back into the house to announce, “Peter is at the door” (12:14). “You’re out of your mind,” the church tells her in unison (12:15).

Earlier, the apostles (Peter included) had a similar response to the women’s claim that Jesus’ tomb was empty. There, the disciples said their words “seemed to them like nonsense” (Luke 24:11). Note, also, the fearful and incredulous reaction of the disciples (Peter included again) to Jesus suddenly appearing in their midst (Luke 24:36-40). How slow we are to respond to the words of God, especially when they contradict our understanding of reality!

When Rhoda keeps insisting that it is Peter’s voice, the church answers, “It must be his angel” (12:15). They apparently think, as many people in the first century do, that guardian angels exist, and are a kind of spirit counterpart resembling the person. Meanwhile, Peter keeps banging on the door. Someone finally opens it, and a thoroughly astonished church gapes at him as though he is a ghost.

Commentators often remark about Luke’s almost slapstick account of Peter’s escape and the church’s refusal to believe it really is him standing at its door. It begins with the comic scene of Peter’s escape from jail juxtaposed with Herod’s serious intent to keep him safely locked away. The disbelieving reaction to Peter’s release by a church who is earnestly praying for God to save Peter is also ironic. These purposely lighthearted scenes are meant to make a serious point: God works his purpose in mysterious ways that humans find hard to understand.

“Tell James” (12:17)

There is probably a joyous outcry when the disciples at Mary’s house finally realize that Peter is really there. He has to quiet the group to explain how God rescued him from prison. After finishing his explanation and saying his goodbyes, Peter asks his listeners to “tell James and the other brothers and sisters about this” (12:17). The James mentioned here is Jesus’ half-brother, [Mark 3:21; 6:3; Matthew 13:55; John 7:5.] not the apostle. (James the apostle, the brother of John, was killed a few days ago.) Along with his

brothers and sisters, James did not believe in Jesus before the Resurrection. But, as Luke has told us, James and his siblings were among the disciples meeting together before Pentecost (1:14). (In 1 Corinthians 15:7, Paul mentions that the resurrected Jesus appeared to James.)

This is the first mention of this James in the book of Acts. It is obvious from the way that Peter singles out James in Acts 12:17 that he is prominent in the Jerusalem church. Peter and the other original apostles are the primary spiritual leaders of the Christian community at large, but James seems to have a more visible leadership role in the Jerusalem church. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul calls James “the Lord’s brother” and implies that he is one of its “pillars” (1:19, 2:9). Luke describes James as the leader of the Jerusalem church about a decade later (21:18).

Luke doesn’t explain how or why the shift in leadership from Peter to James occurs in the Jerusalem church. (Luke focuses on the expansion of Christianity toward Rome, not the details of one particular congregation.) Antagonism in Jerusalem against people who seem to be untrue to Israel’s traditions may cause the church to choose James as the leader, because he is acceptable to the Jewish community.

Also, growing numbers of Jews from a Pharisaic and priestly background are being converted in Jerusalem (6:7; 15:5; 21:20). Someone who is regarded as scrupulously Jewish, who respects the traditions, is needed to lead the congregation. Peter is tainted because of his association with Samaritans and Gentiles like Cornelius. The church in the city needs to be represented by someone known to be respectful of Jewish traditions, and whose qualifications in that regard are beyond reproach. The obvious person is James, who is called “the Just” because of his fastidious piety.

Hegesippus, a second-century Christian of Jerusalem, preserves a tradition, repeated by Eusebius, that James’ knees are like camel’s knees from his frequent prayers for the people. Such is his reputation as a pious man. Eusebius also preserves an ancient tradition that says it is the apostles themselves who chose James to be the leader of the Jerusalem church. [Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.23, 2.1.]

James acquires this authority in the church fairly early. At the time of Peter’s escape from Herod in the mid-A.D. 40s, James seems to be the leader of the Jerusalem church (12:17). A few years later, in A.D. 49, James presides over the Jerusalem Council as chief spokesperson of the church. He has authority to finalize what churches in areas outside Jerusalem should practice (15:13-21).

James continues to maintain his presence in Jerusalem for many years

(21:17-25) until the high priest has him killed in perhaps A.D. 62. [Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:200-201.] Eusebius preserves a tradition that James is thrown from a wing of the temple and beaten to death with a club. [Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 2.1, 23.] This is done because James and some others (probably Christians) are condemned as “breakers of the law.” This happens between the death of the Roman governor Festus in about A.D. 62 and the coming of the next governor, Albinus. (That is, when there is no Roman ruler to maintain order.)

Josephus has a brief account of this, in which he criticizes the high priest for having James murdered. The Pharisees protest this travesty of justice to Herod Agrippa II, and eventually the high priest has his office taken away from him. [Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:197-203.]

James had a statesmanlike breadth of vision, as appears from his policy at the Council of Jerusalem (15:13-21). But he was careful to retain the confidence of the ordinary church members in Jerusalem, many of whom were “zealots for the law” (21:20). In addition, he continued to the end to command the respect of the Jerusalem populace, largely because of his ascetic way of life and his regular participation in the temple services of prayer, where he interceded for the people and their city.... When he was stoned to death in A.D. 62, at the instance of the high priest Ananus II, many of the people were gravely shocked; and some years later some ascribed the calamity which overtook the city and its inhabitants to the cessation of James’s prayers on their behalf. [F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Rev. ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), page 239.]

“Another place” (12:17)

Immediately after telling the story of his escape and asking the church to give James the details, Peter goes into hiding. Luke tersely describes it: “He left for another place” (12:17). Any of the other apostles remaining in Jerusalem probably leave the city as well. Thus, a shift in authority within the Jerusalem church occurs, leaving James with the task of keeping the church from looking like a threat to the Jewish authorities.

Where does Peter go? No one knows. The idea that he goes to Rome is not supported by any evidence. Only at the end of his life do we have biblical and extra-biblical evidence linking him with the capital of the Empire. [1 Peter 5:13; 1 Clement 5:4; Acts of Peter 7.] Perhaps Peter goes to Antioch in Syria. Here he will remain until “certain men came from James” and then he

has a confrontation with Paul over table fellowship with Gentiles (Galatians 2:11-14). From Paul's letters, we have circumstantial evidence that Peter also goes to Corinth, and is at least known to this Jewish-Gentile church (1 Corinthians 1:10; 9:5).

As a postscript to this part of the story, Luke says that the next morning there is a great stir among the soldiers about Peter's whereabouts (12:18). Recriminations probably fly fast and furious about who is responsible for letting him escape. The soldiers' lives are on the line. Herod has a thorough search made for the missing prisoner. When Peter cannot be found, Herod tortures the guards to see if they have any information and then has them executed (18:19).

The later Code of Justinian shows that a guard who allows a prisoner to escape is subject to the same penalty the escaped prisoner would have suffered. This explains why the jailor at Philippi is about to kill himself when he thinks the prisoners have escaped (16:27). It's the reason the soldiers want to kill the prisoners, including Paul, who are on the shipwrecked boat. They don't want the prisoners to escape, because if the prisoners escape, the guards will have to suffer their penalty (27:42).

Herod dies (12:19-23)

Luke now turns to record the shocking death of Herod Agrippa I. After the prison incident, Herod returns to Caesarea (12:19). Apparently there was some problem between him and the cities of Tyre and Sidon. Together with the support (probably through bribery) of Herod's trusted aide, a man named Blastus, these two cities hope to gain an audience with Herod and sue for peace. Luke says the reason they want to make a pact with Herod is economic: "They depended on the king's country for their food supply" (12:20).

Tyre and Sidon are the chief cities on the coast of Phoenicia, in the territory adjacent to Herod's kingdom. They have been centers of commerce and shipping since Old Testament times, but they are dependent on Galilee for their food supply. Josephus gives a parallel account to the event, from which we can fill in some important historical details Luke does not include. [Josephus, *Antiquities* 19:339-352.] Josephus alludes to a dispute between Herod and Marcus the governor of Syria. He doesn't mention Tyre and Sidon in connection with the dispute, however. In any case, Luke's account implies some agreement has been reached between Herod and the coastal cities. Apparently, it is to be ratified publicly at a festival, at which Herod is to speak.

Luke writes that after Herod delivers the speech, his listeners shout, "This

is the voice of a god, not of a man” (12:22). Immediately after this flattery, Herod is struck down with an illness because he does “not give praise to God” (12:23). Luke concludes the story of Herod’s ghastly illness by saying “he was eaten by worms and died” (12:23). (Luke doesn’t necessarily mean that Herod is eaten by worms on the spot, nor that he dies immediately.)

In Josephus’ account, the occasion during which the Phoenicians are to be publicly reconciled with Herod is a festival in honor of Caesar at Caesarea. A large number of provincial officials and other important dignitaries are in attendance. Josephus is probably referring to a festival celebrated every five years in honor of the foundation of Caesarea. [Suetonius, *Claudius* 2.1.] There are two possibilities for the date of the festival. It may be March 5, A.D. 44 – the anniversary of the founding of Caesarea – or on August 1, A.D. 44, the emperor’s birthday.

Josephus describes Herod as donning a silver robe and entering the amphitheater early in the morning on the day of his death. He looks so utterly resplendent that the flattering mobs say he is a god. Josephus observes: “Upon this the king did neither rebuke them, nor reject their impious flattery.” [Josephus, *Antiquities* 19:346.] Immediately after, Herod begins having severe stomach pains. He dies five days later, after being king of Judea for three years. His death is placed in A.D. 44, in the fourth year of the Roman emperor Claudius.

Both Luke and Josephus attribute Herod’s death to God’s judgment on him. The king allows the crowd to hail him as a god, accepting the glory that belongs only to God. Thus, God punishes a vain king. Of course, many other despots and rulers accept – and even encourage – similar accolades. God doesn’t strike them down with worms or a horrible death. So what is special here?

In times when God manifests his glory through miracles, he does so both to vindicate the church and to judge people opposed to his will. God heals the lame man at the temple gate through Peter and he also strikes Ananias dead after Peter accused him. God here strikes down Herod to make a point, to protect his church and further its work. Herod has become the chief enemy of the church. Working with the Jewish leaders, he is planning to have the apostles killed, and perhaps even ordinary church members martyred. By killing off the king, God effectively puts a stop to the conspiracy against the church. (After Herod’s death, Rome sends Cuspius Fadus to be procurator of Judea.)

God also sends a message to the conspirators that their plot against the church isn’t going to work. By ending the persecution and creating a chilling effect against any future attempt on the believers, God saves the church in

Jerusalem for a few more years. The church is greatly encouraged, in that a major persecution is nipped in the bud. Having seen God's miraculous hand in its affairs since Pentecost, the church can read between the lines of Herod's death and know that God is involved.

Word increases and spreads (12:24)

Luke juxtaposes the story of the death of Herod with good news about the church. Herod dies, "but the word of God continued to increase and spread" (12:24). Earlier we saw that Luke comments briefly on the progress of the church at regular intervals (6:7; 9:31). Here he does so again. This summary illustrates the pattern of reversals in Luke's account. The story begins with the future of the Jerusalem church being in grave doubt, with one of its leaders killed and its chief spokesperson awaiting trial and execution. But the tale ends with Peter's escape, the death of the despot, and the church growing and spreading.

There is also another fundamental change in the book of Acts. Up to now, Luke's story could be called "The Acts of Peter." But Peter is about to pass out of Luke's narrative, except for a brief appearance in chapter 15. From now on, Luke's account will be about "The Acts of Paul."

SAUL'S FIRST EVANGELISTIC JOURNEY (ACTS 12:25-14:28)

BAR-JESUS BLINDED ON CYPRUS (12:25-13:12)

Barnabas and Saul take Mark (12:25)

The closing verse of Acts 12 picks up the story of the trip of Barnabas and Paul to Jerusalem to deliver the relief fund, which is mentioned in 11:30. In neither place does Luke give any details about what happens in Jerusalem. In 12:25, Luke simply notes that Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch after the relief visit. Luke mentions that John Mark accompanies them from Jerusalem to Antioch. His presence will be important to a later disagreement between Paul and Barnabas.

As mentioned earlier, Paul's trip to Jerusalem probably occurs *after* Herod dies. His death may be what makes Paul's trip to Jerusalem safe and feasible. (If Herod imprisoned Peter to please the Jews, he surely would have put Paul in prison, too, because that would have pleased them even more.)

The church at Antioch (13:1-2)

We have reached a pivotal point in Luke's account of the growth of the church and spread of the gospel. Up to now, Jerusalem and Judea have been the center of his story. Peter has been the most prominent person in the narrative. Now, Luke shifts his interest to the church at Antioch. Luke says that in the Antioch church there are both prophets and teachers – two important classes of individuals in the church community.

Paul says that prophesying and teaching are gifts of God, given by him for the proper functioning of the church (Romans 12:4-8). In the outline of church roles Paul describes to the Corinthians, prophets and teachers are mentioned just after apostles (1 Corinthians 12:28). In a later epistle, Paul inserts the role of evangelist between that of prophet and teacher (Ephesians 4:11).

Luke names five prophets and teachers in Antioch: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been raised with Herod) and Saul. Their names show that they come from a wide variety of social and ethnic backgrounds.

Barnabas is mentioned first by Luke, as he is the apostolic delegate and a leading figure in the Jerusalem church (9:27; 11:22-30). We already know him as a Levite from Cyprus who lived in Jerusalem (4:36-37). More than this, we know him as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith” (11:24).

Simeon has the Latin nickname Niger, or “the Black.” His name is Jewish, so it is unlikely that he is African, though he may have had dark skin. The nickname may distinguish him from other Simons in the church, such as Simon Peter.

Lucius has a Latin name. It’s possible though not certain that he is a Gentile, because he is from Cyrene in North Africa. Perhaps he was part of the Cyrenian group that first preached the gospel of salvation to the Gentiles of Antioch (11:20).

Manaen is the Greek form of the Hebrew Menahem, which means “comforter.” He was “brought up with Herod the tetrarch” (13:1). This is the Herod of the Gospels, whom Jesus once called “that fox” (Luke 13:32). This Herod was responsible for the imprisonment and death of John the Baptist (Mark 6:14-28). If Manaen grew up with him, it is possible that he was taken to the royal court to be a companion of the prince; such boys were then called “foster brothers.”

What a commentary on the mystery and sovereignty of divine grace that, of these two boys who were brought up together, one should attain honor as a Christian leader, while the other should best be remembered for his inglorious behavior in the killing of John the Baptist and in the trial of Jesus! [Bruce, 245.]

Paul is mentioned last by Luke, and he continues to use the Jewish form of his name, Saul. He is last because he is a relative newcomer to Antioch (11:25). But he will soon take center stage in Luke’s account, while the others, with the exception of Barnabas, will no longer play a part in the story.

Holy Spirit sets apart (13:2-3)

After introducing us to the leaders of the Antioch church, Luke tells us that the church is “worshiping the Lord and fasting” (13:2). He doesn’t explain why the disciples are fasting, but some reason is probably behind it. Perhaps the church is thinking of moving its missionary venture beyond the confines of Antioch. Or they have already decided to do so and are wondering who should lead the endeavor. The church may be in a special meeting, asking God to make his will known in the matter. That is exactly what God does. The answer to the mission question comes from the Holy Spirit, who says: “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them” (13:2).

The importance of the present narrative is that it describes the first piece of planned “overseas mission” carried out by representatives of

a particular church...and begun by a deliberate church decision, inspired by the Spirit, rather than somewhat more causally as a result of persecution. [I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), page 214.]

Luke doesn't define what this "work" is, but from subsequent events, it's clear that it has to do with a mission to the Gentiles. Neither does Luke explain how the Holy Spirit makes his will known. Perhaps what happens is that the Spirit moves one of the prophets to name the missionaries. Here we have echoes of the Old Testament prophets bringing God's message through his prophets. We are reminded of the story of the Judean king Jehoshaphat and his people who were praying and fasting in Jerusalem. They were hoping for God's intervention against a large army coming against the nation. Then, suddenly, "the Spirit of the Lord came upon" a prophet who gave God's will. The nation would be saved without having to fight a battle with the enemy (2 Chronicles 20:14).

Now, at Antioch, God is showing his will about another, quite different concern. This new and monumental enterprise of spreading the gospel around the Roman Empire, particularly to Gentiles, will be no mere human initiative. God will guide it through the Holy Spirit. One of Luke's continuing purposes is to show that the Holy Spirit initiates and guides the activities of the church. This theme – pointed up in 13:2 – is a regular occurrence in the first half of Acts. [Acts 4:31; 8:29, 39; 10:44; 16:6.]

Thus, it is through the Spirit that Barnabas and Paul are separated for the task of evangelizing. Then they are "sent on their way by the Holy Spirit" (13:4). While the church "sent them off," they are really dispatched by the Spirit. Luke is showing that Paul's work will occur in cooperation and continuity with the church and the other apostles. Paul is not a lone ranger, but a person who respects both the church and the congregation of Israel, even as he preaches a revolutionary message to Gentiles.

Even after the prophet utters God's will regarding Barnabas and Paul, the church continues to fast and pray, no doubt for God's continuing guidance. The leaders then place "their hands on them and sent them off" (13:3). The imposition of hands used on this occasion shows that the church supports these men as doing God's will. The Antioch church leaders, by the laying on of hands, agree that Barnabas and Paul have the authority to act on behalf of the Christian community at Antioch. The church leaders' action of imposing hands is taken on behalf of the entire church community at Antioch.

In Acts, the leaders of the church make decisions and take actions that represent its thinking as a whole. [Acts 1:15, 6:2, 5; cf. 14:27; 15:22.] The idea

is that the church as a whole, not just the leaders or a single prophet, is motivated by the Spirit. Both the leadership and the community together are working under the direction of the Spirit to set apart Barnabas and Paul for evangelistic work.

Work on Cyprus (13:4)

Luke now begins the story of Paul's first missionary journey. The entire trip, perhaps about three years in length, is described in chapters 13 and 14. Barnabas and Paul leave from Seleucia, the port city about 16 miles (26 kilometers) west of Antioch and four or five miles northeast of the mouth of the Orontes River. Their destination is the island of Cyprus, in the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea. The journey by boat is about 130 miles (210 kilometers), and when the wind is favorable, takes only one day. Cyprus is about 140 miles (225 kilometers) long and 60 miles (96 kilometers) wide. Cyprus was once part of the imperial province of Cilicia. But in 22 B.C. it became a senatorial province, and in Paul's day it is administered by a proconsul.

Cyprus is a sensible place to begin the church's outreach program because it is Barnabas' native land. He is acquainted with its idiosyncrasies, terrain and people. Christian communities probably exist on the island and can serve as bases of operation (11:19).

At Salamis and Paphos (13:5-6)

John Mark accompanies Barnabas and Paul on the journey as their assistant. The fact that he has a family connection with Barnabas and perhaps is familiar with Cyprus, are probably the reasons he is taken along. Luke describes him as the "helper" of Barnabas and Paul. "Helper" translates the Greek word *hyperetes*, which is used of a synagogue attendant (4:20).

The first of two Cypriot cities Luke mentions is Salamis, the administrative center of eastern Cyprus (13:5). Salamis is a few miles from the modern city of Famagusta. Barnabas and Paul "proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish synagogues" of the city (13:5). There is a substantial Jewish population in Salamis, as there are several synagogues for Barnabas and Paul to preach in. Paul continues this pattern of beginning his missionary work in a city by first working within the synagogue. [Acts 13:14, 46; 14:1, 16:13; 17:1, 10; 18:4, 19; 19:8; 28:17.] That is a logical starting point, for it is a gathering place for people likely to be interested in a message from Jewish preachers based on the Jewish Scriptures, about the Messiah.

Proconsul Sergius Paulus (13:7)

The other city Luke mentions is Paphos, the provincial capital, 90 miles (145 kilometers) southwest of Salamis. At Paphos, the island's proconsul, Sergius Paulus, requests a meeting with the two missionaries. Presumably, Barnabas and Paul preach in the city for some time before they come to the proconsul's attention. Luke describes Sergius Paulus as "an intelligent man," that is, a man of intellectual curiosity and open-mindedness – a person of discernment. As we will see throughout Acts, Luke wants his readers to understand that Roman officials are sympathetic to the gospel message. Here he says of the proconsul that he "wanted to hear the word of God" (13:7). Luke doesn't say why Sergius Paulus wants to hear the message of these traveling Jews. Perhaps it is more for the purposes of inquiry, than a desire to be converted.

Luke doesn't say that Sergius Paulus becomes a Christian. However, he implies that a false prophet is unable to turn the proconsul "from the faith" (13:8). Later, when the proconsul sees that Paul causes a sorcerer to become blind, "he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord" (13:12). However, it is not clear whether this means that he becomes a Christian. He may have believed in the miracle, but not necessarily the message about Christ.

Bar-Jesus, the sorcerer (13:8-12)

Whatever Sergius' Paulus final relationship with the church may be, Luke seems not to be interested in documenting it. (Nor does he give us a single scrap of information as to what happens as a result of Barnabas and Paul preaching in synagogues all across Cyprus.) Luke's main interest in the proconsul is only as the setting for Paul's confrontation with a magician who is the proconsul's court advisor, and who opposes the preaching of the gospel (13:7-8). Luke gives him two names – Bar-Jesus and Elymas the sorcerer. The meaning of "Elymas" is not clear.

Josephus mentions a Jewish magician from Cyprus by the name of Atomos. He is later employed by Felix, the procurator of Judea, to entice the married Drusilla to become his wife. [Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:7, 142.] Some commentators speculate that Bar-Jesus and Atomos may have been the same person. Bar-Jesus means "Son of Jesus." But, ironically, he opposes the servants of God. He does this so vehemently and frequently that Paul finally confronts him, probably at the court of the proconsul.

Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, says to Bar-Jesus: "You are a child of the

devil and an enemy of everything that is right! You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?” (13:10). The individual who calls himself “Son of Jesus” is now shown to be a “son of the devil.” Paul pronounces a curse on the magician, saying he will be temporarily blinded (3:11). Although Paul brings light to the Gentiles (13:47), he brings blindness to this obstinate man – an external indication of his spiritual condition.

The action so impresses Sergius Paulus that he believes. But this doesn’t necessarily mean he becomes a Christian. Simon the magician also “believed” upon seeing the miracles Stephen performed (8:13). Simon was baptized, but Luke says nothing of Sergius Paulus being baptized. It would be surprising if he became a Christian.

Luke is more interested in the story of Bar-Jesus being confronted and cursed by Paul. He is interested in telling the story not of a conversion, but of the superiority of God’s power over the magic of the pagan world. Luke wants to show how Paul uses his apostolic authority to neutralize the evil spirit influence of Bar-Jesus. Luke wants his readers to understand that the power behind the gospel is superior to that of pagan magic. In the same way, Moses’ miracles in the land of Egypt are more powerful than the magicians’ magic. Paul’s squaring off with Bar-Jesus is also reminiscent of Elijah confronting and defeating the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:19-40).

Luke probably has another parallel in mind, this one with the gospel message preached earlier in Samaria. The first major missionary work in Samaria, this one from Jerusalem, was challenged by Simon the Sorcerer (8:9-24). In the same way, the first outreach from Antioch encounters the false prophet Bar-Jesus, who is also defeated.

Saul also called Paul (13:9)

Luke seems to be purposely juxtaposing names in this section. Bar-Jesus is paired with Elymas. The proconsul’s name “Paulus” reminds us of Paul, though the sharing of the name is probably only a coincidence. It is here that Luke tells us for the first time that Saul is “also called Paul” (13:9). He has referred to him as “Saul” since he introduced him (7:58). But from now on he will call him only “Paul.” Luke introduces Paul’s two names casually, as though he already has both names. “Saul” is more appropriate in the Jewish world. But now he is moving into the wider Gentile and Roman world, and “Paul” is more suitable.

Luke does not mention whether the preaching of Barnabas and Paul

results in any converts on Cyprus. He says nothing about the work in general on Cyprus, nor how long the two missionaries remain on the island. Barnabas and Paul travel “through the whole island” of Cyprus (13:6). This takes some time. Presumably, they preach in a number of towns, and teach some converts.

Paul in Perga (13:13)

The missionary group now sails from Cyprus to Perga in Pamphylia, on the southcentral coast of Asia Minor (13:13). Perga is a river port on the Cestrus River about 12 miles (19 kilometers) inland from the seaport of Attalia (14:25). Luke gives no indication that Paul and Barnabas preach the gospel in Perga or the surrounding area – but they do preach there on their way back to Syrian Antioch (14:25).

It is during the trip to Perga that Luke no longer speaks of “Barnabas and Saul.” From now on, Paul is usually in first place, ahead of Barnabas. Before this, Barnabas was usually mentioned first (11:30; 12:25; 13:2). In the account here, Luke speaks of “Paul and his companions,” which literally means “those around Paul.” This expression indicates that Paul is the leader of the group. Luke appears to be signaling to his readers that Paul has become the dominant partner in the missionary team. Luke doesn’t explain why the change occurs. Perhaps it is obvious that the Holy Spirit is working through Paul, as in the case of his confrontation with the magician. Paul’s speaking may be getting results, indicating that God is using him in a special way.

John Mark leaves the evangelizing team at Perga and returns to Jerusalem. His departure will later lead to a disagreement between Barnabas and Paul, and their permanent split (15:2). Luke gives no reason for Mark’s departure. Perhaps John Mark does not like the fact that his uncle, Barnabas, is no longer the leader of the team. Or he may be in disagreement over some policy regarding preaching to the Gentiles, or admitting them into the fellowship. He may even be homesick or afraid of traveling into the hinterland. Whatever the reason for Mark’s departure, Paul doesn’t like it. He calls it desertion (15:38).

PISIDIAN ANTIOCH (ACTS 13:14-52)

Paul and Barnabas leave Perga and travel to Antioch in Pisidia. [In the ancient world, there were several cities named Antioch, just as there were several cities named Alexandria. Rulers who built cities often named those cities after themselves. The Seleucid empire had several rulers named Antiochus.] Luke devotes the rest of chapter 13 to the preaching of the gospel in the city, and much of his account centers around a single sermon in a synagogue.

Surprisingly, Antioch of Pisidia is not in Pisidia, but in Phrygia, *near* Pisidia. It may be called Pisidian Antioch because the city is adjacent to, or over against Pisidia. [Strabo, *Geography* 12.3.31; 12.6.4; 12.8.14.] It's about 100 miles (161 kilometers) north of Perga, some 3,600 feet above sea level. To reach Antioch of Pisidia the missionaries have to cross the Taurus mountains – a difficult and dangerous journey. The Pisidian highlands are subject to sudden flooding. Another danger is from brigands, as the Romans have not yet fully suppressed the robber clans that lived in these mountains.

Thus, on first view it seems strange that Paul and Barnabas would struggle to make their way to such an out-of-the-way town in the center of Asia Minor. Luke doesn't let us in on Paul's thinking, except that it is his goal to preach the gospel in whatever town he can. Some commentators speculate that Paul or someone in the party became ill while in Perga, perhaps a victim of malaria that plagues the marshy coastal strip of Asia Minor. In Paul's later letter to the churches in Galatia he says that he came to them because he was ill (Galatians 4:13).

Some commentators think that Paul contracted his “thorn in my flesh” at Perga, the illness for which he beseeches God's healing on three occasions (2 Corinthians 12:7). However, one must wonder how a deathly ill Paul could survive the rigors of crossing the Taurus mountains. Another view is that Paul has a practical reason for going to Pisidian Antioch: The town sits astride the Via Sebaste, the Roman road from Ephesus going to the Euphrates.

In the synagogue (13:14-15)

Luke now turns to describe a sermon Paul delivers in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch (13:14). Paul's practice of presenting the Christian message in the synagogues of Roman cities becomes a regular feature of his itinerary. Because of this, Paul can put into practice the principle that the gospel should be given “first to the Jew” (Romans 1:16). The synagogue plays a major role in Jewish life in the Diaspora. It serves as a meeting place, schoolhouse,

library and court. The synagogue houses the Scriptures and other important writings, so it is a center of religious education and learning. And it is the place where Jews came to worship.

For these reasons, the synagogue is a place in which the Christian missionaries can find a receptive audience, primed for the gospel message. This is true because Gentile proselytes and God-fearers attend the synagogue as well as Jews. The synagogue-attending Gentiles serve as a bridge to pagan relatives, acquaintances and business associates.

After the reading (13:15)

During the synagogue service, Paul listens to the reading from the Law and the Prophets. After this is completed, the synagogue “rulers” ask if Paul and Barnabas have any words of encouragement for the assembly. One might wonder why these strangers are allowed to speak. This is not necessarily their first Sabbath at the synagogue. Thus, they may be known to the synagogue rulers or officials. Paul’s dress or some other symbol may identify him as a rabbi and Pharisee.

The “ruler” or leader of the synagogue is usually an elder or leading layman. He takes charge of organizing and arranging the service and is responsible for maintaining the building. Luke mentions two individuals who hold the office of ruler, Crispus (18:8) and Sosthenes (18:17), both in Corinth.

Luke provides us with two vignettes in which he describes parts of a synagogue service. The first is a service in the Nazareth synagogue at the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry (Luke 4:16-17). The other is the one given here at Pisidian Antioch.

From the details Luke gives and our knowledge of later customs, we can reconstruct the following pattern of a Jewish synagogue service. It begins with the *Shema*, summarized in the phrase: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Prayers follow the *Shema*. Then comes two readings, one from the Law and a second from the Prophets. A sermon of explanation and exhortation is drawn from the second reading, as was done by Jesus at the Nazareth synagogue (Luke 4:17). The address is given by one or more persons judged to be competent by the synagogue rulers. Philo in his description of a Sabbath synagogue service writes, “Some of those who are very learned explain to them [the audience] what is of great importance and use, lessons by which the whole of their lives may be improved.” [Philo, *Special Laws* 2.62.] After the instruction period is over, the synagogue service closes with a blessing.

Paul's sermon (13:16-41)

A large part of the rest of this chapter is devoted to Paul's sermon in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. It is one of three sermons or speeches Luke records for Paul during his missionary tours (13:16-41; 14:15-17; 17:22-31). This sermon is the only one in a synagogue, and it is by far the longest of the three. Luke gives a rather complete summary so he won't have to repeat himself every time Paul preaches in a synagogue. In later episodes, Luke simply tells us that Paul goes into the synagogue to preach, without giving any details (14:1; 17:2; 18:4).

At most, Luke offers only a sentence or two, tersely summarizing what Paul says. We can infer that Luke wants his readers to understand that Paul preaches a similar message in synagogue after synagogue. If we compare Paul's sermon in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch with other speeches given in a Jewish setting, we find they contain the same message and similar elements.

Paul's exhortation here begins with a survey of Israel's history. Like Stephen, Paul describes how God dealt with the Jews' ancestors. However, he begins not with Abraham and the patriarchs, but with God's saving grace in the Exodus. Paul then moves on to Israel's history in the Promised Land, but he focuses on the life of King David. The reason for Paul's emphasis has to do with his being able to proclaim Jesus as the promised Son of David, using proof-texts about the Messiah from the Hebrew Scriptures. He then moves the point of his speech: that through Jesus his listeners have forgiveness of sins. Paul's speech ends with an appeal not to reject the Savior and a solemn warning about the consequences of unbelief.

Gentiles who worship God (13:16)

Paul begins by addressing not only the Jews, but also "you Gentiles who worship God" (13:16). Besides Jews, there are Gentile proselytes and God-fearers listening to him. Because of their presence, Paul can fulfill his commission to preach the gospel to the Gentiles by preaching in the synagogue!

The Gentiles worshipping in the synagogue are an informed audience, already familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures and knowing the messianic hopes of the Jews – which have become their hope as well. Thus, Paul can present his speech as though he is talking to Jews. These Gentiles already recognize the one true God. There is no need to begin at the more elementary level of identifying God and contrasting him with the false gods of the pagans. Later, when Paul talks before purely pagan audiences, he is forced to take this extra step before moving on to explain that Jesus is Savior.

God chose our fathers (13:17-20)

Paul's first point is that God chose Israel – “our ancestors” – to show his grace and mercy (13:17). He wants to emphasize God's redemptive activity among the Jews, which would bring him in line with Jewish interests. Paul's speech is characteristic of rabbinic models of exhortation. The recitation of Old Testament history is a kind of confessional recognizing God's mighty and merciful hand in the nation's history. We can see the same pattern in Stephen's speech, Matthew's Gospel and in the book of Hebrews. Paul is beginning on thoroughly familiar and acceptable ground.

But Paul doesn't begin his sermon about God's redemptive acts with Abraham and the patriarchs. Even Moses is not singled out for discussion. Paul moves quickly to events in the wilderness, and then talks about the entrance of Israel into the Promised Land. “All this took about 450 years,” Paul says (13:20). This would include the centuries of sojourning in Egypt (Genesis 15:13; Acts 7:6), the 40 years wandering in the desert and an additional 10 years conquering the Promised Land (Joshua 14:1-5).

David, king of Israel (13:21-23)

Paul then recounts events from the period of the judges until the time of Samuel. This enables him to describe Saul as the nation's first king, who was anointed by Samuel. Saul isn't often mentioned in surveys of Israel's history, since he was not a very good example of faith or obedience to God. Perhaps Paul's reference to him reflects his personal interest in a king who bore the same name as he did, and came from the same tribe (Philippians 3:5).

In any case, the reference to Saul's reign is only an aside. Paul is much more interested in Israel's next king, David. Here Paul lingers over the details, as David's example is pivotal to his sermon. Paul quotes God's testimony of David: “I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do” (13:22). This seems to be a composite quote from at least two Old Testament Scriptures: 1) “I have found David” (Psalm 89:20) and, 2) “A man after his own heart” (1 Samuel 13:14).

For Paul, David is pivotal as the servant in whom the purpose of God is centered. After picturing David as a man of faith, Paul says: “From this man's descendants God has brought to Israel the Savior Jesus, as he promised” (13:23). Paul's comment about David's “descendants” may be based on an interpretation of 2 Samuel 7:6-16, which describes a descendant of David in the following words: “I will be his father, and he will be my son” (2 Samuel 7:14). This passage may be considered messianic by first-century Jews. It is similar to Psalm 2:7 (“You are my Son; today I have become your Father”), which is usually considered messianic.

David is a type of the Messiah (“he will do everything I want him to do”) and also the Messiah’s forbearer (“from this man’s descendants”). The promise of 2 Samuel 7:12-16 refers to a continuing line of kings. But Paul, and Peter before him, interprets the verse with a messianic meaning, as referring to one king, the Messiah (Jesus). Paul here builds a bridge from the Jewish expectation of a Messiah – David’s Son – to Jesus as the one in whom the hope is fulfilled. Paul’s proclamation to the Jews in Pisidian Antioch is that God has brought forth the Savior-Deliverer from David’s line, and it is Jesus.

John the Baptist’s work (13:24-26)

Paul’s speech skips from David to the work of John the Baptist. John is highly regarded by the Jews. Some even thought he was the Messiah (John 1:19-20). Most consider him a prophet (Matthew 21:26). Paul uses John’s testimony as a further piece of evidence that the promised Messiah is Jesus. Paul quotes John’s statement that the Messiah is one who is “coming after me whose sandals I am not worthy to untie” (13:25). John clearly pointed out that Jesus is the Messiah “who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

Paul has made his case about Jesus from ancient Jewish history and the recent testimony of John. Then he begins to show why all this is vitally important to his listeners. “Fellow children of Abraham and you God-fearing Gentiles,” Paul shouts, “it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent” (13:26).

Jesus the Savior (13:27-31)

Paul next preaches the gospel message, that Jesus died for our sins and was resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:1-4). He proceeds to explain that the people and rulers of Jerusalem condemned Jesus and thereby “fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath” (13:27).

Here is an irony. Jews (and worshiping Gentiles) are in the synagogue every Sabbath listening to the prophets speak of Jesus. Yet they are unable to recognize that the Scriptures are pointing to him. By rejecting Jesus, they are fulfilling the scriptures that foretell his rejection. The very things the Scriptures say should happen to Jesus, the Jews of Jerusalem carried out (13:29). The people who want to live in accordance with the Scriptures had fulfilled the prophecies by (ironically) rejecting God’s messenger!

The Jewish rulers tried to ensure that Jesus’ body would not be seen when the Sabbath began (John 19:31). They tried to make the tomb secure so the disciples couldn’t steal the body (Matthew 27:62-66). This is a further irony. The Jews thought they could prove Jesus to be a fake because they had his

body. What they didn't know was that "God raised him from the dead" (13:30). His disciples, however, knew he had been raised because they saw him after his resurrection (13:31). And the guards became unwitting supporting evidence that the disciples did *not* steal the body.

God raised up Jesus to be the Messiah even before his death, but God also raised him up after his death. And both "raisings" are predicted in the Scriptures that are read every Sabbath in the synagogues. But people do not have to rely on proof-texts from Scripture to prove that Jesus has been raised from the dead. The resurrection is a verifiable fact because Jesus appeared to his followers over a span of several weeks. "They are now his witnesses to our people" (13:31).

Interestingly, Paul speaks of others as witnesses and not himself. That's because he is not among the original disciples who saw Jesus over an extended period of time after his resurrection.

"You are my Son" (13:32-37)

Paul quotes three more texts and says that they also speak of "raising up Jesus" (13:33). This raising up is prefigured in Psalm 2:7: "You are my son; today I have become your father" (12:33). This is echoed when God spoke after Jesus' baptism: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). Jesus is then anointed by the Holy Spirit, "raised up" or assigned to be the Messiah.

Acceptance of Jesus as Savior-Messiah is the critical difference between those who remain Jews and those who become Christian Jews. As Paul says, "We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews...but to those whom God has called... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:23-24).

Jesus is also "raised up" in another way. Paul later writes that Jesus "was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4). He was already the Son of God; but after the resurrection, he is declared even more powerfully to be the Son. Thus, Jesus becomes Savior of the world by being "raised up" in resurrection. In his synagogue speech, Paul cites Isaiah 55:3 as his second proof-text: "I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David" (13:34). This, says Paul, refers to "the fact that God raised him [Jesus] from the dead so that he will never be subject to decay" (13:34). Paul is moving from discussing the "raising" of Jesus as a "sending," to his "raising" in the resurrection of the dead. He does this by claiming that the resurrection itself is the fulfillment of the blessings promised to David.

In his third proof-text, Paul quotes Psalm 16:10: “You will not let your holy one see decay” (13:35). Paul understands this to be a prophecy about someone other than David. After all, David died an ordinary death and his body decayed. But Jesus’ body does not suffer corruption. His tomb is empty and his body has not been found. This is the argument Peter used at Pentecost, even citing the same scripture (2:24-32). Peter is a witness to the fact of the resurrection, something Paul mentioned earlier (13:31).

Of the three proof-texts, the last one from Psalm 16:10 is probably the most compelling. It is recognized as a messianic prophecy. But it contains a strange discussion about the Holy One, the Messiah, seeing decay – that is, dying. Those who accept the verse at face value are led to the conclusion that the Messiah had to die. But he would also be resurrected – not see decay. Jesus fits both qualifications.

Justified from sin (13:38-39)

Paul now comes to the conclusion of his argument. “Therefore, my friends,” he says, “I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sin is proclaimed to you” (13:38). The need for this forgiveness is a common thread through Acts. [Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 10:43; 26:18.] Humans are sinners, and on their own, there is nothing they can do to change their condition. God must pronounce a person righteous, and he does so upon one’s acceptance of Jesus as Savior.

This brings us to the concept of “justification,” discussed in the next verse. Paul says: “Through him [Jesus] everyone who believes is set free from every sin, a justification you were not able to obtain under the law of Moses” (13:39). [Justification is an important term in Paul’s writings, but Luke uses the word only once, in this synagogue speech of Paul.] To be justified is a legal way of expressing the same thing as forgiveness of sin. When a person is justified, he or she is made right with God, or declared to be righteous. But only through Jesus will God justify a person so that he or she is considered righteous.

Can the law of Moses justify people from some sins? If that were so, Jesus’ work would be needed only to make up the difference – to atone for those sins for which observance of the law could not provide forgiveness.

But this would contradict other verses in the New Testament, which demands the all-sufficient work of Christ. The idea that the law of Moses has power to forgive sins is incompatible with Paul’s teaching throughout Romans and Galatians. [Romans 3:21-28; 5:1, 9; Galatians 2:16; 3:11.] The book of Hebrews makes the point that the law of Moses provides no real justification for sin (10:1-4, 11).

Acts 13:39 does not say that the law can justify anyone. It might say that you did one certain thing right – you met the legal requirements in respect to a certain incident in your life – but that cannot justify you for everything you did wrong. In the final analysis, the law of Moses cannot provide justification for any sin, period. “Everything” – all sins – must be atoned for by Christ.

Heed the prophets (13:40-41)

At this point, Paul had said enough about the gospel. He has shown that Jesus is the expected Messiah, except he came in an unexpected way. Paul also pressed home the importance of putting one’s faith in Jesus. In conclusion, Paul warns his hearers about the danger of rejecting God’s offer of salvation. He concludes by quoting Habakkuk 1:5: “Look at the nations and watch – and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.”

In its original context, the prophecy of Habakkuk 1:5 referred to the failure of the nation to recognize the Babylonian invasion as the judgment of God for sin. Paul here applies it to any failure on the part of God’s people to recognize Jesus as having been “raised up” to be Messiah and Savior. Paul is trying to pre-empt any challenge to his message. What he is doing is saying: If you are ridiculing and scoffing at what I’m telling you, here is one of your own prophets who predicts that you would scoff. So take the prophecy to heart and accept the good news.

The people invite Paul (13:42-45)

After giving his message in the synagogue, Paul and Barnabas prepare to leave. But many people are interested, and crowd around him. They invite him to talk further about this topic the next time they gather, that is, the following Sabbath (13:42). Paul’s speech arouses intense interest because it gives a unique explanation of the Scriptures, and the people want to hear more of this message. Of course, Luke wants us to remember that the unseen Holy Spirit is also at work in the minds of the listeners. Many Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism who hear Paul engage him and Barnabas in conversation after the synagogue service. They want to discuss the topic of salvation further (13:43). Paul and Barnabas give the crowd further words of exhortation. Luke tells us they encourage the crowd around them “to continue in the grace of God” (13:43).

Word gets around during the week about Paul’s message. Luke says “the next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord” (13:44). Luke’s expression “the whole city” does not mean that every person from Pisidian Antioch is gathering in front of the synagogue. He uses

exaggeration to make the point that a large crowd gathers to hear this new doctrine. And strange it must have been: a traveling Jewish rabbi describing to Gentiles a Jewish Messiah, who died, but was now resurrected, and is forgiving sins.

But conflict with the synagogue leaders is looming. When they see the large crowd of Gentiles attempting to get into the synagogue to hear Paul, they are upset. Luke says “they were filled with jealousy” (13:45). (The same motive was attributed to the Sanhedrin regarding the preaching of Peter and John in 5:17.) We can imagine some of the thoughts in the minds of the synagogue leaders, and some of the faithful. The strange ideas Paul is preaching are turning out to be more attractive than Judaism. Proselytes and God-fearing Gentiles might leave the synagogue and no longer support it. Or Gentiles might flood the synagogue and take it over for their own purposes – to hear about Jesus rather than Moses.

We turn to the Gentiles (13:46-48)

Paul is probably denied permission to speak during the next synagogue service. At some point, he turns to the unbelieving Jews and says: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles” (13:46). This is a pattern that will be repeated in city after city: Paul begins his missionary work by preaching in the synagogue. After he is rejected by the leaders and the majority of the Jewish worshippers, he then preaches to the Gentiles in that city.

Luke records three statements in which Paul says, “I go to the Gentiles.” The first is here. It is followed by one in Corinth (18:6), and a final one in Rome, which closes the book of Acts (28:28). Paul’s commission includes preaching to the people of Israel, which he will continue to do. In his mind, the gospel is always to go to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles (Romans 1:16). Paul has a special desire to bring the gospel to the Jews in hopes that all Israel will be saved (Romans 9:1-3; 10:1).

But Paul’s specific mission is to the Gentiles. On this occasion, he quotes Isaiah 49:6 in support of his contention that he has been commanded by the Lord to preach to the Gentiles. This scripture speaks of someone being made “a light for the Gentiles” that he “may bring salvation to the ends of the earth” (13:47). The words of Isaiah 49:6 were originally addressed to the Servant of Yahweh, and then they are applied to Jesus (Luke 2:32). Now Paul applies it to the missionaries who are bringing the good news of Jesus, the Servant. Thus, Paul is saying that the mission of Jesus (the Servant) is also

the mission of the followers of Jesus. It is the task of the new Israel (the church) as the servant of God to bring the light of the gospel to all peoples.

When the Gentiles listening to Paul hear that God has purposed to give them salvation, “they were glad and honored the word of the Lord” (13:48). As many as “were appointed for eternal life believed” (13:48). This verse suggests that a person cannot simply decide to believe in Christ. There is a matter of divine election involved (John 6:44; 1 Corinthians 2:14). That is not to say that salvation is restricted by God in the sense of limiting it to a few people. God’s purpose is that all people come to know about the truth and find salvation (1 Timothy 2:3). However, a person must respond in faith as the Spirit leads him or her to saving knowledge. In the words of William Neil:

It is a pictorial way of expressing the conviction of the sovereignty of God – i.e. that salvation is God’s gift, and does not depend on man’s efforts. But it is not in any sense narrowly predestination, as if some are scheduled for salvation and others for damnation; the Bible constantly stresses the element of free choice: we may accept or reject the Word of God. [Neil, 161.]

Jews incite persecution (13:49-52)

Paul and Barnabas meet with great success in the area around Pisidian Antioch. Luke says, “The word of the Lord spread through the whole region” (13:49). The Jewish leaders are angry, and enter a plot with “the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city” (13:50). Luke is probably referring to Gentile women who are adherents of Judaism and their politically connected husbands.

Apparently, the Jews put pressure on the wealthy women who attend the synagogue. They are probably urged to convince their husbands, the city’s leading magistrates, to expel Paul and Barnabas from the area. This is what happens (13:50). Luke doesn’t say what excuse is given; perhaps the accusation is that the local Jewish community believes Paul and Barnabas to be heretics. Since they are not representing Judaism, a legal religion in Rome’s eyes, Paul and Barnabas are teaching a religion that is not legal. As such, they should be expelled since they are disturbing the Roman peace.

Upon being expelled, Paul and Barnabas shake “the dust off their feet” in protest (13:51). This is a gesture that Jesus himself suggested his disciples practice upon encountering persecution (Luke 9:5; 10:11).

It was customary for Jews to shake off the dust of a pagan town from their feet when they returned to their own land, as a symbol of

cleansing themselves from the impurity of sinners who did not worship God. For Jews to do this to their fellow Jews was tantamount to regarding the latter as pagan Gentiles. The Christians were demonstrating in a particularly vigorous manner that Jews who rejected the gospel and drove out the missionaries were no longer truly part of Israel but were no better than unbelievers. [Marshall, 231.]

Luke ends his story of gospel preaching in Pisidian Antioch by saying, “The disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit” (13:52). Paul and Barnabas have established a congregation of believers in Pisidian Antioch. But they are forced to move on, this time to Iconium.

ACTS 14: PAUL TAKES THE GOSPEL TO ASIA MINOR, CONTINUED

Missionaries at Iconium (14:1-3)

Iconium (modern Konya) is the next city in which Paul and Barnabas carry on missionary work. The city is on the Sebaste Road about 90 miles (145 kilometers) east-southeast of Pisidian Antioch. Following their usual procedure, the two missionaries enter the Jewish synagogue to preach (14:1). Luke tells us that Paul and Barnabas speak so effectively that large numbers of Jews and Gentiles believe the gospel.

But as usual, the nonbelieving Jews embark on a smear campaign that eventually poisons the minds of the Gentiles “against the brothers” (14:2). This probably entails a sustained campaign to discredit the teaching of Paul and Barnabas, perhaps ridiculing their claim that Jesus is the Messiah. In spite of the persecution, the two missionaries “spent considerable time” in Iconium (14:3). Luke gives few details of their preaching here, and compresses the work of several months into a few sentences.

The missionaries preach the “message of his grace” (14:3). Luke has already used the phrase to describe the gospel, and he will do so again (23:43; 20:24, 32). The idea of “grace” is prominent in Paul’s letters, and Luke’s use of it in his messages may reflect Paul’s emphasis. [Romans 3:24; 6:14-15; Galatians 2:21; Ephesians 2:8.]

The preaching of Paul and Barnabas is accompanied by “signs and wonders” (14:3). Paul later refers to these miracles in a letter to the churches in the province of Galatia. He appeals to the miracles as evidence that the good news he preaches is approved by God (Galatians 3:5).

Plot against the apostles (14:4-6)

Paul and Barnabas preach effectively in Iconium, and God performs miraculous wonders through them. Nonetheless, the population of the city remains divided about them. “Some sided with the Jews, others with the apostles” (14:4). Because of the support Paul and Barnabas receive, it takes a long time for any serious opposition to develop. But eventually the Jews are able to hatch a plot with some of the townsfolk and political leaders of Iconium. Apparently, the Jews intend to gather a mob, beat up Paul and Barnabas, and stone them to death (14:5).

The missionaries are informed of the plot, perhaps by sympathetic Jews who accept the gospel. The apostles leave the city before the plotters can capture them (14:4).

Verses 4 and 14 contain the only reference in Acts to Paul being an apostle. This may seem odd in view of the fact that Paul often stresses his apostleship. [See the first verse of many of his letters: Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.] Apparently, Luke restricts his use of the term “apostle” as a special “office” to the Twelve. They are the ones who were with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry and who are witnesses of his resurrection (1:21-25; 10:39-42).

Luke probably thinks of Paul and Barnabas as “apostles” only in a general sense, as special emissaries, envoys, or messengers commissioned by the church at Antioch (13:3-4), and in this sense were apostles, or people “sent out.” Paul himself uses the word *apostle* in a broad sense of a person who is given the responsibility of being a messenger, but who doesn’t hold a special office. He says that Epaphroditus, a co-worker, was, “My brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger [Greek, *apostolon*]” (Philippians 2:25).

Flee to Lystra (14:6-7)

The Jewish plot against Paul and Barnabas is about to be put into operation. Having learned of it, and to avoid stoning, Paul and Barnabas travel to “the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe” (14:6). Here, they continue to preach the gospel. By mentioning that Lystra and Derbe are in the region of Lycaonia, Luke is implying that Iconium is in a different political realm – apparently part of Phrygia.

Healing a crippled man (14:8-10)

The first city in Lycaonia Barnabas and Paul visit is Lystra, about 20 miles (32 kilometers) south-southwest of Iconium. Luke limits himself to narrating a single event in Lystra, which begins with the healing of a crippled man lame from birth (14:8). Paul is speaking to what is probably a crowd of Gentiles in a public place. (From Luke’s account, we have no indication that Lystra has a synagogue.) Apparently, Paul is drawn to this man, somehow perceiving that he has faith to be healed. Paul interrupts his speech and says to the cripple: “Stand up on your feet!” (14:10). At Paul’s words, the man jumps up and begins to walk.

This story portrays Paul as an authentic messenger of God in the tradition of Peter, who also healed a lame man (3:1-10). Luke uses parallel expressions in the two accounts: “lame from birth,” “looked directly at him,” “jumped up and began to walk.” Both Peter and Paul are shown to be using the same power as did Jesus, who also healed a crippled person (Luke 5:17-26).

This incident, selected by Luke for detailed description from

among the “signs and wonders” of the Galatian mission (verse 3), parallels the similar cure by Peter in chapter 3, and doubtless was chosen for this reason. In opposition to those who would challenge Paul’s claim to apostolic authority based on his direct commission from the risen Christ, Luke is concerned to show that his hero shares with the chief apostle the healing power vested in his disciples by the Lord himself. [Neil, 163.]

Gods in human form (14:11-13)

When the beggar jumps up and walks, something unexpected happened. Seeing the healed beggar, the crowd shouts in their own language, “The gods have come down to us in human form!” (14:11). Barnabas is called Zeus, and Paul is thought to be Hermes, because he is the main speaker. Hermes is called the messenger of Zeus and the patron of orators.

Barnabas and Paul refuse worship in Lystra

The people of Lystra, as in other towns of Asia Minor, probably use or are acquainted to some degree with three languages. Latin is the official language of the Roman administration. Greek, the *lingua franca* of the Eastern Roman empire, is understood by most of the Lystrans. The third language in use is the native vernacular – “the Lycaonian language.” Almost certainly, Paul preaches in Greek, which the people understand. However, it’s doubtful that Barnabas and Paul understand Lycaonian. Therefore they don’t know at first what the shouting is all about – even the names of the gods may have been in the local dialect.

The Lystrans think that they are experiencing a divine visitation. The idea of gods coming to earth in human form is familiar in this region because of a legend. The existence of this ancient legend may explain the wildly emotional response of the Lystrans to the healing of the cripple by Paul and Barnabas. According to the legend, Zeus and Hermes came to earth in the neighboring district of Phrygia disguised as human beings. They seek lodging, but no one shows them hospitality and takes them in. Finally, an old peasant couple, Philemon and his wife Baucis, welcome them as house guests, even though it depletes their meager resources. The gods are angry and destroy the whole population for their lack of hospitality, except for the gracious Philemon and Baucis. The couple’s humble cottage is transformed into a temple, of which they are given the charge until their death.

This legend is preserved in a Latin story-poem by Ovid. [Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, “The Story of Baucis and Philemon,” 620-724. Ovid called them by their Latin names, Jupiter and Mercury.] He tells the ancient legend

about half a century before Paul's first missionary journey. This ancient legend is well known in southern Galatia, and it may explain why Paul and Barnabas become the objects of such a wild celebration. Paul's healing of the crippled man make the Lystrans think he and Barnabas are the gods Zeus and Hermes once again come down in human form.

If the people of ancient times failed to pay homage to the gods on their previous visit, the Lystrans are determined not to make the same mistake and incur their wrath again. Thus, the priest at the local temple arranges for a sacrifice to honor the presence of Paul and Barnabas. Luke says he "brought bulls and wreaths to the city gates because he and the crowd wanted to offer sacrifices to them" (14:13).

We are only humans (14:14-15)

Paul makes an impassioned speech in hopes of thwarting the attempt of the Lystrans to worship the missionaries. This speech, in verses 14-17, is an example of how the gospel might be introduced to purely pagan audiences. A more complete example is the speech delivered by Paul to the Athenian Court of the Areopagus (17:22-31). The speech here differs widely in content from those Peter, Paul and others deliver to Jewish and Gentile followers of Judaism. When speaking to Jews and those worshipping with them, Christian speakers can assume their listeners have some knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures, and that they know about the one true God of Israel.

With a purely pagan audience, the speaker has to back up a step to first proclaim the existence of the one true God. In his speech to the Lystrans, Paul begins by explaining that the one God is the Creator of all living things (14:15). Even before this, however, Paul and Barnabas are forced to deny that they are gods. When they understand what the Lystrans think – and that they are going to sacrifice to them – they race into the crowd yelling for them to stop.

"We too are only human, like you," Paul shouts (14:15). (This assumes that Paul gives the speech, as he is chief speaker.) More literally, the Greek means we are "of the same nature as you." That is, Paul is saying that he and Barnabas share the human condition with the Lystrans and they have no special qualities about them. The Bible rejects the idea that humans have any spiritual uniqueness worthy of special homage. This is true for even the greatest of God's servants. James says to Jewish Christians that Elijah was "a human being, even as we are" (5:17). Peter refuses any special reverence from Cornelius, saying, "I am only a man myself" (10:26). Even angels are not to be given special adoration (Revelation 19:10).

Turning from idols (14:15-18)

Paul and Barnabas urge the Lystrans to give up their idolatry – to “turn from these worthless things to the living God” (14:15). The rejection of idolatrous worship practices is a basic test of conversion for Gentiles. Of course, these Gentiles should also accept Jesus Christ as their Savior. But knowing *God* is the starting point for pagan Gentile conversion. As Paul will later write, the Gentile Thessalonians understand this and turn “to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

At Lystra, Paul identifies the true God as the One “who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them” (14:15). Paul and Barnabas are beginning their sermon on an elementary level, starting with nature rather than Scripture. They are saying that nature itself testifies to the existence of a Creator. Paul says the same in his letter to the Romans (1:20). If people understand and accept that God is the Creator of everything, they are also led to worship him.

It is said that there are two books of God. One is his word, the Bible. The second is nature, and the lessons about God that people should draw from it. The existence of the creation can help people understand that God exists and is the creator. But nature does not tell us about a Savior – that is normally communicated through evangelism.

Even further, Paul and Barnabas insist that the works of creation should lead us to understand that God is kind and merciful (14:17). God does not fall into a rage in response to minor matters (as Zeus and Hermes supposedly did when they destroyed people who failed to show them hospitality). Paul says that God’s kindness is shown in his providing rain in due season for crops. The one true God, the missionaries insist, “provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy” (14:17). God demonstrates his presence through the good things we enjoy. The goodness of God in providing rainfall and bountiful harvests is an Old Testament theme (Genesis 8:21-22). It is also a common theme in pagan religions. The idea is that the gods supply bounteous harvests. Since Paul’s audience is probably composed largely of farmers, they understand the importance of food – and that they are dependent on God for its supply.

As a beginning for the preaching the gospel of salvation, Paul’s speech is a good start. At best, however, this sermon based on natural theology is only a preamble to the gospel. The speech is incomplete, for it doesn’t go on to discuss the death and resurrection of Jesus and its meaning for the listeners. Luke doesn’t say if Paul and Barnabas go on to relate this vital aspect of the gospel. Perhaps their immediate intent is simply to stop the crowd from

sacrificing to them. Luke implies that the Lystrans don't really understand Paul's message; his words barely achieve the immediate goal of stopping the townspeople from sacrificing (14:18).

Paul is stoned (14:19-20)

Sometime after this tumultuous event, Jews antagonistic to Paul and Barnabas from Pisidian Antioch and Iconium come into Lystra and begin to preach against the missionaries. Eventually, they win the crowd over (14:19). How soon the fickle Lystrans forget! At one time they are calling the missionaries gods. Now they call them charlatans and frauds. No doubt they are disappointed that Barnabas and Paul claim to be nothing more than ordinary human beings. Because of the Lystrans' disappointment, it is only a small step for the Jews to persuade the townspeople that the missionaries are really hucksters.

The mob singles out Paul for a beating, perhaps because he is the main messenger, and they stone him. After thinking he is dead, they drag his body away and dump it outside the city limits (14:19). But then something astonishing occurs. As the small number of converted Lystrans gathered around Paul's body, probably to give him a decent burial, he gets up, and then goes "back into the city" (14:20). Luke does not present Paul's revival as a miraculous restoration to life. Rather, Luke says that Paul's attackers think that he is dead (14:19) – Luke is implying that Paul is not dead. Paul was beaten into unconsciousness, and then he revives. Nonetheless, the fact that the stoning does not kill him indicates that Paul is under God's protection.

A few years later Paul writes to these Lystrans who live in the region of Galatia, saying, "Let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (6:17). Some of these marks or scars may be from the beating Paul received at Lystra – something the disciples receiving his letter would remember. Later, when Paul writes the Corinthians, he refers to being stoned and "exposed to death again and again" (2 Corinthians 11:23). It is probably the stoning at Lystra that he has in mind as one of those times during which he is almost killed. Even near the end of his life, Paul recalls the abuse from these Galatian towns. He asks Timothy to remember the "persecutions, sufferings – what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them" (2 Timothy 3:11).

Among those who hear Paul, and even see him stoned and left for dead, may be Eunice and Lois, the mother and grandmother of Timothy (2 Timothy 1:5). Timothy is from Lystra, where his mother Eunice, a Jewess,

probably lives as well (16:1-3). Timothy is to become an important worker in Paul's missionary campaigns. It's possible that Timothy provides eyewitness testimony for Luke's account of these events.

In Derbe (14:21)

After Paul revives, he goes back into Lystra, and then he and Barnabas leave the next day for Derbe. Though there is some doubt about its exact location, Derbe is probably about 60 miles (97 kilometers) southeast of Lystra, on the eastern end of the Lycaonian region of Galatia. Luke gives no details about the activities of Barnabas and Paul in Derbe. However, their missionary work must be successful, because their preaching wins "a large number of disciples" (14:21). Among those converts may be Gaius, who becomes a member of Paul's missionary company (20:4). Apparently the missionaries do not suffer any persecution in Derbe. Luke records none, and 2 Timothy 3:11 implies that there isn't any.

This is, in a sense, the end of the first missionary journey as far as preaching the gospel to outsiders is concerned, except for a brief notice of it in Perga (14:25).

Disciples encouraged (14:22)

Paul and Barnabas prepare to return to Syrian Antioch (the sponsor church) after finishing their missionary activity. They could return by continuing eastward along the Via Sebaste, and then south through the Cilician Gates, a mountain pass near Tarsus. However, it would be a difficult journey, especially in winter.

What the missionaries do is backtrack and return to Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch, in that order. They revisit each city, not to make more converts, but for pastoral purposes. Of course, the threat of harm from mobs and city officials is still possible. But the missionaries keep a low profile and avoid public preaching. Paul and Barnabas are apparently able to gain entry into the cities without incident. Their objective is "strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith" (14:22). Luke repeats what must have impressed him as a central point Barnabas and Paul make to the disciples: "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (14:22).

The missionaries apparently see that this type of encouragement is especially necessary for the Galatians. As events are to prove, these people are easily influenced away from the simple gospel message. Paul will later write his strongest letter to the churches in this area because they are accepting false teaching. "I am astonished," he writes, "that you are so quickly

deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel” (Galatians 1:6).

Presumably Paul and Barnabas exhort the disciples not to fall back into either Judaism or paganism. The new converts will be persecuted by relatives and friends for abandoning their ancestral faiths. This will cause them much trouble. They need to be given realistic warnings that the path into the kingdom of God is strewn with such obstacles (2 Timothy 3:12).

Luke mentions the “kingdom of God” several times in Acts. [Acts 1:3, 6; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31.] The contexts in which it is discussed are varied: The risen Jesus speaks of it to the disciples; the disciples wonder if Christ is going to restore it to Israel; Philip preaches it; Paul teaches it in the synagogue, to the disciples, and in Rome during his two-year imprisonment. In this context, the reference to gaining entry into the kingdom seems to refer more to the future realm to be established by God (2 Timothy 4:18).

Appoints elders (14:23)

Paul and Barnabas also appoint “elders for them in each church” (14:23). They commit the Galatian elders to the Lord with prayer and fasting. Paul and Barnabas must feel that these individuals have enough spiritual maturity to serve their fellow disciples. These individuals are not brought in from outside, such as from Antioch, to be pastors. These are members of the congregation in which they are given the responsibility of aiding the community of believers. This is the first reference to “elders” outside of the Jerusalem church (11:30). Antioch has only prophets and teachers, though the latter probably serve in the same capacity as elders. Later in Acts, we will hear of elders in the Ephesian church (20:17). [They are also mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; and 1 Peter 5:1, 5.]

Every community needs some kind of organization, and the most obvious expedient that lay to Paul’s hand for these largely Gentile congregations would be to follow the pattern of the synagogue, since Jews and Gentiles alike were now incorporated into the “Israel of God.” The elders (or presbyters), therefore, would be chosen from the older members of the community, and charged with the oversight of worship, discipline, administration and instruction – more or less along the lines of the “rulers of the synagogue.” [Neil, 166.]

Luke is describing the organization of new congregations, but on a somewhat dangerous base. Barnabas and Paul are forced to give the oversight of the church to converts who have been in the faith for only a few weeks or

months. The missionaries probably have no other choice. A church with poorly trained leaders would be better off than one with no leaders. Paul and Barnabas cannot remain in Galatia as pastors. It's doubtful they can return anytime soon to instruct these congregations. In fact, there is no evidence they ever return, though Paul does write to the churches in this area.

Barnabas and Paul's responsibility is in planting and setting up churches, not in watering or pastoring them. In later years, Paul will instruct people responsible for appointing elders to be careful about their qualifications (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9).

To Perga and home (14:24-28)

After organizing the churches as well as they could, Paul and Barnabas travel south through Pisidia and then Pamphylia. Luke makes no mention of the gospel being preached in these regions. The two missionaries finally reach the coastal city of Perga, where they had begun. This time Luke says they "preached the word in Perga" (14:25). But Luke gives no details about the length or nature of their preaching, nor its success or failure.

Paul and Barnabas then go a few miles south to the Mediterranean port of Attalia (modern Antalya). There they board a ship that takes them to Syrian Antioch (14:26). The first missionary tour is over. It's difficult to say how long Paul and Barnabas have been gone, but the time must be measured in years – anywhere between one to four years.

After arriving in Antioch, Paul and Barnabas gather their sponsoring church to give it a full report of their activities. Luke is careful to point out that the two missionaries are loyal members of the church at Antioch. They report back to the body that commissioned the tour. Paul and Barnabas especially point out how God "had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (14:27). Here we see Paul's use of "door" in a metaphorical sense as an opportunity to have the gospel message heard. Only Paul uses the word in this way. [1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3.]

Luke ends the account by saying that Paul and Barnabas "stayed there a long time with the disciples" (14:28). The time notation is indefinite, but perhaps it is up to a year in length.

THE COUNCIL AT JERUSALEM FORMALIZES THE STATUS OF GENTILES (ACTS 15)

“Certain people came down” (15:1)

While Paul and Barnabas are teaching at Antioch, some people come from Judea and demand that the Gentiles should become practicing Jews before being regarded as real believers. Luke summarizes their claim in a sentence: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved” (15:1).

These hard-line Jewish Christians are confronted by Paul and Barnabas, who get “into sharp dispute and debate with them” (15:2). This is a key moment in the conflict about Gentile conversion. As Luke tells the story, he will also address some doctrinal arguments, but before we get to that, let us see how Paul deals with the question in his letter to the Galatians.

Apparently, the extremists took their legalistic message to other churches, including those in Galatia, which Paul had recently evangelized. The controversy broadened so that Jewish Christians were not even allowed to *eat* with Gentile believers. At some point Barnabas, and even Peter, seemed to side with the extreme position (Galatians 2:11-13).

At this point, the crisis is threatening the unity of the church. It is also striking a blow at the heart of the gospel of salvation by grace. Paul writes: “This matter arose because some false believers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give in to them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you” (Galatians 2:4-5).

Peter probably thinks that it is a centrist position: Gentiles can be part of the church, and Jews can continue to be scrupulous about table fellowship if they wish. Doesn’t everyone get what they want? No, says Paul. He cannot accept a church in which Jews and Gentiles have to eat at separate tables, as if the Gentiles are unclean, unacceptable, not even part of the same family.

If the Jewish rigorists have their way – insisting on strict observance of Mosaic rituals – the church will eventually split. At best, two separate churches will form, one Gentile and the other Jewish. Or Gentile Christians will be forced to place their faith in Jewish regulations rather than the work of Christ.

The people from Jerusalem consider themselves to be representatives of James, not renegade teachers. (But James did not authorize them – see 15:24.) Paul refers to them as “certain men [who] came from James” (Galatians 2:12). But they claimed more authority than James had given them (Acts 15:24).

As we shall see, James, Paul and Peter will eventually agree. The rigorous view implies that a Gentile must become a Jew in order to be saved, and the apostles do not want this false message preached in the church.

“Unless you are circumcised” (15:1)

Luke presents the hard-line argument as one that stresses the need for Gentile converts to be circumcised. But he soon shows that the circumcisers want Gentile converts to practice the entire “law of Moses.” Basically, they are teaching that a person cannot be saved unless they become proselytes, converts to Judaism.

The conflict exists because there are people in the church from sharply varying cultural backgrounds. At one end are devout Jerusalem Jews who continue to worship at the Temple. They scrupulously observe all the cultic practices that define the Jewish way of life – all the laws found in the covenant God made with the Jews at Mt. Sinai. Circumcision is a crucial point. From the time of Abraham, circumcision helped define a person’s faith in God and being part of the people of God. [Genesis 17:10-14, 23-27; 21:4; 34:15-24; Exodus 12:44, 48; Leviticus 12:3; Joshua 5:2-8].

But now an increasing number of formerly pagan Gentiles are entering the church. Their religious life had been centered around pagan temples and their culture had been that of the wider Greek and Roman world. They had been idolaters with little interest in the Jewish way of life. And they do not want to undergo the painful circumcision process since it has no cultural meaning for them.

However, Jewish Christians fear that the Gentiles entering the church will change the nature of the church. In Judea, the religious leaders tolerate the Jewish Christians because they keep the law – they are faithful to the covenant of Moses, even if they do happen to believe that Jesus is the Messiah. Their messianic beliefs are merely a harmless superstition, as long as they continue keeping Jewish customs. But now, if Gentiles come into the church without keeping Jewish laws, that will encourage Jewish believers to be less zealous about the laws as well, thereby bringing persecution from the Jewish leaders.

The Jewish Christians are afraid that many Gentiles have grown up in a culture of loose morals. Their easy entrance into the church might weaken the moral standards. Thus, the circumcisers want Gentiles to become like Jews in lifestyle – as evidence of their conversion, if nothing else.

Many Jewish Christians consider themselves to be part of the righteous remnant of Judaism. God has given them salvation, but as their part of the

bargain, as evidence that they are part of the covenant, they must keep its laws.

The mental background of the Jew was founded on the fact that he belonged to the chosen people. In effect they believed that not only were the Jews the peculiar possession of God but also that God was the peculiar possession of the Jews. (William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, revised edition, The Daily Study Bible Series, page 112)

And circumcision is one of the proofs of this exclusive relationship with God (Philo, *The Migration of Abraham* 92). No doubt many Jews of the time, like Philo, believe that circumcision is more than a ritual (*Special Laws* 1.8-11; 1.304-306). It is a symbol of religious commitment. The rigorists, like other Jews, see the physical act of circumcision as proof of one's allegiance to God (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:38-48).

Zealous Jews believe that a man must be circumcised in order to enter the nation of Israel and to be part of its righteous remnant. A failure to circumcise is regarded as a sign of apostasy (1 Maccabees 1:11-15). Gentiles who are not circumcised and who do not practice the Jewish religious life are considered unclean.

It was the age-old horror of the strict Jew, based on the Law of Moses, of contamination with those who were technically not within the covenant relationship – outwardly signaled by circumcision – and who ate food not permitted by the Law from utensils which had not been ceremonially cleansed. Thus the issue was more than that of admission to membership of the church. It involved also the question whether Jewish Christians ought to mix socially with uncircumcised Gentile Christians, to eat...at the same table, and to share in the same eucharistic celebration. (Neil, 168).

“You cannot be saved” (15:1)

It's important to look at circumcision and the Law of Moses from the point of view of conservative Christian Jews. As far as they know, the entire Torah is still in force. There had been no clear teaching from Jesus to the contrary. In fact, he even seemed to teach the continuance of circumcision and various other rituals (Matthew 5:18; 23:1-2, 23; Luke 2:21-24; 5:14). He certainly lived as a Jew.

They [the Judaizers] found it hard to believe that Gentiles could be saved and become members of the people of God without accepting the obligations of the Jewish law. One can sympathize with their

position; after all, what evidence was there that the law, which represented the will of God for his covenant people, had been repealed? This was the point which was pressed by some Jewish visitors to Antioch. (Marshall, 242)

Peter's experience with Cornelius (Acts 10) shows that any effort to distinguish between "clean" and "unclean" people has no relevance as far as salvation is concerned. Peter explained this to the Jerusalem church. At the time, the Jewish Christians swallowed their concerns and accepted the fact that God is giving salvation to Gentiles (11:18).

The Jewish extremists accept the idea that the gospel is going to Gentiles; they know that the covenant of blessing extends to all nations (Genesis 12:3; 22:18; 26:4). The Scriptures say that the Gentiles will be saved in the last days (Isaiah 2:2; 11:10; 25:8-9; 49:6; 55:5-7; 56:7; 60:3-22; Zephaniah 3:9-10; Zechariah 8:23).

So what's the problem? They do not want to exclude the Gentiles, but they insist on certain requirements for how inclusion is possible: The Gentiles should be proselytized in the context of Jewish faith, and not apart from it. Hence, they call for Gentile circumcision, for Gentiles to become Jews. That is why these people are commonly called Judaizers.

The Judaizers see Israel – or at least the righteous people within it – as God's agent in bringing the blessings of salvation to the Gentiles. They can be saved only through Jewish customs, the methods God approved to keep the remnant righteous, or within the covenant of salvation.

Thus, the conclusion about Jewish observances is obvious to the Judaizers. Yes, God is giving salvation to the Gentiles. But if they *want* salvation, they must begin observing the Jewish ritual laws. Before they can be accepted as first-class Christians they must begin living like the Jewish Christians do. In short, the Judaizers say that Gentiles have to become Jews before they can be Christians.

Thus, the stage is set for a fundamental showdown between the Judaizers and people like Paul, who say that Gentiles are grafted into the church through faith alone.

Go up to Jerusalem (15:2-4)

With the controversy over circumcision for Gentile converts raging in the church at Antioch, and no doubt spreading to other cities, something needs to be done. So the church at Antioch appoints Paul, Barnabas and some other leaders to go to "Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question" (15:2).

We know Paul's beliefs about this from his own writings (Romans 2:28-29; Galatians 5:2-3; 6:15). A strict and vocal Jewish Christian minority in Jerusalem and Judea does not agree with Paul. They insist that Gentile converts accept such aspects of Jewish life as circumcision. This forces Antioch to ask for a major church synod, in approximately A.D. 49, with the apostles and elders of Jerusalem. The unity of the church is threatened, and an official ruling by the leaders seems necessary.

The Antioch delegation travels through Phoenicia and Samaria on its way to Jerusalem. The delegates preach in the churches along the way, explaining how the Gentiles are being converted (8:4-15; 11:19).

Paul and his group are enthusiastically received by the churches in these areas. Finally, the delegates arrive in Jerusalem where they are "welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders" (15:4). Luke is preparing his readers for the good news that Paul's Gentile program will be positively received by the leaders and the church.

Pharisees demand circumcision (15:5)

Upon coming to Jerusalem, Paul and his delegation officially meet with the church leaders and report "everything God had done through them" (15:4). But certain Jewish Christians who belong "to the party of the Pharisees" then rise up to challenge Paul (15:5).

This is the first mention (except for Paul) of converts from the sect of the Pharisees. This group within the church – Christian Pharisees – are calling for circumcision. These Pharisees are *believers* who accept Jesus as the Messiah. As influential members of the Jewish *and* Christian community – and being experienced teachers – they are leaders among the Judaizing group. Clearly, the pro-circumcision lobby within the church is a powerful one.

The fact that there were enough converted Pharisees to have an influential voice in the affairs of the church indicates that the Jewish-Christian party had a powerful case for dictating terms to the pro-Gentile faction. (Neil, 171)

Must obey Moses' law (15:5-6)

At the Jerusalem conference, the Pharisaic believers immediately begin to insist: "The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses" (15:5). There is a long debate on the issue, but Luke dismisses it with a short phrase: "After much discussion..." (15:6).

Luke doesn't give us any of the Judaizers' supporting arguments. But they probably base their teaching on Genesis 17:1-14, which says that God's

covenant with Abraham was ratified by circumcision. This applies to members of his household and to foreigners. If anyone refuses circumcision, that person is to “be cut off from his people” (verse 14). First-century Jews believe that the promises of salvation go back to this covenant with Abraham, and circumcision is part of it.

The Judaizers may also be referring to Exodus 12:48. This verse says that a foreigner living in Israel who wants to observe Passover has to be circumcised. So the circumcision party is using strong evidence from Scripture and from tradition in defense of circumcision as being necessary. On the other hand, Paul and the Antioch delegation do not have proof-texts that say circumcision is not needed. For the moment, it seems like the Judaizing party has the upper hand.

The apostles are faced with this question: Should the church follow the Torah literally in all its details? That is, do Scripture and tradition have a greater authority than the principle of faith in determining the basis who is in the people of God?

Peter’s speech (15:7-11)

At some point in the meeting Peter gets up. He makes a strong case for admitting Gentiles into the church on the basis of faith alone. He argues that God established a precedent, perhaps a decade earlier, of bringing Gentiles into the body of believers through faith. (He is referring to the example of Cornelius and his family discussed in Acts 9:32 through 11:18.)

“God, who knows the heart,” said Peter, “showed that he accepted them [the Gentiles] by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith” (15:8-9). God showed that he accepted a Gentile even while he was uncircumcised.

This summarizes Peter’s argument. He insists that faith is more important than ritual observance in defining a Christian. The proof is that God is giving his Spirit to the Gentiles without them first becoming Jews. Peter emphasizes that conversion is God’s doing, not the work of either the preacher or the believer. People do not decide on their own to take a place among the people of God. God is the one who converts them, and he does it by giving his Spirit, not by requiring the person to practice certain rituals.

Although the council doesn’t make an issue of it, the truth is that only faith can cleanse Jews as well (a point made in the book of Hebrews). Everyone is saved by the grace of God, not through the practice of any system of cultic religious works. Faith is the basis of salvation for Jews and

Gentiles alike. This faith is a righteousness that comes from God through the Holy Spirit, and is mediated by Christ. It is this faith that saves (Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8; Romans 3:28).

Unbearable yoke to bear (15:10)

Peter brands the zealots' desire to force the Gentiles to live as Jews a test of God – challenging something he has already done – and “a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear” (15:10). He says the legalistic faction is calling into question God's will – which he had already made quite evident.

God is circumcising the Gentiles through the Spirit, not with the knife. Insisting on the ritual law is challenging God himself on his actions, Peter is saying. It is questioning the rightness of God in his cleansing the Gentiles through the Spirit. The call for circumcision has the effect of putting God on trial. The Judaizers are saying that God is not doing enough, nor doing it right, in allowing Gentiles *as Gentiles* to be full participants in his body, the church.

Rather, what should be on trial is the cultic cleansing system of the Jews. It had been tried for hundreds of years and found deficient. The law of Moses is irrelevant as far as salvation is concerned and is simply a burdensome lifestyle of “do's-and-don'ts.” In one word, it was a “yoke.”

The word “yoke” (Greek, *zygos*) refers to a restraint. It can be a physical restraint placed on oxen (Deuteronomy 21:3). Or it can be a metaphor for political or social oppression (2 Chronicles 10:10; 1 Timothy 6:1). In this case, the law of Moses is both a physical burden and a form of religious oppression, even though well-meaning Jews are using it to keep themselves separate from the world. But when people use it to separate themselves from other believers, they are failing to keep in step with what God is now doing, bringing Gentiles and Jews into one people.

Jesus said “my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:30). People burdened and weary with sin, guilt and religious duty can come to Christ and find rest in him. That is what Peter is saying. The Christian way of life should not be religiously burdensome. That is a lesson all churches and religions need to learn.

Peter ends his speech by echoing the thought of Paul: “We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (15:11). Peter is on Paul's side and his thoughts are quite Pauline. Peter puts his stamp of approval on Paul's work, phrasing salvation in terms of grace – as the apostle to the Gentiles will frequently do as well. Luke, quoting Peter's

words to this effect, now makes no further mention of Peter anywhere in Acts.

Barnabas and Paul speak (15:12)

Barnabas and Paul now rise to defend their view about circumcision, and “the whole assembly became silent” (15:12). Barnabas spoke first. He was a respected member of the Jerusalem church, and its trusted representative to Antioch. Both he and Paul tell the story of Gentile conversion as it happened. The two missionaries recount the miraculous signs and wonders God did among the Gentiles through them. Once again, this underscores the fact that God is blessing their work, hence it is in line with his purpose with the Gentiles.

Luke devotes only a single sentence to what Paul and Barnabas say at the conference. We don’t know exactly how they argue their case. However, we know from Acts and especially Paul’s writings exactly where he stands on the matter of circumcision. In this case, they probably again report on their experiences. Hundreds of Gentiles are now converted and God is working miracles through Paul. He and Barnabas appeal to such things, just as Peter had argued from his experience with Gentile conversions.

James speaks (15:13-21)

At the end of the conference, James speaks. He is the leader of the church in Jerusalem (12:17; 21:18), and supposedly the one who had originally authorized the overly zealous people to visit Antioch. Everyone respects him, and when all three apostles agree, that settles the matter.

James is clearly representing the Jerusalem church. The Judaizers look to him for support partly because of his respected position among non-converted Jews, and partly because James himself zealously keeps all the Jewish laws. However, they misread him on the most basic issue, one he held in common with Peter and Paul: faith is the basis of salvation, not religious observance. Just because I keep these laws does not mean that Gentiles have to as well.

A people for himself (15:14)

James’ speech sums up the testimony already presented. James begins his comments before the assembly by summarizing Peter’s speech. But he makes no reference to the comments of Paul and Barnabas. That is rhetorically shrewd, for it is *their* teaching that is the subject of the controversy. James wants to win his audience, and using the evidence of controversial persons is not the best way to do it.

The point of James' speech is that God is taking the Gentiles as "a people" for himself (15:14). There is no disagreement on this. If nothing else, the experience of Cornelius proves it. Acts intimates that there is no longer any debate on whether Gentiles are being converted. James is beginning on common ground.

In his speech, he emphasizes the presence of God's hand in the work of the apostles (15:14). In this he is echoing the thoughts of both Peter and Paul. Paul had referred to "everything God had done" (15:4) including his "wonders" (15:12); Peter said that "God made a choice" (15:7) and that "God... showed" (15:8). The three leaders are making the same point: this outreach to the Gentiles is nothing that humans dreamed up. They are only fulfilling the purpose of God.

Prophets agree (15:15)

After James cited the *experiences* of the apostles as dynamic encounters with God's purpose, he refers to a text of Scripture relevant to the discussion. James says, "The words of the prophets are in agreement with this" (15:15). "This" refers to the fact that God is calling Gentiles to his church, and that he does it through faith.

Luke gives only a single example of the verses James cites in defense of the ruling he is about to make. They are the words of Amos 9:11-12. It is probably representative of the other verses James cited.

We should pay attention to the subtle way in which James uses Scripture. He doesn't say that the experiences of Peter and Paul agreed with Scripture. Rather, James says the words of the prophet are in agreement with what God has *done*, that is, the conversion of the Gentiles on the basis of faith! For James, the experience of what God had done interprets the scripture, not the other way around.

James' decision regarding the practice of circumcision and the Jewish law by Gentile converts is based on three vital factors. It depends, first, on the *revelation* of God. The decision is then confirmed in the *experience* of the apostles. Finally, the decision is supported by a new understanding of *Scripture*.

Rest of humanity (15:16-18)

When we analyze the scripture James refers to, we are in for some surprises. The quotation comes mostly from the Septuagint version of Amos 9:11-12, not the Hebrew text on which English translations are based. Amos 9:12 reads this way in the NIV: "So that they [Israel] may possess the remnant of Edom and all the nations that bear my name" (Amos 9:12). This is a

promise that the nation of Israel will possess the remaining people of Edom as well as other nations in a restored kingdom.

That is strikingly different from the Greek Septuagint version of Amos 9:12 which reads like this: “That the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name” (the NIV of Acts 15:17). Here, the remnant of Israel seeks the Lord *together with* the Gentiles. Thus, all people are invited to become part of the people of God in a restored kingdom.

The Septuagint version allows James to support his contention that the people of God should include Gentiles as well as Jews. God’s people consist of a restored remnant of Israel and the nations as part of David’s rebuilt nation.

Some commentators object that James would not use the Septuagint version in Aramaic-speaking Jerusalem. But the council might have been conducted in Greek, since the representatives from Antioch might not know Aramaic. In addition, James might be using a Hebrew text that agrees more closely with the Septuagint than the Masoretic. (The Masoretic is the basic Hebrew text from which the Old Testament is translated into English.) Parts of Amos 9:11-12 are quoted in the Hebrew Dead Sea Scrolls, and they agree with James’ version of this verse.

By quoting Amos 9:11-12, James is saying that the promised enlargement of “David’s fallen tent” (Israel) over Gentile nations is taking place *in the church*, the new Israel. The Gentile mission is the instrument by which Gentiles are becoming part of this new “tent,” the church.

The Hebrew and Greek versions are different, and yet both say that Gentile nations are included in the future kingdom of Israel. But the use of the Septuagint version gave better support for the evangelization of Gentiles and admitting them to fellowship. No longer did Gentiles have to come *through Israel*, the nation, in order to become a people of God.

“It is my judgment” (15:19-20)

At the end of the meeting, James makes his decision: “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (15:19). That is, no one should require Gentiles to be circumcised or to obey other laws of Moses. There are no such entrance requirements for the family of God.

However, James does have a public-relations problem. He is refusing to discriminate against the Gentiles by making them live as Jews. But he also feels the need not to offend pious Jewish believers who have been brought up to observe such things as Old Testament food restrictions.

With this in mind, James outlines four prohibitions that the Gentile Christians should observe. These practical considerations will help keep peace in a church that includes people from two widely different cultures, Jewish and pagan. By stressing the observance of these regulations, James believes it will be easier for Christian Jews to accept Gentiles “as they are” and live in harmony with them.

The four things James asks of the Gentile Christians touch on ethical, ceremonial, and even health aspects of the law – behaviors that are particularly offensive to pious Jews.

James’ four regulations direct Christian Gentiles to “abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood” (15:20). There are several theories about why James selects these four rules. One theory traces them to Leviticus 17-18, which gives laws applying not only to Jews but also to resident aliens within Israel.[See later for further comments on this theory.]

Three of the restrictions concern food. First, any food associated with idolatrous worship is to be avoided – especially meat offered to pagan deities in ritual sacrifices. Such meats are eaten in temple banquets, and the excess is sold in the meat markets.

In Gentile cities most of the meat for sale in shops or markets consisted of the carcasses of animals which had been used for sacrificial purposes in one or other of the pagan temples.... In the process they had been dedicated or offered to some god, represented by his statue. From the Jewish point of view, the eating of such meat condoned polytheism and was an act of sacrilege. There was the added complication that social occasions among Gentiles involving banquets or even family gatherings were often held on temple premises where sacrificial meat that was abhorrent to Jews was consumed. (Neil, 173)

The second prohibition concerns the flesh of animals that are improperly killed (hence, “strangled”), and from which the blood has not been properly drained (Leviticus 17:10, 13). This prohibition is connected with the Noachian covenant (Genesis 9:4), and is considered by Jews as being applicable to all humanity. Jewish slaughter practices ensured that an animal killed for food had its blood drained. Any slaughtered animal that comes from a non-Jewish butcher – where the blood may not have been drained – is questionable, even repulsive to Jewish sensitivities.

The third prohibition cautions Gentile Christians to avoid eating blood (Leviticus 3:17; 7:26; 17:10; 19:26; Deuteronomy 12:16, 23; 15:23). In a sense,

this is an extension of the restriction on eating improperly slaughtered animals.

The three food restrictions are rather straightforward. They are something of a compromise so strict Jewish Christians will not be offended. One of the prohibitions, the ban on eating meat (or any other food) offered to idols, is not a permanent restriction.

When Paul's congregations in Corinth later ask him about food sacrificed to idols, he says "an idol is nothing at all" (1 Corinthians 8:4). That is, food is not actually polluted just because it was offered in pagan rituals. It is physically no different than other meat. Thus, it can be eaten by Christians – but not as part of pagan worship. Paul does not want believers to participate in banquets held in pagan temples. Nor should they eat meat when someone *tells* them it has been offered to an idol – that is giving the meat a religious significance, and the believer should refrain, to avoid offending someone's conscience.

Meat sold in the public shops might not be properly killed and bled, and hence might violate the decree on not eating strangled meat or blood. The Bible does not directly tell us how first-century Christians are to deal with such questions.

Sexual immorality (15:20)

A fourth restriction James imposes had to do with unchastity or sexual immorality (Greek, *porneia*). The New Testament condemns all forms of sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 6:18; 7:2; 2 Corinthians 12:21; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 5:3; Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; Hebrews 13:4). So did Jewish writings of the time (Tobit 4:12; 8:7; Sirach 23:23). Sexual immorality is so detested in Scripture that it symbolizes idolatry (Hosea 5:4; 6:11; Ezekiel 16:15-46; 23:7-35; Jeremiah 3:6-8; 1 Corinthians 10:8 and Revelation 2:14, 20).

Fornication and adultery – sexual immorality in general – are forbidden either directly or in principle. These moral principles are already being taught to Gentile converts as elementary aspects of Christian instruction. So it seems that James does not need to mention sexual promiscuity, since this is forbidden among all Christians – Gentile or Jewish – as much as it is among Jews. Many pagan Gentiles also recognize the evils of sexual immorality.

Why, then, does James mention sexual immorality? He may be referring to something quite specific when he forbids *porneia*. That may be breaches in the special incest regulations of Leviticus 18. (These come after the prohibition of eating blood in Leviticus 17.) Those regulations forbid sexual relations with close relatives. They also forbid adultery with neighbors

(18:19); homosexual activities (18:22); and sex with animals (18:23). But the laws of Leviticus 18 are mainly a corrective to various forms of incest that may have been prevalent in the pagan world of the time.

Is incest a problem in the first-century church? It was in Corinth. The very kind of sexual immorality James writes about occurred in the Corinthian church. A man is having sexual relations with “his father’s wife,” presumably his step-mother (1 Corinthians 5:1).

The situation is so bad that Paul says not even the pagans go this far. Yet, what is more shocking, the Corinthian church prides themselves on allowing this behavior! In the light of this situation, James’ injunction against sexual immorality takes on a quite practical turn.

Despite this, as Paul states, even the Gentiles tend to avoid this kind of incestuous activity. It’s reasonable to suppose that the Christian Gentiles (especially those who have some prior teaching in synagogue and church) are not committing these outrageous sexual offenses to any great degree.

The reason James insists on mentioning this, and the other proscriptions, was primarily for the benefit of the *Jewish* Christians. He wants more to relieve their fears than to correct any widespread disregard of these laws within the church. He wants to assure them that such immorality will not be allowed. (Though, as we see in Corinth, violations can occur.)

In the first century, people eat with others only if they share the same values. In the church, eating together symbolizes spiritual oneness (1 Corinthians 10:14-17). Thus, James’ ruling provides the understanding for a safe and wholehearted table-fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. [For a more detailed analysis of James’ decree, with a different emphasis, see below.]

Moses is preached (15:21)

James has declared that the church should not make it difficult for the Gentiles by requiring them to observe a Jewish way of life. He then lays out four prohibitions for the Gentiles to follow, as described above. James then concludes by saying: “Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath” (15:21). This statement seems puzzling. Why does James refer to Moses?

One answer is that James is stressing the reason for the four prohibitions. James would be saying that there are Jewish communities everywhere who regularly hear the law of Moses read in the synagogues, and the four prohibitions are part of their most fundamental beliefs – and they determine their life-style. The Christian Gentiles should therefore respect Jewish beliefs, and practice them as well.

However, it seems James is doing more than making a concession to

Jewish scruples. After all, circumcision is a much more venerable institution, and James lays it aside. Clearly, the prohibition on sexual immorality, for example, has intrinsic value. It is more than a public relations ploy, since it is important in governing family values and relationships.

Perhaps James' reference to Moses being preached is his way of saying that the four principles he set out are rooted in the Torah. They are the norms the Torah sets down for proselytes and sojourners, and they have value for the Christian life, whether Jewish or Gentile. In that case, James would be saying the following: These principles have been preached from the Torah (Moses) since earliest times and are so today each Sabbath in the synagogues. That underscores their importance. Unlike circumcision or ritual washings, these principles (James might be arguing) have intrinsic worth. The problem here, however, is that one might question whether the ban on food offered to idols had permanent merit. Later, Paul himself seems to compromise it.

A third way to understand James' statement in 15:21 is to see him giving what he feels are the basic essentials of Christian observance in such matters as food and sex. This would be due to Jewish sensitivities. The decree might be given to calm Jewish Christian fears that the Torah is going to be disregarded. In this theory, James is saying that if Christian Gentiles want to find out more details about the Jewish law, then it is up to them to do so. The church will make no more prohibitions, or concessions to Jewish feelings. Interested Christian Gentiles can attend the local synagogue for further instruction – if they so desire.

Yet another possibility is that James is mentioning a different reason for publishing the decree: There are synagogues all around teaching decrees that do *not* apply to Gentile Christians. James is advocating a far more lenient approach – that they should not make it so difficult for Gentile converts, and he says that the lenient decree needs to be published because so many synagogues are teaching the legalistic way.

The whole church (15:22)

James' proposal is accepted by the apostles, the elders and “the whole church” (15:22). That is an important point. Now, almost everyone is on the same page regarding the matter of Jewish beliefs and practices.

The extremist Jews lose the argument, and the church embarks on a more liberal policy. It makes a fundamental statement about the Hebrew Scriptures as well: The church is released from following a strictly literal interpretation of Scripture. Its own experience with God is a more vital element in determining its policy. In the right circumstance, experience can interpret Scripture instead of the Scripture always determining church policy.

Also, Paul's mission and person are now publicly legitimated in the church. Though Paul insists that he received the gospel by revelation and does not need human vindication (Galatians 1:11-12), church members in general have no way of being convinced of this. A formal agreement by the leading apostles gives comfort to both Jews and Gentiles that the path the church is choosing is within God's will.

James' ruling marginalizes a hard-core group of Jewish Christians who are permanently opposed to Paul. They will continue to be a source of friction in the church for decades to come. This, too, is an important part of the story of the apostolic church.

Judas and Silas (15:22)

A letter regarding James' decision is drafted and sent to the churches in Antioch, as well as the provinces of Syria and Cilicia (15:22-23). Two leading members of the Jerusalem congregation, Judas Barsabbas and Silas, are appointed to take the letter and read it to the various congregations. They do more than carry the letter: They give personal witness that the letter is authentic, and as authorized representatives of the apostles, they can answer whatever questions arise.

We are introduced to Judas and Silas as "some of their own men" (15:22) who are prophets (15:32). These leaders represent the viewpoint of the apostles and the Jerusalem church, lest anyone think that Paul was twisting the decision of the church. (The Jerusalem church wisely had Judas and Silas, not Paul, read James' letter.)

We know nothing of Judas Barsabbas, though some have speculated he may have been the brother of Joseph Barsabbas (1:23). Joseph was one of two men selected to possibly replace Judas Iscariot. Neither Judas nor Joseph appears again in Luke's story.

On the other hand, Silas plays a key role as Paul's future partner in missionary work (15:40-41; 16:19, 25, 29; 17:4, 10; 14-15; 18:5). Like Paul, he is a Roman citizen (16:37). Silas is generally identified with Silvanus (a Latin name), a co-worker Paul mentions several times in his letters (2 Corinthians 1:19; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1). Peter also mentions a Silas, who may be the same individual (1 Peter 5:12).

A letter to believers (15:23-29)

Luke reproduces, at least in summary, the letter crafted by the council regarding circumcision. It is addressed to the Gentile Christians in Antioch, the church that serves as a kind of headquarters for the Gentile mission. It is also addressed to the churches in the provinces of Syria and Cilicia, who

presumably were the most affected by the controversy. (Syria-Cilicia was the double province of which Antioch was the capital.)

James' letter apparently is not sent to the entire church. However, as Paul later travels from town to town in Galatia, he delivers "the decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey" (16:4).

The letter begins by acknowledging that the extremist Christian Jews who stirred up the controversy over circumcision came from Jerusalem. But they did so "without our authorization" (15:24). Thus, the letter rebukes the Judaizers for overstepping their authority in laying down requirements Jerusalem had not agreed to.

Barnabas and Paul (the letter mentions Paul in second place) are called "our dear friends" (15:25) and "men who have risked their lives" for the gospel (15:26). Paul, the letter is saying, is held in the warmest regards by Jerusalem. Thus, James, Peter and the Jerusalem church make it clear that they stand together with Paul and Barnabas in what they have been teaching. The church presents itself as unified against the Judaizers.

The letter next appeals to divine guidance in the circumcision matter by saying, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." (15:28). The Holy Spirit is called the author of Jerusalem's decision. The council is claiming that it reached its decision under the guidance of God through the Holy Spirit. The letter ends with a restatement of the four requirements. The decrees were the same ones given in verse 20, except for a slight change in order.

The final statement in James' letter tells the Gentile Christians: "You will *do well* to avoid these things" (15:29). It does not even say that people *must* avoid these things in order to be saved; it just says that it is good to avoid these things.

Luke gives us evidence of the letter being read in three localities where a Gentile mission occurred: Antioch of Syria (15:30-35), Syria and Cilicia (15:46-41), and the southern part of Galatia (16:1-4).

Judas and Silas read the decision in Antioch, and their message is warmly received. After encouraging everyone in the church, they return to Jerusalem (15:33). Paul and Barnabas remain in Antioch, teaching the church and preaching the gospel.

Luke's story now takes a decisive turn. Paul and his associates will dominate the account from now on. Peter and the rest of the Twelve disappear. James and the Jerusalem church appear only once more, in 21:17-26, and then only in the context of Paul's trip to the city.

CHRISTIANS AND THE LAW OF MOSES: A STUDY OF ACTS 15

By Michael D. Morrison

Acts 15 describes the most important meeting the early church had. The future of the church was at stake – was it to be a Jewish group, or would it allow Gentiles?

If Gentiles could enter the church without following Jewish laws, the church would attract more Gentiles, and eventually Gentiles would be the majority. The church would no longer be a sect of Judaism, but a distinct faith. Let's see how the council of Jerusalem developed.

Literary context

The council comes in the center of Luke's inspired history. His book begins with the Jewish church, dominated by Peter in chapters 1 to 5. The book ends with Paul's mission to the Gentiles, in chapters 16 to 28. Chapters 6 to 15 form a transition, alternating between Jewish and Gentile growth.

Chapter 15, the council of Jerusalem, forms the climax of the transition between Jewish and Gentile evangelism. In the story flow, the council forms the decisive step that propels the Gentile mission into dominance.

Paul and Barnabas had returned from a successful missionary trip in Gentile areas. They told the church in Antioch how God had "opened a door of faith to the Gentiles" (14:27). Thus the stage is set for chapter 15.

Controversy arises

"Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: 'Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved'" (15:1). They were saying that circumcision was required for salvation. They probably thought the question was simple: Christians should obey God, and God had commanded circumcision. If people want the blessings of Abraham, they should act like children of Abraham, and that meant circumcision for Gentiles as well as for Jews (Gen. 17:12).

Paul and Barnabas had a different opinion: "This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them" (Acts 15:2). How was the argument to be resolved? "Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question." In this way the church could have unity.

So "the church sent them on their way, and as they traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the believers very glad" (v. 3). Luke is letting us know that

most Christians supported the Gentile mission.

“When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and elders, to whom they reported everything God had done through them” (v. 4). What God had done was part of the evidence. The miracles and conversions supported what he was saying.

The formal debate

Then they debated the question: “Some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses’” (v. 5). We saw in verse 1 that they believed that circumcision was necessary for salvation. Here we see that they also believed the laws of Moses were required. Circumcision was the first step in the process – they believed that Christians must keep all the laws of Moses.

What were these laws? Were they biblical laws, or the unbiblical traditions of the elders? In every other New Testament mention of the “laws of Moses,” the biblical books of Moses are meant (Luke 2:22; 24:44; John 7:22-23; Acts 28:23; 1 Cor. 9:9; Heb. 10:28). Luke could have said “traditions,” but he did not. Anyone who knew the teachings of Jesus would already know that unbiblical traditions were not required of anyone. They did not need to debate about Jewish traditions.

Just as circumcision was biblical, so also were the laws of Moses. The claim was that Gentile believers should be circumcised, and then, as part of the covenant people of God, obey the laws of the covenant. One of the laws of Moses was that males were to be circumcised.

Today, we might explain that Jesus instituted a new covenant, and that the Jewish believers were God’s people not because they were Jewish, but because they were believers. Membership in the new covenant is by faith, not by ancestry. But the Jerusalem council did not approach the question from this perspective. Let’s see how they did it.

The apostles speak

“The apostles and elders met to consider this question” (v. 6). Perhaps dozens of elders were involved. “After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: ‘Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe’” (v. 7).

Peter reminded the people that God had used him to preach the gospel to Cornelius and his family (Acts 10). As far as we know, Cornelius was not circumcised, but Peter did not use that precedent as proof. Rather, he focused

on the theological foundations of how a person is saved – by believing.

“God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He did not discriminate between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith” (vs. 8-9). God gave the Holy Spirit to this uncircumcised family, purifying their hearts, pronouncing them holy, as acceptable to him, because of their faith.

Peter then began to scold the people who wanted the Gentiles to obey the laws of Moses: “Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (vs. 10-11).

Peter’s point is that the yoke of Moses was a burden that the Jewish people were not able to keep successfully. Those rituals showed that, no matter how hard people worked, they could never be perfect. They showed, for anyone who ever wondered, that works can never lead to salvation. Salvation is attained in a different way – by grace. We can’t earn it, so it has to be given to us.

Since the law of Moses cannot bring us salvation, there is no need to require the Gentiles to keep it. God gave them the Holy Spirit and showed that he accepts them without all those rituals. They are saved by grace, and the Jews are, too.

If we follow Peter’s logic, we will see that Jewish believers do not have to keep the laws of Moses, either. They are saved by grace through faith, just as the Gentiles are. The old covenant is obsolete, so its laws are no longer required for anyone, and that is why Peter could live like a Gentile (Gal. 2:14). But that is getting ahead of the story. In Acts 15, the question is only whether Gentiles have to keep the laws of Moses.

The judgment of James

After Barnabas and Paul told “about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles” (Acts 15:12), James spoke. As leader of the Jerusalem church, he had a lot of influence. Some of the Judaizers even claimed him as their authority (Gal. 2:12), but Luke tells us that James was in complete agreement with Peter and Paul.

“Listen to me. Simon [Peter] has described to us how God first intervened to choose a people for his name from the Gentiles” (Acts 15:13-14). The fact that God has already acted was powerful evidence. James then quoted from the Greek translation of Amos to show that Scripture agreed with what was happening (vs. 15-18). He could have used other Old Testament prophecies, too, about Gentiles being included among God’s people.

Experience and Scripture pointed to the same conclusion. “It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God” (v. 19). There is no need to require the yoke of Moses, for that would make things unnecessarily difficult for the Gentile believers.

James then suggested four rules: “Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood” (v. 20). Instead of making things difficult for the Gentiles, these four rules would be enough.

Obviously, Gentile believers should not lie, steal and murder. They already knew that, so they did not need a special reminder about it.

Why, then, these four rules? Some scholars say the Jews believed that these laws dated back to the time of Noah, and therefore applied to all nations. Others say that all four rules were associated with idolatry. Some say that these four rules were laws of Moses, and were given so Gentiles and Jews could eat together. None of these suggestions is fully convincing. (See later for more details.)

However, the decree makes it clear that Gentiles do not have to be circumcised, nor do they have to obey the laws of Moses. They are circumcised spiritually, not physically. God never gave those commands to the Gentiles.

Moses is preached

We should not make it difficult for the Gentiles, James said. Instead, it will be enough to give them four rules, which they will find easy to comply with. Why give them these rules? Notice the reason that James gives: “For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath” (v. 21).

James was not encouraging Gentile Christians to attend the synagogues. He was not saying they should listen to the laws of Moses. No, but because those laws were commonly preached, the apostles should tell the Gentiles four rules. Then they would not think that Christianity is more difficult than it is.

To summarize: Some men said that Gentiles should be circumcised and obey the laws of Moses or else they could not be saved. Not so, said the apostles. Gentiles are saved by grace and faith. God is pleased to dwell in people who aren't circumcised and who don't keep the rituals. But since Moses is widely preached, we need to give a decree that clearly distinguishes the Christian faith from the Law of Moses. This pleased the entire church, so they wrote it in a letter and sent it to Antioch, where they “were glad for its encouraging message” (v. 31).

DECREE OF THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM: THE LITERARY FLOW OF ACTS 15

Acts 15 is the center of the book of Acts. In the story-flow of Acts, the Jerusalem council resolves crucial issues and enables the Gentile mission to go forward with the approval of the Jerusalem church. The council helps portray the unity of the church and helps explain the church's transformation from being essentially Jewish toward being a predominantly Gentile community freed from laws characteristic of Judaism.

The apostolic decree (15:20, 29; 21:25) summarizes the results of the council: an inspired list of requirements for Gentile converts. It shows how Gentiles fit into the people of God.

Despite the crucial role of the Acts 15 council, despite the crucial role of the council's decree, and despite numerous detailed studies, the council and decree remain controversial in several respects. I will bypass questions about the precise date of the council and differences in the Greek texts.

I will focus on literary context, literary source and purpose of the decree. My theses are: 1) The decree is given not as steps required for salvation, but in context of Gentiles *already* being in the people of God. 2) This list was created at the council, not simply borrowed from rabbinic Noachic law lists or Levitical laws concerning aliens living in Israel. 3) I will argue that 15:21 implies that the decree was given in opposition to synagogue preaching, not in harmony with it. 4) Last, I will give evidence that the four prohibitions of the decree were idolatrous practices that Gentiles should avoid.

Literary setting

The apostolic council was called because some Judean Christians were teaching Gentile Christians in Antioch that they had to be circumcised or else they could not be saved (15:1). However, Luke's readers already knew that uncircumcised people had been given the Holy Spirit and had been baptized (10:44-48). God had called Gentiles to repentance and salvation (11:18), but a formal policy about circumcision had not yet been made.

Many Gentiles had come into the church because of the work of Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13-14, especially 14:27), and it became evident that Gentiles would become a substantial part of the church. It became necessary to clarify some theological and practical details of Gentile membership in the church. Some Pharisees had also become believers (15:5). The council was called to determine how both Pharisees and Gentiles could be part of the same community of believers.

Luke was inspired to present the story with a bias that helps his readers

be favorable toward the decree. First, Luke’s readers already knew that circumcision was not required. Luke is contrasting the decree with an obviously erroneous position. Luke also tells us that Phoenician and Samaritan believers expressed great joy when they learned that Gentiles were becoming believers (15:3). Paul and Barnabas were warmly welcomed by the Jerusalem church (15:4) – implying that the circumcision advocates were a minority even within the Jewish church. Both 14:27 and 15:4 remind us that the Gentile mission was being done *by God* – implying that the opponents were opposing God.

Luke emphasizes the error of the Pharisee believers when he says that they taught that Gentile believers must be circumcised *and* obey all the law of Moses to be saved (15:5).¹ [See end of chapter for notes.] As more evidence of Luke’s bias, we see that he reports arguments against circumcision, but none in favor. And he tells us that the people of Antioch reacted to the decree with joy (15:31).

Peter’s speech

There was a lengthy discussion, as there had been in Antioch, but without the discord mentioned in 15:2. Luke is moving the discussion from “sharp dispute” toward resolution.

Peter reminded the group of the precedent set by Cornelius: God is the one who chooses to have Gentiles hear and believe, and this was done first through Peter (15:7). Paul, probably a target of criticism both in Jerusalem and perhaps among Luke’s readers, was not the initiator – God chose to do it. God knew the heart of the believing Gentiles and gave them the Holy Spirit (15:8). Luke says it was a witness to them – to the Gentile believers – but it now serves as a witness to the Jews, too. God did not discriminate; he treated Gentiles and Jews alike (15:9).

By means of faith, God had purified Gentile hearts, or made them ritually clean (cf. 10:15). Ritual purity was a major concern for strict Jews, especially Pharisees. After Peter’s involvement with Cornelius, criticism focused not on Gentile salvation, but on Jew-Gentile fellowship, which had been forbidden as a matter of purity (11:3). In Peter’s vision, too, purity was a major concern. In 15:9, Peter is saying that God had made the Gentile believers clean in the heart, where it is most important, and acceptable to him even in their uncircumcised state.

Peter criticized the circumcision advocates by asking: “Why do you try to test God?” (15:10). The Cornelius event had happened much earlier, and they all understood it (15:7), so, Peter seems to imply, the question about circumcision shouldn’t have even been raised. If Gentile believers are acceptable to God, they ought to be acceptable to Jewish believers. The

extremists were advocating laws that the Jewish people had never been able to carry successfully (15:10).

Though modern readers may think that “yoke” and “burden” (15:10) are derogatory terms, Peter may not be criticizing the law by his use of those words. “When a Jewish writer spoke of the Law as ‘the yoke of the kingdom of heaven,’ he spoke of an obligation to which one gladly committed himself.”² However, Peter says that the law is not an effective means of gaining acceptance with God. The Jews, even though they struggled with the yoke, had never achieved the kingdom of God. Law-keeping cannot save. Jews are saved by grace and faith (15:11), just as Gentiles are.

The question about salvation has already been answered: Gentiles do not need to be circumcised. They do not have to become Jewish by becoming proselytes. The assembly was silent (15:12), apparently in agreement, and they then heard about the miracles God had done in the Gentile mission through Barnabas and Paul – the only reported contribution of Paul to the public debate!

James’ speech

James then spoke. Galatians presents him as a strict conservative, but Luke tells us little about him. He is a leader of the Jerusalem church (12:17). He speaks with authority (15:19); he and the elders tell Paul what to do (21:18, 23). He is presumably accepted by the readers as authoritative. “He is the only character in Acts whose authority no one questions.”³

James does not directly address the question of salvation or of circumcision, but his topic is related: the Gentiles’ place in the church, the people of God. “Peter’s discourse tackles the issue of the salvation of the Gentiles in fundamental terms, while the discourse of James wrestles with this problem from the perspective of the Gentiles’ relationship to Israel.”⁴

James starts with God as the initiator, saying that God is taking a people out of the Gentiles, a people for his name (15:14). Just as God was taking Jews to be his special people, he was also taking Gentiles. “The Gentiles now turning to God are God’s people in the full sense that Israel is.”⁵ And since both Gentiles and Jews are saved in the same way, the implication is that they are the same people of God. Nevertheless, Gentiles can be saved without circumcision.

In 15:15-17, James said that the prophets (the Septuagint version of Amos 9:12) agreed with what God was doing.

God will rebuild David’s fallen tent – a reference to Christ and/or his kingdom – so the everyone else, including Gentiles who have God’s name, may seek him. This quote from Amos helps “bring out more clearly the way in which the progress of the church is in accordance with the Old Testament

prophecies.”⁶

By quoting Amos, James puts the Gentile mission into a new age. As Marshall says, “God is doing something new in raising up the church; it is an event of the last days, and therefore the old rules of the Jewish religion no longer apply.”⁷ This prophecy had been known for ages, James said (15:18), so Gentile converts should be no surprise nor cause for controversy.

Therefore, said James, I decide not to harass the Gentiles (15:19). Because God is doing this, James said, we should not put obstacles in the way of the Gentiles who are turning to God.

In contrast to harassment, James decided to tell the Gentiles to abstain from four things (to be discussed in detail below). The four restrictions are presented as *minimal* requests, as small, easy-to-comply-with requirements – perhaps things the Gentiles in Antioch were already doing. As Dunn notes, “Many of these Gentiles were sufficiently ready to conform to Jewish practices as to make possible regular social intercourse, including at least guest friendship and table-fellowship.”⁸

Moses preached in synagogues

Why these four restrictions? Because Moses is preached in every city (15:21). However, that’s not the only reason for the decree. The “therefore” at the beginning of 15:19 indicates that 15:14-18 is also a reason for the decree.

The logical sequence is this: “A; therefore B, because of C.” C (15:21) is relevant because it explains how B (15:19-20) should be a consequence of A (15:14-18).

A: God is doing this work. B: Therefore we need a decree. C: Because Moses is preached in synagogues. The decree is needed not only because God is calling Gentiles but also because Moses is being preached in synagogues. The sequence implies a *contrast* between the decree and the preaching of Moses, as has already been implied in 15:5.

The thought is this: Because God is doing this work (15:14-17), and because we do not want to hinder his work (15:19), we should therefore give Gentile converts this decree (15:20) because much stricter rules are being preached in the synagogues (15:21). Synagogue rules are too strict for Gentile Christians, but because those rules are being taught in every city, we need to write a decree to let all Gentile believers know that they don’t have to keep the laws of Moses. James is advocating a contrast, not just a pared-down version of synagogue rules.

The “instead” that begins 15:20 also supports this. We do not want to harass the Gentiles, James said. Instead, we should write an easy decree, because Moses is widely preached. This implies that synagogue preaching (the

laws of Moses as interpreted by Pharisees) was a harassment for Gentile Christians. The decree was needed because there was a conflict between God's work and Pharisaic teaching. The decree is needed to counteract the harassing rules of the Pharisees.

This interpretation is further supported when we analyze the audience of the synagogue preaching. Some commentators have assumed (without analysis) that James is referring to preaching that *Gentiles* were hearing in the synagogues. But Gentiles who attended synagogues had already changed their behavior to be acceptable to Jews; they had little or no need for a decree. Moreover, Gentiles were coming into the church who did *not* have a background in the synagogue (11:20).

There was a synagogue in Iconium (14:1), but none is mentioned for Lystra or Derbe, but there were disciples in each city, presumably from pagan backgrounds (14:8-22). James' comment in 15:21, if it referred to Gentiles who attended synagogues, would fail to address the situation the church was facing. The decree was needed even by Gentiles who did not have a background in Judaism – even by those who lived in cities that may not have had a synagogue (16:1-4).

The thought in 15:21 seems to be that in every city there are *Jews* who are being instructed in the laws of Moses.⁹ James was not encouraging Gentiles to go to the synagogues to hear Moses be preached. Throughout the book of Acts, Christ is the one who is preached. It was the Pharisees who preached the law of Moses, and the decree was given in opposition to Mosaic law, not as a supplement to it. The decree was needed because of the discrepancy between synagogue preaching and God's purpose.

The Council's letter

The Jerusalem sent two men with Paul and Barnabas to Antioch (15:22) to testify to the truth of the decree (15:27). These men strengthened the Antioch church (15:32) and contributed to the sense of unity.

The decree was addressed only to Gentiles (15:23), since the four requirements were not designed for Jewish believers (who presumably kept a stricter code). The letter acknowledged the problem (admitting that the troublemakers had been part of the Jerusalem church), praised Barnabas and Paul, and introduced the delegates from Jerusalem (15:24-27). The decision was presented as inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The four requirements were necessary, but not burdensome (15:28). The decree was not a heavy-handed demand for obedience; there was no reference to salvation and no mention of penalties for infraction. Rather, the letter ends with the mild words: "You will do well to avoid these things." Seifrid gives ample evidence for the rendering "you will prosper" or "do

well.”¹⁰

Endnotes

¹ A few people have said that the Pharisee claim was not that Gentiles had to be circumcised *and* to obey the law of Moses, but to be circumcised *in order to* obey the law of Moses. The people then argue that the council rejected only circumcision and not the need to obey the law of Moses – that is, that the council merely concluded that Gentiles do not have to be circumcised in order to obey the law of Moses (as if everyone agreed that the law of Moses should be obeyed; only that the decree did not require Gentiles to be circumcised).

This interpretation would make the decree unnecessary. The Greek words do not support this translation, and I am not aware of any published translation that conveys this idea. Moreover, Acts 21:20-25 shows that Gentiles do *not* have to obey the law of Moses. Also, John 7:22-23 shows that circumcision *is* part of the law of Moses. Last, Galatians 5:3 shows that circumcision cannot be separated from the law as a whole; they are part of the same package. The Pharisees were claiming that Gentiles had to obey the whole package of old covenant law.

² Royce Dickinson Jr. “The Theology of the Jerusalem Conference, Acts 15:1-35.” *Restoration Quarterly* 29 (1987) 65-83, p. 70, citing an article by John Nolland.

³ Jacob Jervell. *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), pp. 185-6.

⁴ Dickinson. p. 68.

⁵ Robert C. Tannehill. *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*. Volume 2: The Acts of the Apostles. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), p. 187.

⁶ Ian Howard Marshall. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 253.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ James D.G. Dunn. *Jesus, Paul, and the Law*. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), p. 150, citing Josephus, *Jewish War* 7.3.3.

⁹ Luke is favorable to Mosaic law – for Jews. He points out the circumcision of Jesus, for example, and the circumcision of Timothy, whose mother was Jewish (16:1-3). Luke defends Paul from the accusation that he encouraged Jews to abandon the law of Moses. But Luke has a different approach when discussing the role of Mosaic law for Gentiles.

¹⁰ M.A. Seifrid. “Jesus and the Law in Acts.” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*. 30 (1987) 39-57, p. 56, note 41.

DECREE OF THE COUNCIL OF JERUSALEM: THE PURPOSE OF THE DECREE

The four requirements

The decree told Gentile Christians to abstain from four things.¹⁵ Minor variations occur in order and number (15:20, 29; 21:25); these variations suggest that order and number are not significant. The four prohibitions:

1) Pollutions of idols (15:20) or things sacrificed to idols (15:29; 21:25). Wilson notes that “pollutions” could have either a religious sense or a reference to morality.¹⁶ All four prohibitions may be described as pollutions, as ritual uncleanness.¹⁷

2) Blood. This is a prohibition of eating or drinking blood.

3) Strangled things. Perhaps meat from strangled animals was forbidden because blood remained in the meat, but if that is the only reason, it would not seem necessary to mention strangled things in addition to blood. Wilson points out uncertainties in the meaning of strangled things. The verb means “strangle,” but the noun may refer to a method of cooking as well as of killing.¹⁸ Either way, it is an unusual dietary restriction. Strangled meat played a role in some pagan cults, and may have been mentioned because of that.¹⁹

4) Sexual immorality (*porneia*). Achtemeier notes that some scholars say it means fornication, others that it cannot mean fornication; some say it means incest; others say it cannot; some say adultery, or marriage to an idolater, or ritual prostitution.²⁰ If the writer(s) of the decree wished to be precise, he picked the wrong term. Incest is included in the meaning of the term (1 Cor. 5:1), but other sexual aberrations were, too. The Gentile recipients of the decree would probably have understood it as major sexual misconduct or perhaps more specifically as pagan temple prostitution.

Wilson says, “The ban on *porneia* is a standard part of Christian exhortation... [often] in connection with or in the same list as idolatry.”²¹ Seifrid emphasizes the connection between *porneia* and idolatry: “Although *porneia* has an ethical dimension, there is good reason to think that all four elements are tied together by a common thread of concern with ritual defilement.”²²

These four laws, of course, are not the *only* laws that Christians need. Many other Old Testament laws have greater claim to permanent validity. Why are they not mentioned? Does the decree assume that the Gentiles know all the valid laws except these four? Why would it be necessary to list these four laws, but not others? To answer that, scholars have explored some possible literary sources of these prohibitions.

Source of the rules: two common theories

What was this collection of restrictions based on? Luke does not tell us. Common suggestions are either rabbinic “Noachic” laws, or laws for Gentiles living in the land (Lev. 17-18). Most scholars have advocated either one or the other, but there are weaknesses with each.

A Noachic theory neatly explains the prohibition of blood (and, as a corollary, strangled meat, which contains blood), because Gen. 9:4 forbids blood. Since Noah is the ancestor of Gentiles as well as Jews, these commands could with reason be applied to Gentiles.

The rabbis listed **seven** Noachic laws: “idolatry, incest/unchastity, shedding blood, profanation of God’s name, robbery, injustice, and eating the flesh of a living animal.”²³ Since the Talmud was written long after the apostolic decree, Sanders suggests that the Acts 15 decree is “an early version of the Noachic laws.”²⁴ This might explain the discrepancy in number – the Talmudic list is an expanded list, or the decree is a selective list. At least the Talmud shows that Jews discussed which laws applied to Gentiles who wished to obey God. Dunn notes a variety of rabbinic opinions about which laws were applicable to proselytes, Gentile Godfearers and resident aliens.²⁵ It seems that the lists were flexible, not fixed.

However, the Noachic theory has serious shortcomings. In the rabbinic lists, blood is not directly forbidden. Strangled things are not specifically mentioned, either, and it is not clear that the prohibitions about *porneia* or idol-meat can be traced back to Noah. Wilson, after a thorough analysis (his discussion of the decree is probably the single best treatment), summarizes the weaknesses of the Noachic theory:

Noachic laws are dissimilar in both number and in content.... They do not, for example, forbid the consumption of “things sacrificed to idols,” although this might be subsumed under the general prohibition of idolatry, and it is the shedding rather than the consumption of blood which is banned.²⁶

The most common theory is that of a Leviticus source. With a little creativity, Lev. 17-18 can be correlated to all four prohibitions. Lev. 17:2-9 prohibits sacrifices to any god except Yahweh; 17:10 prohibits blood; 17:13-15 might be construed as prohibiting snare-strangled game; and 18:6-26 prohibits incestuous sex, homosexuality and other sexual aberrations. What makes the Leviticus theory especially attractive is that all four prohibitions apply specifically to alien Gentiles as well as to Israelites.

But the correspondence is not exact, and Wilson lists numerous

problems.²⁷ Lev. 17 is a questionable source of a prohibition about strangled meats, and it is unlikely that Gentiles would understand the word *porneia*, by itself, to include the Leviticus incest tabus. As Seifrid says, “It is hard to see how Luke intended the readers of the Decree in the narrative, Gentile believers, to discern a narrow Jewish sense.”²⁸

Scholars often mention incest, because Lev. 18 includes it in great detail, but it is unlikely that the decree had that as its main meaning. Wilson notes, “The common meaning of *porneia* – fornication, licentiousness, harlotry – is far broader than the notion of consanguineous [incestuous] marriages.”²⁹ Nor would Jews assume that the sexual behavior of Gentiles was acceptable except for their definition of incest. It seems best to understand *porneia* in a broad sense; the discussion of incest in Lev. 18 is a coincidence rather than the primary sexual guideline needed by Gentile Christians.

Another problem with the Leviticus theory is that Luke does not indicate that the decree has a biblical origin. Wilson notes: “Luke presents the decree as apostolic rather than Mosaic in origin...and we might suppose that, with his penchant for quoting the Old Testament to prove a point, he would have referred clearly to Lev. 17-18 [or Gen. 9] if that was the connection he had wished to make.”³⁰

Another objection is that other Mosaic laws applying to aliens living in Israel were **not** included in the decree. The alien (*ger* in Hebrew, *proselytos* in the Septuagint³¹) was also required to keep the Sabbath (Ex. 23:12; Deut. 5:14), to keep the annual festivals (Lev. 16:29; Deut. 16:11, 14), to be cleansed by the ashes of a red heifer (Num. 19:10), to give sacrifices (Num. 15:27-29), and to be circumcised if he wanted to observe the Passover (Ex. 12:48-49).³² Is there any logic for including some alien laws but not others? None is given.

The mention of strangled meat is especially puzzling, for either theory. Is avoiding strangled things just as important as avoiding sexual immorality? Neither the Old Testament nor the New gives strangled things that much importance. The old covenant penalty for eating blood was being “cut off” (Lev. 17:14), but the penalty for eating meat that might have blood in it was only ritual uncleanness (Lev. 15:15). Moreover, Deut. 14:21 *allows* Gentiles to eat animals that die without proper slaughter. So even by Old Testament standards, “strangled things” doesn’t seem to be a very important prohibition. The New Testament contains many prohibitions, but “strangled things” is not repeated anywhere else in the New Testament. Neither theory explains why it is in the decree.

Another weakness of both Noachic and Leviticus theories is that, if the list were based on the law of Moses, it would imply that the law of Moses

was still in force – four laws for Gentiles, and 613 laws for Jews. This would perpetuate Jew-Gentile distinctions in contradiction to Peter’s statement in 15:9-11 and Paul’s in Eph. 2:11-18. It does not make sense to see the council’s decree as based on the law of Moses.

Both Noachic and Levitical theories have serious inadequacies. The variety of rabbinic opinions – long after the date of Acts – about which laws applied to Gentiles³³ suggests that there was **no** list of undisputed authority, whether Noachic or Levitical, that the apostles could have quoted from. More likely, the decree was created specifically for the early Christian church. The four prohibitions do not need to have a common source; one may have come from Gen. 9 or Lev. 17, another from a different scriptural passage; yet another from a cultural custom, etc.

Purpose of the decree

Many commentators have concluded that the decree was designed to make it possible for Jewish and Gentile Christians to fellowship together without requiring the Jewish Christians to compromise their purity customs. Indeed, there is almost a consensus that the decree required Gentiles to conform to the most important sensitivities of Jewish Christians. This view is held by Longenecker, Neyrey, Seifrid, Tannehill, and others.³⁴

Some commentators specify that the issue is **table-fellowship**: eating together. It is true that table-fellowship was an important part of social acceptance, and it is true that three parts of the decree may involve dietary restrictions, but Luke says nothing in this chapter (unlike 11:3) about table-fellowship. Sanders³⁵ correctly notes three problems with the table-fellowship theory:

1) “The four prohibitions in the decree hardly cover the laws of *kasbrut*: one need think only of pork, shellfish, and meat with milk.” It is unlikely that Gentiles would know all the Jewish table-fellowship rules except for the four mentioned in the decree. Nor does it seem likely that these four are the most important rules. If Gentiles kept the decree, they could still be unclean by Pharisee standards (even pious, God-fearing Cornelius was controversial).

2) “The [[Jewish] dietary laws do not, in fact, prevent Gentiles and Jews having a common meal – if the Jews do the cooking.” If table-fellowship had been the problem, it could have been solved without a decree. Common sense would have told the Gentiles that fellowship could proceed if they followed Pharisee rules.

3) “The Apostolic Council is not convened to deal with the issue of dining together.” The council was about salvation; Acts 11:3 had already addressed the matter of eating together.

4) There is a fourth problem with the fellowship theory: There is no decree to Pharisee Christians that **they** must accept decree-observant Gentiles as clean for fellowship. A decree only to Gentiles (whether in the original setting or in Luke's readership) is an inadequate basis for fellowship because the Gentiles were given fewer rules than the Pharisees wanted them to have. Also, for this theory, it is odd that *porneia* would be mentioned but other sins not mentioned.

Other suggestions

Because the more common theories about purpose are not entirely convincing, other suggestions are worth examining in greater detail. Some have suggested that the decree simply prohibited customs associated with pagan cults.³⁶ This view answers some questions and may be the least unsatisfactory explanation.

All four prohibited things had some connection with pagan customs. Pollutions of idols has an obvious connection with paganism. *Porneia* can, too, since it can refer to cultic prostitution, or it may be a metaphor for religious disloyalty.³⁷ Blood could also have connections with pagan religion:

That *haima* [blood] refers to the bloody rites of pagan sacrifices, one of their most prominent features, is certainly feasible.... It was also the custom in some cults to drink the blood of the victim.... It is not difficult, therefore, to see how blood could have been associated in a variety of ways with pagan cults, especially if that association had already been established by other terms of the decree [such as beginning the list with "pollutions of idols"].³⁸

What about strangled things? Origen wrote that blood, including that in strangled meat, was said to be the food of demons: "If we were to eat strangled animals, we might have such spirits feeding along with us."³⁹ Scythians and Indians were known to strangle their animals, but most Greek cults bled the sacrifices, so the "strangled things" prohibition doesn't fit perfectly. But strangling was a pagan custom in Alexandria, and old Macedonian cults killed without bleeding the animals.⁴⁰ The word was also used for some unusual (pagan?) cooking method.⁴¹ Since Antioch in Syria included many ethnic groups from the east, it is possible that strangulation was a cultic custom there.⁴² Would Gentile Christians be tempted to continue or resume such pagan practices? Apparently they were in Corinth; it is plausible that a decree to this effect would be needed. This is possible, but not proven. Perhaps it seems unlikely.

Unfortunately, the word for “strangled things” is so rare that almost any meaning is “unlikely” and “difficult.” But in the Acts 15 decree, it is not any more difficult to interpret it as referring to paganism than it is to interpret it in terms of Jewish sensitivities. Since the decree already forbade blood, there would be no need to mention “strangled things” unless they were wrong for additional reasons. At least the pagan-cultic theory of the decree’s purpose gives a possible explanation for mentioning strangled things in addition to blood.

However, it may be misleading to expect all four prohibitions to be of the same category. Old Testament laws mixed ritual and moral laws; Jewish vice lists also did, and other Christian lists did, too. The first three items may have been prohibited for cultic associations, and *porneia* for moral reasons; all were considered equally polluting and ungodly. Since idolatry and sexual immorality were considered chief sins of Gentiles, it would be reasonable to address both problems in an early decree.

Conclusion

The best explanation of the decree, if a single explanation must be sought, is that it forbids Gentile Christians to participate in four things associated with pagan cults. This conclusion is supported in part by the failure of other theories to explain the decree, and it harmonizes with these facts:

- Gentiles without synagogue background were coming into the church – a situation significantly different than that faced in Acts 10. Their single greatest instructional need would be to avoid paganism or syncretism.
- The decree lists four things demonstrably associated with pagan cults as well as with Jewish sensitivities. The words have other associations, too, but pagan cultic associations are a viable option.
- The decree is presented as easy to comply with, not a burden, something the Gentiles may have already been in compliance with.
- James says the decree is needed because he did not want to hinder Gentile conversions, but he implied that synagogue preaching would. The decree is much less than synagogues taught and much less than Pharisee Christians would observe.
- The decree is given in answer to people who taught that Gentiles had to keep the law of Moses. This implies that the decree is not based on the law of Moses. It does not perpetuate ritualistic laws for either Jews or Gentiles.
- This theory explains why all Gentiles needed to comply with the decree, whether they lived near Jews or not, and why there was no decree for Jewish Christians.

Endnotes

¹⁵In some Western Greek manuscripts, the decree contains only three ethical admonitions: Avoid idolatry, blood (in the sense of bloodshed) and sexual immorality. This fits in with “the rabbinic tradition which considers the three primary sins of the Gentiles to be precisely idolatry, shedding of blood and immorality” (Stephen G. Wilson. *Luke and the Law*. [Cambridge: University Press, 1983], p. 80). However, Wilson also observes that “the Western version consists of such widely accepted ethical norms that a decree to this effect would be superfluous” (Stephen G. Wilson. *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*. [Cambridge: University Press, 1973], p. 188).

All major English translations, including the King James and the NIV, use a Greek text with four prohibitions. The textual questions are discussed in detail in Bruce Metzger. *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971), pp. 429-433.

¹⁶Wilson, *Luke*, p. 82.

¹⁷Seifrid, p. 48

¹⁸Wilson, *Luke*, pp. 88-91.

¹⁹Hans Bietenhard. “*Pnigo, apopnigo, sympnigo, pniktos.*” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Ed. Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), vol. 6, pp. 455-8, citing Philo.

²⁰Paul J. Achtemeier. *The Quest for Unity in the New Testament Church: A Study in Paul and Acts*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), p. 84.

²¹Wilson, *Luke*, p. 93.

²²Seifrid, p. 48.

²³Wilson, *Luke*, p. 86, citing *Sanhedrin* 56b and *Sibylline Oracles* 4:28-29. Dunn (p. 144) cites *Aboda Zara* 64b and *Sanhedrin* 56a. Maxwell cites *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* 16:6 (Soncino ed., p. 131), *Midrash Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:2(5) (Soncino ed., pp. 26-7), and *Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1:21 (Soncino ed., pp. 23-4) (C. Mervyn Maxwell and P. Gerard Damsteegt, eds., *Source Book for the History of Sabbath and Sunday*. [Berrien Springs, Mich.: Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, 1992], pp. 74-75).

²⁴Jack T. Sanders. *The Jews in Luke-Acts*. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), pp. 121-2.

²⁵Dunn, pp. 142-147.

²⁶Wilson, *Luke*, p. 74.

²⁷Wilson, *Luke*, pp. 84-94.

²⁸Seifrid, p. 48.

²⁹Wilson, *Luke*, p. 88.

³⁰Wilson, *Luke*, p. 85.

³¹The Septuagint version of Lev. 17-18 has the restrictions apply to the *proselytos*. But a major conclusion of the Acts 15 council was that Gentiles did not have to become proselytes, so it would be confusing for the decree to quote, without clarification, *proselytos* laws.

³²If the council were discussing alien laws and chose only four, the Sabbath and annual festivals were specifically excluded – not required for Gentiles. We might be tempted to argue this, but it does not seem exegetically sound, since the decree probably was not based on the alien laws. Rather, the council concluded that Gentiles did not have to look to the law of Moses for a description of Christian conduct.

³³Dunn, pp. 142-7.

³⁴Richard N. Longenecker. “The Acts of the Apostles.” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*. Ed. Frank E. Gaebelin. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), p. 448; Jerome H. Neyrey. “Ceremonies in Luke-Acts: The Case of Meals and Table-Fellowship.” *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*. Ed. Jerome H. Neyrey. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), pp. 380-382.; Seifrid, p. 47; and Tannehill, p. 191.

³⁵Sanders, p. 120.

³⁶Wilson, although not dogmatic, seems to favor this cultic theory (*Luke*, pp. 94-99, citing Lake and Kümmel as scholars who also supported this view).

³⁷Lake points out “a serious difficulty” in understanding *porneia* as a reference to cultic prostitution: “none of the early Christian writers interpreted the decree in this way” (Kirsopp Lake, “The Apostolic Council of Jerusalem,” *The Beginnings of Christianity* [ed. Frederick J. Foakes-Jackson and Kirsopp Lake. Part I, *The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 5.; London: MacMillan, 1933], pp. 195-212; quote from p. 207).

³⁸Wilson, *Luke*, pp. 97-8.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 96-7, citing *Contra Celsum* 8.30.

⁴⁰Bietenhard, pp. 457-8.

⁴¹Wilson, *Luke*, pp. 89-91.

⁴²Christians in the West would be less likely to know that strangled things were associated with pagan customs. Perhaps this explains why the word was omitted in the Western text.

^{**}This study was done in 1992, and many studies have been published on the decree since then. We don’t have time to update the study, but we publish it here as a resource for future studies.

THE SECOND MISSIONARY JOURNEY

Paul, Silas and Timothy in Asia Minor (Acts 15:36-16:8)

Visit the believers (15:36)

After the Jerusalem Council, Luke begins to narrate Paul's second major journey. Paul's original objective on this trip seems to be more pastoral than missionary. Paul says to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing" (15:36).

Paul apparently wants to deliver the Jerusalem decrees to these churches personally. He is encouraged to have the support of the other apostles, especially Peter and James. He knows that the Judaizers have created problems among the believers in Galatia – problems that he addresses in his letter to the Galatians, which may have been written before the Council. Now he wants to see how the churches in the region have responded to his letter.

Controversy about Mark (15:37-39)

Barnabas agrees that another trip through Galatia is in order. However, he wants to take Mark as an assistant. Paul refuses, and their disagreement over Mark is so bitter "that they parted company" (15:39).

The story of the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas does not make pleasant reading, but Luke's realism in recording it helps us to remember that the two men, as they themselves said to the people of Lystra, were "human beings with feelings like" any other (*The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament [Rev. ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988], page 301).

Paul believes that Mark's refusal to go with the missionaries into Galatia during the first missionary trip amounted to desertion (15:38). Perhaps Mark has some defect in his character that makes him unreliable.

On the contrary, Barnabas, the "Son of Encouragement," sees some promising qualities in Mark and wants to give him experience and training. Mark is his cousin, and Barnabas knows the family traits (Colossians 4:10). Or perhaps family loyalty was more important to Barnabas than commitment to the work.

In the end, Mark proved Barnabas right, and perhaps Paul was being too hard-nosed (Colossians 4:10; Philemon 23). Years later, Paul would say to Timothy of the young man he had once rejected: "Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry" (2 Timothy 4:11). Actually, both Paul and Barnabas may be right: Mark would do poorly under

Paul's leadership, but would grow while helping Barnabas.

Barnabas has occupied a central part in Luke's story as a trusted representative of the Jerusalem church (11:22-24). He has been vital to Paul's work and his relationship to the church – as his associate on the first missionary tour (13:1-14:28); for intervening on his behalf with Jerusalem (9:27); in recruiting him for missionary work at Antioch (11:25-26); and in supporting his Gentile mission at the Jerusalem conference (15:12).

But after separating from Paul, Barnabas is not again mentioned in Acts. Luke's story is about Paul, not anyone else. Barnabas is referred to in passing in only three other places in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 9:6; Galatians 2:1, 9, 13; Colossians 4:10). In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of his and Barnabas' need to get jobs in order to support themselves while doing missionary work. Since this epistle was written after the split between the two men, it indicates that they worked together again, or at least had buried their differences.

Paul chooses Silas (15:40-41)

Barnabas takes Mark and sails for Cyprus, presumably to visit the churches on that island (15:39). Luke doesn't tell us anything about this mission, probably because it isn't a trip that advances the gospel toward Rome.

Paul chooses Silas as his missionary partner and sets out on a tour of the churches in eastern Asia Minor. Silas (or Silvanus) is a good choice as an associate. He was a leader in the Jerusalem church, and can speak with authority on its behalf (15:12, 27). He is a prophet (15:32) and a Roman citizen (16:27). He is respected in the church as well as in the wider Roman society.

With Silas, Paul begins his trip by traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches in these provinces (15:41). But what begins as a pastoral visit turns into an extensive missionary journey through large parts of Asia Minor, as well as Macedonia and Greece. It is on this missionary tour that the gospel reaches the eastern frontier of Europe.

Derbe and Lystra (16:1-2)

After his pastoral visit to the churches in Syria and Cilicia, Paul travels to the city of Derbe. His first trip to this and other cities in Galatia was discussed in 14:6-21. After his activities in Derbe are completed (Luke gives no details), Paul takes the northwest road to Lystra. Again, Luke says nothing about what Paul does in the city. Luke's main interest here is to show how Timothy becomes Paul's associate.

Apparently Lystra is Timothy's hometown (20:4). He is already a member of the church, as the disciples in Lystra and Iconium speak well of him. Most likely Timothy was converted as a result of Paul's preaching on his first missionary journey. Timothy's mother and grandmother are also Christian believers (2 Timothy 1:5). His mother, Eunice, is Jewish and has instructed Timothy in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Timothy will become the most important of Paul's associates in his mission to the Gentiles. Luke mentions his role several times in Acts (17:14-15; 18:5; 19:22; 20:4). Paul refers to Timothy as a "co-worker" (Romans 16:21). Two New Testament letters are addressed to Timothy personally. In several, he is listed as an author alongside of Paul.

Paul has a special affection for Timothy, calling him "my son whom I love" (1 Corinthians 4:17). In Paul's mind, there is no individual quite like Timothy, whose thinking is so much like his own (Philippians 2:19-20). Timothy remains a close confidant and friend up to Paul's death. Paul even sees him as a successor who will continue his work. He is used on a number of occasions to help with Paul's pastoral and gospel-preaching responsibilities (1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10; Philippians 2:19; 1 Thessalonians 3:2, 6; 1 Timothy 1:3).

At some point, Timothy is ordained to the ministry. Perhaps it is at this time in Lystra. Paul says that Timothy was given a special divine ability, and the knowledge of it came as a result of divine revelation (1 Timothy 1:18). "Do not neglect your gift," Paul admonishes him, "which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you" (1 Timothy 4:14).

His father is Greek (16:1)

Because Paul wants to add Timothy to his missionary team, he is faced with a public relations problem. Luke tells us that while Timothy's mother was Jewish, his father was Greek, probably pagan, and perhaps now deceased. Timothy was the product of a mixed marriage. Jews will not look kindly on such a situation, because it dilutes Jewish identity (Nehemiah 13:23-27; Ezra 9:1-10).

The father, who had authority over the household, did not allow Timothy to be circumcised – but he did allow her to instruct the boy in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Jews know that Timothy is not circumcised. But since his mother is Jewish, Timothy is also considered a Jew. But because he is uncircumcised, he is considered an apostate Jew.

This presents Paul with a dilemma. Circumcision is of no value in salvation (1 Corinthians 7:19; Galatians 5:6). In one of his most angry

moments, he tells Gentiles, “If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all” (Galatians 5:2). In his more diplomatic times, he allows that “circumcision has value if you observe the law,” but he quickly notes that the real circumcision is “of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code” (Romans 2:25, 29).

Timothy is circumcised (16:3)

Paul decides that in the case of Timothy, circumcision will be helpful, so he has Timothy circumcised before taking him on the journey (16:3). Paul will be preaching in synagogues, with Timothy as his helper. But Jews will not look favorably at someone regarded as an apostate sitting in their midst. Timothy is not circumcised as a condition of salvation or discipleship. It is simply a way to assure his acceptance among those Jews with whom he and Paul will work (1 Corinthians 9:19-23).

“It was Timothy’s mixed parentage that made Paul decide to circumcise him before taking him along as his junior colleague. By Jewish law Timothy was a Jew, because he was the son of a Jewish mother, but because he was uncircumcised he was technically an apostate Jew. If Paul wished to maintain his links with the synagogue, he could not be seen to countenance apostasy.” (Bruce, 304).

Since Paul has Timothy circumcised, who technically is only a half-Jew, this takes the wind out of a later criticism that he is teaching Jews not to circumcise their children (21:21). Luke tells his readers ahead of time that such an accusation is without foundation. By circumcising Timothy, Paul is showing that he is not flouting Jewish customs nor trying to destroy Judaism. (He does the same thing by his own observance of Jewish laws.)

Deliver the decrees (16:4)

Timothy now joins Paul and Silas, and the team travels “from town to town” (16:4). Presumably, Luke is referring to villages in southern Galatia. At each church they visit, they read the letter from the Jerusalem church (16:4). In an interesting juxtaposition, in two consecutive verses, Luke shows Paul circumcising a half-Gentile and then delivering decrees saying that Gentiles do not have to be circumcised. This shows that Paul has Timothy circumcised only for expedience, and that it doesn’t conflict with the essence of the gospel.

Regarding the Jerusalem decrees, Paul never refers to them in his letters, even when dealing with practices they touch on. We may see this as odd, but it reveals his position regarding the *real source* of his teaching. He is in harmony with the council’s judgment, and so he reads the letter from Jerusalem

containing the decrees James laid out. But Paul's gospel depends on direct revelation from Christ, not on what Jerusalem approves. Hence, in his letters, he does not need to rely on the document for his authority.

Churches grow daily (16:5)

Paul and his team travel throughout Syria, Cilicia and Galatia (15:41; 16:4). They take stock of the churches that were raised up on the first missionary journey. Paul strengthens the believers' convictions, organizes them where necessary, and instructs them in the basics of the faith. Luke can now conclude with another summary statement of the progress of the messianic community: "So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers" (16:5).

This is the fourth of Luke's brief and general reports on the progress of the church (6:7; 9:31; 12:24). Besides these more sweeping progress reports, Luke also gives more specific updates regarding the church. Commentators have identified the following ones up to this point: Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7; 8:25, 40; 9:31; 11:24-25; 12:24; 14:21-23.

Prevented by the Holy Spirit (16:6)

Luke doesn't say what plans Paul had for after the missionaries completed their pastoral work in Syria, Cilicia and Galatia. He gives a generalized summary of their subsequent movements: "Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia" (16:6).

The precise meaning of the phrase "Phrygia and Galatia" is unclear. There is a similar reference to "the region of Galatia and Phrygia" in 18:23. On that occasion Paul is traveling west, toward Ephesus (19:1). It is difficult to determine the exact boundaries of Phrygia, and its relationship to Galatia. Strabo has an extensive discussion of this region (*Geography* 12, 7, 1-5).

One reason for the vagueness is that the Roman provincial boundaries were superimposed on older ethnic regions. (We see a similar situation today where African national-political boundaries created by European powers cut across tribal lands.) Phrygia apparently lay partly in the province of Galatia and partly in the province of Asia. Pisidian Antioch and Iconium – two cities Paul visited – might have been in Phrygia.

From Luke's description, it appears the apostle Paul has been moving steadily westward, probably along the road known as Via Sebaste. The cities of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch are all connected to this important highway. Perhaps Paul intends to follow this road to Ephesus, the capital of the Roman province of Asia, which stretches across the west coast of Asia Minor.

However, some dramatic occurrence interferes with his plans. Luke says the missionary team is “kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia” (16:6). Luke doesn’t explain what the Spirit uses to keep Paul out of the province. Whatever the circumstance, Luke recognizes that it occurs under God’s direction. He takes every opportunity to show God’s involvement in the spread of the gospel, and this is another situation he uses to make clear that Paul’s work is directed by God to achieve his own purposes.

Paul’s missionary journeys display an extraordinary combination of strategic planning and keen sensitiveness to the guidance of the Spirit of God, however that guidance was conveyed – by prophetic utterance, inward prompting, or the overruling of external circumstances. (Bruce, 306)

In this case, God causes events to occur in such a way as to prevent Paul from entering the province of Asia. Perhaps political factors, weather or bandit activity are factors. Whatever it is, Paul’s original intent to travel to Ephesus is thwarted. To get around Asia, Paul and his associates travel north through the Phrygian part of the province of Galatia.

On to Bithynia (16:7)

Paul and his party kept on traveling north. “When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia” (16:7-8). Paul is somewhere around the city of Dorylaeum, north of Pisidian Antioch. From Dorylaeum the missionaries could travel to such Bithynian cities as Nicaea and Nicomedia. It is natural for Paul to think that if the large province of Asia is not open to evangelism, then perhaps they should go northwest to the province of Bithynia. It is along the Black Sea coast of northwest Asia Minor, and has a number of civilized Greek cities as well as Jewish settlements.

Later, Peter writes to Christian communities in Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1). Yet later, Pliny the Younger, the province’s governor under Trajan in A.D. 110-12, complained about the many Christians in the area (*Letter* 10:96-97).

But Paul is also prevented from doing missionary work in Bithynia. Luke writes that “the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them” (16:7). This is the only time that the expression “Spirit of Jesus” occurs in Acts. Luke may be trying to tell his readers that Jesus continues to take an active role in directing the preaching of the gospel. Jesus has already made his appearance in Acts as one who mandates the apostles’ work of preaching the gospel (1:3; 7:56; 9:5). The Holy Spirit is called by his own name, or is referred to as “the Spirit of God” (Matthew 10:20), “the Spirit of Christ,” or “the Spirit of Jesus” (Romans 8:9;

Galatians 4:6; Philippians 1:19; 1 Peter 1:11). But there is only one Holy Spirit, of course.

God has again intervened in the plans of the missionaries. He is directing Paul and his associates to a historic new phase of the work. But for the moment, they are unaware of what is happening to them.

Stopping at Troas (16:8)

If they can't preach in Asia, nor in Bithynia, the missionaries can at least get to the coast of Asia Minor – and then decide what to do. Luke tells us “they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas” (16:8). (They had to go through Mysia in order to reach coastal Troas.) Mysia is a somewhat indefinite region in the northwest corner of Asia Minor. It is the land that abuts into the Aegean Sea, and its northern border is the Dardanelles (the Hellespont) (Strabo, *Geography* 12, 4, 5). Mysia includes the historic seaport of Troas, and the site of ancient Troy, about ten miles inland.

Troas is an important port, connecting the land masses of Europe (Macedonia) and Asia Minor as well being near the passageway between the Aegean and Black Seas. It is a regular port of call for trading vessels plying these waters, and it is an important hub for the Roman communication system.

What Paul does not yet realize is that God has boxed him in. He is in a coastal city with nowhere to go except west across the Aegean Sea to Macedonian Europe.

PHILIPPI AND IMPRISONMENT

Man of Macedonia (16:9-10)

It is at Troas that the apostle Paul has a strange vision. During the night he sees the figure “of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us’” (16:9). (Luke doesn’t explain how Paul knows the person he sees in his vision is from Macedonia.)

This is a pivotal event, for Paul now understands that he is being given a divine call to evangelize Macedonia. This province lies west, across the Aegean Sea from Troas, which makes this seaport the ideal place jumping-off point for the mission. A short boat ride across the Aegean will bring Paul to Philippi, a chief port of Macedonia.

“We got ready” (16:10)

It is at Troas that the first of the “we” sections of Acts appears (16:10-17). Luke writes: “After Paul had seen the vision, *we* got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called *us* to preach the gospel to them” (16:10). For the next several verses Luke unobtrusively inserts himself as the fourth member of the missionary team, including Paul, Silas and Timothy. This first “we” section ends in Philippi (16:17).

The next “we” section begins when Paul revisits Philippi after the third journey (20:5-15). (The other “we” sections are in 21:1-18 and 27:1-28:16.) It’s reasonable to conclude, then, that Luke stays at Philippi after Paul, Silas and Timothy make their way across Macedonia, and then go south into Achaia. Perhaps Luke is left there to build and organize the church.

Sailing to Neapolis (16:11)

The missionary foursome (Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke) sail from Troas for the Macedonian port of Neapolis (the port city of Philippi), passing by the island of Samothrace. Like many other captains, the captain anchors his vessel overnight at the island’s port. The entire crossing of 125 to 150 miles usually takes two days. However, the ship Paul is on for his later return trip from Neapolis to Troas encounters rough seas and contrary winds. Because of this, it takes the missionary company five days to cross the Aegean on that occasion (20:5).

Philippi, a chief colony (16:12)

Neapolis (the modern Kavalla) is the port city; Philippi itself lies 10 miles (16 kilometers) inland on the Via Egnatia. This important highway runs east to Byzantium and west across the Balkan peninsula to Dyrrhachium on the

Adriatic coast. Travellers reaching Dyrrhachium can then cross the Adriatic to Brundisium, on the Italian mainland. Here they can connect with another important highway, the Appian Way, which leads to Rome. Perhaps the thought crosses Paul's mind that he might preach in cities along the Via Egnatia and eventually make his way to Rome.

There's no indication that Paul preached at Neapolis. Luke hurries the missionaries to Philippi, which is a "Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia" (16:12).

Philippi had become part of the Roman Empire in 167 B.C. After the second civil war in 42 B.C., when Mark Anthony and Octavian (Augustus) defeated Brutus and Cassius (assassins of Julius Caesar), many Roman army veterans were settled at Philippi, and the city became a Roman colony.

Colonies are governed by the emperor, rather than provincial officials. Roman colonies use Roman law and have constitutions modeled on the city of Rome.

Apart from the deployment of army units throughout the Empire, the Romans strengthened their hold on the provinces by the creation of "colonies." These were towns, strategically selected, whose inhabitants were given the rights of Roman citizenship, lived under Roman law and were governed by a Roman type of constitution; they were often used as settlements for retired soldiers of the Roman army, and thus were tantamount to garrison towns. Although these colonies presented the normal architectural features of Greek civilization ...they were veritable "little Italies" transplanted overseas, with the Latin ethos and language much in evidence. (E. William Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The New Century Bible Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973], 181)

Philippi is the only city Luke *names* as a colony, though other cities appearing in Acts are also Roman colonies: Antioch of Pisidia (13:14), Iconium (14:1), Lystra (14:6), Troas (16:8) and Corinth (18:1). Philippi is an especially important center for Paul's European mission. The Philippian church generously supports him financially in his work (Philippians 4:15-18; 2 Corinthians 11:9). The church there has a "partnership in the gospel from the first day" (Philippians 1:5).

On the Sabbath (16:13)

Luke begins his account of the events in Philippi with the conversion of a woman named Lydia. Paul meets Lydia on the Sabbath day when he and

the other missionaries go “outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer” (16:13). Luke is still signaling his presence by using the pronoun “we” (16:13, 16). The river, called the Gangites, is about a mile and a half west of the city.

Paul usually goes to a local synagogue on the Sabbath, where he can preach the gospel when he is asked to speak. But in Philippi, he goes to a river, suggesting that the city does not have a synagogue, probably because it does not have many resident Jews. Jewish law requires that at least ten male heads of households should be available for regular attendance before a synagogue is formed (Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 1.6). If the minimum of ten cannot be met, a place of prayer is selected for an informal Sabbath gathering in some peaceful setting, either in a building or outdoors. Those present recite the Shema, pray, read from the prophets, and discuss their readings.

If that is the situation Paul encounters at the “place of prayer” near Philippi, then possibly only women are present (16:13). As a traveling Jewish teacher, Paul is allowed to speak some words of wisdom, offer some exhortation, and deliver a blessing. This is exactly what he does (16:13).

A woman named Lydia (16:14)

One of the women listening to Paul is Lydia, “a dealer in purple cloth” who was “from the city of Thyatira” (16:4). Thyatira is in the ancient kingdom of Lydia, which in Paul’s day is part of the province of Asia (Pliny, *Natural History* 5.10). Thyatira is renowned for its purple clothing dyes.

Some commentators suggest that since Thyatira is considered to be in the region of Lydia, Luke was speaking of the woman’s place of origin, not her real name. Some scholars propose that the real name of the “Lydian lady” is either Euodia or Syntyche of the Philippian church (Philippians 4:2). This is only a guess. We shall continue to call her “Lydia.”

Lydia may be the local representative or retailer for a guild in Thyatira, selling its wares in Macedonia. Purple dye and cloth was a luxury trade (Luke 16:19) and we can assume that Lydia is rather well-to-do. She is apparently either a single woman or widow. The fact that she owns her own home and can provide hospitality to the traveling missionaries underscores the point that she is a woman of means (16:15).

Luke calls Lydia a “worshiper of God” (16:14). Commentators suggest that the term is indefinite – she may be a pious Jew or a Gentile who worships the God of Israel as a proselyte or God-fearer.

Luke centers on Lydia as a person who is especially influenced by the gospel message. Since Luke writes some years later, perhaps Lydia is still influential in the church. Luke also identifies women as being prominent

among the believers in the next three cities in which Paul preaches – Thessalonica (17:4), Berea (17:12) and Athens (17:34). (In the secular world, too, women have a more prominent role in Macedonia than in many other provinces.)

Opened her heart (16:14-15)

Luke says of Lydia that “the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message” (16:14). Luke speaks of such “openings” elsewhere in his Gospel. The disciples’ eyes (24:33), their understanding of Scripture (24:32), and their minds (24:45) are opened by Jesus after the resurrection. Luke sees conversion as God’s action on human beings, opening their understanding to the message of salvation. In this he follows Paul, who says that people cannot believe the gospel because Satan darkens their minds (2 Corinthians 4:4). Their hearts have to be opened miraculously by the enlightening Spirit of God.

Lydia’s baptism seems to take place rather quickly after she responds to the message (16:15). But this is not unusual in Acts. She and her household (family, dependents and servants) become the first converts in Europe, so far as we know. After being baptized, Lydia invites the missionaries to stay at her house, which they do. She puts her Christianity to work, inviting the “strangers” to share in her goods (cf. Matthew 25:35).

Demon-possessed slave girl (16:16-18)

Lydia now disappears from Luke’s account, and the rest of the narrative dealing with Philippi centers around Paul’s imprisonment. The crisis begins when the missionaries are going to the place of prayer again. They encounter “a female slave who had a spirit” (16:16). The Greek here is *pneuma pythona*, or a “Pythian spirit.” Luke is describing demon possession in the common parlance.

The demon-possessed girl keeps bothering Paul and his group “for many days” (16:18). The demon inside the girl kept shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved” (16:17). The demonic spirit knows that the presence and power of God is with the missionaries. The demon’s shouting is probably done in mockery, and is intended to disrupt, not enhance, the preaching of the gospel. Luke has already told us about a similar situation Jesus encountered, where a demon keeps on shouting that Jesus is “the Holy One of God” (Luke 4:34). Jesus encountered a similar situation on several occasions (Luke 4:41; 8:28; Mark 1:24; 3:11; 5:7).

Paul finally becomes “so annoyed” that he does what Jesus did on

numerous occasions – he commands the demon to leave. Paul does it in Jesus’ name, and “at that moment the spirit left her” (16:18).

Profit also left (16:19)

When Paul casts out the demon, he creates a confrontation between himself and those who have a financial stake in the demon-possessed girl. She has “earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling” (16:16). Luke has already recounted several incidents where people were interested in financial gain. The actions of Judas (1:16-21), Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11) and Simon Magus (8:18-24) are all examples of greed being exposed by the truth of the gospel.

Now, in Philippi, God’s power used on behalf of the gospel has ruined a business making money from the superstitions of the ignorant. When Paul casts the demon out from the girl, she can no longer tell fortunes, and a business is wiped out. In exorcising the demon, Paul has also cast out the slave owners’ means of income. Luke points this out in a literary way by using the same Greek verb for both the “leaving” of the demon and the slave owners’ profit-making business.

Before the magistrates (16:19-20)

The owners do not take kindly to the closing down of their enterprise. They grab Paul and Silas and drag them before the local magistrates (16:19). Why are only Paul and Silas the targets of persecution? Paul is responsible for casting out the demon, and Silas is another leader of the missionary group. They are both Jews, and perhaps this makes them convenient scapegoats. (Timothy is half Gentile and Luke may be completely Gentile, and this may save them from trouble.)

This is only one of two occasions in which Luke reports Gentiles persecuting Christian missionaries. The other occurs in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41). Both episodes come about because the power of the gospel threatens the vested economic interests of the persecutors. Here the owners of the slave girl drag the two missionaries before the town council and demand that the magistrates prosecute Paul and Silas (16:20-21).

“Magistrates” is the first of three different civic officials Luke mentions in this chapter. Since Philippi is a Roman colony, its government is carried on independently of the provincial administration, which is in Thessalonica. Like other colonies, Philippi’s governing administration is in the hands of two chief magistrates called *duumvirs*, but they prefer the honorary title of *praetors*. The Greek equivalent would be *strategoï*, and that is the word Luke uses for them.

The second group of officials that Luke mentions are the “policemen” or “officers” (Greek, *rhabdouchoi*) of the city who serve under the magistrates (16:35). These individuals carry out the instructions of the magistrates in such law-and-order matters as flogging criminals and administering capital punishment.

The third official mentioned in this chapter is the jailer (16:23). Jailers are often retired army veterans, and their military skills are helpful in controlling inmates and preventing prison escapes.

Unlawful customs (16:20-21)

The angry owners of the slave girl frame their accusation against Paul and Silas in political terms: “These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice” (16:20-21). The accusers begin by appealing to anti-Semitic prejudice. Emperor Claudius had recently issued an edict expelling Jews from Rome because of the civil unrest they caused, which we shall consider later (18:2). No doubt, rumors and official notices of these disturbances reach the patriotic Roman colonies. The officials are therefore somewhat predisposed to think that Jews are troublemakers.

The specific charges the slave owners bring against Paul and Silas are made of two related parts. As plaintiffs sometimes do, they hide their real grievance, which was financial. They claim that Paul and Silas are causing a public disturbance – “throwing our city into an uproar.” This would be a timely “scare tactic” to frighten local officials who know about the problems Jews had recently caused in Rome.

Secondly, the plaintiffs claim that Paul and Silas – those vagabond Jews – are promoting illegal customs. Thus, they deftly counterpoise anti-Semitism with the town’s pride in being “Roman.” Paul and Silas are charged with disturbing the Pax Romana and advocating an illegal religion. Ironically, Paul will soon be accused of a similar charge, but this time by Jews (17:6-7).

Flogged and jailed (16:22-24)

The magistrates order Paul and Silas to be beaten with rods and thrown into the local jail (16:23). The jailer is ordered to “guard them carefully.” He places the two missionaries “in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks” (16:23-24). Luke carefully notes these details about their imprisonment – that they are locked in the stocks of an inner cell that was carefully guarded. He wants to prepare his readers for a miraculous event that will occur shortly.

This is not the only time Paul is beaten, and as Acts tells us, Paul is in

prison several times. Paul later looks back on his many sufferings, including those at Philippi. He says his trials included being “in prison more frequently” and having been beaten with rods on three occasions (2 Corinthians 11:23, 25).

Here, at Philippi, Paul endures both a beating and imprisonment. It is something he doesn’t forget, and he refers to the bad experience as having “suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi” (1 Thessalonians 2:2).

Escape from prison (16:25-29)

Luke now turns to describe the miraculous occurrences that happened while Paul and Silas are in prison, and the consequences that follow. He picks up the account with the imprisoned Paul and Silas praying and singing hymns at midnight (16:25). Luke doesn’t say what the two missionaries were praying about. However, since they are singing, we can assume they are expressing joy. Luke wants his readers to know that Jesus’ disciples are people who turn to prayer in times of crisis (1:14; 2:42, 47; 4:23-31; 6:4; 7:60; 9:11; 10:2, 9; 12:12; 13:2-3). Paul and Silas are like Peter and John, who after being beaten, rejoice “because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name” (5:41).

Around midnight, God intervenes by shaking the prison by means of an earthquake. The prison doors fly open, the prisoners’ chains are opened, and the jailer is awakened. To his horror, he sees the prison doors standing open. Thinking the prisoners have escaped, he is about to commit suicide. (In Roman law, a guard who allows his prisoner to escape can suffer the same penalty as the prisoner would have suffered.)

At this point, Luke’s readers may be concerned that the jailer will face dire consequences. Luke has already told us that when Peter escaped from prison, Herod “cross-examined the guards and ordered that they be executed” (12:19).

On this occasion, however, none of the prisoners escape. Paul and Silas are still in the jail. When Paul perceives that the jailer is about to kill himself, Paul shouts, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!” (16:28).

One might wonder why the other prisoners, whose chains have fallen off, don’t escape through the open doors. Perhaps they are paralyzed with fear by the supernatural power that seems to be with Paul and Silas. The prisoners have been listening to the two missionaries singing to their God, and may assume that the earthquake is an answer to their prayers. But that part of the story is not pertinent to Luke’s account, and he simply doesn’t give us the details.

“What must I do to be saved?” (16:30-32)

More important, from Luke’s perspective, is that the jailer rushes into the cell and falls down before Paul and Silas, in great fear. “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” he cries out (16:30).

It’s not clear what the jailer’s understanding of “being saved” is. He wants to be rescued from something, but from what? Does he fear some kind of retribution from these two “magicians”? (The jailer has probably heard about the exorcism of the demon from the slave girl.) Perhaps he heard something of the gospel being preached in town. Aspects of the message of salvation may have been conveyed to the jailer in the prayers and songs of the imprisoned missionaries.

In any case, he is soon educated as to what it means to be saved. Paul answers the jailer’s question by saying, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household” (16:31). Of course, there is more to being saved than simply uttering the words, “I believe in Jesus.” Jesus himself said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

“Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” is a summary confession of the Christian faith. “Believing on the Lord” is Luke’s shorthand statement for the faith as a whole. He has already used it several times (5:14; 9:42; 11:17).

Paul summarizes the gospel to the church in Rome in the same way: “If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9). This confessional summary implies that human works do not earn salvation. Since salvation comes through Jesus Christ (4:12), one must believe in him as Savior in order to experience him *as* salvation.

But faith in Jesus needs to be explained. Paul does this for the jailer and his family. The two missionaries speak “the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house” (16:32). No doubt they explain the gospel of salvation in terms the jailer and his household can understand. They also probably discuss something of what it means to have a new life in Christ. Further instruction will come later within a church of believers organized in Philippi.

Family baptized (16:33-34)

The jailer takes Paul and Silas into his quarters and washes their wounds. Then, he and his family are baptized – as in the case of Cornelius. The jailer

is then “filled with joy because he had come to believe in God – he and his whole household” (16:34). Since Luke is speaking from hindsight – and perhaps he even served as pastor for these people – he knows that their conversion is real.

The gift offered to the jailer is also offered to his whole household. The New Testament takes the unity of the family seriously, and when salvation is offered to the head of the household, it is as a matter of course made available to the rest of the family group (including dependents and servants) as well (cf. 16:15). It is, however, offered to them on the same terms: they too have to hear the Word (16:31), believe and be baptized; the jailer’s own faith does not cover them. (I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980], 273)

Luke describes the conversion of the jailer in terms of believing in God. As a pagan Gentile, the jailer would be taught about the one true God. Paul has already told him that a person has to believe in Jesus to be saved. To believe in the one true God is to believe in Christ; to believe in Christ is to believe in God. As Jesus said, “Whoever believes in me does not believe in me only, but in the one who sent me” (John 12:44).

Luke, in passing, gives two practical examples of the jailer’s new-found faith. He tends the prisoners’ wounds and brings them into his own house and feeds them. It’s doubtful that an army veteran would have shown compassion to prisoners in his prior life. We should also note that Paul has no hesitation at eating with Gentiles, something that would be impossible for a devout Jew to do.

“We are Romans” (16:35-38)

After the meal, Paul and Silas voluntarily return to their prison cell. The next morning the magistrates send the police officers to the prison with instructions to release the two missionaries. Paul and Silas have paid the penalty for their suspected disturbance of the peace by being beaten and imprisoned overnight. Now they can be freed, and perhaps commanded to leave town.

But Paul surprises the officers by saying, “They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out” (16:37).

When the magistrates learn that Paul and Silas are Roman citizens, they

are alarmed (16:38). They come to the prison, escort the missionaries outside, and plead with them to leave the city peacefully. If any officials appreciate the value of Roman citizenship, it would be the magistrates of a Roman colony. The Valerian and Porcian laws, issued in bygone days, said a citizen could travel anywhere within Roman territory under the protection of Rome. It is illegal to punish or imprison a Roman citizen who appeals for a trial at Rome, rather than under local authorities.

By the time of this incident at Philippi, A.N. Sherwin-White points out, the original laws regarding the rights of the arrested had been modified. A Roman citizen might under some circumstances be chained or beaten at the orders of a Roman magistrate (*Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, page 73). However, under no circumstances can any punishment be given without a trial. This is the issue Paul brings up. He and Silas were beaten and imprisoned without first being tried (16:37).

We have little evidence of how this exercise of the rights of a citizen is normally made. Neither are we certain how an individual can support his claim of Roman citizenship on the spot. In the case of Paul, he is probably registered as a citizen in the provincial records of Tarsus, and a copy of the registration can be obtained, but that could take months. And we have no evidence that Paul is carrying such a document with him.

Much of our information on a Roman citizen's rights regarding trial and appeal actually comes from the book of Acts itself. These matters are touched on in the following verses: 16:37-39; 22:25-29; 25:9-12; 26:32; 27:1; 28:16.

One might wonder why Paul and Silas don't appeal to their Roman citizenship *before* they are beaten and imprisoned. Perhaps they do, but in the heat of the moment no one pays any attention to them. Cicero cites a case in which a prisoner is beaten even as he shouts that he is a Roman citizen (*In Verrem* 5.62). At a later time in Jerusalem, Paul will claim his citizenship rights before being beaten (22:25). But in that case he is about to be scourged, which is a more deadly form of beating than that administered by the officers' rods.

Paul insists on a public apology from the magistrates of Philippi. It serves notice that the missionaries had been wrongly disgraced, which is not so important for Paul, but very helpful for the believers who remain in the city. They will not stand for any arbitrary bad treatment – either here or elsewhere in the empire.

“Leave the city” (16:39-40)

Paul and Silas do not leave the city immediately, even though they were requested to. This, too, makes a point with the authorities. Yes, Paul will

leave, but he will not scurry out of town in fear as though he had been guilty of a crime. The missionaries return to Lydia's home. There they meet with the believers and encourage them. After this, they leave with Timothy and travel westward toward Thessalonica. Luke may stay in Philippi. This is indicated by the fact that the "we" section ends. It does not begin again until Luke and the other missionaries sail from Philippi several years later (20:5).

During the interim, Luke may be the pastor for the small church in Philippi, which perhaps meets at Lydia's house. The congregation presumably begins to grow in size, organization and faith. Paul later writes the church a letter, commending it for its continuing concern for him (Philippians 2:25-30; 4:10-19).

THESSALONICA AND PERSECUTION

On to Thessalonica (17:1)

After Paul, Silas and Timothy leave Philippi, they travel west through the next two towns – Amphipolis and Apollonia. If any missionary work occurs there, Luke has no interest in telling his readers about it. Luke simply says that Paul and his company go through these towns. Amphipolis is about 33 miles (53 kilometers) southwest of Philippi, along the Via Egnatia. Apollonia is 27 miles (43 kilometers) west-southwest of Amphipolis.

Luke is hurrying the missionary group to Thessalonica, about 35 miles (56 kilometers) west of Apollonia. Each town is about a horseback day’s journey from the next. Thessalonica (modern Salonika) is the capital of the province of Macedonia, and its largest and most prosperous city. Thessalonica is a large city of perhaps 200,000 people. It has a good location on the Thermaic Gulf. The Via Egnatia is the main street of Thessalonica, and it is still a major thoroughfare of Salonika.

In Luke’s day, Thessalonica is an important link between the rich Macedonian agricultural interior and land and sea trade routes. Paul seems to view Thessalonica as a strategic center from which to preach the gospel in the Balkan peninsula. Paul knows that he does not have to go to all these areas – once he begins a church in one city, the believers themselves will begin spreading the good news to nearby areas. Perhaps that is why Paul just passes through Amphipolis and Apollonia – he knows they will be evangelized from the churches in Philippi and Thessalonica. Paul can later write to the church, saying, “The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere” (1 Thessalonians 1:8).

Paul teaches in the largest cities of the Roman world – Antioch, Thessalonica, Corinth, Ephesus and Rome. These cities are seaports and on busy trade routes. Churches established in these cities provide a jumping-off place from which nearby towns and villages in the hinterland will be evangelized.

As his custom was (17:2)

When Paul comes to Thessalonica, he goes into the synagogue “as was his custom” and for “three Sabbath days he reasoned with them [the Jews] from the Scriptures” (17:2). Paul uses a simple strategy in spreading the gospel of God. When he arrives in a new city, he almost always visits a local synagogue. This becomes his regular practice (13:14, 44; 14:1; 16:13, 16; 18:4; 19:8).

A Sabbath in a synagogue is a wonderful teaching opportunity for Paul. Here Jews and devout Gentiles gather to read and interpret the Scriptures – the Old Testament in Greek translation. In such a setting, Paul finds people who already know the true God. They share Israel’s hope for a Messiah and the kingdom of God.

At Thessalonica, Paul is able to speak in the synagogue during three Sabbaths. This is probably only the beginning of a longer campaign in Thessalonica. We learn from Paul’s letter to the Philippian church that he receives financial aid from Philippi on several occasions (4:16). But he is also supporting himself even while he is preaching the gospel in the city (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-8). This implies that Paul is in the city for some time.

It appears that most of the converts in Thessalonica were originally pagans, not God-fearers who attended the synagogue (1 Thessalonians 1:9). This implies that Paul is teaching pagan Gentiles directly, probably after his three sessions in the synagogue. Most likely, the three weeks in the synagogue are only the beginning of Paul’s work in Thessalonica. Perhaps the synagogue kicked him out after those first three weeks, and he then teaches the Gentiles directly, but Luke doesn’t describe this part of Paul’s mission in Thessalonica.

Reasoning from the Scriptures (17:2-4)

In the synagogue, Paul is “explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead” (17:3). Paul tries to be methodical in his teaching. He “reasons,” “explains,” “proves,” and “persuades” his hearers. What probably surprises, and angers the Jews is Paul’s claim that the Messiah “had to suffer” (17:3). Preaching a suffering Savior who died is not a popular message for most Jews, since they are looking for a heroic Messiah (1 Corinthians 1:22-23).

Paul argues that Jesus fulfills the conditions for a suffering Messiah – which the Scriptures speak of. Thus, he *is* that Messiah. But to the Jews, Jesus is a criminal and insurrectionist who was executed by the Romans. It’s not surprising that Paul probably lasts only three weeks in the synagogue before being ejected as a heretic, or fool.

In its simplest form, this is the essence of the gospel Paul preaches from the Hebrew Scriptures. He writes later of this “good news”: “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Some of the Jews believe this gospel and join Paul and Silas. As well, so do a number of God-fearing Gentiles who attend the synagogue and a few

“prominent women” (17:4). These all become disciples. Once Paul is barred from the synagogue, he turns to teaching the pagan Gentiles. He apparently receives a much more favorable response from them, as Thessalonians implies. It is helpful to read Paul’s two letters to the Thessalonians in connection with this section of Acts. The epistles flesh out Luke’s account of Paul’s stay in the city and put a very human face on his relationship with the converts there.

Jews accuse Paul and Silas (17:5-9)

Paul’s success with the Gentiles both within and especially outside the synagogue ignite the Jews’ jealousy (17:5). Not only is Paul the renegade rabbi stealing converts from their private preserve, he is having unprecedented success in making proselytes from the Gentile community at large. The unbelieving Jews decide it is time to stop Paul’s evangelizing activities. So they “rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city” (17:5). The mob is composed of criminal types who hang around the public square with nothing to do but cause trouble. The Jews probably pay them to start a riot. Apparently, their goal is to implicate Paul and Silas in a civil disturbance.

The Jews assume the missionaries are in the home of a convert named Jason. They storm the house but find only Jason and some other believers. (Jason’s home probably serves as a house church, as did Lydia’s.) Some connect this Jason with the individual mentioned along with Luke (Lucius) and Sosipater (16:21) in the letter to the Romans. However, Jason is a common name and any connection can only be speculative.

The Jews apparently hope to bring Paul before the popular assembly of citizens, the Greek *demos* (17:5). The translation of the NIV, “crowd,” is unfortunate. (See its footnote or marginal reference, “assembly of the people.”) Failing to find Paul and Silas, the Jews drag Jason and some other believers before the city officials, or politarchs. These are the magistrates of Thessalonica, and the title is known from a number of inscriptions.

The Jews bring a charge of disturbing the Pax Romana against Paul and Silas. They claim, “These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here” (17:6). (The traditional KJV translation, “turned the world upside down,” although memorable, gives an improper nuance to the Greek.) The Jews don’t have Paul and Silas in hand, so they accuse Jason of being part of the conspiracy by allowing the insurrectionists to use his home as a safe house. The Jews also accuse the missionaries of “defying Caesar’s decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus” (17:7). Naturally,

charges of insurrection, subverting the empire, and a plot against Caesar are extremely serious. If they hold up, the missionaries could be executed.

The magistrates of Thessalonica apparently know of the recent troubles in the Jewish community at Rome. These are described by the Roman biographer and historian Suetonius (born c. A.D. 70) as the “constant riots at the instigation of Chrestus” (*Life of Claudius* 25.4). The continuing tumult forces Emperor Claudius to issue his edict around A.D. 49-50, which tries to expel all the Jews from the city. The Jews of Thessalonica are probably playing on these fears, intimating that similar riots might erupt in their city.

This may have had something to do with the accusation that the missionaries are “defying Caesar’s decrees” (17:7). Perhaps the decrees had to do with prohibitions against public assemblies (including religious ones) or the fomenting of riots – meant to prevent the sorts of disturbances that occurred at Rome. The Jews also accuse the missionaries of saying there is another king, Jesus, instead of Caesar. Perhaps the decrees in question contain oaths of loyalty to Caesar. Preaching Jesus as a rival emperor would violate such regulations.

Of course, the Jews are twisting the meaning of the confession that declared Jesus to be the Messiah and Savior. The Jews are putting a politically inflammatory twist on what is a personal and spiritual confession. (Although Jesus is not a king of this world, the gospel *does* call people to give greater allegiance to Jesus than to Caesar.) The Thessalonian politarchs are “thrown into turmoil” when the Jews make these accusations (17:8). They don’t want riots in their city, certainly not like the ones at Rome. The politarchs will be held accountable if they allow the violation of any imperial decrees.

But it seems that the magistrates see through the Jews’ plot and recognize the accusations as erroneous. Perhaps the officials recognize the rioters as the ne’er-do-wells of the town square. What’s more, Paul and Silas, supposedly the leaders of the riot, are nowhere to be found.

To Berea by night (17:10-15)

The Jews probably continue to look for Paul, so as soon as nightfall comes, the disciples spirit him out of the city and send him to Berea. Once again, Paul is forced to make a hasty and humiliating departure, as he did from Damascus (9:23-25), Jerusalem (9:30), Antioch of Pisidia (13:50-51) and Lystra (14:20).

Berea (modern Verria) is about 50 miles (81 kilometers) west-southwest of Thessalonica. It takes Paul about three days to reach the town. Berea is considered an out-of-the-way place, of little historical or political importance.

Paul again goes into the synagogue to preach, but he is given an unusually warm reception by the Jews. Luke presents the Berean Jews as openminded individuals. “The Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica,” he writes, “for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (17:11).

The Berean Jews apparently meet with Paul every day (not just on the Sabbath) to examine the Scriptures. Luke implies that they are zealous to understand the truth. If the Jews in Thessalonica took the time to search for and evaluate the promises of the Hebrew Scriptures, they too would discover that Paul was speaking the truth.

Many Jews in Berea believe the gospel, as do some prominent Gentile men and women (18:12). Among the believers is Sopater son of Pyrrhus, who is identified by Luke as being from Berea (20:4). Sopater might be the same person as the Sosipater of Romans 16:21, but there is no way to be sure.

Luke emphasizes that the converted Gentiles are “prominent,” perhaps in social standing. (One can almost catch a purposeful contrast here. The gospel can attract good people, while the Jews must rely on the rabble and riff-raff to foment a fake riot.) However, the antagonistic Jews of Thessalonica learn that Paul is teaching in Berea. They send some agents to stir up the crowds there. The Berean disciples take immediate action and send Paul “to the coast,” down to the sea (17:14). It’s not clear whether his friends put him on a ship bound for Piraeus, the port of Athens, or escort him by land to Athens. A sea journey would make more sense; otherwise Paul would have to travel a long distance over rough roads to get to Athens.

Silas and Timothy remain in Berea, but Paul gives instructions with the returning Bereans that they should rejoin him as soon as possible (17:15). They apparently rejoin him at Athens later, although Luke doesn’t tell us when (1 Thessalonians 3:1). Paul sends Timothy back to Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 3:2). Silas returns to Macedonia (perhaps Philippi), and then with Timothy rejoins Paul in Corinth (18:5).

Commentators speculate that Paul has not really planned to teach in Athens. Perhaps he would rather follow the Via Egnatia across the Balkan peninsula to Dyrrhachium on the Adriatic, and then cross the sea to Italy – and go to Rome. It may be that political considerations in Macedonia make it impossible for him to continue west. And because of Claudius’ edict expelling Jews from Rome, it is not a good time to visit the city. Whatever his intentions, it’s clear that Paul comes to Athens mainly to escape persecution.

PAUL PREACHES IN ATHENS

Paul at Athens (17:16)

Athens has a 1,000 year history of glory when Paul enters its gates. The city is famous as the founder of democracy. It is a literary, artistic and philosophical center. Aeschylus, Epicurus, Euripides, Plato, Socrates, Sophocles, Thucydides and Zeno are part of its heritage.

The Romans conquered Athens in 146 B.C., but they are so impressed with Greek learning that they foster Athens' continuing dominance in cultural and intellectual matters. Athens continues to function as a free city. She lost her great wealth and pre-eminent position long before Paul teaches there. Athens, while still a great university town, has to live off its history, its reputation, its ancient glory. Its population during Paul's days is only 10,000.

Teaching in the agora (17:16-17)

Paul is in the midst of an intellectual city, proud of its pagan heritage. Luke tells us that while Paul is waiting for Silas and Timothy, "he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (17:16). Paul becomes emotionally troubled by the people's ignorance of the true God. The Athens of Paul's day is a city of many gods. Ancient historians such as Livy (*History of Rome* 45:27) and Pausanias (*Description of Greece* 1, 14, 1-1, 15, 7) attest to the fact that Athens is filled with religious statues.

"It was said that there were more statues of the gods in Athens than in all the rest of Greece put together and that in Athens it was easier to meet a god than a man" (William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, revised edition, The Daily Study Bible Series [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976], page 130).

Paul continues his usual practice of teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath day, where he reasons with Jews and God-fearing Greeks (17:16). But he also pursues a parallel strategy of going to the Gentiles on weekdays. Paul reasons "in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there" (17:17). The marketplace is the *agora*, west of the Acropolis. It is the center of Athenian social life, and serves as its forum and a place where goods are bought and sold. Paul, like certain philosophers were known to do, challenges the crowds with the gospel message.

Stoics and Epicureans (17:18)

Paul soon finds himself confronted by Epicurean and Stoic philosophers who apparently teach in the *agora* as well. Athens is a home base for these rival schools of philosophy.

Epicurus (341-270 B.C.) said that pleasure is the chief goal of life.

“Pleasure,” in his view, is the enjoyment of life that comes with freedom from pain, distressing emotions, superstitions, fears, and anxiety about death. To him the greatest pleasure is the absence of pain, suffering and fear. Today, epicureanism is sometimes confused with hedonism, indulging in physical pleasures without restraint. But that is not what the Epicureans teach in Paul’s day. While they consider pleasure the highest good, it is more of an intellectual detachment from the cares of this life than attachment to physical desire. They know that physical desires can lead to addiction and unhappiness; one of the “pleasures” they seek is simply friendship.

Epicurus and those who followed him do not deny the existence of the gods, but they say the notions held by the multitudes are wrong. The Epicureans argue that the gods are “far off,” with little or no interest in the ordinary lives of people. Epicureans have little motivation to seek after God or to fear his judgments.

The Stoic school of philosophy was founded by Zeno (340-265 B.C.), from Citium in Cyprus. Stoics emphasize human rational abilities, individual self-sufficiency, moral worth and duty. They stress reason and logic as principles that should govern the lives of people. The gods of popular mythology are said to be expressions of this universal Reason. The Stoics are pantheists in that they think of the divine as a kind of “world-soul.”

This babbler (17:18)

It’s clear why the Epicureans and Stoics disagree with the gospel of salvation Paul is teaching in the *agora*. Thoughtful people rely on these two philosophies to explain the nature of human existence to help them cope with a world of suffering. These two philosophies try to explain the plight of humanity apart from any revelation of God’s purpose. In that sense, the gospel message is a great challenge to them. It brings truth and light regarding humanity’s purpose, and calls into question the usefulness of these philosophies.

To believers in Epicureanism and Stoicism, Paul’s “philosophy” sounds alien and foolish – perhaps even dangerous. It’s not strange, then, that upon hearing Paul speak, some of these philosophers say, “What is this babbler trying to say?” (17:18). The Greek word for “babblers” is *spermologos*. The word originally described the action of birds picking up grain. It was then applied to scrap collectors searching for junk. Finally, it came to refer to people who sell the ideas of other people without understanding them. The word *spermologos* describes teachers who have only bits and pieces of learning, but who are trying to sound learned. Or it might refer to busybodies or gossips.

Paul is contemptuously dismissed by the Stoics and Epicureans as

ignorant (1 Corinthians 2:23). Others are less derisive but more perplexed, saying, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods” (17:18). They say this because Paul is “preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection” (17:18). The philosophers seem to misunderstand what he is talking about – the “foreign gods” may refer to a new god (Jesus) and a goddess (Resurrection, or *anastasis* in Greek). Perhaps these philosophers think that Paul wants to have these “new” deities added to the Athenian pantheon.

To the Areopagus (17:19)

The suspicious philosophers take Paul to a session of the Areopagus. It is the city council of Athens, and in Roman times it is still the chief judicial body of the city. The court has perhaps 30 members, and is considered a select body. Interestingly, the word “Areopagus” survives today as the title of the Greek Supreme Court.

The council probably meets on the 377-foot hill called the Areopagus, or the Hill of Ares or Mars. (Ares, the Greek god of war, was equated with the Roman god Mars.) The hill is just northwest of the Acropolis. The council may meet at the Stoa Basileios, a columned building in the *agora*, the city center.

The Athenian Areopagus is the town council responsible for culture, education and religion. It also deals with cases of homicide and has oversight of public morals. The Areopagus evaluates the competence of visiting lecturers to speak in their city.

It’s not altogether clear whether the philosophers simply ask Paul to go before the Areopagus or whether they made a citizen’s arrest and force him to go. The way Luke presents the proceeding it appears to be more of a curious inquiry rather than a formal hearing, and much less a trial. Since Luke doesn’t imply the existence of a legal proceeding, it appears that Paul is asked to present his views before a normal session of the Areopagus. But it may be something of a command performance, not to be refused.

Perhaps we can envision the Areopagus meeting in open session like a city council. It hears reports from citizens regarding issues of vital interest to the community. After all, Luke does say that “the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas” (17:21). The Areopagus probably reflects this on-going talk show, and they would be curious to hear Paul’s “new ideas,” even if they seemed strange and far-fetched.

Johannes Munck is probably right when he says, “Curiosity about his teaching, not an accusation made against him, brought Paul and his audience to the Areopagus” (*The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Bible [New York:

Doubleday, 1967], 169). Nevertheless, while this is probably not a judicial hearing, there is an implied threat in being brought before the council.

Josephus gives several examples of Athenians being punished for offending the gods of Athens (*Against Apion* 2.262-269). Among those recently executed, says Josephus, is “a certain priestess, because she was accused by somebody that she initiated people into the worship of strange gods” (2.267). Even under the best of circumstances, an offer to present one’s views about “strange gods” before the council is not to be taken lightly.

Perhaps we should see Paul’s “defense” before the Areopagus as being a kind of preliminary hearing to determine whether charges are to be filed. How he fares before this “grand jury” may determine his fate.

“You are very religious” (17:20-22)

Paul now stands before the Areopagus and the council asks him to speak. “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?” the Areopagus asks, “You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean” (17:20).

What Paul does in his speech is to point out the weaknesses of popular idolatry. But he does this by relying on the insights of Greek philosophers to show that some pagans have an understanding of God that contradicts idolatry. However, Paul then points out that the philosophers don’t go far enough. Here Paul introduces a new understanding of God and his purpose, and calls on his listeners to abandon their ignorance, and to repent.

Paul immediately takes the side of his listeners by saying, “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious” (17:22). Other people in antiquity are also impressed by the devoutness of the Athenians (Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 1.17.1; Strabo, *Geography* 9.1.16; Livy, *History* 45.27). Josephus says the Athenians are considered to be “the most religious” (*Against Apion* 2.130).

Paul doesn’t accuse the Athenians of idolatry or any sin, but acknowledges their interest in the divine. Paul builds on their piety, he doesn’t condemn it. Privately, of course, he is very distressed by the fact that their worship is directed toward idols (17:16). The word for “religious” used here is ambiguous. It can mean either “superstitious” or “devout.”

“To an unknown god” (17:23)

Paul next refers to an ignorance of the divine that the Athenians themselves admit. He says, “As I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscriptions: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you” (17:23).

We should notice a few things about the way Paul is approaching his “defense” before the Areopagus. First, he is not yet directly challenging their idolatry. Since the Athenians admit that they don’t know who or what this God is (he is “unknown”), they are in no position to deny his nature as Paul explains it. Also, Paul is not attacking their gods and leaving himself open to a charge of atheism. The God he is speaking of is a “new” one.

Second, Paul does not use anything from the Jewish Scriptures in his speech. Paul is not trying to prove that Jesus is the Messiah – that would be meaningless for a council whose members were probably followers of the major philosophies of the day.

Third, this is an excellent example of Paul’s willingness to “become all things to all people” in order to preach the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:22). To those like the pagan Athenian council members – “those not having the law” – Paul “became like one not having the law” to win them over to Christ (verse 21). The speech is a wonderful specimen of Paul’s approach to preaching to pagan Gentiles. The other example, of which Luke gave us a much briefer summary, we have already seen (in 14:15-17).

As to the actual altar, “To an Unknown God,” we have no direct evidence. However, we know from ancient writers that the Athenians have a penchant for setting up altars to unknown deities. Pausanias, the Greek traveler and geographer who lives around A.D. 150, mentions that there are “altars of gods both named and unknown” near Athens (*Description of Greece* 1.1.4).

God made the world (17:24)

Paul’s next point is to establish that “the God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth” (17:24). Paul is telling the Athenians that God is Creator – the maker of all things, not one who can be created by human works. God is not detached from his creation, and the world did not come to exist by chance, but by design. Paul points out that God guides human history. Here he contradicts the beliefs of some philosophers. He appeals to the Athenians’ experience of the creation around them as something that reveals God.

It is said that there are two books about God – the Bible and nature itself. The latter is said to be the basis of a “natural theology,” and that is where Paul begins to explain who God is to these pagans.

In reasoning from the natural world toward faith in God, Luke’s Paul borders upon a “natural theology” – our observation of the natural world and its wonders as a forerunner of faith. How can people look up at the stars or ponder the mysteries of the world without imagining a real, though still unknown, divine force behind it all?

(William H. Willimon, *Acts* [Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1988], 143)

Jews already believe in the one true God, and in Scripture, so when Paul speaks to Jews, he begins with “revealed theology” – that is, the statements of Moses, David and the prophets. He tries to convince them that Jesus fulfilled the *Scriptural* requirements of the Messiah (Luke 24:27).

Of course, what Paul says about God as Creator is a major focus of Scripture as well (Isaiah 40:28; 42:5; 45:12). The Hebrew Scriptures provided plenty of ammunition to proclaim God’s sovereignty through the creation. But to persuade this audience in Athens, he cites examples and writings that are accepted by Greek philosophers. When the gospel is presented to pagans it is necessary to first establish who the one true God is. Paul claims that this God’s existence can be glimpsed by rightly understanding the creation (Romans 1:19-22).

The Athenians would first have to turn to God from idols before they can appreciate his saving work in Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:9). That is what Paul is driving at here, and the better part of his speech continues to be concerned with knowing God.

Does not live in temples (17:24-25)

The true God, said Paul, “does not live in temples built by human hands” (17:24). Stephen made the same statement in a Jewish context (7:48-50). Subtly, both the Jewish temple and pagan temples are placed in the same category. Neither in Jerusalem’s holy place – nor in any other holy place – will people truly find and worship God. Bruce writes, “If even the shrine at Jerusalem, erected for the worship of the true God, could not contain him, how much less the splendid shrines on the Athenian Acropolis, dedicated as they were to divinities that had no real existence!” (336)

But even here, Paul is not in conflict with the philosophers of the Areopagus. Stoic philosophers accept the premise that God (or the gods) is bigger than the temple. Bruce quotes a fragment from Euripides, who says, “What house built by craftsmen could enclose the form divine within enfolding walls?” (ibid.).

Paul continues by saying that “God is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else” (17:25). God needs nothing from us. It is we who need everything from God – even life and breath. This is something that even many pagans understand, so Paul is still on common ground here. The principle that God is self-sufficient is also basic Hebrew biblical theology

(Psalm 50:7-15; 1 Chronicles 29:14). So we can see that as Paul speaks, he is continuing to run on parallel tracks between the Scriptures and the thoughts of the philosophers.

From one man made nations (17:26)

Paul next appeals to the idea that our common humanity has a single source, by which he means the one true God. “From one man he [God] made all the nations,” said Paul, “...he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands” (17:26). Presumably, Paul is alluding to the Genesis story of Adam as the first human (1 Corinthians 15:45) and the scattering during the building of the tower of Babel. Paul is veering a bit from common pagan speculation and might not be on the same page as the Areopagus philosophers.

They might ask, Who was that man? Didn’t the Athenians spring from the sacred ground of Attica? Is Paul implying that God determined Athens’ prominence in the world, and now its relative insignificance as well?

Paul may be attacking the smugness of the Athenians, who still think of themselves as a great cultural force in the world. He is saying that people shouldn’t think of themselves as racially superior. Their worldly station depends on God’s will, as Nebuchadnezzar discovered (Daniel 4:32).

He is not far from us (17:27)

Paul insists that God has a purpose in allowing the rise and fall of nations, and their geographical placement. “God did this so that they would seek him,” says Paul, “and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us” (17:27). Here again, Paul can be interpreted in two ways. The philosophers, Stoics for example, might think Paul is referring to the philosophical search for the truth.

What Paul means is that people should respond to the longing in their inner being and search for the one true God (Psalm 14:2; Proverbs 8:17; Isaiah 55:6-7; Jeremiah 29:13). The Hebrew Scriptures promise that, “The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth” (Psalm 145:18). Paul is saying, with the prophets, that God is nearby, not far away (Jeremiah 23:23) – and he wants to be discovered.

In him we live and move (17:28)

Paul wants to bolster his point that there is a relationship between humanity and God – that God wants to be sought and found in a particular way. Paul does this by quoting some pagan poet-philosophers. Paul says: “‘For in him [God] we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring’” (17:28). There is some difficulty

in knowing whether Paul is quoting the phrase “in him we live and move and have our being.” However, its equivalent is found in an ancient poem, *Cretica*, attributed to the Cretan poet Epimenides, who lived around 600 B.C. In this poem, Minos says this about Zeus:

They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high one –
The Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, idle bellies!
But thou art not dead; thou livest and abidest for ever,
For in thee we live and move and have our being.

The phrase, “We are his offspring,” is found in more than one poet. (Paul’s use of the plural “poets” may refer to this fact.) It is in a work by the Cilician poet (Paul is from Tarsus in Cilicia) Aratus (c. 315-240 B.C.), the *Phainomena*. The poem praises Zeus, and opens with these words:

Let us begin with Zeus. Never, O men, let us leave him
unmentioned. All the ways are full of Zeus, and all the market-places
of human beings. The sea is full of him; so are the harbors. In every
way we have all to do with Zeus, *for we are truly his offspring.*

The phrase is also part of a poem by Cleanthes (331-233 B.C.), *Hymn to Zeus*, in a slightly different form. The first few lines are:

O God most glorious, called by many a name,
Nature’s great King, through endless years the same;
Omnipotence, who by thy just decree
Controllest all, hail, Zeus, for unto thee
Behooves thy creatures in all lands to call.
We are thy children, we alone of all. . .

Paul has no problem in quoting material or ideas that were produced by pagans in honor of gods such as Zeus. He takes the principle – in this case, thoughts about the nature of God and humanity’s relationship to him – and applies it to the one true God.

Paul’s speech, as we shall see at its end, is thoroughly gospel-oriented and biblical in content. He simply cites pagan authorities in the same way he cites the giants of Scripture, such as Moses or David, to prove his point about God’s purpose in Jesus.

Paul doesn’t condemn the poets for groping after some understanding of God in a darkened world. He recognizes the common longing of humanity to connect with God. What Paul does in this speech is begin with the knowledge the philosophers and poets have. He uses it to help his hearers leap over their ignorance, and into the truth of God’s purpose in Christ.

Paul's allusions to pagan worship and the thoughts of the philosophers are simple points of contact with his hearers. What the poets say about Zeus may have been correct, but only when applied to the one true God. In his speech, Paul seeks to make the proper shift.

God is not like the idol (17:29-30)

Paul now makes his concluding remarks about idolatry: "Since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone" (17:29). Paul is hitting closer to home now. Even the highly educated officials of the Areopagus must have some attachment to the gods, though perhaps not in the same way as the masses.

Paul next labels idolatry for what it is: "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (17:30). Peter applied this same theme of excused ignorance to the Jews who rejected Jesus (3:17).

Paul notes that God patiently tolerated human ignorance in ages past (Romans 3:25). In Lystra, Paul says that God "let all nations go their own way" (14:16). While God "overlooks" sin, there is also retribution for people who suppress the truth about his eternal power and divine nature – he lets sin have its natural results (Romans 1:18-32).

But times have changed; a new beginning in God's dealing with the human race has begun. Forgiveness for sin and intimate contact with God through the Holy Spirit is possible. Repentance and acceptance of Jesus as Savior is commanded. The days of groping in the dark and spiritual ignorance are over. The day of repentance is here and the time of judgment is coming.

Paul now warns the Areopagus that his speech is not idle philosophical speculation. His call to repentance is serious because God "has set a day when he will judge the world with justice" (17:31). (The quote is from Psalm 96:13.) The New Testament makes clear in many places that a "day of judgment" is coming. The offer of salvation in Christ is counterpoised with the warning of judgment for those who reject him. (See the following scriptures where the judgment is discussed: Luke 10:12-15; 12:42-48; Romans 2:5-11, 16; 1 Corinthians 1:7-8; 1 Thessalonians 5:2-4; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-10; 2 Peter 3:10-13.)

Proof of resurrection (17:31)

Paul is near the end of his speech. He focuses on Christ, him crucified and resurrected. Paul insists that God will judge the world by "the man he has appointed" (17:31) – referring to Jesus, but not mentioning his name. Jesus has been given all power in heaven and earth. This reality is proven, insists Paul, in the fact that God raised him from the dead (17:31). As Paul

tells the Romans, Jesus “was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead” (1:4).

Paul has come a long way from his introduction, arriving at the essence of the gospel – the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the words of William Barclay, “It is no unknown God but a Risen Christ with whom we have to deal” (132).

Up to this point, Paul has been attempting to demonstrate God’s existence, sovereignty and purpose by the “around” – by things that can be seen. The philosophers might argue about the meaning of nature, but they certainly cannot argue against the fact of its existence. Now, Paul asserts that a human being – Jesus – has been raised from the dead. He is insisting on something contrary to the philosophers’ observation of the way the world works. It is also contrary to the views of the popular philosophies of the day.

“In mentioning the resurrection, Paul risks rejection by his audience. They may agree to a created world and to our common humanity, but there is no possible ‘natural theology’ evidence for an assertion of the resurrection” (Willimon, 144).

Some sneer (17:32-34)

Luke describes the generally negative reaction to Paul’s teaching: “When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on this subject’” (17:32). Greeks believe in the immortality of the soul, but the idea of a person being *bodily* resurrected from death seems absurd. As it turns out, the resurrection as well as the cross seems like foolishness to the leaders of Athens.

In the later part of his speech, Paul has moved from repentance to judgment to the resurrection of Jesus to the return of Christ. Most of his hearers got lost along the way.

The idea of resurrection of dead people was uncongenial to the minds of most of Paul’s Athenian hearers....they would have endorsed the sentiments of the god Apollo, expressed on the occasion when that very court of the Areopagus was founded by the city’s patron goddess Athena: “Once a man dies and the earth drinks up his blood, there is *no resurrection*.” (Bruce, 343)

Part of the Athenian leaders reject Paul’s teaching completely – and with open ridicule. Others, perhaps more curious, speak of hearing his theories at a later date. More than likely, however, they are merely politely dismissing Paul. (At least, no charges are brought against him.) Only a few believe Paul’s message and the gospel. Luke says “Some of the people became followers of

Paul” (17:34). He mentions Dionysius by name, a member of the Areopagus, and a woman, Damaris.

Paul’s work in Athens ends on an anti-climactic note. The New Testament does not mention any church in the city. By contrast, the gospel will receive a strong acceptance in Corinth. This rather dismal experience in Athens may cause Paul to wonder whether any method of preaching the gospel could reach the educated of the pagan world. He later tells the Corinthians that “the world through its wisdom did not know” God (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Paul may even decide to stop using philosophical arguments to persuade pagans. He tells the Corinthians that he “did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom” when preaching the gospel to them (2:1). Paul simply tells them about “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:2).

ACTS 18: THE CHURCH IN CORINTH

Paul left Athens (18:1)

Sometime after Paul's defense before the Areopagus, Paul left Athens. Luke doesn't say how long Paul was in the city, nor if he left rather soon after his defense. Luke was mainly interested in Paul's confrontation with the most popular philosophies of the pagan world and the intellectual elite of Athens. It's possible that Paul had to leave Athens because the Areopagus had not decided whether to allow him to continue preaching. Paul might have been waiting in vain for a favorable decision and decided to move on.

These must have been trying times for Paul. He had been prevented from preaching in Asia and Bithynia. Through a vision, God had directed Paul to preach in Macedonia. While he met with some success there, there were also major disappointments. Paul had been hounded by Jews across Macedonia and booted out of their cities. If Paul had thoughts of going to Rome, these must have been dampened by political events beyond his control. Then, in Athens he was dismissed with polite contempt.

Meanwhile, Paul was worried about the converts in Thessalonica who were in danger from angry Jews (1 Thessalonians 2:17-3:5). Now he was travelling to Corinth, not knowing what would befall him in this city.

Went to Corinth (18:1)

When Paul moved from Athens to Corinth, he left a cultural university town for a fast-moving commercial metropolis of the world. The older city on the Isthmus of Corinth had been destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. However, a hundred years later, Julius Caesar decreed that the city should be rebuilt. It was refounded as a Roman colony a few years later. In 27 B.C. Corinth became the capital of the Roman province of Achaia.

Corinth was built on a strategic plateau overlooking a narrow isthmus. It served as a land bridge connecting the Greek mainland and the Peloponnesian peninsula. Corinth was on the north side of the Acrocorinth, which rose to a height of almost 1,900 feet. That was an almost impregnable fortress.

Corinth was a crucial communications center at the junction of sea lanes to the west and east, and land routes north and south. The city had two ports, Lechaeum on the Gulf of Corinth and Cenchreae on the Saronic Gulf. These factors contributed to Corinth being a major commercial and population center. The city had over 200,000 inhabitants during New Testament times. Every two years it hosted the pan-Hellenic Isthmian Games, second only to the Olympic Games.

Corinth was also the “sin city” of Achaia. As is true of many port cities, it did a bustling trade in pleasures of the flesh as well as goods. The classical Greeks had coined a metaphor from the city’s notorious sin – “to play the Corinthian,” or to “Corinthianize.” This referred to a person who was sexually immoral or who lived a life of lustful debauchery.

Corinth had also attracted a variety of religious cults through the decades. The city had long been home to the worshippers of Aphrodite – the goddess of love. In classical times, her temple on the Acrocorinth had housed a thousand priestess-prostitutes. At night, they came into the city to offer their services. While such activities were vastly scaled down during Corinth’s Roman days, the city still had a reputation for moral looseness.

The sexual license in Corinth was reflected in the church that Paul started. Paul wrote to the Corinthian converts, saying: “Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. *And that is what some of you were.* But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). The believers in Corinth had difficulty in living up to the expectations of the Christian life, particularly in regards to sexual conduct. Paul warned them that Christians cannot continue in a lifestyle of immorality (1 Corinthians 5:1-2; 6:12-18; 2 Corinthians 12:21).

At first glance, Corinth would have seemed the most unlikely of places for the gospel of Jesus Christ to take root. Yet, the Spirit triumphed over the flesh. In what could be described as a “tale of two cities,” philosophical Athens showed much less interest in the message of salvation than fleshpot Corinth. For it was here in the sin city of Achaia that the word of God worked mightily and Paul had some of his greatest successes.

Priscilla and Aquila (18:2-3)

Luke began his account of Paul’s work in Corinth by mentioning a Jewish couple named Aquila and Priscilla. They had recently come to the city from Rome. Aquila was a native of Pontus, which was in northwestern Asia Minor along the Black Sea. Priscilla was called Prisca by Paul, and was often listed before her husband (18:18-19, 26; Romans 16:3; 2 Timothy 4:19). Commentators conclude that Priscilla was either from a higher social class, or considered more important than her husband in some way. Perhaps Priscilla was more active in church work. (Luke used the familiar forms of names such as Apollos, Priscilla, Silas and Sopatros. In his letters, Paul seemed to prefer calling people by their formal names, such as Epaphroditus,

Silvanus, Sosipatros and Prisca.)

Paul saw Aquila and Priscilla because he was a tentmaker as they were. The couple must have hosted Paul's stay in Corinth, and he apparently worked as a tentmaker with them (18:3). They may have owned a tentmaking business in Rome, and had possibly transferred their operation to Corinth. Paul earned his living as a tentmaker even while serving as a missionary (Acts 20:34; 1 Corinthians 4:12; 1 Corinthians 9:6-15; 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-10). Paul would have followed the dictates of Jewish law that directed theology students to also learn a trade (Mishnah, *Abot* 2:2).

Paul spoke highly of Priscilla and Aquila. They were his "fellow workers" in the gospel and "risked their lives" for him (Romans 16:3). The husband and wife team were loyal friends of Paul and also greatly helped the church. At Rome, a house church met in their home (verse 5), as it did in Ephesus when they later moved there (1 Corinthians 16:19). Aquila and Priscilla were probably converted before they moved to Corinth, as there is no mention in Acts of their conversion. At the end of Paul's life, they were still faithful church members (2 Timothy 4:19).

Claudius expelled the Jews (18:2)

Luke noted that Priscilla and Aquila came to Corinth "because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome" (18:2). This edict by the Roman emperor is thought to have been issued in his ninth year, which would correspond to A.D. 49. Suetonius said the banishment order was issued because the Jews were "in constant riots at the instigation of Chrestus" (Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* 25:4).

Any such edict could hardly have been carried out permanently against the entire population of Rome. Some Jews may have left after the edict had been made, as did Priscilla and Aquila. Others may have sought to get the decree reversed, or simply disobeyed it; it may have been enforced only for leaders of the Jewish community, or only when there was a commotion. Jews no doubt began to trickle back as the edict or its enforcement was relaxed. Priscilla and Aquila apparently went back to Rome after living in exile at Corinth and Ephesus (Romans 16:3).

Every Sabbath (18:4-5)

On the Sabbath Paul "reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks" (18:4). Paul continued his usual practice of preaching the gospel of salvation in the places where he (as a trained rabbi) had an open invitation to teach and where there were regular meetings of people who had a religious background that made it easier for them to understand Paul's message.

Silas and Timothy rejoined Paul in Corinth, having come from Macedonia. They brought good news about the Thessalonian church (1 Thessalonians 3:6). Timothy also brought a gift of money from the congregation at Philippi (2 Corinthians 11:9). The Philippians had previously helped Paul financially when he was in Thessalonica (Philippians 4:14-16). The sight of Silas and Timothy and their good news about the spiritual condition of the Macedonian churches must have lifted Paul's attitude. The financial help they brought freed him from having to spend his time earning a living.

Paul had first arrived in Corinth with "weakness and fear, and with much trembling" (1 Corinthians 2:3). But now things had changed for Paul, and he "devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18:5). One senses a reinvigorated Paul, whose mind and time were freed so he could preach the gospel with renewed zeal.

Left the synagogue (18:6)

As usual, some of the Jews soon opposed Paul, and he could no longer teach in the synagogue. In response, "he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them, 'Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent of it. From now on I will go to the Gentiles'" (18:6). Paul used a similar ritual at Pisidian Antioch, there shaking the dust from his feet (13:51). By shaking the dust from his clothes, Paul indicated that he was breaking fellowship with the Jews. Marshall writes, "This kind of action was performed by Jews against Gentiles, and its present significance was to indicate that in the sight of the missionaries those who rejected the gospel were no better than the Gentiles, cut off from the true people of God" (294).

Paul also used a typically Jewish phrase, "Your blood be on your own heads," to show that he had fulfilled his responsibility of preaching the gospel to them (20:26). Paul was saying, that like Ezekiel (33:6), he had been a faithful watchman and was not accountable for their rejection of his message. From now on, in Corinth at least, he would go to the pagan Gentiles who had no association with the synagogue. Paul's ministry at Corinth followed the pattern set at Pisidian Antioch (13:46-52). He initially proclaimed the gospel in the synagogue to Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. After being rejected by most of the Jews, he evangelized pagan Gentiles.

This didn't mean Paul would no longer go to the synagogues in other cities or cease to try to convert his fellow Jews. He meant that at Corinth he was moving his base of operations outside the synagogue. Whenever Paul made a statement about going to the Gentiles directly, it always had reference to a local situation.

House of Titius (18:7-8)

Paul didn't go very far. He left the synagogue and went next door to the house of Titius Justus, a Gentile worshiper of God, who probably attended the synagogue (18:7). This became the first meeting place of the Corinthian church. The center of the new Christian community in Philippi was also based in the home of a worshiper of God, Lydia (16:15).

The fact that Paul's missionary campaign was based next door to the synagogue must have annoyed many of the Jews. Even more galling must have been the conversion of Crispus, the leader or ruler of the synagogue (Greek, *archisynagogos*). (A little later we'll meet another synagogue ruler from Corinth.) Crispus and "his entire household believed in the Lord" and were baptized (18:8). He was not the first believer at Corinth, though. Stephanas and his family apparently were (1 Corinthians 16:15). But Crispus was among the few that Paul had personally baptized (1 Corinthians 1:14-16).

No need to be afraid (18:9-11)

During Paul's missionary journeys through Galatia and Macedonia (and even before) a disturbing pattern had emerged. He would have good initial success, but then opposition would attack him. In many cases Paul had to flee for his life. Would the pattern repeat itself in Corinth? Perhaps Paul thought so, and was discouraged at his prospects. God may have intervened in Paul's life at this time to strengthen his faith.

Though opposition and persecution would continue to occur, the Corinthian mission would continue. In fact, Paul would remain in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching the word of God (18:11). This probably stretched from the fall of A.D. 50 to the spring of A.D. 52. One night the resurrected Jesus spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city" (18:9-10). If Paul had been concerned about what might happen to the mission in Corinth (1 Corinthians 2:3), then this vision brought him new confidence. The promise was that he would be protected from harm and that his mission would be successful, not that he wouldn't face any difficulties.

Gallio the proconsul (18:12)

In fact, trouble came soon after Paul had the vision. Luke said "the Jews of Corinth made a united attack on Paul and brought him to the place of judgment" (18:12). There he faced Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia. Gallio came from a distinguished Spanish family. Perhaps the best-known member

of the clan was his younger brother Seneca, the Stoic philosopher, politician and dramatist. Another brother, Mela, was the father of the poet Lucan. Gallio himself was highly respected and those who knew him spoke of his personal charm.

Achaia was a senatorial province of the Roman Empire. Senatorial provinces were governed by proconsuls, whereas imperial provinces were governed by a legate. Luke's historical accuracy is underlined here in that the status of provinces changed with the times, and proconsuls had been reintroduced in Achaia only in A.D. 44. Proconsuls took office on July 1st and held their position for only one year. Gallio's term ran between A.D. July 51 and June 52. The year has been determined by an inscription found at Delphi, in north Achaia. In conjunction with other inscriptions, scholars have been able to determine the exact year of Gallio's proconsulship with a fair amount of certainty.

The inscription at Delphi, in the form of a letter sent from the emperor Claudius, included a reference to Gallio: "Lucius Gallio, my friend, and the proconsul of Achaia..." The inscription was dated to A.D. 52, but this meant Gallio must have taken office in the previous year. Time would have been required for Gallio to gather information about Achaia, send it to the emperor and then receive a response. Gallio may not have completed a full year as proconsul. Seneca tells us that soon after Gallio became proconsul, he went on a cruise because of an illness and recurring fever.

Brought Paul to the court (18:12)

We don't know at what point in Gallio's proconsulship Paul appeared before him. Paul remained a year and a half in Corinth (18:11) and "stayed on in Corinth for some time" after the Gallio incident (18:18). It's not clear whether this time is to be included within the year and a half stay, or is in addition to it. Scholars generally conclude that Paul arrived in Corinth around late summer or fall of A.D. 50 and left in the spring of 52. The reason is that some months must have elapsed during which Paul had increasing success in gaining converts. At some point, this success became obvious and the Jews become concerned enough to mount a unified campaign against him.

The Jews probably took Paul to court at the very beginning of Gallio's proconsulship in July A.D. 51. They may have been hoping that he wanted to please his new constituency.

"Contrary to the law" (18:13-15)

The Jews charged Paul with teaching things that were illegal: "This man...is persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law"

(18:13). Luke framed the issue with some ambiguity. We do not know if the Jews were referring to the Roman or Jewish law. If it was the former, then the charge may have been that Paul was teaching the citizens and subjects of Rome some ideas that were contrary to decrees laid down by the government.

This sounds like the most effective charge the Jews could have brought against Paul. But we do not know for certain that a category of “illegal religion” even existed under Roman law (Marshall, 298). On the other hand, it hardly seems possible that the Jews were asking Gallio to enforce the Jewish law, unless it was to exclude Christians from the protection Judaism enjoyed.

A.N. Sherwin-White offered another interesting explanation of the Jews’ complaint. He surmised that the Jews may have been invoking the decrees of Claudius against Paul. These guaranteed them the unimpeded enjoyment of their religious and social customs throughout the Roman world. The Jews would have been claiming that Paul was interfering with these rights in some way. Yet, their complaint was, as Sherwin-White has noted, that Paul was persuading *people* to worship contrary to the law, not that he persuaded *Jews* to do this (*Roman Law and Roman Society in the New Testament* [Oxford, 1963; Baker, 1992] page 102).

In any case, when Gallio heard the Jews’ charges, he saw through them. The Jews could point to no misdemeanor or serious crime of which Paul might have been guilty. It was clear to Gallio that this was an internal struggle. He told the Jews: “Since it involves questions about words and names and your own law – settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things” (18:15).

Gallio must have seen that Paul was a Jew, and he saw Paul’s preaching as another variety of Judaism. True enough, the leaders of the Corinthian Jewish community were unhappy with Paul’s brand of teaching – but he was not violating Roman law. There was no reason to call Paul’s teaching a *religio illicita* (if that category existed), nor did Gallio think Paul was interfering with the Jews’ right to practice their own beliefs. Since the case concerned conflicting interpretations of Jewish religious law, it was not worth a proconsul’s time or attention.

Wouldn’t hear the matter (18:14-16)

The decision by Gallio not to prosecute Paul has been taken as a watershed event in the growing Christian movement. The Jews’ formal accusation created a test case, and Gallio’s decision not to prosecute (or even hear the matter) established a protective legal precedent for Christianity. Just as the judicial rulings of the U.S. Supreme Court set precedents today, once

a proconsul as respected as Gallio ruled as he did, other proconsuls would think twice before rendering a contrary verdict on similar charges. Christianity was not to be considered a subversive cult – nor even disruptive to Judaism itself. Paul could continue to preach and enjoy protection under the Jewish “umbrella.” To outsiders, he was simply providing another option under Judaism. Roman institutions could function as a protection and aid for the spreading of the gospel.

Gallio’s ruling meant in effect that Paul and his associates, so long as they committed no breach of public order, continued to share the protection which Roman law granted to the practice of Judaism. It probably served as a precedent for other Roman judges, especially as it proceeded from a man whose brother (Seneca) occupied a position of influence at the imperial court. It meant that for the next ten or twelve years, until imperial policy toward Christians underwent a complete reversal, the gospel could be proclaimed in the provinces of the empire without fear of coming into conflict with Roman law. (Bruce, 354)

What was Luke’s purpose in telling his readers about the incident? He had some apologetic aim in mind. Perhaps it was to point out that Christians were law-abiding citizens and that the preaching and practice of Christianity (as a religion) did not violate any Roman law. But there was also a faith question involved. In terms of the book of Acts as a whole, the Gallio incident showed God as one who is in charge of human affairs and the protector of his church. The account is about how God acts to accomplish his will on earth. The opponents of Paul plotted their strategy. They think their opportunity has come when the inexperienced Gallio becomes procurator. They will halt the gospel and cut off the new religion by using the arm of the law.

But God already knows that a procurator is coming who has an accommodating mind toward Paul and Christianity. In this great drama, Paul will not be a player, but a spectator. He will also be caught up in events as the God of history inserts himself into human affairs. During the trial, Paul is about to defend himself, but he is cut off by Gallio, who has already decided in his favor (18:14). Paul’s oration does not save the day – it is not even needed. Paul virtually stands still to see the salvation of God as the accusers are ejected from the court (18:18).

Paul and the church are the beneficiaries of the God who is in charge of human affairs. He need not show his lordship through astounding miracles. God can exert his will through human events, through the small, still voice.

Paul is saved from the Roman executioner in the same way as Mordecai escaped Haman's noose – through God's quiet manipulation of human events (Esther 5:1-6:10). Paul, in fulfillment of the heavenly vision (18:9-10), can preach unhindered in Corinth for as long as he deems necessary.

Sosthenes is beaten (18:17)

Sosthenes, the synagogue ruler, was not as fortunate as Paul. He was beaten up in front of the court. "But Gallio showed no concern whatever," Luke said (18:17). Luke didn't make it clear who roughed up Sosthenes – nor why they did it. Was it an anti-Semitic crowd hanging around the marketplace and forum? Or was it disgruntled Jews angry at their leader for not presenting a more convincing case to Gallio? Another intriguing possibility is that Sosthenes may have shown some interest towards Paul's teaching. If he had leanings toward Christianity, or disagreed with prosecuting Paul, he would have been a ready target for the disappointed Jewish accusers.

Sosthenes is mentioned along with Paul as the sender of 1 Corinthians (1:1). Perhaps he is Luke's Sosthenes, but we do not know for sure, because Luke gives no indication that Sosthenes was or became a Christian. If Sosthenes was subsequently converted, both rulers of the synagogue in Corinth (or successive ones) would have become Christians.

Unfortunately, Luke gave almost no details about the life or makeup of the church in Corinth. He was greatly concerned with the broad strokes of the development of the Christian mission, but gave scant details regarding the church itself. To learn more about the church we must turn to Paul's letters.

As with the church in Philippi and Thessalonica, Luke's account dovetails with material we have from Paul's letters. He wrote several letters to the church in Corinth, and we have two of them in our New Testament. As in the case of the epistles to Philippi and Thessalonica, it is helpful to read these letters in conjunction with the account of Paul's activities in Acts. In the letters, we find that most of the Corinthian converts came from the lower classes. "Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth," he told them (1 Corinthians 1:26). There were exceptions such as Erastus, the city's director of public works, assuming that Romans was written from Corinth (Romans 16:23).

Paul at Cenchrea (18:18)

Paul stayed in Corinth "for some time" (18:18) and left the city with Priscilla and Aquila, probably in A.D. 52, in the spring, when sailing was safe. His ultimate destination was Jerusalem and Syrian Antioch. But on the way

he stopped at Ephesus in Asia Minor (18:19). Luke mentioned an incident at the beginning of this journey, at Cenchrea, the eastern seaport of Corinth, about seven miles from the heart of the city, facing the Aegean Sea.

Paul mentioned a deaconess, Phoebe, as being a member of the church in Cenchrea (Romans 16:1). She had been of great help to him and others in the church. The church in Cenchrea was probably a result of Paul's evangelizing work during his year and a half stay in Corinth. The church spread further as time went on. In 2 Corinthians, he writes to believers "throughout Achaia" (1:1). These may have been people who embraced the gospel while traveling to Corinth, or they may be results of Corinthian believers traveling to neighboring cities to share the good news.

PAUL'S THIRD EVANGELISTIC JOURNEY, CENTERED IN EPHEBUS

Paul cut his hair (18:18)

In Cenchrea, Luke focused on a vow: “Before he sailed [for Ephesus], he had his hair cut off at Cenchrea because of a vow he had taken” (18:18). At first glance, it seems unclear from Luke’s statement as to who had taken the vow, Paul or Aquila. Most commentators surmise that Paul took the vow. There would be no purpose in Luke’s telling us that Aquila had done so, since he was a lesser character in the narrative. However, Luke would want to take every opportunity to point out that Paul continued to be faithful to his Jewish traditions, and the taking of a vow would underscore this fact.

It’s also not clear what kind of “vow” Paul had taken. The standard Nazirite vow is described in Numbers 6:1-21. The person taking a Nazirite vow abstained from any grape product, including wine, as well as various forms of uncleanness. He would not cut his hair during the period of the vow. The shaving of the hair normally took place at Jerusalem at the end of a vow. The hair would then be dedicated in the temple. However, Paul cut his hair in Cenchrea, rather than at Jerusalem (18:18). Some commentators speculate that such exceptions were allowed for those who lived far from the Holy Land.

This would explain why Luke used the verb for “cut” to describe Paul’s action in Cenchrea, rather than “shave,” the verb normally used for ending a Nazirite vow. When Paul arrived in Jerusalem a few years later, he went into the temple to purify himself, and he *shaved* his head (Acts 21:24).

Other commentators feel that the vow referred to in Cenchrea was not a Nazirite vow, which could not properly be completed outside Palestine. It is then surmised that Paul’s vow in Cenchrea may have been a private vow. Perhaps it was taken in thanksgiving to God’s intervention in Corinth and an unusually successful mission. However we are to understand the vow, it is clear that Luke was interested in presenting Paul as one who still thought of himself as a Jew. He was not opposed to keeping the traditions of his fathers, even though he was now a Christian. But he didn’t require Gentile converts to follow his practice.

Paul at Ephesus (18:19-21)

When Paul arrived at Ephesus, he preached the gospel, entering the synagogue and reasoning with the Jews (18:19). The Jewish community seemed interested in his message and wanted him to stay longer and teach

them. Paul declined to do so. This seems odd for Paul, who always took advantage of any opportunity to preach Christ. Luke didn't explain why Paul declined the offer to stay and teach, so we are at a loss to understand his reasoning at this point. It suggests that Paul felt that his journey to Jerusalem was very important.

Aquila and Priscilla, who had accompanied Paul from Corinth, remained at Ephesus (18:19). Possibly they were transferring their tent-making business to Ephesus, or opening a new branch in the city. They appear to have remained in Ephesus for some time, hosting a house church for the believers. At a later date, perhaps after the death of Claudius, they returned to Rome (Romans 16:3).

On to Judea (18:22-23)

Meanwhile, Paul embarked on a ship sailing east. Luke's narrative is quite compressed at this point. In only a few sentences, he summarized the details of a lengthy sea voyage to Caesarea, an excursion to the church in Jerusalem, and a trip to Antioch (18:22). We should note that Paul went out of his way to make a trip to Jerusalem. His real destination was Antioch. From there he went on a pastoral journey throughout central Asia Minor. Why did Paul go to Jerusalem, and why did Luke mention the trip?

When Luke told his readers about Paul's vow, he wanted them to see his commitment to Judaism. By telling us Paul had gone perhaps 300 miles out of his way to visit the church in Jerusalem, Luke implied that Paul was loyal to the apostolic mother church.

The reason for Paul's going to Syrian Antioch is clear. It had been Paul's home church. It had first sponsored him as a missionary, and so he returned to tell the believers there how the gospel message had fared. Paul had a loyalty to Antioch, perhaps even more so than Jerusalem. We remember he had spent a considerable time in the church there (11:26-30; 13:1-3; 14:26-28; 15:30-35). On this occasion, Paul remained in Antioch for "some time."

Paul then embarked on an extensive pastoral journey. He "traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples" (18:23). Here the expression probably referred to the Phrygian region of Galatia, that is, the area of southern Galatia. Most commentators do not think Paul went into northern Galatia around Ancyra, Pessinus, or Tavium. Rather, Paul systematically moved through all the towns in which he had earlier preached the gospel (14:6). He also had revisited the churches during an earlier trip (14:21-23). Paul then took the road through the interior, heading west toward Ephesus (19:1). By doing so, he may have passed

through the cities of Colossae and Laodicea, but he did not stop to preach (Colossians 2:1).

Apollos arrives (18:24)

During Paul's excursion through the Phrygian-Galatian region (and his trip to Ephesus), a Jew name Apollos came to Ephesus from Alexandria, the great Egyptian metropolis (18:24). Apollos "was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures" (18:24). The word "learned" (Greek, *logios*) can mean either educated or eloquent. It appears that Apollos was both. He knew the Scriptures, and he refuted the Jews handily in debate (18:28).

In future years, Paul would come to regard Apollos as a friend and valued co-worker (1 Corinthians 3:5-9; 16:12; Titus 3:13). No doubt Luke had a purpose for including this incident about Apollos in his account. Perhaps some schismatic converts were claiming Apollos as their special leader (1 Corinthians 1:12). Luke wanted to show that Apollos was not a renegade preacher, but was loyal from the start to the tradition that Paul had taught.

Apollos "spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately" (18:25). However, he only knew the baptism of John. Apparently, Apollos had not heard about being baptized "in the name of Jesus," and its meaning. Such a baptism had been proclaimed since Peter's first public sermon on the day of Pentecost some two decades earlier, so it was odd that Apollos had not yet heard about this Christian baptism. But once again Luke didn't explain the background of the situation. Neither did he say whether Apollos had received the Holy Spirit earlier or had now been baptized into Jesus' name.

In another situation, Paul did rebaptize converts who only knew the baptism of John. They did not have the Holy Spirit before this, and received it only upon being rebaptized (19:2-7). But Luke gave no indication that Apollos was rebaptized, and presumably he already had God's Spirit, for he "taught about Jesus accurately." We should be reminded that while Acts describes a general pattern individuals must follow to receive the Holy Spirit, it also tells of a number of exceptions to the rule. Apparently, Apollos was one of the exceptions.

"Way of the Lord" (18:25-26)

Apollos did need some basic instruction about the Christian faith. Priscilla and Aquila noticed his deficiencies in understanding and "they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately" (18:26). We once again meet the expression "way of God," which describes the faith that Christians practice (9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

We don't know exactly what it was that Apollos needed to be instructed about. But Luke took pains to make this point, when he told his readers little else about him. The significance of this must have been important to Theophilus, but for us it serves only as an interesting detail. Apollos remains an intriguing character about whom we would like to know more.

“Luke’s brief and rather vague account does not enable us to say with certainty very much about Apollos. Had he learned about Christianity from someone of the type of the twelve ‘disciples’ referred to in 19:1-7 – who would almost certainly seem to have been members of a John the Baptist sect” (Neil, 201).

Apollos goes to Corinth (18:27)

After spending some time in Ephesus, Apollos wanted to go to the province of Achaia, probably Corinth in particular (19:1). The disciples were in favor of this move and wrote a letter of recommendation, encouraging the churches in Achaia to receive him. When Apollos arrived in Achaia, he met with non-converted Jews and refuted them in public debate, “proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ” (18:28).

Apollos became highly regarded by the churches in Achaia for his dedication and zeal, as well as his knowledge and public speaking skills. This is seen in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians. In it, he takes to task some of the members who were creating division in the church by latching onto Apollos as their own party leader (1 Corinthians 1:10-12). There is no evidence that Apollos encouraged this party spirit or that he was Paul’s rival. Paul accepts Apollos as a trusted colleague and helpful teacher (1 Corinthians 3:5-6). In effect, Apollos had become another important member of Paul’s discipling team.

We should also note that Paul had not abandoned the Jews in doing his missionary work. Apollos continued Paul’s labor in Achaia by preaching to *Jews*, trying to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah. Perhaps that is a point Luke wanted to make by including Apollos in the story.

PAUL'S MINISTRY IN EPHESUS (ACTS 19)

Paul at Ephesus (Acts 19:1)

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul came to the important port of Ephesus, a city with a rich history. Ephesus was conquered by the legendary Croesus, King of Lydia, around 560 B.C. Later it came under Persian rule. Alexander the Great captured it in 334 B.C. From Alexander's death, Ephesus was ruled by the Pergamum kings. But when the Romans were ready to take over the city, the last king of Pergamum, Attalus III, bequeathed the city to Rome. This happened in 133 B.C. The Romans soon made Ephesus the capital of a newly formed province of Asia.

Ephesus had a fine harbor to the west and was at the end of an important trading highway to the east. Ephesus therefore served as a center for east-west trade, and it became the greatest commercial city of the province. Its population may have peaked at around a third of a million.

Ephesus had passed its pinnacle as a commercial power by Paul's day, though it was still a vital communications hub. Since the city was at the mouth of a river, its harbor continually silted up and had to be dredged. Perhaps that is why Paul had to land at Miletus, a port south of Ephesus, and travel overland to the city (20:15-16).

Paul's third missionary journey was, in large part, devoted to preaching in Ephesus and the surrounding cities. He had stopped briefly at Ephesus earlier, and found a positive response to the gospel (18:19-21). However, as Paul had been intent on going to Jerusalem and Antioch, he couldn't stay very long, but promised to return. Luke says little about what happened during Paul's two-year ministry at Ephesus and Asia. He focused on a few incidents that happened, especially a riot, and devoted most of his report to the circumstances surrounding it.

Found disciples (Acts 19:2)

Luke began his narrative of events at Ephesus by relating a curious story. Paul met some "disciples" (that is what Luke calls them) who had been followers of John the Baptist. The group included 12 men (19:7). It isn't clear under what circumstances Paul encountered these people. Nor did Luke state if or how they were associated with the Christian community in Ephesus.

These disciples were defective in their knowledge of the Way, and didn't even know about one defining characteristic of Christians (Ephesians 1:13). When Paul asked whether they had received the Holy Spirit, they replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit" (19:2). The group

was ignorant of the Pentecost event and everything that followed.

The fact that these people – who were almost certainly Jews – were disciples of John the Baptist and his teachings, and had not heard of the Holy Spirit, is puzzling. John had clearly spoken of the Messiah as one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16).

John's baptism (Acts 19:3-4)

Paul then went on to ask which baptism they had received. They replied they had received “John's baptism” (19:3), which was a baptism of repentance. Paul told the group that they needed to be baptized “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (19:5). Then they would receive the Holy Spirit.

Whether these “disciples” were resident of Ephesus or had come from somewhere else (perhaps with Apollos from Alexandria) is not known. How they could be regarded as disciples – apparently knowing about Jesus – but not understand baptism nor even hear about the Holy Spirit is all rather odd.

Some commentators feel that when Luke called them “disciples,” he must have meant they were disciples of John. This might help explain their ignorance of New Testament baptism, and even the Holy Spirit. But Luke called them “disciples” with no qualification whatsoever. One would think that if he meant they were disciples of John, he would have said so explicitly. Possibly what Luke meant by “disciples” was that they were followers of Christ in the same way that people followed Jesus during his ministry. They were not disciples in the fullest sense of the word, since the sign of the disciple is one who has received the gift of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5; Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3; Titus 3:5; Hebrews 6:4; 1 Peter 1:2; 1 John 3:24; 4:13).

Some suggest that these disciples may have once been part of an extensive and influential sect of followers of John the Baptist. They point to evidence that such a sect may have existed in the second century. Josephus mentioned John as being influential (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18:116-119). The New Testament verifies that he was highly regarded by the Jewish people (Matthew 14:5; 21:46; Mark 11:32; Luke 20:6). This may be the reason Luke included this account in his narrative. It could have had something to do with the John-the-Baptist sect competing with the Christian movement for people's allegiance.

We may see something of this struggle for influence in the Gospel of John, perhaps written in the A.D. 90s. John was careful to portray the Baptist's ministry as being inferior to Jesus and his ministry (John 1:19-23; 29-43; 3:22-36). The Gospels also go out of their way to make it plain that John the Baptist was only the forerunner of Jesus. They have the Baptist

admit that his position is so inferior to Jesus' that he isn't even worthy to carry his sandals (Matthew 3:11).

Perhaps this sect grew to some degree on a parallel track to the Christian mission, and may in some cases have been its rival. Luke, writing perhaps between the mid-A.D. 60s to the 80s, would have included this vignette to make a point: the true body of Christ is the church, not the sect of John the Baptist's followers. Luke would have been trying to show that such disciples of John needed to become Christians. They could do this by being rebaptized into Jesus by a duly authorized missionary of Christ's body, the church universal – and receiving the Holy Spirit.

Baptized into Jesus' name (Acts 19:5-7)

When Paul explained to these former disciples of John the Baptist that they should be baptized into Jesus' name, they readily agreed. By doing so they were putting their faith in Jesus and repenting. The reason these individuals were baptized, and apparently Apollos was not, is unclear from Luke's account. Perhaps they still thought of John's baptism as being fully sufficient.

Now, this group of John's disciples was seeing the light. By accepting another baptism, these people were saying that they understood the superiority of Jesus to John. They were willing to come under the authority of a representative (Paul) of the one body that was correctly defined. (At least some of the apostles had been followers of John and must have been baptized by him [John 1:35-37]. There is no evidence they were rebaptized into Jesus' name. But they had readily become the followers of Jesus.)

After the former disciples of John were baptized, "Paul placed his hands on them" and they received the Holy Spirit (19:6). There is an association, but not a consistent one, between baptism and the laying on of hands in the book of Acts. Peter and John did lay hands on the Samaritan converts (8:17). This was done in Samaria to make it clear that the despised Samaritans had been accepted into the fellowship by the leaders of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem.

In Ephesus, too, the laying on of hands denoted acceptance. Paul, as a representative of the church, accepted these former members of a John-the-Baptist sect. Upon this demonstration of faith, the disciples received the Holy Spirit (19:6). As an outward evidence of this, "They spoke in tongues and prophesied" (19:6). As the Jews on Pentecost, and as the household of Cornelius, these people received the same gift. There was no question about it, because the coming of the Spirit had been verified by the same outward signs (11:17).

Spoke boldly in synagogue (Acts 19:8-9)

After Luke finished the story of the Baptist disciples, he dramatically switched the scene. Paul was now preaching in the synagogue. For three months Paul debated with the Jews “arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God” (19:8). Luke here emphasized the “kingdom of God” aspect of Paul’s message. However, we shouldn’t think Paul preached a substantially different message in Ephesus from his usual one. His gospel message was concerned with *both* Jesus and the kingdom (28:31), because one cannot separate the king from the kingdom. The message of Jesus is the message of salvation. But personal salvation is not obtained apart from God’s kingdom.

The fact that Paul continued in the synagogue for three months shows that the Ephesian synagogue elders were more tolerant than those in Thessalonica (or perhaps that Paul was becoming more careful in the way that he presented the gospel). But even here, Paul eventually outlasted his welcome. Some of the Jews began to publicly deride “the Way” (19:9). Paul then left the synagogue, took the disciples with him and began daily discussions in the lecture hall of Tyrannus (19:9). This is thought by some to be the auditorium of a local philosopher with the name Tyrannus. Others see Tyrannus as the owner of the building, who rented space to speakers such as Paul. (Tyrannus means “Tyrant,” and it was probably a nickname reflecting the man’s personality.) We know nothing else of Tyrannus. But he was introduced so casually that it’s possible Luke’s readers (especially Theophilus) would have known who he was.

All in Asia heard (Acts 19:10)

Paul’s work in Ephesus continued for two years, “so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord” (19:10). Most likely we are to add Paul’s three months of speaking in the synagogue to the total time (19:8), along with other events. The full time that he was in Ephesus might have been nearly three years (20:31). This may correspond to the years between A.D. 52-53 and 55.

Paul did not confine his ministry to the city of Ephesus. Luke says that Jews and Greeks throughout the entire province of Asia heard the word (19:10). People in a number of important cities in Asia would have heard the gospel during these years. We are familiar with some of these cities from other New Testament writings: Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea, Colossae, Miletus, Hierapolis, and Magnesia. It’s possible the seven churches mentioned in the book of Revelation, chapter 2 and 3, were begun during Paul’s stay in Ephesus.

Paul did not necessarily go to every city himself, though he almost certainly evangelized in some of them. Paul's associates, traveling converts, and word-of-mouth tales about such things as the miracles of healing would have spread the gospel message from city to city in the province of Asia. While Paul taught at the lecture hall of Tyrannus, his colleagues carried out missionary work in other cities. Epaphras appears to have been one of Paul's associates who worked in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis (Colossians 1:7-8; 2:1; 4:12-13). These were cities of the Lycus valley, which Paul apparently did not personally visit.

Striking miracles (Acts 19:11-12)

During Paul's stay in Ephesus, the power of God was demonstrated mightily, giving the gospel an attentive hearing. Luke wrote: "God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them" (19:12). Luke's emphasis was on *God* doing the miracles through Paul. Luke was highlighting the divine power at work.

Paul was able to "heal at a distance," as it were. Cloth that Paul had touched could heal the sick. We are reminded of similar "at a distance" healings in the woman whose bleeding disease was healed when she touched Jesus' cloak (Mark 5:27-34). Paul's healing work was also equated with Peter's, whose passing shadow could cause people to be healed (5:15). As was the Master, and Peter, the "chief of the apostles," Paul also was given an extraordinary power of God. Paul himself referred to the signs that had accompanied his preaching of the gospel. These proved that God was using him as he was the other apostles – as such signs marked an apostle (Romans 15:18-19; 2 Corinthians 12:12).

The Greek word for "handkerchiefs" referred to a face cloth used for wiping perspiration from the brow or a sweat-band that a workman tied around his head to absorb perspiration. The Greek word for "aprons" referred to a garment that a working man would place around the body to keep dirt off clothes. The "handkerchiefs" and "cloths" may have been articles Paul wore when making tents. That is, he could have tied the sweat-rags around his head and he would have tied the aprons around his waist.

It does seem odd that God would bring healings through such mundane and personal pieces of cloth. Some commentators find this so difficult to accept that they explain it away as a legend with no basis in fact. Yet Luke is not gullible; he knows that these are extraordinary healings. The unusual nature of these healings is meant to tell us an important thing: It is *God* who

did the cures and exorcisms. He used such everyday items to make the point that it is he, and not the instrument through which he works, that brings about the cure.

Seven sons of Sceva (Acts 19:13-16)

The story above explained that God did extraordinary miracles through Paul in healing people and casting out demons, even at a distance. In his next scene, Luke gives a sharp and humorous contrast: the powerlessness of Jews who tried to usurp Paul's name and the authority of Jesus to effect exorcisms. Apparently, Paul's name and power had become so widespread in Asia that others were hoping to cash in on the exorcism bandwagon. This was becoming a major problem, as a number of Jews were trying to mimic the mighty demonstrations of God's power that were being accomplished through Paul.

Luke cited the example of the seven sons of Sceva, who tried to perform exorcisms. According to Luke, "They would say, 'In the name of the Jesus whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out'" (19:13). We don't know who Sceva was. Luke called him a "Jewish chief priest" (19:14). It's possible he belonged to a Jewish chief-priestly family. Perhaps Sceva or his seven sons may have been renegade priests from a high priestly family. Some commentators speculate Sceva may have been an apostate Jew and the high or chief priest of some pagan cult. However, it is known that no individual named Sceva was ever *the* high priest in Jerusalem since the names of all the Jewish high priests in Jerusalem have been identified.

Another possibility is that the title "Jewish chief priest" was Sceva's own self-designation, and Luke simply reported what he said about himself. If Luke would have been writing today he may have placed the title between quotation marks. On the other hand, Luke does not say Sceva was the one who was a professional exorcist. It was his seven sons whom Luke singled out as trying to use Paul's name. It's possible they even "believed" Paul's message in the same way that Simon of Samaria had (8:9-24).

But in a somewhat comic sequel to this serious story, Sceva's sons were unable to use God's healing and exorcism power as a commodity to dupe innocent people. The finale occurred one day when they were attempting to exorcise an evil spirit. It said to them, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know about, but who are you?" (19:15). Then the man possessed by the spirit jumped on the seven and "gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding" (19:16).

All became fearful (Acts 19:17-20)

Sceva's seven sons were apparently so well-known for their magic and sorcery that the news of their drubbing quickly spread. It was now clear that Paul has a greater power than any of the sorcerers. One is reminded of the story of Moses and the magicians of Egypt during the Exodus. For a time, the magicians of Pharaoh seemed to match some of the plagues Moses was bringing on Egypt. But soon it was clear that a greater power was with Moses. Even the magicians finally told Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God" (Exodus 8:19).

The same thing happened in Ephesus when Sceva's sons failed in their exorcism attempt. Both Jews and Greeks "were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor" (19:17). Many even renounced their magic arts and burned their books or scrolls of magic incantations. Paul must have convinced them that these books were not just worthless – they were worse than worthless and ought to be destroyed rather than sold. Numerous people burned their magic books.

Luke tells us that the value of these scrolls was 50,000 thousand drachmas (19:20). It's hard to determine the modern value of the drachma, anchored as it was in an ancient agrarian economy. The drachma was a silver coin worth about a day's wages. Enough money to pay 50,000 workers for a day went up in smoke. Since a minimum-wage worker now makes about \$40 per day, a modern equivalent would be about two million dollars.

This was the third confrontation between a preacher of the gospel and a practitioner of magic in Luke's narrative. God's servants encountered Simon Magus (8:4-25) in Samaria, Bar Jesus/Elymas in Cyprus (13:4-12) and now the seven sons of Sceva. In each case, the message of God and its messenger triumphed over the forces of darkness and evil. This is how Luke ended this section of his narrative, on a positive and upbeat mode. He summarized the growth of the church and gospel by saying: "In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power" (19:20).

After all this (Acts 19:21)

This summary of the progress of the gospel introduced what is probably the last panel or major division of Acts. (The six panels are: a) 1:1-6:7, b) 6:8-9:31, c) 9:32-12:24, d) 12:25-16:5, e) 16:6-19:20, f) 19:21-28:31.) The last panel begins with the statement: "After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. 'After I have been there,' he said, 'I must visit Rome also'" (19:21). This marks the final part of Luke's story of the movement of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. It

encompassed the years between A.D. 55-6 and 61-2.

The last section of Acts recounts Paul's roundabout journey to Jerusalem, along with its consequences. In Jerusalem, Paul will be arrested and imprisoned for two years in Caesarea. Luke will devote a large amount of space to Paul's defense before the Jews in Jerusalem and to his speeches before rulers and a king in Caesarea. Then will come the dangerous trip to Rome, and Paul's ministry in the city. At that point, Luke abruptly ends his story.

When Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, he told them that he wanted to visit Rome, and he hoped to use Rome as a base for spreading the gospel even further west, to Spain (Romans 15:23-24). He thought that the eastern part of the Roman empire was sufficiently evangelized – he said the gospel had been fully preached “from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum” (Romans 15:19). Illyricum was a region along the Adriatic Sea reaching from northeast Italy south to Macedonia (the modern nations of Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro, and Albania). Luke does not tell us when or how Illyricum was evangelized.

Getting to Rome was an important matter for Paul, but it was not the ultimate goal – Spain was. However, Luke was more interested in Paul's visit to Rome than to Spain. Luke had him saying, “I *must visit* Rome also” (19:21). Luke ended his account with Paul in Rome, and omitted any reference to the Spanish project. We do not know whether Paul ever got to Spain or other parts of the western Roman Empire.

A trip to Jerusalem (Acts 19:21)

But Paul also wanted to visit Jerusalem, and he probably planned his trip near the end of his stay in Ephesus. It became such a driving desire that nothing could dissuade him. He probably thought that once he was in the far western part of the Empire, he might not be able to visit Jerusalem ever again. Perhaps he also thought about taking the gospel message into Gaul, or western North Africa.

But before going to Jerusalem, Rome or parts west, he wanted to revisit the churches of Macedonia and Achaia. The purpose of would be to make a final pastoral visit to these churches. More specifically, he wanted to gather from the churches a collection for the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem. This collection – and resultant trip to Jerusalem – seemed to become the central preoccupation of Paul's mind.

There is some controversy about Paul's decision to go to Jerusalem. Was it something that the Holy Spirit wanted Paul to do, or was the Spirit warning

him *against* going there? The New International Version says Paul “decided to go to Jerusalem” (19:21); this reflects the translation of the Greek *en to pneumati*, which could mean “by his human spirit.” It could mean that Paul on his own decided to go to Jerusalem, without any specific guidance from the Spirit.

Luke, who frequently makes the direction of the Holy Spirit explicit, did not do so here. But later, Luke may have been implying the Spirit’s guidance when he had Paul saying he was “compelled by the Spirit” to go to Jerusalem (20:22). This is still a less-than-explicit statement about the Spirit’s role, however. Prophets of the church – who were speaking through the Holy Spirit – told Paul he would face grave problems if he went to Jerusalem (20:22-23; 21:10-11). Were they implying he should not go?

Paul’s motivation (Acts 19:21)

Whatever the case, Paul seemed to think it was God’s will that he go to Jerusalem – or for some reason, it was absolutely necessary that he go. Luke didn’t explain what strong motivation Paul had for wanting to go to Jerusalem. However, Paul did do so in his letters. He wanted to deliver a collection of money he had taken up to help the poor church members of Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15; Romans 15:25-32).

The desperate plight of the church must have been on Paul’s mind, and he hoped to do something about it. However, there was something else behind Paul’s interest in the relief fund, other than simply wanting to help the church. It was a strong desire to show Jerusalem that the Gentile churches stood solidly with their Jewish counterparts, even though they did not observe the same customs. He hoped that the gift of love would increase the solidarity and unity of the Jewish and Gentile elements in the church.

Luke knew about the collection, since he vaguely referred to it later on (24:17). He even mentioned the representatives of the various church areas by name who were coming with Paul to Jerusalem to deliver the relief fund (20:4). Although this collection was important to Paul, it was apparently not important to Luke’s story of the expansion of the gospel starting from Jerusalem and going to the ends of the earth. The collection probably failed to live up to Paul’s expectations. Going to Jerusalem resulted in nothing but problems for Paul and accomplished very little within the church, so far as we can tell from Acts. For Luke, writing from the perspective of a later time, the collection was insignificant. Luke was interested in Paul’s Jerusalem experience only for its role in the expansion of the gospel – because it gave Paul an opportunity to preach before rulers and kings, and as the springboard for getting to Rome.

Paul apparently began preparing for the Macedonia-Jerusalem-Rome-Spain trip by sending Timothy and Erastus to Macedonia ahead of him (19:22). He wanted them to organize the offering so it would be ready when he came. Timothy was last mentioned when he was at Corinth (18:5). This is the first time that Erastus is in Luke's story. A man named Erastus sent his greetings to the church at Rome (Romans 16:23), and was Corinth's director of public works. (This assumes Romans was written from Corinth.) However, Erastus was a common name, and the Erastus of Acts may not be the same man. A few years later Paul referred to an Erastus as one of his associates (2 Timothy 4:20), and he was probably the individual mentioned in Acts.

The cult of Artemis (Acts 19:23-27)

About the time that Paul was preparing for his trip, "there arose a great disturbance about the Way" (19:23). A man named Demetrius, probably the leader of a regional guild of silversmiths, called together not only his guild but also those in related trades (19:25-26). The silversmiths made a tremendous profit from selling silver shrines of the goddess Artemis. Tradesmen made their living supplying visitors with such religious trinkets, along with offerings and lodging. Ephesus was known for its profitable trade in such religious crafts (Dio Cassius, *History of Rome*, Ammianus Marcellinus, *History* 22.1339.20). Many terra-cotta and marble shrines have been unearthed, but no silver shrines have yet been discovered, perhaps because they were melted down for the precious metal.

The silversmiths of Ephesus regarded their guild as being under the special patronage of Artemis, in whose honor so many of their wares were manufactured. Among these wares were miniature silver niches, containing an image of the goddess, which her votaries bought to dedicate in the temple. The sale of these was a source of considerable profit to the silversmiths. (F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, revised edition, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, page 374)

Artemis of Ephesus (Latin, Diana) was the mother-goddess of fertility. She was depicted as a grotesque, multibreasted woman. Her image at Ephesus was believed to have been constructed in heaven and to have fallen from the sky – from the gods (19:35). The temple of Artemis was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world, and it supposedly could hold up to 50,000 people. It covered an area four times as large as the Parthenon in

Athens, or 400 feet by 200 feet in size. (A field for American football is 300 feet long.) The temple and its cult is well documented in ancient literature. Some examples are: Strabo, *Geography* 14, 1, 22-23; Herodotus, *Persian Wars* 1:26, 92, Pliny, *Natural History* 16.213; 36.95-97, 179; and Xenophon, *The Ephesians* 1, 2, 2-7; 1, 11, 5.

Ephesus had declined since its heyday as a center of shipping, due in large part to the continual silting up of its harbor. The economy of the city had become increasingly dependent on the tourist trade associated with the cult of Artemis. Now, because of Paul's preaching, people were turning away from the Artemis cult. The business of these miniature silver shrines must have fallen off, and the silversmiths were worried about their source of income. Paul was threatening the economy of Ephesus.

In his speech, Demetrius got to the nub of his complaint about Paul's preaching, noting that Paul was preaching "that gods made by human hands are no gods at all" (19:26). In a skillful piece of oratory, Demetrius united the workmen's economic concerns with their superstitious fears. "There is danger," insisted Demetrius, "not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited" (19:27).

City in an uproar (Acts 19:28-34)

Demetrius enlisted the silversmiths and craftsmen from some other trades to begin a riot. They hoped to turn the Ephesians against Paul, and at the same time, create an even greater devotion to Artemis. Naturally, this would translate into greater profits for the tradesmen. Paul had disturbed vested business interests, and now the "better business bureau" of Ephesus swung into action against him. On the pretext of religious devotion, they began a tactic sure to stir up the superstitious devotion of the populace.

The tradesmen apparently were assembled in an open-air theater, the usual place for public meetings (19:29). Perhaps they were in the theater on the eastern side of the city whose ruins are known. This theater could hold about 25,000 people, and it was in full view of the temple of Artemis. The tradesmen in the theater began shouting, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" (19:28). This attracted other people, and before long the entire city was in an uproar. A crowd joined the melee, many without even understanding what it was about. Luke wrote: "The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there" (19:32).

While rushing to the theater, some of the crowd grabbed Gaius and

Aristarchus, two men working with Paul (19:29). They were then dragged into the theater with the crowd. It's not certain who Gaius was. He was a Macedonian (19:29); perhaps he was the Gaius Paul baptized in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:14) and who was a host to him and the church (Romans 16:23). Luke mentioned Gaius as being from Derbe in Galatia (20:4). The individuals mentioned need not be the same person, as Gaius was a rather common name (3 John 1). Aristarchus was mentioned in 20:4 and in 27:2. He was referred to in Colossians 4:10 and Philemon 24 as being a native of Thessalonica.

Paul was concerned about the fate of these two men at the hands of a frenzied mob. He wanted to go before the crowd, but was forcibly restrained by some of the converts (19:30). Luke said, "Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater" (19:31). Luke took this opportunity to again point out that Rome and its officials were not antagonistic to Paul and the gospel message.

Meanwhile, the Jews sent their own representative, Alexander, to the theater in order "to make a defense before the people" (19:33). Since Luke didn't tell us, we don't know exactly what point Alexander wanted to make or who he was. Presumably he wanted to disassociate the Jews from the Christians as the cause of this uproar. The Jews had something to worry about. Jews, like Christians, were monotheistic and posed a threat to the paganism of the times. It's no surprise, then, that when the idolatrous mob realized Alexander was a Jew, they shouted him down. For the next two hours the crowd shouted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" (19:34).

During the commotion, Paul had been restrained from heading for the theater to confront the crowd, presumably to try to reason with it. But there was no need for his presence, as city officials cooled down the mob and ended the riot. Once again, Paul had to sit on the sidelines to see events worked out in his and the gospel's favor, and experience the salvation of the Lord.

Officials stop the riot (Acts 19:35-41)

The city clerk quieted the crowd by reassuring it that the worship of Artemis wasn't being threatened (19:35). He chastised the mob for unjustly condemning Gaius and Aristarchus. "You have brought these men here," he said, "though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess" (19:37). The officials of the province of Asia, the Asiarchs, had already expressed their friendliness toward Paul (19:31). Now the city clerk intervened on behalf of Paul's associates. Vested business interests may not

have liked Paul's preaching, but the government was still a friend of the gospel.

What is especially interesting is that the Asiarchs came from the noblest and wealthiest families of Asia, and promoted the cult of the emperor and Rome. The league of Asiarchs was more of a religious than political organization, since they had little authority in governing the province of Asia. While, in a sense, the cult of Artemis was a rival cult to that of Caesar and Roma, the Asiarchs were themselves polytheists and interested in the economic welfare of Ephesus. That some of them should be Paul's friends suggests that the intelligentsia was not hostile to Christianity, at least not in Asia. It also implies that the educated classes did not fully share in the superstitions of the common people.

The "city clerk" (an unfortunate translation) was the main executive officer of the town assembly, and the city's chief magistrate. He was the most important local official of Ephesus, and would be held responsible for any riots within the city. The city clerk served as the liaison between the town council and the provincial Roman administration with its headquarters in Ephesus.

Realizing the potential penalties the city might receive from Rome, the city clerk implored the mob to take their grievances to the proper authority. He said Demetrius and the guilds could press charges in the courts and with the proconsuls (19:38). "It must be settled in a legal assembly," he insisted. "As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of what happened today" (19:39-40). If the city was cited for rioting, the clerk pointed out, it was in trouble with Rome. There was no way the local officials could account for the disturbance. The chief magistrate urged the crowd to disband and go home, which apparently it did.

Unmentioned troubles

From Luke's story of Paul's two-year stay in Ephesus, one might assume that this was the only major problem he encountered. But that is not the case. Even here Paul did not directly suffer in the riot, as he remained on the sidelines waiting for events to work out favorably. Luke did refer in passing to some difficulty Paul had with the Jews at the beginning of his stay, but this was glossed over rather quickly in a phrase, with no details given (19:9). Otherwise, Luke made it appear as though Paul had an easy time of it in Ephesus, with success piled on success.

But when we turn to Paul's letters, we realize that the successes at Ephesus came at the cost of great suffering. Paul wrote in one letter that he

had “fought wild beasts in Ephesus” (1 Corinthians 15:32). Even if this is a metaphor for violent persecutors, it reveals something of the trials Paul endured during the two years at Ephesus. In the same letter, Paul spoke “about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself” (2 Corinthians 1:8). Priscilla and Aquila, who were resident in Ephesus at this time (18:19), “risked their lives” for Paul (Romans 16:3-4).

Later Paul told the Ephesian elders that he had been “severe testing by the plots of Jewish opponents” during his work in the city (20:19). Paul later met with the elders of Ephesus in Miletus rather than in the city (20:17). Perhaps he did this because he felt it too dangerous for him to return to Ephesus.

During his time at Ephesus, Paul also had great concern about the troubled state of the Corinthian church. His first letter makes this worry abundantly clear. Some visitors from Corinth told him about the deep and bitter divisions within the church (1 Corinthians 1:11-12) and about blatant sexual immorality being tolerated in the congregation (1 Corinthians 5:1). However, if Paul faced such dangers and problems in Ephesus as his epistles indicate, then Luke chose to ignore them. He had already given us examples of the kind of persecution that Paul experienced. Perhaps he did not feel it necessary to belabor the point.

MACEDONIA AND GREECE (ACTS 20:1-6)

To Macedonia (Acts 20:1-2)

A short time after the tumult caused by Demetrius was over, Paul met with the disciples to encourage them. He then set out for Macedonia. This was part of the travel that Paul had planned earlier (19:21-22). His intention was to go through Macedonia and Greece, then to Jerusalem, and from there travel to Rome. A few months early, Paul told the Corinthians that he planned to stay at Ephesus until Pentecost, in late spring. He would then leave for Macedonia (1 Corinthians 16:8). Apparently, a great opportunity to preach the gospel had arisen in Ephesus, but Paul didn't say exactly what that was (verse 9).

After Paul left Ephesus, he probably either took the Roman coastal road north to the port city of Troas, or travelled there by boat from, perhaps Miletus (2 Corinthians 2:12-13). He hoped to find Titus at Troas. Earlier, Paul had sent him to Corinth to deal with the problems in the church. Titus was not at Troas, so Paul crossed the Aegean to Macedonia. Paul must have caught up with Titus there, and received an encouraging report on the Corinthian church from him (2 Corinthians 7:5-7).

We don't know how long Paul stayed in Macedonia, though it may have been as long as a year. Various years are assigned to this part of Paul's ministry. Some scholars think that Paul may have preached the gospel in the province of Illyricum during this time. Luke does not mention any missionary work in Illyricum, so the idea must remain a conjecture.

Luke said only that Paul "traveled through that area," apparently referring to Macedonia (20:2). He then came to Greece, where he stayed three months (20:3). Paul must have spent some of this time in Corinth. It is from there that Paul probably wrote the letter to the church at Rome (Romans 15:23-26). Luke collapsed Paul's rather extensive visit to Macedonia and Achaia into a single brief mention, making it one of the briefest accounts of Paul's activities in the book. Some of Paul's letters written during this period (such as 2 Corinthians and Romans) fill in some of the details. Luke never mentions any of Paul's letters. We know almost nothing of what transpired on this lengthy trip; it did not fit into the theme of Luke's book.

Jews made a plot (Acts 20:3-4)

As Paul was about to sail for Syria from Corinth, presumably to visit Antioch (and then Jerusalem), he learned of a Jewish plot against him (20:3). To avoid the plotters, Paul decided not to leave by sea from Corinth but to

backtrack through Macedonia. (Paul apparently changed his other travel plans as well. He went directly to Caesarea and Jerusalem, without stopping in Antioch.) Luke didn't give any details about the conspiracy. Commentators suggest that Paul may have intended to reach Jerusalem by Passover, and travel on a Jewish pilgrim ship. Fanatical Jews would have found a vessel at sea a convenient place to dispose of Paul, perhaps throwing him overboard during the night.

No doubt the collection money Paul was carrying would have been an added inducement to murder him. Of course, Paul was not going to Jerusalem alone. He was in the company of representatives from the various Gentile church areas that had donated to the Jerusalem relief fund. These men must have been the official delegates appointed by their respective churches to present the collection to the Jerusalem elders. However, Luke was silent concerning the function of the delegation. Luke wanted to show the progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome. Any inter-church affairs mentioned were almost always in the form of summaries or generalities, unless they were relevant to the movement of the gospel message.

Luke did, however, give us the names of the seven men and their origin. Sopater was from Berea, perhaps the Sosipater of Romans 16:21. Aristarchus came from Thessalonica (19:29). He was identified as a Macedonian in 19:29. Secundus was from Thessalonica. This was his first appearance in Luke's account, and he is otherwise unknown. Gaius was from Derbe, in Galatia. Timothy, who was from Lystra, in Galatia, we know well. He is a familiar character from Acts and Paul's epistles (16:1-3). Tychicus was from Asia (Colossians 4:7). This is the only time he is mentioned in Acts but he is well known from Paul's letters (Ephesians 6:21; Colossians 4:7; 2 Timothy 4:12; Titus 3:12). Trophimus came from Asia, and is elsewhere described as an Ephesian (Acts 21:29; 2 Timothy 4:20). He will become the unwitting cause of Paul's arrest in Jerusalem.

Missing are any delegates from Corinth or Philippi. Perhaps Paul took charge of the Corinth offering. Luke may have represented Philippi, as he joined the delegation at this point. Luke's presence is made known by the start of another "we" section (20:5 uses the word "us").

Some went to Troas (Acts 20:5-6)

Paul sent his Gentile travelling companions east across the Aegean Sea to Troas (20:5). But he stayed on at Philippi. Luke's words show his presence with Paul: "These men went on ahead and waited for *us* at Troas" (20:5). This is the first use of the personal pronoun "us" since Paul's trouble with the

demon-possessed girl in Philippi (16:17), during the second missionary tour (16:17). Perhaps Luke had remained at Philippi to strengthen the church, and now had rejoined Paul. He seems to be with Paul until they reach Jerusalem, and will accompany him on the final journey to Rome.

Paul and Luke sailed from Neapolis (the port city of Philippi) for Troas, where they rejoined the delegation (20:6). There is a marked contrast between the scanty allusions of verses 1 through 5 and the detailed description of Paul's subsequent travels. This is credited to the fact that Luke was now with Paul.

TROAS AND THE SPEECH AT MILETUS

First day of the week (Acts 20:7)

Luke described only a single event at Troas, what was perhaps a special “worship service.” He said of himself and the church congregation: “On the first day of the week we came together to break bread” (20:7). It was an evening service, perhaps with a communal meal. If Luke was using a Jewish reckoning of time, with days beginning at sunset (or twilight), then Saturday evening would have marked the beginning of the first day of the week.

This meeting at Troas is often taken as the earliest evidence of the day and time when Christians gathered for their worship service. But this meeting was clearly an unusual one, and may not reflect everyday practice. Further, scholars are not in agreement as to whether the time of the Troas meeting was the *beginning* of the “first day of the week” on Saturday evening or its *ending* on late Sunday afternoon. Both would have occurred, by Jewish reckoning, on the “first day of the week.” This is even further complicated by the fact that scholars are not sure which method of time reckoning Luke used, the Jewish or Roman.

According to the Jewish method of calculating the new day from sunset, Paul would have met with the Christians on what was Saturday evening by our reckoning, and would thus have resumed his journey on Sunday morning. According to the Roman method of reckoning the new day as beginning at dawn, the Christians would have met in the evening of either Sunday (the first day of the Jewish week) or Saturday (the first day of the Roman week). Since elsewhere Luke reckons the hours of the day from dawn (3:1), he appears to follow the Roman method of time-reckoning and the Jewish calendar (cf. Luke 24:1). (I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, page 326)

Literally, the Greek expression translated “on the first day of the week” means “on one of the Sabbaths.” Could Luke have been simply saying that Paul and the church came together “on one of the Sabbaths” or weeks?

One thing is not in doubt. This meeting was an evening meeting, and it became a very late one (20:7, 13). It was also a very special meeting, because Paul thought it would be the last time he would ever see the church. That being the case, it is very dangerous to make any assumptions from this event about the form and time of the apostolic church’s regular worship services.

Lord’s Supper? (Acts 20:7)

Luke said the people “came together to break bread” on this occasion (20:7). This is often taken to mean that the group was celebrating the Lord’s

supper that night as well as being together to receive Christian instruction (1 Corinthians 10:16-17 and 11:17-34, with Luke 22:19; 24:30).

However, Luke could just as well have been speaking of a simple evening meal. Much later in the night, Paul “broke bread and ate” (20:11). This is also, in the best manuscripts, “the bread.” But it most likely referred to a regular meal Paul (and perhaps the group) partook of late in the night.

A miracle for Eutychus (Acts 20:8-12)

Luke’s purpose in narrating this meeting at Troas was not to describe the form, or to point out the time of the early church’s worship services. Perhaps that’s why the account was so fuzzy on these matters. Rather, Luke was interested in telling his readers about what happened to a young man named Eutychus – and its meaning. Paul had been speaking a very long time – until midnight – and then he continued to “talk on and on” (20:9). (Perhaps Luke was also beginning to find Paul’s talk a bit tedious.)

Besides the length of Paul’s talk, the fumes of the lamps and the crush of the crowd made breathing a bit difficult. The flickering lamps may have added to the problem of staying awake by inducing a hypnotic effect on the listeners. It was quite late, and young Eutychus began to nod. (The term rendered “young man” refers to someone between eight and fourteen years of age.) His name means “good fortune,” and as we shall see, that’s exactly what he was to receive that night.

Finally, the drowsy Eutychus fell sound asleep and tumbled to the ground from the third-story window. (Presumably he fell to the *outside* of the building rather than to the inside.) The disciples rushed outside and Eutychus “was picked up dead” (20:9). Paul then “threw himself on the young man and put his arms around him” (20:10). He told the disciples not to be alarmed, and that, “He’s alive!” (20:10).

Luke told the story of the raising of this young man from the dead in such a casual manner as to make one wonder if he was really dead, or only seemed dead. However, it’s doubtful Luke would have singled out this story to tell if the boy had merely been knocked unconscious. Perhaps Luke was trying to show his readers that the power of God was so completely with Paul that such miracles were the natural order of the day. (The same feeling was engendered when we read that pieces of cloth Paul had touched could transmit healing to the sick.)

Paul’s gesture of leaning over Eutychus and embracing him reminds us of Old Testament stories of the great prophets Elijah and Elisha. Elijah restored the life of the son of the widow of Zarephath, who died from some unspecified illness (1 Kings 17:17-24). Elisha resuscitated the Shunammite’s

son who died as a result of a farming accident (2 Kings 4:33-36). Luke already told his readers the story of Jesus raising to life the only son of a widow from Nain (Luke 7:11-15) and Peter's raising of Dorcas (9:36-41). Even as the prophets of Israel, his peer the apostle Peter – and, of course, his Master, Jesus – Paul can be used by God to do good to the point of reversing a tragic death.

Almost casually, after such a dramatic event, Paul, who became hungry during what must have been the middle of the night, ate a meal (20:11). He continued talking until daylight, and then left. Luke concluded the scene by edging closer to telling his readers outright that Eutychus had been raised from death: “The people took the young man home alive and were greatly comforted” (20:12).

Trip to Miletus (Acts 20:13-15)

Paul left Troas, after a night without any sleep, and walked south along the Roman road to Assos (20:11, 13). The distance between the two cities was about 20 miles (32 kilometers), so it was quite a hike. (Luke didn't explain why Paul insisted on walking; it is possible that some of the Ephesian elders walked with him for further conversation.) Meanwhile, Luke and the rest of the delegation boarded a ship at Troas and sailed for Assos. Paul was taken on board at Assos and the delegation sailed to Mitylene, a port on the southeast coast of the island of Lesbos. From there the ship sailed the next day to Chios, the major city of the island of Chios. The stop on the following day was the island of Samos, west of Ephesus. The next day the ship arrived at Miletus, a major port at the mouth of the Meander River, about 30 miles (48 kilometers) south of Ephesus. (The boat made short one-day hops from port to port. This was customary for much of sea travel at the time.)

Luke (as he did when he had the information) gave his readers a day-by-day log of the journey to Jerusalem. Since he was on this trip with Paul, he may have kept a journal to which he could later refer. This and several other sections in Acts appear to be in the form of a travel journal.

Hurrying to Jerusalem (Acts 20:16)

Paul had booked passage on a ship that bypassed Ephesus because he didn't want to spend time in the province of Asia. Luke said “he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost” (20:16). Paul had missed Passover at Jerusalem, but if he could get there by Pentecost, he could still demonstrate to the mother church his loyalty to the Jewish traditions. A visit to Ephesus would have probably kept him in the area too long, as all his friends and the churches would have wanted to see him.

Paul stopped at Miletus instead, and sent a message to Ephesus, asking the elders of the church to come to him. This would have taken several days. A messenger had to be dispatched to Ephesus, and the elders had to be notified of the meeting. It may have taken them some time to get ready, and the trip to Miletus would have required more time as well.

Paul's speech (Acts 20:18-35)

Luke gave his readers only a brief synopsis of what must have been a lengthy meeting at Miletus between Paul and the elders. Still, in comparison with some of the other speeches in Acts, Luke devoted a fair amount of space to what Paul said. This is the only example in Acts of a speech given to a Christian audience. Even at that, it was not necessarily typical in all respects, because Paul was speaking to elders and not lay members of the church. Yet, the speech does have the flavor of his letters to the churches.

There is no mistaking the speech as being Paul's, rather than Peter's or James'. The content is unmistakably the thought, the concerns, even the expression of Paul. In the words of Howard Marshall, "The total impression gained from the speech is that here we are in touch with Paul himself" (*Acts*, 330). The speech at Miletus was close in style and content to Paul's own letters. The likeness between the two has been noted by a number of commentators.

The speech was also a farewell address. Paul seemed to have understood that this would be his last meeting with the Ephesians. There was a sense of foreboding in Paul's words, as he told the Ephesian elders he would never see them again. The speech has been described as Paul's last will and testament to the churches he had planted and loved very much. Luke had already given us samples of Paul's speeches to Jews (13:16-41) as well as to pagan audiences (14:15-17) and the educated of Athens (17:22-31). Later, he will give us further examples of speeches to Jews as well as to secular political leaders. This speech at Miletus is a sample of how Paul spoke to Christian audiences.

Served with humility (Acts 20:18-21)

Paul's address to the Ephesian elders began with what's called an apology or defense of his ministry and work. He reminded his listeners that from the first day to the last he "served the Lord with great humility and tears" at Ephesus (20:19). Paul referred to the fact that he had to endure "severe testing by the plots of Jewish opponents" at Ephesus. Luke had barely mentioned such opposition (19:19), concentrating rather on a single attack by the non-Jewish silversmith Demetrius. But as we saw earlier, there is a

strong indication in Paul's letters that he suffered greatly from Jewish persecution at Ephesus (1 Corinthians 15:32; 2 Corinthians 1:8). This verse corroborates that. This should remind us that Luke omitted many important events, even when they directly concerned the apostle Paul's work. We should not be surprised, then, that Luke's work was not a full history of the apostolic church – nor a full history of Paul – and was not written to be that.

Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that he had not hesitated to teach anything that was helpful to them, and he had taught “publicly and house to house” (20:20). That is, Paul explained the gospel in synagogues and meeting halls but he also ministered privately to people in their homes. Paul had both a public and private ministry. He preached publicly, in the synagogue and the hall of Tyrannus (19:8-9) and privately, to the church that met in the home of Aquila and Priscilla (1 Corinthians 16:19). When he taught, Paul “declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus” (20:21). This was a way of describing the essence of the gospel message. Peter, for example, had urged Jews to repent and turn to God and have faith in Jesus as the Messiah (3:13, 16, 19).

Compelled by the Spirit (Acts 20:22)

In the second part of his speech, Paul drastically changed the subject and tone. He turned from his past work to the future, centering on his forthcoming trip to Jerusalem. Paul said he was “compelled by the Spirit” to go to Jerusalem (20:22). It's not clear here who was doing the “compelling.” The Greek construction allows us to take this as Paul's own spirit compelling him to go to Jerusalem, in the sense of his being determined to go – or feeling some great need to do so. Or we can take the phrase as telling us Paul was being moved by the Holy Spirit, who was impelling him to make the trip.

The New International Version has taken this phrase to be a reference to the Holy Spirit. But others understand this as indicating Paul's own human spirit. Perhaps it is best to understand the phrase as representing a combination of the two ideas. That is, Paul may have *felt himself* to be divinely compelled to go to Jerusalem. In this, his concern to take an offering to the poor saints in Jerusalem loomed large.

Holy Spirit warns me (Acts 20:23-24)

If Paul felt himself compelled to go to Jerusalem – or if the Holy Spirit was somehow “compelling” him – he nonetheless faced a journey of great uncertainty. If the Spirit had compelled him, God had not revealed the purpose of his journey. But the Spirit told Paul that great trials awaited him there. “I am going to Jerusalem,” Paul told the elders, “not knowing what

will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me” (20:22-23). Luke hadn’t given his readers any examples of these messages, but he soon will (21:10-11).

We don’t know when Paul began to receive these warnings, but they must have started some time earlier. His concern about the trip was already expressed in Romans, which was probably written in Corinth, during his third missionary journey. There he asked the church, “Pray that I may be kept safe from the unbelievers in Judea and that the contribution I take to Jerusalem may be favorably received by the Lord’s people there” (Romans 15:31).

In spite of the warnings and his own fears, he refused to back away from the trip. He said he considered his life of no value, except as it could be used to “finish the race and complete the task” that the risen Christ had given him (20:24). This familiar metaphor of the athlete competing in the games and finishing the race is paralleled in his own epistles (2 Timothy 4:7, with 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Galatians 2:2; Philippians 3:12-14).

Paul saw his task as one of “testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (20:24). This same attitude of self-less service to Christ despite persecution and the possibility of martyrdom is expressed in Paul’s letters (2 Corinthians 4:8-12; 6:4-10; Philippians 1:19-21; 3:8). But we shouldn’t see Paul as a passive martyr. Paul used the protection of the Roman government and any other means possible to escape persecution and death. His goal was always to preach the gospel on another day.

As Jesus’ final trip (Acts 20:23)

Luke described Paul’s trip to Jerusalem in similar terms as Jesus’ final journey. Luke knew that Paul didn’t die at Jerusalem. Yet, he seems to have emphasized common elements of the two trips. As Jesus’ final trip to Jerusalem was accompanied by predictions of suffering (Luke 9:22, 44; 18:31-33), so was Paul’s (21:10-11). As Jesus endured a plot by Jews at Jerusalem (Luke 20:20; 22:3-6), so would Paul (23:12-15). As Jesus was handed over to the Gentiles (Luke 23:1), so would Paul be (21:30-33). As Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem ended in his arrest, a defense before the Jewish people and elders, as well as a Roman procurator and king (Luke 22:66; 23:1, 6), so would Paul’s trip end (22:1-21; 24:10-21; 26:23). In each case, the Jews cried “Get rid of him,” (Luke 23:18; Acts 21:36). But the accused – again in both cases – was declared innocent by the Romans (Luke 23:4, 14, 22; Acts 23:29; 25:25-26; 26:31-32).

In short, Luke painted Paul’s journey to Jerusalem in terms of the

Suffering Servant. As Luke, writing several years after the event, could see that there was a more important reason for going to Jerusalem than just delivering a gift of money. What comes out of the Jerusalem trip was the city's final rejection of the prophet-apostle Paul. The city continued to be the one that killed all the prophets, as it did Jesus. Now, only the final consequences were to be worked out – the war with Rome, and the destruction of the city and temple. The beginning of those shattering events were but a decade away.

None to see Paul again (Acts 20:25-28)

In the third part of his speech, Paul began discussing his dire future expectations. He told the elders, “I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again” (20:25). Paul was bidding farewell to the Aegean world of Asia and Achaia. If he escaped Jerusalem with his life – which was not certain – he was off to Rome and the western Mediterranean. And he seemed certain he wouldn't ever come back this way again.

Once again Paul defended his record. He had not hesitated to proclaim “the whole will of God” to them and he was “innocent of the blood of any of you” (20:26-27). As the watchman, he had warned the church and elders to follow the Way of faith and love.

Paul insisted that the elders must keep watch over their own spiritual condition. But they were also elders, so Paul told them to properly shepherd the flock “of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (20:28). The Greek word for “overseers” is *episkopoi*, or bishops. It is more or less equivalent to “elders” (14:23). But here Paul was not speaking of a particular office, but rather of the elders' function as “shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (20:28).

The last part of the phrase – “bought with his own blood” – is awkwardly translated by the NIV. The New Testament doesn't speak of God shedding his own blood. An alternative reading would have the phrase read “the blood of his Own One,” with “Own” referring to Jesus. We find a similar phrase in Romans 8:32. Paul's central message about the redemptive value of the death of Jesus comes through in the phrase. Although there are few places in Acts in which the significance of the cross is discussed, this verse is a clear assertion of the doctrine of the atonement.

In any case, the overseers are guardians of the flock that was purchased with Jesus' blood. They must nurture it with good spiritual food, providing guidance and pastoral care.

The “flock” is a familiar Old Testament metaphor for God’s people (Psalm 100:3; Isaiah 40:11; Jeremiah 13:17; Ezekiel 34). Jesus capitalized on it, applying it to his disciples (Luke 12:32; 15:3-7; 19:10; John 10:1-30). The “shepherds” are the *watchmen* who keep a vigil over the flock. This expression also has Old Testament roots in the watchman of Ezekiel 33:1-6. However, the shepherds or overseers, unlike the prophets, were to watch over the spiritual house of Israel, the church of God. Luke had Paul call the church the “church of God,” and this rings true of him. It is a phrase found exclusively in Paul’s letters, as in 1 Corinthians 1:2.

Wolves will come in (Acts 20:29-30)

The “wolves” were the other element of Paul’s pastoral analogy. The wolves were the ones who threatened the herd, the church. In the fourth part of his speech, Paul spoke of wolves in terms of what Paul foresaw would occur in the church after his passing. As Paul looked toward the future, he painted a somewhat dismal prospect for the Ephesian church. He told the elders: “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them” (20:29-30).

These tragic circumstances began to take shape, even in Paul’s lifetime. They are described in the letters to Timothy, who apparently ministered to the church in Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3-4; 19-20; 4:1-3; 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 1:15; 2:14-18; 3:1-9). A generation later, the Ephesian church, while rooting out some heresy, had become so loveless that the risen Christ threatened it with a loss (Revelation 2:4-5).

In fact, 2 Timothy 1:5 referred to a wholesale revolt of the churches throughout the entire province of Asia. The apostasy in the Asian churches must have begun when Luke wrote Acts. No doubt his reference to Paul’s prophecy about a future insurrection was meant to comfort his readers who knew about it. The message was: the problems in the church should not surprise us, for these are the things that happen among human beings, and Paul even warned us about “wolves” before they tore apart the flock.

“Wolves” is a much-used metaphor for false teachers and apostates in the Bible. Jesus described false prophets as wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matthew 7:15). He told his disciples they would be like sheep among wolves (Luke 10:3). Now, Paul was telling the elders that he had warned them for three years – the entire time he was with them – about the danger of apostasy (20:31). But he would no longer be able to guide them, and they were on their own to deal with any future problems as best as they could.

Supplied my needs (Acts 20:32-34)

Paul closed his final message to the Ephesian elders with a blessing. He committed the elders to God (20:32). Though Paul would be absent, the word of grace could build them up spiritually. Paul insisted he had not desired anyone's possessions, but had worked to support himself and his associates. "These hands of mine have supplied my own needs," he averred (20:34). Paul probably said this with a flourish of his arms, which reminded his hearers of seeing him toiling at his tentmaking trade (18:2). Luke's reference to Paul's protestations of self-support also revealed the voice of the apostle as seen in his letters. Some examples are 1 Corinthians 4:12; 9:12-18; 1 Thessalonians 2:9; 4:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:7-10.

As he often did, Paul based his moral instruction on Jesus' teaching. His own hard work and ministry had served as an example that the strong should help the weak. This, Paul said, reflected the words Jesus had spoken: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (20:35). These words do not appear in any of the Gospels, though their spirit is certainly reflected in other sayings of Jesus (Matthew 10:8; Luke 6:38; John 13:34). The saying may have circulated in some collection or had been preserved in oral tradition. Obviously, not everything Jesus said and did found its way into the four canonical Gospels (John 20:30; 21:25).

Paul's urgent speech was now over, and he was ready to depart. The elders knelt down with Paul, and he said a final prayer. Luke didn't give us the substance of Paul's prayer. But we can know its general tenor from his letters. Commentators have suggested the following prayers found in Paul's letters may echo his prayer at Miletus: Ephesians 1:15-23; Philippians 1:3-11; Colossians 1:3-14; and 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3; 3:11-13; 5:23-24. The elders hugged Paul and wept, for this was the last time they would see or hear from the man who was their human father in the faith. It was a time of great emotion, and Luke caught its pathos with his references to tears, embraces, kisses and grieving.

PAUL PREACHES THE GOSPEL IN PRISON (ACTS 21-28)

THE JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM (21:1-16)

Put out to sea (Acts 21:1-3)

Luke continued to reflect the emotional scene surrounding Paul's departure by saying the travelers had to "tear themselves away" from the elders (21:1). Luke reminded us he was traveling with Paul by inserting another "we" into the narration. He also continued to provide a port-by-port travel guide of Paul's trip. After leaving Miletus, the ship sailed south to the island of Cos, where it anchored for the night. The next day the ship sailed southwest to the island of Rhodes. From there the party docked at the coastal city of Patara.

Patara was a commercial city and possessed a fine harbor. It was a popular port-of-call for large vessels plying such eastern Mediterranean areas as Macedonia, Achaia, Asia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt. At Patara, Paul's party changed ships and boarded a large merchant vessel that would travel non-stop to Tyre, a distance of about 400 miles (644 kilometers).

Luke again demonstrated his accuracy in details. He correctly described the stages of a coast-hugging ship's journey, as well as sea travel in general of those times. For example, individuals journeying by sea would have to find available ships and accept delays caused by loading and unloading cargo. In this case, when Paul's ship reached Tyre it had to unload its cargo, which apparently took several days. Paul and his delegation disembarked and located some disciples in the city with whom they stayed a week (21:4). A church in Tyre had probably been established by the Christian Hellenists who had been forced to flee Jerusalem after Stephen was martyred (11:19). Paul and a delegation from Antioch had earlier met with Christians in Phoenicia (and presumably in Tyre) on their way to the Jerusalem council (15:3).

Through the Spirit (Acts 21:4)

The disciples in Tyre urged Paul "through the Spirit" not to go to Jerusalem (21:4). This reference to warnings of the Spirit picked up the thought that in every city the Holy Spirit had been warning Paul of the hardships awaiting him in Jerusalem (20:23). This again brings up the question of whether Paul was disregarding the voice of the Spirit in going to Jerusalem. Perhaps that is framing the question in the wrong terms. Rather,

the Holy Spirit seemed only to be giving Paul some advance warning about what to expect when he got to Jerusalem, so that he would not be taken off his guard.

The believers would be expressing natural concern about Paul's safety and would be trying to dissuade him from going. The Holy Spirit seemed to be expressing a neutral position regarding whether he should or should not go to Jerusalem. Paul appeared to have a choice about the matter. He could go to Jerusalem or not. Paul chose to go to Jerusalem, and was willing to suffer the consequences of his action – which he did.

Continued on their way (Acts 21:5-7)

After a week at Tyre, the ship was ready to sail, and Paul prepared to continue his trip to Jerusalem. The entire church – men, women and children – accompanied Paul from the city to the coastal port area. In a scene reminiscent of Paul's departure from Ephesus (20:36-37), the group knelt together on the beach and said a final prayer (21:5-6). Emotional goodbyes were exchanged and Paul's party boarded the ship.

The ship made its way south to Ptolemais, about 25 or so miles (40 kilometers) south of Tyre, where it stopped overnight (21:7). Ptolemais, called Acco in the Old Testament (Judges 1:31), had been an important Phoenician seaport. It was renamed Acre in Crusader days. Today, Haifa is the important port in the area. The ship continued south, and the next day Paul's party reached Caesarea, about 35 miles (56 kilometers) south of Ptolemais. The city had a magnificent harbor built by Herod, and it served as the port for Jerusalem. It was also the Roman provincial capital of Judea. (See additional comments on 10:1.)

Philip the evangelist (Acts 21:8-9)

In Caesarea, Paul and the delegation stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist for “a number of days” (21:8, 10). Luke had left Philip at Caesarea at the end of a missionary tour some two decades earlier (8:40), and this is his only reappearance in the book. Philip was apparently living in Caesarea, possibly throughout those two decades. By now he had “four unmarried daughters who prophesied” (21:9). According to traditions the church historian Eusebius preserved, Philip and his daughters later moved to Hierapolis in the province of Asia. The daughters supposedly provided information on the early days of the church to a bishop of Hierapolis, Papias, for his now lost books on Jesus' teachings (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.9).

During his years in Caesarea, Philip probably continued to evangelize the maritime plain. No doubt, he was also an elder in any church that might have

existed in the Caesarea area. Luke here identified Philip as “one of the Seven” (21:8). This refers back to his appointment along with six others to take care of the Hellenistic Jewish widows in the Jerusalem church (6:1-6). The title “the Seven” was complementary to “the Twelve,” and perhaps they had a special ministry to Hellenistic Christian Jews.

Philip was called an “evangelist” (21:8). The Greek word for “evangelist” occurs only twice more in the New Testament (Ephesians 4:11; 2 Timothy 4:5). Paul had admonished Timothy to do the work of an evangelist in supervising the affairs of the growing church at Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3).

Agabus the prophet (Acts 21:10-11)

While Paul was at the home of Philip, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea (21:10). Caesarea was in the province of Judea, but the city was not considered part of the Jews’ land because of its Gentile population and outlook. Agabus had appeared in Luke’s account when he prophesied of a severe famine that would eventually touch much of the Roman world (11:27-28). Agabus apparently lived in Jerusalem, and earlier he was said to be from that city.

Agabus now took Paul’s belt and tied his own hands and feet with it. Then he told Paul: “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles’” (21:11). The prophecy was fulfilled in principle, but not in detail, when a mob of Jews grabbed Paul and the Roman garrison commander “ordered him to be bound with two chains” (21:33). Technically speaking, the Jews leaders did not “bind the owner of this belt,” and they did not “hand him over” – rather, the Romans *rescued* Paul from a Jewish mob. But Luke is not troubled by such discrepancies; he does not see prophecy as being an exact picture, but as a general prediction of the outcome: Paul ends up being imprisoned by the Gentiles.

Luke chose his wording to bring out, in a literary manner, the similarity between the fate of Jesus and Paul in their final trip to Jerusalem.

Many of the Old Testament prophets had begun their oracles with the words, “Thus says the Lord...” (Isaiah 3:16; Jeremiah 2:31; Ezekiel 4:13; Amos 3:11; Nahum 1:2; Haggai 1:6; Zechariah 1:16). In Luke, the Holy Spirit substitutes for the Lord, but Agabus is shown to be in the tradition of Israel’s prophets of old. Agabus’ prophecy also reminds us of Old Testament oracles in that the message was conveyed through action as well as word. Ahijah the Shilonite tore his cloak to demonstrate how Solomon’s kingdom would be broken up (1 Kings 11:29-39). Isaiah walked about naked and barefoot to

demonstrate how the Assyrians would humiliate the Egyptians and take them captive (20:2-4). Jeremiah shattered a clay jar to show how God would cause Jerusalem to be destroyed (19:1-13). Ezekiel built a model to portray the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem (4:1-3).

Paul had earlier stated that the Holy Spirit had warned him that he faced prisons and hardships in Jerusalem (20:23; 21:4). Luke now gave his readers an example of how the Spirit warned him. In this case, it was through an inspired prophet from the Jerusalem church. We should note that Agabus' prophecy contained no command that Paul should break off his journey and not go to Jerusalem. On the other hand, neither did Agabus tell Paul to continue his journey to fulfill some purpose of God. Paul's decision was apparently in his own hands.

Pleaded with Paul (Acts 21:12-16)

Luke, the Gentile delegation and the Caesarean disciples "pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem" (21:12). Earlier, the disciples at Tyre had also strongly urged Paul not to go (21:4). But Paul's inner conviction to go to Jerusalem was stronger. "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart?" said Paul, "I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (21:13).

Seeing Paul's determination, Luke said everyone "gave up and said, 'The Lord's will be done'" (21:14). The group then made preparations for the final leg of the trip to Jerusalem. Some of the disciples from Caesarea decided to go with Paul and the delegation.

When the group arrived in the Jerusalem area, it stayed at the home of Mnason, a long-time disciple from Cyprus (21:16). Perhaps he was one of the missionaries from Cyprus who had preached the gospel in Phoenicia during the early days of the church (11:20). Mnason must have been a well-to-do member of the church. He had a large enough home, as well as the resources, to host not only Paul but also his delegation (and perhaps the disciples from Caesarea).

ARREST IN JERUSALEM (ACTS 21:17-23:25)

JAMES' PLAN AND ROMAN CUSTODY (21:17-36)

Paul arrives (Acts 21:17)

Luke now began a fateful chapter in Paul's life with the casual words, "When we arrived in Jerusalem..." (21:17). The remaining chapters of Acts will be devoted to about four years of Paul's life, all of it spent as a prisoner of the Roman government. Luke devoted a disproportionate amount of space to these four years. He especially emphasized a few speeches Paul delivered as well as his harrowing sea voyage to Rome.

Luke's main concern with the Jerusalem trip was to show his readers that Paul continued to receive the blessing of the mother church in Jerusalem. Luke wrote that when the delegation arrived in Jerusalem the believers there "received us warmly" (21:17). The "us" referred to Luke and the delegates from the Gentile churches who had brought the relief fund to the mother church.

The third "we" section ends here (21:17-18). However, we shouldn't assume Luke left Palestine. He may have used this time to gather information for the writing of his Gospel and the early chapters of Acts. He remained close to Paul. (He will be with Paul on his sea voyage to Rome.) But because Paul's activities became such a focus of Luke's narrative, he may have chosen to speak of him as though he were alone.

Went to see James (Acts 21:18-19)

The day after arriving in Jerusalem, Paul and the delegation had a meeting with James and the elders. James was the leader and spokesperson of the Jerusalem church, just as he was during the landmark conference of A.D. 49 (15:13). Paul reported in great detail on his missionary journeys and the impact of the gospel among the Gentile populations. Luke summarized Paul's report as being positively received, saying, "When they heard this, they praised God" (21:20).

James and the elders recognized that God's direction had been present in Paul's work, and Luke wanted to point this up. We remember that the Jerusalem leaders had also given Peter a positive review when he explained how the first Gentiles had been converted (11:18). Luke wanted his readers to know that Paul's work, no less than Peter's, had been accepted by the mother church as divinely inspired.

Paul had feared that he might be rejected by the Jerusalem church (Romans 15:31). But quite the opposite had happened; he had been accepted.

The church, both its Jewish and Gentile portions, had remained united. Paul was at one with the rest of the Jewish Christian element of the church.

What happened to the offering? (Acts 21:19)

Almost certainly, Paul and the delegates presented the collection for the poor saints when they reported the progress of the Gentile mission. What happened to the offering? How was it received? From Paul's epistles, it seems that presenting the offering personally was the chief reason for his going to Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-4; Romans 15:25-27, with 2 Corinthians 8-9). Perhaps Paul saw the collection as a way of completing his mission to the eastern part of the Empire, before embarking on an evangelizing tour of the West.

But Luke referred to the offering only once, in an aside in Paul's speech before Felix (24:17). This showed that Luke knew about the offering (how could he not know about it, since he was part of the delegation?). He must have also been aware that the relief fund was a major reason for Paul coming to Jerusalem. Given Luke's tendency for trying to show that Paul's Gentile mission and the Jerusalem church marched together, it seems odd that he would not discuss the offering. Some speculate that Luke's silence means that the offering was rejected, and the attempt to demonstrate unity failed. But due to Luke's silence, we do not know for sure.

Zealous for the Law (Acts 21:20-21)

While the church leaders received Paul and his delegation warmly (21:17), many Jerusalem disciples apparently still had some doubts about him. James had recognized that Paul's work had been guided by God. But now he also had to address a public-relations problem in his own congregation.

There is a good reason why Paul was mistrusted. Some within the Jerusalem church were giving credence to rumors that Paul had been teaching against the ancient Jewish customs. That is, that he was teaching *Jews* not to practice their ancestral religion. The elders explained the problem to Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law. They have been informed that you teach all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs" (21:20-21).

The phrase "many thousands" translates the Greek wording that is often used for a very large number, or myriads. Luke had already told us that many thousands had responded to the gospel message in the Jerusalem area during the earliest days of the church. It began with 3,000 on Pentecost (2:41), increased to 5,000 (4:4), to which were added more converts (6:7). These

believers were all zealous for the law and the Jewish religious customs, as Paul had been (Galatians 1:14). They would distrust to anyone who insulted the Torah. And Paul had been accused of that by Diaspora Jews.

For Paul, circumcision made no difference regarding one's status before God (Galatians 5:6; 6:15). However, so far as we know, Paul never told *Jewish* converts not to circumcise their children, nor was he opposed to its practice by Jewish believers. We have already been told in Acts that Paul does not teach against the Jewish Torah in and of itself. He circumcised Timothy for the sake of expediency (16:3); he observed some of the Jewish pilgrim festivals (20:5, 17); he even took part in a Nazirite vow (18:18). The rumors the Jerusalem church heard were not true.

But the zealous Christian Jews of Jerusalem were concerned lest the rumors were true, that Paul was telling Jews to stop observing their ancestral customs. (Teaching the Gentiles to do so was not the issue here.) As long as Paul was out of sight travelling through the empire, he was out of mind. But with his arrival in the city, the Jerusalem church leaders found themselves with a great problem. Its leaders had received a person who was possibly tainted as being a renegade – and worse still, teaching others to be renegades. By welcoming Paul, the leaders seemed to be helping the “apostate” Paul. Something had to be done to put the evil rumors to rest.

Join in purification (Acts 21:22-24)

The church leaders thought they had a solution to their public-relations problem. As it happened, four Jewish church members were in the middle of observing a Nazirite vow. The elders approached Paul with a request regarding these four individuals. They said: “Take these men, join in their purification rites and pay their expenses, so that they can have their heads shaved. Then everyone will know there is no truth in these reports about you, but that you yourself are living in obedience to the law” (21:24).

The Nazirite vow, unless it had a specified time, normally lasted 30 days. During the period of the vow, the confessor would abstain from wine and strong drink, from any defiling contacts such as with a dead body, and would not cut his hair. When the period of the vow was over, the vow-taker would present an offering in the temple. His hair would be cut and sacrificially burned, also at the temple. Another Jew might associate himself with a Nazirite by paying for his offering, something that was regarded as a devout deed. However, if he had just returned from residence among Gentiles (as Paul had), he would be considered as defiled. He himself would have to undergo a separate purification rite.

Luke's account is hazy on exactly what Paul did. It is not altogether clear as to how and why Paul was to be purified. However, his being ritually unclean after a long residence in Gentile lands seems to explain this adequately. The fact that the four men were to have their heads shaved at the end of their vow period indicates they were undertaking a Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:1-21). (For additional comments on the Nazirite vow, see the commentary on 18:18.)

By joining in the rites of the four men and paying for their required offerings, Paul would be making a public demonstration of his respect for Jewish tradition. He would be participating in a hallowed ancestral custom, and no one could claim he was teaching Jews to abandon the laws of Moses.

Decree restated (Acts 21:25)

The elders had asked Paul to show everyone that he still lived as a Jew. They felt constrained to explain again that no such demands would be made of Gentile believers. They had no intention of going back on their previous ruling. The Gentiles' freedom in not having to live their lives as Jews did had been established during the Jerusalem conference of A.D. 49 (15:19-22). The charter still stood, with the exceptions set down at the conference.

The elders reaffirmed the Gentiles' freedom by pointing out the same four regulations that had been part of the earlier decree (21:25). It seems odd that the elders repeated the decrees word-for-word back to Paul. He knew them thoroughly, having been a major player at the conference. He himself read the decrees to a number of churches. Perhaps it was Luke who was repeating the four regulations as a literary device for the benefit of his readers. Today, we would put such information in a footnote.

It's possible Paul initially objected to the elders' suggestion of participating in the purification ritual. Paul may have thought that Judaizers in the church would now claim that he and James had gone back on their agreement. He wanted reassurances that if he participated in the purification rites and vow this would not be interpreted as the church's rejecting the prior agreement. This could be done by publicly reiterating the Jerusalem church's commitment to the decree of Acts 15. The elders would have also needed to reaffirm the exceptions, which they did (21:25). That might be the reason they were repeated word for word here in Luke's account.

There may be a third reason why the elders repeated the four prohibitions stated in Acts 15. Paul apparently had ceased teaching the importance of at least one of the four regulations. He wrote in his letter to the church in Corinth that there was nothing wrong in eating food sold in the meat market,

although most such meat had previously been sacrificed to an idol (1 Corinthians 8:4). One merely needed to be careful not to offend a church member who thought it was wrong. Perhaps the elders had heard about what amounted to Paul's departure from the agreement. They repeated the four stipulations to emphasize that, as far as they were concerned, the stipulations were still valid.

In any case, the request of James and the elders had nothing to do with the way Paul was carrying out the Gentile mission. They were not trying to renegotiate the terms under which Gentiles could be allowed into the church. The problem to be solved was Paul's negative image, that he had supposedly taught Jews (not Gentiles) to "turn away from Moses" (21:21), and its impact on the church. We as readers of Acts already know the accusation is false.

No gentile may enter (Acts 21:26-30)

For the sake of unity and to help the Jerusalem church, Paul agreed to follow its urging and join the purification rites of the four believers. On the next day Paul took the four men and purified himself along with them (21:26). Then he went to the temple, where he gave the priest notice as to when the purification period would end. He would have also taken care of the offering to be made by each of the four men.

Apparently, the purification time still had a week to go. When the seven days were about over, some unconverted Jews from the province of Asia spotted Paul in the temple (21:27). (They were in Jerusalem for Pentecost, as in 2:5.) That's when the riot began. The Jews seized Paul and began shouting, "Help us! This is the man who teaches everyone everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple and defiled this holy place" (21:28).

Earlier, the Jews had seen Paul in Jerusalem with Trophimus. Apparently, they knew Trophimus to be a Gentile, and assumed Paul had brought him into the temple. (The mob said Paul had brought "Greeks" into the temple, that is, more than one. Perhaps they thought Paul had brought the entire delegation into its inner courts.) No Gentile was allowed into the temple's inner courts. The Romans even allowed the Sanhedrin to execute the death penalty for anyone who violated this regulation, something that Josephus (*Antiquities* 15:417; *Wars* 6:124-126) and Philo (*Embassy to Gaius* 212) both mention.

Josephus wrote that there was a stone wall separating the Court of the Gentiles from the inner courts reserved for Jews alone (Josephus, *Wars* 5:193-194). At regular intervals, pillars warned in Greek and Latin that no foreigner

was permitted to go into the inner courts or Holy Place.

Paul was a Jew and was entitled to pass beyond the dividing wall into the inner courts. The death penalty was applicable only to a Gentile who had violated the ban. But since Paul had been accused of defiling the holy temple, the mob was not interested in discussing the finer points of the law. According to Luke, they were trying to kill him on the spot, without even a trial (21:31).

It was the Diaspora Jews from Asia who started the riot. No doubt these were some of the same Jews who had been so hostile to Paul in Ephesus (19:9; 20:19). Paul's trouble was caused by a mob of unconverted Jews, instigated by Diaspora Jews from Asia. It was not caused by the Jewish Christians of Jerusalem. Most likely the church would have liked to help Paul, but it was powerless to intervene. (The church in Jerusalem, along with James, now disappears from Luke's account.)

The suggested strategy by the church elders to have Paul take part in the purification rites had backfired. Paul's appearance in the temple provoked the very situation among unconverted Jews that the elders hoped to avoid within the church.

Commander of troops (Acts 21:31-32)

When the Jerusalemites heard the commotion in the temple area, they came running from every part of the city (21:30). Paul was dragged from the inner courts of the temple, and its gates were shut by the temple police. The mob apparently began beating Paul, probably in the outer court of the temple. Luke repeated the thought that "the whole city of Jerusalem was in an uproar" (21:31, 30).

The commander of the Roman troops quickly heard about the rioting. He took some soldiers, and they ran into the crowd to disperse it (21:32). The Roman garrison in Jerusalem was positioned to intervene at a moment's notice if any disturbance occurred in the temple. The festivals were a particularly dangerous time, according to Josephus (*Antiquities* 20:105-112; *Wars* 5:238-247). To be able to quell any temple disturbance, the garrison was quartered in the fortress of Antonia, in the northwest corner of the temple area. The Antonia tower overlooked the temple, and two flights of steps gave troops stationed there direct access to the court of the Gentiles. The troops could rush down and quickly quell any disturbance, and this is what probably saved Paul's life.

The commander of the fortress was a Roman military officer, the chief Roman authority in Jerusalem. We will learn that his name was Claudius

Lysias (23:26). He would have been directly responsible to the procurator at Caesarea. Lysias had a Greek name, and he had probably advanced through the ranks of the Roman army. He had earlier paid some official to place him on a list of consideration to receive Roman citizenship. The fact that he had the name Claudius probably means that he received his citizenship under the reign of this emperor, and took his name as a token of honor.

As a commander (Greek, *chiliarchos*), Lysias was the “leader of a thousand” or the head of a “cohort.” At full strength, the cohort would have consisted of a thousand troops, including foot soldiers and horsemen. The Jerusalem garrison is thought to have consisted of some equivalent number of troops. We will learn later that the Roman military contingent in the city could afford to send some 470 soldiers to escort Paul to Caesarea, so it must have been at full strength (23:23).

Paul arrested (Acts 21:33)

When the rioters saw the troops coming, they stopped beating Paul. Since Paul seemed to be the focus of the disturbance, the commander arrested him, and ordered that he should “be bound with two chains” (21:33). This probably meant that Paul was handcuffed to a soldier on either side of him, much in the manner of Peter (12:6). At this point, in a roundabout way, the prophecy of Agabus had come true (21:11).

The commander tried to ascertain what Paul had done to cause such a riot. But people were shouting different things, and with the din of the crowd, confusion reigned. The commander then decided to take Paul into the Antonia barracks (21:34). Meanwhile, some in the mob were still trying to get at Paul, so he had to be carried by the soldiers into the fortress (21:35). A crowd followed the soldiers, shouting, “Get rid of him!” (21:36). The shout was similar to that which greeted Jesus in about the same spot over a quarter of a century earlier (Luke 23:18; John 19:15). Luke was pressing the similarity and wanted readers to note it.

PAUL'S SPEECH AND ROMAN "PROTECTION"

"Aren't you the Egyptian?" (Acts 21:37-39)

As Paul was about to be carried into the fortress, he spoke to the commander in Greek, asking if he might say something to him (21:37). The commander was surprised to be addressed in Greek. Why he should have been startled to hear Paul speak Greek is not clear, since it was the lingua franca of the Roman world at the time. Perhaps the commander thought Paul was an uneducated foreigner, but Paul spoke Greek like a native, without the accent common in Judea.

Also unclear is why the commander should surmise that Paul was a well-known Egyptian insurrectionist "who started a revolt and led four thousand terrorists out into the wilderness some time ago?" (21:38). Josephus spoke of such an Egyptian who perhaps three years earlier had appeared in Jerusalem during the procuratorship of Felix, claiming to be a prophet. According to Josephus, he led some 30,000 followers to the Mount of Olives in order to overthrow Jerusalem (*Wars* 2:261-262; *Antiquities* 20:169-172. (The commander estimated the Egyptian's followers at 4,000, which was probably nearer the correct size, given Josephus' tendency to exaggerate.)

The Romans killed and captured many of the Egyptian's followers, though he escaped. The commander's conclusion that Paul was that Egyptian is perhaps not too unreasonable, given the circumstances. Perhaps he thought the Jews, after discovering the Egyptian in the temple, had set upon him as an imposter.

Paul responded by saying to the commander, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, a citizen of no ordinary city" (21:39). The Tarsus of Paul's day was an important center of Hellenistic culture. Paul was telling the commander he was no uneducated anarchist from Egypt, but came from elsewhere, a cultured city of the empire. Paul quickly identified himself as a Jew. He wanted to be sure the commander didn't summarily hand him over to Jewish authorities as a Gentile who had violated sacred temple areas (22:25).

However, when Paul said he was a "citizen" of Tarsus, he wasn't appealing to his Roman citizenship. That he had such citizenship will come out only later (22:25). Paul here was underscoring his loyalty to the Roman Empire. He came from an important city in the empire – and was proud of being one of its citizens.

Paul also asked the commander for permission to speak to the people, which he received. This defense is the first of a series of speeches that dominate the rest of the narrative until Paul leaves Caesarea for Rome. Why

the commander allowed Paul to speak is not clear. Perhaps by doing so he hoped to get at the reason why Paul had been attacked by the Jews. Neither is it clear why the crowd, which was in a hysterical frame of mind, would have even listened to a word of what Paul had to say.

There are probably logical explanations for both situations, but Luke chose not to discuss these things in order to keep his account brief and moving along. It's also been argued that Paul would have been in no condition to speak after receiving a thorough beating. However, it's not certain just how much he had been pummeled before being rescued. In any case, in another situation at Lystra Paul apparently had been stoned into insensibility, but was still able to get up and go into the city (14:14). Then, on the next day he left on a rugged trip into the next town, Derbe.

When the commander gave Paul permission to speak, he motioned to the crowd from the steps of the Antonia fortress. Surprisingly, everyone quieted down. Paul began his defense in Aramaic, which caused the crowd to be even more attentive (21:40). "They became very quiet," Luke said (22:2). Aramaic was the language of Palestine, and of those in the eastern Roman Empire who did not speak Greek. This is the first of three speeches that Paul would make in his defense, and which take up a considerable part of this section (22:1-21; 24:10-21; 26:2-23). (His attempted defense before the Sanhedrin in 23:1-9, a fourth speech, never really got under way.)

"Brothers and fathers, listen..." (Acts 22:1)

Luke was concerned with Paul as a credible witness for the gospel both before Jews and Gentile political figures. The speeches afford us an opportunity to learn something of Paul's background and how he spoke to different audiences. The present speech from the steps of the Antonia fortress dealt with the personal charge against him, that he had acted like a Jewish apostate (21:28). As he spoke, Paul would locate his missionary work in a Jewish context, and would stress that his teaching is based on a revelation from God.

Paul opened his defense by saying in Aramaic, "Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense" (22:1). By speaking Aramaic, Paul was putting himself on the side of the crowd. When he referred to his listeners in a personal way, Paul was trying to make himself one with the group. Stephen had done the same thing in his speech before the Sanhedrin (7:2).

Born, brought up, trained (Acts 22:3)

Paul began his speech by recalling his birth, upbringing and training. He would do the same thing in his speech before King Agrippa (26:4-11). Paul

also gave similar autobiographical material in some of his epistles (2 Corinthians 11:22-29; Galatians 1:13-16, Philippians 3:4-6, and 1 Timothy 1:12-16). As a result, we know a good deal about the apostle Paul's background. This helps us understand the New Testament writings more completely. (The passages in Paul's letters should be read in conjunction with this section of Acts for a fuller picture of Paul's education in Judaism.)

Paul said he was a Jew from Tarsus in Cilicia, but was "brought up in this city" (22:3). Then, he said, "I studied under Gamaliel and was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors." We do not know how old Paul was when he came to Jerusalem. His excellent Greek, his use of the Greek Old Testament, and other marks of a Hellenist culture point to an education outside of Palestine. Tarsus, as a university city and international port of call, would have been a good city in which to receive a Hellenistic education.

However, Paul was not specific enough about where he spent his early years for us to do more than conjecture about his youth. What we do know is that Paul's sister and her family (or at least his nephew) lived in Jerusalem (23:16). It's possible Paul could have travelled back and forth between Tarsus and Jerusalem in his early years. He may have lived with his sister's family in the Jerusalem area, perhaps even in his pre-teen years.

"I am a Jew" (Acts 22:3-5)

Not only was Paul "brought up" in Jerusalem, he studied under Gamaliel, a leader of the Pharisees and a highly respected teacher of the law. (Luke introduced us to Gamaliel in 5:34.) Paul could have begun studying Torah under Gamaliel during his teen-age years. Paul was such a good student that he advanced beyond many of those studying with him (Galatians 1:14). In his willingness to use violence against heretics, he was more zealous than his mentor.

As a Pharisee, Paul was "thoroughly trained in the law" (22:3), which consisted of both the written and oral traditions. Later, he would tell Agrippa, "I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee" (26:5). Of course, what Paul was trying to do was to emphasize that he was a Jew of Jews, not a renegade.

Paul also told his listeners: "I was just as zealous for God as any of you are today" (22:3). In a similar vein, he told the Galatians he had been extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers (1:14). He acknowledged that the Jews were zealous for God as well (Romans 10:2). Paul was telling his listeners that he appreciated their enthusiasm for God, but that he could match and surpass their fervor. Again, Paul was saying he was no outsider, no renegade, no apostate – he was one of them.

But after his conversion, Paul did not put any value on this righteousness of the self, which was not based on true knowledge or faith. Paul counted his former religious accomplishments as rubbish (Philippians 3:8). Knowing Christ, having the righteousness that comes from God by faith – this was what was important to him. He no longer put confidence in his observance of the traditional rites of his community. (However, Paul did practice many of the traditions, since they were part of his cultural heritage – but he was able to put them aside, as needed, if that would serve the needs of the gospel.)

Here in Jerusalem, before this angry Jewish crowd, Paul wanted to emphasize that his former life demonstrated his zeal for God. His Jewishness could not be disputed by any of his hearers, and so they continued to listen to him. Paul continued setting out his “credentials” by saying, “I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison” (22:4). Paul could cite his earlier persecution as overwhelming evidence for his zeal toward God and Judaism. He made the same claim in several of his epistles (1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13; Philippians 3:6).

If anyone didn’t remember Paul the persecutor from something of a quarter of a century ago, they could ask the high priest and the Sanhedrin! He told the crowd: “I even obtained letters from them to their associates in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished” (22:5). Paul was taking every opportunity – through race, language, training, religion and zeal for God – to establish a link with his audience. But now he needed to explain why he had experienced such a complete change of mind.

The heavenly vision (Acts 22:6-11)

Paul used the example of his getting letters of recommendation from the Council as a transition point into the second part of the speech. This is where he began to describe the details of his conversion. Paul spoke of being on the road near Damascus with some traveling companions about noontime on that fateful day. A bright light flashed around him, and he fell to the ground. Then a voice spoke to Paul, saying, “Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?” (22:6).

Paul asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The voice answered, “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting” (22:8). Paul then asked further, “What shall I do, Lord?” (22:10). Thereupon, Paul was told to go into Damascus, where he would be told of his future work. Paul’s companions then led him by the hand into Damascus because he had been blinded by the light.

This is the second account of Paul's conversion. The first was in 9:1-19, where further details can be found in the commentary. A third account will be found in Paul's speech to Agrippa (26:12-18). Each telling of the story was adapted to the particular audience being addressed. Each of the accounts also differ somewhat in the details they present or omit. These differences are minor and reflect the fact Paul didn't tell the story in the exact same way each time. (Of course, none of us use the same wording and detail in retelling our experiences.)

For example, when Luke told the story of Paul's conversion in Acts 9, he said his companions heard a sound but didn't see anyone (9:7). A "light from heaven flashed around" Paul but it was not stated whether his companions saw that light (9:3). Paul heard a voice speaking to him (9:4), which was identified as Jesus appearing to him (9:17). In Paul's retelling of the story before Agrippa, he said he saw about noontime "a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions" (26:13). He also heard the voice speaking to him in Aramaic (26:14), again identified as Jesus (26:15). Paul didn't say whether his companions heard or saw anything. However, since they "all fell to the ground," they must have experienced one or both in some way (26:14).

In the present account, Paul wrote of a bright light from heaven flashing around him at noon (22:6). He heard a voice speaking to him, also identified as Jesus (22:7). Paul said "my companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me" (22:9).

The three accounts of Paul's conversion are not contradictory. If Luke had seen them as contradictions, he would have "fixed" the problem. The differences in detail are easily explained by the fact that we tell the same story in different ways. The three stories are actually complementary. Each adds details to create a more complete picture of what happened on the Damascus road, and Luke intends for readers to be able to compare and combine the accounts.

The fact that Paul's conversion experience is told three times shows the importance Luke attached to it. That each was different from the other two tells us that the story was being told at three times, under varying circumstances. It was not a canned story that Luke "plugged" in for verbal color. The important thing that comes out in each account is that God worked a reversal in Paul's life on the Damascus road. Paul's conversion was the result of a dramatic confrontation with Jesus. He hadn't casually adopted a new religion, he hadn't sought out a new spiritual experience, and his new beliefs had not been imposed on him by any peer group.

Devout Ananias (Acts 22:12-15)

We learned earlier that Paul was visited in Damascus by a disciple named Ananias. Here he was called “a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there” (22:12). Ananias stood next to Paul and said, “Brother Saul, receive your sight!” (22:13). At that moment, Paul could see again. Then, Ananias gave Paul his divine commission: “The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous one and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard” (26:14-15).

The Jewish orientation of the story is seen in the expression “God of our ancestors,” which was the way Jews referred to the God of Israel (Genesis 43:23; Exodus 3:13; Deuteronomy 1:11). “The Righteous One” was a typically Jewish messianic title, one that Stephen also had used (7:52). Paul, speaking to a Jewish audience, stressed that his divine commission had been recognized by a devout Jew – a person like one of those standing before him. The audience should respect Ananias, and that means they should respect Paul’s commission.

F.F. Bruce writes, “As Paul has emphasized his orthodox upbringing and his devotion to the law and the ancestral traditions, so now he emphasizes the part played in his conversion experience by Ananias of Damascus, portrayed as a devout and law-abiding Jew, enjoying the respect of all his fellow-Jews in the city” (*The Book of Acts*, revised edition, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, page 417). This illustrates another difference between the accounts of Paul’s conversion. Here, Paul wanted to stress that his commission was given through the lips of a pious and highly respected Jew, Ananias. (Note that Paul cleverly did not mention that Ananias was also a Christian at the time he went to Paul.) When Paul later told the story before King Agrippa, there was no need to emphasize the role of Ananias. He simply recounted his commission as coming directly from the Lord.

Another difference between the accounts is that here we don’t read of Ananias’ personal struggle in going to Paul, who was then feared as the persecutor of Christians. Because the story was told from a third-person point of view in Acts 9, that aspect of Paul’s conversion experience was included there.

Praying in the temple (Acts 22:16-18)

Paul explained how Ananias urged him to: “Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name” (22:16). Like any other convert, Paul had

to be counseled to repent and put his faith in Jesus Christ, which he did. Paul then recounted how, after being baptized, he returned to Jerusalem, and was praying in the temple. This fact was not mentioned in the earlier account of Paul's conversion. Paul included it here to show that the temple remained a holy place of prayer and worship for him, even after his conversion.

He was asking the Jewish audience to consider the idea that a man who prays in the temple is not likely to desecrate it. Paul was also pointing out that his traditional values had not changed in a quarter of a century. After all, he had been worshipping in the temple just a while ago when the Jews grabbed him. While praying in the temple after his conversion, Paul said he fell into a trance and saw a vision of the Lord speaking to him (22:17). Now Paul was equating himself with the great prophets of Israel who had a vision of the Lord and received a commission (Isaiah 6:1-10; Jeremiah 14-19).

“Leave Jerusalem” (Acts 22:18)

But the commission Paul received was not to Israel or the Jews. Paul recounted that the Lord told him, “Leave Jerusalem immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me” (22:21). In Acts 9, Luke didn't tell us anything about any vision instructing him to flee the city. However, Luke did say that when Paul began to preach in Jerusalem, the Hellenistic Jews tried to kill him (9:29). It was then that the converts took him to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus. Now we learn that Paul left the area, not simply because the disciples insisted on taking him to safety, but that he had a divine warning to leave Jerusalem. Probably, Paul's departure was due to a combination of the vision and the advice of the Jerusalem Christians. Here divine direction and human action worked together.

Some commentators see a contradiction between the two accounts of his departure from Jerusalem. But they are not irreconcilable at all, and merely reflect different aspects of a complex situation.

“Lord...these people know” (Acts 22:19-22)

Paul protested to the Lord about leaving Jerusalem. He repeated what he said on that occasion: “These people know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you” (22:19). Paul explained that everyone knew that he was part of the mob who killed Stephen, and that he had endorsed his murder. Surely, Paul was saying, the Jews should accept his new faith because they knew how sincere he was in his old beliefs. Paul was inviting his hearers to accept his former zealous persecution of Christians as evidence that his new faith was real. William Neil writes:

In view of Paul's past record of persecuting the Christians and assisting in Stephen's execution, the Jews should have recognized that only some divine intervention could have brought about so dramatic a change in his behavior. They might therefore have been expected to listen to his "testimony." (*The Acts of the Apostles*, The New Century Bible Commentary, page 225)

However, the Jews' reaction was the opposite. Paul's zealous belief in Judaism made his new Christian faith more puzzling and unbelievable. Paul must have suspected that his audience at the Antonia fortress wouldn't believe it, either. His speech was more of a witness against them.

Then, Paul spoke the line that set off the crowd once more. He told his Jewish audience that the Lord had said to him, "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles" (22:21). Paul was emphasizing his calling as a "light for the Gentiles" (13:47). He was a human instrument – extending the work that had been prophesied of his Savior, Jesus (Luke 2:35).

As long as Paul spoke of his work in a Jewish context, the crowd listened, even if impatiently. But when Paul uttered the statement about going to the Gentiles, the crowd went into a fit of rage. "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!" they shouted (22:22).

Paul faces torture (Acts 22:23-24)

Confusion again reigned at the temple. The crowd was screaming, throwing clothes in the air and flinging dirt about. The commander still hadn't been able to find out what crime, if any, Paul might have been guilty of. He probably had not understood Paul's speech, as it was given in Aramaic, so he didn't know what his defense had been. The commander was no closer to the truth of the situation, and was losing patience. He directed that Paul be taken into the fortress, and tortured in order to discover the facts of the matter. The torture was flogging, and it was a far worse experience than undergoing a Jewish beating, or feeling the rod of the municipal authority.

The Roman practice of scourging is said to have varied with the victim's status. A slave or non-Roman might be whipped with a knotted leather cord fastened to a wooden handle. The cord could be studded with pieces of metal or bone. A flogging with such a whip could cripple one for life, or even kill. Somehow the Romans thought that people always told the truth when under severe pain like that. Paul was about to receive the same punishment Jesus endured under Pilate. He had Jesus flogged even after declaring him innocent of any crime (John 18:38-19:1).

“Flog a Roman?” (Acts 22:25)

Paul was destined to escape the flogger’s whip by appealing to his civil rights. As the guards stretched Paul out to torture him, he said to the centurion standing next to him, “Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn’t even been found guilty?” (22:25). Citizenship was a highly prized commodity in Paul’s day. Few had citizenship, as it was limited to those of high standing and those who had performed some exceptional service for the government. (Of course, many paid bribes in order to have their names entered on lists of candidates for citizenship.)

Roman citizens were exempt from flogging before trial, often used as torture to ascertain the facts of a case. The Valerian and Porcian laws, enacted over long periods of time, prohibited the beating of Roman citizens. The *Lex Julia* had further given citizens the right of appeal to Rome. In Paul’s day, a proper trial and sentence had to be given citizens before flogging could be administered to them.

“Pay a big price” (Acts 22:26-29)

It’s no wonder when Paul claimed Roman citizenship, the centurion stopped preparing Paul for flogging. He rushed to the commander and told him Paul was a citizen (22:26). The commander raced back to Paul to verify his claim, which he did. When the interrogation team learned Paul was a citizen, they “withdrew immediately” (22:29). The commander even became alarmed that he had put Paul in chains, there being no charge against him. He knew he had almost done something that would have resulted in some severe action against him, such as dismissal, or even execution.

When Paul told the commander he was a citizen, he said, “I had to pay a lot of money for my citizenship” (22:28). Paul replied that he was born a citizen. The commander apparently had been one of those who had bribed his way into getting on a list of people to be considered for citizenship. Since his name was Claudius Lysias (23:26), he probably bought himself a slot on a candidates-of-citizenship list during the reign of the emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54). The historian Dio Cassius spoke of citizenship rights being purchased for great amounts of money during the reign of Claudius (*Roman History* 60, 17, 4-9).

“The ‘great sum’ which Lysias paid was not the price of freedom. It was the bribe given to the intermediaries in the imperial secretariat or the provincial administration who put his name on the list of candidates for enfranchisement” (A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Law and Roman Society in the New Testament*, pages 154-155).

Some commentators feel that Lysias was being sarcastic to Paul when he said he obtained his citizenship at a great price. He was saying something like, “If a trouble-maker like you can buy citizenship rights, it must be rather cheap to buy these days.” That is, the privilege was losing or had lost its value. Paul had turned the tables on the commander. Paul was born a citizen and didn’t need to “buy” his way onto the list. This so-called “Egyptian troublemaker” came from a respected family, a family who had earned citizenship much earlier, when it was *harder* to get. Bruce writes,

Paul, the man whom the tribune was interrogating rather contemptuously, was *born* a Roman citizen. This means that his father was a Roman citizen before him. How the citizenship was acquired by Paul’s father or grandfather we have no means of knowing, but analogy would suggest that it was for valuable services rendered to a Roman general or administrator in the southeastern area of Asia Minor, such as Pompey in 66-64 B.C. or Antony a generation later. (page 422)

It may seem surprising that the commander accepted Paul’s claim of citizenship at face value. The severe punishment for a false claim in this regard made it unlikely that one would lie about it. Perhaps there was some way the commander could verify Paul’s claim, or he simply couldn’t take the chance of not accepting it. As mentioned earlier, there were official citizenship roles in the Empire. Eventually, it would be discovered whether someone was falsely claiming citizenship.

We see that Paul had no compunction about using his status as a citizen to protect himself. He had already done so (16:19-39), and would do so again (25:10-11). However, once Paul appealed to his legal rights, he became a captive to the Roman judicial process. He would be under constant military supervision from now on, and his case would ultimately require over four years to be completed. There is a lesson in Paul’s use of citizenship that is important to all Christians. We should feel free to make use of all legal and civil means to protect ourselves from those who would persecute us for our Christian beliefs.

William Willimon writes, “Paul appeals to his Roman citizenship as a protection against examination by torture, thus suggesting that Christians may be free to use their legal rights, even those bestowed upon them by pagan governments, as protection against injustice and as a means of enabling them to witness to the truth of Christ” (*Acts, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, page 168).

PAUL'S SPEECH TO THE JEWISH LEADERS

Sanhedrin to assemble (Acts 22:30)

The commander Claudius Lysias realized he had a “celebrity” in his hands. Paul was no uneducated guerrilla terrorist out of some Egyptian backwash. He was cultured, educated religious teacher from a distinguished family who claimed to be a Roman citizen. Lysias couldn't simply manhandle the suspect, torturing him to find out why he was the focus of a riot. Still, he had to get to the bottom of the situation.

The commander decided to have the Jewish court investigate the cause of the riot. The reason was because Paul's offense seemed to entail some infraction of Jewish religious custom. The Jewish council seemed the appropriate body to look into the matter. Perhaps sufficient facts would emerge from such a hearing to enable him to either release Paul or hold him for a proper trial.

Lysias ordered the chief priests and the Sanhedrin to assemble for a hearing (22:30). As the ranking Roman official in Jerusalem, Lysias apparently could order the Sanhedrin to meet for such a reason. However, he would have no right to participate in its deliberations – he was just an observer. Meanwhile, Paul was unchained, but held over for the investigation. The next day, the Sanhedrin assembled and Paul was brought in to stand before his accusers (22:30).

“In all good conscience” (Acts 23:1-2)

Luke dispensed with any introductory material in his narration of Paul's attempted defense before the Sanhedrin. He presented no charges or evidence, and what we have is but a brief summary of the occasion. The readers already know what sparked the riot and the Jews' original accusations (21:28). General charges will later be presented against Paul before Felix (24:5-7).

When Luke opened the scene, Paul was standing before the Sanhedrin, ready to make his defense. “My brothers,” he said, “I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day...” (23:1). Paul was again maintaining he was still a good Jew, even though he had become a Christian. The idea of a “conscience” (Greek, *syneidesis*) is something that Paul alone of New Testament writers spoke about (Romans 2:15; 9:1; 13:5; 1 Corinthians 8:7, 10, 12; 10:25, 27-29; 2 Corinthians 1:12; 4:2; 5:11). For Paul, the “conscience” was the moral aspect of one's awareness and thinking. The aim of a Christian life was to live with a pure, good or clean conscience before God (1 Timothy 1:5, 19; 3:9; 2 Timothy 1:3).

Apparently the high priest didn't agree that Paul had fulfilled his duty before God. (Perhaps he didn't appreciate Paul's pronouncing the divine name, especially in support of himself.) Whatever the reason, the high priest was so bothered by Paul's claim that he ordered those standing nearby to slap him on the mouth (23:2). The high priest in this case was Ananias. He had received his office from one of the Herods in about A.D. 47, and held his position for about 12 years. He was known for his greed. Josephus accused him of embezzling the tithes of the ordinary priests and for handing out lavish bribes (*Antiquities* 20:205-207, 213).

Ananias was hated by Jewish nationalists because of his pro-Roman policies. They burned his home in A.D. at the beginning of the Jewish-Roman war. Then, the nationalists hunted him down and he was killed along with his brother (Josephus, *Wars* 2:426, 441-442, 448).

“Whitewashed wall” (Acts 23:3)

Caught off guard, and stung by the command, Paul lashed back at the high priest, “God will strike you, you whitewashed wall!” he said. “You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!” (23:3). Paul had not been tried and found guilty of any infraction of Jewish law. He hadn't even been officially charged with any infraction. For him to be struck as though he was guilty of a crime violated the very law the high priest claimed to uphold.

The phrase “whitewashed wall” referred to a person who was a hypocrite, as the high priest had shown himself to be. Ananias claimed to uphold the law but he was trampling all over Paul's rights according to that law. Compare this with Jesus' evaluation of the teachers of the law and Pharisees, whom he called “whitewashed tombs” (Matthew 23:27-28).

Some commentators seem surprised by Paul's sharp reply. They note that it contradicts the spirit of Jesus' call to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39) as well as Paul's own advice to bless when cursed (1 Corinthians 4:12). But the problem exists only if we think of Paul as some quasi-divine person who had achieved sinless perfection. That is not the way Paul spoke of himself (Romans 8:9-25). The simple answer is that Paul was a human being who sinned, as we all do. Paul was an emotional individual, a reactive person. This is not the only time Paul was guilty of saying something cutting and passionate (1 Corinthians 11:19; Galatians 2:11; 5:12; Philippians 3:2). Here he momentarily lost his composure. Though he spoke the truth about Ananias, it was probably not something he would have said under more ideal circumstances.

We should not forget that Jesus in a similar situation also protested the action of the high priest Annas, who had slapped him (John 18:21-23). (Luke was drawing a parallel between the two events.) Jesus also spoke out in biting terms against the corruption and hypocrisy of the Jewish teachers (Matthew 23:13-33).

“Insult God’s high priest?” (Acts 23:4-5)

Those standing next to Paul said, “How dare you insult God’s high priest!” Paul said: “Brothers, I did not realize that he was the high priest; for it is written [in Exodus 22:28]: ‘Do not speak evil about the ruler of your people’” (23:5). It seems unusual that Paul should have failed to recognize the high priest. He presided at regular meetings of the Sanhedrin, and he should have been identifiable. The answer may be that this was not a regular meeting, and that someone else other than the high priest was presiding. Paul may not have known the high priest at the time by sight. He had been in Jerusalem only a few times in the past two decades or so. Meanwhile, the office had passed to another individual with whom he may not have been familiar (or whose appearance had changed over the years).

Another answer sometimes given is that Paul’s eye condition caused him to have poor vision. A less convincing answer is that Paul was speaking ironically. That is, he would be saying, “I didn’t think that the kind of person who would order me struck contrary to the law could be the high priest.”

In any case, Paul quickly apologized. Even his apology showed that he continued to live by the principles of Torah and according to the law. Since the Scripture condemned speaking evil of the high priest, no matter what his character, Paul admitted that he had erred.

Paul divides the Council (Acts 23:6)

Paul’s speech had been cut short by the action of the high priest. He must have realized that it was pointless to make any further defense before a council headed by someone of the likes of Ananias. Instead of going on, Paul suddenly thought of a different strategy. He realized how he could pit the council against itself. Luke described Paul’s tactic: “Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the other Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, ‘My brothers, I am a Pharisee, descended from Pharisees. I stand on trial because of the hope of the resurrection of the dead’” (23:6).

Luke had already defined the Sadducees, one of the major Jewish sects of the time, as a group “who say there is no resurrection” (Luke 20:27). Josephus, who briefly described the three major groupings of the Judaism of the time – Essenes, Pharisees and Sadducees – said the latter believed that

the soul died with the body (*Antiquities* 18:16). Hence, there would be no resurrection. The Pharisees, however, believed in a resurrection (23:8). Josephus also attested to this. Those who “have lived virtuously” the Pharisees believed “shall have power to revive and live again” (*Antiquities* 18:14; *Wars* 2:164-165). Many references in rabbinic writings also attest to their belief in the resurrection.

This is the first time Paul was identified in the book of Acts as being a member of the Pharisaic sect. He will again be so identified in 26:5. Paul also spoke of himself as a Pharisee in his epistle to the Philippians (3:5). We might think it strange that Paul, a Christian, would still speak of being a Pharisee. But like many other Christian Jews, he saw no contradiction in doing so. He even “boasted” of his background to the church because false apostles were comparing themselves to him (2 Corinthians 11:22). When it came to salvation, however, Paul saw no particular value in his Pharisaic background (Philippians 3:4-9).

A Christian Pharisee would have a different view of the role of Jewish institutions such as the law and temple. The most important thing that divided Christian and non-Christian Pharisee was whether to accept or reject Jesus as Messiah and Savior.

Hope of resurrection (Acts 23:6)

Paul’s appeal to the resurrection was more than just a hope in the raising of the dead as a general belief. There is no resurrection without Jesus, so the true hope is really one that is centered in him. The question for Paul, then, was whether Jesus had been raised. We see this interest in Jesus’ resurrection at various places in Acts. It began with Peter’s speech at Pentecost (2:24, 31-33) and was found in Paul’s earliest preaching in Pisidian Antioch (13:30-35). For Paul, the resurrection of Christ was the basis of hope – and the good news – that Christians also would be raised to immortal life (1 Corinthians 15:1-4, 12-20).

In a sense, Paul was the true Pharisee in terms of believing in a resurrection of the just. The ultimate ancestral hope of Israel was bound up with the resurrection of the dead, when rightly understood. But for Paul, the belief in the general resurrection was dependent on understanding and accepting that Jesus had been raised from the dead and glorified.

A dispute broke out (Acts 23:7-10)

Paul kept this all in the background when he yelled out that he was on trial because of his hope in the resurrection. His immediate interest was not to preach about Christ (now obviously hopeless) but to divide the council,

something he succeeded in doing. His tactic, apparently based on a sudden impulse, caused a dispute to break out between the Pharisees and Sadducees (23:7). The assembly was divided and there was “a great uproar” (23:9). Some of the Pharisees even began to defend Paul. They said, “We find nothing wrong with this man.... What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?” (23:9).

The Pharisees and Sadducees were not on the best of terms to begin with. The Sadducees had little public support, so they had to acquiesce to the Pharisees on many occasions. This gave some power to the Pharisees, although they were a minority on the Council. The Pharisees had more in common with the messianic Christians and might, on occasion, feel a degree of kinship with them. It was the Sadducean group, including the high priestly families, that seemed to form the most virulent opposition to the Christians.

On this occasion, Paul claimed to be a Pharisee. The Pharisees may have suspected that the Sadducees were trying to discredit their position by trying Paul on beliefs they held. The Pharisees may also have surmised that Paul was not that bad a character, given his background in Torah. One might conclude that Luke was painting the Pharisees in a good light. But this is not necessarily so, as we saw in our discussion of Gamaliel. True enough, the Pharisees may have had some beliefs right, and might counsel a more moderate course. However, their response to Jesus as Savior was non-committal at best, as it had been earlier (5:34-39). They may have defended Paul, but they did not accept Jesus.

Paul was able to use the disagreements and differences in viewpoint between Sadducees and Pharisees to good advantage. The dispute between the two groups became so violent that Lysias, the commander, was fearful that his prisoner would be hurt. Lysias ordered a detachment of troops to take Paul from the council by force and bring him into the barracks (23:10). Paul was now taken into protective custody by the Roman authority. For the rest of Acts, for a period in excess of four years, Paul would remain a prisoner of the Romans.

AN ASSASSINATION PLOT AND TRANSFER TO CAESAREA (23:11-35)

“Testify in Rome” (Acts 23:11)

The situation must have seemed bleak to Paul. He had been warned over and over again that he would face dire troubles in Jerusalem. He had barely survived three attempts on his life in just a couple of days or so (21:31; 22:22; 23:10). That his life would end in Jerusalem must have seemed like a likely possibility. Jesus had spoken about a Jerusalem that killed the prophets and stoned those whom God had sent to its people (Matthew 23:37). Paul himself had seen and applauded the death of Stephen in this city. Now, it must have seemed that his turn to be killed had come.

But in one of the darkest nights of his life, Jesus appeared to Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome” (23:11). As during other critical moments of Paul’s ministry and life, God gave him special reassurance through a vision (9:4; 16:9; 18:9-10; 22:17; 27:23). Earlier, Paul had voiced his desire to visit Rome (19:21). The vision shows that Paul had Christ’s approval in his desire to move the center of his preaching westward to Rome.

Now, Paul was certain that he would get to Rome after all. We as readers can breathe a sigh of relief. We know Paul will somehow escape this perilous situation, no matter how many twists and turns it may take.

Plot on Paul’s life (Acts 23:12-22)

A comforting vision in Corinth had been given to Paul just before the Jews made a united attack on him. The attempted persecution proved totally unsuccessful. Now, another vision that told Paul he would escape Jerusalem with his life came *just hours before* conspirators hatched another plot to kill him.

In the morning following the vision, more than 40 fanatical Jews bound themselves with a solemn oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul (23:12). They went to the Sanhedrin asking it to petition the commander to bring Paul before the council on a pretext that it needed to gather more information about his case (23:15). The conspirators would lay in ambush and kill Paul as he was being transferred from the Antonia barracks to the place where the Sanhedrin was meeting. Jerusalem’s narrow and winding streets would make the assassination easier.

Presumably, the chief priest was willing to go along with the plot, which shows something of his violent and evil character. He represented the epitome of the Jewish opposition, which was shown to be irrevocably antagonistic to Paul, and willing to use any means possible to “rid the earth

of him” (22:22). Since Paul preached Christ, the chief priest had shown himself to be against the very Savior that his religion’s holy writings had spoken of.

Luke skillfully juxtaposed God’s promise with the conspirator’s desperate plot. There is an element of humor in Luke’s telling of what was a very serious story. The conspirators had such high hopes for finally doing away with Paul and had devised what they thought was a brilliant plot. But God had already worked out events so that Paul would escape. The plotters still had no idea that their scheme would fail, but we the readers do.

As it happened, Paul’s nephew heard about the plot. He went to the Antonia barracks and told Paul about it (23:16). We don’t know how Paul’s nephew learned about the conspiracy, especially since we know nothing about him personally. Perhaps he or a member of his family was connected to the Sanhedrin or others who may have known about the plot. The fact that Paul’s nephew was allowed access to the fortress, and to speak with Paul, argues that the family had some influence in Jerusalem. In any case, Paul’s nephew was risking his own safety in going to see him.

After Paul heard about the plot, he called a centurion, asking him to take his nephew to the commander with the story. Paul’s nephew then told the commander of the plot to kill Paul (23:20-21). The commander dismissed the young man, cautioning him not to tell anyone what he had reported (23:22). The commander immediately began preparations to transfer Paul under guard to Caesarea. Thus, the Jewish plot failed.

We may wonder what happened to the 40 men who had vowed not to eat or drink until they killed Paul. Rabbinic custom would allow such vow-takers an escape clause. The rabbis provided relief from vows that were “broken under constraint.” The example given in the Mishnah is that of a person who imposed a vow on a friend to eat with him. However, the friend became sick or he couldn’t cross an overflowed river. Such unforeseen “constraints” freed him of the vow (*Nedarim* 3.1, 3). In short, if circumstances prevented one from fulfilling a vow, then he or she was absolved from it. In this case, the plotters couldn’t get at Paul because he was protected by the military and sent away. Thus, they were excused from their vow not to eat or drink.

Transfer to Caesarea (Acts 23:23-24)

The commander could not risk having a prominent Roman citizen assassinated while in his custody. He at once took steps to transfer Paul to Caesarea, the capital of the province of Judea. He called two centurions and commanded them to organize a detachment of 200 foot soldiers, 70 cavalry troops and another 200 heavily armed soldiers (spearmen) to escort Paul to

Caesarea Maritima, about 60 miles northwest of Jerusalem. Paul and the contingent were to leave under the cover of darkness, at 9 p.m. that very night. “Horses” (in the plural) were to be provided for Paul (23:24). This probably referred to a horse for Paul to ride and another one for his baggage. Some make the intriguing suggestion that the plural meant that some of his friends, like Luke, were going to Caesarea with Paul.

If the commander had 1,000 troops under his authority, he was committing almost half the Jerusalem garrison to escort Paul. This may seem “a ridiculously large escort for a single prisoner” (I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, page 369). Perhaps the soldiers needed to go to Caesarea anyway. However, since the Greek word for “spearman” translates an otherwise unknown Greek word, some scholars suggest that they were in reality horses. But this is merely a conjecture.

Whether there were 270 or 470 soldiers in the detachment, Lysias was not taking any chances of having his prisoner murdered by a group of fanatics. Meanwhile, the plotters were still waiting for word that Lysias had granted the Sanhedrin’s wish to question Paul again.

“He wrote a letter” (Acts 23:25-30)

Lysias wrote a letter about the prisoner to Felix, governor of the province of Judea. The centurions were to take the letter to Caesarea with Paul. We may not have a word-for-word copy of the letter. It would have been difficult, at least under ordinary circumstances, for Luke to have seen a copy of what was a “top secret” piece of official correspondence. The letter almost certainly was written in Latin.

His Excellency, Felix (Acts 23:26)

This is an opportune time to introduce the procurator who will be hearing Paul’s case. Lysias addressed Felix as “Excellency” (Greek, *kratistos*). It was a polite address, used as a title of honor for important officials in the Roman government. The same title was applied to the recipient of Acts, Theophilus (Luke 1:3). The orator Tertullus also addressed Felix with a similar title (24:2), and so did Paul of Festus (26:25).

Antonius Felix was born a slave and freed by Antonia, the mother of the emperor Claudius. He was the first ex-slave in Roman history to become governor of a province. According to Josephus, Felix was appointed governor by the emperor Claudius, succeeding Ventidius Cumanus (*Antiquities* 20:137; *Wars* 2:247-249). This occurred about A.D. 52. However, another writer, Tacitus, had Felix as the governor of Samaria and Judea during the time of Cumanus, who he said was procurator of Galilee (*Annals* 12.54). Most commentators follow Josephus. It is thought that Felix may

have been appointed to a post in Samaria under the governor Cumanus, around A.D. 48. The fact that Paul said he was “for a number of years” in Judea lends support to this idea.

The office of governor was usually reserved for individuals of the Roman equestrian order (ranked below that of the senatorial order). It is thought that Felix must have obtained his post through intrigue. His brother Pallas had great influence at Rome, and he may have had something to do with his brother’s rise to power (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:182). Felix was not well spoken of by the ancient writers. Tacitus said he “played the tyrant with the spirit of a slave” (*Histories* 5.9). F.F. Bruce gives us a spirited translation: “He exercised the power of a king with the mind of a slave” (*The Book of Acts*, page 437). In his *Annals* (12.54), Tacitus said Felix “believed himself free to commit any crime.” Josephus concurred with this view. He portrayed Felix as an incompetent administrator who used excessive violence and allowed citizens to be plundered. Under his governorship Jewish violence reached new heights (Josephus, *Wars* 2:253-270; *Antiquities* 20:177, 182).

Felix was the governor of Judea from A.D. 52 to 58 or 59. He was then recalled to Rome by Nero and replaced by Porcius Festus (24:27). We can fix the date of Paul’s imprisonment for two years in Caesarea with some degree of certainty because it occurred during the governor’s last two years of rule (24:27). It is under the governorship of Felix that a fateful turning point was reached in the affairs of Judea. Violence in the province escalated and got so out of control that it ultimately led to the Jewish-Roman War of A.D. 66-70.

Of conditions in Judea during Felix’s governorship, Josephus wrote: “All Judea was filled with the effects of their madness [the insurrectionists]. And thus the flame was every day more and more blown up, till it came to a direct war” (*Wars* 2:265). These facts serve as a useful background for Paul’s visit to Jerusalem and his two-year imprisonment in Caesarea. The political situation in Judea was so unstable that the Roman governors had to be careful not to alienate their constituencies.

Paul became a hot political potato. If either governors Felix or his successor were to simply free Paul, the Jews may have caused a massive disturbance. What to do with Paul (who was obviously guilty of no crime) must have been a political headache for the governors. As we shall see, Paul provided the governor Festus with a way out by appealing to Rome. The solution was to send him out of the province.

Contents of letter (Acts 23:27-30)

Lysias’ letter to Felix summarized the events, from the riot at the temple to the discovery of a plot against Paul’s life. He began his letter by putting a

favorable spin on the situation. Lysias wrote as though he had learned Paul was a Roman citizen at the time the Jews first assaulted him. He described his intervention as a “rescuing” of Paul (23:27). Lysias then explained how he brought Paul before the Sanhedrin to discover what the ruckus was about only to find that “the accusation had to do with questions about their law” (23:29). Lysias carefully forgot to mention that he originally assumed Paul to be an insurrectionist. Neither did he mention that he was about to illegally flog a Roman citizen, and that he was saved from the dire consequences of doing so only by Paul’s last-minute protest.

Of most interest is that Lysias admitted in the letter that “there was no charge against him that deserved death or imprisonment” (23:29). In essence, Lysias was saying that Paul was innocent so far as Roman law was concerned. The Jewish charges against Paul – that he had brought Greeks into the temple – had disappeared (21:28). There was no proof that Paul had brought any Gentiles into the forbidden area of the temple. The charge that he teaches “against our people and our law and this place” was one of those “questions about their law.” It held no interest to the Romans, as it wasn’t a criminal matter. The entire vignette – including the riot, the attempts to kill Paul, and the Roman rescue – dramatically contrasts the attitude of the Jewish leaders toward Paul with the Roman military’s view of him.

Luke was telling his readers that Paul could defend himself and do his work only if he is protected by the Roman military and political authorities. Luke again made it clear that the real enemies and problem-makers were the Jews. Christians had no difficulty with the established authority during these years.

To Caesarea (Acts 23:31-33)

Paul and his military escort left Jerusalem by night and traveled as far as Antipatris, reaching it the next morning. Antipatris was about 35 miles (56 kilometers) northwest of Jerusalem, and 10 miles northeast of Joppa. The town, on the border of Judea and Samaria, served as a military way station. Herod the Great had built the city in honor of his father Antipater, hence its name. The second leg of the journey to Caesarea took place the next day. Paul and his escorts traveled from Antipatris to Caesarea, a distance of about 25 miles (40 kilometers) or so along the road that connected the two cities to Jerusalem.

Caesarea, or more precisely Caesarea Maritima, was a major seaport about 30 miles (48 kilometers) north of present Tel Aviv and almost 30 miles south of Haifa, both of which are also on the Mediterranean coast. Herod the Great

built Caesarea over a 12-year period on the site of Strato's Tower, beginning in 22 B.C. He made the new city into a major international port, in the style of a Roman provincial capital. He named Caesarea for his imperial patron Augustus Caesar. Josephus gave a detailed description of Herod's work (*Antiquities* 15:331-341).

After Herod the Great died, Judea became a province of the Roman Empire, ruled by Roman prefects who lived in the new capital city, Caesarea. The seat of Roman government for the province of Judaea was in Caesarea, not Jerusalem. Caesarea's great harbor complex would rival Alexandria's port as the great emporium of the eastern Mediterranean. It became a major transshipment point on the busy maritime trade routes leading to Rome from the east.

Caesarea became a great Greco-Roman urban center as well, with pagan temples, a theater, hippodrome or circus, and amphitheater. The city had elaborate sewer and water systems as well as paved streets. Today, the ruins of the Roman theater built by Herod greets the person reaching Caesarea from the present-day Route 2. The revitalized ancient theater can hold 2,500 people, but probably had twice that capacity in ancient times. Caesarea's theater has become the most famous in Israel. Performances ranging from rock to opera are given in the spring and summer.

A mounted plaque greets the tourist just inside the gate of the theater complex. This is a replica of an inscription found here during the excavations of 1959-63 (the original is in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem). Although the plaque is partly destroyed, tourists can clearly read the words "TIBERIVM," a reference to Emperor Tiberius) and "...TIVS PILATUS," referring to Pontius Pilate. This is the only archeological evidence of Pilate, the Roman governor during the time of Jesus.

The city figured prominently in the early church. Philip first brought Christianity to this city from Jerusalem (8:4-10). Peter baptized the Cornelius the centurion here as well (10:3-48). Paul was spirited away by the church to Tarsus from Caesarea's harbor (9:29-30). He later passed through the city on several of his journeys (18:22; 21:8-16). He also returned to Jerusalem via Caesarea on his ill-fated trip, staying at the home of Philip the evangelist (21:8). Agabus the prophet came here to warn Paul of impending troubles in Jerusalem (21:10).

"From what province?" (Acts 23:34-35)

When Paul arrived in Caesarea, the leader of the military detachment delivered the letter to Felix and handed Paul over to him. Felix read the letter

and interrogated Paul. He asked what province he was from (23:34). Felix asked this question because it was diplomatically polite to consult with the client king or ruler, if any were involved, on such matters. Since Paul had come from a Roman province, Felix apparently felt comfortable to try the case without any further consultation. As the “crime” was committed in Judea, he had proper jurisdiction in the matter.

A similar situation had come up during Jesus’ trial. When Pontius Pilate, then governor of Judea, heard that Jesus was from Galilee, he referred his case to Herod Antipas, the local ruler of the territory. But Antipas declined to get involved in the heated issue (Luke 23:6-12).

In this case, Felix told Paul he would hear his case when his accusers came down from Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Paul was retained under guard in Herod’s palace.

PAUL IN CAESAREA

THE TRIAL BEFORE FELIX (ACTS 24)

Jews bring charges (Acts 24:1-4)

Five days after Paul arrived in Caesarea, the Jewish prosecuting team arrived to state their charges against him (24:1). It was composed of the high priest Ananias, some of the Jewish elders, and a special legal counselor named Tertullus. Tertullus was a common Greek name, and he was probably a Hellenistic Jew chosen because of his expertise in Roman law and his skill in public speaking. The Sanhedrin was taking no chances on letting Paul slip through its grasp. It had hired Tertullus to act as its lawyer.

When Felix asked Tertullus to present his case, he began with the usual flattery. Luke illustrated Tertullus' approach with these words as the introduction of his speech: "We have enjoyed a long period of peace under you, and your foresight has brought about reforms in this nation. Everywhere and in every way, most excellent Felix, we acknowledge this with profound gratitude" (24:2-3).

Tertullus' introduction was spoken in the style of orators when they spoke before dignitaries. The technique even had a name in Latin, the *captatio benevolentiae*. Luke gave us a summary of what Tertullus said. He probably described in some detail what he thought had brought peace and reform in Judea. However, Felix's administration was characterized by insurrections and unrest, so Tertullus may have found it difficult to find many pleasant things to say.

Of course, Tertullus was not particularly interested in whether his compliments reflected reality. He wanted to sway Felix to the Sanhedrin's position. Offering a twisted version of real events was simply part of business as usual. At some point, Tertullus must have realized he was belaboring the flattery and said, "In order not to weary you further, I would request that you be kind enough to hear us briefly" (24:4). Legal presentations were sometimes timed by the use of a water clock, something that kept long-winded counselors from speaking too long.

The case against Paul (Acts 24:5)

Tertullus next launched into a menacing accusation of Paul. "We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world," he said to Felix. "He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect..."

(24:5). Troublemaker – creator of riots – ringleader of the Nazarene sect – these accusations were meant to paint Paul as an insurrectionist who was threatening the Pax Romana. Tertullus framed his accusations in terms of political subversion rather than religious opinions. By accusing Paul of treason, Tertullus was hoping to involve a political ruler in what was really a factional religious dispute.

The Jews were trying to induce the governor to construe the preaching of Paul as tantamount to causing civil disturbances throughout the Jewish population of the Empire. They knew that the governors were unwilling to convict on purely religious charges and therefore tried to give a political twist to the religious charge. (A.N. Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*, page 50).

Thus, it was claimed that Paul (and the Christians) were a threat to local order and to the security of the Empire in general. Paul, it seemed, was being charged with singlehandedly creating disturbances across the Roman Empire!

The charge is framed in such a way as to suggest that this is no mere religious dispute, but a threat to the stability of Roman government. Paul is accused of being generally a trouble-maker throughout the Empire, a promoter of a particular messianic movement (which would suggest political agitation to the procurator), and a violator of the Sadducean regulations for the sanctity of the Temple, which were guaranteed by the Romans. (William Neil, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The New Century Bible Commentary, page 233)

Tertullus was trying to put Paul among the group of Jewish revolutionaries who were creating trouble for Felix. It's true that Paul's presence in a city did lead to riots among the Jews. But it was the Jews who created the disturbances, not Paul. Tertullus not only tried to put Paul, but the whole Christian movement on trial, by calling it a party or sect (Greek, *hairesis*) – “the Nazarenes.” This is the only time the New Testament uses the plural “Nazarenes,” and it is hung on Christians as a distasteful label. The Greek word *hairesis* meant a party such as the Sadducees (5:17) or the Pharisees (15:5). The Nazarenes could be seen as simply another sect of Judaism, one that happened to believe in Christ as Messiah. But that is not how the Jewish religious leaders looked upon the Christians. When Tertullus called the followers of Paul “Nazarenes,” he meant it as an expression of contempt (24:14).

The Jews' case as described by Tertullus was based on false evidence. The Sanhedrin had used similar tactics before, in the trial of Jesus. Then, council members "were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death" (Matthew 26:59). The same was true in Paul's trial.

Desecrated the temple (Acts 24:6)

Tertullus then moved to the theological aspect of his accusation. He said of Paul that he "even tried to desecrate the temple" and that to prevent him from doing so, "we seized him..." (24:6). The original accusation had been softened. Now the Sanhedrin was no longer claiming that Paul violated the temple, but that he "tried to" do so. Also, the earlier reference to the Gentiles being in a forbidden part of the temple had disappeared.

Here, Tertullus probably wanted to argue that Paul's case should properly be heard by the Sanhedrin. No doubt he would have liked to press the issue that the Jews should be given the right to impose the death penalty on Paul. Tertullus had to get around the fact that it couldn't be proved that Paul had profaned the temple. He cleverly claimed the temple police had grabbed Paul *before* he could carry out his plan. Thus, if challenged on the fact that there were no witnesses to the supposed profanation, he could say that was because it never took place.

We the readers know the facts, and that Tertullus was putting his own spin on the situation. Paul had not attempted to profane the temple, nor had he done so accidentally. Neither was there an orderly arrest of Paul by temple police, as Tertullus tried to imply. A frantic mob had grabbed Paul and was trying to kill him, all on the basis of an unsubstantiated rumor (21:27-31).

What became of verse 7? (Acts 24:7-9)

Some ancient manuscripts (the Western text) add the following words to the end of verse 6: "...and we would have judged him in accordance with our law. But the commander Lysias came and took him from us with much violence, ordering his accusers to come before you" (New International Version footnote).

Since verse 7 is absent from what most scholars consider the best manuscripts, it is often omitted from modern versions, or placed in a footnote. Whether verse 7 was part of the original or came about as a later copyist tried to clarify the text, it adds an interesting dimension to the account. If this verse described part of Tertullus' argument, it implied that the Jews had planned to try Paul themselves, most likely for a crime against the temple. Tertullus blamed the Roman commander for interrupting what he claimed was about to become a legal hearing on the matter by the council.

This might explain why Felix insisted on postponing the case until Lysias could come to Caesarea to give his testimony (24:22).

Tertullus ended his testimony by encouraging Felix to examine Paul so that he “will be able to learn the truth about all these charges we are bringing against him” (24:8). This at first seems odd, as Paul was certainly not going to admit to something he had not done. But in ancient trials, “examine” often meant some form of beating or torture, and Tertullus perhaps hoped Paul would incriminate himself in some way.

Paul’s defense (Acts 24:10-13)

After Tertullus finished presenting the Jews’ case, Felix motioned for Paul to speak. Paul then went on the offensive, contesting the accusations made against him. He began by acknowledging that Felix had “for a number of years...been judge over this nation” (24:10). This was fact, not flattery. Paul was appealing to Felix’s experience as governor of the province. He had seen a number of violent acts that involved Jews. Based on that, he would surely recognize that it was they, not Paul, who started this circus of events.

Paul was implying that the Jews’ antagonism against him was another example of the cantankerous religious and political atmosphere in Judea.

Paul referred to Felix having been in Judea for a “number of years.” This is thought to show that Tacitus (*Annals* 12.54) may have been right in saying Felix had served in Judea before becoming governor.

Paul explained that he had only recently arrived in Jerusalem, having come there about 12 days ago (24:11). He spent perhaps a week of this time as a prisoner (24:1). He would have had little time to organize a riot. He had come to Jerusalem to worship at the temple, not cause trouble. Paul flatly denied that he had stirred up trouble. “My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city,” he said (24:12). To engage in public debate was not a crime. But Paul was saying he had not even disputed with anyone, much less engaged in any activities that would result in a riot.

“I admit...” (Acts 24:14-16)

After denying all the charges, suddenly Paul said he was about to confess to something. But it was not to a chargeable offense. “I admit that I worship the God our ancestors,” said Paul, “as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect” (24:14). The phrase “God of our ancestors” (Exodus 13:3) was familiar to his accusers. They would have known that Paul claimed to worship the same God they did.

Paul had once persecuted those who followed “the Way” (9:1-2). Now, in

an ironic turn of events, Paul himself was being persecuted for being a Christian. However, Paul rightly claimed that his being a Christian did not mean he was violating the Holy Scriptures. “I believe everything that is in accordance with the Law and that is written in the Prophets,” he insisted (24:14). The phrase “Law and Prophets” was a well-known description of the Jewish Scriptures.

Paul chose his words carefully. Though he claimed to be a Pharisee, he said he only believed and practiced what was in harmony with the written law. This was a deft way of saying it was the Jews standing before Felix who by their beliefs and practices sometimes did not agree with the ancestral Scriptures. In a sense, Paul was claiming that he was the true Pharisee or worshipper of God.

Paul was saying he had not deviated from Israel’s *true* ancient faith. He claimed that his being a Christian did not make him an apostate Jew. He did not believe everything that the non-Christian Pharisees did. But neither did the Sadducees, Essenes or some other splinter group within Judaism agree. Paul was arguing that he and the followers of the Way were within the spectrum of Judaism – they worshipped the same God as the Jews, respected fully the Holy Scriptures and believed in a resurrection of the just.

Hope of Israel (Acts 24:15)

Paul continued by saying, “I have the same hope in God as these men themselves have, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked” (24:15). He had already raised the issue of the resurrection before the Sanhedrin (23:6), something to which he would refer again in this speech (24:21).

It’s not clear which of the accusers standing before Felix would have believed in the resurrection. The high priest and the other members of the Sadducean party did not share this belief. However, some of the “elders” that came from Jerusalem might have been Pharisees, and they would have believed in the resurrection (24:1). A significant number of Jews (the people of the land) did believe in the resurrection, since the Pharisees taught among the people and were respected by them. In that sense, Paul would have been in step with the Jewish nation regarding belief in the resurrection.

In any case, Paul had moved the debate from insurrection and profaning Jewish law to a theological discussion of the resurrection. By doing so, he focused on a substantive issue of the gospel and at the same time got to the crux of the Jews’ real problem with him. In short, they didn’t like Paul’s theology. Paul thus undercut his accusers’ attempt to frame their allegations in a political context and get him convicted of a crime against the state.

The Way is not some radical new innovation but something that stands in line with the central affirmations of historic Judaism. It is the Way's claim of the resurrection of the dead which is at issue in the debate and is the cause of contention between the Way and the high priest (24:21). (William H. Willimon, *Acts*, page 174)

Two views of resurrection (Acts 24:15-16)

We mustn't lose sight of how differently from the Christians the Pharisees framed their belief in the resurrection. For the Pharisees, the resurrection of the just was a future event, with justification dependent on an individual's personal commitment to keep the law. For Paul, the pledge of a future resurrection – a down payment on the promise, so to speak – had already occurred in the resurrection of Jesus. An individual's personal zeal to keep God's ways, while perhaps laudatory, was not relevant to the issue. (All Christians, even after conversion, were subject to sin, and fell short of God's glory.)

Thus, Christians had a different approach to salvation. They had to be called by God, believe in Jesus as Savior, be baptized and receive the Holy Spirit. Then, by Jesus Christ living in them through the Spirit, they were accepted by God as righteous or holy. Christians lived generally new lives according to God's will and asked for forgiveness when they sinned.

There may have been a second difference between the Christian and Jewish view of the resurrection. Paul spoke of a "resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked" (24:15). It's not clear that the Pharisees believed in a resurrection of the "wicked." The evidence from Josephus, for example, is ambiguous (*Wars* 2:163; *Antiquities* 18:14).

Both Daniel (12:2) and Revelation (20:11-15) spoke of both a resurrection of the just and unjust. So did Jesus in John (5:28) and Matthew (25:31-46). As it's described in Revelation, the just receive salvation and the unjust eternal punishment. Acts 24:15 is the only place where Paul explicitly states that he believes in a resurrection of both righteous and unrighteous dead. Even the "resurrection chapter" of 1 Corinthians 15 doesn't discuss the resurrection of the wicked. However, Paul does speak of all people who have lived as one day being raised up to face God's judgment (Romans 2:5; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 2 Timothy 4:1).

Since those who do evil things will be judged accordingly, Paul said he strove to keep his conscience clear (24:16). That is, he tried to live in fulfillment of the great law of love, so he had nothing to feel guilty about. Paul told the high priest the same thing (23:1). This led to the ugly scene in which the high priest ordered Paul to be struck.

Paul insisted that the real contention of Ananias and the Jewish elders opposed to him was that they didn't like his religious beliefs. However, Paul said he better conformed with the beliefs and practices of his people than did his accusers, which must have galled the high priest.

Absent for several years (Acts 21:17)

Paul had set the record straight on the nature of the accusations against him, as well as his insistence to be a law-abiding Jew. Next, he proceeded to explain why he had come to Jerusalem. "After an absence of several years," he said to Felix, "I came to Jerusalem to bring my people gifts for the poor and to present offerings" (24:17). Perhaps up to five years had elapsed since his last visit to the city, a visit barely mentioned in Acts (18:22). Before that, according to Acts, he had not been to Jerusalem since the apostolic conference of A.D. 49.

The reason Paul came to Jerusalem was to bring an offering to his fellow Jews. The alms were not for Jerusalemite Jews in general, but for those who were disciples (Romans 15:26). This is the only time Luke refers to the collection Paul had organized among the Gentile churches (Romans 15:25-31; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15).

The collection had been of the utmost importance for Paul. He saw it as a way for the Gentile churches to show their love toward the Jewish disciples in Jerusalem. But Luke did not mention the offering when Paul and his delegation came to Jerusalem. He left it to this point in his narrative to make but a single, and somewhat oblique, reference to it. Yet, for Paul, the offering was an immense and important project.

Luke's motive for downplaying the offering is not known. Perhaps looking at it from a later time he could see it in its proper perspective. It didn't turn out to be important to the preaching of the gospel or the church – at least in the long term.

Ceremonially clean (Acts 24:18-21)

Finally, Paul answered the charge that he had profaned the temple. He insisted that he was ceremonially clean when the Jews discovered him in the temple. There was no menacing group with him in the temple precincts, nor was he involved in any disturbance (24:18).

Paul's real accusers, who had started the wild rumors about his desecrating the temple – Jews from the province of Asia (21:27), were not even present. Presumably, they had returned home after Pentecost. Paul said to Felix they "ought to be here before you and bring charges if they have anything against me" (24:19). But the Asian Jews who had raised the issue to begin with had

not remained to follow through on the charge. This was a serious matter in Roman jurisprudence.

The council had taken up the charge and was pressing it, though in a rather different form. But it must have been obvious to Felix that its representatives were on thin legal ground. Paul, knowing this, turned to his accusers and said to Felix, “These who are here should state what crime they found in me when I stood before the Sanhedrin” (24:21).

Before anyone could answer, Paul did the same thing he had done at his defense before the Sanhedrin. He again claimed he was on trial because of the resurrection, something he had already alluded to (24:21, 15). Paul insisted that the real issue was religious. The Sanhedrin’s official inquiry had established nothing except that Paul believed in the resurrection. Now, the hearing before Felix was again steered into this issue by Paul.

Paul claimed that the prosecution had no case – unless Felix wanted to make Jewish theology the case. This would mean the Pharisees and many of the people of the land would also have to stand trial – since they believed it as well.

Understood “the way” (Acts 24:22-23)

Luke didn’t describe Felix’s reaction at the way the hearing was going, but he must have been exasperated with the proceedings. At this point, he abruptly suspended the hearing (24:22). Luke noted that Felix “was well acquainted with the Way” (24:22). He had acquired a knowledge of the Christian movement (“the Way”) from his years in Judea. This probably came about because of the prominent position of the church in Jerusalem and Jewish antagonism to the Christians (24:24). His wife Drusilla was Jewish. She would also have been aware of this “strange sect” within Judaism.

From his experience with the Way, Felix must have clearly understood that the charges against Paul were theological in nature. The accusations of sedition or profaning the temple simply had not been proved.

Felix now had a problem on his hands. As governor, he had a responsibility to preserve the peace, which was already being threatened by fractious Jews. Felix knew about the great disturbance that Paul’s presence in the temple had instigated. He must have surmised that to release Paul could have caused an even more extensive riot. Felix had already offended the Jews on several occasions, and he must have wanted to avoid another offense by freeing Paul.

The Sanhedrin was not averse to using political intimidation against Roman governors to get their way. We are reminded of the tactic the council used against Pilate, who wanted to set Jesus free. “If you let this man go, you

are no friend of Caesar. Anyone who claims to be a king opposes Caesar” (John 19:12). Felix didn’t want the Jews to accuse him of working against Caesar by letting an insurrectionist like Paul go free. To avoid the problem, Felix simply delayed the confrontation. He talked about deciding the case when Lysias the commander came to Caesarea to give his testimony (24:22). But it’s doubtful that Felix had any intention of bringing the case to a decision. Luke doesn’t tell us whether Lysias ever came to Caesarea to give testimony. Most likely he was never summoned.

Meanwhile, Paul was put under guard, though he was allowed some freedom, and his friends could visit him and attend to his needs (24:23). He was granted what was called “free custody,” since he had not been charged with a crime.

Felix and Drusilla (Acts 24:24)

Paul remained imprisoned in Caesarea for two years (24:27). But Luke mentioned nothing of Paul’s activities or the church during this time. There are many things we might have wished to know. For example, what happened to the Gentile delegation that had come with Paul to Jerusalem? What were Luke and Timothy doing? What role did the church in Jerusalem and Caesarea (and in Antioch) play in helping and supporting Paul?

Luke related only one incident after Paul’s suspended trial and before his final defense before being sent to Rome. Several days after the aborted hearing, Felix came to see Paul with his wife Drusilla. She was the youngest daughter of Herod Agrippa I, the Herod of Acts 12 (Josephus, *Antiquities* 19:354). Drusilla was also the sister of Agrippa II, in front of whom Paul would soon give testimony (25:13).

Drusilla was the third wife of Felix. According to Suetonius, Felix was able to marry a succession of “three queens” despite his lowly origins as a slave (*The Twelve Caesars*, “Claudius” 28). Drusilla had been married to Azizus, the king of Emesa, a small state in Syria. But it was an unhappy marriage. When Felix saw Drusilla (she was only 16), he was smitten with her beauty and decided on a ruse to acquire her as a wife. He sent an acquaintance, a Jew from Cyprus, who pretended to be a magician, and persuaded her to leave her husband for Felix (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:141-44).

The Western text inserts an explanatory note at verse 24, which may clarify the background of the incident of Drusilla and Felix’s visit to Paul. The text adds: “She asked to see Paul and hear the word. So desiring to satisfy her he [Felix] sent for Paul.”

This is important because Josephus said Felix caused Drusilla to “transgress the laws of her forefathers” in order to marry him (*Antiquities*

20:141-143). She would have been considered an apostate Jew. Perhaps Drusilla was hoping to be able to re-enter Judaism through Paul's sect. But she and Felix got more than they bargained for when Paul began to speak about "righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come" (24:25).

Righteousness and judgment (Acts 24:25-26)

The marriage of Felix and Drusilla had been built on adultery, betrayal, lies and sorcery. Now, the imprisoned Paul was teaching the couple that they were living lives that were incompatible with gospel. The gospel has a moral dimension, and speaks to personal behavior. A life of faith in Jesus Christ involves living an ethical life, based on the principles of God's law.

At some point, Felix became agitated and fearful at the direction the meeting was taking. Perhaps he and Drusilla had thought of having a philosophical discussion on religion in general. Or they wanted to discuss Drusilla's reinstatement. But Paul's talk had turned into a discourse on personal responsibility. Perhaps both of them didn't want to hear that they needed to change their lives. Or Felix may have been afraid Paul would talk Drusilla into leaving him. He decided to abruptly end the encounter, and told Paul, "That's enough for now! You may leave" (24:25).

It is interesting that John the Baptist was involved in a similar circumstance in which he spoke of righteousness and self-control to Herod. He had taken Herodias, his brother Philip's wife, as his own. John had told him, "It is not lawful for you to have her," and this especially angered his wife, Herodias (Matthew 14:1-12; Mark 6:14-29). For his truth-telling, John the Baptist was beheaded. Here was a similar circumstance in which Paul, too, could have "lost his head."

But the situation was different, and Felix promised Paul that he would see him again when he found it convenient. True to his word, he did send for Paul "frequently and talked with him" (24:26). But it was not to dispose of his case, nor to hear moral instruction. Felix "was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe" (24:26). Felix thought Paul had the means to pay a large bribe in order to gain his release. He knew that Paul had come to Jerusalem with a relief fund offering for the church, which must have been substantial. Paul had mentioned it in his defense (24:17). Felix may have thought Paul had additional large sums with which he could buy his freedom.

Two years passed (Acts 24:27)

But Paul had neither the resources nor the inclination to buy his way out of Felix's prison. With no bribe forthcoming – as well as Felix's disinclination to offend the Jews – Paul simply languished in jail, though he was given some freedom of movement. Felix didn't release Paul because he feared a violent

Jewish reaction. “Because Felix wanted to grant a favor to the Jews, he left Paul in prison,” wrote Luke (24:27). In the end, he wasn’t helped by this maneuver and was recalled to Rome after being accused by the Jews of crimes against the people.

Two years after Paul was brought to Caesarea, Felix’s governorship over Judea came to an end. He had been governor from A.D. 52 to 58 or 59. Josephus said Felix was recalled to Rome by Nero, and replaced by Porcius Festus, who arrived in perhaps A.D. 59 (*Antiquities* 20:182; *Wars* 2:266-271). What may have caused the downfall of Felix was his rough handling of a civil disorder that pitted Jews against Greeks in Caesarea. He had retaliated against the Jews, indiscriminately killing them and plundering their goods. Felix could have suffered severe punishment for his action. But his influential brother Pallas successfully petitioned Nero on his behalf.

Festus, who replaced Felix, governed Judea from A.D. 59 to his death in A.D. 62. We know little about Festus, though he seems to have been a reasonably good governor, especially in comparison with the man he succeeded as well as his successors, Albinus and Florus (Josephus, *Wars* 2:272-283).

TRIAL BEFORE FESTUS (ACTS 25)

Festus goes to Jerusalem (Acts 25:1-3)

As a new governor, Festus needed to become familiar with the local authorities. Three days after arriving in Judea, he went to Jerusalem to meet with the Jewish leaders. This was a dangerous time for Paul. The religious leaders would see the change in procurators as an opportunity to take advantage of a new and inexperienced governor. (In a similar situation a few years later, James would be killed by the high priest after Festus died and before the next governor arrived to take the reins of office.)

At Festus' meeting with the Jewish leaders, they "requested" that he transfer Paul to Jerusalem so that he could be put on trial (25:3). They were preparing to ambush Paul on the way and kill him. (Luke didn't explain how the plot became known.) We are reminded of the 40 men who had sworn to kill Paul two years earlier (23:14-15). There was a difference with this plot, though. The Jewish leadership itself seemed to have concocted the plan. This may explain why Paul appealed to Caesar in Rome (25:10). He knew that he would never survive a trip to Jerusalem.

For their part, the Jewish leaders had nearly abandoned their attempt to get at Paul through the Roman legal process. Perhaps all they could hope for, if the plot failed, was to have Festus give them the opportunity of trying Paul for profaning the temple. They just didn't have the proof to get him convicted of a state crime.

Festus was in a tricky position regarding Paul. The Jewish leaders had asked him to transfer Paul "as a favor to them" (25:3). This was probably presented in some politely intimidating manner. They may have reminded the new governor that charges against Felix were being prepared (or had already been given) by them in Rome. It was expected that Festus would want to forge a closer and more understanding relationship with the elders. One way Festus could do that would be to grant the Jews' simple request to bring Paul to Jerusalem.

Transfer is refused (Acts 25:4-7)

Festus, perhaps unwittingly, foiled the Jewish conspiracy. He invited some of the Jewish leaders to come with him to Caesarea and press charges against Paul there (15:4-5). Why he did this isn't clear. Perhaps it was simple logic. Paul was already in Caesarea, and Festus was returning there (25:4-5). Caesarea was the headquarters of the province, so that seemed the reasonable place to have the trial.

After eight or ten days in Jerusalem, Festus returned to Caesarea. He convened the court the next day. Paul was brought in and the Jewish leaders “stood around him. They brought many serious charges against him,” but Luke says “they could not prove them” (25:7).

If it were not so serious, the case was becoming a humorous farce. It began with a hearsay-caused tumult in the temple. Then came a riotous hearing before the Sanhedrin and an ineffectual plot on Paul’s life by the 40 zealots. The case next moved to Caesarea in which a bumbling Jewish prosecution failed to prove anything against Paul. However, the waffling Felix could make no decision for or against Paul. Now the case was being opened again, with the same unprovable charges flying about. And there was more to come.

Paul’s defense (Acts 25:8-9)

Luke narrated Paul’s defense before Festus briefly, omitting most of the details of the Jews’ charges and Paul’s defense. We already know the case well, from what Luke has previously narrated. We know that the prosecution has no real evidence, so we are confident that Paul will not be convicted.

Luke summarized Paul’s defense in a sentence. He had Paul say to Festus: “I have done nothing wrong against the Jewish law or against the temple or against Caesar” (25:8). This is a summary of the Jews’ three-fold accusation, and Paul has already successfully defended himself against the charges.

Festus must have been puzzled by the accusations. He was in the same situation as Felix had been in. There was no criminal act for which Paul could be prosecuted. But Festus didn’t want to let Paul go free because of the possible repercussions from the Jews.

Then he thought of a possible way out of his dilemma. The Jews had previously asked Festus, as a favor, to transfer Paul to Jerusalem for trial. There seemed no harm in doing this. He could gain their good graces and rid himself of a potentially volatile situation. So Festus turned to Paul and said, “Are you willing to go up to Jerusalem and stand trial before me there on these charges?” (25:9). Luke added that Festus (like Felix before him) said this “wishing to do the Jews a favor.”

It’s difficult to see what this change of venue would have accomplished. The same ground had already been gone over twice, once before Felix and now before Festus. The Sanhedrin also had attempted to try Paul. Nonetheless, Festus wanted Paul to defend himself *again* in a court session in Jerusalem because he was worried the Jews might riot over Paul. However, it’s not clear that Festus would have acted as judge. In one place he was

ambiguous on the matter, saying only that he wanted Paul to “go to Jerusalem and stand trial there on these charges” (25:20). But there should have been no need for any trial since Paul had been found innocent – again.

Festus was dealing with what seemed to be a mish-mash of religious and political offenses. Some issues were properly in the domain of a governor to decide, and some for the Sanhedrin to rule on.

It is unlikely that a formal session of the Sanhedrin could have been held with Festus as president. What may have been in the procurator’s mind was a trial in Jerusalem before the Sanhedrin on the religious charges – contravention of Jewish law and, in particular, violation of the Temple – followed by a trial on the political charges before the procurator himself. (Neil, 238)

He might have reasoned that witnesses would be more easily available in Jerusalem. He might have allowed the Jews to try Paul on the temple or religious issue. They might decide Paul should be executed and Festus could go along with it. Then he would not be in the awkward position of first having to declare Paul innocent on the political issues. The matter simply wouldn’t come up. Perhaps Festus could have dismissed the political charges first without doing himself much political harm. After all, he was still allowing the Jews to try Paul on the religious charges. In his mind, he could give the prisoner his due and still do the Jews a favor. In any case, it must have been clear to Paul that for him it was a lose-lose situation.

“I appeal to Caesar!” (Acts 25:10-11)

Festus couldn’t simply turn Paul over to the Jews. He was dealing with a Roman citizen who had no official charges proven against him. His duty as a Roman ruler was to protect Roman citizens from local injustice. Festus apparently could not make a preemptory decision regarding a place of trial. He had to get Paul’s agreement for a change in venue.

Paul was now at the crossroads. To agree to a Jerusalem trial was to play into the hands of his accusers. He would have been tacitly agreeing that there was, after all, a case to be decided. Perhaps Paul knew of the plot against him, or must have suspected one would be hatched. Besides, since Festus had already made one concession to the Jews, how many more was he prepared to make?

So Paul told Festus: “I am now standing before Caesar’s court, where I ought to be tried. I have not done any wrong to the Jews, as you yourself know very well....If the charges brought against me by these Jews are not true, no one has the right to hand me over to them. *I appeal to Caesar!*” (25:10-

11). The right of a citizen to appeal to Caesar was an ancient one. It was called the *provocatio ad Caesarem* or “appeal to the emperor” for trial. (This should be distinguished from the appeal *after* a sentence.)

Nero was emperor (Acts 25:11-12)

The emperor at the time Paul made his appeal was the infamous Nero (A.D. 54-68). It may seem odd that Paul would put his life in the hands of an emperor who would be known as a persecutor of Christians. However, we’ve seen that Paul needed to evade the grasp of the Jews in Jerusalem at almost any cost. Neither was he certain of a fair hearing before a governor who had declared him innocent but refused to let him go.

There was a faith issue involved also. Paul must have remembered the vision that spoke of his going to Rome. He may have realized that a sure way to get there and fulfill his calling to preach the gospel was to make his appeal to Caesar (23:11). Also, Nero had not yet become the sinister ruler of his later years. In the early years of his reign, Nero was under the influence of the Stoic philosopher Seneca and the prefect of the praetorian guard Afranius Burrus. They were considered the good years of Nero’s reign, and were even looked upon as something of a Golden Age.

Neither had Nero yet married Poppaea, who Josephus called “a religious woman” (*Antiquities* 20:195). She was a friend of the Jews, and might have been capable of influencing Nero to be disaffected toward a major Christian leader like Paul. It was only later, about A.D. 62, that imperial policy toward the Christians became malicious. Seneca had retired by this time. Burrus was dead. Nero had divorced Octavia and married Poppaea. But none of this could have been foreseen around the time Paul appealed and went to Rome.

The great fire of Rome, something for which Nero apparently blamed the Christians of Rome, did not occur until A.D. 64.

When Paul appealed to Rome, Festus saw that his problem was solved. He conferred with his council about the matter, and then told Paul: “You have appealed to Caesar. To Caesar you will go!” (25:12).

Almost certainly, the Jews were unhappy about this turn of events. But Festus could parry their objections by claiming his hands were tied. Paul was a Roman citizen, against whom no certain charges could be proved. It was the law. Paul had to be allowed to appeal to Caesar if he so requested.

King Agrippa (Acts 25:13)

However, the charade was not yet over for Paul. As it turned out, a few days later King Agrippa and his wife Bernice arrived at Caesarea to pay their

respects to the new governor. They were spending some time there, and naturally, Festus discussed Paul's case with them (25:13).

Marcus Julius Agrippa II (A.D. 27-100) was the son of Agrippa I (12:23), and the great-grandson of Herod the Great. He had been brought up at Rome in the court of Claudius and was a favorite of the emperor. The emperors Claudius and Nero had appointed Agrippa ruler of a number of kingdoms, lands and cities in the Holy Land. At the time of Paul's trial, he was the king over various territories northeast of Galilee.

The emperor had given Agrippa the right to appoint the high priest and to be custodian of the temple's treasury and priestly garments (Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:213, 222, 103). This was because Agrippa was from an Idumean-Jewish family and was knowledgeable of Jewish affairs. Politically, this moderated the power struggle between the Jewish leaders and the Roman political rulers in Judea. Since Agrippa was viewed by Rome as an authority on Jewish religious questions, it's not surprising that Festus discussed Paul's case with him. He hoped to get Agrippa's help in drafting a report to Rome regarding the issues involved.

Queen Bernice (Acts 25:13)

Bernice was the sister of Agrippa II, and the sister of Drusilla. She had been married to her uncle, Herod king of Chalcis. At his death she came to live with her brother Agrippa, which caused rumors that they were having an incestuous relationship. At the close of the Jewish-Roman war, she became the mistress of the Roman general Titus, and for a time lived with him in Rome (before he became emperor). Bernice was once described as "a Jewish Cleopatra on a small scale."

Both Agrippa II and Bernice tried to prevent the Jewish-Roman war, finally opting to take the part of Rome in the struggle. At one point, with considerable risk to her own life, she tried to prevent a terrible massacre of Jews by the governor Florus. (For further details on Bernice see Josephus, *Antiquities* 20:145-147; *Wars* 2:425-429; Juvenal, *Satires* 6.156-160; Tacitus, *The Histories* 2.2, 81; Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, "Titus" 7; Dio Cassius, *History of Rome* 56.18.)

King and Festus discuss the case (Acts 25:14-21)

Because of King Agrippa's role in Judaism, he has been described as "the secular head of the Jewish faith" (I. Howard Marshall, *Acts*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, 388). Festus, knowing that Agrippa understood Judaism's faith and practice, was eager to get his views on Paul's case. Here

were two rulers huddling together to try to sort out the details of Paul's case. The one was an expert on Judaism and the other on Roman culture. Now, they would once again hear Paul's line of defense.

In the next chapter, Luke will narrate Paul's speech before King Agrippa and governor Festus. But before this, he described a private conversation between the two men, in which Festus admitted his consternation (25:14-21). How Luke knew what they discussed is not known.

In his explanation to Agrippa, Festus admitted that when Paul's accusers got up to speak, "They did not charge him with any crimes I had expected. Instead they had some fine points of dispute with him about their own religion and about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive" (25:18-19). These were clearly not offenses punishable under Roman law.

The whole spate of accusations seemed baffling to Festus. Paul's discussion about the death and resurrection of Jesus had been even more incomprehensible to Festus. He was an outsider who understood nothing about the gospel – nor of the Jewish accusations. He admitted to Agrippa: "I was at a loss how to investigate such matters" (25:20). He hoped Agrippa could help him sort out the complexities of the case and aid him in drafting a letter about Paul to the emperor's court (25:26).

SPEECH BEFORE AGRIPPA (ACTS 25:22-26:32)

The case intrigued Agrippa, and he said to Festus, “I would like to hear this man myself” (25:22). Festus granted the king his wish, hoping no doubt for some clarification in the matter. The stage was set for Paul to witness to a both a governor and king at once, as Jesus said his disciples would (Matthew 10:18; Luke 21:12). This meeting with Herod Agrippa II has its parallel in Jesus’ inquest before Herod Antipas (Luke 23:6-12). Both Jesus and Paul were tried before a Roman governor, and each witnessed to a Jewish king who was anxious to meet him.) (Agrippa here played the role taken by Antipas in Jesus’ trial.)

Pomp and circumstance (Acts 25:23)

Luke began to narrate what would be Paul’s longest and final major speech. But before doing so, Luke explained how Agrippa and Bernice “came with great pomp and entered the audience room with the high-ranking military officers and the prominent men of the city” (25:23). Paul’s witness to the gospel would be heard by the most important political leaders of Caesarea and Judea.

Of all of Paul’s defense speeches, Luke gave the most space to his defense before King Agrippa. The speech was tightly constructed and carefully thought out. Luke considered the speech as being very important to his message. It was Paul’s crowning witness before the Jewish authorities and important Gentile dignitaries of the land.

This was not an official trial, nor even an inquiry. Paul had already appealed to Caesar and his wish had been granted by Festus. The informal hearing (if we might call it that) was held because of Agrippa’s curiosity, and in order that he might help Festus construct his report to the emperor. It was also a spectacle and great theater. Agrippa and Bernice had entered the chamber with pomp and circumstance. The lesser dignitaries had marched in behind them. The star was Paul. At the center of a controversy that wouldn’t quit, he had become a media event. Like the Athenians, everyone seemed curious about the new ideas he was expounding.

Not deserving of death (Acts 25:24-25)

Before Paul was to give his defense, Festus made a general declaration of Paul’s innocence to the assembled throng. He told them: “The whole Jewish community has petitioned me about him in Jerusalem and here in Caesarea, shouting that he ought not to live any longer. I found he had done nothing deserving of death” (25:24-25). Lysias had already stated that Paul was

innocent (23:29). For a second time, a Roman authority figure declared that Paul had committed no crime that deserved a death penalty. There would be yet one more affirmation of Paul's innocence (26:31). Like Jesus (Luke 23:4, 15, 22), Paul would be exonerated three times by the Roman authority.

Festus made a second admission to the lords and ladies assembled to hear Paul. He said: "I have nothing definite to write to His Majesty [that is, the Emperor] about him [Paul]. Therefore I have brought him before all of you, and especially before you, King Agrippa, so that as a result of this investigation I may have something to write. For I think it is unreasonable to send a prisoner on to Rome without specifying the charges against him" (25:26-27).

The irony of such a statement should not be lost. There was *no charge* against Paul of a civil nature. He had not committed a crime and should have been freed. Yet, he was incarcerated and will be sent to Rome to stand trial with no crime being charged to him. The truth of the matter is that he was a prisoner only because the Jews were able to intimidate the political authority who did not have the courage to free Paul.

The complication and prolongation of the trial of Paul arose from the fact that the charge was political – hence the procurators were reluctant to dismiss it out of hand – and yet the evidence was theological, hence the procurators were quite unable to understand it. Not surprisingly, Festus called in King Agrippa as an assessor, to help him to draft the explanation which had to be sent with the prisoner to Rome. (Sherwin-White, 51)

It's difficult to know what Agrippa could add to what Festus already knew. He admitted that there was no chargeable offense against Paul. The reason Festus was still holding Paul was that the prisoner had appealed to Rome. For a Roman governor to admit there was no definite charge to write Rome about, was an admission that Paul ought to have been freed in Caesarea. If there was no charge to send to Rome, then why send the man?

It may have been that Festus was hoping that Agrippa – with his expert knowledge of Jewish matters – would be able to find *something* with which Paul could be charged. Or if not, at least he could use the name of a local Jewish leader respected at Rome to underwrite the fact that there was no charge to send.

Agrippa opens the inquest (Acts 26:1)

Though Luke described Paul's speech as a "defense," the occasion was a fact-finding investigation rather than a formal judicial inquiry (26:1). That is

why Festus allowed Agrippa to preside at the meeting, for it was Agrippa who told Paul, “You have permission to speak for yourself” (26:1).

Paul’s speech before Agrippa covered the same ground as his previous defense before the Jews at the temple and later before Felix. The speech was personal and autobiographical. Paul began by asserting that he was a good Jew and had not violated Torah. He insisted that the Jews had accused him because he believed in the resurrection. Paul painted himself as the victim of factional squabbling over whether Jesus was the Messiah resurrected.

Paul spent considerable time recounting his conversion experience. His point was that he had not become a Christian on a whim. Dramatic events in his personal life had led to his change of viewpoint. Paul insisted that his new Christian faith was an outgrowth of his Jewish beliefs as a Pharisee. He claimed that the Christian faith was organically connected with Judaism.

We will see all these threads unfold as Paul speaks. This will be our last chance to hear Paul in depth. After this, Luke will give us only brief snippets of his conversation with shipmates (27:10, 21-25, 33), and a short synopsis of his disturbing meeting with Rome’s Jews (28:17-28).

Acquainted with Jewish customs (Acts 26:2-5)

Paul began by acknowledging that his audience, particularly Agrippa, was not antagonistic to him. Not only that, he said of Agrippa, “You are well acquainted with all the Jewish customs and controversies” (26:3). Paul was talking to someone who understood the unruly nature of the Jewish religious situation in Jerusalem and had an interest in its theology. Also, Agrippa seemed somewhat impartial – since he did not rule Judea, he was insulated from political pressures from the high priests. Indeed, Agrippa had power over the high priest. Paul hoped such a person – one who was expert in the details of Jewish belief and practice – would grasp the fact that his Christian beliefs were the fulfillment of Israel’s hopes.

He pointed out that his way of life since childhood (both in Tarsus and Jerusalem) was well known among the Jews (26:4). “They have known me for a long time” (26:5). Paul was sufficiently prominent to have been a known quantity in Judea. We might say he was a bit of a religious celebrity in his time. He stressed his loyalty to Torah, saying, “I conformed to the strictest sect of our religion, living as a Pharisee” (26:5). The term “Pharisee” described those who had bound themselves to live according to the law (Philippians 3:5). In applying the term to himself, Paul established his Jewish credentials before Agrippa.

Paul proclaimed the gospel *because*, not in spite of, his Jewish ancestry and culture. He characterized the Jewish and Christian hope as being inextricably

linked. Paul wanted Agrippa to see a continuity between his Jewish upbringing and his Christianity.

On trial for “hope” (Acts 26:6-8)

Paul again made the resurrection the real bone of contention between himself and his Jewish accusers (23:6; 24:15; 25:19). “It is because of my hope in what God has promised our ancestors that I am on trial today,” he told Agrippa (26:6). The resurrection was the promise all Israel was “hoping to see fulfilled.” He hammered home the resurrection: “King Agrippa, it is because of this hope that these Jews are accusing me” (26:8).

Paul pointed out that the resurrection was a Jewish hope. He implied that Christians – who have the same hope – are within the boundaries of what was accepted within first-century Judaism. Of course, the Christian view of the resurrection was much more specific, as it centered on a glorified Jesus. All hope for a general resurrection hinged on the specific resurrection of Jesus. This was the real “hope” of which Paul spoke.

The word *hope* is a key term in Paul’s defence (23:6; 24:15; 26:6-; 28:20). It refers to the believing expectation that God will fulfil the promises and prophecies made in the Old Testament, and for Paul it refers specifically to the belief that these promises have been and will be fulfilled in Jesus. (Marshall, 392)

It was absurd, Paul was saying, that he should be persecuted for proclaiming the very hope in which the Jews believed! The Messiah had promised that he would free his people. God had honored Israel’s hope by sending Jesus as the Messiah and then raising him as the forerunner of the promise to raise all the righteous dead. This was the specific “hope” Paul had in mind.

At this point, Paul turned to the audience and made a plea for everyone to accept this “hope.” “Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?” he asked the assembly (26:8). The real issue was the resurrection of Jesus. To put it in the words of Festus, it was “about a dead man named Jesus who Paul claimed was alive” (25:19). Paul had one particular instance of “raising” in mind – that of Jesus. It was one resurrection that had been authenticated and verified. For Paul, to disbelieve in the resurrection of Christ was to disbelieve in the general resurrection of the dead (1 Corinthians 15:12-19).

Paul’s point was that this belief [in a resurrection] had now been validated by God in his raising one man from the dead, demonstrating

by this very fact that this one man was Israel's long-expected deliverer, the one in whom the ancient hope was to be realized. (F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, revised edition, The New International Commentary on the Bible, page 463)

Opposed the name of Jesus (Acts 26:9-11)

Paul admitted that he, ardent Pharisee that he was, had once denounced Jesus and denied his resurrection. Paul had persecuted people who claimed to have seen Jesus alive after his crucifixion.

Paul understood his opponents' frame of mind very well; he had once shared it himself. He himself, for all his belief in the resurrection of the dead at the last day, thought it incredible that God should have raised the crucified Jesus; and when the disciples insisted that he had indeed raised him, Paul treated them as charlatans and blasphemers. (Bruce, 464)

Paul told Agrippa: "On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord's people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them" (26:10). Luke previously told us Paul had been involved with Stephen's death (7:57-60). But now we learn that he was instrumental in the death of many Christians, something he would regret during his entire life (1 Corinthians 15:9; 1 Timothy 1:12-16). The phrase "I cast my vote against them" literally means "I cast my pebble against them." It was a metaphor with the meaning of giving one's approval to something. In what sense he gave "approval" is not clear.

Some commentators believe that Paul was actually a member of the Sanhedrin. Member or not, Paul was working hand-in-glove with the Sanhedrin. He was a sort of point man or *agent provocateur* for the council authorities in hunting down Christians (7:58; 8:1; 22:20). He went from one synagogue to another – including those in foreign cities – and punished Christian Jews, attempting to get them to blaspheme (that is, to deny Christ) (26:11).

Paul spoke as though quite a number of Christians had been put to death under the authority of the Sanhedrin. It is doubtful that the Romans had given the Jewish leaders unilateral permission to kill the Christians they had jailed. The executions were probably illegal executions, or trumped-up political charges about being a follower of a convicted revolutionary. The fact that the Jews got away with Stephen's murder implies they escaped detection and punishment in other executions. Or the authorities may have simply looked the other way.

Conversion experience (Acts 26:12-14)

During a Christian-hunting journey to Damascus – with the authority and commission of the chief priests – a critical moment occurred in Paul’s life (26:12). He came face to face with the risen Christ.

This is the third time that Paul’s conversion has been recounted in Acts (9:3-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18). The event was obviously important for Luke as well as Paul. But each of the three accounts was not an identical retelling. Each version included or deleted information – and each had its emphasis – so that it fit the audience and Luke’s context. There is a general agreement between the accounts, and with Paul’s own statement in Galatians 1. But there are differences in detail. For example, the present account made no mention of Ananias, nor of Paul’s blindness and subsequent healing. Paul also did not mention his being taken to Damascus.

Paul did mention only here that the voice spoke in Aramaic, or literally “in the Hebrew language” (26:14). This is indicated by the Semitic form of his name in which the voice addressed him, “Saoul, Saoul...” The light Paul saw was described as having great intensity. It was “a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions” and everyone fell to the ground (26:13-14). The sheer brightness of the light and its occurrence at noon – the brightest part of the day – also added to the forcefulness with which Jesus confronted Paul. He was stopped dead in his tracks, as it were.

The light represented the presence of God and Christ. By its intensification, Paul was perhaps suggesting that the origin of his belief in Jesus was not based on whimsy. The Damascus road experience (with its overpowering light) could not be doubted. This was the risen Jesus talking to him, and there was no question about it.

Kick against the goads (Acts 26:14)

This conversion account seemed to concentrate its attention on Jesus’ divine commission to Paul given through the voice he heard. Luke’s account accentuated the role of the voice by being the only one to report Jesus’ words to Paul: “It is hard for you to kick against the goads” (26:14). A goad was a long-handled, pointed instrument used to urge stubborn oxen to move forward during plowing. A modern equivalent would be a cattle prod. This prosaic agricultural metaphor was well-known in the Greek world. The expression described opposition to deity. Howard Marshall points out its usage in Euripides’ *Bacchanals*: “Pentheus, the opponent of the cult of Dionysius, is warned: ‘You are a mortal, and he is a god. If I were you I would

control my rage and sacrifice to him rather than kick against the pricks [goads]” (794-795).

It was a proverbial saying, common in Greek and Latin, indicating that no man can resist the will of the gods. The metaphor is that of the stubborn ox kicking back at the driver who is prodding it on in the direction he wants it to go. (Neil, 243)

An ox who kicks against the goad only invites more goading. The only way for the ox to avoid the irritant is to go forward, to do the master’s bidding. The idea as expressed in Paul’s speech seems to have been that God had been pushing Paul towards the truth, but that he had been resisting. That is not to say Paul had been suffering from an uneasy conscience over his persecution of Christians. There is no hint of this either in Acts or Paul’s epistles. Paul claimed the opposite in Acts 23:1. Even to the last moment on the Damascus road, Paul was on his way to track down Christians, not find Christ.

In the words of F.F. Bruce, “The ‘goads’ against which he was now told it was fruitless for him to kick were not the prickings of a disturbed conscience, but the new forces which were now impelling him in the opposite direction” (466).

Appointed to witness (Acts 26:15-16)

Over half of the conversion experience narrative in chapter 26 was taken up by a description of the commission Jesus gave to Paul. In this account, the commission was delivered directly to Paul by the risen Christ. Ananias was not referred to at all. It was Jesus who spoke to Paul, telling him to stand on his feet. He was then told that he had been appointed as a servant and witness of Christ (26:16). There are parallels with the commissioning of some of the Old Testament prophets. One is reminded of the commission of Ezekiel (2:1-8). He, too, was told to stand. Then he was informed that he would be sent as a prophet to a rebellious house of Israel.

But Paul was to be *rescued* from his own people, and then sent to the Gentiles. Paul said Jesus had told him: “I am sending you to them [the Gentiles] to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (26:17-18).

Paul would receive protection from Jews and Gentiles to enable him to fulfill his witness. But he would not be spared suffering in the process (9:16). Paul would turn the Gentiles from darkness (sin and ignorance) to light (understanding and righteousness) (26:18). Paul’s description in Colossians

1:12-13 of the Gentiles as being rescued from “the dominion of darkness” and sharing in “the kingdom of light” is a close parallel. Paul used this metaphor of darkness and light to represent salvation in his own writings. Some examples are: Romans 2:19; 13:12; 2 Corinthians 4:6; 6:14; Ephesians 5:8; Colossians 1:12-14; 1 Thessalonians 5:5.

Moving people from darkness to light was a way of describing conversion (1 Peter 2:9). This involved turning away from sin and evil as well (Ephesians 2:2; Colossians 1:13). In the Bible, the unsaved are pictured as being spiritually blind. Salvation is pictured in terms of restoring spiritual sight to the blind (Isaiah 35:5; 42:6; cf. Matthew 9:30). The Suffering Servant, a reference to Jesus, was commissioned to “open eyes that are blind” (Isaiah 42:7). Jesus applied this commission to himself (Luke 4:16-21, quoting from Isaiah 61:1-2). Paul, as the servant of the Master, was to take the news of that salvation to Jews, and especially to Gentiles – to open blind eyes. Paul was called to continue Jesus’ ministry of conversion, a ministry of spiritual healing.

The turning of Gentiles “from the power of Satan to God” echoed another theme of Scripture. Satan’s kingdom (this world) is at war with God’s kingdom, and must be vanquished. The book of Revelation, for example, is a story of Satan “who leads the whole world astray” (12:9). He is vanquished by the returning Jesus and chained so that “the kingdom of the world” can become the kingdom of Christ and God (11:15; 20:1-3).

Obedient to vision (Acts 26:19)

Paul offered his experience on the Damascus road as a rationale for why he was preaching a message that angered the Jews. He was telling people about what he had seen, Jesus Christ, and following his commands, telling all people that he was the promised Savior. Paul said, “I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven” (26:19). Not being “disobedient” required that he preach to Gentiles everywhere.

Paul explained to Agrippa what he had been doing all these years. He gave a general summary of his missionary activity to the present. (Or rather, Luke put a summary in the book of Acts. Paul may have covered many more details when he was talking to Agrippa.) Paul’s work had occurred in: Damascus, Jerusalem, Judea and the Gentile world. This was similar to the commission given to the 12 apostles. They were to be witnesses of Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (1:8).

Paul was not laying out a chronological summary of his missionary activity. There is no evidence in Acts that he witnessed throughout Judea after preaching in Damascus and Jerusalem, though Luke doesn’t necessary

tell us everywhere Paul preached (9:20-30). Paul's own letters say that he did not preach "in all Judea" in the early days of his conversion (Galatians 1:18-24). He traveled through Judea and into Jerusalem on several later occasions (11:30; 12:25; 15:3; 18:22; 21:7-16). He could have preached the gospel in Judea during these travels.

Repent and turn to God (Acts 26:20)

During his witnessing to Christ, Paul preached that people "should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds" (26:20). We have here something of the basic substance of Paul's message. True repentance involves a new view of oneself in which the need for a Savior to do his work *within* is understood to be necessary. Thus, the stress in the apostles' preaching on the need to accept and put one's faith in Jesus and his saving power. There is a need to turn to God "based on knowledge" and accept "the righteousness that comes from God" instead of seeking a goodness based on our own merits (Romans 10:1-3; Philippians 3:9). Pagan Gentiles would also learn that they had been putting their faith in worthless idols, and they need to turn to the true God.

Following that, believers would begin living a life appropriate to conversion. They would be showing the fruits or evidences of the operation of the Holy Spirit in their lives (Galatians 5:22-25). In short, people do not make themselves acceptable in God's sight because they first decide to keep his law. God first converts people through the Spirit, and this leads them to base their lives on his will. Obedience is the result, and not the cause of salvation.

The proof of genuine repentance and turning to God is a certain kind of life. But these deeds are not merely the reaction of someone whose life is governed by a new series of laws; they are the result of a new *love*. (William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, revised edition, The Daily Study Bible Series, page 179)

Spoke what was prophesied (Acts 26:21-22)

Paul insisted to King Agrippa that it was because of his preaching the gospel – particularly to Gentiles – that the Jews had seized him and tried to kill him (26:21). It was only through God's protection that he had survived the plots against him. Thus, he was able to "stand here and testify to small and great alike" (26:22). Paul explained that he was teaching only what "the prophets and Moses said would happen." That is, he was attempting to prove through the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah. This was Paul's mode of operation when confronting Jews with the gospel (17:2-3).

Paul said he was innocent of any wrong-doing to God or the Jews. He had only taught from the Scriptures – the Scriptures that faithful Jews called their own. Paul’s teaching about Jesus, in that sense, was just pointing out fulfilled prophecy. This is a central argument of Luke in both his Gospel and the book of Acts. The hope of Israel in its Savior was described in the Holy Scriptures and fulfilled in Jesus (Luke 24:25-27, 44; Acts 3:18-26; 10:42-43; 13:27).

The Christ to suffer (Acts 26:23)

The prophets and Moses had prophesied of Jesus. In Paul’s words, they said “the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles” (26:22-23). We can go to the Servant Songs of Isaiah to find the idea of the Suffering Messiah (52:13-53:12, quoted in Acts 8:32). A number of the Psalms also speak of a Savior who would suffer (Psalm 2:1-2, quoted in Acts 4:25-26). If the writers of the Psalms (David in particular) are seen as types of a suffering Savior, then many of these contain prophetic material regarding Jesus.

The other question about Paul’s statement in 26:23 is: Which Hebrew Scriptures speak of a Savior who must first rise from the dead? There are some, though they are not prominent. Peter quoted one of these texts from Psalm 17:10 (Acts 2:25-28). Also Isaiah had said the Servant would “prolong his days” and “see the light of life” after his suffering (53:10-11).

The question also arises as to whether the Jews of Paul’s day ever thought of the Messiah in terms of suffering. The apostles seem to speak as though this was understood, at least in a hazy way. Paul does so here before Agrippa as well. Howard Marshall writes, “Paul as a Christian appears to presuppose the identification of the Messiah as the suffering Servant, but it is not certain whether this step had been taken by the Jews, and it may well be that they disputed it” (398).

It may be in doubt whether pre-Christian Judaism conceived of the Messiah in terms of suffering, dying and being resurrected. The message of the apostles and Paul clearly went beyond the understanding of the Jews, for some of it came by revelation through Christ. The majority of Jews, whatever their view of the Messiah, did not believe this role had been fulfilled in Jesus.

Nonetheless, Paul insisted that God’s purpose was pre-figured in Scripture, and that its prophetic nature could be seen in the inspired writings. That purpose (which Paul said was fulfilled in Jesus) was in harmony and continuity with the true faith of Israel. To accept the reality of Jesus, the resurrection and the Holy Spirit was to realize the true hope of Israel stated in the Scriptures (3:24-26). Jesus was a light to all people – Jew and Gentile.

This had been prophesied in the Scriptures (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6; 60:3).

Luke told his readers early on in his Gospel that Jesus was a “light.” The elderly and devout Simeon had taken the infant Jesus in his arms. Through the Holy Spirit, he prophesied that he would be “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel” (Luke 2:32, from Isaiah 49:6). Echoing Simeon’s statement, Paul made preaching “a gospel of light” the programmatic prophecy of his own work (13:47).

“You are...insane” (Acts 26:24-27)

Such thoughts “about a dead man named Jesus” were beyond the grasp of Festus. To him, Paul was speaking nonsense. He interrupted Paul’s speech, saying, “You are out of your mind... Your great learning is driving you insane” (26:24). To a practical Roman governor, this Jewish messianism was crazy talk.

Paul countered that he wasn’t insane. He insisted that what he was saying was “true and reasonable” (24:25). He referred to King Agrippa for support, as one who was familiar with these thoughts. Paul felt he could speak to Agrippa freely because of this. Besides, the controversy over the Christians was widely known. The gospel had been proclaimed for three decades and the arguments pro and con about Jesus’ death and resurrection would have been widely known and discussed.

Paul turned to the king and said, “King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know you do” (26:27). Paul’s leading question had its point. The Jewish king who knows the Scriptures should accept Paul’s case about Jesus, since it rests on the promises of the prophets. But Agrippa was like most Jews. He could accept the words of the prophets who spoke of a coming Messiah. That was a safe belief that did not require any immediate changes in what he did. But he did not believe they were fulfilled in Jesus; that was a dangerous belief that required personal changes.

“In such a short time” (Acts 26:28-29)

The conversation had suddenly become uncomfortably personal for Agrippa. Paul had challenged him to accept his claims about Jesus since he believed the prophets. He had been logically boxed in by Paul’s question, and he needed to get out it and still remain politically correct.

Agrippa turned and said to Paul, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” (26:28). The King James Version translated Agrippa’s reply to Paul in these words: “Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.” It is one of the most famous of biblical quotations, and many sermons have been preached on its words.

Unfortunately, it is almost certainly not what Agrippa said. The NIV’s

translation is probably more faithful to the king's thoughts. The Greek is difficult in this verse, and commentators translate it in various ways. But whatever Agrippa meant by his words, he was not almost ready to respond to Paul's "altar call." The king had been put into a quandary by Paul's challenge. He was embarrassed by his appeal, but could neither agree nor disagree with certain parts of Paul's question.

He could not admit that he did believe the prophets; on the other hand, he could not say that he did not believe them, for then his influence with the Jews and his standing with their religious leaders would be gone. So he turned Paul's appeal aside with a smile: "In short," he said, "you are trying to make me play the Christian" – for that seems to be the meaning of his words. He was not going to be maneuvered into anything like that! (Bruce, 471)

Agrippa was not going to agree with Paul even a little bit. Otherwise he would be led into a logical box and would have no safe escape. So he parried Paul's question with his facetious remark.

If he confessed belief in the prophets, the obvious follow-up would be, "Surely then you accept that Jesus is the Messiah?" On the other hand, to deny that he believed in the prophets would be unthinkable for a loyal Jew. So he answers, "In a short time you think to make me a Christian!" The answer is light-hearted, but not ironic. It is Agrippa's attempt to get out of the logical trap in which he is in danger of being caught. (Marshall, 400)

To paraphrase, Agrippa was saying to Paul, "You think you can make me a Christian in this short time, don't you?" He side-stepped the question by giving one of his own. This then led Paul to parry back with his own retort. It was probably a play on Agrippa's quick remark. Paul said to him: "Short time or long – I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am" (26:29).

Paul would have liked all his listeners to become Christians, to become free of their spiritual chains. The situation was made more ironic by Paul's own manacles. After saying he wanted his listeners to become as he was, he must have raised his hands, and with a wry smile said, "...except for these chains" (26:29).

Mirror of Jesus' trip (Acts 26:30-32)

Paul's light touch may have elicited smiles and laughter from the audience; it was a good place to end the meeting. Festus, Agrippa, Bernice and some of the dignitaries sitting with them left the room for a discussion about Paul's

fate. Luke summarized their conclusion in a sentence: “This man is not doing anything that deserves death or imprisonment” (26:31).

This is the third time that Roman authorities (now with a Jewish king present) concluded that Paul was innocent (23:29; 25:25). Jesus, like Paul, had also been declared innocent three times by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate (Luke 23:4, 14, 22), with the Jewish leader Herod nodding in assent (23:5). For Luke, Paul’s ministry and trials closely resembled those of his Master, Jesus.

But there were also differences between Jesus’ and Paul’s experience. Jesus’ death at Jerusalem was narrated in gruesome detail. Paul did not die at Jerusalem, nor would he die at the end of Acts in Rome. But to Rome Paul would go. After the Roman governor had declared Paul innocent, he could have released Paul. But it was not politically expedient to do so, and since he had appealed to the emperor, it was deemed appropriate to send him to Rome. As Agrippa told Festus: “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar” (26:32).

JOURNEY TO ROME (ACTS 27:1-28:15)

VOYAGE AND SHIPWRECK

Luke as eyewitness (Acts 27:1)

Sometime after Paul's meeting with Agrippa, Festus made arrangements for Paul to be taken to Rome. Luke wrote: "When it was decided that we would sail for Italy, Paul and some other prisoners were handed over to a centurion named Julius" (27:1). Luke resumed the "we" narrative section, which he had broken off when Paul and the delegation met with James in Jerusalem (21:18). The present "we" section continues until Paul reaches Rome (28:16). This is the longest of the four "we" panels. (To review them, they were: 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16.)

Luke apparently was with Paul during the entire eventful journey. As we shall see from the vivid details he provided, the narrative of Paul's sea voyage was an eyewitness report. Luke described eastern Mediterranean ports-of-call, wind directions, and mentioned places of safety and danger for ships. As far as historians are able to verify, all of Luke's nautical details are as they should be.

In support of the accuracy of Luke's account, commentators often refer to the classic study of Paul's final sea voyage by James Smith (1782-1867). Smith was an experienced yachtsman and a classical scholar. From ancient sources, Smith had carefully studied the geography, weather conditions and navigational practice of Paul's time. Smith was also intimately acquainted with the eastern Mediterranean Sea. With 30 years' experience in yachting behind him, he spent the winter of 1844-5 on Malta. From there he investigated the sailing conditions in the areas mentioned in Luke's account.

In 1848 Smith published his book *The Voyage and Shipwreck of St. Paul*. The book remains the classic study of Paul's last journey by sea. Smith concluded that the voyage was a true account of real events, written by an eyewitness. Smith himself said of Luke's description of the voyage: "No man not a sailor could have written a narrative of a sea voyage so consistent in all its parts, unless from observation."

"We put out to sea" (Acts 27:1-2)

Paul was under the charge of Julius, a centurion of the Imperial Regiment, or the "Augustan Cohort."

Luke, continuing to speak in terms of "we," said the prisoners and crew boarded a ship from Adramyttium "about to sail for ports along the coast of

the province of Asia, and we put out to sea” (27:2). Paul’s dangerous adventure was about to begin. Presumably, the party boarded the ship at Caesarea, though Luke didn’t mention this. The coast-hugging vessel they were on had its home port at Adramyttium, a seaport of Mysia on the northwest coast of Asia Minor, opposite the island of Lesbos.

The ship probably moved in daily legs from one coastal port to another. This seemed to be the way coastal ships scheduled their journeys. We’ve seen this type of hop-and-skip sailing before in Acts (20:13-16; 21:1-3). It must have been difficult to make precise travel arrangements in this catch-as-can environment; much depended on the wind and weather.

Luke mentioned that Aristarchus, a disciple from Thessalonica, was with Paul’s party as it began its voyage (27:2). Perhaps Luke and Aristarchus were Paul’s physician and servant, respectively. Luke had already identified Aristarchus as a Macedonian (19:29). He was a Thessalonian member of the delegation bringing the relief fund to Jerusalem (20:4). Colossians 4:10 describes Aristarchus as Paul’s “fellow prisoner.” Both in this epistle and in Philemon he is listed as one who is sending his greetings. If these two letters were written during Paul’s Roman imprisonment, it suggests Aristarchus travelled with Paul all the way to Rome.

Kindness to Paul (Acts 27:3)

The first stop for the merchant vessel was Sidon, the ancient Phoenician port about 70 miles from Caesarea. No doubt some time was required for loading or unloading cargo. In the meantime, “in kindness,” Julius allowed Paul to visit the disciples at Sidon “so they might provide for his needs” (27:3). As did the other centurions in Luke’s account (Luke 7:1-10; 23:47; Acts 10:1-7), Julius received a favorable portrayal. (See also verses 31-32, 43.)

The church at Sidon probably began shortly after Stephen’s death (11:19). Paul had visited the churches in the area at least twice, and probably knew many of the disciples in Sidon (15:3; 21:4, 7). Luke called the disciples “his friends,” or more literally, “the friends.” Interestingly, John sometimes referred to Christians as “the Friends” (3 John 15). This may have been a title Christians sometimes used to define themselves, after Jesus’ example (John 15:14-15). We don’t exactly know what the church at Sidon provided for Paul. Presumably it was money to help defray the expenses of the trip to Rome, or even winter clothes.

Trouble brewing (Acts 27:4-8)

Paul’s ship left Sidon and sailed northwest toward Cyprus. It hugged the protective east coast of the island, which Luke called “the lee of Cyprus”

(27:4). Contrary winds were becoming a problem, and the land mass offered some protection from the gales. The ship struggled across the open sea, and then crept along the Cilician and Pamphylian coast until it came to Myra in Lycia (27:5).

This ship would then be proceeding around the southwest coast of Asia Minor and north into the Aegean. The centurion therefore had to book passage on another ship, one bound for Italy. After making inquiries, he found an “Alexandrian ship” that met his needs (27:6). Luke didn’t mention what kind of ship this was, but he did say its cargo contained grain (27:38). Since the vessel was heading from Egypt to Italy, commentators surmise that it may have belonged to a fleet of imperial grain carriers.

Keeping sufficient grain moving from Alexandria to Italy was extremely important to Rome’s political stability. Suetonius described how the emperor Claudius was cursed and pelted in the Forum after a series of droughts had caused a scarcity of grain. “As a result he took all possible steps to import grain, *even during the winter months* – insuring merchants against the loss of their ships in stormy weather” (*The Twelve Caesars*, “Claudius” 18).

Apparently, this was one of the grain carriers making a winter run. Its owners would have made a handsome profit on their cargo – or collected insurance for loss, as this ship would eventually have to do. (In the second century, Lucian of Samosata in *The Ship* narrated the voyage of a Sidonian grain ship whose trip remarkably paralleled Paul’s.)

The grain ship with Paul and company on board left Myra, but a buffeting wind slowed its progress. It finally reached Cnidus, the last port of call on Asia Minor before ships had to sail across the Aegean to the Greek mainland (27:7). The ship left Cnidus but was knocked off its intended course. It then “sailed to the lee of Crete” (a 160-mile-long island southeast of Greece) and arrived at the island’s eastern port of Salmone (27:7). Then the ship struggled halfway along the south coast of the island, finally making port at Fair Havens, near the town of Lasea (27:8).

Fair Havens is the modern Limeonas Kalous (which means “Good Harbors”). The winds that blew into the open bay during the winter made it a dangerous place for ships to anchor.

Sailing was dangerous (Acts 27:9)

Luke explained why the eastern Mediterranean was so stormy: “Much time had been lost, and sailing had already become dangerous because by now it was after the Day of Atonement” (27:9). Navigation in this part of the Mediterranean was deemed dangerous after September 14, and impossible

after November 11. Vegetius (*On Military Affairs* 4.39) and Hesiod (*Works and Days* 619) are cited as authorities.

Festus is thought to have arrived in Judea in the early summer of the year in which he took office, perhaps A.D. 59. He would have heard Paul's case soon thereafter. After deciding to send Paul to Rome, he was put on board ship perhaps in autumn of that year. The ship may have left Caesarea before the beginning of the storm season. But sailing became unexpectedly difficult. Due to the slow going, much time had been lost, and now the storm season was in full swing. There seemed little hope of reaching Italy before winter.

When the ship arrived in Fair Havens it was already the Jewish Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), which fell on the 10th day of the lunar month Tishri (in the Hebrew calendar). Since months in the Jewish calendar were based on the moon, with each month beginning at the new moon, the position of the months varied vis a vis the seasons from year to year. Depending on the year, Atonement fell roughly between the latter part of September and the first part of October. In A.D. 59, Atonement fell on October 5. Since the Day was over, it was likely mid-October when Paul's ship arrived at Fair Havens.

Paul gave a warning (Acts 27:10-12)

The weather was terrible, and sailing out of Fair Havens seemed an unwise course of action to Paul. He warned the captain and owner against leaving the harbor. "Men," he said, "I can see that our voyage is going to be disastrous and bring great loss to ship and cargo, and to our lives also" (27:10). Paul was a seasoned traveler. He had experienced dangers at sea, so he knew something about the treacherous waters of the Mediterranean. Three times he had been shipwrecked (2 Corinthians 11:23-25). He must have felt that his opinion on the situation had merit.

The pilot ("captain") and ship's owner, along with the centurion, discussed the situation. After weighing their options, they decided not to winter in Fair Havens (27:11). Their goal was to winter in the larger and safer Cretan port of Phoenix, about 40 miles west (27:12). They had apparently abandoned any plans of reaching Rome before spring.

Unexpected gale strikes (Acts 27:13-15)

The ship's officers were waiting to sail as soon as the wind changed in their favor. Soon the storm seemed to have abated and a gentle south wind began to blow (27:13). This is what everyone was waiting for, and the crew hastily hoisted the anchor and began to sail along the south shore of Crete.

But the ship never reached Phoenix. Without warning, the wind changed

again. Luke tells us that a wind of hurricane force, called a “Northeaster,” swept down over the mountains of Crete (27:14). The ship was helpless in the open waters. It couldn’t keep its forward course and was driven southward away from land by the violent storm.

Fighting the storm (Acts 27:16-19)

The ship was driven towards the sheltered side of the small island of Cauda (modern Gozzo), about 23 miles (37 kilometers) southwest of Crete. In the relative calm, the crew struggled to make the lifeboat secure (27:16). Normally, the ship’s lifeboat was tied to the stern and towed through the water. However, in a large storm the dinghy might be cut loose from the ship and become lost. Or it the waves could batter it against the larger ship. To prevent this, the crew and passengers hoisted the lifeboat aboard the ship, and made it secure (27:16-17).

The crew “passed ropes under the ship itself to hold it together” (27:17). Apparently, ancient vessels had cables that could be used to create a corset for their hulls, to keep them together during violent storms at sea. It’s not clear exactly what “passing ropes under the ships” meant, as it could refer to at least three different procedures. First, ropes could be passed under a ship and then be secured above deck to reinforce the hull. Second, ropes could be tied above a ship’s hull (either internally or externally) to achieve the same purpose. Third, ropes could be used to tie the stem and stern together lest the buffeting sea should break the ship’s back.

The crew feared that the ship could be driven to the southwest. If it were, it would eventually end up on “the sandbars of Syrtis” (27:17). This was the Greek name for an area of shallows in the Gulf of Sidra, on the coast of North Africa. The Syrtis was the “Bermuda Triangle” of its day. It is well documented in ancient writings (Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 5:8-11; Pliny, *Natural History* 5:26). Josephus called it “a place terrible to such as barely hear it described” (*Wars* 2:381).

To help prevent them from being driven onto the Syrtis, the crew “lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along” (27:17). The meaning of “sea anchor” is uncertain. The Greek is more like “the gear” or “the equipment.” One suggestion is that Luke meant they lowered the mainyard which held the mainsail. But the storm continued to batter the helpless ship, and drove it beyond the shelter of Cauda. In order to lighten the ship, some of the cargo was jettisoned the next day (27:18). The following day the ship’s tackle or gear – perhaps the heavy mainsail and yard – was pushed overboard (27:19).

“Keep up courage” (Acts 27:20-26)

The ship’s situation looked bleak. The storm had blotted out the sun by day and stars by night. Since these were the two compasses of the time, the navigator could not calculate the ship’s whereabouts or plot its course. (The ancients had neither sextant nor compass.) The ship was drifting helplessly and the crew was unable to ascertain whether they were heading for land, rocks or shoals. The ship must also have been leaking and threatening to break up. No wonder Luke wrote, “We finally gave up all hope of being saved” (27:20).

That’s when Paul got up and, in effect, told the crew, “I told you so.” He insisted they could have spared themselves the damage to the ship and loss of equipment and cargo – as well as being threatened with death in the sea. But he also encouraged them. “Not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed,” he said (27:22). Paul could be confident in such a hopeless situation because he had received another vision from God.

“Last night an angel of the God to whom I belong and to whom I serve stood beside me,” said Paul. The angel told Paul: “Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you” (27:23-24). In a time of great crisis, Paul again received a comforting message – which he passed on to crew and passengers. The angelic message confirmed an earlier vision that he would reach Rome (23:11).

Paul told everyone to keep up their courage, and that he had faith in God that things would turn out exactly as he had been told in the vision (27:25). However, the ship would not get safely to port. “We must run aground on some island,” said Paul (27:26).

Driven across the Adriatic (Acts 27:27-29)

For two weeks (since either Fair Havens or Cauda), the ship had been driven across the central Mediterranean, then called the “the Adria” (or Adriatic Sea). Today, it is the name of the sea between Italy and the Balkans. In ancient times, the Adriatic was applied to a much larger area of water. About midnight, the sailors began to sense that they were approaching land. They couldn’t see anything, of course. Perhaps by this time the storm had abated somewhat.

The sailors’ suspicions were confirmed when they took soundings. These were probably lines weighted with lead, which were tossed overboard and fed out until the lead hit bottom. The first time the line was fed into the water it measured the water depth as being 120 feet deep (20 fathoms). A short time

later, the line was fed out a second time, and it indicated a water depth of only 90 feet (15 fathoms) (27:28). This indicated that the boat was approaching land. The sailors had no idea where they were. They feared that the ship might be broken up on a rocky shore or find itself stranded on an offshore shoal.

The crew decided to keep the ship where it was for the night. Luke says “they dropped four anchors from the stern and prayed for daylight” (27:29). They hoped the anchors would serve as a brake. When daylight came, they might be able to ascertain what kind of situation they were facing.

Lifeboat cut away (Acts 27:30-34)

The sailors panicked, and tried to leave the ship, hoping to save their lives. They pretended they were going to lower some anchors from the ship’s bow. Their real goal was to lower the lifeboat into the water in order to escape (27:30). The sailors’ action would have endangered their own lives, and made it even more unlikely that the passengers could get to shore. Someone discovered their plan (perhaps Paul) and told the centurion.

Paul became the center of action by telling the centurion, “Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved” (27:31). This time the centurion heeded Paul’s advice and cut the ropes that held the lifeboat, letting it fall into the sea (27:32).

At the same time, Paul recommended that everyone have something to eat. “I urge you to take some food,” said Paul to everyone. “You need it to survive” (27:34). Luke told us earlier that the crew had “gone a long time without food,” perhaps since being caught in the storm off Crete (27:21). Now we learn that the sailors had not eaten in two weeks. Luke didn’t tell us why they had not eaten. Nor is it clear whether he meant they had missed all regular meals or if they had eaten absolutely nothing.

The crew was probably sea-sick from living on a storm-tossed vessel, and their appetite was gone. Cooking may have become impossible as well.

Perhaps there were elements of religious superstition involved in the sailors not eating. That is, they may have been fasting to beseech the gods to save them from the storm. This possibility is seen by what Paul did next.

Not lose a hair (Acts 27:34-37)

Paul told the crew and passengers, “Not one of you will lose a single hair from his head” (27:34). This was a proverbial saying that God would save everyone from death (1 Samuel 14:45; 2 Samuel 14:11). Jesus had used this saying to encourage his disciples that God would save them (Matthew 10:30; Luke 21:18). Here, Paul assured the crew and passengers, in the name of the God of Israel, that their lives would be spared.

Paul took some bread and gave thanks to the one true God for saving them from the storm (though they had as yet not made it to land). Paul broke the bread and began to eat. “They were all encouraged and ate some food themselves” (27:36). It is as though up to this moment everyone feared being lost – and were hoping their gods would save them. But Paul’s words quieted them and they believed they would be saved – but by the God whom Paul worshiped. As Marshall puts it, “Paul is in effect telling them that their prayers have been answered, and there is no need to fast any longer” (413).

Some commentators suggest that Paul’s action of breaking the bread meant that he was offering the Lord’s Supper (the eucharist). Marshall says:

The description resembles that of the procedure of Jesus when feeding the multitudes (Luke 9:16), celebrating the Last Supper (Luke 22:19), and sitting at table with the disciples journeying to Emmaus (Luke 24:30). It is, therefore, not surprising that many commentators have seen in the present incident a celebration of the Lord’s Supper, or as Luke calls it, the Breaking of Bread. (413)

Paul’s offering the bread was more than a simple “saying of grace.” The circumstances were too extraordinary for that. But to make of this event a true eucharist seems to be going too far. (No mention is made of Paul taking wine and offering it, as Jesus did during Passover.) Everyone was eating a simple meal after fasting; the procedure was similar for all meals. In that context – of the crew being saved from drowning – Paul was presenting God as one who saves us from all our trials, including death.

No doubt the few Christians on board (Paul, Luke and perhaps Aristarchus), would have understood the deeper significance of Paul’s prayer. God is our Savior who sees us through the trials of life – and is the one who gives us eternal life. To the Christians, being saved from the storm-tossed ship demonstrated the presence of God and Jesus, and this was certainly a time to thank him for his salvation.

Luke portrayed Paul as a man who was in touch with God. He was practical, cool under pressure and exuded a positive faith that got the attention of even salty and pagan sailors. Paul predicted the future safety of the crew and passengers, and that prediction had come true. When the disciples were threatened with death on the stormy Sea of Galilee, Jesus came to them and said in his own name, “Be of good courage, it is I” (Matthew 14:27). Now, Paul rallied others to courage with a prediction of safety in God’s name (27:22-25, 34-36). (He didn’t seem to mention Jesus’ name to these pagan sailors, prisoners and soldiers.)

Preparing to beach (Acts 27:38-40)

After eating, the crew and passengers began to prepare to abandon the ship. They threw the cargo overboard to make the ship ride higher in the water. This, they hoped, would make it run ashore further up the beach. Some of the cargo had been jettisoned previously (27:18), but the rest apparently had been kept on the ship. It may have served as ballast to keep the ship low in the water, a protection against being capsized. If it was grain, then it was a valuable commodity to Rome, and perhaps the crew had tried to save it. Or the crew may have simply been unable to get to the main hatches during the storm.

When daylight came, the crew saw the land but didn't recognize it. Luke would shortly tell his readers they had arrived at the island of Malta (28:1). What the sailors did see was a bay with a sandy beach, at which point they hoped to run the ship aground (27:39). They had no more use for the anchors, so they dropped them into the sea. The crew released the ropes that held the steering paddles (which served as rudders), apparently to allow the ship to be maneuvered more easily. Finally, the sailors hoisted a small sail. It caught the breeze and the ship began to move towards the shore (27:40).

Stuck in a sandbar (Acts 27:41)

The unexpected happened as the ship entered the bay. The sailors hadn't noticed they were heading into something like a reef or shoal. The ship ran aground and the bow was stuck in the sand. Meanwhile the surf was pounding so hard against the ship that the stern was breaking up. The Greek which the NIV translates "struck a shoal" is literally "having fallen into or lighted upon a place between two seas" (27:41). William Neil suggests that it "could be a submerged spit of land lying between two stretches of deeper water" (253). The traditional site of where this occurred is called St. Paul's Bay on the northeast coast of Malta. It is about 8 miles (13 kilometers) northwest of Valletta, the capital of Malta. Even today, at the entry to the bay there is a shoal that may be the one on which the vessel ran aground.

The ship had travelled about 475 nautical miles from Fair Havens. And the ship had moved in the right direction – toward Rome! It had reached Malta – almost. But now the ship was mired offshore, and it was breaking up.

Kill the prisoners (Acts 27:42-43)

Apparently it appeared to the soldiers that the prisoners were going to jump ship, try to get to shore, and escape. As mentioned previously (12:19;

16:27), military regulations stipulated that guards who let their prisoners escape could suffer the penalties their prisoners would have suffered. The soldiers were ready to kill the prisoners to prevent their escape. But the centurion stopped them because, according to Luke, he “wanted to spare Paul’s life” (27:43). Why he should want to save Paul is not explained.

We can probably surmise that after all that had transpired – with Paul assuring everyone in God’s name that they would be spared – the centurion must have felt Paul was in some way a special person. The Chaldean king Nebuchadnezzar in his limited understanding of God recognized that “the spirit of the holy gods” was in Daniel (4:8, 9, 18). In the same way, the pagan centurion Julius must have seen Paul as one who was in touch with deity.

Thus, Paul and the prisoners were saved. Julius freed the prisoners from any shackles and ordered those on board who could swim to jump into the water and make for land (27:43). The non-swimmers were to use any piece of the broken ship they could find and ride it into the beach. “In this way,” wrote Luke, “everyone reached land safely (27:43). As Paul had said, God was going to bring each person on board the ship to safety (27:24).

Luke filled chapter 27 with detail upon detail of the perilous trip to Rome. Why did he take the time and space to give his readers a blow-by-blow description, when he often skipped over years of Paul’s life with nary a detail? A ship lost at sea and shipwreck made fascinating reading, particularly for those who lived around the waters of the Mediterranean. Stories of dangerous sea voyages with storms and shipwrecks were a staple of ancient literature.

Luke’s story is not fiction but a true happening. He told it in order to show how and why Paul got to Rome. Despite every adversity and hardship from prison to shipwreck, God guided him so he could preach the gospel in the capital of the empire. But Paul did not get to Rome because he wanted to. On his own, he would have either died from an assassin’s sword in Jerusalem, languished in prison, or died at sea. But God guided Paul *through* the trials and dangers he faced, not by stopping them. Things did not go well in Jerusalem and Paul was almost killed. There was no miraculous prison intervention by God in Jerusalem or Caesarea (as there had been in Philippi). No converts were made in either city by Paul’s preaching. Neither did God silence the storm or save the ship.

Safety on Malta (Acts 28:1-2)

Everyone either swam to the island or rode in on debris, and safely reached shore (27:43-44). After a harrowing journey, the passengers and crew could enjoy the safe haven of their landing site, the island of Malta. The Maltese rallied around the victims of this ship disaster much as people lend a

hand to those suffering from disasters everywhere. In the words of Luke, they showed an “unusual kindness” (28:2).

Malta is a small island, about 18 miles (29 kilometers) long and 8 miles wide. It is about 60 miles (97 kilometers) south of Sicily. The Romans had captured the island in 218 B.C., at the beginning of the Second Punic War with Carthage. In the Phoenician language, Malta was called *melita*, meaning “a place of refuge.” For the 276 beleaguered crew and passengers of the doomed ship, it was certainly that and more.

The natives of Malta were primarily of Phoenician ancestry. They would have been regarded by Greeks and Romans as “foreigners,” or people who spoke a foreign language. Luke called the people there *hoi barbaroi*, in Greek, “the barbarians,” which the NIV translates as “the islanders” (28:2). Luke betrayed his Hellenistic culture and outlook by thinking of the Maltese as foreigners or “barbarians.” However, it was not necessarily a derogatory label. It merely identified those who didn’t speak Greek or those who were considered foreign or alien (Herodotus, *Persian Wars* 2:57). Paul himself labeled non-Greeks as “barbarians,” though in a neutral sense (Romans 1:14; Colossians 3:11).

A viper strikes Paul (Acts 28:3-6)

It was cold and raining on Malta, and the survivors began to gather brush and wood to build a fire. Paul pitched in as well. But as he was gathering firewood, he disturbed a snake, which clamped its jaws on his hand (28:3). When the natives who had gathered at the beach saw the snake hanging from Paul’s hand, they said, “This man must be a murderer, for though he escaped from the sea, the goddess Justice has not allowed him to live” (28:4). These islanders were superstitious, so they assumed that divine vengeance had caught up with Paul.

However, to their amazement, Paul shook the snake off into the fire and was unharmed (28:5). He seemed quite unconcerned about it, knowing he was under God’s care (Psalm 91:13; Luke 10:19, with Mark 16:18). Paul was a divinely protected person, and Luke wanted his readers to focus on this point. That is why he told the tale in such vivid detail. Paul, the servant of Jesus, was coming in the same spirit and power as his Master. He proclaimed God’s kingdom, and in the process was victorious over all, including the forces of nature.

The natives began to get some sense of Paul’s divine “connection.” At first they were merely stunned by Paul not dropping over dead. Then their attitude toward him changed. “After waiting a long time and seeing nothing unusual happen to him, they changed their minds and said he was a god,”

Luke wrote (28:6). We're reminded of a similar situation Paul experienced at Lystra, but in reverse. When Paul healed a crippled man, the pagan Lystrans thought he was a god (14:8-12). But it wasn't long before they were influenced to change their minds and to think of him as a charlatan (14:19).

Publius, the chief official (Acts 28:7-10)

The scene in Acts switched from the beach to a situation at the home of a man named Publius. Luke called him "the chief official of the island," which in Greek meant "the first man of the island" (28:7). This was probably an official title. The Romans had established a Roman governor on the island who had a title of *primus omnium*, or "chief man." Since Publius was called the "first" or chief man of the island, he was almost certainly the governor of Malta.

Publius welcomed the survivors to his estate, in which they were housed for three days (28:7). During this time he would have made arrangements for them to find suitable winter lodgings elsewhere on the island.

Of all the incidents that must have occurred during Paul's three-months stay on Malta, Luke described only one dramatic situation. In this case, Luke showcased Paul's ability to heal the sick, which again showed that Paul came in the spirit and power of Jesus. It all began with the father of Publius, who was sick in bed suffering from fever and dysentery (28:8).

Whatever his malady, Paul went to Publius' father, prayed and placed his hands on him – and he was healed (28:8). When the islanders saw what happened, "the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured" (28:9). Paul's presence on the island proved a wonderful blessing to the Maltese. They responded with kindness to the survivors. "They honored us in many ways and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed" (28:10).

Beginning with Paul's safe landing at Malta and during his three months on the island, God had demonstrated his power through Paul in a direct way. After suffering privations of various sorts for well over two years, Paul's life was changing for the better.

MINISTRY IN ROME

After three months (Acts 28:11)

Luke ended his narrative of events on Malta by saying, “After three months we put out to sea...” (28:11). (Note the use of “we,” indicating Luke was still with Paul on the final trip to Rome.) Pliny the Elder noted that, at least officially, navigation on the Mediterranean began each spring on February 8. This was when the westerly winds began to blow (*Natural History* 2.122). However, Vegetius wrote that March 10 was the beginning of the sailing period (*De Re Militari* 4.39). Commentators feel Vegetius was referring to sailing on the high seas, not to coastal shipping, and that there was no contradiction between his statement and that of Pliny.

In any case, these would not have been hard and fast dates for the beginning of the sailing period. Weather conditions from year to year are not identical. November, December and January were certainly non-sailing months, except for those willing to take extreme risks. But September, October and February seemed to be transition months during which sailing had to be undertaken with care. So it was probably sometime in mid-February that Paul boarded a ship at Malta for the final leg of his voyage to Rome. (This means Paul would have left Fair Havens around mid-October in the previous year.)

Paul and Luke boarded another Alexandrian ship (presumably also a grain carrier) with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux (28:11). The vessel had wintered on Malta itself. The twins were the sons of Zeus, whom he had transformed into gods represented by the constellation Gemini. They were considered by sailors as patron “saints” of navigation and a sign of good fortune. For the purposes of Luke’s narrative, mentioning the figurehead seemed to be an irrelevant detail. But it again demonstrated that the author was giving us an eyewitness report. Luke was not speaking from hearsay, but knew from experience the things he described.

On to Italy (Acts 28:12-13)

After sailing from Malta, the ship reached the important port of Syracuse, on the east coast of Sicily (28:12). (Sicily was about 90 miles or 145 kilometers from Malta.) Though originally a Greek city, Syracuse had been ruled by Rome since the Second Punic War, in 212 B.C. The next stop was Rhegium, the modern Reggio di Calabria. It was an important harbor on Italy’s “toe,” and was on the Italian side of the Strait of Messina.

The next day, riding a favorable wind, the ship set out to sea again. In two days the ship travelled roughly 200 miles up the western coast of Italy to

Puteoli, the modern Pozzuoli, in the Bay of Naples. Puteoli was perhaps the most important port of southern Italy (Strabo, *Geography* 5, 4, 6). It competed with Ostia, the newer port of Rome at the mouth of the Tiber. Apparently, in Paul's day the cargo went to Ostia, but passengers disembarked at Puteoli. Travelers could go from Puteoli to Capua, where they would pick up the Via Appia to Rome.

Meeting other believers (Acts 28:14)

There was already a church at Puteoli. "There we found some brothers and sisters who invited us to spend a week with them" (28:14). He apparently meant Christian disciples (1:16; 6:3; 9:30; 11:1; 12:17; 15:1, 32; 16:40). Just how he found them we do not know. Paul had not evangelized in Italy, but Christians were here before Paul arrived. We don't know how the gospel got to this area.

Surprisingly, Paul was allowed to go into the city and stay for an entire week. Whether he was guarded during this time, Luke didn't say. Julius may have found it advantageous to stay here a week. Thus, the prisoners would have to remain in Puteoli with him. Besides, Julius had already allowed Paul to stop off at Sidon to receive help from the church (27:3). Given the events of the last few months, he may have trusted Paul not to bolt or try to escape from custody.

Paul was no ordinary prisoner, far less a common criminal who would take the first opportunity to escape; moreover, throughout the voyage the centurion had good cause to be grateful for Paul's sound judgment and co-operation. He could thus safely leave this particular captive lightly guarded if he had himself to be off on other business for a week. (Neil, 256)

Arrival in Rome (Acts 28:14)

Even though Paul was still in Puteoli, 140 miles from Rome, Luke wrote, in almost over-anxious words: "...And so we came to Rome" (28:14). Luke was moving his story along very rapidly since Paul left Malta. Perhaps Luke was eager to get to the finale – Paul's work in Rome. He is announcing the conclusion before he has narrated the story! (The statement would have been more appropriate at the beginning of verse 16.)

Behind all of Luke's reasons for writing his work was to tell how and why Paul came to Rome. The statement "so we came to Rome" marks the achievement of Paul's earlier desire (19:21) and the fulfillment of prophecy (23:11; 27:24).

Luke actually had one more incident to relate before getting Paul to Rome.

He wanted to tell readers that the church at Rome had heard about Paul's coming, and sent delegates to meet him. Perhaps that is why he needed to introduce Rome prematurely – so he could tell us that the believers there had heard about his arrival.

They had heard (Acts 28:15)

Apparently, two delegations of Christians from the church at Rome went to meet Paul (28:15). They had heard of his arrival during his week-long stay in Puteoli. A number of Christians set out from the Rome, traveling south along the Appian Way to meet Paul and escort him to the capital city. This made it something of a triumphal entrance into Rome for Paul.

In Paul's day, the normal route to Rome was to sail to Puteoli. The traveler would then use existing roadways to reach Capua, some 20 miles (32 kilometers) from Puteoli. At Capua, the traveler connected with the famed Via Appia, built in 312 B.C., named after Appius Claudius, who began its construction. The distance from Capua to Rome was 120 miles (193 kilometers), and the journey took five to six days.

One delegation from Rome got as far as the Forum of Appius (28:15). It was a market town and a traveler's resting place about 40 miles south of Rome. The satirist Horace referred to it, as one translation has it, as a place "full of sailors and wicked tavern-keepers" (*Satire* 1, 5, 3-4). A second group from the church at Rome traveled as far as Tres Tabernae ("the Three Taverns"). This town was another halting place, about 30 miles from Rome. (In Latin, a *taberna* is any kind of shop, including an inn, not simply a tavern.)

Paul gave thanks (Acts 28:15)

Communities of disciples had already been established at Rome before Paul's arrival (see also Romans 1:8, 15; 16:3-16). Earlier, we saw that Priscilla and Aquila had come from Rome. Presumably they had been converted in Rome before they moved to Corinth (18:2). Much earlier than this, at the first Pentecost, Jews from Rome had heard Peter preach (2:10). Some of these people had been baptized and probably returned to Rome to spread the faith.

When Paul saw the disciples, Luke said he "thanked God and was encouraged" (28:15). One wonders why he was encouraged. Paul had just come through some terrible ordeals with faith and courage. He knew that God was with him and that he was going to Rome to witness to Christ. About what, then, was Paul thankful and encouraged? Perhaps he had some doubt about how he was going to be received by the church members. Elsewhere Paul had a number of difficulties with conservative Jewish disciples dividing

the church and distorting the gospel. The churches in Galatia were a good example.

Paul had long nourished a desire to visit Rome. He had written to the church here, perhaps some three years earlier, preparing them for his intended visit (Romans 1:9-13; 15:22-32). Paul wanted to come to the Roman church with joy, so that together they could all have their faith refreshed. Perhaps Paul felt a bit anxious about how well the meeting might go.

In any case, Paul's gratitude for the enthusiastic support of the two Christian delegations was important enough for Luke to make special mention of it. His reference is all the more striking in that this is the only reference to the church in Rome! After Paul's triumphal greetings by the delegates, nothing further was heard of the church in Italy. Luke ended his account with an extensive narration of a single episode in which Paul met with the unconverted Jews of Rome.

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Paul Kroll worked for Grace Communion International for many years, writing hundreds of articles for our magazines. He is now retired. He wrote this material in the mid 1990s. We have updated it with the most recent version of the NIV for this book.

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ABOUT THE PUBLISHER...

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