

## ACTS OF APOSTLES, KEITH STANGLIN

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#### Session I: History of Interpretation

*Questions: How did Acts come to be the canon within the canon in Churches of Christ? How have Churches of Christ traditionally interpreted and applied Acts? How does Acts function now in Churches of Christ?*

1. Canon within the canon. Two characteristics of canon within the canon:
  - a. Most important book.
  - b. Lens through which the rest of Scripture is read and interpreted.
2. Alexander Campbell.
3. Walter Scott. Started what eventually became known as the 5-finger exercise, which in most churches now is H-B-R-C-B.
4. J. W. McGarvey (Commentary of 1863; rev. 1892).
  - a. Purpose of Acts. As a “book of conversions,” Acts sets forth the “conditions of pardon” by showing examples of how people became Christians.
  - b. Canon within canon.
5. Besides the narrow question of salvation, if the broader goal is to restore the NT church, many of the details are found in the book of Acts.
6. What are the (potential) problems with viewing Acts mainly as a book of conversion stories, or more broadly as models of church life, meant to be patterns for us?
  - a. No conversions after ch. 19.
  - b. The pattern of conversion is consistent on a fundamental level, but differs from our practice in important ways. Then we are forced to come up with an interpretive grid to explain the inconsistencies, a way that we can dismiss the examples that don’t fit the pattern we want.
  - c. Reductionistic view of “conversions.” We tend to lose sight of the necessary process of sanctification.
  - d. 5-finger exercise becomes central focus. In reality, conversion has more to do with God’s action than ours.
  - e. Hermeneutical implications. For McGarvey and succeeding generations, narrated examples became as binding as commands. Problem? Ambiguity.

## Session II: Main Theme of Acts

*What is the main theme of Acts? Bearing witness to the restoration of God's people (Israel) through the Holy Spirit.*

When we look for a main theme in Acts, we can and should use Luke's gospel as a pointer. Look at Luke's distinctive emphases to find what he thought was important.

1. **Bearing witness.** Even when the word is not present, the idea is.
2. **Restoration.** This includes *continuity*. "Restoration prophecies." E.g., Amos 9:11-15.

It's evident in Luke that restoration for Israel is not exclusive to Jews, but that Gentiles are a part of God's larger purpose. See Lk. 4:18-30. When we speak of restoration, the pattern/paradigm is: 1) The restoration of Israel, and then 2) bringing in of Gentiles. See Isa. 45:20-25; 49:6.

Example of continuity in Ac. 21:20-25. No need to abolish the Mosaic law for Jews. 23:6- I *am* a Pharisee. Restoration entails an emphasis on continuity—not a whole new thing. The church, composed of Jews and (to use Paul's language in Romans) ingrafted Gentiles, is not the new Israel, but the *true* Israel, restored Israel.

There are **4** components of restoration in OT/Acts (prophecy/fulfillment).

1. Promises and fulfillment are *Davidic* (2 Sam. 7:8-16; Is. 11; Eze. 39; et al.; Ac. 2).
2. Jews returning from all over to *Jerusalem* (Isa. 27:12-13; 44:26-28; 49:8, 12; Eze. 11:17; Zech. 1:16; Ac. 2).
3. Representatives from *12 tribes* (Israel and Jacob; Jer. 31:1; apostles in Ac. 1-2).
4. Outpouring of *Holy Spirit*. Apostles understood the connection (Ac. 1:5-6).

3. **Holy Spirit.** The one who brings restoration.

*OT.* Isa. 44:1-5- Metaphor of liquid being poured out on Israel and Jacob (north and south). Ezek. 37- What is the point of the dry bones story? Eze. 37:14- Restoration of God's people after captivity. True restoration entails the Holy Spirit.

*Luke-Acts.* When the Holy Spirit is mentioned in Lk-Ac, it is usually in the context of restoration, with the expectation that Messiah will bring the Spirit and this restoration. Lk. 3:15-16- People understood that part of the messianic package is that he brings the Holy Spirit. That's John's reason for not being the Messiah. "I don't give the Holy Spirit; Messiah does." Holy Spirit is what was promised in OT. Messiah brings it. Lk. 24:49- "The Promise" = promised Holy Spirit of OT. Ac. 1:4; 2:33, 39- "The Promise" = Holy Spirit.

### Session III: Exegetical and Homiletical Fragments

#### Acts in Thirteen (or more) Sermons: Some Guiding Thoughts

The intention here is to provide not sermon outlines as much as sermon starters, questions, and directions. Each paragraph is intended as the seed for a whole sermon. Divide the book however you like; I have provided a way to survey the book in 13 weeks, but there are ideas for at least 49 sermons.

##### *Week 1: Acts 1 – The Hope of Restoration*

First question: How and when does one receive the gift of the Holy Spirit? This question is more or less easy for us to answer, but not so easy for the apostles staring into heaven or the believers gathered in the upper room. Many questions remained unanswered; much remained unknown. Second question: What does the gift of the Holy Spirit mean for your life? In my experience, this question is somewhat more difficult for us to answer, but would have been no problem for the early church. The coming of the Spirit means new life, the restoration of God's people, forgiveness, that these dry bones can live, that God keeps his promise, that we are the temple of God's presence.

Jesus' last words, which ought to grab our attention, are recorded in 1:8. The commission is to be witnesses. How can we bear witness if we weren't eye-witnesses? We give a solemn testimony (*martyria*), just as a person can be called to the stand as a witness in a courtroom to provide a testimony, even though he was not an eye-witness of the event in question. We have something about which we can testify, and our call is to do just that.

##### *Week 2: Acts 2 – The Pouring Out of the Spirit*

The promise of being "baptized in the Holy Spirit" (cf. 1:4-6) is fulfilled (2:4). Baptism in the Holy Spirit is not an event reserved for a special group of people, either the apostles or more spiritual Christians receiving a third blessing. It is for "all" (cf. 1:15 with 2:1, 4), a larger group than the eleven apostles (1:26; 2:14). "Baptism in the Holy Spirit" is not a technical term meant to describe an event that happened only once or twice (at Pentecost and Cornelius' house), but is one (liquid) metaphor among others to describe the coming and presence of God's Spirit. In Luke 24 and Acts 1-2, baptism in the Holy Spirit is used interchangeably with the promise, being clothed with power, the pouring out of the Spirit, and the gift of the Spirit. The purpose is to restore fellowship with God and bring forgiveness. In (most of) Acts, the rest of the New Testament, and in the early and medieval church, there is a conjunction between water baptism and baptism in the Holy Spirit. Water baptism is the sacramental sign of baptism in the Spirit; that is, water baptism is understood as the ordinary moment of baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Peter, not intending to preach a sermon that day, is asked by the crowd about the meaning of the tongue-speaking (2:12). He responds by proclaiming Jesus as the crucified and risen Messiah, and, once exalted, this same Messiah has poured out what you now see and hear (2:32-33), that is,

the Holy Spirit. This promise of restoration has been fulfilled in your presence. The problem for the Jewish onlookers is that this promise of restoration, which was intended for them, has not come to them. It's not just that the Messiah *was crucified* (by some other terrible, ignorant people), but he is the one whom *you crucified!* They realize this awful truth, and find themselves on the outside looking in. The question, "What shall we do?" (2:37) is not just a general "How can I be forgiven?" It is a desperate cry of "How can we make this right? Is there any way to be forgiven for rejecting the one who brings the restoration that we have been expecting for all these centuries? Must we forever be on the outside looking in?" The divine answer is the same it has always been: Repent and be forgiven. Be baptized in water to receive the baptism of the Spirit.

The earliest Christian gatherings were devoted to teaching and fellowship. Fellowship included the breaking of bread and prayer (2:42). Worship in particular, as well as the church's life in general, takes place in a two-dimensional reality—vertical and horizontal. The Spirit-filled community attends to God ("praising God") and one another ("having favor with all the people") (2:47). These aspects are distinct but not separate; they are two sides of the same coin. One side must not and cannot be fulfilled without the other.

### *Week 3: Acts 3-4 – Outreach and Opposition*

On the horizontal level, the church's "inreach" turns immediately to "outreach," bringing them into conflict with the Jewish leaders. This is the logical flow of the church's life. Worship is the gathering of God's people to listen to God's word, culminating in the sending of God's people into the world to embody and spread that word. The presence and message of the church militant in the world will always result in a twofold response: faith or offense (cf. 3:8-10 with 4:1-4). Expect and prepare for both reactions!

One cannot help noticing the prominent role of miracles in Acts, starting with this first healing miracle. Note the multiple purposes of miracles. First, they are intended to edify those present. If they do not edify, stop (1 Cor. 14). Second, they signify the coming kingdom. Third, miracles reveal and bear witness to the message, as well as confirm it. Fourth, and most important, miracles are intended to point to Christ (3:12, 16). Even if the church does not have the same miraculous gifts, we are recipients of the same Spirit who empowered the church in Acts. Through the power of the Spirit, we are to fulfill those same four goals.

What gets in the way of faith? Why do some people know the gospel message but refuse to believe? In the case of the Sadducees and Sanhedrin, it was not a question of whether the miracles were authentic. After acknowledging the miracle (4:13-16), rather than taking a second look at this Messiah movement, they (incredibly) decide to oppose it more vehemently (4:17-18). They believe the miracle, but have no faith. What this means is that miracles do not always convince, and miracles do not lead to faith. Rather, they confront the onlooker with a choice. Faith necessarily involves the intellect, but it is much more than an intellectual exercise. It is a matter of the heart. Here are some things that hinder faith (some of which are exemplified in ch. 4): Pride, prejudice, procrastination. (I have supplied the three "P's"; you must provide the poem.)

How does the church react to opposition? There are many things that Christians may do, but there is one thing they should never neglect—prayer. Prayer is the reflex reaction of the early church in Acts. Whenever there is an unknown, they pray (1:14). Whenever there is a time for worship, they pray (2:42). Whenever there is opposition, they pray (4:31). In this case, in the face of opposition, they pray for boldness (4:29). This is a pivotal moment in the story. Israel’s leaders, rather than accepting the restoration of God’s people through Jesus Christ, have told the apostles to be quiet and keep their opinions to themselves (4:17-18). Would the disciples be intimidated and go to their little corner in Jerusalem and worship the Messiah in silence? It is a watershed. Their prayer for boldness is answered, and there is no looking back. Would that the church today could be so bold.

Have you ever been in a church that was like a real family? What about one that was very different from a family? Some churches are more like businesses (though businesses sometimes like to think of themselves as a “family”). In the business world, people come and go at the drop of a hat. When something goes wrong, they put their resume in somewhere else. When someone is fired, you may get a memo to that effect. But Acts 4:32-35 describes a church that acts like a family. No one is needy. They worship together, give to each other, and care for one another. In a family, the feelings, opinions, and souls of people are important. If there is a disagreement with your sibling, you don’t just leave the family. You still come to the dinner table and eat with your brother. And how did they do this? What was the difference? The thing that is central in every sermon in Acts: The resurrection of Jesus (4:33). The resurrection changes *everything*. Those who live the resurrected life are not worried about their own needs, but the needs of others. In a church like this, a real family, no one needs to ask, “Why go to church?”

*Week 4: Acts 5:1–6:7 – Struggles Without and Within*

The church’s counter-cultural, resurrected life is exemplified positively by Barnabas and his abundant generosity (4:36-37). But the picture is not idealized by Luke, who does not hesitate to report a negative example of greed: Ananias and Sapphira. Their sin is grave: lying to God, the Holy Spirit, and their Spirit-filled family. Like James and John, they wanted the glory without the sacrifice (Mk. 10:35-38). Ananias and Sapphira have been filled not with the Spirit, but with Satan (5:3). Reminiscent of Israel’s “testing God” in the wilderness, they have put the Lord “to the test” (5:9). In addition, reminiscent of the Old Testament, they receive the ultimate penalty. This punishment, the harshest in the whole book, is reserved for Christians in response to their greed. Do Christians, who live in the most affluent society in the history of the world, need to hear a healthy dose of “fear” when it comes to our use of money (5:11)?

Is civil disobedience ever justified? Is it permissible for a Christian to disobey the government? If so, when is it permissible to disobey civil government? The standard answer: When the government’s laws contradict God’s laws. But is there a difference between the government telling you to do something impermissible, and forbidding you to do something that is right? For example: William Tyndale broke the laws of England by smuggling in an English Bible translation that was not approved by the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and was later executed for doing so.

Would he have been disobeying God by staying in England, reading his Latin Bible, and preaching to the people in English from it? Was he justified in his action of breaking the human law? Modern-day examples? Public prayer in school? Aquinas said that an unjust law is not a binding law. As our society becomes increasingly secularized and anti-Christian, these are real questions that should be addressed in the church.

Gamaliel advises the Sanhedrin to enact a hands-off policy toward the Jesus Messiah movement. Some have thought Gamaliel was perhaps a Christian believer incognito (like Nicodemus). But he is a “Pharisee,” which is enough in Acts to make him a Christian sympathizer, for, in some respects, the Pharisees have more in common with Christians than they have with Sadducees (cf. 4:1-2; 23:6-9). Gamaliel’s logic is not foolproof; Christianity has flourished, but so have many other movements. But his point about civil toleration of others seems right. Thus we should stand up for our beliefs, make an intellectual defense, and live the gospel, seeking to make space for the church in the world without coercion. The God of the universe does not need anyone to violently defend his reputation, honor, and glory. Where do we Christians go wrong here? And will a Muslim Gamaliel please speak up?

*Week 5: Acts 6:8–8:40 – Servant Witnesses*

How can you suffer for Christ today? You probably don’t wake up each morning asking that question, although many around the world do, and some of our church members may. The kids at school, the co-workers, can be hostile toward Christian believers. The story of the proto-martyr Stephen, who is depicted as following in Jesus’ footsteps, is also our story. Participation in Christ’s sufferings (1 Pet. 2:19-23; 4:12-16; Phil. 3:10) can happen in many ways. Don’t seek persecution and marginalization, but make yourself open to it. That is, we must be known as Christians, and then be ready for the twofold response (faith or offense).

Acts 7 comes in a close second place to Matthew 23 as the most scathing indictment of status quo religion in the New Testament. Although Stephen is accused by the Sanhedrin of speaking against the holy place and the law (6:13-14), he turns the tables, comparing the Jewish leaders to their stiff-necked, uncircumcised fathers who killed the prophets. They are the ones who refuse to follow God’s law and its fulfillment in the Messiah. They are the ones who confine God by idolizing the temple establishment and their privileged place in it. What would Stephen say to us? How do we miss what God is doing? What do we, even in the name of our faith, idolize? How do we make God into an “in-house” God, confining God to our peculiar “house” and “place” (7:49)?

With Stephen’s death, Luke has mostly had enough of Jerusalem, at least for his purposes. With the code words “Judea and Samaria” (8:1), we are ushered along to the next step in the fulfilling of Jesus’ words in 1:8. Why does it seem to take persecution to move the church along? Just as clearly as we seek at all costs to avoid suffering, it is equally clear that suffering can be beneficial. How can individual and communal suffering move us along on the road toward maturity? The marginalization of the church in our secular society—not how we would have planned it—may be just what the church needs.

Simon Magus is a classic example proving that a true Christian who believed and was baptized (8:13) can fall away from that grace through sin. In fact, this is the strongest condemnation language in all of Acts (8:20-23). Among other things, Simon is another negative example of the wrong use of money. The lust for reputation can be so subtle, too. From one perspective, it may have looked as if Simon would use his money and the power it might purchase in order to advance God's kingdom. But there is no place for this in the church, even if the intention is good. If you haven't seen it yet in Luke-Acts (and you should have noticed it already!), the message is now clear: The church is powerful, but its power has nothing with to do with money.

Do you look for situations to serve others and spread the gospel? Have you ever looked back and thought you missed a God-given opportunity? Philip took advantage of the opportunity. Yes, he was told by an angel (8:26). But he still did it of his own volition (8:27). The church needs more "angels" who will open our eyes to the opportunities that lie before us. Instead of general requests for volunteers to help, perhaps we should personally ask "A" to do "X." And the church needs more Philips who are willing, when asked, to say, "Here am I. Send me."

Is it permissible to have a whole sermon on the basics of baptism? If there is not an extended time of special focus during a typical baptism, and if it is not being taught in Bible classes (both of which should be happening), then it should be done somewhere. The sermon need not proceed so woodenly, but at least the following questions (with correct answers, all of which can come from Acts) should be addressed along the way. What are the conditions of baptism? What happens at baptism? How much does a person need to know before baptism? What (or who) makes baptism effective?

*Week 6: Acts 9-10 – The Gospel Is for All*

What is your "talent," your natural but God-given ability? What are your gifts and strong character traits? Now, how are you using them for God? Saul of Tarsus was a gifted man. Above all, he was not a person who did anything in a half-hearted way. He already had "a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge" (Rom. 10:2). He was as zealous for the law as Phinehas, whose zeal drove him to destroy the enemies of God (Num. 25:7-8, 11; 1 Macc. 2:26, 50, 54; Acts 8:1; 9:1). Saul already had a missionary spirit, willing to go wherever followers of "the Way" could be found, even as far as Damascus. It seems that Saul took a different approach to the Christian problem than did his teacher, Gamaliel. The zeal and missionary spirit remind us so much of the Christian Saul, who wastes not one moment jumping into the call (9:19-20). This should tell us something about the nature of Spiritual gifts. God has granted us each a unique set of gifts that we can put into service for ourselves and ignorantly, or, through the help of his Spirit and better knowledge, put into the service of the kingdom. A Spiritual gift is not always the spectacular bolt of lightning out of nowhere. It is more often there by virtue of divine creation, and redeemed by virtue of divine grace. This means that the worst of sinners has good traits that are being wrongly used, as sin is nothing but good desires wrongly ordered, a distortion of goodness. Indeed, no one is beyond God's reach, and everyone can be used in service to God's kingdom.

The witness has now spread throughout “Judea and Galilee and Samaria” (9:31; cf. 1:8), indicating that it’s about time to move on to the next group, the Gentiles. But we have this short status update in 9:31. First, the church “enjoyed peace,” due mainly to the conversion of its primary persecutor. Second, the church “grew.” Why? Not because of peace, for it also grew in the face of persecution. The cause of the growth is noted (though watered down in the NIV): “proceeding in the fear of the Lord and in the encouragement of the Holy Spirit, [the church] grew.” The growth is explicitly connected not only to the encouragement from the Spirit, but also to the church’s fear of the Lord. But churches tend to focus on the former and neglect the latter. In fact, I have never heard a church growth expert talk about the fear factor, and I have never seen fear mentioned in a five-year plan. However, the so-called “filial” fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom and connected to sanctification, is a necessary ingredient for any meaningful growth.

What are the evangelistic implications of the Jewish Christians receiving Gentile believers? Since this is about the restoration of “Israel,” can Gentiles be saved? The divinely revealed answer is yes, something we now take for granted. But what does it mean to us that God does not show favoritism? On what bases do we tend to play favorites among non-Christians (do all really deserve to hear the gospel?) and Christians (who deserves our attention within this congregation? the generous givers?)?

*Week 7: Acts 11-12 – Jerusalem and Antioch*

Have you ever been pleasantly surprised by God? As in the whole Bible, God seems to act in unexpected ways in Acts. The church in Jerusalem did not see evangelism to the Gentiles coming. It was so taboo that they chastised Peter not for baptizing Gentiles as much as daring to eat with them (11:3). Of course, no one seemed more surprised and resistant than Peter himself (11:8-10). But this skeptical crowd, by the end of Peter’s testimony, came around (11:18). Do you have stubborn parents, children, co-workers, friends, neighbors? Never give up on helping people to see more clearly who God is and what his will is for them. And, while you’re at it, keep your own eyes open, and pray that your loved ones don’t give up on you!

As quickly as the gospel message spread, churches maintained contact with one another. Jerusalem hears about Antioch, so they send Barnabas as an envoy. As soon as Antioch hears about a potential famine in Jerusalem, they send back a gift of relief. The same Christian fellowship and generosity enjoyed within a congregation extends to the church worldwide. Likewise, we have an obligation to pray for and aid churches in need worldwide.

Herod Agrippa I persecutes Christians. He has James, son of Zebedee, put to death, and he imprisons Peter. But the church was in fervent prayer for Peter (12:5). When Peter is released and goes to Mary’s house, the place of prayer, they say that the messenger, Rhoda, is crazy. Is there something strange about this reaction? They pray, apparently maintaining hope, but still doubt until they see that the prayer is answered (assuming they were praying for his safety and release). And they had reason to doubt. They were probably praying for James, too, but he died. When we pray in faith tinged with doubt, the point is that we are praying. The church in Acts always prays through

its difficulties. The most appropriate prayer, though, is not for physical deliverance, but for boldness in the face of suffering (as in 4:29), which, incidentally, may have been their prayer, answered both for James and Peter.

*Week 8: Acts 13-15 – First Missionary Journey*

How can we listen to God? What does it take to hear his word applied to our situation? First, cut out the noise, the distraction. Second, teach, serve, pray, and fast. This is what the five leaders in Antioch were doing when the Spirit spoke (13:1-3). The next thing they knew, Barnabas and Saul were being sent on a new mission. What distractions must we remove, and what must we put in their place? Then we may ask: To what new task is God calling us and our congregation? We may never know if we don't take the time to pause and listen.

The first stop on this mission trip was an island, which, to the Jewish mind, represented the far-off pagans. Thus it was a symbolic way to begin this mission focused in part on Gentiles. As in Acts 8, here again miracle opposed magic and conquered. Saul's first miracle is a destructive one, causing blindness in the magician Elymas for his opposition to the gospel. Saul himself was the last person struck blind in Acts. In both cases, it is symbolic of spiritual blindness; in Saul's case, the scales were removed. As is the case with all miracles, the goal is to point the onlookers to Christ. Here, the proconsul believed, being amazed, not at the miracle (as one might expect), but at the doctrine (13:12). We betray the gospel if we allow the means (in this case, miracle) to overshadow the message.

"Elders" were mentioned in 11:30, and now they are being appointed in each town during the second phase of the first mission trip (14:23). The fact that the Christian communities had elders at all shows continuity with the Jewish tradition, which maintained the body of elders as an office of leadership and sage guidance. At the same time, it reflects some discontinuity, for the Christians had their own elders, implicitly rejecting the elders (and, ultimately, the Sanhedrin) of the Jews, for they rejected the Messiah. When considering the role, function, and appointment of elders in our churches, the Old Testament background can be instructive; 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are not the first or only passages to study.

The spread of the gospel to Gentiles has raised some important questions in the early church. Above all, the role of circumcision is in dispute. To the Jews, this was an "everlasting covenant" and identity marker ("sign") of God's people (Gen. 17:7-14). The fact that there was a debate about circumcising Gentile believers reflects the mindset of the early Christians. This is the restoration of Israel, and Gentiles are being brought into Israel. Gen. 17:12-13 prescribes that foreigners living among God's people must be circumcised. This would be a moot point if Gentiles were seen as joining a brand new religion. But since they are becoming a part of Israel, it is a legitimate question, and the big guns must be brought together for a conference. The conclusion is that the church should not unduly trouble Gentiles with circumcision. How do we trouble or make it difficult for believers to become part of God's people, and what should we do to rectify it?

The church in Acts has had to deal with several internal problems, from disgruntled Grecian Jewish believers in ch. 6, to a significant doctrinal question in ch. 15. And now there is a strong personal disagreement between Paul and Barnabas (15:36-39). The sharpness of their dispute is noteworthy, but so is their willingness to agree to disagree on a matter that is indifferent with regard to their relationship in Christ. They continue to serve the Lord in their own ways and mutually encourage one another (Col. 4:10).

*Week 9: Acts 16:1–18:22 – Second Journey*

What is faith? Is faith a gift from God? The Lord opened Lydia's heart so that she might pay attention to Paul's words (16:14). This verse reveals something about God's operation in salvation. It does not mean that Lydia or anyone else loses the power to refuse God's grace. But it does mean that, left on our own, we are blind and helpless (2 Cor. 4:4). Just as faith takes more than simply knowing facts, it is also a gift from God, made possible by divine softening of the heart. We must pray for people to receive God's gracious work in their hearts, and also ask ourselves whether our hearts are open to God's work.

It is interesting to trace throughout Acts the various reasons given for opposition to the Christians. In Philippi, the opponents charge Paul's mission team with proclaiming "customs that are not lawful" for Romans (16:21). As the story unfolds, there is only one group behaving illegally—the magistrates, who beat and imprison Paul and Silas without a trial. Paul and Silas, who are Roman citizens and causing no civil disorder, are unjustly accused and treated but also vindicated as acting within their legal rights. This theme of legal vindication for Christians (and Paul in particular) is prominent in the second half of Acts, to show pagans that Christians are not socially subversive and to show Christians a model of living peaceably in a pagan society, using civil law to their advantage. Perhaps it is a model for us as well.

The charge in Thessalonica against Paul's team is that they have upset the world order and proclaimed that there is another king besides Caesar, namely, Jesus (17:6-7). Of all the pagan rumors and misunderstanding toward Christians that would spark persecution in the early church, here is the one charge that had sufficient truth and sticking power. Treason and the refusal to declare Caesar as Lord were the basic grounds for imperially sanctioned persecution until AD 311. Of course, Christians were no direct threat to day-to-day civil order. On the other hand, the Christian message would end up relativizing the Christian citizen's allegiance to the Empire and subverting much of what made the pagan state and cultus thrive. As for us, insofar as we live in a just society, we do not advocate things that are unlawful or cause disorder. But neither can we permit any confusion—among ourselves or outsiders—about our chief allegiance as disciples of Christ. What do we as individual Christians and as the corporate church do and say that may lead to confusion over our chief allegiance?

Who are today's Epicureans and Stoics (17:18), and are we prepared to engage them in conversation? What point of common ground for discussion do we have with the modern atheist and the post-modern agnostic? As Paul eagerly engaged the intellectuals of his day, we do ourselves

and our churches a disservice if we are not “ready for a defense” (1 Pet. 3:15) and ready to talk about the big questions among ourselves. Paul spoke to the philosophers about natural theology and general revelation, but he also told them about God’s specific revelation in Jesus and the resurrection of the body. Similarly, we must find that point of common ground, but also tell the whole truth without compromise.

What kept Paul going? Through all the persecution, endless traveling, constant disappointment, mocking, false accusations, and the like, how could Paul get up and do it all again each day? No doubt there are many reasons, including Paul’s special calling, his own “natural” missionary zeal now in service to Christ, his drive to undo what he had done as a persecutor, and so on. But his encouragement from the Lord in Corinth is twofold. “I am with you, and...I have many people in this city” (18:9-10). Even for the great missionary Paul, ministry is not an individualistic effort, and the Christian life is not a solitary journey. The divine presence and the human presence, with Paul and with us, will keep God’s people going.

*Week 10: Acts 18:23–20:38 – Third Journey*

What have you seen people give up in order to become a Christian? Certain activities? Friends? Throughout Acts, people are willing to give up everything. It would not have been easy for Crispus and Sosthenes, rulers of the synagogues, to become believers. In Ephesus, the new believers will give up their books of magic, which also represent a way of life that depends on other gods for well-being and livelihood. In each case, these are acts of trust that reflect whole-hearted devotion to a new Way. What should we give up that tends to draw us away from God? And what are we actually willing to give up?

Do you remember the church in Florida that turned down a donation of hundreds of thousands of dollars because it had been won through the lottery? Well I do. Should the church have accepted the money, or did they do the right thing in rejecting it? In general, we are so practical and advanced in our ability to rationalize that we immediately think of all the good things that the church could have done with the money. It is interesting that Luke does not report any such hesitation when the Ephesian believers burned their sorcery scrolls, which totaled 50,000 days wages, that is, millions of dollars today. Once again, according to Luke-Acts, although money can be helpful, it is not among the first things to consider in the work of the church. Now that’s a counter-cultural message.

The scene at Troas has been important for Churches of Christ in making the case for weekly communion. Too often, however, the question about frequency (important and unavoidably practical in its own right) has overshadowed the more important question about the nature and meaning of the Lord’s Supper. Instead, the question of meaning should be addressed first, and out of this discussion will flow an answer to the frequency issue. Acts 20:7-12 is an appropriate passage for highlighting the connection that binds together resurrection, the Lord’s Day (first day of the week), and the Lord’s Supper (breaking bread).

Of the many speeches in Acts, the speech to the Ephesian elders is the one major speech to Christian believers, and, therefore, at least with regard to the listeners, it resembles more than any other speech in Acts the weekly preaching in a congregation today. But it is particularly directed to the church leaders. After reviewing their good work and relationship together, which functions to give Paul the right to instruct, he exhorts them to guard themselves and the flock. What is striking is that heresy can arise also from the church leaders themselves. It's not just the church camps and Christian colleges! Every member, including every elder and minister, must submit to the checks and balances that come from being part of a congregation and part of the worldwide fellowship of believers.

Paul's method for mission is an effective model for the church today, whether the application is to the mission across the ocean or to the mission across the street. Paul strives to know the audience—Jews, Gentile God-fearers, pagans, Christian believers—and he contextualizes the message accordingly. He follows up with the new believers by means of visits and letters; he never counts his baptism statistics and leaves the discipleship to someone else. Finally, he serves with dedication and never by himself, at least not for long. (There are many other principles, but these should get the juices flowing.)

#### *Week 11: Acts 21-23 – Imprisonment*

As we enter into the final third of Acts, attention shifts to Paul's plans to get to Rome, the obstacles standing in his way, and the faithfulness of the God who providentially accomplishes the purpose laid out at the beginning of the book (1:8). Once he became a Christian believer, how do you think Paul would have planned out the remainder of his life? Once he became an active missionary to far away lands, how would he have mapped out the journey? He probably would not have planned for imprisonment, plots against him, and shipwreck. Yet in the midst of the trouble, we can see God at work in the difficult circumstances to bring about his purpose for Paul's life. This should give us healthy perspective when things do not turn out the way we planned.

That the Holy Spirit is the primary agent in the book of Acts is beyond doubt. This does not mean, however, that the Spirit's guidance is never ambiguous. Take the case of God's plan for Paul, for instance. The Spirit has borne witness that Paul will suffer (20:23). On his way to Jerusalem, the disciples in Tyre warn Paul "through the Spirit" not to go to Jerusalem (21:4). Yet Paul proceeds. In Caesarea, the prophet Agabus, by the Holy Spirit, says that Paul will be bound in Jerusalem (21:11). Is the Spirit saying, "Don't go to Jerusalem" (21:4), or, "When you get to Jerusalem, you will suffer" (21:11)? At any rate, the disciples again begged him not to go (21:12). Yet Paul insisted that he will go, because he is ready to die (21:13). The best explanation is that everyone (Paul, the disciples, Agabus) was receiving the same revelation from the Spirit: Paul will suffer in Jerusalem. It is the interpretations that vary, from the constant warnings and pleas not to go, to Agabus' matter-of-fact prediction, to Paul's (too pessimistic?) resignation to death (21:13-14), which, of course, was not to be. What is the message to us? Test the spirits. Even legitimate revelation through the word does not necessarily come with its own interpretation and application, but must go through the filters of other Scriptures, historic tradition, reason, and the experience of

the community (similar to the method at the conference in Acts 15). Thus, discernment and study within the Spirit-filled community are of prime importance.

In his speech before the temple crowd, Paul is trying to show them that he is one of them, and that he, Ananias, and other Christians are faithful Jews who should not be persecuted. In fact, it is Christians who are living out their Jewish faith consistently. Paul is again exploiting a point of contact with the listeners; he also was once, like them, a persecutor of Christians, but he has seen the light. At the same time, he is also willing to speak what is unpopular, in this case, about the restoration of Israel that is intended for Gentiles, too (22:21-22). Indeed, this narrative emphasizes Paul's Jewish (21:40–22:5, 12, 14), Greek (21:37), and Roman (22:25-29) credentials. We must also use our gifts to address our increasingly pluralistic society with the gospel.

After Paul's speech before the Sanhedrin, he is comforted by a divine vision (23:11) that promises he will make it to Rome, fulfilling God's will (1:8) and his own desire as well (see Rom. 15). Yet again the fulfillment of the promise will not be easy. Immediately after the divine revelation to Paul, forty Jewish opponents conspire to kill him (23:12-13). God seems to enjoy making (and later fulfilling) promises that we find unlikely, given the circumstances.

#### *Week 12: Acts 24-26 – Appeal*

Paul's defense before Felix and his Jewish accusers emphasizes that he has committed no wrong against the state. He has been charged with desecrating the temple, though in fact he did not bring a Greek into the inner courts of the temple. What are the sacred temples/cows of society that Christians are blamed with profaning? At any rate, in the face of the accusations, Paul calmly asserts his respect for civil law and his duty that is common to all humanity: to maintain a clear conscience before God and others (24:16). Indeed, Paul was in Jerusalem on a charity mission (24:17).

In his commitment to bear witness, Paul never stopped challenging Felix, but spoke about righteousness, self-control, and the coming judgment (24:25). It was enough to make Felix uncomfortable. Paul never stooped to sweet talk or to bribes (24:26) in order to shorten his stay in prison, even though such tactics might have been effective and perhaps could have been rationalized as a way to help God fulfill his promise (cf. Abraham "helping" God fulfill the promise of a son). In his patient endurance, Paul maintained his integrity, outlasted Felix, and lived to see another governor—Festus.

How do people evade the truth of the gospel? As Paul speaks before Festus and Herod Agrippa II, he confronts them with his true testimony. Festus, in a move worthy of the dullest anti-intellectual, responds by dismissing Paul as "crazy" on account of his great learning (26:24). He did not bother to examine or address Paul's truth claim. Turning to Agrippa, Paul, after demonstrating that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies, asked Agrippa if he believes the Prophets. Like the evidence from miracles, the evidence from prophecy confronts the hearer with a choice and, in this case, a dilemma. If Agrippa rejects the prophets, then he betrays his own Jewish faith and the people under his rule. If he accepts the prophets, then he logically accepts the Messiah whom Paul has proclaimed as their fulfillment, in which case he betrays his respectability and sanity (according

to Festus). Thus Agrippa responds cryptically, “In short [time] you are persuading me to become a Christian” (26:28). Festus and Agrippa react to Paul’s truth claim in different ways, but they both equally evade the question of truth. Secularism’s loudest response to Christian truth claims is the *ad hominem* attack. Other responses that are at first glance more sound end up as circular, groundless, and self-defeating assertions. It is important to recognize the difference between a discussion about truth and an evasion of it. Finally, when confronted by a hard truth about ourselves, how do we tend to evade it?

*Week 13: Acts 27-28 – Unhindered Witness*

How does this travel narrative (with all its tireless details) contribute to the theological aim of Acts? It is the fulfillment of God’s purpose to get Paul to Rome, even when it looks most improbable. The point is that—when things look bleakest, when hope is lost, when you can no longer see where to go, when you know that the end is near—God is still present in the midst of the trouble to provide comfort and a sign of his presence (27:23-25, 35). He has not forgotten his promise.

Finally, the book of Acts is not a biography of Peter, Paul, or any other human character. Our curious questions about the circumstances of Paul after his Roman imprisonment, left unanswered at the end of Acts, are not the concern of the writer. In fact, Luke pays just as little attention to Peter, who seemed so central in the early chapters but suddenly disappears from the narrative. We are not really told “what could have become of Peter” (Acts 12:18-19, and one brief cameo in 15:7-11). These literary features highlight that neither Peter nor Paul is the main character. They are instruments of the Spirit, witnesses to the restoration of God’s people, spreading this good news, unhindered. Acts is about God: the Father who keeps his promises; the Son who was crucified and is risen, seated in Messianic victory; and the Spirit who prophesied and is poured out by the Messiah on God’s people to restore them to communion with God.

### For Further Reading

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