

SOURCES/ABBREVIATIONS

Barclay	Barclay, William. <u>The Acts of the Apostles</u> . Westminster, 1953.
Blaiklock	Blaiklock, E. M. <u>The Acts of the Apostles</u> . In vol. 5 of <u>The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries</u> , Eerdmans, 1959.
Bruce	Bruce, F. F. <u>The Book of Acts</u> . New International Commentary on the New Testament. Eerdmans, 1954.
Bruce, Apostle	Bruce, F. F. <u>Paul, The Apostle of the Heart Set Free</u> . Eerdmans, 1977.
DNTT	<u>Dictionary of New Testament Theology</u> , ed. Gerhard Kittel. Eerdmans, 1976.
Haenchen	Haenchen, Ernst. <u>The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary</u> . Westminster, 1971.
KJV	King James Bible
Longenecker	Longenecker, Richard N. <u>Acts of the Apostles</u> . In vol 9 of <u>The Expositors Bible Commentary</u> . Zondervan, 1981.
Marshall	Marshall, I. Howard. <u>Acts</u> . In vol. 5 of <u>Tyndale New Testament Commentaries</u> . Inter-Varsity Press, 1980.
Morgan	Morgan, G. Campbell. <u>The Acts of the Apostles</u> . Revell, 1924.
Munck	Munck, Johannes. <u>The Acts of the Apostles</u> . Anchor Bible, Vol. 31. Doubleday, 1967.
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NIDNTT	<u>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</u> , ed. Colin Brown. Zondervan, 1975.
NIV	New International Version
Stott	Stott, John. <u>The Spirit, The Church, & The World</u> . Inter-Varsity Press, 1990.

“In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen.”

So begins Luke’s second letter, a letter we have come to know as “the book of Acts,” to Theophilus. The sixteenth century Reformer John Calvin said that the book of Acts is a “vast treasure” for believers to investigate and enjoy. Indeed, it is a privilege to look into this repository that contains the story of the origin of the church. Here the heart of a believer will burn with joy as he or she discovers the origins and development of the early church.

One of the early followers of Jesus was a physician named Luke. Dr. Luke was from Antioch in Syria. Tradition tells us that he developed a friendship with Barnabas when the apostles sent aid to the church in Antioch. Luke traveled with Paul on his missionary journeys.¹ He stayed with Philip the evangelist in Caesarea (Acts 21:8). The book of Acts alone mentions over one hundred names. Luke, it appears, gathered information that allowed him to provide his acquaintance Theophilus, with an accurate chronicle of the spread of the early church.

We should always keep in mind that Acts is volume 2 of Luke’s story. In volume 1, the Gospel of Luke, he provides Theophilus with an account of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The second installment, the book of Acts, confirms the truth of Jesus’ claims. Indeed the *gospel of the kingdom* was spread throughout the world.² In Acts we learn, among other things, that Jesus’ mission was inclusive. His followers include Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles! What began in Bethlehem, a small town in a Roman province, ends up permeating the entire Roman world.

Why did Luke write this detailed letter? Several purposes were probably in his mind. New Testament scholar Richard Longenecker suggests that there were at least four:³

1. Acts proclaims the continued confrontation of men and women by the Word of God. In Luke men and women were confronted by the Word in the person of Jesus (cf. Luke 5:1; 8:11, 21; 11:28). In Acts the same confrontation continues through the ministry of the church (cf. 4:29, 31; 6:2, 4, 7; 8:4, 14, 25; 10:36; 11:1, 19; 12:24; 13:7, etc.).
2. Acts demonstrates that Christianity is not a political threat to the Roman world. As a true development of Jewish religion, Christianity should be treated as a *religio licita* (legal religion) along with Judaism. Luke goes out of his way, especially in the later chapters of Acts which detail the arrest and trial of Paul, to show that Christians are not in violation of the laws of Rome.

¹ See Col. 4:14, Philemon 24, II Tim. 4:11.

² See Matt. 24:14, Col. 1:23.

³cf. Longenecker pp. 216-221.

3. Acts shows the real harmony between Paul and Peter. There is evidence that some in the early church understood Paul and Peter to be at odds with one another. Peter, it was claimed, represented true Christianity, a faith that held Judaism dear and upheld the law. Paul, on the other hand, represented a 'lawless' version of the faith. Acts presents the ministries of Peter (chs. 1-12) and Paul (chs. 13-28) in parallel fashion. *Both heal a lame man (3:2-8; 14:8-10); both do miracles at some distance (5:15; 19:12); both exorcise evil spirits (5:16; 16:18); both defeat sorcerers (8:18-24; 13:6-11); both raise the dead (9:36-43; 20:9-12); both defend themselves against Jewish authorities . . . both are involved in bestowing the Holy Spirit on new converts (8:14-17; 19:1-7); and both are miraculously released from prison (5:19; 12:7-11; 16:25-27). More importantly, both proclaim the same message and even use, to some extent, the same set of proof texts (e.g., Ps 16:10; cf. 2:27; 13:35).* (Longenecker, pp. 287-288) Paul acknowledges Peter's authority in the church of Jerusalem. Peter and the Jerusalem apostles encourage Paul in his apostolic ministry (cf. Acts 15).

4. Luke's letter was to provide teaching to a wide audience. In the first century, letters addressed to a single person often had a larger audience in mind. Luke probably wrote his letter to Theophilus with the expectation that churches could use it for instructional purposes. Who knows? Maybe the Holy Spirit informed Dr. Luke that SBCC would study his work in the Summer of 2000 ("Did you say, 2000?").

Sir William Ramsay (St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen, 1895) wrote, *It is impossible to find anything to say about Acts that has not been said before by somebody.* This relatively brief study guide will not attempt to prove Ramsay wrong. It will, however, attempt to guide us as a church through the story Luke has left behind in the book usually called 'Acts.'¹

In one sense Luke himself provides us with an outline of Acts. When Luke includes "The Great Commission" in 1:8 he gives his readers a preview of all that is to come.

¹The title of Luke's second letter to Theophilus (Acts 1:1) is subject to debate. We usually refer to the writing simply as 'the Book of Acts.' But whose 'acts' are in mind? The traditional title, 'The Acts of the Apostles,' dates only from the second century. Some feel this places too much emphasis on the apostles and not enough on God. In the eighteenth century, Johann Bengel proposed the title 'The Acts of the Holy Spirit.' Consider the introduction to a commentary by Arthur T. Pierson (1895):

This book we may, perhaps, venture to call the *Acts of the Holy Spirit*, for from first to last it is the record of his advent and activity. Here he is seen coming and working. . . But one true Actor and Agent is here recognized, all other so-called actors or workers being merely his instruments, an agent being one who acts, an instrument being that through which he acts. (cf. Stott, p. 33)

Stott suggests that both titles overemphasize either the human or the divine element of the story. He then offers his own, admittedly, cumbersome title, 'The Continuing Words and Deeds of Jesus by his Spirit through the Apostles.'

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

Describes the birth of the church at Pentecost in Acts 2.
Acts 3:1-8:1
Acts 8:2-12:25
Acts 13-28

Richard Longenecker outlines the book in the following manner:

Introduction- The Constitutive Events of the Christian Mission (1:1-2:41)

Part I: The Christian Mission to the Jewish world (2:42-12:24)

Panel 1 The earliest days of the Church at Jerusalem (2:42-6:7)

Summary Statement: 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).

Panel 2 Critical Events in the Lives of Three Pivotal Figures (6:8-9:31)

Summary Statement: Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord (9:31).

Panel 3 Advances of the Gospel in Palestine-Syria (9:32-12:24)

Summary Statement: But the word of God continued to increase and spread (12:24).

Part II: The Christian Mission to the Gentile World (12:25-28:31)

Panel 4 The First Missionary Journey and the Jerusalem Council (12:25-16:5)

Summary Statement: So the churches were strengthened in the faith and grew daily in numbers (16:5).

Panel 5 Wide Outreach Through Two Missionary Journeys (16:6-19:20)

Summary Statement: In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power (19:20).

Panel 6 To Jerusalem and Thence to Rome (19:21-28:31)

Summary Statement

ment: *Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ (28:31).*

As we study this God-saturated chronicle of the Holy Spirit's work in the early church consider Luke's view of history. I. Howard Marshall explains:

1. The events in Acts are understood to be the result of God's will and purpose. Jesus did not die by accident. He was crucified according to *the definite plan and foreknowledge of God (2:23)*. The same can be said for events in the life of the church (cf. 4:27-29).
2. Therefore, the life of the church takes place *in fulfillment of Scripture*. *The prophecies made in the Old Testament governed the course of church history—the outpouring of the Spirit and the proclamation of salvation (2:17-21), the mission to the Gentiles (13:47) and their incorporation in the church (15:16-18), and the refusal of the Jews as a whole to respond to the gospel (28:25-27).*
3. The life of the church was led directly by God (cf. 13:2; 15:28; 16:6, etc.).
4. The power of God was demonstrated in *signs and wonders* performed in the name of Jesus (3:16; 14:3). The Christian mission, therefore, is carried out by God (15:4). (cf. Marshall, p. 24)

Together Luke and Acts constitute about a third of the New Testament. Acts contains 1007 verses that fill in the New Testament story in a unique manner. In these verses we see a picture of the expanding early church, her struggles and her joys. This picture should inform our own church life in Santa Barbara.

Study One

Becoming Witnesses

Acts 1:1-26

Christians often become confused, not knowing if they are coming or going. Are we called simply to rest in Jesus? Or are we to be militaristic in our approach to spreading the good news of Jesus? Our perplexity makes a good deal of sense when we turn to the gospels. After all, Jesus calls us to *come* and he calls us to *go*.

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Matt. 11:28

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. . .

Matt. 28:19

Read Acts 1:1-26. Before going on, list those things which stand out to you as you read.

Acts chapter one has four major sections:

1. Introduction to the book of Acts (with a description of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances to the disciples, vs. 1-3).¹

¹Jesus appeared at least ten times between his resurrection and ascension.

1. The women at the tomb (Matt. 28:9-10)
2. Mary Magdalene (Mark 16:9-11)
3. Two men of Emmaus (Luke 24:13-32)
4. Peter in Jerusalem (Luke 24:34; I Cor. 15:5)
5. Ten disciples (John 20:19-23)

(continued next page)

2. The ascension of Jesus (vs. 4-11).
3. Perseverance in prayer while waiting for the Holy Spirit (vs. 12-14).
4. Choosing Matthias to replace Judas (vs. 15-26).

According to Luke, Jesus was doing two things during his forty days on earth after his resurrection. He was *proving* that he was alive and teaching about the *kingdom of God*.

The kingdom of God is a prominent theme in Luke's Gospel and in Acts. In his Gospel the phrase is mentioned over thirty times and it is mentioned in Acts repeatedly (1:6; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31). Notice how the book begins and ends with this theme. Jesus is teaching about the kingdom of God as the book opens and Paul is a prisoner in Rome teaching about the same subject as the book closes.

What is the message of God's kingdom? This idiom summarizes the heart of Jesus' teaching. The kingdom is God's rule in the hearts and lives of his people, who as citizens of this kingdom receive remission of sins and eternal life. Moreover, for the apostles the phrase *the kingdom of God* meant preaching the good news of Jesus' death and resurrection and making disciples of all nations. (Kistemaker, p. 49)

Notice, however, that the disciples were thinking of the kingdom of God in a nationalistic-political sense. They ask Jesus (vs. 6), *Is this the time when you are going to restore the kingdom to Israel?* Their question shows that they were looking for a territorial, earthly kingdom. "Is it finally time for you to get the Roman empire off our backs???" John Stott comments that the question must have *filled Jesus with dismay*.¹ Calvin commented, *there are as many errors in this question as words*. (cf. Stott, p. 41).

Consider Jesus' answer to the disciples question in vs. 7-8. What is he saying? What is his real answer to their question?

What does this answer, along with the ascension and the query of the two men dressed in white (most likely they are angels), "Why are you gazing into the sky?" tell us about our tendency to speculate and probe the time of Jesus' second coming? What should our attitude

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6. Eleven disciples (John 20:24-29)
 7. Seven disciples fishing in Galilee (John 21:1-23)
 8. Eleven disciples in Galilee (Matt. 28:16-20)
 9. Five hundred persons (I Cor. 15:6)
 10. James the brother of Jesus (I Cor. 15:7)

¹Stott defines the kingdom in this way: *The kingdom of God is his rule set up in the lives of his people by the Holy Spirit. It is spread by witnesses, not by soldiers, through a gospel of peace, not a declaration of war, and by the work of the Spirit, not by force of arms, political intrigue or revolutionary violence.* (Stott, p. 42)

be regarding the second coming of Jesus? Can you think of any other Scriptures which support your answer?

In vs. 8 Jesus leaves the disciples with a promise (*you will receive power*) and a mandate (*you will be my witnesses...*).

Who (or what) is this Holy Spirit? Is the Holy Spirit a force or a person? Consider what the following verses teach about the Holy Spirit.

◆ John 15:26

◆ John 16:12-16

The disciples received a missionary mandate. From the beginning, the church (God's chosen community) was understood as a pilgrim people. The disciples were to begin where they were and gradually move out to evangelize the whole world.

Do you understand your faith as a missionary faith? What motivates you in this area? Are you spreading the gospel in your Jerusalem (Santa Barbara)? Why? Why not? In what ways can your homegroup pray for you with regard to your witness?

Most Christians admit to having a difficult time when it comes to spreading their faith. What are the obstacles which promote timidity in this area. Would those of the early church have faced the same obstacles?

Respond to the following statement by Michael Green in his book *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*:

The Spirit of God came upon Christian individuals in order to create in them a quality of life that would otherwise be beyond their powers. The Spirit of God came upon the Christian community in order to unite them in a fellowship which could not be

paralleled in any other group. . . But there can be no doubt from a candid examination of the New Testament accounts that the prime purpose of the coming of the Spirit of God upon the disciples was to equip them for mission. The Comforter comes not to allow men to be comfortable, but to make them missionaries. (p. 58)

In what ways should our evangelistic efforts be different from those of the apostles? How should our style be different? In what was should it be similar?

Only Luke includes the ascension story in his account of the life of Christ. He includes it in both his Gospel and here in Acts. John Stott probes the meaning of Luke's account:

...I think we may say that the apostles committed two opposite errors, which both had to be corrected. First they were hoping for political power (the restoration of the kingdom to Israel). Secondly, they were gazing up into the sky (preoccupied with the heavenly Jesus). Both were false fantasies. The first was the error of the politician, who dreams of establishing Utopia on earth. The second is the error of the pietist, who dreams only of heavenly bliss. The first vision is too earthly, and the second too heavenly. Is it fanciful to see a parallel here between Luke's Gospel and the Acts? Just as at the beginning of the Gospel Jesus in the Judean desert turned away from false ends and means, so at the beginning of the Acts the apostles before Pentecost had to turn away from both a false activism and a false pietism. And in their place, as the remedy for them, there was (and is) witness to Jesus in the power of the Spirit, with all that this implies of earthly responsibility and heavenly enabling. (Stott, p. 51)

Think practically. Are you prone to either temptation (the politician or the pietist)? Which one? Why? How do you fight this?

Answer the same question for Santa Barbara Community Church as a whole. Is our emphasis off kilter with regard to politics or piety?

The disciples *along with the women and Mary*¹ return to Jerusalem and spend, presumably, ten days in prayer. During this time they choose Matthias to be the replacement of Judas so that the twelve disciples will be complete. The stage is set for Pentecost.

Casting lots was somewhat common in Old Testament times. The high priest would use Urim and Thummim (probably stones that gave either a 'yes' or a 'no' to a decision) to guide the nation of Israel (cf. Ex. 28:30). This is the last time in Scripture that the casting of lots was used to make a decision. Perhaps this is part of Luke's purpose in including this story. Is he showing the reader that after Pentecost decisions are made under the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

The fact that Luke includes the number of believers (120) is significant. In Jewish law 120 Jewish men were required to form a new community. Here Luke's purpose in showing the innocence of the early church under Roman law is furthered (cf. Introduction, p. 1).

¹In both his Gospel and in Acts, Luke takes special interest in showing his readers that the good news of God's kingdom extends to the powerless. Therefore, he repeatedly points out that women (socially, politically and religiously powerless in the first century) were a vital part of Jesus' mission and ministry.

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Study Two

Tongues of Fire!

Acts 2:1-41

The history of the people of God in the Old Testament is a chronicle of success and failure. Mostly failure. God repeatedly entered into a covenant relationship with Israel, and Israel repeatedly failed to walk in the way of Yahweh. The problem wasn't with the God of the covenant, nor was the problem located in the covenant itself. Israel repeatedly failed because the nation lacked the *power* to keep its part of their agreement with God. Toward the end of the Old Testament period the prophets longed for the age of the Holy Spirit, for a new covenant which would impute the power of God into the lives of God's people.

The time is coming," declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, " declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.

Jeremiah 31:31-34

With the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost the new covenant has arrived. The age of the Holy Spirit has begun!

Read this section of Acts. What impresses you? Does Peter's sermon sound like a modern evangelistic sermon?

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus' ministry begins when he is baptized by John the Baptist (Luke 3:21). Jesus is baptized and the Holy Spirit descends upon him in the form of a dove. Here in Acts, Luke is showing that the birth and mission of the church is contingent upon a similar outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all who have followed Jesus.

This pivotal event in the New Testament, indeed in the entire Bible, is rich with significance.¹

It can be understood as the final act of ministry by Jesus before his second coming. It gave the twelve apostles the power they needed to fulfill their mission as followers of Jesus. Accordingly, Peter is transformed by the Holy Spirit from a disciple who denies Jesus to a servant girl (Luke 22:56-57) to a disciple who risks imprisonment and death in order to proclaim the gospel.

Peter himself interprets the Pentecost event as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. The new era of the Holy Spirit foretold by the prophets has arrived fifty days after the death of Jesus!

Pentecost has been called the first revival, *using the word to denote one of those altogether unusual visitations of God, in which a whole community becomes vividly aware of his immediate, overpowering presence.* (Stott, p. 61) This revival contained the deep conviction of sin, conversions to Christ (3000!), and a sense of awe at the powerful works of God (2:43).

Pentecost was celebrated as one of the three main annual feasts of the Jews.² Pentecost is the first century name for the Feast of Weeks in the Old Testament. Originally this feast was the festival of firstfruits of the grain harvest. The pilgrims would come to Jerusalem and offer God the first crops of the season out of thanksgiving and faithfulness. The festival was associated

¹cf. Stott, pp. 60-61.

²The other great pilgrim feasts were Passover, which took place fifty days earlier (celebrating deliverance from Egypt) and Tabernacles which took place about 4 months after Pentecost (celebrating the time of wilderness wanderings during the Exodus period of Israel's history).

with the renewal of the covenant God made with Noah (Genesis 9) and Moses. By the time of the first century the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, was considered the anniversary of the giving of the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. It was a time to renew the Mosaic covenant.

Luke's point is dramatic. On this day of Pentecost something new is taking place! Richard Longenecker highlights the significance of this passage:

It is this significance that Luke emphasizes as he begins his Pentecost narrative; viz., that whereas Pentecost was for Judaism the day of the giving of the law, for Christians it is the day of the coming of the Holy Spirit. . . . By his stress on Pentecost as the day when the miracle took place, he is also suggesting (1) that the Spirit's coming is in continuity with God's purposes in giving the law and yet (2) that the Spirit's coming signals the essential difference between the Jewish faith and commitment to Jesus, for whereas the former is Torah (law) centered and Torah directed, the latter is Christ centered and Spirit directed. . . (Longenecker, p. 269)

Luke tells us that all the believers were together in one place. Then, without warning there is sound (like a violent wind), sight (something like tongues of fire resting on each believer) and speech. The Holy Spirit indwelt each believer and he or she began to proclaim the gospel in foreign languages.

The sound of the wind would have brought to mind the prophecy of Ezekiel 37:9-17. The wind of God's breath (Spirit) would blow over the dry, dead bones of Israel and give new life to a dead people. This was to be the Messianic age.

Fire was a symbol in Judaism of God's presence. Recall the burning bush of Exodus 3, the pillar of fire that guided Israel in the wilderness in Exodus 13, and the fire on top of Mt. Sinai in Exodus 24.

The gift of tongues, in the Jewish mind, would signify the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In Judaism . . . the belief arose that with the passing of the last of the writing prophets in the early postexilic period the spirit of prophecy had ceased in Israel. Since then, therefore, God spoke to his people only through his Torah (Law) as interpreted by the teachers. . . But Judaism also expected that with the coming of the Messianic Age there would be a special outpouring of God's Spirit, in fulfillment of Ezekiel 37, and that prophecy would again flourish.¹ (Longenecker, p. 271)

This is exactly the portrait that Luke paints! The Age of Messiah has arrived with prophetic power! Those who watched were amazed and asked, *What does this mean?* (2:12)

Luke indicates that Jews from all over the Graeco-roman world were present. Each heard the message proclaimed in his mother tongue. The age of the Spirit transcends geography,

¹ This explains the excitement over the ministry of John the Baptist as recorded in the Gospels.

language, race and religion. In time a large crowd must have gathered because three thousand people converted to Christianity that day.

Read Peter's sermon again. What is his strategy? How does he use the Old Testament in his sermon? Try to write a simple outline of Peter's sermon.¹

Two of Peter's Old Testament quotations are confusing to our ears. He quotes Psalm 16 and Psalm 110 to show that Jesus is the foretold Messiah. Kistemaker helps explain:

The early Christians applied Psalm 16:10 to Christ: "because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One undergo decay." They interpreted David's word to mean that the grave could not destroy Jesus' body. In Hebrew the word *destroy* has the same root as the term *grave*. "The grave or pit is the place where the body is destroyed." Christ's body did not see decay but was glorified at his resurrection. Therefore, God's promise was fulfilled not in David but in Christ. (Kistemaker, p. 97)

Jesus himself quoted Psalm 110 in the first three Gospels and applied the Psalm to himself (cf. Mark 12:35-37). Peter takes this quotation from Psalm 110 and sees it as a messianic prophecy fulfilled in the crucified and risen Jesus!

We need to be careful with verse 36. Jesus did not become the Messiah and Lord at the time of his ascension. *It is rather that now God exalted him to be in reality and power what he already was by right.* (Stott, p. 77)

How does Peter give his "invitation" to salvation?

Is salvation possible without repentance? What would you say to someone who wanted to become a Christian, yet was unwilling to repent of a certain sin?

How does Luke view those who repented (vs. 40- 41)?

¹In Acts 2-4 we will find three sermons by Peter. Look for the following themes:

1. "This is the age of fulfilment."
2. The ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus inaugurated the new age.
3. Because of the resurrection, Jesus has been exalted at the right hand of God as the Messianic head of the new Israel.
4. The Holy Spirit is the sign of Christ's presence in the church.
5. The Messianic Age will reach its consummation in the return of Jesus to earth.
6. An appeal for repentance, forgiveness and inclusion in the church.

The above is loosely based on C. H. Dodd's Apostolic Preaching.

Consider Stott's comment on these verses:

. . . Peter was not asking for private and individual conversions only, but for a public identification with other believers. Commitment to the Messiah implied commitment to the Messianic community, that is, the church. Indeed, they would have to change communities, transferring their membership from one that was old and corrupt to one that was new and *being saved* (vs. 47). (Stott, p. 79)

How has this brief look at Acts 2 affected your understanding of the gospel?

Does Peter's sermon challenge your style of sharing your faith?

When you became a Christian did your understanding of Christianity correspond to what Peter presents in his sermon?

Read Acts 2:38-39 one more time. What two promises does Peter make those who *repent* and are *baptized*? Describe your experience of these two promises.

6HUPRQ 1RWHV

Study Three

Breaking Bread Together

Acts 2:42-47

Each year the President of the United States gives a speech of great political importance called “The State of the Union Address.” In this speech the President gives his perspective on the social, economic and geopolitical condition of our country. This section of Acts is Luke’s “State of the Church Address.” It is something of a summary statement of church life during the very early days of the church in Jerusalem.

Read this brief section from as several translations. Are you impressed? What was this infant church like?

We might outline these six verses in the following way:

The church’s devotion:
(vs. 42)

to the apostles’ teaching
to fellowship
to breaking of bread
to prayer

The results of the church’s devotion: (vs. 43-47)

public awareness
family provision
community worship
mission

The verb used in verse 42 (*proskartereo* προσκαρτερω translated *devoted*) denotes steadfastness or singlemindedness (to coin a term). It refers to fidelity to a given task. It means *to occupy oneself diligently with something, or to pay persistent attention to...* (DNTT, vol. 3, p. 618).

Church life, at least at the beginning, was a “devoted” affair.¹ The people of the early church were devoted to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to the celebration of the Lord’s supper and to prayer.

Do you see a similar devotion in your life to these aspects of church life? Do you see it in the lives of those around you? Was there anything unique about the time and place of this particular church that would require more intense devotion to these things? In other words, are we “off the hook” because we have almost two thousand years of church history to fall back on?

What does it mean to you to be devoted to the apostles’ teaching?

Consider the following statement by John Stott:

We note that those new converts were not enjoying mystical experience which led them to despise their mind or disdain theology. Anti-intellectualism and the fullness of the Spirit are mutually incompatible, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth. (Stott, p. 82)

Are you *devoted* to the *apostles teaching*? What do you do to study God’s word on a weekly basis? Do you take this study seriously as a part of your discipleship?

Devotion to *the fellowship* implies meetings for corporate worship and instruction.

The phrase *the breaking of bread* is wonderfully ambiguous. At face value the phrase implies that the believers were sharing meals together, but when placed in context of the New Testament we should understand the words to refer to the celebration of the Lord’s supper. Both events were probably taking place at the same time.

Even an ordinary meal among Jews, of course, would have had something of a sacred flavor. In a Christian setting, where hearts were warmed by devotion, it would have been an occasion for joy, love and praise connected inevitably with Jesus. Probably

¹Blaiklock writes, *This was no loose group, but a clear-cut society, universal in membership, but with definite, firm standards. Repentance, confession, and baptism were necessary. Secondly, the authority of the apostles is recognized from the first.* (Blaiklock, p. 61)

“the breaking of bread” should also be understood as subtly connoting the passion of Christ—though, of course, there may very well have been a deepening of understanding with regard to Christ’s passion as the church’s theology came more and more into focus, in accord with Paul’s elaboration of it. (Longenecker, p. 290)

Do you see prayer as one of the central tasks of the church? How is this manifested in your Christian life?

Consider the following verses in Acts. What do they teach about the church and prayer? (This list could be much longer. We will return to this topic in study 6.)

- ◆ 1:14, 24
- ◆ 6:1-4
- ◆ 10:1-4, 9

The *everyone* of vs. 43 probably refers to Jerusalem at large and not just to believers. The events of Pentecost were observable and impressive to the public. Miracles and wonders were being performed for public scrutiny. These were *signs* that validated the message of the apostles.

In vs. 44-45 we learn that the early church took care of the needy in the congregation. At first glance it looks like the church was a commune; *all the believers . . . had everything in common . . .* But when we see these verses we understand:

1. that some (many?) in the church retained private property. Ananias and his wife sold one piece of property, presumably among many, and took part of the money to Peter (Acts 5).
2. that once property or goods were sold, giving was a voluntary act. Barnabas seems to receive some special recognition for his sacrificial giving in 4:36-37. Peter tells Ananias that the money he received from the sale of his property was to be used at his discretion.

Nevertheless, Luke paints a portrait of a church involved in sacrificial giving. The people were going far beyond the Jewish tithes that were required of them.

Does this challenge your own view of your possessions? Are you giving sacrificially? How can your group pray for you in this regard?

Respond to the following statement on giving by C. S. Lewis:

I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them.

Verse 46 is telling. Luke shows again that the early Christians were meeting in the temple courts in full accord with Jewish custom. They are not outlaws of Rome or of Jewish authorities. Church worship has evolved over the centuries and in many ways become divorced from its Jewish roots. The behavior of the early church may surprise us. Marshall writes of this verse,

They met together in a spirit of unanimity in *the temple*. (This) implied that they took part in the daily worship of the temple (3:1). The daily worship consisted of the offering of a burnt offering and incense in the morning and the afternoon; it was carried on by the priests, but there was always a congregation of people who stood where they could see the priests going about their duties and entering the sanctuary; they took part in prayer, and they received a blessing from the priest. . . Theological questions about the replacement of the temple sacrifices by the spiritual sacrifice by Jesus had probably not yet occurred to them. (Marshall, p. 85)

Notice vs. 46b. The believers met with *glad and sincere hearts*. It was a joy to be a follower of Jesus. Luke repeatedly stresses the joy that comes from the Holy Spirit (cf. 8:8, 39; 13:48, 52; 15:3, 16:34).

The last result of the church's devotion was evangelism or mission. *And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved*. . . Stott writes of this section:

On its own, verse 42 presents a very lopsided picture of the church's life. Verse 47b needs to be added. . . Those first Jerusalem Christians were not so preoccupied with learning, sharing and worshipping, that they forgot about witnessing. . . As Harry Boer expressed it in his challenging book *Pentecost and Missions*, the Acts 'is governed by one dominant, overriding and all-controlling motif. This motif is the expansion of the faith through missionary witness in the power of the Spirit. Restlessly the Spirit drives

the church to witness, and continually churches rise out of the witness. The church is a missionary church.' (Stott, p. 86)

How has this paragraph challenged your view of the church? Are there areas where you would like to change your level of commitment and involvement in Santa Barbara Community Church?

Is SBCC a church that patterns herself after Luke's "State Of The Church Address"? In what areas could we improve?

Are we a church characterized by the joy of the Holy Spirit?

Respond to the following statement by John Stott (made while commenting on 2:47b):

He did not add them to the church without saving them (no nominal Christianity at the beginning), nor did he save them without adding them to the church (no solitary Christianity either). Salvation and church membership belonged together; they still do. (Stott, p. 87)

6HUPRQ 1RWHV

Study Four

The Times of Refreshment

Acts 3:1-26

In the Old Testament *hunger* and *thirst* serve as metaphors for spiritual emptiness. They are also used by the prophets to picture the judgment of God.

Therefore my people will go into exile for lack of understanding; their men of rank will die of hunger and their masses will be parched with thirst.

Isaiah 5:13

In the future God will provide refreshment for the spiritually thirsty.

The poor and needy search for water, but there is none; their tongues are parched with thirst. But I the LORD will answer them; I, the God of Israel, will not forsake them.

Isa. 41:17

Acts chapter 3 contains Peter's second sermon. In it the apostle makes the startling pronouncement that *the times of refreshing* have arrived in Jesus.

Acts chapter 3-5 highlight the theme of conflict between Jewish leaders and the early church. The conflict began *one day* when Peter and John bumped into a beggar on their way to afternoon prayer.

Read Acts chapter three. Here we find the first miracle in Acts that is presented in detail. Peter is given opportunity to explain himself.

What impresses you as you read this chapter?

Verses 1-10 describe a miracle. What detail does Luke include to show this is a true miracle?

Friends or family of this man had to carry him to the temple gate called *Beautiful* where he would attempt to beg some sort of a daily income in order to survive.

Read carefully the description of the miracle. Do you see any of Luke's medical background in the description? How many times does Dr. Luke draw our attention to the fact that the beggar was able to walk? Why?

Peter and John were headed for what is called *The Court of Israel* inside the temple area. As they passed the temple gate called *Beautiful* they met the beggar, performed the miracle and continued on into the temple courts for afternoon worship. It is after the time of prayer when Peter delivers his sermon near Solomon's Colonnade.

The outer court of the temple was called *The Court of the Gentiles*, because non-Jewish persons were permitted to walk in it. F. F. Bruce explains:

From the Court of the Gentiles, after ascending some steps, one might pass through the barrier which separated the outer court from the inner courts. Notices in Greek and Latin were fixed to this barrier, warning Gentiles not to penetrate further, on pain of death. Nine gates led through the barrier, of which the Beautiful Gate was probably one. The first of the inner courts was the court of the Women, containing the treasury: it was so called because Jewish women might enter thus far, but no farther. Jewish laymen might go farther, into the Court of Israel. Beyond this was the Court of the Priests, reserved for priests and Levites in the discharge of their respective duties; within this court stood the sanctuary building itself, with its two compartments, the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies. (Bruce, p. 83)

On the way out of the temple Peter, John and the healed beggar draw a crowd in the outer court in the place called Solomon's Colonnade.¹

Re-read Luke's brief condensation of Peter's sermon.

- ◆ How is this sermon different from the sermon Peter preached in Acts 2?
- ◆ How is it similar? What is Peter's strategy in presenting Christ to his listeners?

This story shows Peter overcoming one of the great temptations that must have beset the apostles: the temptation to power. Peter heals a man born lame and the crowd is intensely

¹ This is the site of Jesus' sermon in John 10:23.

interested in Peter. They are astonished at what has happened because they have seen this beggar sitting near the Beautiful Gate for years or perhaps decades. The beggar himself is still holding on to Peter (vs. 11).

With this in mind, the sermon is startling! Peter never even addresses the issue. He merely asks, *Why does this surprise you?* and then points to Jesus for the remainder of his sermon.

Think about your own Christian life and ministry. More than likely you are the “best” Christian somebody knows. Perhaps this person (or these people) are hanging on to you the way the beggar held on to Peter. Are you aware of this? Are you pointing them away from yourself toward Christ? How is this manifested in your life?

3:17 is significant. Jewish law made a distinction between sins committed in ignorance and sins committed with deliberation. The law makes no explicit provision for the latter. Peter implies, therefore, that because the Jews acted in ignorance they are ready for God’s forgiveness.

The unspoken thought is that, if the Jews now fail to admit their sin committed in ignorance and repent of it, it will become a witting sin which is much more culpable. (Marshall, p. 92)

Peter promises three results if his listeners repent:

1. *that your sins will be wiped out.* The verb used means to wash off, erase or obliterate. The same verb is used in Revelation 21:4 for God wiping away our tears when the end comes. Barclay gives a colorful description of this word.

Ancient writing was upon papyrus, and the ink used had no acid in it. It therefore did not bite into the papyrus as modern ink does; it simply lay upon the top of it. To erase the writing a man might take a wet sponge and simply wipe it away. (Barclay, p. 32)

2. *that time of refreshing may come from the Lord.* If translated literally this phrase would read, *that there may come seasons of refreshing from the face of the Lord.* This is the only time the word *refreshing* occurs in the New Testament. It means rest, relief, respite or refreshment.¹

¹ The NIDNTT sees the *times of refreshing* as shorthand for *the age of salvation, which is promised to the nation of Israel if it repents. Although great numbers of Jews are converted (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 21:20), the Israel that Luke describes in Acts is one in which large numbers of Gentiles are incorporated, and from which many of the old Israel remain aloof.* (NIDNTT, vol. 3, p. 686)

It seems to be the positive counterpart to forgiveness, for God does not wipe away our sins without adding his refreshment for our spirits. (Stott, p. 93)

3. *and that he may send the Christ.* . . . One of the mysteries of the New Testament is the fact that our salvation has something to do with the return of Christ. Peter says the same thing in his second letter.

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. . . . You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming . . . (2 Peter 3:9, 11b).

What is your experience of conversion? Obviously we are all waiting for the fulfillment of Peter's third promise. What about the first two promises that Peter makes?

If you are in Christ, then God has forgiven your sins. Do you feel forgiven or do you carry guilt around with you? What is your experience of forgiveness?

What about refreshment? Are you refreshed in the Lord? What is this like?

What does verse 21 teach us about the universe, good and evil and the kingdom of God. Read Romans 8:18-27. What are we waiting for in the return of Christ? What will he do when he comes back?

Peter ends his sermon with further references to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. This has been a constant theme in both of Peter's sermons.¹

Old Testament Idea

Old Testament text

Acts text

¹ The following is based on material from Stott, pp. 94-95

descended from David	Psalms 132:11	2:30
suffered, died and is God's servant	Isaiah 53	2:23; 3:18
the stone the builders rejected became the capstone	Psalms 118:22	4:11
God raised him from the dead	Isaiah 52:13	2:25 ff.
death could not hold him	Psalms 16:8 ff.	2:24, 27, 31
God exalted him to his right hand to wait for the end	Psalms 110:1	2:34-35
through him the Holy Spirit is poured out	Joel 2:28 ff.	2:16 ff.
now the gospel is preached to everyone	Isaiah 57:19	2:39
people must listen to him or pay the penalty of disobedience	Deuteronomy 18:18-19	3:22-23
those who listen and respond will inherit the blessing promised to Abraham	Genesis 12:3; 22:18	3:25-26

6HUPRQ 1RWHV

Study Five

Persecution and Resistance

Acts 4:1-22

Read the verses listed above. Make a list of the details which stand out as you read.

We find in this chapter that the healing incident described in Acts 3 did not end on the day it took place. Peter and John are arrested and spend the night in jail.

There are two waves of persecution endured by the Jerusalem church. Both are initiated by the Sadducees.¹

Politically, they ingratiated themselves with the Romans, and followed a policy of collaboration, so that they feared the subversive implications of the apostles' teaching. Theologically, they believed that the Messianic age had begun in the Maccabean period (163 B. C.); so they were not looking for a Messiah. (Stott, p. 95)

In 4:4 Luke gives us a growth report on the church. It has grown to about five thousand. This will be the last time he gives a specific number. The church is growing too fast to keep track.

Notice who is present for Peter's official defense of his healing ministry the day before.

¹The Sadducees were not a legal body of Jews. They were what we would call 'naturalists'; They did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Hence the preaching of Peter would be offensive. They seem to side with the priests in Acts who oppose the Christian movement. One commentator writes, *It is interesting that, although the Pharisees were the group most opposed to Jesus during his ministry, in Acts they are almost friendly to the church, while the Sadducees (who do not figure in the Gospels until the last days of Jesus) have become the leaders of the opposition.*

the rulers = the Sanhedrin, which consisted of 71 members headed by the high priest;

the elders = rulers of various groups of Jews;

teachers of the law = scribes (usually lawyers who were Pharisees) who taught and copied the law;

Annas = the high priest who was removed from office in 14 A. D. by the Romans;

Caiaphas = the high priest from A.D. 18-36.

When this gathering of “important” people is assembled, they put the question to Peter: *By what power did you do this?*

Peter delivers another sermon in his defense. The apostle is brilliant in his own defense (under the influence of the Holy Spirit). In Jewish law a prophet, even if he performed a miracle, was to be stoned if he led people away from God (cf. Deuteronomy 13:1-5). Peter claims to be pointing people not away but toward the true God of Abraham. He does this by quoting Psalm 118:22. Longenecker explains:

In the first-century A.D. Jewish *Testament of Solomon* 22:7-23:4, the expression “the stone at the head of the corner” (or capstone) unambiguously refers to the final . . . capstone placed on the summit of the Jerusalem temple to complete the whole edifice. (Longenecker, p. 304, parenthesis added)

Peter points to Jesus as the fulfillment of Judaism.

Notice what stands out in the minds of his listeners. They are *astonished* with Peter’s boldness. This is the third time in Acts that Peter boldly lays his gospel at the feet of unbelieving Jews. *You killed him, but God raised him from the dead. . .* (vs. 10). (Is this Luke’s way of showing the transformation of Peter after his three denials of Jesus?)

What happened to Peter? Why is he so bold?

Why does the church need to pray for boldness later in the chapter (4:29)?

Notice some of the descriptive terms Luke uses to describe apostolic preaching. Read the following texts:

- ◆ 9:27 ff.

- ◆ 13:46

- ◆ 14:3

- ◆ 18:26

- ◆ 26:25-26

- ◆ (Ephesians 6:20)

Can we be just as bold as Peter, Paul and the other apostles ? Where is it possible for us to express our faith with such boldness? How can your homegroup pray for you in this regard?

Peter seems to have a ready-made formula for presenting the gospel. His evangelistic sermons follow a similar pattern of development (cf. Study Two).

What is your gospel? How would you share your faith if given 15 minutes of someone's time? Share this with your group. If you don't know, think about this and do some hunting for Bible verses that would help explain what you believe about Jesus.

What keeps you from a bold proclamation of your faith?

Acts 4:12 is one of the well known verses of Luke's book.

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.

Remember Matthew 1:21? The name Jesus means he will *save his people from their sins*. Peter, John, Paul and the other apostles were absolutely convinced that salvation was only found in Jesus. They were not influenced by what is called pluralism (the notion that there may be many paths to God).

Read the following quotation by Colin Brown (NIDNTT, vol 3, p. 213) and look up the references he cites. Could it be that the lack of boldness in evangelism we find in the modern church is tied to our adoption of a subtle pluralism? If we were deeply convinced that the non-Christian was really lost would we be more bold in our witness?

Acts 4:12 makes an absolute and universal claim for the Christian message of salvation. The apostolic kerygma (message) which was addressed first to the Jews (Acts 13:26) and then to the Gentiles (Acts 16:17 etc.) excludes every other way of salvation (Acts 13:38; 15:10 f.), for salvation can be gained only by faith in Christ (Acts 16:31). The salvation given to the one who believes consists in the forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:43; cf. 26:18) and a new relationship with God. (Emphasis added)

The rulers etc. were astonished at the boldness of Peter and John and *took note that these men had been with Jesus* (4:13). What is the observable result of your “being with Jesus”?

Study Six

The Praying Church

Acts 4:23-31

Peter and John are released from jail and, temporarily, from the hostility of their fellow Jews. What were they thinking about on their way back *to their own people*? Suddenly the excitement of this new movement was tempered by the reality of hostile persecution. Their conviction and proclamation that Jesus of Nazareth was the long promised Messiah of the Scriptures could cost them their lives! When Peter and John find their own people, Luke tells us, of the church's response to their release; they prayed.

Before going on in this study read these verses. Consider the prayer of the church.

- ◆ What are the main components of this prayer? How would you outline this prayer?
- ◆ What was the result of the prayer?
- ◆ What surprises you about this prayer?
- ◆ Are your prayers much like this one?

The prayer of the church begins with the title Despotes (δεσποτη). The term is translated *Sovereign Lord*. It was *used of a slave owner and of a rule of unchallenged power*. (Stott, p. 99)

Notice how this prayer begins. Before any petition the people acknowledge the sovereignty and power of God. They begin with praise in the midst of adversity. Notice also that Luke gives no record of thanksgiving for Peter and John's deliverance. What is your guess? Did Luke omit this for brevity or did the church fail to give thanks?

Consider the elements of the church’s proclamation in their prayer:

1. God is creator (24).
2. God has revealed himself (25-26).
3. God is in control of history (27-28).¹

The prayer we find shows the Jewish nature of the early church. The prayer begins like Hezekiah’s prayer in Isaiah 37:16-20, and then relies on Psalm 2 to express confidence in God and to plead for God’s involvement in the present situation.

Psalm 2 began to be understood as a messianic psalm by the middle of the second century B.C. It is something of a favorite among New Testament writers (cf. Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5; Rev. 2:26-27; 19:15).

When Jews read Old Testament prophecy during this time period they emphasized the general fulfillment of prophecy without pressing all the details. This is called a peshet or interpretation. Peter utilized this method of Old Testament interpretation in his Acts 2 sermon with the formula “this is that...”. “These people are not drunk. . . **this is that** which was spoken of by the prophet Joel. . .” Here in Acts 4 we see the same understanding of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy:

Psalm 2:1-2

the nations conspire (rage)
the peoples plot in vain
the kings and the rulers
of the earth
against
the Lord
and his Anointed One

Acts 4:27

the Gentiles conspire
with the people of Israel
Herod and Pontius Pilate
in this city
against
your holy servant Jesus
whom you anointed

Notice how the church understood persecution. Their own suffering is related directly to the suffering of Jesus and the suffering of God’s people in Old Testament times.

¹Regarding verse 28 Guthrie writes, *This is the only place in the NT where the verb ‘predestined’ occurs outside the Pauline epistles.* Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, p. 618.

The requests made at the end of the prayer are somewhat surprising. The church prays for three things:

1. That God would *consider* their threats. *It was not a prayer that their threats would fall under divine judgment, nor even that they would remain unfulfilled, so that the church would be preserved in peace and safety, but only that God would consider them, would bear them in his mind.* (Stott, p. 100)
2. That God would *enable* the church to continue in boldness. The gift of boldness caused astonishment (4:13), and compelled people to decision (14:3-4). The church in Acts 4 was, perhaps, afraid of what was coming. God would provide the boldness.
3. That God would confirm their efforts with miracles.

The surprise of this prayer is the neglect of the church to pray for deliverance. The prayer says nothing about protection from persecution. What do you make of this? Why the omission?

Are our prayers centered too much on our own comforts and not enough on God's will?

This prayer meeting ends with what we might call a "mini-pentecost" experience. Kistemaker writes,

The similarities are striking: the Holy Spirit comes as an answer to prayer (1:14; 4:24-30); the Spirit fills all who are present (2:4; 4:31); and they all proclaim the wonder and the word of God (2:11; 4:31). The believers receive a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit, who fills them with courage so that they proclaim the Good News. (Kistemaker, p. 171)

What can we learn about corporate prayer from this section of Acts?

Is SBCC a praying church? How can we improve our prayer-life?

In recent years the world-wide persecution of the church has received well deserved attention. Paul Marshall wrote a chronicle of the persecution of the church in his book *Their Blood Cries Out* (1997: Word Books). In the preface he writes,

This book is about a spiritual plague. It tells of massacre, rape, torture, slavery, beatings, mutilations, and imprisonment. It also tells of pervasive patterns of extortion, harassment, family division, and crippling discrimination in employment and education. This plague affects over two hundred million people, with an additional four hundred million suffering from discrimination and legal impediments. (p. 4)¹

Clearly the mild persecution described in Acts 4 was but a small portend of what was to come. How can SBCC do a better job of praying for the persecuted church? What can your homegroup do in this regard?

What do these verses teach you about your personal prayer-life? What changes do you want to make as a result of looking into these verses?

Come to your group prepared to pray like the early church prayed. Think about how you can praise God as creator, revealer and sovereign Lord of history. Come ready to practice.

¹ James and Marti Hefley estimate that 119 million men and women died because of their allegiance to Christ in the twentieth century (*By Their Blood: Christian Martyrs of the Twentieth Century* 1996: Baker Books, p. 11)

Study Seven

No Needy Persons

4:32-5:11

How easy it is to write flowery reports on the church. The church is the place where needs are met, where worship is offered, where community is practiced. . . Almost heaven on earth! Indeed, the body of Christ *is* God's creation. The church is called the very *bride* of Christ! But the everyday realities of life in the church are far from idyllic.

Eugene Peterson who was a pastor for three decades concedes that the church, in practice, is always disappointing.

Every time I move to a new community, I find a church close by and join it - committing myself to worship and work with that company of God's people. I've never been anything other than disappointed: every one turns out to be biblical, through and through: murmurers, complainers, the faithless, the inconstant, those plagued with doubt and riddled with sin, boring moralizers, glamorous secularizers. Every once and a while a shaft of blazing beauty seems to break out of no-where and illuminate these companies, and then I see what my sin-dulled eyes had missed: word of God-shaped, Holy Spirit-created lives of sacrificial humility, incredible courage, heroic virtue, holy praise, joyful suffering, constant prayer, persevering obedience.

Leap Over a Wall, p. 101

In this part of the book of Acts, Luke is showing his readers these realities of church life. The church is an institution under attack. First, the attacks came from without in the form of force from the authorities (4:23-31). Here in 4:32-5:11 the attack comes from within in the form of falsehood and hypocrisy.

Read these verses. What stands out in your mind? What was church-life like for these new believers? In what ways does the church in Jerusalem look like the church in America? Like SBCC?

We should read 4:32 in context. The Holy Spirit filled the church and the people spoke the word of God boldly. The result of the Spirit's filling, as far as the church is concerned, is true oneness. The believers are *one* in heart, mind and possessions. Jesus said that the world would judge the veracity of the disciples' faith according to the love they showed for one another (John 13:35). This text sees the early disciples taking Jesus seriously.

Notice, again, how this section of Acts parallels Acts 2:42-47.

. . . just as after the first coming of the Spirit he describes the characteristics of the Spirit-filled community (2:42-47), so after they are again filled with the Spirit he provides a second description (4:32-37). Moreover in both cases his emphasis is the same. *All the believers*, he begins, in 4:32 as in 2:44, formed a closely knit group. They 'were together' (2:44), as they devoted themselves to 'the fellowship' (2:42), and they *were one in heart and mind* (4:32). (Stott, p. 106)

The theology of possessions presented in these verses is not communism. "Property" is not "theft" as Marxists claim. Luke tells us that church members did not *regard* their possessions as their own. They were seen as gifts from God that could at any time be used for the good of the community. Moreover, we learn from Peter's interaction with Ananias and Sapphira that once possessions were sold the proceeds were given or retained at the discretion of the owner.

We can see three elements of the church's giving:

1. Possessions/property were sold to meet special needs.
2. The church had a fund to help those in need.
3. The apostles were entrusted with the monies to distribute as they deemed appropriate.

We have seen how Luke paints a portrait of the early church that is parallel to and in concert with the people of God in the Old Testament. The Old Testament book of Deuteronomy was

a series of sermons by Moses instructing the people how to live after they took possession of the promised land. Deuteronomy 15:4 reads:

. . . There should be no poor among you, for in the land the Lord your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you. . .

Luke sees the church living out this principle. *There were no needy persons among them* (4:34).

After pointing to the general success of community life in this area, Luke gives a positive and a negative example of how the church actually functioned.

First, Barnabas, who will later become a traveling companion of Paul, sells property and gives it to the church. Barnabas plays an important role in Acts. He is *a kind of hinge between the mission to the Jewish world and that to the Gentiles* (cf. 9:27; 11:22-30; 13:1-14:28; 15:2-4, 12, 22, 36-41; see also 1 Cor 9:6). (Longenecker, p. 312). This is the first time we meet him in Acts. He is a giver and his freedom from possessions opens opportunity to serve God.

On the other hand, Ananias and Sapphira's greed and desire for status in the community severely diminish (to put it lightly) their opportunities to serve God.

Again, Luke may be drawing a parallel to the Old Testament people of God. Early in the life of Israel, Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, offered sacrifices that were not appropriate (cf. Leviticus 10). God's wrath was swift and severe. Both priests were *consumed* by the Lord's fire. Scholars speculate that in both Leviticus and Acts God is teaching his people of the need for purity.

Ponder the story of Acts 5. What lessons can we draw from it for our church life together?

John Stott finds three lessons for the church in this passage:

1. The story teaches the gravity of sin. *Luke seems to be underlining the great evil of sinning against God's people. Falsehood ruins fellowship. If the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira had not been publicly exposed and punished, the Christian ideal of an open fellowship would not have been preserved, and the modern cry 'there are so many hypocrites in the church' would have been heard from the beginning.* (Stott, p. 111) This story can only make us all thankful that God allows hypocrites in the church!
2. The story teaches the importance of human conscience. To have a clear conscience is *to live a transparent life before God, without guile or subterfuge, whose*

consequence is that 'we have fellowship with one another' (1 Jn. 1:7). Ananias and Sapphira failed to be transparent before their believing family. The church was diminished.

3. This section teaches the necessity of church discipline. The discipline from God on these two individuals was, undoubtedly, severe and unique. Unrepentant sinners were generally banished from fellowship as a last-ditch effort to spur on repentance. Since the New Testament era, *The church has tended to oscillate in this area between extreme severity (disciplining members for the most trivial offences) and extreme laxity (exercising no discipline at all, even for serious offences). It is a good general rule that secret sins should be dealt with secretly, private sins privately, and only public sins publicly. Churches are also wise if they follow the successive stage taught by Jesus (Mt. 18:15ff). (Stott, p. 112)*

In Christian circles some of the bestselling books are on what is called “financial planning.” Ron Blue has written a bestseller called Master Your Money. Larry Burkett has written a cluster of books on the topic: The Complete Financial Guide for Young Couples; Answers to Your Families Financial Questions; What Husbands Wish Their Wives Knew About Money (wow!); Debt-Free Living, etc..

How do you (or should you) balance what our culture calls financial responsibility with this picture of giving Luke presents?

Are financial planning and generous giving mutually exclusive?

Would you ever consider selling a possession (car, property, guitar etc.) to meet the need of someone in our church? Why? Why not?

The American church is the richest church in the world. Consistently, however, when surveys are taken we find that we give about 3% of our income for the Lord’s work. Why are we so “tightfisted”?

Are you “tightfisted”? What are your giving habits? Do you have any intention of changing your approach to giving?

Respond to the following statements by Gregory Lewis in Is God For Sale?

Christ is calling us, not to poverty, but to a spirit of poverty and denial. There is something spiritually deceitful when we place our trust in what belongs to us instead of in the One to whom we belong.

Do we make the tithe the starting point in our thinking about how much we will give, or do we make our starting point Jesus Christ, who gave everything he had to give, even his own life? Do we want to be like our Lord and Savior who, though being rich, became poor for our sakes, that in him and by him we might have all the riches of heaven?

We of the modern Church proclaim that Jesus is coming soon, and then we rush out to our homes, to eat our food, while watching our television or reading our newspapers. Where is the community?

6HUPRQ 1RWHV

Study Eight

Ministry and Civil Disobedience

Acts 5:12-42

John Bunyan (1628-1688) penned one of the greatest books ever written in the English language, *Pilgrim's Progress*. Millions of copies of this book have been printed and are available in dozens of languages. In spite of the literary "success" of this masterpiece, Bunyan was anything but a Christian celebrity. In fact, this Puritan was arrested three times for *preaching without a state license*, and for his failure to attend the official Church of England. John Bunyan spent twelve years in jail for his convictions! Was Bunyan right to disobey the civil authorities for the sake of his conscience? Does not the Bible teach that believers are to be in submission to their government?

This section of Acts gives the reader a chronicle of the second wave of persecution the church endured. Remember, the church is still enjoying the fact that the Roman government sees the church as a Jewish sect and therefore as a "legal religion." During these early days of the church's life persecution will come from within Judaism itself.

Read these verses. They are Luke's description of what life was like for believers in Jerusalem. What stands out?

In vss. 12-16 we glean a picture of church life. The believers met in public (no comfortable pews). Their worship and proclamation was open to public scrutiny for they met in *Solomon's Colonnade*, the eastern part of the temple court where Peter preached his second sermon (Acts 3:11). The church appears to have met regularly and with growing numbers. The healing ministry of this flourishing body of believers attracted visitors from neighboring towns. Such popularity caused the Sadducees to be *filled with jealousy*.

Luke tells us, *They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail*.

What would you have thought if you had been one of the early Christians watching the arrest of Peter, John and the others? Would this event have caused excitement? Would you want to

rethink this new teaching? Would the event have embarrassed you (“Can I really trust these guys who are going back to jail???”)?

In America believers enjoy tremendous religious freedom. “Going to church” is seen as the right thing to do. Our politicians want to be photographed coming out of their church during a busy election campaign. What would happen if all this changed? How would church life be affected if, from time to time, the police showed up and arrested whoever was preaching? What would happen to SBCC?

Notice it is the **Sadducees** who are jealous in this chapter. The Sadducees were the “respectable” Jews of the first century. They tended to be wealthy, powerful and they collaborated with the political authorities of Rome. From the Sadducees came the priests that performed the various official functions in the temple.

The anger of the Sadducees had a double foundation. As the high priests they were blamed for the murder of Christ, and found a volatile Jerusalem beginning to grow hostile (28); they were also bitterly opposed to the teaching of resurrection, and here the hated doctrine was associated with the prophet whom they had found it expedient to remove (John 11:50). (Blaklock, p. 72)

After their midnight release from prison (vs. 19)¹ the apostles are again found preaching in the temple seemingly unconcerned with the consequences. They appear before the **Sanhedrin** which is the ruling body of the Sadducees.

Think about Peter’s answer to the Sanhedrin. He claims it is his responsibility to disobey *men*, (i.e., the laws of the governing authorities) in order to obey God. Then he preaches another mini-sermon to his accusers.

Peter’s phrase, *We must obey God rather than men!*, is the basic principle of what is called civil disobedience.

For Christian theology and ethics the problem of civil disobedience is raised by two facts. First, Christians are called to an unqualified obedience to their Lord and God (Deut. 13:4; Jer. 7:23; John 14:15). Second, Christians are called to submit to the governing authorities and to recognize that, even where the civil authority is not Christian, God uses (or can use) it as his servant for good (cf. Rom. 13:1-7; I Peter

¹Regarding the escape from prison Longenecker writes, *The ‘angel of the Lord’ is the LXX (the Septuagint, that is the Greek translation of the Old Testament) term for the Hebrew ‘Angel of Yahweh’, which denotes God himself in his dealings with men (cf. Exod 3:2, 4, 7; passim). . . By divine intervention, then, the apostles were released from the public jail . . .* (Longenecker, p. 319)

2:13-17). Civil disobedience becomes an issue when these two claims come into conflict, i.e., when God commands us to do something which the civil authority prohibits or the civil authority commands us to do something which God prohibits. (David Gill, Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, ed. Walter Elwell, p. 245)

We have several examples of civil disobedience in Scripture:

- ◆ Daniel's prayer (among other acts of disobedience) in Babylon (Daniel 6).
- ◆ Paul's refusal to leave prison (Acts 16:35ff.).
- ◆ Peter's preaching here in Acts 5.

Are there areas where civil disobedience is justified in our time?

During the 1980's the "Sanctuary Movement" began. This was the practice of sheltering immigrants from Central America (usually Guatemala) in various churches to prevent their deportation back to their own countries. Many church members and pastors were arrested and jailed for their participation.

Operation Rescue attempts to close down abortion clinics. Participants are arrested and forcibly carted off to jail.

Are these legitimate uses of civil disobedience? Should the church be doing these sorts of things? Why? Why not? Has the American church become domesticated? Is the church too polite? How do we balance Acts 5:29 with Romans 13:1-7? Can you conceive of placing yourself in a position where you would be arrested for your Christian convictions?

Respond to the following statement by David Gill:

If it becomes apparent that there is a real conflict between the demands of biblical justice and love and the demands of the state, and if all available legal avenue of reform are exhausted, then civil disobedience may be warranted. (David Gill, Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, ed. Walter Elwell, p. 246)

MINISTRY AND CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

Note the reaction to Peter's sermon: they *wanted to put them to death*. The apostles are saved, this time, by a Pharisee named Gamaliel.

The Pharisees and the Sadducees were at religious odds with one another. The name Pharisee means *separate*. Pharisees were devoutly religious Jews who had given up on the priestly class of Jews (the Sadducees) because they had made too many compromises with Greek culture and with Roman authorities. Gamaliel was one of the great Pharisees.¹ He was called *Rabban* which means, literally, *our teacher*. It was a title of honor reserved for the best of the rabbis. Interestingly, one of his students was Saul of Tarsus (the apostle Paul).

What is Gamaliel's defense of the apostles?

What do you make of vs. 41? They rejoice because they *had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name*. Early Christianity was not a comfortable religion.

Respond to the following quotation by one of the twentieth century's leading Christian thinkers.

If there is no final place for civil disobedience, then the government has been made autonomous, and as such, it has been put in the place of the living God.

Francis Schaeffer

¹During this time there were between five and six thousand Pharisees in Israel.

Study Nine

Stephen's Discovery

Acts 6-7

In 1876 a Scot living in the United States invented the telephone. Using technology that had been available since the early 1800's, Alexander Graham Bell, at twenty-nine years of age made the first phone call on March 10, 1876. It was a short conversation: *Mr. Watson, come at once. I want you.* Who in March of 1876 would have guessed the impact this invention would make on society? Who would have thought that within a few decades virtually every home would be linked to every other home through the telephone? Who would have predicted e-mail, internet shopping, the World Wide Web, etc.? Who would have predicted cell-phones which ring at the most awkward of moments?

The beginnings of Christianity are similar to the beginnings of Bell's invention. At the outset the early disciples understood themselves as Jews who had discovered who was the Messiah. They remained thoroughly Jewish. They, apparently, had no idea of the magnitude of their discovery. The early church was threatened and harassed by Rome. In time Rome would be a *Christian* empire. They lived in what we call the Graeco-Roman world. In time their world would be called the *Christian West*.

Stephen, as far as we know from Luke's record, was the first disciple to probe the deeper implications of what Jesus did on the cross. Chapters 6 and 7 of Acts are devoted to Stephen's discovery.

Acts 6 is really an introduction to Stephen's self-defense recorded in Acts 7. In chapter six, Luke faithfully records the first division in the church. The New Testament church is far from ideal.

Greek speaking Jewish converts *complained* that they were being neglected in the church's social welfare program.¹ By this point in Acts the church probably had about ten thousand men (plus women and children!). Jerusalem was a relatively impoverished city at this time. Undoubtedly there were some very poor believers in the church.

¹ Luke may again be drawing a parallel between the early church and the Old Testament people of God. The word translated *complained* is the same word use in the Greek translation of the Old Testament when the Israelites complained, or murmured against Moses (cf. Ex. 16:7; Numbers 14:27).

The problem was cultural. The Greek speaking believers felt that the Hebrew (Aramaic) speaking recipients of church aid were being favored. The complaint compelled action. Needs were to be met. The issue also caused the apostles to protect themselves from getting caught up in administration when their first calling was to pray, preach and teach (vs. 2-4). *There is no hint whatever that the apostles regarded social work as inferior to pastoral work, or beneath their dignity. It was entirely a question of calling. They had no liberty to be distracted from their own priority task*" (Stott, p.121)

This paragraph introduces us to Stephen who was one of the seven men set aside for administration of the church. Ironically, this administrator goes on to preach the longest recorded sermon in the book of Acts.

John Stott writes of these verses:

We do a great disservice to the church whenever we refer to the pastorate as 'the ministry', for example when we speak of ordination in terms of 'entering the ministry'. This use of the definite article implies that the ordained pastorate is the only ministry there is. But *diakonia* (ministry) is a generic word for service; it lacks specificity until a descriptive adjective is added, whether 'pastoral', 'social', 'political', 'medical' or another. All Christians without exception, being followers of him who came 'not to be served but to serve', are themselves called to ministry, indeed to give their lives in ministry. . . . We need to recover this wide vision of the wide diversity of ministries to which God calls his people. (Stott, p. 122, emphasis added)

Luke now turns his attention to Stephen and the conflict he had with members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (6:9).

The term *freedmen* relates to a group of Jewish prisoners of war whom the Romans under the command of Pompey captured in 63 B.C. In subsequent years these prisoners were released and built a colony along the Tiber River in Rome. Later, their descendants were expelled from Rome and many of them presumably found refuge in Jerusalem where they built a synagogue. (Kistemaker, p. 228)

Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin and charged with speaking against the two things most cherished by Jews, the law (Moses in vs. 11) and the temple (*this place* in v.14).

(1) Moses himself spoke of God's later raising up 'a prophet like me' from among his people and for his people, which means therefore that Israel cannot limit the revelation and redemption of God to Moses' precepts (vv. 37-38); (2) Moses had been rejected by his own people, even though he was God's appointed redeemer. . . (3) even though Moses was with them and they had the living words of the law and the sacrificial system, the people fell into gross idolatry and actually opposed God (vv. 41-43). (Longenecker, p. 343)

3. The Temple: In vss. 44-50 Stephen challenges the notion that the temple is God's place of residence. *They conceived of Yahweh as so completely identified with the temple that its existence guaranteed his protection of them, while its destruction would mean that he had abandoned them. It was against these notions that the prophets inveighed.* (Stott, p. 130)¹

Stephen's defense of his faith turns out to be an evangelistic sermon with meager results. His method is quite different from sharing *The Four Spiritual Laws*. What can we learn from Stephen about sharing Jesus with others?

What do we learn about discipleship from Stephen?

Does Stephen's boldness challenge your "politeness" with regard to sharing the gospel with others?

¹Stott takes a slightly different approach to understanding Stephen's sermon. He writes, *What Stephen did was to pick out four major epochs of Israel's history, dominated by four major characters. First he highlighted Abraham and the patriarchal age (7:2-8); then Joseph and the Egyptian exile (9-19); thirdly Moses, the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings (20-44); and lastly David and Solomon, and the establishment of the monarchy (45-50). The connecting feature of these four epochs is that in none of them was God's presence limited to any particular place. On the contrary, the God of the Old Testament was the living God, a God on the move and on the march, who was always calling his people out to fresh adventures, and always accompanying and directing them as they went.* (Stott, p.130-131)

Study Ten

The Church Moves Out

Acts 8:1-40

The words *change* and *church* usually don't fit together. Especially when things are going well. Think of the first seven chapters of Acts. The church is growing, fellowship and worship appear to be both a priority and an enjoyable feature of church life. The pastoral staff, by any

measure, is impressive (Peter is the preacher and John is the youth director). With a church like this who needs change?

What is happening to the church? How is the church changing? Think back to Acts 1:8.

*But you will
receive power
when the Holy*

Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Read 8:1-40. Here the church is fulfilling Jesus' mandate to the disciples in a way that the disciples would never have anticipated.

Stephen's execution proved to be the catalyst for *great persecution*. The beginning of chapter 8 shows the cost of discipleship for the early church. Luke notes that Saul, who will later turn to Christ and spend his life turning the world to Christ, approved of Stephen's execution. At this point, Saul is busy trying to *destroy* the church. The Greek word denotes *brutal and sadistic cruelty. It is used of a wild boar ravaging a vineyard into which he had broken, and of a wild animal savaging a body.* (Barclay, p. 64) The persecution was so intense that the church literally fled Jerusalem and looked for more peaceful surroundings.

Here, again, we see the radical nature of New Testament faith. When Satan begins this third wave of persecution on the church there is no reference to believers going back on their commitment to Jesus. They leave homes, friends, employment and flee Jerusalem. Christ is more important than these things.

We also see in these verses how God uses adversity to accomplish his purposes. The church was enjoying rich fellowship, great teaching (imagine passing around tapes of Peter's sermons!) and marvelous homegroups. God uses the work of Satan to spread the good news of His kingdom!

Think about the trajectory of your own life. Think of the blessings you have experienced and the bumps in the road of life which you have encountered. Has God used adversity in your life to accomplish his purposes? Share this with your homegroup.

How would your view of your faith be affected if you had to leave Santa Barbara because of persecution?

What was the result of the scattering of the church?

Verses 5-25 show Philip evangelizing the Samaritans.

It is hard for us to conceive the boldness of the step Philip took in preaching the gospel to Samaritans. For the hostility between Jews and Samaritans had lasted about a thousand years. It began with the break-up of the monarchy in the tenth century BC when ten tribes defected, making Samaria their capital, and only two tribes remained loyal to Jerusalem. It became steadily worse when Samaria was captured by Assyria in 722 BC, thousands of its inhabitants were deported, and the country was re-populated by foreigners. . . Not till the fourth century BC, however did the Samaritan schism harden, with the building of their rival temple on Mount Gerizim and their repudiation of all Old Testament Scripture except the Pentateuch. The Samaritans were despised by the Jews as hybrids in both race and religion, as both heretics and schismatics. (Stott, p. 147)

Philip's encounter with Simon the sorcerer shows the triumph of the Gospel over the powers which impressed the Samaritans in a certain city. Simon was able, under the power of Satan, to perform miracles and was given the name *Great Power*.¹ Notice the conflict between Jesus and Simon: they followed Simon (vs. 11), *But when they believed Philip, they were baptized*. . . Simon himself believes and is baptized. What takes place later in the chapter indicates that Simon's belief and baptism is not saving faith but a way, from Simon's perspective, to gain more impressive power.

¹Simon. . . plays an extraordinary role in early Christian literature. In post-apostolic times he is depicted as the father of the Gnostic heresies. Justin Martyr tells how by his magic power he secured a following of devotees not only in Samaria but in Rome, to which he went in the reign of Claudius. In the apocryphal Acts of Peter we are told how he corrupted the Christians in Rome by his false teaching and made the authorities ill-disposed towards them. . . (Bruce, p. 178)

Before we learn of Simon's fall, Luke tells of an important visit from the apostles who still reside in Jerusalem (8:14-17). Read these verses. What happens when the apostles arrive for a visit with the Samaritans?

Many groups (Catholics, Pentecostals and some Charismatics) use these verses to prove that becoming a Christian is a two-stage event. Roman Catholics see the first stage as baptism followed by the confirmation by a bishop. Some Pentecostal and some Charismatic groups see these verses teaching a two-stage development of Christian faith. They claim belief in Christ and the baptism of the Holy Spirit are separate events.¹

The key question when approaching this text is this: *Is the two-stage Samaritan experience to be regarded as the norm for Christian initiation?*

To this question we need to give a negative answer. . . because what happened in Samaria diverged from the plain and general teaching of the apostles. Initiation into Christ, according to the New Testament, is a single stage experience, in which we repent, believe, are baptized and receive both the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, after which by the indwelling power of the Spirit we grow into Christian maturity. During this period of growth there may indeed be many deeper, fuller, richer experiences of God; it is the insistence on a two-stage stereotype which we should reject. (Stott, p. 154)

The delay of the gift of the Holy Spirit should be understood as God's demonstration to the apostles from Jerusalem that Samaritans had truly been included in the blessings of the Messiah. From a historical-cultural perspective we see God patching up a conflict that was about one thousand years old. Samaritans and Jews are worshipping the same Christ!

We see this same situation in Acts 10. While Peter is preaching, the Holy Spirit fills his Gentile listeners (people worse than Samaritans in the Jewish mind)! He is impressed and asks those present, *Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have!* (Acts 10:46-47). That Peter would ask such a question is testimony to the revolutionary nature of faith in Christ. The Samaritans and now the Gentiles (called *dogs* by the Jews) are included in the gospel!

¹These thinkers would also point to Acts 10:44 and Acts 19:1-7 to support their view.

What has your experience of the Holy Spirit been like? Do you associate the Holy Spirit with “warm fuzzies” or do you understand the Holy Spirit to be a subtle presence and influence in your life? Is the Holy Spirit a force or a person? Can you back up your answer with Scripture?

Have you had times in your Christian life when the Holy Spirit seemed especially near to you? What is your relationship with the Holy Spirit right now?

What can you do to enhance the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your life?

Simon (8:18) sees this impressive display of God’s power and wants to buy it! He wants, again, to increase his fame and fortune. Peter’s response is swift and strong. Simon is *full of bitterness and captive to sin* (8:23).

Verse 25 is wonderful. Peter and John came to Samaria to find out what was going on. They returned to Jerusalem changed persons. On their way home they were *preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages*. The gospel is bigger than they thought.

Have you had a similar experience since becoming a Christian? How has your view of the Christian faith been enlarged since you came to Christ? Have you seen Jesus change people you never thought would change?

Chapter 8 ends with Philip, the mass evangelist in Samaria, becoming the personal evangelist of a particular Ethiopian. The Ethiopian eunuch was probably a convert to Judaism.

He must have been one of two things. In those days the world was full of people who were weary of the many gods and the loose morals of the nations. They came to Judaism and there they found the one God and the austere moral standards which gave life meaning. If they accepted Judaism and were circumcised and took the Law upon themselves they were called *proselytes*; and if they did not go that length but continue

to attend the Jewish synagogues and to read the Jewish scriptures they were called *God-fearers*. (Barclay, p. 70)

Philip finds the Ethiopian reading the book of Isaiah and explains *The good news about Jesus*. In one chapter, the gospel spreads from Jerusalem to Samaria and to Africa. The Holy Spirit is working.

6HUPRQ 1RWHV

Study Eleven

Saul Sees the Light

Acts 9:1-31

One of the least dramatic, but most impressive, conversions of the twentieth century would be that of C.S. Lewis. Lewis gave up the faith of his parents as a teenager and was a staunch atheist. His desire was to not meet God! But God had other plans. God moved in on Lewis and changed him forever. Consider Lewis' own description of this event.

I felt as if I were a man of snow at long last beginning to melt. The melting was starting in my back—drip—drip—drip and presently trickle—trickle. I rather disliked the feeling. . . You must picture me alone in that room in Magdlen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.

Surprised by Joy, p. 228

The most dramatic, but equally reluctant, conversion in the Acts period of the church was that of Saul of Tarsus.¹ Luke is so impressed with Saul's conversion that he includes three versions of the event in the book of Acts (9:1-31; 22:3-21 and 26:1-32). The first of these is told in Luke's words and the second two are told by Paul as he defends himself.

Read each of these accounts. Why do you think Luke spends this much time on Saul's conversion? What differences can you find in the three accounts?

¹Saul of Tarsus is the Hebrew name of the man Christians usually refer to as Paul. Paul was his Greek name and was used more frequently after his conversion because he was ministering to Gentiles. We will use both names in this study.

Acts 9

Acts 22

Acts 26

Saul was thoroughly Jewish. He tells the Philippian church that he *was circumcised the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee. . .* (Phil. 3:6). He was educated at *the feet of Gamaliel* the famous rabbi who we met in chapter 5. Gamaliel was a great lover of the law of God. In the Mishnah, a collection of Jewish writings, we read, *When Rabban Gamaliel the elder died, the glory of the Torah (the law) ceased, and purity and 'separateness' died.* Saul was trained as a young boy to love the Old Testament Scriptures.¹

Paul began his relationship with Christ's church as its persecutor. In 9:1 we find him *breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples.* In 8:1 we observed Saul giving approval to the death of Stephen, the church's first martyr. Paul's murderous activity against the church would shape his self-image and worldview for the duration of his life. He writes to the Corinthians, *I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God* (I Cor. 15:9). He refreshes the memory of the readers of his letter to Galatia, . . . *you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how I violently persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.* When the Judean churches heard of Paul's conversion they were shocked. *The man who formerly persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy!*

When we read of Paul's *former way of life* we don't understand how he could be so evil. How could the man who would eventually plant churches all over the Roman world, suffer in prison because of his faith, and write thirteen letters of the New Testament do such things?

¹It is fascinating that Paul, after his conversion, says so many negative things about the law (consider Romans 7 or Galatians 3). Here we find a Pharisee who, while formerly convinced of his legalistic righteousness, came to understand his own inadequacy before God. Hence the law, as a means of righteousness was repudiated in Paul's thinking. F. F. Bruce shows that Paul's change may have been anticipated in his rabbinic training. *It is possible that he had been taught that Messiah, when he came, would change the customs or even abrogate the law. There was an ancient Jewish chronological scheme, probably going back beyond the time of Paul, which divided world history into three ages of two thousand years each - the age of chaos, the age of law (beginning with the revelation to Moses on Sinai) and the messianic age. . . Those who accepted this scheme might well have believed that the validity of the law was but temporary, lasting only to the dawn of the messianic age.* (Bruce, *Apostle*, p. 70).

It is important to realize that from Paul's perspective he was doing the **right** thing in persecuting the church. The apostles were proclaiming that Jesus of Nazareth was the long expected Messiah. But Jesus had been crucified and a *crucified Messiah was a contradiction in terms*. (Bruce, *Apostle*, p. 71) According to Deuteronomy 21:23 *a hanged man is accursed by God*. Jesus did not meet the requirements of a messiah.

A crucified Messiah was worse than a contradiction in terms; the very idea was an outrageous blasphemy. In later years Paul acknowledged that in preaching a crucified Messiah he was preaching something which was "a stumbling block (a *skandalon* in Greek) to Jews" (I Corinthians 1:23). . . [W]hen he was first confronted by people who publicly affirmed that the crucified Jesus was the Messiah, his course was clear: they were guilty of blasphemy, and should be dealt with accordingly. . .

The law and the customs, the ancestral traditions, and everything that was of value in Judaism, were imperilled by the disciples activity and teaching. Here was a malignant growth which called for drastic surgery. (Bruce, *Apostle*, p. 71)

Consider vss. 3-9 of Acts 9. Who takes the initiative in Saul's conversion?

Is Saul forced to become a follower of Jesus? Does he have a choice in this matter?

If we only read Acts 9 we might surmise Paul's conversion was sudden and completely unexpected. However, in 26:14 we have a hint that God was working on Saul long before the Damascus road experience. *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.*

Here Jesus likens Paul to an ox that is stubbornly kicking against a sharp prodding tool. Jesus, if we can take the illustration this far, is the pursuing farmer trying to domesticate the animal. Kicking a goad hurts!

What do you think were the goads in Paul's life before coming to Christ? Did his conscience bother him as he was persecuting the church? Did he inwardly suffer over his approval of Stephen's persecution? Did he realize his Pharisaic righteousness was not really pleasing in God's eyes?

What was your conversion like? It probably was not as dramatic as Paul's, but it was no less miraculous. Were you resistant to Christ? What led to your yielding to Christ? Were you

kicking against any goads? What were they? Spend some time sharing with your homegroup how you came to know Jesus.

What did Paul think about during his first three days of being a Christian?

Ananias isn't too sure he wants anything to do with Saul (vs. 13). He didn't want to do any "discipleship" with this pugnacious Pharisee! Have you had a similar experience? Have you ever thought, *No way. Jesus can't change that person!*?

Barclay calls Ananias *one of the forgotten heroes of the Christian Church*. . . (Barclay, p. 74) Ananias' willingness to risk himself welcomed Paul into the community of believers.

True conversion always issues in church membership. It is not only that converts must join the Christian community, but that the Christian community must welcome converts, especially those from different religious, ethnic or social background. There is an urgent need for modern Ananiases and Barnabases who overcome their scruples and hesitations, and take the initiative to befriend newcomers. (Stott, p. 178)

Have you acted as an Ananias or Barnabas with someone at SBCC? Can you think of someone you could care for in this way? Who?

Notice 9:20-22. Does this give us a hint as to what Paul was thinking about during those three days of fasting (vs. 9)? Paul immediately enters local synagogues and preaches *that Jesus is the Son of God*. Luke adds, *Saul grew more and more powerful and baffled the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Christ* (Messiah). The Greek verb *prove* means to bring together several pieces of information so a person can come to a conclusion. Paul, apparently, re-thought his vast knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures and re-interpreted them in light of seeing the light of Jesus as Messiah. Suddenly the Scripture took on an entirely new meaning for Paul.

Consider the power and the cost of knowing Christ. Paul went to Damascus to arrest believers. Instead he was "arrested" by Jesus (Phil. 3:12) and had to be led into Damascus as a blind man. He went to Damascus a proud Pharisee and arrived a penitent, but forgiven

sinner. Paul's encounter with Jesus cost him his career as a rabbi. Everything was changed. After his stay in Damascus, Paul the persecutor becomes Paul the persecuted. He flees at night in a basket that is lowered through an opening in the wall of the city. His flight will end, as far as Luke's story is told, as a prisoner in Rome waiting to be tried for his loyalty to Jesus. Along the way Paul will be beaten, stoned and left for dead, imprisoned and shipwrecked.

William Barclay writes,

The Christian is a man who has ceased to do what he wants to do and who has begun to do what Jesus Christ wants him to do. (Barclay, p. 73)

What has your commitment to Jesus cost you? How have you changed since becoming a Christian? To put it differently, how would you be different if you were not a believer?

6HUPRQ 1RWHV

Study Twelve

Peter Sees the Light Too!

Acts 9:32- 11:18

Where does culture end and the Christian faith begin? In what ways do believers *baptize* their culture and then defend that culture as *Christian*? For example, American society values punctuality, civility, self-sufficiency and efficiency. The church will often adopt these cultural values and then read them back into its understanding of the Bible. Jesus was a master of time management. Jesus endorsed a sound investment strategy. Paul was a conservative Republican. Peter was a Marxist.

Ask a seasoned believer where the verse is which reads, *God helps those who help themselves*, and you are likely to get a response. *Hmm, I think that in Proverbs, no, Pslams, no it's at the end of one of Paul's letters. . . Oh, I don't know. Look it up!* But the phrase isn't found in any translation of the Bible.

Peter, along with many Jewish believers in the early church, shared our problem of mixing his culture with his faith. This apostle's culture was thoroughly Jewish. Peter thought Jewish, worshipped Jewish, ate Jewish. . . Peter was, Jewish. So what about those Gentiles? What if the Gentiles placed their faith in Jesus as Messiah? Would they need to become Jewish? Would they have to obey the ceremonial Law of Moses? Would they participate in temple worship?

With the conversion of Saul, the church *enjoyed a time of peace* and continued to grow in numbers (9:31). Luke's narrative leaves Paul in Jerusalem and concentrates on Peter from 9:32-12:25. In these chapters Peter performs miracles (9:32-42), proclaims the gospel to Cornelius who becomes the first Gentile believer (10:1-11:18) and spends some more time in prison (12:1-25).¹ After chapter 12, Paul becomes the central figure in Luke's story. But first, Luke wants to show that the inclusion of Gentiles into the church was the direct result of God's

¹Stott writes of these three sections of Acts, *Each may be seen as a confrontation—with disease and death, with Gentile alienation and with political tyranny. Moreover, in each case conflict gave place to victory—the cure of Aeneas, the resuscitation of Tabitha, the conversion of Cornelius, and the removal of Herod.* (Stott, p. 181)

PETER SEES THE LIGHT TOO!

initiation through Peter (the apostle to the Jews). Those in the first-century church who wished to drive a wedge between Paul and Peter would get no help from the book of Acts.¹

Read these verses and concentrate on 10:1-11:18.

What stands out as you read these verses? Does the attitude of the early church surprise you?

What questions do you have of these verses? What is unclear?

In order to appreciate the shocking nature of this story to the early church we must understand the nature of Jewish/Gentile relations. Religious Jews wanted nothing to do with Gentiles.

Stott clarifies:

It is difficult for us to grasp the impassable gulf which yawned in those days between the Jews on the one hand and the Gentiles (including *God-fearers*) on the other. Not that the Old Testament itself countenanced such a divide. On the contrary, alongside its oracles against the hostile nations, it affirmed that God had a purpose for them. By choosing and blessing one family, he intended to bless all the families of the earth. . . The tragedy was that Israel twisted the doctrine of election into one of favouritism, became filled with racial pride and hatred, despised Gentiles as 'dogs', and developed traditions which kept them apart. (Stott, p. 185)²

Jews would never enter a Gentile home nor would they allow a Gentile to enter their home. They would not accept hospitality from a Gentile because Gentiles failed to tithe (*If Gentiles rob God, how can I accept this gift from them?*). When Peter enters the home of Cornelius in Caesarea he reminds the Roman centurion that to do so *is against our law*. This, again, is not the law of the Old Testament but the law of Jewish tradition.

¹The importance of this event is emphasized by the space Luke devotes to the story. He spends 66 verses on the conversion of Cornelius.

²The Jew had an immense contempt for the Gentile. The Gentiles, said the Jews, were created by God to be fuel for the fires of Hell. God, they said, loves only Israel of all the nations that He had made. The best of the serpents crush, they said, the best of the Gentiles kill. It was not even lawful to render help to a Gentile mother in her hour of sorest need, for that would simply be to bring another Gentile into the world. . . . The barrier between them was absolute. If a Jewish boy married a Gentile girl, or if a Jewish girl married a Gentile boy, the funeral of that Jewish boy or girl was carried out. Such contact with a Gentile was the equivalent of death. (Ephesians Barclay, p. 125)

Cornelius was a dignitary and a *God-fearing* man. Luke tells us that he was generous with the poor and devoted to prayer. Most likely Cornelius did not become a full Jewish *proselyte* (cf. Study Ten, p. 51).

While Cornelius was praying, God in a vision, tells him to send a delegation to Joppa to find and summon Peter. About 21 hours later Peter is praying at noon and has a vision.¹

In the vision Peter is told to *kill and eat*. Peter protests and the vision is repeated two times. The Spirit comes to Peter and tells him *Do not to hesitate to go with* the three men who are downstairs. The Greek word translated *hesitate* could be translated *making no distinction*. Peter is to welcome these Gentiles without distinction. He invites them into his home to rest before the journey back to Caesarea the following day. Peter has seen the light; in Christ racial barriers (and cultural barriers) are broken down.

The walk from Joppa to Caesarea takes about 9 hours. What do you think Peter thought about during this walk? What do you think the unlikely delegation of ten talked about?² Notice the two extremes to avoid in 10:25-29. No individual should be worshipped (*Stand up, I am only a man. . .*) and no individual should be seen as inferior (*God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean.*).

Are you tempted to either of these extremes as you interact with others. Do you have a tendency to hero worship? Are you racially prejudiced? What will help you change this area of your outlook?

Re-read vs. 34-43. Here we have another brief summary of one of Peter's sermons. It is this sermon that causes scholars to speculate that most of Peter's sermons originally contained an oral presentation of what we know of as the Gospel of Mark.

In scope and emphasis, the account is much like the portrayal of Jesus' ministry in Mark's Gospel. It begins with John the Baptist, moves on to Jesus' anointing with the Holy Spirit, refers to Jesus' many acts of divine power in Galilee, alludes to his continued ministry throughout Palestine and in Jerusalem, stresses his crucifixion, and

¹Peter is staying at the home of Simon the tanner. This may be a hint that Peter is beginning to make the same deductions that Stephen made about the implications of the gospel. Tanners worked with dead animals and would have been regarded as *unclean* by devout Jews.

²The group consisted of three men from Joppa, Peter and six others who went to witness the encounter with Cornelius (cf. 11:12). The number of witnesses may be significant. Barclay points out that in Egyptian law seven witnesses were necessary to establish a case completely. *So Peter is in effect saying, "I am not arguing with you. I am telling you the facts and of these facts there are seven witnesses. The case is proved."* (Barclay, p. 92)

PETER SEES THE LIGHT TOO!

concludes with a declaration of his resurrection and its verification by his appearances to chosen followers. (Longenecker, p. 393)

Notice how Peter's understanding of the gospel is being expanded.

I now realized how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. (10:34)

How has your understanding of the gospel grown since the time you first believed?

Peter's sermon is interrupted (vs. 44) by the Holy Spirit! Gentiles receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter's contingent is astonished. Peter then asks the question, *Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water?*

The radical nature of this event in Caesarea is felt when we read on through chapter 11. When Peter's ministry becomes known in Jerusalem he is criticized and must go to Jerusalem to defend his practices. Jewish Christians were facing a new phase in their understanding of what took place at Pentecost. **First**, Jesus was the Messiah of Jews only. **Then**, in Acts 8 Samaritans are included in the blessing (along with an Ethiopian). **Now** the final barrier has been crossed. Gentiles are worshipping Jesus as Messiah. "Now Peter, surely you have gone too far!" The Jews in Jerusalem *took issue with Peter* and asked him to defend his practice: *You entered a house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.*

When Peter tells the story of what happened his critics were silenced (vs. 18).

Nothing could be said to counter Peter's argument. God had acted and clearly shown His will. That He had bestowed His blessing on Gentiles, giving them the change of heart and mind which results in eternal life, was a matter for wonder and praise. Their criticism ceased; their worship began. (Bruce, p. 236)

One of the great lessons of this section of Acts is that of the unity of the church. Paul makes this same point in Ephesians 2:11-21. Read this. What does it add to Luke's story?

How has this section of Acts challenged your understanding of your faith? Respond to the following statement by John Stott:

The fundamental emphasis of the Cornelius story is that, since God does not make distinctions in his new society, we have no liberty to make them either. Yet, tragic as it is, the church has never learned irrevocably the truth of its own unity or of the equality of its members in Christ. Even Peter himself, despite the fourfold divine witness he had

received, later had a bad lapse in Antioch, withdrew from fellowship with believing Gentiles, and had to be publicly opposed by Paul (Gal. 2:11ff.). . . All such discrimination is inexcusable even in non-Christian society; in the Christian community it is both an obscenity (because offensive to human dignity) and a blasphemy (because offensive to God who accepts without discrimination all who repent and believe). Like Peter, we have to learn that 'God does not show favouritism' (10:34). (Stott, p. 197)

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Study Thirteen

Expansion and Persecution

Acts 11:19-12:25

Luke will devote the second half (chapters 13-28) to the reception the Gentiles gave the Gospel throughout the Roman world. Paul, accordingly, comes to center stage while Peter fades from the scene. Before making this transition, however, Luke shows that the church is expanding rapidly and enduring more and more intense persecution.

We might outline our text as follows:

1. The northward expansion of the church from Jerusalem to Antioch (11:19-30).
2. The intensified persecution of believers under the reign of Herod Agrippa I (12:1-25).

As you read the first section realize that the church is not only expanding geographically. We see also the cultural extension of the church. Some of the scattered believers take the message to the *Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus*.¹ When the Jerusalem church hears about what God is doing in Antioch² they send Barnabas to investigate. He *saw evidence of the grace of God*. Barnabas goes to Tarsus to find Saul and the two of them spend a year nurturing the young believers in Antioch.

In verse 26 Luke adds a footnote that is perhaps more significant for modern readers of Acts than it was for those who originally read the book. *The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch*. The name *Christian* will only appear two more times in the New Testament (Acts 26:28, I Peter 4:16) but it became the most popular name to describe the followers of Christ throughout the church's history.

¹Translations vary widely. The Good News Bible reads *Gentiles*, the KJV reads *Grecians* and the Simple English Bible reads, simply, *non-Jews*. The problem comes from a variant in the Greek texts we have. The context, however, seems to clear up the problem. The Gospel is being preached to a new group of people, i.e., non-Jews.

²Antioch was an extremely cosmopolitan city. Its population (estimated at about 500,000) was primarily Greek but included Jews, Persians, Indians and Chinese. Josephus called it the *third city of the empire* behind Rome and Alexandria.

Although Jewish Christians could stay under the protective umbrella of the “freedom of religion” that the Roman government had granted the Jews, with the influx of Gentiles into the church the Christians had to distinguish themselves from the Jews and assume a new name. (Kistemaker, p. 423)

Luke uses other names to denote those who placed their faith in Christ. What aspect of the life of a believer do these names highlight?

- ◆ disciples (6:1)
- ◆ saints (9:13)
- ◆ brethren (1:16; 9:30)
- ◆ those *being saved* (2:47)
- ◆ people of *the Way* (9:2)

What names do you use to describe your relationship with Jesus? Why?

In chapter 12 the time of peace enjoyed by the church since the conversion of Paul comes to an abrupt halt. Herod Agrippa I (born 10 B.C.) was the grandson of Herod the Great (the Herod who tried to kill Jesus when he was an infant, Matt. 2:1ff.). Herod Agrippa I, by virtue of his grandmother, claimed to be Jewish. Accordingly he worshipped in the temple and during the Feast of Tabernacles he was permitted to read a passage from the Law in public worship. His reception by the Jews increased his power in Jerusalem and assured his position in the Roman empire. His pogrom against the church seems to be a calculated measure to insure his political position. After killing James (vs. 2) *he saw that this pleased the Jews* and had Peter arrested.

This wave of persecution must have seemed devastating to the church for its two key leaders were taken by the authorities and one of them, at least, would not be coming back.

It is interesting that Luke mentions the fact that this time of persecution took place during the Feast of Unleavened Bread (also called Passover during New Testament times). During this feast Jews made their bread without yeast (unleavened bread). They also purged yeast from their homes during this festival. This was a symbol of purging sin from the community.

Understanding this allows us to see the irony in Peter’s imprisonment. The Jews may have felt that they were purging the *yeast* of Peter’s preaching once and for all. In reality they are standing against the plan of God. Peter, on the other hand, experiences true deliverance from

his bondage which is very much like what the Jews experienced in the original passover (Exodus 12).

Peter was held in what we would call a “maximum security” prison. He is guarded by 16 soldiers and two of them are physically chained to him.

What do we learn about prayer from this story? Think about vs. 5 and vs. 15 together. Did the church have faith that God would answer their prayers?

Chapter 12 ends with the death of Herod and Luke’s assurance that persecution will not halt the cause of Christ: *But the word of God continued to increase and spread.*

Luke’s description of Herod’s death may seem startling, even fanciful. Interestingly, however, Josephus, an historian of the first century, described Herod’s death in a similar manner. Josephus notes that the people praised Herod as a god when the sun illuminated his cloak.

Straightway his flatterers raised their voices from various directions— though hardly for his own good—addressing him as a god. *May you be propitious to us,” they added, “and if we have hitherto feared you as a man, yet henceforth we agree that you are more than mortal in your being.* The king did not rebuke them nor did he reject their flattery as impious. (cited in Kistemaker, p. 446)

Josephus adds that Herod died five days later after a *severe pain . . . arose in his belly.*

Luke and Josephus seem to be giving two descriptions of the same event. Intestinal worms were (and are) a common problem in the Middle East. Rendle Short, formerly a professor of surgery at Bristol University, notes that worms can form a tight ball and cause *acute intestinal obstruction* that can lead to death (The Bible and Modern Medicine, 1955).¹

Think back through the past thirteen weeks of study in the book of Acts.

- ◆ What have you learned about the church?

¹Other interpreters think Luke has appendicitis in mind.

- ◆ What have you learned about God? Has your gratitude to God and your passion for God been enhanced during your study of Acts? In what ways?

- ◆ Has your Christian life been challenged? In what ways?

- ◆ How have you grown (or regressed) in your relationship to Christ during the past few months?

Study 14: Paul's First Journey Acts 13-14

Luke's book, Acts, takes an abrupt turn in chapter thirteen. Up to this point Peter has occupied most of Luke's narrative. Through Peter's ministry the Gospel was well received in Jerusalem and was, predominantly, a Jewish faith. Now Luke will show his friend Theophilus that the church expanded, through Paul, throughout the Gentile world.¹

Paul, along with Barnabas and his cousin John Mark (13:5), leaves Antioch and begins his career as an itinerant missionary. Note Paul's pattern of ministry. We find it as soon as he and Barnabas land on Cyprus. Paul first preaches the gospel in the local Jewish synagogue to establish an audience in the town he is visiting. This method was advantageous for several reasons:

1. Paul had a deep concern for Jews to trust Jesus as Messiah (cf. Romans 9:1-5).
2. There were Gentile proselytes in the Jewish synagogues.
3. Synagogues were accustomed to allowing visiting rabbis the opportunity to teach.

Read Acts 13-14. Look in the back of your Bible for a map of Paul's journey. Follow along as you read. Geography can be fun! Make a broad, general outline as you read. What stands out? Which of Paul's missionary methods surprise you? Why?

Notice (vs. 1) the international and interracial character of the church in Antioch.

Barnabas was a Jewish Levite from Cyprus (Acts 4:36).

Simeon was probably a black man from Africa and possibly 'Simon of Cyrene' who carried Jesus' cross (Luke 23:26).

Lucius of Cyrene was from North Africa.

Manaen was either a relative or a close friend of Herod Antipas (son of Herod the Great).

Saul, was a Jew who formerly persecuted the church.

¹The transition should come as no surprise: *As a skillful author Luke has prepared his readers by describing the spread of the gospel through Stephen's preaching to Hellenistic Jews in Jerusalem, the scattering of Christians through persecution with resultant expansion of the Christian witness, Philip's evangelizing Samaria and converting the Ethiopian eunuch, Saul's (Paul's) preaching in Damascus and to Hellenists in Jerusalem, Peter's going to Lydda and Joppa and to Caesarea, where he converted a houseful of Gentiles, and the spread of Christianity to Antioch in Syria.* (Gundry, p. 221)

Re-read verses 2-4. Who sends Paul and Barnabas? Is it the Holy Spirit or the church?
Consider Stott's thoughts on this question:

Would it not be true to say both that the Spirit sent them out, by instructing the church to do so, and that the church sent them out, having been directed by the Spirit to do so? This balance will be a healthy corrective to opposite extremes. The first is the tendency to individualism, by which a Christian claims direct personal guidance by the Spirit without any reference to the church. The second is the tendency to institutionalism, by which all decision-making is done by the church without any reference to the Spirit. (Stott, p. 218)

How do you go about making decisions regarding ministry? Would you listen to your church if that body of believers sensed that the Holy Spirit was leading you in a particular direction? What would you do, on the other hand, if you felt a call to do such-and-such and your church did not share your enthusiasm?

The first stop for Paul and Barnabas is on the island of Cyprus (13:4-12). Paul is entering non-Jewish territory and after 13:9 Luke will only use Paul's Greek name and drop his Jewish name Saul.

In 13:13 Luke notes that John left the missionary party and returned to Jerusalem. We are not told why he deserted his friends but the incident would prove divisive when Paul prepared for his second missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas part company over the question of taking along John Mark (cf. 15:36. . .).

Read Paul's first recorded sermon (13:16-41). How is this sermon similar to Peter's sermon and to Stephen's sermon? In what ways is it unique? Try to outline (briefly) this sermon.

Notice how God is the subject of most of the verbs in vss. 16-25! Israel's history and our salvation are contingent on God's work.

How does Paul understand the death and resurrection of Jesus? What is Paul's purpose in including the Old Testament quotations?

Observe the appeal Paul makes at the end of his sermon (vss. 38-41). It contains a succinct presentation of Paul's gospel message. What Paul develops fully in his letters to the Romans and the Galatians we find here in abbreviated form:

Forgiveness of sins comes through Jesus,

through faith

justification comes, not from observing the law, but,
through Jesus.

It is no wonder that Luther wrote in the preface to his commentary on the book of Acts (1533):

It should be noted that by this book St. Luke teaches the whole of Christendom . . . that the true and chief article of Christian doctrine is this: We must all be justified alone by faith in Jesus Christ, without any contribution from the law or help from our works. This doctrine is the chief intention of the book and the author's principal reason for writing it. (from Luther's Works, vol. 35, p. 363)

Verse 48 again shows that salvation is God's work and not ours: "All who were appointed for eternal life believed." F. F. Bruce says that the verb carries the notion of being "enrolled for eternal life in the records of heaven." (Bruce p. 283)

Certainly those who have believed in Jesus and received eternal life from him all ascribe the credit to God's grace, not to their own merit. The converse is not so, however. It is significant that in this very passage those who rejected the gospel are regarded as have done so deliberately, because they did not 'consider [themselves] worthy of eternal life' (46). (Stott, p. 228)

The incident in Lystra (14:8 ff.) is similar to what we saw in Acts 3 when Peter and John healed a lame man in the Temple. In each case a man is miraculously enabled to walk and the crowd heaps adulation on those who performed the miracle. Both Peter and Paul resist the temptation to power and point to the one who really has the power to heal, Jesus.

Paul sharply contradicts the crowd's interpretation of the miracle and uses their misunderstanding to challenge the people's worship of idols. *We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made heaven and earth and everything in them.* (14:15)

The people of Lystra were Greeks who worshipped the pantheon of Greek gods. Paul calls these idols "worthless." What are the worthless idols of American life? Of your life? Have you come to see these idols as truly worthless?

Notice Paul's view of God's grace. It extends to people and cultures that do not acknowledge him. *God has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.* (14:17)

After Paul was stoned and left for dead (did Paul think back to Stephen's execution during this ordeal?) he had the courage to go back into the city.

Luke ends his discussion of Paul's first journey with a brief description of his return trip to Antioch and the report that Paul and Barnabas gave to their home church.

Luke's summary of Paul's travels teaches us something about the early churches which Paul planted. *Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust.* (14:23)

We notice that it {leadership} was both local and plural - local in that the elders were chosen from within the congregation, not imposed from without, and plural in that the familiar modern pattern of 'one pastor one church' was simply unknown. Instead, there was a pastoral team, which is likely to have included (depending on the size of the church) full-time and part-time ministers, paid and voluntary workers, presbyters, deacons and deaconesses. (Stott, p. 236)

Study 15: The Jerusalem Council Acts 15:1-35

From one vantage point Acts 15 records the third most important event in the New Testament (who knows what the fourth is?¹). The most important event in the New Testament is, of course, the death and resurrection of Jesus. It was here that God provided atonement for sin and ushered in the new age of the kingdom. Pentecost could be viewed as the second most important event of the New Testament. On this day (Acts 2) God's Spirit was poured out on his people in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and as a result of what Jesus did on the cross. In Acts 15 the church came together to decide, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, what it really meant to be a follower of Jesus. As we have seen in this study, the early church was at first, entirely Jewish in composition.

One of the big issues facing the early church was the ethnic/cultural question, "How Jewish is Christianity?" In the beginning all believers were Jewish and they undoubtedly understood their new faith as an extension of their Judaism. Suddenly, to everyone's surprise, Samaritans (Acts 8) and Gentiles (Acts 10) were becoming Christians too? "How do we treat these fellow Christians?" "If they worship our Messiah shouldn't they adopt our customs?" Finally, "Does a man have to be circumcised in order to be saved?"

This last question was paramount. As the drizzle of Gentile converts became a flood during Paul's missionary journey, there were some who were concerned that Gentiles were being admitted to the fellowship on the basis of baptism alone without the rite of circumcision. These people were becoming Christians but not becoming Jews.

Read Acts 15:1-35. Try to put yourself in Peter's or James' shoes as you read. These men were leaders in the early church. They had, on one hand, the desire to find a harmonious and peaceful solution to the dispute. On the other hand, they could not compromise the truth of the gospel message.

How many separate parties do you see represented in Luke's account of the council?

Do you understand why this was such an important question for the church to answer? Explain.

If you were a first century Jewish believer, circumcised at birth, how would you have viewed the debate? Do you think you would have backed Peter and Paul? Or would you have sided with the Judaizers (vs. 1) or the Pharisees (vs. 5)? Why? How would your personality shape your views on this issue?

¹Most scholars point to Acts 20 as the fourth most important event of the New Testament. Here Eutychus fell asleep during one of Paul's longer sermons. The event has been comforting to preachers and sleepers alike for the last 2000 years.

Look at Peter's speech in verses 7-11. How does he argue? What are his main points? Consider the same questions for James' speech in vss. 13-21.

James says (vs. 19) *It is my judgement, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.* The NEB translates this, *impose no irksome restrictions on the Gentiles.* . . . Does the American Evangelical church "impose irksome restrictions?" What is your experience in this area? Have you had "excess baggage" added to the Gospel?

Note: James urges abstinence from

1. food polluted by idols,
2. sexual immorality,
2. meat of strangled animals and
3. blood (vs. 20).

Each of these requests for abstinence probably comes from James' desire for the Gentile church not to offend, needlessly, the Jewish church. James is asking Gentile believers to be sensitive to Jewish law as recorded in Leviticus 17 and 18. Longenecker clarifies:

These prohibitions have often been viewed as a compromise between two warring parties, which nullified the effect of James's earlier words and made the decision of the Jerusalem Council unacceptable to Paul. But in reality they should be viewed not as dealing with the principal issue of the council but as meeting certain practical concerns; not as being primarily theological but more sociological in nature; not as divine ordinances before God but as concessions to the scruples of others for the sake of harmony within the church and the continuance of the Jewish Christian mission. . . . To sum up, we may say that two types of "necessary" questions were raised at the Jerusalem Council. The first had to do with the theological necessity of circumcision and the Jewish law for salvation, and that was rejected. The second had to do with the practical necessity of Gentile Christians abstaining from certain practices for the sake of Jewish-Gentile fellowship within the church and for the sake of the Jewish Christian mission . . . (Longenecker p. 448)¹

¹The difficulty with Longenecker's interpretation lies in James' inclusion of *sexual immorality*. This doesn't sound like a Jewish scruple but rather a timeless moral principle that is certainly operative for Gentile converts. The Greek word used here is *porneia* πορνεία. F.F. Bruce writes, *The prohibition of fornication, understood generally, is of course an ethical prohibition . . . but the word may be used here in a more specialized sense,*

(continued next page)

In other words, Gentile believers were to make every effort not to offend their Jewish brothers and sisters in Christ for the sake of unity.

Are there any activities you feel you should avoid for similar reasons? Just about anything you do will offend someone. Some eastern European Christians are offended when they see American Christians wearing jewelry. Some Christians from America are offended when they see European Christians drinking wine. Our sister church in Honduras believes, generally, that going to the movies is “worldly,” and therefore wrong. Some Christians in our country don’t believe it is appropriate for women to wear pants (dresses only). What should we do? In what areas should we abstain for the sake of unity?

Read Romans 14 for help on this question. What is Paul’s view of the above question? Realize here Paul is talking about the question of meat that has been sacrificed to idols and pagan religious holidays. What insights to you learn from this chapter?

Paul writes his own account of the Jerusalem Council in Galatians 2:1-10. Read these verses. What do they add to your understanding of the council? How does Paul’s personality differ from Peter’s?

The decision of the Jerusalem Council was monumental. “When one considers the situation of the Jerusalem church in A.D. 49, the decision reached by the Jerusalem Christians must be considered one of the boldest and most magnanimous in the annals of church history.” (Longenecker, p. 450) Think about it. This new messianic movement that was getting off to a tremendous start is now alienating itself from its Jewish roots. This decision would forever antagonize those Jews who disagreed. From this point on Christians were increasingly on their

of marriage within degrees of blood relationship or affinity forbidden by the legislation of Lev. 18. (Bruce p. 315). If this reconstruction is correct, then all four requested abstentions related to ceremonial laws laid down in Leviticus 17 and 18, and three of them concerned dietary matters which could inhibit Jewish-Gentile common meals. To abstain would be a courteous and temporary (although in some circumstances ‘necessary’, 28, RSV) concession to Jewish consciences, once circumcision had been declared unnecessary, and so the truth of the gospel had been secured and the principle of equality established. (Stott, p. 250)

own. They would no longer enjoy protection from Roman persecution by being viewed as a Jewish sect. The church will, from this point on, face rough times.

Chapter 15 contains Peter's last appearance in Acts. Luke will now focus his attention entirely on Paul and his missionary efforts.

Study 15: Paul's Second Journey Acts 15:36-18:22

PAUL'S SECOND JOURNEY

As we look at this comparatively lengthy section of Acts (it takes about 10-12 minutes to read) try to get a feel for the missionary style of Paul and Silas. What was their life like? Does it surprise you to find history's greatest missionary working for a living as he travels?

It would seem that Paul has a missionary strategy. On his first journey he established churches in two Roman provinces (Cyprus and Galatia). On the second journey, after he visits the churches of Galatia (Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch), Paul branches out and established churches in Macedonia and Achaia (both provinces are in Greece). When they visit Ephesus on the way home they touch the province of Asia. Interestingly they establish churches in the capital city of each province (Thessalonica in Macedonia, Corinth in Achaia and Ephesus in Asia). Paul is a church planting pioneer. After his third journey he writes to the Roman church, *But now there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain* (Rom. 15:23).

Take a few minutes and read these verses. Look in the back of your Bible for a map of Paul's journeys. Follow along if you have such a map. Remember, geography is fun. Consider the following outline as you read:

1. Paul re-visits the churches established in Galatia during the first journey: 15:26-16:5.
2. Paul in Macedonia: 16:6-17:5.
3. Paul in Athens: 17:6-34.
4. Paul from Corinth to Jerusalem and Antioch: 18:1-22.

Notes:

16:11 Consider the historical turning point contained in this verse. This is the first time the Gospel has been taken to the Western world. Eventually Europe would be thought of as the center of Christianity.

16:13 A Jewish synagogue had to have at least ten men in regular attendance. If ten men were not available a "place of prayer" was designated for Jewish worship. Paul and Silas go to this place of prayer and the church of Philippi begins with the conversion of Lydia. It appears that the church began to meet in her home (16:40).

16:33 Notice how baptism is the immediate outward response to believing faith.

17:1-4 Here we encounter Paul doing what he did best. As an Old Testament scholar Paul spent his teaching time in the synagogue "*explaining and proving that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead.*" Then Paul moves to the message of Jesus. "*This Jesus is the Messiah.*"

- 17:13 This verse shows the hatred of the Jews in Thessalonica toward Paul. Berea is about fifty miles southwest of Thessalonica; a long journey just to “agitate the crowds.”
- 17:16 Paul waits for Silas, Timothy (and Luke?) in Athens. Athens was the most prominent of cities in the Greek world. By Paul’s time Athens had about ten thousand residents (Thessalonica had about two hundred thousand). Nevertheless, Athens was rich in history and heritage. It was the intellectual and cultural center of the Roman world.¹
- 18:1 Corinth was a city about the size of Thessalonica. It was a major seaport and trade center. Its cosmopolitan nature along with its prosperity led to prolific immorality. Corinth was the center for the worship of Aphrodite. Her temple employed 1000 prostitutes night and day. Sexual promiscuity was so prominent in Corinth that the city name was turned in to a verb (to Corinthianize) which referred to the sex act.
- 18:2 Aquila and Priscilla play a prominent role in the New Testament. Paul works with them as a team in the years to come.

Rom. 16:3 *Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus.*

1 Cor. 16:19 *The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.*

2 Tim. 4:19 *Greet Priscilla and Aquila and the household of Onesiphorus.*

Paul stays a year and a half in Corinth and thus begins his relationship with a church which caused him great anxiety.

I Corinthians (and parts of II Corinthians) portrays a church that was deeply infected with sin.

- 18:18 This verse shows that Paul remained thoroughly Jewish as he evangelized Gentiles in Corinth. Luke is probably explaining a Nazarite vow which involved abstinence from cutting one’s hair and from drinking alcohol. At the end of the period of abstinence Paul’s hair would have been cut and burned as a symbol of self-consecration to God. Paul is not bound by law, but he is free to practice the law in the context of God’s grace. Note Acts 21:20-25. Paul may be taking this vow to make a point with his Jewish adversaries.

For Discussion:

- 16:17 Does the content of the demon possessed girl’s words surprise you?

¹The Romans conquered Athens in 146 B. C.

PAUL'S SECOND JOURNEY

16:25 Paul and Silas have been severely beaten yet they are praying and singing. Would you be singing if you had this experience? What was the source of their joy? Consider Acts 5:41 and Colossians 1:24.

17:11 Here we find the Bereans searching the Scriptures (our Old Testament) to “*see if what Paul said was true.*” Are you “searching the Scriptures” to confirm the truth of your faith? What happens when you read the Bible? Does it strengthen your faith?

17:16 Paul has a few days (?) alone in Athens. He is impressed by neither the beautiful artwork nor the architecture. Luke tells us that Paul was “*greatly distressed*” because the city was “*full of idols.*”

The adjective Luke uses occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, and has not been found in any other Greek literature. Although most English versions render it ‘full of idols’, the idea conveyed seems to be that the city was ‘under’ them. We might say that it was ‘smothered with idols’ or ‘swamped’ by them. (Stott, p. 277)

There was a lot to see and enjoy in Athens on a cultural level. What was it in Paul that gave him the spiritual insight to ‘see’ the idols? Are you sensitive to the idolatry of Santa Barbara? If not, how can you gain the spiritual sensitivity Paul exhibited?

Luke tells us Paul was “*greatly distressed*”. The verb only occurs here in the New Testament. It originally had medical associations with epileptic seizures. It meant to ‘irritate, provoke, rouse to anger.’ When you see the world you live in what effect does it have on you? Are you moved to respond? Consider John Stott’s comments on this verse:

. . . the pain which Paul felt in Athens was due neither to bad temper, nor to pity for the Athenians’ ignorance, nor even to fear for their eternal salvation. It was due rather to his abhorrence of idolatry, which aroused within him deep stirrings of jealousy for the Name of God, as he saw human beings so depraved as to be giving to idols the honour and glory which were due to the one, living and true God alone. (Stott, p. 279)

17:22-31 Re-read and think about Paul’s sermon. Here we find Paul facing a non-Jewish audience. How is this sermon different from Paul’s other sermons in Acts? What is the difference in Paul’s method of persuasion? How is this sermon similar to other presentations of the Gospel in Acts?

As we share our faith in the 1990's what method should we use? Are we sharing the Gospel with people in the synagogue (17:17)? After all, our country has theological roots that are Judeo-Christian. America is increasingly secular as a society. Are we sharing the Gospel with Epicurians and Stoics (17:18)?

Think through this section as a single unit. What impression has it made on you? What have you learned about the Christian life from these chapters?

Study 17: Paul's Third Journey Acts 18:23-19:41

This section of our study opens with Paul “*spending some time in Antioch*”. Then Paul begins his third missionary journey when he sets out for Ephesus which is about fifteen hundred miles west of Antioch.

Read Acts 18:23-28.

Between Paul's visit to Ephesus on his second journey (18:19-21) and his return to that city during his third journey (19:1 ff.), Apollos came to Ephesus. Apollos is a well educated man from Alexandria, Egypt. What does Luke tell us about Apollos in 18:25? Look for five or six characteristics.

Luke notes that the teaching of Apollos is “accurate”, but incomplete because he knew *only the baptism of John* the Baptist. This story of Apollos sets the stage for Paul's arrival in Ephesus described in Acts 19.

Read Acts 19:1-7. What do you make of this story? Were these Jews followers of Jesus before Paul's arrival or were they disciples of John the Baptist? Does this chapter indicate that the Holy Spirit is given to an individual some time *after* that person believes?

Consider the thoughts of Michael Green in his study I Believe in the Holy Spirit:

The word (disciples) to be sure usually denotes Christians, and Paul clearly mistook them for Christians. But he soon found out his mistake. They seemed to possess none of the marks of the Spirit's indwelling. So he asked them, *not*, as the Authorized Version rather carelessly put it, “Have you received the Holy Ghost *since ye believed?*”, as if the Greeks warranted some great space between their belief and their reception of the Spirit; but, “Have you believed and received the Holy Spirit?” -the participle “believing” being contemporaneous with their receiving. . . The passage goes on to make it crystal clear that these disciples were in no sense Christians. They were followers of John the Baptist, baptized by him (v. 3) who had then made their way hundreds of miles north-west to Ephesus. (pp. 134-135)

The answer of the 12 disciples to Paul is telling. *We have not even heard that the Holy Spirit has been given.* John's preaching was full of prophetic pointers to the coming of the Holy Spirit. This group of twelve disciples is, interestingly, living in the old covenant after the new covenant had arrived. They were ignorant of how the Holy Spirit had been poured out at Pentecost.

“In a word, they were still living in the Old Testament which culminated with John the Baptist. They understood neither that the new age had been ushered in by Jesus, nor that those who believe in him and are baptized into him receive the distinctive blessing of the new age, the indwelling Spirit.” (Stott, p. 304)

We know that Paul's ministry in Ephesus lasted about three years (cf. Acts 20:31). Luke is, obviously, very succinct in his account of Paul's time in Ephesus. Read Acts 19:8-41. As you read the rest of this brief chapter notice how Luke presents Paul's ministry. The name of Jesus is held in *high honor*. The forces of Satan are being defeated.

The story of the seven sons of Sceva shows the superiority of the new covenant over the old. This story, to some extent, illustrates what happened to the twelve disciples in Ephesus when Paul arrived.

Some Jews in the first century used magical names and incantations to perform exorcisms of evil spirits. Such practice was popular in Ephesus. The seven sons of Sceva found a new name which, they thought, would yield them more power over demons. The response of the demons is both humorous and instructive; *Jesus I know and Paul I know, but who are you?*

Notice the result of this misuse of the name of Jesus in vss. 17ff. Verse 19 is striking! A drachma was about a day's wage for a worker! Repentance and belief were very expensive.

Chapter 19 ends with a story of a riot caused by Demetrius, a silversmith and, perhaps, head of the guild for that year. When we read the story carefully we might ask, "Why did Luke include this in his story of the early church?" Marshall explains:

The opposition to Paul which arose in Ephesus was like that in Philippi in springing from pagan sources. To the charge that Paul was interfering with the vested interests of those who made their living from idolatry was added the accusation that he was striking at pagan religion itself. The incident, as Luke relates, expresses the wide effects of the Christian mission, and also brings out the arbitrariness and confusion of the opposition which had no clearly concerted plan of action. . . . The story is in effect a statement that Christians do not constitute a danger to the state and a plea that they be treated with toleration in a pluralistic society. . . . (Marshall, p. 314)

In our last two studies we have seen something of Paul's missionary methodology in evangelism. Remember that Paul stayed in Corinth for over a year and a half (18:11) and for about three years in Ephesus. Respond to the following statement by John Stott. How should our evangelistic/missionary methods be affected by what we have learned about Paul? How are you personally challenged by Paul's example?

When we contrast much contemporary evangelism with Paul's, its shallowness is immediately shown up. Our evangelism tends to be too ecclesiastical (inviting people to church), whereas Paul also took the gospel out into the secular world; too emotional (appeals for decision without an adequate basis of understanding), whereas Paul taught, reasoned and tried to persuade; and too superficial (making brief encounters and expecting quick results), whereas Paul stayed in Corinth and Ephesus for five years, faithfully sowing gospel seed and in due time reaping a harvest. (Stott, p. 314)

Study 18: From Ephesus to Jerusalem Acts 20:1-21:26

We learned in 19:21 that Paul had his eyes set on going to Rome. We know from his letter to the Romans (Romans 15:23-24) that he eventually desires to go to Spain and establish churches there. He feels his work in Asia Minor is finished (. . .*there is no more place for me to work in these regions. . .*). But Paul must first travel to Jerusalem to give a report to James and the Jerusalem church regarding *what God had done among the Gentiles. . .* (21:19) and to deliver the monetary gifts he has collected for the impoverished believers in the area.

Read these verses. Travel with Paul as he draws to a close this era of his life. What do you think he was feeling as he made his way to Jerusalem?¹ What questions do you have of these verses? What speaks to you personally?

Notes:

20:7-12 When Paul ministers in Troas we glean a picture of what worship was like for the early church. Notice what stands out. Worship was on the first day of the week (Sunday)². Worship centered around the word preached (Paul's sermon that was a bit too long for Eutychus) and the breaking of bread, which is, communion. "What builds up the church more than anything else is the ministry of God's word as it comes to us through Scripture and Sacrament, audibly and visibly, in declaration and drama." (Stott, p. 321).

Does the corporate worship of Santa Barbara Community Church follow this pattern?

Do you take seriously your role in corporate worship? What does this mean for you? Do you pray for SBCC's worship?

¹There seems to be a desire on Luke's part to draw out the similarities of Paul's life with the life of Jesus. Both Paul and Jesus 1. travel to Jerusalem with other disciples, 2. are opposed by fellow Jews who plot against their lives, 3. realize that they are going to suffer in Jerusalem, 4. declare their willingness to suffer and refuse to take another way, 5. submit to the will of God rather than their own wills. John Stott notes, *Even if some of these details are not to be pressed, Luke surely intends his readers to envisage Paul as following in his Master's footsteps when he 'steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem.'* (Stott, p. 315)

²This is the earliest reference to *Sunday* worship of Christians. Before this time we have seen the church at worship either daily or on the Sabbath in the Synagogue or the Temple.

Do you prepare to share the word with the church? Do you see your presence in the church as an act of worship? Do you attempt to give God the adoration that is His due?

What could we do to enhance our worship together? Are we on target or should we make some changes?

20:13-38 This is one of the more touching portions of the New Testament. Those who think Paul was a “cold hearted” and sometimes harsh Christian missionary should read this section of Acts. Here Paul travels to Miletus and gathers the elders of the church of Ephesus to say goodbye. Interestingly, this is the only speech in Acts that is made to other believers. Accordingly the tone of Paul’s words are warm and endearing.¹

What do you learn about Paul and his relationship with the church of Ephesus from these verses? Is your experience of church life similar to Paul’s with regard to intimacy?

20:29 Paul sees the church as a flock of sheep threatened by hungry wolves. The metaphor of wolves refers not to persecution from the world but to false teachers from within (*Even from your own number*) who would distort the gospel. Paul calls the pastors of the church to be protective shepherds. Notice that the shepherds are supposed to guard themselves and then protect the flock. Correct doctrine is highly important!

20:32 Paul commits the Ephesian elders *to the word of his grace*. The phrase is a synonym for the gospel, that is, the message that life is found in Jesus the Messiah. Look at this verse. What is the *word of his grace* able to accomplish in our lives? Compare this verse with the words of Jesus to Paul in Acts 26:16-18. This is a succinct and marvelous description of what it means to become a Christian. On a practical level how has this *word of grace* shaped your life?

¹Notice in this section how the leadership of the church of Ephesus is referred to as ‘elders’ (v. 17), ‘pastors’ (v. 28) and ‘overseers’ (v. 28). It is obvious that all three terms refer to the same people. The term pastor is the most general and refers to shepherding the sheep of the flock. ‘Elder’ is a term borrowed from the Jewish synagogue while ‘overseer’ is a term borrowed from Greek forms of leadership (cf. Stott, p. 323). Stott points out, *There is no biblical warrant either for the one-man-band (a single pastor playing all the instruments of the orchestra himself) or for a hierarchical or pyramidal structure in the local church (a single pastor perched at the apex of the pyramid). It is better to think of them (pastors) as a team, some perhaps with the oversight of house-churches, but others with specialist ministries according to their gifts, and all sharing the pastoral care of Christ’s flock. We need today to recover this concept of a pastoral team in the church.*

FROM EPHESUS TO JERUSALEM

Chapter 21:1-17 tells the story of Paul's journey to Jerusalem. It presents to the reader a problem with regard to the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. In 20:22-23 Paul states that he is going to Jerusalem *compelled by the Spirit*. When Paul lands in Tyre in 21:3 he is warned *through the Spirit* that he should *not go on to Jerusalem*. Then Paul receives another warning in 21:11.

Kistemaker explains:

Is there a contradiction between the revelations Paul received from the Holy Spirit and those which the believers in Tyre obtained? No, not at all. The Christians in Tyre heard the Holy Spirit say that Paul would meet adversities, but they did not understand the purpose of Paul's future suffering. Conversely, Paul understood the warnings as confirmation that "he must suffer for [the Lord's] name" (9:16). He considered these divine revelations to be symbols of God's grace designed to prepare him for the immediate future. (Kistemaker, p. 745)

Verses 17-27 show the harmony of Paul's ministry with the ministry of the Jerusalem church. Luke points out that when Paul arrived in Jerusalem he was *received warmly*.

Notice the challenge James and the Jerusalem church makes to Paul (vss. 20 ff.). They want Paul to prove that he is not against the law of Moses by taking a Jewish vow of purification.¹ This proved to be wise counsel because when the vow was almost fulfilled Paul is charged with teaching *all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place (the temple)*.

¹It is certain that in Jerusalem, of all places, he would live as a practising Jew, if only out of consistency with his declared policy, to "give no offence to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God" and to "try to please all men in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage but that of the many, that they may be saved" (I Corinthians 10:32 f.). There were few "Greeks" in Jerusalem, but both the Jews and the church of God in that city would be scandalized if he failed to observe the "customs". (Bruce, Apostle, p. 347)

Study 19: Paul Under Arrest! Acts 21:27-26:32

In this study we are going to enjoy Luke's story-telling abilities. Luke takes his time with this period of Paul's life. His report makes for great and exciting reading. John Stott explains:

... Luke depicts the reaction to the gospel of two communities - of the Jews who were increasingly hostile to it, and of the Romans who were consistently friendly to it. The two themes of Jewish opposition and Roman justice are interwoven in Luke's narrative, with the Christian apostle caught between them, the victim of the one and the beneficiary of the other. (Stott, p. 336)

Look for these two themes as you read through this section of Acts.

Paul arrives in Jerusalem a free man. He leaves for Rome a few years later a prisoner. These chapters tell the story of Paul's arrest, his five defenses (before the people, the Sanhedrin, Felix, Festus and King Herod Agrippa II) and his departure for Rome.

Keep a pencil in hand as you read. Make a list of those verses that speak directly to you. There are numerous presentations of the gospel in these chapters. What excites you? What is confusing? Share these things with your homegroup. Enjoy the text.

Notes and questions for discussion:

21:28-29 What are the two charges made against Paul?

How would you summarize Paul's defense? Does he claim to have given up his Judaism?

22:22 Notice the culmination of Paul's defense to the mob in Jerusalem. When they hear that Paul has been sent to the Gentiles they are outraged and want to kill him. The reaction shows the deep hatred of Jews for Gentiles. It also points to the radical nature of Paul's message. Jews allowed Gentiles to become converts to Judaism

PAUL UNDER ARREST!

but Paul was teaching Gentiles that they could know God without becoming Jewish. This was blasphemy in their minds.

23:1-3 Ananias the high priest did not enjoy a good reputation. He was known for stealing tithes intended for the regular priesthood, violence, an opulent lifestyle and his allegiance to Rome. Paul has a harsh reply to Ananias' order to strike Paul on the mouth. To call Ananias a *whitewashed wall* was to call him, metaphorically, a hypocrite.

23:6 ff. Paul is clever in his defense. He turns the inquisitors on each other by bring up the issue of the resurrection. Again the Romans come to Paul's rescue.

23:26 Felix was the governor of Judea, a Roman province. He, we will see, was a corrupt man who wanted to make some money from Paul's predicament. Felix delays Paul's trial for two years hoping for a bribe. Before this happens he is replaced by Festus.

24:14-16 are fascinating verses! Note how **little** has changed in Paul since his conversion. Look for four areas of agreement between Paul and his accusers. When Paul became a follower of Jesus his basic belief system was left intact. What **has** changed for Paul with regard to his conversion?

When you became a Christian what changed? Did your basic world-view remain unchanged? Did your lifestyle change a great deal?

25:8 Note Paul's defense to Festus. He has been loyal both as a Roman citizen and as a Jew.

26:24-29 Here we see Paul at his best! Though he is on trial he does not shrink back from his accusers. When charged with insanity he responds that his thinking is *true and reasonable*. Then he proceeds to call the king to faith in Jesus as Messiah. The next stop is Rome.

Study 20: From Jerusalem to Rome Acts 27-28

Luke is a masterful story teller. If we think of both volumes of Luke's work, the Gospel and Acts, we think of a journey from Galilee to Jerusalem and then to Rome. One scholar, Floyd Filson¹, calls this the "journey motif" of Luke. Almost half of Luke's gospel concerns Jesus' journey from Galilee to Jerusalem and about one-third of Acts describes Paul's long journey to Rome (19:21-28:31).

These last two chapters provide exciting reading. Luke lets his readers in on the eventual outcome of Paul's travels in 23:11. Here Jesus assures Paul during the beginning of his imprisonment, *Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.* Thus Paul is assured of fulfilling one of his remaining life goals and the reader of Acts is assured of the eventual outcome of Paul's journey to Rome. Nevertheless, Luke's vivid description of the passage to Rome is harrowing and tense.

Read these chapters and enter into the conclusion of Luke's story. Look for a map that you can follow in the back of your Bible.

Notes and Questions:

27:1 Haenchen calculates that Paul was the most experienced traveller on the ship. He estimates that Paul had sailed roughly 3500 miles by sea before this voyage. (Haenchen, p. 716). We are not told where the ship embarked but Caesarea is most likely.

Who are Paul's travelling companions? (Hint, there are at least two.)

28:17 ff. When Paul arrives in Rome his tactics are politically sound. He contacts *the leaders of the Jews* to see what they know of his case and what their attitude is toward him. He realizes that their influence could, if desired, negatively affect the outcome of his trial before Caesar. Paul's query turns into evangelism. *From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.*

28:30-31 Luke abruptly ends his story here. He leaves Paul in his rented house preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus (wouldn't you like to have stopped by for an evening Bible study??). We are unsure if Paul stood trial (though we may have a hint in 23:11) or if he was released and made his trip to Spain. Tradition affirms that Paul was released and rearrested before his execution in Rome in 64 A.D.

Longenecker explains the abrupt ending of Acts. "In seeming to leave his book unfinished, he was implying that the apostolic proclamation of the gospel in the

¹from an essay in *Apostolic History and the Gospel: Biblical and Historical Essays* (1970) p. 75.

first century began a story that will continue until the consummation of the kingdom in Christ (Acts 1:11).” (Longenecker, p. 573)

Before reading the comment below consider what Luke is trying to teach his readers in these two chapters. What lesson or lessons do you learn from these chapters?

Now consider the comments of John Stott:

What, then is the major lesson we are intended to learn from Acts 27 and 28? It concerns the providence of God, who ‘works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will’,¹ declares that ‘no wisdom, no insight, no plan . . . can succeed against the Lord’,² and engineers even evil ‘for the good of those who love him’.³ This providential activity of God is seen in these chapters in two complementary ways, first in bringing Paul to Rome, his desired goal, and secondly in bringing him there as a prisoner, his undesired condition. It was an unexpected combination of circumstances . . . Luke intends us to marvel with him over the safe conduct of Paul to Rome. . . . Circumstance after circumstance seemed calculated to make this impossible. (Stott, p. 402)

Paul ends up in Rome as a prisoner. He probably wondered about his condition. After all, God had called him to Spain hadn’t he? Yet, out of Paul’s Roman imprisonment came four “prison letters”, three of which are central to Paul’s contribution to the New Testament (Colossians, Ephesians and Philippians).⁴ These letters set forth the great Pauline doctrines of Christ (Colossians and Philippians), and of the church (Ephesians). God was using Paul for church ministry that would endure for two thousand years.

Can you think of a period of your life that you interpreted as a time of adversity and later came to see as a time that God was using you in a way that you did not understand?

Luke sees God as having sovereign control over the life of Paul. Look at the verses on providence listed in the footnotes above. Are you confident in God’s providence in your life? How have you sensed this in your past?

¹Ephesians 1:11.

²Proverbs 21:30; see also Isaiah 8:10; 54:17.

³Romans 8:28; see also Genesis 50:20.

⁴Paul also wrote Philemon during his Roman imprisonment.

EXPANSION AND PERSECUTION

Think back over the past twenty weeks of study in Acts. What value has this study had in your own Christian life? Would you recommend Acts to a Christian who has gone 'flat' in her or his Christian pilgrimage? Why?

Think of the characters of Acts (Stephen, John, Peter, Paul, Barnabas, Silas, Luke, Lydia, Priscilla, Aquilla, etc.). If you were one of the characters in Acts who would you be? Who would you like to be?