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OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

ACTS 1–14

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CHAPTER 1

DOCTOR LUKE AND HIS TWO-VOLUME WORK

“Luke the beloved physician greets you.” That is what the apostle Paul calls his faithful coworker in Colossians 4:14. He mentions him along with the non-Jewish believers. From this we infer that originally Luke was a Gentile who had been converted from idols to the living and true God, and was expecting his Son Jesus Christ from heaven.

Luke discloses very little about himself. In fact, he does not even mention his own name anywhere in his books. Eusebius reports in his *Church History* (c. 325) that the evangelist came from Antioch in Syria, the earliest center of the Gentile-Christian church, and that he not only accompanied Paul frequently, but enjoyed contact with the other apostles as well. As a physician he belonged to the upper class. We find evidence of that in his enormous command of language. According to an ancient report, he was unmarried and came to live eighty-four years. But the tradition is not unanimous on this point.

This Christian doctor became of inestimable value for the entire New Testament church. For according to an ancient, unanimous tradition, thanks to him, through the agency of the Holy Spirit, we have the Gospel according to Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. With these books, Luke is the only Gentile writer among the authors of the New Testament. Stated more strongly: Luke provided us in these books with the greatest portion of the New Testament. When we compare the total number of pages of Paul’s letters with the number of pages filled by the third Gospel and Acts, then together the work of Doctor Luke appears more extensive than that of the apostle Paul, and contains approximately one-fourth of the New Testament.

Both friends worked alongside each other for years. That is evident from the use of the first person plural with which Luke narrates many events in Acts. What a blessing it must have been for the apostle to have a doctor alongside him during his difficult and often dangerous journeys (2 Cor. 11:23–27)! They were together as well when, on Paul’s journey to Rome, they suffered shipwreck. And when years later, the apostle was abandoned by many people and was awaiting execution, only Luke remained with him (2 Tim. 4:11). No, none of Paul’s coworkers participated to such a large extent in his struggle for the Kingdom of God and for bearing the name of our Lord Jesus Christ as did this converted physician.

1. The Gospel according to Luke and the book of Acts: Two volumes of a single grand work about Jesus Christ

Acts is the continuation of the Gospel according to Luke. Together they comprise volume 1 and volume 2 of a single grand work. Luke tells us this immediately in Acts 1:1: “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with . . .” This apparently referred to his Gospel, for the introduction of that book indicates the same person as recipient (Luke 1:3). Acts must have been the second book that he wrote for Theophilus. Each of these volumes describes a period of about thirty-three years.

Dedicated to Theophilus

Given the title with which Luke addresses him—Your Excellency—Theophilus must have been a man of importance. He was probably a highly placed Roman government official. For the

governors Felix and Festus were addressed with the same title (Acts 23:16; 24:3; 26:25). In view of his Greco-Roman name, Theophilus was of Gentile ancestry, like Luke himself.

With good reason, people have expressed the suspicion that he lived in Rome and belonged to the God-fearers. They were Gentiles, like Cornelius and Lydia, who sympathized with the Jewish religion and attended the services on Saturday at the synagogue. These God-fearers must be distinguished from proselytes, who through circumcision were included in God's covenant and thereby became Jews with full rights. For a high Roman official like Theophilus, this was practically impossible. As a God-fearer, he would remain a Gentile and thus an outsider.

He was already somewhat familiar with Jesus' teaching and work, but apparently he wanted to know more. To assist him in that, Luke had first carefully investigated everything that had occurred with Jesus, and then wrote it down in an orderly two-volume history book. His purpose was that His Excellency would thereby see how *reliable* the reports were that people had told him about Jesus (Luke 1:3–4).

Though it is possible that the evangelists had yet another subordinate purpose in mind as well. For publishing books was a very expensive undertaking until the invention of printing. For that reason, authors dedicated their works to a well-to-do person, who was ready to support the distribution of the work by, for example, paying for the first copies. Regardless, when he wrote his books, Luke would have had more readers in view than just Theophilus. Luke wrote both of his books, as it were, beyond Theophilus to all believers, especially to those from among the Gentiles, like us who are Christians today from Gentile ancestry.

Acts—but whose?

Based on the title, Acts of *the Apostles*, people might think that this Bible book gives us a report of their work. On further inspection, however, this appears to be the case only partially.

For starters, after the opening pages, we hear nothing more about most of the apostles. Until Acts 15, Peter especially stands in the foreground, but after that point, he disappears entirely from the stage. John and James appear only briefly. By contrast, Luke devotes extensive attention to Stephen and Philip—though they were not apostles. After Acts 15, he confines his attention almost exclusively to the apostleship of Paul.

He describes this in such a way, however, that Paul's person never occupies center stage. Naturally, we do learn a number of things from Paul's epistles, but Luke does not inform us of these personal details. At the closing of Acts, the apostle is sitting in prison. But how does Luke end his book? Without devoting one word to the outcome of Paul's trial. Did he appear before Nero? Did he eventually travel to Spain, as he intended, according to Romans 15:12? And who proclaimed the gospel in the East and in Egypt? To all of these questions Luke provides no answer. For the simple reason that he was describing more than simply the Acts of *apostles*!

Should we then understand this book to narrate the Acts of the Holy Spirit? Does Luke want to show us especially his work and power in the labor of the apostles, in the proclamation of the gospel and the establishment of the Christian church? No, Luke does not place the work of the Holy Spirit in the foreground in such an independent manner.

The continued Acts of Jesus Christ

Luke supplies us with the proper view of Acts in the very first sentence of this book. We have already inferred that his Gospel and the book of Acts together constitute one large work. And

according to Luke, what was the chief content of his Gospel? He summarized that in his first sentence this way: “In my *first* book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up”

With this, he simultaneously gives us the key to the book of Acts. The central character in volume 1 was *the Lord Jesus*. And the main subject was what he did and taught before his ascension. The conclusion is obvious that in volume 2 *the Lord Jesus* is again the central character. And the main subject of volume 2 is what he continued doing and teaching after his ascension.

Even though he enlisted his apostles for this activity far more than he had before his ascension. At that point they were called his disciples. Now, however, their training is finished and they go forth as his apostles or ambassadors. He has given them authority to function in his name. From this time forward, he will speak and act through them.

The title “Acts of the Apostles” is certainly correct, but not complete. We would like to supplement it with “The continuing acts of the ascended Jesus, now through his Spirit and apostles.”

2. The purpose of Luke’s two-volume work: Proclaiming and defending the reliability of Jesus’ redemptive work

If Theophilus did indeed belong to the God-fearers, the fact would not have escaped him that “the sect” of Jesus was experiencing opposition from three sides: from unbelieving Jews, from emerging Gnosticism that was likely of Jewish origin, and from Judaizing Christians. As an intimate coworker of Paul, Luke naturally saw firsthand what a difficult struggle the apostle waged against these opponents.

Reliable report and defense

In this situation, Luke wrote his two-volume work. According to the introduction to his Gospel—which serves as the introduction to Acts as well—he wrote both books with the intention of showing Theophilus the *reliability* of what he had already heard about Jesus (Luke 1:4). For His Excellency not only needed further instruction, but on account of the strong opposition toward the gospel, he also had to be convinced of its incontrovertible factuality.

For that purpose, Luke himself accurately investigated everything and consulted various eyewitnesses. Which well-known figures, who appeared in the Gospel and Acts, could have supplied him with insights? Perhaps Jesus’ mother was still living, and perhaps he had taken note of various details as she told them. Further, he could have spoken with John Mark and his mother, with Philip the evangelist, with the apostles Peter and John, and with James, the brother of the Lord Jesus. And with so many others.

In this way, both of Luke’s writings provide Theophilus, and with him, all Gentile believers, an *ordered* account of Jesus’ words and deed in the first place. In the second place, they supply a powerful *apologia* or defense with which Luke is defending the truth regarding our Lord Jesus Christ over against every kind of objection.

Defense against Jewish objection

From Jesus’ earliest appearance, his gospel encountered fierce objection from unbelieving *Jews*.

We constantly encounter this theme in both of Luke's books, from the beginning (Luke 4:14–30) to the end (Acts 28:17–29). Incited by their leaders, the majority of Israel rejected Jesus as Messiah. His words were made suspect. His innumerable miracles and signs were ignored. His supremacy over evil spirits was termed devil's work. His sacrifice on the cross was despised, and even his resurrection was denied despite their knowing better.

Because of all of this, a lawsuit had raised between God and the Jewish people, involving the legitimacy of Jesus' messiahship. The Holy Spirit functioned in this lawsuit as the Public Prosecutor. In the book of Acts, this trial constitutes one of the main themes. In response to the Jewish lies about Jesus, Luke proclaims in both of his books the complete reliability of his messiahship and he calls upon Theophilus to accept this in faith. The Gentile Christians who had accepted Jesus as Savior of the world had not made a mistake! Luke could assure Theophilus of this for his comfort!

As a high Roman official, His Excellency also had to know that the gospel of Jesus Christ did not breed insurrectionists. This is what the Jews—the earliest persecutors of Christians—had tried to tell the Roman authorities. Just as they had pushed Jesus forward before Pilate as a revolutionary. But wherever the arrival of the gospel was accompanied by incidents, these were caused not by Christians but by Jewish punks (cf. Acts 25:8).

Luke showed with the facts that Christians were loyal citizens. According to him, those confessing the Messiah were the true Israel. For that reason, it was unrighteous for the Jews to incite the Roman authorities to exclude Christians from the right to freedom of religion, which Rome had granted to the Jews.

Defense against Gnostic objection

In addition, during the lifetime of the apostles the gospel was threatened fatally by Gnosticism. This was a conglomerate of errors that included undermining the historical factuality of the gospel. The Gnostics were hardly interested in the literal meaning of Scripture. According to them, you needed to get behind the literal meaning of Scripture to reach its "deeper" meaning. For Scripture deals not with what happened, but with what was intended! Scripture is not interested in the facts, but in the acts. This is a notion that continues to be defended even in our day.

In this way, the faith of some people in Paul's day had been shaken by Hymenaeus and Philetus, two Gnostics whom Luke would surely have known personally. They argued that you did not need to understand the resurrection literally, but as an event within you (2 Tim. 2:16–18). Others declared that the entire incarnation of God's Son was not real, and they were denounced as antichrists by the apostle John in his epistles (1 John 2:22; 4:2–3; 2 John 7).

Paul called Gnosticism a "spreading gangrene" (2 Tim. 2:17), "teachings of demons" and "irreverent babble" (1 Tim. 4:1; 6:20). Naturally, Luke had seen up close Paul's wrestling with this dangerous enemy of the gospel.

Over against the Gnostic *mythologizing*, Luke asserts the historical reliability of the joyful message. In the introduction, he presents his work as a description of a real event, as a thoroughly historical account of the facts, which relied upon his own careful investigation and the testimony of eyewitnesses (Luke 1:1–3). No wonder that he uses numerous times—far more frequently than the other evangelists—the phrase "and it happened."

He was so much writing a book as he was crafting a *report* about real events. By itself, this strong emphasis on historicity characterizes his work implicitly as an anti-Gnostic, believable

Gospel! For what value does the “deeper message” of “biblical stories” have for a person who must soon die and appear before God, if it lacks the power of reality?

Defense against Judaizing objection

Finally, Theophilus could also have been acquainted with the objection directed against the gospel by Judaizing Christians. They argued that believing in the Lord Jesus was insufficient for Gentiles. If Theophilus wanted to be saved by Jesus, then according to these Christians, he had to live like a Jew by observing the Law of Moses. This was something that was practically impossible for a highly placed Roman.

According to the Judaizers, the requirement was to believe in Jesus + observe the Law. In subsequent church history, this grew to believe in Jesus + this + that. This was an error that twisted Jesus’ mild yoke (Matt. 11:30) into a heavy burden, which has brought untold misery to Christianity.

In response to the un-evangelical, Judaizing “*addition-gospel*” (Jesus + observing the Jewish law), Luke defended the reliability and absolute sufficiency of Jesus’ redemptive work. In this as well, he demonstrated himself to be the faithful cobelligerent of the apostle Paul, who experienced the fiercest opposition from these Judaizing brothers. In fact, it was at their instigation that Peter and Paul were put to death in AD 64 in Rome.

In Acts 10, 11, and 15, Luke would devote extensive attention to the condemnation of the Judaizers. For Theophilus and other Gentiles were not supposed to think that in order to believe in Jesus, one had to become a law-abiding Jew first.

Prelude to subsequent church history

The passing of time has taught us that the apostolic era was the “rehearsal” for all of subsequent church history. Judaizing barriers to faith and Gnostic denial of the biblical facts of redemption have afflicted the proclamation of the gospel in every era. (Regarding the disastrous consequences of Judaizing, see the excursus on Judaizing in the commentary on Numbers.)

For that reason, we take in hand with all the more gratitude Luke’s history and *apologia*, in order to be established in the reliability of the apostolic doctrine concerning Jesus’ real activities for the salvation of Jew and Gentile, over against contemporary manifestations of these arch-enemies of God’s church.

CHAPTER 2

ACTS 1:1–12: JESUS' FINAL INSTRUCTIONS AND ASCENSION

Frequently, the books of the Bible link together seamlessly. The one book begins with the same subject with which its predecessor ended. This phenomenon occurs with Genesis through Kings, with Chronicles and Ezra, and now again in the way that Acts 1 connects with Luke 24.

The evangelist did not supply a fresh preface to Acts. With Luke 1:1–4 he introduced both of his books. He does begin this second one with a connective clause with which he summarizes the first book concisely. This involved “all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up” (1:1–2). So the beginning of Acts ties in closely to the ending of the Gospel of Luke. Both deal with Jesus' final hours on earth.

1. The connecting link: Acts 1:1–5

We have already observed, in verses 1–2, that Luke provides a concise summary of his Gospel.

1 This pertained to “all” that Jesus had done and taught: proclaim the Kingdom of God, conquer death and the devil, atone for our sins through his death on the cross, and thereby obtain righteousness, holiness, and eternal glory for us. God the Father had crowned this work and sealed it by raising his Son from the dead.

2 This first volume of his narrative concludes with the day when Jesus was received by God into heaven. For at that point, Jesus' work entered into an entirely new phase. Now it had advanced to the point that he could continue it from heaven.

For that purpose, he had previously selected twelve apostles or ambassadors. He had viewed this as an extremely important matter, for they would have to function as his fully authorized ambassadors. Whoever would hear them would be hearing him, and whoever would read their letters would be reading his letters (cf. 1 Thess. 2:13). They would also have to proclaim the gospel to all peoples (Luke 24:47). Therefore, he had not appointed them as apostles with the help of the Holy Spirit—with whom he had been filled from the time of his own baptism (Luke 3:22; 4:1)—until he had first spent an entire night in prayer (Luke 6:12).

Jesus was heard and seen for another forty days

3 For this great task, he had sufficiently instructed his emissaries before his ascension. The core of their message would have to be: God is so satisfied with Jesus' mediatorial work that he has raised him from the dead and has placed him at his right hand (1 Cor. 15:1–4, 14–19; Phil. 2:5–11; Heb. 1:3).

For those were the facts: the Man who was born to a young Jewish mother, had proclaimed the Kingdom of God throughout the Jewish land, and as prognostic signs of that Kingdom had performed great deeds and was ultimately crucified—that Man arose from his grave after three days.

Jews might deny these facts and Gnostics might empty them of meaning, but Jesus' apostles could defend the truth of these facts. For he had appeared to them after his resurrection. For forty days, they had repeatedly seen the Risen One with their own eyes and heard him with their own ears. And absolutely not as a ghostly phantasm. They had been permitted to touch him, and

recline with him for meals, and watch him eat fish (Luke 24:36–42; Acts 10:41; cf. John 20:27). One can hardly conceive of testimony that is more anti-Gnostic.

During those six weeks, they had learned so much from him about the Kingdom of God. In this way, these weeks became unforgettable for the apostles. Before then, they had only partially understood and accepted the Scriptures of the Old Testament (Luke 24:11–25). But now he opened up their understanding and for the first time the light of Scripture was ignited for them! (Luke 24:44–47).

This made their entire function transparently clear for them. As the Lamb of God, Jesus had taken away the sin of the world. Exactly and entirely as the law of Moses had required of him, and as John the Baptizer had proclaimed (John 1:29). Only in this way could God's royal dominion on earth be restored. Israel's entire covenant history, the royal psalms, God's promises for David's house, the prophecies about the suffering and glorification of the Servant of the Lord—all of this now lay as an open book before them. Much of what they teach us they themselves had received during these final weeks with Jesus.

Although not everything. Just as he had said before his suffering and death, so too now, he left some things for the Holy Spirit to teach: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come" (John 16:12–13).

The baptism with the Holy Spirit announced

4 This apostolic task, however, far surpassed human strength. For that task, they had to be equipped with power from above (Luke 24:49). When Jesus was once reclining with them at a meal, he pressed upon their hearts that they should not leave Jerusalem. For they had come from Galilee and there he had appeared to them (Matt. 28; John 21), and there he had also performed most of his work, but he would continue his activity from Jerusalem, for there is where he wanted to establish his first church.

Given that this was the city that had crucified him, they would have to first summon people to repentance and proclaim to them that they could receive forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name (Luke 24:47). And from the temple city, the gospel would later have to be extended further. Just as the Scripture had foretold: "For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Isa. 2:3; cf. Luke 24:47).

For that purpose, within a short time an ancient promise would be fulfilled. They knew that promise from the books of the prophets: God would in due time pour out his Spirit upon all people (Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Ezek. 36:26–27; Joel 2:28–29; Zech. 12:10). But during the evening before he died, Jesus had applied that universal promise to them in particular (John 14–16).

As his emissaries, they faced an enormous mandate: to proclaim the gospel throughout the entire world! To fulfill Holy Scripture together with others! In connection with that, however, they would receive powerful assistance from the Holy Spirit (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:5–15). In particular, he would go before them as the Spirit of (perspicuity of the) Truth (= Scripture). He would also bring to their remembrance everything that Jesus had said, for this had to be communicated accurately (John 14:26).

5 They still remembered what John the Baptizer had proclaimed: "I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Luke 3:16). Although at that point the Spirit already rested somewhat upon the apostles (Luke

24:45; John 20:22), at this time he would come upon them even more powerfully. Indeed, he would come upon them so abundantly that John had called it a *baptism* or *submersion* in the Spirit. Jesus adopted this powerful expression from him.

He did not say, however, that he himself would administer that baptism, though John the Baptizer had proclaimed that truthfully. Here as the future administrator of the Spirit-baptism, Jesus was humbly standing behind God the Father. For ultimately the pouring out of the Holy Spirit was a gift and promise of the Father (John 14:26; 15:26; Acts 2:33). He had promised to Christ the divine assistance of the Holy Spirit for continuing his redemptive work on earth. And only after Jesus' exaltation and also at his request, the Father would fulfill this promise (cf. John 7:39; 14:16).

For their encouragement, he permitted his apostles to know that this baptism would occur in a few days—it would be in ten days.

2. Jesus give his apostles a worldwide mandate: Acts 1:6–8

In our preceding comments, we called Acts 1:1–5 the connecting link between the Gospel of Luke and his book of Acts. We could also, however, describe Acts 1:1–12 the same way. In these verses, Luke comes back more extensively to the matters he had mentioned at the close of his Gospel. With this introductory repetition, he simultaneously made a smooth transition to what followed in his second book.

Not a misplaced question (vv. 6–7)

6 The prophets had connected the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with the dawning of the Messianic time of salvation (Isa. 32:15; 44:1–5; Joel 2:28; Zech. 12:10). That would entail the restoration of *the kingship of David* as well (Isa. 9:6; 55:3–4; Jer. 23:5; 33:15–22; Ezek. 34:23–24; Amos 9:11), and *Israel* would be exalted by means of many Gentiles turning to the God of Jacob (Isa. 2:1–5, among others).

On the basis of these prophecies, godly people like Zechariah and Simeon were expecting “the consolation of *Israel*” by “the house of *David*” (Luke 1:69; 2:25). According to the angel Gabriel, the Messiah would receive “the *throne* of his father David” and rule as *King* over the *house of Jacob* forever (Luke 1:32–33). And the aged Simeon talked about “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people *Israel*” (Luke 2:25, 32; cf. 1:68–75).

(With this he was not expecting a separate kingdom of Israel, before or after the “thousand-year kingdom,” but great honor for [the believing segment of] Israel by means of the engrafting of Gentiles as fellow citizens [Eph. 2:19]. And for almost two thousand years now, the “Israel of God” [Gal. 6:16] is “exalted” in that millions of “Gentiles,” among them many believing Europeans and Americans, bow before *Israel's* God and King.)

The apostles had heard from John the Baptizer that the kingdom was *near*. Immediately after him, the Messiah would come to baptize with the Holy Spirit. And after they had now received forty days of supplementary instruction from him about the coming of God's Kingdom and of God's Spirit, they now discerned from the Messiah himself that the baptism with the Spirit would occur in Jerusalem *within a few days*.

Was it therefore not logical that they would ask him: If, as you have said, you will pour out the Spirit within a short time, are you then also restoring *in this time* on behalf of (fallen) Israel the kingdom (of David)? This question no longer proceeded from a longing for an independent

Jewish state, but from the complete fulfillment of the aforementioned prophecies about Israel. For the Lord had opened up their understanding, so that they now understood the Scriptures properly (Luke 24:45).

7 Nor did he reject their *expectations*, but merely their query about the *time* of the fulfillment. All the more proof that the apostles had been healed from their Jewish-political power-aspirations. “It is not for you to know,” he responded, “times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority” (v. 7). He has revealed that to no one. Even right before his death Jesus did not yet know the day and hour of his return (Matt. 24:36; cf. 1 Thess. 5:1–2; 2 Pet. 3:4–10).

For us, this is all the more reason to refrain humbly from all kinds of speculations about the course of the “last days,” which began with Pentecost! (cf. Acts 1:16–17; 1 Cor. 10:11).

You shall be my witnesses (v. 8b)

8 He did tell the apostles how they would be enlisted along with the coming of the kingdom: “You shall be my witnesses.” What did the Lord understand by this? For understanding the book of Acts, this is an important question, for this entire Bible book is in fact devoted to the extension of the apostolic witness.

Many Christians today think the word *witness* refers exclusively to someone who talks openly about his religious feelings and his relationship with God. But that is not what the Lord Jesus meant. In Scripture, the word *witness* has, as it does for us in the language of jurisprudence, a judicial or juridical meaning.

Among Israel, people understand a witness to refer to someone called upon in a *lawsuit* to confirm *the facts*. Whether to *defend* someone against his opponents (as witness for the defense, or witness *à décharge*) or to *accuse* someone (witness *à charge*, a task that for us falls to the prosecution). For either of these, he was not supposed to share his feelings, of course, but testify to what he had *heard* and *seen*. In this way, the apostles would have to be eye- and ear-witnesses of Jesus Christ. They had to go everywhere proclaiming what they had *heard* and *seen* of his words and deeds (Acts 4:20; 1 John 1:1–3).

Witnesses in God’s lawsuit against Israel

Their witness, however, would not consist of a universal religious and timeless proclamation of God’s love for poor sinners. On the contrary, it would be intimately connected to what Jesus had prophesied right before the day of his death about Israel’s impending future (Matt. 24–25; Luke 21:5–38). The interpretation of this prophecy determines the interpretation of the book of Acts.

For the history of the later prophets was repeated in the days of the apostles! Just as earlier Jesus had done repeatedly, so now the Lord once again was standing at the threshold of entering a *covenant lawsuit* against Israel. John the Baptizer had already announced: God’s covenantal wrath was hanging above Israel like a dark storm cloud (Luke 3:7, 16–17). And now Israel had recently filled up the measure of her persecution of the prophets by crucifying her Messiah. In his Gospel, Luke had already reported extensively what this coming judgment would entail according to Jesus: the destruction of city and temple (Luke 21:5–36). The contemporaries of the apostles would experience that (Matt. 24:34).

But before it got that far, God first wanted to allow an interim of grace, of almost forty years. For in AD 33, the Lord was crucified, and only in AD 70 did Rome besiege Jerusalem. This

would be a unique period in the history of Israel. During that period, God would put his ultimatum: What do you want? Believe in Messiah Jesus and be saved from the coming judgment? Or harden your hearts and be put outside the Kingdom? (cf. Matt. 21:43; Acts 3:23).

In this covenant lawsuit between God and Israel about the legitimacy of Jesus' Messiahship, the apostles received a high calling. They would have to function as witnesses, both for the defense and for the prosecution. They would have to *defend* Jesus by testifying that God had raised him from the dead and taken him up to heaven. But they would have to *accuse* Israel on account of her rejection of the Messiah. Even though in that context they were permitted to proclaim the forgiveness of sins to every Jew who would repent of this great evil (cf. John 16:9–11; Acts 5:31–32; 10:39–43).

The book of Acts is filled with this *lawsuit* between God and Israel. So people should not view it as a non-covenantal “missionary book,” but we should read it just like all the other books of the Bible: as a redemptive-historically dated and time-related book-of-the-covenant.

From Jerusalem unto the furthest regions of the world (v. 8c)

The apostles would have to give this testimony for the prosecution and for the defense “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

They would have to begin in *Jerusalem*, the temple city of the Old Covenant, where their Master had been crucified. Despite its bloodguilt, they had to herald God's grace-interim and establish the mother church of the New Covenant specifically there. In this way the prophecy would be fulfilled: “For out of Zion shall go the law [into the world], and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Isa. 2:3).

Next, they would have to testify of Jesus' words and deeds in *Judea*, where he had encountered just as much hostility. And in *Samaria* (viewed here together with Judea as a unit), around which many Jews preferred to travel with a wide berth (John 4:9). And in the Jewish Diaspora, that extended during that time to the *furthest regions of the (Roman) world*. Indeed, they would have to testify of the facts of salvation among the Gentiles throughout all the earth. With this, the Lord was putting his finger on two of God's promises in Scripture that pertained especially to the Messiah:

(a) “It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach *to the end of the earth*” (Isa. 49:6; cf. Acts 13:46–49).

(b) “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and *the ends of the earth* your possession” (Ps. 2:8).

Recall how the Lord had joyfully welcomed the first fruits of believers from among the Gentiles (Matt. 8:10–11; 15:21–28; John 4:35–38). When Paul arrived in Rome, the capital city of the Roman world empire, about twenty-five years or so after Jesus' death and resurrection, there were Christians there already (Acts 28:5). From that locale, excellent connections existed with every corner of the then-known world, so that the gospel would be able to be extended easily from this world center. Paul wanted to spread the gospel from Rome all the way to Spain (Rom. 15:23–24).

The structure of the book of Acts

Luke describes how the apostolic witness about Jesus spread along the route that he had

indicated in Acts 1:8. We can view this as the outline of the book. In Acts 1–7, we read how the apostles summoned Jerusalem to repentance. In Acts 8:1–25, we learn how their witness was spread across *Judea and Samaria*. And in Acts 8:26–28:31, we read how it was proclaimed via Syria, Cyprus, Turkey (Asia Minor), and Greece, ultimately coming to *Rome*, which explains why travelers could bring it with them to the furthest regions of the then-known world. When Luke reached that point in his report, he lays his pen down. The mandate of Acts 1:8 had been performed.

Even though this work was not done exclusively by the apostles. On the great Day of Pentecost, Peter spoke to a cosmopolitan audience. At the occasion of the feast, many Jews and proselytes from the entire world were present in Jerusalem (Acts 2:5–11). Those who at that point came to faith in Messiah through his preaching, undoubtedly took the joyful message with them to their second fatherland and there made it known in their surroundings. Who can say where throughout the world such believers had already established home churches before Paul’s “missionary journeys”? He wrote the epistle to the Romans to Christians whom he had never seen (Rom. 1:11; 15:22–24), let alone had brought to conversion. And before Paul was called to be an apostle to the Gentiles, the evangelist Philip had already baptized an Ethiopian official, who undoubtedly made it known in his African surroundings (Acts 8:26–40).

Luke is not describing the “Acts” of all the apostles, but of only some. In fact, in Acts 1–12 he devotes most of his attention to Peter and his testimony among the Jews, while in Acts 13–28 his attention is given to the apostle Paul and his preaching among the Gentiles. This division, however, is not drawn sharply, Peter baptized Cornelius and Paul preached everywhere he went, first in the Jewish synagogues. We should reject any sharp demarcations here.

Power from the Holy Spirit (v. 8a)

This gigantic task—testifying of Jesus to the furthest ends of the earth—would be impossible for the apostles to perform in their own strength. They were only simply Galileans, who had never attended a rabbinical school. Jerusalem residents heard immediately from Peter’s accent that he was from Galilee, the “backwoods” of that day (Matt. 26:73). Did those parochial people have to go testify of Jesus to the furthest ends of the world?

Yes, indeed, but for that task, the Lord Jesus promised them power from above. When the Holy Spirit “comes upon you” (that is how he described the baptism with the Holy Spirit in verse 5), he would grant them divine help for carrying out their great commission. Everything they had heard and seen of the Lord had happened once for all, and therefore it had to be proclaimed everywhere, but it also had to be established accurately for the church of all ages.

For this unique task the Holy Spirit would help them powerfully. He would bring to their remembrance all of Jesus’ instruction, and lead them to understand it better (John 14:26). He would also powerfully convict the (Jewish) “world” regarding its rejection of Messiah, and place Jesus’ innocence in the foreground (John 16:8–9). In this way, he would bear witness along with them (John 15:26–27) by granting them clarity in the Truth (John 16:13) and help them cross the threshold from the Old to the New Testament.

Today we possess this apostolic testimony in the New Testament. Even though non-apostles, like Mark and Luke, also made their contribution, ultimately all the books rely upon the unanimous testimony of the twelve apostles.

3. Jesus’ ascension: Acts 1:9–12

Jesus' ascension is the primary link between Luke's first and second books. He described it twice. At the end of his Gospel, as the conclusion and high point of all that Jesus had done and taught until then (Luke 24:50–53; cf. 9:51). And in Acts 1 as the beginning and basis of everything that he did and taught after that point.

Luke described the ascension itself with remarkable soberness. In Greek, he used only one word (*epērhē*). Our translations need three words: he “was lifted up.” No trace here of the fantasy so characteristic of the legendary stories about the “ascension” of gods and semi-gods who at that time were making the rounds among the Gentiles (cf. Acts 14:11–12). Luke limits himself strictly to the facts. He doesn't say a word about what happened at that moment within the witnesses. He considered that only what they *saw* and *heard* was important for his readers.

What the witnesses saw

9 After Jesus had given his final teaching and instructions, the Lord led his apostles out of the city to the mount of Olives near Bethany. When they arrived there, he raised his hands and blessed them. And while he was blessing them, he left them (Luke 24:50–51). Suddenly it seemed as if he was being lifted by a mighty, invisible hand. His feet left the ground and he began to ascend. Higher and higher above them. Full of surprise, they stared after him. Until a cloud moved beneath him and removed him from their sight. Jesus' ascension was really also a space trip.

What a difference, moreover, between his departure and his appearances after his resurrection! For the latter, he suddenly appeared and just as suddenly disappeared. But his ascension occurred gradually and slowly, and could be observed clearly by his apostles. In verses 9–11, Luke speaks *five times* about their eyes, their staring upward, and their looking toward heaven. Obviously he was interested at this point in establishing the *reliability* of the gospel (Luke 1:4).

This explains his emphatic mention that Jesus' ascension was *seen* by at least thirteen pairs of eyes. Matthias and Barsabbas were also present (1:22–23). Therefore, the historicity of this event is beyond all legitimate doubt. Luke's sober and biblically realistic report, supported by abundant eyewitness testimony, provided ancient and modern Gnosticism no point of contact whatsoever for rejecting Jesus' ascension as unhistorical mythology. Even unbelieving Jewish objections are refuted thereby. Theophilus did not need—nor do we—to doubt that Jesus was taken up to heaven really and physically.

Although this redemptive fact is of the greatest significance for the church, Luke does not develop that great importance. Of course, he knew very well what Paul taught about Jesus' present position in the church and in the cosmos. But he would discuss that later, when he made his report of the preaching of the apostles (Acts 2:29–36; 3:13–16; 5:30–32; 7:55–56; 9:4–6; 13:30–38; 17:31; 22:6–7, 17–18; 26:14–18). Here he was interested in placing in the foreground the historically ratified *fact* of Jesus' being taken up to heaven.

What the witnesses heard

10 The apostles did not observe Jesus' arrival in heaven, nor his being seated at the right hand of his Father. God dwells in “unapproachable light,” and no human being can see him (1 Tim. 6:16). Therefore Jesus did not enter heavenly glory in view of his apostles, but the divine

display of power (Eph. 1:20–21) occurred behind the cloud that had taken him from their sight. Though Jesus' arrival in heaven was indeed confirmed from them by God.

Just as God had done with Jesus' conception, birth, and resurrection, so now God sent angels in connection with Jesus' ascension, to explain what had just happened (cf. Luke 1:26–38; 2:9–14; 24:4–7). While the Galileans stared speechlessly at Jesus as he ascended higher and higher, suddenly (“behold”) two angels dressed in men's clothes were standing near them (angels never appeared as women or children). Their radiant white garments made it obvious that they were God's emissaries. This lent their words superhuman authority, of course.

11 They knew the apostles, for they addressed them as “Men of Galilee.” Coming from their lips, this was undoubtedly polite and respectful. But by means of this address we are reminded once again how unpretentious Jesus' closest coworkers were in terms of the world's standards. There they stood. With a commission that would make one dizzy, for the first time after three years bereft of the companionship of their Lord.

Their attention was claimed by the angels, however, who explained to them what had just happened to Jesus as he moved behind the cloud: he had been taken up away from them into *heaven!* In verse 10, this word is used at least four times. Later they would have understood that with this, the fulfillment had begun of what Daniel was given to see centuries earlier in a night vision: “With the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:13–14).

In this way, the apostles were assured by God that their Lord had reached his unseen destination. Staring above any longer was meaningless. Though they were especially not to think that he had left them for good: “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

He will come back in person, as the incarnate Son of God. Just as visibly as they had just seen him ascend to heaven. With that cloud, he went to God (Dan. 7:13), and he will again come back from God on a cloud. Not that his return will resemble a replay in reverse of his ascension, only coming from heaven to the mount of Olives. For coming in the same *way* is something other than coming to the same *place* (nor can the latter be inferred from Zech. 14:1–7).

With this, the angels were proclaiming nothing new, but they were comforting the apostles with what the Lord had recently assured them about: “Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:30; Luke 17:23–24; 21:27; cf. 2 Thess. 1:7, 10; Rev. 1:7). Until that completion of the world's history, he would be with them always (Matt. 28:20). Relying upon that, they now had to go forth bearing witness of him.

Ascending and being taken up

In the preceding verses, Scripture uses two words for Jesus' departure: being *taken up* into heaven, and *ascending* to heaven. The first word refers to what God the Father did: he took his Son up into heaven as proof that he was completely satisfied with Jesus' mediatorial work and that he desired to reward it with the highest honor.

The second word places greater emphasis on what Jesus himself did. By means of his perfect

obedience, he had received from God the right and the power to ascend to heaven. This is the same event, viewed from two angles: God *took* him up and Jesus *ascended*.

Going to work joyfully

12 After these words of the angels, the apostles descended from the mount of Olives back to Jerusalem, the distance of a sabbath journey, not even a mile. They now knew that the period of Jesus' sudden appearances was over. The Lord was no longer physically present on earth. But "with respect to his Godhead, majesty, grace, and Spirit, he is at no time absent from [them]" (Heidelberg Catechism, LD 18, q. 47).

After the Lord had lifted Elijah in a storm up to heaven, fifty disciple-prophets went looking for him. Although Elisha disagreed, they maintained that the Spirit of the Lord had placed his master somewhere on a mountaintop or in a valley (2 Kings 2:16). Nothing like this occurred with the apostles. They firmly believed what they had seen and heard: the Lord Jesus was taken up into heaven and would one day return in the same way. In Luke 24:52 the evangelist had already reported that after this moving departure, the apostles returned to Jerusalem not with deep sorrow but "with great *joy!*" (cf. John 14:28).

Now they had to bring their work of witnessing of their ascended Lord home and abroad (v. 8). But their testimony would fortunately not need to depend on their weak, human powers, but on three supporting pillars. First, on their ascended Lord, who would assist them from heaven. Second, on the Holy Spirit, whom he would send within a few days. And third, on Jesus' promise: I will return!

CHAPTER 3

ACTS 1:13–26: THE CHURCH PRAYS FOR THE COMING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT AND FOR A SUCCESSOR OF JUDAS

Luke now brings us into the first Christian church meetings. These were held in an upper room. Perhaps in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark. She must have been an affluent woman, who had a large home at her disposal, where subsequently church members gathered frequently (Acts 12:12).

Obedient to Jesus' command (1:4), after his ascension the apostles returned to the city where six weeks earlier Jesus had been crucified. Together with a number of women, they had gathered in that upper chamber, where people would have been less disturbed by the racket on the street (cf. Acts 20:8), to pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit and for a successor of Judas.

1. The church prays for the Holy Spirit's coming (Acts 1:13–14)

As soon as the apostles arrived in Jerusalem, they went immediately to work. Not that they began immediately with their apostolic testimony. First, they went to their knees. This posture still belongs to the ABC of the King of God. First: pray; then: work.

13 Present at this prayer meeting were first of all the eleven remaining apostles: Peter and John, James and Andrew (the only four of whom we know for sure that they were professional fishermen), Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew (the ex-tax collector and writer of the Gospel bearing his name), James the son of Alphaeus, Simon the Zealot (ex-member of the fanatic Jewish resistance party), and Judas the son of James.

14 It was striking that women were also included in their company. In Jewish synagogues, people were used to something else, but in Christian churches women played an important role from the very start.

One woman is mentioned by name and surname: Mary, the mother of the Lord Jesus. The most blessed of all women (Luke 1:42). She is mentioned here for the last time. On the one hand, with her honorific title, on the other hand, as one among other women. She had apparently placed herself under the supervision of the apostles, and was praying and laboring heartily along with them. Perhaps she was able to provide Luke with numerous details about Jesus' birth. Whereas he perhaps told her how widely throughout all the world Jesus' gospel was being proclaimed and believed.

Among those present were also the women who had supported Jesus and his disciples all those years from their own resources (Luke 8:1–3). They had stood near his cross, had attended his burial, and were permitted to be the first one to see him after his resurrection. They were Mary Magdalene; Joanna, the wife of Chuza, a high official of Herod; Susanna; Mary the mother of James and Joseph; Mary, of Clopas; Salome, the wife of Zebedee and the mother of James and John.

In addition, Jesus' brothers were also in the room. They were James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas (Matt. 13:55). Beside them, the Lord also had sisters (Mark 3:31–32). So he grew up in a family of at least seven children. Initially his brothers did not believe in him (John 7:5). At one point they even thought that he was severely psychologically distressed (Mark 3:21). But now they did believe in him.

After his resurrection, the Lord appeared separately to his brother James (1 Cor. 15:7), the

man who would become the leader of the church in Jerusalem and the author of “the epistle of James” (12:17; 15:13; 21:18). Paul called him one of the pillars in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:9). Judas, another brother of the Lord Jesus, would later write “the epistle of Jude.”

These men and women gathered repeatedly during the ten days between Jesus’ ascension and Pentecost to pray together. For the Lord had indeed promised that with a few days they would receive power by means of the baptism with the Holy Spirit, but they did not await this passively. They prayed for his coming.

The book of Acts reports the triumphal procession of the gospel. Powerfully assisted by God’s Spirit, the apostles proclaimed the joyful message from Jerusalem, via Cyprus, Turkey, Greece, all the way to Rome, from where they would spread the gospel throughout the rest of the world. But with what did this victory march begin? With prayer meetings in a quiet upper room!

2. The church prays for Judas’ successor (Acts 1:15–26)

Something that throughout the recent weeks had also constantly occupied the disciples was the betrayal and terrible end of Judas. Don’t forget that for three years he had followed the Lord along with them, and had been their treasurer. And now to their shock, during that night in Gethsemane their friend had come against Jesus with a band of policemen. People did not understand at all how a fellow follower of Jesus reached that point of betraying the Master. Until Peter showed the light of Scripture on that event.

15 On a certain day—at this point a group of about 120 people had gathered—he stood up in the group and spoke. It was scarcely six weeks ago that he had denied the Lord, but the Savior had forgiven him for this and had restored him to his apostolic ministry (John 21:15–25). Therefore, on Jesus’ authority, he was once again readily accepted as one of the Lord’s appointed leaders (Matt. 16:17–19).

Furthermore, later the other apostles did not gloss over Peter’s fall. Matthew, Mark, and John, who were also sitting in the room, would later not omit mention of this dark page in Peter’s life in their Gospels. This means that during that time, this event also had to have a place in the oral proclamation of the gospel. For is it not a striking and encouraging example for all believers of Jesus’ willingness to forgive?

16 Peter definitely did not function as the first pope, as someone who in matters of faith demanded unconditional obedience from his subjects. For he directed his comments not only to his fellow apostles, but to all the brothers and sisters who were present, and he engaged them as mature believers in what he went on to say.

His subject was the empty place in the circle of the twelve apostles that had been left by Judas’ betrayal. With sober expressions he recalled that sad event. Judas has been the guide who had helped the arresting team recognize Jesus in the evening darkness in Gethsemane. He had identified him with a kiss.

But this repulsive betrayal had been, according to Peter, a fulfillment of prophecy. The Holy Spirit, the Author of Holy Scripture, had by the mouth of David spoken indirectly about Judas. For that purpose the apostle would later cite Psalm 69 and Psalm 109, but he was also possibly thinking of Psalm 41, to which the Lord himself had referred during the evening before his death: “He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me” (John 13:18).

It was God’s will that this Scriptural word would be fulfilled (i.e., obtain its ultimate climax) in Jesus’ suffering, in that he too would experience the pain of betrayal. He would suffer this pain more deeply than anyone had ever suffered, and would thereby “fill up the full measure”

with his agony. When people considered Judas' betrayal in this light, they would be better able to process the shock.

17 As a member of Jesus' circle of twelve he belonged to our bosom friends and he shared in our apostolic ministry (literally, *diakonia*).

18 As reward for his shameful act he had been paid thirty pieces of silver. But when Jesus had been condemned to death, he became so sorry that he had thrown the coins down in the temple and had hung himself in despair. And in connection with that, either the branch or the rope broke, and he fell down and burst open, so that all his intestines protruded outside his body.

The chief priests had gathered up the blood money and with it they purchased the potter's field (Matt. 27:7–8). Surely in the name of the betrayer, so that Peter can now say that Judas had received the parcel. In that parcel people would henceforth bury strangers.

19 All Jerusalem had been talking about Judas' betrayal and terrible end. This explains why the parcel of land purchased with blood money had since then been termed in popular speech "Akeldama," or Field of Blood. For the Sanhedrin members, this was not a very attractive epithet, for it reminded them constantly of Jesus' condemnation to death.

20 These events confronted the church with two questions: What had happened to the betrayal as a result of these events, and what had to be done now regarding his empty *place*? Peter answered these questions from Psalm 69 and Psalm 109, respectively. With his deepened insight into Scripture, he saw that the basic pattern (not all the details) of these psalms corresponded with that of the situation in which Jesus had dealt with Judas.

Concerning the first question: the terrible *end* of the betrayer, according to Peter, followed the line of Psalm 69, the lamentation of a poor godly person who suffered severely at the hands of wicked opponents. "*May their camp be a desolation; let no one dwell in their tents,*" is what he was wishing for them (Ps. 69:25). Peter saw this wish fulfilled in Judas' perishing. Who would still want to live on that parcel that had now been purchased with blood money? It was suitable only for strangers who would die during their visit to Jerusalem.

Concerning the second question: for the empty place of Judas, Peter referred to Psalm 109. It too was a psalm of lament of someone who was innocently persecuted. From this psalm he cited verse 8: "*May another take his office!*" In Judas' case, this was the office of apostle. The Lord had appointed twelve apostles to testify of him among the twelve tribes of Israel (Luke 22:30; Rev. 21:12-14). According to Peter, it was therefore the line of Psalm 109 that someone else be appointed to fill Judas' vacancy. Before the Holy Spirit was poured out and before they began fulfilling their great commission.

21 Who could fill that empty spot, however? For an apostle had to have been a witness of Jesus' entire ministry, especially of his resurrection. For that was the basis of their preaching (1 Cor. 15:14, 17–19). Now, twenty centuries later, our faith still depends on the unanimous apostolic testimony that our Savior lives! Therefore Judas could be succeeded only by someone who could tell of Jesus' ministry from his own experience.

22 From the time when John the Baptizer and Jesus ministered simultaneously (Luke 3:21–22; John 3:22-24) until the day of his ascension. He would need to have seen all of this as well. Only someone who fulfilled these requirements could restore the mutilated circle of twelve crown witnesses. Paul did not meet these requirements, so we certainly cannot view this apostolic election as premature.

23 Peter's speech found universal consent. Evidently two candidates were nominated with everyone's approval: Joseph Barsabbas, surnamed Justus (i.e., Righteous One), and Matthias.

People have often appealed to this example to justify the custom of nominating a duo for

ecclesiastical elections. But the question is whether among the one hundred twenty people present there were more than two men who had followed the Lord Jesus throughout the three years of his ministry! It seems likely to us that Joseph and Matthias were the only ones of whom this could be said. If there had been more brothers who fulfilled this requirement, then people would certainly have nominated them as well. For what would have justified excluding them and nominating only two candidates, if people were leaving the decision to the Lord? For he could just as easily have indicated the man of his choosing from multiple candidates as from only two nominees.

24 After this duo was nominated, the choice was not left to the apostles; nor was a general vote specified whereby the decision would be rendered by one-half + one votes; but it was placed directly in God's hands. Who would be permitted to become the twelfth official witness? To find out, people respectfully cast the lot, with the conviction that the lot is of God (Prov. 16:33). This was the only election of an office-bearer in the New Testament for which people used the lot. The seven people appointed to care for the poor in Acts 6:1–6 were chosen by the church without casting lots (cf. 14:23; Titus 1:5). Even though there was good reason to have done so. But here people apparently felt compelled to nominate a duo. At that point they prayed: "You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen"

25 ". . . To take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." Although with these concluding words Peter feared the worst, he did not talk explicitly about the "place of torment" (Luke 16:28). Nor did he call Judas "son of destruction." He left that judgment to the Lord (John 17:12).

26 At that point, people cast their lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. In this way he was declared elected along with the eleven apostles. And hereby the Lord Jesus—for we are reading about his continuing acts—had restored the foundation of his church. For it would have to rest upon the testimony of this group of twelve newly restored.

At this point almost everything was ready for fulfilling their commission. They had received the needed supplemental instruction. They had beheld Jesus' exaltation. The only thing they were lacking was the needed power from above. For Judas' empty spot was now filled, but not that of Jesus. The Holy Spirit would be poured out in a few days, however, as Jesus' Substitute. With that event, the first phase of their work and simultaneously of God's "grace interim" for Israel would begin. And that would occur in the city where he had been crucified, as we will learn from Acts 2–7.

CHAPTER 4

ACTS 2: THE OUTPOURING OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, THE FIRST APOSTOLIC TESTIMONY, INITIAL GROWTH OF THE CHURCH

Remain in Jerusalem, the Lord had commanded his apostles just before he ascended, for there you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. This ancient promise from the prophets, which had recently been repeated by John the Baptizer and the Lord Jesus, would be fulfilled within a few days (1:4–5). He would grant them the needed power to go out witnessing everywhere about Jesus' resurrection (1:8).

After they had prayed for ten days for his coming, he was poured out upon them abundantly. In Acts 2:1–13 we read about the significant signs that accompanied his descent; in verses 14–40 we read about how powerfully Peter, who was now equipped by the Spirit, sounded forth the first apostolic testimony in Jerusalem; and in verses 41–47, we learn how strong the church grew as a result, both in number and in faith.

1. The descent of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1–13)

Three years earlier, John the Baptizer had proclaimed: “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16). This prophecy was now going to be fulfilled. As the Lord Jesus had promised them (John 14–16), he now sent from heaven the Paraclete or Comforter, the Counselor, the Advocate, the Helper, the Assistant, the Accuser.

1 When the day of Pentecost dawned (literally, “the fiftieth day,” after Passover) and the disciples were all together, the time had come. Everywhere in Israel the wheat stood ripe in the fields. But before it was harvested, the firstfruits of the early grain had to be baked into loaves and offered to Yahweh. As symbolic representatives of the entire harvest (Lev. 23:15–21). With this feast of weeks, as it was called in the Torah (Exod. 34:22; Num. 28:26; Deut. 16:10), the season was ended and the new one begun.

Precisely on this day, God chose to inaugurate a new period in the program of redemption. For centuries he had made known his Word only to Israel (Ps. 147:19–20). But henceforth the church doors would stand open for believers from all nations.

2 In the early morning of the “feast of weeks” the disciples heard a roar coming from heaven as though a violent wind had arisen. From one moment to the next, it seemed to be storming through the entire house. They understood immediately that the Spirit had now come. Hebrew and Greek each had one word for “spirit” and “wind” (*rûah* and *pneuma*). So when they suddenly heard a violent wind without feeling anything of it, they knew: here is the holy *pneuma* of God's Spirit! He himself was invisible, but three telling signs accompanied and demonstrated his arrival and made clear what he had come to do.

The sound of a hurricane: the Spirit comes with divine power!

He stormed into the world. This already was very significant. Naturally, he eschewed worldly violence (Zech. 4:6), but when twelve helpless men faced the task of going out into the world to testify of Christ, he came to help them accompanied with a howling noise of a storm. With a telling sign of his invisible, but divine power! We know how irresistible a hurricane is. In the same way an irrepressible movement began in the world when the Spirit was poured out upon the

church!

That is what the rest of Acts shows. In Jerusalem people had never talked about Jesus' ministry as they did after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. "Jerusalem is filled with his teaching," complained the leaders of the Sanhedrin. Once again the issue of Jesus lay on their table (Acts 5:28). His name was soon being proclaimed even in the palaces of kings and governors. A mere thirty years later, the entire Jewish world, from Gibraltar to Tehran and from the Black Sea to Egypt, had heard about him. Thanks to the power with which the Spirit had come to help the apostles.

Fiery tongues: the Spirit kindles light

3 Where Satan rules, people dwell in ignorance and darkness, trapped in lies and deceit. But where the Spirit of the Lord comes, he enlightens their understanding through his Word and kindles in their heart a fiery love toward God and their neighbor. This purifying and teaching work of God's Spirit was symbolized by fiery tongues, little flames that divided and descended upon each of the disciples. Once again a telling sign. It recalled the sevenfold candlestick in the temple, which with its seven flames symbolized the light of divine knowledge that had been bestowed to Israel (cf. *Exodus*, 236–241).

From this time forward, this knowledge would be spread through human communication across the entire world. That was being represented by the form in which the fire branched out over the disciples, namely, the form resembling human tongues. Above each disciple, male and female, such a fiery tongue was burning as a sign that God gives gifts from the Spirit to each of his children, although they don't all receive the same one(s) (cf. 1 Cor. 12). Here the emphasis lies on the gift of proclamation.

4 For what happened? At the same time as the hurricane sound and the fiery tongues, they were baptized or submersed in the Holy Spirit. Before this, he had always descended upon Israel like a soft rain, but now he was being poured out upon the disciples like a tropical downpour, so that they were "filled" with him. Filled with the Holy Spirit. And not only the twelve apostles, but the entire church, from high to low, men and women, young and old, were full of the Holy Spirit (vv. 17–18).

Where Christ comes with his Spirit, the Spirit comes with the Word. Immediately after their fiery Spirit baptism they began to *speak* fervently! They had fiery tongues not only on their heads but also in their mouths! A bit later Peter gave a sermon that deeply affected many. He cited psalms and prophets, he knew how to relate them to this new situation, and he spoke with Scriptural insight and confidence that people would not have expected from a fisherman.

Meanwhile a new miracle occurred. Not only did the apostles speak boldly about God and his mighty deeds, but they also suddenly received the gift to do that in the most diverse *languages*! Such facility takes missionaries many years and much effort of study, but the apostles received it in a heartbeat. As the Spirit gave them utterance, they were suddenly speaking fluently their languages that just before now had been foreign to them.

Foreign languages: the Spirit comes to call the Gentiles also

5 Since the Assyrian and Babylonian captivities (in 722 BC and 586 BC, respectively), many Jews were living throughout the entire then-known world. People called this the Diaspora or Dispersion. From Gibraltar to Persia and from Rome to Alexandria, there was no city of any

significance that did not have a Jewish colony. Later Paul would find in every city a synagogue or place of prayer. Thousands of Jews lived in Rome alone. A million Jews lived in Egypt, most of them in Alexandria. At least one-fourth of the population in Libya was Jewish.

Nevertheless these foreign Jews continued to identify as Jews. Many harbored the dream of spending their old age in Jerusalem—if only that could happen!—in order to experience the coming of the Messiah! Perhaps Simon of Cyrene, who carried Jesus’ cross, was such a retired Jew who had purchased a plot of ground outside Jerusalem. In addition to these repatriated Jews, many Jewish pilgrims had also come from foreign countries to Jerusalem for the celebration of Pentecost (cf. 20:16).

Many of them had already heard about Jesus of Nazareth. At least, Peter assumed that was the case (v. 22). Some of them possibly had cried out seven weeks earlier, “Crucify him!” But at that point they had been misled by their leaders and acted blindly, for many pious Jews were later convicted as they listened to Peter’s apostolic testimony (v. 37).

6 When they heard the miraculous storm-like sound with no accompanying storm, people immediately came from all sides in large numbers to the meeting place of the disciples, and encountered one surprise after another. For many of them, those who had lived their entire lives outside the country, the language of their second homeland had in fact become their mother tongue. As is still the case today: an English Jew speaks fluent English, a Russian Jew speaks Russian, and Anne Frank wrote her diary in Dutch. In the same way, Jews spoke fluent Latin or Greek, Cretan, Persian, Egyptian or Phrygian. Many would have known Hebrew and Aramaic, the languages of Scripture, for when Peter later addressed them probably in Aramaic, they could understand him.

But now, to their speechless surprise, they were being addressed in their own native languages, and that by unlearned Galileans! Phrygian Jews were hearing disciples speaking fluent Phrygian. Persian Jews were hearing others speaking fluent Persian. Egyptian Jews were hearing other proclaiming God’s deeds in Egyptian. And Roman Jews were hearing their familiar Latin coming from Galilean lips.

7 They were surprised out of their minds, and asked in amazement: “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” Perhaps they recognized the group from their clothes or their temple visits. Galileans struck people as uncultivated (cf. John 1:47; 7:52; Matt. 26:71–73).

8 “And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?”

9 And notice that they came from far and wide! From Parthia, Media, and Elam (perhaps descendants of the ten tribes who had been deported there? [2 Kings 17:6]). Mesopotamia (present day Iraq, formerly Babylon, possibly descendants of captives from Judah or those who had moved there for economic reasons), Judea and Cappadocia (south of the Black Sea).

10 Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia (parts of present-day Turkey), Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and Jews from Rome, and Gentiles who had joined Judaism (proselytes or Jewish kinsmen), who were staying in Jerusalem. Whether temporarily as pilgrims, or permanently as tenants. (People have wondered whether the Christian church in Rome could perhaps have been founded by converts from this group.)

11 In addition, the crowd included Jews from Crete (cf. Titus 1:10–14) and from Arabia (where there were tribes converted to Judaism still in the seventh century). How did it happen that each one of them heard these Galileans proclaim God’s mighty deeds in his own mother tongue?

12 They all stood perplexed and did not know what to think of this. Galileans who were praising God in Jerusalem, not in the “sacred” Hebrew language, the language of Moses and

David; nor in Aramaic, the language of Ezra and Nehemiah; but in Phrygian, Egyptian, Persian, Cappadocian, and many more languages. With great embarrassment they asked each other: “Do you understand what this means?”

13 Apparently they were not all equally pious, for some denigrated this divine miracle with the mocking comment: “They have simply drunk too much sweet wine.”

The wall of separation broken down

We understand what happened here far more easily than those who witnessed it. To be sure, it was Pentecost, but here there were only Jews present. For the time being, it was not time for the Gentiles. First the gospel had to be proclaimed in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. Nonetheless, looking back, we see in the language miracle a sign that the wall between Jews and Gentiles was broken down by the Lord Jesus (Eph. 2:14). Later the church doors would be opened not only for Jews from Phrygia, Rome, and Crete, but also for native Phrygians, Romans, and Cretans.

The language barrier appeared to constitute no hindrance for God’s Spirit. He is not bound to Hebrew, but from this time on the Word of God would be proclaimed in Pamphylian, Egyptian, and now in French, German, English, Malaysian, Zulu, etc. This was a genuinely New Testament blessing: to be permitted to have the Word of God in your mother tongue!

By means of this language miracle, the apostles were reminded of Jesus’ commission: “Go out and make all nations to be my disciples” (Matt. 28:18; Acts 1:8). The rest of the book will teach how much effort it would take to accept believing Gentiles as equal participants in Christ’s church.

Pentecost once for all time

Some Christians think that as time goes on, “Pentecost” must happen again and again. They talk about the Spirit blowing afresh and they hope he will be poured out “now also”: “Come, Creator Spirit, visit your church!”

But that is what the Holy Spirit did, seven weeks after Jesus’ resurrection, ten days after Jesus’ ascension. At that point he came to visit God’s church, as Jesus’ continuing substitute. Once and for all time. And in a measure like never before. John the Baptizer and the Lord Jesus had called his coming a *baptism* or submersion or bath in the Holy Spirit. And that is what happened. If formerly he had, as it were, been given to God’s church in drips, now he was *poured* out on the church, like a tsunami, a flood.

But his coming was just as unrepeatable as the birth, crucifixion, and resurrection of our Savior. Just as these are once-for-all-time facts, so too is the descent of God’s Spirit accompanied by the signs of a hurricane sound, fiery tongues, and foreign languages a one-time event. And just as Jesus’ time upon earth was accompanied with a large number of one-time miraculous signs—now we no longer see the dead raised—so too the one-time descent of God’s Spirit is also characterized by the aforementioned one-time signs. Nor does Acts 8:17–18, 10:44–48, and 19:6 mention any repetition of the Spirit’s *coming*, but rather an outworking and confirmation of that coming.

Just as we do not pray, as the Christian church, for a repetition of Jesus’ birth, crucifixion, and resurrection, so too we do not pray for a new outpouring of his Spirit. We would be more wise to take to heart the admonition of the apostle: “Do not quench the Spirit” (1 Thess. 5:19; cf.

Eph. 4:30).

2. The first apostolic testimony (Acts 2:14–40)

For the 120 disciples (1:14–15) who had been praying for this, it was clear: the Lord Jesus had just sent his Spirit! But the surprised bystanders understood nothing of this. If it had not been explained to them, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit would have remained a riddle for them. Peter now proceeds to provide this explanation.

Seven weeks earlier, he had been afraid to confess his Master to a slave girl (Luke 22:56), but now he addresses a large crowd. In such a way that every preacher can still use this as an example, in terms of both form and content. He spoke plainly, relevantly, and personally. His presentation was well constructed and testified to deep insight into the unity and Christ-centered character of Scripture. He could speak this way, naturally, only through the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

In fact, Peter delivered a sermon with three points: (1) Explanation of the event as the fulfillment of prophecy (vv. 14–21); (2) Proclamation of Jesus' Messiahship with Scripture proof (vv. 22–36); (3) Summons to repentance and pointing out the way to salvation (vv. 37–40).

Before discussing this sermon, we need to make comments. First, concerning the connection between Peter's preaching and that of John the Baptizer. And second, concerning the accusing work of the Holy Spirit.

In the line of John the Baptizer

John the Baptizer had warned Israel that a judgment of God was imminent. The axe lay, according to him, at the root of the tree. After him would come someone who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with the fire of judgment. The baptism that John administered in that context portrayed the threatened judgment. Whoever confessed guilt and submitted to this symbolic water judgment would thereby be safeguarded in the approaching real judgment. For this "baptismal water of judgment" was not only proclaiming the guilt of the sin of the person baptized, but also guaranteeing him the washing away of that sin (Luke 3:3; cf. Matt. 3:1–12).

Jesus had taken over this message from John. He had warned Israel about God's wrath even more emphatically than his predecessor (Matt. 8:11–12; Luke 21:24). Two months ago Jesus had predicted about the imposing temple structure: "Here no stone will remain on another" (Matt. 24; Luke 21). Peter's generation would yet experience that (Luke 21:32).

So what had the apostles learned from both John the Baptizer and from their Master? That for Israel, judgment was imminent. The Messiah would execute the covenant curse. When Peter later mentioned the prophecy of Joel about the Day of the Lord, we should not think immediately of the Last Judgment, but first of all of the judgment upon *Jerusalem* that was imminent at that time, though the Last Judgment was, according to Jesus, an extension of this imminent judgment.

Comforter, but also Public Accuser

This approaching judgment upon Jerusalem was also discussed when the Lord talked about the work of the Holy Spirit. For Jesus had announced him as the *Paraclete*. This word is often translated simply as Comforter. In certain contexts, however, it does not mean comforter, but advocate, attorney, and occasionally public prosecutor.

“When he [the Paraclete] comes,” the Lord had promised, “he will convict the [Jewish] world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8). Convicting someone of sin is not the work of a comforter, but of a prosecutor or officer of the court. And that is precisely what the Holy Spirit has come to do: to *accuse* the Jewish world on account of its rejection of Messiah Jesus. The Paraclete would do this through the mouth of the apostles, whom he would supply with the necessary evidence of proof.

In short, our Savior had already pointed to the *judging, accusing* task of the Holy Spirit. Keep this in mind when you later hear Peter reminding the Jews of their having put the Messiah to death (2:23). The apostle was not speaking as a missionary to pagan Gentiles, but was functioning as a witness of Jesus Christ to the Jewish *covenant people*. And not with an evangelistic message, but with an indictment, a prosecutorial summation offered as the closing speech of a *lawsuit*.

2.1 Peter explains the event as the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy (vv. 14–21)

A multitude of people look at Peter in surprise. What did those fiery tongues, that strange sound of wind, and those foreign languages mean?

14 In the name of the Twelve, Peter began to explain that. For the other eleven apostles were standing alongside him. In this way, it became evident that these Twelve constituted a special class of whom Peter was the spokesman. In the name of all of them, he gave voice at that point in Jerusalem to the first apostolic testimony about Messiah Jesus. He addressed the people with a loud voice: “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words.” He would now proceed to explain the events.

15 These men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. Who gets drunk that early? No, something else is happening here. Peter went on, as a good pupil of his Master, to place the event in the light of prophecy (cf. Luke 4:16–30; 7:27; 24:44–49).

Abundant knowledge of God

16 You stood amazed at simple Galileans talking about God’s mighty deeds. And doing so in the strangest languages. Now then, what happened here this morning was the fulfillment of what God had promised through the prophet Joel.

17 Peter’s listeners knew the situation in which this prophet had served. At that time, Israel was being afflicted with a plague of locusts so severe that the sunlight was darkened and the moon at night was blood red. “The day of the Lord is near,” Joel had proclaimed then. “The Almighty is coming to visit his judgments upon us. Let great and small humble themselves deeply before him” (Joel 1:2–2:17).

But when Israel had listened, Joel could posit rich compensation in the near future, and for the long term could give voice to this redemptive prophecy: And then, in the last days, that is to say: *in the coming future*, says God, it will happen that I will spread the knowledge of God in Israel more abundantly than ever before.

Of course, the godly always did possess the Spirit of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness already. How otherwise could anyone ever have come to faith without him? But he rested *in rich measure* only upon a few privileged people, like prophets, priests, kings, sages, and psalmists. But now through the prophet Joel, Yahweh placed two great changes on the horizon. First, in that coming future he would pour out *streams* of his Spirit. And second, he would pour him out upon

all members of his people.

Then not only would prophets prophesy, the Lord promised, but also your sons and daughters would speak the Word of God. The youth among you will see visions and the aged will receive revelatory dreams (we find examples of these in Acts 9:10; 10:17; 16:9; 21:9; 22:18; 26:19; 27:23; cf. Rev. 1:10).

18 Indeed, I will pour out my Spirit upon male and female slaves (most of them non-Jewish), so that they too will prophesy (i.e., instruct and encourage the church).

This explains how it happened that people heard young and old, men and women, male and female slaves talking about God's mighty deeds. God had poured out his Spirit *abundantly* upon *ordinary* people.

Severe judgments

19 In addition to abundant knowledge of God, however, Yahweh had also announced severe judgments for that coming future period: "And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke."

20 "The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day." With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that day had dawned, according to Peter.

Thereby he continued the line of his teacher John the Baptizer, who also had announced the coming of the Holy Spirit in connection with severe *judgments* (Luke 3:16). This was a message that Jesus had taken over from John and clarified.

According to him, before the Last Judgment a severe covenant judgment would be executed against *Jerusalem* (Matt. 24:1–41; Luke 21:5–36). In AD 70 this occurred. At that time, the city and the temple were destroyed by the Romans with much "blood, fire, and smoke." With this event, the prophecies of Joel and John the Baptizer were fulfilled: the baptism of the Holy Spirit in AD 33 was followed by the baptism of fire in AD 70.

But their announcements of judgment were not yet entirely fulfilled. For "immediately," which means: in a straight line, without people needing to look ahead for still other events, according to Jesus, this judgment upon Jerusalem would be followed by the last Day of the Lord (Matt. 24:29).

21 Just as Joel was permitted to proclaim deliverance from the judgment of the Day of the LORD in that time, so now Peter was permitted to do the same with a view to the judgment that would afflict Jerusalem during his own generation. He did this with the words of Joel: "And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

In this connection, we should not think *immediately* of the Last Judgment, but first of that judgment that fell upon Jerusalem in AD 70. Jesus had predicted that an "interim of grace" would precede the destruction of city and temple (Matt. 24:14). This would last about forty years, from 33–70. At that point, the Christians in Jerusalem and Judea had interrupted their lives, following Jesus' advice (Luke 21:20–24) to flee in time to Pella in the region of the Transjordan.

But *indirectly* and included in that proclamation of Joel and Peter was instruction about how people could be delivered eternally at the last Day of the Lord. But, which name of which Lord did people have to call upon for that deliverance?

2.2 Peter proves that God has appointed Jesus as Lord and Messiah (vv. 22-36)

Peter now proceeds to prove from Scripture that *Jesus* is the Lord and Messiah by whom they could be delivered, and that *he* had poured out the Holy Spirit. It is striking that he directed this testimony in the first place to the city where the Lord had recently been crucified! And that many a Jew in his audience had agreed with it.

The apostle speaks as one filled with the Holy Spirit. Given this address, that Spirit bestowed upon him deep insight into Scripture (John 16:13). At the same time, the Spirit functioned through the lips of the apostle as the Public Prosecutor who would convict the (Jewish) world of its sin and of Jesus' righteousness (John 16:8–9). Immediately after his descent, the Spirit began his tremendous lawsuit occasioned by Jerusalem's murder of the Messiah. Even though afterward, the Spirit functioned as Comforter by promising Jerusalem forgiveness if she would confess her sin.

Crucified by you, but raised by God

22 Peter showed his listeners the honor due to them. They were not Gentiles, but “Jewish people.” With that phrase he was showing respect for the covenant foundation on which he stood alongside them (cf. 2:39). He addressed them as representatives of the entire chosen people and as one who had shocking things to tell them. This explains his more-than-formal request that they listen attentively to his words.

His main subject was not the Holy Spirit who had just been poured out, but Jesus the Nazarene. Or rather: what *God* had done with Jesus (vv. 22-24, 32-36). They remembered very well, of course, what Jesus had done among them: blind people could see again, deaf could hear again, the lame could walk, he had cleansed lepers, and he had even raised the dead (Luke 7:22). Each of these episodes was a demonstration of divine power. In fact, *God* had done these things through him, and thereby he had indicated that he had sent this Man (at this point Peter had not yet used the word *Messiah*).

There was an accusatory tone underlying all of this: they should have recognized and acknowledged Jesus' divine proofs of legitimacy! He himself had said: The deeds that I perform testify of me; they prove that I have been sent by the Father (John 5:36; cf. 3:2; 10:38). Why had they not accepted this testimony? But the accusation would become even more pointed.

23 They knew what had happened to Jesus. This divine envoy had been betrayed. A bewildering fact. Even though it did not happen outside of God's established counsel and foreknowledge (his wise administration within history) (John 19:11; 1 Pet. 1:20). He intended to make Jesus Lord and Messiah (v. 36), and to bestow upon us everything along with him (Rom. 8:32). His good intentions led God consciously to surrender him to the wicked intentions of the Jewish leaders. But this did not remove their responsibility and culpability. His death was their doing. “By the hands of lawless men like Pontius Pilate and his soldiers, you had him put to death on the accursed tree and gotten out of the way!” Many of those among Peter's listeners had cried out, “Crucify him!” Others had silently consented to this “legal” murder of an extraordinary divine envoy.

What a shocking accusation! Issued by the Spirit who had just been poured out, who was clearly functioning here as Paraclete or Public Prosecutor or Officer of the Court. (This accusation will be repeated several times, at least in Jerusalem; cf. 3:13–15; 4:10–11; 5:30; 7:52. Later, the Jews in the Diaspora are not held responsible; cf. 13:27.)

24 In doing this, they had placed themselves squarely in opposition to God, something that

he had recently shown. Did they know this already? The man whom they had crucified was raised by God from the dead! A greater contrast in assessing Jesus was unimaginable. God had broken the chains of death, so that they were unable to hold him.

Jesus' resurrection prophesied in Psalm 16

25 This too was prophesied in Scripture. People knew Psalm 16, a psalm of David. But being filled with the Spirit of clarity-in-the-truth, Peter showed that in his psalm, David had spoken not only about himself, but at the same time about Jesus. David was not only confessing his faith in his own resurrection from the dead, but he was also prophesying at the same time about the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth! The degree to which David himself recognized the scope of his own psalm is an altogether different matter (cf. 1 Pet. 1:10–12). Based on the authority of the Holy Spirit who was guiding David (2 Pet. 1:20), we can safely assume that Psalm 16 did possess this additional component.

For what was David saying? I keep the Lord always before me. With him at my side, I do not falter. His bond with me is unbreakable.

26 Therefore my heart rejoices and my tongue is glad, indeed, even my mortal flesh will one day find safety in the hope of the resurrection from the dead and will thus rest safely in the grave.

27 For you will not abandon my soul (i.e., me) eternally in the grave and the realm of the dead, nor will you permit your holy one to undergo decay forever.

28 You will raise me from the dead and show me the paths that lead to eternal life; you will fill me with eternal joy in your presence (Ps. 16:8–11). In these paraphrases we have embedded our exposition of this psalm that you can find in our commentary on the Psalms (Du vol 1, 215–242).

29 With all due respect for the patriarch David, the ancestor of Judah's kings, Peter could nonetheless declare: Brothers (note the friendly form of address!), what David was expecting here in this psalm—his resurrection from the dead—has not yet been fulfilled. He died and is buried. His grave is still among us, unopened until this day.

30 David was not only a king, however, but also a prophet: someone through whom God provided revelation. For he knew all too well what God had sworn to him by means of a solemn oath: I will see to it that from this time forward a physical descendant of yours will sit upon your throne to rule over the house of Jacob (cf. 2 Sam. 7:13; Ps. 89:4–5; 132:11–12; Luke 1:32–33). Concerning the Messiah-King who would come from his line, David had received God's rich revelation (cf. 2 Sam. 23:1–7).

31 Therefore in Psalm 16 he was not only confessing his faith in his own resurrection from the dead, but he was also prophesying with a forward-looking perspective that his great *Son*, the *Messiah*, would not remain death's prey, and that *he* would not be abandoned to decay.

(We are replacing the words “the Christ” in this verse with the equivalent Hebrew expression “the Messiah” (i.e., the Anointed). It is very instructive to make this replacement throughout the book of Acts, for then it becomes more clear that the name *Christ* is not Jesus' “last name,” but his *official title*: the Anointed One, namely, anointed to be the Prophet, the Priest, and the King of Israel. For that reason, people should rather not speak simply of “Christ,” but of “*the* Christ.” Peter is here busy proving that *Jesus* is the Christ.)

32 Now then, what David had prophesied in Psalm 16 was completely fulfilled in Jesus. For God had not yet raised David from the dead, but he had raised his son Jesus! The Sanhedrin contradicted this (“His disciples stole his corpse at night”), but all twelve of us are witnesses of

his resurrection. For six weeks we saw him alive many times. We have even shared food and drink with him! (Why could Peter not have added this? [cf. Acts 10:41]; Luke is here providing only a summary of Peter's preaching [cf. v. 40].)

So then, if David had prophesied concerning the Messiah that God would raise him from the dead, and if he had in fact done this, then the proof was in hand: Jesus was the Messiah! Nevertheless, Peter did not draw this conclusion. Jesus' messiahship would be even more credible if Peter's listeners would learn about Jesus' present exalted position, and would see the connection between his exaltation and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the apostle postponed his conclusion for a moment.

Jesus had received and poured out the Spirit

33 The Jews had put Jesus to death, but God had raised him. Stated more strongly: Israel had committed the most grievous *insult*—nailing him naked to a post—but God had *shown him the highest honor!* By God's right hand he was exalted to God's right hand. And what the people had just heard and seen was entirely Jesus' work!

People knew God's promise that one day he would pour out the Spirit upon everyone (Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Ezek. 36:26–27; Joel 2:28–29; Zech. 12:10). John the Baptizer had repeated it. But this was, first of all, a promise of God the Father to Jesus, and Jesus had made good on that promise today. Jesus had received from God the right to grant the Spirit, and now Jesus in turn had poured out the Spirit upon his church.

That was the explanation of what people had heard and seen that morning. You are dealing once again with Jesus the Nazarene. Except now no longer as the despised crucified one, but as the Lord whom God has exalted to heaven, who received from him the authority to pour out the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' exaltation prophesied in Psalm 110

34 This elevation of the Messiah to heavenly power and glory had also been predicted for a long time, namely, in Psalm 110. This too was a psalm of David, but not a psalm about David. It involved no claim that *David* had ascended to heaven. As had already been said, he was lying buried in Jerusalem. No, David was prophesying about someone else: "The Lord has said to my *Lord*. . . ."

35 "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." This too David was saying about *Jesus!* Jesus is David's "Lord." Jesus has now taken his place at God's right hand, "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion" (cf. Eph. 1:20–23; Phil. 2:9–11; Heb. 1). This was a dire threat for Jesus' opponents and fearsome for Peter's listeners.

Peter's conclusion

Let us repeat briefly: "What did this mean?" the spectators had been asking in surprise when the Holy Spirit had descended upon the disciples. To this question Peter had given the brief summary response: "This is what Joel and John the Baptizer had proclaimed: The Holy Spirit has been poured out. The judgment will now follow soon. And from that judgment only one thing will deliver you: calling on the Lord, namely, on Jesus. For he is not dead, but he is alive and has been exalted by God to the throne of heaven. This is what David had prophesied already in his

psalms.”

36 When Peter reached this point, he drew the conclusion: “Let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made him both *Lord* and *Messiah*, this Jesus whom you crucified.” This is how the first courtroom summation ended, coming from the Holy Spirit as Paraclete or Public Prosecutor in the lawsuit between God and his people Israel concerning the crucifixion of Messiah Jesus. A crushing verdict! For “Lord” (*kurios*) was, in their Greek Bible translation, the name for Yahweh. From this time on, Jesus was also “Lord,” clothed with divine authority and honor (cf. Phil. 2:9–11). By God he was declared to be Messiah, but by you he was crucified! Peter left his listeners with this accusation to reflect on. He left them with this knife to the heart.

2.3 Peter summons people to repentance and promises forgiveness (vv. 37–40)

The multitude was affected deeply. In verse 37 we read literally that Peter’s summation had pierced their heart like a *spear*. No wonder; there were many who had returned from foreign lands to Jerusalem with the quiet hope that there they might perhaps experience the coming of the Messiah, only now to hear from that Galilean that they had killed him! Crucified him! Handed him over to the Romans!

37 Their reaction to this shocking “covenant indictment” was very humble. Peter had certainly cut them to the quick, but they did not grind their teeth in fury, they did not stop their ears, or begin to scream loudly at him, or attack him, as the Sanhedrin would later do with Stephen (7:54). Nor did they attempt to “prove” that he had cited Scripture wrongly and that Joel had meant “something else.” On the contrary, Peter’s words had convinced them. Feelings of guilt and remorse filled them. They had crucified Jesus of Nazareth, the Messiah!

They understood that Peter was speaking in the name of all the apostles, for they turned to all twelve with their fear-filled question: “Brothers, what must we do?” (cf. 16:30; 22:10; Luke 3:10). They were clueless. How could they yet escape God’s judgment on that “great and terrible day” (2:19–20), which according to Peter was imminent?

38a He had already proclaimed this to them (v. 21), but he wanted to repeat it. They had to repent immediately, and be converted. More literally: they had to come to an entirely different thinking and live with a radically different attitude. Ezekiel would have said: “Renew your heart and your spirit” (cf. Ezek. 18:31).

Especially in a religious sense. They had to adopt a different posture toward God and his Word. They had to renounce all striving according to pharisaic notions of self-redemption. And they had to adopt a different posture especially toward Jesus of Nazareth. They had to acknowledge that he was not the false messiah that the Jewish leaders had made him out to be, but the Messiah of the Scriptures, the King of Israel, the Son and Lord of David, who was now exalted at the right hand of God and had just poured out the Holy Spirit.

38b Whoever made this confession had then to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. This was a stern demand and at the same time, a lovely comfort! The water of baptism is first of all the water of judgment. Symbolic of the floodwaters of God’s judgment. And for that reason, according to Jewish understanding it was something appropriate for Gentiles who converted. But now Peter required of them, these pious Jews, that *they* be baptized! And to do so in the name of Messiah Jesus, that is, on the basis of what he had accomplished. Thereby they would of course be endorsing his teaching and would be confessing that by allowing him to be crucified, they had deserved God’s covenant judgment.

But baptism in the name of Jesus could at the same time comfort them. For whoever

submitted to this symbolic watery judgment would thereby simultaneously be assured of his deliverance from the coming real judgment. For such a person, this judgment-water was simultaneously cleansing-water. Even being guilty of the blood of the Messiah would be forgiven such a person. This is what baptism “on the basis of his name” (i.e., his accomplished work) would represent and seal.

Furthermore, such penitent people would, according to Peter, receive the Holy Spirit as well, the divine gift who had just been poured out upon Jesus’ disciples. In order, through that Spirit, to share in all the benefits of that Messiah Jesus that were obtained by means of his suffering and death: justification, sanctification, and glorification.

39 Next Peter comforted them even more. For although God’s Word can occasionally give people pain, his actual purpose is to save. No matter how severe Peter’s summation had been, he had respected the honor and the rights of his listeners as he gave it. His indictment rested on the foundation of God’s covenant, on which he stood together with them.

Just as the prophets had done in earlier covenant lawsuits, he encouraged those who had been smitten in spirit with God’s lovingkindness and compassion. On the basis of the authority of Messiah Jesus, he proclaimed to them that despite their rejection of the Messiah, God’s comprehensively redemptive covenant promise to Abraham and his counsel had not been nullified, but still applied to them (cf. 13:32; 26:6; Rom. 9:4). This included Joel’s promise, flowing from that Abrahamic promise, about receiving God’s Spirit and being delivered from God’s judgment (Joel 2:28–32).

That promise was valid not only for them, but for “all who are far off”: the wives and children of the pilgrims, and all the Jews who had stayed home throughout the worldwide Diaspora. Indeed, the promise was valid for the children as well! For the covenant order of the Old Covenant is maintained in the New Covenant. The Lord God would one day, through the apostles, call into the fellowship of Messiah Jesus and his new Israel the entire covenant people from the furthest outpost of the Jewish dispersion.

With these words we think also of our Gentile ancestors who, as far as God’s covenant was concerned, stood “far off” (Eph. 2:13, 17; cf. Isa. 49:1; 57:19; Zech. 6:15). But with a view to Acts 10, Peter would not have been thinking here at this moment of their calling.

With these and many other words, Peter testified for some time about what God had done through Jesus. In that connection, he urgently summoned the brothers: “Save yourselves from this crooked generation!” (This expression was used by both Moses and the Lord Jesus to characterize their apostate contemporaries [Deut. 32:5; Luke 9:41; 11:29].) Break with this corrupt generation, for they are heading toward a punitive judgment filled with blood, fire, and smoke (v. 19). Let their leaders go, for they mislead the people, they are “serpents” and a “brood of vipers.” Join yourselves to us, the followers of Messiah Jesus, and in this way restore fellowship with God and his people.

In this way Peter gave voice in Jerusalem to the first apostolic testimony. With particular consideration of the guilty city where God’s Son had been crucified, God’s Spirit descended to issue his indictment as Public Prosecutor (John 16:8–9). But in order then to offer forgiveness of sins first to penitent accomplices.

3. The first church, its life and growth (Acts 2:41–47)

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). This promise of the

Lord Jesus to his apostles began to be fulfilled immediately after Peter's sermon. What had never happened during Jesus' ministry on earth happened now: in one day, *three thousand* Jews came to faith and repentance and changed from enemies to worshipers. Actually this was a still more remarkable miracle than the speaking in foreign languages!

41 Peter's testimony that they had crucified Jesus of Nazareth, but that God had exalted him as Lord and Messiah, was humbly accepted by many on that day. They did not reject this serious accusation, but submitted to its punishing truth. They believed that Jesus was the Lord and Messiah of Israel, and that he had just poured out the Holy Spirit. They then humbled themselves for baptism, thereby confessing: "In view of my sins, I deserve to be overwhelmed by the floodwaters of God's wrath!" They were regenerated (i.e., they began a new life) "from water [baptism] and Spirit [the Word]" (John 3:5, 7).

Approximately three thousand people were converted that day. By itself, this was an enormous number. After Jesus' ascension, one hundred twenty disciples had gathered in Jerusalem (1:15). Now there were twenty-five times that! And this growth continued apace (4:4; 5:15; 6:1, 7), so that according to conservative estimates, at the time of Stephen's death, approximately 20,000 Christians were living in Jerusalem.

But if at the time, the city of Jerusalem had somewhere between fifty and one hundred thousand inhabitants, then three thousand converts did not signify anything like a national conversion. Not even the apostle Peter achieved that on this great and final day of Pentecost. This meant that the prophecy was fulfilled once more: Shear-jashub, a remnant will return (Isa. 7:3; Rom. 11:5).

These three thousand persons were baptized yet that same day. If the twelve apostles were assisted in that by the one hundred twenty disciples, this was certainly possible. All the more since this massive administration of baptism probably did not occur by way of immersion. For how and where could people have gotten this done with three thousand people to be baptized in Jerusalem, a city with little water, and in the latter half of the day? Most of the year, the brook Kidron was dry and the Jordan River was too far away for that. Therefore, this first administration of Christian baptism likely occurred by means of pouring or sprinkling. After all, the Israelites had been familiar with this for centuries (Lev. 14:7, 51; Num. 19:19). Baptism by immersion could therefore hardly have been prescribed as the original and only correct form. In addition, the shallowness of the ancient baptismal fonts that have been excavated provide a further indication that in the early Christian church, baptism was administered not by immersion, but by pouring or sprinkling.

In this way, the miracle of God's Spirit occurred on that day whereby three thousand Jews were "saved from this crooked generation" (v. 40). They broke with "Israel according to the flesh" (1 Cor. 10:18) and under Messiah-King Jesus, they constituted the true Israel or the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16; cf. Rom. 2:28; 9:6).

3.1 The four marks of the church (v. 42)

This separated church possessed four marks whereby living churches can still be recognized today. The members held firmly to: (1) the teaching of the apostles, (2) mutual fellowship, (3) the breaking of bread, and (4) the prayers.

1. The teaching of the apostles

42a This included everything that we read today in their Gospels and epistles, namely, the events that really happened, and the apostles' thoroughly lively factual narrative about what the Lord Jesus taught, commanded, and did. Thus, not at all a scholastic dogmatics. Because the New Testament had not yet been written, the apostles would have recited some things, like the Lord's Prayer and the Beatitudes, more than once, so that the disciples could remember them. This was how the apostles fulfilled Jesus' commission: Make them my disciples and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you (Matt. 28:19).

The converts held fast to this instruction. They bowed before the authority of the apostles, and could not get enough of what they were reporting about the Lord Jesus. And the new, Christ-centered explanation of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms filled them with the joy of Psalm 119. In this way, the church "was built upon the foundation of the apostles" (Eph. 2:20).

2. Mutual fellowship

42b All of these three thousand converted Jews would not have gathered every week in one location, but would have formed a number of smaller (house) churches. Perhaps distinguished in terms of country and language of origin (6:1; cf. 6:9). In those churches people felt an intimate bond with one another. The love with which God had granted them forgiveness worked contagiously. They lived as one family whose members loved each other.

One of the earliest fruits of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was that they let go of their money and property. Some who owned fields and houses were so gripped by the love that God had shown them that they on their own volition sold a house or field and devoted the proceeds to the care of the poor (4:34). In terms of our units of monetary value, they gave away more than a hundred thousand dollars easily. That is how heartfelt their mutual fellowship was.

3. The breaking of bread

42c That fellowship was exercised also by means of communal meals, where rich and poor sat together. A finer and more ancient form of practicing fellowship is hard to imagine. At the same time these were fitting opportunities to discuss each other's troubles and to consider solutions together. Churches that are alive will search for and discover contemporary and culturally suitable forms for practicing this Christian fellowship today.

It is remarkable that Luke mentions these communal meals in the same breath as the teaching of the apostles, mutual fellowship, and communal prayers. Therefore, when it comes to the expression "the breaking of bread" (cf. 2:46; 20:7; 1 Cor. 10:16), we should think not only of an ordinary meal of bread, but also of what we now call the celebration of the Lord's Supper, or the Eucharist. Both of those were closely connected, and together they were called "the Lord's meal" (1 Cor. 11:20). People shared those communally in their homes (v. 46).

We suggest the following order of events. With every ordinary meal there was, in good Eastern fashion, bread and wine consisting of alcohol thinned with water. At the conclusion of such a love meal, people took a piece of bread and a sip of wine in order thereby to remember the death and resurrection of the Savior.

Whether people did this at every love meal, we would not know. But they probably did this more frequently than we are accustomed to doing. When later in Corinth, errors arose in connection with this celebration, the apostle advised the church henceforth to enjoy one's usual meal at home and in the assembly use only bread and wine in remembrance of Christ's sacrifice.

Without the complete meal with which the “Lord’s Supper celebration” was initially joined in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 11:22, 34).

4. *The prayers*

42d The church devoted itself faithfully to the various prayers as well: prayers of praise (v. 47), petitionary prayers, intercessory prayers. They prayed for the extension of the Kingdom of heaven, they laid before the Lord the needs of Christianity (later, severe persecution would break out in Jerusalem [8:1]), and brought to God’s attention the church’s life and wellbeing. Intercession for the government would also have occupied a permanent place (cf. 1 Tim. 2:1–2). We assume that this ministry in the church’s assemblies was not left exclusively to the leader(s) who administered the Word.

With its prayers, the church was responding to God’s Word that it was now reading with new eyes on account of the Christ-centered explanation of the apostles. From them they would also have learned to call upon God as “our Father,” in the name of the Lord Jesus (John 16:23–24; Acts 4:27). In Acts 4:23–24 you can read how they held firmly to God’s very Word.

These were the four marks of the “Pentecostal church”: her faithfulness to the teaching, the love, breaking of (Lord’s Supper) bread, and prayer. The more a church lives, the more clearly it will display these characteristics today as well.

3.2 **Miracles and signs, their meaning for then and now (v. 43)**

The early Christian church did not remain unnoticed.

43 All of Jerusalem was impressed by what had happened in the city since Pentecost. Partially as a result of the many (!) miracles and signs that occurred through the apostles, people viewed the followers of Jesus with respect in that early period (cf. 8:1). People sensed that God was at work in that group. This allowed the church to consolidate as she enjoyed a measure of tranquility—and do so in the city where the Lord had recently been crucified!

Of course, the apostles did not perform these signs and miracles in their own strength; they acknowledged that with particular emphasis (3:12; 4:8–12; 9:34; 14:15). They were merely instruments through which Jesus—the Main Actor—focused Jerusalem’s attention anew upon his name (i.e., his words and deeds).

When he was still on earth, he had shown Israel through his signs and miracles that he was the promised Messiah. For he had done precisely what the prophets had proclaimed about him: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy” (Isa. 35:5–6; cf. Matt. 11:5; Luke 4:18–21).

After his ascension, the Lord performed these miracles and signs for some time “through the hands” (5:12) of his apostles. In so doing, he had more than one purpose.

1. *Time signals for Israel*

To the extent that the apostles and other believers (Mark 16:17) performed these signs and miracles in *Jewish* circles, they constituted new *time signals* that once again summoned Israel: “The Messiah is here! The time of salvation has dawned!” For Jesus was again performing—now through his envoys—the same redemptive and promising signs and miracles that the *prophets*

had proclaimed as features characterizing the time of salvation! From this everyone could conclude that this long-expected age had dawned with the person and work of Jesus.

2. *Support for the apostles*

Through the miracles and signs that he was doing through his apostles, the Lord Jesus was providing them with *divine support* in connection with the execution of their worldwide commission (1:8; Mark 16:20). Speaking in a human fashion, their task was unachievable. But by means of incredible signs and miracles, the Lord was focusing attention upon the apostles' preaching and investing their words with power, and thereby spreading the gospel within a span of twenty-five years all the way to Rome.

3. *Testimonies in favor of Jesus' messiahship*

The book of Acts is filled with the *lawsuit* that God was prosecuting against Israel in those years, concerning the rejection of his Son as Messiah. In that lawsuit, the apostles were functioning as witnesses for the prosecution. This means, then, that through them the same miracles and signs were occurring once again as those that the Lord himself had performed on earth. Thereby their testimony was being powerfully fortified that Messiah Jesus had been raised from the dead and was now summoning Israel once more to faith and repentance.

4. *The legitimation of Jesus' envoys*

The signs occurred, however, not only among Jews, but also among Gentiles (14:3; 15:12; Rom. 15:18–19). In both instances, this served, along with the preaching, to *legitimize* the apostles as envoys of God and his Son Jesus Christ. Thereby the Lord was providing his preachers with a powerful confirmation of their authority, and he was confirming the authenticity of what they were preaching. "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you," Paul explained to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 12:12). Thereby the Lord was testifying that these men were his authorized ambassadors, and that their word deserved to be respected as his word (Acts 14:3; 1 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 2:4).

In the same way the Lord had legitimated Moses, in his day, as his servant and spokesman. The powerful miracles and signs that the Lord had performed through him assured Moses that God was standing behind him, and they served to afford him great respect among Israel: "Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses" (Exod. 14:31; cf. Deut. 34:10–12). In the same way as well, Joshua's authority was confirmed by means of the passage through the Jordan River (Josh. 3:7).

5. *Given once, but continuing to be active*

With these miracles and signs, the trial narrative is being drawn up in the books of the New Testament. And in those books we still possess that narrative today. In black and white. Along with it we also received the apostolic testimony about Jesus Christ, confirmed by many miracles and signs. When we read this believingly, those signs *function afresh again and again* even now. When we read John 11, we too see Lazarus coming out of his tomb, thanks to John's "trial

testimony” about this miraculous sign. In this manner they confirm, for us as well, the authority of the Master himself, and in addition, that of his envoys and their message. Under normal circumstances, therefore, healthy faith needs no new miraculous signs.

Or do we perhaps think that the Lord has not yet confirmed his Word with sufficient strength? Do we really need even more miraculous signs now? Do we dare still to expect, given the signs recorded in the New Testament, that he can do what he promises? Must he really raise even more people from the dead, cause more lame to leap, and blind to see, before we believe that he is powerful to make everything new one day? John could easily have told us about more signs, but he thought what he had described was sufficiently convincing (John 20:30–31).

The miracles that the Lord Jesus performed, first himself and later through his apostles, were *time and situation bound* and *limited*. That is why they were *signs*, for pointing toward and proving something. Just as the arrow on a road sign points in a particular direction, so these signs pointed to Jesus. At the same time, they proved that he was not dead, but alive, and was still working. By means of the miracles that he had his envoys perform, he was supporting and assisting the proclamation in its initial, difficult beginning. Don’t forget that people did not yet have a complete Bible!

But what happens with traffic signs? Drivers needing to turn off are informed two or three times, but then not again, and people are expected to remember the directions that were given. So too, the Lord Jesus after his ascension gave many miraculous signs, and had some of them recorded in the book of Acts. The church that would live on was supposed to suffice with all those directions preserved in Scripture. Whoever today thinks that new miraculous signs are needed for the church’s normal life in the world is misunderstanding what has been written down, and is in danger of causing confusion (cf. Luke 11:29; 16:31; John 6:30 [following all those signs mentioned in John 2-6!]).

We say this even though we also confess in connection with these phenomena that God is sovereign to force a breakthrough for his Word in abnormal and critical circumstances. But then we are speaking according to our insight regarding exceptions to the rule.

3.3 Everything in common (vv. 44–45)

The Spirit of Christ brought about a radical conversion in the church also with respect to *money and property*.

44 All who had come to believe that Jesus is Messiah, and who after their break with the Jewish church leaders had joined the apostles, also received a renewed viewpoint regarding their material possessions. More deeply than ever before, they realized that all their fields, houses, silver, and gold belonged ultimately not to them, but to God. He was the *absolute* owner and they were only stewards responsible for a portion of his property. Earlier in the Torah he had commanded: “You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land” (Deut. 15:11). They understood that they were permitted to enjoy their possessions only if they shared them with their poor brothers and sisters (Deut. 15:7–8; 1 Tim. 6:17–18; 1 John 3:17).

45 Thus it happened that repeatedly, those in better circumstances sold their property and possessions and shared the proceeds with all who lived in dire circumstances. These wealthy people put into practice the words of Christ: “Sell your *possessions* [Greek: *ta hyparchonta*] and give alms” (Luke 12:33; cf. Matt. 19:21). “So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has [Greek: *ta hyparchonta*] cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33).

With this, the Lord had not instituted any kind of Christian communism, and was not proclaiming the radical surrender of all personal property. But with this, he had in view the perishable and durable goods that are *nonessential* for sustaining life. The Greek word *hyparchis*, rendered in this verse as what one “has,” does not mean someone’s food, clothing, house, furniture, and other daily necessities, but someone’s fortune, his *surplus* remaining after fulfilling his obligations toward relatives, family, household, and business.

So the Lord was not demanding from his disciples that they sell the house in which they were living. Or that a Christian manufacturer would get rid of his factory in order to share the proceeds with the poor. That would be foolish and would have brought about poverty. The Lord was interested in what a person possessed beyond his required means, that which he could use freely.

The Jerusalem church included wealthy Jews who had lived their entire lives in the Diaspora, and now that they had made their fortune, they could spend their last years in Jerusalem. After the sale of a house they had some capital left over that they did not need for their living expenses, and which they had invested in houses and land (cf. Luke 12:17–18).

However, whenever such wealthy people observed poverty in the church, they did not hesitate from using their *hyparchonta*, their excess property. Without remorse they sold their extra house or piece of land, and gave the proceeds to needy brothers and sisters. Stated in our terms, they easily gave away tens of thousands of dollars.

In this connection there was no talk of compulsion and the surrender of private property. Mary, the mother of Mark, was a wealthy woman who did *not* sell the large house in which she lived (12:12). And Peter stated regarding the piece of land that Ananias and Sapphira had sold: “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?” (5:4). Whoever did sell an asset on behalf of the poor, however, did so in voluntary obedience to what Jesus had taught about neighbor love and one’s possessions.

This was done by the wealthy people in the church on such a large scale that, thanks to this generous care for the poor, for a time no one in the Jerusalem church suffered any lack (4:34). Several years later, however, this church was so impoverished on account of persecution that a collection had to be gathered among foreign churches for this church in Jerusalem (11:29; 24:17; Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:3; 2 Cor. 9:1).

3.4 The daily life of the church (vv. 46–47)

This heartfelt Christian fellowship was practiced not on just one day, but every day of the week. Both in public and in the more closed gatherings.

46 The Christian Jews in Jerusalem did not break away in a revolutionary, abrupt manner from the ministry of the temple. They knew what the Lord Jesus had prophesied concerning the immediate future: First the gospel had to be proclaimed in the whole world (i.e., the Roman empire), and then the temple would be destroyed. The present generation would experience this (Matt. 24:1–28; Luke 5:21–24). In AD 70, the Romans did in fact level the temple to the ground. Until that time, the Old and New Dispensations overlapped somewhat.

The apostles accepted this situation with humility. For that reason, during this grace-interim for Israel, they did not arbitrarily end the practice of observing the ceremonial law, but they waited until God himself made the practice impossible by means of the temple’s destruction. As long as God postponed that, the apostles did not feel called to break with what Jesus had called “my Father’s house.” After Christ’s ascension, therefore, they returned immediately to the

temple (Luke 24:53), and now members of the Jerusalem church were gathering there every day. The so-called Portico of Solomon offered a spacious meeting place (3:11; 5:12), and offered the apostles an excellent opportunity for teaching the disciples and other temple-goers about Messiah Jesus.

By doing this, it became clear as well that they had not established a new religion. And that there definitely was no contradiction between the gospel of Messiah Jesus and the books of Moses and the Prophets. On the contrary, Jesus had fulfilled the Law and Prophets, and his church constituted no new Jewish sect, but was the continuation of the true Israel (Rom. 2:28; 9:6–7; Gal. 6:16), although initially all of this was not yet so clearly evident, as Stephen (6:8–14) and the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews would later teach.

In addition to their public gatherings in the temple, however, they also came together every day in a more closed setting. They did this in one another's homes. In such house churches, they customarily enjoyed a communal (love) meal, which the poor could enjoy due to the generosity of the rich (cf. v. 42; 1 Cor. 11:20–22; Jude 12). In connection with this, more often than we are accustomed to doing this, they broke a piece of bread and lifted the cup in order thereby to remember the Lord Jesus.

They did not carry on these mealtimes in oppressive and somber tones—surely not the bread and wine in remembrance of the Lord—but in joy and harmony and uprightness of heart. Everyone was struck by the fact that the disciples of Jesus, despite every difference in rank and status, gender and age, enjoyed fellowship in such a festive atmosphere and heartwarming unity.

47 Filled with amazement at his love and grace, they continually praised the God and Father of Messiah Jesus, who had given them grace upon grace. They realized that he had a right to such praise, and that praising God is the highest and most glorious thing that people can do. Therefore even now, churches that are alive will continually boast of the great deeds of God and his Christ, telling of them, singing of them, as they pray and converse.

This Spirit-ual life—which naturally included their use of money and possessions—made the early church attractive. All of Jerusalem was filled with amazement with respect to the church, and appreciated the church. It was, as it were, the quiet before the storm. For when the Great Council later turned against the church, and she began to include Gentiles without adopting the requirement of circumcision, that popular favor turned into popular fury (6:11–12; 21:27–28; 22:21–22).

Now, however, every day new believers joined the church, so that its membership climbed in a short time from three thousand to approximately ten thousand (4:4; 5:14). This fantastic growth was not her work, but the work of the Lord Jesus himself. He himself expanded the circle of those who were being saved from the judgment that Peter had announced (2:20–21, 40).

CHAPTER 5

ACTS 3:1–4:31: THE HEALING OF THE CRIPPLED MAN LEADS TO NEW APOSTOLIC TESTIMONIES, STRONG CHURCH GROWTH, AND PERSECUTION OF THE CHURCH

The twelve apostles faced an immense commission: testify about Jesus everywhere on earth! Nevertheless, we read nowhere that for this task they first developed a “mission strategy” with short-term and long-term goals. On the contrary, they let themselves be led step by step by the Spirit of Jesus.

Acts 3–4 shows this clearly. Here Peter and John testified first to a crowd in the temple, and on the following day, to the Sanhedrin! This latter was certainly not planned, for how did anyone who was a Galilean fisherman ever get inside the meeting room of the Supreme Council? No, the exalted Lord Jesus had organized these appearances for them.

When they went to the temple on a particular afternoon, he provided them with an invalid beggar to heal. Luke narrated most of the signs and miracles of the apostles rather briefly (2:43). But this healing he describes extensively, because it set off a chain reaction of events that served powerfully to advance the proclamation of the gospel.

As a direct result of this miracle, the apostles could testify of the Lord once again both to a large group of temple-goers and to the Supreme Council, whereby many came to faith. To be sure, somewhat later persecution of the church broke out, whereby the church in Jerusalem would disperse. But this in turn had the result that the gospel traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch (11:19).

This entire development was not the result of apostolic planning, but was due exclusively to Messiah Jesus who had allowed them to heal a crippled beggar. With this miracle, he had naturally shown the man a wonderful favor, but what he did with special care was to advance the apostolic testimony. He wanted Jerusalem to hear that once more, from those in high places to those of lowly status. So how did he get both the people and the Sanhedrin to listen to the apostles? By means of the powerful uproar occasioned by this remarkable healing!

1. The healing of a beggar rings the bell for new testimonies (Acts 3:1–11)

In Jerusalem it was almost three o'clock, “the ninth hour,” the time for the evening sacrifice. Godly Jews were ascending the temple mount. Among them were Peter and John. As long as “the abomination of destruction” was not yet present in the temple, the church had to continue living in its Jewish context, even though the Lord Jesus had fulfilled all the shadows of the Law. We discussed this earlier in connection with 2:46.

1 Both apostles themselves had not made any big plans for that afternoon, but their exalted Lord had! Jerusalem and its leaders would get to hear a testimony about him once again, just as the Torah required for a legitimate verdict (Deut. 19:15; cf. Luke 10:1). Moreover, it had to be publicized in the center of Israel’s religious life, under the watchful eyes of priests and the Sanhedrin.

2 Near the Beautiful Gate of the temple, a pitiable beggar was sitting. He was older than forty (4:22), and from birth he had been lame. Acquaintances carried him there every day, so he could earn some money by begging. The Beautiful Gate was an excellent location for that, since giving alms was considered a meritorious work. Where better could they place him than where many

pious people would be walking? He would have been a familiar figure, known as “the lame man near the Beautiful Gate.”

But at the same time, he was a living illustration of Israel’s covenant apostasy. For the Lord did not want any beggars among his people, and surely not lying in front of the door of his House. In Israel, begging was to be prevented through compassion (Deut. 15:1–18). But the Pharisees and scribes had neglected such mercy, which weighed the heaviest in the Law (Matt. 23:23). That is why we encounter some beggars in the Gospels. Only in the Christian church were there no longer any needy people (2:44–45; 4:34). Would this invalid have known that? All the while, people continued carrying him to his little spot near the temple . . .

3 . . . and he caught the attention of Peter and John, who were walking past him in order to proclaim the Lord Jesus in the temple. Would he have recognized them as leaders of the mild-mannered disciples of Jesus? When they took notice of him, and he was lying among those who had carried him, he reached out toward them and began to ask them for money in a respectful tone.

4 Most of the time a coin would be tossed his way by passersby, but Peter and John remained standing and looking directly at him. Naturally they had seen him often, but at those times it had not occurred to them to heal him. For they did no miracles on their own initiative, but only when the Lord by his Spirit suggested that to them. “Look at us,” Peter commanded him.

5 He did so, naturally with the expectation of getting some money from them.

6 But Peter, who had forsaken everything to follow Jesus, and who had not become wealthy in so doing (Matt. 10:9; 19:27) said: “Silver and gold I do not have, but what I have, I give to you: in the name [i.e., on the authority and by the power] of Messiah Jesus I command you: Stand up and walk!”

7 And without any hocus-pocus, he grabbed the lame man by his right hand and helped him stand up. Just as the Lord Jesus had done when he had healed Peter’s mother-in-law and raised Jairus’ daughter (Mark 1:31; 5:41). Immediately the beggar senses that strength was flowing into his powerless feet and ankles.

8 And something that he was never before able to do, he could now do at once: use his legs! For the first time in his life he could stand up on his legs! And whereas everyone has had to learn to walk as a child, he walked immediately with no trouble as he tried out his healed legs. This is how he went with them into the temple. Leaping with joy he praised God, for he understood very well that the restoration of his legs was not due to Peter.

9 All those who were in the temple saw him walking and praising God. And in this way they were being summoned at this historical moment to represent all Israel. For the exalted Lord Jesus had performed this miracle, not first of all for the enjoyment of the beggar, but as a testimony to the entire Israelite *people*, as Peter would explain in a moment.

10 Everyone recognized that dancing man as the former invalid beggar who used to lie at the Beautiful Gate. Astonished beyond measure, they were suddenly seeing him walking and jumping! They nervously wondered what had happened to him. We now see that his healing constituted a new redemptive historical time signal, that first of all showed Israel that the Messianic age had dawned! (See our comments in connection with 2:43.) For then, according to Isaiah, “the lame man [would] leap like a deer” (Isa. 35:6). Well, what had happened right in front of their eyes? Later Peter would explain this time signal with a new testimony about Messiah Jesus.

11 For that purpose, the Lord had supplied him with a wonder opportunity by means of the healing of the lame man. It was, as it were, the ringing of a bell, with which the Lord was calling

together a crowd of curious church-goers to hear the preaching of the apostles. For after the beggar had hopped about praising God for a bit of time, he went back to both of his benefactors and with joy was clinging to them. Thereby the attention of everyone automatically fell on Peter and John, and they crowded around the trio filled with surprise.

What did they get to hear at this point?

2. Peter's testimony in the temple (Acts 3:12-26)

The speech in which Peter explained the healing of the crippled beggar showed clear lines of agreement with certain speeches given by Old Testament prophets. When the LORD initiated a lawsuit against Israel in times of covenant apostasy, then his speech of such a prophet showed the style and structure similar to that of Peter in the forecourt of the temple. Both showed agreement with the manner in which an ancient suzerain called a rebellious vassal to account.

2.1 Standard procedures in connection with covenant apostasy

Whenever a vassal-king broke the covenant made with his suzerain, then the covenant violator was not immediately attacked by an army sent to punish him, but he was first warned sternly. Royal emissaries came to remind him of the curse sanctions of the covenant, and on the basis of those sanctions, put before him an ultimatum. That is what the LORD also did when his vassal people Israel had been unfaithful to him. He did not immediately punish them, but out of kindness, he first sent prophets to talk with them about their covenant breach.

At this moment, the most serious covenant trial from its entire history was hanging above Israel's head, and the apostles were functioning now as witnesses for the prosecution. So Peter's speech is also not a plea for Israel to please consider believing in the Lord Jesus, but it is entirely a *testimony for the prosecution* as stipulated by God's covenant. The apostle is appearing here for the second time as a messenger of Israel's Suzerain Yahweh, with the commission to conduct a New Testament trial before the assembled covenant people.

In ancient times, diplomatic relationships between nations included fixed or standard forms for such royal admonitions. To be sure, they did not always include all of the following elements, but often they included many of them: (1) a historical prologue; (2) an indictment; (3) an ultimatum and threat of punishment; and (4) a proposal for peace on the basis of renewed loyalty. As we saw earlier, the prophets often organized their covenant indictments according to this same outline.

Peter follows this covenant treaty style. As far as its form is concerned, his speech is a summation speech in a covenant lawsuit. And like those of the Old Testament prophets, his is also a speech whose focus is Israel's salvation.

Introduction (v. 12)

12 The title with which the apostle addressed his listeners at the outset was covenantal: "Men of Israel" (this included the women who had assembled, of course). With this title he was honoring them as the people of God. Just as Jeremiah had done centuries earlier, when he addressed them in the house of God (cf. Jer. 26). Both men were giving a temple sermon in the face of the rumblings of approaching judgment.

The people were staring at the apostles in stupefied amazement. Could this man be suddenly

walking by means of their power or piety? Peter focused humbly on this mistakenly directed amazement. Not in order to place the Lord Jesus immediately at the center, but first to fix their attention on what God had recently done with Jesus.

The historical prologue (v. 13a)

Later Peter would come with a genuine covenant indictment. But in the line of the lawsuit trial of the prophets, he first recited the pre-history.

13a “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus.” With these words, the apostles provided a brief summary of their entire covenant history, from the patriarchs to Jesus’ ascension. With that name, Yahweh, Israel’s LORD had revealed himself from the burning bush to Moses, when he proceeded to liberate Israel from Egypt (Exod. 3:6, 15; 4:5). And he had remained this kind of God for them ever since: the God of the covenant with Abraham-and-his-seed.

As the crowning and fulfillment of this covenant of grace, he would one day send the Messiah to save the world (Luke 1:5, 72-73; 2:14, 29–30). Because the Messiah would do this under God’s mandate, his nickname was Servant of the Lord. In connection with this task, according to the prophet Isaiah, he would first have to suffer terribly, but then he would be exalted highly: “Behold, my servant shall act wisely; he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted” (Isa. 52:13; cf. 42:1; 49:7; 50:4–11).

These prophecies had recently been fulfilled. For it had become evident now that they were pointing to Jesus of Nazareth. He was the promised servant of Yahweh, who would save Israel by way of a route of deep suffering. And now that he had finished this difficult work, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had rewarded his Servant with the highest honor. Peter will return to this in verse 15.

The indictment (vv. 13b-15)

Continuing in the style of the ancient covenant lawsuit, Peter turns now to his indictment: This servant of Yahweh, *you* (with emphasis) have handed over, denied, exchanged for murder, and killed! A terrible accusation! Especially in view of the aggravating circumstances, which Peter did not spare from telling his listeners.

13b Rather than recognizing Jesus through the light of prophecy as the Messiah-King of Israel, you handed him over to the Roman governor. And this crime can be charged to your account all the more severely because even that pagan judge declared not once, but repeatedly: “I find him absolutely innocent!” (John 18:38; 19:4, 6; cf. Luke 23:4, 14, 20, 22; Matth. 27:23–24). In order to bring you to your senses, he explicitly asked you: “Must I then have your kind crucified?” (John 19:15). He wanted to let him go. But you cried out that Jesus had made himself to be kind, and was thereby opposing the emperor (John 19:12). In your violent rage, you wanted to have him hung on the cross.

14 There was something more, however, that increased your guilt. Because that Roman judge shrank back from condemning an innocent man to death, he asked: “What do you want? Should I release Barabbas or Jesus, who is called Messiah?” (Matt. 27:17). And although you knew that the Messiah was called the Righteous One and the Holy One in Scripture, and that his counter-nominee really had been an agitator, you nevertheless asked for the crucifixion of Jesus and the release of that thieving murderer!

15 In this way, you yourselves became murderers of the Pioneer of life (Acts 7:52). You preferred someone who had murdered and killed, rather than Jesus, the Founder, Author, and Prince of life. The only Guide who possessed the power and the right to lead people into eternal life (John 1:4; 5:25–26; 10:28). You killed him! Here Peter’s indictment reached its climax.

But God was still involved. He raised Jesus and rewarded him with the place of honor at his right hand. We, his apostles, can confirm, as eye- and ear-witnesses, the historicity of his resurrection and ascension (cf. 2:32–36). With this, God was on the one hand condemning the murder and destruction of the Messiah, and on the other hand testifying to his full satisfaction with what his Holy and Righteous Servant had accomplished. In this way, God and Israel were standing squarely opposed to each other!

The explanation of the healing (v. 16)

At this point Peter comes to the explanation of the miracle that had filled his listeners with dismay.

16 With the healing of the crippled beggar, in the presence of everyone a fresh proof was being supplied that Jesus was not dead, but had been raised by God. For the miserable fellow had not received this comprehensive restoration from both of the apostles, but from the risen Messiah Jesus. And he received this through faith in his name.

We, his apostles, assure you that Jesus has been made Lord and Messiah by God (2:33–36). And that he bears his name with honor: Jesus means *Yahweh liberates!* Through him, God saves his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21; Acts 4:25; cf. Isa. 9:5). And from all its consequences as well, like the crippled legs of this fellow. When we believingly called on Jesus’ name (i.e., on Jesus-with-all-his-power) to help him, then his name (i.e., the Risen One himself) provided this man with strength in his legs. This was exclusively his work. Even our faith in him comes from him.

Had the beggar believed in Jesus beforehand? That was not necessary for his healing, for that healing served to proclaim Jesus’ glory. This is not to deny that the fellow, who had laid near the meeting place of Jesus’ disciples, could have believed in Jesus for some time already: Jesus is Lord and Messiah, and he can do everything!

The conditions of peace (vv. 17–19a)

This, then, was Peter’s summary of God’s benefits and Israel’s misdeeds. On the basis of what conditions could the violated peace still be repaired? Continuing in the style of the ancient covenant lawsuit, the apostle now makes a transition to this new section, using the covenant phrase designed for that purpose: “Now then.”

17 Was the covenant between God and Israel definitively over? No. “Now then, I know, brothers,” Peter said in a friendly tone, “that you acted *in ignorance*, as did also your rulers”—without mentioning the exceptions (Matt. 12:30–32). He was not thereby excusing them, for they had sinned in culpable ignorance. The Lord Jesus had furnished abundant proof that he was the Messiah, but they had despised all of his proofs of legitimacy. The apostle was not smoothing that over at all. In verse 19 he will speak emphatically about “your sins.” But by characterizing them as have been done “out of ignorance,” he indicated that these sins could be *atoned*.

He based this on a distinction that the Lord himself had made in the Torah of Moses, between intentional and unintentional sins (cf. Lev. 4–5; Num. 15:22–31). Generally speaking, the first

class was punished with death. But for sins committed “in ignorance” or “in error,” forgiveness was possible (Heb. 9:7; 10:26). Jesus himself had prayed from the cross: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” (Luke 23:34; cf. 1 Cor. 2:8). This terrible evil belonged, then, according to Jesus to those sins committed “in ignorance,” which could be covered with the blood of atonement.

18 There was something else, however, with which Peter could encourage them: God had turned their wickedness to the good. Not that God was responsible for their misdeeds—they remained the people’s responsibility—but he had fit them into his redemptive plans. For he had led all the prophets to predict that the Messiah would come into glory only along a *path of deep suffering* (1 Pet. 1:11). But the Jews—including Peter (Matt. 16:22)—had not wanted that. They had been living in terms of a selective reading of Scripture that talked only about the *glory* of the Messiah-King. Thus they came under the same rebuke that Jesus had directed toward the travelers to Emmaus: ““O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:25–26). Had God not proclaimed that through Moses and all the prophets? And now Israel had perpetrated this suffering against him! But in his wisdom and sovereignty, God had used it to fulfill his prophecies.

19a For that reason, God was demanding all the more intently they change their entire thinking and acting (see our comments in connection with 2:38a). They had to adopt a posture squarely opposite with respect to God and his covenant, the law and the prophets, the temple and their rulers. They must now view all of these from the perspective of Jesus’ Messiahship. In short, complete repentance, that was the condition on which God was willing to establish peace with them.

The terms for peace (vv. 19b-21)

Peter is now coming as the emissary of Israel’s highest King, with extraordinarily kind terms for peace. Especially for this the Lord Jesus had called them together by means of the healing of the beggar. Israel was at this time threatened with the most severe covenantal judgment in its entire history, but this was not an ineluctable fate. If Israel accepted the conditions for peace being offered by its great Suzerain and repented from its rejection of the Messiah, then the Lord was promising three unusual favors.

19b In the first place, he will forgive your terrible sin of putting the Messiah to death (cf. Deut. 30:1–10).

20 And when in this way such wickedness is removed from between you and him, then you may look forward not to days of burning wrath, but time of refreshing. Namely, the time of salvation for which you have so fervently longed. For then God will once again send to the earth Messiah Jesus, whom he had destined first of all for you . . .

21 . . . in order to restore everything here. For according to God’s plan, he had to be received first into heaven as the reward for his work (Phil. 2:9), but not to stay there forever. He now rules his church from there, and awaits the moment when God will have placed all his enemies under his feet (Heb. 10:13). When things have progressed to that point, God the Father will give him the signal (1 Thess. 4:16) to return to earth.

At this point only one crippled man was standing on his restored legs. But at that time, King Jesus will restore the entire good creation of God that is now groaning under Satan, sin, and death, and will make it share in the glorious freedom of God’s children (Rom. 8:19–24). He even

called this the “regeneration” or the “end” of the world (Matt. 19:28; 28:20).

In this way, by means of Jesus’ return, the Lord God will fulfill what he had promised from ancient times through the lips of his holy prophets. For Enoch had announced already before the Flood the end of the present world order (Jude 14–15). And prophets like Isaiah and Micah could reveal glorious things about the renewed earth (cf. Isa. 11:6–8; 65:17–25; 66:22; Micah 4:1–5; Luke 1:74–75).

Peter was permitted to offer these generous terms for peace to Jerusalem, the city where our Lord had been crucified. His listeners had been on the lookout for a messiah who would establish a free Jewish state. But the apostle offered a vision for the forgiveness of sins and a universal *world* restoration by Messiah Jesus. The beggar who had been healed was one among many proofs of Jesus’ power.

Warning (vv. 22–24)

In ancient times, before rulers punished an unfaithful vassal, they would allow them first to be warned, as we have seen. For this purpose, after Israel had rejected Jesus, God had sent the apostles Peter and John to remind Israel of his threatening covenantal wrath. Anyone who continued to reject Jesus hardheartedly would be cut off from God’s covenant people.

22 For this message, Peter appealed to the exalted authority of Moses. He had promised: “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen” (Deut. 8:15, 18–19). At that time people were hearing a direct announcement of the coming Messiah. This is why some had asked John the Baptizer whether perhaps he was “*the* prophet” whom Moses had announced (John 1:21). But in that connection John points to Jesus. According to him he was “*the* prophet.” But in that case, according to Moses, Israel was supposed to listen to him! (John 5:45–47; cf. Matt. 17:5). And in his lovingkindness, God was now allowing them to be summoned once more to listen to him.

23 But woe to those who now continued in disobedience! Peter reminded such Jews of the severe threat of Moses: “Anyone who does not listen to that prophet will be cut off from the people”—this was the more severe punishment known in the Torah! (cf. Exod. 12:15, 19; Lev. 20).

With this, Peter was repeating the threats that John the Baptizer had already sounded. Such unbelievers will be “cut down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:9). And those who refuse the Lord Jesus will be “thrown into the outer darkness” (Matt. 8:12; Luke 13:28). “Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits” (Matt. 21:43). Rather than sharing in God’s covenant blessing (cosmic restoration, v. 21), such Israelites will suffer God’s covenant curse (be placed outside the Kingdom). Something that can befall us, those who are of Gentile descent (cf. Rom. 11:21).

24 Moreover, Moses was not the only one who had spoken about the coming of the Messiah. From Samuel to John the Baptizer, all the prophets had announced his Kingship. For all of them had proclaimed fundamentally the same message: It would go well for the righteous, but badly for the wicked (cf. Ps. 1; Isa. 3:10). Thereby they had promised to believers, directly or indirectly, the blessing of cosmic restoration, but threatened the wicked with being cut off from God’s people.

Final summons (vv. 25–26)

Peter declared this, although God would gladly bless everyone, for that is what he preferred! “I have no pleasure,” God had once sworn, “in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live” (Ezek. 33:11). For that reason Peter was ending his speech by luring them lovingly toward faith and repentance, by reminding them of the unique privileges that God had given them.

25 Were they aware that God had designed the salvation provided by the Messiah first of all for them? You are the sons and heirs of the prophets and the only people who received God’s revelation about the Messiah and his kingdom of peace. You have a right to that kingdom. Through his covenant, God had obligated himself contractually with your forefathers to bless you by means of the Messiah. Or as he had promised Abraham: “And in your seed [i.e., descendant, i.e., Messiah Jesus (Gal. 3:16)] shall all the families of the earth be blessed.” Therefore in him you have the most ancient claim.

26 You are the first one to whom God sent his Servant, Jesus, in order with many signs to proclaim to you the Kingdom. Yes, you are in fact the first ones for whom he died and arose. And now again, you are the first ones to whom he comes after his resurrection. For God is not intending your destruction, but he sent his Servant Jesus in order to bless you and to liberate you from the guilt and the power and the consequences of sin. Therefore he has seen to it that each of you is being summoned to repent from your evil deeds. For make no mistake: He saves you not simply because you are Jews (Luke 3:8).

The ultimatum

When we review Peter’s covenant lawsuit speech, then we see that he has fervently warned Jerusalem, almost forty years before its destruction in AD 70, about God’s “coming wrath” and he has held out once more God’s ultimatum. Fully in the line of John the Baptizer and of the Lord himself (Luke 3:7; 21:32). It was not yet too late. Jesus could still safeguard them from the threatened covenant curse. As long as they received him in faith as the promised seed of Abraham (vv. 25–26), the Prophet-like-Moses (vv. 22-23), the Messiah-King (v. 24), the Servant of the LORD, who had been pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (vv. 13, 18).

3. The preachers arrested, but their message richly blessed (Acts 4:1–4)

In total, this sermon given in Solomon’s Portico would have lasted a couple of hours. Around three o’clock Peter and John had gone to the temple (3:1), and when they were arrested around twilight, they were still speaking (4:3).

Now the Holy Spirit, as the Public Prosecutor, wanted to accuse the Sanhedrin of murdering the Messiah. Naturally, in order to provide these Israelites as well with an opportunity for repentance. But how could two ordinary Galileans even get inside the meeting hall of the Supreme Council? For that purpose the Lord used the evil of their arrest for his own good purpose. By this means, he saw to it that the Sanhedrin itself brought them into their hall!

1 For what in fact happened? While Peter and John were still speaking to the people, suddenly the commander of the temple guard came up to them with a number of priests and Sadducees. The gentlemen were furious.

2 For self-important church leaders it was not appropriate to lose it in public. For starters, they encountered two illiterate lay people teaching a crowd of people as though they were rabbis

with diplomas. This was a dangerous undermining of their teaching office and their order in the life of the temple! But what most offended the priests and scribes belonging to the powerful Sadducee party was what they were proclaiming Jesus of Nazareth, whom they had condemned to death, supposedly arose from among the dead, according to these lay preachers. And everyone who believed in him, he would one day raise them in the same way from their graves (cf. 1 Cor. 15:12-19; Acts 25:15; 26:6-8).

That final claim was the last straw. As modern theologians, they could have choked on that despicable dogma of resurrection from the dead (Luke 20:27-40; Acts 23:8). Only a few months earlier the resurrection of Lazarus had forced the Council to mobilize against Jesus (John 11:45-53; 12:9-11). Shortly thereafter, people watched them being forced to deny the report of Jesus' resurrection. And now his disciples were running around trumpeting this new once again. No wonder that the Sadducee gentlemen were furious (theological systems were bloodthirsty back then already). If this were to cause an uproar and Roman intervention, their position of power would also be endangered (John 11:48). Perhaps they were most concerned about that. The Pharisee members of the Council did believe in the resurrection of the dead (23:7-8). But this "point of difference" did not prevent the parties from entering a covenant of criminals in order to put an end as soon as possible to the work of Jesus' disciples.

3 Given the fact, however, that evening had already come and it was too late to call together the Supreme Council, the two nuisances had to be locked up for only one night. So they had them arrested and put in protective custody until the next day. And so there sat Peter and John, under lock and key. Would they have remembered what the Master had foretold: "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves"? (Matt. 10:16). At that time who could have imagined that the brothers on the Supreme Council would have attacked them like ravaging wolves?

4 Meanwhile, with the arrest of both apostles, they appeared to have delivered a severe blow to the cause of Jesus of Nazareth. But appearances deceive: the Word they had proclaimed was not bound (cf. 2 Tim. 2:9). For many of those who had heard the sermon came to faith. In so doing, their number increased to approximately five thousand men! If their wives were not included in that number, the church at that short time had grown from three thousand (2:41) to more than ten thousand adults! And how many children had to be added to that number?

In short, for Jesus' enemies there was no stopping him when from heaven he continued his redemptive work. Even though the preachers had been imprisoned before the eyes of their listeners, the Spirit of Jesus turned this evil to good, and he brought many to faith. That single "temple sermon" had borne such unimaginable fruit!

4. Peter's testimony before the Supreme Council (Acts 4:5-12)

"God, our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:3-4). For that reason, the apostles had to summon the Sanhedrin to repentance.

The composition and opening of the gathering (vv. 5-6)

5 The Supreme Council took careful notice of the events in the forecourt. The following morning the members assembled. Highly placed civil and ecclesiastical authorities entered the hall. Luke writes as a non-Jew about "*their* rulers, *their* elders, and *their* scribes."

6 Among them were familiar figures like Annas, who had been deposed as high priest by the

Romans, but who was still addressed by the Jews as high priest. He was the first to try the Lord Jesus (John 18:13). In addition, there was his son-in-law, Caiaphas, who several months earlier had led the trial against Jesus. There were also John and Alexander, familiar names in Jerusalem. All of these dignitaries were called upon reluctantly to deal once again with the case of Jesus of Nazareth.

The president, brother Caiaphas, opened the meeting and explained the purpose of this emergency session. The previous day, after the evening sacrifice, a serious irregularity had occurred in the temple. Both of the perpetrators had been arrested, however. So he requested the doorkeeper to bring in Peter and John, who were accompanied by the healed beggar.

As far as the Sanhedrin was concerned, they would be subjected to an inquiry. But as far as God was concerned, they would be testifying before this highest Israelite body that God had raised his Son and was giving them one more opportunity to repent from their judicial murder of Messiah Jesus, before he would have their city and temple destroyed by the Romans.

A striking contrast

The members of the Supreme Council were sitting in a semi-circle. Before them stood both apostles with the healed beggar. Stated in our terms: here stood two Galilean fishermen and a beggar before the dignified rulers and elders of Israel, along with the professors of exegesis of the Torah and the Prophets, church polity, and the complex casuistry of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Several weeks earlier, the same Council had condemned the Master to death.

In the language of the psalms the contrast was even more sharp. Here were standing three righteous men against a company of “wicked men,” “bloodthirsty and deceitful men” (Ps. 5:6; 55:23; 139:19), who “set snares” for their neighbor (Ps. 57:6; 140:5), “evil men,” who “bless with their mouths, but inwardly they curse” (Ps. 62:4). According to Scripture, this line of separation runs straight through God’s people. In this case, it divided an ecclesiastical assembly into “sheep” and “pious wolves” (Matt. 7:15; 10:16).

The hearing and testimony (vv. 7–12)

Luke’s report of this session of the Sanhedrin is a textbook example of ecclesiastical chicanery and formalism, which would unfortunately be demonstrated often in subsequent church history.

7 What irritated the gentlemen the worst did not come up for discussion. Their doctrinal system and power structure was being endangered. Annas’ family possessed a monopoly on materials needed for the sacrificial ministry, whereby they earned a bundle from religion. As genuine ecclesiastical diplomats, however, they camouflaged their self-interest and talked about something altogether different. They didn’t even talk about the resurrection of the dead, for on that subject they were internally divided. Ecclesiastical power—that’s what this was about.

Like real “liars” they presented themselves as zealous for the holiness of God’s house. The central question as to *whether what the apostles were proclaiming was true* (namely, that “Jesus is alive”), they did not discuss at all. Instead, they inquired only regarding the *authority* of the apostles. “By what power or by what name did you do this?” (cf. Luke 20:1–8).

The training school of the Lord Jesus was not an accredited rabbinic education. Peter and John were therefore not authorized to teach the people and by doing so, had disturbed the way of “order” in the church. This accusation would later be leveled against faithful confessors frequently: Your conduct is in conflict with our church order and thereby you constitute a danger

to peace in “our” church.

8 Peter, or rather, the Holy Spirit, responded. For the Master was fulfilling his promise: “And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say” (Luke 12:11–12; cf. 21:12-15). Not even two months earlier, Peter had fearfully denied the Lord to a female servant. Now the Spirit gave him the strength to fearlessly accuse these judges who had condemned his Master to death.

Though he did so with the required respect. For ultimately these gentlemen were sitting, according to Jesus, “in the seat of Moses” (Matt. 23:2). “Honor everyone” (1 Pet. 2:17), he would write later. Here he himself did that with his address, “Rulers of the people and elders.”

9 Sharply and concisely he followed this with: “We are being examined today concerning a good deed done to a crippled man! A sick man was healed, and for that reason you have brought us before you” (cf. John 10:32). Peter received not only the courage to address this renowned body, but also to unmask it as a court that viewed good deeds as misdeeds (cf. John 10:32).

10 So the roles were reversed, and the accused became the accuser. No wonder, for he was filled with the Holy Spirit! And he had been announced by the Lord Jesus as the Paraclete, the Officer of the Court, the Government Prosecutor, who would show the sin that the Jewish world had committed against God and his Messiah (John 16:8–9, 23–24, 48–49). Against that Spirit the Sanhedrin could not win (v. 14). The leadership of the meeting no longer rested in the hands of the chairman, but in Peter’s hands. In the power of the Spirit he tore their “pious” camouflage to shreds and confronted the Sanhedrin once again with Jesus of Nazareth, with the One whom they thought they had finished off once and for all.

By means of what kind of power or name had this man been healed? By the power of Jesus of Nazareth! For he is the Messiah. You crucified him, but God raised him from the dead (something the Sanhedrin already knew, but had wanted to sweep under the rug, Matt. 28:11–15). Yesterday he gave this beggar a pair of healthy legs. A powerful proof that he has risen, for a dead Jesus does not heal a crippled beggar. What you all, and all of Israel, must know well is this: Jesus lives! In this way, the apostles accused the Supreme Council of murdering the Messiah, and they proclaimed before this supreme Jewish church court that Jesus arose from the dead and now possesses divine authority.

11 As if this were not enough, this “unschooled layman” underscored his sharp accusation by holding out before his educated audience a Christocentric explanation of Psalm 118, which chimed like a clock! “You, the leaders of the people and scribes, you are the builders mentioned in this psalm!” (Jesus had also held this out to them, Matt. 21:42-44.) God raised you up in order to build Israel as a Spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5). But Jesus of Nazareth was rejected as the cornerstone for that house, and was brought to the cross. According to you, he was unserviceable for building God’s people. So you did what the writer of Psalm 118 had already observed in connection with the building of God’s church: what God sees as the best stone, church leaders often despise! But God has raised this Jesus whom you despised, and has made him the chief cornerstone, upon which rests God’s entire empire (cf. 1 Pet. 2:6).

12 To put it without figurative language: Israel should not be deceived by looking for a better messiah, for from no one else is the universal restoration of life to be obtained than from Messiah Jesus alone! God has provided no other name or person under heaven for that purpose. Jesus is the only One through whom we can be saved. Not only from the guilt and power of sin, but also from all its consequences. The healthy legs of the healed beggar standing before you (v. 14) were the clear proof of that.

In this way, the Sanhedrin was confronted once more with the living Messiah. The “grace-interim” that God was allowing before the destruction of Jerusalem provided them as well with an opportunity to be converted to him. “For,” Jesus himself had said, “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3:17).

Covenant trial

Just as his Pentecost sermon (2:14–40) and the speech he had given to the people on the previous day (3:11–26), so too Peter’s address to the Sanhedrin bore the characteristic features of a covenant lawsuit. It contains the same elements as the speeches of the prophets when addressing Israel about its covenant apostasy. Now, as Israel’s Great Suzerain, God had brought the most serious of all charges against his vassal people that they had ever heard throughout their history.

Just as the prophets had done in such cases, the apostle had pointed to the *prehistory* of God’s deeds (v. 10), and then to his *charge* that was based on that history (v. 11). After this, he concludes with an *offer of peace*, which simultaneously contained a *summons to repentance* (v. 12). Naturally, Luke is giving us merely a summary of Peter’s speech.

5. The Sanhedrin continues to reject Jesus and puts the apostles under a speech ban (Acts 4:13–22)

What would the Supreme Council do? Would they now humbly confess: “We have sinned and shed innocent blood. The healing of this beggar proves that Jesus has indeed risen from the dead”? No, the Council decided to strictly forbid any further preaching of the gospel.

13 Nevertheless the arrogant assembly was ineluctably affected by these apostles. They understood that these were unschooled men who had not been trained in any rabbinic school. Moreover, they had picked up on their ridiculous Galilean accent. For that reason, they took notice that such simple fellows spoke with such boldness (cf. John 7:15). They suddenly realized that these men had been companions of Jesus.

14 Still, it was undeniable that a miracle had occurred. The crippled beggar who had always lain on Solomon’s Porch was standing in front of them on his two healthy legs! This had so perplexed the assembly that they did not quickly respond to what Peter had told them. Just as the Lord had promised his apostles: “I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict” (Luke 21:15).

15 Therefore the assembly decided to go into executive session. Both emissaries of Jesus Christ were told to leave the hall, after which the church princes continued their deliberations behind closed doors.

16 And what happened behind those doors? Did people wonder seriously whether Peter had applied Psalm 118 correctly? Or whether the beggar’s healing did really prove that Jesus was risen and had performed this new miracle? No, their own honor and power were more important to them than truth and justice. What would they have to do with these Galileans? For they could not get around the fact that they had performed a great miracle. All of Jerusalem knew about this, moreover. The assembly did agree about one thing: We cannot deny the fact (as they had done with Jesus’ resurrection, Matt. 28:12-15; cf. John 9:13–34).

17 Let us then see to it that this wickedness does not proliferate any further (they used the

medical term for the growth of cancer) and let us strictly forbid those Galileans from ever speaking again to anyone by the authority of that name (they avoided using the name “Jesus”). They then attempted to intimidate the apostles by threatening them with flogging, imprisonment, and handing over to the Roman government, if they would ever transgress this command.

Foolish church leaders! To think that they could bind the Word of God, and could ignore such a startling ratification like this healing. A wicked court! To think they could punish a good deed as though it were a crime, and did not need to investigate the correctness of the unanimous testimony of two people claiming that Jesus had risen. Peter’s offer of grace, “Every one can be saved if he believes in Jesus” (4:12), they arrogantly laid down on the table. They wanted nothing to do with the Savior. His entire conduct had to be silenced. If it had depended on these Jewish leaders, we would never have heard about the Lord Jesus.

18 After the apostles were called back in, the president communicated to them the decision of the Supreme Council: “From now on, don’t say one syllable about Jesus! From this moment on, stop teaching on the authority of his name.”

19 But Peter and John did not have to think long about this. With respect but firmness, they rejected this ban on their speech: “Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge.” He has called us to testify about his Son!

20 For that reason, it is impossible for us to keep silent about what we have seen and heard from Jesus (cf. 1 Kings 22:14; Amos 3:8). In this connection, Calvin comments that according to this example, ecclesiastical assemblies that violate God’s Word need not be obeyed. Nor may preachers allow themselves to be compelled to compromise the Truth.

21 Rather than the Supreme Council asking at that point, “What did you hear and see from Jesus?,” they continued to reject Israel’s Messiah and overburdened the apostles with a new set of threats. The church leaders would have preferred to keep them locked up, of course, or even to get rid of them, but they did not dare to do this and therefore they released them.

This they did, in the first place, because they could find no judicial *basis* for excluding them from “the church’s life.” How often would subsequent ecclesiastical assemblies act in this very same way? First condemn faithful confessors, then they behind closed doors conceal this unrighteousness with a judicial *formality*. We can read in Acts 4 who committed this wickedness: the Sanhedrin, with respect to Peter and John. And earlier with respect to Jesus.

22 In the second place, the Council acted out of fear of men. For the healed beggar was forty years old and everyone knew him as “the cripple at the Beautiful Gate.” The entire people were praising God for the miracle whereby this man was now dancing and leaping throughout the forecourt! For that reason they did not dare to punish the apostles for this, for this would have caused great turmoil and serious injury to their own reputation. For the Council did not fear God, but people. Whereas the apostles feared God, but not the people.

6. The apostles place the threat before God and pray for boldness for their work of proclamation (Acts 4:23–31)

Both apostles were permitted to leave and to walk where they wished, but they were forbidden from this point on to preach the gospel.

23 After their release they went back to “their friends.” This does not refer, of course, to all the members of the church, for that number had grown meanwhile to several thousand. Where would such a large group have been able to be together? In fact, would all those people have

known by now that two apostles had been arrested the previous evening? For these reasons, Peter and John would have gone to their fellow apostles. There they likely encountered a few other believers who had likely heard about their imprisonment.

“We may no longer proclaim the gospel, or else the Supreme Council will punish us severely!” This serious threat applied to the other apostles as well. For the Sanhedrin had a long and powerful arm! Later Saul would travel to Damascus with arrest warrants issued by the Council. Apparently they could persecute someone as far away as Syria. This highest Jewish governing body had forbidden them from henceforth to testify of the Lord Jesus to anybody. This Jesus would have to be *silenced*.

24a Were the apostles at this point sitting around in a pit of despair? The situation was certainly threatening enough for that. And were they perhaps engaging in deep discussions about a safe alternative between exercising their calling and remaining secure? No, they consulted Holy Scripture and came to see their situation in prophetic light. In response, they lifted up their voice in unison in a loud and powerful prayer to the Almighty.

To whom the apostles turned

24b The first thing that strikes us is to whom they turned. Namely, not to the Lord Jesus, but to God. This is all the more striking because they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and had traveled about with Jesus for three years as his friends. Moreover, he had appointed them as his witnesses, and the Sanhedrin had prohibited them from talking about him. Nevertheless, in this emergency situation they turned not to Jesus, but to *God the Father*. That is also what Jesus had taught them: to call upon our Father through Jesus or in his name (Matt. 6:9; John 14:6; 16:23–24).

Under normal circumstances, they would certainly have done this, but now when the powerful Sanhedrin had turned against them, they said: “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, . . .” With these words, they were confessing their faith with covenantal formulations (Exod. 20:11; cf. Ps. 146:6). They realized they were dwelling “in the shelter of the Most High” (Ps. 91). What could the Sanhedrin accomplish in opposition to him? (cf. Dan. 4:35).

On what did the apostles based their prayer (vv. 25–28)

They did not immediately address their petition to the Almighty, but as the basis for their prayer, they first reminded him of his own Word, namely, a part of Psalm 2.

25 “You, Lord, are the One who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain?’

26 The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed.”

In his own day, David’s throne was often under threat, not only by Gentiles, but also by Israelite authorities. But he knew that this was not his kingship, but was God’s cause. Yahweh had him anointed by Samuel as his vice-gerent. Therefore he viewed resistance against his authority as rebellion against Yahweh who had anointed him as messiah-king. It was his firm conviction that this would eventually lead to the defeat of his enemies.

David summarized all of this in Psalm 2: What is agitating the nations? Why are kings mobilizing their armies against Yahweh and against his anointed? He who sits in the heavens

laughs at these rebels. For Israel's king is God's king. To attack him is to attack God! Kings, be sensible and stop your resistance. Otherwise God will smash you to pieces like pottery through his anointed.

It was this psalm that the apostles held onto when the Sanhedrin had forbidden any more proclaiming of the gospel. Not because David had foretold their difficulty in that psalm, for he was shedding light in that psalm on his own emergency situation and confessing his faith in God's intervention. But they reached for Psalm 2 because they had recognized in David's emergency situation the same pattern now present in theirs. (For a discussion of how various psalms can be fulfilled, see our commentary in this series, *Psalms I, Du, 146–150*.)

You see how sharply they delineated this conflict. They realized that history was repeating itself with them in Jerusalem. With their renewed insight into Scripture (Luke 24:45), they recognized in the opposition of the Sanhedrin against Messiah Jesus the same fundamental pattern of Psalm 2, and that is what they are setting before the Almighty:

27 “Once again rebellion has broken out against you and your Anointed! In this case, against you, the Sovereign of heaven and earth, and against your Anointed One, Jesus. Just as formerly, people conspired against your anointed one, David, so now, they are plotting against your holy Servant, Jesus. At his baptism in the Jordan, you anointed him to be King of Israel by having your Holy Spirit descend upon him” (Luke 3:21–22; cf. Acts 10:38).

Now, a monstrous alliance of Jews and Gentiles is turning against him. On the one hand, he was opposed by king Herod (Luke 23:8–12) and Pontius Pilate with their Gentile collaborators. On the other hand, the nations of Israel are turning against him. The same Jewish authorities who had him crucified, and are now forbidding us to mention his name. And they are doing that in Jerusalem, your age-old dwelling.

Who could ever have imagined that Israel's leaders would have joined with the world against Jesus' followers? Subsequent church history would often experience such an alliance between a false church and the world.

28 Although a new confrontation with the Sanhedrin could not be avoided, this was not due to any cowardice among the apostles. Psalm 2 assured them that every opposition against God's Messiah was futile. “He who sits in the heavens” would laugh at such nonsense. The gentlemen on the Supreme Council were also on his leash. They could do no more than what God in his power and wise counsel had determined beforehand would happen (see our comments on 2:23 as well). Therefore, neither would this Jewish-Gentile revolt against God's Messiah ultimately harm his interests, but rather advance them. His church grew astonishingly after these events (4:4).

What the apostles asked from the Lord (vv. 29–30)

29 What did the apostles ask, then, on the basis of Psalm 2? Did they ask: “Protect us from persecution and give us the freedom to proclaim the gospel?” No, they did not. The master had said: “In the [ecclesiastical] world you will have tribulation” (John 16:33). They accepted that. For that reason, they said nothing about the humiliation that Peter and John had suffered through being arrested. They asked only for this: “And now, Lord, look upon their threats.” If only God would see the opposition against his Messiah, that would be enough for them (cf. 2 Kings 19:16).

Their most fervent wish was this: “Grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness.” Thus, they did not stalwartly tell him that they would of course courageously seek to undermine the prohibition against speaking. But they prayed that he would graciously give them boldness to obey him rather than the people (v. 19) and to continue proclaiming his

Word faithfully. Just so that Jesus might be glorified, then their persecution would be merely an incidental thing.

30 In addition, they asked God if he would bring about new signs and miracles through the name of his holy Servant, Jesus. This, of course, for the sake of confirming thereby the proclamation of Jesus' words and deeds. For what kind of signs did they pray? At one time, James and John had wanted hostility against the Lord Jesus to be repaid with fire from heaven (Luke 9:54). But now the apostles asked if God would respond to the threat of the Supreme Council with new *healings!* As eloquent signs that Jesus had come to restore human life (cf. John 10:10). Thereby they were immediately putting his command into practice: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44; cf. Luke 6:27–28).

How God responded to this prayer (v. 31)

31 That apostolic prayer reached the ears of the Sovereign of heaven and earth (v. 24), who had already demonstrated his majesty by causing the earth to tremble. Especially when he sought to reveal his majesty as Judge and Keeper of his covenant. After the apostles had prayed, an answer came immediately from heaven: the house where they had gathered was shaking on its foundation!

In that event, everyone sensed God's mighty hand and the assurance that he was standing on their side. And if he was for them, who could be against them? Their appeal to Psalm 2 was obviously being honored by him. Rebellion against Messiah Jesus signified rebellion against the Sovereign who had appointed him.

Their requests were answered as well. First, all of them received fresh power from the Spirit, so that they continued proclaiming the Word of God about Messiah Jesus with boldness. Despite the Supreme Council's ban against their speaking. Secondly, their testimony was soon ratified by new signs and miracles of healing (5:12, 16).

CHAPTER 6

ACTS 4:32-5:11: THE CHURCH, MONUMENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT: ILLUMINATED, BESMIRCHED, CLEANSED

Amazing! What a meeting that was! First a man, and later his wife, fell dead to the ground!

One minute brother Ananias stood before the apostles healthy and happy, telling them that he had just sold a piece of land and given the entire proceeds to the poor, and a few seconds later, he was dead. A few hours later, he was buried!

As though this was not bad enough, this terrible episode was repeated barely three hours later with his wife, Sapphira. She had come without suspecting anything, had answered Peter's question, and suddenly collapsed dead. You should have been there! You would never have forgotten that. No wonder that Luke tells us twice that both of these deaths triggered great alarm both among the church members and among outsiders (5:5, 11).

Meanwhile, this was not easy history to narrate! All the more difficult when we recall that these two people fell dead at Peter's feet, who himself not that long ago had denied the Lord with cursing and swearing (Matt. 26:74). And then a day later, Jesus had said to a murderer: "Today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). He had also assured a woman caught in adultery: "I do not condemn you. Go and sin no more" (John 8:11). But after they lied, Ananias and Sapphira fell down dead.

6.1 The dark background of the monument

This shocking episode occurred in the early Christian church which, after two thousand years, continues to enjoy a certain fame. In part because it had repented so radically from covetousness and hypocritical religion of show. Thereby the early church stood as a monument in the midst of the Jewish religion of that day, a monument of love and uprightness. Erected by the Holy Spirit in a world of egoism and external piety. And that monument is what Ananias and Sapphira violated!

Covetousness

Jews of the Pharisee party apparently took religion very seriously. They did more than God had required of them in his Law. This is why they would not prefer to drink from a cup that had not first been washed clean. And they fasted twice per week, although the Lord had required them to do that only on the great Day of Atonement. Nor should you suppose that they walked one step further on the Sabbath day than was "permitted." But all the while they were very tight!

And this when serving God is completely incompatible with serving mammon. The Lord Jesus therefore warned strongly against covetousness. "No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money" (Luke 16:13). "Truly, I say to you," he said to his disciples, "only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19:23–24).

Recall what Jesus had portrayed for them in his parables: the rich man clothed like a prince who celebrated a sumptuous feast every day, while at his gate lay poor Lazarus covered with

sores (Luke 16:19–20). The successful businessman whose money was his god, but who suddenly died one night (Luke 12:13–21). With these parables, the Lord Jesus was uncovering for many Jews what was their besetting sin: covetousness! Among the Pharisees, however, his warnings aroused anger and opposition. For when they heard all of this, they found what he said to be ridiculous, for they were “*lovers of money*” (Luke 16:14–15).

Hypocritical sanctimony

In the second place, the Lord Jesus was uncovering much of their hypocritical sanctimony or piety-for-show. Do I help someone in need? Why, of course! Only, not out of sympathy with the poor, but in order to be praised (Matt. 6:1–4). Do I pray? All the way to the street corner. Only, not in order to live intimately with the Lord, but play the part of a pious person (Matt. 6:6). Fasting? A hundred times more often than God requires. Only, with a sober face and unkempt appearance, so that everyone will think: look at him fasting so strictly! (Matt. 23:5).

Jesus called things by their name: walking around with extra wide prayer shawls over their shoulders, and paying a tithe of the smallest of objects. But along with it, neglecting the most important precepts of the Law, like justice, mercy, and faithfulness. In so doing, they resembled whitewashed tombs, according to Jesus: pretty on the outside, but full of decay on the inside (Matt. 23).

6.2 The monument of love and uprightness (Acts 4:32-37)

Amid this covetous and sanctimonious Jewish people, the church of Messiah Jesus constituted a monument of love and uprightness. For through the Holy Spirit the church was freed from the bonds of Pharisaic greed and hypocritical sanctimoniousness. An eloquent proof of the church’s divine power! For money and possessions can hold a person in their iron grip, as Luke had reported earlier (Luke 12:13–21; 16; 19:1–10). He had wanted in fact to emphasize that the coming of Jesus Christ signified good news especially for the poor (Luke 4:18; 6:20; 7:22). That was evident in his church in Jerusalem. There, nobody suffered poverty!

32 Meanwhile in Jerusalem thousands of Jews had come to faith in him. Nevertheless, despite their large number, they lived together in deep harmony, for that entire group was one in heart and soul. One manuscript adds to this: “And there was absolutely no disunity among them.” Among them, neighbor love was not a form of arrested self-love, designed simply to portray oneself as a pious man or woman, but it was pure and upright affection for each other. Together they constituted one body, where the pain of one member was felt immediately by the other.

Although private *property* was not at all eliminated, they did live practically in terms of common property *usage*. For everyone acknowledged that God was the *absolute* Owner of everything they possessed, and that they were supposed to use this according to his instructions. Thus, they were not to use everything for themselves, but were supposed to allow the poor to enjoy this as well (see our comments on 2:44–47). Therefore, whenever the rich observed poverty in the church, they didn’t keep sitting on their money, but shared it generously with their less fortunate brothers and sisters. God’s Spirit has freed their heart from money and possessions. This was one of the first and most glorious fruits of his outpouring!

33 In fact, not only did the ministry of mercy flourish, but the ministry of the Word enjoyed good progress as well. For despite the strict ban of the Sanhedrin (4:18), the apostles

courageously acquitted themselves with respect to their mandate to proclaim the gospel. The main content of that preaching was always the same: their eyewitness testimony that God had raised the Lord Jesus from the dead, along with all the redemptive benefits of that (cf. 1 Cor. 15). Don't forget that already at that point, most of the church members had not seen the Lord Jesus after his resurrection. Their faith—just like ours—had to depend entirely on what the apostles had heard and seen.

Now then, the twelve were preaching this with great power. First, by means of the boldness they had received for this (4:29), and the impressive power of conviction that the Holy Spirit was granting them (1 Cor. 2:4; 1 Thess. 1:5). Secondly, by means of the signs and miracles with which the Lord fortified their testimony. Their word was not being debunked by a shameful church life, but was being put into exemplary practice by thousands of believers.

So there was great grace upon them. For the fact that so many Jews repented from their hypocritical, covetous, and outward religiosity was due, of course, only to the grace of the Holy Spirit. And the fact that they no longer served God in a narrow, legalistic manner, but “with glad and generous hearts” (2:46), released from their money and possessions, was also a glorious fruit of God's grace. By means of this pure piety, they also received the sympathy of the populace (2:47).

34 For it became known, of course, that these thousands of followers of Messiah Jesus loved one another so much that none of them suffered any lack. What were people seeing take place now and again in the church? Believers who owned fields and houses not required for their own sustenance did not shrink back from selling such capital assets and putting the proceeds at the disposal of the apostles. Expressed in our terms, in so doing they easily gave away thousands of dollars.

35 Thanks to this generous beneficence, a benevolence fund could be established, from which the apostles could provide for everyone's needs. Whoever needed much, received much. Whoever came only a little short, also received a little, for such generosity did not exclude careful apportioning. Some time later the church became so large and poverty relief so extensive that it became too burdensome for the twelve apostles to provide both for the ministry of the Word and for the ministry of mercy (Acts 6:1).

The example of Barnabas

36 Barnabas, a nephew of Mark and later a companion of Paul, provided a moving demonstration of self-denial and neighborly love. His real name was Joseph, and he “was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith” (11:24; cf. 9:27). Because he possessed special gifts for comforting and encouraging people with God's Word, he had acquired the nickname Bar-Nabas among the apostles (literally, son of encouragement). Therefore, he belonged to the prophets, for exhortation and encouragement was in those days the preeminent work of the prophets (11:22-23; 13:1; 1 Cor. 14:3).

Barnabas was a converted Levite, native of Cyprus, and therefore probably a Greek-speaking Jew (cf. 6:1; 9:29). All of this would later make him very suitable for preaching the gospel in foreign lands. Luke gives us an extended introduction, presumably because later in the book, he would play such an important role. He would be mentioned about twenty times.

This Barnabas owned a piece of land and thereby a source of income that he could enjoy for the rest of his life. He too was inwardly freed from his field, although it was perhaps his only possession. According to the Torah, as a Levite he had the right to receive the tithes of the

church. But when he saw others suffering need, he was prepared to give them everything.

He did not view his capital asset as a nest egg, but decided to give it away and put the money at the apostles' disposal. Apparently he did not need this for his daily living. For the Lord did not ask everyone, of course, to give away his means of subsistence and thereby cast himself into poverty (see our comments on 2:45). Moreover, later the good man would have to provide for his own needs, just as Paul did (1 Cor. 9:6).

No law, but a hint

In writing this, Luke was not formulating a universal law, but rather he was sketching a unique portrait. Nor did Paul hold up the mother church in Jerusalem as a binding pattern for all the Gentile churches. On the contrary, he wrote to the Thessalonians: "Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another" (1 Thess. 4:9). The way in which they gave shape to that love he left to their own creativity. He even organized collections for the poor churches (2 Cor. 8–9; Rom. 15:25–31). Timothy did have to impress strongly on the hearts of the rich "to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share" (1 Tim. 6:18).

In this way, the example of Barnabas and the church in Jerusalem was not being commanded, but also not being prohibited. Wealthy Christians may surely be stimulated in their own way to be as generous as those Jerusalem "Brothers [and Sisters] of the Common Life."

6.3 The monument besmirched and cleansed (Acts 5:1–11)

But Satan was also there, and he would seek to dangerously undermine and overthrow this lovely church life. Just how did the father of lies attempt that? Of course, by means of lies. By means of pretending that hypocritical Christianity was really the work of the Holy Spirit! At that point, the Lord proclaimed his disapproval of that once and for all, by means of two impressive punishments.

1 The generous act of Barnabas did not remain unnoticed. When Ananias and Sapphira heard how glowingly people were talking about his sacrificial generosity, the desire grew in their hearts to make a similar godly impression on the church. Therefore they decided to sell a piece of land, too. Oh how people in the church would look up to their voluntary generosity! "Have you heard what a huge gift Ananias and Sapphira gave to the poor?"

This was their first sin: hypocritical sanctimonious ambition, a pious masquerade. And doing that when they knew that God's Spirit lived in the church, and that the Lord Jesus had disapproved so sharply of exactly that hypocrisy: "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you" (Matt. 6:1–4).

2 But Ananias and Sapphira were tied to their money too tightly to let go of the entire proceeds of the field on behalf of the poor. They sought the honor, but refused the cost. Therefore Ananias, with his wife's knowledge and complicity, underhandedly withheld a portion of the money. Sapphira was obviously not the kind of gemstone after which she was named,

otherwise she would have prevented her husband from this wickedness.

Ananias appeared to be a second Barnabas, but he was a second Achan. For that man had taken what had been devoted to God, and thereby he had unleashed God's wrath upon all Israel (Josh. 7:1). In the same way, by means of his hypocrisy, Ananias had endangered the whole church. And he did so despite Jesus having said emphatically, when he talked about helping the poor, that "your Father" sees what you do in secret (Matt. 6:4).

But they wittingly silenced the voice of the Holy Spirit in their consciences (cf. 24:16). They preferred people's favor above God's favor. As church members watched with amazement, Ananias laid the money at the feet of the apostles. Thinking that no one could ever discover his deceit, he lied in saying that he was thereby giving the entire proceeds of the piece of land to the poor.

In doing this, he had seriously besmirched the monument that the Holy Spirit had erected in Jerusalem. What power would continue to proceed from Jesus' words if the hypocritical sanctimoniousness, that "leaven of the Pharisees" (Luke 12:1), would permeate his church? That such covetousness and false religiosity held its members once again in its grip? That would undermine the church's right of existence.

3 At the same moment the Holy Spirit gave Peter a glimpse of Ananias' heart. He was at that point nothing more than the mouth of the Holy Spirit when he said: "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart?" For although the devil had spurred him on in this deceit, he himself remained responsible for his act. He should have, and could have, resisted Satan, strengthened by faith (1 Pet. 5:8–9; James 4:7). As it was, he had allowed his heart to be *filled* by the devil. Thereby he had placed the governing center of all his actions under Satan's command (Prov. 4:23).

Why did you withhold some of the money? And why are you acting as though you are giving everything you received for your land, out of love for God, to the poor? So that you are ultimately deceiving not people, but the Holy Spirit! You are pretending that what is purely Satan's work is supposedly purely the Holy Spirit's work, and you presume to give that as a holy offering to God! So you presumed that he would not discover and punish your deceit.

4 What moved you to act this way? For you were not obligated to sell your land. Before you sold it, it was your property, and once you had sold it, the proceeds were yours as well. No one would have criticized you for keeping part of it for yourself, and giving the rest away. For then too you would have performed a good work! But now that you pretend to be giving the entire amount, you have deceived God's Spirit. Ananias had intentionally lied in his very presence. Peter was accusing him not of avarice, but of hypocritical sanctimony. This was *pseudo*-piety and *pseudo*-sacrificiality.

The sentence and its message (v. 5)

5a The apostle did not pronounce the sentence, but left that to God. And God pronounced the sentence and executed it immediately. While Ananias was still listening to Peter, he collapsed—surely to Peter's shock as well—and breathed his last.

Perhaps we feel that he was being punished with incomprehensible severity. We realize that he pretended to be more pious than he was, but who of us has never done that? He did give away a large amount for the poor, didn't he? We could easily justify a soft and friendly admonition from Peter, but death? We must not gauge the seriousness of this offense, however, in terms of our sensitivities that by nature do not know what the "fear of the Lord" is, but we must discern the weight of this wickedness from God's measuring scale. He is our Lawgiver (Isa. 33:22) and

if he assessed Ananias' deceiving of the Holy Spirit to be so serious, then then it was a serious offense. And then we must simply accept that verdict.

In addition, we must view this horrific punishment in its historical context. For it occurred during that special period in salvation history when the Lord was still confirming the Word of the apostles by means of miraculous signs that he permitted them to perform (Mark 16:20; Acts 4:30; 5:12).

For the most part these were *redemptive* signs: many sick were healed, Stephen received a glimpse into heaven, Dorcas and Eutychus were raised from the dead. But *calamitous* signs occurred as well: Saul and Elymas, the magician, were both struck with temporary blindness. And in the Corinthian church there were many who were sick and weak; some had even died. All these redemptive and calamitous signs served to spread the testimony of Jesus Christ powerfully.

The gripping deaths of Ananias and Sapphira belong to this same category. When with their pseudo-piety they deceived the Holy Spirit, the Lord punished them immediately in that *redemptive historical situation*. In this way he was cleansing the monument of his Spirit and maintaining the holiness of the church.

From this we learn that in the New Covenant, God requires even more respect for his holiness than in the Old Covenant. In that earlier covenant, he frequently punished violations of his holiness with death. "Among those who are near me I will be sanctified, and before all the people I will be glorified," the Lord had said after the death of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:3; cf. Exod. 28:35, 43; 30:17–21; Num. 21:4–9; 2 Sam. 6:7; 1 Cor. 10:9).

How much more did this apply now that the church in the New Covenant consisted entirely of priests (1 Pet. 2:9). Godlessness is even more dangerous for the church than it was for ancient Israel. The death of Ananias proclaimed therefore an even more serious message than the death of Nadab and Abihu (cf. Heb. 10:29–30).

5b This intervention of the Holy One had an immediate effect among the Jerusalem church! For everyone who was present or who heard about it later was gripped with holy fear. Which was exactly God's intention. The church of every age must be deeply aware that God is Holy, and that he maintains his ancient covenant requirement: "Walk before me, and be blameless" (Gen. 17:1).

Ananias' burial

After Ananias fell down dead, a few young men carried him away. Though in the warm climate of the ancient Near East, little time passed between a person's death and his burial—the Lord Jesus was also buried immediately—this surely was the case with someone who was punished with death by God. So a bit later, Ananias was carried to the cemetery, presumably on a hastily improvised stretcher. Without being embalmed, as was the custom of that time.

In Israel, the cemetery was always located outside the city gate, for reasons of ceremonial purity (Luke 7:12). In this case, this had happened at the center of the city and the young men had to walk such a distance that they returned after three hours (v. 9).

We modern Westerners find it strange that Ananias had already been buried, while Sapphira had not yet been informed of his passing. But an Easterner would not have considered that strange. Burial was men's work. If the widow went along to the burial place, then she walked behind in mourning garments and could observe something of the burial only from a distance. Only after the burial were people concerned about her. That is what happened here as well.

Sapphira's death

In order to inculcate in the church all the more deeply his aversion to hypocritical piety, the Lord led events such that Ananias and Sapphira were heard, and punished, separately rather than simultaneously.

7 For approximately three hours after Ananias died, people had not yet spoken with Sapphira. For when she entered the meeting room, she was not yet aware of what had happened to her husband. Had she perhaps become concerned because he had been gone for so long?

8 Peter put the same question to her: Tell me, did you folks let go of that land for such and such a price? Perhaps he may have mentioned the amount that Ananias had told him, or he may have pointed to the sack of money lying at his feet. Although this was a conscience-question that still afforded her an opportunity to retreat from their deceit, she did not repent. Without hesitating, she confirmed her husband's lie: Yes, that's right; we received that amount for it.

9 The apostle responded with this: Why did you folks agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Had they really thought that he would not have seen through this? In so doing, they had in fact challenged his ability to know the heart, and were testing him. This entailed their doubting the Spirit's divine power, closing their eyes to his divine majesty, and not taking seriously his divine will. Whereas through Moses he had already commanded: "You shall not put the LORD your God to the test" (Deut. 6:16). Defying God in this way in the wilderness had cost many Israelites their lives (Num. 14:21–23; Ps. 95:7–11; Heb. 3:16–19). We need not suppose that Ananias and Sapphira had challenged the Holy Spirit self-consciously and intentionally, but they challenged him nonetheless.

Then the Spirit made it clear to Peter that Sapphira would suffer the same punishment as her husband. This time, this apostle did declare God's judgment: I hear the footsteps at the door of those who have buried your husband; they will carry you out as well.

10 At that very moment she collapsed at his feet. "With the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked," Isaiah had prophesied concerning the Messiah (Isa. 11:4). And behold! When the young men entered, they saw that a woman had died in the meeting place. A bit later they carried her out of the city and buried her alongside her husband.

Luke says nothing more about their subsequent fate. Calvin believes that they were eternally lost. But in Scripture, the first death is always something altogether different from the second death. Moses was also punished with death, right before Israel's entrance into Canaan. And Uzzah fell down dead when he touched the ark. But that does not mean they were eternally condemned. Is not such a shortened life already punishment enough? Let us simply follow the wise maxim: What God has not revealed to us with certainty, we need not know with certainty.

Ongoing impact

11 Meanwhile, the sudden death of Sapphira, occurring so shortly after that of her husband, made a deep impression. The entire church and many outsiders as well were filled with deep awe in the face of these frightening judgments. What an unforgettable way that God had maintained the holiness of his Spirit-work!

Even now, we shudder at this divine exercise of punishment of the first hypocrites in the Christian church. It was with exactly that intention that these judgments were narrated for us as well. This as all the signs of Jesus and his apostles function to this day, so too this double catastrophic sign continues to speak its fiery language. For centuries now, it has confirmed Jesus'

instruction about God's deep aversion to hypocrisy and pseudo-piety (Matt. 6). Apparently he takes it far more seriously than we are often aware.

Nevertheless, Christians have committed this sin innumerable times since then. But even though today God does not immediately unleash his rage against pretended piety like he did back then, he still despises it deeply. In order to imprint that lesson upon us, he had that religiously-play-acting couple fall dead three hours apart in a church meeting. To serve as an example-prelude of his final judgment upon those who persist in the evil of hypocrisy or insincere and pretended piety.

That is how dangerous it can be to belong to God's church. "Do you not know that you [plural] are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you [plural]? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you [plural] are that temple" (1 Cor. 3:16–17).

Moreover, in verse 11 Luke uses for the first time the Greek word for church (*ekklēsia*) in reference to those who had accepted Messiah Jesus. The Greek translation of the Old Testament had used that Greek word to refer to "the congregation [church] of Israel." But now the evangelist uses the same term for the believing New Israel, who had listened to the apostolic summons: "Save yourselves from this crooked generation" (2:40). Soon numerous Gentiles would also be permitted to enter into this New Israel through faith in Messiah Jesus.

CHAPTER 7

ACTS 5:12-42: THE SANHEDRIN RESPONDS TO SIGNALS OF A NEW ERA AND ITS TESTIMONIES WITH FLOGGING AND A PREACHING BAN

“The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Ps. 103:8). Jerusalem experienced that in a remarkable way during the apostolic era.

Recall how many prophets had been killed throughout the centuries (Matt. 23:37). Finally, Jesus himself, the Messiah, was crucified. The people and their leaders had assumed full responsibility with their terrible self-malediction: “His blood be on us and on our children!” (Matt. 27:25).

Did not that blood come upon them about thirty years later? At that time, the Jewish War erupted (66–70), and Jerusalem was afflicted with the divine retribution that John the Baptizer and the Lord Jesus had announced (Luke 3:16–17; 21:5–38). In that connection 1,100,000 Jews lost their lives and 97,000 were led away into captivity.

Nevertheless, like a compassionate Suzerain, God had been patient for a generation with his rebellious vassal nation. Not only with the inhabitants of the bloody city, but even with the Supreme Council that had condemned God’s Son to the most brutal death possible. In Acts 5:12–16 we read how the apostles enticed the people and their leaders to faith in the Lord Jesus by healing many sick people in his name. And in 5:17–42 we see how the Supreme Council reacted to their testimony and offer of grace: they were mistreated and once again the preaching of the gospel was strictly forbidden.

7.1 New signs and miracles confirm Messiah’s coming and promote the church’s growth (Acts 5:12-16)

What a difference it made whether as a resident of Jerusalem you were a member of the official Jewish “state church,” or had joined the disciples of Jesus of Nazareth.

That “state church” had degenerated into a mighty religious business with higher and lower functionaries and official recognition by the occupying power. But right in front of their beautiful temple sat a poor beggar (Acts 3:1–3). Don’t ask what those impoverished churchgoers got to hear every Saturday in the synagogues. Boring disentangling of the law, as dry as straw. Moralistic discussions about what you may and may not do. No, it was far better to be with the church of Messiah Jesus!

12 There you would be joyful! There the apostle not only proclaimed that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Redeemer, but they also demonstrated this. For in his name they performed glorious miracles. Many other signs followed the healing of the lame beggar. Each of them signaled the arrival of a new era, signals sounding throughout Jerusalem: “What is happening here proves that the Messiah has come. All you need to do is read the prophets. The Kingdom of God has drawn near.” The same miracles that Jesus performed were now happening through the hands of his apostles. Proving all the more powerfully that he had risen from the dead and that they were his authorized ambassadors (cf. 2 Cor. 12:12).

In addition to wonderful mutual concord (2:44–45; 4:34–35), a heartwarming unity dominated among his disciples. Yet another striking difference from the Jewish “state church.” That was sharply divided between Pharisees, Sadducees, and other movements that couldn’t tolerate or stand each other. But the followers of Jesus were one in faith, hope, and love.

People often saw them together in Solomon's Porch, where Jesus had also walked (John 10:23). For "the abomination of desolation" that would herald the disappearance of the temple (Matt. 24:15–16) had not yet arrived there. Therefore the Jewish Christians did not break in a high-handed manner with the ceremonial ministry in the temple, but they participated in it for quite some time. On the other hand, they held their own meetings both in the temple and in their own homes (2:46), so that amid all their interrelationships with Israel, at the same time they functioned as a distinct group.

13 Their "separateness" acquired such an obvious form that of the others—Jerusalem residents who had not (yet) accepted Jesus as Messiah—no one dared join them lightly or with ignoble intentions. The sudden death of Ananias and Sapphira had made such a deep impression. Everyone senses that in the church of Messiah Jesus, one was standing on holy ground, and that one should not suppose he could join that group out of false piety. This did not contradict the fact, however, that the followers of Jesus enjoyed great respect among the entire population of Jerusalem on account of their mutual love (cf. 2:47; 4:21).

14 Many were affected by the preaching of the apostles and the holy conduct of the church. They were convinced that Jesus was the promised Messiah. Among them were women who had chosen, with or without the agreement of their husbands, for the Lord Jesus (Matt. 10:35–36; Luke 14:26). In this way, large groups of new believers were added by him to the church. Shortly before, the size of their membership was known (approximately five thousand men, 4:4), but now people lost count because of the large masses of adherents.

15 Through this increasing faith in the Lord Jesus and the healing power that he was exercising by means of the apostles, the sick were being laid with their beds or mattresses on the street. People were confident that if Peter would walk past, just his shadow was enough for them to be healed. This was not superstition, just as earlier, the desire to touch Jesus' garment was not superstition (Mark 6:56; cf. Acts 19:12). No, the apostles were performing in his power even greater deeds than Jesus himself had performed, just as he had promised them (John 14:12).

16 In the surrounding cities as well, their work attracted a lot of attention. At the gates of Jerusalem, people were constantly encountering those who were bringing the sick to the apostles. They did not need to disappoint anyone, for in Jesus' power they could heal them all. From unclean spirits as well, which had assaulted their victims so terribly. By means of their liberation, Jesus was revealed once again his glory as victor over Satan (cf. Matt. 22:22–30). That is how the gospel began to spread outside Jerusalem. Once again with no thanks to strategic planning on the part of the apostles, but through the leading of their exalted Lord.

What more could God have done?

So in the same year as the year when the Lord Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem, God was stacking one blessing upon another! Hundreds of people were being saved from diseases and evil spirits. Arms and legs, hearts and lives were being restored in the name of his Son who had been rejected here in Jerusalem.

In this way, the Lord was confirming in a powerful manner the authority of his apostles. All of their miraculous healings constituted a forceful appeal to the populace: Believe what these men are testifying about Jesus of Nazareth! Their signs and miracles prove that he is Messiah and that he has sent them to you as his envoys.

For about thirty years, God continued to provide Jerusalem with opportunity to repent from their rejection of the Messiah, before he would pour out his covenant curse upon city and temple.

Fortunately many Jews at that time made use of this postponement of judgment.

7.2 The apostles arrested and freed by an angel: an appeal for the Supreme Council and encouragement for the church (Acts 5:17–25)

But the Supreme Council impolitely rejected God’s goodness and patience. The stream of hearings could not melt their hard hearts. Even though the most glorious messianic prophecies were thereby being fulfilled. They refused, however, to notice the signals of this new era, and they refused to repent (Matt. 13:14–15).

Arrested (vv. 17–18)

17 What a stark contrast! God had rewarded Jerusalem with a stream of healings, thereby repaying evil with good. But this merely filled the high priest and his Sadducee compatriots with jealousy. The more signs the apostles performed and the more the church grew, the more angry and envious they became (see our comments on 4:2). They had so hoped that with the death of Jesus they would be finished with him, and now his name was being heard everywhere. Filled with envy, they observed that the people had deep respect for the twelve lay preachers who were exercising unheard-of healing power in the name of Jesus. On a certain day, the high priest and his Sadducee contingent felt that they had had enough, and they intervened.

18 All the apostles were arrested in the middle of their blessed work. Not only Peter and John, as had happened several weeks earlier (Acts 4:1–22), but this time, all twelve. The Sanhedrin’s opposition was clearly becoming more intense. They were not locked up in one of the temple rooms, but with the riffraff being held in detention (cf. 1 Cor. 4:13). Recall that not long before, their Master had prepared them for being imprisoned and even being flogged and put to death (Matt. 10:17, 28; Luke 21:12).

Freed (vv. 19–21a)

19 According to the Sadducean members of the council (and their modern sympathizers), angels do not exist (Acts 23:8). But when they had placed Jesus’ envoys behind lock and key, God need to send but one angel to make monkeys out of the Sadducee gentlemen. While the guards stationed at the doors saw nothing, this angel “simply” opened the prison gates, let the apostles out, and closed the doors after them, locked and all. This kind of act of liberation was an easy matter for an angel. And God has millions of such helpers!

20 The heavenly messenger had not come, however, for their personal wellbeing, but for the sake of their worldwide calling. So he put them back to work immediately: “Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life.” The unbelieving Jews sought life in their “law,” but the apostles were now supposed to testify: “God gave us eternal life, and this life is in *his Son*. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:11–12).

21a And did the apostles dare to resume this work? Were they thrown off balance by their arrest? And did they not think it would have been “smarter” just not to irritate the Council for the time being, all the more because the Sadducean council members refused to have anything to do with a resurrection from the dead? (Matt. 22:23; Acts 23:8). No, they did not hesitate for a moment in implementing Jesus’ commission. They left the outcome to him (cf. 2 Tim. 1:7).

The doors of the temple had barely been opened for the morning, and there stood Peter and the others again teaching the people confidently about Messiah Jesus, who had been killed but now lived (cf. 4:29, 31). Later they would be repeating this once more to the Sanhedrin with its Sadducean members.

Appeal to the Council, encouragement for the church (vv. 21b-25)

21b Meanwhile, the high priest had called the Supreme Council together, this highest Jewish governing body. Something like the combination of a synod, a theological faculty, and a court. The sharpest minds and the most respected Jews belonged to it. Professors and doctors, jurists and exegetes, priests and elders. Before God allowed “the day of reckoning” (Luke 21:21) to dawn, he gave an opportunity to the court that had condemned Messiah Jesus to death to repent from that judicially prosecuted murder.

21c-22 After the gentlemen had sat down, they sent servants to the prison to get the apostles. But when they arrived, they discovered that those arrested were no longer in their cell. They returned to the meeting hall without the apostles and reported:

23 “Everything was in order. The doors of the prison were carefully locked and the guards were standing in front of them. But when we opened the doors, no one was inside.”

24 When the temple commander and the chief priests heard this, they wondered in amazement about what they should think about this event. Those arrested could not have received help from the outside (after all, angels did not exist, they thought). The gentlemen didn’t know at all what they should do.

25 All the more so since, there followed the crowning touch: someone entered the room to report: “The men you put in prison are teaching the people in the temple!” So they had not gone into hiding at all! With this new miracle God was making one of his numerous appeals to Israel’s highest representatives. First, the guards at Jesus’ tomb had told them that an angel had opened the tomb (Matt. 28:11–15). Next, Peter and John had testified in the meeting of the Council that they had seen and heard Jesus after his resurrection (Acts 4:8–20). Then numerous miraculous healings in the name of Jesus had confirmed this testimony (Acts 5:12-16). And now one more: that empty prison! No, God had not left himself without testimony to the Sanhedrin before the destruction of the temple!

7.3 The apostles’ trial and testimony (Acts 5:26–33)

By means of the escape of the apostles, the Sanhedrin may well have come out looking like monkeys, but they recovered quickly. Without any sign of remorse, they decided to arrest them once more. They simply *refused* to listen to the divine appeal that was being issued in the apostles’ release. At that point, God in his patience allowed them once more to hear the facts about Jesus, complete with an offer of forgiveness!

Arrested and accused once again (vv. 26–28)

26 At that point, the commander with his helpers went out to arrest the apostles for the second time. Except this time not with force, but with a sweet line. For they were not afraid of God, but of the people (cf. Matt. 21:25–26). Imagine what would happen if the enraged people stoned the temple guard because they were imprisoning those popular Galileans again.

27 So it happened that this time, not only Peter and John, but all the apostles were led before the Supreme Council. As loyal subjects they offered no resistance. The Lord would put on their lips wise words to speak before that body (Luke 21:15; cf. Matt. 10:19–20). They need not have been worried about that.

What a remarkable confrontation occurred here, once again without any human planning! The twelve envoys of Messiah Jesus confronted by the seventy heads of Israel! Led by the high priest, the son of Aaron, Israel's preeminent representative before God. As chairman of the Sanhedrin, the high priest (Annas, 4:6; or Caiaphas) led the hearing.

28 Slyly and without an ounce of humility, he made no mention of their escape. He refused to see in that event any divine protection. He launched immediately into his indictment. This consisted of two points: (1) Did we not strictly forbid you from giving instruction in that name? And what have you done? Your teaching is the talk of all Jerusalem! (2) You want to shift to us the responsibility for the crucifixion of that man, and make his blood come down on our heads. As if we would have done that without cause!

You see how condescendingly the high priest spoke about our Savior. The gentleman considered it beneath his dignity to take the name of Jesus on his lips. He talked denigratingly about "that name," that man," and "your teaching," as though the apostles had invented a unique teaching (that is how denigratingly people would speak later about "the teaching of Luther" or that of other faithful teachers.) Why didn't people open the Scriptures at that point, in order to investigate whether what had happened fit with Scripture? Because they had always loved their power more than the truth (cf. 4:7).

The accused accuse their judges (vv. 29–32)

29 This time, it was not only Peter who spoke, but the others joined him. Regarding the first point of the indictment (transgressing the ban against preaching), they replied: "Surely we must obey men, but God even more!" (cf. 4:19; 1 Pet. 2:13). For that reason they were not permitted to suspend the proclamation of Jesus' name. With this they were responding at the same time to the second point of the indictment: You have spread your teaching throughout all Jerusalem, and you have assigned to the Sanhedrin responsibility for the death of Jesus.

30 The apostles had indeed done that: "You have killed Jesus with your own hands by hanging him on a tree." This was a clear reference to the Scriptural saying: "A hanged man is cursed by God" (Deut. 21:22-23). But the God of our ancestors judged differently! He raised the accursed crucified One from his grave.

31 and gave him as Leader and Savior of the world an exalted position at his right hand. Also with the intention of giving Israel an opportunity yet to repent of having rejected the Messiah and of receiving forgiveness of sins through faith in the Lord Jesus.

32 We, his apostles, saw him and talked with him repeatedly after his resurrection. And we were standing there six weeks after his resurrection to watch him being taken up into heaven. We are now testifying of that, together with the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.

The covenant trial once again

This speech of the apostles also constitutes part of God's *covenant trial* with apostate Israel, a trial that occupies such a central place in the book of Acts. The twelve apostles functioned here

once again as witnesses for the prosecution, assisted in this by the Holy Spirit as Paraclete (cf. our comments on 2:36; 3:12-26).

Here he was the Defender of Jesus' righteous cause, the Helper of the apostles, and the Public Prosecutor, who was placing Israel's highest judges under accusation by means of the apostles' words (cf. 4:5-12). Except not for the purpose of pronouncing an immutable judgment afterward, but in order from God's side to make an offer of grace and a proposal for peace.

For the Supreme Council did have him crucified, but the blood of Jesus did not need to descend inevitably upon them (cf. v. 28). Even the Sanhedrin, who had put Jesus on the accursed tree, was receiving yet one more opportunity, through these words, to repent in sorrow of their killing of Messiah, and to receive forgiveness from God from that act.

The peace proposal rejected (v. 33)

33 But when the gentlemen on the council heard this new testimony about the Lord Jesus, they were livid and wanted to put the apostles to death! Imagine: Jesus, whom they had condemned to death, was supposedly taken by God into heaven? And only those who believed in him would be obeying God and possessing the Holy Spirit? Whereas they were supposed to repent? This must have especially enraged the Pharisee members of the council (cf. Luke 3:8; 18:9).

Without a trace of remorse and humility, they rejected the apostles' accusation and the offer of grace. For accepting forgiveness meant acknowledging guilt, and that is precisely what the Supreme Council refused to do. The gentlemen hated Jesus and his apostles. If he had not caused an authoritative voice of opposition to be raised, the Sanhedrin would have killed his apostles and smothered his gospel forever.

7.4 By means of Gamaliel's advice, the Lord saves the lives of his apostles (Acts 5:34-40)

But at this tense moment, Professor Gamaliel asked to speak. And his speech was used by God to restrain the Sanhedrin from carrying out a new sentence of capital punishment, and in this way to save the life of the apostles.

34 Gamaliel was one of Israel's most illustrious scribes, and a grandson of the even more famous rabbi, Hillel. He was known for his practical wisdom and balanced opinions. The apostle Paul sat as a student at his feet (22:3). Although Gamaliel belonged to the movement of the Pharisees, his word carried a lot of weight in the deliberative Sadducean Council. After he rose to speak, he asked first that "these men" be put outside for a moment. At that point, the apostles of Jesus Christ were sent out of the room.

35 and the professor launched into his remarks. "Men of Israel," he said, "take care what you are about to do with these men!"

36 Take to heart the lesson of history. You know that in the past, there have been other "messianic" movements and that ultimately these came to nothing. You recall Theudas, who some time back argued that he was someone special and who gathered a group of about four hundred around him. But he was killed and his followers split up. His entire movement bled to death.

37 Then Judas the Galilean acquired a following. That was during the time of the census. (According to the ancient Jewish historian, Josephus, this Judas called on the people to boycott

the census. According to him, as members of the holy people we were not to pay tax to the pagan emperor [cf. Luke 20:20–26].) When he unleashed a rebellion and was himself killed, all his followers were scattered.

38 What lesson could the Council draw from that with respect to the followers of Jesus? According to Gamaliel, there were two possibilities: Either this movement was invented and initiated by people, or it had happened at God’s initiative and came about in his power.

Regarding the first possibility, suppose that this entire “Jesus movement” was purely human work. If so, then after some time passes, it will automatically dissolve into nothing. The Sanhedrin wouldn’t need to intervene at all in that case. The founder, Jesus of Nazareth, had already been killed. So keep your hands off these men! Let them go! History teaches us not to persecute such movements with force.

39 But if this involved the work of God, then the Council would not be able to destroy it at all. Be careful that later you do not appear to be fighting against God! (Would he have been thinking perhaps of Proverbs 21:30? “No wisdom, no understanding, no counsel can avail against the LORD.”) In short, whether this movement was from God or from men, *in both cases*, the Counsel would be advised, according to Gamaliel, to do nothing to undermine it.

Advice, but no confession

Gamaliel did not give any indication whether he saw God at work in this movement of Jesus. Why not? The twelve apostles who had been arrested had unanimously testified that they had seen Jesus after his resurrection. Moreover, they had supported this with Scripture. Why did the famous scribe pass by this double proof without comment?

In fact, as a member of the Council he knew the report of the soldiers who had guarded Jesus’ tomb, didn’t he? The Sanhedrin had not bought them off without reason, had they? (Matt. 28:11–15). Or had the remarkable growth in the number of believers, the miraculous signs of the apostles, and now their inexplicable release from prison made a deeper impression on him than he was letting on? But if he had detected divine work in those events, then he was in any case not confessing that here. The renowned professor came up with a cautious proposal of advice, not with a courageous confession.

The rabbi, who knew so much about God’s miracles done in the past, was denying God’s miracles in the present. All the signs of Jesus’ exaltation he left unaddressed. He did not even confess his guilt, nor did he call upon his fellow council members to confess theirs. Based on his words, the professor was not genuinely won over to the gospel, at least not during this meeting.

What an increase in their responsibility! The Lord Jesus said once: “If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father” (John 15:24).

Moreover, Gamaliel’s reasoning was vulnerable for another reason. He acted as if you could infer God’s disapproval or approval from the *progress* of a movement. And as if you could wait to determine that before forming your own judgment. But even apostate movements can acquire enormous influence. Even long after the death of their founder. Think only of the power of Islam after the death of Mohammed. No, Gamaliel was supposed to view the facts in the light of the Law and the Prophets, which he knew by heart.

Not killed, but flogged (v. 40)

40 After Gamaliel was talked out, the Supreme Council voted to adopt his advice. No one pointed out the weaknesses in his argument. Thus no one recalled that people had condemned Jesus to death on account of alleged blasphemy (Matt. 26:65–66), so that based on their own position, Jesus’ movement could not possibly have come from God. Even more inconsistent was the fact that no one called out: “Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD!” (Lam. 3:40).

By this means, the Lord saved the lives of his twelve witnesses. For after Gamaliel was talked out, the Sanhedrin retreated from their intention to kill them and decided to free them. But not without first having strictly forbidden them from speaking anymore in the name of Jesus.

To press this on them effectively, and to satisfy their rage against them, the Council decided to have them flogged before letting them go. This was a shameful and especially painful ecclesiastical punishment. Not designed for villains, but for transgressors of ecclesiastical commands. The Roman judges were not allowed to apply this to Roman citizens (Acts 16:37).

So the twelve apostles had to bare their backs because they had proclaimed the gospel of the Lord Jesus, and the whips rained down blows upon them. Likely it was the well-known number forty-less-one (cf. Deut. 25:2-3; 2 Cor. 11:24). According to the Mishnah, the whip consisted of a four-layered belt or strip of leather. It happened occasionally that a person would collapse during the flogging. While the Sanhedrin was looking on, the witnesses of Messiah Jesus bent over in pain.

So deep was the hatred of the “pious” Sanhedrin against Jesus of Nazareth. And so deep was their hatred against the men who had accused them, of all people—the leaders of Israel—of disobedience, and had dared to call them to repentance, and had promised them forgiveness!

7.5 The apostles continue testifying in Jerusalem (Acts 5:41–42)

At that point, the apostles were allowed to return home, with their bleeding backs and all.

41 And how did they leave the courtroom? Defeated? Mentally broken? That was certainly the purpose for which the Sanhedrin had them flogged. But the torture had just the reverse effect. Despite their bloodied backs, they were joyful! For they considered this reproach to be an honor! One that certainly does not come to everyone, namely, to be tortured for the name of Jesus! They did not complain about their pain, they did not protest against the injustice done to them, but they recalled Jesus’ saying: “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets” (Luke 6:22-23; cf. 1 Pet. 4:13).

42 Each day they continued courageously with their instruction. Obeying God rather than the Supreme Council. They gave their instruction first of all in the temple (see our comments on 2:46), under the watchful eyes of the priests and the temple police. And beyond that, in the many house churches, where interested inquirers were also welcome (1 Cor. 14:23).

In this way, for about thirty years before the temple’s destruction in Jerusalem, they proclaimed the good news that Jesus of Nazareth was the promised Messiah-King. Of course, this would have included everything else that we heard them proclaim in connection with earlier testimonies, especially the “words of this life” (v. 20; cf. Acts 2:14–40; 3:12-26; 4:8–12).

CHAPTER 8

ACTS 6:1–7: DIVISION OF LABOR IN CONNECTION WITH THE *DIAKONIA*

In the New Testament, *diakonia* is the word for almost every form of Christian service: preparing love feasts and serving the guests, collecting money for poor foreign Christians, supplying life necessities for the impoverished, cultivating one's grace-given gifts as equipment for helping, offering direction, showing compassion, visiting the sick, and comforting the sorrowing. For all these and similar expressions of Christian neighbor love, the New Testament uses the Greek word *diakonia*, whose straightforward meaning is *service*.

The meaning of *diakonia* is even more broad. Paul used the word to refer to his apostolate. He and the other apostles proclaimed the gospel publicly and in closed gatherings. In so doing, they too were “deacons.” Except that they were serving in the *diakonia* or administration of the gospel. Timothy and Erastus, who assisted Paul in this work, are called in our translations “his helpers,” but in Greek they were called his “deacons” (Acts 19:22).

In the church of Jerusalem, this multi-colored *diakonia* flourished. The apostles were proclaiming the gospel with power, and a warm mutual love reigned supreme, coming to expression in remarkable spirit of sacrifice (2:44–45; 4:32–47). But when the church became ever larger, difficulties arose in connection with the *diakonia*. If at that point the apostles had not functioned wisely, Satan would have gotten hold of a new tool for disrupting the church, a tool with which he could have demolished the heartfelt unity of the church and kept the apostles from doing their real work.

But instead, from these challenges the division of labor emerged that we enjoy to this day in the Christian church, namely, a twofold *diakonia*: the ministry of the Word and the ministry of mercy. In part because of this, the church could grow unhindered, both in faith and in number.

8.1 Problems with the daily *diakonia* (Acts 6:1)

The apostles had remembered very well the lesson of the foot washing (John 13). Following the example of the Great Deacon, Jesus, his disciples were called to be each other's deacon or servant. Thus, in Jerusalem it could occur that poor people would be invited to a love feast provided by the apostles. Wealthy people who had sold houses or fields for the benefit of the poor, laid the money “at the feet of the apostles” (2:44–45; 4:34–37), and they in turn distributed the money among the poor.

Perhaps they sat at tables, like the money changers or bankers (literally, table people) in the temple (Matt. 21:12). In that connection, the word *table* (Greek, *trapeze*) acquired something of a financial connotation. In Luke 19:23, Luke uses the Greek word for *table* to refer to a bank. The expression, “serve tables,” used in Acts 6, does not need to mean simply provide for meals, but can also mean: manage poverty relief and the benevolence fund. Or perhaps even more broadly: supervise the finances and look after other material interests of the church.

The Greek-speaking widows overlooked (v. 1)

1 As long as the church could still be overseen, the apostles could combine this “*diakonia* of tables” with the “*diakonia* of the Word.” But when the number of disciples continued to grow,

until in Jerusalem there was a large city church of some 20,000 - 25,000 members, problems arose in connection with caring for the poor.

During that time, many Jews were living in Jerusalem who had spent the larger part of their lives living abroad, and now they were spending their golden years living in the shadow of the temple. In the hope of experiencing there the arrival of the Messiah, or in any case, to be buried there. From Acts 2:9–11 it seems that these immigrants had come from every region of the ancient world.

Because they had been living abroad for years, or perhaps had been born there, they had lost touch with the ancient Hebrew language. This was true as well for the related language of Aramaic, that was being spoken in their fatherland, which they could speak either a little or not at all, as we learn from their tomb inscriptions. They spoke Greek, the international language of that time. They read the Bible in Greek as well, in the Septuagint, and not in Hebrew. As immigrants they would have been distinguished by their somewhat different lifestyle as well. In Jerusalem they constituted a distinct group, one that the Pharisees were known to look down on. They met together in their own synagogues (cf. 6:9) with Greek-language worship and their Greek-language Bible. In the original text of Acts, Luke calls them *Hellenists* (*Hellēnistai*).

And now their great desire was being fulfilled! They were experiencing the coming of the Messiah. Some of them had perhaps heard the great news on Pentecost from the lips of Peter. Thanks to the language miracle they may have heard it in their own familiar Greek language. In any case, they had come to faith in the Lord Jesus, and had become members of the Christian church of Jerusalem, where Aramaic was being spoken for the most part—the language with which the Greek-speaking immigrants were having difficulty. Therefore they likely formed distinct house churches as well.

Due to the fact that most of them had moved to Jerusalem for the first time in their later years, there were many widows among them. In antiquity, a widow could not pay for her own upkeep. If she was needy and had no children to care for her (1 Tim. 5:4), then she depended for support on the poverty relief provided by the synagogue. Since she had now become a member of the church of Jesus Christ, she was dependent on the support of these brothers and sisters.

Initially these women were well provided for. The church was not yet too large and enjoyed unparalleled generosity. But when the number of believers continued to grow, the table-*diakonia* soon exceeded the apostles' capacities. The Greek-speaking widows were the first ones to fall victim to this problem. This was to be expected. At that time, widows lived quietly and withdrawn. For those born and raised in Jerusalem, this was not a problem. They found someone whom the apostles could direct to assist in their need. But the Greek-speaking widows constituted a minority that could easily be overlooked without malice.

Discontent arose in the new community. The Greek-speaking Christians murmured against the Aramaic (Hebrew)-speaking Jewish believers: “Why are our widows being slighted in connection with the daily distribution of assistance, and why are they not being invited to the love feasts?” Had they left their Greek synagogues, along with the associated poverty relief, in order now to be overlooked by the followers of Jesus?

This event marked a new attack by Satan against the church. After his attacks from the outside had failed (the Sanhedrin was now leaving them alone), he was trying to destroy the church from the inside. A tactic he still uses today.

8.2 The apostles and church together discover a solution (Acts 6:2-6)

It seems once again that the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit, who is also the Spirit of wisdom. They were not feeling that their toes had been stepped on by the Greek-speaking believers, so that they were refusing to cooperate any further with serving tables. Nor did they look around for a scapegoat, but they considered the matter carefully. Thereby they were acknowledging the legitimacy of the charge.

The church enlisted in the deliberation (v. 2a)

2a The first thing they did was to call a congregational meeting. Probably in the area of Solomon's Porch (cf. 5:12-13, 42). Not that the thousands of members of the church were all present, including women and children. By the phrase "the whole church," Holy Scripture often understands the gathering of the older men. Presumably here only the older men gathered together, for in verse 3 those present were addressed as "brothers."

This gathering constituted a new demonstration of the remarkable unity in which the early Christians lived together (2:44-47; 4:32-35). For no quarrel erupted between the Aramaic- and the Greek-speaking believers regarding the question as to whether the charges were legitimate. On the contrary, the proposal that the apostles presented at the congregational meeting received universal consensus (v. 5).

Moreover, is it not remarkable that the apostles once again enlisted the church? (Cf. 1:15-26; 15:4, 22). After this period there was never again any group with the kind of authority in Christ's church as his twelve apostles exercised. Nevertheless, they did not treat the church like a group of immature laity. On the contrary, they called them together as mature believers. And in that meeting, they didn't foist on them any decrees, but entered into fraternal discussion with them and they focused on the question that should really govern every ecclesiastical meeting: What would the *Lord Jesus* want us to do?

Each one remain with his calling (v. 2b)

2b Clearly the ministry of the tables grew beyond the capacities of the apostles. Perhaps in this connection, as mentioned earlier, we should think not only of poverty relief, but also of more ecclesiastical housekeeping needs. Many things belonged to this category. Selling houses and fields for the benefit of the poor brought significant capital. The apostles were responsible for administering and distributing these large amounts (4:34). And did so in a fast-growing church of many thousands of members! No wonder that this work demanded so much of their time and energy. And now Greek-speaking widows were falling victim to that situation.

Behind these difficulties connected with poverty relief, however, the apostles saw another problem. Through the growth of the church, the scope of the support work was continuing to expand as well. The threat occasioned by that expansion was that the ministry of the Word would be subordinated to the ministry of mercy.

The Lord Jesus certainly would not have wanted that to happen. He had appointed the apostles to be his *witnesses* (1:8). Not that they should view poverty relief as inferior, but the Lord had not called them to that ministry. They were supposed to proclaim Jesus, the Bread that gives eternal life (John 6:35). They must not neglect that high calling to do other good work to which the Lord had not called them. Moreover, the apostles saw no opportunity for combining both ministries any longer.

Needed division of labor (vv. 3–4)

3 Meanwhile, widows and orphans had been God’s special favorites from antiquity, for whom the church ought to have cared very well (cf. Deut. 14:29; 24:19; 26:12; Isa. 1:17; Zech. 7:10; James 1:27). So it was a serious matter that especially with the daily distribution of life necessities they were overlooked. And that such should happen in the church of the Lord Jesus, who while on earth had provided such a demonstration of generosity by means of his abundant distribution of bread and fish (Luke 9:10–17). This explains why the twelve thought that a kind of division of labor was needed for the *diakonia*.

They did not announce this, however, like a one-sided apostolic decision, but they formulated a proposal: Brothers, choose from among yourselves seven capable men who have a good reputation and are full of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Tim. 3). The apostles apparently thought that poverty relief was just as much divine work as that of administering the Word. This explains why their proposal envisioned wise, discerning men who had received from the Holy Spirit the gifts needed for this tender work.

4 We apostles can no longer be tasked with administering tables. We want to serve (Greek, “be deacons”), but in the future we will restrict ourselves to the *diakonia* of the Word and the prayers. This was figurative language for proclaiming the gospel! The Greek verb *diakoneō* means “to serve tables.” This is what Martha did when the Lord Jesus visited her home, and what Peter’s mother-in-law did after the Lord had healed her: walk around with a tray and set food before someone. The apostles used that word for their work: *serve* people with the Word of God.

The proposal accepted and implemented (vv. 5–6)

5 The proposal of the apostles fell in good soil at the meeting. As a result, people chose the following seven brothers: Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. We hear about his work and his life’s end in a moment. In addition, Philip, the man who would later baptize the first African (8:26–40). Later Doctor Luke would lodge with him in Caesarea for several days. In addition, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, and Parmenas. Finally, Nicolaus, a fellow Jew from Antioch, a Gentile who had subscribed to the Jewish faith before he became a Christian.

These brothers all had Greek names. Although we do encounter these names among Jews in Palestine, we nonetheless get the impression that in this case, in order to put the Greek-speaking members of the church at ease, the gathering purposely nominated Greek-speaking brothers. In so doing, they were being wise enough to deal with each other in peace and love (cf. Prov. 19:22a). Even Nicolaus, a convert and circumcised Gentile, was nominated.

6 These seven brothers were chosen by the church and brought before the apostles to be appointed. After the apostles prayed for God’s blessing and strength upon them, they laid their hands on them. Thereby the Holy Spirit was bestowed upon them, though not for the first time (cf. 8:17), for they were chosen because they were already filled with the Holy Spirit (v. 3). But in this way, the responsibility for the “table *diakonia*” was transferred to them symbolically, and the help of the Holy Spirit was being sought. In this manner, the murmuring Hellenists were satisfied through the appointment of these seven Hellenists.

The first deacons or their predecessors?

It is a disputed matter whether the seven brothers were the first deacons as we know them in today's church. Ancient ecclesiastical writers, and later, John Calvin, read in Acts 6:1–6 the institution of the deacon's office. Others saw the task of the "Seven" as a temporary function, one that was tied to the church of Jerusalem.

It is true that Luke does not explicitly call the seven brothers "deacons," but this is not decisive. After all, he was not writing a book about the origin of the church's polity and organization. But in the literal sense of the word, the "Seven" were in fact deacons (i.e., servants). They served in supporting the poor and widows. So even if they were not the first deacons in today's sense of the word, they were undoubtedly the predecessors of our deacons.

The comparison between the "Seven" and today's deacons does not extend much further than that. For we later read about Stephen that in addition to his table ministry, he performed "great wonders and signs" and argued in the synagogues with deep wisdom (6:8–10). And Philip, who was also one of the "Seven," taught the palace official from Ethiopia and baptized the man himself. These brothers occupied unique positions that had to do with the history of salvation, positions from which we cannot draw direct indications for today's office of deacon.

But whether the "Seven" were the first ones to occupy the deacon's office, two things can be learned from this episode: first, that church needed leadership in connection with the ministry of mercy; and second, that such leadership should not rest in the hands of the ministers of the Word. Churches in our day ignore this apostolic wisdom to their injury.

Directors of the church's fellowship

As far as the leadership of the ministry of mercy is concerned, we read that the seven were appointed over the *diakonia* of the tables. From this time forward, they were supposed to provide leadership to the Jerusalem *diakonia* for the poor. In this we find an important indication for the task of our deacons today.

In fact, every member of the church are called to be a deacon or servant toward one another in mutual love. All forms of Christian works of love are then *diakonia* as well. But for that, the Holy Spirit gives some men and women special gifts, as he did to the "Seven." Therefore the apostles appointed them to provide *leadership* in Jerusalem to the demonstration of mutual affection. Not to take over from others such demonstrations of affection, but in order, like master conductors, to stimulate and coordinate these efforts of Christian works of service. We might call them the *coordinators* of congregational service.

May that remain the ideal for our day as well: a church where every member is a deacon or deaconess, excelling in works of love. Fired up for that by means of the officially appointed deacons. For good deacons show how the church should be imitating the love of the great Deacon, Jesus Christ, toward those in need. They function not as substitutes on whom the church can shift the work of mercy, but as those who are the work providers. Only when others leave needs unattended do they spring into action. In short, in a lively church, the deacons function as the conductors of congregational fellowship.

The church in Jerusalem chose capable, discerning brothers for that work. The church in Cenchreae later had a woman deacon. Paul wrote: "I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [ESV note: deaconess] of the church at Cenchreae" (Rom. 16:1), though this could simply refer to the fact that she was doing a lot of benevolent work, just like numerous women quietly perform much Christian *diakonia*. Although never ordained to the ecclesiastical office of deacon, they are deaconesses in true form.

For the rest, the New Testament provides no detailed description of the deacon's task. Their work differs from place to place and from age to age. But it would have consisted in all times and places in *servicing* the church and in stimulating various forms of *mutual diakonia* or works of Christian charity.

Division of labor connected with diakonia

Although the apostles were each filled with the Holy Spirit, they acknowledged that they were unable to take adequate care of the housekeeping matters of such a large church in addition to proclaiming the gospel. They had their hands full with the *diakonia* of Word and prayer.

This applies even more to today's ministers of the Word. Of course, they are far beneath the apostles. But they are similarly called to the "*diakonia* of the Word." For this ministry they should be thoroughly knowledgeable about it, and realize that this is such a comprehensive task that it requires the whole person and all his time and energy (cf. Paul's admonition: "Be diligent in these things; give thyself wholly to them" [1 Tim. 4:15, ASV]). Wherever preachers become overburdened, however, with various social and administrative work, so that they have hardly any time left for Bible study and prayer, the ministry of the Word often suffers deplorably. And what happens then? "Where there is no prophetic vision, the people cast off restraint" (Prov. 29:18).

For that reason, the apostles relinquished doing poverty relief, for the sake of the ministry of the Word. They knew that they were not the only ones to whom the Spirit had given gifts for the ministry of mercy. As well as for less important matters. For the benefit of churches and their leadership bodies, it is very important that they put into practice in their own situation the lesson of the Scripture passage.

For the rest, the New Testament nowhere talks in a bureaucratic fashion about the boundaries of various ministries. The apostle Paul wrote that Christ had sent him not to baptize, but to proclaim the gospel. Nevertheless, he did baptize on occasion (1 Cor. 1:17), and he organized in faraway places a collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. And Stephen, who was charged with leading the ministry of mercy, taught from the Scripture. In our opinion, Stephen was occasionally performing the work of an apostle, and Paul was doing deacon work. Apparently the boundaries between the various offices or ministries was flexible. Stephen was even martyred because he had not restricted himself to the ministry of the tables.

8.3 The salutary results of the division of labor (Acts 6:7)

Soon it was evident that the apostles and the church had made a wise decision. The division of labor in the *diakonia* provided the twelve from now on with the opportunity to devote all their time and energy to the *diakonia* of the Word. And that was blessed richly. Luke mentions four results: (1) the Word of God spread; (2) the number of disciples increased, (3) and did so in Jerusalem; and (4) a great multitude of the priests came to faith.

7 (1) We would perhaps have listed the growth in membership first, but Luke first mentions the continually increasing influence of the Word of God. Just like the water of a river rushes along in springtime, so too *the Word* rushed throughout Jerusalem. Its dominion over the hearts and lives of believers grew like mustard seeds (Luke 8:11–15). The Sanhedrin could not stop that. For the gospel "is a power of God" (Rom. 1:16). It resembles a seed that germinates and

grows by itself, apart from our knowing how (Mark 4:26–29).

In the same way, the powerful expansion of the gospel in the sixteenth century was, according to Luther, not human work: “While I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philip and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything.” Before that time, however, the gospel had made a far more impressive triumphal march: from Jerusalem, it had acquainted Europe, from Greece to the North Cape, with the Lord Jesus.

(2) The problems connected with the *diakonia* had arisen through the expansion of the church (v. 1). But now that those problems had been solved and the apostles could devote all their time and energy to proclaiming the gospel, the church grew continually in *the number of members*. Luke described it as strong growth. There, too, the increasing influence of the Word of God came to be seen.

(3) And then to imagine that all of this occurred *in Jerusalem*, the apostate city of blood, where the Lord had been crucified and the Sanhedrin had flogged the apostles and had imposed a strict ban against their preaching! Even there “massive” conversions of Jews occurred, before the city was afflicted in A.D. 70 with God’s covenant curse.

(4) The most poignant proof of the supremacy of God’s Word was the fact that *priests* were now also listening to the summons to believe and repent. Not an individual here or there, but a numerous multitude! (This, in contrast to the chief priests in the Sanhedrin, who became more and more hardened [5:24].)

For several months these “ordinary” priests had probably given credence to the official “press releases” of the Sanhedrin: “Jesus’ corpse was stolen.” But now they were deeply affected by the words, wonders, and signs with which the apostles were proving that Jesus had in fact risen. Thus these priests became more and more disconnected from the web of lies promoted by the Sanhedrin, and came to faith-obedience.

As Levites, it was their office to function as mediators between God and his people, to offer the sacrifices connected with that. Now they recognized in the Lord Jesus the Man of Sorrows and the Lamb of God spoken about in Isaiah 53. And just as they had initially been called to teach the people from the Word, these teachers now became in turn pupils and disciples of Messiah Jesus. What a fresh encouragement for the thousands of believers, that these priests also entered into their groups!

Did they at that point immediately quit their work in connection with the sacrificial ministry in the temple? We wonder about that. The Lord Jesus had foretold to his apostles that during their lifetime God would cause the temple to be destroyed down to its last stone. When they would see “the abomination of desolation” in the holy place, the end of the temple ministry was imminent (Matt. 24:14). As long as God still delayed that judgment, the Jewish believers did not arbitrarily break with observing the ceremonial law. Moreover, the significance of Jesus’ death for the sacrificial ministry and observing the Law would not have been immediately clear to them yet. The letter to the Hebrews had not yet been written! Later it would appear that the believers in Jerusalem were still hesitating with respect to the transition from the Old to the New Testament. But especially Stephen, one of the “Seven,” would help many cross that threshold of fear, by means of his deep insight into the manner in which the Lord Jesus had fulfilled the Scriptures.

CHAPTER 9

ACTS 6:8–15: STEPHEN PROCLAIMS THE FULFILLMENT OF LAW AND TEMPLE, FOR WHICH HE IS ACCUSED OF BLASPHEMY

If ever there was a difficult transitional stage in church history, then surely it was when the apostles proclaimed the gospel orally and in writing. Those were unique years, when the Old and New Testaments continued to overlap. For the old dispensation had ended in many respects on Good Friday, but the sanctuary was destroyed only in A.D. 70.

Under these circumstances, the apostles were standing on the threshold between two dispensations. On the one side, they were still living fully under the Old Testament. They were circumcised, and from their youth they had served God in the temple. For a significant period after Jesus' ascension they had even proclaimed the gospel in the temple. On the other side, the Lord had foretold to them that their generation would be experiencing the destruction of the temple (Matt. 24:34). And God had underscored this prophecy by tearing the curtain in the temple (Matt. 27:51).

Nevertheless, it was not an apostle but Stephen who led the church with the lamp of Scripture across the threshold from Old to New Testament. More sharply and quickly than they, Stephen recognized the significance of Christ's coming for the continued observance of law and temple ministry. He had to seal this pathbreaking labor, however, with martyrdom.

But he continues to speak, even today. For Saul of Tarsus, who still at that point agreed with Stephen's execution, would later take the torch from him and communicate his insights, both to Jews and to Gentiles. When you read Paul, you hear Stephen in the background.

Before we discuss his activity, however, we need to make three comments. First, about the fulfillment of the Law; second, about the disappearance of the temple; and third, about the assistance that the Holy Spirit provided the church in connection with the difficult step across the threshold from the Old to the New Dispensation.

9.1 Jesus' instruction about the fulfillment of the law

So let's turn first to the time when the law was given. Israel had been liberated from Egypt and was en route to Canaan. At Mount Sinai, Yahweh comes to them with three surprising blessings.

First, he declares that he is Israel's *Suzerain*. Secondly, as their Suzerain he establishes a (vassal) *covenant* with Israel, laying it, as it were, atop the covenant with Abraham. Thirdly, he promises to come *dwell* among Israel. Moses receives instructions regarding how he wanted his royal tent to look, and how Israel was to be allowed to serve him there. With what sacrifices, on what occasions, and through the mediation of what kind of priests. In addition, Yahweh acted like a good ruler in giving Israel a collection of salutary laws, as the basis for Israelite society. These three benefits constitute the core of the Torah or Law of Moses.

When Stephen is later accused of blasphemy against "Moses" and "the Law," you should not think that this refers exclusively to the Ten Commandments, but to the five books of Moses: Genesis - Deuteronomy. With the term *Law* or *Torah*, Scripture is referring to all of the divine instructions contained in those five books, dealing with God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; God's kingship and dwelling among his people; the ministry of sacrifice and of the priests; and Israel's living as God's holy people. When Stephen later begins his defense speech with the calling of Abraham, then he is thereby paging through the opening chapters of the Law!

Now, according to Paul, the Law also had the task of *protecting* Israel against pagan influences. Therefore he compared the Law with an ancient *pedagogue*, a slave who would accompany the children from his master's house to school, and would also teach them. In this same way, God had placed his son Israel under the authority of the law. "So then, the law was our guardian [*paidagōgos*] until Christ came" (Gal. 3:24). The Law was supposed to take Israel firmly by the hand until the time when the Messiah came, and to impress Israel never to surrender to paganism.

In Ephesians 2:14–15, Paul clarifies this task of the Law with the illustration of a wall. The prescriptions of the Law served as a wall of separation between Israel and the pagan nations. Thereby Yahweh was screening his people from the pagans, and he constantly pressed this upon Israel: Be holy, for I am holy!

According to the Law of Moses, the Israelite church had served God for more than a thousand years. With sacrifices and streams of animal blood. Through the mediation of priests. On prescribed feast days. In terms of a religious and obligatory diet. With laws for clean and uncleanness. With a sanctuary and a high priest.

No wonder that Stephen gave his Jewish listeners an enormous shock when he proclaimed: "The Law was supposed to be our baby-sitter as long as the Messiah had not yet arrived. But with his coming, its job is finished!" In their way of thinking, this was nothing less than a religious earthquake. Nevertheless, he had not invented this notion, but he was speaking through the Spirit of Christ. The Master himself had already announced these changes.

"Do not think," he had said, "that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to *fulfill* them" (Matt. 5:17). What happened with the Law is similar to what happens with an engagement that ends up in being married. The end of the engagement does not signify that thereby the love relationship has ended, but that it has reached fulfillment! It thereby reaches its ultimate purpose and fullness. So too, the Lord Jesus did not come to abolish the Law, to reject it, to declare it invalid, or to annul it, but to fulfill the Law.

This means, first, that he came to fulfill the requirements of the Law. This includes the regulation, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sin" (Heb. 9:22). Secondly, this means that over against the misinterpretation by the Pharisees and scribes, he brought to light the Law's gospel (evangelical) meaning. And thirdly, this means that he rounded off the teaching of the Law and the Prophets, he deepened it, completed it, finished it, and brought it to its conclusion. He did not reduce the measuring standard of obedience, but rather he increased it. "You have heard that it was said to those of old . . . But I say to you . . ." In so doing, he was demanding more righteousness than the Law had ever required (see Matt. 5:17–48).

Now to be sure, all the institutions of the Law whereby Jesus' work was typified (sacrificial ministry, sabbaths, and the like) are made obsolete with his coming. We are no longer obligated to observe circumcision, Passover, and other Israelite feasts, as well as the Mosaic purity- and food-laws. All such ordinances have reached their destination in Christ (Rom. 10:4). With his coming the legislation of Sinai achieved its purpose. But this does not deny that the Law is and remains God's Word. Its "truth and substance" retain their abiding significance in Christ Jesus (cf. Belgic Confession, art. 25). He has simply transposed its demands into a higher octave. With his example he is now our law (1 Cor. 9:20–21).

With this insight, Stephen was ahead of even a man as assertive as Peter. For Peter needed a special vision before he recognized the new situation in the kingdom (Acts 10). Without this further instruction he would never have dared to enter the house of the Gentile officer Cornelius. That is how strictly he still held to the Mosaic food laws. But the Law had fulfilled its task as

pedagogue. And the Law as the wall of separation between Jews and Gentile was also torn down by Christ's sacrifice. Stephen possessed this insight then already, but Peter did not.

9.2 Jesus' instruction about the obsolescence and disappearance of the temple

Our Lord Jesus Christ fostered deep respect and love for the temple. He called it "my Father's house" (John 2:16). "Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching," he said in connection with his arrest (Mark 14:49). As a lad of twelve years old, he stayed behind in the temple to be taught by the rabbis (Luke 2:46). He could not put up with the obnoxious noise of the animal and money market in God's house (John 2:13–17). Nevertheless, with all his fiery zeal for the temple, he knew that his Father was busy with an unheard of work of the Spirit. Thereby the house of his Father would soon have served its purpose and now faced imminent disappearance (cf. Heb. 8:13).

To the Samaritan woman he put it this way: "Believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. . . . The true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth" (John 4:21–24). Now that he had come to earth, he could declare with certainty: "Something greater than the temple is here" (Matt. 12:6). For as close as God had come near to us human beings in his incarnate Son, he had never come that close to us in his temple.

In connection with that earthly dwelling, under the Old Covenant for more than a thousand years animal blood was shed as atonement for sins. But the Lord Jesus gave his own blood and this signified, according to him, the immediate change in covenant dispensation. When in the night before he died he instituted the Lord's Supper, and passed around the cup, he said, "This is *my* blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28). And when he died for our sins as the Lamb of God, the Father did not wait for a moment to provide his commentary: the curtain in the temple was torn from top to bottom (Matt. 27:51).

What was God testifying by that? Was he thereby directing our attention to the connection between the shadowy worship and the death of our Savior? And was he thereby preparing Israel for the disappearance of the Old Covenant? Because the High Priest of the New Covenant had now fulfilled all the required obedience, and was ready to enter the heavenly sanctuary with his blood? (Heb. 8:13; 9:11–12). In short, did the torn curtain herald the obsolescence of the Horeb covenant and the disappearance of the temple?

Or must we view it as a divine underscoring of the strict statement that Jesus had made shortly before: "See, your house is left to you desolate" (Matt. 23:38)? And a divine underscoring of what Jesus had said then to his disciples: "Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down" (Matt. 24:2)?

Perhaps we could best understand that with the torn curtain God has confirmed both of these interpretations: both the obsolescence of the temple by means of Jesus' sacrificial death, and the destruction of the temple according to Jesus' prophecy of judgment. Not forty years later (in A.D. 70) it was torn to the ground by the Romans. At that point, not only was the Horeb covenant obsolete and gone, but also the sanctuary associated with it. Stephen had a sharp eye for this development as well.

9.3 The Spirit of clarity in the truth

It is understandable that the first Christians, all of whom were Jews, were harboring initial

resistance in connection with the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. You can imagine: for more than one thousand years, Israel had served God according to the Law of Moses and by means of the sanctuary as part of the Horeb covenant. And now both of these were at the point of disappearing forever (Heb. 8:13). The time had arrived about which the prophet Jeremiah had prophesied when he announced the New Covenant (Jer. 31:27–34). But who discerned that change?

During that difficult transition stage, God supported his people powerfully by the Holy Spirit. Of course, his work included far more than this assistance. But we may say with confidence that our exalted Lord poured out the Holy Spirit in part for the purpose of helping his church across the threshold from the Old to the New Covenant.

Certainly, the Lord had already helped his disciples move quite far along this route in understanding Scripture. But shortly before his death, he had promised them: “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:31). He would lead them still further into Jesus’ teaching, so that they would obtain an even more clear view of the Truth (i.e., the Scriptures) than they had already received during their interaction with the Lord.

And this is what the Holy Spirit did. We have already seen, in connection with their testimonies before the people and the Sanhedrin, what clarity in the truth he had bestowed upon his apostles. Notice how they understood Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms in a Christ-centered manner! (cf. Luke 24:44–45). But the Spirit provided clearest insight in the fulfillment of the Law and the obsolescence of the temple to the “deacon” Stephen.

9.4 Stephen is accused before the Supreme Council of blasphemy (Acts 6:8–15)

We are acquainted with Stephen as one of the seven leaders of the Jerusalem poverty relief (6:5). There Luke introduced him as “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.”

8 Here Luke describes him as “full of grace and power.” He was literally a “graced” preacher. For he had received from the Holy Spirit not only the gift to proclaim the gospel, but also the power to confirm it by means of wonders and great (!) signs among the people. Apparently the Spirit gave this power not only to the twelve apostles, but also to men like Philip (8:6–8) and Stephen.

The new dispensation inaugurated

From what follows, it seems that Stephen also proclaimed with great power that with the coming of Messiah Jesus, a new dispensation had dawned in salvation history. With radical consequences, both for living according to the Law and for the continued existence of the temple ministry.

Regarding the *Law*, as a good disciple of his Master, Stephen would have taught that the Lord Jesus had come to fulfill the Law, and that the Law had now lost its function as pedagogue or babysitter. Perhaps he also pointed out that, with the fulfilling of the Law, the wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles was broken down. From now on, access to the Father had been opened for Gentiles as well (Eph. 2:14–18).

Regarding the *temple*, he would have communicated that according to Jesus, the shadowy worship was now obsolete. The time had arrived when the true worshipers would no longer worship the Father in a temple built by human hands in Jerusalem, but everywhere. In Spirit and in truth (John 4:21–24). God himself would soon put an end to the temple ministry, by means of

the destruction of the temple.

Law and temple—that was the heart of the conflict between the church of Christ and apostate Judaism. This conflict would soon result in the definitive break and separation between synagogue and church.

Hellenistic opposition

9 Opposition to Stephen began in Hellenistic circles. Especially among foreign Jews who had come from “African” and “Asian” synagogues. Some of them had lived earlier in North Africa: in Cyrene (Simon of Cyrene had carried Jesus’ cross); in Alexandria, the center of Jewish scholarship in Egypt. Among them were also Libertines, freed Jewish slaves or their descendants. Others had come from Asia Minor: Cilicia and the Roman province of Asia, whose capital city was Ephesus.

Paul could have belonged to such an “Asian” synagogue. For he came from Tarsus in Cilicia, and had studied with Gamaliel in Jerusalem (9:11; 22:3). It is well possible that in these synagogues, he had participated as Saul of Tarsus in debates about Messiah Jesus and his significance for Law and temple. For these matters were being heavily debated!

You can imagine the concern of these Hellenistic Jews. Because they had returned from abroad especially to Jerusalem in order to live and eventually die near the temple, and now according to Stephen, this sanctuary was obsolete and would soon disappear forever! This must have affected these Jews especially.

10 But they could not contradict his Scripture proof. Which does not surprise us, for the Lord Jesus was fulfilling his promise: “I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict” (Luke 21:15). Moreover, Stephen was being assisted by the Holy Spirit, the Author of the Scriptures (2 Pet. 1:21). And he gave him great clarity in the Truth, also regarding the fulfilling of the Law and the obsolescence of the temple (John 14:26).

Did Stephen’s opponents bow before the Truth at that point? Did they accept the reality that in their lifetime, God had moved from a temple of stones to a living temple, a Spiritual house (1 Pet. 2:5)? From an Aaronic priesthood to that of Messiah Jesus? From worshiping in Jerusalem to worshiping “in Spirit and in truth” (i.e., through God’s Spirit and in fulfillment of the ministry of shadows), as Jesus had foretold (John 4:21–24)?

11 No, they did not submit, but they prevaricated. Satan’s old weapons appeared once again: deceit and violence. First, deceit. They employed false witnesses to spread lies: “Stephen? A dangerous man! We heard him speak blasphemy against the Word of God (the Law of Moses) and against the house of God (the temple), and in so doing, against God himself.”

12 In this way, they succeeded in inciting both the people and the elders and scribes against him. For the followers of Jesus might well have been friendly people, but their Jewish compatriots would not accept blasphemous words against God and Moses. Popular opinion reversed. And when no more danger threatened from that side, Satan employed his second weapon: violence. On a particular day they came to Stephen unexpectedly, seized him, and dragged him off to the Sanhedrin. The same courtroom before which his Master had stood not long before.

13 There people brought forward false witnesses, who accused him of the same crime they had accused his Master of committing: this man is going around giving blasphemous speeches against this holy place (God’s house) and against the Law of Moses (God’s Word) (cf. Matt.

5:17; 26:60–61).

14 For we heard him say that that Jesus of Nazareth would tear down this holy place and change the precepts that Moses handed down to us in the Torah. This was clearly a caricature of what Stephen had really been proclaiming. First, with regard to Jesus' fulfillment of the Law. Secondly, with regard to the obsolescence of the temple ministry. And thirdly, with regard to the coming destruction of the temple, as a part of God's judgment for Israel's rejection of the Messiah.

A heavenly declaration of testimony

15 Was Stephen in fact guilty of blasphemy? God himself answered this question in a poignant way before the eyes of all who were sitting on the Supreme Council.

As is customary with judges, they looked intently at the accused. Were his eyes showing fear, because the penalty for blasphemy was capital punishment (cf. Lev. 24:15–16)? No, before them was standing a man with a visage radiating like that of an angel! As they all knew, such a heavenly radiance had shown on Moses' face as well, after he had been with God on Sinai for forty days and forty nights, to receive the law from him (Exod. 34:29–35).

This phenomenon was now being repeated with Stephen. Was the Sanhedrin supposed to judge whether this man had blasphemed "Moses" and God's holy dwelling? Even before the accused had said one word, God himself intervened as a witness for the defense. By having Stephen's face radiate in the same way as that of Moses, the Giver of the Law was declaring: this accused man has me and the real "Moses" on his side! It was at the same time God's "Amen" upon Stephen's teaching about the fulfillment of Law and temple.

We get the impression that the Sanhedrin remained under the spell of his "angelic visage" until the end of Stephen's speech. At least we find no indication that anyone interrupted him before he had said everything that the Spirit of Jesus wanted to set before the Jewish leaders. As the yet unconverted Saul, Paul had presumably also seen the glow of Stephen's face (cf. 7:58). And perhaps Luke wrote down the entire account of Stephen's trial later on the basis of Paul's own recollection.

CHAPTER 10

ACTS 7:1–8:3: STEPHEN’S DEFENSE AND MARTYRDOM

“This man is a blasphemer and Scripture twister who is constantly giving sacrilegious speeches about God’s Word and God’s house. We have heard him claim that that Jesus of Nazareth will tear down this holy place and change the precepts that Moses handed down to us in the Torah.”

With this accusation, a raging mob had slipped into the meeting hall of the Sanhedrin. There he was standing, with a supernatural glow on his face. Did the Council read from this God’s declarative testimony: “I am bestowing on this defendant the same honor as I gave to Moses?” Did this assembly retreat from its bias because of this? No, the chairman—was it brother Caiaphas again?—had faced hotter flames before. Despite the angelic expression on Stephen’s face, the hardened church leader dared ask him the question: “Is that true? Did you blaspheme God?”

At that point Stephen opened his mouth to speak.

10.1 The structure of his speech

A superficial reading could give the impression that Stephen was simply reciting biblical history, but in doing that, he was nonetheless responding thoroughly to the accusation. This accusation consisted of two parts: (1) speaking evil of this *holy place* (the temple); and (2) speaking evil of the law (God’s Word). Or as it is summarized in 6:11: “We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.” Stephen was now defending himself with Scripture against this twofold accusation.

Like the apostles (Acts 4:5), he turned from the accused to the accuser before this court. That does not surprise us, for he was filled with the Holy Spirit (6:5, 10), and the Holy Spirit had come in order to function as Public Prosecutor in accusing the Jewish world. Driven by that Spirit, Stephen not only defended himself against the accusation, but at the same time he also leveled a sharp indictment against the Sanhedrin, which he concluded this way: “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you” (7:51).

In so doing, he dealt with three issues: (1) God and the temple ministry; (2) Moses and the Law; and (3) Israel’s opposition against the Holy Spirit. His speech thereby resembles a three-stranded cord. We hope to clarify the insights in his speech by unraveling the three “threads” and discussing each of them separately.

10.2 Stephen defends himself against the accusation of blasphemy against God and his holy place (Acts 7:2-53) (I)

At this point we are limiting our attention to Stephen’s defense against the first point of the accusation: blasphemous assertions about the temple. Was he wrong in claiming that the temple was outdated and had he thereby blasphemed God? If so, he would have to show from Scripture that God had never bound himself to a sanctuary in such a way that people could have control over him, as Stephen’s opponents were apparently thinking. He will later conclude this part of his defense by saying: “The Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands” (v. 48).

The “blasphemer of God” confesses the God of glory

2 Stephen begins his defense plea with a confession of deep respect for God, and of an intimate relationship with God’s people. “Brothers and fathers, listen!” He continues to feel that he is an Israelite among Israelites.

Next, the so-called blasphemer of God talks about “the God of glory.” This is an expression drawn from Psalm 29, which sings with such deep respect about God’s glory and power in the storm. God travels his divine path sovereignly and powerfully, and he does not allow himself to be bound by the expectations of religious people, but summons them to follow him. This confession dominates the entire speech.

The patriarchs knew no holy place (vv. 3–8)

At this point, you would expect that Stephen would have begun his defense speech with Moses, whom he had allegedly blasphemed. But he began five centuries earlier. With the beginning and basis of the existence of all Israel: the calling of Abraham out of paganism (Josh. 24:2-3). This not only preceded the law and the temple ministry by centuries, but it also constituted their foundation. This explains why Stephen did not start with Moses, but with “our father Abraham.”

As he did so, he came to the point immediately. Where had the God of glory appeared to Abraham? In Jerusalem? In a temple? No, in Ur, in *Mesopotamia*, before he had departed to live in Haran.

3 In that thoroughly pagan Mesopotamia, where he (?) and his family had served other gods (Josh. 24:2), Abraham received the mandate to leave his country and his family and go to the country that God would show him.

4 Obediently, he left the region of the Chaldeans. And what was the country that God showed him? Initially it was not Canaan, but *Haran*. And after Abraham’s father had died, God allowed him to move to this country where you now live.

5 At that time, it was not a holy land, but a pagan land. And God did not yet give Abraham even one square foot of property. He did indeed promise to give it one day to him and his descendants as their possession. Even though at that time, Isaac had not yet been born. So at that point, Abraham had no land, no law, no temple, no child, and he was not even circumcised, but he believed the God who made promises. And he served this God not in a temple, but simply under the oak tree of Mamre.

6 God foretold him as well that his descendants would dwell as sojourners in the land belonging to another. And that they would serve the inhabitants of that country as slaves, and be treated badly, for four hundred years—Stephen rounded off the number. In reality, the length of time between when God established a covenant with Abraham and when Israel left Egypt was four hundred thirty years (Exod. 12:41; Gal. 3:17).

7 Then I will bring judgment upon their oppressors, and they will depart to serve me in this place (i.e., here, in Canaan). You can sense Stephen’s apologetic purpose. Had he blasphemed God, because he had proclaimed the coming disappearance of the temple? Well, how had God been served for four hundred years by their own ancestors? Not in a holy land, even less in a holy place, but in pagan *Egypt*! The same kind of time-without-a-temple was once again about to dawn.

8 In addition, God established with Abraham “the covenant of circumcision.” That is, that covenant on which the entire Law of Moses and the temple ministry rested. (Just like our salvation through the blood and the Spirit of our Lord Jesus!) So he fathered Isaac and circumcised him on the eighth day. Isaac fathered Jacob, and Jacob fathered the twelve patriarchs. Four hundred thirty years before Moses received the law, and about a thousand years before Solomon built the temple, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob found their certainty in the *covenant* that God had made with them, and not in a temple.

God was with Joseph in prison (vv. 9–10)

9 From Abraham, Stephen moved to Joseph. He was sold to the Egyptians as a slave by his ten envious brothers! But God was with him there. Notice carefully: in that pagan land, where there was no temple for Yahweh!

10 While living there, God saved him from all his distress. He gave Joseph much wisdom, whereby he enjoyed favor with Pharaoh. This king assigned to him the administration of Egypt, and appointed him to be the manager of his palace affairs. Did God do this because Joseph had called out to him from a temple? No, Joseph served him in a prison, and God was with him there. Once again this was a proof that the Most High is not bound to a “holy place.”

Jacob and the patriarch served God in Egypt (vv. 11–18)

By means of the rest of the history of the patriarchs Stephen felt that he was innocent, as well.

11 In that time, all of Egypt and Canaan were afflicted by severe famine. At a given moment, our forefathers and their families had nothing left to eat.

12 But when Jacob heard that there was grain in Egypt, he sent our forefathers down to Egypt. That was their first visit to Egypt.

13 On their second visit, Joseph disclosed his identity to his brothers, and in this way Pharaoh became acquainted with Joseph’s origin.

14 After this, Joseph had his elderly father Jacob and his entire family come down to Egypt, numbering about seventy-five people.

15 So Jacob left for Egypt, and he died there. His sons, Israel’s ancestors, also lived there until they died. Once again we have a wonderful argument proving Stephen’s innocence! With God’s full approval (Gen. 46:1–4), father Jacob traveled to pagan Egypt. Israel served Yahweh there for centuries, enjoying his blessing and protection, even though there existed no temple for him in Egypt.

16 Jacob and his sons did not return to Canaan while they were alive, in order to worship God. They did that in Egypt. Only after their death, according to their wishes, they were brought back to the promised land. Jacob was placed in the tomb that Abraham had purchased in Hebron (Gen. 49:29–50:14), and his sons in the tomb that Jacob himself had purchased in Shechem. From the perspective of Stephen’s listeners, Israel’s forefathers were lying buried in semi-pagan *Samaria*! This course of events also proved the legitimacy of what Stephen was teaching: God is not bound to holy places.

17 In that very same Egypt, where there was no temple for him, God was also fulfilling his promise to Abraham: “I will make of you a great nation” (Gen. 12:2). The closer the fulfillment of God’s promise about the land, the greater the nation became.

Where did Moses live until his eightieth year (vv. 18–22, 29)

18 As long as people remembered Joseph, the Israelites enjoyed a good relationship with the Egyptian court. But when a king came to power who had not known Joseph, it did not look good for them.

19 In a cunning way, he threw our forefathers into misery. Their newborn boys had to be thrown into the Nile. In this way, our people would gradually die out. Desperate parents were forced to abandon their infants, so that many babies died.

20 During that trying time, Moses was born. He was cared for in his parental home for three months.

21 At that point, they could hide him no longer, and they had to abandon him. They arranged things so that Pharaoh's daughter discovered him, and eventually adopted the nice little boy, raising him as her own son.

22 In this way, Moses received an excellent education. He was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and grew to be a man who was powerful in word and deed.

23–28 When he was forty years old, he defended an Israelite slave who was being mistreated, killing his Egyptian overseer. This did not turn out well.

29 Moses had to flee the country and he went to live in Midian as a sojourner, where he fathered two sons. He lived there for forty years.

How, then, could the Sanhedrin maintain that the temple ministry was indispensable? Their very own highly respected Moses—note well—lived for forty years in the *Egyptian* palace, and after that, for another forty years in *Midian*, in neither of which places was there to be found a temple for the God of glory!

Where was the period of the law inaugurated? (vv. 30–38)

But now what about the deliverance from Egypt and the giving of the law at Sinai? Where was that great era inaugurated, and with what?

30 In the *wilderness*, at Mount Sinai! Forty years after Moses' flight, the Angel of Yahweh, the pre-incarnate Son of God, appeared to him there. This Angel spoke to him out of a bramble bush that was engulfed in flames but not consumed.

31 Filled with amazement, Moses eagerly watched the scene. But when he went near to look more closely, he heard the Angel of the Lord say:

32 "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob." (So this Angel was God himself!) Trembling with fear, Moses lost any courage to go and see.

33 Then the Lord (i.e., the Angel) said to him: "Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place you are standing is holy ground." In this context, the word *place* is very significant. Stephen was being accused of blasphemy against "this holy *place*"! But did the Sanhedrin realize that as Moses was standing near a thorn bush in the wilderness, he was standing in a "holy place"? That point was the start of Israel's exodus and the giving of the law.

34 For, said the Angel, I have seen clearly how badly my people are being treated in Egypt, and I have heard their sighing, and I have come down to liberate them. And now, come, I am sending you to Egypt.

36 Where was Moses to perform the signs and wonders with which Yahweh would deliver his people? Once again in *Egypt*, in the *Red Sea*, and in the *wilderness*. For forty years!

38 To whom did God give the law at that point? To the church in the wilderness. Where did the Angel (i.e., the Son of God) speak with Moses? Not in the tabernacle, for that still had to be built, but on *Mount Sinai*. There he received the living words of the Torah that he was now supposed to communicate in order to show you the way of life.

Wanting to “confine” God

41 Already during that period when the law was given, Israel was demonstrating its inclination to want to control the God of glory. For they made a golden calf and thought that with it, they could have him under their thumb (cf. 1 Sam. 4:3). And now Stephen’s opponents were committing the same idolatry with the temple as their ancestors had done with the calf. Formerly they thought that God was affixed to their image of a bull, and now they thought he was locked up in “their” temple! Just like in the time of Jeremiah (Jer. 7:4). That was why Stephen’s announcement of a coming era when there would be no temple sounded like blasphemy to their ears.

The tent of testimony (vv. 44–46)

By now, we’ve read 80% of Stephen’s address, but he continues to dwell on those centuries when Israel did not yet have a sanctuary. This structure of his speech is itself very telling!

44 Fine, at God’s command the fathers received “the tent of testimony,” where the two stone tablet of the Horeb covenant or the tablets of testimony were kept. This tent was constructed by Israel in the wilderness. In saying this, Stephen was not so much specifying a place and pointing to an *era of history*. For this first time, *in the wilderness period*, about 400 years after the calling of Abraham, Israel received a sanctuary! And what a sanctuary it was! God was not asking for a permanent dwelling, but showed Moses the pattern for a mobile *tent*. Just one more proof that serving him is not tied to one place.

This tent was constructed according to the pattern that God had shown to Moses on the mountain (Exod. 25:40). Was Stephen wanting to say with this that both tent and temple had a *shadowy* significance, and were pointing away from themselves toward things that lay in the future? First toward the work of the future High Priest of the future New and better Covenant, Jesus Christ. Second, to the end and consummation of the world, when God would come to dwell among people in a far more glorious way (Heb. 8:5; 10:1a; Rev. 21:3–4).

45 Later that tent was brought into the land by our fathers. That happened when they were led by Joshua in conquering the pagan nations that God was driving out before them. That is how the service of God was arranged until the time of David. During all those centuries from Joshua until David, Israel served God not with an established temple, but with a mobile tent.

46 Now you know how highly favored with God David was, the man after God’s heart. So he asked God whether he could build a “house for the Mighty One of Jacob” (Ps. 132:5). Not a tent of canvas, but a temple of stone, something that from the days of Abraham God had never enjoyed.

But even though the Lord had much affection for David, his response was very telling. He thought it was a wonderful offer, and would reward David for that by building for him a (royal) house, but that house of stones for God could wait for awhile. David’s son and successor would be permitted to build that (2 Sam. 7). At that time already, Yahweh attached such a relative importance and value to having a temple. Did Stephen perhaps see this as proof of divine

indulgence toward David?

How Solomon and the prophets viewed the temple (vv. 47–50)

47 Thus it happened that it was Solomon who first constructed a temple for God. What did the Sanhedrin think of that? If God had waited so long with the building of the temple, would he have bound himself to it from that time on forever?

48 As though he had left heaven in order to be contained forever in that building? Like the idol gods of the pagans were tied to their images and temples? No, already at the consecration of the temple, Solomon had said: “But will *God* indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!” (1 Kings 8:27).

Stephen sharpens Solomon’s formulation a bit. Fine, idol gods may dwell in temples built with human hands. But not the *Most High*! He does not dwell in what *has been made with human hands*. The Sanhedrin was in fact thinking in a pagan manner about the bond between God and his temple.

49 Finally, the “deacons” appeals to Isaiah, and with this his defense speech reached its climax regarding this point. This prophet lived several centuries after Solomon, when Israel had become accustomed to the temple ministry for a long time now. And what did he proclaim? That God and his temple may absolutely not be placed on the same level. “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?

50 All these things my hand has made” (Isa. 66:1–2). That is how critically the Lord himself talked about the temple through Isaiah. He had no need of a house. When Stephen now argued the same point, this was not blasphemy, but ancient orthodox doctrine!

Review

At this point, Stephen had defended himself on Point 1 of the charge: blasphemy, because he had proclaimed that the temple ministry had come to an end. But Israel’s history taught that God had been served for centuries without any sanctuary. Moreover, he had been served for centuries in a tent, and from the time of Solomon, in a temple. With the coming of Messiah Jesus, however, this building was obsolete and was now scheduled for demolition.

But the Jewish leaders were blinded to this, for they had rejected Jesus as Messiah. They had forgotten God’s infinite exaltedness, which Solomon had recalled at the consecration of the temple (2 Kings 6:18). They had locked him up in their doctrinal system, and had annexed his temple for their “religion.” God had torn the veil, but they had immediately sown it back together. They continued to bind him to what had become “their” holy place. And they refused to acknowledge that in their days, God was busy “moving” from this obsolete temple to Christ’s church, his new temple constructed with living stones.

Until finally Jesus’ prophecy came to be fulfilled: “See, your house is left to you desolate” (Matt. 23:38). You may keep it. God doesn’t need it anymore. In A.D. 70 God’s temporary dwelling went up in flames.

Encouraging for converted Gentiles

Of course, in reporting this address—the longest in his book!—Luke was thinking especially

of Theophilus, for whom he had written his Gospel and Acts in the first place. For this former pagan, it was obvious: a God and a temple go together. Was he now supposed to accept it on the authority of the Jewish scribes that the God of Israel, whom he desired to serve, dwelt in the temple in Jerusalem? He and many other believers would have noted Stephen's liberating teaching with intense attention!

First, the Samaritans, to whom Philip would later proclaim the gospel (Acts 8:4–25). By Stephen's teaching, they were delivered from the age-old quarrelsome question: Should we pray in the temple on Mount Gerizim, or in the temple in Jerusalem? Jesus had spoken about that with the Samaritan woman (John 4:20–24). His announcement of the monumental changes was now being explained further by Stephen.

Second, the numerous believers from among the Gentiles. They lived in a world filled with idol temples, but now they were learning from Stephen that they did not need to serve the God and Father of Jesus Christ in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. Its destruction in 70 did not need to lead to their confusion. For the end of this building definitely did not signify the end of the Christian faith, but the end of the Old Dispensation.

10.3 Stephen defends himself against the accusation of blasphemy against Moses and the Law (Acts 7:2-53) (II)

At this point we can unravel the second “thread” of the cord of Stephen's argument: his refutation of the charge that he had spoken blasphemously also about Moses and the Law.

Here as well, he in turn accused his judges. Without the question being posed directly, it was nevertheless being asked between the lines, so to speak: Who is actually devoted to the real Moses, rather than to a caricature of Moses? The Sanhedrin and its followers? Or Jesus of Nazareth and his disciples?

Deep respect for Moses

20 Although Stephen provided only a brief overview of the first forty years of Moses' life, he did not neglect to confess his respect for him by recalling that already as a child, Moses was “beautiful before God.”

22 Subsequently, Moses was a man who became very cultured, thoroughly trained in the famous Egyptian sciences. In addition, he was powerful in word and deed.

23 Nevertheless, Moses was not estranged from his people on account of his being raised in a pagan palace. On the contrary, he continued to view that as his brothers and sisters, in faith and hope (Heb. 11:24–26).

24 He would rather do nothing more than protect and deliver them. When one time an Israelite was being mistreated by an Egyptian overseer, he defended his helpless brother by killing the Egyptian.

29 When he had to flee to Midian on account of that, he tended the flock of his father-in-law for decades, this Moses who was an Egyptian prince with his “academic” training! During all that time, he refrained from pursuing any program of deliverance and waiting humbly for a new divine summons to become engaged on Israel's behalf.

30–35 Forty years after his initial encounter, Yahweh sent him back to Egypt as leader and liberator. Meanwhile he had reached eighty years old.

36 Thus Moses became the man who was to lead Israel out! And how had that happened?

Just like Jesus, Moses performed his great signs and wonders. For forty years Moses could do this in the land of Egypt, in the Red Sea, and in the wilderness.

That is how humbly and piously Stephen spoke to his judges about God's servant Moses. Surely he had been doing the same in the debates in the Greek-speaking synagogues (6:9). The decision was now the Sanhedrin's: had this man, who also had performed great signs and wonders (6:8), blasphemed Moses? Or must he be acquitted of this accusation?

The real Moses pointed to Jesus (v. 37)

The only issue between them was whether Stephen and his opponents were talking about the same Moses. Their "Moses" stood squarely opposed to Jesus of Nazareth. But what had the real Moses foretold about Jesus?

37 According to the Torah, he had said to Israel: "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet *like me* from among you, from your brothers" (Deut. 18:15, 18). A prophet who like Moses would be a mediator of a covenant. At the same time, someone who like Moses would validate his divine mission by means of signs and wonders (cf. v. 36). Thus he would not be a prophet like many of those whom Israel had known, men who harked back to Moses and the Law. But one who would finish Moses' saying, fulfill it, bring it to completion. Like Peter, Stephen applied this saying of Moses directly to Messiah Jesus (cf. Acts 3:22).

Without mentioning Jesus' name, Stephen was here refuting Point 2 of the charge: "We have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth . . . will change the customs that Moses delivered to us" (6:14). As though Moses had not already announced "a prophet like himself," who would come to speak a concluding Word as the capstone of God's Word spoken through Moses. And had not Jesus validated his claims, like Moses had done, by means of performing great signs and wonders?

In saying this, Stephen was calling upon the Sanhedrin on the basis of Moses' authority to believe in Jesus. For the real Moses had already pointed to him. Jesus had not abolished the Law of Moses, but fulfilled it! Just as he had said (referring to Deut. 18:15, 18): "If you believed Moses, you would believe me" (John 5:46). So anyone who rejected Jesus was also rejecting Moses.

The real Moses received living words (v. 38)

In connection with this verse, we should remember that the gospel proclamation of Stephen and the apostles contained a twofold liberation. First, from the Horeb covenant now fulfilled by Christ, and second, from the caricature that the rabbis had made of that covenant. The legalistic extrapolations with which they had burdened churchgoers sabbath after sabbath were as dry as dust. Always and forever it was: command upon command, rule upon rule (cf. Matt. 23). Had Moses given such dry doctrines to Israel?

38 No, Moses himself had not invented any laws. He had simply mediated between the Angel who spoke to him on Sinai and the assembly at the foot of Sinai in the wilderness. And what was he supposed to communicate to Israel? The dry, rabbinic doctrinal system that was communicated in the Jewish synagogues as if it were the Law of Moses? No, he received from the Angel *living words*! The Law of Moses was the *gospel* of Moses. Yahweh said this explicitly in connection with the Torah: "If a person does them, he shall live by them" (Lev. 18:5). God's ordinances were life-enhancing in every sphere. And Jesus' "words of eternal life" fit beautifully

with those “living words” that Moses had received (cf. John 6:68; 1 Tim. 6:3).

Review

With this, Stephen had defended himself against the accusation that he had blasphemed Moses and the law. In contradiction of that charge, he confessed his deep respect for what God had given to Israel through Moses. But his accusers no longer knew the real Moses and his living gospel. Their “Moses” spoke lethal words. Thus it escaped them that Jesus had not abolished the Mosaic divine revelation, but had fulfilled, deepened, and completed it (Matt. 5:17).

10.4 Stephen accuses Israel of perpetual resistance against the Holy Spirit, of persecuting the prophets, of despising the Law, and of killing the Messiah (Acts 7:2-53) (I)

The third “thread” making up the cord of Stephen’s argument is an astonishing accusation aimed at his judges and opponents. According to them, he was a blasphemer. But according to Stephen, they represented an Israel that had opposed the Holy Spirit throughout all the centuries of their existence, had despised the Law of Moses, had killed the prophets, and now had recently murdered even the Messiah! We will now focus only on those verses where he levels and summarizes this accusation.

The patriarchs persecuted the “redeemer” Joseph (v. 9)

9 Israel’s hatred of the prophets began already in the tents of their tribal ancestors, the twelve sons of Jacob. Out of envy, those men sold Joseph to Egypt. This was not simply a family quarrel that had gotten out of hand, for Jacob and his sons constituted the church of that time! And Jacob was given the task of oversight and discipline in the church. Therefore Joseph was supposed to turn to his father for relief, when he heard wicked rumors concerning his brothers (Gen. 37:2). To whom else was he supposed to turn? When his brothers angrily sold him on account of that, they were not simply lifting their hand against their biological brother, but they were at the same time lifting it against their brother in the church of that time. More than that, against someone through whom the Spirit of prophecy was speaking to the church and world of that time. In short, Israel’s patriarchs already persecuted a prophet and redeemer of God’s people.

Moses rejected already at his first appearance (vv. 23–29)

23 Stephen had been accused of blasphemy against Moses, but Israel had rejected Moses already at his first appearance! When he was forty years old, he refused any longer to be a son of Pharaoh’s daughter (Heb. 11:24–26). Although he had grown up in the Egyptian palace, he knew from his youth that the slaves in Goshen were his brothers and God’s people! Therefore the yearning arose within him to take their lot upon himself and to *help* them. Stephen would have been meaning to say that this yearning arose within him by divine inspiration.

24 When he saw that an Israelite was being mistreated by an Egyptian overseer, Moses defended the Israelite who was being worked to death by slaying the slavedriver. Stephen apparently viewed this not as a rash act, but as the initial activity of a redeemer who had been called by God.

25 Moses supposed that his brothers would now understand that God wanted to liberate them by means of Moses' intervention, but they did not understand this.

26–28 To his deep disappointment, that became clear the following day. When he tried with peaceable words to reconcile two fighting Israelites, the one who had struck the other pushed Moses aside, and told him: "Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?" (Exod. 2:14).

29 Because of that comment, Moses fled and went to live in Midian. He realized that his people had no respect for him, and were rejecting him as their liberator. So at his initial encounter, the people manifested the heart attitude that the Lord Jesus would later characterize with the words of Isaiah: "For this people's heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear" (Isa. 6:9–10; Matt. 13:14–15; cf. Acts 28:25–26). So it was Israel's own fault that their deliverance was postponed for forty years. Because of their unbelief in the wilderness later, yet another forty-year postponement occurred, so that the entrance into Canaan occurred eighty years later than it could have happened.

Moses repeatedly rejected in the wilderness (vv. 35–36, 38–43)

35 Nevertheless, God gave that rejected Moses a new mandate to liberate Israel from Egypt.

36 He was empowered to perform great miraculous signs, in Egypt itself, but also in the Red Sea and in the wilderness, where he wandered with the people for forty years.

38 So it happened that in the wilderness, Moses functioned as an intermediary between the Angel who spoke with him on Mount Sinai and our ancestors. He was permitted to transmit to us life-giving words. The man who forty years earlier had been rejected by his people was now exalted for such a task as this. Through him, God gave us the Torah.

39 But what did our forefathers do with him? They refused to listen to him and pushed him aside. They wanted to return to Egypt and to its idol gods (Ezek. 20:8, 16, 24), where the Pharaoh had wanted to kill them off, and from where Moses had led them.

40 Their attachment to those idol gods became evident in what they said to Aaron: "Make us gods that we can see. Then they can lead us further. For who knows what has happened with that Moses who took us from Egypt."

41 Then they made an idol in the form of a calf. In that world this was a common symbol of an idol god. When it was finished, they brought sacrifices to that image and thereby gave idolatrous honor to something their own hands had made.

42 After their idolatry with the golden calf, things went from bad to worse. Until the day dawned when God—tired of constantly warning them—turned away from them and let them go their own way. At that point, their despising of the Law of Moses came to light very egregiously. They transgressed the first and fundamental command of the Horeb covenant (Yahweh alone!) by worshiping the sun, moon, and stars as gods.

Later God returned again to this start of Israel's idolatry and despising of the law when he asked through the prophet Amos: Tell me, Israel, during those forty years in the wilderness, did you bring animal sacrifices and other sacrifices only to me? (Amos 5:25).

43 No, at that time your heart was already committing adultery with other gods! You lugged along with you images from the tent of the idol Molech, and walked around with the image of the star god Kaiwan. You worshiped images that you yourselves had made. Therefore I will send you away into exile, even further away than Babylon.

Thus, already during the wilderness period, Israel had rejected Moses, the servant of God. In

so doing, they had despised all of God's holy law and covenant—the two benefits that he had bestowed through Moses' mediation! Because already then, they were lusting for their own creations. And those were often the cause of Israel's subsequent religious degeneration. The members of the Sanhedrin were committing idolatry with the temple, and later, the Christian church did the same thing with the mental images of God that she developed.

Age-old opposition of this generation is alleged (vv. 51–53)

But what was the situation with Stephen's accusers and judges? Were they observing the Law of Moses? No! That is what Stephen in the power of the Holy Spirit now finally held before the arrogant church leaders.

51 According to you, I supposedly spoke blasphemous words against God and Moses, did I? I have just finished refuting that accusation. But you yourselves are *stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears*. With these words God had characterized Israel after her sin with the golden calf (Exod. 33:3, 5) and shortly before the captivity (Jer. 6:10; 9:26). The members of the Sanhedrin resembled those apostate generations! From Egypt until now, you have opposed the Holy Spirit! With this Stephen was referring to Isaiah 63:10 and Psalm 106:33.

52 For let them now identify one prophet who was not persecuted by their forefathers! They would not be able to mention even one who had appeared from Moses until John the Baptizer! (cf. Matt. 23:37). Every one of them had encountered opposition, reproach, and rejection among Israel. Nevertheless, all those prophets had in fact announced “the coming of the Righteous One” (i.e., the Messiah with all his redemption). Now when he had recently arrived, the members of the Sanhedrin had, with the help of Judas and Pilate, betrayed and murdered him, Israel's *Messiah-King*! In so doing, they had brought Israel's centuries-long bloodthirstiness for prophets to its epitome.

53 So not I, but you have not kept the law! Even though you received it from God in the most impressive manner, namely, through the mediation of angels (Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2). In short, they had sinned against the Holy Spirit, against the Messiah, and against the Law.

Review

From this indictment, it becomes clear that for Stephen, Israel did not consist of the sum of separate individuals. On the contrary, forged together by God's covenant, they constituted an intimate, centuries-spanning unity from generation to generation. He and his listeners were born into that great, historic national entity, and could not possibly separate themselves from it. He had acknowledged his own connectedness with this Israel-down-through-the-centuries by speaking about “*our* father Abraham” and “*our* fathers” (vv. 2, 11–12, 15, 19, 39, 44–45). For Stephen, the Sanhedrin was the highest representative of this historical Israel.

Proceeding from this, he could tell his listeners, who were living a thousand years after Moses: “*You* received the Law” and “*You* always oppose the Holy Spirit.” The generations that had sold Joseph, rejected Moses, persecuted the prophets, and killed Zechariah, constituted along with the generation that had crucified Messiah Jesus, one un-Spiritual historical entity.

The Lord Jesus had spoken in the same way about the prophet Zechariah, son of Berechiah. It had been eight centuries (!) ago that he had been killed by king Joash (2 Chron. 24:20–27), but the Lord nevertheless spoke to the Pharisees and scribes of his day about “the blood of Zechariah whom you murdered!” (Matt. 23:31). According to Jesus, they shared the blame for the death of

this righteous man.

But Stephen himself had listened to the apostolic summons: “Save yourselves from this crooked generation” (Acts 2:40). For no matter how deeply he sensed the bond with his own people, he wanted no part in Israel’s persecution of the prophets and rejection of the Messiah. This explains why, in verses 51–53, he moved from speaking in the first person to the second person.

It is remarkable that the expressions he used in accusing the Sanhedrin (stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart and ears, opposing the Holy Spirit) are sharper than those used by the apostles. Nor did he minimize their guilt by taking into consideration their “ignorance,” as Peter had done in his address to “the ordinary person” (3:17), for Israel’s leaders had willfully and deliberately rejected Jesus (John 11:49–50; 19:11).

Nonetheless, there was still hope for them. John the Baptizer and the Lord Jesus had perhaps announced God’s “coming wrath” coming down on Israel’s wickedness. But anyone who repented from that, could still escape God’s judgment. The apostles themselves had proclaimed this to the Sanhedrin who had seen to their Master’s crucifixion (Acts 2:37–40; 3:26; 4:12; 5:3).

Stephen’s speech as well, despite his sharp accusation, contained a new summons to repentance and conversion. For they too were standing in that era of the “grace interim,” when God was still showing favor to the Jewish nation, before he would unleash his wrath in A.D. 70 upon city and temple. God’s patience would come to an end!

10.5 Stephen’s final testimony (Acts 7:54–56)

Up to this point, the Sanhedrin had been listening to Stephen in silence, but now the members of the body lost their self-control. *They* were stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears? *They* were children of those who persecuted prophets and murdered the Messiah? *They* did not observe the law of Moses? And to allege all of these things knowing full well that the Pharisee members of the council fasted twice per week, always used clean dishes, brought their tithe of even dill and cumin, and had constructed burial markers for the prophets (cf. Matt. 23).

54 When the council members heard Stephen declare this terrible accusation, they were deeply offended and they ground their teeth in rage against him. Also, of course, because he had claimed that God could easily get along without “their” temple. In saying this, Stephen had touched their idol. Nevertheless, at this moment they did not yet interrupt him. The Spirit wanted to validate Stephen’s charge by means of a miracle.

55 It happened suddenly. While Stephen was looking upward, he was given to see what no one had ever seen. After confessing “the God of glory” (v. 2) so courageously, he was allowed to see the glory of God! To see something of the “kabōd Yahweh.” And in that heavenly light he saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God! Occupying the highest possible position of authority in heaven and on earth!

56 Immediately he cried throughout the meeting hall: “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!” This signified first of all, of course, an extraordinary encouragement for Stephen himself. Surrounded by enemies of Christ and looking death in the eyes, he was permitted to behold our Savior in heavenly glory! He had confessed Jesus before men, and now Jesus was confessing him before God (Luke 12:8; Rev. 3:5). Just as witnesses in Israel always stood before the judge’s bench to provide their testimony, Jesus too was standing up as the defense attorney on behalf of his very first martyr.

But the Spirit granted this vision also to seriously *warn* the Sanhedrin one more time. For

when Stephen testified that he saw “the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God,” the scribes undoubtedly heard an allusion to the vision of Daniel:

“And behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed” (Dan. 7:13–14).

Did the council members still remember that they had condemned Jesus to death as a blasphemer? Because when he was standing in their courtroom, he had quoted this very same Scripture passage and related it to himself: “But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the right hand of the power of God” (Luke 22:69; cf. 20:41–44).

But now when Stephen claims that he is seeing Jesus standing in that heavenly position of authority, then this proves three facts. First, that he was indeed God’s Son. Second, that they had illegitimately condemned him to death as a blasphemer! Third, that his disciple Stephen had not blasphemed God and the Law of Moses. For then the Law and the Prophets were indeed fulfilled by the suffering and death of Jesus as the Lamb of God, and the temple ministry was now obsolete. With the glimpse that God granted him into the heavenly sanctuary, he was confirming Stephen’s teaching about the earthly sanctuary.

This was how the Holy Spirit (i.e., the Paraclete or Public Prosecutor) was pointing the Sanhedrin for the third time to their sin of murdering the Messiah. The first time he did this by Peter and John (3:21). The second time by all the apostles (5:30–31). And now for the third time by Stephen. What would Israel’s supreme court do with this warning?

10.6 Stephen is stoned (Acts 7:57–8:1a)

Did people now ask Stephen, with shattered hearts: “Brother, what must we do?” (cf. 2:37). No, the Sanhedrin erupted in demonic rage.

57 Jesus of Nazareth—a mere man!—is supposedly standing at God’s right hand? A pious Jew would never let himself listen to such blasphemous talk! The council members began to scream loudly in order to drown Stephen’s voice, and they plugged their ears. Imagine: the high priest was allowed to enter the holy of holies in the earthly sanctuary only once per year. And that apostate Hellenist now dares to claim that he saw the heavenly sanctuary opened and saw that despicable Jesus there, surrounded by divine glory! Plug your ears for such talk!

The substantive content of Stephen’s long defense speech was not discussed. Nor his testimony about Jesus’ heavenly glory. They simply determined that he was worthy of death because of blasphemy. We get the impression that this verdict was never pronounced formally.

Nor did they ask permission from the Roman government for the execution, as they had done for the execution of the Lord Jesus (John 18:31). Did the Jewish authorities have permission, in

cases of exceptional crimes (like blasphemy against the temple) to implement the death sentence themselves? Or did they simply assume that they would not be risking any conflict with the governor in this case an unknown Christian? Certainly if no formal death sentence was issued here, the governor could easily dismiss it as a Jewish religious squabble. All the more because they were supposed to be allowed some freedom in religious matters, according to the wish of emperor Tiberius.

The first Christian martyr

58 At the end things move quickly. As one man they stormed up to him, seizing him and marching him out of the hall and dragging him out of the city, probably with the help of the temple police. They were convinced that Leviticus 24:13–16 was applicable here: “Bring out of the camp the one who cursed, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him. . . . Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death” (cf. Num. 15:35).

The sentence might well have been rendered improperly in the tumultuous assembly, but its executive went strictly according to the rules of the law. In order to prevent superficial accusations and revenge killings, Moses had commanded: “The hand of the witnesses shall be first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hand of all the people” (Deut. 17:7).

So then, these men provided scrupulously for those witnesses. Perhaps the same false witnesses who earlier had been put forward by foreign Jews in order to accuse Stephen before the Council (6:11). They dared take on themselves responsibility for throwing the first stones of the execution.

For the sake of convenience, they laid their garments down with Saul, who would later become the apostle Paul, who was, according to Luke, a young man at the time. In terms of standards used in that time, he was not yet forty years old. Later he would be authorized by the Sanhedrin to enter houses to arrest Christians. If possible, all the way to Damascus (9:1–2). If this is true, then at Stephen’s execution presumably he was not a young lad who simply had to watch the clothing, but he likely played a prominent role (cf. 26:10). At that time he would have been at least thirty years old, for before that age men in Israel did not occupy any leadership position. Taking all of this together, Paul would have been born around the same time as the Lord Jesus.

59 Luke describes the events almost minute by minute. First the stones rained down on defenseless Stephen. He persevered to the end. His Master died with the words on his lips: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46). His disciple now prays: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

A moving confession in this circumstance! A Jew used the word *Lord* to refer to Yahweh alone, but as he died, Stephen directed the name publicly to Jesus, whose name he had not mentioned before now. In so doing, he was confessing that Jesus is the Son of God. The Sanhedrin had crucified Jesus for that very reason (Matt. 26:63–64), but Stephen had just proclaimed that he had seen Jesus standing at God’s right hand. As Someone who is on the same level as the Almighty!

To that exalted Lord Jesus the martyr now directed his prayer: “Receive my spirit” (Greek, *pneuma*, i.e., wind, spirit, life breath, life energy, the power that moves a person to activity; not *psychē*, i.e., soul; cf. Ps. 31:5). He did not die jubilantly, but believing in the power and

faithfulness of the Lord Jesus. For he committed his life breath into Jesus' care, fully confident that he would receive it back from Jesus when he later came back to raise the dead unto eternal life.

60 With his final ebbing strength, he obeyed the word of the Lord Jesus: "Love your enemies, . . . and pray for those who abuse you" (Luke 6:27–28). For while stone after stone struck his body, he fell to his knees (out of respect or out of weakness?) and called out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." In so doing, the disciple was acting in the spirit of his Master, who had prayed as he was dying: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). With respect to at least one of them, this prayer was heard: Saul, who was standing with the garments. The Lord Jesus did not hold this sin against him (1 Tim. 1:13–14). After this prayer, Stephen fell asleep.

And Saul consented to his sentence

8:1a Our beloved brother Paul was at that time an unconverted Pharisee, so unbelieving and blind (1 Tim. 1:13) that he celebrated the judicial murder of Stephen. When stone after stone wounded the martyr, Saul definitely suffered no nausea or something similar, but he was even "consenting unto his death" (KJV; cf. 22:20).

All of Stephen's Scriptural evidence had not affected him nor brought him to repentance. That would require even more power (Acts 9). Nor did Stephen's testimony that he saw Jesus standing at God's right hand given him pause to ponder these matters. Not even the dying Stephen's prayer for his enemies. Saul thought: "Good! Blasphemers deserve to be killed!" He would suffer lifelong remorse later (1 Tim. 1:12-13).

Looking back, we may see that God had already then ordained him to take up the inheritance of Stephen and spread it and defend it throughout the world. With mouth and pen. In the letters to the Romans and the Galatians, to the Philippians and the Corinthians. At the cost of unimaginable suffering. He too was stoned in Lystra. People assumed he was dead (Acts 14:19). Through Paul we have learned from Stephen, that God no longer dwells in temples and other buildings, but dwells through his Spirit in his *church*, that is, in people (1 Cor. 6:19; Eph. 2:22).

Luke would have learned this report of Stephen's address and stoning from Paul's own lips. The apostle probably attended the meeting as a spectator, and had heard Stephen's last words. He spoke and wrote later, often with deep shame, about his participation in the execution of Stephen and the persecution of the church that flowed from that (Acts 22:4–7; 26:9–11; 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13, 23; Phil. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:12-16).

10.7 The church is persecuted, Stephen is buried (Acts 8:1b-3)

Stephen's arrest had already demonstrated that popular opinion had turned. No matter how sympathetic people had been toward Jesus' disciples (2:47; 5:13), "revolutionary" talk about the Law of Moses and the temple was simply unacceptable to many people. For that reason, the Jewish leaders did not need to fear them (cf. 4:21; 5:26). As long as they presented Jesus' disciples as enemies of the temple ministry, for many people that was reason enough to go after them.

Persecution breaks out

8:1b Immediately after Stephen’s stoning and burial, heavy persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem. This would have surprised the believers. They knew, of course, what the Sanhedrin thought about them. For this body had already arrested the apostles several times. But after being imprisoned for a night, and after receiving a flogging, they had been released (Acts 4–5). Therefore the report of Stephen’s stoning would have exploded like a bomb. Suddenly the life and safety of their leaders was endangered! Exactly as the Master had foretold (Luke 21:12). These believers came under such heavy pressure that many of them—perhaps especially the Hellenists (11:19–20)?—felt compelled to leave the city.

Entire families departed via the city gates, and were spread across the plains of Judea and Samaria. From this point on, believers no long lived only in Jerusalem, but also throughout “the dispersion” (cf. James 1:1; 1 Pet. 1:1). For the rest, many believers stayed behind living in Jerusalem. The church had at least 25,000 members at that point. Not every last man and woman would have left the city. As happens so often in Scripture, here too the word “all” probably means “many.”

It is not impossible that this spontaneous outburst of popular rage subsided after several weeks or months. After Saul had left for Damascus, many refugees apparently returned to Jerusalem (9:26).

During the persecution in Jerusalem, however, the apostles had remained. Because of this, the Jerusalem church remained the “headquarters” of gospel preaching. As long as it was not yet clear that God had taken the kingdom away from Israel (Matt. 21:43), the “city of God” had to be the starting point for apostolic preaching. According to the prophecy of Isaiah and Micah: “For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem” (Isa. 2:3; Micah 4:2; cf. Acts 15:2, 6, 22–23; 16:4). As long as a few portents of the destruction of the city and temple could be seen, that destruction was not yet imminent (Luke 21:20) and Jerusalem could still be held in honor by the apostles. They were miraculously protected.

Stephen is buried

2 Despite the fierce persecution that broke out on the day he was stoned, Stephen received a decent burial. After the raging mob had left, “godly men” appeared at the place of execution to pay final tribute to the deceased martyr. They obviously harbored great sympathy for him.

If these were friends or family members who had not (yet) openly identified with Jesus, they call to mind Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, who as secret followers had buried the Lord Jesus. But if these were church members, then they stepped forward courageously as kindred spirits of the “blasphemer” who had been stoned.

With gentle tenderness they pulled the body of the deceased Stephen from under the stones, in order to lay his body tenderly in the ground, so that it would not fall prey to the voracity of vultures and other predatory animals. Luke pictures their work using a word that describes everything people were accustomed to doing on behalf of a dead person: wash, anoint, wrapping in linen cloths, and carrying him to a grave.

According to the precepts of the scribes, it was forbidden to show grief for a condemned criminal. For such persons were put outside God’s church. On the same day as they died, they were to be carried without any ceremony to a cemetery for criminals. For Moses had commanded, “You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance” (Deut. 21:23; cf. Num. 35:34).

Nonetheless, these men gave loud and sobbing expression of their deep sorrow at losing this

brother. Ancient Eastern grieving customs always included loud wailing, but in terms of Jewish custom, they expressed remarkably deep sadness about Stephen, who had been so “full of faith and the Holy Spirit” and so “full of grace and power” (Acts 6:5, 8).

Before the apostles had done so, Stephen had taught believers about the significance of Jesus’ coming for observing the law and for the service of God in the temple. As the first martyr of the New Dispensation, Stephen had sealed this pioneering work with his death.

The dark pages in Paul’s life

3 Up until this point, the church had been opposed mostly by the largely Sadducean Council. But now the Pharisees and Sadducees made a gruesome pact, and the Pharisee Saul of Tarsus arose as the driving force behind the persecution of the church. He had been a pupil of Gamaliel, but lacked the moderate posture of his teacher. With Pharisaic fanaticism, he did his very best to destroy the church. From Zion the Word had to go out into the world, but Saul attempted to dam up the river of redemption.

Fearing no one and nothing, with his armed assistants he burst into the homes of believers, dragged men and even women outside, and had them put in prison. His intention was to compel them, if necessary by means of physical punishment (Matt. 10:17), to recant their faith (Acts 26:11).

No wonder that many sought to escape arrest by following Jesus’ advice to flee to the countryside (Matt. 10:23; cf. Acts 14:6). Especially in nearby Samaria they were beyond the reach of the Sanhedrin.

After his conversion, Paul confessed to Agrippa: “I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities” (26:9–11). “But,” he wrote later, “I received mercy The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost” (1 Tim. 1:12-16).

10.8 The apostolic testimony brought to an end in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1–8:3)

Everything we have read up to this point was related to the proclamation of the gospel in Jerusalem. Only there, the apostles had testified, both before the people and before the Supreme Council, that Jesus was the Messiah. Especially in the temple, which according to Jesus’ prophecy would be destroyed in their lifetime (Luke 21:5–24).

With the martyrdom of Stephen, a unique period came to an end for Jerusalem, one in which the apostles had repeatedly and powerfully confronted people and leaders with Messiah Jesus, and has urgently called them to turn to him. Another twenty-five years would pass by now before Jerusalem would get to hear another apostolic testimony from the mouth of Paul (Acts 21:40–22:22). Fifteen years later the city and temple would be destroyed by the Romans.

Regarding the Jews who confessed the Messiah, Stephen’s teaching would still have to be processed by them. By no means did all of those believers recognize equally clearly as he did that the Law was fulfilled by the Lord Jesus and that the temple was becoming obsolete. The inquisitor Saul was still carrying on furiously, though he was destined by the Lord to become his

most powerful and effective apostle. In a short time, the Lord would take hold of him en route to Damascus, and press him into service.

What Satan had intended for evil through Stephen's death, God turned to good. For the driving of believers out of Jerusalem served to spread the gospel and to distance them from the temple. In this way, they gradually separated from this obsolete sanctuary, having been taught by Stephen that this definitely signaled no loss for them.

Eventually, his teaching about the fulfillment of Law and temple by Messiah Jesus would be the single greatest breaking point leading to the separation between church and synagogue. This would lead to the synagogue petrifying with "the letter that kills," and the Jewish church being blessed by "the Spirit who makes alive," together with the millions of Gentiles whom it would later include.

The Samaritans are the first ones to be included.

CHAPTER 11

ACTS 8:4–25: THE LORD JESUS PROVIDES TESTIMONY TO HIMSELF IN JUDEA AND SAMARIA

According to Jesus' commission, his apostles were to be witnesses in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, indeed, to the ends of the world (Acts 1:8). In 2:1–8:3, Luke narrates how they fulfilled that commission in Jerusalem. We were struck in that connection by the fact that he was not describing the Acts of the apostles as much as the Acts of the ascended Lord Jesus. For they were not implementing their own strategy, but were being led step by step by the Lord Jesus.

He was the One who stipulated the course of their testimony. He had set it in motion by means of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Next, by means of the healing of the lame beggar he provided them with one opportunity after another to testify of him, both before the people and before their leaders. They needed simply to do what was put before them (cf. 1 Sam. 10:7).

That's also how it went with the spread of the gospel across Judea and Samaria, about which Luke is now going to report. In this connection as well, the apostles did not strategize but were led in surprising ways by the Lord. After all, he knew how to turn the loss of the gifted Stephen into a huge profit!

11.1 The apostolic testimony reaches Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:4–8)

It is true that the Lord had not intervened when his first martyr was stoned, and when the first persecution of Christians erupted, but he did make use of these for spreading the gospel from Jerusalem across Judea and Samaria.

4 Because the church in Jerusalem was split up, it appeared to have suffered severe injury, but it was precisely its dispersion that promoted its spread! The storm of persecution carried the seed of the gospel throughout all Judea and Samaria (even as such storms would continue to do elsewhere). Wherever it fell, it germinated and grew roots. Once again: the gospel spread without any particular strategy! The Lord Jesus was leading events from heaven.

For the Jerusalem refugees trekked throughout the land, and were not quiet about the reasons for their flight, but proclaimed the Good News everywhere they had opportunity. It seems that they did not consider this privilege to be reserved for full-time preachers, but saw it as the duty of every believer (1 Pet. 3:15). Thus, it was not the apostles, but these refugees who proclaimed the gospel beyond Jerusalem for the first time.

Luke does not talk explicitly about conversions in Judea, but from Galatians 1:22 and 1 Thessalonians 2:14 we learn that churches were established there too. Later we will read that some of the Jerusalem refugees trekked even further, all the way to Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch (11:19). It is possible that in this way, the gospel reached Damascus as well (9:2).

Philip proclaims the gospel in Samaria (vv. 5–8)

5 Among those who took flight was Philip, who together with Stephen was one of the seven leaders involved with caring for the poor in the Jerusalem church. He is also called Philip the evangelist (21:8), and he had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy. His Greek name leads us to assume that he was a Hellenistic Jew, something that enabled him to move more easily among non-Jews.

He descended from the elevated city of Jerusalem to “the city of Samaria” and there he

proclaimed that Jesus was the Messiah. In so doing, he was the first to cross the boundary that the Lord had initially kept closed for the apostolic preaching (Matt. 10:5), but which he had opened when he ascended (Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8). Philip thereby demonstrated that he was a courageous man, for centuries-long enmity existed between Jews and Samaritans.

The Jews believed that a bastardized group had come into existence after the deportation of the ten tribes (722 BC), composed of a mixture of Israelites, whom the king of Assyria had not led away into captivity, and the colonists whom he had moved into the depopulated Israelite territory from Northern Syria and Babylon (2 Kings 17:24–41). So the Samaritans consisted partly of Gentile and partly of Israelite descendants.

They worshiped Yahweh in their own manner, they were circumcised, kept the Sabbath, and accepted the five books of Moses as God's Word. They too expected a messiah (John 4:25). Because Zerubbabel had previously refused their collaboration in connection with rebuilding the temple (Ezra 4), and because the temple was off limits for them, they had built their own temple on Mount Gerizim near Shechem. This temple, however, had been destroyed already in 128 BC.

When he was traveling through Samaria, the Lord Jesus had proclaimed the gospel for two days in Sichar. At that time, many had come to faith. They saw in him not only the Messiah of the Jews, but the Savior of the whole world, and so too of them (John 4:39–42). The report that Jesus had been crucified would have affected these believers deeply.

Philip would surely have known of their existence. But did they know already that God had raised the Lord Jesus from the dead and had exalted him to his right hand? He came as the Lord's herald proclaiming this great news.

6 When the Samaritans learned from him what Jesus had done and taught, and they saw the signs that Philip performed in the power of Jesus, hundreds of them did what many Jews had refused to do: they came to faith or were powerfully strengthened in faith.

7 Also surprising was how powerfully the Lord confirmed the reliability of the gospel in connection with the signs that accompanied it (Mark 16:20; Heb. 2:4). There in Samaria were many wretched people in whom the devil had taken up residence. These poor souls were delivered by Philip from their evil spirits. With loud cries these spirits left their victims (cf. Mark 1:23–26).

In addition, many lame and crippled people were healed by him. In the Kingdom of God, one day no one would be using crutches or wheelchairs any longer. That is what Philip's miraculous signs demonstrated. He could perform them in order to provide the Samaritans with previews and guarantees of redeemed human life upon the new earth. The Holy Spirit gathered these healings into an official report in Holy Scripture in order to assure us of the complete redemption of our body (Rom. 8:23).

8 No wonder that great joy arose everywhere in that city (a fact that Luke always likes to mention: cf. Luke 1:14; 2:10; 24:52; Acts 8:39; 13:48, 52; 15:3; 16:34). In a glorious way, the Kingdom of God was proclaimed by means of Philip's preaching, and was demonstrated and validated by means of his miraculous signs.

11.2 The gospel delivers the Samaritans from the ban of Simon the Sorcerer (Acts 8:9–13)

In the Greco-Roman world people lived in constant fear of evil spirits, which at any moment could bring you misfortune. This fear dominated every level of society, from the lowest slave to the imperial palace in Rome.

To protect themselves as well as possible against these frightening powers, people sought refuge in sorcery, in applied magic or charms. This explains why sorcery flourished so widely in the world of antiquity. Anyone who was unsuccessful in romance could stimulate his beloved partner by means of a magical potion. Anyone wanting to know something beyond his ken could consult the dead or turn to an astrologist.

But you could also use sorcery to turn the evil powers to your advantage as well. If you directed this against your enemy, you could render his field unproductive or attack his health, so that he died. Or it could help you find a lost object or track a criminal.

In addition to the charms mentioned, a variety of other magical techniques was available. People wrote spells and curses on lead or golden tablets which were then buried, so that the subterranean spirits could read them. Or people abused a doll or portrait of an enemy while pronouncing an incantation. Or people often used magical herbs, even parts of a corpse. The mixing of magical potions was especially widespread. That was easily given to a person without getting caught. The magicians knew the recipes and possessed manuals for bringing evil upon someone by means of magical techniques.

Holy Scripture leaves no doubt that all forms of sorcery are devil's work and an abomination in God's eyes. Back in Moses' day, God strictly prohibited Israel from becoming involved with this form of Canaanite practice (Deut. 18:10–14) and Paul mentioned idolatry and sorcery in the same breath (Gal. 5:20). Anyone who surrendered to this practice would not be permitted to enter the gates of the holy city, but would be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone (Rev. 21:8; 22:15; cf. Gal. 5:21). In Samaria, this abominable occultism was threatening to falsify the gospel that had just been proclaimed!

Simon the sorcerer joins Philip (vv. 9–13)

9 Sorcery played an important role in that city of Samaria. A certain man named Simon lived there, who was a real expert in the field of the occult. He even claimed to be “somebody great.” With the aid of secret powers he could affect people and situations. Even before Philip's arrival, he had for some time been confounding the residents of Samaria by means of his sorcery. So he was not simply a clever magician, but someone who performed miracles with Satan's help. So people could see startling things happen, as we recall from the sorcerers in Egypt (Exod. 7:11, 20–22). It is possible that the unclean spirits that Philip drove out had entered their victims by means of Simon's practices, for people would employ those dark powers by means of occultism.

We may imagine that Simon was a successor soothsayer, astrologist, spiritist, and hypnotist. Perhaps he also employed paranormal (i.e., granted by Satan) gifts of healing. This latter assumption is based on the fact that the Lord had allowed Philip to perform many healing miracles and to cast out *demons*. Is it possible that in this way, Philip had surpassed the devilish imitation miracles of Simon, the doctor of sorcery, and broken his power (v. 13)?

10 For everyone, both small and great, had the highest confidence in him. They even called him the Great Power of God, and perhaps considered him to be an emanation (outflowing) of the deity, endowed with divine energy. In the Greco-Roman world, many people believed in the existence of such mediating beings between God and men. And of course, the sly sorcerer enjoyed receiving such idolatrous respect.

11 Because he repeatedly stunned those who admired his magical arts, he constituted a tremendous obstacle to the spread of the gospel in Samaria. In Jerusalem, the gospel had encountered Jewish Pharisaism, Sadduceeism, and Zealotism. Here in Samaria, the gospel

encountered occultism and syncretism. Superhuman power would have to be employed in order to liberate these blinded people from the satanic grip of the sorcerer.

12 Well, that kind of “divine power unto salvation” is exactly what the gospel is (Rom. 1:16). This became evident when Philip proclaimed the good news that with the arrival of Messiah Jesus, God’s kingdom had broken through. When he further explained the name (i.e., deeds) of Jesus, and performed even greater miracles than the famous sorcerer, many misguided Samaritans came to believe that not Simon, but Jesus was “the Great Power of God” (cf. 1 Cor. 1:24). The gospel, and the miraculous signs with which the Lord fortified its power, broke Simon’s power over their hearts and brought them to the conviction that Philip’s message of salvation was true. Women as well, who often were the first ones to be nabbed by figures like Simon, broke with the sorcerer. One after another was baptized, which also involved confessing all forms of sorcery as sinful.

That is how the Kingdom pioneered its path in Samaria. A Jew was baptizing *Samaritans*! Jesus had already sown the gospel among them, and Philip was now permitted to gather the harvest. Just as Jesus had foretold: “One sows and another reaps” (John 4:35–38).

13 Even Simon came to faith, and was baptized. Later Peter would accuse him that his heart was not right before God (vv. 18–19). Whether this had been the case from the very start cannot be determined. Scripture used the word “believe” also for superficial trusting (John 2:23–25; 8:30–31; James 2:19) and teaches that some people believe for only a limited time (cf. Matt. 13:20–22).

After his baptism, Simon constantly stayed near Philip. Earlier he had stunned people with his occult miracles, but now he in turn was baffled by the great power manifested by the evangelist Philip. As a “professional,” he saw clearly that these miracles were of a higher order than his own devilish arts, and far surpassed them. Moreover, his practices were directed to his own honor, whereas those of Philip brought glory to *Jesus*, and served to illustrate the salvation that he would bring. And just as the sorcerers in Egypt had to acknowledge that Moses’ miracles far surpassed every created power (Exod. 8:10), so too Simon had to admit the same regarding Philip’s miracles.

11.3 The Holy Spirit confirms the inclusion of the Samaritans in the church (Acts 8:14–17)

For many Jewish Christians, the conversion of the despised Samaritans was certainly a shocking event. But the Lord helped them cross this threshold. By his Spirit, he sanctioned Philip’s work, so that the Samaritan believers were accepted as full members of the church.

14 The apostles in Jerusalem had also heard that Samaria had accepted the Word of God. After the flight of many church members, this was undoubtedly jubilant news for them. The Lord had mandated them to bear witness to him there as well (1:8), and now the gospel had gone out ahead of them!

But would the Jewish believers accept the Samaritans as full-fledged brothers and sisters? Or did the threat now arise that a schism would occur because they would view them as a minority break-off church? Both groups had lived for so long in enmity toward each other! Due to this danger, the conversion of the Samaritans would have filled the apostles with significant concern.

It was important that Jewish believers would confess their close connection with the Samaritans without any discrimination whatsoever. Whereas from their side, the Samaritans would need to acknowledge the Jewish apostles as having been appointed by Jesus to be leaders

and teachers among all the churches. To see to this important matter, Peter and John were sent to Samaria.

Would John still have remembered that he had once proposed to the Lord that an entire Samaritan village be destroyed with fire from heaven (Luke 9:54)? Now he was en route to remove the centuries-long cleft between Jews and Samaritans, and to welcome them into the Christian church. We will not encounter John any further in the rest of Acts.

15 When both apostles had arrived in Samaria, they prayed for the Samaritan believers, that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Not because they did not yet possess him at all. They had all come to faith, and that is always the fruit of God's Spirit and Word. So the apostles were not praying that they receive "the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!'" (Rom. 8:15), for their faith and joy gave evidence that these Samaritans already possessed the Spirit (v. 8). No, they asked for a *special* working of the Holy Spirit, just as they themselves had received on Pentecost.

Why did they pray for this for these believers in Samaria, and not for new believers in Jerusalem? Because with the conversion of the Samaritans, a unique moment in the history of redemption had dawned. Until now, the gospel had been proclaimed exclusively among Jews. Shortly before this time, the Lord had even forbidden them from preaching in Samaritan cities (Matt. 10:5). Now he had taken down this wall of separation. *Samaritans* had accepted the Word of God!

But because some Jewish believers would probably have a bit of difficulty with this, the apostles prayed that those believers in *Samaria* might receive the Holy Spirit in a visible way (cf. v. 18). For then it would be irrefutable for the Jews that the Lord had taken down the wall of separation between Jew and Samaritan, and had included both as full-fledged members in his church.

16 The Holy Spirit, however, had not come down upon anyone in Samaria as he had on Pentecost in Jerusalem. They had merely been baptized. Certainly this was done as the Lord had commanded, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19), although for the sake of brevity, Luke mentions only the Lord Jesus. Jewish Christians might wonder whether the inclusion of Samaritans had God's approval, or whether the Messiah of Israel had come also to save those half-Gentiles.

17 In an extraordinary way, the Lord put an end to that possible threat to Christian unity. But not without enlisting the apostles. For what happened? Repeatedly, whenever Peter and John laid hands on Samaritan believers (the form of the verb indicates a repeated event), these believers received the Holy Spirit. Bystanders could see the results (cf. v. 18). What they observed Luke does not tell us. Did those believers speak in tongues? Or did young and old begin to prophesy and praise God? The Lord did accompany the gospel with these gifts later, when he crossed an even higher threshold, namely, with the Gentiles (Acts 10:44–48; 19:6–7).

At any rate, in an exceptional and convincing manner, the Holy Spirit highlighted the fact that the proclamation of the gospel had entered a new phase. And that this crossing of the threshold enjoyed God's full approval. No one may doubt that henceforth the Samaritans were, together with the Jewish believers, "fellow citizens with the saints" and "members of the household of God" (Eph. 2:19).

There was, however, yet one more reason why the conversion of the Samaritans was an event of historical proportions for the Jewish believers. It demonstrated God's lovingkindness toward the remnant of Manasseh and Ephraim that had survived as Samaritans. And it demonstrated that the gospel was bringing not only Judah, that ancient nation of the two tribes, but also all of

David's original kingdom under the scepter of David's Son and was including them in the new Israel.

Not a law for all times

From this course of events in Samaria, we must not deduce a rule that transcends all times. As if everyone who today comes to faith and is baptized would thereafter need to receive the Holy Spirit in the same way as the Samaritans did—after the laying on of hands and prayer. As though otherwise, their faith would be incomplete. For then every Christian would have to move through two phases before being sure he or she was a *full-fledged* member of the church. At that point, however, we would be turning this unique event into a universally binding law.

For now when people come to faith, anywhere in the world, the gospel is not crossing any redemptive-historical threshold, as it was with the Samaritans. Their conversion constituted a turning point in the history of redemption. Therefore the Holy Spirit sanctioned that *crossing of a threshold* by means of a special working, and he thereby validated their legitimate infusion in the Christian church. In such an extraordinary manner he would later approve the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church as well (Acts 10–44–48). After that point, the gospel never again crosses such redemptive-historical thresholds, and such a distinct proof of God's agreement was no longer necessary.

In this context, we would observe that before the Holy Spirit fell upon the converted Samaritans, they were not rebaptized by the apostles. Obviously nothing more had to be added to their baptism by Philip. This Scripture passage, then, offers no basis at all for the teaching of a “two-stage entry” into the Christian church.

11.4 The apostles reject mixing the gospel and the occult (Acts 8:18–25)

For Samaritans the doors of the Kingdom stood wide open, but then they would have to break with their semi-pagan, semi-Jewish mixed religion. Therefore the apostles heartily welcomed them, but forbade them strictly from following occult practices, with which Simon the sorcerer was threatening to falsify the gospel.

18 When he *saw* (!) that the Holy Spirit had come upon someone when the apostles laid their hands on that person, he offered them money and asked:

19 “Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” For “the Great Power of God” (Simon) was stunned by the heavenly powers with which Philip had confirmed the gospel (v. 13) and with which the apostles had “distributed” the Holy Spirit. He couldn't begin to match that with his occult power moves! According to his magical suppositions, the secret of their miracles lay hidden in their laying on of hands. Perhaps he himself had included with his own sorcery practices some kind of hand movements. But exactly how had the apostle done this? If he knew that, he could continue with his occult practices, naturally for a high fee, advertising them as Christian, and he could keep his leading position among the people! He was ready to pay a handsome sum to learn the “art” of the apostles. Often sorcerers sold each other their magical knowledge.

20 But Peter, functioning here again as the spokesman of the apostles, knew how seriously Moses had warned Israel against occultism: “There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires

of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord” (Deut. 18:10–12).

The apostle detected in Simon’s request the fatal danger of syncretism: mixing true and false religion. He wanted to practice fellowship with the Samaritans, of course, but only if they broke with their mixed religion. In that respect, the apostles continued following the same line as Zerubbabel and Nehemiah, who earlier refused any compromise with Samaritan syncretism (Ezra 4:1–5; Neh. 2:19–20).

He condemned Simon extremely harshly: “To hell with you and your money! Because you think you can buy God’s gift (the Holy Spirit) with money!” In order with that to be able to earn even more money. What an amazing insult to God the Father, who had surrendered his only begotten Son unto death to provide the gift of his Spirit! What great bondage for this sorcerer as he remained chained to his occultism, to think that the apostles knew techniques for “distributing” God’s Spirit, and that they would trade that art for a precious sum of money from him (cf. Matt. 10:8; 2 Kings 5:15–16).

21 But Peter warned him: “You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.” Simon continued to be governed by sorcery and greed. As one of those who handled the keys of the kingdom of heaven, Peter refused him entrance into that kingdom for that reason (cf. Matt. 16:19; 18:18; John 20:23).

22 But this outcome appeared to have been conditional, for Peter did show him a way out: “Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.” It was not that Peter doubted God’s willingness to forgive, but Simon should request it soberly and penitently.

23 “For I see,” the apostle continued, “that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity.” With this statement, Peter was alluding to Deuteronomy 29:18, where Moses had warned that no idolater was to be tolerated in Israel. For if the root of the toxic weed was not eradicated, then it would not be surprising later if it overtook all the other plants. Therefore let no one among you turn aside from the LORD, our God, “to go serve the gods of these peoples.”

It is remarkable that Peter alluded to this statement in Scripture! Simon was, as a sorcerer, already an abomination in God’s eyes (Deut. 18:12). Peter saw that clearly. Simon’s activity was fatally dangerous for the gospel, for he was practicing syncretism, mixing true and false religion, in this instance, the gospel and magic. If at this point a powerful response was not forthcoming, then later the sorcerer, like a poisonous plant, would overcome and choke the seed of the gospel in the Samaritan field.

24 Simon responded with the request that the apostles would ask the Lord for him to please spare him the fate that Peter had threatened him with.

Did this request arise from genuine penitence and conversion? Calvin thought so. In his commentary on this verse, Calvin wrote that Simon’s consciousness of his sin, his fear of God’s judgment, and his request for intercession “are certainly not the minimum signs of repentance, [so that] we are therefore entitled to conjecture that he did repent.” Others are of the opinion that as a genuine, as yet unconverted sorcerer, Simon assumed that the prayer of the apostles would have more “power” than his own.

In any case, Luke is not interested in Simon’s life story, but in the progress of the gospel in Samaria. Satan had tried to destroy the gospel by mixing it with occultism. But the Spirit of Jesus conquered the mighty sorcerer and preserved the young church from a Christianity-tinted syncretism, and thereby from falling back into paganism.

25 After this, Peter and John remained for some time in Samaria, and testified that Jesus Christ had fulfilled the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. On their way back to

Jerusalem, they proclaimed the good news in many Samaritan villages. In this way, they were implementing the mandate of the Master, that they testify of him not only in Jerusalem and Judea, but also in Samaria (1:8), and the semi-pagan Samaria was also included in the Christian church.

Was Simon the magician the same person as Simon Magus?

In the post-apostolic literature, we read often of a Simon Magus. In those early Christian writings, he is viewed as the first heretic, the father of Gnosticism, and the founder of his own church, from which he received divine honor. He supposedly was a fierce opponent of Peter in Rome. Although writers like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus argue vigorously that this Simon was the same person as Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8, today this is doubted by church historians.

If, however, these were the same person, then despite Peter's punishment, he would nonetheless have mixed the gospel with magic, and he continued to be a poisonous root in the field. If Luke knew about this, his report serves at the same time to refute a possible false appeal of Simon Magus to the apostles. For they had sharply condemned Simon's sorcery from the outset. And this explains why he had separated himself from orthodox Christianity.

But as we said, we are groping in the dark when it comes to the identity of both Simons. "Accordingly the safest course is to have nothing to do with uncertain opinions imposed on us, and simply to embrace what is recorded in Scripture. What we read about Simon elsewhere can rightly be regarded with suspicion for many reasons," Calvin wrote in his commentary.

CHAPTER 12

ACTS 8:26–40: PHILIP BAPTIZES THE FIRST AFRICAN

Until now the gospel had been proclaimed exclusively within the ancient borders of Israel, to Jews and Samaritans, the descendants of Shem. Things would remain this way for a little while. Nevertheless, the preaching to the Gentiles is coming within view. For even before Peter proclaimed the gospel to the Roman official, Cornelius, and before Paul had begun his missionary journeys, Philip was given the privilege of baptizing the first person from among the Gentiles. This was not a white European or a descendant of Japheth, but a black African and descendent of Ham: he was the chief treasury official of Ethiopia.

This was how the Lord Jesus began opening the way for an even wider proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles. Here in Acts 8, he calls Paul to be an apostle to the Gentiles. In Acts 10–11, he teaches Peter that the law had been taken down as a wall of separation between Jew and Gentile. In Acts 11, he founded the church in Antioch, which would become the home base from where Paul would be starting his missionary journeys from Acts 13 onward.

12.1 Philip proclaims the gospel to an Ethiopian official (Acts 8:26–35)

The incorporation of the first African in the New Testament church did not happen at the initiative of the apostles, nor of Philip, but as the direct result of heavenly intervention. The way in which Philip met the palace official was clearly a result of divine guidance.

26 For the Lord began by sending an angel. This phenomenon always indicated that something special was about to happen. In this case, it was the incorporation of the first African in the Christian church. And this happened not by way of circumcision, but by way of baptism (cf. Acts 10:3, 47–48).

Get ready, the angel commanded Philip, and see to it that around noon you are walking along the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza (formerly a Philistine city). There are two roads connecting these locales, one busy, the other less so. Philip was to take the secondary road, the one running past Gaza through the desert to Egypt. He obeyed the command given him, but he did not immediately understand precisely what he would have to do on the quiet road, and in the heat of the day when everybody else was resting.

The unsatisfied seeker

27 But this quickly became clear. For precisely at that quiet hour, a very important Ethiopian came riding toward him! He was likely a black man, and the chief treasurer of the candace of Ethiopia. This was not a first name, but a title, similar to “pharaoh.” In this case, the title of the queen-mother. The king of Ethiopia was viewed as a son of the sun god and therefore too holy for administering the country himself. The real authority rested, therefore, with the queen-mother, who functioned on behalf of her son as the regent. Because in those days there was no difference between the private purse of a ruler and the treasury of the kingdom, this chief treasurer was something like a minister of finance. So the Lord chose an influential man to be included as the first Gentile in the Christian church.

On the surface, he was a successful man, but on closer inspection, he was a pitiable wretch. The Bible describes him as a eunuch, a castrated male. As a highly placed servant of a queen, he

had been castrated. In the ancient Near East, this was occasionally done shortly after birth, sometimes at a later age, but most often before puberty. We don't know exactly how the surgery was done in this man's case. In any case, he had obtained his high position at the cost of his masculinity. The joys of married life and fatherhood were unknown to him. All forms of sexual feeling had been cut off.

He arouses our sympathy further because he had his fill of pagan religions and philosophies. He had not found peace. Until he had met Jews. At that time about two million Jews were living in Egypt, and there was a prosperous trade relationship between Egypt and Ethiopia. Perhaps such a minister of finance had come into contact with a Jewish merchant or missionary. In this way, before making his pilgrimage to Jerusalem he could have already heard quite a bit about Yahweh and his people (Matt. 23:15), and just like Theophilus, he could have belonged to the "God-fearers" (13:50; 17:4, 17; 18:7).

And now he was making the trip of a lifetime: a pilgrimage to the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem. About a thousand miles (fifteen hundred kilometers) long! This man must surely have been deeply gripped by God and his Word! When he arrived he would presumably have had to process several deep disappointments.

In the first place, as an Ethiopian he could proceed no further than the so-called Court of the Gentiles. In the second place, he encountered an even more painful "No trespassing" sign than that. If he did not know ahead of time, he would have been told in Jerusalem: as a castrated man he would never be able to enter God's people as a full-blown proselyte through circumcision.

In Israel, a eunuch was an excluded person. In the book of Moses, it was in black and white: "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose male organ is cut off shall enter the assembly of the LORD" (Deut. 23:1). They could live in the country, but not enter the assembly, the church *assembly*. A descendant of Aaron who had a defect in his sexual organ was excluded from priestly service (Lev. 21:16–21).

This was one of the pedagogical-symbolic ordinances whereby Yahweh imprinted upon his people that as Creator and God of life, he has an intense aversion toward sin, death, and defect, and he was unwilling to take pleasure in these. Therefore, a "dry tree" like a castrated man (Isa. 56:3) was unsuited to enter the assembly of God's church. All the more so because among the Gentiles, young boys and men were castrated for religious reasons, something that was an absolute abomination in God's eyes.

His stay in Jerusalem, then, would not have given the Ethiopian the joy he was perhaps expecting. Being so near to the God of Israel, it would have become clear that he would remain at a distance, at most a second-class worshiper. And to think that he was traveling a thousand miles (fifteen hundred kilometers) just for that! Nevertheless, this disappointment had not embittered him.

28 He had acquired (perhaps in Jerusalem?) a scroll of Isaiah. These were extremely expensive because they were produced on parchment, or the skin of the papyrus plant, and were written by hand letter by letter. Far and away most Jews had to go to the synagogue if they wanted to study a Bible scroll, but this minister of finance was able to acquire one (or more?). (How wealthy we are, then, to be able to own complete, beautiful, and inexpensive Bibles!) When Philip and he met, he was reading the scroll of Isaiah.

The first gospel proclamation to an African Gentile

29 At this moment, the Spirit made it clear to Philip why he had to be on this road in the heat

of the day. “Go over and join this chariot,” he told Philip. So Philip got a heads up, but the Ethiopian did not. The latter, like the rest of us, had to come to faith along the normal, mediate path, namely, by means of the proclamation and explanation of the *Word* of the Spirit. In this way the Lord had also brought the Emmaus travelers to faith, by opening the *Scripture* for them (Luke 24:13–35; Rom. 10:14–15).

30 Philip quickly climbed into the chariot and heard that the traveler was reading the prophet Isaiah. Nowadays he would not have been alerted to that, since when we read the Bible by ourselves, we read it quietly. But because people in antiquity wrote without punctuation and spaces between words, it was easier to read aloud. In fact, people had a better ear for the eloquence of the language. What an experience for Philip: a black man reading the book of Isaiah!

Surely he was reading the Septuagint, the Greek translation that had been distributed widely in Egypt. For just as with English today, so too in those days Greek was the world language that was spoken everywhere. Both men would have spoken Greek. Philip had been appointed as “deacon” on behalf of the Greek-speaking widows (Acts 6:1–6). He addressed the pilgrim with a cute Greek wordplay that went like this: Do you understand what you are standing before?

31 With modesty, the important man said forthrightly that he did not understand much of what he was reading. How could I, he continued, if no one guides me? Then he asked Philip to step into the chariot, and so Philip found himself sitting alongside this inquiring African and castrated government minister.

32 It was indeed fortuitous that this Ethiopian just happened to be reading from Isaiah 53, the chapter that could have been written at the foot of the cross. In that chapter, the prophet was talking about the Servant of Yahweh, who would come into great glory along the route of suffering and dying. The traveler has just come to Isaiah 53:7–8. In the Greek translation, which differed a bit from the Hebrew text, this passage goes like this:

*Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.*

33 *In his humiliation justice was denied him.
Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth.*

In connection with these verses, we think immediately of the Lord Jesus, but for the Ethiopian, these were obscure words. In fact, for most Jews as well (Luke 24:25–26, 44–45).

34 May I ask you, the treasury official said, about whom is the prophet speaking here? About himself or about someone else?

35 Then “Philip opened his mouth”—an expression that Scripture uses more often when someone is about to say something special (Matt. 5:2; Acts 10:34). This too was a historical moment! Philip got ready to proclaim the gospel for the first time to an African Gentile. To be sure, he was already a Bible-reading “God-fearing” Gentile, but a Gentile nonetheless. And a eunuch as well, who according to the Law would never be permitted to enter an Israelite church meeting.

Philip took as his starting point the Scripture passage that the poor money-man happened to be reading (Isa. 53:7–8), and proclaimed to him the good news that this prophecy had recently been fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth. He was the Servant of Yahweh about whom Isaiah had

spoken (cf. 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30). After he had appeared, mighty in Word and deed—Philip would surely have given examples of this—he had allowed himself to be slain like a lamb. The humiliation about which the prophet was speaking had been so deep that this Servant had died on a cross.

Philip could explain from this same Isaiah 53, however, why the Messiah had to suffer and die: “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. . . . [T]he Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53:5–6).

But when this happened, we Jews did not understand it. He was “despised and rejected by men” (Isa. 53:3). Our people were expecting not a sufferer, but a fighter. Not a savior from sins, but a savior from Rome. Therefore we considered the crucified Jesus as “stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted” (Isa. 53:4). Isaiah had prophesied with sharp detail the entire course of the Messiah’s life.

Including the fact that his path of suffering would bear immeasurable fruit. This could be read further on: “Who shall tell of his descendants? . . . When he has given himself as a guilt offering, he will see his descendants and Yahweh’s plan (to save the world through him) will succeed through his ministry.” For he will “justify many” by bearing their guilt for them (Isa. 53:10–11).

Perhaps the government minister confided in Philip at that point that he was castrated. Would he be able to share fully in the redemption about which the prophet was speaking? Perhaps he did not need to acknowledge this at all, because the evangelist immediately proclaimed to him that with Jesus’ coming, the Law of Moses was antiquated and had, as the wall of separation between Israel and the Gentile nations, been taken down (Eph. 2:14–22). This was something that Philip has possibly learned from his fellow-deacon, Stephen.

This is how we imagine the conversation in that chariot. The Ethiopian asking questions, and the evangelist answering them. He would have taught him in this context about baptism as well, for according to Hebrews 6:2, this belonged to “the elementary principles.” One name kept coming up again and again: the name of him who had fulfilled the Law and the Prophets as the Lamb of God, Messiah Jesus of Nazareth!

12.2 The Ethiopian comes to faith and brings the gospel to one of the ends of the earth (Acts 8:36–40)

“Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation,” the Lord Jesus had commanded. “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16). The Lord had not given a command to circumcise converted Gentiles, and Philip courageously followed suit. In this respect as well, he agreed with Stephen, who—earlier than the apostles—had seen with such sharp clarity the consequences of Jesus’ coming for observing the law.

The first African is baptized

36 When Philip had spent some time proclaiming that Jesus was the promised Messiah, in light of Isaiah 53, they passed by a brook or small lake. “Look, water!” the Ethiopian said. “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” If he had understood Philip well, Jesus had broken down the wall of separation between Israel and the Gentile nations.

What a probing question for Philip! Not circumcising, but baptizing a Gentile who had come

to faith? Did this fit with the new-found Christian freedom from the law? The apostles had not yet stipulated the conditions under which Gentiles could be accepted into the church. But by virtue of the Lord having commanded Philip through an angel to proclaim the gospel to this man, the Lord overcame his possible objections. Nowadays many would have wondered whether the man had been instructed adequately. And whether a deacon-evangelist was authorized to administer baptism. And whether you could simply baptize someone in just any stream.

37 According to this verse, Philip supposedly replied: “If you believe with all your heart, you may be baptized.” At which point the Ethiopian confessed his faith. But in the majority of manuscripts, and the earliest ones, this verse is lacking. This explains why new translations put it in parentheses or omit it entirely. It must have been a very ancient addition, however, for Irenaeus (c. 180) already knew it. One assumes that a later scribe, who thought all of this proceeded somewhat quickly and easily, had inserted these words because in his day, adults who were to be baptized had to first confess faith. The Apostles’ Creed has come from just such an early Christian “baptismal confession.” But as we indicated, according to the best manuscripts, Philip never spoke these words, and verse 36 is followed immediately with verse 38.

Nevertheless, the insertion of verse 37 is certainly scriptural. According to this verse, Philip would have been acting in line with the rule that Paul held before the Galatians years later: “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6). And that is what the eunuch confessed: “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” If the words of this verse were inserted by a scribe already before 180, then apparently people at that time saw this confession sufficient for someone who was to be baptized.

38 If we skip over verse 37, then obviously Philip did not doubt at all whether the Ethiopian had received the Lord Jesus as his Savior. And then he apparently did not require that the man provide a detailed confession of his faith. Nor did he think it desirable to postpone the administration of baptism until his “catechism student” would know “more.”

In fact, is it at all certain that the man possessed only a small knowledge of Scripture? How long had he already believed that the God of Israel was the only true God? And that this God had promised Israel a Savior? He had already heard so much about him that he had acquired a Scripture scroll and had made a pilgrimage of nearly a thousand miles (fifteen hundred kilometers) in order to worship him in Jerusalem! Philip would certainly have instructed him much longer than an hour’s class period. This narrative provides us, therefore, with no tool in hand for seeing basic catechesis as superfluous for granting access to baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Although, on the other hand, it remains true that the gospel is so simple that a child can believe it. Entering the kingdom of God is definitely not a question of mastering a complicated theoretical system, but of a heartfelt trusting in God’s promises in Christ Jesus and growing in that throughout the rest of one’s life.

As a high-placed official, the minister of finance was certainly traveling with an escort on horseback and a chariot driver, for he commanded that the chariot stop. In this way, his entire entourage witnessed their master being baptized. He and Philip went down into the water, which at this moment was a sign and seal of the washing away of his sins through the blood and Spirit of Jesus Christ.

By the way, from this Scripture passage there is no necessary indication that the eunuch was entirely submerged. How do we know that the water was deep enough for that? As someone observed, this seems more like the portrayals we find in the catacombs, where the person being

baptized went to their knees in the water and the water was poured over their head.

With this, the first African was baptized even before the first European. For Peter had not yet baptized the Roman Cornelius, and it would be years before the household of Stephanus would become “the first converts in Achaia” (i.e. of Greece, which is to say: Europe) (1 Cor. 16:15). The Ethiopian treasurer was given to be the leader of the millions of blacks who would come to faith in his wake.

39 Did Philip at that point begin his “follow-up care”? No, for they had hardly emerged from the water before the Spirit of the Lord Jesus yanked Philip away. He had done this before in miraculous ways (cf. 1 Kgs 18:12; 2 Kgs 2:16; see also 1 Thess. 4:17). If he did this with Philip as well, this miracle would have strengthened the faith of the palace official in no small way. At that point, the incorporation into the Christian church of the first Gentiles began with a divine intervention and ended with another. As a small servant of the great Christ, the evangelist could be confident that through his Word and Spirit, the Lord would now continue caring for the newly baptized African government minister.

This man was full of the Lord Jesus, and therefore so joyful that he had no need to go looking for Philip. With great rejoicing he continued his trip. He had come to know Jesus Christ and God’s love, which extended also to him: a Gentile, and a eunuch as well. He who first was far off had now been drawn near by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:13).

Free access for eunuchs

How elated he must have been when he unrolled the scroll further, and read in Isaiah 56:3–7:

“Let not the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’; and let not the eunuch say, ‘Behold, I am a dry tree.’

For thus says the Lord: ‘To the *eunuchs* who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant,

I will give in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off.

And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant—

these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.’”

How that must have increased the jubilation of that unmarried financier! Would a man who could never have a family, who would never have posterity, nevertheless receive a memorial and an indestructible name? Was God promising single people something better than sons and daughters? Indeed he was, for Jesus will one day make all things new.

The gospel reaches the interior of Africa

We can confidently assume that what filled his heart flowed forth from his lips when he arrived home. According to the tradition (Irenaeus, Eusebius, Jerome), he proclaimed the gospel in his native land. We may assume he did so both to the Jews, through whom he had come to

know the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to his own countrymen, the inhabitants of Cush (the Hebrew name for Ethiopia), the descendants of Ham (Gen. 10:6).

In this way, as a result of Stephen's death and Philip's preaching, the gospel came for the first time as far as the Lord Jesus wanted to have it proclaimed: "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). For in antiquity, Ethiopia was viewed as the southernmost end of the earth, where the world stopped, so to speak. In this way, Psalm 68:31 was fulfilled: "Nobles shall come from Egypt; Cush shall hasten to stretch out her hands to God" (cf. Zeph. 3:10).

The further ministry of Philip

40 After his sudden disappearance, Philip was next seen in Azotus, the ancient Philistine city of Ashdod. From there he traveled as an evangelist to the cities along the coast, like Ekron, Jamnia, Lydda, Joppe, and Antipatris, until he arrived in Caesarea, the harbor city filled with Roman culture. In this way, the Jerusalem deacon eventually obtained the name of Philip "the evangelist."

About twenty years after this episode, when he had gone with his four unmarried daughters to live in Caesarea, on a certain day he received a visit from Paul and Luke (Acts 21:8–9). Together with Timothy and seven other Gentile Christians, they were en route from Asia Minor and Greece to Jerusalem. During the days when they were lodging with Philip, they very likely told him about the great things that the Lord had done in those countries through their ministry. Would they not also have reminded each other at that point of the eunuch treasury official of the candace of Ethiopia, the firstfruits of Africa, who had been baptized by Philip as the first Gentile Christian?

CHAPTER 13

ACTS 9:1–31: THE LORD JESUS CALLS SAUL OF TARSUS TO BE AN APOSTLE

Now comes one of the most important events in world history after Pentecost: the conversion of Paul and his call to be an apostle of Jesus Christ. And what an apostle he was! Without detracting at all from the significance of the twelve, he could write: Through God's grace I have worked harder than everyone else (1 Cor. 15:10). Millions have learned from him: Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone!

From Jerusalem to Rome, perhaps all the way to Spain (Rom. 15:24), he proclaimed the gospel to innumerable Jews and Gentiles. Moreover, he wrote a very large part of the New Testament. It contains thirteen letters from his pen, with such rich content that there is always more depth with every reading. Take simply the letter to the Romans. Calvin called that one a priceless but the most hidden treasure of Holy Scripture. In this way Paul has been the teacher of the New Testament church for almost twenty-one centuries by now. More than one of the twelve other apostles, he has explained for us the significance of Jesus' work.

But before he himself understood Scripture and recognized Jesus as the promised Messiah, an enormous change had to occur in his life. For Paul had been a seasoned Pharisee for years, and later became a fierce persecutor of Christians. This is an appropriate opportunity for sketching his life up to his conversion. When we summarize what he himself has told us in Acts 22, 23, 26, Galatians 1, and Philippians 3, we obtain the following portrait.

13.1 Paul's early life

He must have been born at approximately the same time as the Lord Jesus. In Tarsus, a prominent Hellenistic city in Cilicia (in southeastern Turkey), and at that time a center of science. His parents belonged to the tribe of Benjamin. His father also had Roman citizenship, and for that reason was a person of some prominence. When he was eight days old, he was circumcised and received the Hebrew name *šā'ul* (Sha'ul, which in Greek became Saul. Until Acts 13:9, Luke called him by that name. We know him now by his Roman name, Paul (i.e., "small" or "humble").

As the son of parents who were Pharisees, he received a strict Jewish upbringing. Outside the home, people spoke Greek, but at home he learned Hebrew and Aramaic. Judging from his Roman name and citizenship, he would also have known Latin. According to Jewish custom, as a young boy of five years old, he would have known the Hebrew alphabet for reading the sacred scrolls of Scripture, and the Pharisaic laws were imprinted upon him: "No, Saul, we Israelites don't do that!"

Saul was still young when his family moved to Jerusalem, where he grew up. As a young man he became a student at the Torah school of the famous professor Gamaliel. At his feet, Paul developed into a fanatic scribe of the Pharisees. He zealously memorized not only large parts of Holy Scripture, but also much teaching that famous rabbis like Hillel and Shammai had drawn from the law: hundreds of regulations for what, according to them, you may and may not do as a Jew (cf. Matt. 23:16–26). All of this Paul put into practice with extraordinary zeal (Acts 22:3; Gal. 1:14). According to Pharisaic standards, the young Paul was "blameless" (Phil. 3:6).

According to Jewish custom, the up and coming rabbi also learned manual labor, namely,

that of tent making or leather worker (as a rule, tents were made out of leather). He practiced this trade later alongside his apostolic work, in order to make his living. He needed few tools for that trade, and he could easily find business in every city (Acts 18:3; 20:34). In this way he could continue living in financial independence if he wished (1 Cor. 4:12; 9:6–18; 1 Thess. 2:9). Perhaps as he traveled, he may have slept overnight in a portable tent that he himself had made.

He too came into contact with disciples of Jesus, who claimed that he was the Messiah and that through his suffering and death he had fulfilled the law. Especially the Hellenist, Stephen, had proclaimed with great power the provisional character of the law and the temple (Acts 6:8–14). According to him, Jesus was sitting now at the right hand of God, and he was supposed to be worshiped as Lord (Acts 7:56, 60). When he heard this, the young Pharisee burned with zeal for his church. Like a new Maccabean, he defended “our law, our sanctuary, and *our* religion.” He threw into prison those despised followers of Jesus. And when large stones rained down on Stephen the Christian, Saul was standing nearby and thought: Good, despisers of the law must be eradicated!

With calculation, this fanatic Pharisee and ruthless inquisitor was chosen by the Lord Jesus to proclaim his work to Gentiles and Israelites, from the highest to the lowest of them. For that purpose God had separated him already from his mother’s womb, just like Jeremiah (Gal. 1:15; Jer. 1:4). Fitting into this divine plan for Saul was his initial phase of life with his study under Gamaliel and his living according to the caricature of the law. Once he was converted from these, he would be able all the more richly to proclaim the gospel of God’s free grace.

Luke apparently found the call of Paul to be so important that he mentions it three times, in various contexts and with various purposes. Here in Acts 9:1–19a, Luke provides the description; in 22:6–16 and 26:11–18 Paul himself narrates the episode.

13.2 En route to Damascus (Acts 9:1–8)

In Acts 8, Luke tells us remarkable things about the spread of the gospel in Samaria, and even deep into Africa! But don’t forget that this was the work of *dispersed* believers who, like Philip, had been driven to flee from Saul.

1 Since the death of Stephen, Saul’s persecuting rage had not cooled down. He continued to prowl like a roaring lion, threatening to murder anyone who was a disciple of the Lord Jesus. Anyone refusing to deny him ran the risk of having to pay for that with his life. He dragged even women and mothers from their homes (8:3). And when the court was weighing a death sentence, Saul always voted for it (Acts 26:10). I was a terrible brute, he would later confess with deep sorrow (1 Tim. 1:13).

“They will do these things,” the Lord Jesus had foretold, “because they have not known the Father, nor me” (John 16:3). Saul of Tarsus was such a person yet at that point. To be sure, he was a scribe of the Pharisees, a graduate of professor Gamaliel, stuffed full of rabbinic explanations of the law and rigorously devoted to maintaining that Pharisaic caricature of the law. But with all his rabbinic Scripture scholarship, at that point our beloved brother Paul did not know God the Father nor the Lord Jesus!

2 In this blind fanaticism, he turned his eye toward Damascus as well, where at the time thousands of Jews were living (Nero later killed 10,000 of them). He could possibly track down followers of Jesus there as well, and in this way prevent their heresies from being spread further from this international commercial center. Therefore Saul requested the high priest and the Sanhedrin (22:5; 26:10) to grant his written authorization to arrest men and women “of that way”

in the Syrian capital city, and to bring them back to Jerusalem. Naturally to apply a strong hand there so they would renounce their faith.

Such an action was evidently possible. The Sanhedrin possessed no civil authority outside Judea, but they did exercise widespread authority among Jews living in foreign places. A persecution of Christians in Damascus was made easier by the fact that not only was the administrative board of the synagogue in the Sanhedrin's pocket, but the governor was as well (9:29; 2 Cor. 11:32). In addition, the Christians had apparently not yet separated from the synagogue.

What a remarkable description Luke provides of the gospel and the believers: "those who belonged to the Way"! A Christian was a person who did not follow a theoretical system, but a different way of life. With his whole heart he is a disciple of the Lord Jesus, who said: "I am the way" (John 14:6). Whoever believes in him is on the way to eternal life.

In Saul's ears, however, this was blasphemous talk. According to his firm conviction, Jesus was dead and his name and followers had to be exterminated. He saw this as God's will and the best thing for the Jewish church. Yet, this grand inquisitor would soon be turned around 180 degrees, and called to become an apostle!

3 There he goes with his authorizations and arrest team. Ananias, a Jewish Christian in Damascus, had already heard the bad news: that fanatical Saul of Tarsus is coming to arrest Christians (v. 14). The church members—no doubt including believers from Jerusalem, who had already fled from Saul—held their breath. Were they not safe from him even in a foreign land?

Only when the "wolves" (Matt. 10:16) had approached Damascus after several days of travel, and were at the point of assaulting the defenseless "sheep," the Good Shepherd intervened. Around 12 o'clock noon, when the sun was at its highest, Saul (not his companions) was suddenly bathed in a light that was brighter than that of the midday sun (26:13). In a split second the terrified inquisitor laid trembling on the ground, "owned by Christ Jesus" (cf. Phil. 3:12). His escort had also fallen to the ground (26:14).

4 In that supernatural light Saul saw a human form (26:16; Gal. 1:16). From 1 Corinthians 9:1 and 15:8, we learn that he was seeing the glorified Jesus, though he was not immediately aware of that. Scripture provides no further description of Jesus' form, from which we might be able to learn something more about his existence in heaven. Scripture speaks just as reticently here as it does about Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. Except that this heavenly light revealed Jesus' divine glory. (With such majesty the Lord Jesus will later be seen by all people when he returns! [Matt. 24:30].) Saul did hear the voice of that heavenly figure. Clearly and in Hebrew (26:14) the Lord said to him: "Sha'ul, Sha'ul, why are you persecuting me?"

5 In a split second, the Lord had made him small. Very respectfully and with trembling voice, the crushed persecutor of the church asked: "Who are you, Lord?" To which he heard—perhaps curtly—the response: "*I* [emphatic] am Jesus, whom *you* [emphatic] are persecuting." For whoever attacks Jesus' church attacks his body and thereby Jesus himself!

6 Saul's death warrant appeared certain, but it was not issued! "Stand up and enter the city," the Lord continued, "and there it will be told you what you must do." We already know what that was: at the cost of much suffering, he was to become an apostle to the Gentiles!

7 His travel companions stood speechless. They had seen the light and heard a voice, but they did not understand what he said (cf. John 12:28). Nor did they see anyone in the light. Saul was the only one who got to see something of the inexpressible glory of God's Son and to be addressed by him. After all, to accomplish his task, he had to be—just like the twelve—an eye- and ear-witness of Jesus' resurrection (1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8).

8 When Saul was helped to stand upright, everything remained black before his eyes. Jesus' heavenly glory had struck him blind. His assistants took him by the hand and that's how he stumbled into Damascus. No longer the feared bully coming to arrest Christians, but himself a trembling captive of Jesus Christ.

13.3 On Straight Street (Acts 9:9–19a)

As one broken in heart and slain in spirit, Saul arrived at his lodging place, at the home of a certain Judas who lived on Straight Street. In a few moments, the glorified Jesus had turned the entire Pharisaic life of Saul upside down, and had unmasked every lie about himself. Jesus, the One whom he had hated so intensely, was indeed alive! He had really risen from the dead, and he, Saul, had seen and heard him! His followers were right: He was the Messiah! And Stephen had told the truth when he said: "I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56).

And then to think that he had viewed this Jesus as a false Messiah, and had persecuted his disciples with fire and sword! He had not been serving God, but instead had been opposing him. Something about which his teacher Gamaliel had warned (Acts 5:39). Instead of being the most pious rabbi, he was one of the greatest sinners: a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a bully (1 Tim. 1:13–14).

Indeed, what would have gone passed his mind in review as he sat on Straight Street? His Pharisaic upbringing. The zeal with which he had stored up in his memory the rabbinic tradition. His pride about his knowledge and walk of life. Now he viewed these as worthless garbage (Phil. 3:7–8). How he had gone astray! His vision of the Law and Prophets was, along with his messianic expectation, thoroughly mistaken. Jesus' crucifixion was the fulfillment of Scripture and his resurrection confirmed that God had made him Lord and Messiah.

9 For three days and three nights, the Lord granted Saul the time to meditate on his appearing and accusation. Before he explained to him his apostolic task, every bit of Pharisaic prig and self-willed righteousness in him had to be broken. During that entire period, Saul had no desire to eat or drink. When he had been able to see, he was blind toward Christ. Now that he was blind, he saw him continual in a heavenly light. He had to wait for three days before someone came to console him. How he must have pleaded for forgiveness during that time!

Ananias learns about Saul's high calling (vv. 10–16)

10 In Damascus it will be told you what you must do, the Lord Jesus had informed Saul at his appearing. For that purpose he sent him no angel or apostle, but an ordinary disciple: Ananias, someone respected among all the Jews in Damascus on account of his godliness (Acts 22:12). This man had first to be readied for his visit to the frightening inquisitor, for he knew nothing except that a terrible danger was threatening the believers in Damascus! The terrible Saul of Tarsus was en route to them in order to arrest the disciples of Jesus and lock them up in Jerusalem. Ananias had every reason, therefore, to hesitate in going to visit this feared persecutor of the church. Therefore the Lord intervened personally. He lovingly appeared to his disciple in a vision and commissioned him with these words:

11 "Rise and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul, for behold, he is praying." So Ananias did not need to be afraid of him. The brute had been broken, and had already been accepted by the Lord as a believer. Ananias must

now do the same.

12 Meanwhile, the Lord had already sent Saul a sign of his compassion and had prepared him for the arrival of Ananias. He had given the bully who had been struck with blindness a vision, in which a certain Ananias came to him, laid hands on him, and gave him back his sight. The Lord informed Ananias of this as well. He could go with confidence to Saul. God had brought him to his knees, and he was expecting Ananias.

13 Nevertheless he did not yet dare to go to Straight Street. As though the Lord himself did not know this, the astonished Ananias replied: “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints [i.e., believers] at Jerusalem.

14 And here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who call on your name.” Must this archenemy of Jesus now really be healed of his blindness? Ananias thought he knew the situation better than the Lord did. We might well grin about this, but often the Lord hears us reasoning—and praying—with just as narrow an outlook about the real state of affairs in his Kingdom.

15 Was Ananias concerned about Jesus’ name? Then he might as well know what Jesus intended to do with that terrifying opponent. “Go to him, Ananias! For this Saul, who wanted to destroy my name on the earth is my chosen instrument of mine to carry my name throughout the earth! This gifted Hellenistic Jew will become the apostle to the Gentile nations. All the way to the highest circles, he will make known my name, even in the palaces of their kings. He will also proclaim that name among many Israelites in the Jewish Diaspora. In short, the world will become his workshop.”

What a surprising message, both for Ananias and for Paul!

16 Was Ananias filled with the pain that Saul had brought upon the disciples in Jerusalem? Well, I will show him in the course of his life how severely he himself will be persecuted, and how much he will have to suffer for my name in connection with his burdensome work in distant lands (cf. 2 Cor. 11:23–33).

This was Jesus’ agenda for Saul’s new life. Ananias would have to inform him about that. The rest of the book of Acts shows how Paul did indeed proclaim the gospel according to this plan revealed in Damascus: especially to the *Gentiles* (Cyprus, Turkey, Greece, Malta, Rome, Spain [?]); to their *kings* (the proconsuls of Cyprus and Achaia, king Agrippa, the governors Felix and Festus, and perhaps even emperor Nero); to the nation of *Israel*, especially those scattered in the countries mentioned.

Saul’s gracious reprieve validated by baptism (vv. 17–19)

17 After the Lord had revealed all of this to him, Ananias dared to go to the lion’s den on Straight Street. He entered the house of Judah. He did not have to evangelize here. Saul knew the Christian confession and had already been brought to conversion by the Lord en route to Damascus. Evidently Ananias had also heard about this from the Lord. For that reason he lovingly laid his hands upon the blind ex-inquisitor and welcomed him into the Christian Church: “Brother Saul (!), the Lord who appeared to you on your way here has sent me so that you can see once again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” As we now know: in order that in the Lord’s power he becomes Paul the apostle, Bible writer, and church teacher.

Later Paul narrated the rest of what Ananias had said: the God of our forefathers has chosen you to make known his will, to show forth the Righteous One, and to sound forth his voice. For you must testify on his behalf before all people concerning what you have seen and heard. What

are we waiting for? Come, be baptized and have your sins washed away, as you call upon his name (Acts 22:14–16).

18 Immediately after Ananias laid his hands upon Saul, it was as though scales fell from his eyes. He could see again and the first thing he did was to be baptized. In so doing, he was confessing that he now belonged to Messiah Jesus, with whom he had been crucified (Gal. 2:19), parenthesis and in whose death his old life has been buried. From henceforth, he would live for God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 6:3–4, 11).

19 His powerful emotions and the three-day fast had exhausted Saul. Nevertheless he was not in a hurry to eat. First he was baptized. Then his deep depression disappeared and he developed an appetite, so that he regained his physical strength.

In this way, in his room on Straight Street, our beloved brother Paul was incorporated into the Christian church, which he had persecuted so fiercely. He came into the kingdom of God and his Christ, and breathed in the fresh air of the forgiveness of sins. The slave of the “law” now stood in the glorious freedom of the children of God, which is so salutary for a person and which makes him a genuine person for the first time.

Our former Pharisaic brother instructed the New Testament so powerfully about our justification by grace, through faith, for the sake of Christ’s blood. He spoke from his own experience about the deep chasm between slavery to a religious “law” and living from grace and faith.

For that matter, Luke is not telling us here the *conversion* story of Saul the individual, but the *calling* story of the apostle Paul! And he received that commission not by the authority of a fellow apostle, but directly from heaven: “through a revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:12). For that reason, he traveled three years later to Jerusalem, in order to be trained and appointed as an apostle (Gal. 1:17).

Looking back, we now see something of the amazing significance of Paul’s calling for our part of the world. When the heavenly light shone around him en route to Damascus, God was harboring wonderful plans that included our distant ancestors. At that time our land was shrouded in deep pagan darkness. And at that point whom did the Lord call to proclaim the joyful news to Europe as well? He purposely called the most intense Pharisee, the most fanatic legalist, and the most harsh persecutor of Christians who was walking around the Jewish land: Saul of Tarsus. In a split second, Jesus Christ made him small. In this way, his calling to be an apostle was a poignant proof of God’s forgiveness not only toward Saul himself, but simultaneously for the millions who would later put their trust in Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 1:16).

13.4 Saul begins his apostolate (Acts 9:19b-22)

Ananias had crossed the threshold. He had accepted the feared Saul of Tarsus as a brother in Christ. Of course he had also explained to his fellow believers how it was that he was able to take this surprising step: the Lord had appeared to him in a vision and had revealed to him that he was placing Saul in the service of proclaiming the gospel throughout the world.

19b The other disciples then followed Ananias’ example. They overcame their fear and aversion, and accepted Saul in their group. Although there possibly were believers from Jerusalem among them, who had experienced Saul’s terror firsthand and for that reason had fled to Damascus. But if the Lord had extended grace to him, could they refuse to forgive him?

20 As a biblical scholar, Saul probably had a formidable knowledge of Scripture. But because of his rejection of Messiah Jesus, his Scripture study was always accompanied by a thick

veil upon his heart, so that he had never really understood Moses and the prophets. Since the Lord Jesus had appeared to him, however, and as Lord and Messiah had accepted him, that veil over the Scripture was torn away at once (cf. 2 Cor. 3:14–16). To his holy amazement he now saw that Moses and the prophets had testified about Jesus (cf. Luke 24:27, 44–45; John 5:39, 45).

Without delay he began immediately to proclaim in the synagogues, for he sensed deeply that the Lord had shown him mercy especially with that work in view (2 Cor. 4:1; 12:9; 1 Tim. 1:12–13). As rabbi and as a student of the famous Gamaliel, he had easy access to the “pulpits” in the synagogues. For biblical scholars were often asked if they wanted to speak an encouraging word to the church (cf. 13:14–15). This explains why during his subsequent journeys, Paul always went first to the synagogue. He had access there, and permission to preach, and moreover, he attracted Gentiles who were already worshiping the God of Israel.

At this point, people in Damascus knew him as a fierce inquisitor who had come to arrest Jesus’ followers. But to everyone’s great amazement, Jesus’ opponent stood up as his defender! He proclaimed emphatically to the Jews that Jesus is the Son of the living God!

On account of that confession, Jesus had recently been condemned to be crucified by the Sanhedrin—also with Saul’s consent—but now he knew better. Jesus was “equal with God” (Phil. 2:6). And only a short time ago he had appeared to Saul in such a heavenly light that his divine glory had struck Saul with blindness. From this time forward, this would belong to the core of Paul’s preaching, namely, that our Savior is God’s Son (cf. Acts 13:33; Rom. 1:3–4; Col. 2:9; etc.).

21 Of course, this proclamation, along with its source, generated a lot of consternation in the synagogues. Everyone who heard him was dumbfounded and wondered: Isn’t this the man who eradicated Jesus’ followers in Jerusalem and came here to arrest them in order to bring them back to the chief priests? How could that persecutor have changed so quickly into a preacher? Rather than destroy Jesus’ name, he was declaring that name!

22 More so than our churches, these synagogues were teaching halls, where you could discuss matters with the speaker, if you wanted. People did this with Saul. But whatever objections they raised against his preaching, no one could counter him successfully. On the contrary, because Scripture continued to open up more deeply before him, Saul was seeing all the more clearly that it had foretold that *through suffering* Christ would have to attain his glory. Along this route Saul’s persuasive power continually increased. He was able to show powerfully from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah, such that ultimately he disarmed the Jews in Damascus. Just as with Stephen, they were not strong enough to withstand the wisdom with which this converted rabbi was talking (6:10).

13.5 Saul’s apostolic suffering begins (Acts 9:23–25)

I will show him how much he must suffer for my name, the Lord had said about Saul (9:16). No fewer than eight times the Jews themselves would conspire to kill him! (9:23, 29; 14:5, 19; 20:3; 21:31; 23:12; 25:3).

23 They made their first attempt to get rid of him “when many days had passed” after Paul’s calling. With this, Luke must have been referring to a period of several years. In Galatians 1:17 Paul tells us that after his conversion, he had spent some time in “Arabia.” That is what people in that time called the desert regions that extended from southeast of Israel up to Damascus (cf. 2:11). How long he had stayed there Paul does not say. He does mention that Saul returned from that “Arabia” to Damascus (Gal. 1:17–18).

When he renewed his appeal to the Jews that they believe in Messiah Jesus, they became so full of religious hatred that they held a meeting where they forged a plan to kill him. Thereby Jesus' saying was fulfilled: "The hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God" (John 16:2). For their murderous plan they were able to garner the support of the governor under king Aretas (2 Cor. 11:32). This phenomenon would be repeated often in subsequent church history: "pious" enemies of Christ who, with the help of political power brokers, persecuted his faithful church.

24 This conspiracy was leaked prematurely, however, and Saul heard of it. Because the Jews were having the city gates guarded day and night, Saul's fate appeared to be sealed. But King Jesus was watching over the life of his apostle, who still had an immense job to do for him.

25 His disciples—for he had already made some—lowered Saul by night in a basket through a window of a house on the city wall, or through a hole in the wall. That is how the first attack on his life failed, and this was also how Paul's apostolic path of suffering began.

Years later he called this humiliating escape a remarkable example of his personal weakness (2 Cor. 11:30–33). As apostle of Jesus Christ, he had not left Damascus as a prominent church leader being carried under a canopy above his head, but in the dead of night in a basket! He boasted in such weaknesses, however, because they showed that he was not the great person who would bring in the kingdom, but that this would happen through God's power.

13.6 Saul acknowledged in Jerusalem as an apostle and his life attacked again by the Jews (Acts 9:26–30)

Two or three years had passed since Saul had left to go to Damascus in order to arrest disciples of Jesus (Gal. 1:17–18). Meanwhile many believers who earlier had fled Jerusalem out of fear of him had returned to the city. Apparently they had learned something about Saul having been concerted, but people evidently were not entirely confident about the matter.

26 For when after his escape from Damascus, he had returned to Jerusalem, he was reminded painfully about his sinful past. All the church members avoided him (cf. v. 13). No one could believe that he too had become a disciple of the Lord Jesus. No wonder, for he had been persecuting the church for a long time (22:4). Some believers had even been tortured by him (26:10–11). Was the wolf now entering the sheepfold to come after them? How painful this reception must have been for Saul: no one wanted anything to do with him, neither his former associates nor his new brothers.

27 With one exception: the good man Joseph (11:24), surnamed Barnabas, who would later become Paul's friend and travel companion. This man showed again that he was true to his surname—man of comfort (see our comments on 4:36). He took seriously Saul's story of his conversion and calling, and introduced him to the apostles. At least to Peter and James, the brother of the Lord Jesus, for Saul became acquainted initially only with this duo (Gal. 1:18–19). The other apostles would not have been in the city.

Barnabas passed Saul's report on to Peter and James: their persecutor had also become a witness of Jesus' resurrection! Something that after Stephen's death nobody else had experienced—that is what he had experienced: the Lord had appeared to him on the road to Damascus. He had also called him to proclaim the gospel to Israelites and Gentiles (9:15; 26:16–18), something that he had done immediately. Instead of eradicating Jesus' name, he had proclaimed that name boldly in Damascus (and "Arabia")!

28 On the basis of this intercession by Barnabas, Saul was then accepted by Peter and James

as a brother and a fellow apostle. And on their authority, by the church as well, of course. Believers who had perhaps been persecuted and injured by him now recognized and embraced him as apostle in the gatherings of the church!

In Galatians 1:18 Paul indicates that this stay lasted only two weeks. With this statement he was proving to certain opponents of his that no one could later claim that Paul was trained and appointed by Peter to be an apostle. On the contrary, he had received his appointment directly from Jesus Christ himself, by means of his glorious appearance on the road to Damascus (Gal. 1:12).

Although for the entire Christian church it was naturally of fundamental importance that he had, for two weeks, enjoyed confident concourse with the “pillars” Peter and James. Their unanimity would be perpetuated years later when they faced severe struggles of faith, so that no “churches of Paul” came into existence alongside “churches of Peter” (15:24–33). The apostle Peter and the brother of the Lord undoubtedly told Saul details from Jesus’ life that he had not yet known. This is why he could later write that he was handing down what he had “received” (1 Cor. 15:5–6).

For the residents of Jerusalem, it was nonetheless a remarkable picture—the previous inquisitor Saul of Tarsus, so to speak, walking arm in arm through the city with the famous leaders of “the sect of the Nazarene”! Everyone—the Sanhedrin as well as Saul’s former companions—could see in that picture that the ex-chief of the persecution of Christians had been accepted as a member in good standing in Jesus’ church. And that he had openly recanted his anti-Christian activities!

29 He had done this, in fact, by his preaching, which went directly against the propaganda of the Sanhedrin (Matt. 28:11–15). For during those fourteen days, which included two sabbaths, he stood up boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus. Using the Scriptures, he proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. He talked and debated about this especially with the Greek-speaking Jews, to whom he had belonged from his birth (for more about these Hellenists, see our comments on 6:1).

From these groups, meanwhile, false accusations had come against the preaching of Stephen, which led ultimately to his martyrdom (6:9–15). And now the man who had helped stone Stephen was proclaiming the same message! When they were just as unable to withstand Paul’s wisdom as Stephen’s (6:10), their religious hatred erupted against Paul as well. So fiercely, in fact, that already within that short period of fourteen days they made several attempts to get rid of him!

This reaction must have disappointed Paul deeply. For as a converted inquisitor he thought he was just the right man to convince his former companions of their error, but he was seriously mistaken. In a vision the Lord showed him clearly that people living in the city of the Sanhedrin did not want to hear anything about Jesus: “When I had returned to Jerusalem and was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw him saying to me, ‘Make haste and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me’” (22:17–18). Paul argued a bit against doing this, but the Lord concluded the conversation with: “Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles” (22:19–22).

30 For this purpose, King Jesus, the great Main Actor in this book, protected his apostle once more. He saw to it that the murderous plots that the Hellenists in Jerusalem had hatched against Paul came to nothing. When the brothers heard about it, they decided that Saul could better return to his native city of Tarsus. Perhaps there he could find an open door for the gospel. Paul agreed with that plan. All the more because the Lord had already prepared him in a vision for a

field of labor that lay far away.

Brothers accompanied him for safety's sake to Caesarea, a harbor city with a prestigious Gentile population, where he faced significantly less risk of being killed by Jewish assassins. This enabled him to travel both by land and by sea to Tarsus in Cilicia (modern southeastern Turkey). There as well as in the coastal region of Syria, he proclaimed the gospel and established churches (Gal. 1:21–22).

Presumably this would also have been a time of gaining deeper insight for Paul. In this way, “the mystery” would have been “revealed” to him during those years, the mystery that earlier generations had not known. Namely, “that the Gentiles would be fellow heirs and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus” (cf. Eph. 3:3–13) and that Jesus was going to combine those two together, Jews and Gentiles, “into one body” (Eph. 2:11–22). But Luke is silent about this. He now temporarily drops the thread of Saul's apostleship. He picks it up again when Barnabas comes looking for Saul in Tarsus (Acts 11:25). But that will happen two years down the road.

CHAPTER 14

ACTS 9:31–43: THE FURTHER BUILDING AND EXPANSION OF THE CHURCH

The previous inquisitor Saul was called by the Lord to be an apostle to the Gentiles. He had already proclaimed the gospel in Damascus and its environs. But when he testified about the Lord in Jerusalem, he had to take flight to Tarsus on account of the threatening plot to murder him. Meanwhile, how were things going in the young churches in the Jewish land, now that the engine of ecclesiastical persecution was idling?

That is what Luke tells us in 9:31–43. As we saw him doing earlier (2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16; 6:7), he interrupts his report here in order to simply provide an interim assessment of ecclesiastical life, and to mark the transition to a new phase in the apostolic preaching. For in Acts 10 the Lord will show his apostles that he had opened the barrier to the Gentile world.

Because he had appointed Peter to heal the paralyzed Aeneas and to raise the deceased Dorcas, many in the coastal region came to faith. With that, the apostolic preaching in Israel came to something of a conclusion. For the Jewish and Samaritan churches, there began a period of upbuilding, when they could grow in grace, faith, and number.

14.1 The church enjoys some time of peace and upbuilding (Acts 9:31)

Luke had not yet told us anything about any apostolic preaching in Galilee, but that was natural. For there the Lord had done most of his work and found his most loyal followers. Moreover, the gospel was being proclaimed not only by the apostles, but also by the Jerusalem refugees (8:4) and perhaps also by the five hundred brothers to whom the Lord had appeared (in Galilee?) after his resurrection (1 Cor. 15:6). In short, by this time Christian churches had been established in all of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. Luke calls all of them together “the church.”

31 And those churches now experienced a period of peace, although it would not last long (cf. 12:1). Remarkably, that rest did not lead to laziness. On the contrary, it introduced a time when the church was built up by means of the encouragements and admonitions of the Holy Spirit, built up in both breadth and depth. Those who had just been converted lived more and more heartily and powerful in the “fear of the Lord” by means of cultivating loving respect for him and being afraid of causing him sorrow. This lifestyle made the churches attractive to outsiders as well, so that many joined the churches. In this way they grew and flourished through the assistance of the Holy Spirit both in faith and obedience, as well as in number.

14.2 Through the healing of Aeneas the Lord brings all of Lydda and Sharon to conversion (Acts 9:32-35)

By means of two miraculous signs, Luke now shows how the Spirit of Jesus fostered the growth and upbuilding of the church in an unusually powerful way.

32 The first one occurred when Peter arrived, on his circuit trip to visit the Christian churches, among the “saints” in Lydda. With the term “saints,” the New Testament did not have in view “sacred relics,” but ordinary believers who were sanctified (i.e., set apart from the world and consecrated to God) by Christ’s blood and Spirit and therefore obligated to lead a holy life. According to the apostolic example, at the beginning of a letter to a Christian congregation we

could write: “To the saints in Chicago” (cf. Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Phil. 1:1).

33 There in Lydda Peter came upon a lame man, called Aeneas. Doctor Luke did not deny his vocation when he accurately mentions that the poor fellow was bedridden for eight years (!) and was evidently incurably ill.

34 Peter looked at the powerless man and said: “Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed.” Thus, the apostle was showing clearly that not he, but the Lord was performing the miracle.

35 Immediately Aeneas listened with faith to Peter’s command and stood up! His powerless bones could suddenly support him! After lying for eight years in bed, he was walking again. It is obvious that this healing makes a powerful impression. All of Lydda and Sharon came to see the lame man walking. And when the residents heard by whose power Peter had healed him, many converted to the Lord Jesus and believed that he was the compassionate Messiah, whom God would send into the world.

For poor Aeneas, this was an incredible blessing. Nevertheless, this event did not center on him and Peter, but on Jesus Christ, through whose power the lame man had been healed. With this miraculous sign, the Lord was “confirming the Word” (cf. Mark 16:20) and he was helping his apostles with the spread of the gospel.

By means of Aeneas’ healing, he was guaranteeing and illustrating the truth that his gospel does not gladden the world with a worthless trinket, but that he can do what he promises: in his kingdom, “the lame man [will] leap like a deer” (Isa. 35:6). What no rheumatologist or neurologist can do—eliminate every disease of the nerves and muscles—Jesus will do when he comes. This expectation depends on promises that he validated through, among other things, Aeneas’ healing.

So we must pay careful attention to the *sign* character of this miracle. Otherwise today’s saints who are confined to wheelchairs and nursing homes could legitimately ask: Why did he heal Aeneas but not us? For despite all their prayers, they were not delivered from their paralysis. If we are reading in this story, however, about a sign and a new *proof* that the Lord Jesus is not given to boasting, then every believing paralytic may know: When Jesus comes, then I will be able to walk again!

14.3 Through the raising of Dorcas many in Joppa come to faith (Acts 9:36–43)

Now comes a second miraculous sign whereby the Lord Jesus promotes with unusual power the growth and flourishing of his church. It occurred in the same region, in Joppa, the modern Jaffa, a seaport on the Mediterranean Sea, where one time Jonah had boarded a ship.

36 Living there in Joppa was a lovely and apparently wealthy disciple of the Lord Jesus, Tabitha by name (in Greek: Dorcas, which means roe or gazelle). Luke does not say whether she was young or old, married or single. He does say that she was inexhaustible in compassion and gave away as much as she could. She was so full of the Holy Spirit and so gripped by the love that God had shown her that she was free from attachment to her money and possessions, like so many other believers in Jerusalem (cf. 2:45).

Later we will read that her good deeds consisted especially in making and distributing clothing to widows (v. 39). She knew very well: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction” (James 1:27). In this way, Dorcas went like a delivering angel and genuine deaconess throughout the church.

37 But whereas in Lydda a blissfully happy Aeneas was walking about, in Joppa beloved

Dorcas became seriously ill. Until the unsettling report went through the church: “Dorcas has died!” Women cared for her and brought her to the cool upper chamber. There was no doubt: that she was really dead and that later she would really be raised from the *dead*.

38 Lydda was not far from Joppa, perhaps eleven miles (eighteen kilometers) or so. When the disciples heard that Peter was staying in Lydda, they sent two men to him with the request: Please come as quickly as possible. Were they expecting a miracle from him, and is that why Dorcas was not buried immediately (cf. 5:6, 10), but had been laid in the cool upstairs room (cf. 1 Kgs 4:10, 21)? Or did they need only comfort and encouragement?

39 Peter went with them immediately. When he entered the house of the deceased four or five hours later, people brought him upstairs where the deceased was lying. Once there, he was immediately engulfed with the deep sorrow that had overwhelmed the church in Joppa through this sad event. All the widows in the room came to stand around him, and with tears in their eyes they showed him the garments that Dorcas had made for them.

40 After everyone had expressed their sorrow, Peter sent everyone out of the room. What was the will of the Lord here? To learn that, Peter went worshipfully to his knees, deeply aware of his own impotence, but also of God’s almighty power. Did Peter draw courage from what the Master had promised his apostles (John 14:12-14)?

At that point the Spirit made clear to him that he was, with God’s help, to call Dorcas back to life. And did he ever! Doctor Luke was well-informed (perhaps even through Dorcas herself) about the facts of the miraculous sign. According to him, Peter did not say any secret magical incantation, but simply gave a curt command consisting of two (presumably Aramaic) words: “Tabitha [her Aramaic name], arise!” That was it. Only one letter different than what he had heard the Master say when he raised the daughter of Jairus: “Talitha, arise!” (Matt. 5:41). Words that parents used even today to awaken their daughters.

Peter did not direct this command to the “material remains” of Dorcas, as the pagan expression still puts it, but to her dead body—that is to say: to Dorcas herself. For the dead person lying there was still really *Dorcas*. Father Jacob talked the same way about his deceased wife: “There I buried *Leah*” (Gen. 49:31).

Then the divine miracle occurred. Luke describes it with a physician’s trained eye. Dorcas awoke from her sleep of death. As the first sign of life, she opened her eyes. Then she looked at Peter, and then she sat up.

41 He took her by the hand and helped her stand. Then he called the saints (again we have that wonderful word for believers) and the widows and placed her in the flesh before them.

42 The news of Dorcas’ resurrection spread like a prairie fire through all of Joppa: “Among the followers of Jesus a woman died and came to life again! Really!” This miracle brought many to believe that Jesus is the Lord and Savior of the world. And those conversions were in a certain sense “resurrections from the dead” as well (cf. Eph. 2:1–6).

43 Peter remained afterward for a period in Joppa, perhaps to further instruct the many new converts. He lodged with Simon, a leather worker, who lived by the sea (10:6). Not very prestigious circumstances, since for Jewish tastes this was a rather degrading profession. Cadavers rendered their handlers unclean (Lev. 11:39), and caused unbearable stench. Was Simon’s place of business alongside the sea? Or was his villa there, and his shop elsewhere? In any case, Peter would soon be learning with regard to such a tannery that God had suspended the distinction between clean and unclean (Acts 10).

In this way, the Lord Jesus helped his apostles

From this episode we learn the same lesson as from that of Aeneas: it did not center on Dorcas, although she remains an inspiring example for our expressions of compassion. Nor does it center on Peter, although he was esteemed very highly and his authority was strengthened through this event. The main person here too is our Lord Jesus Christ, through whose power Peter was enabled to raise Dorcas.

His apostles had received an immense assignment from him. They had to go from Jerusalem to the furthest corners of the world to witness to him (1:8). Since that time about ten years had gone by. During that time, they had established Christian churches throughout the entire lands of Judea and Samaria. And now, through the healing of Aeneas and the raising of Dorcas, the Lord had powerfully promoted the spread of the gospel in the semi-pagan coastal region.

With that, the first part of the apostolic mandate—bearing witness in Israel—had reached a certain point of completion. Now within a short time, the church doors would open widely to call the Gentiles in. Twenty years later the gospel will have penetrated all the way to Rome, the center of the world of that day.

This explosive church growth was due to the powerful cooperation that the Lord Jesus granted his apostles from the highest of all power centers (cf. Matt. 16:19–20). This cooperation came through, among other means, miraculous signs like the healing of Aeneas and the raising of Dorcas. These were the proofs of legitimacy of being a genuine apostle (2 Cor. 12:12), whereby the Lord strengthened their authority and lent heavenly power to their preaching, so that during their lifetime that gospel bore fruit “in the whole world” (Col. 1:6). At the same time, in this way he also helped his still small world church make it through its challenging time of birth.

Jesus' power over death is shown again

The Lord had left behind immense promises, like: “For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:40). What that mere grandiloquence? No, the Lord Jesus demonstrated his power and authority for that purpose by raising three people from the dead during his life on earth. In this way he validated the gospel already at that time, and three times he furnished the proof that he could fulfill his promises.

In that context he could have left matters there and simply mandated his apostles to proclaim this everywhere. At that point no one could have accused him of bluffing. But in his wonderful benevolence, he allowed Peter, and later Paul, to raise someone from the dead. In order to validate his gospel even more strongly than he had already done, and make it more credible than it already was. In fact, with super abundance—but that is how accommodating he is. At the same time he reimbursed the first Christians for their lack of a complete Bible. For as long as that Bible had not yet been completed, they were unable to comfort each other at the graveside with 1 Corinthians 15, 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, and Revelation 21–22.

The Lord raised Dorcas, therefore, not simply to comfort and to increase the church in Joppa, but for the sake of the Christian churches throughout every century. For now the Holy Spirit had constructed from the historicity of this miraculous sign a lawsuit in Acts 9, complete with the names of Aeneas and Dorcas, a lawsuit that functions for the believers of all time. We also believe, in part on the basis of Dorcas' resurrection, that there is no grandiloquence in play here with the Lord, when he promises the blessed resurrection of believers who have died.

At his discretion, the Lord had almost adequately validated his gospel at this point. Therefore

after the raising of Eutychus (Acts 20:9–12), he did not illustrate or guarantee the gospel again by means of a resurrection. What loyal believer things such is needed anymore? After these mighty miraculous signs, who would still suspect him of boastfulness? We, too, stop giving guarantees at a certain point, don't we? You give your husband or wife a wedding ring only once, right? And you don't have your last will and testament notarized every year anew, do you? So too, we must trust in the Word that God confirmed once and for all time through miraculous signs.

Dorcas' resurrection can strengthen our trust in what Jesus promised to do at the last day. That is, do on a worldwide scale the same thing he did in the sickroom of Aeneas and in the death chamber of Dorcas: "Away, disease! Away, death!" Banned at the command of the One who has received from God all power and authority for that very purpose.

CHAPTER 15

ACTS 10:1–11:18: GOD OPENS THE CHURCH DOORS FOR GENTILES

In the kingdom of God, great events often begin very small. The exodus from Egypt began with an infant in a reed bassinet. The birth of our Savior occurred without publicity in a stall. And the opening of the ancient, Israelite church doors to Gentiles began on the roof of a tanner, who was constantly surrounded with the stench of dead animals.

Of course, Stephen the deacon-evangelist has already discovered that the law and temple had been rendered obsolete through Jesus' work, and that God was busy replacing the Old Testament by the New Testament. His fellow office bearer Philip shared that insight, and he already baptized the "first fruits of Africa." That was the black castrated finance minister from Ethiopia (Acts 8:26–40). But with regard to the mission to the Gentiles, the apostles were still having some initial resistance. So it was high time that they too learned to see what time it was in the history of redemption. Otherwise the Christian church would have remained a church consisting only of Jews. To prevent that, a powerful divine intervention was needed.

On the roof of that tanner's house in Joppa, the Lord showed, not Paul, but Peter, the leader of the twelve apostles, that he had taken down the law as a wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles. The keys of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 16:19; 18:18) would from now on be used to allow Gentiles to enter. After Peter had convinced his fellow apostles and Judean brothers about this, the way was clear to go and preach the gospel, according to Jesus' mandate, "to the ends of the earth" (1:8).

Salvation history could now take a historic turn. Luke found this breakthrough of the gospel to the Gentiles of such great importance that he has devoted no fewer than sixty-six verses to it. Perhaps this was also because, as Paul's travel companion, he had experienced firsthand the fierce Jewish resistance against this course of events. "Away with him! Such a person does not deserve to live!," people had screamed in rage against the apostle in Jerusalem (22:22).

15.1 The breakthrough of redemption into the Gentile world begins at God's initiative (Acts 10:1–8)

That the Jewish Christian church has expanded into an international, multiracial church did not occur at the initiative of the apostles, but thanks to the intervention of the Lord himself. He brought the apostle Peter into contact with a Roman officer, and from that ultimately came the Christianizing of our Germanic ancestors.

Cornelius, a God-fearing Italian

1 The man who received a key role in connection with the calling of the Gentiles was named Cornelius. A centurion or chief officer over a hundred soldiers in the so-called Italian cohort (a military platoon of some 600 - 1000 soldiers), which was stationed in Caesarea. At that time, this city was a beautiful city on the Mediterranean Sea, with a predominantly Gentile population. It had a large Roman garrison and it was the residential locale of Roman governors.

2 This Italian officer, who was the first European to come to faith in the Lord Jesus, makes us think of the minister of finance from Ethiopia, who was baptized into the name of the Lord

Jesus as the first African (Acts 8:26–40). Both had their stomachs full of the pagan religions and were strongly attracted to the religion of the Jews. Cornelius was even a “worshiper of God” or “God-fearer.” Luke uses such phrases to identify Gentiles like Lydia, the seller of purple in Philippi (16:14), Titius Justus in Corinth (18:7), and Theophilus, to whom he had dedicated his books.

Such Gentiles enjoyed visiting the Jewish synagogue on Saturday morning, to be instructed in the Law and the Prophets. Thereby they naturally became familiar with the Jewish expectation of the Messiah. Cornelius prayed to God daily and gave away much of his wealth to Jewish poor people. And something else that was also very telling: his entire house—his family, his slaves—also worshiped the God of Israel.

Nevertheless, a chasm continued to exist between such God-fearing Gentiles and native Israelites. For men like Theophilus and Cornelius, who performed important political and military functions, this was a particularly wide chasm. For them the Jewish food laws already constituted an ineradicable obstacle to their joining the Jewish people by means of circumcision, as the proselytes did. For this reason, Theophilus deeply appreciated the fact that Luke devoted such extensive attention to the fortunes of Cornelius.

For this officer, too, wanted nothing better than that he and his loved ones would be saved (cf. 10:4; 11:13–14). He had prayed for that most of all. But would the God of Israel ever be willing to listen to an uncircumcised Roman? Indeed, would the salvation by the promised Messiah pass him by? These were things that the esteemed Theophilus probably wondered about as well.

An angel commands Cornelius to get the apostle Peter

3 Then on a particular afternoon, around three o’clock (“the ninth hour”), when he had just begun to pray (v. 30), Cornelius received a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God enter the room. This angel apparently knew him, for he called him by his name: “Cornelius!”

4 Frightened and shocked by the heavenly apparition that suddenly stood in front of him, he stared at the angel and stammered: “What do you want, sir?” Then the divine messenger replied: “The prayers that you sent up to heaven and everything you have done for the poor, have ascended to God like an incense offering and a memorial offering” (cf. Ps. 141:2). So God had indeed heard him, a Gentile!

5 “Immediately send men to Joppa, and have them ask whether a certain man named Simon, also called Peter, will come to you.” In 11:14 we read that the angel also said: “He will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.

6 He is lodging with a tanner, a certain Simon, whose house is near the sea.” The angel said nothing more. Preaching the *gospel* to Cornelius—that is something an apostle was supposed to do. And for that to happen, the Lord did not want Cornelius to go to Peter, but Peter to travel to Cornelius.

7 As soon as the angel had departed, Cornelius called two of his servants and one of his guards, a soldier who also worshiped the God of Israel

8 He was apparently close to them, for only after Cornelius had told the three about the appearance and the message of the angel, he sent them to Joppa, about thirty-one miles (fifty kilometers) from Caesarea.

15.2 The Lord shows Peter that the dividing wall between Jews and Gentiles has been

taken down (Acts 10:9–23)

The apostle Peter was still lodging at the home of Simon the tanner. What he was now about to experience perhaps made an even deeper impression on him than the healing of Aeneas and the raising of Dorcas.

Peter is not yet mature for proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles

9 As the delegation of Cornelius had nearly arrived in Caesarea around twelve noon (“the sixth hour”), Peter was climbing up to the roof garden in order to pray there in solitude.

10 At that point he became hungry and wanted something to eat. But as that was being prepared for him, he fell suddenly into an ecstasy of the spirit. This was something entirely different from what people today think of as a trance or ecstatic experience. Today these involve various experiences of sensory deprivation, but in the Bible, such experiences were the means by which the Holy Spirit brought someone into a situation where a person could apprehend with full consciousness supra-sensory things.

11 In Peter’s case, this involved an extraordinarily important revelation! For it was proclaimed to him directly from heaven that what the Law of Moses had taught for centuries about clean and unclean was obsolete! The old dispensation of the covenant of grace was making room for the new dispensation (Heb. 8:13). And that new wine needed new wineskins (Luke 5:37).

With lively language Luke narrates this great event, using the present tense. Peter suddenly sees in an opening in the sky above us an object coming down, one that looked like a colossal bed sheet. It was held by its four corners and was being let down to earth.

12 On that cloth he saw various kinds of animals: four-footed, which included life-threatening predators like wolves and lions. In addition, there were reptiles, like snakes, and different kinds of birds. In short, various kinds of animals were crawling about among one another, both unclean that, according to the law of Moses, he was not allowed to eat, as well as clean, which he was allowed to eat. Except that the clean animals here were being defiled by the unclean animals, so that all of them were now forbidden food for him.

13 Next he heard a voice from heaven saying: “Rise, Peter; kill and eat!”

14 For the hungry apostle, upon first hearing, this was a devilish temptation. For more than a thousand years, one could read in Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 which of these animals it was forbidden to eat. This was one of the pedagogical tools with which the Lord God imprinted upon Israel that he had separated them from the world as his own private people and ordained them for his service. So you could tell simply by whether someone ate pork or rabbit whether you were dealing with a Gentile or with a Jew.

No wonder that Peter protested: to eat such an animal, even though this command came from heaven! “By no means, Lord,” he said, “for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.” It was burned into his soul: an unclean animal “shall be detestable to you” (Lev. 11:10–11; cf. Ezek. 4:14). Daniel had even risked his life over this (Dan. 1:8). And had not the Lord Jesus also kept this command strictly (though he did allude to the coming obsolescence, Mark 7:19)?

15 Peter did not ponder about overturning the law. The only thing that could convince him that these prescriptions were obsolete was the Lawgiver himself. Therefore once more he heard from heaven: “What God has made clean, do not call common.”

16 Peter heard this declaration no fewer than three times. It involved extremely important information for all the apostles. If God was suspending the distinction between clean and unclean, and thereby removing the barrier between Jews and Gentiles, then they were not allowed to maintain that barrier. After this divine declaration had sounded three times, the subject was taken back up to heaven.

17 It was not immediately clear to Peter what this vision signified. Were only the Mosaic food laws abolished? Or was there more behind this? He did not immediately grasp that the Lord was lifting not only the uncleanness of particular animals, but especially the uncleanness of the *Gentile nations*.

Peter is carried across the threshold

Meanwhile, after making the needed inquiries, the delegates of Cornelius found the house of Simon the tanner and were standing at the front gate. Luke introduces this information with: “And behold!” Notice how accurately the Lord had arranged the arrival of the travelers and the end of the vision to happen simultaneously!

18 Now the appearance of the angel to Cornelius and the vision of Peter had to be connected. “Is there a Simon, surnamed Peter, staying here?,” the men called out at the front gate.

19 They had to invite him to go with them, but would he dare to accept their invitation? He had just given assurances that he had never eaten anything unclean. Would he now enter the house of a Roman, a native Gentile? A centurion, no less, who as a garrison commander would be very involved with the pagan cult and would have lived right in the middle of paganism? As a pious Jew, Peter would surely not do that (John 18:28). The otherwise forward-looking Peter would not yet have discerned that God had already placed his church in the freedom of the New Covenant. He was still thinking about the meaning of the vision.

At that moment the Holy Spirit intervened, for the gospel had to go throughout the world! Including to our own pagan ancestors in western Europe. For that purpose, the apostle Peter had to be pulled along past the wall of separation that had been taken down. In order to prevent him from retreating, the Spirit said: “Behold, three men are looking for you. They want to speak with you.

20 Go downstairs and do not hesitate to go with them, for *I* have sent them.” Thereby the Spirit was providing Peter with the explanation of the vision: *People* whom God had declared clean, you may not consider unclean!

21 He went downstairs and introduced himself as the man they were seeking. Probably not fully aware of the redemptive historical moment, he asked: Why have you come?

22 “We’ve been sent by Cornelius,” they replied, “a Roman centurion in Caesarea.” In order to persuade Peter to go with them, they added: “He is a righteous man who honors the God of Israel and enjoys a good reputation among the entire Jewish population on account of his conduct. Yesterday a holy angel mandated him on behalf of God to invite you to come to his house to hear what you have to say.” Now Peter knew that a *Gentile* officer had invited him by *God’s* command to come to him. And for what other purpose that to proclaim the gospel to him?

23 His Jewish exclusivism had by now given way to the extent that he invited the three Gentiles to come in and spend the night. It was afternoon at this point (v. 9), and they had a long trip behind them. For that reason they decided to depart the next morning.

In view of the shocking nature of his assignment, Peter evidently thought it prudent to ask six brothers (11:12) from the Jewish church in Joppa to accompany him. He would have told them

beforehand about his vision, and about the Roman who at God's command had requested him to come. Otherwise they would not have given a second thought about defiling themselves by entering the house of a Gentile. Later it would become clear that God had chosen them to bear witness along with Peter concerning the *official* inclusion of Gentiles in the Christian church. In connection with that, they would be representing Jewish Christianity, and Cornelius and his family would be representing the non-Jewish believers.

When Peter would later give an accounting of this in Jerusalem, the six brothers from Joppa would be able to defend him and confirm that he had proclaimed the gospel to Gentiles exclusively at the urging of the *Holy Spirit*. Just as later he would function as a witness for the prosecution for the apostle Paul (15:7–11).

15.3 Peter is the first apostle to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10:24–43)

The next morning the ten men (Peter, the soldier, both domestic slaves, and the six brothers) left Joppa for Caesarea.

24 They did not travel those nearly thirty-one miles (fifty kilometers) in one day, so they arrived in Caesarea on the next day. By now it had been four days ago that the angel had appeared to Cornelius (v. 30). Cornelius had calculated how late they might be arriving, and was looking anxiously for them. He had called together his family, who also worshiped the God of Israel (10:2), and his best friends (also God-fearers?). Their salvation he was also taking to heart.

Peter came upon an uplifting scene there! Isaiah had prophesied about the Messiah: “The coastlands wait for his law” (Isa. 42:4; cf. 51:5; 60:9; Zech. 8:23). Now then, here a house full of Gentiles is waiting for what the Messiah had to say to them through his envoy.

25 When Peter was about to enter the house, Cornelius came to meet him, kneeled before him, and paid him tribute. This was a demonstration of respect that was not uncommon in civil relationships. In religious relationships, such a slavish show of respect is impermissible, however. As disciples of the Lord Jesus, we have but one Master, and we are all brothers of one another, who must, if we are to follow the example of the Master, wash rather than kiss each other's feet (Matt. 23:8–11; John 13:12–17).

26 Peter had remembered this lesson well. For that reason he helped Cornelius to stand, and humbly said, “Stand up; I too am a man!”

27 Next came a moment of first importance in church history. Jesus Christ pushed his apostle over the threshold of a Gentile house and thereby along the dismantled barrier between Jews and Gentiles! As if this were the most common thing in the world, Peter entered, unforced, as his host was talking. By means of reporting this apparently superfluous detail, Luke is showing how obediently Peter was following the new course. In the dwelling, he discovered to his surprise that Cornelius had gathered an entire group of people.

28 But the situation was just as unusual for the non-Jewish people as it was for Peter: a Jew with them in the house? They themselves were already afraid to touch something in the house of a Gentile! Therefore any uneasiness about his presence had to be removed: “You know,” Peter began, “how unlawful it is for a Jew to associate with or to visit anyone of another nation” (cf. Luke 7:6).

(This was a human precept. God had forbidden only marriages and covenants with Canaanites [cf. Exod. 34:10–17; Deut. 7:1–4]. But the Jews had refined this to forbid all concourse with Gentiles [cf. 1 Cor. 5:9–10]. Cornelius and his household would also have been avoided by pious Jews.)

“But,” Peter continued, “God has shown me that I should not call any person common or unclean.” From this his listeners could conclude that in God’s eyes they were no longer unclean Gentiles.

29 On the basis of this divine message, I came here at your invitation without objection. May I ask why you have had me come?

For the third time: the angel appears

30–32 Modern readers would expect a brief summary of the preceding at this point. But Luke now launches into a moderately extensive narrative for the third time about how Cornelius had received from an angel—his speaks here of “a man in bright clothing”—a mandate to send someone to Joppa to invite Peter. In 11:13–14, he would mention this for the fourth time. Obviously, Luke was putting all his effort in hammering home for his readers—especially Theophilus—that proclaiming the gospel to the uncircumcised, non-Jewish world was completely legitimate. Because it originated not from human initiative, but from divine appointment. Every Jewish opposition against this preaching, about which Luke would be telling us in the rest of Acts, was therefore illegitimate.

33 Cornelius had implemented the angel’s command immediately, and now spoke joyfully about Peter’s arrival. Being aware that God had brought this gathering together in a miraculous way, he concluded his welcome speech this way: “We are all here in the presence of God to hear all that you have been commanded by the Lord.” A more receptive audience Peter (and every gospel preacher) could not desire.

God desires to save also Gentiles through Jesus

34 Then Peter opened his mouth. This is a ceremonious expression for moments when someone is about to say something very important (cf. Matt. 5:2; Acts 8:35). He too was speaking at a historical turning point in the course of gospel proclamation: from now on it would go to all nations! The Lord had promised this already to Abraham (Gen. 12:3) and some of the prophets had talked about it (e.g., Isa. 2:1–5; Micah 4:1–5; Ps. 87), but for Israel this had remained a secret that demanded to be further disclosed (Eph. 3:4–6). And Peter had now received that disclosure. This is why he exclaimed: Now for the first time it has dawned on me that with God, in terms of his saving work, there is no respecting of persons.

35 Now the time has dawned when God cares nothing about whether you were born a Jew or a Gentile. From now on, he no longer looks at whether someone has been circumcised and eats kosher, but whether someone has loving respect for him and wants to do his will out of faith.

We modern Gentile Christians can hardly imagine what an enormous reversal this constituted for Jewish sensitivities! For almost two thousand years (from the time of Abraham), the church doors had been closed for people like our Germanic ancestors (Ps. 147:19–20). Unless you are a full Jew by having been circumcised. Even God-fearers like Cornelius and Theophilus were not allowed to go any further in the temple than the forecourt of the Gentiles.

36 But now God had replaced the “No Entrance” sign with another: “Gentiles are also heartily welcome!” And they are welcome apart from obligating them to observe the law of Moses! This had served for centuries as a dividing wall that separated Jews from Gentiles, but now God had inactivated its ordinances and commands (Eph. 2:14–15). Recently he had sent to the Israelites the good news that through Messiah Jesus he wanted to establish peace with them.

Not just with Jews, but also with non-Jews. For Jesus is not only Messiah of Israel, but Lord (and later, Judge [v. 42]) of *all* people (cf. Rom. 10:12). God proclaims peace on earth, apart from people having to become Jews first in order to receive it (Luke 2:14).

The next days (v. 48), Peter certainly proclaimed in greater detail that Jesus has reconciled not only Jews and Gentiles to God, but also has ended their *mutual* division. Paul would later write: “So that we might both have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:14–18; cf. Rom. 5:1).

In Cornelius’ house that new unity became visible in a remarkable way. For there was Peter the Jew proclaiming to an officer of the Roman occupying army that he did not need to remain standing outside the door of God’s church, but he with his household was being permitted to enter with ease. The apostle said not a word about being circumcised and observing food laws and sabbaths. He understood now that the Horeb covenant and Israel’s exceptional position were past (Heb. 8:13). He did mention what God had brought about through Jesus of Nazareth.

37 We already know something about the important events that occurred in recent years throughout the entire Jewish land. It all began in Galilee, not long after John the Baptizer had summoned the people to undergo his baptism unto repentance and had prepared them for the coming of the Lord (Luke 3:3–4).

38 Then came Jesus of Nazareth. Cornelius and his household had already heard about him, but what was the hidden background of his activity? Well, this Man was anointed by God with the Holy Spirit at his baptism in the Jordan river, anointed to be Messiah-King (cf. Luke 3:22; 4:1, 18), and equipped with the Spirit’s power. Worldly kings would at such time call themselves “benefactors” (Luke 22:25), but Jesus traveled throughout the land as the true Benefactor. He healed the sick and those who were in the grip of the devil. He could do that because God was with him, and by means of these signs he showed that he had sent Jesus and that with him the Kingdom of God had come (cf. Luke 11:20; John 3:2; 8:29; 10:30).

39 And we are witnesses of everything that he did, both in the Jewish land as well as in Jerusalem. And then they murdered him by hanging him on a *tree*. As though God has cursed him (Deut. 21:22–23) instead of anointing him! Here Peter was pointing once again to the sharp contrast between what *Israel* and what *God* had done with Jesus (cf. 2:36; 3:13–15; 4:10; 5:30–31). In fact he brought our sins upon that tree (1 Pet. 2:24) and he became accursed *in our place* (Gal. 3:13).

40 But what Cornelius perhaps did not know was that after three days God raised him from the dead and had him appear for forty days in the flesh. So that seeing and hearing him meant that his genuine physical resurrection is no fable but a completely trustworthy, historically dated and verified fact.

41 Because God was interested in that verification of Jesus’ real resurrection, he did not have Jesus appear to the entire nation. That would have had no benefit (Matt. 28:1–15; Luke 16:30–31). Moreover, it would not have fit with the honor and esteem of our risen Lord and Savior, whose humiliation had now come to an end. No, God had him appear to us, whom he had chosen beforehand to be eye- and ear-witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection (in 1 Cor. 15:4–8, Paul mentions even more people who saw Jesus after his resurrection, but the apostles were the *official* witnesses). We did not get this news secondhand, and after his resurrection we did not merely catch a glimpse of him. No, after this event we ate and drank with him many times, and received further instruction from him (Luke 24:43; John 21:13; cf. Acts 1:3).

42 And he has commissioned us as his heralds to proclaim to the nation and emphatically to testify that this same Jesus whom they crucified was appointed by God as Judge of the living and

the dead (cf. 2:22-36). He is coming soon to raise all the dead in order to judge them together with those still alive—as to whether they have accepted him as Savior (cf. 17:31; 24:25).

43 Except there is this great difference: whoever believes in him is not condemned by him (John 3:18), but will receive forgiveness of sins through his name (i.e., his redeeming work). This is a benefit of the Messianic age that was announced by all the prophets. Cornelius had surely heard such promises read aloud in the synagogue: “The people who dwell there will be forgiven their iniquity” (Isa. 33:24; 53:5–11; cf. Jer. 31:34; 33:8; 50:20; Micah 7:18).

The news that Peter was now proclaiming was that these promises applied from now on not only to Israelites, but to *everyone*, Jews or non-Jew, who accepted Messiah Jesus. A tremendous turning point in covenant history! God’s promise to Abraham found fulfillment: “and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:3).

People have pointed out that here Luke was also indicating the manner in which the apostle Peter was accustomed to proclaiming the gospel to Gentiles. According to an ancient tradition, in his Gospel the writer Mark had put in writing Peter’s preaching in Rome. So then, according to Mark as well, Peter began most often, just as he does here with Cornelius, with the activity of John the Baptizer, and ended with Jesus’ resurrection and commission to the apostles.

15.4 The Holy Spirit confirms that the barrier is removed (Acts 10:44–48)

But would Peter also dare to baptize these Gentiles? He was carried by the Spirit across this threshold as well.

44 For just as the Spirit had validated the inclusion of *Samaritans* in the church in a remarkable way (8:14–17), the Spirit did the same when Peter as the first apostle proclaimed the gospel to Gentiles. What an impressive moment! For while (!) Peter was still speaking *these* words (namely, those of verse 43: there is forgiveness for *everyone* who believes) and Cornelius and his household were as yet not baptized, the Holy Spirit descended (literally: fell) suddenly upon Cornelius and his household.

We should not confuse this with the “ordinary” work of the Holy Spirit: work faith in human hearts through the preaching of the gospel. Just as he had already done in Cornelius’ heart: the man believed Moses and the Prophets. We must pay careful attention here, however, to “time, place, and manner.” The testimony about Jesus has now reached its third boundary crossing, coming after *Judea* and *Samaria*, this one, the ends of the earth (1:8).

In connection with this boundary crossing, the Spirit communicated through a special descent that he absolutely approved Peter’s actions. Gentiles may no longer be viewed as unholy or unclean people, who were excluded from citizenship in Israel (Eph. 2:12). On the contrary, Peter and his fellow apostles are spurred on by this special working of the Spirit to take firmly in hand Jesus’ commission to proclaim the gospel also to *Gentiles* (cf. Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). Later the Spirit would have to spur them yet again to do that (13:2).

Such a work of the Spirit was characteristic for the apostolic period, when the foundation of the international Christian church has to be laid. That foundation is the teaching of the apostles (Eph. 2:20). Their names stand on the twelve foundations of the city wall in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:14). When their teaching was finished and thereby the foundation was completed, the Spirit no longer came with the signs of fire, wind, and languages. Those were just as superfluous as for the builder to lay a *foundation* beneath an attic room.

45 When the Jewish brothers from Joppa saw what had happened, there were surprised beyond measure (cf. 2:7, 12). They thought for sure that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been

promised exclusively to Israelites (Joel 2:28–32). On Pentecost he had descended only upon *Jews* and *Jewish proselytes* (i.e., Gentiles who had been circumcised and had become Jews). But now they observed to their great astonishment that he was poured out upon *uncircumcised* Gentiles (literally: the nations) as well (cf. 15:1).

46 No doubt about that was possible, for they heard them praising God in *tongues* or *languages* that they had never learned. If this is translated “in *tongues*,” then it seems to refer to hearing indiscernible sounds (cf. 1 Cor. 14). What contradicts that interpretation, however, is that Peter later reports that the Holy Spirit came here *in the same manner* as “on us at the beginning” (11:15; 15:8). At that time, Galileans had praised God in foreign but understandable languages. The foreign-born festival-goers had recognized the languages of their homelands (cf. 2:4). The great difference was that here in Caesarea, *Gentiles* were doing the very same thing that Jews had done on Pentecost in Jerusalem.

If Cornelius had had, so to speak, Syrian or Egyptian slaves, and the God-fearing soldiers of his bodyguard were Greeks or Romans, then God was being praised there in Greek, Syriac, Egyptian, Latin, or whatever other language was being spoken by those present in the house.

Thus it was clear as day: the chasm between Jew and Gentile was removed. God proclaimed the end of Israel’s exclusive citizenship rights in the Kingdom. From now on, he would be praised in many languages, for all the nations could now become “fellow citizens of the saints” and “members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:12, 19). Peter had finally accepted this situation and responded confidently to this divine intervention with the question:

47 “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” Later in Jerusalem he would add: I could not oppose God, could I (11:17)?

48 He then commanded that they be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. From now on, his death-and-resurrection was also their death-and-resurrection. And his righteousness and holiness was also their righteousness and holiness. At the request of Cornelius and his household, Peter remained several days with them in Caesarea.

During that stay, he had to eat with Gentile Christians at one table for the first time in his life (as a Jew he probably never once wanted to eat non-kosher), but in any case he did enjoy table fellowship with them. In the ancient Near East that included far more than it does for us. But having been taught by the vision in Joppa, he did not bind his table companions to the Jewish food laws and he acknowledged them as “clean” and as fellow believers in good standing. Surely he must have told them much more about what the Lord Jesus had taught and done. In short, everything that we can read in the Gospels, especially in the Gospel of Mark.

15.5 Peter justifies his gospel preaching to Gentiles (Acts 11:1–18)

Peter was taken, as the first of the twelve apostles, past the broken-down wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles. But the other eleven, and the Jewish believers, did not know whether that wall of Mosaic ordinances was still standing. According to them, Gentiles could indeed be saved, but for that, they must become Jews and submit to the Law of Moses (cf. Matt. 23:15). In this way, they supposed that the prophecies about the conversion of the Gentiles would be fulfilled.

Fortunately these believers were open to Peter convincing them of their error. But several years later the same issue would sow deep division in the young Christian churches. It would focus on the question: How is a person justified? Through faith alone? Or through the total sum

of believing in Jesus + observing the law? (cf. 15:1–5; Rom. 3:21; Gal. 2:15–21; Phil. 3:9–11).

Concerned Jewish believers condemn Peter's activity

1 The news that the Gentiles had accepted the Word of God reached the other apostles and the Jewish believers in Judea.

2 For us, such mission news is “ordinary,” but for many Jewish believers this represented a tremendous shock. In distinction from the Gentile believers, Luke identifies them as “those who were from the circumcision” (cf. 10:45). We need not view them as forerunners of later Judaizers, but rather as believers who in good faith were upset with this turn of events. Don’t blame them: they had not yet heard the divine message given in Peter’s vision! Moreover, they were acquainted with only Jewish and Samaritan churches, where all the men, including their fellow Christian Jews, were circumcised. When as a Jew who believed in Jesus as the Messiah heard what Peter had done in Caesarea, then you would naturally have thought you were witnessing a religious earthquake, wouldn’t you? No wonder that when he arrived in Jerusalem, they confronted him with the question:

3 What is this that we are hearing? You paid a visit in Caesarea to men who had foreskins (didn’t that sound rather insulting on their part?). That fact alone broke every boundary. But in addition you also ate with them! To think that Gentiles often ate meat that came from a sacrifice to an idol (1 Cor. 10:28), and that Romans enjoyed eating pork. You can understand that some of these believers later would even more fiercely oppose accepting a Gentile who had *not become a Jew* and did not observe *the law of Moses*.

For the second time: the vision

4 Peter responded to the criticism from his concerned fellow believers in a Spirit-filled manner. He did not enter into debate with them, but simply told them what God had made clear in Joppa and Caesarea. God himself had put an end to their exceptional standing as Jews by incorporating Gentiles into his church as well. And apart from obligating them to observe the law of Moses.

A new dispensation had dawned in God’s redemptive work. There could be no doubt about that. Neither among the Jewish believers, nor among the God-fearing Gentiles like Cornelius and Theophilus. This is why Luke devotes such remarkably extensive attention to this history.

He obviously considered it to be fundamentally important for the acknowledgement that Jews and Gentiles possessed *equal rights* in the Christian church. As fellow worker of Paul, he knew firsthand how Judaizing believers contested this equality of standing in almost every Jewish-Gentile church. Therefore he does not hesitate at this point to have Peter himself report in great detail how he had come to take his remarkable step (ancient readers did not stumble over such repetitions).

5–10 According to Jewish sensitivities, Peter had seen an abominable vision of a sheet filled with unclean animals. At least three times, a voice from heaven had commanded him to slaughter an animal and eat it. When Peter refused to do that, this command was repeated, and he heard three times: “What God has declared to be clean, you may not view as unclean!” The brothers who had made comments about his actions could infer from this that he had not taken this step willy-nilly. Initially he was shocked just as deeply as they were.

Surely I cannot restrain God, can I?

11 But what happened immediately afterward testified to such a remarkable guidance that he drew special attention to it with the phrase, “And behold!” Immediately (!) after the vision there were three non-Jewish men from Caesarea waiting at the door, ready to invite him to come along with them.

12 At that point once again, Peter was not acting on his own authority, but at the command of the Holy Spirit. For that Spirit had unburdened me by setting aside all my objections, and led me to accompany them. These six brothers from Joppa have come with me and can confirm my report, if needed. So then we could not oppose the Holy Spirit, could we? This is how it came about that we were led by the Spirit to enter the house of that Gentile man.

13 There we were immediately confirmed in the correctness of our course of action, for Cornelius told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house, who had said: “Send someone to Joppa, to Simon, also called Peter, and ask him to come here.

14 He will tell you how you and your entire household can be saved.” For God’s rule remained the same: as the authoritative Scripture commentary adopted by the Synod of Dort (1618–19) puts it: “If the father of the household believed in Christ, the entire household was considered to belong to the covenant, according to the promise (Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39; 16:15, 33), unless through their own unbelief they rejected this grace.”

15 Were there at that point perhaps still some objections among some against Peter’s actions? Then those were completely removed (v. 18) by means of his crowing argument: “And when I had begun speaking to them for some time, the Holy Spirit descended upon them, exactly as he had descended upon us at Pentecost” (cf. 10:46).

16 Then I recalled why the Lord had said repeatedly to us: “John baptized [only] with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (1:5). This was something that Peter had learned from John himself as well: “He who is coming after me is mightier than I . . . He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matt. 3:11). After his resurrection, Messiah Jesus had indeed baptized (immersed) a multitude of *Jews* from every corner of the earth on Pentecost with the Holy Spirit. But now Peter saw for the first time the full richness of Jesus’ promise.

17 For in Caesarea God had bestowed the very same Gift (viz., the Holy Spirit) to *non-Jewish* believers, just as he had to the Jewish believers (cf. 15:7–9). Now then, whom am I that I could resist God in this matter? For Peter, only one conclusion remained: If God had opened the church doors for Gentiles as well, then no Jew was going to keep it shut.

This was how Peter attempted to convince his concerned brothers of the fact that he had acted exclusively on God’s instructions. Did they not see clearly that God was leading in these shocking events? First, no one less than an *angel* had promised Cornelius. Second, a *voice from heaven* had revealed to Peter that converted Gentiles no longer needed to submit to the law of Moses. And third, the *Holy Spirit* had validated their citizenship by descending upon them. In sum, everything that had concerned the Jewish brothers happened at *God’s initiative*: believing Gentiles should from now on be received into God’s church as having equal standing with Jewish believers

The breakthrough of redemption for the Gentiles accepted

18 Fortunately these brothers did not continue maintaining their position stubbornly. Although for them this represented a religious earthquake, they were convinced by Peter’s

narrative. They began to glorify God on account of the great things that he was obviously doing. They perceived that Peter had simply been compelled to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles as well. And that the Lord had evidently offered them the opportunity to repent and be converted, and thereby to receive eternal life.

As far as that goes, Cornelius was not the first Gentile who had heard the gospel. Philip had already proclaimed it earlier to the Ethiopian finance minister (8:26–40). But he had done so as an evangelist, and Peter did so as the leader of the twelve *apostles*. That is the tremendous difference between both conversion episodes.

Now that the Holy Spirit had convinced him and his fellow apostles that the law had been removed as a wall of separation, everyone could also proclaim the gospel on the basis of their authority to Gentiles as well. For the apostles were Jesus' primary agents, to whom he had entrusted the keys of the Kingdom (Matt. 16:19; 18:18). From now on, with their approval, people could permit believing Gentiles to enter the church.

Whether the Jewish believers perceived at this point that Gentiles were *fully equal in standing* with them is another issue altogether. The matter would come up again for intense discussion after Paul's first "missionary journey," both in Jerusalem (Acts 15) and far beyond. Paul would deal with this in virtually all of his letters.

Even Peter would later, in a moment of weakness, retreat from eating with Gentiles. He would be severely admonished for this by Paul. For in so doing, Peter was undermining the equal standing of Gentile believers and he was giving the impression that in the Kingdom of God, Jews constituted the elite and Gentiles were second-class citizens (Gal. 2:11–14).

Finally, as far as we are concerned, we learn from this episode that our distant ancestors were definitely not called out of Germanic paganism through "Acts of the apostles," but through the Spirit of Jesus carrying the apostles across the demolished wall of separation.

CHAPTER 16

ACTS 11:19–30: THE BIRTH OF THE GENTILE-CHRISTIAN CHURCH IN THE GLOBAL CITY OF ANTIOCH

Now Luke takes us along to Antioch, the capital of the Roman province of Syria. In that day it was a global city. After Rome and Alexandria, it was the largest city in the Roman empire. People estimate that at the point, half a million people lived there, of whom three-hundred thousand were slaves. In addition to Syrians, Greeks, and Romans, one would also have encountered people from Persia, as well as from India and China.

From years earlier, there was also a large Jewish colony, one that included many “God-fearers,” Gentiles who sympathized with the Jewish religion (Acts 6:5). According to ecclesiastical tradition, Luke also came from there.

The city lay on the Orontes river, some nineteen miles (thirty kilometers) or so from Seleucia, its seaport on the Mediterranean, and about three hundred miles (five hundred kilometers) north of Jerusalem. By virtue of its favorable location, it constituted the natural link between Asia and Europe. Here the proconsul resided, the highest Roman authority in the entire Near East.

Antioch was also a splendid city. One of its nicknames was “the queen of the East.” It was famous for its three mile (four kilometer) marble paved main boulevard that ran through the center of the city. It consisted of a gallery of pillars with a fourfold colonnade between which three roads ran parallel: the center road was for heavy lorries, the outer two for pedestrians, riders, and luxury vehicles. At the end of this road arose at the top of a mountain a gigantic image of the supreme god Jupiter, which dominated the entire city landscape from that vantage point. Around the city stood a fortification wall with more than three hundred towers. In addition, it was praised for its street lighting (a provision known from antiquity to have been present only in this city), its fountains and waterways, its glorious parks, sculpture galleries, temples, villas, university- and government-buildings. Its schools for philosophy, medicine, and rhetoric were, together with its renowned library, world famous.

For tourists, which were a phenomenon in the ancient world as well, Antioch had many kinds of experiences to offer. They could enjoy the wonderful public baths, performances of plays in the theaters, exciting sporting events in the amphitheaters, Roman military parades, and picturesque Eastern merchant caravans. Naturally, this world city also had a night life. Just as throughout the ancient world of antiquity, prostitution was a religious activity. The many male and female prostitutes had devoted their bodies to gods and goddesses.

Near Antioch, in Daphne, there was a famous sanctuary where Apollos the sun god, who was also the god of music and song, together with Artemis, the goddess of fertility, were worshiped. In the paradisaal amusement park surrounding the temple, many people surrendered to abominable immorality. “Daphnic morals” was even a common expression for a dissolute lifestyle. Conservative Romans viewed Antioch as a sewer of baseness and meanness that contaminated even Rome.

In this depraved metropolis along the Orontes, the Lord Jesus founded a church. One consisting of Jews and Gentiles, one that would quickly become very significant as a beachhead for proclaiming the gospel in the Gentile world. For from this cosmopolitan city, Paul would later begin his “missionary journeys” throughout the Roman empire. Thereby the church in Antioch would acquire a central place among the other Christian churches, which would endure

for three centuries.

16,1 The origin of the church (Acts 11:19–21)

The church in Antioch is definitely not the result of a carefully calculated evangelism campaign. Not even the apostles were involved. It was clearly the work of God's Son and as happened so often, it began unremarkably and with the effort of unremarkable people.

19 As you recall, immediately after the stoning of Stephen a severe persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1–3). In order not to be thrown into prison by Saul, Hellenist families especially had fled out of the city. They were spread throughout the plains of Judea and Samaria, the they proclaimed the gospel everywhere. This is how it came to be known in Samaria, Caesarea, Lydda, Joppa, and even in Damascus. Some of the refugees traveled still further, to Phoenicia (modern Lebanon). Perhaps they were the ones who established there the churches of Ptolemais, Tyre, and Sidon. Later Paul would encounter brothers there (21:3–4, 7; 27:3). Other refugees crossed over to Cyprus or ended up in Antioch.

It is obvious that people asked them why they had traveled so far from home. At that point they rehearsed how they were persecuted because they believed that Jesus is the Messiah. Except that they chatted (Luke uses a simple verb here) about the gospel with no one other than Jews alone. Apparently it was not yet evident to them that God wanted to have the Gentiles also share in Jesus' work of redemption (cf. 10:28; 11:3).

20 Among these refugees, however, there were also some Jews who had come from the island of Cyprus in North Africa (cf. 6:9; Simon of Cyrene, who had carried Jesus' cross, was this kind of African Jew, Matt. 15:21). Born and raised in a foreign land, these Jews were accustomed from their youth to dealing with Gentiles. When they arrived in Antioch, they spoke also with Greeks there about the Lord Jesus.

Did they dare to do this because they had heard that in Caesarea, at the command of God, Peter had baptized the Roman officer Cornelius and his household? Or did they do this spontaneously, without needing Peter's example? Because they had learned from Stephen already that through his cross, the Lord Jesus had demolished the law as a barrier between Jews and Gentiles? Both possibilities are plausible.

Except, among Gentiles—apart from some proselytes—they could not link up with knowledge of the law of Moses or the expectation of a Redeemer, for these poor folk were living without hope (Eph. 2:12; 1 Thess. 4:13). Therefore they were proclaiming to them the joyful message that Jesus is the living *Lord*, to whose grace they could surrender safely for time and eternity (cf. 2:36).

21 Whether they were familiar with Peter's preaching to the Gentiles, or were ignorant about that—God obviously approved their proclamation. For the famous hand (i.e., power) of the Lord, so well-known from the Old Testament, was obviously with them. That appeared from the powerful working of his Spirit and Word, and from the extraordinarily rich fruit with which their proclamation was blessed. For not merely a few, but a great (!) number of Gentiles came to the faith and converted from their pagan lifestyle to the holy lifestyle through the Spirit of Jesus. (Pay attention to the sequence: first, faith, and as fruit of faith, conversion.) Did Luke himself come to conversion at this time as well?

In this way, in the metropolis along the Orontes, a church of the Lord Jesus came into existence. In fact, this was still a result of the martyrdom of Stephen and the dispersion of the church in Jerusalem. God turned this evil to the good, and in a remarkable way! For what did the

refugees do? When the opportunity presented itself, they spoke with the Antiochean Gentiles about the Lord Jesus. And he made the seed that they voluntarily spread in their workplaces and their market stalls to grow to become the famous church in Antioch.

From there the gospel would spread throughout the entire Roman empire in the years that followed. Paul proclaimed it in the great city centers. Only, at that point it was not told by those possessing the special gifts of office, but just as in Antioch, by the spontaneous, informal evangelization of ordinary believers, whose names are known by God alone.

16.2 Jerusalem shows its unity with Antioch (Acts 11:22-24)

In Caesarea Peter had baptized only Cornelius and his household. But in Antioch, an entire multitude of uncircumcised Gentiles came to the faith. How would the church in Jerusalem respond to this stormy development? Much depended on that response in connection with the Spirit-created unity of Jewish and Gentile Christian churches! They had not received supreme authority over the other churches, but as the “mother church” she did bear a special responsibility. It had accepted Peter’s defense of the baptism of Cornelius (11:18). Would the Jerusalem church dare to accept the consequences of that? Then it would now have to acknowledge that the believing Jews and Gentiles in Antioch were one in Christ and completely equal in standing.

22 That is indeed what it did. For when the reports of the massive conversion of Gentiles in Antioch reached them, no fierce protests erupted, as had happened after the baptism of Cornelius (11:1–2). On the contrary, the gospel proclamation of the Cyprian and Cyrenian men to Gentiles was not condemned. They did decide to send Barnabas there (cf. 8:14). His mandate is not described by Luke, but it can be inferred from what follows. He had to convey the mutual bond in the one Lord, and offer to help with the further upbuilding of the young church.

They could not have appointed a more suitable delegate for this delicate assignment. For Barnabas was a real peacemaker (9:26–27). As a Jew, he could get along well with Jews, and as a Cypriot, he could get along with the Cyprian brothers who had proclaimed the gospel in Antioch to Gentiles.

23 When he arrived, he saw with his own eyes the enormous gathering that had occurred in the Gentile world city. Of the half million people living there, “darkened in their understanding, alienated from the light of God” (Eph. 4:18), many had accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. This was obvious from their lives, which had been thoroughly changed by this new faith. The kind Barnabas was altogether rejoicing because of this, for this could be explained only as a miracle of God’s grace that had come to the depraved metropolis.

He had understood very well Peter’s vision in Joppa (10:9–16): after many centuries God had opened the church’s doors to Gentiles as well. No man could restrain that anymore (11:17–18). Naturally he also observed that there were differences among the believers. With respect to sabbath keeping, circumcision, and eating kosher, the Jewish and non-Jewish believers did not follow the same practices. But he did not make a big deal about that. He did not bind the converted Gentiles to the Law of Moses, for he understood that with the coming of Christ, that was not obsolete. For example, he ate with them with no trouble (Gal. 2:12-13), and did not lay on them any extra-Scriptural burdens.

In sum, Barnabas dared to confront the new situation. He recognized the Gentile Christian church in Antioch as God’s plant, and accepted it as a full sister church. Because he had great influence in Jerusalem as well, his manner of conduct in Antioch was very important for the

further spread of the gospel and for the peace between Jews and Gentiles in the same church. He did warn against falling back into paganism. Entirely in line with his surname (“son of encouragement,” 4:36), he continually spurred everyone to remain faithful to their new Lord with heart and soul.

24 He could function so peaceably because he was a good man, generous (4:36–37), friendly (9:27), patient (14:37), and just like Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit. To this Spirit he owed his clarity-in-verity, and the courage to step over the threshold from the Old to the New Dispensation. For that reason he could get away with giving his full approval to the Cyprian and Cyrenean men calling Gentiles to faith and repentance, without demanding from them in this connection that they would have to observe the Law of Moses from now on. In part through Barnabas’ ministry, a rather large multitude was added to the Lord. A fine expression that Luke uses for church growth!

16.3 Barnabas and Saul instruct the church (Acts 11:25–26)

The young churches should have been growing not only in number, however, but also in faith. For that, they needed further instruction. Just as the Lord had commanded: “And *teach* them to keep everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19). Moreover, Barnabas saw that this international commercial intersection offered tremendous possibilities for the further spread of the gospel.

It would have been impossible, however, for him to undertake all of this work by himself. At that point he thought of his old friend, Saul of Tarsus. Who would be better suited to help him than this scholar, who had been specially called by the Lord for proclaiming the gospel to Gentiles (9:15)? Even though he would come to stand in Saul’s shadow, Barnabas accepted that possibility with humility. As long as Christ was glorified and his church built up, why should Barnabas’ prestige matter?

25 Meanwhile Saul had been staying for several years near his hometown, in Cilicia (modern southeastern Turkey). So Barnabas departed to Tarsus (about one hundred fifty miles [two hundred fifty kilometers] away) to track him down. When he had found him, he took him along to Antioch. During that period it was he who had introduced Saul to the apostles. And now that a new phase had dawned in Saul’s life, once again Barnabas was playing an important role in connection with it. He was the one who introduced his friend to what would be his life’s work: proclaiming the gospel from Antioch to Rome.

26 For a full year they both gave instruction to many people. Naturally this involved especially the significance of Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return. But this also certainly involved what the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms testified about him. For Barnabas had spurred them on to abide with the Lord (v. 23), for which they had to learn what this meant in practice.

Christians

Gradually it became obvious to outsiders that in their city, a new religious movement had formed around a certain “Christos.” This group distinguished itself from the Jewish synagogues by virtue of accepting non-Jewish followers as well. As long as these people accepted this “Christos” as Lord. The Gentile populace would have heard in this oft-mentioned name not the Greek translation of the Hebrew title Messiah (i.e., Anointed), but the proper name of one of

their hitherto unknown deities. And just as the partisans of Herod were called Herodians (Matt. 22:16), people began to call the followers of that Christos *Christians*. That term was not immediately a sobriquet. Initially people could have used it jokingly.

The term *Christians* must have spread quickly, for a few years later, king Agrippa used it in Caesarea, and it was even known already in Asia Minor (26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16). In the New Testament, however, it was used only by non-Christians. The believers themselves called each other *disciples, saints, brothers, and believers*. In the second century the name *Christians* came into vogue for the first time among believers themselves.

They probably avoided using it initially. As long as they were being viewed as a Jewish sect, they shared in the religious freedom enjoyed by Judaism as being a *religion licita* (permitted religion) in the Roman empire. Later Luke shows how the Jews repeatedly contested precisely that standing when they appeared before Roman government officials. Those Christians, according to the Jews, follow a new religion, one that fell outside the civil rights and privileges enjoyed by the Jews, and therefore ought to be prohibited by the government.

16.4 Antioch supports Judea (Acts 11:27–30)

Humanly speaking, the church in Antioch owed its origin to Jewish refugees. Just how grateful the church was for them was shown when Judea was threatened by famine.

27 Around the time when Saul and Barnabas were active in Antioch, several prophets arrived from Jerusalem. These were brothers (sometimes also sisters, Acts 21:9; 1 Cor. 11:4–5) who had received from the Holy Spirit the gift to “build up, encourage, and console” the church (1 Cor. 14:3, 29–32; cf. Acts 13:1; 14:32). For example, they would have taught that the emergence of Gentile Christian churches was the fulfillment of Old Testament promises. Occasionally the Spirit granted them a glimpse of the future, for example, that Paul would be facing imprisonment and persecutions (20:23; 21:11). Because their prophecies were for the most part of temporary and local significance, they are not preserved.

28 Among them was a certain Agabus (cf. 21:10–11). This man foretold that soon a widespread famine would affect the entire inhabited world. The Holy Spirit had given him that insight. Under emperor Claudius his prophecy was fulfilled. Roman historians confirm that at that time, not only in Judea but also in Egypt, Greece, and even in Rome, food shortages arose in various places as a result of poor harvests. With this event, one of the preliminary signs was being fulfilled which according to the Lord Jesus would introduce the destruction of the temple (Matt. 24:17; Luke 21:11). From that, people could infer that this judgment was approaching.

29 At that point in a heartwarming manner, it became evident how joyful the former pagans in Antioch were with the gospel, and that through a living faith they had been converted from carnal selfishness (Gal. 5:19–20) to Christian neighbor love. They understood that the growing multitude of poor in Jerusalem would suffer hardship. And although they too were threatened with possible food shortages—since this would be affecting the entire inhabited world—they did not turn to hoarding, but organized an assistance program for the affected believers in Judea. Everyone decided to contribute according to their ability. Less would have been expected from a slave, of course, than from his master. Luke called this program literally a “*diakonia*”—in the New Testament this word described virtually every form of Christian service. Apparently this applied to supporting needy churches abroad as well.

30 They combined word and deed. The collection was taken, and Barnabas and Saul were appointed to bring the proceeds to the elders in Judea and Jerusalem. In this way, Paul taught

early on the great importance that such collections represented. Later he would devote extensive attention in his epistles to this matter (cf. Rom. 15:25–28; 1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8–9; Gal. 2:10).

And that's what happened when the food prices in Judea hit the roof. Saul and Barnabas arrived with a couple of sacks of money and put it in the hands of the elders in order, perhaps with the assistance of the deacons, to distribute it among the brothers and sisters. According to 12:1 their visit occurred approximately the same time as when the apostle James was put to death by Herod and when Peter was arrested.

Thus the Gentile believers obeyed the love command of their new Lord and Master, and honored the church in Jerusalem. For ultimately the dispersion of that church had served the cause of the gospel in Antioch! (cf. Rom. 15:27). What great sympathy they would have obtained among the Jewish churches in Judea, for whom the conversion of Gentiles had initially been such a shocking experience (cf. 2 Cor. 9:13), but who now, in a time of hunger and persecution, were being supported by, of all people, converted Gentiles.

CHAPTER 17

ACTS 12: KING HEROD DEFIES KING JESUS IN VAIN

In Antioch, the gospel has rescued many people from Satan's power, and had called them out of the darkness of paganism into God's wonderful light (1 Pet. 2:9). But the evil one did not let them make that transition without mounting opposition. In Jerusalem he went on the offensive.

There it was that Herod had two apostles, crown witnesses of Jesus, arrested. He was fully responsible for that, of course. But it was undoubtedly Satan who had incited him to do it, for the statement applies to this part of church history as well: "For we do not wrestle [fundamentally] against flesh and blood [i.e., people], but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12).

James was killed and Peter's days appeared to be numbered. It seemed as though Herod was poised to deliver a severe blow to the cause of the gospel. But when many church members came together to pray for the apostle, King Jesus intervened. Peter was freed. Herod died. But the Word of the Lord was not bound (2 Tim. 2:9). Its influence grew despite the persecution and conquered more hearts than ever (12:24).

This continues to happen. Anti-Christian rulers have often severely hindered the spread of the gospel and persecuted God's church, as in recent decades in China. But "he who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord holds them in derision" (Ps. 2:4). Never had the gospel spread so strongly in China as under the communist dictator.

17.1 James killed, Peter arrested (Acts 12:1–5)

This generation will yet see the temple razed to the ground, the Lord Jesus had predicted to his apostles. But before that happens, they will arrest you and put you into prison. You will have to appear before kings for the sake of my name and some of you will be killed (Luke 21). For James and Peter, this prophecy was now going to be fulfilled. At the command of king Herod, they were arrested.

1 It happened in the same time as when Agabus foretold the great famine, and the church of Antioch took a collection for the church in Jerusalem, but presumably before the famine really broke out.

As a figurehead of Rome, king Herod Agrippa ruled over the Jewish country. He was a grandson of the king who murdered the children in Bethlehem and a nephew of the Herod who had John the Baptizer beheaded and who had allowed the Lord Jesus to be mocked (Luke 23:8–12). His grandfather was an Edomite, but his grandmother was a full-blooded Jewess. Through her he had Maccabean blood in his veins. As a young man he had led a dissolute life in Rome.

Because he knew how deeply the Jews hated his family, he seized every opportunity to present himself as a very religious Jew, especially in the eyes of the Pharisees. One time he walked along "humbly" in a procession with a basket of first fruits on his shoulder. To the great delight of the Jews, he moved the seat of government from Caesarea to Jerusalem. And when emperor Claudius wanted to put in the temple an image portraying him as a god, Herod was smart enough to counsel him against doing so.

The degree of his popularity because of such gestures became evident when he read to the

people at a Feast of Booths from the book of Deuteronomy (cf. Deut. 31:9–13). When he came to the words: “You may not put a foreigner over you [as king], who is not your brother” (Deut. 17:15), the “pious” ruler got tears in his eyes! For his grandfather was an Edomite! But the multitude cried out assuringly: “You are our brother! You are our brother!”

Because he knew how fiercely the Jewish leaders hated the followers of Jesus, the persecution of Christians was well suited for his politics. In order to procure favor, on a particular day he seized some of the church members with the intention of mistreating them.

Thus, whereas far away the church in Antioch was growing and flourishing, the church in Jerusalem was being persecuted again after a few years of rest (cf. 8:1; 9:31). Subsequent church history would display this portrait repeatedly: here there was peace and rest, while there violence and persecution broke out.

The death of James

2 Herod would afflict the church the most severely if he were to rob it of its leaders. That entire “Jesus movement” could possibly disappear altogether. To that end he first had the apostle James arrested. In order to sense the seriousness of this event, we should recall that the church in Jerusalem at that time did not possess a complete Bible!

As long as the four Gospels had not yet been written, the twelve apostles functioned as “walking Gospels.” If you had wanted to know what the Lord Jesus had said and done, you had to ask them. And now Herod was intentionally getting James, one of the most valuable brothers, out of the way.

Note well: one of the twelve official ear- and eye-witnesses of all of Jesus’ activity, from the baptism of John to his resurrection and ascension (1:21–22). Moreover, together with Peter and John, he was one of Jesus’ most intimate disciples. They were the only ones who had seen how he had raised the daughter of Jairus from the dead, how God had glorified him on the mountain in the presence of Moses and Elijah, and how distressed he had been in Gethsemane (Luke 8:51–56; 9:28–36; Matt. 26:37).

When at a certain moment James’ mother had expressed the wish that her sons James and John would eventually occupy the positions of first and second ministers in Jesus’ government, the Lord instead described for them the cup of suffering that lay ahead (Mark 10:35–40). Now James was drinking from that cup. Presumably he was beheaded just like John the Baptizer (Luke 9:9). Luke says nothing about any kind of trial. And every trace of martyr-worship is missing.

The murder undoubtedly led to tremendous dejection in the church in Jerusalem. For just as they would later be praying for Peter, surely this had also been done for James. But according to God’s sovereign design, Peter’s apostolic task was not yet finished and that of James was. In his vacant spot among the twelve was never filled, in contrast to that of Judas, through appointment of Matthias (1:12–26).

Luke respects God’s sovereignty, and without fanfare reports that the Lord sent an angel for Peter, but not for James. Miraculous deliverances were not the rule for apostles, and throughout the subsequent centuries, they would be just as infrequent for innumerable martyrs. Believers who are persecuted must, according to Peter, not be surprised (1 Pet. 4:12). God spares his sheep often, Calvin remarks in connection with this passage. Otherwise far more blood of Christians would be shed in this God-hating world.

Peter arrested

3 The news of James' death was received well by the Jewish public in Jerusalem. The popular favor in which the church could initially rejoice (2:47) had changed after the passage of time into popular hatred. It is possible that this reversal was caused by people perceiving that the church of Messiah Jesus was now incorporating uncircumcised Gentiles. This kind of action deeply offended the legalistic Jewish sentiment of superiority.

James was likely murdered shortly before Passover. The joy of the Jews about his death arose, therefore, precisely during the days of unleavened bread. Precisely when they had piously removed all the leaven, which symbolized sin, from their houses, they hardened themselves in their age-old sin of killing the prophets (cf. Matt. 23:29–39; Luke 11:47–51; Acts 7:51–52).

When Herod observed that by this action, he had achieved his political objective, he had Peter arrested as well, the leader and primary spokesman of Jesus' followers. For him this was the third time that he was imprisoned (4:1–3; 5:18). On account of the Passover week, he was kept temporarily alone in the jail (cf. Matt. 26:5). After the feast, Herod would get him out of the way by means of a show trial, and in this way get the Jews eating out of his hand even more.

4 Perhaps he had sensed that Peter had many miracles to his credit, and that had even escaped from prison once already (5:19). In any case, he instituted strict security precautions. Four groups of Roman soldiers, each consisting of four men, were assigned to guard him day and night. Two soldiers were stationed close to him in the cell. In front of the door stood a guard and a bit further away yet another. Finally, in front of the heavy iron exterior gate there was a third guard. Every chance of escape appeared to be gone. As so as the festival week was over, Herod would deal with him in public.

The intercession of the church

5 Peter's arrest, coming so quickly after the death of James, was naturally a severe shock for the entire church. Would the church have to lose another apostle? The only thing the church could do for him at that point is what they did: over against the royal violence the church raised its fervent prayer. Day and night they called upon the King of kings for help. And surely not only in the home of Mark's mother (v. 12). Let us be spurred on by their example to pray persistently for the many Christians who are being persecuted in our own day!

What would the church in Jerusalem have prayed? Knowing the church somewhat, we can assume that they did not beseech the Lord first of all about Peter's personal well-being. For the church, the preaching was more important than the preachers. That had appeared already after Peter's first arrest, along with John. At that time they had not prayed for their physical well-being or for the ending of the persecution, but they asked: "Grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness" (4:23–31). It is obvious that this was their primary request now as well: Give Peter power and wisdom to glorify you and your Son Jesus before the king and the people!

17.2 Peter's liberation from prison (Acts 12:6–11)

Herod had defied Jesus, "the King of kings" (Rev. 17:14; 19:16), and the latter accepted the challenge. What should have increased Herod's popularity, Jesus caused to end up for Herod as a painful flop.

6 Herod had already fixed the date for the show trial against Peter. And the verdict was

already determined as well. It would lead to Peter's execution, for according to Herod, this time escape would be impossible. While the apostle Paul later sat chained presumably to one soldier (Acts 28:16; Eph. 6:20), Peter was chained firmly to two guards for good measure. As though that was not enough, in front of the cell there stood a guard. Herod's scheme appeared to be impossible to fail.

Peter would have been thinking the same thing. There will come a time when people will bring you to a place you don't want to go, Jesus had foretold him (John. 21:18). Had that time dawned? He loved the Lord dearly. "Even if I must die with you, I will not deny you!," he had said once (Matt. 26:35). He was constantly prepared for that eventuality. He had no concern about what he would have to say to the king. The Lord had promised that he would tell Peter what he needed to say when the time came (Luke 12:11; 21:14–15). In connection with both of his previous arrests, he had discovered that he could count on that (4:8–12; 5:29–32).

When his last night seemed to have descended, he did not panic, but he lay restfully sleeping between his guards! In the Spirit of Psalm 3: "I lay down and slept; . . . for the LORD sustained me" (cf. Phil. 4:7). A fine example of what he would later write to persecuted believers: "Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good" (1 Pet. 4:19).

7 Peter's apostolic task was not yet finished, however. Therefore King Jesus intervened. Suddenly there shone a heavenly light in the cell. An angel of the Lord had come from the invisible world and entered the dungeon. He shook Peter awake (so deeply was he sleeping!) and said: "Quickly! Stand up!" Without the soldiers next to him noticing anything, the chains fell from his wrists (and ankles?).

8 "Fasten your belt and put on your sandals," the angel continued. When Peter had done so, the angel said: "Put on your mantle and follow me."

9 Obediently Peter walked behind him out of the prison. That it had really been an angel and that he had really come to free him, had not yet dawned on him. He thought he was seeing a vision.

10 First they passed the guard standing in front of the cell door. He saw nothing. The second guard similarly noticed nothing. Next they reached the large iron prison gate, which led out to the city. Without the angel needing to touch the locks, the heavy door opened automatically (Greek: *automatē*) and they stepped outside. The angel walked one more block with Peter and suddenly disappeared. All in all, the entire activity of setting Peter free lasted only a few minutes.

Of course, God could also have rescued Peter in a split second. Just like he didn't really need six days to create the heavens and the earth. But in less than fifteen minutes he performed an entire series of miracles. That made his intervention even more impressive, all the more because Luke described it in such great detail.

11 When the angel had disappeared together with his heavenly light, and Peter stood alone in the street in the darkness and cool of the night, he became alert once again and realized that he was really not dreaming! There was no doubt about it: the Lord had just performed a great miracle! He had sent his angel to free him from the hands of Herod and to protect him against the Jews who were looking for his execution.

17.3 Peter informs the church of his liberation (Acts 12:12-17)

The Lord had freed Peter in a miraculous way, but now he had to move forward once again in a

normal way.

12 Peter stood thinking for a moment, before deciding first to let the church know about his rescue. For that purpose he went to the home of Mary, the mother of John, surnamed Mark.

Did he choose this address because at that time already a bond existed between him and Mark? Later Peter called him “my son Mark” (1 Pet. 5:13). From this we see that Peter was very important in Mark’s life, like a teacher is important in the life of a student. According to an ancient tradition, Mark is the writer of the Gospel according to Mark, which he wrote on the basis of Peter’s preaching in Rome.

Mark’s mother was apparently wealthy. She owned a spacious house with a gate building that provided access to an interior building. This was one of the many meeting places of the Jerusalem church, which numbered in the thousands by now. Church buildings would be constructed for the first time centuries later. That night, many church members had gathered together in her home to pray for Peter.

13 After he (carefully, to avoid rousing the neighbors?) knocked on the door of the outer gate, Rhoda the maidservant came, presumably with a racing heart, to ask who was standing there in the dark of night at the door? Hopefully not an arrest detail from the king?

14 Peter evidently came more often to this home, for when he said his name, she immediately recognized his voice. For her there was no possible doubt: standing outside was the man they had been praying for! She was suddenly so happy that due to the excitement she forgot to unlatch the door for him. She ran head over heels inside and called out to the prayer group: “Peter himself is standing at the door!”

15 But they thought for sure that the pressure had become too much for her, for they responded to her: Girl, “you’re out of your mind” (cf. Luke 24:11). But she continued maintaining that it was really true. “You’ve got him confused with his guardian angel,” they retorted. Many Jews in these days believed that every person has his or her own guardian angel, and that this angel could present himself as one’s double. This cannot be inferred from Scripture, though it does teach that believers are protected by angels, but not that each person has his or her own guardian angel.

People have often accused these believers of not believing that their prayers were being heard, even though they were praying fervently for Peter’s release. They had been praying at the time Peter had earlier been freed from prison by an angel (5:19). But is this judgment fair? Theirs was and remained a *prayer*. Moreover, Luke does not say explicitly that they were praying for his release. After a previous imprisonment they had not placed before God as their deepest wish: “Spare *the life* of your servants,” but: “Give your servant every boldness to proclaim *your Word*” (4:29). Would not the same church now be praying in the same spirit? Naturally also for Peter’s personal well-being, but especially that the Lord would help him through his Spirit. So that soon he would be able to give a powerful testimony before king Herod about Messiah Jesus. And when God now gave them much more than they asked him, they could hardly believe it.

16 Meanwhile Peter was standing at the door knocking. When a couple of believers finally went to the outer door and opened it, they were beside themselves with surprise. Indeed, there was Peter, standing before them in the flesh!

17 Filled with surprise and joy, everybody began talking loudly over each other. Peter sensed, however, that time was short. At any moment they could have noticed his disappearance from the prison and started to hunt for him. Moreover, such noise in the quiet nighttime could easily identify his location for his pursuers. Therefore he urged them to be quiet and told them how the Lord had sprung him from prison. And he asked them to pass this news on to James, the

brother of the Lord Jesus, and the other leading brothers.

Afterward he left for another place, where he faced less of a risk of being seized again by Herod. The Master had advised such a flight in cases like this (Matt. 10:23). Because Herod died shortly after this event, the danger facing Peter quickly disappeared as well. In Acts 15 he is in public in Jerusalem.

17.4 The divine miracle misunderstood by Herod (Acts 12:18–19)

Through Peter's miraculous disappearance the Lord God was simultaneously making an urgent appeal to Herod and the Jewish people to reflect on their hostility against Jesus and his church. But unfortunately, the ruler and his people remained deaf to this new appeal.

18 When daybreak arrived, the soldiers to whom Peter had been chained discovered to their dumbfounded amazement that the prisoner was no longer lying between them! That generated great distress among the other guards, of course. According to Roman law, they could now receive the same punishment as was deserved by the prisoner whom they had allowed to escape! (cf. 16:27; 27:42). In this way people tried to prevent bribery of the guards. In this case, however, that was not involved. What could have happened to that heavily guarded man?

19 Herod immediately initiated a search. In connection with that, surely numerous Christians would have been interrogated and their homes would have been searched. The arrestee was not found, however. Next the king, who had become personally involved in the matter, called the guards to account. During this hearing he would have understood very well that the soldiers were innocent. Peter's escape was obviously a divine miracle. But this was the very thing that the anti-Christian Herod refused to acknowledge. Whereas a child of God could taste God's mighty hand in this event, Herod self-consciously closed his eyes to this possibility, and he continued to defy King Jesus. Just as the Sanhedrin had done after the miraculous deliverance of all the apostles, when the Sanhedrin remained blind though they saw them free (5:19–24; cf. Matt. 13:13–14).

He had the soldiers led away, most likely to be executed. They had to devote their lives to guarding the prisoner, and now they had to pay with their lives because of his escape. Here as well we see how God's ordination are inscrutable to us and his ways past finding out (Rom. 11:33). Peter got a guardian angel, but James and the soldiers were innocent when they were put to death. To our comfort, we may know that God's dossiers about this case will one day be opened by the Judge of the living and the dead (Rev. 20:11–15).

Herod was deeply disappointed. Through the death of Peter he had hoped to win the favor of the Jews. Instead, he had suffered a painful loss of face. Disillusioned, he left Judea and went to Caesarea. In this way, the church in Jerusalem received rest once again.

17.5 The death of Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:20–24)

“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall,” says Proverbs 16:18. That shows us Herod's end very clearly.

20 Some time later, the populace of Tyre and Sidon incurred the rage of Herod. These ancient and powerful commercial cities along the Mediterranean Sea (cf. Ezek. 27) had a large population, but a small geographical surrounding territory. For that reason, they had been dependent for centuries on Israel for their food. Solomon sold them grain (1 Kgs 5:1). Because the Roman emperor naturally prohibited his vassals from settling their differences with military weapons, Herod threatened to impact the region by stopping the grain exports. Perhaps he had

even implemented his threat. And that in a time of a grain shortage in the world market (11:28).

To avert a catastrophe, both cities had sent a peace delegation to Caesarea. These emissaries were able to win Blastus to their side, who as the palace official of Herod exercised significant influence on him. He promised—with a golden handshake, of course—that he would do his utmost to get the king to give these emissaries an audience. So that they could make an urgent appeal to him to improve the mutual relationships and to stop the grain boycott.

21 Blastus' mediation was successful. Herod was willing to receive the envoys. In order to ensure that they realized that both of their city-states had to live from his largesse, he made known his conditions of peace during a mass gathering that had been organized during that same time. Emperor Claudius had returned only a few months earlier from his campaign against the Britons. According to Flavius Josephus, in honor of his success, public entertainment was organized in the predominantly pagan Caesarea, events that drew a lot of people. On the second day of these events, Herod would address the delegates.

To demonstrate his power and glory, king Herod took the stage in the morning in the great open air theater, in his full regalia. According to Josephus, he was wearing a mantle adorned with silver broaches, something that altered his appearance into a glittering illuminated figure when the sun glistened on it.

22 When the pagan public saw and heard him, they were so impressed by him that they shouted in exultation: “The voice of a god and not a man!” From the Greek we learn that they did say this once, but kept it up for some time. Josephus also says that flatterers called out to him that until now they had viewed him as a mortal man, but now they perceived that he was a god. With these cries, the same show of honor was being given to him as to the emperor. And although as a Jew he certainly knew about the First Commandment, he did not immediately reject the show of honor out of hand, but accepted it with pleasure (cf. 10:26; 14:11–18).

23 When the murderer of the Lord's apostle thereby seized the honor that belonged to God alone, the measure was full for King Jesus. In a breathtaking manner, he intervened. He sent an angel who struck the arrogant ruler clad in silver in a split second with a terrible and fatal disease. In the sight of the people and the Phoenician envoys, Herod shriveled up from a ruler who had been honored as a god into a beggarly pile of human misery. He was eaten from the inside by worms, writes doctor Luke. This must have involved excruciating pain. According to Josephus, after five days of unbearable suffering, he breathed his last. God's oppressed people could be comforted by this: in this way he will one day make all his enemies perish!

24 But the Word of God was irresistible! (cf. 6:7; 19:20; 2 Tim. 2:9). In gradually wider circles it was renewing human hearts, until despite many kinds of opposition it was proclaimed even in Rome. When Luke described that later in Acts 21, he laid his pen down and was silent about the outcome of Paul's trial. For his purpose was to describe not the lives of the apostles, but how the testimony about how the Lord Jesus reached the ends of the earth from Jerusalem via Rome (1:8). In that connection we are thinking about our own pagan ancestors as well.

17.6 Back to Antioch (Acts 12:25)

Luke now picks up the thread again that he had left in 11:30, and he returns to Barnabas and Saul, who were in Jerusalem around this time. In connection with the threatened, or already begun, famine, the church in Antioch had taken a collection for the believers in Judea and Jerusalem. Barnabas and Saul had brought the proceeds of that collection to the brothers.

25 After having completed their ministry of love, they returned to Antioch. They took along

John Mark, the nephew of Barnabas. Evidently because they considered him well-suited for the ministry of the gospel. Later they would have a difference of opinion and they would split up because of Mark (13:5–6; 15:37–40), but shortly before his death, Paul requested Mark to come to him, because he could put him to good use (2 Tim. 4:11).

Bidding Jerusalem farewell

With this, Luke was bidding temporary farewell to the church in Jerusalem. Up to this point he had described how it came into being through the power of the Holy Spirit and how it had grown through Word and miracle, but despite severe opposition as well. For after the death of Stephen, a severe persecution had broken out in Jerusalem under the leadership of Saul, whereby many believers were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Through the evangelizing work of these refugees, churches came into existence in the coastal region (Joppa, Caesarea) and the testimony of Jesus reached as far as the world city of Antioch.

Meanwhile we learn incidentally from Luke's narrative how various preliminary signs of the destruction of the temple were being fulfilled now already (Luke 21:5–26). The Lord Jesus had foretold in that context the appearance of famines and persecutions, arrests and imprisonments. In Acts 4–12 we saw how many of these had already been realized. "You will be hated by all for my name's sake," the Lord had predicted (Luke 21:17). How the Jews would have rejoiced if Peter's head had been severed at the command of Herod. The majority of Jerusalem's inhabitants continued to reject Jesus' name with horror. They hated his apostles and arrogantly rejected the ultimatum that these divine emissaries had communicated to them. As they continued to harden themselves, they were heading toward their destruction in AD 70.

But many Gentiles did accept the Lord Jesus as their Lord and Savior. That now become Luke's main theme: how the gospel reached Rome, the heart of the world of that day, as it went from Antioch via Asia Minor (i.e., Turkey). From now on, the activity of the apostle Peter is no longer the focus, but the preaching of the apostle Paul in the Greco-Roman world. Even though he will call Jerusalem to conversion one more time.

CHAPTER 18

ACTS 13:1–12: PAUL’S FIRST APOSTOLIC JOURNEY (1): CYPRUS

From this point forward, the river current of gospel proclamation increases in speed, and receives a steadily widening riverbed!

In Acts 1–7, the church consisted exclusively of Jewish believers.

In Acts 8, Samaritans were added, and Philip baptized the first African.

In Acts 9, the Lord called Saul to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles as well.

In Acts 10, he taught Peter that the Law of Moses was broken down as a wall of separation between Jews and Gentiles. He was permitted to proclaim the gospel with confidence to the Roman officer Cornelius.

In Acts 11, the other apostles and believers in Judea acknowledged that God had given the Gentiles repentance unto life. Cyprian and Cyrenian Jews, who had fled from the persecution in Jerusalem, proclaimed the joyful message to Gentiles in Antioch. This is how a large Jewish-Gentile church came into existence in that world city. The first sheep from the Gentile world had been brought across the bridge.

In Acts 13–28, Luke tells us how the great river flows from this. In these chapters we read how Paul proclaimed the gospel from Antioch all the way to Rome, the center of the ancient world.

18.1 Missionary journeys? Better: apostolic journeys!

We are accustomed to the phrase “Paul’s *missionary* journeys.” Nevertheless, upon closer inspection, it would be better to speak of *apostolic* journeys. For there are deep, principial differences between the preaching of the *apostle* Paul and that of the later missionaries.

To begin with, Acts is not a “book of missions” in the sense we often use the word, but from start to finish it is embroidered with the threads of God’s covenant. It narrates how the apostle Paul implemented in a unique period of covenant history in a unique manner his unique commission. In that connection, he always went first to Israel, God’s ancient covenant people. For that reason his ministry cannot simply stand as a model for later mission work.

The history of missions tells us of men and women who, out of respect-inducing consecration to God and his Kingdom, traveled to remote places to proclaim the gospel to blind pagans who knew neither God nor his covenant. In that connection they faced first the mandate to learn the language of the region and then to translate Bible passages into that language. Because their hearers often were illiterate, they had to teach them to read as well. In doing this, many missionaries spent their entire lives among primitive people.

By contrast, the apostle Paul proclaimed the gospel preferably in the large population centers along the main routes of the Roman empire. He liked to work in seaports like Thessalonica, Ephesus, Corinth, and in regional capitals. From such centers the gospel could expand in a natural way across the plains and countryside. In this way, after two years of preaching in *Ephesus*, “everyone in *Asia*” had heard the Word of the Lord (19:10). When he had proclaimed the gospel in a number of such capitals, he wrote: “. . .so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have *fulfilled* the ministry of the gospel of Christ” (Rom. 15:19).

For this he did not need to learn a foreign language, for he could get along everywhere using

Greek, the world language of that time. Moreover, he did not need to translate any Bible books, but could use the Septuagint, the widely accessible Greek translation of the Old Testament. And whereas people in the eastern part of the Roman empire did not understand Greek, for them Aramaic was the trusted language of international concourse.

Whereas missionaries would later travel abroad to plant churches where no one knew the living God, Paul everywhere went first to the synagogues of existing Jewish churches. There he could not only link up with the already present deep knowledge of Scripture, but he could also meet up with “God-fearers”: Gentiles who attended the synagogue services every Saturday, where for a long time they had heard the Law and the Prophets read and discussed publicly. Many of these Gentiles were thereby thoroughly at home in the Old Testament already before Paul’s arrival.

In contrast with later missionaries, Paul hardly needed to teach his first listeners the ABCs of the Scripture, for example, in Lystra and Athens. In many places, he could link up right away with the existing Jewish messianic expectation, and proclaim to Jews and “God-fearing” Gentiles: “The prophecies are fulfilled! Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah!” Something that he would go on to prove to them from the Scriptures they knew.

His activity signified at the same time, however, a confrontation with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem who had rejected Jesus as Messiah. It is remarkable that the apostles held the Jews in Jerusalem and in Judea co-responsible for the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, but that Paul did not do this in the foreign synagogues. He did warn them earnestly about God’s covenant wrath in the event that they should reject him.

This confrontation as well was definitely not “mission work” in the customary sense of the phrase today, but belonged to the special interim of grace that God permitted before he would have Jerusalem and his temple destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. Paul’s preaching belongs to the category of God’s covenant lawsuit against Israel regarding its rejection of the Messiah. The apostles brought God’s ultimatum to the Jews who were living abroad.

The Lord frequently confirmed Paul’s preaching by means of the unusually great miraculous signs he allowed Paul to perform (Rom. 15:18–19; 2 Cor. 12:12). Which missionary has ever imitated that? Thereby King Jesus was validating himself as God’s Messiah and was validating the apostle as his envoy. Paul’s words and epistles received divine authority thereby. This is also characteristic for this period of special *revelation* during which the apostle labored. During his apostolic journeys he was laying the *foundation* on which all subsequent preachers would build (1 Cor. 3:10). No missionary after him ever wrote letters with *apostolic* authority.

Belonging to the special character of this period of revelation was also the breaking down of the Mosaic wall of separation between Israel and the Gentile nations. The Christian church did not have full members and half members: Jewish full-believers and Gentile half-believers. In the post-apostolic period, this was obvious, but Paul had to fight against his Judaizing opponents throughout his entire life.

Finally, there is this. Missionaries often worked an entire lifetime in one place. But Paul traveled to a new place after preaching for a short while in a locale. The remaining issues needing attention he left to one of his collaborators (Titus 1:5). Although he did not travel incessantly. He worked in Corinth for a year and a half, and in Ephesus for two years (cf. 18:11; 19:10).

18.2 Sending out Saul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1–3)

“How shall men preach unless they are sent?” (Rom. 10:15). This applied to Paul’s own journeys as well. He did not make these on his own initiative, but as one sent by the Spirit of Jesus. Or as he would later explain: “an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Gal. 1:1).

1 When the New Testament still had to be written, some believer had received from the Holy Spirit the gift of prophecy. Thereby they could make known God’s will in specific instances (see our comments on Acts 11:27). The completion of the Scriptures rendered this gift superfluous (cf. 1 Cor. 13:8). Others possessed the special gift of teaching in the truth of Holy Scripture (Rom. 12:7). The church in Antioch was richly blessed in this regard; it was served by five prophets and teachers.

Leading them was the good man Barnabas, a Levite from Cyprus and a friend of Saul (4:36–37; 9:27). In addition there was Simon, also called Niger (i.e., Black), presumably because he was a North African Jew. In addition, there was Luciene from Cyrene, possibly one of those who had proclaimed the Lord Jesus in Antioch to Gentiles (cf. 11:20). The fourth was the aristocratic Manaen. He was the foster brother and childhood friend of Herod Antipas, the tetrarch who had John the Baptizer beheaded and who had mocked the Lord Jesus (Luke 3:19–20; 9:7–9; 23:6–12; cf. 13:31–32). Did Luke obtain his many details about the Herodian family from this Manaen? Finally, Saul also belonged to this five.

Sent out at the command of the Holy Spirit

2 The go-ahead for Paul’s journeys was given by God’s Spirit. In the church in Antioch, the great international cultural intersection. The historical moment arrived during a service of Word and prayer where, in addition to the prophets and teachers, church members were also present. Had people perhaps been praying precisely for the further spread of the gospel in the world? In obedience to Jesus’ command: “Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest” (Matt. 9:38). To show him how uprightly and humbly they were praying according to his will, they had entered with empty stomachs.

During that unforgettable prayer service, the heavenly command came to go into the world with the gospel, whereby the gospel ultimately penetrated the world all the way to us in our own land. Through the lips of one of the prophets, the Holy Spirit said: “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

It was about fifteen years by ago by now that the Lord had called Saul in Damascus to the apostolate (Acts 9:1–19a). He was not sent out alone, however, but together with Barnabas. This was according to Jesus’ rule that they were to work in groups of (at least) two (cf. Luke 10:1). In the rest of the book, Luke shows what task the Spirit had in mind for them: proclaiming the gospel to Jews, Gentiles, and even their kings and the emperor (cf. 9:15; 22:15; 26:16–32; 27:24).

3 Because, after their first journey, they had made a report to the church (14:27), it seems obvious that they had also been sent out by way of a gathering of the church. On account of the weightiness of the matter, they had first fasted in humility, before they called upon “the grace of God” (14:26).

Then they laid their hands on them. Not as a magical rite whereby they were suddenly equipped, for Barnabas and Saul already possessed the gift of the Holy Spirit. But this was a symbolic action whereby they were publicly acknowledging the heavenly calling of both brothers and as a church were confirming its solidarity with them. They did this again in

connection with a subsequent journey (15:40). Still today we acknowledge Paul's heavenly calling, when we take seriously the superscriptions above his letters and read those letters as sent from someone called and authorized by God.

18.3 Paul and Barnabas on Cyprus (Acts 13:4–12)

In which direction would both gospel messengers now travel? Antioch enjoyed good connections with the Far East. According to ancient traditions, the apostle Thomas had already traveled to India and proclaimed the gospel there. But Paul was sent by the Holy Spirit from the outset toward the West, where our ancestors also lived.

4 Did Barnabas, as a Cypriot (4:36), prefer to proclaim the gospel first in his own native country, even though he would not have been the first to do so (11:19)? This consideration was led by the Holy Spirit. Luke repeats it emphatically: they departed as emissaries of the Spirit.

First they traveled to Seleucia, which lay some fifteen miles (twenty-five kilometers) away. This was the seaport serving Antioch, lying at the mouth of the Orontes. There they booked passage on a sailing ship that took them to Cyprus. How they financed their trip is something Luke considered unimportant for his readers to know.

5 After a voyage of approximately one hundred twenty-five miles (two hundred kilometers), the ship moored along the coast of Salamis, a large international commercial city of more than a half million inhabitants. It also had a large Jewish colony with a number of synagogues. Barnabas and Paul made their way first to those synagogues.

This was natural. The Jews possessed the oldest rights to the Messiah, even though this constituted no privilege any longer. For he has removed the wall of separation and had reconciled both Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:14, 16). Paul would encounter both people groups in the synagogue: Jews and God-fearing Gentiles. All of them were listeners who already knew the Law and the Prophets. The only thing required for them was proclaiming that the Lord Jesus had fulfilled the Scriptures. This explains why from now on, we see Paul always going first to the synagogues.

They were accompanied by John Mark, the nephew of Barnabas, who was a “minister” or “servant.” Did he serve as a personal assistant? Or (also) as a “minister of the Word” in the sense of Luke 1:2? He could tell a lot about the Lord Jesus, in part because Peter came regularly to the home of Mark's mother (12:12-14). If necessary, he could supplement or illustrate the preaching of Paul and Barnabas very well.

The proconsul comes to faith

6 They traveled throughout the entire island preaching, until they reached Paphos ninety-three miles (one hundred fifty kilometers) away, where the residence of the Roman proconsul was located. In that city was a temple of Venus, the Canaanite goddess Astarte, in connection with which the city was center of immorality and sorcery. There Paul and Barnabas encountered a certain man named Barjesus, a Jewish magician and pseudo-prophet (cf. Jer. 14:14–15). He reminds us of Simon the magician (Acts 8:9–24). Such false prophets were, according to the Lord Jesus, a preliminary sign of the coming destruction of Jerusalem (Matt. 24:24).

7 This Barjesus moved in the circles of the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, a modest and prudent man. He reminds us of figures like the chief financial officer from Ethiopia (8:26–40) and the Roman officer Cornelius (10:1–2). All three were genuine seekers who, like so many in that

time, had had enough of the pagan religions.

During his quest, Sergius Paulus, however, had walked into the snare of Barjesus. He had foisted himself on the governor as palace preacher or palace astrologer. Naturally, as a Jew he knew from the Torah how deeply Yahweh hated every form of occultism (Deut. 18:10–14). He also undoubtedly knew Israel's expectation of the Messianic peaceable kingdom. But he did not point the governor to that. Instead, with his abominable magic and pseudo-prophecy he fed the spiritually hungry Roman with stones rather than bread. Apparently this intellectual Gentile did not trust the matter entirely, for he called upon Paul and Barnabas so he could hear the Word of God about salvation through the Jewish Messiah Jesus.

8 Once again we have a historic moment! For Paul was Jesus' appointed instrument to bring his name "before the Gentiles and kings" (9:15). And there he was now standing before a full-blooded Gentile and a Roman proconsul as well, the "king" of the island! How many members of his palace staff would have listened in when he proclaimed to Sergius Paulus: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your house" (cf. 16:31).

Elymas (that was the Greek name of Barjesus) sensed right away that this would deal the deathblow to his lucrative position as magician and "prophet." So when he observed that the governor was giving an ear to the good news, he spoke fiercely and constantly against the apostles. The proconsul would surely have realized that Elymas was also a Jew, and thus also an expert in these matters. As such an expert, then, the prophet advised him strongly against giving any credence to what Paul and Barnabas were proclaiming to him about that Jewish Savior Jesus.

9 Saul—now that his Gentile apostolate has begun, Luke from now on calls him by his Roman name, Paul—filled as he was with the Holy Spirit, identified the situation clearly. Here Satan was directing a frontal attack on the gospel, and this "prophet" was his instrument. Here as well it was not just one sinner who was being diverted from the Savior. The breakthrough of the gospel on the entire island of Cyprus was at stake. For if the powerful governor accepted the Lord Jesus, others would more easily follow in his steps.

10 At this critical moment, the Spirit of Jesus intervened. This magician had to be punished as an example, so that all of Cyprus—with Sergius Paulus in the lead—would perceive that Elymas was a false messenger and Paul was a true messenger of God. So Paul looked at him intently and spoke as with the tongue of the Spirit: "You son of the devil [the Master had also spoken this way once, cf. John 8:44; 1 John 3:10], you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord?"

11 And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time." This was an eloquent punishment for someone who wanted to extinguish the light of the gospel! At that very moment a haze came over Elymas' eyes and everything around him became pitch black. God was still gracious toward him, for if he repented, this temporary darkness would be protecting him from the eternal darkness.

This was a remarkable intervention! By far the most signs with which the Lord confirmed the joyful news during the apostolic period were *benefits* and thereby *redemptive* signs. But the blindness of Elymas was one of the few *non-redemptive* signs that he performed through his apostles (the others were the death of Ananias and Sapphira, and that of king Herod). Thereby he was seriously warning once for all the falsifiers and opponents of his gospel for his Last Judgment. Earlier (pp. ??-?? Du 63–66) we discussed more extensively the significance of miracles and signs for then and now.

12 When the proconsul saw how the magical power of his minion had been broken through superhuman intervention, he too perceived Elymas as an arch deceiver and he came to faith.

Deeply impressed by what he had learned and seen from Paul and Barnabas about God and his Son (cf. Luke 4:32).

A characteristic beginning for Paul's entire labor

People have pointed out that this initial work of Paul after his official commissioning was simultaneously characteristic for his entire subsequent ministry.

He immediately stumbled upon Jewish opposition and upon their attempts to keep the Gentiles away from the Lord Jesus. They would never stop trying. The Lord supported him, however, and the gospel triumphed. Paul was the equal of Peter, who also opposed a magician (8:20–21). The Roman government was still favorably disposed and was even harboring sympathetic interest in the gospel.

CHAPTER 19

ACTS 13:13–52: PAUL’S FIRST APOSTOLIC JOURNEY (2): ANTIOCH AND PISIDIA

Paul and Barnabas were not the first to preach the gospel on Cyprus. Refugees from Jerusalem had preceded them (11:19). But from now on, it was a matter of honor for Paul “to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation” (Rom. 15:20; cf. 2 Cor. 10:15). This explains why he now turned his gaze toward the continent of Asia Minor. There the Lord was going to perform powerful things through him.

19.1 Mark turns back (Acts 13:13)

A painful experience, which years later would still be felt, was the breakup of the trio.

13 From Paphos on Cyprus, Paul and both of his collaborators sailed to Attalia, a seaport in Pamphylia, on the southern coast of modern Turkey. From there they traveled some fifteen miles (twenty-five kilometers) further to Perga. There Mark decided to abandon them and go back to Jerusalem.

What drove him to do that is something that Luke covers with the mantle of love. Presumably all the more because his friends had since that time been restored to honor. In 15:36–40 his name comes up again, but here too apart from the purpose of narrating the difficulties. According to Paul, Mark’s departure was not a trifling matter: thereby he “had not gone with them to the work” (15:38). This phrase was used more often to refer to the apostolic preaching (13:2; 14:26). Barnabas later wanted to ignore the event. Was this because Mark had ultimately not been called by the Spirit to the work? But Paul viewed the matter so seriously that later he refused to take him along as a co-worker (15:36–40). Later, though, he did again enjoy using Mark’s services (2 Tim. 4:11).

Fortunately this did not represent the end of Mark’s ministry of the Word. We owe to him the second Gospel! An additional advantage of his temporary return was that now people in Jerusalem could know much earlier that the proconsul of Cyprus had come to faith and that Paul and Barnabas were now proclaiming the gospel in Asia Minor.

19.2 A difficult journey to Antioch in Pisidia and reception in the synagogue (Acts 13:14–15)

Because there were in antiquity more than twenty cities called Antioch, people called the city to which the apostles were now traveling Pisidian Antioch. We should not confuse this with the Syrian world city called Antioch, from where Paul and Barnabas had been sent out.

14 From Perga, Paul and Barnabas began traveling on foot for more than ninety-three miles (one hundred fifty kilometers) over the Taurus mountains to Antioch in Pisidia. Up mountains, down mountains, along deep ravines. Surely along this pathway they were “in danger from rivers, danger from robbers” (2 Cor. 11:26). After approximately eight days, they arrived at this Antioch, the regional capital of Pisidia, lying on the Via Sebaste, the Roman imperial highway that ran straight through Asia Minor from Ephesus to the Euphrates.

This Pisidia was part of the Roman province of Galatia, where the cities of Iconium, Lystra,

and Derbe were also found. To the believers in the “the region of Phrygia and Galatia” (16:6), Paul would later write his Epistle to the Galatians. In that letter, he tells us about his first preaching in these regions: “I was sick at that time.” Nevertheless people had received him as a divine envoy (Gal. 4:13–15).

Paul receives a preaching request

On the sabbath, Paul and Barnabas went to the synagogue. This was a multi-functional building, serving during the week as a school, a social center, a guesthouse, and on Saturday as a church building. There these men would have found ample provisions. A visit from two prominent rabbis did not happen every week. Surely not from a rabbi who had studied with professor Gamaliel at the famous rabbinic school in Jerusalem.

15 After, according to the worldwide Jewish liturgy, the Shema (“Hear, O Israel . . .”) had been prayed, and someone had read a passage from the Torah and the Prophets (cf. 13:27; 15:21), the synagogue administrator asked them: Brothers, if you have a word of consolation and encouragement for the people, please let us hear it. And while Jews and God-fearing Gentiles listened attentively, Paul began to speak, very likely in Greek.

19.3 Paul proclaims to Jews and Gentiles that God has sent the promised Messiah and calls them to accept him (Acts 13:16–41)

Of the innumerable sermons that Paul gave, Luke has summarized four of them for us. The first one he gave to Jews and God-fearing Gentiles in the synagogue of Antioch (13:16–41). The second and third to thorough-going Gentiles, in Lystra and at the Areopagus in Athens, respectively (14:15–17; 17:22–31). With the fourth sermon, he was speaking to the elders of the Christian church in Ephesus (20:18–35).

The theme and points of the first sermon go like this: *God sent Jesus as the Savior promised from of old*. (1) The pre-history of his coming; (2) His death and resurrection; and (3) Summons to faith and warning against unbelief.

16 After the buzz in the synagogue had been silenced with a gesture from Paul, he began addressing the Jews and Gentiles who were there, as follows: Men of Israel and worshipers of God, listen.” With the second phrase he was referring to the Gentiles who were already acquainted with God’s Word through their attending the synagogue, but who had not yet been circumcised.

3.1 The pre-history of Jesus’ coming (vv. 17–25)

Entirely in the style of the ancient covenant documents and the preaching of the Old Testament prophets, Paul began with the historical prologue to Jesus’ coming: the gracious goodness that the Lord had shown to Israel already in the patriarchal period. This constituted the foundation upon which rested all of God’s subsequent work of rescuing humanity.

That is simultaneously the characteristic difference between Stephen’s overview of Israel’s history in Acts 7 and that of Paul here in Acts 13. Stephen emphasized *Israel’s* continual infidelity. But Paul shed light on *God’s* gracious faithfulness, which had recently reached its climax in the sending and raising of Messiah Jesus from the dead.

God's faithfulness to Israel

17 So at its deepest core, Paul's sermon is not Christocentric at its deepest core, but theocentric. From beginning to end he speaks about what "the *God* of this nation of Israel" has done, in and through Messiah Jesus. God had laid the basis for his coming when he had chosen under oath "our fathers" Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with their descendants to be his people. He did so out of free grace, apart from any merit on their side. After all, from the outset they had been idolaters (Josh. 24:2). By saying this, Paul cut off at the root every form of Jewish self-exaltation. God had chosen them only because he loved them (Deut. 4:37).

He covenanted himself to them with tremendous promises (Gen. 12:1–3; Luke 1:73–75). Faithful to these blessings, God elevated them already in Egypt from being slave workers to being a great and strong nation, whom the Pharaoh feared (Exod. 1:18–22). And when the Pharaoh had wanted to kill them off, God honored his oath (Deut. 7:8) and preserved Israel from total extermination and led Israel with a display of divine power out of their slavery into freedom.

18 As a loving Father he then saw to it for forty years that his children had something to eat and drink in that "great and terrifying wilderness" (Deut. 1:19). Paul passes by Israel's unbelief in that wilderness. His theme is: *God's faithfulness*, even despite Israel's unfaithfulness.

19 Upon arriving in Canaan, Israel did not conquer that land in its own power (Ps. 44:2–3). God was the one fulfilling his covenant promise to Israel's patriarchs: "To your descendants *I* will give this land." Therefore, it was *he* who exterminated seven nations before them and *he* gave them that land to possess. All of this took about 450 years (Egypt: 400; wilderness: 40; conquest: 10; cf. Gen. 15:13; Acts 7:6).

20 Afterward it was again God's faithfulness that repeatedly rescued Israel's national existence by means of judges. The apostle was silent about the fact that the work of the judges was caused by Israel's infidelity. Things continued this way until the time of Samuel, the last judge, whom Israel viewed as being one of the greatest prophets at the same time.

21 When he was old, Israel asked for a king. In so doing, Israel was in fact rejecting Yahweh, their Great King (1 Sam. 8:7–9). But remembering his covenant, God was accommodating once again and he gave them Saul, the son of Kish, who ruled for forty years. He was a Benjamite, however, and according to God's promise, the Messiah would come from the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49:10). God faithfully fulfilled that promise as well.

God's faithfulness to David

22 For after he had set Saul aside—Paul does not mention the reasons for that—the Lord graciously exalted David from Judah, bringing him from a shepherd to a king, and gave him this testimony: "In David, the son of Jesse, I have found a man after my heart, who will observe all my commandments." With this we have a description of the quintessential forefather of the Messiah. If Paul had asked his Jewish and Gentile listeners: "What do you think of the Messiah—whose son is he?," all of them would have answered immediately: "David's Son" (cf. Matt. 22:42).

23 For that is what God had promised: the Prince of peace would be born from David's family (2 Sam. 7:16; Isa. 11:1; Jer. 23:5–6; Zech. 3:8; Luke 1:32–33). The listeners' eyes would have opened widely when Paul passed over a thousand years of history and proclaimed: God has recently faithfully fulfilled this promise! He made good on his covenant promises to both the

patriarchs (v. 17) and to David by having Israel's Deliverer come forth from the latter's family: Jesus of Nazareth. Except that Paul did not add immediately for the God-fearers in the synagogue that God wanted to save believing Gentiles as well through Jesus (v. 39).

24 John the Baptizer—about whom the entire synagogue had surely heard—had appeared before Jesus' arrival as his herald. With the baptism of repentance, which he proclaimed to the people, he had prepared all Israel for the arrival of Messiah Jesus. For apart from repentance there is no salvation (cf. 2:38).

25 Near the end of his ministry, John had said: "No, I am not the one you think I am. But behold! After me One is coming whose sandals I am not worthy to untie!" In saying this, the famous John had powerfully turned people's attention away from himself and had announced His Royal Majesty Messiah Jesus.

This was the first "point" of Paul's sermon: the *historical prologue* of Jesus' coming into the world. He definitely did not fall out of thin air, but came as the fulfillment of God's ancient covenant promise to Israel's forefathers and to king David. And as the Ruler announced by his herald, John the Baptizer.

3.2 Jesus' death and resurrection (vv. 26–37)

Now Paul comes with the facts surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection. Jerusalem had put him to death. But God had raised him and declared him to be the Messiah-King of Psalm 2. Through him there is forgiveness from sins obtainable for everyone who believes.

Jerusalem put Jesus to death

26 Having reached this point, Paul's address becomes more intimate. In verse 16 he had addressed his Jewish listeners as "Israelites," but now as "brothers" and "sons of Abraham." These terms indicate that they were lawful heirs of the covenant promises that God had made to father Abraham. But along with these promises he was also calling upon them to imitate his faith. Later the apostle would urge them to choose as true sons of Abraham for Jesus and against the Sanhedrin. He addressed the God-fearers as well. The entire synagogue had to know that both of their guests were divine envoys who had come to proclaim salvation-through-Jesus to both Jews and Gentiles.

27 Next the apostle mentions something that for Jews was an enormous stumbling block and for Gentiles was pure folly (1 Cor. 1:23): this Savior was crucified! The apostle didn't conceal it. The people of Jerusalem and their leaders did not acknowledge or recognize the Messiah in him, although he had performed all the signs with which he had been identified in the Scriptures (Isa. 29:18; 35:5; Luke 7:20–23). This was therefore an issue of culpable ignorance (see our comments on 3:17; cf. Luke 23:34; 1 Cor. 2:8). (It is striking that Paul held the Jerusalem Jews and their leaders directly responsible for Jesus' death, but not those in the diaspora!)

But for those in Antioch, this may not be a reason for rejecting him now. On the contrary, this had to spur them to accept him in faith. His being condemned constituted precisely the proof that he was the Messiah! It fit completely with the pronouncement of the prophets that were read aloud each Sabbath in every synagogue. From them, everyone could know that the Messiah had to enter his glory via a path of suffering (Luke 24:26). Precisely by condemning Jesus to death, in spite of themselves, Jerusalem and its leaders had fulfilled the prophets (cf. 3:18). The Messiah had to be rejected by Israel's leaders (Ps. 118:22). And he had to be counted among the

criminals. And he had to be struck and spit upon. And in order to atone for our sins according to the requirement of the law, he had to be killed (Lev. 17:11; Isa. 50:6; 52:13–53:12; Luke 18:31; Rom. 8:4).

28 Through all of this, his death was an entirely judicial murder. For although the Sanhedrin could not find any legitimate basis for the verdict of capital punishment in the declarations of many false witnesses (Matt. 14:56), and even though Pilate had declared him innocent, Jerusalem and its leaders had pressured Pilate to condemn Jesus (cf. 3:13–14).

29 For this, then, they were fully responsible. Also for the manner in which he was put to death: on the accursed tree (Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13). But at the same time, they unconsciously fulfilled everything that had been written about him in the Scriptures. It was their fault that he had to be buried. Though during his death, he lay in the grave of a rich man! Just as it had been foretold (Isa. 53:9; Matt. 27:60).

Paul's listeners had to grasp this well: in all of Jesus's suffering no prophecy went unfulfilled! If they believed this testimony, they would no longer take offense at Jesus's crucifixion. On the contrary, then they would dare to break with the Jerusalem (mis)leaders and accept Jesus as Israel's long-awaited Messiah-King.

But God raised Jesus

30 For that is who Jesus was: the Messiah-King. God had called him to that in an incontrovertible manner. When the people and their leaders had gotten rid of him, God raised from the dead this Jesus whom they had cursed, and thereby pronounced his condemnation of such a judicial murder. Peter had pointed them repeatedly to this abominable sin (cf. 2:23–24, 36; 4:10; 5:30–31).

31 Yes, Messiah Jesus was alive! They could count on that. For after his resurrection, he appeared not just once, but repeatedly during the next forty days (1:3). To his twelve apostles, who had followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem and whose identity therefore could not be mistaken. They testified now before the people that after his resurrection, they had heard, seen, and touched Jesus, and had eaten with him. This testimony was now being communicated in the synagogue of Antioch. (Scripture critics can contradict it, but naturally, such denial in no way vitiates that verified redemptive *fact*.)

32 This was the good news that both guests had come to proclaim. What God had promised already to their distant ancestors, and for which Israel had waited for so long, this God had now fulfilled for them, for their posterity, by raising Jesus. It is possible that in saying this, the apostle was referring not only to Jesus' resurrection from the dead, but to his entire ministry. Just as in the past God had "fathered" judges, kings, and prophets, and "raised" them up (Deut. 34:10; Judges 4:9), so now he had done the same thing with the Savior Jesus (cf. 3:22; 7:37).

33 In saying this, Paul was not proclaiming a new doctrine, but the fulfillment of the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Whoever rejected Jesus was breaking God's covenant with Israel and was despising the grace that he had shown to them in Messiah Jesus. This is why Paul went on to undergird his preaching with several citations from Psalms 2 and 16, and Isaiah 65. In order thereby to legitimize Jesus' Messiah-Kingship, and to move the synagogue worshipers to break with the Sanhedrin and to believe in Jesus.

They were familiar with Yahweh's declaration in Psalm 2: "You are my Son; today I have begotten you" (v. 7). That was the ancient covenantal royal terminology of the covenant statute in which God had appointed the legal position of David and his successors. He would adopt

these rulers as his sons (2 Sam. 7:14). With those ancient words from the psalm, God had ceremoniously called Jesus to be Messiah-King. He had even sounded the proclamation twice from heaven: “You are my Son!” First when Jesus was baptized (Luke 3:22), and second in connection with his glorification on the mountain (Luke 9:35).

34 In this way, long ago God had promised that he would raise from the dead this Son and King descended from David’s house. And (different than with Lazarus) in order never to die again (cf. Rom. 6:9). This was contained in what God had said through Isaiah: “I will make with you an everlasting covenant, the sacred things of David that are sure” ((Isa. 55:3–4; Paul is citing the Septuagint version of v. 3b). According to the apostle, with these words the Lord was referring to the *eternal dominion* of David’s Great Son (2 Sam. 7:16; Luke 1:32–33). This required that this Ruler would live forever. Therefore God had raised Messiah Jesus from the dead, after he had completed his task, in order now to rule as the eternally living Davidic King over those who later would become the eternally living citizens of his peaceable Kingdom (cf. Rom. 1:3–4).

(Would several of the God-fearing Gentile listeners have thought in this connection of the immediate context of Paul’s citation from Isaiah 55? Most of the time, with citations from the Old Testament, the New Testament writers want to call to mind the context as well. So before coming to the prophecy cited above, Isaiah had prophesied this: “Behold, I made him a witness to the *peoples*, a leader and commander for the *peoples*” (55:4).

35 Why had Jesus’ resurrection from the dead lay embedded in the prophecies of Isaiah? Had his rising already been foretold then? Yes, in another psalm God had said through the mouth of David: “You will not let your holy one see corruption” (Ps. 16:10). (With this same Psalm Peter had earlier supported Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 2:25–32). Had he perhaps learned this interpretation from Jesus himself? (cf. Luke 24:44).

36 Afterward it seems that with these words David had not prophesied that he personally would never die and return to dust. For after he had served his own generation according to God’s plan, he slept and was placed alongside his ancestors. So he did see corruption. Therefore he could not have been the eternal Messiah-King, for that person would rule over all generations.

37 But with Jesus, everything was different. He may well have died, but before he was given over finally to decay, he was raised from the dead by God. In order, now that he was freed from decay, to be our Savior forever. For, as Paul would write later, Christ was raised “as the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20). Though they “who are Christ’s” will “be made alive” according to their order, “at his coming” (cf. 1 Cor. 15:22–23).

In this way, Paul was speaking theo-centrally in this second part of his sermon as well. What *God* had done constituted the thread of this section. Especially the miracle of God’s love, faithfulness, and grace as he had shown these in the sending of his Son, Jesus Christ.

3.3 Only those who believe in him are justified (vv. 38–41)

And now comes the *meaning* of Jesus’ suffering, death, and resurrection. Obviously, Paul was explaining this in greater detail than Luke is narrating. In fact, here the evangelist is providing in passing a summary of Paul’s entire teaching about our justification through faith alone. With this, we have the core of his letters to the Romans and to the Galatians.

Paul was in fact speaking at this time in Galatia! It is striking that here already, Paul mentions every fundamental issue that would reappear in his anti-Judaizing letter to the Galatians: Jesus’ crucifixion (v. 29), the forgiveness of sins (v. 38), justification through the law

or through faith (v. 39), and God's grace (v. 43). Theophilus would certainly have perceived the anti-Judaizing tone of Paul's sermon.

Peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ

38 At this point, the apostle makes no distinction any longer between his Israelite listeners and his God-fearing Gentile audience, as he did in verses 16 and 26, but he calls all of them "brothers." For his good news was ordained for all peoples. Jews and Gentiles all had to know: God is proclaiming to you today that through this crucified and resurrected Jesus, you can obtain forgiveness of sins.

39 Who knows how many of them had thought up until this moment that only through the scrupulous observance of the law of Moses could they obtain righteousness (i.e., obedience) before God. But according to Paul, this was an impossible path.

First, the blood of bulls and goats in the Mosaic sacrificial ministry lacked the power to take away sins (Heb. 10:4, 11). It did atone for the sinner (cf. Lev. 4–5; Num. 15:25–26). Only, it did so in a symbolic, sacramental manner: as a shadow (sign and seal) of the sacrifice of Christ. Using the same manner of speaking, Peter said that baptism saves us (1 Pet. 3:21).

Second, the Mosaic law lacks the power to effect within sinful people the obedience to its commandments by which they could be justified with God (Rom. 8:3a). Along that route, no one was justified (i.e., just before God, or innocent) before God (cf. Rom. 3:21–22; Gal. 2:16; 3:11; Heb. 7:19).

But now God is making known that with him righteousness for a person existed all along. This righteousness was obtained by Jesus Christ and could be received gratis by everyone who believed in him. This was the good news that Paul and Barnabas had come to proclaim in Antioch. When one was Jew or Gentile, *everyone* who accepted Jesus as his Surety and Mediator could count on the fact that for the sake of Jesus, God had declared him righteous (i.e., acquitted him of the guilt of sin and granted the right to eternal life; Rom. 5:1–2).

Warning against unbelief

This news was not open-ended, however. Therefore the apostle warns his listeners not to reject it in unbelief.

40 Therefore, take care that the severe threat of judgment does not apply to you, the one that (according to the Greek translation) is pronounced in the book of The Twelve Prophets by Habakkuk [<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/32-twelve-nets.pdf>]:

41 *Look, you despisers, and watch!
And marvel at marvelous things, and be annihilated!
For I am working a work in your days
That you would not believe if someone should tell it.*

This is a citation from the covenant lawsuit (*rib*) that God was waging against Judah in the days of Habakkuk and Jeremiah. He was going to bring about an unbelievable and terrifying "work": the rise and fall of the Babylonian world empire. By means of this frightening power, he would discipline the wicked in the church (Hab. 1:5). But the righteous would survive the judgment through his faith (Hab. 2:4). Habakkuk confessed with humility: "O LORD, I have

heard the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear” (Hab. 3:2).

As far as the basic pattern was concerned, this history was being repeated. Perhaps it sounded unbelievable to the synagogue worshipers, but God was getting ready to afflict Judah again with his covenant wrath! (Luke 21:6, 20–24). Now on account of the rejection of his Son. For this unspeakable “work” he would soon be using the Roman imperial power. It would cost 1.1 million Jewish lives and would cost 97,000 their freedom. God does not allow people to mock him (Gal. 6:7; cf. Jer. 1:12).

Therefore they should choose for Messiah Jesus and against the Sanhedrin. Then in the coming Last Judgment the promise spoken by Habakkuk would apply to them as well: “But the righteous shall live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4).

Jewish Christians were allowed to experience something of that in the Jewish War (66–70). When the Roman armies were approaching Jerusalem, they remembered Jesus’ word: “Flee to the mountains” (Luke 21:20–21), and they hurried to leave the city doomed to destruction in the direction of the Transjordan city of Pella. Directly opposite to the stream of Jewish refugees who were running toward the city, because they had not believed Jesus’ announcement of judgment (Luke 21:20–24), and could not imagine that God would ever allow his city and temple to be destroyed (cf. Jer. 7:4). But the righteous ones who fled Jerusalem saved their earthly lives at that point by faith in Jesus’ word.

Fundamental principles for preaching

For today’s gospel preachers, basic principles for Christian preaching can be drawn from Paul’s first sermon in Galatia.

1. Paul preached more “theo-centrally” than “Christo-centrally.” The main theme of his sermon was what God the Father has done for Israel and the nations through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ.

2. Paul did not come with all kinds of emotional, scholarly, or practical opinions, but with facts. Jews demanded visible signs and Greeks longed for “deep thoughts” (1 Cor. 1:22), but a poor sinner can do nothing with these. Paul narrated biblical history and thereby the great deeds of God. For we need to have that: what has God done to save us from sin and death? If you had heard Paul, then you’d know the answer.

3. Paul took a thoroughly covenantal approach by beginning with God’s historical acts of redemption, and in this way, with the pre-history of Jesus’ coming and work. Our Savior did not appear unannounced on the world stage, after all, but as the fulfillment of Law, Prophets, and Psalms. The Christian church knows nothing of any “Old Testamentish” Old Testament.

4. In view of his forms of address, Paul acknowledged the historic covenantal rights of his Jewish listeners. In this way, the Christian church should not be addressed as pagans with whom God and his Spirit must yet start at the beginning, but with respect for the historical sanctification of its ancestors. In our land the gospel began to be heard more than a thousand years ago!

5. Paul not only called his listeners to believe, but also warned them against unbelief. For God’s covenant consists not only of promises and commands, but also of threats. Christian preaching may not silence the warning: “Whoever does not believe is condemned already” (John 3:18).

6. Paul’s preaching about God and his Son was the work of the Holy Spirit, even though Paul never mentioned him. Through Paul, the Holy Spirit was active as Comforter and as Public

Prosecutor who would convict the (Jewish) world of sin, of unrighteousness, and of judgment (John 16:8). Even as Paul, too, had learned from him that Law, Prophets, and Psalms spoke about Jesus (John 16:13).

19.4 The reactions of Jews and Gentiles to Paul's preaching (Acts 13:42-52)

“Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth?,” our Savior asked. “No, I tell you, but rather division” (Luke 12:51). In Antioch, there was a church split after Paul's sermon!

After the church service

42 After the service concluded, Paul and Barnabas were urgently invited to come on the next Sabbath to talk about what God had accomplished through Jesus. People apparently thought that more people had to hear this (cf. v. 44).

43 Naturally, the sermon had generated many questions about the Law and the Prophets, but especially about Jesus of Nazareth. A large number of Jews and God-fearing proselytes did not want to wait a week for further explanation, and therefore after the service they went along with Paul and Barnabas. Of course, these two told more about what Jesus had taught and done. How he had vanquished the devil and had healed those afflicted with various diseases. How he had raised Lazarus and the daughter of Jairus. How he had given forgiveness and new hope to penitent sinners.

Evidently during those early days, there were many who heartily believed this good news brought from the distant fatherland. Did Paul and Barnabas perhaps foresee vigorous opposition already at this time? In any case, they encouraged the believers repeatedly with the exhortation: Do not any longer expect your salvation from your own righteousness through the *works* of the law, but continue to trust in the *grace* that God is showing you by crediting to you the righteousness of Christ.

Unfortunately many would fall back quickly into Jewish works–righteousness, so that in his letter to the Galatians Paul had to admonish them sternly (Gal. 1:6) and again teach them about the righteousness that comes by grace alone, through Jesus alone, and through faith alone.

4.1 The Jews reject the gospel (vv. 44–47)

The church split that resulted from Paul's preaching occurred a week later.

44 On the next Sabbath the house of instruction was packed to the rafters. Virtually the entire city had gathered to listen to the Word of God. Many would have stood outside (cf. Mark 2:2). The God-fearing Gentiles had passed the word everywhere: You can receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life free! You don't first need to become a Jew to receive these, or begin living according to the Jewish apartheid laws. Among them a Savior has risen, who is for Jews and non-Jews!

45 But upon seeing such a crowd of people, the Jews were filled with jealousy. What are all those uncircumcised Gentiles doing in “their” church? Listening to the Word of “their” God and sharing in “their” Jewish blessings? Fine, if they get circumcised and begin living according to “their” law, then the Jews could make their peace with this. But according to that rabbi Paul, their Jewish privileges had become obsolete after the coming of Jesus. God's grace was now for everyone who believed in Messiah Jesus. This was unbearable for their Jewish-religious sense of

superiority.

The church service degenerated into a chaotic gathering. Angry and with eyes filled with religious hatred, the Jews began to disrupt Paul's address. They repeatedly interrupted him with their objections. They didn't even restrain themselves from making blasphemous comments about the Lord Jesus. Perhaps they called out that as someone who had been crucified, he was a criminal accursed by God. The gospel was for them an aroma of death (2 Cor. 2:14–16).

The Jews break from the Israelite-Christian church

46 With this the church split in Antioch became a fact. The synagogue separated from the ancient national Israelite church of Moses and the prophets, and thereby also from its international Israelite-Christian continuation. This break would become characteristic for Paul's future work. From now on, he would repeatedly discover that Jews rejected his gospel, whereas Gentiles accepted it. This is why Luke devotes such extensive attention to the events in this particular Antioch.

The cause of the split was clear. The influx of Gentiles into "their" church and under "their" God, without their having to become Jews, led the Jews to their fierce opposition. They stumbled over the proclamation that God's grace in Jesus Christ was ordained for believers from every nation.

Paul and Barnabas accepted the break and did not continue with endless appeals. Ultimately the Word of God is not up for discussion. You either accept it or you reject it. With dignity and confidence they gave their Jewish opponents this reply: Through the raising of Messiah Jesus God has fulfilled his ancient covenant promises to Israel. This had to be proclaimed to you first. Ultimately as men of Israel (v. 16) you possess the oldest rights to this message and its blessings (cf. Rom. 9:4–5).

But you are rejecting the Word of God. Paul earnestly explained the meaning of this: Thereby you are despising for yourself the life of the coming age. God considered you worthy of that life! As far as he is concerned, you could have inherited it. But you do not consider yourselves worthy (cf. Matt. 21:43; John 1:11). Therefore Paul and Barnabas would now be turning to the Gentiles. At least here in Antioch, for until he got to Rome (28:17), the apostle would continue going in every city first to the Jews (cf. Rom. 9:1–3; 10:1).

47 Were they opposing his preaching to the Gentiles? Then they had to listen carefully once more to what God had prophesied about the Messiah through Isaiah:

*It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth* (Isa. 49:6; cf. Luke 2:32).

For this reason, Messiah Jesus had commissioned Paul and Barnabas to call Gentiles out of the darkness of Satan to God's wonderful light (cf. 9:15; Eph. 5:8; 1 Pet. 2:9).

In this way, the break between church and synagogue happened. It was not caused by the apostles, for they had Moses and the prophets on their side. But it was caused by the Jews, who blasphemed the gospel and thereby in fact separated themselves from "the Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16; cf. Luke 20:16; Acts 3:23; Rom. 9:7; 11:17–21; Rev. 2:9; 3:9). Although they had

belonged to the original branches of the cultivated olive tree of Israel, they were cut off on account of their unbelief. Whereas Galatian Gentile branches were grafted as branches from the wild olive tree among the cultivated branches (Rom. 11:17–21). In this way, Luke was defending in passing for the benefit of unbelieving Israel the legitimate warrant for the Israelite-Christian church.

4.2 The Gentiles accept the gospel (vv. 48–49)

The fierce Jewish opposition could easily have made the God-fearing Gentiles wary. But many of them did not allow themselves to be disconcerted and came to faith.

48 Whereas the Jews blasphemed the Word of the Lord, it was praised by the Gentiles. For them, it was an aroma of life (2 Cor. 2:14–16). They were very delighted with what Paul had cited from the prophet Isaiah both concerning the Messiah as well as about themselves. They were filled with inner joy especially because, on account of the atoning blood of Messiah Jesus, righteousness with God could be obtained freely by Gentiles as well.

This is how God's grace conquered. Before the foundation of the Israelite-Christian world at Horeb he had already decided at that time to save Gentiles as well (cf. Gen. 12:3; Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 2:9–10). He had implemented this ancient plan irresistibly despite the Jewish resistance. As many as were destined by God for eternal life came to faith in the Lord Jesus. Thereby Luke was not informing us especially that no *more* Gentiles came to faith than God had determined, but that no fewer did. The Jewish blasphemy appeared impotent in keeping even one Gentile from believing. Thus, whereas salvation was proclaimed with equal sincerity of purpose to Jews and Gentile alike (v. 46), the Jews separated themselves through unbelief from their calling-and-electing, and the Gentiles made theirs sure through their faith (2 Pet. 1:10; cf. Luke 7:30).

49 There were many, in fact, who did this. From the regional capital of Antioch, the gospel of the Lord Jesus spread unstoppably throughout the entire region. Presumably especially by means of personal evangelism by the new believers, who sought to communicate the gospel to whomever would listen. Like yeast in dough, the gospel penetrated the society (Matt. 13:33).

4.3 The Jews persecute Paul and Barnabas (vv. 50–52)

So the gospel made a triumphal circuit through Antioch and the surrounding region, but for its preachers it led to a path of suffering. Shortly before his death, Paul recalled his “persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch . . .” (2 Tim. 3:11).

50 After several months (?) the Jews could not tolerate the victorious course of the gospel any longer, and they unleashed persecution against Paul and Barnabas. A new proof that long before Christians persecuted Jews, Jews were already persecuting Christians (cf. 9:23–24, 29–30; 12:1–4). In fact, just as ever since Cain and Abel, it was especially church people who persecuted the church. Often with the help of worldly rulers, as was the case here as well.

Among the God-fearing Gentiles in the synagogue were also converted women from the higher classes, who were married to city administrators or had relatives in influential circles. Did it perhaps annoy them that according to Paul, with all their zeal for the often burdensome (15:10) Jewish laws, they had an advantage over no one? There were incited by the Jews to get the city government against Paul and Barnabas, so that they were chased out of the region of Antioch like two criminals. Was that perhaps accompanied with a few blows on their backs (2 Cor. 11:25)?

It is possible that this was at the same time a sly attempt on the part of the Jewish authorities to drive the Christian church outside the protection of Roman law. The Jewish religion was a so-called *religio licita*, a legally protected religion. By distancing themselves from the apostles and their followers, they were able to characterize them as a group that had separated from Judaism. And thereby it had the character of a *religio illicita*, an impermissible religion, which as such constituted a danger for the Pax Romana, the peace in the Roman empire.

The apostles, however, attached a high value to good relations with the Roman government. Therefore Luke puts in a clear light who it was that bore the ultimate responsibility for driving the apostle away. Not the city council, but the Jews who had incited them. Later Luke indicates, in connection with new persecutions, that these did not occur at the initiative of the Roman governments, but of Jewish conspirators. They went around wrongly accusing the Christians of breaking with the Jewish faith. The disciples of Jesus, they were the lawful heirs of the Jewish Bible. See Luke's extensive account of Paul's sermon! Theophilus had to know good and well as a high Roman official that Christians were loyal citizens, who were being accused wrongly of rioting and heresy.

The synagogue accused, the church filled with the Spirit

51 At the city limits, Paul and Barnabas bid farewell with what for Jews was a very poignant gesture. They shook and wiped the dust from their feet. As a symbolic testimony against the unbelieving Jews: "We have proclaimed the Savior to you, but you rejected him. We are innocent of your destruction and we are breaking off all fellowship with you! As far as we are concerned, you no longer belong to Israel. Even the dust from your city that clings to our feet, this you may keep—we are wiping it off." This is what the Master had commanded for cases like this (Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5). The apostles would have performed this disturbing action with a heavy heart, for the Lord had added to his command: "It will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town" (Luke 10:10–12; cf. 18:6; 22:22–23).

After a trek of about six hundred twenty miles (one thousand kilometers) in a southeasterly direction, Paul and Barnabas reached Iconium, an important commercial city in the Phrygian-Galatian mountain region. This city lay at the intersection of five roads, and for that reason was excellently suited for the spread of the gospel.

52 They had not worked in Antioch in vain. They left behind a church, consisting of Jews and Gentiles who had become disciples of the Lord Jesus. His apostles may have been driven out, and the city council may have been characterized by an anti-Christian attitude. But the Holy Spirit remained with them as Jesus' agent and advocate. They could not have wished for a better *paraklete*. He filled their hearts and led them to see Messiah Jesus on every page of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. In this way, he filled them continually with indestructible joy in every difficulty.

CHAPTER 20

ACTS 14: PAUL'S FIRST APOSTOLIC JOURNEY (3): ICONIUM, LYSTRA, DERBE, HOME BASE

Like two criminals, Paul and Barnabas were expelled from Antioch by unbelieving Jews. And where do we meet them afresh when they come to Iconium? In a Jewish synagogue!

Because the power of blood is not to be resisted? Certainly, it caused the apostle pain and sadness that his physical Jewish relatives rejected Messiah Jesus (Rom. 9:1–3). But the Lord led him from city to city especially to the synagogues on account of the *lawsuit* that God had been engaged in against Israel, beginning already with the sending of John the Baptizer.

“Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand,” John had cried out. He was the “Elijah” who, according to Malachi, would go before the Messiah (Mal. 4:5). But Israel had killed its Messiah on a cross, and now the “days of vengeance” were at hand (Luke 21:22). But the book of Acts tells us how, for almost forty years, God had first given his people throughout the world the opportunity to repent of rejecting his Messiah and to receive the forgiveness of sins.

First we have read how the apostles, as witnesses in this covenant lawsuit, proclaimed to *Jerusalem* and *Judea* that God had vindicated Messiah Jesus by raising him from the dead. Next came the Jewish *diaspora*. Everywhere this choice was placed before the Jews: Whom will you follow? Your wicked leaders in Jerusalem? Or Messiah Jesus, of whom Moses and the Prophets testify? This question will now be put before the synagogue in Iconium.

20.1 Paul and Barnabas in Iconium (Acts 14:1–6)

It is remarkable that after their expulsion from Antioch, Paul and Barnabas did not continue their journey by going immediately to a world city like Ephesus, but instead they went first to nearby Iconium. Apparently they wanted to establish a group of sister churches who could help each other in times of need. This is why later Paul could write a common letter for all of them, the epistle to the Galatians.

History repeated itself in Iconium. A large church was founded, but the apostles were expelled once again through the agitation of unbelieving Jews.

A large Christian church

1 In Antioch, Paul and Barnabas had broken with the Jews (Acts 13:51), but in so doing, they had not broken with all of their kinfolk. In Iconium, they began their preaching once again in the Jewish synagogue. There they would have spoken on several Sabbaths. How and what Paul proclaimed we have already seen in Acts 13:16–41. He did not come with an evangelistic address, for his listeners knew the Scriptures. From the Scriptures he demonstrated that Jesus was the Messiah and warned them against unbelief. He would have done the same thing here. Many were convicted by their ministry, so that the church in Iconium expanded into “a great number”! This number included both Jews and Greek-speaking Gentiles. Some of them had perhaps attended Jewish church services for years as “God-fearers.”

Jewish opposition again

2 Nevertheless even Paul did not get agreement from all the Jews. Although from their youth they had known Moses and the Prophets, they refused to accept the crucified Jesus as Messiah. Why was that? Didn't the apostle speak enthusiastically enough? Wasn't his approach winsome? Luke credits their unbelief pointedly to their disobedience, that is, to their unwilling, hardened heart. God's Word requires faith, but they simply *did not want* to be convinced. They were not "dissidents," but they were people who through their unbelief were "*disobedient to the Son*" (John 3:36; cf. Heb. 3:18; 1 Pet. 2:7–8).

So here as well, the gospel drove a wedge between the listeners (Matt. 10:34–35; Luke 2:34–35). Angry because of the loss of their Jewish privileges and jealous because so many had believed Paul, the Jews began a smear campaign. They incited the Gentiles against the believers, so that a hostile attitude toward the brothers arose. Presumably the Jews of Iconium had been spurred on in this by the Jewish authorities who had earlier expelled Paul and Barnabas from Antioch and followed them to Iconium. As far as they were concerned, no one was permitted to hear and believe the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

In this way here as well a monstrous alliance arose between the anti-church (in this case, the synagogue) and the world against Jesus' faithful followers. This was how the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem had, with the help of Herod and Pilate, crucified the Lord and persecuted his apostles. Later the Jews in Iconium, once again in concert with the Gentiles, would attempt to stone Paul and Barnabas (v. 5). No wonder that these men taught the believers here "that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (v. 22).

But the Lord was still there as well!

3 Nevertheless, Paul and Barnabas still got an opportunity and the courage to work for a significant amount of time in Iconium. During the entire first apostolic journey, which lasted about a year and a half (46–48), they stayed here the longest. Filled with confidence in the Lord, they proclaimed frankly and freely the gospel of God's grace. And the Lord desired to establish a flourishing church in Iconium, and for that reason stood powerfully alongside his envoys by means of signs and (healing) miracles. By means of these tangible previews, their proclamation of the peaceable kingdom was strengthened in extraordinary measure. No Jewish agitator could refute that. In his letter to the Galatians—among whom were the Christians in Iconium—Paul reminded them later of this heavenly show of power (Gal. 3:5).

The apostles must flee

4 Meanwhile the hostility toward Paul and Barnabas heated up. The populace was divided into two camps. Some were under the sway of the Jews and thus against Christ. Others favored the apostles and thereby favored Christ.

5 At a certain moment, both Gentiles and Jews appeared ready to have been done once and for all with the apostles and stone them. Since this was a typically Jewish method of punishment for blasphemy, the Jews would have been the driving force behind this murderous attack. How did Paul and Barnabas react to this situation of moral danger facing them? Did they refuse "in faith" to back down? No, they did not have that kind of fanatical spirit.

6 They perceived that further work in Iconium was impossible. So they fled about twenty miles (thirty kilometers) south to Lystra, and later to Derbe. Two cities in the region of Lycaonia,

where Laodicea was situated.

People should not accuse them on this account of cowardice. If there was one man who suffered for Christ, it was Paul. But that did not mean that we sought suffering recklessly. If he hit a wall of unbelief, as here in Iconium, then he went around it. Following the example of the Master, who in situations of unbelief also did not keep on harping at people, but backed off and went into hiding (cf. Matt. 13:58; Luke 4:30; John 8:59; 12:36). In fact, the Lord had spoken not only about taking up one's cross and losing one's life for him (cf. Matt. 10:38), but in the same context he also said: "When they persecute you in one town, *flee* to the next" (Matt. 10:23; cf. Luke 9:5).

For Paul, by now this was the fourth time that he had to flee: Damascus, Jerusalem, Antioch (9:25, 30; 13:50), and now Iconium. Shortly before his death, he talked about this tense period in Iconium (2 Tim. 3:11).

20.2 Paul and Barnabas in Lystra and Derbe (Acts 14:7–21a)

Lystra was a completely pagan city. Luke tells us nothing about a synagogue, so there were not many Jews living there. There was a temple for Zeus, the Greek supreme deity. This is the first time that Luke reports about a sermon that Paul and Barnabas gave to complete pagans (cf. 17:22-41).

A lame man is healed

7 When they were busy preaching the good news there,

8 a man was sitting along the street who was lame from birth and had never stood on his legs or walked. All the more radiant, therefore, would God's almighty power be displayed when this poor fellow would stand upright in a moment!

9 It happened when he had listened to Paul for some time, and had heard him speak about Jesus' miraculous healings (cf. Acts 10:38). When Paul looked at him intently, he received an inspiration: this unfortunate pagan believes that Jesus Christ could heal him!

10 Now the apostles never did a miracle off the cuff, but always as they were led by the Spirit of Jesus. In his name (i.e., power) Paul spoke to the lame man, with a powerful voice so that everyone could hear him: "Stand up!" This was an obviously impossible command to obey! But he obeyed it in faith and immediately he could do it. He leaped up and for the first time in his life he walked around to and fro. Just like the lame man and the Beautiful Gate and the lame Aeneas in Lydda, both of whom had been healed through Peter (Acts 3:1–10; 9:32-35).

In this way, the Lord validated the gospel of our complete redemption (cf. Isa. 35:6; Mark 16:20), and he legitimated Paul and Barnabas as divine envoys. Recall our earlier discussion about the function of signs and wonders for then and now.

Viewed as gods

11 At this moment, according to Luke, a "crowd" of people was standing around Paul. His preaching had evidently not affected them, but his miraculous sign did so. For when they saw what he had done, they were beside themselves and shouted in Lycaonian: "The gods have come down to us in human form!" According to their pagan deity stories, this happened periodically.

12 They viewed Barnabas—perhaps because he was the older one—as an incarnation of the

god Zeus. And Paul, the one who had addressed the people, they viewed as the god Hermes, the speaker and messenger of the gods. Among the Romans these gods were called Jupiter and Mercury.

13 Apparently there was a temple of Zeus just outside the city gates. The officiating priest hastily had bulls and wreaths brought, for the purpose of celebrating the appearance of both “gods” with a great sacrificial feast.

14 Because Paul and Barnabas did not understand Lycaonian, they eventually perceived what a blasphemous thing was about to happen. As a sign of dismay and disapproval, they tore their garments (a handbreadth at the collar). They jumped in among the people in order to restrain them from this twofold idolatry.

15 Amid these agitated pagans who were at the point of sacrificing bulls on their behalf, only the most necessary things could be said. But what Paul and Barnabas declared amid their haste to dissuade the people was thoroughly evangelical.

Preaching about a living God

People, they shouted, what are you doing? We are but ordinary men, just like you! Therefore we may not accept any divine worship. We have a joyful message for you. You must turn away from gods like Zeus and Hermes to the living God who made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them. For these stone and wooden gods are “vanities”: they are nothings and non-entities. They don’t hear you, they don’t see you, and that can do nothing for you (cf. Isa. 37:19;; 44.9–18; Hab. 2:18–19).

16 But the living God whom we proclaim to you is a benefactor! In former times, he allowed all nations to wander their own path, without the light of the Word (cf. Ps. 147:20). For that Word they had, every since the Flood, wickedly suppressed (Rom. 1:18). Because of this, these were “times of ignorance,” when they nonetheless aroused God’s wrath through their unrighteousness, but he tolerated much from them (Acts 17:30; Rom. 1:18; 3:25).

17 Nevertheless, during all those centuries, he definitely had not left himself without witness toward them. Always and everywhere he saw to providing demonstrations of his existence and beneficent involvement with them. He did so in a very appealing way: during all that time he had provided them with their basic life necessities. He had provided them with rainy seasons and fruitful harvests, so that they could eat to their heart’s content and enjoy life. In short, he had made himself known as a faithful benefactor.

And now Paul and Barnabas had come to put an end to those “times of ignorance” in Lycaonia. Only, they could not withstand that ignorance here with an appeal to God’s Word and to his work in the history of Israel, as they had done in the Jewish synagogues. The Gentiles whom they had met there already worshiped God and knew from the Scriptures the Jewish messianic expectation, so that the apostles could link that directly to the good news: “He has come! Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah!”

But to these Gentiles in Lystra they first had to proclaim that the living and true God was an “only God” (Deut. 6:4) and not the head of an entire collection of gods and goddesses. Next, they tied in to the revelation of God’s beneficent goodness in creation. Especially in the miracle of the seasons, whereby God provided food for people and for animals (cf. Acts 17:24–29).

At the moment, Paul and Barnabas could not deliver to the agitated crowd. When tranquility had returned, of course they proclaimed God’s lovingkindness toward people in sending his Son Jesus. Just as they had done already before the healing of the lame man.

In this preaching to blind pagans we have an example for proclaiming the gospel to adherents of non-Christian religions. Paul presented himself as a man among men. He knew what his listeners had deified and showed the emptiness of that. His address was not a whimsical exchange of religious opinions, but a summons to turn to the living God, whose existence and lovingkindness toward people enjoyed abundant witness through the cycle of the seasons.

18 But even with this, they could hardly restrain the crowd from rendering a sacrifice to them. Nonetheless, from verses 20–22 and 16:1–2, it appears that some came to faith. To this church belonged Timothy and his mother Eunice and grandmother Lois (Acts 16:1–2; 2 Tim. 1:5).

Paul stoned by Jews

19 The events in Lystra became known to the Jews in Antioch and Iconium, who had expelled Paul and preferred to stone him (14:5). Their hatred against the gospel was so fierce that they had enough energy to make a long and weary journey of a hundred miles (one hundred sixty kilometers) from Antioch and twenty-five miles (forty kilometers) from Iconium in order to stamp out the name of Messiah Jesus in Lystra. Some time must have elapsed between the events narrated in verses 18 and 19.

This Jewish thirst for persecution occurred in the penultimate stage of God's lawsuit with his disobedient people. Already in Egypt, Israel's aversion toward God and his Word had begun. In the wilderness and Canaan they continued to oppose him. Their obstinacy had been opposed by all the prophets. God had visited their sins with severe punishments and even captivities. In the murder of the messiah, their infidelity had reached its deepest point. And now that God had, with almost endless patience, placed Israel before the choice once more through his envoy Paul, Israel rejected God's ultimatum out of hand. Looking back, we see the shadow of Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70 already falling across this episode.

In Lystra as well, the centuries-old monstrous alliance arose between the apostate church and the unbelieving world. It was not hard for the Jews to enlist the disappointed and disillusioned Gentiles. Were Paul and his friend unwilling to be worshiped as gods? That made that it much easier to turn the popular favor into popular hatred. Theophilus would have recalled from Luke's first book that turning from "Hosanna!" (Luke 19:37–38) to "Crucify him!" (Luke 23:21).

Paul was seized. The Jews had apparently took the lead, for he was condemned to the usual Jewish punishment of stoning. Would he perhaps have thought at that moment of Stephen, in whose stoning he had taken part at the time? (Acts 7:58–8:1). Now as some who was similarly being falsely accused, he was staring death in the face. A shower of stones rained down upon him. Blood ran down his face. He sank to the ground and every thought was: he is dead. So he was taken for dead and dragged out of the city, where people left him. The vultures would take and clean up his corpse.

20 But the seed of the gospel he had scattered had already borne fruit. He already had disciples in Lystra, saved right out of paganism. They came out of the city to pay their last respects to their beloved brother Paul. With intense sorrow they stood in a circle around the battered "dead man" lying on the ground. Was young Timothy also standing with them (2 Tim. 3:11)? Later Paul would call him "my beloved and faithful child in the Lord (1 Cor. 4:17; 2 Tim. 1:2), which leads us to assume that the apostle was permitted to guide him to conversion on his first journey.

But both friend and foe had been mistaken about Paul's situation! The Lord Jesus, the central

figure in Acts, had preserved the life of his envoy during the stoning: the stones had not killed him, but had rendered him unconscious. (Otherwise Luke would surely have reported that Paul was the only apostle raised from the dead.)

To the great surprise and joy of the disciples, the “dead man” opened his eyes! His bloody body began to move. Yes, despite his injuries the victim of stoning picked himself up and walked on his own with them into the city! Even though he was not raised from the dead, the fact that a victim of stoning who a moment before had shown no signs of being alive was able to do this pointed to a miraculous preservation and confirmation by his Sender.

This is all the more significant when we see him starting out the next morning once again on a trip of some forty miles (sixty-five kilometers) to Derbe. What a powerful example of the courage of faith he was giving to the new Christians of Lystra. For this was the exact opposite of a month-long sick leave! Although Paul’s wounds would surely not have been healed immediately. It is remarkable that later he explicitly recalls, in his letter to the Galatians, “the marks of Jesus on my body” (cf. Gal. 6:17; 2 Cor. 11:25; 2 Tim. 3:11).

Gospel proclamation in Derbe

21a After several days, Paul and Barnabas arrived in Derbe, which in that day was a border fortress of the Roman empire and the eastern most point of their first journey. There as well they brought the good news and they made a numerous multitude of disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Matt. 28:19). A beautiful, but nowadays little used term for believers: pupil or disciple!

Luke reports nothing about opposition against the proclamation of the gospel in Derbe. In 2 Timothy 3:11, Paul recalls his suffering in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra, but he mentions nothing of the sort in connection with Derbe. One of his fellow workers came from this city: Gaius of Derbe (Acts 20:4).

20.3 Paul and Barnabas strengthen the young churches in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (Acts 14:21b-23)

From Derbe, the shortest return route to Antioch in Syria by land ran via Tarsus, across the well-known Cilician pass over the Taurus mountains. Nevertheless they chose a long detour. Perhaps also because Paul had earlier proclaimed the gospel in the neighborhood of his birthplace (cf. Acts 9:30; 11:25; Gal. 1:21–23). But especially because they wanted to provide the needed follow-up to the new churches.

21b In Derbe they decided not to return to their “sending church” along a straight route, but first to visit the churches they had founded in Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra. In so doing, they made a courageous decision. For in Antioch they had been driven out of the city at the instigation of the unbelieving Jews. In Iconium Paul had almost been stoned, and in Lystra he had really been stoned. The newly converted disciples had remained behind in that hostile environment. Before they set out on their return trip, Paul and Barnabas wanted to strengthen them in the faith and to help with the organization of the churches.

Strengthening in the faith

22 With respect to the unbelievers, they had shaken the dust from their feet (13:51). Therefore at this point they no longer went to the synagogues or conducted public forums, but

went directly to the Christian churches. They encouraged them and urged them, in the face of the attraction of hostile Judaism and paganism, to persevere in the faith. For that purpose, they would have proclaimed to them what we now read in the four Gospels and in the apostolic letters. Unfortunately, many a Galatian would quickly allow themselves to be drawn away to a pseudo-gospel by pseudo-apostles (Gal. 1:6–7).

In addition, they did not need to be surprised about that hostility of their surroundings, for that hatred was a normal feature of the Christian life (1 Thess. 3:4; 1 Pet. 4:12). God has ordained that life in such a way that we must enter the Kingdom of God through much suffering and distress, the apostles assured them. In this as well, the disciple was not above his Master (Matt. 10:24–25; 16:24). Through our suffering for the sake of Christ, his name is glorified and our faith is purified. In short, first the cross: suffering for the sake of Christ, and only then the crown: ruling with Christ (Rom. 8:17).

Appointing elders

23a Before the apostles departed, they helped the disciples organize their congregational life. The new churches needed permanent leadership and supervision. Various policies also had to be made so the congregational life could function as it should.

Following the example of the ancient Israelite church, they appointed elders to lead and shepherd the flock as teachers and overseers of the good Shepherd. They did not appoint just one head shepherd for the entire region of Galatia, nor just one overseer for each local church (Greek: *episkopos* > bishop). A single member council is alien to Christ's church. In each church they appointed a plurality of older men as shepherds and overseers. The gifts they had to possess would have been the same as those that the apostle would mention later in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 12:5–9. If things proceeded properly, the elections of elders would acknowledge and recognize those Spirit-given gifts.

Presumably at this stage, Jewish believers especially would have come under consideration, those who from youth knew Holy Scripture, like Timothy (2 Tim. 3:15) together with God-fearing Gentiles, who had been attending synagogue services for a long time already. After all, newly converted Gentiles would not have been able to instruct others.

The elders would have been chosen in consultation and cooperation with the church (cf. Acts 6:3–6). During this early stage deacons would not yet have been appointed. The church would have instituted that ministry later.

Responsible departure

23b At that point, the paths diverged. The new churches remained behind in hostile Antioch or dangerous Iconium and Lystra. Many had to choose, on account of their faith in the Lord Jesus, between him and their unbelieving families and friends (cf. Matt. 10:34–39). What wisdom, faith, and perseverance would be needed by the newly appointed elders in such difficulty circumstances.

The apostle Paul knew very well his responsibility for the churches (2 Cor. 11:28). Therefore he did not abandon them before he implemented three pastoral measures. First, he instructed them once more (v. 22). Second, he provided for continuing pastoral supervision and instruction (v. 23a). And third, he commended the new believers to the care of the living Lord, who had brought them to faith through his Spirit and Word (v. 23b). He sensed that it was not he, but only

God who could preserve the church together with their elders.

This “commending them to God” was definitely not a pious cliché. On the contrary, on account of the seriousness of the matter, they went without several meals before they called upon the Lord for his help. In this way they were underscoring with their empty stomachs the seriousness of their prayer, the depth of their dependence, and the uprightness of their faith.

20.4 Paul and Barnabas return to their home base: Antioch in Syria (Acts 14:24–28)

In the estimation of many, about one and a half or two years had passed since the Holy Spirit had sent them forth from Antioch in Syria (13:2-3). Now they embarked on their return trip to the church in that world city on the banks of the Orontes.

The return trip

24 They took the same route as on the trip out, which involved again the wearying foot travel from Antioch in Pisidia across the Taurus mountains and its robber hideouts, to Perga in Pamphylia, a distance of about one hundred miles (one hundred fifty kilometers). It was here that John Mark had left them earlier (13:13).

25 On the trip out they presumably had not preached. On the basis of Galatians 4:13–14, some have expressed the assumption that for health reasons, Paul needed to move as quickly as possible through the hot plains to the higher and cooler region of Pisidia. But now they proclaimed the gospel in Perga as well, and we may also assume that they founded a church there. Next they descended to Attalia (modern Antalya) some ten miles (fifteen kilometers) further, an important seaport on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

26 There they booked passage on a ship whose destination was Seleucia, the harbor of Antioch. We do not learn that they stopped at Cyprus. So Sergius Paul, the converted governor, was not visited. Then the Syrian coastline came into view. The ship moored in the wharf of Seleucia. Paul and Barnabas continued their journey to Antioch on the Orontes. There they had earlier been entrusted to God’s grace by the church for the challenging work that they were now completing. God had heard this prayer. He had richly blessed their preaching and had provided them a safe homecoming.

Arrival and travel report

27 After their arrival, they called the church together and gave a report about the great deeds that God had performed through their ministry. On Cyprus, Sergius Paulus, the Roman governor, had come to faith. And in Asia Minor, churches were founded in Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and Perga. Would Luke—who according to Eusebius was a native of Antioch—have heard this report in person?

These must have been unforgettable and broadening meetings. These had nothing to do with Christian missionary hero worship. God’s grace was the central focus. Certainly not the weak Paul, who had arrived in Galatia sick, had been chased out of Antioch, fled from Iconium in mortal danger, and in Lystra was dragged out of the city as one taken for dead.

All the honor went to God’s compassion toward the blinded Zeus-worshippers in Lystra and the many other pagans. God had done the actual work, although he had performed it “with them” as his “fellow workers” (cf. 1 Cor. 3:9; 2 Cor. 6:1). In this way he had opened the door to the

expansive world of Gentiles so they could receive “access to the Father” through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:2; Eph. 2:18; cf. Acts 11:18). And this apart from requiring them to observe the Law of Moses.

28 After surviving these challenges, Paul and Barnabas remained some time in Antioch and took part in the instruction of that church (Acts 15:35). According to the most common estimate, they stayed there approximately from August/September 47 until the summer of 48. These months would be far from tranquil for them, however. Their gospel offering to both Jews and Gentiles of salvation through faith alone would unleash widespread contention during this time (Acts 15). It could also have happened in this period that Paul had to chastise his fellow apostle Peter (Gal. 2:11–14).