

A grayscale photograph of a person walking away on a forest path, with a large wooden cross in the foreground. The person is wearing a backpack and is walking away from the camera. The path is surrounded by dense foliage and trees. The lighting is dappled, suggesting sunlight filtering through the trees. The overall mood is contemplative and spiritual.

ACTS AND *BEYOND*

Following Jesus to places we've never been...

...beyond the ISMS

Lee Magness

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PREFACE ~ *ACTS and BEYOND*

Following Jesus to places we've never been...
...beyond "ISMS"

The "Acts" of the title of this book is the Acts of the Apostles, the fifth book of the New Testament. The book is often overlooked, even by Christians. We know how foundational the four Gospels are for our faith in Jesus, God's Son, our Savior. They tell his story, reveal his identity, record his teachings, and recount his interactions with those he came to serve and save. We also know how indispensable the New Testament Letters are for shaping our understanding of what God has done in Christ and of what God wills to work in our lives through Christ. Acts gets lost in the middle, picking up where the Gospels leave off and contemporaneous with the Letters, but not exactly fitting with one or the other. That's part of the problem—what is Acts? It's a narrative but not a gospel. It gives examples of life in the church, but it's not a letter to a church.

There's another reason why Acts has not received the attention it deserves in the life of the church—our expectations. What do we expect Acts to contribute to our understanding of the ancient church and the church today? Traditionally Acts was catalogued in the library of the New Testament as a *historical* book. And it certainly is that. It gives a thorough, detailed account of many of the founding events during the first thirty years of the history of the church. But it is so much more. Recent scholarship has recognized Acts as a *theological* book, exploring what early Christians believed and taught about the nature of God (theology), the nature of Jesus (Christology), the nature of God's Spirit (pneumatology), and the nature of the church (ecclesiology). Insights into Christian ministry, the missionary enterprise, evangelism, and church planting also abound.

In this short study of Acts we're going to discover another feature of Acts which has come to the fore only recently. It is a *sociological* book. The book not only answers

the questions “What happened?” and “What did early believers believe?” It also uncovers how first century Christians lived in relation to one another and to the world around them, encountering all the social forces that make our human interactions so complex and challenging.

Meaning

So our focus will be on how the church related to its cultural context. Did it absorb the culture, was it co-opted by its culture, or did it position itself as counter-cultural? The early church certainly recognized the realities of its cultural climate. Hierarchy dominated every aspect of the social fabric—the economy, race and ethnicity, religion, politics, the military, even gender. The rich looked down on the poor. Romans oppressed Jews and Jews despised Romans and Samaritans and Gentiles in general. Priests controlled the people. A spectrum of hierarchical ranks characterized the government and the military. And men dominated the lives of women in the family and in the broader culture.

Did the church adopt these hierarchical patterns, adapt them to its own purposes, ignore them, reject them? The testimony of the book of Acts—and one reason why the study of this ancient narrative is so important for the church—is that early believers did not reject the realities of their social context. But neither did they defer to cultural norms—only Jesus was Lord, and that made all the difference. And they were not defined by them—they followed only Jesus, and that made all the difference. The term I have chosen to describe the way the church related to cultural forces is “beyond.” They lived beyond them, beyond the “isms”—beyond racism, beyond materialism, beyond sexism, beyond individualism, beyond classism—into a new defining reality in Christ.

Some of the women of Acts serve as a good example of living “beyond.” Women in the Roman Empire generally occupied a very marginal status, leaving them vulnerable in every area of social relationships. But in the early church, according to Acts, women were not defined by their gender or its lower status. Lydia, Priscilla, and Tabitha, to name a few, stood on vastly different rungs near the bottom of the socio-

economic ladder of the first century. But their social status did not define them—they were in Christ. In fact being women did not define them—they were in Christ’s church. What defined them in Acts was that they were the objects of God’s mercy in Christ. They were what they were. They were women. They were rich merchant, middle class artisan, and poor seamstress. They were from Asia Minor, from Rome, and from Judea. These facts were undeniable realities and Christians did not naively reject those realities. But, for the body of Christ and for the believers who were its members, the defining reality was that they had encountered Christ and that they were in Christ. And being in Christ meant learning and leading, connecting and contributing. Early Christians did not exactly live “counter” to cultural realities, they lived “beyond” them, beyond the racism and sexism and materialism and classism of their cultures. So, Acts and Beyond.

Methodology

Each of the chapters that follow explores an “ism,” a common construct within human culture, then and now. We will approach each topic in several steps.

1) First, we name the cultural “ism” the early church resolved to live “beyond”:

BEYOND RULE ~ Beyond Authoritarianism

2) Second, we explore the social realities related to that topic:

The social structure of the first century was characterized by hierarchical authoritarian relationships. In Acts, early Christians encountered and were forced to function within those chains of authority. The church interacted with all levels of government authority—emperors and kings, proconsuls and procurators, national treasurers and municipal clerks. The church interacted with multiple levels of military authority—from foot soldiers to centurions to tribunes military rulers (*strategoi*). The church interacted with many levels of economic influence—wealthy landowners, wealthy merchants, shopkeepers, artisans, even slaves. And the church interacted with many layers of religious authority—high priests, Sadducees, Pharisees, elders, the Sanhedrin.

3) Third, each chapter investigates the roots of early Christian attitudes toward social “isms” in the teachings and example of Jesus:

It’s no surprise that the early church did not model itself after the hierarchical character of Greco-Roman culture. Jesus had taught his closest followers to be leaders not rulers. Jesus instilled this kingdom principle in his apostles on the occasion of a bold request by James and John (aided and abetted by their mother) – “*to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom.*” (Matthew 20.20-28, Mark 10.35-45) They want to rule with Jesus. They want the preeminent positions of authority in his kingdom. Jesus warned them that their request was misguided, but they persisted. Finally Jesus had to explain to the brothers and the other angry (and probably jealous) apostles that he expected them to live beyond rule, beyond authoritarianism. “*You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.*” They were well aware of the hierarchical dynamic of Greco-Roman culture. But in Christ, in his kingdom, in the church, the vanguard of that kingdom, ruling was ruled out, authoritarianism was unauthorized. “*It will not be so among you.*” Even the apostles, the leaders of the movement, were to live as servants – “*whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant.*” Why? Not just to avoid the path of pagans, but to follow the way of Jesus – “*the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.*”

4) Fourth, we search the book of Acts for examples of how the first century church struggled to keep the pervasive tendencies toward authoritarianism and tyrannical rule from shaping structures and relationships within the church.

How did the first followers of Jesus lead without lording? Two among the many examples in Acts will suffice to illustrate our method.

Acts 1.12-36 ~ Leading with Lording

For a variety of practical and symbolic reasons an apostolic replacement for Judas, bringing the number back to twelve, was in order. Peter took the lead in the enterprise but he did not lord it over the Christian community. He directed but did not

dictate. Instead of choosing the replacement apostle himself or calling the Eleven into executive session, he convened a “crowd” of believers. He explained the need and suggested a procedure and then turned the matter over to the congregation. *They* nominated two qualified candidates, *they* prayed for guidance in the decision, and *they* sought the Lord’s will in the culturally appropriate way—casting lots. Peter and the other Eleven could easily have assumed and argued that there was a simpler and more efficient way to accomplish the task. But it would also smacked of rule, not of faith but fiat. This way was the way of Jesus, beyond rule, beyond authoritarianism.

Acts 6.1-6 ~ Servants not Sovereigns

As time passed in the life of the Jerusalem church, the congregation grew in number and diversity. A crisis in the distribution of donated funds to the needy arose, fueled by the size of the community in need and a lack of communication among various cultural groups. Once again the apostles mobilized the congregation to address the oversight. And once again they lead without lording. First, the Twelve “*called together the whole community of the disciples.*” Second, the Twelve instructed the community to “*select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task.*” The Twelve suggested the parameters, but the community did the picking—they were pleased with the apostolic plan and *they* chose the appropriate servants. As promised, the apostles finished off the appointment process with a prayer of commissioning. The apostles led, they guided, they planned, they prayed, they appointed. But they did not dominate or dictate—that was the way of the Gentile culture, which they were resolved to live “beyond.” They followed the principles of Jesus, not lording it over, servants not sovereigns.

Acts and Beyond ~ Beyond the ISMS

The chapters that follow will use that method—naming the “ism,” identifying the reality of the “ism” in first century culture, investigating how Jesus interacted with that social reality, and exploring the ways in which the early church lived beyond the “ism.” Not that the Christian congregations we meet in the book of Acts were perfect.

They struggled to understand and to act out all the demands of Christ's kingdom, just as the apostles had during Jesus' ministry, just as we do today. So the beliefs and behaviors of the early churches are no absolute pattern to be legalistically emulated. But we do benefit, benefit greatly, from empathetically engaging with events in those formative years. We join them on their journey, following Jesus to places many of us have never been before, beyond the powerful and pervasive hierarchical structures of Greco-Roman society, to a Christ-shaped, kingdom-shaped world beyond the "isms."

Chapter 1 ~ *Beyond ME*

Following Jesus to a place we've never been...

...beyond ACTIVISM

"We hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." (Acts 2.11)

Acts of the Apostles or Acts of God?

Although the earliest title of the fifth book of the New Testament was simply "Acts," Christians have for centuries referred to the book as "The Acts of the Apostles." The title is as paradoxical as it is persistent. For one thing, the book does not contain *all* of the acts of the apostles. The author, Luke, is very selective, telling only those incidents that serve his purpose in describing the character and accomplishments of the early church. For another thing, it does not contain the acts of *all* the apostles. After the names of the eleven apostles are listed in 1.13, only Peter, John, and James are mentioned again in the entire narrative. Third, the book features the acts of any number of Jesus' followers who were apostles but not part of the twelve—like Paul and Barnabas—and the acts of many who were not apostles at all—like Stephen, Philip, Tabitha, and Lydia. *Someone* has suggested *somewhere* that we might call the book *something* like, "*Some* of the Acts of *Some* of the Apostles." *Somehow* that just never caught on.

If "The Acts of the Apostles" has its problems, then the Acts of whom? Several scholars have recommended "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." A case could also be made for "The Acts of Jesus Christ." Then again, maybe the best title is "The Acts of God." At any rate, the book takes us well beyond the acts of the apostles, beyond the acts of early Christians, beyond the acts of the early church, beyond human activism, to the acts of God and God's Son and God's Spirit. The book of Acts takes us, in fact, beyond acts, the outcome of our faith, back to God, the basis of our faith. In other words, the

book of Acts is not only historical, chronicling the deeds of the early church, but also theological, recording the pattern of belief in the early church, a belief which saw God at work through his Son and through his Spirit to bring about his salvation.

The nature of the Lord's church as seen in the book of Acts demands that we let Jesus take us to a place we may never have been, a place where we are focused not so much on our own accomplishments as on the Spirit who inspires them, not so much on our own leaders as on the God who guides them, not so much on the accomplishments of the apostles as on the Lord who called them and commissioned them. Impossible? Beyond imagination? The life of the early church shows us that it was not only necessary but possible to live beyond activism.

THE ACTS OF JESUS CHRIST

All that Jesus was doing and teaching

The book of Acts begins with its focus firmly on Jesus. Volume one, the gospel of Luke, recorded "all that Jesus began both to do and to teach" (Acts 1.1). Volume two, the whole book of Acts, is, by implication, all that Jesus continued to do and to teach. Acts is about Jesus—Jesus' deeds and Jesus' teachings. We experience Jesus directly in Acts 1.1-11 and in the preaching of the early Christians who filled their sermons with reminders of his life and ministry, death and resurrection. We also experience Jesus indirectly in the lives and ministries and teachings of his followers as they replicated his way and his will.

After he suffered

The first events in the book of Acts are events from the end of the earthly life of Jesus (1.1-11). Right here at the beginning of a book about the early church we encounter Jesus' death (1.3), resurrection (1.3), and post-resurrection appearances (1.3-5). We hear his answers to the apostles' questions and his clarification of their confusion (1.6-7). Next comes his commission—"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1.8). This commission by Jesus sets the

trajectory for the whole book of Acts, for the lives and ministries of early Christians. The preface of the book ends with the ascension of Jesus, the event in which the apostles experienced Jesus' glory, the event which invigorated them for ministry, the absence which promised his presence, the departure which assured his return (1.9-11). Acts begins with the acts of Jesus, the acts of Jesus on which all the succeeding acts of his followers would be based.

This Jesus God raised up

At the great festival of Pentecost, just days after Jesus' ascension, his apostles began bearing witness to his saving death and victorious resurrection. A summary of their sermon appears in Acts 2.22-36. It is a sermon about Jesus. First come events the audience had heard of—Jesus' ministry, especially his miracles of helping and healing. Then comes the event the audience had participated in, directly or indirectly—Jesus' crucifixion. Next the sermon emphasizes an event the audience had no way of knowing about—Jesus' resurrection. The prophets had foretold it, the apostles had experienced it, now the listeners must respond to its implications—that the man they had crucified was the Lord, God's long-promised Messiah. And how should those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah respond? The apostle Peter instructed them to respond with repentance in the light of his redeeming death and with baptism into him, into his death and resurrection.

Every sermon preached by the early followers of Jesus followed this same pattern, at least the sermons preached to Jews who already knew the person and promises of God. Peter's sermon in 3.12-26, Stephen's sermon in 7.2-53, Paul's sermons in 13.16-47 and 17.3, all highlight the death and resurrection of Jesus. When Philip preached to the Samaritans, he "proclaimed the Christ" (8.5). When he encountered the Ethiopian man, Philip "proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus" (8.35). When Peter finally agreed to share the gospel with the Roman God-fearer, Cornelius, it was all about Jesus: Jesus is Lord of all, Jesus is the path to peace, Jesus was anointed with the power of God's Spirit, Jesus went about doing good and healing, Jesus was crucified, Jesus was raised from the dead, Jesus appeared to eyewitnesses whom he

commissioned to bear witness to him, Jesus is the source of the forgiveness of sins (10.36-43). Even sermons presented to Gentiles, like Paul's sermon in Athens (17.22-31), sermons which necessarily began with the reality of the one true God, wove their way inexorably to the resurrection (17.31).

Remembering the words of the Lord

Early Christians replicated the ministry of Jesus in their own ministries, teaching what they had heard him teach, remembering the very words he had spoken to them. At one point in the book of Acts, we have a teaching of Jesus that appears nowhere else in the New Testament, not even in the four gospels. Paul concluded his message to the spiritual leaders of the church at Ephesus with an admonition about giving to the needs of the poor. He had plenty to say on the topic (e.g., 2 Corinthians 8-9), but he quoted a teaching of Jesus that had been passed on, word for word, to him: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (20.35). For early Christians, "remembering the words of the Lord Jesus" was a vital part of their instruction to one another regarding the conduct of their lives.

In the name of Jesus Christ

Early Christians also mimicked the ministry of Jesus in their deeds of service, performing miracles of divine healing as their Master had instructed and empowered them. When Peter and John healed the crippled man at the Temple gate (3.1-10), they made it clear that they were acting on the authority of Jesus: "in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk" (3.6). When Peter healed the paralyzed man in Lydda (9.32-35), he proclaimed, "Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you" (9.34). When Paul cast the spirit out of the slave girl in Philippi, he said, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her" (16.18).

Suffering for the sake of his name

Early Christians were often persecuted, and when they were it was for preaching about Jesus or acting in the name of Jesus. Then they used their persecution as an

opportunity for further testimony about Jesus. In chapter 3 Peter and John are arrested not for healing a lame man but for “teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead” (4.2). Their only defense?—“this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead” (4.10). In the midst of their own trial, they proclaim “this Jesus” as the foundation stone of faith and the one source of salvation (4.11-12). Their only sentence?—“not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” (4.18). The rest of the apostles had the same experience in chapter 5. The accusation?—“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you...are determined to bring this man’s blood on us” (5.28). Their defense?—you killed Jesus, God raised Jesus, God exalted Jesus, Jesus is our leader and savior, and Jesus is the source of our forgiveness. We cannot but speak of what we have seen! Their punishment?—flogging and orders not to speak about Jesus (5.40).

Stephen was arrested and eventually stoned to death for teaching about Jesus in Jerusalem (6.14). The same with Paul on numerous occasions and in numerous places. After Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem (chapter 22), he endured a series of incarcerations and trials, some before the Jewish supreme court, some before Roman governors. At each trial he spoke of Jesus—his encounter with the risen Lord, his conversion to Christ, his commission by Christ, the teachings of Jesus, the good news of resurrection in Christ. Governor Antonius Felix “heard him speak concerning faith in Christ Jesus” (24.24). Festus, governor of Judea, and Herod Agrippa II, king of the Jews, listened to his testimony of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Acts ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome, “trying to convince [Jews] about Jesus,” “teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ” to all who would listen (28.23, 31).

So the early church kept its focus on Jesus. They had a wide-ranging ministry—through many people, in many places, in many ways. But everything—their salvation, their lives, their community, their ministries—was founded on their faith in Jesus: “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved”(16.31).

THE ACTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

God's Spirit animates nearly every page of Acts, even as it animated every person who came to faith in God through Jesus Christ. Jesus taught his apostles through the Holy Spirit (1.2) and promised them the Spirit's empowering presence (1.5, 8). On the day of Pentecost the Spirit did empower them to proclaim the gospel in other dialects (2.4). From then on, all who came to faith in Jesus received the presence of God's Spirit (2.38; 8.15, 17; 10.44-45, 47; 11.15-16; 15.8). In the days that followed Pentecost, disciples continued to testify to their Lord through the Spirit (5.32; 6.10). "Filled with the (Holy) Spirit" was the way Luke described God working in mighty ways through the apostles and early converts—speaking boldly to their accusers (4.8), experiencing God's comforting presence (4.31), doing signs and wonders. Committed Christians like Stephen and Barnabas and Paul were often described as "full of the Spirit" (6.3, 5; 7.55; 11.24; 13.9, 52). God's Spirit guided the paths and thoughts and words and ministries of early believers (8.29, 39; 10.19; 11.12; 11.26; 13.2, 4; 15.28; 19.21; 20.23, 28; 21.4, 11).

The empowering presence of God's Spirit was the consistent consequence of coming to faith in Christ. It was regularly associated with the human response to God's saving work in Christ—the profession of faith (confession), the radical reorientation demanded by that faith (repentance), and the complete commitment called for by that faith (baptism). It "filled" the followers of Jesus, not as some quantity that trickled out and needed to be topped off, but as a divine quality that pervaded every aspect of a believer's life and ministry. And the Spirit guided every step of those committed to the Way. It revealed God's will. It guided them when they declared the mighty works of God and when they defended themselves. It empowered prophets. It directed and redirected their paths. Wherever the church was at work, the Holy Spirit was at work. Whenever faith in Jesus was guiding, the Spirit of Jesus was guiding. Whenever God was moving, God's Spirit was moving.

THE ACTS OF GOD

Besides talking about the acts of Jesus, the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit of God, the book of Acts also talks directly about the work of God in and through the early church. When Jesus appeared to his followers in chapter one, he renewed his ministry of teaching, now in the light of his death and resurrection. His last earthly lesson would be the same as his first—the kingdom of God (1.3). It had always been about God’s sovereign reign, and it always would be. Even before Pentecost the apostles awaited the empowering of God’s Spirit by seeking God’s will, praying with Jesus’ other followers for the movement of God (1.14).

In chapter two, sandwiched between the inbreaking of God’s Spirit and the proclamation of the gospel of God’s Son, we learn just what Pentecost was all about—“in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power,” God’s magnificent deeds, God’s mighty works (2.11). Everything had always been about God’s greatness—creation and covenant, rescue and revelation, power and promise. And it still was—from the outpouring of God’s Spirit to the good news of God’s Son. In the proclamation of that good news (2.22-36), God is the subject, the doer, the actor, the prime mover. *God* promised to send a Messiah (2.30). *God* attested to Jesus’ Messiahship through signs and wonders (2.22). *God* handed him over to be crucified (2.23). *God* raised him from the dead (2.24). Peter must say it again: *God* raised him up (2.32). *God* exalted Jesus (2.33). *God* declared him both Lord and Messiah (2.36). The community of believers that coalesced after Pentecost kept God at the center of their faith, praising *God* (2.47). As a result, they grew, or to put it the way Luke put it, *God* grew them (2.47).

God retains this role in every gospel sermon in Acts. Notice 3.13-26: *God* glorified Jesus, *God* raised Jesus, *God* promised Jesus, *God* raised Jesus. Check out 5.30-32 and 13.16-41. The proclamation of the gospel was for the disciples a matter of obedience to God. When they were ordered to stop preaching, Peter responded: “We must obey *God* rather than human authority!” (5.29). Stephen’s defense to the Jewish supreme court was a lengthy rehearsal of all that *God* had done in and for Israel, leading

up to the coming of the Righteous One (7.2-53). And God was still at work, performing miracles through Paul and other apostles (19.11).

In Acts God was not only the one who had revealed his will to the prophets of Israel regarding his plans for salvation; God also clarified his will to the early church. While many early believers were still struggling with the incorporation of Gentiles into the fellowship of the faithful, Peter was called to the home of a Roman centurion. Peter, hesitant even to enter the home of a Gentile, explained it this way: “*God* has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean” (10.28). Later Peter accounted for his decision with a question: “Who was I to hinder *God*?” (11.17). Ultimately salvation in the name of Jesus Christ was the work of God. When God’s prophet revealed that God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh, that everyone who calls on God will be saved, he meant all, he meant everyone. After the conversion of Cornelius, Christians came to understand that “*God* has given even to the gentiles the repentance that leads to life” (11.18).

So the gospel of Jesus Christ which was proclaimed throughout Acts was nothing less than “*the word of God*” (4.31, 13.46, 16.32). It was the spread of the “*word of God*” that preceded and made possible the growth of the church (6.7). The gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news of “*the salvation of God*,” for Gentiles as well as Jews (28.28). The gospel, as it turns out, was “*the whole purpose of God*” (20.27). Conversion to Christ was by definition a “*turning to God*” (15.19). The gospel of Jesus Christ was “the good news of *the kingdom of God*” (8.12). It—*the kingdom of God*—was what the risen Jesus taught to his apostles, what Philip shared with the Samaritans, and finally what Paul proclaimed to the very end of what we know as the book of Acts (28.31).

Early Christians preached about *God*. They reminded Jews that *God* had been at work at every stage in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. They revealed to gentiles that *God* made the world and everything in it (14.15; 17.24), that *God* does not live in shrines of human construction (17.24), that it is *God* who gives all people life and breath and all things (17.25), that in *God* we live and move and exist (17.28), that *God* provides for our sustenance (14.17), that *God* is spirit (17.29). They revealed that the purpose of human existence is to seek and find the one true *God* (17.27).

Early Christians also prayed to God. They devoted themselves to prayers (2.42)-- of all kinds, at all times, for all reasons. They prayed to God as they prepared for the coming of his Spirit (1.14). They prayed to God when they chose Judas' successor (1.24). They prayed to God in the face of growing persecution (4.24f). They prayed to God for the release of their imprisoned leaders (12.5). They prayed to God when they parted company with one another (20.36). They prayed to God for healing (28.8). They prayed to God at morning (3.1) and at noon (10.9). The apostles made sure that nothing, even other important ministries, interfered with their devotion to prayer (6.4).

And early Christians also praised God. From the earliest days of its existence the church of God devoted itself to praising God, at the Temple and in private homes (2.47). People whom the apostles healed and people who heard of the healings praised God for the healing power of the name of Jesus (3.8; 4.21). Believers praised God for the faithfulness of their leaders even in the face of persecution and praised God for his faithfulness in rescuing them from persecution (4.24). Converts to Christ praised God for evidence of his Spirit's presence (10.46). Believers praised God at the news of these conversions, especially the conversions of gentiles (11.18; 21.20). Paul even praised God on a storm-tossed ship bound for shipwreck (27.35).

In their preaching and in their praying and in their praising, early disciples recognized the presence and power of God, the working of God, the grace of God in their lives and ministries. The acts of the apostles were instrumental in the founding period of the Lord's church. The acts of hundreds and thousands of other believers were also crucial. But behind all the acts of the church of God, beyond all the acts of the new covenant people of God, were the acts of God themselves, acts which early Christians recognized and celebrated. The church of Jesus Christ, the church of God, must keep that same focus today. Our deeds of service, our mimicry of the ministry of Jesus, our acts -- as important as they are for "working out our salvation" in active faith, for living out the love of our Lord, for leaning into God's future with hope -- are always our response to the acts of God, the saving acts of God's Son, and the empowering acts of God's Spirit. The acts of whom? The acts of God!

Chapter 2 ~ *Beyond MINE*

Following Jesus to a place we've never been...

...beyond MATERIALISM

"Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need." (Acts 2.45)

Matter matters

It's not that we lack for warnings about one of the most pervasive isms of our day—materialism. Call it what we will—materialism, consumerism, conspicuous consumption—the dangers are clear. Christian teachers have always known that possessions do not ultimately satisfy. Fifteen hundred years ago Gregory of Nazianzus said, "Let us treasure up in our soul some of those things which are permanent..., not of those which will forsake us and be destroyed, and which only tickle our senses for a little while." Nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon said, "If you are not content with what you have, you would not be satisfied if it were doubled." Thomas Merton, twentieth-century theologian, agreed: "The tighter you squeeze, the less you have." Materialism is also a barrier to generosity; the exemplary missionary Jim Elliott used to say, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Mahatma Gandhi, not a Christian teacher but deeply influenced by the teachings of Jesus, understood that materialism is not a necessary response to legitimate need, but an outcome of our covetousness: "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not every man's greed." And the apostle Paul said that the clambering for possessions is actually a source of sin: "The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil."

It's not that matter—including money—is evil. Christians of all people know that matter is inherently good. God made the material world and declared it good. Jesus' incarnation, his embodiment as a flesh-and-blood-and-bone human being, confirmed that materiality is not the problem. And it's not that matter doesn't matter.

The laws of Moses, the message of the prophets, and the teachings of Jesus make it clear that God cares about the material world and God expects his people to care for the material world. God's people must demonstrate loving stewardship for the natural world (Genesis 1.28-29), must care for the physical needs of the poor (Amos 2.6-7), and must respect their own and others' bodies as the temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6.19-20). Matter matters!

It's materialism, not materiality, that's the problem. Materialism is based on the greedy desire to acquire more and more. Materialism is insatiable. Enough is never enough. Materialism underlies our culture's consumerism—the belief that the accumulation of wealth is the greatest good. The cult of consumption, conspicuous or otherwise, is fed by mass advertising and mass marketing, creating the need for what we don't really need, even creating the desire for what is undesirable. The result? Debt, poverty, crime, oppression, war. The list seems a bit overwhelming, maybe even exaggerated, but it's hard to exaggerate the negative consequences of materialism. The human race as a whole is currently consuming thirty percent more material than the world's resources can provide over the long haul. When the countries that consume more than they can produce need to make up for that shortfall by controlling and consuming the resources of other countries, the result is economic oppression which leads to economic imperialism and often armed conflict. To bring it closer to home, recent surveys report that, for the first time, most students are attending college not to gain expertise in a field of study or to equip themselves to help others but to make money. Apparently some of us didn't realize that humorist Art Buchwald wasn't joking when he said, "The best things in life aren't things."

The pressing issue for the church is not the materialism of our culture but the degree to which the church and its members have accepted and adopted and even at times advocated the acquisitive spirit of the world with its desire to possess and consume and possess yet more. Will the church join this culture of consumption or will it maintain the Biblical witness that, although matter matters, we can and must learn when enough is enough? The nature of the Lord's church as seen in the book of Acts demands that we let Jesus take us to a place we may never have been, unhindered by

the materialism that separates us from God and from one another and in a sense from our true selves. Impossible? Beyond imagination? The life of the early church shows us that it was not only necessary but possible to live beyond materialism.

Acts...beyond Materialism

The book of Acts begins not with the church but with Jesus, Lord of the church (Acts 1.1-11). It also begins with a masterful interplay between the spiritual and the material. After appearing to his disciples not as a disembodied spirit but in a resurrection body, meeting and eating, convincing them of his resurrection and commissioning them to be proclaimers of his resurrection, Jesus ascended to the Father. But before his ascension Jesus faced a question from his disciples: “Lord, are you restoring the kingdom to Israel at this time?” (1.6). Even as Jesus was maintaining the delicate balance between the spiritual and the material, his disciples were succumbing to the magnetic pull of the material—this time, this place, this nation. No more Roman rule, no more military oppression, no more taxes, no more tribute money, no more control of commerce! Jesus’ answer refocused their attention on the spiritual authority of the God’s kingdom. Later, as Jesus rose from their sight, they could only stare into heaven. They had to be reminded that staring into heaven would not fulfill their commission or accomplish their mission—right there, right then. The opening scenes of Acts demonstrate that the church must not only move beyond a disembodied spiritualism, but also must move beyond an exclusively earthly materialism.

All things in common

After the preaching of the gospel on the day of Pentecost and the conversion of thousands to Christ, the believers joined in a community, a partnership that extended to every area of their lives (2.42-47). Among other aspects of their shared lives, the followers of Jesus “had all things in common, and were selling their properties and possessions and distributing them [the proceeds] to all, as many as were having need” (2.44-45). Not only did they meet together at the Temple for worship, they “broke bread in their homes, sharing their food” (2.46). Early Christians were not

“communists” in the modern sense of that term, abolishing all private property. Neither did they live in “communes,” pooling all their personal assets in a common fund. They clearly continued to own property and possessions, as the stories of Barnabas (4.36-37) and Ananias and Sapphira (5.1-11) demonstrate. Materialism has less to do with the quantity of our possessions than with the quality, the value with which we imbue them. It’s a matter of attitude, a matter of attitude toward money, toward matter. Materialism is a “matter-tude”! Many of the believers owned property and possessions, but these possessions were always at the disposal of those who had material need. The saints did not all sell their houses; instead they held an ongoing “open house,” maintaining an “open door policy” when it came to housing and hosting fellow saints at shared meals. Early Christians held their possessions loosely, always looking for occasions to share what they had with those who lacked what they needed. They had material possessions, but the way they used their possessions and the way they thought about their possessions showed they were living beyond materialism.

Walk, work, and worship

Acts 3.1-11 tells the story of the healing of the crippled man at the Temple gate. He was there to beg for money from the worshipers who, among other things, came to the Temple to place coins in one of thirteen offering containers in the Court of Women. When the jobless man asked Peter and John for alms, Peter replied, “Silver and gold are not at my disposal, but what I have this I give you” (3.6). What did Peter mean by saying he had no money? Didn’t believers place money at the apostles’ feet for redistribution to the needy (4.37)? Maybe Peter and John truly had no cash with them. Maybe the apostles were not yet keepers of the common fund or felt like it wasn’t theirs to share unilaterally. Maybe the apostles were personally poor even though the church had donated funds. Maybe they thought the fund was for needy believers, not this unbeliever. Maybe they had money but wanted to make it possible for the man to replace begging for money with the health and strength to earn money. In any case, Peter and John did respond to the man’s physical need with a miracle of physical healing. They didn’t say, “It doesn’t matter if you can’t walk or work, we’ll tell you

about Jesus.” They honored his material needs by reinvigorating his body for working and earning money. But they went beyond materialism, informing the man that he was being healed in the name—the personal authority— of Jesus of Nazareth. The man responded to his physical healing by walking and leaping with joy. But he went beyond materialism, praising God as the source of his healing.

“Speaking” of possessions

Acts 4.32-35 reminds the reader that the sharing of possessions that characterized the earliest Christian community (2.44-46) continued in spite of rapid growth and increased persecution. And once again the generosity was as much a matter of attitude as of action. First, the “crowd” of believers was of one heart; they shared an inner life (4.32a). A sense of common devotion and common purpose animated their giving. The church’s generosity was based on their attitude toward the community. Second, not one of the “Christian crowd” was “speaking” of their possessions as if they were their own; everything that was theirs was “common” (4.32b). Their possessions were their own of course, but they didn’t talk about them that way, and they didn’t think about them that way. Everything that was theirs was at the disposal of others. The church’s generosity was based on their attitude toward their possessions. Third, although some early Christians experienced circumstances that landed them in poverty, the church immediately responded by funneling the resources of its members to meet those needs (4.34). It’s not that no Christians owned property; it’s just that Christian property owners were always ready to liquidate their property whenever a need arose. It’s not that no Christians ever had material needs; it’s just that no Christian’s material needs ever went unmet. The church’s generosity was based on their attitude toward the needy.

Two examples

One of the believers who modeled a life lived beyond materialism was Joseph, better known as Barnabas. What he did was exemplary: he sold a piece of property he owned, he brought the money to the apostles, who then distributed it to those with

financial needs (4.36-37). But his attitude was as exemplary as his action. The apostles had nicknamed Joseph “Barnabas” because of his attitude toward people and possessions. “Bar-nabas,” “Son of Encouragement,” “Encourager,” they called him. He had property, but he thought more highly of people than of property. So he liquidated some of his property as an encouragement to those who were discouraged by financial distress.

In Acts 5.1-11, two other believers serve as examples of generosity—negative examples. Ananias and Sapphira are a good example of how generosity is more a matter of attitude than amount. But they are a bad example of generosity itself. Like Barnabas, this Christian married couple sold a piece of their property. Unlike Barnabas, they brought *some* of the proceeds to the apostles for redistribution. There was no requirement that early followers of Jesus had to give everything or a certain percentage to the work of the church. Instead they seem to have misrepresented their gift to the church, giving the impression that they had donated the full sale price. It was this misrepresentation, not the percentage of the gift, that led to the disastrous consequences described here. Ananias, whose name means “God is gracious,” became a model of a covetous spirit rather than God’s grace. And his wife Sapphira, “sapphire,” seems to have been more concerned for the “gem” of materialism than for generosity.

The daily distribution

Even though Acts 6.1-6 describes a breakdown in the generosity of the early church, it highlights the church’s refusal to yield to materialism. Because the church was growing numerically, some of the needy were being overlooked in the distribution of funds.¹ Because the apostles were Galilean Jews, they tended to be less aware of the financial needs of Hellenistic Jewish Christians, especially their widows. When the problem was called to their attention, the apostles could have argued, “Meeting spiritual needs is more important than meeting physical needs.” They could have said,

¹ Although many English translations add the words “of food” to the end of Acts 6.1, no such words appear in the Greek. The apostles would have been distributing what people were bringing to them—money (4.37; 5.2). The reference to “waiting on tables” in 6.2 indicates banking tables, accounts, not tables of food. Thus the ministry mentioned here is the daily distribution of funds not food.

“We can’t help everyone!” They might have quoted their Master out of context, “The poor you will have with you always.” Instead they admitted the pattern of neglect, called the whole Christian assembly together, and communicated the need. Oversight and distribution of the common fund was now beyond their ability, especially given their unique responsibility to testify regarding the resurrection of Jesus. But the meeting of financial needs was too important to be overlooked. They recommended that seven spiritually mature and trusted believers be appointed to the task. The Christian community in Jerusalem agreed, chose the seven, and the apostles ordained them to this crucial ministry.

“Material” needs

Even as the Christian faith spread outside of Jerusalem, so did Christian generosity. In Acts 9.36-42 we meet a disciple named Tabitha who lived beyond materialism. She had matched her skill—weaving and sewing clothing—with a common material need—clothing for the poor—in her hometown of Joppa. It was one of many good deeds and manifestations of mercy in her life. When Peter was called to her deathbed, he was greeted by widows who showed him the fruit of her labors, the very clothing they wore. We know nothing of Tabitha’s financial situation, but we do know that she gave of her possessions, gave of herself. She wasn’t materialistic; instead she made material, cloth, clothes, for those with material needs.

Each according to ability

One of the extraordinary moments in early Christian generosity is recorded in 11.27-30. Agabus, a Christian prophet visiting the young congregation in Antioch, prophesied a wide-spread and severe famine. Immediately this congregation—“each one according to their ability” — agreed to take up a collection of money to be delivered to the relatively poorer Christians in Jerusalem. Many of the believers in Jerusalem would have been fired by their Jewish employers or disowned by their Jewish families. Many of the believers in Jerusalem had come from afar and stayed in Jerusalem after their conversions, far from the financial support of family, friends, and jobs. The

believers in Jerusalem had also given themselves practically to the point of poverty by meeting the physical needs of the poor among them. Even so the Christians of Antioch could have reasoned materialistically – that this famine would strike them too, that they would need all their extra resources for a financial cushion, that the Jerusalem Christian would just have to fend for themselves, that they would give if other Christian churches gave. Instead without hesitation they acted generously, to face the demands of a financial plight that they too would feel. Like Barnabas, one of the leaders of the Antioch congregation, they acted beyond materialism.

A service of the saints

Although Luke makes no mention of it in the book of Acts, one of the congregations Paul founded on his missionary journeys was especially generous. We learn from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians that the Christians of Philippi were exemplary in their giving (2 Corinthians 8-9). It's not that the Philippian believers were so wealthy. One was—Lydia (Acts 16.14-15). But Paul says they gave to the Christian missionary enterprise “out of their extreme poverty” (2 Corinthians 8.2). It's not that the Philippian believers thought that they could “fulfill all righteousness” with a one-time gift. Paul makes it clear that they gave frequently (Philippians 4.16). It's not that they gave out of guilt. Paul had not asked for or expected the gift; in fact he was resolved to support himself during his missionary travels. It's not that they gave under compulsion. They gave freely, voluntarily (2 Corinthians 8.3). It's not that they gave according to some uniform standard. Each gave according to their means (2 Corinthians 8.3). To the believers of Philippi, giving their material possessions was a ministry, a service of the saints to the saints, a grace, a gift to them as much as to those to whom they gave, the gift of giving (2 Corinthians 8.4).

The collection

Another evidence of the generosity of the early followers of Jesus was a multi-congregational collection for the Christians in Jerusalem. Once again the book of Acts only hints at this project, mentioning the large group of believers travelling with Paul

on the third missionary journey (20.4). They would have provided assistance in the physical transportation of the coins that had been donated; they would have provided protection from highway robbers that plagued the ancient world; and they would have protected Paul against any charges of misappropriation of funds. But most importantly they served as congregational representatives, assuring that the gifts were more than money. They represented the personal offerings of support from one Christian congregation to another. And they could report back on the actual people whose lives had been benefitted by the gifts. This project was so important to Paul that he risked and experienced personal danger and imprisonment just to make the delivery.

On Paul's way to make that delivery, Paul stopped to meet briefly with the spiritual leaders of the church at Ephesus. During that extended discussion Paul spoke about living beyond materialism (Acts 20.33-35). He reminded them of his own example—not coveting the financial resources or the fine clothing of others, not being unwilling to work with his own hands to earn the money that he needed for his own necessities, not afraid to call his fellow Christians to generosity to the poor. Then he reminded them of the teaching of Jesus, a teaching about possessions: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (20.35). This teaching was so crucial to the life of the church that although it had never been written down, at least not in our four gospels, it had been remembered by believers ever since it had been uttered by Jesus. Jesus cared about our attitude toward and use of material possessions and so must his followers.

Early Christians did not pretend like money did not exist or was not a necessary component of our lives. They did not ignore material needs or act like the church should only care about spiritual needs. The early church and its leaders recognized the reality of material necessities in our lives. The meeting of those needs was a church-wide responsibility, including the disciples who gave generously and according to their means, including the apostles who originally oversaw the collection and distribution of funds, including the Seven who were appointed to the oversight of the common fund, including to Gentile converts who were taught that generosity was a part of the life of faith into which they had been called. If generosity was so much a part of the lives of

the congregations mentioned in the book of Acts, what about our congregations? We have only to ask, What would it look like for Christians today to be part of that great ongoing act of generosity, to give according to our means, to give beyond our means, to possess but possess loosely, to gain but to gain to give, to live beyond materialism?

Chapter 3 ~ *Beyond Us and Them*

Following Jesus to a place we've never been...

...beyond RACISM and NATIONALISM

*"You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria,
and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1.8)*

Battling Boundaries

In some ways it would be best if Christians were color-blind. We are the people after all who know that in Christ, "there is no longer Jew or Greek" (Galatians 3.26-28). We are the ones who know that Jesus died for "every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5.9, 14.6). We would be like the little white boy whose parents had moved the family into a racially integrated neighborhood. "Did you make any friends," the father asked the boy after his first day at school. "I made one good friend already," the boy responded, "Chad." "Great, and is Chad a black boy or a white boy?" the curious father asked. Finally, after a thoughtful pause, the boy answered, "I don't remember." In some ways it would be best if we were color-blind, but in other ways it may be better to recognize our racial and ethnic differentness, remembering all the while that ultimately, in Christ, our differentness makes no difference.

In some ways it would be best if Christians were nation-neutral, ignoring flags and patriotism and national identities altogether. We are the people after all who have been called into "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Peter 2.9). We are the ones who know that we are part of a new kingdom whose king is God (Revelation 5.10) and that "the kingdom of this world" (every kingdom!) "has" (already in a sense) "become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (Revelation 11.15). A number of American churches have sensed the potential inconsistency of being part of one new nation in Christ and flying their national flag in their worship spaces. They remove the

flag and downplay the patriotic holidays that loom so large in some congregations. They have a point. But there's also something to be said for the congregations who have lined the walls of their worship areas with the flags of all the nations of the world. In some ways it would be best if we were nation-neutral, but in other ways it may be better to recognize our national differentness, remembering all the while that ultimately, in Christ, our differentness makes no difference.

In any case, the nature of the God whose we are, of the Christ who died and rose for us, and of the Spirit who indwells us, demands that we live our lives, individually and communally, beyond the limitations of racial identity and national loyalty. The nature of the Lord's church as seen in the book of Acts demands that we let Jesus take us to a place we may never have been, unhindered by what separates us. Impossible? Beyond imagination? The life of the early church shows us that it was not only necessary but possible to live beyond racism and beyond nationalism.

Acts...beyond Boundaries

The church began with a cluster of Galileans, northern Jews from "Galilee of the Gentiles." That's how the apostles were identified by the crowd at Pentecost: "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" (2.7). There were also some women and the mother and brothers of Jesus among that earliest group of Christ-followers, but they too appear all to have been ethnically Jewish. The church, then, began as a group of Galilean Jews who looked alike and ate alike and dressed alike and thought alike and talked alike, and it could so easily have stayed that way—of the Jews, by the Jews, for the Jews, just Jewish. That it did not is one of the remarkable revelations of the book of Acts. The early church went beyond racism and beyond nationalism; it represented a new humanity and comprised a new nation under God.

Every nation under heaven

Right from the start the Galilean believers shared their resurrection faith not only with their fellow Jews but also with Gentiles, the "nations," on the day of Pentecost, with "every nation under heaven." Acts calls those people from the nations

“proselytes” – converts to Judaism from various races and ethnicities from around the Mediterranean world. Thus the first converts to the faith were not just Jews, much less Galileans. They included “nationals” from Mesopotamia, from Parthia, Media, and Elam (what we call Iraq and Iran). There were people from Asia Minor, from Cappadocia and Pontus and Asia and Phrygia and Pamphylia (our Turkey). There were Africans from Egypt and Libya and Arabs from the Arabian Peninsula. And there were westerners, Cretans and Romans (2.9-11). For Luke these were not just exotic places from which ethnic Jews had travelled; these names represented people groups from across the empire and beyond in the 1st century AD. The church’s first outreach went beyond national borders and beyond racial boundaries. Ministry to Gentiles, even Gentiles who had affiliated with Judaism may have been beyond the imagination of Jesus’ Jewish disciples. But God’s Spirit drove them to step beyond their limits. And after Pentecost the Jewish and Gentile converts not only shared a common faith in Jesus as Lord, they also shared a common life (2.42-47) that reached across their cultural and linguistic differences.

Hellenists and Hebraists

This characteristic of the early church to reach beyond nation and race was not without its challenges, as Acts 6.1-7 demonstrates. There were two culturally distinct groups in the early church – the “Hebrews” and the “Hellenists” – and it was hard for the Galilean Jewish apostles who led the early church to be sensitive and attentive to the needs of both. The two groups may have been separated only by language – Aramaic and Greek – not by ethnicity; that is, they may all have been Jews now converted to Christ. But the Hellenists may in fact have been ethnic Greeks, Gentiles, “nationals,” Greek-speaking proselytes who had been a part of the church since Pentecost. In any case the challenge of this cultural and perhaps ethnic divide was met. The apostles appointed seven servants, seven bridge-builders (one of whom was definitely a non-ethnic Jew, the proselyte Nicolaus), who were sensitive to the needs of the “Greek” group in the church. And the unity and common mission of the church were preserved.

One of those seven servants was Stephen. Besides taking the lead in the charitable ministries of the early church, giving aid to the poor, Stephen shared his faith in Jesus as the Messiah in what was probably his home synagogue, the Synagogue of the Freedmen (6.9). Since Hellenistic synagogues like the Synagogue of the Freedmen were attended by ethnic Jews of the Diaspora and by Gentile proselytes and God-fearers, Stephen may well have been preaching and teaching and perhaps even converting Gentiles, nationals from Libya and Egypt and Cilicia and Asia, to faith in Jesus. In other words, it is very possible, even likely, that the early church, having started so narrowly not only in number but in ethnic breadth, reached out with its good news to Gentiles as well as Jews on the day of Pentecost, in its relief ministries, and in its synagogue evangelism. That band of Galileans got it right, right from the start—the gospel was for everyone and so was the church.

Evangelizing the outcasts

The church's next big step beyond their national and racial limits involved Philip, another of the seven servants appointed to meet the needs of the "Hellenists" (8.1-25, 26-40). Philip fled Jerusalem after Stephen's stoning and traveled to Samaria, preaching Jesus as the Messiah and supporting his message with a ministry to the physical needs of the Samaritans. Frankly, deliberate contact with Samaritans was "beyond the pale" for most Jews. They were hated as ethnic half-breeds, despised as political and economic rivals, and excluded from Temple worship as spiritually unworthy. Although Samaritans were distantly related to Jews ethnically, they were disliked by Jews as much if not more than Gentiles. But many Samaritans believed the message of Philip and were baptized into Christ. Outreach to these barely-Jewish, worse-than-Gentile Samaritans was almost beyond the imagination of the Jewish-Christian leaders in Jerusalem. But they sent Peter and John to Samaria, and the apostles confirmed the conversions under Philip and did some preaching of their own in the area—to Samaritans! (8.25).

And even to the ends of the earth

Philip was also involved in the church's next giant step beyond their expectations of racial and national boundaries. The Spirit of God impelled Philip to evangelize an Ethiopian government official, on his way home from Jerusalem. Whatever else the Ethiopian man was, he was an "Ethiopian," a "burnt-faced" man. He was at least a God-fearer; he had been to Jerusalem to worship. He may have been a proselyte, a full convert to Judaism. But he was definitely an Ethiopian, an African, not a Jew. Although he was already a worshipper of the God of the Hebrews, he was a Gentile, an Ethiopian national, who accepted the gospel and was baptized into Christ. Interaction with an Ethiopian might have been beyond imagination to Philip, but it was not beyond the imagination of God. God's Spirit led him geographically and evangelistically to a place he had never been—all because he was following Jesus. Wherever Philip ministered, this Hellenistic Jewish Christian reached across very firm if unseen boundaries to minister to Gentile proselytes in Jerusalem, to Samaritans in Samaria, and even to an African from one of the "ends of the earth."

Evangelizing the enemy

Sometime after Peter's ministry in Samaria, following up on the evangelistic work of Philip (8.14f), he embarked on a pastoral visit to believers along the central coast of Palestine, traveling from Jerusalem to Lydda, to Joppa, and on to Caesarea. In Lydda he healed Aeneas of his paralysis. Was Aeneas a believer or not? Was Aeneas a Jew or a Gentile? We do not know the answer to either question. But, with a Greek name like Aeneas, the healed man may well have been a Gentile, a "national" from somewhere in the Mediterranean world. From Joppa Peter embarked on an evangelistic opportunity that became a pivot point in the spread of Christianity—the conversion of Cornelius. Remember that Cornelius was not, as Christians so often claim, the first Gentile convert to Christianity. Ever since the day of Pentecost ethnically Gentile converts to Judaism called proselytes had been accepting the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Ethiopian man, an ethnic African, was certainly a Gentile. But there was something special about Cornelius.

Cornelius (a Roman name) lived in Caesarea, the Roman capital of Judea. He was an officer—a centurion to be exact—in the Roman army. And he was or had been attached to the “Italian Cohort.” All signs point to Cornelius being an ethnic Italian and a Roman citizen. He had been attracted to many aspects of the Jewish religion: he was “devout,” he and his family “feared God,” he gave alms to needy Jews and prayed regularly to the God of Israel. But he was not an ethnic Jew or even a proselyte, like some of the converts at Pentecost. He was a God-fearer. Like Simon the Samaritan sorcerer, like the Ethiopian treasurer, like the devout Jew Saul, Cornelius was a man of considerable influence and authority. But one thing sets him apart. He was the enemy, an official representative of the government that had oppressed the Jews for decades and had crucified Jesus. Samaritans were often despised, Ethiopians were decidedly different, but this man was the enemy.

For Peter, approaching an enemy officer with the gospel would have been beyond imagination. He had to overcome a number of barriers before he was able to reach beyond the borders of his racial and national biases. First, there was the barrier of *association*. As Peter himself observed, “it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile” (10.28). It took a vision from God to convince Peter even to go to Cornelius’ house. Second, there was the barrier of *communication*. Peter might still have hesitated to share the good news of Jesus with this Gentile. It took another vision, Cornelius’ vision, to convince Peter that “God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10.34-35) and that Peter should preach the gospel to these Italian nationals. Third, there was the barrier of *incorporation*. Peter may have felt bound only to share the good news and move on. It took the direct operation of God’s Spirit, gifting the Gentile listeners with the ability to praise God in foreign tongues, to convince Peter to accept Cornelius and his companions into the community of the redeemed just the way they were. “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” Peter asked himself and his companions (10.47).

Of course Peter should have known better. The teachings and actions of Jesus had pointed to his acceptance of Samaritans and Gentiles. Jesus’ commission had

specifically commanded Peter and the other apostles to take the gospel to all the nations. And the early church had already welcomed Gentiles into the fold, albeit Gentiles who had already become Jewish proselytes. But with the conversion of Cornelius, uncircumcised, un-proselytized Gentiles had now entered the kingdom through no door other than faith in the saving death and victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ and baptism in his name. It was an important turning point for the early followers of Jesus who were learning to follow Jesus to a place they had never been—beyond racism and beyond nationalism.

Just because Peter was willing to follow his Lord to a place beyond racism and nationalism, doesn't mean all believers caught on right away. Chapter 11 reports that some of the saints back in Jerusalem were troubled with the acceptance of Gentiles into the family of the faithful. Some "from the circumcision" complained. These are probably some of the ethnically Jewish Christians who assumed that, since they had arrived at the foot of the cross by way of the path through Judaism, everyone should. They scold Peter for even going to the home of and eating with Gentiles ("uncircumcised men"), but they were probably equally horrified by the open preaching and baptism without preconditions for full acceptance. Peter simply rehearsed what had happened, relating the events that had slowly but surely led him to a new realization of God's will for other nations and races. He concluded with a significant question: "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" To their credit, the circumcised believers got the point, ceased their opposition, and praised the God whose kingdom leads us beyond racism and nationalism: "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life." (11.18) We are left with the uneasy notion that nationalism and racism among Christians today could actually hinder God in some way, contradicting his will for the human race, for his kingdom, and for the church.

Flowering of cross-cultural evangelism

The greatest concerted outburst of Christian evangelism beyond the boundaries of race, ethnicity, and national identity was in Antioch of Syria (11.19f). Christian

outreach began in that great metropolis in an all too familiar way. Believers shared the gospel only with Jews, the narrow ethnic group among whom the movement had started years before (11.19). But then some saints from Cyrene (in north Africa) and from Cyprus (a nearby island in the Mediterranean Sea) arrived with a broader vision, sharing the gospel with a broader group (11.20).

Some fine ancient manuscripts of Acts say they proclaimed the Lord Jesus “to the Hellenists”; other equally old and reliable manuscripts read “to the Hellenes.” The former variant reading refers to ethnic Jews who lived in the Hellenistic world. In this case there is nothing really new; the gospel was still being preached to Jews. The latter variant implies Greeks, Gentiles, non-Jews. This would have been news to the saints down in Jerusalem! People were coming to Christ who not only were ethnically Gentile but who had had no previous affiliation with Judaism—not Samaritans, not proselytes like Nicolaus, not God-fearers like Cornelius. No wonder they sent Barnabas, a compassionate and trustworthy believer and a fellow Cypriot, to check up on developments in Antioch! It’s also no wonder the leadership team in the church at Antioch was so diverse in its ethnic and national identity (13.1). There was the Palestinian Jew Manaen. There were the Hellenistic Jews Barnabas and Saul. There was the African (Ethiopian?) man (Niger = black) who, with a name like Simeon, may have been a Jewish proselyte before following Jesus. And there was Lucius of Cyrene, whose Roman name and African homeland suggest he was a Gentile. And no wonder “it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called ‘Christians’” (11.26). There and at last then, the church functioned in the “no-longer-Jew-or-Greek” way God’s kingdom was meant to function—beyond racism and nationalism.

Turkey, Greece, and beyond

The missionary work of Paul, along with partners like Barnabas and Silas and Timothy, continued to reflect this new inclusiveness that went beyond racial and national boundaries. The missionaries faithfully sought out converts in Jewish synagogues across Cyprus and Turkey and Greece—Jews like Crispus in Corinth and God-fearers like Lydia in Philippi. But they also led Gentiles to Christ—like Sergius

Paulus (Roman governor of Cyprus), the polytheistic population of Lystra, the Roman jailer in Philippi, and Dionyus and Damaris in Athens. Like Peter before them, Paul and Barnabas had to face some small thinking back in Jerusalem (15.1-35). Some saints were still arguing, “It is necessary for them [Gentiles] to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses” (15.5). At the meeting that ensued, Peter reminded them that he had been “the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers,” when it became clear that God had “made no distinction between us [Jews] and them [Gentiles]” (15.9). Then Barnabas and Saul rehearsed “all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles” (15.12). And finally James, a pious Galilean Jew, one of that first little group of Galilean Jews among whom the movement had started, drew them all back to God’s original intention—“that all other peoples may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles” (15.17). The leadership of the Lord’s church and the church they led were united in their resolve to live beyond racism and nationalism.

Unhindered!

The book of Acts ends with the missionary Paul under house arrest in Rome. He is still reaching out with the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ to Jews and to Gentiles, trying to explain the true nature of God’s inclusive kingdom. He does so under the conviction that, although God had forged a special covenant relationship with the Jews, a covenant fulfilled by the saving work of Christ, “this salvation of God has [also] been sent to the Gentiles” (28.28). The last sentence of Acts reports that Paul, even under house arrest, was “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and unhindered” (28.31). There is a sense of course in which the gospel was unhindered by opposition and arrest and imprisonment. But there is another sense in which the gospel, as it was shared by the first generation of followers of the Way, was also unhindered by the oppressive and restrictive bonds of racism and nationalism. Now we have only to ask, What would it look like for Christians today to be one in Christ, “no longer Jew or Greek,” to be God’s new nation, “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ,” to live beyond boundaries?

Chapter 4 ~ *Beyond ME, MYSELF, and I*

Following Jesus to a place we've never been...

...beyond INDIVIDUALISM

"All the believers were together and had everything in common." (Acts 2.44)

Too Much Me?

The "Me Generation" – that's what some sociologists have dubbed the current younger generation. This large group of people in our culture and in our churches is said to be part of an epidemic of narcissism. They may not be any more selfish than the rest of us, but they are self-oriented, self-focused, and self-centered. Their favorite slogans include "Be yourself," and "Believe in yourself." This "Look-at-me" generation is high on self-esteem, they say. They are the ones whose first response to Jesus' call to "Love your neighbor as yourself" might be to highlight the importance of self-love. The anecdotal evidence is everywhere. A girl wants a city street blocked off so a marching band can announce her sixteenth birthday. Plastic surgeries have quintupled. People hire fake paparazzi to pursue them and make them appear famous. Reality TV. YouTube. Social networking. There's even a Facebook group called Association of Justified Narcissism.

But other culture critics aren't so sure. They remind us that older generations habitually think the younger generation has gone to the dogs in one way or another. They point out growing interest in service-learning in college and service-oriented activities after college. They challenge the claim of waning interest in politics by referring to polls in the recent presidential election. And they remind naysayers that social networking is in fact "social." They argue that the "Me Generation" may be better called the "We Generation." To whatever degree "Generation Me" is a reality, self-focused living is a problem, especially as it affects the life of the church.

Whatever our take on the self-centeredness of a given generation, individualism has always characterized human behavior, including that of many Christians. Call it a temptation or a time-honored trait, but me-first-ism has been with us for a long time—just look at Jacob and Esau. This trait is especially true in America where “rugged individualism” has been elevated to a national virtue. Even the shapers of our country’s Constitution were unable to “form a more perfect union” until they assured citizens of their individual rights. Even today, maybe especially today, most Americans could tell you more about the Bill of Rights than about the Constitution itself.

Jesus had nothing against individuals. He called individuals, taught individuals, expected individual loyalty, and commissioned individuals. But he had little time for individualism. He called his disciples into a community of followers (“to be with him,” Mark 3.13), he taught and mentored them in a group, and he sent them forth two by two. The nature of the Lord’s church as seen in the book of Acts demands that we let Jesus take us to a place we may never have been, unhindered by what separates us, to a life of community, of common faith and common service. Impossible? Beyond imagination? The life of the early church shows us that it was not only necessary but possible to live beyond individualism.

Acts...beyond Individualism

The first event of the book of Acts (1.3-11) shows Jesus, after his death and resurrection, reestablishing community. Together he gave his community of followers evidence of his resurrection, he appeared to them together, taught them together, ate with them together, commissioned them together, met with them together, corrected them together, and finally ascended before them...together. Just as Jesus had formed his individual disciples into a community of followers and goers, so after his resurrection he reformed them into a convinced and commissioned community of resurrection faith in a way that went way beyond individualism.

Preparing in Community

Between the ascension and the day of Pentecost, the followers of Jesus were acting in community, while they awaited the movement of God's Spirit (1.12-26). The recently commissioned apostles did not just go off on their own Lone Ranger missionary journeys. They were individuals; verse 13 lists their individual names. But first they gathered together with the other followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, a hundred and twenty of them or so. They stayed together (1.13). They prayed together (1.14). The "they" even included women. Jewish communities included women, but they were separate and secondary. In synagogue worship women sat silently on one side of the assembly, or in the back, or in a balcony. But in the Christian community women seem to have been full participants. The early church followed Christ not custom. Jesus had always included women in his band of disciples (Luke 8.1-2) and had commissioned women to be the first bearers of the gospel message (Luke 24.9-10). And so they were partners in the community that formed the early church.

They also planned together (1.15-26). When Peter realized the practical and symbolic need to replace Judas among the Twelve, he did not act alone and he did not call the Eleven into executive session. First, Peter informed the *community* of the kind of person they needed—someone who had been with Jesus from the beginning of his ministry and had seen the risen Lord at the end (1.15, 21-22). Second, the *community* nominated two candidates from among them whom they knew to be qualified (1.23). Third, the *community* prayed to God regarding the decision (1.24-25). Fourth, the *community* cast lots—not just a role of the dice, but a time-honored way of seeking God's will (1.26). Peter and the Eleven took the lead, but they led in such a way that involved the whole fledgling Christian community in this important decision.

A very important word in the vocabulary of Acts first appears in this passage, in 1.14. It is the Greek word, *homothumadon*, with the accent on the last syllable. It means "with the same passion," "in one accord," "unanimously" (Lat., *un* = one + *anima* = spirit). In 1.14 and 4.24 we learn that the early church prayed *homothumadon*. In 2.46 and 5.12 they met *homothumadon* in the temple courtyards for worship and evangelism. In 15.25 they made decisions *homothumadon* for the sake of the unity of the community

in doctrine and in practice. The one time this word is used outside of Acts is in Romans 15.5-6, where Paul writes this beautiful benediction: “May the God of endurance and encouragement give you the same mind among yourselves according to Christ Jesus, so that *homothumadon* with one mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The early church praised God with one accord.

Even before Pentecost and the empowering of God’s Spirit, God was creating a sense of community which focused on their common praise of God, their common faith in Christ, and their common guidance by God’s Spirit. They prayed together, they praised together, they prepared together – *homothumadon*!

Proclaiming in Community

It was precisely when “all of them were together in one place” that God’s Spirit signaled that the time for bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus had come. Acts 2 emphasizes that Pentecost preaching was a concerted effort. Yes, the apostles spoke as individuals. God’s Spirit had empowered “each one of them” to proclaim the mighty deeds of God (2.3). But this was no place or time for individualism. The people heard “*them* speaking” (2.6, 11). It was a choir, a chorus, not a solo. When Peter stood up to clarify that they were speaking in the Spirit, not in the “spirits,” he did so “with the Eleven” (2.14). And when the people asked how they should respond to the news of Jesus’ death and resurrection, they spoke “to Peter and the other apostles” (2.37). Pentecost was not all about the apostle Peter; it was about all the apostles and their united testimony to the gospel.

P.S. to Pentecost

Acts chapter two does not end with the individual baptisms of three thousand people, as important as that was. The chapter concludes with the molding of these three thousand convicted and converted individuals into a radical new community. It does not end with thousands of individuals obtaining eternal life, but with their amalgamation into a community of shared life. The climax of Pentecost is beyond individualism: “all the believers were together” (2.44). Together they attended to the

teaching of the apostles about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah (2.42). Together they shared their lives, just as Jesus had taught his first followers, a concept called "*koinonia*" (2.42). Together they engaged in "the breaking of the bread," the way early Christians remembered and reenacted Jesus' saving death (2.42). And together they joined in prayers to God, the way Jesus had taught them and modeled for them (2.42). But the *koinonia* doesn't stop with verse 42. The converts at Pentecost also observed the deeds of the apostles, miracles which mimicked Jesus' miracles and modeled his compassion for all (2.43). They did not just share their lives theoretically or in the abstract. They shared their possessions with anyone who had need (2.44-45). They did not just partake of periodic meals of communion. They generously and joyfully shared meals together daily in one another's homes (2.46). And their prayerful lives became praiseful lives, worshipping God as a community. Pentecost was about conversion, but it was also about *koinonia*. Pentecost was about individuals, but it also went beyond individualism to shared lives in Christian community.

Persecuted in Community

If you were not careful, you might think that Peter had a solo ministry in the months and years that followed Pentecost. But in chapter 3 (verses 1-11), Peter is partnered with John in the healing of the lame man. "Peter and John" went to the temple. The lame man saw "them" and spoke to "them." Peter looked intently at the man, "as did John." He returned the gaze to "them." After the healing, people ran to "them," and later temple authorities arrested "them." In other words, Peter may have taken the lead in the healing, but he certainly did not act alone. After their release from prison, Peter and John found their friends staying together and praying together. Although persecution had begun, the Spirit of God was moving mightily among them all (4.23-31). Corporate ministry continued in 5.12f. All the apostles were together in the Temple courtyard. All the apostles were preaching. And all the apostles were arrested. Peter "and the apostles" responded boldly to the charges. They all were flogged. They shared in the proclamation and they shared in the persecution.

Problems in Community

Oddly enough, it was a problem in the community life of the church that illustrates best how important community was to the early church (6.1-7). As the church grew and diversified and as persecution accelerated and the temptation to self-protection increased, the church floundered in its attempt to meet the material needs of all the members of the community. Once again, it was not an apostolic sub-committee that addressed the problem nor were the apostles called into executive session. Instead “the Twelve called together the *whole community* of the disciples,” explaining the problem and their inability to minister to all the needs of the growing group (6.2). Next they asked the *whole community* to select seven people to focus on this ministry of monetary relief (6.4). The *whole community* was pleased with the approach the apostles were taking, the *whole community* made the selection, and the *whole community* presented them to the apostles for appointment (6.5-6). It is not surprising that the growth of the Christian church in Jerusalem was enhanced by this communal way of handling a community problem, a way beyond individualism.

A Community for Paul

We are always thrilled by the story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, arch persecutor of the early Christians. But those early Christians were not so thrilled, especially the ones in Jerusalem where Saul had wreaked havoc, participating in Stephen’s stoning, arresting and imprisoning many others. News of Saul’s conversion in Damascus had filtered back to Jerusalem, but the believers there were suspicious. When Saul himself returned to the scene of his earlier “crimes,” they shunned him (9.26). Community was one thing, but their *koinonia* was not quite big enough for this killer of Christians. It took Barnabas, whose vision of the community was big enough to include even former persecutors, to incorporate Saul into the community. He brought Saul to the apostles for a face to face meeting (9.27). That built enough trust and acceptance for Saul to begin moving in and out among the believers (9.28). When Saul himself became the object of Jewish persecution, the believers in Jerusalem arranged for his relocation to Tarsus (9.30). *Koinonia* is never easy or automatic; they kept working at

it until they got it right. Ultimately it was not about the past of an individual named Saul or the opinion of an individual named Barnabas; it was about a corporate trust that went beyond individualism.

Peter in Community

Acts 9-11 reminds us that Peter never had been and never was a solo performer. These chapters show Peter moving from one community of believers to another—from Jerusalem to Lydda to Joppa to Caesarea and back to Jerusalem. In every place he ministered as an individual and to individuals—Aeneas, Tabitha, Cornelius—but always in the context of the larger Christian community—the saints in Lydda, the disciples in Joppa. After Peter’s evangelistic ministry to Cornelius in Caesarea, some Christians back in Jerusalem were unwilling to accept the legitimacy of his conversion. Peter could easily have written off this group as a bunch of negative naysayers, hopeless legalists. The church could have fragmented over such a challenge to the status quo. But Peter respected the community, even the disagreeable members of it. He went back to Jerusalem and met with them. He listened to them. He talked them through everything he had done and why he had done it. And they listened to him, and eventually gave praise to God for the conversion that they had previously contested. Peter knew it was not just about him or even about Cornelius, but about the whole community and its health.

The First “Christian” Community

The congregation at Antioch of Syria was a wonderful example of how to live beyond individualism. As believers found their way to the thriving commercial center of Antioch, many people “turned to the Lord” (11.19-21). Why? Under the pastoral guidance of these early evangelists and later Barnabas and still later Saul, the Antioch church became a model of shared life (11.22-26). How? For one thing, they *shared their faith*. People became believers in Jesus through contact with the saints of Antioch. Their core commitment to Christ made it easy for the locals to give them a fitting nickname; they were the “Christians”! Christ was the focus of their faith (11.26). For

another, they *shared their funds*. When news of an upcoming famine reached them, they collected financial resources and sent them to the saints in Jerusalem who had faced persecution and who had given themselves to the edge of poverty. Their devotion to Jesus demanded dedication to generosity (11.26-30). And finally, they *shared their faithful leaders*. The leadership team in the Antioch congregation was diverse and gifted. They were five distinct individuals with their own names, their own backgrounds, and probably their own ministerial gifts. But two of their number who were *gifted* were about to become *gifts* to a world that needed to know God's love in Christ. These leaders worshipped together, fasted together, and prayed together. Led by the Spirit together, they acted together, sending Barnabas and Saul off on what we call the first missionary journey (13.1-3). Individual evangelists, individual pastors, individual elders, and individual missionaries—they all worked together for the sake of their common faith, their common life, and their common goal, beyond individualism.

From Conversion to Community

Many of us are familiar with the accounts of Paul's missionary journeys—stories of the evangelistic efforts of Saul, now Paul, and his companions. We remember the ministries of teaching and preaching and healing, and the conversions that resulted. What may not be so obvious is the way Paul *fostered community* on his missionary journeys. At the end of the first journey Paul and Barnabas returned to each town where there had been converts in order to follow up convert-making with community-building. There were good reasons not to. To go back took them out of their way and took them into the face of persecution, the hornets' nests they had stirred up along the way. And to go back might have flown in the face of conventional wisdom: get them converted; that's all that matters. But instead Paul and Barnabas went back, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to cling to their faith, warning them of the likelihood of persecution, challenging them to remain committed to the kingdom, and appointing elders as spiritual guides to the congregations. At the beginning of the second journey he did the same thing, revisiting congregations before striking out to new territory. On the third missionary journey, after a lengthy ministry

in one new locale (Ephesus), Paul returned to encourage and strengthen previously converted saints. Individual conversions were not scalps on Paul's belt or notches on his evangelistic rifle; they were lives to be folded into the body of Christ, the church of the redeemed, the congregation of the committed.

Concluding with Community

The events at the end of Acts—Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, his trials, and his extradition to Rome—may seem to focus on an individual, but they highlight Christian community at its best. Believers in Jerusalem welcomed him warmly (21.17), even though Jewish hostility was on the rise. Paul's refusal to go it alone, his resolve to reach out to the Jerusalem Christians after his conversion, during their economic crisis, and after each of his missionary journeys had created a bond of Christian community. In place of the suspicion of chapter 9 and the criticism of chapter 15, Paul now experienced true Christian *koinonia*. During his two-year incarceration in Caesarea, Paul was cared for by local Christians (24.23). Instead of disassociating from this missionary in the cross-hairs of political and religious persecution, they put themselves at his disposal, putting his needs above their fears. Upon his arrival in Italy as an imperial prisoner (28.14-15), Paul was met and aided by Christians there, believers who had all the more reason to fear association with this criminal.

At every point Acts makes it clear that the ministry of the early church was not a matter of individual accomplishments. It was the gospel that was going places, not just evangelists. It was the church, the community, that was growing, not just the number of individual believers (6.7, 9.31, 12.24, 19.20). Throughout the book individuals speak and act beyond individualism. At first it is Jesus, teaching about the kingdom into which they had been called. At the end Paul is still preaching the kingdom. Paul the individual is under house arrest, but the gospel was still being proclaimed and the shared life of the church, the *koinonia*, was alive and well—"unhindered. Now we have only to ask, What would it look like for Christians today to be one in Christ, to live *homothumadon*, to experience true *koinonia*, to think of ourselves as us not me, to live beyond individualism.

Chapter 5 ~ *Beyond MERELY MALE*

Following Jesus to a place we've never been...

...beyond SEXISM

"...along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers." (Acts 1.14)

Still Male and Female

In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul wrote, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is *no longer male and female*; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3.28). In Christ the old social structures, the old social strictures, were obliterated. The characteristics that identify us—race, class, gender—still exist; but these identifiers are not "signifiers," neither are they "separators." Our significance comes only from our relationship to God in Christ. And that relationship signals an essential unity that far outweighs our social distinctions. So in the body of Christ there must no longer be any racism, or classism, or sexism. But the sad fact is that in many areas of the Lord's church there is still male and female. Sexism is still alive.

Sexism is the view that one gender (usually female) is inferior in value or ability to the other. Sexism leads at best to prejudice of one gender toward another and at worst downright hatred. It often involves the seemingly innocuous but ultimately destructive tendency to gender stereotyping. However sexism manifests itself, Jesus has called us beyond gender stereotyping and discrimination. His example and teachings call us beyond the sexism that pervades our culture and even creeps into our churches.

Fact #1: Women were not viewed as persons under American law until 1875.
Problem: It's not just that women had no legal status; it's that men regarded women as less than real persons and women often devalued themselves as well.

Fact #2: Women were not given the right to vote in the United States until 1920.
Problem: It's not just that the opinions of women were disregarded about matters that

directly impinged on their lives; it's that men didn't think women had the good sense and sound judgment to make important decisions and women also doubted their own mental and moral capacities.

Fact #3: Women do seventy percent of the world's work, earn ten percent of the world's wages, and own one percent of the world's property. Problem: It's not just that women work more for less; it's that some people try to excuse it—"It's only right that breadwinners in families (males) earn more." Others even try to blame the victim—"Women shouldn't be working outside the home anyway."

Fact #4: Sixty to eighty percent of women report experiencing some form of sexual harassment by the time they reach eighteen. Problem: It's not just that sexual harassment exists in our culture, it's that some people try to excuse it—"I didn't mean anything by it!" Others even try to blame the victim—"That's what they get for dressing that way!"

Fact #5: Boys receive more attention and praise from teachers than do girls. Problem: it's not just that eventually girls speak up in class less and less frequently; it's that girls begin to assume that their ideas are inherently less important.

Fact #6: Many of the manifestations of gender discrimination that characterize human culture have influenced our relationships and attitudes in the Lord's church. They have blinded us to the clear teaching of scripture. Some of us have even "baptized" sexual discrimination as an inherently Christian concept. But Jesus our Lord manifested attitudes and actions toward women that rejected the patriarchal, prejudicial patterns of the first century. The nature of the Lord's church as seen in the book of Acts demands that we let Jesus take us to a place we may never have been, unhindered by what separates us. Impossible? Beyond imagination? The life of the early church shows us that it was not only necessary but possible to live beyond sexism.

Living beyond Sexism

In the beginning, women

When the eleven apostles returned from the ascension, they made a beeline to where the followers of Jesus were anxiously, expectantly gathered (Acts 1.13-14).

Among that group, Luke emphasizes, were women. Women were no afterthought, no Johnny-come-latelies, no second-class citizens, among the early followers of Jesus. They did not lurk in the shadows, waiting to respond to the needs and wishes of the real disciples, the main disciples, the male disciples. They were an integral part of the assembly. They were in on the action, at the heart of the action, right from the start. The eleven were all of one mind, *along with the women*. It's not that they agreed about everything or saw everything from the same perspective. But they had a common foundation, a common focus, and that was Jesus. The eleven were also engaged in regular and fervent prayer, *along with the women*. Their corporate prayers opened themselves to God's will as they waited on God's time, when God's Spirit would empower them to proclaim God's mighty deeds and preach about God's son. The women of the early Jesus movement were not segregated or silent or insignificant. There was no men's group and women's group, no apostolic prayer meeting and women's prayer circle. The followers of Jesus gathered together, were of one mind together, prayed and sought God's will together, *along with the women*, beyond gender distinctions, beyond sexism.

Who were these women? Mary the mother of Jesus was there. The woman who knew first about his birth, who understood best the meaning of his life, and who followed him at last to the place of his death, was an active part of the resurrection community. The gospel of Luke, volume one, gives us a clue as to who some of the other women might have been. There were the women who had traveled around with Jesus, female disciples, living with Jesus and learning from Jesus just like the male disciples. They also financially supported his ministry out of their personal material means (Luke 8.1-3). This group included Mary Magdalene, the first follower to see the risen Lord, and Joanna and Susanna and *many other women*. Luke refers to them as "the women who had followed him from Galilee." It was they—women—who stood and watched as he died (Luke 23.49). It was they—women—who saw where his body was laid and went to prepare burial ointments (Luke 23.55-56). It was they—women—who found the tomb empty, listened in terrified amazement to the angelic announcement of the resurrection, and reported the good news to the disbelieving male disciples (Luke

24.1-10). Luke names them again in 24.10—Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and the “many others,” including another Mary, the mother of James. Mary and Martha, two sisters deeply devoted to Jesus (Luke 10.38-42), may well have been present as well. Their home in Bethany was only a few miles from Jerusalem. Only one of the two disappointed disciples the risen Lord encountered on the road to Emmaus is named—Cleopas. The other one may well have been a female follower (Luke 24.13, 18). At any rate, the women with whom the apostles and other followers met in Acts 1 were the female disciples who were among the first to follow Jesus, the first to finance Jesus’ ministry, and the first to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. They were the faithful females who followed Jesus to the cross, who followed his corpse to the tomb, who found his tomb empty and him risen from the dead. They were the very first proclaimers of the gospel: “He is not here, he is risen!”

If women were actively engaged in the life of the pre-Pentecost community (and they were), engaged in the consensus-building, in the public prayers, in the decision-making (and they were), why are the believers called “brothers” (Acts 1.15)? Why use such a gender-specific word? Clearly Luke the narrator and Peter the speaker knew that women made up a significant portion of the community of Christ-followers. They must be using the gender-specific term in a gender-inclusive way. “Brothers” highlights the familial relation of believers to God their “father” and to their fellow “siblings”—brothers and sisters—in the family of God. The first family included “sisters”!

In the last days, women

As Peter began his proclamation of the gospel on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), he accounted for the outbreak of God’s Spirit by quoting from the prophet Joel (2.28-32). “In the last days”—days which were beginning even as he spoke—“In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy....” Then Joel, and Peter, says it again: “Even on my male slaves and my female slaves, in those days I will pour out my Spirit.” Finally, just in case we didn’t get the point, the prophet and the preacher add, “Then everyone who

calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Ever since God created both men and women in his image, God’s Spirit had worked on and in the lives of both men and women. What had been would be. “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh!” –both men and women. When God communicated his will to his people through prophets, he had always done so through both men and women. What had been would be. “Your sons and your daughters will prophesy!” –both men and women. God’s servants had served his purposes from of old and those servants had always included both men and women. What had been would be. “Even on my male slaves and my female slaves, I will pour out my Spirit” –both men and women.

The emphasis on the inclusion of women in God’s saving purposes is unavoidable. Women, as well as men, will be called by the Lord, will call on the name of the Lord, will be cut to the heart by the Savior’s sacrifice, will repent, will be baptized, will be forgiven, will receive God’s promise, and will receive God’s gift of God’s very Spirit. In short, women as well as men will be saved and will serve. Neither Joel nor Peter makes any distinction between the salvation that men and women will receive from God—accepting the gospel—and the prophetic service that men and women will render for God—proclaiming the gospel. The very first proclamation of the gospel in Acts 2 makes it clear that the promise of the gospel not limited by gender and neither is the ministry of proclaiming that gospel to others. Christian prophets would include “daughters!”

In accountability, a woman

Sapphira, the woman we meet in Acts 5.1-11, is hardly a model of Christian discipleship, but her experience demonstrates that the early church operated beyond the gender stereotypes of the day. When she and her husband Ananias misrepresented the generosity of their gift to the needy believers in Jerusalem, the reaction was swift and decisive. Their deception of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ amounted to an attempt to deceive the very Spirit of God which indwelt the church. Peter challenged Ananias, holding him morally and spiritually accountable for the deception. His instant death sent shockwaves through the church. The early believers, raised in a patriarchal

culture of male dominance, might have assumed that divine justice had been meted out; the discipline had served its purpose; the responsible party, the husband, the head of the household, had been dealt with. But Peter confronted Sapphira as well. She was an independent moral agent. She was not a mere appendage of her husband. She was equally and independently involved (5.2, “with the consciousness of his wife”), equally and independently culpable, equally and independently accountable. Even in the discipline of the early church women were treated in a manner that went beyond sexism.

Both men and women

In the next section of the book of Acts (chapters 5-12) women continue to be an active part of the life of the church. “Both men and women” were converted to faith in Jesus as the Christ and were incorporated into his body, the church (5.14). “Both men and women” were arrested and imprisoned for their faith in Jesus by Saul, who was ravaging the church at that time (8.3). “Both men and women” were baptized into Christ as a result of the ministry of Philip in Samaria (8.12). “Both men and women” were the objects of Saul’s search for followers of Christ in Damascus, Syria. He traveled there to arrest, bind, and bring back those who belonged to the Way, the journey on which he confronted the risen Lord (9.2).

One concrete example of the “both men and women” approach of the early church was Peter’s ministry to Tabitha, a woman (9.36-42). Luke loved male/female pairs. Right from the start in the gospel there was Mary and Joseph and Elizabeth and Zechariah, a trend that continues with Ananias and Sapphira and Aeneas and Tabitha. Tabitha’s faith found its way to her fingers. Her devotion to good works and needs of mercy manifested itself in the sowing of garments for widows too impoverished to buy suitable new clothing for themselves. Peter raised her from the dead just as he had healed Aeneas from his paralysis. She testified to the love and mercy of God by making garments for widows living on the margin of their culture economic productivity; the widows testified to the love and mercy of Tabitha by showing Peter those very garments. Her generosity, their gratitude, and her healing combined to testify to the

love and mercy of God to many others along the Palestinian coastline: “many believed in the Lord.”

Another example of the church’s “both men and women” conviction appears in the person of Mary, the mother of John Mark (12.12-17). Mary’s generosity consisted of sharing her home with the Lord’s church in Jerusalem. It was a common meeting place of corporate communication and prayer. This apparently wealthy Christian woman owned her own home in the city, had a female household servant, and made that home available as a regular meeting place for believers, so regular that Peter knew where to find them after his release from prison. Later Mary would share her son as a companion with Barnabas and Saul on their first missionary journey. Was Mary the spiritual mentor of this house church? Did she lead the intercessory prayers for Peter’s release? At the very least she hosted the Lord’s church when they gathered for worship.

On the second journey, women

Women reappear in Acts in interesting ways during the second missionary journey (15.36-18.22). A young man from Lystra joined the missionaries Paul and Silas as an associate and helper. His name was Timothy. Acts 16.1 briefly mentions Timothy’s mother, a Jewish woman who had become a believer in Jesus. Only in 2 Timothy 1.5 do learn a little more. Her name was Eunice. She and Timothy’s grandmother Lois were his mentors in the faith, a sincere faith, a living faith. These two generations of committed Christians had so shaped Timothy’s character that the young man’s devotion was known far and wide, not only in his home church in Lystra but also among Christians in Iconium, twenty-five miles away.

In Philippi (16.1-40) Paul and Silas encountered some Gentile women who feared God and gathered for prayer on the Sabbath. One of them, Lydia, a well-to-do merchant woman, listened intently to the good news about Jesus, opened her heart to the message of salvation, and was baptized into Christ. She also influenced her “household” (family members? employees? male? female?) to come to faith and baptism as well. And she opened her home to the traveling missionaries in Christian

generosity. In Thessalonica and Berea (17.1-14) Paul's preaching in the synagogue reached the ears of Gentile God-fearers. Many of them became followers of Jesus, devout men and "not a few of the leading women" (17.4). The pattern was repeated in Berea where preaching in the synagogue resulted in the conversion of "not a few Greek women of high standing and men" (17.12). Luke our narrator makes a point of identifying the female converts as "leading women" (foremost, prominent, important) and as "women of high standing" (highly-respected). He seemed to think there was nothing "oxymoronic" about using these adjectives of women in the church. In Athens (17.16-34) another prominent woman named Damaris is listed among the handful of converts there (17.34).

Teaching the preacher, a woman

Still on the second missionary journey Paul befriended one of the most remarkable women in the early church—Priscilla. Although we do not know the circumstances of her conversion, we know that she was married to a Jewish Christian man named Aquila, she had been driven out of Rome with her husband during a purge of Jews in AD 49, she and Aquila were tentmakers, and they welcomed Paul to share their shop and their home (18.1-3). Not long after the couple moved to Ephesus, one of the greatest Christian preachers of that day, Apollos, arrived, enthusiastically and skillfully teaching Jews about the Messiahship of Jesus on the basis of his vast knowledge of the Hebrew scriptures. For some reason Apollos' understanding of Christian baptism was deficient. So Priscilla and Aquila (yes, Luke names her first) became the teachers of this respected teacher on this crucial doctrinal matter. He was highly educated in the things of God, he taught about Jesus accurately, he was an eloquent preacher and a bold teacher. And he was a man. But this woman, along with her husband, took him and taught him. She listened first and carefully. But then in a welcoming, non-confrontational way, perhaps over a meal, Priscilla and Aquila explained, expounded the Way of God more accurately (18.26). Luke gives no hint that early Christians would have disapproved of this Christian woman teaching this Christian man. Her friend Paul never spoke with anything but praise and admiration

for her, this teacher of teachers, Priscilla. In fact in his letters Paul extols her generosity, her hospitality, and her leadership in house churches wherever she and Aquila moved. To Paul, she was his co-worker in the ministry of the gospel. For Luke in Acts, Priscilla was the teacher who taught the preacher about Christian baptism, a role that transcended the gender stereotypes and sexist pigeonholes of her day and ours.

Having the gift of prophecy, women

Several other women are mentioned briefly and somewhat tangentially in the closing chapters of Acts. There is Paul's unnamed sister; Drusilla, wife of the Roman procurator Felix; and Berenice, wife of Herod Agrippa II, king of the Jews. But in Acts 21.9 Luke introduces his readers to four women who played a truly significant role in the life of the early church. They were sisters, real sisters, biological sisters. They were the daughters of the evangelist Philip. And they were prophets. We wish we knew more about them—their names, the insights from God that they shared with the Christians in and around Caesarea, the Roman capital of Palestine. But what we know is enough and it is stunning—four women, unmarried women (“virgins”), proclaiming the word of God, the will of God, to the Christians of Caesarea. Luke reports their ministry with no hint of disapproval. Paul honors them and their ministry by accepting the hospitality of their family, staying in their home for a period of time at the end of the third missionary journey. In one of the first references to women in Acts, we hear the prophet Joel and the apostle Peter announcing that men *and women* will be prophesying in these last days—speaking for God, speaking forth the message of God. Now here in one of the last references to women in Acts, we see four single women doing just that. It may have been beyond the sexist expectations of their culture, but it certainly was not beyond the expectations of the God who created them, of God's Son who saved them, of God's spirit who gifted them, of God's people who benefited from their prophetic ministry, or of the leaders of God's church who worked side by side with them in the spread of the gospel, beyond gender stereotypes, beyond sexism.

Chapter 6 ~ *Beyond RANK*

Following Jesus to a place we've never been...

...beyond CLASSISM

"...the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution." (Acts 6.1)

Class Act

Class. Sometimes we think that sharp class distinctions are from another place—like the caste system of India—or another time—like the Middle Ages with its nobles and knights and serfs. But social stratification is a reality around the world today and even in democratic societies where “all men are created equal.” Not all people *are* men, and most people aren't *treated* as equals even if they are created that way.

What is the church to make of its social settings and the human propensity to form fairly fixed class identities? The church in China, the church in India, the church in Kenya, the church in Brazil, even the church in the USA? How should the church be the church amidst persistent social stratification whose main goal is to protect class status, even if it means persecuting other classes?

In light of these questions, this chapter explores how all classes—those shaped by political, economic, gender, ethnic, and other social forces—were welcomed and valued in the early church. We look once again in the book of Acts, this time for examples of how the church did and can live beyond rank, beyond class.

The cultural climate of the first century AD in which the church was first planted and grew was thoroughly *hierarchical*. The societal structure featured strata based largely on *economic* forces. Romans who owned lots of land and controlled production made up the small upper class. Then there was a small middle class of retainers,

artisans, shopkeepers, and merchants. Just about everyone else was lower class—workers, servants, farmers—or slaves.

But there were many other factors involved in the complex social structure of the Roman world. Kinship counted, so there was a relational component (clans and tribes). Ancestral identity was crucial in determining who could hold political office and serve in higher military ranks. Gender was an obvious factor in the thoroughly patriarchal system. Racial and ethnic identity was always in play, even though the dynamic was different from our experience. (For instance, slavery was not race-based the way it was in America.) Jewish law created its own unique categories that affected a person's legal, societal, or religious status. Acts will introduce us to such people as tanners, eunuchs, Samaritans, and Gentiles, all of whom faced legal and therefore social limitations.

One dynamic—the “patron-client” relationship—was another reality that worked to the mutual benefit of both parties but was still based on hierarchical distinctions. A patron offered an economic safety-net, funded political aspirations, underwrote business projects, facilitated marriage arrangements, etc. A client on the other hand stood ready to serve the interests of the wealthy patron in a wide range of pursuits.

Class Dismissed

The Gospels tell us that for his followers Jesus struck a direct blow at class distinctions, which flourished in Roman and Jewish societies of the first century AD. He was born into a family that bridged the peasant and artisan classes. Joseph was a small town carpenter, but the family was definitely lower class. On the other hand Jesus was thoroughly familiar with the whole range of social ranking in his day. Nazareth, his boyhood home, was only four miles from Sepphoris, a major Gentile urban center, where he would have at least observed the whole socio-economic mix. His teachings refer to slaves, peasants, merchants, wealthy landowners, and kings. Throughout his ministry he encountered Jewish kings, high priests, teachers of the law, as well as Roman governors and military officers (centurions). He was especially attentive to tax collectors, a class that was at once Jewish but worked for Rome, at once well-off but despised by Jews. Many of Jesus' parables featured farmers, domestic

servants, merchants, and masters. His experience and teachings show that Jesus' mindset went well *beyond class*.

The religious movement that sprang from the death and resurrection of this peasant Rabbi emulated his trans-class principles. Paul's classic statement regarding class is Galatians 3.28: "*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*" Elsewhere Paul challenged Christ-followers to show mutual regard for one another across class lines (Philemon; Philippians 2.3; 1 Corinthians 7.21, 11.17-34; 1 Timothy 6.1). The Letter of James leaves no place for class-based discrimination, especially economic (2.1-6, 5.1-6). In the writings of John believers are advised about their attitudes toward wealth (Revelation 3.17-18) and their actions toward the poor (1 John 3.17). But it is in the book of Acts that we see these attitudes acted out.

Class in Acts

Acts 1.1-5 ~ "Most Excellent"

The issue of social status emerges immediately in the opening verses of Acts. In Luke's prologue to Volume 2 he addresses the same recipient as in Volume 1—Theophilus. An important clue to the identity of Theophilus is the adjective "most excellent." The term was customarily used for Romans with "equestrian" rank. An *equus* achieved his inheritable status on the basis of wealth (an estate of a certain size). He wore a gold ring and a special tunic with a purple stripe to mark his privileged status, second only to the senatorial class. This equestrian class of wealthy, landed Romans filled the senior administrative and military assignments across the Empire.

This fits the way the adjective is used in the book of Acts. Luke always uses "most excellent"—in a letter from a Roman army officer (23.26), in an address by a Roman lawyer (24.3), and in an address by a Roman citizen (Paul) (26.25)—to refer to an imperial provincial governor in his role as a judge. This raises the very real possibility that Theophilus was a significant Roman government official or Roman judge.

But here's the interesting thing. Although the adjective appears in Luke 1.3—"most excellent Theophilus"—it has been dropped in Acts 1.1. Why? Some think that,

when Luke addressed Theophilus with his rank in the gospel, Luke was still a seeker, eager for the “certainty” that Luke promises in Luke 1.4. But now Theophilus has become a faithful follower of Jesus and as brothers in Christ he and Luke have moved *beyond rank*. The class differences are still a social reality, but they no longer apply in the body of Christ. It is also possible that Theophilus and Luke had a “patron-client” relationship; writing materials were extremely expensive in the first century, so a literary patron would have been essential. In either case Luke is operating in Christ *beyond class*.

Acts 2.1-21 ~ “All flesh,” “Everyone”

On the first Pentecost after the resurrection, God’s Spirit directed Jesus’ apostles to begin their role as public witnesses. In doing so, they reached *beyond rank and class* in several ways—geographically, politically, culturally, religiously, and racially. Their audience represented numerous nations, a variety of native languages, Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism. (2.5-13)

The apostles’ address to that socially diverse multitude spoke to two other cross-class realities. First, whom God’s message was *from*. The Spirit had empowered “sons” and “daughters,” both “men” and “women,” to be witnesses of the risen Lord, even though they are characterized as the bottom of the heap class-wise—“slaves.” (2.17-18) Second, whom God’s message was *for*. “Everyone!” Regardless of class or rank. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (2.21)

Acts 2.37-41 ~ “For you, and all who are far away”

This passage introduces us to the first converts to Christ. It may seem obvious, but it is important to affirm that incorporation into Christ had nothing to do with class or rank, nothing to do with wealth or kinship, nothing to do with gender or ethnicity. A heart-felt faith, a repentant mind, and openness to God’s forgiveness secured the presence of God’s Spirit and the promise of God’s salvation. Surrender to Christ in baptism was the response that all seekers shared. The apostles affirmed this by including “you” and “all those far off.” In a culture where affiliations were based on

property, gender, ethnicity, and above all wealth, the society of Jesus was uniquely *beyond class*.

Acts 2.42-47; 4.32-37 ~ “All things in common”

Cultural class was determined by economic status. A few controlled more property and possessions than they could ever need, some lived day to day barely supporting themselves and their families, and many simply never had enough. The economy of the early church could not have been more different. It was based not on amassing and maintaining and multiplying wealth but on sharing. *“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.”* (2.44-45)

The same situation prevailed well into the early days of the church. In spite of persecution (which invites the “hedgehog” effect of self-protection) and numerical growth (which invites tribalism, coalescing into kinship-based cliques), the church continued to resist economic classism. Of course some believers owned property and others did not, but *“no one claimed private ownership of any possessions.”* (4.32) They considered their possessions as the common property of the body of believers, selling property as needed to make it available to the needy. (4.34-35) A landed Hellenistic Jew nicknamed Barnabas became the model of living beyond economic class distinctions. (4.36-37)

Acts 4.1-31; 5.17-42 ~ “Obey God rather than man”

The work of the witnesses eventually brought persecution from various classes of religious and political rulers. How would the church respond? Would it yield to the worldly authority figures that controlled and maintained social rank? First, the apostles Peter and John were arrested by “the priests, the captain of the temple, and the Sadducees” — representatives of religious rank, military rank, and economic wealth. (4.1) Next, they stood trial before *“their rulers, elders, and scribes assembled in Jerusalem, with Annas the high priest, Caiaphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family.”* (4.5-6) This body was the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jews. Their

question, their concern? *“By what power”* do you do these things? Peter knew he was seriously outranked and addressed his judges accordingly—*“Rulers of the people and elders.”* (4.8) But Peter and John refused to function under the limitations of class and rank—*“Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.”* (4.19-20)

In the next chapter all the apostles join in the preaching at the Temple and find themselves in prison. They are released by divine means (angel), return to the scene of the crime (Temple), and recommit the crime (proclaiming the resurrection). When they are finally located by the authorities, they appear before the same cast of rulers and judges—the Sanhedrin—who demand an explanation. The incredulous high priest sputters, *“We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.”* It is not a statement or a question; it is an accusation. The answer of the apostles is telling: *“We must obey God rather than ‘man’”* [human authority]. Even as they submit to the authority of these high-ranking officials, they reject it. Their lives, their ministries operate beyond rank.

Acts 6.1-6 ~ Caring beyond Culture

The opening paragraph of chapter 6 provides yet another example of how the early church struggled against the forces of classism as they sought to live out the example and teachings of Jesus. Hellenistic Jewish widows were being overlooked in the Jerusalem church’s financial distribution to the needy (see above). A number of class-related factors are involved. They were Jewish, by race and by religious upbringing. They were Hellenistic (Greek), by native language and culture. They were women, second-class citizens in both Roman and Jewish society. And they were widows, among the most economically vulnerable in that social structure. In mobilizing to address this situation, the church had to face and overcome many of the most powerfully divisive characteristics of social class—*race, religion, language, culture, gender, and poverty*. In a move that would be labeled (libeled?) as “politically correct” by many today, the congregation in Jerusalem, guided by the apostles, chose servants

who were culturally similar to the victims themselves so as to correct the oversight (the seven all have Greek names). When the congregation might have been tempted to ignore the complaint that affected only a minority of the congregation, the church and their leaders chose to live above and beyond class.

Acts 8-10 ~ Authority...figures!

Chapters 8-11 of the book of Acts introduce us to a fascinating array of men of rank in the first century world. Each of these converts represents a form of social significance, a class status that they carried as a badge of honor in this heavily hierarchical social setting.

Beyond spiritual authority. First we meet Simon the Great, a Samaritan mage. (8.4-25) Simon was renowned across the Mediterranean, as far as Rome, for his magical skills. At the preaching of Philip and along with other Samaritans, Simon came to faith in Jesus and surrendered himself in baptism. This magician, at the top of his game and fame, became submissive to the lordship of Jesus. But letting go of authority is never easy. Neither is the notion that wealth is the key to obtaining and maintaining influence. Simon offered to pay Peter and John handsomely for the authority to bestow God's Spirit on others. Their refusal stands as a reminder that status in the kingdom is not a matter of rank or riches.

Beyond political authority. Next we catch up, like Philip did, with the Treasurer of Ethiopia. (8.26-39) We are uncertain of his religious identity. Was he a full convert to Judaism (a proselyte) or a less formal but committed follower of the God of Israel (a God-fearer). But there is no doubt about the man's political and financial influence. There is also evidence of personal wealth—the ability to finance a journey from Ethiopia to Judea, to hire a carriage for the long trip, and to afford a scroll of Isaiah. He had already made the worship of God a priority and sought God's wisdom in scripture. But now this wealthy powerful man humbly accepted the gospel instruction of Philip, yielded his life to Christ in faith and baptism.

Beyond judicial authority. Third there is the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, later known as the apostle Paul. (9.1-18) His authority was derived from the high priest in

Jerusalem in his role as chief justice of the supreme court of the Jews (Sanhedrin). As Luke put it, “*he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke [the Lord’s] name.*” His orders sent Saul to Damascus where Jews in the synagogues there were coming to faith in Jesus. Saul was to arrest them and return them to Jerusalem for trial. But an encounter with the risen Lord and mentoring by a Christ-follower in Damascus named Ananias brought Saul to faith and baptism. His delegated judicial authority became delegated apostolic authority to promote rather than hinder the gospel.

Beyond military authority. Finally this section of Acts records the conversion of Cornelius, an officer of the Roman army stationed in Judea. (10.1-48) He had become a God-fearer, having been attracted to the monotheism and morality of Judaism. But he was still a Gentile and an active representative of the army of the oppressors. It took a vision to Peter, a vision to *Cornelius*, and a special gifting of God’s Spirit to Cornelius and his Gentile friends in order to convince Peter to even visit the home of the centurion, let alone share the gospel with them and baptize the believers among them. Finally with those three divine “nudges” Peter was about to move beyond rank.

Clearly Luke was eager to show that the fledgling Christian movement was not only for peasants and slaves, and in so doing he teaches us that membership in that movement incorporated and transcended class. Right in the midst of this section full of authority figures, Luke illustrates the Lord’s (and Peter’s) love for the low class—a Jewish man with a Greek name whom he healed of paralysis, a charitable woman with a Hebrew and Greek name whom he raised from the dead, and a tanner (an “unclean” profession to Jews) with whom he spent the night.

Acts 13-21 ~ Realities of Rank

The missionary journeys of Paul, which dominate the next nine chapters in the heart of Luke’s discourse, feature numerous encounters demonstrating how evangelists reached out to and the church incorporated men and women from a wide variety of social ranks. At the foot of the cross they were all the same—beyond class and rank.

The congregation of Antioch, which sent out Paul and his companions, was led by five teachers and prophets whose racial diversity we have already taken note of. But

the rank of one of the five, Manaen, deserves further notice here. Luke describes him as “co-nursed” with Herod the tetrarch, Herod Antipas, a son of Herod the Great and ruler of Galilee and Perea. This Herod never held the title “king” but ruled as a virtual king of the Jews. The term is translated in a variety of ways: 1) his mother was also Antipas’ wet nurse; 2) he was raised with Antipas and remained a life-long friend; 3) he was an official member of Antipas’ royal court. In any case Manaen had stepped away from a position of great influence and possibly political rank to follow Jesus in faith and lead the great missionary congregation in Antioch.

On the first missionary journey Barnabas and Saul encountered Sergius Paulus, the proconsul in Paphos, the capital of the Roman province of Cyprus. (13.6-12) Astonished by the teaching and miraculous powers of the missionaries, the governor came to faith in Jesus. He serves as a kind of climax to the persons of authority and influence we saw in chapters 8-10. He is the highest-ranking political official converted to Christ in the book of Acts.

Paul and Silas’ visit to Philippi in northern Greece on the second journey provides another interesting example of relative rank among early converts. (16.11-40) In that significant Roman military outpost, the missionaries touched the lives of three distinct classes. First, there was Lydia, a wealthy merchant woman. As a “seller of purple” she would have associated with wealthy and powerful patrons of the upper class, the only people who could have afforded such an expensive luxury as clothing dyed with purple. Second, they ministered to a slave girl, who lived at the mercy of traveling salesmen who bartered her supposed ability to read omens and tell fortunes. Third, there was a complex interaction with a low-level government functionary, a Roman jailer. Lydia and the jailer became believers. In this one Roman colony Christian evangelists offered the good news of salvation to seekers in a way that crossed some of the most disparate lines of rank and class.

During Paul’s ministry in Ephesus on his third journey, he interacted again with a variety of social classes. (19.1-20.1) His ministry elicited a strong reaction from the merchant class, in the person of Demetrius the silversmith. They warned of negative effects on the religion of the city’s patron goddess Artemis. When the complaints

snowballed into a major civic protest, Roman provincial officers (Asiarchs) advised Paul to avoid the theater where the demonstration raged. In other words the early church was not naïve about the realities of rank—economic, religious, or political; but they were not defined by class or dependent on it.

Acts 22-28 ~ Rank upon Rank

The final chapters of Acts are dominated by Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, his trials in Jerusalem and Caesarea, a sea voyage to Rome, and his incarceration in Rome. Along the way Paul was, from one perspective, at the mercy of individuals of high rank. Accused by Jews of disturbing the peace in the Temple in Jerusalem, Paul was "rescued" from a mob but arrested by a contingent from the Roman garrison, including Roman soldiers, centurions, and a tribune. When hearings before the chief priests and Sanhedrin failed to clarify the charges and when an assassination plot against Paul was uncovered, the tribune sent him to the Roman capital of Judea in Caesarea. There over a period of around two years Paul was imprisoned, punctuated by hearings before a parade of powerful Romans. First came Antonius Felix, Roman procurator (governor) of Judea, then his successor Porcius Festus, and finally Herod Agrippa II, King of the Jews. When it became clear that the Roman rulers were clueless about how to handle his case and were ready to send him back to Jerusalem, Roman citizen Paul appealed to the highest human authority he knew—the Roman emperor, Nero himself.

So Paul was at the mercy of the authority (and whims) of the highest ranking people of his worlds—both Jewish and Gentile. He acquitted himself well in all those hearings, speaking respectfully but never compromising his principles. And he maintained a steady conviction that his only Lord was Jesus Christ. He spoke to Felix "*concerning faith in Christ Jesus, ...justice, self-control, and the coming judgment.*" (24.24) To Festus he spoke "*about a certain Jesus, who had died, but whom Paul asserted to be alive.*" (25.19) Paul's audience with King Agrippa came with all the trappings of authority: he arrived with his wife "*with great pomp, and they entered the audience hall with the military tribunes and the prominent men of the city*"—rank upon rank. (25.23) Paul calmly rehearsed his whole conversion story, concluding with the affirmation that "*the Messiah*

must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.” (26.23)

The book ends with Paul in Rome, guarded by Roman soldiers, under Roman detention, awaiting a Roman trial before the Roman emperor. People of rank and class had him under their authoritative control. But, according to Luke, Paul still found opportunity to preach about God’s kingdom and his Lord Jesus Christ “*quite openly and unhindered.*” Paul’s ministry and the witness of the early church continued to flourish beyond rank and class.

Chapter 7 ~ *Beyond WALLS*

Following Jesus to a place we've never been...

...beyond DEFEATISM

"...proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ boldly and without hindrance." (Acts 28.31)

What about the Walls?

"Unhindered" —the last word in the book of Acts is "unhindered." There is something wonderful and wonderfully paradoxical about that word, which turns out to be a major theme throughout the thirty years or so in the life of the early church as chronicled in Acts. The word is wonderful because it highlights the power of God and the faithfulness of the early followers of Jesus. The word is paradoxical because the early church faced obstacle after obstacle, from within and from without, from the challenges of human selfishness, to the challenges of the God's church living up to God's expectations, to the challenges of a culture which continually tempted the church to conform itself to the spirit of the age rather than the Spirit of God. Any one of these obstacles could have left the early church feeling defeated. Instead its members lived their lives and pursued their ministries "unhindered!"

Today's barriers to the maturation of Christian congregations and their members are just as dangerous, just as onerous, and just as numerous as they were in the first century. There are almost as many books, articles, and websites devoted to barriers to church growth as there are devoted to principles of church growth. And the lists are telling: many of the obstacles are internal! Low self-esteem (personal and congregational). A shortage of volunteers, lack of contact with the community, no follow-up with visitors. Lack of vision, purpose, outreach, assimilation, focus, and finances. Fear of change—change of leadership, of worship style, of power structures. Absence of prayer, of unity, of mature leadership. Too much conflict, too much

comfort. We might get the impression that we, the church, are our own worst enemy. We might get the impression that we've already been defeated.

Some sources prefer listing the positive qualities that characterize strong and growing congregations. They confirm the same impression. What makes or breaks a congregation is often internal—attention to scripture, to spiritual maturation, to worship, to evangelism, to wise use of financial resources, to making disciples, to training leaders, to loving and living in meaningful relationship with one another. Failing to attend to these principles and practices makes us our own worst enemy. The task seems too large, the walls too formidable, the challenges too many. The characteristics of the church to which we aspire could in and of themselves leave us feeling hindered, discouraged, defeated.

The book of Acts, the book of the “unhindered” church, supports the notion that many of our greatest impediments are internal to the life of our congregations. Acts also reminds us that the early church faced many obstacles whose source was external to the life of the church but had a significant effect on it. Acts also reveals that some obstacles are from God, meant to guide and direct Christians in fulfilling God's will for their lives and ministries. Either way, with walls internal or external, the nature of the Lord's church in Acts demands that we let Jesus take us to a place we may never have been, unhindered by what hinders us. Impossible? Beyond imagination? The life of the early church shows us that it was not only necessary but possible to live beyond barriers, beyond defeatism.

Living beyond the Barriers

Overcoming the Absence of their Lord (1.1-11)

The first barrier that faced the followers of Jesus after his death was his death, and that first barrier could have been the last. The disciples could have drifted back to their previous lives and occupations, the memory of Jesus nothing more than a sweet but fading recollection. That's the way we meet the apostles in Acts 1.1-8. The death of Jesus had left them lacking conviction, confused over the nature of the kingdom of God, and at a loss for any purpose for their lives. How did they overcome that hindrance?

They didn't. Jesus did. The resurrection of Jesus provided them with a renewed conviction that he was the Messiah, corrected their confusion about the nature of God's kingdom, communicated their Master's marching orders, and commissioned them for ministry throughout the world. The apostles would have been defeated, were defeated, in the very first act of Acts, were it not for the resurrection of Jesus. Instead of being paralyzed by his death, they were unhindered, prepared to leap the barrier of death with the message of life.

Jesus' ascension in Acts 1.9-11 was a potential barrier to fulfilling that ministry. It left them without their mentor, their model, their master. The leader they had followed for so long was now gone. Jesus' absence could have caused its own kind of paralysis, the paralysis of the apprentice who is accustomed to letting the journeyman take the lead, do the job, with the assistance of the apprentice. How did they overcome that hindrance, the barrier of his absence? They didn't. Divine messengers appear with a question. Why do you stand looking into heaven? The question implies another question: Don't you have a job to do? Didn't Jesus give you a commission, assign you to a task? Shouldn't your response to his absence be a strong sense of his presence? Then the messengers added some information: The teacher will return? They knew what that meant. Jesus had told parable after parable about workers who wait for the return of their master by working. Thanks to the words of the messengers, Jesus' glorious exaltation at the ascension was transformed from a paralyzing absence to an invigorating sense of his presence.

Overcoming the Loss of Leadership (1.12-26)

Even after their obedient return to Jerusalem, hindrances cropped up that could have defeated the fledgling followers. They were leaderless without their Lord. Their recently risen and returned master had risen in a different way—not back into their earthly presence but out of it. They were directionless without their shepherd. The one they had literally followed for years had now sent them on, sent them out, sent them out on their own. They were fearful of the forces and foes that had orchestrated their Lord's death. If they tried to keep the movement alive, they might be its next martyrs.

And they had a sharp sense of abandonment by one of their own—Judas. Into the leadership vacuum stepped Peter, organizing and energizing the shepherdless flock for action. Into the fractured fellowship stepped Matthias, just as qualified as Judas to tell the story of Jesus’ life and ministry and to take the lead in witnessing to his resurrection. And they dealt with their fears through faith, faithful prayer.

Overcoming Question and Criticism (2.1-47)

The preaching of the gospel in Acts 2 was not without its barriers. For one thing there was the crowd: How could they communicate with so many people from so many places? For another thing there were questions borne of confusion: “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” “How is it that we hear, each of us, in our own languages?” “What does this mean?” “What shall we do?” The apostles could have gotten bogged down explaining how Galileans, looked down on by most Jews, were capable of communicating so compellingly. They could have fallen into the trap of trying to explain the phenomenon (speaking in tongues) rather than focusing on the message. Instead they cut right to the point—what is happening is due to the Spirit of God and the message we bring is about the Messiah of God. Then there was the mockery. Either because the various languages sounded like babbling to some of the Jews gathered for Pentecost or because they wanted to discredit the speakers, some listeners sneeringly suggested they must be drunk. How did they overcome the barriers of the crowd, the confusion, the questions, and even the mockery? They didn’t. God did; God whose mighty works they recounted. God’s Spirit did; the Spirit whose powerful presence enabled them to communicate. And God’s Son did; the Son whose good news they rehearsed and whose commission they carried out.

Overcoming Competing Priorities (3.1-26; 9.32-43)

Another hindrance that could have left the early feeling defeated was the physical need that surrounded them. According to the gospels, when Jesus first sent them out, he told them to mimic his ministry—his healing, his exorcisms, as well as his preaching. But it would have been easy for the apostles to have been overwhelmed by

needs for healing. Instead of abandoning preaching for healing or healing for preaching, the early Christians turned each opportunity to meet physical needs into an opportunity to meet spiritual needs. Peter and John were not limited by the “lame” expectations of the lame man at the Temple (chapter 3). They had something better than a handout; they gave him a healing hand. Then they preached the good news of Jesus to the crowd that gathered in response to the healing. Peter’s healing of Aeneas and raising of Tabitha (9.32-42) exercised the healing power of Jesus while keeping the focus on the person of Jesus—“Jesus Christ heals you.” The early church worked hard not to allow one ministry to become a hindrance to the accomplishing of another ministry.

Overcoming Persecution (4.1-31; 4.32-5.16; 6.12-8.3; 12.1-25; etc.)

Persecution was an obvious hindrance which could have left early Christians utterly defeated in their efforts of live out and preach out the good news. Amazingly enough, situations of persecution, even harsh physical punishment, left them unhindered. When Peter and John were arrested in the Temple for preaching Christ, they not only preached Christ during their trial, they returned to preach Christ at the Temple, the very thing the court had ordered them not to do (chapter 3). The same thing happened to the Twelve in 4.32-5.16. This time they were flogged for preaching, but not before they evangelized to the accusers and after which they returned to the scene of the crime to recommit the crime.

Stephen’s stoning resulted from openly preaching about Jesus in his home synagogue, in the supreme court where he was tried, and even as he was being stoned (6.12-8.3). Philip fled the persecution in Jerusalem, but his flight furnished him with the opportunity for expanded proclamation of the gospel (8.4- 40). He preached to people he never would have dreamed of reaching—Samaritans and an Ethiopian—were it not for the persecution that drove him from home. The trend continues in Peter’s imprisonment in chapter 12, Paul’s stoning in chapter 14, Paul and Silas’ beating and imprisonment in chapter 16, and so on.

Fear of persecution manifested itself in a different way in chapter 9. Saul, an active persecutor of Christians had become a believer in Damascus. He had fellowshiped and worshipped with the Christians there and evangelized among the Jews of Damascus for around three years. But when Saul returned to Jerusalem, the Christians there were afraid of him and shunned him. It took one brave and faithful saint named Barnabas to come to Saul's side and, risking his own reputation, convince the other believers of Saul's sincerity.

Acts ends with a series of trials and imprisonments endured by Paul. In every situation Paul shared with his captors and accusers the good news of Jesus. Just to emphasize how "unhindered" the emissaries of Christ were by persecution, notice the first word in Acts 14.3. The leaders of the town of Iconium were agitated by the presence of Paul and Barnabas; eventually they would attempt to stone them. "So!" – so the missionaries remained longer, undaunted, unhindered by the threat of opposition and persecution!

Overcoming Need and Greed (5.1-11, 6.1-7; 8.18-24; 11.27-30; 13.6-12; 16.16-24)

Other potential hindrances that could have robbed the early believers of their joy and left them defeated included the size of the growing church and the enormity of the needs among the believers. When the apostles realized that they were overlooking the needs of some Christian widows, they reacted decisively but humbly, appointing others to meet the overlooked needs (6.1-7). When a famine threatened to overwhelm one congregation (Jerusalem), others (notably Antioch) moved to meet their needs (11.27-30). When financial need continued to plague the church in Jerusalem, Paul organized a massive relief effort among the churches of Turkey and Greece, the reason for so many fellow travelers on his third missionary journey (20.4).

Greed for money (5.1-11), greed for spiritual authority (8.18-24), greed for political influence (13.6-12), and greed for commercial success (16.16-24) all arose in the hearts of hearers and heeders of the gospel. In each case the response was swift. Ananias and Sapphira died, Simon the sorcerer sought repentance, Elymas Bar-Jesus was blinded, and the slave girl's owners lost their meal ticket.

Overcoming Exclusivism (10.1-48; 11.1-18; 15.1-35)

Legalism could have become an insurmountable barrier in the early church. Simon Peter's limited view of God's will made it hard for him to even visit the home of the Gentile army officer Cornelius, let alone preach to him about salvation in Christ, let alone baptize him into Christ. How did Peter overcome this barrier? He didn't. God did. In a series of visions and dreams and spiritual manifestations, God made it clear to Peter and to Cornelius that God welcome this Gentile into the fold just the way he was, without first becoming a Jew (10.1-48). Peter's original exclusivism was shared by some in the church back in Jerusalem. When Peter returned there he faced criticism. How did he overcome the obstacle of criticism from within the fellowship of believers? By rehearsing how God had led him to a new understanding, every step of the way. Eventually they were able to rejoice in the conversion of Gentiles along with Peter the evangelist (11.1-18). But the obstacle of legalism had not been eradicated. Some Jewish Christians in Jerusalem clung to the notion that circumcision and other Jewish rituals and regulations were essential for salvation. They were troubled by news that Paul and Barnabas had been baptizing pagans simply on the basis of their faith in Jesus. Acts 15.1-35 tells the story of the Jerusalem Conference, at which the Pharisaical Jewish Christians had their say, followed by presentations by Barnabas, Paul, Peter, and James. They concluded that God had called them to accept Gentiles on the basis of faith in Christ and a potentially huge hindrance to the growth and life of the church was overcome.

Overcoming Isolation

Another potential hindrance to the early church was the geographical distance among congregations of believers. Travel was slow, difficult, and dangerous. If the congregations scattered throughout the Mediterranean world did not keep in touch, they might develop different perspectives, different interpretations, even different doctrines. Just as bad, a kind of isolationism would settle in that would rob the church of its rich diversity and unity. But they did—they did keep in touch. The book of Acts records a number of examples of inter-congregational communication. The Christians

in Damascus had heard of the persecution by Saul in Jerusalem (9.13). The Christians in Jerusalem heard about the conversion of Gentiles in Caesarea and were waiting for an explanation when Peter returned (11.1). The Christians in Jerusalem had heard of evangelistic efforts in Antioch and sent Barnabas to help with the work there (11.22). Later the Christians in Antioch learned of a coming famine in Jerusalem from the prophet Agabus (11.27-28). Christians in Iconium had heard about the devout young believer named Timothy down in Lystra (16.2). And so it goes. Eventually we read how Christians in Rome heard that Paul had been brought as an imperial prisoner from Palestine and showed him hospitality on his final journey to Rome (28.15). Distance and geographical separation could not hinder the communication and unity of the early church.

Overcoming Discouragement

One of the factors that could have been a barrier to the growth of the church and the spread of the gospel is discouragement. There would have been discouragement over the loss of Judas (chapter 1), the greed of Ananias and Sapphira (chapter 5), and the overlooking of the Hellenized widows (chapter 6). Paul and Barnabas may have been discouraged by the paucity of converts on the island of Cyprus, their first stop on the first missionary journey. It is possible that only one person responded to the gospel during months of ministry. Depending on the reasons, Paul and Barnabas would have been discouraged by John Mark's decision to abandon the missionary team on the first missionary journey (chapter 13) and by their sharp difference of opinion over taking John Mark along on the second journey (chapter 15). Ministry in Philippi on the second journey (chapter 16) may have left them discouraged by the spirit of paganism, the opposition from businessmen and magistrates, and the persecution that followed—imprisoned, beaten with rods, placed in the stocks (chapter 16). In Athens Paul was overwhelmed by the idolatry and mocked by philosophers, all for a handful of converts (chapter 17). Corinth brought a discouragement so deep that it took a vision from God to reassure Paul about continuing his ministry there (chapter 18). Imagine Paul's discouragement in Ephesus on the third journey—doctrinal confusion among the

believers, rejection by Jewish leaders, jealous emulation by sorcerers, opposition by the business community (chapter 19).

Later Paul had to face the discouragement of plots against his life, false charges by fellow Jews, a severe beating in the Temple courtyard, arrest, extended incarceration, and a series of trials (chapters 21-26). Then there was the discouragement of a harrowing sea voyage chained as an imperial prisoner to a Roman army officer, a storm at sea, and shipwreck. Once again God communicated with Paul in the midst of his discouragement, sending a messenger to reassure Paul and his storm-tossed captors.

Hindered by the Spirit of God (16.6-10)

One of the most interesting hindrances in the book of Acts is a series of hindrances sent from God. These obstacles clocked the path of Paul but guided him on new paths leading to more fruitful fields of service. Early on the second missionary journey Paul and Silas experienced their first divine hindering. They appear to have been headed for Ephesus, the capital of Asia, but the Holy Spirit forbade them from entering Asia. Then after heading north instead of west, the missionaries were not allowed to enter Bithynia by the Spirit of Jesus. We have no idea what form these divine hinderings took—dream, vision, intuition, earthquake, report of robbers. But they definitely blocked Paul's path and nudged him in new directions. Finally a night vision in Troas indicated that it was God's will for Paul to enter and begin evangelizing Macedonia and on into Europe. Perhaps the two hindrances were God's way of getting Paul to broaden his horizons and expand his vision.

Unhindered! (28.30-31)

The last word of Acts, that wonderful and wonderfully paradoxical last word, serves as one final reminder that the early Christians were not hindered by the many obstacles thrown in their way. Empowered by God's Spirit, encouraged by God's presence, educated by God's son, lived unhindered lives. And this in spite of their circumstances! At the end of Acts Paul is under house arrest, an imperial prisoner, chained to a military guard, awaiting trial at the whim of an unpredictable emperor,

limited in his movement, limited in his ministry. Paul was hindered, but his message, the gospel, was unhindered, unhindered by imperial edicts, judicial calendars, Jewish rejection, or physical incarceration. There he was, for two whole years, “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and *unhindered!*”

The book of Acts reveals quite a list of barriers—some internal, some external, some built by God’s Spirit, some overcome only by the power of God’s Spirit—that could have left the early church feeling defeated even before they were started on their mission to witnessing to what God had accomplished in Jesus Christ. But in the power of God, the church of Acts overwhelmed the walls, breached the barriers, overcame the obstacles. The challenge is left to the church of today to live its life in God unhindered.

Chapter 8 ~ *Beyond BELIEF*

Following Jesus to a place we've never been...

...to BELIEF and BEYOND

"For we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." (Acts 2.20)

Why "Beyond" belief

It might not be a bad idea to comment on the title of this chapter. You may be wondering, "Why beyond belief?" Earlier chapters, like "Beyond Materialism" and "Beyond Sexism," did assume that there was a problem with Christian lifestyles characterized by materialism or sexism. They were bad ideas that the early church struggled against and the contemporary church must as well. But this chapter's title needs to be interpreted differently. We are not suggesting that there is something deficient about faith. There's nothing bad about belief.

It's like Buzz Lightyear saying, "To Infinity and Beyond!" There's nothing deficient about Infinity, but Buzz can still call out "To Infinity and Beyond." Or it's like shopping at "Bed, Bath, and Beyond." There's nothing wrong with beds or baths, but there is more in the store, more to explore, so "Bed, Bath, and Beyond" it is. Maybe it's most like the common phrase "Above and Beyond." There's nothing bad about "above." Beyond is not better than "above." The two go hand in hand—"Above and Beyond."

Before we explore this theme in the book of Acts, we should note that great Christian thinkers from Paul to the present have understood the centrality of faith and the need to move beyond.

Beyond to what? Actions! The apostle Paul and the elder James were the most eloquent New Testament authors on the interrelationship between what we believe and how we live. Read Paul's words in Ephesians 2.8-10 (not just verses 8-9!). He teaches that we are saved by grace, through faith, for good works. James reminds us over and

over that we live lives based on belief but also beyond belief. “What good is it if you say you have faith but do not have works?” (2.14) “Faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” (2.17) I will show you my faith by my works.” (2.18) Faith apart from works is barren.” (2.20) [Abraham’s] “faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works.” (2.22) “A person is justified by works and not by faith alone.” (2.24) “Faith without works is dead.” (2.26).

Numerous early Christian teachers continued the Biblical emphasis on living beyond belief into action. Near the end of the first Christian century (AD 96), Clement of Rome wrote, “And we, too...are not justified by...our works...but by that faith.” He then added, “Let testimony to our good deeds be borne by others.” (1 Clement 30, 32) Polycarp (AD 110-150), after reminding his readers that “you are saved by grace not by works,” admonished them to “walk in [God’s] commandments.” (Letter to the Philippians).

Belief and beyond, a faith that fosters good works, facts to be believed resulting in acts to be lived—this concept was not just taught by Christian leaders, it was acted out by early Christians. It is the message of the book of Acts.

The Gospel, the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, calls us to faith, demands belief, but it calls us to belief and beyond, because the resurrection is not just a doctrine to be believed. The resurrection is a reality that demands a response, a fact that expects an act. It always has.

According to the Gospels, Mary ran to the tomb, ran to tell. Peter and John found the grave clothes, empty like the tomb. Thomas cried out, My Lord and my God! They listened to his commission, they watched him rise, and they obeyed his instructions. They watched and waited, ate and eagerly anticipated. They prepared and prayed and finally preached, preached what God had done in Christ. And what did they preach? The Acts of God!

The first gospel sermon (2.11-37) focused on just that—the Acts of God in Christ.

God promised to place David’s heir on the throne. (2.30)

God did deeds of power through Jesus of Nazareth. (2.22)

God purposed him to be put to death. (2.23)

God raised him from death to life. (2.24, 32)

God exalted him to his place of power. (2.33)

God gave him the Spirit to pour out on his people. (2.33)

God made this Jesus both Lord and Messiah. (2.37)

This Gospel was the focus of faith and it called people to faith. It demanded belief, but belief and beyond. The resurrection was more than a doctrine to be believed, it was a reality that demanded a response, a fact that expected an act.

So the first people to hear the first gospel sermon, the first to understand how God had acted in Christ, wanted to know how to act. And they did. They repented and were baptized. Forgiveness led to fellowship, salvation led to sharing. They taught and learned, and prayed and communed, and shared meals and possessions. They praised God, and praised God, and praised God.

Acts 1-2

1:3-11 ~ From Conviction to Commission

After his resurrection Jesus presented his disciples with a whole new understanding—a new understanding of himself, the risen Lord; a new way of dealing with his death; a new conviction regarding the resurrection; a new conception of the kingdom, new understandings of baptism and of the work of God's Spirit. The realities would form the foundation of the faith his followers held fast and the faith they shared with others. Jesus is risen! Jesus is Lord! Jesus died for a purpose! The Kingdom has come! Baptism has a new spiritual significance! The Holy Spirit is no longer just a power upon us but a presence within us.

But that wasn't all. The new conviction became a new commission.

Sometimes people read this section of Acts and wonder why Jesus planned such a dramatic departure—what we call the ascension. Why not just not show up one day after forty days or so of final instructions? There are a number of good answers. But one factor is surely this. The presence of a mentor can be paralyzing to a student. As long as the mentor is around, the master, the trainer, it's better to let them do what

needs to be done. They can do it more effectively and more efficiently. As long as Jesus was still around, even just showing up periodically, they would experience a kind of pastoral paralysis. But Jesus had commissioned them to act, to act on his behalf. Their presence surely bolstered their faith, his absence was essential to their acting out that faith. Seeing Jesus depart from their presence, knowing that Jesus was and would no longer be physically with them, would have had a liberating and energizing effect. So “know” became “go.” Faith demanded proclamation. Awareness demanded action. Jesus said, “You will be my witnesses.” The white-robed men asked, “Why do you stand here looking into the sky?” New facts led to new acts. Belief, yes, but belief and beyond!

2.12; 2.37 ~ From Realization to Response

As the apostles began their preaching on the day of Pentecost, the attentive listeners were confused. Simple men from Galilee were talking about God’s mighty deeds in languages from their homelands. So they asked a really intelligent question, “What does this mean?” (2.12) They were eager for understanding, eager to turn their bafflement into belief.

So the preachers began preaching. They said:

You already know from the prophet that God promised to pour out his Spirit.

What you need to know is that this is it!

You’ve already heard or seen how Jesus came doing great deeds of power.

What you need to know is that that was God at work in him.

You already know that Jesus of Nazareth was executed.

What you need to know is that his death was part of God’s saving plan.

You already know that God promised not to abandon his Holy One to death.

What you need to know is that God raised Jesus from the dead.

You already know that we’ve been with Jesus, watching and listening.

What you need to know is that we saw him risen from the dead.

You now know that God raised Jesus from the dead.

What you need to know is that God exalted him as Lord and Savior.

But the listeners that day were not satisfied with their expanded knowledge. They had found a new faith in the person of Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah. But it was a new realization that demanded a response. They knew they had to move from belief to belief and beyond.

So they asked a second, equally wonderful question – “What must we do?” (2.37) Their new belief in the saving work of God needed to be supplemented by action. And the preachers were ready with an answer to that question too.

Repent! Reorient your lives toward the will and way of God.

Be baptized! Commit your whole person to the Lordship of Jesus.

Open yourselves to the forgiveness of your sins that God offers through Christ.

Open yourselves to the presence of God’s own Spirit in every area of your lives.

That’s the message of Pentecost, that’s the full gospel. We live on the basis of belief, but belief and beyond, acting in response to the God who has acted among us and in us.

2:42-47 ~ From Conversion to Community

“All who believed” (2.44) – that is what they were called, those three thousand or so who accepted the good news of Jesus’ saving deeds. They were “believers” all right, but they quickly came to be described by what they did – they were identified by their actions. They devoted themselves to shared life. They studied what the apostles had to teach them about Jesus. They communed in remembrance of Jesus’ death. They prayed. They gave their resources to the needy. They worshiped God at the temple. They ate meals together in their homes. They gave thanks and praise to God. Belief cannot be separated from life. Faith does not function without following. Doctrine does not exist apart from deeds. At its best belief, especially right belief – orthodoxy – is always intertwined with action, especially right action – orthopraxy!

4.13-31 ~ From Silence to Speech

After preaching the good news of Jesus Christ in the Temple one day, Peter and John were arrested and warned by the Supreme Court of the Jews “to speak no more to anyone in this name.” (4.17) They might have reasoned, it’s enough to believe the right

thing, even if we don't get to share it. But believing was not enough. So first they warned the members of the Court that action was not an option for them, even if it meant disobeying the Court's orders. (4.19-20) Then they gathered with other believers and prayed, not for protection but for boldness—the boldness to speak, the boldness to heal, the boldness to act! (4.29) And they did! (4.31) So the command to silence was supplanted by the confidence to speak. Sound faith became bold proclamation.

4:32-37 ~ From Believers to Benefactors

The same dynamic of faith and action, of believing the saving facts and doing the acts that flowed from that faith, continued as the church grew. “The multitude of those who believed” is still the designation of the early followers of Jesus. But those designated as “believers” are described not by what they believed but by what they did. The apostles *gave* their testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. Those with disposable property *sold* some of their possessions, and *brought* the proceeds, and *laid* them before the apostles. The apostles gave away those goods as eagerly as they had shared the gospel. They *distributed* them among the needy. Barnabas was a perfect example of the process. He *sold* a field, *brought* the money, and *laid* it before the apostles for distribution. They gave, they sold, they brought, they laid, they distributed, they gave. The believers lived a life of faith, but they also lived lives of active service. It was beyond belief!

The “acts” of the believers continued throughout the book of Acts. The apostles did “signs and wonders,” healing the sick, curing the unclean. (5.12-16) They kept teaching in the Temple courtyards in spite of repeated arrests. Their explanation to the Supreme Court is interesting: “we are witnesses to these things.” (5.29) Their identity was determined not only by what they were (“witnesses”) but by what they must do (“bear witness”). A witness is someone who both sees and tells, believes and acts, not one or the other.

In Acts 6 the Jerusalem church mobilized to provide funds for widows whose economic needs were being overlooked because of cultural differences. The congregation chose the Seven, culturally sensitive believers who acted out their faith in

this financial ministry. Later Stephen, one of the Seven, emulated and expanded the ministry of the apostles by preaching and serving in a synagogue of Jews with the same Greek cultural background. Philip, a colleague of Stephen's, extended the apostolic ministry to the despised Samaritans and to a foreigner from Ethiopia. (Acts 8). Peter launched a pastoral tour toward coastal Judea, ministering to the needs of believers. Throughout this period of expansion outside Jerusalem, believers went above and beyond, putting their faith into action among a amazing array of humanity in need of their Spirit-empowered ministries.

Acts 10.1-48 ~ Two Conversions

The book of Acts and the theme of beyond belief to action reaches a climax in chapter 10. The encounter is usually entitled the "Conversion of Cornelius," from unbelief to belief, to faith in Jesus Christ. But there is another conversion story in chapter 10, the conversion of Peter, from belief to beyond belief, from belief to action. Peter already believed that Jesus was the Messiah, the son of the living God, and he had said so—we call it the Good Confession. But that belief was not enough. He already knew that his Lord had come for and called all people, Gentiles as well as Jews. He had seen Jesus minister to Samaritans, to a Roman centurion, to a Syro-Phoenician woman. He already knew that Jesus had released his followers from the Mosaic food laws. But all that knowledge and all that belief were not enough. Faith in Christ must be acted on; the knowledge of Christ's teachings must be acted out.

Some early Christians would have wondered if the good news of salvation was meant for people like Cornelius, a Gentile, a Roman army officer, an oppressor. But Peter not only should have known better, he did know better. He had already proclaimed that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. He had already ministered to Gentile converts in Jerusalem and to Samaritans in Samaria. But faith in Christ must be continually acted on; the knowledge of Jesus' intentions must be continually acted out.

Still moving beyond belief is never easy. Acting on and acting out our faith is always fraught with challenges. Peter still needed three divine "nudges" in order to

move from believing the right things to doing the right things. First, a vision from God convinced him to go, to go and associate with Cornelius. Second, the report of Cornelius' own divine vision convinced him to preach, to preach to the Gentiles in Caesarea. Finally, the out-breaking of God's Spirit convinced Peter to baptize these Gentiles, just as they were. God himself guided Peter in closing the gap between belief and action.

The same process persists throughout the rest of the book of Acts. But these examples from the first half of the book should suffice to illustrate several aspects of the challenge to move beyond belief to acts.

The Resurrection Challenge—Acts 1 affirmed that, as wonderful as it is to know the power of God as seen in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is also essential to go and share that good news. Knowing demands going.

The Ascension Challenge—Acts 1 also teaches us that the absence of Jesus' physical presence among us is an empowering absence, liberating us not only to believe in him but to act out his ministry among all those for whom he came to seek and to save.

The Pentecost Challenge—In Acts 2 the preaching of the good news of God's acts through Jesus inspired two insightful questions: "What does this mean?" and "What shall we do?" Believing that Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior, and acting out that belief in dynamic community must always go hand in hand.

The 242 Challenge—Acts 2.42-47 introduces us to "believers" who were also "livers," living out their faith. They went "beyond belief" by their devotion to the teaching and ministry of Jesus' apostles, to living and giving in community, to remembering Jesus at the Lord's Supper and sharing suppers with one another, and by living lives of worship and praise.

The Sovereignty Challenge—One of the realities that makes it hard for us to move beyond belief to action is the presence or threat of persecution. Jewish religious leaders could not stop the faith of the first followers, but they did try to stop their actions, their outreach. The early believers dared to declare that they must obey God's authority rather than human authority (5.29). We must be bold to believe and bold to act.

The Peter Challenge—Peter had all kinds of good reasons to avoid contact with Cornelius—religious, racial, political, legal. But thanks to the gentle but persistent persuasion of God’s Spirit, Peter moved from “knowing” to “going”, from believing to doing. (Acts 10)

Recent theologians still affirm the connection. John Wesley (1703-1791) wrote, “true faith...cannot subsist without works.” (*Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament*) In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer asserts that “The Bible never draws the antithesis between faith and good works so sharply as to maintain that good works undermine faith. Grace and active obedience are complementary.”

The philosopher Descartes developed the famous slogan, “I think therefore I am.” The book of Acts offers an alternative—“I believe therefore I live, I act, I do! Are we willing to be satisfied with “What does this mean?” Or are we resolved to press on to “What must we do?” That is our final lesson from the book of Acts—the necessity of “acts,” not without faith, but with belief, belief and beyond!