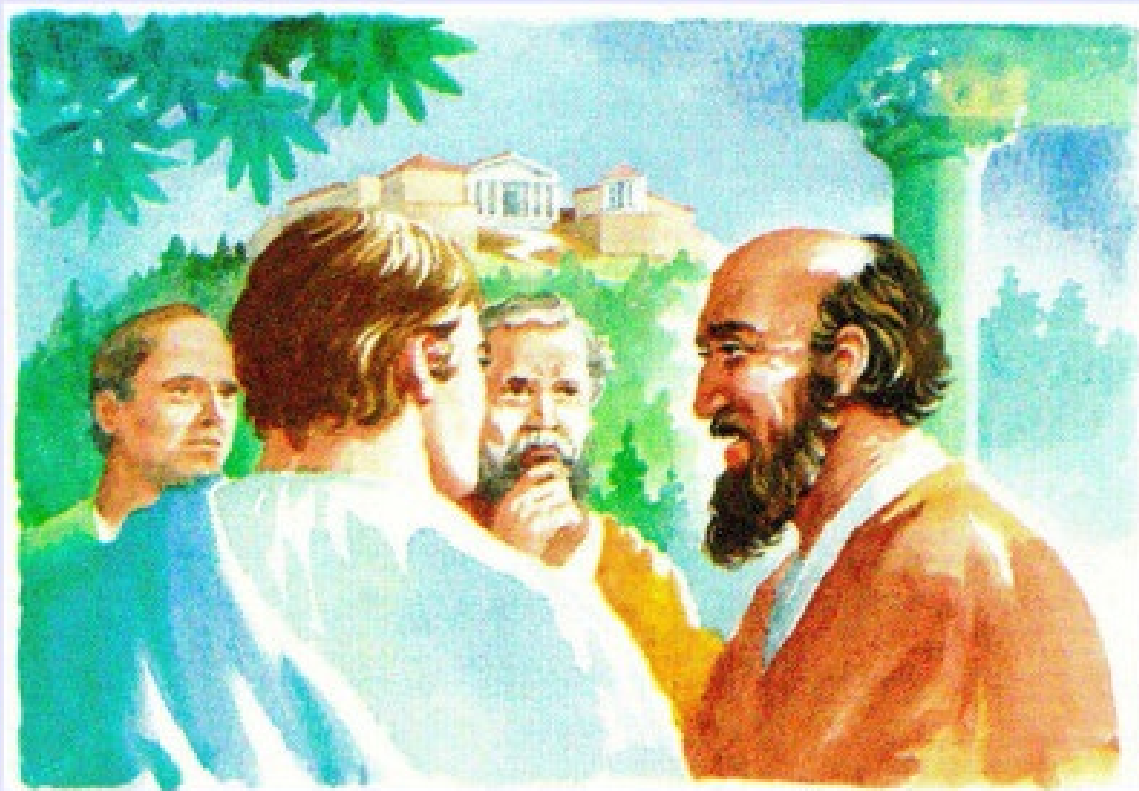


Exploring the Word of God
Acts of the Apostles, Volume 3:
Acts Chapters 8–11



By Paul Kroll



GRACE COMMUNION
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Living and Sharing the Gospel

Exploring the Word of God
Acts of the Apostles
Volume 3: Acts Chapters 8–11

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Acts Chapter 8:

The Church Expands Into Judea, Galilee and Samaria

A young man named Saul (8:1)

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

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

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

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

Luke's phrase "at his feet" may signify that Paul is a leader of the opposition to Stephen. Perhaps he is instrumental in rushing Stephen and dragging him outside of the city to a place of stoning. Luke uses the expression "at the feet" three times in the story of church members selling their property and bringing the money to the apostles (4:35, 37 and 5:2). There it is clear that the expression is meant to convey the apostles' leadership.

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

22:4-5).

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

Persecutes the church (8:1-4)

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

The word used of Paul's activities...can describe the devastation caused by an army or a wild beast tearing its meat. It conjures up a terrible picture of the persecutor as he went from house to house — perhaps every known Christian home and at least every known place of Christian assembly... The relentlessness of the pogrom is underlined by the reference to women being dragged off as well as men. [David J. Williams, *Acts*, New International Bible Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1990), 152.]

Paul was a zealot for Judaism, as he later admits. The proof of his zeal is that he violently persecutes the church (Philippians 3:6; Galatians 1:13, 22).

He probably believes that the new faith is a dangerous distortion of the ancestral traditions he believes in — a distortion that endangers the nation's favor with God. In later years, Paul refers to his devastation of the church as a shameful period in his life (1 Corinthians 15:9; 1 Timothy 1:13). But that understanding comes later, after he is confronted by the risen Christ on the road to Damascus.

Though Luke doesn't say, it is possible that the persecution is directed specifically against Hellenistic Jewish Christians, and those who share Stephen's views, those who downplay the importance of the temple. At least, the Hellenistic believers are the ones whose work Luke now begins to describe (8:4; 11:19). Williams says,

We need not understand by the word all that every member of the church left the city; verse 3 shows that they did not. Luke is prone to use "all" in the sense of "many" (see discussion on 9:35). But even of those who left, many may soon have returned. [Ibid., 151.]

This point is indicated by the fact that the apostles, who seem supportive of Jewish institutions such as the temple, are not forced to flee Jerusalem (8:1). Also, we find disciples in Jerusalem a short time later (9:26). This round of persecution apparently doesn't last long. Luke soon notes that the church throughout Judea, Samaria, and Galilee is living in peace (9:31). Later we will see that the church in Jerusalem is flourishing under the leadership of James. He is called James the Just, and is known for his piety and respect for Jewish institutions. (But even he will be martyred under the urging of the high priest in A.D. 62.) Richard Longenecker points out:

With the martyrdom of Stephen, the Christians of Jerusalem learned the bitter lesson that to espouse a changed relationship to the land, the law, and the temple was (1) to give up the peace of the church and (2) to abandon the Christian mission to Israel. [Richard N. Longenecker, "Acts," *The Expositor's Bible*

Commentary, vol. 9 (ed. Frank E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1981), page 353.]

Church scatters (8:1, 4)

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

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

Philip preaches the gospel (8:5)

The first seven chapters of Acts deal with mission work among Jews in Jerusalem. Luke is now finished with this part of the story, and he begins to describe gospel outreach activities further afield. He mentions that the scattered members of the Jerusalem church flee to other parts of the province of Judea, preaching the gospel as they go (8:1, 4). However, Luke gives no further details about the evangelization of Judea, nor does he mention anything about the churches in other cities of this province. (He is also silent about the work and church in Galilee.)

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

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

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

The intensity of Samaritan feelings against Jerusalem is shown by the Samaritans' refusal of Herod's offer of 25 B.C. to rebuild their temple on Mount Gerizim when it was known that he also proposed to rebuild the Jerusalem temple....The Judean antagonism to Samaria is evident as early as Ecclesiasticus 50:25-26, which lumps the Samaritans with the Idumeans and the

Philistines as Israel's three detested nations and then goes on to disparage them further by the epithets "no nation" and "that foolish people that dwell in Shechem." [Longenecker, 357.]

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

Mission to Samaria (8:5)

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

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

Proclaims Christ (8:5-8)

At first glance, we might assume the mission to Samaria is the first step in the evangelization of Gentiles. However, Jews consider the Samaritans more as schismatics than as Gentiles. (Samaritans kept the laws that distinguished Jews from Gentiles. We will later see that Peter had no problem in going to the Samaritans, but he needs a mind-changing vision before he visits a

Gentile.) To put it another way, the Samaritans are viewed as “half-breeds,” both religiously and racially, by the Jews. But they were thought of more as heretics from the faith rather than outright pagans.

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

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

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

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

(8:5).

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

Historically, the movement of the gospel into Samaria following directly on the heels of the persecution of Hellenistic Jewish Christians in Jerusalem makes a great deal of sense. Doubtless a feeling of kinship was established between the formerly dispossessed Samaritans and the recently dispossessed Christian Hellenists because of Stephen's opposition to the mentality of mainstream Judaism and its veneration of the Jerusalem temple — an opposition that would have facilitated a favorable response to Philip and his message in Samaria. [Longenecker, 355.]

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

The work of the Hellenistic Jews (such as Philip) constitutes a new advance of the gospel and the church. But it occurs in Samaria, a quasi-

Jewish environment. A dispossessed group, but within the boundaries of ancient Israel, is experiencing the outreach of Christ through the church. However, a mission to pagan Gentiles is yet to occur.

Simon the great power (8:9-13)

Luke intertwines his story of the Samaritan mission with that of a famous local religious personality named Simon, generally called Simon Magus or Simon the Sorcerer (Magician). He looms large in the writings of second-century Christians as the first heretic, troubler of the church, and founder of Gnostic Christianity. The early Christian theologian Irenaeus (A.D. 120-202), bishop of Lyons, France, calls Simon the originator of a number of heresies. [*Against Heresies* 1:23.] Justin Martyr, a native of Samaria who died around A.D. 165, says that his countrymen revered Simon as “the first god” or God above all. [*Apology* 1:26.] Luke notes a similar belief about Simon, saying he is known as “the Great Power” (8:10). According to Justin, Simon goes to Rome during the reign of emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-54), where his feats of magic bring him great honor.

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

Peter and John go to Samaria (8:14)

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

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

Samaritans receive the Spirit (8:15-17)

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

Why this delay? Luke does not hint at any deficiency in the Samaritan believers' faith. Philip does not perceive any, and neither do the apostles. Nor do the apostles need to enlighten the Samaritans any further about the faith. (On the other hand, it must be pointed out that Simon's sin is not evident right away, either — it becomes known when he tries to buy the power to give the Holy Spirit.)

An important point may be behind the delay in the evidence of the Holy Spirit for the Samaritan believers. Luke may be implying that the Samaritans

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

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

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

signal the presence of the Spirit (13:52; 16:34; 1 Thessalonians 1:6).

In this case, the Holy Spirit is given only after the laying on of hands. However, we should not assume that this is a requirement in all cases. For example, Luke does not say that the believers converted on Pentecost had hands laid on them (by the apostles or anyone else) before receiving the Spirit (2:38-42). The laying on of hands is also not mentioned in Luke's account of the household of Cornelius receiving the Spirit (10:44-48). The point is that believing in Christ and being baptized is the fundamental path to "receiving" the Spirit, not laying on of hands. F.F. Bruce writes, "In general, it seems to be assumed throughout the New Testament that those who believe and are baptized have also the Spirit of God." [F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Rev. ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), page 169.]

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

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

be regarded as converted but later be “confirmed” by exhibiting a special outward manifestation of charismatic gifts.

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

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

Luke next takes up the story of Peter’s encounter with Simon, who tries to buy the power to distribute the Holy Spirit. “Give me also this ability,” he asks, “so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit” (8:19). Simon had no appreciation for the *inward* operation of the Spirit. He thinks the apostles are using a magic technique worth purchasing, one that will bring him more prestige and power.

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

But Simon doesn’t understand, and has his mind only on physical consequences. “Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me,” he answers (8:24), and that’s the last we hear of him in Acts, or anywhere else in the New Testament. Luke concludes the story of the

church's mission to Samaria with a single-sentence summary that hints at a much larger mission in the territory. Peter and John preach the gospel "in many Samaritan villages," and then return to Jerusalem (8:25).

An angel directs Philip to Gaza (8:26)

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

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

But that's what Philip is told to do — go down the road that leads to the edge of the desert. (The road from Jerusalem to Gaza is 50 miles long, and leads to the main coastal trade route going to Egypt.) Commentators point out that the word "desert" in Luke's account can refer either to Gaza or to the road. Most likely the former is in view here. Apparently, the old town of Gaza is referred to as "Desert Gaza," in distinction to a newer town named Gaza. This is the southernmost of the five main Philistine cities in southwestern Judea. It is also the last settlement before a traveler encounters the barren desert stretching to Egypt.

The Ethiopian official (8:27-28)

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

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

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

The word eunuch (*eunochos*) frequently appears in the LXX and in Greek vernacular writings “for high military and political officials; it does not have to imply emasculation”... Therefore, we are probably justified in taking “eunuch” to be a governmental title in

an Oriental kingdom. [Longenecker, 363.]

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

Eunuch baptized (8:29-38)

As Philip, at the behest of the Spirit, runs up to the Ethiopian eunuch’s chariot, he hears him reading from the book of Isaiah (8:32-33). It is hardly an accident that at the precise moment of Philip’s arrival the Ethiopian is reading a passage that makes him open to the good news about Jesus. The Ethiopian is reading from the Suffering Servant section in Isaiah 53. As Philip approaches the chariot, the eunuch asks him whether the prophet is talking about himself or someone else (8:34).

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

The eunuch halts his chariot, goes to the water and both of them go “down into the water and Philip baptized him” (8:38). The phrase “went down into” implies that the baptism was done by immersion. Jesus himself was baptized this way (Mark 1:9-10). The fact that the official goes “on his

way rejoicing” indicates that he has received the Holy Spirit (8:39). Luke often sees joy as a response to God’s work in the world. [Luke 1:14, 28; 2:10; 6:23; 8:13; 10:17, 20; 13:17; 15:5, 7, 10, 32; 19:6, 37; 24:41, 52.]

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

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

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

Angel takes Philip away (8:39)

Having fulfilled his role with the Ethiopian eunuch, Philip is suddenly snatched away by “the Spirit of the Lord” (8:39). The story of the eunuch’s conversion ends where it began, with God’s presence and direct intervention. Luke is again making the point that the gospel is being preached and people are being converted at God’s direction, not by human desire.

The presence of the gospel out here in the desert of Gaza with this Ethiopian of somewhat murky physical, religious, and ethnic status can only be attributed to the constant prodding of the Spirit. If the good news is being preached out there, it is the work of God, not of people. No triumphal, crusading enthusiasm has motivated

the church up to this point, no mushy all embracing desire to be inclusive of everyone and everything. Rather, in being obedient to the Spirit, preachers like Philip find themselves in the oddest of situations with the most surprising sorts of people. [Willimon, *Acts*, page 72.]

Philip preaches along the coast (8:40)

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

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

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

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Chapter 9: The Conversion of Paul

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

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

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

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

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

Thus it is that Paul sets out toward Damascus with the zeal of an avenging prophet. He has letters from the high priest with authority to extradite any Christians he finds in the synagogues of Damascus. Paul will capture them and return them to Jerusalem for trial and punishment (9:2). Most likely those being hunted down are the Hellenistic Christians who fled Jerusalem, not

those who lived permanently in Damascus. So far as we know, the high priest has no direct authority over the latter, since they are not in his immediate jurisdiction.

Later, Paul explains that the entire council signed the order of extradition he was given (22:5). Luke is pointing out that the Jewish leaders continue to be in the forefront of trying to eradicate the new sect of Jesus believers. Some questions have arisen over exactly what powers of extradition the letters from the high priest gave Paul. Two centuries earlier, Rome had decreed that Jews who fled to Egypt could be extradited to Jerusalem (1 Maccabees 15:15-24). They were then to be punished according to Jewish law.

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

"The way" (9:2)

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

It's easy to see why the word "way" or "road" is a Christian metaphor for

“manner of life.” It has to do with the believers’ understanding that a person needs to walk in the path of God’s salvation, in obedience and faith to him. Opponents, of course, think that the church is walking the wrong path. Outsiders refer to the church not as “the Way” but as “the sect of the Nazarenes” (24:5, 14; 28:22).

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

On the road to Damascus (9:3)

When Luke turns to Paul’s conversion experience, he places him on the highway, near Damascus. Paul has traveled about 150 miles (242 kilometers) from Jerusalem. Damascus is one of the cities of the Decapolis, which is a league of self-governing cities in eastern Syria and the area east of the Jordan river (Matthew 4:25; Mark 7:31). Damascus is a thriving commercial center, part of the Roman province of Syria since 64 B.C. The city has a large Nabatean Arab population, a fact that might figure later into this part of Paul’s life. (The Nabatean kingdom stretched from the desert southward to the Red Sea, and its capital was Petra.) Damascus also has a large Jewish population. Josephus says that 10,500 Jews were killed in the city when the Jewish-Roman war broke out in A.D. 66. [*Wars* 2:561; 7:368.]

The moment of encounter (9:3)

Acts 9 gives us the first of three accounts of Paul’s conversion. The story is also told as part of Paul’s speech before a Jerusalem crowd (22:5-16) and his testimony before Agrippa and Festus (26:12-18). This is one of the most significant events in the early church’s history, and it’s not surprising that Luke gives us three versions of it. Paul himself writes of the importance of

his encounter with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road: “God, who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me” (Galatians 1:15-16).

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

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

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

“Why do you persecute me?”

The voice addresses Paul in Aramaic, something we learn from Paul’s account of the event given before Agrippa (26:14). (Is it because this is the

language Jesus spoke, or the one Paul spoke as a first language?) “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” the voice asks (9:4). The double name is used for emphasis, and is found in other stories of divine calling, including Abraham’s, Jacob’s and Moses’ (Genesis 22:11; 46:2; Exodus 3:4).

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

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

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

Saul could not escape the fact that the Jesus whose followers he had been persecuting was alive, exalted, and in some manner to be associated with God the Father, whom Israel worshiped. He,

therefore, had to revise his whole estimate of the life, teaching, and death of the Nazarene because God had beyond any question vindicated him. Thus he came to agree with the Christians that Jesus' death on the cross, rather than discrediting him as an imposter, fulfilled prophecy and was really God's provision for man's sin and that Jesus' resurrection confirmed him as being the nation's Messiah and mankind's Lord. [Longenecker, 371.]

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

Saul taken to Damascus (9:7-9)

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

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

Ananias has a vision (9:10-12)

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

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

Afraid of Paul (9:13-16)

Ananias is quite hesitant about going to meet Paul. He has heard reports about him and knows that he came to Damascus with authority from the chief priests to arrest Christians. Ananias refers to the Christians as “saints” (*hagioi*). This is the first time Luke uses the term in describing the church community (also in 9:41 and 26:10). The saints or holy ones are those whom God sets apart for his service. All Christians are saints. They are not “saints” because of their own goodness but because of what God does to them, making them his own. Christians are commonly called saints in the New Testament, especially in Paul’s letters. [See, for example, Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 6:1; 2 Corinthians 1:1; 8:4; and Ephesians 1:1.] Even though Paul has persecuted the saints, the Lord insists that Ananias visit Paul. Ananias is told: “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel” (9:15).

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

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

Ananias visits Paul

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

In Acts 22, Luke gives a fuller account of Ananias’ part in the conversion.

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

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

Paul's early preaching

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

The substance of Paul's initial preaching is a basic and simple gospel of Jesus' Messiahship, as understood by the church. Jesus died and was

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

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

But Paul grows more powerful in his preaching and baffles “the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah” (9:22). The verb “proving” used here literally means “placing together,” “bringing together,” or “comparing.” That is, Paul is placing Old Testament references to the Messiah with each other — and alongside their fulfillment in Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. This placing together is meant to lead Jews to see Jesus as the one who fulfilled what the Scriptures say about their hoped-for Messiah.

Paul escapes (9:23-25)

It is only a matter of time before Paul becomes the target of persecution. Luke tells us that after Paul preaches for “many days” in Damascus, the Jews conspire to kill him (9:23). Paul somehow learns of the plot, but getting out

of the city will be difficult. Jewish spies are watching the city gates night and day in hopes of spotting Paul and killing him. But the disciples devise a plan of escape. “His followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall” (9:25; see also 2 Corinthians 11:33). Houses were often part of the city wall, and their upper-floor windows opened to the outside of the city. This is apparently what Luke means by “an opening in the wall” (9:25). Note that Paul now has “followers” — he had become a leader in the Damascene Christian community and probably led a number of people to faith in Jesus.

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

Preaching in Arabia?

The king Paul mentions is Aretas IV (9 B.C.-A.D. 40), the ruler of the Nabatean kingdom, or “Arabia.” Paul’s mention of King Aretas is important because of what it tells us about his movements during the three years between his conversion and first trip to Jerusalem. From Luke’s account in Acts 9 it appears that Paul stays the entire three years in Damascus, preaching in the synagogues, before his escape to Jerusalem. But according to Paul’s letter to the Galatians, he goes “into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus” (1:17). Since Aretas was king of “Arabia,” we may have a reason why the

king's representative in Damascus is involved in the plot to arrest and execute Paul. Why would a Nabatean king and his agent be involved in a plot against Paul? That is to say, why would an Arab ally himself with Jews over matters of interest only to Judaism?

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

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

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

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

- Paul is converted in Damascus (9:1-19);
- he preaches in the synagogues of Damascus for a short time immediately following his conversion (9:19-22);
- he then goes on a prolonged trip into Arabia with the purpose of preaching to Gentiles (Galatians 1:17);
- he returns to Damascus and for the rest of the three-year period, and again preaches in the synagogues there (9:23-25);
- Jews and agents of the Nabatean king try to find and arrest Paul; Paul escapes from Damascus and travels to Jerusalem.

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

Luke is also interested in the nature of Paul's conversion and commission. However, his concern centers more on how the gospel message spreads from Jerusalem, around the eastern end of the Empire, and then to Rome. He

doesn't mention Paul's excursion into Arabia because it veers off the main geographical movement of the gospel that Luke wants to highlight. (For the same reason, Luke says nothing of the church's mission to Galilee.)

Church suspicious (9:26)

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

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

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



Paul in Jerusalem (9:27)

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

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

will as well.

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

In Galatians Paul makes another statement about his visit that seems to contradict what Luke writes. In his epistle, Paul writes that he is “personally unknown to the churches of Judea” (Galatians 1:22). Yet, Luke says Paul preached in public, moved about freely, and had meetings with Peter and James — even staying with Peter. The answer may be that Paul confines his public appearances to debates with the Jewish Hellenists in Jerusalem. Although Galatians says Paul does not meet with the disciples in the churches around Judea, it does not say he doesn’t meet any of the *Jerusalem* believers. The answer may be that Paul’s stay is confined to Jerusalem; he is therefore not known to Christian communities scattered about Judea. Because of the disciples’ suspicion and fear of Paul, they probably would not make any effort to see him anyway.

Speaks boldly (9:28-29)

During his stay in Jerusalem Paul speaks “boldly in the name of the Lord” (9:28). He debates with the Grecian or Hellenistic Jews. This is the same group to whom Stephen preached, and which ultimately led to Stephen’s arrest, trial and death. In a sense, Paul is taking up the work Stephen began. In a bit of irony, Paul ends up at odds with the same group he represented, or

even led, in its conflict with Stephen. Paul's appearance before the Hellenists is actually a witness against them. One of their own — the most zealous one — had made a total about-face regarding Jesus. This dramatic change in Paul should alert the Hellenists to take another look at the facts about Jesus. But their minds are closed. Paul soon finds himself in the same difficulty as Stephen was in. Luke says tersely that the Hellenistic Jews “tried to kill him” (9:29).

Paul goes to Tarsus (9:30)

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

We will learn later that Paul may be a “problem” to the Jerusalem church. The reason is because it wants to maintain good relations with the orthodox Jewish population in the city. But Paul is so hated by the Jews that his mere appearance in Jerusalem stirs up strife, for himself and potentially for the church. That is not to say the church would railroad Paul out of the city against his wishes. There is a more compelling reason for Paul's departure, one Luke doesn't mention in Acts 9. However, he does mention it in Paul's speech before a crowd of Jerusalem Jews. In his defense at the time, Paul speaks of an occasion when he was in the temple praying, and he has a vision. Paul sees the Lord saying to him, “Quick!...Leave Jerusalem

immediately, because the people here will not accept your testimony about me” (22:18).

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

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

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

Church grows (9:31)

Luke’s first panel of material ended with a summary statement about the church and the progress of the gospel in Jerusalem (6:7). The second panel, in keeping with the programmatic prophecy given by Jesus (1:8), describes missionary work in Samaria, as well as parts of Judea. Luke ends the second

panel with the following summary statement: “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, and it increased in numbers” (9:31).

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

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Peter preaches in Judea (Acts 9:32-43)

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

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

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

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

Raised from the dead (9:36)

Peter next goes to Joppa (modern Jaffa, or Yafo). It is 35 miles (56 kilometers) northwest of Jerusalem, 10-12 miles northwest of Lydda. Today, Jaffa is part of greater Tel-Aviv. Joppa is the only natural harbor on the Mediterranean between Egypt and Ptolemais (Acco), to the north. Thus, it serves as a seaport for Jerusalem. Herod the Great built the artificial harbor of Caesarea Maritima, 30 miles north of Joppa, which is an important seaport in

the first century, too.

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

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

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

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

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

As he had seen Jesus do in the case of Jairus’s daughter, he ordered the mourners out of the room and prayed. Then he spoke these words: “Tabitha, get up” (which in its Aramaic form *Tabitha*

kumi would have differed in only one letter from Jesus' command *Talitha kumi* ["Little girl, get up"]). [Longenecker, 382.]

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

Both the raising of Tabitha and the healing of Aeneas mirror similar miraculous works performed by Jesus (Luke 5:17-26; 7:11-16). The accounts in Acts 9 also remind us of the power to heal and to raise the dead exhibited by Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:32:37). Taken together, these biblical accounts show God as one who continues to work through his servants — be they prophets or apostles or his own Son — to show his saving power. God brings his power to bear on behalf of the less-advantaged people of the world. Among those whom he liberates from death and sickness are widows like Dorcas and the poor and disenfranchised who have no one on whom they can rely.

Simon the tanner (9:43)

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

Peter seems to have an open mind regarding Jewish beliefs and practices;

this prepares us for what will come shortly. He will be tested in the next chapter on matters “clean and unclean,” but from a much broader perspective.

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

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

With this short section, Luke informs his readers that the gospel has been preached in the province of Judea by the apostles, at least by Peter (after Philip did so). Now, the story of the gospel in Judea has been told. Peter, the servant of God, has entered the cities of the Plain of Sharon, and has done wonders in the name of Jesus Christ. Many see his work, give God thanks and are converted.

The Christian mission within the Jewish nation has widened from southern Judea to northern Judea. The reader is now prepared for the next leap of the gospel message that must be taken. The good news must be preached to Gentiles, and in areas beyond Judea.

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Chapter 10

The Gospel Goes to Cornelius, a Gentile (Acts 10:1-11:18)

Part 1: Chapter 10

The Gentile challenge

Luke now begins to tell the story of a fundamental turning point in the history of the early church. For the first time Gentiles will be *directly* evangelized and admitted into fellowship with Jewish Christians. As a result, the church will not remain just an offshoot of an ethnic religion (Judaism). It will become a universal body embracing people from every nation and race.

Luke takes great pains to show that this change in the church is the result of God's will and guidance. It does not come about through some human-devised program. This section shows that God, through the Holy Spirit, is bringing the Gentiles into his spiritual body, the church. We will see this in verse after verse describing the account of Cornelius' conversion as a supernatural operation of God. [Acts 10:3, 11-16, 19-20, 22b, 30-33, 44-46; 11:5-10, 12-13, 15-17.]

At the beginning of his two-part work, Luke alerts his readers to the promise that Jesus would be a "light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32). Quoting from Isaiah the prophet, Luke repeats the promise that through Jesus "all people will see God's salvation" (Luke 3:6). Luke also tells us that Paul will carry Christ's name to the Gentiles (9:15). (Ironically, God will open the church's door to the Gentiles through Peter, not Paul.)

But up to this time, the barrier between Jew and Gentile has not been breached, though on several occasions it has been nudged. When the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch (probably already a proselyte or God-

fearer) are converted, for example, almost certainly the issue of the church's attitude to non-Jews comes up. The controversy over the Gentiles is probably avoided only because the Ethiopian lives far away and the Samaritans probably fellowship among themselves in their own congregations. And they are considered "half-Jews" anyway. Thus, the issue of Gentiles directly mingling with Jews can be sidestepped until chapter 10.

But to have Gentiles evangelized directly and en masse, and then to have them fellowship with Jews, is another matter. Jews will be coming into contact with people who are considered impure, and whose food is regarded as unclean. Gentiles will not be living in conformity with Mosaic law. For example, they don't circumcise their children.

Of even greater concern is that Gentiles are idolaters, worshipping many false gods. Granted, they might become converted. But what will be the shape of their day-to-day religious practices? Will they corrupt and contaminate the practices Jews hold sacred? Such issues will soon become major concerns, dividing the church for decades to come.

Meanwhile, the range of the Christian evangelistic program has been steadily broadening — pushing out from Jews in Jerusalem, to Jews throughout Judea, to the Samaritans, to African proselytes. Now the time has come to crash through the "wall of partition." The gospel is taken directly to Gentiles, and questions about their eligibility to be among the people of God have to be dealt with head on.

A test case

A test case is needed to show God's will in this matter: Can Gentiles become Christians, and what is the path toward their becoming disciples? As it turns out, God uses the Roman centurion Cornelius, his family and friends to break down the barrier to the Gentile world. The space Luke devotes to the conversion of Cornelius reveals how controversial it is in the church, and

how important it is to the story of the spread of the gospel. Entire sections in chapters 10, 11 and 15 deal with the crisis precipitated by Cornelius' conversion. Three times in these chapters Luke discusses the conversion of Cornelius and its implication for the church. Luke narrates the original story of the event in 10:1-48. He discusses it again, along with the controversy it engenders, in 11:1-18. Then, for a third time, he summarizes the story of Cornelius' conversion in 15:6-11.

The story of Cornelius, which ends with Peter's speech to the assembly at Jerusalem, is the longest narrative in Acts... Judged solely on the basis of the amount of space Luke gives to the story, we know that we are dealing with a crucial concern of Acts, a pivot for the entire book, a turning point in the long drama of redemption. [Willimon, 95.]

Breakthrough at Caesarea (10:1)

Caesarea is the setting for the conversion of Cornelius. It is an apt place for the calling of the first Gentiles to fellowship with Jewish Christians. The city is in the center of the coastal Plain of Sharon, about 65 miles (105 kilometers) northwest of Jerusalem. Herod the Great built some magnificent projects here, including an amphitheater, an aqueduct and a superb port. A garrison of soldiers protects the city, harbor and water facilities. The military guard includes the Italian Regiment, of which Cornelius is a centurion.

In this period, Caesarea serves as the capital of the Roman province of Judea. It is the residence of the Roman procurator (23:23-24). Josephus says that the population is primarily Gentile. [*Wars* 3:409.] However, Caesarea also has a large minority of Jews. The two groups brawled on a regular basis. [*Antiquities* 20:173-178.]

Philip probably preached to the Jews of Caesarea (8:40). Paul stopped there on his way to Tarsus (9:30), but there's no indication that he preached in the area. Now, Peter on his own missionary journey has gone as far as

Joppa, 30 miles south of Caesarea.

Centurion Cornelius (10:1-2)

Cornelius, the hero of the story, is identified as an army man, a centurion in the Italian Regiment or “cohort.” A centurion is a noncommissioned officer who worked his way up through the ranks to take command of a group of soldiers within a Roman legion. (A comparable rank in the American military would be captain, and in the British army, a company sergeant-major.) When a cohort is at full strength, a centurion is in command of 100 men. William Barclay gives the following description of Rome’s military units:

In the Roman military set-up there was first of all the *legion*. It was a force of six thousand men and therefore was roughly equal to a division. In every legion there were ten *cohorts*. A cohort therefore had six hundred men and comes near to being the equivalent of a battalion. The cohort was divided into *centuries* and over each century there was a *centurion*. The century is therefore roughly the equivalent of a company. [William Barclay, *The Acts of the Apostles*, revised edition, The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), page 79.]

The above applies to regular legions of the Roman army. However, it is likely that there are no such legions in Judea between A.D. 6 and 66. Roman governors in Judea have *auxiliary* forces, and the cohorts have smaller numbers. The Italian Cohort (Regiment) to which Cornelius belongs would be an auxiliary unit. The historian Polybius describes the qualifications of a centurion: “Centurions are required not to be bold and adventurous so much as good leaders, of steady and prudent mind, not prone to take the offensive or start fighting wantonly, but able when overwhelmed and hard-pressed to stand fast and die at their post.” [*History* 6.24.]

Cornelius may be a descendant of one of the freedmen of a man named

Cornelius Sulla, who liberated 10,000 slaves in 82 B.C. According to common practice, the freed slaves took their patron's name. Centurions are generally pictured in a favorable light by Luke. The first Gentile with whom Jesus came into contact, so far as we know, is a centurion stationed in Capernaum. He is pictured as exhibiting extraordinary faith in Jesus (Luke 7:1-10). The centurion at Jesus' crucifixion also recognizes something special in him (Luke 23:47). Later, another centurion, Julius, shows kindness to Paul and spares his life (27:1, 3, 43).

Devout and God-fearing (10:2)

Luke describes Cornelius and his family as “devout and God-fearing” (10:2). The description of Cornelius as “a righteous and God-fearing man” best sums up his spiritual qualities (10:22). We might call him a “deeply religious man.” He worships the God of Israel, attends the synagogue, and lives according to many of the standards of the Torah. He is a Gentile (10:28) but is “respected by all the Jewish people” (10:22). He prays at the designated hours of Jewish prayer (10:30), gives “gifts to the poor” (10:4) and is devout (10:2). But he is not a proselyte — he isn't circumcised (11:3).

Luke describes the piety of Cornelius in traditional Jewish terms as one who engages in prayer and almsgiving (Tobit 12:8-10). Specifically, he gives alms “to the people.” Luke uses the term “the people” to indicate the nation of Israel, or the Jews. This suggests that Cornelius helps Jews, as does the centurion of Luke 7:5. “In sum, Cornelius was a noble and spiritually sensitive Roman army officer,” says Richard N. Longenecker. [385.] And we may say of him with F. F. Bruce, “He had every qualification, short of circumcision, which could satisfy Jewish requirements.” [203.]

While it's not clear that the Jews have a technical designation such as “God-fearers” for people like Cornelius, it's clear that there are many such Gentiles scattered throughout the Roman Empire. They along with full

proselytes are found worshipping in synagogues in which Paul preaches. They ultimately constitute an important part of the church (13:14, 26, 48).

We notice too that his family, and even his military aide (10:8) are also said to be devout people. In that society, the entire household, including servants, usually adopt the patriarch's religion. Cornelius would influence them by his example. This fact, along with his reputation for good works (10:22), indicates that Cornelius is an older man who has been in Caesarea for some years. He may even be a semi-retired army officer.

Cornelius has a vision (10:3-8)

The fateful time of Cornelius' calling is at hand. It begins on a certain day about three o'clock in the afternoon, one of the statutory Jewish hours of prayer (3:1). Cornelius is praying at this time (10:30). He has a vision in which a messenger from God, an angel, said: "Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God" (10:4).

The angel speaks in the language of sacrifice used in Jewish circles. The "memorial offering" mentioned here alludes to the Old Testament flour offerings made from grain that were to be burned "as a memorial portion" (Leviticus 2:2). [The Greek word for "memorial" in Acts 10:4 was the same one the Greek Septuagint used in Leviticus 2:2.] This offering was burned on the altar and "an aroma pleasing to the Lord" went up to God (Leviticus 2:2).

Like the aroma of the sacrifice, the scent of Cornelius' prayers and gifts is going "up" to God. God is signaling his pleasure with Cornelius, and he is ready to reveal his salvation to him. In preparation for this, the angel tells Cornelius to send men to Joppa to ask Peter to come to his home. Cornelius calls two servants and a military aide, a devout man, and dispatches them to Joppa (11:7-8).

Peter's vision (10:9-16)

The scene in Luke's drama switches to Peter, who is praying on the roof

of Simon the Tanner's house. The roof is a convenient place to get away from activity in the house. The time is around noon, the sixth hour, by the ancient method of reckoning. Noon is also one of the three appointed times for Jewish public prayer (Daniel 6:10; Psalm 55:17).



During the time of prayer, Peter becomes hungry and asks someone in the house for something to eat. While the meal is being prepared, he falls into a trance (10:11-12). Peter sees a large sheet held up by its four corners being let down to the ground. Inside the sheet he sees various four-footed animals, reptiles and birds. The three categories of living things Peter sees correspond roughly with the three divisions given in Genesis 6:20: animals, creatures that move along the ground and birds.

A voice tells Peter to get up and eat. But Peter replies, "Surely not, Lord!...I have never eaten anything impure or unclean" (10:14). Peter's strong negative — "Surely not, Lord!" recalls the prophet Ezekiel's horror when he is told by the Lord to use human excrement as fuel for baking bread. He said: "Not so, Sovereign Lord!... No impure meat has ever entered my mouth" (Ezekiel 4:14).

We saw earlier that Peter is not overly scrupulous in observing certain Jewish regulations. He stays at the house of a leather worker, who would

come in contact with dead animals. Perhaps he even works with unclean animals (9:43). But Peter does apparently follow the Jewish dietary laws based on the Torah. He knows from Leviticus 11:47 that a Jew needs to “distinguish between the unclean and the clean, between living creatures that may be eaten and those that may not be eaten.”

However, the sheet contains “all kinds” of living things. Luke’s account implies it includes animals traditionally acceptable to eat as well as those forbidden by old covenant law. Perhaps Peter sees the living things he recognized as unclean touching the edible ones, thus tainting them. “While clean animals were represented in the sheet, Peter was scandalized by the unholy mixture of clean and unclean and by the fact that no distinctions were made in the command to ‘kill and eat’.” [Longenecker, 387.]

The Jews’ adherence to the dietary laws profoundly affect their relations with Gentiles. Food laws have the effect of keeping the people separated from each other. A Jew visiting a Gentile can’t be sure he will be served “clean” food, or that the food is prepared according to the requirements of the law, or whether it has been tainted by an idol. To eat with Gentiles is to risk defilement, and this is a strong inducement for Jews not to fellowship with them. Since food is at the center of social life, it is the thing that perhaps more than anything else creates a barrier between Jews and Gentiles. And as an ideal, Jews have no dealings with Gentiles. Food regulations are a point of heated debate in the church. [Romans 14:1-8, 17; Corinthians 8:1-13; Galatians 2:11-14.]

It’s not surprising, then, that Peter is confused by the next statement of the voice in his vision. When he refuses to eat, a voice says: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean” (11:15). This happens three times, perhaps with the sheet being lowered each time, accompanied by a command to eat and not to call anything unclean that God had cleansed.

Pondering the vision (10:17-23)

Peter is puzzled about the meaning of the vision, with its strange mixture of living things, and the odd commands (10:17). While Peter is mulling over what he has seen, the emissaries from Cornelius arrive at Simon's home. They stop at the gate, shouting to the occupants, asking whether Peter is staying there (9:17). This little scene with Gentiles calling out from beyond the gate reflects exactly the situation the vision is meant to correct.

Devout non-Jews such as those who came from Cornelius probably understand that Jews do not want any close association with Gentiles. Thus, it would be rude for them to come to the door of a Jew's home, with the desire of being allowed inside. But at the same time as the exchange at the gate, the Holy Spirit says to Peter: "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them" (10:20). The fact of the Spirit having to encourage Peter not to be hesitant reveals his reluctance to associate with Gentiles.

By now, however, Peter begins to suspect that God is making some purpose known to him, so he invites the men into the house as his guests (10:23). (No doubt, this occurs with the tanner's permission, since Peter himself is a guest.) The men explain they are here at the request of Cornelius, emphasizing that he is "a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people" (10:22). More than this, they say that Cornelius has not decided on his own to contact Peter, but an angel from God told him to do so.

Contingent goes to Caesarea (10:23)

Peter must now be doubly impressed that something of importance — something inspired by the Holy Spirit — is happening with the Gentile Cornelius. He wholeheartedly agrees to go with the men. The next day Peter starts out for Caesarea, 30 miles away. He takes some of the disciples living

in Joppa with him. We learn later that the contingent consists of six people (11:12). They are identified as “circumcised believers,” which is to say they are Jewish Christians who follow the traditions of the Torah (10:45). In retrospect, this proves a wise move, as Peter will later be severely criticized by the Jerusalem church for meeting with Cornelius (11:3). The six will be important witnesses to the operation of the Holy Spirit in this momentous event.

Peter meets Cornelius (10:24-26)

Meanwhile, Cornelius has called together his relatives and close friends (10:24). Earlier, Luke described his household as “devout and God-fearing” (10:2). Later, all of Cornelius’ family will share in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and be baptized (10:44, 48).

Peter arrives at the residence of Cornelius, and goes in (10:25). A momentous milestone lies hidden here. Peter, in contradiction to all that Judaism stands for, enters the house of a Gentile. The church will never be the same again. Cornelius meets Peter and falls at his feet in reverence (10:25). It’s understandable why he reacts this way. Having an angel specifically tell him to send for Peter could make him think there is something holy or supernatural about the apostle.

Also, perhaps something of Cornelius’ former superstitious background is manifesting itself, in which humans are sometimes thought to be gods. Paul and Barnabas are similarly thought of and worshipped by the pagan Gentiles of Lystra (14:15). Peter, of course, will have none of this, and makes Cornelius stand up. Then he sets the record straight about who he is. Luke’s simple phrase from Peter’s words says it all: “I am only a man myself” (10:26).

Call no one impure (10:27-33)

Peter goes inside the house and begins to explain to the group why he, a

Jew, is here in the home of a Gentile. He admits that it is against Jewish law for Jews to associate with or even visit Gentiles (10:28). (The “no contact rule” was probably the *hoped-for* Jewish position. There are provisions in Jewish law that allow business partnerships with Gentiles. But any such contacts, of either a business or social nature, make a Jew ceremonially unclean.)

Various Jewish religious groups debate the degree of separation a Jew needs to maintain vis á vis Gentiles in order to remain loyal to the regulations of the Torah. Some groups, such as the Essenes, seem to maintain an almost complete separation. The Pharisees are more moderate in such matters, and the common folk the least observant. Peter is probably on the more liberal end of the spectrum regarding the wall of separation. (Fishermen are used to handling dead animals and unclean animals.) Yet, he is having great difficulty understanding the new direction the church is to be taking (even with the leading of the Holy Spirit).

Though Peter was not by training or inclination an overly scrupulous Jew, and though as a Christian his inherited prejudices were gradually wearing thin, he was not prepared to go so far as to minister directly to Gentiles. A special revelation was necessary for that, and Luke now tells how God took the initiative in overcoming Peter’s reluctance. [Longenecker, 387.]

By now Peter is clear about what God is trying to teach him. He tells the people assembled in Cornelius’ home: “God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean” (10:28).

After Peter explains to his audience why he is in the house of a Gentile, he says to Cornelius: “May I ask why you sent for me?” (10:29). Cornelius then describes the details of the vision he received. He explains that an angel (“a man in shining clothes”) told him he was chosen to receive God’s grace (10:30-31). Cornelius describes how he was commanded by the angel to send

for Peter.

Cornelius appreciates Peter having come to see him, a Gentile. The whole group is now ready to hear him. Cornelius says, “We are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us” (10:33). In the second telling of the Cornelius event, Luke makes it clear that Cornelius already knows why Peter is coming to see him. The angel told Cornelius that Peter “will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved” (11:14). Cornelius is expecting the gospel of salvation.

Peter’s speech (10:34-43)

Peter begins to speak to the group about the importance of Jesus’ work in repentance and conversion. This speech is similar in content to the one he gave on Pentecost (2:14-40). As with all the sermons and speeches in Acts, we are here reading only a summary of what Peter says. No doubt Peter’s message contains examples that illustrate his main points. Peter probably includes illustrations of Jesus’ healing and power, similar to those found in the Gospels.

The speech follows a familiar pattern, which we now expect from Luke’s summaries. In this case, Peter begins by describing John the Baptist’s mission, and then the work of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, Judea and Jerusalem. The speech moves into a discussion of the crucifixion and resurrection. Peter says that the apostles are witnesses to these facts, and are commanded to preach the gospel of peace. He also talks about the judgment to come, but especially that “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (10:43).

This speech probably represents a summary of the standard apostolic preaching to Jews and Gentiles attending synagogues who are familiar with the Old Testament message. The Synoptic Gospels follow this general pattern

in presenting their material on Jesus' ministry. (Acts gives us only two examples of the form of apostolic preaching to purely pagan audiences. One is at Lystra (14:14-18) and the other at Athens (17:23-31). In such cases, the speaker needs to explain who the one true God is before moving on to his purpose in Jesus Christ.)

As devout people, Cornelius and the others are familiar with the Jewish Scriptures, the hope of a Messiah and the kingdom of God. They may well be aware that a man named Jesus performed miracles, attracted a following, and was killed. Peter suggests that they know something of "the message God sent to the people of Israel" and "the good news of peace through Jesus Christ" (10:36-37). In several ways, then, Cornelius and his family are prepared for what Peter is telling them.

Accepts people of every nation (10:34-35)

Peter begins his speech with the point that there are no impure or unclean people in God's eyes in terms of their receiving salvation. God "accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right" (10:35). Peter himself is being educated on this point, as well as his audience. He is summarizing his own experience of God during the past few days, since seeing the vision of the animals.

Peter's words — "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism" (11:34) — registers his own surprise at the new understanding he has just received, and which he can now pass on to others. The light is dawning in Peter's mind that people are not acceptable to God simply because they are members of a particular nation, a nation that seeks to express its uniqueness in protective rituals. God accepts anyone "who fears him and does what is right" (19:35), that is, in simple terms, all who trust in him.

God's choice of a people who experience his saving grace — whether the

nation of Israel or individuals for salvation — rests on his unmerited act of grace. This includes receiving the Holy Spirit now and eternal life in the future. However, such grace, if it is accepted, calls forth a response of obedient service and faith toward God. That is, the people of God respect him and “do what is right.”

The prophets said that grace would one day be extended to all nations. For example, Isaiah spoke of a time when God would call Egyptians and Assyrians (two dreaded enemies of ancient Israel) as his people, along with the Israelites (19:25). But somehow God’s purpose was forgotten by the Jews who returned to Judea in the 6th century B.C. after their nation had been defeated by the Babylonians and sent into captivity. Upon their return, the Jews felt the need to protect their identity as Torah torchbearers against idol-worshipping Gentile paganism. Thus, the notion developed that Gentiles could become part of the people of God (whether nation or church) only if they first became law-observant, God-fearing Jews.

Good news of peace (10:36)

But now a new thing is happening: the “good news of peace through Jesus Christ” (10:36) — and it is being sent to Gentiles directly. The apostle Paul explains this peace as a two-fold endeavor. God’s purpose is to “create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace” (Ephesians 2:15). The gospel of salvation is meant to break down the enmity and differences between Jews and Gentiles, creating a single new people of the Spirit. Thus, spiritually speaking, there is no such thing as a “Jew” and a “Gentile.” They are all one in Christ (Galatians 3:28).

Jesus’ gospel of peace is meant “to reconcile both of them to God through the cross” (Ephesians 2:16). Thus, Jesus’ work establishes peace between humans and God, and between one branch of humans and all others. As Paul explains it, Jesus “came and preached peace to you who were far away

[Gentiles] and peace to those who were near [Jews]” (verse 17).

“We are witnesses” (10:37-43)

Of course, Cornelius and his family do not yet fully understand what the good news of peace means to them specifically, as Gentiles. Peter is here to relate the meaning of the gospel to their lives — that they can share in the promise of salvation.

Though Peter assumes that his hearers already know something about this ministry through living in Palestine, he proceeds to summarize it in greater detail than anywhere else in his recorded preaching. In scope and emphasis, the account is much like the portrayal of Jesus’ ministry in Mark’s Gospel. [ibid., 393.]

Since Peter has been one of the witnesses of everything Jesus did in Jerusalem, Judea and Galilee (10:39), his hearers can be confident in what he says. The task of witnessing includes giving the meaning of Jesus’ work during his ministry (10:39) and explaining the significance of his death and resurrection (10:41). Peter begins his accounting of Jesus’ ministry by first referring to the work of John the Baptist. Luke consistently makes John’s work of baptism as the turning point in God’s purpose with humanity, and the beginning point of Jesus’ ministry (Luke 3:3; 16:16; Acts 1:22).

Peter characterizes that ministry in terms of Jesus doing good and healing all who are under the power of the devil (10:38). The work of the Holy Spirit is central to Acts, and Luke here shows that the liberating works of Jesus are possible because God has anointed him with the power of the Spirit (10:38). Peter goes on to explain that the glorified Jesus has been given the authority to judge both the living and the dead. However, he doesn’t emphasize condemnation. Rather, as Hebrews tells us, Peter speaks of Jesus as the “author” of salvation and as a merciful and faithful high priest who makes “atonement for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2:10, 17).

Peter presumably cites texts from the Old Testament as evidence, because he insists that “all the prophets testify about him” (10:43). And what they testify explains in what way Jesus is the judge of both living and dead: “That everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (10:43).

Holy Spirit poured out (10:44-46)

As Peter is making this point, something extraordinary interrupts his talk. Everyone listening to his message suddenly receives the Holy Spirit (10:44). (In Peter’s later summary of what happens, he said the interruption occurs, “As I began to speak...” (11:15). When Peter makes the point that Jesus is the one who forgives sins, he has said all that is necessary.)

When the group hears Peter talking about faith in Christ, they believed the message. They have faith — accepting their need for Jesus as Savior. Cornelius and his family (and presumably the others present) are devout and God-fearing people. They are praying people, ones who do good to others. But they had not received the Holy Spirit, which is the “sign” of those who are God’s people. When they respond positively to the news that Jesus Christ is their Savior and the hope of the world, they receive the Holy Spirit. Their allegiance is no longer in their own religious work, but in Jesus as their Savior. This change comes only when Cornelius and the others are confronted with making a choice about Jesus Christ.

How do Peter and the others know that Cornelius’ group have received the Holy Spirit? It is evident by a miraculous sign — “they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God” (10:46). In fact, the Spirit comes on these people in more or less the same way as he did upon the Jewish converts at Pentecost. For this reason, this event is sometimes called “the Gentile Pentecost.”

It is not possible to mistake this momentous event. “Just as the first

Jewish believers had received the Spirit and praised God in other tongues on the day of Pentecost, so now these Gentiles received the identical gift of God.” [I. Howard Marshall, *Acts* (Tyndale New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans: 1996), 194.] The Holy Spirit is given only to those who believe in Jesus (Acts 11:17; Galatians 3:2). It is an irrefutable sign that God accepts these Gentiles. Cornelius and the others respond to Peter’s message in faith and God accepts them, sealing them as his people with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The six Jewish believers are astonished at this turn of events — “that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (10:45). But there is no refuting what occurs before their eyes — or in this case, their ears. The Jewish Christians know the Spirit has been given to the group because they “heard them speaking in tongues and praising God” (10:46).

The gift of tongues at Pentecost was speaking in various human languages. Here it is not so clear what is in view. If the group is speaking in other languages, which ones are they speaking in, and how would the Jewish observers know? Perhaps what is being described here are ecstatic utterances of a sort that are understood as praise to God. This may be, at least in part, the “tongues” that Paul describes. [1 Corinthians 12:7-11, 28; 13:1; 14:1-28.] In any case, these miraculous tongues and praises are given for the sake of the Jewish believers who came with Peter. They will later verify Peter’s contention before a board of Jerusalem believers that God accepts Gentiles into the church.

They were baptized (10:47-48)

Cornelius and the others believe and receive the Spirit, but they are not yet baptized. Baptism is a rite that symbolizes an individual’s having been cleansed of sin and “resurrected” to newness of life. It can also function as a sign to the believer that he or she has been received into the community of

believers.

We should be careful about thinking in terms of a formula as though a person receives the Holy Spirit only *after* being baptized. This is obviously not the case here, as everyone receives the Holy Spirit before being baptized. However, baptism is an important ceremony to the individual's Christian life in the same way that a marriage ceremony is a vital beginning point of a marriage. (But the ceremony doesn't *cause* the marriage.) Although people are saved by faith, not baptism, the New Testament pattern is that all who have faith are also baptized in water.

With this in mind, when Peter sees that the group has already received the Holy Spirit, he says, "Surely no one can stand in the way of their being baptized with water" (10:47). He then orders that they should be baptized in Jesus' name, in effect saying he (and the church) accept what God has already done.

A new direction

We should state once again what the Cornelius event means to the church. Not only can Gentiles be accepted into the church as Gentiles, it means that they can also be directly evangelized. They can become disciples in every sense of the word without having to become fully observant Jews. The Spirit baptizes people, whether they are Jews or Gentiles, into one body, the Israel of God (1 Corinthians 12:13).

The Jewish believers seem to understand this — that God accepts the Gentiles as they are. This is indicated in the fact that no one seems to suggest that Cornelius should be circumcised. However, the issue of circumcision for Gentile believers plagues the church for decades to come. As well, the question of whether Gentiles should live like Jews in such things as their eating habits will also continue to trouble the church.

Cornelius does not ask to be baptized. Nor does the church (Peter) ask

him if he is interested in fellowshiping with the body of believers, hoping for a later conversion. From start to finish, God is operating his salvation upon Cornelius, who has little role in this part of the story except to accept what God is doing. William H. Willimon correctly says:

Cornelius is surprisingly passive in this story, as if he is someone who is being swept along, carried by events and reacting to actions quite beyond his power to initiate or control. This is the way it is with repentance. It is more than a decision we make ('since I gave my life to Christ'; 'since I took Jesus as *my* personal Savior') or some good deed we offer to God; repentance is the joyful human response to God's offer of himself to us. [100.]

In fact, all conversion accounts in Acts begin with God's initiative through the Holy Spirit. God is always pictured as the One who begins and completes the process of repentance.

God is the chief actor in all Lukan accounts of conversion. Even the smallest details are attributed to the working of God. Conversion is not the result of skillful leadership by the community or even of persuasive preaching or biblical interpretation. In many accounts, such as those of Philip's work with the Ethiopian, the mysterious hand of God directs everything. In other stories, such as the story of Peter and Cornelius, the church must be dragged kicking and screaming into the movements of God. Manipulation, strategic planning, calculating efforts by the community aimed at church growth are utterly absent. Even our much beloved modern notions of "free will" and personal choice and decision appear to play little role in conversion in Acts. Conversion is a surprising, unexpected act of divine grace. [Ibid., 104.]

Luke's story is about how the gospel reaches Rome, and Cornelius plays no further role in that story. He leaves Luke's account as abruptly as Ananias does. Johannes Munck observes that "the narrative about Cornelius seems, from an historical point of view, to be left hanging in midair as a detached

fragment.” [Munck, 107.]

We would like to know more about Cornelius’ subsequent history. How does he live out his life as a Christian? Does he continue to serve in the military? Does he get caught up in the church’s squabble over whether Gentiles should live like Jews, and what is his reaction? But Luke tells us nothing further about Cornelius, except that Peter stays with him for some time (10:48). Then the apostle goes to Jerusalem to answer his critics, and Cornelius becomes lost in the mist of history.

Luke has interests other than recounting the converted life of Cornelius. He wants to tell the story of how God opens salvation to the Gentiles. Once he tells that tale, Luke moves on to narrate other events that show the growth of the church, and the gospel being preached further afield.

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Chapter 11

The Gospel Goes to Gentiles, Part 2

The Gentile challenge

The conversion of Cornelius is a milestone in the church's history. However, it doesn't settle the troubling issues of the proper relationship of Jews to Gentiles within the body of believers. In fact, the church throughout Judea is soon buzzing with the tale that Peter met with and baptized Cornelius. Luke writes of the controversy: "The apostles and believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So that when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the uncircumcised believers criticized him and said, 'You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them'" (11:1-3).

Luke makes a distinction between "the apostles and believers" (11:1) who hear about what Peter did and "the circumcised believers" who criticize them. This implies that the apostles and leaders of the Jerusalem church, as well as some believers in Judea, don't have a problem with Peter's actions in Caesarea. It is other circumcised believers of Jerusalem who think that Peter violated Judaistic regulations pertaining to the separation of Jews from Gentiles. (That is not to suggest that there is a formal "circumcision party" in the church at this time, though apparently there will be one later.)

The circumcised believers apparently do not criticize Peter for baptizing Cornelius. Rather, Peter is challenged because he enters the house where uncircumcised people are, and eats with them. (That he eats there is not directly stated by Luke but is inferred from Peter staying at Cornelius' home for some days.)

Peter's opponents are accusing him of abandoning his sacred Jewish heritage by associating with and eating with uncircumcised Gentiles. Some

think he is putting the identity of the church community at risk. Thinking in terms of the Jewish paradigm of Israel as God's holy nation, some emphasize that the church is a holy people. It is to be separate from the pollution of the world, including fraternizing with Gentiles. But now the church is tainted because one of its leaders violated ritual separation.

There may be another, more practical concern as well. The Hellenistic believers were persecuted and driven out of Jerusalem for their attacks on the foundations of Judaistic piety. Now Peter, a leading apostle, has disregarded the sacred and traditional laws of separation in order to associate with a Gentile. This may lead the Sanhedrin to persecute the remaining, and more conservative, Jewish converts in Jerusalem.

Peter explains his actions (11:4-17)

Peter needs to explain why he met with Cornelius and baptized him. He goes before the "circumcised believers" of Jerusalem (not the apostles!) and there "told them the whole story" (11:4). That is, he recites the events related to Cornelius' conversion in sequence, step by step. In giving us a summary of what Peter says, Luke repeats, to a large degree, the material he includes in chapter 10. We need not tell the entire story again, though there are a couple of new pieces of information that should be mentioned.

Peter refers to the six circumcised disciples who go to Caesarea with him, and who also enter the home of Cornelius (11:12). The fact that he brings these six men with him to Jerusalem suggests that he expects to be challenged. These six men are important witnesses to what happened. They are circumcised believers, and hence their credentials as pious Jews (as well as Christians) should carry weight with the church in Jerusalem.

The six saw Cornelius and the other Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit (10:45). Thus, they are witnesses to the fact that God put his stamp of approval on the whole occasion. More than this, the six believers also enter

Cornelius' home, and eat with him. They are more than witnesses for the truth of Peter's story. These pious and observant Jewish Christians are also implicated in Peter's actions at the house of Cornelius. Since they are respected members of the circumcision, the fact that they are willing to be "tainted" by being in a Gentile's presence would help counter the objections being raised. Peter did not act alone.

More important, however, is that Peter can appeal to God as the One who orchestrated the meeting with Cornelius. Thus, Peter concludes his defense by saying, "If God gave them [the Cornelius group] the same gift he gave us...who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" (11:17). The important phrase here is "same gift." The Gentiles experienced something similar in all essentials to that of the original Jewish disciples at Pentecost (2:1-5). That being so, they should have an equal membership in the body of Christ.

Peter argues that he went to the home of Cornelius, baptized him, and then fellowshiped with the group in response to God's action. He didn't do this simply on his own initiative or to play fast and loose with tradition. There has been a divine motivation in all this, beginning with his vision on the roof of Simon the tanner's house.

For the moment, the Jerusalem disciples are satisfied with Peter's explanation. "They had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life'" (11:18). On the surface, this appears to be the end of any controversy regarding the Gentiles. But that is not the case, as we shall see later in Acts.

Controversy continues

The conservative Jewish Christians acknowledge that Gentiles can receive the Holy Spirit before living the Jewish life. After all, Peter and the six witnesses show, through the miracles involved in the conversion of

Cornelius, that God is behind the salvation of Gentiles. Perhaps they allow that Peter, in this extraordinary circumstance, needed to fellowship with uncircumcised Gentiles.

However, some in the church will claim that Gentiles should, after conversion, begin to fulfill all the requirements of the Torah, such as circumcision. Only after doing so can they be saved. No doubt, the more “zealous” [Zealous for the law, that is — not zealous for grace.] members of the Jerusalem church point out that many problems will be created in allowing formerly pagan Gentiles to fellowship with observant Jews. The Gentiles will ritually “defile” the Christian Jews and will then make it difficult for them to fellowship with non-Christian Jews.

The Jerusalem believers might also be concerned about the results if a large number of Gentiles become part of the church. What will that do to the standing of the church in Jerusalem? After all, the church is being closely watched by the Jewish leaders to see if it is upholding the standards of Judaistic worship. Any suspicion about the church fraternizing with Gentiles will create suspicion and rancor in the Jewish community. This will be a problem in other cities with a large Jewish population in which large-scale Gentile evangelization and conversion occur.

These issues are not solved nor even taken up by the Jerusalem church at this time. However, the questions will continue to linger — until the apostles find it necessary to call an unprecedented council (Acts 15). Meanwhile, the Jerusalem congregation struggles to remain acceptable to the Jewish authorities. If they fail in this regard, they will suffer the fate of the Hellenistic Jewish Christians who were persecuted and expelled (8:1).

Such fears may cause the Jerusalem mother church to acknowledge James as its leader, rather than any of the apostles. (The apostles probably agree that such a course is best, and in any case they soon have to leave the city.) James

is known to be a scrupulous practitioner of the Torah, for which he is called “James the Just,” or “James the Righteous.” He enjoys a good reputation with the Jewish community. This will help diffuse any potential crisis with the Sanhedrin over the “Gentile question.”

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The Church Expands to Syria

Acts 11:19-30

Preaching expands (11:19)

Regardless of doubts and questions by some of the members, the Jerusalem mother congregation confirms Peter's action in baptizing the first Gentiles living in Judea. More importantly, God is showing his will that Gentiles should receive salvation and become part of the spiritual community, the church.

The stage is now set for Gentile evangelization. Luke is ready to launch into the main theme of his book, which is to show the expansion of gospel and the church throughout the Roman world. Luke leaves Peter in Jerusalem, to whom he will return in chapter 12 and then again briefly in chapter 15. After that, we won't hear of him again, and Luke will focus on Paul.

Antioch (11:20)

Luke begins his story of the Gentile mission by recounting the proclamation of the gospel by Hellenistic Jews in Syrian Antioch. This city will soon become the staging area and springboard for missionary activity to other parts of the Roman Empire. It will also serve as kind of second headquarters area for the growing church. Antioch, the largest city of Syria, is on the Orontes River, about 300 miles north of Jerusalem and 20 miles inland from the Mediterranean. We should not confuse the ancient province of Syria with modern Syria, though the two overlap. The region of ancient Antioch is now in the southeastern corner of Turkey, and the Turkish city is called Antakya.

Josephus calls Antioch "the third city in the habitable earth that was under the Roman empire." [*Wars* 3:29.] Antioch has between 500,000 and 800,000

people. Only Rome and Alexandria are larger. According to Josephus, the city has a particularly large Jewish population. [Ibid., 7:43.] Antioch is the capital of the Roman province of Syria. It is also an important commercial and economic center. The agricultural produce of the hinterland, and of the East, is shipped through Antioch, and then to destinations around the Mediterranean. Culturally, first-century Antioch is a melting pot of Greek, Roman, Semitic, Arabic and Persian influences. The city is also known for its loose morals.

The city was not only known for its sophistication and culture but also for its vices. The beautiful pleasure park of Daphne was a center for moral depravity of every kind, and the expression *Daphnici mores* became a proverb for depraved living. The Roman satirist Juvenal (A.D. 60-140) aimed one of his sharpest gibes at his own decadent Rome when he said the Orontes had flowed into the Tiber (*Satirae* 3.62), flooding the imperial city with the superstition and immorality of the East. [Longenecker, 399.]

The church in Antioch

When Luke opens his narrative, a flourishing church community in Antioch already exists. It will play a prominent part in his history of the gospel. No other city apart from Jerusalem appears as frequently in Luke's story. For now, he portrays it as the church where the mission to the Gentiles in general begins (11:19-26). Antioch will soon become a mission-sponsoring church, sending Paul and Barnabas on tours of evangelism (13:1-3). Paul will use Antioch as his home base of operations.

The debate over Gentile religious life-styles will also come to a head in this city (14:26-15:2). A crisis will occur in Antioch over table fellowship when Peter refuses to eat with Gentiles after "certain men came from James" (Galatians 2:12). Luke, more interested in the unity of the church, does not mention this divisive event. It is in Antioch that Paul and Barnabas will

separate their missions (15:36-40). The final time we will hear about Antioch is when Paul visits the church before beginning his final evangelistic tour (18:22).

Scattered Jews preach (11:19-21)

Luke introduces his Antioch story by referring back to “those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed” (11:19, referring to 8:1). Earlier, he mentioned these Hellenistic Jews as people who “preached the word wherever they went” (8:4). We’ve already learned that they went throughout Judea and Samaria (8:1). Now we discover that they are as far as Phoenicia (north of Caesarea), the island of Cyprus, and Antioch (11:19).

These exiled Jews from Jerusalem living in the areas Luke mentions preached the gospel, but only to other Jews (11:19). These individuals are pushing out beyond the areas where Peter and Philip have done missionary work — but not yet to Gentiles.

But then some Christian Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene come to Antioch and they begin to speak “to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus” (11:20). Unfortunately, the Greek text is somewhat unclear at this point. Some manuscripts have the word *Hellenas* (“Greeks”), but others read *Hellenistas*, which could mean “Grecian Jews.” However, the context indicates that these are Gentile Greeks and not Hellenistic Jews who are being evangelized. It would make little sense for Luke to say that the Antiochian Christians preach at first only to Jews (11:19), but then begin to speak to other “Jews” (11:20). Almost all of the Jews in Cyprus and Antioch are Hellenistic Jews. The Gentiles being reached here are most likely Gentiles who already have an interest in Judaism, for they would be more likely to have social contacts with these traveling Jews.

Cyprus and Cyrene (11:20)

Luke mentions in particular that the Jews preaching to Greeks are from Cyprus and Cyrene. Cyprus is an island in the eastern Mediterranean, near Antioch. Cyrene is in North Africa, in the territory included in Libya today. Jews from Cyrene are among those who had opposed Stephen (6:9). The Cyrenian Christian Jews may have come directly from Cyrene to Antioch. Or they may have been living in Jerusalem, and were converted after Stephen's death. Perhaps the Lucian of Cyrene that Luke mentions later is one of these missionaries (13:1). Barnabas may also be one of these pioneers, as he came originally from Cyprus (4:36).

We don't know what causes these individuals at Antioch to begin preaching the gospel to Gentiles. Luke presents the situation casually, as though no controversy occurs over it. It may be a gradual development, since Gentiles often attend synagogues. Or these dispersed Christian Jews may know about the conversion of Cornelius, and take it as a precedent, which it is. They preach a message about Jesus *as Lord*, rather than announcing him as the Messiah. Or in Luke's words, they tell "the good news about the Lord Jesus" (11:21). The word "Lord" is more meaningful in Hellenistic culture; the word "Messiah" would appeal less to a Gentile audience.

The apostles are not in the forefront of missionary activity to non-Jews, just as they were not the leaders in Samaria. Although these people were probably leaders in the church at the time, they are nameless and unknown to us. They begin the process of widespread Gentile evangelization. Another decisive moment in the history of the apostolic church is occurring without the presence of the apostles.

He [Luke] emphasizes the part played by anonymous believers in spreading Christianity. Without detracting from the massive contribution of Paul or ignoring the significant roles of Peter and Philip, Luke makes it plain, as he has already done in the case of the [Judean] Christian communities, that so also, farther afield in Phoenicia and Cyprus, the gospel was first proclaimed by men

whose names have not been recorded. [Neil, 143.]

Reacting to the urging of the Spirit, these unnamed Christians reap the harvest God provides. Luke tells us “the Lord’s hand was with them” as they preached (11:21). The Holy Spirit validates their testimony, and as a result “a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (11:21).

Barnabas is sent to Antioch (11:22)

It isn’t long before the church at Jerusalem hears about the large number of Gentile converts in Antioch. They decide to dispatch a delegation to check on the situation, as they did in the case of the Samaritan conversions (8:14). Perhaps some in Jerusalem are fearful that the evangelistic program is out of control. There may be a fear that if Gentiles come into the church in large numbers, they may overwhelm the Jewish cultural heritage. The issue of whether Gentile converts have to become practicing Jews has not yet been solved. This, too, may be a concern.

Jerusalem’s reaction is not necessarily hostile or fearful. Peter and John were sent to the Samaritans to establish a relationship with the Christians in Samaria. What they did was positive, in that the two apostles put a stamp of approval on the evangelization of Samaria, and drew Christian Jews and Samaritans more closely together. Jerusalem is still the residence of the Twelve (8:1). They are looked upon as those who are specially called and empowered to lead the church. Thus, it is natural for Jerusalem to act as overseer.

The man chosen to represent Jerusalem in Antioch is Barnabas, a Jew from Cyprus. Earlier, Luke mentioned that he has an outstanding reputation for piety and generosity among the believers at Jerusalem, and that he is respectful of the apostolic leadership (4:36-37). Thus the apostles can have total confidence in his analysis of the situation in Antioch. At the same time, Barnabas is a Jew from the Dispersion in Cyprus. He is a compatriot of

people who established the church at Antioch (11:20). He can act as the link between the Hebrew and Hellenistic elements in the church. Thus, on two counts, Barnabas is the right choice to head the delegation.

Preaching is encouraged (11:23-24)

Barnabas has the nickname “Son of Encouragement” (4:36). He certainly lives up to his name in evaluating the progress of the gospel at Antioch. Luke says that when Barnabas sees “what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them” (11:23). How Barnabas knows the grace of God is working is not stated. Presumably the fact that so many Gentiles are accepting Jesus as Savior is considered proof in itself. Perhaps the evidence is in changed lives, or in a display of the gifts of the Spirit. Barnabas doesn’t find any defects in the new converts’ faith or theology. He simply encourages both missionaries and converts “to remain true to the Lord” (11:23).

While Luke doesn’t make an issue of it, the arrival of Barnabas in Antioch could have resulted in a crisis for the church. If he reacted negatively to the Gentile conversions, then the advance of the gospel at Antioch, and Paul’s future work, could have been derailed. But Barnabas is specially equipped to be able to see the hand of God at work in Antioch. He is, as Luke paints him, “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith” (11:24). Thus, he has the spiritual insight to recognize where and how God is working.

Barnabas brings Saul to Antioch (11:25)

Luke has said nothing about Paul’s whereabouts or work since he left Caesarea for his hometown of Tarsus (9:30). Though Luke does not mention it, Paul has probably been preaching the gospel message in his home area of Syria and Cilicia (Galatians 1:21), just as he had preached near Damascus (Acts 9:22). During these blank years, which some commentators say is nearly a decade, the Jerusalem church hears a report about his preaching. Paul summarizes their reaction in these words: “The man who formerly persecuted

us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy” (Galatians 1:23-24).

The Jerusalem church and apostles praise God for the progress of the gospel, but apparently they make no effort to contact Paul. In the same way, there is no indication that Paul has any association with the church at Antioch, though Tarsus is not that far away from Tarsus. What is he doing then, and where is he?

It is certain that in some way Saul continued preaching after leaving Jerusalem and that this was known back in Jerusalem. Perhaps the five lashings he received at the hands of the synagogue authorities (2 Corinthians 11:24), together with some of his other afflictions and hardships enumerated in 2 Corinthians 11:23-27, occurred during those days in Tarsus, for they find no place in the records of his later missionary endeavors.... It also may have been during this period that he began to experience the loss of all things for Christ’s sake (cf. Philippians 3:8) through being disinherited by his family. [Longenecker, 402.]

During Barnabas’ stay in Tarsus, there are large-scale conversions at Antioch (11:24), just as there were before his arrival (11:21). The extent of Barnabas’ ministry is expanding so rapidly that he needs a co-worker. Barnabas is convinced that Paul will be the perfect choice to help evangelize Antioch. He already acted as Paul’s patron when he encouraged the Jerusalem church to accept him (9:27). Now, Barnabas again becomes Paul’s advocate. He goes to Tarsus looking for Paul, and finds him (11:25). The two of them return to Antioch, and teach large numbers of people for a year.

There’s one small point of interest that we should notice in connection with Paul’s rising star. In Acts 11:25 and in some succeeding passages, Luke mentions Barnabas first and Paul second (12:25; 13:1, 2, 7). But soon, he will shift the order, putting Paul first (13:43). However, Luke will again place Barnabas first (14:14; 15:12, 25), though Paul will be in first position at times (13:46, 50; 14:20; 15:2, 22, 35). There seems to be no consistency to this

except that Luke balances the relationship. Each is listed in first position eight times.

They are called Christians (11:26)

During the time of church expansion at Antioch, outsiders begin to call the disciples by the term “Christian” (11:26). In the Greek noun form it is *Cristianoi*. This is a way of verbally identifying a follower of a group. For example, those of the party of Herod are *Herodianoi*. The *Caesariani* are those who belong to the party of Caesar. Members of one of the major Jewish religious sects are the *Pharisaioi*.

“Christian” is not a term the disciples generally use for themselves. They prefer such names as “brothers,” “disciples,” or “saints.” The two other occurrences of the word “Christian” in the Bible are references to the church made by outsiders such as Agrippa (Acts 26:28) and persecutors in general (1 Peter 4:16).

The use of the name “Christian” by outsiders may indicate that people in Antioch realize that the church is not just another sect of Judaism — it includes Gentiles as well. This realization is risky to the church. As long as it is seen as another variant of Judaism, the church is better able to obtain protection from Rome as a *religio licita* — a legal religion. Judaism has long enjoyed such protection, and it would be helpful for the church to continue to claim that umbrella for itself.

Of course, there is a continuity between Judaism and the church. Both believe in the one God of Israel; both claim the same Holy Scriptures; both espouse a similar moral code. (Even today we speak of the “Judeo-Christian” ethic.) The decisive difference, of course, is that the church places its faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah and the author of salvation. Outsiders would see a practical difference, too: Jews tended to keep to themselves, whereas the Christians were eating with Gentiles (Galatians 2:12).

Prophets from Jerusalem (11:27)

Luke now breaks off his discussion of the church's mission in Antioch to tell his readers about some church prophets who come from Jerusalem. However, he mentions only a single prophecy by a man named Agabus.

Prophets are important in the early church. Luke mentions them several times in Acts (13:1; 15:32; 21:9-10). Paul lists prophets as belonging to a God-ordained function in the church (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11). The church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and he ranks the latter next after apostles (Ephesians 2:20). He also recognizes prophets as having an important charismatic function (1 Corinthians 14:29-33; Ephesians 3:5).

Prophets in the Old Testament had a dual function, to foretell and to forth-tell. In speaking forth, they foretold the future and/or told God's will. Agabus apparently is known for his foretelling, that is, his predictions. We shall hear from him again later in Acts (21:10).

Agabus tells of famine (11:28)

At Antioch, Agabus prophesies "through the Spirit" that a severe famine will spread over the entire Roman world (11:28). Luke wants his readers to understand that Agabus' prediction is not a hoax. The Holy Spirit inspires him, and thus his prophecy has important meaning for the church. Agabus apparently doesn't say exactly when the famine will occur. But Luke, writing many years after the event, inserts the parenthetical statement that, "This happened during the reign of Claudius" (11:28). Emperor Claudius rules from A.D. 41-54.

In speaking of a severe famine that will spread over the entire "Roman world," Luke uses the Greek word *oikoumene*. It literally means the "inhabited world," and is commonly used to refer to the Roman Empire, in Latin the *orbis terrarum*. We have no record of a *single* famine ravaging the

whole empire in the time of Claudius. However, there is good supporting evidence from secular historians that extensive famines did occur throughout his reign. Agabus may mean that a series of famines in various parts of the empire would strike at different times. Taken together, the Roman Empire as a whole suffers from famine.

A number of Roman historians refer to various crop failures and famine conditions during the reign of Claudius. [Suetonius, *Life of Claudius* 18.2; Tacitus, *Annals* 12.43; Dio Cassius, *History of Rome* 60.11; Orosius, *History* 7.6.17.] Josephus writes of a severe famine that hits Judea in what is thought to be about A.D. 45-47. [*Antiquities* 20:49-53, 101; 3:320-321.]

F.F. Bruce says, “We know from other sources that Claudius’s principate was marked by a succession of bad harvests and consequent scarcity in various parts of the empire — in Rome, Greece, and Egypt as well as in Judaea.” [230.] This includes famine conditions in Rome itself at the beginning of Claudius’ rule, in Egypt during his fifth year, throughout Greece in his eighth or ninth year, and in Rome again between his ninth and eleventh year. Suetonius speaks of “a series of droughts” that cause “a scarcity of grain” that hits Rome especially hard. [*Claudius* 18.2.]

Josephus tells the story of Helena, queen-mother of the territory of Adiabene, and a Jewish proselyte. [*Antiquities* 20:49-53.] During a severe famine in Judea, she purchases grain in Egypt and figs in Cyprus. Helena has these transported to Jerusalem for distribution to the famine-stricken population. Meanwhile, her son King Izates sends a large sum of money to the Jerusalem authorities to be used for famine relief. Josephus said this famine occurs during the rule of Cuspius Fadus and Tiberius Julius Alexander. [Ibid., 20:101.] That would be between A.D. 44 and 48.

Disciples help other believers (11:29)

Just as queen Helena and her son Izates helped the Jews in Jerusalem, the

disciples at Antioch organize a relief fund for the mother-church. Luke says, “As each one was able, [they] decided to provide help for the brothers and sisters living in Judea” (11:29). The members apparently contribute money and goods to this special fund. In a later collection, organized by Paul for the churches in Judea, he advises that the Greeks should “set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income” (1 Corinthians 16:2).

Luke’s mention of the relief fund for Judea ends the section on Antioch. It may seem to be an abrupt conclusion, but it is a fitting one. In the words of William Willimon, “The new congregation in Antioch — composed of gentiles who a short time before were considered questionable subjects for the gospel — responds generously to the appeal for help in Judea.” [108.] Thus, the Gentile and Hellenistic Christians of Antioch prove their faith and love (and their unity with the mother church) by sharing their material possessions with those less fortunate. While less dramatic than the story of the Jerusalem Christians sharing their goods (2:44-45 and 4:32-37), this also illustrates the continuing church practice to aid its poor.

The church, under the encouragement of its leading apostles, will “continue to remember the poor,” something that Paul says he is “eager to do” (Galatians 2:10). Paul will call his own future multi-church relief fund a “contribution for the poor among the Lord’s people in Jerusalem” (Romans 15:25-31, with 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 and 2 Corinthians 8-9).

It seems that the Jerusalem church is living on the edge of destitution. Its more wealthy members may have been the Hellenists who fled the city. The early practice of selling personal property to contribute to the common fund may have reduced the economic strength of the church community. Thus, it is ill-prepared to cope with a famine that strains its resources to the breaking point. But the brothers and sisters in Antioch save the day.

Gift is sent to elders (11:30)

Once the relief fund is collected, Barnabas and Paul carry it to the elders in Jerusalem for disposition (11:30). This is the first time “elders” are mentioned in the church at Jerusalem, and they now seem to have charge of the relief fund. Earlier, the apostles delegated this responsibility to people who were known as the “Seven” (6:1-6). Perhaps some of them, as well as others, became known as “elders.” Apparently, elders are leaders appointed to serve in the churches (14:23; 20:17). They seem to function just below the apostles (15:4, 6, 22; 16:4; 21:18).

Perhaps more than coincidentally, “elders” is the name given to leaders of Jewish synagogues. With the influence of Judaism strong in the early church, it’s possible that the early church is following the Jewish form of organization, at least to some degree.

Paul’s trip to Jerusalem (11:30)

Paul brings the relief fund to Jerusalem; this brings up the question of the relationship of this visit to the two visits he mentions in Galatians (1:18; 2:1). Most commentators correlate the first visit of Galatians with the one of Acts 9:26-29, and that is not a problem. The real question revolves around the second visit of Galatians 2:1-10, the one he makes 14 years after his conversion. Often, this is identified with Paul’s trip to attend the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15.

Others, however, feel that this visit correlates better with the famine-relief visit here in Acts 11. In the words of Richard N. Longenecker, “The simplest solution that provides the most satisfactory and convincing reconstruction and leaves the fewest loose ends” is to correlate the visit of Galatians 2:1-10 with this famine visit of Acts 11. [Longenecker, 405.] If that be the case, then Paul’s comment that he goes to Jerusalem “in response to a revelation” (Galatians 2:2) is explained by Acts 11:28. The revelation is Agabus’ prophecy of famines around the Empire. That means that Paul’s visit to

Jerusalem in Acts 15 is a third visit to the city, one he doesn't mention in Galatians. (Perhaps Galatians was written before he went to Jerusalem for the Acts 15 council.)

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About the Author

Paul Kroll worked for Grace Communion International for several decades. He is now retired and lives in southern California. He wrote hundreds of articles for our magazines. This commentary on Acts was written in the mid 1990s, but we were not able to print the commentary then. We are happy to update it in 2012 and publish it as a series of e-books. This work has been edited by **Michael Morrison**, PhD, instructor in New Testament for [Grace Communion Seminary](#).

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