

Luke-Acts, Continued

Let us begin with prayer.

Father, I know there is much on our minds here as the semester draws to a close. The pressure and stresses of school often refocus us from the rest of life, and yet the rest of life does not give up. Thus there are many pressures on these students at this time. Father, I would pray for all of us that in this hour especially we would not lose focus on You. For we are here, ultimately, to serve You and to learn how to serve You better. And we are here on this earth, ultimately, to bring glory to You and to enjoy You forever. We pray that we may not lose sight of that. Lord, I pray also that You would pour out Your grace on these students as they continue to work diligently in this class and other classes. Father, may they know Your presence and feel Your peace in the midst of the work to which they are called. May they take a wise and disciplined approach to the task before them, that all things may be done for Your glory. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Last time we entered into the discussion of Acts and Luke-Acts. The way I entered into that discussion was, I believe, through the prologue into Acts and by noting some of the themes that come up there in the key words and phrases of the prologue. Some of these things are the same as the particular emphases of Luke's Gospel. These include the theme of the Holy Spirit, the apostles, and the nature of the proofs of Jesus in His crucifixion and especially in His resurrection. The themes also include the idea of the mission that the apostles and ultimately the whole church is called to and the idea that all of this is part of what Jesus began to do and teach. Ultimately, Acts will be a continuation of the ministry of Jesus. This is because the people in Acts follow in the train of Jesus. They minister to others, performing miracles and healing as Jesus did. They teach others as Jesus did. They suffer and die as Jesus did. All that is very much part of Acts. For example, you can think of the miracles at Pentecost and Peter's teaching in the midst of that. This continues, in a sense, Jesus' ministry because His ministry has been passed on to the apostles. Those with the apostolic mantle are then responsible for the spreading of this good news, which is to be found in Jesus.

This is even true when you come to something as shocking as, for example, the death of Stephen in chapters 6 and 7. When Stephen is stoned, there is a sense in which the way Stephen speaks at the end of his stoning ties into the Gospel's account of the death of Jesus. Let me give you a sense of this. Let us read from chapter 7, at the very end right before they stone him. In Acts 7:52 Stephen says the following, "Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the righteous one, whose betrayers and murders you have now become, you who received the laws ordained by angels and did not keep it.' [...] But being full of the Holy Spirit, Stephen gazed intently into heaven and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God and said, 'Behold, I see the heavens open up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.'"

Who else accused the people of persecuting the prophets? Jesus. Stephen specifically indicts them for the death of Jesus. The last phrase we read is the most closely paralleled to Jesus' words: "Behold, I see the heavens open up and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." Who else says that? Jesus does. In what context does Jesus say it? In his trial before the Sanhedrin. And what is the result? They declare Him a blasphemer and decide He is worthy of death. The result here is this: "They cried out with a loud voice, covered their ears, and rushed upon him with one impulse. And when they had driven him out of the city they began stoning him. So you see Stephen undergoes a death very similar to Jesus. Now, the crucial thing here is that Stephen at no point claims an atoning worthiness to his death. Jesus, on the other hand, in the institution of the Lord's Supper in Luke proclaims that this is the work of the

new covenant, established in His blood. Stephen is not trying to inaugurate anything new. He is looking to his Lord, to emulate Him in his life, proclamation, and ultimately in his death. So you see this sense of what Jesus began to do and teach even works out in the death of some of the people in Acts.

There are many connections to be made between Luke and Acts. We started talking about some of those last time. I got into a number of those through the discussion of the prologue of Acts. I should note that the prologue has many of the themes people typically see in Luke and Acts, but not all of them. For example, the prologue (at least to the point we have read it) does not specifically mention prayer. But prayer is a theme very common to Luke and Acts that is not pronounced in the prologue. Another theme that is often seen in Luke, and you see touches of it in Acts as well, is the theme of the rich and poor. Luke focuses a lot on the poor and their particular responsibilities and the particular graces that come to the poor and the dangers that come to the rich. You see some of that in Acts. We may see this a little in the story of Ananias and Sapphira. They die when they claim to have given everything they had to the church but had in fact held back some, and the Lord puts them both to death. You have some similarities there. Thus there are some themes outside the prologue that are common to Luke and Acts. But most of the themes can be found in the prologue. That touches on some common themes.

I want to move into the structure of Acts, and then I want to look at some instances in Acts. I want to move our discussion from the Gospels into Acts. Let me say that we could spend an entire semester on any of the books in the New Testament, and certainly Acts. Thus my intention here—as in all the rest of the class—is not to give you a Chapman take on the whole book of Acts in 30 minutes so that you suddenly know exactly what to do with every part of Acts. Rather, my goal is to give you some methodological tools and some big-picture elements. I do this so that, as you work your way through Acts, you will have a sense of where you are in the flow of Acts, and also so that you can see how the themes in the different little episodes in Acts have import. I want to just show you a few methodological tools—that is my main goal. This is in keeping with the old saying you may have heard that says, if you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach a man to fish, you can retire and let him do all the work. That is my goal here, to give you the tools. This is because in the rest of your life of ministry, in whatever lay or professional ministry you are called to, you will need to do these things yourself. That, by the way, will be true of the next few class periods as well, as we look at John and Paul.

Let us talk a little about the structure of Acts. There are a few ways one could divide up the sections in Acts. One way is by Peter and Paul, by focusing on the people in Acts. Peter is the main actor in chapters 1-12, but in chapters 13 to the end of Acts, Paul takes center of stage. Thus one of the main overt ways of seeing transition in Acts is going from Peter to Paul. There are problems with that as a working division. Right in the middle of Peter's section there is a whole lot of "non-Peter" material. Even if you allow the story of Ananias and Sapphira in chapter 5 to be ultimately connected with Peter—since Peter announces their doom in some ways—chapters 6 and 7 clearly talk about Stephen. Thus there are two long chapters in the midst of the Peter section that are clearly talking about something else. Then if you continue into chapter 8, there is a brief focus on Saul (who will come up as Paul in the rest of Acts), and then the rest of chapter 8 talks about Philip. Then there is the conversion of Saul/Paul in chapter 9. You do not come back to Peter until chapters 10 and 11. In other words, at least the Peter section is extremely muddled, if you try to divide Acts into Peter and Paul. Thus I would suggest that that is not an adequate division for Acts. The people are important, they take center stage at different points, but it is not as if there is a way to structure Acts that revolves around a neat division into key people.

Leaving that behind as a possibility for the structure of Acts, there is another major feature to Acts that has been suggested. That is found in the prologue, specifically in the commissioning of the disciples to

witness (in Acts 1:7 and especially 8). When you read Acts 1:8, you read these very famous words: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses, both in Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest ends of the earth.” Thus you have this removal from Jerusalem the city to Judea and Samaria, the regions surrounding Jerusalem, to the uttermost ends of the earth. That does, in some ways, work itself out in Acts. In the early chapters, everyone is in Jerusalem. Then with the death of Stephen in Acts 7, people are suddenly thrust out from Jerusalem. The apostles stay in Jerusalem, but others leave. Then the narrative begins to follow those who left. Philip is one of these, a famous one of the earliest people who left. He encounters Samaritans, the Ethiopian eunuch, and such. Thus you have this move out to Judea and Samaria, which continues unto chapter 13. In chapter 13 Paul and Barnabas are commissioned to the first missionary journey of the apostle Paul, where they begin to go into other regions. This is actually a very pronounced structure in Acts. They start in Jerusalem, move out to Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. Acts ends with Paul in Rome as the central city in the Roman Empire.

This is one possibility for the structure of Acts. I think it is one we should take into account because of some of the elements there. Thus the very commissioning of the people of God focuses initially on Jewish converts, and then on Hellenistic converts, then on God-fearers in the land of Judea, and then finally on Gentiles in the lands of the uttermost parts of the earth—after Jewish people are ministered to in those contexts as well. So you see this transition from a purely Jewish religion to a religion that incorporates the whole of humanity. That is tied up with the structure of Acts that is announced here: Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth.

It has to be said, though, that even this structure has some problems with it. It does not have nearly as many problems as the idea of dividing up Acts by the people. But one of the problems is that Jerusalem keeps factoring in to the action of Acts. Paul and Barnabas go on their first missionary journey and they come back to Jerusalem. There is a dispute as to whether the Gentiles need to be circumcised, and in Acts 15 there is a meeting of the church to determine whether the Gentiles need to be circumcised. And where do they meet? In Jerusalem. They started in Jerusalem, went out, and came back to Jerusalem. Then at the end of Paul’s third missionary journey, he feels the call of God to go back specifically to Jerusalem to fulfill a vow there. Then the action again focuses on Jerusalem for a time until Paul is ultimately led in chains to Rome. Thus there is a sense in which people keep coming back to Jerusalem. I do not think that is a major indictment of this idea of Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth as a structural feature. But it is a reminder to us that this structure is not neat and clean like we might prefer it, if that was the whole of the structure of Acts.

There is one other feature in Acts that I want to point out as a possible structural marker, to let you know where you are as you go through Acts. That is, this phrase that shows up again and again in some variation. This phrase is found, for example, at the end of chapter 6, verse 7: “The word of God kept on spreading; and the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were becoming obedient to the faith.” Now, compare that to 9:31, which says, “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.” Moving on to 12:24: “But the word of the Lord continued to grow and to be multiplied.” I will skip the instance in 19:20 and take us to the very end of the book, 28:30-31: “And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.” In all three instances I just cited, there is a concept that comes up again and again—the idea of the increase of the church, the multiplication of the church. At the very end of Acts, it ends on this idea of the unhindered growth of the church, or that Paul’s

proclamation at least was unhindered. Thus you have this idea of the expansion of the church. And there are several key points where the author steps back and says, “Look, it is continuing to multiply.”

If you look back at 6:7 as an example, what is striking about some of these is that effectively this provides a very nice and neat ending to the section that preceded 6:7. In the chapters before 6:7, you have events going on within the church, persecution of the church, and the choosing of the seven; the account has focused essentially on Peter and the church in Jerusalem. So he ends by saying, “...the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly in Jerusalem...” Thus this sums up the increase of the church in Jerusalem, which comes back to our geographic structural markers: Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth. Then 9:31 sums up the growth of the church in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. Thus the geographical theme is wed with this idea of the multiplication of the church. Therefore I would argue that these provide ending points to sections in Acts. We are tempted when we outline a book to stay with chapter headings and chapters. I would argue that the first section of Acts, at least after the Pentecost events, ends in 6:7 and not in 6:1. That is the summary statement of that section. Then when we move into the Stephen account, we move into an account of a martyrdom. But ultimately it is a martyrdom that forces the church to expand beyond the borders of Jerusalem, to go into Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. In the beginning of chapter 8, after Stephen’s death, we read (8:2), “Some devout men buried Stephen, and made loud lamentation over him.” But prior to that, note in 8:1: “And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” Thus there is a sense in which one of the major features of Stephen’s death is that it forces the church out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria. This section is summarized in 9:31, when he notes that the church is multiplied in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee.

Thus what I am saying is that when you look at the structure of Acts, there is an interweaving of the geographical theme with the theme of the multiplication of the church throughout all these territories in the midst of persecution. These become another several important thematic elements to Acts. First, there is the geographic spread of the Gospel. That is compounded with the spread of the Gospel beyond the ranks of Judaism. There is the theme of the multiplication and spread of the church. And there is also the theme of that multiplication happening in the midst of persecution. So if you look at some of these structural features, they even bring some of these thematic elements to the surface.

It has been asked, what is the date of Stephen’s death and the resultant scattering of the church? I am not sure I can answer that. We know Gamaliel was active in the Sanhedrin at the time. Part of the issue is that all the chronology in Acts is relative chronology. There is not a date that is given anywhere in Acts. There are always references to the leaders at the time, and if you know the dates of the leaders you can date everything else. When we come to Paul, the one secure date we have for Paul comes from Acts because we know Paul was in Corinth and was tried by Galio, who was a leader in Corinth at the time. I think he was a councilman, but I would have to check that. Thus the result is that we know he was there during the time Galio was there. Well, an inscription has been found that tells us when Galio was leader of this region. That allows us to date when Paul was there. Everything else with Paul’s chronology is done relative to that date. If you want specifics on that, Carson and Moo have a part where they discuss the chronology of Paul’s life. One of the issues you come across with Stephen is at what point did this happen? That has to do with when Jesus died and when this happened relative to Paul’s ministry. This is because our only secure date has to do with Paul. We can only guess when Jesus died. It is an educated guess, but it is a guess. Thus all our chronology in Acts is relative to that date for Paul. I would put it in the fourth decade of the first century, sometime in there. But I am not sure if we could come to a more precise date. The commentaries might be helpful on that.

It has been asked if the themes of Acts could be restated. There are the common themes of Luke and Acts that you find in the prologue of Acts. I drew out four extra themes in Acts in addition to some of the common themes I mentioned earlier. I draw these four themes from the structural elements. To recap, those four themes are the geographic spread, the spread from Jew to Gentile, the multiplication of the church, and the fact that this multiplication comes during a time of persecution. There is almost incessant persecution going on in Acts. Those were the four themes I mentioned.

Let us move on. I would like to talk about how the themes in Acts relate to key events in Acts. Of course for Luke as the author, all of chapters 1-28 are important to him. It is not as if there are some chapters that should stand out as more important without acknowledging the importance of the others. But I do want to skim over the surface and put out some really important features. They are important because they show changes happening in the church, and they tie into some of the thematic elements of Acts. So we will do a quick skim of Acts, and I will focus on the things that most stick out, at least to me.

I think, given that the structure of Acts is this interesting interweaving, at least we have to take into account the geographic structure and the notion of the multiplication of the church as part of the structure. For the first one of these, the really important factor is Acts 1:8. The apostles ask a question in verse 6: “Lord, when are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” And Jesus’ response is, “I am not going to answer that question. And you should not worry about it, because it is not for you to know.” So in 1:7 it says, “He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority...” And he continues by telling them what they should know—the job that is ahead of them: “...but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth.”

That mentions two major elements: the Holy Spirit and the apostles’ expansive witness. What that does for the reader is it sets us up the expectation that Jesus will send the Holy Spirit on them, and then for them to witness. But you have to go through an entire chapter of other things before we get to the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. So, certainly from a narrative perspective, there is a tension created in the reader. You are waiting for these events to happen. From the perspective of the history of the church, there are a number of things that have to happen in between, including the ascension of Jesus and the choosing of the twelfth disciple. This shows the church’s concern with maintaining the structure Jesus Himself set up and also with maintaining the number 12, because that number functions as a reminder that Jesus’ own ministry here was to the 12 tribes of Israel. Thus you have this need to reinstate this number 12, and so there is an election.

But the fact that—at that very opening structural mark—Jesus (and, of course, Luke) announces that the Holy Spirit will come on the disciples causes us to wait on Pentecost. So probably the most important event in Acts is Pentecost. Thus you have the waiting for the Spirit, the explanation of the Spirit, the first speech as to what the evangelism of the early church will look like—and this is all announced at the coming of Pentecost. I want to come back to that speech in a bit when we talk about the speeches in Acts. Thus Pentecost is a key event.

Then there are subsequent sermons of Peter and a variety of miraculous things that happen. There is this very striking event of Ananias and Sapphira, and the result is a great fear that comes upon the church (5:11). There is this sense that God is at work among these people, performing miracles, performing the multiplication of the church. And He is purifying and refining His church so that they understand that they must live in a reverential fear of God, because this is serious. That is what is going on, in a sense, with Ananias and Sapphira.

I have already mentioned repeatedly this whole event with Stephen. The event of Stephen is important because it provides an impetus to the spread of the church throughout the rest of the regions. It also provides an introduction to us of Saul, who will be a major character. In 8:1 Saul is there watching the whole thing happen. And it says he was in hearty agreement with putting Stephen to death. Saul becomes a character later on, so you get a first taste of this man who was at the first great martyrdom of the church and heartily agrees with it. That provides all the more of a character change as you come to Saul's Damascus road experience. The other thing to mention about Stephen is his very long speech, which recaps the history of Israel and does so ultimately at the end. Throughout the speech, there are a variety of things that come up. But at the end his point is to indict the Jewish leaders and the Jewish people because they have not followed the prophets in the past, and it is no surprise they are not following Jesus now.

One of the thematic issues that comes up throughout Acts is how the Jewish people are being viewed. Some people have accused Acts of being anti-Semitic. This has been especially true during the last century or so, because of World War II and the Holocaust. A good part of New Testament scholarship is still, if you would, reeling from the Holocaust. There has been an increasing awareness of the degree to which the church over the last two millennia has participated in anti-Semitic behavior. Especially the church in Germany fanned the flames of anti-Semitism in some respects and then sat idly by as millions of Jewish people were put to death. Thus there has been this sense of particular awareness of and sensitivity to elements of anti-Semitism in anything that is Christian.

As a quick aside, I think we as Christians should acknowledge that the history of the church has at times evidenced significant anti-Semitism, even with some of the heroes of the church. Tertullian, for example, said some terrible things about the Jews. And Luther is an especially grievous example of this. Luther in his old age got very crabby and said some things that were extremely bad and wrong about Jews. And unfortunately, because the German church held Luther in such esteem, that really did set the German church on the course toward being increasingly anti-Semitic in some respects. Thus we need to acknowledge that as Christians. We also need to come to grips with the extent to which there is anti-Semitism in the New Testament. There have been those who have argued for significant anti-Semitism, especially in Acts and John, where the Jews are people who constantly oppose Jesus. My response is that they are neglecting the nuance of what is going on and the historical situation in which these accounts appear.

Should anyone ask you about anti-Semitism, here is what I would say. It is first of all simply the case that in Acts, Jewish people in the synagogue form the major rival and one of the main persecuting arms against the church in Acts. So we need to acknowledge that the church perceived itself to be, in some sense, in combat with at least some synagogue leaders and some synagogues. That is simply part of what is going on. Since that is true, it is only fair to acknowledge that this is not anti-Semitism per se, but rather it is a rivalry over who has the right claim to the Jewish religion. The Jewish people are engaging in physical harm against the church. In some ways the church is simply responding to that. Thus some of the harsher things that are said need to be put in that context. In other words, the earliest history of persecution that we can see seems to be Jewish persecution against the church. Ultimately, and very sadly, the church became very powerful and turned on the Jewish people and so it went the other direction. But in this early period, we need to see which way the persecution was going. That is one point. A second point is that most of the authors of the New Testament were themselves Jewish. So when John in his Gospel (which we will get to soon) speaks of the Jews as the main opposition against Jesus, it has to be acknowledged that John himself was Jewish. Thus he was effectively indicting his own people. This cannot truly be deemed anti-Semitism. It is not that he is against the Jewish people. He

is effectively saying that the majority of Jews in Jesus' time in Palestine missed the Messiah. That is an indictment of his own people.

As long as we are on this topic, there are some interesting features in Acts that have to do with the relationship between the church, Judaism, and the death of Jesus. After all, one of the great claims against the Jewish people by the church is that they are Christ-killers. This a term that is extremely offensive to Jewish people today because it was under that slogan that much anti-Semitic persecution in Western society has gone on: they do not deserve to be treated well because their whole race constitutes Christ-killers. Thus much of the issue here has to do with who was responsible for Christ's death.

Those of you who remember the controversy surrounding the movie *The Passion of the Christ* know that this is what created such a stir. In the movie, the Jewish people (as in the Gospels) clamor for Jesus' death. There was a fear that this would stir up anti-Semitism. Now, I think it is fair to say that in the movie, and certainly in the Gospels, it is not just the Jewish people clamoring for Jesus' death. The Gentiles are ultimately responsible. They are the ones who scourged and beat and crucified Jesus. You have both aspects in the Gospels, so effectively everyone is indicted. But you see this as well explicitly in Acts.

If you turn to Acts chapter 2, there is another statement that appears a couple of different ways in Acts and at least a couple of times in Peter's speeches. In Acts 2:23 it says, "...this man [namely Jesus], delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you [Jewish people] nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put him to death." In Jesus' death there are three other actors besides Jesus, according to this verse. There are the Jewish people, who are the ones ultimately responsible for nailing Jesus to the cross because they are the ones who clamor for the crucifixion. But there are also the Gentiles, who are the godless men who actually carry out that death sentence. And then the third actor is God Himself, who acts in foreknowledge and predetermination to bring all of it about. Here is a frank acknowledgement of the human parties who are involved and an indictment of both the parties. But because he is talking to the Jews in this context, he especially indicts the Jewish people by saying, "You put to death the Messiah!" And he calls for repentance, which is certainly the proper response in that context. But both sets of human parties, Jew and Gentile alike, are held responsible for the death of Jesus. Yet even all of this is under the foreordaining plan of God. God's hand was over all of this. If we recognize all of those parties in the action, then I think this idea that this speech is particularly anti-Semitic is quite muted. It becomes part of the proclamation to the first-century Jewish people, who were in fact responsible for the clamor, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" That becomes a basis for then offering to them repentance in the name of Jesus Christ and baptism in His name. That is what is going on there. I wanted to bring out that theme as long as we are on Stephen.

Acts is quite forthright in indicting the Jewish people. But in doing so (as my final comment on the anti-Semitism topic), it is fully within the prophetic mode of the Old Testament. If you want some particularly harsh passages on the Jewish people, I suggest you read Isaiah or some of the Minor Prophets. They go straight for the jugular and indict them again and again for being a stiff-necked, uncircumcised people because they are uncircumcised in the heart and refuse to follow the commands of God. Effectively in Acts, these are Jewish people speaking to their Jewish colleagues. They indict them on prophetic grounds. That is fully what Stephen is doing in this speech.

In a response to a student's comment that the movie *The Passion* was just telling the story as it is, I will not staunchly defend the movie. In part, what Mel Gibson showed was not truly history. I would argue that half or less of that movie is actually historical. He frequently departs from the Gospels and goes to medieval Catholic tradition in the movie. It is a very artistic film. It has some very good theological

elements as well as some elements I would question, etc. I have an appreciation for the film, but I will not staunchly defend its portrayal of history. What this comment was getting at, though, is effectively the historicity of the Gospels themselves. The Gospels show that this is what happened at the death of Jesus. And the student was quite right to say that, on one level, we are just telling the story of what happened. There are nuances to all of that, though. One cannot just paint a broad picture and say that the Jewish people were involved. On the other hand, here is what I would ask you. How would you sensitively convey that to a Jewish friend? There are hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Jewish people living today who have immediate relatives who died in a Nazi concentration camp or who have a grandfather who still bears the mark of a number from the camps. To too quickly absolve Christians of some responsibility in that is certainly not going to go over well, and it would not be true to history either. That is why whenever I deal with this subject I always begin by admitting Christian guilt in the Holocaust because there is some, and we need to frankly acknowledge that. We have bridges that we can build there so that we can discuss some of the deeper questions of anti-Semitism in the New Testament. And ultimately what I am trying to do is build bridges for the Gospel. I think we have to acknowledge that there is this problem. We also have to admit that particular verses, taken out of context from the Gospels, have been part of that tradition of anti-Semitism for a long time. I would argue that those verses were taken out of both their literary and historical context and were misused and abused by some people in the church—not all, but some. And that means that those same statements become for many Jewish people—who are often very aware of these statements—sensitive in themselves. We need to recognize that as we try to build bridges for the Gospel. I agree with the student's comment that this is simply history, so why disabuse ourselves of that? But at the same time I want to encourage a different means of communicating that to Jewish people.

There is a history of anti-Semitism that has gone on for more than 2000 years. There was much anti-Semitism among pagans in the first century. The Jewish people have been up against this for a long time. We need to be sensitive to that as well. If you want some evidence of how sensitive this makes people, I have tried to dispassionately look at the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, and see that Gibson too is extremely careful in that movie to indict Jew and Gentile, to claim that guilt of all people. This is so much so that Jesus proclaims, "Forgive them," from the cross twice in the movie, which is certainly not in the Gospels. And He does so looking first at a Roman soldier and the second time looking at the Jewish leader. It is as if they went out of their way to walk this line of saying that Jews and Gentiles were involved in the death of Jesus and both are offered forgiveness. I think a dispassionate look at the movie would move you in that way. But because all the statements that have caused so much trouble over the years are included, the very fact that they are included has caused some people to accuse the movie of anti-Semitism. I do not know Gibson's heart on that; I am not trying to vouchsafe the movie. But there is some evidence even there that we need to be very sensitive to as we approach these issues. There is much sensitivity there, and we need to be careful as we interact with our Jewish friends. At the same time, the church needs to be very careful not to back off on this. Jesus is the Messiah. And there is no salvation outside of Jesus. He is the way, the truth, and the life. Therefore Jewish people need the Gospel. There has been a major move in Christian theology since the Holocaust to try to say, "We are all a part of the same basic family. Jewish people do not need a separate salvation." This is mainly because Jewish people sometimes say, "If you try to convert me, that in itself is anti-Semitism." No, that is just truth. I want to say there needs to be a distinction there, but we need to be sensitive in how we do that.

Let us turn now to considering the miracles in Acts. It is the case that the miraculous spread of the church in Acts has to do with the power the Holy Spirit shows. But I would also say the power the Holy Spirit shows is seen in a variety of different ways. There are even a variety of different miracles. There are healings and the casting out of demons. But there is also Philip miraculously showing up on a road with an Ethiopian eunuch in the middle of a desert. And after that he is miraculously taken up in the

Holy Spirit and sent to do ministry in Samaria. Of those who hold to the necessity of miracles in the church today, I do not know anyone who says, “And that means that when I need to go to my conference in Dallas, I expect the Lord to take me there—bing.” There is a sense in which we expect some of these miracles to have some continuity with the present and others that we do not. Moreover, there are these miraculous dealings with people where their hearts are changed. Gentiles come to the Lord even before they hear the whole Gospel! (This happens in Cornelius’ household). The evidence of that comes in the manifestation of the Spirit in their lives. The filling of the Spirit becomes evidence that God is already working in their lives. Thus the filling of the Spirit and some of the miraculous gifts given show the proclamation of the Gospel. They also show that these different spheres of people you never thought would be brought into the kingdom are brought into the kingdom. That is why some of these particular miracle stories are recorded in Acts.

What I want to say with regard to the miraculous in Acts is that they show the continuing power of the Spirit. And there is no sense in Acts that all this will cease, or even that some of the miracles will cease. But we need to see a whole range of miracles, from the mundane of someone coming to Christ to the healings and the like. Of course, someone coming to Christ is much less mundane than we tend to think. This is evident when we realize the change of a person from the sphere of darkness, held in the power of the prince of this world (using the language of Ephesians) into salvation; they are no longer dead, but alive. So you see the miraculous working out in a variety of different ways in Acts.

Continuing through Acts, after Stephen’s martyrdom, we see Philip. The work of Philip gets downplayed too much, I think. Ultimately Philip is one of the ones who really shows to us and becomes a face of the ministry to the Samaritans. Remember, the increase of the church starts in Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria, and then the uttermost parts of the earth. One of the most striking things about Acts is that the apostles are not the first to understand their call and leave to go to Judea and Samaria. It seems that the Hellenized Jews who have become Christians are the ones who leave first. Luke makes the point that the apostles stay in Jerusalem. That is why, after the death of Stephen, the next most important figure is Philip, who is not an apostle at all—at least not in the classic sense of the 12 apostles. Philip, then, becomes the face of the Gospel as it goes into the next stage, to Samaria and ultimately to the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip is the one who brings the Gospel to the hated Samaritans. They had a separate temple, worshiping at Mount Gerizim instead of at Jerusalem. They had a separate canon; they only accepted the Pentateuch, and even that they had changed in some respects from the Hebrew sources. They had a separate history after the Pentateuch because they did not accept the canonical history after Deuteronomy (Joshua-Esther). There was constant enmity between Jews and Samaritans, so much so that Josephus mentions instances of them bringing up arms against one another. You see this especially in Jesus’ Good Samaritan parable, where it is such a surprise that it is a Samaritan who helps out the Jew who has been beaten. But in Acts the surprise is that the next place the Gospel goes is Samaria, and Philip is the face on that. That is very significant.

In Acts chapter 9 we have another defining event of Acts. Saul on the Damascus road encounters Jesus. Saul—the very person who had stood by and in his heart was glad to see Stephen martyred. Saul—the person who went to the high priest and the priesthood to ask for letters so that he could pursue all these Christians who had run away to other towns from Jerusalem. Saul on the Damascus road encounters Jesus. The entire direction of his life changes, and he becomes the voice of Christ in the whole end of Acts.

Chapters 10 and 11 are important. Before this time there appear to have been at least non-Jewish people in the church, especially through Philip’s ministry. But there had not yet been in the church a sense that the Gentiles were to be received in on their own terms (to put it too extremely), apart from the food laws

that Jewish people followed. There was still an understanding that since Gentiles ate pork, the Jewish Christians could not enter their homes. Peter sees a vision, and the whole nature of the vision pertains to eating, which pertains to table fellowship. In that time and culture, table fellowship pertained to being in communion with Gentiles. Then Cornelius comes to Christ. He is a prime example of a whole household coming to Christ. The Spirit falls upon them even before they are able to be baptized. Peter seems to be wrapping up his sermon, but he is not quite done—and the Spirit falls on these people. Peter responds, “Clearly the Gentiles are being brought into the kingdom.” The whole nature of that story is crafted in such a way to say, “Gentiles are now part of the kingdom, and they do not have to obey the food laws.”

In chapter 12 there is Peter’s arrest, but then in chapter 13 Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles begins. Paul goes on his first missionary journey to Asia Minor and does ministry alongside Barnabas. There is a constant, recurring theme in the first and second missionary journeys of Paul. He shows up in a city, and then he goes straight to where the Jewish people are meeting. If there is a synagogue, he goes there. If there are not enough Jews to meet in a synagogue, he goes to wherever they are meeting (the side of a river or some place like that). He shows up, goes to the synagogue, and preaches. Sometimes he is invited back, but eventually they get tired of him and kick him out. He leaves with some of the Jewish people and some of the believing Gentiles who were already attending the synagogue. And eventually he starts spreading the proclamation to other Gentile people. Then the Jewish people in the synagogue get jealous and kick him out of town. This pattern happens again and again. This is part of the persecution of the church theme in Acts. This is also part of the theme of the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles.

In that regard, perhaps another major landmark in Acts comes in Acts 15 with the council in Jerusalem. The question that arises is whether the Gentiles must be circumcised. It is interesting that the question arises especially from Christians who were from the Pharisaic sect of Judaism. The question was whether they should circumcise these Gentiles. If you remember, there are three things you have to do as a proselyte, a convert to Judaism. You have to be circumcised, baptized, and agree to keep the whole Law. Effectively, they say that what the Gentile converts to Christianity have to undergo is circumcision. And that is it. This is what the whole council in Jerusalem is about, deciding this question. The council in Jerusalem ultimately decides the Gentiles do not have to be circumcised. But they also give the advice that Gentiles should be careful not to offend Jewish people with certain things, like eating blood and the like. That is how the council of Jerusalem ended. That became a major part of the church.

After that there is the second missionary journey of the apostle Paul. This is important in part because he finally finds a long-term place where he can base his ministry. Remember the theme of Paul coming to a synagogue, preaching, being thrown out, preaching to the Gentiles, and then being thrown out of the city? Then he would go to the next city, get kicked out of town, etc. He goes to Corinth in chapter 18 (after the great speech in Athens in Acts 17). He goes to the synagogue and is kicked out, but then he preaches to the Gentiles and is able to stay in Corinth for a few years. Thus he has the chance to actually found a church in Acts 18. This shows that as he goes out there is increasing hope. Then there is the third missionary journey. Later there is a conspiracy against Paul to capture him. Eventually he is captured while in Jerusalem. Then there is the move out to Rome. Along the way he proclaims the Gospel, even to some of the most powerful leaders in the world—or at least in Palestine.

Then Acts ends strikingly in chapter 28. Paul is being kept under house arrest in Rome, and some Jewish people come to him. Acts 28:23 says, “When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening.” Now, the strange thing about Acts is that it ends with a lack of success, as

it were, because of continued persecution and rejection. And yet the Gospel continues to go out unhindered. What happens is that the Jewish people ultimately disagree with each other (28:24). And when they did not agree with one another, they began leaving after Paul had spoken one parting word. He indicts them with a citation from Isaiah that is similar to a citation Jesus Himself speaks at the beginning of His ministry as recorded in the Gospel of Luke: “You will hear, but you will not hear [...] and thus you will not perceive.” And thus he says to them in verse 28, “Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen.” (You can see why some would think this is anti-Semitic). The whole ending of Acts is “Do you know what matters in the kingdom of God? It is not whether you have a Jewish ancestry or a Gentile ancestry. What matters is whether you will listen. If you will listen, then all the blessings and benefits of the kingdom of God are yours. But if you do not, there is no hope.” Yet, as it says here in verse 31, “Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.” Thus even in his imprisonment the Gospel continued to go forward.

This is a very quick overview of Acts. You can get many more historical details in F. F. Bruce’s book and many more theological themes in Ladd’s book. Next time we will quickly discuss one or two speeches in Acts. Then we will spend the bulk of our time on John.