

Lessons for Living in a Pagan Culture

— Meditations on Acts —

James R. Hughes, 2024-2026 [[Other publications](#)]

Unless otherwise noted, direct Bible quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).
References from the NIV are from the 1984 edition.

[Note: it is planned that this document will be updated weekly (usually on Friday) with an additional entry as it is included in our congregational bulletin.]

Contents

Planned Future Entries:.....	iv
1. Acts – An Historical Account	1
2. Acts – A History to Encourage Gentiles	2
3. ‘Acts of the Apostles’	3
4. The Holy Spirit	5
5. Resurrected Presence	6
6. Post-Resurrection Bodies	7
7. Baptism with the Holy Spirit.....	9
8. A Question about Kingdom Restoration	10
9. End-time Date Setting.....	11
10. Witnesses to the World.....	13
11. The Ascension	14
12. Jesus Will Return.....	16
13. Waiting in Jerusalem	17
14. Judas the Betrayer.....	18
15. Matthias Replaces Judas	20
16. The Bible is the Word of God the Holy Spirit ...	21
17. God Knows the Hearts of Men	22
18. The Coming and Filling of the Holy Spirit.....	24
19. The Jewish Diaspora.....	25
20. Speaking in Tongues	27
21. Speeches in Acts	28
22. Joel’s Prophecy Fulfilled	29
23. The Last Days.....	31
24. Eschatological Timeline	32
25. Use of Cosmic Terminology.....	33
26. Salvation	35
27. Preaching Christ Crucified	36
28. Preaching Christ’s Resurrection	38
29. Sign Miracles, Not Special Effects	39
30. Jesus is the Promised Messiah	40
31. Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus	42
32. Predestination and Human Responsibility	43
33. Conversion.....	44
34. Water Baptism	46
35. Marks of a True Church.....	47
36. The Fellowship of the Believers	48
37. Miraculous Signs and Wonders	50
38. Worship Transition.....	51
39. Peter Heals a Lame Beggar.....	53
40. A Miracle Performed by the Risen Christ.....	54
41. Jesus, God’s Holy Servant.....	55

42. Jesus, The Holy and Righteous One	57
43. Jesus, the Author of Life.....	58
44. Faith in Jesus	59
45. A Response is Required.....	61
46. Jesus, the Final Prophet	62
47. God’s Covenant with Mankind.....	64
48. Truth Proclamation – A Threat.....	65
49. Truth Proclamation – A Blessing.....	66
50. Truth Proclamation – Public Boldness	68
51. Salvation Only in Jesus.....	69
52. Confounding Foolishness	70
53. Legislating Against Christianity	72
54. Civil Disobedience	73
55. Praise of the Creator	75
56. Fulfilled Prophecy about the Beast.....	76
57. Predestination	77
58. A Prayer for Boldness.....	79
59. Sharing and Caring	80
60. Encouragement	82
61. Hypocrisy in the Church.....	83
62. God is to be Worshiped Only as He Requires ...	84
63. Private Ownership of Property	86
64. The Church	87
65. Healing the Sick.....	89
66. Anti-Christian Animosity	90
67. Prison Escape.....	91
68. Satan and the Demonic	93
69. Perplexed Magistrates.....	94
70. Enraged Magistrates	95
71. Gamaliel’s Moderating Advice.....	97
72. Futile Attempts to Stop Gospel Proclamation ...	98
73. A Need Identified	99
74. Deacons – Qualifications and Role.....	101
75. Deacons – Selection and Installation	102
76. Church Growth	104
77. Stephen Confounds His Disputers	105
78. Stephen’s Arrest	106
79. Stephen’s Apology (Defense and Counter Charge).....	108
80. Stephen’s Use of Scripture	109
81. Abraham – His Calling	110
82. Abraham – Promised Land and Covenant Promise	112
83. Abraham – His Age at the Death of Terah	113
84. Joseph – A Deliverer	115
85. Moses – In Egypt.....	116

86.	Moses – His Calling	117
87.	Moses – A Redeemer.....	119
88.	The Living Oracles of God – the Law of God .	120
89.	Apostasy in the Wilderness	122
90.	The Place of Worship	123
91.	Rejected Messiah	124
92.	Stephen’s Vision of the Risen Lord Jesus.....	126
93.	Jesus, the “Son of Man”.....	127
94.	Stephen’s Murder	128
95.	Martyrdom.....	130
96.	Prayer Directed to Jesus.....	131
97.	Saul’s Introduction	133
98.	Persecution and Dispersal.....	134
99.	Philip and the Samaritans	135
100.	Philip and Simon the Magician.....	137
101.	Magic and the Demonic.....	138
102.	Peter and John in Samaria.....	139
103.	Peter and Simon the Magician	141
104.	The Gospel.....	142
105.	Philip Sent to Meet the Ethiopian Eunuch	144
106.	The Importance of Bible Reading.....	145
107.	Philip Presents the Gospel to the Ethiopian Eunuch	146
108.	The Gospel of Isaiah.....	148
109.	The Ethiopian Eunuch Believed and was Baptized	149

Planned Future Entries:

- The Gospel Spreads into Gentile Lands
- Saul, Breathing Threats and Murder
- Jesus Confronts Saul
- Ananias Called to Service
- Saul's Mission
- Saul's Commissioning
- Saul Proclaims Jesus in Damascus
- Saul's Escape from Damascus
- Saul Preaches in Jerusalem
- A Threat Against Saul's Life in Jerusalem
- Peace from Persecution
- Peter Heals Aeneas
- Dorcas, A Model of Christian Service
- Peter Restores Dorcas' Life
- Cornelius - A Devout Man
- Cornelius' Vision
- Peter's Residence with Simon the Tanner
- Peter's Vision
- Peter is Given an Astounding Revelation
- Cornelius and Peter Meet
- The Mystery of Gentile Incorporation Revealed
- Cornelius' Desire to Hear the Gospel
- Jesus is Lord of All
- Peter Bears Witness to Jesus
- Jesus is Judge and Saviour
- Centurions
- The Holy Spirit Falls on the Gentiles
- Peter Challenged by the Circumcision Party
- Peter Recounts the Visions to the Circumcision Party
- Peter's Defense of the Gentiles' Admission to the Church
- Remember the Word of the Lord
- Repentance Unto Life
- Evangelism Beyond Ancient Palestine
- Many Believed in Antioch
- Barnabas Sent to Antioch
- Barnabas and Saul in Antioch
- Prophets in the Apostolic Age
- The Church in Antioch Responds to a Famine Prediction
- Tithes and Freewill Offerings
- Elders in the Churches
- James' Murder by Herod Agrippa
- Peter's Third Imprisonment
- Peter's Rescue from Prison
- Angels
- Prayers for Peter are Answered
- Peter's Report and Departure from Jerusalem
- Herod Agrippa I Executes the Sentries
- Herod Agrippa I Meets the People from Tyre and Sidon
- The Death of Herod Agrippa I
- Despite Persecution the Word of God Increased
- Mark Joins the Gentile Mission
- Barnabas and Saul Commissioned
- Team Ministry
- Religious Fasting
- The First Missionary Team Reaches Salamis, in Cyprus
- Elymas the Magician Opposes the Faith
- 'Saul' Becomes 'Paul'
- Elymas the Magician is Cursed
- Elymas the Magician is Punished with Blindness
- Arrival in Pisidian Antioch
- Paul's First Recorded Sermon - A History Lesson
- Paul's First Recorded Sermon - Jesus is the Saviour
- Paul's First Recorded Sermon - Jesus Died and Rose Again
- Paul's First Recorded Sermon - Resurrection Proofs
- Paul's First Recorded Sermon - Forgiveness and Freedom
- Continuing Interest in the Gospel of Grace
- Paul Turns from the Jews to the Gentiles
- The Gospel Spreads among the Gentiles
- Driven out of Pisidian Antioch
- Jews Poison Greek Minds in Iconium
- An Extrabiblical Account of Paul's Visit to Galatia
- Driven out of Iconium
- Healing a Crippled Man in Lystra
- Encounter with Paganism
- Paul Declares God the Creator
- God Allowed the Nations to Walk in Their Own Ways
- God's Grace Displayed Toward all Mankind
- Paul Stoned at Lystra
- A Time of Refreshment in Derbe
- Revisiting the Galatian Congregations
- The Kingdom of God
- Appointing Elders

- Conclusion of the First Missionary Journey
- Return to Syrian Antioch
- Circumcision, Claimed Necessary for Salvation
- Announcing the Conversion of the Gentiles
- The Council Debates the Necessity of Circumcision
- Peter's Speech at the Council
- Salvation by Grace through Faith
- Barnabas and Paul Relate Events to the Council
- James' Speech at the Council
- James' Recommendation
- Blood, the Life-Tribute Owed to God
- The Council's Letter to Gentile Believers
- Presbyteries, Synods, and Councils
- The Delegates Return to Antioch from the Jerusalem Council
- Dispute Between Paul and Barnabas
- Two Pastoral Teams
- Timothy Joins Paul and Silas
- Visiting Churches in Phrygia and Galatia
- The Macedonian Call
- A Prayer Meeting Outside the Gate of Philippi
- The Conversion of Lydia
- Household Baptisms and Infant Baptism
- Casting Out a Demon
- An Uncivil Response to Casting out a Demon
- Paul and Silas in Prison
- The Philippian Jailer is Converted
- Challenging Civil Magistrates and Leaving Philippi
- Paul and Silas Declare Jesus in Thessalonica
- Jewish Resistance in Thessalonica
- The Noble Bereans
- Jewish Resistance in Berea
- Paul's Arrival in Athens
- Reasoning with Philosophers - Paul's Method
- Reasoning with Philosophers - Paul's Message
- Paul's Sermon before the Areopagus
- Proclaiming the 'Unknown' God
- Proclaiming God, the Creator
- God's Providential Dealings with Mankind
- Worship of God, Not Through Idols
- Repent! Jesus is the Judge of All Mankind
- Responses to Preaching the Gospel in Athens
- Paul's Arrival in Corinth
- Paul Worked as a Tentmaker
- Proclaiming Jesus in the Synagogue in Corinth
- The Church in Corinth
- Paul's Assuring Vision in Corinth
- Paul Accused Before Gallio
- Transition-Second to Third Missionary Journey
- Paul's Vow
- If God Wills
- Apollos in Ephesus and Corinth
- Paul's Arrival in Ephesus
- Types of Baptism in Acts
- Paul's Preaching and Teaching in Ephesus
- Miracles Performed by Paul in Ephesus
- The Seven Sons of Sceva, 'Exorcists'
- Rejecting Magic Arts
- Paul's Revisitation Resolution
- Idol Makers' Business Disrupted (part 1 of 2)
- Idol Makers' Business Disrupted (part 2 of 2)
- The Riot at Ephesus
- Restoring Civil Order in Ephesus
- Paul Revisits Macedonia and Achaia
- The Sabbath Moved to the First Day of the Week
- The Lord's Day is the Christian Sabbath
- Eutychus' Life is Restored
- Resurrection of the Dead
- Voyage to Miletus
- Paul's Farewell Address to the Ephesian Elders
- Paul Reflects on His Character
- Paul Reflects on His Commitment
- Paul Reflects on His Commission
- Duties of Elders
- Paul Warns about Spiritual Wolves
- Sanctification
- Paul Commits the Ephesian Elders to God
- Paul Reflects on His Conduct
- The Sin of Covetousness
- The Blessedness of Giving
- Paul's Departure from Roman Asia
- The Journey to Jerusalem
- Paul's Visit with Christians in Tyre and Ptolemais

- Paul's Visit with Philip in Caesarea and Agabus' Prophecy
- Discerning God's Will
- Questions about Prophecy
- Paul's Jerusalem Return, Reception, and Report
- Luke's Acquisition of Source Material
- A Zeal for Ritual
- Paul's Participation in a Purification Rite
- The Jews Seek to Kill Paul-Again!
- A Roman Tribune Rescues Paul
- Paul Asks for Permission to Speak to the Mob
- Paul's Apology Before the Jews
- Paul Informs the Jews of His Early Days
- Paul Informs the Jews of His Encounter with the Risen Jesus
- Paul Informs the Jews of Ananias' Role
- Paul Informs the Jews of His Commission to the Gentiles
- Paul Declares His Citizenship Rights
- Citizenship Obligations and Rights
- The Relationship between the Church and the State
- Paul's Appearance Before the Jewish Council (part 1 of 2)
- Paul's Appearance Before the Jewish Council (part 2 of 2)
- Paul Divides the Jewish Council
- Jesus Encourages Paul
- The Jews' Conspire to Kill Paul
- Lawful Oaths and Vows
- Paul's Nephew Exposes the Jews' Conspiracy
- The Roman Tribune Protects Paul
- The Tribune's Letter to Felix
- Felix Receives the Tribune's Letter
- Paul's Trial Before Felix
- Flattery
- The Jews' Charges against Paul
- Manuscripts and Translations
- Paul's Defense before Felix (part 1 of 2)
- Paul's Defense before Felix (part 2 of 2)
- Christianity is Jewish
- Christian Hope
- The Resurrection of the Just and Unjust
- A Clear Conscience
- Paul Kept in Custody by Felix
- The Way
- Paul Reasons with Felix
- Apostolic Apologetics
- Indecisiveness and Procrastination
- Extortion and Bribery
- Festus Replaces Felix
- The Jews Seek to Kill Paul, Again
- The Jews Press their Unsubstantiated Claims Against Paul
- Paul Appeals to Caesar
- Administering Just Judgements
- The God-Defined Roles for Civil Government
- Capital Punishment
- The Fear of Death
- Using Secular Courts
- Festus Updates Agrippa on Paul's Case
- The Fundamental Question
- Paul Introduced Before Agrippa and Bernice
- The Emperor Cult
- Paul's Speech Before Agrippa and Festus
- Paul's Prologue Before Agrippa
- Paul, an Exemplary Jew
- Paul Declares that His Hope is Israel's Hope
- The Credibility of Resurrection
- Paul, the Former Persecutor of Christ
- Paul tells Agrippa of His Conversion
- Resistance is Futile
- Paul tells Agrippa of His Commission
- Paul tells Agrippa of His Compliance
- Christ Fulfilled Moses and the Prophets
- Festus Accuses Paul of Mania
- What is Truth?
- Paul's Appeal to Agrippa to Believe 'Christian'
- Paul Declared Innocent by Governor and King
- Departing Caesarea for Rome
- The Journey from Caesarea to Fair Havens
- Decision to Sail Farther
- Beyond Human Help in a Storm
- Paul's First Words of Encouragement on the Ship
- Nearing Landfall on Malta
- Paul's Second Words of Encouragement on the Ship
- Shipwreck and Deliverance
- Hospitality from Barbarians
- Paul is Protected from a Viper Bite
- Miracles on Malta
- From Malta to Puteoli
- Arrival in Rome
- Paul Introduces

Himself to the Jewish
Leaders in Rome

- Paul Preaches to the
Jews in Rome
- Paul's Final Words to
the Jews in Rome
- God's Dealings with the
Jews Today
- Paul's Witness to All in
Rome
- What Happened Next?

1. Acts – An Historical Account

(Acts 1.1-2)

During the ‘Enlightenment’, Scientific Revolution, and Industrial Revolution it became fashionable to question the accuracy of the Bible’s historical sections. This included attacks on Luke’s account in his Gospel and in Acts. Some claimed that Luke did not identify historical figures correctly or that he used incorrect terminology. In the late 19th century and during the 20th century archeological discoveries (e.g., stones found with engraved titles of Roman government officials) vindicated Luke’s account. Today, the claim that Luke did not present an accurate historical account is unsupportable—except that people continue to question his reports of the miracles performed by Jesus and his apostles.

We are not told much about Luke in the Bible. We know that he was a friend of Paul (Col 4.14) and that he travelled with Paul during two of his missionary journeys. But we don’t know where he was born or grew up. Eusebius (c. 260-c. 340) mentions Antioch. Others suggest Philippi, since he may have been known there and was not jailed with Paul and Silas (Acts 16.16, 19). Also, we don’t know whether he was a Jew by birth or a Gentile. Internal evidence in his Gospel and in Acts, shows that he had an extensive knowledge of practices in Judaism. This may indicate that he was a Jew. However, it also may indicate that, as a converted Gentile, he had a keen interest in the OT and learned quickly. That he was intelligent is evidenced by the fact that he was a physician (Col 4.14) and by his sophisticated use of the Greek language. His Greek vocabulary is extensive, rivalling that of secular writers of his day, and larger than that of any other NT writers (about 30% of the unique words in the NT occur in Luke’s two books). At times, he uses rarer linguistic forms (e.g., optative mood, verbal adjectives), indicating advanced skills. He also exhibits knowledge of classical writings in grammatical constructs, such as figures of speech, and through his use of literary techniques, such as the inclusion of a prologue. Regardless of his native ethnicity, he had the same vision Paul had—to bring the Gospel to the Gentile world.

Luke had an ability to do historical research (Lk 1.1-3) and to present an historical account in an orderly, detailed, and interesting manner. That he was a good storyteller is evidenced by his use of suspense, irony, and humour. We find examples of humour in the account of the servant girl Rhoda leaving Peter standing at the gate of the domestic compound (Acts 12.13-14) and of Eutychus falling asleep and out of a window as Paul droned on (Acts 20.9). His attention to detail is exhibited by his use of specific correct titles for Roman and Greek officials and his exact descriptions of nautical procedures during a storm (Acts 27.13-38). The inclusion of this detail contributes to the historical accuracy of the accounts and heightens the suspense of the history he is relating.

Luke was a participant with Paul in two of his missionary journeys and was with him during his imprisonments in Caesarea and in Rome (Acts 28.14-16; Phm 24; 2 Tim 4.11). It was likely that during the first two years of Paul’s imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28.30) Luke wrote Acts from information he had gathered during his travels with Paul. During his time in Palestine (Acts 21.3-27.1), he would have had an opportunity to meet with Jesus’ believing half-siblings (including James and Jude) and his mother Mary. In the early chapters of his Gospel, Luke records material about Jesus’ early life which neither Matthew nor Mark report. He would also have been able to obtain firsthand accounts of the ministry of Jesus from the apostles (Acts 21.18) and then information about the advancement of the early Church from Philip (Acts 21.8), and probably from Cornelius (Acts 10.1-48; Acts 21.8) and Agabus from Antioch (Acts 11.28) who were in Caesarea (Acts 21.10) when Luke was there. He would have also learned from Paul about his conversion and early ministry before he joined Paul in Troas (Acts 16.11). From that point, much of what Luke reports in Acts would have been from his own eyewitness recollection. The abrupt ending of Acts, with Paul waiting in prison for his trial before Caesar, appears to indicate that Luke completed Acts in, or about, 64 AD, and then dispatched it to his friend Theophilus.

We defend the authority of the NT books by referring to them as having *apostolic* authority. But only three

of the original twelve disciples, who were also apostles (Matthew, John, and Peter), authored books of the NT. Two of the books (James and Jude) were written by Jesus' half-brothers who did not believe that Jesus is the Messiah before his resurrection (Mk 3.21; Jn 7.5). However, they later became defenders of the truth and were viewed as equivalent to apostles. It is generally believed that Mark recorded what he heard from Peter and thus under Peter's apostolic authority. The rest of the NT, other than Luke's books, was written by Paul, who was a later appointed true apostle of Jesus (2 Cor 11.1-33). So, Luke, who was neither an eyewitness of Jesus' earthly ministry nor an apostle, wrote his two books (which make up over 25% of the NT) under Paul's apostolic authority. So, we can be sure that Acts was written under the direction of the Holy Spirit (2 Pt 1.21) and that it is God's word for our generation.

Luke was blessed by God with skills required to serve as an accurate historian. We should be thankful that Luke was careful to report accurately events from what he and other eyewitnesses observed during the early life of Jesus, the three years of Jesus' earthly ministry (what he did and taught), and the first thirty years of the expansion of the NT Church. Thus, as we begin our studies in Acts, we can be confident that we have before us an accurate historical account of selected events in the life of the early NT Church. Let us pause and pray that we will learn from this book about how the Church should live in a pagan culture, twenty centuries after it was founded.

2. Acts – A History to Encourage Gentiles

(Acts 1.1-2)

Luke directed and dedicated his two books (his Gospel and Acts) to a person named Theophilus. It seems that this person was more than a mere associate of Luke. He may have been a personal friend, since Luke took considerable effort (Lk 1.3) to provide him with confirming information about the “certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Lk 1.4). Speculation has been offered about who Theophilus was. It appears that he was a believer, or at least one having knowledge about Christ and the Gospel, before Luke authored his books (Lk 1.4). It has been suggested that the etymology of his name (‘lover of God’) indicates that Luke used a pseudonym, like Gentile seekers associated with synagogues were called ‘God-fearers’ (Acts 10.2), because they had not completed the steps of a proselyte converting to Judaism—which for a male would have had to include circumcision. Because Luke refers to Theophilus with the honorific, ‘most excellent’, he was probably an official of rank in the Roman government (compare, Acts 24.2; Acts 26.25), even possibly one among Caesar's household (Phil 4.22).

An interesting suggestion is that Luke used a pseudonym to avoid calling attention to a high-ranking Roman official. Thus, it has been proposed, that he was Flavius Clemens, the cousin of Domitian who later became emperor. Clemens served as consul in 95 AD during Domitian's emperorship. Clemens was married to Vespasian's daughter. He was executed shortly after the conclusion of his consulship, in April 95 AD, on the charge of atheism. A Roman historian (Cassius Dio) who lived in the next century, indicated that the charge was because Clemens had gone over to ‘Jewish opinions’—in the early years of the NT Church, Christianity was viewed as a sect of Judaism. He may have been a secret Christian (like Nicodemus was for a time) and an early Christian martyr. However, some Jewish historians claim that Clemens was a convert to Judaism.

Despite the uncertainty about Theophilus' identity, it appears that Luke wrote his two books with the express purpose of addressing a Christian Roman patron. It may be that Luke intended for Theophilus to function as a sponsor who could finance the high cost associated with publishing books in those days and advance the dissemination of his books to a wider audience. If this is the case, then it would provide support for the belief that Luke's Gospel and Acts are directed primarily to a Gentile audience with the goal of introducing them to a history of Jesus and of the early expansion of Christianity around the wider Mediterranean world (“to the end of the earth”, Acts 1.8).

We cannot establish definitively if Luke authored his books (or at least, Acts) primarily for a Gentile audience. Evidence supporting the view that he did, is provided by the way he defines and describes Jewish customs and practices (Lk 1.9; Lk 2.27, 42; Acts 21.21-26, 29). He also traces Jesus' genealogy (Lk 3.23-38) to Adam, the father of all mankind, not just to David or Abraham (Mt 1.1). This would have been used as part of the polemic that God is the creator of (Acts 17.26, 29), and sovereign over (Acts 17.13-31), all mankind. In addition, much of Acts focuses on the evangelistic efforts of Paul, who stated that he was the apostle to the Gentiles (Gal 2.8-9; Eph 3.8; 1 Tim 2.7).

Once the account of the preaching of the Gospel expands beyond Judea, Acts presents a picture of general animosity to the Gospel and rejection of it by the Jews (e.g., Acts 13.45, 50; Acts 14.2; Acts 17.5; Acts 18.6). In contrast, Acts highlights instances of the reception of the Gospel by Gentiles—the Ethiopian (Acts 8.26-39); Cornelius, his family, and friends (Acts 10.33); preaching to Gentile Hellenists in Antioch who became believers (Acts 11.20-21) and the disciples there were the first to be called 'Christians' (Acts 11.26); and the reception of the Gospel by some of the polytheistic Athenians (Acts 17.34). Also, the council held in Jerusalem indicates that the Church leaders were concerned about making it easier for Gentiles to be incorporated into the Church without imposition of the burdens of the ceremonial aspects of the law (Acts 15.1-35).

Luke's presentation of the impact of the Gospel on the Mediterranean world is balanced. He indicts unbelieving Jews who persecuted Paul and his ministry partners, pagans such as the riotous crowd at Ephesus (Acts 19.21-41), and Roman officials who persecuted the evangelists (Acts 14.5; Acts 16.19-24). But he also indicates that Jews and Gentiles were being converted (Acts 14.1; Acts 16.14; Acts 17.34). The Gospel is inclusive since anyone can be an heir of the promise made to Abraham, as Paul states (Gal 3.28-29).

We cannot be certain that Luke targeted Acts to a Gentile audience, such as Christians in Rome. But we can be certain that he intended to demonstrate the triumph of the Gospel. Even when faced with what might appear to have been unmovable obstacles, the Gospel advanced among the Gentiles as the chosen apostles carried its message from Jerusalem and Judea, to Samaria, and beyond (Acts 1.8). It progressed from its first reception in Antioch, a leading Gentile city in the eastern portion of the Empire, to Rome, the leading city of the western portion of the Empire. Acts ends with Paul spending two whole years "proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28.30-31). The readers of this series of *Lessons for Living in a Pagan Culture* will be mostly of a Gentile background. We are the beneficiaries of the triumphant work of the Holy Spirit as he drove forward the early advance of the Gospel into Asia (western Turkey) and into Eastern Europe. Praise God that the Gospel is still going forward to the ends of the earth!

3. 'Acts of the Apostles'

(Acts 1.2-4, 13)

During the forty days (Acts 1.3) after his resurrection in which Jesus remained on the earth, "he presented himself alive" to the disciples as he met with them multiple times. The disciples to whom he appeared included more than just the remaining eleven apostles, after Judas' betrayal and suicide (Acts 1.21-22). However, Luke specifically identifies the disciples whom Jesus had chosen and appointed as apostles (Mk 3.14-19). During those forty days, Jesus expanded on the training he had given to the disciples during his three years of ministry. The purpose of this additional instruction was to complete their training so that they would understand how he was the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures (Lk 24.27, 44-45). They needed to understand how his sufferings, death, and resurrection were a necessary part of his coming into the world (Lk 24.46) so that he could bring repentance and forgiveness of sins to the nations (Lk 24.47). His purpose was to establish a worldwide everlasting spiritual kingdom (Dan 2.44-45; Dan 4.3), not to set up a temporal

Jewish kingdom in a small territory at the edge of the Roman Empire, as they thought (Acts 1.6).

Luke reports that during those forty days of his post-resurrection appearances Jesus also gave commands to the apostles (Acts 1.2). In his opening words in Acts, Luke does not reiterate what those commands were. However, we can identify the core message of the commands from the conclusion of Luke's Gospel and the parallel sections of the other three Gospels. He told the disciples to "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation." (Mk 16.15). They were to make disciples of the nations, baptizing them in the names of the Trinity, and teaching them to keep Jesus' commands (Mt 28.19-20). They were being sent out to the entire world, as Jesus was sent into the world (Jn 20.21), to be witnesses to all that Jesus had done and taught (Lk 24.48). Luke provides a summary of these commands, which is that the apostles were to carry the message of the Gospel "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1.8). Later, Peter, the leader of the Church in Jerusalem at that time, stated that they were to "preach to the people and to testify that [Jesus] is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead" (Acts 10.42).

Another command which the apostles were given by Jesus before he departed for heaven, was that they were to return to, and remain in, Jerusalem until they had been clothed (anointed) with power from on high (Lk 24.49; Acts 1.4-5). Their receipt of this power would occur fifty days after Jesus' resurrection and ten days after his ascension. We see the fulfillment of this promise in Acts 2.2-4. One of the reasons they were to return to Jerusalem was so that a replacement apostle for Judas could be identified—which we read about later Acts chapter 1. Another reason was so that the Gospel would be presented first to the citizens of Jerusalem (Acts 1.8) and the NT Church could be established first among believing Jews (Acts 2.47), God's ancient covenant people. Then, the Church would be expanded to include Gentiles, to fulfill the promise that God would call the Gentiles into his covenant community (Gen 12.3; Gen 18.18; Gen 22.18; Ps 22.27-28; Is 2.1-2; Is 49.6; Is 66.18-19; Lk 2.30-32).

Acts has traditionally been referred to as the 'Acts of the Apostles'. Ancient manuscripts of Acts usually include the title (ΠΡΑΞΕΙΣ ΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΩΝ, 'acts of apostles') before the handwritten text of the narrative. An example, of this practice is seen in the single-page Greek majuscule (uppercase) [manuscript](#) of a portion of Acts (Acts 6.1-8) contained in the library collection in a university in the Netherlands. Likewise, printed editions of the Greek NT, from which we obtain our translated English versions, usually include the title. The first recorded reference to the book by this title is attributed to Irenaeus (c. 120–c. 200 AD) who was bishop of Lugdunum (Lyon) in Gaul, which included the territories of modern France and Belgium.

However, in Acts, we find that details of the acts of only two of the original twelve apostles are recorded. Peter is prominent in the first twelve chapters. John is also mentioned as he accompanied Peter (e.g., into the temple precincts, Acts 3.1). Other than their names being listed (Acts 1.13), there are only brief references to the other individual original apostles (e.g., Acts 12.2). There are also collective references to them (e.g., Acts 15.2). But after chapter 15, which recounts the council in Jerusalem, and the delivery of the council's decision (Acts 16:4), the original apostles are no longer mentioned.

Saul appears on the scene in Acts 7.58 as an antagonist to Christ and persecutor of Christians. From chapter 13 onward, the account in Acts focuses primarily on the ministry of Saul, as Paul—Acts 13.9 records his two names. As we know from elsewhere (primarily in 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians) Paul defends his appointment to the apostolic office by a special miraculous appearance of Jesus (Acts 9.1-19) and a personal call from Jesus (Gal 1.15-16).

Acts does recount the acts of apostles—but only of three named ones. We can derive two lessons from this. First, the work of advancing of the Kingdom of Christ has often been undertaken by men and women whose names are lost in the shadows of history and are known only to God. Being prominent (a Peter or a Paul) in the work of the Church should not be our goal. Our goal should be to serve our Lord faithfully. Second, as some have suggested, Acts should probably be called 'The Acts of the *Holy Spirit*'. It was the Holy

Spirit, working behind his human instruments, who carried the Gospel message from Jerusalem and opened Eastern Europe (Acts 16.9-10) and the world to the Gospel.

4. The Holy Spirit (Acts 1.2)

We concluded the previous meditation noting that it was the Holy Spirit, working behind his human instruments, who carried the Gospel message from Jerusalem to the world. The work of the Holy Spirit is mentioned at least forty times in Acts. Actions attributed directly to him include:

- Guiding the authors of the OT (Acts 1.16; Acts 4.25; Acts 28.25).
- Communicating directly to believers (Acts 1.2; Acts 8.29; Acts 10.19; Acts 11.12, 28; Acts 15.28; Acts 20.23; Acts 21.4, 11).
- Endowing (filling, baptizing) believers with gifts and power (Acts 1.5, 8; Acts 2.4, 33, 38; Acts 4.8, 31; Acts 5.32; Acts 6.3, 5, 10; Acts 8.15, 17-19; Acts 9.17; Acts 10.44-45, 47; Acts 11.15-16, 24; Acts 13.9, 52; Acts 15.8; Acts 19.2, 6).
- Comforting believers (Acts 9.31).
- Anointing Jesus (Acts 10.38).
- Setting individuals apart for service (Acts 13.2, 4; Acts 20.28).
- Performing miracles (Acts 8.39).
- Directing the work of evangelism (Acts 16.6-7; Acts 19.21; Acts 20.22).

In addition, Luke reports instances of people sinning against the Holy Spirit (Acts 5.3, 9; Acts 7.51, 55).

We cannot develop a full doctrine of the Holy Spirit from Acts alone. But we can identify some dimensions of his person and character. The Holy Spirit:

- Is a distinct volitional person (Acts 15.28; Acts 16.7), not a force, or an emanation or mode of God.
- Communicates with humans through direct messages (Acts 8.29) and indirect methods such as visions (Acts 10.19).
- Has divine knowledge and wisdom which he imparts to humans (Acts 1.16).
- Can be sinned against (Acts 5.3), indicating that he is God since sin is breaking God's law (Ps 51.4).
- Has sovereign rights over the lives of human beings (Acts 5.9).
- Has the power of God to act directly in the world and not just through second causes (Acts 5.3, 5; Acts 8.39).
- Is commissioned and sent by God the Father (Acts 2.33) and by Jesus, the Son of God (Acts 1.2; Acts 16.7).
- Works in and through Jesus (Acts 2.38; Acts 10.38).

The final two items in the list above, indicate that the Holy Spirit represents Jesus to mankind, and Jesus represents the Holy Spirit. This bidirectional relationship between Jesus and the Holy Spirit demonstrates that there is total agreement between these two persons of the Trinity. However, this agreement extends to the Father as well. Within the Godhead, there is a tripartite relationship. We do not have a common English word to describe this complex relationship. During the early Middle Ages, Greek theologians used a term (*perichoresis*) to describe how the three members of the Trinity work lovingly together with a common existence, will, and purpose. Western theologians coined a Latin word (*circumincession*) to describe this relationship. Both terms can be understood as working with, in, among, and around one another.

In OT times, the Holy Spirit came upon believers and unbelievers (e.g., Num 24.2; Judges 3.10; Judges 11.29; 1 Sam 10.6; 2 Chron 20.14) so that they were empowered to prophesy or to serve God in another extraordinary way. During Jesus' ministry only a few people are described as having the Holy Spirit upon them. Jesus himself was identified as being blessed by the Father through the presence of the Holy Spirit

(Lk 3.22). This was a fulfillment of OT prophecies which indicated that he is the Messiah (Is 11.2; Is 61.1-2; Mt 12.18; Lk 4.18). Mary (Lk 1.35) and Simeon (Lk 2.25) appear to be the only others blessed in this manner before Pentecost. During the earthly ministry of Jesus, none of the disciples are described as having the Holy Spirit upon them.

Jesus tells the disciples that they will receive power as the Holy Spirit comes upon them (Acts 1.8). From that point, there are numerous instances of the disciples being endowed with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Some of these instances are associated with extraordinary actions on the part of the recipients such as when the apostles miraculously spoke in foreign languages (e.g., Acts 2.4). However, the gift of the Holy Spirit coming upon a person appears to take on a new dimension within the NT Church context. We will explore this idea later in this series of meditations when we consider Acts 1.4-5.

OT believers in the coming Messiah were indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Ps 51.11; Ps 143.10), just like post-resurrection believers are. There is no possibility of salvation without the Holy Spirit working in the heart of a person. However, there appears to be a fuller or heightened aspect to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon believers since Pentecost (Joel 2.28; Acts 2.16-21), even when they are not apostles performing miracles. The giving of the Holy Spirit is God giving himself to believers. In the NT Church, all believers have a fuller understanding of God's person and attributes (e.g., the Trinity) and the mystery of salvation that was veiled in OT times (Rom 16.25)—how God worked salvation through the incarnation and the death and resurrection of Jesus, and how he has called Gentiles into the covenant community. Also, NT believers are empowered to live in obedience to God's law (Jer 31.33) and to be witnesses to the Gospel in ways that OT believers were not.

5. Resurrected Presence

(Acts 1.3)

Acts 1.3 provides the only record of the time that passed between the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus. Luke tells us that it was forty days. No reason is given for why it was *forty* days. But it is a period that may have an association with the duration of Jesus' temptation (Lk 4.2) and Elijah's time on Mount Horeb (1 Ki 19.8). During these forty days, Jesus "presented himself alive" to the disciples as he met with them multiple times. He had two objectives: 1) To demonstrate the reality of the resurrection. 2) To complete their training so that they could carry the message about the Kingdom of God to the world.

The multiple appearances of the risen Lord had a purpose. If he had appeared to only a few disciples or only once to the original disciples, questions could have been raised about the truthfulness of the report and whether they might have succumbed to a personal or mass delusion. With multiple appearances, there was an opportunity for doubters to be convinced that Jesus really had been raised from the dead, as with his demonstration to Thomas (Jn 20.24-28).

The inhabitants of the first-century Greco-Roman world clung to superstitions about gods performing supernatural acts. Nevertheless, when presented with an account of a true miracle—the resurrection of Jesus who had really been dead—they were cynically sceptical (Acts 17.32; Acts 26.23-24) just like many people of our day reject the miracles in the Bible. Therefore, it was necessary that Jesus' resurrection be confirmed with multiple convincing proofs given to numerous dependable witnesses. Luke does not inform us in Acts what those proofs were. We can surmise that it included Jesus showing witnesses the remnants of the wounds on his body resulting from the crucifixion (Jn 20.27) and performing miracles (Jn 21.6). He likely also presented arguments for why a resurrection is not an impossibility for God (Gen 11.6; Lk 1.37; Acts 26.8; Heb 11.19) and why it was necessary for him to rise from the dead in order to fulfill OT prophecy and to conquer death (Lk 24.25-27).

We are not informed of the total number of times that Jesus appeared to people after his resurrection.

However, he appeared to his disciples collectively at least three times (Jn 21.14) and he had appeared to Peter individually (Lk 24.34) and later to two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24.13-32). Paul informs us that Jesus also appeared to more than five hundred people at one time (1 Cor 15.6), many of whom were still alive when he wrote about this appearance. Neither Paul nor Luke informs us of when Jesus appeared to this large crowd. It could have been in Jerusalem, to a crowd that gathered at the time Jesus commissioned the apostles (Mt 28.16-18) or at his ascension (Acts 1.6-9).

Paul also reports of a private appearance to James (1 Cor 15.7). This James was likely not one of the original disciples but probably a half-brother of Jesus. He did not initially believe that Jesus is the Messiah (Mk 3.21; Jn 7.5), but later believed (Acts 1.14). It may have been this special appearance of Jesus to James that convinced James that he is the Messiah. If so, we can imagine the meeting as Jesus in his glorified body appeared to James and encouraged him to believe. This is a clear indication of the love Jesus had for his own human family. It is reported by early Church historians that James later became the bishop (elder/pastor) of the Jerusalem church.

It is interesting that neither Luke (in his Gospel or in Acts) or Paul (in 1 Corinthians) reported the appearances to Mary Magdalene (Jn 20.14-18) and the collected women (Mt 28.9-10). These appearances are likely not mentioned by them because the witness of women in the ancient world had little legal standing. By excluding these instances, they were not supporting the prevalent view that a woman's testimony was worthless. But referring to the appearances of Jesus to eyewitnesses whom Gentile unbelievers could not respect was not going to decrease the scepticism of the doubters in Corinth or Rome.

It was essential that the resurrection be proved infallibly to the apostles so that they could serve as dependable witnesses to the fact (Acts 1.8, 22; Acts 2.32; Acts 3.15; Acts 5.32; Acts 10.39-41; Acts 13.31). During the decade or two following the ascension of Jesus, none of the NT books existed. Therefore, there was not yet a written record about the life of Jesus, his death, and his resurrection. This would only become available after the Gospels were written. Thus, the apostles were able to speak with confidence to the early converts in the congregations which they were founding, because they had personally been with Jesus through his ministry on earth and had seen the risen Lord Jesus.

Jesus not only gave the apostles proof of his resurrection but continued to teach them about the Kingdom of God. We are not told what additional he taught them that he had not already taught them during the three years of his ministry. However, we can surmise that additional instruction helped them understand how his death and resurrection was the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures (Lk 24.27, 44-46) so that he could bring repentance and forgiveness of sins to the nations (Lk 24.47). He likely also informed them that his purpose was to establish a worldwide everlasting spiritual kingdom (Dan 2.44-45; Dan 4.3), not to set up a temporal Jewish kingdom in a small territory at the edge of the Roman Empire, as they thought (Acts 1.6). Jesus completed his ministry on earth during those forty days. But his work did not end. It would be advanced as the apostles began the task of carrying the message of the Kingdom of God to the world.

6. Post-Resurrection Bodies

(Acts 1.4)

If you read Acts 1.4 in the ESV you will note that the translation has the words, "while staying with them". The NASB has "gathering them together". The NKJV and KJV have, "being assembled together with them". The NIV has, "while he was eating with them". The ESV has a footnote, "while eating with them". The Greek word that Luke uses, which underlies these various translations, occurs only once in the NT text. Therefore, determining a good translation of the word in this context is not simple since we have nowhere else in the NT which we can use as a comparison.

Bible lexicons suggest four possible meanings for the word—'lodging with', 'gathering with', 'assembling

with', and 'eating with'. The translations cited above cover the spectrum of these options. The ESV's main translation appears to be based on the idea that the word used by Luke is related to a very similar word (not used in the NT) which means to 'live in fellowship with'. The NIV's (and ESV's footnote) translation appears to be based on a parsing of the compound word which Luke uses, which could be understood as 'sharing salt with', which can be interpreted as 'eating with'.

We should not get bogged down in a debate about which is the 'correct' translation since the primary message which Luke is communicating is that Jesus spent an intimate time with the disciples during the forty-day period after his resurrection and before his ascension. However, we can derive a key lesson from a consideration of the different translations and use Luke's statement to provide a possible hint of what our resurrected bodies will be like.

Since most Christians cannot read the Bible in its original (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) languages, we are dependent on using translations for our study of God's word. We therefore need to be aware of challenges associated with translation. For example:

- Source words in any language can have nuanced shades of meaning and should be translated into another language using different words, depending on the context; for example, 'evil' in Hebrew can be translated as 'evil' (Gen 6.5), 'grievous' (Dt 6.22), 'calamity' (Is 45.7), or 'wild' (Ezk 34.25).
- We should not make claims that translations are word-for-word. People who make such claims are often ignorant of the nature of translation, including: the difficulty of translating idioms, the existence of verb forms in source languages not found in target languages, and word order variation across languages for emphasis. There cannot be an exact word-for-word equivalent when translating from one language to another, or translation would be merely simple symbol replacement and easy to automate.
- No translation can ever be the final one in any 'living' language. The meaning of words change, new words are created or borrowed from other languages, and words become obsolete.
- Theological biases can be introduced into translations.

Therefore, it is wise for us to use multiple translations when conducting an interpretive study of the Bible. And we should avoid being dogmatic about the rendering of a particular verse where reliable translations vary widely.

Keeping in mind this brief consideration about dogmatism over translation, it is interesting to note the implications of NIV's and ESV's footnote translation of the word Luke uses. Their translation may permit us to speculate on the nature of believer's post-resurrection bodies.

We must believe that Jesus' resurrected body is an actual physical body (Mt 28.9; Lk 24.39; Jn 20.27) although glorified. We also must believe that we will be granted bodies of the same nature as Jesus' at our resurrection (Rom 6.5; Phil 3.20-21). That Jesus did eat food in his resurrection body is stated by Luke (Lk 24.42-43) and hinted at by John (Jn 21.12). Since he ate food with the disciples during that forty-day period, this may tell us something about the physical nature of the everlasting new paradise. Jesus ate food in his resurrected body. He invites his people to attend a banquet in heaven (Rev 19.9) and John saw the restored tree of life in the new paradise from which the saints could eat (Rev 22.2). Therefore, we can expect that in the new paradise we will be able to eat food in our resurrected bodies.

Eating food in our current realm is required to sustain life and there are waste products to process after we have extracted energy from food. So, we cannot use the current state as a model for how things will be in the new heaven and earth. Adam and Eve (and the animals) were instructed to eat food from the plants in the garden of Eden (Gen 1.29-30; Gen 2.9). Yet, in that perfect state, before Adam sinned, there would have been no deleterious decay and permanent increase of entropy. This implies that in the original paradise physics and chemistry operated differently than they do for us. So, we can legitimately infer that in the new heavens and earth, physics and chemistry will be different from what we experience now. For example,

God may operate the new creation with different ‘laws’ of physics by continually removing waste energy (e.g., heat caused by friction as we walk around) and injecting new high-order energy (e.g., light; Gen 1.3; Rev 21.23; Rev 22.5). Regardless of how the physics and chemistry will operate, we can be certain that heaven will be more glorious than we can currently conceive (2 Cor 12.2-4). Let us not be sceptical about what God can do. Rather let us rejoice in the promise of the new physical heaven and earth in which believers will dwell with post-resurrection physical bodies.

7. Baptism with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1.4-5)

Jesus ordered the disciples to remain in Jerusalem until they had been baptized with the Holy Spirit. He gave this command for at least the following reasons:

- The Gospel would be presented first to the citizens of Jerusalem (Acts 1.8) so that the NT Church could be established first among believing Jews (Acts 2.47), God’s ancient covenant people.
- The apostles needed to learn patience and obedience before they acted (“*wait* for the promise of the Father”; Acts 1.4), so that they could work with the understanding that the advancement of the Gospel would be in accord with the timing of the Father. A lesson we all need to learn.
- They would be clothed (anointed) with power from on high (Lk 24.49; Acts 1.4-5) to fulfill their role. They received this anointing (baptism) on Pentecost (Acts 2.1-47), fifty days after Jesus’ resurrection and ten days after his ascension.

What it means to be “baptized with the Holy Spirit” has been intensely debated in the evangelical Church since the 1960s, following the advent of the Charismatic Movement. What it means is not simple to discern from where the term is used in Acts (Acts 1.5; Acts 11.16; see also, Mark 1.8; Acts 10.47). However, it is evident that the term does not mean the Holy Spirit’s work of converting a person’s heart so that he can believe in Jesus as saviour. The Holy Spirit comes upon all believers (e.g., Acts 2.33, 38; Acts 10.45; Acts 11.15). Paul states that believers have the Holy Spirit dwelling in them (2 Tim 1.14), are baptized into Christ’s body through the Spirit (1 Cor 12.13), are empowered by the Holy Spirit (Rom 15.13), and are sealed with his presence (Eph 1.13). And Peter indicates that the Holy Spirit rests upon all who are insulted because of their faith in Jesus (1 Pt 4.14). Also, the disciples had already received the Holy Spirit before Pentecost when Jesus breathed on them (Jn 20.22).

So, if every believer has received the Holy Spirit, then what could Jesus mean when he says that the disciples would be ‘baptized with the Holy Spirit’? It is evident that in Acts most, or even all, of the instances where believers are endowed with the Holy Spirit, this endowment is accompanied with extraordinary actions. We use terms such as ‘supernatural’ or ‘miraculous’ to refer to these actions. Examples include the apostles and others miraculously speaking in foreign languages which they did not know prior to their being anointed with the Spirit (Acts 2.4; Acts 10.46; Acts 19.26). Similarly, the apostles performed signs and wonders (Acts 2.43). Peter and Paul healed the lame and sick and cast out demons (Acts 3.1-11; Acts 8.5-7; Acts 9.32-34; Acts 14.8-10; Acts 16.16-18; Acts 19.11-12; Acts 28.8-9). Peter and Paul even restored life to dead persons (Acts 9.36-42; Acts 20.9-12). There are also instances of miracles being used as judgement (Acts 5.5, 10; Acts 13.8-11).

The accounts of the miracles in Acts often include statements about people coming to faith in Jesus as a result of observing the miracles. This indicates that they were sign miracles (Mk 16.20), being used to attest to a divine endowment on the Church and to the authority of the apostles as the NT Church was being established.

Paul deals with the abuse of the sign gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12.1-8; 1 Cor 14.1-25). This indicates that these gifts were not confined to the apostles. This is also evident from examples in Acts of the endowment

on others of at least the gift of being able to speak miraculously in a previously unknown foreign language (Acts 10.46; Acts 19.6). Until the NT was completed and the apostles had done the initial work of laying the foundation for the NT Church (Eph 2.20) the sign gifts were used by the Holy Spirit to build the Kingdom of God.

There is considerable debate in the broader evangelical Church about whether the baptism of the Spirit, which endows miraculous gifts, was a temporary phenomenon or has a continuing role within the NT Church. During the patristic period, it was generally accepted that these gifts were no longer present in the Church. For example, John Chrysostom (349-407 AD), writing on these verses in his [*Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*](#) says: “This whole place is very obscure: but the obscurity is produced by our ignorance of the facts referred to and by their cessation, being such as then used to occur but now no longer take place. And why do they not happen now? Why look now, the cause too of the obscurity hath produced us again another question: namely, why did they then happen, and now do so no more?” The principal Reformation leaders (e.g., Luther, Calvin, Knox) also believed that the miraculous gifts were no longer present in the Church. Commentators within the Reformed tradition have generally taken the position that the miraculous gifts which Luke and Paul refer to were signs of the presence of the true apostles (2 Cor 12.12), and that they ceased after the apostolic age.

Regardless, we should not become engrossed with the supernatural dimension of being “baptized with the Holy Spirit”. Rather, we should focus on the spiritual dimension. When the Holy Spirit baptizes an unbeliever, he becomes convicted of sin and judgement (Jn 16.8-11), is effectually called to receive the Gospel (Eph 1.17-18), is baptized into Christ (Acts 2.38), and endeavours to live through the power of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5.22-25). Calvin makes an appropriate observation, “We are not in vain baptized with water by men, because Christ, who commanded the same to be done, will fulfill his office, and baptize us with the Spirit.”

8. A Question about Kingdom Restoration

(Acts 1.6-7)

Luke now briefly describes the last conversation of Jesus with the disciples as he met them on the Mount of Olives (Acts 1.12). This was moments before his ascension (Acts 1.9). At this meeting, the disciples asked, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” Jews at that time had an expectation that an anointed king, descended from David, would arise and establish a permanent kingdom in Israel which would not be subject to an overlord nation like Rome (Ps 10.16). Some even hoped that this re-established kingdom would rule over all the other nations of the earth (Ps 2.10-12; Dan 2.44-45).

From their reading of the OT, the disciples likely expected that the promised Messiah-king would have divine attributes (Ps 24.7-9; Is 9.6-7). They may not have understood fully that this person would be the God-man. However, Jesus had demonstrated that he is God through the sign miracles which he performed and finally through the miracle of the resurrection. In addition, the disciples came to understand that he was the promised Messiah-king. In his human nature, he was a descendant of David (Mt 1.1-17; Lk 3.23-31), born in Bethlehem (Mic 5.2; Mt 2.4-5). John the Baptist had declared that the kingdom was at hand (Mt 3.2). And Jesus stated that the kingdom had arrived (Mt 12.28; Lk 11.20; Lk 16.16) and acknowledged that he is a king (Jn 18.37).

During his ministry, of just over three years, Jesus often spoke about the Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven and its imminent coming (Mt 16.28). However, the disciples generally misunderstood him. They did not realize that he was teaching about a spiritual kingdom which is not bound by time or place (Jn 18.36). Also, Jesus had continued giving them instruction about the Kingdom of God during his last forty days on earth (Acts 1.3). So, it is not surprising that they thought that their resurrected Lord would bring about the realization of a restored temporal kingdom for Israel. Their question indicates that they expected

that Jesus would divinely intervene to overthrow Roman rule over Israel and establish a glorious Kingdom of Heaven ruled from Jerusalem (Ps 2.6; Ps 48.2).

The disciples had not yet realized that the kingdom had already been established. At the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Satanic kingdom—his temporary reign over the earth (Mt 4.8-9; Mt 12.26; Rev 2.13)—was defeated (Rev 12.9). Paul tells us that since Jesus completed his role as redeemer, his reign is now absolute (Phil 2.9-11). John also informs us that Jesus rules over this world (Rev 11.15). The worldwide Church—the new Israel (Gal 6.16)—is the current earthly manifestation of the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus. From his throne in heaven, Jesus rules now in the hearts of his new covenant people still on the earth. As the Gospel goes forth and more people are converted, the Kingdom of Jesus is growing in extent and number among all nations. This great movement began with the special outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 1.8; Acts 2.2-4). Jesus also governs all the nations of this earth today through his providential sovereignty over all that transpires.

Even though the Kingdom of God is here now, many people are still looking for a restored kingdom of Israel in Palestine. They misunderstand the fulfillment of biblical prophecies and claim that Jesus is going to establish a one-thousand-year reign on this earth. They claim that a new temple will be built in Jerusalem, that a human priesthood will be restored, and animal sacrifices reintroduced. They also claim that Jesus will reign over an earthly kingdom from Jerusalem, which will come to an end after a great battle against an army lead by Satan after he has been released from prison for a season. This end-time model is not what is taught in Scripture and is a modern equivalent of the disciples' expectation that Jesus would establish an earth-based kingdom. Jesus reigns now. His kingdom has been established. The thousand years mentioned in Revelation (Rev 20.1-7) is to be understood as figurative. It represents the entire time of this earth between the resurrection of Jesus and his second coming. We know that the 'thousand years' is figurative, because it occurs in the context of many figurative illustrations (e.g., 'key', 'bottomless pit', 'great chain', 'dragon', 'ancient serpent', 'beast', and a mark on the foreheads and on the hands). The larger context of Revelation, which is a book of revelatory visions described in a figurative form, also implies that the 'thousand years' is to be understood figuratively. And all of the other occurrences of the specific phrase 'thousand years' in the Bible are figurative (Ps 90.4; Eccl 6.5-6; 2 Pt 3.8), do not have a literal sense, and are a hyperbolic means of referring to a 'long time'.

It is sometimes suggested that the disciples asked the wrong question about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. But Jesus does not rebuke them for the purpose of their question. Jesus' answer (Acts 1.7) implies that the kingdom *will be* restored to Israel, but they were not to ask *when* this will occur. So, how can this be? How is it that the kingdom exists now and Christ reigns now, and yet the kingdom will be restored to Israel? We encounter in this question 'the already' and 'the not yet'. The Kingdom of Jesus is here now, but it also is not yet. Jesus reigns now, but his reign is not yet complete. This tension arises because we are in the time between the two comings of Jesus. When he comes the second time he will establish a kingdom on a physical earth—not on this current earth, but on a new earth (2 Pt 3.10-13; Rev 21.1). It will be governed from the new Jerusalem (Rev 21.2). In this visible manifestation of an earthly reign, all Israel will be present. That will be the true Israel, the spiritual seed of Abraham drawn from all nations on earth (Gen 12.3; Gen 18.18; Gen 22.18; Rev 7.9) who will inherit the new earth (Mt 5.5) as an everlasting paradise (Rev 2.7).

9. End-time Date Setting

(Acts 1.6-7)

The disciples asked Jesus if he would restore the kingdom to Israel "at this time". Jesus' answer implies that the kingdom *will be* restored to Israel, but they were not to ask *when* this will occur. As we noted in the previous meditation, the kingdom will be restored to Israel—the spiritual seed of Abraham. However, the way it will be restored is not as the disciples thought. Jesus was not going to overthrow Roman rule and

establish an independent kingdom ruled from Jerusalem. Likewise, many misunderstand kingdom prophecies and believe that Jesus is going to establish a Jewish kingdom in our near future, with Jerusalem at its epicentre, which will last for one thousand years. The Kingdom of Jesus has already been established as the Church and will be manifested in a physical form with the creation of the new heaven and earth at his second coming.

Believing that the kingdom would be restored, the disciples' obvious question is *when*? This is the same question that has been asked probably by every believer since then—when will Jesus establish the visible physical form of his reign? Or, when will he return? The disciples had already asked a similar questions. “Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?” (Mt 24.3). We might think that since Jesus had given them an earlier detailed answer to their questions, they would not ask again about the timing. But the question they ask does not indicate that they were blockheads. By this point they were convinced that Jesus is the Messiah. But the circumstances had changed—the resurrected Lord stood before them. In their minds it was logical that the kingdom would now be restored. So, Jesus again addresses the question of the timing of the end of the age, his second coming, and the establishment of his everlasting reign in a restored physical paradise.

The first time they asked the question, Jesus stated, “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only.” (Mt 24.36; Mk 13.32). He indicated that the timing of the end of this realm was established by the Father and could not be known by creatures and was even hidden from his human nature. The second time they asked the question, Jesus again stated that the timing was fixed by the authority of the Father. The Father is mentioned only two times in Acts (Acts 1.4; Acts 1.7). Both times, Jesus indicates that events unfold in this realm according to the Father's eternal decrees. The second time, Jesus tells the disciples that it is not for them “to know times or seasons”. But he did not indicate that he also did not know when the end would be. In his post-resurrection glorified state, the veil over the infinite divine knowledge has been lifted and Jesus knows all in his human nature.

Twice, Jesus told his disciples that they were not to inquire into the secret counsels of God with an attempt to determine when the end of time would arrive. His message has not been heeded by many Christians for the past two thousand years. Around 1000 AD, a great millennial fever swept through Europe and today there are prognosticators who lineup current events and inform us that the return of Jesus is imminent. However, clear statements in the Bible tell us that:

- Current events such as wars, famines, and natural disasters are not to be construed as signs of the end (Mt 24.6-8).
- The return of Jesus will be when people *least* expect it (Mt 24.44), and they have been lulled into a false peace and security (1 Thess 5.3) and believe that everything is going smoothly.
- Not even Jesus, in his unglorified human nature, knew the day or hour, so it is utter foolishness to think that anyone can predict when Jesus will come again.
- Christ's return will occur like the coming of an unexpected thief in the night (1 Thess 5.2; 2 Pt 3.10; Rev 16.15). We are always to watch because we “know neither the day nor the hour” (Mt 25.13).
- We must constantly be on guard, waiting expectantly for his return—which could be in the next few seconds, tonight, or at any time in the future. This should engender keen anticipation, keep us from becoming complacent and indifferent, and prevent us from living like the pagans around us.
- The Gospel must be “proclaimed throughout the whole world” before the end will come (Mt 24.14).

Mankind is given no advance information by which to forecast the return of Jesus and is not to seek it. If we knew for certain that Christ was going to come on a particular date in the future, then there would be a compelling tendency among men, including Christians, to put off serious attention to the state of their souls and how they will stand before God on the day of judgement.

End-time date setting is sinful. It is a desire for forbidden knowledge. God established a test to determine the truthfulness of a pretend prophet. If a prophet speaks about the future, and what he says does not come true, then he is a false prophet (Dt 22.18). We should no longer listen to anyone who makes end-time claims because he is teaching falsehood.

However, in denying knowledge to mankind about *when* Jesus will return, God does not withhold the fact that he *will* return. The angels standing as honour guards at Christ's ascension tell the disciples that he will return in the same manner as he left (Acts 1.11). Paul tells us he will descend from heaven accompanied by an archangel's shout and a trumpet blare (1 Thess 4.16). And Jesus states, "Behold, I am coming soon" (Rev 22.12). He is coming soon to wrap up history, open the graves, execute judgement, and renovate the created order. Are you prepared to meet him?

10. Witnesses to the World (Acts 1.8)

After Jesus appointed the twelve apostles (Mt 10.2), he sent them out to proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven and to perform sign miracles (Mt 10.7-8). These would demonstrate that the age of the Messiah had arrived. However, he added to his instruction that they were not to go among the Gentiles or Samaritans, but to focus their ministry on "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 10.5-6). Until such time as the Jews, as a people, rejected their Messiah, kingdom membership was primarily offered to the physical seed of Abraham. Nevertheless, during Jesus' ministry on earth, there were some Samaritans (Jn 4.1-42) and Gentiles (Mt 8.5-13; Jn 12.20-21) who showed an interest in knowing about the true God. Jesus did not turn them away but welcomed them into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Jesus anticipated that the Jews, as a people, would reject him (Mt 23.36). They did this when their leaders declared, "We have no king but Caesar" (Jn 19.15), and the crowd shouted "Crucify, crucify him!" (Lk 23.21). They were given a wonderful opportunity to receive the light of the world but rejected it (Jn 1.11). Thus, Jesus indicated that they in turn were rejected by God (Mt 21.18-19; Mt 23.38; Lk 13.6-9). Likewise, Paul states that the wrath of God has come upon them (1 Thess 2.15-16). The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (in 70 AD) is a clear sign that God has stopped dealing with the Jews as a nation. This of course does not mean that individual Jews cannot come to Christ just as any other sinner can turn to him for salvation (e.g., Mt 23.39; 2 Cor 3.14-16; Eph 2.11-18).

Jesus taught that following the Jews' rejection of himself as their Messiah, the Gospel would be formally opened to the Gentiles (Mt 8.11-12; Mt 21.28-46). When Paul was in Corinth the Jews opposed him and became abusive. After shaking his clothes in protest, he said "Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." (Acts 18.6; see also Acts 28.25-28). That the Gentiles would be called into the covenant community (the Church) was not a new concept which arose because of the Jews' rejection of Jesus. It was what God always intended from the first when he drew out of the world his covenant people. When he enacted the covenant with Abram, he told him that all nations on earth would be blessed through him (Gen 18.18) and through his offspring—the Messiah (Gen 22.18). Similarly, the Prophets and the Psalms predicted that the nations would be brought into the covenant community (Is 19.16-24; Is 66.18-19; Jer 3.17; Ps 22.27; Ps 45.12). So, the last thing Jesus is recorded as saying before he left this earth, was that the time had arrived for the Gospel to go out to the nations. The fulfillment of the Messiah's mission to the *world* (Jn 3.16) began on Pentecost when the apostles received power from the Holy Spirit.

Jesus indicated that the apostles were to be witnesses. He certainly included in the use of this term their being eyewitness to the reality of his resurrection. However, he likely intended to convey more. Essentially the same Greek word is translated in other places as 'testimony'. They were to proclaim the Gospel as a testimony (witness) to the nations (Mt 24.14). That is, they were to bear witness to the truth of Scripture and to Jesus as the Redeemer. Also, the word translated as 'witness' or 'testimony' is the word from which

we obtain the English word ‘martyr’. Thus, being a witness for Jesus will often include suffering persecution because of a testimony for Christ (Mt 10.18; 2 Tim 1.8).

The apostles were to be witnesses as they carried the message of salvation from Jerusalem. It has been noted by commentators that Jesus identifies three steps in their mission, which correspond to major sections within Acts. The initial work in Jerusalem is covered in Acts 2.1-8.3. That stage ends temporarily with the Jews, including Saul (Paul), persecuting Christians in the city and driving many away from the city. The second stage covers mission activities in Judea and Samaria (Acts 8.4-11.18). There is territorial overlap in the mission focus in the latter part of chapter 11 and in chapter 12—Jerusalem, Judea, and Antioch. Chapter 13 opens with work in Antioch and the commissioning of Paul and Barnabas to begin carrying the message of the Gospel beyond the eastern end of the Mediterranean. The book closes with Paul under house-arrest in Rome.

The Gospel reaching “to the *end* of the earth” (Acts 1.8; Is 66.18-19) is not recorded in Acts. The mission assigned to the apostles was not yet complete. When Paul was in Corinth, he had plans to visit Spain after passing through Rome (Rom 15.24, 28). Some of the Church fathers (e.g., Clement of Rome who died c. 100 AD), claim that Paul made it to Spain after being released in Rome. One modern historian believes that Paul preached in Spain for a couple of months, but with little success. The Church in Spain experienced substantial growth in key urban centres after Constantine’s Edict of Milan in 313 AD, which allowed for the open practice of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire.

The Gospel had spread throughout of the Roman Empire (including north Africa and Britain) by the end of the 3rd century and was expanding into northern Europe by the 8th century. Also, historians believe that the Gospel reached India and China long before Europeans arrived in the East in the mid-to-late Middle Ages. For example, Marco Polo reports in about 1300 AD of having encountered Nestorian Christians in what is now western China. And there is a consensus that Orthodox Eastern Christian communities had been established in Malabar (southwest India) by 600 AD at the latest. Today there is not a single country on earth in which there is not at least one true believer in Jesus Christ. And the percentage of the world’s population which is identified as ‘Christian’ continues to increase—despite declines in the West. Jesus’ command was also a prediction and a promise. The mission given to the apostles has reached the end of the earth.

11. The Ascension (Acts 1.9-10)

The Gospel writers, other than Matthew, speak about the ascension of Jesus (Mk 16.19; Lk 24.51; Jn 20.17; Acts 1.2, 9). However, only Luke provides details about who was present as witnesses and how it occurred. He tells us that two angels were present and more than the eleven apostles, because a replacement for Judas had to have been a witness (Acts 1.21-22). In addition, Luke describes Jesus being lifted on a cloud. Clouds were associated with the presence of God, such as during the Exodus (Ex 13.21), at the giving of the law on Mount Sinai (Ex 19.16), when the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the temple (1 Ki 8.10), and at the transfiguration of Jesus (Lk 9.34-35). These clouds veil the presence of God (Ps 18.1; Ps 97.2) but also reveal his presence (Ex 19.9). It was prophesied that the Son of Man would be accompanied by clouds (Dan 7.13), indicating that he is God, who is figuratively portrayed as riding on clouds (Ps 104.3).

The ascension of Elijah, a type for Jesus, indicated that his faith and righteous life were pleasing to God. Likewise, Jesus’ ascension into heaven was given as a visible sign that his redemptive work had been accepted by the Father in heaven. Also, the presence of the honour guard of two angels appearing in human form and clothed in white robes indicates that Jesus was ascending as a victor to a place of highest exaltation (Phil 2.9-11). The disciples who witnessed this event were gazing into heaven as Jesus was lifted from their

presence. It may be that we are to understand the Greek, 'into *the* heaven', to indicate that the disciples were not just looking upward into the sky but had an actual vision into the presently invisible heaven, as Stephen did before his martyrdom (Acts 7.55). Even though they had witnessed Jesus perform amazing miracles and had seen the resurrected Lord in his glorified body, they would have been transfixed by the marvel of what they were seeing before their eyes.

The ascension raises two questions in our minds. The first is, why did Jesus return to heaven? As the God-man, he could live anywhere and could have continued to live among men on this earth for millennia in his indestructible body. We are probing somewhat into the hidden counsels of God. We could leave the matter and say that God's eternal decree is a sufficient reason. However, Jesus tells us that he had to go in order that he could return to the Father (Jn 14.12; Jn 16.5). He has a true material body with the physical limitation that a material entity cannot be in multiple places at one time. He went to his home in his glorified body where he is seated in everlasting glory at the right hand of the Father (Mk 16.19). Also, he indicates that it was necessary for him to leave so that upon his departure he could send the Helper (the Holy Spirit) who would continue his work of convicting the world of sin, righteousness, and judgement (Jn 16.6-11). We see the formal arrival of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2.3-4). Jesus also stated that he went to prepare a place for his elect (Jn 14.2), so that he could return one day and take them there to be with him forever (Jn 14.3).

Humans are not mere automata without responsibilities. God created us in his image to act volitionally (Gen 1.26). Therefore, it seems appropriate to suggest that on his departure, Jesus transferred power to his human delegates, as Moses did when he commissioned Joshua (Dt 34.9) and as Elijah did with Elisha (2 Ki 2.9-15). This transfer of power went first to the apostles (Mt 16.18-19; Mt 28.18-19; Acts 2.33) and then to their ongoing successors, pastors/elders. The Church represents Christ on earth and has the responsibility for advancing the Kingdom of Heaven through evangelizing, preaching, teaching, and serving until the last elect person is ushered into the kingdom.

Another proximate reason for Jesus' departure is that believers are called to live by faith, not by sight (Jn 20.29; 2 Cor 5.7; Heb 11.1). Without Jesus' physical presence among us, we must look beyond the ephemeral and passing to the everlasting and permanent. We must not be sceptical scoffers (2 Pt 3.3-4) who live without God and have no hope (Eph 2.12). We must look forward, with true hope (Heb 6.18), to that day when he will return and re-create the universe and wipe away all the vestiges of sin and suffering (2 Pt 3.12-13; Rev 21.4).

A second question is, where is heaven? In Scripture heaven is represented as being up from the earth (Gen 28.12; Prov 30.4; Mt 14.19) and hell as being below (Mt 5.22; Lk 16.23). Unless we were to speculate that heaven surrounds our entire physical universe, we cannot think of it as being in a particular direction. We know that when the disciples saw Jesus being lifted up into heaven, this is a form of phenomenalism since there cannot be a true 'up' in the cosmos relative to our spherical earth. Heaven is not part of our universe and not immaterial (because material bodies are currently present in heaven). And heaven is not just a state of mind. So, since it is a material place, it must be somewhere. Some suggest that heaven exists as a parallel universe to our own. It might be better to use the term 'alternate' rather than 'parallel', since the latter term could be construed as suggesting that heaven exists with time running in parallel to our own universe. It may be preferable to think of this alternate universe as being perpendicular to our own. We can picture each event in our time being equidistant from this alternate universe like the tire ends of spokes on a bicycle wheel are equidistant from the wheel's hub. Elsewhere, Luke describes Jesus as vanishing from their sight (Lk 24.31). It is as if, using modern Sci-Fi terminology, he went through a portal into the alternate universe. Regardless of where heaven is, we can rest confidently in the truth that Jesus is currently there and that one day all those who have repented of their sins and have placed their faith in him will be welcomed into that glorious place to be with him forever.

12. Jesus Will Return

(Acts 1.10-11)

The disciples had witnessed an amazing event. Jesus had been lifted up on a cloud and had disappeared from their sight (Acts 1.9). It is no wonder that they stood gazing in the direction of Jesus' departure. We noted previously a number of reasons why it was necessary for Jesus to leave this earth and to take up his abode in heaven. From there he is reigning over the events on this earth and interceding with the Father on behalf of his elect.

Two angels had appeared at some point during the ascension of Jesus. They turned to the disciples and asked why they stood transfixed. It may be that these were the same two angels who stood beside the women outside the empty tomb (Lk 24.4-7). They addressed the disciples as 'men of Galilee'. This is an example of detailed information which increases the credibility of an eyewitness account. It may also have a deeper meaning. Isaiah prophesied that Galilee would be blessed (Is 9.1-5), for out of it would arrive the Messiah (Is 9.6-7; Lk 23.6). The women of Galilee witnessed the crucifixion and were the ones to whom the angels spoke outside the tomb (Lk 23.49, 55). The first disciples of Jesus were also drawn from that territory. At that time, Galilee was a 'backwater' region in Israel. To reach Galilee from Judea, one had to traverse the territory of the despised Samaritans or cross the Jordan and travel through essentially Gentile territory (Perea and Decapolis). God called his initial witnesses to the life of Jesus, and to his death, resurrection, and ascension, from among those considered of no account from a worldly perspective. The disciples were mostly lay persons (although John may have been of a priestly family), labourers not men of letters, and of sketchy backgrounds (a tax collector and a political zealot). Paul confirms how God works this way in his first letter to the Corinthians. He says that God chose the foolish and weak to shame the worldly wise and strong (1 Cor 1.27). He did this to demonstrate that what the world honours and praises is nothing and so that no human being has a right to boast before God (1 Cor 1.28-29).

The angels outside the empty tomb had rebuked the women for seeking the living among the dead, and now these angels rebuked the disciples for looking into the sky. This rebuke was necessary because Jesus had told the disciples that at his departure, they would receive the Spirit and because they had work to do serving as his witnesses (Acts 1.8). Also, the rebuke was required because the disciples appear to have forgotten the words Jesus spoke in the upper room before he was betrayed. He had told them that it was necessary for him to leave but also that he would come for them (Jn 14.3, 18). Thus, the angels follow the rebuke with the reminder and promise that Jesus will return to this earth.

The unbelieving world scoffs at the idea that Jesus will come again (2 Pt 3.3-4). But, despite an apparent delay (James 5.7-8), Jesus will return. We can accept it as absolute truth because the angels at the ascension confirm it, the apostles confirm it, Jesus himself confirms it, and the Holy Spirit confirms it through the Bible. There could not be any future event that is more certain than that Jesus will return. Even a person's own death does not have that degree of certainty, because Jesus could return before that person dies.

Notice that the angels say that 'this Jesus, who was taken ... will come'. It will be Jesus in his glorified body. This will be a true physical body which will be recognizable to the disciples who knew him while he was on the earth. This provides an assurance for us that at the general resurrection, we will see Jesus in his bodily form (1 Jn 3.2). Not only that, but believers will also have transformed bodies that will be like his glorious body (Phil 3.21; 1 Jn 3.2). This is a great promise and hope for Christians as they experience physical decay in this world.

The angels also say that Jesus will return in the same way as he left. Based on this, we can expect that when Jesus comes again, his return will be accompanied with a visible sign of clouds (Mt 26.64; Mk 13.26; Lk 21.27; Rev 1.7). John tells us that every eye will see the return of Jesus (Rev 1.7). John likely does not mean only those who are alive on the earth at that time, but literally everyone. Jesus said that at the end of time the graves will be opened, and everyone will be raised into a new physical existence—some to the

resurrection of life and others to the resurrection of judgement (Jn 5.28-29; see, Dan 12.2). Thus, in an instant the entire population (multi billions) of all of humanity will be assembled into one place and will see the Lord Jesus Christ returning on the clouds. How this will come about is not something which we can comprehend.

When Jesus returns, he will judge all mankind (Mt 16.27; 2 Cor 5.10; Heb 9.27). Again, this will occur instantaneously. Those who are judged righteous through the imputation of Christ's righteousness, will be given glorious bodies fit for an everlasting paradise (1 Cor 15.42-43; 1 Thess 4.16). Those who remain reprobate to the end will also be given replacement bodies. However, these will be suited for perpetual physical punishment in everlasting darkness, according to the sure word of Jesus himself (Mt 8.12; Mt 13.41-42, 49-50; Mt 22.13; Mt 24.51; Mt 25.30). This is a gruesome thought, and it should encourage all unbelievers to flee from the coming wrath of God against mankind's rebellion and turn to Christ in faith and repentance.

The other key event which will occur when Jesus returns will be the re-creation of the universe (2 Pt 3.12-13) with a new paradise (Rev 21.4). All the elect will be welcomed into the new heaven and earth (Mt 25.21, 23) to be with Jesus forever. This is why Paul says that we should encourage one another with the sure promise that Jesus will return (1 Thess 4.18).

13. Waiting in Jerusalem (Acts 1.12-14)

Jesus commanded the disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the promise of the Father—the anointing with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1.4). So, after the ascension they came down from Mount Olivet (the Mount of Olives) and returned to Jerusalem. Mount Olivet is one of three hills on a ridge to the east of Jerusalem. It is about 100m higher than the temple mount in Jerusalem and offers a good prospect for looking toward the city. At one time the slopes of the hill were covered with olive groves. However, from about the time of David it began to be used as a cemetery. Today there are around 150,000 graves covering the slopes.

Luke tells us that Mount Olivet is a Sabbath day's walk from the city. Jewish rabbis, before the time of Christ, established the concept of a Sabbath day's walk—the farthest a person could go beyond his home on the Sabbath without becoming a Sabbath breaker. Apparently, they based their rulemaking on the command Moses gave to the people not to leave their houses to collect manna on the Sabbath (Ex 16.29). They defined a person's place of residence to include a distance in any direction of 2,000 cubits (~1 km), based on the pasturelands assigned to the Levites (Num 35.5). Even the Levites would have had to walk out on a Sabbath day to tend to their animals (e.g., to provide them with fodder and water). Luke reported for his readers other Jewish customs, not reported by the other Gospel writers (Lk 1.9; Lk 2.27; Lk 2.42). He does this without indicating whether these practices have continuing applicability to NT believers.

On their return from Mount Olivet the eleven named apostles gathered in an upper room in Jerusalem. Jesus' half-brothers (probably at least James and Jude of his four half-brothers; Mk 6.3) who were now believers were with them. Paul tells us that James was honoured with a personal meeting with the resurrected Lord (1 Cor 15.7). Also, present were Mary, Jesus' mother, and other women. Among these women may have been the apostles' wives (e.g., Peter's wife; Mt 8.14). Calvin argues, based on Paul's comment in 1 Corinthians 9.5, that Luke here in Acts is referring to their wives. It is also likely that other women, who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee (Lk 23.49, 55) were present. There were probably other disciples present, since at least two others had been present at the ascension (Acts 1.23). This upper room may have been the large guest room (Lk 22.11-12) which had been used when Jesus and his disciples ate the Passover meal, and when Jesus inaugurated the new covenant sacramental meal in the night he was betrayed (1 Cor 11.23). Rooms of this type were usually on a third floor (above a residential dwelling) and were accessed by separate exterior stairs.

The apostle John probably ensured that Mary was present during this time. He had been assigned responsibility for her by Jesus and she lived with John in Jerusalem (Jn 19.26-27). Luke's mention of her presence with the apostles is endearing. Since this is the last mention of her in the NT, it indicates that John was faithfully fulfilling his duties. It also provides a positive ending note about the life of a faithful servant of the Lord (Lk 1.38). It must have been excruciating for Mary to have witnessed the crucifixion of her son. We are not told whether Jesus appeared to her in his resurrected body, or if she was present at his ascension. But we can surmise that in his compassion for his mother he would have given assurance to her that he was alive. Regardless, while she was with the apostles after their return to Jerusalem, she would have been blessed with the knowledge that her son was in the glory of heaven.

Jesus did not tell them how long they would have to wait before the promise of the Father was given. The ten days between the ascension and Pentecost must have been filled with expectation but also with a degree of frustration as they were asking, "What's going to happen next?" and "How long before it happens?" This provides a crucial lesson for the Church. We need to learn to be patient as we wait for God to work out his redemptive plans—for example as we pray for revival in our land, as we ask him to pour out his Spirit on our congregation, and as we ask for unsaved family members to be saved. Patience is not a common virtue in our day of instant meals, instant internet access, and instant gratification. The Psalmist declares that he waited patiently for the LORD to hear his plea (Ps 40.1). Paul tells us that we are not to be impatient and to grow weary in doing good (Gal 6.9). Also, James puts patience into an eschatological context, telling us not to stress out because Jesus hasn't returned yet (James 5.7-8). We are to follow the example of Abraham who waited patiently to have the promise of a son fulfilled (Heb 6.15).

As they waited, they prayed. This is the first recorded prayer-meeting of the NT Church. Some argue that Acts 1.14 provides an apostolic example of women praying when the church is assembled. However, we are not told explicitly who led in voiced prayer. The word 'together' is not present in the Greek, only the preposition 'with'. The antecedent to the preposition could be 'prayer' (meaning they prayed with), but it could also be 'all these' (meaning they were with the apostles in the upper room). If the apostles followed the synagogue model which formed the basis for NT worship assemblies and they held to the same understanding as Paul expressed in his epistles (1 Cor 14.33b-35; 1 Tim 2.8-15), then the women did not offer voiced prayers in the assembly when men were present. Regardless, we can derive a second key lesson from what Luke reports. Jesus had taught his disciples the importance of prayer, and how to pray. The assembled church understood that it was through prayer that God would advance the mission which they had been assigned—to take the witness of the Gospel to the world (Mt 28.19-20; Acts 1.8).

14. Judas the Betrayer

(Acts 1.15-20)

During the ten days between the ascension and Pentecost, Peter addressed the congregation of about 120 believers in Jerusalem. He did not presume a self-appointed role as a pastor of the congregation. Jesus had indicated that he had a leadership position (Mt 16.18; Jn 21.15-17). As the first lead pastor of the Jerusalem congregation, he became their key spokesman (Acts 1.15), primary preacher (Acts 2.14), chief dispenser of discipline (Acts 5.1-11), and an initiator of significant changes as the Church transitioned from its OT form into its NT form with the inclusion of the Gentiles (Acts 10.1-11.18). His activities are reported in the first fourteen chapters of Acts—except in Acts 6.1-15 and Acts 7.1-60, which deal with the appointment of seven deacons and Stephen's speech and murder. Peter's last appearance in Acts is at the council held in Jerusalem where he defends the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Church without imposing the burdens of the Mosaic ceremonial rites and restrictions (Acts 15.7-11).

The disciples were intimately familiar with the betrayal of Jesus by Judas and of his gruesome death. Nevertheless, Peter believed that it was necessary to remind them of what had happened before he made

his proposal to appoint an apostle to replace Judas. One reason may have been to illustrate the importance of true penitence for sin. Peter's own denial of Jesus, less than two months previously, was likely still in his mind. But he knew that repentance led to forgiveness and restoration (Jn 21.15-17). In contrast, Judas was unwilling to confess his sins and ask for forgiveness. He did not have real faith that enabled him to turn to Christ, who is always willing to forgive sins (1 Jn 1.9). Instead, in despair, he committed suicide. Matthew tells us that Judas hanged himself (Mt 27.5). Luke adds detail. The rope Judas used may have been weak or frayed, because he fell headlong, and his body burst open, and his guts spilled out (Acts 1.18). There is a telling irony in the account of Judas' suicide. Peter says that the *reward* for his wickedness was that the reward he had received for guiding those who arrested Jesus (Lk 22.5) was used to purchase a field which became associated with a bloody death and a burial ground for paupers (Mt 27.7-10).

We may be perplexed at why Jesus selected Judas as an apostle to share in the ministry (Acts 1.17). In this instance, we cannot attribute his decision to his divine knowledge being veiled from his human nature. Jesus knew Judas' real character before the betrayal (Jn 6.64, 70-71; Jn 13.21-27). Nor can we conclude that Judas was included among the apostles for pragmatic reasons, such as his shrewdness in dealing with money (Jn 13.29). It would have been possible for God to have arranged matters so that the Messiah would be delivered to his executioners without betrayal by one of his disciples. So, God had reasons for including an unconverted man in a position of Church leadership. We can suggest possible reasons. One reason may be that God designated Judas as part of Christ's humiliation, which included not only persecution by his enemies but denial (Jn 18.27), desertion (Mt 26.56), and betrayal by one who claimed to be his friend (Mt 26.50). Also, this example of the presence of a duplicitous man in Church leadership provides a warning for us that there will always be wolves in sheep's clothing in the Church (Mt 7.15; Acts 20.29; Jude 4, 10-13). We must be aware of this danger and assess the lives of Church leaders in relation to their teaching (Lk 6.43-45), and their teaching against what the Bible states (Acts 17.11). The presence of men in positions of leadership in the Church who are unfaithful to Christ teaches us that we must never rely so heavily on men that our faith is shattered if one of them displays an evil character. Our reliance should be only on Jesus. Finally, a reason may be to warn us of the vices of greed and covetousness, which were displayed by Judas (Mt 26.15; Jn 12.6). It may be because of Judas' example that Paul warns the Church that elders/pastors are not to be lovers of money (1 Tim 3.3), because the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil (1 Tim 6.10), even leading to betrayal of the sinless one.

Peter justified the action to replace Judas among the apostles by stating that Scripture had to be fulfilled. He quoted from the Psalms. First, he indicated that Judas had forfeited his position because of his wickedness. His 'camp' or 'tent' (Acts 1.20; Ps 69.25) was cursed and left desolate. Then, he applied another Psalm to Judas, "May his days be few; may another take his office!" (Ps 109.8). Peter displayed a reverence for Scripture, which includes:

- The belief that the Holy Spirit spoke through the OT writers (Acts 1.16; 2 Pt 1.21), as he would also as the NT was written (2 Pt 3.16).
- An understanding that the Psalms are part of Scripture. He had heard Jesus declare that the Psalms had to be fulfilled (Lk 24.44), not only in his life and death, but in events surrounding his death, such as Judas' betrayal.
- An explicit belief that all prophecies contained in the Bible must be fulfilled (Acts 1.16) and will be as another takes Judas' office.
- An understanding that the OT prophecies were to be interpreted in the context of NT events, such as the application of both of the quotations from the Psalms which first applied to David's personal situation.
- A conviction that the OT is Scripture and has relevance for the NT Church. It would be over a decade before the first portions of the NT arrived, initially with epistles from Paul and James. Peter's own memoirs, recorded by Mark are believed to be contained in the first Gospel, but the Gospel of Mark likely appeared around a decade and a half after this first congregational meeting.

We need to ensure that we have the same confidence in the written word of God. Like Peter, we must believe that all that it states is true, understand what it states in its plain sense, and accept all of the Bible, including the OT, as normative for Christian faith and practice. Do we have Peter's faith, and trust the Bible?

15. Matthias Replaces Judas

(Acts 1.15, 20-26)

Peter addressed the 120 folks assembled as the congregation in Jerusalem with inspired direction. He stated that it was necessary to find a replacement for Judas who had defected from his office by his betrayal of Jesus. A question which arises from this action is why was it necessary to appoint a replacement apostle? Peter quotes from Psalm 109.8, which says, "may/let another take his office!" He indicates that this was to fulfill Scripture (Acts 1.16). However, this does not explain why God the Holy Spirit directed through David that another should take the place of a wicked and deceitful man. One suggestion for why Judas had to be replaced bases the reason on the foundational role of the apostles (Mt 19.28; Eph 2.20; Rev 21.12, 14) and that Jesus chose *twelve* apostles (and not another number like seven or ten). It appears that the twelve apostles were understood to be symbolic representatives of Israel in the NT Church. Israel (Jacob) had twelve sons, which grew into twelve tribes. The NT Israel would likewise have twelve spiritual tribes drawn from the nations (Jer 31.1, 8, 10; Ezk 37.15-28). In effect, the Holy Spirit was indicating that the Gospel would go out to the nations, "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1.8), as the Messiah established a renewed spiritual house of Israel on which the Holy Spirit would pour out his blessing.

Peter states the key conditions for the selection of a replacement for Judas (Acts 1.21-22). The man had to have been among the disciples during Jesus' entire earthly ministry. He had to have been present when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. And he had to have seen Jesus in his post-resurrection appearances and been present at the ascension of Jesus into heaven. These conditions were necessary so that the replacement apostle could be a credible eyewitness to all which Jesus said and did (Lk 1.2; Lk 24.44-49; Acts 10.39-41). Peter specifically mentions their being witnesses of the resurrection because they had to understand that Jesus died for sinners (Rom 5.8) and rose to conquer death (1 Cor 15.54-55). Their intimate knowledge of all that had transpired would enable them to be reliable guarantors of the truth as far as possible among humans.

We can be certain that other qualifications were also included when the two men (Joseph and Matthias) were chosen from among the other disciples. These men would have displayed evidence of true faith in Jesus as saviour and of a devout and disciplined life (compare, Acts 6.3, 5). They would have also been put forward because they had displayed the preaching and teaching skills which would be required to fulfill the mission mandate assigned to the apostles (Mt 28.19-20). They may have demonstrated these skills when Jesus sent out the seventy-two to evangelize and announce the Kingdom of God (Lk 10.1-11, 17).

The appointment of a replacement for Judas appears to indicate that the apostolic office was limited to these twelve individuals. Also, the fact that a replacement for Judas was chosen from among the disciples indicates that not all the disciples held apostolic office. In general, in Acts, when the term 'apostle' appears it seems to refer to the twelve. There is a clear exception when Barnabas and Paul are called apostles (Acts 14.14). So, we must conclude that the word 'apostle' is used in the NT in a specific sense to refer to the *office* of the twelve but also refers in a general sense to one who is commissioned to fulfill the *role* of an apostle as a spiritual ambassador for the Kingdom of Christ. The apostolic office was unique. Those filling the office of apostle performed sign miracles to authenticate their appointment (Mk 10.2, 8; 2 Cor 12.12). The apostolic office was put in place to lay the foundation for the NT Church and to compose, or oversee the composition of, the NT canon of Scripture. When the last (presumably, John) of the twelve apostles died, the apostolic office ended. No new apostles can be appointed to the *office* because no one can meet the qualifications Peter gives in Acts 1.21-22. However, the general *role* of apostle continues to this day

among those called to be pastors/elders in the Church.

Two individuals (Joseph and Matthias) were selected from among the disciples and put forward (i.e., presented). Luke does not explain how they were selected. Some believe that they were selected by congregational vote. They suggest that this is the first instance of nominating candidates for spiritual leadership positions within congregations. However, the context seems to suggest otherwise. It appears that the eleven apostles vetted possible individuals and selected two to put forward. They did not put them forward so that the congregation could vote for one or the other candidate but to present them to the congregation before the Lord identified whom he had chosen. If this account can be applied to how congregations should identify their spiritual leaders, it does not appear to support the idea that members of the congregation may nominate candidates. Rather, it appears that existing leaders in churches (i.e., elders) are to vet individuals with the skills and qualifications (1 Tim 3.1-7; Titus 1.6-9) for leadership in the Church and present them to the congregation.

The apostles through prayer asked Jesus, who knows the hearts of all men, whom he had chosen. They used the Mosaic means of deriving guidance from God by casting lots. They did not have access to the Urim and Thummim stones used by the high priests (Ex 28.30; Lev 8.8; Ezra 2.63; Neh 7.65). So, they may have used a means of casting lots with coloured pebbles (Rev 2.17). They had absolute confidence that the lot would be directed according to the will of the Lord (Prov 16.33). We probably should not use this as a precedent for selecting among candidates for congregational leadership. However, we should also not dismiss the use of casting lots (e.g., flipping a coin) for making decisions such as who kicks off first in a football game. It is probable that a congregational vote is the right way to select a new elder, but this passage cannot be used to support the idea.

16. The Bible is the Word of God the Holy Spirit

(Acts 1.16; Acts 4.25; Acts 28.25)

Three times in Acts we read that the Holy Spirit spoke through the words written in the OT Scriptures. Both Peter (Acts 1.16) and Paul (Acts 28.25; see also, Heb 3.7) state it as a fact, as did the early assembled believers during prayer (Acts 4.25). Likewise, Matthew, quoting Jesus, declares the OT Scriptures to be the word of God (Mt 4.4). Also, John indicates that the OT is the word of God (Jn 10.35). Elsewhere, Paul states that all Scripture is “breathed out by God” (2 Tim 3.15). Thus, the principal apostles who wrote NT Scriptures believed that the ultimate author behind the text of Scripture is God the Holy Spirit. They also believed that the human authors of the biblical writings were mouthpieces of the Holy Spirit. As Peter says, “For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” (2 Pt 1.21). Nevertheless, we know that the personalities and skills of the individual authors are evident in their compositions. So, even though the Holy Spirit is the ultimate author of the Bible, humans are the proximate authors of the books and are not mere mechanical recording devices. We will not engage in an attempt to explain how this apparent paradox can be resolved, any more than we can explain how God can predestine all things and yet humans be held responsible and accountable for their thoughts and actions (we will consider this in a later meditation, *Predestination and Human Responsibility*). The Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is the word of God, as God himself declares it to be. His word is self-authenticating!

The Bible in its final form, with the revelation about Jesus through his apostles, is God the Holy Spirit’s true word for mankind. It communicates to us all that God wants us to know, and all that we need to know about how to find salvation and how to live in a way that will please him. Other writings which people call ‘holy books’ and claim to be of equal standing with the Bible, are not holy. In many cases what they say is false, blasphemous, and perversely evil—leading men to hell, not heaven.

Someone who wishes to challenge a Christian and his beliefs might ask for proof that the Bible is true and,

for example, that the *Qur'an* and *Book of Mormon* are false. He will accuse the Christian of being irrational and simplistic, and of applying circular reasoning. However, the challenger is mistaken in his reproof of the Christian position, since claiming that the Bible is our ultimate authority for truth is not irrational. Also, while stating that the Bible is self-authenticating is an example of circular reasoning, it is not an invalid or untruthful claim.

It actually makes no sense for a person to ask for proof that the Bible is true. No one can *prove* (or disprove) the Bible's truthfulness—although there are many types of evidence which support its veracity and accuracy, such as historical and scientific facts and the fulfillment of numerous detailed prophecies. The problem is that if someone attempts to prove (or disprove) that the Bible is true, he will have to select a system of proof to demonstrate the truthfulness of the Bible. Then, his opponent could ask him to prove that whatever system he had selected was valid. For example, if we subjected the historical statements of the Bible to a test of their historicity by comparing them with nonbiblical accounts of history, we would have to ask how we could prove that the nonbiblical writings are accurate. Any form of proof brought forward to defend a lower level of proof would have to be, in turn, subjected to another, higher, level of proof. The argument would proceed into an infinite-regress, with no hope of a solution. The Bible cannot be an *ultimate* standard if it is subjected to proof, otherwise whatever standard was used to assess the Bible would have to be considered an ultimate standard.

It is necessary to apply circular reasoning to validate *all* instances of ultimate authorities. For example, God can swear by no other, so he swears by himself (Heb 6.13). Or consider logic. It is impossible to prove that logic is logical or true—we cannot step outside the system of logic to prove logically that the laws of logic are true. Yet, if the laws of logic did not exist or weren't consistent, we couldn't make any arguments. Since we can make rational arguments using logic, the laws of logic must exist, and they must be true. Logic authenticates its own existence. Similarly, you cannot prove that mathematics is true, without assuming it is true. Logic and mathematics are ultimate self-authenticating systems because they are derived from the mind of the self-existent God. The 17th-century German mathematician and philosopher Leibniz, wrote in the margin of a printed copy of his own essay *Dialogues*, a short sentence: "When God calculates and thinks things through, the world is made."

Someone might still demand that we prove that the Bible is true, otherwise he is unwilling to accept the claim that it is true, and that other writings, such as the *Qur'an*, are false. The best way to answer this demand is to suggest that the person read the Bible, and that while reading it he asks the Holy Spirit to open his heart and mind to hear the truth of the Bible. All men know, in the deep crevasses of their minds, even if they won't admit it consciously, that there is a God. And when they read the Bible, they know that they are hearing from the living God, even if they strenuously deny it to be his word. When men read the Bible, they encounter God and his self-authenticating word. Two of our presuppositions must be that there is a God, and that the Bible is his perfect word. All men know that these things are true! No test can be devised by human minds to make this determination definitive. The only way that we can ultimately know that truth is true is because the Holy Spirit, through direct personal revelation, tells us that it is. We know that the Bible is true because the Holy Spirit opens our minds so that we can understand the Scriptures.

17. God Knows the Hearts of Men

(Acts 1.24)

When did you last lie to yourself? If you are honest, you will admit that it was quite recently, and likely even today. We all think more highly of ourselves than we ought (Rom 12.3). We think that our thoughts are pure, our tongues gracious, and our works loving. While we are in our current bodies, the remnants of sin will continue to fog our heads and foul our hearts, and we will always deceive ourselves. For believers in Christ, this is not as serious as it could be. We have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, and he helps us to confess our sins daily. But for unbelievers, mankind's tendency to self-deception is catastrophic.

The Bible declares the true state of a person's heart who has not been blessed with the converting work of the Holy Spirit:

- "Their heart is false" (Hos 10.2).
- "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?" (Jer 17.9).
- "Everyone utters lies to his neighbor; with flattering lips and a double heart they speak." (Ps 12.2).
- "Also, the hearts of the children of man are full of evil, and madness is in their hearts while they live, and after that they go to the dead." (Eccl 9.3).

Many people think that they are smarter than everyone else in the room and that their opinion matters more than that of others. Most bosses claim that they are nice people and easy to get along with. A person addicted to chemical (alcohol or drugs) or sexual stimulation deceives himself, saying, "I can stop at any time, when I want to." Our culture proclaims 'victimhood' as the cause of much dysfunctional behaviour, instead of declaring it for what it is—sin! Since Adam and Eve (Gen 3.12-13), people always make excuses for their behaviour, rather than blaming their own hearts (Mk 7.21; James 1.15). They claim that their family has bred a co-dependency, that they have not had opportunities for self-actualization, or that society has mistreated them unfairly, so they deserve more.

The two biggest self-lies which unbelievers cherish are either that:

- They are not sinners. John states that this is self-deception. (1 Jn 1.8).
- All of their bad thoughts, words, or actions are outweighed by their good ones. The balance on God's naughty and nice list, or their *karma*, will tip in their favour and, in the end, they will scrape through into a blessed next life. Paul is explicit, this kind of self deception leads only to hell (1 Cor 6.9-10).

Why do people constantly lie to themselves? The Bible provides insight into the reasons, which humanistic psychology cannot understand:

- The root cause of self-deception is pride (Prov 16.18). It started at the beginning in the garden when Eve thought that she could play God and act autonomously in determining good and evil (Gen 3.5).
- Men think that they are masters of their own destinies (James 4.13-15).
- Men also think that their inner sins are hidden from God (Ps 36.2).
- They think that hearing the word, without a proper responsive action is acceptable in God's sight (James 1.22-26).
- They suppress the truth about the Creator-God, their creaturehood, and their sinful state, and are given over by God to a debased mind (Rom 1.18, 28).

In the NT and in the Greek translation of the OT, the term 'heart' (*kardia*, from which we get words like *cardiac*) is applied to various aspects of man, including:

- A synecdoche for a person's entire being or life (Acts 14.17; James 5.5).
- The moral component of mankind, which can be either good or bad (Ezk 18.31; Ezk 36.26; Lk 16.15; Acts 1.24; Rom 6.17; 1 Cor 14.25; 1 Tim 1.5).
- An intellectual component of mankind. A metaphor for a person's thoughts (Acts 7.23; Acts 16.14; Rom 1.21; Eph 1.18; 2 Cor 3.14-15).
- A volitional component of mankind (Mt 5.28; Mt 15.18; Mt 18.35; Acts 5.4; Rom 1.24; 1 Cor 7.37; 2 Cor 9.7).
- The seat of emotions (Mt 22.37; Acts 2.26, 37; Acts 21.13; 2 Cor 2.4).
- Where the Holy Spirit works at conversion (Rom 5.5; 2 Cor 1.22; Gal 4.6).
- Where Christ dwells when we have faith in him (Eph 3.17).

The apostles prayed, asking the Lord to indicate which of the two disciples (Joseph or Matthias) they were to appoint to the apostolic office. In their prayer that said that the Lord knows the hearts of all—i.e., he

would know which of the two would be best suited for the apostolic office. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for their love of money and told them that “God knows your hearts” (Lk 16.15). The truth that God knows and searches the hearts of men and women is stated multiple times in the Bible (e.g., Jer 17.10; 1 Cor 4.5; 1 Thess 2.4; Rev 2.23). The wicked should be wary of God, for he knows and exposes the wickedness in their hearts. But the Psalmist is confident that his love for God is real and asks God to search his heart to establish the sincerity of it (Ps 139.23-24).

God has infinite knowledge. He knows everything about us, every molecule in our bodies, every hair on our head (Mt 10.30), our most intimate thoughts (Ps 139.2, 23; Is 66.18), and our words before we even utter them (Ps 139.4). In contrast, the natural man cannot know anything certain about anything in his own heart because it is polluted with original sin. Even believers, because of the remnants of sin dwelling in them, do not know their own hearts as well as God does. Because God knows us better than we know ourselves, he knows what is best for us and how best to answer our prayers.

18. The Coming and Filling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4)

Pentecost had *arrived*. The Greek word Luke chose to use, indicates that it was a day that not only completed a period of waiting with expectation (the 10 days since the ascension), but a day purposely selected for a momentous event. God governs time, schedules, and calendars. And at the ‘right time’ (Mk 1.15; Rom 5.6; Gal 4.4) Jesus was sent to redeem his elect people and the Holy Spirit was sent to inaugurate the NT Church.

What made Pentecost the *right* day for the coming of the Holy Spirit? Fifty days after Passover seems to be arbitrary. From a providential perspective, the day was ideal for launching the NT Church, because many pilgrims, visitors from nearby towns, and city residents would be present for the annual celebration of the Feast of Weeks (Ex 34.22; Dt 16.9-11). All Jewish males were supposed to appear at this feast (Ex 23.17). This would have provided a ready audience and good exposure for the coming of the Holy Spirit with signs and wonders. And then, as all those who did not live in Jerusalem returned to their homes, they would carry news of the events. Those converted on that day would form a foundation of believers in the Messiah within their respective synagogues.

However, there likely is another significant reason. When the festival was established by Moses it was also referred to as the Feast of Harvest (Ex 23.16; Ex 34.22; Lev 23.15-21). As such it had two purposes: to give thanks to God for his bounty and to offer to him a tribute of the firstfruits from the grain harvest. The events of Pentecost were a fulfillment of the OT type. The Holy Spirit offered up to the exalted Christ, the firstfruits of a Gospel harvest.

When the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost, “they were all together in one place”—likely in the upper room mentioned previously (Acts 1.13). Many, going back to antiquity, have suggested that the ‘they’ refers to the 120 (Acts 1.15) who had been present at the appointment of the apostolic replacement for Matthias. However, this is likely not the case. The immediate antecedent for the ‘they’ is the twelve apostles (Acts 1.26) who were staying together (Acts 1.13). The apostles were sitting in the house (Acts 2.2) when it was filled with a sound like a rushing wind. It was the apostles upon whom the Holy Spirit descended with divided tongues that appeared to be fire. This manifestation of his presence was not a general anointing of believers with the Spirit, but a special filling vested upon those commissioned by Christ to lay the foundation for the new form of his Church (Eph 2.20; Rev 21.14). This initial filling was certainly not a symbolic consecration of all believers into a universal priesthood, as has been suggested.

Only Luke among the Gospel writers gives a report of people being filled with the Holy Spirit (or being given the gift of the Holy Spirit). Other instances are:

- John the Baptist, before he was born (Lk 1.15).
- Elizabeth, on hearing a greeting from the pregnant Mary (Lk 1.41).
- Zechariah, when his mouth was opened, and he prophesied (Lk 1.67).
- Jesus, after his Baptism to prepare him for his temptation (Lk 4.1).
- Peter informing his hearers that they may receive the gift (Acts 2.38).
- Peter, when he spoke before the Jerusalem Jewish council (Acts 4.8).
- A group of believers after an earnest prayer (Acts 4.31).
- Peter, when he condemned Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5.3).
- The seven appointed to serve, with Stephen being named (Acts 6.3, 5).
- Stephen, before he was murdered (Acts 7.55).
- Saul (Paul), when Ananias laid hands on him (Acts 9.17).
- The gift being poured out on Gentiles (Acts 10.45).
- Barnabas, when he was sent to Antioch (Acts 11.24).
- Paul, when he condemned Elymas the magician (Acts 13.9).
- Disciples in Iconium (Acts 13.52).

There are also a few instances reported in the OT of people being filled with the Spirit of God (e.g., Ex 31.3; Ex 35.31; Mic 3.8). All of these instances indicate that being filled with the Holy Spirit could occur immediately at conversion or later in a believer's life. It was not necessarily a one-time event but could be repeated (as in the cases of Peter and Paul). And it might not be associated with the ability to perform extraordinary signs like what occurred on Pentecost (i.e., speaking in tongues). Rather the filling provided spiritual empowerment for executing a ministry or service assigned to a believer by the Holy Spirit. Being filled with the Holy Spirit does not create a special class of Christians but is something which all believers should seek to have (Eph 5.18) through intimacy with the word of Christ (Col 3.16).

On Pentecost, the pouring out of the Holy Spirit was manifested by audible and visible signs, similar to when the Holy Spirit appeared like a dove at Jesus' baptism (Mt 3.16). In this instance, three signs manifested the Spirit's presence:

- *A sound like a mighty rushing wind.* The Greek words for 'spirit' and 'wind' are from the same root. Jesus used this relationship when he spoke with Nicodemus (Jn 3.7-8) and breathed on his disciples (Jn 20.22). A way to make the Spirit's work evident was with a physical wind or breath.
- *Divided tongues of fire.* God often made his invisible presence known through fire. It was used as a symbol of holiness (Ex 3.2-5; Ezk 1.27), giving of the law (Ex 19.18), and judgement on sin (1 Ki 18.38-39; Is 66.15).
- *The apostles speaking in other tongues.* This sign miracle was used by God to convince hearers of the Holy Spirit's presence with the apostles.

These signs announced a decisive event in the history of redemption—the founding of the NT Church—which was a unique and unrepeatable event.

19. The Jewish Diaspora (Acts 2.5-11)

Upon hearing the sound of the mighty rushing wind (Acts 2.1) which manifested the Spirit's presence with the apostles, a multitude gathered outside the house where the apostles were staying. Presumably, at that point the apostles went outside the house and the crowd heard the apostles speaking in tongues. In our next meditation, we will address the miracle of tongues. Today, we will consider what Luke tells us about the multitude that came together.

Luke informs us that devout men were dwelling in Jerusalem at that time. All Jewish males were supposed to appear at this feast (Ex 23.17) and likely many brought their families with them, like Joseph did when

he took his family to Jerusalem for the Passover (Lk 2.41-42). So, the city would have been full beyond normal capacity with pilgrims from distant lands (diaspora Jews), visitors from nearby towns in Judea and Galilee, and city residents. Luke says that the people in the crowd were from ‘every nation under heaven’. We need not get tied in knots over this statement because his list of nations doesn’t cover the whole world and he omits nations which later are important in Acts (e.g., Syria, Galatia, Macedonia, and Achaia). Clearly, he is speaking hyperbolically, like when a reporter says that the entire city went out to celebrate a team’s championship win. Luke wants us to understand that there was a wide variety of people representing many nations and languages.

Luke’s list includes nations from the four compass directions (e.g., Media to the east, Arabia to the south, Cyrene and Rome to the west, and Parthia to the north). Why he includes or excludes nations has been widely debated. His purpose was not to be exhaustive, but to identify areas where concentrations of Jewish people had settled during the intertestamental period and were close enough so that they could make an annual pilgrimage to the feasts. Many of the visitors from beyond Palestine would not have spoken Aramaic or easily understood the Greek *lingua franca* of the day. Thus, Luke mentions the fact that multiple languages were spoken among the crowd that had assembled outside the house. This set the stage for the sign miracle as the members of the crowd heard the apostles speak about the mighty works of God in their own tongues.

Luke states that among those in the crowd were devout men (Acts 2.5) who were Jews or proselytes (Acts 2.11). The devout Jews were ones who took seriously the Torah (law), Nevi’im (prophets), and Ketuvim (writings) of the OT and were looking forward with expectation for the coming of the promised Messiah (Lk 2.25; Acts 8.2; Acts 22.12). The proselytes were Gentile converts to Judaism who believed the word of God and participated in the synagogue worship, such as some Greeks who asked to see Jesus (Jn 12.20-21), the centurion who exhibited great faith (Lk 7.1-10), and Cornelius another centurion (Acts 10.1-2, 22), but who had not yet taken the radical step of being circumcised. These proselytes were some of the early fruit among the Gentiles prior to the delivery of the commission given by Jesus to the apostles to carry the Gospel to the nations of the world (Mt 28.19-20; Acts 1.8).

As the crowd assembled, they heard the apostles speaking to each of them about the “mighty works of God” in their own languages (Greek: ‘dialect’); not in the Aramaic spoken by Galileans, or in Greek. This demonstrated that something extraordinary was transpiring, as evidenced by Luke’s description of the crowd’s reaction with the words, ‘bewildered’ (Acts 2.6), ‘amazed’ (Acts 2.7), ‘astonished’ (Acts 2.7, 12), and ‘perplexed’ (Acts 2.12). The members of the crowd knew that what was happening was not normal and that they were witnessing a true miracle. Thus, the crowd was primed with open ears to hear Peter’s sermon about the Messiah/Christ.

It has been suggested by a number of writers on this section of Acts, that there is a possible preview of the undoing of the curse on mankind’s hubris at Babel. There God confused and separated mankind by instantly creating multiple languages to replace the single common language everyone had spoken (Gen 11.1-9). This undoing may be hinted at indirectly by the word ‘divided’ Luke uses in Acts 2.3, to describe the flames. In Greek, it means ‘to spread out’ or ‘to disperse’. The only other place it is used in the Bible is in the Greek translation of Deuteronomy 32.8, where Moses speaks of the division of mankind. The world is still divided linguistically, and tensions often arise over the use of particular languages (as we in Canada witness in Quebec). However, the fact that all the members of the crowd (Jew and Gentile) on Pentecost heard the Gospel preached in their own languages indicates that God was beginning to break down the nationalism that arose from the linguistic division of mankind. For a moment, divisions were gone, and the Holy Spirit was pointing to God’s ultimate goal. All mankind, in Christ, will be united into one new nation—the spiritual Israel. The dividing line between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, and male and female is dissolved as all are made one in Christ (Gal 3.28; Eph 1.9-10). John sees the result of this reversal in his visions into heaven where the multitude in the Kingdom of Jesus Christ is made up of people from every nation and

language (Rev 5.9; Rev 7.9).

There were likely many among the three thousand (Acts 2.41) converted on Pentecost, who were from distant lands. As they returned to their homelands and home synagogues, they would carry news of the events of that day. Thus, the Jewish diaspora would form a foundation of believers in the Messiah within their respective synagogues. This would serve as an initial base for evangelism (Acts 9.20; Acts 13.5, 14; Acts 14.1; Acts 17.2, 10, 17; Acts 18.4, 19; Acts 19.8).

20. Speaking in Tongues (Acts 2.4, 6, 11-15)

The ability to speak any language is a miracle. God has endowed humans with a prewired ability to process language. If this were not the case, humans could not process any language. Children demonstrate this prewired capability since they can learn *any* language to which they are exposed and can even learn multiple languages simultaneously. So, we are not surprised when we encounter people who are multilingual. Yet, on Pentecost the crowd was surprised by a language miracle. The miracle was not that the apostles were multilingual (they likely spoke both Aramaic and Greek already, and probably also Hebrew). The surprise was that the apostles were able instantly to speak in languages which they had never learned, and the hearers were able to understand languages which they had never learned. So, when the crowd first assembled outside the house where the apostles were staying, one of the apostles could address a person in the crowd in that person's native language. But also, if an apostle, such as Peter did later in the morning, spoke in his own native language each member of the audience would hear what the apostle was saying in his own language. The linguistic miracle was instantaneous, multi-directional, simultaneous translation.

Why did the Holy Spirit use this miracle as he founded the NT Church? Possible reasons may be:

- If the speakers had communicated only in their native Galilean dialect of Aramaic, few would have listened and understood. The Holy Spirit invented a means for bringing the Gospel to the nations for the first time.
- The Holy Spirit was signifying that the Gospel is to go out to all nations (Mt 28.19-20; Acts 1.8). Today, this is accomplished by missionaries and evangelists who have a God-given ability to learn new languages in which to communicate the Gospel and by those who translate the Bible.
- This sign miracle brought attention to the mighty works of God and validated the apostles as founding spokesmen for Jesus in his Church.
- We noted previously that this miracle may provide a preview of the undoing or reversal of the linguistic curse placed on mankind after their attempt to usurp God's authority at Babel.

Some evangelical scholars claim that the linguistic phenomenon which occurred on Pentecost is different from the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues which Paul deals with in 1 Corinthians. However, Paul does not deal with 'ecstatic sounds' as they suggest, but with natural human languages just as those which were heard on Pentecost. The primary difference is that Paul deals with the miracle of speaking a previously unknown foreign language but does not refer to the other dimension of the miracle displayed here—the hearers hearing in their own language. During the apostolic period, as the Church expanded into new territories, the Holy Spirit would endow some speakers (e.g., Paul; 1 Cor 14.18) with the ability to instantaneously speak in a previously unlearned foreign language. So, when Paul deals with the gift of tongues in his letter to the Corinthians, he has to provide guidance for its use. A person is not to speak in a foreign language if no one in the congregation can understand that language, or an interpreter must be present. He makes it clear that the gift of tongues is to be used to bring the Gospel message to those who cannot understand the language being spoken in the congregation. Paul also states that when someone declares a revelation (1 Cor 14.6) in a previously unknown foreign language and everyone else in the congregation cannot understand what is being said, the message is lost and the words coming from the

mouth of the speaker are nothing more than the babbling of barbarians and is useless (1 Cor 14.9, 11, 14, 16-17). Presenting God's truth in the common language of the congregation is of greater value for the Church than speaking in tongues (1 Cor 14.5), since prophesying provides understandable content which influences others for good and builds up believers. Paul states that if a person speaking in a tongue cannot be understood, then what is verbalized has no value and the person should be silent (1 Cor 14.28).

Not surprisingly the hearers in the crowd were 'bewildered' (Acts 2.6), 'amazed' (Acts 2.7), 'astonished' (Acts 2.7, 12), and 'perplexed' (Acts 2.12). Some mocked the apostles and accused them of being drunk—filled with new (sweet) wine. Peter explained with an element of humour, that the apostles couldn't be drunk since it was still early in the day (about 9:00 am). They would have had to have been drinking for hours to have consumed enough wine to make them drunk. On a more serious note, devout Jews would not have been drunk that early (if at all) because they wouldn't have broken their overnight ritual fast yet. And, even if the apostles were inebriated that would not provide an explanation for the mockers' own new linguistic abilities to hear the words in their own language.

The fact that some in the crowd mocked God and his messengers should not surprise us. Scepticism is not a new phenomenon, exclusive to our 'enlightened', 'scientific' 21st-century. Despite their credulity (e.g., using superstitious practices, believing in fatalistic forces which control their destiny, and proposing foolish notions such as the cosmological myth that nothing can generate something), when people are confronted by true miracles, they become instant sceptics. They attribute true miracles (e.g., feeding thousands from a few loaves of bread or the restoration of life to a dead person) to something else such as myths or lies, or offer naturalistic explanations. There are two true miracles which occur daily that we must declare boldly to the sceptical world:

- No one can explain how life arises from non-living chemicals. But at the moment of conception a new life comes into existence.
- The Holy Spirit changes stone-dead hearts into living hearts destined for the perfect heaven.

21. Speeches in Acts (Acts 2.14)

Luke records over twenty speeches in Acts. The exact number is debated. Some of the recorded narratives could be understood as reporting conversations or statements rather than being speeches. Regardless, speeches represent about one-third of the text of Acts. And many of them we would consider to be sermons. Lessons we can derive from an overview of the speeches in Acts include:

- *Summarization.* The text of Peter's message in Acts 2.14-39 can be read aloud in a few minutes. But it likely lasted longer, since Luke informs us that "And with many other words he [Peter] bore witness and continued to exhort them" (Acts 2.40). Similarly, Peter's speech in Acts 3.12-26 appears to have begun around 3:00pm (Acts 3.1) but lasted until sundown (Acts 4.3)—which would have made it considerably longer than what is recorded. Thus, we can conclude that Luke reports to Theophilus the essence of what was said and does not give verbatim transcripts of entire speeches.
- *Indirect vs. direct knowledge.* Luke was not in the audience for many of the speeches, such as Peter's and Stephen's. Although, he was present for some of Paul's speeches. He may have received a record of Peter's speeches directly from Peter when he visited Jerusalem. However, he could not have received a firsthand account of Stephen's speech (Acts 7.2-53) from Stephen since Stephen was murdered immediately after he gave his speech. So, the record of it had to have been provided by another person who was in the audience. This indicates that the record of the speeches is likely reported in Luke's own words. Another factor providing evidence that this conclusion is valid, is that he provides a Greek summary of what was spoken in some cases in Aramaic or Hebrew (Acts 22.2). This does not mean that his record of the speeches is inaccurate, since he wrote under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (2 Tim 3.16; 2 Pt 1.21).

- *Use of a translation.* Luke used the Greek translation when he quoted from the OT (e.g., Acts 2.17-21, 25-28). Luke's use of the Greek translation and not the original Hebrew or the cognate Aramaic Targum illustrates a principle documented in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which states, "because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope." Luke's example of quoting from a translation, indicates that preachers are to use contemporary translations of the Bible in the language of their audience when they preach. Of course, this does not mean that they shouldn't study and understand the original languages in which the Bible was written.
- *Use of the Bible.* The sermons in Acts contain quotations from the OT and allusions to the OT. This demonstrates that preaching is to be Bible-based, and not to be sourced from studies of human psychology, worldly business models, or men's theories that purport to be scientific.
- *Situated within a contemporary context.* The speeches are clearly geared to their respective audiences. For example, Peter's address to the assembled believers (Acts 1.15-22) dealt with a particular matter—the replacement of Judas—as did James' speech at the Jerusalem council (Acts 15.13-21). Paul gave speeches to encourage the Ephesian elders (Acts 20.17-35) and fearful passengers on a ship (Acts 27.21-26). A sermon by Peter (Acts 2.14-39) demonstrates that the man, Jesus of Nazareth (Acts 2.22), who was known to his audience, is truly the promised Messiah. Paul's message to the Athenians on Mars Hill uses their religiosity (Acts 17.22) as a contextual starting point. He also quotes from their own philosophers as a means of engaging with them to present the true God, their need for repentance, and the work of Jesus as the God-man. Some of the speeches are defenses by Christians on trial before Jewish or Roman authorities, often with an evangelistic message embedded within them (e.g., Acts 4.8-12; Acts 7.2-56; Acts 22.1-21; Acts 24.10-21). Luke illustrates how opportunities were taken by the apostles in different contexts to address contemporary issues and to testify to the person and work of Jesus Christ. It has been suggested that preachers should have the Bible in one hand and a newspaper (tablet, these days) in the other.
- *Centrality of the cross.* Paul tells the Corinthians that his great mission was to preach Christ crucified (1 Cor 2.2). The sermons presented in Acts, whether to Jewish or Gentile audiences, emphasize the crucifixion and then resurrection of Jesus. They often then call for an immediate response—repentance and belief in the Lord Jesus a saviour (Acts 2.38; Acts 3.26; Acts 10.43; Acts 16.31; Acts 17.30).
- *Importance of preaching.* God has established *preaching* as the fundamental means of presenting the Gospel to the world (1 Cor 1.21; Rom 10.14-15). Preaching is God's chosen means of revival—the Holy Spirit's instrument for changing the human heart. Along with prayer, preaching has played a central role in the history of every revival and significant evangelistic movement. There has never been a revival that was initiated by anything other than God's designated dynamic duo: prayer and preaching. Spurgeon said, "I do not look for any other means of converting men beyond the simple preaching of the Gospel and the opening of men's ears to hear it. The moment the church of God shall despise the pulpit, God will despise her. It has been through the ministry that the Lord has always been pleased to revive and bless His churches." (C. H. Spurgeon, *The Early Years*, Vol 1, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1962), p. v.).

22. Joel's Prophecy Fulfilled (Acts 2.14-21)

Peter, as the spokesman for the twelve apostles, "lifted up his voice" as he began speaking to the assembled audience, composed mostly of Jewish males but with some others present. The term 'lifted up his voice' implies a gravity (Gen 27.38; 1 Sam 24.16; 2 Sam 3.32; 2 Sam 13.36) which was a befitting contrast to the accusation that the apostles were drunk (Acts 2.13, 15). The seriousness of what he was going to say was

confirmed by his exhortation to the crowd, “give ear to my words”, which could be translated idiomatically as “listen carefully” (NIV). He was accompanied by the other eleven apostles, who were standing with him. This was similar to what we see on the news when a police chief or other city official has to make a critical announcement and is accompanied by senior staff standing beside and behind him. The presence of these other eyewitnesses to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus would have served to reinforce the importance of what Peter was about to say, ending with his call to the audience to repent of their rejection of the Messiah (Acts 2.36-38).

Peter began his sermon with a quotation from the prophecy of Joel (Joel 2.28-32). We might wonder about the relevance of this passage to Pentecost. Joel gave this prophecy after a locust plague had devastated the land (Joel 1.1-3) and the people were suffering from a subsequent famine (Joel 1.1-12, 16-20). However, Joel uses physical disasters as symbols for a deeper spiritual plague and famine and calls the nation to repentance (Joel 1.13-15; Joel 2.12-14). He goes on to declare a promise that the LORD would have pity on his people (Joel 2.18-27). Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, the words that follow in Joel’s prophecy are the ones which Peter selects as the OT text for his sermon. Peter extracts the prophecy from its original context, during the Jewish monarchy period, and extrapolates it to the events of Pentecost. He replaces the words “And it shall come to pass afterward” (Joel 2.28) with “in the last days” (Acts 2.17), applying the passage to the Messianic age and giving it an eschatological significance. The coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost indicates that God’s purposes for mankind are being consummated, since redemption has now been accomplished through the death and resurrection of the Anointed One—the Messiah (Christ).

Peter states that the events of Pentecost are what Joel was speaking about. However, he only quotes Joel’s prophecy and does not provide an exposition of it or an explanation of how it applied to the situation at hand. Joel’s prophecy mentions that when the Spirit is poured out people will see visions and have dreams and prophesy. There is no evidence that any of this occurred specifically on Pentecost, other than Peter’s own speech. However, throughout Acts we see examples of Joel’s prophecy being fulfilled. Prophets and prophesying are mentioned (Acts 11.27; Acts 13.1; Acts 15.32; Acts 19.6; Acts 21.10), including prophetesses (Acts 21.9). Visions, which were given to Jews and Gentiles—‘all flesh’—are also mentioned (Acts 9.10, 12; Acts 10.3; Acts 10.10-17; Acts 11.5; Acts 16.9-10; Acts 18.9). Some of these visions occurred at night, which would have been considered dreams (Acts 16.9; Acts 18.9). However, we don’t need to confine our consideration to the record in Acts. John saw many visions, and reported numerous prophecies, which he documented in Revelation. And the apostles or their helpers (e.g., Mark and Luke) and the half-brothers of Jesus (James and Jude) who wrote the rest of the NT received direct revelation from the Holy Spirit and delivered prophecies (e.g., 1 Thess 4.15-17; 2 Pt 3.10-13).

There had been a prophetic drought for over 400 years from the Persian period until the arrival of the Messiah. With the advent of Jesus, a new covenant age was inaugurated (Lk 22.20), and the Holy Spirit poured out his word upon the nascent NT Church. Once the apostles had passed into glory and the NT canon was complete, prophecy (new revelation and foretelling) ended. However, we do not live in an age of drought like that of the intertestamental period. We have the completed word of God and know how the story of redemption will end—with the return of Jesus to usher in the everlasting manifestation of his kingdom in a new heaven and earth. We also have the equivalent of prophets (pastors and teachers) who declare God’s Gospel truth in the Church and to the lost world of mankind—Jews and Gentiles. And, even more, the prophecy of Jeremiah has been fulfilled. He said, “And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD.” (Jer 31.34). All believers have been endowed by the Holy Spirit with spiritual knowledge and wisdom which exceeds that which the OT saints had (1 Cor 1.4-7; 2 Cor 8.7; Col 1.9; Eph 1.17; Col 3.10; 2 Pt 1.3; 1 Jn 2.20). Fundamental questions we must ask are: What do we do with the gift of knowledge we have? Do we have the faith like the OT saints identified in Hebrews 11.1-40, who had far less understanding of God’s plans than we do? And do we ask for godly wisdom and knowledge (James 1.5)?

Fulfillment of biblical prophecy sets the Bible apart from all other religious texts. God challenges idols (Is 41.23, 26) to predict the future. Also, God says that if a prophet speaks about the future and what he says does not come true, he is a false prophet (Dt 22.18). In contrast, the Bible makes accurate predictions of the future. Abram predicted that the Hebrews would be slaves in Egypt (Gen 15.13; Ex 12.40-41). Joseph predicted seven years of plenty and famine in Egypt. Isaiah named Cyrus about 150 years before he arrived (Is 44.28; Is 45.21). Daniel knew that the captivity would end soon (Jer 25.11-12; Dan 9.2). He also predicted the arrival of the Messiah in 490 years (Dan 9.24). And dozens of explicit OT prophecies about Jesus have been fulfilled. When God makes a prophecy, he fulfills it. We had better pay attention to what he says is yet to come.

23. The Last Days

(Acts 2.17)

What year is it? Everywhere in the world, people using computers, cell phones, and the internet know that their device displays a year in the 21st century. Christians know that the 21st century is measured from the approximate year of Jesus' birth. It is approximate since Jesus was probably born in 4 BC, so a year like 2025 would actually be 2029 if determined relative to the birth year of Jesus. A reference to a year after the birth of Jesus has traditionally been identified with an 'AD' (from the Latin *anno Domini*, which means 'year of the Lord'). A year prior to Jesus' birth has been identified with a 'BC', meaning 'Before Christ'. Historical revisionists, advocates of 'political correctness', and individuals who are anti-Christian wish to replace the labels 'AD' and 'BC' with the labels 'CE' (Common Era) and 'BCE' (Before the Common Era). However, changing the labels cannot change the reality that calendars the world-over reflect the fact that the dividing point of history is based on the incarnation of Jesus.

The Bible divides history on the life of Jesus. For example, Paul refers to the "former days" (Rom 15.4) when speaking about the OT era. In his speech in Jerusalem on Pentecost, Peter quotes from the prophecy of Joel (Joel 2.28-32; Acts 2.17-20). He replaces the words "And it shall come to pass afterward" (Joel 2.28) with "in the last days" (Acts 2.17), applying the passage to the Messianic age and giving it an eschatological significance. The term 'last days' is also used by Paul (2 Tim 3.1; Heb 1.2), James (James 5.3), and Peter (2 Pt 3.3). Peter uses a synonymous term, 'last time(s)' (1 Pt 1.5, 20), as does Jude (Jude 18). Paul also refers to this era as 'end of the ages' (1 Cor 10.11). These NT writers contrast the former era, before the arrival of the Messiah (Christ), with the era after his birth, death, resurrection, and ascension.

How we understand the term 'last days' affects how we interpret the biblical passages which speak about eschatological events—the doctrine of the last things. The term 'last days' (and synonymous terms) applies to the NT age—the period from Christ's resurrection and ascension until the final harvest of mankind on the day of judgement. We live in the last days now. The last days do not have a start date in our future. Thus:

- When Peter (2 Pt 3.3) and Jude (Jude 18) say that scoffers will come in the last days, following their sinful desires and ungodly passions, they are not speaking of events in our future. These scoffers were already presenting their heretical teachings during the lives of the apostles, and Paul and the other writers of the NT had to warn against them, as did Jesus when he addressed the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3. Scoffers, such as the Gnostics, Marcion, and Arius arose in the subsequent centuries and continued to appear subsequently into the modern era (e.g., Darwin, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Sagan, and Dawkins). The appearance of sceptics in our own day is not to be misinterpreted as a sign that Jesus will return imminently (even though he could and might return at any moment; when we least expect it; Mt 24.35). Nor are we to interpret the excessive ungodliness we see around us as a sign of Christ's immediate return. Paul described the evil culture of his day, which was full of the same kind of wickedness which we see, as being already present (Rom 1.21-32).
- When Paul referred to times of difficulties which will arise in the last days (2 Tim 3.1), he was not

speaking of a great persecution in a future far distant from him. He was speaking of issues with which congregations in his day would be confronted. These difficulties would occur because evil people would arise who have an appearance of godliness but are full of every kind of evil (2 Tim 3.2-9). He warned Timothy about these challenges because he knew from experience (e.g., in Corinth and among the congregations in Galatia) what can happen in churches. Since churches founded by the apostle Paul could experience such difficulties, we need to be on guard to avoid such from arising in our congregations.

- Revelation, in chapters 5 through 17, does not provide visions of events which will occur in a chronologically sequential manner in our future. Rather, each of the series of seven disasters mentioned in Revelation—seals, trumpets, plagues, and bowls—covers the same period of history, which terminates with the return of Jesus Christ. Thus, Revelation covers three times, from multiple perspectives, the ‘last days’—from Christ’s death and resurrection until the end of time. The cosmic terminology used in passages such as Revelation 6.12-14 must be interpreted as figurative symbols of God’s judgement on idolaters, in the same way that Joel’s prophecy is to be understood figuratively. The natural phenomena described in Revelation do not apply to a single event (called by some, ‘the great tribulation’) that will occur in our future before the end of the age but to the ongoing judgement God metes out on the wicked even today.
- Peter speaks of God’s power related to salvation to be revealed in the last time (1 Pt 1.5, 20). This is the same as the ‘mystery’ which Paul speaks of as having been hidden (Rom 11.25; 1 Cor 2.7; Eph 1.9; Eph 3.1-12; Eph 6.19; Col 1.26-27; Col 2.2; Col 4.3; 1 Tim 3.9, 16). When Paul speaks of the mystery of God, it is in reference to what God has done in saving mankind through the God-man Jesus Christ and uniting Jews and Gentiles in salvation. He uses ‘mystery’ as a synonym for ‘gospel’. This is what God has revealed in Christ, through the writers of the NT, in the ‘last time’. We live in the ‘last days’, in which God “has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.” (Heb 1.2). Praise God that we live in the last days, the Gospel age, and that he has made us recipients of the blessing of Christ through the Gospel.

24. Eschatological Timeline

(Acts 2.17)

Peter applied Joel’s prophecy to the events which occurred on Pentecost. As we have noted, we live in the ‘last days’. However, the concept of the ‘last days’ is misunderstood by many today. This misunderstanding is exacerbated by the moral, economic, and political chaos in nations everywhere, which has stirred an ‘end-times’ fervour. There are ‘prophets’ who claim that they can read the ‘signs’ and that a rapture or a visible return of Jesus is but days or months away. A similar idea arose among some believers in the early churches who thought that with the arrival of the Messiah, his everlasting eschatological Kingdom of Heaven would appear. But 2,000 years have passed since Pentecost and ‘signs’ are still being observed. Therefore, it may be helpful to provide a summary of key eschatological events mentioned in the Bible to guide our thinking:

- Satan was bound when Christ paid the penalty for sin and rose from the dead, so that he could no longer deceive the nations and so that the Gospel could go out freely to the whole world (Mt 28.19; Acts 1.8; Rev 20.1-3).
- The period of 1,000 years referred to in Revelation 20.2-7 is a symbol for the complete period of the *last days* (Acts 2.17; Heb 1.2; 1 Jn 2.18)—the period between Christ’s first coming and his second coming. This is not a present period of a literal 1,000 years, nor is it a period of a literal 1,000 years yet to come, when Christ will rule in a special way—either before his physical return or after his physical return.
- Christ reigns now as King of kings (Acts 2.29-36; Acts 4.25-28; Rev 17.14; Rev 19.16; Is 9.6-7). His mediatorial reign formally commenced at his ascension to the right hand of the Father (Phil 2.9-11).
- The Church will grow and increase in number and fill the whole earth, by being present in every nation, throughout the period of the *last days*. From a small seed like that of a mustard plant, the Church will grow

into a great tree (Mt 13.31-32). From a small lump of yeast, the Church will grow to fill the entire dough of the earth (Mt 13.33). People out of all nations will come to Christ (Mt 28.19; Rev 7.9). In absolute numbers and in relative numbers, the Church will grow into a vast multitude that no one can count (Rev 7.9), throughout this period of the last days.

- Although the general trend for the Church will be one of growth, there will be periods of great decline in society and in the Church (1 Tim 4.1; 2 Tim 3.1-5; 2 Pt 3.3-4; 1 Jn 2.18; 1 Jn 4.3; Jude 18).
- There will be a final time of falling away before Christ returns (Lk 18.8; 2 Thess 2.3, 6-8). But we will not be able to determine if any specific period of falling away is the final one before the return of Christ, since this will be one of many; and we are constantly to pray and hope for revival in society and reformation in the Church.
- Christ will return to this earth (1 Thess 4.15-16) in the same way as he was taken from the earth (Acts 1.11).
- Christ's return could happen at any time. Every generation should expect his return (Rom 13.11-12; Heb 10.37; 2 Pt 3.8-10), since it will come suddenly, without warning, and will be universally unexpected—there will be no special signs or evidence to indicate when he will return (Mt 24.36-44; Mt 25.1-13; 1 Thess 5.1-3; 2 Pt 3.10).
- At Christ's return, every person alive on the earth will see him (Rev 1.7).
- The Church will be complete (all the elect saved) at his return (1 Cor 15.23; 1 Thess 3.13; 2 Thess 1.10) and the time of probation for mankind will have closed and Christ's intercessory work through the Holy Spirit will cease (Jn 14.16-17, 26; Jn 15.26; Jn 16.7; Titus 3.5-6; Rev 5.6).
- The NT sealing ordinances of baptism (Mt 28.19-20) and the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11.26) will no longer be observed after Christ's return, because they are anticipatory and not consummating ordinances.
- When Christ returns, all the dead will be raised from their graves (Dan 12.2; Jn 5.28-29; Acts 24.15; 1 Cor 15.20-23; 1 Thess 4.15-17). Believers will be given new bodies fit for heaven (1 Cor 15.43-44; Phil 3.20-21). The new bodies of the unrepentant wicked will be suited for their everlasting punishment in the lake of fire (Lk 16.24; Rev 20.15).
- Judgement will follow the resurrection of mankind (Mt 13.49, 50; Mt 16.27; Mt 25.14-46; Lk 19.15-27; Jn 5.28, 29; 1 Cor 4.5; 2 Thess 1.6-10; Jude 14-15; Rev 20.11-15). This judgement will be administered by Jesus (Mt 25.31; Jn 5.22, 27; Jn 9.39; Acts 10.42; Acts 17.31; 2 Cor 5.10; 2 Tim 4.1; Rev 21.5) and mankind will be judged according to the works they performed during their lives (Mt 10.32-33; Mt 16.27; Mt 25.31-46; Lk 19.11-27; Rev 20.12-13).
- Everlasting rewards and punishment will be dispensed by Jesus (Mt 25.31-46). For the righteous, there will be everlasting joy and honour (Mt 13.43; 2 Tim 4.8; 1 Pt 1.4). For the unrepentant wicked, there will be everlasting and unescapable torment and woe (Mt 13.41-42, 49-50; Mt 25.30, 46; Rev 21.8).
- At the time of the general judgement the heavens and the earth will be consumed with fire (2 Pt 3.7, 10-12; Rev 20.11; Rev 21.1), all creation will be replaced (Rom 8.19-22), the new heavens and new earth will be established (Is 65.17-25; 2 Pt 3.13; Rev 21.1), and heaven will be extended to the earth (Rev 21.2-4), in which there will be no more sin (Rev 21.4; Rev 22.15).
- The saints will be forever relieved of their earthly efforts for advancing the Kingdom of Jesus (Lk 19.13) and persecutions (Mk 10.30; 2 Cor 4.17) and will experience an everlasting sabbath (Heb 4.9-10).
- The saints will participate with Christ in his victory over Satan, sin, and death; and march and celebrate with him in his triumph parade (Rev 19.11-16).
- Then the saints will sit down with Jesus at the perpetual marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev 19.9).

25. Use of Cosmic Terminology

(Acts 2.19-20)

The section of Joel's prophecy from which Peter quotes, includes the following statement, "And I will show wonders in the heavens and on the earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood" (Joel 2.30-31). Peter adds the word 'signs'. The word 'signs' indicates that an event or action has a special meaning (e.g., Mt 24.3) and may be associated with miracles

(‘wonders’) such as those which occurred on Pentecost with a sound like a rushing wind, tongues of fire, and the apostles speaking in previously unlearned foreign languages (Acts 2.2-4). The specific event to which Peter applies Joel’s prophecy includes the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (Acts 2.16). But it can likely also be applied to a more encompassing event—the arrival of the “day of the LORD/Lord” (Joel 2.31; Acts 2.20). The ‘day of the Lord’ could refer to God’s working victory for his people and punishing his enemies (Is 13.6, 9; Jer 46.10; Ezk 30.3), chastisement of God’s people to call them to repentance (Joel 1.15; Joel 2.1, 11; Amos 5.18, 20), the final judgement of mankind (Joel 3.14; Ob 15; Zeph 1.7, 14; Mal 4.5; 1 Cor 5.5; 1 Thess 5.2; 2 Thess 2.2), or the renovation of the cosmos (2 Pt 3.10-13). As it is used in the immediate context, it appears to refer to a call to repentance to avoid personal punishment (Acts 2.21, 38).

However, the events of Pentecost were a portent of an earth-shaking change from the Mosaic covenantal economy, which was exclusive to Jews, to the new covenant which incorporates the Gentiles. Peter replaces the words “And it shall come to pass afterward” (Joel 2.28) with “in the last days” (Acts 2.17), applying the passage to the Messianic age and giving it an eschatological significance. With the incarnation and arrival of the Messiah, the last days had arrived. Peter also adds two prepositions to his quotation from Joel, ‘above’ and ‘below’. This may indicate that Peter understood the signs’ phenomena to be world-encompassing. Thus, the cosmic signs which Joel and Peter speak of, likely direct our attention beyond the events of Pentecost to some other future event. Later, when Peter wrote his second epistle, he may have had in mind the quotation which he had used from Joel on Pentecost. He applies the ‘day of the Lord’ to the last day of this current realm. (2 Pt 3.10). So, if not on Pentecost certainly later, he understood Joel’s prophecy to be speaking *ultimately* of the events which will occur when Jesus returns to this earth, on the final day of this spatial-temporal realm.

It appears apparent that Joel uses figurative language because Peter asserts that these events were fulfilled (Acts 2.16). However, none of the specific physical phenomena mentioned as signs occurred on Pentecost. The signs in Joel’s prophecy use a form of prophetic (apocalyptic) language which speaks of cosmic objects and events (Is 13.9-10, 13; Is 24.23; Jer 4.23, 28; Ezk 32.7-8; Joel 2.10, 31; Joel 3.15; Amos 8.9; Hab 3.11; Rev 8.10, 12; Rev 9.1; Rev 12.4). In *general*, when we encounter this kind of language, we should understand it as figurative, and not prophecies of events which will occur in the physical cosmos.

We can also consider two other examples of the use of cosmic terminology.

- In Revelation 6.12-14, as the sixth seal is opened, John reports a vision of a great earthquake, the sun being darkened black, the moon becoming blood, stars falling from the sky, the sky vanishing, and mountains and islands being removed. There are many suggested ways for how to interpret this vision. However, the two primary, reasonable, interpretations are: 1) Events which will occur before the end of this age and world, followed directly by the final judgement of all mankind. 2) The Jewish war with Rome and the destruction of Jerusalem by Titus. The latter is probably the correct *primary* focus of this vision. The immediate audience was the seven churches in Asia Minor. The vision was given to them for their encouragement when facing persecution.
- In Revelation 9.1 John says that he saw a star fall from heaven to the earth. Even commentators who claim that we are to interpret aspects of the other trumpet blasts with physical exactness concede that an actual star did not fall from its place in the galaxy and land on the earth. We know that even the smallest stars are many orders of magnitude larger than the earth, and that if a real star collided with the earth, the earth would be vaporized. In fact, John tells us that the ‘star’ is a person (‘he’, in Rev 9.1, 11).

If these interpretations are correct, then we can understand the various ‘natural’ phenomena that John observes to be figurative symbols of God’s judgement on idolaters. In the same way, Joel’s prophecy can be understood figuratively.

The word ‘generally’ was used above because there is at least one prophecy of cosmic events which we can

be certain will happen in this physical cosmos. That is Peter's, which speaks about the pending destruction of this universe and its replacement with a new heaven and earth when Jesus returns (2 Pt 3.10-13).

In OT prophecy there appears to be no obvious way to distinguish between two key future events: the first coming of the second person of the Trinity at the incarnation of Jesus and his second coming at his Parousia. Jews expected only one coming of the Messiah who would deliver them from the hegemony of the nations and establish an everlasting kingdom. The way the disciples ask a question of Jesus, "Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" (Mt 24.3), demonstrates that they conflated the two events. Peter's application of Joel's prophecy does not indicate when the signs would be fulfilled in their entirety, which might surprise us since the angels had told the disciples that Jesus was to return on the clouds (Acts 1.11).

26. Salvation (Acts 2.21)

Peter concludes his quotation from Joel 2.30-32, with the words "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." This leads us to ask, from what are we to be saved? What is salvation? And, how can we be saved? Before we address these questions, we need to consider the person to whom the call for salvation is to be directed.

The Hebrew text of Joel's prophecy refers to calling on the name of the LORD (*Yahweh*), the personal name of God. In the NT translation of Joel's prophecy, the Greek uses *kurios*, which is rendered in English as 'Lord'. There can be no doubt that Peter understood the reference to the LORD in Joel to apply to Jesus (Acts 2.36). In the remainder of his sermon, he demonstrates that Jesus is not only the Messiah, but the LORD. Jesus is God—the incarnation of God as the God-man. Both the OT and NT text use the term 'name of'. Calling on the name of someone is to call on that person. To call 'upon the name of the Lord' is more than just referring to God's name, it is making an appeal to Jesus as a person.

There are numerous references in the Gospels to 'salvation'. If we focus only on Luke's usage in his Gospel and in Acts, we find different dimensions of how the concept is used. Mary calls God her "saviour" (Lk 1.47). She rejoiced in both the spiritual and physical provisions from God. However, she does not provide an explicit definition of what she means by the term 'saviour'. Zechariah speaks of God raising "a horn of salvation" (Lk 1.68). He applies it first to being rescued from the hands of enemies (Lk 1.69). Then he explicitly applies it to forgiveness of sins (Lk 1.77) and to spiritual enlightenment (Lk 1.79). John the Baptist associates "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" with salvation (Lk 3.3, 6). This salvation, from enemies and from sin, is associated with the coming of the Messiah, the Son of David (Lk 1.69), and specifically with Jesus (Lk 2.11, 30), a light for God's revelation to Jew and Gentile (Lk 2.32; Lk 3.6). As Jesus' ministry unfolds, the themes of salvation as belief (Luke 8.11-15) and for the forgiveness of sins (Lk 7.49-50; Lk 19.9) are developed. In Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus, salvation is associated with reception of Jesus as the Messiah who came to save the lost and with genuine repentance of sins (Lk 19.1-10).

Peter warns his hearers to be saved from their crooked generation. Those who repented and believed his words were forgiven and saved (Acts 2.37, 40, 47). Later, he states that salvation can only be obtained through the name of Jesus (Acts 4.12). He also associates salvation with belief in Jesus as saviour, forgiveness of sins, and obedience to the word of God (Acts 5.31-32). Likewise, Paul told the Philippian jailer that he could be saved by belief in the Lord Jesus (Acts 16.30-31).

From this brief survey of 'salvation' in Luke's writings, we see that salvation is more than physical rescue (e.g., Acts 27.20, 31). It is a rescue from spiritual darkness, slavery to sin, and everlasting damnation. It is accomplished by calling on the name of Jesus. But just saying the word 'Jesus' or 'Lord' as a superstitious exclamation or repetitious mantra (Mt 7.22) is not sufficient unto salvation. To be saved, it is necessary for

a person to:

- Acknowledge his need of salvation (Ezk 18.4, 20; Rom 3.23; 2 Cor 5.10).
- Repent of personal sins and be born again (Prov 28.13; Jn 3.7-8; Acts 3.19; 1 Jn 1.9).
- Believe in Jesus Christ (the promised Messiah) as God who became a man and died on the cross as a substitute for sinners and rose from the dead on the third day (Jn 1.1-5; Jn 3.16; Acts 16.31; 1 Cor 15.3-4; Heb 11.6).
- Be baptized (Acts 2.38).
- Strive to obey God's law and continue to repent of sin (Mt 19.17; Jn 14.15, 21; Jn 15.10; 1 Jn 2.1-3; 1 Jn 5.3).
- Reject other supposed means of finding God or being reconciled to him. Peter declares that salvation is found only through belief in Jesus as saviour (Acts 4.12). Salvation cannot be obtained through doing good works or following religious rituals. As Paul declares, salvation comes only through faith, which is a gift from God (Eph 2.8).

The quotation from Joel that Peter uses, states that “*everyone* who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved”. At the end of his sermon, Peter also says that the promise is for “all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself” (Acts 2.39; see also, Acts 10.34; Acts 15.7-11). The OT prophesied about the Gospel message being opened widely to the Gentile nations (Gen 12.3; Gen 18.18; Gen 22.18; Ps 22.27-28; Is 49.6). Luke is the only Gospel writer who mentions the presentation of the infant Jesus at the temple in Jerusalem. He tells of Simeon, a devout believer, who declared that his eyes had seen the promised Messiah. Luke then quotes Simeon's statement that Jesus would be a light for the Gentiles and for glory to Israel (Lk 2.25-32). The universal scope of Jesus' work was declared by Jesus himself (Jn 3.16; Lk 24.46-47). The presentation of the Gospel was to begin among the Jews (Mt 10.6; Mt 15.24) so that they might have an opportunity to repent (Acts 3.13-15, 17-20; Acts 5.30-31). But it was not to end with preaching to the Jews (Mt 28.19-20; Acts 1.8). The remainder of Acts illustrates the fulfillment of the promise as the Gospel is carried by the apostles from Jerusalem into Turkey and into Eastern Europe. Luke ends the book with, “let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen.” (Acts 28.28). Praise God that we have been made the recipients of this promise, and that the Gospel is going “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1.8)!

27. Preaching Christ Crucified

(Acts 2.22-23)

Paul states that he purposed to know and proclaim nothing except Jesus Christ who was crucified (1 Cor 2.2). Peter understood that his mission was to proclaim the same message. Thus, the core of this first sermon preached by an apostle to an unbelieving audience, after Jesus had returned to heaven, is about Jesus the crucified and risen one. This became the central message of apostolic preaching in Acts. It should also be the central message in the pulpit today. One way to focus on this message is through the frequent observation of the Lord's Supper, with related teaching, as we remember his death until he comes (1 Cor 11.26).

Peter opens this section of his sermon with the observation that Jesus is a man. There cannot be any salvation for mankind without the incarnation. Mankind sinned in Adam and mankind must pay the debt of sin—“The soul who sins shall die.” (Ezk 18.20). If a substitute is to stand in a man's place and take his punishment for sin, then it must be another man—not an animal (Heb 10.4) or an angel. Peter says that this man was Jesus, a name which means ‘saviour’ (Mt 1.21). Most translations (the NASB is an exception) also have Peter referring to him as being ‘of Nazareth’ (i.e., from Nazareth). This was certainly true, since Nazareth was his hometown (Mt 2.23; Lk 4.16). However, the Greek text does not have ‘of Nazareth’ or ‘from Nazareth’ (Acts 10.38), but rather ‘*the Nazarene*’ (Acts 6.14; Acts 22.8; Acts 26.9). It may be that a *double-entendre* is intended. Jesus was from the despised backwater town in Galilee (Is 9.1). Nevertheless,

he was the ‘Branch’ (Heb: *nezer*), a Messianic title (Is 4.2; Jer 23.5; Zech 3.8; Zech 6.12), who would be descended from Jesse/David (Is 11.1; Jer 33.15-16).

Not only was it necessary that the Messiah be a man, but he also needed to be God (Is 9.6). No mere man could stand in the place of another man, because all men have sinned and deserve to die (Rom 3.23). So, Peter reminds his audience that many of them had seen mighty works, wonders, and signs performed in their midst by Jesus over the preceding three-plus years. Along with Nicodemus, a Pharisee, the Jerusalem audience knew that no one could perform such miracles unless God was with him (Jn 3:2). Peter says that these miracles attested to Jesus as being from God. It might be better to translate Peter’s word as ‘accredited’ since he (or Luke) uses a Greek term that was generally applied to office holders. The sign miracles which Jesus performed accredited him not only as from God, but as God—Jesus is the God-man. Although, at this point in his sermon, Peter does not declare or allude to the deity of Jesus. However, the sign miracles are given as the first of three forms of evidence that Peter presents in this sermon about God’s sovereignty in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Peter proceeds to declare that Jesus was crucified. This was a major stumbling block for Jews (1 Cor 1.22) because they had difficulty with the concept of the Messiah being consigned to a cursed death on a tree (Dt 21.23; Gal 3.13; Acts 10.39). Peter states further that this was not a mere happenstance but was done in accordance with the “definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Gal 1.4; 1 Pt 1.2). This is the second of the three forms of evidence Peter presents about God’s sovereignty in this sermon. It was necessary for the Messiah to undergo capital punishment if he was to stand in the place of mankind, because mankind had committed a capital crime in rebelling against his maker (Gen 2.17). Jesus came into the world to die as a substitute (a ransom) for his people (Mk 10.45; Lk 22.22; Jn 3.16; 1 Cor 15.3). Paul states that God’s plan for the crucifixion of Christ was no foolish endeavour (1 Cor 1.22) but an act of God’s love (Rom 5.8; 1 Jn 4.10).

The crucifixion was no accident. And it was not under the control of either the Jewish or Roman officials. Nevertheless, in God’s providence, Jesus was killed by the Jewish religious leaders and complicit crowd (“you”) and “by the hands of lawless men” (the Romans)—implicating all mankind in the death of Jesus. Without realizing it, these men carried out God’s predetermined will (Acts 13.27). This relates to the apparent paradox of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, which we will address later in this series of meditations.

Paul says that the crucifixion was “decreed before the ages” and that if the rulers of this age had understood the decree, “they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2.7-8). Paul is not saying that if the leaders had understood that Jesus is the Messiah, they would not have treated him so cruelly and unjustly but instead would have honoured him. This contradicts God’s explicit plan and decree. The logic also fails, because by extension if every person were to have believed that Jesus is the Messiah no one would have crucified him. Ironically, if everyone believed the message about the saviour and salvation, no one would be saved since no one would have crucified the saviour. Rather, if the wicked men had understood God’s plan, they would *not* have crucified the saviour because by so doing they advanced his plan to provide vicarious atonement. If they had understood God’s plan, they would have rebelled by attempting not to do what God wanted to be done. Because they were ignorant of God’s plan, they fulfilled it. In so doing, they thought they served their own ends but advanced God’s purposes and plan and destroyed themselves. Wicked men follow in the footsteps of wicked Satan. Satan and his earthly minions, the rulers of this age, continually misunderstand God’s purposes and plans as they attempt to thwart him. Paul’s statement reinforces the necessity of the crucifixion which Peter preached. The crucifixion was precisely what God had planned, and it was brought about by foolish rebels against him who thought that they could thwart his eternal plans by killing off Jesus (Acts 2.23). But God overruled to ensure that his Son would die on the cross so that you and I could be saved!

28. Preaching Christ's Resurrection (Acts 2.24)

We noted previously that Peter identified two acts of God's sovereignty:

- The sign miracles which demonstrated that Jesus is the Messiah (Acts 2.22).
- Delivering Jesus' to be crucified according to his plan and foreknowledge (Acts 2.23).

As he continues his sermon, Peter gives a third evidence of God's sovereignty—raising Jesus from death.

A believing Jew should not have viewed the concept of raising the dead with scepticism. In their Scriptures there are examples of restoration of life: Elijah's restoring a widow's son (1 Ki 17.17-24) and Elisha's restoring a Shunammite's son to life (2 Ki 4.18-37); and when a dead body was thrown into Elisha's cave-tomb, and the person came back to life (2 Ki 13.20-21). There are also three recorded instances of Jesus restoring life to the dead—the widow of Nain's son (Lk 7.11-17), Jairus' daughter (Lk 8.49-56), and Lazarus (Jn 11.1-44). These restorations of life were not done in secret. Luke tells us that one report went out widely (Lk 7.17). The restoration of Lazarus' life took place in Bethany, an easy walk from Jerusalem. Some of the witnesses reported the miracle in Bethany to the Pharisees. They, along with the chief priests, acknowledged that the miracle had been performed and still they initiated their plot to put Jesus to death.

The fact of Jesus' own resurrection could not be denied by Peter's audience—there had been too many eyewitnesses who had seen the resurrected Jesus among them (Mt 28.9-10; Jn 20.14-18; Lk 24.13-34; 1 Cor 15.5-8). So, Peter didn't provide evidence about the resurrection of Jesus—he just stated it as a well-known fact. It was different for Peter and his Jewish audience who knew of the resurrection than for Paul and his Gentile audience in Athens. There they neither knew the history of OT restorations of lives, nor had seen lives restored, nor had trusted friends or relatives who had. Thus, some of Paul's Gentile audience were sceptical about the idea of a resurrection and mocked him (Acts 17.32).

Peter states that it was impossible for death to hold Jesus, because:

- The OT Scriptures, which cannot be broken (Jn 10.35), prophesied that the Messiah would be resurrected (Is 53.10; Peter and Paul quote Ps 16.10 in Acts 2.27 and Acts 13.35; 1 Cor 15.4).
- The resurrection vindicated Jesus' claim that he is God (Rom 1.4).
- Jesus is God. His human nature was united with his divine nature in one person. The God-man could die only through the voluntary (Jn 10.17-18) act of his giving up his spirit from his body (Jn 19.30). But the God-man could not remain under the power of death.
- God's character will not allow a truly perfect person who trusts in him to be everlastingly forsaken, and certainly not in death.
- The body of God's Holy One, the sinless Jesus, could not experience decay and corruption (Ps 16.10).
- God demonstrated through the resurrection his providential governance over all things, including over life and death.
- God also demonstrated through the resurrection that he is the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor 15.45).
- The debt of sin has been paid through a single sacrifice for all time (Heb 10.12). The sacrifice must not be perpetual, or that would show that it was an abject failure, like the sacrifices of the millions of animals (Heb 7.27).
- The resurrection is confirmation that the Father has accepted the perfect life and work of Jesus and his substitutionary atonement (Heb 1.3).
- It was necessary that the last enemy, death, be conquered through the resurrection (1 Cor 15.54-55). Peter alludes to this when he says, "loosing the pangs of death" (2 Sam 22.6; Ps 18.4; Ps 116.3). Death is regarded as being in the pangs of labour and unable to hold its birthing child. Death gave up, 'birthed', the risen Christ because it could not hold him.
- God the Father provides an ultimate accreditation and vindication of the Messiah's servanthood through the Son's resurrection.

- Death could not hold Jesus. He had to be raised in order to assume his rightful place in heaven (Phil 2.9).
- The Son of David could not be prevented by death from exercising his everlasting kingly rule (Ps 110.1-7; Dan 7.14, 27; Lk 1.33; Rev 11.15).
- If Jesus was not raised, then there is no resurrection for believers, and mankind is without any hope and a believer's faith is futile (1 Cor 15.12-19).
- The resurrection of Jesus is the assurance of believers' pending resurrection into an everlasting glory (1 Cor 15.20-21).

Peter states that, "God raised him up". When we find 'God' used to refer to one person in the immediate context of Jesus as a separate person, we understand that the writer is usually referring to God the Father in the first instance. Without question, the Father raised Jesus from the dead by his glory (Rom 6.4; Gal 1.1; 1 Pt 1.3). The Holy Spirit, the giver of life, is also credited with the resurrection of Jesus (Rom 8.11; 1 Pt 3.18). And Jesus as God, raised himself from the grave (Jn 2.19-22; Jn 10.17-18). There are many references to God being instrumental in the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2.32; Acts 3.15, 26; Acts 4.10; Acts 5.30; Acts 10.40; Acts 13.30, 34, 37; 1 Thess 1.10; Heb 13.20). They may be understood as speaking of God the Father, but they may also be a collective reference to the Godhead. The entire Trinity was directly involved in opening the tomb and replacing Jesus' mortal body with his glorious immortal body. God handed over Jesus for crucifixion, but he did not leave him in death, he raised him up!

29. Sign Miracles, Not Special Effects (Acts 2.22)

Why did the second person of the Trinity become a man at the time in history when he did (i.e., from 4 BC to 33 AD)? Why was Jesus born when he was? Providential reasons for the timing of his coming into history include:

- An arrival that coincided with the beginning (from the accession of Augustus in 27 BC; Lk 2.1) of a roughly two-hundred-year period of relative peace in the Roman Empire. This peace (the *Pax Romana*) facilitated easier travel and quick communication for the early dissemination of the Gospel (as Luke recorded in Acts).
- The wide use of the Greek language, which was the *lingua franca* of the day used for commercial and legal transactions. All of the NT was written, or made available, in Greek within the first century.
- The confluence of two lines of descent from David, through Solomon (Mt 1.6, 16) and Nathan (Lk 3.23, 31). The Jewish practice of genealogical record keeping was still in place at that time and would have permitted a sceptic to determine that Jesus was a true descendant of David (2 Sam 7.12-16; Is 1.11; Jer 23.5)—through his bloodline through Mary (Lk 2.3-5) and via adoption by Joseph. Since Christ's day, genealogical records have not been kept in this way among the Jews. No Jew living today could prove that he is descended from either Jacob or David.
- Jesus was born at a time when the Jewish people were in bondage to foreign kings (the Herods and Romans) and not a free people. The Jews had an expectation that the Messiah would come at a time when they were in political bondage and free them from oppression (Gen 49.10; Ps 2.10-12; Ps 10.16; Is 61.1; Dan 2.44-45; Acts 1.6). Of course, the true liberty Jesus provides is not secular but spiritual release from slavery to sin.

Daniel gave explicit prophecies for when the Messiah would appear (e.g., Dan 9.24-27; Dan 11.40-45). The Messiah would arrive and inaugurate a new covenant era (Dan 9.24) 490 years after the issuance of the decree to rebuild Jerusalem (Dan 9.25). Regardless of which decree is assumed (that of Cyrus based on revised dates or that of Artaxerxes I based on traditional dates), the terminus for the prophecy's time period is without question the arrival of the Messiah. Thus, Jesus arrived because Scripture must be fulfilled (Lk 22.37; Acts 1.16). Ultimately, the incarnation took place because it was at the 'right time'—i.e., the time

established by God in his eternal plan (Mk 1.15; Rom 5.6; Gal 4.4).

However, we could still ask, why was Jesus born in 4 BC? or why was he born at that time in history? Thus, another reason can be suggested based on the Jewish demand for signs (1 Cor 1.22). Peter states in his sermon that Jesus was “attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst” (Acts 2.22).

When God sent Moses to redeem Israel from its bondage in Egypt, he gave Moses the ability to perform signs (Ex 4.1-9) which he could use to convince his enslaved people that he was sent from God. When Moses and Aaron first appeared before Pharaoh, he demanded that they prove themselves by working a miracle (Ex 7.8). But Pharaoh was not impressed because his magicians were able to simulate the miracle by their secret arts (Ex 7.11). Then, with the first plague of turning the water into blood, the magicians of Egypt feigned the ability to perform the same miracle (Ex 7.22). They did the same with the second plague of the frogs (Ex 8.7). This gave Pharaoh an excuse to deny that God was with Moses and Aaron. However, after the third plague of the gnats, the magicians admitted that this was a miracle from the finger of God (Ex 8.19). From then on, we hear nothing more about the magicians. Nevertheless, Pharaoh was still unwilling to see the work of God, and we know the rest of the account leading up to the tenth plague of the slaughter of the firstborn and the exodus.

During the first century, the miracles which Jesus performed could not have been attributed to mere human capabilities—no mere human could feed thousands from a few loaves of bread (Mt 14.17, 21), provide sight to a person who was born blind (Jn 9.32), heal lepers with a word (Lk 17.12-14), restore withered limbs (Mt 12.10-13), and restore life to a person who had been dead for three days (Jn 11.1-44). His miracles were understood to be supernatural, even if it was claimed by some that they were not from a divine source (Mt 12.24). However, the Jewish leaders didn’t deny that Jesus had performed these miracles. They also did not attempt to manufacture alternative naturalistic explanations, as they did later with Jesus’ own resurrection (Mt 28.13-15). Instead, they used the miracles as a pretext for conspiring against him (Mt 12.14; Jn 11.46-53).

Sceptical scholars today attempt to explain Jesus’ miracles as slight-of-hand or natural phenomena. However, their scepticism shows through clearly. God could have arranged events so that Jesus appeared at a different time. However, if Jesus were to have appeared in our century—assuming that all of our technological ‘advances’ were in place—his miracles would be dismissed as special effects and camera tricks. Jesus appeared when sign miracles could be legitimately interpreted as nothing other than from a divine source.

In Isaiah, God defies idolators and their idols. He Demands: “Set forth your case”, “bring your proofs” (Is 41.21). He demands that they demonstrate that their idols of wood, stone, and metal are gods. Jesus’ sign miracles demonstrate that he is truly God. His miracles could not be faked or manufactured with special effects. This is the evidence that Jesus is God (Jn 10.37-38).

30. Jesus is the Promised Messiah

(Acts 2.25-36)

Peter quotes from two of David’s Psalms which include prophecies about the Messiah. The number of Messianic Psalms is debated. The Hebrew word for ‘anointed’ (*mashiyach*), which could be applied prophetically to Jesus, occurs in at least eight Psalms (Ps 2.2; Ps 18.50; Ps 20.6; Ps 28.8; Ps 45.7; Ps 84.9; Ps 89.20, 38, 51; Ps 132.10, 17). However, there are other Psalms which do not use the title Messiah but are Messianic in whole or in part (Ps 22.1-31; Ps 24.1-10; Ps 40.1-17; Ps 72.1-20; Ps 110.1-7; Ps 118.1-29) because they speak of Jesus as king or saviour. Also, other Psalms include portions which speak prophetically of events in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection which we don’t have space to list here.

However, many more of the Psalms are Messianic because they include the spectrum of trials and emotions of the soul which Jesus experienced. Jesus stated that there were things written about himself in the Psalms which must be fulfilled (Lk 24.44). Of the Psalms from which Peter quotes, only Psalm 110.1-7 is considered clearly to be Messianic. In fact, commentators question why Peter quoted from Psalm 16.8-11 as it does not appear in a listing of Messianic Psalms.

Peter's intention in quoting from the Psalms of David is to show that Jesus was the prophesied Christ (Acts 2.36)—'Christ' ('the anointed one') comes from the Greek word for 'anointed' and is equivalent to 'Messiah' (Jn 1.41). Peter states that David was a:

- *Patriarch* (Acts 2.29). By referring to David as a patriarch, Peter indicates that he is speaking of the Israelite kingly line that was established with David. Jesus is the Messiah because he is descended from David through two of David's sons, Solomon (Mt 1.6, 16) and Nathan (Lk 3.23, 31).
- *Prophet* (Acts 2.30). By referring to David as a prophet, Peter indicates that the Psalms (at minimum, the portions which he quotes) speak prophetically about the Messiah.

The quotation from Psalm 16.8-11 (reproduced almost exactly as it appears in the Greek OT translation) speaks about a descendant of David, God's Holy One, who would not be abandoned to Hades (the grave) and would not see corruption. Peter states that this could not be applied to David. David died and was buried, and the location of his tomb was known to the inhabitants of Jerusalem at that time (Acts 2.29). So, if it didn't apply to David, then it must apply to one of his descendants who would sit on David's throne (Ps 132.11; Acts 2.30). It also could not apply to any of David's descendants through Zedekiah, as all of them had died and their bodies were left in graves to decay. Since Zedekiah's death (sometime after 586 BC), the throne of David had been unoccupied for 600 years to the time when Peter was speaking. Peter's key point is that the Messiah-king had to be a descendant of David in order to maintain the everlasting promises that had been given to David (Ps 89.3-4). Also, for a descendant of David to qualify, per Psalm 16.10, his body could not be left in the grave to experience corruption through physical decay. Jesus is the only descendant of David who qualifies as the Messiah because he is in the line of David and through his resurrection (which his audience could not legitimately deny; Acts 2.32), his body did not experience decay, and he lives forever in his resurrected body.

Peter then moves to his second key point to show that Jesus is the Messiah. For this he provides additional scriptural proof, quoting from Psalm 110.1. Through the resurrection and ascension, Jesus was exalted to the right hand of the Father as evidenced by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as the audience had just witnessed (Acts 2.33). This happened exactly as David prophesied it would, and as Jesus also prophesied it would happen as he applied it to himself (Lk 22.67-69). Again, this prophecy could not be applied to David himself or to any of his descendants before Jesus. Their bodies are all dead and in their graves. None of them had been exalted to the right hand of the LORD. The Messiahship of David's descendant depends on both his resurrection (Peter's first point) and on the ascension of the resurrected one into heaven to assume rule beside the Father (Peter's second point). Only Jesus fulfilled both requirements.

Paul says that without the resurrection of the Messiah there is no salvation and no hope for mankind (1 Cor 15.12-19). A death of a man, even of a perfect one, cannot conquer death. Death can only be conquered by a resurrection. But even a resurrection is not sufficient. A resurrected man continuing to exist on this earth could not assume the role of divine ruler. The ascension is the third essential component in the plan of redemption. Jesus is the Messiah only because of his humiliation through the incarnation, death as a vicarious substitute, resurrection to defeat his enemies (Acts 2.35) including the last enemy death (1 Cor 15.54-55), and exaltation into everlasting glory. Thus, the Church proclaims Christ Jesus, born of a virgin, the perfect one who was crucified, raised, and ascended into glory. In glory, Jesus has been exalted to the highest place (Phil 2.9-11), the right hand of the father, from which he rules the universe with absolute authority (Mt 28.19) and power, and he will rule the new heavens and earth forever.

Peter concludes this section of his sermon by declaring to the house of Israel that the Messiah (Christ) has arrived in the Jesus whom they crucified. He says that God (the Father) also made him Lord. In this instance, Peter isn't using the title 'Lord' (*kurios*) as an equivalent for Yahweh (as he did in Acts 2.21), but as 'master'. The title, Lord, is applied to Jesus over 700 times in the NT. Of these over 200 occurrences are in Luke's writings and almost 300 in Paul's writings, including Hebrews. It is Jesus Christ the Lord, the fulfillment of the OT prophecies, whom we are to rely upon for salvation and to whom all worship is due.

31. Evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2.25-36)

Peter presents two kinds of evidence for the resurrection of Jesus, prophetic revelation and eyewitness accounts. He starts with what God spoke through the prophet David about what was to happen (Acts 2.27). Then he refers to an event to which "we all are witnesses" (Acts 2.32). This is the order our apologetic process should follow. We should always begin with what God says ("it is written"; Mt 4.4) and interpret what our eyes (or laboratory instruments) tell us through the paradigm that posits God's word as ultimate truth. For example, when we assess the creation account in Genesis 1.1-31, we must start with the premise that God did exactly what he said he did—he created the entire universe in six consecutive natural days just over 6,000 years ago. Then we apply that premise to how we interpret physical phenomena such as light arriving on earth from stars which are likely many trillions of kilometers away. Similarly, when we consider the account of the virgin conception, we begin with the premise that Mary was truly a virgin and that the Holy Spirit miraculously added a second set of chromosomes to those derived from one of Mary's eggs (Lk 1.34-35). So, when we come to the resurrection of Jesus, we start with what the Bible says and use that to guide our understanding of what sceptics might say (Acts 17.32) about the impossibility of restoring the life a person who is truly dead.

We find numerous statements in the NT which declare that Jesus was raised from the dead. All four Gospels provide an account of the resurrection. Throughout the preaching in Acts, the resurrection is emphasized, and many of the epistles include accounts of the resurrection (for example, 1 Cor 15.5-8). For Peter, fifty days after the resurrection, there were not yet any NT writings from which he could say, "as it is written". So, he had to refer to the OT in order to provide evidence that the Messiah was to be raised from the dead. He does not draw his evidence from historical examples of reanimation of recently dead corpses (1 Ki 17.22-23; 2 Ki 4.32-35; 2 Ki 13.21). Rather he declares David to be a prophet and turns to the Psalms (Ps 16.8-11; Ps 110.1) to provide revelatory evidence. He chooses to use particular prophecies in the Psalms which demonstrate that Jesus is the Messiah (see the previous meditation), and that the resurrection was a necessary dimension of his Messiahship.

He opens this section of his sermon by calling his audience 'brothers'. Most of those in attendance would have been males, but the term 'brothers' certainly would have included any women present. However, he uses 'brothers', rather than the collective term 'men' (Acts 2.14, 22), as a term of endearment, even though later he will declare that they are sinners who need to repent (Acts 2.38). He wishes to be conciliatory with his audience so that they will heed what David prophesied. The use of this single word teaches us how we are to present the Gospel to the lost world. We are not to come in 'with all guns blazing' but to be prepared to address people with gentleness and respect (1 Pt 3.15-16). How we say things is almost as important as what we say.

The first prophecy of the resurrection which Peter presents from the Psalms is found in the words, "For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption." (Ps 16.10; Acts 2.27) and "You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence." (Ps 16.11; Acts 2.28). Peter applies this prophecy to show that the dead body of the Messiah (the Holy One) would not be abandoned in the grave (Ps 49.15; Ps 86.13) and would not see physical decay, and that he would

continue alive in the presence of God. Peter indicates that this prophecy could not have referred to David himself because David's tomb, containing his decayed remains (Acts 2.29), was presently in the vicinity of Jerusalem. The audience would have known where David's tomb was located, although today no one is certain where it was located. In contrast, many in the audience would have also known where Jesus' tomb had been. They could have gone there and seen that it was empty. This is why the Jewish leaders concocted a story about his body having been stolen (Mt 28.13-15).

The second prophecy Peter applies to the resurrection of Jesus, is the quotation from Psalm 110.1. The Lord/LORD (God the Father) says to the Lord (the Messianic king) that he is to sit at his right hand as the enemies of the Messiah are being subdued. Again, this could not apply to David since his mortal remains lay nearby. They could only apply to Jesus who, ten days before Peter preached this sermon, had ascended into heaven from a low hill a short distance from where they were all standing on Pentecost. Peter declares that it was Jesus, not David, who was exalted to the right hand of God (Acts 2.30). Not only was this proven by the ascension, which was witnessed by many, but also by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.

Peter also appeals to the witness of their own eyes (Acts 2.32). The 'all' could refer to the apostles exclusively. But it could have a broader application, since five hundred people at one time saw the resurrected Jesus (1 Cor 15.6).

The fact that David prophesied about the resurrection of the Messiah is evidence that the plan of redemption—to have the God-man die in the place of sinners—was in accordance with God's eternal precepts. The Jews had rejected Jesus as their Messiah and had handed him over to be crucified by the Romans. But God had planned for this from the depths of eternity (Acts 2.23). Likewise, God had planned that after the death of the Messiah, he would be raised from the dead so as to conquer the last enemy—death (1 Cor 15.26, 54-55).

32. Predestination and Human Responsibility (Acts 2.23)

Peter states that Jesus was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2.23) and states that the Jewish religious leaders and complicit crowd (“you”) and “the hands of lawless men” (the Romans) put Jesus to death (Acts 2.23). Without hesitation he declares that God predetermined the events of the crucifixion and yet the individuals who carried it out were responsible for their wickedness. This causes confusion for many people. How can God hold a person accountable for his actions if his actions have been predetermined by God from before time began? Some people then accuse God of being the author of sin and make man a victim of circumstances.

God tells us that he sovereignly predestines all events including every thought, word, and action of all men (Ps 139.4, 16; Prov 16.33; Acts 13.48; Rom 8.29-30; Rom 9.1-29). In addition, he declares clearly that men are truly and fully responsible for their actions (Jer 17.10; Ezk 18.1-32; Rom 6.23; Mt 16.27). God even states that events are both predestined and the actions of responsible agents (Gen 50.19-20; Ex 9.34-10.1; Acts 2.23; Acts 4.27-28). This appears to be a contradiction, but it is not illogical.

Many people claim that the concept of predestination destroys mankind's 'free will'. Some try to protect mankind's supposed free will by suggesting that God knows the future but does not control the future actions of men. He can see the future because he is outside of time and sees all things at once, including every free action of men. They say that foreknowledge is not the same as fore-determination—being able to predict that something will happen is not the same as making it happen. For example, they say that God has foreknowledge of those who will believe in Jesus and in response he loves them in advance. This allows man to act freely and God to see in advance the events (repentance) that are contingent on the free will of

man. The idea that God's foreknowledge is not his will ignores the reality that God states that he elects and predestines some individuals to eternal life (Acts 13.48; Rom 8.28-30; Eph 1.4-5, 11) and does not elect others. The idea that God only foresees what men will choose to do but does not decree (predestine) their actions is an impossibility. In a world of truly contingent events, no one could know with certainty what would happen in the future. So, unless God were to make events happen, he could not foresee them.

Some philosophers and theologians attempt to reconcile God's providential will and supposed human free will using a continuum of Aristotelian causation. They claim that our supposed free will can be found in second causes. Some people also claim that the biblical doctrine of predestination is a form of fatalism. Fatalism is the belief that events are inevitable because they have been predetermined by an inanimate force or impersonal power beyond our selves. However, predestination is not fatalism because all events are controlled by a personal God who acts justly and displays immeasurable love toward sinners by sending his Son to die on our behalf (Rom 5.8).

Most attempts to reconcile God's sovereignty and human 'free will' bog down in definitions based on semantics and convoluted conditions and end up either limiting God and giving man too much volitional freedom or turning man into a mere puppet. We must avoid the universal tendency to go to one extreme or the other—to view God as a superhuman being, but with limited knowledge, or to view men as mere puppets and the victims of fatalistic forces. Instead of trying to explain something that our finite minds cannot understand, it is better for us simply to accept truths that God states—he predestines all things and men are responsible for their own actions.

In addition, the idea that man has a free will is a psychological fiction. Men believe that they act entirely by their own rational self-determination. In fact, their actions are determined by their inborn natures (Jn 8.34). Man cannot behave contrary to his nature physically, morally, or volitionally. Man, as a sinner, is not free to choose to do either good or evil, because he has an evil heart that always and ever inclines him to sin (Rom 7.7-24). If we were truly free agents then we could choose not to sin—but everyone born, by natural generation, throughout all history has sinned. If we were truly free agents, we also could choose the time and circumstances of our birth and death or choose not to die (excluding suicide). Since we cannot do any of these things, it is clear that we are not actually free agents. The biggest lie that has ever been told is that men are born as free moral and volitional agents, but the Bible nowhere teaches this.

We should not be embarrassed by the doctrine of predestination. False religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism are fatalistic—for example, their belief in *karma*. Religions which are pantheistic are also fatalistic—the 'stars rule our fate'. Islam is also an essentially fatalistic religion based around an unknowable and capricious deity. Materialistic naturalists, while claiming that men have free will, are fatalistic determinists—our genes or random events at a macro or micro level determine how we will behave. Many Christians limit God (e.g., 'open' theology) so they can preserve the myth of free will (e.g., semi-Pelagianism, in which the beginning of faith is an act of free will). Biblical Christians do not have a problem with the doctrine of predestination; it is unbelievers and wishy-washy Christians who have the problem. Biblical Christianity maintains the tension between God's absolute sovereignty and human responsibility. We should be supremely confident, knowing that God is working out his providential governance for his own glory and the good of his people (Rom 8.28-30).

33. Conversion (Acts 2.37-41)

Peter declared that Jesus is the Messiah (Christ) whom his audience had rejected and crucified but whom God had raised from the dead (Acts 2.22-36). On hearing this, Peter's audience understood what he was saying, and they were "cut [pierced] to the heart" (Acts 2.37). Peter's preaching was the instrument which the Holy Spirit used to stun them, awaken their consciences, and open their hearts to receive truth (Acts

16.14). Their response was to ask, “What shall we do?” This question should not be understood as their asking how they could appease God through works-righteousness (Lk 10.25). Rather, it was a sincere desire to know how they should respond to what they had discovered about Jesus and their previous thoughts and actions toward him.

At the heart of Peter’s response to their question is the command to repent (Acts 2.38). True repentance consists of, at least, the following:

- *Realization of sin.* In response to the command to repent, we could ask, “Repent of what?” Peter had informed his audience of their sin—complicity in murder (Acts 2.23, 36). Salvation is more than belief in Jesus, it requires that we know that he died because of our sins. Each of us needs to realize that we have broken God’s law (Ps 51.4) and are sinners.
- *Confession of sin.* Once we know that we are sinners, we need to confess our sins and ask to be forgiven of them. This confession must be more than mere remorse for the consequences of sin but a genuine sorrow over our sin.
- *Turning from sin.* Repentance is going in the opposite direction we are currently heading (Acts 3.19). It incorporates a change of heart or mind—the Greek word translated ‘repentance’ is made up of two words and can be understood as ‘an after mind’—and a change of action (Ezk 18.23, 30, 32).
- *Turning to obedience.* Repentance is a new resolve that we will no longer live for our selves, but we will strive to live for God by obedience to his law.
- *A requirement for salvation.* Jesus said, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Lk 13.3, 5). God desires that all mankind heed the command to repent (2 Pt 3.9), experience forgiveness, and demonstrate a key confirming step of having been saved, which is to be baptized (Acts 2.38, 41). Baptism is an outward sign of an inward new relationship with Christ.

Luke informs us that Peter said many other words as he bore witness (Acts 2.40). It is important that we notice this. While repentance and baptism are essential components of conversion, they are not the only ones. Elsewhere we see that belief is a key component of salvation (Mk 1.15; Acts 3.16; Acts 16.31; Acts 20.21). Not only must we know that we are sinners and repent of our sins, but we must also believe the Gospel message. Key things which we must believe are that Jesus is both God and man, that he is the Messiah who was promised from the beginning (Gen 3.15), that he died on the cross as a substitute for our sins, and that he arose again on the third day and ascended into heaven to assume his everlasting reign. Peter had covered much of this in his sermon, and it was these facts which had caused his audience to turn to him for an answer.

Conversion (salvation) is a gift received from God (Acts 3.26; Eph 2.8-9). The members of Peter’s audience received the effectual call of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.39). They received knowledge and understanding through Peter’s words (Acts 2.41). They received faith and the motivation to repent of their sins (Acts 5.31; Acts 11.18; 2 Tim 2.25) through the Holy Spirit’s cutting them to the heart. They received new minds and hearts (Ezk 18.31; Eph 4.23)—they were born-again (Jn 3.3, 7). They received the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ezk 36.26; Acts 2.38), which in this context likely means that they were converted rather than the ability to speak in tongues or to perform miracles. And, through their conversion and baptism, they received membership in a new covenant community.

Luke also informs us that on that day (Pentecost) about three thousand persons were converted, baptized, and added to the Church (Acts 2.41). When Pentecost was established by Moses it was also referred to as the Feast of Harvest (Ex 23.16; Ex 34.22; Lev 23.15-21). These three thousand souls were the firstfruits of a spiritual harvest the Holy Spirit offered up to the exalted Christ. But this was only a small beginning of the fulfillment of OT promises. The promise of the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion was given to future generations of those who heard Peter’s sermon and to “all who are far off” (Acts 2.39). Those who are ‘far off’ would certainly have included the Jewish diaspora and proselytes who were represented by

those in attendance from diverse geographies (Acts 2.5-11). But this promise extends “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1.8)—to everyone, Jew or Gentile (Acts 22.21; Eph 2.11-13), whom the Lord calls to himself.

With these firstfruits, the Holy Spirit was beginning to create a new covenant community, the new spiritual Israel of God (Gal 6.16). Peter warns his audience to save themselves “from this crooked generation” (Acts 2.40). He is speaking primarily of his peer-generation in Israel who had wickedly handed over the Messiah to death. But his exhortation has a wider application. The first covenant community was formed after Abram had been called out of Ur (Gen 15.7). Separating from the pagan nations continued when the Hebrews were called out of their Egyptian slavery (Hos 11.1). The new Abrahamic covenant community consists of Christians who have heeded the call of God to come out from the midst of pagan societies and to be separate (Is 52.11; 2 Cor 6.17; Phil 2.15). We need to heed Peter’s warning and strive to be morally and spiritually separate from the damning influences of the wicked forces which swirl around us.

34. Water Baptism (Acts 2.38-39, 41)

Baptism is a topic that divides the evangelical Church. Questions arise over its nature, purpose, and effect and over whom should be the recipients of it. Clearly it would not be possible in a single page to deal with all aspects of this complex topic. So, we will only consider lessons we can derive directly and by inference from what Luke tells us (with a few references from elsewhere in the NT).

Among the last words Jesus gave to the apostles was the command to baptize new disciples brought into the Church (Mt 28.19). It was expected by the apostles that all new converts would be baptized. Therefore, Peter commanded his hearers to repent and then to be baptized (Acts 2.38). Thus, baptism is not optional for those who claim to be Christians. Nevertheless, baptism is not *required* for salvation, since the thief on the cross was not baptized into Jesus, nevertheless he was saved (Lk 23.43). Immediately, those who were baptized were added to the Church (Acts 2.41). Later in Acts we read that the Ethiopian eunuch was also baptized immediately upon his conversion (Acts 8.36-38). This appears to indicate that a person is enrolled into Church membership upon conversion and baptism. The apostles did not require new converts to attend communicant classes, nor did they conduct an extensive examination of the understanding and faith of the new converts before they became members of the Church.

Peter told his audience to be baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 2.38). There appear be two dimensions in this statement. The subjective dimension is an expression by the convert of his belief in Jesus as the Messiah, whom Peter had just finished presenting to his audience. The objective dimension is the ritual act by the one performing the baptism. Jesus had told the apostles to baptize in the name of the Trinity (Mt 28.19). Peter was not contradicting Jesus’ instruction. He was indicating that Jesus is God. When the apostles performed the 3,000 baptisms, they undoubtedly used the baptismal formula in the name of Trinity which has been used for the past 2,000 years.

Peter associated baptism with forgiveness of sins (Acts 2.38). The meaning of the preposition ‘for’ (“*for* the forgiveness of your sins”) has been the subject of debate. Peter is not proposing that baptism provides forgiveness of sins, a view called baptismal regeneration. Rather, he means the opposite. Forgiveness of sins through repentance (Acts 3.19; Acts 5.31; Acts 10.43; Acts 13.38-39; Acts 26.18) is the basis upon which baptism is to be performed. Baptism is not a mechanism for salvation. Rather it is a conscious means for a person to demonstrate that he has believed in Jesus and has repented of his sins.

From its earliest days, the Church has expressed the view that baptism is a public profession of faith. This has been facilitated through a person making a simple statement of faith in Jesus (e.g., “Jesus is Lord”; Rom 10.9; 1 Cor 12.3) and confession of sin, through responsive reciting of a creed, or by responding

affirmatively to vows of Church membership. Converts to Christ often have limited knowledge of the Bible, about God's law and sin, and about Jesus. So, the key factor leading to baptism is that there is a credible expression of faith and repentance. An example is provided by the response to Peter's preaching. His hearers were 'cut to the heart' and had a sincere desire to know how to respond to what they had heard (Acts 2.37). Peter associated both repentance and faith in Jesus with baptism (Acts 2.37). Baptism is a sign of a spiritual change, an inward conversion. It symbolizes the washing away of sin that has been performed by the Holy Spirit at conversion when a sinner repents of his sin and confesses faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and saviour.

It is significant that the first command to be baptized is given to a mostly male audience. Most of the men would have been circumcised. An exception could have been the proselytes (Acts 2.11). Baptism was now required for those already bearing the sign of the Abrahamic covenant. This indicates that we have entered a new covenant era with a new covenant sign to replace circumcision. Evidence for this change is provided by the fact that women, who could not have received the old covenant sign, are to be baptized (Acts 16.15). Since the new covenant sign of corporate membership now includes women, it would have made no sense to his Jewish audience if it would now exclude children. Rather, Peter says that the promise is "for you and for your children" (Acts 2.39). Also, Peter's statement "for all who are far off", indicates that the new covenant would incorporate the Gentiles—who would not have to receive the old covenant sign (Acts 15.1-21; Gal 5.1-6). A new form of unity is created under the new covenant, in which there is no longer Jew or Gentile or male or female (Gal 3.28). All true believers who have confessed their sins are one in Christ.

Another aspect of the command to be baptized given first to Jewish males, relates to the nature of the sign. It would have been obvious to anyone seeing a Jewish male (e.g., in a public bath) that he was a Jew. Many religions use visible forms of separation from others. Sikhs have turbans; Orthodox Jews have kippahs, tassels, and long sideburns; Muslims have hajibs and burqas; Buddhist monks and nuns wear saffron robes and shave their heads; Hindus use permanent ink and temporary henna tattoos. In contrast, biblical Christianity does not have a permanent indicator of separation since the water of baptism evaporates within minutes. Some Christians today attempt to demarcate (separate) themselves from the broader society with distinctive garments (monks, and nuns), plain long skirts, collars (priests and pastors), head coverings (scarves or hats), jewellery (crosses), and long beards. Christians should demarcate themselves through holy lives, which the ritual separation and holiness laws of the OT symbolized.

35. Marks of a True Church

(Acts 2.42, 46-47)

The *Belgic Confession* was published by Guido de Bres in 1561 for the churches in Flanders and the Netherlands. It was adopted by a Reformed Synod at Emden, in 1571. Article 29 deals with the marks of a true church and how it differs from a false church. It specifies that the marks by which a true church is known are: 1) the "pure doctrine of the gospel is preached", 2) the church "maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ", and 3) "church discipline is exercised in chastening of sin". This Confession was written in the context of the 16th-century Reformation and Reformed churches' separation from the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, in this context pure doctrine would emphasize salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, with no attribution to meritorious works. The pure sacraments instituted by Christ would include only Baptism and the Lord's Supper, not the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. In addition, the Lord's Supper would not be observed as a sacrificial mass, and belief in transubstantiation would have been repudiated and proscribed. The call for the exercise of church discipline was largely fueled by immorality among the clerical hierarchy and the notion that indulgences and acts of penance could expiate a person's sin.

Acts 2.42 says, "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." This verse could suggest four marks of the true Church: sound doctrine is taught and preached, fellowship is maintained (which implies discipline, otherwise there cannot be fellowship),

the sacraments (as signified by breaking of bread) are administered correctly, and worship (as signified by corporate prayer) is properly observed. However, even if we declare that there are four marks by which we can identify a true church (congregation or denomination), we are left with a challenge of defining what constitutes the correct manifestation of the marks.

A true church is first marked by apostolic teaching. The apostles would have communicated what they had learned from Jesus during their three-plus years of training. Since Jesus taught from the OT, the apostles would have also done likewise. The teaching of Jesus was then incorporated into the NT—written by the apostles or their deputies. Thus, apostolic teaching is biblical teaching. Obviously, what the apostles taught would have included what Peter preached—Jesus is the Messiah who was crucified and raised from the dead. We cannot list all apostolic teaching here. Rather, we commend the *Westminster Confession of Faith* as providing the best summary and systematization of true biblical doctrine and theology. A church which does not teach from the entire Bible (2 Tim 3.16-17) and preach correct biblical doctrine and theology is not a true church.

A person cannot have close fellowship with others if there is not agreement on principles (Amos 3.3; 2 Cor 6.14) or matters of discord, dissension, and division have not been resolved. Thus, the use of the word ‘fellowship’ in this context—the only place it occurs in Acts—indicates that there was a harmony of spirit among the early converts (2 Cor 13.14; 1 Jn 1.3). And, when issues arose the apostles addressed them (Acts 6.1; Acts 15.1-35) and exercised discipline (Acts 5.1-11). A key attribute of a true church is the observance of God’s law, especially that summarized in the Ten Commandments. Overt sins, as defined by God, must be dealt with by the elders (Mt 16.19; Mt 18.17-18; 1 Cor 5.13; Titus 1.13; Titus 2.15; Titus 3.10). Many churches today have turned God’s moral requirements upside down, calling good evil, and evil good (Is 5.20)—such as ‘blessing’ same-sex unions, pushing for interfaith meetings, and endorsing abortion. Jesus will expel these Jezebels from his Church (Rev 2.20-23).

It is not easy to determine whether ‘breaking bread’ (Acts 2.42; Lk 22.19) should be understood as sharing a common meal or if it refers to the observation of the Lord’s Supper. In this context it possibly includes both. When an apostle was present at a communal meal to teach and officiate, the Lord’s Supper was likely observed. In addition, new converts would have been immediately baptized, per Peter’s command (Acts 2.38). Thus, a true church will faithfully perform baptisms and regularly observe the Lord’s Supper.

Both prayer and praise were offered by the assembled believers. They continued to attend services in the temple (Acts 2.46; Acts 3.1) and continued to observe the seventh-day Sabbath by attending synagogue services (Acts 6.9; Acts 9.2, 20; Acts 13.5, 15, 43). However, they also assembled on the first day of the week to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus. Thus, Paul warned the Colossians not to judge someone who continued to observe the old-order Sabbath (Col 2.16). After the converts from Judaism were expelled from their synagogues and the temple was destroyed in 70 AD, Christian spiritual worship became clearly demarcated from the old covenant ceremonial worship forms. Worship regulated by apostolic command and example was not historically included among the marks of a true church. The Reformers may have included it under the rubric of pure doctrine, or their efforts at purging false worship had been so obvious that they didn’t feel compelled to identify it as a mark. However, this is not the case today, when we consider the chaos in ‘worship’ in the broader evangelical Church. The Church needs to return to a proper understanding of true worship. True worship consists of reverential acts authorized by God, that are directed to him and that are performed to honour him or his name (Ps 96.9). True worship does not include the polluted offerings that many vainly offer to God with the false notion that their actions please him. The early Church was marked by frequent, faithful assembly (Heb 10.25) for God-honouring public worship.

36. The Fellowship of the Believers (Acts 2.42-47; Acts 4.32, 34-37)

Selfishness is a problem which plagues humanity. It is certainly not the most egregious sin from our perspective, like murder or adultery. But it is still a serious sin. It falls primarily under the prohibitions of the tenth Commandment, “You shall not covet.” However, selfishness is engendered by pride, so also falls within the wider prohibitions of the first two Commandments. When we are selfish, we make meeting our own ends into our god. James warns his readers that where there is selfishness, the results will be “disorder and every vile practice” (James 3.16). Paul doesn’t use the specific word, ‘selfishness’ but he implies the same thing when he says that craving after “money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim 6.10). This is why the Psalmist asks God to incline his heart to obedience to God’s law and away from a desire for selfish gain (Ps 119.36).

When a selfish person is converted to Christ, his life becomes noticeably different. For example, after Zacchaeus had his encounter with Jesus, and was saved, his heart was changed, and he instantly became generous. He not only repaid what he had stolen following the biblical guidance for restitution (Ex 22.1; Lk 19.8) but went far beyond by giving away half of his possessions. So, it is not surprising that after the mass conversions on Pentecost we see that there was an outpouring of generosity among those new believers who had joined the Church.

In addition to their commitment to apostolic worship, the new believers became active in caring for one another. God was building a new covenant community, not just saving individuals. This new community displayed a spirit of generosity through sharing, which was evidenced by:

- *Unity.* The believers were together (Acts 2.44, 46). This indicates that they did not live in isolation from one another but as a gathered community. This does not mean that they lived in communes, but it does indicate that they were united in a common cause and assembled regularly together.
- *Voluntarism.* They displayed a concern for one another. Those in need were cared for with donations of food and even with direct disbursements of money. They took to heart Moses’ command that there should be “no poor among you” (Dt 15.4). This does not mean that they attempted to have everyone provided with the same number of pairs of leather sandals, linen undergarments, and wool cloaks. Rather, they ensured that no one was suffering from abject poverty. Nor does it mean that they threw all their wealth and possessions into a common purse. Rather, they continued to own property which could be disposed of at their choice (Acts 4.37; Acts 5.4) and homes in which they could meet (Acts 2.46; Acts 12.12).
- *Discretion.* Luke states that they distributed their contributions “as any had need” (Acts 2.45; Acts 4.35). This indicates that they did due diligence to ensure that they weren’t being scammed and that lazy loafers were not being coddled (Eph 4.28; 2 Thess 3.10).
- *Hospitality.* The word ‘hospitality’ does not appear in Acts. Nevertheless, it is evident that they followed what would later become apostolic teaching, that Christians are to show hospitality (Rom 12.13; Heb 13.3; 1 Pt 4.9). They opened their homes for worship, fellowship, and meals. Many of the homes of the Christians in the city must have been opened, because there would have been no single home large enough for a crowd of thousands to meet.
- *Fellowship.* They shared meals in the intimacy of table fellowship, as stated in the idiom ‘breaking of bread’. This may have become the basis for what Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 11.20-22 (see also, 2 Pt 2.13; Jude 12), and later Ignatius calls an ‘agape feast’. They probably observed the Lord’s Supper at these meals when an apostle was present to teach and officiate.

Through their worship, generosity, sharing, and fellowship, they bore witness to how their lives had been changed after they had repented of their sins and believed in Jesus as the Messiah. The watching world took notice of their actions (Acts 2.47). Likewise, unbelievers take notice when we live as Christians and may ask us for an explanation of the difference displayed in our lives (1 Pt 3.15). The Holy Spirit may use this to lead some to Christ and everlasting salvation.

Luke describes an ideal state. It is the state that Jesus desires for his Church (Jn 13.35; Jn 17.11). For a brief time, they had a foretaste of the exhilaration that believers will experience in heaven. But it was short lived. Persecution soon broke out, and many believers were scattered from Jerusalem (Acts 8.1). And conflicts would arise between individuals (Acts 15.39) and over doctrine (Acts 15.1-35; Gal 2.11) and practice (Acts 6.1). The problems Paul addressed in the congregation in Corinth are more indicative of the challenges which the Church faces this side of the last day, than is the awe and euphoric joy that was evident immediately following Pentecost. Nevertheless, the present realities of discouragement and schism which appear so prevalent today in the Church in the West should not dull our desire and willingness to strive for a manifestation of the Christian community that Luke portrays for us among those who had “glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2.46). If we want to make a difference within the household of faith, then we should have a proper attitude, setting aside pride for humility (Phil 2.3), greed for love (Jn 13.34; James 2.8), selfishness for service (Gal 5.13), and personal interests for corporate welfare (Eph 4.16). This becomes particularly important today. With modern technology people can work from home, order food and supplies to be delivered, obtain entertainment online, meet with medical personnel virtually, and even ‘attend’ worship services via streaming. Thus, it becomes more important for Christians to assemble together on the Lord’s Day for worship and fellowship.

37. Miraculous Signs and Wonders

(Acts 2.43; Acts 5.12)

During his sermon on Pentecost, Peter quoted from Joel 2.28-32. In that prophecy an outpouring of signs and wonders is mentioned (Joel 2.28; Acts 2.19). Later in his sermon, Peter states that Jesus was attested with mighty works and signs and wonders (Acts 2.22). Luke informs us that following the events of Pentecost, many signs and wonders were done through the apostles (Acts 2.43; Acts 5.12). Peter and Paul (and possibly Barnabas with him) performed miracles which were classed as signs and wonders (Acts 4.30; Acts 14.3; Acts 15.12). Also, it is reported that Stephen (Acts 6.8) and Philip (Acts 8.6, 13) performed sign miracles. Other miracles are recorded in Acts, which are not specifically identified as signs or wonders (Acts 3.1-11; Acts 5.5, 10; Acts 9.18, 32-34; Acts 14.8-10; Acts 16.16-18; Acts 19.11-12; Acts 28.8-9; Acts 13.8-11). Peter and Paul even restored life to dead persons (Acts 9.36-42; Acts 20.9-12).

Stephen was not from the original twelve apostles. Yet he worked sign miracles. This indicates that the ability to perform miracles was not confined to those who held the apostolic office. Despite this, commentators within the Reformed tradition have generally taken the position that the miraculous gifts were signs of the presence of the true apostles (2 Cor 12.12), and that they ceased after the apostolic age. Nevertheless, the observation that others than apostles performed miraculous signs leads some in the modern Church to claim the God continues to endow men with the ability to perform miracles.

God can perform miracles when, where, and how he wishes. “What is impossible with man is possible with God.” (Lk 18.27; Gen 18.14; Job 42.2; Jer 32.17, 27). In fact, he directly performs miracles continually—the conception of a baby which creates a new life, the conversion of a stone-dead heart by the Holy Spirit (Jn 3.7-8), inexplicable sudden recoveries from serious illnesses such as cancer, and Jesus’ holding the universe together (Col 1.17) are all miracles. The issue under consideration is not *if* miracles can occur, but whether God continues to perform miracles *through* his appointed messengers of the Gospel.

At the inauguration of the Abrahamic covenantal era, God performed a miracle so that the seed of promise would be directed through a barren woman who was post-menopausal and unable to conceive a child (Gen 16.1-2; Gen 18.11, 14). Likewise, at another major milestone in the history of redemption, God worked signs and wonders. This is mentioned in Acts 7.36. Stephen indicates that Moses performed signs and wonders in Egypt, at the Red Sea, and in the wilderness for forty years. Miracles were associated with other

significant events during the history of Israel. However, they were rare. And after the close of the OT canon, there was a period of about 400 years of revelatory silence and an absence of sign miracles through God's messengers. Then Jesus appeared on the scene and was attested by signs and wonders as the God-man, the Messiah (Acts 2.22). The next major event in the history of redemption is covered in Acts, as God expands his covenant community to incorporate Gentiles, in keeping with the promise made to Abraham (Gen 18.18; Gen 22.18). So, it is no wonder that God authenticates the inauguration of a new era with a magnificent display of 'fireworks'.

The apostolic office was put in place to lay the foundation for the NT Church and to compose, or oversee the composition of, the NT canon of Scripture. When the last of the twelve apostles died, the *inauguration* of the new era—the new covenant age—ended. We now live in the equivalent of the intertestamental period of revelatory silence and an absence of sign miracles through God's messengers. However, there will be one more significant event which will be associated with signs and wonders. This will be the return of Jesus which will wrap up this age and usher in the new heavens and new earth (2 Pt 3.9-13).

We can ask, why would we need sign miracles today? What would a healing miracle accomplish today, which Jesus and the apostles have not already accomplished? Would a healing miracle performed in the name of Jesus (Acts 3.6) add anything to the proclamation of the Gospel message? Jesus performed many sign miracles and yet people didn't believe in him (Jn 12.37). And he taught that even if people do listen to the words of Moses and the Prophets, they won't be convinced if someone was raised from the dead (Lk 16.31). The purpose of the sign miracles was not necessarily to convince skeptics of the Gospel message that was preached. It was to validate Jesus as God's messenger and the apostles as his sent ones. We must not expect God to work today as he did during the NT inaugural period. The ability to perform signs and wonders is not the normal state for Christians (1 Cor 12.29). We have the completed Scriptures which teach the way of salvation. This is what needs to be proclaimed.

People today who claim to be able perform 'great signs' (Rev 13.13; Rev 16.14) are not performing genuine miracles, but rather counterfeit imitations which are demonic. These 'signs' fall into two classes:

- *Deluded deceptions*. The incantations and rituals of shamans and nature worshipping pagans who naively believe that they can influence the gods and work propitious outcomes.
- *Deliberate deceptions*. Tricks of charlatans (psychics, fortune tellers, practitioners of witchcraft, new age gurus, and faith healers) used to derive glory from men or fill their purses. They rationalize deception with claims that people enjoy the show or want to believe that God has helped them.

Satan does not care whether counterfeit miracles are based on delusions or are deliberate deceptions, as long as they distract people from the hearing the Gospel.

38. Worship Transition

(Acts 3.1)

The first Christians were primarily converted Jews, although there would have been Gentile proselytes (Acts 2.11) among the assembled believers in Jerusalem in the days immediately following Pentecost. The early Jewish believers in Jesus did not consider belief that Jesus is the Messiah (i.e., the Christ) to make them participants in a different or new religion. Rather, they considered themselves to be Jews who continued to believe the Law, Prophets, and Writings. The arrival of the Messiah was the fulfillment of their long-held religious beliefs. From their perspective, it was the Jewish leaders, who were antagonistic to Jesus, who were no longer true Jews, because they had rejected the Messiah.

Within the context of this religious continuity, the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem continued to observe the Mosaic ordinances. They had not yet developed a full understanding of the changes which were occurring in how God is to be worshiped. The curtain in the temple, dividing the inner court from the most holy place,

had been torn at the moment of Jesus' death (Mt 27.51). Even though this had significant implications, they were not fully understood by the disciples at this time. Likewise, Jesus had indicated that the temple was to be replaced (Mt 12.6; Jn 2.19-22; Jn 4.21-24). However, about three months after the resurrection, the temple was still standing, and the daily sacrifices were being offered. It would require the teaching of Paul as he wrote to the Hebrews (before the temple had been destroyed) to provide a fuller understanding of how different worship in spirit and truth (Jn 4.23-24) is from worship facilitated by the shadowy types which pointed to the culminating work of Jesus.

Shortly after Pentecost, Jewish leaders began to persecute Jews who professed that Jesus is the Messiah (Acts 8.1) and to drive them out of the synagogues (Jn 16.2; Acts 19.9). This began to create a clear demarcation between the unbelieving Jews and Christians—between unbiblical Judaism and Christianity. The declaration of the council in Jerusalem reinforced this distinction by no longer requiring that believers observe the Mosaic ceremonial rites and restrictions (Acts 15.1-35). The destruction of the temple in 70 AD was the definitive act which marked the end of the old ceremonial economy.

Thus, the first generation of believing Jews were in a transition period. They continued to observe the old-order rites. But they also adopted new practices for worship. We encounter an example of them continuing to follow Mosaic ordinances in Acts 3.1, with Peter and John going to the temple at one of the three customary prayer times (Ps 55.17; Dan 6.10) during the offering of the evening sacrifice (Ex 29.41). Peter and John had been partners in their fishing business in Galilee (Lk 5.9-10). They were likely good friends and were found together in discussions with Jesus (Mk 13.3) and at significant events, such as at the restoration of a girl's life (Lk 8.51), at the transfiguration (Mt 17.11), preparing for the Passover (Lk 22.8), in Gethsemane (Mk 14.33), and during Jesus' trial (Jn 18.15). They were also the first among the disciples to arrive at the empty tomb (Jn 20.2-4). So, it is not surprising that we find them together going to the temple, and at later events recorded in Acts (Acts 4.13, 19; Acts 8.14).

Their observance of the evening prayer at the time of the evening sacrifice indicates that the apostles considered that the place and time for public worship under the old covenant was still sacred. Paul also continued to observe temple rites (Acts 21.26; Acts 24.11) when he was in Jerusalem. This might surprise us, given his antipathy to imposing old-order ceremonial rites on Gentiles, as he expresses in his letter to the Galatians.

During this transition period, the apostles and other believers in Christ continued to go to the synagogues for Sabbath worship, until they were expelled. In some instances, if the majority of a congregation believed in Jesus as the Messiah, the synagogue assembly would have become a NT church. During this transition period, they also observed the Lord's Day as a day of worship to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus. Thus, the early converts from Judaism observed two weekly Sabbaths—on the seventh and first days of the week. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and the first generation of converted Jews had died out, Christians discontinued observing the seventh-day Sabbath and consolidated on observing only the first-day Sabbath. But during the transition period, Paul had to warn the Colossians not to judge someone who continued to observe the old-order Sabbath (Col 2.16).

We can derive general lessons from the example of first-generation NT worship:

- Observing regular times of prayer (public or private) is commendable.
- Assembling for public worship at designated times should be our practice.
- We should follow the apostolic example of assembling for worship on the Sabbath—the Christian Sabbath. Since 'sabbath' means 'rest', not 'seventh', the observance of the Sabbath on the first day of the week is fully consistent with resting one day out of seven (Ex 20.8-11).
- Assembling for both the morning and evening sacrifice of praise-worship (Heb 13.15) on the Lord's Day is an eminently wise practice which all devout Christians should desire to follow (Heb 10.25). The

lack of a desire evident in our day to assemble with God's people for public worship twice on the Lord's Day is an indicator of the low spiritual state of the Church.

- The NT Church form of Sabbath worship developed out of the synagogue form of worship observed by Jesus (Lk 4.16, 26; Jn 6.59; Jn 18.20) and the apostles (Acts 6.9; Acts 9.2, 20; Acts 13.5, 15, 43; Acts 17.2).

39. Peter Heals a Lame Beggar

(Acts 3.1-11)

In Genesis 1:1-3, God presents himself first as the *creator* who brought space, time, energy, and matter into existence, and then secondly as a *communicator* ("God said"). In the accounts in Acts of the first two miracles performed through the apostles we find a reversal of this order. The first miracle performed through the apostles was the ability to speak in a previously unknown language—i.e., communication. The second was a miracle which transformed physical matter—lame limbs became strong supports (Acts 3.7) as the man was restored to 'perfect health' (Acts 3.16) as if he had just come from the hand of the creator.

This man was congenitally lame in his ankles and feet for over forty years (Acts 4.22). He could not walk and had to be carried daily by others and placed at his begging station. His condition was known to everyone who entered the temple and passed him lying on his pallet. They could not attribute his condition to a psychosomatic state of mind. There could be no reasonable doubt expressed by a sceptic that a true miracle had occurred. Due to his condition, he was placed outside the temple because (probably by an invalid extrapolation of the Mosaic regulation given for the priests; Lev 21.16-23; 2 Sam 5.8) no lame person was permitted to enter the place of worship. This poor man was multiply cursed, he was: 1) lame, 2) immobile, 3) a beggar (1 Sam 2.36; Ps 109.10), and 4) excluded from the public means of grace in the temple. Jesus came to offer a solution to the curse of sin symbolized by physical infirmities (Lk 7.22; Lk 14.13, 21). We should be thankful that no matter what our background or physical condition, we are no longer under God's curse and may enter his house with joy and praise.

While waiting for a traffic light to change, you likely have had the experience of being accosted by a beggar. If you are like me, you avoid eye contact with him, thinking that he would waste your coins on drink or drugs. Likewise, most of the people passing the beggar outside of the temple, would have averted their eyes even if they would flip him a lepton or denarius. It is ironic that they were 'on their way to church' and their hearts were not softened to show compassion toward a person who through no personal fault (Jn 9.2-3) was in a condition which degraded him to begging and should have been helped (Lev 25.35; Dt 15.7; Ps 41.1; Prov 21.13). Peter does something astounding. He doesn't avert his eyes but commands the man to look at him and John. The man is so surprised that he gives his total attention to them, probably hoping for a display of unexpected generosity. His hope must have faltered for a moment as Peter showed him his empty hands. Then Peter gave a second command, "Rise up and walk!" Peter assisted him to stand up as his legs were being fully restored. This miracle of healing did not require weeks of therapy and rehab after surgery. Instead, the man was leaping around like a young deer (Is 35.6). Incredible! No wonder other folks who were present in the temple precincts were "filled with wonder and amazement" (Acts 3.10). In God's providence, Peter and John had few monetary resources with them at that time. They may have deliberately left their purses behind, possibly to avoid being pickpocketed. Regardless, God used their lack of material resources to make another person 'rich' (2 Cor 6.10). This should remind us that our usefulness for the Kingdom of Christ is not evidenced by, or dependent upon, our access to money or other temporal possessions.

We can reasonably assume that Jesus had passed this lame man more than once during his visits to the temple but had not healed him. Nevertheless, Jesus had not forgotten the man. The Holy Spirit gave Peter an assurance that he didn't need to ask Jesus to heal the man. He knew that Jesus would do this as he

commanded the man to stand up. Peter knew that it was through faith in the name and power of Jesus that this man would be healed, not through power or piety intrinsic to the apostles (Acts 3.6, 12, 16; Acts 4.30) or through the utterance of an incantation (Acts 19.13-17). Jesus healed many but not necessarily all persons he encountered who were blind, deaf, or lame. Likewise, the apostles performed miracles only at strategic points in their work of carrying the Gospel to the world. Both Jesus and the apostles were dedicated to making people spiritually whole through teaching about sin, the need for repentance, and of faith in Jesus rather than to making them physically whole. Thus, each miracle recorded in the Bible had a specific purpose such as directing people to God and validating the Messiah and the Messiah's messengers (the apostles).

It is evident that this healing miracle, the only one described in detail as having been performed in Jerusalem through the apostles (Acts 2.43; Acts 5.12, 15-16), had a specific purpose. We see this purpose unfolded as Peter speaks to the amazed audience and refers to Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 3.18) who would provide "times of refreshing" (Acts 3.20) and restoration (Acts 3.21). This miracle was intended to remind the Jewish audience that the age of the Messiah had arrived (Lk 7.22). Peter directs his hearers away from a focus on the physical miracle to the spiritual miracle which it was intended to symbolize. Jesus came not to heal the sick. They would get sick again and eventually die. Rather, as "the author of life" (Acts 3.15), Jesus came to give them spiritual healing which would result in an abundant everlasting life (Jn 10.10).

The lame beggar thought that he needed silver or gold. This miracle of healing reminds them that worldly riches which men have or desire, or think that they need, are not what they really need (Rev 3.17). What men need is to hear a message of hope declared. This hope is that Christ offers a solution to the mess that has been inflicted upon mankind because of Adam's sin. What the lame beggar received was a new life as his crippled soul was strengthened through belief in Jesus.

40. A Miracle Performed by the Risen Christ (Acts 3.11-25)

After healing the lame beggar, Peter and John proceeded toward the temple courts. However, the healed beggar clung to them as he was leaping for joy and praising God (Acts 3.8). He had been restored to perfect health (Acts 3.16). The Greek word Luke uses to describe the man's physical condition is found only here in the NT. It appears to hint at the unblemished animals which could be offered as sacrifices (Ex 12.5). Being unblemished, without any deformities, the man could now enter the temple courts as a living sacrifice to God. His healing, joyous response, and progress toward the inner court of the temple created quite the spectacle in what should have been solemn precincts. So, a crowd quickly gathered to see what was happening. Peter took advantage of the assembled crowd to address them in Solomon's portico on the temple mount along the eastern side of the court of the Gentiles.

Peter and John had gone to the temple for prayer and meditation. Peter had not prepared in advance a sermon for that evening but took the opportunity to preach when it was presented to him. His spontaneous sermon is summarized by Luke. But it is clear that Peter had such intimate knowledge of the Scriptures and of how they applied to Jesus that he could preach extemporaneously. He presents a good exemplar for us. We should know Christ, the contents of the Bible, and the message of the Gospel so well that we can provide from our hearts a defense to anyone who asks us for reason for the hope that we have in Christ (1 Pt 3.15).

The astounded crowd were staring at Peter and John after they had witnessed the transformation of the cripple. They viewed Peter and John as miracle workers. Peter immediately diverts the crowd's attention from themselves to direct them to the true miracle worker, Jesus. Peter states that the miracle of healing was not performed by any innate power or piety in them. Since Peter would likely have addressed the crowd in Aramaic, Luke chose a specific Greek word, translated into English as 'piety'. It describes the deeds or character of a religiously devout person. This would have been a word familiar to Theophilus to whom Acts

was first directed. Luke's choice of this word likely indicates that he wished to communicate that divine character could not be attributed to the apostles. Peter wanted his hearers to put aside any idea that there was something special about him or John. Rather, Peter attributes the miracle to God's power in Jesus and to faith in Jesus' name. The apostles had neither the power of the Holy Spirit nor exemplary moral character which enabled them innately to perform miracles. Although they were saints, they were not canonized 'saints'. Like pipes are used for bringing wholesome water, men are merely one of the channels through which Jesus communicates life (Acts 3.15). Peter understood this and expressed the same humility which Mary did when she declared herself to be God's humble servant (Lk 1.48). This is good lesson for us to learn. Every good and perfect gift which we have is given to us from above by God the Father (James 1.17).

Peter indicates that Jesus performed the miracle through the channel of faith in his name (Acts 3.16). Faith in this instance is the belief that the all-powerful God can perform the 'impossible'. Peter does not indicate who exercised this faith—the lame man or the apostles. Because it is open ended, we can infer that it is both. Peter had witnessed the resurrection and would not have questioned the possibility of a lame man's limbs being restored to wholeness. The lame man had probably seen Jesus (or at least had heard of him) when Jesus had visited the temple multiple times over the preceding three-and-a-half years. Thus, he could have believed that in the name of Jesus he could be healed. This belief in the power of Jesus' name is not a form of superstition. It is a metonymy, where the name is used as a figurative substitute for the person. Jesus was able to heal the man because he had been glorified by the God of the patriarchs (Acts 3.13) through his resurrection (Acts 3.15) and is God. From his place in glory, Jesus rules the universe and holds it together (Col 1.17). Re-forming limbs is nothing compared with what he does every moment holding our existence in his hands (Acts 17.28).

Peter provided evidence that Jesus is both God and the promised Messiah, and therefore can perform miracles:

- *Abrahamic seed*. Jesus is the one promised to the patriarchs (Acts 3.13, 25).
- *Prophetic fulfillment*. About whom the prophets spoke (Acts 3.21, 24-25)
- *Holy and Righteous One*. Who was without sin, with the full holiness of God.
- *Servant*. Who suffered and died to pay the debt of sin for his elect people.
- *Resurrection*. Who was raised from the grave by the power of the Trinity.
- *Author of life*. Through whom everything was created (Jn 1.3-4, 10).
- *The final prophet*. Who spoke with the authority of Moses (Dt 18.15).

Peter places Jesus within the context of the old covenant, indicating that it has been fulfilled with the inauguration of the new covenant. The shadows and types have been surpassed by the antitype, the reality to which they pointed. Jesus is the fulfillment of all that the OT spoke about (Lk 24.44). He is the Seed of Adam, of Abraham, and of David. He is the Prophet who gave the law to Moses and explained how it was to be properly understood (Mt 5.17-48). He is the God-man who was validated by performing sign miracles. He was vindicated through his resurrection into glory, where as King of kings he reigns on David's throne forever. Peter was not proclaiming any new revelation or introducing a new religion. He was declaring that the religion of their fathers has fulfilled in every detail in Jesus. It is to this Jesus that he directs his hearers to turn in repentance to obtain times of refreshing (Acts 3.19-20).

41. Jesus, God's Holy Servant (Acts 3.13, 26; Acts 4.27, 30)

We encounter a number of appellations applied to Jesus throughout the NT. For example, he is called Immanuel, "God with us" (Mt 1.23); Christ ('anointed'), Lord (Mt 8.2); Son of God (Mt 8.29); Son of David (Mt 9.27); Lamb of God (Jn 1.29); and 'last Adam' (1 Cor 15.45). He calls himself Son of Man', alluding to Daniel 7.13 (Mt 8.20); 'light of the World' (Jn 8.12); 'bread of Life' (Jn 6.35); and others. John

reports additional titles of majesty for him in Revelation such as, Alpha and Omega (Rev 1.8), Word of God (Rev 19.13), and King of kings (Rev 19.16). In Acts, unique titles are applied to Jesus, including, ‘servant’ (Acts 3.13), The Holy and Righteous One (Acts 3.14), and ‘Author of life’ (Acts 3.15).

Peter calls Jesus a ‘servant’ (Acts 3.13, 26) in the second of his public sermons which he delivered in Jerusalem (of those recorded by Luke). As Peter concluded this sermon, the Jewish authorities arrested Peter and John and told them to stop preaching (Acts 4.1-22). After their release from custody, a gathering of their friends offered a prayer of thanksgiving and picked up Peter’s reference to Jesus as a ‘servant’ (Acts 4.27, 30). However, they added the adjective, ‘holy’. This addition appears to indicate that the apostles understood that the title ‘servant’, when applied to Jesus, encompasses more than the word ‘servant’ often implies—a person hired to undertake domestic or menial labour.

Before we consider the implications of Jesus being referred to as a servant, we need to note that an alternative translation of the Greek was used in the past. Early English versions (Tyndale, Geneva, KJV) used ‘son’ or ‘child’ instead of ‘servant’. They may have been influenced by the Latin Vulgate which has ‘son’ (*filium*). The ESV includes a footnote with the alternative translation of ‘child’ (Acts 3.13). However, the translation ‘servant’ in the main text in modern English versions appears to be correct. Let’s consider what is entailed in referring to Jesus as the holy servant of God.

Willing service. A servant is not a slave. A slave is one who has been forced into a situation of service (e.g., as a captive of war or by defaulting on accrued debt). A servant is one who takes on a service willingly. We apply the term in this way when we refer to a person who has chosen to take a position as a ‘public servant’. This expression used to mean more when people gave up other opportunities to serve in their political jurisdiction, than it does today when many people see public office (elected or appointed) as means for personal advancement or gain or as an opportunity to push personal agendas. Paul tells us that Jesus willingly emptied himself by taking on the form of a servant (Phil 2.7). And Jesus states that “the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mk 10.45).

Submission. While the word ‘servant’ can be used as an honorific for a person who willingly serves. It also incorporates the concept of being in a position of submission (humiliation) or of being obliged to another person. For example, David applied the word ‘servant’ to himself (1 Chron 17.24) when he expressed thankfulness for the covenant God had enacted with him and the honour God had bestowed upon him. The Greek word used in the Septuagint translation of the OT in David’s prayer is the same one that is used in the verses in Acts which we are considering. Jesus offered submission to the Father as he humbled himself by becoming a man. He was born in a low estate, lived in near poverty (Mt 8.20) during his three-plus years of ministry, and was humiliated as a criminal in the unjust treatment he received during his trial (Acts 8.32). He also demonstrated acts of submissive humiliation such as washing his disciples’ feet (Jn 13.1-15) and caring for social outcasts such as lepers, prostitutes, and tax collectors. He taught that anyone who wished to be first, “must be last of all and servant of all.” (Mk 9.35). The ultimate act of submission which Jesus offered in his humiliation was when, as the sinless one (the holy servant), he died in the place of sinners.

Fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Peter likely had in mind the Servant Song passages in Isaiah (Is 42.1-4; Is 49.1-7; Is 50.4-11; Is 52.13-53.12) when he referred to Jesus as God’s servant. These passages have been understood by Bible-believing theologians to be prophecies speaking of a person who was to appear as the Messiah—not of Israel as a people or nation, as some Jewish interpreters suggest. Peter reminds his audience that Jesus was the suffering servant of Isaiah. The likelihood that Peter used the term ‘servant’ to refer to Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecies is reinforced by the apparent allusions which occur in his sermon. For example, he speaks of Jesus being ‘delivered over’ (Acts 3.13). The Septuagint has ‘given over to death’ in Isaiah 53.12. Peter refers to Jesus as the Righteous One (Acts 3.14) as does Isaiah 53.11. We will consider another example below. Therefore, it is evident that Jesus, the suffering servant (Acts 3.13-15) of Peter’s sermon, is the suffering servant referred to by Isaiah.

Exaltation. Peter also says that the God of their ancestors had “glorified” his servant Jesus (Acts 3.13). This is likely an allusion to what Isaiah declares about the servant, “he shall be high and lifted up, and shall be exalted” (Is 52.13). Jesus was already the Son of God when he came to earth. He had the full glory of deity (Jn 1.14). So, the glorifying to which Peter refers must apply to Jesus as the God-man. His human nature was glorified along with his divine nature at his resurrection and ascension into glory. Paul tells us that because of his willingness to be subjected to humiliation culminating in death, Jesus was highly exalted (glorified) and given a name above every name (Phil 2.9).

42. Jesus, The Holy and Righteous One (Acts 3.14)

Peter accuses his Jewish audience of denying “the Holy and Righteous One”. Peter’s audience would have understood that by using this title he was declaring that Jesus is God. God told the Hebrews during their journey from Egypt to Canaan, that they should be holy as he is holy (Lev 11.44-45). The Psalmist uses the explicit term ‘Holy One’ when he records that the Hebrews provoked God in the wilderness (Ps 78.41). Thus, Peter may be associating the denial of Jesus by his contemporary audience with the provocation of God by the Hebrews during the exodus. In a previous sermon, Peter applied Psalm 16.10 to Jesus when he gave prophetic evidence for the resurrection (Acts 2.27). This Psalm states that the Holy One will not experience corruption through bodily decay. The term ‘Righteous One’ is also applied to God in the OT (Prov 21.12; Is 24.16). Pharaoh admits that he has sinned against the ‘righteous one’ (Ex 9.27). The most apposite OT reference is in the passage describing the work of the suffering servant, where the Messiah is referred to as “the righteous one, my servant” (Is 53.11). Peter conflates God’s ‘servant’ (Acts 3.13) and ‘righteous one’ (Acts 3.14) as he applies these terms to Jesus. Thus, Peter declares not only that Jesus is the LORD of the OT but also the promised Messiah.

We can briefly consider what holiness and righteousness are as applied to God. Both are of the essence of God’s character. Holiness is separation from anything that could pollute one’s nature. God is the ultimate manifestation of holiness (Is 6.3). Righteousness is derived from the concept of measuring something with a straight edge (like a ruler). It refers to actions and judgements done in accordance with justice and obedience. The saints in heaven declare to God, “All nations will come and worship you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.” (Rev 15.4).

Jesus is holy, the only holy man who ever lived. He committed no sin (1 Pt 2.22), even though he was tempted in every respect like we are (Heb 4.15). He told those who refused to listen to him that they could not accuse him of sin (Jn 8.46). He was also declared to be the ‘Holy One of God’ by demons (Lk 4.34) and by Peter speaking on behalf of the apostles (Jn 6.69). Jesus is also righteous. The centurion who witnessed the crucifixion, declared “Certainly this man was innocent [righteous]!” (Lk 23.47). The OT prophesied that the Messiah, the righteous king, would come riding on a donkey (Zech 9.9). This was fulfilled when Jesus entered Jerusalem during the week before his crucifixion (Mt 21.5; although Matthew does not include the word ‘righteous’ in his quotation). Other passages in the OT prophesy that the coming Messianic king would reign in righteousness (Is 32.1; Jer 23.5). Later Stephen accuses the Jews in the same way as Peter did, of betraying and murdering the “Righteous One” (Acts 7.52).

Jesus as the God-man is both holy and righteous. Jesus as God is, by his essential character, both holy and righteous. However, these attributes are essential, not only because Jesus is God but because he is the mediator between God and man and the sovereign king over the universe. It was necessary that the mediator of the new covenant be perfect (holy and righteous) so that he could offer the perfect sacrifice of himself on the cross as a substitute for sinners. Had Jesus had any defects (blemish or spot of sin) he could not have been the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Ex 12.5; Jn 1.29). Peter declares that we have been ransomed from futility by the precious blood of Christ who was like a lamb without blemish or spot

(1 Pt 1.19). Likewise, Jesus must be perfect to establish his everlasting holy and righteous reign. As king, Jesus will judge the world in righteousness (Ps 72.2; Ps 96.13; Ps 98.9).

The fact that Jesus is holy and righteous has a direct impact on believers. Those who have confessed their sins and believed in the Holy and Righteous One as their Lord and saviour are also holy and righteous. For example, Paul tells the Corinthians that they are holy as the temple of God (1 Cor 3.17). The Greek word he uses is the word from which we derive our English word ‘saints’. Throughout the NT believers are referred to as saints—the sanctified ones, or to coin a word, the ‘holified’ ones. Likewise, believers are the righteous ones (Heb 12.23) who live by faith (Rom 1.17; Gal 3.11; Heb 10.38) and have been made righteous by the righteousness of Jesus (Rom 5.19). Paul uses both terms when he states that his conduct was “holy and righteous and blameless” (1 Thess 2.10). He could only make such a statement if it were true. Later in this series of meditations (at, Acts 20.32) we will consider sanctification as imputed (application of), forensic (declaration of), progressive (growth of), and definitive (perfection of) which believers experience. Now, we can rejoice over the wonder that God, through Christ, imparts to us holiness and righteousness and that one day these will be perfected in us, because we will be like our saviour (1 Jn 3.2).

The trial of Jesus was a fabricated farce. Peter says that when the Jews denied Jesus as the Messiah and demanded that he be crucified, they asked instead that a murderer be released to them. When they sentenced to death the only perfect person to have ever lived, they turned holiness and righteousness upside down. They declared good to be evil, and evil to be good. People today are no different. They revile Jesus and judge his teachings and commands in the Bible to be foolish and onerous. For example, they punish people who speak truth (e.g., that a man with a penis cannot be a woman with a uterus or that abortion is murder) and reward those who commit crimes by eliminating bail requirements and minimizing their punishment. Isaiah warns us, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness ...” (Is 5.20). God will judge anyone who denies the Holy and Righteous One.

43. Jesus, the Author of Life (Acts 3.15)

Peter accuses his audience of an astounding crime, “you killed the Author of life”. He states a contrast between the one who gives life to another person and those who kill one who is alive. He presents what could almost be considered a paradox. How could the author (source) of life be killed? The eternal God is life, and he cannot die. Only he can give life to another person, as he did when he breathed life into the body he had formed for Adam, “and the man became a living creature” (Gen 2.7). It would have seemed to be a contradiction in the minds of Peter’s audience for Jesus to have died if he is God. Everyone knows that only a created “living creature” can die. The answer to this apparent paradox lies in the fact that Jesus is both God and man—the God-man. As God, he cannot die, but in his human nature, his spirit could be separated from his temporal body. This is what Luke tells us happened, ‘Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last.’ (Lk 23.46).

The Greek word translated as ‘author’ which Luke uses is a compound word derived from words that mean ‘beginning’ and ‘to go’. Early English versions (e.g., Tyndale and Geneva) translated it as ‘Lord’, the KJV introduced the term ‘Prince’. The NIV and ESV have ‘Author’. The word appears in three other places in the NT but is not translated as ‘author’ in the ESV. In Hebrews 2.10, “founder of salvation” could be translated as “author of salvation”. Also in Hebrews 12.2, “founder ... of our faith”, could also be translated as “author ... of our faith”. Later in Acts (Acts 5.31), the word ‘Leader’ is used. Other translations use ‘Prince’ or ‘ruler’ in this verse. Thus, the word as it is used by Luke in Acts appears to have two possible meanings: ‘author’, meaning the one who originates something, and ‘leader’, meaning the one who goes before or ahead. All instances of the word in the NT are applied to Jesus. He is both the source of life and

the one who leads (goes before) others to life as the firstfruits of the resurrection (Acts 26.23; 1 Cor 15.20-21). The word provides an excellent summary of the role of Jesus in both temporal creation and spiritual re-creation through salvation. We will focus our attention on the first of the proposed possible meanings—Jesus is the author and sustainer of all life.

Jesus is the author of all created life—animal, human, and angelic. Consider what the NT writers say about Jesus as creator:

- “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life ...” (Jn 1.3-4).
- “... Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” (1 Cor 8.6).
- “For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.” (Col 1.16).
- “... for whom and by whom all things exist ...” (Heb 2.10).

A created entity does not have the power or ability to create life. To believe that chance events formed nucleotides, assembled them into information-laden, reproducible DNA, and spontaneously created living creatures is to believe in a myth that is more foolish than that greedy Midas was cursed because everything he touched, including his food, turned to gold. Likewise, the belief that one day scientists will create intelligent living entities by assembling organic molecules or on a silicon wafer salted with metals is more foolish than belief that a sprinkling of pixie dust will give you the ability to fly. Living creatures (animal or human) come into existence at conception only as Jesus wills it and as he acts through the Holy Spirit (Lk 1.35).

Not only is Jesus the author of physical life, but he also is the sustainer of all living created entities. Every breath that we take is given to us by Jesus (Acts 17.28). And Jesus literally holds the universe together (Col 1.17) at the subatomic forces level (i.e., the strong, weak, and electromagnetic forces) and at the macro level (i.e., gravity). Ask any physicist the simple question, ‘What is gravity?’ A NASA website says, “Gravity is what makes pieces of matter clump together into planets, moons, and stars. Gravity is what makes the planets orbit the stars...” That does not explain what gravity *is*, it only tells us what gravity *does*. Saying that it is a ‘force’ doesn’t help, because then we have to define what a force is. At the end of a definitional chain, we must conclude that the universe is held together by the mind of Jesus. Jesus didn’t wind up the universe and walk away from it. Every moment, from his throne in heaven, he sustains everything.

Jesus is also the author of spiritual and everlasting life. It is Jesus, again working through the Holy Spirit, who changes the hearts and minds of the spiritually dead and makes them into living saints who will be with him forever. Jesus declared:

- “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” (Jn 14.6).
- “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” (Jn 10.10).
- “... that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” (Jn 3:15).

Paul, writing in Hebrews, likewise says that Jesus is the founder (author) of salvation (Heb 2.10) and founder (author) of our faith (Heb 12.2). And John says, “In him was life, and the life was the light of men.” (Jn 1.4). By virtue of his perfect sacrificial death on the cross and through his resurrection, which conquered death (Acts 3.15, 26), Jesus is the author (source) of a new spiritual and physical everlasting life for all those who believe in him (Acts 3.16) and have repented of their sins and had them blotted out (Acts 3.19).

44. Faith in Jesus (Acts 3.16)

Which of the following requires the most faith? To believe that: 1) Jesus lived 2,000 years ago, rose from

the dead and is God. 2) The earth is a flat disk, not a sphere. 3) Aliens visited the earth, and they built the pyramids. 4) Life on earth appeared from a chance molecular agglomeration. 5) The universe created itself. 6) Anthropogenic generation of carbon dioxide is the *cause* of global warming. 7) Robots with AI will displace humans? Everyone has faith in something. We all live by faith. For example, if we didn't have faith we wouldn't eat or drink anything because we would be paranoid that someone is trying to poison us.

In the movie *Indiana Jones - The Last Crusade* (1989), Indy is standing at the edge of deep chasm which he needs to cross to get to the 'holy grail'. Sweat beading on his forehead, he says, "It's a leap of faith." Then he leans forward with his left leg outstretched and his foot lands on a previously invisible narrow stone bridge. Is everything we believe a 'leap of faith'? Why do people believe what they believe? Are their beliefs based on deductive logic? Are they influenced by claims of experts in white coats? Are they following the science? Is their faith based on inductive arguments—what has been seen here will be the same 'everywhere'? Do they follow majority opinion? Are they basing their beliefs on empirical evidence as Thomas claimed that he needed so that he could believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead (Jn 20.25)? Even if a person, like Thomas, says that he will only believe what he sees with his own eyes, he cannot know for certain that his eyes are informing him correctly. We know that people can easily be fooled by optical illusions and special effects. Also, our experience cannot be used to define reality. For example, we experience time as a constant, but we now know that it varies with velocity and gravity.

Peter's use of the word 'faith' in this sermon is its first occurrence in Acts. Luke had used the word about twenty-five times in his Gospel. For example, Jesus saw the faith of the men who lowered the paralytic from the roof, he said to the paralytic, "Man, your sins are forgiven." (Lk 5.20). Jesus also marveled at the faith of the centurion (Lk 7.9). There are about the same number of occurrences of 'faith' in Acts as in Luke's Gospel. From a biblical perspective, true faith is primarily confidence in the trustworthiness of God and his word. If a person accepts the truthfulness of Scripture, then faith also includes belief that Jesus is the person described in the Gospels. Thus, true faith believes that Jesus is God incarnate who died to pay the penalty for his people's sins and rose victoriously from the grave on the third day. True faith also believes, based on the word of God, that Jesus will return (Acts 1.11) to this earth to judge all mankind (Acts 17.31) and to create a new heaven and earth (2 Pt 3.13). Faith, as it is used in the Bible can have other meanings such as 'the faith', which is the body of apostolic truth (Acts 6.7; Jude 3). The word can also be used as equivalent to evidence, as Paul uses it in Acts 17.31 (translated 'assurance'). Thus, faith can refer to an act of belief; the object of that belief such as in God, Jesus, or the Bible, and God's promises (Heb 11.13); and the means of forming that belief (Gal 3.14).

Peter uses the word 'faith' in two senses in Acts 3.16. He indicates that it was through belief in the name of Jesus—that is, through belief in Jesus—that the lame man's feet were restored. Thus, faith was the object of belief. Then, he says that the faith was through Jesus. Thus, faith was the means of the healing miracle. Peter does not indicate who exercised faith in Jesus. Since there is no mention of the faith of the healed man it likely was Peter who exercised faith. He believed that Jesus could heal the man. In some instances of miracles, the object of the miracle exercised faith (Lk 8.48; Lk 17.19; Acts 14.9). In other cases, the faith was exercised by people who cared about the person(s) to whom the miracle was administered (Lk 5.20; Acts 27.25). In some cases, the faith was exercised by a person performing a miracle (James 5.14-15), as with Peter's faith.

Was Peter's faith a leap into the chasm of the unknown, as was Indy's? Certainly not! Peter's faith was founded on his trust that Jesus as God could perform miracles even though he wasn't present on earth. He had witnessed Jesus perform many miracles, and was a witness to the resurrection, so he knew for certain that Jesus could perform another miracle if that was his will.

Faith in Jesus is not a leap into the unknown. It is the most rational act any person can make in his life. It is an acceptance that the word of God is true. Christian faith is supported by logical arguments. For example,

there is a God who as creator has the right to establish moral laws and the means whereby sinners may be saved. A person who denies these realities is a fool (Ps 14.1). We don't have the immediate evidence of Jesus' physical miracles or of his resurrection which Peter had. However, we have reliable eyewitness accounts in the Bible. Our faith in Jesus is bolstered by accounts such as Luke's record of the healing of the lame man. However, every believer, whether he does or does not believe that sign miracles are still available to the Church today, is an eyewitness to miracles. He has at minimum personally experienced two miracles: he exists, and he has been converted. In addition, believers have ultimate evidence to support their faith in Jesus. This is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who enables us to believe in Jesus as our Lord and saviour.

Unbelief in Jesus is the real leap of blind faith. It is based on suppression of innate truth (Rom 1.18); on fairy tales (e.g., 'Big Bang' cosmology); and on foolish beliefs such as in the innate goodness of people, we can use technology to solve moral problems, or that our destiny depends on our *karma* (Rom 1.22).

45. A Response is Required (Acts 3.14-26)

The common expression, 'He pulled no punches.', applies in this situation. Peter is blunt with his audience with his direct accusations of their wickedness (Acts 1.26). About three months previous they had denied that Jesus is the Messiah. They had asked that Barabbas, an insurrectionist and murderer, be released by Pilate instead of the Holy and Righteous One. And, they had screamed, "Crucify, crucify him!" (Lk 23.21) as they handed over the Author of life to die at the hands of the Romans.

Peter graciously acknowledges that there was a degree less culpability in their actions because they apparently did not have all the facts about who Jesus is. Peter appears to make a subtle distinction between sinning unintentionally ('in ignorance') and sinning defiantly (Num 15.27-31; Lev 4.2, 27; Lev 5.17). It is similar to the distinction in our laws between manslaughter during a fight and premeditated murder. However, another common expression applies in this case, "Ignorance is no excuse." If you are stopped by a police officer for turning right at a red light where a sign is posted prohibiting this, you cannot use the excuse, "But I didn't see the sign." The officer will rightly say, "You should have been paying attention." And he will hand you a ticket for the infraction. Thus, what they did against Jesus, without a full understanding of who he was, in no way diminished their guilt. So, Peter did not back away from proclaiming their complicity in evil. But he did offer them a means of escape from their situation.

One of the ways to change their situation would be for his audience to learn more about who Jesus really is. So, Peter provides them with additional information about Jesus as the fulfillment of what Moses and the prophets wrote—including the surprising truth that the suffering and death of the Messiah was in accordance with God's plan. Thus, they would no longer be able to claim ignorance about Jesus. Then, if they rejected Jesus after that, their culpability would be complete, and they would be destroyed (Acts 3.23). With the completion of the NT and the worldwide availability of the Bible, the times of ignorance (Acts 17.30) have ended. No one can claim before God, "But I didn't know who Jesus is."

Another way for addressing their rejection of Jesus, was given in the command to repent (Acts 3.19). Peter knew about second chances. His denial of knowing Jesus was a grievous sin. Yet Jesus forgave Peter. And here he is a few months later boldly professing Christ and declaring remission of sins through repentance. There is no sin committed in ignorance that is unforgivable. Without getting into a debate about what Jesus means when he speaks of an unforgivable sin, we can rest in the assurance that even a previous rejection of Jesus is forgivable if a person is truly repentant (Mt 12.31-32). Likewise, every sin (e.g., idolatry, murder, adultery, theft, deceit, or covetousness) is forgivable if a person turns back from his sin with a deliberate change of mind. In this about-face a person must have an understanding of having committed sin. A person cannot repent of something he doesn't know or acknowledge to be a sin. This is why Peter identified

their egregious sins. Repentance also must include a knowledge of who has been offended by the sin. This means that a sinner must confess that it is God whom he has offended by breaking his law. He must also come to Jesus in faith as he appeals to him for forgiveness. Throughout Scripture, we find numerous examples of how forgiving God is. As Peter speaks to his audience, he echoes the sentiment of Jesus' gracious word on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Lk 23.34).

Peter informs his hearers that if they repent (Acts 3.19-21):

- *Their sins will be blotted out.* Salvation is definitive. Every sin, past, present, and future in a believer's life is covered by the blood of Christ. This does not mean that by uttering a few words like "Forgive me, Lord." we can go on sinning. True conversion changes a believer's heart so that he hates sin and desires to have it expunged from his life.
- *Times of refreshing will come.* When a person becomes a Christian, his life is changed like when a spring rain revives a dry landscape. His life is no longer without hope (Eph 2.12). Instead, he is filled with the presence of the Lord through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2.38). He has a new purpose in life, which is to glorify God (1 Cor 10.31) rather to serve self.
- *They will be with Jesus at the restoration of all things.* A believer in Jesus understands that Jesus will certainly return to this earth (Acts 1.11). This will occur only at the time appointed by the Father (Mt 24.36) for restoring all things (Acts 3.21; Mt 17.11). At that time, Jesus will establish a reconstituted paradise, the new heavens and earth (2 Pt 3.10-13). Thus, every believer has been endowed, by the indwelling Holy Spirit (2 Cor 1.22; Eph 1.14), with the hope of an everlasting life in a sinless glory (2 Tim 4.8).

Those who have been provided with a second chance to repent should not shirk their responsibility to turn from their wickedness. Another opportunity may never come again. Thus, Peter warned his hearers of the consequences if they ignored the information he had provided about Jesus (Acts 3.23) and hardened their hearts with deliberate rejection of the Gospel message and of the saviour. To reject Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, the God-man, the murdered but risen saviour (Acts 3.15, 26), will lead to nothing but destruction. God declares that he will repay and judge those who continue in rebellion against him. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." (Heb 10.30-31). Each one of us has the same responsibility—believe in Jesus and repent—otherwise we also will not be with Jesus at the restoration of all things.

46. Jesus, the Final Prophet (Acts 3.22-24)

Peter appeals to Moses and the Prophets to defend his assertion that Jesus is the promised Messiah. He declares that Jesus is the fulfillment of all that the Moses and the prophets preached and wrote about. The Pentateuch ends with an editorial comment added after the death of Moses. It states that no prophet had arisen in Israel like Moses who knew the LORD face to face and did signs and wonders (Dt 34.10-11). After Moses, the only person until Samuel who is referred to as a prophet is an unnamed individual (Judges 6.8) who warns the Israelites of the consequences of their disobedience. Peter implies that the first formal (great) prophet since Moses was Samuel. In his own lifetime, Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD (1 Sam 3.20). Following Samuel, there was a succession of prophets. Peter states that Moses, Samuel, and subsequent prophets all prophesied about the coming of the Messiah, who is Jesus.

We won't review the prophecies about Jesus which were pronounced by the prophets after Samuel. There could be as many as three hundred of them. The most direct come from the Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Zacheriah. However, why is Samuel mentioned by Peter as a prophet who spoke about the coming days of the Messiah? We don't usually think of Samuel delivering a Messianic prophecy. Samuel was a prophet of the Messianic eschatological age because of his role in establishing the Davidic kingship (1 Sam 16.1-

13) which would be an everlasting kingdom (1 Ki 2.45; Dan 7.14, 27).

In the intertestamental period, before the coming of Christ, the words of Moses which predicted the coming of a prophet like himself (Acts 3.22; Dt 18.15), were understood as not having applicability to any prophet who had yet appeared. The Jewish people were anticipating the coming of a specific prophet, king, and lawgiver who would have a role similar to that which Moses had filled. It seems that there was a heightened Messianic expectation of the arrival of the Prophet before John the Baptist began his ministry—e.g., among those in the Qumran community. When John began preaching, his hearers asked him if he was the Prophet, which he denied being but said that he was the forerunner of the Prophet (Jn 1.21, 25-27). People who heard Jesus' teaching and witnessed his miraculous signs understood that the Prophet had finally arrived (Jn 6.14; Jn 7.40-41). Peter indicates that Jesus is in fact the Prophet and the Messiah whom Moses and the prophets spoke about. He said that their own authoritative Scriptures declare that Jesus is the one whom they had been expecting (Lk 2.25-26). It should be noted that Peter appears to use a *double-entendre* with his statement, "The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet ..." (Acts 3.22). Jesus was brought forth as the fulfillment of Moses' prophecy, but he was also raised from the dead (Acts 3.26) to solidify his offices of prophet, priest, and king.

During his earthly ministry, Jesus spoke prophetically. He referred to his pending crucifixion and then resurrection (Mt 16.21-23; Mt 17.22-23) and to the destruction of Jerusalem within a generation (Mt 24.1-28). From his place in glory, he also provided many additional prophecies, delivered through John in Revelation. So, clearly Jesus is a prophet. But the Messianic expectation of a prophet like Moses, was not focused so much on foretelling but on lawgiving. Moses was the great legislator who gave the Jewish people the Ten Commandments, the case-law examples of how to apply the summary commandments, and the ceremonial and holiness-separation laws. Jesus established himself as the Prophet when he delivered his *Sermon on the Mount* and informed his audience how the Mosaic law was supposed to have been properly interpreted and applied (Mt 5.21). Later he is explicit that he is the lawgiver (Mt 28.20; Jn 15.10). The people accepted him as one who spoke with authority (Mt 7.28-29). In addition, Paul, writing in Hebrews, makes it clear that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Mosaic ceremonial laws. Jesus is a greater legislator than Moses (Heb 3.3) because the Mosaic laws came from Jesus as LORD, he kept the law perfectly in every detail, declared that he had not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it (Mt 5.17-19), and indicated how the law should be properly applied.

Jesus is the great and final Prophet who supersedes all prophets before him (Heb 1.1-2). It is his law that all mankind must obey. The final revelation of his law is given in the NT which he delivered to us through the apostles. Now that the NT is complete, there is no need for new prophetic revelations (*foretelling* or *forthtelling*). As the *Shorter Catechism* (Q. 3) informs us, the "The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man." Today there are no prophets in the Church. In addition, there were no prophets after Christ—Mohammed was not the 'seal of the prophets', nor were pretenders like Joseph Smith or Charles Russell prophets, nor are Benny Hinn and his ilk today. There is only one Prophet to whom we should listen, that is Jesus as he speaks to us through his word in the Bible.

Peter declared twice (Acts 3.22-23) that Jesus must be listened to. He echoed Moses' words (Dt 18.19) as he said that anyone who does not listen to this final Prophet will be destroyed (Acts 3.23). The message of the Gospel reported in the Bible is clear. God, through the God-man Jesus, is the lawgiver. All mankind, in Adam, broke God's law, and every person sins daily. Jesus declares that he is the way, the truth, and the life and that the only way to come to the Father is through him (Jn 14.6). Peter states that men must repent of their sins (Acts 3.19) and listen to the words of Jesus. If men do not, then there is only one direction for them. Jesus will say, "depart from me, you workers of lawlessness" (Mt 7.23), "into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." (Mt 25.41).

47. God's Covenant with Mankind (Acts 3.25-26)

Peter reminds his audience of their relationship with God through the covenant made with Abraham and marked with the sign of circumcision (Acts 7.8). He calls them “sons of the covenant”. For the Jews, being able to trace their ancestry to Abraham was important. It gave them a sense of identity as the called-out people of God. The importance of ancestry for the Jews is illustrated by those who claimed to be among the priests’ families but were unable to show that they were descendants of Aaron. They were excluded from the privileges of the priestly office (Ezra 2.62; Neh 7.64). Peter doesn’t take his audience back to the beginning, in the midst of the curse on sin, when God promises that the Messiah would come and destroy Satan. (Gen 3.15). Nevertheless, he grounds his message of the good news that Jesus is the Messiah of history and promise.

Outside of Paul’s writings (including Hebrews), the word ‘covenant’ appears only seven times in the NT. Luke records Zechariah’s prophecy, in which he refers to God remembering his holy covenant made with the fathers (Lk 1.72). The covenant with the fathers is mentioned here (Acts 3.25) by Peter and later by Stephen in his sermon (Acts 7.8). John also sees a vision of the Ark of the Covenant (Rev 11.19). During the supper on the night he was betrayed, Jesus lifted the cup and said, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.” (Mt 26.28; Mk 14.24; similar in, Lk 22.20). We understand this to be the inauguration point for the new covenant which is the last form of the covenant between God and man. This covenant was first made with Adam as mankind’s representative. It was re-enacted with the second ‘Adam’, Noah (Gen 6.8; Gen 9.9-17), who would become the father of and represent all postdiluvian mankind. Then the covenant narrowed to include only the physical descendants of Abraham (Gen 15.18; Gen 17.9). The covenant was narrowed further to include only the descendants of Jacob when it was re-established (Ex 6.4-5) at Mount Sinai with Moses as the mediator (Dt 4.13).

In Mark’s account of the enactment of the new covenant, the words “which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” are added. It is generally believed that Mark’s Gospel is essentially the words of Peter, recorded by Mark. Thus, it is significant that Peter (Mark) refers to the sacrifice of Jesus as being ‘poured out for many’. Then, in this sermon in the temple precincts, Peter states that through the offspring of Abraham all families on earth would be blessed (Acts 3.25), which is a quotation from Genesis 22.18 (see also, Gen 12.3) and relates to the Abrahamic covenant. The word ‘offspring’ used in both instances (Gen 22.18; Acts 3.25; see also, Gen 17.7) is singular. Thus, as Paul tells us (Gal 3.16), it is to be understood as pointing to a single individual—Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant.

Peter informs his audience that Jesus was sent to the Jews first (Acts 3.26; Rom 1.16). As God’s particularly selected covenant people, they were given the opportunity to receive the Gospel message and salvation before it was offered more widely to Gentiles. The Jews in Peter’s day were the obvious heirs of the covenantal promise made to Abraham—Jesus was first Israel’s Messiah (Rom 9.5). However, the new covenant is focused on a person (Jesus), not a nation or ethnic group. So, Peter does not limit the Abrahamic promise to the Jews. He understood correctly that Jesus came into the world to save sinners, regardless of their national or ethnic background (Jn 3.16-17). This is consistent with the theme that Luke presents throughout Acts, beginning with Jesus’ statement at his ascension when he told the apostles that they would be his witnesses “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1.8). Paul states explicitly that there is neither Jew nor Greek among those who are in Christ Jesus, but all believers are “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” (Gal 3.28-29).

Peter announces that blessings promised to Abraham are poured out on all those who are encompassed within the Abrahamic covenant—Jew or Gentile. The summary of the blessings is given in Peter’s words, “turning every one of you from your wickedness” (Acts 3.26). The blessings of the Messianic age include:

- *Repentance*. Peter called for his hearers to repent (Acts 3.19). The ability to repent of sin is not innate

within a sinful heart. It is a gift from the Holy Spirit. Therefore, repentance is one of the blessings of being in the covenant.

- *Faith*. Peter indicated that it was through faith in the name of Jesus that the lame beggar had been healed (Acts 3.16). The ability to exercise faith to believe in Jesus is a blessing and gift from the Holy Spirit (Eph 2.8-9).
- *Forgiveness*. Peter told them that their sins would be blotted out (Acts 3.19). Forgiveness of all our sins is a tremendous blessing. Satan can no longer hold us hostage with the threat of our sins being exposed, because they have all been covered with the blood of Christ—by the new covenant in his blood.
- *Baptism*. In this sermon, Peter didn't call for his audience to be baptized. However, he had in his previous sermon (Acts 2.38). Those who repented and believed were baptized and added to the Church (Acts 2.41; Acts 4.4). A blessing of the covenant is that we become members of a new family. We are brothers and sisters with Jesus and our father is the Father in heaven.
- *Obedience*. Peter encouraged his hearers to 'turn back' or 'turn around' (Acts 3.19). When a person becomes a Christian, he is blessed with a desire to serve God and with an ability to perform works that are pleasing to him.
- *Perseverance and glorification*. Peter doesn't refer to these blessings. But they are implied for recipients under the Abrahamic covenant. Abraham believed that he would receive a better city than Ur (Heb 11.6, 10).

48. Truth Proclamation – A Threat

(Acts 4.1-3, 5-7)

Teach truth and your contract will be cancelled, you will lose tenure, or you will find it difficult to obtain a teaching position. Around the time this meditation was written, a news item had appeared, "[Arizona school board member says district should reject hiring teachers with Christian values: 'Not...safe'](#)". The issue at this school board is one that is being encountered throughout the West. The biblical truths that there are only two sexes and that God designed marriage between one woman and one man is despised. A Christian holding to biblical truth is increasingly finding it difficult to obtain a teaching position. However, it is not only in the secular school systems that biblical truth is being expunged. Many purported evangelical Christian universities and seminaries also ridicule biblical truth. For example, they believe the myth that the universe is billions of years old and reject the Genesis account, which states unequivocally that God created everything in six consecutive natural days, and he did this a bit over 6,000 years ago. We don't need to consider the wider body of 'Christian' institutions which reject miracles and have sucked on the mind-befuddling pipe of naturalism.

Peter and John were telling the visitors to the temple how the lame man had been healed through faith in Jesus (Acts 3.16) and proclaiming that through Jesus there is a resurrection of the dead (Acts 4.2). The excitement of the gathered crowd came to the attention of the religious leaders in Jerusalem and of the custodians of the temple. Without a just reason they arrested Peter and John and imprisoned them until the next day. Peter and John had the honour (James 1.2) of being the first post-resurrection NT Christians to spend a night in jail because of an expression of their faith in Jesus. Their arraignment followed the next day. They were set in the midst of the same assembled council which had condemned Jesus a few months earlier. Both Annas and Caiaphas had taken part in the crucifixion of Jesus. They were primed to act against Jesus' disciples.

Satan continues to work through his earthly minions in the same way today. The administrations in many academic institutions are prone to react quickly to perceived threats. There is limited due-process and hypocritical lip-service for the concepts of 'innocent until proven guilty', 'open discourse', 'academic freedom', 'let the facts speak for themselves' or 'follow the science'. If a person teaches truth which contradicts the 'party line', you can be sure that educational administrators will immediately take action

and endeavour to silence the teacher. Today, if a teacher challenges abortion on demand, socialistic economics, ‘social justice’, revisionist history, ‘cancel culture’, reparations, transgenderism, homosexual practices, enforced equity, Critical Race Theory, or anthropogenic causes for global warming he or she will be walked out the door. However, we can be thankful that there is still a measure of freedom in our culture, and teachers of truth are not sent to black ops sites and inflicted with water-boarding.

Luke tells us that the religious authorities were “greatly annoyed”. Peter and John were not teaching against the current social order, they were not challenging the ceremonial rites—they had entered the temple to observe the evening hour of prayer—they were not calling for a rejection of the Mosaic law, nor were they inciting the populous to rebel against the council’s authority or that of their Roman overmasters. To the contrary, people who believe the preaching about faith in Jesus and the resurrection become better behaving people who care for one another (Acts 2.42-46; Acts 4.32-37). What then caused the Jewish authorities to be exasperated? Some reasons are implied by the general context:

- *Power and prominence.* The council consisted of men of influence who loved to have political and religious power and prominence (Lk 20.46). By teaching in the temple precincts, the apostles were undermining the perceived authority of the council members. The council could not deny the miracle itself. Instead, they inquired about the source of the power and authority for the apostles to heal and teach (Acts 4.7). The council, particularly the Sadducees (who denied the resurrection; Lk 20.27-40), could not tolerate teaching that was contrary to their dogma. They were especially annoyed because the apostles were not ‘educated’ (Acts 4.13) and yet were teaching the people in the temple’s portico (Acts 3.11). They were jealous (Acts 5.17) to retain their places of prominence. Throughout history men, even in the Church (e.g., popes during the Middle Ages) have been obsessed with maintaining power and prominence.
- *Prosperity and ‘peace’.* As is often stated in crime dramas, “Follow the money!” The Sadducees controlled significant portions of the wealth and land in Judea. They had carved out a tenuous coexistence with the Roman authorities that allowed them to advance their material wellbeing (Lk 20.47). Anything that might upset the status quo—such as the expectation of a Messianic deliverer who had come to set up a new Davidic kingdom—could not be tolerated. They were more interested in maintaining a false peace than in hearing about the true peace which Jesus provides (Jn 14.27).
- *Panic.* Fear often drives irrational behaviour. The council went into ‘damage control’, attempting to cut down the rapidly growing plant (Is 5.7; Jn 15.5; 1 Cor 3.6-8) which is based on faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Behind their efforts was an impulsion from Satan. He was likewise panicking. His efforts to derail Christ’s ministry and the provision of salvation had failed after the resurrection. Now thousands were becoming Christians (Acts 4.4). Satan and the world hate Christ and Christians (Jn 15.18-25). They panic and try to stop the preaching of Christ’s death and resurrection. But as Luke shows in Acts, their efforts are foolish. Satan never learns. He cannot defeat Christ (Gen 3.15; Rev 20.10). His actions, driven by panic, only make the Church stronger than before.

49. Truth Proclamation – A Blessing

(Acts 4.4, 33)

In February 2023, a ‘revival’ took place at Ashbury university. We should not doubt the sincerity of those who wished to continue their worship experience after the chapel service had ended. Presumably, the chapel service had included a proclamation of the Gospel message that we are sinners who can only be saved through belief in Jesus (Acts 4.12) and through repentance of sin (Acts 2.38; Acts 3.19). However, we should apply due diligence when assessing an event such as this. John tells us that we must “test the spirits to see whether they are from God” (1 Jn 4.2). Were there true conversions which occurred and were those converted added to the Church (Acts 4.4)? And in the months which followed did those who participated in the ‘revival’ have changed lives which was demonstrated through obedience to the commands of Christ as summarized in the Ten Commandments?

In the modern evangelical community, alternatives to proclamation (preaching) are often offered as means for leading people into the kingdom. For example, showing a movie about the life of Jesus; producing a drama to illustrate a biblical parable; offering ESL programs; an extended praise time on a Sunday morning; hosting a panel discussion or debate; serving in activities that demonstrate the love of Christ, such as operating a soup kitchen or handing out blankets and cups of hot chocolate to the homeless; building compact living accommodations for the homeless; or participating in a boycott against products of a company without a ‘social conscience’. While many of these activities may be intrinsically acceptable for Christians to participate in, and they may attract individuals to Christians and to Christ, an objective consideration of the history of the Church shows that their impact has been very limited for bringing people to salvation, when compared with preaching. They must never be offered as substitutes for biblically-based preaching of the Gospel.

Peter’s sermons on Pentecost (Acts 2.14-39), in the temple precincts (Acts 3.12-26), and before the Jewish council (Acts 4.8-12)—in fact all the sermons in Acts—are examples of how the Gospel must be declared. We noted previously (see, *Speeches in Acts*), that the preaching recorded in Acts is saturated with the Bible and centred around the crucifixion and then resurrection of Jesus.

Luke informs us that many who heard Peter speaking in the temple believed the message and were added to the Church—which had now grown from over 3,000 converts (Acts 2.41) to about 5,000 converts in Jerusalem. We know that Peter’s sermon was effective, not only because of the number added to the Church, but also because of the offense it engendered within the Jewish establishment who attempted unsuccessfully to put a stop to it (Acts 4.18-20). God *always* blesses the faithful proclamation of the Gospel with an outpouring of grace (Acts 4.33). This does not mean that we may expect to see conversions every time it is preached. However, it does mean that preaching *always* results in blessings. For example, a young child in attendance at a Sunday morning service may appear to be distracted, but he may hear something which he retains in his long-term memory. Many years later, the Holy Spirit may use the subconscious memory to convict, convert, or to compel action. When the Gospel is preached:

- *Conversions occur.* Men, women, and children come to believe in Jesus, repent of their sins, and are saved from everlasting damnation. There is no greater blessing for mankind than when the Holy Spirit uses preaching of the Gospel to lead a person into the Kingdom of Heaven.
- *Change happens.* People’s lives are changed. Self-worship is replaced with the worship of the true God. Selfishness is replaced with love and generosity (Acts 2.42-47; Acts 4.32-37). And degenerate behaviour is replaced with conformity to God’s revealed will as expressed in the Ten Commandments. Sometimes these changes are so dramatic (like the healing of a forty-year-old man lame from birth; Acts 3.2; Acts 4.22) that observers are amazed (Acts 4.10).
- *Cultures become civilized.* Without preaching of the Gospel, the world would still be steeped in the pagan, superstitious darkness of Gerco-Roman culture (Acts 17.22-23). We do not have space to enumerate all the blessings which are the result of two millennia of biblical preaching. A few examples will have to suffice. Preaching has resulted in an increase in the population of the world professing to be Christian from a few thousand to over two billion. Through this, Christian influence has been instrumental in the introduction of hospitals and universities, a reduction in pervasive poverty, abolition of slavery, literacy for the masses, the elevation of the status of women, and the introduction of empirical science.

Paul stated that he was sent to “preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” (1 Cor 1.17). Satan hates it when the Church makes its primary mission to be that of Paul and of the other apostles, who were sent into the world to teach (Mt 28.20). Satan knows that proclamation of the Gospel results in great blessings. Therefore, if we wish to see Satan thoroughly defeated, we must pray earnestly for preachers and preaching. Pray that the Church would return to a full-

hearted confidence in the power of preaching and cease from attempts to find ‘seeker-friendly’ substitutes. Pray that seminaries and presbyteries would teach how to preach effectively, with the power of the Holy Spirit and not with human wisdom, and that they would have the courage to dismiss those who do not understand the blessings which result from preaching. Pray also that the Church today would be given means for offering in-person, live preaching before the world. God has established *preaching* as the fundamental means of presenting the Gospel to the world (1 Cor 1.21; Rom 10.14-15). May it flourish until Jesus returns.

50. Truth Proclamation – Public Boldness (Acts 4.7-13)

The history of the Church is replete with examples of believers in the true God who spoke boldly to persecuting authorities. Consider, for example, Elijah calling Ahab a troubler of Israel for abandoning the commandments of the LORD (1 Ki 18.18), John the Baptist declaring Herod Antipas to be an adulterer (Mk 6.17-18), Luther standing on Scripture at the Diet of Worms, Andrew Melville telling King James VI that he was the subject of King Jesus, and Margaret Wilson, aged 18, declaring her confidence in God by quoting Psalm 27.10, before the Wigton authorities sentenced her to death.

Three-and-a-half years before the events recorded here in Acts, Peter and John had been ordinary fishermen—“uneducated, common men”, the Greek uses a word for ‘common’ from which we derive our word ‘idiot’. And about three months prior to these events, Peter had been a timid denier of Jesus. Yet standing in the midst of the Jerusalem authorities they were now speaking boldly. What brought about this transformation? Their opponents in the council recognized that one reason was that they had been with Jesus. Jesus himself was not a trained rabbi, yet he taught with authority that exceeded that of the scribes, the religious legal scholars of his day (Mt 7.29). The apostles had been taught by Jesus, observed his methods of teaching, and understood the importance of the sign miracles which validated him as the final Prophet (Acts 3.22-24). They had also developed a confident belief in biblical truth as their Messianic expectations were fulfilled in Jesus. There is nothing in this world more potent than a conviction based upon absolute truth. Another reason for their boldness was that the promise of Jesus was being fulfilled. He had told them not to be anxious about what to say when they were brought before authorities, because the Holy Spirit would give them the right words (Lk 12.11-12). However, there was an additional factor that brought about the radical transformation—they were “filled with the Holy Spirit”. Every believer today has access to essentially the same resources which can prepare us to defend the faith with bold humility (1 Pt 3.15). We have access to the teaching of Jesus recorded in the Gospels; know for certain that Jesus is the God-man, the saviour of the world; and have the power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. Believers in Jesus Christ are not dependent on their own resources and never stand alone before the antagonistic forces of the God-haters.

Lawyers sometimes use the quip, “Don’t ask a question if you don’t want to hear the answer.” The lawyers in this council didn’t heed the advice. They asked by what power or in whose authority Peter and John acted. Clearly Peter and John had not applied to ‘City Hall’ to perform a miracle or for a speaking permit. Peter jumps immediately to the ultimate source of their authority—God, in Jesus. He states that the lame man was healed by Jesus. But he doesn’t pause to let the council challenge his assertion. Rather, he boldly declares to them that:

- *Jesus died.* With the assistance of the Roman authorities, they had murdered the Author of life (Acts 3.15) on the cursed tree (Dt 21.23; Gal 3.13).
- *Jesus lives.* God overruled their wickedness and raised him from the dead.
- *Jesus reigns.* This one, whom they had rejected as their Messiah, is now the cornerstone (chief, head) of the new covenant community (Ps 118.22). It is ironic that they thought themselves to be custodians of the Herodian temple, which was still under construction, but which would be destroyed within a

generation; but Jesus is the builder of an everlasting temple—the Church (1 Cor 3.16-17).

- *Jesus saves.* This one, who saved the lame man (the Greek word ‘saved’, is translated ‘healed’ in Acts 4.9), also saves (Acts 4.12) spiritual cripples from the devastation of sin and destruction of Satanic dominion. What happened to the lame man was a sign of a far greater reality.

This is the core of the Gospel message which should be proclaimed (“let it be known”; Acts 4.10) regularly and boldly throughout our land.

As in his previous sermons, Peter anchors his proclamation about Jesus in the OT Scriptures, particularly with references to the Psalms (e.g., Ps 2.1-12; Ps 16.1-11; Ps 110.1-7; Ps 118.1-29). Jesus stated that the Psalms spoke about the necessity of his suffering and resurrection (Lk 24.44-46). A sad situation is that many in the Church today overlook the Christology developed throughout the Psalter when they replace the Psalms in praise-worship with inferior mere-human compositions. An important lesson for us is that if we wish to be blessed with boldness in proclamation of the Gospel, we should be intimately familiar with the word of God, especially with what is taught about Jesus in the Psalms.

When an opportunity was presented to Peter, he jumped immediately and boldly proclaimed the truth about Jesus. We may think that opportunities such as this are rare. After all, few of us are currently being arraigned for preaching in a public forum. However, opportunities are presented more often than we might think, in our daily encounters with our neighbours and co-workers, and with strangers. For example, think of a situation in which you recounted a series of unlikely events that had occurred such as a near-miss in an automobile accident in which others were killed but you survived. The person to whom you were speaking might say, “Wow, were you ever lucky!” An opportunity has just been presented for you to respond with words such as, “No, not *luck*, but God’s providential care.” Likewise, when scheduling a meeting with an unbeliever, you can say, without giving offense, “God willing, I will meet you at <time and place>”. This is how James tells us we should respond (James 4.15). Let us be bold in our faith and proclamation of the Lord’s presence in our lives, and by no means be ashamed of the Gospel, the power of God for salvation (Rom 1.16).

51. Salvation Only in Jesus (Acts 4.12)

There are verses in the Bible that are considered especially offensive by the pagan, ‘multi-faith’, and relativistic culture in which we live. One example is Leviticus 18.22. Acts 4.12 is another. Peter uses a strong double negative to declare that there is ‘salvation in not none other’ than in Jesus (Acts 4.10). This verse, along with the words of Jesus, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (Jn 14.6) present an exclusivity about Christ and Christianity. Paul reinforces the message: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” (1 Tim 2.5). This exclusivity is resisted with antagonism both without and within the Church. Many in the wider Church seem to forget the words of Jesus, Peter, and Paul, and strive for détente with other religions. For example, in 2021 Pope Francis met with an Iraqi Shiite leader, seeking to build ties with Islam.

Peter says that “we must be saved”. Salvation is necessary for mankind. ‘Salvation’ can be applied to rescues from temporal challenges, such as healing of a withered hand (Lk 6.9-10) or of a lame man (Acts 4.9), or rescue from a ship in a storm (Acts 27.20, 31). However, as Peter uses it here, he is speaking of spiritual salvation—being saved from the curse of sin and from committed sins (Lk 19.10; Acts 2.21). Without spiritual salvation, a person is without hope (Eph 2.12) and is destined for an everlasting damnation in hell (Mt 25.41; Rev 21.8). Peter addressed the Jewish religious leaders who would have known the LORD’s claim to being humanity’s exclusive saviour (Is 43.11-12; Is 45.22; Ps 96.1-5). He took them to the logical conclusion. Jesus is the LORD who saves. The Jewish leaders had rejected Jesus as the Messiah, but God raised him up from death and took him into heaven through the ascension, where he now reigns

over the nations and the entire created order as the God-man (Acts 4.11).

The biblical claim to the exclusivity of faith in Jesus Christ as the only God and as the only means of salvation rules out all other proposed means, including:

- *Temporal 'solutions'*. There is no salvation in health, wealth, family, friends, education, or technology. None of these provide solutions to mankind's sin problem. Technologies such as cryogenic preservation and transhumanism are illusionary inventions of deluded minds (Rom 1.22).
- *Alternate faiths*. Sadducism, Pharisaism, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism (the list is endless!) are all false religions. Everyone of them rejects Jesus as God-incarnate, who was crucified to pay the debt of sin and was raised to conquer sin and death. Every faith, other than Christianity, is based on the premise that mankind can work his way out of sin and find God.
- *Pluralism*. The idea that multiple faiths can co-exist is Satan's scheme to get rid of Christianity. It is a chimera that cannot be achieved. Islamic, Hindu, and communist governments realize this and impose their systems on the populous and often prohibit the overt practices of Christianity. The foolish notion that a plurality of religious practices can be supported is demonstrated by the inconsistencies among the views which defenders have from different religious persuasions about topics such as abortion, divorce, polygamy, same-sex 'marriage', blood transfusions, eating meat, and immunizations.
- *Universalism*. Many people have concocted the myth that God has destined that all people will eventually be saved (e.g., after millennia of purgation). There is no 'Plan B'. The only means of salvation is through faith in Jesus.

Peter declared that the only true religion and the only means of salvation, is through faith in Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom the sanctimonious Jewish leaders and Roman magistrates had crucified, but whom God had raised from the dead (Acts 4.10). Paul reinforces the necessity of the resurrection for salvation. He says, that without it:

- *Preaching is a vain pursuit* (1 Cor 15.14) – It is a waste of time to preach the Gospel, since there can be no message of salvation, because death still holds sinners in its clutches.
- *Faith is vain* (1 Cor 15.14) *and futile* (1 Cor 15.17) – Our faith would be directed toward a dead saviour who could do nothing.
- *The apostles and preachers misrepresent God* (1 Cor 15.15) – Christianity is a myth rather than a proclamation of historic facts and absolute truth.
- *Everyone is still lost in sin* (1 Cor 15.17) – Jesus was “delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom 4.25); but a dead saviour cannot save anyone.
- *Those who have died (fallen asleep) in Christ have perished* (1 Cor 15.18) – If the resurrection is a lie, how could we know if men have a created everlasting essence—that could be a lie also—and all that we could conclude is that people cease to exist at death.
- *We have hope only in this life* (1 Cor 15.19) – The pleasures we can eek out of aging, decaying bodies are our only hope. So, we may as well grab with gusto what is left of our life—eat and drink as if there is not a tomorrow—or give up in a Nietzschean despair.
- *We are, of all people, to be most pitied* (1 Cor 15.19) – Christians are to be pitied for wasting their time on a futile pursuit that has less hope of fulfillment than a SETI project.

Peter expands the scope of Jesus as the only means of salvation with his words 'under heaven' and 'among men'. Jesus is not only the saviour of believing Jews but is the saviour of all who believe from every nation on earth (Jn 3.16; 1 Tim 2.5-6). All mankind needs salvation. Calling on Jesus in faith and repentance of sin is the only way to be saved.

52. Confounding Foolishness (Acts 4.13-18)

The phrase, “Go woke, go broke.” was a current meme among conservative commentators around the time this meditation was written. It is not a new concept. Paul phrases it in a different way, “Claiming to be wise, they became fools.” (Rom 1.22). Isaiah declares woe on those who are wise in their own eyes (Is 5.21; see also, Prov 12.15; Prov 18.2). Paul also asks where is the one who is wise and declares that God has made foolish the wisdom of this world (1 Cor 1.20). He goes on to say that the wisdom of men cannot give them knowledge of God (1 Cor 1.21). Thus, in the Bible, moral and intellectual foolishness is attributed to idolatry (Is 44.20; Is 45.20; Jer 9.14; Jer 10.8, 14) and the denial of the only true God (Ps 14.1; Ps 53.1; Ps 74.22), his wisdom (Prov 1.22; Prov 16.14), and his laws (Prov 14.16; Is 32.6; Titus 3.3).

God confounds worldly wisdom (Job 12.17; Is 44.25; 1 Cor 3.19). He did this after Peter and John had been arraigned before the Jewish council and Peter had proclaimed to them that the Jesus whom they had killed, now lives, reigns, and saves (Acts 4.10-12). The council members were confounded by:

- *Obvious boldness.* From their perspective, these common men should have been cowed into submission. Two former fishermen were standing before the august council members with their long beards and ornamented robes. Yet, the apostles treated them as the mere men they were, who needed to repent of their wicked actions. Displays of pomp and ceremony and acts of force are used today in the same way in attempts to enforce compliance with anti-Christian regulations. For example, a SWAT team in riot-gear might be sent to arrest an elderly woman praying outside of an abortion facility. Christians who stand with bold humility in the face of this form of persecution enrage pagan authorities, but also confound them.
- *An apparent incongruity.* The council was confused about how these uneducated men, not trained as Jewish legal scholars or Greco-Roman rhetoricians, were able to make such an effective proclamation. Nothing has changed 2,000 years later. For example, Richard Dawkins has stated, “It is absolutely safe to say that if you meet somebody who claims not to believe in evolution, that person is ignorant, stupid or insane (or wicked, but I’d rather not consider that).” And, “If you’re a young earth creationist you may be not stupid but just ignorant. Fortunately ignorance is curable. Try reading a science book.” He simply cannot fathom the idea that a person with an earned doctoral degree in physics, chemistry, geology, or biology could believe in the biblical account of creation.
- *The facts.* Facts were clearly placed before the council. A forty-year-old man who had been lame from birth was standing in their midst with restored limbs (Acts 4.14). And they knew that Jesus had been raised from the dead and had tried to suppress the fact (Mt 28.11-15). Likewise, today you could present overwhelming evidence that the earth cannot be billions of years old (e.g., the earth’s rapidly decaying magnetic field), that the masses of fossils and numerous canyons were formed by a catastrophic Flood about 4,330 years ago and not millions of years in the past (e.g., soft tissue in dino bones and C¹⁴ in coal). Yet, in the face of unassailable facts, the purveyors of evolutionary mythology and deep time deny reality.
- *How to resolve the issue.* The council was stumped. They had no clue how to stop the apostles from preaching the truth. They could not initially use dragoon tactics because they feared a public reaction (Acts 4.21), but they would soon resort to them (Acts 8.1). At most, all they could do was warn them not to speak any more in the name of Jesus (Acts 4.17-18).

Luke reports the *in camera* deliberations among the council members (Acts 4.15-17). There has been speculation about how this became known to Luke. For example, Nicodemus (John 3.1) or Paul (Acts 22.4-5; Acts 26.9-10) before his conversion may have been in attendance and one of them reported it to Luke. Regardless of how Luke got the information, the account reminds us that nothing is secret from the Lord (Ps 94.8-11; Eccl 12.14; Lk 8.17). Just as when the Jewish leaders’ plot to murder Paul was exposed (Acts 23.16, 20-21), so God exposes the foolish schemes of Satan and men who aim to destroy Christianity. We can take a general assurance from this and not be sucked into believing conspiracy theories that swirl around us today. The Lord is in control and exposes evil.

God, through his general grace, has permitted mankind to accomplish much in technology and science, and in other disciplines—particularly as Christianity civilized Europe from about 300 AD until 1700 AD. However, we are seeing a regression into pagan darkness as our civilization crumbles with incidents of rampant foolishness. Examples include, socialistic economics, evolutionary medicine, transgenderism, wide-open endorsement of homosexual practices, enforced equity, ‘cancel culture’, defunding police services, quotas based on skin colour, sanctuary cities, bail ‘reform’, and the elimination of school exams. The playground retort applies, “Stupid is as stupid does!”

The only solution to the stupidity that is plaguing our society, is not to keep doing the same thing, hoping for a different outcome. The solution is to obtain the knowledge that only God can provide through a reverent fear of him (Prov 1.7) and by turning away from evil (Prov 14.16). A believer steeped in the Scriptures, without the academic credentials honoured by the world is wiser than a room full of fools with PhDs. As Paul reminds us, ‘For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their craftiness,” and again, “The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.”’ (1 Cor 3.19-20).

53. Legislating Against Christianity (Acts 4.17-18, 21)

The Jewish leaders sought ways to silence Jesus, even with a threat of murder (Mt 26.4; Jn 11.57). They thought that they had been successful when they handed him over to the Roman authorities to be crucified, based on a falsified charge of blasphemy (Jn 19.7). But the teaching of and about Jesus had not been silenced. Now, the apostles were boldly proclaiming the Gospel. So, they again tried to silence the proclamation of it. This is the first instance of authorities legislating against Christianity.

Satan uses the Beast of anti-Christian governments and the False Prophet of false religions (Rev 16.13) among his futile attempts to destroy Christians, the Church, and Christianity. At times, governments and false religions are at odds with each other (e.g., the Communist Chinese oppression of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang Province). At other times, a government regime and a false religion are united as one entity in their opposition to Christianity (e.g., emperor worship in ancient Rome and the Islamic Caliphate). Satan is not concerned if evil destroys evil, as when males claim to be females and undermine women’s rights. Or when the Middle Eastern Islamic Council declares a ‘fatwa’ against Hamas for its reign of corruption and terror against Palestinian civilians within Gaza. Satan’s primary desires are to see mankind destroy itself and that people never become Christians.

It has been observed many times that Satan’s attempts to destroy the Church through persecution have been ineffective. The threat voiced by the council (Acts 4.21) and later overt persecution (Acts 8.1) were useless. Within a generation, Christianity had spread throughout the entire Roman Empire and to far distant dominions, such as beyond Persia and into Ethiopia. The Roman persecution of Christians had ended by about 300 AD, and Rome had become nominally Christian. The Inquisition may have slaughtered as many as 30,000 Christians (and Jews), and the post-revolution Killing Time directed at Protestants lasted three decades (1660-1688). But soon after the Reformed churches dominated much of Europe and the colonies. Muslim attacks against Christians in Sub-Sahara Africa are proving equally useless for supporting Satan’s evil goals, since the Church continues to grow in size and strength throughout the continent.

In the once ‘Christian’ West government officials are attempting to expunge any evidence of Christianity from their heritage, while embracing the evil practices of false religions (such as sharia law and worshipping at satanic temples). In the recent past, egregious examples included banning the Lord’s Prayer from legislatures and schools, removing the Bible from oath swearing in courtrooms, tearing down monuments containing the Ten Commandments, eliminating capital punishment for murder, forbidding Christian

adoption agencies from refusing to place babies with same-sex couples, and annulling Lord's Day observance legislation. These actions were undertaken largely in the name of plurality, inclusion, and diversity. However, today attacks against Christians, the Church, and Christianity are more overtly direct. They are not necessarily attempts to preserve the 'rights' of others but to expunge Christians' rights. Recent examples include:

- The FBI declared some Christian groups as [domestic terrorist organizations](#).
- The definition of censorship zones around abortion facilities in the UK includes offering *silent* prayers as a [criminal act](#).
- An [appeals court](#) in NY state ruled against a Christian employee who had worked as a clerk in municipal government but had been fired for refusing to attend a mandatory LGBTQ training session.
- A [Christian school](#) in Vermont withdrew its girls' basketball team from a playoff game because it believed that the transgender player "jeopardizes the fairness of the game and the safety of our players." The school was banned from participating in any sport.
- Likewise, it appears that most of the major social media platforms, largely the [mouthpieces](#) of the current elitists' hegemony, have actively censored material supporting biblical morality and anything which challenges 'politically correct' consensus thinking. This form of censorship was evident when the Jewish council "charged them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus." (Acts 4.18). In other words, their voices were to be muzzled.

God calls upon the wicked to undertake a rational consideration of his righteous reign and requirements (Is 1.18). However, without the converting work of the Holy Spirit this cannot be accomplished, because mankind steeped in sin is irrational (Rom 1.22). Legislatures throughout the world enact laws which are directly contrary to biblical law (e.g., requiring doctors to support abortion and euthanasia and health care plans to fund sex transition surgeries; sponsoring lotteries; and requiring companies to accommodate practices of their Muslim employees). These legislatures cannot countenance challenges to their authority by proponents of biblical morality, and they will not engage in rational discourse. Instead, they respond with the only means that Satan can use to challenge Christianity. They use *force* (Acts 4.21) or *farce* (Neh 2.19). They use the power of the sword to compel compliance. Or they ridicule and scorn Christians so that many are cowed into compliance. These legislatures will not be voted out by the electorate for their overt attacks on Christianity as long as their citizens feel that their personal health and welfare are not jeopardized. Also, increasingly their legislation cannot be challenged through courts, since most of the lawyers and judges hold to the same anti-God philosophies which they espouse. However, the fact that the Church continues to grow in geographical distribution and numerical strength indicates that Satan is fighting for a losing cause (Mt 16.18).

54. Civil Disobedience

(Acts 4.18-20; Acts 5.29)

We are to obey government commands. Jesus states that when those commands are not contrary to God's law, we are to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Mt 22.21). We are to be subject to governments in those areas of responsibility that have been assigned to them by God. For example, if the civil magistrate requires that we stop at red lights, we must do so, in compliance with both the fifth and sixth Commandments—to honour those in authority over us as 'parents' and to protect the life of our neighbours. However, if a civil authority demanded that a congregation accept his appointment of a pastor or demanded that a new element of worship be added, the congregation must not render obedience to Caesar. Paul and Peter expand on the requirement to obey governments (Rom 13.1-7; 1 Pt 2.13-17) within their scope of responsibility.

We must obey governments even if their laws are stupid, but not morally wrong, such as the requirement not to use plastic straws or not to cut down a tree that is rotten and could fall on our house in the next storm.

We are to obey even when the laws are oppressive. Paul and Peter wrote about obedience to government under the rule of a wicked Roman emperor (Nero). It is clear from their teachings that rebellion against government is unlawful (Rom 13.2). Quoting John Calvin (*Institutes*; 4.20.31) and claiming that government is a criminal gang does not provide a warrant for rebellion against governments—even tyrannical ones. The Christians living in Rome, and suffering persecution, during the three centuries after Christ, present a model of how we should relate to government. Their example speaks to us as well as to Christians living in China or Iran.

The council could have commanded Peter and John no longer to enter the temple precincts and to speak specifically in that location, and they likely would have obeyed as upright citizens. They would not have been disobeying God to obey the council. It was the blanket command no longer to speak in the name of Jesus which they could not obey. Jesus had commanded them to preach and teach (Mt 28.19-20; Acts 1.8) and he had to be obeyed, regardless of what the highest human authority in Jerusalem might have commanded.

The apostles believed that God's law is supreme over all human commands. Even the members of the council would have agreed with this. Thus, we must disobey the government only when it commands us:

- *To do something that is contrary to God's law.* For example, if a government requires a Christian doctor to participate in an abortion or in an assisted suicide procedure, he is to refuse to participate (Ex 20.13). Also, if a government requires justices or pastors to perform marriage ceremonies for homosexuals or to issues a same-sex 'marriage' certificate, they are to refuse, since this is not a marriage (Gen 1.27; Gen 2.24).
- *Not to do something that God has required that we do.* For example, if a government bans Christians from assembling for worship, they are to ignore the command (Heb 10.25)—the Scottish Covenanters had to do this during the Killing Time (mainly in 1680-1688) and meet in conventicles. Likewise, if a government commands us to stop reading the Bible we are to refuse.

Christians must be law-abiding citizens until a human law exceeds the clearly written law of God, as summarized in the Ten Commandments and illustrated by case laws in the OT and NT. Civil disobedience is only biblically permissible when a human law explicitly defies God's law.

Luke dedicated his Gospel and Acts to Theophilus (Lk 1.3; Acts 1.1), who was likely well educated, like Luke, and likely a prominent Roman citizen. Thus, it has been suggested by commentators that the words of civil disobedience which Socrates used during his trial before the Athenian judges, when ordered to stop teaching his philosophy, are similar to Peter's words (Acts 4.18; Acts 5.29). Luke may have alluded to Socrates' words, famous in the Greco-Roman world, to indicate the nobility of Christianity and that teaching truth must prevail.

During the COVID situation (2019-2021) these verses became common currency among those inclined to resist what they considered to be draconian dictates—lockdowns, mask mandates, and vaccine mandates. A sober future reflection may likely indicate that governments overreacted. However, there was a palpable irony displayed by many who appealed to these verses as fodder for their rebellion against government. As one commentator from the mid 19th century said, "Fanatics have more than once hurled this apostolic saying like a fire-brand among men, and thus produced insurrections and confusion." Most of the people calling for civil disobedience against COVID restrictions were reacting to what they felt were restrictions on their personal liberties. Few of them would have considered it wrong to go to the shopping mall on a Sunday. And if their boss required them to work on the Lord's Day (the Christian Sabbath) in a commercial venture such as in a manufacturing or retail establishment, they would not have refused to do it (Ex 20.8-11). We must not be subjectively selective when we exercise civil disobedience. We must be highly principled. We must:

- Ensure that a command of the civil magistrate is a clear breach of God's law.

- Have exhausted alternative means of facilitating non-compliance (e.g., changing jobs, filing a civil suit, or proposing creative alternatives).
- Use only the armaments authorized by God (Eph 6.11-18).
- Not conspire in secret rebellion. Peter states boldly their non-compliance.
- Be willing to face death for disobedience to the civil magistrate's commands.

55. Praise of the Creator

(Acts 4.24)

Luke informs us that when Peter and John were released from their arrest by the council, they went to their 'own'. Translations supply a word, such as 'company', 'companions', 'people', or 'friends'. Peter and John were from Galilee, so their families may have not been with them in Jerusalem at this time. For example, Peter's wife may have remained in Capernaum (Mt 8.5, 14). So, we can infer that Luke is referring to the broader family which believers have in Christ. They went to the house in Jerusalem where they had been staying with a number of other believers. On arriving, they would have given a report of the events which had transpired—the healing of the lame man and the opportunity to proclaim the Gospel before the Jewish council. Luke tells us that the apostles reported the council's demand that they were no longer to speak in the name of Jesus.

The response of the assembled friends was to turn to the Lord in prayer. Their response indicates that they placed the attack against Peter and John into the context of an attack on their master, the Lord Jesus Christ. This is made clear by their quoting from Psalm 2.1-2 (Acts 4.25-26), in which David indicates that human rulers of the earth (including the Jewish council) align themselves in an attack against the Lord's Messiah ("his Anointed"). Their response should be ours, whatever news we receive—good or bad. God clearly had a purpose for decreeing the attempt to silence the presentation of the Gospel. At least one reason was to strengthen the resolve of the apostles to speak boldly for Christ. Likewise, when he sends challenging situations into our lives, we need to remember that he governs all events through his superintending providence.

Their prayer opens with praise of God by reflecting on one of his key attributes—his sovereignty in creation. We derive our English word 'despot' from the Greek word translated here as 'Sovereign Lord' (also in Rev 6.10)—the word 'sovereign' is added in the ESV and NIV. Elsewhere in the ESV, the word is translated as 'Lord' (referring to God, Lk 2.29), 'masters' (referring to human overseers, 1 Tim 6.1-2; Titus 2.9; 1 Pt 2.18), 'Master' (referring to Jesus, 2 Pt 2.1; Jude 4), and 'master of the house' (referring to Jesus, 2 Tim 2.21).

God's lordship or sovereignty is first displayed in his being the creator. The Bible opens with the declaration that God created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1.1). Then, the creation account documents the creative work of God as he fills the heavens (e.g., on the fourth day with stars, and on the fifth day with birds) and the land and sea with plants, sea-based animals, land-based animals, and mankind (on days five and six). The disciples' prayer reflects this progression—"the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them." God presents himself as the creator before he presents any other attribute of himself—such as his being a spirit (Gen 1.2) and a communicator (Gen 1.3) or having a plurality of persons (Gen 1.26). If God is not the creator of everything that is not eternal, then he is not God. The doctrine of creation is *the* foundational doctrine that underlies all other doctrines in the Bible. For example,

- God's transcendence and sovereignty (Gen 14.19, 22; Ps 89.11).
- Man's accountability to God (Rom 1.18-20, 25; Heb 4.13).
- Christ's deity and authority (Col 1.15-16).
- God's revelation about himself (Is 45.18-19; Zech 12.1-2; Eph 3.9).
- God's worthiness of universal praise from all his creatures (Ps 148.5; Jer 32.16, 17; Rev 4.11; Rev 14.7).

- God's trustworthiness—i.e., the one we can trust (1 Pt 4.19).
- The fear and reverence with which we should honour God (Ps 33.6-10).
- The covenant of redemption (Is 42.5-7; Is 43.1-7).
- God's law—specifically the Sabbath (Ex 20.11)—and our required obedience (Dt 32.5, 6; Mal 2.10; Acts 17.24, 30).
- God's knowing all that will happen in the future, because as the creator he decrees it (Is 45.1, 7, 11-13), and cares for his people (Gen 14.19, 20).
- Why God can bring about a new spiritual creation (Eph 2.8-10; Col 3.10).
- God's acting as the judge of nations (Jer 51.15-16) and the sovereign judge (Rev 10.5-7).
- God's promise to renovate the physical creation (Is 65.17, 18; Rom 8.19-22).

Many in the Church today have been influenced by post-Enlightenment myths. They claim to believe that God is the creator. But their definition of 'creator' is deistic with God at best using natural processes that he has let unfold through billions of years. If we don't understand the truth that God created in six consecutive natural days, by the word of his power, as recorded in Genesis 1.1-31, then our thinking about the rest of Scripture and its teachings will not stand before the wind of secular humanism and the storm of materialistic naturalism.

Some commentators read too much into the words, "they lifted their voices together." They wonder how a collective assembly could make this prayer—for example, did they offer responsive prayer (one leading and the others repeating the words) or did the Holy Spirit endow the entire assembly with the ability to speak this prayer in unison? The simplest explanation is that one or a few of the members led sequentially in prayers. Luke provides a summary of the essence of what these prayers contained. The entire body of believers participated in these prayers through their voiced 'amens'. Luke is simply reminding us of the unity of mind that was displayed in the early NT Church. When we assemble and the pastor or one of the elders leads the congregation in prayer, we all lift our voices together through them, and express our hearty concurrence when we utter our 'amen'.

56. Fulfilled Prophecy about the Beast

(Acts 4.25-28)

Peter and the other apostles understood that the Messianic age had arrived, and that they were living in the era in which many of the OT prophecies were being fulfilled. For example, Peter says that the sign miracles given on Pentecost were the fulfillment of what Joel had prophesied (Acts 2.16). Likewise, they apply David's prophecy in Psalm 2.1-2 (Acts 4.25-26) to the Idumaean king, Herod Antipas, and the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, as representatives of Gentile and Jewish subjects in rebellion against the Lord's Anointed (Acts 4.27). Psalm 2.1-12 was applied to the wicked rebellion of Gentile leaders against God in the days of Jesus and the apostles. However, it has a broader application to rebellion of any earthly monarch, government official, or nation against God and his laws.

Peter, or whomever voiced this prayer (Acts 4.24-30) on behalf of the assembled believers, informs us about the nature of biblical revelation:

- *Intermediaries* – God speaks to mankind through various means, including voices manifested as vibrating air (Dan 4.31; Mt 3.17; Acts 9.4-6), through theophanies (Gen 3.9; Gen 18.1; Acts 7.38) or angelic messengers (Dan 8.19-26; Lk 1.19-20, 30-37), and through the incarnated second person of the Trinity (Heb 1.1). Here we are told that God spoke through a human messenger—David—as he did through other OT prophets and NT apostles.
- *Individuals* – We are informed that David was the author of the Psalm, even though neither the Hebrew original nor the Greek Septuagint translation mention his authorship of this Psalm (compare, Ps 3.1). This confirms that David was a prophet (Acts 1.16; Acts 2.29-31). The reference to David also confirms

the fact that God used the personalities and skills of individual authors as he revealed the material which eventually became the Bible.

- *Inspiration* – Although each author’s personality is evident in his writing, behind the authorship of every book of the Bible is its ultimate author—God the Holy Spirit (Acts 1.16; Acts 4.25; 2 Tim 3.16; Heb 3.7; 2 Pt 1.21). The Holy Spirit ensured that every word contained in the Bible is true and that the progressive revelation of the message of redemption was maintained as a cohesive and consistent whole over a period of about 4,000 years.
- *Inscription* – The Psalms are part of the authoritative word of God, which declare Jesus (Lk 24.44). Portions of the Psalms are quoted close to 70 times in the NT. The next closest is Isaiah, which is quoted about 55 times. This indicates that the Psalms were authoritative for the apostles, and so they should be for our generation and for all who come after us (2 Tim 3.1).
- *Interlingual* – The Greek Septuagint version of the OT is quoted verbatim. This indicates that the apostles viewed a translation (even if not a perfect one) still as the prophetic word of God. Thus, when a pastor reads from the ESV translation before his sermon on Sunday, he is reading the word of God to the congregation. This does not excuse sloppy translation or the responsibility of translators to be as accurate as possible. The Westminster *Directory for the Public Worship of God* indicates that we should use the best translation available in the current common language.

Psalms 2.1-12 is a prophetic reference to the Beast of anti-Christian governments (Rev 16.13) being held accountable for their response to God the Father (represented by ‘LORD’ in the Hebrew) and to Jesus, the LORD’s Anointed servant. It has a similar theme to Psalm 110.1-7, which opens, “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’” (Ps 110.1). The destiny of every nation on earth is determined not by their earthly governmental system (e.g., monarchy, dictatorship, democracy, etc.), economic system (e.g., socialism or capitalism), access to abundant natural or human resources, advances in science and technology, innovative spirit, freedoms and supposed rights, or access to piles of armaments. Their temporal and everlasting destiny is determined by what honour they attribute to Jesus, who is King of kings and Lord of lords (1 Tim 6.15). He has been appointed to rule over the nations, now and forever (Ps 2.8-9; Dan 2.44-45; Dan 4.3; Phil 2.10). All the machinations of our politicians, which they would claim to be for mankind’s betterment, are nothing but a phantasm if they reject Jesus as King and his laws (summarized in the Ten Commandments) as the standard for their nations.

The Christians assembled in an upper room in Jerusalem after Peter and John were released by the council, understood that the collective response of the “peoples of Israel” and the Gentiles, and their respective leaders were fulfilling the prophecy about the Beast. Their application of Psalm 2.1-2 to the antagonism against Jesus shows that Jews and Gentiles are united in their hatred against God’s Anointed. The people of Israel to whom Jesus came first (Mt 10.5-6) rejected him as Messiah and ceased to be the Lord’s covenant people (Acts 13.45, 50; Acts 14.2; Acts 17.5; Acts 18.6) and are now classed with unbelieving Gentiles—all of whom can be saved through faith in Jesus (Gal 3.28-29). Our culture is saturated with hatred and prejudices among people groups (e.g., Muslim against Jew, those with one colour of skin against those with a different colour of skin, and people of one language against those of another language). Yet, these are not the most serious division among mankind. The only division which matters ultimately is the division between being a Christ-hater or a Christ-lover. As Jesus says, “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.” (Mt 12.30). Where Christ does not reign in the hearts of people, they are all aligned with Satan’s desire to destroy the Church. The quotation of Psalm 2.1-2 teaches us that we are not to place our hope in any government (the Beast) in this world but to place our hope in Jesus who is building his new and everlasting nation—the Church—made up of the spectrum of humanity (Rev 7.9).

57. Predestination

(Acts 4.28)

We previously considered the topic of predestination (see, *Predestination and Human Responsibility*). However, since this is the only place outside of Paul's writings (Rom 8.29-30; 1 Cor 2.7, translated as 'decreed'; Eph 5.1, 11) where the word predestined occurs, we will address the topic a second time. The Greek word contains the idea of decreeing or ordaining something in advance. The context of the prayer in which it is used indicates that the rebellion against the Messiah by the rulers and their peoples was decreed by God from before the creation of the world, from 'before the ages' (1 Cor 2.7).

The Bible teaches that everything that is planned by God happens (Is 14.24; Rev 4.1). God controls all events which transpire in this created realm. The thoughts and actions of believers and unbelievers are predestined by God (Rom 8.29-30; Acts 4.28). Human authorities like Herod Antipas and Pilate may deliberate and make decisions, but God determines their destiny (Prov 21.1; Dan 4.35). Thus, the crucifixion of Jesus was not an afterthought solution to a problem concocted by Satan. It was exactly what God had planned before the world and mankind were created (Mt 25.34; Jn 17.24; Eph 1.4; 1 Pt 1.20; Rev 13.8). The enemies of Jesus performed only those actions which God had decreed for them to apply. Jesus had to die to save sinners (Mk 10.45). It is not that God controlled their actions despite themselves, but that God completed his plans through their actions.

Everything that happens, including all intermediate second causes and conditions necessary for something to happen, unfold according to God's eternal plan. His eternal plan is manifested through his decreeing and controlling all events (Eph 1.11; Eph 3.11). Most people think of the word predestination in the immediate context of God's saving the elect (Rom 8.28-30; Eph 1.4-5). However, it must logically apply to his decreeing *all* events, since nothing happens in the world which is disconnected from every other event. For example, assume that a person from a native tribe in the jungle hears a Gospel presentation, believes in Christ, and repents of his sin. His presence at the moment he heard the Gospel is connected to a long chain of events, the day of his conception, and the year in which his distant ancestors began their migratory trek from the vicinity of the tower of Babel. Likewise, the presence of the missionary is linked to a similar chain of events, which includes his parents taking him to Sunday School, the Protestant Reformation, and Noah's son Japheth moving north-west from Shinar.

When we state that God predestines man's actions, most people object with the claim that this removes man's freedom of will, and that man becomes nothing more than a carbon-based computer which cannot be held accountable for its actions (e.g., for sin). They even go as far as to say that if God predestined man to sin, then God is the author of sin. Yet, God tells us without an equivocation that he predestines everything that comes to pass (Ps 139.4, 16; Prov 16.33; Acts 13.48; Rom 8.29-30; Rom 9.1-29); and at the same time that man is a responsible agent, fully accountable for his actions (Ezk 18.1-32; Rom 6.23). God even states that events are simultaneously predestined by him and the actions of responsible human agents (Gen 50.19-20; Acts 2.23; Acts 4.27-28). The only possible way for this to be true is if God *makes* happen that which he has purposed. If events are truly contingent, then they are indeterminate; and if indeterminate, they are unknowable in advance. There is no way that even God could have predicted hundreds of years before that a pregnant virgin in the line of David, living in Nazareth, would give birth in Bethlehem because she was summoned there by a Roman census, or that her son would be crucified while men gambled over his clothing, unless he made it happen. God knows, and can reveal, the future because he makes it certain.

Man's free will is a psychological fiction. Men believe that they act entirely from their own rational self-determination. In fact, they are determined by their inborn natures (Jn 8.34). Man cannot behave contrary to his nature physically, morally, or volitionally. Man, as a sinner, is not free to choose to do either good or evil, because he has an evil heart that ever inclines him to sin (Rom 7.7-24). If we were truly free agents then we could choose not to sin—but everyone born, by natural generation, throughout all history has sinned. If we were truly free agents, we could also choose the time and circumstances of our birth and death or choose never to die. Since we cannot do any of these things, it is clear that we are not actually free agents. The biggest lie that has ever been told is that men are born as free moral and volitional agents. But the Bible

nowhere teaches this.

Some philosophers and theologians attempt to reconcile God's providential will and supposed human free will. They use a continuum of Aristotelian causation, claim that our supposed free wills can be found in second causes, or state that God decrees man's free actions which he sees in advance. However, most attempts to reconcile them bog down in definitions based on semantics or convoluted conditions. We must avoid the universal tendency to go to one extreme or the other—to view God as a superhuman being, but with limited knowledge; or to view men as mere puppets and the victims of fatalistic forces. We must not try to outthink God!

Predestination is a precious doctrine for believers. Paul states that all whom God predestines to salvation will be brought to glory (Rom 8.29-30) because their names are written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev 21.27). Jesus has declared that all those whom he has saved will be with him forever (Jn 14.3, 8). Knowing this, the early Christians asked for boldness as they spoke for Jesus (Acts 4.31).

58. A Prayer for Boldness (Acts 4.29-31, 33)

The believers' prayer in Acts 4.23-31 provides a structural and content model for our prayers. They begin with praise of God as he displays himself through his attributes, particularly as the creator (Acts 4.24). They express confidence in the reliability of God's word and its application to their contemporary situation (Acts 4.25-27). They acknowledge that God governs all things through his eternal plan (Acts 4.28). They then make a personal petition (Acts 4.29) with the understanding that an answer to their petition depends on the Lord's will (Acts 4.30). There are similarities to the structure and content of the Lord's Prayer (Mt 9.6-13), which is not surprising since Jesus had taught his disciples how to pray.

There are two parts to their petition. The first part is that God would take note of the threats of their opponents. This does not imply that they thought that God was unaware of the posturing of the Jewish council. Rather, it expresses confidence that God is fully cognizant of all that transpires and that he will address the threats made against Christ and his people, the Church.

The second part of their petition is not what we might expect. A normal response to antagonism would be to ask to have the threats of enemies removed. This is what Hezekiah did in his prayer (Is 37.16-20). He opened his appeal in a similar manner to that of the disciples, acknowledging that God is the creator and then identifying the current situation Judah faced from their enemy, Assyria. Then Hezekiah appealed for deliverance. Such a request is valid, as demonstrated by the fact that God gave the deliverance in a spectacular way (Is 37.36). David also shows the validity of asking for deliverance from our enemies (e.g., Ps 59.1-2; Ps 64.1-2). However, the disciples' petition is surprisingly different. They didn't ask to be taken out of the way of persecutors but to be strengthened to face them. David does something similar when he asks that the LORD make his way straight before him (Ps 5.8), to help him to walk in a righteous way before his enemies. The disciples' prayer is for boldness to face the attacks of the enemies of Christ. They knew that more opposition was coming (Ps 2.2; Mt 24.9), and they wanted to be able to face it with the confidence that their Lord had displayed (Is 50.7; Lk 22.42). We can learn from their example. We can pray for deliverance from difficulties, but if that is not the will of the Lord, then we should ask to be given sufficient grace to face the difficulties which God is sending our way to challenge us (2 Cor 12.8-9).

Their petition is to be given boldness when speaking God's word. Christian boldness may be exhibited in various ways, but it most often involves boldness through a spoken word. Boldness in prayer is exhibited by our confidently acknowledging that God hears and answers prayer. Boldness for truth involves our being willing to tell the whole truth and to leave the consequences to God. For example, not trying to outthink

God by assuming that there are legitimate reasons for prevarication. Or being willing to state with conviction that God created mankind male and female (Gen 1.27) and that the idea that a person born as a male with XY chromosomes can declare himself to be a female is ludicrous. Boldness in obedience may not involve words *per se*. For example, doing what is morally right could require the execution of a proper action even when no one other than God knows that we have done it. However, often boldness in obedience requires us to express words, for example declaring to a demanding boss that we will not work on the Lord's Day to advance his mercenary goals or requesting that co-workers not misuse the name of Christ when they speak. Boldness in faith is often displayed by our being willing to profess that we are Christians and that we believe in a particular truth of the Bible (e.g., that God defined marriage to be between one man and one woman and not between two people of the same sex; Gen 2.24) when the consequences might involve severe consequences such as dismissal from a university professorship.

The disciples asked that God would grant them the ability to 'continue' to speak with boldness. This indicates that boldness in speaking God's word is not a one-off event or confined to a particular class of events. We may be bold in particular situations, but not in others. For example, we might find it easier to present the Gospel before an anonymous crowd than among unbelieving family members. It also indicates that the boldness in speaking God's word is a gift from God that we cannot inculcate through our own efforts. However, as with faith which is a gift (Eph 2.8) that is to be exercised (Lk 8.25; James 1.3), the more we exercise boldness in speaking God's word, the easier it becomes to be bold in our speech in similar or different contexts.

They surround their petition with a confession of their dependence upon God's sovereignty in human affairs. It is as God stretches out his hand that his will is exercised in this world. They attribute the healing of the lame beggar (Acts 3.11-25) directly to Christ. Whether in the ordinary or extraordinary matters of life, God is working out his providences.

God's answer to their prayer is immediate and dramatic (Acts 4.31). The place in which they were gathered was shaken (e.g., by thunder or a mini earthquake). This gave them a sense of God's presence with them. Then, they were refilled with the power of the Holy Spirit so that their request for boldness would materialize (Acts 4.33). It is implied that when they next spoke the word, it was accompanied by power from the Holy Spirit. At times, God may answer our prayers in dramatic ways. At other times answers may come with "the sound of a low whisper" (1 Ki 19.12). Regardless, their example teaches that God always answers prayer, but not necessarily how we might think he should.

59. Sharing and Caring (Acts 4.32-37)

The first and greatest commandment is that we are to demonstrate our love for God (Mt 22.37-38). We do this primarily through keeping the first four of the Ten Commandments—worshiping God correctly, as the only God, honouring his name, and keeping the Lord's Day (the Christian Sabbath) holy. The second summary commandment is to love our neighbour as ourselves (Mt 22.39). We fulfill this by keeping the second six of the Ten Commandments, and by applying biblical case laws which provide examples of how to keep the summary laws. Sometimes, we wonder if Christians take seriously the words of Jesus. He said, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (Jn 13.35).

Luke indicates that all the believers were united in "one heart and soul". This union was displayed by a common boldness in witnessing to the saving work of Jesus (his death and resurrection) and by worshiping together, as illustrated by their communal prayer (Acts 4.24). However, Luke wants to demonstrate that a common witness and worship results in a common walk that is dramatically different from the way of the world. The bold preaching of the Gospel message "with great power" (Acts 4.33) is life-altering—

spiritually and temporally as “great grace” (Acts 4.33) falls upon the Church. Luke demonstrates that a secondary outcome of biblical preaching, after salvation, is bold unselfishness and generosity, evidenced by their sharing with and caring for one another.

The biblical model for providing temporal welfare is through individuals and families taking responsibility for themselves and those who are within their sphere of influence. The Bible indicates that we have a responsibility to help poor individuals (Dt 15.7-8, 11; Ps 41.1; Prov 14.21; Is 58.6-7; Mt 25.35-36; Gal 2.10; 1 Jn 3.17-19), and that taking advantage of the poor or ridiculing them is sin (Prov 14.31; Prov 17.5). However, there is considerable debate about who the poor are. Luke alludes to who they are, with the words, “as any had *need*”. If an able person is unwilling to work, he is not to be included among the deserving poor (2 Thess 3.10). The specific classes to whom we are to give food, clothing, and money directly are those who are not able to help themselves due to their age (too young or too old) or who have a real infirmity, that is:

- Older widows, orphans, and aliens (Dt 10.18; Dt 16.9-12; Is 1.17; Acts 6.1; 1 Tim 5.3-9, 16).
- Those who are unable work due to severe disabilities (Acts 3.2-10).
- Those who are in situations of severe distress, with serious needs and no family members to help (Lev 25.25; Is 58.7; 1 Tim 5.8-10, 16).

The Gospel message about God’s grace in Christ generated a voluntary culture of sharing and caring in love (2 Cor 8.1-9.15) among the new believers. This demonstrates that Christianity has clear social implications. However, this is not support for a form of ‘social gospel’ which claims that it is necessary to change the physical situation and temporal status of people before we can direct them to Christ. It is biblical preaching and conversion that will be followed by changed lives. This certainly does not mean that we are not to help persons who are in true desperate need but are not converted. But the world’s approach—socialism, government funded welfare programs, and ‘social justice’—can never solve mankind’s problems because they undermine individual responsibility. There is nothing in Luke’s description of the operation of the early church in Jerusalem which can be construed as supporting communal ownership of property or a centralized control of the means of production, as might be found in some cults.

Only conversion to Christ results in an understanding of the concept of biblical stewardship. The material possessions with which God gifts us, are to be used for his glory (1 Cor 10.31) and for the care of others—starting with those in the household of faith with serious needs, so that there will be no poor among us (Dt 15.4; Acts 4.34). Among the believers, there was a readiness to share what they had, because no one claimed that any of his possessions were exclusively his own—they understood that ultimately their possessions belonged to God. This is a dramatic shift of mindset from sharing based on the concept of reciprocity—i.e., if I do something good for him, he will owe me and direct good toward me at some time in the future (Lk 6.32-36; Lk 14.12-14).

Some of the believers demonstrated excelling generosity. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, is given as an example. He sold a piece of property and brought the proceeds from the sale to the apostles for use in the distribution to those with needs. As a result, he has gone down in history with his nickname Barnabas, which Luke tells us means “son of encouragement” (Acts 4.36-37). He is presented as a contrast to those who would attempt to feign generosity to earn praises from men (Acts 5.1-11).

Barnabas and the others who sold lands or houses or who donated money, laid the money at the apostles’ feet (Acts 4.35, 37). This means that they assigned the distribution of their voluntary offerings to the leadership of the church. God’s appointed ‘backstop’ means for providing support to the deserving poor (the truly needy) who have no other means of support (i.e., no relatives who can support them) is through local churches, not through government programs. However, local churches may work together and utilize the services of parachurch organizations for the distribution of support to the needy. It is necessary to have local engagement with the poor to ensure that their needs are genuine and that their needs are addressed as

much as possible through an ad hoc temporary manner, rather than through regular distribution that furthers endemic poverty.

60. Encouragement (Acts 4.36)

Luke informs us that a Jewish believer in Jesus as the Messiah, a Levite from Cyprus named Joseph, was called Barnabas by the apostles. Luke tells us that this means ‘son of encouragement’. What an honour it was to be recognized by the apostles in such a manner! This Aramaic cognomen means literally ‘son of rest’. However, Luke provides an idiomatic equivalent in Greek. The Greek word which Luke uses for ‘encouragement’ incorporates the sense of one person being called along side another person, such as when a lawyer is called to the side of an accused person to defend him. In its noun form it can mean an advocate or a helper (Jn 14.26). In its verbal form it refers to a person who comes along side another person to provide comfort and assistance. Luke refers to Paul giving encouragement and speaking of encouragement in Acts. Also, Paul refers to the necessity for Christians to be encouragers. Therefore, we should consider what we can learn from Paul about what it means for us to be encouragers.

As Christians we, collectively and individually, can be encouragers by:

- *Reading the Scriptures* (Rom 15.4). When we read the Bible in our private or family times of worship, the words from God will provide us with encouragement. However, it is particularly important that the Scriptures be read in the public assemblies of the Church (1 Tim 4.13). There has been a tendency in many parts of the Church today to minimize the use of the words of the Bible (words from God) and to concentrate on offering up mere-human compositions (words from man).
- *Expounding the Scriptures* (Acts 13.15; 1 Cor 14.3; 1 Cor 14.31). Preaching and teaching how to apply the words of the Bible for faith and practice are important for collective encouragement of believers within a congregation.
- *Worshipping together* (Heb 10.25). Since a primary purpose for worshipping together on the Lord’s Day is to hear the word of God read and expounded, it is key that brothers and sisters in Christ come together. Just being with other believers and worshipping together with them is also a means of encouragement in which each of us can participate.
- *Exhorting, charging* (1 Thess 2.12), *and admonishing one another* (2 Thess 3.12). Preaching and teaching by pastors/elders, and Sunday School teachers can provide the kind of encouragement which builds up faith and directs members of the congregation into the paths of righteousness. However, this kind of encouragement is not confined to the pulpit or classroom. Each of us can direct our peers to increased faith and holy living through well placed words. For example, Paul speaks of the use of the Psalms, which are the words of Christ, as an effective means of accomplishing mutual edification (Eph 5.18-19; Col 3.16).
- *Speaking positive words* (Acts 16.40; Acts 20:2 [a different word in Greek, used only once in the NT]; 1 Thess 4.18; 1 Thess 5.11). The Psalms are full of words of exhortation, admonition, and comfort. A timely quotation from the Psalms, when another person is despondent, discouraged, or feeling deserted, can help lift his spirits. Paul speaks specifically about using words which reflect on the promises of God to build and reveal the everlasting Kingdom of Jesus Christ.
- *Praying with and for a person* (Eph 6.18-19). Although Paul does not give an explicit connection between prayer and encouragement, his actions of encouraging congregations would have undoubtedly included prayer. When a Christian is aware that he is being prayed for he knows that others care for him, and that God hears their petitions on his behalf.
- *Providing words and actions of comfort* (Eph 6.22; Col 4.8; 1 Thess 5.14; 1 Tim 5.1). Just being present when a person is feeling ‘down’ can be helpful. At times, an embrace or loving hug or holding the person’s hand can help. Also, actions such as visiting a person in a retirement home or hospital, providing a ride to a doctor’s office or the supermarket, remembering his birthday, or providing a pre-

cooked meal can provide comfort and help a person overcome feelings of helplessness and loneliness. There are likely other ways that we can be encouragers. It is important that we think consciously about how we can do it. For example, we could work regularly through the congregational directory and take the next person or family on the list and ask ourselves, what can I do to encourage him, her, or them.

To be encouragers requires that we have a positive attitude about God's unfolding providences in the world and in our lives, the temporal and spiritual blessings of our life in Christ, and our everlasting hope. People who are gloomy and doomsayers cannot be effective encouragers. Paul gives us guidance for having the right attitude in order to be encouragers. This includes:

- Being a positive model of faith (Rom 1.12) and life (2 Thess 3.12), and trust in God (Acts 27.36 [a word used only once in the Greek NT]).
- Focusing on the promises of God and the hope set before us (Heb 6.18).
- Rejoicing with a cheerful outlook (Phil 4.4) and giving thanks always, in all circumstances (Eph 5.20; 1 Thess 5.18).
- Speaking positive, edifying words (Eph 4.29; Eph 5.4; Col 4.6; 1 Thess 5.11).
- Not displaying anxiety or fear (Phil 4.6).

Encouragement is a gift from God (Acts 9.31; Rom 15.5), through knowing Christ (Phil 2.1-2; Col 2.2). Therefore, the ability to be an encourager is a gift given to the Church by God. We are earnestly to seek to have the good gifts (1 Cor 12.31-13.13; 1 Cor 14.12) which will build up and edify the Church. It would be great if each of us had the gift of encouragement and could be called a 'Barnabas'.

61. Hypocrisy in the Church

(Acts 5.1-11)

Luke presents a number of ironic contrasts between the accounts of the selfless generosity of the disciples, such as Barnabas (Acts 4.32-37), and the selfish greed of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5.1-11):

- When Joseph sold a piece of property, he brought all the proceeds before the apostles (Acts 4.37), but Ananias and Sapphira withheld a portion (Acts 5.2).
- The disciples laid the proceeds of their gifts at the disciples' feet, but Ananias and Sapphira ended up dead at Peter's feet (Acts 5.5, 10).
- Rather than being filled with the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5.22-23), including kindness, goodness, and self-control like Barnabas and other disciples, Ananias and Sapphira were filled with Satan's lies (Acts 5.3).
- Instead of displaying a love for others (Acts 4.34-35), Ananias and Sapphira demonstrated a dangerous love for money (1 Tim 6.10).
- Joseph's name means 'he will increase'. He lived up to his name, and because of his generous spirit was dubbed with the cognomen Barnabas—the 'son of encouragement'. In contrast, Ananias ('God is gracious') and Sapphira ('beautiful') degraded their names and brought disrespect, disgrace, and dread (Acts 5.11) into the nascent NT Church.

These contrasts demarcate two spiritual forces active since Adam and Eve's fall into sin. Ananias and Sapphira represent the depraved human nature, which is dead in trespasses and sins, under the power of Satan, and destined for everlasting wrath (Eph 2.1-3). Barnabas represents those who have been made alive in Christ through the mercy, love, and grace of God (Eph 2.4-5).

Before the disciples, Ananias and Sapphira appeared virtuous by selling a property to provide help to the needy in the congregation. However, they were hypocrites. While the outward action was commendable and they seemed to be making a personal sacrifice, their motives were deceptive. They sought acclaim from men. Solomon describes the situation, "The sacrifices of the ungodly are an abomination to God." (Prov 15.8). They were a blemish on the early NT Church (2 Pt 2.12-15). Wherever we look in the history of the

Church and in the Church today we find their ilk. Every congregation or denomination which departs from the foundations of the faith (Jude 3) has been led astray by individuals who desire accolades from men, are seeking power over others, or fleece the flock for riches.

Their specific sin was lying—lying to the others in the Church and to the Holy Spirit. While they owned the property, they were under no obligation to sell it (Acts 5:4). And even after they had sold it, they could have declared that they were giving a portion (e.g., a tenth) of the proceeds (Acts 5:4). Their pretence was pretending that they were giving the entire proceeds, while they were withholding a portion (Acts 5:3). The Greek word which Luke uses at this point, translated as ‘kept back’, can be applied to acts of embezzlement. They loved money but also loved the praise of men, so they colluded in a scheme which would make them appear righteous and generous. We must be cautious that we are not like them, dressing up in pious works for appearances when our hearts are full of deception. Sadly, this form of hypocritical lying is all too common in churches. A true test of the condition of our hearts is what we do and say when no one else is around. A simple example, is illustrated by the [Shopping Cart Test](#). When no one else is in the parking lot, what do we do with our empty shopping cart? Do we take it home filled with groceries and then ditch it, abandon it near where our car was parked, return it to a nearby corral, or take it back to the door?

God is constantly watching (Ps 11.4), and he knows the state of our hearts (Ps 139.1-4; Prov 5.21) better than we know them ourselves. We cannot lie to him, even though we lie all the time to ourselves and to others, if not in words, then by our hypocritical actions. Although Ananias and Sapphira’s sin was hidden from men, the Holy Spirit revealed it to Peter—he was given a special “ability to distinguish between spirits” (1 Cor 12.10)—so that he could confront them, in order that the necessary swift judgement could be administered. Peter identified their sin but did not pronounce a sentence. God administered the punishment directly and miraculously, rather than through a civil magistrate (Rom 13.3-4) or Church elders (1 Cor 5.13).

Sickness and even death may result directly from sins related to the misuse of holy things—Ananias and Sapphira’s sin falls into this category, when they both fell instantly dead upon hearing Peter’s charge against them. Other examples include the deaths of Nadab and Abihu who presented unauthorized fire before the LORD (Lev 10.1-2), and Achan who took some of the spoil that was to have been devoted entirely to God (Josh 7.1-26). Paul says that some who had abused the Lord’s Supper had suffered death (1 Cor 11.30). However, these instances are rare. If God was to punish all sins in holy things many churches would be emptied, since they are full of false worship and people living duplicitous lives.

We might think that God was too harsh on Ananias and Sapphira. After all, they hadn’t murdered anyone. If we think this, we misunderstand entirely the nature of God and of sin. Ezekiel states that “the soul who sins shall die” (Ezk 18.4, 20). Every sin against God is a capital crime and ultimately requires the punishment of death. Adam and Eve were told that if they ate from a particular tree in the garden of Eden, they would become subject to death (Gen 2.17). Not only did their sin bring death on them, but it infected the entire human race born of natural descent. We should not be surprised that the creator has the right to administer the death penalty for sin. Rather we should be surprised that God is patient and doesn’t strike people dead instantly but gives them an opportunity to repent.

62. God is to be Worshiped Only as He Requires (Acts 5.1-11)

The account of Ananias and Sapphira teaches us that God requires that only correct worship be offered to him. In their case, it related to tithing and freewill offerings.

The Ten Commandments tell us that God alone is to be worshiped and that false worship (e.g., worshipping

carved idols, worshiping him through manmade images, or defining our own acts of worship) is unacceptable to him. They tell us that God's name is to be revered (i.e., worshiped), and that a holy day is to be set aside ("remembered"; Ex 20.8) for consideration of spiritual matters (i.e., for the worship of God). We have been so influenced by our culture that we have bought into the myth that it is more important how we treat our neighbours (e.g., not hurting them or stealing from them) than how we treat God. God does not see it that way. He tells us first to worship him correctly, and then how to show neighbourly concern. As Jesus said, when summarizing the two sections of the Ten Commandments, "The most important [command] is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. 'The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mk 12.29-31). God considers worship to be so important that he used more than half of the text of the Ten Commandments to reinforce its importance.

In many other passages in the Bible, God speaks about the importance of offering him true worship and avoiding false worship (e.g., Dt 12.28-32; Is 65.2-7; Mk 7.7-13; Jn 4.23-24; Heb 12.28-29). In addition, he demonstrates that offering false worship is a grievous sin by punishing in righteous anger those who worship him in ways other than through means that he has authorized. These instances of punishment for false worship appear to align with the inauguration of each *major* new form of worship instituted by God:

Punishment of False Worship During the Inauguration of a New Form of Worship		
Associated Covenantal Administration	Primary Worship Form	Punishment for False Worship
Creation (Adam): Commencement (Gen 1.26-2.17)	Initial form not stated. Animal Sacrifices (Gen 4.4; Gen 8.20)	Cain rebuked (Gen 4.4-5) for his evil deeds (1 Jn 3.12)
National (Abraham): Promise of Seed and Land (Gen 15.1-21; Gen 17.1-14)	No major change. Fellowship Meal of Bread and Wine added (Gen 14.18)	--
Sinaitic (Moses): Law (Ex 24.1-18)	Ceremonial System (Ex, Lev, Dt)	Nadab and Abihu consumed with fire (Lev 10.1, 2). Golden calf plague (Ex 32.35)
Royal (David): Kingdom (2 Sam 7.5-16)	Psalms and Musical instruments added (1 Chron 23.5)	Uzzah struck down (1 Chron 13.9, 10)
New (Christ): Consummation (Jer 31.31-34; Lk 22.7-21; Heb 8.9-12)	Spiritual Equivalents, bloodless sacrifices (Heb 13.15)	Ananias and Sapphira struck down (Acts 5.1-11). Corinthians sick and dying (1 Cor 11.29-30)

The inclusion of Ananias and Sapphira and some Corinthians becoming sick and dying in the table above, indicates that God's concern for proper worship did not apply only during the OT economy. At the inauguration of the NT's new form of worship, God reminded the Church that it was important that they worship correctly. The requirement to worship God in a correct manner and with a proper attitude has not changed since the time of the apostles.

Today we don't hear about people being struck dead for introducing new forms of worship. This may lead some people to think that God no longer punishes false worship. This is not correct thinking. We must not assume that God always deals with the introduction of false worship in the same way. Paul tells us that God gave us examples in the past to warn us of the dangers of disobedience (1 Cor 10.9). We do not know how or when God will deal with false worship in the Church, but he will. Others may conclude that since God appears to be blessing their congregations, their worship must be acceptable to God. This is also false

reasoning. God often blesses us despite our sin, as we learn from the example of Abram and David who committed sins but yet were blessed by God.

Ananias and Sapphira were punished because their offering (an element of worship) was made unacceptable through their greed, deception, and hypocrisy. Satan was attacking the nascent NT Church from two directions—outwardly through the Jewish council which attempted to prohibit the apostles from preaching and inwardly through the introduction of false worship—worship which was not correct in both form and spirit of truth (Jn 4.23-24). God reminded the early believers that he is jealous for the holiness of his Church (1 Cor 3.16-17) by swiftly executing judgement on an act of false worship. Thus, a great fear fell upon the Church (Acts 5.11). We must take seriously the truth that God is to be worshiped only as he requires.

63. Private Ownership of Property

(Acts 5:4)

Peter told Ananias that before he sold the piece of property, it was his own; and even after he had sold it, the distribution of the proceeds was at his disposal. This indicates that the spontaneous acts of sharing their wealth with the truly needy, demonstrated by members of the early Church (Acts 2.42-47; Acts 4.32, 34-37), had nothing to do with common ownership of property, the confiscation and consolidation of private property, or the centralized control of property or the means of production. Private ownership of property is a fundamental right endowed by God upon humankind and necessary in a free society.

The eighth Commandment, “You shall not steal” (Ex 20.15), does make any sense if there is no such thing as private property. If everything belongs entirely to God, then anything we took (e.g., eating fruit from *any* tree, rather than from one; Gen 2.17) would be against the eighth Commandment. Or, if everything belongs to all people collectively, then taking anything could not be a sin. The logical conclusion from the Commandment is that God permits individuals to declare ownership over some things and make them their private property.

God states that individual people are permitted to own real property—land and buildings (Lev 25.10; Acts 5.4)—and personal property such as movable objects, whether animate or inanimate (Ex 22.4, 7-8; Heb 10.34). He also states that stealing real property (Dt 19.14; 1 Ki 21.17-19) or personal property (Rom 13.9; Eph 4.28; Titus 2.10) is a sin, and that people must take care of the property of others and return it if lost and found (Dt 22.1-4). And, if a person persists in a life of stealing the property of others, or endorsing theft by receiving stolen property, his condemnation will be everlasting death (1 Cor 6.10; Rev 9.21).

Based primarily on an understanding of the Bible’s teachings but also through experience and Common Law development, Western legal tradition has viewed the right of individuals to own private property, with no term limits, to be a key factor for the creation and maintenance of a free society. This right, while balanced by the Common Law concept of Adverse Possession (or ‘squatters’ rights’), includes subordinate rights such as: to use however the owner sees fit; exclusion of others from access or use of it; income through rental or productive use; compensation through payment for damages; transfer through sale or gift; and disposal or destruction. These subordinate rights have been eroded in the West over the past 200 years—with debatable validity, in some cases—through such things as zoning and environmental laws, limits on patents, and eminent domain and government ownership.

There has been pressure on the right of individual private property ownership from anti-Christian forces, including proponents of socialism and communism and from the ‘neo-liberal’ advocates of ‘social justice’, the ‘social gospel’, and ‘egalitarian distribution’ within the organized Church and the broader society, who claim that a free society requires enforced protection of civil and political rights, but not of the rights of private property. One of the key tenants of communism, as expressed by Karl Marx in the [Communist](#)

Manifesto is that “the theory of the communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property.”

The fundamental reason for the existence of private property is that God gives mankind the right to own things. Other reasons why it is important, include:

- *Responsibility through ownership.* Even if a person pays to use a property, he has less incentive to maintain the property than if he owns it. We can see the difference in the level of maintenance in a housing development where the units are owned vs. rented. Humans generally don't care about property that is owned by others or by a collective entity. Private ownership is necessary in order to engender a spirit of responsibility in mankind.
- *The problem of ownership of property by the State.* Government was not delegated responsibility by God to own property on behalf of its citizens. When governments own resources and the means of production, they control access through cronyism, graft, and other unjust forms of allocation. Ownership of property should be as close to the individual level as possible.
- *Mankind emulates his creator through ownership.* God ultimately owns everything (Job 41.11; Ps 50.10) because he is the creator; but in delegating a sub-sovereign responsibility of ownership to mankind as his image bearers (Gen 1.26-27), he endowed us with the ability to emulate him. Ownership of property is an effective means for mankind to fulfill its mandate to subdue the earth (Gen 1.28) through innovation and responsible stewardship.
- *Ownership leads to thanksgiving.* James says that every good and perfect gift is from God the Father (James 1.17). And Paul indicates that we are to give thanks to God for all things (Eph 5.20; Col 3.17). When we reflect on God's provisions for us, we praise him and give glory to him (1 Cor 10.31); which pleases him. Our obedience to God is tested by our willingness to use property wisely, enjoy the gifts he has given us, and praise him for them.
- *Ownership engenders prosperity.* The most prosperous nations throughout the ages have been those which have respected the God-given right for people to own property. These nations are also the ones that have individuals who have been able to supply resources for pursuits beyond providing for the necessities of life, such as advanced education and the arts. Christians who are prosperous, are enabled to contribute more to the Church (1 Cor 16.2) and charities. Notwithstanding the human tendency to be rapacious, property ownership is 'fuel' that God uses for the advancement of the Gospel and for the improvement of society and of civilizations.

64. The Church (Acts 5.11)

This is the first occurrence of the word 'church' in Acts. Luke does not use the word in his Gospel. The only other uses of the word, prior to its use to identify assemblies of believers in Jerusalem, are recorded in Matthew. Jesus stated that he would build his Church (Mt 16.18), and he provides guidance for how to deal with a person who refuses to repent (apologize) for an offense against another believer (Mt 18.17). Luke introduces the term 'church' in Acts without providing an explanation for Theophilus. So, it is likely that by the time he wrote Acts, the term was held as common currency among believers and understood to refer to a collection of believers in Jesus. Prior to this, Luke used alternative terms to describe the collective group of believers (Acts 2.44, 47; Acts 4.32). From this point in Acts, the word 'church' occurs often. Paul uses the term extensively in his writings (more than 70X). James and John also use the term a few times in their writings. However, it is interesting that Peter does not use the term, even though it is the term used by Matthew when he reports Jesus' words to Peter (Mt 16.18).

The Greek word (*ekklesia*) which is translated as 'church' in English, is a compound word from, 'out of' (*ek*) and 'called' (*kaleo*). In secular Greek, it referred to an assembly of citizens called together (Acts 19.32, 39, 41). In a Christian context, it refers to those who have been divinely called out from the world. The

earliest Reformation period translation of the NT into English, by Tyndale (c. 1530), did not use the word ‘church’ but rather used ‘congregation’ to translate the Greek word. Our English word ‘church’ comes from the Dutch word ‘kerk’ or German word ‘kirche’ which are derived from the Greek word ‘*kurion*’ (‘lord’) which is a short form for the concept of the ‘Lord’s house or assembly’. The word ‘church’ in the English NT always refers to an assembly (‘congregation’) of God’s people. It is used to refer to:

- Local assemblies (1 Cor 16.19; Rom 16.5).
- A regional collection of believers in different congregations (Acts 5.11; Acts 8.3; Acts 19.31). We often use the word ‘church’ as part of the name for a denomination—such as, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Canada. This is consistent with biblical usage since a denomination is usually a regional collection of believers in different congregations.
- The worldwide collection of believers (Mt 16.18).

However, the word ‘church’ is never used to refer to a physical building in the NT. We should try to use the term ‘church building’ when speaking of a building rather than ‘church’—for example, we can say, “Our church meets (assembles) at [location].”, but should avoid saying, “Our church *is* at [location].” if we mean the physical facility, since a building is not a *church*.

Some people become distressed over the use of the word ‘church’ in English translations and claim that the use of the word reinforces the idea of a hierarchical organization in contrast to local independent assemblies. Some even go as far as to say that any assembly of Christians which calls itself a ‘church’ is an abomination. They argue for what they call the ‘*ecclesia system*’. In so doing, they do not see the irony in their argument. Paul (and other NT writers) used a Greek term from the political realm to refer to the assembly of God’s people. The word ‘church’ is also derived from a secular Greek word—one that means ‘master’ or ‘lord’. Applying one secular word to translate the Greek word is essentially no different from using another—as long as the use of the word is explained within a Christian context. Juliet’s words are probably a good corrective to this extremism, “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

The early NT believers understood that they were the true continuation of the congregation or assembly of Israel. In the Greek translation of the OT, the Hebrew words ‘assembly’ and ‘congregation’ are sometimes translated as *ekklesia* (or as ‘synagogue’). Stephen refers to the congregation in the wilderness using the term *ekklesia* (Acts 7.38). They understood that they were the called-out ones, the new Israel of God (Rom 2.28-29; Gal 6.16; 1 Pt 2.5, 9; Rev 1.6). They were called out from both the old Israel (from among those who rejected the Messiah) and the world of the Gentiles, as the foundation for the worldwide Church of Jesus Christ. From this point forward in Acts, ‘church’ refers to the growing community of believers (either in congregations or universally).

Paul uses a fuller expression, ‘church of God’ when speaking with the Ephesian elders (Acts 20.28). Likewise, he uses the expression a few times, in his letters to the churches in Corinth (1 Cor 1.2; 1 Cor 10.32; 1 Cor 11.22; 1 Cor 15.9; 2 Cor 1.1) and Galatia (1 Cor 1.13) and to Timothy (1 Tim 3.5). It is possible that Paul appends the words ‘of God’ when writing to his Gentile audiences to reinforce the distinction between citizenship in a Greek city-state and citizenship in the Kingdom of God. In the past, people rarely needed to modify the word ‘church’ in English as the term had generally been assumed to refer to a Christian assembly or building. However, some cults (e.g., The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints; i.e., Mormons) have also appropriated the term.

Luke’s first use of the word ‘church’ after the sin of Ananias and Sapphira is likely deliberate. The Church as a community of believers cannot flourish when trust is broken with deception and hypocrisy. The Church prospers only when it is living in conformity with God’s revealed will. The Church belongs to Jesus. It is his spiritual bride (Eph 5.25-27; Rev 19.7-9). As members of his Church, we need to strive to maintain its holiness and unity. Let us not be like the Corinthians whom Paul had to chastise for their party spirit (1 Cor 1.10) or like Ananias and Sapphira who attempted to deceive other believers (and the Holy Spirit) with an act of false worship.

65. Healing the Sick (Acts 5.12-16)

The disciples had prayed that God would demonstrate his power and presence among them by performing healing miracles through the name of Jesus (Acts 4.30). We see in this portion of Luke's account the immediate fulfillment of that prayer. The apostles were granted the ability to heal people of illnesses and diseases and to cast out unclean spirits. Luke states that, in this instance, the miraculous healings were performed by the hands of the *apostles*. Others who were not among the original twelve apostles, including Stephen (Acts 6.8) and Paul, would perform healings; but Luke is emphatic—it was the apostles who were healing the sick.

The knowledge that it was the apostles who performed these healings, helps us understand what Luke says next. First, “they were all together in Solomon's Portico” (Acts 5.12). The antecedent of ‘they’ is the apostles. Luke is not saying that the thousands of believers were assembled in Solomon's Portico, but only the apostles. They assembled where Peter and John had healed the lame beggar (Acts 3.1-11). This was a deliberate act of defiance against the unlawful command of the council to desist from speaking or teaching in the name of Jesus (Acts 4.18). As they were healing the sick, they were speaking in the name of Jesus. Second, Luke's statement that it was the apostles who were healing helps us to understand what Luke means by his statement, “None of the rest dared join them.” (Acts 5.13). This statement has engendered much discussion. However, many seem to miss the point Luke is making. He is not saying that unbelievers were hesitant to join the community of believers. In fact, many new believers were being added (Acts 5.14). Rather, the antecedent of ‘them’ (twice in verse 13) refers again to the *apostles*, not to the larger community of believers. Luke is saying that no one else dared to join the apostles who were performing healing miracles in Solomon's Portico.

There were possibly two reasons why other believers were reluctant to be present with the apostles. First, since the apostles were exercising divinely appointed authority, other believers may have hesitated to assume such an authority on their own. They may have been in awe of the judgement which had befallen Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5.1-11) and were afraid (Acts 5.11) to do anything which might be construed as being out of order. Another reason is that it is likely that those who were already believers were reluctant to be seen as flagrantly disobeying the council's dictate. They feared the repercussions from the council if they were caught in Solomon's Portico where the ‘law’ was being broken by the apostles. Thus, Luke's point appears to be that an element of fear from being persecuted had entered into the early NT Church. Luke is demonstrating that the apostles were courageous and willing to speak boldly and to heal in the name of Jesus when other believers were keeping their distance. Yet, from the ‘sidelines’ the other believers held the apostles in “high esteem” (Acts 5.13). All Christians should be bold like the apostles, but not all are. It is not sufficient that we should be in awe of what some other believers are doing for the Kingdom—e.g., speaking out against the wickedness in our society such as the endorsement of abortion, homosexual practices, or transgenderism; or preaching powerfully the message of faith and repentance from sin. We all need to pray for boldness (Acts 4.29-31, 33) to speak about Jesus and his commands wherever he leads us—in our places of employment, in our community, and in political forums.

Word of the apostles' actions of healing was spreading. People were arriving from outside Jerusalem (Acts 5.16) to experience the healing. But they were receiving more than physical healing. They were hearing the message of the Gospel being preached along with seeing the miracles. Multitudes were believing in Jesus and being “added to the Lord” (Acts 5.14). Luke observes that an element of superstition among some in the crowd accompanied the good work of the apostles. Some believed that if Peter's shadow fell on their sick relations they would be healed. Luke does not indicate that this worked. Rather, it shows how easy it is for the good and pure to be adulterated with superstitions. Within the Church, many have been infected with superstitious ideas and practices around the observance of ordinances. For example, they view attendance at services to be meritorious, imbue the sacraments with powers which they do not have, ritualize

prayer, or consider the continuance of sign miracles essential.

God gave some, but not all believers (1 Cor 12.9-10), in the early NT Church the ability to perform healing miracles and other forms of miracles (e.g., to restore the life of a recently dead person). One reason he did this was to validate his messengers before the NT was completed. The sign miracles validated the apostles, who would be responsible for producing the NT canon of Scripture, as authoritative spokesman sent by Jesus. Another reason God gave this ability was to authenticate the message to a Jewish audience that Jesus as the Messiah had to be crucified (1 Cor 1.23), and to the first sceptical Gentile audiences that Jesus was raised from the dead (Acts 17.32). The period covered by Acts was unique. Someone might argue that new territories are being opened to the message of the Gospel and therefore sign miracles still have a place for convincing sceptics. However, this notion is mistaken. We now have the completed Bible, including the NT canon, which provides all that we need to know for faith and practice. In the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Abraham stated, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.” (Lk 16.31). We now have far more than ‘Moses and the Prophets’ with the Gospels and other NT writings. It is biblical preaching (Rom 10.14) which brings people to faith and repentance, not miracles of healing.

66. Anti-Christian Animosity (Acts 5.17-18)

About a week before this meditation was written, a female, pretending to be a male, killed three children and three adults at a private Christian elementary school in Nashville. Police responded quickly and killed her. This form of violence has become too common in our society. However, that is not the issue we need to consider today. Evil of this kind is what brought about the total obliteration of mankind by the Flood (except for the eight individuals in the ark). We read, “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” (Gen 6.5). The Flood did not solve the problem of sin. Wickedness came roaring back quickly. And even among God’s covenant people, everyone was doing what was right in his own eyes (Judges 17.6; Judges 21.25).

Shortly after the slaughter, some people attributed blame for the shooting on Christian [indoctrination](#) which had caused the shooter to carry her pain into adulthood and become hostile to Christianity. Their conclusion is that it is evil to teach biblical truths such as that there are only two sexes (Gen 1.27), that transgender transitions should not be permitted, and that sexually immoral behaviour (e.g., homosexual practices or sex outside of marriage) should not be endorsed by governments and encouraged by the media. A similar anti-Christian attitude was demonstrated by the Canadian government under Justin Trudeau which proposed cancellation of the charitable status for pregnancy care centres because they don’t support abortion. Likewise, if a person objects to being forced to wear a rainbow-coloured armband he is viewed as being intolerant. It is not considered sufficient to allow people to have different views, one must now endorse an anti-Christian belief or be labelled ‘racist’, ‘homophobic’, or a ‘Nazi’.

Isaiah describes the current situation in our culture. “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!” (Is 5.20-21). Our culture has declared moral goodness (as defined by God) to be evil and has endorsed evils that deserve death as if they were good (Rom 1.32). This is because men claim to be “wise in their own eyes” and have no desire to know what God has said in his word (the Bible), and specifically in the Ten Commandments, about what is right and what is wrong. As Paul stated, they claim to be wise but are fools (Rom 1.22).

Why does anti-Christian animosity exist? Because men:

- *Love darkness rather than light* (Jn 3.19). People enjoy sinning. They get an adrenaline rush from wicked actions—e.g., from shoplifting, a secret sexual liaison, or a drug-induced high. They reject the

Bible's standards as 'Victorian' moralism, stifling, boring, and irrelevant.

- *Desire autonomy.* Since Eve was beguiled by the serpent who led her to question God's authority (Gen 3.1), mankind has universally rejected God's commands and striven to be his own authority for all things moral. People do not want Jesus to rule over them (Ps 2.2; Lk 19.14).
- *Protect their interests.* The high priest along with the party of the Sadducees were filled with jealousy (Acts 5.17). They were afraid that their religious hegemony would be disrupted by the teaching that the Messiah had arrived and that a new covenantal economy had been introduced. It is certainly ironic that in less than 40 years from this time, the temple was destroyed, the entire Jewish ceremonial system overthrown, and the priesthood abolished. Politicians and government administrators and the faculty of universities are the modern equivalent of Sadducean party. They jealousy protect their tenure and resist anything which could unseat them. Anyone who does not follow the 'party line' is exiled to the hinterlands. For example, in a university setting if a person speaks against prevailing foolish notions (e.g., CRT, DEI, evolutionary theory, socialistic economics) his contract will be cancelled.
- *Are proud creatures.* A related reason to protecting personal interests is that pride abounds in the human heart. It is exhibited as people grasp for power and prestige, with a desire to satiate their greed. The jealousy exhibited by the high priests and Sadducees was the result of their desiring to be praised by men (Jn 12.43), with no thought for what God honours (1 Sam 2.30).
- *Are impelled by Satan.* Behind the anti-Christian animosity displayed by individuals declaring their autonomy from God is Satan's hatred against God. Satan uses false religions (particularly Islam) and evil governments—the False Prophet and the Beast (Rev 16.13; Rev 19.20; Rev 20.10)—as his pawns to heap abuse on believers to fulfill his fervent wish to overthrow the Kingdom of Christ.

Anti-Christian sentiments are irrational. Arguments against Christian teaching—in any area (e.g., theology, morality, anthropology, or psychology, etc.) cannot prevail because they are based on human wisdom which is foolishness (1 Cor 1.19-20) and “earthly, unspiritual, demonic” (James 3.15). So, instead of engaging in rational discourse with the disciples, the high priest and his cronies undertook the only course of action they thought would work for silencing the apostles' preaching—they jailed them (Acts 5.18). Satan and his human minions cannot defeat Christ and his Church with logic or debate, so they resort to using force. Persecution of Christians has been a preferred means in Satan's anti-God arsenal. But he loses every time, and the Church continues to grow in extent and influence. In our day, the forces of evil seem to be in the ascendancy. We need to be earnest in our appeal to God to send a reformation into his Church so that Christians will boldly declare the Gospel and bring a revival into our land.

67. Prison Escape (Acts 5.18-21a)

An internet search will provide a list of some of the most daring and ingenious escapes from prison. Some have become the source of novels or adventure movies. In some procedural dramas prison escapes are used as a means of bringing a notorious antagonist back into the thematic vector. However, your internet search will likely not include the prison escape recounted here or the even more dramatic two escapes recounted later in Acts—Peter's second escape (Acts 12.6-10) and Paul and Silas' release from the Philippian jail (Acts 16.24-28). Miraculous events as recorded in the Bible, such as the prison escapes in Acts or the most amazing escape of all—Jesus' departure from the tomb—are invariably discounted as mere fiction.

Throughout our studies in Acts we have encountered miracles such as the apostles being able instantly to speak in a previously unlearned language, healing the sick, and casting out demons. When we considered these events, we briefly addressed the debate about the ongoing role of these kinds of miracles in the post-apostolic Church. The accounts of the prison escape miracles raise the same issue—are believers who are wrongly incarcerated for proclaiming biblical truth to expect God to send an angel and break open the prison doors? Consider the case of Linda Gibbons in Toronto. She ignored the prohibition against protesting

outside an abortion facility. She would be arrested and imprisoned. After she was released, she would return to the same place on the sidewalk and hold up a sign with a picture of a baby and text saying, “Why Mom? When I have so much love to give.” and silently pray. She would then be rearrested. She spent more than a cumulative decade in prison for repeatedly ignoring the government’s wicked prohibition against proclaiming the truth about life.

We are not to expect miraculous escapes when we stand firm for biblical truth (Heb 11.36-37). Stephen did not escape from those who stoned him to death (Acts 7.57-60), the apostle James was murdered by Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12.1-2), and Paul was not released miraculously from his arrest in the temple precincts (Acts 21.33). He was a prisoner during the remainder of the account in Acts, even spending two years under house-arrest in Rome (Acts 28.30). God had specific purposes for each of the three miraculous prison escapes recorded in Acts. In this first instance, God did not intend to release them permanently from suffering and persecution (Peter would be rearrested, Acts 12.3). His purpose was to confound the magistrates (Acts 5.21b-26), to continue laying the foundation for the new covenant Church in Jerusalem, to establish the principle that all that transpires is according to his eternal plan, and to encourage believers to trust that whatever happens in this life we are protected by the hand of God. We need to be reminded that suffering persecution for the cause of Christ should be expected (Mt 5.10-12; Jn 15.19-20; Rom 8.17; 1 Pt 4.12-16).

God is a master at confounding the wicked with irony. For example, the book of Esther is permeated with coincident events which are so improbable that they fall outside of the realm of ‘chance’ occurrence and show clearly that God’s directing hand is at work. Consider the situation, Mordecai who served the king and not himself was ignored, and wicked Haman, who had only his own ambitions in mind, was promoted (Est 2.23; Est 3.1). But soon after, the king asked for advice about honouring Mordecai from Haman, the person who hated him the most (Est 6.6-11). Likewise, the account of this prison escape contains ironies:

- The apostles were placed in a public prison (Acts 5.18) but were released secretly and then could not be found (Acts 5.22).
- An angel of the Lord (Acts 5.18) released the apostles. This is an evident snub against the Sadducees who denied the existence of angels (Acts 23.8). We are not told by Luke if this was an angel like Gabriel (Lk 1.19) or a theophanic appearance (e.g., Acts 8.26, 29).

The angel told the apostles to return to the temple and resume preaching. So, at first light, they were back as the same spot in the temple where they had been arrested. Linda Gibbons would follow the same procedure. Immediately after being released, she would return to the same spot on the sidewalk outside the abortion facility. The apostles were not concerned for their safety. They had explicit instructions from Jesus, relayed through the angel, and they were obedient. Each of us may not be called to preach in public forums as were the apostles, or to carry out persistent silent and peaceful protests as was Linda Gibbons. But each believer has a calling from the Lord. Whatever it is, we are to pursue it with complete diligence for the glory of the God (1 Cor 10.31). As we do what we are called to, we are to do it courageously, and trust that God will be with us. If he requires that we die for the sake of the Gospel, he will give us the strength to persevere to the end. If he requires that we remain here to pursue the spiritual battle for another day (Phil 1.23-24), he will lead us in the way.

The apostles were told to “speak to the people all the words of this Life”. It is interesting that the ESV and NASB capitalize the word ‘life’—however, they appear to be inconsistent by not capitalizing the word in Philippians 2.16. The ‘words’ or ‘word’ is the message of the Gospel, and ‘this Life’ is what the Gospel promises—eternal life (Jn 1.4; Jn 5.24; Jn 6.68; Acts 13.48; Phil 2.16; 1 Jn 1.1-2). In colloquial English we use the term ‘afterlife’ to refer to the life that follows death. However, this implies that the life we now live is really life. It might be better to refer to this life as ‘before-life’ and the life to come as ‘Life’. For believers, our life now is a mere shadow of what life will be like in our resurrected bodies in the new heaven and

earth.

68. Satan and the Demonic

(Acts 5.3; Acts 5.17; Acts 8.7; Acts 26.18)

In Acts, there are two references to Satan (Acts 5.3; Acts 26.18) and two to ‘unclean spirits’ (Acts 5.17; Acts 8.7), which are elsewhere referred to as ‘demons’ (Mt 10.1, 8). During Jesus’ ministry, he was subjected to temptations by Satan (Mt 4.1-11) and healed many who were possessed by unclean spirits by casting out the demons (Lk 11.20). Likewise, his disciples were tempted by Satan (Lk 22.31; Jn 13.2) and given authority to cast out demons (Mt 10.1, 8).

From a survey of Scripture, we can conclude that Satan and demons:

- *Exist.* The existence of the demonic is part of a biblical worldview. We must not attribute them to myth or define them in psychological terms.
- *Are fallen angels.* Satan is an angelic being who was created along with the other angels, probably on the first day of creation. Satan may have been one from among the leading class of angels (a peer of the named angels, Gabriel and Michael) and led a rebellion of a number (possibly a third, based on Rev 12.4) of the angels against God’s rule (2 Pt 2.4; Jude 6; Rev 12.7-9).
- *Were expelled from heaven.* After his rebellion, Satan waged war against the heavenly host. But he was defeated by the angels that remained loyal to God and was thrown out of heaven (Rev 9.1; Rev 12.3-9).
- *Cannot perform miracles.* Satan does not have miraculous powers, nor can he foretell the future. Satan’s (and demons’) power is likely confined to an ability to possess humans (Mt 4.24; Eph 2.2) and animals (Mt 8.31) and to tempt and deceive mankind—except when Satan is given explicit permission by God to intervene directly in the physical realm (e.g., Job 1.6-12; Job 2.1-7). We must not think of Satan as equivalent to God, but an evil counterpart.
- *Tempt humans to sin.* Satan appears on the scene in human history in Genesis 3.1, possessing a serpent and tempting Eve to sin (2 Cor 11.3; Rev 12.9; Rev 20.2). Moral evil is not isolated in the heart of man but relates to the kingdom of Satan in the invisible realm. Peter told Ananias that Satan had filled his heart to lie to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5.3). Satan is a “roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Pt 5.8), who desires to tempt believers in Christ to sin. Men without Christ are held in slavery by him (2 Tim 2.26). His demons, continue to direct people to consider the tantalizing ‘fruit’ of sin (e.g., illicit sexual encounters, expressions of anger, or prideful self worship) and question God’s prohibitions against sin; and they suggest arguments for how to rationalize disobedience (Mt 16.22-23; Mk 4.15; Lk 4.1-13; Lk 22.3).
- *Are liars.* Satan has been a liar from the beginning (Jn 8.44), so it is not surprising that the first statements from his mouth are a lie deceptively appearing to be the truth (Gen 3.1), followed by an explicit lie (Gen 3.4). As soon as he became a sinner, he became a *satan* (accuser); as soon as he became a traitor against God, he became a tempter of man.
- *Can possess humans.* The influences and operations of Satan advance by degrees. At first, they are temptations. At some point, the demonic can fill the heart of a person and take entire possession of it (Jn 13.27; Acts 5.3).
- *Appear to have limited powers today.* There is debate about if and how demon possession is manifested today. No information is given in the apostolic letters on this topic. Exorcism is not identified as a spiritual gift. And Satan’s powers appear to be limited now that Christ has procured redemption for the elect (Jn 12.31; Rev 20.2-3) and conquered sin and Satan.
- *Can be resisted.* Man is a responsible creature, and must bear his guilt, when he abandons himself to satanic influences. So, we need to be aware of Satan’s methods (2 Cor 2.11) and resist him (Eph 6.11; James 4.7).
- *Hate God and Christians.* Satan’s entire being strikes out in rage against God and his glory. He uses

his power to control people's minds to influence them against Christ (Jn 13.2), his Church (Rev 12.3-6, 16-17), and the true worship of God. He uses false religions and evil governments—the False Prophet and the Beast (Rev 16.13; Rev 19.20; Rev 20.10)—as his pawns; and he compels the licentious hedonists to resist any imposition of God's law and to heap abuse on believers. He does everything he can to discourage believers, sow discord in congregations, and spawn heresies. Satan's demonic spirits are the empowering force behind false prophets (Rev 16.13-14). This is not a 'politically correct' statement, but it is based on Scripture—we must state emphatically that all other religions, besides Christianity, are demonic!

- *The instigator of persecution against Christians.* When Satan is unable to deceive believers and weaken their faith in Christ and the word of God, he cajoles uncivil magistrates and unruly mobs to silence a Christian witness in the public forum—through imprisonment, torture, and martyrdom (Acts 4.1-3; Rev 2.10).
- *The deceiver of the world.* Satan's falsehoods extend beyond the explicit domain of 'religion'. As the deceiver of the world (Rev 12.9; Rev 20.10), his falsehood extends into every other area of life—including philosophy, psychology, anthropology, history, science, and economics. He deceives people so that they believe that mankind is nothing more than an evolved 'ape', who is from birth good, and that men can solve all their problems without consideration of God or his laws.
- *Consigned to the everlasting hell.* Satan's prospect is torment in the everlasting hell (Rom 16.20; Rev 20.1-2, 10). However, no regrets arise in his mind. His hatred is only increased, and his resolve hardened as he seeks to drag those who hear the Gospel into his gloomy abode (Mt 13.19-22). He attempts to fill his kingdom, the abyss of hell (Rev 9.11), with as many reprobates as he can. His wish is to shake his fist at God and say to him, "You have failed, look at all the men I have claimed for my realm!"

69. Perplexed Magistrates (Acts 5.21b-26)

The arrest and imprisonment of the apostles for preaching about eternal Life (Acts 5.20) is a serious matter. However, we cannot resist a smile when we read about the consternation experienced by the members of the council when they discovered that the prisoners had escaped and were back standing in the temple and teaching. God always has the last laugh over the wicked and their exploits:

- "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. (Ps 2.4).
- "the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming." (Ps 37.13).

The council had delivered a stupid command—telling Peter and John "not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus." (Acts 4.18). In Acts 5.21b-26 they see the results of their stupidity. God makes a mockery of their dictates and use of force against the apostles. Politicians today seem to be just as remarkably stupid with their dictates, with no understanding of the unintended consequences which will invariably result. A simple example was the ban placed on incandescent light bulbs in many jurisdictions. Following the initial declaration people began using compact fluorescent bulbs which turned out to produce an inferior quality of light and contained mercury, a potent neurotoxin. Thankfully, human innovation came up with better alternatives. Someone will argue that banning incandescent bulbs will 'save the environment' and that the ban is not a 'moral issue', even if stupid. So, we can consider two recent stupid examples with clear moral ramifications:

- In 2016, after North Carolina banned self-professed transgender people from using the washrooms in public buildings other than that which aligned with their biological sex, California retaliated by banning state-funded travel to that state. California went on to ban travel to 23 states with similar policies. So, sports teams at public universities had to find other ways to pay for travel to away games. However, in 2023 the [legislators admitted](#) that the policy was not working, and they were looking for ways to get out of the mess they had created.
- Our 'wise' politicians and judges permit a biological male to compete in a female sport or to use a

female change room because he declares himself to be a female. This is not tolerance or accommodation of people's differences. It is insanity. We can make a certain prediction—the policy will end up in a cloud of smoke as it self-destructs.

Just as God confounded the high priest and his cronies, God will always confound Satan and his human minions when they attempt to overrule God's moral decrees and his redemptive plans.

The evident consternation in the council strengthened the apostles. The captain of the temple guard was afraid of a backlash from the people. But the apostles were not afraid of the captain or of the officers, and they went willingly with them to re-appear before the council. They knew, from the preceding miraculous release from prison, that God was controlling the events swirling around them and that they were under his protective care. We can derive some key lessons from this account:

- *Honour civil magistrates.* The apostles went willingly with the captain and his officers. They honoured those in authority over them (Ex 20.12), as long as their commands and their requests were not contrary to what God required of them (Acts 5.29). Even when civil magistrates are wicked, we are to obey them, unless they require us to break God's law or prohibit us from doing what God requires of us.
- *Do not fear men.* The captain and the officers were afraid of being stoned by the people if they forcibly arrested the apostles. The irony is evident. Wicked men were afraid of what others might do to them. Yet, the apostles were not afraid of what men could do. The change in the apostles is dramatic. At the arrest of Jesus, the disciples left Jesus and fled out of fear (Mt 26.56), and then Peter denied knowing Jesus. About three months had passed, and now they were bolder than a mongoose facing a venomous King Cobra. Repeatedly (over one hundred times in the Bible), God tells his people not to be afraid of what men can do to them. Jesus especially states, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." (Mt 10.28). What does it take for us to believe God and to trust him?
- *Fear God.* Jesus went on to say, "Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell." (Mt 10.28). Some interpret this to mean fear Satan who through his wiles could tempt a person to sin unto everlasting death. However, it is probably better to understand Jesus to say that we must fear God and keep his commandments (Eccl 12.13), since he has the ultimate power for bestowing everlasting life or punishing with everlasting death. The apostles had a proper fear of God (Acts 5.29). The council did not. They had to give an account of their wicked deeds before God (Eccl 12.14).
- *Fighting against God is hopeless.* The schemes of the council were thwarted by God. From their perspective, the situation was out of control. What they did not understand was that God was in total control. All things were working out according to his purposes and for his glory (Rom 8.28). Satan and his earthly minions—e.g., most politicians today—are clueless, thinking that they can fight Christ by attacking his Church. They dismiss God as a figment of Christians' imaginations and deny that God's law has any authority in the public forum. Yet, they are fighting in a war that they can never win. Jesus stated that even the gates of hell cannot rise up against his Church (Mt 16.18). Rather, Satan and the beast of anti-God government, along with all false religions, will be consigned forever to the fires of hell (Rev 20.10).

70. Enraged Magistrates

(Acts 5.27-33)

The apostles were brought back into the council chamber for cross examination. They were charged with two offenses: 1) contempt of court, 2) slander. A strict analysis of the situation indicates that they were disobeying an explicit command from the council (Acts 4.17-18). It is wrong for anyone to disobey a court order, as long as the order is not immoral. Thus, it is wrong for Christians to attempt to justify disobedience to government laws by claiming that the government itself is evil or tyrannical. However, the apostles appealed to a higher authority (Acts 4.19; Acts 5.29) which overruled the council's dictate. In God's courtroom they were not guilty of contempt. Nevertheless, they did not respond with violence or protests against the magistrates. Christians should not use the instruments of Satan as a supposed means for

advancing the cause of Christ.

The high priest also accused the apostles of slander, by making them (the council) guilty of the death of Jesus. The high priest refused to use the name of Jesus and referred to him only as ‘this man’. The council members knew that they were complicit in the death of Jesus. But they did not want this stated because they feared a potential uprising from the citizenry who were impressed by the miraculous healings being performed among them (Acts 5.12-16) and might stone them if they abused the apostles (Acts 5.26). The apostles were not guilty of slander. They were speaking truth—the Jewish leaders had unjustly condemned Jesus to death and handed him over to the Romans to be crucified. Peter does not pull back from stating this truth when he speaks again before the council, and states, “whom you killed by hanging him on a tree.” (Acts 5.30).

Peter opens his apology (defense) by reminding the council that all men are ultimately accountable to God. A king is not a law unto himself but is subject to the law of God and to the King of kings (Ps 2.10-12). Elders in the Church have oversight responsibilities only as far as they are assigned to them by Christ, who is the head of the Church. So, every law, statute, regulation, judicial ruling, dictate, or command issued by men must be consistent with the law of God as summarized in the Ten Commandments. Christians must submit to governing authorities and show respect to them (Rom 13.1-7; 1 Pt 2.13-17), but only as far as their actions are clearly consistent with God’s revealed will in the Bible. We have already considered the matter of obedience to government (see, [Civil Disobedience](#)). So, we will consider only one example today. Many Christians today will use the excuse for working in commercial activities on a Sunday, that their boss requires it or that they will be fired if they do not work on that day. We don’t hear them appealing to Exodus 20.8-10 and Acts 5.29 to override their boss’s authority. The apostles were willing to face imprisonment and even death to defend God’s rights over mankind. We wish that Christians today would have that level of commitment to Jesus and his commands (Jn 14.15, 21).

Peter didn’t give a defense of their actions. Instead, he took the opportunity of being before the council to present the Gospel message, which included:

- *Continuity*. Christianity is not a new religion. It is the same religion, rightly understood, as that which was observed by the fathers—by Abraham, Moses, and David, and all the OT saints with them.
- *Christ*. The Messiah is Jesus (‘this man’) who taught among them.
- *Crucifixion*. He was crucified through the cursed death on a tree (Dt 21.23).
- *Confirmation*. His Messiahship was confirmed through the resurrection that was publicly known throughout the city.
- *Condemnation*. The Jewish leaders were guilty of having crucified Jesus.
- *Coronation*. Jesus, as the originator (leader) of salvation was exalted through his ascension to the right hand of the Father (Ps 110.1), where he now reigns.
- *Call*. The Gospel call was offered to Jesus’ murderers. Forgiveness of sin, even of murder, is possible through genuine repentance.
- *Confirmation*. The eyewitness testimony of the apostles, and the inner working of the Holy Spirit, confirm the truth of what Peter proclaimed.

Evil hates God and the truth he has communicated in the Scriptures concerning sin, righteousness, and judgement (Jn 16.8). The council was not moved to repentance at Peter’s preaching. Instead, they were enraged to such an extent that they wanted to kill the apostles. Shortly after this, they began to put Christians to death, starting with the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7.59-60) and later with the execution of the apostle James (Acts 12.2). They also began a campaign of persecution against Christians (Acts 8.1). Since then, anti-God antagonists have attempted to silence Christians. We do not have space to review the list of persecutions of Christians that followed for the next 250 years from both Jews and Roman Gentiles and then was pursued by forces such as the Inquisition. Today, enraged antagonists against Christ, Christians,

and the Bible include governments in countries dominated by Islam and communism. However, in North America, which at one time would have been considered part of the ‘Christian West’, enraged forces are welling up also. For example, governments label Christian as ‘terrorists’ if they speak against homosexual unions, abortion, or gender transitions. If they had their way, Christians would not be permitted to disseminate information (including the text of the Bible) on websites, and churches and Christian charities would have their charitable status designation revoked. It may not be much longer before politicians and organizations such as the ACLU and Antifa will be calling for the confiscation of Christians’ property, their incarceration, and even their execution. Let us pray that God will give us the strength to stand faithfully for Christ when that day comes.

71. Gamaliel’s Moderating Advice (Acts 5.34-39)

Paul declares that because men do not honour God as God or give thanks to him, God hands them over to futility in their thinking (Rom 1.21). At times men believe some incredibly stupid things. Current examples of men declaring themselves to be wise but demonstrating that they are fools (Rom 1.22) include: believing that a biological male can declare himself to be a woman, claiming that using a natural gas stove will change the earth’s climate, teaching that mankind is the product of millions of years of evolution, and thinking that waving bail for people who commit serious crimes will reduce recidivism rates. We can only shake our heads at the nonsense being paraded as human wisdom. Nevertheless, God still gives intelligence and insight to mankind. We have seen astounding examples of innovation over the past fifty years—including a vast repository of information on the internet, powerful hand-held computing devices, gene therapy, and AI applications in crop management. God’s general grace overrides human foolishness, and he permits us to live healthy and productive lives.

Luke refers to an example of God giving natural wisdom to an individual, which moderated the venomous anger (Acts 5.33) of the Jewish council against the apostles. This came in the form of advice from a member of the minority party—a Pharisee named Gamaliel. He was a rabbinic scholar who must have been well respected for the Sadducee majority to listen to him and to heed his advice (Acts 5.39). Paul tells us that he trained as a Pharisee under Gamaliel’s tutelage (Acts 22:3). Gamaliel ordered that the meeting proceed *in camera* (Acts 5.34). He may have wanted the deliberation about the fate of the apostles not to be clouded by their physical presence, or he wanted to prevent the views of the council members from becoming public knowledge. It is ironic that what he said did become known. Paul was likely an attendee and later reported to Luke what transpired.

Gamaliel then used a pragmatic argument to suggest to the council that pursuing a violent course of action against the apostles could be counter productive. For example, they might find themselves in opposition to the Jerusalem populace who were enamoured by the apostles’ teaching and miracle working (Acts 5.13). Gamaliel gave two examples of movements which had arisen in the recent past and described their demise. [We won’t engage in the debate about whether what Gamaliel says about these movements differs from what Josephus states. They may not be describing the same resistance movements. The information presented by Luke is the word of God and accurately reports what Gamaliel stated.] Gamaliel suggested that if the Christian movement was like these secular movements, it would fade into nothing. He added a prescient observation. If the Christian movement is merely of men, it will fail, but if it is from God, no opposition from men will be able to overthrow it. Thus, it would be unwise to be found opposing God. He spoke more truth than he understood. From its small beginnings, Christianity has become a world-encompassing movement and not even the gates of hell have been able to rise up against it to stop its advance.

The Pharisees viewed themselves as separated (the word ‘pharisee’ is probably derived from an Aramaic word meaning ‘divide’) from the common folks. At the time of Jesus, they held distinctly different views

from the Sadducees. They believed in a coming Messiah, that God actively controls human activities, in a physical resurrection, in the existence of angels, and that the OT teachings were the word of God (Acts 23.6-9). They were close to the Kingdom of Heaven. Some of them received and believed the Christian message (Acts 15.5). However, Gamaliel disregarded the teaching of Peter which he had heard twice (Acts 4.8-12; Acts 5.30-32). His advice to the council was not for them to listen to the truth that had been proclaimed by Peter, but to follow a temporalized approach for dealing with the immediate issue of the apparently recalcitrant apostles. His was a band-aid solution for addressing the cancer of hardened unbelief evident in the council members. Waiting to see how things might turn out is generally not a good form of guidance to follow in difficult situations.

Besides being pragmatic, Gamaliel's advice is fatalistic. He didn't really believe in God's providential governance of the world or understand how to apply it in his life. If he had, he would have understood that we are not to give way to the naïve belief that "what will be, will be." False religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism are fatalistic—for example, with their belief in *karma*. Islam is also an essentially fatalistic religion based around an unknowable and capricious deity. Religions which are pantheistic are also fatalistic—the 'stars rule our fate'. And materialistic naturalists, while claiming that men have free wills, are determinists—our genes, or molecular or cosmological events at a micro or macro level, determine how we will behave. In contrast, biblical Christianity maintains the tension between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Christians understand that we are to act responsibly in obedience to the revealed will of God (1 Cor 10.31). Also, if Gamaliel had really understood God's management of history, he would have accepted the fact that Jesus is the Messiah who fulfilled dozens of prophecies given about him.

The moderating advice of Gamaliel teaches us that:

- Men who do not have the Holy Spirit in them do not know how to address the most fundamental issues facing mankind.
- God is in control. He can frustrate every evil counsel, just as he frustrated Haman's wicked intentions (Est 5.14; Est 7.9-10).
- God controls the minds of men and uses unbelievers to advance his purposes.
- Wicked men will not succeed in preventing the advance of Christ's Church.

72. Futile Attempts to Stop Gospel Proclamation (Acts 5.40-42)

When we think of physical abuse or even murder being directed at Christians, Pakistan or northern Nigeria might come to mind. Worldwide, at least 5,000 Christians are killed annually because of their profession of faith in Jesus, and many more become refugees as they flee from their persecutors. It is [estimated](#) that 360 million Christians (one in seven) live in nations with high levels of persecution or discrimination against Christians. Most of these nations have Islamic governments, but some have other forms of repressive regimes (e.g., North Korea and China). It is not an exaggeration—if God lifted his restraining hand, Christians would soon be slaughtered in the once 'Christian' West.

Luke records the first instance of NT believers (the apostles) being physically abused for proclaiming the name of Christ. They were beaten. Likely they were given thirty-nine lashes (forty less one, Dt 25.3; 2 Cor 11.24) on their backs and chests with a triple-stranded strap of cow hide. These lashings could produce bleeding and occasionally resulted in the death of a victim. The reason they were punished was ostensibly because they had ignored an explicit command to desist from speaking in the name of Jesus (Acts 4.18; Acts 5.28). However, the real reason they were physically abused was because they proclaimed truth—the truth that Jesus is the Messiah, that the Jewish leaders were responsible for his execution (Acts 5.30), and that God had raised Jesus from the dead.

It is the proclamation of truth by Christians which infuriates their enemies. Homosexual activists want the Bible's statements against their abominable practices silenced (Lev 18.22; Lev 20.13; Rom 1.26-27; 1 Cor 6.9; 1 Tim 1.10). They want Bibles banned from public libraries and if they could accomplish it have Bibles in private homes confiscated as hate literature and wipe the Bible from the internet. Pro-abortion advocates scream and spit in the faces of Christians offering quiet (even silent) prayers outside of abortion facilities. They have the police [arrest](#) the Christians, claiming that their presence on the sidewalk offends women wishing to exercise their 'rights'. After the shooting in a Nashville Christian school, transgender militants issued a [call](#) for widespread violence against Christians. Jesus said that knowing the truth will set mankind free (Jn 8.32). But the anti-Christian forces do not want to hear truth, because they do not want to be set free from the spiritual darkness engulfing them (Jn 3.19). The concept of 'freedom of speech' to them is one-directional. They demand the 'right' to have drag-queen readings in public libraries and teach their perverted notions about sexuality in schools. But their objective is to criminalize the proclamation of any biblical truth. And then, it would not be sufficient to just silence Christians. Their next objective is to require that Christians think as they do and openly endorse their evil practices.

Jesus predicted this type of maltreatment would come upon his disciples (Mt 10.16-23; Jn 15.18-27; Jn 16.2-4). So, they were not surprised. However, we also should not be surprised when we are persecuted for proclaiming biblical truth (Mt 5.10-12; Acts 14.22; Rom 8.17; Phil 1.29; 2 Tim 3.12). Our surprise should rather be that persecution has been less overt and egregious in the West for the past 500 years. God, in his providence, has limited our persecution. However, since many in the Church today appear to be living with a nominal faith and with a flagrant disregard for his commandments, God may be bringing persecution in our direction to purify the Church and make evident who are his people.

The apostles rejoiced that they were worthy to suffer corporal punishment for the cause of Christ (Acts 5.41). James, the half-brother of Jesus and not one of the original apostles, may have been among those physically abused. Even if he heard of it only later, he exhorts believers to "Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." (James 1.2-4). Paul, who suffered much for the cause of Christ (2 Cor 11.16-33), also teaches that we are to rejoice in sufferings because of the hope which they produce in us (Rom 5.3-4). Peter encourages the same thing (1 Pt 1.6; 1 Pt 4.13). Most of us do not yet understand how God can produce joy in believers when they are persecuted for their faith in Jesus and for proclaiming his truth. We whine if we have to suffer first-world inconveniences, like waiting in line at the grocery checkout, not having enough water pressure in our shower, when the Wi-Fi signal doesn't reach throughout the whole house, or we don't have the latest model of 'smart' phone. Let us pray that our attitudes will change when God directs persecution in our direction.

The warnings and beating had no effect on the apostles. They continued teaching and preaching every day in the house churches and in the temple. The threats and abuses heaped upon them could not deter or defeat the proclamation of truth, because nothing can stop the advance of the Kingdom of Christ. Luke introduces a word, translated as 'preaching', from which we get our word 'evangelize'. The apostles were evangelizing the city with an increased intensity and soon it would overflow into the regions beyond Jerusalem and "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1.8). They proclaimed that "the Christ is Jesus." Jesus is the promised Messiah. He is the one who was promised to Eve in the midst of the curse on sin (Gen 3.15). He is the one who would fulfill the promise made to Abraham that the nations of the world would be blessed (Gen 12.3; Gen 18.18). And he is the one whom David declared would sit at the right hand of the Father and defeat all his enemies (Ps 110.1). Let us make it our primary objective to proclaim this truth—Jesus is the way the truth and the life and no one who comes to him will perish.

73. A Need Identified

(Acts 6.1-2)

Growth is desirable but can result in challenges. When young teenagers go through their growth spurt, they can experience joint pain. When companies grow too quickly their original collegial atmosphere can be hindered by communication failures or by the imposition of bureaucratic procedures. Likewise, churches that grow quickly can be challenged by questions about ministerial priorities and the allocation of human and financial resources. The early church in Jerusalem was “increasing in number” and had grown to over ten thousand men, women, and children (Acts 4.4). They would not have been able to assemble in a single synagogue or home setting, so the apostles would have had a challenge coordinating the worship and ministries of the Jerusalem church across multiple congregations. And now they had to address a complaint.

Luke introduces the word ‘disciples’ into Acts. His choice of the word ‘disciple’ (rather than ‘believers’; Acts 5.14) appears to be deliberate. This term describes someone who is a dedicated follower of a teacher. Thus, Luke informs us that these Christians were dedicated to the apostolic teachings and practices. They were “obedient to the faith” (Acts 6.7). Luke’s outlook is positive. A problem has arisen in the nascent Church, but it can be addressed because the apostles and disciples have a desire to see the Church succeed.

The disciples had demonstrated a great degree of generosity and supplied money that could be distributed to each person who had a need (Acts 4.34-37). But a crack was beginning to appear. A complaint was raised because some “widows were being neglected in the daily distribution”. The biblical model for distribution of funds is to support the truly needy (i.e., orphans and widows; Dt 24.19-21; Is 10.2; James 1.27) who are unable to work to support themselves due to severe disabilities or infirmities of old age, and who have no family members to provide support. Widows are specifically mentioned by the complainants because of their likely being a disproportionate number of them in Jerusalem. Apparently older Jewish couples from the diaspora (i.e., Hellenistic Jews living abroad) retired to Jerusalem to spend their final days in the ‘holy land’ (Ps 78.54). When the husbands died, some women were left as widows with limited financial resources and no nearby relatives to support them. The neglect of the widows was not intentional. When money was donated, it was laid at the apostles’ feet (Acts 4.35, 37). This implies that the apostles initially had the responsibility for distributing the funds to those who had need. But with the increase in the size of the Jerusalem church the apostles were not aware of the needs of the foreign widows. The complainants were correct to point out this oversight.

The ESV refers to a daily ‘distribution’. The Greek word Luke uses, is the word from which we obtain our word ‘deacon’. Tyndale translated it as ‘ministry’, which the KJV followed. Some modern translations translate it as ‘serving of food’. It appears that these translators have assumed that the expression ‘serve tables’ (‘minister at tables’; Acts 6.2) should be construed as serving food as in a ‘soup kitchen’. However, this conclusion seems to be invalid. The Greek word translated table can refer to either a table where food is eaten (Mt 15.27) or a table used by money changers (Mt 21.12). It is improbable that the apostles used the money donated by generous disciples to purchase food to then distribute to widows. It is more likely that they had initially assumed the responsibility for the allocation and distribution of the donated money.

The oversight of the distribution of funds to some widows was a problem which the apostles would address. However, there was a deeper issue which needed resolution. The issue is implied in the words, “complaint by the Hellenists arose *against* the Hebrews”. A sectarian spirit was being manifested across the congregations within the Jerusalem church. The Hellenists were those who spoke primarily Greek and had a limited skill at speaking Aramaic or Hebrew. The complainants were raising the specter of prejudice. The widows among them were being treated as second-class citizens. The reason was because they didn’t speak like the locals, likely had foreign practices, dressed differently, and were attending local synagogues organized around nationality or language (Acts 6.9). We are familiar with how prejudices can arise from interaction with immigrants with whom it is difficult to communicate because of their inability to speak our official languages. This problem began at Babel as God cursed mankind’s hubris (Gen 11.7-8). This should warn us that, as much as possible, our congregation should reflect the nature of our multicultural city. Isolating into congregations of people who speak, look, and act, just like us is not the model that Jesus

envisions for his Church (Jn 13.34-35).

The apostles acted quickly to address the issue. However, they did not act as dictators. They had learned the lesson given in the upper room that a servant is not above his master (Jn 13.14). They called the disciples together to discuss the matter and to propose a possible solution. How they called 5,000+ men together and where they met is not explained by Luke. It may be that they had already introduced a representative approach and elders from within house-churches came together in a primitive presbytery. Regardless, they laid the foundation for congregational involvement in the appointment of church officers and eschewed a top-down hierarchical approach. The apostles stated that it was inappropriate for them to continue with the distribution of funds when their primary roles should be preaching and praying. They laid another foundation for the church—to separate the administration of donated funds from those who are preachers who might be tempted to use their positions for personal gain (1 Tim 3.3). As we will see, they established the role distinction between elders and deacons.

74. Deacons – Qualifications and Role (Acts 6.2-4)

Recent commentaries seem to favour the view that Acts 6.1-7 should not be understood as documenting the creation of the office of deacon. For example, one says, “They are not called ‘deacons’ and Luke’s intention cannot simply have been to describe how the order of deacons originated.” Another says, “Only eisegesis can find deacons ... This passage cannot be used to assert that deacons handle the business matters ... of the church!” In contrast, Calvin said, “Luke declares here upon what occasion, and to what end, and also with what rite, deacons were first made.” And the members of the Westminster Assembly wrote, “The scripture doth hold out deacons as distinct officers in the church. Whose office is perpetual. To whose office it belongs not to preach the word, or administer the sacraments, but to take special care in distributing to the necessities of the poor.” (*The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government*, Deacons; 1645). They included as ‘proof texts’ references to Acts 6.1-4.

If Acts 6.1-15 does not describe the origin of the office of deacon, then where do we find apostolic authority for its creation? The only references to the diaconal office outside of Acts 6.1-15 are found in Paul’s epistles. In Philippians 1.1 he greets the overseers and deacons. In 1 Timothy 3.8-13 he gives the qualifications for those who are to serve as deacons. There are other uses of the Greek word, which could be translated as ‘deacon’. However, in the ESV they appear with more generic terms such as ‘servant’ or ‘minister’, and do not refer to the office of deacon (e.g., Mk 10.4; Jn 12.26; 1 Cor 3.5; Col 1.7). Without Acts 6.1-4 providing a context for the office of deacon, we would not understand its role. When Paul provides Timothy with the qualifications for deacons, he doesn’t say what deacons are to do. The office of deacon was established by the twelve apostles (Acts 6.3) in response to an emergent need within the early NT Church. This was consistent with one dimension of their mission, which was to lay the foundation for the NT Church (Eph 2.20). The office of deacon was not introduced later in the 1st century, but within a few months of Jesus’ ascension and among the first Christian congregations in Jerusalem.

Luke indicates that the apostles gave three qualifications for deacons. They must be of good repute, full of the Spirit, and have wisdom. The primary criterion for a person to serve as a deacon is that he be a Christian and displays attributes of holiness and devotion to Christ. The secondary criteria are that he is reputable and displays wisdom. The wisdom being spoken of, in this context, applies to the men having an applied skill for administering the financial contributions (tithes and freewill offerings) being made by the congregants. They needed to be able to discern real needs and to judiciously apply the contributed funds to those needs. The apostles set a high standard. Deacons must display godly personal character, be known for their piety, and have demonstrated a fitness for managing money. These attributes must be obvious to all in the congregation (Acts 6.3).

Paul provides additional guidance for those who will fill the office of deacon (1 Tim 3.8-13). Their godly character and piety must be displayed through dignified behaviour. They must not be hypocrites ('not double-tongued') or have a passion for overindulging in temporal pleasures ('not addicted to much wine'). They also need to have a well-developed understanding of the Gospel (1 Tim 3.9). Since they will be administering the financial resources for a congregation, they must not be 'greedy for dishonest gain'. They cannot be tempted to pilfer funds and must be irreproachable (disciplined and transparent) in their handling of money. They should also have a good understanding of how to manage physical assets of a congregation, such as a building. This additional aspect of a deacon's role definition can be derived from the distinct role assigned to the Levites (separate from the priests) who took care of the temple and its precincts (1 Chron 23.1-32). Before a person is appointed to the office of deacon, he must have demonstrated that he can manage his family. Paul also indicates that deacons' wives (most men in Jewish society were married) must have similar characteristics.

The biblical qualifications for deacons (as for elders) are high and demanding. The Church must be served by men who are truly committed to the advancement of the Kingdom of Christ. In some churches the office of deacon is assigned to a novice with a hope that he might grow into the office. However, Paul is clear, men must be tested (their qualifications must be clearly present) before they can be appointed to the office of deacon (1 Tim 3.10).

The apostles tell the congregation to pick seven men who meet the qualifications. They were to pick *men*. Paul indicates that those who will be appointed as deacons are also to be *men*, since he refers to their wives. The role of deacon (as with the role of elders) is assigned to men. Women are not to hold ordained offices (elder or deacon) in the Church. This view is hotly contested in many modern denominations. It is claimed that the appointment of men was purely an artifact of the Jewish (or ancient) patriarchal society that no longer applies in our 'enlightened' age. We cannot engage in this debate in this brief meditation.

We can derive a few lessons from these considerations:

- God calls believers to different roles of ministry (*diakonia*) in his church.
- No one should attempt to serve in ministry without the proper qualifications.
- Those called to serve in the ordained offices of elder and deacon must meet the demanding standards defined in Scripture.
- The Church has a responsibility to preach the Gospel and to minister to the physical-temporal needs of the truly needy within a congregation.

75. Deacons – Selection and Installation

(Acts 6.4-6)

Presbyterians have generally held to the view that the officers in a congregation are to be elected by the members of the congregation which they will serve. This understanding is partly derived from this passage. The apostles did not appoint deacons unilaterally to serve in the Jerusalem church. Rather, they told the assembled congregation to pick men with the requisite qualifications. The idea that officers are to be selected (elected) by the congregation has been challenged throughout the past 2,000 years. In some denominations, clerical positions are assigned by those who have authority within a church hierarchy. For example, a pastor (vicar, rector, priest, etc.) can be injected into a congregation, even if the parishioners have no desire to have that man as their under-shepherd. In other denominational contexts, church officers have been appointed by landowners, who as patrons would allocate a benefice to a person of his choice in a parish situated within his domain. Significant rifts (e.g., in Scotland in 1843) within Presbyterianism have occurred over this practice—with it being viewed as tyranny and the civil magistrates' interference within the church's sphere of responsibility. Our understanding of church government is that individual members within congregations have the right and responsibility to elect those who will serve them as elders and

deacons. Nominees' names for the positions can be submitted by elders within a congregation or by any member of the congregation. We need to be on guard not to allow this right to be encroached. For example, there have been instances of 'popes' within presbyteries who have effectively maneuvered to have their favourites appointed into congregations with pastoral vacancies.

The apostles suggested that seven men be selected to serve as deacons in the Jerusalem church—presumably to serve across multiple congregations which would have met in homes or in synagogues where the majority of the attendees had become Christians. There does not appear to be a theological reason for the appointment of seven deacons. The suggested number may have been based on the understanding of the needs to be addressed. For example, it may have been based on an allocation of diaconal responsibility into districts within the city.

The congregation chose seven men who are named by Luke. One of the men (Stephen) appears later in Acts. Little is known about the other six except that Luke tells us that Nicolaus was a Gentile convert (a proselyte from Antioch) to Judaism who had subsequently become a Christian. Based on extrabiblical traditions, there have been suggestions about where two (Prochorus and Nicanor) of the others may have served in latter days. When we encounter lists of names in the Bible, with little detail provided about many of the individuals, we should be thankful that God has a record of them and of the contributions which they made to the advance of the Kingdom of God (Mal 3.16; Rev 13.8).

It has been noted that the seven selected persons had Greek names. This has led some to conclude that the seven were drawn exclusively from the Hellenist (Greek-speaking) portion of the Jerusalem church, rather than from the Hebrew (Hebrew/Aramaic speaking) portion (Acts 6.1). However, others have noted that some Jews at that time had Greek or Latin names, sometimes in addition to their Jewish names even if they were not from among the diaspora (e.g., Saul/Paul; Cephas/Peter; Mark, the cousin of Barnabas [Col 4.10]). Although the issue being addressed by the appointment of deacons related to the Hellenists' widows being neglected in the daily distribution of funds (Acts 6.1), this does not mean that we can infer that the men appointed as deacons were selected only from within the Hellenist portion of the Jerusalem church. It seems unlikely that the apostles would have allowed for a situation which would have reinforced a sectarian division based on linguistic differences. Their objective was to bring a resolution to the problem so that they could foster harmony and peace.

The account informs us that Stephen was full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. We will see shortly how this qualification was very evident in Stephen. Presumably, his character is called out because of the immediate events, leading to his death, which are recorded. However, we can be confident that the other six men elected also met the apostles' criteria. They were men of good repute (reputable) in their business dealings with those outside the church, displayed true Christian piety, and were wise in dealing with pecuniary matters (Acts 6.3). The apostles would not have proceeded to ordain these men, if they had not been sure that they displayed the requisite character. A congregation will only be truly effective if the men in its ordained offices meet the biblical qualifications and are full of the Holy Spirit.

Some commentators claim that these men were commissioned for a specific task but were not ordained to the office of deacon. Some also argue that the act of laying on hands cannot be construed as a perpetual rite for installation. They claim that the formal rite of ordination came later in Church history. As we noted previously, the apostles were establishing the foundation for how the NT Church is to operate. These deacons (and later, pastors/evangelists; Acts 13.2-3) were ordained to their office and this was formalized through prayer and the laying on of hands. This practice continues to this day in our Presbyterian polity. The act of laying on hands symbolizes dedication and consecration to the work of the Lord (Acts 9.17; Acts 13.3; 2 Tim 1.6), blessing (Gen 48.17-20), and a transfer of vested or delegated authority and power (Num 27.17-20; 1 Tim 4.14). Ordination is a solemn act with a covenantal component since vows of commitment are included. It must not be undertaken frivolously (1 Tim 5.22).

76. Church Growth

(Acts 6.7)

The imminent danger of a sectarian split over language and cultural differences had been averted. The flashpoint had been the neglect of the Hellenists' (Greek-speaking) widows during the daily distribution of funds (Acts 6.1). The resolution had been the appointment of deacons, men with a demonstrated godly character—a good reputation with outsiders, filled with the Spirit, and known for their wisdom in administering temporal affairs (Acts 6.3). These deacons were assigned the responsibility for managing donations (tithes and freewill offerings) and distributing funds to the truly needy. We can derive useful guidance for how congregations should operate from how the apostles dealt with this issue.

- *Immediacy.* The apostles acted immediately as soon as they became aware of the issue. Likewise, when a problem arises in a congregation and the elders become aware of it, they should act as quickly as possible to address the issue. Ignoring problems, hoping that they will go away, will not contribute to spiritual or numerical growth or to the maintenance of harmony and peace within a congregation. Delays increase opportunities for gossip and for members to feel that the leaders are shirking their responsibilities.
- *Judiciousness.* However, as a balance to taking immediate action, the elders must ensure that they have all the facts about the issue. For example, if it is a matter of personal discord, they need to understand what each party believes has created the tension. If it is a matter relating to an accusation of a grievous sin, they need to hear the case from both the accuser and accused and from witnesses (Mt 18.16). They also need to season their deliberations with diligent prayer, asking for wisdom for addressing the matter (James 1.5).
- *Delegation.* The apostles defined a new role (deacon) for the Church. They applied a wise principle of management—to delegate responsibilities to others. Before this matter arose, it appears that they had been responsible for the daily distribution of the funds that had been donated (Acts 4.35, 37). They realized that managing the funds was hindering them from their primary responsibilities which were to pray, preach, and teach (Acts 6.2, 4). Their example does not mean that churches today can create new ordained offices. However, it does require that congregational leadership establish meaningful roles for congregants and delegate duties to them.
- *Trust.* The apostles delegated a significant responsibility to the deacons—the management of financial resources and the care of the needy (James 1.27). This indicates that they placed their trust in the competency of these men. In a different context, Paul blasts the Corinthians for their lawsuits and shames them for not believing that they had men among them who were competent to act as mediators in disputes. He tells them and us that we need to trust wise men to act in the best interests of our local congregations and for the greater cause of the Kingdom.
- *Flexibility.* The apostles demonstrated flexibility in how they dealt with an emergent issue. This does not give a warrant to the modern church to redefine church polity and governance. The apostles had responsibility for laying the foundation for the NT Church. However, their example of flexibility does indicate that the elders need to apply pastoral prudence when taking action to resolve issues in a congregation. Not all issues can be dealt with 'by the book' since matters are often quite grey and not black and white.
- *Holiness.* The apostles established holiness (Spirit-filled) as a key criterion for those who will have roles within the Church. Compromise for the sake of expediency should be excluded.

As a result of the apostles' quick and wise action the possibility of a sectarian division was avoided, the needs of the widows were being addressed, and the apostles could focus on their primary responsibility—preaching (evangelizing; Acts 5.42). Luke records the beneficial results with three measures of success:

- *The word of God continued to increase.* With the apostles again dedicating themselves to prayer and preaching, the word of God was spread to a wider audience and bore abundant fruit (Lk 8.8, 15). The

preaching of God's word is a vital force (Is 55.10-11; Rom 1.16; Heb 4.12) and the primary means that God uses for advancing the growth of the Church (Rom 10.14). We should do whatever we can to enable the pastors in our congregations to focus on their primary responsibilities and not be bogged down in matters which others can address, often more efficiently and effectively than a pastor.

- *The disciples multiplied greatly.* The Christians in Jerusalem demonstrated an extraordinary measure of love, and the residents of the city knew that they were distinctly different from others with whom they had dealings (Jn 13.35). Many wanted to become part of this community. May it be that our congregations would attract people to Christ and the Gospel in the same way!
- *Many of the priests became obedient to the faith.* Luke reports a surprising outcome. Many priests were converted. The irony is evident. The council that had been harassing the apostles and telling them to stop preaching consisted mainly of priests and Sadducees (Acts 4.1, 6; Acts 5.17). In our context, a similar surprise would be if suddenly a significant number from [Jane's Revenge](#) (a militant pro-abortion group) were to be converted. These priests became "obedient to the faith"—they professed the fundamentals: Jesus is the Messiah who was crucified on behalf of sinners but raised to conquer death; and that salvation from sin is through grace alone, through faith in Jesus, and not through supposedly meritorious works.

Acts 6.7 is a pivot point in Luke's account. Two occur later (Acts 12.24; Acts 19.20). In each, Luke records the growth of the word of God. Despite challenges, the Gospel is spreading from Jerusalem "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1.8).

77. Stephen Confounds His Disputers

(Acts 6.8-10)

Stephen was ordained as a deacon. He was first assigned a critical responsibility, to ensure that none of the widows in the Jerusalem church were being neglected in the daily distribution of money (Acts 6.1) which had been donated by other members of the church (Acts 4.35, 37). His role would have quickly expanded to include visiting the sick and arranging care for other truly needy persons (e.g., orphans and those unable to support themselves because of severe disabilities). During his visits among the poor and needy he performed miracles—called by Luke, "wonders and signs". Luke doesn't tell us how Stephen discovered that he had been granted the ability to work miracles. Although we may legitimately suppose that the Holy Spirit led him to undertake his first miracle. Luke also does not tell us what kinds of miracles he performed. But again, we may suppose that the miracles he performed involved healing the sick and lame and casting out demons among those not yet saved (Acts 8.6-8).

Stephen is the first person in the NT Church, other than the disciples from which the apostles were selected, who was given the ability to perform miracles (Acts 6.8). Luke hints at a reason he was granted this ability, besides addressing temporal needs. He refers to the miracles as 'signs'. Thus, we can infer that the miracles he performed validated him among the first in the new office of deacons. This indicates that the Holy Spirit endorsed the action taken by the apostles when they created the office of deacon. We are not told whether the others who held the first diaconal offices were also able to work miracles. If they were not granted this gift by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12.8-11), then we encounter another instance of the unique circumstances which accompanied the establishment of the NT Church, first in Jerusalem and then as it expanded into Gentile territories. Other instances included the apostles' working miracles, miraculous prison escapes, and the execution of Ananias and Sapphira for a false act of worship. Therefore, we must not expect that deacons in today's congregations should be able to perform miracles to accompany their ministry of visitation and care.

The apostles had successfully addressed one issue—neglect of some widows (Acts 6.1)—by creating the diaconal office. With that problem addressed, and the apostles being able to refocus on their primary role of preaching, the Church was expanding (Acts 6.7). But Luke doesn't let us catch our breath. Satan was

desperate to find a way to undermine and destroy the nascent Church. The attack through a problem within the body of believers had failed and the attacks by the high priest and council members against the preaching by the apostles had failed. Now Satan tried to foment a popular uprising. This came from within the community in which Stephen may have previously been a member, a synagogue associated with the diaspora groups resident in Jerusalem.

Luke tells us that members of a synagogue which took the name ‘Freedmen’ arose to dispute with Stephen. These men were likely Greek speaking diaspora Jews since they came from Cyrene (in north Africa), Alexandria (in Egypt), Cilicia (part for what we call Turkey), and Asia (also in Turkey). That they called themselves ‘freedmen’ seems to indicate that they were former slaves or descendants of slaves (possibly among those deported by General Pompey after he had besieged and conquered Jerusalem in 63 BC) who had gained their freedom. The word, recorded by Luke, which they used to name their synagogue is not a Greek word but a Latin word—from its root, we obtain our English words such as ‘liberty’ and ‘libertarian’. Paul was a Cilician Jew (Acts 21.39) and during his time studying in Jerusalem under Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) he may have attended synagogue services with these men. It may have been in this synagogue that he later debated with the Hellenists who sought to kill him (Acts 9.29).

This is the first reference in Acts to a synagogue. Like our word ‘church’, a synagogue was an assembly of worshippers (i.e., a congregation) and could also be used to refer to a building (Lk 7.5). Synagogues were places of worship and study without animal sacrifices (which were confined to the temple). Ezra and Nehemiah laid the foundation for synagogue worship (Neh 8.1-18). During the Babylonian captivity and later among the diaspora Jews and Jews living at a distance from Jerusalem at the time of Jesus (Mk 1.21; Jn 6.59), synagogues were the centre of religion and of Sabbath worship among the Jews. The 16th-century Genevan Reformers returned to the model of synagogue worship since it was endorsed by the practice of Jesus and the apostles. This form of worship is familiar to people who attend churches today with a simple form of worship (e.g., prayers, singing Psalms without instrumental accompaniment, readings from Scripture, and preaching). Synagogues are mentioned numerous times in Acts. In some instances, they are antagonistic to the preaching of the Gospel. At other times, they serve as the starting point for Paul’s mission in a new city.

As Stephen fulfilled duties as a deacon, he would have had opportunities to teach informally about Jesus. This led men from the synagogue of the Freedmen to dispute with him. Luke does not inform us of the nature of the dispute. However, we can infer from the false charges laid against him (Acts 6.11-14) that by stating that Jesus is the Messiah and the implied changes in the covenantal economy (e.g., moving Sabbath worship to the day of the resurrection) they viewed Stephen’s teaching as a radical departure from their understanding of what Moses taught. But Stephen was able to stand against the onslaught as a first-class debater. He was full of grace, power, and the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, and his antagonists could not present arguments which could withstand his teaching. We should desire that every believer can defend belief in Christ as Stephen did (1 Pt 3.15).

78. Stephen’s Arrest (Acts 6.11-15)

Stephen’s opponents were unable to respond to his logical arguments and Spirit-filled wisdom (Acts 6.10). So, they had to resort to using dishonest, underhanded means to silence him. They secretly suborned false witnesses to commit perjury (Acts 6.11, 13). Bearing false witness against anyone is explicitly prohibited in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20.16). But this didn’t cause them to hesitate in their fanatical rush to silence Stephen. It has been suggested that the Jews from the diaspora were nationalistic Zionists. For them, Stephen’s presentation of Jesus as the Messiah who established a new form of the covenant would have incited animosity and blind zeal. However, the Jewish council of priests and elders was not drawn from the diaspora Jews. Yet they hated the message being preached by the apostles just as much as did the Hellenists

from the synagogue of the Freedmen (Acts 6.9). Rather, both parties were fanatically opposed to God, his Christ, Christians, and the presentation of Gospel truth. We encounter the same fanaticism today among those who endorse evil beliefs and practices. Consider the shrill (and often false) charges raised during recent confirmation hearings for conservative US Supreme Court justices. For example, a false accuser of Brett Kavanaugh, later admitted that she had fabricated graphic sexual allegations to [get attention](#). Fanatical advocates of abortion, transgenderism, and homosexual practices, and false religions don't hesitate to make false claims and use other perverse means to advance their causes. Fanatics:

- Believe what they assert as true, even if facts show otherwise (Rom 1.22).
- Are unable to think rationally and follow logical arguments (Rom 1.28).
- Deaden any moral sensibilities (Rom 1.32).
- Use evil means to advance their unjust causes (Rom 1.29-31).
- Believe that any means can be justified if their end goals are achieved.

So, we must not be surprised that, like Stephen, Christians involved in any kind of ministry will be attacked with falsehoods, vicious threats, and even violence.

The falsehood propagated by Stephen's opponents was that he spoke blasphemy. The specific charges were that he spoke against the Mosaic law and customs and against the holy place (i.e., the temple). His opponents claimed that by speaking against the holiness and majesty of the law and the temple, Stephen spoke against God. Despite their use of false witnesses, their claims about what Stephen had said likely had an element of truth. But Stephen did not speak blasphemously. Jesus had taught that the Pharisees misunderstood the law and he had provided a proper interpretation through his teaching (e.g., in the *Sermon on the Mount*) and actions (e.g., by healing the lame on the Sabbath). He was misconstrued as being a lawbreaker. Also, his sacrifice and the introduction of the new covenant which replaced the ceremonial sacrifices, and the change of the Sabbath from the seventh day of the week to the first day to commemorate the resurrection, would have been viewed by devout Jews as heresy and contrary to the law of Moses. Jesus was misunderstood when he spoke at one point about the destruction of the temple and of his rebuilding it three days later, applying it his own body (Jn 2.19-21). Nevertheless, he had also predicted that the physical temple would be destroyed (Mt 24.2). That the temple could be razed within a generation was beyond belief to the Jewish mind.

Spreading the claim of blasphemy against Stephen incited (stirred up) both the people and the council (elders and scribes). This is the first instance since the resurrection and ascension of Jesus that the crowd turned against the apostolic teaching. Until this point, Christians were viewed favorably (Acts 2.47). But the crowd can be fickle. About a week prior to the crucifixion of Jesus, the crowd was singing their hosannas (Mt 21.9-11, 15). But shortly thereafter they were screaming "Crucify!" (Jn 19.15). Fomenting mass hysteria is not difficult. Most people are credulous and not disciplined in applying analytical thinking. Examples range from the tulip bulb speculation in the 17th-century; to the 1938 radio broadcast of H.G. Wells' novel, *The War of the Worlds*; Y2K; global warming caused by burning fossil fuels; and fake news broadcast on X (formerly Twitter). Luke records an example in Ephesus (Acts 19.23-41) when the citizens responded to Demetrius' claim that the preaching of Paul was undermining their idol-making business, and the people ran into the amphitheater and screamed for two hours, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

Without warning, Stephen was seized and brought before the council. We can picture a scene similar to what we might see in a crime drama when a person walking on a sidewalk is kidnapped and thrown in the back of a van. Luke does not say who made the arrest. It could have been the frenzied crowd driving Stephen toward the meeting place of the council, or the temple guards acting on behalf of the council. Regardless, Stephen was arraigned and was going to face a trial before a kangaroo court. Instead of addressing the issue of the false witnesses (Dt 19.16-18) as they should have done, the council was prepared to cross-examine Stephen. The events in this account, have significant parallels with how Jesus was treated. He was led before the council (Mk 14.53). False charges were also laid against him (Mk 14.56-58)—the charges related

to the destruction of the temple (Mk 14.58) and to blasphemy (Mk 14.64).

As the council was ready to begin Stephen's cross-examination, they gazed at him. They were transfixed seeing his face, like the face of an angel. His face may have taken on a glory like Moses' (Ex 34.29-35). However, it may have been the way Stephen stared them down with a courageous confidence that displayed no fear, anger, or bitterness. Stephen was strengthened by an inner assurance from the Holy Spirit which enabled him to face whatever trial came his way.

79. Stephen's Apology (Defense and Counter Charge) (Acts 7.1-53)

The high priest, as the presiding officer of the council, asked Stephen if the (fabricated; Acts 6.13) charges were true. Essentially, he asked him to plead innocent or declare his guilt. Stephen did not answer his question. Rather he took the invitation to speak as an opportunity to defend himself indirectly against the false charges and to go on the offensive by accusing the council of rebellion against God (Acts 7.51-53). Stephen's defense is offered primarily in the form of a history lesson. This summary account of the history of Israel, proceeds from the calling of Abraham and the covenant God made with him to the temple built by Solomon. His account of these events demonstrates that Stephen was not a blasphemer (Acts 6.11) against God, the land, the law, or the temple.

It is likely that Stephen delivered this speech in Greek. He probably was one of the Hellenists chosen and appointed to be a deacon. His primary spoken language would have been Greek and not Hebrew or Aramaic. Also, Greek was generally understood, and widely spoken, throughout Palestine at this time. In addition, since most (possibly all) of the NT books were first composed in Greek, this indicates the prevalence of the Greek language at that time.

This speech was delivered before the Jewish council so only a few of the apostles may have been present. However, it is possible that Saul (Paul) who was present at the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7.58), and probably had a remarkable ability to remember what he had read or heard, provided the contents of the speech to Luke for inclusion in Acts. Also, Philip might have heard the speech and relayed his memory of the contents when Luke visited him in Caesarea (Acts 21.8).

Stephen begins his speech with deference. He refers to his audience as brothers and fathers (Acts 7.2). He does not want initially to antagonize them, even though he will later accuse them of sin. He also expresses reverence and devotion to the God of glory (Acts 7.2). As he surveys highlights from the history of redemption, he displays awe at the grandeur, power, and sovereignty of God. His objective is to demonstrate that Jesus and his Gospel are the fulfillment of the prophetic message delivered by Moses and the prophets. However, the history of the Jews demonstrates a continual rejection of the message of the prophets (Acts 7.35, 39). They persecuted and even killed some of them (Acts 7.52; 2 Ki 17.7-20; 2 Chron 36.14-16; Neh 9.26). They also rebelled against God and his law by indulging in the evil of idolatry (Acts 7.41). This line of rebellion reached its climax in the council's rejection of God's law (Acts 7.53) and of the Messiah (Acts 7.52), the prophet of whom Moses spoke (Acts 7.37), and their murder of him (Acts 7.52).

The council demonstrated by their actions that they did not cherish God's law. In contrast Stephen shows respect for the law and its divine character. He calls it 'living oracles' and is positive about its requirements, such as in his consideration of the rite of circumcision (Acts 7.8). He quotes ten times from the law, the Pentateuch (especially Genesis and Exodus), and is not critical of it in any way during his speech. There is nothing in his speech that could lead to the conclusion that he held to a radical Hellenist or Christian theology about the law.

One of the specific false charges made against Stephen is that he did not show respect for the temple ('holy place') and claimed that Jesus would destroy it (Acts 6.13-14). The Jews had a false reverence for the temple. Some may have believed that it was the only place in which God made his presence known to his people. So, throughout his speech Stephen demonstrates that the temple (Acts 7.46) was not the only place where God's presence was manifested. God was present in the burning bush and declared the nearby ground to be holy (Acts 7.30-33) and then later in the wilderness with his people and on Mount Sinai (Acts 7.38). He alludes to Solomon's prayer of dedication of the temple (Acts 7.48). In that prayer, Solomon indicates that God does not dwell, *per se*, in temples made by human hands (1 Ki 8.27). He then draws from Psalm 11.4 and Isaiah 66.1-2 to confirm that the prophets declared that God cannot be confined to an earthly temple (Acts 7.49-50). Thus, Stephen indicates that if one were to state that temple is not the only place where God's presence is made known, he is not stating anything that is radical and not already stated in the Scriptures. Of course, his point is that it is through Jesus, as the living temple of God (Jn 2.18-22), that God makes his full presence known to mankind (Col 2.9). By rejecting Jesus, the Jews rejected what the temple and the sacrifices preformed in it pointed to. There is a distinct irony in the council's concern over reverence of the temple. Jesus ensured that this false reverence was wiped out by the destruction of the temple about 35 years after Stephen gave this speech (Mk 13.2).

However, Stephen does do something radical from the council's perspective. He identifies Jesus (Acts 7.37, 52) as continuing in the OT prophetic tradition. He identifies Jesus as the Son of Man (Acts 7.56), tying him to Daniel's Messianic prophecy (Dan 7.3). He goes a step further by including himself in that prophetic tradition through his seeing a vision of the risen Lord Jesus in heaven (Acts 7.56).

Standing in the tradition of the prophets, Stephen concludes his speech, not with a defense of himself or an appeal for leniency, but with a scathing indictment of the council (Acts 7.50-53). They abused the law and justice by persecuting the apostles. They desecrated the temple with their love of money and prestige and by buying and selling in the place of prayer and worship (Lk 19.45-46). And they had rejected Jesus as the final prophet. They were the guilty party (apostates and idolaters), not Stephen.

80. Stephen's Use of Scripture (Acts 7.2-50)

Stephen spoke under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6.10). And Luke recorded Stephen's speech as he himself was guided by the Holy Spirit (2 Pt 1.21). What is recorded in this chapter is without error. This understanding must guide our observations about how Stephen used the OT Scriptures.

Apparently, Stephen spoke extemporaneously. Without warning he was seized by the council (Acts 6.12), so didn't have time to prepare sermon notes before he preached to the council. He quotes directly from the OT about ten times. This indicates that he had memorized significant portions of the OT. In addition, his organized historical summary displays an extensive knowledge of the OT. We should learn from his example and develop a full grasp of the contents of the Bible so that when we are presented with opportunities to present the Gospel, we will be prepared to present a reason for the hope that we have (1 Pt 3.15).

The quotations are generally verbatim from the Greek translation known as the Septuagint. Stephen was probably one of the deacons appointed from a Hellenist congregation. So, his native language (or one he worked in frequently) was likely Greek. It is possible of course that Luke (or Paul) translated Luke's speech and supplied the Greek version. Regardless, the use of the Greek translation for the OT quotations informs us that when the Bible is translated, it is still the word of God. Of course, those who translate the Bible from its original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) should strive for accuracy. English speakers are blessed with having over 500 years of careful deliberation on how best to translate the text of the Bible into English. Likewise, organizations like Wycliffe Bible Translators attempt to provide accurate translations

into languages which are receiving the Bible for the first time.

Commentators like to point out apparent historical discrepancies between what Stephen reports and what the OT records. Three often identified examples are:

- Stephen states that the Hebrews were *enslaved* and *afflicted* for four hundred years (Gen 15.13; Acts 7:6). This is not inconsistent with the 430 years mentioned elsewhere (Ex 12.40; Gal 3.17). The Hebrews were not enslaved or afflicted during the entire time they were in Canaan or Egypt. There is no need to resort to the claim that Stephen was rounding his number.
- It is claimed that the numbers don't add up when Stephen says that Abraham left Haran after the death of his father (Acts 7.4). We will address this supposed issue in a separate meditation. There is simply no need to suggest that Stephen was mistaken.
- An apparent chronological issue is that Stephen says that God appeared to Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia (Acts 7.2). Yet it is claimed that God appeared first to Abraham after he had arrived in Haran (Gen 12.3). Stephen does not get the chronology wrong. God appeared to Abraham first in Mesopotamia and then again in Haran. Genesis 11.31 refers to Terah leaving Mesopotamia with his family. It doesn't address the reason why they left. Stephen supplies, by guidance of the Holy Spirit, additional information which is not recorded in Genesis.

Stephen provides information not recorded in the OT. As just noted, he supplies detail about Abraham receiving the call to depart from Ur. Likewise, he informs us that Abraham did not have “even a foot's length” of land as an inheritance (Acts 7.5). Then he states that Moses “was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians” (Acts 7.22). He also tells us that Moses supposed his fellow Hebrews would understand his reason for taking action (Acts 7.25). None of this is interpretive detail added by Stephen, as if he were writing historical fiction. He may have obtained this information from extrabiblical accounts that were maintained by the Jews. However, that is not an issue since what Stephen reports, guided by the Holy Spirit, is historical fact.

Stephen follows the Septuagint which appears to take liberties with a direct quotation from the OT. The quotation in Acts 7.42-43 is derived from Amos 5.25-27. The names of the gods differ in the two versions. This does not present an issue since names are often translated and not transliterated. For example, the KJV has ‘Diana’ for ‘Artemis’ (Acts 19.24) and the ESV has ‘Zeus’ and the KJV ‘Jupiter’ for ‘Dia’ in the Greek (Acts 14.12). However, the Septuagint follows the Hebrew and has ‘Damascus’ (Acts 7.43). But Stephen substitutes ‘Babylon’. He is not applying a conflation or an inexact approach to quoting Scripture popular in Judaism, as suggested by some. Rather, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, he expands the prophecy of Amos, which was directed at the northern kingdom (Israel) before they were taken captive by the Assyrians, to include the southern kingdom (Judah) which was taken captive by Babylon about 150 years later. Stephen is declaring the ongoing cross-generation guilt of the Jews who persisted in idolatry from the time they made the golden calf during the exodus until Nebuchadnezzar carried off the exiles.

Stephen's use of the OT Scriptures does not indicate that he followed a practice of free quotation—to give the sense if not the exact meaning through the use of a precise phrasing. Nor does it suggest that he had memory gaps or provide a warrant for us to apply inexact translations. Commentators who suggest that there are inconsistencies between Stephen's speech and the OT, need to stop presenting this false narrative. They should accept the fact that the Holy Spirit has superintended the dissemination of the word of God so that we have been blessed with the words of life which we need to know.

81. Abraham – His Calling (Acts 7.2-4)

No reason is given in Genesis (Gen 11.31) for why Terah and his family left Ur of the Chaldeans, in southern Mesopotamia, and began to travel to Canaan. We could suppose that the departure was precipitated by changes in the Mesopotamian socio-political or economic climate. For example, Terah may have been migrating north-west to avoid excessive taxation or a change of dynasties worried him. There is nothing in the Genesis account that would indicate that there was a religious reason for the departure from Ur—for example, to avoid seeing the idolatrous rituals being performed in market squares, or to escape overt suppression of true worship or a requirement to participate in pagan worship (such as in Daniel 3.1-30). That they were heading to Canaan would seem to suggest that the objective was not to separate from false worship. Canaan was where the cursed descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham, lived (Gen 9.25; Gen 10.19). It was the centre of a demonic polytheism that used cultic rituals with male and female prostitutes, and where Sodom and Gomorrah were located. Also, their settling in Haran would appear to contradict any suggestion that they were seeking a place where they could have practiced true worship. Haran was the centre of the moon-god cult, which may have been Terah's particular attachment among the idols (Josh 24.2, 14-15).

We need to know the rest of the story to understand what was going on. Stephen tells us that, “[t]he God of glory appeared to Abraham in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.’” (Acts 7.2-3). It was not Terah who initiated the migration from Ur, but Abram (Abraham), under God's direction. Terah went along, as an aged companion, with Abraham and Sarai; as did Lot. Nahor and Milcah were probably part of the migrating party, since they are mentioned as living in Haran (Gen 24.10; Gen 27.43).

Terah is credited with leading the migration because he was the patriarch. We do not know how old he was when the journey began. However, the fact that Sarai had been declared barren (Gen 11.30) seems to indicate that she was advanced in years. So, it is probable that Terah was old, unwell, and expecting to die soon—particularly since his son, Haran, had died before him in Ur (Gen 11.28). Abraham was subject to his father and, out of deference, did not press him to continue the journey when he wanted to settle for his remaining days in Haran—about a two-day journey from the ford on the Euphrates where one could enter Canaan. Abraham planned to wait until his father died, and then he would continue to Canaan, which he did (Acts 7.4). Other than the death of Haran before his father (Gen 11.28), Terah's death (Gen 11.32) is the first death reported in Genesis since the death of Noah (Gen 9.29). Thus, the notice of Terah's death is a marker for the end of the postdiluvian era. It serves to designate Abraham's independence from his father's house (Gen 12.1) and identifies the beginning of a new era—what would become Abraham's descendants' (the Israelites) possession of Canaan.

God's command to Abraham to leave Ur indicates that he wanted Abraham out of that city and region. At that time, Ur was the largest city in Mesopotamia. With an estimated population of 65,000. It was also likely the largest city in the world at the time Abraham left it. Archaeological excavations in the early 20th century discovered that it had a highly developed urban culture with supporting agricultural hinterlands, based on the Sumerian culture that had preceded it. The ziggurat in the ruins is massive. It has been cleared of debris by the Iraqi government and, since 2009, developed as a tourist destination.

The command God gave to Abraham to leave Ur is not to be understood as a general principle—e.g., that Christians are to abandon pagan cities. God has not abandoned cities, in general—although he might abandon specific cities because of their wickedness. The call to Abraham to leave Ur does not mean that God does not want the Gospel proclaimed in the capitals of modern ‘empires’. God called Abraham to make an explicit break with his extended family and the national deities that saturated his experience. His departure from the urban setting to a rural setting in Canaan was a way to provide him with a training ground in which his faith could be developed. His separation was similar to the separation Paul experienced in Arabia and Damascus after his conversion (Gal 1.16-18). God was challenging Abraham to live out the

principle of separation which Jesus would later enunciate when he taught his disciples that they were to love him more than their own family members (Mt 10.37-38).

God's plan was for Abraham to cut his ties with his former nation in order to establish a new anti-Babel spiritual kingdom, the Church, founded on faith, to which all true believers in the Messiah belong. It would:

- Replace polytheistic idolatry with worship of the one true God.
- Be a worldwide kingdom of nations (Gen 17.4-6, 16), rather than a city-state (Gen 11.4).
- Not be ruled by a divinized man, but by God incarnate as the God-man, the King of kings (Rev 19.16).
- Include a city built by God (Heb 11.10), not by men (Gen 11.4).
- Not have a tower-temple (Rev 21.22), for its temple is Jesus (Jn 2.19, 21).
- Be accessed by the 'gate of God' (Ps 24.9), not the 'gate of god' (Baal).

The Church is not opposed to empire *per se*. The Church is the anti-Babel 'empire' because it is the worldwide Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.

82. Abraham – Promised Land and Covenant Promise (Acts 7.5-8)

Noah and Shem (and others in the line to Abraham; Gen 11.10-26) were likely believers in the true God and understood that they were in a covenant relationship with him (Gen 9.8-17). Nevertheless, the covenant made with Noah (like the one made with Adam prior to Noah) applied to all mankind. The first covenant that applied to a subset of mankind was the covenant made with Abraham. Thus, the Jews considered that their history began when Abraham was called out of Ur in Mesopotamia and migrated to Canaan/Palestine ("this land in which you are now living"; Acts 7.4). So, Stephen begins his defense, given primarily in the form of a history lesson, with Abraham.

Stephen indicates that God took the initiative through a series of gracious actions:

- He manifested his glory as he appeared to Abraham (Acts 7.2) and spoke with him (Acts 7.3, 6).
- He commanded Abraham to leave his current abode and to go, sight unseen (Heb 11.8), to a land he would be shown (Acts 7.3).
- He removed (sent out) Abraham from Haran to Canaan (Acts 7.4).
- He gave him a promise that he would have offspring (even though at that point he had no children) who would possess the land (Acts 7.5), after they had faced a time of affliction in a foreign land (Acts 7.6-7).
- He established the covenant of circumcision with Abraham (Acts 7.8).

In Stephen's account, Abraham is portrayed as being mostly passive. There is no mention of his acting in faith. However, Paul informs us that Abraham had great faith (Rom 4.9; Gal 3.7, 9; Heb 11.8, 17). Stephen's message reminded his proud hearers that a new relationship with God is not achieved through 'righteous' works of obedience to the law (Gal 2.16; Eph 2.8-9) but through faith in the only one who kept the law perfectly—Jesus. It is no different today. God has acted in the life of everyone who is a believer. He has made known his glory through the converting work of the Holy Spirit. He has commanded him to leave the land of spiritual darkness and to begin a pilgrimage toward the promised land. And, he has confirmed with him the covenant of circumcision through baptism (Col 2.11).

The false witnesses against Stephen accused him of speaking "words against this holy place" (Acts 6.13). In their minds the land of Palestine, the city of Jerusalem, and the temple within it, were sacred (1 Ki 8.10-11; Ps 48.2; Ezk 43.1-5; Dan 8.9; Dan 11.16, 41). However, they had it wrong. They thought that these places were intrinsically holy (just as they thought that they as a people were holy), because the sovereign LORD had made his presence known in these places. Stephen began to dismantle their false notion. God had manifested his glory to Abraham in a pagan land far from Canaan. Stephen would later point out that

God had done the same when he appeared to Moses in the burning bush in Midian (Acts 7.29-30), again a land distant from Canaan. In addition, Abraham did not possess the land of Canaan. He had “no inheritance in it, not even a foot’s length” (Acts 7.5). Abraham lived there only as a temporary resident. Stephen’s point is that God makes his presence known to believers wherever they assemble to worship, not specifically in a ‘holy place’. He may not have realized it, but he laid a foundation for the reception of the Gentiles. We will see shortly in Acts, that God would be calling them into his Church, and they would worship God in their locations, without any reverence for the physical temple and its sacrifices. Also, Stephen was indicating that the land and the temple were not to be revered because they were only types for the greater realities—the everlasting paradise, and Jesus the living temple of God (Jn 2.18-22). We need to learn from this:

- Although we call the place in which we assemble for worship on the Lord’s Day, a ‘sanctuary’. It is a holy place only when God’s holy people assemble, and God makes his presence known there through the Holy Spirit being with God’s people. Christian’s can assemble for worship in private homes, in rented school classrooms or cinema auditoriums, or in outdoor settings.
- Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were pilgrims (Gen 47.9), living in tents (Heb 11.9). Jacob’s offspring were sojourners for 400 years in a foreign land (Acts 7:6). None had a permanent home country. Abraham realized that Canaan was not to be his permanent home because “he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.” (Heb 11.10). We must view the things of this world with a similar detachment. This world is not our everlasting inheritance. Everything here will perish (2 Pt 3.10). Our only permanent place of residence must be with the Lord in heaven (Jn 14.2), in the new paradise (Lk 23.43). This is the ultimate fulfillment of the promise of the land possession given to Abraham’s offspring (Acts 7.5).
- Many in the Church today have a faulty eschatology. They think that Jerusalem and the land of modern Israel still have a special place in God’s plans. They believe that Jesus is going to set up a 1000-year reign from Jerusalem and that a temple will be rebuilt there. God ended his special relationship with the Jews as a nation and with the land of Palestine with their rejection of the Messiah and the destruction of Jerusalem, the temple, and the ceremonial system in 70 AD. Jews today can come to Christ as their saviour just like any other person, not because they are Jews under a special providence, but because they have repented of their sins.

Stephen refers to the “covenant of circumcision” (Acts 7.8) made with Abraham. He doesn’t speak of the covenant’s duration. If he had said that this covenant had been replaced with the new covenant enacted by Jesus (Lk 22.20), they would have gone ‘ballistic’ sooner. They would have only seen the discontinuity with the discontinuance of bloody circumcision. They would not have understood the continuity as believers are brought into the same covenant community with the bloodless ordinance of baptism, with its wider scope that now includes women.

83. Abraham – His Age at the Death of Terah (Acts 7.4)

In Genesis 11.26, 32, the chronicler (possibly Isaac) informs us that Terah lived to the age of 205. That in itself is not a problem, once we have accepted the fact that the early postdiluvian patriarchs lived considerably longer than people do today, and that their ages declined across the generations from Shem to Abraham.

In Genesis 12.4 we are told that Abraham was 75 years old when he departed from Haran. If Abraham was born when Terah was 70 years old (Gen 11.26), then this means that Abraham left Haran when Terah was 145 years old, and that Terah lived for an additional 60 years in Haran after Abraham had left. However, Stephen says that Abraham left Haran *after* his father died (Acts 7.4) and then God brought him into the land in which the Jews were then living (Palestine). This apparent contradiction is often raised as a challenge

to the historical accuracy and trustworthiness of the Bible.

A number of explanations have been provided for how we might resolve this apparent contradiction, including:

- Stephen reported a widely accepted, incorrect, rabbinical tradition. In this case, Luke just reported what Stephen said. So, there is no inaccuracy in Scripture—it *reported* factually. However, since Stephen delivered his sermon in the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6.15; Acts 7.55), he seems to have been diligent in his study of the OT Scriptures, and the Holy Spirit recorded his words in the NT, it seems unlikely that he would have made a mistake reporting such an important piece of information about Abraham.
- Stephen *inferred* that Terah had died before Abraham had left Haran, because the order in the account reports the death of Terah after the departure of Abraham. Whereas Abraham left 60 years before his father's death but never saw him again. This suggested explanation is similar to the previous one and implies that Stephen made a mistake.
- Stephen was following an alternate version of the text. For example, the Samaritan Pentateuch says that Terah *died* at the age of 145. However, it is unlikely that Stephen would have used the Samaritan version of Genesis when he had the Hebrew and Greek translation (Septuagint) available to him. The Septuagint supports the reading in the Hebrew text.
- Stephen referred to the death of Terah in a figurative sense. Terah may have become enamored with the prosperity and lifestyle of Haran and given up on continuing the journey to Canaan. It seems that he became beguiled by the idolatry of the northern inhabitants (Josh 24.2, 14-15). So, Abraham considered his father to be spiritually dead. Those who suggest this 'solution' often point to Matthew 8.21-22 for support. However, there is no contextual evidence to support the view that Stephen uses the term 'died' in his sermon in a spiritual sense.

An alternate explanation is possible, which John Calvin defends in his commentary on Genesis. The solution is quite simple—Abraham was not the natural firstborn son of Terah, although he later became the appointed firstborn, who was to inherit the covenant blessing. Terah could not have had three sons born to one wife all at the same time when he was 70—unless they were triplets. Rather, *after* he had turned 70 the first of his three sons was born.

The question that needs to be addressed is whether we *must* understand the listing of the three sons as giving their actual birth order. For comparison, it should be noted that Shem was not the firstborn of Noah's three sons. Japheth was the firstborn and Ham the youngest son. Yet, Shem is always listed first when the three sons are listed together (Gen 5.32; Gen 6.10; Gen 7.13; Gen 9.18; Gen 10.1), because he was designated as the formal firstborn; similar to how Jacob is placed before Esau (Josh 24.4; Heb 11.20), and Jacob later changed the positions of Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen 48.13-14). The account does not state what the birth order of the three sons was. It only states that they were born after Terah had turned 70. So, Abraham was most likely Terah's youngest son, born 60 years after Haran, the natural firstborn.

Some object to this solution, that Terah became the father of Abraham when he was 130, 60 years after the birth of his firstborn, Haran. They say that Terah would have been too old to have produced a son at the age of 130. Yet he was of the generations of the postdiluvian patriarchs who were living longer than men do today. Those who object, also refer to Abraham's questioning God (Gen 17.17) about the possibility of a man who is a hundred years old producing a child. However, they seem to miss the fact that Abraham produced a number of other children by Keturah (Gen 25.1-2), after the death of Sarah, when he himself was about 130 years old.

There is in fact no contradiction in the Bible, we do not have to appeal to textual variants of the OT, and Stephen did not make a mistake when he reported the departure of Abraham from Haran. God's word is

vindicated. Just as it is reliable here and in all of Acts 7.2-53, it is reliable in every statement it makes. We can trust it absolutely when it declares how and when God created the world, sent the Flood, and divided mankind's language. It is important that we have an accurate understanding of when Abraham left Haran because this information is a key for calculating that creation occurred about 4000 BC, the Flood occurred about 2345 BC, the division of language occurred sometime before 2215 BC, and the date of Abraham's birth around 1990 BC.

84. Joseph – A Deliverer (Acts 7.9-16)

If you hear the word 'Auschwitz' or the term '9/11', images of scenes of horror might arise in your mind. Likewise, when Stephen was speaking before the council, he used an evocative term. In these verses, he mentions 'Egypt' six times. This would have reminded his hearers of the hardships of the slavery in Egypt and of the times when Israel had later been unfaithful to God and had sought assistance from Egypt when they should have depended solely on God (Is 30.1-7). While Egypt is personified as an enemy, Stephen identifies another enemy; one not beyond the borders, but within the covenant family. Stephen states that "the patriarchs, jealous of Joseph, sold him into Egypt" (Acts 7.9). He didn't refer to the brothers of Joseph as brothers but called them 'patriarchs' and spoke of their jealousy. This appears to have been a subtle accusation against the council. Joseph was rejected by his brothers and suffered abuse but ended up a prince over them and as their deliverer. Likewise, Jesus was rejected by his Jewish 'brothers', the descendants of the patriarchs, out of jealousy (Mt 27.18) and suffered much at their hands. Nevertheless, he was a prince over them (Ps 110.1; Ps 118.22; Jn 18.37) and offered them deliverance from the spiritual famine and from slavery to sin in the spiritual Egypt of this world. Later, Stephen is not subtle. He condemns the council for rejecting the Messiah (Acts 7.51-52).

Throughout Stephen's speech he reminds the council that God's providential dealings with his people was not confined to the land of Canaan, and thus not confined to their then current territory in Palestine. In this section he reminds them that Canaan was subjected to a famine and that their fathers could find no food (Acts 7.11). The famine was so severe that help had to be obtained in Egypt! God's ruling providence had sent Joseph ahead so that his family could be saved (Gen 50.19-20). Instead of referring in detail to the unjust afflictions imposed on Joseph, Stephen indicated that God rescued Joseph and gave him favour and wisdom before Pharaoh (Acts 7.10). Thus, the purposes of God were being fulfilled outside of the borders of the promised land. At the end of this section Stephen mentions that the bodies of the patriarchs were buried in Shechem. We know of at least Jacob and Joseph's bones being returned to Canaan and buried in Shechem (Gen 50.13; Josh 24.32). The interments were in a field purchased by Abraham from Ephron the Hittite of the clan of the sons of Hamor (Gen 23.10-20; Acts 7.16). The irony in this would have been obvious to the members of the council. The territory of Shechem was no longer in a region controlled by the Jews. It was a Samaritan territory. The 'precious' remains of the patriarchs were not even in the 'holy land'.

Stephen uses an overview of Israel's history to provide key theological lessons:

- Stephen states that Joseph became the ruler over Egypt and over Pharaoh's household. From a human perspective this would have seemed impossible. How a slave could be elevated from a dungeon to the second highest position in the realm would appear to be possible only in fiction. But with God nothing is impossible (Lk 1.37). This should remind us never to put God in a box—he acts according to what he determines is best.
- God reigns as sovereign over the rulers (kings, presidents, prime ministers) of this earth. It may appear that political matters throughout the nations today are out of control and some believers may doubt that God really is in control. Yet, as with pagan Egypt, God raises up national leaders according to his will and purposes (Is 44.28-45.1; Dan 2.21; Rom 13.1).

- God may appoint Christians in important civil government positions where they have opportunities to influence government policy. In addition to Joseph, examples in the Bible include Daniel, Nehemiah, and Mordecai and Esther. We should pray that God will raise up and protect Christian statesmen who will serve diligently and consistently with biblical principles.
- Sometimes God uses pagan kings to chastise his delinquent children, as he did when Israel was taken into captivity by Assyrians and Judah was taken into captivity by the Babylonians. At other times God uses pagan kings to provide direct assistance to his people. This was the case with the Pharaoh at the time of Joseph (Gen 47.5-6; Acts 7.13). Later God used Cyrus (2 Chron 36.22-23) and Ahasuerus (Esther 8.10) to provide for the welfare of the Jews. In every case, God uses pagan kings for the advancement of the Kingdom of Jesus (Ps 110.1-2; Prov 21.1), even though they may not realize it and may be in active rebellion against Jesus.
- Joseph was a type for the future Messiah. The parallels between him and Jesus illustrate the connection, both were:
 - Blessed with grace and wisdom (Lk 2.52; Jn 1.14; Acts 7.10).
 - Loved by their fathers (Gen 37.3; Mt 3.17).
 - Sent on missions to foreign lands to save their people (Gen 50.20; Jn 5.36-37; Lk 19.10).
 - Rejected by their own brothers—Joseph by his paternal siblings and Jesus by his fellow Jews.
 - Not recognized by his brothers on a first visit (Gen 42.8; Acts 7.12-13; Jn 1.11). It was the same with Moses (Acts 7.26-29) who was not received until 40 years later. Stephen implies that the council will reject Jesus a second time.
 - Suffered under false accusations—Joseph by Potiphar’s wife (Gen 39.14-18) and Jesus by false witnesses (Mt 26.60).
 - Made rulers by God over the people who had rejected them (Gen 37.9; Ps 118.22; Mt 21.42; Acts 4.11).
 - Elevated to positions of glory after passing through the trials which had been appointed for them by God (Acts 7.10; Acts 2.33; Phil 2.9-11).

85. Moses – In Egypt (Acts 7.17-29)

Many believers are perplexed. Why is God permitting so much evil to boil up from Satan’s cauldron? Why is our country plagued with the murder of the unborn and infirm? Why are perverse sexual practices being foisted upon our children? With the Psalmist, we cry out, “Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Ps 10.1). This is how the Israelites must have felt as they lived under the oppressive regimes of Pharaohs for 400 years. An especially tyrannical Pharaoh arose who used infanticide (compare with abortion today) to perpetrate genocide (Ex 1.8-22; Acts 7.18-19). We in the West cannot complain, the overt ascendancy of evil has been for only about 50 years. Of course, some of our persecuted brothers (e.g., the Armenians in eastern Turkey) have lived under the oppressive hand of Islam for far longer. In response, Stephen provides a hopeful and helpful rejoinder. “But as the time of the promise drew near ...” (Acts 7.17). God is working, but he works to his own schedule. We can take comfort from these words. God will send a spiritual revival to our land, if he so chooses, in his time. We must believe this. God will extend his Church until his promise is fulfilled, “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” (Hab 2.14).

The time had come to fulfill the promise made to Abraham, that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan (Gen 12.7; Ex 6.3-4). God could have fulfilled his promise in various ways. He could have sent an angel and wiped out the entire Egyptian aristocracy and army (compare, 2 Ki 19.35), thus letting the Israelites exit from Egypt without any hinderances. He could have converted the entire nation and made them friends of the covenant. However, he chose to send Moses as a deliverer and lead the nation out of Egypt through a series of challenges. Moses would typify Jesus, the greater deliverer who would lead his

people out of a spiritual slavery in ‘Egypt’, also at times through temporal challenges. Later, God told Moses that he worked this way so that the wicked nation and its king would see what he can do (Ex 6.1; Ex 9.16). We can take comfort from this also. God will not allow the wicked flowing out of our legislatures, the media, or academia to go unpunished. He will demonstrate what he can do, when he turns the nonsense (Rom 1.22) they are spouting back on their own heads and leaves them with a spirit of confusion (Is 19.14). Just as God knew what suffering his people were experiencing in Egypt (Ex 6.5), he knows how Christians are suffering wherever they may be. He will give them grace to endure (2 Cor 12.9) or remove them from this scene to be with him forever (1 Thess 4.17).

The second deliverer (the first was Joseph; Acts 7.9-16) that God sent to rescue his covenant people was Moses. Stephen informs us that Moses was:

- *Beautiful in God’s sight* (Acts 7.20; Ex 2.2). This does not mean that the baby was just cute. After all, every mother and father know that they have a cute baby. It means that Moses was endowed with a special grace from birth.
- *Rescued*. While other male children were being slaughtered, Moses was protected by God with an eye to his future mission, through adoption into the household of the Pharaoh who wanted him dead (Acts 7.21; Ex 2.2-10).
- *Instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians*. This information about Moses is not recorded in Exodus. It is provided by Stephen who likely had access to extrabiblical writings, which we no longer can access, which gave more details about the life of Moses. As with Daniel (Dan 1.4-5), Moses was given the ‘best’ of the ancient world’s training. While Moses was in the care of his mother (Ex 2.2-10) he would have been taught about the LORD. With this training, he would have been able to critique his pagan education in the Egyptian court. Not all children can manage being taught in secular schools. Sadly, some turn from the truth when indoctrinated in modern myths such as evolution. However, thank God that we have many highly educated Christian scientists and other intellectuals who understand the times (1 Chron 12.32).
- *Mighty in his words and deeds*. There is much speculation about what Moses accomplished during his first forty years in Egypt. Some suggest that he was a key military leader. We will just accept Stephen’s statement as a fact.

God placed on Moses’ heart a desire to help his oppressed Hebrews (Acts 7.23; Ex 2.11). His first attempt at becoming their deliverer appeared to be a total failure. But God intended to send Moses into the wilderness to prepare him for his great mission. Moses saw one of his brothers (from the Hebrews) being physically abused by an Egyptian and defended him. Moses did not *murder* the Egyptian as some suggest. At worst, his zeal for defending his fellow Hebrew resulted in an act of manslaughter. However, since Moses was defending another person, and God requires this of us through a positive application of the sixth Commandment (Ex 20.13), we cannot accuse him even of manslaughter. In addition, due to his position in the civil administration of Egypt, Moses acted with authority to avenge evil (Acts 7.24; Rom 13.4). And as God’s appointed deliverer he acted as God’s avenger. However, the fact that Moses had taken the life of an Egyptian, caused him to flee from the wrath of Pharaoh (Ex 2.15).

Stephen observes that Moses’ fellow Hebrews misunderstood his actions (Acts 7.25-28). They rejected him (Acts 7.27; Ex 2.14) and this added impetus to his fleeing from Egypt to Midian where he became an exile for forty years and married and became a father of two sons (Acts 2.29; Ex 2.15-22). Stephen implies that the rejection of Moses as a deliverer was equivalent to the rejection of Jesus by his fellow Jews (Lk 19.14; Lk 20.13-18; Jn 1.11; Jn 19.15). The rejection of Moses resulted in forty more years of hard servitude. Take this to heart! No one should reject Jesus as his deliverer and remain in bondage to Satan.

86. Moses – His Calling (Acts 7.30-34)

Why did God leave the Hebrews in Egypt to suffer an additional forty years of hard servitude? The Bible does not give us a direct answer. It has been noted that Moses' life of 120 years (Dt 34.7) is divided into three forty-year periods. However, that does not provide a reason for God's continuing their subjection in Egypt. During those forty years, Moses likely heard accounts of the suffering of his people, for example from his brother Aaron or sister Miriam who would have still been living in Egypt. This must have distressed him, particularly since he had a sense that he was called to be a deliverer of his people (Acts 7.25). Some suggest that this time was required for Moses to be trained in patience. But that seems a bit extreme when Jesus trained the disciples in just over three years, and Paul probably spent a similar amount of time in Arabia preparing for his ministry to the Gentiles (Gal 1.16-18). It may be that God punished the generation which had at first rejected Moses (Acts 7.27; Ex 2.14) with forty years of ongoing hardship. This would parallel the punishment of the generation (Num 23.13) of the exodus migrants, which they received after their rebellion over the report of the spies who had inspected the land of Canaan (Num 14.33-35). Thus, most of the adults who had been alive when Moses defended a fellow Hebrew who was being abused by an Egyptian (Ex 2.1-2; Acts 7.24), would have died off.

Whatever the reason for the 'delay' (God's timing is always perfect!) in God's providing a deliverer, he had not forgotten his people (Acts 7.34) or his promise to Abraham that he would return his people to Canaan (Acts 7.6-7). It was time for God to act on behalf of his people. Notice the initiative is entirely the Lord's—"I have surely seen", "I have come down", and "I will send you" (Acts 7.34). Deliverance, whether from temporal danger or from spiritual death is always the result of God's work. He sends his angels to care for his people (Ps 91.11), or the Holy Spirit indwells a person to provide a new life (Jn 3.7-8).

In the calling of Moses, God appeared to him as the "angel of the LORD" (Ex 3.2; Acts 7.35). He made his presence known to Moses through the physical phenomenon of a flame of fire which did not consume the bush in which it burned (Ex 2.2; Acts 7.30). Then he spoke out of the bush (Ex 3.4; Acts 7.31). God used an extraordinary means of arresting Moses' attention. But he does not always act in this way when calling a person into his service. At key junctures in the history of redemption, God uses extraordinary means. We explored this concept previously when we considered the signs and wonders which accompanied the apostles' ministry earlier in Acts.

Today, God may call a person into service through a miraculous rescue from a physical disaster (e.g., surviving a plane crash). He may call a person through a message heard in a sermon, which the person feels is directed specifically at him. He may call a person through an 'open door' providing an unexpected opportunity for service in his Church. Or he may call a person through the counsel and words of a friend or church officer. In each situation the outer call will usually be accompanied by an inner call from the Holy Spirit which reinforces the outer call and encourages the person to act on the call, like Paul's being impelled to preach (1 Cor 9.16). However it is that God calls us into his service, we need to be willing to respond and to go forward with a confident faith.

Many Christians today are reluctant, as Moses was at first, to heed the calling of the Holy Spirit to enter into roles of service in the Church. They make excuses—"It isn't the right time in my life for me to serve in this way." "I have family responsibilities." (Lk 9.57-62) "I'm a nobody." (Ex 3.11), or "I am not qualified" (Ex 4.10). Thank God that he continues to call people into his service as pastors, evangelists, missionaries, elders, deacons, or Sunday School teachers, or into other roles of service such as maintaining a church building, serving coffee and tea, preparing sandwiches, or typing worship services bulletins. All of these service roles have displayed God's presence in the world as the constantly burning flame of the Holy Spirit in the bush of the Church for 2,000 years.

As a cautionary note, we need a balance. There are some folks in the Church who obtrude themselves into roles of service without both an inner and outer call. Paul warns that the Church should not be hasty in

laying on of hands to ordain or commission a person into ministry (1 Tim 5.22). Others may feel that some roles are beneath them and that they should be in a different one and are unwilling to wait until God clearly opens a way. Some people have a misguided sense about their gifts and think they are qualified for a particular role, but they are not and are unwilling to listen to the advice of counsellors. And some folks volunteer for many roles and overextend themselves. Christians are still subject to temptation. Their reasons for seeking roles may be to gain recognition, to earn ‘points’ with God, or to have power over others. Service in the Church must be *service* (Jn 13.12-17) for others not for self aggrandizement.

God required Moses to remove his desert-soiled sandals as he approached the burning bush because the ground around the bush was designated as holy ground (Ex 3.5; Acts 7.33). The ground itself was not sacred. Rather it was the presence of God which sanctified it. Stephen reiterates this before the council to remind them that in the early history of the Hebrews God had made his presence known outside of the promised land, with Abraham (Acts 7.2), Joseph (Acts 7.9), Moses in Egypt (Acts 7.22), and then with Moses in Midian. The temple precincts were not special in themselves but only because God chose to reveal his presence there. Wherever God is, that is where he commissions his servants to serve.

87. Moses – A Redeemer

(Acts 7.35-38)

Stephen becomes more explicit in his defense of Jesus as the Messiah. He refers to the Hebrews as having rejected Moses and denying his God given right to rule (Acts 7.35). He is clearly drawing a parallel with Jesus and implicating his audience and others among the Jews for having rejected their Messiah (Lk 19.14; Lk 20.13-18; Jn 1.11; Jn 19.15).

Stephen goes on and calls Moses a redeemer. Again, he is drawing a parallel with Jesus. In Luke’s Gospel, one of the two travellers heading to Emmaus states that they had hope that Jesus would redeem Israel (Lk 24.21). They may have misunderstood how Jesus would act as a redeemer and expected that Jesus would free them from the hegemony of Rome as Moses redeemed the Hebrews from their slavery in Egypt (Ps 111.9). However, later Peter and Paul inform us that the redemption Jesus provides is ransom (salvation) from slavery to sin, spiritual futility, and lawlessness (1 Pt 1.18; Titus 2.14).

Stephen reminds his audience that Moses performed wonders and signs in Egypt, at the crossing of the Red Sea, and during the forty years that the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness (Acts 7.36). These signs and wonders validated his authority as a ruler, redeemer, and law giver. Stephen clearly implies that in the same way, the signs and wonders performed by Jesus validated him as the Messiah, although many did not believe in him (Mk 6.2-6; Jn 12.37).

Stephen reinforces the parallel between Moses and Jesus. He quotes from Moses—“God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers.” (Acts 7.37; Dt 18.15). A Jew in Stephen’s day would have been unlikely to claim that this prophecy had already been fulfilled. There had been many great prophets after Moses (e.g., Samuel, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel) but none of them was considered to have been the prophet of whom Moses had spoken. Jesus spoke with an authority which caused many to be amazed (Mt 7.28-29; Lk 4.36-37). They understood that Jesus was no ordinary prophet. Those who accepted that Jesus is the Messiah understood that he fulfilled the role of the prophet about whom Moses had prophesied. Peter made it explicit in the sermon he delivered in the temple portico (Acts 3.22-23). So, the council could have had no doubt that Stephen was equating Jesus with Moses’ prophecy and even with Moses himself. Jesus is *the* Prophet because he provides the ultimate and final revelation from God and about God. As the God-man, he demonstrates the fullness of God (Col 1.19). He displays the character of God as holy (Jn 8.46; 1 Jn 3.5), full of love (1 Jn 4.8, 16), being willing to forgive sins (1 Jn 1.9), and providing a means of redemption through his blood on the cross (Col 1.20). Jesus is also *the* Prophet because he is the ultimate source of all of God’s communication to mankind (Jn 1.1). It is he who appointed the apostles to complete

the revelation about his life and mission (in the Gospels) and through their epistles to provide guidance for how to be saved, how to live holy lives, and how to administer his Church.

Moses received the law from the angel who spoke with him on Mount Sinai (Acts 7.38). Stephen's reference to an angel (compare, Gal 3.19) delivering the law should be understood as a 'messenger' rather than as a reference to a created rational being. God himself spoke (Ex 20.1) through one of the persons in the Godhead. Jesus or the Holy Spirit acted as the messenger of the Trinity to deliver the law. Moses served as the human mediator to bring this law to the congregation in the wilderness. In contrast Jesus as the ultimate prophet of God, in his incarnate form, did not speak through a human mediator. He delivered the law directly, again in a wilderness area (Mt 5.1). As he spoke the *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus expounded on the law. He declared that the law continues to stand and must be obeyed scrupulously (Mt 5.17-20). However, he corrected misinterpretations of the law and explained how it is to be applied correctly (Mt 5.21-47). Contrary to his false accusers (Acts 6.13), Stephen viewed the law positively. He called it the "living oracles" of God (Acts 7.38). [We will consider the law, which is the living oracles of God, in the next meditation.] All mankind is required to obey his living oracles as summarized in the Ten Commandments (Ex 20.2-17) and applied through representative sample case laws.

Stephen refers to the Hebrews in the wilderness as the 'church'. The ESV and most other modern translations use 'congregation' or 'assembly' (Acts 7.38). Many modern commentators state that Stephen used the term in a secular sense, as a common assembly of citizens, as it is used in Acts 19.32 to refer to the Ephesians who gathered to defend their goddess. However, Stephen probably uses the word 'church' (*ekklesia* in the Greek) deliberately since it would have riled the council members. Jesus had declared that he would build his Church (Mt 16.18) and the assembly of believers was being referred to as the church (Acts 5.11). If Stephen had wished not to associate the congregation in the wilderness with the NT Church, he could have used a different Greek word such as the word (*plethos*) used in Acts 15.12 and Acts 19.9, or the word (*synagogue*) used in James 2.2 and Daniel 11.13 (in the Greek translation). It is important that we understand the connection between the Hebrews in their wanderings toward the promised land and Christians making their way through the spiritual wilderness of this age as they progress toward the heavenly city in paradise, the true fulfillment of the promised land. Jesus has one Church. It includes believers before Christ came who were looking forward in faith to the coming of the Messiah (Lk 2.25) and were justified by their faith (Rom 3.27-31; Gal 3.24). It also includes post-Pentecost believers who believe that Jesus is the Messiah who was promised and are also justified by their faith in him (Eph 2.8-9).

88. The Living Oracles of God – the Law of God

(Acts 7.38)

Stephen refers to the law as "living oracles" (Acts 7.38). Paul declares the word of God (which would include the law) to be living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword (Heb 4.12). The law of God is the living word of God because it:

- *Proceeds from God himself* (Ex 20.1; 2 Tim 3.16).
- *Reveals the character of God*, whom men should wish to know intimately (2 Pt 3.18), and informs mankind that God is holy and righteous and hates sin (Lev 11.44-45; Lev 20.7-8).
- *Informs mankind of their duty to God* and shows them how they should walk before him (Ps 37.31; Ps 119.105; Micah 6.8; 2 Tim 3.16-17). Without the law, men would have to guess at what God demands of them and would never be certain of the right way to obey him. Only through the law can men learn the way of righteousness (Is 26.9). In the false religions, which are all works-based, men can never know if their moral actions are 'good enough'.
- *Restrains evil* (Rom 13.4). Although people ignore and suppress God's law (Rom 1.18), it still has, by God's general grace, a restraining influence on their consciences and on their actions through its administration by the civil magistrates who threaten punishments for crimes. To an extent the existence

of laws keeps people from hurting one another and damaging or stealing the property of others.

- *Displays sin for what it is*—a breach of God’s righteous requirements—and the extent of the sinful pollution that infects human nature and all human hearts and lives.
- *Reveals personal sins* by defining what sin is (Rom 3.9, 20, 23; Rom 7.7).
- *Convinces men of their inability* to meet God’s demands upon mankind (1 Tim 1.9-10).
- *Humbles men* by showing them their moral inadequacy and by giving them a sense of the sin and misery into which their sins have led them.
- *Points men to Christ*. When the Holy Spirit enables men to see their moral inadequacies, he then directs some of them to understand their deep need of a saviour and of the perfection of Christ’s obedience since he kept the entire law without a single sin.
- *Awakens men to flee from the coming wrath* and drives them to seek for Christ (Rom 10.4; Gal 3.24). From the beginning (Gen 2.17), the law not only identified the duties of mankind before God but also the punishments that would ensue from any breach of the law (Ezk 18.4, 20; Rom 6.23; Gal 3.10).
- *Destroys any excuses* men may have for their disobedience (Rom 1.20; Rom 2.15). No man will be able to stand before God on the judgement day and claim that God gave him insufficient information about his demands and the consequences of not meeting them.
- *Provides wisdom for running a nation and society*. The Bible is not a textbook on sociology, psychology, economics, political science, or jurisprudence. However, when it does speak on any these areas of human study it is definitive and we ignore its principles at our peril. The past two centuries have proved this with such disasters as evolution, communism, socialism, Freudian psychology, and humanistic naturalism, which have all attempted to dismiss God and his rules for governing human society.
- *Provides mental relief*. Knowing that we are not required to keep the law perfectly in order to receive salvation is a great relief. Believers have been delivered from the moral law as a covenant based on works and have the assurance that they are neither justified by law keeping (Gal 2.16) nor condemned by a failure to keep the law (Rom 8.1; Gal 3.13-14).
- *Makes believers thankful to God* for the grace they have received. Knowing how depraved man’s nature is—the law shows us how high God’s standards are and how great is our failure to keep the law—and the punishments associated with a failure to obey God, believers are thankful that through their union with Christ, his perfect obedience has been credited to their account (Gal 2.20; Gal 4.4-5). Believers know that they are no longer subject to the curse on sin and disobedience but are the recipients of rewards that have been procured by the meritorious work of their saviour.
- *Informs believers of how to please God*. Out of a spirit of thankfulness, believers desire to conform themselves to the law. They use obedience to the law to please and love God and to show love for their neighbours.
- *Provides blessings* (Dt 30.15; Ps 19.11; Ps 94.12; Ps 112.1; Prov 13.13). Obedience to the law changes lives. Being taught from God’s law, people are enabled to live in peace and harmony in their families and congregations and with their co-workers and neighbours. In addition, obedience to the law improves their health and prosperity (Dt 28.1-14; Dt 29.9; Ps 1.1-3; Jn 13.17) as they shun the destructive ways of the licentious, apply self-discipline in their lives, take responsibility for providing for themselves and those for whom they should have a concern, and plan for future eventualities.
- *Brings freedom* (James 2.12). The law is good when it is used lawfully (1 Tim 1.8). Only those who desire to obey the law of God are truly able to live this life to its full potential. Thus, the law should be our delight (Ps 1.2; Ps 119.77; Rom 7.22) and not be viewed as heavy burden (Mt 11.28-30).
- *Produces fruit*. When Christians strive to obey the law, their outward behaviour and demeanor—full of kindness and hope—is noticeably different from that of the world, which is full of selfishness and despair. Through their lives they witness to the truth of the Bible and to Christ. Unbelievers take notice and ask for an explanation of the difference (1 Pt 3.15), and this leads some to Christ and everlasting salvation.

89. Apostasy in the Wilderness (Acts 7.39-43)

Even after being led out of the slavery of Egypt by Moses, the multitude rejected him as their leader. They had seen God perform great miracles through Moses in Egypt, in the waters of the Red Sea, turning bitter water sweet (Ex 15.22-25), and the provision of water from a rock (Ex 17.3-6). So, their rejection of Moses was not only the rejection of a man, but the rejection of God who had appointed Moses. Stephen implies that in the same way, the rejection of Jesus and his miracles was the rejection of God who had sent his Beloved son.

The Hebrews reinforced their rejection of Moses by turning their hearts back to Egypt (Acts 7.39)—the place which shortly before they had been desperate to leave. They sealed their rejection by making a calf idol formed like the god Apis (Hapis) that they had known in Egypt and offered sacrifices to it. They had already heard the Ten Commandments from Moses and had promised to obey them (Ex 24.3). Yet within days, they broke the first two Commandments which explicitly prohibited their having other gods (Ex 20.3; Acts 7.40), their making an idol (Ex 20.4; Acts 7.41), and their offering sacrifices to it (Ex 20.5; Acts 7.41). Moses went up Mount Sinai a second time to receive additional commands and stayed there for forty days (Ex 24.18). The people claimed that they didn't know what had happened to him and used that as an excuse for making their idol (Ex 32.1; Acts 7.40). When Moses came down the second time from Mount Sinai, he carried with him two tablets of stone inscribed with the Ten Commandments written by the finger of God (Ex 31.18; Ex 32.15-16; Dt 4.13). Moses' anger was hot at seeing the licentious rebellion of the people and threw the tablets and broke them (Ex 32.19). Later he returned to Mount Sinai for another forty days with replacement tablets (Ex 34.1-5, 28).

This sad account teaches us that the human heart lusts after the spiritual Egypt and false worship rushes in. The first instance occurred near the beginning of time when Cain substituted vegetable offerings for sacrificed animals (Gen 4.3-5). At the time of the Exodus, the people had just completed vowing not to make an idol and quickly broke their vow. In this regard, John Calvin observes, "For men pay no regard to what God has commanded, or to what he approves, in order that they may serve him in a becoming manner, but assume to themselves a license of devising modes of worship, and afterwards, obtruding them upon him as a substitute for obedience. ... God rejects, condemns, abominates all fictitious worship ..." (*The Necessity of Reforming the Church*). We need to beware. We can be just as easily duped into thinking that we know what pleases God as worship and how best to offer him worship.

Stephen skips ahead in his historical survey. Because of the people's proclivity to engage in false worship God turned his back on Israel and gave them over to an expanded idolatry (Acts 7.42). They worshiped the host of heaven, just like the pagans around them. When people reject the true God and his representative sent to earth—Jesus—their innate need to worship leads them into the foolish practice of idolatry and they exchange the glory of God for images of created entities (Rom 1.22-23). Then God hands them over to all manner of immorality (Rom 1.24-32). As our culture has turned its back on God, he has handed it over, in particular, to being consumed with the dishonourable passions of relations between individuals of the same sex (Rom 1.26-27), who take delight in their debauchery (Rom 1.32).

Stephen quotes from Amos 5.25-27 (Acts 7.42-43), contained in the book (scroll) which contained the collection of the shorter prophetic writings (Acts 7.42). Amos wrote before the northern kingdom (Israel) was taken captive by the Assyrians who had their capital in Damascus. But Stephen expands the prophecy to include the southern kingdom (Judah) which was taken captive by Babylon about 150 years later—he substitutes 'Babylon' for 'Damascus'. Thus, he declares the ongoing cross-generational guilt of the Jews who persisted in idolatry from the time they made the golden calf during the exodus until Nebuchadnezzar carried off the exiles.

The first part of his quotation from Amos asks, “Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel?” This is a rhetorical question with the implication that even while offering sacrifices to God, their hearts were idolatrous. The Jews at the time of Stephen treated the temple almost like an idol, with it being intrinsically ‘holy’ and not because God made his presence known there (Acts 6.13). They viewed the temple as more important than God who had given it to them and dwelt in it. Thus, Stephen is implying that although the daily sacrifices were being performed in the temple precincts, the Jews of his day, including the members of the council to whom he spoke, were at heart idolators.

The intermittent apostasy of Israel which began with the calf in the wilderness and continued for about a thousand years led to their being handed over to exile beyond Babylon. By denying Jesus as the God-man, the Jews of Stephen’s day rejected God and were likewise idolators. And as their idolatrous ancestors they were destined for the same outcome—exile beyond Babylon. John informs us that the spiritual Babylon of this world—the nations without God—is destined for destruction (Rev 18.1-24). To be exiled *beyond* Babylon is to be sent into the hinterlands, the domain of Satan and his demons. Jesus is the only image of the invisible God (Col 1.15). He is to be worshiped as the representative of the Godhead, but not with manmade images or with forms not authorized by him. We must avoid idolatrous apostasy as we traverse the wilderness of this world.

90. The Place of Worship

(Acts 7.44-50)

Jesus spoke with a Samaritan woman beside a well outside of a town called Sychar (Jn 4.5-7). After Jesus had spoken about “a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4.14), the woman asked about the right place where people ought to worship God—a mountainside in Samaria or at the temple in Jerusalem (Jn 4.20). Jesus’ answer would have been astounding to a Jew or a Samaritan, “the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.” (Jn 4.21). On hearing this, Jews in Judea would have been appalled. In their thinking, the temple was *the* holy place (Acts 6.13). Any worship activities outside of its precincts, where the daily sacrifices were offered, would have been considered inferior. To a Samaritan, Jesus’ words would have been a surprise. How could a Jew speak disparagingly about the temple? Jesus went on to explain that true worship is not defined by a *place* but by *people* who worship God in spirit and truth (Jn 4.22-24).

In his speech before the Jewish council, Stephen picks up on the concept that worship of God is not confined to a place but to a people. This is the last example he uses in his historical survey which he presented as his apology. After this he will shoot his final arrow—his declaration that the council members are rebellious idolators who murdered the Righteous One (Acts 7.51-53).

He first refers to a wandering place of worship. It travelled with the Hebrews for forty years and then had various semi-permanent locations in Palestine (e.g., Shiloh, Nob, Gibeon; Acts 7.45) until its parts were taken into Solomon’s temple and it presumably decayed to dust or was destroyed about 400 years later by the Babylonians. God himself, Stephen, and Paul call it a ‘tent’ (2 Sam 7.2; Acts 7.44; Heb 9.2) indicating its temporary nature. It was assembled according to explicit instructions given to Moses (Acts 7.44) with a specific layout and ritual (Heb 9.1-8). Paul informs the Hebrews that the forms and service which it typified were ineffective at making perfect the conscience of a worshiper (Heb 9.9). Despite the reverence the Hebrews would have had for the tabernacle, it was impermanent. It was intended to point to the more glorious permanent worship centred in Jesus as the holy of holies.

Stephen then makes a passing reference to the temple. David had requested the honour of making a permanent home for God (Acts 7.45-46; 2 Sam 7.1-17) but was refused. His son Solomon built the house

(Acts 7.47). God indicated to David that he did not need to make his presence known to worshippers in a permanent manmade house (Acts 7.48; 2 Sam 7.5-6). Stephen reminds the council that the place which they viewed as being so sacred, was merely another resting place for the God who reveals himself wherever his people are present. Stephen was not rejecting the temple as such, but their idolatry and abuse of it. The Jews worshipped the temple more than they did God and they attempted to confine God's presence to a single physical place, even though God had demonstrated that his presence is everywhere—in a burning bush in Midian or in a wandering tent. They also had turned the temple into a place of commercial thievery (Lk 19.46). Stephen calls out the council members for their hypocrisy.

Stephen goes on to reference Scripture to reinforce his point. First, he alludes to Solomon's prayer of dedication of the temple (Acts 7.48). Solomon declares that even heaven cannot contain God, much less an earthly house built by human hands (1 Ki 8.27). Then Stephen quotes from Isaiah 66.1-2 (Acts 7.49-50). God's throne is in heaven and there is no house on earth which can contain the creator of the universe. As J. B. Polhill says in his commentary on Acts, 'When a place of worship becomes a representation for God himself, it becomes a substitute for a living relationship to God. The manmade "house" is worshiped, not the living God; and that is idolatry.' Tragically, the Jews did not listen to Jesus or Stephen, and they became more nationalistic—launching revolutionary movements from the temple. God overruled their idolatry, and the temple was razed to rubble in 70 AD by Titus's army.

This brings us full circle to the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman. Jesus is the ultimate temple of God, not made by human hands (Jn 2.19-21; Heb 9.11). The tabernacle and the temple in Jerusalem were both types pointing to Jesus. Jesus is how God makes his presence known to mankind (Col 1.15). So, the *place* of worship is in a *person* (Jesus) and not in a physical building. Then, the people of God are also the temple of God (1 Cor 3.16; 1 Cor 6.19; 2 Cor 6.16). The next words which follow those quoted by Stephen from Isaiah are, "But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word." (Is 66.2). When believers assemble for worship, they are the temple of God. True worship is not defined by a *place* but by the presence of the *people* who worship God in spirit and truth. Whether Christians assemble for worship in private homes, rented school classrooms or cinema auditoriums, or in outdoor settings that is the place of worship because the people are God's temple. We need to keep this in mind. We should never make a physical building where we meet more important than the people who meet in it. Also, we should not refer to the physical building where we meet as a 'church'. The church is *people*, not a building. Say instead of "Our church is at ...", "Our church building is at ...". An additional lesson follows from this consideration. Many in the Church today believe that Jesus is going to return to this earth and establish a temporal rule centred around a rebuilt physical temple in Jerusalem. This belief is false and misses the truth proclaimed by Stephen—God does not dwell in houses built by men but in his people—the Church.

91. Rejected Messiah

(Acts 7.51-53)

We may not have Stephen's entire speech. It may have been shortened while being recounted to Luke; likely by Paul who probably attended the council meeting before his conversion (Acts 7.58; Acts 8.1). However, it appears that Stephen could sense that his audience was getting frustrated with his history lesson, and he quickly concludes. His statements throughout reinforced his own respect for Abraham, the Mosaic law, and worship at the temple. But in them, he indirectly accused the Jews of idolatry. So, he suddenly changes course and like Elijah (1 Ki 18.18) explicitly accuses the members of the council of a series of evils and serious crimes. He switches from 'our' (Acts 7.19, 38, 39,44), as he was recounting Israel's history, to the 'you' of direct address (Acts 7.51-53). His scathing rebuke of the leading members of Jerusalem society is like a grenade being launched into a small room. He accused them of:

- *Being stiff-necked*. The accusation that they were a stubborn people reflects the observation of God about the Israelites after they had made the golden calf (Ex 32.9; Ex 33.3, 5). His audience would have

understood him to be saying that their inordinate veneration of the land and temple was idolatrous.

- *Being spiritually uncircumcised.* He indicated that they had broken the Abrahamic covenant of circumcision (Acts 7.8) and were equivalent to pagans (Jer 9.26). They were like pagans profaning the temple (Ezk 44.7, 9) rather than offering true worship to the ultimate temple of God, not made by human hands (Jn 2.19-21; Heb 9.11). He told them that they should stop being stubborn and through repentance circumcise their hearts (Dt 10.16).
- *Resisting the Holy Spirit.* Gamaliel had advised the members of this council not to oppose God by suppressing the preaching of the apostles (Acts 5.38-39). They had taken his advice at that time. But by arresting Stephen they indicated that their opposition to the Gospel was growing more entrenched.
- *Complicity with the persecution of the prophets.* He issued an indictment of their being like their ancestors who persecuted and killed the prophets who had rebuked the Israelites for idolatry and other sins (1 Ki 19.10; 2 Chron 36.15; Neh 9.26). Jesus had also indicted his generation of persecuting and killing the prophets (Lk 11.47-51). These prophets spoke of the coming Messiah, who is *the* Prophet of whom Moses had also prophesied (Acts 7.37). By rejecting Jesus as the Prophet, the Jewish leaders in the council were just like their ancestors.
- *Betrayal of the Righteous One.* Peter accused the Jews earlier of denying “the Holy and Righteous One” (Acts 3.14), taken from Isaiah 53.11. Peter’s audience would have understood that by using this title he was declaring that Jesus is the Messiah of God. Stephen and some of the council may have been present during Peter’s speech in Solomon’s Portico. Thus, the council would have realized that Stephen accused them of slaughtering the Messiah.
- *Murder of Jesus.* He goes on and is explicit. They were responsible for Jesus’ betrayal and death. They had paid Judas the thirty pieces of silver to lead them to Jesus in the garden. They had tried him and handed him over to the Romans for crucifixion (Lk 24.20; Acts 4.10; Acts 5.30). They knew what they were doing at that time and what they had done as Stephen was speaking. They could not appeal to ignorance as an excuse for their actions. They had deliberately scorned the Lord’s Anointed who was holy and without any sin.
- *Disobedience to the law.* The false witnesses had accused Stephen of speaking against the law of Moses (Acts 6.11). But it was not Stephen who was breaking the law, it was the council members. Their suborning false witnesses was a clear breach of the law (Ex 20.16; Ex 23.1). In addition, their false veneration of the temple and denial of Jesus as the God-man were idolatry (Ex 20.3-4). They were like many occupying positions of power who expect others to obey laws but do not apply the laws to themselves.

Stephen’s historical survey in his apology demonstrated that the Jews had a persistent history of rebellion against God. The leaders in Jerusalem were no different from their ancestors. Later Stephen shows a gracious spirit, asking God to forgive his antagonists (Acts 7.60). So, at this point in his speech we might expect that he would present the offer of forgiveness through repentance to his audience, as Peter did earlier (Acts 3.19-21). However, the council members were so incensed (Acts 7.54) by his charges against them that they could not have listened to the offer of the Gospel and instead slaughtered him with a barrage of stones (Acts 7.58).

We might wonder how this section of Stephen’s speech could apply to us. We might think that we are not like the members of the council, and we don’t act like they did. However, the apostles warn us that we must be careful that we don’t rebel like the ancient Jews did or as the Jewish leaders at the time of Jesus did (1 Cor 10.11; Heb 13.12; 2 Pt 3.17). There are ways that we as Christians can be just like them, such as when we:

- Make excuses for why we don’t have to keep specific laws of God.
- Hold stubbornly to our own opinions and display an unwillingness to learn from or to take counsel from other Christians.
- Become angered and hold a grudge when someone points out our faults.

- Selfishly strive to protect our own interests over the interests of others.

These behaviours are rampant around us. But they are compounded by another grievous sin widely demonstrated today in our society. Men revile and reject Jesus as saviour. They have no interest in the promise of everlasting life which he provides. Their hatred of Jesus is equivalent to murder of him (Mt 5.21-23; 1 Jn 3.15). Beware, lest Stephen's indictments apply to you!

92. Stephen's Vision of the Risen Lord Jesus

(Acts 7.55-56)

When the apostles proposed to the assembly that deacons should be appointed to administer the benevolence fund, they indicated that the men chosen should be full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6.3, 5). Stephen as one of those deacons would have displayed the spiritual maturity and temporal wisdom which the apostles required of these office bearers. However, when we are told here that Stephen was "full of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7.55), we are to understand that in this instance he had a special endowment of the Holy Spirit's presence. Even if Stephen had not been given a vision of heaven and of Jesus, he was prepared by the Holy Spirit to face whatever challenges lay ahead. We have observed previously that Paul (Saul) likely attended the council and had heard Stephen's speech (Acts 7.58). He later reported it to Luke for recording in Acts. Seeing the supreme confidence of Stephen in the face of belligerent resistance, must have stuck with Paul. Thus, Paul reported that Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit and gazing into heaven.

Stephen may have sensed from the rage and teeth-grinding displayed by the council members (Acts 7.54) that his life was nearing an end. Yet he displayed a serene demeanour before the face of fierce opposition. Stephen was certain that what he had testified and the challenge he had given to the council were true. He knew that Jesus' words had come true. He had just experienced the Holy Spirit giving him the words he needed to speak after he had been dragged before the authorities (Lk 12.11-12; Lk 21.12-15). He was confident that Jesus had risen from the grave, was reigning over the entire created realm, and was intimately watching over and caring for his people (Is 43.1) and would reward him in glory (Mt 5.11-12). He also understood that he was following in the steps of his Lord, Jesus (Jn 15.20). Any persecution which he faced would be nothing compared with what his Lord had suffered on his behalf. So, a calmness settled over him as the Holy Spirit enveloped him in his grace.

Jesus went further and gave Stephen a special dispensation to prepare him for his death. He was granted a vision into heaven. We normally think of heaven as being up in our spatial dimensions (Acts 1.9-11). However, it is not necessarily *up*. There is debate among theologians about whether heaven is part of this created order or separate from it. Genesis 1:1 indicates that at the beginning God created heavens (plural). It is possible that this creative act included three heavens—our atmosphere; the celestial heavens encompassing our solar system, the Milky Way, and all the galaxies beyond; and paradise. However, this does not inform us about whether the third heaven (2 Cor 12.2) is part of this universe or separate from it. Given that a visual portal was opened into heaven through which Stephen looked, it may be that heaven is in a separate but parallel reality. Science fiction speaks of parallel universes. However, 'parallel universe' is an oxymoron. The term 'universe' originally was applied to everything that exists other than God. Regardless, heaven is a real physical place. It was created by God. And, at times people other than Stephen have looked into it (Ezk 1.1; Mk 1.10-11; 2 Cor 12.2-4; Rev 4.1).

Stephen saw Jesus at the right hand of God the Father. This confirmed the:

- *Physicality of Jesus*. After his resurrection, Jesus was recognizable to the disciples (Lk 24.31) and told them to touch the vestiges of his wounds to confirm that he was physically present with them (Jn 20.20). Stephen likely would have seen Jesus when he taught in Jerusalem and recognized him even in his glorified body.
- *Deity of Jesus*. A prophecy of David spoke of the Messiah who would be at the right hand of the Father

(Ps 110.1). Jesus applied this prophecy to himself (Mt 26.64) using his self-designation ‘Son of Man’, which Stephen applies.

- *Resurrection and ascension of Jesus.* Jesus was not in the tomb. His body had not been stolen (Mt 28.13). Jesus was resurrected on the third day. He is alive now with a glorified body which is resident in heaven.
- *Exaltation of Jesus.* Being at the right hand of God the Father indicates that Jesus, as the God-man, has been exalted to the highest possible place of honour (Phil 2.9-11).
- *Acceptance of Jesus’ sacrifice.* The way of access to God has been opened through the shed blood of Jesus. The old ceremonial system has been abrogated through the fulfillment of the types, the veil of separation has been torn away (Mt 27.51; Heb 10.19-20), and the physical temple has been replaced by the spiritual temple—the Church.

Stephen saw Jesus standing rather than being seated. Other references to the Messiah’s presence with the Father, speak of him being seated beside the Father (Ps 110.1; Mt 26.64; Mk 16.19; Eph 1.20; Rev 3.21). This is the only instance where Jesus is referred to as standing *beside* the throne of the Father. A suggested reason, derived from Daniel 7.13-14, is that Jesus stood to execute judgement and thus he assured Stephen that the council was facing his divine wrath. However, Jesus indicated that he would be seated when he executed judgement on the righteous and wicked (Mt 25.31-46). Another commonly offered suggestion is that Jesus was standing as a token of welcome. Thereby Stephen was assured that as he faced death, he would be received into the open arms of his saviour. Jesus, the King over all creation, honoured Stephen by standing.

The council members must have thought that Stephen was a lunatic as he voiced his last words before them. But his vision into heaven opens for us a promised reality. One day all those who have believed in Jesus and have repented of their sins will be welcomed with a “Well done!” (Mt 25.21). This is our confidence.

93. Jesus, the “Son of Man” (Acts 7.56)

In his vision, Stephen sees the glorified Jesus in heaven. He refers to him as the ‘Son of Man’. Modern translations capitalize both ‘son’ and ‘man’, indicating that this is formal title for Jesus. It has been observed that Jesus uses this title as his primary self-designation. For example, in Matthew’s Gospel (where it occurs slightly more often than in Luke’s Gospel), Jesus uses the title to refer to himself over twenty-five times. In the NT, outside of the Gospels, the term is applied to Jesus only three times. Stephen uses it when he relates his vision to the council. John, in his visions in Revelation, refers to seeing ‘one like the son of man’ (Rev 1.13; Rev 14.14) who, based on the description he gives about the person he sees, could be no other than Jesus. However, he appears not to be using it as a title.

Why did Jesus choose this title ‘Son of Man’ as his self-designation? But first, why didn’t he refer to himself as the ‘Son of God’? If Jesus had stated explicitly, “I am the Son of God” from the beginning of his ministry, the statement would have been viewed as blasphemous. It would have incited a riot, and his ministry would have been hindered and ended before its fulfillment with his crucifixion. Jesus is called the ‘Son of God’ (using Matthew’s Gospel) only a few times:

- During Jesus’ temptation in the wilderness for forty days, Satan said scornfully, “If you are the Son of God ...” (Mt 4.3, 6).
- As Jesus met demon possessed men, the demons asked, “What have you to do with us, O Son of God?” (Mt 8.29).
- After Jesus walked on the water to the boat, the disciples worshiped him and said, “Truly you are the Son of God.” (Mt 14.33).
- During his trial, the high priest asked Jesus if he was the Christ (Messiah), the Son of God. Jesus

confirmed it and declared that the Son of Man would be seen seated at the right hand of Power. The high priest tore his clothes and stated that Jesus had spoken blasphemy (Mt 26.63-65). In this instance, we see that the Jesus equated the terms ‘Son of Man’ with ‘Son of God’, but only shortly before he was handed over to the Romans to be crucified.

- The spectators at the crucifixion challenged Jesus like Satan had, “If you are the Son of God save yourself!” (Mt 27.40). One of them accused Jesus of having stated that he was the ‘Son of God’ (Mt 27.40). Jesus had never said these words, but his confirmation during his trial that he was the Son of God and his equating the two titles ‘Son of Man’ and ‘Son of God’ was understood as a self declaration of his deity.
- After Jesus’ death and the subsequent earthquake, a Roman centurion declared, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (Mt 27.54). It is fitting that this declaration of Jesus’ deity came from the mouth of a Gentile, since the Jewish council to whom Stephen was speaking denied his deity, and the history of the Church is at a pivot point with the murder of Stephen. The Gospel will be taken to the Gentiles.

It was unnecessary for Jesus to use the title ‘Son of God’ when the title ‘Son of Man’, when properly understood, served the same purpose, without inflaming prejudices. It identified Jesus as the Messiah and as divine. Stephen understood this. He is the only person beside Jesus to use the explicit title, ‘Son of Man’ to refer to Jesus. He associated the title with the previous one he had used to designate Jesus—‘the Righteous One’.

It appears that Jesus used the title ‘Son of Man’ to refer to himself, to:

- *Identify himself as the Messiah.* Daniel saw a prophetic vision in which the Ancient of Days (God the Father) gave to the Son in his incarnate form (‘one like a son of man’) an everlasting kingdom that would be over all nations and languages (Dan 7.13-14). The Jews understood that this individual would be the Anointed One (Messiah/Christ). For example, in the [*Similitudes of Enoch*](#) [1 En 37-71] and [*4 Ezra*](#) [13.32], Messianic language is used with reference to the ‘son of man’ figure. Likewise, Jesus associated the title to the Messiah:
 - He declared that he would be lifted up, meaning crucified (Jn 12.32). The crowd questioned his meaning and asked how the Son of Man could be lifted up (Jn 12.34).
 - Peter declared Jesus to be the Messiah (Mk 8.29) and then Jesus stated that he as the Son of Man must be crucified then resurrected (Mk 8.31).
 - Then, during his trial, he applied Daniel 7.13 to himself (Mk 14.62).
 Jesus chose the title ‘Son of Man’ primarily to identify himself as the Messiah.
- *Declare his deity.* Daniel’s prophecy (Dan 7.13-14) indicates that the Son of Man would be divine. Jesus used the title to confirm that he was from heaven.
- *Associate himself with Adam.* He also used the title to declare that he was a man. Through the use of the title, he associated himself with Adam. Jesus is the last Adam (1 Cor 15.45). He is the true man, the man that Adam should have been if had not sinned. He is the man to whom those he saves will be like, with sinless glorified bodies (1 Jn 3.2).
- *Show that he is the God-man.* The title ‘Son of Man’ indicates that Jesus has both divine and human natures. He is the person of the Trinity who became God incarnate through the virgin conception.
- *Demonstrate his glory.* Stephen, guided by the Holy Spirit, declared that he could see the Son of Man in heaven at the right hand of the Father (Ps 110.1; Dan 7.13; Acts 7.56). Jesus had prophesied that this would occur to the same high priest and council which Stephen addressed (Mt 26.64). It had been fulfilled. Jesus, the eternal Lord of glory (1 Cor 2.8; James 2.1) has been exalted to the highest glory (Phil 2.9-11) as the ruler over all mankind.

94. Stephen’s Murder (Acts 7.54, 57-60)

Stephen counter-charged the judges and jury in the council of being the criminals. He called them stiff-necked having uncircumcised hearts and murderers (Acts 7.51-53). They were too proud to hear the truth about themselves and became enraged, even grinding their teeth (Acts 7.54). Rather than allow Stephen to say anything more—he had just informed them that he saw the resurrected Lord Jesus, the Son of Man, standing in heaven (Acts 7.56)—they cut his speech short with loud voices (Acts 7.57) and covered their ears so that they didn't have to listen to any more of his infuriating words. Thus, he had no opportunity to conclude his speech with a call to them to confess their sins and to repent, as Peter had done earlier (Acts 3.19-21). However, given the state of their minds and hearts a call to repentance would have fallen on deaf ears (Is 6.9; Is 43.8). The council members knew that what Stephen had said in his historical survey and his charges against them were true. They had hardened their hearts and were not inclined to listen to the truth but wanted to suppress it (Rom 1.18).

Like an incensed mob they dragged him out of the council chamber and took him outside Jerusalem and stoned him. If their reaction was not so sinfully tragic, it would be comical. This assembly of staid individuals who usually walked in a stately manner with their hands clasped behind their backs and their heads bowed in feigned meditation had now become consumed with frenzied fury. Their action substantiated Stephen's charges against them. They were the lawbreakers, not Stephen, as they claimed (Acts 6.11). They had not examined the false evidence against Stephen (Acts 6.13-14) but unjustly assumed his guilt (Ex 23.2; Lev 19.15). They dispensed with due-process and rushed to carry out a sentence. Also, under Roman jurisdiction their religious court had no civil authority to execute a person, which they well knew when they handed Jesus over to the Romans for execution (Jn 18.31).

At root, their action was not a rejection of Stephen, but of Jesus. They did not want to hear the truth about God's law, their sin, repentance, and forgiveness. Western society has become similar as it has departed from a biblical foundation. An example illustrates the issue. Wendy Ashby, a [Waterloo Ontario Catholic board trustee](#), tweeted that "The most dangerous creature on the planet is the white Christian male. They're a Threat to anyone that is not them." In another tweet she said, "White women make obedient soldiers for the Christofascist patriarchy." After she was challenged about these statements, she shut down her Twitter account and excused her comments by claiming that as a Métis woman in a professional role she needed to "challenge our existing systems." Without the Holy Spirit sending a revival to our land, we can anticipate that this kind of reaction to the truth of the Gospel will increase. It isn't just radical Islam that is violently antagonistic to Christianity. People and organizations which support abortion, euthanasia, abhorrent sexual practices, and gender transition surgery have no respect for truth or life. Increasingly, if they can get away with it, they will protest outside of supreme court justices, incinerate churches and facilities operated by Christian organization, and slaughter Christians. This must not surprise us. It is what Jesus told his disciples would happen (Mt 24.9).

While being pummelled with stones, Stephen uttered two brief prayers directed to Jesus whom he had seen standing in heaven waiting to receive him (Acts 7.56):

- "*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.*" His words echo those of Jesus when he gave up his spirit on the cross (Lk 23.46), which appear to have been derived from Psalm 31.5. They exhibit a strong confidence and trust (faith) in his saviour. He knew that life does not end with physical death. For believers, death is the portal to a new and far better physical life. Even while suffering pain from many cast stones, he knew that it was a momentary light affliction that would be replaced with an "eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4.17). He anticipated an immediate reception into the presence of Jesus (Lk 23.43). It has been noted that "he prayed his way into heaven". Let us hope that when our time comes, we can have an absolute trust in Jesus our saviour, being full of the Holy Spirit (Acts 7.54), and approach our death with the confidence Stephen displayed.
- "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them.*" Again, he echoed the word of Jesus (Lk 23.34). Jesus had taught the disciples to forgive others (Mt 6.12, 14-15; Mt 18.21-22). Even if Stephen had not been among the original larger body of disciples which followed Jesus, he had probably heard some of Jesus'

teaching when Jesus was in Jerusalem or had heard it second-hand from Peter—the one who knew what real forgiveness means (Jn 21.15-19). These final words from Stephen’s mouth demonstrate that he had a true heart.

These two prayers not only voiced Stephen’s confidence, but they also served as a witness to those who had attempted to shut their ears against him in the council chamber. His first prayer declared that Jesus is the risen Lord reigning from heaven. His second, pointed to Jesus who will forgive the sins of everyone who calls upon him with a spirit of true faith and repentance. So, with his dying breath Stephen proclaimed the Gospel—Jesus lives, Jesus saves! Hallelujah!

After his last breath passed, “he fell asleep” (Acts 7.60). In the Bible, sleep is used as euphemism for death (Job 3.13; Ps 76.5; Dan 12.2; 1 Cor 15.6). Jesus told the disciples that Lazarus had fallen asleep, and he would awaken him. He had to correct the disciples misunderstanding and tell them that Lazarus was dead (Jn 11.10-14). When people die, they do not become unconscious. However, from this temporal perspective, for believers it is as if their bodies are resting and awaiting awakening at the resurrection at the Lord’s return.

95. Martyrdom

(Acts 7.58-60)

As the Acts account proceeds, there is an escalation of persecution of the witnesses to Christ. Members of the Jewish governing council arrested Peter and John for preaching in the temple (Acts 4.1-3). After cross-examining the two apostles, they gave them a threatening warning not to speak again about Jesus and the resurrection (Acts 4.18, 22). The apostles refused to heed the immoral command—they had to obey God rather than men (Acts 4.19-20; Acts 5.29). So, they were arrested again. This time the council members wanted to kill them (Acts 5.33). However, Gamaliel advised the others to stand down (Acts 5.34-39). The council heeded his advice, and had the disciples beaten, charged them to stop speaking in the name of Jesus, and released them (Acts 5.40). Then they arrested Stephen, a deacon and not one of the apostles. His speech and accusations against the council enraged them (Acts 7.54). They could not be restrained this time and rushed Stephen out of the city and stoned him to death (Acts 7.57-58).

Many commentators state that Stephen was the first NT martyr. This isn’t the case. John the Baptist was the first. He preached about the Messiah and was beheaded for declaring the truth about adultery (Mt 14.3-11). It is more accurate to say that Stephen was the first post-resurrection martyr. After him, there are others mentioned in the NT. Herod Agrippa I (grandson of Herod the Great) arrested some who belonged to the Church and killed James (son of Zebedee) the brother of John (the apostle and author of a Gospel, three letters, and Revelation) with the sword (Acts 12.1-2). John mentions an Antipas, a member of the congregation in Pergamum, who was killed for being a faithful witness to Christ (Rev 2.13). We know nothing more about Antipas, which is surprising because the Church honoured many of the early martyrs. However, he is known to Jesus, who recognizes his faithfulness. Later in Revelation John mentions multiple unnamed witness who were martyred (Rev 6.9, 11; Rev 12.11; Rev 20.4).

In Revelation 2.13 Jesus refers to Antipas as “my faithful witness”. The Greek word which is translated as ‘witness’ is the word *‘martus’*, from which we derive our words ‘martyr’ and ‘martyrdom’. The ESV consistently translates the Greek word as ‘witness’. In one instance, the NIV translates it as ‘martyr’ (Acts 22.20). After the apostolic period, the word ‘martyr’ took on a specialized meaning beyond its initial meaning of bearing witness or testimony to Jesus (Acts 1.8; Acts 2.40; Rev 19.10; Rev 20.4). Even though Luke’s account of Stephen’s death is brief, his life and death exhibit features which became expected of those facing Christian martyrdom—a devout life (Acts 6.2, 5), false or unjust charges (Acts 6.13-14), courage in the face of inquisitors (Acts 6.15), boldness when speaking about Jesus (Acts 7.51-53), an often lingering and painful death (Acts 7.58-60), a gracious spirit while facing death (Acts 7.60), and a beatific vision (Acts 7.56). During the early centuries of the NT Church, martyrdom almost became a sacred calling

and reading the accounts of martyrdom was encouraged to fortify faith. For example, Polycarp (69–155 AD), who was a pastor of the congregation in Smyrna provides an example of the persecution about which Jesus speaks (Rev 2.9-10). Irenaeus gave a description of his martyrdom, in [The Martyrdom of Polycarp](#), and presents Polycarp as an example who heeded Jesus' exhortation to "be faithful unto death" (Rev 2.10). Likewise, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* (1563), which went through dozens of editions, helped to frame Protestant consciousness for over 300 years.

Throughout the centuries, God's covenant people have been persecuted, and many killed, for their profession of faith. It began with Abel who professed his faith through proper worship and continued with the prophets (Mt 5.12; Acts 7.52), the Babylonian captivity (Dan 3.1-30; Dan 6.1-28; Est 3.8-9, 13), the Maccabean martyrs (Heb 11.36-38), Christians being fed to lions for entertaining the crowds in the Roman arenas, the Waldensians in the 12th century in the Cottian Alps between France and Italy, and the Huguenots in the 16th and 17th centuries in France. In our own Presbyterian heritage, Covenanters fled Scotland, had their property confiscated, were imprisoned (over 1,000), and as many as 800 were killed during the 'killing time' (1680-1688) by agents of kings Charles II and James VII. Persecutions and martyrdom continue today—with thousands being driven from their homes and killed each year by Muslims and totalitarian regimes (e.g., North Korea) in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. The mainstream media rarely report on these acts of persecution because of their tendency to view Islam as a 'religion of peace' and their antipathy to Christianity. Organizations like [Voice of the Martyrs](#) provide current information about ongoing persecution of Christians.

As the faithful undergo persecution they bear witness to the world that faith in the true God overcomes all adversity. God uses the persecution of his people to draw others into the church. Tertullian (2nd century) wrote that "the blood of martyrs is the seed of the Church," teaching that the faithful death of believers leads to the conversion of others. Likewise, today, the faithful lives of Christians facing persecution leads many others to align with Christ. Persecution always undermines its own objectives. For example, Muslim groups which persecute Christians may slaughter many and drive even more from their homelands, but the witness of the persecuted adds more to the Church daily. Until Christ returns, his Church will continue to grow and be the most visible worldwide institution (Dan 2.34-35, 44-45; Mt 16.18; Mt 28.19-20).

May Stephen's example encourage us to be faithful to the end and to pray earnestly for those suffering persecution today for their witness to Christ.

96. Prayer Directed to Jesus (Acts 7.59-60)

Prayer is mentioned about thirty times in Acts. We are told that the apostles and the other believers:

- Devoted themselves to prayer (Acts 1.14; Acts 2.42; Acts 6.4).
- Observed regular prayer times (Acts 3.1; Acts 16.13; Acts 22.17).
- Covered key milestones in the advancement of the Church with prayer (Acts 6.6; Acts 8.15; Ac 13.3; Acts 14.23).
- Prayed for God to act and even to perform miracles, and sometimes received immediate answers to their prayers (Acts 1.24; Acts 4.31; Acts 9.40; Acts 10.9, 31; Acts 16.25; Acts 12.5; Acts 27.29; Acts 28.8).
- Prayed for one another (Acts 12.5, 12; Acts 20.36; Acts 21.5).
- Called unbelievers to repent of sin and pray for forgiveness (Acts 8.22), with the promise of salvation (Acts 2.21).

In summary, they prayed in every situation and without ceasing (Eph 6.18; 1 Thess 5.17). Their example is a good model for us to follow.

In Acts 7.59-60 we find the only instance in Acts (and probably in the entire NT) in which prayer is directed explicitly to the ascended Lord Jesus. The thief on the cross asked Jesus to remember him when Jesus assumed his kingdom, and Jesus promised him that it would be so (Lk 23.42-43). We can certainly view this as a prayer, and it is consistent with the fact that Jesus received worship before his resurrection (Mt 2.11; Mt 14.33; Mt 21.9) and after his resurrection (Mt 28.9). Some commentators suggest that we can infer that the apostles' prayer in Acts 1.24 is directed explicitly to Jesus, since they used the word 'Lord'. However, they may have used the word 'Lord' as a general reference to God (Acts 2.39; Acts 3.19-20). In addition, Peter and Paul refer to calling on the name of the Lord (Acts 2.21; Acts 9.14, 21; Acts 22.16; compare, Rom 10.12, 13). However, this could be calling on God the Father in the name of the Lord Jesus.

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* defines prayer as, "Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, (Ps 62.8) in the name of Christ, (Jn 16.23) by the help of his Spirit; (Rom 8.26) with confession of our sins, (Ps 32.5-6; Dan 9.4) and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies (Phil 4.6)." This definition refers to God, which we infer means God the Father since the definition distinguishes the other persons of the Trinity (Christ and the Spirit). Other than in Acts 7.59-60, it appears that throughout the rest of the NT, prayer is made to the Father in the name of the Son. So, Stephen's prayer directed explicitly to Jesus may be unique.

Does Stephen's example provide us with a warrant to pray directly to Jesus? Before we answer this question, we observe that nowhere in the Bible are prayers directed explicitly to the Holy Spirit. He certainly assists believers to pray (Rom 8.26), but he never asks to be addressed in prayer or records in the Bible an instance of his receiving direct prayer from believers. People who direct prayers explicitly to the Holy Spirit are doing something that is not endorsed by the Holy Spirit himself or supported by apostolic example. We should conclude, other than the exception in Acts 7.59-60, the Bible teaches that our prayers are to be directed to God (the Father) in the name of the Son, with the assistance of the Holy Spirit. However, Stephen's example appears to provide a warrant for us to pray at times directly to Jesus. Calvin, in his commentary on Acts states, "Furthermore, we are taught hereby that we call upon Christ rightly and lawfully, because all power is given him of the Father, for this cause, that all men may commit themselves to his tuition."

If we know Jesus as our personal saviour and consider him to be a dear brother and close friend, there may be times when we may want to pray to him directly. Examples of when to address Jesus directly in prayer include:

- An obvious instance is when we consider what Jesus did by dying on the cross for us. The Trinity was actively engaged in planning and procuring salvation and applying it. However, it was the God-man who gave his life for us. Neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit became incarnate and suffered death as a substitute for sinners. So, we can offer thanks to Jesus for his redemptive work on the cross. This could become part of our daily prayers. However, a most opportune time is as we are partaking of the elements during the Lord's Supper. We can say with sincere gratitude, "Thank you Lord Jesus, for dying for me!"
- If we are conscious as we near the moment of our death we can ask Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, to lead us through the valley of the shadow of death (Ps 23.4) into his presence in glory. We can use the words Stephen used, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.", taken from Psalm 31.5.
- Jesus tells us that we are to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us (Mt 5.44). We should be prepared to follow Stephen's example. With his last breath, he asked Jesus to forgive those who were stoning him, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." (Acts 7.60).
- Jesus promised to send the Helper to his disciples when they faced trials (Jn 15.26; Jn 16.7). We can appeal directly to Jesus for the same assistance if we are facing challenges when bearing a testimony for Jesus.
- It also makes sense to direct an extemporaneous prayer to Jesus when we are speaking with an unbelieving co-worker, neighbour, friend, or relative about Jesus. We should utter a quick silent prayer,

“Lord Jesus, help me to be courageous and to say the right things. Please send the Holy Spirit to prepare the field of this person’s heart so that the seed of life may be planted.”

What a privilege we have! We are able to address prayers to our Father in heaven and to our brother who is at the right hand of the Father (Ps 110.1; Acts 7.56).

97. Saul’s Introduction

(Acts 7.58; Acts 8.1a, 3)

We know the adage, “First impressions can be deceiving.” It is easy to make a mistake about a person when we first see or meet him. We all have biases which influence our judgement and at times (often) can lead us to mistaken conclusions. However, when Luke introduces Saul (Paul) to us, our first impression doesn’t appear to be wrong. Saul comes across as an austere, fanatical, self-righteous Pharisee who is intent on destroying the nascent NT Church. He later describes himself in this way, “as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” (Phil 3.5-6).

But there is more to the story, much more! If Saul’s initial response to the preaching of the Gospel by the apostles and Stephen had not been so serious, we could almost find humour (or at minimum, irony) when we compare the ‘before’ with the ‘after’. We can imagine Paul later sitting with Luke as he is writing Acts. They begin reflecting on what happened to Stephen and on the immediately following events and shake their heads in amazement. Then they both fall on their knees and thank God for what a marvelous transformation he had wrought, Saul the persecutor became Paul the preacher.

Luke’s introduction of Saul is not auspicious. Luke informs us that Saul was a witness to the execution of Stephen (Acts 7.58). But he was not an innocent bystander. He approved of the execution (Acts 8.1a) and endorsed it by guarding the garments to those performing the execution. He may not have lifted a stone to throw at Stephen, but he was culpable for abetting murder. A modern equivalent would be a person who uses his cell phone to make a recording of a tragic scene. Rather than intervening to protect the victim or calling emergency services, he gets a perverse pleasure from observing and recording the event. Later, Paul describes this kind of behaviour among pagans who not only do evil themselves but approve of those who practice it (Rom 1.32).

Saul was from Cilicia (Acts 22:3), so it is possible that he was considered to be a Hellenistic Jew. Stephen was likely also a Hellenistic Jew. They both may have attended the synagogue of the Freedmen, which appears to have included members from Cilicia (Acts 6.9). Thus, it is possible that they knew each other before the conversion of Stephen. Saul may have been among those who disputed with Stephen (Acts 6.10-14). As a witness at Stephen’s trial and execution, Saul would have also heard Stephen’s defense (Acts 7.1-53) and his final words as he described Jesus as the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God the Father (Acts 7.56) and calling on Jesus to receive his spirit into heaven (Acts 7.59). Rather than having doubts raised in his mind about who Jesus was, Saul would have become incensed and entrenched in his hatred toward Jesus. Notice that Luke tells us that Saul was “a young man” at the time. He likely had that naïve belief, common in many young people, that he was going to solve the world’s problems—at this point, the problem was ‘intolerant conservative Christians’ like Stephen. They needed to be removed from society, and everything would be set right. Thus, Saul was likely among those who took the lead in accusing and sentencing Stephen.

Immediately after the murder of Stephen, Saul is enflamed with ‘righteous’ zeal against the Church. Luke describes Saul’s behaviour as ‘ravaging’ (Acts 8.3), like a wild beast tearing apart an animal of prey. The same word is used in the Greek translation of Psalm 80.13, which would have been used by Luke. Some suggest that Saul was struggling with an internal tension after hearing Stephen’s defense. This caused him to cover his sense of unease and guilt with a reactionary aggression. However, this does not appear to reflect

Saul's feelings or thoughts at the time. He didn't experience guilt until after his conversion (Acts 9.1-19). Later, he tells us of how deep he considered to have been his sin at the time of Stephen's death and his persecution of the Church:

- "For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." (1 Cor 15.9).
- "For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it." (Gal 1.13).
- "Though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent." (1 Tim 1.13).

His violence against the Church, included forcibly entering private homes and synagogues and dragging off men and woman and imprisoning and beating them and even having others killed (Acts 8.3; Acts 22.4, 19; Acts 26.10). He didn't consider Christians to be just mistaken in their belief that Jesus is the Messiah, but as being perversely evil. He covered his wicked actions with the authority of religious leaders in the Jewish council (Acts 9.1). This form of systematic persecution against believers in Christ would later be followed by members of the Church hierarchy, for example, during a series of inquisitions (e.g., from around 1185 to about 1800). His hatred and violence against Christians escalated to such an extent that he executed persecution as few other individuals in history have. So, after his conversion, the Church in "Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up" (Acts 9.31).

The change of Saul to Paul demonstrates the power and mercy of God (1 Tim 1.13). He turned a fanatical opponent of the Gospel into a powerful defender of the faith. Let us not forget this when we pray for unsaved loved ones or for those in government who are destroying the Christian heritage in our land.

98. Persecution and Dispersal

(Acts 8.1b-4)

Most of the seedpods from a Maple tree float to the ground within a 100-meter radius around the tree. However, a strong wind can carry the 'helicopter' keys well beyond the mother tree. So, it was in Jerusalem immediately after the murder of Stephen. The strong wind of persecution which hit the church in Jerusalem scattered the seeds of the Gospel well beyond the mother church.

Stephen's speech to the council and subsequent murder sparked a pogrom against Christians. This was led by the fanatical Saul who undoubtedly was assisted by leaders of the Jewish council who fomented the crowd (Acts 6.12) and gave a formal endorsement to his vicious actions (Acts 9.1). Luke informs us that Saul ravaged (tore to pieces) the church in Jerusalem by forcibly entering private homes and dragging off men and women for imprisonment (Acts 8.3). Some of those who were arrested were also put to death (Acts 22.4; Acts 26.10)—whether directly by his own hands is not explicit. We could enquire into the motives of Saul at this time. Some suggest that his background as a Hellenistic Jew (from Tarsus in Cilicia; Acts 22:3) caused him to be more conservative than many of the Hebraic Jews who sat on the council. He therefore viewed the preaching of the apostles about Jesus as the Messiah who introduced a new covenant to be highly offensive. However, that is merely supposition, particularly since Paul tells us that he was raised and educated in Jerusalem at the feet of a prominent rabbi (Acts 22:3). The underlying reason for Saul's antipathy to Christianity was not because of his being Hellenistic, but because he was a sinful human. Since Adam's sin in the garden, mankind has hated Christ and Christians because a call to conversion undermines their pride and desire for autonomy from God. Saul was a proud creature before he was humbled by Christ on the road to Damascus.

In the middle of his report of the outbreak of persecution, Luke makes a brief digression to inform us of the burial of Stephen (Acts 8.2). This might appear to be incongruous. However, Luke is deliberate in introducing this sidenote. The persecution of Christians had been escalating from warnings to the apostles

to desist from proclamations about Jesus (Acts 4.21), to a beating of the apostles (Acts 5.40), to murder of Stephen (Acts 7.58, 60). It was Stephen's martyrdom which sparked the persecution of the wider church in Jerusalem. Luke now closes the account of the expansion of the Church in Jerusalem and begins a new account as the Church expands to Samaria and "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1.8). Luke tells Theophilus (and us) that devout men buried Stephen and made great lamentation over him. He doesn't tell us who these men were. Some suggest that they were devout Jews who respected Stephen (like Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who took care of the burial of Jesus). Whereas others claim that they were other Christians who had remained in the city and had not fled from the persecutions. It is more likely the latter. Luke wants us to know that Stephen was loved, and that he hadn't died in vain. It required courage for the Christians in Jerusalem to make their allegiance to Christ and Stephen known (particularly since Stephen would have been viewed by the council as a criminal) and to accord him the honour a martyr deserved. Thus, the burial of Stephen was a form of witness to Christ and the hope of the resurrection.

Luke tells us that the persecution was directed at the *church* (Acts 8.1, 3). It was not directed at a specific group of believers in Christ (e.g., Hellenistic Christians living in Jerusalem) but against any man or woman who proclaimed that Jesus is the Messiah and the Son of God. By using the word 'church', Luke is informing us that the persecution was directed at the true, spiritual Israel—the new covenant people. As a result of the persecution, believers fled the city. Jesus had endorsed flight from pending persecution (Mt 10.23; Mt 24.16), so they did nothing wrong by avoiding a confrontation with the Jewish authorities and the fanatical Saul. The apostles and other courageous Christians (such as those who had buried Stephen) remained in the city. Some misapply the 'all' (Acts 8.1) and claim that every Christian, but the apostles left the city. However, if that had been the case, there would have been no one left for Saul to drag from their homes and imprison. Rather, we understand the word 'all' in a generalized sense, similar to someone saying, 'All the city came out to greet the winners of the Stanley Cup.' We understand that not every single person lined the parade route. Those who remained were not necessarily courting martyrdom, but they demonstrated a deep conviction that they had a continuing service to perform for Christ in the city.

Those who left the city carried the message of the Gospel with them. English translation since Tyndale have generally stated that those who were scattered were 'preaching'. However, when we hear the word 'preaching' we usually think of a formal sermon presented on Sunday morning from a pulpit. However, the Greek word (from which we obtain our word 'evangelize') can be understood as speaking about good news (e.g., Lk 1.19; Lk 2.10; Lk 8.1). So, we can understand that the scattered believers proclaimed the *word* (Greek, *logos*) that Jesus is the saviour. In general, they were all engaged in leading people to Jesus Christ.

God's plan was to use the persecution in Jerusalem to demonstrate to the Jewish leaders that the Gospel cannot be stopped, even when believers are faced with persecution. Those in the city continued to demonstrate their faith in Jesus. Those who left the city boldly proclaimed the truth about Jesus. God's plan was to take the Gospel from a parochial setting in Jerusalem and to introduce it to the world. This had been his objective since he covenanted with Abraham that through him all nations on earth would be blessed (Gen 22.18). What Saul and the council intended for evil God intended for the good of all mankind (Gen 50.20).

99. Philip and the Samaritans (Acts 8.5-8)

There is debate about whether this Philip was one of the deacons appointed by the apostles to serve the church in Jerusalem through the distribution of the benevolence funds (Acts 6.1-6) or one of the original apostles appointed by Jesus (Mt 10.3)—we assume the former, based on Acts 21.8. Many Christians left Jerusalem when the persecution led by Saul broke out (Acts 8.1, 14). Philip travelled north about 80 kms onto the plain at a lower elevation ('down', Acts 8.5) from Jerusalem into the region occupied by the Samaritans. Luke does not provide precise details about where he went, since the city named 'Samaria' had

been destroyed twice (by Sargon II in 722 BC and by John Hyrcanus in 127 BC) and did not exist at the time of the apostles. The ESV footnote indicates that there is a manuscript variation ('a city' vs. 'the city'). He may have gone to Sebaste, the capital of Samaria, to Shechem at the foot of Mount Gerizim, or to Sychar where Jesus met with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4.5). This surprising lack of precision by Luke may be deliberate. The point he wishes to make is that the Gospel was first taken outside of Jerusalem and the Jewish territory of Judea into Samaria, just as Jesus prophesied and directed that it would be (Acts 1.8).

The Samaritans were considered to be 'half-breeds' by the Jews. They were not descendants of Jews who had lived in the northern kingdom of Israel before the Assyrians deported them. Rather, they were the descendants of other peoples who had been imported into the region by the Assyrians around 720 BC (2 Ki 17.24). One of the Jewish priests who had been carried into exile was made to return to the region and teach them to fear the LORD (2 Ki 17.25-28). At the time of Jesus and the apostles, the Samaritans accepted the books written by Moses, the Pentateuch (the Law), but did not accept the other OT writings (the Prophets and the Writings). So, they were not considered to be pagans or Gentiles by the Jews but also were scorned by the Jews (Jn 4.9; Jn 8.48) even though they held to the writings of Moses and claimed to worship the same God as the Jews.

Jesus had taught in Samaria (Jn 4.1-42) as a sign of what was to transpire after his crucifixion. But Philip's proclamation of Christ in this region is the first time the Gospel had been presented outside of Jewish territory since the ascension of Jesus. It is significant because non-Jews were being brought into the Kingdom of God as had been foretold (Gen 22.18; Ps 22.27-28; Ps 86.9). Since the Samaritans had maintained a commitment to the teachings of Moses for over 700 years, they had an expectation of the coming of a Messiah (Jn 4.25), whom they referred to as the 'restorer'. This gave Philip a point of contact with them. Luke informs us that Philip proclaimed *the* Christ (Acts 8.5). He declared that Jesus is the Messiah who was expected by both the Jews and by the Samaritans. Luke provides no detail about the contents of Philip's presentation about Jesus, as he did when he recorded the speeches of Peter and Stephen. This is likely because Philip's offer of the Gospel was not confined to a single speech. He likely spent many days among them teaching about the Christ until he was told by an angel to travel to Gaza (Acts 8.26).

Even though Philip was not an apostle, his proclamation of Christ was accompanied by sign miracles (Acts 8.6) which validated his message as coming from God. The miracles consisted of casting out demons and healing the paralyzed and lame (Acts 8.7). When we read about sign miracles accompanying the proclamation of the Gospel we might wonder if we would see more conversions if missionaries and evangelists today could do the same when they enter territories where Christ has not been proclaimed before. However, we should not conclude that miracles will convince sceptics any more than hearing the message of the Gospel preached (Lk 16.31). During the first couple of decades of the NT era, the record about Jesus' life was being communicated only orally. However, now that the entire Bible is complete and we have the record of Jesus' ministry and of the work of the apostles, the reason for miracles to validate their teaching of truth is not essential. Luke tells us that it wasn't the miracles which convinced the Samaritans but that they paid attention to what Philip said (Acts 8.6). The miracles attracted attention, but the message resulted in conversions. We should also note that there may have been a second reason for Philip's being able to perform miracles. The miracles attracted the attention of Simon the Magician (Acts 8.9-13), and God was setting the stage for a confrontation with the demonic.

The Gospel message was received positively by the Samaritans. We are not informed about how many were added to the Church, as Luke has reported previously (Acts 2.41; Acts 4.4). Luke has already indicated that growth is to be expected when the Gospel is proclaimed. However, we all have a tendency to want to count heads and report on the size of our congregations or the number of pledges received during an evangelism event. We must be careful not to make an increase in numbers our measure of success (as David did when he took the census; 1 Chron 21.17) rather than an increase in godliness (1 Cor 16.13-14; 1 Tim 4.7-8; 2 Pt 1.6). Rather than focus on the local, we should consider the global. The Church has grown from a small

band of discouraged disciples into a world encircling and world changing force (Dan 2.34-35; Acts 17.6).

Philip's proclamation resulted in "much joy in the city" (Acts 8.8). The Gospel:

- Enlightens minds darkened by superstitions and paganism (Jn 1:9; 2 Cor 4.4).
- Brings hope where only hopelessness reigned previously (Eph 2.12).
- Overcomes native selfishness and makes us thankful for blessings (Col 3.15).
- Gives true peace where formerly jealousy and discord prevailed (Phil 4.7).

100. Philip and Simon the Magician (Acts 8.9-13)

Satan darkens the minds of mankind with many delusions as he attempts to keep them from hearing and believing the Gospel. Throughout much of the world in the past he used superstitions, acts of magic, and the occult as some of his means for enslaving mankind. This continues today in religions such as Hinduism and with a resurgence of mysticism among people who would claim to be non-religious and rational empiricists.

As the Gospel moved out of Judea, where the teachings of the OT Scriptures would have been widely known, Philip encountered a strong demonic influence. He cast out demons (Acts 8.7) and was confronted with Simon, who practiced magic. What this 'magic' consisted of is debated. Some suggest that Simon was able to perform actions that were equivalent to miracles but through demonic powers. Others suggest that his magic was essentially mind tricks and sleight-of-hand. It is likely best to consider that his abilities were natural and not supernatural, since the Bible does not indicate that Satan and demons can directly control aspects of the natural realm (e.g., telekinesis, levitation, transmutation, divination, and necromancy), other than possessing humans and animals.

Simon claimed to be "somebody great" and the people of Samaria said that he was "the power of God that is called Great" (Acts 8.9-10). He claimed to work miracles through the power of a pagan god and to be an emissary from Zeus, not the LORD (Yahweh) of the Bible. The influence of his teachings appears to have spread beyond Samaria after the events recorded in this chapter. Justin Martyr says, 'Simon, a native of the village called Gitto, who in the reign of Claudius Caesar, and in your royal city of Rome, did mighty acts of magic, by virtue of the art of the devils operating in him. He was considered a god, and as a god was honoured by you with a statue ... erected on the river Tiber, between the two bridges, and bore this inscription, ... "To Simon the holy God." And almost all the Samaritans, and a few even of other nations, worship him, and acknowledge him as the first god.' (*The First Apology of Justin*, 33). The Samaritans reference to Simon as the 'great God' was clearly blasphemous and directly contrary to the commandments recorded in Exodus 20.3-7, to which they claimed to adhere.

The Samaritans paid attention to Simon and were amazed by his magic (Acts 8.10). They were fooled by his tricks. We might excuse their gullibility by saying that it was a naïve age. Today we can watch YouTube videos of magicians performing 'mind reading' and sleight-of-hand tricks with cards or balls. We know that these magicians are not actually reading a person's mind or making objects appear from the air. However, the people of our age are just as gullible as were the Samaritans. Many believe that astral forces control their destiny, that their actions influence their *karma*, and that crystal auras affect their moods and can act as natural healers. Also, the 'intellectuals' who reject such superstitions are also just as gullible, believing that life spontaneously came into existence in a bath of organic molecules and that the complexity of genetic information has increased through random mutations in DNA. Men like Dawkins, Lewontin, and Lenski (all with the first name 'Richard') are the Simon Maguses of our day.

Philip "preached good news about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8.12). The

message he brought to the Samaritans was simple:

- The Kingdom of God had been made manifest with the incarnation of the God-man, Jesus the Messiah.
- Salvation from sin is available to those who repent of their sins and believe in Jesus' substitutionary work on the cross.

This is the good news—the Gospel—which the Samaritans believed. Luke does not tell us how many of the Samaritans believed Philip's message, but those who did were baptized. So, Philip must also have told them that baptism is the rite of admission into the Church. This would have been relevant since magicians would have had their rites for admission into the inner circles of adherents. Baptism is a public profession of faith and not a secret ritual like those practiced by the mystery cults. The fact that Luke mentions that both men and women were baptized is also important. Women in the ancient world were often considered to be second-class citizens. And, in the OT ceremonial system women were represented by the male heads of households who alone were circumcised. Under the new covenant, women are equal citizens with males in the Kingdom of Heaven and the true spiritual offspring of Abraham (Gal 3.28).

Simon is also said to have believed the message of Philip and was baptized (Acts 8.13). He saw the signs and miracles Philip was performing and he knew that these were not like his deceptive tricks. He knew that Philip was endowed with power by the Holy Spirit. However, his was a mere intellectual belief and not a faith that relied on Jesus for salvation (Acts 8.20-22). A human being or demon (James 2.19) can believe in God, in his creative work, and even that Jesus is God (Mk 3.11), without placing faith in Jesus (Mt 13.1-9, 18-23; Jn 2.23-25; Jn 8.31). This provides us with a lesson so that we will be cautious. There are wolves in sheep's clothing in the Church (Mt 7.15; Acts 20.29; Jude 4) who are hypocrites. It is only through their evil works and the lack of consistency of their teaching with the Bible that we can discern the falsehood of their profession of faith (Acts 7.16-20). Likewise, Simon's baptism was merely a superstitious action (like a person performing the sign of the cross) with no understanding of the meritorious work of Jesus Christ. The fact that he was baptized by Philip also provides an important reminder. Adult baptism can provide no more of a guarantee that a person is converted, or will be converted, than infant baptism does.

101. Magic and the Demonic (Acts 8.9)

What was the magic which Simon practiced? Some people believe that Simon derived power from Satan to perform material works which were similar to the miraculous signs which the apostles performed. For example, one commentator says that "magic in Luke's narrative is presented as 'satanic power actualised'".

The Bible does not state that Satan has miraculous powers. Yet, some interpreters claim that Satan was behind the Egyptian magician's abilities to mirror the first few miracles Moses performed—turning a rod into a snake (Ex 7.11-12) and water into blood (Ex 7.22), and making frogs appear (Ex 8.7). However, it is merely a supposition that Satan gave Jannes and Jambres the ability to work miracles. Rather the account states that they performed their feats with 'secret arts' (Ex 7.11, 22; Ex 8.7, 18). Their feats were probably equivalent to tricks of sleight-of-hand. Ironically, they had to call on Moses and the true power of God to undo the effects of the true miracles (Ex 8.8).

Satan's (and the demons') power is likely confined to an ability to possess humans (Mt 4.24; Eph 2.2) and animals (Mt 8.31) and to tempt and deceive mankind. They have no ability to control physical phenomena (e.g., telekinesis, levitation, transmutation). The only possible exception described in the Bible, is when Satan was given explicit permission by God to intervene directly in the physical realm (Job 1.6-12; Job 2.1-7). We must not think of Satan as a powerful equivalent to God, but an evil counterpart. Satan is a created angel who led a rebellion against God's authority. His means of waging war against God are in the spiritual realm (Eph 6.12). So, we should not conclude, without evidence, that Satan gave Simon supernatural abilities to perform physical miracles.

The magic Simon performed was likely aligned with the activities associated with occult practices centred around astrology and divination. The English (and Greek) word ‘magic’ is derived from a Persian word that referred to a class of wise men (‘magi’) purporting to have extraordinary abilities to read astral signs to identify propitious alignments (Est 3.7) and make predictions about the future. The Medians who came to see the baby Jesus applied their astrology to reading signs that were correct only because God supplied the sign (Mt 2.1-2, 7) to fulfill an ancient prophecy about the arrival of the Messiah (Num 24.17).

Simon’s magic and the magic of others mentioned in Acts (Acts 13.8; Acts 19.19) likely consisted of purported abilities to perform:

- *Clairvoyance* – Seeing current or future events at a distance in space or time (e.g., through a crystal ball).
- *Divination* – Foretelling future events by reading the alignment of celestial objects, entrails of sheep, or the lines on a person’s hand.
- *Necromancy* – Communicating with the dead and channelling their voices.
- *Enchantment* – Controlling future events by invoking curses or blessings, as Balak asked Balaam to do against Israel (Num 22.4-6).
- *Interpreting dreams* – God gave individuals dreams and interpretations (Gen 40.5-22; Gen 41.1-32; Dan 2.1, 31-45). However, the pagan magicians were not able to interpret these dreams (Gen 41.8; Dan 2.3-11), because no one can interpret dreams unless he is a true prophet of God.

All these forms of ‘magic’ involve interaction with the unseen world and are demonic. Often, they are accompanied by drug-induced trances.

Simon’s magic could not have included real instances of sorcery. He could not manipulate impersonal natural or personal demonic forces to make humans act in a particular way or to invoke physical phenomena. The prophets of Baal claimed this kind of power but failed to demonstrate it (1 Ki 18.26). If he made it appear that he was controlling phenomena in the natural realm, he did so by using what we refer to as sleight-of-hand. Both his claims to interact with the unseen world and to perform physical wonders were seductive deception (Acts 8.10-11). He worked on the imaginations of simple folk for his own glory.

The Bible explicitly declares that we must not engage in any of these practices of ‘magic’ (Dt 18.9-14). They are demonic, pagan, and an abomination before God. They are idolatry and a direct contradiction of the first and second Commandments (Ex 20.3-4).

When Philip cast out demons and healed the paralyzed and lame (Acts 8.7), Simon was amazed (Acts 8.13). He knew that his claims to perform magic were a sham compared with the real power of God being displayed through Philip. The sign miracles which Jesus performed (including giving sight to the blind and raising the dead) and the apostles performed were in a completely different class than the ‘magic’ of the quacks like Simon. The sign miracles performed by the apostles and by Philip did not bring glory to themselves but pointed to the work and glory of God. A genuine preacher like Philip directs people to the saviour.

The message Philip proclaimed in Samaria liberated the new believers from the power of Satan and the demonic and brought them into the light of the Gospel and provided them with everlasting salvation. As Christianity migrated from its birthplace in Jerusalem, it began to conquer the Satanic kingdom that had held most of mankind in the slavery of religious superstitions for over 2,000 years since the Flood. Magic (in the sense it is spoken of in Acts) is demonic, pagan, illogical, manipulative, and evil.

102. Peter and John in Samaria (Acts 8.14-17)

The mother church in Jerusalem received word of the evangelistic revival in Samaria. So, they dispatched Peter and John to assess the extent and genuineness of the conversions to Christ. Peter, as the leading spokesman for the Church at that time, had been given apostolic authority to make this kind of assessment (Mt 16.19). During Jesus' time on earth and after his ascension, we often find John cooperating with Peter in aspects of ministry (Mt 17.1; Mk 5.37; Mk 13.3; Mk 14.33; Lk 22.8; Acts 3.1; Acts 4.19). Their association began when they worked in their fishing businesses in Galilee (Mt 4.18, 21) and continued as they worked together in their new roles as 'fishers of men' (Mt 4.19). There may be a subsidiary reason for John going to Samaria. He had been one of those who had asked Jesus if he should call down fire on the Samaritans for their unwillingness to receive Jesus as he passed through their region (Lk 9.52-44). He would have been especially keen on seeing the results of Philip's preaching.

Because of the long-standing antipathy between Jews and Samaritans (Jn 4.9), the apostles wanted to ensure that the reported conversions were sincere and that the Samaritans had accepted Jesus as the Messiah. The apostles knew that the Gospel would be brought to the Samaritans, since Jesus had assigned them the task of carrying it there as his witnesses (Acts 1.8). However, there would likely have been some sceptics among Judean and Galilean Jewish Christians about the reality of what was being reported. The stature of Peter and John could provide the necessary confirmation on their return to Jerusalem. A definitive assurance of the reality of the Samaritans' conversions would be provided with their reception of the Holy Spirit when the apostles laid hands on them (Acts 8.17). This same confirmation would again be provided at another major step in the spread of the Gospel when Peter gave the same evidence about the conversion of Gentiles (Acts 11.15-17).

There is another reason why Peter and John went to Samaria as witnesses of the results of Philip's preaching. The apostles had authority over the entire Church at this time. During the early years of the NT era, when the NT had not been completed, they had to ensure that new congregations were established on the foundation of the prophets and apostles (Eph 2.20), that their teaching was sound, and that officers were appointed. During their time in Samaria, Peter and John would have solidified the link between the mother church in Jerusalem and its daughter churches beyond. Later in Acts we find confirmation of this relationship when the council of apostles and elders which met in Jerusalem (Acts 15.1-35) established principles for all the churches (by that point congregations had also been formed in Gentile regions). This hierarchical relationship continues in the Church today. A large congregation may hive-off a new congregation. The mother congregation will maintain an oversight function for a time and provide various forms of support (e.g., prayer, financial, fellowship, and teachers) until the new congregation matures. Likewise, presbyteries maintain oversight of new congregations being organized. Peter and John's visit was a manifest indicator of the unity of the Church. The apostles had had to address the previous challenge of maintaining unity between the Hellenistic and Hebraic Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 6.1-7). They now ensured that a continued unity, under apostolic authority, would be established as a new cultural group was added to the Church.

The apostles determined that although the new believers had been baptized, they had not yet received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8.15-16). After Peter and John prayed for them and laid hands on them, the new believers received the Spirit (Acts 8.15, 17). They were likely given extraordinary spiritual gifts such as the ability to speak in previously unlearned foreign languages. Also, some believers may have been granted the ability to perform miracles of healing or other of the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit which Paul speaks about in 1 Corinthians 12.4-11, which the Holy Spirit apportions as he wills (1 Cor 12.11). Some have referred to this as the Samaritan Pentecost. The endowment of these gifts amazed Simon and made him covet the apostles' authority and power (Acts 8.18-19).

The believing Samaritans had been baptized by Philip but had not received the extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit until the other apostles came. This appears to indicate that granting of the gifts of the Spirit was assigned to the apostles and did not extend to subsequent generations of believers. Paul refers to these gifts

as “signs of a true apostle” (2 Cor 12.12). There is a possible exception when Paul was blessed by Ananias, and he regained his sight and was filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 9.17). However, it is possible that in this instance what is being referred to is Paul’s conversion. He was subsequently baptized (Acts 9.18). Regardless, we should not attempt to establish a definitive model for the Church today from the accounts in Acts which speak of baptism with water, baptism with the Holy Spirit, laying on of hands, and the giving of the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit. The order in which these things occurred and to whom the gifts of the Spirit were given are not always the same in Acts. In addition, it appears that after the initial conversions in new territories, which included manifestations of extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, subsequent waves of converts apparently did not receive these gifts, for example additional believers in Jerusalem after Pentecost or any who may have been converted when Peter and John preached in the Gospel in other areas of Samaria on their return to Jerusalem (Acts 8.25). Luke reports events during a transitional period as the Gospel is expanding from its purely Jewish roots and does not provide a standard model for how things should operate today in the Church. We must not dictate how the Holy Spirit should operate as he works in and through Christ’s Church (Jn 3:8).

103. Peter and Simon the Magician (Acts 8.18-25)

People have a fascination with the fantastic. They can be mesmerized by human feats such as brilliant musical performances, astounding slight-of-hand tricks of magicians, or displays of ‘impossible’ gymnastics. They often also display a morbid curiosity that compels them like moths to a lantern light to observe emergency rescues. Even professing Christians can be attracted to spectacles, whether claims of miraculous healings or emotion-stirring music performances. So, it is not surprising that a professional magician would be amazed when he observed Peter and John laying hands on believers and endowing some of them with the extraordinary gifts of the spirit (1 Cor 12.4-11). Thus, Simon mistakenly thought that the apostles were magicians like himself.

It appears that Simon did not receive any of the extraordinary gifts of the Spirit, such as the ability to heal the lame. These gifts were not even endowed on every true believer. They were apportioned by the Holy Spirit as he determined what would be best for the Church (1 Cor 4.11). But Simon was not interested in receiving a specific supernatural gift of the Spirit. What he wanted was the ability to endow others with spiritual gifts, as Peter and John displayed (Acts 8.18-19).

Simon was interested in what he conceived to be the commercial possibilities of the ability to function as the Spirit’s channel for endowing believers with spiritual gifts. So, he offered to purchase the ability from the apostles. He had likely purchased information from other magicians about how they performed their tricks of deception, so it would not have been exceptional for him to think that he could purchase insider knowledge from these other wonder workers. The term ‘simony’ has been derived from this incident. As the term is applied today, it generally means paying money to be ordained or inducted into a religious office so as to receive the future tithes and freewill offerings for personal use. However, he was not interested in purchasing an office. He wanted to purchase the power to endow others with the ability to work miracles.

Simon’s sin was attempting to manipulate or cheat the Holy Spirit for monetary gain, prestige, and power. Ananias and Sapphira had done something similar when they attempted to hide the total amount of the proceeds from the sale of their property (Acts 5.4, 9). Sadly, this deception continues in the Church today. We see misguided ‘evangelists’ who use eloquent rhetoric via television or internet streaming to dupe folks into sending them money so that they can live lavishly. But attempts to manipulate God for personal gain are not unique to false preachers. People who believe that they can use works to gain favour with God are self-deceived ‘Simons’. They think that if they do something good, then God owes them something in return. This is no different from the false notions of *karma* in Eastern religions or ‘condign merit’ in Roman Catholicism. It is the idea that a person can accumulate merit through works. In theological terms we call

this ‘works righteousness’. Simon had no understanding that the gifts of the Spirit were *gifts*, which could not be purchased. Likewise, salvation cannot be purchased through works, but only through a single ‘work’ of belief in Jesus Christ sent from heaven (Jn 6.28-29). All gifts from God are dispensed by his grace and cannot be purchased with money or works (Is 55.1-2; Eph 2.8-9).

Peter exposed the hypocrisy of Simon’s evil, mercenary heart. He exercised the authority of a judge given to him and the other apostles to bind and loose (Mt 16.19; Mt 18.18; Jn 20.23)—i.e., to accuse and condemn a person or to declare him innocent and admit him into fellowship with the Church. Peter was explicitly blunt with Simon, telling him that his attempt to extort the Holy Spirit (Acts 8.20) was full of “the gall of bitterness” (Dt 29.18; Heb 12.15) and that he was “in the bond of iniquity” (Acts 8.23). Peter also told Simon that he was destined to perish along with his silver (Acts 8.20) and had no role in administering the gifts of the Spirit or in the work of the Church (Acts 8.21). Peter was given extraordinary insight into Simon’s heart to see that it was not right before God (Acts 8.21). Rarely can Elders in a church today have this kind of understanding of a person’s heart and be able to pronounce condemnation as Peter did.

Despite issuing a curse, Peter exhorted Simon to repent and receive forgiveness (Acts 8.22) for his attempt to serve both God and money (Mt 6.24). However, rather than turning to God himself with a prayer of confession and repentance, Simon asked Peter to pray for him (Acts 8.23). He couldn’t see the blackness of his own heart and instead held to a superstitious notion that Peter could offer or obtain absolution for him. It is evident that Simon’s earlier profession of belief and receipt of water baptism (Acts 8.13) were not sincere. This should serve as a caution for us. A person’s profession of faith, baptism as an adult, participation in the Lord’s Supper, membership in a church, and even holding office in a church provide no guarantee that the person is a true child of God. God alone knows the heart. At best, we can only observe his fruit (Mt 7.20).

The account of the beginning of the Gospel’s advancement in Samaria ends with a note that Peter and John preached in many Samaritan villages on their return journey to Jerusalem (Acts 8.25). We can infer from this that the superstitions associated with Simon’s magic had been suppressed by the light of truth. If early writers (e.g., Justin Martyr and Irenaeus) are correct, Simon left Samaria and took his deceptions elsewhere. When the truth of the Gospel advances in hearts and minds, in countries and nations, and in societies and cultures, Satanic darkness, demonic influences and superstitious practices are expelled. Pray that God would revive our land with the good news of the light and truth of Christ the saviour.

104. The Gospel (Acts 8.25)

The word ‘gospel’ (as a noun) appears for the first time in Acts (in the ESV) in Acts 8.25. But the Greek does not have a noun at this point. The Greek simply has the word ‘preaching’. The addition of the word ‘gospel’ to ‘preaching’ occurs in other places in Acts (Acts 8.40; Acts 14.7, 21; Acts 16.10). However, the word ‘gospel’ as a noun occurs twice in Acts, in both the Greek and in the ESV (Acts 15.7; Acts 20.24). The verb form of the word, from which we derive our English word ‘evangelize’ is translated in the ESV in Acts as ‘preaching’, ‘preached’, ‘preach’, and ‘bring news’. The ESV translation supplies the words ‘good news’ (‘gospel’) to inform us of the content of what was preached.

So then, what is the *good news* that was preached throughout Acts? We can obtain guidance for understanding the content of the Gospel from instances where Luke supplies additional words:

- Acts 5.42 – “preaching the Christ Jesus”.
- Acts 8.4 – “preaching the word”.
- Acts 8.12 – “preached ... concerning the kingdom of God”.
- Acts 8.35 – “preaching to him ... about Jesus”.

- Acts 10.35-36 – “every nation ... preaching ... peace through Jesus Christ”.
- Acts 11.20 – “preaching the Lord Jesus”.
- Acts 15.7 – “word of the gospel”.
- Acts 15.35 – “preaching the word of the Lord”.
- Acts 17.18 – “preaching Jesus and the resurrection”.
- Acts 20.24 – “the gospel of the grace of God”.

From these we define the message of the Gospel as the proclamation about the:

- *Lord* – Jesus is proclaimed as ‘both Lord and Christ’ (Acts 2.36). The Greek word, translated as ‘lord’ is used to refer to God throughout the NT. So, Jesus is God and lord over everything (Acts 10.36). The Gospel begins with the fact that Jesus is the sovereign God, and he is superintending his creation as he works out his eternal plans to save his people.
- *Saviour* – Jesus is the second person of the Trinity who took to himself a human nature and human body through the conception and birth in the virgin. He is the God-man. The Hebrew root word from which we derive the name Jesus, means deliverer or saviour. He was given his personal name Jesus because he would save his people from their sins (Mt 1.21). A key message of the Gospel is that Jesus provides salvation from sin for those who have placed their faith in him.
- *Anointed One* – Jesus is the Christ (Greek) or Messiah (Hebrew). He is the anointed one of God (Ps 2.2). He is anointed as a king, a prophet, and a priest. He is the one whose coming was promised from the beginning of time (Gen 3.15) who would conquer Satan, sin, and death (1 Cor 15.54-56) and establish a new Israel, as the last Adam (1 Cor 15.45) and a new (second) man (1 Cor 15.47). The exaltation of Jesus at the right hand of God the Father, places him as the Messianic head of the new Israel (Gal 6.16).
- *Word* – The Gospel is the proclamation of the “the word of the Lord”. It is the message which God has given through revelation which cannot be derived from nature or mere human reason. It is the message contained only in the Bible, not in the religious texts of other religions. It declares that God is the creator, and that mankind is in rebellion against God, but that God has been working out his plans to save a great multitude (Rev 7.9) from within sinful humanity. The word of the Lord tells us not only how we can be saved from our sins but how we are to live in accordance with God’s law.
- *Kingdom* – The Gospel declares the arrival of the Kingdom of God which is the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Tim 4.1). That Jesus (the Messiah) would be a king was proclaimed multiple times in the OT (e.g., Ps 2.1-12; Ps 110.1-2; Is 9.6-7; Dan 2.44-45). Upon completing his work on earth, Jesus returned to heaven (Acts 1.9) where, in his exalted glory, he rules and governs the universe (Phil 2.9-11).
- *Peace of God* – The Gospel is a message of peace. The debt of sin has been paid, for those who believe in Jesus, through his sacrifice on the cross. With believers’ sins being wiped out, their former rebellion against God has been replaced with peace with God (Rom 5.1). Through peace with God, believers also can have peace with one another (Rom 12.18).
- *Resurrection* – Gospel preaching emphasizes the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 4.2; Acts 17.18). However, since there was a resurrection, there must have been a death. The Gospel message includes the centrality of the crucifixion of Jesus—to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles, folly (1 Cor 1.23).
- *Grace of God* – Salvation from sin which is proclaimed in the Gospel is a message of God’s grace toward sinners. There is no room for works righteousness. Salvation can be obtained only by grace through faith and not by any works which we think might procure merit for us before God (Eph 2.8-9).
- *Nations* – The message of Acts is that the Gospel went out to the entire world beginning with Jerusalem and Judea and extending to Samaria and “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1.8)—as illustrated in Acts chapter 8 with Philip’s missionary journeys to Samaria and then to meet the Ethiopian. The mystery of the Gospel (Rom 16.25-26; Eph 3.6) is that the promise made to Abraham, that all nations would be blessed through him (Gen 12.3; Gen 18.18; Gen 22.18), is being fulfilled as the Gospel is carried to all people groups on earth.

The ministry, death, resurrection, and triumphant reign of Jesus are at the core of the Gospel's proclamation. It is truly good news!

105. Philip Sent to Meet the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8.26-29)

There is considerable debate about how to rationalize topics such as 'free will', human responsibility, and predestination. However, rather than assuming that we can outthink God on these topics, we must draw our conclusions from the Bible (see, *Predestination and Human Responsibility* and *Predestination*). Solomon stated, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." (Prov 16.33). Nothing happens by chance. Chance is a non-entity. The universe did not spontaneously pop into existence by a *chance* quantum wrinkle in a pre-existing space-time fabric or from absolutely nothing. Species did not develop through *chance* beneficial mutations which added complex genetic information over a supposed half a billion years of biological evolution on earth. And the direction of our lives is not determined by *chance* events. God controls the outworking of everything, as shown in this passage by:

Providence – An angel of the Lord directed Philip to undertake a new mission. Modern translations have 'an angel' (Acts 8.26). [The KJV and Tyndale have 'the angel', but the Greek has no article.] When we encounter the word 'angel' we think of someone like Gabriel. However, the Greek word can also be translated as 'messenger' (Mt 11.10; 2 Cor 12.7). So, the supposition made by many commentators that the person who spoke with Philip was the Holy Spirit is probably correct (Acts 8.29). The work of the Holy Spirit is evident throughout Acts and particularly as the Gospel is being carried into territories beyond Judea. God's initiative in this account is unquestionable. He reaches out to lost mankind, he sends messengers to preach to them, and he converts hearts.

Place – Philip was directed to travel down a road through a desert area, leading from Samaria toward the coastal territory of Gaza (Acts 8.26). This road would have continued along the Mediterranean coast, through the Sinai Peninsula, toward Egypt. It would have provided access into Africa. We might think that the mention of the place is not significant. However, the detail reinforces the fact that Luke is relating history and not a legend. The place was outside of Jewish territory. This indicates that the Gospel was being directed beyond Judea and Samaria "to the end of the earth" (Acts 1.8). Also, there may be a spiritual dimension. The Gospel was sent into a desert place, hinting at the spiritual desert into which the Gospel has been spreading since the days of the apostles.

Passivity – Philip presented no resistance to the Holy Spirit's direction. He may have wondered why he was being sent to such an out of the way place when the Samaria missions appeared to be so fruitful (Acts 8.22). But he wasn't like Jonah who attempted to flee to the 'ends of the earth'. When he arrived where the Spirit wanted him to be and encountered the Ethiopian, the Spirit gave him additional direction to join the Ethiopian in his chariot (Acts 8.29). Philip had no idea what the Spirit's intention was when he was sent toward Gaza but was given additional direction as events transpired. The Holy Spirit demonstrated that salvation of one man was important. But there is likely more to the story. We cannot know what was set in motion and what lives were saved when the Ethiopian returned to his home. Like Philip, we need to be passive when we receive direction from God's word or when it is obvious that the Holy Spirit is leading us in a particular direction. We must not resist the Spirit. He will clarify our mission as we obey.

Pilgrimage – The person whom Philip was sent to meet was a eunuch and the minister of finance for queen Candace of Ethiopia (probably a dynastic name like 'Pharaoh', rather than her personal name). As a eunuch, he may have been castrated as a child. But the title can also be understood as a synonym for a trusted court official. The Ethiopia of his home was likely not the country by that name today but was a territory south

of Egypt in part of what is now called Sudan on the upper reaches of the Nile. In the OT, this area is referred to as Cush. This kingdom existed from the time of Isaiah until about 350 AD. At the time of the events in Acts, it was at its height and legendary for its wealth. The eunuch had been in Jerusalem to worship (Acts 8.27). There is debate among commentators about whether he was a Jew by birth or through circumcision, or a Gentile proselyte like Cornelius (Acts 10.1-2). Regardless, his pilgrimage to Jerusalem indicates that he had some knowledge about the true God and about the form of worship represented by the ceremonial sacrifices in the temple (Ps 27.4). If he was a Jew, but castrated, then he may not have been permitted to have entered the temple court for Jewish males (Dt 23.1) and would have been confined to the court of the Gentiles.

Prophecy – Luke overheard the eunuch reading from the prophecy of Isaiah (Acts 8.28). In those days, people read texts out loud, not silently as we do. He may have purchased his copy of the Isaiah scroll while in Jerusalem. If we can use as an example the Isaiah scroll found among the Dead Sea scrolls, which date to around the same time of the events recorded here, this scroll would have been about the height of a letter sheet of paper but over 700cm (24') long. He likely was riding in an ox-drawn chariot (or wagon) in which he could have placed a reading 'desk' in front of him and laid out the scroll to read it. The NT did not yet exist. But from an evangelistic perspective the book of Isaiah was key. It presents the Gospel message and indicates that the nations would be called into the Church. Giving a Gentile a copy of Isaiah in those days would be like giving a copy of the Gospel of Luke to an unbeliever today. As we will see, it gave Philip an opportunity to open the meaning of the prophecies and apply them to Jesus the Messiah. The Ethiopian provides a good lesson for us. When we have opportunities to read (e.g., on a long flight) we should take advantage of the time and read the Bible. This would prove more edifying than watching a movie.

106. The Importance of Bible Reading (Acts 8.30)

When Philip met the Ethiopian eunuch, he was reading in Isaiah (Is 53.7-8). He undoubtedly would have later continued reading in Isaiah and would have soon come upon the passage where God declares that his word does not return empty, and it will accomplish its purpose (Is 55.11). In Luke's account of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian, we see this prophecy realized. By reading just one book of the Bible, the Ethiopian was having his mind opened by the Holy Spirit to the truth of the word of God. This illustrates why organizations which translate the Bible and distribute copies of the Bible have such a passion for their work. From testimonials which they hear, they know that the word of God is powerful and by reading it individuals can be converted to faith in Jesus. In Philip's day, it would have taken a scribe about a week to copy by hand the book of Isaiah onto parchment or papyrus. Thus, to purchase a copy would have cost the equivalent of at least \$2,000 dollars. This cost did not change significantly for the next 1,400 years. With Guttenberg's introduction of movable type, the cost of printing a book began to drop. Today, a person can purchase cases of 'economy' editions of the entire Bible in English for less than \$5 per copy. However, anyone with a computer or a cell phone can access over a dozen reliable translations of the Bible in English at no cost. This free access to the Bible is important today when many are trying to silence Christians and the proclamation of biblical truth about sin and salvation. God's providence is superintending so that the Bible will always be available and never silenced.

However, the Church today seems to be missing the importance of facilitating access to the Bible. Many churches appear to be deemphasizing reading of the Bible during their worship services. There is often considerable time devoted to singing mere-human compositions, some time devoted to prayer, and then time allocated for the pastor's words of exhortation. Reading from the Bible might consist only of a verse or two before the pastor's sermon. The guidance given by the men who participated in the Westminster assembly, in *The Directory for the Public Worship of God*, is certainly not followed in most churches today. This directory calls for the public reading of the Bible systematically from the pulpit. They recommend that generally a chapter from each Testament should be read during each service on each Lord's Day. Today, in

the churches, man's words prevail. God's word is pushed into the background.

People inside the Church and outside the Church need to be hearing the Bible read and reading it for themselves. Churches need to facilitate Bible reading by:

- Reading significant portions of the Bible at each worship service so that people hear its authoritative voice (1 Tim 4.13).
- Preaching through books of the Bible, so that members of the congregation hear the relevant passage read and then an exposition of it (Acts 8.30, 35).
- Making the Bible available in quality contemporary language translations. Churches should provide financial support to organizations which translate the Bible. They can also encourage members who have linguistic skills to consider becoming part of international or domestic translation teams.
- Supporting the distribution of copies of the Bible (or portions, such as the Gospels of John or Luke) to enquirers. This can be facilitated through parachurch organizations which distribute Bibles globally or by individuals in the congregation who give out copies when an opportunity arises.
- Encouraging systematic Bible reading. Elders should encourage families to read through the Bible by reading a portion each day, for example at a family meal. Individuals should also be encouraged to read the Bible systematically on their own. There are many apps available which support daily Bible reading. Some of these apps enable reading through the entire Bible in a year. Folks can also be encouraged to use audio versions of the Bible that they can listen to while driving or doing their daily walk. The daily practice of listening to 30 minutes of Bible reading would prove more profitable than listening to the latest popular singer.
- Recommending different formats for reading the Bible so that subsequent reading through the Bible does not become perfunctory. For example:
 - Some people could find devotional Bibles helpful. These provide lessons for personal life associated with the passage read daily.
 - Another approach is to suggest the use of a Bible that is organized chronologically (e.g., interweaving the prophetic books into the accounts of 1 Kings and 2 Kings, and providing a harmony of the Gospels).
 - For some people it could be helpful to use different translation each time they read through the Bible.

When an inquirer begins to show an interest in reading the Bible, he likely will need some guidance for how to read it. He might read through Genesis and Exodus and then get bogged down in Leviticus. Also, reading through the accounts in 1 Kings and 2 Kings and then again in 1 Chronicles and 2 Chronicles may become too much for a first-time Bible reader. Likewise reading all four of the Gospel accounts one after another might be a bit overwhelming. If we have the opportunity to work through a Bible reading program with an enquirer, an approach may be to follow an abbreviated first pass through the Bible which picks up key themes leading to the Messiah. A good strategy might be to give the enquirer a reading 'assignment' of a chapter or two and then make time available to sit with the person to answer any questions he might have about what he has read (Acts 8.30, 34-35). As with the encounter Philip had with the Ethiopian, it is important that we facilitate people opening the Bible for the first time so that they can be guided in their understanding of what they are reading.

107. Philip Presents the Gospel to the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8.30-35)

The Holy Spirit's timing is impeccable. No event happens by chance. Paul informs us that "For while we were still weak, *at the right time* Christ died for the ungodly." (Rom 5.6). Likewise, at the moment Philip arrived beside the eunuch's chariot (Acts 8.29-30) he heard him reading an ideal passage from the OT which Philip could use as a foundation for presenting the Gospel. The eunuch was reading the prophetic

words from Isaiah (Acts 8.32-33) about the suffering and death of the Messiah to pay the debt of sin for his people.

Through the urging of the Holy Spirit, Philip asked the eunuch if he understood what he was reading (Acts 8.30). Philip wasn't asking if the eunuch understood the Greek words, but if he understood the profound meaning of what Isaiah was communicating. Even though a person can read, that does not necessarily mean that he has an ability to *understand* what he is reading. As an illustration, consider the following ('random') extract from an article posted on CMI's website:

Genomes encode scores of enzymes responsible for catalyzing various chemical modifications on tRNAs. These modifications can occur on tRNA precursors or fully processed tRNAs. Nucleotide insertions or substitutions are often necessary to ensure base pairing within the tRNA in the three kingdoms of life and that the modifications occur in a stepwise fashion. (Royal Truman, [The complex tRNA subsystem: part 2 - creation.com](#).)

Most people proficient in English could smoothly read the extract but would not have a clue what it is talking about unless they had some familiarity with biology and genetics. This illustrates why Philip's question was so relevant. It is possible to read the words of the Bible and not understand what they mean.

Much of the Bible is explicitly clear in its plain sense. For example, there can be no doubt that the opening chapters of Genesis tell us how God created the universe. Likewise, the accounts given in the Gospels about the death and resurrection of Jesus are so clear that any reader can understand them. However, some sections of the Bible are less easily understood by someone who has no background in the Bible or in Christian doctrine and beliefs. More difficult sections of the Bible to interpret and understand are found in Jesus' teaching which includes parables and the use of hyperbole. Also, books such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel contain prophetic sections which are difficult to understand without a fuller understanding of the teachings of the entire Bible. In addition, the eunuch was reading a portion of the OT which had just recently been fulfilled in Jerusalem, and he did not have access to the NT interpretation and application of OT prophetic passages, as we have in the records of Jesus' teaching and in the apostolic writings. The eunuch's response to Philip indicates that he was a thoughtful man. He wanted to know about whom the prophet was speaking (Acts 8.34). He realized that without guidance it would be difficult to understand what Isaiah was saying (Acts 8.31).

Philip's question points out the need for those who read the Bible for the first time and are enquiring about Christianity to have access to good guidance in how to interpret what they are reading. When new converts hear systematic biblical preaching or attend Bible studies or Sunday School classes where solid teaching is provided, they can be guided into good interpretations of Bible passages. However, if they are left to find guidance about the Bible from the internet and are not disciplined analytical thinkers, they can be caught up in silly speculations. Over the past 2,000 years the Holy Spirit has guided the Church as it has grappled with interpretation of the Bible and in particular the OT prophetic texts. Jesus taught the disciples how to understand the OT (Lk 24.45-47) and we are provided with guidance from them in how to interpret these passages. For example, Peter provides guidance for understanding the use of figurative cosmic terminology (Acts 2.14-21). How to apply the Mosaic ceremonial laws and prophetic passages to Christ who fulfilled them, continues to present a challenge in the Church.

Today there are people who think that they can be fully independent interpreters of the Bible. They despise the collective wisdom of interpreters consolidated over centuries, which has been made available in commentaries. And they think that doctrines and interpretations which have been forged with much toil can be overthrown with their novel ideas. Every enquirer into Christianity (and even mature believers) need to display the humility of the Ethiopian eunuch. Even though he was rich and powerful, he invited Philip, a stranger, into his chariot to sit with him and explain the text he had been reading (Acts 8.31).

What a tremendous invitation. It would be great if we received invitations like this from enquirers on a regular basis. But not only was there an eager enquirer, there was an equipped explainer. Philip was a student of the Word and was well prepared to explain the meaning of the Isaiah passage which the eunuch was reading. Philip began with that passage and went on to explain the good news about Jesus (Acts 8.35). There were no distractions on the desert road leading toward Egypt and they likely talked for a few hours. This gave Philip the opportunity to present Jesus as the Messiah who fulfilled the servant passage in Isaiah 53.7-8. He undoubtedly would have gone on to provide an overview of the birth, life, teaching, crucifixion, and then resurrection of Jesus. He would have also explained the nature of sin and the substitutionary atonement that Jesus provided on the cross—"the good news about Jesus". If we wish to be effective in personal evangelism, we need to be prepared to provide guidance to enquirers about the hope of the Gospel (1 Pt 3.15). When we are prepared, the Holy Spirit will provide us with opportunities as he did for Philip.

108. The Gospel of Isaiah (Acts 8.32-33)

A pastor (we will call him 'Ben') told the story of his conversion. Ben grew up in a Jewish community in NY City. A Christian (we will call him 'Chris') was telling Ben about Jesus as the Messiah. Chris read a portion of Isaiah to Ben that included the verses which the Ethiopian eunuch was reading. After Chris had completed reading the passage, he asked Ben who had written this passage. Ben said, with an element of scorn, something like "Probably that traitor, Paul." Chris then turned the Bible toward Ben and showed him that the passage came from Isaiah. Ben reported that when he saw that the words had been written by the OT prophet, it was as if scales fell from his eyes. He realized that Isaiah had prophesied about the Messiah and that the prophesy applied to Jesus of Nazareth.

Jews at the time of the apostles debated whether this section of Isaiah about the suffering servant was to be understood as referring to Isaiah himself or to the Messiah, or to the nation personified. Jews today generally apply this passage to the nation, since they cannot accept that it applies to Jesus as the Messiah. The Ethiopian's question appears to indicate that he was aware of the debate among the Jews of his day when he asked, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" (Acts 8.34). We can be certain that Philip applied the passage to Jesus. When this passage of Isaiah is interpreted correctly, a reader understands that it presents the good news (the Gospel) that the Messiah was to suffer and die on behalf of sinners.

During his time on earth, Jesus quoted from Isaiah chapter 53 and indicated that the prophecies would be fulfilled in his ministry of healing (Mt 8.17), by his being rejected by some of his hearers (Jn 12.38), and by his pending crucifixion among two thieves (Lk 22.37). After his resurrection, Jesus taught two disciples travelling toward Emmaus that certain things found in Moses and the Prophets were written concerning himself (Lk 24.27). Although the Gospel can be derived from other portions of the OT than Isaiah (e.g., Gen 3.15; Gen 22.8, 13-14; Ps 22.1-24; Ezk 18.1-32), the Gospel message comes across most clearly in Isaiah. There could have been no better starting point for presenting Jesus to a Jewish proselyte than what the Holy Spirit had arranged for the Ethiopian to be reading when Philip approached his chariot and overheard what he was reading.

We find Jesus Christ (the Messiah) in Isaiah chapter 53. Specifically, the passage which Luke records (Is 53.7-8; Acts 8.32-33) teaches that Jesus was:

- *A Sheep* – Only ritually clean animals (e.g., sheep, goats, bulls) could be offered to God under the ceremonial sacrificial system. Their ritual holiness symbolized sinlessness. Jesus was sinless (2 Cor 5.21; Heb 4.15; 1 Pt 2.22).
- *A Lamb* – John the Baptist declared Jesus to be the Lamb of God (Jn 1.29, 36). Jews in OT times understood that a sacrificed lamb was given as a propitiatory sacrifice (Gen 22.8, 13-14; Lev 23.26-

- 28). The apostle John saw Jesus as the sacrificed lamb in one of his visions into heaven (Rev 5.6).
- *Led to slaughter* – Jesus was compelled by his tormenters to proceed to the site of his crucifixion (Jn 19.16-17). His slaughter was far more excruciating than what a lamb would have encountered. The lamb would have died within seconds after its throat was sliced and the blood drained out quickly. In contrast Jesus had to endure the agonies of crucifixion for about six hours.
 - *Silent* – During his trial, Jesus did not speak in defense of his own life (Mk 14.61) because he came into the world to die for sinners (Jn 12.27; Rom 5.8). He only spoke when adjured by the high priest to state whether he was the Christ (Mt 26.63) and when Pilate asked him if he was a king (Jn 18.34-37).
 - *Humiliated* – Jesus who is God, the creator, and King of kings was treated with contempt (Mt 27.28-29, 31), spat upon (Mt 27.30), and cursed (Dt 21.23; Gal 3.13).
 - *Denied justice* – Jesus was deprived of justice when falsely accused of blasphemy (Mk 14.55-59) and treated as a criminal (Lk 23.32).
 - *Blessed with spiritual progeny* – The ESV translations are accurate: “for his generation, who considered ...?” (Is 53.8) and “Who can describe his generation?” (Acts 8.33). Calvin states about this sentence, “But interpreters have wrested this place miserably.” Without doubt, it is difficult to interpret. However, we should probably not interpret Isaiah’s statement in a negative way—i.e., the spiritual sons and daughters of Jesus will be paltry. Rather, we should view it with awe—i.e., who can enumerate (describe) the amazing expansion of the spiritual progeny who will experience the new birth (Rev 7.9)—since two verses later the prophet declares, “he shall see his offspring” (Is 53.10). Within a few months after his ascension Jesus had thousands of followers and that number has reached to be around a billion persons today.
 - *Murdered* – Jesus’ life was cut short. At the age of approximately 33, his temporal life was taken from him. The English translation from the Hebrew, “he was cut off out of the land of the living” (Is 53.8), supports this understanding.
 - *Resurrection and Ascension* – Luke quotes from the Greek translation of the Hebrew, rendered into English, “For his life is taken away from the earth.” (Acts 8.33). While the Hebrew has ‘cut off’ or ‘removed’, the Greek Septuagint has ‘carried away’. This could be interpreted as speaking of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, rather than his death. Since the Greek translation is included in the NT under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the authority of the apostle Paul (who would have supervised Luke’s writing of Luke and Acts), it is possible that Isaiah’s prophecy can be interpreted with this second application.

What better passage could Philip have used to expound the Gospel to the eunuch?

109. The Ethiopian Eunuch Believed and was Baptized (Acts 8.36-39)

Philip must have done more than just exegete the verses extracted from Isaiah (Is 53.7-8; Acts 8.32-33) while he was speaking with the Ethiopian eunuch. He must have explained to him the need for faith in Jesus and repentance of sin. He probably also explained to him the purpose and nature of the sacraments—at least of baptism as the sign and seal of faith in Jesus. Since the eunuch requested baptism and Philip baptized him, this indicates that he had understood the teaching he had been provided by Philip.

The eunuch requested baptism in an unconventional manner. He asked, “What *prevents* me from being baptized?” (Acts 8.36). He probably believed that he might not have been eligible for baptism into Christ and the Church, the fulfillment of the true religion typified by the ceremonial system in the OT:

- As a eunuch he probably would have been prohibited from entering the temple court for Jewish males (Dt 23.1) and would have been confined to the court of the Gentiles. With the change of the covenantal sign from circumcision to baptism, he wanted to be sure that he could have that sign applied to himself, as women now can have under the new covenant.

- As a probable Gentile proselyte, he wanted to ensure that he could receive the sign of covenant inclusion without having to be circumcised.

Since Philip baptized him, he was provided with an immediate answer. The barriers which separated Gentiles from Jews have been removed by Christ and the Gospel is extended to all people on earth (Eph 2.11-13).

Philip and the eunuch understood the reasons for water baptism (see, [Water Baptism](#)) and how it should be practiced; this includes:

- Baptism is a sign of submission to Christ.
- It is to be applied to all believers and their households, including their children (Acts 2.38-39; Acts 16.15, 33).
- It is a seal of membership in Christ's covenant community, the Church.
- It is an outward sign of a confession of an inward faith.
- It will not necessarily be accompanied with a manifestation of extraordinary gifts of the Holy Spirit.
- It is to accompany preaching of the Word. It is not a standalone rite. Neither preaching or the sacraments are to be overvalued or undervalued relative to the other, and they should be administered together.
- It is not to be withheld until after a person has completed catechumen classes. A new believer is to be baptized immediately upon a credible profession of faith (Acts 8.36-38; Acts 16.33). Instruction through preaching and teaching, leading to a growth in biblical knowledge and strengthening of faith should follow.

Some commentators are emphatic and say that the passage supports (even requires) baptism by full immersion. However, if it requires immersion, then both Philip and the Eunuch would have been immersed since both went 'into' the water. The text states "they both went down into the water". The plain sense is that Philip and the eunuch stepped into a body of water. Although we accept immersion as a valid form of baptism, this verse is not a proof-text for immersion. Instead of focusing on the water (e.g., was it deep enough for immersion), we should focus on the provision of it at the moment that it was required. The Holy Spirit was overseeing the incorporation of the eunuch into the Church.

Philip was transported by the Holy Spirit from his meeting with the eunuch. And the eunuch "went on his way rejoicing", because:

- He understood that the promises in the OT prophets had been fulfilled in his day with the incarnation of the Son of God. He knew that the reports he had heard about Jesus' death and resurrection, while he had been in Jerusalem worshipping (Acts 8.27), were true—Jesus was the promised Messiah.
- He had been given an inner assurance by the Holy Spirit that he had been granted mercy by God the Father and had been saved from his sins through his faith in Jesus' work on the cross (Mt 13.44).
- He knew without any doubt that he would eventually be welcomed into everlasting glory (Mt 5.12; Mt 25.21), not because of any works which he had done but because he was covered in the righteousness of Jesus.
- The fear of death could no longer hold a fearsome tyranny over him.
- His mind had been opened to see the folly of the animistic rites and pagan religions (Rom 1.22-23) which would have surrounded him in his homeland in the upper Nile region. The darkness of Satanic deception was dispelled.
- He understood that as a eunuch the prophecy of Isaiah about eunuchs was fulfilled in himself. It is likely that Philip had pointed out the passage (Is 56.3-5) which would have been a few columns of text after where the eunuch had been reading when Philip encountered him (Is 53.7-8). This promise is held out to eunuchs and foreigners—a time was to come when they would be welcomed into the Church.

Every spiritual 'eunuch' or 'foreigner' to the Gospel who is brought to faith in Jesus can have the same experience of joy which filled the Ethiopian eunuch's heart (Lk 2.10). Joy upon conversion is a manifestation of the work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8.8). We need to consider if we continue to rejoice in

our salvation.

The conversion of the Ethiopian and his reception into the Church is the beginning of the fulfillment of the words of Jesus as he returned to the Father. He said, the Gospel would go “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1.8). It was carried beyond the edge of the Roman and Greek world as the Ethiopian returned home.