

Acts of the Apostles

A commentary

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ACTS OF THE APOSTLES
(A commentary on the NIV version)

Chapter 1

1-2. The author is Luke, who had already written his 'Gospel', and Acts is the second part of the one story. It is all, both Gospel and Acts, about the life and work of Jesus. In the Gospel that life and work was effected through the human body which was born of Mary and was crucified at Calvary. In Acts, that life and work was continued - and is now continuing - through those who believe in him. So the Gospel was about the beginning of a life and work which has no end. Acts begins where Luke's Gospel ended and there is the very briefest overlap: Luke 24:47-53 is retold in a slightly different form in Acts 1:1-14. Jesus did not begin his ministry until he had been baptised and empowered with the Holy Spirit and the whole of his ministry had been fulfilled in the Spirit. This translation, in common with the majority, states that his instructions were inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is possible that the meaning is that the choice of the apostles was directed by the Spirit. Both are true.

3. The kingdom of God was a priority in the life and teaching of Jesus. It was, in his earthly ministry, even more important than himself, even though he was both its king and the means of entry, the way, into it. Mark 1:15 states that Christ opened his ministry by proclaiming, "The time has come; the kingdom of God is near." Both Matthew (6:33) and Luke (12:31) state that it is to be sought as a priority over everything else. Here we see that it was the overriding subject of Christ's instruction of his apostles.

Luke is at pains to stress the fact that Christ was alive. It wasn't passive, in that these men might have seen him in a personal vision; no, Jesus deliberately showed himself to them when they were together, and he ate and drank with them (10:41). They heard his voice.

4-5. To say that it was while Jesus was eating with them that he gave his command, is pushing the meaning of the original to its limit. However, it certainly implies more than a fleeting appearance in order to give a message. The command arose out of a time of fellowship. During those 40 days Jesus spent time with his disciples and continued to share himself with them. The gift (literally 'the thing promised') is the Holy Spirit. The disciples had already experienced the power to preach, to heal and to cast out demons, when Christ had sent them out as the 12 and then with 60 others. However, that seems to have been an extension of his own earthly ministry; they did not have that power within themselves. Here Jesus refers to the statement of John the Baptist that he baptised only with water but one who followed him would baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Luke 3:16). In saying this he extends the implication of what it means to be baptised. With water baptism the person goes into and out of the water which, as a substance, drips and dries away. The Holy Spirit 'speaks' into the person and abides.

It would have been natural for the apostles to have returned to their home area of Galilee. However, God had ordained that it should be in Jerusalem, where the good news of the kingdom had apparently perished, that it should burst into fuller life.

6. Once we have an idea or understanding in our minds it is difficult to change it. The younger we are when we receive that understanding and the more it is tied to the culture in which we grow up, the more it becomes part of us. The apostles were Jews who had grown up with the knowledge that they were God's people, who had been given their land for eternity, and one day

all the nations of the world would recognise this; acknowledge Israel's exalted place in the plan of the true and only God, and come to worship him in Israel's land. Although these men had been with Jesus in his earthly ministry, and although during the past 40 days he had taught them about the kingdom of God, this was not sufficient to bring about the radical change necessary in their understanding of the nature of that kingdom. This is revealed in their use of the word 'restore'. It implies a looking back to the concept instilled in them by their national heritage. They still saw the kingdom in political terms - a nation set in a specific area of the land, ruling over other nations. The kingdom to come was the kingdom promised to Israel alone. It was also a temporal (but not temporary) kingdom; had it now arrived?

7. At first sight it seems that Jesus endorses their view of what the kingdom is - it does belong to Israel alone, it will be their land, other nations will come to them. But that is to ignore Christ's teaching elsewhere about the kingdom. It is indeed a realm to be entered yet it is also within us (Luke 17:21). If the apostles have not yet grasped the implication of his teaching over the past 40 days, he is not likely to be able to enlighten them further now, in the short time available to him. Yet he does not want to reject their understanding that there is a kingdom to come; so he stalls by saying it is not for them to know times and dates set by the Father - which is the truth, as far as it goes. The Holy Spirit will lead them into all the truth when he comes. It is noteworthy that this is last reference in scripture to any idea that the kingdom is tied to a restoration of Israel's land. Peter, himself a Jew, speaks of an inheritance which is kept in heaven (1 Pet.1:4), and Paul does not refer to an inheritance of land at all.

8. Just as Jesus received power when the Holy Spirit came upon him at his baptism, so his followers will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them. So he diverts them from a nationalistic understanding of the kingdom where the nations flock to them, and he sends them to the nations where their witness is to be about him, the King, rather than about a territory or nation. They are to start where we all have to start - where we are. Those are the last words spoken by Christ before he is taken from them.

9-11. Luke makes it very clear that the ascension was a real and visible event. However, we must guard against taking this in a too material manner. For instance, we must not assume that heaven is "above the bright blue sky." It is a spiritual realm which is real but requires no physical location. The cloud which received him was, no doubt, similar to the cloud on the mount of transfiguration; the cloud which shields the glory of the divine presence. Thus the disciples did not watch Jesus getting smaller and smaller as he went up into the distance; he was enfolded in a cloud and taken home. Luke carefully states that Jesus did not simply ascend in his own strength; he was taken up. There was a power outside himself which took him.

Why this elaborate display? why was he taken visibly if heaven is not 'up there' and it was not a natural cloud? We see the answer at once if we imagine that the ascension had not been visible. For 40 days Jesus had appeared and disappeared without warning. If, suddenly, he had stopped doing this and had not appeared again, the apostles could never have been certain that something had not gone wrong on the other side. Had there been some 'accident' in the spiritual realm? Had Jesus died again - this time finally? As it was, they saw him with their own eyes, return to the Father. Similarly, we need to be careful about interpreting the details of Christ's return. Luke stresses the reality of that return. It will be the Jesus who walked this earth and was crucified who will come; and he will return from and with the glory into which he went. That is to be

enough. We are not to linger, looking into the sky, but to go out into the nations of the earth. His coming will be too obvious for anyone to miss it. As angels announced Christ's birth and his resurrection, so they appear at his ascension to close one chapter but to enter another. He will return - will we be found about his business when he does?

12-14. A Sabbath's day's journey refers to the Jewish code where the distance which it was permissible to travel on the Sabbath was specified. Here it seems to be about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile. However, it may be that Bethany, where Jesus lodged with Martha, Mary and Lazarus, when he was visiting Jerusalem, was accepted within the code, although that was about 2 miles from the city.

We do not know anything about this upper room. There is no reason to suppose it was the one where the last supper was held. Certainly on that occasion the disciples were not lodging there. Here the room was in the place where they were staying. Luke lists the 11 remaining apostles, but in different groupings from the list in his gospel. There he sets brothers together. Perhaps their months of fellowship had produced different bondings.

This inner core were joined by the women who had been associated closely with Jesus, and also by James, who had not believed in Jesus prior to the resurrection, and other brothers of our Lord. There is, of course, dispute about whether these were true brothers. The Roman Church holds that Mary remained a virgin all her life. In Africa today the term 'brother' can mean any male from the same village. However, there is no reason to believe that after the birth of Jesus Mary and Joseph did not have other children.

In his gospel (24:23) Luke states that they were continually in the temple. Presumably the main topic of their prayer was the fulfilment of Christ's promise that the Holy Spirit would come. True petition and intercession is always that God's plan, purpose and will should be fulfilled; and for that we may pray with absolute faith.

15-17. It was some time between Christ's ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit that Peter took the initiative and announced to the company of believers (who were ten times the number of original disciples) that a replacement should be chosen for Judas. We cannot know for certain if he was right. Certainly, as John Stott points out, the procedure was exemplary. He appealed first to the general leading of scripture, then to common sense as to the qualifications required, and thirdly they prayed that as the Lord had chosen the original 12, he would choose the replacement. However, the Holy Spirit had not yet been given and so Peter was left to his own promptings. It seems that the Lord honoured these, but we cannot be certain that this was truly his plan. It has been suggested that Paul was actually the Lord's choice to replace Judas, although he never joined the council of the apostles. Perhaps James was the replacement or, maybe, no replacement at all was to be made.

18-19. Luke breaks off the narrative to explain what happened to Judas. Matthew 27:3-10 gives an alternative version of the death of Judas and the naming of the field. There, when Jesus is condemned, Judas is seized with conviction and remorse. He tries to return the thirty pieces of silver to the priests because it was 'blood money'. They won't accept it and he throws it down in the temple and goes and hangs himself. They use it to buy a field which, until then was known as the potter's field, for use as a burial ground for foreigners, but then became the Field of Blood as it was bought with blood money. How important is it that the two reports should be reconciled?

The two writers, Matthew and Luke may simply be reporting different traditions. However, it may be that Judas hanged himself - perhaps in that field. The priests did not want to be associated with the blood money and, as it was Judas's money, bought the field in his name. Perhaps the rope broke or, in cutting him down, his body fell and in decomposing broke open. What seems beyond doubt is that Judas died about the time of the crucifixion or soon after, and the money he received for betraying Christ was used to buy a field which then became known as the Field of Blood.

20-22. The quotations from Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8, would not immediately spring to mind as support for Peter's proposal that a replacement be found for Judas. However, the Holy Spirit will often use scripture in ways which are not immediately obvious to us.

There is no indication that replacements were made for other apostles as they died. It may be that it was because Judas was an apostate that a replacement was necessary. The qualifications that Peter lays down are interesting, not only must the person have seen the risen Lord, but must also have accompanied the other apostles from the time that Jesus had been baptised by John. Paul, who claimed to be an apostle, qualified under the former condition but not the latter. It seems very likely that both candidates nominated to replace Judas had been amongst the 70 (or 72) sent out by the Lord.

23-26. We know nothing for certain of either of these men, beyond what is stated here. Matthias joined the eleven but nothing more is heard of him. However, that is true of the majority of the apostles from now on. Perhaps other books, as exciting as this, might have been written of their experiences. It was a godly way to seek guidance by praying and then casting lots. It was used in the Old Testament, and Zechariah had been chosen by lot to burn incense in the temple (Luke 1:9). It took the choice out of the hands of men and allowed room for God to act. However, there is no record in the New Testament of it ever being used again. The Church had and has the Holy Spirit to guide into all the truth.

Chapter 2

1-4. Pentecost means fifty, and was the feast held fifty days after Passover to celebrate the completion of the grain harvest. Just as Jesus had to be filled with the Holy Spirit at his baptism to empower him for his ministry, so the Church had to be filled with the same Spirit for its ministry.

The word for spirit in Hebrew and in Greek can be translated (and often is) as wind or breath, so there is a dramatic link between the outward sign of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the reality of his in-filling of the believers. It was a 'sound like', not the wind itself. That is to say, no leaves or dust would have been disturbed. I have experienced this sound on one occasion as the Spirit came upon a congregation. Similarly, it was 'what seemed to be' tongues of fire, not actual fire. This was the fulfilment of John the Baptist's prophecy that Jesus would baptise with fire (Mat.3:11).. The picture of one source of fire, separating to rest upon each one, is significant with regard to the unity of all believers. The implication seems to be that each of them began to speak in other languages.

'Tongues' is a gift of the Spirit and, in public, should always be followed by an interpretation (1 Cor.14:27/8). According to Paul, it may be a human language unknown to the speaker, or an angelic language (1 Cor.13:1). This event on the day of Pentecost is not typical because there was no need for any interpretation. People from different countries, in Jerusalem for the feast, heard their own languages being spoken, recounting events which gave glory to God.

5-13. Apparently the believers left the upper room at some stage and went outside. It seems that by 'all' in v.1. Luke is referring to the 120 rather than the 12. It is unlikely that they were simply standing around in an orderly manner. With the coming of the Spirit in such a dramatic way, there must have been excitement and the release of various emotions. In other instances of the Spirit coming upon believers, which Luke will describe later, there were visible as well as audible manifestations accompanying it. It is probable that this was the case here. The fact that some onlookers thought the disciples were drunk may point to the fact that they were at least staggering about. If we try to picture the scene of 120 people suddenly empowered by the Spirit and all speaking different languages at the same time, there must have been some degree of chaos.

The languages, or their nations, mentioned here refer to all of the then known world and, even then, are not necessarily exclusive of others. Luke is simply making an extensive list. We do not know the form of the utterances. Very likely they were of praise and thanksgiving to God for all the great and wonderful things he had done.

14-16. If the disciples had wondered how they would begin their ministry, it was decided for them. Peter simply took the opportunity; the crowd had already gathered. With this speech, and all the others recorded in Acts, we must appreciate that they are not verbatim accounts. Luke himself was not present to hear many of them - including this. Most of them, as recorded, are far shorter than they would have been in reality. They are a summary and may not be the exact words used by the speaker. That does not mean that they do not reflect correctly the views and thrust of the speaker. We may trust that they convey what God wants us to know.

17-18. How exciting to know you are seeing and experiencing a prophecy of long ago being fulfilled in your midst. How important, also, that there had been that prophecy - what could Peter have said otherwise to validate the bizarre behaviour of the believers? Joel's prophecy in the original began, 'Afterwards.' Peter (or Luke?) changes this to, 'In the last days.' For believers the last days began when Jesus returned to heaven and will end when he comes again. We are all living in the last days. In speaking of 'all people,' Peter does not mean every person who is born; rather that it will no longer be upon very few individual prophets, kings or craftsmen, but upon male and female, young and old; everyone who serves the Lord, irrespective of social standing, riches or poverty: all will be used by God.

19-21. Once again there is a minor alteration in Joel's wording. He says, "wonders in the heavens and on the earth." Luke records the insertion of 'signs' on earth, possibly to highlight the behaviour of the believers which onlookers were witnessing. With regard to the wonders in the heavens, are we to see these as referring to what happened at the crucifixion or do they relate to the 'Day of the Lord'? Alternatively, are these a poetic way of referring to upheavals in the affairs of mankind - wars and social change? The Day of the Lord was an Old Testament phrase pointing to the time when Israel would be revealed truly as God's chosen people. It was longed for by the nation but the prophets warned that it would be a day of judgement. Before that day, for believers in Christ, there is the opportunity to fulfil his command to preach the gospel to every creature, in the power of the Spirit, and all who respond will be saved.

22. Jesus had said that the work of the Holy Spirit, when he came, would be to glorify him. As soon as Peter has set the manifestation of the Spirit in its scriptural context to allay doubts and criticism, he is inspired to turn at once to speaking of Jesus. The Spirit does not seek glory for himself. We do well to remind ourselves of this.

Although Jesus, in his essence, could never cease to be God, he was truly human. He did not have a 'superman' body with 'superman' powers. He had only a human brain. He had no power in himself to work his miracles; these were performed by his Father through the Holy Spirit dwelling in him. Luke is clear about that: it was God working through him. The miracles were works of power to cause people to wonder in astonishment and were thus signs pointing to something beyond himself, but were also to authenticate and accredit Jesus in the eyes of all.

23. Here we meet the paradox which has fascinated theologians down the years. God did not only foresee the cross, it was part of his plan. He instigated Christ's judicial death. He predestined it. Nevertheless, the Jews were responsible for their actions in using the Roman authorities to condemn Jesus to the cross. Although we cannot reconcile free will and predestination, one day, from the perspective of heaven, we shall understand.

24. Christianity hangs upon the fact of the resurrection. If that did not happen nothing is left. It has no power and there is no reason to believe Jesus was more than a deluded man. The word 'agony' was used particularly of childbirth (it is like us saying 'the labour of death') and the picture is of life, true life, bursting forth. Death is so totally alien to life (in a spiritual sense death is unreal) that it just cannot hold this life in. It is like a plant forcing its way through concrete and becoming a tree.

25-28. Peter (and Paul cf. 13:35) attributes this psalm (16:8-11) to David. Almost certainly when he wrote it, David was not thinking of resurrection from death. He was in a desperate situation

with people seeking his life. He turned to God and found peace; he became convinced that God would not allow him to be killed and buried. He sought to be faithful to God so God would not permit him to die and decay on this occasion. Meditating on this, David has intimations of immortality and refers to eternal pleasures at God's side (not quoted by Peter). With typical, and acceptable, Jewish reasoning Peter regards the psalm as speaking of someone who did die but was not allowed to remain in the grave and decay. That cannot be David, as he goes on to explain:-

29. David was abandoned to the grave and his body did decay. Therefore the words of the psalm cannot refer to him.

30-31. David was regarded as a prophet. Mark 12:36 tells of Jesus arguing with the teachers of the law and quoting a psalm, saying that David was speaking by the Holy Spirit. The teachers did not dispute this. There are a number of references in the O.T. to God promising that David's descendants would occupy his throne. Here, Peter refers to just one descendant and claims that that one is the Christ (the anointed one) of God. He has not yet stated that Jesus was the expected Christ (Greek) or Messiah (Hebrew), but is about to do so.

32-33. Luke is writing a history of events for the benefit of Christians who, therefore, know of and believe in the resurrection of Christ. Here he is reporting Peter's speech on the Day of Pentecost. There would have been little general knowledge of Christ's resurrection because he had appeared only to believers.. The crowds would have departed from Jerusalem soon after Passover and the disciples had returned to Galilee. Now, six weeks later, more visitors had arrived to celebrate Pentecost. So it is an astounding claim that Peter makes - this man Jesus, who had been crucified six weeks earlier, had been raised to life. He and his colleagues know it because they had seen him and talked with him. Before his listeners had time to absorb the astonishing claim that a dead man had been raised to life, Peter goes on to say that he is no longer on the earth but had been taken up to be God's right hand man in heaven. There, God the Father had given to him Holy Spirit - manifested in the strange behaviour of the small band of believers; behaviour which the onlookers were now witnessing. The claims that Peter made, and which are recorded in just two verses, were doubtless explained in greater detail, but in our familiarity with the doctrine we must not overlook the impact of these statements on Peter's hearers.

34-36. At first sight the quotation from Ps. 110:1 could be taken as addressed to king David by one of his faithful followers or servants, which would then imply that it was David who was to sit at God's right hand. However, says Peter, David did not ascend to heaven. It was, in fact, David himself who was speaking and so he was thinking of Jahweh addressing someone else, whom David called 'Lord' (as Jesus himself points out in Mk. 12: 35). Peter now reaches the summit of his argument; it is Jesus who is that Lord and the Christ. It has been said rightly that Jesus is not the resurrection and life because he rose from the dead, but that he rose from the dead because he is the resurrection and the life. Similarly the Father did not make Jesus both Lord and Christ because he fulfilled his mission, rather he fulfilled his mission because from eternity the Father had made him Lord and Christ.

37. This was a clear conviction of sin. When we consider that the majority of these people would not have heard of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus until the speech of Peter's, and few

would have heard even the question asked by some of Jesus' ministry, "Can this be the Christ?" (Jn. 7:26), it is astonishing that they were affected so quickly. It can be only the convicting work of the Holy Spirit upon them. Perhaps we underestimate the visible manifestations exhibited by the 120 when the Spirit came upon them, in addition to the speaking in tongues; and this together with Peter's explanation provided the fertile ground on which the Spirit could work. It reminds us that all true conversions are the work of the Spirit and not man, although he uses the words and works of men.

38-39. Peter was ready to answer their question although he had not been asked it before. 'Repent' was the word Christ used when he began his own ministry (Mk. 1:15). It involves a change of both thinking and action. A person's life changes direction because his or her goals and purpose have changed. The final commission of Christ had been that his followers should not only preach the gospel and heal but also baptise. Peter was obviously under the anointing of the Holy Spirit who not only reminded him of these things, but also led him to assurance that the new believers would receive the Holy Spirit, even though Peter and the 120 had only just experienced this themselves. The double promise - forgiveness of sins and the filling with Holy Spirit - was for his hearers and the next generation, for those far off (geographically and spiritually) for everyone whom God would call. It seems that Peter himself did not appreciate the implication of his own words. It was some time later that the Lord had to teach him that the promise was for Gentiles as well as Jews (Acts 10). Peter's address covered the doctrines of God's initiative (he called) and man's response (repent).

40-41. Luke explains that he has given only a summary of Peter's words; but what a summary it is, covering so many crucial matters. Here he shows that to be a believer means a total shift of allegiance. There is the world (social order organised apart from God) and the Kingdom of Heaven. The former is corrupt, rebelling against God. Baptism was a focus of the change. People were not left to say, "Fascinating ideas;" were they willing to join with the other believers and become members of Christ and, therefore, of his Church? 3000 did. Presumably the 120 helped administer the baptism, but how did they cope with the subsequent organisation that was needed?

42. This verse sets out the basics, from the beginning of the life of the Church: a continual growth in understanding of the faith (the apostles' teaching); fellowship - a community where relationship with God spreads to embrace relationship with fellow believers. One of the greatest needs of each of us, perhaps the greatest, is to be loved and valued. That fellowship is enhanced and epitomised in sharing a meal (breaking bread) particularly the fellowship meal instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper. In the earliest days of the Church 'Holy Communion' was almost certainly an extension of a fellowship meal; as indeed were Passover and the Last Supper. So fellowship led to worship which, of course, involved prayer. This fourfold basis did not create an isolated, exclusive Church; it led to mission, but there had to be a vital, attractive fellowship to welcome new converts.

43-47. The way in which the believers lived, their dedication and joy, and their love for each other, even before they began their mission, had a profound effect on others. The apostles were able to work miracles. How much of this was due to the heightened realisation of the power of the Spirit within them and the virility of their faith, and how much to the obedience of the

believing community to the direction of the Spirit, so that the apostles operated from a basis of corporate faith?

Fellowship was obviously a vital ingredient in maintaining unity. Did they all sell everything? The text does not imply this. What seems to have happened was that they were willing to share their possessions - lending each other tools and implements. If anyone was in such need as could not be met in this way, then one or more of them would sell something so that it might be met.

They met in the temple, that is in public. That would be very different from us meeting out of sight behind the walls of a church building. The temple was open and, especially if they met in Solomon's arcade, they would be very visible. This itself would be a means of evangelism. They also met, obviously in smaller more intimate groups, in each other's homes. There was a sense of joy and probably fun in their worship. This must have been very attractive, and the ordinary people were impressed and friendly towards them so that the numbers joining them continued to grow. Luke makes a point, however, of attributing this growth to the Lord. All true believers are called by the Lord.

Chapter 3

Luke has described the beginning of the new community - the Christian Church. So far everything has been ideal. The population's attention has been gained, new believers are joining at an astonishing rate and the community is regarded with general good favour. However, just as Christ's personal ministry provoked opposition and then persecution, so his ministry through his Church did the same. Luke explains how this happened.

1-2. Remember Luke was a doctor and he had researched this incident sufficiently to know that this man was born a cripple. Apparently, as happens today, he had his staked-out place by a particular gate of the temple where his friends or relatives laid him. It was all planned. He didn't spend all day there, he went at the time of prayer when the greatest number of people would pass by. It was obviously a prime site. Worshippers would be more likely to give as they went to or came from their worship.

3-5. The man was a familiar sight and no doubt even those who did give him something would only glance at him, and he them. It must have been a surprise when Peter spoke in such a way as to gain the man's full attention.

4-8. We are not told why Peter and John chose to heal this particular cripple. There must have been many others in Jerusalem in need of healing. Just as Jesus chose to heal only one of the many at the pool of Bethesda, so Peter and John must have been directed by the Spirit. It reads as an eye-witness account with the details of the right hand, and the man not gradually testing his ability to walk but actually jumping to his feet. Luke may be recording Peter or John's own description of the event.

Peter and John did not ask for the man's healing, they commanded it - just as Christ had done - "Be healed!" "Be opened!" "Lazarus come forth!" How encouraging that whilst the man stayed close to Peter and John and was, no doubt, grateful to them, he understood where his healing had come from, and gave praise to God.

9-10. Is it because he was a doctor and understood the medical condition of a man born a cripple better than most, that Luke is impressed by the miracle and keeps repeating the fact that he was walking and jumping? It isn't only that his feet and ankles were strengthened immediately, but he would not have known what it was to balance - which has to do with our ears. Normally this involves a learning process. Maybe he was still unsure of himself because he was holding onto the two apostles.

11-12. Solomon's Colonnade was a long covered area running along the eastern side of the temple. Obviously news of the miracle spread like wildfire and the people nearby actually ran to see the cripple not only on his feet but jumping and leaping about. As on the day of Pentecost, Peter seizes the opportunity to commend Christ.

We must acknowledge that no one would have been taking notes at the time and Luke's summary of Peter's speech would probably be coloured by his later maturity of thought about the Christian Faith. However, Peter's words were obviously effective and, inspired by the Spirit, reflected a rapidly growing understanding of just who Jesus was and his place and purpose in the plan of

God. It is natural that the crowd would have thought that the power which had performed the miracle belonged to Peter and John themselves. Peter corrects this idea.

13-15. This passage is so comprehensive that it is probably a summary of all that Peter said. First he grounds his explanation firmly within the Jewish belief. It is the God they have always worshipped, the God of the patriarchs and of their ancestors who has done all this. Jesus was his servant, the one to whom Isaiah referred so often as the servant of the Lord, who would come to do his will. He was holy and righteous and is, in fact, the source, the starter, the bringer of life. Yet they, the Jewish people, had actually disowned the very one they had so long been waiting for, and they had killed him. Peter emphasises this by reminding them that Pilate would have released Jesus, but the Jews had deliberately forced him to change his mind. However, God, their God, had raised Jesus to life and Peter and John had seen this and testified to it. If anyone might be tempted to refute this Peter forestalls them by pointing to the proof -

16. The strength of Peter's explanation is that whatever reasons others might set forward as to how the crippled was healed, this is the explanation given by the two people through whom the miracle was performed and far from it bringing gain or glory to themselves it gave it all to Christ. The name of a person epitomises just who the person is, so it is Christ himself and the effective and comprehending use of his name that has healed the man. This, of course, involves faith, belief, which is the channel for the power to flow; but the faith itself is engendered by Christ and the proclamation of the truth about him. Faith is not simply an intellectual or cerebral matter; the people had something they could see to encourage them - the cripple whose healing was complete. If we would commend Christ, his power in our lives must confirm our words.

17-18. Ignorance is not in itself a full defence, although there is obviously a difference (recognised in the Old Testament) between sins committed deliberately and knowingly and those committed unwittingly. However, even if the Jews did not understand who Jesus was and the role he fulfilled, he was clearly a just, righteous, kind and good man. To execute such a man when the Governor announced there was no case against him was totally wrong.

Although the Jews were unaware of it, God was, in fact, fulfilling his purpose which he had revealed through the prophets of old, that the Messiah would suffer. Peter is summarising here. To speak of all the prophets is reminiscent of Christ opening the Scriptures to the two on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27). In fact there is no direct reference in the prophets to the Messiah suffering. Isaiah speaks of a suffering servant. It is only after the coming of the Holy Spirit (who is to teach them all things) that the believers understood how Jesus brought together and fulfilled in himself so many strands of Old Testament prophecy.

19. Ignorance of what they had done does not exonerate them and, anyway, they are no longer in ignorance; the miraculous healing of the cripple reveals who Christ is. So they need to repent. Repentance may begin in the mind, but it must involve a change in life. It is more than sorrow for the past, it means setting out in a new direction - a turn. They are to turn to God. If they do this, then their sins of the past will be obliterated with no record of them left. Also, the present and future will be totally different from the life they have known so far. They will feel different, experiencing "times of refreshing." It may be that Peter is here referring to a corporate experience of the People of God renewed in the Spirit; but just as each individual must repent, so each is personally refreshed.

20-21. Peter gives a third consequence of their repentance - the coming again of Jesus and the restoration or renewal of everything. He links the return of Christ to the repentance of the Jews (in 2 Pet. 3:12 he actually speaks of us being able to hasten it). When Christ returns, that will be the end of this creation as we know it. There will be a new heaven and a new earth. Everything will be as God intended. However, there must be a redeemed people to share this re-creation with Christ for it is with him that we shall inherit all things. It is by repentance and faith that we receive that redemption; so it is essential we repent if Christ is to come. Until then he has returned to heaven. All this is not some new theory of Peter's; it is to be found in the teaching of the prophets.

22-23. Peter continues by giving details to support his claim that the prophets were proclaiming Christ. He will refer specifically to Samuel and Abraham, but begins with the great hero of the Jews, Moses. Of course, Moses could not know of whom he was speaking but, inspired by the Spirit, he knew that God would send a prophet in the future, raised up from among his people, who would stand in the councils of the Lord, as he had done. In fact, there were to be several prophets - Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and so on; but Peter takes the fact that Moses referred to a single prophet to claim that he was pointing to Jesus. Peter amends the text slightly. The original in Deuteronomy 18:15 and 18-19 where the punishment for not listening is that God will call such a person to account, and imports the alternative punishment of being cut off from his people from Leviticus 23:29 which relates to those who work on the day of atonement. To the Jewish listeners, Peter's argument from the words of Moses must have been very powerful.

24-26. There are, of course, certain specific statements of the prophets which point to Christ, e.g. in the case of Samuel 2 Sam. 7:12. However, Peter is not necessarily thinking of these. He is probably painting with a broader brush, seeing the whole of the Old Testament as paving the way for the fulfilment of God's purpose which is realised in Jesus. His listeners, alive now, are the ones who inherit the promises God has made in the past. He refers them to the beginning of God's plan to form a people for himself, the covenant with Abraham. That plan is to embrace all peoples, not just the Jews. Nevertheless, it is the Jews who are to be the first to benefit - in particular the very ones Peter is addressing. He has spoken already of the forgiveness of sins; but there is more that Christ, the servant of the Lord offers. They can walk in righteousness with power over sin.

Chapter 4

1-2. The captain of the temple guard was himself a senior priest. The healing of the cripple had attracted much attention and a crowd had gathered around Peter and John. This would obviously have been drawn to the notice of the authorities. The Pharisees were the die-hard patriots seeking to preserve the law and traditions of the Jewish Faith. They would not have accepted the Roman occupation of the land. The Sadducees, on the other hand, were less concerned with tradition, but wanted to preserve their own position of authority and power. They included many priests and the privileged class of society. They were, therefore, more prepared to compromise with the Roman authorities. The Sadducees, unlike the Pharisees, did not believe in the resurrection from the dead. They would have been concerned about Peter and John on at least two counts. The crowd might get out of control and cause the Roman soldiers to intervene; they didn't want the soldiers over-riding their own guards within the temple precincts. Also, Peter and John were preaching the resurrection of Jesus as the basis of their teaching.

3-4. Already the opposition had started. Peter and John must have wondered whether what had happened to Jesus was about to happen to them.

5-7. The rulers would be the high priest and the senior priests. The elders were probably laymen; influential members of Jerusalem society, and the teachers were scribes or lawyers, most of whom would be Pharisees. Annas had been high priest but he had been deposed by the Roman authorities. Nevertheless, he was head of the family even though Caiaphas, his son-in-law, had the official title. The family was obviously very powerful. The questioning of Peter and John begins by asking them how they had been able to perform the cripple's healing.

8-10. Jesus had warned (Lk. 12:11) that his followers would be brought before the Synagogues and courts and put on trial. They were not to work out their defence beforehand for the Holy Spirit would tell them what to say at the time. When we are born again, our own spirit comes alive and acts as a sort of reservoir for the Holy Spirit. We need to be filled and re-filled. Here Peter is given the special filling or anointing he needs. He does not seek to defend himself but to glorify Jesus, for that is the special work and desire of the Spirit ("He will glorify me" Jn. 16:14). Peter addresses his judges respectfully but then lays the basis that they are discussing something which can only, and by all, be regarded as good. It was a kind act which resulted in healing. The simple fact is that it was effected by or in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Peter uses his full title. Then, without compromise, he adds, "You had him crucified, but God raised him from the dead." At once the controversial matter of resurrection is brought before the court.

11-12. The reference to the capstone or corner stone comes from Psalm 118:22. It is not entirely clear what its meaning is in the original; maybe the writer had been rejected and restored, or maybe Israel had been despised by the surrounding nations but had triumphed. But Peter's meaning is clear. The very people questioning him were the 'builders' who had rejected Jesus, but God had chosen him for the position of highest honour.

Peter links the healing of the cripple, his being made whole, effortlessly with salvation and being saved. The question related to a healing; Peter widens the concept to total soundness. In doing so he is making the name of Jesus, rather than the law, the basis of this salvation.

13. The court must have been intimidating and no doubt the rulers were used to seeing any opposition to their will dissolve when they made a show of their authority. They were obviously disconcerted when these laymen, unversed in the Torah, the Jewish law, quoted Scripture at them and made a very strong argument in support of Christ. They had faced a similar problem with Christ himself, and here were his followers carrying on in the same manner.

14. Luke does not explain how the healed cripple was there. Presumably he had been arrested with Peter and John. The problem for the court was that if they did not accept Peter's explanation, they had to come up with another.

15-17. Although Luke could not have been present at the deliberations of the Council, he had researched his material carefully. We know that later a large number of priests became believers (6:7) and it is very likely that one or more of these had been at the meeting. Luke's presentation of the facts shows Christianity in a good light. It is powerful but no threat to good government. It is interesting that the Council admits the miracle, offers no alternative explanation of how it was done, yet does not believe. Yet this is the history of mankind's behaviour to this day. To believe places demands on us and would have many consequences which we dislike. So, many avoid the consequences by making no decision about the facts.

They call this movement of God in the world a 'thing', and think it can be stopped by ordering Peter and John, and possibly the cripple, not to speak about Christ. They avoid discussing the crucial issue - the resurrection.

18-20. Under guidance from the Holy Spirit, Peter and John have obviously gained the upper hand. The Council give them orders but no reason for them. They will not grasp the nettle of how the miracle was done. They are, therefore, totally vulnerable and can only bluster.

The apostles need have made no reply, but just ignored the order. However, courageously (no doubt sensing the confusion of the council) they clarify the issue which their questioners have refused to face - is this of God? They know what they have seen and heard: Jesus is risen and has instructed them to go out in his name. God has testified to Jesus (v.10), should they obey God or the Council set up by men (which will not give a ruling on whether the miracle was of God)?

21-22. The Council persisted in doing what was expedient rather than deciding on the facts of the case. To take action against Peter and John would make them, the rulers, unpopular with the people for this was a very well known figure who had been healed. So they simply raise their threats and let the apostles go.

23. Peter and John must have been elated at what was, in fact, a victory. They had been arrested by the very people who had arrested Jesus and had him crucified. Immediately they return to their closest friends and colleagues to share the exciting news. The effect was that they were all overwhelmed by the wonder of God.

24-26. Their natural response is one of worship and praise. God is in control so the word on their lips is 'sovereign.' He, the Creator, has ordered everything. What is more, he has made his ways known through the prophets and through David the great servant-king of the Lord. Psalm 2 matches their mood. Originally this psalm must have echoed some nationalistic fervour -

perhaps at some victory. Israel was God's chosen people, so why do the nations imagine they can ever defeat them? Here, Peter and John have been vindicated by God. But, in fact, it is Jesus who is the victor. He is the true Anointed One.

They now turn from quoting a psalm to recounting what God has actually done at the present time

27-30. Herod and Pilate, as rulers, were ultimately responsible for the death of Jesus, but they had only given in to the demands of the people. Yet, in fact, they were fulfilling the plan of God.

Having given praise to God, and thereby encouraged themselves that he is in control of affairs, the apostles turn to the future. They are realistic; God's over-all control does not mean we have no free will. Evil men will continue to oppose the truth. So they do not ask to be spared difficulty or suffering, but for faithfulness and boldness in the face of opposition. There is evil in the world, there is sickness. They ask that God will confirm the truth by signs of the arrival of the kingdom. It is a battle, but Jesus, risen and ascended, continues to lead his faithful ones to victory.

31. Shaking of earth and buildings had occurred in the Old Testament when the Lord was present in a special way - Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:18) and the Temple (Is. 6:4). There were also instances of individuals falling down when the Spirit of God fell on them - Saul and Daniel. It is not surprising if there is some manifestation when the living God of creation makes some specific contact with that creation. In fact, it is surprising that such manifestation is not more frequent. Here it was obviously a sign that God had heard the prayer and was present in power. The filling of the Spirit is a continuing process, not a once for all event. He is power and we need constantly to be re-filled.

Luke has already said something about the inner life of the community of believers (2:42-47). He now develops this further.

32-33. Communism is an attempt to enforce common ownership on everyone. Its failure is not so much in the ideal as in the need to enforce. Every political system is unable to deliver its ideals because of the corruption of the individual members of the society it seeks to serve; in other words, because of sin. This is why Christ devoted his ministry to individuals and the need for each person to be born again, as he put it. If society is to be redeemed, every individual in that society must be changed. The Church is the society of the redeemed. Initially it worked, at least to a very great extent. Luke is working up to the first and important failure, but first he paints the success; all believers were one in heart and mind. It doesn't necessarily mean that they gave up their possessions, but they made them available to each other. It seems that Luke regarded the power of the apostles' testimony as being linked to the manner of life of the members of the community. How much of the weakness of the Church's witness today is its failure to practise what it preaches?

"Great grace was upon them all," could be, "they were held in favour by all." Probably both were true.

34-35. In the Old Testament there were provisions to ensure that no one should continue poor. There was the law of the Jubilee (Lev. 25) by which all land sold by Jews to other Jews should be returned to the original owner, and the law of cancelling debts every 7 years (Deut. 15). This is the New Testament way of dealing with the problem of poverty in the community. It is not that all are equal but that no one should be in need. Christians are members of one body, one family, and are members of one another. The richer members did not sell everything so that all were equally poor but from time to time, as it was necessary, they would sell some possessions, including land or houses. This would probably be houses they rented out; it does not necessarily imply they made themselves homeless.

In making this statement directly after his reference to the apostles' testimony to the resurrection, is Luke preparing the way for the problem of administration and the work load of the apostles which comes to a head in Chapter 6?

36. Barnabas is to play an important role in the book and Luke introduces him here as one of the generous members of the community. Originally the Levites were forbidden to own land; they were supported by the other tribes. Apparently this law was no longer applied. We do not know whether the land he sold was in Cyprus or Israel.

Chapter 5

1-2. Luke is an honest historian and shows that early on problems arose within the Church. This story offends us in our culture; the punishment seems too severe. There was no opportunity for repentance and redemption. How could a loving community, as the Church is meant to be, bury a husband without first consulting his wife?

The story is obviously condensed. The principle sin is hypocrisy and lying. The record makes clear that this couple were under no compulsion to sell the land nor, having done so, to give all the money they obtained for it. However, they connived together to say that they were giving it all but were in fact holding some back. They wanted public approval or acclaim for an act of total generosity to rank with that of Barnabas and others in the community, but were not willing to make the same sacrifice. There would have been no judgement had they been honest.

Commentators rightly liken this incident in the early days of the new community to the sin of Achan who similarly 'held back' some of the spoil at Jericho when the people of God first entered the promised land. Violent judgement followed both.

3-4. Some commentators imply that Peter was using some psychic or magical powers. This isn't so. He had a word of knowledge given by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12:8), just as Christ knew the history of the woman at the well (John 4).

Peter makes it very clear that the sin was against God. They knew in their hearts that it was deception, yet they went ahead with it. Peter also spells out the fact that they were serving the enemy, Satan. This was a satanic attack against the young Church and had to be dealt with immediately.

5-6. Had it been possible to perform an autopsy, no doubt it would have revealed that Ananias died of a heart attack. Nevertheless, that was only the physical cause. Luke clearly implies that this was the direct action of God.

In the climate of Palestine, it was the custom bury bodies quickly. Nevertheless, it seems peremptory to bury Ananias before his wife can be informed of his death. However, obviously the body could not be left where it was.

7-8. Again, it seems hard that Peter did not begin by breaking the sad news of her husband's death. However, had he done so he could hardly then begin to question her in her grief. He gave her the opportunity to be honest, but she continued in the deception they had both agreed.

9. The reason why we find this story so difficult is that we do not grasp how evil sin is. Because God does not act immediately to judge every sin we think he is unfair to have acted as he did on this occasion; and because other sins appear to us to be more serious, we claim that the punishment was too severe. We need to be reminded that God is God and we his creatures. We have all rebelled against him. If, in his graciousness, he has not destroyed us, we have no right to object if he does act to destroy any other sinner. This was the first recognised sin in the new community of God's people. It was a deliberate, calculated, planned and mutually agreed sin.

His judgement stands as a sign of God's attitude to all sins and is there to warn us. Even if we do not see his judgement so vividly and violently enacted on all sin today, we need to remember that we shall stand before him tomorrow.

Was Peter's word to Sapphira a word of knowledge or a curse? It was probably a word of prophecy which was fulfilled by Peter speaking it out.

10-11. If fear had seized those who heard about Ananias (v.5) what must have been the effect when his wife dies also? Perhaps some might have thought that the death of Ananias was simply due to the shock of exposure, and not have recognised the hand of God in it. But for exactly the same to have happened to Sapphira, particularly after Peter's prediction, was awe-inspiring.

12. The prayer of 4:30 was answered. Although Luke majors on Peter and Paul in this book, the other apostles also performed signs and wonders. Whilst it is understandable that as the Church grew and as it spread to colder climates, it was expedient to acquire buildings where believers could meet, it is sad that our worship is so often hidden and has become an unfamiliar mystery to people. The early Church met in a public place, open to all. Our Faith is a public truth, not a hobby for a few.

13-14. As they stand, these two statements are contradictory. Some of the problems may be due to translation; older versions speak of 'the rest'. However, that raises the question, 'the rest of what?' What seems clear is that, following the judgement that had fallen on Ananias and Sapphira, many people were reluctant to profess faith and commitment - after all, look what happened if you didn't measure up! Nevertheless, the believers were well respected. At the same time the Church continued to grow as more and more men and women believed in the Lord.

15-16. What are we to make of this matter of Peter's shadow? There is no reference to whether it was effective (as there is in a somewhat similar case with Paul [19:12]). There is not necessarily any connection with magic here. The people had seen Peter heal when he laid hands on people, so why should this power not come from him if you are near to him? If the passing of his shadow was the focus or channel of their faith, maybe it was effective. The word Luke uses is the same as that of the angel to Mary (Lk. 1:35) when he tells her that the Holy Spirit will 'overshadow' her and she will conceive a son.

Luke's aim here is to show the high reputation of Peter and the other apostles. It was so great that it began to spread from Jerusalem to the surrounding area. Sick people were brought in and were healed.

17-18. The apostles had already been ordered by the Sanhedrin to stop preaching Christ (4:18-21). This blatant disregard of the order was bound to bring conflict. This translation says that the rulers acted out of jealousy. That may be so, but the original can mean 'religious zeal'. This time it was not only Peter and John who were imprisoned (see v. 29).

19-20. Some commentators, pointing out that the word translated 'angel' can also mean simply 'messenger', claim that it was a fellow human being, perhaps a sympathetic (and even believing) warder, who opened the doors. However, Luke seems to imply more than this by reporting the

instruction given by this angel that they are to continue proclaiming the truth. A fellow human being would be more likely to advise them to get away to safety.

We must not assume from this that God plans always to save his people from suffering. That is patently not so. He is sovereign and acts according to his own purpose.

21. The apostles showed great courage in returning to the most public place and taking up their preaching again. How different they were from the scattered, frightened band at the time of Christ's arrest. It is almost humorous to picture the Sanhedrin waiting for their prisoners who, unknown to them, were freely proclaiming Christ in the temple for which these leaders were responsible.

22-24. For a short while, before further news came, the Sanhedrin were in a strange situation. This was a full gathering of the legislature who suddenly found that they had no agenda, there was nothing for them to do.

24-26. The Sanhedrin, by their actions, were simply giving added publicity to the apostles and their cause. People would have known of the arrest the previous day and here they were, early the next morning, at it again. Once more they were arrested but the officers were careful not use force because the people were on the side of the apostles.

27-28. Allowing for the fact that it is normal for people to over-state their case, the high priest's claim that the apostles had "filled Jerusalem" with their teaching, shows how rapidly the church was growing in influence.

It is interesting that the priests who had encouraged the cry 'crucify' (Jn. 16:6) were now eager to dissociate themselves from responsibility for Christ's death. He was, again, popular with the people. We shall all be judged one day on our relationship to Christ. For them the judgement had already begun.

29. In this book Luke is careful to show that the Christian Faith is no threat to law and order; its followers are loyal citizens. However, in the final analysis, all authority is God given. Normally human authority will not clash with that of God. Where it does, then it is human authority that is in error and God must take precedence.

30-32. The apostles are careful to place their faith and teaching within the ancient faith of Israel. It is Jahweh who raised Jesus from the dead. Again, the religious leaders are blamed for his death. It is interesting that they see the cross as a tree. In Jewish eyes "anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deut. 21:23). Were they implying that the authorities had sought to give the impression that Jesus was under God's curse? If so, they should know that God had now set him in a place of honour at his right hand. It is through him that Israel's salvation is to come - a claim which challenged the whole Jewish concept of the covenant God had made with them. The apostles claimed that they knew this because of what they had seen and experienced. They also claimed that the Holy Spirit, who had been given to a few revered people in the past, was now given to all who obey God. Of course, this is too much for the members of the Sanhedrin.

33-39. How did Luke learn of what had happened when the apostles were put outside? Very likely, as the church grew, some of the Sanhedrin became sympathetic to the cause. In any case, friend would have confided in friend. If the Jews were not permitted to put Jesus to death (Jn. 18:31) they had no right to execute the apostles either. Nevertheless, their fury might have driven them to do it had not Gamaliel intervened. The Sadducees were primarily concerned about their position of power and were politically motivated. The Pharisees were more concerned about upholding the law than about political ambition. Gamaliel interpreted the law more liberally than some, and was both respected and popular. In the midst of the heat of emotion and fury, he brought reason and calm. We know little of Theudas and Judas. Josephus does mention both names, but his Theudas arose after the time of this debate in the Sanhedrin, and Judas, according to the account recorded here, arose after him. The census was a means of assessing taxation and nationalistic zealots might well try to revolt at that time.

Gamaliel's wisdom lays down a principle which is true, but it may take a very long time to work through. Think how long it took to abolish slavery!

40. The Sanhedrin was permitted to order such a flogging for breach of the Jewish law. It was probably the 'forty lashes save one,' which was a terrible and severe punishment.

41-42. The church has always been strengthened by persecution. Perhaps we have it too easy in our land and that is why the church has lost so much respect and influence; we are flabby Christians. Nevertheless, it is when we read of such heroism as this that we wonder how we would respond under such treatment. The apostles not only stood up to the beating, they actually rejoiced. It seems that the Holy Spirit gives a special joy in martyrdom.

Luke refers simply to the 'Name'. Do we recognise and value the name of Jesus? The apostles were not driven underground. They continued to teach openly in the temple.

Chapter 6

Just because people are Christians it does not mean that problems will not arise between them. The important thing is how the problems are dealt with and solved. That itself, is a witness to others. It wasn't simply that these groups spoke different languages, they came from different cultures. It is not surprising, therefore, that like would mix with like. There probably was not anything deliberate about the unfair distribution of food. Possibly the distribution was in the hands of the Hebraic Jews who were unaware of the need in the Grecian group. The Church was growing and here we see the problems of administration beginning to arise.

2-4. The first essential of those chosen to 'wait on tables' was that they should be men who were filled with the Spirit and wisdom. It was not that it was a lesser ministry than preaching, teaching and prayer, it was different. The apostles were not to be diverted from their calling and gifting. It was essential that the Church be built up in the truth to avoid heresy.

5-6. The apostles showed real wisdom in dealing with the situation in this way and it immediately met with general approval. It is interesting that the names of all those chosen are Greek rather than Hebraic. That does not necessarily mean that every one of them came from the Greek group who were voicing their dissatisfaction, but no doubt many of them were. As it was the people who made the choice it shows a generosity of spirit amongst them. A possible serious weakness in the Church was avoided. Had the apostles been diverted from their calling the Church may well have perished almost before it had begun. As it was, a new group were appointed and anointed for service. Some were to develop new ministries.

7. So far there had been three attacks by Satan on the Church. The authorities had sought to silence the apostles; Ananias and Sapphira might have corrupted the Church from within it; and the Apostles might have been diverted from preaching the word or the administration might have broken down. Having dealt with the problems in the wisdom of God, the word spread and the Church grew rapidly. Wonderfully, some (a large number) of the priests became convinced that Jesus is the Messiah.

8. Stephen's gifts were not dependent upon his being appointed one of those to wait on tables, but it was this which gave him some authority. It seems that he was especially anointed; he is one of those full of the Spirit and wisdom (v.3), he is specifically mentioned by name as full of faith and the Holy Spirit (v.5) and here as full of God's grace and power.

9-10. We are not told just what it was that caused the opposition initially. The attack was that he had been preaching heresy. The 'freedmen' may have been either Jewish slaves or Roman prisoners now granted their freedom. Being foreigners, they had formed their own Synagogue. Often it is those initially from outside who are the most active upholders of the status quo. Perhaps Stephen was himself a member of that Synagogue - certainly he has a Greek name. At first they engage in theological debate, but Stephen refutes their arguments, inspired by the Holy Spirit. They then adopt the attitude so often seen in bigots and reactionaries, "My mind is made up, do not confuse me with facts."

11-14. The problem, as so often in cases like this, is that the allegations are not totally false, they are a serious distortion of the truth. Moses was the one to whom the law was given, so the accusation of blasphemy against Moses meant that Stephen was speaking against the law. No doubt Stephen was teaching that Jesus offered the way of salvation; but for the Jews, the law was the way of salvation. Presumably, Stephen was also teaching that Christ himself was the focus of worship rather than the temple which would eventually be demolished. No

wonder traditionalist Jews were horrified. The witnesses they produced were false, Luke makes that clear, but they had sufficient evidence to make a case to the Sanhedrin.

15. Very probably Luke inserts this description of Stephen as a deliberate comparison with the glory which shone from the face of Moses when he had been in the Lord's presence. It obviously means more than that Stephen's face shone with emotion or enthusiasm. Apparently every member of the Sanhedrin noticed it.

Chapter 7

This long chapter is devoted to Stephen's defence and his subsequent execution. Some commentators criticise him for making a rambling speech on matters which would have been known to the Sanhedrin even better than to him. There are two matters to consider. First why did Stephen adopt such tactics and, secondly, why did Luke include the speech in such detail? (Leaving aside the question raised by scholars as to whether this was indeed Stephen's speech or was it mainly Luke's fabrication?)

We must look beyond the facts actually stated by Stephen. He was on trial; the manner in which he approached his judges had an important bearing on their attitude to him. As his argument develops it becomes clear that he is not concerned about his own safety, but his aim is to present the claims of Christ clearly so that the Sanhedrin will understand. He wants them to listen, so he begins by showing that he knows the Jewish history and his aim is to establish that Christianity arose out of that history; it is an ongoing development of it, not some totally new system of belief. Throughout his recitation of the facts, however, he lays the foundation which will enable him to defend himself against the two specific charges that he has been speaking against the Temple and against Moses.

1-3. By using the terms 'brothers and fathers' and referring to 'our' father Abraham, Stephen identifies himself with main-stream Judaism. He may have a Greek name, but he is as much a Jew as his judges. Subtly, he points out that Abraham was not in Jerusalem when God appeared to him, nor was there a temple. God is not confined to one area or one building.

4-8. Stephen's summary does not conform exactly to the Old Testament record; problems arise about the age of Abraham's father if the former did not leave Haran until after his death. Luke could have corrected this in his reporting had he wished to do so. Stephen was on trial for his life, he was not preparing a historical text book. His point is that Abraham was obedient and trusted God. God has proved faithful, the Jews are at that moment living in the land promised to Abraham.

9-10. In telling the story of Joseph, Stephen mentions the name 'Egypt' eight times. Is he trying to show that God is not confined to a place, even the temple? Joseph was taken to Egypt but God was with him. He had such wisdom that even foreigners were impressed sufficiently to give him great power and authority. Is Stephen seeking to show that God works not through the exercise of military might nor a party group such as the Sanhedrin, but through individuals he raises up (e.g. Jesus)?

11-16. Jacob and Joseph never lived in the promised land again, they died in Egypt. Verse 16 is a condensed description of the facts. Jacob was buried in the field Abraham had bought at Machpelah, and Joseph in land bought by Jacob at Shechem.

17-19. God had promised that Abraham would have many descendants and that he would give them a land of their own. It was in captivity that their numbers increased and they became a people. Terrible as their slavery was, the oppression bonded them together. It had taken four hundred years but now everything was ready for God's promise regarding the land to be fulfilled.

20-22. The section about Moses is the longest in Stephen's speech, no doubt because he was accused of attacking Moses. He speaks of him in three periods of 40 years, stating that from the outset he was no ordinary child but was obviously marked out by God. It may be reading too much into the description to say that Stephen was deliberately likening the situation to that of Jesus. Moses was taught the wisdom of the culture where he lived; Christ,

although he was the Son of God, was similarly taught within the culture of humanity - in particular that of the Jews.

23-29. There is little doubt that here Stephen was likening the situation of Christ to that of Moses, although it may well have been lost on the Sanhedrin. Jesus knew he was being used by God to rescue his people, but the people did not recognise it any more than the people of Moses's time would accept his authority.

30-34. There are two points in this narrative which are particularly relevant to Stephen's defence. First that God was aware of and able to do something about the plight of his people, even though they were not in the promised land, and it was not the temple site alone that was or could be holy. Wherever God chooses to be is holy. Indeed, even in the most holy place of the temple God had not appeared in as clear a manner as he did to Moses in the wilderness.

35-36. Stephen is getting near the bone now. The people rejected Moses as king, "who made you our ruler and judge?" The parallel with the Sanhedrin's rejection of Christ is very clear, particularly as both Moses and Jesus did miraculous signs and wonders.

37-38. "So," says Stephen in effect, "It was this Moses you accuse me of not respecting, who spoke of someone like himself whom God would send. You say that I speak against the law given to us through Moses. I agree that the law was given him by God - living words passed down to us." Stephen now reaches the core of his argument that although their ancestors had the law, they did not obey it, or Moses.

39-43. Stephen points out the rebellion of God's people against him. He quotes from the Greek version of Amos 5:25-27. His argument appears to be not that the Israelites did not offer sacrifices in the desert, (clearly they did) but that they were offered in effect to false gods because their hearts were not truly set on the Lord.

44-47. Stephen now turns to the other matter he has been accused of - speaking against the temple. He gives a brief history of how the temple came to be. It began with the tabernacle, the tent where the presence of God accompanied his people wherever they went. It was made according to the blue-print given to Moses by God himself. It was not until they were established in the promised land under David that there was any suggestion of building a permanent tabernacle in the form of the temple, and that was not at God's demand, but man's request. In fact God did not permit David to build it, but allowed his son, Solomon, to do so.

48-50. Having illustrated so clearly that God has never been confined to one place, but has always accompanied his people wherever they may be, Stephen clinches his argument by quoting Isaiah. Wonderful and precious as the temple is as a place and focus for worship, God does not live in it. He fills all in all.

51-53. Stephen now throws discretion to the winds. He has laid the foundation for his case. The Sanhedrin are repeating the rebellion of the Jews all down the years and, like their forefathers, were guilty of resisting the Holy Spirit. Their ancestors persecuted the prophets who foretold the coming of the Messiah. They had capped it by betraying the Messiah himself to the Roman authorities and having him murdered. The Old Testament itself does not refer to the law being given through angels; Moses received it direct from God. But the Jewish tradition had developed that angels were involved. Stephen claims that it is not he who has failed to revere the law, it is they, the leaders who have not obeyed it: they committed murder.

Such talk was not likely to endear Stephen to the Sanhedrin. Not only was he attacking them; his words contained too much truth for their comfort.

54-56. In certain conditions a crowd can take on what seems to be one personality. The Sanhedrin exploded in rage. This is the third time that members of this sect have accused them of murdering Jesus. Stephen, however, is not looking at them, his gaze is drawn to heaven and he is given a vision of God's glory with Jesus standing at God's right hand. The term 'Son of Man' was one used by Jesus of himself and is rarely found outside the gospels. Maybe it is used here specifically to high-light the fact that Jesus has taken humanity to the throne and he is ready to welcome Stephen into the presence of his Father. Elsewhere we read that Jesus has 'sat down' at the right hand of God, signifying that his work is finished and his reward has been given. However, had Stephen seen Jesus seated on this occasion, might it not create the impression that our Lord is slightly dissociated from Stephen's ordeal and is just observing it? As it is we are made to feel that Stephen's faithfulness has so moved Christ that he is on his feet, almost as a football manager jumps up when his team scores a victory, to receive his brave witness. Stephen is so overwhelmed and encouraged at this that he shares what he sees.

57-58. The effect of Stephen sharing his vision was devastating. The claim was that the Jesus they had denounced as an impostor and blasphemer was alive and was at God's side. They covered their ears and shouted Stephen down so that he could not be heard; a case of "My mind is made up, do not try to influence me with facts." The Sanhedrin had no authority to deliver the death penalty. Indeed there is no record of any formal judgement being passed. It was more like mob rule.

It is at this stage, with the skill of a consummate story teller, that Luke mentions the name of a young man who is shortly to dominate the story.

59-60. In these two cries, Stephen echoes the words of Christ at his death, but in reverse order. Jesus prayed for those who were nailing him to the cross and, at the end, committed his spirit to the Father. Whether Stephen was consciously copying his Lord or whether this was simply the Spirit of God within him prompting him (and very likely it was both), Stephen reveals a remarkable generosity of spirit. In the Old Testament there is reference to people 'sleeping with their fathers' to describe death. However, it is a little unusual to use that description in the case of such a violent death as this. Yet, somehow it conveys a victory and sense of peace. The violent men killed him, the Lord received him into glorious life.

Chapter 8

We are told just a little more about this stranger called Saul. He was on the side of the Sanhedrin. He had all the arrogant certainty of youth that he was right. The sight of a brave young man being painfully and cruelly killed must not be allowed to divert the course of justice! However, his arrogance and certainty sprang from his desire to serve God, and that gave the Holy Spirit access to his soul. Stephen's witness to the truth was not to be smothered that easily. Saul had seen it, it was there within him.

It seems that the execution of Stephen breached the dam that had been holding back all the anger, guilt and frustration of the Jewish authorities. A sudden and great wave of persecution was unleashed against the Church. The apostles stood firm; we do not know why they were not arrested or executed. But the great majority of the believers fled from Jerusalem.

2. We are not told who these men were. It would have been dangerous in that climate of violent persecution to be identified with Stephen. It has been suggested that they may have been Pharisees, perhaps members of the Sanhedrin, who felt that things had gone too far and that Stephen's witness had not deserved death. However, the fact that these men mourned deeply for him suggests that they were more likely his friends.

3. Very often, it is when we have most doubts that we shout loudest. This is probably because we do not like to face the consequences of what change would mean. Saul could not contemplate the possibility that all that he had believed and devoted his life to serving, was wrong. He was a fanatic and cruel; he threw women as well as men into prison and was more than willing to see the followers of Christ put to death (22:4 and 26:10). Later he, himself, described his actions as an obsession (26:11). However, Luke leaves Saul for a while to concentrate on a most surprising effect of this persecution.

4-8. Although it was the persecution which forced the believers to flee, they were not frightened to speak of their faith. No doubt people would ask them why they had left Jerusalem - so they told them. This may well have accounted to some extent for the success which Philip encountered in Samaria (Luke does not state which particular city it was in that land). There was no love lost between the Jews and the Samaritans and so Philip showed some courage in preaching there. It may be the fact that he had been persecuted by the religious authorities in Jerusalem, who were the enemies of the Samaritans, that encouraged them to give him a hearing. Both Stephen and Philip performed similar miracles to those of Jesus and then the apostles, although they were not themselves apostles. It was this which so impressed the Samaritans. Philip fulfilled the three-fold commission which Jesus gave to the 12 and then the 72; "preach the gospel, heal the sick, cast out demons."

9-13. Simon was obviously a very important and influential man; the people of the area believed he was divine. Very likely he was using, or was used by, some occult power, similar to a witch doctor in Africa. He was not just 'doing tricks'. However, Philip was not claiming that he had any power of himself, he was preaching the kingdom of God and Jesus. Many of Simon's followers left him, accepted what Philip was preaching and were baptised. Simon was also persuaded and was baptised. Because of Simon's later behaviour, which Luke describes shortly, he is often disparaged. However, Simon adopted an astonishing attitude. He was famous and important and, as his followers changed allegiance, it would have been so easy for him to resent Philip and seek to attack him. Instead, he is willing to associate himself fully with the crowd and humbly be baptised along with them.

14-17. These verses raise a number of important issues. First, why were Peter and John sent to investigate? As the word spread rapidly in all directions, it would not have been possible for the Apostles to have sent such investigative teams in every case. A likely explanation is the hostility which lay between the Jews and Samaritans. There could well have been a foundational split with a Samaritan church and a Jewish church. It was vital that both Jewish and Samaritan believers saw themselves as belonging to each other because they belonged to Christ, and Christ is not divided. By coming to and praying with these new converts, and laying their hands on them, Peter and John clearly proclaimed that these Samaritans were one with them. There is only one Church.

The major issue here is one that has been discussed down the ages. Is true conversion a one stage or a two stage process? Why did these Samaritans require that Peter and John laid hands on them before they received the Holy Spirit when they had already believed? Those who hold that there is only one stage would claim one of two explanations. One, the Samaritans initial belief was inadequate - the report states that they believed Philip (12) rather than put their trust in Jesus. But this seems to be splitting hairs and, anyway, Luke gives no indication that Peter and John gave any further teaching. Admittedly the Baptism was only in the name of Jesus and not that of the full Trinity. However, important as the doctrine of the Trinity is, we must beware of a legalistic attitude. The apostles did not regard it as necessary to re-baptise the believers. The alternative explanation by those who claim that there is only one stage, is that the Samaritans did receive the Holy Spirit at the time they first believed, and the apostles simply imparted some special charismatic gift of specific power. John Stott provides a further explanation. He claims that the norm is one stage. However, in view of the fact of the enmity between the Jews and the Samaritans, God deliberately withheld the Spirit on this occasion, so that the apostles could come down and, by laying hands publicly upon the Samaritans, show that they were one with all other believers.

Others claim that there are two stages to full conversion. These also are divided by two different explanations. The Catholic view is that the first stage is baptism and the second is confirmation, the one imparts salvation and membership of the church, the other imparts the Holy Spirit. The second explanation is similar but does not relate the stages specifically to outward rites. The two stages are conversion with regeneration (that is, repentance and faith on the part of the individual and the new birth imparted by the Holy Spirit) and the Baptism in or of the Holy Spirit, imparting power for service.

There is another way of looking at it. It is similar to the last explanation but instead of referring to stages we should speak of events. It seems that at conversion two separate but closely connected events should happen. First, in response to the working of the Holy Spirit in convicting a person of the truth, he or she repents and believes, putting his or her trust in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. They are then born again, regenerated, by the Holy Spirit. Until then the person has been operating in life only as body and soul (what the New Testament refers to as 'the flesh' or, in modern translations, 'the old nature'). "Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (John 3: 6). Until then a person's spirit is not operating. At regeneration his or her spirit is activated. This provides a place where the Holy Spirit may dwell and so this empty vessel needs to be filled by or with the Holy Spirit. It is interesting to see these two events reflected in the life of our Lord. He was born or conceived by the Holy Spirit, but he also needed to be filled with the Spirit at his baptism before he entered upon his ministry. We see that repeated in the life of the Church. On the first Easter Day Jesus breathed upon the disciples and gave them authority (John 20:22-23). This was a symbolic act imparting birth to the new community of the Church. However, they were told to wait in Jerusalem until they received power when the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:8). Having once been given, the Holy Spirit is now immediately available to all believers and the

norm should be that a person is both regenerated and filled by the Holy Spirit at the same time. It should not be in two stages, but it is nevertheless two distinct events. We need to be both born of the Spirit and filled with the Spirit. Perhaps the reason why the two are so often separated in our experience today is that the process is not understood and therefore not explained to prospective converts. Being filled with the Spirit is therefore not expected or sought.

One other matter to mention here is the fact that the apostles laid on hands in order that the Samaritans might be filled with the Spirit. Obviously this was an effective act on this occasion. However, this was by no means the norm and certainly we cannot read into this incident the need for this in the case of all or even the majority of believers; but nor should we despise it. There are individuals for whom in particular circumstances this may be appropriate and helpful.

18-24. Simon is almost universally disparaged. Admittedly he was totally wrong to believe that the gift of God could be purchased with money and his name has been used to describe all such behaviour, 'simony'. However, he was a new convert of a matter of hours only. He had been a most important man, used to wielding great power over people. He had humbled himself and been baptised along with those who had previously actually worshipped him (10). With that background it is natural (though sinful) to seek to maintain his position of influence. Seeing the power of God exhibited through Philip, he desires it without any real understanding of what is involved and assumes that, like everything else in his life until then, it can be bought. Commentators make much of the fact that he shows no repentance, only fear. That is true, but he continues in the faith; he doesn't go off in a huff because he has been so roundly rebuked in public. He accepts what Philip has said without question and is scared that he has offended this God he has only just met. He doesn't trust his own ability to get through to him and so, unheeding the fact that his contrition is very public, he begs Philip, who clearly is in very close touch with God, to pray for him that he will be spared punishment. Simon, like the rest of us, is a saint in the making; he is only just setting out on the journey. Far from condemning him for his foolish mistake, we should recognise the depth of his conviction that Philip was preaching the truth. He had a great deal to learn, but there is no indication that he didn't go on to learn it.

25. They stayed long enough to establish relations with the new believers, but returned to the other apostles, taking the opportunity to spread the word on the way.

26-27. It reads as though receiving instruction from an angel is an everyday occurrence. Maybe some such dramatic event was necessary because from a human view point there would be little incentive for Philip to leave the area where his preaching was so successful to set out on a desert road. Marshall points out that the term 'go south' literally means 'at noon' (when the sun is due south so it came to have a geographical meaning). If this is the meaning here it would add to the strangeness of the order, because few would willingly travel at the heat of the day. On the other hand, it might relate to the exact timing required for Philip to meet up with the Eunuch.

Philip was obedient and meets up with an important official in the Ethiopian court. The word Candace is not a personal name but an official title. The story raises a number of issues which cannot be resolved because Luke gives no background. Presumably, as an Ethiopian, the official was a black man. He had gone to Jerusalem to worship so it seems that he was a Jew but, if so, was it by birth or by conversion? Certainly, Luke seems to imply he was not a Gentile because he presents Cornelius (Chapter 10) as the first Gentile convert. However, Deuteronomy 23:1 orders that no true eunuch could enter the assembly of the Lord (although

Isaiah 56:3-5 looks to a time when this law will be changed). It might possibly be that here the term eunuch does not imply literal, physical castration.

28-31. It was an angel who had given Philip the original instruction to set out on this adventure, but now it is the Spirit who guides him. The word chariot subconsciously raises in us the thought of war-like vehicles travelling at speed. That would not be the case here, it may well have been drawn by an ox, so Philip could easily keep up with it. To have a personal scroll of at least part of the book of Isaiah would not have been a common thing and only a rich man could have afforded it. It was customary in those days to read aloud. Hearing what the man was reading and recognising it, Philip seizes the opportunity and politely asks if he understands it. It may be that there was a little more conversation, which Luke does not record, before the eunuch invites Philip to sit with him to explain it. What a humble man he was. An official with his own chariot, yet seeking to learn from Scripture. It is interesting that on this occasion there were no miraculous signs, the official saw no vision of Jesus, it was simply the conviction of the word of Scripture which brought this man to Christ.

32-35. The fact that the eunuch was reading from Isaiah 53:7-8 illustrates how, in this case, God over-ruled the circumstances so that Philip was on hand at just this time. To us today, the fact that this passage so obviously refers to Christ must not colour our understanding of the situation then. The expectation was that the Messiah would be a victorious figure, leading the Jews to victory over their enemies. So who was the prophet talking about? Was it Israel as a whole or was it a particular person? It was Jesus himself who revealed that it was fulfilled in him. This eunuch was obviously earnestly seeking the truth. He was fruit ripe for picking and Philip simply gathered the harvest by telling him the good news of Jesus - what a lovely description that is.

36-38. Luke's reference to the good news of Jesus obviously implies that Philip spoke of how a person becomes a Christian. Presumably he would follow the example of Peter on the day of Pentecost (2:38) and speak of baptism. It seems that some scribe in copying this manuscript wanted to clarify this and show that Philip had checked to ensure that the man's heart was right before God (cf. v.21) and inserted what is numbered as verse 37. However, this does not appear in the earlier manuscripts. The reference to them both going into the water does not reveal anything about its depth and whether the baptism was by immersion or affusion. Apparently early paintings depict them standing in water to their waists and Philip pouring water over the eunuch, but again that proves nothing. The important truth is the fact of the baptism, not its method.

39-40. The ending of this story is as supernatural as its beginning. The implication is clearly that Philip was snatched away by the Spirit and transferred to Azotus (Ashdod) which is near the coast above Gaza. We must be careful about reading more into this than Luke intends. Certainly he makes nothing more of it and does not specifically describe it as a miracle. There are manuscripts which include a reference to the Holy Spirit coming on the eunuch and the angel of the Lord catching up Philip, but scholars do not regard these as reliable.

Chapter 9

1-2. Saul was a fanatic and appointed himself as an inquisitor. He had already done all he could to destroy the Church in Jerusalem (8:3) and, because some of the Christians had fled to Damascus, his passion drove him to follow them there. He was obviously arrogant and, driven by blind hatred, was quite prepared to kill in order to maintain what he personally regarded as the truth. The sadness is that he had convinced himself that he was serving God. Technically, it is doubtful whether the high priest was able to give him any authority to extradite the believers from another nation. However, there was a strong contingent of Jews in Damascus and the high priest would have religious authority over them.

For the first time Luke refers to Christianity as the "Way". What a lovely name, and it conveys so much. It is first the way to God, through Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. It is then the way of God. Having found Jesus, or having been found by him, we then seek to please him by the way we live. So it is the way to live life and, in fact, is life itself. There are many different ways that people live their lives but this is life in abundance and so it is The Way.

3-6. Later Paul, (Saul) is to describe this event on two occasions and the details vary a little. This happens all the time. It doesn't mean that any one version is incorrect, but in our endeavour to explain the main facts of an event we do not give exact details of minor issues. Had we witnessed it ourselves, no doubt we would readily appreciate and confirm all three descriptions as being correct. What is clear is that there was a sudden supernatural intervention. Paul was the target and recipient of the revelation but the men who were accompanying him were aware that it was going on. It seems that as well as the blinding light, Paul actually had a vision of the Lord because he later claims to have seen him (1 Cor. 9:1 & 15:8) and Barnabas asserts it in his defence of Paul to the apostles (27), and we know of no other occasion when this might have happened. The word 'Lord' does not indicate that at this stage Paul accepted Jesus fully as the Lord, as he was to do shortly. It simply means 'Sir', and is a term of respect.

The risen Lord makes clear that by persecuting the Church, Paul is persecuting him. We do not know how quickly Paul appreciated the implications of that one sentence. It was the believers' preaching that Jesus was alive that had so incensed him. Yet here was Jesus speaking to him. It could only be that God had raised him. Paul was convinced that his zeal was righteous and that he was serving God. In fact, all the time had been opposing him. The whole of his life's aim was a terrible mistake. This realisation must have been devastating and his self-confidence totally destroyed.

7-9. If we compare the three versions of this event (22:3-16 and 26:9-18) it seems that initially the whole party fell down but, according to this verse, Paul's companions regained their feet. They were all enveloped by the blinding light but his companions did not see anyone (implying that Paul did). They heard a sound but could not distinguish any words. With the blinding light, Paul's natural reaction was to shut his eyes, and when he opened them again he found he was blind. What a frightening experience. There was nothing to encourage him that this was not to be permanent. What should they do, return home or go on into Damascus? They were near the latter and with Paul an invalid, they went on. The arrogant, self-righteous persecutor was led into the city a broken man, relying on others to lead him. What wisdom of God to leave him blind for a period. Paul could do nothing but think. There was no question of him having imagined it all - he was left with his blindness. He had been completely wrong, the believers he had persecuted were indeed the servants of God and he was not. Jesus was the Messiah and he, Paul, had opposed him and actually persecuted him. He was being punished for his spiritual blindness by his physical loss of

sight. It must have seemed that his life was over, he had no future; after this life he had to face his judge, and he knew all too clearly what the judgement would be.

10-12. From 22:12 we learn that Ananias was a devout Jew, highly respected by his fellow Jews as keeping the law. So presumably he had lived in Damascus for some time before his conversion, which we must assume was due to some believers coming to the city when they fled from Jerusalem during the persecution following the death of Stephen. He has a vision (so this is more than 'a word of knowledge') in which the Lord speaks to him in astonishing detail. He gives him precise instructions that he is to go to a particular house on the main east - west road of the city and he is to ask for a man named Saul who comes from Tarsus.

Then there is the interesting information that Paul is praying. Although his life has been turned upside down and Paul must have been in depression, he has not lost his faith or given up on life as hopeless for him. He does what he is accustomed to do - he fasts and prays. No doubt it is in a far more meaningful and personal manner than he has ever done before. Almost certainly he prays for mercy and forgiveness. As the hours pass, perhaps it dawns on him that if the Lord has actually appeared to him and spoken to him, maybe it is because he wanted to show Paul the truth, not simply to humiliate him before passing judgement, but because he has some purpose or plan for him. As he prays he has a vision. This is also in some detail; he sees a man come to him to lay hands on him to restore his sight, and he is even told the man's name - Ananias. How vital it is that the vision shall be literally fulfilled. This is Paul's first experience of the Lord's dealing with him. If no one came or if he wasn't named Ananias, Paul could never again trust that he was hearing the Lord correctly.

13-16. It is interesting that not only had news reached Damascus of Paul's persecution of the Jerusalem church, but also that he had been granted authority by the chief priests there to arrest believers whom he found in Damascus. The Lord was asking Ananias, so he thought, to put his head into the lion's den. However, the command was imperious - "Go!" but it was accompanied by an explanation which, as he thought about it, no doubt encouraged Ananias to view Paul with the astonishing generosity of spirit which he was to show. The wonder of it must have astonished Ananias - the truth of Christ was to be taken to the Gentiles and their rulers, as well as to the Jews; and the person chosen to do this was the greatest antagonist the church had yet seen! In addition, he who had caused so much suffering to those who confessed the name of Christ, was himself to suffer for the same name.

17-19. There is no indication that Ananias had some supernatural revelation of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, he was very probably told about it by whoever received him into the house (Judas?). What an encouragement to Paul to hear the voice of a believer calling him "brother". Whether the blinding light had caused some reaction in Paul's eyes to produce something like puss which had dried we do not know, but Luke, the doctor adds the description of some physical manifestation of scales falling away. At once Paul was baptised. We cannot know for certain whether or not the Holy Spirit filled him immediately before or at the time of the baptism, nor the manner of the baptism, and it really isn't very important. What is important is that both the filling and the baptism happened.

19-22. We need to read this section alongside Paul's own description of events in Galatians 1:11-24. It seems that as soon as his sight was restored and he had been baptised and filled with the Spirit, he began to preach the truth he had now come to believe. There were no half measures, he did not proclaim only that Jesus was the expected Messiah (22), he stated that he was the very Son of God. This took great courage because he deliberately went to the very synagogues for which he had obtained letters of commendation from the high priest (2). They were expecting him and understood that his message would re-inforce the truths of the Jewish faith and he would seek to arrest any who had defaulted to the new cult of those who

followed Christ. To their astonishment he confessed that he, himself, was now such a man and that Christ was indeed the Messiah. His dramatic experience of conversion would be sufficient to convince him of that. However, he had had years of teaching and study in the Jewish religion. He needed time to re-assess all of this in the light of his new understanding of Jesus, so he went into near-by Arabia where, without discussion with anyone, he spent time alone with God and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, worked out his new theology. He then returned to Damascus and continued his teaching, in even greater power. His arguments apparently defeated the Jews who sought to refute him. Obviously this angered them.

23-25. According to Galatians the 'many days' amounted to three years. The anger of the refuted Jews became so intense that they actually planned to murder Paul. In 2 Corinthians 11:32 Paul states that they had the authority of the city governor appointed by King Aretas. He learned of their plan and, as they were watching the city gates, he had to be lowered under cover of darkness in a basket from a window set in the wall to make his escape. Paul regarded this as ignominious and was to refer to the event as a sign of his weakness - of which he boasted in order to give God the glory (2 Cor. 11:30-33). Already Paul's gift of leadership was apparent, because it seems that he had followers or disciples who helped him escape.

26-30. In Galatians Paul; says that he was personally unknown to the churches of Judea. Presumably he means that they had not seen him as a Christian; surely they would have known him as a persecutor of three years previously. Understandably they are somewhat wary and will not accept him. Barnabas, who was so aptly named (encourager), believes in Paul and vouches for him. According to Galatians the apostles Paul meets are confined to Peter and James. So Paul is accepted by the brethren and moves around Jerusalem freely proclaiming the Christ he had so vehemently attacked. Stephen, of whose execution Paul had so clearly approved, was a Greek and Paul made a particular point of seeking out the Greek Jews and arguing with them the truth of Jesus. This provokes them, as with the Jews in Damascus, and they seek to kill him - and he had only been in Jerusalem two weeks! So the believers - now Paul's brothers - persuade him to leave and accompany him to Caesarea and send him off to his home area of Tarsus.

31. It is a fact of history that the church has often been at its best in times of persecution. We have seen already that it was the persecution which arose after the death of Stephen that caused the believers to scatter and spread the faith further into the world. However, there is need also for times of consolidation. Luke refers to the fact that the one church had now extended from Jerusalem to include the rest of Judea and also Samaria and Galilee. It enjoyed a time free from persecution; it grew in strength and in numbers; there was a healthy fear and awe of the Lord and the Holy Spirit was clearly at work.

Having told the stories of Philip and the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, and the conversion of Saul who was to become Paul, Luke leaves the latter for a while and returns to Peter. The most significant event he will record is the conversion of Cornelius, a Gentile, because this is to change the course of the evangelism of the Church. First, however, he records two healings under Peter's ministry which illustrate his authority as an apostle.

32-35. The time of peace (31) allowed Peter to travel freely to visit and, no doubt, encourage the Christians away from Jerusalem. He goes west towards the Mediterranean and at Lydda he finds a man who has been paralysed and bedridden for eight years. It seems that Luke deliberately draws attention to the similarity between the words of Peter and those of Christ to the Paralytic (Luke 5:24) "Get up, take your mat and go home." Peter does not pray that

God will heal the man, rather he proclaims his healing, but he is careful to explain where the power lies - "Jesus Christ heals you."

We need to be careful when we find the word 'all' in scripture. It does not necessarily mean every individual. We may feel this casts doubt on the reliability of scripture. But we have to understand it today in the light of what the author meant and what his readers would have understood at the time. It is similar to our phrase 'everyone knows', which is a general term for many people. Luke is simply saying that the healing of Aeneas had a profound effect on the people of that area and as a result the church grew significantly.

36-43. What went through Peter's mind as he went with the men? He had seen people die under a prophetic word (Ananias and Sapphira). He had seen Stephen die and not raised to life. He had seen people miraculously healed, but there is no record that, as yet, anyone had been raised to life since the resurrection of Christ. Did he have faith to raise the dead? The name Tabitha means 'gazelle', which in Greek is dorcas. This story is so similar to the raising of Jairus's daughter. Commentators point out that in that case Jesus said, "Talitha koum!" (Little girl, get up) and Peter said, "Tabitha koum". Like Jesus, Peter sent the mourners out of the room. Next, he knelt down and prayed (in those days it was customary to stand), and then he turned to Tabitha and commanded her healing by telling her to get up. It is interesting that his prayer was apparently simply between himself and the Lord, that is he was not praying over Tabitha but was concentrating on his own role in the matter. Was he asking God whether it was his will that Tabitha should be restored? Was he seeking to increase his own faith? After his prayer he had the confidence to command the healing.

Simon the tanner obviously had to deal with dead animals' skins, and commentators point out that normally a Jew would not consider staying in such a house. Was Peter already broadening in outlook?

Chapter 10

1-8. Cornelius was not a Jew, but he was God-fearing. By referring to the time (three in the afternoon) which was one of the Jewish times of prayer, Luke implies that Cornelius had adopted the same practice and was himself praying when he had his vision. It seems that his life had affected his servants and personal soldiers (apparently the soldier mentioned here was a sort of 'batman'). Certainly he was able to share openly with them his experience of seeing the angel. Once again specific details are given - where to go, the name of the person to ask for, whose house it was and the area of the city where it could be found. The vision was so vivid that Cornelius had no hesitation in obeying.

9-16. Stott aptly points out that the story is not so much about the conversion of Cornelius but of Peter. He had been brought up a devout Jew and would have been taught not only the laws of what animals were 'clean' and 'unclean' to eat, but also that the Gentiles were 'unclean', and it was forbidden to eat with them or enter their homes. It is interesting that when the Church in Jerusalem heard of Cornelius and his conversion, it was not this in itself for which Peter was called to account, but that he had entered the house of a Gentile and eaten with him (Acts 11: 3).

Luke reveals God's perfect timing by showing how the various elements in the story dovetail together. While the men were on their way to see Peter, God prepares him for their visit. At midday Peter was on the roof of the house, probably seeking relief from the heat and possibly under an awning to shield him from the sun. He was praying, so he was particularly open to any move of God. Peter has a 'waking dream' and, as in many dreams, everyday things are interwoven with surrealist images. Peter was hungry and waiting for food; he sees a sheet (the awning?) being lowered from heaven containing all sorts of animals. The stress is on the fact that they were 'unclean', we do not know whether there were any 'clean' ones amongst them. A voice tells Peter to kill and eat. Because it is a dream, the fact that apparently Peter has no knife is unimportant. Peter objects in his dream, just as he objected in real life to the Lord's revelation that he is to suffer and be put to death, and to him washing his feet. He has never eaten anything unclean in his life. The voice then says that he is not to call unclean anything that God has cleansed. In its context, the dream is about food. Jesus had already declared all foods clean by his teaching that nothing that enters a man from outside can make him unclean (Mark 7:18/19), although it is doubtful if the disciples saw the significance of that remark until after Christ's ascension. Indeed it may be the incident of Peter's dream that enabled them to understand what Jesus had meant.

The vision is repeated twice more for emphasis.

17-23. The men arrive at just that moment. Peter is no longer dreaming but the Lord continues to direct him, this time through his Spirit speaking into his own spirit and thus to his mind. Scholars point out that the phrase 'do not hesitate' may be translated, 'make no distinction'. The men give what is obviously a carefully prepared explanation, commending Cornelius and stressing the divine intervention in the form of an angel, no doubt to encourage Peter, a Jew, to make such a journey to visit a Gentile. Even so, without the specific guidance from the Holy Spirit within him, it is doubtful whether Peter would have gone. He had not yet discovered the significance of the vision. Under the common understanding of hospitality in those days, it was expected that travellers should be offered accommodation after such a journey. Marshall states that the Jews differentiated between offering hospitality to Gentiles and accepting it from them. Barclay, on the other hand, states that the Jews would not entertain Gentiles at all. Certainly the messengers respectfully stopped at the entrance and called out, rather than approaching uninvited.

24-26. From 11:12 we know that there were six others who accompanied Peter and the three men. Although Peter was a Jew, Cornelius must have reasoned that the angel would not have told him to send for him unless he would come. In faith, Cornelius gathers his relatives and friends to be there in the house when Peter arrives. Cornelius, a Roman (he was from the Italian Cohort) and a soldier of some importance, falls in reverence at Peter's feet; but Peter will not accept such behaviour which is akin to worship and makes it very clear that although the summons may have been divine, he himself is simply a man.

27-30. It seems that Peter and Cornelius had a rapport from the start because Luke adds the little comment that the two were busy talking to each other as they went indoors. Peter greets the large group who are gathered by explaining that whilst it is part of the Jewish tradition (reference to law is, perhaps, rather strong) to have no dealings with Gentiles, God had shown him that it was wrong to call any other human being either impure or unclean. He had had time now to understand and apply the meaning of the vision of the unclean food. Politely he asks what it is all about.

31-33. Luke now retells the story, putting the words into the mouth of Cornelius. There are very minor differences e.g 'a man in shining shining clothes' instead of the 'angel' of v.3. This event was of such profound importance that Luke repeats the whole history, again stressing the divine intervention throughout. No doubt his intention is to quell opposition from Jewish believers to the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Church.

34-38. Peter humbly acknowledges that he needed to learn that all men are equal in God's sight. He has begun to understand that if the Jews are chosen, it is not for any special merit of their own, but to be witnesses, because God accepts all who fear him and do what is right. So Cornelius and the others are acceptable. To our ears that sounds incredibly patronising, but for them to hear that from a Jew was revolutionary. Peter assumes they have some knowledge about Jesus. God gave a word or message about peace (in this case embracing the whole meaning of salvation) through Jesus, it was given to the Jews but he is, in fact, Lord of all people. This Jesus was anointed by God for office, but with the Holy Spirit rather than oil. He went around doing good (what a summary of his life's work) and healing all who were in the devil's power. His ability to do this, says Peter, lay not in himself but because God was with him and God is greater than the devil.

39-43. Peter stresses the fact that he is not preaching religious theory but personal conviction based on experience - always the most effective testimony. He, together with the other apostles, witnessed the ministry of Jesus and then witnessed his death (by speaking of the cross as a tree he is referring to the fact that Jesus was under God's curse. cf. Deut.21:22/3) and then they witnessed that he had risen from the dead - he even ate and drank with them. However, he was not seen by everyone but by those already chosen by God whose task now was to tell others that Jesus is the one who will judge all mankind. However, although he is the judge, he is also the Saviour of all who will put their trust in him, for they will be forgiven their sins. This is not something totally new, it had been foretold by the prophets. Did Peter fully appreciate what he was saying about 'everyone' who believes receiving forgiveness of sins? He probably accepted that in theory but had not yet been faced with its full implication; but he was well on the way to learning.

44-48. The effect of Peter's words was surprising. He had not even finished or called for a response. Obviously his hearers accepted the truth of what he was saying. The Holy Spirit, knowing their hearts were responding to his inner conviction, came upon them just as he had on the apostles on the day of Pentecost - even to their speaking in tongues. There could be no denying what had happened. The Jewish Christians who had accompanied Peter were utterly astonished that the Holy Spirit had been given to Gentiles. However, there really was no

room for debate about whether they could be accepted within the Church, because they had so obviously been accepted by God. Peter simply voiced the obvious, but it showed an open heart that he actually proposed it. How good that God gave such an exact replication of what had happened on the Day of Pentecost; there could be no questioning whether perhaps the Gentiles had received a slightly inferior blessing. As these Gentiles had already received the reality of what baptism signified, how could they be refused baptism? Nevertheless, Peter rightly appreciated that the outward sign was still necessary if they were to be accepted as members of the Church.

They were only at the very beginning of their Christian walk and needed to learn so much more. They invited Peter to stay with them and we are left to assume that he did; his conversion to accepting the Gentiles as brethren was complete.

Chapter 11

1-3. News of all this spread and reached Jerusalem. It must have caused consternation but there is no hint that Peter was summoned to return; in due course he arrived back there. Some translations stress the circumcised group as though it were a right-wing party within the Church. This is not necessary; Luke is simply differentiating between the Gentiles and the Jewish believers. It seems that the concern of the Jewish leaders was that, whilst they had become believers in Jesus, they saw themselves as fulfilled Jews - their Messiah had come. They were not giving up their Jewishness. The laws about clean and unclean were still effective. Peter had not only entered the house of unclean people, he had actually eaten their unclean food. As so often with us human beings, they missed the wonder of the conversion of these Gentiles because their eyes were fixed on a detail. It was like the Jews objecting to Jesus healing on the Sabbath.

4-17. Luke tells the whole story again, this time in a slightly different order because it is from Peter's standpoint. There is an addition in verse 14 where, apparently, Cornelius was given information about the nature of the message Peter will bring. No doubt, this would have helped prepare the hearts of Cornelius and his friends; they would have been expecting information which would require some response from them; a message which would offer them something they desired. The statement that it was as Peter began to speak that the Holy Spirit fell, need not be translated in quite that way; it simply means he had not completed his explanation. The basic story has now been told three times. Once in 10: 1-23; then as Peter and Cornelius exchanged details of the separate experiences they had had (10:27-35) which culminated in the baptism of these Gentiles; and finally 11:1-17. If the Church had not embraced the Gentiles, it would have become only a sect within Judaism and may not even have survived. So this event was of profound importance. This is why Luke recounts it in detail yet again.

Peter, does not attempt to put forward any argument, theological or rational; he simply recounts the facts and lets them speak for themselves.

18. Their objections were not only silenced they were turned to praise. The word 'even' grates, but reveals the depth of feeling that had existed (and still exists) amongst the Jews towards every other race. The battle was won, but it was to be raised again in a lesser form in Chapter 15 and even Peter himself reverted to the old ways, in fear if not conviction (Galatians 2:11-16).

19-21. Luke goes back to his comments at the beginning of Chapter 8 that the persecution following Stephen's death scattered the believers. He followed the history of just one of these, Philip. He now reminds us of the others, although he does not name them. Initially, of course, as we have already seen, they went to Jews only. However, some began to preach the good news of Jesus to Gentiles also - or did they? There are two problems here. One is textual. The actual word is 'Hellenists'; who are they? Does the word refer to the Greeks as the translation implies? or does it simply mean Greek-speaking Jews? In view of the difficulty the Lord had in convincing first Peter and then the Church leaders in Jerusalem that salvation was for the Gentiles only, it seems unlikely that the scattered believers (all of whom were Jews) would have preached to any but fellow Jews. Or has Luke condensed the story and in fact it was only after the clarification of the situation given in vv. 1-18 of this chapter that missionaries went to the Gentiles? It is interesting to notice Luke's careful description that these men came from Cyprus, an island and Cyrene on the coast of Africa, many miles east of Jerusalem. How rapidly the faith was spreading.

22-24. We have seen that it was the custom for the church in Jerusalem to send apostles to check and confirm the work of missionaries as the gospel spread (8: 14) and they did the same when news of the events in Antioch reached them. However, in this case they did not send an apostle but Barnabas. Luke was obviously impressed by Barnabas and pays a simple but profound tribute to him in the way he describes him. The Lord continues to add believers to the Church and to himself.

25-26. Something between seven to nine years had passed since Saul had escaped from Damascus and then sent home to Tarsus from Jerusalem. We know nothing of what he had been doing, although it may be during this period that he went to Syria and Cilicia (Gal.1:21). Barnabas remembers his friend, and as Tarsus was only some 150 miles from Antioch, sets off to find him and bring him back to Antioch to work with him in the new Church there. They stay for a whole year. Probably the nickname 'Christians' was somewhat derisory. It seems that the people assumed Christ was a proper name rather like our surname, rather than a title 'The Christ'. In fact the term is not used very frequently by the writers of the new testament, who prefer to refer to the saints or the brethren. However, Peter uses it in his first letter (4:16).

27-30. Today, we are not used to having prophets within the Church; we concentrate more on priests, pastors and administrators. However, the prophets were important people and held in high regard. It is interesting that so early on in the history of the Church there were these recognised bands of itinerant prophets, because Luke gives no information about how they arose, nor gained their authority. As time went on, presumably the truth of their prophecies were self-authenticating. They were not linked to any one locality or congregation; they belonged to the Church as a whole. Scholars have a problem in identifying a world-wide famine at this time, although it is known that there was a famine in Judea in AD 46.

Luke continues his emphasis on the unity of the Church. The believers in Jerusalem had sent Barnabas to build up and encourage the Gentile believers in Antioch. Now, they send him back, with Saul, to Jerusalem with a financial gift because the members of the Church are all 'brothers'.

Chapter 12

1-5. Herod Agrippa died in AD 44, so if the famine in Judea was the one in AD 46 (see note on 11:28) that would mean that the aid brought by Saul and Barnabas arrived very early. However, Luke is vague about the timing here. Herod was not popular and it seems that he saw a way of ingratiating himself with the Jews by attacking the Christians. The death of James raises a spiritual/moral problem which recurs all down history: why is one (Peter) saved while another (James) perishes? We must not dare speculate that prayer was made for the former but not for the latter; nor that one was more or less righteous than the other (for which was which?). Seeing the approval he received at the execution of James, Herod decides to go for the leader, Peter. No trial was permitted during the Feast of Unleavened Bread, so Herod puts Peter in prison and, no doubt being aware of his escape from prison on a previous occasion (5:19), he puts him under personal guard round the clock.

6-7. Luke lets the facts speak for themselves without elaboration, but it is wonderful to see the growth of Peter's personal faith. He who was so frightened on the night of Christ's betrayal that he denied three times that he was one of the Lord's followers, is now in prison chained to two guards (it was common practice to be chained to one, but Herod was taking no chances) awaiting almost certain execution - his great friend and colleague, James, has already been beheaded - yet he is fast asleep!

8-10. Some commentators are reluctant to see a supernatural miracle in this deliverance of Peter. They point out that the word 'angel' can be, and often is, translated as 'messenger'. They speak of bribery of the guards and point to legends current at the time with similar content; arguing that this actual event then became embroidered with such legendary detail. However, that is to contradict the impression which Luke so clearly wishes to convey. He records that the chains 'fell off', they were not loosened by another human being. The guards on the other end of the chains do not wake up, even while Peter gets dressed; nor do the other two guards as they pass them. Luke stresses that the gate opens of its own accord and that Peter did not think it was really happening, he sensed that there was something abnormal about it.

11. At last Peter realises that this is no vision or dream; he really is walking down the street.

12. This simple sentence reveals so much information. Mark, who was to accompany Paul on a missionary journey and later write the second gospel, had a mother who was obviously deeply involved in the early Church. Indeed, it seems that her house was the current headquarters of the believers. It has been suggested that it may be here that there was the 'Upper Room' of the last supper. Certainly it was a large house because many people were gathered there and it had an outer court and there was a servant (assuming Rhoda was based at that house and was not simply a believer who was attending the prayer meeting - it is unlikely that a servant girl from another house would be free to attend). It was some time into the night yet these Christians had gathered to pray (v.5).

13-15. Perhaps to authenticate the story, Luke mentions the name of the servant and that name has been handed down the years to us today. When the immediate danger was over, the story would no doubt be told with much humour that she had left Peter standing outside. At the time, however, Peter must have been frustrated. The Lord had brought him out of prison, but if he was kept out on the street much longer, someone might recognise him. How foolish we are so often, instead of philosophical argument, why did they not go to the door and look?

16-17. Most commentators remark on the fact that they were in the middle of praying for Peter, but when their prayer is answered they are astonished. What does that say about faith? Jesus was never surprised, he expected his prayer to be answered. Nevertheless, such a comment is easy to make; yet we must face the fact that very often we do not see our prayers answered so dramatically. The reference to the hand gesture encourages the understanding that Luke based his description of events on an eye-witness report. James cannot have been the apostle because he had just been executed. It must refer to the Lord's brother who did not believe in him until after his death and resurrection. By Chapter 15 he is the recognised leader of the apostles and here we see his importance as Peter mentions him specifically. Various suggestions have been made as to where Peter went. Some Roman Catholics claim he went to Rome and became the first Pope, but that is most unlikely as he was back in Jerusalem for the Council in Chapter 15. There is a visit he made to Antioch mentioned in Galatians 2:11 which is not accounted for elsewhere. However, it seems that all that Luke implies is that Peter went into hiding until the danger had passed - possibly after Herod's death.

18-19. It was customary that if a prisoner escaped, his guards should suffer the penalty which was likely to have been imposed on the prisoner. (Another reason to dismiss the bribery theory.) In this case it seems unfair. We need to remember that in the world set-up, for God to answer our prayers, it may mean that someone else must suffer. That may be right or necessary, but we need to be aware of it.

20. Herod left Jerusalem to go to the provincial capital. Josephus, the historian, records that some games had been arranged there in honour of Caesar. Apparently the people of Tyre and Sidon, which were self-governing, had upset Herod in some way and, as their food supply came from the area over which he ruled, they contacted his chamberlain and sued for peace.

21-23. Herod decided to capitalise on the submissive approach of the people of Tyre and Sidon, and publicly humiliated them by his address. Josephus states that he was dressed in a silver robe which reflected the sun and the people said that if before they had treated him as a man they now realised he was more than mortal. Herod did not refute this but was immediately afflicted by some internal pain, was carried into his palace and died five days later. Luke tells a similar story. He attributes it directly to an angel of the Lord but does not imply the angel was visible. In that area round worms or tape worms can cause intestinal obstruction. Having recorded how Herod's attack on the Church resulted in his own death, Luke comments:-

24-25. The reference to Barnabas and Paul comes as something of a surprise because they have not been mentioned as involved in any way with the events just described. Were they really in Jerusalem at that particular time, or has the order of things become muddled somewhere? However, we have now been introduced to John Mark.

Chapter 13

1-3. We have already seen that there was a cosmopolitan population at Antioch and that applied also to the Church there. It may be that Simeon is the Simon from Cyrene who carried Christ's cross. Mark, in his gospel, records that Simon was the father of Rufus and Alexander -as though he assumes his readers will know who these two are. It seems most likely, therefore, that they had become believers and very probably that was because their father had become one also. There is the problem, however, that Luke refers to him as Simon in his gospel and Simeon here. The reference to Manaen is interesting because it may be that Luke gained his information about what went on in the court circles from this man.

The Church obviously practised fasting as well as prayer and on one occasion, as they were worshipping, the Holy Spirit revealed that God had a special task for Barnabas and Paul. Luke does not explain how the Holy Spirit revealed this; probably one of the prophets received it and the others confirmed it was true; or maybe Barnabas and Paul felt the call, shared it with the others and they confirmed it. Nor does Luke give details of just what the 'work' was; perhaps it wasn't revealed at that stage. Obviously, however, some sense of mission in a wider sense than had been the case until now, was involved. It isn't clear whether it was just the five mentioned here who were involved in the decision; more probably it was the whole Church membership. So after further prayer and fasting the two are commissioned with the laying on of hands and sent off.

4-5. Luke now concentrates on Barnabas and Paul, particularly the latter. However, we must not forget that the Holy Spirit was at work through other apostles and believers, it is just that their lives and exploits have not been recorded in such detail. Did the Spirit clearly direct Paul and Barnabas to Cyprus or was it that Barnabas who came from there, wanted to share his new faith with his own people and that was in line with God's will? Seleucia, was the nearby port, about 15 miles or so from Antioch. They took with them John Mark. Some commentators seek to question whether this was right; had he been called by the Spirit? However, it is probably more simple than that; the two older men probably wanted someone to accompany them as a helper or servant. It does not necessarily mean that they intended to use him in ministering the gospel. The fact that there was more than one synagogue at Salamis indicates that there was a sizeable population of Jews there, and it is to them that the two missionaries go first.

6-12. Barnabas and Paul travelled across Cyprus from Salamis in the East to Paphos in the West - about 90 miles - apparently preaching as they went. Luke does not record any details of the journey but concentrates on their encounter with a false prophet. He had done the same in respect of Philip's encounter with Simon (8:9 ff.) and, of course, Paul himself had been in darkness and opposed to the gospel. It seems that Luke seeks to stress the power of God overcoming the powers of darkness. 'Bar-Jesus' literally means, 'Son of Salvation', but this is the very last thing this man was for he was leading people into error. His Greek name, Elymas, was more accurate, for Luke interprets it as meaning 'magic'. Luke points out that he was a Jew; Jews were forbidden to practise magic. He describes the proconsul as an intelligent man who 'wanted to hear the word of God'. Elymas obviously sees the danger to himself and his position as an attendant or adviser, and seeks to divert his master from believing Barnabas and Paul.

Luke mentions in passing, as it were, that Saul was also known as Paul. It may be romantic to suggest that Paul himself made the change to show that the old person, the Jewish bigot, had died and he was now a new creation in Christ, but it is more likely that, in common with many others, he had both a Jewish and a Greek name. No doubt, as he sets out as a missionary to the Gentiles he was known more and more by his Greek name and certainly

from now on Luke refers to him as Paul. Interestingly whereas until now the two have been referred to as Barnabas and Saul, from this point Paul is always mentioned before Barnabas. Paul confronts Elymas and exposes him as a being not a child of salvation but of the devil. He pronounces upon him a punishment which reflects what he himself experienced on the road to Damascus (although it would be wrong to see it as a punishment in his own case where it seems to be a consequence of the brilliant light); he will be blind for a period - a physical manifestation of his spiritual state. This happens immediately. The proconsul is deeply affected by this and becomes a believer; not so much because of the immediate fulfilment of Paul's pronouncement but because he was amazed at the teaching about Jesus. 13. We are not told why they left Cyprus and chose to go to Pamphylia; and must assume that they believed this is where God wanted them and would have intervened if they were wrong. Perga is, in fact, about 12 miles inland from the port of Attalia. Here John Mark leaves them. At this stage Luke simply records the fact without comment. However, it was a very serious matter because later (15:38) Luke is to state that Paul saw it as desertion and it caused a major split between him and Barnabas. It is pointless trying to speculate why John went home. He would have been very young and immature at the time, but later he was to write the gospel bearing his name.

14-15. There is no record of any particular ministry undertaken at Perga. It has been suggested that Paul may have developed the illness to which he refers in Galatians 4:13 and that this was a form of Malaria. It was, therefore, more helpful for Paul to leave the lowlands and go up into the mountains (but how did he cope with the climb if he was, indeed, sick?). It was Paul's custom always to preach first to the Jews and only if and when they rejected the gospel to go to the Gentiles. We are not told how the rulers of the synagogue recognised that Paul was a Rabbi. Was he dressed as one? or did this come out in some conversation prior to the service? Luke now records what he probably intends us to understand as a typical sermon of Paul's when he is amongst Jews.

16-20. In Israel in Christ's time Rabbi's would sit to teach; it seems the custom was different here. Paul begins by establishing his orthodoxy. He is a foreigner and unknown so he rehearses the truths of the Jewish faith stressing the fact that God had a purpose and plan for the Jews. Apparently Paul allows for 400 years in Egypt, 40 in the wilderness and 10 in possessing the land.

21-22. Having dealt with God's plan to call Israel and give them a land, Paul now turns to deal with God's plan to give them leaders. He does not need to mention Moses because he has already reached the point where the people are in the promised land and, in any case, his aim is to get to Jesus as quickly as he can. So he comes to David who was recognised as the greatest King Israel had ever had.

23-25. Paul assumes that his listeners are aware that God had promised to David that his descendants would sit on the throne for ever (e.g. 2 Sam.7:12), and moves straight from David to Jesus. There is no explanation given as to who Jesus was, where he came from. Was Paul assuming that news of Jesus had reached Pisidian Antioch? or is it that Luke is summarising Paul's sermon and does not record the actual detail which Paul would have given here? Similarly Paul speaks of John the Baptist with no explanation of where he came from or who he was. He thinks it necessary to record John's understanding of himself that he was a humble forerunner of the Messiah. (There is a view that news of John had reached these people and that he was too highly revered so Paul sets the record straight. This seems unlikely.) There is some underlying dynamic here we cannot fully understand. Most probably Luke is setting out a typical sermon of Paul rather than the exact words he used on this occasion.

26.31. Paul goes straight to his main point. He has reminded his listeners that a Saviour, descended from David, has been promised and states that it is now, in this generation, that the promise has been fulfilled. "The message has come to us." It had, of course, come to the people of Jerusalem first, but they missed it, they rejected it. The Law and the prophets had just been read that morning in the hearing of them all, as it was every Sabbath in every synagogue. So the people knew that the prophets had warned that when the Messiah came he would be rejected and they had fulfilled that very prediction. Paul does not put the blame on the Roman authorities for executing Jesus; unlike the Jews, who had the scriptures, they did not know the prophecies. It was the Jews of Jerusalem who had asked that Jesus be put to death. That was what man had done to Jesus. However, God intervened and raised Jesus from the dead. This may sound unbelievable, but he was seen (not as a one-off experience, but over many days) by the very people who knew him best, the ones who had travelled with him. They (Paul of course, had not been one of these who had been with Jesus in his earthly ministry) are now testifying to the truth about this Jesus.

32-37. Paul now uses the pronoun 'we' as the bringers of the good news. The great hope for which the people of Israel have been longing all down the ages, has been fulfilled now, in their own time. By linking the quotation from Psalm 2 to the resurrection, it could seem that Paul was saying that it was when the Father raised Jesus that he became his Son. It is much more likely that his intention is to show that it was because Jesus was his Son that he raised him. The quotations from Isaiah 55:3 and Psalm 16:10 indicate that it was someone other than David who was to inherit the blessings. David died; he was not raised but his body was buried and decayed. It is the one who was raised, Jesus, who is the Holy One.

38-41. Having explained that Jesus is the Messiah and the certainty of his resurrection, Paul now makes his appeal. As it is set out here it might seem that he is saying that the law of Moses can justify you from some sins and Christ deals with the rest. That is not so; in his letter to the Galatians - the very people he is addressing here - he states that "by observing the law no one will be justified." We all fail to keep the law so the law cannot save anyone, but full and free salvation is offered to everyone who believes: in his very first sermon in Galatia Paul proclaims salvation for Jew and Gentile alike, through Christ. He backs up his appeal with a warning. In a typically Jewish manner he takes a prophecy which to us seems totally out of context. It is from Habakkuk 1:5 where the prophet is speaking of the surprising act of God in bringing the Babylonians against the people of Israel as instruments of his judgement. This sermon preached by Paul in Antioch of Pisidia is very similar indeed to that preached by Peter in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, including the reference to David.

42-43. The Authorised Version has the strange statement that when the Jews had left the synagogue it was the Gentiles who asked the two to come back the next Sabbath. However, this is based on what is almost certainly a corrupt text. It seems that it was the people as a whole (and not just the leaders) who asked them to return. Some didn't even wait so long; after the meeting they followed Paul and Barnabas to find out more. What did Luke mean by 'continue in the grace of God?' Was he saying that already some of the Jews and proselytes had found the Grace, as opposed to the Law, of God in the Old Testament? Or was it that some had begun to see the truth of what they had just heard from Paul who, with Barnabas, encouraged them to persevere in their new understanding?

44-48. There is no doubt that Luke exaggerates when he says that all the city gathered; what he implies is that it was no longer just the Jews and the proselytes who came. Paul and Barnabas had created such a sensation that the Gentiles heard about it and wanted to hear the gospel also. We are not entirely sure what the jealousy of the leaders was. Some commentators suggest it was the large numbers whom they had not been able to attract

themselves. However, the Jews were not naturally evangelistic believing themselves to be chosen above other nations, and it is more likely that the jealousy was that they wanted to preserve their exclusiveness. They naturally attacked Paul's teaching that the privileges of being the chosen people were for everyone. It was Paul's custom in each town, always to offer the good news to the Jews first. It seems that he believed this was God's will. However, as soon as the Jews rejected it he went to the Gentiles.

There are two interesting points here. Paul speaks of the Jews not considering themselves worthy of eternal life. We must not press this phrase. Paul's theology was that no one is worthy; eternal life is the free gift of God, all we can do is accept it. No doubt he phrased his words to high-light just what these Jews were doing by rejecting the gospel. The other point is Luke's comment about people being destined for eternal life. Here he comes down very heavily on the side of the predestination aspect of salvation. However, in referring to Paul's condemnation of the Jews exercising their choice to reject the word of the Lord, he has already declared the aspect of free-will. It may be that Luke is simply setting down the fact that the Jews had kept their religion to themselves; once Paul and Barnabas declared that the gospel was for everyone many of the Gentiles responded by believing.

49-51. The impact was so great that the new believers shared their faith through the surrounding region. However, the pattern of mission was repeated; success brings persecution. When the word of God spreads it challenges the existing order. As so often happens, it seems that in some families it was the women who were God-fearing. The Jews got at their husbands through them and the leading men of the town were persuaded to take action against Paul and Barnabas, who were expelled from the area under their control.

In their turn the missionaries shook the dust from their shoes. This was a symbolic gesture carried out by Jews returning to their homeland; shaking the dust of pagan lands from their feet. The two were thus proclaiming that those who had rejected the gospel had turned themselves into pagans. Some commentators assume that verse 52 refers to Paul and Barnabas, but would Luke, at this stage, refer to them as disciples? It is more likely that he is speaking of the new converts left behind in Antioch.

Chapter 14

1-3. Paul and Barnabas followed their custom of going first to the synagogue. Once again the initial response is encouraging and a large number of both Jews and Gentiles (presumably the proselytes) believe. However, once again some of the Jews are opposed to what is being preached - the implication is that they were disobedient in this - and they stir up trouble by influencing other non-Jewish citizens against Paul and Barnabas. There is a sudden shift in the story because we might expect them to 'shake the dust from their feet' as they had done at Pisidian Antioch (13:51) but apparently the very opposition was what made the two stay in Iconium for a considerable time. As had happened with the preaching of the word at Jerusalem, God confirmed the truth of it by performing signs and wonders through the two missionaries.

4-7. Although Paul and Barnabas were more than prepared to stay in the face of opposition to establish the believers and to expound the truth in detail, when it reached the stage that the people in authority were willing to allow a lynching, the two fled to a neighbouring but different region of Galatia. There does not seem to be any strategic reason why they selected Lystra and Derbe to continue their mission; presumably these were the most convenient safe havens at the time. Their experience at Antioch and Iconium, however, in no way hindered their enthusiasm to preach the gospel. It is interesting that in verses 4 and 14 Luke refers to both Paul and Barnabas as apostles. Neither had been amongst the original 12 but Paul claimed to have seen the risen Lord - one of the criteria for being recognised as an apostle. It seems that there were others who were sent out as representatives of a church, as Barnabas had been with Paul, who were recognised as apostles in a less exclusive sense.

8-10. There is no reference to a synagogue in Lystra and apparently Paul begins to preach in the open. It seems very probable that in his preaching he refers to the power of Jesus to heal because there is a cripple whose interest and faith were stirred. Paul is aware of this and, as Peter had done with the cripple at the beautiful gate (3:4), he looks straight at him and commands the healing, which happens immediately.

11-13. The response of the crowd may seem extraordinary to us. However, Lystra was a village off the beaten track and would not be open to the influence of traders and others with a wider view of the world. In view of the behaviour of some devotees of flying saucers in our own day, why should we be surprised at the reaction here? After all, they had just seen a man crippled from birth healed in an instant. In addition, there was a local legend that once Zeus and Hermes had visited the area in the form of mortals, and had not been received; in their anger these gods had punished the people by sending floods. Obviously the inhabitants did not want to risk offending them again! Paul had presumably addressed the people in Greek, but the conversation amongst the people was conducted in a local language or dialect which Paul and Barnabas did not understand. It was only when the priest of Zeus came to offer them sacrifices that they understood what was happening.

12-18. Tearing clothes was a sign of grief and distress. Luke records enough of Paul's speech on this occasion to show how he adapted his material to his audience. These were not Jews who knew the scriptures or merchants in the cities, but pagans living off the land. They worshipped a multiplicity of gods, each responsible for a different aspect of life. Paul tells them of the one true and living God; he created everything and he it is who is at work today, sending them rain for their crops etc. v.15 refers to the 'good news' and Paul must have elaborated on this, explaining just how the people could turn from their worthless idols to the living God. .

19.20. It is not difficult to imagine how the Jews would be able to confuse the people of Lystra by saying that even they, who believed in the one creator God, disowned Paul and Barnabas. The people would feel foolish at mistaking the two as being gods, and directed their embarrassment away from themselves towards those who had caused it. In 2 Cor. 11 Paul lists the hardships he has suffered in Christ's service and says, "once I was stoned" (v.25). Obviously this was the occasion. His attackers thought he was dead but he wasn't - Luke claims no miraculous resurrection here. His disciples (so apparently there were some who had accepted the truth of what he had preached) gathered round him and he returned to the city to stay over night. In the morning, in spite of his wounds, he and Barnabas leave for Derbe.

21-25. In 2 Tim. 3:11 Paul mentions the opposition in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra but says nothing of Derbe. Presumably this did not happen there to any great extent. Luke gives no details but obviously it was a very successful and encouraging mission in Derbe because there were many converts. Then Paul and Barnabas show incredible courage; they return to the cities where they had been persecuted. In the first of these Paul had nearly lost his life. However, it must have been their concern for the new believers which drove them to return. Paul was not content to win converts, he wanted to 'present them mature in Christ.' In order to encourage them, they warned them that the Christian life is difficult, but the reward is certain and sure - a place in the kingdom of God. It is difficult to know how they chose the elders. Where would these leaders receive their own instruction? Obviously there was very great reliance on the Holy Spirit to 'lead them into all truth.' The elders were commissioned as Paul and Barnabas had been, with prayer and fasting.

Paul and Barnabas then cross the mountains and enter the lower plains. This time they do visit Perga, which they had not done on their arrival, and preach there before going on to the port of Attalia.

26-28. It may well be that Luke was among the people who gathered to hear from Paul and Barnabas. How important it was (and is) that those who had commissioned the missionaries, should feel and be involved in their work. If we pray for people, we need to hear how God is at work in their lives. Today, we do have to wait for them to return to have reports, films, videos and photographs. Nevertheless these are not a substitute for renewing friendship and personal contact when they return. The final verse implies that they were distinct from the other church members. Although they had now 'completed the work' for which they had been commissioned, they did not simply slot back into the fellowship; it was only a 'stay' before they would be off again for the Lord.

Chapter 15

1-4. There are some problems about reconciling the time scale of Acts with details given in Paul's letters but it seems that this dispute was probably the one Paul refers to in Galatians 2: 11-21. If so, Peter was at Antioch and was happy to eat with Gentile converts until some men arrived who claimed (apparently falsely) that they came with James's authority and under their influence he separated himself from them. The other Jews followed suit and even Barnabas wavered (Gal.2:12-13). Here Luke does not refer to the issue of eating (although it obviously was an important issue at the council in Jerusalem which he reports later in this chapter [vv. 20 and 29]) but states only that the men from Judea raised the matter of circumcision. Paul, who had been the most extreme of Pharisaical Jews, stood firm on the sufficiency of faith in Christ for salvation and strongly opposes these men (and, according to his letter to the Galatians, Peter himself).

This issue was crucial; the whole of the subsequent history of Christianity depended on the outcome. The view of the Judean group was not that the good news should not be preached to the Gentiles, nor that they were excluded from God's plan of salvation, but that they had to become Jews first and that meant that the men had to be circumcised. It has been said that if that view had been upheld then Christianity would never have been anything more than a sect within Judaism. Looked at from the Jewish viewpoint, their argument seems entirely logical. There is no doubt from the Old Testament that the Jews were God's chosen people with whom he had made an eternal covenant. The sign of that covenant was circumcision. They were looking for the long-expected Messiah. The disciples had convinced some Jews that this Messiah was Jesus. To the surprise of these 'believing' Jews, God was bringing Gentiles into membership of the People of God; they could not deny that the Holy Spirit was falling upon Gentiles as upon themselves. So they were willing to welcome these Gentiles into membership with them; but it was obvious that they must receive the covenant sign of circumcision. As Peter and even Barnabas were swayed by this argument it seems that it was Paul alone who saw the real issue. Had the Antiochan believers given way that would have set a precedent which might have been followed unquestionably for years and it might then have been too late to overturn it.

Paul saw clearly the issue at stake. People were saved out of every race and nation by faith in Jesus (10:35), not because they belonged to any particular race or nation. God had made a new covenant, not adapted the old one. The old covenant was based on law and if the Gentiles had to be circumcised then they were being put under the law. But the law could save no one. If Jews were saved, they were saved not by keeping the law but by faith in Jesus. If Gentiles were saved, they too were saved by faith in Jesus; so why impose the law upon them? That was not only unnecessary but could lead to dangerous misunderstanding. The dispute was 'sharp' and could not be resolved locally; it had to be referred to Jerusalem. So Paul and Barnabas, with some other representatives of the church at Antioch were sent off to Jerusalem for a ruling. As they travelled they shared with the believers they met, the news of the conversion of so many Gentiles; news that was joyfully received.

5-11. The group from Antioch had wisely not raised the issue which had brought them to Jerusalem until they had told what God had been doing among the Gentiles. Thus the discussion, when it came, was not theoretical; the disputants had heard the facts about what had been happening. The group did not have to raise the issue; some Pharisees did it for them. Apparently a further special meeting was called to discuss the matter but, although the leaders dominated the debate, 'the whole assembly' (12) was present.

Peter, having been swayed temporarily in Antioch by the argument of the Pharisees, for which he was rebuked by Paul, was now totally persuaded that Paul was right; indeed, as he

himself had been originally. He now gives a reasoned argument in an unthreatening manner. He reminds them of the conversion of Cornelius under his own ministry (perhaps some 10 years ago). He refers obliquely to God's gentle rebuke to Samuel, who examined all Jesse's sons before anointing David, that God looks on the heart and not the outward appearance. The Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius (and now many other Gentiles) without them being circumcised and so God made no distinction between them and Jews on those grounds. To insist on circumcision was to question what God had already done for and to the Gentiles. Peter then makes one of those points which society prefers not to raise - a tenet which does not really work but no one has the courage to voice - like the emperor's new clothes which did not exist. The law, on which the whole Jewish faith was based, was ineffective because no one had ever been able to keep it. It was a yoke which no one had been able to bear since the day it was given to Moses. It is interesting how Peter ends; he reverses the usual line of argument. He does not say that "we Jews are saved and now the Gentiles are saved as we are" but, the Gentiles are saved by faith in Jesus and we Jews, with all our tradition and law, are saved in the same way as the Gentiles -by grace."

12-18. Wisely the group from Antioch had let Peter present the argument, for he carried more authority in Jerusalem than they. Apparently they then rehearsed what God had done among the Gentiles. Luke does not spell out the details because he has already described the missionary tour fully. The James who speaks here is the brother of Jesus and seems to have assumed the leadership of the Jerusalem church; certainly he is respected and has become known as James the Just. According to Paul (Gal. 2:12) the Pharisee believers had adopted him as their champion and he now intervenes to sum up and declare his own conviction. Although Luke had referred to Peter, he here recalls that James used his Hebrew name 'Simon' or 'Simeon', perhaps stressing his background as a Jew. James refers to the conversion of Cornelius as an illustration of God choosing a people from himself out of the Gentiles. That is, he calls them out just as he had called Israel. He does not say that they are added to Israel. Thus, subtly, he implies there is no need for them to be integrated into the ways of Israel.

The assembly have been told what has been happening; James now seeks to show that this is in line with prophecy. There is a problem with the passage he chooses from Amos, because he does not use the most authentic Hebrew text, which refers to the restored people of Israel 'possessing' the remnant of Edom (i.e. Gentiles), but quotes from the Greek Septuagint. However, the Qumran sect apparently knew of a Hebrew version which probably lies behind the Septuagint translation and James may be quoting from that.

19-21. The word 'judgment' is probably too strong for this was a council not a legal court. James as an (or the) accredited leader, probably the chairman, shares his conviction. The stipulations he proposes are strange as they stand for they appear to link Jewish ceremonial laws (which are peculiar to them) with universal moral principles such as no murder (if 'blood' means shedding blood) and no sexual immorality. It would be superfluous to instruct any believers to abstain from the two latter acts. It is probable that James was here referring to two consecutive chapters of Leviticus where the Jews were given instructions by God about not eating blood and the method of killing animals for food, and also about forbidden sexual relationships i.e. forbidden marriage with various relatives. The purpose then would not be to impose Jewish laws on Gentiles, but to encourage Gentile believers to respect the customs of their Jewish brethren and do nothing which might cause the latter to have to separate themselves from fellowship with them. The final comment (v.21) would seem to bear this out if James is saying, "Because the laws of Moses are still being read out to Jews in their synagogues week by week."

22. James carried the day and the whole church accepted his proposals. Not only was this an immensely important decision for the faith, it was also a very brave one. It was obviously going to make things even more difficult for the Jerusalem Church in their relations with Orthodox Jews and would increase the persecution they could expect from this quarter.

The matter was handled with extreme and sensitive care. They set the decision in writing to carry authority, but they sent two of their own members to authenticate it and explain it - letters can be so cold and impersonal. It seems probable that of the two men chosen to accompany Paul and Barnabas, Judas (of whom we know nothing more) was a Hebrew whereas Silas, who is often referred to as Silvanus, was a Greek. He was to accompany Paul on his next missionary journey and also helped Peter (1 Pet. 5:12). They were not simply members of the church, they were leaders and would be able to speak with authority and benefit any congregation they visited.

23-29. For some reason the NIV translates a repeat of the word 'brothers' as 'believers' in verse 23. The stress is on the fact that the brothers in Jerusalem write to the Gentile brothers in Antioch etc. The Jerusalem church fully accepts them as members of the Christian family with themselves. They refute the claim of the trouble makers that they had been sent by James (Gal. 2:12). The letter then sets out what had been proposed by James and agreed by the assembled company, but it makes clear that they believe they have been guided by the Holy Spirit. The words carry an appropriate sense of authority but the letter ends by commending rather than commanding the judgement.

30-35. Naturally, the believers in Antioch were delighted with the decision that they did not have to become Jews to be Christians. Judas and Silas cemented the bond and ministered as prophets. They stayed a while and then were given an official farewell, to return to Jerusalem. Verse 34 is not included because after the clear statement about the farewell, it is obviously a gloss by a later scribe who tried to explain how it was that Silas was able to accompany Paul (v.40) and added the words 'but Silas decided to remain there.' Although Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch for a while longer, the Church had now produced its own teachers and so the two were free to travel again. The reference to preachers in addition to teachers implies that they continued to reach out to unbelievers.

36-41. It may well have been in the spring, when travel became possible again, that Paul had the idea of re-visiting the churches he and Barnabas had planted. They could take the letter which had been addressed not only to Antioch, but to Syria and Cilicia also. Barnabas, the encourager, wanted to give his cousin, Mark, another chance but Paul obviously thought that Mark's desertion (13:13) on the previous missionary journey, proved him unreliable. The difference of opinion was so sharp that Paul and Barnabas parted company over the issue. (Some commentators believe the matter to be so trivial that there must have been a more profound disagreement which Luke does not reveal. However, trivial matters can trigger deep resentments.) The row reflects poorly on the two of them, but Luke's honest reporting is an encouragement to us - the early church was far from perfect, but God could still use it. Indeed, because both Paul and Barnabas desired to serve the Lord, in spite of their personal differences, he was able to bring good from it. There were now two missionary teams instead of one. Presumably both Mark and Silas had to be called from Jerusalem. We hear nothing of the experiences of Barnabas and Mark, Luke concentrates on Paul and Silas. They travel to Syria and Cilicia strengthening the churches Paul had founded on his previous journey. At that time it does not seem that they had any intention of breaking new ground.

Chapter 16

1-2. Travelling by foot from the East, the first of the churches they came to was at Derbe and then they went on to Lystra, where Paul had been stoned and left for dead! Here they found Timothy whom Paul describes as his 'son' (1 Cor.4:17), so presumably he had been converted under Paul's ministry some 5 years ago. He had been marked out by the believers at Lystra and also Iconium as a young man of promise and Paul decided to take him with him on the rest of his journey. Being of a mixed marriage, Timothy had not been circumcised and Paul rectifies this omission. This has caused problems for some commentators because Paul had only just won his battle in persuading the Jerusalem council to rule that circumcision is not necessary for salvation and that Gentiles were not to have that imposed upon them.

However, this incident shows what a big man Paul was. He had indeed won his point of principle so he could afford to be flexible in dealing with particular situations. The point here is that Timothy was not a Gentile, his mother was a Jewess. Admittedly, children of a mixed marriage were not always accepted by orthodox Jews as being legitimate, but Paul was more than willing to accept him. However, in order for Timothy to be accepted by other Jews, he should receive the covenant sign of circumcision. Paul had strongly opposed the demand that Gentiles should have to become Jews in order to belong to Christ; but here he was simply making a Jew truly a Jew. That did not affect the basis of the salvation for Gentile and Jew alike - faith in Jesus. Timothy would now have greater influence as he joined Paul and Silas on their mission, because he would be acceptable to both Jew and Gentile.

4-5. As Paul revisited the churches he shared the contents of the Jerusalem letter so that there would be no doubt in the minds of all believers that Jewish laws were not to be imposed on Gentiles. How vital it was that this principle should be established from the outset. As in Syria and Cilicia (15:41) the churches were strengthened, and also new believers were added.

6-10. It seems that initially Paul and Silas had no plans to break new ground but simply to revisit the churches which Paul and Barnabas had planted. However, once in Galatia they decided to press on. Here Luke speaks of clear and specific guidance given by the Holy Spirit, whom he also calls the Spirit of Jesus - illustrating the unity of the Godhead. The guidance is both negative - 'kept from', 'prevented' - and positive, in the form of a dream or night vision. We have no idea whether the prevention was due to some outward circumstance or an inner conviction, God can use both. From Iconium it would require some very definite intervention to bring the party to Troas and even more prompting to encourage them to set out across the sea to Macedonia. It was Paul who had the vision but, after he had shared it with his companions, it seems to have been a joint decision to recognise it as a call from God. Suddenly, the pronoun 'we' is introduced; Luke himself has now joined the group. He gives no indication of how he met up with them. Had one of them needed a doctor? was it, in fact, some sickness which had prevented them from entering Asia or Bithynia? We do not know. All Luke wishes to convey is that it was Jesus himself, through the Holy Spirit, who was directing operations.

11-12. Samothrace was a rocky island and apparently they put in there overnight, arriving in Neapolis (the modern Kavalla) the next day. The total journey was some 125-150 miles, so they made good time to cover that in 2 days; the return journey took 5 (20:6). Philippi was some ten miles inland. The text is a little uncertain here but Luke was obviously fully aware of the political division of Macedonia - it has been suggested that Philippi was his home city. The point he establishes here is that for the first time the missionaries reach a Roman colony. It was the custom for Rome to people such colonies with retired soldiers who brought Rome with them. They wore Roman dress and kept Roman laws. No doubt, as with most colonials, they were traditionalists; even more Roman than Rome.

13-15. It seems that in Philippi there was no synagogue. As Luke refers to a gathering of women, it may be that there were not the necessary group of ten Jewish men in order to set up a synagogue. Wherever it was possible synagogues were built near water because of the Jewish purification rites; for the same reason the 'place of prayer' would be by the river which flowed outside the city gates. Waiting until the Sabbath, the little missionary group of four, Paul, Silas, Timothy and Luke, go to this place. Obviously four men who were strangers would create an interest, and it seems that they were invited to address the group or, at least they were put in that position as they talked to the women.

Amongst them there was a business woman, a dealer in purple cloth. Purple dye was extremely expensive and so the implication is that she was reasonably wealthy. She came from Thyatira in a part of Asia known as Lydia (an area which Paul might well have visited had he not been prevented from doing so by the Holy Spirit [16:6]). It may be, therefore, that, as Stott mentions, she was known as 'the Lydian Lady', and then Lydia. She had adopted the Jewish faith and already believed in God. Luke is careful to set out the process of true conversion. God required a human being, Paul, to preach the gospel, but it was he who opened Lydia's heart to respond. We do not know who was included in her household; was it just her servants or was she a widow with children? However, they were baptised and immediately she invites the group to stay in her home. It seems that they hesitated, but she insists and they gladly accept. Not only would it be more comfortable to have such a base, but it might give them a certain standing in the eyes of the local people which would make them more readily accepted as the preached.

16-18. Luke selects three major incidents during the time that they were in Philippi. Having told the story of Lydia's conversion he now relates an encounter with a slave-girl who was demonised (literally 'pythonised', the snake spirit of divination). Spirits, even evil spirits, recognise Jesus (Mark 1:24) and also those who belong to him. What the spirit spoke through this girl about Paul and his companions was indeed the truth. Sometimes spiritist mediums are able to speak the truth and correctly foretell the future. The problem is that the spirits control the persons they inhabit and can lead people away from worshipping God. Satan is willing even to heal people if by so doing he can win their allegiance. Why this spirit was willing to testify truthfully about the standing of the missionaries we cannot know. Perhaps it had knowledge but not wisdom; it was used to speaking out through the poor girl what it knew without understanding the consequences of such proclamation. Paul did not need the attestation of such a source and probably he had concern for the girl. He commands the spirit in the name of Jesus to leave and it does. Luke thus records the power of Christ's name. We are not told whether or not the girl was converted. Many commentators assume that she was. Certainly, now that she was in control of her own life, she may have joined the believers; but she was still a slave and her owners may have prevented this. It may be that Luke tells the story because he is about to relate the wonderful way in which the gaoler was converted and he needs to explain how it was that Paul and Silas were put in prison.

19-21. The girl was no longer able to predict the future and so her owners lost their income from her. The town square was where justice was dispensed and they grabbed Paul and Silas (leaving aside Timothy and Luke) and dragged them before the magistrates. There were usually two such men appointed in a Roman province. Obviously their accusers could not bring as a charge the real reason for their resentment - they had lost their means of making money because Paul and Silas had healed a demonised girl; so they traded on the universal racist dislike of the Jews and piously accused them of seeking to subvert Roman citizens to adopt beliefs and customs not allowed by law. It is true that strictly Romans were not to follow foreign cults, but normally no action was taken against it provided this did not cause trouble.

22-24. We cannot know why the crowd turned on Paul and Silas. Maybe because they were foreigners and there is, to this day, a tendency to blame people who are different from us for anything and everything. The magistrates were obviously influenced by the nature of the charges and the actions of the crowd. There is no hint that Paul and Silas were given a chance to speak in their defence but they were sentenced to be flogged (presumably this was one of the three floggings Paul mentions in 2 Cor. 11:25) and put in prison. Apparently the jailer was given particular instructions to guard them carefully. Was this because their success with the slave girl made the authorities believe they had some abnormal powers? Luke records the instructions no doubt to highlight the wonder of the subsequent release.

25-28. We know that the beating Paul and Silas received was severe (23). They must have been in pain and were singing and praying to focus their faith and keep up their spirits. This was also an important witness because it would have prepared the other inmates of the prison to link the subsequent earthquake and release with the God to whom the two were praying. We can never know how God may use our witness and lifestyle. It is pointless asking how Paul and Silas knew the jailer was about to commit suicide when they were in the inner prison and he wasn't and while it was dark. Luke does not interest himself with such details (the explanation might be as simple as the jailer's wife shouting to him, "Don't kill yourself.")

29-30. No doubt it is for dramatic effect that Luke goes straight to the question asked by the jailer without filling in details of background. Perhaps he had already heard of these two strangers who were preaching about the way of salvation; in any case, he would almost certainly have wanted to know what was so special about them that he had been given instructions to guard them with particular care. The shock, bordering on panic, caused by the earthquake together with his fear which had driven him to suicide, would have enhanced his sense of the supernatural. He calls for lights and actually falls on his knees, shaking before Paul and Silas. Then he leads them out of the inner prison and asks the most important question of his life.

31-34. Paul and Silas explain the way of salvation not only to the jailer but to everyone in his household - presumably they had all come into the prison by now to see what was happening. Much has been made of the fact that the jailer washed their wounds and they washed his sins. Some have even speculated whether the same water was used for the two events. At once the entrance of the jailer into the faith creates a unity, jailer and jailed are equal and he brings the two into his house and feeds them. Luke particularly mentions the joy of the jailer. Surely there could be no question of him putting the prisoners back in the stocks that night. Who can speculate what would have happened had the magistrates not sent for them early next morning?

35-37. Presumably Paul and Silas would have stated their Roman citizenship earlier but, without a trial, this had not been reported to the magistrates. They could be in trouble for treating Roman citizens in such a way. It was important that Paul should make this stand, not only for himself and Silas, but for the future of the Church they were leaving behind. As missionaries who were proclaiming the gospel of Jesus they were people of some standing, and it was important that the city should recognise that. The magistrates must come personally and by so doing publicly acknowledge their mistake.

38-40. The magistrates realised that by making his demand, Paul was not the sort of person to be cowed and so they did as he requested, but nevertheless still requested them to leave, fearing more trouble from their citizens. Paul and Silas do leave, but in their own time so to speak. By going first to Lydia's house, saying their goodbyes and encouraging the believers,

they make the point that they are not being hounded out. Apparently Luke did not go with them because the 'we' of vv. 10-17 reverts to 'they'.

Chapter 17

1-4. At this stage of the spread of Christianity did Paul realise fully the strategy of going to cities on a major trade route so that travellers would take the faith with them to other parts, or was it only that he went to the larger cities where there would be the most people?

Thessalonica was a major trading city and was situated on the Egnatian Way. It lay some 100 miles west of Philippi and the missionaries had to pass through Amphipolis and Apollonia on the way. Luke makes no mention of them stopping in these towns to preach. In Thessalonica Paul goes first to the synagogue. It was his usual tactic to go to the Jews first. No doubt this was to give them the first opportunity to recognise Jesus as their Messiah but also these were the people who would be versed in the religious background on which Paul wanted to build. There is no record of any dramatic miracle in Thessalonica, to confirm the truth he preached; here it seems to have been a matter of intellectual argument - reasoning, explaining, proving, proclaiming and persuading. Some of the Jews were convinced and joined Paul and Silas, but most of the converts were Gentiles. We do not know if the prominent women were important in their own right or whether it was that they were married to important men.

5-9. It is understandable that the Jews were jealous that several of the Gentiles who were attending the synagogue were attracted to Paul's teaching. Although Luke speaks of Jason as though he would be familiar to his readers, in fact we know little of him. Presumably he was a Gentile. Apparently he had taken Paul and Silas into his home but they were not there when the mob turned up. However, Jason himself was there together with some other believers, so it seems that his house was a place where Christians gathered. The term Luke uses for 'city officials' is unusual but other contemporary sources show it to be correct. The charges laid against the missionaries are very serious indeed. Apparently news of them has spread from other towns they have visited - almost certainly from Philippi. They are described as trouble makers (the phrase 'turned the world upside down' in the AV is beloved of preachers but has been discovered to be inaccurate). The most serious accusation is that they are proclaiming another king in opposition to Caesar. Stott points out that Paul may well have spoken of Christ's return, using the word 'parousia', which was commonly used of the visit of a king. All of which could easily be interpreted as stirring up a revolution. No wonder this threw the people and their officials into a panic. Apparently they released Jason and his friends on some form of surety that Paul and Silas would depart from the city.

10-12. It was obviously safer to move Paul and Silas by night and they set off for Berea, about 50 miles to the south west. The zeal of Paul and Silas is astonishing. After their frightening experiences in Philippi and Thessalonica and the fact that they had to flee both, they go immediately to the synagogue in Berea and begin proclaiming the message of Jesus. The Bereans have given their name to those down the ages and today, who make careful study of the Scriptures. In Thessalonica they had preached on three Sabbaths, here they speak daily because the Bereans are so eager. If they checked Paul's message so carefully with Scripture, it is no wonder that many believed. It is interesting that Luke mentions the Greek women before the Greek men; perhaps there were more of them.

13-15. Paul and Silas had had no official trial at Thessalonica and there was nothing to prevent them proclaiming the word at Berea, so when the Jews of the former city heard about it, they came to Berea themselves and repeated their tactics there. Obviously Paul was the main object of their hatred because Silas and Timothy (who has not been mentioned specifically since 16:3) are allowed by the brethren to stay in Berea. However, they think it advisable to take Paul to the coast from where, presumably, they travel by boat to Athens - some 300 miles. There they leave him, returning to Berea with his instructions to tell Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as they can.

16. Athens was the cultural centre of the world. Paul would have heard much about it and its buildings were magnificent. However, what attracted his attention was the great number of idols. He was not overawed by the views of others about the city, he saw things with the eyes of God. The words 'full of' imply luxuriant growth and it was as though the city were overgrown with idols. Paul's reaction was that of God himself; he was jealous for God. Whatever the reputation of the city in the eyes of the world, to Paul there was an aching emptiness in its citizens, they did not have the truth which lies behind all things.

17-18. As was his custom, Paul first sought out the synagogue and preached to those who already believed in Jahweh; but he went also to the market-place and every day shared the truth with any and everyone who was willing to listen.

18. The Epicurean philosophers believed that there were gods, but they were so remote that it was up to us to make what we could of life and find our own happiness. The Stoics believed that everything was an expression of God who was in everything and who was the sum of all that happened. Thus everything that happened was his will and all we could do was accept it because there was nothing anyone could do about it. Some of these philosophers dismissed Paul, calling him a babbler. The word actually means a seed-picker; a bird which turns over all sorts of things looking for food. The implication being that Paul picked up a bit of this and a bit of that but was greatly inferior to themselves who examined things in depth. Others were willing to give him a hearing but didn't understand what he was getting at. It has been suggested that in speaking of Jesus and the resurrection ('Anastasis'), Paul was commending two new gods - Jesus, a male and his consort, Anastasis.

19-21. The Areopagus literally means, 'the hill of Ares'. The Greek god, Ares, was the Roman god, Mars; so it is more usually known as Mars' Hill. It was here that the judicial court of Greece used to meet. It had actually moved to the Royal Porch of the Agora but retained the title, 'Areopagus'. So there is uncertainty as to whether Paul was brought formally to the court to be examined or whether it was a less formal gathering on the hill site. In his time the court had lost much of its legal powers and was more of a Council, regulating city affairs. It seems therefore that Paul was not on trial legally, but it was more than a spontaneous open air gathering. Luke, in writing up the event later, inserts an ironic comment about people who know a lot about religions but do not commit themselves to any - something by no means unknown today.

22-23. Paul is brilliant here and we can learn from him in our approach to those of other faiths. He does not attack them for who enjoys being attacked and made to feel that all that they have believed is wrong? We can win arguments and lose a convert by our insensitivity. We may see the irony in the reference to being very religious, but Paul uses it as a conciliatory statement. Apparently there were many altars to unknown gods in Athens; the people obviously felt that there could well be some god or gods they might offend by leaving them out of their reckoning. Paul's claim that he could tell them who that unknown God is, would have been very intriguing and gained the attention of his audience.

24. Paul proclaims from the outset a cosmic God. He is the one who created everything and cannot be confined in any way by man, certainly not in any man-made building.

25. God does not need anything, if he did he would be incomplete and therefore less than perfect. That does not mean that we are not to serve him but to state that we exist for him, not he for us. He supplies what we need in order to do this; we do not supply him.

26. This verse raises problems. The majority of scholars accept that Paul is referring here to Adam; all mankind comes from common stock. However, has God really determined which empires shall dominate and for how long? and does he determine national boundaries? When these are changed by wars, is God literally manipulating these or is man disrupting God's ordained plan? Perhaps Paul means no more than that although God has given mankind free will, he has not abandoned overall control. He does not move us around like chess pieces, but nevertheless he is in ultimate control. History is not made by man alone, God is also active in it with us. Alternatively, it could be that Paul is saying only that God determined when man should appear upon earth and has set the boundaries between the sea and the land where man is able to live, but his words seem more specific than such a general truth.

27-28. It is not easy to understand the reasoning behind the words 'God did this'. God did what? Create everyone from Adam? But originally, in his innocence, there was no barrier of sin between man and God and so there was no need for man to seek for God; God spoke to man and man heard him. So does the phrase refer to God setting times and boundaries? How does that in particular encourage man to seek for God? However, the thrust of Paul's argument is that although man is estranged from God, God longs that man should seek for him and find him. This is not simply intellectual understanding as the Greek philosophers would argue, but in personal knowledge as experienced by the Jews of the Old Testament. The phrase 'In whom we live...', is ascribed to Epimenides of Crete but is not quoted in a poetic form, so maybe it is the second quotation, 'We are his offspring' which Paul attributes to Greek poets. They, of course, are speaking of Zeus, but Paul cleverly takes their thought, showing that he is well aware of Greek culture, but relates it to the one true God he is commending.

29. In the sense that Paul is using - that we all come from one man (v.26) - we are all indeed God's offspring. If we come from him, therefore, (made in his image as Genesis puts it) how can anyone believe that he can exist as an image, an idol, made of metal or stone (or any other material)? God made us, we cannot make him.

30-31. Paul began by referring to the altar to the unknown God. He does not attack the Athenians for this but explains that God was willing to overlook such ignorance in the past; but this ignorance must not continue and everyone everywhere must repent. This is because God has appointed a day when he will judge the whole world. We do not know the date, but we know the judge. It is to be an agent of God, a man. It will therefore be a righteous judgement because he understands both what it is to be a man and he represents God. Paul does not here claim that that man is God. Perhaps he feels he has already given the Athenians enough to assimilate at this stage. However, he does go on to make the claim which first prompted the Areopagus to question him - the resurrection of Jesus (v.18). It was this which confirms his appointment by God as the judge.

This report of Paul's speech is, of course, a summary compiled by Luke. Paul must have spoken for more than the two or three minutes it would take us to speak out the recorded words. Apart from anything else, from what is reported here, he hasn't mentioned Christ's death, but he could hardly refer to his resurrection without first speaking of his death. Nor is there mention of the name of Jesus; although Paul had certainly done so in the market place (v.18).

32-34. There are a number of key doctrines of the faith but the resurrection is crucial. If this is not true everything else falls (1 Cor. 15:14 & 17). It was this that caused Paul to be brought before the Areopagus and it was this which ended the session. Some sneered and rejected the Gospel. Others said they wanted to hear more; this may have been a polite way of ending the

discussion but maybe some really did want to think more about what Paul had said. Probably, also, some of these simply wanted to debate (v.21). However, Paul did win some converts. We know nothing about Damaris, but there is a tradition that Dionysius became the first Bishop of Athens.

Chapter 18

1-4. Corinth was a far larger city than Athens and was a centre for trade, controlling trade routes both North/South and East/West. It was an excellent centre from which the Gospel would spread. It was also noted for its immorality and the term 'Corinthian' was in common use to describe someone of loose morals. Aquila and Priscilla were very likely believers already - the faith had almost certainly been taken to Rome, the capital of the empire, by this time. Rabbis were expected to have a trade so that they could teach the Jewish faith without charge and Paul was a tentmaker. The word which lies behind this term refers to the hair of a special goat from the region of Tarsus, where Paul grew up. This hair was woven into a cloth which was used for curtains and rugs as well as tents. Maybe Paul was able to weave this cloth as well as make tents from it. As tents were also made of leather, the term could mean that Paul was a leather-worker. (Interesting that at Damascus he stayed at the home of a tanner.) It seems that he was offered employment by his hosts. As was his custom on his journeys, every Sabbath he went to the synagogue to proclaim the gospel to his fellow Jews and to the God-fearing Gentiles.

5-6. Paul had asked Silas and Timothy to come to him (17:15). They now join him but we hear no more about Silas. In 2 Cor. 11:9 Paul refers to a financial gift from the brothers from Macedonia. It seems that this was brought by his two companions because apparently Paul does not need to earn his own living and is able to give all his time to preaching the gospel (The A.V. and R.S.V. do not make that clear). As happened so often, the Jews reject the teaching that Jesus is the Christ and, once again, Paul goes to the Gentiles.

7-8. Paul's bravery is astonishing. In other towns he had suffered physical violence at the hands of the Jews. Here, when the Jews oppose him in the synagogue, he moves into the house next door! One of the first converts is the ruler of the synagogue, what a witness this must have been. The fact that such a prominent Jew should become a believer in Christ may well have influenced the Gentiles to take Paul seriously. In 1 Cor. 1:14 Paul mentions that the only people he, personally, baptised in Corinth were Gaius and Crispus, and this has led to the speculation that Titius Justus was also known as Gaius.

9-11. Ours is a supernatural faith. That does not mean that God does not work through natural means, usually he does; however, he is not confined to such means. Of course, the supernatural is only so to us; no doubt from God's viewpoint, there is less distinction between natural and supernatural ways of expressing himself. Paul was later to reveal to the Corinthians that he came to them in weakness and fear, and with much trembling (1 Cor. 2:3). So he was in need of spiritual encouragement and strengthening. (How wonderful that he did not allow this to prevent him from fulfilling his missionary calling.) Without warning the Lord Jesus appears to him with the greatest encouragement of all - there are many people who are to be won to him by Paul's faithfulness. Paul wins and establishes the new converts by teaching them the word of God.

12-15. At last, as elsewhere, the hostility of the Jews overflows. Maybe they took advantage of the arrival of a new Governor, before he had settled in, to bring a legal case against Paul. This passage reveals the accuracy of Luke as a historian which, in turn, adds authenticity to the record he gives of the early church. Prior to 44 AD Achaia had been part of a larger area governed by a full Consul or Legate; at that time, however, it had been given some autonomy and a Proconsul had been appointed. From other records it is known that Gallio took up that post about 51 AD. He was a younger brother of the philosopher Seneca and has a reputation of being a fair and kind man. The Jews could not really have expected a Roman Governor to make pronouncements about the Jewish faith and so it seems likely that their argument was that whilst the Jewish faith was one legitimately practised under Roman law, Christianity was

so different that it amounted to a new religion and was, therefore, illegal. Gallio does not allow the case to continue as far as allowing the defendant to speak, but refuses to have anything to do with it on the grounds that it is all to do with the internal law of the Jews. No doubt this ruling would have been reported and may well have encouraged other Governors elsewhere to take a similar line, as well as discouraging Jews from looking to the Roman authorities to back them.

16-17. From the word used, it seems that Gallio sanctioned some degree of force, certainly a show of it, in having the Jews ejected. It is difficult to understand why Sosthenes should be made the scape goat. If the words 'they all' refer to the Gentile citizens of Corinth, it may be that they used Gallio's rejection of the case as an opportunity to humiliate the Jews and beat up the nearest senior Jewish official. If the words refer to the frustrated Jews then we have no means of knowing the reason. However, it is interesting that in 1 Cor. 1:1 Paul says he is writing in both his own name and that of a certain Sosthenes. Is this the same man? (after all, the letter was addressed to the Corinthians) and, if so, was he beaten because he, like his predecessor Crispus, had become a believer? or, again did his beating by his fellow Jews encourage him to join the believers himself? It is all conjecture.

18-22. We do not know at what stage of Paul's stay in Corinth the episode before Gallio took place. Obviously Paul remained there for a while afterwards and then decided to return to Syria; no doubt to return to the church at Antioch which had sent him out. Priscilla and Aquila went with him as far as Antioch. It is interesting that in verses 18 and 19 the wife is named before her husband. Luke now summarises a considerable period of time. Almost certainly much will have happened which he does not record. This may be due partly to the fact that he was not with Paul at this time (presumably still in Philippi), but more likely because the events were probably very similar to what he had recorded already and would add little to our understanding of how the faith was spread.

He tells us nothing about the details of the vow which Paul had taken. Almost certainly it would have been the Nazarite vow explained in Numbers 6:1-8. It may seem strange that Paul, now a believer, should return to a provision of the Jewish law. The point is that he was so completely free of his bondage to that law that he could happily rejoice in the fact that he was a Jew with all the heritage that that implied; and was able to use the provisions of Jewish law rightly. He probably took the vow as a form of thanksgiving for God's faithfulness to his promise (vv. 9/10) to keep him safe in Corinth. For a period he would have refrained from meat and wine and would not have cut his hair. At the end of that period the hair would be cut and burnt as a symbol of self-offering to God. Officially this should have been done in Jerusalem, but it was permissible to cut the hair elsewhere and take it to Jerusalem to be offered there at a later date.

At Ephesus he went, as usual, first to the synagogue to preach there. On this occasion he was well received and he was invited to stay longer, but he was not diverted from his plan to return to Antioch as soon as possible, promising to return provided God was willing. Leaving Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus he set off by boat. As Paul was making for Syria it is surprising that he went to Caesarea (some 250 miles south of Antioch) rather than Seleucia. Perhaps this was the only ship available at the time, or maybe it was blown off course. On the other hand, if Paul was planning to get to Jerusalem as soon as possible to make an offering of his hair, he may well have chosen Caesarea deliberately. Although there is no specific mention of which church it was that Paul greeted before going to Antioch, almost certainly it was the 'headquarters' at Jerusalem. The phrases 'going up' and 'going down' were almost invariable used about visiting Jerusalem.

23. Paul had the heart of a missionary evangelist. Much as he had wanted to return to Antioch he could not settle there; he needed to be on the move again. There is always the danger that life may become too comfortable and our passion for Jesus may cool. Luke gives no specific details of just where Paul went but he obviously visited many if not all of the churches which he had founded on his second journey and encouraged the believers who were strengthened by his coming.

24-26. Luke interrupts the story of Paul's third missionary journey to tell of Apollos. Alexandria was a place of learning and he was obviously an intelligent man with a gift of public speaking. He had heard the news of Jesus and believed in him, but his understanding was defective. In particular he had not received full Christian baptism. The baptism of John was one of repentance and did not include the impartation of power to live the new life. It seems that he had heard about the new life or 'the way of the Lord', as Luke puts it so beautifully, but knew nothing of the power of the Holy Spirit to enable him to live it. Apollos was a Jew with a 'thorough knowledge of the scriptures' and he spoke boldly in the synagogue at Ephesus. Priscilla and Aquila were also Jews and heard Apollos. They might easily have argued publicly with Apollos but instead they befriended him and took him to their home where they explained the truth more fully. Here we see a practical example of the way the Church, the Body of Christ, should function. Apollos was the gifted, up-front speaker; Priscilla and Aquila were the loyal supporters with a gift of hospitality. They had taken Paul into their home in Corinth (vv. 2/3) and encouraged him and now they did the same for Apollos, teaching him things about the faith which, no doubt, they would have heard Paul expound.

There is no record of Apollos being baptised again, but that does not necessarily mean it did not happen. Alternatively, Apollos was already a believer and if, as a result of the teaching of Priscilla and Aquila, he was filled with, or baptised in, the Holy Spirit, it may well have been considered unnecessary for him to go through another baptism.

27-28. We know that Paul approved of the ministry of Apollos in Corinth ('I planted the seed, Apollos watered it.' 1 Cor. 3:6) and with his background of learning and deep knowledge of the Scriptures, he would be a formidable advocate for the truth. Luke inserts the words 'by grace'. Grammatically the sentence would make perfect sense without them, but he feels it right to stress that however great the gifts of learning and oratory of a Paul or an Apollos, it is a sovereign act of God that a person comes to faith.

Chapter 19

1-7. Paul had promised to return to Ephesus if God permitted (18:21) and now, about a year later, he does so. There is no reason to suppose that the twelve whom Luke now mentions were the only believers in Ephesus. Priscilla and Aquila had no doubt been sharing the truth and Apollos had had an up-front ministry before being sent to Corinth by 'the brothers' (18:27). However, Paul obviously noticed something deficient in this group, because he asked if they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed. Although in many respects they resembled the state of Apollos before Priscilla and Aquila took him in hand, it seems that they were much further back in their belief. Apparently they had no real understanding of what Christ had come to do. Their remark that they had not even heard of the Holy Spirit must not be taken too literally. Probably they would know enough of the Old Testament to have heard how the Spirit came upon Gideon and others, especially the prophets. Also, of course, John the Baptist, whose baptism they had received, had spoken of one who would follow him who would baptise with the Spirit. They were simply stating that they had no personal knowledge of the Spirit and that they did not know that he was available to them.

This passage of Scripture has given rise to much debate about whether Christian initiation is in two stages or just one. However, that is not the best question to ask because, important as initiation may be, the truly vital matter is not initiation but life. To be a Christian a person must repent, believe, be baptised and be filled with the Spirit. Scripture records that all are necessary but there is no set order in which these things happen. Peter believed in the Lord sufficiently to follow him before he was convicted of his sin. Cornelius believed and was filled with the Spirit before he was baptised. With regard to the Holy Spirit there are two aspects of his work, and there may or may not be a period of separation between them. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts of sin (Jn. 16:8) and no one is able to recognise and confess that Jesus is Lord without the Holy Spirit working upon him or her. Unbelievers (the world) cannot receive or even recognise the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:17) and so, before a person can be filled with the Spirit, he or she must be born again, which is itself the work of the Holy Spirit and which is expressed in and through baptism (Jn. 3:5). Jesus himself was born or conceived by the Holy Spirit but he did not enter upon his ministry nor work any miracle until after he had been filled with the Spirit at his baptism. We must be both born of the Spirit and filled with the Spirit. The former, like natural birth, cannot be repeated, but the latter is not a once and for all event; we need to go on being filled with the Spirit, not because we leak (although we may) but because, if we are about the work of God, the Holy Spirit will be flowing through us and out to others to bring them into the kingdom and to bring the kingdom in.

In this case, when the group were baptised, Paul laid his hands on them and Luke makes it clear that it was then that the Holy Spirit came upon them; they spoke in tongues and they prophesied (they spoke to God and for God).

8-10. On Paul's first visit, the Jews had asked him to spend more time with them (18:20). On this, his second visit, he spends three months reasoning with them. Luke says he was speaking about the kingdom of God; to do that would obviously involve speaking about its king - Jesus. Eventually, of course, the proclamation of the truth provokes a crisis; it cannot go on being a debate, you have to make a decision. Some of the Jews decided they could not accept what Paul was saying and, human nature being what it is, they ridiculed what challenged them. Once again, the Christian Faith is described as the Way. It is no longer possible to use the synagogue for evangelism and so Paul makes use of a teacher named Tyrranus (from which we get our word tyrant). Was that really his name or a nickname given by his students? One text adds the information that Paul taught from 10am until 4pm. In the heat of the day most Ephesians would be taking a siesta and Tyrranus would not be using

the hall himself. Luke comments that this went on for two years which enabled the truth to be shared in the whole region.

11-12. Our translators are a little cautious here; the handkerchiefs were, in fact, the sweat bands which Paul wore round his head, together with his aprons, when working. The events described where articles of clothing, detached from the person, were used (by God, not Paul) to heal people, were most unusual and even Luke calls these particular miracles 'extraordinary'. They happened and there is no reason to state that they cannot happen today, but we are given no encouragement to believe that we should expect them or seek them. Normally (if we can use that word in connection with miracles) the person God uses to heal is present to pray, lay on hands or anoint. The reference to evil spirits prompts Luke to recount a further strange incident.

13-16. In those days there were travelling bands of exorcists. Often they would invoke the name of every god they could think of in the hope of hitting on the right one. We know nothing about Sceva, certainly he was not actually the high priest. Possibly he was related to a high priest. This translation tries to get round the problem by calling him a chiefpriest - probably in his own opinion. It is clear that his sons had no personal knowledge of Jesus, they had to refer to him as 'whom Paul preaches'. In the case of one demonised man, the evil spirit speaks through him. Spirits recognised Jesus in his earthly ministry (Mk. 1:24, 5:7) and apparently this one knew of Paul. Demonised people often possess extraordinary strength; this man was able to overpower the seven brothers and inflict such damage that they ran from him naked and bleeding.

17-20. For many years, especially in the West, the Christian faith has been cerebral; so much a matter of words. It is, of course, right that our faith should rest on facts and not emotionalism. However, we have neglected and no longer expect the supernatural. This is strange when the whole doctrine depends upon the fact that God became man and that that man was raised to life from the dead. Here, the evidence of the power of evil forces, yet the supremacy of the name of Christ, produced an effect which preaching by itself could not. Some of the Jews who had refused to believe (9) were awe-struck and revered the name of Jesus. Apparently some people who had already professed belief still kept books on magic, known as 'Ephesian Letters'. They now publicly destroyed them. A drachma represented a day's wage, so this represented a vast sum. Perhaps we believers today need some dramatic illustration of the reality of spiritual evil and the supreme power of Christ to concentrate our thoughts on what we truly believe.

21-22. In Romans 15:26 Paul refers to an offering which the believers in Macedonia and Achaia had made for the church at Jerusalem and Luke refers to it in Chapter 24:17. It seems that Paul had been advised of this while in Ephesus and was here making arrangements to go and collect it. However, there was still a great opportunity for his work in Ephesus. He refers to this in 1 Corinthians 16:8/9, but also mentions severe opposition. So he sends Timothy and Erastus on ahead. What a man Paul was: travel was difficult and dangerous in those days, but here he is planning the very long journey to Macedonia and Achaia, then to Jerusalem and after that his heart is set on Rome.

23-27. It must be remembered that Luke does not attempt to tell everything that happened to Paul, but he selects his material with a purpose in mind. Here, almost certainly, his aim is to show that the Romans authorities have nothing to fear from Christianity. He had already begun this argument in chapter 18 vv.14 ff. regarding an incident in Corinth, and what might have developed into a very serious riot enables him to illustrate the same truth with regard to Ephesus.

Demetrius was a man who was able to attract others to a cause but he seems to have little idea of how to develop that cause beyond rabble rousing. He was able to appeal to his guild of craftsmen on a number of counts. First he mentions money and says that Paul's preaching is having, or will have, a serious effect on their earnings. He states that great numbers of people are being affected. Even allowing for exaggeration, it shows that Paul was indeed, reaching people with the gospel. Although Christianity is peaceful, it inevitably challenges the ways of the world. Having stated the true basis of his concern, Demetrius then brings in a more noble argument, that the temple of Artemis (the Greek equivalent of the Roman Diana) which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, would be discredited and even the goddess herself might be robbed of position and authority.

28-31. Demetrius was able to stir up mass hysteria and the crowd began to get out of control. They grabbed two of Paul's companions, of whom we have heard nothing before but who are to accompany him when he leaves Ephesus, and then they all rush to the obvious meeting place - the vast theatre which could hold 25,000 people. Showing astonishing bravery, Paul wanted to do what he could in the situation and was more than willing to go to the theatre but the other Christians would not let him do so. It is interesting that by now Paul had made some friends amongst the officials of the area and these also sent a message that he ought not to appear in public.

32-34. Psychologists today speak of crowds taking on what is almost a personality where people en masse do things which, as individuals, none of them would do. Luke illustrates this by explaining that most of the people in the theatre did not even understand the reason they were there. Almost certainly the incident with Alexander arose because Christianity was regarded as a sect within Judaism and the Jews wanted to dissociate themselves from Paul and the Christians because they were being tarred with the same brush. From the viewpoint of Demetrius and his friends that is understandable because Jews, as well as the Christians, forbade idols. It is easy to picture Alexander standing on the stage with his fellow Jews in the front row, trying to give him instructions on what to say. He seeks a hearing, but as soon as the crowd realise he is a Jew they begin again to shout the slogan with which Demetrius and his guild had begun the riot.

35-41. Luke, once again, is well acquainted with the structure of officials at the time. The city clerk was the elected chief administrator recognised by the Roman authorities but not himself a Roman. He was obviously well respected. His argument here is reasonable and responsible. He bolsters the reputation of Artemis and the temple simply by stating that it is already established world-wide. He points out that they have no charges to bring against Gaius and Aristarchus that would stand up in law - if they have then they should bring them through the proper channels. As it is, it is they themselves who are in danger of being charged with breaking the law by the Roman authorities. That would indeed damage Ephesus. He must have been a man of some presence because the crowd disperses.

Chapter 20

1-3. Paul had already planned to leave Ephesus for Macedonia and then Jerusalem (19:21) and the near riot probably convinced him and his friends and advisors that now was the time to go. However, he does not slip away without meeting with the disciples in the city. After encouraging them he sets out. Verse two hardly summarises what was probably nine months or a year of travels. In his letters Paul refers to a visit to Troy (2 Cor. 2:12) and claims to have preached the good news in Illyricum (Rom. 15:19), further to the north and west than any other records show; it was probably during this time that those visits were made. Eventually he reaches Corinth and stays there three months. He had planned to travel back to Syria by sea. Very likely other Jews would be making the same journey at that time in order to reach Jerusalem in time for the Passover. If some of these were the ones who had attacked him when he was previously in Corinth (18:12) without success, it is easy to understand how they might plan to ensure that Paul mysteriously disappeared overboard while at sea. Whatever the means by which Paul discovered the plot, we can surely see God's hand in it; Paul's task was not yet finished.

4-6. Luke gives a list of those who travelled with Paul, who was a man who obviously enjoyed the fellowship of others. Several of those in his party are mentioned elsewhere in Scripture (is Sopater the Sosipater of Rom. 16:21?). The interest for us is to see the different areas from which they all came, indicating the spread of the Gospel under Paul. Almost certainly these were the representatives of the churches which had contributed to the financial gift to help the church at Jerusalem. It seems that it was a considerable sum and, no doubt, they went with Paul to render robbery less likely. Apparently Luke himself joins up with Paul again at this stage because he reverts to 'we'. Paul realised that there was no possibility of his reaching Jerusalem for the Passover and so he celebrated it in Philippi. It may well be that he kept it as the believers festival of Easter.

7-12. There is some uncertainty as to what Luke means by the reference to the first day of the week. The Jews reckoned a day from evening to evening, in which case here the meeting began on the Saturday evening. On the other hand, Luke usually adopted the Roman custom where the day began in the morning, and so the meeting would have begun after work on the Sunday. If this is the case here then it is an indication of the Christians changing from the Jewish Sabbath to observing Sunday, the day on which Christ rose from the dead, as their principle day of worship. The phrase 'to break bread' is more than to say 'for a meal'; it refers to the celebration of the Last Supper. However, it would not be the formal liturgical service we are used to today. There would be a fellowship meal to which all who could would contribute. For some of the poorer members, this might be the best meal of the week. Within this they would also celebrate the remembrance of Christ, as he had instructed his disciples to do. Thus Christ would be brought into the very fellowship of the believers who were vividly reminded that their fellowship with each other existed because of their common allegiance to him as Lord and Saviour.

By the way Luke refers to him, Eutychus, was a lad of about 12-14. The windows of the house were openings which could be boarded up with shutters. With so many in the room and with the oil lamps, it would have been very hot and stuffy so this young man settled himself where there was greater chance of getting some air. For the youngster the discussion (for it would have been a time when the company could question Paul) was probably difficult to follow. He became drowsy, fell asleep and toppled out of the window. The third storey would be what to us is the second floor. This translation is correct in saying that he was picked up dead and not 'for dead'; and remember that Luke was present (v.8) and that he was a doctor. Luke implies that others in the room reached him first and then Paul came down. He copies the action of Elijah and Elisha in similar circumstances, and lies on top of the young man

who is restored to life. Astonishingly they all go back into the room, have their meal which includes the remembrance of Christ in the Last Supper and then Paul resumes his teaching until morning. After such a night it seems an understatement for Luke to say they were all greatly comforted.

13-16. Luke gives no explanation for Paul's decision to walk to Assos while the rest of the party went by ship. It was only 20 miles or so by road (longer by sea). Perhaps he wanted time to be on his own, or maybe he accompanied someone with whom he wanted to speak; speculation is useless. Luke gives a summary of the journey and explains that, having missed Passover in Jerusalem because of the Jewish plot which prevented Paul travelling by sea (v.3), he wanted to be there in time for Pentecost. Presumably because he did not wish to lose their place on the ship which did not call at Ephesus, instead of going himself to that city he sends for the Elders of the church there to come to him at Miletus which was some 30 miles south.

17-21. Some commentators believe that this speech is really more Luke than Paul. Obviously Luke wrote down what we have here; however, there is so much of it that rings true to Paul's thoughts contained in his letters. Luke was present on this occasion (21:1) and could hardly fail to be moved if Paul did indeed speak as Luke reports. Luke may even have made notes, but his memory of the occasion was probably very vivid. We can hardly fail to recognise the similarity between Christ and Paul here. Christ knew he was going to Jerusalem to die and he was concerned for his disciples; would they remain true in the future? As he said, he had so much still to share with them, but they were unable to receive it then. Paul also knows that he is going to Jerusalem to be arrested (v.23) and that he will never see these men again (v.25). It is not surprising that his speech should show some emotion. This is, in fact, the only record of a speech that Paul made to a Christian audience. Like Christ, Paul is concerned for his disciples (the elders of the church at Ephesus) for the future.

He refers first to his own example. His passion for the gospel was overwhelming; the sense of urgency is conveyed in his reminder that he preached publicly and in home after home. The basis of his preaching is summarised in the statement, "Repentance towards God, and believing on or into Jesus who is Lord." It is always difficult to speak of humility because to claim to have it implies the very opposite. The A.V. has "humility of mind," and the R.V. "Lowliness of mind." Whatever his faults, Paul never forgot who he was and what he was when Jesus called him - 'the chief of sinners'.

22-24. Paul's reference to 'every city' probably implies that other people, prophets, were warning him of what lay ahead. Normally we might expect that God gives warnings for us to take action to avoid the danger. In this case, however, Paul does not even contemplate that God may be leading him to avoid Jerusalem. He is so utterly convinced of the reality of eternal heaven that nothing, not even his life, is worth anything compared with pleasing God. These are not just words; Paul knows he is facing danger and suffering; whether or not that means his death he does not know. He will just press on, serving his Lord by proclaiming the gospel until the Lord calls him home. That should be the desire of every Christian - to pass the finishing post still running well.

25-31. Even if Paul doesn't die, his eyes now are fixed on Rome and Spain (Rom. 15: 24-28), so he knows he will not come to Ephesus again. He has a clear conscience about his ministry to the believers at Ephesus. Few pastors can claim this; they feel there is always something more they could have done. Paul so spent himself that he knows that he could not have done more than he did. This is remarkable and reveals his passion for the gospel. This passage reveals something of the leadership structure of the early church. Paul is speaking to the elders of the church at Ephesus (v.17). He tells them that they are overseers (from which we

get our word 'bishop') and shepherds or pastors. Thus these are not three different offices; the same people exercise the different duties. Their first responsibility is to guard their own spirituality before they assume authority over others; and they must always remember that the flock for which they care does not belong to them. It belongs to God who bought his sheep at an incredible price.

He warns also of the danger of heretical teachers (he describes them as savage wolves; no doubt continuing the imagery of the flock)) who will come in and seek to cause disruption. More dangerous still, heretical would-be leaders will arise from their own membership. This is one of the great problems for church leaders, when some new movement occurs within the church; is it the work of the Holy Spirit or is it of the flesh or the devil? Part of the problem is that what begins as the work of the Spirit can become distorted by the other two. Discernment is essential.

32-35. There is a balance between accepting our rightful responsibility towards those in our care, whether it be as pastor, schoolteacher or parent, and relinquishing control. Jesus and now Paul had done all they could to strengthen their disciples; finally, however, they and we can only commit our charges to God. Paul also lays stress on the 'word of his grace'. At this time the word is presumably the Old Testament, or does Paul have in mind such charismatic gifts as words of knowledge and wisdom and prophecy?

He then returns to speaking of his own ministry among them. He worked to support himself and also, he claims, his companions. He quotes words of Jesus which we do not have recorded elsewhere.

36-38. Having completed his exhortation Paul makes his farewells. Sometimes he comes over as a rather abrasive person - he was so passionately devoted to preaching the kingdom; and he set the very highest standards for Christian living, both for himself and for others. Also, however, he was very much a 'people' person. Here we are given a glimpse of the affection in which he was held by the Ephesian elders, and their distress as they bid him goodbye and stay with him to the very last moment.

Chapter 21

1-6. This passage reveals the difficulties of travel in those days; there was no advance booking! You arrived at a port and searched around for a ship that was going near where you wanted to be and negotiated with the captain. The journey from Patara to Tyre was about 450 miles. We see also the bond between Christians. This little group did not know the believers in Tyre, but immediately they are welcomed and stay for seven days. The phrase 'through the Spirit' is interesting. The warnings regarding Paul about suffering will be discussed under v.11; but with this particular phrase, was the Spirit really directing the disciples to instruct Paul not to go to Jerusalem? It is probably preferable to take it as meaning that the Holy Spirit revealed what lay ahead for Paul, but it was the disciples who, in their concern for him, took that to mean that they should try to persuade him not to go. The scene on the beach, where the wives and children come with the men, is reminiscent of the recent farewell with the Ephesian elders.

7-9. Ptolemais is only 40 miles from Tyre yet Paul and his companions waited 7 days while the ship unloaded its cargo. They could easily have covered the journey on land in 2 days. It seems therefore that they had made good time and could afford to relax a little in their endeavour to get to Jerusalem in time for the feast. Ptolemais is another name for Acre or Akko. Philip was one of the 7 deacons chosen by the church in Jerusalem (6:5) and was last mentioned in 8:40 after his meeting with the Ethiopian eunuch, as going to Caesarea. No doubt he had been one of the founders, if not the founder, of the church there. Luke refers to the role of the daughters as prophets; so at least some role of women in ministry was recognised in the early church.

10-11. Agabus has already been mentioned (11:28) but is introduced here as though for the first time. It may be that Luke made notes or kept a diary of the events in which he, personally, had been involved. Later, when he came to write up his history (this book), he researched the subject and was informed about the prior activities of Agabus which he recorded in chronological order, and here he simply makes a direct quotation from his notes without amendment. Agabus echoed the method of many Old Testament prophets and acted out, symbolically, the truth revealed in his prophecy. In fact the prophecy was not fulfilled in literal detail - the Jews did not hand Paul over to the Gentiles; the Gentiles (Romans) rescued him from the Jews. However, it was because of the Jews that Paul fell into the hands of the Romans. The prophecy was certainly fulfilled in substance, but this illustrates that we ought not to take literal interpretation of Scripture to extremes. Surely those who were there to hear the prophecy would not question its accuracy in the light of what happened.

What was the purpose of the Holy Spirit in revealing the suffering that awaited Paul? The disciples (v.4 and v.12) assumed that the information was given so that Paul should be deflected from his purpose to go to Jerusalem. But this does not necessarily follow. Jesus was fully aware of what lay ahead for him in Jerusalem, but he set his face resolutely to go there because he believed that was God's will for him. No doubt Luke sees the similarity here and deliberately draws attention to Paul's willingness to follow his Lord. When the Holy Spirit reveals a truth to us, we need wisdom to know what we should do with that knowledge. It may be something to help us in our dealings with someone, but that does not mean it is always right to reveal what we know to that person or, indeed, anyone else. A word of knowledge gives us facts, a word of wisdom shows us how we should act (1 Cor.12:8). It seems that here the Spirit gives Paul and the church, knowledge of what lies ahead so that they will not be taken by surprise and think that God has lost control of the situation. In that, it is a means of strengthening. Paul was convinced that the Holy Spirit was compelling him to go to Jerusalem and had already warned him what to expect (20:22/3).

12-14. Luke includes himself with those who tried to persuade Paul not to go to Jerusalem. This must have put extra pressure on Paul, just as Peter's remarks at Caesarea Philippi (Matt.16:22ff.) put such pressure on Jesus that he actually referred to him as Satan. Indeed, as we have seen, in the whole of this passage Luke is highlighting the similarity between Paul and Jesus. Even their words, "the Lord's will be done," echo those of Jesus in Gethsemane. Very likely Paul himself saw it as encouragement and a privilege to follow his Lord so closely.

15-16. The phrase, 'got ready', can mean, 'packed our baggage' or 'Saddled horses'. The journey to Jerusalem was about 65 miles and horses would be helpful. Some of the disciples from Caesarea were willing to make the journey with them; perhaps they wanted to attend the feast also. We know nothing of Mnason but it may be that, being a Cypriot, it was easier for Paul to lodge with him than with a more traditional Jewish believer. How ready the early Christians were to open their homes to fellow believers.

17-19. Luke includes the information that Paul and his companions were very well received by the 'senior' church at Jerusalem and the next day they go to see James, who was the recognised leader and the other elders. There is no mention here of handing over the gift which formed an important aspect of Paul's coming to Jerusalem. Luke mentions it only in passing in Chapter 24 v.17. It may be that Paul was apprehensive about how the Jewish believers would receive this gift from the Gentiles; he had asked the Roman Christians for their prayers (Rom.15:31), "that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there." Maybe he felt he still had to justify to the Jewish believers his taking the gospel to the Gentiles. Whether this was so or not, he reported in detail what God (not himself) had been doing among the gentiles through his ministry. He had the balance right; a genuine and not a false humility. The power is the Lord's but we have the responsibility, the privilege and the authority to minister it.

20-25. There was obviously a tension within the early church. The Gentiles had originally complained that they were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food to widows (Chapter 6). But, away from Israel, the Gentile believers did not seem to hold any great resentment towards the Jewish believers - it was the traditional Jews who caused the trouble - and, indeed, they had raised an important donation to help their Jewish brothers in Jerusalem which Paul and his companions were then in Jerusalem to deliver. In Jerusalem, however, the Jewish believers were very wary of the faith being spread amongst the Gentiles. It is important to realise that when a Jew becomes a believer he or she does not cease to be a Jew but becomes a fulfilled Jew; he or she has found the Messiah in Jesus. So they would maintain their Jewish customs. It was a very real concession for them not to impose those customs on Gentiles (Chapter 15). However, there was no question that they, themselves, would relinquish them.

The elders at Jerusalem were in a difficult position. They could not deny what God had done through Paul and the only response possible was to praise God; nevertheless, the more Gentiles who believed, the greater the pressure on them to maintain the unity of the church. We see this pressure manifesting here. They are careful to call Paul 'brother' but to balance his report of the conversion of more and more Gentiles they tell him of conversions among the Jews - 'many thousands' - and all of them zealous for the law. They break it to Paul that the news has got around that he has not only passed on the agreed concessions to the Gentiles but he has extended these to Jewish believers also. Whether or not this is so we cannot know. Paul would not deliberately set out to do this, but if he was evangelising a particular city, it would be very difficult constantly to proclaim different standards or routes, for Jew and Gentile. There is no record here that the Elders actually ask Paul if there is truth in the allegation; maybe they were too tactful to do so. However, they clearly expect trouble once it becomes general knowledge that Paul is actually in Jerusalem. So they try to forestall

objections by asking him to fall in with a plan which they had probably thought up in anticipation of his arrival. He should publicly align himself with Jewish law and customs.

Luke gives no details of the actual purification rites involved and commentators disagree about what they were. We know that a Nazarite vow could involve some expense and it was by no means unusual for a friend or patron to assume these for someone else. Luke does not need to go into detail because all he wants to convey is that Paul should be seen publicly to be supporting the Jewish law and customs. The elders actually press the point to its limit by saying "that you yourself are living in obedience to the law." Paul had certainly never given up his pride in being a Jew and we know that he had already taken a similar vow at Cenchrea (18:18), but it is doubtful that his observance of the law was sufficiently strict that the Jewish believers would wholeheartedly approve. Having pushed the scales down so heavily on the one side, the elders seek to balance things by reminding Paul that they had already written to the Gentiles (in a letter carried by Paul himself [Chapter 15:22/23]) laying down the only regulations they would seek to impose on them.

26. We see here something of Paul's wholeness in Christ. He had been set free not only from the law but from the rigidity which often accompanies such a change. He might so easily have claimed that to be associated with an act of purification under the law would be to compromise his position and all that he stood for. However, being free of the law had not put him in bondage to that freedom.

27-29. This section gives us an insight into the situation facing the elders of the Jerusalem church. Jews from other areas, including Asia, would come to Jerusalem for the feasts. As time went by no doubt some of these would share their experiences of a Jew named Paul who had visited their towns and cities bringing a new teaching and persuading some of their number to leave the traditional faith. He was teaching that the law was no longer essential and that the temple in Jerusalem was not central to the faith. On hearing this, no doubt the traditional Jews in Jerusalem would increase their attacks on their fellows in their city who had joined the disciples and become believers. Almost certainly these believers, in their turn, would resent Paul, not only because he had apparently abandoned his own Jewish faith but he was indirectly responsible for stirring up greater opposition towards themselves.

When Paul was in the temple completing his purification, he was recognised by some of the foreign Jews who knew of, and may well have been involved in, the troubles and near riots his teaching had provoked in their cities. In particular, it seems, there were some who recognised Trophimus, who was one of Paul's converts from Ephesus. These men already had it in their heads that Paul taught against the temple and what it stood for and either deliberately or without checking the facts, spread the false rumour that Paul had brought Trophimus into the area of the temple forbidden to Gentiles, thus defiling it.

30-32. News of what was happening spread rapidly and Paul was manhandled out of the temple. The cohort in Jerusalem consisted of about a thousand men, a quarter of them cavalry. They were stationed in the Fortress of Antonia which was attached to a corner of the temple with steps leading down to the court of the Gentiles, so they were virtually on the spot. The situation was very serious because the crowd were actually trying to kill Paul, but when they saw the colonel and his soldiers they stopped.

33-36. Once again we see Luke stressing the fact that it was the Jews who caused the problem and the Romans who provided safety; that is Christianity is no threat to peace and just government. He also continues to draw attention to the similarity between the attack on Christ and that on Paul. The crowd had similarly cried, "Away with this man" regarding

Christ (Luke 23:18). Stott draws attention to the fact that the same word lies behind the crowd 'seizing' Paul (27) and the commander 'arresting' him.

37-40. As Paul had been seriously manhandled by the crowd, it is surprising that he was fit enough to address them. His mind was clear enough to be able to speak politely to the commander in Greek. The Egyptian to whom the latter refers, had attempted to start a revolt in Jerusalem some 3 years previously. This had been put down firmly and harshly, but the ring leader had escaped. Paul explains who he is but does not, at this stage, reveal that he is a Roman citizen. The commander gives him permission to speak to the crowd. It reveals something of the power of God which Paul exercised that he was able to quieten the mob howling for his blood by a wave of his hand. He addresses them in their own language.

Chapter 22

Paul begins in conciliatory and respectful terms, referring to his listeners as brothers and fathers. We sense that we are reading an eye-witness report because, having explained that Paul waited until the crowd were silent, Luke says that when they heard their own language they became even more attentive.

2-5. Of course, we have this speech by Paul only as it is remembered by Luke and anyone else he consulted when he came to write it up. However, we have no reason to doubt that he correctly conveys the sense of it. Paul speaks with great care and winsomeness. Although he was born in Tarsus he was brought to Jerusalem at an early age (i.e. "I'm one of you"). He was trained by one of the most respected Rabbi's of the day and was so zealous for the faith of the fathers that he was a leading persecutor of 'the Way'. He appeals to the high priest and the Council to confirm that he asked for and received letters of authority from them to go to Damascus and make prisoners of those who were followers of this Way. He thus lays the foundation of his position by pointing out that he was even more fanatical than they in his zeal to put down what he saw as heresy.

6-9. Here Luke tells again the story he related in chapter 9 (see notes) of Paul's dramatic conversion, but here he sets the words in Paul's mouth. The two versions are almost identical, here he adds the information that Jesus was from Nazareth. There is an apparent discrepancy over what the companions heard. The earlier account said they heard the sound, here the original says they did not hear the voice. This NIV translation is probably correct in conveying the sense that they heard a sound but it was meaningless to them.

10-13. Paul is obviously hoping to take the crowd along with him. He is not presenting concepts and ideas of reasoning which caused him to change his mind, but he is recounting events which happened to him and over which he had no control. All who hear this account, including us today, must face the issue, 'If this had happened to me, what would I have done?' Paul is careful to stress that Ananias was a devout Jew but, tactfully, he does not refer to the fact that he was also a believer in Jesus. The fact that Paul receives his sight at the words of this man, authenticates what Ananias is about to say.

14-16. Paul is careful to point out that Ananias refers to 'the God of our fathers,' thus setting the instructions firmly within the continuity of the Jewish faith. He points out also that God's choice of him was prior to his response. He prepares his listeners for the fact that he is about to tell them that he has had a vision of Jesus by reporting the words of Ananias that he is to see the Righteous One and that it was also Ananias who told him that he was to witness to all men, i.e. both Jews and Gentiles.

17-21. Paul does not mention that it was some three years before he returned to Jerusalem. He includes something not told us before - that he had a vision of Christ in the temple. No doubt Paul recounts this to this particular audience to show that following his baptism he never ceased to be a Jew and follow Jewish customs; the vision came to him when he was in the temple. Again Luke draws the similarity between the way Paul was being treated and the experience of Jesus - his testimony would not be accepted in Jerusalem. Once more Paul refers to the fact that originally he had persecuted the Christians; only some dramatic event, coming from outside himself, could have caused such an astonishing change in his attitude.

22. Here the crucial issue arises; the Jews were exclusive, they alone were the chosen people of God. They fell into the error which God constantly corrected in the Old Testament - they were not chosen for any merit of their own. They did not exist when he planned to create them to be a light to the Gentiles. They were chosen to draw others to himself. The effect of

Paul's statement that God had sent him to the Gentiles, shows just how momentous was the decision of the Council of believers in Jerusalem (chapter 15) that Gentile believers could become Christians without first having to become Jews. Once again (21:36) the crowd cry for Paul's death - as they had done to Christ.

23-29. The action of the crowd in throwing clothes and dust in the air may simply have been a common way at that time of expressing their anger, or the reference to dust may refer to the custom of shaking dust from their feet as a sign of rejection. The flogging was not a punishment but a means of extracting the truth. It was so violent that people might die under it. It is at this stage that Paul reveals his Roman citizenship. It was illegal to subject Roman citizens to such treatment without a trial and by binding Paul the commander had already gone too far, and he was obviously fearful of a complaint. Marshall believes the Tribune was at first sarcastic, implying anyone could become a Roman citizen these days by bribery, as he had done. But there is no reason to assume that. Paul inherited his status from his father, but we do not know how his father had gained it. Nor do we know why Paul waited so long before revealing his standing. He had done the same thing at Philippi (16:37). Perhaps he wanted the truth of the gospel to carry its own authority without him claiming any personal authority because of his status.

30. The tribune had not been able to get at the facts. He had arrived on the scene when the riot had already begun and the crowd was so excited that they had been able to give no coherent explanation (21:33-4). Paul's speech had given some of his personal religious background but had suddenly been interrupted by the crowd for a reason the tribune could not understand. So he summoned the Sanhedrin. It is doubtful if this was a formal meeting of that body because a Gentile would not be allowed to attend; and, in any case, it had been called by the commander not the Jewish authorities. He now knew that Paul was a Roman citizen and so he wanted to be sure exactly what it was Paul had done to cause such a disturbance.

Chapter 23

1-5. Paul's claim that with regard to the faith that he follows his conscience is clear infuriates the high priest. This is probably because Paul sees no conflict between his being a faithful Jew and offering the salvation of God to Gentiles who are outside the 'law'. Ananias is known to have been a disreputable man; open to bribery (both given and received) arrogant and a bully. He orders Paul to be struck on the mouth, presumably for speaking blasphemy.

We cannot know whether Paul lost his temper or whether this was controlled righteous anger. Certainly Paul's declaration of God's judgement was fulfilled when Ananias was later assassinated by Jewish zealots for collaborating with the Romans. In Ezekiel 13:10 we read of those who build flimsy walls and cover them with white-wash to hide their imperfections. Many different explanations are given regarding Paul's claim that he did not recognise the high priest. Had he been away from Jerusalem so long that he did not recognise him? As it was an informal meeting of the Sanhedrin, was he not wearing his distinctive robes? Was Paul being sarcastic, that anyone who had ordered him to be struck without trial was not worthy to be the high priest? (This seems unlikely in view of Paul's quotation from Scripture [Exodus 22:28] for that would make him knowingly guilty of transgressing the law.) Or was it that Paul had a problem with his eyes (Gal. 4:13-15 and 6:11) and he could not clearly see who it was who had given the order?

6-10. The question arises whether Paul was deliberately seeking to confuse the issue by setting the Pharisees against the Sadducees and, if so, was he justified in doing so? From Luke's description in verse 6, it seems that Paul did know full well what he was doing. However, it may well be that he was bringing the issue to a head for the sake of the gospel rather than just saving his own skin (See note on v. 11). The Sadducees were the fundamentalists of the time, taking the Pentateuch alone as their authority and interpreting it literally. The Pharisees had more open minds and, seeing they already believed in a resurrection of the body, might be persuaded that Jesus had, indeed, risen from the dead. They might also be more ready to accept the truth about the work of the Holy Spirit. The issue of the resurrection is crucial to the Christian faith and Paul sets that clearly before the Sanhedrin. Some of the Pharisees take up this issue and side with Paul, others are not convinced, and the Sadducees are even more enraged. It seems as though the commander had adopted the role of an observer rather than judge or interrogator. He had brought Paul before his elders and allowed them to argue out the issues involved, hoping in this way to understand what had caused such violence on the part of the crowd. In fact, what had happened was that almost immediately the same violence had broken out again amongst the leaders of the Jews. For the third time the commander had to send in the troops to rescue Paul.

11. No one could doubt Paul's courage after all that has been told about him already. He was prepared to die for the Lord. However, it is often easier to show bravery in the immediate circumstance of opposition and action than alone in captivity over a period. That night the Lord appears to Paul to tell him that he is to witness to him in Rome. The remaining chapters of the book will tell of the astonishing conflicts which Paul was to experience in getting there. He must have been strengthened over this period by the assurance of these words from the Lord. Whatever commentators may say about Paul's behaviour before the Sanhedrin (vv. 6-8), Jesus calls it testimony to himself.

12-15. There is a group of Jews who are obviously fanatics. Often such people are impetuous; these forty take an oath without thinking too clearly about the consequences and they explain their plan to the leaders in the Sanhedrin who are more than prepared to go along with them to further their own ends.

16. How much and how little this verse opens up. We learn that Paul had a sister. Did she also become a believer or did she remain under the law? How old was her son? Presumably he was not more than a teenager because the commander was particularly gentle with him, holding him by the hand (19). How did he hear of the plot? were the fanatics boasting about what they would do? Prisoners, particularly Roman citizens, would be allowed visitors, indeed they might rely on them for proper food, so there would probably have been no difficulty in the boy getting in to see his uncle. Indeed, he would present less of a threat than an adult would-be assassin.

17-24. On hearing the youth's story the commander immediately makes up his mind what to do. Very likely he had already planned to pass the case over to Felix because he himself had not been able to get to the root of the charge and, with Paul a Roman citizen, he may have felt that he could not deal with a matter which seemed to be gaining more and more importance. It was obviously vital that the Jews should not know that their plot had been reported to him, so he warns the lad not to tell anyone. The size of the armed guard to accompany Paul is surprising. The word translated 'spearmen' is not found elsewhere and may mean something else (led or pack horses has been suggested). Even so it is a large force. However, the commander had already had to rescue Paul on several occasions and the current threat may have convinced him that he should act on the safe side. Felix was an unpleasant character who was later to be dismissed from his office. He was a freed slave and Tacitus described him as a man who exercised 'the power of a king with the mind of a slave.'

25-30. How did Luke know the terms of the letter which the tribune wrote to the Governor? Perhaps it was read out when Paul was brought to trial. If Luke is making an intelligent guess at what was written he shows something of a sense of humour because the commander doctors the report to show himself in a better light. He makes out that he was aware that Paul was a Roman citizen before he rescued him whereas he only discovered this when he had had Paul bound and was about to torture him - something he conveniently omits to mention. However, the letter does accurately reflect the over-all situation.

31-35. Luke continues to stress that all the problems about the spread of the faith arose because of the attitude of the Jews and that it posed no threat to the Roman authorities, who behaved very well, protecting Paul. Cilicia was not actually under Felix but it was not a full province at this time. This was not a major case and it would cause problems to send Paul back to his home area with the necessity of causing the Jews to travel there to give evidence. Felix was authorised to deal with such a case and decided to do so. Herod's palace had become the seat of government in Caesarea.

Chapter 24

1-4. Ananias is so determined to finish Paul that he comes down to Caesarea in person, together with some of the elders and an official lawyer. It was customary for counsel to make some pleasant remark about the judge but this is sickening and totally untrue. Felix was a brutal man who had dealt cruelly with trouble makers and had stirred up more ill feeling than he had put down. He was most unpopular.

5-9. Three charges are levied against Paul: he is a troublemaker, a pest; he is a ringleader of a sect which, here alone in all the New Testament, is known as the Nazarene (Jesus was known as coming from Nazareth); he had defiled the temple (by bringing Trophimus, a Gentile, into it [21:29]). This last charge had apparently got lost in the previous trial before Lysias and is now revived. If vv. 6-8a are genuine (NIV puts them in the margin), The truth that the mob were about to lynch Paul is twisted to show the Jews in a better light and cast blame on Lysias. Luke has not mentioned any Jews coming down with the official party from Jerusalem, so is he here referring simply to Ananias and the elders or were some local Jews of Caesarea also present?

10-21. Felix does not question Paul but allows him to answer the charges. Paul's opening is polite but far less flowery than that of Tertullus. Felix's wife Drusilla was a Jewess and he was indeed well informed about Jewish practice. Paul's defence is that he had only arrived 12 days ago, so how could he possibly have become a ring leader and organised a rebellion in that time? His accusers cannot produce anyone with whom he was arguing or creating any disturbance. He was in the temple simply to worship the same God they worship. He admits he is a member of the 'Way' - how interesting that we first heard that description when Paul (then Saul) was persecuting its members (9:2) - but he is totally orthodox in his belief in the Law and The Prophets. His reason for coming to Jerusalem was to bring gifts for the poor which had been raised by the believers in foreign parts - the very area where he was supposed to have caused so much trouble amongst the Jews. He begins to refer to the Asian Jews who stirred up the crowd against him (21:27) but he does not develop this. Once again he refers to the resurrection of the dead, citing that as a possible reason for the opposition he is facing. This, of course, is a purely Jewish argument and is no threat to the Roman occupation. Paul has subtly ensured that Felix realises that the issue is one of interpreting the Jewish faith and not of infringing the Roman law.

22-26. Very probably Drusilla, as a Jewess, was interested in hearing what Paul had to say and maybe she encouraged Felix to bring Paul before them informally. However, Paul makes use of the opportunity and speaks of those things which will most challenge Felix. Felix had persuaded Drusilla to leave her husband and marry him and, as we see here, he looked for bribes. Talk of righteousness, self-control and judgment were rather too near the bone for Felix and he became afraid - but it didn't make him change. However, he was probably intrigued and could not let the matter rest, as well as looking for a bribe.

27. Festus was recalled to Rome because of complaints about particular brutality he had used in dealing with a dispute between Jews and Syrians. He might well have lost his life had not his brother persuaded Caesar to be lenient. Knowing why he had been recalled it is no wonder that Felix tried to curry favour with the Jews, and left Paul in prison.

Chapter 25

1-5. On taking up his post, Festus would obviously be advised of outstanding matters, one of which would be the case of a prisoner, a Roman citizen, surprisingly held for over two years without trial. He may even have looked at the papers reporting the reason why Paul was transferred so hastily under guard from Jerusalem. How did Luke know of the plot to kill Paul? Was it from the same source as the previous plot (23:12ff.) Festus wisely tells the Jewish leaders to come to Caesarea to present their case.

6-8. Festus is in a difficult position, the Jews cannot prove their allegations and Paul strongly refutes them in the three key areas - he has broken no Jewish law, he has not desecrated the temple and he has not offended against any Roman law.

9. Although Paul was a Roman citizen, he has been arrested and imprisoned and is now in court; thus the governor's question is not as conciliatory as it appears. The reality is much more along the lines - "I propose to hear your case in Jerusalem; do you raise any formal objection?"

10-12. Paul knows that he is unlikely to get justice in Jerusalem. Very probably, Festus would summon the Sanhedrin to present their case, as Lysias had done. Paul therefore appeals to Caesar - a right of Roman citizens to have their cases tried in Italy. Festus is bound to grant this request but, in fact, it relieves him of a very tricky situation.

13-22. Agrippa was the great-grandson of Herod the Great who had sought to kill the infant Jesus; the grandson of Herod Antipas who had beheaded John the Baptist; and the son of Agrippa I, who had killed the apostle James. He was a puppet king who had been given only part of Palestine as his kingdom. Bernice was his sister, who was also sister to Drusilla. However, he was responsible for the temple in Jerusalem and had the right to appoint the high priest; he was more than familiar with the Jewish faith. Agrippa obviously made a courtesy visit to Festus soon after his appointment as governor and the latter mentioned Paul's case to him. He recounts the circumstances and the only new information we gather from this is that it was not simply to please the Jews that Festus wanted to transfer the case to Jerusalem. Once he understood that Paul was not being charged with crimes against the state but with regard to the Jewish faith he admits that he was out of his depth and it seems as though he hoped that bringing Paul before the Sanhedrin with himself presiding, he might gain clarification of the issue. As it is, he probably hoped that Agrippa could throw some light on the matter.

The obvious question arises as to how Luke learned of the conversation between Festus and Agrippa. We know that Luke was a thorough historian and researched his subject as well as he could and it may be that a servant overheard the discussion and told Paul or someone else. However, Luke almost certainly had to write this up in his own words. What we do know is that Paul did appear before Agrippa and Festus.

23-27. We are continually reminded, as Luke intends, of the similarity between the experiences of Jesus and Paul. In both cases the real objection of the Jews was religious, but they tried to trump up a political charge in order to get their victim executed by the Roman authorities. The governor, in each case, had the prisoner examined by the king, who found him not guilty. Although Festus was a great improvement on Felix, he knew that there was no evidence to support the charges against Paul. He was in a similar position to Pilate with Jesus. He knew that he ought really to release his prisoner. He engages on a rather ingenious strategy. He knows that his immediate predecessor had been very unpopular, so here, at the very beginning of his rule, he invites all the local dignitaries to attend this hearing

of Paul's defence. It is all done with pomp and ceremony so that they will feel they are given due recognition, and then he appeals to their king, "Will you please advise me what I should say to the Emperor when I send this prisoner to him." He then invites Agrippa to take the chair. It is easy to imagine the feelings of Agrippa and the city leaders at such courteous treatment.

Chapter 26

1-3. We know that Paul was chained at this time (29) but he was free to use his arms and hands. Such details imply that we are reading an eyewitness account here; someone must have recalled the gesture in recounting the story to Luke. Paul must have been delighted to have such a large and notable audience. He intends to make the most of it and at the start prepares them to expect a long speech.

4-8. At his recent trial before Festus Paul defended himself against the charges which concerned the Roman authorities. Now he concentrates on matters of faith. He lays the foundation that it is well known that he grew up as a zealous Jew in one of the strictest sects. He is a Pharisee of the Pharisees. What is Paul referring to when he speaks of the 'hope of what God has promised'? Their great hope was surely the coming of the Messiah and Paul is convinced that he has indeed come in the person of Jesus; he is about to argue that. He also introduces the central tenet of the Christian Faith - the resurrection.

9-11. There are some difficulties here. We know only of the death of Stephen. It seems that the Roman authorities turned a blind eye to this but if there had been a series of deaths, as Paul implies here, they would have had to take action. Similarly, what position of authority did Paul have which enabled him to have a vote? He speaks of foreign cities. We know that he had letters of authority regarding Damascus, what other cities were there? It may be that Paul was generalising for effect. His aim is obviously to show that he was as zealous in opposition to Jesus as any who are his accusers now. So there must have been some powerful event to change the mind of a man as bigoted as he.

12-18. This is the third time that the story of Paul's conversion has been told by Luke. In chapter 9 Luke records the story as part of his narrative. In chapter 22 he puts the story in Paul's own mouth as he does here. Although the basic details are the same in all three versions, here the emphasis is not so much on Paul's conversion as on his commissioning. He does not spend time explaining that part of this commissioning came from the Lord himself and part through the words given by the Lord to Ananias, that would be a distraction from his purpose here which is to put before Agrippa and the rest of his audience the situation that he faced; "Out of the blue, the very person I believed to be dead and whom I was opposing, knocks me to the ground, speaks to me, tells me to stand up and commissions me to serve him as a witness before both my fellow Jews and the Gentiles. In view of that how could I possibly disobey.?" It is probably deliberate that his description of the Lord's call closely resembles the call of some of the Old Testament prophets (e.g. Jeremiah and Ezekiel).

The careful reference to the fact that the Lord spoke in Hebrew (probably meaning Aramaic) raises an interesting issue. What language does the Lord use to speak to us? Paul could speak perfect Greek also. The implication here is that Paul did not simply receive an internal impression of what the Lord wanted; he heard actual words and knew exactly what language they were.

19-23. Paul explains that what he has been doing is simply to fulfil the commission he was given. Although he is known as the apostle who, above all, taught that salvation was by faith and not works, he is quite clear that true repentance is demonstrated by our subsequent deeds. He explains that this is the real reason why the Jews seized and tried to kill him - that he had preached salvation to the Gentiles. Yet he is doing nothing that was not foretold by the prophets. Almost certainly he had particularly in mind the teaching of Isaiah about the Messiah being a light to the Gentiles. In fact Paul was making an assumption here which the Jewish Rabbis as a whole may well not have done. He identifies the 'suffering servant' of Isaiah with the Messiah. We know that the disciples themselves, and particularly Peter,

found it difficult to believe that if Jesus was the Messiah, he would suffer and be put to death. That was far from what was expected of the Messiah. Once again Paul majors on the resurrection and links this firmly to Old Testament prophecy and his own commission) to bring light to the Gentiles.

24-32. Although Festus has allowed Agrippa to chair this meeting it seems that Paul's claim that a man, certified dead by the Roman authorities, had risen to life again drove him to interrupt with the statement that Paul was out of his mind (a charge that had been levelled at Christ). Was this really a trial? Paul had appealed to Caesar and had been told by the governor that he would be sent to Rome, so at the most this was an investigation to establish the charge against him (25:26/7). So Paul no longer attempts to defend himself but uses the opportunity to seek to win Agrippa to the Lord. He replies with dignity that he is not insane but that Agrippa will understand very well what he is talking about. He then makes a direct challenge to the king and his faith. Agrippa is put in a difficult situation; there are many senior men in attendance waiting to see how he will respond. He gets out of the problem rather cleverly with what is probable a fairly light hearted remark, "Do you think you can convert me so quickly?" But Paul, although he is respectful, knows that the matter is too important to be lightly dismissed and makes the whole gathering face the issue by holding up his chains, thus saying, in effect, "this is how vital the matter is to me. It is the only reason why I am here under arrest. I wish you were equally convinced." That is enough for Agrippa. Luke clearly implies that it was the king and not Festus who ended the session. Once again, as with Jesus before Pilate, Paul is found not guilty of anything deserving death.

Chapter 27

1-2. It is not surprising that if there were other prisoners due to go to Rome they should all be sent together. We know nothing about those transported with Paul. Centurions seem always to be shown in a good light in the New Testament and Julius is no exception; he treated Paul with respect. It may be that the Imperial Regiment was an elite group, rather like 'the Guards' in the British army. We are not told the port of embarkation but as Paul was being held at Caesarea it is likely that it was from there. Apparently there were no ships sailing for Italy at that time and so they board a coastal vessel on its way back to Adramyttium, a port near Troy. Aristarchus has appeared already as Paul's companion (19:29 and 20:4). In Col. 4:10 Paul refers to him as 'My fellow-prisoner'. Was he a voluntary prisoner? It has been suggested that the only way he could travel with Paul was to declare himself as his slave. Or maybe he was simply on his way home to Thessalonica. Certainly Luke travelled with Paul because there is a return to the 'we' form in the narrative. Many commentators refer to the accuracy of the descriptions of the voyage - it must be an eye-witness account.

3-8. Obviously Julius trusted Paul in that he allowed him to visit friends while the ship was in the port of Sidon (probably accompanied by a soldier). They reach Myra in reasonable time and the centurion here finds an Egyptian grain ship (v.38). Rome relied on Egypt for its grain and there were probably several such ships putting into Myra from time to time. At that time of year (autumn) the prevailing wind was north-west and the ship had great difficulty in travelling the comparatively short distance to Cnidus. It did not put in there but was unable to hold to the normal and shorter course to the north of Crete, but was blown south where, at least it was protected by the island. Fair Havens was really only a bay rather than a port, but immediately west of there the coast runs north west and offers little protection from the wind.

9-12. An interesting point arises regarding the reference to the 'Fast'. This would be the day of atonement, the actual date of which varied according to the position of the moon, but which fell between September and October. It is known that within the span of years during which this voyage must have taken place, AD 59 was the year when it fell latest (5th October). Most likely, therefore, this was the year involved. Luke does not state that Paul had a direct revelation from the Lord about the danger; however, the Holy Spirit may often use and enhance our common sense and Paul was an experienced traveller. It seems that there was no intention of attempting to reach Italy before the winter really set in, only to seek a better port further up the coast of Crete.

13-20. The details of the actions taken to save the ship are exciting and add to the veracity of it being an eye-witness account. The sand-bars of Syrtis were many miles south, off Libya, but with no means of steering the ship in the storm, the crew tried to slow progress by lowering the gear (NIV assumes this refers to a sea anchor). With no compass or sextant, and no sight of sun or stars to fix their position, it must have been frightening and no wonder they felt they would perish.

21-26. Was Paul guilty of a little show of 'I told you so'? If so, it would have had some beneficial effect because it might add some weight to his new pronouncement that they would all be kept safe. At Fair Havens he had said that the voyage would bring loss of both ship and life; now he says that the ship will be lost but not one person. He explains that this is not just a personal view of his but that an angel from God had given him this news. Even in the desperate situation of the storm, Paul takes the opportunity to commend his God - "whose I am and whom I serve." He gives the detail that they will run aground on an island.

27-32. In Paul's time the term 'Adriatic Sea' covered a wider area than today. Interestingly, modern soundings of the water around 'St. Paul's Bay', Malta, agree very closely with the measurements quoted by Luke. From a practical viewpoint the sailors would be needed in seeking to bring the ship safely on shore but Paul may have had in mind the Lord's promise that no one would be lost and he felt it important that all should stay together. IT is noticeable that now the centurion was more than willing to listen to Paul - albeit that he was the prisoner!

33-38. With the ship being tossed about, it would have been difficult to prepare any food and with their fear (and probably sea-sickness) no one would have wanted to eat. Paul is concerned that they will need all their strength (he is aware that the ship itself will be lost [22]) and he urges them to eat - setting the example himself. It is astonishing how he, a prisoner, assumes the role of leader, yet without undermining the authority of Julius. There is no reason to think that Paul was celebrating the Eucharist here; certainly not with so many unbelievers. He simply said grace before he ate. Luke mentions that there were 276 people on board. A large number, when we remember how comparatively small the ships, even grain ships, were in those days. They had already thrown much of the cargo overboard (18) but some would have been needed for ballast. Now, so near to land they needed to lighten the ship to get as near to the shore as possible.

39-44. There is nothing that can be added to Luke's graphic account of the way in which everyone reached the shore. Soldiers would pay with their lives for any prisoner who escaped while in their charge and, without any order to do so, were about to kill all of them. However, the centurion had come to respect Paul and wished to preserve his life; and the other prisoners gained theirs because of him.

Chapter 28

1-6. Malta in those days was called Melita. Its common people did not speak Greek and were thus called barbarians by Luke, but the word does not carry the connotations it has today. NIV simply translates the word as 'the islanders' some versions say 'the natives'. The people kindly make a fire and Paul helps to gather wood for it. He must have been very strong to be in a state to do that after the ordeal they had all been through. It shows something of the man that he buckled to with the natives. There is some uncertainty about the episode with the snake. Nowadays there are no poisonous snakes on the island but presumably there were then because who, otherwise, would the natives expect him to die? Did it actually bite him? Luke seems to imply that but does not state it clearly. The word Justice has a capital letter because the reference is to a power or goddess of justice. Luke seems to express some amusement at the swing of the extreme views of the natives; one moment Paul is a murderer, the next he is a god.

7-10. To provide shelter and food for 276 people must have caused some problem - did Publius receive all the company or just a few of them? The story of Paul healing Publius's father (perhaps of 'Malta fever' caught from a virus in goat's milk) is similar to that of Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law, especially as it resulted in other sick people coming for healing. With regard to the latter Luke uses a word which means 'receive medical attention'. Was he seeking to imply that he, as a doctor, was involved and that it was a two-fold ministry, natural and supernatural? It is interesting that although they stayed on the island for 3 months, there is no reference to Paul preaching the gospel or to any converts.

11-16. If it was mid October when they reached Malta it would be mid February when they set sail again. This would be the very start of the shipping season. Was Luke just giving some information he recalled when he tells us that the ship had the figure heads of Castor and Pollux, these were the sons of Zeus and were the gods responsible for navigation and were the patrons of seafarers? Or is there some irony here in the light of the preservation from the storm of all 276 people, by the one true God. Some Christians today might be afraid to travel in a ship which was so openly proclaimed pagan beliefs. Paul, of course, would have no choice in the matter. The only danger to believers is if they were tempted to believe that these figure heads did, in fact, have some power. Paul knew they didn't and so he was totally uninfluenced by them.

There is a possible problem about verse 14. How can it be that a prisoner was allowed to spend a week with friends? Some commentators dismiss this verse as an invention by Luke. But this is unwarranted. There was probably some simple explanation. Possibly Julius needed further instructions, or he was awaiting the arrival of a relief guard (or maybe he himself had friends in Puteoli and wanted to stay with them!) It must have impressed him, and others, that people who had never met Paul travelled 33 miles (to Tres Tabernae) and a further 10 (to Appii Forum) to welcome him. What an encouragement that must have been to Paul. When they reached Rome Paul was allowed 'house arrest'; no doubt because of the report furnished by Festus regarding the nature of the charge against Paul and the report of Julius regarding Paul's behaviour on the journey. It raises the point of how Paul was financed. Presumably it was the believers who provided for him. It is interesting that Luke does not refer to them again but concentrates on Paul's dealings with the Jews.

17-23. When we consider what Paul had been through, he wasted no time at all in calling for the leaders of the Jews in Rome. In chapter 18 v. 2 Luke reported that Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Presumably this order had been rescinded or relaxed. Paul gives these leaders a brief résumé of how he comes to be in Rome, stressing that he has done nothing against the Jewish faith and he has nothing against the Jewish leaders who opposed

him. Paul makes it clear that he has never given up his Jewish faith, indeed his whole argument is that that faith has been fulfilled because the hope of Israel, the Messiah, has come in the person of Jesus. It is interesting that the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem had not contacted the Jewish leaders in Rome. However, it may simply be that they were wary of making any further official charges directly to the emperor, lest this reflected badly on them, and it probably never occurred to them that Paul would be granted house-arrest where he would be able to talk with the Jews. However, the Jews there had certainly heard about the new 'sect' within Jewry, the Christians, and that everyone was reporting badly of it. They were interested to hear from him personally what he believed. Paul, like his Lord, concentrated on preaching the kingdom of God.

24-29. (Some texts add verse 29 the Jews left, arguing vigorously among themselves.) As had happened so often on his missionary journeys, the Jews were divided in their opinion as to the truth of Paul's message. We do not know what happened to those who claimed they were persuaded; did they join the believers? Luke gives no indication that any of them returned. It seems that Paul's technique was to do all he could to reason and to commend Christ, but if his listeners rejected the truth, he then added what is in effect a threat; not a threat invented by himself but one which is fully scriptural. As always, having given the Jews first the opportunity to hear the truth, Paul then turns to the Gentiles.

30-31. Perhaps the better translation of 'his own rented house,' is 'at his own expense.' Presumably Paul was allowed to work (tent-making?) to earn some money. Luke stresses the fact that although he was in Rome, the capital city of the empire, for two years Paul was allowed to preach the very message that had brought him there as a prisoner, without causing any problems to the authorities, and people were allowed to come and go, visiting him, as they wished.

So, Luke's history closes with the Gospel being preached in the capital of the world of that time. Christ's command to his disciples (1:8) has been fulfilled. We do not know what happened to Paul. It may well be that he was released and that he continued his travels; some claim that he even reached Spain. There is general agreement that if he was released, then he was arrested later and martyred, probably in the persecution of Christians under Nero. However, that is incidental to Luke's purpose. The Gospel goes on.

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