

A Brief Outline of the Acts of the Apostles

David Gooding

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Outline of the Acts of the Apostles

I understand you have been studying this book in some detail for many months, and you have reached the introduction to the last trial that Paul suffered before he was despatched to Rome to have his case tried there by the emperor. Perhaps, therefore, the occasion is suitable to ask ourselves what exactly Luke is doing in this last section of his work. The simple answer of course is obvious: he's relating a number of trials to which Paul was subjected in these days.

Perhaps you are of a more patient disposition than I am, but when I read these long trials, many times repeated, I begin to wonder why Luke has thought fit to include so many of them in his history. If we say it's because they really happened, I suppose that is one good answer. But so many other things happened in the course of the period covered by the Acts of the Apostles, which Luke has not thought fit to record, that perhaps we should not content ourselves with such a simple answer.

What happened, for instance, to all the other apostles and their work for the Lord? Luke does not record that anywhere, but we cannot think that he didn't know what they did. He seems deliberately to have selected his material because he was interested in certain themes. Therefore, if we apply that principle to the last great section of his book, we shall have to say that Luke included the accounts of Paul's trials not simply because they happened, but because behind his record he had some further and serious purpose.

What I propose to do is to make an open and honest confession of what I understand the Acts of the Apostles to be about. It is frequently said, on the basis of a phrase in chapter 1, that the book is the record of the spread of the gospel geographically: 'you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth' (v. 8). And so the book begins with a story of the apostles in Jerusalem and ends with the Apostle Paul in Rome, capital of the then known world; and certainly that is a very valid observation of the contents of the book.

The book does record the geographical spread of the gospel. But as I understand it, Luke has an even more profound intention in writing his work than merely to record the geographical spread of the gospel. So I want to call attention to one place in his book where it is immediately obvious that geography is not the prime consideration in Luke's mind. To do that, may I just remind you that Luke divides his narrative into six major parts by inserting, from time to time, a noticeable refrain.

1. Notice that kind of summary remark and what it is talking about. Here it is the increase of the word of God and the multiplication of the disciples.

And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. (6:7)

2. When we come to the end of the next major section, Luke again uses a similar phrase. At the end of the first section the word of God increased and the disciples were multiplied; and here it is that the church had peace and was multiplied.

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied. (9:31)

3. Then we shall notice a similar short phrase. So now we find the refrains are alternating. First, the word of God increased and the disciples multiplied. Then the church multiplied. Now once more, the word of God increased and multiplied.

But the word of God increased and multiplied. (12:24)

4. It's becoming very clear that these are deliberately repetitive refrains: summary verses ending the major sections, and we're back this time with the churches. The word increased, the church increased; the word increased, the church increased. It is a recipe that still holds good, of course, if you want the church to increase.

So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily. (16:5)

5. But then look at the end of the fifth great section of Luke's work and notice the mounting sense of the victory of the word of God.

So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily. (19:20)

6. And when we come to the end of the whole of the book, there is a bigger refrain, but one of equal triumph. The triumph of the word of God:

He [Paul] lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance. (28:30–31)

So I would argue to myself, if these refrains are Luke's own method of dividing his work up, then they divide it into six major sections. But now may I call your attention to one of them in particular that is exceedingly significant for our understanding of what Luke is doing.

So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily. (16:5)

Our task now is to notice exactly where in the narrative Luke puts that phrase, and then to ask why he put it there. If this is one of his refrains, it concludes the fourth major section of his work—but what an odd place for it to come.

You say, 'Why odd?'

Well, look at what is happening at that point. 'And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are"' (15:36). After a very long narrative in the great section four of his work, Luke is now beginning the next major missionary journey. Paul and his companions have preached the gospel in Asia Minor and we are now going to embark with Luke on the next great surge forward of the gospel, where Paul and Silas begin in Asia Minor but very quickly come over into Europe with enormous consequences for the subsequent spread of the gospel.

Therefore, 15:36 is the beginning of this major missionary journey, and you might have thought that Luke would begin a new section with it. Geographically speaking, it is now a big new beginning of a further stage. But whereas Luke begins to record this new missionary journey here, he hasn't been going very many verses when he comes to 16:5 and he ends the section before the missionary journey's scarce got going. Why does he put one of his division markers after so few verses, and then go on to speak of that great missionary journey in the next section?

It seems to me there is a very obvious answer to that question. Luke is interested of course in the geographical spread of the gospel, but his main interest is in even bigger things. Go back a little bit to the beginning of chapter 15 and notice what Luke was talking about: 'But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved"' (v. 1). Well, that was a bit of a bombshell at Antioch, and when Paul and Barnabas heard these men from Judea teaching that you had to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to be saved, they said, 'Never! You will not preach that stuff here.' So they were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to ask the apostles and elders about this question.

But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, 'It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses.' (v. 5)

What on earth they believed, Luke doesn't tell us, but they passed for believers and were presumably in the church. They likewise said that it was necessary to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses. As in verse 2, where they 'had no small dissension and debate', so again in verse 7 there was 'much debate' about the matter.

So, at the beginning of chapter 15 the question of circumcision is raised, and the answer is, 'No, not on your life'. But then notice what chapter 16 says.

Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. (v. 3)

Now we forget all about geography. It doesn't matter where it happened or which missionary journey it happened on; for theologically you have here a tremendous question. At the beginning of chapter 15: 'Circumcision?' 'No.' At the beginning of chapter 16: 'Circumcision?' 'Yes.' And therefore Luke has underlined it. Please read the beginning of chapter 16 with chapter 15, because you will not understand the theology unless you're prepared to hold those two things together.

And then there is a minor theme that brackets these things together. 'And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them . . .' (15:2). Paul and Barnabas were in a big theological row against the false teachers. It was Paul and Barnabas against the others. Then look at the end of chapter 15:

Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to

the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. (vv. 37–39)

It was honest of Luke to tell us that Paul and Barnabas had a big disagreement; so big that they parted company. It is a comfort, though, to see what it was they stood shoulder to shoulder about and what it was they parted over. When it came to the doctrines of the gospel they stood shoulder to shoulder. When it came to methods in the Lord's work, it was very different and over that they parted.

So I have argued to myself that, while Luke is interested in the geographical spread of the gospel and marking the various stages that it passed through, he is even more interested in certain other, what you might call theological and doctrinal, matters; and it is as such that I tend to read it.

It seems to me that what Luke has done in his first five major sections is to tell you the story of the rise of Christianity and its progress. As he does so, he points out that from time to time there arose certain very big fundamental issues over which, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the apostles had to make up their minds what they stood for: what they believed, and where, therefore, they had to diverge from Judaism. The early Christians started off as Jews, but then they diverged.

Why did they diverge and over what issues?

It is highly instructive and exceedingly important for our grasp of Christianity to mark those points of divergence. When it came to such matters the apostles said, 'Sorry, dear Jewish brethren, we cannot possibly compromise over this. If you won't have it, then we must leave.' In a point that is absolutely fundamental to Christianity, you cannot surrender it without surrendering Christianity itself.

But now we notice a very interesting thing. Christianity as we know it didn't come down from heaven all written up in a government paper with the notice on the top, 'From Sunday next at 2 o'clock in the morning you will stop Judaism and begin Christianity'.

It didn't happen quite like that, did it? Christianity developed under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as the gospel went forward, and inevitably they would meet a particular problem and have to decide what to do about it. As they moved a bit further, they would meet another problem and have to decide what to do about it. And so, under the Holy Spirit's guidance, the Christian faith was being defined. So let me rehearse what I think are the issues in the six sections in the book.

1. Who is Jesus?

As I read it, the fundamental issue in the first major section of Acts, up to the beginning of chapter 6, is nothing other than the person of the Lord Jesus. The Holy Spirit came down on the day of Pentecost to do the work that the Lord said he would do: to glorify the Lord Jesus. The evidence the Holy Spirit has given, says Peter, points to this: 'God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified' (2:36).

Who is Jesus? To the apostles the resurrection has demonstrated that God has made him both *Lord*, in the fullest sense of that term, and *Christ*, seated now on the very throne of the heavens. Judaism said ‘no’, and therefore the Christians had to diverge from Judaism. They had no choice. The person of the Lord Jesus—who he is, lies at the very heart of Christianity. Compromise on it and you’ve ditched Christianity altogether.

He has risen from the dead. Of course that raised a problem for the Jews. If Jesus is the Messiah, where is his kingdom? The Old Testament said that when the Messiah came he would set up his kingdom. The Jews had every right to ask then, ‘You say Jesus is the Messiah, but where is his kingdom? We can’t see much of it around.’

And therefore, the first stage of Acts has to give itself, at great length and in repeated detail, to pointing out what is the programme for the establishment of Messiah’s kingdom. It’s an integral part of the gospel. It is summed up in 2:34–35: “‘The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’” That covers the Old Testament programme, the ascension, the present era, and his second coming in power and great glory.

It is a question that our gospel has still to answer, not only to Jews, but to men in general. ‘If Jesus is the Messiah, the Old Testament said that the Messiah would put down evil. Why hasn’t your Jesus done it?’ We need an answer to it for intelligent men and women. Two thousand years of the preaching of Christianity seems remarkably ineffective for putting down evil, and the Hitlers and the Stalins of this world still go merrily on.

But the Old Testament did not say that at his first coming he was going to put down evil. It said the programme would be this. He would become incarnate; he would be raised to sit at the right hand of God—his ascension. There would be an ‘until’ period, and only after that period is finished would his enemies be made his footstool.

2. God’s call to be his missionaries

The second great passage of the Acts of the Apostles, between 6:8 and 9:31, is a very clearly defined part of Luke’s work. It contains four stories:

1. The martyrdom of Stephen (chs. 6–7).
2. The evangelization of Samaria (ch. 8).
3. The conversion of the Ethiopian (ch. 8).
4. The conversion of Saul of Tarsus (ch. 9).

Historic watersheds

Luke, in his normal literary style, has arranged it that every now and again a brilliant phrase will help you to see how things are connected. For instance, in the first story Luke records how Stephen said at the very beginning of his defence, ‘The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, “Go out from your land and from your kindred”’ (7:2). So then, the God of glory appeared to Abraham and said, ‘Get out’.

That’s the first story, and the fourth story in chapter 9 is about Saul of Tarsus. He was careering up the road to Damascus: ‘Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him’ (v. 3). He was sent into the city after

that to await the coming of Ananias, and when Ananias came he delivered the message to him, 'Saul, you are to get out and go back to the Gentiles' (see vv. 10–18).

By that simple device Luke is calling our attention to the fact that we stand now at a great watershed in history. Centuries before, God had intervened and called Abraham out of the Gentiles. Now God is doing the opposite; he calls out Saul of Tarsus to send him back to the Gentiles. The great dispensation of the Hebrew race that started with Abraham began with this call: 'Come out of the Gentiles, Abraham, and I will make you a blessing.' But there was also the promise: 'in you and in your offspring shall all the nations be blessed' (see Gen 22:15–18). They weren't brought out permanently; they were to go back.

And now the time has come. This point in history is equal in importance to the beginning of the Hebrew race, when Abraham was called out of Ur of the Chaldees. It is a mighty move forward, and Saul the Jew is sent back to the Gentiles. The church is going to become predominantly Gentile now, and Luke records both events. When God called out Abraham, the God of glory appeared to him and made him a pilgrim, but when the light from heaven shone on Saul it made him a missionary.

We must keep those two things together, my dear brothers and sisters. You won't make much of a missionary unless first of all the Lord calls you out of the Gentiles. But when he calls you out of the Gentiles, don't forget he does it so that he can send you back among them again. We need both: we need to be pilgrims, but we do need to be missionaries.

The worship and service of God

The next big issue on the agenda over which Christianity is going to contradict Judaism is over the matter of the temple and the worship of God. Though Luke tells us that Stephen's accusers maligned him and their accusations weren't strictly true, Stephen was doubtless preaching an early version of what we later find fully developed in the Epistle to the Hebrews. Christ was going to change the customs; so what was the attitude of Christianity to the Jewish temple, its worship and service of God?

Stephen makes it very clear that the worship of Israel was God-given. But the God of Israel's history was a God who from time to time moved on, and in Christianity had come one of those times when God was going to move on again.

He had called Abraham out of the Gentiles to Canaan, and said, 'Live in this land' (see Gen 12:1). So, for most of the time at least, the patriarchs were faithful to that tradition and kept in the land. Then God suddenly led the patriarchs down to Egypt, 'Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation' (Gen 46:3). He told Jacob to take everything and leave.

You say, 'If God has told us to come out from the Gentiles, we must stick by that.' Well so you must—until God changes things, for God's a living God.

So now they had to go down to Egypt and they were there for four hundred years. They had got used to it, and then suddenly God was on the move again (Exod 3:9–10). He is going to bring them out of Egypt. It was no good saying, 'Our fathers were here; God brought us down, and we're not shifting.' To stay in Egypt when God has left would be to depart from the living God.

Stephen's case is based on Old Testament history. Even with the Hebrews, from time to time God begins something new and moves on. And now, in our Lord Jesus Christ, God is moving on again. He points out that Israel consistently rejected the men whom God sent to lead them and our blessed Lord was no exception. Their rejection of the Lord Jesus was not faithfulness to God's Old Testament revelation; it was apostatizing from the living God.

Why should we bother our heads about that kind of thing? Because it lies at the very heart of our gospel. Could the people come into the holiest of all? Listen to the writer to Hebrews:

But into the second *went* the high priest alone once every year, not without blood, which he offered for himself, and *for* the errors of the people: The Holy Ghost this signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing: Which *was* a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience. (9:7-9 KJV).

In Judaism, no, they could not come into the holiest of all. They had to have forgiveness. Not even King David could enter. If you'd suggested to him that he should bring his harp in and sing some of his psalms, I think he would have had a heart attack!

'David, I did enjoy Psalm 32, I think it's one of the best you ever wrote. I know what it means to be forgiven too. Come on, David, bring your harp and we'll go into the holiest of all and have a session of praise.'

David would have said, 'In the holiest of all? Of course not.'

'Why not? Haven't you got forgiveness of sins?'

'Yes, I'm forgiven—up to the moment, at any rate.'

They had no access into the holiest and their consciences were not yet made perfect, according to Hebrews, so they had to keep on offering sacrifices.

If you find people who keep offering sacrifices, you'll know that they haven't got a conscience made perfect. We have lots of them in Belfast, and in the South of Ireland even more. What a shame, because they could have. This is an integral part of our gospel. Stephen was prepared to die for it, and we must resist all movements nowadays for Christendom to go back into Catholicism, and the whole thing to go back to Judaism.

It has done it over the years, hasn't it? If you go to Greece, you'll find the Greek Orthodox think the church building is the dwelling place of God. When you go inside they've got a mighty great wall built across, halfway through. So there are two places. The room behind the wall is the holiest of all with the altar in it. The priests may go through, but the people never. So their very buildings contradict Christianity, and they've gone back to Judaism.

The Samaritans. But Luke is being fair. In his first story it is the temple of Jerusalem, and in the second it is the evangelization of Samaria. That should be interesting, because the Samaritans had very fixed ideas on worship. The woman at Samaria argued it with our Lord: 'Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship' (John 4:20). 'Our religion is as good as yours.'

On that occasion our Lord announced that in Christianity it would no longer be the place 'where'. 'The hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship

the Father' (v. 21); but notice, he did add, 'You [Samaritans] worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews' (v. 22).

So now, when the Samaritans hear the Christian gospel, what will God do? Will he say, 'You don't like the Jews, but never mind. We'll forget all about that and we won't argue about it any more, now that we've got the gospel'?

Not God. When the Samaritans believed, they got baptized. But they didn't get the Holy Spirit until certain men came down from Jerusalem, of all places, and laid their hands on them. That in itself was evidence that they were converted, because Samaritans would never have let Jews lay their hands on them; they'd have punched them right square on the nose. See the effectiveness of the gospel. When these Samaritans repented of their decades-long defiance of God's word and got converted, they admitted that salvation was of the Jews and it came from Jerusalem.

We must remember that modern Christendom has cut its roots with the Old Testament, so they don't believe it and are prey to a lot of theological quacks like old Simon (8:18–19). Christianity is not a philosophy; it is the culmination of God's great historical processes, and if we don't believe Moses we shan't believe our Lord either. We cannot jettison the Old Testament and say that it doesn't matter whether it was inspired or not, because we preach the gospel. True salvation has this mark about it: it comes from Jerusalem. If you've got something that comes from America through Mrs White or Joe Smith or somebody, it isn't the real thing.

So, in this great second section, Luke is defining Christianity and its gospel in relation to the temple: the Jews being the Orthodox and the Samaritans being the non-conformists, if you like.

And now he's going on to talk about the further service of God and the witness of God, for the temple at Jerusalem was not merely a place where Israel worshipped God. The temple at Jerusalem was a place where God dwelled, to be a testimony to the world, and we shouldn't underestimate the effectiveness of that testimony. All those centuries were not wasted.

Here comes an Ethiopian (ch. 8). Having turned his back on the idolatrous superstitions of his country, where's he coming to? He's coming to the temple of Jerusalem, because it was renowned among the nations as the temple of the imageless God. There were no idols there; he'd come up to worship and see the effect of Israel's testimony in the world.

We mustn't despise the Old Testament as part of our gospel message. We need it still. While this modern world goes to its modern idols, one of which is science, we need Isaiah and all the other prophets in their protest against idolatry, old and new.

See the effect, then, on this Ethiopian coming up to Jerusalem to worship, and the big thing that Judaism gave him was a Bible. He was returning with a bit of the Bible. What a tremendous bit of evangelization and what a marvellous book the Old Testament is. Amongst all the holy books of the world it stands unique, you know.

So he's going back in his chariot. Why didn't Israel bring him to salvation? And now you come to another point in which Christianity diverges from Judaism. He was reading Isaiah 53 and he couldn't make sense of it—nor can Israel to this day, and they won't have it. It was telling of God's servant who was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities (v. 5). Israel will not have the doctrine of vicarious suffering and substitutionary

atonement, nor will modern Christendom either. But if they deny the atonement they have no gospel.

Luke is showing us the utter essence of Christianity and how Christianity diverges from Judaism. What its gospel is at its heart, and if we compromise on these points we cease to be Christianity.

Now there comes Saul of Tarsus, the biggest missionary that came out of Judaism other than our Lord. God turned the man into a missionary. Another thing that Judaism won't have is the realization that Jesus is God. Saul asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' (Acts 9:5). Then he woke up to the fact that, though he thought he knew God, he didn't. Saul hadn't cared for God's missionary.

He who left the Father's side and came into our world was God. He came to seek and save that which was lost. God became a missionary to our planet and if that doesn't burn in our hearts, then we don't know God as God really is. Saul had a religion until then, but he hadn't got a Saviour. That's a very important thing. That's what made Saul a missionary and it ought to make us missionaries as well.

3. What it means to be a saint

The third great section I'm going to do very briefly. As usual, the Holy Spirit knocks the nail on the head, puts the key at the front door and all that. If you look at the third great section, it begins in 9:32, 'Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda', and it continues to 12:24.

It's about lots of things, but the major subject of that part of Acts is the question of holiness, or sainthood. As I say, Luke knocks the nail on the head when he tells you that Peter came down also to the 'saints'. Not to the brethren, nor to the disciples, nor to the Christians, nor to the church, but to the saints. What are saints, if you ever should meet one?

I have to tell you now that this is a rather curious story, but one of the biggest obstacles to the spread of the gospel was sainthood. Isn't it curious? It came about like this.

The time had come for God to move on again. Until now the gospel had been preached by all and sundry. When it was preached to the Jews no problem arose; even if they were unconverted Jews you could go and have coffee with them. But now God wanted the gospel taken to the Gentiles. Peter wasn't prepared to drink coffee with a Gentile, and it's remarkably difficult to preach the gospel to a man you're not prepared to drink coffee with.

Imagine the situation that could have arisen if God had not intervened with the sheet that came down from heaven (10:9-16). Here's Peter, innocently walking across the marketplace one day and up comes Cornelius, this very smartly dressed centurion of the Roman army.

'Good morning, sir. I believe you are a Christian apostle.'

'Yes, that's right.'

'I've become very interested in what you preach.'

'Oh, I'm glad to hear it.'

'I wonder, would you come home to lunch with me today to explain it?'

'Well no,' said Peter, 'thank you very much, but I've got another engagement.'

'Never mind, come tomorrow.'

'Let's talk about it here in the marketplace.'

'It's rather crowded and uncomfortable here. We could talk at ease in my home. I'll send my servant along with the chariot and you can come to lunch. Or would you prefer dinner tonight?'

'No, I'm sorry, I can't.'

'Why can't you come?'

'Well, I'm a saint.'

How would that have gone down?

'Oh, I see. So I'm not a saint and you're a saint, and because you're a saint you can't eat with us?'

If he'd been sarcastic, Cornelius might have said, 'Tell me, Peter, that Caiaphas man, would you drink coffee with him?'

'Well yes, if he asked me.'

'Oh, I see. Caiaphas is a saint, is he?'

Those concepts of sainthood would have proved an enormous obstacle to the spread of the gospel, but God has now intervened to introduce in clear terms what Christian sainthood is, as distinct from Jewish sainthood. Jewish sainthood had been a very important thing, of course, and we mustn't pour scorn on it.

I would remind you what you read when the sheet came down from heaven and the voice said, 'Rise, Peter; kill and eat,' and Peter replied, 'By no means, Lord' (Acts 10:13-14). God didn't say, 'Don't be silly, Peter. All those rules and regulations about food and diet are old fashioned and narrow minded, so stop that nonsense.'

It was God who gave the law when Israel was a child and they had to be treated like children under a guardian; a wall put round them and kept from the Gentiles (Gal 3:23-25). That's not Christian sainthood, is it? Christians have got to be free to move into the world with no walls around them. But then of course, Christianity has a different basis and resource for sainthood to what Judaism ever had.

So Peter preaches, and Luke goes on to record further details of what the basis of that sainthood is. First of all, utter forgiveness of sins for Jew and Gentile, both together. The Jew as bad as the Gentile and the Gentile as bad as the Jew; both find forgiveness at the foot of our Lord's cross.

Baptism in the Holy Spirit (11:1-18). That's a new thing completely that only came with our blessed Lord. Being God incarnate, he can put men in the Holy Spirit and baptize them into one body, whether Jew or Gentile. Christianity has a power for holiness that Judaism knew nothing about, but surely it is telling us something exceedingly important and very relevant to our gospel work as missionaries in the world. Christian holiness is a different thing from Jewish holiness, and we need to be careful always that we don't slip back from the Christian position into the Jewish concept of holiness.

4. The doctrine of salvation

I would suggest that the fourth section is about the doctrine of salvation. I needn't stay to prove it, except to notice that in section 3 we were thinking of the social implications of the gospel going to the Gentiles, and Peter must now become truly Christian and not Jewish in his sainthood. Whereas in section 4 you have the doctrinal implications of the gospel going to

the Gentiles (12:25–16:5); at Antioch in Pisidia Paul as usual preached as a servant, but it's all about salvation (13:13–52).

And then in chapter 15 we have the story of the great meeting in Jerusalem, where the apostles and elders met together to pronounce upon this topic. Doctrinally speaking, how is a person saved? Until now, when the gospel was going to the Jews and they got converted, they'd already been circumcised as infants, so the question never really arose. Now suddenly, somebody raises the question. 'What is the relation of circumcision to the gospel and being saved? Is it necessary, or does it help?'

'Oh, yes,' said certain Pharisees, who believed (v. 5).

Believed what? Presumably they believed that Jesus was the Messiah, but they weren't clear on the basis of salvation, were they? But they said, 'Yes, you do have to be circumcised.'

It was merciful, wasn't it, that the apostles gathered and pronounced once and for all time on what grounds a person is saved? As Peter put it, 'We believe it is by the grace of the Lord Jesus that even we Jews shall be saved, as well as those Gentiles' (see v. 11). There can be no compromise in the great doctrine of salvation. But how often Christendom has slipped back into Judaism and mere religion, making sacraments and ceremonies necessary to salvation.

5. The gospel comes to Europe

And what is the fifth big section about? I'm getting myself further and further into hot water by exposing my notions, I suppose, but I'm sure you'll be kind amidst your criticisms. Now it will not be the gospel diverging merely from Judaism. We're moving out into the great big Roman and Greek cities and Luke shows us the gospel diverging from a number of Gentile things.

Gentile Spiritism. At the beginning and end of that section, the Christians talk about being led by the Spirit; but the ancient pagans also talked about being led by spirits. And today on the streets of Malaysia you can see many like that woman who brought her employers much profit from her fortune telling (16:16). Businessmen consulting mediums to get guidance. What's the difference between Christians being guided by the Holy Spirit and businessmen seeking mediums?

I've just come back from Marseille. In the great council estates they have these vast high-rise flats where many mediums live, and the people, having long since ditched anything Christian, constantly go to consult them. What's the difference then?

Roman politics. And then Luke has to show us the difference between Christianity and politics. When they preached Jesus as a king it was not a political message, in spite of what the Jews tried to say. Today we still need to make the distinction. Liberation theology doesn't ring true, does it? Christianity is not politics and it isn't philosophy either (ch. 17). Paul knows his philosophy and how to talk to philosophers, but Christianity isn't philosophy. Perhaps in academic circles more than many, we need to distinguish between what is Christianity, what is Hellenistic culture, and what is Judaism.

6. Paul's defence of Christianity

In this final great section, it seems to me that Luke is not showing us Christianity diverging from Judaism or even from Hellenistic and Roman culture so much, as now he turns to the question of the defence of Christianity. Christianity and the Christian preachers had been slandered all around the Roman empire, and Paul was statesman enough to know that he would have to try and put a stop to these slanders.

You see, if the folks in your neighbourhood think you're a cranky lot, perverts, and a nasty little sect, they won't let their children come to the Sunday school. They certainly won't come to the gospel meetings themselves. And if you allow the papers or the BBC to tell the world that you are a sect, then the gospel is going to be hindered. Paul wouldn't put up with it, and he was set for the defence of the gospel among the pagans and the Jews, and finally among the Romans.

There was a Christian attitude to pagan temples, about which they were slandered, and the record had to be put straight. There was the Christian attitude to the temple at Jerusalem, over which again Paul was slandered and the record had to be put straight. He got himself in great trouble, both at the time and subsequently with many theologians. Never mind, 'the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome"' (23:11).

So now we've arrived at the last trial (ch. 26). Why has Luke recorded so many, and what is this trial before Agrippa going to add, if anything, to all the others that have gone before? What will it tell us about Christianity?

Luke has told us about Paul's attitude to money, to suffering, and his attitude to a whole host of things so that we might size up Christianity. But in the trial scenes themselves, what have been the issues at stake and how should we read this last one?

Paul is arrested in the temple at Jerusalem (ch. 22). Paul was a Pharisee of the Pharisees, an exceedingly learned man, and here he was before a howling, ignorant mob. He treats them with all dignity, but points out, 'I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city [Jerusalem], educated at the feet of Gamaliel [one of the highest Jewish rabbis] according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers' (22:3). It's like somebody nowadays saying to a mob that's about to lynch him for his theological views, 'I have a DD from Cambridge, and you down there, what do you know?' Paul put it politely, but he wasn't afraid to cite his theological education.

In his unconverted days Saul had been a Jew *par excellence* and now he was surrounded by an ignorant mob who were neither devout, godly nor learned. Probably what lay behind a lot of the attacks in Jerusalem was that they thought Paul was giving the privileges of Jews to the Gentiles.

When it came to being zealous for the religion of the fathers, Paul could challenge anybody in the crowd. In other words, I read that speech to be very tough. Gracious, but tough, and Paul put them in their place.

His trial before the Jewish council (ch. 23). The issues are different, therefore, between his arrest in the temple and the first real trial here in chapter 23. Paul is brought before Ananias

and rebukes him, though he later apologizes for it, because Scripture says, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people' (v. 5). He rebuked Ananias, but he didn't know he was the high priest. Here's the man sitting on the bench, supposedly conducting a theological trial of Saul for his heresies, when all the while the high priest is breaking his own Old Testament. Paul wasn't going to have that. If he's going to be judged as a heretic by the high priest, the high priest had better keep his own Old Testament first.

Then some people think Paul was cheating, but he wasn't cheating. He saw that half of the council were Sadducees and half were Pharisees. The Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection and the Pharisees did, so he deliberately split them. It wasn't that he was trying to escape the issue, but now of course the Pharisees were obliged to side with him.

The first major thing that Christianity preached was the resurrection of our Lord. The Sadducees said there was none, but the Pharisees admitted there was such a thing as a resurrection. Why should Saul be persecuted for believing what half the nation and more believed, that there was a resurrection, so he wanted to get matters in the clear. The difference, therefore, was simply, is Jesus risen from the dead? That would depend on the evidence, but they didn't give Paul a chance to cite the evidence; they fell into such a theological controversy that the court came to an end (v. 10).

When we have to stand up against academic theologians, we mustn't be weak-kneed and let Christianity be slandered. I remember being asked years ago by some Christian parents to meet their very brilliant son. He'd got a place in university, but he had a year to spare so he thought he would read religious instruction in the sixth form. When I met him, his faith was nearly shattered, so as gently as I could I asked the dear lad if he would show me his syllabus of what they'd been teaching him. He came with long book lists, modernist to a man.

I said, 'How very interesting. Haven't they called your attention to so and so, and so and so, and so and so?' mentioning certain scholars, who were believers and evangelicals.

'No, I haven't heard of them.'

I said, 'I thought your course was scientific. How is this scholarship, if they haven't even told you of the case on the other side?'

But that's very often the way.

So Saul is now pointing out that if the Pharisees may believe in the resurrection and still be accepted on the council, he's not going to be condemned because he's preaching the resurrection. It must now be brought into proper focus. The sole issue is the evidence for whether Jesus Christ is risen, and at that court I take it that Paul is sifting out what the real centre of the case is.

The trial before Felix (ch. 24). Then in the next one, when he stood before the governor, the charge against him was, 'we have found this man a plague, one who stirs up riots among all the Jews throughout the world and is a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes' (v. 5). But Paul himself says, 'But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets' (v. 14).

Now the Romans would take exception to this kind of thing. One of the things that disturbed the Romans in the ancient world was not merely what you believed, but your attitude to your own ancestral religion. The Christians were often called atheists by the

Romans and, in that sense, they didn't like atheists. The Romans were all for law and order, and if a man respected the gods of his ancestors he was liable to be an orderly citizen. If he rejected the gods of his ancestors he was liable to be a bit of a rebel in all sorts of ways.

Secondly, in ancient cities, where you have the gods of a city, if a man didn't worship them, the general public were afraid that the gods would visit the city with wrath, so the people would be afraid and it would lead to riots.

And thirdly, the Romans expected everybody of whatever religion not only to worship the gods of their fathers, but to show respect to everybody else's gods, and anybody who didn't was a possible centre of trouble in a city. Look at what happened in Ephesus (ch. 19).

The Romans were interested in it from the point of view of law and order. Religion, even to the present, can be the cause of all sorts of strife and civil war and riots in cities. So the Romans would come down heavily on leaders of sects, which were calculated in their minds to be a trouble. They didn't like Jews, because they wouldn't respect other people's gods and went around saying they weren't true gods.

But the Christians were worse. The Jews did at least worship the God of their fathers and, as the Romans were told by the Jews, these Christians didn't even do that. When they investigated it, of course they found the Christians were meeting in separate buildings, not even worshipping the God of their fathers in the Jewish synagogue. Being a sect was a very serious charge to bring against the Christians with the Romans.

Nowadays you're condemned in the eyes of many people if you're called a sect. Recently in Dublin, a book was published calling one Christian organization a sect. The BBC took it up as though it were the truth, and if you're called a sect in Southern Ireland that's the end of you in the eyes of multitudes of people.

What is the answer to the charge of being a sect? Paul said that he worshipped the God of his fathers, 'believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets' (24:14). I'm mainstream Christianity myself—I believe everything in the book. Actually, I believe more than Bishop David Jenkins of Durham. He does not believe traditional Christianity. I'm not going to be condemned by bishops or anybody else for being a sect, when I'm not one. I believe the whole lot. It's about time we told the world who it is that's departing from the faith. The BBC gives their Don Cupitt¹ all the publicity and somebody ought to be making a very big protest over here in Britain to the BBC.

So that's what I take the big issue to be in chapter 24, and for demonstrating that Christians are not a sect.

Paul's trial before Agrippa. But then of course, there comes the big trial in chapter 26. I do believe it's the defence of the gospel, but I think that, perhaps more than the others, it's got more positive exposition of it. To expound what the gospel really is, is in the last analysis its true defence, but a lot of people never get round to hearing what the gospel is. They're taken in by all these slanders. When Festus said in a loud voice, 'Paul, you are out of your mind' (26:24), perhaps he didn't know Paul in his early days. Isn't it funny, when Saul was persecuting people, torturing them, causing them to blaspheme, hauling them to prison, nobody said he was mad. When he got converted and stopped persecuting, when he delivered

¹ Cupitt came to the British public's attention in 1984 with his BBC television series 'The Sea of Faith', in which orthodox Christian beliefs were challenged.

that poor half-crazed woman at Philippi and brought her to sanity, and converted that thug in the jail to a tender-hearted servant of Christ, did they say it was madness?²

² The recording ends here. For a full exposition of the book of Acts, see *True to the Faith* by David Gooding.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING is Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University, Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He has taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He has published scholarly articles on the Septuagint and Old Testament narratives, as well as expositions of Luke, John, Acts, Hebrews, the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament, and several books addressing arguments against the Bible and the Christian faith. His analysis of the Bible and our world continues to shape the thinking of scholars, teachers and students alike.