

Methods of Studying the Book of Acts

Luke's Six Literary Divisions

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Shall we just ask God's help that we might understand his word.

Blessed Lord, we remember when it was said, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.'¹ Grant us, we pray thee, as we open thy word, that we might have that sense in our hearts that thou art present, calling personally to each one of us to have yet further experience of thee as our teacher. Give us vigour of mind, and that perceptiveness that comes from thy Holy Spirit. Grant us, O Lord, so to hear thy voice, that we each one may catch something from thee and be led and encouraged in the task of loving thee with all our mind. In thy holy name we ask this thing. Amen.

You have asked me to speak on the topic, 'Methods of studying the book of Acts', and I suppose there are as many methods as there are people. I shall mention two, and then proceed to the method that I find particularly helpful myself, and deal with it at some length.

1. *Take the book of the Acts as a story book.* It is not a letter or a reasoned exposition; it is an assembly of stories. Historical books of this sort in the Bible do raise problems. How do you go about studying them? We can take each individual story and learn the lessons that it has to teach. For instance, stories that deal with conversion. We can study actual incidents of people getting saved, see what led up to it, how it actually happened, and what resulted.

Or we could take the theme of the Holy Spirit. His descent and his consequent activities; how people received the Holy Spirit, on what conditions, and with what implications.

Or the topic of the church. Watch how people were converted to Christ; how they began simply to meet together, so that the church was born. How other churches sprang up through the spread of the gospel; what they did, how they did it, and where later on they felt a change was necessary, and in what direction.

You might take these and a number of other topics, basing yourself on a string of otherwise isolated incidents.

2. The second way does not cancel out the first; it is but an extension of it. You could approach the book *with the interest of a historian or a geographer*, to trace how Christianity spread from Jerusalem through the then-known world—Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth. This approach provides a very helpful scaffolding, particularly when it comes to the missionary work of the Apostle Paul. You can follow him geographically, so to speak, in the spread of the gospel.

3. The third method, and the one I wish to illustrate to you, doesn't cancel out either of those other methods. It is not everybody's cup of tea, and I wish to emphasize that I do not

¹ John 11:28.

claim inspiration for it as the only method of studying God's holy word. You may even find it a hindrance. If you do, put your fingers in your ears now and forget it forever. It is merely one way of studying holy writ. We, who can't be scientists, geographers, or historians, have to content ourselves with reading books like this as though they were literature. So *my approach will be literary* more than anything else.

But let me just observe that if you follow *the geographical spread of Christianity* in those times, you will notice that it raises a number of interesting issues. In Jerusalem, it was preached against the background of Judaism to people who knew the Old Testament very well, and already had a God-given system of worship based on the temple.

In its early days, as Christianity began to make its voice heard in Jerusalem, the problems were sizeable enough. As you might expect, they were different from the problems when it branched out a bit further and came, say, to Samaria. And again, when it left Asia minor and came across into Europe, where the background was not merely Judaism. There were Jews with their synagogues in these Gentile cities of course, but the background was Spiritism mixed with all the pagan religions, intellectual philosophies, and Roman politics.

It was the same gospel, but it is interesting to watch Christianity coming successively into these different geographical regions and dealing with the various spiritual problems. It wasn't welcomed anywhere without opposition. It is instructive, therefore, to see how God's Holy Spirit led the early church and the early evangelists in the development of their own understanding of Christianity. Whatever the problems were, they triumphed in the end.

Christianity had to diverge from Judaism

There is another interesting thing to observe. According to the Acts of the Apostles, Christianity didn't come down from heaven in the form of an act of parliament all nicely tied up, with a preamble saying that from one o'clock next Sunday morning Judaism will stop and Christianity will begin. No. Christianity developed as men and women developed. When they saw a problem, they said to themselves, 'As Christians, what view are we going to take about this?' God's living Holy Spirit gradually directed them into all truth. So in the Acts you'll see Christianity emerging, and you'll find very vivid lessons to show exactly what Christianity is and what basically and essentially it came to be.

It had to diverge from Judaism, and eventually leave it completely. The issues over which it had to diverge are fundamental to Christianity. So fundamental that Christianity could no longer stay as one Jewish synagogue amongst many. All along the line we shall see Christianity diverging. Down the centuries, one of Christendom's greatest temptations has been to lapse back into at least some form of Judaism, with its ceremonies and institutions and offices.

It hasn't come clear of the mud of pagan superstitions, celebrating All Soul's Day for instance. That is the old pagan festival when children go out to the cemetery and bring back the dead spirits to their homes and they have a feast. When they've entertained the spirits, they take them back again to the cemetery and hope they won't get out without permission until next year. It's an old pagan ceremony, but you will find it in some parts of the world. We

have it in Ireland, for instance. The children still hollow out their turnips and put candles inside, to make them look like ghosts. It's a bit of old paganism still clinging to Christianity that ought to have been booted out long since.

Luke's literary divisions of the book

I will base myself, therefore, on what I consider to be Luke's own literary divisions of his narrative. It is not original with me, so neither praise or blame me. Jane Wilson pointed out long ago, 'Luke marks his narrative in his Acts of the Apostles, as indeed he does it in the Gospel, by certain refrains that naturally divide up the whole.'

So, let's look at these refrains in Acts.

1. '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. '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. 'But the word of God increased and multiplied' (12:24).
4. 'So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily' (16:5).
5. 'So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily' (19:20).
6. 'He 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).

You will begin to observe that, in spite of opposition, we're going through stages of growth and increase. It has broken through all the barriers and is steaming ahead without any hindrance. If it was Luke's intention to divide up his narrative in some literary fashion by these refrains, you would have six parts to Acts. I will take those now and illustrate some of the leading themes; and in one or two of them, perhaps do a little literary analysis.

Part 1: The gospel beginning at Jerusalem (1:1-6:7)

Emphasis on the Holy Spirit

The first one is too big to do any literary analysis with. It is the story of the gospel beginning at Jerusalem. One of its main themes is about the Holy Spirit. After all, this is the section that tells about Pentecost: that unique historic event when the Holy Spirit came down from heaven. Christ baptized the infant church in the Holy Spirit, inaugurating what you might call 'the age of the Holy Spirit'.

Before Pentecost the Holy Spirit came upon people, but Pentecost was so generous that it was something unique. In our Lord's lifetime the disciples went out on their gospel missions, and it was by the Holy Spirit's power that they cast out demons. But in his farewell discourses before he died the Lord Jesus said, 'the Holy Spirit cannot come until I go' — 'Nevertheless, I

tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you' (John 16:7).

So obviously Pentecost was something distinct, something that never happened before. The Holy Spirit came in a way he'd never come before: he came to remain. So throughout this whole first section you'll find many references to the Holy Spirit.

Emphasis on material things

Another topic that is repeated many times is the emphasis on material things. For instance, one of the immediate results of Pentecost was:

1. 'And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need' (2:44–45).

2. 'There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold a field that belonged to him and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet' (4:34–37).

There is a striking contrast here between Judas Iscariot, who, 'with the reward of his wickedness, bought a field' (see 1:18). The gospel makes some reverses, you know. This Levite sold his field.

3. In chapter five there is quite a long story about Ananias and Sapphira and their regrettable deed. They too had possessions, which they sold, but they kept back some of the price, pretending that they were giving it all (5:1–11).

4. The final story in this section is a question of the daily distribution of money. The Greek-speaking Jews murmured and complained that the widows among them were being neglected, so men were appointed to look after the funds of the church (6:1–6).

You may think that it is not by accident that these two seemingly opposite themes should be joined together in this first section. The tremendous emphasis on the spiritual side of life, in the coming of the Holy Spirit—the most spiritual part of the whole New Testament; and yet an equal emphasis on the material side.

Luke begins by the appointment of apostles: men whose task it was to see to the spiritual side of the church (1:12–26). The section ends with the appointment of 'deacons': men appointed to look after the material things of the community (6:1–6). He has a habit of doing that kind of thing in his literary style; similarities or contrasts at ends and beginnings. But it isn't only a literary device, it shows the healthy balance between the spiritual and the material.

Opposition from Judaism

1. The Sadducees' attitude to Jesus Christ

And as they were speaking to the people, the priests and the captain of the temple and the Sadducees came upon them, greatly annoyed because they were teaching the people and

proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead. And they arrested them and put them in custody until the next day, for it was already evening. (4:1–3)

But the high priest rose up, and all who were with him (that is, the party of the Sadducees), and filled with jealousy they arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison. (5:17–18)

You won't hear much in Acts about the Sadducees, for a very good reason, but here they are preeminent. Under the Romans, the government was vested in the high priest and the ruling party. At this time most of them were Sadducees, so there was inevitably a clash with Christianity. You now had three to five thousand people in the same city with their leaders, apostles and deacons, so of course the high priest was forced to raise an eyebrow. 'What on earth is happening here? We are the leaders in this nation. What do these upstarts think they're doing?'

If you're in political and religious power, you can't ignore thousands of people within your small city who have their own apostles, leaders, deacons and things. Who on earth do they think they are? Are they setting up a state within a state, or something? They were a religious group, and of course the high priest would be challenged because he was meant to be the spiritual leader of the nation. What was going on?

In this first section, therefore, you will see that the first major difficulty faced by emergent Christianity was this clash between the leaders of the church and the leaders of Judaism. The issue between them was twofold. It was over the person of Jesus Christ. As Peter pointed out to these men, 'You are the builders of this nation, but you've rejected the chief cornerstone upon which the nation should be built. You've rejected Messiah; you have murdered the Messiah' (see 4:10–11). That was a big enough issue for anybody's conscience.

So, between these two groups lies this vast gulf. According to Peter's claim, the Sadducees have murdered their Messiah.

2. The Sadducees' disbelief in resurrection

There is another issue. Peter preached that Jesus was the Christ, and the evidence and proof was in the coming of the Holy Spirit, resulting in this hubbub in Jerusalem.

Said the Sadducees, 'That can't be so because there isn't such a thing as resurrection' (see 4:2). Luke later tells us in another section that the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit (23:8). They were the religious humanists of the day.

They wanted a religion with beautiful aesthetics and happy morals, but not one that believed in the resurrection of the dead, in angels, or spirit. They didn't want a religion that was basically spiritual; a religion that began by saying that salvation consists in a personal relationship with a man who's been crucified and risen from the dead. As we stand with two feet on the ground in this world, we can be in contact with a man who is in that spirit realm. This was anathema to Sadducees. It wouldn't have been so bad to the Pharisees, but the Sadducees were materialists; they were humanists.

What is true Christianity?

1. It is a faith that primarily stresses the reality of that spirit realm, demonstrated in the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord, and the utter necessity of a spiritual relationship with

God here and now through the risen Christ. It preaches that, just as Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, there is coming a great resurrection. This world isn't going on forever with successive generations; there will come an end. He who came and lived in our world, who died, and went back to that spirit realm, is coming again. 'This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven,' said the angels (1:11). He is merely waiting 'until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet', and then he shall come (Heb 10:13).

That is Christianity, and it contrasted very strongly then, as it does now, with all versions of mere humanistic religion. The ancient Jews of the Sadducean sort had long since learnt to spiritualize away all notions of the Lord's coming. The Old Testament talked of it, of course. It said that Christ was coming, but they did not take it literally. They said, 'It can't be an event in history.' Notice the tendency to humanistic reinterpretation. A self-contained earth, a god up there somewhere, but no spirit, no angel, no resurrection, no end of the world, no coming again of Christ when that world breaks into this.

Christianity stands in tremendous contrast, believing in the reality of that world. Not only that Christ is coming again, but true religion is within our contact here and now. The risen Lord Jesus Christ, by the power of his Holy Spirit, has come down from heaven and is present with us.

2. But now, lest you should go to a wrong extreme and think that Christianity is a kind of Gnosticism—so spiritually-minded that it hasn't any time for material things—let Luke stress the other thing to you. Spiritually-minded as Christianity is, it is equally concerned with the goodness and necessity of things material. It isn't Gnosticism, it isn't even Plato's philosophy. That is, if you will stick to Christianity and not let Thomas Aquinas and various other people colour your Christianity with Plato and Aristotle. It believes in the goodness of the body; the goodness of things material. I needn't elaborate that again here. I have already pointed out the various passages dealing with the attitude to goods. It has both in it. The rightness of material things, as they're controlled by the Holy Spirit of course.

You may sum up that kind of emphasis in the story that is told in chapter three. A man who was lame from birth was at the gate of the temple. The apostles were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer and there he was, asking to receive alms. His friends thought that this was a good tactic. If you can catch people going into church or coming out, it's then that they feel religious and charitable. Isn't this what religion's all about? Helping the poor? Isn't that the church's job in the world? Is it?

Along comes Peter, and the man asks for alms. Said Peter, 'I have no silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!' (v. 6). And he healed him. The crowds came flocking around and Peter made his comment.

'You stand here wondering what's happened to this man. I'll tell you what's happened. You wanted my sixpence, but I've got something vastly better. I can talk to you about the Author of life, the very source of life, whom God raised from the dead. You will take my sixpence, but you killed the Author of life himself. It's the name of Christ—by faith in his name—that has made this man strong and well' (see vv. 15–16).

Isn't it curious? But it's the same the whole world over. They have their version of Christianity, and what it ought to be: 'Look here, we're tired of your preaching and your doctrines. Show us a bit of practical living. Give to Oxfam.'

Your Christianity will perish forever, if you listen to them. They want your shilling, but they don't want the Author of life. It would be utterly traitorous to him, to Christianity, and to your non-Christian friends to let them get the impression that, so long as they get your shilling, that's all Christianity is about. It is primarily about the reality of that spirit realm; of being reconciled to God, receiving the very Author of life; being ready for his coming. This whole creation is going to move forward a great stage when he comes again, and to take the church's shilling and reject her Lord is a pathetic tragedy.

It doesn't mean we should be indifferent. Of course not. They can have our shillings; they can have all we've got. I say again, Christianity believes in the goodness and rightness and necessity of things material in the body. But never let them trick you into thinking that you'd better play down the doctrines of Christianity, the person of Christ, his resurrection, the need for regeneration, and end up with something that's nothing more than a social welfare institution. That would be a denial of all that Christianity is, a going back to sheer Sadducism.

Part 2: Christianity's distinctiveness (6:8–9:31)

There are four stories in section two

Distinctive worship

1. Stephen and the temple; his trial and martyrdom (6:8–8:3).
2. Philip going down to Samaria and the conversion of people in Samaria (8:4–25).

Distinctive witness

3. The Ethiopian eunuch led to Christ by Philip in the desert (8:26–40).
4. The story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus (9:1–31).

They're very interesting, aren't they? The first two are the story of Christianity against the background of Judaism's worship, and the second two are the story of Christianity against the background of Judaism's evangelical outreach. Any respectable religion ought to have those two sides: worship and evangelical witness.

But now let's look at the first two. They form an interesting pair, both to do with the temple. The Jews were the orthodox and the Samaritans were the non-conformists: a lot of Christianity is said to be either of those two.

Distinctive worship

1. *Stephen and the temple; his trial and martyrdom (6:8–8:3).*

they set up false witnesses who said, 'This man never ceases to speak words against *this holy place* and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy *this place* and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.' (6:13–14)

Stephen's accusers brought a garbled version before the court, but there was some truth in it. Stephen probably said what the later Christian writer to the Hebrews said. Indeed, the old temple was still going. It had been instituted of God, but its services would have to change. Now that Christ had come and offered the supreme sacrifice, that old God-given worship with its animal sacrifices was going. And the old priesthood with a high priest was going too. You can't have two high priests, can you? In Christianity, Christ is the high priest. It would be utterly blasphemous for anyone else to attempt to be. You don't want incense now that you've got Christ, do you?

The early Christians were much more concerned with 'the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man' (Heb 8:2 KJV). Now you'll find them happily meeting in an upstairs room where folks could fall out of windows! (see Acts 20:9). They weren't altogether upset when they couldn't go to the temple any more, because Christianity is about the spiritual reality of which Judaism was only the shadow.

Christianity has so frequently fallen back to the Judaism from which it came, but you won't change a nation overnight. Actually, when they heard Stephen talk like this, they thought they'd never heard such blasphemy in all their lives.

'Stop offering animal sacrifices? It's in the Bible that you have to offer animal sacrifices, isn't it? It's in Leviticus, and wasn't it inspired by God? Hasn't God commanded the Old Testament sacrifices, and who is Stephen to say that they've got to stop? That's what's being put about by these ignorant fishermen and their supposed converts.'

How would you deal with folks like that? You say, 'Read them the letter to the Hebrews.' Well, it hadn't been written yet, and, if it had, imagine trying to prove it to some rabbi. Stephen quoted from the Old Testament. Actually, he read them a lesson in history with very little comment, if I may paraphrase him.

The Old Testament shows that God is a God of progress, a God of movement, from which we take our history. He called Abraham out of Ur of Chaldees, and he came into Palestine. But there came a moment when the very God who called Abraham out, told his descendants to go down into Egypt. You can imagine some of them saying, 'No, we can't do that kind of thing. God called us here.' So he did, originally. But now the ways of God have taken a turn, and for the next four hundred years there's going to be another 'age', when it is God's will that they're down in Egypt.

Then a man called Moses came along, and said that they'd come to a climax in history. God was on the move once more, and they had to come out of Egypt. It took him a long time to persuade them that it was so, but if you had been a Jew living in Egypt when Moses and the rest moved out, you might have said, 'I'm staying in Egypt because God brought our fathers here.' That wouldn't have been true conservatism; it would have been apostasy, for God was moving on.

Well, they eventually got into the land, and Solomon built the temple. It was marvellous, but even Solomon wasn't altogether too sure when he finished how long it would be there, for he said, 'The Most High does not dwell in houses made by hands. The heaven of heavens cannot contain him.'

The prophets saw that, in its very nature, this must be only a temporary thing. The time would come when this would have to pass.

With Christianity, it had reached another of those great crises when God was moving on once more, so it was no longer faithful to remain a Jew. It was apostasy against the living God to keep all the old temple worship. Christianity's God is a God of progress, you know. One of these days you won't keep the Lord's Supper any more, because the Lord is coming and there's going to be another big move forward. God is the living God.

Then Stephen made the point that none of the men God raised up to lead his people to the next stage forward was welcomed. They didn't like Joseph: they hated him and sold him. They didn't like Moses: they rebelled against him. And so on and so forth down the years.

'In fact, your rejection of all these God-sent leaders,' says Stephen, as he quotes Scripture, 'is not an example of praiseworthy conservatism; it's an example of resistance to the Holy Spirit' (see 7:51).

Compared to Judaism with its mere symbols, Christianity is the religion of progress. We must come past the old temporary symbols into the spiritual realities to which they pointed forward.

2. Philip going down to Samaria and the conversion of people in Samaria (8:4–25).

When you come to Samaria, you'll find the opposite side of the coin. It was precisely about this business of the temple that the Samaritans objected to the Jews. They agreed that the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, was the word of God. They differed on how you should worship God. As the Samaritan woman put it to Christ, 'Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship' (John 4:20). It was a question of worship.

Philip went down to Samaria, and had a most successful mission. Many were saved and they'd been baptized (8:12). Why no Holy Spirit? How odd. Let me read you the text, just to remind you of what happened.

Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. (vv. 14–17)

The thing that convinces me that those Samaritans, apart from Simon Magus, were genuine converts is that they let Peter and John put their hands on them. If they hadn't been converted they would have spat in their faces. The Jews didn't have any dealings with the Samaritans, so Peter and John wouldn't have gone anyway, not if they'd been die-hard Jews. The Samaritans wouldn't have received them because of this centuries long bitter feud between them.

'Why all this fuss?' you say. 'Why did God make those Samaritans wait for the apostles to come from Jerusalem and lay their hands on them, before God would own that they were genuine converts?'

I think this is exceedingly important. Let's go back a bit in our thinking. Our Lord did tell the woman in Samaria that the time was coming when they would worship God neither in Jerusalem nor in Samaria. The whole question of religious headquarters was going to be struck out; there weren't going to be any more spiritual headquarters on earth, neither in Jerusalem nor Samaria. That is quite true in Christianity. There is no indisputable headquarters for Christianity that I know of now, except in heaven.

Even so, God didn't say to these Samaritans, 'Let's forget the past; we'll scrub it out. You had a difference with Jerusalem about where you ought to worship, but let's forget those things.' No, indeed he didn't. There was a very important reason behind God saying that Jerusalem was to be the place where those people should worship. When they entered the land, God solemnly warned them that there would be only one place where God's name should be put, and where God would be worshipped. If they started worshipping him anywhere else, they would fall into abominable idolatry like the heathen did. They were to have one place where God's worship would proceed according to holy Scripture.

Idolatry was always a very real danger in the ancient world. They weren't physicists, were they? If a woman combed her hair at night and it crackled a bit, they thought a demon had got into it. And if the moon went into eclipse they banged their bins as hard as they could to frighten the devil that had got hold of the moon. They didn't have astronauts, and it was perilously easy for people in those days to turn to idolatry. Idolatry always leads to bondage and makes a person into a slave. Instead of being lord of creation, he's now bowing down to sticks and stones, electrical thunderstorms, shadows over the moon, and all that kind of thing. He's meant to be an intelligent man but he's gone down into idolatry. How were they to know the difference?

God said, 'We'll have none of that stuff. You will come to Jerusalem. You will not be given free rein in your imaginative schemes to make religion a bit more attractive. You'll have an idol-free temple with the plain word of God and the great doctrines of redemption taught in its ritual.'

The Samaritans disagreed; they had another scheme. They said they were as good as the Jews, and you didn't always have to go by the Bible. They found a way round the more awkward bits; they cut them out and changed them. Does that matter?

Let's go down with Philip to Samaria and see what happened. There was a certain gentleman called Simon Magus. He was an old psychological quack. The people thought that he was an absolute wonder: 'This man is the power of God that is called Great' (v. 10). Half of them were nearly granting him divine honours. They had fallen prey to the very thing that God was trying to save them from by demanding they come up to Jerusalem.

Caiaphas and Annas weren't the most spiritual men you've ever met, but they weren't likely to be taken in by a quack like Simon Magus, because at least they had stuck to God's word in his temple. In cutting their roots with Jerusalem, the Samaritans had fallen for the deception. Before God will grant these Samaritans his full salvation, he says, 'You'll have to let the apostles come down from Jerusalem, own that anything worth having comes from Jerusalem.'

That's conservatism with a vengeance, isn't it? I take leave to add, ladies and gentlemen, that if *you* have anything worth having in the spiritual realm, it likewise comes from

Jerusalem. It comes through a Jew with the name of Jesus Christ, the Jews' Messiah. He is the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matt 1:1). He isn't a bright boy with a new brand of theology who has some wonderful insights. He is the flower of that great historic process down the ages recorded in the Old Testament.

Never cut your roots with history. If Jesus Christ is what he says he is, he is the Messiah prophesied through this special book that came through this special nation. He himself said, 'For if you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?' (John 5:46–47). Alas for a Christendom that has in this last hundred years cut its roots with history. It doesn't necessarily believe that the Old Testament is inspired; it doesn't believe in a literal resurrection. It cuts its roots with history, and offers us in its place existential philosophy into which Christian terms have been fitted with consummate skill. Christianity is the culmination of that great historic movement. To cut your roots with history and belief in the inspiration of the Old Testament, is to land yourself in danger of being carried away with the most recent philosophy, which is only another form of bondage to idolatry of the human intellect.

Distinctive witness

3. The Ethiopian eunuch led to Christ by Philip in the desert (8:26–40)

Here is one form of Judaism's evangelism. Their worship of God and their reading of the law, its purity, and its high, lofty morals were a great lesson to the ancient world. The Ethiopian chancellor was one man amongst many who found themselves attracted to Jerusalem to seek the true God, turning their backs on idols. There were many in various stations in life. Men in the army, like the centurion; that good woman in the fashion trade, Lydia, mentioned in Acts 16. They were God-fearers, much attracted to Judaism's purity of religion, its morals and its law.

This man had come up to Jerusalem, and he was going back evidently disappointed. Without knowing it, he had in his hand a great potential, the great message of salvation. Why wasn't he converted while he was in Jerusalem? Well, it was because Judaism wouldn't accept that Isaiah 53 referred to Jesus of Nazareth and his atoning sacrifice, and therefore they had no gospel. It was the exact passage that God used to lead him to Christ and into salvation. The law isn't gospel, you know. You may observe in history that the Jews did a certain amount of evangelization around Alexandria. But there has only been one point in history where there issued from Judaism a mighty flood of evangelism that filled the world, and since that happened it's never happened again.

What made Judaism erupt in that phenomenal way—never before and never after? Philip will give us the answer. Law isn't gospel, you see. I myself have never found any power in the law, so why should I go to the next street even, to tell somebody the law? Why would I go and tell anyone to be good, when I know myself that I wouldn't have the puff to do it? Now I've got more: I've got the gospel, I've got the Saviour. 'The Lord laid on him my iniquity, and by his stripes I'm healed' (see Isa 53:5–6). Now I can tell others, 'Christ has died for me, and he died for you as well, if you'll have it.'

It was that message, the vast volcano of Christianity, that pushed Philip into the desert. But the steam would go out of its evangelism if Christendom were ever to lose its message of the atoning death of Christ and lapse back into being merely a thing of ethics and Judaism's law. Have you ever seen it happen? It's a pity that Christendom has sometimes grown ashamed of the doctrines of the blood of Christ, his vicarious suffering, and his atoning death.

4. *The story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus (9:1–31)*

In Saul, you find the biggest evangelist that Judaism ever produced. He was a Jew, wasn't he? What made him an evangelist? Well, it's an interesting thing. Let's examine Luke's literary beginnings and endings.

Stephen started his defence with the famous observation, 'The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham' (7:2). God called him out and made him a *pilgrim*. If the God of glory appears to you, he'll make a pilgrim of you.

When *Saul* got converted, a light from heaven flashed around him (9:3). What did that do to him? It made a *missionary* of him.

The God of glory appeared to Abraham and brought him out of the Gentiles;

The light from heaven shone upon Saul and sent him back to the Gentiles.

It was the discovery of the deity of the Lord Jesus that turned Saul into a missionary. It was the discovery of his risen glory that revolutionized Saul's life and sent him, the erstwhile Pharisee, out to the Gentiles with the gospel. He discovered that this Jesus whom he had despised with all his heart was the Son of God. He was a learned rabbi; he could argue well, excel in Haggadah and Midrash, and all the rest of it. He wasn't one of these wild prophets from the north, running around in their evangelical fervour with strange doctrines about the second coming, and this kind of thing. He was a conservative Jew, until he discovered that this despised Jesus, with his street corner preaching, was the Son of God.

I wonder if we would stand with Jesus if he came preaching around our street corners, or would we be ashamed of him as a narrow-minded evangelist?

Part 3: The social implications of evangelising the Gentiles (9:32–12:24)

What is Christianity's idea of sainthood? If the gospel is going to move out to Gentiles, Judaism's notion of what it means to be a saint has got to be revised.

Peter visit the saints (9:32)

What is a saint? Judaism had its ideas of what a saint is, and Jews wouldn't eat with Gentiles, but it's remarkably difficult to preach the gospel to a person if you won't eat with them. And so in this section you will find Christianity emerging, and Peter faced with the task of taking the gospel to a Gentile. It provoked him to rethink his whole concept of sainthood in the light of Christianity (10:28). The old middle wall of partition was broken down, and sainthood became something else. But that's a long story (see Eph 2:14–18).

Part 4: Justification by faith, not by the works of the law (12:25–16:5)

This raised the doctrinal implications of taking the gospel to the Gentiles. Should you make Gentiles keep the law of Moses to be saved? Should you ask them to circumcise their sons at eight days old? Should you make it necessary for salvation? And the answer, of course, is a very definite no. They're saved by grace through faith, with no Judaist additions.

Part 5: Christianity and Paganism (16:6–19:20)

Having talked about what Christianity is as distinct from Judaism in its doctrine of salvation, and then its doctrine of sainthood, now it's Christianity in the light of a pagan background.

Spiritism

What's the difference between the guidance of the Holy Spirit and Spiritism? The world longs for guidance. On the quiet, people laugh and joke about it, but they believe in Lord Luck, in Virgo and Sagittarius, and that kind of thing.

The world craves for some kind of guidance, and this section opens with the woman who had a spirit of divination, and people came to her for guidance. There is a discussion about the guidance of the Holy Spirit upon his servants, Paul and company. Not to go here, not to go there, shepherding them here, shepherding them there, until at last they came to Europe (16:6–10).

Philosophy

And then Christianity against the background of philosophy at Athens; stoicism, fatalism, the epicurean atomic theory, and what have you (ch. 17).

Part 6: Paul's defence of the gospel (19:21–28:31)

And finally, this one is somewhat different from the rest. It is taken up largely with Paul's defence of the gospel, in which of course both man and gospel are intertwined. There is some sense in which Paul was the gospel. Why am I putting it that way? Because he is the man, perhaps more than any other, to whom Christ revealed the length and breadth of his gospel.

What kind of a man was Paul? What was the gospel that he preached against the background of Jewish accusations that they were a sect? It's a favourite way of trying to kill anything to call it a sect—'Nasty little sect, a splinter group.' Against the background of political accusations that they were antisocial—and the Romans would have to take a lot of notice of that—Paul was put on trial. He stood for 'the defence of the gospel', as he puts it (Phil 1:16).

Luke goes into it in great length here because, if Paul hadn't gone both to Jerusalem and to Rome to defend the gospel from all those charges, there would have been many sensible people who would not have bothered to listen to the gospel. They would have said, 'Aren't

Christians a little bit emotionally unbalanced? They're nasty sectarian people.' And they wouldn't even dream of going to listen to them.

How clever the devil is. He does the same kind of thing today, doesn't he? If there's any new-fangled notion against the inspiration of Scripture, we'll have it on the front page of the newspapers. John Allegro's² notions on the Dead Sea Scrolls, and such like things, get great publicity. The result is that multitudes of people wouldn't begin to listen to you. There is room, not merely for preaching the gospel, but, as time and opportunity are granted, to *defend* the gospel, so that people's ears may be kept open to listen to it.

Well, thank you for your kind patience in listening to me for so long.

² John Allegro (1923-1988) was an archaeologist and religious scholar. He is the author of *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, *The People of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, and *The Treasure of the Copper Scroll*.

About the Author

DAVID W. GOODING (1925-2019) was Professor Emeritus of Old Testament Greek at Queen's University Belfast and a member of the Royal Irish Academy. He taught the Bible internationally and lectured on both its authenticity and its relevance to philosophy, world religions and daily life. He 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.