

Christianity Defined and Defended

Studies in the Acts of the Apostles

David Gooding

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Introduction to the Series

Distinguishing What Matters: Daring to be Different.

There are six major parts to the Acts of the Apostles and it is my purpose to take one of those parts each week and to examine with you one or two, or possibly three, of the leading ideas to be found in each section as we study them. I will at this juncture point out what the six major sections of this book are, for Luke himself has divided his narrative, by a very simple device, into six parts, and we shall be following Luke's own divisions of the material.

The sections of the book of Acts

The first part that we will be considering this evening goes from 1:1–6:7, where Luke sums up the first stage of the great triumph of the gospel with the words '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.' That is section one.

The next great part of his work goes from 6:8–9:31, where again Luke pauses to mark the great progress of the gospel by telling us, '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.' Already we begin to see from Luke's chosen vocabulary, the multiplication of the work of God and its increase and its resultant edification, for one of the things we will derive from the study of this book is a sense of the tremendous growth and irresistible progression of the work of the Lord, under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

The third section runs from 9:32–12:24 where, against the background of Herod's attempt to persecute the church and to stop its progress, Luke records, 'But the word of God increased and multiplied'—Herod and his persecution notwithstanding.

The fourth major part of the work then proceeds from 12:25–16:5, where Luke says, 'So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.' If you have been paying close attention, you will have noticed that these refrains which Luke places here and there in his text alternate between telling us about the spread of the word of the Lord, and the increase of the church of the Lord. The one thing, of course, is directly related to the other. The chief method, still to this day, by which the church of God increases, is the increase of the word of God. That simple observation carries the potential for a half a dozen sermons within it, but we are looking at the sections of Luke!

The next great section goes from 16:6–19:20, where against the background of Paul's long work in Ephesus which was so soon to be disrupted by the great riot in that city, Luke tells us, 'So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily.' And that emphasis

on the irresistible progress of the word and work of the Lord continues through the final stage of the book and reaches its triumphant conclusion in 28:30–31, where ‘[Paul] lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him.’ This was in spite of the fact that in that hired dwelling, he was under house arrest and virtually therefore imprisoned. Nevertheless, he proceeded ‘proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.’

Our approach to the study of Luke’s account

There are many ways of reading the Acts of the Apostles and multitudinous are the lessons that can properly be drawn from the study of this book. I would not wish to disturb your favourite way of looking at the book, nor to question the lessons that you have been taught from it. One way of looking at the book of course is to regard it simply as a history book that is giving us the story of the spread of Christianity, from the Upper Room in Jerusalem via Judaea and Samaria and then to the uttermost parts of the earth—symbolized for us by the arrival of Paul and the gospel in Rome, the capital city of the Roman Empire. That is a very valid way of looking at it and, if you are geographically minded, then you doubtless have already made out for yourself your own homemade map; or if not that, looked it up in the back of your Bible and seen maps made of the geographical spread of the gospel, along with its historical spread. These are profitable things and they move our hearts still—to long for the day when the gospel will have infiltrated into every nook and cranny of this habitable earth. It has spread a long way, but every tribe does not yet have the gospel in its own language and there are still some places to go, even in this late generation. So a study of the book from its historical and geographical angle would certainly remain a profitable study.

Christianity being distinguished and defined

But in addition to telling us of the spread of the gospel geographically, Luke points out to us in his work that as the gospel spread, it met certain problems in each of the areas where it was preached. As the early church met these problems and relied upon the Holy Spirit for their guidance in solving those problems, Christianity itself grew and was formed. You will be aware that Christianity in its original state was Judaism. Every man among the apostles was a Jew and all the believers at one stage were Jews. When we meet them in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, they’re still very godly Jews going up to the temple at the hour of prayer and doubtless taking part in its services. Christianity began as Judaism.

Of course, it didn’t remain Judaism. Then you say, ‘Well how did it develop and when did it stop being Judaism and become Christianity?’ That’s a very interesting question. It didn’t happen in the way that we put the clocks back and forward. You know, suddenly we see to our surprise there’s a notice in the paper or over the radio that next Sunday morning at two o’clock, you will cease wintertime and go over to summertime; and of course all dutiful citizens, except one or two, manage to remember and turn their clocks forward an hour. Or else they’re very embarrassed when they turn up at the meeting on Sunday an hour too late! Christianity didn’t happen in that way: there didn’t come an announcement from heaven saying, ‘At two o’clock next Sunday, you will stop Judaism and begin Christianity.’

Divergence between Christianity and Judaism

If in the early days, the Christians were still going to the temple and still behaving as ordinary Jews, it becomes a matter of exceeding great interest to see what made them start doing things differently. But then of course, if you ask that question, you'll soon have to ask another question, 'What is the difference between Judaism and Christianity anyway, and why did Christianity bother to be different? Why couldn't they go on just being Jews?' Any schoolboy could see, if he read his Old Testament and then read his New Testament, that there is a tremendous lot in common between Judaism and Christianity, so why couldn't they go on being the same thing? They didn't go on being the same thing. Presently, Christianity began to diverge from Judaism. Eventually the gulf became fixed.

What was it all about? That we shall see as we proceed, but this we might observe from the very beginning; that if we will allow Luke to show us the points at which Christianity diverged from Judaism, we will discover the essential nature of Christianity. We will discover things so fundamental, so vital to Christianity, that Christians couldn't compromise those things and still be Christian. Therefore when Judaism disagreed, or refused or rejected what the early Christians had to say, then reactively enough, the early church had to diverge from Judaism and became distinctively Christian. I repeat, if we will observe the point of departure, we will begin to discover those things that lie at the very heart of Christianity and makes Christianity Christianity.

Indeed, it is not merely at one point that Christianity diverged from Judaism, but a whole succession of points, and we will find that Luke has so arranged his narrative that the first four sections of his book cover four major areas in which the early church diverged from Judaism. But then of course, the early church didn't only diverge from Judaism. Presently the Christian missionaries came across from Asia into Europe, into the big world of Roman imperialism and Greek culture. There they met philosophy and politics and spiritism, and there they met a thousand different religions.

By selecting certain occasions, Luke shows us very carefully the difference not only between Christianity and Judaism, but the difference between Christianity and spiritism. Christians talk of being led by the Spirit, but so did the ancient world. They got led by spirits too and what's the difference? People needed to know then, and they still need to know. And Christianity is shown as differing not only from spiritism, but from Roman politics, and Jewish politics for that matter. The early Christians were very careful to point out that Christianity was not a form of politics, for the world needed to be told that then and they still need to be told it. Christianity had to be compared with the Greek philosophies so that we could all see what they have in common and yet how distinct Christianity is, even from Gentile philosophy. We still need to be told it. Thus it is that Luke goes through his book showing us not only the spread of Christianity, but what Christianity is, how it began and what it became.

The importance of understanding what Christianity is, and what it isn't

You say, 'Why should I be bothered to find out what Christianity is?' Well of course, in the ancient world people demanded to know anyway. The world into which Christianity was born was a world that had thousands of religions. I dare say that when people, particularly of

the educated sort, heard of Christianity, many of them shrugged their shoulders and said, 'What, not another religion! We've got thousands already, why should we need another one? What then do you stand for and why must you be different from the Jews?'

And there's another reason. Not only did the ancient world need to know, but we as Christians need to be reminded from time to time of what essential Christianity is. What are those things about Christianity that we may never compromise? Because, if we compromise them, we are ditching Christianity itself. We live in an age when the mood worldwide is to blend religions. Christendom itself is to be heard, in many quarters, suggesting that we Christians should give up the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ our Lord, and rather proceed by selecting the best out of every religion and putting them together and making a world religion. Days will come when that argument will bring with it a tremendous power of cogency as men will argue that religious strife has been the source of much pain and sorrow and persecution and death and division in this world, and therefore isn't it only the logical and proper thing that religions should drop their distinctive facets and all join up to become one great world, peace-loving religion?

In those days, should you live to see them, the men and women who dare stand out for the distinctives of Christianity will find life less comfortable than they would wish it to be. And, of course, history has already taught us many serious lessons on this matter. For if we look back through our history of Christendom, we will remember that there have been great periods, centuries at a time, when what went under the name of Christianity wasn't Christianity at all. Instead, Christianity had slipped back very often into a form of Judaism from which it originally came; and alas, on other occasions, it slipped back into the paganism from which it had been converted. I have not time now to cite the examples to back up my thesis, but if you are interested to discuss it afterwards, let's do that.

Christianity's Fundamental Distinctive — The Person of Christ

Section 1: Acts 1:1–6:7

Tonight, we are to think together of the first of these major sections of the Acts of the Apostles. I propose to take one of those sections each week and draw from it one or two of its major ideas. Let us read a portion of the word of God by way of introducing ourselves to the topic.

But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: "And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapour of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know — this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. For David says concerning him, "I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence." Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." Let all the house

of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.' (2:14–36)

It is an exceedingly practical and fundamental thing that looks out at us from the pages of Luke's history and tonight, as I say, I take the first section and I want to suggest to you what its leading theme is. It will be one of those fundamental things which distinguish Christianity from Judaism and indeed from all else, and you will find it stated explicitly in the words we read in verse 36:

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

The first major thing between Christianity and Judaism is that Jesus is the Christ—the Messiah—and that Jesus is Lord. On this basic rock, Christianity is built.

Let us briefly think for a moment, therefore, about what Peter means when he says that God has made him Lord. In what sense is Jesus 'Lord'? He is the Christ, the Messiah. Israel denied that then and denies it to this present day but 'God has made him both Lord and Messiah'. What Peter means, we may deduce from the Psalm he quotes in verse 34:

For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, 'The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.'

Here Peter was showing himself a very apt scholar of our Lord, for it was our Lord himself who had quoted this verse from Psalm 110, first of all to the Sadducees and then doubtless very often to his own disciples, because it is one of the key verses of the Old Testament. You will remember the question he attached to it, when he reminded the Sadducees of it (see Matt 22:42–44). He said, 'What do you think about the Messiah? Whoever the Messiah is, leave that for the moment, but the Messiah when he comes, who will he be—whose son is he?' And they said, 'He will be the son of David,' which in its way was perfectly true, but by itself would have meant that he was nothing more than human.

Immediately our Lord picked up on that and, quoting them this verse, he asked 'Well if he is simply the son of David, if he is simply human, then how is it that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him "Lord"?' (see v. 43). In the Middle East in ancient times, and still more there than here, the distinction between father and son is a very, very big distinction. In those ancient days, a teenager didn't walk into the home, kick his shoes off and say, 'Hi, dad.' Fathers expected a great deal of reverence from their son, and there's one thing a father would never have said to his son: he would never have referred to his son as 'my Lord'. Yet David is heard speaking to God and speaking about God, and David describes the Messiah in these terms, 'my Lord'. For God the Father—Jehovah, the LORD—said to the Messiah, said to my Lord,' says David. If David therefore, speaking by the Spirit, called him 'Lord' how do you say that he is simply David's son?

The use of that verse goes back to our blessed Lord himself in all the wonder of his self-conscious deity. This is no invention of the church. What wonderful moments they were when God's own incarnate Son, author of that Old Testament, stood here on earth and explained to

us men and women what was implied in it. The exceeding marvel—more than ever we might have dreamed or hoped—calling our attention to this wonderful fact that the Messiah is more than David's son. He is David's Lord. He is indeed God's Son. It is this that is the essential foundation of true Christianity.

I hope you will not count me a gloomy Jeremiah when I point out to you that Christendom has not always been faithful to the person of Jesus Christ our Lord. Alas, in many a theological seminary, one of the early things the students learn is to question the authority and the deity of Jesus Christ our Lord. It is not a question of being narrow minded, but if we would be 'Christian', then we make it our first business to get hold of this prime distinctive thing: Christianity is built on the confession of Jesus as Messiah, Son of God.

Why must we insist on it? For this very good reason, as Peter subsequently told the Sanhedrin, and the high priest included, 'You builders have been treacherous men. You've attempted to build a temple of this nation on a foundation of your own making. Not only will your religion go astray if you reject that foundation, but man's salvation will be forfeited.'

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. (4:12)

Be called a bigot if you have to be, but if you love men's souls, because there is no salvation in any other, you must stand uncompromisingly over the deity and the messiahship of Jesus Christ our Lord.

The witness of the Holy Spirit

You will say to me, 'But, Mr Preacher, you rightly said you were going to pick out just one of the themes from this first section of the Acts. Surely there are others. Are there not more important things? The first section of Acts concentrates on the day of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Isn't that the major theme?' Well of course, in a sense you're right. Far be it for me to speak even a comma to detract from the importance and the majesty of the Holy Spirit or to say anything derogatory to his deity and his all-importance. Indeed, I should want to emphasize with all the breath in my body that the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was an event unique in the history of the world and unique in the history of redemption. There had been nothing like it before. That day he came in a sense that he had never come before. Many times had he visited our world and clothed himself with this man and with that woman and used them as his servants. Many times had he visited; on this occasion, he came to reside. But even as we say that, the blessed Holy Spirit will not be grieved when we point out what Scripture says; that the coming of the Holy Spirit was not an end in itself. The coming of the Holy Spirit was for a purpose.

Our Lord Jesus had told the disciples that when the Holy Spirit came, he would do two things (see John 16:8–11). He would convict the world and he would glorify Christ before the believer. He would convict the world of their sin and not believing on Jesus. He would convict the world that Jesus was right, and he'd gone to the Father and demonstrated he was right. He would convict the world of the judgment of this world—that the prince of this world has been judged. For what seemed a defeat at Calvary and a triumph for Satan had, by the

resurrection, been turned into a triumph for Christ and a defeat of Satan. And the Holy Spirit's coming would be for that very purpose, to convict the world of these things.

And his second purpose would be that he might glorify the Lord Jesus. That is why he came. See him doing it at Pentecost when he went direct to his task of glorifying the Saviour. He filled the apostles and others with his gifts and, as they spoke to the people and the people came enquiring, 'What was this thing?', they learnt it was the pouring out of God's Spirit. Why was the Spirit poured out? So that all the house of Israel should 'know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ' (2:36).

That is his first purpose. We who are called, as this book tells us, to be witnesses to our Lord, recognize at once that the Holy Spirit comes not merely to help us but to control and to organize that witness. If we submit ourselves to him, then the first thing he will lead us to do in our witness for the Lord, and the prime topic of that witness, will be that Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah.

The Messiah and his kingdom

If then we have considered what is the major topic of these early six chapters, let me now briefly run over with you the flow of the argument in the first three of these chapters. Let me point out to you a thing that Luke has done to make it easy to get our minds round his writing. Look with me if you will at Acts 1:6-7 where Luke records a question which the disciples asked of our Lord during the forty days, 'Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' To which the Lord replied, 'It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.'

We notice the question and the reply, but now let's look at chapter 3, where Peter is bringing to its climax the lesson to be deduced from the healing of the lame man. He calls on Israel:

Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Christ appointed for you, Jesus, whom heaven must receive until the time for restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets long ago. (vv. 19-21)

You notice the reference again to the question of restoration, and you will notice how Luke brings that idea to its head in fulfilment and climax in Peter's sermon, 'The time is coming when God will restore all things that he ever promised through the mouth of his prophets.' It is important to see that Luke hasn't been wandering from the point. He's setting out the programme, and what he has to say in between those points all bears upon that question.

The apostles have come in for a great deal of criticism from all sorts of preachers. Poor old apostles, what they didn't know was terrible! Just listen to them, asking the Lord such an infantile, narrow-minded question! We would have known better, wouldn't we? The Lord risen from the dead and Pentecost about to burst upon the world and the gospel going out to the Gentiles, and these poor little, narrow-minded apostles asking the Lord, 'Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' And thus with an apology for the early apostles of Christianity, we pass on to those who have understood Christianity much better, namely us!

Well that's one way of interpreting the thing but it isn't perhaps the best to jump to the conclusion that the apostles didn't know what they were talking about. How did they ever come to ask the question, 'Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' It wasn't such a stupid question when Peter, by the Holy Spirit, subsequently told the whole nation that one day everything will be restored. They asked the question because they did believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Even before he went to the cross, they believed that. And you will remember the sadness with which the two who journeyed to Emmaus had recounted to the stranger how their hopes had been so bitterly dashed. 'We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel' (Luke 24:21). But his death had seemed to them to wreck all their hopes.

But now he was risen. They had seen him go to Calvary, then be buried in the tomb. Now he'd come back again. Wonder of wonders, the Messiah had returned. You say, 'How do you mean he returned? He hadn't gone anywhere.' Hadn't he? Where had he been then? If you think he hadn't gone anywhere, then I respectfully ask you to think again. Does his death at Calvary and his burial, his commending his spirit to the Father, mean he hadn't gone anywhere and was still hanging around Jerusalem? And here he was, come again. The reality of that they couldn't doubt, for as he moved among them for forty days, he gave them many infallible proofs that he was alive. He had come again, so then he *was* the one that would redeem Israel after all. And if you really believed that, the next question would come very quickly to your lips, 'Well, Lord, when are you going to do it?' If you didn't ask that question, you could be taken almost for an unbeliever! It was a sensible question because if Jesus Christ was the Messiah, the King, you can't be a king and not have a kingdom.

It wasn't merely that. You notice that during those forty days he didn't stay with them all the time: he would come and he would suddenly disappear. Those must have been exciting days to live through. Fancy thinking, 'Now this is breakfast time, but before supper the Lord may have come again.' Goodness me, if I thought that today I would have been a bit better behaved! He might actually come through the wall, and one day when he came in like that, he said that they were to wait in the city until he sent the promise of the Father upon them (see Luke 24:49). It must have been electric: all those vast Old Testament promises of the restoration and everything a Jew had hoped for. 'You're to wait in the city until you get the promise of the Father.' They knew their Old Testament perhaps better than we do, and of course they would ask, 'Why do we have to wait, and is this going to be the time when you restore the kingdom to Israel? Will that be your second coming?' For all they knew, one of these constant comings might turn out to be *the* great coming. How would you know? And so they asked him, 'Is it at this time?'

You will notice that they didn't say, 'Are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' That was taken for granted. The Greek that Luke uses makes it very clear what the question was. 'Yes, you're going to restore Israel, that we know. But is it at this time you're going to do it?' And you will notice what he didn't say in reply. He didn't say, 'Don't be so silly. I'm never going to do that.' He simply said, 'It's not given you to know the time when.' Oh, but you say he did contradict it: they were expecting the kingdom to be restored to Israel and he told them something quite different. He said, 'Don't bother about Israel. Go and preach the gospel and you will be my witnesses to the end of the earth.' Do you suppose that has nothing to do with Israel? Let me make up a little analogy — such things help sometimes!

I take you back to the Second World War and up to some port in northern Scotland maybe, and here are the ships of Her Majesty's Navy, lined up. These are the ships that normally have gone on the run to Russia and here they stand by the quayside and they're being loaded with all sorts of things. The ship's boy sees the admiral coming down the quayside, so he salutes him and says, 'Sir, is it on Friday that we're going to Russia?' and the admiral says, 'It's not given to you to know the times. You get on with your job and load this ship.' What would you suppose the admiral meant? 'Don't be so silly, we're not going to Russia'? Wasn't the loading of the ship preparatory to going to Russia?

And when the disciples asked, 'Are you going at this time to restore the kingdom?' our Lord said, 'It's not given to you to know the times, but what you will do is this, you're going to be my witnesses and you'll start here in Jerusalem.' Why in Jerusalem? Chapter 3 will tell you why: because before the time of the restoration of all things, Israel must repent. The heavens must receive him until that time, and if Israel is to be saved, Israel must repent.

If that coming happened and they were not ready, what disaster it would be for Israel. So they were to go out and preach, and God in his mercy would bring them to repentance. And not only Israel, for Isaiah had said that all the nations would hear. So they were to go out and preach to all the nations, that people might be given a chance to repent and believe and to find the Saviour and thus be prepared for his coming again and his glorious reign.

You can't expect people to believe that Jesus is the Messiah unless you can also show what God's programme is for him to have his kingdom. What's the good of trying to prove to a Jew that Jesus is the Messiah and the Jew turns round and says, 'Well where is the kingdom? I don't see any kingdom around here yet. Look at all the evil in the world. How can you say Jesus is king?' Well if you believe he's king, you'd better have some notion of when he's going to set up the kingdom. That therefore was what the apostles asked and as they were asking, 'Is it going to be at this time?' he said 'no', in effect; 'it's not given to you to know the time.' But at that moment he was taken from them.

They were able to watch him going. This was a new thing, for hitherto when he'd come, he'd just appeared and then at the end he just disappeared instantaneously, gone through the wood of the door or gone through the walls. But this day, he didn't disappear instantaneously. Instead he brought them out to Bethany and, deliberately, and very slowly, he was gently lifted up and parted from them. It happened so slowly that they saw him go and they watched with wonder as he gradually went up until a cloud received him from their sight, and he passed, we know not how, into that other world. What did he do that for? It was an answer to their question, of course.

The restoration of the kingdom could not possibly happen until his second coming. What would his second coming be like? Would it be like this kind of thing that had been happening during these forty days—suddenly there? No, not like that and the angels explained how that second coming would be. The second coming will be not an instantaneous thing, coming through the door and there he is. The second coming will be staged as the ascension was staged, and every eye will see him. It will be like the lightning that goes from one end of the earth to the other and all will see it. 'This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven' (Acts 1:11). Then the kingdom will be restored. Meanwhile, get on with your witnessing.

If you were given a chance to witness to a Jew that Jesus is the Messiah, how would you do it? It's interesting to watch how Peter did it. First of all, of course, he called upon the witness of the Holy Spirit who had come down from heaven. But then, as the Jews couldn't make head nor tail of it, Peter pointed out to them the implications for the prophetic timetable of the coming of the Holy Spirit.

But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh'. (2:16-17)

So the coming of the Holy Spirit can point to our position in the prophetic programme. We are in the last days but we've not arrived at the end yet. And Peter goes on to quote Joel to the effect that 'the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day' (v. 20). We are in the last days but we are, thank God, before the great day of judgment preceding our Lord's coming.

Well if that's where we are in time, and this is what the prophet meant, and here is the evidence of the Holy Spirit being poured out, then how do you prove that Jesus is the Messiah? Peter says that there is the evidence of the miracles of his life:

a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know. (v. 22)

That was evidence number one, and then evidence number two is going to be his resurrection, but there's something that you have to say before that. Because if you're talking to a Jew, it's no good proving that the Messiah has risen again. That doesn't get you very far because most Jews weren't expecting the Messiah to die to start with. If the Old Testament didn't say that the Messiah was going to die, it's no good proving that Jesus rose from the dead, because that's besides the point. So first of all, Peter has got to prove to them that, yes, according to the Old Testament, Messiah had to die. For this purpose he takes up David's Psalm:

For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. (Ps 16:10)

Peter reminds them that David's tomb is with them: he has gone to corruption. Therefore David was not talking about himself but about somebody else, namely the Messiah—that he was not left in the grave and God has raised him from the dead. The Old Testament preached that he was to die, and die he has, but he would be raised again.

Then a Jew would likely say, 'That's all very well, Peter, but if Jesus is the Messiah—the one to whom God will give the government of our whole earth—where is his kingdom or any evidence of his rule? How can you say that Jesus is the Messiah if he hasn't got a kingdom?' I don't know what your answer to it would be, but Peter's answer was simply to direct them again to Psalm 110, which maps out the programme for Messiah's coming into his kingdom when it says,

The LORD says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.' (Ps 110:1)

You see what the psalm is saying. There was a time when God's Son was not at the right hand of God, because he came here for our sakes. And there came a time when, by divine decree, he was invited to ascend and sit at the right hand of God, and that he has done at his resurrection and ascension. And then the Psalm indicates that between that ascension and his coming in power and great glory, there is to be an interval, 'sit at my right hand, *until* I make your enemies your footstool'. There it was in Old Testament Scripture: it was no invention of the Christians, but plain and prophetically set for the programme. Messiah has risen. The Old Testament will tell you that after his rising and ascension, there has to be a period before he comes and puts down his enemies.

We stand in that period, looking for his coming again. Earth has no hope without him and, in Acts 3, we are given a foretaste of what it will be when the King comes. Peter and James went up to the temple to pray. There was a man sitting outside who was lame from birth. That is a vivid picture of our world. Men would raise a temple to praise God the creator, and on its very doorstep are the maimed and the lame. It is evident that creation has gone wrong somewhere, and how will creation praise God unreservedly while the mysteries of pain and misshapen creation remain everywhere around us? 'Don't start preaching to me about being good. What about the wrecks of creation itself—the malformed in the womb, those with learning difficulties, those with disabilities? Being good won't do much about that, will it?' What hope is there that one day creation will praise God without reserve, free from its bondage to corruption?

Yes, there is hope and it's hope in only one person. Let no fear of being called 'bigot' or 'narrow minded' make you afraid to proclaim it. This is the only hope the world has to save our creation, to relieve creation from its bondage of corruption and set it free, into the glory of the children of God. As a specimen of what one day will be done on a grand scale, Christ through his apostles made that man perfect even in the presence of all (see 3:6–11). See the lame man now not just walking but leaping, as he goes into the temple to praise his God—a foretaste of the powers of the age to come and what would be general when the heavens at last send Christ back again and God restores creation as his holy prophets have said. How was the lame man healed? Says Peter, it was by faith in the name of Jesus, the one the nation crucified. There is no salvation in any other name. It is to this distinctive, fundamental truth that the Christian church is called to bear witness: that Jesus is the Lord.

Christianity and the Jewish Temple

Section 2: Acts 6:8–9:31

Tonight, we are to study the second section of the book and for that purpose, let us begin by reading a brief selection from the section.

And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. Then they secretly instigated men who said, 'We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.' And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and 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.' And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel. And the high priest said, 'Are these things so?' And Stephen said: 'Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham'. (6:8–7:2)

But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. (9:1–3)

May God give us good understanding of his holy word.

This is the second of our six studies in the Acts of the Apostles. In these six studies, we are not attempting to cover all the detail of this very long book. We're simply taking the six main sections, one section per night, and looking to see one particular theme that the writer has before him. We are looking to see at what point, and over what issues, the early church diverged from Judaism. The idea in so doing is simply that if we can perceive those points at which the early church diverged from Judaism, then we will begin to perceive what is strictly and characteristically Christian, for if the early church had not felt so strongly about these things, they would not have diverged from Judaism but would have remained in that religion.

The fact is of course, and Luke emphasizes it, that as the early church grew, it not only grew in numbers and in geographical extent, but it also began seriously to diverge from the Judaism in which it began. It diverged over points that were considered to be absolutely fundamental to the Christian faith—points over which the early Christians could not possibly compromise without denying both the faith that they held and the Lord whom they worshipped. We will be studying these sections to see those points at which Christianity diverged and thus to get some clear idea of what basic, fundamental Christianity is. As we do so, we will find that it is not a merely theoretical topic. It will help us to grasp the glories and the wonders, the riches and the wealth of our Christianity and bring us on out of Judaism and its partial truths, into that perfection of which the Epistle to the Hebrews speaks, so that leaving behind the elementary things that God taught his people in past ages, we shall press on towards true, full, adult, mature spiritual growth. Thus our understanding and our enjoyment of Christianity and of the Lord will be increased, and our effectiveness in our witness for him.

At the same time it will serve us as a warning. As we observed last week, Christendom has from time to time, in the course of long ages, slipped back from what is true Christianity and, without intending to, has slipped back into what is little better than Judaism. Indeed, as we shall see later in this book, Christianity itself was exceedingly distinct from pagan philosophy and paganism generally. Alas, similarly in the course of the centuries, the Christian church has from time to time slipped back into the very paganism of which this book speaks. We must not imagine that we, in our advanced day, are beyond that temptation. There are tendencies and signs all around us that Christendom is constantly under this temptation to compromise the fundamental and characteristic things of the faith and to go back, either to Judaism or to paganism.

The person of Christ—the fundamental point of divergence

Now last week, we considered the first section together and found the point, above all other points, in which the early church diverged from Judaism at its very beginning. The point at issue was that the Christians believed that Jesus was Lord and Christ; that he was both the Son of God and the Messiah of Israel. Israel believed in a Messiah—that one day there would be a Messiah. But Christians diverged from Judaism in believing and claiming that Jesus was that Messiah. That the very Jesus whom the nation had crucified, God had raised from the dead and made him Lord and Christ; and that the Holy Spirit had come down from heaven primarily for this very purpose, to give witness and evidence that Jesus, being raised from the dead, was thereby demonstrated to be Lord and Christ.

A direct conflict

Many of the people in Israel believed that message and came to repentance over their foul murder of the nation's Messiah and God's Son and, professing repentance and faith, were baptized in his name and stood with the apostles and the early Christians. But Judaism officially, alas, set itself to oppose the witness of the Holy Spirit and the witness of the apostles. That first section of Acts tells us that the Sanhedrin summoned the apostles before them and

forbade them to speak any more in his name. They warned them severely that they were not to preach in the name of Jesus.

That immediately precipitated a conflict, because Luke tells us in the opening verses of the book that, when the risen Christ met his disciples in the course of the forty days, he charged them to be his witnesses, beginning in Jerusalem and throughout all Judaea and Samaria to the uttermost parts of the earth. He charged them to witness. Now the apostles were not spiritual revolutionaries. They made no attempt to put a bomb under the temple. They made no attempt to flush the high priest out from his office. They were calm and peaceable and law abiding citizens, as all Christians ought to be. But when the Sanhedrin chose to use its governmental authority to order the apostles not to preach in the name of Jesus, then Peter made the only answer it is possible for a believer in those circumstances to make. 'We leave it to you to judge whether we should obey God or man. The risen Christ has charged us to preach and if you pit your Sanhedrin's authority against the authority of the risen Christ, we as Christians have no option. We shall go on obeying the risen Christ' (see 4:18–20).

That in itself contains an exceedingly important principle, a principle which in God's mercy we have not had to consider in this country for many a long year, but a principle that lies ever before many of our fellow Christians in other countries, and in particular those who live behind the Iron and the Bamboo curtains. What would you do, what would I do, if a government took charge of this province that forbade us to preach and forbade us to teach our children, and forbade us to do what the Lord commands us to do? As to particular tactics we might adopt, I do not now speak, but it seems to me there is no doubt that our general answer should be on that basic principle. If a government commands us not to do what the risen Lord has charged us to do, we have no option but to obey the risen Lord and take the consequences.

So it came to pass that the apostles went on preaching and the multitude of the converts grew to three thousand and then to five thousand and then more, until there were in Jerusalem virtually two nations. There were the Jews at large, under the Sanhedrin, and there was another growing and influential group: the Christians, under the apostles and those seven men which some people call deacons (and other people call anything they please!). Not just an odd man here or there, but an organized society under its spiritual leaders and its material administrators, a society of over five thousand strong. You cannot conceal such a society in a city the size of ancient Jerusalem—virtually two nations, the one within the other, owning two ultimately different authorities. Thus the early church came into existence and, as we remarked last week at great length, came into existence over this fundamental quarrel that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah.

No other foundation

In the course of his defence in the Sanhedrin, we saw last week that Peter made the remark that there was no other foundation than the stone chosen of God, elect and precious. The high priests and the Sanhedrin in general had the task of guiding the nation in its worship, so then Peter in effect charged them that they were now defying God and refusing the stone that God had set—that stone upon which any worship must be built if it is to be acceptable to God, namely Jesus Christ our Lord. We should not be surprised therefore when now, in the second

section of the Acts of the Apostles, Luke turns to consider what the early church's attitude came to be over matters relating to the temple and to the worship of God.

In section one, had we noticed the detail, we would have found that Peter and John went up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at the hour of sacrifice, apparently as yet quite oblivious to any difficulty that that might cause in the way of belief and faith. Of course they trusted Christ, of course they trusted his sacrifice, but as yet there appeared to be no discrepancy between believing in the Lord Jesus as the great sacrifice for sin and the suffering servant of God on the one hand, and attending the worship of the Jewish temple on the other. But now, as the church begins to grow, we find that this whole matter of the worship of God and the status of the temple in Jerusalem comes up for consideration before the early Christians. What attitude are they going to take to the temple and the worship of God? And eventually, as we know, there came another great divergence in the road. Judaism continued on its way, with its literal temple and sacrifices at Jerusalem, and the early church diverged and eventually abandoned the temple altogether. But so that we should see the many different sides to this particular topic, let us notice then that this second section of Acts contains four major events—but only four, so that they will be easy to comprehend and to remember.

Christianity and Jewish temple worship

Beginning in chapter 6 and verse 8, and proceeding all the way through chapter 7 and then the opening verses of chapter 8, we have the story of the persecution of Stephen, of his arraignment before the court, of his condemnation and execution and, in between, we're given the account of the defence that he made before the Sanhedrin, before he was condemned and executed. Then there is the story in chapter 8 from verse 4 onward, of the evangelization of Samaria by Philip. Then later from 8:26 onwards, we have the story of the conversion of the Ethiopian who was accosted by Philip in the desert. And finally we have the story of the conversion of Saul. Let's look at the four stories for a moment, just a little bit more deeply.

Stephen

When Stephen was arraigned before the court, we are told in chapter 6 what they accused him of, 'This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law' (6:13). That was the charge levelled against Stephen and I suspect all of us will begin to see that what Stephen must have been preaching was very much like an early version of what you finally find in the Epistle to the Hebrews, namely that the temple was only a temporary arrangement and was soon to vanish away, because God had provided for his people something infinitely better. At any rate, the first major story is going to be about the Christians' attitude to the temple in Jerusalem and its worship of God, and the related topic of the law of Moses.

Samaria

The second story is going to be about Samaria and the evangelization of Samaria. Of course that immediately raises all sorts of memories in our minds. In Samaria, they held some very curious notions about the temple in Jerusalem. We remember it from the Gospel of John chapter 4, how that the Samaritan woman put it very tactfully, but very pointedly, to the Lord

Jesus that the Jews and the Samaritans were at loggerheads and had been for many generations precisely over this matter of where the right place to worship was. The Jews said that Jerusalem was the place where people ought to worship God. The Samaritans said, 'Nonsense and heresy, Mount Gerizim is the place where people ought to worship God.' For many generations they had been bitterly opposed to each other with a terrible religious bigotry and spite, all over the very matter of where was the right place to worship God. It will be interesting to see, when we come to it, what the early Christians said when they got among the Samaritans. If they're going to be different from the Jews in their worship of God, if they're going to diverge from the temple at Jerusalem, what will they say to the Samaritans, when they get that far, about their worship on Mount Gerizim and whose side will they take in all that dispute? In those two stories therefore, we shall be thinking about the temple in its aspect of the worship and the service of God.

The Ethiopian

When we come to the third story, we will still be thinking about the temple, because we meet an Ethiopian and Luke tells us that he had been up to Jerusalem to worship. Brought up in a pagan, idolatrous country as he had, the man obviously had grown tired and weary of the absurd idolatry of the ancient pagan world and of its hopelessness and its disgusting immorality. For him the temple at Jerusalem, even in its pre-Christian stage, had been a brilliant light from God, a witness in the heathen darkness around, not something to be despised. There was to be found a nation, unique among the nations, who worshipped an unseen God and declared that the true God was only one; who had in their hands a unique revelation, the Old Testament Scripture. A nation who moreover combined religion and morality and did not leave them separate, as so many pagan nations did. The Ethiopian had come up to Jerusalem to worship, and we notice with gratitude the effective way in which pre-Christian Judaism had witnessed for God among the nations. It wasn't all disaster. Israel had been an exceedingly effective witness among the Gentile world. We Christians shouldn't forget it.

But the Ethiopian was going back and then the Christians met him, or at least one of them did, by the name of Philip, and what did Christianity have to say to this Gentile that could satisfy him more than Judaism could? How more powerful a witness could Christianity be to the pagan nation than Judaism knew how to be? So that with the third story, we are thinking of the temple, yes, and the Christians' attitude to the temple, but now not so much in the question of worship, but in the question of being the witness for God to the pagan nations around, and the key to the church's gospel.

Saul of Tarsus

Finally, with the conversion of Saul, we meet the biggest missionary that Christendom has ever produced, barring Jesus Christ our Lord. He was a bigoted Jew whose motto, as he chased up the Damascus road, was 'Back to Jerusalem.' Then something happened to him that made

him leave Jerusalem and become the missionary *par excellence* who would go outside Judaism and go out to the nations in the four quarters of the earth.

Our four stories then are going to be about the early church and its relationship to the temple: first of all as it related to the worship and service of God, and then, in the second two stories, Christianity diverging from Judaism in the message and in the manner of its witness for God among the pagan nations. And when we've considered them, then we shall have to ask ourselves, 'If that is true Christianity, are we really and truly respectable Christians?'

Stephen's view of the temple and God's purposes

So let us come to Stephen and think about the charge levelled against him. '[He] 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). I shall not need to spend a long time pointing out to you what Stephen must have actually said. He didn't propose physically to destroy the temple, nor was he preaching that Christ had come to undermine the moral law of God expressed through Moses. But the subsequent Epistle to the Hebrews will make abundantly clear what it was that Jesus Christ had come to do away with, and in what sense.

A new covenant

Now Stephen would be saying that the old covenant given through Moses had to give way and God was beginning to put into operation the new covenant—not just a dusted and polished version of the old, but a completely new and different kind of covenant. The kind of a covenant that, instead of being a two-party thing like the old covenant was, was a one-party covenant that offered salvation and relationship with God solely by grace. A covenant which did not say, 'God will do his bit, but it all depends on you doing your bit and if you break your bit of the covenant, the whole thing will be ruined'; but a covenant that was in the nature of a will, where to any who cared to receive it by repentance and simple faith, God guaranteed to give salvation. It was guaranteed in the blood of Christ, and God guaranteed that he would write his laws on their hearts and that their sins and iniquities would never be remembered again. In that sense, Jesus Christ most certainly was changing the covenant laid down through Moses.

A greater high priest

And then of course there were major implications for the temple and its institutions. Hebrews reminds us that under the Old Testament regulations given through Moses, Israel had upon earth a high priest who was the intermediary between Israel and God. Stephen would be saying that that was now passing away and eventually would be completely obsolete. The order of the Aaronic priesthood given to Aaron and his sons was coming to an end. Now there was to be another priesthood, not of the tribe of Levi, but after the order of Melchizedek (see Heb 7:15). Christians would acknowledge only one high priest, ascended into the heavens, Jesus Christ our Lord; far superior to Aaron and his sons, for whereas they died, this man, by reason of the fact that he ever lives, has an unchangeable priesthood. And because he ever

lives to intercede, he is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him (see Heb 7:23–25).

Moreover, so much is Christ superior to Aaron's priesthood that their priests were made priests without the swearing of any oath; whereas when our Lord was appointed high priest after the order of Melchizedek, his appointment was solemnized by the divine oath of God Almighty.

The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest for ever'. (Heb 7:21)

The point of God's swearing an oath at the appointment of our high priest is that we might have absolute certainty; and that God might make it manifest that his Son is not merely the mediator of the new covenant, he is the guarantor of the new covenant (Heb 7:22). He not only brought it into being by his mediation, he guarantees the fulfilment of every clause by the fact that he is guarantor and will cover all the expenses involved—and how tremendous they have been. Here is God saying that however much and great the expense of this new covenant will be, Christ has gone guarantor and paid the very last penny of debt accumulated by our sins.

So much greater is he than Aaron's priests. But he is greater also because—as Hebrews would say and Stephen was already saying—the temple of Jerusalem would become obsolete. Our Lord, minister of the new covenant, appointed high priest after the order of Melchizedek, doesn't deign any longer to minister in some little stone temple in Jerusalem. He's gone through the heavens, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, and is minister of the ideal tabernacle which the Lord pitched and not man (see Heb 9:11).

A superior sacrifice

With that comes a superiority of his ministry and of the sacrifice he offered, and Stephen would be saying this as well. Not only would the temple become obsolete, but its sacrifices likewise, for they were but animals and what can an animal know about the problems of sin? You can bring your sacrifice of a bullock or a lamb to an altar in Jerusalem and the priest slay it and its blood be shed, and God will give you forgiveness and the poor old animal won't even know what it's all about. What can an animal know about moral conscience and the torment it can be to have a moral conscience? But then that's part of being human: you can't be human without a moral conscience. How could animals ever cope with that problem? Though you spill the blood of a million of them, they could never do what Christ has done. Being human and God combined, and through the power of the eternal Spirit, he has offered himself without spot to God (see Heb 9:14) and wrestled with that problem that lies at the heart of this universe—the problem of sin and guilt, the problem of fallen man being reconciled to God:

No blood, no altar now,
The sacrifice is o'er!
No flame, no smoke ascends on high,
The lamb is slain no more,

But richer blood has flowed from nobler veins,
To purge the soul from guilt, and cleanse the reddest stains.¹

A heavenly tabernacle

Thus would Stephen be saying to them, and he would add that the temple will become obsolete because when a person has found Jesus Christ as the God-appointed sacrifice and knows a conscience at rest, cleansed with the blood of Christ, then that person will perceive that he or she is fit to enter the very holiest of God. Not the holiest of God in some sacred temple in Jerusalem, though Jews were afraid and forbidden even to enter that literal, physical Holy Place in the temple at Jerusalem more than once a year. That a man or woman whose conscience has been cleansed by the blood of Christ has boldness, not to enter into the holiest in Jerusalem but—infinately and inexpressibly more wonderful—into the holiest of all in the presence of God. Now who needs a temple built of wood or stone in which to worship God, when they realize that they are able to enter the immediate presence of God in spirit?

Consequences for Christianity

Thus did Stephen preach and if that's what he preached and if that is what they eventually executed him for preaching, then we must be standing at a point of tremendous importance—Stephen was prepared to die for this. I don't know if you are, or whether I would be if I were really pushed to it, but according to Stephen, this is true Christianity. To keep quiet about it, to compromise it, to give it up, was to compromise on an essential feature of Christianity. I am not here to throw stones: I talk in general and I talk historically. But it remains the cold, historical fact that Christendom has, from time to time, given up on all these things. It has gone to unregenerate men and instead of preaching the new covenant, it has substituted the old covenant as a way of salvation, bidding men to try and keep the law of Moses so that, by keeping it, they should be at last accepted with God. Some have gone so far as to deny that it is possible to be absolutely sure of justification. And as for the glorious third term in the new covenant—'their sins and iniquities I will never remember against them any more' (see Heb 8:12)—some have denied it is possible for believers on earth to know that it applies to them, and have done it, alas, in the name of Christianity.

We can pass hurriedly by the fact that Christendom eventually invented human high priests on earth, sometimes one and sometimes half a dozen. I can hurriedly pass by the simple fact that eventually in Christendom, church architecture took on the form of the ancient Jewish tabernacle and temple, and a big screen was erected between the ordinary Holy Place, and the Most Holy Place; and the ordinary people were not allowed to go inside the Most Holy Place. Instead of accepting the fact that the sacrifice of Christ is once and for all—and therefore not merely is there no more sacrifice, but there is no more offering of that sacrifice—great sections of Christendom have claimed that the sacrifice is to be repeated and is in fact repeated every time the mass is offered.

We are not talking about peripheral matters but of things that are the distinctive, characteristic marks of true Christianity, the very vitals of the gospel. If Stephen stood for

¹ Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), 'No blood, no altar now.'

them in his day to show us clearly what true Christianity is and the gospel it preaches, and paid for it with his blood, let us who have enjoyed the vast and glorious harvest of these wonderful truths of God seek to understand them and be prepared to stand courteously, kindly, but with rocklike firmness, refusing to give up the sacred glories and wonders of the gospel for a mere, obsolete Judaism.

An unwelcome change

For all that, when Stephen began to say these things, perhaps you can perceive how upsetting the Jews found it. You have been inured to the shock of hearing these things, because you've heard them, perhaps some of you, ever since you've heard anything! So it never appeared to shock you like it would have shocked you if you had heard them for the first time as a Jew, for the Jews believed the Old Testament was inspired. The Jews believed all those regulations about the temple and the sacrifices and the high priesthood of Aaron: they were in the inspired word of God. And here was this Nazarene, by the name of Stephen, getting up in Jerusalem and telling the people that you didn't have to do those things anymore. What would you say or what would your elders say, if someone on a Sunday morning got up and proposed that from now on, we didn't carry out the Lord's Supper, because that was old fashioned?

What do you suppose the Jews felt like when the Christians got up and said that now the temple was going, the sacrifices were going, the Aaronic priesthood was going, the old incense was going? 'You're throwing out the word of God', they would have said. To the Sanhedrin, it must have sounded the height of folly —blasphemy they called it. How then would Stephen prove his case that the Christians weren't absolutely stark mad? How could the Christians still profess to believe that the Old Testament was inspired and say the kind of thing they were saying about the temple and the rituals of Moses' law? We haven't the time to trace every nuance in Stephen's long defence. We can pick out two of its salient points perhaps. What he did on this occasion was to read the Sanhedrin a lesson in Jewish history and point out to them one feature in Jewish history that stands out prominently—that under God's leading and government, Judaism had never been a permanently static religion. It had been a religion that, from time to time, moved on to something bigger and different. You can check that if you consult the passages to which Stephen refers.

A history of change!

It all began of course with Abraham, when the God of glory appeared to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees, when Abraham was still a pagan, and said, 'Get out.' Abraham came out from the Gentiles and came into Palestine and lived there as a pilgrim and a stranger in Palestine—the direct result of that authentic self-revelation of God within history to Abraham. So he lived, and so did Isaac and Jacob, for many, many decades. Then there came a change and the very God who had taken Abraham out of the Gentiles took them back again. For now Abraham's seed, who have been told that the promised land was one day to be theirs, were taken by God down to Egypt to dwell four hundred years among the Egyptians. No good saying to God, 'Look here, God, this is silly. We're here in Palestine because you brought us here: we're not shifting.' To refuse to follow God down to Egypt would not have been loyalty

to the word of God. It would have been apostasy from the living God, so they went down in Egypt.

They were down in Egypt a long time. Sometimes in the early centuries they experienced great success and glory, and then latterly hardship, but down in Egypt they were. Then God moved again and brought them out of Egypt. No good now saying, 'We are sure God brought us into Egypt and we're not moving from Egypt.' No, the time had come to move and they must abandon Egypt or else be left behind by the living God, for God was moving on to come out into the wilderness. So they were in the wilderness then and God led them and God proved himself to them in the wilderness. There came the moment when they had to leave the wilderness. Some of them didn't want to go, some of them refused to go, some of them perished, and they were the apostates, for eventually the wilderness had to give way to something else—the *promised land*.

In the wilderness, God told them to build a tabernacle. It had to be a portable shrine. It wasn't to be solid. They took it with them when they went into the promised land. Years later David said to God, 'Now I think I'd like to build you a permanent house in this land.' God said, 'No, the time hasn't come yet. We carry on with the temporary affair if you don't mind, a portable building,' and there it remained a portable building, until Solomon came and God's purpose has moved on again. No longer a portable shrine, now at long last it was to be a permanent stone temple. Solomon's labourers had laboured for years and years, and at last they'd put on the last little bit of gold leaf and the masons had chiselled off that last corner, and the wood had been carved and the door was all ready. They were having the inauguration service and everybody said, 'How marvellous, we've arrived at last.' When Solomon got up to preach the inaugural sermon, he said, 'This won't do. God will never be content with a temple like this. How could our Almighty dwell in a temple made with hands?' Solomon felt in his bones that the day would have to come when God had a bigger and a different kind of temple from this.

So a plain reading of the Old Testament shows us that Judaism had never been static. God's way with Israel had been that the passing centuries were divided into different ages in which God was doing different things, and there would come the great crises when Israel were led further on into the developing purposes of God. That is theme number one and Stephen applies it with this idea that what God has done in the past, now he is doing again. In Jesus Christ, God is moving Israel on again to the full and final stage for the moment of his revelation.

I say 'for the moment' because, while Christ is the final word of God, not all things that Christians do now will they do forever. We meet around bread and wine, and count it one of the most sacred things in our collective experience as a church. We won't do it forever. God isn't static. One day the Lord will come and the Lord's Supper will be over and done with forever. Now we come before God in these broken bodies of ours, and broken minds, but thank God, that won't last forever either. Now we live in a world that groans and travails in sorrow but, take courage, that stage isn't going to last forever either, for the Lord will come and the times of the restoration of all things. Thank God, we worship a God who is not static: he is on the move.

How exciting the next move forward is going to be. It doesn't mean he's on the move every Tuesday. You will get it in proportion: half a dozen moves in all the two thousand years of Israel's history. Nonetheless, the God of Judaism was not a static God. Neither is the God of Christianity. It is not blasphemy therefore to think that in Christianity, God will be moving on and Hebrews sums up the lesson of it. We are to leave behind the elementary things, not abandon them as though they were altogether useless. The child who in the infant school has learnt to count with beads, may throw the beads out of the window, but not the principle that one and one makes two. Of course, he no longer knits his brow and worries about this great mystery that two times three is six and three plus three is six, and all those wonderful things! Now he's gone on to computers, but he hasn't abandoned the elementary lessons.

In that same way, we're to leave behind and not lay again the foundation that we shared with Judaism, but we are to go on to maturity (see Heb 6:1). That is full-blown Christianity. Not an earthly high priest, but a heavenly one. Not a literal temple on earth, but the true tabernacle in heaven. Not animal sacrifices repeated, but the sacrifice of Christ once for all. Not a forgiveness that left you still afraid to come even into the Holy Place in the temple, but a forgiveness that so fits you that you are able to enter the very holiest of God in heaven, right now. We have to move on.

The other point that Stephen made and made it so powerfully and yet so sadly was that, time and time again, the very men that God sent to lead Israel on their next stage forward, Israel rejected. Joseph was to be their deliverer and bring them down to Egypt: they rejected Joseph. Moses was sent to bring them out of Egypt into Canaan and they rejected Moses. God gave them a tabernacle in the wilderness, and for nearly forty years they wouldn't have anything to do with it and abandoned it and set up their own tabernacle to Moloch. The generation of the wilderness were an evil, apostate people. 'Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And you've done the same thing to the messenger that God had sent to bring you this next stage forth, even Jesus Christ' (see 7:52). Thus did Stephen plead his defence that God is a God of progress.

Samaria and the proper place to worship

Then Philip went down to Samaria. We said earlier that Samaria makes a great contrast. As we know from the Gospel of John, for many, many years there had been a very bitter controversy between the Jews and the Samaritans. The Jews said that Jerusalem was the place where men ought to worship. The Samaritans said no it wasn't, it was on Mount Gerizim (see John 4:20). The thing was made all the more grievous by the fact that both Jew and Samaritan accepted the first five books of the Old Testament. To see them arguing, fighting and warring, would have made it difficult to understand how they could possibly have accepted the same Bible. Well at least they accepted the first five books, but the Samaritans wouldn't accept the rest of the Old Testament.

So bitter was the controversy that the really Orthodox Jew wouldn't even use the same vessels as a Samaritan; and the Orthodox rabbis taught the Jews that Samaritan women were in a permanent state of uncleanness. Anybody who touched them or used anything they used was defiled. Worse than that, the Jews at one time had gone up to Samaria and utterly destroyed the Samaritan temples. The Samaritans for their part took a lot of dead men's bones

and they went down to Jerusalem and scattered them in the temple court. You could not possibly imagine a bigger insult or a bigger desecration.

So what did Philip say to the Samaritans? You say, John's Gospel was very clear, what Philip said to them is what Christ said to the woman at the well—that God wants her. Stepping over the big religious divide, Christ asked for a drink of water from the woman who was a Samaritan, which surprised that woman. She thought he would not speak to her, being a Jew. He would spit at her maybe, but for him to ask for a drink of water from her cup, a cup that she had handled, and he was a Jew, that amazed her. But Christ was saying that God loved the woman and wanted to reach her. Christ was prepared to step over that religious divide and its absurd rules and regulations. Secondly, he made the point to the woman that whereas they could argue for days on end about which was the right place to worship, the time was coming when true worshippers would worship neither in that place nor in Jerusalem, for God is spirit and they that worship God must worship him in spirit and in truth (see John 4:23–24). So it wasn't simply whether Jerusalem was right or Samaria right, it was rather that if you're going to worship God acceptably, you'll need the gift of his Holy Spirit that you might worship him in spirit and in truth.

Does that mean that you can forget about that old argument about Jerusalem? No it doesn't, for sometimes we forget that our Lord said something else to the woman. He said, 'You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews' (v. 22). That would have been a bitter thing for the woman to swallow, but our Lord said it and you won't accuse him of bigotry, will you? With all his kind and tender compassion, he must tell that woman that the Samaritans were wrong—they had defied Scripture, they had defied the word of God, they had disobeyed God's injunction. Salvation was in fact of the Jews.

So what would Philip tell the Samaritans? 'Forget the Jews, forget Jerusalem. We don't care anything about Jerusalem ourselves. We are Christians: we've fallen out with the Jews too, so let's forget Jerusalem. Now let's get on with personal relationship with the Lord.' Well personal relationship with the Lord is exceedingly important, and Philip led many of these people to the point where they personally trusted the Saviour. That was glorious, but they did not get the Holy Spirit. What was wrong: what was missing? Well you'll see what was wrong and what was missing if you notice what had to happen before they did get the Holy Spirit. Yes, they had believed on the Lord Jesus and had been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. They did not receive the Holy Spirit until the apostles came down from Jerusalem.

Luke says explicitly that the apostles came down from Jerusalem and laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit (8:17). Well you can tell now that the Samaritans had really got converted, because if they hadn't got converted, those aforesaid Samaritans would likely have spat on Peter and probably punched him in the face as well! 'What! Let a man from Jerusalem lay his hands on me?' Yes, a man from Jerusalem, and not just anybody from Jerusalem either, but the authoritative man, the apostle from Jerusalem. For God will make Samaritans admit that there is no salvation that doesn't come via Jerusalem.

Let me stop and ask you at once, dear friend, are you saved? Have you got salvation? Just be careful where you got it from. Does it come via Jerusalem, or have you got a local variety, manufactured by Tom Smith or Mrs White, or somebody like that, a kind of a salvation that

Jerusalem never heard of? For the only genuine salvation is the salvation that comes via Jerusalem, like this gospel. Says Paul, 'It is witnessed to by the Law and the Prophets' (see Rom 3:21). It's not a philosophy that Tom Jones thought up in the 1890s or the 1760s or something. Christianity is not in that sense a philosophy at all. It's part of God's own self-revelation within history. It has been a continuous thread. As our Lord observed, if you don't believe Moses, you won't believe Jesus anyway (see Luke 16:31). You cannot ditch the Old Testament and suppose you're going to have salvation. If you cut your link with history and with that Old Testament revelation, what you've got is not true Christianity. For our blessed Lord is of the seed of David and that is exceedingly important. God will make the Samaritan admit it.

Christianity and Judaism's witness to the world

So now for a moment, I ask you to think with me about the story of the Ethiopian eunuch and then the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. In those two stories we still think of the early church in relation to the temple at Jerusalem, only now we think of the temple not so much as the place where the Jews worshipped God and served him, but as the centre of the Jewish testimony to the Gentile world. We as Christians should never become so proud as to forget that in the early centuries, before the Lord Jesus came and indeed for some years afterwards, the Jewish temple at Jerusalem formed an exceedingly important part of God's witness to the nations. We should not despise it and the testimony for which they stood among the nations. We as Christians still stand for it, if we know our business. And so we think of that Ethiopian eunuch, one among many thousands of men and women doubtless from all over the ancient world for whom the Jewish temple of Jerusalem proved a veritable blessing from God, as it stood to witness against the absurd and crude and immoral and intellectually unsatisfying idolatry of the ancient world.

Distinctive features of Judaism

There were three distinctive elements in Judaism as it stood amongst the sea of pagan idolatry to witness for God. There was, in the first place, that it stood in testimony for the true and only and invisible God—God transcendent above all time and space, the true God as distinct from idolatry. In all the other pagan nations of the world, God was not the creator of the whole universe: he was a part of the universe. In many a pagan culture, the ancients had come by their gods by refusing initially to retain the knowledge of the true God and then had debased the likeness of God into the likeness of a man, or even into the likeness of creepy crawly things; and men had come to deify the forces of nature, as though they were the ultimate forces of the universe, much as modern man in many quarters still does. For if modern man too rejects the transcendent creator, then man is obliged to acknowledge that the ultimate forces of this universe are simply the great material, physical forces, mindless as they are, yet they remain the ultimate forces of the universe if there is no Creator God. Israel stood against the folly of idolatry to witness to the true God, saying in the words of Isaiah,

Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God and there is no other. (Isa 45:22)

For if there is no creator, then man has no Saviour other than his own wits, and you will not need me to tell you how feeble they are against the material and physical forces of the universe.

Secondly, Israel had stood amongst the nations as a witness to morality—that the God of heaven whom they worshipped in that temple was also the God whose divine authority lay behind morality. That was not always evident in the pagan world. In the ancient world, perhaps the last place on earth you looked for morality was the temple. In the ancient world, by and large, sacrifice was merely a way of persuading the gods to be on your side and against your enemies. It had precious little to do with truly moral behaviour: in many cases temples were the seats of sexual immorality to the nth degree. If in the ancient world you wanted to concern yourself with morality, strictly so described, then you went not to religion but to the philosophers, who tried, among other things, to fathom what is man's duty. Israel stood head and shoulders above all the other nations in that it not only worshipped the God who was the unique sole creator of the universe, but it stood among the nations to say that the creator was concerned with morality and all his divine power lay behind the sanctions of his holy and moral law. Thus did ancient Israel stand for a certain moral health among men.

Thirdly, Israel and its temple stood amongst the ancient world for the glorious assertion that there was point and purpose in history. They maintained that the world was not just going round in circles, getting nowhere. They maintained, against Stoic and a good many other philosophers, that there was a purpose in history in as much that Israel was God's chosen people and one day, through Israel, God would introduce his Messiah; and Israel prophesied in the name of God that one day God would intervene in our creation, and the Messiah would come and God would restore all things and bring creation to its glorious fruition, the purpose for which it was ultimately made. Thus did Israel stand for a gospel of hope among a world which, as Paul reminds us, was without God and without the hope of Messiah and therefore without any hope. Israel then was God's testimony to the nations.

When we see that Ethiopian chancellor coming up to Jerusalem, we perceive how effective Israel's witness had been. This strange temple was the only one in the world that didn't have an image in it, where people worshipped the unseen God. He had come up from Ethiopia to the temple at Jerusalem, doubtless tired and sick of the crudities of pagan religion and seeking after the true God that Israel professed to know. He'd come up to Jerusalem to worship, in so far as Gentiles were allowed thus to do in the temple. On his way home he was reading a scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and now we notice a fourth thing for which Israel stood unique amongst the ancient world. It had a book that it claimed was inspired by God, namely the holy Scripture, and the Ethiopian was going home with this tremendous treasure in his hand—God's particular self-revelation to men through the Jews.

A further vital distinctive—Christianity's message of redemption

Christianity had no quarrel whatsoever with all of that and, if we know our stuff, we still stand for all those four things as Christians in a pagan society. But then we might well ask, 'What has Christianity to add then to the Jewish testimony?' It has much to add, for listen as Philip came up to the chariot of the Ethiopian. The Ethiopian was reading from Isaiah and

had got to the early verses of Isaiah 53. 'In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth' (Acts 8:33). And the Ethiopian asked Philip, 'Who is the prophet speaking about—about himself or about someone else?' And beginning at the same Scripture, Philip told him the good news about Jesus.

That is to say, Philip explained, as a good Christian should, that this figure of Isaiah 53 was none other than Jesus Christ. He is the suffering servant who was to give himself for the iniquities of many; who was to be wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities, and upon whom would be the chastisement of our peace. Philip explained that that person was none other than Jesus who recently had been crucified in Jerusalem. But there of course, Philip diverged from mainstream Judaism. Alas, the Israel through whom that prophecy was given denies that it refers to the Lord Jesus. Therefore, to this day, the Jews have no message of redemption to preach.

Israel has a law, and their faith in that law made them missionaries of a kind throughout the dispersion: their synagogues, like the temple in Jerusalem, were centres of witness. But when you've said that you've almost said it all. When did you find any Jew coming to your door and seeking to bring you the story of forgiveness of sins? Why aren't they concerned about us Gentiles? Why don't they mount evangelistic campaigns? They've got an Old Testament full of gospel, why don't they come and preach it to us? And the answer is, they have no redemption. Once upon a time, they had a system of sacrifices. When a man sinned, he could bring a sacrifice of an animal and it could be killed and its blood shed, and in the name of God, forgiveness could be pronounced. But for centuries they've not had a temple where they could offer any such sacrifice. They have no means of redemption.

It's very difficult to be an evangelist if you haven't got a message of redemption to preach—at least I would find it so. I believe the law of God with all my heart, mind, soul and strength. My reason tells me this law of God is right and rational. My emotions tell me it's a wonderful and delightful thing, and that if everybody lived according to the law of God, what a delightful world it would be. Do you know why I don't come to your door urging you to keep the law of God? Because I would say to myself, 'How would you have the cheek to do that? You keep it first and then go and tell others to keep it.' And the fact that I can't keep it perfectly takes all the puff out of me. I wouldn't think of coming to your door and telling you to keep it. I can't keep it and therefore if all the message I have was merely, 'keep the law,' I wouldn't be a missionary.

I'm going to tell you what *will* bring me to your front door one of these days—this message that when this world was lost because we couldn't keep God's law, there was one who died in our stead, God's suffering servant.

But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. (Isa 53:5)

Oh, that will bring me to your front door! What a message it is, for if God has a Saviour who can save me from sin and forgive me my sin, then he can save you from your sin. If God, the great creator, the author of the moral law, nevertheless has loved me and given his Son for me, he loves you and gave his Son for you, and you won't mind me coming along to tell you that I am such a sinner, but God sent his Son and died for me, and he died for you too. Here

then is another of those places where the early church diverged from Judaism. Sad it is that Judaism didn't come with the church.

An interesting conversation

Some years ago, I was lecturing in my old university city and trying to expound some passages in the Old Testament to a student gathering, when a young gentleman accosted me afterwards and said he found it interesting to hear a Gentile talking about the Old Testament.

'Why don't our rabbis do that?' he asked.

'I don't know.' (I didn't know they didn't anyway.)

'No, they're always talking about the Sabbath. Why don't they get up and expound the Bible?'

'I don't know. They've got some gorgeous stuff to expound, haven't they? All those tirades against idolatry. Goodness me, we modern Gentiles need to hear that stuff and to break off our idolatries that are everywhere around us—the consumer society and materialism and such like things. Why don't they preach it: I'd love to hear it.'

So we had dinner together and presently I found myself saying something like this, 'As a Gentile, I do admire your law. If the rabbis got up and preached it, wouldn't it be marvellous? I believe it's right—God's absolutes. I'll tell you something else about your law. I believe it: the trouble is, I've broken it.' (And if we break the law, we can't say it doesn't matter anymore. Either the law matters or it doesn't matter; and if we say with one breath that it's marvellous and ought to be kept; and the next minute, when we break it, say that it doesn't really matter, we might as well throw the whole thing out.)

So I said, 'What impresses me is that in your Old Testament, when somebody broke the law, God didn't say it didn't matter. The man had to bring a sacrifice, the blood of an animal had to be shed to put away sin that the honour of the law might be upheld. Tell me, did the blood of those sacrifices actually put anything away? Did it do anything?'

'No,' he said, 'it didn't.'

'I didn't think it did really. It was only a symbol, wasn't it?'

'Yes,' he said, 'it was a symbol.'

'Of what?'

'No, don't press me. But I'll tell you an interesting thing. We had the chief rabbi round here the other week, talking to our Jewish Society in this university. Do you know what the subject of his lecture was? It was that we Jews must find a substitute for the doctrine of the atonement.'

The heart of the gospel—Christ's atoning death

There's no gospel without atonement, but if that be so, then let us remember that the thing that makes Christianity distinct from Judaism lies now in the heart of this message that Jesus is the suffering servant, the atoning sacrifice for sin. Throw that away, let it go by the board, then the Christian church itself has no gospel to preach and will lose its missionary endeavour. It is not my business to throw stones in the direction of any glasshouse, but just to observe the objective historical fact. It has been a sad thing in this last fifty years to see how many churches have abandoned the preaching of the cross. They'll preach the incarnation, they'll preach the

resurrection, they'll preach morality, but they say they don't like to hear too much about the blood of Christ and his atoning death. When you cease to preach the atoning death of Christ—that Jesus is the suffering servant, wounded for our transgressions—then you cease to have any gospel. And tell me whether you can still claim to be Christian if you cease to preach the atoning sufferings of Jesus Christ our Lord.

Saul of Tarsus

But from the Ethiopian eunuch, we pass to Saul of Tarsus and you perceive we're still on the theme of Judaism as a missionary force. In Saul of Tarsus, we meet a man who became the biggest missionary the Christian church has ever seen, apart from Jesus Christ our Lord. The man called by God to be the apostle of the Gentiles, who led that great movement out of Judaism. So we must for a moment consider him and his conversion. What was it that produced this missionary, Saul of Tarsus? For again let us not be proud as Gentiles: it was Judaism in one sense which, at this juncture in history, produced this vast missionary movement that filled the very world with its message. At one stage Judaism produced it and we've seen the reason—as some Jews discovered that Jesus was the suffering servant. So then, what made Saul of Tarsus into the missionary that he became, taking the gospel to the Gentiles?

It's a very interesting conversion story. As you read at the beginning of chapter 9, the day that Saul of Tarsus got converted he was doing what Saul of Tarsus was determined to do—that which was his life's work as he then conceived of it. He'd got letters in his pocket from the high priest at Jerusalem and he was careering up the road to Damascus, following these nasty little Nazarenes who, after the persecution of Stephen, were beginning to go everywhere preaching the Lord Jesus. Saul of Tarsus was determined to stop them. What a perversion of Judaism he thought it was, going out prattling these things to the Gentiles. They were to come back to Jerusalem, and he had letters in his pocket authorizing him to bring them back to Jerusalem. 'Back to Jerusalem', I think must have been the motto on the front of his chariot. Had he gone on like that, there would perhaps have been very little Christian missionary work. 'Back to Jerusalem' was his ideal, and then he got converted. How did he get converted? Well there came a light from heaven and he was struck blind. Then there was sent to his lodging a gracious man by the name of Ananias, to whom God appeared in a vision and said, 'Ananias, I want you to go and meet Saul of Tarsus and I want you to tell him certain things.'

Notice what God told Ananias to tell Saul of Tarsus. Had it been you and I going to see Saul of Tarsus, we might have said, 'Well what that man sorely needs to know is the forgiveness of sins. Go and tell him how he can find peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ, how he may know his sins are forgiven, how he may know how to get hold of eternal life.' Doubtless Saul heard of those things presently, but that's not quite the message that Ananias brought him. Ananias was sent to tell him that 'he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name' (9:15–16). That is to say, in the very moment of his conversion, he was told that he was chosen to get out from Jerusalem, to bear the name of Christ before the Gentiles.

A gospel for the whole world

A tremendous lot hinges upon that. Judaism up to this point had been prepared to cope with Gentile converts—but you had to come and join the Jews. You had to come and acknowledge the temple at Jerusalem, you had to be circumcised, you had literally to become a Jew. You couldn't be saved and remain a Gentile. Now God was about to do something different. Let us see how Luke helps us to see the proportion of the thing. Do you remember that we learnt that Stephen, in his defence, began his message with these words, 'Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham . . . and said to him, "Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you"' (7:2-3). With that auspicious event, the very beginnings of Judaism took place. God visited the Gentiles, appeared in all his glory to Abraham, brought Abraham out of the Gentiles and started the Hebrew race, and Abraham began to be a pilgrim and a stranger, separate from the Gentiles. The God of glory appeared to Abraham.

That's how Judaism began. God took them out of the Gentiles. But now we've come to another big turning point in history and this time, not quite the God of glory, but a light out of heaven shone all round Saul of Tarsus and said to Saul of Tarsus, 'Saul, get back to the Gentiles'. When God called Abraham out of the Gentiles and began the Jewish nation, it wasn't so that the Jewish nation could forever remain a little nation all walled around by themselves, keeping their blessings to themselves. When God chose out Abraham and started a new nation and made him a pilgrim and separated him and his seed from the Gentiles, it was so that eventually, through him and through his seed, all the Gentiles of the world might be blessed.

Now in God's good time the moment has come, the plan has matured. Israel who had been cooped up inside their wall all these centuries, are now going back to the Gentiles, like God intended they should, taking the glorious message of the Messiah to the uttermost bounds of the earth. This is the God of the ages, the God of history, now moving on his plans, one bit further. Just as you may look upon Abraham as the tremendously important turning point of history for the Jew, so you may now look upon the Saul of Tarsus incident as a similarly important and significant turn in history. You say, 'What converted Abraham?' It was the sheer glory of God. All the glitter of the civilization of Ur of Chaldees was nothing compared with his glory. When he saw the real thing, the glory of the living God, it dispelled all that stupid idolatry stuff and brought Abraham out of Ur of Chaldees, a pilgrim for the rest of his life.

What turned Saul into a missionary? Proud Jew that he was, with all his Jewish tradition, he felt superior to these nasty little Gentiles. If they wanted to get converted, well, let them humble themselves and become Jews and join the proud Jewish nation; that was the only way to be saved. So what turned Saul into a missionary? A light from heaven, and as instinctively he cried, 'Who are you, Lord?', addressing whoever it was dwelling in all the radiance of the Shekinah glory of the presence of God, the voice came back, 'Jesus.'

'What, the Jesus who hung upon a cross? This is God?'

Yes, the God whom Saul worshipped ignorantly and thought was a God of such glory as Gentiles had to come to him or be lost. Now he discovered that he was the God who for our sakes became incarnate, himself left heaven, came on his great missionary journey, right down

to our planet and went out to the darkness of the cross to reach a world — for God so loved the world. Paul discovered something about the nature of God and the glory of God.

That God in Jesus Christ had become a missionary to our world changed Paul forever. No longer hugging his privileges to himself, he discovered one who, being in the form of God, thought it not a thing to be held on to to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation and humbled himself and took on him the form of a servant, and humbled himself and became obedient to the death of the cross, that he might bring salvation to the world. Being converted meant following the footsteps of a God like that. Yes, God in his glory, in all his moral dignity, in all his transcendence, that was a right and proper message for Judaism to preach. But when Jesus Christ came, it added another side to God's character in our eyes. God, the transcendent Lord above time and space, now showing himself the God of redemption, the missionary God, in time and space, reaching out to the lost.

And what happened at the historical side we could say also applies to our own little lives. If the God of glory appeared to us like he appeared to Abraham and called us out of the world, we won't be much good for God unless that happens first. For if I have seen the true glory of God and seen how false and empty the glory and glitter of this little world is, it will make a pilgrim of me. And when the glory of God has made a pilgrim of me, then presently the glory of God will send me back as a missionary into the world. What a delightful balance, for if the glory of God called me out of the world but left me there, what a one-sided man I would be. I need to be made a pilgrim, brought out of the world. I need to be sent back into the world as a missionary.

And what other practical lessons shall we draw from it? Well we might perhaps stretch a point and say this. God give us more and more young folks going out to the foreign mission field, to the Far East, to the third world, to goodness knows where. Let's observe this: that when we go out with the gospel to other cultures, we don't have to turn them into Irishmen as well as Christians, nor even, tremendous advantage though that might be in the eyes of some, turn them into Englishmen as well as Christians! There are some people who think that that's what our job is. They go abroad with the gospel, that's marvellous; but along with the gospel, they take all sorts of western customs and ecclesiastical associations and goodness knows what else. People get the impression that to be a Christian you have to not only have faith in Christ, you have to be an Englishman as well. What an unfortunate mistake!

That was old Judaism's idea and when Paul got converted, he saw how false that was now. It wasn't going to be any longer like that. Now it is that God is going out to the Gentiles, and they don't have to become Jews in order to get saved. Of course, the Jews didn't necessarily like that, not even some of the Christian Jews liked that idea: they thought that was going a bit far. Because we've not always appreciated it, there are some Asians that I know and they think the gospel is a Western thing — God associated with Western culture, when all the time it is not, for our Lord was an Asian according to the flesh. It's not a question of getting people to come into our culture. That's Judaism. It's a question of going out to where they are. That's Christianity.

True Christianity is the latest in God's great progression. The God that progressed all the way down Judaism's history eventually sent his Son in the last of these days. While the earlier revelations were partial, in these last days God has gone the next great stage and spoken to us

in his Son. God is a God of progress. But although he's a God of progress, we must not cut our roots with history. Alas, for the number of children in schools and congregations in churches who have been told that the Old Testament is not to be trusted and can be safely disbelieved in favour of some modern reinterpretation of Christianity. Writing to the Colossians, Paul urges them not to be moved away from 'the hope of the gospel that you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, became a minister' (Col 1:23). If Paul and the other apostles didn't know of it, or if they wouldn't have approved of it, then it isn't the gospel at all.

May the Lord write these things on our hearts and give us good understanding.

Let us pray.

Our Father, we thank thee for these things that exercise our minds and invite us to think clearly and make distinctions in things that look the same but are different. Help us, Lord, as our grateful contribution to thy work, to give ourselves to thee and to thy Holy Spirit that we may be trained, and rigorously trained; that we may think and think hard; that we may understand clearly what thy gospel is and then stand for it in our day and generation, uncompromisingly.

At the same time, we beseech thee to touch our hearts with the great glory of what thou has revealed of thyself in Jesus Christ our Lord, so that we give thanks that our eyes see things that kings and prophets would have liked to have seen, but in ages past did not see them, but we now see them. Touch our hearts with these glories, we beseech thee; that we may not merely stand for the gospel out of a sense of duty, but stand for it out a sense of wealth and joy and gladness, unashamed of this gospel that is thy power to salvation and the enriching of the world. This we ask, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Christianity's Definition of Holiness

Section 3: Acts 9:32–12:24

Overview of section

We are currently studying the Acts of the Apostles, taking one of its major sections per evening, and tonight we must concentrate on the third section of the book and for that purpose, let us read a few excerpts that will help us take our bearings in this particular section.

Now as Peter went here and there among them all, he came down also to the saints who lived at Lydda. (9:32)

And there follows the story of Aeneas, who was healed from his paralysis, and of Dorcas, who was raised from the dead. But in passing, we notice the description that Luke is pleased to give to these people. He says that Peter came down to 'the saints' at Lydda. Then there follows the major story of Peter's visit to Cornelius, and we read Peter's summing up of the lesson that God had taught him in this whole affair.

So Peter opened his mouth and said: 'Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.' (10:34–35)

When Peter returned to Jerusalem after that visit, his brethren in Jerusalem called upon him for some explanation of what seemed to them his extraordinary behaviour. He came and reported the things God had done through them, and Luke records their reaction.

When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, 'Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.' (11:18)

After that, in this third section of Acts, Luke tells us how the gospel came to Antioch and how the church was formed there. Finally he tells us in chapter 12 that, about that time, Herod the king was persecuting the church and killed James, the brother of John, and imprisoned Peter. But the angel of the Lord came and delivered Peter out of prison. So now let us read what Peter perceives is the significance of what has been done.

When Peter came to himself, he said, 'Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod and from all that the Jewish people were expecting.' (v. 11)

There is a sequel to that story when Herod, in his political dealings with part of his kingdom, sat down upon a throne and made an oration:

And the people were shouting, 'The voice of a god, and not of a man!' Immediately an angel of the Lord struck him down, because he did not give God the glory. (vv. 22–23)

The Lord give us good understanding of his holy word.

Christianity emerging/diverging

In this series of studies of the Acts of the Apostles, we are taking each of its major sections, one per evening, and the thing which interests us particularly in these studies, is to notice at what points and over what matters the early church diverged from Judaism. It is our thesis that if we can observe at what point the early Christians diverged from Judaism, we shall then perceive what they regarded as being essential Christianity—essential doctrines and beliefs of the early church that they could not compromise without ceasing to be Christian. These were points of doctrine and practice over which they diverged from a Judaism that was not prepared to go along with them. When we considered section two of the book we found that there it was a question of the early church in relation to the Jewish temple. First it was in relation to the Jewish temple as the place and locus of Israel's worship of God and we noticed wherein the early Christians came to diverge from Judaism, first of all in relation to the temple at Jerusalem and then secondly, in relation to the Samaritans and their worship of God in Samaria. Then we thought of the temple in relation to its witness in a pagan world, as shown in the case of the Ethiopian eunuch; and then the commissioning of its greatest missionary to the Gentile world, in the person of Saul of Tarsus.

Christian holiness and Jewish isolation

Now we've got straight in our minds the differences between Christianity and Judaism over this matter of the temple, not only in worshipping God, but also in our evangelical witness to the world. When we see what a different thing Christianity is from Judaism, then we must be prepared to follow one of the implications of that. And section three of the Acts of the Apostles hits the nail completely on the head by its very first words when it says that Peter went down to visit the saints (see 9:32). Saints? What on earth are they? What is a saint? Whatever a saint is or is meant to be, we are now about to meet one of the problems that the early church encountered when they started seriously to take the gospel out to the Gentiles.

That long story about Peter going to Cornelius sums up the whole difficulty. God wanted to send Peter to preach the gospel to the Gentile Cornelius, but God knew that, good apostle as Peter was, he wouldn't go unless something special was done to the man. Why wouldn't he go? Well because, to put it briefly, Peter was a saint. Perhaps that's the first time you've come across it in all your experience, that sainthood would keep a man from going to preach the gospel! But that's how it was, for Peter had been brought up with the idea of holiness that was particularly Jewish, and a very strict version of Judaism at that. According to that particular section of Judaism in which he had been brought up, in order to be a saint you couldn't go and enter into a Gentile's home and take a meal in a Gentile house. Why not? Well

because they wouldn't observe the laws of purity and cleansing in that Gentile home, and therefore, if you went into a Gentile home, you got ritually defiled, so you couldn't go.

But then, just imagine the difficulty. How can you go and preach the gospel to somebody if you're not prepared to drink coffee with him, and what do you say when you get invited and you refuse to go? Just imagine if that had happened. There's Peter, walking along the street one day and talking learnedly to James about the gospel and how marvellous it is, and up comes Cornelius and says,

'Good morning, sir. I believe you're Peter the apostle?'

'Yes, that's right.'

'I'm delighted to meet you, sir. I was wondering—I know it's a lot to ask—would you come and have dinner with me?'

'Well thank you very much, but I can't.'

'Oh, but I wanted to ask you about this Jesus and how a person can find peace with God through Jesus Christ. I want to know about this Jesus.'

'Certainly, just ask anything you wish.'

'Well, that wouldn't be convenient here with all the people milling around. Come home to dinner with me and we can talk in peace.'

'No, I'd prefer to do it here.'

'Why would you want to do it here? Come home.'

'But I can't.'

'Why not?'

'Well I'm a saint.'

'Oh, dear, so you're a saint. Well that's good to know, and you mean I'm not a saint?'

'Well, not really.'

'So my house isn't good enough for you.'

'Well I wouldn't quite put it that way, but your house is . . . dirty, well I mean, unclean . . . it's very difficult to explain.'

'Oh, I see, and you're a saint, because you're a Jew. Now tell me, Peter, what about those fellows, Caiaphas and Annas, are they saints?'

'Oh, yes, they're saints, because they're Jews.'

'I see, and I'm not a saint, because I'm a Gentile?'

How would you preach the gospel to people if that were your concept of sainthood? So if the gospel is going out to Gentiles, something will have to be done about this concept of sainthood and to get it clear in the Christian mind what Christian sainthood—Christian holiness—really is and how it works. Here then is another of those tremendous divergences between Christianity and Judaism and it was taught to Peter by the vision of the sheet coming down from heaven, full of creepy crawly things of unmentionable kind, and a voice saying to Peter, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat." But Peter said, "By no means, Lord" (10:13–14).

Distinguishing holy and common

Now I want you to notice one or two things very carefully. When the sheet came down from heaven full of these unclean animals, and the voice said, 'Rise, Peter, kill and eat', Peter of course said, 'By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean.' Now please notice what the voice didn't say. It didn't say, 'Oh, Peter, come off it. All this pernickety business about not eating crab and not eating pig and things like that is absolute nonsense. That's narrow-minded: ditch all that stupid stuff.' No, and we mustn't speak like that either. It wasn't narrow-mindedness on Peter's part. The Old Testament forbade him to eat it. God's own laws in the Old Testament had said Peter wasn't to eat it. That wasn't narrow-minded. God is never narrow-minded.

What was now happening was not that Peter was to be got out of narrow-mindedness. It was something that God was going to do to make a change. Said the voice to Peter, 'What God has made clean, do not call common' (10:15). So what had been the point of those Old Testament laws about eating things? Whatever the many considerations, God had been teaching them the difference between the holy and the common. If you had gone up to the temple in Jerusalem, for instance, you would have come to a big wall. Outside was common, inside was holy. It doesn't mean that outside was bad, but outside was common. Inside was specially consecrated to God; that is, holy. And if you came to the Jewish nation, over the Jewish nation were the words 'Holiness to the Lord', for God had chosen them out of the common herd of humanity that they would be set apart for God. 'You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exod 19:6). 'All the earth is mine, but I've chosen you and you are my special people' (see v. 5). The rest of the nations were, in that sense, common. Israel was specially chosen and consecrated to God and thereby became holy.

In Jerusalem, there were two kinds of saucepans. There were the ordinary saucepans in everybody's house. They were common. Let's hope they were clean, but they were common anyway. You could do anything with them, sprouts, potatoes, anything you liked. Then there was another set of saucepans. They were holy. You only found them in the temple: they were devoted to the cooking that went on for the sacrifices. That was the difference between holiness and what was common. Israel had very rightly been brought up to believe that they were holy, they were specially devoted, specially called, a separate nation, dedicated to God; and the rest were common. That was perfectly true. It was equally true that now, that distinction was to go and the middle wall of partition was to be broken down. Jews were no longer going to hold a privileged, special position—holy, and all the rest common—but all were to be on the same footing before God. Nowhere ever after that is Peter going to be allowed to call any person 'common'.

Clean and unclean

Of course, there was the other reason. Israel was called upon to be clean as well as holy; whereas the Gentiles, many of them, were tainted with all sorts of moral and spiritual uncleanness. God in his mercy had kept Israel from them as far as he could, by putting a big wall round them. That wasn't narrow-mindedness either. Some of you parents have got teenage daughters, sixteen, seventeen years old. There are parts of London you wouldn't want them to go to, aren't there? There are parts of Paris you'd forbid them to go. Is that because

you're narrow-minded, or because you think your daughter is better than anybody else's daughter? No, because you jolly well know that her human nature is like anybody else's human nature, and you know right well that to send an innocent child into such circumstances would be for that child to get corrupted. And so, as a parent, as long as she is a child, you put a wall around her, and very properly so. She hasn't yet the defences that you've built up. It would be absurdity bordering on criminality to let your teenager go into society like that. You put a wall around her.

God had done that for Israel in the ancient world, because the ancient world was a filthy place. It wasn't because Israel in their hearts were better than the Gentiles. They were just as bad, and to have let them mix among the Gentiles would have been courting disaster. They were bad enough as they were, and for centuries God put the wall around them. These two sides of the question—holiness and cleanness—God symbolized for them in the very food they ate daily, as you would for infants, using symbols to press home the truth that there was clean and there was unclean. But that couldn't last forever, could it?

Your teenage daughter may not be the person to send to some of the backstreets even of Belfast or London or Paris, but if somebody doesn't go, the gospel may never reach them. You don't send your youngster of ten years old to take a bouquet of flowers to somebody that's suffering with smallpox. That would be madness: they've got to be isolated. But if a doctor and a nurse don't go, the smallpox victim will die. Somebody's got to go. Somebody that's got the defences against it and can walk where there's danger and remain undefiled. Outside the wall of Judaism there was a vast world, lost in its sin and filth. How would God reach them? He'd never reach them if Israel were going to be forever cooped up within this wall, not even allowed to drink coffee with them. So how will he reach them?

Christian holiness

There will have to be a new method of holiness, a new concept of holiness, and now we see where the church begins to diverge. What is holiness anyway—the real, grown up, adult thing? What is the Christian basis and concept of holiness? Well, Luke begins his account with two little narratives. There's the story of Aeneas and there's the story of Dorcas.

Aeneas

Peter came down to visit the saints and he found Aeneas. Well now, whether Aeneas was a saint or not, I couldn't actually assure you one way or the other. There's a little bit inside me that hopes he wasn't a saint, and then perhaps he was. Anyway, Aeneas was paralysed. That wasn't his fault, doubtless. He'd been paralysed these eight years, so paralysed that he lay on a bed. And what was worse, other people had to make it: he couldn't even make his own bed. Well it wasn't his fault, but what could Christianity say about that? Here comes Peter. He says, 'Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you; rise and make your bed' (9:34). Just imagine that: see the man making his own bed! Well when the locals saw that, they looked on with open-mouthed wonder. 'Wow, look at Aeneas getting up and making his own bed!' and multitudes of them turned to the Lord. They saw a miracle had happened.

You'll forgive me if I spiritualize that little incident, won't you? Holiness is not just a negative thing, all the things I don't do. Holiness is a positive thing and sometimes our

concepts of holiness are such that the world's idea of us is of people who don't do this and don't do that and don't do the other—and the world isn't very impressed. But if the power of Christ so got hold of us that we got up and, so to speak, made our own beds, perhaps the world might be persuaded to look on and ask the secret. What kind of a person are you in your church, for instance? Do you make your own bed, or do you have to have other people do everything for you? You can always recognize people that make their own bed in the church, because they never complain. What's the sense, if you make it yourself? You find the people that complain are probably the ones who don't make their own beds, so they feel free to complain against those who do!

Dorcas

And then there was that woman, Dorcas. She was full of good works, for holiness is a positive thing. It was among the Jews. If you get a good holy Jew, they'll be full of good works, and Christianity doesn't say that's wrong, at least I hope it doesn't. Dorcas was full of good works and the clothing department looked after the widows—social relief and things. What would Christianity say to her? Well she died, but Christ through Peter raised her from the dead and, as she rose from the dead and was led into the next room where all the widows were with Peter showing him the garments. Wasn't that nice? She rose and there were her works in front of her. Yes, Christianity has that to say, because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, because one of these days all who trust him will be raised from the dead. So what? Well this is what Paul says to the Corinthians:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain. (1 Cor 15:58)

Isn't that marvellous? You've sewn a bed jacket for Mrs O'Flaherty. She's 94 and you suspect that she may not last out until October, but the one she's got is full of holes. Is it worth the effort? You say, 'Yes, as a Christian, I can't see the woman like that and she's a dear, so I'm going to do it for her.' You make it for her and she only lasts the next two weeks and then she goes home to glory. Do you say that you wasted your time? No, you certainly haven't, for the Lord is coming, you'll be raised from the dead and there'll be Mrs O'Flaherty's bed jacket, so to speak (I don't know in what eternal forms bed jackets come!) but the Bible says that when the Lord comes, we shall receive the things done in the body; whether they be good or bad: we shall see them again. Christians' view of holiness is not to despise works. Christianity agrees with Judaism that a great, essential part of holiness is the positive doing of good works, so where is the difference then?

Cornelius

Finally, we'd better listen to Peter going to preach the gospel to Cornelius. As he enters Cornelius's house he says,

Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. (10:34–35)

Having said that, I don't know if you would ever invite Peter back to preach the gospel in this church! Imagine starting up a gospel sermon by saying that, 'In every nation, anyone who does what is right is acceptable with God.' Is that how you preach the gospel? I've heard other versions. I've seen the preacher shake his fist and say, 'Look here, all your righteousnesses are as filthy rags' (see Isa 64:6 KJV). I'm glad Peter didn't begin like that in Cornelius's house, because it would have been difficult. You just imagine Peter walking in, saying, 'Now all you Gentiles, I'm going to tell you plainly, your righteousnesses are as filthy rags.'

'Half a minute,' says Cornelius, 'I had an angel in here the other day and he said that my prayers and alms would come up before God as a memorial. Who is right, you or the angel?'

We do have to be careful how we preach the gospel!

You say, 'But wait a minute, Mr Preacher, all our righteousnesses *are* as filthy rags.' Yes, of course they are, and the prophet who had to complain that on behalf of his nation was being very honest (see Isa 64:6). He said, 'You know us Jews, our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment.' I'll leave you to guess what our sins are in God's sight, but when we see ourselves as we really are, every one of us would admit our righteousness comes short. But don't let that lead us to give the unconverted a wrong impression. Sometimes we give them the impression that God isn't interested in good works and God doesn't like good works. That's nonsense. God is for good works and if you're going to turn people into saints, this is what you want to get them to do. They've got to be brought to become people who will be full of good works that are pleasing to God. God is not against good works and Peter had to learn that if a Gentile does good works, God doesn't discount them. If a Jew does good works, God does not give him extra credit just because of his Jewishness. Likewise, if a Jew does bad works, God doesn't overlook them. We are dealing with a thrice-holy God. His objective is good works: it doesn't matter who does them.

What then is the secret of a truly holy life? How shall I come to the point of producing works that are really acceptable with God? Here is this Gentile Cornelius. As best he knows how, he wants to please God. He's been doing all sorts of things to please God and God has noticed and approved. The man will never be saved by those works, but he's telling God he wants to please God. And God, who reads men's hearts, has got a Peter prepared to come and preach the gospel to the man, so that the man might get saved. Then listen to how it's preached.

'I used to think we Jews were better than you. I discovered that isn't so, Cornelius. In every nation, anyone who does what is right is acceptable with God. You're interested in good works, Cornelius, so let me tell you about Jesus Christ. What a marvellous life his was. He was anointed with power and the Holy Spirit and he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. What a life of good works it was.'

'Yes, that's marvellous. Where's he now?' says Cornelius.

'I have to tell you that we Jews murdered him.'

'You murdered him?'

'Yes, we murdered him.'

'What, you Jews, with all your fancied holiness?'

'Yes, I'm afraid so. With all our ritual, with all our holiness, we murdered God's Son. That exposed our holiness as bogus, didn't it? I tell you, Cornelius, now he's raised from the dead

and the marvellous thing is that it's Jesus Christ who is going to be judge. It's not a question of whether I as a Jew am better than you as a Gentile, or you as a Gentile are better than me as a Jew. It's a question of how you stand before Jesus Christ. He's the judge and we Jews are sinners: we murdered God's Son. How about you Gentiles: are you better than us Jews? Are you not sinners too? The marvellous thing is that, though he's judge, God has declared that in his name, there is forgiveness of sins' (see 10:43).

The foundations of true holiness

That is foundation number one of true Christian holiness. Jew and Gentile, both of them bankrupt sinners before God, saved solely through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That still remains the truth. We're not saved by our works, none of us. God isn't against your good works. If you want to please God by doing good works, he takes notice of your heart. You'll never be saved by those good works. If you want to please God, he'll send a missionary to you and he'll preach you the gospel in these terms that you, Jew, Gentile, European or African, in common with the rest of us, have sinned. We stand condemned on that same common platform, sinners before God, and the message is that God loved us and Christ died for us, and through him there is forgiveness. Together we stand, forgiven, simply through faith in Christ.

When Peter got home to his brothers in Jerusalem, he reminded them that there was a second part to this gospel of holiness. He said, 'As I stood there preaching the gospel to these Gentiles—I couldn't help it, I couldn't stop it happening—but while I was preaching, the Holy Spirit fell up on them, as on us at the first. And I remembered the word of the Lord Jesus, "You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." God gave them his Spirit, Gentiles though they were' (see 11:15–18).

We put these two great facts together—forgiveness through the death of Christ and baptism in the Holy Spirit—they are the two foundation platforms of true Christian holiness. Forgiveness, but not to go out and do as you like. Forgiveness leading to a holy life, not simply because we're bowed down with rules and regulations, but forgiveness followed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, to make and to keep us clean by his holy energies. If these two things are the secret of Christian holiness, then it is clear that there is a world of difference between Christianity and the old Jewish concept of holiness. May the Lord by his Spirit work in our lives so that we are Christians not only in name, but Christians who are manifestly Christians because our holiness is truly based on Christ.

Christianity and the civil authority

Before we finish, we ought to notice one other large message that this third section of Acts has for us. You may have noticed in your homework or at other times that the third section of Acts, having discussed this new concept of holiness that marks Christianity as distinct from Judaism, spends chapter 12 describing to us what is nothing less than an absolute perversion of holiness. Let me remind you of the details. Around about the time of Passover one year, Herod laid hands on some who belonged to the church and he killed one good man with the sword and he put Peter in prison. He did it, so we are told, because being a politician with

eyes to political support where he could get it and he needed it, he saw it pleased the Jews. If he persecuted the Christians, killed them or put them in prison, he thought to catch votes and support thereby. What have we here if not political discrimination on the basis of religion? That is not holiness: it is a perversion of holiness. Let us think it through a bit.

You say, 'Surely the Jews were in their right to do it: they regarded the Christians as heretics.' They did that, certainly, so hadn't they the right, given them by God, to put down heretics? Well, you're forgetting your history. Yes, once upon a time, they did have that right. When Israel was brought out of Egypt and constituted a theocracy with a king eventually appointed by God—the Lord's anointed viceroy on earth—they were positively commanded to do it. They were to enforce the law of God and if people disobeyed it, the civil power was to take the sword and enforce it on them. Deuteronomy is very clear that if they were to hear that in such and such a city in the land, the people had gone over to idolatry or blasphemous doctrine, they should warn them and give them opportunity to repent; and if the people wouldn't repent, the civil power was to take out the army and destroy the heretic and the idolater.

That was in days when Israel was a theocracy, when their kings were anointed by God. But by the time we come to the Acts of the Apostles that isn't any longer so. God had taken away political independence from the Jews. They had no political leader of the seed of David, anointed by God. After the exile, God had brought them back to their land and allowed them to build a temple, but what he had not done was given them back their theocracy. Now they were under Gentiles, utterly unregenerate men who had no spiritual relationship with God, and they were the government that controlled the land at that time. If you want to know what kind of man was on the throne at that time, you'll see by the end of chapter 12: it was this Herod who, having a political speech to make to win over a certain people, sat on his throne and made a great oration, and the people shouted, 'The voice of a god and not of a man!' (v. 22). That foolish politician accepted that blasphemous praise and immediately the angel of God struck him down for usurping the place of God—a man that comes as near being a foretaste of antichrist and the man of sin as you could possibly get.

Just you imagine the Jews at this time, when God had deliberately taken from them political power, using the unregenerate government in the name of religion to put down what they felt were heretics. That's sad and sorry. That is not holiness: that is a perversion of holiness. I repeat, using unregenerate governments to establish the faith and to discriminate against people that don't believe the same as you do, isn't holiness. When they put Peter in prison, just imagine how poor Peter would have felt. Even though Peter was an apostle, he had that little streak of fear just like us. James had had his head cut off and a lot more Christians were in danger of getting their heads cut off as well. Now here was Peter in prison, chained to four sturdy soldiers, and perhaps thinking to himself, 'Can a lot of Jews be wrong and I right, a humble fisherman from Galilee?'

And here's the government and the Jewish religious authority, hand in hand now. Then the angel of the Lord came and brought him out of prison and Peter, getting outside, couldn't believe his eyes or ears and pinched himself to see whether he was awake. Yes, he was awake and he was outside. 'Now I know,' says Peter for the second time in this third section of Acts, 'now I am sure that the Lord has sent his angel and rescued me, and the Jews are wrong.'

Calling on the unregenerate Gentile political authority to discriminate against the Christians politically was an anti-God thing. Why do we need to take in that message? Because the church has forgotten that for centuries on end. There have been many centuries, throughout Europe at least, when the vast majority of folks believed that their sovereigns were appointed as the direct representatives of God; and that the pope on his throne was Christ's viceroy and had the right to call upon the political civil power to crush heretics. If you asked such people to justify it, they would tell you, 'Oh, but this is a Christian country.' How did it become 'Christian'? Well the answer to that is that everybody in those days had been baptized as infants. Does that make them regenerate Christians? What a myth it is: a fatal delusion to imagine you can make nations into Christians simply by lining them up at the command of the king and getting them baptized, or getting innocent babies and baptizing them and, hey presto, they somehow become Christian. And the government is Christian, because it's a Christian country, and therefore the government has a right to act for the church and use the sword to put down heretics.

It hasn't only been the Roman Catholic Church that has done it. It has been Protestant churches that, when they've got the chance, have done the self same thing. It wasn't Rome that put John Bunyan in prison. How we do need to be reminded of what Christianity is and what it isn't. We are not Israel and we're certainly not Israel under that old system of theocracy, so that the particular country that we're in happens to be a Christian government responsible to use the civil power to back the gospel and to put down heresy. No, we're not. The idea that somehow you serve the cause of the gospel by calling in the unregenerate civil power is, in my humble estimation, a grievous delusion. Certainly it isn't holiness. You will see where that kind of thing ends up. Call in the unregenerate civil power to exercise the sword over the people you please to call heretics, but they're unregenerate men and when the man of sin comes, they'll be on his side. Look at Herod, one minute the Jews are pleased with him. He has put the Christians in prison: he's keeping them down. The next minute, the man is on his throne, accepting divine honours blasphemously. That is what the man of sin will do inevitably. That's a grim lesson, but it's there on the page of Luke, and in this context of what is true Christian holiness as distinct from Jewish holiness.

Shall we pray.

Our Father, we come at these simple, foundational truths of our Christian faith, perhaps from a slightly different angle from which we've been accustomed to, but yet see them again. Help us, Lord, to perceive the wonder of them and the glory of them, the majesty of them. And help us, Lord, to take our lives by thy grace and set them beside the pattern of thy holy word. We do believe in Jesus Christ our Lord as our Saviour. We have no other hope than he. But Lord, we pray thou wilt use thy word, by thy Spirit, to conform us to the image of Christ; that we may be a people who are not Christian in name only, but Christian in quality of character in our holiness, in our zeal for thy gospel, in our love for the world around us, lost

in its sin. To this end, bless thy word, we beseech thee, and part us now with thine evening blessing through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Christianity's Message: Salvation by Faith

Section 4: Acts 12:25–16:5

Overview of section

This evening, we are to think about the fourth section of the book of the Acts of the Apostles. Let us take a selection of readings that will help refresh our memories as to the salient points.

And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark. Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. And they had John to assist them. When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they came upon a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet named Bar-Jesus. (12:25–13:6)

We notice how Luke singles this out for mention and for our attention. He began his story with the teachers and the prophets who were in the church at Antioch. Now some of them go out on their missionary journey, and their teaching and the preaching of the gospel are resisted and opposed by this false prophet, a Jew by the name of Elymas, who was a sorcerer. '[He] opposed them,' says verse 8, 'seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith.' Paul dealt with that man by miraculous, God-given authority and power. There fell on that man, says verse 11, 'mist and darkness'. Darkness in part happened to this Israelite for his resistance to the spread of the gospel, and what happened to him, alas, in another sense happened to his nation. 'Blindness in part [has] happened to Israel,' Paul was to lament later on (see Rom 11:25 KJV). When the proconsul saw what was done, verse 12 says that he believed, being astonished at the teaching of the Lord. Now this Gentile proconsul, in spite of what that renegade Jew tried to do, was astonished by the teaching. While we may be interested in miracles in this section of the book, we will in particular be interested in Christian doctrine and we are yet to see many an argument about Christian doctrine. However, that incident over, we read that,

Now Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. And John left them and returned to Jerusalem, but they went on from Perga and came to Antioch in

Pisidia. And on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, 'Brothers, if you have any word of encouragement for the people, say it.' (13:13–15)

There Paul preached them a very famous sermon. Let us simply pick out now, some of its leading themes.

And when [God] had removed [King Saul], he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, 'I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.' Of this man's offspring God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus, as he promised. (vv. 22–23)

Brothers, sons of the family of Abraham, and those among you who fear God, to us has been sent the message of this salvation. (v. 26)

For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.' (v. 47)

And then for a moment, if we could come back a few verses to hear the basic principles of the salvation which this sermon proclaimed.

Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses. (vv. 38–39)

So then, this section began with prophets and teachers and proceeded to tell us how they were sent out to preach the faith, and now Luke gives us an example of the preaching of that faith. It turns out to be a sermon on salvation, and central to that doctrine of salvation as the early Christians preached it, was that it was a salvation utterly by grace, by which a man could be justified from all things. A salvation that the law of Moses could not possibly offer a man or procure for him. This is the Christian faith, the doctrine of salvation.

through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed [justified KJV] from everything.

So much then for the preaching of this salvation. Then Paul went further, says chapter 14, through various cities in that part of the world, but we are told that the unbelieving Jews,

stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. (14:2)

In fact, when eventually, according to verse 8, Paul and Barnabas came to Lystra and miraculously cured a lame man, the natives in their primitive superstition thought that the gods had come down to earth, and they proceeded to bring out sacrifices and would have sacrificed to Paul and Barnabas.

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their garments and rushed out into the crowd, crying out, 'Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like

nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. (14:14–15)

So Paul and Barnabas restrained those Gentiles from breaking the law of Moses, forbidding them to engage in idolatry. Nonetheless, the Jews stoned Paul and persuaded the natives to join in, and left him for dead; but he got up and went into the city, and the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. After they had preached there, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, and eventually their return journey took them all the way home.

And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they remained no little time with the disciples. (14:27–28)

Salvation and circumcision?

So we've gone out with Paul on his missionary journey as he preached the doctrine of Christianity, the doctrine of salvation, and we have now returned. Then comes chapter 15, and we read that certain men came down from Judaea—these presumably are a different crowd—and they were teaching that 'unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' That was no minor variation on the message the apostles had been preaching so, as you might expect, it provoked a major debate, with Paul and Barnabas on the one side and these men from Judaea on the other.

Eventually they all went up to Jerusalem and there we are told that some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, 'It is necessary to circumcise [the Gentiles] and to order them to keep the law of Moses' (15:5). Necessary for what—for salvation? That's what the fellows from Judaea had said, and here are certain of the Pharisees who believed, and they're saying the same thing—that you have to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses to be saved. So we are given the account of how the apostles and the elders collaborated and discussed the matter and came up with their verdict on these things. We shall read simply now, for sake of time, what Peter said.

Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will. (15:10–11)

To translate it, we should translate it in proper emphasis:

But we believe that it is by the grace of the Lord Jesus that we will be saved, just as they will.

Peter is stressing that it is entirely by the grace of the Lord Jesus that the Jews will be saved—not by circumcision or keeping the law of Moses—and they are saved thus by his grace in the exact same manner as Gentiles are saved. There are not two doctrines of salvation, one for one dispensation and one for another. There is only one way of salvation, whether you are Jew or Gentile. Here Peter himself enunciated it, 'It is by the grace of the Lord Jesus we will be saved.' To which sentiment of course, all the apostles agreed and James added weighty reasons why

they should. Then verse 22 tells us that it seemed good to the elders and the church to write a letter and send it by the hands of Paul and Barnabas and others, to the Gentile church at Antioch; and we are told that when the letter was read there, the church rejoiced because of its encouragement.

We might think that was the problem sorted, but not quite. Shortly thereafter, Paul and his other preaching companion, Silas, came to Derbe and there was a man there named Timothy. He was the son of a Jewess who was a believer, and his father was a Greek. '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' (16:3). Surely not! Paul has just been all the way up to Jerusalem to oppose this root and branch and insist that circumcision isn't necessary, but there is the plain, historical fact. Says Luke, 'He took Timothy and he circumcised him.' Whatever did he do that for? How can you explain it?

Purpose of our study

Well, however we explain it, we have taken a bird's eye view of the fourth section of the Acts of the Apostles. Just let's remember what it is we're trying to do. We are not trying to expound this book in all its detail. We are taking, week by week, roughly one major section of this book and we are looking to see in each section that point, or those points, at which Christianity, the early church, diverged from Judaism. Our idea is just this, that if we will mark in each of these sections those points over which the early Christians felt they must break with Judaism—where they had no choice but to diverge from Judaism—then we shall find that it lies at the very heart of basic Christianity.

These will be things that characterize the new faith, things so essential to Christianity that the early church felt it could not possibly compromise. If the Jews wouldn't have it, then they must break with the Jews. And we're doing this so that we might take a firmer grip ourselves nowadays on what true basic and essential Christianity is. For the danger is that even today, we shall do what the church has very frequently done in the course of history—they have let go what is distinctively Christian and fallen back to a kind of Judaism, or sometimes even worse, to paganism.

Points of divergence

We found in our *first section* of Acts that the point of divergence was over the person of the Lord Jesus. The Christians said that, 'God has made Jesus both Lord and Messiah.' He was Son of God. He was Messiah. The Jews said 'no'. They believed in Messiah, but to their way of thinking Jesus was not the Messiah and he wasn't the Son of God. Over that, Christianity diverged: there could be no compromise. If in our days, professing Christian people let go of the deity of Christ, what they have left is not Christianity, for there is no other name under heaven given amongst men whereby we must be saved.

We saw in the *second section* that Luke shows us Christianity in relation to the Jewish temple and that from two aspects. First of all, the Jewish temple as the place of worship and service of God, and how the early Christians began to diverge from that, holding that the Jewish temple and all its ritual was a thing given by God in the Old Testament for the time

being—full of shadows and symbols, pointing the way to the coming of the real thing in Jesus Christ our Lord. But now Christ had come and that old system of ritual was passing away and would soon be obsolete.

We saw also in that section that Luke chose certain incidents to help us see the relation of early Christianity to the Jewish temple in its witness to the nations around. Even that Ethiopian chancellor had been impressed by the testimony of the Jewish temple and came up to seek the true God. We were far from criticizing that Jewish temple or its function, but we did observe that, good as it was, even at its best it had something short of the true gospel to preach. What that gospel was, Philip preached to that eunuch, as we saw, and as he preached it, he preached a thing over which Christianity and Judaism diverges irreconcilably. Christianity says that the suffering servant of Isaiah 53—the one who was wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities—is none other than Jesus Christ, God's Son, who for our sakes bore our sins in his body on the tree.

Christianity therefore has a gospel to preach. Not merely a law that tells men about the holiness of God and how they should behave, but a gospel that tells them how they might be forgiven and reconciled to God, through the atoning sufferings of Jesus Christ our Lord. The Judaism that rejects it is left without any gospel of forgiveness. And modern Christendom has got to be careful: some do not like anymore to preach the blood of Christ and his atoning death and the wrath of God against sin, which was atoned by the Saviour's blood. In cutting that out of their preaching, they've got no gospel left—nothing but ethics and social conscience. Good as those two things are, they don't convert anybody and they certainly can't save anybody. If the church is to keep its evangelical dynamism, it must keep hold of the doctrines of the atoning death of Christ.

Then last week, we pushed on to the *third section* and found it to be the difference between the early church and Judaism on the question of holiness. Under the law, God had made his people holy by a method that you'd describe as putting a big wall around them—of ritual and ceremony and symbolic law, food laws, laws of cleanliness and uncleanness. These put a wall round the Jews and kept them separate from the Gentiles, for in those days, God was treating his people as children, as Galatians says (see 3:24). We saw how that wouldn't work any longer. If now the Christians had got to go out and take the gospel to Gentiles, they couldn't be separate from the Gentiles anymore. They must be free to go and drink coffee with such as Cornelius the centurion, for if you're not free to drink coffee with the man, how on earth will you preach the gospel to him?

So in that third section we found described and illustrated the basic principles of true Christian holiness, as distinct from Jewish methods of holiness. We saw that true Christian holiness is not founded so much on rules and regulations, food laws and such symbolic things, but on two great foundations. Jew and Gentile, both equally sinners, at the foot of the Saviour's cross, confronted with the holy life of the Saviour and his holy deeds that condemn both Jew and Gentile and show us both to be unholy. But by that death, both Jew and Gentile can get forgiveness on the same terms, accepted as we are in Christ and for Christ's sake.

That is the first great foundation of Christian holiness, and the second is that to which Peter called the attention of his colleagues in Jerusalem when he explained to them that God had given to the Gentiles the same Holy Spirit as he'd given to the Jews. The Holy Spirit had

fallen on them in Cornelius's house when they believed, and they had been baptized in the Holy Spirit just as the Jews who believed in Christ had been on the day of Pentecost. So Jew and Gentile were baptized into one body, in one spirit, leading to holiness in two directions. First of all, the secret of true Christian holiness is not simply a law written on two tables of stone. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit and a divine nature, begotten in the very heart of the believer. Nothing short of the new birth, being baptized in the Holy Spirit if you will. But then if a person is indeed indwelt by the Holy Spirit, born again of the Holy Spirit, taken up into the very Body of Christ, then that person is safe to go out among the Gentiles with the word of the gospel. He or she has sufficient to make them and keep them holy.

And as for those old walls of division between Jew and Gentile, well of course they automatically fall down. If you take a Jew and, by the Holy Spirit, you baptize him into the Body of Christ and then you go and take a Gentile and you baptize him into the Body of Christ, now they're sharing the same body. Would you put a wall between your right hand and your left? Would you sit at the table with your right hand and leave your right foot outside the door? No, all that kind of thing becomes obsolete for men and women who have genuinely been baptized in one spirit, into one body.

Defining what 'salvation by grace' really means

We move on now to *section four* and here is a section that I needn't labour (although I might indeed fall to doing so!) because here is a something of which I need not convince you at all, I trust. If the third section of the Acts concerned the impact of the spread of the gospel on the doctrine of holiness, this fourth section follows that with a study of the doctrine of salvation—likewise forced upon the apostles' attention by the gospel going to the Gentiles. I am not implying that the apostles didn't know the gospel right from the word go. But sometimes as you go through life and you keep preaching the gospel and folks get saved, presently you come across a question that forces you to think more clearly about how exactly a person is saved. You've been saying it's by faith, but then you keep exhorting the people to come to the Lord's Supper, or that they ought to be baptized. So now when it comes to brass tacks, exactly on what conditions is anybody saved?

Such a situation arose in the early churches, when the gospel began to go out to the Gentiles. Our passage has concentrated our attention on this. That first missionary journey began with these prophets and teachers of the early church, sent out by the Holy Spirit to preach the faith; and we saw how this renegade Jew, alas not true to his own Bible but gone off into mysticism and sorcery, tried to persuade the Gentile proconsul against the faith, and suffered the discipline of God. He stands as one example of God's ways of discipline with the Jewish nation. It broke Paul's heart. He tells us he had constant sorrow of heart for his brothers' sake, but then again he tells us that they 'displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved' (1 Thess 2:15–16). In spite of that, the gospel went forward and in this fourth section, the great sermon that Luke selects to record is the sermon preached by Paul in Antioch.

A sermon about 'being saved'

How would you like to enter a strange city like Antioch and into this large synagogue, and on the front row were learned Jews and the rabbis. You want to get the message of salvation across, but how on earth are you going to do it? You'll only have to mention the word *saved* and you'll be classed as one of these nasty little evangelicals! 'We really don't like that word *saved*.' So how are you going to get it across then? Paul knows a thing or two as a gospel practitioner, so after the Scripture reading, he doesn't say, 'Now I'm telling you, gentlemen, you need to be saved.'

He says, 'Gentlemen, isn't it a marvellous thing, as we read the inspired record of our ancient Jewish history, how marvellous have been the ways of God with our fathers!'

'Yes, yes,' the old learned heads nod. 'How he made our forefathers great during their stay in Egypt.'

'Yes, they were.'

'And with an uplifted arm, God led the people out of Egypt.'

'Yes, he did that. He led the people, that's what he did.'

(They wouldn't have been so keen if he'd said he saved them so, 'He *led* the people out of Egypt.' That'll do. What's the sense of putting their backs up too soon!)

'Yes,' said the rabbis, 'he did lead them out, and we believe in freedom, in being delivered.'

'So do we,' says Paul, 'deliverance from tyranny.'

Of course you gospel preachers know what to make of that, and have made of it a thousand times! From tyranny in Egypt you go on to talk about another tyrant and how God delivers people who trust in Christ from that other tyrant, but Paul is letting the Old Testament sink in. And then came the period of the Judges. 'Do you know, gentlemen, our people from time to time declined in their moral standards? They fell prey to the corrupt immoralities and idolatries of the Canaanites, and came into bondage.'

'They did,' say the rabbis, 'that shows you what a bondage sin is: were it not for God, who comes and delivers his people, where would we be?'

'Yes, I'm preaching you deliverance. God has always been the great God of deliverance from social, moral and spiritual decline.'

It sounded good, didn't it?

'But we had big enemies outside us—like the Philistines and the giant who stalked the land with such a sword that threatened us all with inescapable death; and God raised up David to save us from Goliath's sword.'

(He's got the word 'saved' in now, but they haven't noticed it perhaps just yet!)

'I could tell you about the biggest tyrant of all,' says Paul. 'Death itself one day will beat you and put you in a coffin. Have you got any deliverance from death? I preach to you the sure mercies of David, that God promised our fathers that one day God would send us a deliverer who would break the very power of death and raise people again, and God has done it in Jesus Christ.' That was masterly gospel preaching, wasn't it? But wait a minute, if there's a resurrection, what happens if you have to stand before God? If death is not the end and you have to stand before God, where can I find deliverance from the claims of his law? Then Paul preached that from David's offspring God has raised up a Saviour through whom they can be justified in a way that was not possible under the law of Moses.

That, ladies and gentlemen, is preaching salvation through Jesus Christ our great deliverer. When many of the Jews rejected the message, the Gentiles heard it gladly, forerunners of millions who've heard it and been delivered from all kinds of bondage; from the bondage of death, and ultimately from the bondage of guilt.

Justification and the law

The hymn reminds us,

'Tis God that justifies!
 Who shall recall His pardon or His grace,
 Or who the broken chain of guilt replace?
 'Tis God that justifies!²

What does that mean in actual practical terms? Paul is going around telling Gentiles that they can be justified by faith as well as Jews, and it's utterly by grace. Does that mean then it doesn't matter if you break the law? Some people have had that idea, that being justified by grace, apart from the law, means that it doesn't really matter if, having been justified, you do break the law. That makes the more morally inclined amongst religious people very sceptical of this doctrine of justification by faith. How could it be of God, if it leads to people breaking the law and saying the law doesn't matter? The enemies of the gospel have always said that: they use the theological term *antinomianism*; that you tell people it doesn't matter if they break the law. But that is a slander upon true Christianity, for see the very next story.

Here's Paul and company and they go forth among the Gentiles and their journeys take them to some exceedingly primitive parts. (I mustn't say too much, because at that time Ireland itself was even more primitive!) When Paul and Barnabas went to Lystra and did a miracle and healed a lame man, the poor primitive people, near savages, thought that the gods had come down and they prepared to offer sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas. Think of it, Paul and Barnabas had the opportunity of their lives — they could have been high priests of the new religion in Lystra and they could have made a pound or two out of it! But these men—who believed that salvation is utterly by grace and not by the works of the law—immediately ran in among them and told them to stop. What did they say?

We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. (14:15)

Being good Jews, they had in effect preached the first commandment of the law! It is the fact that the gospel presumes the law. You'll need to get it straight that there is only one God, before you can be justified with him. If you think there are ten thousand gods, you won't get justified. The gospel presumes the law. When a man or a woman has been justified by faith through grace, apart from keeping the law, yet that leads to the keeping of the law. If it doesn't, you may question whether it's the real thing. How glad we should be that Luke has put those

² Horatius Bonar (1808-1889), 'Blessed be God our God.'

two stories side by side, to keep the balance. Justified apart from the law; leading to the keeping of the law.

But it put the Jews in a little predicament, for the Jews didn't like this doctrine of justification by faith. They were determined to stamp it out. Said they to themselves, 'Who let this man go round telling poor, ignorant Gentiles that you don't have to keep the law and you can be justified simply by faith.' So they felt it their duty to follow Paul and Barnabas down the road and stop them confusing poor Gentiles. They got to the suburbs of Lystra and there were Paul and Barnabas preaching to these Gentiles. As they drew near to the crowd and listened, how unfortunate that they should have come at just the moment when Paul and Barnabas weren't preaching justification by faith: they were telling these Gentiles to keep God's law! That didn't deter the Jews, who picked up stones and they persuaded the Gentiles to join in stoning the apostles. Alas, there are some folks who would prefer you to be drunk every night of the week and be religious, rather than that you should get saved by grace and get drunk no more.

The Christian doctrine of salvation

With that, we have covered the major section and it remains for me to say little more, save only to remind you that after that flow of thought in which Paul presents the preaching of the doctrine of salvation in that very balanced fashion—salvation by faith, not by works of the law, but leading to the keeping of the law—there now comes the doctrine, the underpinning doctrine of salvation.

We are told that there came down men from Judaea who began to teach the disciples that unless you are circumcised and keep the law of Moses, you cannot be saved. Who on earth were these fellows? You say, 'They must have been of the Jews' party.' Yes, but when they got back to Jerusalem, did you not hear those others, some of the Pharisees who believed, who said, 'Yes, you do have to tell the Gentiles to be circumcised and keep the law.' When Luke says these fellows were believers, what does he mean? They believed what? Were they in the church? It looks like it, doesn't it? You say, 'They believed that Jesus was the Messiah.' Lovely, but then when it came to the rub, they were Jews and the menfolk had been circumcised as infants, and although they believed on the Lord Jesus as the Messiah and they believed he was Saviour, they hadn't sat down to think how this circumcision business relates to salvation. They hadn't thought about it apparently until the gospel began to go out to Gentiles and Gentiles got converted, and then a question arose, 'Do you have to circumcise Gentiles for them to be saved?'

And some of these fellows said, 'Well, yes of course you do, or you can't be properly saved.'

'But I thought it was by grace.'

'Ah, yes, but you're not going to tell us circumcision does nothing.'

Wasn't it a good thing the issue came up so that we Christian people should be very clear as to what exactly the relation of such ceremonies upon babies is? Does it help salvation? Well there was an enormous dispute and, unashamedly, Luke tells us that Paul and Barnabas stood firmly against these ideas. The salvation of men's souls was at issue and a fundamental

principle of the gospel was at issue. They weren't for mincing any words and gave not an inch. How could they give in when it was a question of salvation?

They went to Jerusalem, not to get permission from the apostles—Paul got his gospel straight from God. But he went up to Jerusalem to secure this: that the apostles should put out a statement saying that, contrary to rumours that Paul preached one thing and Peter and James another, Paul, Peter and James all preached the very same thing. Have you ever heard it said to you that James contradicts Paul? Well Paul and company went up to Jerusalem to get all the apostles to make a statement that everybody agreed with what Paul preached. Listen to Peter:

Why do you want to put a yoke upon the neck of the Gentiles, which neither we nor our fathers could bear? (see 15:10)

It's a bondage. It is a yoke. Don't let any misguided kindness of heart lead you to compromise on that basic thing of the gospel. Neither circumcision nor anything else performed on babes or anybody else can save. We are saved and justified by faith in Christ. Compromise that and you're leading back into the bondage of spirit that alas has marked Europe for many, many centuries. Says Peter, 'We Jews believe that it is by the grace of the Lord Jesus that we shall be saved. All our circumcision, rites, ceremonies and the whole lot avail nothing. Even we Jews believe that it is by the grace of the Lord Jesus that we shall be saved in the exact same manner as the Gentiles.'

That is the apostolic doctrine of salvation. James had a lot to say as usual and supported Peter, and it was decided they would write a letter to the churches. 'These men with this other version have subverted your souls,' says James. 'We gave them no authority, but now we're telling the Gentiles what to do. You're saved by grace, yes, now abstain from idolatry, won't you, and obey the moral and spiritual requirements of the law. And go the extra mile: if it isn't a question of salvation but simply accommodating the tender conscience of Jews, well forgo your rights, you Gentiles, and respect some of the habits of Jews, their scruples and their conscience, when it is not a question of salvation.'

No compromise of the truth but flexibility in practice

It is in that spirit, surely, that we are to understand the final stories in this fourth section. The one story tells us that Paul and Barnabas, who had stood so magnificently, shoulder to shoulder, against false doctrine on salvation, subsequently fell out and they parted. We should be careful to notice what it was on which they agreed and on what kind of thing it was they disagreed. When it came to the basics of the gospel, they agreed. When it came to methods in the Lord's work, they disagreed. That's not the last time that's happened. If that's the best we can do, brethren and sisters, let's do that. Let's see to it that when it comes to the fundamentals of the faith, we stand shoulder to shoulder. Alas, how oftentimes the Lord's servants have fallen out over methods in the Lord's service. What makes us do it, I wonder. At least of this it could be said, they went each one his way and the world's a big place, so instead of tripping on each other's toes, they went and got on with the gospel. God blessed them and both of them saw souls saved. Paul didn't set up Pauline churches and tell people not go to any of the

churches set up by Barnabas. Likewise Barnabas didn't set up Barnabas churches and tell people not to go to any of Paul's churches because he's wrong on methods! We should follow that example too, if we must fall out at all.

The circumcision of Timothy

'But what are you going to say, Mr Preacher, about Paul's curious behaviour in going and circumcising Timothy? Whatever did he do it for?' Well of this we may be sure, that Paul hadn't forgotten about the argument at Jerusalem. And we can also be sure that he wasn't abandoning the principle that salvation is utterly by grace and by faith, and that circumcision is not necessary for salvation. Then why did he do it? Because in this circumstance it wasn't a question of getting the man circumcised for salvation. As he himself was later to write in the Epistle to the Galatians, actually if you don't make it a condition of salvation, circumcision is neither here nor there. Circumcision is nothing, uncircumcision is nothing.

Timothy was half a Jew. Paul wanted him to work among Jews. There were Jews who had been converted and they felt, 'Yes, salvation is utterly by faith, but if you really are a believer and you've been forgiven, the righteousness of the law should be fulfilled in you.' You say, 'Yes, but that refers only to the moral law: the ritual law is no longer needed.' But these dear converted Jews, although they were clear that salvation is by faith, still felt that the command of circumcision is a moral command. You see that it isn't a moral command, only a symbol, so you feel free not to keep it. So Paul takes Timothy and circumcises him. Whatever for? Well I suggest to you, simply for gospel tactics.

Let me close by citing a possible analogy. One of these days, from the comfort of Finaghy, you feel called by God to go as a missionary to the Outer Hebrides. Be aware that there are people there who are exceedingly religious—some of them, alas, are not saved—and they feel that you have to keep the law, and the Sabbath is part of the law. Others that are saved likewise feel that the Sabbath is a moral commandment and that if you are a genuine believer, you ought to keep the Sabbath. So they wouldn't like it if they saw you driving to the church in your car on Sunday or having a fire in your lounge on Sundays. You say that the Sabbath isn't a moral commandment. I agree with you, but these folk think it is. So now if you're going to evangelize them, what are you going to do? You say, 'Well I don't take notice of that silly nonsense: I shall arrive up on my bicycle, if not in my Rolls.' Well you might as well stay at home then. They won't listen to you. In their understanding, you're deliberately breaking the law of God, so you couldn't be a genuine believer. How will you ever preach the gospel to them? You'll tell them straight, if they ask you, that you don't have to keep the Sabbath to be saved. But out of consideration for their conscience and to win them for the gospel, you're prepared to forgo your right, and so you walk to the meeting on the Sunday in order not to offend them, so that you can preach the gospel to them. As I understand it, that is what Paul did about circumcision. If they tried to tell him it was necessary for salvation, he'd tell them plainly it wasn't. But simply to respect other folks' conscience, he was prepared to go along with their conscience so as to be able to preach the gospel to them.

With that, we close. Our study has been long. God help us to select from it what he wants to teach us and may he bless his word to us all.

Shall we pray.

Our Father, we thank thee for the way thy word speaks to us over the centuries. We recognize in the situations that met the early church, problems and principles that we ourselves still have to face. We thank thee for these clear examples which set before us, without shadow of doubt, what are the principles of salvation. We pray tonight, Lord, that all of us here, without exception, may clearly see exactly how a person is saved by grace; and that all of us without exception may enjoy that salvation. Give us, Lord, that same missionary zeal to take that message to others—if need be, in the process, forgoing our own rights that by all means we may win some. Part us with thine evening peace through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Christianity, Paganism and Greek Philosophy

Section 5: Acts 16:6–19:20

Let's begin our study this evening by reading two brief passages from this section of the Acts of the Apostles.

So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: 'Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, "To the unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way towards him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are indeed his offspring.' Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.' (17:22–31)

But when Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews made a united attack on Paul and brought him before the tribunal, saying, 'This man is persuading people to worship God contrary to the law.' But when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, 'If it were a matter of wrongdoing or vicious crime, O Jews, I would have reason to accept your complaint. But since it is a matter of questions about words and names and your own law, see to it yourselves. I refuse to be a judge of these things.' (18:12–15)

May God give us good understanding of his holy word.

Overview of section

Hitherto we have found in the book of the Acts of the Apostles that Luke has been concerned to describe Christianity against the background of Judaism and, what is more, to define Christianity by describing to us those major points and issues over which early Christianity

diverged from Judaism. In the fifth section of the book, which falls to our study this evening, we shall find Luke still doing that same thing. He will again contrast Christianity with Judaism and show us some of those fundamental points at which Christianity diverged from Judaism. But at the same time, Luke will go further because in his narrative he follows Paul as Paul eventually leaves Asia Minor and comes over into Europe, visiting the large cities of Greece with their highly developed culture and philosophy.

Against that background too, he now describes nascent Christianity, so that he will show us Christianity diverging still, but not merely diverging from Judaism, but diverging from some of the great movements of thought and practices that characterize the ancient Greek and Roman world. We will see Christianity in this part of the book contrasted with pagan spiritism. We will find it also contrasted very vigorously and clearly with Roman politics and Judaistic political Messianism. In the central speech which is recorded in this part of the book, we will find Paul addressing the Areopagus and there we will have ample opportunity to contrast Christianity and its gospel message with those philosophies preached by the Greeks—notably Epicureanism and Stoicism.

Finally, we will find Christianity described as diverging even from that message which John the Baptist preached, as we come across disciples of John who were not yet Christian. We will see how they were led on into full Christian faith and what was necessary to turn them from being simply the disciples of John the Baptist into fully-fledged Christians; and how, when they became Christians, Paul insisted on the difference by insisting that these men now be baptized again, this time in the name of Jesus.

Christianity and pagan spiritism

So we start our study this evening with some narrative that helps us to perceive the contrast between Christianity and pagan spiritism. In chapter 16, as Paul comes eventually to Philippi, we are told that he was there accosted by a woman who had a spirit of divination. The woman was owned by certain businessmen who made a great deal of money by hiring out her services as a soothsayer to all in that city who were looking for guidance. The ancient world in many respects was a very bleak place. The pagan world is still. When people have used the very last ounce of grey matter they have and pondered the many problems that come across their path and tried to devise plans that they hope will be successful, there comes upon them oftentimes a feeling of loneliness, that life is too big for them. They need more than human wisdom to live life successfully, to know how to decide the multitudinous and worrying problems that meet them in the family and in business.

It is therefore not to be wondered at that in the ancient world, pagan people stretched out for guidance of some sort from more-than-human intelligence. Here is one example of a woman who was used by her employers as a soothsayer and made money, because people did crave for guidance in life and thought that they could get it from this source. Even today in Far Eastern countries, not only the ignorant and unlearned but the shrewdest of businessmen will consult spirit mediums on what is the wisest move to take next in business; and parents will consult such people as to what is the best for their children in marriage and in education. Christian people too of course are heard quite frequently talking about

guidance—being led by the Spirit, seeking to know the will of the Lord, asking God to direct them in their paths. So what is the difference between this matter of Christian guidance and the kind of guidance that the non-Christian and the pagan world seeks?

Spiritual guidance

Whether we can answer that question fully tonight is doubtful, but we can at least look at the narrative and observe what it tells us. By your permission, we may step back a verse or two into the declining verses of section four, where Paul and Barnabas set out on their next missionary journey. That too is interesting in connection with this matter of guidance. We are told what happened when Paul and Barnabas went on their journey and what kind of things led them in their decisions, and a very interesting few verses they are. First of all in 15:36 we read that 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.' Paul proceeded to do that, and verse 41 tells us that 'he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.'

So far you will not notice any mention made of particular guidance—you will in the verses that follow from 16:6 onwards—but in these verses, first of all, there is no mention of any specific and particular guidance. What then was it that launched these men on such a positive step as this second missionary journey? If we've been told all the truth, it would appear that it was simply the sheer pastoral necessities of the situation. Paul and Barnabas on their previous missionary journey had preached and multitudes of men and women had got converted, and then they had been obliged to leave them. Still lingering in their hearts and minds was concern for these young converts. They wanted to see how they fared and how they were coping with the difficulties of their early Christian days and how they were coping with the difficulties of forming churches and living church life. Said Barnabas to Paul, and Paul to Barnabas, 'Wouldn't it be an idea to go and see how they're getting on and give them a helping hand and confirm them in their faith?' If they sought special guidance on it, they don't tell us. Obviously the sheer duty was enough to alert them to the need to take this missionary journey. That strikes me as being very sensible and spiritually healthy.

To use an analogy, I've never been in the position of a mother who wakes up at 7:30 in the morning, and I wouldn't know if Christian mothers get down on their knees and ask the Lord whether they should get up and make the breakfast for the children and their husband who's about to depart to work. There might conceivably come situations in which a Christian mother would have to ask the Lord whether it was his will to get the breakfast. In times of persecution, when the food is getting low, there might be a real need to wait upon the Lord, but normally I suspect most Christian mothers don't even mention the matter. They take it as the normal duty imposed by the wise Lord that mothers, bless them, do get the breakfast ready and husbands sometimes collaborate. Children have to be fed and you don't have to ask special wisdom or particular guidance from God. The normal understanding is, when God gave the children to you, that you would feed them as many times as children have to be fed, or as you are able to feed them. So then, if God has given converts into our hands, along with it comes the normal duty to look after them, to confirm them in their faith. Other things being equal, we should be expected to do it and we will not need special guidance to know whether it needs to be done or not.

That, it seems to me, brings a certain sanity into matters of this question of guidance. As they went on their way, however, chapter 16 does tell us of certain matters of particular guidance, and very interesting they are. For I find that on two occasions at least, Paul and his company sought to go in one direction and the Holy Spirit did not allow them to do so. Verse 6 says that 'they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.' And secondly, 'when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.'

Now I do not know how you read that honest confession that Paul and company tried to go somewhere and then the Holy Spirit didn't allow them to. For all I know you may read it as a criticism of Paul, 'What an unspiritual man, that he attempted to do something and the Holy Spirit had to stop him.' But the likes of me secretly will rejoice. For, to be frank, sometimes I hear good Christian men and women saying what marvellous guidance they've had from the Lord and sometimes they give me the impression they have guidance every Monday, morning and afternoon as required; Tuesdays as well sometimes; Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, and I find myself saying, 'Well, Gooding, you must be an inferior Christian.' Well that stands to reason of course, but more inferior than you might think, because how many times have I sought guidance from the Lord and not received any?

If you think that's a wicked thing to say, then please tell me your secret—when you have had particular and specific guidance over everything you've asked for. I shall be grateful to learn your secret, for here was Paul, pioneering in his missionary work for the Lord, in process of bringing the gospel to Europe, attempting to go somewhere and the Holy Spirit didn't allow him. It shows me one thing, that as he set out to go to such and such a place, he had no specific guidance one way or the other. And I'm not disposed to think that Paul was unspiritual that morning or deliberately went against what he knew was the Lord's will. I suspect it was one of those days when no specific guidance comes and we do what seems the best thing to do, in the fear of God, in the light of the circumstances.

Of course, along with that he then tells us that when they came down to Troas, a vision did appear to Paul in the night and God was pleased to give him special and particular guidance. There appeared to him a man of Macedonia saying, 'Come over and help us.' Even with that, I imagine that when it came to breakfast next morning, they talked it over as to what the vision meant and they still had to use their wits and intelligence to deduce the significance of the vision. But there we have it, at the beginning of this missionary journey, God's guidance coming sometimes from the plain, ordinary, everyday run of the mill duty, not requiring any specific command or guidance, but just the general rule—'Look after young converts.' Secondly, the guidance came very often by Paul attempting to do this, but then he wasn't allowed; and attempting to go there, and he wasn't allowed that either. It came in the form of negative things that made it impossible, or considerations that arose that prompted them to think that fully Christian principles wouldn't allow them for the moment to do this or that or the other. So, left without any particular guidance still as to what they should do, they did what seemed the next obvious thing—all they knew was that the door here had been shut and the way there had been closed, so they went somewhere else.

By that means, the Holy Spirit was bringing them to a position where they would both need particular guidance and where the particular guidance would then make sense, so that very often the closing of doors is as much guidance as the opening of doors. And sometimes the absence of specific guidance is as much guidance as a particular and specific command. My reaction to this story is to be struck again by the sanity of it. A mixture of direct, you might call it miraculous, guidance, with the ordinary fulfilling of a daily duty and the carrying out of our Lord's general commission to go and preach the gospel and to feed his sheep. For every day, spectacular, miraculous guidance with a great deal of common sense and moral duty; on the other occasions, genuine, direct, miraculous guidance—but a mixture of the two.

One more confession might be permissible, if not necessarily in order—it is strange, isn't it, how some twisted characters will pervert even the loveliest things! And so it came to pass in my youth that I turned this whole matter of guidance into a miserable bondage of law, rather than treating it as a delightful gospel. I heard brother X say how he'd been guided: it left me open mouthed with wonder. I heard sister Y tell us of extraordinary providences that made me as jealous as jealous could be. I said to myself, 'Well of course, you have to be a super-duper saint before that kind of guidance would ever come your way.' So I set out to be that super-duper saint, but the guidance didn't come and I thought what a desperately difficult thing life is. First of all, I'd got to do the job. That was difficult enough. Then I had to be guided and that's even more difficult. You perceive my silly mistake—that I was looking on guidance as a something very difficult that you have to go in for and only succeed in if you are of special excellence. That made life more worrying than it was before, as to why you didn't get the guidance and so forth. Whereas surely this business of God's guidance is not law, but gospel.

Here is a shepherd and there are his sheep in the field. Not every second comes a clod of earth by the sheep's ear to turn it in that direction, or the crook on the other side of the head to move it there. No, the shepherd has brought the sheep to eat grass. Grass there is and the sheep goes here and the sheep goes there and the sheep goes somewhere else, and it's eating grass and the shepherd is delighted. So long as the sheep is within what the shepherd intends by bringing him into that situation, the shepherd sees no need to give the sheep special guidance. If the sheep started going too dangerously near a precipice, there might come a clod of earth, as I've seen it done in the Middle East, warning the sheep not to go in that direction. And if the sheep was given to going through holes, the shepherd might put a barrier across them. But ordinarily the sheep would go about its business, secure in the knowledge that over there was a shepherd whose eye never closed. It was to enjoy the security of knowing it was being watched. My brother and sister, you haven't got a shepherd whom you have to implore to guide you, as if he wasn't thinking of doing anything of the sort and couldn't be bothered to guide you until you came and implored him to. The shepherd who gave his life's blood for you watches you, moment by moment. Never is his eye from you. We would be wise to keep in touch with him constantly, wouldn't we? At the same time, we should understand his guidance of us to be gospel and not a burdensome law.

The soothsayer

What shall we say is to be learned from Paul's treatment of the woman with the spirit of soothsaying that he found in Philippi? It is interesting and doubtless significant that Paul didn't rush to cast out the demon the first time he set eyes on the woman. Lesser people perhaps should take a leaf out of Paul's book. Secondly, we must notice as a major lesson that he was not deceived by the attitude adopted by this evil spirit within this woman. She constantly shouted out to the public, 'These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation' (16:17). It might have appeared to the unwary that, whatever the spirit was within her, it was on their side, that they were really in the same business of bringing guidance and gospel to people.

It is instructive to notice that Paul would not tolerate it, but insisted on the difference, and when Paul insisted on the difference and cast out that evil spirit, you will then perceive the true colours of that spirit, for it stirred up severe opposition against the apostles and eventually landed the apostles in jail. That evil spirit that purported to be the side of the gospel was nothing but an enemy of the gospel. There was no such thing in the ancient world as Christian spiritism. There is no such thing in the modern world as Christian spiritism or Christian spiritists. There are those who *claim* to be Christian spiritists, but it is false; and no sense of kindness or tolerance should allow anybody to give the impression that spiritism and the gospel are working to the same ends. They are not.

Had we time, we would have to read the solemn warnings given to us by the apostle of love himself, the Apostle John, in his first epistle. There he is at pains to point out those marks that demonstrate that evil spirits are against the gospel. You may think I'm talking of things only to be found in foreign, distant lands. I talk of things to be found here in Belfast. Says John the apostle in his epistle, 'Whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ, they're not of God. Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ' (see 1 John 2:22). You will find people here in Belfast who will tell you, 'Yes, Jesus tells us the way of salvation.' If you were to probe them and ask them, 'Is Jesus the Christ?' they might well give you some unsatisfactory answer, 'Oh, we believe that the Christ filled Jesus. Jesus gave himself to the Christ perfectly and therefore Jesus is now exalted in his present position.' But if you were wise, you would push them a little bit further and say, 'Now tell me, I didn't ask whether Jesus gave himself to the Christ, I asked whether you believe that Jesus *is* the Christ?'

If you push them hard, they will then say, 'No, Jesus isn't the Christ. The Christ is the great world spirit. Jesus couldn't have got the infinite world spirit within his human body. No, Jesus gave himself to the Christ. The Christ filled Jesus, but Jesus isn't the Christ.' Yet they will profess to tell you that the gospel they preach is founded on the Bible, and that they agree with everything Jesus said, and so on. Sometime in life maybe, you will come across such people and they need to be delivered from a deception of the devil. No amount of preaching of love and being kind and loving to everybody should allow it to obscure in your mind that spiritism and things that deny that Jesus is the Christ are not of God.

The Jewish exorcists

At the end of this section, interestingly enough, Luke has seen fit to record another instance involving evil spirits and spiritism in general. For from 19:11 onwards, he tells us that many spectacular miracles were done by Paul, and evil spirits were cast out.

Then some of the itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits, saying 'I adjure you by the Jesus whom Paul proclaims.' Seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva were doing this. But the evil spirit answered them, 'Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?' And the man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. (19:13–16)

That incident resulted in a tremendous triumph for the gospel and a burning of the books of black magic in Ephesus by the town residents.

Again, what lessons may we draw from this? Well it would appear that these sons of Sceva seemed to regard the name of Jesus as a kind of a magic charm. They had no personal faith in the Lord Jesus. It would appear they knew nothing of redemption and forgiveness of sins and eternal life, nothing of union with Christ. They were simply in the business of dabbling in spiritism, of turning out demons, and Jesus was a kind of a name that you chanted over the victim and, hey presto, somehow or other, it worked. God was at pains to show that that kind of thing is pseudo. Jesus isn't the name of a charm, a mantra to be recited, some impersonalized power that you can call upon. Jesus is the name of a person, no less than God's Son incarnate, now risen from the dead and ascended to heaven. For the proper use of the power that he has to dispose of, the man that would use it needed a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus.

I'm not saying that everybody who is used to cast out demons is necessarily a believer, for if I did, you would quote me Matthew 7, where our Lord strictly warns us that in the coming day, people would come to him and say, 'Lord, in your name we cast out demons,' and he will say, 'I never knew you' (see vv. 22–23). God reserves to himself the right to do as he pleases, to use whom he will, and he who once used the jawbone of a donkey and, on another occasion, a donkey himself, to speak, reserves the right to use whom he will. But the norm is that the power of the Lord Jesus is not an impersonal power to be used in magic or in a spiritist *séance* or as a charm by unconverted people. It is the name of a glorious person, God's own Son, and if we would genuinely know the power of his Holy Spirit in our work for God, we must start by having a moral and spiritual relationship with the Lord Jesus himself. It is all too dangerous to get caught up with interest in spirit and forget things moral.

I once was invited to preach in a church that began its life as a spiritist church. I hasten to tell you that when I went to preach in it, it was no longer a spiritist church and hadn't been for many a long year. But it began its life as a spiritist church, led by a group of men who had become very interested in spiritism and were in touch with spirit powers. Their leader, now an elderly and delightful Christian man, told me when I asked what it was that first made him think that the spiritism in which he was engaged was evil. He said, 'Well I will not tell you some of the experiences we had, but what I did notice was that in all those experiences, there

was never any moral progress. It was spiritism, power, no moral progress. The thing that first made me see the difference was reading the Sermon on the Mount with all its moral imperatives and the matter of sin and guilt and the need for repentance and for personal salvation.' He found the Saviour and abandoned his spiritism. And if we know our job as Christian preachers, we will certainly see to it that we keep the centrepiece of the gospel at the very centre of all our preaching. It is the personal relationship with Jesus Christ our Lord and his glorious salvation.

It seems to me a very important thing to observe how little is said in the Acts of the Apostles about turning out evil spirits. Have you noticed how little? Paul turned out evil spirits here in Ephesus, for instance. The verse tells us that many evil spirits went out. How little we're told about it. I don't know if they had paperbacks in their day, but what a tremendous book trade Luke could have had if he had seen the possibilities, commercial and otherwise, of writing Christian thrillers all about demons and Satan and witches! They would have sold in their thousands. And if tonight I had announced I was going to speak on the devil, I would have had three times the congregation this size. It is so perilously easy to minister to bad taste and unspiritual appetites seeking excitement, and playing into the hands of Satan by concentrating people's minds on spirit things when they ought to be concentrated on the Lord. My brother and sister, would you permit a little word of advice from a man whose hair grows grey? If you find it much more interesting to read books about witches and casting out demons than to read the Gospel of John, there's something gone wrong with your spiritual taste. Notice, as we pass, how little is said in all this book of the Acts on that business of casting out evil spirits and learn there from true, healthy proportions in the work of the Lord.

Christianity and politics

But now we must look at another matter which came up in Philippi and again in Corinth, where Paul was obliged to insist on the difference between Christianity and politics. First of all, when he came to the Roman colony at Philippi, the crowd and the businessmen who had lost their money over that woman, the soothsayer, set it abroad that Paul was teaching the people to observe customs which it was not lawful for them to observe as Romans. That, of course, was a complete lie: Paul was doing no such thing. He was cast in prison nonetheless, publicly, untried, beaten, put in the stocks. In the morning, when it came to the ears of the authorities in the city that they had beaten Roman citizens, uncondemned, of course the authorities were alarmed they had done something very seriously illegal, and Paul, we notice, was quite ready to forgive them the bodily injury they had done to him and his colleague.

What he was not prepared to have happen was for those magistrates, having acted illegally and besmirched the fair name of the gospel, to have Paul and his colleague Silas quietly released and nobody know about it—because Paul was interested not in his own reputation merely, but in the reputation of the gospel. He was not prepared to have petty little magistrates quite illegally besmirch the gospel as something worthy of prison and against the political authority of Caesar, when all the while it was no such thing. So he insisted on his citizen rights and he had the magistrates come personally and make their personal appearance

on TV, and correct the mistake and own that they had wrongly imprisoned these men and that their gospel was not against the Roman Caesar.

On the other hand, you could understand some of the Romans getting a little bit nervous about the gospel that the Christians preached, particularly when some of the Jews deliberately misrepresented the gospel. We are told, for instance, in chapter 17, that when Paul came to Thessalonica the Jews were jealous because of the numbers professing salvation and they grabbed Jason and hauled him before the rulers of the city alleging that the Christians were acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar by saying that there is another king, Jesus (see vv. 5–7). That was a very serious charge to bring against the gospel before a Roman magistrate, for if Paul was indeed preaching that Jesus was another king in a political sense, then the Roman political authority would have been well within its political rights to squash the whole movement by force. Paul, of course, was very careful on all occasions to point out that this was a serious misrepresentation.

We ought to stay and ponder it, because nowadays in some quarters it is less clear than it used to be that Christianity is not a political movement. Among many Jews, belief in the Messiah was directly a political thing. Many of the right wing Jews still believed that one day the Messiah would come and he would be a political saviour. He would gather the armies of Israel, he would drive out the imperialists and the oppressors and he would set Israel free and give her political independence, and give her economic independence and superiority. The Roman authorities were therefore very suspicious always of political Messianism and, in Israel, when the great feasts drew near, the Romans would naturally redouble their guard and keep their watch on the temple, lest some hot-headed zealot roused the people to think that some Messiah had come, and that belief in the Messiah meant taking up arms to break the power of Rome and drive out the imperialistic tyrant.

Of course, there was a body of Judaism which didn't any longer believe in such political Messianism. Caiaphas belonged to that group. What he feared, or at least so he made out at the last Passover that our Lord attended, was that our Lord was going to raise the crowd against the Romans as a political Messiah and then, said Caiaphas, 'If he does that, the Romans will come and they'll take away our place and nation. They'll steamroller the whole lot of us into the ground.' That was not what our Lord stood for.

It is alas true that the Pharisees did slander our Lord before Pilate and Herod. They said, 'We found this man perverting the people and stirring the people up politically, and forbidding them to pay taxes to the government' (see Luke 23:2). They were representing him to be a political activist. Even Pilate could see that that was nonsense and those Pharisees showed their folly and their duplicity when Pilate tried to manoeuvre them and said, 'All right then, you say Jesus is a political activist and you don't like political activists, well now choose, which one shall I set free to you, Jesus or Barabbas?' Everybody knew that Barabbas was a political activist, who had even done murder in the cause of his political activism. They said, 'Give us Barabbas' (see John 18:39–40).

These things were not just theory, as our Lord indeed warned. Later on in history, in AD 66, the section of Judaism that was interpreting its faith in this political sense forced the hand of the Jewish leadership and led a tremendous revolt against Rome that eventually Rome put down in a bloodbath in AD 70. As if they hadn't had enough of that, in the years AD 129

onwards, a certain Simon Bar Kokhba led another revolt against Rome and succeeded in obtaining political independence for Judaea, as far as Jerusalem at any rate, for three or four years and actually minted his own coinage. One of the leading Jewish rabbis at the time gave it out to the nation that Bar Kokhba was the Messiah, and the Romans came this time and flattened Jerusalem and turned it into a Gentile city.

Distinguishing the conquering King and the suffering Saviour

As Paul went preaching the gospel around the Roman Empire in the big city centres, amidst all sorts of nationalities, where sometimes resentment against the Roman imperialists would be simmering under the surface, it was an exceedingly important thing for Paul to make it abundantly clear that his message had nothing to do with politics. Certainly he was preaching that Jesus is King, but king in what sense? Not certainly as a competitor to Caesar upon the throne. Listen to how Paul had very carefully phrased himself in chapter 17, when he went into the synagogue at Thessalonica.

He reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.' (vv. 2-3)

Notice that Paul was so very careful to point out in the synagogue what were two somewhat separate things. First of all that the Messiah, according to Scripture, must suffer, die and be raised from the dead. That's what the Old Testament preached. It does not preach simply a Messiah who comes, raises the armies of Israel, fights the imperialist government and breaks their power and gives Israel political independence. Far from it. It preaches a Messiah who would suffer and die and then be raised from the dead. That's Christianity.

Secondly, he stressed that, 'The Jesus whom I'm preaching to you is that Messiah, he has died.' He has not led Israel against the Romans. He hasn't attempted to break the political structures of society. He has accepted the cross, and died. Now he's raised from the dead, King indeed. But if you want to get into his kingdom, notice from this book of the Acts of the Apostles how you get in. You're not voted in by a majority of the democracy. You are not coerced into it by the armies. You come in personally by repentance and faith, of your own free will. That's how it's done now. The notion that by terrorism you can advance the kingdom of Christ is a sorry notion indeed: except a person has been born again, they cannot even enter. Notice what will happen when he comes to take up his kingdom on earth and reign. He will not come and stage an ordinary human battle in competition with the powers of the earth. No, he comes descending from heaven and all the nations of the earth shall mourn because of him. Man in his puny folly will try to fight the Lamb as he comes with the myriads of his saints, but this will be when God Almighty intervenes. Human government as we know it is dismissed, and from that other world Christ returns to reign.

That's Christianity, and if you got the chance to stand by Her Majesty the Queen, you could preach Jesus as King without any fear that you were preaching some disloyalty to her gracious Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II. Christ is not in competition for the throne of England. Why do I spend so long on it? Not because I think you in this church, that has so kindly invited

me and tolerated me these last long sessions, are about to go over into politics. But it is wise that we know that great sections of Christendom nowadays do preach that Christianity is politics. And the World Council of Churches, having given up on any idea that the Christ will come again, apocalyptically, preach that the true way of extending the kingdom of Christ is politically; and therefore it is right, in the name of Christ, if fascist dictators won't yield any other way, to get Christian activists to engage in guerrilla warfare, to bomb and to blast and to engage in terrorism and, if need be, to fight—and this somehow is forwarding the cause of Christ.

That, in my estimation, is a ghastly mistake. If it was God's gospel, if it's in the gospel of Christ to put down fascist dictatorships, why didn't Christ do that to the Roman government? It is no good you saying, 'Oh, well of course, the time wasn't opportune. He wouldn't have had a chance to succeed.' Who do you suppose Jesus Christ was? A little Che Guevara or something, who wanted to smash the political opposition, but he hadn't quite the strength to do it? Come, come, the very notion demeans our Lord to a point of blasphemy. We talk of one who is Saviour of the world, God incarnate, God's own Son. When the time comes for his enemies to be made his footstool, for him to reign from shore to shore, God will do it for him. Until then, it is a Messiah who has willingly accepted death at men's hands and risen from the dead that men through him might be reconciled to God.

Christianity and Greek philosophy

We've considered Christianity and Roman politics, but what about Christianity and Greek philosophy—what shall we say about that? If you are fearing, you need not fear that I shall now discourse at length on the doctrines of the Stoics and Epicureans! There are many philosophical handbooks from which you might learn, if you care or need to learn, what the doctrines of those philosophical sects were. However allow me to say that they weren't mumbo jumbo. Stoicism, if one may talk for a moment in human terms, was one of the most noble faiths invented. Not Christian of course, not ultimately true, but a noble attempt by pagan men to behave rightly. Epicureanism may not have been quite so noble, but on their side, the Epicureans were the people who perpetuated the atomic theory of Democritus: what a brilliant piece of thinking it was that first perceived that our universe was made up of atoms.

We shall not despise the efforts of the pagan Gentiles to try and understand their world and to devise systems of morality that keep men acting in some sense honourably. Wherein is the difference between Christianity and men's philosophy? Perhaps I'd best explain that by briefly reminding you of the key points of Paul's sermon or address to the Areopagus. I submit that what we have is not a word-for-word account. He might even have lectured longer than I preach! What we have is presumably a summary of what Paul said before that learned and august body.

As you will know, Paul has been much criticized for his speech on this occasion, by men who feel that they have such a grasp of the gospel that they can perceive that on this occasion, Paul blundered. It's interesting that the criteria by which they criticize him, they get from Paul himself! They say that here, before the Areopagus, the man was like we all are sometimes—tempted to argue instead of preaching the gospel and liable to fall into a philosophical argument with the unconverted, which you say never does any good. Really he ought to have

preached the cross, but he didn't preach the cross. There was no word of the cross in all he said, so they maintain, and the results were meagre. Well if it was so wrong, I wonder that there were any results at all. And when he got to Corinth, he had learnt his mistake and there he preached no philosophical sermons. Perhaps they weren't up to it, but he preached the cross and he wrote it in his first letter to the Corinthians, 'For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor 2:2). So, the critics say, with a wise wag of the head, he'd learnt his lesson at last.

Well perhaps there would be something in the criticism if, in the first place, you could prove that he didn't preach the cross before the Areopagus. You could only deduce that with certainty if we had a word-for-word, verbatim report of the whole address, but we haven't got that. He did preach the resurrection, but did he do that without telling them how our Lord came to be dead anyway? He was starting with raw pagans. How could you preach the resurrection without first telling them how he died? And if he taught them *how* he died, would he not have explained *why* he died and what the cross was about? So, are you sure he didn't preach the cross?

You say, 'Well he might have preached it in passing, but look at all that stuff at the beginning when he's talking about the God who made heaven and earth and creation and all that. Surely he shouldn't have done that? He ought to have got on with preaching the cross.' But wait a minute, do you by any chance believe that when he wrote the epistle to the Romans he was inspired? Because in Romans, before he starts preaching the cross, he has a long, long chapter about the evidence of creation — proving how men need to be saved because they have sinned against the light of creation. Moreover he tells us there that man is without excuse and is standing under the judgment of God. What's the good of preaching salvation to men who don't know they need to be saved? And if you've got to convict them of sin, you've got first to convict them that their very ideas of God are wrong. Not with some superior wisdom on my part but, because I happen to believe that Romans 1 is inspired and a very good thing to preach, I must approve of what Paul preached on the Areopagus.

God made heaven and earth, 'And you're wrong, gentlemen,' he said, 'you oughtn't to think of God like you do.' What was wrong in pagan thinking about God? Well first of all, the God who made heaven and earth does not dwell in temples made with hands. That's the number one thing: he's bigger than that. I know that even to the Jews, God from time to time was pleased to localize his presence in the temple and thus to teach the Jews the difference between sacred and secular. That was always a temporary lesson and a very limited one, and one that could so easily go wrong. People who think that God dwells in a temple made with hands, think that there's something sacred in the building, and very quickly fall to thinking that life is in two bits. There's God and the sacred — when you go to church or to the temple or what have you — then there's the rest of life. Some of them fall to thinking that you can manage to avoid meeting God so long as you don't turn up in church on Sunday. That's nonsense, isn't it, when God is at your very elbow?

Other poor folks have it in their head that the only place you could get saved is in church. I remember once meeting a good gentleman, not long converted and on fire with his enthusiasm for Christ and his salvation. I asked him how he got saved. He began to tell me how he got convicted of sin and so forth and how one day in the factory, the light of the gospel

dawned in and he was saved. He went home to his charming wife to tell her what had happened, but she said, 'You're not saying you've been saved, are you? You couldn't be saved in a factory. You should be saved in the church if you're going to be saved, or at a gospel mission somewhere. You can't get saved in a factory.' What damage we do ourselves by this kind of division. Pity those poor folks who think somehow there's merit in walking from here to Mecca, or from here up to the top of a mountain, because these places are more sacred than others—as though somehow there, they were nearer God. God isn't like that: the real God is right at your elbow. You must meet him, but if you need him to save you, there he is where you sit.

And the real God is not worshipped by men's hands, as though he needed something. He gives to everybody. It's lovely to see a child on dad's birthday giving dad a present. Mum has given him the money to buy dad a present, and the little one walks up with great pride to give the present and tells everybody, 'I gave that to Dad.' We smile because we know dad first had to earn the money so that the child could have it to give it to dad. How God loves us to bring him gifts. He had to give them to us first. But the fact that he loves us to give him gifts shouldn't make us think that we can buy salvation from him. He's not in business. He's not served by men's hands, as though he needed anything. He doesn't need anything, and yet it is ingrained in the pagan heart that somehow we have to pay God for salvation. Our Bible tells us, 'To the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due' (Rom 4:4). It's not that God is in my debt because I've done so many good works, and now God will have to pay up in the coin of salvation. What an impossible thing. God does not have a salvation small enough for you to buy it, or a heaven tiny enough for you to pay for it. He made you and all you have. You couldn't buy anything from him. What you couldn't buy, he's prepared to give you.

The ancients also got it into their heads that they had to carry God. They were so used to looking at idols, and because you wanted your lucky charm with you to help you in days of distress, you carried it with you. If you could manage to get it down small enough to put it round your neck you did that, but it was there and you had to carry it. 'No,' says God, 'that isn't what I'm like. You don't have to carry me. I carry you.' That's the true God. It spells the end of all slavery for those who know him. He gives us his salvation and he does the saving.

'And know this,' said Paul to those learned men, 'life is not a chance thing.' A lot of folks think it is. They think life is just one great chance. 'If my number comes up,' they say; or, 'It's all your *luck*.' Horrible word. The Epicureans believed that it was all by chance. It isn't. On the other hand, it isn't by sheer determination: the Stoics needed to be told that. Says Paul, 'God has determined the boundaries of their dwelling place' (see 17:26). He knows where every one of us is and if, starting from there, we should seek God and perhaps feel our way toward him and find him—we are to get up and to seek him; we are indeed to repent. It's no good saying, '*Que sera, sera*, what is to be, will be. I've no choice: I was born this way. If you want to be religious, you'll be born religious; and if you're not going to be religious, you're not born religious and that's that, and there's nothing you can do about it.' That's all nonsense. For us who sit here tonight, God has put us in such circumstances where we could find him if we wished. It's for us to get up and seek him and repent of sin, and seek the Lord while he may be found. You could be saved if you wanted to be.

We must repent, because this world is a moral universe. Says Paul to the learned philosophers at the Areopagus, '[God] has fixed a day on which he will judge the world' (17:31). What gospel that is. You don't like to hear the preaching of judgment? What an insult to your fellows. You don't think it matters what I do? I'll tell you a better message than that. I know I am tiny beyond description, compared with the eternal God, but the eternal God pays me this compliment, that he thinks what I do matters. There's going to be a judgment. You're not a cabbage, nor a carrot, nor a donkey. God will have you stand before him, because you matter and what you do matters. That's paying you a very big compliment. That's gospel. God isn't going to let the injustice of this world go on forever. There will come a day of judgment. And here Paul is preaching what he wrote in Romans 2: your moral conscience approves of that, doesn't it? How many times you've tried to get what is fair and right, and you've failed. I don't know what it was—from some housing society or something, or from your next-door neighbour—you felt you were done an injustice, and the big old world rolled by and they said, 'Too bad, that's your luck.'

Now tell me, is that how you want it to be? So in the end it's just luck and it doesn't matter and all that feeling in your heart that it wasn't fair, is all a nonsense, a mirage, a delusion, because the world is one of chance and there is no judgment? Is that how you want it to be? You don't, do you? You want fairness to triumph. It will one day. Don't look to the politicians to do it, because sometimes they're the ones that perpetrate the unfairness. But there will be a final judgment, when God will judge the very secrets of men's hearts by Jesus Christ. Oh, what a gospel it is for this world, wearied with the injustices.

Having preached the light of creation and then the light of moral conscience, Paul now comes to what is distinctively Christian—the preaching of Jesus and the resurrection. This is the evidence of history. How different this is from philosophy. This is not something that was spun out of somebody's head. These are facts of history now. There was a grave in Palestine and Jesus Christ was put in it, dead; and on the third day he rose from the dead. This is history, not theory or philosophy. The evidence of history that death has been conquered, that Christ is risen and that he will be the judge. And what's more, there is salvation through him, and you may be justified through him who was delivered for our offences and raised again for our justification.

Thus did Paul preach and insist on the difference between Christianity and philosophy. It was a full-hearted gospel, and we do well in a world that is rapidly becoming post-Christian not to be content with preaching half a gospel. You'll need to tell your next-door neighbour what God is really like. You will need to preach him a bit of creation. We will need to argue with men's moral judgment. If they don't realize they're morally condemned before God, how will they seek salvation? We will need to preach the evidence of history that Jesus Christ is risen and can save, and is coming to judge.

We have not reached the end of our section five, but I've more than reached the end of your patience and I dare not trespass any longer! Next week, God willing, which is our last, we shall have to telescope much material into small time.

Shall we pray.

Our Father, these are weighty things and sometimes when we read of these great pioneers that thou didst raise up in these early days to preach thy gospel and to bring it to Europe, we feel like pygmies before them. We thank thee for these tremendous men, who understood their fellow men and understood their needs and preached a full and sane gospel, able to speak to men at every level. Give us the grace, Lord, each within our abilities and limits, to prepare ourselves thus to wrestle with life's questions and, understanding the questions, learn what are the answers that thy gospel has to give. And give us a heart of compassion for a world that's lost, increasing faith in thy gospel that it can meet their need. Save us from loss of nerve. Save us, we beseech thee, from getting entangled in things that are not really the gospel and clouding the real issue. Help us in our pagan world to stand boldly for thee and, as it may please thee, crown the efforts of thy servants with a harvest of men and women believing. Grant us then thine evening peace through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Christianity Defended

Section 6: Acts 19:21–28:31

Let us begin our study by reading from the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 26.

So Agrippa said to Paul, 'You have permission to speak for yourself.' Then Paul stretched out his hand and made his defence: 'I consider myself fortunate that it is before you, King Agrippa, I am going to make my defence today against all the accusations of the Jews, especially because you are familiar with all the customs and controversies of the Jews. Therefore I beg you to listen to me patiently. My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee. And now I stand here on trial because of my hope in the promise made by God to our fathers, to which our twelve tribes hope to attain, as they earnestly worship night and day. And for this hope I am accused by Jews, O king! Why is it thought incredible by any of you that God raises the dead? I myself was convinced that I ought to do many things in opposing the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And I did so in Jerusalem. I not only locked up many of the saints in prison after receiving authority from the chief priests, but when they were put to death I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often in all the synagogues and tried to make them blaspheme, and in raging fury against them I persecuted them even to foreign cities. In this connection I journeyed to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. At midday, O king, I saw on the way a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, that shone around me and those who journeyed with me. And when we had all fallen to the ground, I heard a voice saying to me in the Hebrew language, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' And I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.' Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance. For this reason the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me. To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great,

saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.'

And as he was saying these things in his defence, Festus said with a loud voice, 'Paul, you are out of your mind; your great learning is driving you out of your mind.' But Paul said, 'I am not out of my mind, most excellent Festus, but I am speaking true and rational words. For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner. King Agrippa, do you believe the prophets? I know that you believe.' And Agrippa said to Paul, 'In a short time would you persuade me to be a Christian?' And Paul said, 'Whether short or long, I would to God that not only you but also all who hear me this day might become such as I am—except for these chains.' Then the king rose, and the governor and Bernice and those who were sitting with them. And when they had withdrawn, they said to one another, 'This man is doing nothing to deserve death or imprisonment.' And Agrippa said to Festus, 'This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar.'

May God give us true understanding of his holy word.

Overview of section

Tonight, we come to the last section of the Acts of the Apostles and we will find that it is distinctly different from the five previous sections that hitherto we have studied. In the first five sections of the book, we have found the apostles preaching the gospel from one angle or another. In this last section of the book, Paul gives himself not so much to the preaching of the gospel as to the defence of the gospel. Again, we have noticed that in the first five sections of the book, Luke has been tracing for us the points at which the early Christians diverged from Judaism and diverged also from other philosophies and political theories of the ancient world. Thus Luke has shown us what essential and characteristic Christianity was and still is, because at those points and on those issues over which the early church was obliged to diverge, we see what is essential, vital Christianity.

But now in this last section, Luke chooses not to tell us any more about how Christianity differed from other religions or philosophies. Instead, Luke records for us seemingly endless court scenes in which the early Christians are defending Christianity from the charges, accusations and slanders that had been levelled against it. So it is not a question so much of distinguishing Christianity from, say, Judaism; it is a question of showing what true Christianity really is, as distinct from the slanderous reports and accusations that had been levelled about it.

Defending the gospel

I ask us then to notice in the first place how important Luke obviously regards this business of defending the gospel to be. This is by far the largest section in the whole of the book and in as much as tonight we shall be obliged only to touch on a few major things from this last section, we could easily miss that, unless we deliberately reminded ourselves. This section of

the book is devoted to the topic of the defence of Christianity from the slanders and accusations levelled against it. Luke obviously thought it was exceedingly important and so did Paul, who deliberately set himself to what he obviously conceived of as a major task: the defence of Christianity in the highest quarters possible.

'Apologizing' for the gospel

Now I say this because there have been Christians, and I suspect there still are, who tend to take the view that apologizing—in the strict sense of that term, 'apologetics'—is a thing that Christians ought not to engage in. 'Preach the gospel,' they say 'irrespective of what the critics or others may say. Don't bother to answer them: get on with your major task of preaching the gospel and forget all about apologetics.' Well I respect the motives from which people take that point of view, but it seems to me quite evident that it wasn't the point of view that Paul took, nor is it the point of view that Luke took. He was concerned not merely that Paul gave so much of his time to the defence of the gospel—to apologetics, if you like—but Luke was concerned that the world should hear of it, and not just a brief summary of that defence. So in his last section he includes court scene after court scene, until some people get a little bit wearied with the apparent monotony. But Luke is determined that everybody should hear about it and hear what the defence of Christianity is.

There is an obvious practical reason why both Luke and Paul took this point of view. It is all right for Christians to get up in their corner and start preaching the gospel, or even to stand in the main thoroughfare in the town and preach the gospel, but if the gospel has been slandered, and slandered in high places and widely slandered, until the mass of the population has come to believe the slander, then the general public won't come anywhere near your preaching the gospel. Your preaching of the gospel can be sound, but if people don't come to hear it, they never will get converted. Pardon the thought (it is an absurd thought to introduce into a lecture like this!) but if you here in this particular church got the reputation in the locality of being rather peculiar people—not to be trusted with children, people that are liable to pervert the teenager, as though you were some sect or something—and you did nothing to dispel that slander, then of course you might faithfully preach the gospel at seven o'clock on Sunday nights, as you doubtless do, but the parents wouldn't let their young folks come. And self-respecting people would pass by and say, 'I'd never dream of coming anywhere near that strange lot.'

And what could be said at the small level of one individual church is of course all the more important about Christianity as a whole in this wide, wide world. It is very remarkable what curious notions get about as to what Christianity stands for. So if people are going to be induced to listen to our gospel—where the gospel has been slandered—we will therefore need to stand up and defend it. It may be on the estate where you live, you will be called upon to explain to your neighbours that they're not a bunch of cranks you meet with down in the gospel hall, and that your Sunday school teachers are very balanced and sane and healthy people. And it may be that you in your factory will have to stand up in your lunch hour and defend Christianity in front of your fellow workers, and you businessmen likewise.

And some of us in school and in university and in college will have to stand up and refute the idea that Christianity is anti-scientific, obscurantist and anti-intellectual, and point out that

such things are slanders. Christianity is as seen as anybody else on the use of the brain and, on the whole, a little bit keener. I see it happening every year. Young folks come flooding to university and large numbers of them are under the impression that Christianity is something to be equated with the stories of Red Riding Hood and dismissed with the toy things in the playroom, or at least after you've got out of the Sunday school. And that anybody with any respectable intellect at all would finish with Christianity completely. And because that's what they believe, they don't even bother to listen to the gospel.

Paul journey to Rome—God's plan or a sad mistake?

At any rate Paul, as we now see, gave himself in these last years to the defence of the gospel against the slanders that had been levelled against it and so he determined, we are told, to go first to Jerusalem and then to Rome. His defence was mainly conducted in those two places, in Palestine at least, in Jerusalem first, and then in Caesarea and then, as he went further, in the capital of the Roman world, Rome itself, before Nero. But here again, my task tonight is made difficult because many people have said that on both these counts and in both these places, Paul made a sad mistake. First they say he ought never to have gone to Jerusalem at all: he got out of the will of God and went astray by going to Jerusalem against all warnings to the contrary. That's bad enough. Secondly they say that when he got to Jerusalem, poor man, he misrepresented the gospel completely and got himself into endless trouble with the Jews and was eventually imprisoned for his trouble, thereby making a complete hash of defending the gospel. In fact, he compromised it exceedingly seriously and went to Rome in chains, when he might have gone there as a free man. You will know of course that very wise, learned, God-fearing, responsible expositors take these points of view and so, at the beginning perhaps and then later on, I shall have to say something about these things. I say it with due respect for those with whom I am obliged to disagree, but let me, to begin with, take the first charge and reserve the second until later on in our discussion.

The charge that Paul oughtn't to have gone to Jerusalem at all is based on what Luke tells us in chapter 21, where in verse 4 he says that when Paul came to Tyre, and tarried with the disciples seven days, these said to Paul through the spirit that he should not go on to Jerusalem. And then when he came to Caesarea, we're told:

A prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and he bound his own feet and hands and said, 'Thus says the Holy Spirit, "This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles."' When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, 'What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.' And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, 'Let the will of the Lord be done.' (vv. 10-14)

These then are the two passages on which Paul's critics base their charge that he was distinctly told, not once but twice, by the Holy Spirit not to go to Jerusalem and in spite of it, the man went and, as you might have expected, being thus disobedient to the Holy Spirit, got

himself into a lot of trouble when eventually he arrived. Well if that's how it was, that's how it was and to be sure, Luke is being very honest. Suppose Paul then, extraordinary notion surely, knowing it was the Holy Spirit's voice, aware that he was distinctly forbidden by the Holy Spirit, decided to defy the Holy Spirit and go. Suppose that is the fact. I ask you why do you think Luke recorded it? Well you could perhaps think up all sorts of reasons, but he needn't have recorded it, need he? It was perhaps a very curious thing to tell the world at the time perhaps when Paul was still alive and trying to defend the gospel. You will notice the book concludes before Paul comes before Nero for the first time, let alone the second time. An odd thing to go and advertise round the world that the very man who is standing for the faith of the gospel has got it wrong and is in disobedience to the Lord.

But need we put that construction upon it? Let me point out to you what Luke has earlier told us, before he recorded these two passages that I have just read. Look if you will at 19:21.

Now after these events Paul resolved in the Spirit to pass through Macedonia and Achaia and go to Jerusalem, saying, 'After I have been there, I must also see Rome.'

You will notice how carefully Luke records it, as Paul said once to the Corinthians:

Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no' at the same time? (2 Cor 1:17)

You are not dealing with a man who was normally given to arrogant, self-willed decisions. Luke records that when Paul made his resolution to go first to Jerusalem and then to Rome, it is said that 'he resolved in the Spirit' to go (19:21). And then you notice what he told the elders at Ephesus:

And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. (20:22-24)

And for the second time over, we are told, now through Paul's own mouth, that as he was journeying to Jerusalem and thence to Rome, he was doing it under the constraint of the Holy Spirit. He was fully aware of the implications, but as far as he was concerned that was nothing compared with the constraint he was under to fulfil his responsibilities to the Lord. You may say that there's a lot of contradiction, because it does then say that the people at Tyre told him 'through the Spirit' (21:4) not to go to Jerusalem, so how do we reconcile the contradiction?

Allow me a humble analogy. You, sir, have a birthday coming up. You've set yourself secretly in your heart upon Matthew Henry's Commentary, or the collected works of John Nelson Darby, or whatever other great tome is to your taste. As your birthday approaches, your wife over breakfast one morning looks at you and says, 'My dear, what would you like for your birthday?'

'Nothing much,' you say.

'You'd like Matthew Henry's Commentary, wouldn't you?'

'Yes. Well I would, but you're not to get it for me because, my dear, you need a new coat and that must come first: you're not to spend all that money on me on a birthday.'

True as eggs are eggs, you come down to breakfast that birthday morning and there's this enormous package sitting on your breakfast table, tied up with blue ribbon and with a card saying 'Best wishes from your darling wife'.

And you say, 'My dear, I told you not to get it. I told you to spend it on a dress.'

'I know you did.'

'Well I shall have to tell the elders then that this isn't to be. In fact I must start divorce proceedings.'

Well I know you wouldn't say that, and your wrath, if you had any, would be tempered by a tremendous admiration. You chalk it up as one more example of that tremendous self-giving love that you've known and admired all your life long.

When God wanted somebody to defend the gospel in Jerusalem and Rome and knew in the end it would cost the man his very life, he told Paul that, as far as he was concerned, Paul needn't go. God didn't want any conscript. 'I warned him distinctly that if he went, it would be bonds, imprisonment and possibly death. Now don't go.'

And Paul says, 'But you know I love the Lord and what do I care about my life, if only I can fulfil the charge that the blessed Lord gave me.'

I'm not so sure, my brethren, that when Paul stands before the judgment seat, Christ will criticize him for going. How easily some of us are put off making the slightest sacrifice. But in the task of defending the gospel, it is true to say that it's very rarely done effectively apart from men and women who know what it is, deliberately, to face the cost; and not because they're compelled to do it, but for love of the Lord. Let none of us do what would break Paul's heart, as he said in verse 13, for the Lord has few enough men and women who are prepared for that ultimate sacrifice.

Having thus broached the topic of Paul's willingness to suffer, let us now from these chapters begin to extract a number of themes by which we may judge Paul and likewise the gospel he preached. For in those closing chapters, though of course there were by this time men and women all over the place preaching and standing for the gospel, now in Luke's book the centre of attention must be Paul. As he stands before priestly court and king's court, as he stands before the raging mob or in the civilities of King Agrippa's presence, it is Paul that is carrying the standard for the gospel. As you judge the gospel he preaches and defends, you will, per force, have to judge Paul himself and what kind of a man he was. Because anybody who hears the gospel is going to look to the man who preaches it and they're going to judge the two things together. They'll say, 'This is what he preaches but what does he practice?' And our estimate of the gospel is going to be in no little way affected by what we think of Paul himself. Of course, in a lesser way it's true of any one who stands for the gospel. People are going to judge the gospel by what the gospel itself says and then they're going to judge it by the way those people behave who talk about the gospel.

Paul's attitude to suffering

So let's take one theme to start with, the theme of suffering. Here is Paul, in spite of the explicit statement that imprisonment and afflictions await him, determined to go on to Jerusalem, cost what suffering it may. How do you regard a man who behaves like that? For one must be a realist and not carried away by starry-eyed enthusiasm. There are some people in this world who are quite ready to suffer and, instead of admiring them, you'd have to pity them — people who like making martyrs of themselves and are ready to make a martyr of themselves for a cause, religious or political. Too great a readiness to suffer is not always a commendable thing. There are stories coming down to us from the early ages of the church that when the Romans began to persecute believers, some young men would sometimes walk out in front of the Roman magistrates and say, 'Look, come take us too, execute us too. We'd like to be executed,' and that surely is not to be commended but to be deplored: wanting to be a martyr is psychologically unhealthy. Was Paul a fanatic of that order? Well read the whole section and all its details and you will find the man exceedingly balanced when it comes to this very matter of his attitude to suffering.

If defending the gospel at Jerusalem and Rome means suffering, imprisonment and death, then if the Lord has told him to go and defend the gospel, he'll face the suffering. But he isn't going to suffer any more than he has to. Here's the captain in the Roman army and he's rescued Paul from the mob and he's taking him up the stairs (see 22:24–29). He's given Paul a chance to address the crowd and the crowd have heard him up to a certain point, and then a colossal riot has broken out. And the captain, as he takes Paul further into the barracks, orders that the man be bound and examined by flogging. It was one of the procedures that the Roman magistrates were allowed on people that were not Roman citizens. They held the view that if you flogged a man good and proper, he was more likely to speak the truth with that preliminary preparation than if you hadn't. What does Paul say? 'Yes, flog me. I love being flogged for the sake of the Lord Jesus.' I should think not. He isn't going to take a flogging when he doesn't have to, so he has a word with one of the centurions. He said, 'Excuse me, would you like to ask the commander whether it's right to flog a Roman citizen or even bind him and flog him, without his being first condemned?' (see v. 25).

And when the centurion related that to the captain, the captain was in great consternation, for even binding Paul when he was a Roman citizen was highly illegal, and Paul could have made it very awkward for that good captain. Of course, when the captain heard it he had Paul released forthwith. No further talk of flogging. Though Paul would suffer for the Lord Jesus if he had to, he didn't take a flogging when he didn't have to and you will perceive then, surely, an exceedingly balanced character.

Or take his attitude when at last he found himself in Caesarea. You will remember that, having faced the Jews in Jerusalem, he was then eventually taken down to the Roman headquarters at Caesarea, there to stand trial. The Jews concocted a plan. They would ask the Roman governor to bring Paul back to Jerusalem that he might stand trial in Jerusalem itself, because they had themselves arranged, unbeknown to the governor we hope, that as Paul was being transported back to Jerusalem, they would attack the convoy and assassinate Paul (see 23:12–35). At first, the Roman governor, Festus, said to the Jews, 'No, you come down to Caesarea,' so they came down to Caesarea. But they didn't make much headway there, and

Festus, willing to please the Jews, said therefore to Paul, 'Paul, would you be willing to go up to Jerusalem to be tried there?' And Paul knew what that meant. A little money in the palm of the Roman governor or a little more money in the palm of the military officer in charge of the detachment, and they would have been looking the other way when some dark footsteps came out of the shadows and assassinated Paul, and that would be the end of that.

What did Paul do? Well he wasn't having that. He stood for the gospel. He wasn't going to have the gospel's name dragged into the mud through the corruption of some petty officials and, therefore, when he saw that there was no way out and if he consented to go up to Jerusalem to be tried that was certain death, and knowing that God had told him that he was to go to Rome anyway, Paul used the rights of his Roman citizenship. 'I appeal to Caesar,' he said, and then to Caesar he had to go and that put an end to all plans to assassinate him. A man willing to suffer for the Lord Jesus, but not to suffer more than he had to. To suffer for the sake of the gospel, but not to suffer if suffering would act against the gospel.

Paul's attitude to money

And that brings us to another matter, the question of money. It's never far away, particularly when you get a new religion started. Who finances this and what do they do with the collections when they get them? So how does Paul stand up when it comes to his attitude to money? And anyway, where lies the Christian system with money? All these gifts being collected from Gentile churches all over the place and so forth, what are they doing with the money? In that connection, there are two stories at least. There are some more, but two major stories that you might care to consider. They both concern incidents that happened at Ephesus. In chapter 19, we are told of the one incident, the riot that took place in Ephesus against Paul. It was led by certain silversmiths and of course then the crowd joined in. At one stage, so we're told, thousands of them rushed into the theatre — it's there still in Ephesus — and for the space of two hours, they stood shouting their heads off, 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians.' You've never heard such a hubbub. What were they doing? They were standing for what they thought was the truth — 'Great is Diana of the Ephesians' — but there was another side to it.

The local chamber of commerce, or at least that division of it which was concerned with the silversmiths, had had a meeting a little while earlier and their leader pointed out, 'There is the question of the truth, gentlemen. Everybody knows throughout the world the fame of Ephesus as the city that has the temple of the great Diana and of that image that fell down from Jupiter. But there is the other matter that Paul is preaching the gospel message according to him, and if folks go and believe that, they'll stop buying silver shrines and our trade is going down the drain.' And so for the truth's sake, they decided to stop this gospel preaching; but it wasn't absolutely clear that the motives of the people there in Ephesus were altogether altruistic, concerned only for the truth. Money played an enormous part in it.

Chapter 20 gives us another scene — still in Ephesus or nearby — as Paul came to the nearby port on his way past and called for the elders of the Christian church to give them his farewell address. As he stood before them, among the things he said was this: 'Gentlemen, would you look at my hands, which show what kind of a man I've been among you. All the years I was among you, I held nothing back from you of God's good council. Moreover, I worked with these hands and earned every penny that was necessary to pay my own expenses and the

expenses of my team. And I did so for this second reason that I might leave you elders an example that you ought to remember the word of the Lord Jesus, “it is more blessed to give than receive”. Work, so that you will be able to assist those who need your help’ (see 20:34–35).

Paul wasn’t denying the right of some men and women to live off the gospel. He would stand up for Peter’s right and the right of other servants of the Lord, to be maintained by the churches as they went preaching the gospel. But as far as Paul himself was concerned, here’s a man who was prepared to work to earn his own living, pay the expenses of his own team and have something to give to the poor that he might make the preaching of the gospel of no charge. And what is more, to inculcate in the believers by his own example, what is the norm to be followed. It is our bounden duty, left thus by the Lord Jesus himself, that as a part of our ministry, we not only preach the theory, but as Christian men and women we should work so that we might have that which we can give to the poor.

Merely a sect?

There was another charge that was frequently brought against Paul in the courts that he was compelled to testify in, and that is the charge that Paul was building a sect. We know that if you want to damn a thing straight off, call it a sect! Because with a good many people, calling a thing a sect is immediately a smear and a condemnation. So Paul wasn’t mainline Judaism: he was a little sect. Of course, Judaism had its sects. There was the sect of the Sadducees. They didn’t believe in the resurrection. There was the sect of the Pharisees. They did believe in the resurrection, but then they were numerous, so if you’re going to be a sect and want to be respectable, be numerous! The kinds of sects that aren’t respectable are the ones that happen not to be numerous. Call it a sect and multitudes of people will say, ‘I won’t go anywhere near them.’

So Paul, when he appeared before Felix, said, ‘Yes, I freely confess that according to the Way which they call a sect, that I follow. Therefore, I’m a sect. I’ll tell you something else, I believe everything in that book. I believe everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets. If that’s sectarian, well I’m a sect’ (see 24:14). But as you perceive, Paul is far from admitting that he is a nasty little splinter group. He stands central to the faith. He believes all that Moses and the prophets have said. And had he wanted to, he could have said something thing more, ‘I believe in the hope of the resurrection that our fathers held from the Prophets. There are a good many folks around here, high priests included, who no longer believe in the resurrection. Who is the sect then, me or them?’ Let folks call us what they will. We’re not obliged necessarily to sit down under the accusation that we’re a sect. The point is what do we believe? If we’re prepared to believe all that is in that book, well then the idea that you’re a funny little sect is far from the truth.

Now I must dismiss a related implication—was the man a fanatic? It is a mark of sects sometimes that they become fanatical. Compared with the composed, mature, responsible behaviour of mainline groups, sects can from time to time exhibit a certain fanaticism. There’s no denying that in these last chapters of Acts there’s a certain amount of fanaticism about the place. There is a band of assassins, for instance, that took an oath and a vow that they would neither eat nor drink until they’d assassinated Paul. You’d count that a little bit extreme,

wouldn't you? They weren't Christians. Here's Paul at last arrived in Rome, says Luke. He's about to go into Caesar to make his defence. Before he goes, he calls the elders of the Jewish community to come and visit him in his prison and when they come, he explains to these Jewish elders how he happens to be here. 'Gentlemen,' he said, 'our fellow Jews in numbers of cities have persecuted me, stoned me, nearly killed me and have driven me, as the only way I could possibly escape death at their hands, to appeal to Caesar and that's why I'm here, because of the fanatical opposition by Judaism. So I now go to Caesar.' That was what Paul could have told Caesar, couldn't he, about those Jews? Now listen to him, 'Gentlemen, I want to tell you that when I go to Caesar, I have nothing to accuse my nation of' (see 28:19). Loyal to his nation to the very last. You can call that sectarian fanaticism if you like, but then the facts would contradict you.

Paul's attitude to 'the temples'

Finally, I come to the major part of his testimony that some people say he completely spoils. We may begin by considering the two major stories about temples that occur in this part of Acts. There was a riot about the temple at Ephesus, you may remember. There was a riot in Jerusalem, again about the temple. Two temples—one a heathen temple, the other a Jewish temple. The town clerk at Ephesus had to remind the crowd of a very interesting fact; that though they were getting so excited in the defence of their temple, Paul and his colleagues had never attempted to despoil or desecrate the Temple of Diana at Ephesus. That is important. Of course Paul preached that the Gentiles were to turn away from idols and serve the true and living God and, had the nation responded to him, they would have left their idols and their temple. That is what Paul preached, but whereas he preached it, he never once made an attempt to go up to the temple and smash the idols or desecrate their temple and that's exceedingly important. Never once was there a demonstration outside the temple. I have occasionally heard of Christian people who have gone into the churches of those they don't agree with and put mud in the font. Foolish men. That isn't serving the cause of truth. Preach the truth, but when it comes to other people's sacred places, Paul's example is that we should respect them.

And what of the temple at Jerusalem? The Jews alleged that Paul had entered the temple and desecrated it by bringing Gentiles into the temple. He had done no such thing. He gets strong criticism from some Christians for not doing it, as if Paul were re-erecting 'the middle wall of partition'. But that's because now Paul was in a Jewish temple, not in a Christian church; and if Paul chose to go into a Jewish temple, then Paul would abide by the rules and regulations of the Jewish temple. And if in the Jewish temple Gentiles were forbidden, Paul wouldn't begin to think of bringing a Gentile, not even a Gentile Christian, into the temple. It was a lie. He hadn't desecrated that temple by bringing any Gentile into it. Yes, he believed that in Christ there is no longer a middle wall of partition and Jew and Gentile are one in Christ. That's true of the Christian church. It isn't true of a Jewish temple and Paul didn't try to behave in a Jewish temple as though it were a Christian church.

But then comes the rub. 'He shouldn't have gone to the temple at all,' say some, 'and as for that business of actually paying for the vow, surely he got that wrong?' Paul had gone to Jerusalem and James suggested to him that, in order to placate the Jews, Paul ought to join

with these men who had a vow, and pay for their sacrifices (see 21:17–26). The theory is that Paul ought to have said, ‘What, go back to Judaism? Never on your life. I can’t help it if the Jews get upset. I’m not going to do any such thing.’ But instead Paul then weakened and compromised and fluffed the gospel and tried to placate the Jews. And of course he didn’t placate them, but made matters a thousand times worse, and got himself imprisoned and went to Rome a prisoner.

But wait a minute, Paul wasn’t trying to placate any Jews. James said there were a lot of people in the city who believed who were Jews, and these believers, who were Jews, were like the people we met in chapter 16. They knew that, as Christian Jews, they didn’t have to keep the law for salvation, but they had a conscience that they ought nevertheless, as Christian Jews, to carry out certain features of that law. We’ve heard what the apostles said about that, one and all of them. Gentiles didn’t have to keep the Jewish law, but if Jewish Christians wanted to keep it, not for salvation of course, but because they were saved and wanted to please the Lord; and if the way they felt they could please the Lord was by keeping that law, then neither Paul nor Peter nor James nor John or any one of them told them they mustn’t. The question was, did you have to keep it for salvation? Paul and everybody said, ‘No, never for salvation,’ but if the Jewish Christians wanted to keep it as a way of pleasing the Lord, you’ll never find anything in Paul that says they mustn’t.

But there was another reason, wasn’t there? The particular case that came up was a vow. Certain Christian men had made a vow before God, according to the Jewish law. Now the question is put to Paul, ‘What does Christianity say about that?’ You say, ‘Well the men shouldn’t have taken the vow.’ All right, but they have taken the vow. They have taken a vow solemnly before God that they will do a, b and c. Now here comes Christianity. What does Christianity teach people about vows?

You married Miss Martha Smith and have gone through all sorts of vows. She’s not a converted woman, and now you become a Christian. You say, ‘Sorry, I did make a vow that I would be your husband until death us do part, but now I’ve become a Christian, so I’m afraid I shall have to throw you out.’ Is that what Christianity teaches? I fancy not. Christianity teaches that if a man has vowed, then unless to fulfil the vow would be a sin, the man must fulfil the vow. Justification by faith does not mean that because we’re justified by faith we are free to cast off any responsibilities we have undertaken. It was no small principle that was at stake when Paul came to Jerusalem and demonstrated that true Christianity is not irresponsible antinomianism, but teaches people to fulfil the responsibilities that they have undertaken before God.

Paul, you’re mad!

Finally, I leave you contemplating Paul before Agrippa. Said Festus, as he heard the gospel message, ‘Paul, you’re mad’ (see 26:24). It wasn’t the first time the opposition had said that about the Christian gospel. It won’t be the last. Let’s examine this a little bit more closely. There was a time when Paul, even by his own admission, was mad, exceedingly mad. Watch him going up the Damascus road, hounding the Christians out of their homes, dragging them to prison, standing by while the torture is applied and getting this young lady here to blaspheme the name of Jesus under terrible pain. Watch him as he stands exulting, as they

take the heavy stones and smash Stephen's ribcage. 'I was mad against them,' he says. Neither Festus nor anybody else called him mad then. Said Paul, 'Christ appeared to me. You say that's madness, Festus, but I tell you what I've been doing. I stopped the persecuting. I myself have been stoned many times, beaten, left for dead. I've been delivering people by God's grace from the power of Satan into God's wonderful light. I could take you to Philippi and there was a girl who was mentally disturbed by an evil spirit. You go to Philippi now and you'll find a woman, calm and at peace. I could take you to a jailer in Philippi, brutal thug of a man that lashed my back until it stood raw. I could show you that man as a Christian gentleman. And now you call me mad. Well if that's madness, God give us more madmen.'

Closing remarks

And there we must leave him. We've studied Paul and some of Paul's apologetics. I feel now I must apologize to Paul, if he can hear me. How crudely I have put what he put so brilliantly. God give us to perceive the greatness of that man to whose defence of the gospel we who sit here tonight are obliged. It was through his defence of the gospel at the highest quarters in the land that Christianity came through that period of slandering and survived down to this present day. God give us the same zeal, the same willingness to suffer for Christ, the same balanced character, the same testimony before the world that we, in our day, may stand for the gospel and defend it against its critics and by God's grace preach it. That God may bless it, even in our day and generation.

Shall we pray.

And now, Father, we pray thou wilt take thy word and cause there to well up in our hearts, we beseech thee, a greater understanding of what the great heroes of the faith did for us and for thee in those early days. And in the gratitude of our hearts that arises to them and to thee, give us the desire to be more like them in our day and generation that we may do nothing against the gospel, and bring no slur or stain upon it. That, by upright walk and devoted life and sane attitude, we may commend thy gospel and adorn it in all things, for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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.