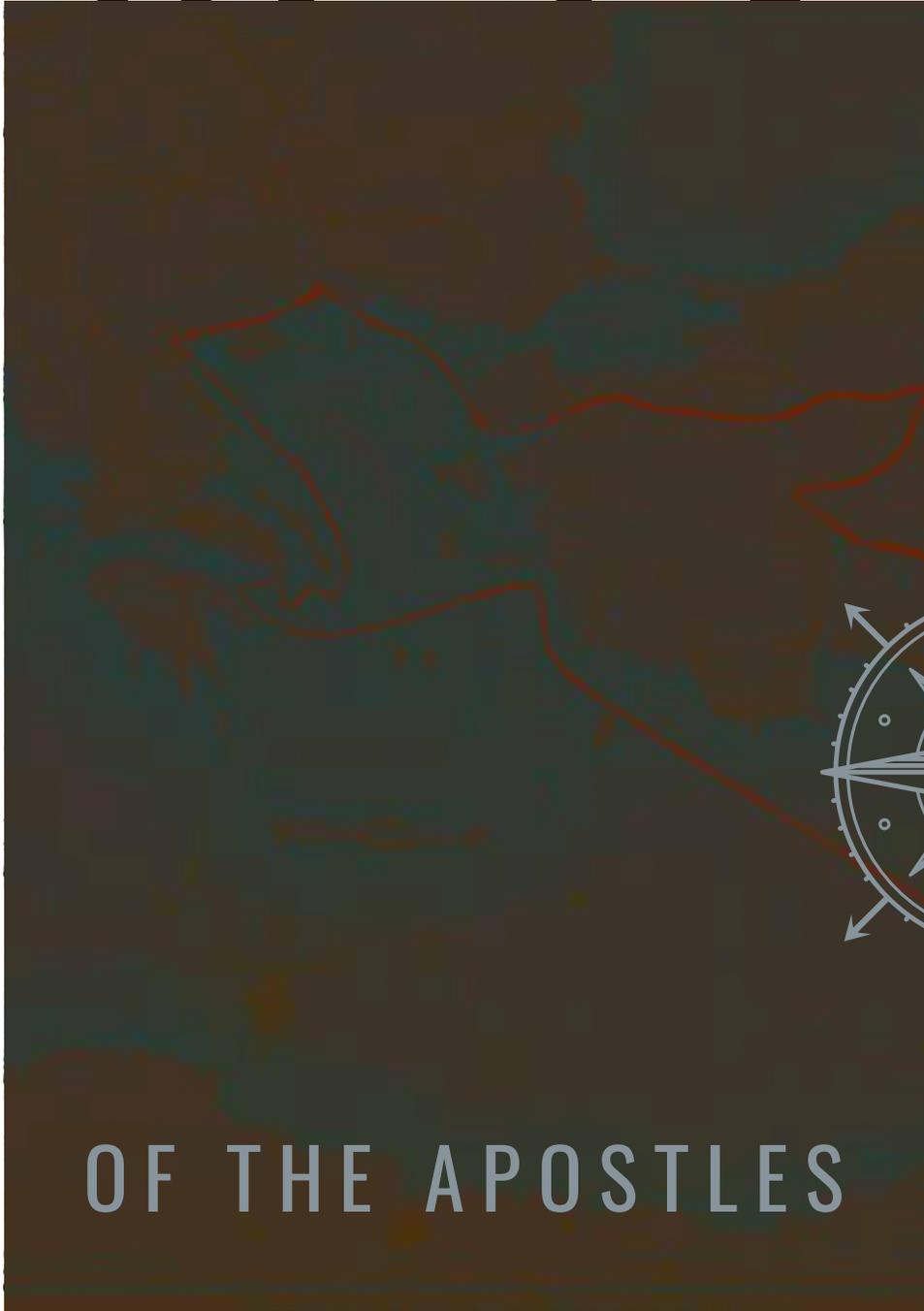


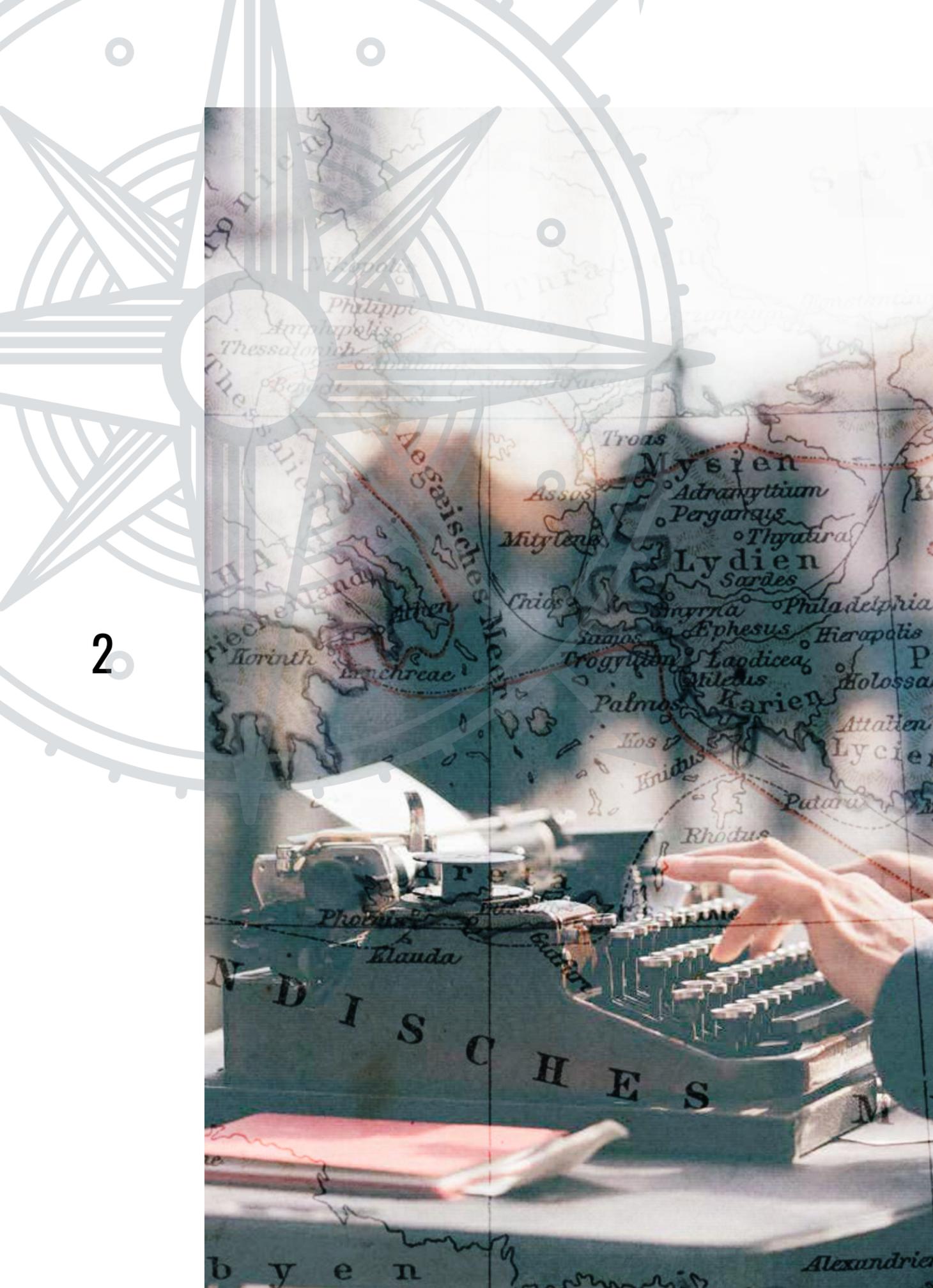
ACTS



OF THE APOSTLES

IRON CITY CHURCH

VOLUME 1



INTRODUCTION TO ACTS

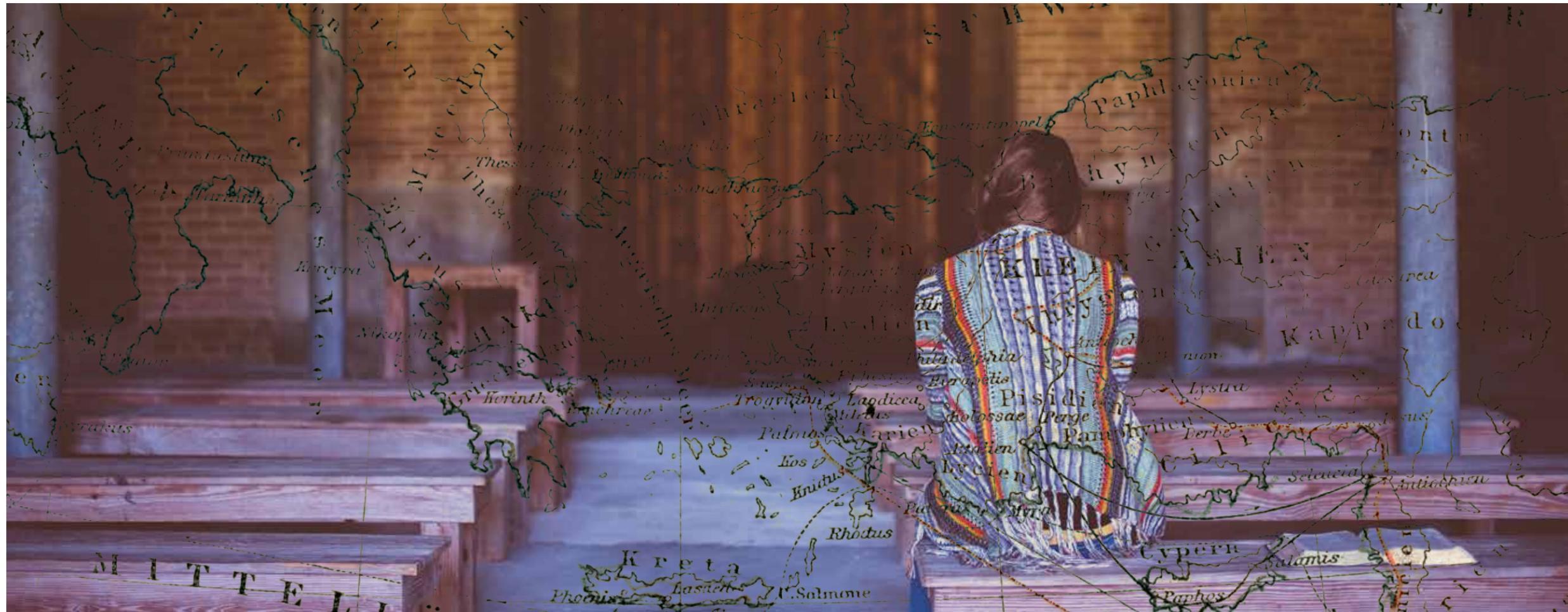
The book traditionally called “the Acts of the Apostles” continues the work Luke began in his Gospel, “to write an orderly account ... a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us” (Luke 1:1-3). While the Gospel of Luke deals “with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day he was taken up” (Acts 1:1-2), Acts provides a look at God’s continued work in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ and forming of the Church through the preaching of that good news.

While the author is never explicitly identified in either the Gospel or Acts, the Christian tradition has almost universally affirmed Luke with authorship of both. As early as the second century, Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyons, identified Luke the physician as the author of the Gospel in his apologetic writings against early Christian heresies. Historically, external evidence has never consistently suggested any author other than Luke himself. The stylized introductions make clear that the author of Acts is the very same individual that penned the Gospel.

Both works are addressed to a recipient named Theophilus (“lover of God,” a possible pseudonym for a particular individual or a title for any Christian reader), and Acts makes clear that it continues the purpose of the “first book” (1:1). Both books emphasize similar themes including the role and work of the Holy Spirit, God’s interest in socially marginalized individuals, the inclusive nature of the gospel for all peoples, and the cosmic implications of Jesus’ redemptive work. These facts support joint authorship of Luke and Acts, and therefore Lukan authorship. In addition, Acts 16:10 begins a prolonged section of first-person narrative that points to an individual who accompanied Paul during the time he wrote Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon. Colossians 4:14 and Philemon 24 include “Luke the beloved physician” among Paul’s “fellow workers” who minister to him and complement his ministry during his first imprisonment. Therefore, the history of the Christian tradition and the internal evidence within the Bible point to Luke as the author of our third Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles.

Who then was Luke? As previously mentioned, he was a physician (Colossians 4:14), which accounts for some of the detailed descriptions of infirmities and illnesses found in both works. Luke is a Greek name, and he employs the language skillfully and excellently as he pens the twin accounts of Jesus and his Church, indicating he was probably Greek himself. For a Gentile, Luke nevertheless demonstrates an extensive familiarity with the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament. Therefore, he may have been a Gentile convert to Judaism prior to faith in Christ or at least benefitted from thorough training in the Scriptures after believing in the gospel. Both are equally possible, especially since he travelled with Paul, a former Pharisee who would have memorized most if not all the Old Testament.

However, we also know that Luke was not just a temporary or intermittent companion of Paul. Colossians and Philemon make it clear that Luke was with Paul before and during his first imprisonment in Rome (Acts 28:11-31). However, Paul was eventually acquitted after that first trial (around A.D. 62; cf. 2 Timothy 4:16-17), ministering for several years throughout the Roman Empire and as far as Spain. Second Timothy finds Paul once more in chains, awaiting the trial which will result in his own martyrdom (2 Timothy 4:6-7). During that difficult time, Paul declares that it is “Luke alone” who remains with the Apostle (2 Timothy 4:14), indicating that the physician was a lifelong partner and companion of Paul throughout much of his ministry and until its bitter



end. Truly this follower of Christ remained a faithful partner in the ministry of the gospel, and that ministry included employing his intelligent and thorough mind in the composition of a lengthy account of Jesus' ministry and the early history of the Church.

Since Acts and the Gospel of Luke should be taken together, we know the author's purpose in writing these works. His aim is to provide the reader with "an orderly account" which compiles testimonies from "those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" including Luke and his contemporaries (Acts 1:2-3). As such, Luke's Gospel heavily relies on material from the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, but he also supplies details which could only come from other eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry in Judea. As with all the Gospel accounts, his history is selective, possibly reflecting the concerns of this Gentile believer. But what Luke has included is what he believes may help the believer "have certainty concerning the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:4). How does this purpose manifest in the text of Acts? It demonstrates the fulfillment of God's promises in continuing his salvific work in Jesus through the Holy Spirit, resulting in a changed people from every nation who live in a renewed, faithful, and fruitful relationship with God. It is these same people who carry on Jesus' work through the power of the Spirit, just as Jesus promised.

Before he ascends to the Father, Jesus promises his disciples that they "will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon" them, enabling them to be Christ's "witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8-9). The rest of Acts records God's work through his Church to bring about the completion of this plan.

Following the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (2:1-12), the disciples begin to preach the gospel with clarity, power, and authority, eventually across ethnic, linguistic, and cultural barriers. Beginning in Jerusalem, Peter, John, and the disciples proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Jewish Messiah who died by the hands of sinners, but was raised according to the purpose and power of God and is revealed as not only the rightful ruler over all things, but also the Lord himself (2:14-36). Additionally, the Holy Spirit works through the apostles to confirm and underscore the preaching of this same message, bringing about miraculous healings (3:1-8; 5:12-16). As a result, people in Jerusalem increasingly come to faith in Jesus Christ and begin a life of true worship, selfless service, and loving care in the community of the Church (4:42-47).

However, persecution from the Jewish leaders presents a challenge to the growing body of believers. A recently

ordained deacon named Stephen is arrested and stoned, initiating a harsh persecution against the Church in Jerusalem (8:1-3). However, God uses this opposition to further spread the gospel beyond Judea. Philip preaches in Samaria (8:4-25) before taking the Gospel south, leading to the conversion of one of the Ethiopian princess' advisors (8:26-40).

But even more surprisingly, Jesus reveals himself to the Church's fiercest persecutor, Saul of Tarsus (also known by his Roman name, Paul; 9:1-19). Following his conversion, Saul enters the Jewish synagogues in Damascus and begins preaching the very same gospel he had previously tried to quash (9:20-22). The gospel of Jesus Christ will not be stopped, and through its power God is able to turn even its most staunch opponent into one of its most important servants. As such, the Holy Spirit continues its spread, bringing increasing numbers of Gentiles into the faith, and visibly falling on them in the presence of Peter to confirm that this gospel is good news for all people (10:44-48).

From that point on, Luke records the specifics as Paul, the Apostles, and more believers carry the gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Despite opposition from the Jews and Gentiles, through suffering and rejection, God uses

his Spirit-filled servants to forward the message of his faithfulness to the world for the salvation of people and the restoration of all things. Even when Paul, the missionary to the Roman Empire, is imprisoned, God uses his access to a Roman appeal to take the gospel of Jesus Christ to Rome itself. It is there, in the seat of the Roman power, that Paul, even in chains, is able to proclaim "the kingdom of God" and teach "about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (28:28-31).

In Acts, Luke records this history in detail, so that its report will be a bulwark for the believer's faith. Why? Because it is the intricate, accurate, and factual presentation that not only in the Resurrection, but also beyond it, God delivers on his promises. His writings show that Christ's work continues after he returns to the Father and that redemption touches down in the "already" as the Church waits for the "not yet" — when Jesus will return to restore the Kingdom of God on earth. Within these words and pages, we find testimony upon testimony of God's faithfulness, the Holy Spirit's power, and the veracity of the Gospel, all included to establish the certainty of our hope. And in that certainty, we, like the early Church, can worship, commune, serve, and witness.

INTRODUCTION TO VOLUME 1

6

Jesus Christ has risen from the dead and walks the earth with his disciples once again. Nevertheless, his time on Earth is coming to a close. How will the disciples go on? How can they possibly fend for themselves in this life without their teacher and Lord with them?

He will be with them not in body but in spirit, as the Holy Spirit would come upon them, which Christ had promised. He had told them, "it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you...But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:7, 13). The Holy Spirit did indeed come upon them in Acts 2, in language alike to that of God descending upon Mount Sinai in Exodus. The followers of Jesus are filled with the Spirit, and they will never be the same. It is this same Spirit of God who will move and work mightily during the Acts of the Apostles, guiding them every step of the way. The Spirit will take them through adventure, trial, imprisonment, travel, miracles, conversions, and more.

The movement called the Way will be made up of "called out ones," who follow Jesus of Nazareth and claim that he was in fact the long-awaited

Messiah. This group of believers will preach the message of Christ with an insurmountable boldness that could only come from the Spirit of God. These apostles were "uneducated, common men," but they could not suppress the good news and eyewitness testimony that had not only changed their lives but would change the history of the world. This first volume of Acts, which spans the first seven chapters, follows the progression of the witness in Jerusalem as the gospel takes root.

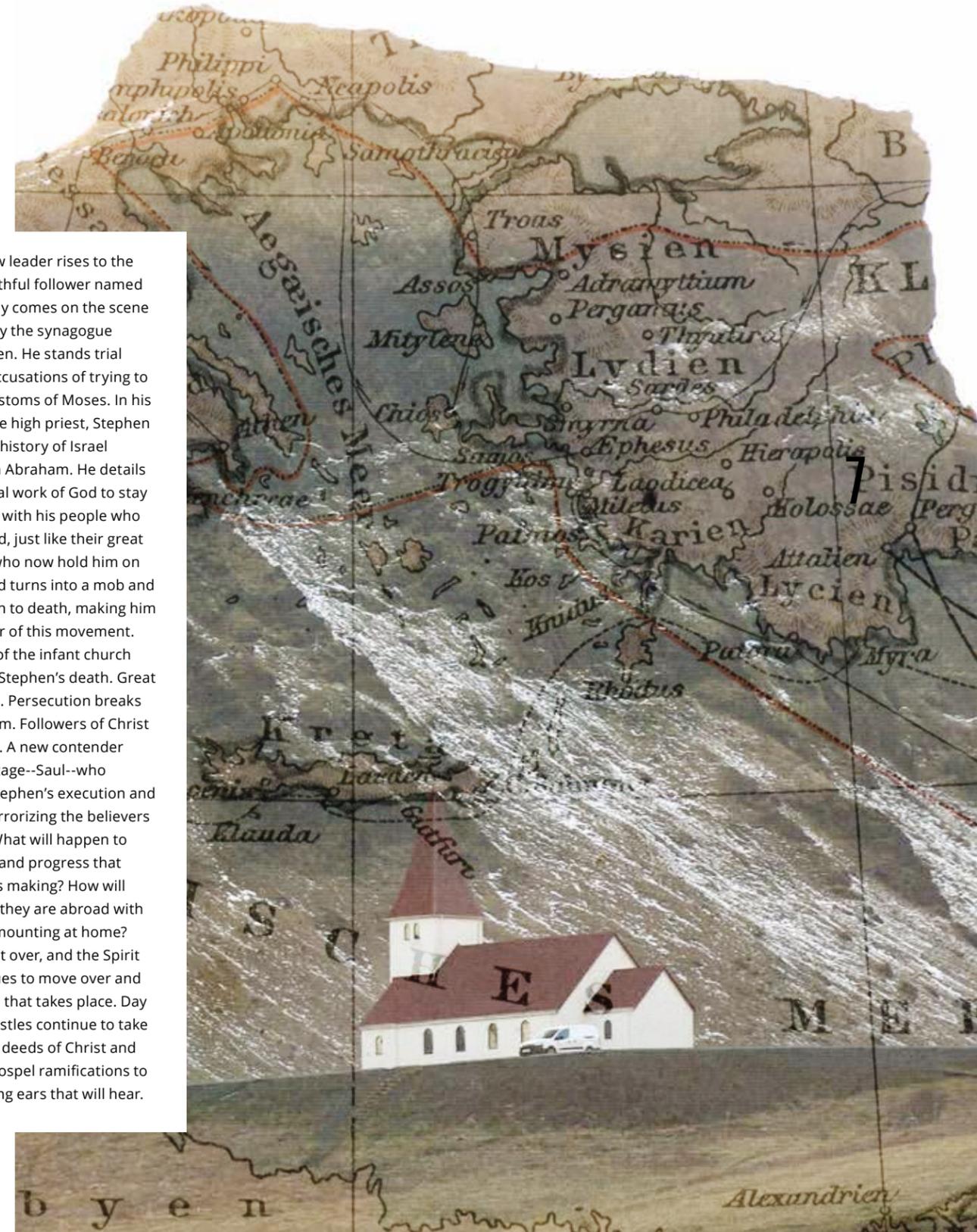
The apostles are no longer the stumbling, bumbling fishermen who many people like to chide for their ineptitude in the gospel accounts. These movement leaders are now fishers of men, evangelists, proclaimers, and directors. Peter emerges as the main leader of this bustling group of believers. He is no longer held back by his denials of Christ; instead he is doing just as Jesus instructed in John 21. He is feeding Christ's sheep, this new flock of the church. The apostles grow in their maturity and flexibility as the new body grows.

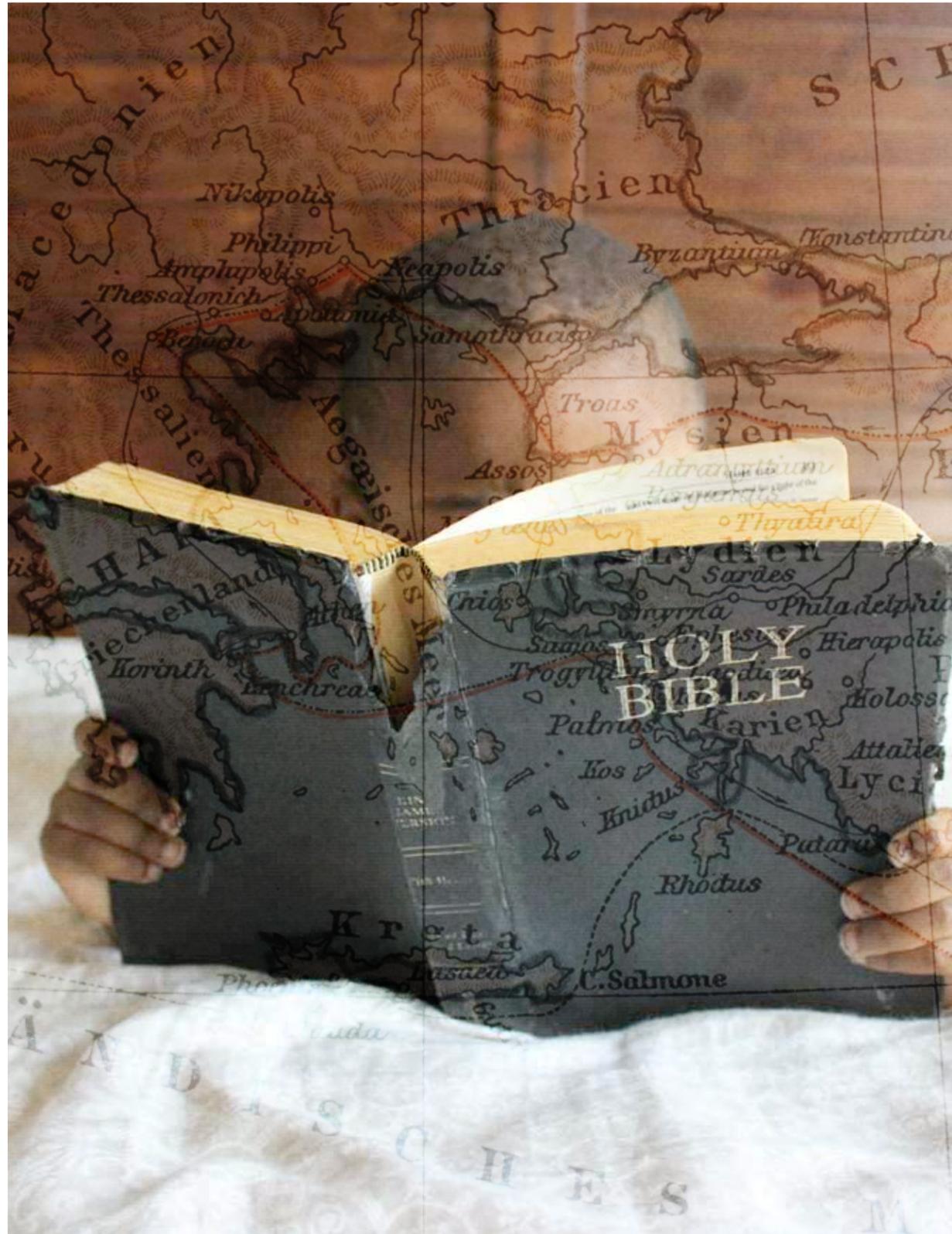
These first seven chapters of Acts show the infancy of the church. The Holy Spirit dwells within the lives of Christ followers, and the Spirit has brought together people of diverse backgrounds, languages, and

ethnicities at Pentecost, such that everyone is able to hear the message in their own language. The events of the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 are being reversed in the wake of the outbreathing of the Spirit of God upon human beings. The church begins to grow in breadth and depth. Numbers increase, and selfishness decreases. This strange group shares everything in common as they sell their possessions in community. They break bread together and praise God for what he is doing, yet they never cease in prayer. Even when they suffer persecution and imprisonment, they pray for boldness all the more to endure and continue spreading the truth of the gospel.

Healings, signs, wonders, and miracles were being done at the hand of the apostles, and the surrounding world takes notice. They cannot deny the acts of these apostles. Jerusalem becomes filled with the teaching of Christ, and the chief priests attempt to charge the apostles to quit teaching this gospel that convicts the Jews of crucifying Jesus in chapter 5. The apostles succinctly answer that they must obey God rather than men. The number of those in the fellowship of believers grows to the extent that more leaders must be chosen to serve. Out of this process

in Acts 6, a new leader rises to the occasion. A faithful follower named Stephen quickly comes on the scene and is seized by the synagogue of the Freedmen. He stands trial amidst false accusations of trying to destroy the customs of Moses. In his response to the high priest, Stephen chronicles the history of Israel beginning with Abraham. He details the providential work of God to stay in relationship with his people who are stiff-necked, just like their great descendants who now hold him on trial. The crowd turns into a mob and stones Stephen to death, making him the first martyr of this movement. The narrative of the infant church darkens upon Stephen's death. Great lament ensues. Persecution breaks out in Jerusalem. Followers of Christ scatter in peril. A new contender arises to the stage--Saul--who approved of Stephen's execution and then begins terrorizing the believers who are left. What will happen to all the growth and progress that the church was making? How will they survive if they are abroad with persecutions mounting at home? The story is not over, and the Spirit of God continues to move over and underneath all that takes place. Day by day the apostles continue to take the words and deeds of Christ and proclaim the gospel ramifications to any surrounding ears that will hear.





Acts 1:6-11

As I prepared to write this devotional, I was struck with the magnitude and importance of Jesus's last words on earth. What a gift we have in the Scriptures to know the words of Jesus. With his last words, Jesus reassured his apostles of the power, authority, omniscience, and wisdom of our Father. When Jesus called them all together just before he ascended to heaven, the disciples asked if he was about to restore the kingdom to Israel as a nation. While this question exposed the disconnect between the disciples' views of Jesus's ministry and the reality of his everlasting Kingdom, Jesus doesn't rebuke the disciples for this question. He simply answered: "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority" (1:7). Think if Jesus had told them he wouldn't return for thousands of years. He didn't want them to be discouraged or distracted from their mission, but desired a faithful, steadfast life of evangelism for these men.

The last sentence recorded that Jesus spoke is the next verse: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (1:8). So first, he reassures his followers that the Father has appointed all times and seasons, and it is not necessary to have all knowledge to be a faithful disciple. Next, he promises they will receive the power they need when the Holy Spirit is given to them. He says that the apostles "will be" his witnesses to the ends of the earth. These are bold, confident statements from our King. Our Father is sovereign, we will have the power of the Holy Spirit, and we will be his witnesses. Zero percent of these statements depend upon us, as do zero percent of the results of these statements. Our Father has a vast plan to bring every tribe, nation, and tongue to himself, and he will accomplish this through us. This humbles me, because I know how faithless, selfish, and distracted I can be. But Praise God in the highest, because he promised to accomplish his will through his people. The disciples needed this encouragement before their King ascended, and we need this encouragement today. So, dear Christian, are you humbly submitted to the work God has for you? Or are you distracted by discontentment, forgetting that you are a servant of the omniscient, all-powerful King? Remember the perspective of eternity today and be encouraged by this promise: "He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it" (1Thessalonians 5:24).

ACTS 1:12-26

Prophecy without fulfillment is like a heart without a beat, just a flatline

We serve a God whose very introduction was prophetic word –“Let there be light...” (Gen. 1:3). The overture of Genesis is laced with prophecy that finds fulfillment throughout Scripture. This theme introduces a rhythmic pattern of God’s word: that which God says is true. He is faithful to bring his promises to fruition. His prophecies will always be fulfilled (Joshua 21:45; Hebrews 10:23; 1 Thessalonians 5:24).

In Acts 1 we see the disciples response to prophecy fulfilled. The betrayal of Jesus Christ was fulfilled in Judas (Matthew 27:9-10); the sacrifice of Christ (Jeremiah 19:1-13), the thirty pieces silver (Zechariah 11:12,13), and the purchased field (Jeremiah 32:6-9). Even the response to his betrayal of Christ, Judas’ death, is a fulfillment of Scripture (1:16-20). As such the disciples of Christ find themselves, immediately after Christ’s ascension, in prayer and counsel to discern the replacement of Judas (1:9-11).

The disciples reveal a biblical theme to difficult situations and decisions through their response. “They all were continually united in prayer...” (1:14). In the midst of questions they together relied on the Holy Spirit through prayer and the word. Peter quotes the book of Psalms as a guide for wisdom in the disciples’ steps toward replacing Judas (1:20; Psalm 69:25; 109:8). The Word became the light to their feet. Not in the sense that it spelled out clearly the method of replacement, or who the next disciple would be, but it reveals the need and gives meaning to the moment. The very position in which they find themselves has been ordained and prophesied through Scripture. This is not by happenstance that they are there. Therefore, they can trust the Holy Spirit to guide them, for he knew they would be gathered together here, united in prayer, seeking wisdom after Christ’s ascension.

Now that they have gathered together in prayer and leaned on the word for guidance and purpose, they begin to make the decision on Judas’ replacement. They establish a foundation of requirements, prescribing that there must be faithful fruit before a candidate may be considered. Practically, they looked for dependency and experience as a witness of the ministry of Christ from the beginning (1:21-22). Biblical qualification helps filter biblical decisions. The Scripture did not speak to who specifically would replace Judas, nor did it establish how they would go about discerning this. But their walk with Christ gave them the qualifications they needed.

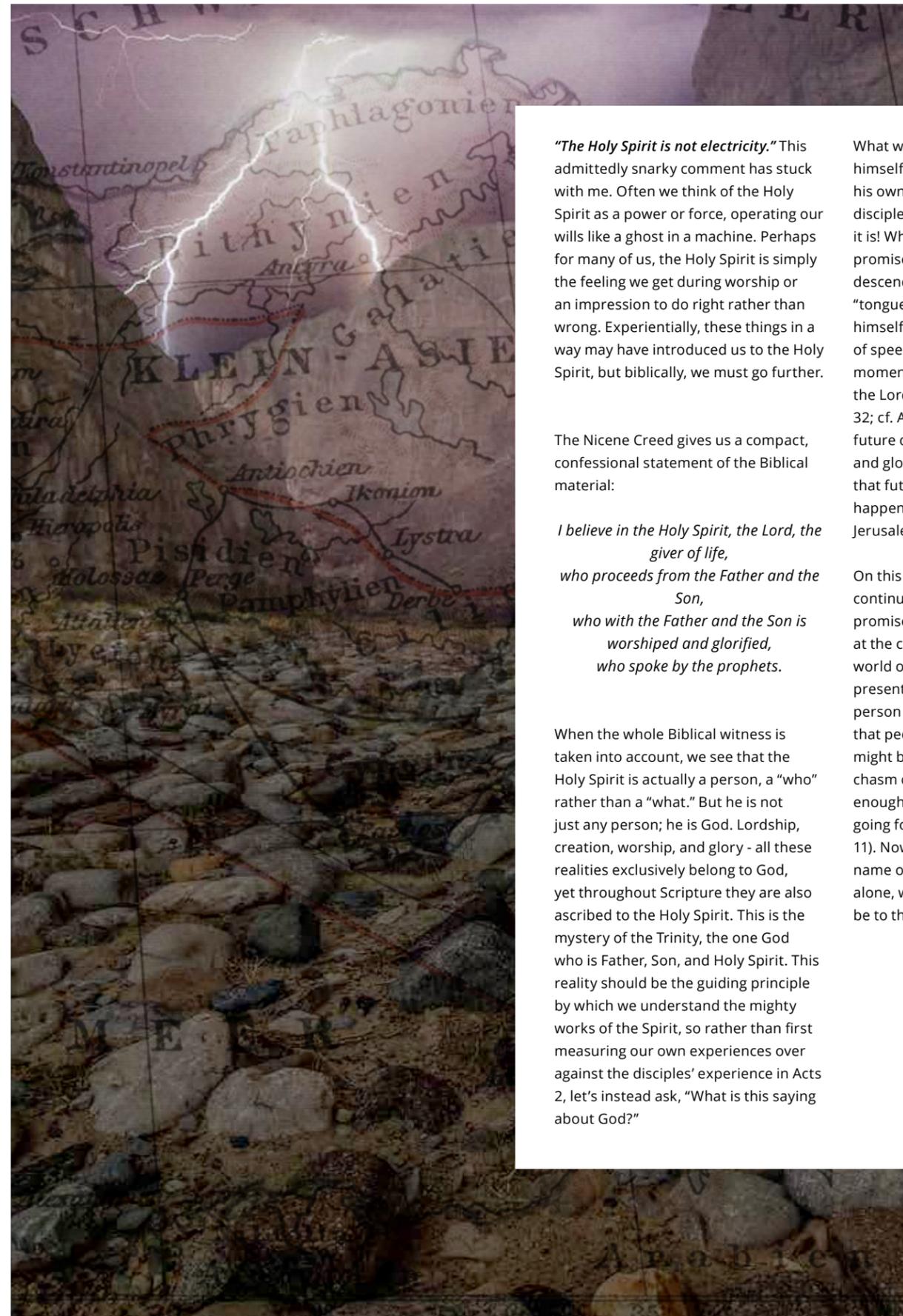
They knew each other, lived with one other, walked together in the ministry of Jesus who taught them and established biblical truths in their hearts. These became the requirement for Judas’ replacement: a witness of the resurrection and a connection to Christ.

Finally, with qualifications laid out and propositions presented, again they respond in prayer (1:24-25). Oh what absolute trust and dependence on Christ they mirror for us! “You, Lord, know everyone’s hearts...” In the end, they chose not to rely on debate or outward appearances, which most likely were rather similar; rather, they completely let go of the decision and opened their hearts to the will of the Lord. The casting of lots is not a biblical condoning of gambling, nor is it a prescription for all decision making. Rather it is a lesson in the dependence of the disciple of Christ in all things.

Are we united in prayer—gathering in community to discern and seek the Lord? Are we turning to the Word, acknowledging the necessity of its fulfillment, accepting the nature of its promises? Are we leaning on the witness of Christ as our example—our qualifications and requirements? Finally, are we ultimately trusting in God? We must believe, whichever path is taken; he is behind the orchestration and has been since His introduction.

10

ACTS 2:1-13



“The Holy Spirit is not electricity.” This admittedly snarky comment has stuck with me. Often we think of the Holy Spirit as a power or force, operating our wills like a ghost in a machine. Perhaps for many of us, the Holy Spirit is simply the feeling we get during worship or an impression to do right rather than wrong. Experientially, these things in a way may have introduced us to the Holy Spirit, but biblically, we must go further.

The Nicene Creed gives us a compact, confessional statement of the Biblical material:

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.

When the whole Biblical witness is taken into account, we see that the Holy Spirit is actually a person, a “who” rather than a “what.” But he is not just any person; he is God. Lordship, creation, worship, and glory - all these realities exclusively belong to God, yet throughout Scripture they are also ascribed to the Holy Spirit. This is the mystery of the Trinity, the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This reality should be the guiding principle by which we understand the mighty works of the Spirit, so rather than first measuring our own experiences over against the disciples’ experience in Acts 2, let’s instead ask, “What is this saying about God?”

What we see in this passage is God himself coming to enact and empower his own mission through his own disciples, and what a powerful moment it is! When God the Holy Spirit, the promised Helper (John 16:7-11), descended, the earth shook while “tongues as of fire appeared.” The Spirit himself even gave them a different kind of speech. What a universe-shattering moment! It is reminiscent of the Day of the Lord in the book of Joel (Joel 2:28-32; cf. Acts 2:17-21). This was a great future day of both gloomy judgement and glorious salvation, yet in Acts 2, that future day was somehow already happening right at that very moment in Jerusalem.

On this day of Pentecost, God was continuing to do the sort of thing he promised to do all along. And just like at the cross and resurrection, here the world of future hope collides with the present darkness. God himself, the person of the Holy Spirit, had come so that people of all tribes and tongues might be saved. Not even the deep chasm of language and culture was enough to prevent God’s gospel from going forward into the nations (2:7-11). Now, literally all who call upon the name of the LORD, rather than Israel alone, will be saved (Acts 2:21). Thanks be to the Holy Spirit! Thanks be to God!

11

ACTS 2:14-41

This first public proclamation of the gospel by the early church was immediately preceded by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit with spiritual and physical manifestations. These signs are so viscerally powerful that the apostles seem to be intoxicated. The clarion call of Peter's voice provides a sharp counterargument to this suggestion, and boldly rings out the truth to all who can hear.

He begins by using Joel 2 to show that the last days have come; an incredible earth-shaking, age-shifting, paradigm-shattering event has occurred (2:17-20). God has opened the door to salvation. There is no barrier, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (2:21). The day of the Lord approaches.

But why should this crowd fear the day of the Lord? They have perverted justice. This crowd was given "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God ... [who] you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." This was certainly "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God," and yet these hearers still bear the weight of responsibility for their actions (2:22-23). God's predestination

does not remove the responsibility of man. When theologian Charles Spurgeon was confronted about how he reconciles divine sovereignty and man's responsibility, he replied, "I wouldn't try. I never reconcile friends."

Peter then proceeds to prove that Jesus was the Messiah. He is the Davidic king who would always rule over the people (2:30). He is the one who would not be abandoned to the grave (2:24-32). He is the one who sits at the right hand of Almighty God and will have his enemies submitted under his feet (2:33-35). The scriptures, resurrection, and outpouring of the Holy Spirit form a chorus of witnesses that will not be refuted. Having shown that God has changed the world, that Jesus is the Messiah, and that the crowd bears an insurmountable guilt, Peter proclaims, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ; this Jesus whom you crucified" (2:36).

This message, accompanied by the conviction of the Spirit, strikes the heart of the listeners. They deeply feel their need for redemption, and ask how they may call on the name of the Lord (2:37). Having wielded the sword of the

Spirit to "cut to the heart," Peter now applies the message of healing from the scriptures; he urges the crowd to turn from their sins, to follow Christ in faith, and reminds them that the promise is available for all who the Lord calls (2:38-39). Again, he does not stop there, trusting only in the sovereignty of God, but continues to bear witness and exhort the crowd, pleading with them to be saved from the crooked generation (2:40). They heard the preached Word and believed, and 3,000 souls were saved (2:41).

This word is for you. You are full of sin, but God has moved heaven and earth to provide salvation for you. You confirm God's election by repenting and believing (2 Peter 1:10). We must not move past calling on the name of the Lord, repenting and believing in Christ's work (Romans 8:29-30). Having done this, we can rest in God's sovereignty, but the gospel compels us to preach indiscriminately to all men, to plead with them for salvation, never knowing whom the Lord has chosen, and whether or not we may be the means by which he saves their souls (Romans 10:11-17).

ACTS 2:42-47

A clear presentation of the gospel at Pentecost had just left the community in awe. For the first time, they were moved with their sin, and not just any sin. These people had come face to face with the reality that they had murdered the Son of God. "This Jesus, this Jesus whom you killed, this Jesus whom you murdered, this Jesus whom you murdered with your own lawless hands, this Jesus could not be held by death. He rose and walked among us and is now our advocate beside the Father."

His accusers, the same ones who had just cried, "Barnabas, give us Barnabas," were bare, cut to the heart, drenched with reality. "What shall we do?" they asked. They stood in realization that they murdered their only good King, and when they sought how to repay the one they had attempted to put to death, "repent and be baptized" was the response. How humbling! There was nothing they could do on their own accord. Their only hope was to receive grace in faith, but that truth was enough to change them.

In Acts 2:42-47, the new believers beheld the mercy of the Lord and that moved them to have mercy on another. Their hope was no longer found in worldly things, but instead their devotion dealt with participation in the sacraments, sitting under wise teaching, prayer, and the fellowship of believers. They saw the horror of the cross and the infinite value of what was accomplished on it. A worth that was so much greater than anything the world had to offer.

Nearly 2000 years later, it's the same gospel. It's the same infinitely valuable, horrible cross that our Savior hung on, but does it have the same effects on those callus places of your heart? What's it worth to you? Do you share with the early church in placing your sole worth in the gospel of Jesus Christ, or does one fist still clinch tightly to the fickle promises of the world? To those believers in Jerusalem, who had just so clearly heard the word of the truth, it was worth everything. So much so that they counted it joy to participate in the burdens of their brothers and sisters, not only when it was convenient to them but when they had to sacrifice for their benefit.

Search your heart today. Have you sold it completely to a heavenly calling? Do you anticipate your paycheck more than you anticipate the Lord's faithfulness to your prayers? When was the last time you prayed for the hurt of another? Better yet, when was the last time you participated in the hurt of another? Iron City Church, let us not look to the world for fading material comforts. Let us be a people who hope in the gospel, care for our brothers and sisters and hold fast to the treasure of Christ that is proclaimed that horrifying yet infinitely valuable cross.

Acts 3:1-10

The healing of the lame beggar reminds believers of the infinite hope we have in Jesus. This passage is one that reminds us that healing, in all forms, comes from the hands of a loving Father who not only sees us but cares, a God who sees what we may perceive as our greatest need and does one better by providing the avenue for eternal healing.

At this gate called Beautiful occurs a miraculous healing, reflecting the beauty of our God. Peter and John had come, together, to pray but stop, together, to heal this beggar. This in itself is a call for believers to come together in the pursuit of our God. We come together to worship him in prayer, and we come together to engage the rest of the world, meeting both its tangible needs and spiritual ones. It is a “beautiful” picture of how we as the Church are to care for beggars and those in need. Society picked the beggar up and laid him out for passersby to look upon and have pity. But when the beggar sought money, Peter and John stopped and made him look at them. Sometimes we need to be more intentional about looking into people’s eyes and regarding them with dignity, whether they are the beggar sitting on a corner downtown or the cashier at Publix.

After acknowledging the man with dignity and kindness, they healed him “in the name of Jesus.” Dear Church, we are fools if we think we can do anything apart from the name of Jesus. And we waste what we carry when we insist on doing things without him. Doing things in his name, not only do we get the joy of being in God’s presence and giving him the glory, but we also give



those around us the opportunity to witness the goodness of our God for themselves. The healing in this passage spurred those around the beggar to stand in awe and amazement and caused those who knew the healing power of Jesus to praise and glorify him that much more!

And let us not forget, that while we have the freedom to pray for physical healing, physical healing is not the point of the story. If it were, there'd be no use for verses 9-10. Healing is a testimony of who our God is, and it is meant to be shared with others, not hoarded for one's self. The point is to share with others what our God has done and is continuing to do in our

lives – not because we did anything to deserve it, but because God does it nonetheless. Like the beggar, we offer nothing but a humble request for help. God, in his kindness, meets us with healing.

May God help us believe in the healing power of his Spirit and that he remains a God of miracles. May we not doubt him when the healing and miracles arrive differently than we might expect. And may God help us to trust that his will is to make all things right according to his standard and in his perfect timing, because no matter what – God is good.

ACTS 3:11-26

If you saw someone radically healed before your very eyes it would change your life. This has just happened. A man that thousands passed in the streets day-in and day-out has just been healed by Peter. When something like this happens, it begs the question, “How?” The crowd gathers around Peter to find out who he is. What we then see is the second powerful Gospel presentation in the book of Acts. God manifests himself

in power and then proclaims the truth of the gospel.

As God’s people, we can learn a lot about how to faithfully share the gospel from this text. First, we should pray that God uses us to powerfully display his might and glory in our daily living. When this happens and people notice, we must point to Jesus. The people want to know if it is Peter’s own power that he possesses or his piety that healed the man. Peter tells them neither, rather it is the name of Jesus Christ and faith in him.

At once Peter tells the people who Jesus is considering their culture. He is the promised one whom they have been looking for, the Savior of the world. He tells them of their sinful state and their need for Christ. He tells them how to respond to this revelation, with repentance. He tells them of the salvation that comes from faith in Jesus Christ and the eternal hope found only in him.

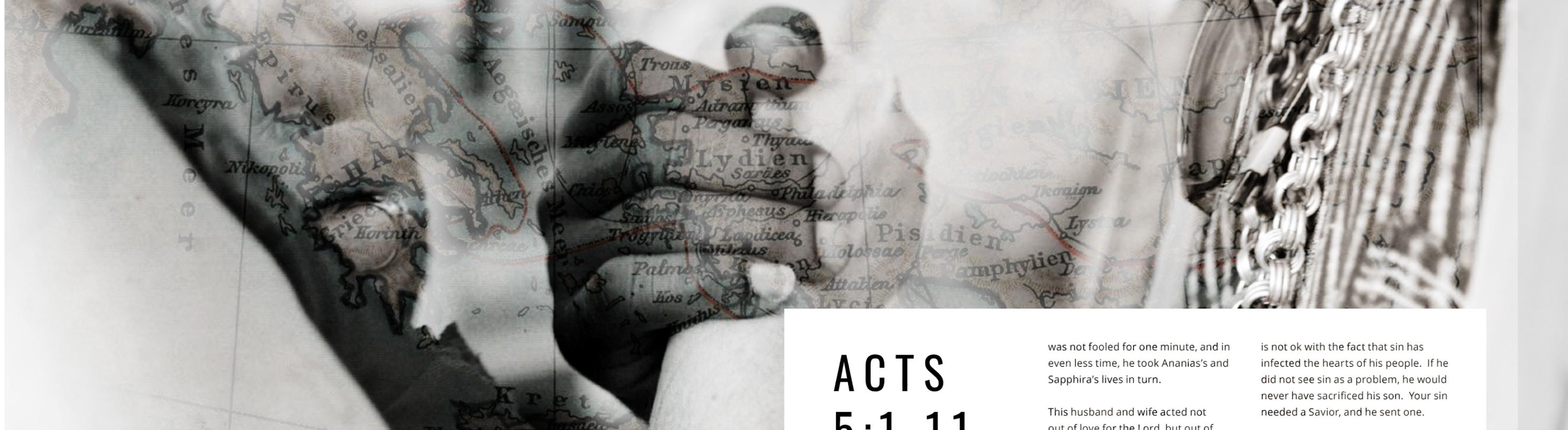
There is a question I want us to wrestle with today: “Is this how we respond?” When people see a glimpse of Christ working in and through us, do we leverage it for the gospel? I find for myself the answer is far too often “no.” I more often shrug off a compliment or give a thin answer about my faith when asked why I am living a certain way. As followers of Christ, we should eagerly seek to see the Father move and work powerfully in our lives. When God graciously works powerfully in our lives we should be quick to point others to him. What keeps us from doing this is either fear of the consequences or an inability to articulate the gospel faithfully.

Peter doesn’t hold back. He tells the people the seriousness of their sin. “You killed the author of life” is not a phrase anyone wants to hear (3:15). Part of faithfully pointing people to Jesus is telling them of their need for him and their own sinfulness. When we are unwilling to face the gravity

of our sin we will never be very bold to tell others of their need for Christ. Peter has denied Christ three times; he abandoned Jesus. Peter knew firsthand the deep grace of the Lord. When we have laid the totality of our sin before our abundantly gracious Father only then can we point others to do the same.

Peter also knows the gospel. There is a tension here that we must live in. If you feel ill-equipped to share your faith, then study the scriptures or ask someone to disciple you. Do whatever it takes to grow your competency. But, know that it is not your eloquence or depth of knowledge that changes a man’s heart but rather the Holy Spirit. Peter is transformed here not because he suddenly has new knowledge, but because he is full of the Spirit. If you are wanting to grow in your evangelistic faithfulness, pray! Ask the Father to equip and empower you. This cannot be at the neglect of hard work and study, but it is more than hard work alone. God works and moves supernaturally upon the hearts of those privy to Peter’s preaching. The same people likely saw Christ perform similar miracles and more but did not believe. Here we see the power of the Spirit at work to draw many to Christ.

Lastly, remember we still need to hear this. The truths Peter shares here are not just for those in need of conversion, but we must remember them daily. We killed the author of life. He bore our wrath. He reconciled us to the Father. He is the one who all the prophets point to and we too should point everyone to him.



ACTS

4:32-37

One of the four pillars of Iron City Church is that we are “for unity.” And this text in Acts chapter 4 is a beautiful picture of the unity that is possible through the power of the Holy Spirit. Immediately before this passage, in verse 31, it says that the believers were “filled with the Holy Spirit.” This is key to understanding verses 32-37. Verse 32 says the believers—literally “those who believed” in Christ—were of “one heart and soul,” and they were able to share this deep union because they were each filled with the same Holy Spirit. So first and foremost, we must remember that we will see unity most clearly in our lives and in our church when we are most fully living and walking by the power of the Spirit.

Second, we must remember that our possessions are not our own. I think it’s clear when looking at the rest of Scripture that this passage was meant to be more descriptive than prescriptive. That is, these verses are not a command that we must sell every

piece of property and every possession that we own and give it to the church. But what I do believe Luke, inspired by the Spirit, wanted the Church to understand is that we should hold all our earthly possessions with an open hand, knowing that everything is from the Lord and everything belongs to Him. There is no X-Y-Z protocol for how much you can or should own. But there is a clear open-handedness in regards to earthly possessions and a clear heart of selflessness and generosity among fellow believers in this passage that is a call for us even today.

John Piper puts it this way: “Faith in Christ creates a bond of love to people, and cuts the bond of love to things.” As we are made more and more into the image of Christ through the process of sanctification, we begin to count the things that once seemed so valuable to us as “rubbish” as Paul says in Philippians 3:8, and we can gladly lay those things aside for the sake of knowing Christ and caring for our brothers and sisters.

When we display this kind of unity with other believers, who, like us, are humans with personal sin struggles and many of whom have different doctrinal beliefs or political stances or cultural upbringings—when we

display this kind of unity—we give a powerful testimony to a world that sees no universal unifying factor on the surface. We testify to a unity that comes from within. We testify to the work of the Holy Spirit. And we testify to the abundant grace of Jesus found in His death and resurrection (4:33).

Confess to the Lord the things that you have been holding with a closed fist and offer those things to him for the advancement of the Church. Maybe it is a house or personal property. Maybe it’s other financial resources. Maybe it’s your time. Whatever it may be, may we be like Barnabas, the “Son of Encouragement,” who, in verses 36 and 37, is seen gladly giving his possessions for the work and the people of the church. So lay “your” possessions at the Lord’s feet and be willing and excited to use, or maybe even give up those things for the building up of the body or to support a brother or sister in need. This is what unity in Christ and love for his Church looks like. So may we, by the power of the Holy Spirit, reflect the grace and love of Christ in our low regard for temporal possessions and our high regard for both unity in the church and the needs of our fellow believers.

ACTS

5:1-11

The story of Ananias and Sapphira can leave us asking a heavy question: What do we do with a wrathful New Testament God?

The God who smites, expresses anger and disappointment, and showers his wrath upon people who disobey his commands is the God we associate with the Old Testament stories. We think of Sodom and Gomorrah, Pharaoh and his army, anyone who dared touch the Ark of the Covenant, and a sinful King David with a newborn son. We tend not to think of the God who spoke of love as the greatest commandment, welcomed little children unto himself, and died so that we could live.

To try and understand why God acted so aggressively against this couple, we have to understand their sin. Ananias and Sapphira decided to sell a portion of their land and give the money earned to the church. They told the apostles that the sum they were donating was the full amount they received from the buyer. However, they were lying. They kept some of the money for themselves. They deceived Peter and other members of the church. Moreover, they attempted to deceive the Lord. But God saw their dishonesty, fraudulence, selfishness, and greed. He

was not fooled for one minute, and in even less time, he took Ananias’s and Sapphira’s lives in turn.

This husband and wife acted not out of love for the Lord, but out of concern for their own satisfaction and contentment. Not only did they not trust that the Lord would be generous and provide for them through their remaining income, but they assumed he would not care, or notice, or know of their deception. They underestimated the Lord in securing their own well-being. They did not trust him, and in doing so proved themselves to be untrustworthy.

So, the Lord struck them down where they stood.

This story does not sit well with us, and it is not supposed to. We are meant to walk away asking questions. Our immediate temptation is to make those questions about the character of God. Why would he do this? Is he going to directly punish me for every sin I commit? What bad thing will he do to me the next time I disobey?

We rattle off these questions to Heaven, wondering if we understand who God is at all, and we miss the significance of this story entirely. We are meant to walk away questioning who we are, not who he is. He has proven to us time and time again that he is the same. He has not changed. The same God that recognized sin in Eden is the same God who sees your sin now. God is merciful, but he is also just. He hates sin. He

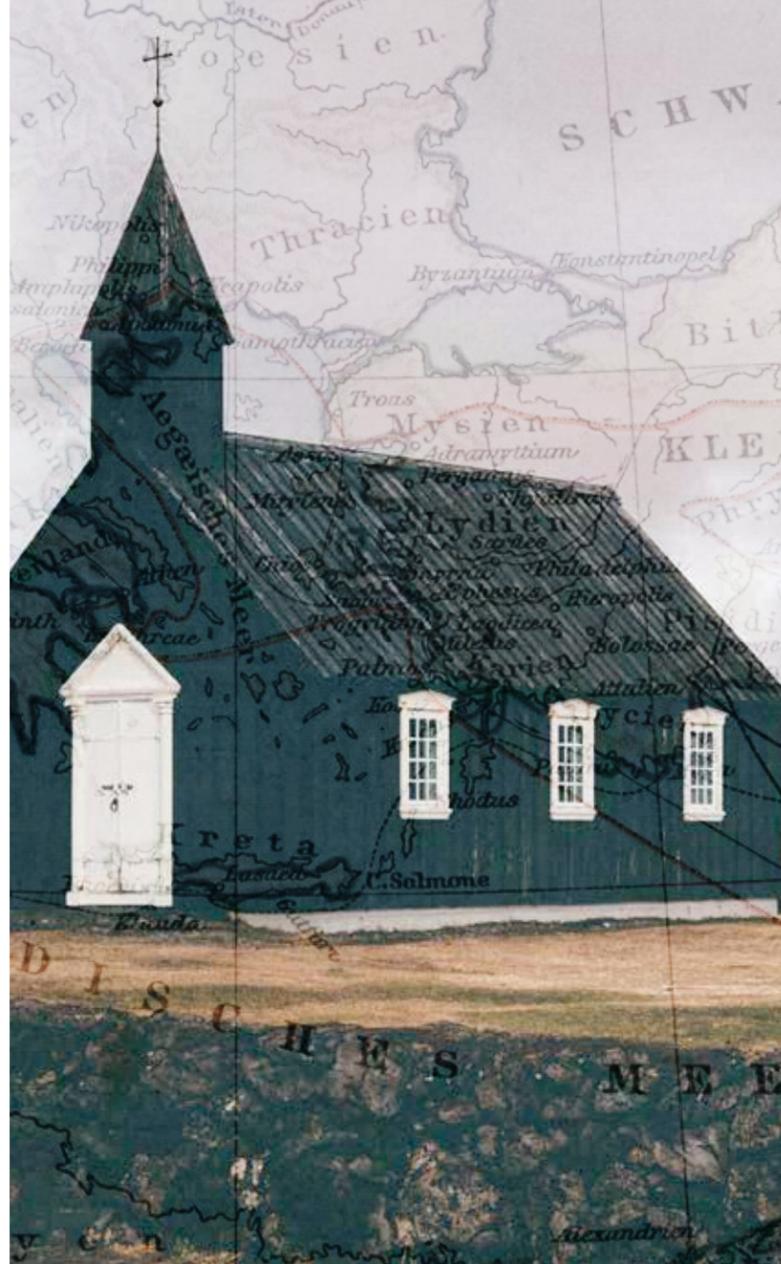
is not ok with the fact that sin has infected the hearts of his people. If he did not see sin as a problem, he would never have sacrificed his son. Your sin needed a Savior, and he sent one.

Now, in light of God’s sacrifice for you, he wants to help you change.

The reality of the sanctification process is that we mess up. We do. It is entirely unavoidable, because sin is inevitable. Disobedience is as much a part of the human condition as breathing. But the reality is also that God understands this. He does. He knows that you fail, that you fall, and that you flail wildly in your attempt to do what is right. All he wants you to do is try. He wants our honest best because he knows that is the most we can give.

Ananias and Sapphira were not willing to give their best. They were purposeful in their sin, unrepentant in their dishonest greed. God chose to immediately punish them and confront them face to face on the other side of eternity.

The Lord has different ways of teaching us, revealing our sin, and confronting our mistakes. Take heart, for this is not something to fear, but to appreciate. He is not out to punish you at every wrong turn, but to help you understand how to be better. He knows you, loves you, and wants what is best for you. Love is never easy. It is challenging yet rewarding. In God’s love for you, you will be challenged, and in his mercy, changed.



ACTS 5:12-16

The unity and simplicity of the early church is beautiful. I love considering a group of diverse yet like-minded individuals with everything in common, unified in their doctrine and worship. "There was not a needy person among them," says Luke in Acts 4:34. Even after Ananias and Sapphira were struck dead, instead of quenching the Christian movement and scaring new converts away, the body of believers continued to grow as the Holy Spirit worked powerfully through the apostles. "...many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people"

(5:12). Those with illnesses of the body and mind were brought from towns outside of Jerusalem, and they were all healed. The apostles used these miracles as opportunities to spread the Gospel, and a harmonious message was shared. The signs and wonders illuminated the truth of the doctrine of the Gospel, which provided spiritual healing, while also showing the realistic compassion of the Gospel, which provided physical healing. How the hearts of the people must have been stirred as they began to know a Messiah who cared for every part of them. May our own church community continue to reflect this heart as we serve each other joyfully and without regard for our own interests. These miraculous signs and wonders were being carried out by men who only chapters before were still focused on Jesus building the earthly kingdom of Israel. What a transformation to see the boldness and healing power that had been bestowed on these men through the power of the Holy Spirit. In Acts 1:8 Jesus promises: "...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem...". Here, we see this promise realized as the Holy Spirit had so filled Peter that even his shadow seemed to have healing power. If you are in Christ, this same Spirit dwells in you, dear Christian. Though the Spirit may not commonly manifest today through miraculous healings of this kind, he is the same powerful guide and gives strength and insight to God's people. Because of the Holy Spirit, we who were once far off and unable to see the goodness of the Lord have been brought near to our Savior through no work of our own. Our dying souls have been revived and will live forever. Praise be to God for bestowing the Holy Spirit on his people.

ACTS 5:17-32

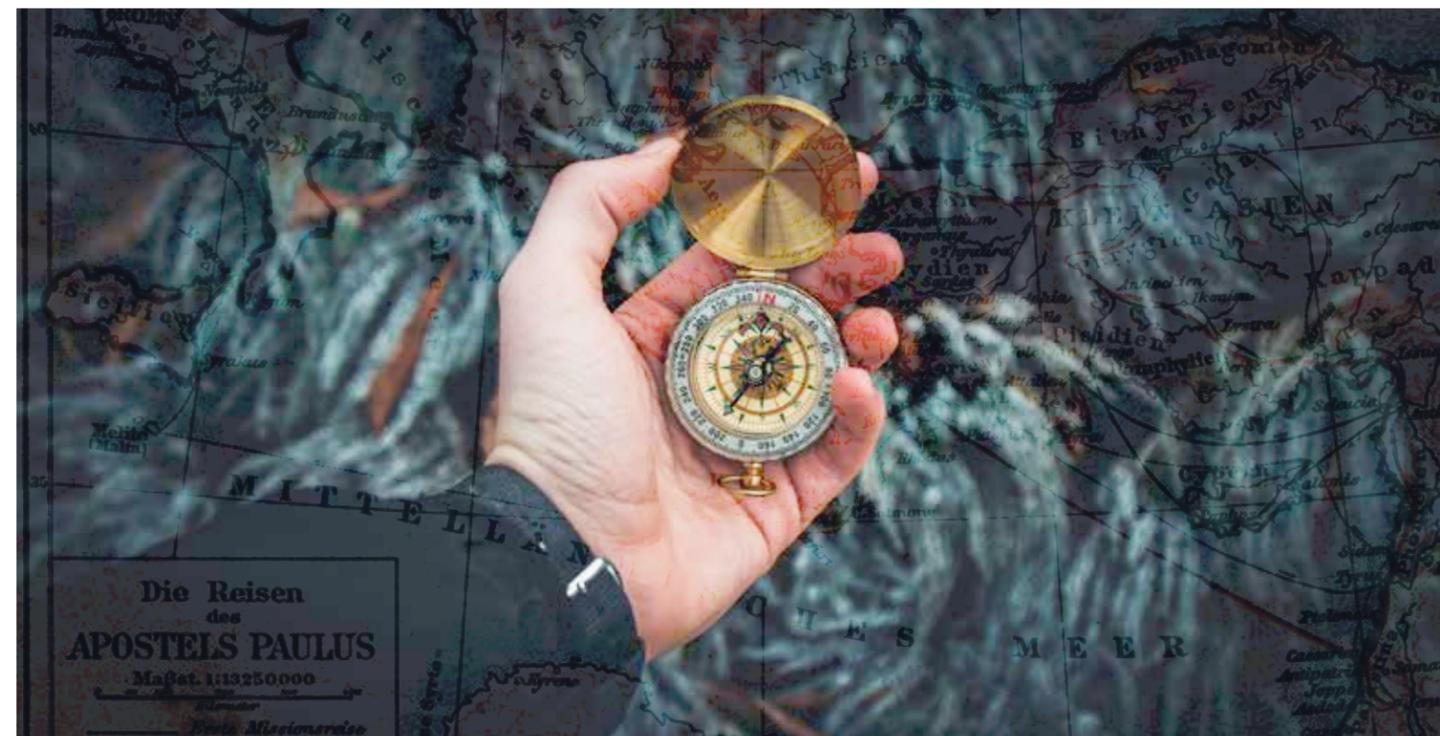
There is no question that the apostles were men on a mission. They had their orders from Jesus to "go...and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). They were determined to follow these orders no matter the cost. Nothing would stop them from obeying Christ by spreading the good news across all nations and making disciples—nothing.

Here in Acts 5:17-32 we see this played out. This story shows the apostles obedience, boldness, and witness which challenges us to follow in their footsteps. After being thrown into prison for preaching Christ, the apostles are greeted by an angel of the Lord who opens the doors and tells them to "go and stand in the temple, and tell the people all about this life" (5:19). And what is "this life?" It is the life that they have found in Christ. It is full, abundant life which is only found in the God

who created us for himself. The apostles were imprisoned and God freed them to continue the work he had called them to. God did not free them because they were in bondage, he freed them to continue walking in obedience by spreading the gospel so that others might come to know this life also.

This is the call of God not simply for the apostles but for us today. We too are called to walk in obedience by sharing the good news of this new life with everyone. Our friends, classmates, neighbors, co-workers, and family all need Jesus and "we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us" (2 Corinthians 5:20). God has ordained that we are the means by which his salvation comes so if we aren't spreading his gospel, who will? For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." "How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are

they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'" (Romans 10:13-15). Jesus himself said, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matthew 4:19) so if we aren't fishing, how faithfully are we following? When we look at the apostles in this passage, we see their obedience by the way they were witnessing to his gospel. They were in love with Christ, longing for others to know the incredible gift of life which they had received from him. And this, to the apostles, took immediate precedence over all safety, concerns, or comfort. They were men in the midst of a battle for souls and would not rest until their mission was complete. May we follow after them in saying, "we must obey God rather than people. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus... to his right hand as ruler and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit Whom God has given to those who obey him" (5:29-32).



ACTS

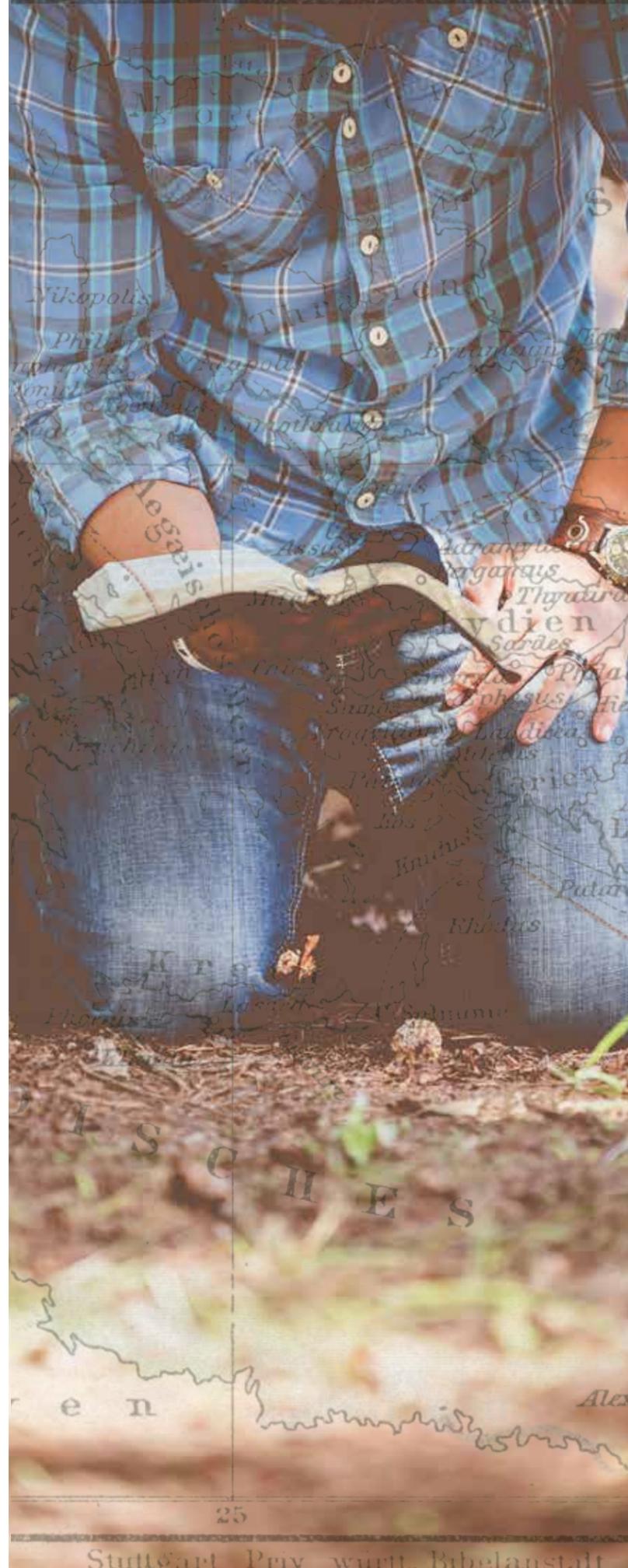
5:33-42

Peter and the apostles were not rebels because they had rebellious spirits. They were marked rebels because of this theology: "We must obey God rather than men" (5:29). The Holy Spirit, as witness to the truth of the Gospel, filled them with power and boldness. The same power and boldness are still available to us today. God has not changed. This is not a theology that can be lived out of the human will. Rather, it must be empowered by God himself.

Peter and the apostles were tried, threatened and beaten. After God willed their release, they "rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name." Then, they continued preaching and proclaiming Christ publicly every day.

If there is anything that shines forth from this passage, it is the sovereignty of God. His plans and purposes will prevail. This is a theme throughout the Book of Acts. God's plans cannot be thwarted even in the face of the greatest odds. This is even expressed by Gamaliel the Pharisee (5:38-39).

Beloved, be bold for the name of Christ. Obey God rather than men, and rejoice when you are worthy to suffer dishonor on behalf of the name. As our Lord said, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad" (Matthew 5:11-12). This is not just a call for the missionary or preacher. As you boldly speak the name of Christ, remember that his plans to spread the name will not fail.



ACTS 6:1-7

The beginning of Acts 6 shows us a beautiful picture of different roles in the church and the urgent importance and impact those roles can have when performed properly. As we've just seen, the gospel of Christ was being preached and people were being saved amidst persecution in the early church. Just two chapters earlier, we saw that there was not a needy person among the believers. Possessions were sold for the sake of brothers and sisters. However, in Chapter 6 people took notice of some who were now neglected — widows. The Word of God is the foundation for all that happens in the church. Even so, the physical needs of the members of our church should not only be of interest to us, but they should be things we intentionally seek out and try to meet whenever we can. When we hear of a single mother in our church who needs help getting groceries, we should care. When an elderly man or woman needs a ride to church (I pray the Lord brings us many of these), we should care. Let us take an example of those in this chapter and love our brothers and sisters in the church well enough to ascertain that needs are being met.

The disciples took interest and took it upon themselves to appoint men who would be able to take care of physical needs (i.e. serving tables) within the church so that they could

do their job of preaching the Word of God (6:2). This is not a lesser job for lesser men. These men were described as wise, full of the Spirit, and of good repute (6:3). The end of this section gives us a glimpse into the effects that happen when members of the church carry out their duties faithfully. The Word of God increases and many are brought to repentance and faith through hearing! Men who show a great confidence in the faith in Jesus Christ through the way they serve, allow for men to care for God's church by feeding the sheep the Word of the Lord (1 Timothy 3:8).

As a deacon in our church, it brings me great delight when I hear the elders of the church express thanks for service because they have noticed that they were freed up for pastoral duties. These are signs that our church is growing in health and maturity. Furthermore, I don't think the pastors are freed up only by the work of people with a title of "deacon." Paul told the church at Ephesus that the work of the ministry is that of the saints. That is you and me. We are to work "for the building up of the body of Christ" and "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" until we all "attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God" (Ephesians 4:12-13). Then he stresses the importance of the people of the church playing

their part. It is so that we have sound doctrine, built on the firm foundation laid for us in God's Word, and are not tossed to and fro by every crafty sounding idea that we hear.

We see in both Ephesians 4 and in Acts 6 that fruit is seen when a church's people are faithful to fulfill the work of the ministry. Members of the church grow into greater Christlikeness. The word increases, creating disciples who make disciples. If you desire to be a deacon or elder in the future, be encouraged to be faithful where the Lord has you currently. As our pastor often reminds us, these titles should be no more than recognition of those who are already fulfilling those roles. And if you do not desire to be a deacon or elder, you also should seek to be faithful where the Lord has you in Church. This is a way, Paul tells us, to love one another by helping each other become more like Jesus and confidently believe true things about God and who he is.

ACTS 6:8-7:53

The fledgling Church has been growing by leaps and bounds, to the point that more leaders are needed to tend to the flourishing flock. One of the men “full of faith and of the Holy Spirit” chosen to serve is Stephen (6:5), but Luke makes it clear that this deacon is not just empowered to “serve tables” (6:2). “Full of grace and power,” Stephen performs “wonders and signs among the people” which accompany faithful, biblical preaching that points to Jesus Christ as the sinless, suffering, yet risen Messiah (6:8-10). The Holy Spirit continues to work among the people in Jerusalem, and he honors the faithful ministry of servants to the point that even “a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (6:7). However, as fruit abounds, opposition rises.

Like they did with Jesus, a portion of the Jewish religious establishment, fearing the loss of their power and influence, incites a crowd against God’s servant, arrests Stephen, and brings up false witnesses to twist Stephen’s words and God’s message into an actionable offense (6:12-14). But Stephen does not fear. Full of the power and presence of God, Stephen embodies the faith and confidence that while he faces tribulation in the world, God has overcome it in Jesus (John 16:33). When the opportunity comes to mount his defense and appeal his case, Stephen speaks boldly, demonstrating a clear understanding of the Jewish Scriptures and using them to continue the Spirit’s work in the world.

What message does Stephen proclaim? From Abraham to the prophets, Stephen expounds the nature of human sin in the face of God’s faithfulness. The people of Israel are the descendants of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with whom God graciously bound himself in a covenant relationship. When Abram did not know the Lord, God revealed himself to the man and promised him a land and an offspring (7:2-5). God also revealed that Abram’s descendants will sojourn as captives in a foreign land before God will judge the nation whose oppression stands opposed to God’s purposes (7:7).

When God appointed Joseph to preserve the covenant family, his brothers, “the patriarchs,” sold him into slavery only for God to turn that affliction into provision for many (7:9-17). And when human sin turned that blessing into bondage, God was faithful to provide a servant who enacted his redemptive agenda (7:17-38). But the people God prepared Moses to deliver nevertheless rejected and opposed him time and time again (7:26-29, 35). Even after the deliverance was accomplished, Israel’s ancestors “refused to obey him,” longing for captivity in Egypt and attempting to craft for themselves a god they could manipulate and control (7:39-41). Because of the hardness of their hearts, God repeatedly gave them up to the idolatry they chased after (7:41-43), but he still drew near to them in grace rather than abandoning them to their iniquity (7:44-50).

Like their forebears, the Jews to whom Stephen speaks persecuted the prophet like Moses whom God raised up from among the people (7:37, 52). As their fathers opposed their previous deliverers, the Jewish leaders rejected the promised Messiah. As their ancestors longed for Egypt rather than the Tabernacle of the Most High, they sought to preserve a house of worship rather than the Temple of Jesus’ body (John 2:19-21). And as the patriarchs turned to gods of their own making, they abandoned the Lord of glory when they crucified God the Son (7:51-53). Jesus promised that when the Holy Spirit comes, “he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment” (John 16:8). Through the Spirit’s power, Stephen expounds the scandalous history of elect Israel to reveal the nature of human sin which his audience perpetuates. Apart from God’s grace in Jesus and the Spirit’s work to circumcise our hearts, we too fall victim to the same cycle of forsaking our Savior (7:51). But in the Spirit, we can repent from these ways and reveal to the world its captivity to sin and worthiness of judgment. May God grant us the grace and power, like Stephen, to remain faithful to God’s Word in the face of opposition and to speak against the sin and idolatry which permeates our world.



ACTS 7:54-60

Stephen might be one of the most important figures in the entire book of Acts and, arguably, the entire history of the Church. He was a man who was chosen for leadership in the early Church because he was full of integrity, wisdom, faith, the Holy Spirit. It might be tempting to say that these qualities should be obvious for anyone in ministry and discard these words quickly. But Luke has a deeper purpose of encouragement for writing these things. Namely this: if we are not full of the Holy Spirit, we have no ability to be like Christ in his life or death. But if we are full of the Holy Spirit, then Christ will be glorified in our bodies, whether by life or by death.

As Stephen is performing many signs and wonders, he is seized by some of the Jews who are spewing hatred at him for preaching the Risen Christ. After his long sermon, the crowd violently reacts, wanting to silence him once and for all as they “grind their teeth at him” (7:54). We have no record of what hateful things the Jews might have said to him, nor of what curses left their lips for him. But we do know they were violently angry with Stephen. We see a man being faithful to preach the Word of Christ, disregarding any consequence, and for that, he is hated.

As Stephen is taken and thrown out of the city, he sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Normally, the Scriptures speak of Jesus sitting at the right hand of the throne of God. This is the one and only occurrence in which Jesus is standing. Luke is signaling for us to pay close attention to what is happening. Christ is deeply pleased with his servant’s obedience. It is incredible that Stephen saw Christ in His glory right before death. And it was by God’s grace that Stephen endured until the bitter end.

The scene in at the end of Acts 7 should be all too familiar for us, because it sounds much like Christ’s own life. Primarily that he is rebuked by the crowd, thrown before a rigged jury, sentenced to death, and pleads for God to not hold this sin against his oppressors. Stephen’s whole heart revolved around Jesus, so when persecution came, he did not cower. Like Jesus, when Stephen was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to the one who judges justly (1 Peter 2:22-23). If we are to be counted faithful, it will be by the means of the Holy Spirit which is actively working and breathing in us to fulfill the work of Christ. In the darkness of death, Christ brings light and victory through his Resurrection. He redeems even that which seems irredeemable. And, in Stephen’s account, his death pushes the Church to grow and expand far outside of Jerusalem, to Judea and Samaria. Stephen’s faithful death is the conduit through which Christ expands his Church. What man meant for evil, God intended for good. (Gen. 50:20) We are called to be faithful to whatever end. Seeing what was to come, Jesus comforts his disciples with this: “I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).



ACTS 8:1-3

These three short verses offer an ending to this volume that is really dark in the wake of what seemed like a great beginning to the church's story. The number of the church was growing; the believers were fellowshiping together in one place; the lame were healed; prison doors swung open; and the authorities could hardly control the spark of the church. Then just like that, one of the prominent leaders of this movement, Stephen, is executed by a mad mob. Persecution breaks out, the church scatters, and this Jewish leader

named Saul is ravaging what's left of the church in Jerusalem.

The leaders of the church had certainly faced challenge, imprisonment, and persecution on some level already, but these verses increase the breadth and depth of the persecution. Now the entire Church body suffers; no one is safe. Not only is it suffering, but it is also scattered. In our present day we have the rest of the book of Acts, so we know that this chapter isn't the last one in the story. But a very real

question to ask at this point would have been, is this about to be the end of the church? The end of what Jesus started? Have these apostles and their fellow believers met their match?

No. This apparent setback will not be the end. In fact this persecution will actually be a catalyst that causes the Church to break out all over the entire region. God is divinely scattering seed all around the surrounding region into Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. He had ordained this time for his glory and for the growth of the body of Christ, so that they may bring in more people to the family of God.

The response of the apostles supports that in this dark time they are willing to trust God and remain faithful to him amidst the suffering.

They had heard Jesus talk about suffering for the years leading up to his death! They are able to remember his teaching: "if the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you" (John 15:18). "Blessed are you when people hate you and exclude you and revile you and spurn your name on account of the Son of Man" (Luke 6:22). Christ told them that they would have trouble but that they can trust that he has overcome the world (John 16:33).

Peter had already told the chief priests once, "we must obey God rather than men" (5:29). Later he would pen in a letter, "rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (2 Peter 4:12-14). No matter how dark and defeated the times may feel, they knew that God was in control and

that they had the power of his Spirit to help them persevere.

In our current day, we may not have someone like Saul going around like a member of the Gestapo secret police, "entering house after house" and dragging off believers in our neighborhood. We may not have a leader like Stephen be stoned to death by a mob. Nevertheless, there will be dark days and difficult trials if we earnestly follow Christ. Yet in these days, we must remember that this does not invalidate the blessings and places into which God has already brought us. Let us remember that "the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one" (2 Thessalonians 3:3). In our lives as well as in Acts, the story is not over, and there will be more chapters ahead.



