

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study
New Canaan, Connecticut
Fall, 2011

The Book of Acts

II: Deepening Community; Growing Mission
Acts 5-8

Acts 5-8 continues the story of the early followers of Jesus in Jerusalem, but it also tells of the first stirrings of a more general mission to the Gentile world. It begins with the curious episode of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11), who are severely punished for their attempt to hold on to some of their own possessions in a community whose custom was to share everything. Perhaps this was a tale with a moral for the Christians of Luke's day, who were probably not involved in such a "communist" approach to communal life, but who would be called upon for generous support of the church. It says, in effect, "Watch out, don't hold back and deceive the Church!"

Tales of miraculous healings (5:12-16) and persecutions (5:17-42) follow. An attempt to jail the apostles (5:18) is thwarted by an angel, who releases them and sends them to preach in the Temple. When Peter and his colleagues are brought before the high priest and the council (the Sanhedrin), he dramatically proclaims his allegiance to God over any human authority (5:29), anticipating a stance of many Christian witnesses since. Peter again declares the core of his faith (5:30-32), that Jesus, executed by the Jerusalem authorities, has been raised from the dead and appointed to be "Leader (*Archegos*) and Savior," to stimulate repentance and forgiveness of sins. The apostles, guided by the Holy Spirit, are witnesses to this truth.

All elements of Peter's little speech are significant and typically Lukan. There is no understanding of a pre-incarnate Jesus; the events that make him "Leader and Savior" are the cross and resurrection. The purpose of his mission is to deal with sin and to elicit the repentance of many prodigal sons.

In response, there is an equally interesting judgment by a leading Pharisee, known from Rabbinic sources as Gamaliel, who tells his brethren to leave the followers of Jesus alone. If God is for them, no one can be against them (5:19). Here Luke's concern with the relations between his movement and the traditional people of God surfaces in an interesting way. He is willing to lay blame for the death of Jesus at the feet of Jerusalem's leaders (5:30), but wants to portray some of those leaders at least as recognizing that God might somehow be involved in the movement of his followers.

The narrative then turns to the internal situation of the Christian community. The apostles are overwhelmed by the demands of practical service to the widows and orphans in addition to their preaching and teaching responsibilities, and so appoint a group of “deacons” to assist (6:1-7). At the same time, this administrative move indicates some sort of division within the supposedly harmonious community of Jerusalem believers. The people particularly in need of help are the “Hellenists,” and the names of the appointed deacons (6:5) are all Greek, and one is identified as a “proselyte of Antioch.” Much has been written about these “Hellenists” of the early community, most of it speculative. Luke’s brief account does suggest that an important part of the early Christian community in Jerusalem was composed of Greek-speaking Jews from the diaspora. As he will indicate, these believers play a major role in the spread of the movement, but before he tells that story, he has another account of persecution and another major speech.

One other feature of the account should be noted. Luke’s insistence that the deacons are just in a subordinate role of service (6:2) probably reflects conditions of his own day, toward the end of the first century, when the hierarchical organization of Christian communities had begun to develop and the roles of presbyters (elders) and deacons were more distinct, with deacons in a decidedly inferior role. The actions reported here of exemplary deacons such as Stephen and Philip suggest that they played a much more important role in the life of the community than their title would indicate.

Stephen, one of the deacons, perhaps himself a member of the “synagogue of the Freedman” comprised of Jews of the diaspora (6:9), was arrested on charges that he advocated or predicted the destruction of the Temple and the change of Mosaic custom (6:14). His response to these charges is a lengthy address to the Council (7:2-53), which provides a concise account of the history of Israel. The speech highlights on the idolatry of the Exodus generation (7:39-43) and the divine judgment that followed, expressed in the forceful words of Amos 5:25-27. This sets the stage for the climax of the speech (7:48-50), which renders judgment on the Temple and on any manufactured abode for the divine. Here again (7:49-50), Stephen is portrayed as calling on scripture (Isa 66:1-2) to make his point.

Stephen’s speech marks a turning point in the stance of the text toward the Temple as a traditional focal point of Jewish piety. Although the Jerusalem community had spent time in the Temple (2:46), its significance in the life of the movement would diminish as the mission to the Gentiles develops. Luke also, with the benefit of hindsight, may also be reflecting on the fate of the Temple, destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE as a result of the Jewish revolt.

Two things result from Stephen's speech. The first is his own martyrdom (5:54-60), which imitates the account of Jesus' death and at the same time introduces the character of Saul (7:58). The second, resulting from the flight of believers from the persecution in Jerusalem, is spread of the gospel to new areas and peoples, first the Samaritans (8:4-25), then an Ethiopian eunuch (8:26-40). There are interesting details in both stories. The Samaritans were baptized by Philip, but did not receive the Holy Spirit at that event. That occurred only when the apostles Peter and John laid hands on them (8:16-17). The story once again emphasizes the leading role of the apostles in contrast to the deacons, while it also provides a foundation for later sacramental practice, distinguishing between baptism and confirmation. The account also contains the episode of the attempt to purchase spiritual power by one Simon (8:18), providing the name for the sin of "simony." Both of these short accounts probably reflect tensions in the church of Luke's own day.

The account of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch marks a step toward the development of a mission to the Gentiles, but we are not quite there yet, since the eunuch was apparently a Jewish proselyte, come to Jerusalem to worship (8:27) and was reading the prophet Isaiah (8:28). Interpretation of a famous passage from that prophet (Isa 53:7-8), one of his "servant songs," as a poem about Jesus, is the means by which Philip brings the eunuch to baptism (8:38) before being spirited away (8:39) eventually to Caesarea, where the next major step in the development of the mission to the Gentiles will take place.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Stephen's speech offers a strong criticism of a focus on a particular sacred space. Is that criticism just a part of the tension between early Christians and their Jewish neighbors or does it have something to say to a twenty-first century audience? Are there "sacred spaces" that we revere more than we should?

2. Stephen's speech also offers a model of how one can appropriate the history of God's people to make a point about what faithful people should do in the present. Can his way of reading the past be adapted for our own use? If so, how would you tell the tale of the community of the faithful to shed light on the present situation of the Church?
3. What do you make of the curious episode of Ananias and Sapphira? If you had to teach a Bible study on the text, what would you hope students might derive from the story?

For Further Study:

- Lawrence M. Wills, "The Depiction of the Jews in Acts," *JBL* 110 (1991) 631-54.
- John J. Kilgallen, "The Function of Stephen's Speech (Acts 7,2-53)," *Biblica* 70 (1989) 173-93.