
As you might expect, in comparison to Mark and Matthew, Luke has his own emphasis. The Gospel of Mark was focused on the Gentiles and the house churches of Rome. The Gospel of Matthew was written to Jewish Christians dealing with the separation from the synagogues. Luke tries to fit everyone in. This is probably because he was not in an isolated community. Most likely, Luke intended to write to all of these scattered congregations along the path of Pauline mission because he was part of Paul’s missions team. We saw that in the so-called “we” passages of the book of Acts. Luke thought about the events in Jesus’ life and the stories that he would report to these congregations. It is interesting because we see different pictures of these mixed congregations in Acts. The one in Pisidian Antioch started out predominately Jewish, but it was in south Galatia. There was a strong influx of Gentiles there, and we see that in the way Paul talks about his mission there is as a light to the Gentiles. He picks up on the language of Isaiah. From the very beginning it seems that Luke has all these scattered congregations in mind even in the way that he tells the story of the beginning of Jesus’ birth. He makes it clear in what Simeon said and what John the Baptist said. He says that “all flesh” and “all people” will see the salvation of God.

Luke’s Christology
It is interesting that when it comes to Christology and characterizing Jesus, we’ve seen that certain titles were more or less important to Matthew and Mark individually. Matthew’s Christology to the Jewish Christians was focused on “Son of David,” “the Christ,” “the Messiah,” and “King of the Jews.” For Mark, “Son of God” has a different emphasis than in Matthew. That title is not focused so much on His Davidic role as it is the contrast to Caesar as the filius divinus or Son of God. We’ve seen how the Christology of the Gospel writers is impacted by who they are addressing. Luke’s Christology is focused on the word “Lord” and “Savior.” The two big titles for Luke about Jesus are Jesus is kurios and Jesus is soter. Right from the beginning he understands that in the way in which the shepherds are told about the announcement of Jesus’ birth. The angels say, “I bring you tidings of good joy. Unto you is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” We get it right there. Those are the three main words for the way in which Luke characterizes Jesus. In Acts 10 we see why the word “Lord” is so important. It is because Peter says He is Lord of all. For Luke, Jesus is the Messiah, the long-awaited Messiah of the Jews, and the Lord of all the nations.

We see the theme of Savior also from the very beginning of Luke’s Gospel, when Simeon says, “My eyes have seen your salvation” as he holds the infant Jesus. In the stories unique to Luke, we have the Zacchaeus episode in Luke 19. Readers hear the theme again there: “Today salvation has come to this house because this man is a son of Abraham, for the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” The title of Savior is also carried into the selection of stories. Some of the important, uniquely Lukan parables are in Luke 15. Luke tells several stories about lost things: a coin, a sheep, and a son. Jesus is the Savior, the One who came to seek and save what was lost. Again, we see this from the beginning of the Gospel in the way that Zechariah characterizes the mission of John the Baptist. His mission is “to turn the hearts of the people, to turn the hearts of the fathers, back to their sons.” He is to return the people to the Lord and prepare a people for the Lord. This is a great reclamation project, first in terms of the house of Israel, then, in Acts (part 2), in terms of calling the nations to the one who is the Lord and judge of all. That comes to flower when we see Paul and Barnabas at Lystra and before the Athenians in the Areopagus where Jesus is characterized as the judge and Lord of all. They call the people to repentance.
When Luke talks about who Jesus is, He becomes the center. This comes out more in Acts, Luke’s second volume. In Acts 2, Peter quotes from the prophet Joel, “I will pour out my Spirit, and your sons and daughters will prophesy.” He ends the Joel quote by saying, “Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.” Joel refers to Yahweh, but Luke plays it out a little differently. He refers to God, but he puts Jesus really close. He puts Him as Lord, so there is a double entendre there. He starts to characterize Jesus in the same way and with the same functions that Israel’s God, Yahweh the LORD, has in the Old Testament. He is the center of worship, so those of “the Way” call on Jesus to be saved. Luke has a very high Christology.

Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath and the Lord of the banquet. One of the things that we see in the start of Luke’s Gospel is that Jesus clearly fulfills the role of the Davidide and Messiah, foretold in Isaiah 9 and 11. It is fleshed out in terms of what the Messiah will do in Isaiah 35 and the servant songs of Isaiah (ch 42, 43, 49, 52-53). It is interesting that Isaiah blurs the line between the Davidic Messiah and this notion of the servant, the Lord’s servant. He characterizes the Lord’s servant’s mission in much the same way as he characterizes the mission of the Davidide or “root of Jesse” earlier in his prophecy (ch 9, 11). Luke understands that Isaiah is doing this and brings the two roles, Messiah and servant, together. Isaiah’s vision of the arrival of the eschatological kingdom is the image of a banquet. We have an image in Isaiah 35 and again at the end of Isaiah of a big banquet. Likewise, Luke tells a lot of stories with meals. It seems like they are always eating in Luke. That is another reason why it is one of my favorite Gospels! They always sit down to eat something, and Jesus tells stories about meals. Places of worship are always at the center in Luke and Acts. Everything starts and ends in the temple in Luke’s Gospel. Along the way Jesus starts His ministry in the synagogue. It is interesting that when Jesus journeys He always sits down for a meal with someone. Meals in the Jewish society definitely have a cultic quality to them. They are a picture of where everything is headed. Everything is headed toward the eschatological banquet and the feast with God! The passage that started all of that is Exodus 24. When the elders of Israel came upon the mountain, they eat a meal with God. The sacrifices themselves depict meals with God.

Jesus views these meals as pictures of the eschatological kingdom. Look at Luke 14 where Jesus tells the parable of the banquets. There is a meal at the Pharisee’s house. That builds on an earlier meal at the Pharisee’s house in Luke 7. Jesus warns the Pharisees about taking the seats of honor. In Luke 7 is the sinful woman who anoints Jesus’ feet. We see a theme that comes right out of Isaiah. Look at who is invited to these banquets: the lame, blind, poor, and prisoners. This goes back to Isaiah 61 where things started in Luke’s Gospel in chapter 4. Jesus says in Luke 14:15,

When one of those at the table heard this he said, “Blessed is the man who will eat the feast in the kingdom of God.” Jesus replied, “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I am on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’ Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I cannot come.’ The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. […] Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”

The Pharisees’ comment is from Isaiah 25 and 35. The excuses that the original guests give are not lame excuses. They might sound a little weak to us, but they are not lame. These come right out of the law,
and they are legitimate reasons to delay military service. These are important things, because you make your living by tilling the ground. If you get married, it is a huge change. You have to establish your household. Luke has already established the importance of the second group of people that the owner invites. Jesus ministers to those whom He restores because of the time on the clock. The eschatological age has begun, and the Messiah does eschatological work. He is doing the work of the expected Davidide to restore the kingdom. These are kingdom stories about the great banquet, and the blind and lame are invited to His banquet. The theme that began in Luke 4 is continued on as people respond to the prophetic word. Just like in the prophets, some accept the prophet’s message, and some reject it. You have a division of the house of Israel that happens. There is a restored group within Israel, and the disciples will be appointed as the new leadership of Israel. The reformation of Israel is underway. At the same time it means Israel is being judged. This is just like in the prophets. Some believe, but some are rejected. Some accept the blessings of the covenant, but others will experience the curses of the covenant.

When Jesus comes to the temple after this long journey, He speaks over Jerusalem like a prophet. He weeps and says, “I would have gathered you, but you did not recognize the time of visitation.” He picks up on that word “visitation.” This is the time of restoration when the Messiah would come and restore the function of the temple. Jesus’ teaching in the temple restores its function. It is supposed to be a house of prayer to the nations. He clears out the Gentile courts because they are cluttered with the moneychangers. The clearing of the temple is also an expression of restoring the temple to its proper function as a house of prayer for the nations. Again, there is parochialism, national pride, as the Jewish people spend God’s blessings upon themselves. They forget their broader vocation. Jesus clears out the court of the Gentiles so it can be used as it was intended, as a house of prayer for the nations.

Another thing that is important about these meals is that it is often where Jesus is recognized for who He is. We see that especially with the Last Supper as Jesus reveals His suffering. It should be understood in terms of the righteous sufferers of the Psalms. It should be understood in terms of the righteous sufferer of the servant of the Lord in Isaiah 53. At the end of Luke’s Gospel in Luke 24, Jesus opens the minds of the disciples. It is “in the breaking of bread” with Cleopas and his companion, when Jesus stays with them, that they recognize who He is. He is the one about whom the Scriptures testify, the Messiah and Lord of all. These are the main Christological titles that are important for Luke: Lord, Savior, Christ, but the Lord’s servant as well.

Luke’s Inclusive Gospel

We have already talked about some of the other aspects that are unique to Luke’s Gospel, but let me be more specific. There is the emphasis on the inclusion of different people groups, including women and the poor. We see a prominence of women in Luke by comparison to the other Gospels. Women are among the most important supporters of Jesus financially. In Luke 8 we see that women are part of His entourage, and we see this all throughout Luke’s two volumes. Luke tells the story of the advance of the Pauline mission into Europe. Lydia is the first convert in Europe, and her house in Philippi is the basis of the mission. We see an emphasis also on the lost and the least. The people who were least powerful include the widows and the Good Samaritan, which is a unique parable in Luke 10. There are a lot of stories of rich and poor, which begins with Mary’s song at the very beginning. She talks about in praising the Lord how He will bring the powerful down and lift up the humble. She is just a poor peasant girl, and it is interesting that she is the one who will be the instrument of this new Messianic age coming in. Luke also emphasizes the Holy Spirit from the very beginning. There is a massive emphasis on the Spirit in Acts.

I would like to do something out of order, and direct our attention to Acts. It is out of canonical order, but we have already set the stage of what Luke is up to. You will recall that I said the telling of the story of Jesus (volume one) is greatly influenced by the fact that Luke also plans to tell the story of the church and the early Christian mission. Let us move ahead into volume two, which is Acts. Luke picks up his story to Theophilus, and Acts 1:8 sets out a table of contents for the book of Acts. You have probably heard that before, and I think it is a very helpful guide to how the story will progress. This was an oral culture, so verbal signals are important. Luke picks up on the techniques of other history writers who tell the story of a people by region. They went from one region to another. In the same way that the journey to Jerusalem is very important in Luke’s Gospel, journeys are very important in Acts. The journey of the Word of God goes out from Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria to the ends of the earth. The Commission is given along with the content of the message in Luke 24. We will see that a lot of the speeches in Acts follow that same pattern. What are the witnesses supposed to preach? Christ must suffer, He will be raised, and repentance is to be declared to all of the nations beginning in Jerusalem for the forgiveness of sins. Repentance for the forgiveness of sins is Luke’s way of focusing the Gospel appeal. Finally, the gift of the Holy Spirit is given. We see that pattern exactly when Peter preaches at Pentecost. He explains first what has happened with the sound of wind and fire by using Joel 3. He says that is exactly what Joel the prophet told them would happen. He says the people are not drunk; it is too early in the morning for that. He reminds them of what Joel said and notes what happens. Right after that he talks about the Gospel, and he does it in exactly the order that Jesus had commissioned them to do in Luke 24. He follows those same elements in Acts 2.

We begin Acts with where the story ended in Luke. Acts 1 begins with the ascension, and we get an outline of where Luke is headed. He reassures Theophilus and other members of mixed congregations of their place together in God’s people. He does this by narrating the effectiveness of the ministry of God’s Word and Spirit as it advances from Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria to the ends of the earth. We see this outline very clearly flowing out from Acts 1:8. The Holy Spirit comes in power to empower apostolic witness. They have to wait for that, and that picks up where Luke 24 left off. Then the outline follows out of Acts 1:8. Acts 3 through 7 is focused on Jerusalem, and Acts 8 through 12 is focused on Judea and Samaria. Beginning with Paul and Barnabus’s first mission at Pisidian Antioch in south Galatia to Rome, Acts 13 through 27 focuses on the Gospel going to the ends of the earth. There is apostolic witness in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

The word “witness” is very important to Luke. Turn to Isaiah to discover why this word is important. We have already hinted at how important Isaiah is to Luke in the telling of the story. Look at Isaiah 43:8 and following. The notion of Jesus as Savior and Lord comes right out of Isaiah. In Isaiah 40 through 55 the Lord says over and over again, “I am the LORD, the only Savior around. There is no other one.” Isaiah 43:3 says, “I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.” We will see that repeated several times in Isaiah 40 through 55. We see it again in Isaiah 45:5-6, which says, “I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other.” This claim for Lord and Savior comes right out of Isaiah 40 through 55.

Let us get back to talking about witnesses and why Jesus characterizes them as such. Isaiah 43:10 says, “‘You are my witnesses,’ declares the LORD, ‘and my servant whom I have chosen so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he.’” In the last lesson we talked about what the Gospel is in Isaiah 52, which is that the Lord God reigns. Several times the Lord commissions His servant as a witness to Him in Isaiah. The servant sometimes is talked of corporately as Israel, and sometimes it is talked of in terms of this one person or individual. The commission that will declare that Israel’s God is

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the Savior to all the nations, even as a light to the nations, begins in Isaiah. When Jesus commissions His witnesses in Luke 24 and Acts 1, He echoes Isaiah’s commission of Israel declaring to the world that her God is the only Savior and Lord. That is the beginning of the book of Acts.

In Acts 2 we see that all kinds of various nations are represented at Pentecost from the beginning. Male Jews are told that three times a year they have to come and bring their offerings to the Lord. This happens at Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Booths. The Feast of Weeks is also known as Pentecost. We have devout men from every nation under heaven gathered together. When the Spirit comes, all of these Jews have left their homes and traveled long distances. We think that because of the distance they probably make this journey one time in their lifetime. Those who come from the Diaspora and those who live in Palestine probably do not even make it all three times a year. They probably just make it one time a year, because they have to take care of their farms and everything. Oftentimes they would send finances to pay the temple tax and their tithe through others who traveled. As a result we have a great infusion of wealth and people who come to Jerusalem to worship. Acts 1:9 says that the people gathered includes Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygi and Pamphylia, Egypt and other parts of Libya. Luke just draws a circle around the Mediterranean, and all of those communities are represented at Pentecost. People leave after they have seen and heard what has happened at Pentecost. Peter preaches, and we are told that thousands come to know the Lord that day. Paul is not the only one who tells the story of the Gospel. Churches are formed in Asia, Egypt, and even perhaps in Rome. This is all as a result of those Diaspora Jews who returned home but were there and witnessed the event of Pentecost. That day the Spirit comes, and He is primarily the Spirit of prophecy. Those who experience the renewal of the Holy Spirit are emboldened to speak as witnesses for the Lord that He is the only Savior and God.

The Spirit does something else, and we see the results in Acts 2:42-47. Oftentimes this is just set aside as an extra summary, but I would suggest that that is a mistake. The Pentecostal pattern is not only empowerment for witness, but it is also transformation for fellowship. That means that because the Spirit has come, a new economy is also born. This is really important. We have already seen in the parable of the tenants in Luke 20 and Jesus’ prophetic critique of the leadership of Israel that those leaders are being thrown out. During Pentecost you bring your first fruits of your harvest, your tithe, and the firstlings of your flock. You give these things partly to support the priests because they have no land to plant crops for themselves. Part of your offering goes to support the priests. In Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus we also see that the priests have a responsibility to take the wealth of the produce of the land and use it to support the poor. The temple is not only a center of worship, but it is also a bank or a financial resource. It is also a center of political leadership, though we have heard that Jesus will throw those men out. It is interesting that Acts begins with Judas buying land with the money that he betrayed Jesus for. Judas gets thrown out because he is an unfaithful steward of the land as well. Just like the temple leadership that he was in cahoots with, he gets thrown out. We need a new guy to come in, because these twelve will be the new leadership of restored Israel. Not only are they commissioned as Jesus’ witnesses of the message of salvation, but they are also entrusted with responsibility of the new economy. They are entrusted with responsibility of distributing goods for the poor. In Acts 2 we have a very important part of the Pentecostal pattern. Acts 2:45 says, “Selling their possessions and goods they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts. And all the believers had everything in common, and they dedicated themselves, devoted to the apostles teaching.”

In Acts 4:32 we see something very similar. “The believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed any of his possessions was his own. They shared everything they had with great power. The apostles...
continued to testify of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them, for from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales, put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.” This is a direct echo of Deuteronomy. Luke makes it very clear that the apostles have the role that the temple leadership was supposed to have. All throughout Luke we see that one of the big problems with the temple leadership is that they are greedy. They actually crush the poor and devour widows, as Jesus says. They get thrown out, not only because they do not recognize Jesus for who He is, but also because they do not do their job. They do not take care of the economy of Israel properly. Pentecost is this huge symbol of the blessing of God of the land. They bring the produce of God into God’s house in response to that. Part of what is supposed to be done with that money and wealth is that it is supposed to take care of God’s people.

This was really important for all of these house congregations scattered along the avenues of Pauline mission, because many of them had been evicted from the synagogue. This must have been frightening to them because the synagogue had supported them in many vital ways. Synagogues were mini-temples. The synagogues were the local branch banks. They were the place not only that you came for worship and instruction in Torah, but also the place where you went for help in times of economic hardship. Your sons were drafted into conscription into the Roman army, and you could not take care of your land because you were too old to plow the land. You went to the synagogue for help. These people who believe that Jesus is Israel’s Messiah were being thrown out of the synagogues. Paul and Barnabas get thrown out of the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, Corinth, and Ephesus. They set up shop in schools and in the house of Gaius, Stephanus, Chloe, and Lydia. It was not just a place to meet for worship, though. It was a whole economy. Their economic life was at risk. They had no insurance policy anymore. They were scared, and they should have been scared. Part of what happens is that Luke tells them, “It is okay. You are part of the people of God, and the church leadership is supposed to take care of this.” The church and house churches began to fill that same role. We see that in the beginnings here with what the apostles are entrusted with. They are not only entrusted with being witnesses to Jesus, but they are to take care of this community. They are to be the stewards of the economy of the house of God.

Barnabas is an example of what is supposed to be done. He sells property and gives money to the church. Then we have the negative example of Ananias and Sapphira. They say that they give the money from their land, but they lie to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is in their midst. They are in the place of worship, and the Spirit’s role is not only to empower witnesses, but His role is also to bless and generate this new economy. He guides those who steward those resources. The care of the widows, orphans, and those who get in trouble because their sons are taken off to war is now part of the church’s job. This makes the conversion of the priests in Acts 7 a big deal. They see that the Christians are doing what they are supposed to be doing.

This Pentecostal pattern is repeated as Luke tells the story of the advance of the Word in the Spirit. It is not just the advance of the Word, but it is the advance of the Spirit as well. In our Reformed tradition we have really emphasized the Word. Sometimes we have not talked about the Spirit enough. Other traditions emphasize the Spirit but maybe not the Word enough. It is interesting that at Pentecost both elements are important. Spiritual experience is vital. The Christian life will be dead unless the Spirit is there. Spiritual experience is narrated for us. Things are happening! Worship is exciting! It is really alive. But that does not explain and discern. So Peter preaches and tells everyone how it relates to Joel 2. Word and Spirit are together here, and that is the pattern given in Acts. It is really the pattern of the New Testament.
As the Word and Spirit advance, we get this outline of its advance. Having announced his table of contents in Acts 1:8, Luke also announces how things spread. He gives us summary markers about the growth of the church. In Acts 2 we see that the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Then Acts 4:4 says, “But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.” We see the way is marked. To stop the further spread of this among the people there is a gag order from the Sanhedrin. Their gag order is powerless, and we see that the Word of God continues to spread. After they pray, the place is filled with the Holy Spirit, and they speak the Word boldly in Acts 4:31. In Acts 6:7 we see the conversion of the priests, “The word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” Acts 8:4 says, “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.” Verse 1 mentions a day three days after Pentecost because Acts 1 through 7 is a slow progression of time. Acts 8:1 says, “On that day there was a great persecution against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.” There is a direct echo of Acts 1:8 here. We begin to see the spread into Judea and Samaria.

Luke stops every once in a while and summarizes and refers back to the beginning of the commission to go out and witness in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. He reports on the Word of God growing rapidly in particular regions.

Look at Acts 12 where we come to the end of the Samaria section in verse 24. A great number of people are brought to the Lord in Acts 11. We get another notice in Acts 12:24, “The word of God continued to increase and to spread. Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission. They returned from Jerusalem taking with them John, who was also called Mark.” This begins with Peter, who goes out in Acts 9 to do a tour through Samaria. Acts 8:14 says, “When the apostles heard that Samaria had accepted the word, they sent Peter and John. And when they arrived they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon them. They had simply been baptized in the name of Jesus.” Luke marks this Pentecostal pattern as the Word advances out. Stephen is one of the first witnesses, and after his death we see Philip and his ministry in Samaria. We see the giving of the Spirit as well. The pattern that started in Acts 2 is repeated in Samaria in Acts 8.

Turn to Acts 19, which talks about the one area left after Judea and Samaria, which marks the progression of Word and Spirit toward “the end of the earth.” We get a repetition of this Pentecostal pattern when Paul goes to Ephesus. Acts 19:1 says,

While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They answered, “No, we have not yet heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” So Paul asked them, “What baptism did you receive?” “John’s baptism,” they replied. Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is in Jesus.” On hearing this they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus, and when Paul placed his hands on them the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve of them in all. Then Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God.

We have two important markers, first in Samaria when Peter and John go out and then with Paul when he goes out into Ephesus. The marker is the repetition of the Pentecostal pattern. We see it first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and then to the ends of the earth. It is interesting that at Ephesus the same sort of thing happens. Paul talks to the Ephesian rulers in his farewell speech in Acts 20. At Ephesus you have a contrast between Paul and Demetrius the silversmith. Again the issue is not just the
message about Jesus but the use of wealth and resources. Paul points out what should characterize elders of God’s people in Acts 20 during his farewell to the elders at Miletus. In Acts 20:18-35, Paul says,

When they arrived, he said to them: “You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.

Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

The pattern that began at Pentecost with the stewardship of Pentecostal offerings by the apostles continued with Paul. The Pentecostal pattern went out into Samaria and the ends of the earth.

One thing is really interesting and fascinating to me, because the commentaries do not do a very good job discussing it. We see that Paul has just said that he will go back to Jerusalem. The question is why? Why does he go back to Jerusalem? Acts 15, like a seismic boom, settles the question of whether or not Gentile believers in Jesus must be circumcised to be included in the community of “the Way.” Acts 10 and 11 are where Peter tells the story again and again about the conversion of Cornelius. The same cleansing Spirit that fell upon believing Jews at Pentecost is bringing gentiles into the church. There is no problem with the purity laws, because the Holy Spirit makes them clean. God is on the march throughout the world. Once the question about circumcision is settled at the Jerusalem Conference in Acts 15 and they know how Jews and Gentiles were supposed to behave together in the house of God, it is surprising that they need to go back to Jerusalem again. Why does Luke take us back there yet again? In Acts 20:16 Luke tells us that Paul went back to Jerusalem to get there in time for Pentecost. Paul is a faithful Pharisee, and he goes back to Jerusalem to be there in time for Pentecost. The reason for his return comes out of Romans 15. Paul says, “Pray for me, Romans, because before I come to you I have to go to Jerusalem.” He goes to Jerusalem to minister to the needs of the saints. They need money, and
they are in trouble financially. As we hear about the journeys from port to port, Luke counts the days. He starts telling us how many days they were at each port because we know that from the time of Passover to Pentecost is 50 days. He starts counting. We see the countdown, and Paul gets to Jerusalem in Acts 21 in time for the purification week. All of the Diaspora Jews who come to Jerusalem for Pentecost have to spend time in a purification ritual because they have been out in the pagan lands. They had come in contact with dead bodies and all kinds of pagans. They have to be ceremonially clean before they can bring their offerings into the temple.

Paul agrees with what James suggests, which is to pay the costs associated with oaths that 4 fellow Jews have made and thereby to show his own commitment to the Law and to Israel as a people. Paul tells everyone when he speaks to them in Acts 21 and 22 and in Acts 26 that he went into the Temple to give alms and in keeping with the purity requirements. Remember that one of the purposes of Pentecost was to take care of the poor. Paul characterizes this in his own letters as a service to the people of God and the churches of Judea. However, Luke wants to depict Paul’s final journey to Jerusalem as an enactment of this Pentecostal pattern. He gives us the reason why Paul is motivated, and that is that he goes in time for Pentecost because he wants to take gifts. It is extraordinary, because these gifts are from Gentile churches. You have Trophimus from Ephesus, Timothy from Derbe, and others listed in Acts 20 who go with Paul. We know from Philo, Josephus, and others who talk about the practices of travel that every synagogue would send a representative with their money. They wanted to make sure their money got where it was supposed to go so that someone else did not steal it and take it for himself. We have representatives of all of these congregations who traveled with Paul. They were people who had given money, and he would bring it back to Pentecost. The Pentecostal pattern includes this new economy of the kingdom of God.

We should say something about how many times two things are emphasized in the book of Acts. One is the conversion of Saul. Luke tells us that story three times. We see it in Acts 9, 22, and 26. Once it is in the third person, and Paul tells it twice in first person. The other story Luke emphasizes is the story of Cornelius. This is told over and over again in Acts 10 and 11. It is interesting, because we get the story one time when Peter has his vision. We also get the story through Cornelius when he tells about his vision. Then we get the story again when Peter goes in Acts 11 to report to Jerusalem about what happened and how God gave faith to the Gentiles. These two stories of Saul’s conversion and the conversion of Cornelius are repeated for emphasis. We do not want to miss that. It is interesting that all of these intersect in Acts 15. There we have Paul and Peter, and Peter is there to report about what happened to Cornelius. He supports Paul and Barnabas’ mission as they have already gone out and began to see Gentiles come to faith. Lystra has already happened in Acts 14. This whole intersection of these two repeated stories comes together in Acts 15.

The question before the church is, in order for us to have meals together and for Gentiles to be a part of Christianity, are Gentiles going to have to become like Jews? Are Gentiles going to have to keep the kosher laws? This is a huge issue. The answer is no. Peter gives us this reason based on Ezekiel 36. This is beautiful. Israel goes into exile because of their sinfulness and idolatry. God tells them what will be the decisive factor of them coming to the land. It is not based on if they are kosher or if they stay circumcised. The decisive precipitating event for the renewal of the Jews is exactly the same as the decisive precipitating event that brings the Gentiles in. It is about the cleansing of the heart by the Holy Spirit. Based on his exegesis of Ezekiel 36, we see an emphasis on the word “cleansing.” When Peter tells the story about his vision, God tells him, “Do not say that this is defiled when I have made it clean.” God cleansed it. Then we see that in the gift of the Holy Spirit to Cornelius and Peter’s report of that in Acts 11 he says, “He cleansed the heart just like he did for us.” Luke’s point through Peter and Paul is that the Jews who believe and the Gentiles who
believe are in the church on the same basis. It is exactly the same basis, which is belief and faith in Jesus’ name, calling on the name of Jesus, and the cleansing of the heart by the Holy Spirit. Because they are there on the same basis, they can have table fellowship together, and the Gentiles do not have to be circumcised. That is not the decisive mark. The decisive mark of Christian identity is faith in the cleansing of the heart by the Holy Spirit.