



Session Eighteen

The Book of

Acts, Pt.2

Acts 3-5:11

The centerpiece of these chapters, as the mission of the early church commences, is two incidents that result in Peter bearing witness to the people of Israel and their leaders about the *kerygma*, or Gospel, of Jesus Christ. What Peter says and how his words are received reveal much about how the earliest Christians understood what it meant to proclaim and live the Lordship of Christ.

1) Chapter 3 opens with a healing narrative (1-9), the story of a man, lame from birth, who positions himself outside the Temple to beg. Peter heals him in Jesus' name, he jumps up, and enters the Temple. Part of the significance of this story is obvious: the man is healed. But there is a bigger, more profound message in these events. What do you think that message might be?

2) It can be helpful to read 3:1-9, and Peter's response to the crowd in 3:11-26, relative to the sermon Peter preached at Pentecost (2:14-41). Peter's words in 3:11-16, therefore, is the second opportunity people had to understand the Gospel and that the Kingdom was at hand. If you compare the Pentecost sermon with this one, you'll see that the language here is sharper, as if the stakes are now higher given that people have heard this before. You'll also note that both sermons are the result of the people not understanding what they've witnessed. Thus, we see a continuation of the pattern we witnessed in Jesus' ministry: people seeing and hearing but not understanding. It's a pattern that continues to the present day: people see and hear the Word but do not really understand what it means or the claim it makes upon them. This is partly due to the radical nature of the Word, and partly due to the vagaries of human nature. What does this suggest about our responsibility as followers of Jesus?

3) Look carefully at 3:13-16. Note that a right understanding of the miracle of the man's healing provides opportunity for a right understanding of Jesus. This is a reminder that, even today, we cannot separate understanding of who Jesus is from an understanding of—and participation in—what Jesus does.

4) Note that in 3:17 Peter acknowledges that the people acted out of “ignorance” in rejecting Jesus. To the extent people today still reject Jesus out of ignorance, what is our responsibility as a family of faith, and how can we best discharge that responsibility? This is not a rhetorical question—answering it will become a driving force throughout the growth of the early church, returned to one way or another in the rest of Acts and virtually all of the Pauline epistles, Hebrews, James, and the letters of Peter and John.

5) In 4:1-4 we again encounter the Sadducees, the group which will prove most hostile to the growth of the early church. Less is known about the Sadducees than the Pharisees, but this much seems accurate: they were devout laity from wealthy Jerusalem families close to the political and financial institutions of Judean society, including the Temple. Thus, they stood to lose a great deal in terms of power and control from the growth of a movement like early Christianity. Put another way, they had the greatest stake in things not changing—and the Gospel and early church represented *significant* change. Are there any Sadducees left today?

6) The second incident resulting in Peter bearing witness to the people of Israel and their leaders begins at 4:5. I want to draw your attention to a word in verse 9: most English translations use the word “healed” but the Greek word is *sozo* which means “saved.” Throughout Acts *sozo* is used with this double meaning, reminding us that salvation is not just about life to come but wholeness in life now.

7) Look at 4:12. Peter is very explicit: “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” This raises the issue of *universalism*—whether or not salvation is for all people—vs. *exclusivism*—salvation is only through belief in Jesus Christ. I urge you to be willing to spend some time thinking about your comfort level with this because the issues in play are bigger than who goes to heaven and who goes to hell. Where you fall on the universalism-exclusivism continuum (whether you realize it or not) says a great deal about your understanding of the character and nature of God. We’ll discuss this more in class.

8) The Jewish leaders command Peter and John to stop teaching in the name of Jesus. Peter and John respond, “we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” Can you?

9) Read 4:24-31. Reactions like this to prayer (re: verse 31) are fairly common in Scripture but, televangelist theatrics notwithstanding, relatively rare in contemporary life. How do you explain this?

10) You’ll remember the “ideological and political minefield” of 2:42-47. The same can be said of 4:32-35. But in these verses, I urge you to notice the emphasis on unity and humility within the earliest Christian community and the presence among them of “great grace” such that “there was not a needy person among them.” Assuming we don’t want to explain this state of affairs as coincidence—and I don’t think we do—are we then willing to acknowledge that a dynamic exists (or can exist) among unity, humility, and providence? And if we’re willing to

acknowledge it, are we each willing in our own lives to embrace the first two that the third may be enjoyed by all? Put another way, how do you understand your responsibility to the world?

11) Note what Barnabas' action in 4:36-37 says about his character. This will become important in his work with Paul later in Acts.

12) Relative to #s 10 and 11 above, Ananias and Sapphira provide the contrasting negative example of how *not* to live in Christian community—and the price they paid for living that way. But let's be honest: aren't we more like Ananias and Sapphira than Barnabas and the early Christians in 4:32-35? Luke may be exaggerating to make a point (e.g. Ananias and Sapphira dropping dead on the spot once their deception is revealed), but it's an important point nonetheless. Living one way provides life for all; living the other only leads to death.