

COMMENTARY - ACTS - Faw

Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary : Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993),

1: 15: Designations of early Christians:

The brethren (which includes both women and men) is the first-mentioned and one of the most frequent names for Christians in Acts. It first occurs in 1;15 (RSV) and, in the Greek, is used some 23 times after that, although NRSV almost always changes it to believers. The word points toward relationships within the group: brotherly and sisterly love mutuality and sharing. Perhaps the best commentary on its wealth of meaning is the community described in 2:42-47 and 4:32-35: the new Christians showed themselves to be one family in the Lord by sharing their possessions and holding everything in common. ¹

Acts 1:6-9: Commissioning Apostles

The story continues with the risen Lord meeting once more with his chosen apostles. It is a moment of high expectation. He has spoken to them before of the kingdom of God (1:3). Now they ask him if this is the time for restoring the kingdom of Israel. They are thinking of an earthly rule, as seen in Luke 22:24, where they all wanted to be the greatest in the kingdom. Jesus' answer is twofold. First, he tells them that the times for the coming of the kingdom are in God's hands, a well-kept secret. Second, Jesus directs their minds away from the matter of times and seasons and onto the task that awaits them. The important thing right now is their empowerment from on high and their witness to the ends of the earth. ²

Acts 1:8 has rightly been seen as the key text of the book. Here Jesus gives the central theme of witnessing by the Holy Spirit. The ever-widening areas of

¹ Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary - Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 310.

² Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary - Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 30.

witness correspond with the three major divisions of the Act account;

in Jerusalem, found in chapters 1-7; *in all Judea and Samaria*, in 8-12; and *to the ends of the earth*, in 13-28.

As for the three concentric circle of geography, we shall note that each successive area includes some return to earlier areas. Thus chapter 8-12 tell of further work done in Jerusalem and 13-28 report witnessing once more in both Jerusalem and Judea-Samaria. ³

In 1:8, Jesus speaks of the power that the apostles will receive when the Holy Spirit has come upon them (cf. Luke 24:49). This refers to the experience they will have on the Day of Pentecost (Acts2:1-47). The power they are to receive will be primarily for witnessing, the content and effectiveness of which will be demonstrated again and again throughout the book (see "The Threefold Meaning of Witness" under TLC). The ministry is a fulfillment of prophecy of Isaiah, who spoke of Israel being called to be God's witnesses to the world (Is. 43:10; 44:8). Paul makes this point in Acts 13:47, where he quotes Isaiah 49:6. Since the witnessing of the early church is by both word and deed, miracle-working is a major expression of this power, as seen through all of Acts. ⁴

[After Jesus' ascension], the women who met with the eleven remaining apostles are likely those referred to Luke 8:2-3 and 23:49.

[8: 2-3: The twelve were with him,²as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out,³and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them* out of their resources.]

[23:49: But all his acquaintances, including the women who had followed him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.]

³ Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary - Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 30.

⁴ Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary - Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 30.

If so, then among them are Mary Magdalene, out of whom seven demons had been driven Joanna the wife of Chuza, a steward in the court of Herod Antipas; Susanna, about whom nothing more is known: and "many others." All of them have been healed of various diseases or delivered from demons. Out of appreciation for what the Lord did for them, they followed him and his apostles about, ministering to them from their own resources. They were the last at the cross and the first at the empty tomb. Now, as dedicated and experienced disciples themselves, they are present in the upper room awaiting the fulfillment of the promise of the Father.⁵

Jesus' own family is also present with the eleven and this goodly company of women. They include his mother Mary and her four sons, his *brothers*. According to Mark 6:3, they were James, Jose, Judas, and Simon, probably half brothers.⁶ From John 7:3-5, we learn that Jesus' brothers did not at first believe in Jesus. The change probably came after the resurrection: I Corinthians 15:7 mentions a special appearance to James. This one, the eldest of the four, rises to prominence in the Jerusalem church, a presiding elder of note (12:7c; 15:13-21; 21:18-25) and traditional author of the epistle of James. The only other one known to church history is Judas, traditionally identified as the author of epistle of Jude (Jude 1 calls him "the brother of James)."⁷

2: 44-45 (4:32) All things in common

The powerful sense of divine presence and outpoured love through the Holy Spirit creates a new attitude toward personal property. As Luke puts it, *no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common*. They are shaken loose from possessiveness and self-seeking. No longer is it 'I' and "mine" but rather "we" and "ours" as the Spirit creates a

⁵ Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary - Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 32.

⁶ Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary - Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 32.

⁷ Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary - Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 33.

higher unity to which all belong. They begin to share *all things in common* in a new and exciting sense of community. With almost reckless abandon, they start to sell off property and pool the money to help those in need (2:45).⁸

4: 32-37 Believers share their possessions

After the dramatic account of prayer power in the new fellowship [Pentecost], Luke gives the reader another summary of church activity (cf. 2:42-47). This one underscores the unity, communal sharing, powerful witness, and popularity of these believers. The members of the church are *of one heart and soul* because all centered on Jesus, who unifies deep within. Thus dedicated to Christ and one another, no one *claims private ownership of any possessions*. All things belong to the Lord and are on loan to them for the good of the community. Thus Luke can say that everything they own is held in common (4:32). This enables them to testify to the resurrection of the Lord *with great power*. They can rise above selfish material interests so that spiritual realities take first place in their testimony, and the grace of God is manifested in them all (4:33). One manifestation of this is the way they begin to sell off their property and bring them proceeds to the apostles to be distributed to the needy in their midst. The result is that no one among them suffers serious want (4:34-35).⁹

Luke presents Barnabas, who sells a field and brings the money to the church (4:36-37). This man is a good example of the community practice. Luke presents him not only as a fine example of generosity in the early church but also as a sharp contrast to Ananias and Sapphira, the cheating couple to be mentioned in 5:1-11.¹⁰

⁸ Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary - Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 49.

⁹ Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary - Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 68.

¹⁰ Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary - Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 69.

5: 1-11: The tragic case of Ananias and Sapphira

Among many who participate in the joy of sharing, this one couple demonstrates a totally different spirit (human weakness and loss). They kept back part of the money received from the sale of some property (5:1). He brings the rest and lays it at Peter's feet as though it were the whole amount (5:2). That leader is aware of the deceit and asks, *Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit? (5:3).*¹¹

Peter next reveals both freedom of the community and the nature of the couple's sin. While the property remained unsold, it was theirs, and even after that they may do with the money as they wish. The community is dedicated to sharing, but this is to be *voluntary*. The grievous sin of Ananias and Sapphira is that they have conspired together to bring *part* of the money as though it were the whole proceeds, and to enjoy the remainder in private for themselves. It is a lie not only against human beings but against God! (5:4).¹²

Peter has been criticized by some modern thinkers for what takes place next, and Luke has been blamed for including it in Acts. What happens next is a direct act of God. Peter is simply the Lord's spokesman. As soon as he exposes their guilt, the weight of Ananias' sin is too much for him, and he collapses at the apostle's feet. Such immediate and drastic death as "the wages of sin" (Rom. 6:23) sends a shock through the community which Luke describes as a *great fear seizing* all who hear it (5:5). Some scholars explain what happened as a massive heart attack brought on by the sudden exposure. Three hours go by before Sapphira appears, still ignorant of what has happened (5:7). When she shows that she has shared in the lie from the beginning, Peter has one nagging question: Why? How can it be that she and her husband would agree together to *put the Spirit of the Lord to the test?* The apostle tells Sapphira that she too will be carried out and buried (5:9). Like her husband, she collapses under the weight of her guilt and is soon taken away and buried next to him (5:10). Again Luke

¹¹ Faw, *Believers Bible Commentary - Acts*, 69.

¹² Faw, *Believers Bible Commentary - Acts*, 70.

observes that *great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things* (5:11).¹³ There must be no trifling with the Holy Spirit. It is high-voltage Christianity, powerful for good (as in 2:43-47) when channeled according to God's will, but destructive when short-circuited by human greed.¹⁴

16: 25-26 Jail doors were open

*About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them.*²⁶ *Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened.*

Background story of the text (16: 16:24)

Paul and Silas were in the area of Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. They were staying at the Lydia's for a while after she and her household were baptized by Paul. One day, as they were going to the place of prayer, they were met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling.¹⁷ While she followed them she would cry out, 'These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.' She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, 'I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the market-place before the authorities. When they had brought them before the magistrates, they said, 'These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe.' The crowd joined in attacking them. The magistrates, after giving them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

¹³ Faw, *Believers Bible Commentary - Acts*, 70.

¹⁴ Faw, *Believers Bible Commentary - Acts*, 71.

Two aspects of the story stand out in Luke's striking summary. One is the strong anti-Semitism that puts their being Jewish as the first charge against them. The other is the tough Roman nationalism apparent in accuser's smug reference to themselves as *us Romans*. They do not mention their real grievance against the apostles, the loss of profits from this closing down of a questionable business. Instead, they cloak it under emotionally charged religious and racial accusations. Added to this is the fact that just the previous year (A.D. 49) the Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome, the impact of which is no doubt sharply felt in this Roman colony. This is why Paul and Silas can be so viciously attacked even though there is nothing against Rome in the things they have been doing – attending Jewish worship, making converts to Christianity, casting out a demon. Not content with simple imprisonment, the authorities consign Paul and Silas to the *innermost cell* of the prison (16:24). They instruct the jailer to keep them safe, and this he does by shackling their feet in stocks, wooden fasteners bolted to the wall. This is either in the dungeon or the most remote inner cell. The jailer is likely a centurion, disciplined, trustworthy, and eager to carry out these orders.¹⁵

16: 25-34 Earthquake of Midnight: Jailer Converted

Hours go by as God's messengers sit uncomfortably bound in the darkness, their backs sore and bleeding. Yet, instead of groaning or vowing revenge, they are praying and singing psalms to their Lord in sounds that carry throughout the prison. Here are seen in action the Christian ideals of praying and rejoicing under all circumstances (cf Phil 4:4; 1 Thess. 5:16; Rom. 5:3; James 1:2; 1Pet. 5:6).¹⁶

Phil 4:4:	Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice;
-----------	--

¹⁵ Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary - Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 185.

¹⁶ Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary - Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 185.

1 Thess. 5:16:	Rejoice always;
Rom. 5:3:	We also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance.
James 1:2:	My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy ...
1Pet. 5:6:	Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time.

Then without warning, an earthquake strikes. It is so powerful that the prison foundations are badly shaken, door fly open, and individual fetters come unfastened (16:26). Earth tremors are quite common in this area, yet the timing and effects of this massive one are seen as a divine answer to prayer, both by the prisoners and by Luke himself. God has intervened to make sure that the work goes forward! Nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37).¹⁷

20: 17-38

This paragraph is Paul's farewell speech to Ephesian elders – it is his final parting with leaders of the Ephesian church where he last worked extensively. [He is now leaving for Jerusalem]. Luke may personally be present for the occasion and therefore able to preserve this eyewitness account and first-hand summary of the speech. The message moves forward from Paul's opening statement about his past ministry (20:18-21) to his immediate plans (20: 22-23). Then it interweaves references to his own exemplary work among them with warnings and exhortations as they face opposition in the more distant future (2); 24-35).¹⁸ He knows that none of them will see his face again in this world (20:25).

¹⁷ Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary - Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 186.

¹⁸ Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary - Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 233.

Paul once more emphasizes his servant role at the end of his speech (20: 18-21, 33-35). He reminds them how he supported himself and his colleagues by manual labor (20:34), an example of how Christians should work and help weak (20:35a). Then, Luke reports, he climaxes it all with an otherwise unknown saying from Jesus that it is more blessed to give than to receive (20:35b). This word, though not found in any of our gospels, is true to other teachings of Jesus (Luke 6:38; 11:11-13; John 13: 34).¹⁹

Luke 6:38: *give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.'*

Luke 11:11-13: *Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? ¹²Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? ¹³If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit* to those who ask him!'*

John13:34: *I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*

¹⁹ Chalmer E. Faw, *Believers Church Bible Commentary - Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1993), 235.