



# **The Characters of Faith**

**Minor Characters with Major Impact  
in the Book of Acts**

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## *Introduction*

The book of Acts is unlike anything else in the New Testament. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each give us a narrative account of the life of Jesus, and New Testament letters by Paul and others give us important insights into the opportunities and challenges faced by specific Christian communities. But only Acts gives us a narrative account of the life of the early church, written by Luke as a sequel to the Third Gospel. Acts picks up where the Gospel of Luke ends—with the appearance of the resurrected Lord to the community of disciples, their commissioning as witnesses, the promise of the Holy Spirit as power from on high, the command to wait in Jerusalem until that promise has been fulfilled, and the ascension of Jesus to his active reign at the right hand of God. As part two of Luke's sweeping story of God's saving purposes at work in Jesus and in the world, Acts offers a powerful narrative of Christian faithfulness, lived out in response to the story of Jesus, the promises of God, and the presence of the Spirit.

In Acts, Luke invites us to journey along with the disciples as they bear witness to the Risen Jesus in their words and in the distinctive nature of their life together. When we think about Acts, major characters like Peter and especially Paul loom large in our imaginations, and for good reason! At the same time, with their dramatic moments of power and impressive public testimony, we may sometimes find these major figures admirable but far removed from our personal experience. But the story of Acts isn't simply the story of singular human heroes; it's the story of God at work in the life of the whole church. And Luke populates his story with a range of characters, whose presence in the story may occupy no more than a few verses but who each embody something critically important about life lived faithfully before God.

In this ten-week itinerary through Acts, each week takes up a so-called minor character, exploring what they reveal about faithful life with God and in community with one another. In ancient narratives, characters were often presented as examples, positive or negative, for the reader to either imitate or reject. Luke seems to have crafted his characters with a similar goal in mind, revealing something important about Christian faith through the crafting of these characters and scenes. Moreover, paying careful attention to these characters helps to form our own character. When we read characters in a story like Acts, we draw together information from the setting and the flow of the plot along with descriptions of the character and what actions that character takes, integrating and evaluating as we go. Doing that process in community provides us with the opportunity not only to understand the story of the early church more thoroughly but also to consider how these accounts of Christian faithfulness affirm, challenge, redirect, and inspire our own lives. In the end, this series aims to prompt individual and collective reflection on our own identities as characters within the narrative of God's creating, redeeming, and restoring work.

## *Outline of the Series*

Week 1: Community as Character—Acts 1:12-26; 2:42-47; 4:32-35

Focus Question: The community is a constant character in the story – praying, waiting, fellowshiping, acting, eating, sending, and discerning. Does our church think of its ordinary life as formation for participation in God’s unfolding story?

Week 2: Stephen: Prophetic Courage and Practical Service—Acts 6:1-7:60

Focus Question: Stephen is well-known for his defense speech before his accusers, but before he was a martyr, he was a table servant who was known for his wisdom. How does Stephen model wise, embodied, and faithful witness for Christians today?

Week 3: Ethiopian Eunuch: Seeking Understanding—Acts 8:26-40

Focus Question: The Ethiopian eunuch, though an unlikely convert, is a model of the faithful search for understanding. What are his characteristics as a learner, and how could we cultivate those same characteristics?

Week 4: Ananias: Courageous Obedience—Acts 9:1-19

Focus Question: Ananias of Damascus plays a critical but often overlooked role in the most famous conversion story in the Bible. Where does Jesus call us to obedience beyond our comfort level?

Week 5: Tabitha: Selfless Service—Acts 9:36-43

Focus Question: Tabitha isn’t just the recipient of God’s healing power – she’s a model disciple. What human legacies and artifacts of selfless service will our church leave behind?

Week 6: Barnabas: Gracious Encouragement—Acts 11:19-30, with 9:26-28 & 15:1-35,

Focus Question: In the book of Acts, the character of Barnabas shows up again and again as missionary, intermediary, and encourager. What does Barnabas-like encouragement look like among us and through us?

Week 7: Lydia: Courageous Hospitality—Acts 16:11-40

Focus Question: Lydia’s hospitality to Paul and his companions, both before and after their arrest, is an act of Christian faith and commitment. Are we open to extending hospitality in ways that challenge and transform us?

Week 8: Apollos: Learning Humbly—Acts 18:24-28

Focus Question: Apollos is already a powerful teacher when he meets Priscilla and Aquila, but he is also willing to learn. Do we see ourselves as perpetual learners, even though we are already educated in the Way?

Week 9: Priscilla and Aquila: Gospel Partnership—Acts 18:1-28

Focus Question: Priscilla and Aquila model partnership in the name of Jesus. Where can we partner together with one another and with others in service to Jesus in our own context?

Week 10: Living in the Story of Jesus

Focus Question: Each of the minor characters we’ve studied in this series has, in one way or another, made the story of Jesus part of the story of their own lives. Where are we called to live out our lives in the Way of Jesus?

## *Components of the Weekly Outlines*

- **Focus Texts:** Some lessons address a single story or chapter, while others draw together later passages in which the same character appears. The focus texts listed at the top of each outline indicate which passages are in view.
- **Focus Question:** Each lesson is also oriented by a single question that introduces the key theme for that week. Teachers may want to share that question with their classes or simply allow it to guide their own preparation and teaching.
- **Introductory Comments for Teachers:** These short comments provide literary and sometimes historical background. These comments will also provide an initial orientation to the focus and direction of the lesson plan.
- **Locating Ourselves in the Story:** Characters are always best understood within the context of the larger story, so each lesson will provide comments that orient the class to the location of the scene within the plot and structure of Acts.
- **Learning Objectives:** Each week's objectives include not only invitations to think, analyze, or comprehend, but also relate, experience, empathize, reflect, imitate, practice, and commit.
- **Learning Activities:** Each week contains a series of learning activities for teachers to adapt and use for their particular classes. Each of the activities aims to prompt:
  - **Active engagement** – Each week is imagined to be a collective exploration of the text. While the teacher serves as an informed guide, the whole class is intended to actively make the journey.
  - **Close reading** – Many of these stories are well-known, which presents both opportunities and challenges. The lessons provide questions intended to prompt careful attention to specific details, characters and plot, and literary context as aids to interpretation.
  - **Classroom interaction** – The activity descriptions occasionally provide some suggestions for different approaches to reading and discussion, meant to stimulate interest and interaction.
  - **Commitment** – Since the aim of the study is a life of faithful participation in the Way of Jesus, each lesson includes some activity that creates space for active commitment to a specific activity, personal reflection and self-assessment, and/or communal exploration of the church's calling to become like Christ.

## *Using the Weekly Outlines*

- Each weekly outline provides sufficient activities for a 50-60 minute class while recognizing that “instructional time” will vary. As part of their preparation, teachers should select the verses, learning activities, and discussion questions of highest priority for their specific learning community. The following questions might guide those selections: 1) What do I think is most important for understanding this story and what this character helps us to understand about Christian faithfulness? 2) Do my chosen points of emphasis allow for learning that is both intellectually engaging but also practically oriented? 3) What do I think my particular class might be invested in or most benefit from exploring?
- The opening pages of each lesson plan are intended to support each teacher’s own study. The additional notes provided in the outlines are not intended as a script for classroom use but as background information that can inform the teacher’s leadership of the give and take of discussion and collaborative interpretation. Unless otherwise noted, all passages cited in the lesson plans are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
- Given the emphasis on careful and attentive reading, teachers might encourage their classes to bring a hard copy Bible, which makes it much easier to study particular scenes in their broader context.
- Each weekly outline hopes to spark teachers’ own teaching imaginations! While the suggested learning activities aim to be useful and generative, they are not intended to be limiting but instead to open up new possibilities for study. May God bless you with discerning hearts, wise leadership, and fruitful Christian imaginations as you consider minor characters with major impact in the Acts of the Apostles.



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# Community as Character

*All Together in One Place: Characters of Faith Week 1*

## **Focus Text(s)**

Acts 1:13-14; 2:42-47; 4:32-35

## **Focus Question**

The community is a constant character in the story – praying, waiting, fellowshiping, acting, eating, sending, and discerning. Does our church think of its ordinary life as formation for participation in God’s unfolding story?

## ***Introductory Comments for Teachers***

In ancient narratives, individuals or groups were characterized both by direct description, which “tells” their character, and indirect description, which “shows” their character, most commonly by describing their actions or activities. The character descriptions also build over time, as new scenes and descriptions add details. As their sense of a character develops, readers also begin to make comparisons between one character or character group and another. All of these things — direct and indirect description, cumulative characterization, and characterization by comparison — are present in Luke’s narrative and applicable to the individual characters we’ll look at throughout this series. They are also applicable to this week’s consideration of the church in Jerusalem as a composite character.<sup>i</sup>

The summary statements that Luke employs in Acts 1-6 provide one of the most common ways that Luke communicates such characteristic details about the church. Acts 2:42-47, coming immediately on the heels of Peter’s speech at Pentecost is the most famous of these, though you also find summary statements in 1:12-13; 4:32-35; 5:12-16; and 6:7. These summary statements serve several functions. Writing about Acts 2:42-47, Joel Green notes that “narrative summaries generally link scenes, present what is typical, and provide background information, and this is true in the present case, where Luke characterizes the nature of the community of believers in relatively short compass.”<sup>ii</sup> Importantly, the *communal* response to the Gospel takes center stage in these summaries. While individual change of belief and practice is certainly implied, the focus is on the reorientation of life *in community* with certain practices at the center. This week, our focus is on the way Luke’s account of the life of the church in Jerusalem helps us both evaluate and appreciate the character of our own congregational life as our communal response to the good news of Jesus.

## *Locating Ourselves in the Story*

In the opening verses of Acts that recount his final teachings for his ascension, Jesus tells his disciples “not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father” (Acts 1:4). The arrival of the Spirit in Jerusalem in Acts 2 sets the stage for the emergence of the church as a community empowered by God’s Spirit and definitively shaped by the story and ongoing presence of Jesus. Throughout Acts, even as the church is scattered due to an outbreak of persecution and as the Gospel is proclaimed in destinations far removed from it, Jerusalem remains an important central hub. Moreover, Luke’s portrayal of the Jerusalem church is paradigmatic—it sets our expectations for what the communal life of Christians will look like going forward.

### *Learning Objectives:*

Through this lesson, learners will...

- Build a character profile of the Jerusalem church in Acts 1-7, based on close attention to the descriptions and summary statements that Luke provides.
- Reflect on the power of the practices of the church described in these statements, particularly considering the events that occur in these early chapters.
- Write a summary statement for Central Church of Christ based on its observable practices, identifying both an area of current strength and an area for growth.

### *Notes for Study and Preparation:*

First, pray that God will guide your preparation to teach, as well as your class discussion and study, that you might grow together in faithfulness as disciples of Jesus.

Second, begin by reading all of Acts 1:12-6:7, preferably in one setting. Characters are defined both by their descriptions and by the broader settings, plots, and conflicts in which they are involved, so a sense of the broader story of the Jerusalem church is important. Then, read and analyze Acts 1:13-14; 2:42-47; 4:32-35. In preparation for the collaborative analysis of the summary statements, build your own list of characteristic practices and repeated descriptions.

Third, read through the entire teaching plan and determine your highest priority activities and discussion questions, so that you can make thoughtful adjustments as needed during class.

## Learning Activity 1: Opening Discussion

(10 minutes)

*This activity provides space for people to reflect on both outside perceptions and insiders' perspectives on the church.*

If you asked your non-Christian neighbors to think of the church as a character, what kind of character do you think the church be? An absent parent? An eccentric uncle? A strict teacher? A bumbling politician? A social services provider? A cruise ship social coordinator? Something else?

What kinds of information or evidence might a non-Christian in our context use to make judgements about the character of the church? How is that similar to or different from the kinds of information that shapes how a Christian might answer that question?

Transition: When we think of biblical characters, we typically think of the big names, the heroes of faith—Esther, Moses, Ruth, David, Joseph, Peter, Paul, and the like. But often in the book of Acts, the community of believers appears as a kind of “composite character.” Thinking of the church as a character – and the character of the church – raises some important insights for us to consider.

## Learning Activity 2: Investigating Summary Statements (15-20 minutes)

*This activity invites learners to build a cumulative “character profile” for the church in Acts 1:12-6:7, drawing on the summary statements that provide both direct description and indirect descriptions of the church's actions.*

*Note for teachers: This activity focuses on summary statements, while reading them in light of the events that surround them. You might also consider giving a quick overview of the events in Acts 1-6, depending on how well your community knows the book. If possible, build the character profile cooperatively, using a whiteboard if available.*

### Step 1: Close reading

Invite the class to consider the summary statements in 1:12-14; 2:42-47; and 4:32-35., by projecting the passages on a screen and/or inviting people to read them aloud. After each one, identify important descriptors and characteristic actions of the church, writing them on a whiteboard if one is available. (Note: The italicized comments provided here [as in future lessons] are meant to provide the teacher with additional insights or resources that can help in leading a robust discussion).

- Acts 1:12-14:
  - *Luke takes care to identify members of the broader community of 120 believers.*
    - *The eleven remaining apostles, a specially designated subset of the larger group of disciples originally named in Luke 6:12-16.*
    - *Jesus's mother and brothers. Recall Luke's emphasis on the faithfulness of Mary in Luke 1 and 2; see also Luke 8:19-21.*
    - *“The women”:* *Luke frequently highlights the role of the women who followed Jesus from his Galilean ministry onward. They actively*

*participate in and support his ministry (Luke 8:1-3), witness his crucifixion (Luke 23:49), follow to see where he will be buried so they can prepare (Luke 23:55-56), and become the first to proclaim the resurrection (Luke 24:1-12, 24).*

- *In describing their unified activity in verse 14, Luke uses a distinctive and intense term for togetherness (homothumadon), which has the sense of one mind or impulse. The term is also used in 2:46, 4:24, 5:12.<sup>iii</sup>*
- *Note the particular emphasis on prayer as an ongoing activity of the community.*
  
- *Acts 2:42-47*
  - *The word for fellowship (koinonia; 2:42) is related to the word used later to describe holding all things in common (koina; 2:44; 4:32). In context fellowship as and including the sharing of material goods is in view. A prolific proverb about friendship in Luke's day claimed that "friends hold all things in common."<sup>iv</sup>*
  - *The connected phrases, that all 'were together' and 'had everything in common' fit an ancient view of friendship in which sharing/reciprocity is key.*
  - *The form of the verbs for selling and distributing indicates that this was customary behavior in the community; concern with addressing material needs shows up again in 4:35, and in the discussion about the distribution of food to widows in 6:1-6.*
  
- *Acts 4:32-35*
  - *Here, themes of unity and sharing are restated even more strongly; the community was of "one heart and soul" and held everything in common.*
  - *Luke Timothy Johnson notes that "ownership was not utterly renounced (see 5:4) but grasping at individual possessiveness was."<sup>v</sup>*
  - *For comparison, see Deuteronomy 15:1-18 and 6:1-6.*

## Step 2: Discussion:

Use the following questions to prompt evaluation and discussion of the characteristics and features you found in the activity.

- Does this cumulative picture of community life seem realistic or practical to you? If yes, all of it, or only certain parts? If no, why not?
- Often in these summary statements, the sharing of possessions and the unity of the community are closely related. How does the presence (or absence) of possessions and wealth divide people in our world?
- Consider the events that are happening around the life of the church in these first six chapters. How might these specific practices have helped the church to thrive and stay faithful in its environment?

## Learning Activity 3: A Central Summary Statement (15-20 minutes)

*This final activity invites the class to reflect on the shape of communal life at Central, both describing and then evaluating the descriptions of the characteristic practices of the church that the class has written.*

*Note for Teachers: Depending on the size and general practice of your class, you could structure this activity in several ways. The practice recommended here is to have people do steps one and two either individually or in a small group, before that work is shared as a larger class as part of a concluding discussion. Please adapt as needed in accordance with your class size and needs. The final discussion will be best served by having several summary statements to reflect on.*

### Step 1: Identifying and Describing

Working alone or in pairs, make a list of the customary and characteristic practices at Central, the kinds of things that an attentive outsider might notice about what you regularly do. Worship and Bible classes are obvious candidates, but you should also think broadly and even outside of the church's formal programming. Consider these questions:

- What events and activities are an important part of our congregational life?
- What informal gatherings or acts of service are especially characteristic of our congregational life?

### Step 2: Summarizing

After completing your congregational "practices audit", write a short summary statement that captures your customary, characteristic, communal practices. Try modeling it on Acts 2:42-47—i.e.: All the believers at Central are...."

### Step 3: Evaluating

After providing space for people to share a few examples of summary statements for Central, use these discussion questions to do some evaluation as a full class:

1. What community practices in our congregation were affirmed by this exercise?
2. Where do you think the example of the Jerusalem church shows us an opportunity we have to grow as a church community?

Conclude class with a charge for each person to reflect on where they might be called to participate more intentionally, consistently, or reflectively in some part of Central's common life and practice.

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<sup>i</sup> Richard P. Thompson, *Keeping the Church in Its Place: The Church as Narrative Character in Acts* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 17–28.

<sup>ii</sup> Joel B. Green, *Conversion in Luke-Acts: Divine Action, Human Cognition, and the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 124.

<sup>iii</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2003), 68.

<sup>iv</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1992), 59.

<sup>v</sup> Johnson, *Acts*, 86.

# The Character of Stephen:

*Faithful Witness: Characters of Faith Week 2*

## **Focus Text(s)**

Acts 6:1-7:60

## **Focus Question**

Stephen is well-known for his defense speech before his accusers, but before he was a martyr, he was a table servant who was known for his wisdom. How does Stephen model wise, embodied, and faithful witness for Christians today?

## *Introductory Comments for Teachers*

The first seven chapters of Acts recount the life of the Christians in Jerusalem, the subject of last week's exploration of the church as collective character. During that time, the church grows exponentially in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, while also facing challenges from outside, like the two trial and imprisonment scenes, and challenges from within, like the scene with Ananias and Sapphira. The final challenge from within occurs in Acts 6:1-6, a conflict that arises when some widows are overlooked in the daily distribution of food. That conflict scene introduces our focus character for today—Stephen.

The stoning of Stephen is not the first time that opposition to the church in Acts has become violent; the apostles are flogged in Acts 5:40. It is, however, the first time that opposition to the church has become deadly. In this way, Stephen becomes the first martyr, in the sense we usually mean: someone who has died for their faith. The Greek word martyr, however, also has the general sense of "witness", and Stephen is indeed a powerful witness to Jesus in both his words and his deeds.

Luke presents Stephen as an exemplary character. He is one of the seven chosen to oversee the ministry of the table that constituted an important ministry to widows. He is described as "full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom" (6:3), "full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (6:5), and "full of grace and power" (6:8). Not only does he serve at tables, but he bears witness to Jesus in conversation with a group of Jewish opponents and then, after hostility mounts, offers a defense speech that retells Old Testament history to both proclaim Jesus and prophetically challenge his accusers. In his death, he clearly imitates Jesus. This week's lesson explores the various dimensions of faithful Christian witness that Stephen presents for us.

## *Locating Ourselves in the Story*

The extended scene featuring Stephen, from his selection to oversee the ministry of the table to his stoning by an angry mob, is the culminating story in the first section of Acts that is set in Jerusalem. Following his death, persecution breaks out that scatters the church outside of Jerusalem and onto the trajectory laid out by Jesus in Acts 1:8 – “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

## *Learning Objectives:*

Through this lesson, learners will...

- Analyze the trial scene and the various characters or parties involved.
- Consider the perspectives, motivations, emotions and behaviors of the characters in the scene, both good and bad.
- Determine the dimensions of Christian witness that Stephen embodies and exemplifies for the church in his day and in ours.

## *Notes for Study and Preparation:*

First, pray that God will guide your preparation to teach and your class discussion and study, so that you might grow together in faithfulness as disciples of Jesus.

Second, read the entire scene. Stephen’s speech is the longest in Acts. The lesson plan does not include in-depth analysis of the speech and its various details, but teachers would be well served to have a fairly comprehensive sense of what Stephen argues and what evidence he uses.

As you read, consider the following questions:

- What Old Testament stories does Stephen cite? What about each Old Testament scene/character does he emphasize?
- How does Stephen’s speech both respond to the charges against him and move to convict his listeners.

Third, the lesson plan provides a fair number of notes about the various parties in the scene, which are intended to support the role play activity that the week includes. Review these notes in preparation for class and determine your highest priority activities and discussion questions, so that you can make thoughtful adjustments as needed during class.

## Learning Activity 1: Opening Discussion

(10 minutes)

*This week's opening discussion dives directly into the conflict scene that introduces Stephen into the story, inviting reflection on experiences of conflict and resolution.*

In Acts 6:1-6, we have a scene of conflict within the church. Read verse 1 and discuss:

- How would you summarize the issue here?
  - *The issue seems to be language and possibly culture barriers between different groups within the Jewish community. Recall that Jewish communities are found all over the Greco-Roman world, speaking many different languages. The different languages spoken at Pentecost were for the benefit of the "devout Jews from every people under heaven" who were in Jerusalem (Acts 2:5).*
  - *Carl Holladay notes, "Luke probably has in mind, on the one hand, Jewish Christians who speak Greek primarily if not exclusively, and on the other hand, Jewish Christians who speak Hebrew or Aramaic as their native language and possibly Greek as their second language. The former would read or listen to the LXX [the Greek translation of the Old Testament] as their Scripture, whereas the latter would read or listen to the Hebrew Bible. One could imagine each group attending different synagogues, where readings and prayers were done in Greek and Hebrew or Aramaic respectively."<sup>i</sup>*
- Share a story about a time when you've seen a similar conflict in some group that you've been part of. How was that conflict resolved?
- What is the resolution proposed here?

Transition: This scene of conflict is the context from which Stephen, our focus character for this week, emerges. Stephen is introduced as one of the seven individuals chosen to oversee the ministry of the table (Acts 6:5) before he steps onto center stage in 6:8-7:60.

## Learning Activity 2: The Trial of Stephen

(20-25 minutes)

*This activity prompts an interactive exploration of the conflict and trial scene that follows, with attention to Stephen's character development.*

*Note for teachers: this activity is designed for small groups as a type of role play activity. You are encouraged to ask groups to take on the perspective of their assigned character in the story and then designate a spokesperson who will represent the perspective of their group, with the teacher playing the role of the judge. If you feel that your class would strongly resist this form of active learning, you can reconfigure the assignment for group discussion.*

Acts 6:8-7:60 present the trial of Stephen before the council in Jerusalem, along with the violent outcome of that trial. To explore the various dynamics of this scene, we are

going to treat it like a trial scene in a courtroom drama and explore it from the perspective of different characters.

### Step 1: Set Up the Activity

- 1) Divide the class into four groups, subdividing the groups if they are too large to make for easy conversation.
- 2) Assign each of the groups one of the following characters (real or imagined) from the scene: the prosecutors, the character witnesses, the defendant (Stephen), and the jury.
  - a. *The Stephen group has the most ground to cover, since Stephen's speech is the longest speech in Acts. You might encourage them to focus on the characters Stephen includes and how he concludes the speech.*
- 3) Once each group is decided, give each their discussion question(s) along with several minutes to prepare a response.
- 4) Ask each group to nominate a spokesperson who will represent their group's perspective in the "mock trial."
- 5) Host the "mock trial", asking each group to make their case in turn.
  - a. *You may find the notes provided below helpful to further flesh out the information provided by each party. It is available to use at your discretion.*

### Discussion Questions for Each Group

- Prosecutors: What, specifically, are the charges you are bringing against Stephen? What might motivate you to bring these accusations?
- Character witnesses (an imagined role in the scene): What do you have to say in Stephen's defense about his identity and character?
- Stephen: What is the basis of your defense? What parts of the story of Israel do you recount and emphasize? For what purpose?
- Jury (an imagined role in the scene): What is at stake for you in this scene? What is your reaction to Stephen's testimony? Why do you reach the verdict you do?

### Teacher Notes for Each Role

- Prosecutors:
  - *The accusers (referred to in modern parlance as "prosecutors") are Jews from the broader Mediterranean world.*
  - *The initial charges were that Stephen had spoken blasphemous things "against Moses [i.e.: the Law] and God" (6:11).*
  - *These false charges were elaborated later when Stephen is brought before the Sanhedrin – "This man never stops saying things against this holy place and against the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses handed on to us" (6:13-14).*
    - *Jesus's own words are placed on Stephen's lips here. Carl Holladay notes, "By including here, rather than in the Lukan passion narrative, the threat that Jesus poses to the temple, Luke ironically interprets what has been reported in Acts 3-5. The apostles' unrelenting proclamation, along with their healing miracles, has been carried out in the temple precincts. The community of believers that has formed around these dramatic displays of*

*power has arisen within the temple. Even more remarkable, a sizable group of priests are now numbered among the new converts (6:7). At the narrative level, what the false witnesses charge is true: Jesus the Nazarene poses a serious threat to the temple and to the continuing viability of Mosaic customs.”<sup>ii</sup>*

- “Character Witnesses”: details about Stephen that character witnesses might use.
  - “Good standing...full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (6:3) – the criteria for the selection of the seven, which Stephen clearly meets.
  - “Full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (6:5) – part of Stephen’s initial introduction
  - “Full of grace and power” (6:8) – recall the pairing of power and Holy Spirit in Acts 1:8
  - “Did great signs and wonders” (6:8) – the language of signs and wonders recalls the prophets and the miracles (both healings and rebuke of demons) done by Jesus. Luke references wonders and signs done by the apostles Acts 2:43 and 5:12 and calls the healing of the lame man in 3:1-10 a “sign of healing” in 3:22. Signs and wonders points to the continued saving work of God in the world.
  - Spoke with “wisdom and Spirit” that could not be opposed (6:10) – see Jesus’s promise to the persecuted disciples in Luke 21:14-15: “make up your minds not to prepare your defense in advance, for I will give you words and a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict.”
  
- Stephen: His selective retelling of Old Testament History
  - Stephen retells their collective story in a selective way that builds toward the indictment in 7:51-53. The structure of the speech follows:<sup>iii</sup>
    - 7:1-8 – God’s promises to Abraham
    - 7:9-16 – Joseph and the Patriarchs
    - 7:17-43 – The Rejection of Moses
    - 7:22 – Moses educated in wisdom, powerful in deed.
      - 7:23-29 – killing and flight to Midian
      - 7:30-34 – burning bush and commission to return.
      - 7:35-38 – Moses was rejected.
      - 7:39-43 – golden calf
    - 7:44-53 – the “tent of testimony,” the Temple and the concluding indictment
  - Note the moment in 7:51 when Stephen shifts from talking about “our ancestors” to referring to “your ancestors,” a shift that indicts his accusers as those who resisted the work of God.
  
- The “Jury”
  - The accusations against Stephen strike against the very center of Jewish religious and cultural identity – the temple in Jerusalem and the law. It helps to bear in mind that the Jewish people are a threatened minority within the broader Roman empire, and these markers of identity have been attacked by foreign empires before (as during occupation by the Greeks). As theologian Willie Jennings notes, “These faithful of Israel’s far off places perceive Stephen as a threat. Like the religious leaders who interrogated the apostles earlier in our story, these anxious souls cannot hear and see the new order coming from Stephen. They only hear one who

would take away hard-won freedom to be true to the ancestors and one who would render unrecognizable the identity of the faithful to God."<sup>iv</sup>

- Beverly Gaventa notes that "like the council in 5:33, the audience is enraged; grinding of the teeth frequently characterizes the enemies of God or God's people in the Old Testament (e.g., Job 16:9; Psalm 35:16; 37:12; 112:10; and see also Luke 13:28. With Stephen's claim to Christophany [i.e.: a vision of Christ] in v. 56, the rage erupts into violence."<sup>v</sup> What started as a formal trial scene before the council seems to descent into mob violence.

### Learning Activity 3: The Character of Stephen (10 minutes)

*This final activity shifts attention specifically to the conclusion of the scene and what it reveals about the character of Stephen.*

*Notes for Teachers: To transition away from any role play activity, it is helpful to explicitly ask everyone to drop the perspective they've adopted and turn their attention back to broader scene.*

Let's look together at the conclusion of the scene, which Luke narrates in a way that makes explicit connections between Stephen and Jesus.

- What parallels between Stephen and Jesus does Luke draw our attention to?
  - *Vision of the Son of Man at the right hand of God*
    - Stephen – Acts 7:55-56
    - Jesus – Luke 22:69
  - *Entrusting of self to God*
    - Stephen - "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" Acts 7:59
    - Jesus – "Father into your hands I commend my spirit" Luke 23:46
  - *Forgiveness of accusers*
    - Stephen – "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." Acts 7:60
    - Jesus – "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" Luke 23:34
- Why do you think that Luke takes such care to show us the parallels between Jesus and Stephen? What are we meant to see? To learn?

## Learning Activity 4: Stephen as Model of Faithful Witness (10-15 minutes)

*This final discussion approaches Stephen as a model of what faithful witness looks like.*

*Note to teachers: Based on the time remaining, you might format this discussion in two ways. The first option is called "Think-Pair-Share" in which 1) individuals are given a minute or two of silence to think to themselves, 2) then pair up with a neighbor to share what they thought, before 3) shifting to full group discussion. Alternatively, you can conduct a single full group discussion.*

Luke seems to present Stephen as a model or example, given his positive characterization and his exemplary, Jesus-like actions. Discuss:

- What does Stephen model for believers today, in our context?
- When you think about the different aspects and activities of Stephen – his wisdom in speech, his Jesus-like ministry, his table service to the vulnerable, his knowledge of the Scriptures, his Jesus-like suffering, etc.—which to you seems most needed in our context? Most lacking?

## Final Reflection and Sending (1-2 minutes)

Conclude class with prayer, asking for God to grant us the same Spirit of wisdom, service, and power so that we might bear witness to the Way of Jesus in our words, our suffering, our ministry, and our service.

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<sup>i</sup> Carl Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 152.

<sup>ii</sup> Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, 158.

<sup>iii</sup> The outline follows Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 119–30.

<sup>iv</sup> Willie James Jennings, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 67.

<sup>v</sup> Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 130–31.



# The Character of the Ethiopian Eunuch:

*Seeking Understanding: Characters of Faith Week 3*

## **Focus Text(s)**

Acts 8:26-40

## **Focus Question**

The Ethiopian eunuch, though an unlikely convert, is a model of the faithful search for understanding. What are his characteristics as a learner, and how could we cultivate those same characteristics?

## ***Introductory Comments for Teachers***

The Ethiopian eunuch's encounter with Philip is the second of four "representative conversions" in Acts 8-10, each of which takes up a distinctive figure who represents the powerful spread of the Gospel to and beyond the church's initial expectations. This week's lesson looks at the character of the Eunuch, paying attention to how he is described in the story and what actions he takes as a person who seeks to understand and who faithfully responds based on his understanding.

The Eunuch is an utterly unique character in Luke's story, one who occupies a complicated position in the broader Greco-Roman world. Eunuchs, who were fully or partially castrated men, often worked in palaces or for prominent women. In ancient Greek and Roman thought, they were "non-men" because they lacked physical and procreative power. Some writers went so far as to call them "monstrous".<sup>i</sup> Israel's Torah prohibits eunuchs from serving in priestly capacities (Lev 21:17-23) and excludes them from full admittance into the assembly of the Lord (Deut 23:1). It is unclear what access the eunuch would have had when he went to Jerusalem to worship. Says New Testament scholar Brittany Wilson, "eunuchs were considered ritually unclean because they. . . did not meet standards for bodily wholeness."<sup>ii</sup> For this reason, the eunuch is often described as the consummate outsider.

One of the fascinating things about this scene is that it presents the Ethiopian Eunuch as an example of faithful reading, faithful seeking, and faithful response. New Testament scholar Michal Beth Dinkler argues that Luke presents this story in part to help to teach his readers what it looks like to be a faithful learner and interpreter of Scripture.<sup>iii</sup> This lesson looks at the Eunuch through both of these lenses, paying attention, first, to how Luke characterizes him, and second, to what the Eunuch reveals about the practices and postures of someone faithfully seeking to understand.

## *Locating Ourselves in the Story*

In Acts 8, Luke has brought us along to witness some key, boundary breaking moments in the ministry of Philip and in the life of the early church. Philip is one of the Greek-speaking Jews identified to lead the ministry to the widows; he is in the same list as Stephen and is likewise “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3). In Acts 8:3-25, Philip ministers in Samaria, where a great number of people turn to the Lord, including one erstwhile magician. In 8:26-40, God directs Philip to encounter a man traveling home from Jerusalem to Ethiopia, a location considered by many Greek and Roman writers to be the edge of the known world. In this way, Philip’s ministry helps to fulfill Acts 1:8 – “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit falls on you. And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and *Samaria*, and to the *ends of the earth*.”

## *Learning Objectives:*

Through this lesson, learners will...

- Build a character profile of the Ethiopian eunuch, paying attention to both his distinctiveness and Luke’s portrayal of him as a model learner.
- Reflect on their own identity as an insider or outsider, as well as their own experience as a learner.
- Take a concrete action in the coming week to deepen their own practice as a person of faith seeking greater understanding.

## *Notes for Study and Preparation:*

First, pray that God will guide your preparation to teach, as well as your class discussion and study, that you might grow together in faithfulness as disciples of Jesus.

Second, read this story carefully, paying attention to the interaction between Philip and the Eunuch. You might also find it instructive to review the previous scenes in which Philip has appeared, both in 6:1-6 and in 8:3b-25.

As you read, consider the following questions:

- How is the character of the Eunuch described? What does the historical information provided add to your understanding of the significance of the scene and the questions exchanged between Philip and the Eunuch?
- If you categorize this scene as an educational scene, what features or actions seem important?

Third, read through the entire teaching plan and determine your highest priority activities and discussion questions, so that you can make thoughtful adjustments as needed during class.

## Learning Activity 1: Opening Discussion

(5-10 minutes)

*Given the Eunuch's position as a "consummate outsider" who nonetheless becomes part of the Christian movement, the opening question invites people to reflect on the experience of being an insider versus an outsider.*

*Note for teachers: Since the discussion might elicit some sensitive or closely held features of people's experience, the "poll" below is anonymous. In the discussion, everyone is invited to reflect on the experience of being an insider or outsider, no matter how they answered.*

- Reflect for a moment: In your day-to-day life, do you more often feel like an outsider or an insider? Now, close your eyes; let's take an anonymous poll by raising hands.
- After sharing the overall insider-vs-outsider tally from the poll, reflect together:
  - What does it feel like to be an insider? An outsider?
  - What are the gifts of each state of being? What are the challenges?

Transition: The story of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 is the second of four conversion stories in this section. We're going to consider the unique character of the Eunuch as an outsider seeking understanding.

## Learning Activity 2: Encountering the Ethiopian Eunuch

(15-20 minutes)

*This activity aims to build out a character profile of the Ethiopian Eunuch; in this story there is a greater amount and variety of detail than in other short stories.*

*Note for teachers: Decide in advance how you want to structure this activity, particularly whether you want to conduct the search for relevant details as a whole class or assign the task to smaller discussion groups who then report back to the whole group.*

Step 1: To begin the discussion, build a character profile for the Ethiopian Eunuch:

- Identify any indications of his features, social location, or characteristics. Look for 1) titles and descriptors, as well as 2) indications of what this character has or possesses.
  - "Ethiopian": In the eyes of Greek and Roman thinkers, Ethiopia was an exotic and foreign place south of Egypt (the region of modern-day Sudan). While sometimes viewed with fascination, more commonly its inhabitants were viewed derisively. Such thinkers also typically looked down on countries like Ethiopia with female monarchs.<sup>iv</sup> Candace is the title for the queens of Ethiopia.
  - "Official" – the title shares the same root as the word for power; he is a person of power, though he is a servant of the queen.

- *In charge of treasury.* The fact that he possesses both a scroll of Isaiah in a world where scrolls are incredibly expensive and a chariot big enough for three (he has a driver; 8:38) indicates that he has access to considerable means.
- *“Eunuch”:* this is the character description that appears persistently throughout the story (vs. 27, 34, 36, 38, 39).
  - See the historical information provided in the “Introductory Comments for Teachers.”

## Step 2: Discussion:

- In what ways is the Eunuch an “insider”? In what ways is he an “outsider”
- Can you think of any characters in the Gospels that are similarly both insiders and outsiders in some way?
  - *Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10 may be a potential comparison – he is the chief tax collector, with access to wealth and resources. Yet, the fact that people grumble when Jesus visits the home of this “sinner” indicates his outsider status.*
- Can you think of any figures in our world, either specific figures or character types, that are comparable to the Ethiopian Eunuch in some way? What are the similarities? What are the differences?

## Learning Activity 3: The Eunuch Encounters the Gospel (15-20 minutes)

*The activity focuses our attention on the way the Eunuch seeks to understand.*

*Note for Teachers: If possible, you might list the Ethiopian’s actions as a learner on the board, so that people can easily refer to them in the discussion that follows.*

This is an educational scene – there is a clear subject matter (the scroll of Isaiah), a teacher, a student, questions, and answers.

### Step 1: Assess the scene.

- What actions does the Ethiopian take that characterize him as a person seeking understanding?
  - *He had traveled to Jerusalem to worship (8:27).*
  - *He reads from the scroll of Isaiah (8:28, 30).*
  - *He admits his need for help understanding (8:31).*
    - *In response to the question, “Do you understand what you are reading?” the eunuch asks how Philip thinks he could possibly understand without a guide (8:31). The word for “guide” is related to the word for road or way—i.e.: How could I understand without someone to show me the way? Luke may well intend a play on words here, given that he alone of the New Testament authors calls the church “the Way.”*
  - *He invites Philip to instruct him (8:32)*
  - *He asks questions (8:34)*

- *He responds in faith and submits to baptism (8:36-38)*
- *He goes on his way rejoicing (8:39)*
  - *For joy as a response to the recognition of God's work, see Mary's joy in Luke 1:47; Jesus's joy in Luke 10:21; the joy at the end of the three parables in Luke 15; and the Philippian jailors joy at receiving the gospel in Acts 16:34*
- The Eunuch's second question is "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Where does the verse he is referring to come from? What do you think might have interested the Eunuch in that particular verse?
  - *The quote comes from the "suffering servant" song in Isaiah 53. It describes a figure who is 1) silent before his shearers (or, more literally, his "cutters"), 2) humiliated, 3) with no descendants. Some commentators wonder -- Is it possible that the eunuch might have identified with the figure in the Isaiah passage?*
  - *Note the Philip begins with this passage – with the Eunuch's original point of interest and perhaps personal identification – to proclaim the gospel (8:35).*
- The Eunuch's third question is "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" Since Philip immediately baptizes him, the ultimate answer seems to be "nothing!" But if we step back and think about it, is there anything that might have given Philip reason to pause?
  - *Based on passages like Deuteronomy 21:1, Philip could have conceivably answered "the fact that you are a eunuch." But Philip seems to see God at work in the kind of great restoration talked about in Isaiah 56:2-5 (see below).*

<sup>3</sup>Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say,  
 "The Lord will surely separate me from his people";  
 and do not let the eunuch say,  
 "I am just a dry tree."

<sup>4</sup>For thus says the Lord:  
 To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths,  
 who choose the things that please me  
 and hold fast my covenant,

<sup>5</sup>I will give, in my house and within my walls,  
 a monument and a name  
 better than sons and daughters;  
 I will give them an everlasting name  
 that shall not be cut off."

*Says Wilson, "Luke presents the eunuch as an included member of 'the Way', signaling the eschatological in-breaking of God's action in the world."<sup>v</sup>*

## Learning Activity 4: Final Discussion (10-15 minutes)

*This final activity moves the class toward concrete action in response to the story.*

Discuss:

1. The Eunuch is a “consummate outsider” who ultimately becomes part of the community through baptism into the name of Jesus. In your opinion, does being an “insider” tempt you to think that you are no longer someone who needs to seek understanding? Explain your answer, offering examples or details if possible.
2. Which of the actions toward seeking understanding that the Eunuch models comes most easily for you? Which do you find most difficult, for whatever reason?
3. Where does the example of the Eunuch invite you to seek deeper understanding of God more actively and faithfully? What is one concrete step you can take *this week* in that direction?

## Final Reflection and Sending (1-2 minutes)

*Conclude class with prayer that asks God to help us be both like Philip, looking out for those around us who might be seeking, and like the Ethiopian Eunuch, persistently seeking deeper understanding and commitment to God.*

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<sup>i</sup> Brittany E. Wilson, *Unmanly Men: Refigurations of Masculinity in Luke-Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 120.

<sup>ii</sup> Wilson, *Unmanly Men*, 123.

<sup>iii</sup> Michal Beth Dinkler, “Interpreting Pedagogical Acts: Acts 8:26-40 and Narrative Reflexivity as Pedagogy,” *NTS* 63 (2017): 424.

<sup>iv</sup> Wilson, *Unmanly Men*, 115–19. See also Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts*, 109.

<sup>v</sup> Wilson, *Unmanly Men*, 124.

# The Character of Ananias:

*Courageous Obedience: Characters of Faith Week 4*

## **Focus Text(s)**

Acts 9:1-19, with Acts 22:12-16

## **Focus Question**

Ananias of Damascus plays a critical but often overlooked role in the most famous conversion story in the Bible. Where does Jesus call us to obedience that stretches us beyond our comfort level?

## *Introductory Comments for Teachers*

The conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus probably qualifies as one of the most famous stories in the New Testament, and almost certainly the most famous story in Acts. Luke tells it no fewer than three times — first in Acts 9, where it is told by the narrator, and then again in Acts 22 and 26 when Paul employs it in defense speeches before an angry crowd in Jerusalem, and later before Herod Agrippa and the Roman Governor Festus. When we look at the account of Saul's conversion in Acts 9, however, we notice that much of the attention falls on a man called Ananias, a disciple who lived in Damascus and one of the very people that Saul intended to imprison. Like Saul, Ananias receives a vision directly from Jesus. Like Saul, Ananias is given instructions by Jesus regarding what he is to do. Like Saul, Ananias helps to change the course of the story, but his role in this famous scene is easy to overlook.

Some of us have a powerful story of how turning to Jesus reshaped our lives in a dramatic way. Others of us do not. Given his ultimate fame and powerful presence in the New Testament, Saul/Paul can feel out of reach to us, but Ananias of Damascus may feel a little closer to home. He is a community insider, a church member, one who is well-respected and known for his faithfulness. Jesus breaks into his life to call him to the risky work of obedience for the sake of another. Theologian Willie Jennings puts it this way, "Ananias was there for the crucial time of blindness when someone could not see their way and did not know their future. Luke makes sure we see the courageous actions of this disciple."<sup>i</sup> Attending to the character of Ananias provides us with opportunities to reflect on the courage that obedience requires.

## ***Locating Ourselves in the Story***

The story of the conversion of Saul in which Ananias plays such a critical part immediately follows the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch and constitutes the third of four representative conversions in Acts 8-10. The story begins by recalling our earlier introduction to the character of Saul, who appears in the final moments of Stephen's stoning in Acts 7, where the witnesses "laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul" (7:58). Acts 8:1-3a confirms Saul as one involved in the severe persecution of the church in Jerusalem: "Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison" (8:3). When Luke says in Acts 9:1, "*Meanwhile* Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord," it conveys that this has been Saul's ongoing activity while our attention has shifted to Philip's ministry.

## ***Learning Objectives:***

Through this lesson, learners will...

- Reconsider the story of Saul's conversion, focusing on the role of Ananias within that story.
- Consider who and what we personally feel is risky about the call to follow Jesus, when we are honest with ourselves and others.
- Commit to pray for God to increase our courage and correct our perception of others.

## ***Notes for Study and Preparation:***

First, pray that God will guide your preparation to teach, as well as your class discussion and study, that you might grow together in faithfulness as disciples of Jesus.

Second, read both Acts 9:1-19 and Acts 22:12-16, working through the character profile questions in preparation for the discussion.

As you read, consider the following questions:

- Unlike other characters, like the Ethiopian eunuch, explicit descriptors of Ananias are few. Based on the details Luke does provide, what do you think we can reasonably assume about Ananias?
- What about Ananias reminds you of other biblical characters?

Third, read through the entire teaching plan and determine your highest priority activities and discussion questions, so that you can make thoughtful adjustments as needed during class.

## Learning Activity 1: Opening Discussion

(10-15 minutes)

*Since the lesson will focus on the courage demonstrated by Ananias in his obedience to Jesus, this activity sets the stage by prompting a debate about whether following God is risky or safe.*

*Note for teachers: If your classroom dynamic permits it, this activity is designed as a debate. Consider dividing the room in half, asking one half to prepare to argue that following Jesus means safety and the other half to argue that following Jesus means taking risks. Then, ask both sides to present their assigned perspective, providing evidence. If you suspect a debate may not work well for your class, try at minimum to elicit different perspectives during the discussion.*

- What do you think? If forced to choose one option, would you say that following Jesus involve safety or risk? Provide some evidence for your conclusion.
  - *The assignment involves the forced choice between one or the other, because forcing people to land on one side of the divide tends to generate the clearest positions. For the sake of the discussion, encourage people to think in either/or terms as a thought experiment.*

Transition: This week, we'll spend some time with Ananias — not the one who lied to the Holy Spirit, or the high priest in Jerusalem, but Ananias of Damascus, whose risky obedience to Jesus helped to alter the course of the story.

## Learning Activity 2: Familiar Story, Less Familiar Character (20 minutes)

*While this activity culminates in focused attention to the character of Ananias, it begins with attention to narrative of Saul's conversion.*

### Step 1: Recollection:

Ask someone to retell the story of Saul's conversion from memory. Then, ask if anyone else remembers a detail about the story that wasn't included in that retelling.

### Step 2: Review:

Read or have someone read Acts 9:1-9, and discuss:

- What details about Saul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus did we not initially recall?
- What details in this story are interesting to you, or seem important for understanding the significance of what is happening?
  - *Note the ironic reversal in these first nine verses. Saul is travelling to Damascus so that he might "bring [Christians] bound to Jerusalem" (v. 1). Instead, his companions "led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus" (v. 8).*
  - *Jesus says to Saul, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute ME?" This is the second time in the story that someone's actions toward the Christians have been taken as*

*actions against God. Recall that Peter tells Ananias and Sapphira that they have “lied to the Holy Spirit” in their attempt to deceive the church.*

### Step 3: Character Profile:

Build a character profile for Ananias, using Acts 9:10-19 and Acts 22:12-19.

- What details about him are we given? What do we have to assume or infer about Ananias, based on what we know?
- What actions does Ananias take? What lines of dialogue does he have in the scene, and who does he speak to?
- Does anything about Ananias remind you of other biblical characters?
  - *For similar responses to divine call, see Abraham in Genesis 22:1; Jacob in Genesis 31:11 and 46:2; Moses in Exodus 3:4; and young Samuel in 1 Sam 3:4<sup>ii</sup>*
- Now, read Acts 22:12-19. What further details does Paul’s later description of the role of Ananias in the story add to what we already know?
  - *Paul’s note that Ananias was well-respected by the Jews in Damascus is likely part of his attempt to persuade the crowd in Jerusalem that the Jesus movement is faithful to the God of Israel. In the same speech, Paul also emphasizes his upbringing under Gamaliel in Jerusalem and his zeal for the law. Recall that at this point, the Christian movement was understood to be a sect of the Jewish faith (Acts 24:5, 14; 28:22). Importantly, recall also that Luke often uses “the Jews” as shorthand for the Jewish opponents of the Christians; after all, a great many of the Christians – including Paul! - are Jewish believers in Jesus.*
  - *New Testament scholar Carl Holladay makes the following point: “in the first account, Ananias is called a ‘disciple’ (9:10), whereas in the second account his Jewishness and his fidelity to Torah are paramount. To both Jews and Christians, Ananias is present as a credible participant in the event. Yet he is not only a participant; he is also a witness, someone who can vouch for the veracity of what Luke reports and what Paul repeats in his defense speech. . . . Given Luke’s description of Ananias, his impeccable qualifications, and his dutiful submission to the risen Lord himself, no one could question that Saul had truly repented of the sins he had committed against the church, that these sins had been washed away, and that he had received the Holy Spirit as proof of his conversion.”<sup>iii</sup>*
- What new insights do these passages in Acts 9 and Acts 22 add to our understanding of the role of Saul/Paul in the story? Where and how do those things become true?
  - *We get two indications of Saul/Paul’s future vocation:*
    - *Acts 9:15: “he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.”*
    - *Acts 22:14-15: “The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One, and to hear his own voice, for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard.”*

## Learning Activity 3: A Faith like Ananias

(15-20 minutes)

*This activity explores the implications of Ananias's story for our own call to faithfulness.*

*Note for Teachers: Whenever possible, gently encourage the class to be specific in their answers. For instance, if someone named the potential risk of extending hospitality to people who aren't like us, try to clarify what kinds of difference feel most threatening (i.e.: people who don't share our political views, etc.).*

With a clearer picture of the character of Ananias in mind, let's turn now to explore what his example might have to teach us.

Discuss:

- Imagine for a moment that Ananias decided the risk was too great and refused to do what Jesus had asked of him. What about Christian faith and Christian history would be different if Ananias had never gone to Saul?
  - *Of course, God could always have sent someone else. Still, it's instructive to think about the monumental consequences of Ananias's response of trust and obedience.*
- What kinds of encounters, with what kind of people, feel risky to us? Why?
- In his commentary on Acts, Willie Jennings says this about the scene:

*"Luke does not tell us whether Ananias was afraid of Saul, but only that he was honest with God. We must not run past his honesty with God. He reminds God that Saul is a killer, and God in turn calls Saul his vessel who will carry the name of Jesus. God sees us differently no doubt, but the question always for disciples is, can we see with God? Can we see those who are in rumor or truth dangerous as God sees them?"<sup>iv</sup>*

How is it that God sees Saul here? How does God see the people we named a moment ago?

- We've focused so far on the potentially risky encounters with others that obedience to Jesus might call us to. What other acts of obedience to Jesus seem potentially or actually risky?
  - *For instance, we might think of radical generosity like the act of selling possessions and giving to the poor (see Luke 12).*
- What are the qualities or conditions that make it possible for us to courageously follow Jesus even when it is difficult?

## Final Reflection and Sending

(1-2 minutes)

Conclude class with a time of silent prayer, in which each person is invited to pray about the ways Jesus might be calling them to more courageous obedience and / or to

ask for God to provide them with what they need to obey courageously. After 30-60 seconds of silent prayer, draw the class to a close with a short final closing prayer.

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<sup>i</sup> Willie James Jennings, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 94.

<sup>ii</sup> Carl Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 197.

<sup>iii</sup> Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, 210.

<sup>iv</sup> Jennings, *Acts*, 94–95.

# The Character of Tabitha:

*Gracious Encouragement: Characters of Faith Week 5*

## **Focus Text(s)**

Acts 9:36-43

## **Focus Question**

Tabitha isn't just the recipient of God's healing power – she's a model disciple. What human legacies and artifacts of selfless service will our church leave behind?

## *Introductory Comments for Teachers*

It's easy to overlook Tabitha. Her story is sandwiched in between two of the most famous stories in Acts – Saul's transformative encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus earlier in chapter 9 and Peter's transformative encounter with Cornelius, the first Gentile convert, in chapters 10-11. Comparatively, her story is short, and our readings of it tend to focus more on Peter's role than hers. But Tabitha, or, Dorcas, if you prefer her Greek name, deserves more from us than this.

There is much about Tabitha that we do not know. We don't know her age, only that she became ill and died. We don't know anything definitive about her social standing, whether she was rich or poor. The nature of her ministry to widows and her acts of regular generosity to the poor suggest that she has resources at her disposal but do not necessarily mean she was wealthy. After all, Luke has told us elsewhere of a widow giving all she had to live on (Luke 21:1-4). We don't know anything about her past or present marital status, only that no husband is mentioned. These kinds of details are largely left to our imaginations.

The details we are given paint a portrait of a woman worthy of our attention and respect. Her identity as a disciple is the first and most important detail about Tabitha. It even precedes her name! Luke frequently uses "disciples" to describe the broader community, but only rarely uses the singular "disciple" to describe an individual.<sup>1</sup> Luke here uses the female form of the word disciple, which is quite rare; we miss it in our English translations, but it practically leaps off the page in Greek, heightening the emphasis. This lesson presents us with the opportunity of exploring the concrete nature of her discipleship, her significance to her community, and how her example can influence our own actions and the way we show honor to others.

## *Locating Ourselves in the Story*

Following Saul's return to Tarsus after Barnabas vouches for him with the Jerusalem church (9:28-30), Luke swings the spotlight back onto Peter. Peter has evidently been engaged in ministry in the broader region of Judea. In the transition, Luke indicates that while we've been paying attention to Philip and Saul, Peter has been travelling "here and there among the brothers and sisters" (Acts 9:32). Tabitha's scene is the second of two miracle stories featuring Peter. He heals a lame man named Aeneas in Lydda, a city ten miles northwest of the coastal city of Joppa, where Tabitha lives.<sup>ii</sup> Though Luke records no "mission to Joppa", there is a substantial Christian community there who sends for Peter upon Tabitha's death.

## *Learning Objectives:*

Through this lesson, learners will...

- Identify the details of Luke's portrayal of Tabitha as a model disciple.
- Reflect on personal experiences with the kind of personal care, love, and service that Tabitha models and that the widows honor.
- Select a concrete means of either 1) honoring the service of Tabitha's among us or 2) joining in service alongside them.

## *Notes for Study and Preparation:*

First, pray that God will guide your preparation to teach, as well as your class discussion and study, that you might grow together in faithfulness as disciples of Jesus.

Second, read both Tabitha's story in Acts 9:36-43 and the parallel story of Jesus's healing of the dead girl from Luke 8:40-42, 49-56 (the healing of the bleeding woman interrupts this narrative). Compare those two stories in preparation for the class activity. Also, take a closer look at other scenes regarding care for the poor in Luke's Gospel, those cited in the lesson and others you may remember (if you have access to the Luke curriculum, see lesson eight).

As you read, consider the following questions:

- In what ways is Tabitha (or Dorcas) honored and described?
- What do we learn by paying attention to the response of the community to her passing?

Third, read through the entire teaching plan and determine your highest priority activities and discussion questions, so that you can make thoughtful adjustments as needed during class.

## Learning Activity 1: Opening Discussion

(5-10 minutes)

*To introduce the discussion of Tabitha, this activity invites the class to reflect on the experience of receiving someone's concrete care and attention through the gift of something handmade, a situation analogous to the widows in our passage today.*

*Note for teachers: This discussion lends itself particularly well to discussion pairs or groups, so that more people have an opportunity to share. If you choose that discussion format, you might ask for 4-5 examples to be shared with the whole class.*

- Think about something you own that someone made for you, something that is significant to you. Describe it. What does it look like? Who made it and what is their relationship to you?

Transition: Luke presents Tabitha, a native of Joppa on the coastline of Israel, as a model disciple. We began by thinking about the generosity of people in our own experience because we see in Tabitha's story the grateful response of members of her community who received her generosity.

## Learning Activity 2: The Character of Tabitha

(20-25 minutes)

*The purpose of this activity is to invite learners to pay careful attention to Tabitha's single scene in Acts, looking at the specific details that add to our understanding of her character and her significance to her community.*

*Note for teachers: The passage is short enough that, if you are using a projector, you might be able to project the whole story of for the class to consider. This could be helpful, as the lesson calls for very close attention to the details. You might also consider projecting the two sections of the passage that we'll look at it turn, each on a different slide.*

### Step 1: Build a Character Profile

Read Acts 9:36-38, which introduces us to Tabitha and to her Christian community in Joppa. Then, discuss the following:

- What details are we given about Tabitha? What details are we left to imagine or infer?
  - *The tense of the verbs for "devoted to good works and acts of charity" (NRSV) indicate ongoing action. Acts of charity means almsgiving to the poor. The NIV more accurately captures this, saying that she was "always doing good and helping the poor."*
  - *See the note about her description as disciple in the opening summary.*
- Think back to Luke's Gospel. What does Jesus say about almsgiving or care for the poor as a feature of discipleship?
  - *Luke 12:32-34: after the instructions to not worry about life or money — "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do*

*not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near, and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”*

- *Luke 18:18-25: Jesus’s encounter with the rich ruler — “[Jesus] said to him, “There is still one thing lacking. Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” But when he heard this, he became sad, for he was very rich. Jesus looked at him and said, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!*
  - *Luke 19:1-10: from Jesus’s encounter with chief tax collector Zacchaeus — “Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham.*
- Think back to earlier in Acts. Where else have we seen generosity for the poor as a distinctive mark of the Christian life?
    - *See notes on the summary statements in week 1.*

## Step 2: Miracle Story Comparison:

Continue reading with verses 39-43.

- Several details of this story are arranged in ways that recall the story in Luke 8:40-42; 49-56 when Jesus heals the young girl who had died. Re-read that story. What features or key moments do these stories share? What differences seem important?
  - *Similarities of particular interest: both Peter and Jesus are sent for by those who loved the dying/deceased person. Both Tabitha and the young girl are taken by the hand bid to “get up.” Both healings are private or semi-private.*
  - *Important differences:*
    - *The elaborated description of Tabitha, who is both named and characterized as a disciple.*
    - *The presence not just of mourners but the featured widows in the community who show Peter what Tabitha had made for them.*
    - *Peter kneels and prays before the healing (indicating that it is God who does the healing)*
    - *The contrasting concluding lines of the scene.*
- Luke seems to portray Tabitha as highly important to her community. What indications of her importance do you see?

## Learning Activity 3: Imitating and Honoring Tabitha (10-15 minutes)

*The activity aims to elicit reflection on the ways we do (and don’t) recognize the work of Tabithas among us and the ways we do (or don’t) imitate those kinds of disciples.*

*Note for Teachers: Based on the time available, you might choose specific features or questions to focus on. Whenever possible, invite people to be both concrete and specific.*

Discuss:

- As stated above, Tabitha is highlighted as a significant *female* disciple. In your experience, was Tabitha ever highlighted as a significant disciple of Jesus? If so, what about her was emphasized or not emphasized? If not, why do you think that was the case?
  - *Teresa Calpino notes that, while Tabitha was one of many women disciples, “she was the only one who was given the title specifically, which attests to her prominence and importance in the tradition.”<sup>iii</sup>*
- Tabitha’s ministry is concrete and tactile, and she is “held up as a specific type of discipleship, one that used her commercial and financial resources to support and provide hospitality to her community.”<sup>iv</sup> In your experience, what forms of ministry receive the most attention, recognition, and honor? Has it been the case in your experience that ministries that are concrete, behind the scenes, or related to care, feeding, and provision are less emphasized than those that are public or public-speaking related? If so, why do you think that is the case?
- In a particularly poignant moment in the scene, “all the widows stood beside [Peter], weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. The sewing of clothing requires time and personal attention. What other forms of ministry could we imagine that show a similar investment of time, personal attention, and care?”

#### Learning Activity 4: Final Discussion (10-15 minutes)

*This final activity moves the class toward concrete action in response to the model of Tabitha’s ministry.*

It’s easy to overlook Tabitha, much as it is easy to overlook the Tabithas in our own communities, who see the things that need doing and then do them, who attend to those who might be overlooked, and who care for the concrete needs of the community. But Luke presents her as a model disciple and foundational member of her community, who obeys those hardest commands of Jesus to divest ourselves of material goods in service to the poor.

1. What constitute the concrete, tactile signs of our care for the vulnerable (like the tunics shown to Peter)?
2. What human legacies and artifacts of selfless service do we want our church to leave behind?

In the final moments of class, encourage the class to choose one of two actions to honor and imitate the example set to for us by Tabitha:

- Show honor to a Tabitha among us: send a thank you note to an individual, honoring their service, take a thank you basket to a local non-profit that serves the poor, etc.
- Take an active step toward service: Forgo something you might buy for yourself and give that money to the poor. Stock your car with care packages for the homeless. Sign up for a shift with a church ministry or local nonprofit that cares for the most vulnerable members of your community.

### Final Reflection and Sending (1-2 minutes)

Conclude class with prayer of thanksgiving for those who have modelled Christian generosity, compassion, and personal care. If possible, give thanks for individuals named in the opening reflection.

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<sup>i</sup> Ananias of Damascus (Acts 9:10), Saul (9:26), Timothy (16:1) and the otherwise unmentioned Mnason (21:16) are the four individuals Luke describes the noun *mathetes*, which is the masculine form of the noun.

<sup>ii</sup> Carl Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 224.

<sup>iii</sup> Teresa J. Calpino, *Women, Work, and Leadership in Acts*, vol. 361 of *WUNT 2* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 150–52. Michael Parsons points out that Tabitha is described as a “certain” female disciple, indicating that there are others, and the beginning of the same chapter points to Saul’s targeting of members of the Way, both men and women. Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 138.

<sup>iv</sup> Calpino, *Women, Work, and Leadership*, 150–52.

# The Character of Barnabas:

*Gracious Encouragement: Characters of Faith Week 6*

## **Focus Text(s)**

Acts 11:19-30, with Acts 9:26-28 and 15:1-35

## **Focus Question**

In the book of Acts, the character of Barnabas shows up again and again as missionary, intermediary, and encourager. What does Barnabas-like encouragement look like among us and through us?

## *Introductory Comments for Teachers*

As far as “minor characters” go, Barnabas is well known. When we are first introduced to him, we are told three things: 1) he is a native of Cyprus, where there were large Jewish communities, 2) he is a Levite, which might have entailed some kinds of formal religious service, and 3) his name is Joseph, but the disciples nickname him Barnabas, meaning “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36-37).<sup>i</sup> In his first actions in the story, he provides an individual example of the broader communal practice of selling property and laying the proceeds at the apostles’ feet. His brief introduction is immediately followed by the story of Ananias and Sapphira, whose deceitful departure from that community practice famously ends in their demise. A common form of moral instruction in the ancient world involved the comparison of good and bad models of moral behavior; this seems to be what Luke is after in the back-to-back presentations of Barnabas in contrast with Ananias and Sapphira.<sup>ii</sup> This makes for a strong first impression of Barnabas, the encourager.

But even good first impressions need a second look, and that is the aim of this week’s exploration of the character of Barnabas in later scenes in Acts. After his brief introduction in Acts 4:36-37, Barnabas shows up repeatedly in critical moments and important locations in the story. He plays an important role in Saul’s entrance into the Christian community, helps to establish and strengthen the first major Gentile church in Syrian Antioch, co-ministers with Paul across Asia Minor, testifies to God’s work among the Gentiles alongside Paul at the Jerusalem Council, and helps to encourage and reconcile Gentile churches after the Jerusalem Council concludes.

This week’s lesson invites careful attention to the contexts, situations, and relationships in Barnabas’s ministry to and with the predominantly Gentile church in Antioch in Syria. What specific actions does Barnabas take that we would describe as encouraging? Who does Barnabas encourage? To what ends or for what purposes? And what do we have to learn from him?

## *Locating Ourselves in the Story*

In Luke 11:19, Luke once again shifts the narrative spotlight, this time away from its tighter focus on Peter and the momentous aftermath of his stay in Cornelius's house (Acts 10:1-11:18) to a broader look at the development of a church in Antioch. The church in Antioch becomes a major Christian hub, one Paul will visit many times. It is in Antioch that the disciples are first called "Christians", suggesting that they are large and notable enough to have gained some public visibility.<sup>iii</sup> Notably, this is a church comprised of both Jews and Gentiles. Carl Holladay notes, "What the conversion of Cornelius has demonstrated specifically, the founding of the Antioch church exemplifies more generally: A gentile household in Caesarea Maritima has paved the way for a gentile church in the capital city of Syria."<sup>iv</sup> The Antioch church sends critical financial aid, through Saul and Barnabas, to the Jerusalem church facing a famine (11:27-30), commissions and sends Paul and Barnabas for ministry at the Spirit's prompting (13:1-3), and then serves as home base when they return from what the map in the back of your Bible likely calls Paul's first missionary journey (14:24-28).

### *Learning Objectives:*

Through this lesson, learners will...

- Describe the various aspects of Barnabas's ministry to and with both the Gentile Church in Antioch and Saul of Tarsus.
- Identify with the experience of those in the story who need and receive Barnabas's encouragement and inclusion.
- Identify and commit to an action aimed at bringing Barnabas-like encouragement to those in our community.

### *Notes for Study and Preparation:*

First, pray that God will guide your preparation to teach, as well as your class discussion and study, that you might grow together in faithfulness as disciples of Jesus.

Second, gain a big picture view of the role of Barnabas in Acts. Read his introduction in Acts 4:36-27, his short cameo in 9:26-28; his foundational work in the new community in Antioch in 11:19-30, his missionary work with Paul in Acts 13-14, and his role in the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. While you won't discuss every scene, a big-picture view will inform your understanding of Barnabas's significance.

As you read, consider the following questions:

- Who benefits from Barnabas's encouragement?
- What specific actions does Barnabas take regarding those persons and communities? Why might those actions be significant or meaningful for them?

Third, read through the entire teaching plan and determine your highest priority activities and discussion questions, so that you can make thoughtful adjustments as needed during class.

## Learning Activity 1: Opening Discussion

(5-10 minutes)

*This activity invites the class to begin thinking about the practices and relational dynamics that characterize someone who is encouraging, providing an on ramp into the discussion of Barnabas.*

*Note for teachers: Since careful attention to the character of Barnabas requires looking at several passages, it may be wise to keep an eye on the time.*

- Tell a story about a person in your experience who you would describe as very encouraging.
- Identify the verbs that characterize that person (i.e.: they *pray*, they *notice*, etc.) List them on the board, if possible.

Transition: Joseph of Cyprus, a minor character in Acts, is known to us by the nickname the apostles gave him — Barnabas, or “son of encouragement.” That language of encouragement brings with it all sorts of associations based on our experience. Today, we want to pay attention to the specific activities, contexts, and relationships that define who, what, how, and why Barnabas is an encourager within the life of the early church.

## Learning Activity 2: Barnabas, Saul, and Antioch

(15-20 minutes)

*The purpose of this activity is to invite learners to pay attention to Barnabas’s ministry in the city of Antioch, with particular focus on his actions.*

*Note for teachers: Though the primary focus is on Acts 11:19-26, the discussion will draw on Acts 9:26-30 and Acts 13:1-3. You may find it effective to ask for volunteer readers for these passages up front, to facilitate smooth transitions between the passages within the discussion.*

### Step 1: Meeting the Church in Antioch

Begin by having someone read Acts 11:19-23, then discuss the scene together:

- What details does Luke provide here about the spread of the church to this new place? Using a map in the back of your Bible or a map available online, work with a partner to try to locate the various cities mentioned here. What do you notice?
  - *Tip: Many maps of the Mediterranean world fail to include major cities in Northern Africa, which is a real problem. One of the best maps in terms of the range of cities included is located at [https://catholic-resources.org/Bible/NT\\_Geography.htm](https://catholic-resources.org/Bible/NT_Geography.htm) -- scroll to the bottom of the page. If you are using a projector, it would be helpful to project this so that everyone can view the same map together.*
  - *When we think of missions, our mental images tend to default to white people of European or American origin travelling to far flung destinations around the world. Yet, as Luke points out here, missionaries from northern Africa, Cyrene specifically, are proclaiming the Gospel in Syrian Antioch long before what we now call Europe is in the picture!*

## Step 2: Discovering Further Details about Antioch from Acts 13

Have someone read Acts 13:1-3, a short scene that provides more details about the make-up of the church in Antioch.

- What do those three short verses add to our understanding of this church community?
  - *Simeon who was called Niger – the terminology indicates his dark skin, another sign of the racial and ethnic diversity of this community.*
  - *Lucius of Cyrene – perhaps one of those identified in Acts 11:20 who arrived from North Africa and proclaimed the Gospel in Syria*
  - *Manean from the court of Herod Antipas – An interesting inclusion, not least since the son of that Herod just died a spectacular death due to his pride (Acts 12:20-23)! This isn't our first character with connections to Herod; Joanna, the disciple of Jesus, was married to the Chuza, one of Herod's stewards (Luke 8:1-3).*

## Step 3: Considering the Role of Barnabas in This Community

With these details of the Antioch church in mind, discuss:

- What role(s) does Barnabas play in the life of this community? How is he described? Why is he there? What does he do (pay close attention to his verbs)?
  - *For both this activity and the next one, it might be helpful to keep a running list of these descriptors on a white board if one is available. If you kept a list of verbs from the opening activity, you might create a second column for Barnabas's verbs.*
- This is not Saul's first encounter with Barnabas. Read Acts 9:26-30. Put yourself in Saul's shoes. If you were Saul, how would you describe the role that Barnabas has played in your life if Simeon, Lucius, or one of the other Christians in Antioch asked you?

## Learning Activity 3: Barnabas, and the Gentile Christians (15 minutes)

*The purpose of this activity is to highlight the often-overlooked role Barnabas ultimately plays in the full inclusion of the Gentiles—as Gentiles—in the Christian community.*

*Note for Teachers: The Jerusalem Council provides much more to discuss than time will allot. The focus here is specifically on Barnabas's role and on the resolution of the scene represented by in the letter from the Jerusalem leaders carried by Barnabas, Paul, and others to the Gentile churches troubled by the debate.*

In the event in Acts 15 that we typically refer to as the Jerusalem Council, the church concludes that God has offered the same salvation to the Gentiles that God has offered to the people of Israel. Consequently, Gentiles should be fully included in the church as Gentiles (i.e.: without requiring circumcision and full Torah obedience), though with provision made for them to share table fellowship with their Jewish brothers and sisters (the list of basic commands Gentiles should follow echo the provisions made for

Gentiles living in the midst of Israel in Leviticus 17-18). Peter, Paul, and James are major players in that event, but so too is Barnabas!

Step 1: Reviewing the Cause and Conclusion of the Jerusalem Council  
After inviting the class to turn to Acts 15, discuss the following:

- What occurs in the church in Antioch that ultimately causes the gathering in Jerusalem? What role does Barnabas play here? (see Acts 15:1-5)
  - *Luke often uses deliberate understatement to create emphasis. When he says that Paul and Barnabas had “no small dissension and debate with them,” (v. 2) he’s indicating a very significant, vehement debate!*
- If you were one of the Gentile Christians in Antioch while this debate about your standing as a Christian is occurring, what might you have been thinking and feeling?
- In Jerusalem Paul and Barnabas “told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles” (v. 12). Eventually, James determines that the Gentiles must be included without the requirement of circumcision. Following that decision, a letter is sent to the Gentile churches, care of Paul and Barnabas along with two leaders from Jerusalem. Read that letter in Acts 15:23-29. What does the letter reveal about the experience of the church in Antioch?
- Thinking about Barnabas’s long-standing relationship with the church in Antioch and the recent experience of that church, in what ways does Barnabas live up to his reputation as an “encourager” in this scene?

#### Learning Activity 4: Final Discussion (10-15 minutes)

*This final activity highlights the way Barnabas appears to be especially focused on encouraging those who are on the outskirts, asking how that might illuminate the opportunities and responsibilities of our congregation.*

From his first scene in the story in Acts 4 to his final appearance in Acts 15, Barnabas seems consistently attentive to those who are on the outskirts of the Christian community for some reason – the poor in Jerusalem, Saul the enemy turned gospel proclaimer, and the Gentiles in Syrian Antioch and throughout Asia Minor.

- What are the reasons why someone might feel on the outskirts of our own community?
  - *It is important to bear in mind that you likely have class members who also feel on the outskirts of church life. Bear that in mind as you facilitate the discussion.*
- Think about the different actions of Barnabas that we’ve traced this morning. Which of these actions do you think is particularly important for encouraging those in our own community?

In the final moments of class, encourage people to identify a specific way that they might encourage or build up another person or the broader community. Then, have them share that commitment with another member of the class, so that they might encourage one another to keep it.

## Final Reflection and Sending (1-2 minutes)

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Conclude class with prayer, asking for the Holy Spirit to help us to *see* and *wisely respond* those in need of encouragement, whether they are already around us or are those God might be calling us to seek out. Ask God to encourage our own souls as we seek to love and care for one another in the Body of Christ.

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<sup>i</sup> Carl Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 135.

<sup>ii</sup> Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts* (Paideia Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 72.

<sup>iii</sup> Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, 246.

<sup>iv</sup> Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, 246.

# The Character of Lydia:

*Faithful Hospitality: Characters of Faith Week 7*

## **Focus Text(s)**

Acts 16:11-40

## **Focus Question**

Lydia's hospitality to Paul and his companions, both before and after their arrest, is an act of Christian faith and commitment. Are we open to extending hospitality in ways that challenge and transform us?

## *Introductory Comments for Teachers*

In Acts 16, we meet a woman named Lydia in Philippi. Philippi was an official Roman colony located on a major trade route, which may help to explain why Lydia, a native of Thyatira, lives there. Luke packs a lot of detail into her short introduction. First, he calls her a "worshipper of God," more literally a God-fearer, a Gentile who was associated with Jewish synagogues but who had not fully converted to Judaism (Cornelius is another famous God-fearer). Second, Luke tells us twice that she was listening. Unlike those Paul warns about in Acts 28 who have ears but do not hear, Lydia is listening, and God opens her heart to listen to Paul's message. Third, Lydia's birthplace of Thyatira is a region known for its dyes, and Lydia is a dealer in purple cloth. Though purple cloth was a luxury item, it came at various price points. Lydia was not necessarily wealthy, but she had sufficient means to extend enthusiastic hospitality to Paul and others.

The importance of this act of hospitality extended to the itinerant Christians as well as potentially a house church (see 16:40) should not be underestimated. Hospitality in the ancient Mediterranean world was a central and important social expectation. Within Luke's Gospel and Acts, hospitality is highlighted as a critical feature of *discipleship*, not just social custom or mere politeness. For the earliest churches, hospitality around a common table was the context for worship, for prayer, and for the taking of communion, and for scripture reading, those activities that Acts 2, Paul's letters, and other early Christian sources point to as foundational for congregational life. As we will see, hospitality to other Christians was not necessarily risk-free.

The considerable archaeological evidence we have from Philippi clearly points to the early and prominent presence of Christians there. Without Lydia's initiative, without her material commitment to support the Christian movement through hospitality and the financial support that would have entailed, without her willingness to risk association with Paul even after his imprisonment at the hand of an angry mob, we might well wonder what kind of archaeological evidence would exist.

## *Locating Ourselves in the Story*

Following the Jerusalem council, Paul and Barnabas part ways (Acts 15:36-41), with their ministry continuing with different travel companions. Luke follows Paul's journey with Silas. Paul begins by revisiting churches he had previously established in Lystra and Derbe, where he encounters Timothy who eventually joins them (16:1-5). Paul's travels through Asia Minor are interrupted by a vision from a man of Macedonia, saying "come over to Macedonia and help us" (16:9). Paul and company cross the strait, land in Neapolis, and end up in Philippi. For the next several chapters, Luke will focus primarily on major events in Paul's ministry in various major Greco-Roman cities: first Philippi, then Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, and Ephesus.

### *Learning Objectives:*

Through this lesson, learners will...

- Review the important features of hospitality as a mark of discipleship in Luke and Acts
- Construct a character profile of Lydia, imagining what it would have been like to be part of the events that occurred with Paul and Silas in Philippi.
- Evaluate practices of hospitality, both personal and communal, and define what it might mean for those practices to be more faithful.

### *Notes for Study and Preparation:*

First, pray that God will guide your preparation to teach, as well as your class discussion and study, that you might grow together in faithfulness as disciples of Jesus.

Second, read the entire scene in Philippi in Acts 16:11-40, paying attention to both the references to Lydia and the broader events in the story, both causes and outcomes.

Third, review the passages covered in the section on hospitality in Luke and Acts, as well as any other passages about hospitality that come to mind, like Luke 5:27-39 or Luke 14:1-24. (If you have access to the Luke curriculum, see week 9.)

As you read, consider the following questions:

- What role does hospitality play in the events in Acts 16:11-40?
- Based on this story and the features of hospitality as a mark discipleship elsewhere in Luke-Acts, what does it mean to me for hospitality to be faithful?

Third, read through the entire teaching plan and determine your highest priority activities and discussion questions, so that you can make thoughtful adjustments as needed during class.

## Learning Activity 1: Opening Discussion

(5-10 minutes)

*Since hospitality is central to the events that occur in Philippi and the response of Lydia to the Gospel, the opening discussion aims to evoke memories and experiences of hospitality.*

*Note for teachers: Depending on how enthusiastically your class tells stories, you may need to keep a close eye on the clock, particularly so that you have time to get to the second question.*

- Share a story about an experience of hospitality and table fellowship that pushed you near or past your comfort zone. What were you eating? Where? Who were you eating with? What sticks out in your mind about this experience?
- In the New Testament world, hospitality to strangers and travelers was an important social practice and social value. Think about your own experiences extending and receiving hospitality over the last five years. What percentage of the time would you say your hospitality experiences involve people you've only very recently met, as opposed to family and friends you already know? What factors contribute to the percentages in your experience?

Transition: One of the important characteristics of Lydia is her hospitality to Paul and those travelling with him. This lesson explores her actions, how her welcome fits with broader themes in the story, and what those actions reveal about her faith.

## Learning Activity 2: Hospitality and Faith in Luke-Acts

(10 minutes)

*This activity aims to situate Lydia's act of hospitality within the broader context of the story of Luke-Acts, in which hospitality is a critical dimension of discipleship and right response to God.*

*Note for teachers: Since the discussion draws broadly from Luke, you may find it helpful to introduce the principle and then assign readers to read the appropriate verses aloud. You will likely find it helpful to identify readers up front, to facilitate smooth transitions.*

Hospitality is a major emphasis in Luke's Gospel.

- First, Jesus is described as having "visited."
  - *After the raising of the widow's son in Nain, the crowd proclaims, "A great prophet has risen among us. God has visited the people!" (Luke 7:16).*
    - *Some translations say, "God has looked favorably on the people", another valid option. Given the prevalence of hospitality scenes and instructions in Luke-Acts, the language of visiting has much to commend it.*
  - *In Luke's account of Jesus's entry into Jerusalem, Jesus stops to weep over the city, because they "did not recognize the time of [their] visitation." (Luke 19:44).*
- One of the central questions, now that he has "visited", is whether and how Jesus will be welcomed. Can you think of examples of Jesus being rejected or insufficiently welcomed?

- Note that the Samaritan villages turns Jesus away (Luke 9:51-56)
- Recall that Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus but failed to show him the standard courtesies offered to a guest (Luke 7:36-50).
- The hospitable welcome of Jesus, and Jesus’s disciples by extension, is one of the marks of discipleship and faithful response in Luke and Acts.
  - In the instructions Jesus give to the 72 disciples that he sends out ahead of him, he tells the disciples to depend on the hospitality and provision provided to them by individuals Jesus calls a “person of peace” (see Luke 10:1-12). These same instructions name the real possibility that they will be rejected instead.
  - In the same chapter in verses 38-42, the hospitable welcome of Mary and Martha in both service (Martha) and active listening (Mary) reveals their discipleship.<sup>i</sup>
- In Acts, hospitality in homes is a central feature of the life of the early church. What examples come to mind?
  - See the summary statement in Acts 2:42-47, which explicitly says, “they broke bread from house to house and ate their food with glad and sincere hearts” (2:46).
  - Saul goes “from house to house” looking for Christians, indicating that he knows they gathered in the context of hospitality in homes (8:3).
  - We also have scenes that indicate church gatherings in homes. In Acts 12:12-17, after his divinely facilitated escape from prison, Peter knows to find the church gathered in the home of Mary, the mother of John Mark. Mary is evidently the host of the house church, placing her alongside Priscilla, who hosted a house church with her husband (Rom 16:3-5) and Nympha, who hosted a church in her home in Laodicea (Colossians 4:15).

### Learning Activity 3: Learning Lydia (15-20 minutes)

The purpose of this activity is to unearth the significant details about Lydia packed into her four concise verses in Luke 16.

#### Step 1: Build a Character Profile

After inviting the class to turn to Acts 16, read or have someone else read the short initial scene that features Lydia in Acts 16:11-15. Then, discuss the following:

- With what locations is Lydia connected, and what do those locations indicate about her as a character?
  - “The place of prayer” (Acts 16:13): Paul’s usual practice in a new city was to begin his ministry in the synagogues and expand from there as opportunity and necessity dictated. The “place of prayer” might be a different term for a synagogue, or an indication that Paul did not find a formal synagogue there but a more informal religious gathering. Her association with this place of prayer, plus Luke’s description of her as a “worshipper of God” indicate that she is a God-fearer like Cornelius, a Gentile who was informally affiliated with the Jewish synagogue but not a full convert.

- *The city of Thyatira: Thyatira was widely known for its participation in the cloth trade, including the dyeing of purple cloth that was Lydia's own occupation.<sup>ii</sup> While we are not told why Paul meets Lydia in Philippi, the city's location on a trade route might be one explanation.*
- *"My home" (Acts 16:15): As with Tabitha, there is no husband or male figure identified here. The home belongs to Lydia; it is her home and her household. She may have been widowed, perhaps divorced, but Luke's interest is not in how the home came to be hers but rather what she does with it.*
- What other aspects of Luke's brief description of Lydia in verses 14-15 seem important to understanding her character?
  - *"She ... was listening to us." – the scene Luke portrays has instructional elements. Paul and his companions sat down, a posture appropriate to a teacher in the Greek and Roman world, and the word used for their speech here is elsewhere used for the proclamation of the gospel (Acts 14:1; 16:32).*
  - *"The Lord opened her heart" – the same phrasing was used to describe how the Lord opened the hearts of the disciples on the road to Emmaus so that they understood the Scriptures.*
    - *Notes New Testament scholar Teresa Calpino, "Paul may have spoken the message, but it is the intercession of the risen Christ and Lydia's unconditional acceptance that was highlighted here."<sup>iii</sup>*
  - *She spoke directly and persuasively – upon her conversion, Lydia say to Paul, "if you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." Evidently, they judged her faithful, for she successfully prevails upon them*

## Step 2: Reflecting on the Experience of Hospitality in the Events in Philippi

References to Lydia bracket Paul's time in Philippi. Acts 16:40 reads, "After leaving prison they [Paul and Silas] went to Lydia's home, and when they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters there, they departed."

- Imagine that Paul and Silas, having arrived at Lydia's house after their release from prison, fill on her on what has taken place. What might they share about what has happened to them? If you were Lydia, what might you be thinking or feeling in response to their story?
- Luke tells us that Paul and Silas encouraged the Christians assembled in Lydia's home. Based on what has happened in the story, what do you think they might have said to encourage these believers?

## Learning Activity 4: Faith-Full Hospitality (10-15 minutes)

*This final discussion shifts attention to hospitality as a mark of faith.*

### Step 1: Considering the Implications of Hospitality in Philippi

For Lydia, the extension of hospitality to Paul, Silas, and the others was explicitly a matter of faith – "if you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my

home" (16:15). To bring our discussion to the present, let's explore what makes hospitality a matter of faith for Lydia and for us.

- Luke highlights Lydia's hospitality to Paul and company both before AND after their imprisonment. Is there anything at stake for Lydia in her welcome of these people who have been accused of being troublemakers and asked to leave town?
- Have someone read Acts 17:5-8 and the outcome of Paul's successful preaching in Thessalonica, just down the highway from Philippi. Who is Jason and what happens to him?
  - *We need only look to the very next scene in Thessalonica to see this what can happen to a local person who falls in with the Christians. Some of the local Jewish community oppose Paul and stir up others to oppose him too. In the uproar that results, a mob attacks the house of Paul's host in the city, here a man named Jason, and then drags Jason before the city officials. He must post his own bail before the city officials will release him.*
  - *That scene, which follows so shortly on the heels of Paul's stay with Lydia, casts a new light on her role. By hosting Paul and other Christians in her home both before and after his imprisonment, and by presumably continuing to serve as a central hub for Christians after Paul's departure, Lydia likely incurred some risk.*

## Step 2: Considering the Implications of Hospitality for Us

Now, let's shift the discussion to hospitality as a matter of our own faith, as we express it in our individual lives and as a community.

- Assess your own personal practices of hospitality over the last five years, as we did at the start of class—who you associate with, eat with, and receive or accept invitations from? What about your self-assessment makes you happy? Where does your assessment point to opportunities to grow in both faith and practice?
- Now, work together to review whatever you would consider to be the hospitality practices of Northside Church of Christ. What about your assessment makes you happy? Where does your assessment point to opportunities for growth?
- When we think about hospitality, we often imagine ourselves primarily, or even only, in the position of host, in control of what happens. What might shift in our thinking if we imagine ourselves instead as the guests of others? Do we put ourselves in the position to be invited by others in our community, so that they might prevail on us to accept their hospitality?

## Final Reflection and Sending

(1-2 minutes)

Conclude class with prayer, asking for Jesus to open our hearts like he opened Lydia's so that we, like her, might open our hands and our homes to others.

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<sup>i</sup> Jennifer S. Wyant, *Beyond Mary or Martha: Reclaiming Ancient Models of Discipleship*, vol. 21 of *Emory Studies in Early Christianity* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019).

<sup>ii</sup> Teresa J. Calpino, *Women, Work, and Leadership in Acts*, vol. 361 of *WUNT 2* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 199.

<sup>iii</sup> Calpino, *Women, Work, and Leadership*, 224.



# The Character of Apollos:

*Learning Humbly: Characters of Faith Week 8*

## **Focus Text(s)**

Acts 18:24-28, with 1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:1-9; 4:6

## **Focus Question**

Apollos is already a powerful teacher when he meets Priscilla and Aquila, but he is also willing to learn. Do we see ourselves as perpetual learners, even though we are already educated in the Way?

## *Introductory Comments for Teachers*

In between accounts of the major events of Paul's ministry in the city of Corinth in the southern region of Greece, and those in Ephesus on the western coast of what we now know as Turkey, we have a short scene featuring a man named Apollos, who encounters and benefits from the ministry of Priscilla and Aquila (more on them next week). Apollos features here in Luke's narrative and in Paul's letters, including Titus and most prominently in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians.

Apollos is first introduced as a native of Alexandria who arrived in Ephesus for reasons unknown. Alexandria, an ancient city located in Northern Africa, was the literary center of the Greco-Roman world and a center of higher learning and study. There is ample evidence of a large Jewish population in this region of Egypt, and Alexandria is further famous for being the location where the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, a translation called the Septuagint or the LXX (note: this is the translation that all of our New Testament authors are using).<sup>i</sup> To put it in modern language, Alexandria is the Ivy League, and Apollos has every indication of having an advanced degree. He is eloquent, well-versed in the scriptures, instructed in the way of the Lord, a compelling and accurate teacher. But there is a deficiency in his understanding – it seems he only knows the baptism of John, not the baptism of “Holy Spirit and fire” that Jesus offers.

In a critical moment, Apollos receives the correction offered by Priscilla and Aquila. Rather than rest on his laurels, he gains further understanding. With sponsorship from the church in Ephesus, he then goes on to minister in Corinth where, Luke tells us, “He greatly helped those who through grace had become believers” (Acts 18:27). His importance to the church in Corinth is further confirmed by Paul's first letter to that church. Apollos's willingness to learn, his willingness to be corrected and called into greater understanding, helps to unlock a powerful ministry to other believers.

## *Locating Ourselves in the Story*

The story of Apollos provides a short interlude between Luke's accounts of major events in Paul's ministry in Ephesus and Corinth, part of Luke's broader portrayal of Paul's ministry in major Greco-Roman cities. It immediately follows on of Luke's travel summaries, which condenses months or even years of travel into a few words: Paul sails from Ephesus, lands in Caesarea, visits Jerusalem, heads back up to Antioch, and then travels "from place to place" in Asia Minor, visiting congregations he had established earlier and "strengthening all the disciples" (Acts 18:21b-23). The mobility of Paul's ministry is mirrored in Apollos's. With his more complete understanding of baptism, Apollos desires to cross the Aegean Sea from his current location on the west coast of modern-day Turkey to the city of Corinth. He apparently remains there for some time, and eventually returns to Ephesus. At the end of 1 Corinthians, Paul sends greetings from Apollos in Ephesus to the Corinthians, indicating that Apollos would visit again when the time was right (1 Corinthians 16:12).

## *Learning Objectives:*

Through this lesson, learners will...

- Integrate insights from Acts 18 and I Corinthians 1:10-12 and 3:1-9 to gain a sense of Apollos's character as a learner and teacher.
- Reflect on the experience of both knowing confidently and encountering the limits of our knowledge.
- Choose an area in which they personally need to grow, whether into greater confidence in what they know to be true, or greater humility and openness to continuing to learn.

## *Notes for Study and Preparation:*

First, pray that God will guide your preparation to teach, as well as your class discussion and study, that you might grow together in faithfulness as disciples of Jesus.

Second, carefully read the Acts 18:24-28 as well as 1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:1-9; 4:6.

As you read, consider the following questions:

- What markers of Apollos's character do you see in these passages?

Third, review the various discussion questions that invite learners to reflect on their own knowledge. Think through your own responses to those questions as you prepare, and determine your highest priority activities and discussion questions, so that you can make thoughtful adjustments as needed during class.

## Learning Activity 1: Opening Discussion

(5-10 minutes)

*To help put ourselves in an analogous situation to Apollos in Acts 18:24-28, these questions evoke reflections on experiences of learning and facing the limits of one's knowledge.*

*Note for teachers: You might choose the one or two that you think will generate the most robust conversation from your class.*

- Have you ever had someone try to explain something to you how to do something you already know how to do? Or try to explain something that you are already an expert in? What was that experience like? How did you feel? Amused? Irritated? Resistant?
- What is something in your faith that you have changed your mind about, or something where, when you look back, you can see how much your understanding as deepened and developed?
- Has an influential teacher or Christian leader ever gently challenged your understanding and called you to see things a different way? What was that experience like?

Transition: Acts 18:24-28 presents another scene of instruction. We saw one earlier in Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch, but Apollos's encounter with Priscilla and Aquila has several distinguishing features. By paying attention to the character of Apollos, both as it appears here and in light of the further details provided by 1 Corinthians, we have an opportunity what it looks like to be both a confident knower and a humble learner.

## Learning Activity 2: Reflecting on the Character of Apollos (10-15 minutes)

*This activity focuses on the details Luke provides about Apollos's character, both through direct and indirect description.*

First, to build a character profile for Apollos, begin with the characteristics of Apollos that Luke introduces the scene within verses 24 and 25. Working together as a class, name as many distinct characteristics as you can.

- *He is a Jew, probably a Jewish believer in Jesus (see note on his education below)*
- *He is from Alexandria*
  - *Alexandria is a city in Northern Egypt that is a major center for learning and scholarship (see notes above). It is also a city known to have a large Jewish population.*
- *He was eloquent, or perhaps in a broader sense "learned and cultured"<sup>ii</sup>*

- *“well-versed in the scriptures”*
  - *The Greek literally says, “being powerful in the Scriptures”, which likely implies deep knowledge, insightful interpretation, or both.*
- *He “had been instructed in the Way of the Lord” and “taught accurately the things concerning Jesus.”*
  - *Though it’s impossible to know for sure when Apollos was instructed, the form of the Greek word “invites us to imagine a previous period of instruction in Alexandria. If so, this suggests that Christianity spread to Egypt quite early.”<sup>iii</sup> This fits with our earlier consideration of Antioch, when Christians from the island of Cyprus and the North African city of Cyrene were among the first to preach the Gospel to Gentiles.*
- *He spoke with “burning enthusiasm” (NRSV) or “great fervor” (NIV). More literally, it reads “being excited/on fire with the Spirit.”*
- *He knew only the baptism of John.*
  - *The baptism of John comes up several places in Acts. John himself, in Luke 3:17, points ahead to the coming one who will “baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” In the final instructions of Jesus before his ascension, Jesus tells the disciples, “This is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:5). Those same words of Jesus are quoted by Peter in Acts 11:16 as part of his recognition that God has given the Gentiles the same Spirit given to the people of Israel. In the next scene in Acts 19, Paul encounters some disciples who only knew the baptism of John for repentance. In that scene also, Paul corrects their not-yet-complete understanding, and they were baptized in the name of Jesus (19:1-7). When the understanding of baptism lacks baptism in the name of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, Luke portrays clear moves to address that lack of understanding.*

Second, based on these details, reimagine Apollos as a modern-day character. Where would he have gone to school? Where would he work? What would people know him for? How would he dress? What might he post on Instagram?

- *Note for teachers: feel free to encourage the class to have a little fun with this.*

### Learning Activity 3: Faithful Knowledge (15-20 minutes)

*Based on Apollos’s willingness to learn, as indicated by Acts 18:26, and in conversation with Paul’s references to Apollos and to the character of Christian knowledge in 1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:1-9; 4:6, this activity aims to prompt personal reflection on what it looks like to know confidently and to learn humbly.*

Apollos is characterized in verse 26 as a learner, who is taken aside by Priscilla and Aquila who “explained the way of God to him more accurately.” Beverly Gaventa notes that “the instruction [Apollos] receives remains unspecified, and readers deduce its connection with baptism from the end of v. 25. . . the content of the instruction Priscilla and Aquilla give him appears less important than the fact that they give it and he receives it without resistance.”

The presentation of Apollos here gives us an important opportunity to reflect on how and why we know:

- Churches of Christ have historically prided themselves on knowledge of the Bible—we are debaters, Bible Bowl enthusiasts. What are the gifts that come with a great deal of knowledge? What are the temptations?
- What feelings can arise for us when we are presented with the limits or incompleteness of our knowledge? When someone challenges our understanding? Which of those feelings seem productive and helpful? Which are unhelpful?
- In your experience, would you say that Christians are more inclined to think of themselves 1) as experts who confidently know and proclaim, — OR — 2) as learners whose understanding is incomplete but growing? Why do you think that is? Is one of these perspectives more appropriate than the other?

#### Learning Activity 4: Apollos in Corinth: Love & Knowledge (10 minutes)

*This activity integrates insights about Apollos that are found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, particularly chapters 1-4.*

*Note to teachers: It might be useful to select readers for these passages at the beginning, to facilitate a smooth discussion.*

Apollos, of course, famously appear in the first few chapters in 1 Corinthians. We'll read these passages one at a time and see what they contribute to our understanding of Apollos, knowledge, and love.

First, read 1 Corinthians 1:10-13. Then discuss:

- What is the issue facing this community that Paul addresses here? Can you think of any modern-day comparisons to "I follow Paul!" and "I follow Apollos!"

Then, read 1 Corinthians 3:1-9. Then discuss:

- Paul and Apollos are both authoritative teachers for this community; Acts and 1 Corinthians both confirm this. What do these nine verses add to our understanding of what it looks like to possess knowledge in a faithful way (or not)?
- Later in 1 Corinthians, Paul says "knowledge puff up, but love builds up" (8:1). What does knowledge employed with love and in service of others look like in practice? Can you name an experience when someone else's knowledge of God, the Bible, and the Christian life has built you up?

## Final Reflection and Sending

(1-2 minutes)

Conclude class with a charge for each person to discern where they might most be called to grow, not just in their knowledge of God, but as a *knower*. Is God calling you to step out more confidently in what you know to be true, so that you like Apollos can be an encouragement to others as they come to believe? Is God asking you to increase in your humility, so that you, like Apollos, can be shown and realize an area you need more understanding and seek those with wisdom and insight to help you?

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<sup>i</sup> Carl Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 362.

<sup>ii</sup> Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, 362.

<sup>iii</sup> Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, 363.

# The Characters of Priscilla & Aquila:

*Gospel Partnership: Characters of Faith Week 9*

## **Focus Text(s)**

Acts 18:1-28, with Romans 16:3-5a; 1 Corinthians 16:19-20; 2 Timothy 4:19

## **Focus Question**

Priscilla and Aquila model partnership in the name of Jesus. Where can we partner together with one another and with others in service to Jesus in our own context?

## *Introductory Comments for Teachers*

We first encountered Priscilla and Aquila in last week's consideration of the character of Apollos. In that scene, they appear briefly, pulling Apollos aside to instruct him in the way of God more accurately (18:26). At first glance, this couple doesn't appear to be that significant. Even compared to other minor characters, they have limited airtime in Luke's story. But careful attention to Aquila and Priscilla as they appear in Acts, paired with the other significant references to them in the New Testament, reveals a powerful partnership in ministry that deserves a second look and some further reflection.

Aquila and Priscilla's impact on the churches in the New Testament is evident in several ways. They appear in three different scenes in Acts 18, as well as three separate Pauline letters: Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Timothy. Few of Paul's travel companions and fellow ministers are mentioned this frequently. They are associated with three different cities with large communities of Christians: 1) Corinth, where Paul originally meets them; 2) Ephesus, where they travel with Paul and where Paul leaves them to minister while he travels on; and 3) Rome, where they evidently returned following their initial exile from the city (see Acts 18:2).

While Priscilla and Aquila are always mentioned in the same breath, the order of their names changes, with Priscilla appearing first three times and Apollos the other three. This is a significant detail in a status conscious and hierarchal society in which things like name order were indicators of status. Some commentators suggest that Priscilla had higher social standing than Apollos, but it is likely that the unexpected placement of Priscilla's name first recognizes her prominent service among the early Christians. In any case, they consistently appear as partners in ministry: with each other, with Paul, and with Christians across the Roman world. In the end, Paul concludes that all the churches of the Gentiles owe them thanks (Romans 16:4).

## *Situating Ourselves in the Story*

Paul's first encounter with Priscilla and Aquila takes place after his arrival in Corinth, one of the major cities that Luke focuses on as a location for Paul's ministry in Acts 16-20. While in Ephesus, Paul "resolved in the Spirit" to return to Jerusalem, after which he "must" see Rome (Acts 19:21-22). Paul's determination to visit Jerusalem and then Rome sets the stage for the dramatic final events of his life, as Luke focuses our attention more narrowly on Paul beginning with his arrival and arrest in Jerusalem in Acts 21 and concluding with his arrival in Rome for trial in Acts 28.

## *Learning Objectives:*

Through this lesson, learners will...

- Analyze various references to Aquila and Priscilla in the New Testament to construct a composite portrait of their character.
- Personally reflect on ministry partnerships in our own context and on the ministry partnerships visible in the lives of Aquila and Priscilla
- Commit to a concrete action that either supports an admirable ministry partnership or joins in such partnership with others.

## *Notes for Study and Preparation:*

First, pray that God will guide your preparation to teach, as well as your class discussion and study, that you might grow together in faithfulness as disciples of Jesus.

Second, read all of Luke's account of the events in Corinth and Ephesus in Acts 18-19, as these provide the narrative context for Priscilla and Aquila, who meet Paul in the first location, travel with him to the second, and are likely witnesses of what Luke recounts.

Third, review the six New Testament passages that reference Priscilla and Aquila, as well as the notes provided for each.

As you read, consider the following questions:

- What does this passage contribute to my understanding of the significance of Priscilla and Aquila within the early church?
- What present-day ministry partnerships do I respect or admire? Do I know anyone whose ministry partnership reminds me in some way of the characters of Aquila and Priscilla?

Third, read through the entire teaching plan and determine your highest priority activities and discussion questions, so that you can make thoughtful adjustments as needed during class.

## Learning Activity 1: Opening Discussion

(5-10 minutes)

*Since this lesson will consider Aquila and Priscilla as ministry partners, this first activity aims to elicit reflections on the ministry partnerships that we personally know and admire.*

*Note for teachers: To generate the widest base of participation and reflection, consider structuring this discussion as think-pair-share or as a small group discussion. As you reflect together as a group, try to collect a range of examples. It is certainly an important part of the story that Aquila and Priscilla are a husband-and-wife team, but it's important that marriage not be presented as the only model of ministry partnership, so that single, widowed, and divorced members of the class do not feel excluded.*

Think of a partnership in ministry of some kind (paid or volunteer, formal or informal) that you really admire. That partnership could be between a husband and wife, a parent and child, or between friends and co-workers.

- What is it about this ministry partnership that most impresses or inspires you?
- What gifts and abilities does each member of that partnership contribute?
- What does that ministry partnership contribute to God's kingdom?

Transition: Priscilla and Aquila, who we first met last week, appear in various places in the New Testament as a ministry partnership. Our aim today is to listen closely to what Luke tells us about this couple, in conversation with the details we learn about them from Paul's letters.

## Learning Activity 2: Meeting Priscilla and Aquila

(15-20 minutes)

*Because the details about Priscilla and Aquila are distributed throughout Acts 18 and in later references in the New Testament, this activity aims to pull those details together into a composite portrait of their work among New Testament churches.*

*Note for teachers: You have a couple of possibilities here. The recommended approach is to divide the class into six groups, assigning each of them one of the six appearances of Priscilla and Aquila in the New Testament to examine and report back on. Alternatively, you could move through the examples all together as a class or choose to discuss a selection of them while simply presenting the others.*

Aquila and Priscilla appear in six different places in the New Testament. Drawing them together, we can get a clearer composite portrait of their ministry among Gentile churches in the Mediterranean world. Working in small groups, we are going to explore each reference for what it contributes to our understanding of these characters.

## Step 1: Collect Evidence from References in Acts and the Letters

Break the class into six groups and assign a passage to each of them. The following notes are provided to aid the teacher in facilitating the discussion.

- Acts 18:1-4
  - Here, Aquila is introduced here in Corinth, where he and his wife have fled after the edict of Claudius evicted them from Rome. Scot McKnight summarizes the edict: “seeking to show his own bona fides to Roman religion and traditions, [Claudius] cut the knees out from under the Jewish troublemakers in Rome by exiling them. We read about this in Acts 18:2 when it says, ‘because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome.’ An early Roman historian adds to Acts 18:2 that the Jewish ‘disturbances’ were ‘at the instigation of Chrestus.’ The terms ‘Chrestus’ and ‘Christus’ were so alike that the historians ‘Jews’ were probably our ‘Jewish Christians.’ In the middle of this group of Jews expelled were Priscilla and Aquila.”<sup>i</sup>
  - On their tentmaking – “That Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla were all artisans who shared in the same craft of tentmaking places them among urban handworkers who might have had visible social status and means. A recurrent feature of Paul’s apostolic self-description is claiming rather proudly that he supported himself by working with his own hands.”<sup>ii</sup>
  
- Acts 18:18-21
  - Aquila and Priscilla, first hosts to Paul in Corinth, now become his travel companions, joining the ranks of other occasional travel companions of Paul including famous names like Barnabas and Silas along with lesser-known names like Sopater, Secundus, Gaius, and Tychicus (see Acts 20:1-6).
  - Aquila and Priscilla are very mobile. Aquila is from Pontus, which is in northern Turkey on the coast of the Black Sea. When Paul meets them, he and Priscilla most recently hail from Rome, in Italy. They move from Rome to Corinth in the region of Achaia in southern Greece, from there to Ephesus on the western coast of Turkey, and then eventually back to Rome.<sup>iii</sup>
  - They evidently remain in Ephesus some time, as Paul sends their greetings from Ephesus to Corinth and then later sends greetings from prison to them in 2 Timothy, a letter addressed to Timothy as he ministers in Ephesus.
  
- Acts 18:24-28
  - See notes from last week. In addition, commentators note how Priscilla’s name appears first in their instruction of Apollos. One early church father, John Chrysostom, characterized Priscilla as a teacher.<sup>iv</sup>
  
- 1 Corinthians 16:19-20
  - Paul is writing to Corinth, most likely from Ephesus. Since he sends warm greetings from Aquila and Priscilla to the church in Corinth, this implies that Priscilla and Aquila are as well-known to the Corinthian churches as we would expect from Acts 18. That they send “warm” greetings implies ongoing affection for the church in Corinth. We see also that Priscilla and Aquila host a church in their home in Ephesus.<sup>v</sup>

- 2 Timothy 4:19-22
  - *This letter, which Paul writes from prison (location unknown), is addressed to Timothy who is ministering in Ephesus. From this detail, it seems that Aquila and Priscilla are currently in Ephesus.*
- Romans 16:3-5a
  - *Since in this letter Paul sends greetings to Aquila and Priscilla in Rome, they have eventually returned to Rome after they had been forced to flee by Claudius. There, they are once again the host of a house church. Paul names several other Jewish names in the extended final greetings in Romans 16, and the attention to the integration of Jews and Gentiles in the church in this letter suggests that many Jews, like Aquila and Priscilla, were part of this church.*
  - *Paul calls them “co-workers” a term he does not use for Christians in general but only for specific Christians who apparently held some kind of leadership position.<sup>vi</sup>*
  - *Paul does not elaborate on his claim that they “risked their necks for my sake” or indicate what specific event he has in mind, but it likely refers to events in Corinth or Ephesus.<sup>vii</sup>*

#### Step 2: Summative Discussion:

- Based on the details we glean from these different appearances of Aquila and Priscilla in the story, how would you describe their ministry? Do the features of their ministry partnership remind you of anyone you know or know about?

### Learning Activity 3: Partners in Ministry (10-15 minutes)

*This final discussion considers various forms of Priscilla and Aquila’s ministry partnership and then moves toward exploration of the potential implications for ministry partnerships today.*

#### Partnership with Each Other:

- Priscilla and Aquila (or Aquila and Priscilla) are presented to us in surprisingly mutual ways—they are always mentioned together, and the status-indicating order of their names changes. What kinds of character qualities do you think are required for any ministry pair to work together in partnership with one another?

#### Partnership with Paul:

- Paul calls Aquila and Priscilla his “co-workers/ fellow laborers in Christ Jesus,” who risked their necks for my life” (Romans 16:3). Though it’s not precisely clear what event Paul is referring to here, what events in Paul’s ministry in Corinth and Ephesus do we expect that Aquila and Priscilla were there to witness?
- Paul meets Aquila and Priscilla due to their common trade of tent-making. They extend hospitality to him, and he stays and works with them. That common trade seems to provide a platform for their ministry; we see from the letters that Paul works with his own hands to support his ministry (see 1 Thessalonians 2:9).

What opportunities does your work, paid or unpaid, outside the home or within it, provide for you to minister to others?

Partnership with the Broader Church:

- Priscilla and Aquila are associated with churches in Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome; in the last two cases they were the hosts of the church that met in their home. Paul tells the Romans that not only does he give thanks for them, but also “all the churches of the Gentiles.” What ministries do we give thanks for?

## Final Reflection and Sending (3-5 minutes)

Anthony Thiselton summarizes it well: “In Aquila and Priscilla we see a combination of true Christian devotion and sacrifice, a vision for the spread of the gospel, deep affection for Paul, and affection for communities of Christians in a network of locations that was growing into a worldwide church.”<sup>viii</sup>

Conclude class by calling the group to commit to a concrete action in response to the example of Aquila and Priscilla. You might offer the following possibilities or, if time permits, provide space for people to brainstorm possibilities.

- Write a letter or email to the ministry partnership you thought of in the first activity, naming what you admire about them.
- Reflect on whether anyone would consider you a partner in a particular ministry. What ministry is that? What kinds of character qualities does that ministry require from you? If no ministries come to mind, where might God be calling you to greater partnership in his service?
- Select some form of concrete support that you’d like to offer to a ministry that you admire – a financial donation, volunteer hours, etc. Make a specific commitment and tell someone who you trust to hold you accountable to it.

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<sup>i</sup> Scott McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards: A Gospel of Peace in the Midst of Empire* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019h), 9.

<sup>ii</sup> Carl Holladay, *Acts: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 351.

<sup>iii</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistles to the Corinthians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 1343.

<sup>iv</sup> Ben Witherington, III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 385.

<sup>v</sup> Thiselton, *The First Epistles to the Corinthians*, 1343.

<sup>vi</sup> Witherington, III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 385.

<sup>vii</sup> Witherington, III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 386.

<sup>viii</sup> Thiselton, *The First Epistles to the Corinthians*, 1344.

# Stepping into the Story:

## *Faithful Participation Today: Characters of Faith Week 10*

### **Focus Question**

Each of the minor characters we've studied in this series has, in one way or another, made the story of Jesus part of the story of their own lives. Where are we called to live out our lives in the Way of Jesus?

### ***Introductory Comments for Teachers***

Story has the power to form us. The stories we are told, the stories we tell, and the stories of our communities are central to the way we make sense of our pasts, conceive of our possibilities and responsibilities in the present, and imagine our futures. This series is built on the premise that the stories of minor characters with major impact in the story of Acts can inform and inspire us as disciples of Jesus.

Among the New Testament literature, Luke and Acts together offer something totally unique. Luke, like Matthew, Mark, and John, tells the story of Jesus, but only Luke follows his gospel with a corresponding story of the early church. Acts invites us to both witness and consider what it means to be formed as a *disciple* of Jesus by the *story* of Jesus. For the gospel story of Jesus clearly shapes the life of the early church: the disciples we meet in Acts participate in his liberating ministry, imitate the character of his suffering, obey his commands, and embody the distinctive way of life that he both modeled and taught. Luke is a master story-teller — and a purposeful one. From Israel to the Roman capital, through the life of Jesus and then through the life of the early church, but he reminds us that everything we are reading is part of the broader story of God's saving and redeeming work. New Testament scholar Joel Green refers to this as the fundamental continuity that Luke demonstrates between the story of Israel, the story of Jesus, and the story of the church.<sup>i</sup>

Writing about the formative power of this story, Green argues that Luke's story "not only sketches a plot and develops a set of characters within its pages, but also invites us into its plot so that our character is developed or formed as well."<sup>ii</sup> This final week of the curriculum 1) looks back at the characters we've studied and the specific ways each character embodies the way of Jesus, and 2) looks forward to explore the ways the book of Acts invites us to step into its plot, so that our communal and individual lives also bear witness to the crucified, risen, and reigning Lord.

## *Locating Ourselves in the Story*

Rather than park in a single passage, or a group of related passages, this week's lesson plan takes a 30,000 foot view of the story as a whole, from the early post-Pentecost days of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 1-6), the expansion of the church to Judea, Samaria, and ultimately to the Gentiles (Acts 7-15), the missionary movement of the Gospel within major Greco-Roman cities (Acts 16-21), and the arrest, trial, and transfer of Paul to Rome (Acts 22-28). This more holistic attention to the story helps us to consider, in the words of Joel Green, "What sort of world, what sort of community, and what sort of person is this text constructing?"<sup>iii</sup>

### *Learning Objectives:*

Through this lesson, learners will...

- Review and summarize the story of Acts as a whole: its contents, its claims about God, and its portrait of the church.
- Identify with the characters discussed in this series, reflecting on them in light of their impact on those around them and on the plot of the story overall.
- Encourage one another toward greater faithfulness, as we seek to "step into the plot" of God's kingdom come and God's kingdom coming.

### *Notes for Study and Preparation:*

First, pray that God will guide your preparation to teach, as well as your class discussion and study, that you might grow together in faithfulness as disciples of Jesus.

Second, as you feel you need, review the major features of the characters we've covered so far; this will equip you to support the final reflection on the impact of those characters within the story and on us as readers. As you review, answer the reflection questions for yourself. Be sure, also, to answer for yourself the questions in the first activity about the overall shape and contents of the story, refamiliarizing yourself with the structure and plot of Acts. Pay particular attention to the closing scenes in Acts 28, since the final two verses are the focus of the third activity.

Third, read through the entire teaching plan and determine your highest priority activities and discussion questions. Note the option provided on page 3 to skip the third activity and allot greater time to the second activity.

## Learning Activity 1: Opening Discussion (10-15 minutes)

*This activity provides an opportunity to step back and consider the view of the story from 30,000 feet, after spending several weeks closely analyzing particular passages.*

*Note for teachers: This activity may need support depending upon the extent to which your class is familiar with the structure and content story of Acts as a whole. It might be helpful to review some of the “big picture” features of Acts from the introductory class. Hard copy Bibles would be extremely helpful; if possible, make some available for those who don’t have one in hand.*

### Step 1: Reviewing

- Working together in small groups, review the book of Acts as a whole. You might, for instance, skim the subheadings from beginning to end, pay attention to locations and the movement of the story between them, consider what main characters take center stage at different points, and so forth.

### Step 2: Summarizing

- Working in those same groups, complete the following three sentences, drawing on your sense of the whole story:
  - The book of Acts is about...
  - In Acts, God /Jesus /Holy Spirit....
  - In Acts, the church...
- Then, ask one or two groups to share their response to one or more of the questions, pausing to compare and reflect.

## Learning Activity 2: Connecting (with) the Characters (20-25 minutes)

*With that broader sense of the story in hand, this activity returns to the specific characters discussed in this series, connecting each of them to the story of Jesus and to the broader story of Acts in which they appear.*

*Note for teachers: Given time constraints, it is unlikely that you will have time to discuss each character as a full group (20 minutes leaves only 2 minutes per character). You might, instead, select only two or three of the nine characters for discussion using the questions below, or assign one or two characters to small groups for discussion, having them report back to the class. If you are using a projector, you might find it helpful to display a full list of the characters discussed.*

*Alternatively, you could opt to skip the third activity and give this activity more time, closing with the final prayer and charge.*

In this series, we’ve considered the following characters in Acts:

- The Jerusalem Church - Acts 1:12-26; 2:42-47; 4:32-35

- Stephen - Acts 6:1-7:60
- Ethiopian Eunuch - Acts 8:26-40
- Ananias - Acts 9:1-19
- Tabitha - Acts 9:36-43
- Barnabas - Acts 11:19-30, with 9:26-28 & 15:1-35
- Lydia - Acts 16:11-40
- Apollos - Acts 18:24-28
- Priscilla and Aquila - 18:1-28

Step 1: Either assign to small groups or choose a character to consider as a full class. Then, discuss:

- How does this character live out the story and imitate the character of Jesus? For instance, where do they obey something that Jesus taught? Where do they act in a way that reminds you of Jesus?
- What impact does this character have on the people around them? On the overall plot of the story?

Step 2: Group Discussion and Reflection

- With which one of these characters do you MOST identify? What about them resonates with your experience in some way?
- Which one of these characters most inspires you to greater faithfulness?
- If someone was writing a summary of your life, how do you hope they will see that you lived out the story of Jesus and imitated his example? What impact do you hope to have had on the people around you?

### Learning Activity 3: Final Discussion (10-15 minutes)

The conclusion of the book of Acts is open-ended. After tracking, with sometimes painstaking detail, the slow progress of Paul through the Roman judicial system leading to his successful appeal to Caesar, Luke never tells us about that final trial. Instead, the story ends with Paul under house arrest in Rome.

Have someone read Acts 28:30-31, then discuss:

- Paul is, almost by definition, “hindered” by his house arrest, but Luke suggests that proclamation of the kingdom and the Lord Jesus Christ cannot ultimately be restrained. Is there anything in our context that you fear would hinder the spread of the Gospel? Is it possible to look at that differently?

- One possibility is that Luke concludes the story without telling us the outcome of Paul's life because in the end, the story isn't about any single character, even one as remarkable as Paul. Instead, the story is about the saving work of God, who keeps promises, heals, liberates, commissions, provides, directs, and empowers.

How should this story of the saving purposes of God, a story in which the disciples of Jesus are called to participate, shape how we see the world around us and our opportunities and responsibilities as disciples in it?

## Final Reflection and Sending (1-2 minutes)

Conclude this class meeting, and the series, with a prayer, asking God to give us the encouraging presence of Barnabas, the open hearts and homes of Lydia, the Eunuch and Apollos's willingness to learn, and the generous service of Tabitha.

Send the class out with a charge to step into the plot of God's saving purposes, in confidence that God goes with us.

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<sup>i</sup> Joel B. Green, "Doing Repentance: The Formation of Disciples in the Acts of the Apostles," *ExAud.*18 (2002): 9.

<sup>ii</sup> Green, "Doing Repentance," 3.

<sup>iii</sup> Green, "Doing Repentance," 2.