

## Cork Scripture Group



***Your Word, O Lord, is a lamp for my steps and a light for my path.***

Psalm 119:105

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### Acts of the Apostles: New beginning aren't always easy Marian Mortell

The aim of this presentation is to look at the beginning of the Christian community as outlined in the Acts of the Apostles. First we will look at the ideal picture that is described in the summaries and then we will look at some of the complications and problems that arose and how they were dealt with.

#### The background

The Acts of the Apostles was written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke and is, in fact, part II of the same story. The Gospel traces the life of Jesus until his death and resurrection and then Acts continues the story of the new community that Jesus sends forth to spread the Good News throughout the whole world. Jesus' last words to them were: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

After the ascension, the apostles returned to Jerusalem to wait for the coming of the Spirit and they gathered with about 120 other disciples including the women who had come up with Jesus from Galilee (Luke 8:2-3), had remained with him throughout the Passion and were the first to witness to the resurrection (Luke 24:1-11). Acts tells us: "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers" (Acts 1:14). Immediately after Pentecost, empowered by the Spirit, that group began to preach the Good News. Peter's preaching resulted in over 3000 people joining them that very first day.

Straight away, the author of Acts described how that group formed itself into the ideal early Christian community (even though they were not called Christians at this stage). It must seem strange to place this description at the end of what is still Pentecost, the very first day of the new community of Jesus followers. However, it is important to remember that Acts is not a history in the modern sense and neither is it a documentary. If Luke was writing in a strictly chronological order, then this summary should appear later in Acts. However, he has a reason for placing it

here. As Luke Timothy Johnson explains, the author wants “to give literary shape to a theological vision.”<sup>1</sup> He wants to show that the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers is following the same pattern as the life of Jesus in the Gospel and that from the very beginning the followers of Jesus gather together in fellowship. The word *κοινωνία* is used to describe the fellowship or communion that exists between them.

*Κοινωνία* (fellowship, communion, association)

Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35

The description of this fellowship is given in the form of a summary passage, the first of many that we meet in Acts. Readers of the Gospel are already familiar with these summary passages as they are very common in Luke’s Gospel. By using the Imperfect tense, they describe in a very concise way, either prolonged situations or else events that happen repeatedly. Rather than describing an historical event, Luke takes fragments of tradition and forms them into an ideal picture of the life of the early community. The aim is to make readers aware that these events are regular practices and have been happening for a considerable amount of time and are typical of the way of life of the new community. We are going to look at two summaries, the first immediately after Pentecost (Acts 2:42-47) and the second two chapters later (Acts 4:32-37).

#### **Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35. The Ideal Community**

**Acts 2:42-47** They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.<sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles.<sup>44</sup> All who believed were together and had all things in common;<sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.<sup>46</sup> Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,<sup>47</sup> praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

**Acts 4:32-35** Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common.<sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.<sup>34</sup> There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.<sup>35</sup> They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

*What are the key elements that make up the life of the early communities of Jesus followers?*

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<sup>1</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 1.

## Key elements of the early Christian Community

### *Listening to the Apostles' Teaching*

The first point that is mentioned is that they listened to the apostles' teaching. This is reminiscent of the first mention of Jesus' public ministry which says that "he began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone" (Luke 4:15). See also Luke 4:31-32; 5:3, 17; 6:6; 13:10, 22; 19:47; 20:1, 21; 21:37 all of which refer to Jesus' teaching. The teaching of the apostles had already been described in Acts 2: 14-36 when Peter addressed the crowd and, by drawing on Scripture, introduced Jesus as the Messiah. He also emphasized that despite being crucified, Jesus had overcome death and this was reiterated in the second summary when the apostles testified to the resurrection (Acts 4:33).

### *κοινωνία or Fellowship.*

Secondly, we return to this word κοινωνία or fellowship. This concept is an essential aspect of the new community. It involves not only living in peace and harmony but also holding everything in common and sharing with those in need. As Acts says, the early Christians were so united that they were "of one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32). This fellowship was also proposed by Greek writers (like Plato) and Jewish groups (like the Essenes and the community at Qumran) who saw this as the ideal example of living in friendship and community.

### *Sharing of Possessions.*

For the early community, fellowship was seen in particular in their attitude to possessions. They "had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:45-46). In this they were following the teaching of Luke's Gospel where John the Baptist urged those he baptised to share (Luke 3:10-14) and Jesus told his disciples to "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" (Luke 12:33). When the rich ruler told Jesus that he already kept all the commandments, Jesus asked him to go further. "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" (Luke 18:22). Because of this sharing, the second summary states that "there was not a needy person among them" (Acts 4:34). This fulfilled the promise that the Lord made in Deuteronomy that if the Israelites obeyed the commandments of the Lord, "there will, however, be no one in need among you, because the LORD is sure to bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you as

a possession to occupy” (Deut 15:4). In other words the Jesus followers saw their community as a fulfillment of the covenant community that the Lord promised to establish.

In the first summary, the sharing seems to have been a spontaneous action on the part of the early Christians, but by the second one it already had a more structured element to it. The expression that people laid the proceeds of the sale of their land and possessions “at the feet of the apostles” (Acts 4:35) means that they were showing their obedience to the apostles and recognizing that they had the authority to collect the money and also to distribute it to those in need.

### *Prayer*

The early community also devoted themselves to prayers and met daily in the Temple. They were still members of the Jewish community just as Jesus had been throughout his whole ministry. He was first introduced as an observant Jew who was presented in the Temple as a baby and also circumcised (Luke 2:21-38) and he was brought to the Temple every year by his parents for the feast of Passover (Luke 2:41). During his adult ministry he continued to pray and teach in the Temple. It was when people misused it and turned it into a den of robbers that he became angry and threw out those who were selling there (Luke 19:45-46).

At the end of Luke’s Gospel, the disciples were continually in the temple blessing God and this continued as the new community was established. However they met in the precincts of the Temple (ἱερόν), the place where Jesus taught, rather than the inner sanctuary area (ναός). In those early days, they continued Jewish observances and prayers, but as time went on the Temple become a place of conflict and they eventually moved from there to meeting in their homes.

### *Breaking Bread*

From the very beginning, the home was an important place of gathering for the followers of Jesus. It was while they were gathered in a home that the Holy Spirit descended on them at Pentecost. The first summary explains that they continued to go to the Temple for prayer but also met in family homes to break bread.

It was central to Jesus’ ministry to gather with people, often the outcasts and marginalized, for meals. In fact, he was even described as a glutton “who eats with tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34). The stories of the feeding of the 5000 (Luke 9:10-17), the Last Supper (Luke 22:14-20) and the meeting on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) raised these meals to a different level. It was when Jesus blessed the bread, broke it and shared it in the Emmaus narrative that the disciples recognized him.

When Acts discusses 'breaking bread' it can mean both gathering for an ordinary meal and the Eucharist and quite often it includes both. "In both instances the normal taking of food is linked to the Eucharist. In Acts, the poor followers of Jesus could get food at communal gatherings while worshipping. One should therefore be reminded that the Eucharist had its roots in the open table fellowship of Jesus with his disciples, social outcasts and opponents."<sup>2</sup>

By the time readers have read the first few chapters of Acts they have a very clear idea of what the ideal Christian community should be like, listening to the word, prayer, breaking bread together and a sharing community where the needs of all are met. This is a community where the Lord's command to love God and neighbour are put into practice.

### Not always Perfect

Real life however is not always like this perfect community. The early Christians had to tackle various difficulties and learn to deal with them in a variety of ways.

#### *Sharing of Possessions*

The summary in Acts 4 focuses largely on how the community held everything in common and shared with the needy. It even made the very significant claim that there was no needy person among them. This was reinforced in the description of the generosity of Barnabas who sold a field that belonged to him and placed the money at the feet of the apostles (Acts 4:37). This is then contrasted with the story of Ananias and Sapphira who do not live up to the same ideals.

#### **Acts 5:1-11 The story of Ananias and Sapphira**

**But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property;<sup>2</sup> with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet.<sup>3</sup> "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land?<sup>4</sup> While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!"<sup>5</sup> Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it.<sup>6</sup> The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.<sup>7</sup> After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.<sup>8</sup> Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price." And she said, "Yes, that was the price."<sup>9</sup> Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are**

<sup>2</sup> Eben Scheffler, Caring for the Needy in the Acts of the Apostles, *Neotestamentica* 50.3 (2016), 131-165.

at the door, and they will carry you out." <sup>10</sup> Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. <sup>11</sup> And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

*Read how things didn't always work out as intended. What went wrong here?*

The story of Ananias and Sapphira is considered by many commentators to be a legend or a sort of parable meant to teach a lesson rather than the recounting of an actual event. Yet legend or fact, it examines the unity of the young community as exemplified in its attitude to property and sharing.

The story is a complete unit in itself and is very tightly structured. The language in verses 1-6 about Ananias has the same basic components as the language in verses 7-11 regarding Sapphira.<sup>3</sup> By repeating the story about the man and then the woman, a type of parallelism that Luke does frequently, the importance of the message is emphasised even more.

V.1	Ananias	V.7	Sapphira
3-4	Peter said- Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit	8-9	Peter said- They put the Spirit of the Lord to the test
5a	Ananias fell down and died	10a	Sapphira fell down and died
6	Young men/carried/buried	10b	Young men/carried/buried
5b	Great fear upon all	11	Great fear upon all

Both the man and his wife are blamed equally. Ananias sold the property ‘with the consent of his wife’ (5:1) and kept back some of the proceeds of the sale “with his wife’s knowledge” (5:2). There was no effort to subordinate the woman to the man and in fact, “Sapphira . . . may be the most fully “equal” woman in the New Testament.”<sup>4</sup>

Their wrong-doing however was not about property or possessions. Their sin was not that they held back some of the money. Peter explained to them that they were free to do what they wanted with their own property. They could keep it or donate it to the community. By retaining some of the property that they said they were giving to the community, they lied to God and that

<sup>3</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, (Macon; Georgia: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 2003), 50.

<sup>4</sup> Richard I Pervo, “Sapphira”, *Women in Scripture*, Eds. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven and Ross s. Kraemer, 149-150, (Grand Rapids; Michigan: Willam B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000).

was their great deception. The story was told as a stark warning to the new community that by lying to the Holy Spirit they also damaged relationships within the community.

While this story was not ultimately about their attitude to possessions, it showed that this was a human community with faults and failings and the ideal was not always possible. For the rest of Acts, there was less emphasis on having everything in common and both Peter and Paul met communities gathered in households and family units, who supported the early Christians but continued to work and live in their own homes.

### *Disputes in the Community*

The ideal community lived in fellowship and harmony, but from time to time, disputes arose.

The dispute described here involved widows, a particularly vulnerable group. Widows were one of the groups of people for whom the Torah insisted on special care. Deuteronomy described YHWH as “full of justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing” (Deut 10:18). Doing justice for widows was considered a sign of conformity to the covenant.

The Hebrew widows were Jews from Palestine while the Hellenists are also Jews but Greek speaking and probably from outside Palestine.

#### **Acts 6:1-6: The Hellenist and Hebrew Widows**

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food (τῆ διακονίᾳ τῆ καθημερινῇ).<sup>2</sup> And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables (διακονεῖν τραπέζαις).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task,<sup>4</sup> while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word (τῆ διακονίᾳ τοῦ λόγου)."<sup>5</sup>

*What is the problem (or problems) here and how is it (are they) solved?*

On first reading, the problem here can be described very simply: a dispute between two different factions within the new Christian community, one group could be described as ‘native’ Jews and the other as ‘foreigners.’ However, they all had the same religious beliefs and background. One group felt that their widows were being treated unfairly and the apostles solved the problem by deciding that seven men should be appointed to oversee the work. By choosing the men from the Hellenist (Greek-speaking) community, it looks like a good solution to the dispute.

However, a closer look at the text opens up many other possibilities

First it should be noted that the noun *διακονία* and the verb *διακονέω* are used three times in the above text. These words mean both service and ministry and were used in Luke's Gospel to describe Simon's mother-in-law (Luke 4:39) and Martha (Luke 10:40) providing hospitality for Jesus and his friends and the Galilean women providing financial support for the community who travelled with Jesus (Luke 8:3). In the latter part of the Gospel, using this same word *διακονία*, Jesus told his disciples that he was among them as one who serves and this was the type of ministry that he proposed for all his followers (Luke 22:25-27).

<i>διακονία</i> (Diakonia)		to serve or minister
Verse	NRS translation	Other possible translation
Acts 6:1	Daily distribution (of food)	Daily service or ministry
Acts 6:2	To wait on tables	To serve or minister at table
Acts 6:4	Serving the Word	Ministry of the Word

With Luke's understanding of diakonia in mind, there are a number of different possible causes for the original complaint.

1. If the widows were impoverished, then the daily distribution would apply to the distribution of food to the needy, a very common practice in Judaism. The early Christian community with its emphasis on sharing with the needy continued this practice. Therefore the exclusion of the Hellenist widows from this distribution would be the antithesis of their core values.
2. This sentence could apply to the table fellowship gathering or breaking of bread and the possibility that the Hellenist widows were excluded from the communal meal described in Acts 2:46. Since in Luke's writings, table fellowship was always inclusive (in sharp contrast to Jewish meals where people of an equal social standing were usually invited), and since Jesus welcomed people from a variety of backgrounds and ate 'with tax collectors and sinners' (Luke 7:34), then it is very strong criticism indeed of the ethos of the Christian community if the Hellenist widows were not allowed to join in table fellowship, be that a meal shared by the community or a Eucharistic meal.
3. Since Acts 6:2 described the twelve waiting on tables and the table could have been the table of the Lord (i.e. the Eucharist) as described in 1 Cor 10:21, then the ministry described in 6:1-2 could actually be Eucharistic ministry, which could involve buying the



food, preparing, serving/ministering and even cleaning up after the Eucharistic meal.<sup>5</sup> So was the problem that the Hellenist widows were not allowed to exercise ministry at the Eucharistic gathering?

4. Another possibility is that διακονεῖν τραπέζαις (6:2) may refer to financial administration. This word for example was used for the money changer's table.<sup>6</sup> So, the widows may have been supporting the community in the same way that Mary Magdalene, Susanna and Joanna (Luke 8:3) supported Jesus in the gospel, thus exercising a financial ministry. So were they excluded from the financial administration of the community?

Finally, this text translates τῇ διακονίᾳ τοῦ λόγου (Acts 6:4) as service of the Word but it could also be translated as ministry of the Word and it is obvious that the apostles see preaching the Word as a ministry. Then since seven men are chosen to replace the twelve (Acts 6:5), it is likely that verses 6:1-2 are also about ministry rather than the simple preparation of meals. Does it mean that women were now being excluded from this ministry?

*Who is welcome to be a member of the new community?*

Jesus' final instruction to the disciples was that they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). However, it took the new community some time to define what that meant. The ideal community, as envisaged in the summaries, consisted of both local and Hellenist Jews from Palestine and the Diaspora but, as Peter and the first converts and later Paul and the other missionaries discovered, there were also many Gentiles who were called to follow Jesus.

### **Acts 10: Peter and Cornelius**

In Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion of the Italian Cohort, as it was called.<sup>2</sup> He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave alms generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.<sup>3</sup> One afternoon at about three o'clock he had a vision in which he clearly saw an angel of God coming in and saying to him, "Cornelius."<sup>4</sup> He stared at him in terror and said, "What is it, Lord?" He answered, "Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God."<sup>5</sup> Now send men to Joppa for a certain Simon who is called Peter;<sup>6</sup> he is lodging with Simon, a tanner, whose house is by the seaside."<sup>7</sup> When the angel who

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM, 1983), 165.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara E. Reid, "The Power of Widows and How to Suppress it," in *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine with Marianne Blickenstaff, 71-88 (London: T&T Clark International, 2004).

spoke to him had left, he called two of his slaves and a devout soldier from the ranks of those who served him,<sup>8</sup> and after telling them everything, he sent them to Joppa.<sup>9</sup> About noon the next day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray.<sup>10</sup> He became hungry and wanted something to eat; and while it was being prepared, he fell into a trance.<sup>11</sup> He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners.<sup>12</sup> In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air.<sup>13</sup> Then he heard a voice saying, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat."<sup>14</sup> But Peter said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean."<sup>15</sup> The voice said to him again, a second time, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."<sup>16</sup> This happened three times, and the thing was suddenly taken up to heaven.<sup>17</sup> Now while Peter was greatly puzzled about what to make of the vision that he had seen, suddenly the men sent by Cornelius appeared. They were asking for Simon's house and were standing by the gate.<sup>18</sup> They called out to ask whether Simon, who was called Peter, was staying there.<sup>19</sup> While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Look, three men are searching for you."<sup>20</sup> Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them."<sup>21</sup> So Peter went down to the men and said, "I am the one you are looking for; what is the reason for your coming?"<sup>22</sup> They answered, "Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say."<sup>23</sup> So Peter invited them in and gave them lodging. The next day he got up and went with them, and some of the believers from Joppa accompanied him.<sup>24</sup> The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.<sup>25</sup> On Peter's arrival Cornelius met him, and falling at his feet, worshiped him.<sup>26</sup> But Peter made him get up, saying, "Stand up; I am only a mortal."<sup>27</sup> And as he talked with him, he went in and found that many had assembled;<sup>28</sup> and he said to them, "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean.<sup>29</sup> So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?"<sup>30</sup> Cornelius replied, "Four days ago at this very hour, at three o'clock, I was praying in my house when suddenly a man in dazzling clothes stood before me.<sup>31</sup> He said, 'Cornelius, your prayer has been heard and your alms have been remembered before God.'<sup>32</sup> Send therefore to Joppa and ask for Simon, who is called Peter; he is staying in the home of Simon, a tanner, by the sea.'<sup>33</sup> Therefore

I sent for you immediately, and you have been kind enough to come. So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say."<sup>34</sup> Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality,<sup>35</sup> but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.<sup>36</sup> You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ-- he is Lord of all.<sup>37</sup> You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ-- he is Lord of all.<sup>38</sup> how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.<sup>39</sup> We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;<sup>40</sup> but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear,<sup>41</sup> not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.<sup>42</sup> He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead.<sup>43</sup> All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."<sup>44</sup> While Peter was still speaking, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.<sup>45</sup> The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles,<sup>46</sup> for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter said,<sup>47</sup> "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"<sup>48</sup> So he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they invited him to stay for several days.

*Who is welcome to be a member of the new Christian community?*

*Since this third example is very long it will not be possible to look at it in the same detail that we did for the others, but please spend some time reading it yourself to see how Peter came to the realisation that the community of Jesus is open to all.*

It is important to remember that the first followers of Jesus saw themselves as Messianic Jews who had encountered Jesus, the promised Messiah. As the summaries state, they still went up to the Temple every day to pray. In his preaching, Peter traced the lineage of Jesus from David and situated him in covenant history as outlined in the Hebrew Scriptures (Acts 2:14-36; 3:11-26). However, it was not long before the Temple authorities begin to persecute the Jesus followers because they preached about Jesus' resurrection and worked miracles of healing in his name. Following the stoning of Stephen, a severe persecution began and the followers of Jesus were

forced to leave Jerusalem. Even though Philip began to preach in Samaria and many Samaritans were converted (Acts 8:4-13) and he also baptized the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-40), the focus was still almost completely on evangelizing the Jews.

Acts 10 is when the first major deliberation about reaching out to the Gentiles took place. Peter's vision followed by his encounter with the Roman centurion, Cornelius, forced him to rethink his attitude to evangelizing the Gentiles. In the vision, Peter was instructed to eat unclean animals, in other words, to disobey the Jewish dietary laws. This was followed by the invitation to preach to Cornelius and his family and he explained: "You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean" (Acts 10:28). This is not however the end of the matter as he had to justify his action before the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 11:1-18).

The struggle to understand what it meant to be a follower of Jesus continued after this. When some men from Cyprus and Cyrene evangelized Greeks in Antioch, Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to check on their actions (Acts 11: 20-22). After the first missionary journey (Acts 13-14), Paul and Barnabas had to return to Jerusalem to defend their actions. This took place at the first church council in Jerusalem where many Jewish Christians (especially those from among the Pharisees) argued that converts had to keep "the law of Moses" and be circumcised first before they could become members of the community. Peter and Paul both disagreed with this and after much debate and having told the community of their encounters with the Gentiles it was finally decided "to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication" (Acts 15:28-29). This facilitated the spread of the Good News throughout the 'whole world' (Acts 1:8).

### *Summary*

In the summaries in Acts, Luke gives a picture of the ideal Christian community but since this is not the perfect community, then problems arise and have to be dealt with from very early on. The sections we looked at posed questions about how to live within the community and what their attitude to possessions said about their relationship with God and one another. Questions were asked about the treatment of the poor and vulnerable and various ministries, including the role of women in these ministries. Finally, an ongoing debate related to who was welcome to join the new community. Acts gives much food for thought for us in our church today.