

Closing

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National Council of Churches
Stony Point, New York
1981

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Justo: We have been discussing the Book of Acts. It is usually called "Acts of the Apostles." A better title would be "Acts of the Spirit."

It is really a book about the Spirit leading a people in pilgrimage from Pentecost to the sharing of goods; from structural readjustments to Samaria; from the Ethiopian eunuch to Cornelius; from Paul's journey to Damascus to Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Rome.

All of this is exemplified in Stephen's speech in Acts 7: 44 – 48.

"Our ancestors had the tent of witness in the wilderness, even as the One who spoke to Moses directed him to make it, according to the pattern that he had seen. Our ancestors in turn brought it in with Joshua when they dispossessed the nations that God thrust out before them. So it was until the days of David, who found favor in the sight of God and asked leave to found a habitation for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built a house for God. Yet the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands. . .

This is one of the reasons why his listeners do not like what Stephen has to say. They wish to remain settled. They want final answers. Indeed, they have the final answer. To be told that the answers that one has, comfortable as they seem, may be a betrayal of one's very nature is not a very happy experience. To be told, when one is comfortably settled, that it is time to remember the pilgrim God who goes before a people in pilgrimage, and to follow that God is not an easy thing. And so, Stephen is stoned.

Catherine: We need to be careful how we hear this. It is not a matter that there is a temple-tradition, which is wrong, and a tent tradition, which is right. Both can be misused—the temple to avoid the continuing pilgrimage—as Stephen points out—and the tent to avoid any social and political engagement in our present situation. We cannot say, without doing great damage to our understanding of Scripture, that Israel was totally in error to build a temple, that they had misunderstood God at that point. There is a whole strand of New Testament use of the temple-tradition to say that God had accustomed the people to the geographic locatability of God (not denying the universal presence of God) in the Temple. The incarnation itself is a continuation of the Temple tradition. The Book of Hebrews includes this as does Mark 14:58 (“We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands,’” and John 2:19 (Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up). If the Temple is destroyed Jesus will raise up a new one in three days. In a sense, Jesus is the new Temple, destroyed, but raised up in three days.

It needs to be mentioned in passing that this debate has not ended in the Christian church, for some of our ecumenical dialogue and debate has to do with the significance of place for worship. Some of us come from traditions that maintain the tent motif and dislike church buildings that seem at all to create "holy space." Others of us find great help, comfort, and strength in a place set aside for worship, a sacred space that aids in our worship. Some traditions, like my own, are divided between the Puritan, iconoclastic wing and the more "high church" branch that sees the value of such a set-aside place. We cannot short-circuit the

discussion either in Scripture or in our contemporary church life without doing damage to the Word of God.

At the same time, Stephen's speech is an accurate warning against those who would use the Temple tradition to avoid the constant insecurity and faithfulness that being God's pilgrim-people always demands.

Pilgrimage is not an easy matter, however. It has its high points and its long stretches of trudging on. The Book of Acts is quite realistic about this. In fact, some of the "high points" may have their own difficulties.

In this regard there is another passage I would bring to your attention. To me it seems extremely appropriate for the end of a long and tiring—though hopefully also exhilarating—conference. It is from the 20th chapter of Acts. Paul has come to Troas for a very brief stay. The faithful there are very glad to see him, and they gather for what might be called a conference—their own "ecumenical moment." They gather—young and old—in an upper room, three stories up, for a meal (or two?!) and to hear Paul speak to them. There are a lot of people and a lot of lights, which make the room even warmer, and a long, long speech. Hear the words from Acts 20:7-12.

On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the morrow; and he prolonged his speech until midnight. There were many lights in the upper chamber where we were gathered. And a young man named Eutychus was sitting in the window. He sank into a deep sleep as Paul talked still longer; and being overcome by sleep, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. But Paul went down and

bent over him, and embracing him said, "Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him." And when Paul had gone up and had broken bread and eaten, he conversed with them a long while, until daybreak, and so departed. And they took the lad away alive, and were not a little comforted.

If some speakers on such occasions go on for a long time, they evidently have biblical warrant for it, but they would do well to block the windows or else be sure of their restorative powers! On the other hand, if some of us get very sleepy when the talking goes on and on, we, too, have the assurance that such a happening occurred even when Paul preached in that supposedly model early church. Meetings are human occasions, even when the Spirit is present! Our tiredness is to be expected. It may well be a prelude for renewed life and vigor. In one sense, we ought to be thankful that there are long stretches of drudgery and monotony in our pilgrimage, for at least we don't run the danger of falling out of windows then.

Justo. When Paul took his leave from these people, that was not the end of the story. Indeed, the book of Acts does not end. It simply quits. If you look at the end of chapter 28, the last chapter of Acts, it almost gives you the impression that something is missing. Here for all these chapters, we have been following the ministry of Paul. Now he is at a crucial moment. He is in Rome, waiting to stand trial before Caesar, and the book ends. It is almost like one of those Batman episodes on television. . .

Several explanations have been offered for this. One is that the author was writing to someone who knew that part of the story. Theophilus, whoever that may have been, knew the end, and

he had asked for the background. Another is that this book is trying to picture the early church under the best possible lights vis-à-vis the Empire. To go on to depict Paul as being tried and condemned by the authorities would have undone much of that argument.

Frankly, I do not find these explanations convincing. There is another possibility. The book is not about the apostles. The book is not about Paul. Just as in the first chapters, the Jerusalem church is the focus of attention and then it disappears into the background to move on to Stephen and Philip, then to Peter and Cornelius, and eventually to Paul, now it is time to move away from Paul. The book does not tell us what became of the Jerusalem community, nor of Peter, nor of Philip, nor of Paul.

The book is unfinished precisely because it is not about the Acts of the Apostles. It is about the Acts of the Spirit. And those acts have not ended. At the end of chapter 28, Paul fades away. But we are now living in chapter 29; still in the age when the Spirit is active; still a pilgrim discovering new dimensions of people; still mission, even as we go about our daily pilgrimage. We do find ourselves in the book of Acts. We find ourselves because there is much that we have in common with those early characters of whom we have been speaking these days. But in a certain sense our place in Acts is also in that chapter that Luke did not write: Acts 29.

As Stephen reminded his listeners, Abraham set out, not knowing where he was going. We are still on the same pilgrimage. We are still a people of the temple and a people of the tent. The

ecumenical movement is a pilgrimage. The life of the church is a pilgrimage. The life of the world is a pilgrimage. As people of faith, we follow God in that pilgrimage. Not always knowing whither, we follow the cloud and the pillar of fire.

Thus, as a final act of sharing, let us take a few minutes to write a few more verses to this book:

Acts 29:1-3. Think about what has happened since that is meaningful to you and to us; of the Acts of the Spirit since the times of Paul; Acts of the Spirit today. In your mind, or on a piece of paper, write those two or three verses.

And then, if you wish, do speak them out loud.

