

BSK-CBFVA Bible Study Project 2022

# Faithful Curiosity

A Five Week Study in Luke-Acts



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2022

Content Editor: Dr. Laura Rodgers Levens  
Design Editor: Dr. David Adams

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## Letter from the President

Dear Reader,

As you use this resource, I hope you will not only grow in insight around studying the scriptures, but that you will also discover BSK to be a partner in your faith journey.

Celebrating our 20th anniversary this year (2022), BSK has developed a reputation both for scholarship and respect for congregations. In fact, our commitments include: “As faculty and students, our primary commitment is to exercise together scholarly gifts and vocation as stewards of the mysteries in service to God’s church.” Across this Bible study, you will see this commitment in action.

BSK is also known for its work around racial justice, women in ministry, rural ministry, and pastoral care. While we have graduate programs supporting the formation of ministers, chaplains, and leaders of non-profits, we also offer non-credit experiences designed to provide local church leadership with theological education.

Our partnerships also express the ways we learn from congregations. BSK walks alongside the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, particularly in Kentucky, Virginia, and Florida, where we have formal alliances. We also are the official seminary of the National Baptist Convention of America, Inc. (NBCA), a 3-million-member denomination in the Black church tradition. Resources such as this are informed both by our scholarship and our understanding of the needs of this wider community.

I hope you will check out the growing selection of online topics created by our Flourish Center ([flourish.bsk.edu](http://flourish.bsk.edu)). These affordable courses can be enjoyed from the comfort of your home or office, at your own pace. BSK’s Flourish Center is another example of our commitment to provide theological education resources for congregations.

Of course, if you are interested in short-term graduate certificates or the Master of Divinity degree, BSK is an ATS accredited seminary that offers the ability for you to pursue these degrees from where you live and serve. Learn more at [BSK.edu](http://BSK.edu).

We are pleased to offer this free resource to support your ministry. If you find it useful and wish to support BSK’s work, I hope you will give online at [bsk.edu/give](http://bsk.edu/give).

May God bless your journey through these texts in ways that are transforming!

Peace,



David Cassady, Ph.D.  
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# Introduction

*By Laura Rodgers Levens*

The opportunities for discovery and reflection are endless as we ponder Scripture together. For example, we can learn information about the Scripture text. We can gather information about how authors wrote passages of Scripture, when they wrote it, and the historical period they recorded. We can also immerse ourselves in the Bible as we study Scripture. We can dive into a fascinating story or take in the emotions of a psalm. And we can look for God and ourselves in the text. We can catch what the author is saying about God and wonder what the Scripture text is saying about us. Studying Scripture together is a deep learning process.

Welcome to a five-week Bible study that encourages curiosity and deep reflection in a group setting. The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Virginia has invited Baptist Seminary of Kentucky to provide curriculum for Sunday Schools and other small groups that study Scripture together. As a seminary, we aim to share with you how we study the Bible together while providing information about the Scripture text and possible interpretations for our current time. Within these pages, you will find interpretive essays and Bible study methods offered by BSK professors, staff, alumni, and students.

We at BSK acknowledge that the work of studying Scripture is never done and cannot be mastered by one person. Those of us who have studied Scripture for decades and might be called “experts” acknowledge that the more we learn, the more we realize there is much more to learn. The challenge of studying Scripture continues, especially as we listen carefully to our community members and pay attention to the different contexts and viewpoints everyone brings to the study of Scripture. We practice a balance of listening to the text, studying about Scripture, and listening to one another. In all of this, we pray for faithful interpretations that shape us to encounter God and live faithfully in the world. The interpretive essays you will encounter in each week of study reflect this balance and model the diversity of interpretation that is possible when studying Scripture.

We are also committed to sharing our knowledge with the wider church in a way that builds up church members and ministers. In past decades and even today in some circles, sometimes the flow of scholarship from seminaries to churches has been unidirectional and unbalanced. Many assumed seminaries held the important information and handed it on to ministers and churches, but there was nothing for church members and ministers to teach one another or to the seminary in return. At BSK, we aim to disrupt those unbalanced expectations. We want to provoke further interest in Biblical information and interpretation methods across the wider church as a means of encouraging congregations to interpret the Bible together and seek more learning together. To fulfill these aims, this Bible study is built in an “all-learners” style that is flexible for different group setups.

For this project, we selected five Scripture texts from the New Testament books of Luke and Acts. Most scholars accept that these two books were written by the same author, who we call

“Luke” throughout this study. Luke wrote lively narratives about Jesus and the early church that provoke us to think about physical places, bodies, materials, society, and other conditions of life and faith. We chose five passages from these two books:

Session 1: Luke 13:10-17: A Woman Healed on the Sabbath

Session 2: Luke 14:7-14: Jesus’ Instructions at a Banquet

Session 3: Luke 19:1-10: Jesus and Zacchaeus in Jericho

Session 4: Acts 2:2-13: The People of Pentecost

Session 5: Acts 8:26-40: Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch

For each week, we invited two different authors write new interpretive essays on the assigned passage. We asked them to draw upon the breadth of their knowledge about the text and encouraged them to provoke their curiosity about the text. We have also included a helpful guide for provoking curiosity and reflection as a small group reads the Scripture text together. As a result, this Bible Study guide provides information for deep study of these five texts as well as methods that can be used over and over again for ongoing study of Scripture.

## **How to Use this Study**

This Bible Study is designed with small discussion groups in mind, and with the knowledge that many Sunday Schools and study groups like to engage with curriculum in their own way. In this “all-learners” style guide, everyone is given the same information. There is no “leaders only” guide and we encourage each discussion group to provide members with access to the whole booklet.

In “Journeying through Scripture Together,” we offer an instructive guide for pondering Scripture as a small group. This guide can be reused each week for deep reading and reflection time directly with the text. We highly recommend direct reading and reflection of the Scripture passage with these questions to be part of preparation and early discussion during small group time. After a few weeks of reading Scripture together in this way, you may find the information and reflection shared by the group during this time to be so engaging that it is hard to move on to anything else. That is perfectly okay!

This study also offers information for preparation and/or study and conversation during the rest of the group session together. The layout of for each session is as follows:

1. Introduction to the Session
2. Scripture text
3. Interpretive Essay #1
4. Interpretive Essay #2
5. Discussion Questions

For each study session, there are two interpretive essays written by different authors. They may also be read in preparation for small group discussion time or the group may read them during their time together. However you decide to incorporate these essays, we encourage setting aside discussion time in the small group for reflecting upon the offered interpretations.

We have provided an abundance of material and questions for each week. In some sessions, the essays may discuss the same topics found in the passage but from different points of view. In others, authors found very different aspects of the passage compelling for study, prayer, and interpretation. Many of the authors ask questions to the reader throughout their essays, and we offer discussion questions at the end to encourage more conversation about the essays to which small group members feel most drawn.

## **Biblical Studies Overview of Luke and Acts (or Luke-Acts)**

Below is a brief overview of biblical studies information about the books of Luke and Acts. Neither the author of the Gospel of Luke nor the author of the Acts of the Apostles is named in their respective books. However, both books are addressed to “most excellent Theophilus” (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). As the name Theophilus can be translated “friend of God,” this most esteemed recipient name could have been a stand-in for the author’s patron or as a general term for an “excellent Christian reader.” In the opening of Luke, the author promises to give Theophilus “an orderly account...so that you may know the truth concerning things about which you have been instructed” (Luke 1:3-4). The opening of Acts continues the story by reminding Theophilus of the first book wherein “I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up into heaven” (Acts 1:1-2). Due to the links between the introductions, the common audience of “Theophilus,” and a good deal of shared language and vocabulary, most biblical scholars accept that the same person authored both books.

### *Authorship, Composition, and Audience*

Following tradition, most biblical scholars call the author “Luke,” even if there is a variety of opinion about the historical details concerning the identity of this author. The name Luke appears in two companions lists in the Pauline letters (Philem. 24; Col. 4:14), and various early Christian writers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian identify the Gospel writer as Luke. Ironically, widespread discussion of Luke’s Gospel at this time was due to a dispute over accepted books in the Christian canon, known as Marcionism (150s CE). Most scholars date the writing of Luke and Acts between 80 and 90 CE, although they are not sure about where Luke was living when these books were composed.<sup>1</sup> Historical data suggests the author knew Paul and likely accompanied Paul on occasion. However, scholars disagree on where Luke was from, what he did, and how well he knew the Apostle Paul. Early tradition says that Luke was from Antioch in Syria and a physician. He may or may not have been a Gentile convert to Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever Luke’s occupation, the language and genre range within the books of Luke and Acts demonstrate that Luke was highly educated, well-versed in Jewish tradition and the Old Testament, and a sophisticated writer. In two volumes, Luke narrates events surrounding the birth and early life of Jesus of Nazareth (birth approx. 4 BCE), and then the ministries of Jesus and the early church (approx. 28/29-63 CE).<sup>3</sup> Some scholars combine the two books into one nickname, “Luke-Acts,” for research and discussion, but there is a variety of opinion whether they should be considered one narrative in two parts or two separate narratives that share similar features. Luke Timothy Johnson, for example, argues that the books must be “read as a *single*

story,” where Acts continues and provides a commentary on Luke. Other scholars, however, simply acknowledge that the two books share many theological themes and Luke constructs some of the historical events in a similar way (e.g. the arrest and trials of Jesus [Luke 19:28-24:53] and Paul [Acts 21:27-28:31]).<sup>4</sup> The interpretations in this Bible Study acknowledge the connections of Luke-Acts, but most essays focus on the respective Biblical book for interpretation of their assigned passage. Small groups may decide to examine each Scripture passage in light of both books if they so desire.

When studying selected passages in Scripture, it is always beneficial to keep the larger context of the biblical book in mind. Luke and Acts are two different literary genres and contain multiple smaller genre pieces within them. Luke is written in the genre of a Gospel, in which several smaller stories and teachings are knitted together in a particular way to provide the larger story and meaning of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. Luke borrows from the Gospels of Mark and Matthew as sources for his gospel, but he also incorporates unique material that is only found in the Gospel of Luke. The three passages from Luke in this study are only found in this gospel, although small groups may connect the themes in these passages with other passages in Luke or the other gospels.

The Acts of the Apostles is written in the genre of ancient historiography. Many scholars believe that Luke uses miracle stories, grand speeches, travel narratives, dialogues, sermons and more to construct the story of the origins of the early church through the work of the Holy Spirit. The two selected passages in Acts, for example, could be classified as short stories about the Holy Spirit’s activity. They are also part of a much longer narrative of the early years of the church shortly after Jesus ascended to heaven (Acts 1-9, approximately 30-33 CE). Small groups may decide to read our shorter Acts selections in connection with the longer narratives of Pentecost (Acts 2) and the spread of the church into Judea and Samaria through the ministry of Philip (Acts 8).

Although both books are addressed to Theophilus, Luke wrote to a much bigger audience in a particular region of the Roman Empire. We do not know Luke’s specific historical audience, but there are many clues about his intended audience. “Theophilus” was a name that could address either Jewish or Gentile audiences. Since Luke’s Hellenistic Greek is some of the best in the New Testament and he is so well-versed in Greco-Roman writing conventions, scholars assume that Luke wrote for a Greco-Roman audience. The extensive use of the Greek Old Testament and Jewish religious traditions suggests an audience connected to a synagogue outside of the Judean region where Jesus lived. It is possible that Luke and his audience share these attributes, and perhaps Luke envisions Theophilus to be a recent convert who is familiar with the synagogue but who doesn’t yet have either knowledge of the story of Jesus and his followers or full understanding of the theological and social consequences of joining “the Way” (Acts 9:2). These consequences included the tensions felt between the synagogues and the early Christians.<sup>5</sup>

## *Book Outlines, Literary and Theological Themes*

Biblical books are already separated by chapter and verse for readers, but there are other ways to divide Luke and Acts into different sections based on the events, themes, or other patterns the reader sees in the text. Organizing sections of these texts into narrative outlines is another way to see the larger story arcs across the chapters or what themes may grow in importance as the book progresses. These narrative outlines are descriptive and informative; they range from short and quick to exhaustively detailed and long. Biblical scholars often build their own in order to highlight what their research has uncovered or focused upon. Below are some helpful outlines produced by recent scholars of Luke and Acts:

### **The Gospel of Luke**

#### **Outline by Judy Fentress-Williams**

1:1-4 Prologue  
1:5-2:52 Birth narratives and childhood  
3:1-4:13 Preparation for ministry  
4:14-9:50 Jesus' ministry in Galilee  
9:51-19:28 Jesus's journey to Jerusalem  
19:29-21:38 Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem  
22:1-23:56 Jesus' trial and death  
24:1-53 The resurrection

#### **Outline by Luke Timothy Johnson<sup>6</sup>**

1:1-4 Prologue  
1:5-2:52 Birth and Childhood of the Prophet  
3:1-8:56 The Prophets John and Jesus  
9:1-50 Preparing a Leadership for the People  
9:51-19:27 The Prophet Journeys to Jerusalem  
19:28-21:38 The Prophet in Jerusalem  
22:1-23:56 The Suffering of the Prophet  
24:1-53 The Prophet is Raised Up

### **The Acts of the Apostles**

#### **Outline by Mikael Parsons**

1:1-7:60 The Sense of a Beginning  
8:1-12:25 Beyond Jerusalem: Philip, Saul,  
Peter, and Others  
13:1-19:41 Paul's Mission to the Gentile  
World  
20:1-28:31 Paul's Farewell Journey

#### **Outline by Willie James Jennings<sup>7</sup>**

1:1-4:37 The Revolution is Here!  
5:1-9:43 The Struggle of Diaspora  
10:1-15:41 The Desire of God Exposed  
16:1-21:40 The Spirit and the End  
of Segregation  
22:1-28:31 The Disciple-Citizen

In the charts above, the outlines on the left side are considered more traditional outlines. Both Judy Fentress-Williams and Mikael Parsons have divided their respective books based on the movements and activity of key characters such as Jesus, Philip, Peter, and Paul. The outlines by Luke Timothy Johnson and Willie James Jennings on the right side, in contrast, are outlines formulated by important literary and theological themes of the respective books.

There are several literary and theological themes that appear across Luke and Acts. As seen above in Johnson's outline, Luke literarily shapes his narrative about Jesus after the pattern of Moses. The motif of Jesus and the apostles in Acts as prophets is also a theological theme throughout Luke-Acts, and helps explain Jesus' death, resurrection, and the power poured out

upon the early Christians by Jesus through the Holy Spirit as well (Luke 13:33-34; 24:25-27, 44-46; Acts 2:34-36). Other literary and theological themes include Luke's use of the title "Lord" for Jesus across Luke-Acts, and how Jesus teaches about the reign of God and brings the reign of God about by his presence on earth. To that end, Jesus regularly focuses on the "materially *and* spiritually poor," especially social outcasts and women, as welcome inheritors of the reign of God in Gospel of Luke. Parables, healing stories, and teaching narratives in Luke's Gospel routinely explore the relationship between repentance, faith, following Jesus as Lord, and the material conditions of discipleship.<sup>8</sup>

Another major theme across Luke-Acts is its world-affirming stance. Literarily, for example, non-Judean outsider characters are portrayed as open-minded, reasonable, and perceptive. Theologically, scholars have described the "universal gospel" in Luke, as Jesus over-abundantly fulfills Israel's hopes and is also revealed as a "light to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; 26:23).<sup>9</sup> However, scholars differ on how open Luke continues to be towards Jews and the synagogues. In their joint commentary on Luke, for example, Ben Witherington III reads continued effort to maintain contact with Jews and the synagogue, whereas Amy-Jill Levine "is much less optimistic." Both agree that Luke's love for Judaism's tradition does not translate into love for rival authorities like the Pharisees and Sadducees.<sup>10</sup>

Jennings' outline of Acts captures the context and struggle of this world-affirming stance, seen above right. From Luke's perspective, the early Christians are caught in a bind; they are not destroying Jewish identity or Gentile identity, but they know they are "betraying" everyone. At the same time, the Spirit calls to the early disciples that God desires them to live, and to make known to all the world that God desires life but also demands the death of social, ethnic, and hierarchical segregations. In Acts, people are always trying to "catch up with the Spirit and keep pace with a God who is calling for a new creature in the Spirit."<sup>11</sup> Keep an eye out for interruptions, disruptions, and revolutions in the two passages from Acts for this study.

## **Bible Translations and Resources in this Study**

As you read through the interpretive essays in each session, you may notice that many different translations of the Bible are mentioned and referenced. We did not set one standard Bible translation for our authors in this study because we do not have one standard translation that we use at Baptist Seminary of Kentucky. Instead, we find that consulting more than one modern English translation increases curiosity and deepens learning as we study Scripture together. Differences between English translations provoke new questions and help us notice things about the text we previously overlooked. For consistency, we have included the Scripture passage for each session from the updated edition of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSVue).<sup>12</sup> Other Scripture references may be in NRSV, unless identified otherwise. Your group may decide to consult the same translation together or study a diversity of translations. We also encourage the exploration of how different translations render the Scripture passage as a part of your study of Scripture.

Each of the Bible Study sessions are organized as deep immersion experiences into the five passages from Luke & Acts. If you or your study group are interested in learning more about these topics, the footnote information provided in this introduction and the interpretive essays will alert you to possible books and other scholarship resources for further learning. (We also hold classes on these topics in our academic program and our Flourish courses for continued education). Here is a select bibliography used throughout this study:

Gafney, Wilda. *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church, Year A*. New York: Church Publishing, 2021.

Jennings, Willie James. *Acts*. Belief: Theological Commentary on the Bible Series. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

Levine, Amy-Jill and Ben Witherington, III. *The Gospel of Luke*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary Series. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

McGann, Mary E. *The Meal That Reconnects: Eucharistic Eating and the Global Food Crisis*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020.

Parsons, Mikael. *Acts*. Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament Series. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008.

Talbert, Charles H. *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary*. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Possibilities include Caesarea, Rome, Antioch, or Greece, although most scholars agree that the “place of Luke’s writing is...anyone’s guess.” Some scholars argue for locations based on the date of composition (Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament Series [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994], 18).

<sup>2</sup> For more on early Christian engagement with the Gospel of Luke and other evidence on the authorship of Luke-Acts, see Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 4-7.

<sup>3</sup> Scholars traditionally date the birth of Jesus of Nazareth to correspond with the Gospel of Matthew’s claim that Jesus was born near the end of Herod’s rule over Judea. Herod the Great ruled from 37-4 BCE (Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 75). For dating of early church events across Acts, see J. Bradley Chance’s full Chronology of Early Christianity in *Acts*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary Series (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), 20-21.

<sup>4</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Commentary Series (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 4-5; Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 4-8.

<sup>5</sup> Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 63-65; see also Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 14-15.

<sup>6</sup> Judy Fentress-Williams, *Holy Imagination: A Literary and Theological Introduction to the Whole Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021), 265; Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, v-vii.

<sup>7</sup> Mikael Parsons, *Acts*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), vii-viii; Willie James Jennings, *Acts*, Belief: Theological Commentary on the Bible Series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), v-viii.

<sup>8</sup> Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 18-21; Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, 29-43. See the introductions of these two commentaries for a fuller discussion of literary and theological themes in the Gospel of Luke.

<sup>9</sup> Chance, *Acts*, 22-23.

<sup>10</sup> Amy-Jill Levine and Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Luke*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary Series (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Jennings, *Acts*, 6-12.

<sup>12</sup> Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

# Journeying Through Scripture Together

*By Aaron Austin*

Scripture is a glorious world filled with innumerable vantage points to contemplate and explore. A single text may elicit joy, anxiety, or confusion depending on our personal experiences and theological perspectives. We may have vastly different reactions to the same passage at different stages of our lives. Just as we have particular worldviews that influence how we interpret the newspaper or our social media feeds, our embedded theologies can constrict our view of scripture's vast landscape so that we see only through our particular narrow lens. If we take time to sit in this world of scripture and remain with these texts (even those texts that leave us anxious or confused), we may find that our eyes begin to adjust to new ways of seeing. Even better, if we can take this journey with friends, our unique perspectives can lead us to vistas we could never discover on our own.

Below you'll find questions that we encourage your small group to use each week in Bible study. You'll notice that none of the questions have right or wrong answers. They are meant to help us share our curiosities, frustrations, and our own unique viewpoints as we journey through scripture together. As we share, we learn not only about the scripture, but also about the lenses we use to interpret these passages.

## Weekly Bible Discussion Questions

- After reading this passage, what are you curious about?
- What feels important to you in this passage?
- What do you find frustrating or problematic?
- Where do you see yourself in this passage?
- What happens before and after this passage?
- Why do you think this story was told?
- What does this passage say about God?
- What does this passage say about humanity?
- What questions does this passage invite you to ask?
- What current events, issues, or people does this passage make you think about?
- Where does this passage lead you?

There are several ways your group could utilize these questions, but as a facilitator I'd like to share what works for my community's small group. First, we print the questions alongside our Scripture passage for the week so that everyone in the group has the opportunity to participate fully. We remind folks that anyone is welcome to ask any of these questions at any time and new questions are always welcome. We usually start by reading the scripture and asking the first question, "what are you curious about?" Often, there's much to be curious about. If your small group would like to continue using these questions after the end of this Bible Study, I recommend choosing Scripture passages that leave you feeling a little confused. This is a sign to me that there will be plenty to talk about.

As we discuss the passage, themes naturally begin to emerge. To facilitate these discussions, I mostly listen reflectively, restating comments folks have made, inviting clarification, and connecting the common threads of our conversation. If a particular path seems to have come to an end, I may ask if there is another question on the list anyone would like to explore. If a new question resonates with the group, we add might add it to expand our list of questions.

Other times, I share with the group some of the deeply entrenched theologies that still linger and shape my readings in ways that don't reflect my current understanding of God's ways and work in the world. When we have permission to ask questions of scripture that make us feel uncomfortable, or to examine our interpretations that feel incongruent with the love, justice, and grace of Christ, we can move forward together toward a more generous and compassionate reading of the text. Exploring scripture in this loving and non-judgmental way allows these truths to reach not only our intellects but our hearts as well.

After using these questions for a while, I've found our Bible study to be lively and engaging. Everyone usually has an insight to share or a question to pose during our discussion. Our group comprises folks from a variety of vocations including public school teachers, professors, healthcare workers, and government employees. These diverse areas of specialty bring welcome nuance and perspective to our discussion. We don't all need to be professional biblical scholars. Moreover, as a facilitator, I don't need to have all the answers or bestow deep spiritual insights. This style of bible study is improvisational in nature. We follow a basic form, but as we riff off of one another, we find interesting ideas that emerge from the interplay of our reflections.

When I recently shared these discussion questions with a congregant in another Sunday small group, they openly wondered, "How do you know where you're going?" In the end, all I could answer was "we're finding our way together." This way of exploring scripture is messy. The questions are real questions—there are no predetermined right answers or morals to learn. There is no pre-defined destination. Like most of life, I never know where we'll actually end up at the end of each session. I hope these questions help you discover beautiful and generous readings as you explore these scriptural landscapes together.

## A Woman Healed on the Sabbath

### Luke 13:10-17

What would it be like to have your whole life rearranged by liberative healing? In the Scripture passage below, we meet Jesus of Nazareth in the middle of his ministry. Scholars call the ten chapters between Luke 9:51-19:28 the “Journey to Jerusalem” section because Luke writes that, “when the days drew near for Jesus to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem” (9:51). An ever-growing number of disciples follow Jesus (along with the Twelve), and even larger crowds gather to hear Jesus teach about the kingdom of God, faith, and being ready, “for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (12:40).

Luke does not mention Jesus’ geographical location for the healing event in 13:10-17, but he does tell us that Jesus is teaching at a synagogue on the Sabbath day. According to Luke Timothy Johnson, the healing of the woman amidst Jesus’ other teachings in this section comes as “a complete surprise” and “creates a conflict over the legitimacy of healing on the Sabbath.”<sup>11</sup> It is not the first time Jesus has healed in a synagogue on the Sabbath and instigated a fury, however. Small group members may want to look back to 6:6-11 to compare Jesus’ synagogue healing miracles. What is different about the situation this time?

What would it be like to have your whole life rearranged by liberative healing?

Our interpretive essays for this session provide different entry points into the Scripture today. T. Devan Franklin III considers what life must have been like for the unnamed woman before she was healed, the cultural stigmas and judgments around people who are chronically ill, and how her life represents “so much more than one person suffering from oppression.” Steve Ivy contemplates the imagery of “bentness” as a literal description of the woman’s physical pain and also as a metaphorical description of the synagogue leader’s denunciation of Jesus’ haste to heal.

#### Scripture Passage (NRSVue):

<sup>10</sup> Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. <sup>11</sup> And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. <sup>12</sup> When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment.” <sup>13</sup> When he laid his hands on

her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. <sup>14</sup> But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the Sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, “There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured and not on the Sabbath day.” <sup>15</sup> But the Lord answered him and said, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it to water? <sup>16</sup> And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the Sabbath day?” <sup>17</sup> When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame, and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things being done by him.

## FIRST INTERPRETATION

### Liberation from Crippling Spirits

By T. Devan Franklin, III

Whenever we are confronted by the reality of disability our natural impulse is to wonder about the cause. *Was she in a car accident? Was he wounded in battle? Is this cause genetic?* The question of theodicy—what is the rhyme and reason of human suffering in the presence of an almighty and all-loving God—is right before our eyes when we see disability. We may not always be able to understand why certain people are faced with disability and suffering as opposed to others, but we can sometimes point to a particular event or a specific diagnosis as the root cause of suffering.

This same impulse to look for answers to existential questions is present in the biblical world as well. The common response to suffering was that it must be connected to some type of sin. In the Old Testament, Job’s friends were convinced that his suffering was the result of some unconfessed sin (Job 4:7-9). Even during Jesus’ ministry, his disciples are found asking him whose sinfulness was to blame for a certain man’s blindness—him or his parents (John 9:1-2). These are called “physiognomic assumptions”—the belief that a person’s disability is related to questionable morality.<sup>2</sup>

What is the rhyme and reason of human suffering in the presence of an almighty and all-loving God?

These kinds of assumptions are not relics of biblical times and are not applied to disabilities alone. Even today, the principles of sowing and reaping and divine judgement are offered as an explanation of human suffering. The Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004 which killed an estimated 225,000 people and the 2016 shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando resulting in the death of 50 people were both interpreted by some to be God’s judgement on persecution of Christians and homosexuality, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

It is reasonable to assume that the unnamed woman in Luke 13:10-17 was subject to such assumptions and judgments. Her “bentness” was likely taken as an indication that she had participated in her own condition through some sinful action. To those on the outside looking in, she was only reaping what she had sown. However, Luke identifies that the cause for the woman’s bent posture was a spirit, and Jesus himself says that Satan had bound her for eighteen years. There is no indication that the woman invited the crippling spirit upon her or that she aided Satan in her own binding, but rather this binding spirit has been thrust upon her. Therefore, we must at least consider that Jesus’ healing of the woman is not simply a feat of physical healing meant to display God’s power, but a release from demonic forces that lead to the woman’s liberation. The bending of her back may well be the result of an eighteen-year battle with oppression.

A number of factors contribute to the woman’s oppression. In a male-dominated society, her gender alone causes her to be subject to several forms of oppression. Not only would her disability have made her a public spectacle, it may have also impacted her ability to earn a living wage, making her economically disenfranchised as well. This woman knows systemic oppression both in and out of the religious community. She knows it from the administration of Caesar and from the Synagogue staff that has ignored her. She knows it from those in her own community who, because of her disability, assume the worst about her before they know her.

The namelessness of this woman is suddenly powerful, because she represents so much more than one person suffering from oppression.

The namelessness of this woman is suddenly powerful, because she represents so much more than one person suffering from oppression. She represents all of Israel, who has historically been subject to exile and oppression. The Children of Israel had their backs bent by the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Babylonians and, at the time of this healing, they are having their backs bent and are unable to stand up under Rome. Beyond Israel, this woman represents oppressed people for all time, in all places. She represents women in the Suffrage Movement fighting for the right to vote, and women today fighting for the right to maintain agency and autonomy over their own bodies as *Roe v. Wade* has been overturned. She represents Black Americans—especially Black women—in the Antebellum South and Africans in the war-ravaged streets of 21<sup>st</sup> century Ukraine.<sup>4</sup> Anyone who has been marginalized by a socio-political system and been subsequently devalued and overlooked has a share in the woman’s bentness. Part of the beauty of this story, is that while Jesus’ eyes were caught by this crippled, bent over woman and while everyone else seemed to dismiss her, Jesus called her to himself and ministered to her.

Jesus' words to the woman are a hint that this healing is one toward liberation. He says, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." This is different than the words Jesus used elsewhere in the Luke when he performed healings. In Luke 5:20, when a group of men lowered their paralyzed friend through a roof in front of Jesus while he was teaching, Jesus says, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." In Luke 8, Jesus encounters a demon possessed man and speaks directly to the demons before casting them out (Luke 8:26-39). Here, Jesus does not speak to the spirit, not does he forgive her of any sins. This woman's healing is not predicated on her sinfulness being forgiven or demonic influence being removed from her; it is predicated on her liberation from a spirit that has crippled her—*Woman, you are set free!*

Through this healing narrative, we are called to see those who are bent and stand up on their behalf.

A demonic, crippling spirit must be addressed, but it does not reside in the woman. There is sin that needs to be addressed, but it is not personal sin, it is social—and those who must repent are those who explicitly or complicitly participate in systems of oppression that uphold the crippling spirits of sexism, racism, classism and all forms of discrimination and devaluation that work to break the backs of those in their own community. Jesus liberates her from the stress and strain of systemic oppression that has suppressed her spine for eighteen long and grueling years and empowers her to stand up. In a religious space where this woman has been overlooked, Jesus uses his privilege as a male authority in the space to see and minister to her needs.

Through this healing narrative, we are called to see those who are bent and stand up on their behalf. Also, we are invited to imagine the Kingdom of God, where crippling spirits of systemic oppression can no longer bind God's children, but everyone can stand up!

## SECOND INTERPRETATION

### A Bent Woman and A Bent Leader

By *Steven S. Ivy*

In Luke 13:10-17, an account unique to Luke, we read two stories of “bentness.” One’s bentness is obvious while the other is less obvious but perhaps more instructive.

Have you or a loved one lived for many years with severe back pain or physical deformities that left you hunched over? Medicine still struggles to address these physical conditions, whether resulting from trauma, illness, or genetic defects. When our body’s vulnerabilities and uncontrollable events result in “bentness,” we struggle to lift our eyes. But bentness comes to us in other ways. Our lives are bent by sorrows and failures. We cannot lift our eyes because of shame, guilt, grief, or loneliness. This story speaks to these spiritual experiences of bentness as well.

Jesus was teaching in the synagogue on the sabbath, as clearly was his custom. Teaching the scriptures was indeed one of the synagogue’s functions in first century Palestine.<sup>5</sup> The synagogue had other functions within the Jewish community. It was a place of prayer, both during the week and on the sabbath. It was a community courtroom where disputes could be settled. It was a gathering place for social events and for dispensing support to the needy. Much of the village’s life centered around the synagogue.<sup>6</sup> And Jesus was there.

The woman came to pray and hear the scriptures read and taught. For 18 long years she had shuffled from her house to the synagogue doing what faithful women did, whether bent or straight. Physicians and healers had sought to cure her condition, but to no avail. She had accepted her lot in life with all its limits and kept placing one foot in front of the other. She did not approach Jesus asking to be healed. She knew the Torah and its interpretations—her kind of pain could not be healed on the sabbath.

Jesus did not ask her if she wanted to be healed. He did not forgive her sin. He saw her, reached out his hand and simply healed. Her back straightened, she lifted her head, and she “began to glorify.” She prayed, sang, and shouted the doxology! Praise God from whom all blessings flow! Perhaps the Psalm for the day was Psalm 121, “I lift up my eyes to the hills, . . .” Or, it might have been Psalm 116, “I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications.” What song do you sing when you experience relief from life’s pains and miseries?

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In our medicalized culture we frequently get hung up on “miracles.” How did Jesus do that? We want explanations.

In our medicalized culture we frequently get hung up on “miracles.” How did Jesus do that? We want explanations. “I passed the test! What a miracle!” “A miracle happened today; the doctor says the surgery can wait!” Our backs grow a little straighter. We also speak of miracles when science produces an unexpected tool for healing. “That medicine is a miracle!” “What kind of miracle did that surgeon do to save her patient!” And we speak of miracles when nothing in the natural order can explain what we have witnessed. Sometimes such miracles are physical and at other times they are spiritual; both create wonder, awe, and worship. Miracles are not for explanation. They are opportunities to lift our eyes and praise God. What miracle are you praying for (or celebrating?) today?

Jesus faced a second challenge in this story, perhaps more difficult than the first. The leader of the synagogue confronts Jesus for his sabbath violation. The leader was not described as rabbi, Pharisee, or any other learned profession. He was likely a lay person appointed by the community to keep order and decorum regarding synagogue matters. And his most important responsibility was to protect the 4th Commandment, “Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy” (Ex 20:8). The Lord made clear to Moses and Israel, do no work on the sabbath, not even your livestock can work! So, throughout the centuries the teachers had debated, counseled, and negotiated how to get through the vicissitudes of life without breaking the sabbath. After all, women go into labor on the sabbath; how can they be assisted without violating this ordinance? The sheep need water on a sweltering summer day; what can be done to assist them without violating the law? People experience grave injuries and illnesses on the sabbath; what can be done for them?

My childhood was shaped by the Sunday “Blue Laws” of Tennessee and a conservative Baptist culture. Most cities or states still have vestiges of these laws today. Stores did not open on Sunday, except for the gasoline station because travelers needed gas. Gasoline stations only sold gas, not milk and potato chips. I giggle with appreciation recalling the debates within my pastor father’s congregation. Was it okay for the children to play board games? Could we play basketball? (For me, the answer was yes in the backyard but not in the school gym.) For all the silliness involved in those concerns, I still find myself saddened to walk out of church on Sunday and see everyone scatter as if the rest of the day was disconnected from worship. Do we still

concern ourselves with keeping a holy day? How do we keep the sabbath holy?

Perhaps we can identify with the synagogue leader. The teachers had clearly stated that emergency medical interventions were acceptable on the sabbath. This woman had lived among them for 18 years, stooped and bent. Jesus, why not wait one day? Why not protect the sabbath? Why disrupt our carefully planned liturgy for the day?

Jesus' reply was stinging. If the donkey can be watered, why can this woman not be healed? What better way to spend the sabbath? Why not "set (her) free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" (Lk 13:16) Sabbath is for liberation! And Jesus bestowed the nameless woman with a title used nowhere else in scripture; she was blessed as "a daughter of Abraham." In God's reign women's status is transformed.<sup>7</sup> All disorders—whether physical, psychological, social, or spiritual—are signs of mortality, evil and/or dysfunction. All God's people can expect healing, liberation, on any sabbath.<sup>8</sup> And such healing makes any day holy. When Jesus shows up, sabbath work begins. All are unwise who argue to keep "the way things are" or to go back to "the way things were," because Jesus will always act based on "how things should be, and indeed shall be."

All are unwise who argue to keep "the way things are" or to go back to "the way things were," because Jesus will always act based on "how things should be, and indeed shall be."

To the synagogue leader's credit, he experienced shame. He knew his purity motive was wrongly applied. The others gathered on that Lord's Day began rejoicing. They gave thanks for God's triumph over evil demonstrated by their neighbor's restored health. It is easy for us church people to over-value orthodoxy, believing the right thing. Throughout the gospels we meet Jesus demonstrating orthopraxy, doing the right thing. In Acts we meet the earliest disciples continually being confronted by orthodoxy. Who can I associate with? What can I eat? What rituals will make me a true child of God? Yet, Peter and Paul stumbled into the truth that Paul stated so clearly in 1 Corinthians 13:13: "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."

I pray for a life more consumed by love and less by judging, more by liberation and less by rules, more by seeing all as children of God yearning for the sabbath of new life. May we wait with those yearning for new life; may we celebrate with those experiencing new life; may we allow the crucified One to join in our sufferings and lead us to new paths of healing.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After reading through the essays, what aspects of their retelling of the Bible story were new to you? What did you find interesting or compelling in their interpretations and questions?
2. When Jesus heals the woman on the Sabbath, T. Devan Franklin hears a call to “to see those who are bent and stand up on their behalf,” and an invitation to “imagine the Kingdom of God, where crippling spirits of systemic oppression can no longer bind God’s children, but everyone can stand up!” What call do you hear in the Bible story?
3. As Jesus breaks Sabbath custom in this story, Steven Ivy wonders how this story shapes a new sense of “keeping the Sabbath holy.” What would you say in response to his questions about whether the Sabbath ought to be protected, and how to do so in light of Jesus’ work and example?
4. Are these two interpretations similar or very different from one another? How so? What might these two interpretive essays say together?
5. What might your group add to these essays from your time reflecting on Scripture together?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 214.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory E. Lamb, “Sinfully Stereotyped: Jesus’s Desire to Correct Ancient Physiognomic Assumptions in the Gospel According to Luke,” *Word & World* 37, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 177–85.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Marus, “Blackaby says tsunamis God’s judgment; missions experts question theology,” *Baptist News Global*, January 24, 2005, <https://baptistnews.com/article/blackaby-says-tsunamis-gods-judgment-missions-experts-question-theology/#.YoPNHOjMLb0>; and Sarah Heise, “Sacramento pastor ‘upset more didn’t die’ in Orlando,” *KCRA*, June 15, 2016, [https://www.kcra.com/article/sacramento-pastor-upset-more-didn-t-die-in-orlando/6429157?\\_ga=1.87029274.347654369.1466604443#](https://www.kcra.com/article/sacramento-pastor-upset-more-didn-t-die-in-orlando/6429157?_ga=1.87029274.347654369.1466604443#)

<sup>4</sup> Char Adams, et al, “‘Open the door or we die’: Africans report racism and hostility trying to flee Ukraine,” *NBC News*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/open-door-die-africans-report-racism-hostility-trying-flee-ukraine-rcna17953>

<sup>5</sup> Chad Spigel, “First Century Synagogues,” *Bible Odyssey*. Accessed 4/12/2022. <https://www.bibleodyssey.org:443/en/places/related-articles/first-century-synagogues>

<sup>6</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching Series (Louisville: John Knox Pres, 1990), 169-170.

<sup>7</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 272-277.

<sup>8</sup> Richard B. Vinson, *Luke*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary Series (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2008), 450-457.

# SESSION 2

## Jesus' Instructions at a Banquet Luke 14:7-14

There are moments in Luke's Gospel when Jesus is intent on overthrowing all custom and turning everything upside down. Jesus will physically turn tables over and cause a scene later on during his first hours in Jerusalem (19:45-48), but here on the road he acts to heal on the Sabbath again (14:1-6) and then comments on the guests' behavior at the Sabbath meal. As seen in Session 1, Jesus has a habit of healing chronically ill and disabled people on the Sabbath in this gospel. He also has a habit of disrupting meals when he dines at the tables of the Pharisees with arguments about forgiveness and honor (e.g. 7:36-50; 11:37-44). The Pharisees, in return, are constantly interrupting Jesus' meals to complain about his selection of guests at the table, namely the tax collectors and sinners (e.g. 5:29-32; 19:1-10). In the Gospel of Luke, the Sabbath and the meal are two highly charged events with social, religious, and political significance.

In this Session 2 passage, Sabbath and the meal combine for a super-charged confrontation at the Pharisee's table. Luke 14:7-11 is a selection from the epicenter of this story, but you may choose to read the whole

**Sabbath and the meal combine for a super-charged confrontation at the Pharisee's table.**

narrative around it (14:1-24). Luke calls Jesus' teaching a parable, but do these verses sound like other parables in Luke? If it is a parable, what could it be about?

Our two interpretive essays offer rich descriptions of the social systems and rules of social status that Jesus overturns in this parable. Amber Inscore Essick thinks very deeply about what it means for Jesus to subvert honor-based systems and how it might look for churches to live into this honor-less, "generosity-based" system portrayed in Jesus' parable. Mark Medley connects the politics of hospitality and humility taught by Jesus during this meal with human desires to eat, to be welcomed, and to be well thought of.

### Scripture Passage (NRSVue):

<sup>7</sup> When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. <sup>8</sup> "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host, <sup>9</sup> and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person

your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.

<sup>10</sup> But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you.

<sup>11</sup> For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." <sup>12</sup> He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. <sup>13</sup> But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. <sup>14</sup> And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

## FIRST INTERPRETATION

### Some Party!

*Written by Amber Inscore Essick*

*Some party, Jesus!*

*You can't go to one dinner without stirring the proverbial pot  
and offending someone, can you?*

However strange it may feel for Jesus, an invited guest, to use a dinner as a teaching moment, this is not the first time in Luke's gospel where Jesus does so. In fact, it is the third. For Jesus, suppertime is the right time to teach and rebuke. Jesus has previously lectured his host, notably a Pharisee, about the tendency for great forgiveness to evoke great love and hospitality (Luke 7:36-50). He has chosen dinner time to illustratively skip handwashing and then insult the Pharisees' and lawyers' concern for outward appearances of righteousness and legalistic tithing without practicing justice or loving God (Luke 11:37-54). At times, Jesus' willingness to "party-poop" during meals can cause exchanges that get rather heated.

This particular episode, though awkward, is somewhat less inflammatory.

While attending a dinner where folks are seated in the room according to their social status or their familial relationship to the host, Jesus notes that there is a certain jostling toward the honored seats. Both the practice of honor-based seating and the jockeying for position might be considered normal for that time. We retain some of that today in formal settings, but perhaps our place cards have curtailed both the uncertainty and the mobility of status within the party setting. The honor-based system Jesus refers to in this text was part of the social dance of dinner parties. Jesus instructs the

**For Jesus, suppertime  
is the right time to  
teach and rebuke.**

guests to navigate the honor system by subverting it—sitting in the lowest place, thus forcing the host to publicly reseal them—and instructs the host to invite those without any special honor in the first place.

As readers, we often bring some assumptions to the biblical text. We might ask ourselves, what assumptions about this passage need to be challenged? When reading the first instruction (vv. 7-11), we might assume that Jesus condones the practice of seating guests according to honor. But if Jesus wants the host to invite those without any social status or money (v. 13), it would dismantle the whole system of seating arrangements. Jesus teaches the guests to subvert the practice altogether. If everyone sits at the lowest place, quite a lot of party time will look like an adult game of musical chairs. Eventually, there will be no place of honor at all. Perhaps the host will tire of this exercise and put everyone in a circle?

Jesus never assumes that the poor deserve to be poor or that the wealthy deserve their riches. Neither should we.

We might assume that by virtue of their social status and wealth (or lack thereof), one group of guests is more deserving to be at the party than the other. Jesus cautions us against the danger of this thinking. Wisdom and work might play a part in the gaining of wealth and status, but so do injustice, generational poverty, bad luck, and economic and political realities beyond our control. Jesus never assumes that the poor deserve to be poor or that the wealthy deserve their riches. Neither should we.

While respect and material wealth can be earned, Jesus asserts that creating debts of gratitude are in poor taste for God's party. His instructions on inviting those who cannot pay you back in kind echo his Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-49), where he blesses the poor and hungry, the grieving and excluded, promising that in heaven they will be empowered, filled, given joy, and rewarded. Jesus rebukes those who love and lend in order to create debts of gratitude and favor (Luke 6:32-36). He suggests that loving and lending, that forgiving and including, might be best for everyone if it moves in an outward direction with no expectation of a return of goodwill. God's mercy and love are a wellspring, not a dammed-up pond.

We might think of a wedding feast as a chance to invite our closest friends and those who will make us happiest and give great gifts. God wants us to make friends in low places.<sup>1</sup> We want the party to be comfortable and the guests to be respectful. God wants the party to be equitable and the host to be gracious. We are feasting with the motives and mores of this world in mind. God is setting a table for the heavenly banquet. Jesus' party prefigures the heavenly banquet.

The table Jesus sets is one at which everyone belongs and each one is fed by the host. At God's table, economic realities and power structures should not be ignored; rather, they should be leveraged in the direction of equity and generosity. Jesus sets the table of Isaiah 55, where God calls the hungry and thirsty to eat and drink, those without money to participate in God's economy, and everyone to "go out in joy and be led back in peace" (Isaiah 55:12). Even the earth responds to God's generosity and the people's celebration, with trees clapping and mountains singing.

Just as Jesus' party prefigures the heavenly banquet, our celebration of the Eucharist also ushers us into it. In worship, when we take the bread and cup, we are mystically present to God with Christ in the heavenly feast. Across time and space, we join Jesus and the disciples on that "first-last supper" and we are simultaneously present with God and all the saints at the heavenly feast, at the end of all things, in the kin-dom of heaven.<sup>2</sup> In Luke's telling of the Lord's Supper story, Jesus twice refers to eating and drinking in the fulfilled kingdom of God. In the Meal, Jesus was setting his disciples, and we who eat it today, a place at the table of God.

**The table Jesus sets is one at which everyone belongs and each one is fed by the host.**

If Jesus' instructions about inviting those who are "poor, crippled, lame, and blind" (v. 13) are to be followed at the Communion table, how will such people get to the table? Can they get up the steps into your sanctuary? Are the pathways clear, marked, and attended? When they get there, are they allergic to your bread? Will someone bring the bread and cup to them if they cannot rise? Have all those present even been invited (literally and figuratively) to the table? Have we plainly stated each time that all who are present are welcome to partake? Accommodations that enable full participation for all will take time, consideration, effort, and it may cost us resources (if lifts and elevators and removed pews are involved). These practical concerns help us to take seriously Jesus' instructions to invite, welcome, and accommodate our guests. After all, God's hospitality is extravagant.

Likewise, every meal or instance of feeding that happens in our churches (and perhaps even in our homes) is a chance for us to usher in God's kin-dom. We can realize that future moment with each potluck or food distribution or banquet. We can practice Christ's hospitality in ways great and small. If God's future reality (and indeed, the reality already realized in Jesus) is to be one of inclusion, healing, hospitality, and joy, why should we wait to bring it about?

Though it might arrive through awkward instruction at someone else's dinner, Jesus' idea of a party is one where everyone is invited, welcomed, and well-fed. The guests are not worried about where they will sit. They are not

beholden to the host in any way. They are happy to be there. They know they belong. Their ways of being and moving through the world are honored and accepted.

Now, that's *some party*.

## SECOND INTERPRETATION

### Jesus' Politics of Humility and Hospitality

By *Mark Medley*

Jesus enjoyed a good meal. As Mary E. McGann notes, the gospel narratives are “filled with stories of Jesus sharing food, eating and drinking with people at table, offering parables of food and feasting to his followers.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus delighted in gathering around a festive table to feast with people and evoke the abundance of God.

#### *The Dinner*

Luke 14 narrates the story of a provocative encounter at a banquet. Before our passage for today begins, Jesus arrives to dine at the home of a leader of the Pharisees on the sabbath. The gospel writer tells us that “they” (Jewish leaders) were watching Jesus closely (14:1). That “they watched him” indicates the banquet was a trap.<sup>4</sup> This is not surprising since Jesus has been accused of breaching the law when he healed the woman on the Sabbath (13:10-17). Jesus was most likely aware that his host's hospitality masked inhospitable intentions.

To understand Jesus' parable, we must not miss an important plot point in the story: as Jesus arrives at the banquet a man with dropsy is placed in front of him (14:2).<sup>5</sup> A condition typically symptomatic of a serious disorder, dropsy (known today as edema) was an illness usually associated with severe retention of fluid which often led to extreme swelling all over the body. In antiquity, according to Mikeal Parsons, “dropsy was employed as a favorite metaphor for the vice of avarice. . . . [His] ‘brief cameo role is to be a physical, visual representation of an ethos of craving desire.’”<sup>6</sup>

Jesus delighted in gathering around a festive table to feast with people and evoke the abundance of God.

After Jesus heals the man who had dropsy, he offers a parable. In the parable, Jesus focuses on the politics of humility and hospitality.

## Humility

In verse 7, Luke informs the reader that Jesus has carefully watched the social behavior of both the host and other guests. The social context is a “big dinner where only the elite are invited.”<sup>7</sup> As the banquet begins, Jesus witnesses the dinner guests scramble for the best seats at the table. The reader can imagine something like the mad dash for a seat when playing the game of musical chairs. Or perhaps the scene of enthusiastic fans bolting across the arena floor to secure a front row spot at a concert.

Humility involves understanding that you cannot manage and control everything that happens to you.

Remember how the man with dropsy represents a metaphor for craving desire? The guests crave, if not tussle, for the best seats. “They are, as it were,” say Mikael Parsons, “drowning in their own insatiable thirst for wealth and status.”<sup>8</sup> Self-exaltation motivates these socio-cultural elites’ behavior.

Jesus teaches the dinner guests about table manners: don’t rush to the places of honor. As Luke Powery explains, “this story about hospitality involves humility, the humility of the guests.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus counsels humility, which is not to be equated with politeness or niceness. He admonishes and proclaims, “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (14:11).

Humility is key to Jesus’ politics, as he himself teaches his disciples (Mark 10:35-45) and exemplifies in his own self-giving for the sake of the world (Philippians 2:5-11). Humility is manifest in knowing the *limits* of our lives and experiences and the limits of others as well. Humility emerges as you awaken to your own poverty and need. It involves understanding that you cannot manage and control everything that happens to you. Such awakening can have the consequence of deepening the capacity to feel compassion and a common shared humanity with all people. Humility is also an invitation to risk being vulnerable in a way that makes it possible to live one’s own existence in deep connection with others (and God) and not remain aloof from their anxiety, alienation, sickness, poverty, grief, and loss.<sup>10</sup>

In the case of this gospel story, humility entails living without concern for reputation. Yes, sometimes reputation does matter. But the people of Jesus’ community hold reputation lightly. They do so because they know that they are known and infinitely loved by God. And they are invited to commune with this God who invites them to sit and dine with the Christ at the feast. The humble always live by remembering God’s gracious hospitality.<sup>11</sup>

The man’s healing represents the very possibility that our desire for self-exaltation can be transformed by knowing that God invites us (“Friend, move up higher” [14:10]) to a feast—a life—beyond our wildest imagination.

## *Hospitality*

A humble disposition is not only for guests. Jesus tells the host to put together a radically different guest list for a wide and welcoming feast.

Jesus understands the moral and spiritual abundance found in the relationship between food, feasting, and faith.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the host, who made the sharing of food a celebration of himself and his elite guests, eating matters to Jesus because it celebrates God's good gifts of food and life. Unlike the banquet that preserves unjust, status-quo social practices of elitism and exclusion, Jesus' justice-oriented and egalitarian meal practice of shared life and human solidarity embodies and anticipates the great messianic banquet. Jesus challenges the host and the other guests: "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (14:13-14).

What do I mean by the great messianic banquet? The "great messianic banquet" is an enticing image of God's generous, inclusive, gracious, hospitable in-gathering of all sorts of people and all of creation at the divine, festive, sumptuous, lavish, and celebratory table of belonging. It is a transformative term of boundary-breaking hospitality concerning the nature of Christian community (the church) and God's eschatological future. With roots in Jewish apocalypticism, the "great messianic banquet" is an image that Jesus employed in his teaching and ministry across the Gospel of Luke as well as the other gospels (see especially Jesus' parable in Luke 14:15-24). All the gospel passages regarding Jesus' practice of eating together can help offer interpretive light on this subversive image. The "great messianic banquet" is also an "eucharistic" image in that the Christian practice of Holy Communion is not only a glimpse but also an anticipation of the great messianic banquet at the consummation of the age (Luke 22:14-30).

**Jesus' practices of radical hospitality means that those persons at the margins are placed front and center at the table.**

By anticipating the "great messianic banquet," Jesus flips the social script. Cultural values, expectations, and boundaries are justly disrupted and graciously transgressed. Guess who's coming to dinner? The uninvited and excluded. The poor, the disabled, and the despised. Those who are in no position to host us in return, persons with no social, economic, or political status, persons who can't help us get connected with influencers, and persons who can't help us "get ahead." Jesus' practices of radical hospitality means that those persons at the margins are placed front and center at the table.<sup>13</sup> Such friendliness and welcome express the generosity and solidarity of the gospel.

Jesus' feasting "embodied and proclaimed a God who eats and shares life" with society's castaways and pariahs, and he calls persons following his example "righteous."<sup>14</sup> The shared meal at table can be a communal space to practice habits of receiving and welcoming difference, of listening, of reimagining perceptions of the world from another's point of view.<sup>15</sup> As we feast together, we can learn humility. Table fellowship is "a way of tasting, feeling, and discovering" God's new economy of grace.<sup>16</sup>

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After reading through the essays, what aspects of their retelling of the Bible story were new to you? What did you find interesting or compelling in their interpretations and questions?
2. To Amber Inscore Essick, "Jesus' idea of a party is one where everyone is invited, welcomed, and well-fed," and Jesus' table "is one at which everyone belongs and each one is fed by the host." How might this story provide wisdom for how we set the Communion table, as Amber suggests? And how we engage in Communion together?
3. Mark Medley hears an everyday politic in this story of Jesus' humility and hospitality. What did you hear in Mark's explanations of humility and hospitality? What is so disruptive about "the abundance of God?"
4. Are these two interpretations similar or very different from one another? How so? What might these two interpretive essays say together?
5. What might your group add to these essays from your time reflecting on Scripture together?

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A special thanks to Garth Brooks, another party-pooper, who, like Jesus, is responsible for ruining his share of black-tie affairs.

<sup>2</sup> Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), 89. Ada María Isasi-Díaz first used the term kin-dom of God in her book *Mujerista Theology* to describe the reality brought about in Christ where all are brought into a familial relationship with one another because of the love of God. She says, "the coming kin-dom of God has to do with a coming together of peoples, with no one being excluded and at the expense of no one." She emphasizes that 'kin-dom' rather than 'kingdom' removes sexism and hierarchy from our discussion about God's reality, enacted in Jesus.

<sup>3</sup> Mary E. McGann, *The Meal That Reconnects: Eucharistic Eating and the Global Food Crisis*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020), 15.

<sup>4</sup> David Lyle Jeffrey highlights the fourth-century theologian Cyril of Jerusalem's comment that the periphrastic form *hesan parateroumenoi* ("they were watching him") suggests "a fox ready to pounce" (*Luke*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible [Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012], 314); Cf. Cyril of Alexandria, "Sermon 101," *Commentary on the Gospel of St Luke*, trans. R. Payne Smith (Long Island, NY: Studion, 1983).

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey comments that the man with dropsy is the bait in the trap (*Luke*, 314).

<sup>6</sup> Mikeal C. Parsons, *Luke*, Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament Series (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 226. Parsons quotes Willi Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 41.

<sup>7</sup> Parsons, *Luke*, 226.

<sup>8</sup> Parsons, *Luke*, 226.

<sup>9</sup> Luke A. Powery, "The Welcome Table: Luke 14:1, 7-14," a sermon preached at Duke University Chapel on September 1, 2013, [https://chapel.duke.edu/sites/default/files/The%20Welcome%20Table\\_Revised%209-1-13.pdf](https://chapel.duke.edu/sites/default/files/The%20Welcome%20Table_Revised%209-1-13.pdf), accessed on April 26, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Douglas E. Christie, *The Insurmountable Darkness of Love: Mysticism, Loss, and the Common Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 119-120.

<sup>11</sup> Jeremy Begbie, "Keep Humble," *Faith and Leadership*, March 2, 2009, <https://faithandleadership.com/keep-humble>, accessed on April 26, 2022.

<sup>12</sup> A full discussion of food and faith is beyond the scope of this essay. See Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating*, 2nd edition (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019) and McGann, *The Meal That Reconnects*, on the biblical, spiritual, and theological meanings and significance of growing, cultivating, preparing, and sharing food.

<sup>13</sup> Latin American liberation theology identified this as the preferential option for the poor.

<sup>14</sup> McGann, *The Meal That Reconnects*, 18.

<sup>15</sup> McGann, *The Meal That Reconnects*, 10-11.

<sup>16</sup> McGann, *The Meal That Reconnects*, p. 19.



# SESSION 3

## Jesus and Zacchaeus in Jericho Luke 19:1-10

What does salvation have to do with economics and power? In the Gospel of Luke, these questions started before Jesus was born as Mary sang her prophetic song, “My soul magnifies the Lord...He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (1:46, 52-53). Jesus and his audience have wrestled with these questions during all of Jesus’ ministry in Galilee and on the way to Jerusalem. From his first sermon in Nazareth until his arrest in Jerusalem, in Luke Jesus regularly teaches about the kingdom of God and repentance when encountering a situation involving wealth and power. We have seen this in our previous two sessions about the healing of the woman on the Sabbath and the meal at the Pharisee’s house.

What does salvation have to do with economics and power?

Jesus has almost completed his travels to Jerusalem when he enters Jericho. There is a cumulative feeling about his encounter with Zacchaeus when this story is read at the end of the large travel section (9:51-19:28). Many scholars compare Zacchaeus’ response to the prior disappointment of the rich ruler who kept the commandments but couldn’t give away his possessions and follow Jesus (18:18-30). The major conflict in this story is over what to call Zacchaeus. The crowd in Jericho grumbled and called him a sinner, but Jesus called him a “child of Abraham” (19:7, 10).<sup>1</sup>

The crowd’s main problem is with Zacchaeus’ political position as a tax collector and his wealth as a worker inside an unjust, oppressive Roman empire. How will his pledge to Jesus affect the crowd? Kelly Hale explores the social and political situation in this story from the perspective of those who had been defrauded by Zacchaeus. Lewis Brogdon explores the importance of viewing salvation as both personal and systemic for addressing the structural inequities of race in America.

### Scripture Passage (NRSVue):

<sup>1</sup> He entered Jericho and was passing through it. <sup>2</sup> A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. <sup>3</sup> He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. <sup>4</sup> So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. <sup>5</sup> When

Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.”<sup>6</sup> So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.<sup>7</sup> All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”<sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>9</sup> Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham.<sup>10</sup> For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

## FIRST INTERPRETATION

### The Perspective of the Defrauded

*By Kelly Hale*

If you have ever been in a children’s Sunday school class you know the story of Zacchaeus, the “wee little man” of song who climbed up in a sycamore tree, “for the Lord he wanted to see.” You know the story. Jesus passed that way, looked up, and told Zacchaeus to come down because Jesus was going to Zacchaeus’ house. Maybe you even remember the hand motions! I eventually graduated from children’s church and heard a few sermons on Zacchaeus. Most of them follow a form something like this: Zacchaeus’ station in life as a tax collector, his short stature, and his wealth make his salvation impossible. But Jesus shows up. He sees and speaks to Zacchaeus. He saves and then sanctifies Zacchaeus as evidenced by Zacchaeus making reparations to those from whom he has stolen.

Jesus shows up. He sees and speaks to Zacchaeus.

Sometimes there is a caveat like this one: “This is not a case for socialism so that the rich will be forced to redistribute their wealth. It is a case that proves that the impossible is made possible: Jesus has ushered a rich man into the kingdom of God.”<sup>2</sup> There is often much made of Zacchaeus climbing a tree in his expensive robes, humiliating himself just to get a glimpse of Jesus, and of Jesus eating with Zacchaeus, much to the chagrin of the crowd. The moral of the story is variously that Jesus will find you if you seek him; even if it is embarrassing you should seek Jesus; Jesus invites everyone, even the worst of tax collecting sinners.

Academic writing about Zacchaeus argues about the form of the Zacchaeus story within the larger Lukan tradition. It is variously a symbolic story that delivers a saying at the end that will comfort the sinner; a story mainly about Jesus and his purpose; or a quest story where the hero finds what he

seeks at the end.<sup>3</sup> Zacchaeus is sometimes cast as a comical, satirical figure, in a specific literary genre,<sup>4</sup> hurry, scurrying, climbing a tree, actions unacceptable for a man in that time, and Jesus surprises everyone by bringing salvation to the comic hero's house.<sup>5</sup>

There is nothing wrong with these interpretations. Scripture is rich enough for us to find many good and life-giving interpretations. But what I find curious is the overall lack of emphasis on the reparations made by Zacchaeus. There is some argument over what Zacchaeus means when he states he will give half of all he has to the poor and pay back four times what he has stolen if he has cheated anyone. Some see this as hyperbolic, an impossible task. Others believe he is justifying himself and saying he already does this.<sup>6</sup> The argument seems to draw us away from any conclusions we might make for our own lives, what reparations or justice might look like for us today.

I used to feel sorry for Zacchaeus' wife and children. How would they survive if Zacchaeus gave so much away? I mentioned this in a seminary class. The answer I received from my classmate, an African American woman, knocked me for a loop. She said simply, "What about all those children he had stolen from?" It seems so elementary. I should have always thought of them first, but my perspective as an upper middle class white woman didn't allow for thoughts, except in an abstract way, for all those Zacchaeus had defrauded. Biblical scholars and interpreters have largely come from my world, so there is little wonder why there is a lack of emphasis from the perspective of the defrauded.

Zacchaeus was part of the economic system of Rome. As a chief tax collector, he may have been wealthier than the regular tax collectors, getting his cut before they even got theirs. Tax collectors were encouraged to take more than what was owed because they were not paid a fair wage by Rome, and then they had to give some of what they collected to the chiefs. This was a system that seems to have been set up to make the poor poorer, and the temptation must certainly have been to take as much as possible so the tax collectors would live comfortably. Perhaps they felt it was due to them since they were despised by their countrymen as agents of Rome. If nobody liked them, and they weren't getting paid a fair wage, they would make sure to take care of themselves regardless of how they hurt others.

But Zacchaeus meets Jesus. Luke may make him look intentionally ridiculous by bringing in an element of satire. He is despised, but Jesus makes a

Zacchaeus is sometimes cast as a comical, satirical figure, in a specific literary genre, hurry, scurrying, climbing a tree, actions unacceptable for a man in that time, and Jesus surprises everyone by bringing salvation to the comic hero's house.

point of welcoming all. And maybe Zacchaeus is on a quest to meet Jesus. Any way you look at it, Zacchaeus meets Jesus and Zacchaeus makes a bold statement. If I were to look at this from a perspective that is not upper middle-class white, I might see Zacchaeus' words as the best news, the crux of the whole story. The place where the meaning of the name Zacchaeus, which is "righteous or pure one", is no longer ironic. The place where the man who has been stealing bread from my children's mouths has repented and will make sure my children get not only bread, but maybe some peanut butter, milk, and fresh fruit for lunch. I hear Zacchaeus breaking with the corrupt economic system and making things right so that his comfort is no longer purchased at the cost of the flourishing of others.

Now my heart is pierced. Now I hear the message for me in this oh so familiar story. Where do I participate systems that steal from those who already have so little? Do I sit idly by and watch as people with power and voice make sure other voices are not heard so they can maintain their own power? Do I do the same to maintain my own voice and power? Do I hold tightly to the gains I have made in my life, yet fail to assist others to make similar gains?

Jesus says that salvation has come to Zacchaeus, that he comes to seek and save those who are lost. Salvation, σωτηρία (*sōtēria*), means preservation, rescue, or deliverance. Save, σώζω (*sōzō*), means to bring safely or to restore to health. Zacchaeus needed to be rescued from something, needed to be restored to health. He was sick and in danger because of the corrupt system in which he was so enmeshed that he failed to see the terrible harm he was doing to his fellow Israelites. Perhaps that is something we need to examine in our own lives. What systems keep us in such bondage that we

Jesus shows up. He sees and speaks to Zacchaeus.

cannot see the harm we do to others when we take resources, power, voice, and choice from others? How are we in danger when we want more and more because we think we deserve it and that more is gained at the expense of someone else? Why do we think we and our families or communities are more deserving of resources or have a greater right to flourish than others? Perhaps this familiar story can take on new meaning when I, with Zacchaeus, seek Jesus and surrender to his saving power and freedom from corrupt systems.

## SECOND INTERPRETATION

### Zacchaeus and the Way of Salvation<sup>7</sup>

By Lewis Brogdon

In the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus, there are two very interesting and very radical statements in Luke 19:8-9. The first is, of course, the fact that Zacchaeus would relinquish the wealth he had gained unjustly and would repair generously the damage done to those he cheated. “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the oppressed, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” Zacchaeus acknowledged his complicity in the system of taxation even though social and political forces created the tax system that way before Zacchaeus took the job or was even born.

Second, Jesus responds to Zacchaeus and claims “today salvation has come to this house.” What is so surprising about Jesus’ response is that it does not fit the way most white Christians talk about salvation. Luke does not tell us that Zacchaeus prayed the “sinner’s prayer” or that he asked Jesus to “come into his heart.” Zacchaeus does something that involves the poor and those cheated by unjust economic practices and Jesus responds by talking about salvation. Both responses—Zacchaeus and Jesus—are revealing, radical, and do not reflect the normal ways we talk about discipleship and salvation.

The fact that the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus is not the standard for our understanding of salvation is one of the reasons American Christianity refuses to correct mass injustices like slavery, genocide, and poverty. In many of the denominational strands of white American Christianity, there is no need to confess and repair wrongs done to the vulnerable. The Lord’s Supper can be taken over and over again without the slightest concern for the plight of African American sisters and brothers who are also members of Christ’s body. Instead, American Christianity views sin as each individual’s problem, and therefore sins are forgiven on an individual basis. As a result, many white Christians do little to acknowledge and repair social harm done, no matter how severe and far reaching. This model leaves America not experiencing the kind of “salvation” Jesus spoke of in Luke 19.

Zacchaeus does something that involves the poor and those cheated by unjust economic practices and Jesus responds by talking about salvation.

Across the Gospel of Luke, Luke’s vision of salvation reflects a holistic understanding salvation that is personal and systemic. Over and over, Luke

shows us the God who brings salvation in the fullest sense of the word. In order for readers to see God's vision of salvation, Luke tells stories that demonstrate the ways people are ensnared and enslaved by sin imbedded in both the heart and systems of the world. For example, Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 and his conversation with the rich young ruler in 18:18-30 give similar examples of what it means to respond to the radical call of discipleship by Jesus and the salvation he brings to the world.

The responses to Jesus in these three stories should be interpreted in light of two key passages in Luke: the parable of the Good Samaritan in 10:25-37 that teaches the principle of neighbor love; and the story of Jesus' radical call to discipleship in 14:25-33. The rich man in 16:18-31 ignores Lazarus and clearly violates Jesus' teachings about neighbor love in 10:25-37. Lazarus was a neighbor in need of love in the form of food, clothing,

**Zacchaeus models radical neighbor love and "followship" of Jesus.**

and compassion. The rich man overlooked him and his needs. This man also illustrates a refusal to forsake what one has for Jesus. He used his material wealth on himself and seemed to live a life-giving little consideration of others. The rich young ruler did not follow the way of Jesus either. At the direct request of Jesus, he refuses to give his money to the poor and to treat them as neighbors in need of love. He also refuses to obey a command of Jesus because it would cost him too much of what he had.

Luke shows his readers how both rich men refused to follow the way and message of Jesus. More importantly, Luke wants readers to see just how tight the grip of the socio-political system can be on persons. The lives, values, and material resources of these men are so tied into the system and its privileges that they refuse to relinquish them, even if giving away their wealth would bring relief to the poor and marginalized. When Jesus called these people to let their privileges go, like Moses told Pharaoh to let the Israelites go, these men, like Pharaoh, refused (Exodus 5:1-9).<sup>8</sup>

In comparison, Zacchaeus models radical neighbor love and "followship" of Jesus. Zacchaeus, without being directly prompted by Jesus (as best as we can ascertain), decides to give half of all his goods to the poor and to pay back every person he wronged (cheated) four times more than he took. This radical response prompted Jesus to say, "Today has salvation come to this house" (19:9). Zacchaeus modeled neighbor love and a willingness to forsake everything for Jesus and is Luke's shining example of radical discipleship because he was willing to let go of the privileges given through unjust means as a tax collector and local collaborator to the unjust system of taxation. This story is important for Luke because it shows it is possible

to relinquish privilege, correct wrongs done to the vulnerable, and to follow Jesus, who represents a new way of ordering social relationships and material wealth. In the end, Zacchaeus shows readers the way of salvation.

Reading the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus, especially when it is connected to the rest of the Gospel of Luke, expands our understanding of salvation. As long as our focus is on personal salvation, the forgiveness of our individual sins, and our ticket on the train to glory, we will ignore what happens in the socio-political world, the world in which we live, past and present. That is exactly what much of white Christianity does with the history of slavery. They ignore it because they assume it has nothing to do with their salvation. But because salvation has social dimensions, Christians cannot ignore what happens in the world. They also cannot ignore what happened in the past. To join God in the ministry of reconciliation, we must take seriously the things in the socio-political world that cause estrangement, suffering, and death.

Our only hope in addressing the structural inequities of race in America is in a model of radical discipleship that leads to salvation taught in Luke-Acts. There is a path to salvation for America and Zacchaeus shows us this path. The question is, “Will white Christians follow it or will they follow the path of the rich young ruler?” The path to salvation for white Christianity begins with a serious commitment to spend the next few decades developing theological responses to the history of slavery and racism. In other words, white churches have to lead a push for a holistic model of reparations.

The path to salvation for white Christianity begins with a serious commitment to spend the next few decades developing theological responses to the history of slavery and racism.

In the realm of education, this includes new theology and history scholarship, and programs and policy proposals to repair the damage done to African Americans. In wider socio-political world, this involves challenging white Christians to begin a long multi-generational process of relinquishing privilege and embracing what they would define as poverty so as to correct the deep structural problems built by centuries of slavery and discrimination. It sounds impossible. And it is likely impossible. But the example of Zacchaeus provides a path to seeing the same kind of salvation Jesus celebrated. His example should inspire and, more importantly instruct us and maybe one day Jesus may proclaim, “Today has salvation come to [our] house.” May it be so, amen.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After reading through the essays, what aspects of their retelling of the Bible story were new to you? What did you find interesting or compelling in their interpretations and questions?
2. By looking closely at Zacchaeus' experience, Kelly Hale invites us to examine, "What systems keep us in such bondage that we cannot see the harm we do to others when we take resources, power, voice, and choice from others?" If it is hard for us to see, where might we go for more information?
3. By considering past Lukan narratives about rich men and Jesus' reaction to Zacchaeus, Lewis Brogdon invites us pay attention to spiritual *and* social dimensions of salvation around us and in the world, for this is where God's work of reconciliation is found. How could your group and your church begin (or continue) to follow the path of holistic salvation that Zacchaeus models (especially if you are part of a historically white church)?
4. Are these two interpretations similar or very different from one another? How so? What might these two interpretive essays say together?
5. What might your group add to these essays from your time reflecting on Scripture together?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, 287. See also Charles Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel* (New York: Crossroads, 1986), 176.

<sup>2</sup> Maarten Kuivenhoven, "Easier for a Camel than Zacchaeus: A Sermon on Luke 19:1-10," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 6, no. 1 (Jan 2014): 145–54.

<sup>3</sup> Robert F. O'Toole, "The Literary Form of Luke 19:1-10," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 110, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 107.

<sup>4</sup> David H. Sick, "Zacchaeus as the Rich Host of Classical Satire," *Biblical Interpretation* 24, no. 2 (2016): 229–44.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Rebecca Solevåg, "Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke Comic Figure, Sinner, and Included 'Other,'" *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 14, no. 2 (July 2020): 225–40.

<sup>6</sup> Sick, "Zacchaeus as the Rich Host," 236.

<sup>7</sup> This essay was adapted and updated from a journal article by Lewis Brogdon: "Zacchaeus and the Salvation of American Christianity: Toward a Biblical Theology of Reparations," *Christian Ethics Today* 28, no. 2 (Spring 2019): 21-28, [http://www.christianethicstoday.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/CET\\_112.pdf](http://www.christianethicstoday.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/CET_112.pdf). Used by permission.

<sup>8</sup> Like the Exodus story, Pharaoh's refusal to do justice—"let my (as in enslaved) people go"—foreshadowed or preceded the collapse of the Egyptian empire and its economic system that was so heavily dependent on slave labor, the responses of these rich men foreshadow a similar collapse. Jesus warned about this in 21:20-22. In 70 C.E., Rome seized Jerusalem and destroyed the very system these rich men were benefitting from.

## The People of Pentecost

### Acts 2:2-13

What if we followed the spread and character of the early church from the moment of Pentecost? Luke spends the majority of the Acts of the Apostles following a few early leaders as they travel throughout Judea, Samaria and then into other regions of the Roman Empire. Before the travel tales begin, however, there is a major breakthrough here in Pentecost. In the Old Testament, the tower of Babel had been the first scattering and breaking of community (Genesis 11:1-9). Historically, the nation of Israel had experienced scattering and breaking of community during several hundred years of empire occupation.

Since the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel to Assyria and Judah to Babylon in 721 BCE and 587 BCE, respectively, the lands of Israel and their neighbors were regularly assaulted and overthrown by large and

**In our passage today, the Spirit works a miracle that overturns several hundred years of forced separation, confusion, and segregation.**

powerful kingdoms who captured people and deported them far away as a means of keeping order. Other Israelites and Judeans, like the prophet Jeremiah, fled or immigrated on their own. These dispersed and scattered communities of Israelites set up synagogues and practiced the Jewish faith in foreign regions and places where they sometimes lived as the “enemy” in hostile territory (see Esther). They became known as peoples of the Diaspora; it is a tragedy that they do not know the language of the Galileans.<sup>1</sup>

In our passage today, the Spirit works a miracle that overturns several hundred years of forced separation, confusion, and segregation. Anastasia Holman connects the astonishing and disruptive experience of this event with the overarching and unifying power that the Spirit offers in this moment. Dalen Jackson demonstrates how Luke’s writing style in this passage unequivocally emphasizes the inclusion of diverse peoples and how different the message of this passage sounds to those who are minority or marginalized persons.

**Scripture Passage (NRSVue):**

<sup>2</sup> And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

<sup>3</sup> Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue

rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup> All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. <sup>5</sup> Now there were devout Jews from every people under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup> Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?” <sup>8</sup> And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup> Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup> Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup> Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” <sup>12</sup> All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” <sup>13</sup> But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

## FIRST INTERPRETATION

### Unifying Power

By *Anastasia Holman*

There are several groups of people at Pentecost. Those who waited on the promise, those who were in awe of the promise, and those who ridiculed the promise. The first chapter of Acts foreshadows the Spirit’s arrival by gradually introducing us to the people who will be touched by the Holy Spirit. First, Jesus commands the remaining eleven disciples to stay in Jerusalem until they receive the promise. “‘This,’ he said, ‘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’” (1:5). When we take a closer look at Acts 1:12-15, there are many more people gathered to wait with the Eleven. In Acts 1:15, we learn that a crowd of 120 believers have gathered with the disciples.

Both male and female followers of Jesus were waiting as he commanded them to, and they were waiting on the promise by demonstrating their obedience to Jesus.

According to biblical scholar and Episcopal priest, Rev. Dr. Wilda C. Gafney, this upper room community could have included Mary, the mother of Jesus and “other unnamed women along with the eleven remaining apostles (Acts 1:13-14), plus a newly elected apostle (who will immediately disappear) (Acts 1:23-26).” For Gafney, this mixed crowd, full of women as well as men, “might explain why Peter chooses Joel to explain the phenomenon [of Pentecost], because of its explicit inclusivity.”<sup>2</sup> Both male and female followers of Jesus were waiting as he commanded them to, and they were waiting on the promise by demonstrating their obedience to Jesus.

In Acts 2, the reader is introduced to all the followers of Jesus (or “The Way”) together in one place. It is possible that there were even more than 120 people present. Imagine what they must have felt. Their leader, friend, and teacher had ascended into heaven. Some may have wavered between hope and fear and grief and amazement. No matter what they may have felt, they stayed and waited on the promise. They waited with anticipation and prayerful hearts, not knowing the exact hour, “not many days from now,” the promise would arrive (Acts 1:5). Then without warning—the Spirit shows up. The inbreaking and outpouring of the Spirit arrives. Abruptly the Spirit of God shows up!

For some, to hear that the Spirit has come in a disrupting way, pushing like a strong wind or taking up space like someone interfering with a group, causes tension. However in the book of Acts, many theophanies of God take people by surprise, interrupting the monotonous day-to-day activities of the believer and the Church. According to Bruce Malina and John Pilch, “the Spirit always stands for action, activity, doing. It is activity and effect that demonstrate that the spirit is or has been actually present” throughout Acts.<sup>3</sup> In Pentecost, the Holy Spirit is actively moving and energizing. Wind and tongues of fire rested on each of them that day. The very breath of God and the refining, refueling, and re-engaging power from heaven was present in the room, sanctifying and setting hearts on fire.

“the Spirit always stands for action, activity, doing. It is activity and effect that demonstrate that the spirit is or has been actually present”

However, this inbreaking is not the first time God’s Spirit has manifested in the world. Looking back to the Old Testament, Gafney argues, “the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost marks the dawn of the Church, but is not the dawn of the Holy Spirit.” In Genesis, “she births creation, hovering over her newly hatched brood. “The Spirit “breathes through scriptures,” whose life-giving work celebrated in many psalms like the psalmist who proclaims, “She is the one who makes the winds her celestial messengers, fire and flame her ministers... You send forth your spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the earth” (Ps. 104:4, 30). According to Gafney, “the God of wind and flame in Psalm 104:4 is the same God, the same Spirit who is the wind and breath of the Pentecostal fire.”<sup>4</sup>

The Holy Spirit enabled the disciples of Jesus to speak in foreign languages. According to Malina and Pilch, “Here Luke reports that the spirit-filled group speaks in a range of foreign languages (Greek: *xenoglossia*; to be distinguished from *glossolalia*, ecstatic speech, as in 1 Corinthians 12:10, 18, 30; 14:1, 4-6, 9; Acts 10:46; 19:6).”<sup>5</sup> The Eleven disciples, “uncouth Galileans,” could not speak well and did not meet the standards of those whose

It is dangerous to ignore the move of God's Spirit because people miss the promise, people miss the power, and people miss seeing all people as God sees them.

oratory skills were elegant and perfected. Now they stand with the power of the Holy Spirit and with the skill set of speaking many languages; they went from unilingual to multilingual. Luke, the author, indicates that these “newfound abilities” mean that “the apostles and those who will carry on their work are now prepared to engage in a worldwide mission.”<sup>6</sup> Here at Pentecost, the Spirit empowers disciples with gifts of speech to take the mission out into the world.

God's move and the Spirit's sound beckons the devout or God-fearing Jews “from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem” (Acts 2:5). They came running to witness the activity taking place and they could hear in their native tongue the message of God's deeds and power. These people were in Jerusalem for religious reasons. By Jesus and the disciples' time in the first century CE, Second Temple Judaism had become a “cosmopolitan religious movement,” that attracted Jewish people who were “originally from many different regions.” On the day of Pentecost, many Jewish religious pilgrims would have traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of Weeks, Shavuot, one of “the Jewish calendar's three major pilgrimage festivals (Exod. 34:22-23; Duet. 16:1-17).” It is important to realize that the ethnic and cultural diversity of early Christianity was like Second Temple Judaism. What made Pentecost astonishing was that at that moment, “members from one group can readily make understandable to members from other groups their message concerning ‘God's deeds of power.’”<sup>7</sup> It was as if the scattering and confusion of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9) had suddenly been undone.

Some people in the crowd were shocked and surprised at the move of God. Some stayed open and curious; others were amazed and baffled, not knowing the meaning of what they saw and heard. Others in the group ridiculed the power of the Holy Spirit, saying, “They are drunk on new wine” (Acts 2:5). In doing so, they become sarcastic and insensitive to God's calling forth of all flesh into the promise. They cannot see that the Promise of God includes all people, even the proselytes or the stranger. It is dangerous to ignore the move of God's Spirit because people miss the promise, people miss the power, and people miss seeing all people as God sees them.

God's Power through the Spirit has always been a transformative and active presence in the world. The Spirit's power was not meant to be for individuals to have platforms of prestige and promotion. The Spirit ignites people to action, gives insight to those who hear, and includes people marginalized and excluded. Let us go into the world singing:

O Spirit of the Living God, thou light, and fire divine,  
Descend upon thy church once more, and make it truly thine.  
Fill it with love and joy and power, with righteousness and  
peace;  
Till Christ shall dwell in human hearts, and sin and sorrow  
cease.<sup>8</sup>

## SECOND INTERPRETATION

### Amazing Diversity

By Dalen Jackson

The appearance of the Holy Spirit to the early followers of Jesus marks a dramatic moment in the life of the church. The extraordinary sights and sounds of this occasion are highlighted in Acts 2:1-13. The writer, commonly accepted by scholars as the “Luke” who also wrote the gospel of Luke, has carefully designed the scene to evoke sights and sounds, excited conversations, and expressions of bewilderment and confusion. It would be a mistake to move too quickly past the sensory appeal of this account as we search for its theological meaning.

This text, like all biblical texts, was written with the expectation that it would be read aloud to its intended audiences, the vast majority of whom would have been illiterate. Luke designed the story to engage his ancient readers in its drama, to help them sense its confusion and excitement and hope.

After a brief summary sentence locating the scene in a time (Pentecost) and a vague place, Luke describes the wondrous events in pithy couplets with repeating catchwords:

2<sup>2</sup>... a sound like ... wind (*pnōē*). 3... tongues (*glōssai*) like fire ...!

4... holy spirit (*pneumatōs*), and [speaking] in other tongues (*glōssais*)!

In Acts 2:5-13, the scene shifts abruptly to the response of the crowd that has gathered. Instead of couplets, the structure follows an inverted (A-B-A<sup>1</sup>) pattern, where Luke draws attention to the central material in the middle of the story by adding repetitive remarks before and after. Inverted patterns, sometimes called chiasms, were another common way for ancient writers to compose engaging narratives and arguments. In this section, Luke uses repeated surprised reactions (A, A<sup>1</sup>) to highlight the list of names of far-flung places from which the people in this crowd hail (B):

It would be a mistake to move too quickly past the sensory appeal of this account as we search for its theological meaning.

<sup>5</sup>And there were Jewish people living in Jerusalem, ... from every people group under heaven. <sup>6</sup>And ... the crowd came together and ... each one of them heard them speaking in their own language.

A <sup>7</sup>And they were surprised and amazed,

B and they said, “Wow, aren’t all these people who are speaking Galileans?! <sup>8</sup>So how is it that we are all hearing in our own language ...? <sup>9</sup>Parthians and Medes and Elamites, and people who live in Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the part of Libya near Cyrene, and visiting Romans, <sup>11</sup>Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs, we hear them speaking in different languages the great works of God.

A <sup>12</sup>And they were all surprised and confused, and they said to one another, “What would this be?” <sup>13</sup>But others mocked them and said, “They’re full of wine.”

The listing of people groups, described in the words of the crowd themselves, is framed by expressions of their amazement, confusion, and even disagreement about these signs they’ve heard and seen. The diverse identities of these peoples are surely the most momentous takeaway from the scene!

The passage is rich with images and details open to interpretation, but its rhetorical structure clearly focuses on the embodiment of the coming of God’s Spirit as a movement toward a more diverse expression of the good news of God. From the opening scene of the book of Acts, a pattern of

The listing of people groups, described in the words of the crowd themselves, is framed by expressions of their amazement, confusion, and even disagreement about these signs they’ve heard and seen.

outward expansion of the gospel emerges, linked to the power of the Spirit. Before he ascends to heaven, Jesus tells his chosen apostles, “[Y]ou 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” (1:8 NRSVue).

The whole book of Acts unfolds in accordance with this pattern: the initial chapters tell the story of the earliest community of believers in Jerusalem, then persecution causes them to venture out into the broader region of Judea and Samaria, and finally the gospel message inevitably spreads across distant lands until the final verse of the book describes its proclamation “with all boldness and without hindrance” (28:31).

For American Christians who share the values of a majority culture, this story of the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost may not arouse the feelings of excitement and expectation that minority or marginalized persons experience. Listening to the diverse voices of non-majority Christians is especially valuable in helping us imagine the scope and the wonder of the event.

For Black theologian Willie Jennings, the book of Acts in its entirety is a challenge to all forms of nationalism: “God from the very beginning of the Acts drama will not share holy desire with any nationalistic longing that draws borders and boundaries.”<sup>9</sup> As Americans regularly see and recite references to God and country on currency and in our national pledge, for example, this can be jarring news about God. As we read the list of names, Jennings also asks us to “imagine peoples in many places, in many conquered sites, in many tongues all being told that their languages are secondary, tertiary, and inferior to the supreme languages of the enlightened peoples.” Many of them were conquered people; their ancestors had experienced generations of empire and occupation by Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome. Jennings reminds us, Western colonial empires (including the United States) also suppressed languages and cultures of diverse peoples as they took over territory and enlarged their borders.<sup>10</sup>

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This suppression of languages is evident in our history as well as current events. We could point to the brutality of the efforts of previous generations to stamp out native American languages and heritage in American and Canadian religious schools, that is now coming to light. In recent years, we have seen “English only” political movements aiming to silence dialects and languages of minority communities as a means of suppressing civil rights.<sup>11</sup> In both the past and the present, a nationalist understanding of Christianity paired with Western culture has been used to conquer and to oppress people in the name of God. This is not the spread of the gospel envisioned in Acts. This should trouble us.

The powerful meaning of the Pentecost event is an unlimited invitation to join in the work of the Spirit, even in the face of cultural forces that seek to limit participation within borders and boundaries. For Jennings, “What God had always spoken to Israel now God speaks even more loudly in the voices of the many to the many: join them!” Love of Neighbor, which we have already heard about in the Gospel of Luke, will now be love “that goes into the far country.” In Pentecost, we see that “this is love that cannot be tamed, controlled, or planned, and once unleashed it will drive the disciples forward into the world.” Even after the event, Pentecost leaves the disciples

and all of us with a driving question, “Where is the Holy Spirit taking us and into whose lives?”<sup>12</sup>

Right now the far boundary for many of our communities may pertain to the inclusion of LGBTQ persons. Thomas Bohache calls for queer people to see themselves in the Acts of the Apostles as he reads this Pentecost story as “a demonstration of divine hospitality and inclusivity in earliest Christianity.”<sup>13</sup> As we ponder how the Spirit’s appearance in the diverse tongues might inform us, we would do well to listen to voices from this community as well.

This expansion of the gospel community in the book of Acts, of course, does not come without conflict. Tension arises when cultural values of the earliest community come into conflict with cultural values of new communities receiving the gospel. Chapter 15 of Acts describes the “Jerusalem Council” where this conflict comes to a head; an agreement is reached to disentangle the gospel from many of the cultural values that had become identified with it. Even as we read this Pentecost account over against other scripture texts suggesting boundaries and borders, we must take seriously the “unhindered” trajectory of the Spirit in Acts.

“Where is the Holy Spirit taking us and into whose lives?”

In this light, the challenge for us as readers today is to imagine the scope of this invitation for diverse people to join in the work of the Spirit while we address our own cultural understandings. Will we enter “mission” opportunities with the expectation that the Spirit has already preceded us to speak to the lives of the people we minister among? Will we allow our own moral and theological understandings to be challenged by persons whose cultures don’t align with our own? And we would do well to trust our senses as we allow ourselves to be drawn into the excitement of the scene, imagining the lives we may join and the work to which we may be called by God’s Spirit.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After reading through the essays, what aspects of their retelling of the Bible story were new to you? What did you find interesting or compelling in their interpretations and questions?
2. Anastasia Holman traces the Holy Spirit's disruptive, transformative, and igniting work during Pentecost and then backward into the Old Testament. What did you learn from interpreting Pentecost in light of the Psalms and Second Temple Judaism?
3. Dalen Jackson focuses on the diverse identities of the people on the scene, and how the Holy Spirit's power unites without conquering or oppressing like empires do. What steps does Dalen offer for joining in the work of the Spirit as we read and interpret Scripture, despite cultural forces that continue to suppress and divide?
4. Are these two interpretations similar or very different from one another? How so? What might these two interpretive essays say together?
5. What might your group add to these essays from your time reflecting on Scripture together?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Willie Jennings explains that diaspora “means scattering and fragmentation, exile, and loss.... Diaspora is life crowded with self-questioning and questions for God concerning the anger, hatred, and violence visited upon a people.” It is not a powerless existence, even though it is an existence lived under empire. Diaspora is to live with fear and remember loss, but it “is also power, the power of a conviction to survive and the power of a confession to never yield to the forces that would destroy them” (*Acts*, 6).

<sup>2</sup> Wilda C. Gafney, *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church, Year A* (New York: Church Publishing, 2021), 191.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce J. Malina and John J. Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Gafney, *A Women's Lectionary*, 196. Translation of Psalm 104 is Rev. Dr. Gafney's translation.

<sup>5</sup> Malina and Pilch, *Social-Science Commentary on the Book of Acts*, 28.

<sup>6</sup> Gary Gilbert, “The List of Nations in Acts 2: Roman Propaganda and the Lukan Response,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, no. 3 (2002): 504.

<sup>7</sup> Michael H. Floyd, “Exegetical Perspective of Acts 2:1-21,” *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Vol. 3* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Hallam Tweedy, “O Spirit of the Living God, Thou Light, and Fire Divine,” *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989; orig. composed in 1935), 539.

<sup>9</sup> Willie James Jennings, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible Series* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 23.

<sup>10</sup> Jennings, *Acts*, 30.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the nationalism and hostility toward minorities behind recent English-only political movements to “make English the official language of the United States,” see Beatriz Díez, “‘English Only’: The movement to limit Spanish speaking in US,” *BBC News* (December 3, 2019), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-50550742>.

<sup>12</sup> Jennings, *Acts*, 32.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Bohache, "Pentecost Queered," in *The Queer Bible Commentary*, ed. Deryn Guest (London: SCM Press, 2015), 567.

# SESSION 5

## Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch Acts 8:26-40

In the Scripture passage for our final session, there are few (if any) neat conclusions or ends. The number of disciples has grown despite political attempts to quench their preachers and leaders. The Spirit has been bursting all types of boundaries before the early followers have time to consider the long-term ramifications. According to Luke, some of them are now forced to scatter outside of Judea and Jerusalem. Perhaps they followed the same roads as those who left Jerusalem after Pentecost. How will the early disciples be further changed by their travels and dispersion? Who will the Spirit include in the church next?

Much of what happened is left to the annals of early Christian history and to our imagination. In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke follows the experience of Philip, who first fled Jerusalem and was then sent to Samaria.<sup>1</sup> He is traditionally called the Evangelist (8:3-8:40). Small group members may want to look up Philip's other appearances in Acts, where earlier he is chosen to care for Hellenistic widows and later, along with his four prophesying daughters, hosts Paul in Caesarea (6:1-7; 21:8-14). Luke gives Philip's conversation partner, the Ethiopian eunuch, most of the attention and action in this Scripture passage. In the story, the eunuch does most of the inviting. He invites Philip into his carriage, into his study of Scripture, and ultimately to perform his baptism. Again, before anyone in the story has time to understand what the Ethiopian eunuch's confident entry into the waters might mean for the Christian church, Philip is scattered and sent again.

...before anyone in the story has time to understand what the Ethiopian eunuch's confident entry into the waters might mean for the Christian church, Philip is scattered and sent again.

In this bewildering moment, we are caught up in wonder at the Spirit's work in this narrative. John Inscore Essick enters into the wonder of this moment by following the questions Philip and the eunuch ask one another throughout the story. Erica Whitaker focuses on the Ethiopian eunuch's identity and the barriers the white American church has built up to ensure its own power instead of following the Spirit's power.

### Scripture Passage (NRSVue):

<sup>26</sup> Then an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Get up and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." (This is a

He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"

He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?"

wilderness road.)<sup>27</sup> So he got up and went. Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of the Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to Jerusalem to worship<sup>28</sup> and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah.<sup>29</sup> Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it."<sup>30</sup> So Philip ran up to it and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?"<sup>31</sup> He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him.<sup>32</sup> Now the passage of the scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter,  
and like a lamb silent before its shearer,  
so he does not open his mouth.

<sup>33</sup> In his humiliation justice was denied him.  
Who can describe his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth."

<sup>34</sup> The eunuch asked Philip, "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?"<sup>35</sup> Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.<sup>36</sup> As they were going along the road, they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?"<sup>38</sup> He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip[c]baptized him.<sup>39</sup> When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; the eunuch saw him no more and went on his way rejoicing.<sup>40</sup> But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he was passing through the region he proclaimed the good news to all the towns until he came to Caesarea.

## FIRST INTERPRETATION

### Conspiracies of Belonging

*By John Inscore Essick*

The movement of the Holy Spirit within and among the believers in Acts draws them ever more deeply into conspiracies of belonging. Those gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost (Acts 2) were driven by the Spirit to press their own speech into foreign tongues, signaling a belonging that reaches across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Healings, public testimony to the

power of God at work in Jesus, and a commitment to prayer are the Spirit's tools for fulfilling Jesus' promise that his followers would become "witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). The gospel is always bursting forth.

The early chapters of Acts detail active witness in and around Jerusalem, but in chapter 8 we learn that the Spirit's conspiracy of belonging has already been scattered farther and wider than we knew. In fact, the belonging made possible by Jesus requires his witnesses to catch up to a gospel already drawing in diverse people and places. This is exactly what was required of Philip in Acts 8:26-40.

Philip must have had a special care for the marginalized, for he was drawn toward the hungry, the avoided, and the forbidden. In Acts 6 we find him among those selected to make sure the most vulnerable had something to eat. Early in Acts 8 we find him in Samaria, preaching with power and healing in a place and among a people generally avoided by those of Philip's background. It is worth noting that Jesus' parable about a "Good Samaritan" also took place along a road. Why, then, should we be surprised to find Philip in this passage approaching, engaging, and ultimately baptizing a eunuch traveling back home to Ethiopia after going to worship in Jerusalem? We learn with Philip that the Spirit of God moves toward, around, in and through all kinds of places and bodies.

We learn with Philip that the Spirit of God moves toward, around, in and through all kinds of places and bodies.

There is much to chew on in this episode, but I want to call your attention to the questions asked during this encounter. Philip and the eunuch ask questions which draw them together and depict a kind of holy curiosity on the part of all involved. Their exchange of questions about the scripture emerges in the context of ancient reading. Philip, who was told to catch up to a chariot, encountered a court official of The Candace, Queen of the Ethiopians, reading from the prophet Isaiah. Philip, in a moment of spiritual curiosity, asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" (8:30). No self-introduction is reported. We are not told of any small talk or chit chat. Rather, Philip immediately seizes the opportunity to ask whether the reader understands what is being read. The eunuch, too, immediately seizing upon Philip's willingness to talk about meaning and interpretation, answers a question with a question: "How can I, unless someone helps me?" (8:31). With these two questions we are exposed to a range of intriguing and compelling possibilities for discussion.

Asking good questions can often be an entry point for getting caught up in the Spirit's conspiracy of belonging. What might it mean that this

encounter took place on a desert road? Who is this chariot-riding, prophet-reading reader? Why would Philip wonder whether the reader understood the text? What was at stake culturally, socially, and theologically when Philip accepted a castrated foreigner's invitation to join him in the chariot and after that the waters of baptism? These types of questions and others rightfully come to mind, and they are worthy of consideration.

But there is an element of this story that is easily missed. As readers removed some 2,000 years from the period in which this story is set, we might assume that the act of reading is the same for us as it was for that ancient eunuch in his chariot. He was a reader. Philip was a reader. We are readers. Yes, but there is more to it than that.

We should not miss the fact that Philip *heard* the eunuch reading, which signals that he was following the common practice of reading out loud. "Most reading in antiquity was out loud," says biblical scholar Charles Talbert, but some also followed the "art of reading silently."<sup>2</sup> Whereas we are more likely to read silently when alone and out loud to or for others, this Ethiopian reader appears to have been reading out loud to himself. Talbert also notes the eunuch may have been reading out loud because it was standard practice to study the Torah audibly. Reading out loud was how most of the ancients studied scripture even when they were in a private space.

### How does scripture sound to you?

This little piece of historical context can help us consider the differences and distinctions between our own habits of audible and silent reading of all texts, but especially scripture. Can you think of a time when reading scripture out loud in earshot of someone else led to holy conversation like the one in this story? If so, what was it like? How does scripture sound to you? How might this story be experienced by a hearing-impaired person? What made the conversation holy in your mind?

We learn that the eunuch was reading from Isaiah 53 and he is eager for "help" understanding about whom, exactly, the prophet speaks. One sincere and humble question from the chariot-reader leads to a second: "About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" (8:34). Philip, at the Spirit's behest, was quick to oblige. And then it was just a matter of time before they left the chariot for the water.

Reading is one thing, but understanding is another. Assistance is required for interpretation. We may read in solitude (out loud or silently), but we never read alone. This is a point that Black theologian Willie Jennings drives home when he writes that God had Philip chase the chariot down

“because God will not leave the traveler alone with the text.”<sup>3</sup> The reading that the Spirit of God desired on that desert road was a reading *together*, a joining of bodies around a deep story that reaches back into ancient Israel on its way to making visible the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. That kind of reading does not—cannot—happen in isolation. The Spirit of God drew different readers together to “help” one another read an old passage in their own day. So it is with us as we journey together in our chariot.

What would it look like for us, as readers of this story in this moment, to open ourselves up to “help” with our own reading? What insight might blossom as we admit we need help reading a book of the Bible or a passage or a verse that confounds us? It has often come from sermons, Bible study curricula, and commentaries—some more helpful than others. Those are fine places to begin. But let us also be open to “help” from new directions. Are we prepared to allow someone else to ask us if we understand what we are reading? Can we imagine new or challenging voices chasing down our chariots of isolated, private reading eager to hop in with us and talk about things of utmost importance? I hope so. Help can arrive from songs, films, poems, art, and readings from all around the globe.

In closing, I recommend a short essay by Womanist scholar, professor, and priest Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney as an example of receiving “help” from outside the chariot, so to speak. Gafney has written a brief but compelling essay on this passage in which she imagines herself hopping into the chariot with the Ethiopian Eunuch and Philip to join the vibrant conversation about Isaiah 53. The essay explores some of the challenges posed by the eunuch’s questions and struggles with how to read Isaiah 53 in a way that is faithful to the gospel while preserving its “ancestral contextual integrity.” The essay is free to read online at <https://www.wilgafney.com/2012/05/04/black-jewish-and-queer-the-ethiopian-eunuch/>.

Can we imagine new or challenging voices chasing down our chariots of isolated, private reading eager to hop in with us and talk about things of utmost importance?

Could Philip have imagined that following Jesus would involve chasing chariots, baptizing eunuchs, and being whisked away into God’s beautiful future? Could the Ethiopian eunuch have imagined that a Jewish man would jump in his chariot, guide him to see how Isaiah and Jesus could help him read his own body and life, and return home a baptized part of God’s beautiful future? Probably not, but that’s precisely what the Spirit’s conspiracy of belonging brings about.

## SECOND INTERPRETATION

### Barriers the Church Must Break Down

By Erica Whitaker

The book of Acts consists of accounts of the early disciples of Christ. These stories have historically been interpreted as the working of the Holy Spirit forming and shaping the body of Christ, the Church. The first century church had to work through many challenges that surrounded the practice of who would be included or excluded from the body of Christ. Acts 8: 26-40 is one of many stories about the Church becoming more inclusive and allowing the Spirit of God to expand their hearts, their minds, and how to imagine the body of Christ. God's inclusive nature is an invitation for all people to readjust their vision of who is welcome in the kingdom of God.

The Ethiopian eunuch is a Black Jewish man from North Africa whose physical body would never be allowed in portions of God's temple in Jerusalem.

One issue in the early church was nationality and religion. In our passage, Luke, the author, describes a man riding in a chariot as "an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of The Candace, the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of her entire treasury" (Acts 8:27). Because the man is historically known to be "an Ethiopian kinsman" and a "court official," he has traditionally been labeled as a Gentile convert.<sup>4</sup> However, Glifford Rhamie argues that there is plausible evidence "for the Ethiopian eunuch to be envisaged as a black African Jew" similar to other "fully-fledged Jews" mentioned in prior chapters of Acts. If Rhamie is correct, the story of Philip and the eunuch is a story firmly connected to Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8), the gathered Jews who were present for Pentecost (2:8), and the diasporic Jews spread throughout Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.<sup>5</sup>

This nuanced interpretation of the Ethiopian eunuch's background is an example of how looking closely at these characters interrupts the habitual ways we imagine biblical characters. The Ethiopian eunuch is a Black Jewish man from North Africa whose physical body would never be allowed in portions of God's temple in Jerusalem. He lives at the cross-section of different national and religious boundaries. Luke's depiction of this man and his interactions with Philip press us to ask how the power of the Holy Spirit and the witness of the Gospel disrupt and rearrange these boundaries. By the end of the story, Philip and the eunuch enter the water together for the eunuch's baptism. Then they are separated, as the "Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip" and sent him north to Judea and Samaria while the eunuch continued south into Africa (8:39). What cultural and religious

boundaries did the Spirit, the gospel, and the waters of baptism interrupt? What barriers were washed away?

These questions are important in our lives and in the life of the church today, especially for white American Christians. Black theologian Willie Jennings says that the Western world today has a “diseased social imagination...[and] most Christians sense that something about Christians’ social imaginations is ill.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, the way white Christians imagine or see people in scripture and in their own context is affected and corrupted by two particular barriers formed by whiteness: nationalism and the nature of bodies. By interrupting the twenty-first century white church’s imagination about the Ethiopian eunuch’s religion, nation, and body, we can also critically examine the barriers of exclusion and inclusion in white American Christian imaginations about nationality and bodies today.

First, what is “whiteness”? Whiteness is not primarily an ethnic category that refers to “people of European descent.” According to Jennings, the most important thing to understand about “whiteness” is that it is a powerful social imagination that affects how we make meaning and behave, whether from impulse or after careful thought. We engage in a social imagination as we filter what we encounter in the world by what we deem is important to observe, remember, and feel about a person, situation, or idea. Often, we first notice what we have filtered by how we are reacting emotionally or bodily. We can imagine whiteness running in the background at all times, affecting how people are treated differently and on what level someone is accepted into a group. Even if race is not mentioned in a social event or a political policy, for example, whiteness affects how people interpret who’s invited or how to follow directions.

...“whiteness”...is a powerful social imagination that affects how we make meaning and behave, whether from impulse or after careful thought.

Willie Jennings has given examples of this whiteness social imagination in his experience within both churches and theological education. When two white men from a church down the street visited to evangelize twelve-year-old Jennings and his mother at their home, his mother instinctively stood to protect her Black son and one man spoke to him as if he were a small child. Jennings could tell these two white men would always consider the Jennings family as strangers to evangelize because they were Black, even though his parents were church leaders in the Black church nearby. As an adult, Jennings watched as a white man was chosen for a teaching job over a Black woman at his school. The candidates were evenly matched, but the faculty easily appreciated how the white man challenged the school in “the right way” and “was a better fit” for the job. They could not imagine how the

Black woman might “fit” in the same way. In both cases, whiteness infected how people made decisions and related to one another.<sup>7</sup>

The barriers of whiteness, second, reinforce and support assumptions of white superiority. So whiteness is also a racialized ideology, and it is rooted in nationalism and religious purity (this includes sexuality). As a result, whiteness takes advantage of rules and regulations that are designed to establish who is included and who is excluded from the community. According to Richard Dyer, being identified as white is a “passport to privilege” and power. But whiteness can be invisible too, as long as white people claim neutrality and maintain the power to be the observer, interpreter, and judge in society. White superiority is often expressed with “emphases on purity, cleanliness, [and] virginity.”<sup>8</sup> The lens of whiteness warps the way white Christians see creating a culture of national and physical purity and superiority.

To challenge whiteness, the first barrier to break down is the white Christian perception of the nation. By the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Phillip transgresses the boundary of nationalism and welcomes the Ethiopian eunuch into the greater body of Christ. For myself, I am proud to be an American. I am proud to be a Christian. America is my home. The Church is my home. However, being American does not mean being a Christian and being Christian does not mean being American. This does not mean you have to choose one and reject the other. Rather, the community of faith is called to hold the tension between the church and state, and to resist merging patriotism with love for the kingdom of God.

God is calling the white church to engage in a dense life together, a deeper community that includes all people beyond their nation of birth and the nature of the body.

The second barrier the church must break down is over the nature of the body. This Ethiopian Jew was a eunuch, a beloved child of God who from an early age was given the prestigious role of serving directly beside the king and queen. A eunuch’s body is altered, removing his ability to have children and possibly affecting his sexuality. These alterations meant that he was no longer ritually clean. By entering the waters of baptism, Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch transgress the rules of bodily and ritual exclusion that would have separated them before.

It is important to note that the story of the Ethiopian eunuch is about more than cleanliness rules. His body was ultimately viewed against the religious standards of what a male body should be. In our time, the standards set by whiteness promotes the white, male heterosexual body as considered purer, cleaner, and superior. All others, including females, non-white, and homosexuals, were and still are deemed less than.

The standards of whiteness, says Jennings, organizes lives in such a way that “distorts identity,” and “strangles the possibilities of dense life together.”<sup>9</sup> God is calling the white church to engage in a dense life together, a deeper community that includes all people beyond their nation of birth and the nature of the body.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. After reading through the essays, what aspects of their retelling of the Bible story were new to you? What did you find interesting or compelling in their interpretations and questions?
2. John Inscore Essick explores how the practice of reading Scripture together and asking questions with one another might quietly and surprisingly shape us into belonging to one another. Have you experienced the Spirit’s “conspiracies of belonging” by reading Scripture together? What might that be like?
3. In viewing the Ethiopian eunuch and the socio-religious barriers melted away in this story, Erica Whitaker sees the barriers of whiteness that continue to challenge white American churches. Which barriers mentioned in Erica’s essay do you find most challenging? Most urgent? Most perplexing?
4. Are these two interpretations similar or very different from one another? How so? What might these two interpretive essays say together?
5. What might your group add to these essays from your time reflecting on Scripture together?

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jennings states, “Philip was scattered and now he was sent.” In Acts 8, Philip was living in between the boundaries, where people outside the church like Simon the Magician and the Ethiopian eunuch often saw greater power than those inside the church. Historically, what Christians have seen in these texts has been used for good or for ill toward the “outside world” (*Acts*, 77).

<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2005), 76. Talbert’s examples of ancient readers in silence include Euripides, Theseus, Julius Caesar, unnamed senators and women, and Ambrose of Milan. Still, it was most common to read out loud in the ancient world.

<sup>3</sup> Willie James Jennings, *Acts, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible Series* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2017), 82.

<sup>4</sup> Gifford Charles Alphaeus Rhamie, “Whiteness, Conviviality and Agency: The Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:26-40) and conceptuality in the imperial imagination of Biblical Studies” (Ph.D. dissertation, Canterbury, UK: Canterbury Christ Church University, 2019), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Rhamie, “Whiteness, Conviviality and Agency,” 27.

<sup>6</sup> Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>7</sup> See Jennings, *The Christian Imagination* (3), for his story as a young boy and Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* ([Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020], 23-29), for his story about the faculty hire.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Dyer, "Coloured White, Not Coloured," *White*, 20th Anniversary ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017; originally published in 1997), 40-45, 70.

<sup>9</sup> Jennings, *After Whiteness*, 8.



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