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# Acts and Work

Theology of Work Project

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## Acts and Work

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### Introduction to Acts

The Acts of the Apostles depicts the early church working hard to grow itself and serve others in the face of opposition, shortages of people and money, government bureaucracy (church bureaucracy came later), internal strife, and even the forces of nature. Their work shows similarities to what Christians face in non-church-related workplaces today. A small group of people put all their heart into work that brings Christ's love to people in every sphere of life, and they find the amazing power of the Holy Spirit at work in them as they do it. If this is not what we experience in our daily work, perhaps God wants to guide, gift, and empower our work as much as he did theirs.

Work takes center stage, as you might expect in a book about the "acts" of the leaders of the early church. The narrative is abuzz with people walking, speaking, healing, giving generously, making decisions, governing, serving food, managing money, fighting, manufacturing clothes, tents, and other goods, baptizing (or washing), debating, arguing, making judgments, reading and writing, singing, defending themselves in court, gathering wood, building fires, escaping hostile crowds, embracing and kissing, holding councils, apologizing, sailing, abandoning ship, swimming, rescuing people, and through it all, praising God. The men and women in the book of Acts are ready to do whatever it might take to accomplish their mission. No work is too menial for the highest among them, and no work too daunting for the lowliest.

Yet the depth of the Book of Acts stems not so much from what the people of the early church do, but why and how they engage in this amazing burst of activity. The why is service. Serving God, serving colleagues, serving society, serving strangers—service is the motivation behind the work Christians do throughout the book. This should come as no surprise because Acts is in fact the second volume of the story that began in the Gospel of Luke, and service is also the driving motivation of Jesus and his followers in Luke. (See *Luke and Work* at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org) for essential background information on Luke and his audience.)

If the why is service, then how is to constantly challenge the structures of Roman society, which was based not on service but exploitation. Luke continually contrasts the ways of God's kingdom with the ways of the Roman Empire. He pays attention to Jesus' and his followers' many interactions with the

officials of the empire. He is well aware of the systems of power—and the socioeconomic factors that support them—operative in the Roman Empire. From the emperor to nobles, to officials, to landowners, to freemen, to servants and to slaves, each layer of society existed by wielding power over the layer below. God’s way, as seen in the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts, is just the opposite. God’s society exists for service, and especially for service to those in weaker, poorer or more vulnerable positions.

Ultimately, then, Acts is not a model of the kinds of activities we should engage in as Christ’s followers, but as a model of the commitment to service that should form the foundation of our activities. Our activities are different from the apostles’, but our commitment to service is the same.

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## The Beginning of God’s New World (Acts 1-4)

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### A Community with a Mission (Act 1:6)

In the book of Acts, Jesus’ mission to restore the world as God intended it to be is transformed into the mission of the community of Jesus’ followers. Acts traces the life of the community of Jesus’ followers as the Spirit forms them into a group of people who work and use work-related power and wealth differently from the world around them. The work begins with the creation of the unique community called the church. Luke begins with the community “when they had come together,” and continues with the mission to “restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6). To accomplish this work, the community must first be oriented to its vocation for the kingdom of God, and then to its identity as the kingdom of God’s witnesses in daily life.

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### An Orienting Vocation for the Kingdom of God (Acts 1:8)

The book of Acts begins with a post-resurrection interaction between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus teaches his disciples about “the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). They respond with a question about establishing a sociopolitical kingdom, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6). [1] Jesus’ response relates closely to our lives as workers.

It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:7-8)

First, Jesus closes down the disciples’ curiosity about the timeline of God’s plan. “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority” (Acts 1:7). We are to live in

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anticipation of the fullness of God's kingdom, but not in a way that wonders about the precise timing of God's return in Christ. Second, Jesus does not deny that God will establish a sociopolitical kingdom, that is "to restore the kingdom to Israel," as the disciples' question put it.

Jesus' disciples were all well versed in the Scriptures of Israel. They knew that the kingdom described by the prophets was no other-world reality, but that it was a real kingdom of peace and justice in a world renewed by the power of God. Jesus does not deny the reality of this coming kingdom, but he expands the boundaries of the disciples' expectation by including all creation in the hoped-for kingdom. This is not merely a new kingdom for the territory of Israel, but "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

The fulfillment of this kingdom is not yet ("at this time") but it is here, in this world.

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God ... And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals."  
(Revelation 21:2-3)

The kingdom of heaven comes to earth, and God dwells here, in the redeemed world. Why is it not here yet? Jesus' teaching suggests that part of the answer is because his disciples have work to do. Human work was needed to complete God's creation even in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:5), but our work was crippled by the Fall. In Acts 1 and 2, God sends his spirit to empower human work. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8a). Jesus is giving his followers a vocation—witnessing, in the sense of bearing witness to the Spirit's power in every sphere of human activity—that is essential to the coming of the kingdom. God's gift of the Holy Spirit fills the gap between the essential role that God assigned to human work and our ability to fulfill that role. For the first time since the Fall, our work has the power to contribute to fulfilling God's kingdom at the return of Christ. Scholars, by and large, view Acts 1:8 as the programmatic statement for this second of Luke's two volumes.

Indeed, the entire book of Acts can be taken as a (sometimes faltering) expression of the Christian vocation to bear witness to the risen Jesus. But bearing witness means far more than evangelizing. We must not fall into the mistake of thinking Jesus is talking only about the work of the individual sharing the gospel with an unbeliever through his or her words. Instead, bearing witness to the coming kingdom primarily means living now according to the principles and practices of God's kingdom. We will come to see that the most effective form of Christian witness is often—even primarily—the shared life of the community as it goes about its work.

The shared Christian vocation of witness is possible only through the power of the Holy Spirit. The

Spirit transforms individuals and communities in ways that result in the sharing of the fruits of human labor—especially power, resources, and influence—with the community and the surrounding culture. The community witnesses when the strong aid the weak. The community witnesses when its members use their resources to benefit the wider culture. The community witnesses when those around see that working in the ways of justice, goodness, and beauty leads to fuller life.

The locations mentioned by Jesus reveal that the witness of the disciples puts them in social danger. Jesus' group of Jewish disciples is commanded to speak for a man who has only recently been crucified as an enemy of the Roman Empire and a blasphemer of the God of Israel. They are called to take up this vocation in the city in which their teacher was killed, among the Samaritans—historic, ethnic enemies of the Jews—and in the broad reaches of the Roman Empire.<sup>[2]</sup>

In summary, Acts begins with an orienting vocation that calls Jesus' followers to the primary task of witness. Witness means, above all, living in accordance with the ways of God's coming kingdom. As we will see momentarily, the most important element of this life is that we work primarily for the good of others. This vocation is made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit and is to be exercised with little regard for social barriers. This orienting vocation does not denigrate the value of human work or the working lives of Jesus' disciples in favor of proclaiming Jesus by word alone. Quite the opposite, Acts will argue forcefully that all human work can be a fundamental expression of God's kingdom.

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## An Orienting Identity as God's Kingdom Witnesses in Daily Life (Acts 2:1-41)

There is no question that the story of Pentecost is central to the life of the early Christian community. This is the event that initiates the vocation of witness described in Acts 1:8. This section of Acts makes claims on all workers in two ways. First, the Pentecost account identifies its Christian hearers within a new community that brings to life the re-creation of the world—that is, the kingdom of God—promised by God through the prophets. Peter explains the phenomenon at Pentecost by referring to the prophet Joel.

These [men] are not drunk, as you suppose, for it's only nine in the morning. No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: "In the last days, God declares, I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."  
(Acts 2:15-21)

Peter refers to a section of Joel that describes the restoration of God's exiled people. Peter uses this section to claim that God has initiated his once-and-for-all deliverance of his people.<sup>[3]</sup> The return of God's people to the land both fulfills God's covenantal promises and initiates the re-creation of the world. Joel describes this re-creation with breathtaking imagery. As God's people return to the land, the desert comes to life as a sort of new Eden. Dirt, animals and people all rejoice at the victory of God and the deliverance of God's people (see Joel 2). Among the rich images in this section of Joel, we hear that the restoration of God's people will lead to immediate economic impact. "The LORD said: 'I am sending you grain, wine and oil, and you will be satisfied; and I will no more make you a mockery among the nations'" (Joel 2:19). The climax of this act of deliverance for Joel is the outpouring of the Spirit upon the people of God. Peter understands the coming of the Spirit to mean that the early Jesus followers are—in some real, even if profoundly mysterious, manner—participants in God's new world.

A second important and closely related point is that Peter describes salvation as rescue from a "corrupt generation" (Acts 2:40). Two things need clarification. First, Luke does not describe salvation as escape from this world into a heavenly existence. Instead, salvation begins right in the midst of this present world. Second, Luke expects that salvation has a present-tense component. It begins now as a different way of living, contrary to the patterns of this "corrupt generation." Because work and its economic and social consequences are so central to human identity, it should come as no surprise that one of the first patterns of human life to be reconstituted is the manner by which Christians manage their power and possessions. The flow, then, of this early section of Acts moves like this: (1) Jesus suggests that all human life should bear witness to Christ; (2) the coming of the Spirit marks the initiation of the long-promised "day of the Lord" and initiates people into God's new world; and (3) expectations of the "day of the Lord" include profound economic transformations. Luke's next move is to point to a new people, empowered by the Spirit, living according to a kingdom economy.

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## An Orienting Community that Practices the Ways of God's Kingdom (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-38)

After Peter announces the Spirit's creation of a new kind of community, Acts traces the rapid growth of such communities in a variety of places. The community summaries in Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-38 are the most concentrated descriptions. Indeed, the texts themselves are remarkable in describing the scope of commitment and shared life of the early believers.<sup>[4]</sup> Because the summaries have many similarities, we will discuss them in tandem.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in

common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as who owned lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds from what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. There was a Levite, a native from Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means "son of Encouragement"). He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 4:32-37)

While these texts do not describe work directly, they are keenly concerned with the deployment of power and possessions, two realities that are often an outcome of human labor. The first thing to note, in comparison to the surrounding society, is that Christian communities cultivate a very different set of practices with regard to the use of power and possessions. It is clear that the early Christians understood that the power and possessions of the individual were not to be saved for the comfort of the individual, but were to be expended or wisely invested for the good of the Christian community. Stated succinctly, goods are for the good of another. More than anything else, life in the kingdom of God means working for the good of others.

Two things should be stated here. First, these texts ask us to understand our identities primarily as members of the Christian community. The good of the community is the good of each individual member. Second, this is a radical departure from the patronage economy that marked the Roman Empire. In a patronage system, gifts from the rich to the poor create a structure of systematic obligation. Every gift from a benefactor implies a social debt now owed by the beneficiary. This system created a sort of pseudo-generosity in which generous patrons often gave out of self-interest, seeking to accrue honor connected to patronage.<sup>[5]</sup> In essence, the Roman economy viewed "generosity" as a means to social power and status. These notions of systematic reciprocal obligation are completely absent in the descriptions in Acts 2 and 4. In the Christian community, giving is to be motivated by a genuine concern for the flourishing of the beneficiary, not for the honor of the benefactor. Giving has little to do with the giver and everything to do with the receiver.

This is a completely different socioeconomic system. Like Luke's Gospel, Acts regularly demonstrates that Christian conversion results in a reoriented approach to possessions and power. Moreover, this insistence that goods are to be used for the sake of the neighbor is patterned explicitly off of Jesus' life, mission, and—primarily—his self-giving death. (See *Luke and Work* at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org).)

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## The Economics of Radical Generosity (Acts 2:45; 4:34-35)

There is continuing debate about whether or not these community summaries advocate a certain economic system, with some commentators describing the practice of the community as “proto-communism” and others seeing a mandatory divestiture of goods. The text, however, does not suggest an attempt to change the structures beyond the Christian community. Indeed, it would be difficult to think of a small, marginalized, socially powerless group having designs on changing the imperial economic system. It is clear that the community did not fully opt out of the systems of economics within the empire. Likely, fishermen remained members of fishing cartels and artisans continued to do business in the market.<sup>[6]</sup> Paul, after all, continued making tents to support his missionary travels (Acts 18:3).

Rather, the text suggests something far more demanding. In the earliest church, people of means and power liquidated their goods for the sake of the less powerful “from time to time” (Acts 4:34) as anyone “had need” (Acts 2:45; 4:35). This describes a kind of radical availability as the normal status of each person's possessions. That is, the resources—material, political, social, or practical—of any member of the community were put at the constant disposal of the Christian community, even while individual members continued to oversee their particular resources. Rather than systematically prescribing the distribution of wealth in such a way as to ensure flat equality, the earliest church accepted the reality of economic disequilibrium, but practiced a radical generosity whereby goods properly existed for the benefit of the whole, not the individual. This form of generosity is, in many ways, more challenging than a rigid system of rules. It calls for ongoing responsiveness, mutual involvement in the lives of community members, and a continual willingness to hold possessions loosely, valuing the relationships within the community more than the (false) security of possessions.<sup>[7]</sup>

It is highly likely that this system within a system was inspired by the economic ideals expressed in Israel's law, climaxing with the practice of Jubilee—the once-in-fifty-years redistribution of land and wealth within Israel (Leviticus 25:1-55). Jubilee was designed by God to ensure that all people had access to the means of making a living, an ideal that appears never to have been widely practiced by God's people. Jesus, however, introduces his ministry with a set of texts from Isaiah 61 and 58 that produce a great many Jubilee themes:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the

poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

Jubilee ethic is further alluded to in Acts 4:34, where Luke tells us "there were no needy persons among them." This appears to be a direct echo of Deuteronomy 15:4, where the practice of the Sabbath year (a mini-Jubilee occurring once every seven years) is designed to ensure that "there should be no poor among you."

It is fitting that the Christian community would see this as a model for their economic life. But whereas in ancient Israel, the Sabbath year and the Jubilee were to be practiced only every seven and fifty years, respectively, radical availability marked the resources of the early Christian community. We can imagine it in terms similar to the Sermon on the Mount. "You have heard that it was said of old, 'Give back your land to those who are landless once every fifty years,' but I say to you, 'Make your power and resources available any time you see the need.'" Radical generosity based on the needs of others becomes the basis of economic practice in the Christian community. We will explore this in depth through the incidents in the book of Acts.

The practices of the early churches challenge contemporary Christians to think imaginatively about models for radical generosity today. How could radical availability stand as a witness to the kingdom of God and form a plausible alternative way of structuring human life in a culture marked by the tenacious pursuit of personal wealth and security?

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## The Holy Spirit Empowers Radical Generosity With Every Kind of Resource (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-38)

Two final points are important to note with regard to the use of resources in the early Christian community. First is the necessity of the Holy Spirit to the practice of radical generosity. The descriptions of the community in Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-38 follow immediately from the first two major manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Luke could not be clearer in forging a link between the Spirit's presence and power and the ability of the community to live with Christ-like generosity. We must understand that one of the fundamental works of the Spirit in the life of the early Christians was the cultivation of a community that took a radically different stance toward the deployment of resources. So, while we often get caught up in looking for the more spectacular manifestations of the Spirit (visions, tongues, and so on), we need to reckon with the fact that the simple act of sharing or consistent hospitality might be one of the most magnificent gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Second, lest we begin to think that this word is only for those with financial resources, we see Peter and John demonstrate that all resources are to be used for the sake of others. In Acts 3:1-10, Peter and

John encounter a beggar at the gate of the temple. The beggar is looking for money, though Peter and John have none. They do, however, have a witness to the coming of the kingdom through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Hence, Peter replies, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk” (Acts 3:6). Here is an example of resource sharing that is not connected to monetary wealth. The use of power and position to build community will occur on several further occasions in Acts.

Perhaps the most moving expression occurs when Barnabas—who, in Acts 4:32-38, is an example of radical generosity of financial resources—also puts his social resources at Paul’s disposal, helping welcome him into the reluctant fellowship of the apostles in Jerusalem (see Acts 9:1-31). Another example is Lydia, who employs her high social standing in the textile industry in Thyatira as a means of entry for Paul into the city of Thyatira (Acts 16:11-15). Social capital is to be deployed, like any other capital, for the good of the kingdom as understood by the Christian community.

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### A Just Community Is a Witness to the World (Acts 2:47; 6:7)

When resources are properly deployed in the life of the Christian community—as they are after the selection of the table servers in Acts 6—the community becomes a magnet. The community’s life of justice—marked primarily by the other-centered use of power and possessions—draws people to it and to its head, Jesus. When the community uses its possessions and privileges to give life to those in need, when the resources of the individual are fully committed to benefit others in the community, people flock to join. We have seen already that “the Lord added to their number daily those being saved” (Acts 2:47). It is evident in the aftermath of the Spirit-empowered service in Acts 6 as well. The community-forming, justice-promoting work of the seven deacons results in life for many. “The word of God spread; the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7).

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### A Clash of Kingdoms: Community and Power (Acts 5-7)

Acts takes place in the earthy reality of a genuine community, and it does not gloss over the threat that the effects of sin pose to communities. The first two major threats to the Christian community that Luke presents are resource-related issues. As we will see, Ananias and Sapphira, as well as the Hebrew/Aramaic speaking sector of the community, fall into sin in relation to their stewardship of resources and power. For Luke, this defect threatens the very life of the community.

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### Ananias and Sapphira: A Case of Malicious Identity (Acts 5:1-11)

The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) are nothing if not frightful and puzzling. The two, a married couple, sell a piece of property and publicly give the proceeds to the community. However, they secretly hold back a portion of the money for themselves. Peter detects the deception and confronts the two separately. Merely hearing Peter's accusation causes each of them to fall dead on the spot. To our ears, their fate seems out of proportion to their infraction. Peter acknowledges that they were under no obligation to donate the money: "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own?" he says. "And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal?" (Acts 5:4). Private property has not been abolished, and even those in the community of love-for-neighbor may legitimately choose to hold the resources God has entrusted to them. So why does lying about the money bring instant death?

Many attempts have been made to describe the reason for their deaths and even simply to name the sin they committed. [8] It appears, fundamentally, that Ananias and Sapphira's transgression is they are counterfeit community members. As the scholar Scott Bartchy puts it, "By lying in order to achieve an honor they had not earned, Ananias and Sapphira not only dishonored and shamed themselves as patrons but also revealed themselves to be outsiders, non-kin." [9] They are not so much misers as imposters. [10]

Their deceit demonstrates that they are still functioning as members of the Roman patronage system, while they pretend to have become members of the Christian love-of-neighbor system. They attempt to look like Barnabas in his other-centered approach to stewarding resources (Acts 4:36-37). But their motivation is actually to gain honor for themselves on the cheap. In so doing, they actually function as part of the Roman patronage economy. They look generous, but they are giving for the sake of status, not love. Moreover, their lie about their stewardship of resources is interpreted by Peter as a lie to the Holy Spirit and to God (Acts 5:3-4). How striking that a lie to the community is equated with a lie to the Spirit of God! And a lie about resources is as serious as a lie about "religious" matters. We have seen already that one of the primary roles of the Holy Spirit is to form God's people into a community that uses resources in accordance with a deep concern for others. It is not surprising, then, that Ananias and Sapphira's faked act of generosity is depicted as falsifying the work of the Spirit. Their false generosity and their attempt to deceive the Holy Spirit are a threat to the identity of the Christian community. This is a sober reminder of the serious stakes connected to the Christian community and to our own participation within it.

Ananias and Sapphira's deceit occurs in the realm of money. What if it occurred in the realm of work itself? What if they had falsely pretended to serve their masters as though serving God (Colossians 3:22-24), or to treat subordinates justly (Colossians 3:25), or to engage in conflict honestly (Matthew 18:15-17)? Would deceiving the Christian community about such things have caused a similarly unacceptable threat to the community? Luke doesn't report on any such cases in Acts, yet the same principle applies. Genuinely belonging to the Christian community carries with it a fundamental change

in our orientation. We now act in all ways—including work—to love our neighbors as ourselves, not to increase our social status, wealth and power.

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## The Spirit and the Worker (Acts 6:1-7)

Themes from the account of Ananias and Sapphira are present in Acts 6:1-7, which marks the first intra-group dispute in the Christian community. The Hellenists are probably Greek-speaking Jews who have returned to Jerusalem from one of the many Diaspora communities in the Roman Empire. The Hebrews are probably Jews who are from the historic land of Israel (Palestine) and who primarily speak Aramaic and/or Hebrew. It takes very little social imagination to see what is happening in this situation. In a community that sees itself as the fulfillment of Israel's covenant with God, members who are more prototypically Israelite are receiving more of the group's resources than the others. This sort of situation happens regularly in our world. Those who are most similar to the leaders of a movement on the basis of background, culture, status, and so on, often benefit from their identity in ways unavailable to those who are in some way different.

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## Serving the Word and Serving Tables are Equally Valuable (Acts 6:2-4)

One of the greatest contributions that Acts makes to a theology of work emerges from the apostles' response to the intra-community injustice of Acts 6:1-7. The work of administering justice—in this case, by overseeing food distribution—is just as important as the work of preaching the word. This may not be clear at first because of a misleading translation in the NRSV and the NIV:

The twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables." (Acts 6:2, NRSV)

It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. (Acts 6:2, NIV)

It is hard not to read some condescension in the voices of the apostles in these English translations. In the minds of some, working with the word of God is "ministry" (as the NIV puts it), while the work of "waiting" at tables is somehow menial. One line of interpretation has followed this sense, suggesting that waiting on tables was "trivia,"<sup>[11]</sup> a "humble task"<sup>[12]</sup> or one of the "lower tasks"<sup>[13]</sup> in the community. This line of interpretation sees Stephen's subsequent preaching as the "real" purpose behind the Spirit's influence in 6:3.<sup>[14]</sup> There would be no need for the Holy Spirit to get involved in

the menial task of managing the allocation of resources.

But this line of argument depends on dubious translations. The Greek verb translated as “wait” in the NRSV and NIV is diakoneō, which carries the sense of service or ministry. The King James Version and the NASB put it more accurately as “serve.”

It is not reason [i.e., right] that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. (Acts 6:2, KJV)

It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. (Acts 6:2, NASB)

Moreover, just a few words later, in Acts 6:3-4, even the NRSV and the NIV translate the same word as “serving” and “ministry,” respectively.

We, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word. (Acts 6:3-4, NRSV)

[We] will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. (Acts 6:4, NIV)

In other words, the Greek word for the work of the word is exactly the same (in verb form) as for the work of distributing resources, diakonia, “serving.” The NRSV and NIV translators rightly regard the work of preaching as “serving” and “ministry.” Yet they condescend to a more demeaning word when referring to the work of food distribution, “waiting” tables. In contrast, the KJV and NASB translators do not read such condescension into the text. Whether working with the word or with food on tables, both groups “serve” in these translations.

The Greek text gives the important sense that the work of serving those in need is on a par with the apostolic work of prayer and preaching. The apostles serve the word, and the deacons (as they have come to be called) serve those in need. Their service is qualitatively the same, although the specific tasks and skills are different. Both are essential in the formation of God’s people and for the witness of God’s people in the world. The life of the community depends upon these forms of service, and Luke does not give us the sense that one is more powerful or more spiritual than the other.

Despite all this, could it be argued that the condescension is not just a matter of translation but is really

present in the disciples' own words? Could the apostles themselves have imagined that they were chosen to serve the word because they are more gifted than those who are chosen to serve tables? If so, they would be falling back into something similar to the Roman patronage system, setting themselves up with a status too high to sully by serving tables. They would be substituting a new source of status (gifts of the Holy Spirit) for the old Roman one (patronage). The gospel of Christ goes deeper than this! In the Christian community there is no source of status.

Ironically, one of the table-servers, Stephen, turns out to be even more gifted as a preacher than most of the apostles (Acts 6:8-7:60). Yet despite his preaching gift, he is set aside for the service of resource distribution. At that moment, at least, it was more important to God's purposes for him to serve as a table-server than as a word-server. For him, at least, no lingering hunger for status stands in the way of accepting this call to serve tables.

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## The Work of Community Leadership is a Work of the Holy Spirit (Acts 6:3)

The workers best suited to heal the ethnic divide in the Acts 6 community are qualified because they are "known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom." Like those qualified for prayer and preaching, the table-servers' ability is the result of spiritual power. Nothing less than the power of the Spirit makes possible meaningful, community-building, peace-making work among Christians. This passage helps us to see that all work that builds the community or, more broadly, that promotes justice, goodness, and beauty, is—in a deep sense—service (or ministry) to the world.

In our churches, do we recognize the equal ministry of the pastor who preaches the word, the mother and father who provide a loving home for their children, and the accountant who gives a just and honest statement of her employer's expenditures? Do we understand that they are all reliant upon the Spirit to do their work for the good of the community? Every manner of good work has the capacity—by the power of the Spirit—to be a means of participation in God's renewal of the world.

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## Work and Identity (Acts 8-12)

The next section of Acts moves the Christian community, by the power of the Spirit, across cultural barriers as the gospel of Jesus Christ is extended to foreigners (Samaritans), social outcasts (the Ethiopian eunuch), enemies (Saul), and all ethnicities (Gentiles). This section tends to introduce figures by giving their occupation (roughly rendered). In this section we meet:

- Simon, a sorcerer (Acts 8:9-24)
- An Ethiopian eunuch, who is an important economic official for the queen of Ethiopia (Acts 8:27)
- Saul, the Pharisee and persecutor of Christians (Acts 9:1)

- Tabitha, a garment maker (Acts 9:36-43)
- Cornelius, a Roman centurion (Acts 10:1)
- Simon, a tanner (Acts 10:5)
- Herod, a king (Acts 12)

Issues of work are not Luke's main concern in this section, so we must be careful not to make too much of the naming of occupations. Luke's point is that the way they exercise their vocation marks them heading either toward the kingdom or away from it.

Those headed into the kingdom use the fruits of their labor to serve others as witnesses of God's kingdom. Those headed away from the kingdom use the fruits of their labor solely for personal gain. This is evident from a short summary of some of these characters. Several of them seek only personal gain from their work and its accompanying power and resources:

- Simon offers money to the apostles so that he can have power to bestow the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:18-19) —a clear effort to maintain his social status as a “man [who] is the power of God that is called Great” (Acts 8:10).
- Saul uses his network of relationships to persecute followers of Jesus (Acts 9:1-2) in order to protect the social status he enjoyed as a zealous Jew (Acts 22:3) and Pharisee (Acts 26:5).
- Herod uses his power as Rome's client-king to bolster his popularity by killing James the apostle (Acts 12:1-3). Herod later allows himself to be acclaimed as a god, the ultimate patronage status claimed by the Roman emperors (Acts 12:20-23).

The consequences of these acts are dire. Simon is strongly rebuked by Peter (Acts 8:20-23). Saul is confronted by the risen Jesus, who identifies himself with the very community Paul is persecuting (Acts 9:3-9). Herod is struck dead by an angel of the Lord and eaten by worms (Acts 12:23). Standing in counterpoint to them are several people who use their position, power, or resources to bless and bring life:

- Tabitha, a garment maker, makes clothes to share with widows in her community (Acts 9:39).
- Simon, a leather worker, opens his home to Peter (Acts 10:5).
- Cornelius, a Roman centurion already known for generosity (Acts 10:4), uses his connections to invite a great number of friends and family to hear the preaching of Peter (Acts 10:24).

Though he was introduced prior to this section, Barnabas—who we know from Acts 4:37 is a Levite—uses his position within the community to graft Saul into the apostolic fellowship, even when the apostles resist (Acts 9:26-27), and to validate the conversions of Gentiles in Antioch (Acts 11:22-24). We should note that Acts 11:24 shares the secret of Barnabas's ability to use his resources and position in such a way as to build the community of Christians. There we learn explicitly that Barnabas was “full of the Holy Spirit.”

The message in all these examples is consistent. The power, prestige, position, and resources that arise

from work are meant to be used for the sake of others—and not only for the benefit of the self. This, again, is modeled on no less a figure than Jesus, who—in Luke’s Gospel—uses his authority for the benefit of the world and not only for his own sake.

Acts 11:27-30 gives a community example of the use of resources for the good of others in need. In response to a Spirit-inspired prophecy of a worldwide famine, “The disciples determined that according to his ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea” (Acts 11:29). Here we see the use of the fruit of human labor for the benefit of others. And here we see that this sort of generosity was not merely spontaneous and episodic but planned, organized, and deeply intentional. The collection for the church in Jerusalem is discussed further in the section on “[1 Corinthians 16:1-3](#)” in *1 Corinthians and Work* at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org).

Acts 11:1-26 begins an account of how the Christian community resolved a deep dispute about whether Gentile must convert to Judaism before becoming followers of Jesus. This dispute is discussed in an article on [chapter 15](#).

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## A Clash of Kingdoms: Community and Powerbrokers (Acts 13-19)

We will explore this section according to four main themes relevant to the theology of work that emerges from Acts. First, we will examine one further passage relating to vocation as witness. Second, we will discuss how the Christian community exercises the power of leadership and decision making itself. Third, we will look at how the Spirit-led community engages the powers that be in the wider culture. Fourth, we will examine whether following Christ rules out certain forms of vocation and civic engagement. Finally, we will explore Paul’s own practice of continuing to work as a tentmaker on his missionary journeys.

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## Vocation in the Context of Community (Acts 13:1-3)

Acts 13:1-3 introduces us to a set of practices in the church at Antioch. This community is remarkable both for its ethnic diversity and its commitment to practical witness of the kingdom of God. [\[15\]](#) We have seen already how Luke shows that work—especially the use of power and resources—functions as a form of witness. [\[16\]](#) We have seen in Acts 6:1-7 that this applies equally to vocations we more naturally associate with ministry (such as missionary) and those we are more likely to call “work” (such as hospitality.) All vocations have the potential to serve and witness the kingdom, especially when employed in the pursuit of justice and righteousness.

Acts 13:1-3 shows the Christian community trying to discern how the Spirit is leading them toward witness. Paul and Barnabas are singled out to work as traveling evangelists and healers. What is

remarkable is that this discernment is accomplished communally. The Christian community, rather than the individual, is best able to discern the vocations of its individual members. This could mean that today's Christian communities should participate alongside families and young people as they seek answers for questions such as, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" "What will you do after graduation?" or "To what is God calling you?" This would require Christian communities to develop a much greater expertise in vocational discernment than is presently common. It would also require them to take a much more serious interest in work that serves the world beyond the structures of the church. Merely asserting authority over young people's work lives is not enough. Young people will pay attention only if the Christian community can help them do a fuller job of discernment than they can do by other means.

Doing this well would be a double form of witness. First, young people from all religious traditions—and none—struggle deeply with the burden of choosing or finding work. Imagine if the Christian community could genuinely help reduce the burden and improve the outcomes. Second, the great majority of Christians work outside the structures of the church. Imagine if all of us engaged in our work as a means of Christian service to the world, improving the lives of the billions of people we work alongside and on behalf of. How much more visible would that make Christ in the world?

Community discernment of vocation continues throughout Acts, with Paul taking many missionary partners from the community—Barnabas, Timothy, Silas, and Priscilla, to name but a few. Second, testifying again to Luke's realism, we see that this shared vocation to witness does not eliminate the relational tension brought about by human sinfulness. Paul and Barnabas have such a serious dispute over the inclusion of John Mark (who had deserted the team on a previous engagement), that they go separate ways (Acts 15:36-40).

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## Leadership and Decision Making in the Christian Community (Acts 15)

An example of the radical reorienting of social interactions in the Christian community arises during a deep dispute about whether Gentile Christians must adopt Jewish laws and customs. In hierarchical Roman society, the patron of a social organization would dictate the decision to his followers, perhaps after listening to various opinions. But in the Christian community, important decisions are made by the group as whole, relying on their equal access to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The dispute actually begins in chapter 11. Peter experiences a surprising revelation that God is offering "the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18) to Gentiles without requiring them to become Jews first. But when he travels to Jerusalem in the company of some uncircumcised (Gentile) men, some of the Christians there complain that he is violating Jewish law (Acts 11:1-2). When challenged in this way,

Peter does not become angry, does not attempt to lord it over the men by reminding them of his leading position among Jesus' disciples, does not denigrate their opinions, and does not impugn their motives. Instead, he tells the story of what happened to lead him to this conclusion and how he sees God's hand in it, "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?" (Acts 11:17). Notice that he portrays himself not as wise, nor morally superior, but as one who was on the verge of making a serious mistake until corrected by God.

Then he leaves it to his challengers to respond. Having heard Peter's experience, they do not react defensively, do not challenge Peter's authority in the name of James (the Lord's brother and the leader of the Jerusalem church), and do not accuse Peter of exceeding his authority. Instead, they too look for God's hand at work and reach the same conclusion as Peter. What began as a confrontation ends with fellowship and praise. "When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God" (Acts 11:18). We can't expect every dispute to be resolved so amicably, but we can see that when people acknowledge and explore the grace of God in one another's lives, there is every reason to hope for a mutually uplifting outcome.

Peter departs Jerusalem in concord with his former antagonists, but there remain others in Judea who are teaching that Gentiles must first convert to Judaism. "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses," they say, "you cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1). Paul and Barnabas are in Antioch at the time, and they, like Peter, have experienced God's grace to the Gentiles without any need for conversion to Judaism. The text tells us that the division was serious, but a mutual decision was made to seek the wisdom of the Christian community as a whole. "After Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders" (Acts 15:2).

They arrive in Jerusalem and are greeted warmly by the apostles and elders (Acts 15:4). Those who hold the opposite opinion—that Gentiles must first convert to Judaism—are also present (Acts 15:5). They all decide to meet to consider the matter and engage in a lively debate (Acts 15:6). Then Peter, who is of course among the apostles in Jerusalem, repeats the story of how God revealed to him his grace for the Gentiles without the need to convert to Judaism (Acts 15:7). Paul and Barnabas report their similar experiences, also focusing on what God is doing rather than claiming any superior wisdom or authority (Acts 15:12). All the speakers receive a respectful hearing. Then the group considers what each has said in the light of Scripture (Acts 15:15-17). James, functioning as the head of the church in Jerusalem, proposes a resolution. "I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood" (Acts 15:19-20).

If James were exercising authority like a Roman patron, that would be the end of the matter. His status alone would decide the issue. But this is not how the decision unfolds in the Christian community. The

community does accept his decision, but as a matter of agreement, not command. Not only James, but all the leaders—in fact, the entire church—have a say in the decision. “The apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided ...” (Acts 15:22). And when they send word to the Gentile churches of their decision “to impose on you no further burden” (Acts 15:28b), they do so in the name of the whole body, not the name of James as patron. “We have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you” (Acts 15:25). Moreover, they claim no personal authority, but only that they have tried to be obedient to the Holy Spirit. “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” (Acts 15:28a). The word *seem* indicates a humility about their decision, underscoring that they have renounced the Roman patronage system with its claims of power, prestige, and status.

Before we leave this episode, let us notice one more element of it. The leaders in Jerusalem show remarkable deference to the experience of workers in the field—Peter, Paul, and Barnabas—working on their own far from headquarters, each facing a particular situation that required a practical decision. The leaders in Jerusalem highly respect their experience and judgment. They communicate carefully about the principles that should guide decisions (Acts 15:19-21), but they delegate decision making to those closest to the action, and they confirm the decisions made by Peter, Paul, and Barnabas in the field. Again, this is a radical departure from the Roman patronage system, which concentrated power and authority in the hands of the patron.

The beneficial effects of the practice of uniform education about mission, principles, and values combined with localized delegation of decision making and action are well known because of their widespread adoption by business, military, educational, nonprofit, and government institutions in the second half of the twentieth century. The management of virtually every type of organization has been radically transformed by it. The resulting unleashing of human creativity, productivity, and service would be no surprise to the leaders of the early church, who experienced the same explosion in the rapid expansion of the church in the apostolic age.

However, it is not clear that churches today have fully adopted this lesson with respect to economic activity. For example, Christians working in developing countries often complain that they are hampered by the rigid stances of churches far away in the developed world. Well-meaning boycotts, fair-trade rules, and other pressure tactics may have the opposite consequences of what was intended. For example, an economic development missionary in Bangladesh reported about negative results of the imposition of child labor restrictions by his sponsoring organization in the United States. A company he was helping develop was required to stop buying materials that were produced using workers under sixteen years old. One of their suppliers was a company consisting of two teenaged brothers. Because of the new restrictions, the company had to stop buying parts from the brothers, which left their family without any source of income. So their mother had to return to prostitution, which made things much worse for the mother, the brothers, and the rest of the family. “What we need from the church in the U.S. is fellowship that is not oppressive,” the missionary later said. “Having to

comply with well-intentioned Western Christian dictates means we have to hurt people in our country.”

[17]

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## The Community of the Spirit Confronts the Brokers of Power (Acts 16 and 19)

In the latter half of Acts, Paul, his companions, and various Christian communities come into conflict with those who wield local economic and civic power. The first incident occurs in Pisidian Antioch, where “the God-fearing women of high standing and the leading men of the city” (Acts 13:50) are incited against Paul and Barnabas and expel them from the city. Then, in Iconium, Paul and Barnabas are maltreated by “both Gentiles and Jews, with their rulers” (Acts 14:5). In Philippi, Paul and Silas are imprisoned for “disturbing” the city (Acts 16:19-24). Paul has run-ins with the city officials of Thessalonica (Acts 17:6-9) and the proconsul of Achaia (Acts 18:12). Later, he comes into conflict with the silversmiths’ guild of Ephesians (Acts 19:23-41). The conflicts culminate with Paul’s trial for disturbing the peace in Jerusalem, which occupies the final eight chapters of Acts.

These confrontations with local powers should not be surprising given the coming of God’s Spirit announced by Peter in Acts 2. There we saw that the coming of the Spirit was—in some mysterious way—the initiation of God’s new world. This was bound to threaten the powers of the old world. We have seen that the Spirit worked in the community to form a gift-based economy very different from the Roman patronage-based economy. Christian communities formed a-system-within-a-system, where believers still participated in the Roman economy but had a different manner of using resources. Conflict with local leaders was precisely due to the fact that these leaders had the greatest stake in maintaining Rome’s patronage economy.

The confrontations in Acts 16:16-24 and Acts 19:23-41 both merit deeper discussion. In them, the shape of the kingdom clashes deeply with economic practices of the Roman world.

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## Confrontation Over the Liberation of a Slave Girl in Philippi (Acts 16:16-24)

The first of the two confrontations occurs in Philippi, where Paul and Silas encounter a girl with a spirit of divination.[18] In the Greco-Roman context, this type of spirit was associated with fortune-telling—a connection that “brought her owners a great deal of money” (Acts 16:16). This seems to be an example of the grossest form of economic exploitation. It is puzzling that Paul and Silas do not act more quickly (Acts 16:18). Perhaps the reason is that Paul wants to make a connection with her or her owners before correcting them. When Paul does act, however, the result is spiritual liberation for the girl and financial loss for her owners. The owners respond by dragging Paul and Silas before the authorities, on charges of disturbing the peace.

This incident demonstrates powerfully that the ministry of liberation Jesus proclaimed in Luke 4 can run counter to at least one common business practice, the exploitation of slaves. Businesses that produce economic profit at the expense of human exploitation are in conflict with the Christian gospel. (Governments that exploit humans are just as bad. We discussed earlier how Herod's violence against his people and even his own soldiers led to his death at the hands of an Angel of the Lord). Paul and Silas were not on a mission to reform the corrupt economic and political practices of the Roman world, but the power of Jesus to liberate people from sin and death cannot help but break the bonds of exploitation. There can be no spiritual liberation without economic consequences. Paul and Silas were willing to expose themselves to ridicule, beating and prison in order to bring economic liberation to someone whose sex, economic status, and age made her vulnerable to abuse.

If we look ahead two thousand years, is it possible that Christians have accommodated to, or even profited from, products, companies, industries, and governments that violate Christian ethical and social principles? It is easy to rail against illegal industries such as narcotics and prostitution, but what about the many legal industries that harm workers, consumers, or the public at large? What about the legal loopholes, subsidies, and unfair government regulations that benefit some citizens at the expenses of others? Do we even recognize how we may benefit from the exploitation of others? In a global economy, it can be difficult to trace the conditions and consequences of economic activity.

Well-informed discernment is needed, and the Christian community has not always been rigorous in its critiques. In fact, the book of Acts does not give principles for gauging economic activity. But it does demonstrate that economic matters are gospel matters. In the persons of Paul and Silas, two of the greatest missionaries and heroes of the faith, we see all the example we need that Christians are called to confront the economic abuses of the world.

Chapters 17 and 18 contains much of interest with regard to work, but for the sake of continuing the discussion of confrontations arising from the gospel's challenge to the systems of the world, this article is followed by the account of the confrontation in chapter 19:21-41, returning then to chapters 17, 18, and the other parts of chapter 19.

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## Confrontation Over the Disruption of Trade in Ephesus (Acts 19:21-41)

The following discussion falls a little out of order (skipping over Acts 19:17-20 for the moment) so that we can cover the second incident of confrontation. It occurs in Ephesus, home to the Temple of Artemis. The Artemis cult in Ephesus was a powerful economic force in Asia Minor. Pilgrims streamed to the temple (a structure so grand that it was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world) in hopes of receiving from Artemis enhanced fertility in the hunt, in the field, or in the family. In this context, as with other tourism centers, many of the local industries were tied to the ongoing relevance of the attraction.<sup>[19]</sup>

A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the artisans. These he gathered together, with the workers of the same trade, and said: “Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business. You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus but in almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her.” When they heard this, they were enraged and shouted: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” The whole city was filled with confusion; and people rushed together to the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul’s travel companions. (Acts 19:24-29)

As Demetrius recognizes, when people become followers of Jesus, they can be expected to change the way they use their money. Ceasing to buy items related to idol worship is merely the most obvious change. Christians might also be expected to spend less on luxury items for themselves and more on necessities for the benefit of others. Perhaps they will consume less and donate or invest more in general. There is nothing prohibiting Christians from buying silver items in general. But Demetrius is right to see that patterns of consumption will change if many people start believing in Jesus. This will always be threatening to those profiting most from the way things were before.

This prompts us to wonder which aspects of economic life in our own context might be incommensurate with the Christian gospel. For example, is it possible that, contrary to Demetrius’s fears, Christians have continued to buy goods and services incompatible with following Jesus? Have we become Christians, yet continued to buy the equivalent of silver shrines to Artemis? Certain “aspirational” branded items come to mind, which appeal to buyers’ desires to associate themselves with the social status, wealth, power, intelligence, beauty or other attributes implied by the items’ “brand promise.” If Christians claim that their standing comes solely from the unconditional love of God in Christ, does self-association with brands function as a kind of idolatry? Is buying a prestigious brand essentially similar to buying a silver shrine to Artemis? This incident in Ephesus warns us that following Jesus has economic consequences that may make us uncomfortable at times, to say the least.

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## Engaging the Culture with Respect (Acts 17:16-34)

Despite the need to confront the power brokers in the wider culture, confrontation is not always the best way for the Christian community to engage the world. Often, the culture is misguided, struggling, or ignorant of God’s grace, but not actually oppressive. In these cases, the best way to proclaim the

gospel may be to cooperate with the culture and engage it with respect.

In Acts 17, Paul provides a model for us in how to engage the culture respectfully. It begins with observation. Paul strolls the streets of Athens and observes the temple of the various gods he finds there. He reports that he “looked carefully” at the “objects of worship” he found there (Acts 17:22), which he notes were “formed by the art and imagination” of people (Acts 17:29). He read their literature, knew it well enough to quote, and treated it respectfully enough to incorporate it into his preaching about Christ. In fact, it even contains some of God’s truth, Paul says, for he quotes it as saying, “As even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring’” (Acts 17:28). A commitment to the radical transformation of society does not mean that Christians have to oppose everything about society. Society is not so much totally godless—“for in him we live and move and have our being”—as God-unaware.

In a similar way in our workplaces, we need to be observant. We can find many good practices in our schools, our businesses, in government, or other workplaces, even though they do not arise within the Christian community. If we are truly observant, we see that even those unaware or scornful of Christ are nonetheless made in the image of God. Like Paul, we should cooperate with them, rather than try to discredit them. We can work with nonbelievers to improve labor/management relationships, customer service, research and development, corporate and civic governance, public education, and other fields. We should make use of the skills and insights developed in universities, corporations, nonprofits, and other places. Our role is not to condemn their work, but to deepen it and show that it proves that “he is not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27). Imagine the difference between saying, “Because you don’t know Christ, all your work is wrong,” and “Because I know Christ, I think I can appreciate your work even more than you do.”

Yet at the same time, we need to be observant about the brokenness and sin evident in our workplaces. Our purpose is not to judge but to heal, or at least to limit the damage. Paul is particularly observant of the sin and distortion of idolatry. “He was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” (Acts 17:16). The idols of modern workplaces, like the idols of ancient Athens, are many and varied. A Christian leader in New York City says,

When I’m working with educators, whose idol is that all the world’s problems will be solved by education, my heart connects to their heart about wanting to solve the world’s problems, but I would point out to them that they can only go so far with education, but the real solution comes from Christ. The same is true for many other professions.<sup>[20]</sup>

Our careful observations, like Paul’s, make us more astute witnesses of Christ’s unique power to set the world to rights.

While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:30-31)

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## Tent Making and Christian Life (Acts 18:1-4)

The passage most often connected to work in the book of Acts is Paul's tent making in Acts 18:1-4. Although this passage is familiar, it is often understood too narrowly. In the familiar reading, Paul earns money by making tents, in order to support himself in his real ministry of witnessing to Christ. This view is too narrow, because it doesn't see that the tent making itself is a real ministry of witnessing to Christ. Paul is a witness when he preaches and when he makes tents and uses his earnings to benefit the broader community.

This fits directly into Luke's view that the Spirit empowers Christians to use their resources for the sake of the whole community, which in turn becomes witness to the gospel. Remember that Luke's orienting idea for Christian life is that of witness, and the entirety of one's life has the potential to bear witness. It is striking, then, that Paul is an exemplar of this Spirit-formed practice.

It is certainly true that Paul wants to support himself. Yet his impulse was not only to support himself in his preaching ministry, but also to provide financial support to the entire community. When Paul describes his economic impact among the Ephesians, he says:

I coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel. You yourselves know that these hands ministered to my necessities, *and to those who were with me*. In all things *I have shown you that by so toiling one must help the weak*, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, *'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'* (Acts 20:33-35, emphasis added, RSV)

Paul's money-earning work was an effort to build up the community economically. [21] Paul employs his skills and possessions for the sake of the community, and he explicitly says that this is an example others should follow. He does not say that everyone should follow his example of preaching. But he does say everyone should follow his example of toiling to help the weak and being generous in giving, as Jesus himself taught. Ben Witherington argues convincingly that Paul is not claiming any higher status arising from his apostolic position, but rather is "stepping down the social ladder for the sake of Christ." [22]

In other words, it is not the case that Paul engages in tent making as a necessity so that he can do his “real job” of preaching. Instead, Paul’s varieties of work in the sewing shop, marketplace, synagogue, lecture hall, and prison are all forms of witness. In any of these contexts, Paul participates in God’s restorative project. In any of these contexts, Paul lives out his new identity in Christ for the sake of God’s glory and out of love for his neighbors—even his former enemies. Even as he is being transported across the sea as a prisoner, he employs his gifts of leadership and encouragement to guide the soldiers and sailors holding him captive to safety during a severe storm (Acts 27:27-38). If he had not had the gift of being a preacher and apostle, he would still have been a witness to Christ simply by the way he engaged in making tents, toiling for the sake of the community, and working for the good of others in all situations.

“Tent making” has become a common metaphor for Christians who engage in a money-earning profession as a means to support what is often called “professional ministry.” The term “bi-vocational” is often used to indicate that two separate professions are involved, the money-earning one and the ministry one. But Paul’s example shows that all aspects of human life should be a seamless witness. There is little room to draw distinctions between “professional ministry” and other forms of witness. According to Acts, Christians actually have only one vocation, according to Acts—witnessing to the gospel. We have many forms of service, including preaching and pastoral care, making tents, building furniture, giving money and caring for the weak. A Christian who engages in a money-earning profession such as making tents, in order to support a non-money-earning profession such as teaching about Jesus, would be more accurately described as “dual service” rather than “bi-vocational”—one calling, two forms of service. The same would be true of any Christian who serves in more than one line of work.

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## The Gospel and Limits to Vocation and Engagement (Acts 19:17-20)

Acts 19:13-16 presents an odd story that leads to the repentance of “a number who had practiced magic” (Acts 19:19). They collected their magic books and burned them publicly, and Luke tells us that the value of the scrolls burned by these converts was 50,000 drachmas. This has been estimated as the equivalent to 137 years of continuous wages for a day laborer or enough bread to feed 100 families for 500 days.<sup>[23]</sup> Incorporation into the community of God’s kingdom has massive economic and vocational impact.

While we cannot be certain whether those who repented of their engagement in magic were repenting of a means of earning a living, such a costly collection of books was unlikely to have been a mere hobby. Here we see that the change in life precipitated by faith in Jesus is immediately reflected in a vocational decision—a result familiar from Luke’s Gospel. In this case, the believers found it necessary to abandon their former occupation entirely.

In many other cases, it is possible to remain in a vocation but necessary to practice it in a different way. For example, imagine that a salesperson has built a business selling unnecessary insurance to senior citizens. He or she would have to cease that practice, but could continue in the profession of selling insurance sales by switching to a product line that is beneficial for those who buy it. The commissions might be less (or not), but the profession has plenty of room for legitimate success and lots of ethical participants.

A much more difficult situation occurs in professions that could be done legitimately, but in which illicit practices are so thoroughly entrenched that it is difficult to compete without violating biblical principles. Many civil servants in high-corruption nations face this dilemma. It might be possible to be an honest building inspector, but very difficult to do if your official pay is \$10 a week and your supervisor demands a \$100 a month fee to let you keep your job. A Christian in that situation faces a difficult choice. If all the honest people leave the profession, so much the worse for the public. But if it is difficult or impossible to make a living honestly in the profession, how can a Christian remain there? This is something Luke discusses in Luke 3:9, when John the Baptist counsels soldiers and tax collectors to remain in their jobs but to cease the extortion and fraud practiced by most of their profession. (See "[Luke 3:1-14](#)" in *Luke and Work* at [www.theologyofwork.org](http://www.theologyofwork.org) for more on this passage.)

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## Leadership as Witness (Acts 20-28)

The last eight chapters of Acts present an action-packed account of an attempt on Paul's life, followed by his imprisonment at the hands of two Roman governors and his harrowing shipboard journey to trial in Rome. In many ways, Paul's experience recapitulates the culmination of Jesus' ministry, and Acts 20-27 could be thought of as a kind of Passion of Paul. The aspect of these chapters most relevant to work is the depiction of Paul's leadership. We will focus on what we see of his courage, his suffering, his respect for others, and his concern for the well being of others.

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## Paul's Courage (Acts 20-28)

After the conflicts in Philippi and Ephesus, Paul receives threats of imprisonment (Acts 20:23, 21:11) and death (Acts 20:3, 23:12-14). These threats are not idle, for indeed two attempts are actually made on his life (Acts 21:3; 23:21). Paul is taken into custody by the Roman government (Acts 23:10) and a suit is brought against him (Acts 24:1-9), which, though false, ultimately leads to his execution. Given the episodes of conflict we have already explored, it is no surprise that following the ways of God's kingdom leads to conflict with the oppressive ways of the world.

Yet through it all, Paul maintains an extraordinary courage. He continues his work (preaching) despite the threats, and even dares to preach to his captors, both Jewish (Acts 23:1-10) and Roman (Acts

24:21-26; 26:32; 28:30-31). In the end, his courage proves decisive, not only for his work of preaching, but for saving the lives of hundreds of people in the midst of a shipwreck (Acts 27:22-23). His own words sum his attitude of courage as those around him shrink back in fear. “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 21:13).

The point, however, is not that Paul is a man of extraordinary courage, but that the Holy Spirit gives each of us the courage we need to do our work. Paul credits the Holy Spirit for keeping him going in the face of such adversity (Acts 20:22; 21:4; 23:11). This is an encouragement to us today, because we also can depend on the Holy Spirit to give us the courage we may lack. The danger is not so much that courage may fail us in the moment of greatest terror, but that general worry will deter us from taking even the first step into following the ways of God’s kingdom in our work. How often do we fail to defend a colleague, serve a customer, challenge a boss, or speak up about an issue, not because we are under actual pressure, but because we are afraid that if we do we might offend someone in authority? What if we adopted a position that before we will act contrary to God’s ways at work, we at least have to receive an actual order to do so? Could we begin by counting on the Holy Spirit to sustain us at least that far?

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## Paul’s Suffering (Acts 20-28)

Paul needs every ounce of courage because of the heavy sufferings he knows his work will bring. “The Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me,” (Acts 20:23) he says. He is kidnapped (Acts 21:27), beaten (Acts 21:30-31; 23:3), threatened (Acts 22:22; 27:42), arrested many times (Acts 21:33; 22:24, 31; 23:35; 28:16), accused in lawsuits (Acts 21:34; 22:30; 24:1-2; 25:2, 7; 28:4), interrogated (Acts 25:24-27), ridiculed (Acts 26:24), ignored (Acts 27:11), shipwrecked (Acts 27:41) and bitten by a viper (Acts 28:3). Tradition says that Paul is eventually put to death for his work, although this is not recounted anywhere in the Bible.

Leadership in a broken world entails suffering. Anyone who will not accept suffering as an essential element of leadership cannot be a leader, at least not a leader in the way God intends. In this, we see another radical refutation of the Roman patronage system. The Roman system is structured to insulate the patron from suffering. Patrons alone, for example, had the right to escape bodily violation, as we see when Paul’s status as a citizen (a patron, albeit of a household of one) is the only thing that protects him from an arbitrary flogging (Acts 22:29). Paul nonetheless embraces bodily suffering, along with many other forms, as the necessity of a leader in Jesus’ way. Today, we may seek to become leaders for the same reason men in ancient Rome sought to exercise patronage—to avoid suffering. We might succeed in gaining power and perhaps even insulating ourselves from the hurts of the world. But our leadership cannot benefit others if we will not accept hurt to ourselves to a greater or lesser degree.

And if our leadership does not benefit others, it is not God's kind of leadership.

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## Paul's Respect (Acts 20-28)

Despite Paul's utter conviction that he is in the right about both his beliefs and his conduct, he shows respect for everyone he encounters. This is so disarming, especially to those who are his enemies and captors, that it gives him an unimpeachable opportunity as a witness of God's kingdom. When he arrives in Jerusalem, he respects the Jewish Christian leaders there and complies with their odd request to demonstrate his continued faithfulness to the Jewish Law (Acts 21:17-26). He speaks respectfully to a crowd that has just beaten him (Acts 21:30-22:21), to a soldier who is about to flog him (Acts 22:25-29), to the Jewish council that accuses him in a Roman court of law—even to the point of apologizing for inadvertently insulting the high priest—(Acts 23:1-10), to the Roman governor Felix and his wife Drusilla (Acts 24:10-26), to Felix's successor Festus (Acts 25:8-11; 26:24-26), and to King Agrippa and his wife Bernice (Acts 26:2-29) who imprison him. On his journey there, he treats with respect the centurion Julius (Acts 27:3), the governor of Malta (Acts 28:7-10), and the leaders of the Jewish community in Rome (Acts 28:17-28).

We should not confuse the respect Paul shows with timidity about his message. Paul never shrinks from boldly proclaiming the truth, wherever the chips may fall. After being beaten by a Jewish crowd in Jerusalem who falsely suspect him of bringing a Gentile into the temple, he preaches a sermon to them that concludes with the Lord Jesus commissioning him to preach salvation to the Gentiles (Acts 22:17-21). He tells the Jewish council in Acts 23:1-8, "I am on trial concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 23:6). He proclaims the gospel to Felix (Acts 24:14-16) and proclaims to Festus, Agrippa and Bernice, "I stand here on trial on account of my hope in the promise made by God to our ancestors" (Acts 26:6). He warns the soldiers and sailors on the boat to Rome that "the voyage will be with danger and much heavy loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives" (Acts 27:10). The book of Acts ends with Paul "proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:30-31).

Paul's respect for others often wins a hearing for him and even turns enemies into friends, notwithstanding the boldness of his words. The centurion about to flog him intervenes with the Roman tribune, who orders him released (Acts 22:26-29). The Pharisees conclude, "We find nothing wrong with this man. What if a spirit or an angel has spoken to him?" (Acts 23:9). Felix determines that Paul "was charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment" (Acts 23:29) and becomes an avid listener who "used to send for him very often and converse with him" (Acts 24:26). Agrippa, Bernice, and Festus come to see that Paul is innocent, and Agrippa begins to be persuaded by Paul's preaching. "Are you so quickly persuading me to become a Christian?" he asks (Acts 26:28). By the end of the voyage to Rome, Paul has become the de facto leader of the ship, issuing orders that the captain and

centurion are happy to obey (Acts 27:42-44). On Malta, the governor welcomes and entertains Paul and his companions, and later provisions their ship and sends them away with honor (Acts 28:10).

Not everyone returns Paul's respect with respect, of course. Some vilify, reject, threaten, and abuse him. But, in general, he receives far more respect from people than do the masters of the Roman patronage system among whom he operates. The exercise of power may command the appearance of respect, but the exercise of true respect is much more likely to earn a response of true respect.

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## Paul's Concern for Others (Acts 20-28)

Most of all, Paul's leadership is marked by his concern for others. He accepts the burden of leadership not to make his life better, but to make others' lives better. His very willingness to travel to hostile places to preach a better way of life is proof enough of this. Yet we also see his concern for others in concrete, personal ways. He heals a boy who is severely injured by a fall from an upper-floor window (Acts 20:9-12). He prepares the churches he has planted to carry on after his death, and encourages them when they are overcome "with much weeping" (Acts 20:37). He attempts to preach the good news even to those who are trying to kill him (Acts 22:1-21). He heals all the sick on the island of Malta (Acts 28:8-10).

A striking example of his concern for others occurs during the shipwreck. Although his warning not to make the voyage had been ignored, Paul pitches in to help and encourage the crew and passengers when the storm strikes.

Since they had been without food for a long time, Paul then stood up among them and said, "Men, you should have listened to me and not have set sail from Crete and thereby avoided this damage and loss. I urge you now to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For last night there stood by me an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I worship, and he said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before the emperor; and indeed, God has granted safety to all those who are sailing with you.' So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will be exactly as I have been told." (Acts 27:21-25)

His concern does not end with words of encouragement but proceeds with practical acts. He makes sure everyone eats to keep up his strength (Acts 27:34-36). He devises a plan that will save everyone's life, including those who can't swim (Acts 27:26, 38, 41, 44). He directs preparations for running the ship aground (Acts 27:43b), and prevents the sailors from abandoning the soldiers and passengers (Acts 27:30-32). As a result of his concerns and actions, not a single life is lost in the wreck (Acts

27:44).

Paul's leadership encompasses far more than the four factors of courage, suffering, respect, and concern for others, and it is visible far beyond Acts 20-27. Yet these factors as presented in these chapters form one of the most stirring demonstrations of leadership in the Bible and remain as much of an example today as they did in Luke's day.

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## Conclusion to Acts

Investigating work and work-related issues in Acts presents a coherent treatment of vocation in God's world. In Acts, a Christian view of work is not relegated simply to the realm of ethics. Rather, work is an active form of witness in God's redemption of the world. The logic of Acts moves in this direction:

1. The coming of the Spirit initiates Christ's kingdom—God's new world—in a new way. The Roman patronage system that seeks status for the self is replaced with a spirit of love that seeks the good of others. This follows the example of Jesus who spends himself for the sake of others—evident above all in the cross.
2. The Christian vocation is conceptualized as Spirit-empowered witness to Christ's kingdom, not only by proclamation but also by acting in accord with God's spirit of love in everyday life.
3. The Christian vocation is given to the entire community of believers, not merely to individuals. The believers' practice is not perfect—sometimes very far from perfect—but it is a real participation in the new world, nonetheless.
4. The community bears witness to Christ's kingdom by working and using work-related resources—power, wealth, and status—for the sake of others and the community as a whole. Membership in the community goes hand in hand with a transformed way of life, leading to love and service. An exemplary result is the practice of radical generosity with every kind of resource.
5. When work is performed in this way, every profession can be an act of witness by practicing the structures of justice, righteousness, and beauty brought forth by God's kingdom.
6. The Christian community thus produces a way of working that challenges the structures of the fallen world, and sometimes brings it into conflict with the world's power holders. Nonetheless, the intent of the community is not to clash with the world but to transform it.
7. Leadership is a prominent arena in which the new spirit of love and service for others is enacted. Authority is shared and leadership is encouraged at every level of the community. Leaders accept the burden of acting for the good of others, and they respect the wisdom and authority of those they lead.

Leadership attributes—including courage, suffering, respect, and concern for others—come to the fore in the example of the Apostle Paul.

Acts helps us to see that all of human life—including our work and the fruit that emerges from our work—can be a means of participating through the power of the Spirit already emerging in God’s kingdom coming to earth. In this way work is not only dignified but also essential to the human vocation of witness. As it was from the beginning, work is central to what it means to be fully human. Workers today are called to be cultivators and transformers of earth, culture, family, business, education, justice and every other sphere—all for the sake of God’s kingdom.

## Key Verses and Themes in Acts

VERSE	THEME
<b>Acts 1:6</b> When they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”	Christian life occurs in a <b>community</b> oriented with a vocation for the kingdom of God
<b>Acts 1:8</b> You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.	The Christian community is oriented to witness of <b>God’s kingdom</b> in daily life.
<b>Acts 2:17-21</b> In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day ... Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.	<b>Christian life</b> is participation in God’s new world
<b>Acts 2:40</b> And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.”	<b>Christian life</b> is participation in God’s new world
<b>Acts 2:42-47</b> They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers ... All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need ... And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.	<b>Power, status, and resources</b> are to be used for the sake of the community

<p><b>Acts 3:6</b> But Peter said, “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.”</p>	<p>Power, status, and resources are to be used for the sake of the community</p>
<p><b>Acts 4:18-21</b> So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, “Whether it is right in God’s sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard.” ... All of them praised God for what had happened.</p>	<p>God is sovereign over systems of power</p>
<p><b>Acts 4:25-26</b> It is you who said by the Holy Spirit through our ancestor David, your servant: “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples imagine vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers have gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah.”</p>	<p>God is sovereign over systems of power</p>
<p><b>Acts 4:32-38</b> Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. There was a Levite ... [who] sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.</p>	<p>Power, status, and resources are to be used for the sake of the community</p>
<p><b>Acts 5:1-11</b> But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife’s knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles’ feet. “Ananias,” Peter asked, “why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land?” ... Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died ... And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.</p>	<p>Power, status, and resources are to be used for the sake of the community</p>
<p><b>Acts 5:27-32</b> When they had brought them, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” But Peter and the apostles answered, “We must obey God rather than any human authority ... And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him.”</p>	<p>God is sovereign over systems of power</p>

<p><b>Acts 6:1-7</b> Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word." ... The number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.</p>	<p>Power, status, and resources are to be used for the sake of the community</p>
<p><b>Acts 8:18-24</b> Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, saying, "Give me also this power so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain God's gift with money ... " Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may happen to me."</p>	<p>Power, status, and resources are to be used for the sake of the community</p>
<p><b>Acts 8:26-40</b> 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." ... Now there was an Ethiopian eunuch ... [who] had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah. Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over to this chariot and join it." ... Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. 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?" He commanded the chariot to stop, and both of them, Philip and the eunuch, went down into the water, and Philip baptized him ...</p>	<p>Power, status, and resources are not substitutes for a relationship with God</p>
<p><b>Acts 9:36-43</b> Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs ... Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord ...</p>	<p>Power, status, and resources are to be used for the sake of the community</p>
<p><b>Acts 9:43</b> Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.</p>	<p>Power, status, and resources are to be used for the sake of the community</p>

<p><b>Acts 10:24</b> The following day they came to Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends.</p>	<p>Power, status, and resources are to be used for the sake of the community</p>
<p><b>Acts 11:27-30</b> At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.</p>	<p>Power, status, and resources are to be used for the sake of the community</p>
<p><b>Acts 12:20-23</b> Now Herod was angry with the people of Tyre and Sidon. So they came to him in a body; and after winning over Blastus, the king's chamberlain, they asked for a reconciliation, because their country depended on the king's country for food. On an appointed day Herod put on his royal robes, took his seat on the platform, and delivered a public address to them. The people kept shouting, "The voice of a god, and not of a mortal!" And immediately, because he had not given the glory to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.</p>	<p>All authority comes from God God is sovereign over systems of power</p>
<p><b>Acts 13:1-3</b> Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.</p>	<p>Discernment of particular vocation is done within the Christian community</p>
<p><b>Acts 13:50</b> But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, and stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their region.</p>	<p>The Christian life brings confrontation with the powerful</p>
<p><b>Acts 16:11-15</b> We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony ... The Lord opened [Lydia's] heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.</p>	<p>Power, status, and resources are to be used for the sake of the community</p>

<p><b>Acts 16:16-24</b> One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners a great deal of money by fortune-telling. While she followed Paul and us, she would cry out, "These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation." She kept doing this for many days. But Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the authorities ...</p>	<p>The gospel liberates from evil manifest in oppressive economic practices</p>
<p><b>Acts 17:12</b> Many of them therefore believed, including not a few Greek women and men of high standing.</p>	<p>The church has economic diversity</p>
<p><b>Acts 18:3-4</b> Because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them, and they worked together—by trade they were tentmakers. Every sabbath he would argue in the synagogue and would try to convince Jews and Greeks.</p>	<p>Power, status, and resources are to be used for the sake of the community</p>
<p><b>Acts 19:19</b> A number of those who practiced magic collected their books and burned them publicly; when the value of these books was calculated, it was found to come to fifty thousand silver coins.</p>	<p>Some particular vocations are inimical to the Gospel</p>
<p><b>Acts 19:23-41</b> About that time no little disturbance broke out concerning the Way. A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the artisans. These he gathered together, with the workers of the same trade, and said, "... this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods ..." When they heard this, they were enraged and shouted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" The city was filled with the confusion; and people rushed together to the theater, dragging with them Gaius and Aristarchus, Macedonians who were Paul's travel companions ... When the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "... we are in danger of being charged with rioting today, since there is no cause that we can give to justify this commotion." When he had said this, he dismissed the assembly.</p>	<p>The Christian life brings confrontation with the powerful</p>
<p><b>Acts 20:33-35</b> I coveted no one's silver or gold or clothing. You know for yourselves that I worked with my own hands to support myself and my companions. In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."</p>	<p>Power, status, and resources are to be used for the sake of the community</p>
<p><b>Acts 21:8</b> The next day we left and came to Caesarea; and we went into the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven, and stayed with him.</p>	<p>Power, status, and resources are to be used for the sake of the community</p>

**Acts 27:11** But the centurion paid more attention to the pilot and to the owner of the ship than to what Paul said.

Power, status, and resources are to be used for the sake of the community

## ENDNOTES

- [1] *Apokathistēmi*, the restoration verb used by Luke, is used by the Septuagint and Josephus to describe Israel's hope for national restoration (see Exodus 4:7; Hosea 11:11; Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 11.2, 14, *interalia*). See also David L. Tiede, "The Exaltation of Jesus and the Restoration of Israel in Acts 1," *Harvard Theological Review* 79, no. 1 (1986): 278-286 and James D. G. Dunn, *Acts of the Apostles*, Epworth Commentaries (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 1996), 4.
- [2] For references to antipathy between Samaritans and Jews, see Josephus *Antiquities of the Jews* 18:30; *Jewish War* 2:32ff. For the reference to the "ends of the earth" implying the full extent of peoples and places in the Roman Empire, see David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 91-96.
- [3] The Christian modification of Israelite expectations about the end of the age is called "inaugurated eschatology" and is often organized under the rubric of a kingdom that is simultaneously *already* present and *not yet* consummated. Israel expected the day of the Lord to come in one climactic stage. Early Christians discovered that the day of the Lord was initiated at Jesus' resurrection and with the outpouring of the Spirit, but that the kingdom would not come in full until the return of Jesus.
- [4] Much has been written about the parallels between the community summaries and groups within Luke's historical context. Essene/Qumran parallels: Brian J. Capper, "The Interpretation of Acts 5.4," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 6, no. 19 (1983): 117-31; Brian J. Capper, "The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods," in *The book of Acts in its Palestinian setting*, edited by Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1995), 323-356; Greco-Roman friendship parallels: Alan C. Mitchell, "The Social Function of Friendship in Acts 2.44-47 and 4.32-37," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111, no. 2 (1992): 255-72; Greco-Roman utopian parallels: Gregory E. Sterling, "'Athletes of Virtue': An Analysis of the Summaries in Acts (2.41-47; 4.32-35; 5.12-16)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113, no. 4 (1994): 679-96; parallels with Greco-Roman associations: Philip A Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Creating a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003); John S. Kloppenborg, "Collegia and Thiasoi: Issues in Function, Taxonomy and Membership,"

in *Voluntary associations in the Graeco-Roman world*, edited by John S. Kloppenborg and S.G. Wilson, 16-30, (London/New York: Routledge, 1996).

- [5] It is not difficult to notice that giving within the Christian community can still function in this way.
- [6] Philip A Harland, *Associations, Synagogues, and Congregations: Creating a Place in Ancient Mediterranean Society*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003); John S. Kloppenborg, "Collegia and Thiasoi: Issues in Function, Taxonomy and Membership," in *Voluntary associations in the Graeco-Roman world*, edited by John S. Kloppenborg and S.G. Wilson, 16-30, (London/New York: Routledge, 1996).
- [7] Christopher M. Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics*, *Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament* 2.275 (Tubingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2010) explores the ethics of wealth in Luke and Acts in depth.
- [8] See options for interpretation in Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, The Anchor Bible*, (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 318-319.
- [9] S. Scott Bartchy, "Community of Goods in Acts: Idealization or Social Reality?" *In The Future of Early Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester*, edited by Birger A. Pearson, A. Thomas Krabel, George W. E. Nickelsburg and Norman R. Petersen, 309-18 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 316.
- [10] For a full treatment of this narrative with respect to economic and communal implications, see Aaron J. Kuecker, "The Spirit and the 'Other,' Satan and the 'Self': Economic Ethics as a consequence of Identity Transformation in Luke-Acts," in *Engaging Economics: New Testament Scenarios and Early Christian Reception*, edited by Bruce W. Longenecker & Kelly D. Liebengood, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 81-103.
- [11] Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, The Anchor Bible*, (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 344.
- [12] John Michael Penney, *The Missionary Emphasis of Lukan Pneumatology*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 65 fn 11.
- [13] Joseph T. Lienhard "Acts 6.1-6: A Redactional View." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 37 (1975), 232.
- [14] Youngmo Cho, *Spirit and Kingdom in the Writings of Luke and Paul* (Waynesborough, GA; Paternoster, 2005), 132.

- [15] Ben Witherington, III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 392.
- [16] It is worth noting, once again, that the proper function of the community—marked particularly by generosity, economic justice, and God-and-other-centered love—regularly results in the growth of the kingdom (Acts 2:47; 6:7; 9:31; etc.).
- [17] Name of source withheld at his request due to security concerns. Notes taken by William Messenger at the Theology of Work Project conference, Hong Kong, July 29, 2010.
- [18] See John R. Levison, *Filled with the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 318-320, for a description of this type of spirit in Greco-Roman perceptions.
- [19] See Ben Witherington, III, *Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 592-593.
- [20] Telephone interview with Katherine Leary Alsdorf, Executive Director, Center for Faith and Work, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York, December 15, 2012.
- [21] This ethic is also expressed by Paul in 1 Thessalonians 1:9 and 1 Corinthians 9:1-15.
- [22] Ben Witherington, III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 547.
- [23] Darrell Bock, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 605.