

# ACTS

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WILLIE JAMES JENNINGS

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## *Publisher's Note*

William C. Placher worked with Amy Plantinga Pauw as a general editor for this series until his untimely death in November 2008. Bill brought great energy and vision to the series and was instrumental in defining and articulating its distinctive approach and in securing theologians to write for it. Bill's own commentary for the series was the last thing he wrote, and Westminster John Knox Press dedicates the entire series to his memory with affection and gratitude.

William C. Placher, LaFollette Distinguished Professor in Humanities at Wabash College, spent thirty-four years as one of Wabash College's most popular teachers. A summa cum laude graduate of Wabash in 1970, he earned his master's degree in philosophy in 1974 and his PhD in 1975, both from Yale University. In 2002 the American Academy of Religion honored him with the Excellence in Teaching Award. Placher was also the author of thirteen books, including *A History of Christian Theology*, *The Triune God*, *The Domestication of Transcendence*, *Jesus the Savior*, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, and *Unapologetic Theology*. He also edited the volume *Essentials of Christian Theology*, which was named as one of 2004's most outstanding books by both *The Christian Century* and *Christianity Today* magazines.





## *Series Introduction*

*Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* is a series from Westminster John Knox Press featuring biblical commentaries written by theologians. The writers of this series share Karl Barth's concern that, insofar as their usefulness to pastors goes, most modern commentaries are "no commentary at all, but merely the first step toward a commentary." Historical-critical approaches to Scripture rule out some readings and commend others, but such methods only begin to help theological reflection and the preaching of the Word. By themselves, they do not convey the powerful sense of God's merciful presence that calls Christians to repentance and praise; they do not bring the church fully forward in the life of discipleship. It is to such tasks that theologians are called.

For several generations, however, professional theologians in North America and Europe have not been writing commentaries on the Christian Scriptures. The specialization of professional disciplines and the expectations of theological academies about the kind of writing that theologians should do, as well as many of the directions in which contemporary theology itself has gone, have contributed to this dearth of theological commentaries. This is a relatively new phenomenon; until the last century or two, the church's great theologians also routinely saw themselves as biblical interpreters. The gap between the fields is a loss for both the church and the discipline of theology itself. By inviting forty contemporary theologians to wrestle deeply with particular texts of Scripture, the editors of this series hope not only to provide new theological resources for the

church but also to encourage all theologians to pay more attention to Scripture and the life of the church in their writings.

We are grateful to the Louisville Institute, which provided funding for a consultation in June 2007. We invited theologians, pastors, and biblical scholars to join us in a conversation about what this series could contribute to the life of the church. The time was provocative, and the results were rich. Much of the series' shape owes to the insights of these skilled and faithful interpreters, who sought to describe a way to write a commentary that served the theological needs of the church and its pastors with relevance, historical accuracy, and theological depth. The passion of these participants guided us in creating this series and lives on in the volumes.

As theologians, the authors will be interested much less in the matters of form, authorship, historical setting, social context, and philology—the very issues that are often of primary concern to critical biblical scholars. Instead, this series' authors will seek to explain the theological importance of the texts for the church today, using biblical scholarship as needed for such explication but without any attempt to cover all of the topics of the usual modern biblical commentary. This thirty-six-volume series will provide passage-by-passage commentary on all the books of the Protestant biblical canon, with more extensive attention given to passages of particular theological significance.

The authors' chief dialogue will be with the church's creeds, practices, and hymns; with the history of faithful interpretation and use of the Scriptures; with the categories and concepts of theology; and with contemporary culture in both "high" and popular forms. Each volume will begin with a discussion of *why* the church needs this book and why we need it *now*, in order to ground all of the commentary in contemporary relevance. Throughout each volume, text boxes will highlight the voices of ancient and modern interpreters from the global communities of faith, and occasional essays will allow deeper reflection on the key theological concepts of these biblical books.

The authors of this commentary series are theologians of the church who embrace a variety of confessional and theological perspectives. The group of authors assembled for this series represents

more diversity of race, ethnicity, and gender than most other commentary series. They approach the larger Christian tradition with a critical respect, seeking to reclaim its riches and at the same time to acknowledge its shortcomings. The authors also aim to make available to readers a wide range of contemporary theological voices from many parts of the world. While it does recover an older genre of writing, this series is not an attempt to retrieve some idealized past. These commentaries have learned from tradition, but they are most importantly commentaries for today. The authors share the conviction that their work will be more contemporary, more faithful, and more radical, to the extent that it is more biblical, honestly wrestling with the texts of the Scriptures.

William C. Placher  
Amy Plantinga Pauw

## *Preface*

I have enjoyed two sources of great help, instruction, and inspiration in the writing of this commentary. First, I am thankful for the scholarly work of many people that served as able and wise guides for me as I wrote this commentary. The commentary work and theological reflections of Clarice J. Martin, Luke Timothy Johnson, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, C. Kavin Rowe, Justo González, Ben Witherington III, Douglas Campbell, Chris Tilling, Jaroslav Pelikan, and John Calvin were immensely enlightening. As I was finishing this work, I received the incredible commentary of Craig Keener, all four volumes! It was fantastic, but it came too late for me to assimilate and incorporate as many of the powerful insights of this master work as I would have wanted. However, I am deeply grateful for this work as well. Every theologian should at some point in their life write a commentary. This was a beautiful labor of love that fed my soul and my mind as I meditated on Scripture. I understand better why ancient church writers did their most important theological work by commenting on Scripture. It has the profound effect of clarifying what you believe and what you hold dear and bringing those commitments into strong and loving confrontation with the Word of God. Confrontation is the right word, because the Bible parades the good, the bad, and the ugly without apology. Indeed, I, like so many others, feel a demand always placed on me when I read Scripture to make sense of my faith by striving for a real coherence between my life and the life of God depicted in the texts and between what I see there as the actions of God and the actions I should be taking in and with my life. This means that writing a commentary is always an occasion for confession. I am not the

Christian I ought to be. Daily I need the Spirit guiding me, and yet daily I must repent of my resistance to the Holy One. I am part of that great congregation that survives only by the grace of God.

The other source of instruction and inspiration has been the Moral Monday Movement that grew in North Carolina under the courageous leadership of the Reverend Dr. William Barber. I, like so many others, have marched, shouted, sung, prayed, been arrested, handcuffed, and jailed all while pressing for justice and advocating for those being hurt and killed by policies that advantage the rich and disadvantage everyone else. I (and on several occasions my wonderful wife, Joanne) have walked and stood in the North Carolina heat and sun, cold and rain, listening to speech and testimony, to cry and plea of women and men asking simply that their humanity and the humanity of others who could not be there be respected. I have seen astounding things, like women and men who have never marched, never protested, never voted, or never voted in any other way than straight party lines, lift their voices shouting together, "What do we want? Justice! When do we want it? Now!" I have seen Christians, Jews, Muslims, and peoples of many other faiths, people of no faith, people who hate faith, people from all sectors of the LGBTQ community, and people socially and political conservative singing and praying together that the state legislature would do right by the suffering people of North Carolina. I have seen young people, from junior high students to high schoolers, college students, graduate students, and even professors (!) marching, protesting, learning about public policy, legislative structures, and procedures, as well as learning how to organize. I watched the birth of a new generation of activists from all walks of life. I saw black folks advanced in age, tender of body but sturdy of spirit, raise their voices once again for justice and speak with a wisdom unrivaled in this world of how to protest and yet not hate, how to speak of evil and not be overcome by that same evil, how to call out unjust acts without name calling, and how to demand respect without showing disrespect. And in all this, I felt the Holy Spirit clearly, precisely, distinctly. I felt the Spirit at work in the common. A protest march is a fleeting moment even if it last for several hours, but it is exactly in such fleeting moments that we can sometime sense the permanent presence of the Spirit of God

who never tires, never ceases to demand justice for love's sake, and never ceases to love a world mired in injustice. Acts is fundamentally about such fleeting moments that speak a more permanent reality, a new world. So this commentary is dedicated to Reverend Dr. William Barber and the Moral Monday Movement.

This commentary is also dedicated to others who have been inspirations to me in how they teach and live the Scriptures: To Amanda Diekman and Franklin Golden and the wonderful people they pastor together at Durham Church, a beautifully struggling, fledging church in Durham, North Carolina, formed in the hope and desire to be a community that embodies boundary-breaking love for one another. Amanda is no longer there as a pastor, but her powerful witness of reconciling life together remains. To Dr. James Earl Massey, Dean Emeritus of Anderson School of Theology in Anderson, Indiana, former Senior Pastor of the Metropolitan Church of God in Detroit, and former Dean of the Chapel of Tuskegee University; like the late Gardner C. Taylor and Peter Gomes, Dr. Massey has been a giant among us. I could not write this commentary without thinking of the brilliance and elegance of his preaching and exegesis. To Dr. W. C. Turner, my former colleague and pastor, whose ministry has been unparalleled in shaping generations of women and men in the art of listening carefully to the Scriptures while also listening to suffering and pain in this world and preaching in the small space between the two. I also dedicate this commentary to the Rev. Joanne L. Browne Jennings, my wife and colleague in life and ministry, who also happens to be one of the finest preachers I have ever heard. I am thankful beyond measure for her and for our wonderful daughters, Njeri and Safiya, and my mother-in-law, Elsie Browne. I also want to thank Dr. Justin Ashworth, a brilliant young theologian and ethicist who did an excellent job editing this book and offering perfect suggestions. Like so many others, I am deeply grateful for having known Bill Placher, who along with Amy Plantinga Pauw, established this commentary series. Bill was a theologian whose humanity matched his theology, both gracious, genuine, and inviting. I miss him terribly. Whatever is helpful I owe to this cloud of witnesses, but all the mistakes are mine alone. What I share with this cloud is the desire to answer in the affirmative the question, Is there a Word from the Lord?

# *Introduction*

## *Why Acts? Why Now?*

### *The Revolution of the Intimate*

The book of Acts speaks of revolution. We must never forget this. It depicts life in the disrupting presence of the Spirit of God. Luke, its author, is a master storyteller. He is a master storyteller not because his skill in storytelling rises above all his contemporaries or because of his command of the historical archive of events, sayings, stories, and accounts of Jesus and his disciples' actions and decisions. His two volume work, Luke–Acts, exemplifies master storytelling because he follows God on the ground, working and moving in and through the quotidian realities of struggle, of blood and pain, suffering and longing. He never loses sight of God or of humanity, both locked in the drama of life together aiming toward life abundant. Although commentators remind us endlessly that these two volumes go together, the book of Acts has its own character, its own anointing.

Written probably in the 80s or 90s CE, the power of the story of Acts overwhelms, pulling the Gospel of Luke into its vortex and turning that book into a precursor of this radical beginning. The book of Acts is like the book of Genesis. It announces a beginning but without the language of beginning. Like Genesis it renders without pomp and flag-waving a God working, moving, creating the dawn that will break each day, putting into place a holy repetition that speaks of the willingness of God to invade our every day and our every moment. This God of Israel waits no more for the perfect time to be revealed. Now is the time, and here is the place. There is only one central character in this

story of Acts. It is God, the Holy Spirit. This author's narration yields to the insurgency of the Spirit, but not as any kind of magical dictation. The Spirit is present in the storytelling. Although it is the story of the Spirit of God, Luke does not play off human agency against divine agency. God moves and we respond. We move and God responds. Nevertheless this is God's drama, God's complete exposure. Cards are on the table and the curtain is drawn back, and God acts plainly, clearly, and in ways that are irrevocable. There is no going back now. A history is being woven in front of our eyes that we cannot deny, or we deny only at our own peril.

### *History in Acts*

The book of Acts creates a history that will show us how to think history. How to think history is not the same as thinking historically and certainly not the same as thinking like a historian. Too often the book of Acts is aligned with an historian's optic, a way of looking that asks honorable, even noble questions about what actually happened. The author of Luke-Acts is not against such nobility, but he is caught up in a different optic. He wants his readers to see a past unfolding in a future and making intelligible a present. In this regard, his history is now. The Spirit has come, and Luke will narrate how one discerns God's movement. This is his agenda. Luke is offering us instruction in historical consciousness. As such Luke is not offering a special kind of history. This is not a special revelation of history. Nor is this a gnostic return to a hidden history closed off to unspiritual eyes. This lesson in thinking history begins with a dogged refusal to imagine history as anything other than what it actually is, a creature, a creature embraced by God. History the creature needs its creator.

History, because it is a creature, must always be treated in its truth. It is created. It is storytelling that comes to life from the minds and mouths of other creatures. It shares in the beauty and majesty of the creature and through the incarnation has been embraced by the Creator. God has entered the life of the creature and joined the storytelling that is history. Now the divine life may ride on the multiple narrations of creatures. God has joined in the storytelling



as well, but with God a different procedure explodes on the scene. God plays in the telling, moving back and forth from past to present to future. There in the storytelling of the past, now in present storytelling and ready, anticipating future telling. History understood as creature means that storytelling never aims to fully capture anything, especially not God. Yet it is ever useful to the Creator. History understood in this way aims at one thing: witness. Why witness? Witness lives. Witness is about the living and the ways we chose to live. History that becomes witness is history that shapes the paths of the living, bound up with their heartbeats and their breathing. Witness reveals the telling of history without the false pretense of history for history's sake. Witness is history being honest about its wishes. Witness exposes the storytellers and their desires to shape worlds, large or small.

The book of Acts then is honest history revealing the creature that is history. Just as there are many creatures, so too are there many histories; and just as some creatures will yield to the Spirit of God, so too Acts is a history yielding to the Spirit. In this regard, Acts has an interesting relation to what will later emerge as the rule of faith and the idea of tradition. In truth Acts helped to establish the rule of faith and the tradition in the ways it narrates the "and then" and the "what follows." Such establishment does not aim at immutability but irrevocability. Now that the life of Jesus and the way of discipleship has been marked in space and time, it cannot be denied. Now that God has shown the divine life to be this way and not another way and now that women and men have been extravagantly embraced by the Spirit of God, there is no going back.

This irrevocability in Acts sometimes gets confused with immutability so that Acts gets interpreted as the historical foundation of the church's life, as if Acts reveals the marble, stone, brick and mortar of ecclesial existence. Acts as architecture, in this sense, creates monument thinking about this narrative. Monument thinking turns the book of Acts into an ecclesial museum, the purpose of which is to show us the earlier forms of church life, religious ritual, or theology. That way of reading Acts has given into a colonialist procedure that places Acts inside the processes of knowledge acquisition and accumulation. The Book of Acts becomes an artifact. In this frame

of reflection we turn to Acts in investigative analysis. The conversation about this book pivots on archival speculations. How does the book of Acts match up against other artifacts? What traces of ancient life and ancient ways of thinking and writing can we tease out of its accounts? These are not illegitimate questions, and they do not reflect inappropriate concerns. They do, however, miss an opportunity provided by this history to enter a life-giving historical consciousness found in the divine life made flesh.

The book of Acts beckons us to a life-giving historical consciousness that senses being in the midst of time that is both past and present and that pulls us toward a future with God in the new creation. That future with God, however, does not discount the now, the present moment. This is the work of the Spirit, who relishes each moment with us, never discounting our time and never treating the time of creation and each creature as inconsequential time. The book of Acts reveals the Spirit, who joins us in time, sharing our spaces and partaking in the places we inhabit as places fit for divine activity. Such historical consciousness, growing out of meditating on the book of Acts, does not romanticize the past. Indeed it is attuned to histories that claim what Walter Benjamin calls “. . . the crude and material things without which no refined and spiritual things could exist.”<sup>1</sup> It is keenly aware of suffering and those who cause it, and it also sees God working toward the good in the midst of pain. Life-giving historical consciousness builds from the truth that history is a creature, and we are invited through the creature that is Luke–Acts to allow our seeing and sensing to align with the presence of the Spirit here and now. This history then requires that we grapple with three things: (1) a spatial history we enter, (2) a history we tell, and (3) a history we realize.

### *A Spatial History We Enter: Faith between Diaspora and Empire*

How can faith be found inside of empire? The book of Acts takes place in empire—the Roman Empire—and this is not a fact that we should ever let escape our attention. The goal of the Roman Empire

1. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 254.

was to shape the world in its own image. This is always the desire of empire. Rome understood its task as the reconstruction of land, space, and life under its rule. This was a civilizing mission at its deepest level where construction of place would mean reconstruction of life. As Justo González notes, “. . . Romans understood their civilizing task was precisely the ‘cityfication’ of the world. For them, the greatest human creation was precisely the city, and their purpose in history was to promote city life throughout their empire.”<sup>2</sup> That city life came with a cost as peoples were displaced by the expansion of large agricultural estates that serviced the growing markets of the city. Small farmers had the choice that is no choice: either come under the Roman aristocracy and farm for your new masters or join the displaced masses in the cities. City life under Rome was city life permeated by the logic of slavery. In slaveholding society, one’s humanity was not a given. The body of a slave was a commodity and not a human being. Only by birth into the right family or by purchasing one’s freedom or by manumission could one claim a humanity, which was an elusive dream for many.

An aesthetic regime came with the Roman Empire that was woven into its building projects and that gloried in the visual. Beautifully colorful public buildings, temples, and homes covered the Mediterranean world. Beautiful buildings were not merely a signature of aesthetic design but also social desire as Rome sought to inculcate its vision of domesticity and community life. Such a vision, built on a slave economy, accommodated cultural difference and promoted a controlled cosmopolitanism that allowed for a diversity of beliefs as long as those beliefs were not a threat to the divinity of the emperor or the empire. Yet controlled cosmopolitanism is always cosmopolitanism in decline and diversity in retreat as the sensibilities of Roman life made their way ever more deeply into the quotidian realities of peoples. Thus life under empire is always life under threat of assimilation and transformation through the weakening and even loss of cultural identities and religious sensibilities. For Israel, such threat was woven into its history, and in the book of Acts we see the agonizing pain of such threat. Israel in Acts is diaspora Israel.

2. Justo L. González, *Acts, The Gospel of the Spirit* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 10.

Diaspora means scattering and fragmentation, exile and loss. It means being displaced and in search of a place that could be made home. For Israel it means life among the Gentiles. Danger and threat surround diaspora life. Diaspora life is life crowded with self-questioning and questions for God concerning the anger, hatred, and violence visited upon a people. We must never confuse voluntary migration with diaspora, because diaspora is a geographic and social world not chosen and a psychic state inescapable. The peoples who inhabit diaspora live with animus and violence filling the air they breathe. They live always on the verge of being classified enemy, always in evaluation of their productivity to the empire, always having an acceptance on loan, ready to be taken away at the first sign of sedition. They live with fear as an ever present partner in their lives, the fear of being turned into a *them*, a *dangerous other*, *those people* among *us*. They also remember loss—of land and place, of life and hope, and even for some of faith. Yet diaspora is also power, the power of a conviction to survive and the power of a confession to never yield to the forces that would destroy them. Diaspora is life by any means necessary. The condition of diaspora is often bound up with life under empire.

In Acts we find faith caught between diaspora and empire. Faith is always caught between diaspora and empire. It is always caught between those on the one side focused on survival and fixated on securing a future for their people and on the other side those intoxicated with the power and possibilities of empire and of building a world ordered by its financial, social, and political logics that claim to be the best possible way to bring stability and lasting peace. The book of Acts is read poorly when we forget this double bind or forget the pain of Israel in its pages. There is palpable fear flowing through the narrative and not just the fear of the Israel who resists Messiah Jesus and his followers but also the fear of the Israel who embraces King Jesus but is unclear about the Spirit's leading. The Spirit always confronts our fear in order to free faith to live in its true home in God. But this is not easy. Indeed the context of Acts is struggle. The content of Acts is also struggle. It is struggle in two senses. It is the struggle against the powers and principalities that exploit the emotional currents of diaspora and empire, seeking to drive people to

kill, steal, or destroy for the sake of securing diaspora or empire's futures. The second sense of struggle is the struggle to yield to the Spirit, following God into the new that God imagines and is bringing about for the world.

The Spirit of God intervenes between diaspora and empire, offering a new world to both. Both diaspora and empire have just cause for their visions of life. Israel in diaspora remembered correctly those whose aim was their elimination. Diaspora Israel was rightly on guard against those who would threaten its common life and its way of faith. It was clear eyed about oppressors and liberators; friends and enemies; and plans, ideas, and belief systems that would help them or hurt them. The Roman Empire was clear too about its supporters and loyal subjects or those who harbored sedition in their communities or their bodies. The Roman Empire was about building a world that made order a material reality that everyone could experience and inhabit. Every people hold the dream of an ordered society, safe, secure, and productive, and Rome understood itself as the world's best hope for realizing that dream. Who would possibly imagine life, good life apart from diaspora or empire? To imagine whole life, good life apart from diaspora or empire comes only by the Spirit of God. We must hear in the Acts story the pathos of life caught in the grip of diaspora and empire—of people angry, confused, and frustrated as the resurrected Jesus calls them to envision the new creature in the Spirit, which is a mind-altering new life together. Fundamental to that new reality is the joining of Jew and Gentile.

### *A History We Tell—Jew and Gentile Joined*

Acts presents the interruption. The established storytellers have been halted in their tracks and their stories have been disrupted. These disciples of Jesus are now telling the story of Israel differently, and they are emerging as new storytellers. Indeed the writer of Luke–Acts is performing a great feat of storytelling, presenting himself as a new narrator of Israel's story. The stories that had been told are now being told differently, and the established storytellers are being challenged. The storytellers are the most powerful people

in the book of Acts and in every time and every place. They conjure identity through their stories, weaving together a vision of the past of a people with implicit instruction about how they should see themselves in the present. Yet the power of storytellers is most potent when they draw that self-definition, that sense of self woven through narration toward destiny. Storytellers seek to turn self-definition and identity toward determining how life ought to be lived and how a people ought to imagine building a life.

The interruption in Acts was not the destruction of Jewish identity, but many of those in the story perceived it as such. That destruction in their view would ride in on the Gentiles who, like water leaking into a boat at sea, threaten to drown Jewish faith and life. From the perspective of diaspora, the followers of Jesus, especially Paul, have become tools for Jewish assimilation that would mean nothing less than social death. This interruption is for them terrifying and absurd. Gentiles outnumbered the people of Israel and must not be allowed to enter and trample over sacred space. Yet the interruption is less entry and more expansion. The space of Israel is expanding by the Spirit and the number of people who worship the God of Israel is growing. Acts renders the Gentiles as a profound question to the Jews of diaspora: What will you do if I join you at the body of Jesus and fall in love with your God and with you? The Gentiles of Acts are on their way to communion with Jews while remaining Gentiles. This is the most terrifying aspect of interruption: love.

The Gentiles have not arrived at love of Israel in Acts, but they are surely on their way. That journey toward love is already a journey in love through the Spirit who has revealed a God creating an intimate space of joining between Jew and Gentile. There at the body of Jesus the futures of Israel and the Gentiles are being drawn toward a new destiny in God. This does not mean the loss of identity but its expansion. But there is loss involved, especially for the Gentiles. The radical nature of the story being told by the Spirit through these disciples is most acute at the site of Gentiles. Gentiles gain a new story of their existence told by the storytellers of Israel. They hear that they, too, like Israel, have been claimed by God through God's outstretched arm and mighty hand. They, too, have been freed from the powers and principalities and released from captivity to the demonic forces

at work in this world. Indeed the Spirit of the living God finds them a suitable home for the divine life.

New life with the God of Israel beckons and yet it requires that the Gentiles turn away from other gods. This is no simple matter because that turning away touches the ground in every way and throws everyday life into crisis, touching friendships and relationships, habit and custom that form the fabric of life. These multiple peoples touched by the Spirit find their worlds undone. First they find out that they are indeed Gentiles, those outside the covenant of promise and at the margins of concern of a people born of Abraham and Sarah. But then they learn that they are indeed included by grace, by the sheer overwhelming love of Israel's God, who has the power over life and death. This God is their God too; Israel's creator is their creator too and now their friend. For those Gentiles touched by the Spirit, this story has become their story, a life-defining, life-directing story, but for those unconvinced, the story is sheer folly, and the Gentile followers of a Jewish God have descended into madness and cultural and ethnic betrayal.

The book of Acts reminds us that to follow Jesus is to already be a betrayer of one's people. That betrayal is at the point of diaspora concern and imperial desire. The disciples of Jesus do not betray an identity but a destiny, not a history but how the story of my people will be used to dictate to me a future and plan my life projects. The imperial project of the Roman Empire also dies in the body of the disciple who has joined her or his body to the risen savior, Jesus. The Spirit is crumbling imperial design from within by destroying the divide between those enslaved and their masters. The hierarchies nurtured so carefully by the Roman Empire are being undone by the Spirit, who will not release slave or free, Jew or Gentile, to their own self-interpretations but who will relentlessly prod them to open themselves toward one another in a life that builds the common. Now in the Spirit the common is not the bottom, not the despised humble beginning, and not the launching pad into social and economic hierarchies. It is the goal of life together in God.

The common is the condition of joined life where the haves and have-nots are bound together in clear sight of one another and in shared support. The common is the redistribution of life where

the Spirit invites us to a sharing of space and place, resources and dreams. The common takes from empire its designs for building a world and from diaspora its plans for surviving in it. Instead the common joins, weaving together purpose and hope in the life of discipleship to Jesus. Neither Roman Empire nor diaspora Israel could tolerate the common, because it represented a massive disruption to political, religious, economic, and social designs. And anyone caught promoting the common was deemed a criminal, a heretic of the faith, and an enemy of the state. Incarceration, prison, and torture often go hand in hand with being of the common, and the disciples of Jesus were of the common. The story of Acts brings us into contact with the carnal weapons of this world: violence and the threat of violence. These weapons represent the seductive power of death that tempts us to envision a world made right through its uses. Death invites us to imagine creation through its power. We are often seduced into believing that killing and destroying can create and sustain peace and order. This has always been a fool's gold. The enemies of the Way repeatedly believed that violence would thwart the Spirit of God and end discipleship to Jesus. They misunderstood not the power of religious conviction but the nature of divine desire.

### *A History We Learn—The Desire of God*

At heart, the book of Acts exposes divine desire inside a writer's desire. God's desire is for the living. We are the pearl of great price sought after by the Spirit. Yet the new thing Luke narrates is intensification of divine desire in flesh. The heart of Israel's God is laid bare and presented to all flesh through the Spirit. Now is revealed the divine fantasy of a creation turned in love and embraced by its creator. This divine fantasy for people is what God brings to the disciples who follow the Son who has made concrete God's intentions. God intends to join. God has offered God's body to be taken in, eaten, chewed, and swallowed. Divine desire is of the earth, of flesh and blood, body and dirt, of hunger and passion and *eros*. The Spirit announces God's seeking of pleasure in the joining. This is what the Spirit seeks to impart to the disciples, a new fantasy desperately



needed by the world. The prevailing fantasy of people is to have power over others, to claim the power of self-determination, and to make a world bow to its will. This is the fantasy of nations and clans, peoples and corporations. But the Spirit offers us God's own fantasy of desire for people, of joining and life together and of shared stories bound to a new destiny in God. This desire for people is not the desire for their utility but for their glory, to draw them into the divine pleasure and joy at the sight of the creature in communion and formed in hope. The disciples are to make evident divine desire, reveal it to be the central gift of the Spirit.

Where the Spirit of God is, there is divine desire not simply for God but for one another and not simply for one another but for those to whom we are sent by the Spirit, to those already being drawn into communion with God and sensing the desire of God for the expansion of their lives into the lives of others. The deepest reality of life in the Spirit depicted in the book of Acts is that the disciples of Jesus rarely, if ever, go where they want to go or to whom they would want to go. Indeed the Spirit seems to always be pressing the disciples to go to those to whom they would in fact strongly prefer never to share space, or a meal, and definitely not life together. Yet it is precisely this prodding to be boundary-crossing and border-transgressing that marks the presence of the Spirit of God. Clearly, one disciple in particular emerges as a crucial figure in the narrative: Paul. Yet it might be better to read Paul less as foreground and more as background to the agency of the Spirit. This is not to discount Paul's important role in the story, but by focusing too strenuously on Paul, Acts too often gets read with a masculinist optic as a heroic tale, and as the exploits of a virtuoso apologist who wields an incredible intellect.

We must notice who Paul joins, who accompanies Paul, and whose company Paul keeps. We must attend to the places he goes and the people who inhabit those places, as well as the responses not only to his message but to his companions. Paul yields to the Spirit. This is the sum total of his story in the book of Acts, but inside that story is the story of a God who desires us and all of creation and will not release us to isolations, social, economic, cultural, religious, gendered, and geographic. This is why the book of Acts will

always be contemporary, always of this present age and this current moment. We are constantly trying to catch up with the Spirit and keep pace with a God who is calling forth the new creature in the Spirit. That new creature in the Spirit collapses diaspora and empire into each other and seeks to weave together a breathtaking joining. Yet the Spirit is being resisted by flesh and the desire of God is being denied by women and men both inside and outside the church. We have yet to hear the message of Acts of an erotic God who seeks to place in each of us desire for those outside of us, outside our worlds of culture, clan, nation, tribe, faith, politics, class, and species.

The Acts of the Apostles is about aesthetics before it is about ethics. It is about a God whose weapon of choice is the divine desire placed in us by the Spirit. That desire has the power to press through centuries of animosity and hatred and beckon people to want one another and envision lives woven together. Such a life never asks people to forget their past or deny their present, but to step together into a future that will not yield to the given order of isolations, but yields to the Spirit that is poured out on all flesh. Segregation is an ancient strategy for creating a world, and it continues to work because it teaches us to see the world in slices, fragmented pieces of geographic space that we may own and control. Segregationist ways of thinking and living permeate this world including the church, dimming our sight of ourselves as creatures and our connection to other creatures, and weakening our ability to discern where and to whom the Spirit wants to lead us. We need people of faith who will yield to the Spirit in this present moment. God fills the world with God's own life. God fills the disciples of Jesus, and they speak the languages of others. God fills Gentiles as well, as they too speak words of peoples not their own. God drives some into the lives of others for the sake of Jesus and the hope born of love. This is the book of Acts for us. Welcome to the real.