

Accepting Others: God's Boundary Crossing According to Isaiah and Luke-Acts

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Wednesday, August 19, 2009, was eventful for the ELCA, the day that delegates at the churchwide assembly in Minneapolis engaged in dialogue, amended, and voted two-thirds approval (precisely 66.67 percent) of the Social Statement on "Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust."¹ For several hours, more than a thousand voting delegates gave reasons for and against, their eyes occasionally overflowing into tears while quoting the Bible. My colleague at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Herb Anderson, is now saying that he will emphasize "empathy" for each other within the church while teaching his pastoral care courses. After listening for days to all those Bible quotations, I came home and changed my course syllabi to include significant bibliography on Lutheran interpretation of the Bible.²

1. Second, during the debate, a tornado passed over the Minneapolis Convention Center, blowing away items on the roof of Central Lutheran Church next door. Third, that same evening, Rev. Barbara Lundblad preached at Central Lutheran from Mark 4:35-41, Jesus in a boat when "a great wind-storm arose," a lectionary text chosen long before. Three *awesome* events the same day!

2. See e.g., Gordon L. Isaac, "The Changing Image of Luther as Biblical

Jesus' and Peter's sermons

Interpreting the Bible (Luke 4 and Acts 10)

Jesus interprets the Bible in his inaugural sermon in Luke 4. Jesus' first sermon in Matthew (chaps. 5-7) is from the Q collection of his sayings, but Luke makes these sayings not his first, but Jesus' second sermon (6:17-49). Actually, Matthew's Sermon on the Mount begins (5:3) with a reference to the same text, Isaiah 61:1, but only Luke 4:18-19 climaxes this first sermon with the next verse, Isaiah 61:2: Jesus brings good news to the poor, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's acceptance" (*dekton*, my translation).³

Expositor," in *Ad fontes Lutheri: Toward the Recovery of the Real Luther: Essays in Honor of Kenneth Hagen's Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. T. Maschke, F. Posset, and J. Skocir (Marquette Studies in Theology 28; Milwaukee: Jesuit University Presses, 2001), 67-85. See also Gary M. Simpson, "'You shall bear witness to me': Thinking with Luther about Christ and the Scriptures," *Word & World*, vol. 29/4 (2009), 380-88.

3. Jesus' inaugural sermon justifies the "acceptance" of Gentiles by appealing to scripture (Isa 61:2), *pace* Richard I. Pervo, *Acts, Hermeneia* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 23-24.

The final word in the sermon, the verbal adjective *dektos*, occurs three times in Luke-Acts, twice in this story itself (see 4:24). The prophet Isaiah's words, quoted by Jesus, are then proclaimed again by the apostle Peter to Cornelius, "in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable (*dektos*) to him" (Acts 10:35). The prophecy from Isaiah with which Jesus climaxes his inaugural sermon is fulfilled by God's acceptance of a pagan/Roman centurion into the people of God in Acts 10, which generated significant disputes in the early church, resulting in the first church council (Acts 15).

The theme of "acceptance" in Luke-Acts:

Proclamation and crossing social/ethnic boundaries

The theme of "acceptance" is one of sixteen that biographers and historians employed and varied when telling stories of the origins of a city, ethnic group, or in Luke's story, the origin of *ekklesiai*, house churches.⁴ Luke-Acts develops this theme in a number of passages that concern both God's prophesied "acceptance" of humans in all ethnic groups, passages that also pose the question of human "acceptance" of the gospel of God's acceptance. "The seed is the word of God, . . . and the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, accept (*dechontai*) it with joy" (Luke 8:11, 13). On the other hand, some do not accept (*dechontai*, Luke 9:5) the twelve, whom Jesus sends out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal (9:2). Who-

ever accepts (*dexetai*) a child in Jesus' name accepts both Jesus and the One who sent him (9:48). If towns of Samaritans (9:52) welcome/accept (*dechontai*) the seventy [-two], there will be uncomfortable social consequences for disciples accustomed to dietary restrictions: Jesus commands, "eat what is set before you" (Luke 10:8b).⁵ We read later in Acts (8:14) that "Samaria had accepted (*dedeketai*) the word of God, so the apostles at Jerusalem send Peter and John to them." The major conflict in Acts is announced when "the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had accepted (*edexanto*) the word of God" (11:1). Again, "these Jews [in Beroea] were more receptive than those in Thessalonica, for they welcomed (*edexanto*) the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so" (17:11). The scriptures they were examining would have included Isaiah 61:2.

Why do some accept the word, and some do not? The seventy[-two] traveling among *Samaritans* say, "The kingdom of God has come near to you" (10:9). Philip was also proclaiming "the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus" (Acts 8:12) in the city of *Samaria*. When "a great many of the *devout Greeks* and not a few of the *leading women*" in *Thessalonica* were persuaded by Paul and Silas (Acts 17:4), local Judeans rioted, so believers packed Paul off to Beroea. There, too, "not a few *Greek women and men of high standing*" believed (Acts 17:12) after examining the scriptures. In each of these cases the narrative includes both the word proclaimed and, simultaneously, the

4. This article in *Currents* is based on earlier research published as "Jesus as Founder of the Church in Luke-Acts: Form and Function," in *Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse*, ed. T. Penner and C. Vander Stichele, SBLSS 20 (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 139-88; on "acceptance," 164-65.

5. Compare 1 Corinthians 10:27c, where the same Greek words appear in a different order. In certain circumstances they allow Corinthian believers to eat meat offered to Zeus. Contrast Leviticus 11:7, which forbids eating pork.

proclaimers and their auditors crossing social/religious boundaries. Isaiah had announced God's crossing ethnic boundaries, Jesus and Philip practice it with Samaritans, and Peter institutionalizes it by baptizing the pagan Cornelius. The question why some accept the word while others do not must include their responses to God's provocative, but prophesied, eschatological crossing of ethnic boundaries, boundaries guarded by powerful visual/bodily symbols/commands such as kosher food and circumcision that are enshrined in ancient scripture. This raises the question whether God is allowed to change, even in relation to inspired scripture.

The stories in Luke 10 and Acts 8 involve *Samaritans* accepting the word. The social context of both the historical Jesus and later of the evangelist Philip become clearer when we review what Josephus (Luke's contemporary) narrates about Samaritans. Josephus writes that Alexander the Great approached Jerusalem (late fourth century B.C.E.) and was shown the book of Daniel (*Antiquities* 11.337), which declares that a Greek should destroy the Persians. He supposed this Greek to be himself, Josephus tells us, and so he granted Jews in Jerusalem and those in Babylon the right to live by their own laws (11.338). He then visited the Samaritans and their metropolis, Shechem, who saw that he had honored the Jews, so they determined to profess themselves Jews. Josephus rather declares them "apostates (*apostatōn*) of the Jewish nation" (11.340). "If anyone were accused by those of Jerusalem of having eaten things common, or of having broken the Sabbath, or of any other crime of the like nature, he fled away to the Schechemites...." (11.346-47) This is precisely the rumor that James reports hearing against Paul: orthodox believers in Jerusalem "have been told about you, that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to apostatize from Moses

(*apostasian...apo Mouseos*), telling them not to circumcise their children" (Acts 21:21, my translation; compare *Ant.* 11.340).

Antiochus IV Epiphanes took Jerusalem and installed a garrison of Macedonians, but impious and wicked Jews also lived there, according to Josephus, who caused their co-citizens much suffering (*Antiquities* 12.246, 252). Antiochus built an idol altar on God's altar and offered swine, forbidding Jews to circumcise their sons, which many obeyed (12.253-55, mid-second century B.C.E.). When Samaritans witnessed this suffering, they denied they were Jews, but rather claimed to be a colony of Medes and Persians, with which Josephus agrees (12.257). Samaritans say rather that they choose to live according to the customs of the Greeks (12.263). In this context Josephus begins narrating the revolt of Mattathias the Maccabee (12.265). The conflicts concerning ethnic relationships, boundaries, inclusion and exclusion narrated in Luke-Acts are four centuries old, dating back at least to Alexander the Great; then Antiochus Epiphanes reignited these cultural/religious tensions. The Judeans' neighbors, the Samaritans, were occasionally their cultural/religious antagonists, viewed by some as "apostates," who were joined by Judeans from Jerusalem whenever they had violated key identity symbols/commands (not keeping kosher or resting on the Sabbath) and so felt that they had to flee Jerusalem. Jesus himself entered a Samaritan village (Luke 9:51-55), told the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-29, which most interpreters conclude is authentic), and healed a Samaritan leper (Luke 17:11-16).

Acts 10:28b reveals how provocative this social/ethnic boundary crossing was: [Peter]: "You yourselves [Cornelius' household] know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile [*alloghlylo*]." The

noun here, typically translated "Gentile" is not the usual one (*ethnos*) and means rather "alien, foreigner, of another tribe." It occurs 290 times in Luke's Bible, the Septuagint, most often for "Philistine." For example, in 1 Sam 17, when the Hebrew has *Philistim*, the Septuagint repeatedly translates with the Greek *allophyloi*, as in 1 Sam 17:4, "And a mighty man came out from the ranks of the *allophytes*; Goliath was his name" (New English Translation of the Septuagint = NETS). Similarly, Judas Maccabeus prays, "Blessed are you, O Savior of Israel, who crushed the attack of the mighty warrior [Goliath] by the hand of your servant David, and gave the camp of the *allophytes* into the hand of Jonathan son of Saul. . . . Strike them down with the sword of those who love you" (1 Macc 4:30, 33 NETS). This translation of the Hebrew "Philistine" by the Greek *allophyte* is characteristic for the narratives of Samson (Judg 13–16), the ark (1 Sam 4–6), King Saul (1 Sam 9–19; 1 Chr 9–10), and David (1 Sam 17–31; 1 Chr 11–18). The *allophytes* worship idols (1 Sam 31:9) and are uncircumcised (Judg 14:3; 1 Sam 17:36–37; 2 Sam 1:20). The Lord delivers the *allophytes* to Israel (1 Sam 17:46) and saves Israel from them (2 Sam 3:18).

We do not usually realize how radical it is when the "believers from Joppa" (Acts 10:23) hear Peter characterize Cornelius as an *allophyte* and then baptize him: he is baptizing Goliath into the church! When Peter proclaims, "In every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable (*dektos*) to him" (10:28), he includes the Philistines/Goliath/Cornelius! The tension with the historical books of the Hebrew Bible, as translated in the Septuagint, is so high that it takes the authority of the prophet Isaiah (61:2), emphasized by Jesus in his inaugural sermon (Luke 4:19), to legitimate God's provocative acceptance of these foreigners by Peter in the later church (Acts 10:35,

45). God inaugurates a new era of salvation history, prophesied long ago; will God's people "accept" God's acceptance of uncircumcised, pork-eating aliens? Initially, at the apostolic council as reported by both Paul (Gal 2:9) and Acts (Acts 15:10–12, 19), the Judean believers do! Conflicts are so high, however, that the agreement eventually falls apart (Acts 21:18–21; Gal 4:21–31). Tradition, enshrined in scripture, makes God's new act difficult to accept.⁶ Luke is usually understood to be emphasizing the continuity of salvation history,⁷ but is not the author, a Gentile believer writing to predominantly Gentile house churches, legitimating *dis*continuity (pork-eating, [and if male] uncircumcised Gentile followers of Moses who do not rest on the Sabbath), by arguing that this was prophesied?

Have Lukan house churches changed Moses' customs?

No, God prophesied acceptance, so this change is not a change!

The purpose of Luke's two volumes must be related to the "accusations" made against both Stephen and Paul.

This man (Stephen) never stops saying things against this holy place and the law; for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs (*allaxei ta*

6. Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 167; Paul's reading of scripture is "antithetical"; he exploits tensions within Torah, building his hermeneutic on differences, e.g., between Genesis and Exodus, Abraham and Moses. Unlike Paul, Luke is *narrating* salvation history. He must have been aware, however, that this gospel narrative presents salvation history with more discontinuity than the Maccabean literature.

7. Pervo 10, 20, 22.

ethe) that Moses handed on to us (Acts 6:13-14).

They (believers among the Jews) have been told about you (Paul) that you teach all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake (*apostasian*) Moses, and that you tell them not to circumcise their children or observe the customs (*tois ethesin peripatein*; Acts 21:21).

Luke, writing a generation after Paul, is not primarily concerned to legitimate the "historical" Stephen and Paul, to polish their reputations. The author rather opposes rumors, doubts, being voiced perhaps both inside and outside the Lukan house churches toward the end of the first century: can we Lukan Christians, uncircumcised (if male) Gentiles, who would not know how to cook kosher even if we wanted to, really claim continuity with the ancient revelation of God through *Moses*, or have we not "changed the customs Moses handed on to us"?

From a twenty-first century point of view, the Lukan churches had obviously changed Moses. Priests in Jerusalem would never have recognized Cornelius (Acts 10), the Philippian jailer (16:27), Titius Justus of Corinth (18.7), Tychicus and Trophimus from Asia ([Ephesus] 20.4) as belonging to the people of Israel!⁸ For ancient historians in general, who assume that the "founder" of a city or people has given them an ideal "constitution" and laws, whether the founder was Romulus of Rome or Moses of Israel, change was very awkward, a corruption of the original divine laws. Again, from a modern historian's point of view, history brings changes, discontinuities, and they are often good! In

8. Priests opposed "mixing" with foreigners: Ezra 10:3, 9-15, 18-44; Neh 9:32; 13:1, 3, 23, 25, 28, 30; Ps 105[106]:35; 2 Macc 14:3, 38; Josephus, *Antiquities*. 4.148, 153, 159, etc.

the United States we may finally cover all with health insurance, although we dare not call this socialist. But ancient historians could not admit this, and when unwillingly they were forced to narrate change, they had to deny it was change, sometimes claiming that the original founder long ago really had said something analogous.

Dionysius, a biographer/historian who wrote during the last decade B.C.E., and Plutarch, a contemporary of Luke, both write of founders' customs.⁹ Dionysius is legitimating Romulus as founder of Rome and retrojects important changes in the succeeding seven centuries back onto the original laws set out by the founder. Plutarch, however, is not legitimating the founders whose biographies he narrates and is therefore franker about founders changing laws and customs. Theseus, the founder of Athens, Plutarch narrates, did away with offices of the powerful, a change which eventually resulted in his death (Plutarch, *Theseus* 24.3; 29.2). Dionysius (*Roman Antiquities* 6.22-92) narrates the origin of the office of tribunes, established long after Romulus, but immediately inserts a digression claiming that Romans have never ever made any innovations in their laws (*Roman Antiquities* 7.70-73)!¹⁰

The Jewish historian Josephus is forced to narrate the change from aris-

9. Balch, "Jesus as Founder," 174-80. Dionysius is translated by Cary, Plutarch by Perrin, both in the Loeb Classical Library.

10. See Balch, "Political Friendship in the Historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus," *Roman Antiquities*, in *Greco-Roman Perspectives on Friendship*, ed. John T. Fitzgerald (SBLRBS 34; Atlanta: Scholars, 1997), 123-44 and Balch, "Rich and Poor, Proud and Humble in Luke-Acts," in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. M. White and O. L. Yarbrough (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 214-33.

toocracy (charismatic judges) to monarchy (1 Sam 8-9), which tormented the mind of the prophet Samuel (Josephus, *Antiquities* 6.36). God appears to him, comforting him saying that "it was not he (Samuel), but himself (God) whom they so insolently despised and would not have to be alone their king.... However in no long time they would sorely repent of what they did..." (6.37-38).

Similarly, just before telling of Moses descending from Sinai to deliver God's divine constitution to Israel, Josephus narrates the story of Balaam (*Antiquities* 4.102-58), who advises the Moabite king, Balak, to have beautiful, young Moabite women seduce Jewish boys. Since their customs are alien to all humanity, the women urge the boys, after they are enslaved to them (4.133), to worship their gods (4.137-40). Zambrias then calls Moses a "tyrant" (4.146), asserting that he has married a foreign wife and will sacrifice to the gods he chooses (4.148-49). Phinees, however, kills both Zambrias and his foreign wife (4.153, 159; see Num 25:1-15). Commenting on this story, Feldman suggests that Josephus may well have been directing this story against assimilation to Jewish readers who supported the agenda of Zambrias, who supported change.¹¹

Growth and change?

Luke differs from Josephus: the "new" (Luke 5:36¹²; 22:20; Acts 5:20; 17:19) eschatological event being experienced in the present was prophesied long ago by

11. Lewis H. Feldman, *Jewish Antiquities 1-4: Translation and Commentary*, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 378, n. 392, commenting on Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.131.

12. But the author/editor seems rather to think, with many contemporaries, "the old is good" (Luke 5:39). Luke may be retelling Jesus' parables, who did indeed value the new.

Isaiah, so it is a change that is not a change. Luke is not oriented exclusively toward the past, but also to the eschatological present, in which God is doing something new. Ancient authors often commented on this new event, in which foreigners are accepted into the citizen body. Such additions would bring "growth," but negatively, "mixing" so accusations ran, would change traditional language and customs.¹³ Rome grew in numbers and power by welcoming/accepting fugitives from other poorly governed cities. Ancient historians of Rome criticized the so-called wise Greeks, including Athenians, so proud that they granted citizenship to only a few, jealous of their noble Greek birth. Some, the Spartans, even expelled foreigners, but they received no advantage from this haughty attitude. The Thebans and Athenians, through the single military disaster at Chaeronea (338 B.C.E.), lost both the leadership of Greece and their freedom. But Rome's strength, due to her growth by adding strangers, was favored by Fortune (Dionysius, *Roman Antiquities* 2.17).

So also Luke: the church grows multi-ethnically by preaching the word, not by military means. Paul preaches the word boldly in Ephesus, no longer only in Jerusalem or even in Antioch, with its large, ethnically familiar population, "so that all the residents of Asia, both Jews and Greeks, heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10 NRSV). Paul is victorious in conflict with some exorcists, so that "all the residents of Ephesus, both Jews and Greeks, everyone, was awestruck; and the name of the Lord Jesus was praised" (19:17). The exorcists burn their books, and "so the word of the Lord grew (*auxano*) mightily and prevailed" (19:20).

In contrast, it was a strain for Athe-

13. See Balch, "Jesus as Founder," 165-70.

nians to combine diverse *Greek* towns, the residents of Attica, into one city (Plutarch, *Theseus* 2). Likewise, residents of Jerusalem opposed admitting foreigners and their customs (2 Macc 14:38; 1 Esd 8:87). Josephus and Luke differ in relation to this value. Contrast the following quotations of Josephus and Acts: "let there be one holy city...and let there be one holy temple therein, and one altar...For God is one and the Hebrew race is one" (Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.200-01). "From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth" (Acts 17:26; compare Eph 4:4-6). Acts, which supports a multiethnic people of God, denationalizes Josephus' formula.

Growth results from "mixing."¹⁴ Aeneas, founder of the Roman people, finally stopped wandering when he came to the later site of the city of Rome, where he mixed the two races, native and foreign, combining their customs, laws, and religious ceremonies; these diverse nations shared a common life, the origin of Rome (Dionysius, *Roman Antiquities* 1.60.1-3). Plutarch narrates essentially the same story: Romulus sees his city filling up with aliens mixed with poor people, so he blends them and creates fellowship (*koinonia*, *Romulus* 14.2, 6). Numa, the king of Rome who followed Romulus, mixed Roman and Spartan customs. He was admired for distributing the people by trades, because they had utterly refused to become united, but were filled with contention (Plutarch, *Numa* 17.1). Numa, aware that hard substances will not readily mingle, obliterated the original distinctions, distributing the people by arts and trades into musicians, goldsmiths, carpenters, etc., and made "one" out of them all. At last he banished from the city the practice of speaking of some as Sabines, others as Romans, so that his division resulted in a harmonious mixing of them all (*Numa* 17.3-4).

Luke is selectively *Romanizing* the people of God, a modern historian would say, changing God's people from ethnocentric (as in Athens, Sparta, and Jerusalem) to multiethnic (as in Rome). Judeans, Samaritans, and Greeks, even *allophyles*, become one. The ancient biographer/historian Luke would insist that this is not change, but is rather an unfolding of the ancient plan of the God of Moses and the prophets, who long ago prophesied God's acceptance of all peoples (Luke 2:31-32; 17:18; 24:46-47; Acts 2:17 [Joel 3:1-5 LXX], 23; 5:38-39; 10:34-35 [Isa 61:2]; 13:46-47 [Isa 49:6]; 15:14-17 [Amos 9:11-12 LXX]; 16:10; 26:22-23; 28:28).

Founders, agents of change, die

Plutarch begins his biographies of the founders of Athens and Rome observing that in their final days they both came into conflict with other citizens (*Romulus* 27; *Numa* 22). Of the five kings who followed Numa, the last was dethroned and died in exile, but none of the other four died a natural death (Plutarch, *Numa* 22.6). The ancient writer Xenophon also observed, "all sorts of changes in government are attended by loss of life" (*thanatephoroi*, "bearers of death," *Hellenica* 2.3.32).

When John (Luke 3:3) baptizes for the forgiveness of sins and Jesus also forgives (7:48) far from the Jerusalem temple with its holy days and sacrifices (see Luke 19:45-48; 21:5-6), they announce that one experiences the transcendent somewhere other than the traditional holy place, dangerous stuff. E. P. Sanders argues that Jesus in his final days did indeed perform some action symbolizing the future apocalyptic destruction of the temple, whose import was that Jesus was "attacking the temple service commanded by God. Not

14. Balch, "Jesus as Founder," 167-70.

just priests would have been offended.”¹⁵ When Jesus in his inaugural sermon announces the cleansing of Naaman the Syrian leper, not of lepers in Israel (Luke 4:27; compare the grateful Samaritan leper in 17:16-18), his shift in ethnic values generates rage. Like the Samaritans whom Josephus mentions, Jesus behaves differently on the Sabbath (6:1-2, 6-7), and then he tells of a Samaritan showing mercy, in contrast to a Jerusalem priest and a Levite (10:25-37), not a story to make the audience comfortable. He revalues economic class, challenging those who assert their own status (6:20-26; 12:13-21; 14:13; 18:25), reversing highly symbolic eating customs: the master promises to serve reclining slaves (12:35-38). He criticizes Judean (11:37-54; 18:11-12) and Roman (13:31-32) authorities. As North Americans know, reevaluating “family values” would also generate controversy (14:25-26). Any one of these might get a leader killed (see 22:1-2), as happened in the assassination of transformative leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. (1968), Bishop Óscar Romero (1980), Anwar al-Sadat (1981), and Yitzhak Rabin (1995).

After change, after death, some leave town; they are “sent out”

The crisis that evokes a “going out” may be a famine (Dionysius, *Roman Antiquities* 1.27.3) or “sending” away some who tend to rebel (*Roman Antiquities* 1.85.2). In Acts the sending out is connected to the heightening of conflict in a revolutionary context. After the apostles do signs and

wonders (Acts 5:12-16), they are arrested by the high priest (5:17). Gamaliel, a Pharisee, compares the situation to that of Theudas’ and later Judas the Galilean’s uprising (5:36-37). This pattern is repeated three times in Acts 3-7,¹⁶ after which “a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered (*diesparesan*) throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria” (8:1bc). Further, “Those who were scattered (*diasparentes*) because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch..., but...on coming to Antioch [they] spoke to the Hellenists also, proclaiming the Lord Jesus” (11:19ab, 20bc). Pervo (96) perceptively observes, “henceforth, persecution will drive the plot of Acts.” As my reference above to King, Romero, Sadat, and Rabin indicate—preceded by Xenophon’s ancient observation that such social change is a bearer of death—persecution and death are more than an entertaining plot in Acts, but at some level are social history generated by social-political-religious change, initiated by Jesus and implemented by early followers, in Acts primarily by crossing traditional ethnic boundaries, while claiming the support of biblical prophecies. In Greco-Roman society those “sent out” would establish colonies, but in Luke-Acts they establish rather houses (Luke 10:5; 19:9; Acts 2:46; 8:3; 11:14; 16:15, 31; 18:8; 20:20) and churches (Acts 8:3; 9:31; 15:3, 41; 20:28).

God’s character in Luke-Acts

Given that Luke-Acts is legitimating prophesied discontinuity, who is God? Luke announces crucial aspects of God’s character in the Magnificat (1:46-55). A

15. E. P. Sanders, “Jesus and the Temple,” in *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research*, ed. J.D.G. Dunn, 361-81 and S. McKnight (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), reprinted from E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (1985), 61-76.

16. See Pervo, *Acts* 97 on this “pattern of cult foundation.”

distinctive cluster of terms signals God's acts: humility (*tapeinosis*, 1:48), slave woman (1:48), proud (*uperephanous*), powerful (1:51-52), exalt the humble (*hupsosen tapeinous*, 1:52), rich (1:53). Mary is a humble slave woman, and God exalts the humble; in contrast, God humbles the proud, powerful, and rich. Strikingly, Paul employs a similar cluster of terms in the Philippians hymn: slave (2:7), humbled (*tapeinoo*) himself (2:8), God highly exalted (*uper-hypsoo*) him (2:9), heaven and earth (2:10). In the Philippians hymn now Christ, not Mary, humbles himself, takes the form of a slave, whom God then exalts, so that every knee on heaven and earth bends. To return to Luke-Acts, Peter's sermon inaugurating the church employs a similar cluster of terms, again Christological, which rely more on spatial, vertical, high/low imagery than on a chronological timeline: slaves, both men and women (2:18, quoting Joel 3:1-5 LXX), heaven and earth (Acts 2:19), Hades (2:27 and 31, quoting Psalm 15:8-11 LXX), exalted (*hypsoo*, 2:33), at God's right hand (2:33-34; compare 5:31), heavens (2:34). God will pour out God's Spirit on "my slaves, both men and women," with signs in heaven above and earth below; not even Hades can corrupt God's Holy One, who is rather exalted at God's right hand, has ascended into the heavens. So the cluster of terms narrates what God had done for Mary and also (in Phil 2 and Acts 2) God's acts in relation to Jesus Christ and the church. Finally, Luke employs this cluster of terms ethically: rich (Luke 16:19, 21), poor (16:20, 22), with Abraham (16:22-26), Hades (16:23), a great chasm (16:26). Without employing the terms humble and exalt, this parable nevertheless verbally represents God's reversal of the situations of rich and poor, the poor to Abraham's bosom, the rich to Hades, as in the Magnificat, Peter's

inaugural, ecclesiastical sermon, and the Philippians hymn.

Luke's Greco-Roman readers/auditors were familiar with this cluster of terms.¹⁷ In Rome poverty revolts against wealth (*penia pros plouton*), the humble against the eminent (*tapeinotes pros epiphaneian*); in nearly all states, the lower class is generally hostile to the upper (Dionysius, *Roman Antiquities* 6.54.1). These two groups are contrasted as "the arrogant" (*oi uperephanoi*, 6.72.3) and "the humble" (*oi tapeinoi*, 6.76.2). The senators are "unwilling to associate (*akoinoneta*) as fellow-citizens and to share their blessings with those of humbler estate" (*tapeinoterous*, 6.80.4). The poorer citizens need their debts forgiven (*apheisthai ton ophlematon*, 6.83.4, the same verb and noun as in the Lord's prayer, Luke 11.4). There is intense rivalry between the aristocracy and the people; Coriolanus, "the most illustrious man of his age" (6.94.2), as one of the former, keeps the price of corn high (7.20.4). Tribunes, representing the plebeians, charge Coriolanus, but he is defended by Minucius, who then advises Coriolanus to descend from his haughtiness (*uperephanon*) and to assume the humble and piteous demeanor (*schema tapeinon kai eleeinon*) of one who has erred (*emartekotos*) and is asking pardon (7.45.4). Manius Valerius also addresses Coriolanus, advising him to "change his way of life to a humble deportment (*schema tapeinon metalabein*, 7.54.5). He refuses, and the Romans vote for Coriolanus' perpetual banishment (7.64.6). The rich Roman general then

17. See Balch, "Political Friendship" and "Rich and Poor, Proud and Humble in Luke-Acts." These articles cite the "historian" Dionysius; today I would add comparative texts from the "biographer" Plutarch, *Coriolanus* (Loeb Classical Library). See also Shakespeare, *Coriolanus* (1608) and Bertolt Brecht, *Coriolan*.

describes himself as cast aside, forsaken, exiled, and humbled (8.1.5), as a resourceless, homeless, humbled outcast (*tapeinon*, 8.32.3). This suits the character of the God praised by Mary in the Magnificat, by Jesus in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, by Peter in his inaugural sermon, and by Paul in the Philippians hymn. Coriolanus utterly refused to humble himself in relation to the poor. In contrast, Christ Jesus humbled himself, took the form of a slave, and became obedient to the point of death on a cross; therefore, God also highly exalted him.

The story of God's action ritualized in meals

Finally, this is ritually embodied in meals, symbolically the most sensitive social events in Greco-Roman culture. A leader invites Jesus to a meal on the Sabbath, "and they were watching him closely" (14:1),¹⁸ no longer a surprise. Jesus heals a man of dropsy, "a Cynic metaphor for consuming passion" (Braun 30-38), on the Sabbath, striking in Greco-Roman society, where luxurious display in triclinia generated honor and power. I do not have space to interpret this parable of the dinner (14:15-24), only to quote Luke's interpretation: "for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." (14:11)

Second, Jesus tells the parable of watchful slaves "whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down [literally: recline, the posture of masters] to eat, and he will come and serve (*diakonesei*) them" (Luke 12:37), another reversal, as

in the Magnificat. Those who had been socially and legally shamed are honored.

Mark narrates the dispute about which disciple is the greatest when Jesus is still journeying to Jerusalem (Mark 10:32, 35-45). The redactor of Luke purposely moves this story into the narrative of the Last Supper immediately after the "words of institution" (Luke 22:15-22, 24-30). "For which is the greater, the one who sits [reclines] at table, or the one who serves? Is it not the one who sits [reclines] at table? But I am among you as one who serves" (*diakonon*, Luke 22:27, NRSV). When instituting the Eucharist, Jesus teaches as a shamed slave.

Will the ELCA accept God's acceptance of *allophyles*/LGBT pastors?

Is Jesus not teaching us about the God whom we saw acting in the awesome events at the 2009 ELCA Churchwide Assembly, the God we worshiped, to whom we prayed every twenty minutes, whose Spirit we felt moving among us, when God and the church accepted those formerly legally and religiously shamed, reversing millennia of rejection, inviting those formerly excluded now to serve the Eucharist among us?¹⁹ Will church members, congregations, deacons, pastors, and bishops accept these newly called and ordained ministers of word and sacrament?

18. On this parable of an upside down banquet, see the innumerable insights of Willi Braun, *Feasting and Social Rhetoric in Luke 14* SNTS Monograph 85 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1995).

19. See *Homosexuality, Science, and the Plain Sense of Scripture*, ed. David L. Balch (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000; republished Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007). David L. Balch, "Rom 1:24-27, Science, and Homosexuality," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 25/6 (December 1998), 433-40.