

**Hermeneutics
as
Interpretation,
Part 2:
Contextual
Truths in
Sub-Version
Preaching**

by
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In the 1997 issue of *Binah*¹ (Volume 2) I presented Part I of a two-part study, "Hermeneutics as Interpretation and the Caribbean Student," and promised to complete the project as Part II, showing practical or homiletical aspects of biblical interpretation. Part I was an introduction to classical biblical hermeneutics that revisited various methodological approaches to biblical interpretation throughout the history of the discipline in the academy. It approached the study of biblical interpretation as a descriptive task that focused on special ways of reading the Bible primarily in Europe and America. Those hermeneutical methods were largely personality-driven and are associated with many big names in biblical studies.

The approach pursued in Part II is driven by the search for **contextual truths for sub-version preaching** and is designed for the little people of the Caribbean: the regular people in the church pew on Sunday morning trying to make sense of the word they hear from the pulpit in their own unique context—a context marked by poverty, distress, homelessness, lack of educational opportunity, unemployment, under-employment, broken families, a cycle of violence, and chemical dependency.

Challenges to Biblical Preaching

Good biblical preaching is much more difficult than it appears on the surface; the

¹*Binah* merged with the *Caribbean Journal of Evangelical Theology* (CJET) in 1998.

preacher who dares to challenge people to read the Bible for "contextual truths" in "sub-version preaching" faces many challenges. First, the work of the preacher is less precise than the school teacher, police officer, or nurse; the preacher thrives on the gift and power of imagination, and "preaching is a sub-version." On the one hand, the preacher never has access to the primary version of the biblical text. The primary version is the live, existential, and dynamic revelation that the biblical writer or speaker received at the moment of inspiration. Most, though not all, of this was captured in the original written text or manuscript which, in the case of the NT, we do not have. As Walter Brueggeman said, the preacher therefore wrestles with a sub-version of the original text—a version of a version of a version, "always a version, a rendering of reality that lives under the dominant version." We do not have immediate knowledge of all the intricacies, inferences, innuendoes, "hyperbole,

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incongruity, disputations," and multiple meanings of the biblical text. We do not "know the codes" to "pin all the meaning down, get all mysteries right and have our own way, without surprise, without deception, without amazement, without gift, without miracle, . . . without anything that signals mystery or risk" (Brueggeman 199).

On the other hand, the preacher is called to preach a subversion of the dominant version of human reality in society—a society of dishonesty, injustice, selfishness, inequity, oppression, and godlessness. The preacher has a risky task of proclaiming the God of the ancient biblical text, a just, loving, kind, righteous, but problematic, complex, elusive, mysterious, and sovereign God—to a world whose demeanor is the antithesis of God. The preacher must merge the horizon of that elusive God found in the "sub-version text" with the horizon of the people by taking risk and reimagining God and the world anew in a "subversive" gospel message.

Second, the academic problems of deciding how to read the problematic ancient biblical text in the modern Caribbean and what tools to use in the art are just as challenging as unlocking the mysteries to the text. Many of the European and American approaches to biblical interpretation the pastor studied in graduate school are practically

useless in the Caribbean. Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis (JEDP), von Rad's form critical approach to the Pentateuch, Bultmann's existential demythologizing of the synoptic Gospels, Robinson's New Quest for the Historical Jesus, and Derrida's deconstruction theory are recipes for disaster in the hands of a *nouveau-ric* (a newly graduated seminarian) in the region where the "Bible as canon," the Scriptures as we received them, is the most sacred document in the world. It is not to be jettisoned or dissected by the preacher but to be used for spiritual transformation and bettering people's prospect in life.

The Caribbean Bible interpreter also has to transcend the way of reading biblical texts which insists that Scripture and Scripture alone must interpret Scripture. The interpreter was cautioned not to allow personal biases and prejudices (essentially, the pre-understanding and contextual "situatedness") to enter into the exegesis of the text. Such biases and pre-understandings, according to the theory, corrupted the text and the truth. The reader or interpreter must come to the text with a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate or empty mind (a total impossibility) to be filled with the divine truths of God.

The problem, however, is that truth exegeted from the text by those who pretended to approach the Bible completely unbiased was always biased. Their "truth" was often the "truth" that they wanted to see and hear in the biblical texts. In the Caribbean that truth had one side marked "the word of God" and the other corrupted by the interpreter's colonial, Eurocentric, cultural and ideological biases toward slavery and the interest of the planter class. Such truth derived from reading the Bible was **colonial truth**.

While slaves, ex-slaves, and abolitionists used the biblical texts to battle slavery and poverty, many colonials associated with the church saw in the same texts instruments of enslavement and exploitation. The Jamaican-born Noel Erskine, professor of theology at Chandler School of Theology, Emory University, said this about the paradoxical role of the church and the Bible in the Caribbean:

The church in the Caribbean has had a paradoxical relationship to the society. At times the Bible was used to challenge the very assumptions on which slaveocracy thrived. At other times this very Bible was used to justify oppression (Erskine 1).

Erskine continues:

It was this church that, after slavery, bought large plots of lands and subdivided it to the masses. This church built schools, hospitals, clinics, and water tanks for the masses of people in Jamaica (Erskine 1).

Third, the pastor has to battle the popular notion that the church has no business in politics, or that he must take care of the people's souls and let God take care of their bodies. The Caribbean preacher who dares to reimagine God and the world must pro-actively seek new ways of **subverting** the kind of philosophy exemplified in the colonial instructions of an 1765 British Baptist Missionary communique given to its missionaries to the Caribbean:

You are going to a people in a state of slavery and require to beware lest your feelings should lead you to say or do anything inconsistent with Christian duty. Most of the servants whom the Apostle Paul addressed in his epistles to the churches were slaves, and he exhorted them to be obedient to their own masters in singleness of heart, fearing God, and this not only to be good and gentle but scriptural and Christian (Clark 74; also cited in Erskine 3).

Three fallacies are obvious in that communication: a) Most of the persons to whom Paul preached in the first century were Roman citizens and religious Jews who were free to practice their religion in the synagogues, not slaves. The number of slaves of whom the New Testament (NT) speaks is rather minuscule in comparison to the large numbers of people who had become Christians at Philippi, Corinth, Rome, and elsewhere. b) God never intended that Christians should enslave anyone or be enslaved by anyone. Christ made it abundantly clear in Luke 4:18 that his mission was to bring freedom to those held captive against their will. c) The church's official ruling that missionaries, or preachers, must stifle their consciences and compromise the liberating power of the gospel is a blatant negation of the instructions Jesus gave his disciples and the example he set for them throughout his public ministry.

The British Baptist Missionary William Knibb saw through the fallacies in the oppressive colonial reading of the biblical texts and

attacked the communique with a subversive ferocity. He used the same missionary document and Christian Bible to fight for the abolition of slavery and social justice in Jamaica before and after 1834. For this, Knibb was branded a non-conformist, impious, and half-crazy man who instigated slaves to riot in the parish of St. James, Jamaica (Stewart: 16, 20-28, 111-114). Knibb and his supporters were hunted down like mongooses by a savage mob from the colonial government in Jamaica who thought they could destroy the "subversive" message and reimagining vision of that British prophet.

The Caribbean pastor inherited the need to reimagine and refashion the Caribbean church away from the colonial mentality of an indifference or insensitivity to the plight of the poor. Even after our own creole pastors took over the leadership of the established denominations in the Caribbean (Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Wesleyans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists) in the post-colonial era, the Eurocentric mentality and culture dominated their reading and playing with the biblical text.

Often the word was strange as it did not know the context to which it was addressed. The existential needs of the parishioners or of the populace did not pierce the consciences of our pastors, and the congregants themselves were not aware that this was a need that could be addressed (Erskine 2).

Fourth, by constantly having to battle the practical needs of the poor people in the parish, pastors have very little time to do the research necessary for solid exegetical preaching in the problematic and mysterious ancient biblical texts. Sermon preparation shares time with a host of pastoral duties: hospital and parish visitations, counseling, parenting, community service, lengthy committee meetings, and finding ways to meet one's own financial needs. The pastor's desk is also cluttered with memos of crisis: food crisis, family relations crisis and community crisis. There is barely space (or time) to consult Greek and Hebrew lexicons, or to do Bible translation for every sermon. There certainly is no time to be preoccupied with what Thomas Long calls "Ugaritic parallels and details about syncretistic religion in the Phrygian region of Asia Minor" (344). Yet, the preacher has to prepare well in order to preach well.

Finally, in more recent times, the Caribbean pastor has had to subvert the “gospel of success” and “ginalism” (deception) in the media. Some televangelists preach a gospel of success in which they convince the poor people of the Caribbean that they are suffering because they have sin in their lives, poor family values, lack faith, and do not give enough to missions. At the same time, under the guise of feeding starving children in Haiti and poor African countries, these religious televangelists persuade compassionate believers to donate, out of their limited resources, funds badly needed in the Caribbean—funds which are used to purchase huge estates for luxurious living. How is the Bible interpreter to deal with these challenges?

Contextual Truths in Sub-version Preaching

As a solution to the problems a pastor faces in reading and playing with the biblical text in the Caribbean I propose the **hermeneutics for contextual truths** (hereafter

HCT) in subversive preaching. This hermeneutic will do justice to the contents and truths of the biblical text in its own contexts of author and circumstances of immediate audience, on the one hand, and the Caribbean contexts and truths of the readers and hearers of the biblical text, on

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the other. HCT bridges several gaps and forces the worlds of the reader into humble dialogue with the worlds of the biblical text and its hearers; the interpreter must be humble because humans lack the codes to unlock all the mysteries of the text. This hermeneutical project does not stop at hermeneutics as methods—concentrating only on the context, language, syntax, world of the biblical text, and its author and audience—but goes on to deal with what I call Exegesis III, drawing reader and hearer into the world of the text and then taking them back to their own contexts so they could ask: What does this mean to us in Port-aux-Prince, Kingston, or St. Georges? What shall we do to be saved? (Acts 2:37) Or, How can I help the needy?

This is what my NT professor, Julius Scott of Wheaton Graduate School, calls “Going there in the world of the text and coming back

home with the bacon" (Scott, lecture). The "bacon" constitutes the truths derived from the dialog between text and reader or hearer, held in dialectic tension and applied to real life situations and problems of Caribbean peoples. The use of the word "truths," plural, is not without significance for it acknowledges that a text has more than one truth; and both text and reader have their own truths derived from their own contextual situations, none of which could be ignored in the exegetical process. Without a reader actively engaging the text, the Bible's truths remain lifeless and powerless, if not dead, in a book.

HCT forces us to read the text in our own Caribbean context, knowledgeable of our unique Caribbean experience, the legacy of slavery, and the never-dying impact of colonialism on our Caribbean underdevelopment, poverty, underemployment, and sense of hopelessness. Elsewhere, I have labeled this way of reading biblical texts, "text and play in Caribbean context" (Murrell 1996, 4). For indeed, anyone who attempts to bridge the worlds of reader and text, hearer, speaker, and author is playing with biblical texts in particular contexts. In this sense, HCT is not another New Hermeneutic from the continent, a new fallacy, or some hocus pocus approach to the Bible in which an Alice-in-Wonderland-character disrespects the established canons of literary interpretation to make a text say what he/she wants it to say. In fact, HCT applies some proven principles in biblical interpretation to the theological exercise.

Principle One: HCT reads the entire text in its broadest context and observes all of the coordinating ideas that have significant bearing on the interpretation of the pericope, a smaller unit of text. This I call exegesis level I. For example, Luke 4:18 should be read in the broader context of verses 1-29 and the life and times of Jesus, the new prophet from Nazareth. While Luke's prefaces (Lk 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-2) show the author's literary and historical proclivity, the Luke-Acts collection also shows that Luke is writing theology for the young Christian church.

He is not concerned simply to narrate past events but to tell of divine accomplishments ('the things that have been fulfilled among us'): The mighty acts of God, the fulfillment of his promise, the continuation of what began with the people of Israel, were brought to a climax in the ministry of Jesus and are continuing in the life of God's missionary community in the world (Gasque 119).

A careful reading of the broad context of the text thus reveals the author, his purpose for writing, his audience, and the specific set of circumstances that are essential to divining the meaning of the text, what I call the "first truths of the text." Taking a text out of its original context is a major problem in some Caribbean churches that delight in making doctrines out of obscure Bible verses and phrases. This is the number one problem in Rastafarian hermeneutics, the indiscriminate "citing-up" of biblical verses in their reasonings, citations, and written narratives with no regard for the context of the biblical text or what the text really means to someone other than Rastafari. But taking a text out of its context is like denying a fish its natural aquatic habitat—before long it dies a thousand deaths.

Principle Two: HCT analyzes the pericope for special grammatical, syntactical, and literary structures that definitely affect the accurate translation and meaning of the text in its original context. This is exegesis level II, the level at which the context or horizon of the interpreter merges with the world and meaning of the text. Many modern translations of the Bible give divergent interpretations of the same texts and show the translators' biases from particular doctrinal or ecclesiastical positions—biases which often overshadow the text's intent on theological grounds. HCT, therefore, does not put total confidence in any one version, or rather sub-version, of the Bible, but compares versions with the "original" when necessary.

This hermeneutic of suspicion is especially crucial in the use of modern translations done exclusively by people of European origin. Whenever possible, the interpreter should do his or her own translation of the text from the Greek and the Hebrew, notwithstanding the crunch on the preacher's time, and one should be selective in purchasing biblical tools to aid in that exercise. Pastors who do not have facility with the biblical languages could find helpful suggestions on using biblical tools in my essays on biblical studies in *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies* (April 1989 and April 1990).

Principle Three: HCT puts hands, feet, flesh and bones of real people to the text. During this phase of the exegetical process of reading, analyzing, and exegeting the text, the interpreter's task is to bring the horizon of the hearer or reader into conversation with the text in order to derive special meaning from the text for the salvation or transformation of that community socially, emotionally,

economically, politically, and otherwise. This is exegesis level III. No flashy magic wand or televangelism gimmick is needed here; just a radical commitment to reimagining Christ and the world in subversive preaching which requires serious study of the lives, contexts, and fate of the people in the pew, as well as knowledge of the world and content of the biblical text.

Principle Four: HCT combines reading the Bible as Canon, accepting the Bible as a received theological document of the church, and retelling the scriptures as narratives and stories. Simply put, reimagining God in story-telling the received biblical text with theological content is the most powerful tool for drawing the hearer into the world of the biblical text. As seen in the NT, first-century writers and preachers interpreted the "First Testament" (OT) as **the received text** and used it for effective preaching and teaching rather than purely textual critical exercise.

Using the tool of Biblical Criticism responsibly, it is quite appropriate for the preacher to point out that there are differing accounts of the life of Christ in the Synoptics; or that "the New Testament contains four accounts of the origins of the Lord's Supper in a meal shared by Jesus and his followers on the eve of his death (Mark 14:17-26; Matt 26:20-30; Luke 22:14-23; I Cor 11:23-26)" (Busey 70).

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Biblical criticism can solve technical linguistic, grammatical, and theological problems in biblical texts during sermon preparation. However, the dissecting of scripture into JEDP, Third and Fourth Isaiah, demythologized synoptic fragments, and Q materials, has no place in a Caribbean pulpit.

The busy pastor's time is better served if he really gets to know, reimagine, and retell the biblical stories accurately and with dramatic nuances in their canonical form. Reimagining and retelling the biblical stories address a real problem of the paucity of Bible knowledge in the church. L. Gregory Jones, Dean of the Divinity School and Professor of Theology at Duke University expressed the problem this way:

Familiarity with the biblical texts has diminished over the past several years. . . we have lost a sense of the Bible as a (or the) central text in the formation of Christian character and identity. This is not primarily an issue about whether the interpretations of the Bible are excellent or poor, constructive or destructive. Rather than facing a struggle over how to provide wise readings and performances of biblical texts, we are now in the position that the texts are increasingly marginalized in Christian community and Christian life. As such, we have lost a clear sense of the ways in which Scripture's words . . . shape both our minds and our bodies (Jones 70).

As a solution, Jones encourages us to "consume the text" or get to know the existing biblical stories in their present form. "Most basically, we need to learn the stories—to have Moses and Deborah, Amos and Paul, Mary and John, become people we know" (Jones 70); and we do this by what Jones calls having the word journey with us for character formation and Christian community. People can be moved as much by the accurate and dramatic retelling of a Bible story as by an exegetical sermon that is laced with Hebrew and Greek word studies.

Contextual Truths in the Book of Acts

Acts chapters 1-6 is as good a body of canonical texts as any to hear a biblical text as story and see HCT in action in and through a community of faith. Using a much smaller pericope or unit of text (e.g. Acts 2:5-21; or 2:29-42) is the most effective way of focusing an exegetical sermon. Taking a hawk's eye's view of the first 6 chapters of Acts, however, works best in this essay. Here one witnesses a variety of worlds, contexts, truths, actions, interactions, and results in the play as the interpreted word pulls its hearers into its worlds—the world of the Hebrew Bible, the world of the first century, and the world of the Christ event seen in the kingdom of God as it explodes in the lives of the first Christians. Here the world of the First Testament and that of the first-century hearers merged in a *horizontverschmelzung*, blended horizons, as the human and the divine interfaced in the interpretation process and salvation became a reality for thousands of people.

Let the narrative begin in the world of the biblical texts in Acts, with its many contours, dimensions, twists, and turns in the unfolding

drama of the coming into being of the first Christian church. The narrator is Dr. Luke who writes a version of the facts (many years after the fact) as a sequel to his Gospel instructing his friend Theophilus further in the knowledge of the life of Christ and first Christians. Luke reports that after Jesus' post-resurrection appearance and instruction to the disciples, he ascended to heaven leaving them with the command to wait in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit needed for vital Christian ministry (Acts 1:1-11). Obeying Christ, the 120 disciples, including women, assembled in the historic Upper Room in Jerusalem, chose Matthias to fill a vacancy on the twelve-apostles slate, caused by Judas' tragic end, and waited for the coming of the Spirit (1:12-26). After many days of waiting, and probably praying, the Holy Spirit came with quite unusual manifestations and filled the disciples with power and the gift of tongues, empowering them for the ministry for which they were preparing for over three years as they walked with Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ of God. At this point, Luke is clearly laying the foundation for building his theological theory that the formation, direction, and *modus operandi* of the earliest Christian Church was the work of the Holy Spirit from start to finish; and was a public phenomenon that began in Jerusalem.

The Spirit came on the day of the Jewish feast of Pentecost, a time when representatives from different nations and Jews from the diaspora converged on Jerusalem for business, pleasure, and religion. What Luke calls the Day of Pentecost, τὴν ἡμέραν τῆς πεντηκοστῆς (Acts 2:1), fiftieth day, first used in the LXX—or Septuagint, the third-century B.C. Greek version of the Hebrew Bible used by Christ and the apostles—was one of the earliest of the three major feasts instituted into the social and religious constitution of ancient Israel under the Mosaic covenant (Ex. 23:16; Lev. 23:14-21). It was written as a part of the extended arm of the Decalogue (10 Commandments) recorded in Exodus 20:1-17 and was to be observed 50 days ("a day after seven Sabbaths") after the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

As a means of legitimizing their already sacred calendar, Jewish tradition has it that God also gave the *Torah* (the law) to Israel on the Day of Pentecost, 50 days after Passover; thus adding double significance to this feast. Whether this claim is true or myth-making, the institution of the feast was given in the form of a solemn command from Yahweh as a time to show gratitude to God for his goodness and abundant harvest. By the first century A.D., the Feast of Pentecost was

still a major “national event” and a political, cultural, and economic affair attracting people from all parts of the then-known world and especially those of the Jewish diaspora.

The unusual phenomena that accompanied the coming of the Holy Spirit caught the curiosity and interest of a large number of the celebrants to the Feast and gave Peter a golden opportunity to preach his first sermon in public, and what a dynamic “Pentecostal,” contextual, theological, and life-changing sermon that was! Capitalizing on the people’s curiosity, Peter seized the moment to reimagine God and the world by digging deep into the world of the only written scriptures he knew and could read fluently, the Hebrew Bible, made accessible to him in his own Greek lingua franca through a sub-version (a version of a version), the LXX. With the emphatic declaration, “This is that which was spoken by the Prophet Joel” (Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2:16, KJV), Peter entered the Hebrew world of his Jewish audience by using their own sacred tradition and past historical experience. He then merged their world with his personal knowledge of the oral traditions and experiences of the life and teachings of Jesus.

When Peter quoted Joel 2:28-29 to explain the significance and meaning of the Pentecostal phenomenon (Acts 2:16-21), and cited David in the Psalms (Ps. 16:10-11, 110:1) to support the doctrine of Christ’s resurrection (Acts 2:24-35), he was doing contextual theology. He made the vital connections to the past religious and theological world of his audience. He merged their world with their present context and encounter with the word as preached in the statement: “Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36, NRSV)

As Peter retold the ancient stories in the exegesis of passages from the *Neviim* (Hebrew Prophets) and the *Kethuvim* (Writings) in light of the reimagined Christ event, the worlds of the preacher, the texts, and the people came together. They merged in a manner that elicited an immediate personal response: “Brothers, what shall we do?” Like a lion stalking its prey, fisherman Peter, transformed to Apostle-evangelist and preacher of the word, seized the opportunity for a “bumper” harvest and moved in for the kill with the unapologetic dual command:

Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him (Acts 2:38-39, NRSV).

The imperative tense of the verbs “repent” (μετανοήσατε) and “be baptized” (βαπτισθήτω) show that while Peter’s sub-version of the OT texts was an *apologeia* of the gospel, his message was direct and uncompromising; salvation comes only through repentance and faith in Christ via obedience in baptism. The response of the people to Peter’s preaching was epoch-making. Over 3000 persons said “yes” to the Christ of Peter’s expository preaching of the Word and were baptized and added to the church the same day. How the apostles got all these folks baptized and inducted into the faith in one day Luke gives no details, but he is sure that this phenomenon is not a human effort; it is the work of the **Holy Spirit** in the lives of committed believers. The coming of the Spirit, the preaching of the powerful Word, and the mass conversion and baptism are God’s doing.

For Luke, the show is just heating up. The Apostles continued their preaching, organized Bible-study groups, and further instructed the believers in the Didache: a rapidly developing body of oral traditions and exegetical interpretations of the Hebrew Bible from the LXX, the life and teachings of Jesus, the apostolic street preaching, and the home Bible study of the first Christians. They also celebrated the Eucharist and prayed daily in homes and in the temple. The novelty of the electrifying presence and power of the **Spirit** in the burgeoning community of faith worked miracles and created awe and amazement on all those who came in contact with the movement. This gave the believers a sense of awe in the eyes of the public and cemented their unity and fellowship, which included sharing goods and services and caring for those in need among them (Acts 2:42-47).

Clearly, Luke wants Theophilus to understand that the new movement is not just an “eleven to twelve o’clock on Sunday” in-the-church-religion that ends with a pastoral benediction, a handshake, a God bless you sister, and a smile. The only activity in the temple recorded in the early chapters of Acts is the 3:00 p.m. prayer meeting. Earliest Christianity was a daily walk with Christ, a life committed to the transformation, economic welfare and stability of

the community. The healing of the beggar at Gate Beautiful by Peter and John (Acts 3:1-11) confirms this. It shows the subversive gospel changing a life in ways that profoundly empower the person to get up, get off "welfare" and handouts, and take care of himself with pride and dignity—a vital part of the Christian mission ignored by many.

The miraculous work of the Spirit in the life of the lame man at Gate Beautiful created more wonder and mystery, and gave Peter the opportunity

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for a second public sermon which increased the believing community to over 5,000 people (Acts 4:1-4). Peter's reimagining version of the kingdom of God in people's lives became a subversion of the dominant Pharisaic religious notion that salvation can be achieved through good deeds and observances of scruples. The powerful preaching of the word subverted the dominant ideologies of the Jewish world in light of the death and resurrection of Christ. And indeed, Jewish religious authorities saw Peter's preaching (captured in Acts 3) as an unauthorized subversive message designed to destabilize their dominant version of society, and so they attempted to silence the preachers by arresting, incarcerating, interrogating, and punishing them. They threatened to murder them if they ever spoke or taught again in the subversive name of Jesus of Nazareth (4:5-22).

But how could they silence the powerful subversive *kerygma* bearing witness to the death and resurrection of Christ with "δυναμίς μεγάλη" (great power, megatons of dynamite) that came from the Holy Spirit? (4:33) Peter got even more daring and imaginative as he preached what looks like his third subversive in-your-face sermon to the "rulers, elders, and scribes" who had "assembled in Jerusalem with Annas the high priest, Caiphas, John, and Alexander, and all who were of the high-priestly family" to interrogate and punish the preachers (Acts 4:5-7, NRSV).

Using a sub-version of David's version of God's program in the Psalms, Peter told the authorities:

"The stone that was rejected by you the builders, it has become the cornerstone." He is the only source of human salvation and we, his apostles, derive our authority from Him and Him only; we will take marching orders to preach or not to preach only from the chief cornerstone, the Messiah of God, not from those who killed him (Acts 4:8-12).

Highly offended and infuriated by this charge, the authorities wanted to execute the apostles. But fearing retaliation from the crowd, they released "the subverters" insisting that the apostles obey their orders.

That Luke's intention is to prove that the dynamic power of the Spirit in believers' lives, unity in faith and confession, and social and economic well being of people were the trademarks of the early Christian community is again underscored in Acts 4:1-37. The Spirit led them in the preaching, healing, and the saving of souls. The Spirit defended, encouraged, and empowered them in times of persecution. But the Spirit also directed their social and moral conscience; he caused them to overcome selfishness, rugged individualism, insatiable greed for personal wealth and insensitivity to the everyday needs of others, so characteristic of Western Christianity. They had no huge savings account balances, or millions of dollars worth of stock options. Instead, the community gathered its resources in a common pool to ensure that no one went hungry, homeless, cold, or unloved.

In Evangelical language, the movement was "red hot" and "on fire for God," but it never turned its back on the homeless, the widows, the orphans, the hungry, or the less fortunate. It never ceased to subvert the ways of an unequal, unjust, and inhumane society. Incredibly Luke says: "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" (Acts 4:32). The church used its resources to care for the community so that "there was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet and it was distributed to each as any had needs" (Acts 4:34-36, NRSV). For example, a man named Joseph, or Barnabas, who

was transformed by the preaching of the word through the **Spirit**, sold a huge piece of personal real estate and brought the proceeds to the apostles (4:37). But when Ananias and his wife Sapphira decided to be selfish, insensitive, and dishonest, the **Holy Spirit** visited them with massive cardiac arrests and they died instantly (Acts 5:1-10).

The Ananias and Sapphira tragedy stunned the community at large. It further cemented the people's commitment to the faith and strengthened their unity (Acts 5:1-12). As a result of blending vibrant faith, dynamic and courageous public witness, and solid expository preaching of the word with social awareness and a sense of community, the **Spirit** multiplied the numbers of believers in the face of great odds (whipping, death threats, imprisonment and other forms of persecution, Acts 5:13-42). When race prejudice and sexism began infiltrating their ranks and affecting the equal distribution of resources to women and those of non-Jewish ethnic background, the leadership of the movement immediately called a conference and nipped racism and sexism in the bud. They appointed seven **Spirit-filled**, reputable, intelligent, and wise deacons to direct the church's social welfare program for its thousands of members (Acts 6:2-17).

This was not a superficial arrangement of forced distribution of goods under a form of communism (the godless materialist philosophy that kills individual enterprise by shifting the control of wealth and economic means from the people to the state), and certainly not Marxism (another atheistic concept of classes struggling against each other in dialectic tension for social and economic control of scarce resources). This was something new in Palestine, "Christian communalism," the result of subversive preaching of the word where the horizon of the biblical word merged with the worlds of the messenger and hearers of the word. This produced radical transformation in the lives of prostitutes, greedy business people, tax cheats, racists, sexists, etc., who were willing to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of their sins and receive the gift of the **Holy Spirit** (Acts 2:38).

In Acts, Luke offers excellent examples of preaching the canonical text as story in ways that transform lives. As Ward Gasque puts it:

The narrative of Acts opens the eyes of the imagination of its readers to the life of the church of an earlier day by presenting vignettes of the Spirit's activity primarily through the ministry

of key personalities, . . . In this connection, the sermons . . . are not merely representations of what was proclaimed in an earlier age but suggestions by Luke for what should be proclaimed in faithful witness by the church in his day (127-28).

In fact, Luke's narrative is appropriate for preaching a message that subverts the dominant culture's ways of seeing God, people and the world—whether in Jerusalem or in the Caribbean, first century or twentieth century.

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