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In the tradition of biblical prophecy, as we have seen, the word of God was not only announced verbally by the prophet but was embodied through physical gesture. The prophet's body served as the medium of revelation in speech, yes, but also in symbolic actions, as transparent as marrying a prostitute (Hosea) or as arcane as burying a soiled loincloth (Jeremiah). The conviction that truth was expressed not simply in words but above all in personal behavior — in character — was also widely shared among Greco-Roman philosophers; parodies of false philosophers, such as those deliciously developed by Lucian of Samosata (see, e.g., Timon), focused particularly on the gap between a philosopher's fine spoken sentiments and the sordidness of his personal life. How then does Luke's narrative portray the character of Jesus and his disciples? Is this depiction consistent or inconsistent with his understanding of the good news of God's kingdom?

Luke does not show Jesus proceeding in ways that, at least hypothetically, might have been available to someone with a prophetic call in first-century Palestine. He does not gather money from the wealthy or the support of the religious elite; he does not organize his followers into units of economic production or cadres of economic reform; he does not manipulate the obvious mechanisms of political or economic power; he does not — as present-day academics and politicians might — establish a center for messianic studies in the city of Jerusalem.

Instead, Jesus' prophetic challenge is embodied in four interlocking dimensions of his ministry. The focus here is not on what Jesus did; we study that under the rubric of prophetic enactment. Here we look at Luke's depiction of Jesus' prophetic character in terms of poverty, itinerancy, prayer, and servant leadership. I examine each of these characteristics in turn, looking first at the Gospel narrative for what it says about Jesus and what Jesus demands of the disciples. Then, I look at Acts to see how the actual behavior of the disciples conforms to the pattern established by Jesus.

Prophetic Embodiment

Poverty

and the Sharing of Possessions

The good news announced by the prophet Jesus is that the kingdom of God belongs to the poor (see 1:52; 6:20; 7:22; 16:19-31). This announcement is not delivered from on high by a member of the privileged population, but by one who is himself among the poor. Jesus speaks to the poor as one of them. Luke shows him embodying poverty even as he announces God's rule to the poor. This depiction begins in Luke's infancy account. I noted earlier how Luke uses narrative midrash to suggest to the reader that the characters who hear and receive God's word are among the "poor of the land" who are to form Israel's remnant.

The circumstances of Jesus' birth, however, point to a degree of actual poverty as well as spiritual receptivity. Luke does not mention any means of economic support for Jesus' family. He omits the identification by the townspeople of Nazareth of Jesus (Mark 6:3) or his father (Matthew 13:55) as a tekton, a wood-craftsman. Luke's lack of interest in Joseph — whose son Jesus was "thought to be" (Luke 3:23) — is striking when compared to Matthew's infancy account, in which Joseph plays the leading role (Matt 1:16, 18, 19, 24; 2:13, 19). Luke's concentration on Mary, a young virgin who becomes pregnant out of wedlock, means as well a focus on the "lowliness" of Jesus' origin (Luke 1:48).

John's birth is announced to a member of the priestly class in the midst of public worship and creates a public commotion (1:57-66); Jesus' birth is announced in private to a young woman with no special status (1:26-27). Luke deliberately contrasts the social marginality of this "servant of the Lord" and her exaltation because of "God's favor" (1:39). A similar double contrast is found in Luke's account of the births of John and Jesus. While John's birth to Elizabeth takes place in the rejoicing presence of friends and neighbors and the new-found speech of his father causes fear and excitement throughout the hill country of Judea (1:67-66), Jesus' birth is celebrated by an angelic host praising God (2:13-14). The cosmic celebr-
tion, however, makes even starker the actual physical circumstances attending the Messiah’s birth: the young parents are far from home; they find no place among other pilgrims; the baby is placed in a feeding bin; and those delivering the angels’ message are shepherds, socially and religiously among the most despised occupations held by Jews.

When Jesus announces, “Blessed are you poor” (6:20), then, the reader understands that this man who had spent forty days wandering in the wilderness, filled and led by the Holy Spirit (4:1), is among them as himself a poor man. Jesus’ radical poverty is demonstrated by his resistance to the testing of the devil: he spurns the offer of magical food, rule over empires, and guaranteed protection by God, clinging to the words of Scripture that demand absolute obedience to God alone (4:3-12). His marginal social status at birth, when there was no room for him in the inn, is confirmed when he proclaims this good news to the poor in his hometown of Nazareth, where his neighbors rise up, drive him out of the town, and seek to kill him (4:28-29). From this point in the narrative forward, Jesus has no fixed abode, no place of security. He tells those who would follow him, “Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head” (9:58). Luke shows Jesus supported by the women who have accepted his message and move with him toward Jerusalem: they “provided for them out of their resources” (8:3). He is dependent as well on the hospitality offered him by others (see 10:38-42; 19:1-10).

Luke’s narrative indicates that Jesus’ earliest disciples “left everything and followed him,” whether it was their livelihood as fishermen (5:11) or as a tax collector (5:28). Peter later states to Jesus, “We have given up our possessions and followed you” (18:28), and is promised that there are none “who have given up house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive an overabundance in this present age and eternal life in the age to come” (18:29-30). He says to his disciples, “Every one of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple” (14:33). When Jesus sends out the Twelve, he tells them, “Take nothing for the journey, neither walking stick, nor sack, nor food, nor money, and let no one take a second tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there and leave from there” (9:3-4). And he tells the Seventy-two, “Carry no money bag, no sack, no sandals, and greet no one along the way ... stay in the same house and eat and drink what is offered to you” (10:4, 7). In a word, to be a disciple is to live poor in the same way as Jesus.

Those who fail in their discipleship are those who prefer familial relations and filial responsibility over a commitment to the prophet (6:60-61): Jesus tells such a one, “no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks to what was left behind is fit for the kingdom of God” (9:62). Paradoxically, the wealthy ruler who professes the fulfillment of all the commandments, cannot follow Jesus when he is told, “Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor” because he was “very rich” (18:21-23), leading Jesus to declare, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God” (18:24).

In tension with the demand of radical dispossession is another mode of disposing possessions, namely, through almsgiving. The Sermon on the Plain advocates giving to all who ask without demanding repayment (6:30). Jesus tells the Pharisees to give alms, “and if you have not been doing so, you are worse than those outsiders who are.” (18:28), and is promised that there are “a hundred who enter into the temple and not one who will come out” (18:33). He tells his followers, “Sell your belongings and give alms. Provide money bags for yourselves that do not wear out, an inexhaustible treasure in heaven that no thief can reach nor moth destroy” (12:33). He draws the lesson from his parable of the Dishonest Steward (16:1-8) with similar imagery: “I tell you, make friends with yourselves with dishonest wealth, so that when it fails, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings” (16:19). Zacchaeus the chief tax collector receives Jesus into his house, declaring, “Behold, half my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over” (19:8), and Jesus says in reply, “Today salvation has come to this house” (19:9). Finally, in contrast to the Scribes, who are condemned for devouring the houses of widows (20:47), Jesus praises the poor widow who, by donating two small coins into the temple treasury for the poor, “put in more than all the rest; for those others have all made offerings from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has offered her whole livelihood” (21:2-4).

There is considerable complexity in Luke’s specific directives concerning the use of possessions. It is not easy to reconcile radical abandonment of possessions with the ideal of almsgiving. If “giving all to the poor” is a once-for-all gesture, to be sure, then the two can go together. But logically, one is required to have funds in order to share them, and once one has “left everything” it is impossible to fulfill the command of almsgiving.

We shall see below how this tension is resolved in Luke’s portrayal of the first community in Acts. What is consistent within this complexity, however, is Luke’s complete avoidance of wealth and acquisition as the expression of God’s kingdom. There is here no prosperity gospel, no identification of fruitfulness with worldly success. The kingdom belongs to the poor and to those whose sharing of possessions with others includes them among the poor.
Closely related to Jesus' poverty is his itinerancy. He does not have a fixed abode. He does not occupy a cult center. Instead, Luke shows him constantly on the move. Such restlessness or rootlessness most resembles ancient prophets like Elijah and Elisha and Greco-Roman philosophers in the Cynic tradition. After Jesus’ forty-day sojourn in the wilderness (4:1-13), Jesus makes the circuit of Galilee (4:14-15) before preaching in his hometown of Nazareth (4:16-30), then moving on to Capernaum (4:31), where in rapid sequence he appears in the synagogue (4:31-37), in Simon’s house (4:38-41), and in a deserted region (4:42), before setting out to preach in the synagogues of Judea (4:44). He passes by the Lake of Gennesaret (5:1) and enters another town (5:12). He passes through fields on the Sabbath (6:2), enters a synagogue (6:6), ascends a mountain (6:12), and then descends to a plain (6:17-19) where he delivers a lengthy sermon.

After the sermon, Luke locates Jesus back in Capernaum (7:1) and then immediately in the town of Nain (7:11). In a summary passage unique to his narrative, Luke describes Jesus: “He journeyed from one town and village to another, preaching and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God” (8:1). The evangelist draws explicit attention to the prophetic character of Jesus’ ministry. In 8:22, Luke has Jesus set sail, arriving in the “territory of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee” (8:26). He returns to Galilee after healing the man with demons (8:40). All of this movement occurs even prior to Jesus’ turn to Jerusalem and long journey there.

As I stated in Chapter One above, Luke is entirely responsible for the construction of the long journey narrative that brings Jesus to Jerusalem and the destiny that awaits God’s prophets there. From one perspective, this expansion of his story enables Luke to include a wealth of sayings material that otherwise he would have difficulty fitting into his fast-moving story — since he has chosen to avoid Matthew’s practice of inserting long discourses. From another perspective, the journey enables Luke to make a specific point about the character of prophetic embodiment as itinerant. The journey has a formal opening in 9:51: “When the days for his being taken up were fulfilled, he resolutely determined to journey to Jerusalem.” The translation “resolutely determined” is correct as to meaning, but it fails to capture the scriptural allusion Luke created by the Greek phrase meaning “he hardened his face,” which echoes the language used by the LXX for the prophet Ezekiel, when he is told to “set his face against Jerusalem” and “prophesy against the land of Israel” (Ezek 21:7-8 [Eng. vv. 2-3]).

From that point forward, Luke reminds the reader constantly that Jesus is journeying (Luke 9:56; 9:57; 10:1; 10:38). Luke notes in 13:22, “he passed through towns and villages, teaching as he went and making his way to Jerusalem,” and in 17:11, “As he continued his journey to Jerusalem, he travelled through Samaria and Galilee.” Luke has Jesus approach Jericho (18:35) and then pass through it (19:1) as he drew near to Jerusalem (19:11). He approached Jerusalem (19:28), and as he drew near to it (19:41), he wept over Jerusalem because it did not recognize the time of its visitation (19:44). Because the prophet is always on the move, he has “nowhere to lay his head” (9:58), making this journey narrative a particularly apt means of expressing the importance of hospitality and inhospitality as modes of response to the prophet and his message. Jesus is shown hospitality by Martha and Mary (10:38-42) and by Zacchaeus (19:1-10). He is refused hospitality by the hostile Samaritans (9:51-55). And although he is invited to table on the Sabbath (6:5), enters a synagogue (6:6), ascends a mountain (6:12), commands given to the disciples whom Jesus commissions to expand his prophetic ministry. Luke shares the account of the sending of the Twelve (Luke 10:1-12). The supreme inhospitality, to be sure, is shown by the leaders of the people in Jerusalem, who actively seek his death even as the common people throng to hear him teach (19:47-48).

The themes of itinerancy and hospitality are found as well in the commands given to the disciples whom Jesus commissions to expand his prophetic ministry. Luke shares the account of the sending of the Twelve (Luke 9:1-6) with Matt 10:1-15 and Mark 6:7-13: they are to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal, taking nothing for the journey (9:3), staying in houses that welcome them (9:4) and “if not welcomed, shaking the dust from their feet” (an apotropaic gesture) as they leave that town. Luke reports that the Twelve “went from village to village” (9:5). When Jesus sets his face to travel to Jerusalem, Luke notes that “he sent messengers ahead of him,” who were refused by the Samaritans because they were headed to Jerusalem (9:52-53).

Distinctive to Luke’s narrative is the sending of the Seventy-two (10:3-12). Commentators have always puzzled over this apparent duplication in an author who dislikes doublets: what purpose does this sending serve? Does it symbolically anticipate the mission to the Gentiles in Acts? Answers are complicated by the text-critical problem. It is not clear whether Luke intended to write seventy or seventy-two. If the correct reading is seventy, then Luke must intend an allusion to the appointment of seventy elders by the prophet Moses to share in his work with the people (Num 11:16-17), who also have a share in the spirit of prophecy (Num
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11:25). In either case, those sent out by Jesus share in the same mission as the Twelve, namely to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal (10:9); they are to "go on [their] way...greet no one along the way" (10:3-4); they are to stay in one house where they are welcomed (10:7); if rejected, they are to move on (10:10-11).

In sum, Luke clearly understands the "Jesus movement" to be precisely that, a mode of God's visitation that is constantly on the move. Prophecy does not find a single center or a secure home. It moves as the Holy Spirit directs, moves lightly and with as little encumbrance as possible. Itinerancy is another way of speaking about prophetic poverty.

Prayer

That prayer is of special interest to Luke has been noted by many readers. Less frequently observed is the way in which Luke's attention to the prayer of Jesus and his disciples is a form of prophetic embodiment. The prophet is led by the spirit not least because the prophet is one who is attentive to the workings of the spirit in prayer. Moses was the Lord's intimate friend because of his prayer (Exod 33:12-17); he "knew the Lord face to face" (Deut 34:10). Elijah was powerful in prayer when he raised the widow's son (1 Kgs 17:20-22) and when he called down fire on the sacrifice prepared for the Lord and then rain for the drought-stricken land (1 Kgs 18:36-45). Isaiah is in prayer in the temple when he sees the Lord, "seated on a high and lofty throne," and receives from the Lord his prophetic commission (Isa 6:1-13). So Luke shows Jesus to be a prophet whose ministry is defined not by a set program but by the practice of prayer.

Every significant moment in Jesus' ministry is marked by prayer. Luke alone among the Gospels portrays Jesus as praying after his baptism at the moment that the Holy Spirit descends on him bodily (Luke 3:21). The effect on the reader is to establish the connection between the activity of prayer and the bestowal of the spirit. And as Jesus is led by the spirit into the wilderness to be tested by Satan, the reader knows that he is able to persevere through this testing because he is a man of prayer. Before he chooses the Twelve, "he departed to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God" (6:12). The choice of his prophetic successor, we are to understand, itself requires the direction of the spirit, and the channel for that discernment is prayer (22:32).

Similarly, Luke shows Jesus "praying in solitude" before asking his disciples concerning his identity (9:18). In his version of the transfiguration (9:28-36), Luke alone attributes to Jesus the express intention for ascending the mountain with his disciples: he "went up the mountain to pray" (9:28). It was, in fact, "while he was praying" that his appearance changes and Moses and Elijah appear with him in glory, speaking of the exodus that Jesus was to accomplish in Jerusalem (9:29-31). Jesus' true identity, spoken to him privately while in prayer at his baptism — "You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased" (3:22) — is here declared to his closest followers: "This is my chosen son; listen to him" (9:35). And the disciples who reported popular opinions concerning Jesus, that he was one of the ancient prophets or Elijah, here see Jesus' prophetic mission confirmed, as Moses and Elijah discourse with him concerning his destiny in Jerusalem. All this through the experience of prayer; true identity is revealed in the presence of God.

At the Last Supper, Jesus speaks of his prayer in behalf of Peter: "I have prayed that your own faith may not fail, and once you have turned back, you must strengthen your brothers'" (22:32). In the garden, before his arrest, Luke describes Jesus kneeling and praying, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me; still not my will but yours be done," and continues, "He was in such agony and he prayed so fervently that his sweat became like drops of blood falling on the ground" (22:41-44). With this prayer, Luke shows how totally Jesus embodies the poverty of those who live by God's rule, the poverty of utter obedience. As his mother has said before him, "Behold the servant of the Lord, be it done to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38), so does Jesus define himself totally by God's will rather than his own.

At the crucifixion, Luke further shows Jesus embodying the prophetic message when he prays for those who have shown themselves his enemies. In his Sermon on the Plain, Jesus told his disciples, "Bless those who curse you; pray for those who mistreat you" (6:28). Now, as the leaders of the people mock him, Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them; they know not what they do" (23:34). The response of total submission to God's will is once again expressed at the moment of Jesus' death, when Jesus prays with the words of Psalm 31:5: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (23:46).

Like Matthew, Luke has Jesus provide his disciples with a sample of prayer. The placement of instruction in each Gospel reminds us of the evangelists' respective methods. Matthew includes the Lord's Prayer in a section of the Sermon on the Mount devoted to modes of piety (Matt 6:1-
Luke places the instruction within the context of Jesus’ own practice. 

Luke observes that, while on his journey to Jerusalem, he was praying “in a 
certain place,” and when he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 
“Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples” (11:1). The prayer 
Jesus teaches them, then, is based in his own practice, and part of Jesus’ 
program of forming his disciples. Luke’s version of the prayer is notably 
shorter and less liturgically shaped than its parallel in Matthew 6:9-13:

Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, Give us each day 
our daily bread and forgive us our sins for we ourselves forgive every­ 
one in debt to us, and do not subject us to the final test. (11:2-4)

With its emphasis on the coming of God’s kingdom and on the forgiveness 
of sins, this prayer sounds much like an epitome of Jesus’ prophetic word 
in the Sermon on the Plain. The further instructions on prayer Jesus gives 
his disciples in 11:5-13, however, provide a turn on his command to give 
without expecting a return. In relationship with God, it appears, constant 
demand is not out of place: the client is expected to be persistent in making 
requests of the patron. The parable of the “Friend at Midnight” concludes with the lesson, “He will get up to give him whatever he needs because of his persistence” (11:8). Likewise, the command to ask, seek, and 
knock in the expectation of receiving, finding, and entering is based on the 
conviction that God as a loving father will give what the children need. 

Luke’s fascinating version of the conclusion, moreover, draws once more 
the connection between prayer and the Holy Spirit: “How much more will 
the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?” (11:9-13). 

The same point about persistence in prayer is the subject of another journey parable, this one about the persistent widow who demands of an un­ 
just judge what is her due; Jesus tells this parable to his disciples, Luke tells 
the reader “about the necessity for them to pray always without becoming weary” (18:1-8).

The final plea of the Lord’s Prayer was “Do not subject us to the final 
test.” The Greek term πειρασμός is, literally, “testing.” After his baptism, Luke 
showed us the man of prayer Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, being led by the 
spirit into the wilderness, where he was “tested” by the devil (4:1-2). Having 
failed to turn the prophet Jesus from his obedience to God, when the devil 
had finished all this test, he left him for a time (4:3). The time of Jesus’ arrest, 
trial, and death is now another time of testing by Satan, who enters into Judas (22:3) and is sifting the disciples like wheat (22:31). Jesus, we have already 

seen, prays for Peter that he can later strengthen his fellows (22:32). And 
when Jesus enters the garden to pray, he tells his disciples both before and after 
his agony, “Pray that you may not undergo the test” (22:40, 46).

Perseverence in prayer is required not only in times of crisis but also in order to remain faithful to the commitment of faith. In Jesus’ exhorta­ 
tion to his disciples concerning the future, he declares in words that clearly 
echo the interpretation of the parable of the Sower (8:14):

Beware that your hearts do not become drowsy from carousing and 
drunkenness and the anxieties of daily life, and that day catch you by 
surprise like a trap. For that day will assault everyone on the face of the 
earth. Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to es­ 
cape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man. (21:34-36)

Servant Leadership

The people the prophet gathers around himself as the remnant of Israel is 
constituted by faith. After establishing Jesus in chapters 3-7 as the prophet 
who brings God’s visitation to the people, Luke devotes chapter 8 in par­ 
ticular to the forming of this people. It is here we learn that as the prophet 
sows the word of God (8:11), “those who hear the word of God and keep it” 
(8:19-21) are the ones who make up the people. Throughout this section of 
his narrative, Luke stresses the response of faith (7:50; 8:25, 48, 50) as that 
which “saves,” that is, restores those in need to full participation in the 
people.

Luke makes no discrimination among those who have the faith that 
saves — there is equality among the members of this prophetic commu­ 
nity. Luke provides an initial glimpse of the people forming around Jesus 
in Galilee: the Twelve and some women who had been cured of evil spirits 
and infirmities — these provide support out of their resources. As Jesus 
moves toward Jerusalem and his death, Luke shows him gathering disci­ 
plines around him and instructing them in prayer, the use of possessions, 
and perseverance. When Jesus enters the city, Luke has him greeted “by a 
whole multitude of his disciples” (19:37).

Because the Twelve are to follow the prophet Jesus as leaders over Is­ 
rael (22:30) — the implication of Luke’s parable of the Pounds in its narra­ 
tive context (see 19:11-27) — Luke is particularly concerned to connect his
mode of leadership and theirs. It is a mode that challenges the conventional understanding of power and patronage in the ancient world. The Twelve are to share in Jesus' ministry of proclaiming God's rule and enacting that rule through healing (9:2); like Jesus, they are to receive support by way of hospitality (9:4). But Luke is also concerned that the Twelve be schooled in a mode of leadership like his own.

The first such lesson occurs when Jesus feeds the five thousand, immediately upon the return and report by the Twelve of what they had accomplished (9:10-17). Luke draws a close connection between their delegated mission and his when he has Jesus receive the crowd that gathers and speak to them about the kingdom of God, and heal those who needed to be cured (9:11). When the Twelve urge Jesus to allow the crowd to find provisions, he tells them, "Give them some food yourselves" (9:13). Then Jesus blesses the loaves and fishes, "and gave them to the disciples to set before the crowd" (9:16). Luke here connects prophetic leadership with the service of others and establishes the symbol of table service as the marker of genuine leadership.

The second lesson in countercultural leadership occurs on the journey to Jerusalem, immediately after Jesus' second prediction of his passion, and it has two aspects. The disciples fall into a dispute over who was the greatest among them. Jesus puts a child in their midst and declares that receiving such a child in Jesus' name is to receive Jesus himself (9:46-48). He then states, "For the one who is least among all of you is the one who is the greatest" (9:48). The measure for "greatness" must change within the rule of God: becoming great means becoming little. As Luke has Jesus say twice in his narrative, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted" (14:11; 18:14). Such humility is reinforced by the next incident: the disciples want to prevent someone casting out demons in Jesus' name "because he does not follow in our company" (9:49). Jesus reminds them that the point of leadership is not membership in an exclusive club, but advancing the kingdom of God: "Do not prevent him, for whoever is not against you is for you" (9:50).

The third lesson is embedded in a set of parables Jesus tells his disciples during the journey to Jerusalem. The first compares the sort of vigilance and alertness they should have in awaiting the Son of Man to the eager expectation of servants awaiting their master's return from a wedding: they should be ready at all times, "for at an hour you do not expect, the Son of Man will come" (12:35-40). Intriguingly, Luke has Peter interject a question at this point, "Lord, is this parable meant for us, or for everyone?" (12:41). Jesus responds with another parable, concerning the "faithful and prudent steward whom the master will put in charge of his servants to distribute the food allowance at the proper time" (12:42). The effect of Peter's question is to shift attention from all servants to those put in charge of servants; we therefore understand his question—"is it meant for us?"—to refer to the Twelve. We note that they are set over other servants and that they are to "serve" them by allotting the food they require; we see again the symbolism of table service for leadership. The parable makes clear that an abuse of leadership is to treat those under them badly while seeking their own pleasure and that all authority is answerable to the master, who will punish those who use their authority wrongly: "Much will be required of the person entrusted with much, and still more will be required of the person entrusted with more" (12:42-48).

The fourth and final lesson is given at the Last Supper. Immediately after Jesus shares with them the bread and cup that signify "my body which will be given for you" and "my blood which will be shed for you" (22:19-20)—in gestures that vividly recall his feeding of the five thousand—and after Jesus predicts that one of them will betray him (22:21-22), the disciples fall into an argument, first over who might betray Jesus (22:23) and then "which of them should be regarded as the greatest" (22:24). It is difficult to conceive a more poignant juxtaposition of prophetic embodiment and the mind-set of the world, here expressed by those chosen to be the prophet's representatives. Luke has Jesus respond in a manner that makes clear both that the Twelve are to hold positions of leadership over Israel (22:29-30) and that the manner of that leadership must be in accord with the prophetic reversal of values expressed in the Sermon on the Plain.

In contrast to the "kings and those in authority" among the nations, whose leadership is expressed through power ("lord it over them") and who receive the honor of being called "benefactors," authority in God's people is to be measured by the status of those who are youngest—remember the child in 9:47-48—and the leader is to be a servant (using the Greek verb diakonein in 22:26, with specific reference to table service). Luke then has Jesus develop the table service image of leadership: "Who is greater, the one who sits at table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is seated at table?" The observation contains the same realistic appreciation of conventional social status that is reflected as well in Jesus' statements concerning seating positions at a banquet in 14:7-10. This is the way the world is: the people who sit and are served are greater than those who serve them; Luke has Jesus make the same point in 17:7-10. The point, then,
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is not to place the Twelve in the position of being served, but rather in the position of those serving: leadership is not benefaction at the whim of the patron, it is service to the needs of others. Luke startlingly connects this understanding of leadership by the Twelve to Jesus' own authority among them. He has just served them at table, with his own body and blood! So Luke has Jesus say, with utter simplicity, "I am among you as the one who serves" (22:27). As Jesus embodies the countercultural prophetic vision through his own leadership, so are the disciples to embody the same manner of leadership within the messianic and prophetic community.

With impressive consistency, Luke has characterized Jesus and the disciples in a manner consistent with the word of God announced by the prophet. Jesus embodies the prophetic message in his manner of life and instructs his disciples in the same dispositions. The themes of prayer, poverty, itinerancy, and service leadership, we see, are not random, but are internally consistent and interrelated aspects of that faith which "hears the word of God and does it." The disposition of prayer places one in attendance on God and in receptivity to God's Holy Spirit, rather than with reference to human rulers or conventional social expectations. Poverty indicates a complete reliance on the God who gives graciously and in abundant measure to those who ask in prayer, freeing the one who has "been given the kingdom" to share possessions with others rather than cling to them as a means of security. Similarly, itinerancy declares that the one who attends to God's spirit has nothing to lose and is free to move as the spirit directs. Since security is not sought in place, family, friends, or wealth, faith can move into spaces that might otherwise be frightening, expecting a hospitable reception among those of good heart. Servant leadership, finally, makes the most powerful statement — because most public, visible, and contrastive — that the measure of the kingdom is not the measure of the world and that the function of power within the prophetic people is to empower others.

Prophetic Embodiment in Acts

In order to appreciate the way in which Luke continues to show Jesus' disciples as embodying the prophetic word in Acts, we need to shift the question from the individual to the community and ask about the extent to which Luke shows the reader a church that has a radical character. The answer to this question is of the greatest importance for interpreting Acts.

Prophetic Embodiment

suggested earlier how some readers understand the powerful spirit at work in the apostles through signs and wonders as a form of theology of glory: the institution of the church in Acts, therefore, must necessarily be triumphalistic. Such a reading misses the point of Luke's prophetic characterization. He has shown in the Gospel how the power working signs and wonders is God's, and how the authority of the prophet is expressed through servant leadership. If Luke continues to show prophetic embodiment in the new community formed by the Holy Spirit in Acts, this means that, in his view, the Jesus movement reached its full expression in the earliest church and was at least as radical in its character as was the one through whose spirit it exists.

The question of prophetic embodiment in the church of Acts is also of first importance for self-examination by the present-day church. Christians today might be tempted to dismiss the radical characterization of Jesus: he acts the way he does because he is son of God, or he has special prophetic gifts that are unique to him. If such is the case, then the contemporary church can admire but need not worry about emulating Jesus' radical manner of life. But if the church in Acts - clearly a community and institution that exists over generations and spans nations — is portrayed in equally radical terms, then the church today is more directly challenged. There is no real reason why the prophetic spirit that expressed itself in radical terms among the apostles might not also find such embodiment today.

The place to start the analysis is clearly the two descriptions of the first community's life in 2:41-47 and 4:32-37. These passages have long been recognized as distinctively Lukan summaries, which he uses to expand and generalize on the few specific stories available to him. By means of such summaries, Luke gives amplitude to an account that otherwise might seem overly spare. Readers have also perceived how Luke's language in these passages concerning unity and the sharing of possessions echoes that of foundation stories occurring in Hellenistic philosophers, with the strongest resemblances to the accounts in Iamblichus and Porphyry of the founding of the Pythagorean school. The nature of these passages suggests that Luke had maximum freedom for expressing his understanding of the community that was shaped by the prophetic spirit poured out on them by Jesus (Acts 1:8; 2:4, 17-18, 33, 38).

In 2:41-47, Luke describes the internal community life of the three thousand who were added by baptism to the initial 120 who had gathered before Pentecost to await the Holy Spirit (1:15). Concerning the apostles.
Luke notes that the community was “devoted to” their teaching (2:42) and that “signs and wonders were done through the apostles” (2:43). The two items correspond to Jesus’ command to the Twelve in Luke 9:1-6 to proclaim the kingdom of God (teach) and heal (signs and wonders). No further attention is given to the authority of the Twelve in this description. In addition to their devotion to the apostles’ teaching, Luke focuses on three activities of the first believers. First, they prayed and gave praise to God (Acts 2:42, 47). Second, they practiced fellowship (koinônia). Luke seems to have in mind two discrete practices in this respect: they “broke bread” in their houses and ate together (2:46); and they shared their possessions. Luke gives particular attention to this:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need. (2:44-45)

Third, they met together every day in the temple area (2:46). This practice prepares for the next sequence of stories that take place in the temple precincts — especially the very next story, in which Peter’s healing in the name of Jesus restores to a lame man participation in the temple worship (3:1-7) — and it also continues the careful exposition concerning the temple that Luke had woven into the Gospel narrative. We remember that when he drove merchants out of the temple, Jesus had declared, “It is written, ‘My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves’” (Luke 19:46). After that prophetic act of cleansing (echoing Isa 56:7 and Jer 7:11), Jesus in effect occupies the temple area as the place for his daily public teaching (Luke 19:47; 20:1; 21:11; 22:53), and it is actually within the temple area that he predicts its destruction (21:5-6). Showing the prophetic community at prayer and praise in the temple indicates that this is the authentic Israel that fulfills the intended role of the temple as a “house of prayer.”

Finally, Luke describes the internal dispositions of the believers and the response of outsiders. The believers take their food with “exaltation and simplicity of heart” (Acts 2:46). The first term echoes the language of the infancy account for the birth of John, Elizabeth’s recognition of Mary as the mother of her Lord, and Mary’s song of praise (Luke 1:14, 44, 47). It is the same Greek term used by Luke for Jesus’ exaltation “in the Holy Spirit” when he praised God for revealing not to the wise and learned but to the childlike (Luke 10:21). The term “simplicity of heart” recalls the dispositions advocated by the Sermon on the Plain and exemplified by those who hear the word of God and “embrace it with a generous and good heart” (Luke 8:15). In the first description, Luke portrays the response of ordinary people to be entirely positive: “fear” or “awe” comes on them all (Acts 2:43), and the entire people shows favor (charis) toward the believers. As a result, “every day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved” (2:47).

Luke had considerable leeway in depicting the first believers. The points of emphasis in his description indicate the two major impressions he wanted to make on his reader. The impression that best serves his overall narrative purposes is the portrayal of the church as the restored Israel according to the spirit. By emphasizing the positive response of the people, the gathering of the people in the temple area, their life of prayer and praise, and their eschatological exaltation, Luke shows how “God’s visitation” through the prophet whom God raised up created a people, in Zechariah’s words, “that, rescued from the hand of enemies, without fear . . . might worship him in holiness and righteousness before him all our days” (Luke 1:74-75).

But by emphasizing their attention to the apostles’ teaching, the working of signs and wonders, the sharing of possessions, the practice of prayer, and their simplicity of heart, Luke also indicates that this is a people formed according to the prophetic vision first enunciated by Jesus. They have “save[d] [themselves] from this corrupt generation” and committed themselves to the countercultural mode of life demanded by the prophet as the works that demonstrate repentance. It is perhaps worth noting that the notes of servant leadership and itinerancy are not struck in this first passage. Both will appear later in the narrative. By placing the first community in the environs of the temple, however, Luke indirectly asserts something about the first community as diasporic in character. It does not build its own place, establish its own center. The believers break bread in their houses and gather in the temple for prayer. But this is only a temporary place. Even before the temple is destroyed, the people are able and willing to move elsewhere according to the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Luke provides a second description of community life in Acts 4:32-37, again following a powerful outpouring of the Holy Spirit in response to prayer (4:23-31). In this summary, we find two elements listed also in 2:42-47: the apostles bear witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus “with great power” and the community enjoyed great favor — it is not clear whether this is from the populace, as in 2:47, or from God (4:33). Oth-
wise, the passage focuses completely on the sharing of possessions. The believers were “of one heart and mind,” virtually a definition for friendship in antiquity, and “no one called anything his own.” The axiom for friendship was “friends hold all things in common,” and Luke states that among the believers, “all things were common” (4:32).

Two aspects of this sharing are stressed. By observing that “there was no needy person among them,” Luke makes clear allusion to Deut 15:4, which promises that when Israel keeps all the commandments concerning the land, there would be no poor among them. The first believers’ sharing of possessions signals once more, the realization of the authentic Israel restored through the spirit of prophecy. Luke also places the apostles at the heart of the practice of sharing possessions. Now, those who owned property or houses would sell them, bringing the proceeds of the sale and lay them at the feet of the apostles, who would, in turn, “distribute to each one according to need” (4:35). The specific example is Barnabas, who sold a field and “brought the money and put it at the feet of the apostles” (4:37) — foreshadowing the future narrative role of this “son of consolation” (see Acts 9:27; 11:22-24, 30; 12:25).

Placing the apostles at the heart of the sharing of possessions — having the goods put at their feet and then having them distribute to others — represents the biggest difference between the first and second descriptions of community life and serves an important narrative function within Luke’s overall story. Immediately after the first description and Peter’s speech following the healing of the lame man in the temple precincts, the apostles are hauled before the Sanhedrin and warned not to speak in Jesus’ name (4:1-22). The narrative question is whether they or the Jewish court truly “rules Israel.” Following this first arrest, the apostles are powerfully filled with the Holy Spirit (4:23-31) and are shown to hold unquestioned authority within the community — they receive possessions from the faithful, and they strike dead those who falsify this sharing (5:1-11); when they travel in the street, “signs and wonders” are done even by the casting of their shadow (5:12-16). When the Sanhedrin tries to arrest them a second time, they are not able to keep them in prison and are reduced to feeble resistance (5:17-42).

Luke has thus shown the Twelve to “sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:30). They are the true authorities within the restored prophetic people. At the same time, having the apostles not only receive the goods placed at their feet but also distributing to each one according to need, Luke continues to develop the theme of servant leadership. In imitation of the Jesus who declared, “I am among you as the one who serves” (Luke 22:27), they serve at the table by distributing goods to others. Finally, Luke’s two descriptions show the distinctive way in which a community can fulfill the radical demands of the prophet in a manner that no individual can. We saw in the Gospel that there was a tension between the command to leave all one’s possessions to follow Jesus, and the command to give alms. But a community can do both, for by sharing everything, they both “call nothing their own” and “give to each one as needed.”

By placing these two descriptions of community life immediately after bestowals of the prophetic spirit, and by putting them at the very beginning of Acts, Luke indicates to his readers his understanding of the church as the embodiment of the prophetic word. In the history of Christianity, it is worth noting, these passages have served to inspire radical forms of communal discipleship. It was hearing Jesus’ command to the rich man to sell all his possessions and follow him that impelled Antony to leave all he owned to his sister and plunge into a life of prayer in the wilderness. But for the founders of the coenobite (communal) form of monasticism — Augustine, Basil, John Cassian, Benedict of Nursia — these passages in Acts described the nature of the “apostolic” Christianity they sought to emulate. The radical Anabaptist reformation likewise found precedent for their poor and countercultural form of discipleship in Luke’s description of the primitive church, and appeal to that example continues in Mennonite and Hutterite communities. Present-day Christian communities based in liberation theology similarly find in these passages an inspiration for their vision of the church as one in which all things are shared alike.

The Christians through the ages who have based their own radical forms of discipleship precisely on the apostolic church in Acts stand opposed to the scholarly habit — based, to be sure, in a distinctively Protestant reading of Paul — of regarding Acts as advocating institutional and theological triumphalism. In my view, those who see Luke as portraying ideal Christianity in terms of a prophetic embodiment that is radical and countercultural, rather than accommodating and comfortable, read him more rightly than do the academics who fail to grasp either Luke’s literary methods or religious vision. But there is still more evidence to consider. We have yet to look at the rest of the Acts narrative, to see whether the four marks of prophetic embodiment — poverty, itinerancy, prayer, and servant leadership — are consistently ascribed to the church of the apostles.
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Poverty/Possessions

Following the description of the community sharing of possessions in 2:42-47 and 4:32-37 — as well as the "falsification of the spirit" represented by the conspiracy to withhold possessions by Ananias and Sapphira (5:1-11) — Luke provides another glimpse of the Jerusalem community's practice of sharing possessions in his account of the dispute that arose over the feeding of the Hebrew and Hellenist widows (6:1-6), a conflict that necessitated a decision to expand ministry within the community. Since the feeding of orphans, widows, and sojourners was a common obligation taken on by Jewish synagogues, attested also among the early Christians in 1 Timothy 5:16, Luke once more shapes his portrait of the church as the restored Israel that observes all the commandments of Torah ensuring there be "no needy person among them" (Deut 15:4). By showing the community devoting its resources to those totally unable to reciprocate, furthermore, Luke indicates that it embodies the prophetic mandate of giving to others without expecting a return (Luke 6:30-35).

Consistent with the Gospel narrative, Luke uses a character's disposition of possessions as a character indicator. In Joppa lived a disciple named Tabitha who was "completely occupied with good deeds and almsgiving" (Acts 9:36) and who appears to live at the center of a community of poor widows (9:39). Like the Gentile centurion in Luke's Gospel, of whom Jesus is told, "he loves our nation and he built the synagogue for us" (Luke 7:5), the Gentile centurion Cornelius in Caesarea is identified as one who was "devout and God-fearing along with his whole household, who used to give alms generously to the Jewish people and pray to God constantly" (Acts 10:2). Cornelius is told by the angel that "your prayers and almsgiving have ascended as a memorial offering before God" (10:4). By focusing on his prayer and sharing of possessions, Luke identifies Cornelius as one who lives by the prophetic program even before hearing the good news. He is, as Peter subsequently states, among the righteous: "In every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him" (10:35). In the case of both Tabitha and Cornelius, furthermore, the household hospitality shown Peter further demonstrates openness to the prophetic visitation (9:38-41; 10:24-33).

In three ways, Luke shows Paul embodying the prophetic word through the use of possessions. As noted earlier, when Paul addresses the elders of the church of Ephesus he describes his personal practice as based in the words of Jesus:

I have never wanted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You know very well that these very hands have served my needs and my companions. In every way I have shown you that by hard work of that sort we must help the weak, and keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus who himself said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." (Acts 20:33-35)

Although Luke — undoubtedly for reasons of his own — does not explicitly state that Paul gathered a collection for the church in Jerusalem from among his Gentile communities, something that, according to the letters, occupied much of Paul's time and effort (Gal 2:10; 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9, Rom 15:25-39), he does have Paul state in his defense before Felix, "After many years I came to bring alms for my nation and offerings" (Acts 24:17), leading the prefect to anticipate receiving a bribe from him (24:26). Finally, Luke shows Paul as intimately involved in the collection for the Jerusalem church taken up by the church in Antioch. Because the great famine threatened the church in Jerusalem, "the disciples determined that, according to ability, each should send relief to the brothers who lived in Judea. This they did, sending it to the presbyters in care of Barnabas and Saul" (11:29-30). Just before the two are commissioned for their itinerant mission in 13:1-4, Luke takes care in 12:25 to note that they had completed "their relief mission" (diakonia).

With respect to the use of possessions, then, Luke shows the church to be thoroughly in line with the prophetic word announced by Jesus. There is no trace of ecclesiastical wealth or the desire for wealth. Indeed, when Simon Magus offers money to acquire the power to bestow the spirit (8:18-19), he is told by Peter, "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money. You have no share or lot in this matter, for your heart is not upright before God. Repent of this wickedness of yours and pray to the Lord, that, if possible, your intention may be forgiven" (8:20-22). The translation "share or lot in this matter" does not quite capture the Greek phrase, which suggests a sharing in the prophetic word from which Simon's self-aggrandizement excludes him. The mark of true discipleship in Acts is the sharing of possessions, especially with those most needy. The greatest difference in this part of Luke's narrative is that such sharing is embodied by the practice not only of individuals (Peter, Barnabas, Tabitha, Cornelius, Paul), but by the community of disciples as such.
Itinerancy

I suggested that in the Gospel narrative the Jesus movement truly was a “movement” because Jesus and the disciples were constantly in motion. I also suggested that itinerancy is a dimension of poverty: lack of a proper location and the willingness to move anywhere in response to the promptings of the spirit demand a complete dependence on God and on the willingness of others to provide hospitality. Itinerancy in this sense is another name for homelessness.

The first impression one gets of the church in Jerusalem is that it is settled in that place. But I suggested above that Luke already points to a certain marginality with respect to place when he describes the first believers as gathering in the temple precincts while they are selling field and house to provide for the needs of others. But immediately after the death of Stephen, Luke suggests that only the apostles stay in Jerusalem, while other disciples are “scattered” through Judea and Samaria. This small notice sets the pattern for the remainder of the narrative, which shows the prophetic message spreading across the Mediterranean world and its proclaimers constantly on the move. As I observed earlier, Luke makes the continuation of the gospel mission unmistakable by having the disciples travel two by two (in fulfillment of Jesus’ command in Luke 10:1) and shake the dust off their feet when they are rejected (Acts 13:51; see Luke 9:5; 10:11).

Peter and John visit the church in Samaria (8:14) before returning to Jerusalem (8:25). Peter travels on his own to Lydda (9:32), Joppa (9:36), Caesarea (10:24), and back to Jerusalem (11:2), before leaving “for another place” (12:17) after his escape from prison. Luke brings him back to Jerusalem for the council deciding the inclusion of the Gentiles in 15:7. Philip, another one filled with the prophetic spirit, travels to Samaria (8:5) and then to Gaza (8:26) before being snatched by the spirit and ending in Azotus and other towns on the way to Caesarea (8:39-40). Hellenists travel from Jerusalem to Antioch where they proclaim the good news to the Greeks (11:19-20). Barnabas travels from Jerusalem to the church in Antioch (11:22), then to Tarsus to pick up Paul (11:25) and bring him to Antioch (11:26), and from there delivers (with Paul) the collection for the church in Jerusalem (11:30).

Paul travels from Damascus, where he was instructed in the faith and baptized (9:18), to Jerusalem (9:26) to join the community there. He is sent on to Tarsus (9:30) and then brought by Barnabas to Antioch (11:26). After completing the delivery of the collection to Jerusalem (11:30; 12:25), Paul and Barnabas together are commissioned by the church in Antioch (13:2) and travel to Cyprus (13:4), Antioch of Pisidia (13:14), Iconium (14:1), Lystra and Derbe (14:6, 8, 20), and then circle back through the same communities (14:21). They then make their way through Pisidia to Pamphylia (14:24), to Perga and Attalia (14:25), before arriving back at Antioch (14:26), and then, in response to controversy, to the council in Jerusalem (15:2). After the dispute with Barnabas, Paul travels with Silas (and Timothy) through Syria and Cilicia (15:41) to Lystra (16:1) and the Phrygian and Galatian territory (16:6). He moves from Troas (16:8) to Neapolis and Philippi (16:11-12), then to Thessalonica (17:1), Beroea (17:10), Athens (17:15), and Corinth (18:1). After some time, he travels to Ephesus (18:19), Caesarea (18:22), Antioch (18:22), Galatia and Phrygia (18:23), and back to Ephesus (19:1). Again after some time, he travels to Macedonia (20:1), Greece (20:2), back to Philippi (20:6), then to Troas (20:6), Miletus (20:14-15), Tyre (21:1-6), Ptolemaeus, and Caesarea (21:8), and finally to Jerusalem (21:17). As a prisoner, he moves from Jerusalem to Caesarea (23:23), and then is taken on a lengthy and dangerous sea voyage that ends in shipwreck (27:1-44). He moves from Malta (28:1-10) by stages to Rome (28:16).

The impressive journeys of Peter, Philip, Paul, Barnabas, and Silas are coordinated with the movements of minor characters: the prophets who come to Antioch from Jerusalem (11:27) or who deliver the apostolic letter from Jerusalem to the churches of Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (15:22-23, 30-32) before being sent back to Jerusalem (15:33); Silas and Timothy, who travel from Thessalonica to meet Paul in Corinith (18:5); Priscilla and Aquila, who come from Rome to Corinth (18:2) and then travel from Corinth to Ephesus (18:26-27); Apollos, who comes from Alexandria to Ephesus and is sent by the disciples to Corinth (18:24-27). This constant movement and mission depicts a church that responds to the promptings of the spirit and is not defined in terms of place; the church emphatically continues the prophetic style of itinerancy practiced and commanded by the prophet Jesus.

Prayer

The Gospel emphasized the prayer of the prophet Jesus as the practice that enabled the communication of the Holy Spirit and the discernment of God’s will in the concrete circumstances of his life; the Gospel also showed Jesus teaching his disciples how to pray, above all with perseverance. The narrative of Acts is rich in its display of this form of prophetic embodi-
ment among the disciples. Even before Pentecost, those who had come from Galilee and gathered around the Eleven "devoted themselves with one accord to prayer" (Acts 1:14). The assembly likewise prayed to be shown who was to replace Judas among the Twelve (1:24). The community thus shows itself, just as Jesus did at his baptism, prepared for the outpouring of the prophetic spirit (2:1-4).

The community that responded to Peter's proclamation by being baptized also received the Holy Spirit (2:38) and "devoted themselves . . . to the prayers" (2:42), as shown by the intense petition expressed "with one accord" by the gathered associates of the Twelve after the first harassment by the Sanhedrin (4:23-30). The connection between prayer and the spirit is shown vividly by Luke's description of the outcome: "As they prayed, the place where they were gathered shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness" (4:31).

As in the Pentecost story, it is the community as such and not simply an individual that receives the spirit and speaks God's word. Luke shows the Jerusalem community gathered again in prayer when Peter is imprisoned (12:12) and the church at Antioch at worship when the Holy Spirit commissions Barnabas and Paul for their ministry (13:2-3).

Luke also shows individual prophetic characters in acts engaged in prayer. In imitation of Jesus at his death, Stephen cries out as he is being stoned, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59; see Luke 23:46), and, embodying both the command of Jesus concerning forgiveness (Luke 6:35) and the example of Jesus at his death (Luke 23:34), he asks forgiveness for his enemies: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). Peter prays before raising Tabitha from the dead (9:40). Both Peter and Cornelius are at prayer when they experience the visions that set in motion a new stage of God's visitation (10:2; 9, 30; 115).

Paul in particular is a man of constant prayer. He remains in prayer after his encounter with the risen Lord (9:11). In his later defense speech before the Jerusalem Jews, Paul reports that while praying in the temple he experienced a vision of Jesus (22:17-18). Paul and Barnabas appoint elders in local churches "with prayer and fasting" (14:23). It is when they are seeking "a place for prayer" that Paul meets Lydia and exorcizes the slave girl with an oracular spirit (16:13, 16), and while in the Philippian jail, Paul and Barnabas "were praying and singing hymns to God as the prisoners listened," when an earthquake frees them from their captivity (16:25). On his way to Jerusalem and his final arrest, Paul prays together with the Ephesian elders at Miletus (20:36); in the same fashion, he kneels on the beach to pray with all the believers at Caesarea (21:5). When Paul declares his determination to continue to Jerusalem despite prophecies of his death, the community responds, "The Lord's will be done" (21:14). When he and his shipmates were in deadly peril because of the storm at sea, Paul "gave thanks to God in front of them all, broke [bread], and began to eat. They were all encouraged and took some food themselves" (27:35-36).

In sum, the narrative of Acts displays the consistent embodiment of the prophetic word with respect to prayer, consistent both with the command and practice of Jesus. The prophetic leaders and the community as a whole engage in prayer, not as a matter of formal ritual—although Luke never suggests that such formal prayer is problematic—but as a matter of prophetic consciousness: prayer is the place above all where empowerment by the Holy Spirit can happen.

**Servant Leadership**

This aspect of prophetic embodiment is particularly important for properly assessing Luke's understanding of the church in Acts. The very first thing that should be stated is that, as soon as one speaks about a community rather than an individual, issues of boundary and authority necessarily come into play. It is a sociological fantasy to conceive of a "charismatic community" with no structure and no decision-making apparatus. There are necessarily going to be elements in Luke's depiction of the church, therefore, that are lacking in his portrayal of Jesus and the disciples on the road. The real question is the extent to which his portrayal of institution and authority has a character consistent with the prophet's vision of a countercultural people.

Several aspects of Luke's depiction of leadership in Acts are immediately striking when compared, for example, to a contemporary Jewish sectarian movement. At Qumran, there is a distinct hierarchical authority structure that imitates the biblical legislation for the temple cult: leadership is conceived in terms of priests and Levites. Such leadership is theologically legitimated, furthermore, by the ideological conviction that the Dead Sea community is the authentic temple where the spiritual sacrifices of study and prayer are offered to God—in contrast to the corrupt worship and leadership in the Jerusalem temple. Luke lacks either a hierarchi-
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cal structure of leadership or an elaborate theological legitimation for leadership. He treats respectively the charismatic leadership of the Twelve and others who are “filled with the spirit” as apostles and witnesses, and whose ministry, as we have seen, is almost entirely itinerant, and the local leadership over specific communities exercised by “elders.”

Although Luke wants to show the Twelve as “ruling over the tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:30) and, as I have shown, emphasizes the authority of Peter and John particularly over the people, in contrast to the decreasing ability of the Sanhedrin to stop the prophetic movement, it is equally the case that he conceives of their authority in terms of the servant leadership mandated and exemplified by the prophet Jesus. Thus, although the placing of possessions at the feet of the apostles (Acts 4:34-35, 37; 5:2) symbolizes the recognition of their authority within the community, Luke’s description of the same apostles as distributing the goods to each one according to need also continues the theme of leadership as table service established by the Gospel (Luke 9:10-16; 12:35-48; 22:25-30).

The same symbolism is employed in Luke’s account of the choice of the Seven in Acts 6:1-6. Readers have often puzzled over the fact that the proposed solution to the crisis of the neglect of Hellenist widows made little practical sense. The withdrawal of the Twelve is inadequately compensated by the addition of the Seven. And in fact, the Seven do not wait on tables in the literal sense. Stephen and Philip are described as prophets and exercise the “ministry of the word” in the same manner as the Twelve, leaving—if we are to be rigorously logical—no one to feed the widows! The best explanation for the anomalies is that the story was really about the transmission of authority from the Twelve to others, and that a prophetic authority—using the imagery of “waiting on tables” to signify that this authority, like that of the Twelve—must conform to the pattern of service taught and practiced by Jesus.

Luke’s perception that apostolic authority should be for the service of others rather than the glory of the minister is made clear as well by the instances in which both Peter and Paul defecit efforts to honor them as more than human. When Peter enters Cornelius’s house, the centurion “falling at his feet, paid him homage,” and Peter responds, “Get up, I myself am also a human being” (10:25-26). Even more dramatically, when Paul heals a lame man in Lystra, the native population sought to honor him as Hermes and Barnabas as Zeus, saying, “The gods have come among us in human form” (14:11). Paul and Barnabas tear their garments in response, and Paul declares, “Men, why are you doing this? We are of the same na-

ture as you, human beings. We proclaim to you good news that you should turn from these idols to the living God who made heaven and earth and sea and all that is in them” (14:15).

Even more remarkable, Luke shows the prophetic leaders as eschewing an authoritarian mode in favor of collaborative discernment and decision-making. In the account of the election of Matthias (1:11-26), for example, Peter identifies the issue for the gathered assembly and interprets it through the citation of Scripture, but it is the assembly that puts forward two candidates over whom the community then prays for God’s choice of who would replace Judas in the circle of the Twelve. Similarly, in the crisis over the need for an expanded ministry (6:1-6), the Twelve identify the problem and ask the community to nominate from among their number seven men; the apostles then pray and lay hands on those chosen. When the church in Jerusalem is presented with the challenge of a former enemy (Saul) seeking a place in its fellowship, Barnabas sponsors Paul, presenting the story of his conversion and prior ministry to the apostles; they accept him, and he practices his ministry in their midst (9:26-29). But when the Hellenists seek to kill Paul, it is “the brothers” who secure his safety by taking him to Caesarea and sending him on to Tarsus (9:30).

The most impressive example of servant leadership is displayed in Luke’s long narrative about the beginning of the Gentile mission, first with Peter’s baptism of Cornelius’s household (10:44-48), then with anonymous Hellenists preaching directly to Greeks (11:19-21), then with an expanded mission through Paul and Barnabas (13:1-14:28). At each stage, Luke shows the interplay of experience, narrative, and the discernment of God’s plan, carried out by all the leaders involved (see 11:1-18). The climactic council in Jerusalem brings all these factors together, as Peter, Barnabas, and Paul all testify to the work that God had done among the Gentiles, and after debate and discussion, James and the other Jerusalem leaders concur that Gentiles need not be circumcised or observe Torah, beyond the minimum required to maintain communion between Jewish and Gentile believers (15:1-21). The declaration, “It is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us” (15:28)—which at first blush may sound like an arrogant usurpation of divine authority—is actually the humble recognition that the church needed to catch up with what the Spirit was doing in the world. The tone of the letter sent to the troubled churches is likewise humble and conciliatory, with apologies for the commotion caused by “some of our number” (15:24); the letter, moreover, is delivered to those churches by personal delegates who strengthened and exhosted the believers (15:32).
In addition to the itinerant, charismatic leadership of the Twelve and other apostolic witnesses, Luke notes the presence of elders in specific communities, especially Jerusalem (11:30; 21:8); in the council deciding the question of Gentile admission, Luke consistently pairs “apostles and elders” in Jerusalem (15:2, 4, 6, 22; 16:4). Paul and Barnabas appoint elders in the churches they had founded (14:23), and Paul gives his farewell address to the elders of the church of Ephesus (20:17). Only two things need be said about these elders. The first is that such boards of elders were the standard form of organization in both Greco-Roman and Jewish associations and synagogues, and for the most part they served straightforward administrative rather than cultic functions. The second is that Paul’s farewell discourse to the Ephesian elders, in which he places himself explicitly as a model of leadership, emphasizes service over dominance.

Paul reminds them of his own “service of the Lord” (using the Greek term for slavery) that was carried out with “lowly-mindedness” and tears and testings (20:19). All these terms echo Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Plain. Paul taught them both in public and in their houses “what was for their benefit” (20:20), as he proclaimed repentance to both Jews and Gentiles (2021). Paul knows through the spirit that imprisonment and hardship await him, but he regards this as “finishing the ministry” (Greek diakonia) he received from the Lord (20:24). At the end of the sermon, as we saw above, Paul speaks of his own practice of working to share possessions with the weak as obedience to the words of Jesus (20:34-35). There is nothing in Paul’s mode of leadership that suggests anything but an embodiment of the prophetic word.

What, then, about those elders in Ephesus whom “the Holy Spirit has appointed as overseers” (Greek episkopoi) to shepherd the flock that is the church of God” (20:28)? In this context, the Greek term has no cultic or hierarchical connotations. The translations “overseer” or “superintendent” or “supervisor,” are all more accurate than “bishop.” Paul tells them to “keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock” (20:28): the stress is not on their position or honor but on their personal integrity and the well-being of the community. The church, furthermore, does not belong to them, but is one that God acquired “through his own blood.” Their task, then, is to stay steady even when false teachers (“wolves”) seek to savage the flock (20:29-31). If the local leader can be called the shepherd of a flock whose task is to protect against wolves, then leadership is not about glory but about selfless service to God and to the people.

**Challenge to the Contemporary Church**

Luke’s portrayal of Jesus and his disciples as embodying God’s countercultural vision for “a people prepared for the Lord” is consistent throughout the narrative of both the Gospel and Acts. We do well to remember that it is an idealized picture: Luke constructs the character of Jesus and the early church in accord with what he understood Jesus’ prophetic message to have been. I do not mean to suggest that there was no basis in reality for his portrait, only that his portrait isolates and develops those traits that form an embodiment of the prophetic word. His is, as I have suggested, a utopian vision for the church.

It is, therefore, slightly unfair to use his depiction as a rigid measuring stick for the contemporary church. In every age, finding the failures to match the prophetic vision would be easy work, simply because the church is human and humans are frail. They have been gifted by the Holy Spirit, we are convinced, but however willing the spirit is, the flesh is always weak, and the church always has been and always will be but an imperfect instrument for expressing God’s word and showing forth the good news. If failure and sin are the constant companions of individuals, they are even more persistently and publicly the bane of institutions, whose natural tendency is toward corruption.

Even when this has been recognized, however, it remains important for the contemporary church (in every age) to regard Luke’s characterization as a measure for its life, not because the church lives up to it, but because without attention to such a utopian vision the church will fall even more disastrously short of its best identity. At stake, after all, is the credibility of the message that the church proclaims. If the church proclaims as good news God’s reversal of conventional norms, and teaches as the requirement of repentance that believers live according to the measure of the prophetic word, its proclamation and teaching reveal itself as empty, even hypocritical, when the church itself lacks convincing signs of living by, embodying, the values it espouses. What can it mean to be “saved from this generation” if nothing in the actual behavior of the church distinguishes it from this generation? A serious engagement with the prophetic challenge of Luke-Acts means, then, that every community calling itself church must include in its examination of conscience a consideration of the four marks of prophetic embodiment.
Prayer

The form of prophetic embodiment to which the church has been most faithful through the centuries has undoubtedly been prayer. Whether with the formal cadences of the Book of Common Prayer, or the blessings in the Rituale Romanum, or the ecstatic utterance in Pentecostal assemblies, or the free-style conversations with God practiced by many Evangelicals, the steady commitment to prayer by Christians is obvious. The most precious examples of Christian literature, from Augustine's Confessions to the Journals of Thomas Merton, are shot through with prayer. And virtually every act of Christian worship has included the prayer taught by Jesus to his disciples, so that, from the time of the apostles to the present, believers have prayed that God's kingdom be realized (Luke 11:2).

The church can rightly examine itself, however, concerning the prophetic character of its prayer. The prayer of believers today tends to take the form either of public worship (the prayer of praise) or of individual request (the prayer of petition). These are both legitimate expressions of prayer, found in the mouth of Jesus and of the apostles. But still, it is appropriate to ask if the prayer found in worship is more often ritual expression than heartfelt commitment. It is not unseemly to ask whether the prayers uttered in private are exercises in self-interest, more often pleas that what we will be done rather than what God wills.

More pertinent to the issue of prophetic embodiment, though, is the question whether Christians appreciate and practice their communal prayer as an expression of the politics of God's kingdom. The single greatest countercultural act Christians perform is to worship together and proclaim that Jesus is Lord. To cease from the constant round of commerce and consumption, to resist the manipulation of media that insists that working and possessing defines worth, and to proclaim with the body language of communal gathering that Jesus, not any other power, is Lord is to enact the politics of God's kingdom and to embody the prayer "your kingdom come." Yet, that community prayer has this prophetic dimension is seldom even part of Christian consciousness.

Similarly, the prayer of individuals can be a form of prophetic embodiment when it is not a matter of petition but of silent attentiveness. Whether taking the form of set times of silence before the Lord — again, a gesture of withdrawal from and resistance to the claim of the world that worth is measured by effort and acquisition — or taking the form of constant attentiveness to the presence of God and of God's word within and behind the sur-

faces of the world's self-presentation, such prayer serves for believers today, as it did for Jesus and the apostles, as a means of prophetic discernment and readiness. The recovery of contemplative prayer and mysticism in the church today is part of the recovery of prophetic consciousness.

Poverty/Sharing Possessions

As with the practice of prayer, we must acknowledge at once the many ways in which churches have through the ages shared possessions, especially with the most needy. Christians have built and managed hospitals and orphanages and shelters for the homeless; they have donated money and good for the needy of lands far away; they have participated in efforts to make better the lot of the diseased and depressed. Missionaries have worked tirelessly to improve the conditions of the world's destitute. The "doing of good works" has always included the practice of almsgiving, and continues to do so today.

It must also be acknowledged that many Christians both in the past and the present have pursued a more radical ideal with respect to possessions, embracing an evangelical poverty either as a sign of identification with Christ or the little ones with whom Christ identified himself; joining in communities that practiced a sharing of possessions in imitation of the apostolic church in which nothing is claimed as one's own and everything is shared equally; adopting a mendicant manner of life dependent on the generosity and hospitality of others; living among the poorest of the poor in city slum and rural village.

Over against all these admirable expressions of obedience to the prophetic vision, however, stands the unassailable fact that the church, as institution, has far more often through the centuries been a sign of wealth rather than of poverty and has aligned itself with the rich and powerful on earth more than the weak and lowly. The favor shown the Catholic church by wealthy patrons made of medieval monasteries treasure-troves of gold and jewel-encrusted vessels, fabulous vestments, and priceless libraries; made of Renaissance churches showplaces of architecture and art. The astounding material wealth accrued by the Catholic church, symbolized by the glittering grandeur of the Vatican, makes it difficult to make the case that the church stands as a prophetic challenge to the acquisitive instincts of the world or its measurement of worth through possessions.

The notorious wealth of the Vatican makes an easy — and legitimate
— target for prophetic criticism. But the wealth of Roman Catholicism is not the only example of Christianity's failure to realize an institutional witness to the prophetic word. The various Crystal Cathedrals and Towers of Power and suburban megachurches that stand as witness to the spirit of entrepreneurship more than to the spirit of evangelical poverty, which exemplify the modes of rationalization and investment and advertising that precisely mimic the corporate culture of the First World, are no less scandalous as the settings within which the beatitudes of the prophet Jesus are read from gilded pulpits. When the word proclaimed in such settings by preachers in fine garments or splendid haberdashery is “the Gospel of Prosperity,” to be sure, there is at least a consistency between message and embodiment. But both message and embodiment are far from the good news announced and personified by the prophet Jesus.

The spirit of competition and commodification characterize contemporary churches in subtler ways, whenever they think of success in terms of swelling membership or expanded staff or elaborate programs or new buildings or expanded reputation, rather than in terms of fruitfulness of life, faithful discipleship, and constant conversion. Even when such modes of success lead to programs that “share possessions” with others, they tend to resemble the patterns of patronage rejected by Jesus (Luke 22:26) rather than the “giving of one's very life” that he praised in the case of the poor widow (Luke 21:4). We remember that when Jesus announced that the poor were blessed because theirs was the kingdom of God, he did so not as a wealthy benefactor but as one who shared the state of the poor. Somehow, the church needs to think through the question of how, as an institution, it might at least approximate such embodiment.

**Itinerancy**

In Luke-Acts, itinerancy is as much a mark of prophetic embodiment as poverty and prayer. Indeed, it can be seen as an aspect of those other two marks: moving from place to place in response to the Holy Spirit demands travelling light, being unencumbered by relationships and possessions; and such freedom of movement demands in turn an openness to the Spirit’s direction, available through constant prayer. It is safe to say that it is an ideal that has been realized or even attempted only sporadically in the history of Christianity, simply because when movements become institutions they become less mobile, and the larger and more complex they be-
Precisely because Acts shows us the disciples — as a community — continuing to embody the ideal of itinerancy in imitation of Jesus, it poses a particularly sharp question to the church today. Like the other prophetic values (prayer, poverty, servant leadership), itinerancy requires translation to changing circumstances. Such translation, after all, is an example of the responsiveness and flexible freedom that itinerancy symbolizes. Churches today are not likely to abandon all things and hit the road as did the Twelve and the Seventy and Paul and Barnabas. But they need to ask themselves about the cost of abandoning this form of prophetic abandonment entirely. And they can begin by examining the ways in which their organizational structures actually hamper rather than facilitate obedience to the Holy Spirit.

**Servant Leadership**

The church’s failures to embody the prophetic ideals of poverty and itinerancy are connected to its failure to exercise servant leadership in the manner taught and exemplified by Jesus and the apostles. Perhaps the most obvious example is found among the seriously self-aggrandizing televangelists whose manner of life and style of leadership resemble much more those of the scribes who “love places of honor at banquets and devour the houses of widows” (Luke 20:46) rather than serve at tables as did Jesus who declared, “I am among you as the one who serves” (Luke 22:27). The cult of personality encouraged by some such preachers leads them to invite rather than repel inappropriate homage, quite unlike Peter, who deflected the honor shown him by Cornelius, “Get up. I myself am also a human being” (Acts 10:26). The problem of servant leadership, however, goes far beyond personal style or even personal disposition. It arises also from institutional structures.

The greater the wealth of the church, the more centralized and elaborate its authority structures, the more ministry within the church becomes a matter of career advancement and privilege rather than of simple service to the needs of people. The hierarchy becomes a caste that exhibits the same instincts for self-preservation and mutual protection against outsiders — other believers! — found among members of other castes. The leaders at the very top, the leaders at the very center are concerned mainly with what happens at the top and at the center; they grow ever more remote from the discernment of what God is doing at the margins — the place, we shall see in the next chapter, where God’s spirit most characteristically acts for creative change.

Such remoteness, in turn, breeds attitudes of entitlement and privilege: leadership appears to those who exercise it as an endowment rather than a mandate; position is held for the sake of honor more than for sacrificial devotion to others; authority easily becomes domination; direction quickly becomes control, and dissent regarded as an apostasy that requires first discipline and then exclusion. The words of Jesus to the disciples at the Last Supper as they fought over “which of them should be regarded as the greatest” ought to haunt such leaders and ought to generate prophetic critique among the people of God: “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them and those in authority over them are addressed as benefactors; but among you it shall not be so” (Luke 22:25-26).

The four marks of the prophetic character or prophetic embodiment in Luke-Acts are, as I have shown, interconnected. Poverty and the sharing of possessions, prayer, itinerancy, and servant leadership form an internally coherent set of dispositions and practices that give real expression to God’s vision for humanity. For the church to seek such embodiment, it must first repent, that is, undergo a real conversion in the way it thinks about things and assigns value. But in addition to a change of dispositions, the church must also practice those actions that demonstrate repentance, and this means the church must undergo the painful and slow process of actual institutional change.