

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Session 2: THE WORLD OF ACTS

1) In this session, we will

- explore the world of Acts in which the early Christians lived and preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- consider our own context in Singapore, and see whether there are lessons for us today.
- turn to see how Paul contextualized the message of the gospel to different groups of people

2) I will deal with 3 aspects of the world of Acts:

a) The political world:

We need to understand the political background in the intertestamental period in order to understand the world of Acts in the first century AD.

i) Under Persian Rule after OT period (424 – 331 BC)

- The Jews returned from exile to Jerusalem, where they rebuilt the temple and the walls of Jerusalem – Ezra & Nehemiah
- Obedience of the Law became very important because the Jews believed that their obedience would bring about their freedom. The exile happened because of their disobedience.
- This period saw the rise of the synagogue.
- This was also the beginning of oral Law. The Jews sought to apply the Law to every area of their lives. Gradually a body of oral tradition - interpretation and application – grew as they sought to apply the Law of Moses in new situations.
- This was the time when Aramaic was established as the main language for business and international relations in many parts of the Persian Empire.

ii) Under Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic Period (331 – 167 BC)

- Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire, and extended his kingdom beyond it to include Egypt and India.
- Israel came under Greek rule in 331 BC.
- Hellenization – the spread of Greek culture and influence language throughout the Empire.
- Impact of Hellenization on Jews: adoption of Greek culture – see 2 Macc. 4:10-17 (late 170s BC); Greek became the common language. Many Jews in Palestine would know some Hebrew (for religious purposes), Aramaic as their vernacular, and Greek for business, commerce and relations with the military and political authorities. The

Diaspora Jews began to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek as early as the mid-third century BC – this is the Septuagint or LXX.

- Alexander died in 323 BC, at the age of 33. He left no heirs, and there was a struggle for power.
- The empire came under the rule of two dynasties. The northern half, based in Syria, was under the Seleucid rule while the southern half, based in Egypt, came under Ptolemaic control.
- Israel was under **Ptolemaic control** from 311 – 198 BC. This was a period of relative peace and freedom for Jews.
- Israel came under **Seleucid rule** in 198 BC when Antiochus III conquered and occupied Israel. The Jews continued to have freedom and self-government until Antiochus IV came on the scene in 175 BC. He imposed heavy taxation on the Jews in order to pay tribute to Rome under a treaty made in 188 BC. He took upon himself the name of Antiochus Epiphanes – a claim to divine manifestation. He ransacked the temple in Jerusalem and took away its sacred objects and treasury monies (1 Macc. 1:20-23). Two years later he again looted the city and slaughtered many (1 Macc. 1:29-32). He also renamed the temple for Zeus Olympius, and set up pagan altars where swine were sacrificed. He also forbade circumcision, Sabbath observance, banned the Torah and ordered sacrifices to be made to pagan gods. On the 15th day of Chisleve (Dec. 167 BC.), he erected a desolating sacrifice on the altar of burnt offering (1 Macc. 1:54). Many Jews understood the ‘abomination of desolation’ in Dan. 11 to refer to this event. The books of the Law were burnt.

iii) The Maccabean Revolt and the Hasmonean Dynasty (176 – 63 BC) –

- Some Jews complied with Antiochus’ orders. But there were others who revolted.
- By 164 BC Judas Maccabees had gained control of the temple and had purified it. The Jews marked this with the celebration of the Feast of Dedication (or Hanukkah). This was the Feast of Dedication found in John 10:22 This background helps us to understand the hostile relations between Jews and Gentiles in the NT. Jewish hatred for the Gentiles intensified during the Maccabean revolt.
- The Maccabees dominated Israel from then on. This ushered in a period of independence until the Romans conquered it in 63 BC. Jewish nationalism was very strong during this period. It kindled hopes for a restored kingdom under the rule of a king from the line of David (Ps. Sol. 17:21-24). By the time of the Gospels, many Jews were still living in expectation of their coming Messiah or king.
- During this period, the Jews were ruled by a succession of ‘priest-kings’ (the Hasmonean dynasty).

iv) The Roman Period (63 BC through the entire NT era)

- Pompey invaded Jerusalem in 63 BC, profaned the temple by entering into the Holy of Holies.
- The Romans set up 'client-kings' at the provincial and regional levels. These acted as representatives of the Roman Emperor who ruled from Rome.
- During the Roman Empire, the Jews generally enjoyed freedom of religion. They were able to worship according to their own traditions and were not required to take part in emperor worship (more about this later). This started during the reign of Julius Caesar, when Antipater (father of Herod the Great; from 63-43 BC) helped the emperor. In return, the emperor reduced Israel's taxes, gave her permission to rebuild Jerusalem's walls and allowed Judaism a special status. Judaism became a legal religion. During the early days of the church, Christians were regarded as part of the Jewish sect and thus enjoyed protection and privileges granted the Jews. But later it became clear that Christians were different from the Jews. In AD 64 Emperor Nero blamed the fire of Rome on Christians.
- After Antipater's death, there was a power struggle. Herod won and ruled over Israel from 37 – 4 BC. Towards the end of his reign he became overly suspicious of people whom he thought were going to overthrow him. So he executed a lot of people, including some of his sons and his most loved wife Marianne. This was the Herod who ordered the massacre of young children of Bethlehem when he heard from the Magi that they had come to worship the King of the Jews (Matt. 2:1ff). This can be found in Josephus' account. Herod was the one who restored the temple. Work began in 19 BC and went on until AD 63, just a few years before the complete destruction by the Romans in AD 70. Herod made massive improvements and extensions to the temple, which was not in a good state when Herod came to power. The temple is a very important theme in the Gospels.
- When Herod died, he gave his kingdom to his three sons: Archeleus (Judea & Samaria), Herod Antipas (Galilee & Perea), and Philip (Northern Palestine) [See map]. Herod Antipas ruled Galilee until AD 39, and is the Herod who appears in the later part of Jesus' life (Matt. 14:1ff; Luke 23:6-12). He is the Herod who married Herodias, and he sentenced John the Baptist to death.
- Archelaus was banished by the Romans in AD 6, and Rome appointed governors/procurators to control this southern part of Israel (Judea & Samaria). Pontius Pilate was the governor from AD 26-36. He ruled as the representative of the emperor and had to remain loyal to the emperor. So when he was accused of not being a friend of Caesar if he were to release Jesus, he took it very seriously and immediately handed Jesus over to the Jews (John 19:12). Other governors in Acts – Felix and Festus.
- Herod Agrippa I succeeded Antipas in 44 AD. This is the Herod in Acts 12.

King Herod Agrippa I (Acts 12:1-4, 19-23)

Against this political background, let us look at the actions of King Herod in 12:1-4, 19-23. Luke tells us that he arrested some Christians. James the brother of John was executed. When he finds that this pleases the Jews, he arrests Peter and puts him in maximum security prison. Later on, God delivers him from prison in a miraculous way.

Why does God allow James to be killed and Peter to be rescued? Luke does not tell us the answer. But he goes on to record the death of Herod in 12:19-23. His death must surely be seen as God vindicating his name.

Herod is in Caesarea, and a delegation from Tyre and Sidon come to him to make peace with him. They need Herod for food. They ask Blastus, a trusted servant of the king, to be their intermediary. On the appointed day, Herod sits on the throne and delivers his message. The people shout: *This is the voice of a god, not a man*. Luke writes: *Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died*.

Is this account authentic? Josephus, a Jewish historian (37-100AD) became a loyal supporter of Rome and enjoyed royal patronage. His writings are pro-Roman but a good source of the history of the Jewish people during the intertestamental period. This is his record of Herod's death:

On the second day of the shows Agrippa put on a robe made of silver throughout, of quite wonderful weaving, and entered the theatre at break of day. Then the silver shone and glittered wonderfully as the sun's first rays fell on it, and its resplendence inspired a sort of fear and trembling in those who gazed at it. Immediately his flatterers called out from various directions, in language which boded him no good, for they invoked him as a god: 'Be gracious to us! they cried. 'Hitherto we have revered you as a human being, but henceforth we confess you to be more than moral nature.' He did not rebuke them, nor did he repudiate their impious flattery. But soon afterward he looked up and saw an owl sitting on a rope above his head, and recognised it at once as a messenger of evil as on a former occasion it had been a messenger of good; and a pang of grief pierced his heart. At the same time he was seized with a severe pain in his bowels, which quickly increased in intensity ... He was hastily carried into the palace, and ... when he had suffered continuously for five days from the pain in his belly, he died, in the fifty-fourth year of his life and the seventh year of his kingship.¹

Luke's account is consistent with Josephus' version with a few differences. For Luke, Herod's death was an act of God and a direct judgement on his opposition against God and his people, and his failure to give praise to God. Luke was looking at the event from a theological point of view: God is sovereign and God is vindicating his name and his people.

For Josephus, he recorded a historical event. Both accounts are clear that Herod was struck with pain immediately. Both attribute the death to Herod's failure to give God the glory. Josephus tells us that he died five days later. Luke however records that an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died. Some have said that Herod had some

¹ Josephus, *Antiquities* 19.8.343-350.

kind of intestinal worms which was a common condition at that time. It could also be that Luke was using a phrase which some ancient writers used when speaking of the terrible way in which some people die, especially those who opposed the gods and so suffered God's judgement.

John Stott sees Herod's death as similar to the death of Antiochus Epiphanes, who 'had thought to grasp the stars of heaven' but 'was seized with an incurable pain in his bowels and with excruciating internal torture²', until he died.

So Luke's account is not a fanciful tale. It is a historical account but from a theological perspective. We see a contrast between the beginning of Acts 12 and the end. In 12:1-4, we see Herod's power in executing James and imprisoning Peter. At the end of chapter 12, Herod is dead, Peter is free, and the word of God continued to increase and spread. No one – whether tyrant or dictator or repressive government – can stop God's word from spreading. From chapter 13 onwards, we find Paul and others bringing the gospel to the Gentile world. This fulfils God's programme in Acts 1:8 – *you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*

The Roman Emperor

Luke makes a direct reference to Caesar's decrees in Acts 17:1-9, which is about the beginning of the church in Thessalonica:

- Paul & Silas come to Thessalonica after they are released from the jail in Philippi. As is Paul's custom, he goes to the synagogue to preach. He spends three Sabbaths when "he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead". Paul teaches that Jesus is this Christ.
- The impact of Paul's message is that some of the Jews join Paul & Silas, and a large number of God-fearing Greeks, and not a few prominent women.
- But the Jews are jealous and angry, and stir up a riot. They could not find Paul in Jason's house, where Paul is staying, and so they drag Jason and other Christians to the officials. Note their claim against Paul & Silas: "***These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decree, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus.***" It is a charge of sedition.

It is useful for us to know something about the emperor and emperor worship (or imperial cult) in the Roman Empire. The emperor was the head of political power and the guarantor of peace in the empire. Thus the well-being of the emperor was held to be very important for the welfare of people in the empire.

For more direct rule in the provinces, he appointed governors or provincial magistrates, variously named legates, procurators or proconsuls. They were his representatives, commissioned to administer the provinces on his behalf. When Pliny was appointed governor of Bithynia in 111 CE, the emperor Trajan wrote to him, "*The people of that province will*

² 2 Macc. 9:5ff (JB).

understand that I have their interests at heart. For you will take care to make it clear to them, that you were appointed specially to represent myself."³

Divine honours were paid to emperors as early as 49 BC. An inscription from Ephesus honouring Julius Caesar reads: *The cities of Asia and the [communities] and the country districts (honour) Gaius Julius, son of Gaius, Caesar, Pontifex Maximus, Imperator and consul for the second time, descendant of Ares and Aphrodite, the god who has appeared visibly and universal saviour of the life of human beings.*⁴ Divine honours were also conferred on other emperors. The city of Myra in Lycia honoured the emperor Tiberius as *"the exalted god, son of exalted gods, lord of land and sea, the benefactor and saviour of the entire world."*⁵

The imperial cult exerted a **pervasive influence** in the lives of the people, both corporately and individually, and in terms of their social, political and religious life.

The **widespread presence of the imperial cult** in the Roman Empire is attested by ancient writers. One of them, Dio Cassius (150 - 235 AD) wrote: *This practice [of imperial cult], beginning under him [Augustus], has continued under other emperors, not only in the case of Hellenic nations but also in that of all the others, in so far as they are subject to the Romans.*⁶

In Asia Minor, the initiative for establishing the imperial cult came from the people themselves. They built imperial temples to honour the emperor. In return, they expected the emperor to confer some benefits on their city.

See H-J Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000) 324 for a list of places in the NT which practised the imperial cult - Handout.

Practice of the Imperial Cult in Asia Minor:

- The main feature of the imperial cult was the imperial festival, which was held in honour of the emperor, and often celebrated in conjunction with a local festival. These festivals were organised on a regular basis, but sometimes, were also celebrated irregularly. Instances of irregular celebrations included the accession of a new emperor, the birthday of an emperor, or the receipt of good news concerning a reigning emperor. On a regular basis, imperial festivals could be held once every four years, or once every two years, or in some cities, annually.
- Everyone in the community, from the governor to the ordinary person, participated in imperial festivals. Next, the *koina* or the local body responsible for emperor worship on a provincial level would organise the events appropriate for such occasions. This organisation comprised priests and other official-holders, who came mainly from the rich and elite part of the community. Often the rich provided funds for the celebration of the imperial festivals. They would give banquets for the people, and provide funds

³ Pliny, *Ep.* 10.18.

⁴ *SIG 3/760* cited in H-J.Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions* (ET; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 290.

⁵ Cited in Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity*, 302.

⁶ Dio Cassius, 51.20.7.

for the sacrifices, gladiatorial shows, mainly gifts of olive oil, and distributions of grain.

- The celebrations were communal events, and imperial festivals were part of the life of the people, and important occasions in their calendars.
- The celebrations were centred around the imperial temples and sanctuaries. These buildings would generally occupy the most prominent places in the cities. Here, statues of the emperor could be found – they occupied the centre piece. When new temples were erected for the honour of the emperors, they were typically the centrepiece of new cities and communities.
- Outside the temples, there would be processions through the streets, and as they passed by, householders were required to sacrifice on altars outside their houses. The door of one's house would be decorated with laurels and lamps. Everyone was expected to take part, wearing festive attire, especially crowns.
- Imperial worship was so widespread by the early second century AD that when Pliny the Younger, the governor of Bithynia in 111 AD, sought a means by which men and women could denounce Christianity and profess their attachment to paganism, oaths and sacrifices to or on behalf of the emperors were the elements common to almost all instances of the enforcement of paganism.

You can understand the uproar created in Thessalonica when the people heard Paul preaching about a new king. This was subversive to Caesar's rule. They had to stop him.

b) The Religious World

The Jews

Why were the Jewish religious leaders so hostile against Christians? We need to understand something of Judaism in the first century AD.

- **One true God** – belief and worship of one true God, Yahweh, the God of the OT. The *Shema* in Deut. 6:4-5 – *Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength.*
- **God has chosen Israel to be his people** and has made a covenant with them. God has called Israel to be a light to the nations (Gen. 12:1-3; Zech. 8:20-23; Isa. 60:1-3).
- **God has provided a way for his people to live** – this is the law or Torah. Keeping the Law was not a condition of becoming the people of God (see Ex. 20:2-3). They were already God's people when the Law was given. Rather keeping the law was the means of maintaining their covenant relationship with God. Three areas of the Law were very important for Jews: circumcision, keeping the Sabbath and the food laws. Wenham & Walton (31-32): "For faithful Jews, keeping the law was vital for two reasons: first, to maintain their standing within the community of God's people, those whom he would redeem when he acted to free Israel from her present bondage under

the Romans. Second, maintaining the distinctives of the torah – circumcision, the Sabbath and the food laws – preserved Jewish national identity at a time of pagan rule. So at the time of Jesus the law was central to Judaism; it would be hard to overstate its importance.” Keeping the Law was closely linked to national identity.

- **God has given the people a land, focused in the temple.** God’s promise of land was given to Abraham. Within this land, in the city of Jerusalem stands the temple, which is the focus of their worship of God – the presentation of sacrifices, the celebration of festivals.
- **Hope for the future** – The situation of God’s people after the exile was disappointing – they were still under foreign rule and remained so for many years. The Jews looked forward to a hope in the future: hope for the restoration of all twelve tribes of Israel to the land; the conversion, subjugation or destruction of the Gentiles; a new purified or renewed temple; pure worship; Messianic expectations – a new king from David’s line.

Ps. of Solomon 17:21-24

See, Lord, and raise up for them their king,
the son of David, to rule over your servant Israel
in the time known to you, O God.
Undergird him with the strength to destroy the unrighteous rulers,
to purge Jerusalem from gentiles
who trample her to destruction;
in wisdom and in righteousness to drive out
the sinners from the inheritance;
to smash the arrogance of sinners
like a potter’s jar;
To shatter all their substance with an iron rod;
To destroy the unlawful nations with the word of his mouth.

Just as the Jewish religious leaders rejected Jesus and put him to death, so they too rejected the message of salvation preached by the apostles. They expected a Messiah who would free them from Roman rule. We see the hostility of the Jewish religious leaders in Acts 3 to 8, when persecution caused them to be scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. This is of course in line with Acts 1:8.

The Gentiles

What kinds of gods did they worship?

In **14:12** when Paul and Barnabas are in Lystra, they heal a crippled man. The people mistake them for Hermes and Zeus, and begin to worship them with sacrifices. The people here are mainly common people, unlike the philosophers in Athens (Acts 17), and they speak the local dialect.

There was a legend (recorded fifty years before in Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.626ff) in that region that supreme god Zeus (to Greeks and Jupiter to Romans) and his son Hermes (to Greeks and Mercury to Romans) came in human form to visit the people there. They sought a

place for rest but not one of the thousand homes welcomed them. Only an old couple, Baucis and Philemon, welcomed them into their humble house and prepared a meal for them out of their meagre provisions. Later the gods destroyed the people of the whole region for their rejection but the old couple was spared and rewarded. There are also inscriptions and a stone altar showing the worship of Zeus and Hermes as their local gods.

This legend could have been in their minds when they see Barnabas and Paul healing the lame man. They shout in their Lycaonian language: ‘The gods have come down to us in human form!’ Immediately they treat them like Zeus and Hermes, and proceed to offer them sacrifices. They do not want to be like the people in the story. We will talk about Paul’s sermon later.

In **19:27**, we are told of a silversmith by the name of Demetrius, who makes silver shrines of Artemis (or Diana), the patron goddess of Ephesus. He incites other silversmiths and those in related trades to a riot, accusing Paul of leading their people astray. There is also a danger that their livelihood will be affected as more and more people turn away from the worship of Artemis and worship Jesus. But they also advance other reasons for attacking Paul: ‘their trade would lose its good name, their temple its prestige, and their goddess her divine majesty’ (Stott, 309).

Witherington (546-7): “The temple of Artemis was a great attraction to ancient travellers as well as to the Ephesians themselves, and pilgrims must have contributed greatly to the prosperity of the city. Much was at stake for the silversmiths and for the population of Ephesus as a whole. There was no other Graeco-Roman metropolis in the Empire whose “body, soul and spirit” could so belong to a particular deity as did Ephesus to her patron goddess Artemis. Consequently, any threat to the cult of Artemis and her temple would naturally have provoked a strong response.”

Cities usually had their own patron gods (civic cults) and they also worshipped other gods. These were gods that were worshipped privately in the temples. They also worshipped household gods in their homes.

c) The cultural and socio-economic world:

Trade Associations

In 19:23-27, we see something of the socio-economic world of Acts. How could one silversmith arouse all the other silversmiths and those who worked in related trades in Ephesus against Paul? What kind of trade networks did they have?

In the city, many people were members of voluntary associations, which were common in the first century AD. One of these was the trade association, comprising people of a common trade.⁷ There is evidence of an association of silversmiths in Ephesus during the reign of Claudius (41 - 54 AD).

⁷ E.g., an association of silversmiths in Ephesus during the reign of Claudius (41 - 54 CE): G.H.R. Horsley (ed.), *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* 4 (1987) 7; an association of bankers and traders around 43 CE: *CIL* VI.6797.

Regular meetings together created a brotherly spirit among members, who could find mutual help in times of need.⁸ They would hire or build at their own expense a set of rooms for their meeting place. There they would meet regularly for "pure comradeship." When they met together, members also participated in religious activities. Most of these associations had their own patron gods.

Meetings of trade associations were for commercial and social purposes but there was also a religious element to them. When they met for celebrations, they would indulge in excessive drinking and feasting, culminating in drunkenness, orgies and revelry. All these culminate in idolatry.

These meetings were often rowdy, so much so that complaints had been brought against them. The rules of an association of gypsum merchants provided that "regularly on the twenty-fifty of each month, they shall drink six pints of beer each." It is not surprising that the rules and regulations of some associations enjoined members to "take your ease without ill-temper," to maintain "tranquillity and propriety," and to appear on feast days "in your most decent clothes."

Demetrius would have been a member of the association of silversmiths. So he is able to call together all the silversmiths and those engaged in related trades.

This background also helps us to appreciate the dilemma that Christian traders or merchants or fishermen had to face. They would not be able to participate in the activities of the association. They might not be able to sell their goods, and so would suffer economic loss.

Different schools of philosophy

In 17:16-34, we find Paul in Athens, where he addresses those in the marketplace. There, a group of Epicureans and Stoics argue with Paul. 17:32 – When they heard about the resurrection from the dead, some of them sneered but others said, ***‘We want to hear you again on this subject.’***

Epicureans followed a philosophy founded by Epicurus in the 4th century BC.

Stott (280): ‘The Epicureans considered the gods to be so remote as to take no interest in, and have no influence on, human affairs. The world was due to chance, a random concourse of atoms, and there would be no survival of death, and no judgement. So human beings should pursue pleasure, especially the serene enjoyment of a life detached from pain, passion and fear.’ Epicurus “promoted pleasure and friendship as ideal values and encouraged withdrawal from civic activities” (*Dictionary of NT Background*, 324). “Pleasure was understood as the absence of disturbances. Epicurus taught that ‘whenever we say that pleasure is the goal, we do not mean the pleasures of dissolute persons or the pleasures that are found in sensuality ... but rather the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul’ (325). They did not believe in afterlife. They might have been the ones who sneer at Paul’s teaching about the resurrection from the dead.

⁸ Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, 88; M.N. Tod, *Sidelights on Greek History* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1932) 92.

Stoics – Stott (280-281): ‘The Stoics ... acknowledge the supreme god but in a pantheistic way, confusing him with the ‘world soul’. The world was determined by fate, and human beings must pursue their duty, resigning themselves to live in harmony with nature and reason, however painful this might be, and develop their own-self-sufficiency. To oversimplify, it was characteristic of Epicureans to emphasize chance, escape and the enjoyment of pleasure, and of the Stoics to emphasize fatalism, submission and the endurance of pain.’

They might have been the ones who want to listen again to Paul. They believed in a divine rational principle that orders all things and all beings in this world. And their aim in life was to live according with this rational principle which dwelt in all things. They ‘emphasised the pre-eminence of the rational over emotions, believing in self-sufficiency or autonomy as the highest goal. They were also highly principled in regard to ethical and civic duties’ (Witherington, 514).

Discussion in small groups (each group to do 1, 2, 3 or 4, and all groups to do 5)

We all have heard or read about the recent spate of attacks on churches in Malaysia. Some time ago, our Deputy PM had spoken of the concern that such violence should not spread to Singapore. We may argue that our situation is different from Malaysia, whose Constitution forbids Malays (deemed to be Muslims) to convert. Our Singapore Constitution allows all of us to practise our religion.

1) I would like us to consider our context in Singapore.

- The Constitution provides for the right of everyone to profess and practise his or her religion and to propagate it. Refer to Article 15 of the Singapore Constitution. I am involved with The Turning Point, a Christian half-way house for women drug addicts and offenders. Two years ago when I was Chairman of the Board, we applied to renew our status as an Institution of Public Character (IPC). This status enables us to raise funds from the public, and apply for funds from the government. The National Council for Social Services wanted us to confirm that our activities at TP are not carried out with a view to proselytising the residents. One issue relates to the definition of proselytise. The NCSS are of the view that proselytization means that you use force to convert someone to be a Christian. I looked up the dictionaries and checked with my English consultant, and they all tell me that proselytize does not include the element of force. We have a right under the Constitution to practise and propagate our religion. In the end, the NCSS accepted the words: We preach the gospel to our residents but we do not force them to become Christians.
- Consider section 8 of *The Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act* Cap 167A.
- Give some background to the enactment of the Act – see **Notes**, p. 11.
- Declaration of Religious Harmony – see Straits Times, 10/6/03.
- **Implications of the Act for Christian conduct and evangelism** – need not stop evangelism; be more sensitive; think of more creative ways – friendship evangelism, social concern, community service (Love Singapore network), etc. rather than door-

to-door or mass evangelism. As to the Declaration of Religious Harmony, stress the clause which provides for the fostering of inter-religious communications.

- Refer to *A Guide to Praying for Religious Harmony*
- Refer to conversation with Richard Magnus a few years ago – when asked whether any restraining order had been issued, he said that only one had been issued against a Muslim cleric from the Middle East.

2) Let us look at the **religious context** in Singapore:

What are the main religions in Singapore?

Do you know the main teachings of these religions?

3) Let us look at our **social networks**.

Most of us may not have the opportunity to preach to large crowds like Peter and Paul did in Acts. But all of us have the opportunity to share the gospel to another person or to two persons or in a small group. Let's examine the networks we have.

Think about the different networks you have: family and relatives, social (friends & neighbours), professional, etc. How can you use these networks to share the gospel?

4) Are there some **public places** where we can share the gospel? What do you think of Stott's suggestions?

One cannot help admiring Paul's ability to speak with equal facility to religious people in the synagogue, to casual passers-by in the city square, and to highly sophisticated philosophers both in the *agora* (marketplace) and when they met in Council. Today the nearest equivalent of the synagogue is the church, the place where religious people gather. There is still an important place for sharing the gospel with church-goers, God-fearing people on the fringe of the church, who may attend services only occasionally. The equivalent of the *agora* will vary in different parts of the world. It may be a park, city square or street corner, a shopping mall or marketplace, a 'pub', neighbourhood bar, cafe, discotheque or student cafeteria, wherever people meet when they are at leisure. There is a need for gifted evangelists who can make friends and gossip the gospel in such informal settings as these. As for the Areopagus, it has no precise equivalent in the contemporary world. Perhaps the nearest is the university, where many of the country's intelligentsia are to be found. Neither church evangelism nor street evangelism would be appropriate for them. Instead, we should develop home evangelism in which there is free discussion ... There is an urgent need for more Christian thinkers who will dedicate their minds to Christ, not only as lecturers, but also as authors, journalists, dramatists and broadcasters, as television script-writers, producers and personalities, and as artist and actors who use a variety of art forms in which to communicate the gospel.

What do you think are the modern-day equivalent of the synagogue, city square, agora, and Areopagus in Singapore?

Contextualisation – Study the comparison of Paul’s sermons in Acts 13:13-52, 14:8-20 and 17:16-34 in D. Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission* (Leicester: Apollos, 2005) 86-89.

What are the common points in these three sermons?

What are some of the differences in these three sermons? What do you think are the reasons for these differences?

What are some of your observations about how Paul adapted the gospel message to each audience and context?

The comments below are from Flemming (84-85):

- Paul’s sermons are tailored according to the audience and context.
- Different starting points for different groups – clearly seen in the different way Paul presents the gospel to Jews and God-fearers in the synagogue and to pagan Gentiles. For the former, Paul assumes ‘a commitment to monotheism, an acceptance of the authority of Scripture, and an understanding of the biblical story.’ He then goes on to reinterpret the biblical history by showing how Jesus fulfils the promises given by God in the OT to Israel. (see Appendix).
- Paul does not use this starting point when speaking to pagans. Instead he speaks to them in a way that does not assume their understanding of the OT. But he tells the story of salvation in new ways. He begins “with universal themes, which the audience could understand: God’s creation and care for the world, God’s nearness to humanity, and peoples’ aspirations to seek and to know God. Instead of directly citing Scripture, he finds points of contact in their philosophy and literary traditions and in the experience of the Creator’s silent witness in nature. He connects with *their* story, which is a different story than that of the synagogue crowd.” (Flemming, 84)
- In his two sermons to pagans, his approach also is different. To common folk in Lystra, he speaks of God’s provision of rain, crops and food – the basic needs of life. To the educated and philosophers at Athens, he takes a different line of argument. He portrays the gospel as the fulfilment of their religious yearnings.
- There are also some common threads: the same content in the gospel message (13:32; 14:15; 17:18). All three sermons are in narrative form. (In Asia people like to listen to stories). He preaches Jesus who died and was raised from the dead. He ‘engages and confronts the cherished beliefs and the competing stories of its audience. He calls them to repentance of their sins and embrace an entire new vision of the world’ (Flemming, 85).