

# GUIDELINES

BIBLE STUDY FOR TODAY'S  
MINISTRY AND MISSION

MAY–AUG 2019

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**Reading God's word today**  
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**Romans: two at a time**  
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May–August 2019

Edited by **David Spriggs**

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# Suggestions for using *Guidelines*

Set aside a regular time and place, if possible, when and where you can read and pray undisturbed. Before you begin, take time to be still and, if you find it helpful, use the BRF Prayer on page 6.

In *Guidelines*, the introductory section provides context for the passages or themes to be studied, while the units of comment can be used daily, weekly or whatever best fits your timetable. You will need a Bible (more than one if you want to compare different translations) as Bible passages are not included. At the end of each week is a 'Guidelines' section, offering further thoughts about or practical application of what you have been studying.

Occasionally, you may read something in *Guidelines* that you find particularly challenging, even uncomfortable. This is inevitable in a series of notes which draws on a wide spectrum of contributors and doesn't believe in ducking difficult issues. Indeed, we believe that *Guidelines* readers much prefer thought-provoking material to a bland diet that only confirms what they already think.

If you do disagree with a contributor, you may find it helpful to go through these three steps. First, think about why you feel uncomfortable. Perhaps this is an idea that is new to you, or you are not happy about the way something has been expressed. Or there may be something more substantial – you may feel that the writer is guilty of sweeping generalisation, factual error, or theological or ethical misjudgement. Second, pray that God would use this disagreement to teach you more about his word and about yourself. Third, think about what you will do as a result of the disagreement. You might resolve to find out more about the issue, or write to the contributor or the editor of *Guidelines*.

To send feedback, please email [enquiries@brf.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@brf.org.uk), phone +44 (0)1865 319700 or write to the address shown opposite.

# Writers in this issue

**George M. Wieland** is the Director of Mission Research and Training at Carey Baptist College and Carey Graduate School, New Zealand. His background includes mission in Brazil, pastoring Baptist churches in the UK and teaching the New Testament. He is the author of *The Significance of Salvation* (Paternoster, 2006) and other publications on the Bible and mission.

**David Dewey** is a Baptist minister now serving both Baptist and Anglican communities in South Yorkshire. Alongside helping people engage with scripture, his interests include Bible translation and interpretation.

**Kate Bruce** is an RAF chaplain. In her previous role as Deputy Warden at Cranmer Hall, Durham, she taught preaching at BA and MA level. She did her PhD on preaching and imagination and now continues her work in teaching and researching on preaching, alongside her commitment to the RAF.

**C.L. Crouch** is David Allan Hubbard Professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary and author of several books and numerous articles, including *An Introduction to the Study of Jeremiah* (Bloomsbury, 2017). She has particular interests in Old Testament ethics and in the prophetic books.

**Andrew Francis** is a URC minister, published poet/writer and community theologian. He is a popular conference speaker, congregational educator and Sunday preacher. His latest book is *Eat, Pray, Tell* (BRF, 2018).

**Steve Walton** is a researcher and teacher of the New Testament who serves as an Associate Research Fellow of Trinity College, Bristol. He is an Anglican priest, and has served in different ministries and taught in many colleges and universities. Steve is presently working on a major commentary on Acts.

**Neil Le Tissier** is a Regional Minister with the Heart of England Baptist Association, having previously served as Minister of Southborough Lane, and then Sutton Coldfield Baptist Churches. He contributed to *The NIV Comprehensive Concordance* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2001).

**Henry Wansbrough OSB** is a monk at Ampleforth Abbey in Yorkshire. He has been Chairman of the Oxford Faculty of Theology and a member of the Pope's Biblical Commission. More recently, he has been Professor of Biblical Studies at Liverpool Hope University. He has just published a new annotated version of the Bible, *The Revised New Jerusalem Bible*.

**Conrad Gempf** has been a Lecturer in New Testament at London School of Theology for more than 25 years. He is the author of several books on New Testament subjects, including *How to Like Paul Again* (Authentic, 2013).

# David Spriggs writes...

The next four months have as their spiritual focus the celebration of the Feast of Pentecost, when we commemorate again the gift of the Holy Spirit to the gathered disciples, with all the implications for communicating the gospel, the empowering for mission and the reproduction in our lives of the character of Jesus.

This issue of *Guidelines* engages with several of these great themes. Kate Bruce offers us some reflections on the role of the Holy Spirit in communicating. David Dewey also offers us different ways of reading the Bible which are themselves formed by approaches found within scripture.

George M. Wieland takes us through Acts, looking at it through a mission and spirituality lens. By drawing on his own cross-cultural experience and linking it with his passion for mission, he brings fresh insight and challenges to this foundational text for the church's mission today.

If Acts is the foundational text, then Romans could claim to be the foundational epistle. Conrad Gempf gives us a short overview of this great letter – but with a twist. He draws attention to how one chapter's teaching should influence our understanding of another chapter. This makes for a fascinating rereading of Romans.

In the description of the fruit of the Spirit is peace. Andrew Francis, a new writer for *Guidelines*, focuses on shalom, bringing to us his insights through the text of both the Old and New Testaments.

In addition to all of these, we have substantial contributions from Steve Walton, who continues taking us through the second half of Luke's gospel, and also from C.L. Crouch on that fascinating and heart-searching prophetic book of Hosea. Neil le Tissier helps us appreciate the significance of metaphors as a form of divine and human communication by unpacking 'trees' in the Bible. And Father Henry Wansbrough uses his extensive biblical knowledge to examine some of the key passages in 1 Chronicles.

Finally, I have some exciting news: Dr Helen Paynter will take over as commissioning editor in the September–December 2019 issue. Helen left a career in hospital medicine in 2008 to obey the call to Baptist ministry. She trained at Bristol Baptist College, and then went on to combine pastoral ministry at Victoria Park Baptist Church, Bristol, with further study, doing her doctorate in the Old Testament. She is now Director of the Centre for the Study of Bible and Violence at Bristol Baptist College, and Associate Minister of Westbury on Trym Baptist Church, Bristol.

My prayer is that, through all of these enriching notes, our awareness of the life-giving power of God's Holy Spirit will be increased.

# Acts: participating in the unfolding mission of God

George M. Wieland

In Luke's gospel, Jesus, anointed by the Spirit, announces and demonstrates the arrival of the long-awaited kingdom of God. A group of followers gathers around him. They begin to comprehend who he is and to learn a new way of living, relating and serving together under his leadership. In Luke's second volume, the book of Acts, those followers, empowered by the same Spirit, witness to the world that their risen, exalted Lord calls all to acknowledge him, trust in him and enter into the reality of shared life under his rule.

The narrative of Acts pulsates with movement. It unfolds geographically, from beginnings in Jerusalem through Judea, across into Samaria and around the Mediterranean world until the book reaches its conclusion with the proclamation of the kingdom of God in Rome, the capital city of the empire. Political, ethnic, social, religious and cultural boundaries are crossed as the radical nature of this kingdom comes into sharper profile in the context of mission. A remarkably diverse cast of characters comes into view, proclaiming, receiving or resisting the new kingdom. Diverse, countercultural communities emerge in which the risen Jesus is active and kingdom life is shared.

Old disputes over whether the book of Acts should be regarded as history or theology are now seen to be outmoded. The writing of history always involves interpretation and an account may be written in such a way as to draw out theological significance while still being true to what actually took place. Acts may be read as a narrative of real people and events through which the activity of God's Spirit is discerned and God's mission is realised. Furthermore, since that mission continues today in our own contexts, we should expect resonances between the story recorded in Acts and the continuing story in which we participate.

Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version (Anglicised).

# 1 Give up your own agenda

## Acts 1:1–14

In the opening paragraphs of Acts, we meet people who were to be leaders in the church's mission. There was a major obstacle, however, to their effectiveness in that role. Even after the risen Jesus had spent 40 days with them, 'speaking about the kingdom of God' (v. 3), their vision of that kingdom was far too small. 'Lord,' they asked, 'is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' (v. 6). In their minds, this kingdom was surely their kingdom, for their people, in their place, with a king ruling in their city and no doubt significant positions for his friends. Their best hope for the future was a restoration of their nation to the glories of a past age.

Jesus' reply (vv. 7–8) pointed them to a new way of looking for the kingdom that went far beyond those expectations. It was to be not only in their place but in every place; not only for their people but for all peoples; realised not through the acquisition of political power but by the empowering of God's Spirit for witness to Jesus, risen and reigning. This constituted a challenge to surrender their own agendas and have their horizons of what God was intending to do stretched beyond their own immediate interests and concerns. It also shifted the question from what Jesus would now do for them to what they were to be and to do as his servants and as participants in his mission.

Even with that reorientation, do we detect some reluctance on the part of the apostles to move on from the place where they had witnessed the ascension of Jesus, as there had been at the transfiguration (vv. 9–11; compare Luke 9:28–36)? That's understandable. The mountain was a place of peace, remote from the everyday world, where they had been enjoying the company of the risen Jesus, having their hearts stirred as he spoke of the kingdom of God. The city, by contrast, was a place of challenge and vulnerability. It would have been easier to wait on the mountain for the promised power, and then venture more confidently into the hard place. But the promise to them, and to successive participants in God's mission, is of enabling at the point and in the place where it is needed. Mission requires going vulnerably into that place, and waiting there for the Spirit to enable and help.



## 2 To all the world, through all God's people

### Acts 2:1-21

When it did come, the empowering that the disciples received was utterly different to anything they might have envisaged. There, in the city and at the right time, the Spirit enabled them to communicate the reality of God and his saving power, with the result that the ears and hearts of thousands were opened to the good news about Jesus. And who were those thousands? Luke emphasises the presence in Jerusalem of 'devout Jews from every nation under heaven' (v. 5). They were diaspora people from the Jewish communities scattered around the Mediterranean and beyond. On that significant day when the Spirit of God was poured out in a dramatic manifestation of the presence and glory of God, it was people of the diaspora who felt the impact. The Pentecost miracle meant that they not only heard with their ears but also knew in their hearts that what had happened in Jerusalem in the raising up of Jesus as Lord and Messiah (2:36) was of urgent relevance not only to them but also to their places and peoples.

There are more diaspora people in the world today than ever before. According to United Nations statistics, there are currently 244 million people who have moved from their countries of birth to live elsewhere. Migration and migrants have always had a vital role in the mission of God. The experience of dislocation often results in greater openness to new learning and, indeed, to God. Once the gospel has become known, the transnational networks of migrants become avenues along which it can spread. An urgent task for the church in migrant-receiving countries and other contexts of increasing diversity is to learn how to relate and communicate across linguistic and cultural barriers so that dislocated people may find a place of belonging with them in God's kingdom.

A remarkable feature of Pentecost was the participation of the whole community of believers in this witness to the nations. Peter recognised the fulfilment of God's promise to pour out the Spirit not only on a handful of key leaders but on 'all flesh', women and men, young and old, slaves and free (vv. 17-18, quoting Joel 2:28-29). Where churches understand ministry as the activity of a few overworked professionals, and formally or informally restrict access to those roles on grounds of gender, age or socio-economic status, Pentecost continues to present both an uncomfortable challenge and an exhilarating promise.

### 3 Sharing life in the kingdom community

**Acts 2:37–47; 4:32–37**

Coming under the lordship of Jesus and entering into life in the Spirit brought the believers into community with each other. And what a community! They were always found together, at the temple and in homes, worshipping, praying, learning eagerly from those who had been with Jesus, experiencing God's power in remarkable ways. They also enjoyed the mundane but no less remarkable miracle of enough to eat every day. This happened as those who had food shared it generously and those with material wealth offered it to meet the needs of those without. Little wonder that their witness to the risen Jesus was powerfully effective (4:33) and many were drawn to join them (2:47).

That principle of living generously so that no one in the community would be in need was part of the blueprint for the communal life of Israel set out in the book of Deuteronomy. The promise that there would be 'no one in need among you' (Deuteronomy 15:4, echoed in Acts 4:34) becomes a reality as those who have resources open their hearts and hands to those around them who are in need (Deuteronomy 15:7–11). Luke is indicating that where Jesus rules, God's intention for flourishing community is realised.

There were in Israel groups that went beyond acts of generosity to renouncing personal ownership of their possessions and embracing a communal economic life. These were the Essene communities that, according to the Jewish writer Philo, were found in many of the towns and villages of Judea. They functioned socially and economically as kinship groups, substitute families for those who became members. Like monastic communities in later Christian traditions, they maintained houses of hospitality for the poor, the sick, lepers or travellers. It is possible that it was an Essene hospitality house in Bethany ('Beth-anya', possibly 'house of the poor') that Jesus and his disciples stayed in as pilgrims from Galilee to the Jerusalem festivals.

Whatever specific form it might have taken, the shared life of the Jerusalem church went far deeper than is suggested by the English term 'fellowship' (2:42). In the privatised cultures of much of the western world, it might seem adequate to chat over coffee after a Sunday service before plunging back into individual lives largely disconnected from those they

refer to as their family in Christ. The arrival of refugees and other migrants shaped by communal cultures, however, might catalyse a rediscovery of more authentic community and kinship.

## 4 Prayer in alignment with the mission of God

### Acts 4:13–31

Prayer percolates through the narrative of Acts. It is the constant activity of the groups of disciples as they wait in Jerusalem between the ascension of Jesus and Pentecost (1:14); it is through prayer that this group commits to God the choice of an apostle to replace Judas (1:24–25); prayer characterises the daily life of the Pentecost community (2:42); they continue to participate in the regular temple prayers (3:1); it is a ministry priority for the apostles (6:4); with prayer people are commissioned for ministry (6:6); the last breath of Stephen the martyr is prayer, entrusting his spirit to Jesus and seeking forgiveness for his killers (7:59–60); and on through some 32 specific references. Prayer is intrinsic to the story of mission.

For all that, the actual content of the prayers is not reported, with the exception of Stephen's dying words (7:59–60) and this prayer of the church (vv. 24–30). The setting is the first recorded experience of official persecution. Peter and John had healed a beggar at the temple gate and proclaimed that this had been done in the power of Jesus, who had been raised from the dead and was now exercising divine authority (3:1–26). This had led to their arrest, imprisonment and appearance before the council. Hoping to put an end to this new movement before it spread any further, the leaders of the people had warned the apostles to stop what they were doing and specifically to speak no more in the name of Jesus.

At this crisis point for the Jesus community, their immediate recourse was to prayer. They affirmed who God is, the ruler and creator of all things; they found in scripture (Psalm 2) a framework within which to interpret the opposition that first Jesus himself and now they were experiencing; they held to what they had come to believe about Jesus and had experienced of God's Spirit; and they prayed, not for their own safety but for God to continue to act, for courage to play their part and for the name of Jesus to be vindicated.

In post-Christendom societies, where assumptions of the church's place in national life still linger, it can be difficult to comprehend the threat to the very existence of Christian communities that followers of Jesus face in

many other contexts today. For them and for all of us, the response of that first Christian community models prayer in alignment with the saving mission of God.

## 5 From problems of difference to the potential of diversity

### Acts 6:1–15

Cross-cultural mission generates multicultural community. The Pentecost miracle had brought into being a diverse body of people. There were the Galilean followers of Jesus and others from Jerusalem and the regions round about. They would have been among the ‘Hebrews’ that Luke mentions (v. 1). The Pentecost miracle had then added a large number of diaspora Jews who were in Jerusalem at that time. Some would have travelled to worship at the festivals; others might have relocated permanently to Jerusalem. Luke calls them ‘Hellenists’ (v. 1): not Greeks but Jews exhibiting aspects of the Greek cultures of their places of origin and probably using Greek as their main language of communication.

It was not long before this new community, trying to function as a kinship group for purposes of mutual support, was experiencing tensions. But the strains exposed a cultural fault line. The diaspora ‘outsiders’ had the impression that the local ‘insiders’ were getting preferential treatment. It came down to access to resources, which involved having the connections with the people responsible for them; locals tend to have such connections, while immigrants do not.

It began as grumbling. Wisely, the apostles didn’t get defensive. They acknowledged the problem and offered a pathway forward. New appointments were made to the community’s leadership. But look at those names (v. 5) – all seven are Greek. Those appointed came from the ‘outsiders’ group that was feeling discriminated against and wondering if they really belonged with the local ‘insiders’.

Tracking the Acts narrative, this episode precipitates a dramatic reorientation outwards. Those Hellenistic believers appointed to community leadership roles did much more than ‘wait at tables’ (v. 2). Stephen, now validated by recognition within the community, reached out boldly to other diaspora Jews. This provoked a violent backlash (vv. 8–15), but out of his

martyrdom came both increased persecution and exponential growth. It was Philip, not the original apostles who had heard Jesus' commission to go beyond Jerusalem (1:8), who crossed the boundary separating Jews from Samaritans to take the gospel to Samaria (8:4–25).

The grumbling was not only silenced; it was turned into growth. And that continues to happen when 'outsiders' who have natural openings into a wider world join the church's leadership and, with the church's backing, extend the scope of its mission far beyond the imagination of the 'insiders'. There is enormous potential for the church's health and mission in recognising and affirming gifted people from outside traditional leadership groups.

## 6 Who's passing through?

### Acts 8:26–40

So far in the mission narrative of Acts, we have seen crowds impacted with the witness to and demonstration of the kingly authority of Jesus. The next three chapters, however, relate how God dealt with individual people to bring revelation of and commitment to Jesus. In each case, human agents are impelled by divine communication to travel to specific places to encounter particular people in whom God is already at work. Mission often seems to take the form of God bringing people who are seeking him into engagement with people whom he is preparing to act as his messengers.

In today's passage, Philip, one of the seven Hellenists appointed to serve the Jerusalem church and subsequently the pioneer of mission to Samaria, is prompted by an angel to travel to a desert road. There, he receives further prompting from God to enter into conversation with a distinguished traveller, the royal treasurer of the Candace, queen of Ethiopia. Luke does not make clear the precise relationship of this man to Judaism, whether he was a diaspora Jew or a Gentile God-worshipper. It is also uncertain whether the term 'eunuch' necessarily represents a castrated male; it could refer to a court official more generally. It could well be, however, that the appearance of this traveller in the unfolding story of mission points to the extension of the witness to Christ in two ways. The witness is carried to 'the ends of the earth' (1:8), which for some ancient writers was represented by Ethiopia. It also includes people, such as eunuchs and foreigners, who had been marginalised and excluded from full participation in the worship of the people of God (compare Isaiah 56:3–8).

Philip's part in this story repays reflection, with his attentiveness to God's prompting, his obedience, courage and willingness to (literally) journey alongside the seeker, and the dialogical and responsive mode of his engagement. The place of the encounter is also significant. The witness of a community of believers in a settled location can be very effective, as it had been in Jerusalem (2:43–47). There, the church's shared life as well as its words had impacted those who lived in proximity to them. The story of this Ethiopian traveller alerts us to the potential of encounters on the road for revelation and transformation. Who is passing through? And what might be the questions that are occupying them on their journey?

## Guidelines

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- What is your understanding of the scope of the kingdom of God? What does it mean for you to seek it?
- Does your ministry and mission agenda align with that which Jesus articulates in 1:7–8?
- Do the diaspora people in your neighbourhood know that the God whom local Christians worship also cares about them? Do they ever hear about this God in their native/heart languages?
- Are there people in your own church or mission context of whom little is expected because of their gender, age or socio-economic or other status? Consider the potential if their participation were empowered.
- What could the economic dimension of life as a kingdom community look like in the context of your local church? If realised, what would be different about its worship, discipleship and mission?
- Consider a particular challenge facing the Christian community in a local, national or international context that you know. Using 4:24–30 as a template, compose a prayer bringing that situation before God and seeking alignment with the mission of God in it.
- Do issues in your faith community reveal inequities between more- and less-privileged groups? If so, how might those be addressed?
- Does the leadership team of your church or Christian organisation reflect the diversity of the community it serves? How might able people from under-represented groups be identified and validated in ministry?



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**Guidelines** is edited by **David Spriggs**, previously Dean of Studies at Bible Society.

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