The Trouble with Kindness in the Acts of the Apostles

Paul Hertig

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Abstract

This article explores the theme of kindness in the book of Acts. Following Pentecost, the first act of kindness leads to the first act of persecution. Peter heals a man crippled from birth and charges his accusers of indicting him for "an act of kindness" (4:8-10). The story puts Peter and the earliest church in a positive light while simultaneously critiquing the religious and political establishment. Acts of kindness usher various disciples into the realm of spiritual warfare, and evil forces attempt to thwart the good deeds of the church at every turn. Peter describes Jesus as "doing good and healing all oppressed by the devil" (10:38). Thus, acts of kindness become a gateway into the spiritual battle. Luke's term translated as "kindness" is εὐεργεσίᾳ ("benefaction"), a technical word embedded in social structure that depicts financial support for persons and groups; those who benefit from benefactors promise their loyalty to them. The Apostles assume the role of benefactors as they follow in the footsteps of Jesus and have a dramatic impact on society for the greater good. But, unlike Roman benefactors, they expect nothing in return. What the Apostles offer in contrast to the quid pro quo demands of benefactors is restoration of life. They declare this restoration in temple courts where the disciples become the new authority figures while testifying to "new life." There disciples enter and authoritatively occupy sacred space while religious and civic leaders seek to obstruct them. Kindness may be the most powerful force in the world. It can harden or soften people's hearts. Kindness can reach the heights of heaven and knock on the gates of hell.

Key Words: Acts of the Apostles, Acts 3:6, 4:9, benefaction, good works, healing, kindness

Precursor

Luke-Acts refers to Luke's Gospel and Acts, both written by Luke. The themes in Luke, relevant to this study, clearly match the themes in Acts: deeds of kindness, persecution against the early disciples, deliverance of the poor and marginalized, and unrestrained worldwide mission.

Introduction: Acts in Civic Context

In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke articulates the account of the early church in civic context. As the Christian movement progressed from region to region, the birth of worldwide missions also challenged ancient Greco-Roman decision makers to sustain the ideals of true and just civic life. In and around the first century, historians spoke forthrightly about the virtue of citizenship and held those in power accountable to their duties of keeping law and order and improving conditions in society. As a historian, Luke does not exhibit political or social naiveté, but he conveys how to overcome misuse of power in social, religious, and political life (Penner 2003, 78, 94-96).

For instance, Peter heals a man crippled from birth and responds to his indictment, by the rulers and elders of the people, by charging his accusers of arresting him for "an act of kindness" (4:8-10).[1] Luke's telling of this story, a key passage in this study, puts Peter and the earliest church in a positive light while simultaneously critiquing the religious and political establishment. Historians, and Luke without exception, often depicted public and political life in Greco-Roman context as riddled with power games and status seeking. Luke recounts deliberations, debates, and

criminal proceedings that include appraisals of civic discourse and community life (e.g., Acts 4-7, 12-17, 25-26). The early church sets the tone for kindness in an unkind world.

The Progressing Theme of Kindness in Acts

Luke develops the counter-cultural theme of kindness throughout the book of Acts. The sovereign God initiates the big bang of the accelerating power of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Peter then gives a Pentecost sermon in which the people are "cut to the heart" and ask Peter, "What shall we do?" He responds by highlighting the need for repentance, baptism, and receiving the gift of Holy Spirit (2:37-38). The Holy Spirit then empowers the community to "do" what is good and just: Immediately after Pentecost, the earliest church community begins to share everything in common, giving to anyone who has need, partaking in table fellowship in homes, engaging in temple courts (2:42-47), and having "no needy persons among them" (4:34). Furthermore, kindness does not remain confined to the community alone; the community shows kindness to outsiders as well, "enjoying the favor of all the people." As a result, the Lord adds daily the number of those who were being saved (2:47). These core values fit civic ideals in Greco-Roman society. First-century historian Josephus emphasized a society led by the examples of virtue and goodness with shared equity that emphasizes "justice, truth and gentleness." He also spoke of justice as "the aim and end of the law" (Penner 2003, 91-92). The early Christian disciples exhibited kindness to one another and extended that kindness to citizens outside of their own community, thus contributing to the betterment of civil society (2:47; 4:9; 10:38).

The fact that new believers were added daily to the community implies that the needs of newcomers from outside the community were also met. A community led by the Holy Spirit will be constantly driven to reach out beyond itself. If the Christian community had merely served itself, it would not have enjoyed the favor of all the people. The great appeal was how ministry genuinely met spiritual and physical needs without polarizing either domain. The community shined its light on a social context that included illnesses and poverty, characterized by an abundance of beggars and sick people (cf. Acts 3:1, 5:15-16, 8:7; Luke 16:19-31).

The church's voluntary and sporadic sharing of property and possessions, as mentioned above, hints at the social location and urban context of the first disciples and those added daily to the church. Sharing all things in common was not only evidence of the counter-cultural work of the Holy Spirit, but it was also a way to provide for the community's needs. Luke portrays a community never striving after greatness or wealth, including its leaders (20:33-36), a group of humble servants joyfully prepared to suffer persecution for Jesus and receive power in his name (5:41). The persecuted early church experienced signs and wonders that included sharing all things in common and unity in diversity—even in the midst of suffering.

The kind-heartedness of the community contrasted the Palestinian economic system, as depicted by Jesus' social interactions and parables that depict absentee landlords, day laborers, ubiquitous tax collectors, and cumulative debts of the poor (Freyne 2014, 120, 131). Giving was spontaneous, generous, and from the heart—not institutionalized, but inspired by the Spirit. "All the believers were one in heart and mind" (4:32a). Kindness characterized the community. Selfishness was renounced: "No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had" (4:32b).

Kindness Leads to More Kindness

Noteworthy is what happens after this supernatural community, fresh from Pentecost, living in joy and harmony, relates to the surrounding world. In the very next passage, after the description of the oneness and generosity of the early church (2:42-47), on their way to the temple Peter and John meet up with a beggar, crippled from birth. Significantly, the move from communal living to missional engagement serves as a transition from a community of kindness to an opportunity to do kindness.

A disciple, graced with a new way of relating to people outside of the community, is summarized in one concise sentence by Peter: "I have neither silver nor gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk" (Acts 3:6; author's Greek rendering). Peter indicates that there is something far more valuable than money, and that is the healing power of Jesus. Peter gives two mandates: "Look at us!" and "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (3:4,6). Next, he literally takes hold of the man's right hand and yanks him up (3:7). Suddenly the man enters the temple, walking, leaping, and praising God (3:8). The people are filled with wonder and amazement (3:10). The account demonstrates how words must accompany the deed; otherwise, the sign would leave onlookers bewildered.

Healing as a Sign

Peter's words emphasize the power of Jesus in healing the lame man, rather than "our own power or godliness" (3:12). Peter and John thus express a power that breaks in from on high, carefully directing attention to Jesus and the God of Israel who performed the miracle. The power of the good deed comes not from status or human strength but from dependence on "the name of Jesus" as the source of power, a power in consonance with human faith, "the faith that comes through him" (3:16).

The man's healing was not an end in itself. He immediately accompanied Peter and John into Solomon's Colonnade walking, jumping, and praising God, astonishing the Israelites (3:8-10). A key feature in Acts involves disciples entering sacred space and authoritatively occupying it (cf. 5:20-22). Initially, the beggar had sat outside the temple gates daily, impaired and unable to worship inside the court; now he not only walks inside the gates but leaps and praises God. In this important change of scene, "all the people," a cohesive group, "came running" into Solomon's Colonnade to see the healed man with Peter and John (3:11). Peter addresses them as "people of Israel," signifying completeness (4:12). The two Apostles now have the complete attention of the Israelite people within their sacred space during their sacred time. The afternoon service peaked in attendance because it coincided with the time of the daily whole offering, explaining the beggar's presence at that time and the crowds that gathered upon his healing (3:11;4:4). Reversing the power dynamics, Peter and John spoke to "all the people," while the priests and captain of the temple guard and Sadducees approached "greatly disturbed," seized Peter and John, and put them in jail (4:1-3, 10).

Ironically Solomon's Colonnade was built as "a hall of justice" a porch of judgment for the king (1 Kings 7:7). Now it exhibited a new form of justice, the healing of a crippled beggar, provoking the authorities to come forth, reassert their power, and pronounce their biased judgment in the "halls of justice." After jailing the disruptors who healed a poor and suffering individual, God's message prevailed "and the number of believers grew to about five thousand" (4:4). The questions begin to surface: Who are the legitimate authority figures of Israel—from the perspective of the people, from the perspective of the Apostles, and from the perspective of the established leaders? James D.G. Dunn seems to have pondered some of these questions. He states that "striking

is the contrast between the boldness of the unlettered apostles . . . and the confusion and weakness of all the most powerful people in the city" (Dunn 1996, 51). A reversal of authority is at hand.

Authoritatively, in the aftermath of the miracle, Peter's first words to the people of Israel gathered at the Colonnade are, "Why does this surprise you?" In other words: 'A new and powerful era of kindness has dawned and you might as well get used to it!' The healing is one of the many signs and wonders following Pentecost. A sign is not an end in itself; it leads to something greater. It glorifies God. Focusing on signs misses the point. No wonder Peter carefully articulates that this surprising event did not transpire through human power but through the God of Israel who has glorified his suffering servant Jesus (3:12-13).

There is an abiding continuity between Jesus' approach to suffering and the approach of the early community of disciples. A considerable amount of time and attention in the early community was spent ministering to suffering people through deeds of kindness. Typically, when a person on the street asks for money people either give some coins or walk hurriedly past. Peter and John, however, looked the crippled beggar directly in the eye, gained his full attention, and met his deepest needs, both for healing and salvation (3:4-5).

Peter expresses that there is something far more valuable than money, which the disciples share freely with one another, and that is the healing power of Jesus (3:6).[2] And yet, these very acts of kindness got the early church in trouble with authorities. The Sanhedrin was disturbed by the Apostles' proclamation of the resurrection (4:2), but Peter also viewed it as persecution against the mission of kindness: "We are being brought to trial for an act of kindness to an ailing man" (4:9; author's Greek rendering).

Kindness: A Pillar in Judaism

Simeon the Righteous (or Simeon the Just), a Jewish High Priest during the Second Temple era (ca. 300 BCE) and one of the last members of the Great Assembly of 120 scribes, sages, and prophets, said, "Upon three things the world stands; upon Torah, upon worship, and upon the showing of kindness." Kindness, steeped in Jewish tradition, provides continuity between Jewish historical practice and the early church. It also provides continuity and contrast with Greco-Roman society. The word translated as "kindness" in 4:9 is "benefaction," a technical word imbedded in social structure that depicts financial support for persons, groups, and even whole cities. This system pervaded every level of society; those who benefited from benefactors promised their loyalty to them. The early disciples assumed the role of benefactors because they followed in the footsteps of Jesus and had a dramatic impact on society for the greater good. However, unlike Roman benefactors (Luke 22:25), they expected nothing in return. What Jesus and the Apostles had to give was more precious than the quid pro quo benefits of silver or gold of benefactors: the restoration of life itself.

Peter described Jesus as doing kindness, literally "benefaction" in his earthly ministry: "doing good and healing all oppressed by the devil" (10:38). Thus, acts of kindness become a gateway into spiritual battle. As the book of Acts unfolds, we discover that the church does not initiate encounters with the devil or even hunt down the devil; instead, the forces of evil attempt to thwart the good purposes of the church at every turn. Therefore, the first act of kindness leads to the first act of persecution. After putting the whole judicial process on trial— *"for an act of kindness to an ailing man" we are being brought to trial*—Peter goes on to contrast the unkindness of putting Jesus ("whom you crucified") to death (4:9-10).

An example from today's world comes from a woman in Cincinnati (Ohio, USA) who was sentenced to jail for "obstructing justice" when she fed overdue parking meters prior to ticketing. This 63-year-old grandmother of ten was sentenced to 90 days in jail and a $750 fine for these random acts of kindness so the offenders would avoid parking tickets. "Sylvia Stayton should be congratulated for her act not punished," said her lawyer. She became a folk hero and received money from people donating to her "legal abuse fund." A church group that has been anonymously feeding parking meters for years printed up T-shirts: "Sylvia Stayton . . . guilty of kindness" (Carlson 1996, A15). The jail sentence of Peter and John can be summarized similarly: "Peter and John: Guilty of Kindness." Kindness has a powerful impact on legal systems that are not set up to welcome kind deeds. Enforcers of the letter of the law slighted the kind deeds of the early church.

Arrest Leads to Unrest

Luke's narrative transitions to the motives of particular Sadducees who arrest and jail the Apostles: they are filled with 'religious zeal', translated as 'jealousy' (5:17-18). Their self-centered motives lack integrity and foresight. After releasing the apostles from prison, an angel sends them to declare about "this new life" in the "temple courts" (5:20), the sacred space that represents the locus of power for the high priest. The true identity of the leadership of Israel comes into question. To 'stand' and 'teach' in the temple courts places the apostles in the arena of legitimate authority over the people of Israel (5:20, 21). This authority is evidenced by their daybreak arrival, when the people gather for the morning worship service, and the apostles "tell the people all about this new life" (5:20). The shift: no longer are the apostles on trial, but the authority figures of Israel admit that they have been charged as guilty of Jesus' death (5:28) and have become afraid to use force against the apostles for fear of being stoned by the people (5:26). The high priest and associates thus became diverted in their responsibilities of presiding over the morning service due to their preoccupation with silencing the apostles who stand in their sacred space teaching the people of Israel. "Who are the real leaders of Israel? Who currently staffs the temple? Who is teaching the people at the temple? The 'official leadership'? No, those roles are filled by the apostles" (Chance 2007, 94).

The irony is that the faithful followers win by losing while the opponents think they win yet actually lose. For instance, in narrating the release of the Apostles from jail, Luke pokes fun at the Sadducees, the persecutors, who did not believe in angels. Luke tells the story with a wry sense of humor: the next morning the prison guard stands guarding an empty cell! The religious leaders create their own comedy of errors—all in response to the kindness of the apostles.

Noteworthy as well is how the apostles did not simply accuse the Jewish leadership of participating in Jesus's death but early on invited them to repent (5:31), another mark of kindness. The response to rulers is not to bring down God's judgment upon them (although that is how the high priest misunderstood the invitation), but to specify their error so that they might turn back to God. Peter responds to the charge, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name," without defending against the charges but by declaring the gospel story (5:28-32). The apostles are "witnesses" who testify to the gospel as their only defense (Chance 2007, 95). As in chess, the best defense is an offense. Jealousy and guilt motivate the religious leaders, while the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins motivate the apostles (5:31).

Peter and the other apostles respond: "We must obey God rather than human beings" (5:29). This declaration is not a universal rejection of human authority, but refers to a particular conflict. Peter and John are not necessarily questioning the Sanhedrin's authority, or searching for mandates

to disobey. A key theme in Acts is God's "kindness" to "all nations" (14:16–17) and God's sovereignty over all creation and over all of human life (17:25–28); thus, Peter's statement that he must obey God corroborates with this overarching theology.

Further Acts of Kindness

Stephen, full of grace and power, who did great wonders and signs among the people (6:8), also engaged in acts of kindness. He and Philip were among those assigned to wait on tables for poor widows (6:1,5). Could it be that service and miracles are not ranked as one better than the other? Many want to engage in the spectacular, but meeting needs of suffering people is also an essential spiritual practice.

Philip proclaimed the Messiah (8:5), casted out unclean spirits, healed the paralyzed and lame, and produced great joy in Samaria (8:7-8). Philip's preaching, exorcisms, and healings were mutually reinforcing; the signs were not random showcases of power, in contrast to Simon's magic, but affirmations of the word Philip preached. Word and deed accompanied hearing and seeing (8:6), and signs and wonders pointed to the greatness of God (8:5, 8, 12). Peter's travels led him to "visit," or "strengthen," the believers in Lydda (9:32b). There he heals another crippled man, in continuity with his earlier healing of a man crippled from birth shortly after Pentecost (3:2-6).

Tabitha's ministry of good works for the poor was so vital that God raised her from the dead so that she may continue her good works (9:36-37,40). She was "always doing good and helping the poor" and made clothing for widows. Tabitha's service was an enactment of Jesus' declaration of "good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). Her deeds of kindness fit the description of kindness and Jewish piety, also descriptive of Cornelius and Jesus in the next chapter (10:2, 38). The narrative flows from an earlier passage about widows: just as the once-neglected Hellenist widows' needs were met in the daily distribution of food (6:1-3), so Tabitha met the needs of widows by making clothing for them (9:39). The term referring to her "good works" bestowed honor in civic Greco-Roman society. Tabitha fits the role of a benefactor; however, the fact that she made her own clothing likely indicates that she was not giving out of her wealth, which typified benefactors, but out of a sacrificial lifestyle. Tabitha's lack of abundant resources could also explain why she got sick and died as well as why disciples of Lydda urged Peter to come immediately, which he did.

Upon arrival, knowing what he needed to do, Peter sent the weeping widows who were surrounding her out of the room, got on his knees, and prayed. Then he turned to the dead woman and told her to get up. She opened her eyes, Peter helped her to her feet, and he presented her alive. This miraculous event created an exciting stir all over Joppa, and many people believed in the Lord (9:36-42). This passage provides continuity with the proclamation of the resurrection in sermons in Acts (2:31; 3:15; 4:10, 33; 5:31; 10:40; 13:30; 17:18, 31, etc.). The resurrection demonstrates the authenticity of Jesus and Christian faith. Upon healing the woman, Peter "called for the believers, especially the widows, and presented her to them alive" (9:41). The widows, surrounding Tabitha and weeping just prior to her resurrection and their specific mention after the resurrection, highlight a core issue in this healing: These widows had depended on Tabitha, and her rare gift of kindness, to provide for their needs. Luke's accounts present a contrast between those who hid resources and therefore died (Ananias and Sapphira), and Tabitha, who provided resources openly and was resurrected from the dead! The narratives also point to the power of the prayers of extremely poor widows that set the scene for the resurrection of a woman who takes care of their needs. The backdrop of this episode is God's very own kindness in answering their prayers through a spectacular miracle of the resurrection of the dead.

The connection between the resurrection and kindness is also evident in Peter's speech on

> . . . how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. 'We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen' (10:38-40).

All the dots are connected above: Jesus' deeds of kindness and healing propel him into spiritual battle, resulting in his being persecuted through death but culminating victoriously in resurrection. This sequence depicts the trouble with kindness as well as the triumph of kindness.

Cornelius, devout in prayer, feared God and gave generously to the poor (10:2). The angel responded, "Your prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God" (10:2-5). God is blessed by our giving. We show our faithfulness to God through kind words and good deeds (10:38). Described as "respected by all the Jewish people" (10:22), Cornelius was also respected in heavenly realms. An angel commends him for his prayers and gifts to the poor, literally "alms" that show pity on the poor (10:2), features of Jewish piety. These prayer and alms "came up to God" as a memorial offering, which is equivalent to a sacrificial offering in the Temple (10:4; Neil 1973, 138). Heaven and earth have taken notice of this man due to his prayers backed by action. This account flows appropriately from the passage on Tabitha, "always doing good and helping the poor" (9:36).

The question arises about the religious background of Gentile Cornelius and his household of "devout God-fearers" who gave generously to people in need (10:2). He may be practicing his own religion and/or may have been influenced by Judaism. He might have been a "God fearer" in the technical sense of a Gentile who practiced Jewish ways. "God fearers" worshiped the God of the Jews and observed Jewish Laws as strictly as they were able, but in the synagogues they sat in separate areas. Many historical records describe "God fearers" who resonated with the civic identity of the Jews. Josephus, for instance, states that every city in Syria had both its Jews and its Judaizers and that Jewish practices appealed to large numbers of citizens of Antioch (Rajak 2009, 118).

The Reciprocity of Kindness

Kindness can go both ways. During Paul's final journey, he and his shipwrecked companions washed ashore on the island of Malta. Immediately the text states, "The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold" (28:2). The narrative of kindness *to those* who do not know Christ now transitions to kindness *from those* who do not know Christ.

Publius, the chief official of the island of Malta, owned an estate and "welcomed us to his home and showed us generous hospitality for three days" (28:7). This generosity is quickly reciprocated by Paul: "His father was sick in bed, suffering from fever and dysentery. Paul went in to see him and, after prayer, placed his hands on him and healed him. When this had happened, the rest of the sick on the island came and were cured. They honored us in many ways; and when we were ready to sail, they furnished us with the supplies we needed" (28:8-10). In summary, the islanders first show kindness and generosity, then Paul responds with an act of kindness and generosity of healing. Once this healing extends to the remainder of the sick on the island, they

"honored" the disciples "in many ways," kindly furnishing the supplies they needed for their journey. Kindness opens the door to people's hearts and becomes the gateway for the contextualization of the gospel.

Contemporary Illustration and Conclusion

Deeds of kindness usher the Apostles into the realm of spiritual warfare (10:38); evil forces attempt to thwart the good purposes of the church at every turn. In the last decades of the twentieth century, in many communist countries of Asia churches were shut down and pastors imprisoned. Those who came from other countries for ministry silently walked the streets and prayed for weeks at a time. Anything more overt would lead to immediate imprisonment. Yet over the years, persecution has lessened in many of these regions because of the Christians' kindness. Although sharing the gospel is in many cases illegal, communist officials have begun to express appreciation for Christian service to prisoners, the sick, peasants, and farmers. Kindness has become the key to ministry in communist contexts.

A pastor in Asia had been caught in the vicious cycle of drugs, prison, release, relapse, and resentencing. One day, this cycle came to a dramatic halt when he met Jesus Christ. He began to share his joy with other drug addicts, utilizing his home as a Christian rehab center. Former addicts were transformed into catalysts for a social movement of doing good deeds in a communist setting. They reached out to friends who were drug addicts, then widened their involvement in civic transformation to caring for orphans and disaster relief. They deliberately reached out to "the most culturally destitute."

The success of this movement led the pastor back to the same prisons where he had been incarcerated, where it is illegal to share Christian faith, but where suddenly the closed door swung wide open for him to proclaim good news. Thousands of prisoners and hundreds of staff, moved by the gospel story, eye-witnessed God's good work of transformation.

The pastor reflects: "I did not dare to dream about this in a communist country, but God convinced me to move forward in faith." The ministry has flourished because of the positive working relationship the pastor has developed with local government officials. When ushered before these authorities, he explains to the government officials that prison rehabilitation and an improved society go hand in hand. Standing in front of government officials, the ministry leader parades former drug addicts to the front of the room and states, "These were once your enemies who harmed society; now they are your friends who care for the well being of society." He has effectively defended his ministry by utilizing the civic argument, just as the early apostles did before the authorities when they defended their healing ministry as "an act of kindness."

Kindness may be the most powerful force in the world. It can harden or soften people's hearts. Kindness can reach the heights of heaven and knock on the gates of hell. God's kindness bursts forth from on high in beauty and bounty. We see its evidence everywhere. Through kindness, we enter the world of the other, and we either rock that world or gain access. Either way we would do well to be kind in an unkind world.

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[1] Scriptures are quoted from the NIV, unless otherwise stated.

[2] In a parallel passage, Paul states that he did not hesitate "to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (20:27), did not covet anyone's "silver or gold or clothing" and worked with his own hands to support himself and his companions (20:33-34). "In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (20:33-35).