



Acts and The Early Church (Week 6/8) Transformed but Imperfect

Small Group Discussion Questions

Connect Review how you are using your money to care for the least. How sacrificially generous would you like your giving to be?

Warm-Up

1. As the Gospel went *outward* into the world, *what sort of external resistance did the first Christians face?*
2. As the Gospel *inwardly* came to bear on Christians, *what internal resistance do we witness in Christians?*

Read Acts 15:36-41

3. What has happened in the lead up to this disagreement between Paul and Barnabas?
4. What details do we know about the content of the disagreement? *How does Luke describe the intensity?*
5. Why do you think people are surprised by the imperfection of Christians? Should we be surprised?
6. What does 'admitting imperfection' look like to God and others in everyday life?
7. How do you think being willing to admit that we are imperfect is distinctive in our world? Do you think it has the power to be distinctive on your various frontlines?
8. Do you ever lament the harm our sin can cause? In what ways can our sin *be destructive, dishonour God, and damage our witness?* What then does a regular rhythm of confession look like?
9. How is admission that we get things wrong actually a form of proclaiming the Gospel of grace?

Read Acts 9:31 and 20:32

10. What is sanctification? How are there *past, present, and future* dimensions to our sanctification?
11. How do these verses point to the ongoing work of sanctification? What role does the Holy Spirit play?
12. Can you think of ways you've seen the Spirit's work change someone over time (including yourself)?
13. If our ongoing transformation into Christ's likeness is by God's power, what part do we have to play?
14. What practices help us cooperate with God's transforming work? How can we encourage each other when growth feels slow, messy, or like "*one step forward, two steps back*"?
15. Why is it important *not* to compare our spiritual growth to others? *Who should be our point of reference?*

Read 1 John 3:2-3

16. According to John, what is the future of those who believe? Why can we be confident of that future?
17. What most excites you about Jesus' return? What is one way you live in light of that day?
18. What happened to Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark? How is this a sign of God's grace at work?

Apply In what area of your life do you most need to be reminded that God will finish the work he started?

Pray Gracious Father, thank you that even amidst our weakness that you can use us for your glory. Please help us to live in the light of your grace. In Jesus' Name, Amen

GOING DEEPER

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Small Group Discussion Questions


On Your Frontline this Week

Who else is praying for your frontline? You might want to share some prayer points with a friend. Pray for their frontline too.



For Families

- *Download:* some of the family resources to use at home: stbartskids.org

Listen, Watch, and Read

- *Listen (sermon):* “To Europe” by John Stott:
https://www.allsouls.org/Media/AllMedia.aspx?show_media=212796&show_file=226040
- *Listen (sermon):* “Philippi” by Vaughan Roberts:
<https://stebbes.org/sermons/philippi/#sermons>
- *Read (blog post):* “How a Skeptical Philosopher Becomes a Christian” by Larry Sanger:
<https://larrysanger.org/2025/02/how-a-skeptical-philosopher-becomes-a-christian/>
- *Read (article):* “When Christians disagree” by Darryl Dash:
<https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/columns/straight-paths/when-christians-disagree/>
- *Read (book):* “Bullies and Saints” by John Dickson 
- *Listen (song):* “Light of your Grace” by Citizens:
<https://open.spotify.com/track/34dSY60x8HFunVOont3v0H?si=addfe3e2fd23477a>

Series Resources

- *Read (book):* “Strange Religion” by Nijay Gupta. 
- *Read (commentary):* “The Challenge of Acts” by Tom Wright. 
- *Read (book):* “Why the Gospel” by Matthew Bates.
- *Read (advanced commentary):* “Acts: Witnesses to Him” by Bruce Milne.

 [Available to borrow in the Church library](#)

ACTS: STRANGE RELIGION

Week 6/8 “Transformed but Imperfect”
by the Rev’d Adam Lowe (31/08/2025)

변화되었지만 아직 온전하지 않은 자 | 蜕变但不完美|
மாற்றப்பட்ட வாழ்கை ஆனால் குறையுள்ள வாழ்கை

Bible Passage: Acts 15:36-41

Gracious Father, thank you that even amidst our weakness that you can use us for your glory.
Please help us to live in the light of your grace. In Jesus’ Name, Amen

When I had just been serving as a minister for a few years, I remember one of my extended family members who is not *yet* a Christian saying, it must be so wonderful to be part of a community — a church — in which there is never *ANY* conflict and everyone *ALWAYS* treats each other lovingly.

I mean I’m constantly amazed by just how extraordinary Christian community is, but it’s not perfect! They had an image of a perfect community made up of perfect individuals!

-
- Now, at one level that’s **funny**, *even a bit sweetly naive?!*
 - Yet at another level, it’s **sad**, because their hunch that Christians *should be* different is right, *they were onto something!* However, it just doesn’t quite line up with reality.
 - Yet it is also **confused**. They’ve got the wrong impression, perhaps even from Christians. Because *being followers of Jesus doesn’t make us perfect*. We have a perfect Lord. But we still sin. *We’re all works-in-progress*.
 - **We are transformed by God’s grace**. In the power of God’s Spirit. *We are secure in God’s love, adopted as his children, called to bear his fruit, proclaim his name, assured of the future which awaits.*
 - But as we seek to faithfully follow in a way in keeping with the one who has set us apart, we simply get it wrong over-and-over again even as we grow in Christ’s likeness.
 - Christians have not escaped making mistakes, getting off course, and disagreeing, even as we’ve been set free from being slaves to sin.

We've been taking quite a whirlwind tour of Acts so far, marvelling and being challenged by the distinctiveness of these Christians *as the Gospel came to bear on the shape of their lives*.

- And it might be tempting to think, oh! They were the real deal! They always got it right.
- But even a cursory scan of the chapters we've jumped this last week, chapters 4 to 15, reveals a very different story. It's been far from rosy. //
- In fact, there's two forces at play resisting the Gospel.
- **As the Good News goes outward into the world, it has been met with opposition and persecution *from external sources*.**
- The apostles were put in jail; Stephen was stoned to death.
Paul is expelled from the synagogues.
Paul and Barnabus are left for dead when Jews and Gentiles team up to stone them.
James is executed. Peter is imprisoned. /
As the Gospel goes outward there's been no shortage of external resistance.
- But that's not the only force resisting the Gospel.
- **Because as the Gospel comes inward into the life of the community, it has also been met with resistance from within, from internal sources.**
- Ananias and Sapphira lied to the community and faced God's judgement.
There's been complaint of neglect of the Hellenistic widows being overlooked.
There's been debate over who is in and who is out.

And seemingly, not long after that is all wonderfully sorted,
Paul and Barnabus have an argument and opt to part company.

- They're anything but perfect.
- Yet even as they faced persecution from the outside,
and mistakes on the inside,
God was at work refining his people and advancing his mission.

The first Christians were:

- Imperfect *and willing to admit it*;
Works-in-Progress *by God's power not our own*; and
Awaiting Glorification *when Jesus returns*.
- So let's consider those aspects one-by-one,
because they're also true of us.
- We are imperfect, works-in-progress, awaiting glorification.

IMPERFECT (AND WILLING TO ADMIT IT) | VERSES 36-39A

온전하지 않음을 인정하는 자 | 不完美 (我愿意承认!) | குறையுள்ள வாழ்கை (ஒப்புக்கொள்ள தயார்)

First, Christians are IMPERFECT *and should be willing to admit it*. Verse 36...

Some time later Paul said to Barnabas, “Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing.” Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.

Not long before this, Paul and Barnabus had been instrumental at the Jerusalem Council in resolving some of the most *important issues that had plagued the early church which—if left unresolved—could have torn it apart*. They were able to decide and affirm that:

- Gentile converts to Christianity did not need to be circumcised or uphold the Mosaic Law. AND salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ alone, not the keeping of the Law. /
- Amazing! What an landmark moment of unity. But not for long. /
- We don’t know how much time had passed *between the council and Paul and Barnabas’ blue, stoush*, but given it immediately proceeds the council in c.15, it couldn’t have been long. /
- It almost feels like that moment in a family when you’ve had a wonderful time out, *maybe even at church*, but things fall apart the moment you get in the car to drive home. /
- It’s important to note that when Luke describes this event as a ‘sharp disagreement’,

he doesn’t simply mean they had a sought of jovial debate or difference of opinion.

- But this is intense and heated – it’s a serious clash of heartfelt conviction. /
- **Barnabas** wanted to take his cousin—John Mark—with them on their missionary trip. **Paul** definitely did not want to, as John Mark had deserted them previously.
- You can imagine Paul thinking, no way! I’m not going down that road again!
You can imagine his hesitation, the possible hurt he carried, and his concern for others.
Perhaps Barnabas didn’t think it was that big of a deal *or just wanted to pour out grace*.
We don’t know if they stomped off in a huff, or shook hands agreeing to disagree.
But whatever the case, it’s okay just to feel saddened by it all. *We don’t need to smooth it over.*
- / Now, at one level, we shouldn’t be surprised that divisions can arise.
Nor even that some of the most godliest of Christians can see things differently.
Of course we can. And it’s important to *work that out* and *work that through* with grace.
But it’s also okay and right for us to be disappointed that it can—and does—happen. /
- They were about to embark to do such a good thing: to go back, visit, and check-in on all the believers in all the towns where they had preached. How good is that!?
But their lack of unity *and an inability to work it out*, meant they couldn’t do that together. /
- How sad is that! There’s all sorts of things that we read of in Acts that might disappoint us.
And if we read through the letters, there’s no shortage of things believers were doing, *all sorts of sin*, which should grieve us. // *There’s a great book, ‘Bullies and Saints’ that kind of makes the point that the history of Christians is both better and worse than you think.*

The same is true today. / But we can't be surprised by that because we're all sinners.

- If we weren't then we wouldn't need God.
- Acknowledging that we're imperfect, doesn't give us a free pass to do as we please.
- But falling short also doesn't put our salvation in jeopardy.
Christians should be under no pretense or pressure to think we're perfect,
in fact, we should have the greatest clarity of all of just how imperfect we are.

What it should cause us to do:

- Is to want to live differently — which we'll look to next, but also, that we'd be:
sorry for the ways that we fall short;
gentle in bearing one another being quick to forgive; and
free to lament when we witness that in ourselves and in others.
- I resonate with Paul when he said, to paraphrase a little (cf. Romans 7:15):
*I don't understand what I do! Why do I do the things I do not wish to do,
And fail to do the very things that I want to do!? And sometimes, many times, on repeat!*
- Do you ever feel that? / Of course we lament that. We lament that because:
It's destructive of relationships and communities.
It dishonours God: *as we're not taking his Lordship seriously;*
It damages our witness: *one of the greatest criticisms of Christians, fairly or not, is our mistakes.*

- *And if we're too busy bickering then it's completely distracting from the mission at hand.*

It's no wonder that when Jesus taught the disciples *to pray* and *gave us a prayer*,
he put confession — our need to say sorry and ask for his forgiveness —
just as we forgive others, together with our need for daily bread. //

- We don't just do that in our individual or family devotional lives,
but also as a gathered community.
- It's why, every time we gather, we have a confession — *along with a declaration of forgiveness*,
which we say together. //
- Saying words together can feel a bit strange.
And of course we need to guard that those words never become verbal regurgitation.
- *But it is so good for us. We're admitting as individuals and as a community that we get it wrong.
And that we — like everyone else — need God's forgiveness. And need to forgive others. /*
- **I love that we say the words TOGETHER.**
Not only because *it's a little protest against the hyper individualism of our culture*,
but also because *it's reassuring that we're not alone. You're not alone.*
We're all in the same boat.
- If we think we've got it altogether: *we're proclaiming a type of works-based righteousness.*
But when we admit that we get it wrong: *we're proclaiming that we're all in need of God's grace.*

WORKS-IN-PROGRESS (BY GOD'S POWER) | ACTS 9 & 20

하나님의 능력으로 이루어져 가는 과정 | 进行中的工作(靠着神的力量, 而非我们的力量)|
நடைபெற்றுக்கொண்டிருக்கும் வேலை (நம்முடைய சுய வல்லமையால் அல்ல, தேவனுடைய வல்லமையால்)

Second, Christians are WORKS-IN-PROGRESS. There are many parts of the New Testament, that speak of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit shaping us into Christ's likeness, but we also witness earlier in Acts chapter 9, that it is one of the signs of God's ongoing work.

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. **Living in the fear of the Lord** and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

- Or later in chapter 20 of Acts, Paul tells the Ephesians leaders that the Word of God's grace is able to build them up — that is able strengthen them and grow them in holiness. That's what Christians understand as the work of sanctification.

In the simplest terms sanctification means being made holy.

- Set apart by God. Growing to be more like Jesus.
When you put your trust in Jesus, there are at least three dimensions to that being set apart.
- **There is a past and permanent dimension.** / *From the moment you put your trust in Jesus, that because he has died and for risen for you, you have been made holy right now in his eyes. You have been washed, sanctified, and justified by the Holy Spirit!*

- There's nothing we can do to earn that. There's nothing we can do to add to that. /
- **There is a future holiness that we look forward to** — when Jesus returns. We'll get to that.
- **And there is a present process of sanctification of growing in holiness.**
Between: when we become followers of Jesus and receive his Spirit, and when Jesus returns and brings that work to completion.
Bearing the fruit of the Spirit. Conforming to the image of God's Son.
Keeping in step with the Spirit. Putting to death the things not of God, sin. *As Lewis put it:*

The Christian does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because he loves us...
When Go said, 'be perfect,' he meant it. He meant that we must go in for the full treatment... If we let him...

Part of our letting him, our participation with God's work, is our obedience.

- Remember, it is ultimately the work of the Spirit. What chance do we have on our own?
- *It's why we can't look at one Christian or another person, and think better of ourselves. It's why we shouldn't look at one Christian and think they're better because they seem so far ahead.*
- We really have very little idea of what is going on in others inner lives, and we have no cause to boast in ourselves, because it is ultimately not our own doing. /
- I'm sure everyone can think of times in which they've made a mistake or got off course.
- But I'm also sure, that you can look back over your life since becoming a follower, *and think, I think slowly, perhaps even painfully, my life is being shaped more by the Gospel.*

- Perhaps on occasion, when things happen, you've even been caught by surprise by your response — in a good way. Perhaps you've thought, wow. that's not my normal response.
- You could ask someone who knows you well how they see that ongoing work in your life! *We can acknowledge it—it's not boasting in our doing—but giving thanks for the Spirit's work.*
- Other times we can feel like we're taking one step forward and two steps back. It can be a painful process for us and also for others. //
- *I remember one mature Christian saying to me, just when I think by God's grace I'm on top of one characteristic, priority, or behaviour, I discover, the Spirit points out another.* But the way you'll be empowered to keep growing in Christ's likeness, is to keep coming back to the one who has the power to change us.
- Confession, devotion, obedience, gathering together as his people. These aren't a laundry list of ways that we make ourselves right. They're ways that press us more deeply into the one who has set us right.

Whenever reading a book, I always find the acknowledgements section really interesting. The part in which the author thanks those who have contributed to the book coming into being. And almost always, one of the people thanked is the editor! It usually goes something like: *I am indebted to my editor for their advice & meticulous editing that have immeasurably improved this work. Any inaccuracies or errors are entirely my own!*

- *That's what I want to say to those who are turned off Jesus because of Christians.*
Any goodness you see in me is the handiwork of the one who is perfectly good.

And any shortcomings you see in me, well they are my own doing.
They're signals of the sin that still lurks, but one day will be put to death. /

- Peter went from denying Jesus three times to risking his life to declare the Gospel. Paul went from persecuting Christians to willingly put his own life on the line.
- It doesn't always look dramatic. But you might be surprised by how dramatic the effect of your transformation can be.
- Time-and-time again, research indicates that whilst the shortcomings of Christianity can be a significant blocker to belief, that actually often, it is the quiet witness and example of *Christians that people know* that opens others to belief. //
- In an article detailing his journey from skeptic to Christian, the co-founders of wikipedia, *Larry Sanger reflected that one of the strangest and surprising things that had challenged his unbelief was the unusual grace that was demonstrated by Christians in the face of obnoxious trolls!*

I observed Christians on social media often (though not always) behaving with maturity and grace, while their critics often acted like obnoxious trolls. Some of my favorite people were Christian, too. And some of them were extremely intelligent. Strange. [Note he's not saying they were perfect... but they were different.]

Even the broken and inconsistent *gracious* witness of Christians was sufficient reason—in *part*—to cause his disbelief to fall away.

AWAITING GLORIFICATION (WHEN JESUS RETURNS) | 1 JOHN 3

예수님 다시 오실 때 영화롭게 될 자 | 等待榮耀(当耶稣再来时) | மகிமைக்காக எதிர்பார்திருத்தல்

Finally, Christians are AWAITING GLORIFICATION when Jesus returns. 1 John, ch.3, verse 2...

Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, **we shall be like him**, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. (1 John 3:2-3)

Glorification is short-hand of describing what it will be like for us when Jesus returns.

- We'll be made like him! / Mortal bodies made imperishable. / Sin and evil will be no more. The work of new creation has begun in us will be brought to completion.
- That doesn't give us an excuse to sin now. *It compels us to live in anticipation of that future.* It means that longing to live like Jesus is not futile.

It's not like the seemingly endless process of renovating an old house which restarts when you finish.

- **What he began, he will complete.**

// It's like watching the grand final when you already know the outcome. *Instead of sitting on the edge of your seat experiencing it as a series of nail-biting moments, you can have peace, because you know how it is going to end.*

*Perhaps there's an area of your life right now,
that you need to be reminded that God will finish the work he started.*

We know how things will end — which should change how we live. //

We don't know *how* Paul's relationship with Barnabas and John Mark was resolved, but we do know that Paul did reconcile with them both.

- *He mentions them both warmly in two other places.
Even asking for John Mark to join him, because he is helpful to him in his ministry.*
- I kind of love that we don't know who was right, or even if either was right.
- But that they were reconciled by God's grace; AND
God still used them for his gracious purposes. //
- Even when we get it wrong, God can still use us for his gracious purposes. /
- What makes us weird, is not because we're perfect,
But because of how we approach our imperfections.
- We're *willing to admit it.*
*We're works-in-progress by the power of the Holy Spirit; AND
We're waiting faithfully until that day when Jesus returns and makes his work complete.*