

Copyright Geist Christian Church, May 29, 2022

**Title:** The 3 "W" Gifts that Shaped Early Christianity

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**Text:** [Acts 16:9-15](#)

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You know how there are some Bibles that divide the text into sections with headings? Like “The Feeding of the 5,000” (miracle story) or “The Birth of Jesus Foretold” (by the angel Gabriel to Mary) or “God’s Covenant with Abram” (covenant of land from the Nile to the Euphrates). That sort of thing.

Well, the section in the Book of Acts that I’m speaking from today is entitled, “The Conversion of Lydia.” When Pastor Danny asked me to preach today, he reminded me that we were not in the middle of a series and that I had the freedom to select my own text. And I thought of Lydia because I really like Lydia. I am impressed by her—inspired by who she was and what she did.

Her story is found in Acts, chapter 16. Acts is a continuation of the story written in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus has been crucified, resurrected, and identified by disciples. He has blessed them one last time before ascending into heaven. Acts is the story of the establishment of the early church.

Paul is out and about doing missionary work with his friend and fellow disciple, Silas. They traveled from town to town, places far and wide, declaring and sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. That Good News included those decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus’ death.

Long before any organized church structure took shape, believers gathered together in small clusters, and God’s Spirit moved among them, often taking them away from the established patterns of their known religious practices and life. Missionaries like Paul, Silas, and Timothy made

a great impression with all these groups, and the churches were strengthened in faith and increased their numbers.

Paul and Silas were journeying through Phrygia, current-day Turkey, when they picked up the disciple Timothy in Lystra. This is where they stalled out, not sure where to go next.

The story tells us that they were stopped by the Holy Spirit from heading east into Asia, or north to the region of Bithynia. They didn't proceed into these places, but they needed clarity about what to do next. It was then that Paul had a dream. He was directed to go west to Macedonia, into current day Greece, across the Aegean Sea.

Macedonia was truly a missionary frontier. Crossing over the threshold into this region is a symbolic and real gesture in support of the spread of the Gospel. Paul and his companions were looking for divine guidance and here it was, given to Paul through a dream. Going to Macedonia, crossing over, constitutes a tremendous leap of faith for those guys.

They ended up in Philippi. Now, Philippi was a Roman colony, an outpost under Roman rule, and thereby a colony whose influential people were Gentiles; Romans, not Jews. It was in this mission field of Philippi that our Christian missionaries encountered Lydia:

*On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.*

*A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira, and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.*

*When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." And she prevailed upon us.*

Acts 16:11-15 NRSV

As I've said, I love Lydia and what she represents. She gives me strength and hope and courage. She gives me direction in my faith and in my ministry. Maybe she can do the same for you.

First, and perhaps most obvious, Luke emphasizes the role of women throughout his writing, starting with the detailed story of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, her cousin and mother to John the Baptizer. There are also stories of sisters Martha and Mary, and of Mary Magdalene

that you find only in Luke. Luke saw the value of women to the faith and wrote about it. Thus, Lydia becomes a model of female spirituality and leadership.

*A woman.*

She was a dealer in purple cloth. I love the color purple, in nature (flowers, grasses, part of the rainbow). Not so much in animals (except maybe some kinds of butterflies, fish, and tree frogs). And I love purple cloth. I'm sure this is at least partly due to the implications through history of what the color purple represents. In many parts of the world, purple has always meant a high station in the hierarchy of life, the upper crust, if you will. If one wore purple, one was at least a royal—maybe even a king or a queen.

Lydia's work with purple cloth signified that she was a businesswoman who dealt with influential people, who were probably wealthy people. She was most likely *wealthy* herself.

So...here is a *wealthy woman* choosing to separate herself from those she hangs around with during the week to go outside the gates of the community to pray with Jewish people. I expect that in that prayer group, a group that undoubtedly felt unwelcome to practice their Sabbath prayers within the walls of Philippi, Lydia stood out. And I'm guessing she did so with grace and poise. I like Lydia.

It would seem that she was alone, by herself in the world. Verse 15 states that "she and her household were baptized." Scholars of the New Testament agree that the inference here is that she is single and head of her own household. It can be further postulated that she is widowed, based on the assumption that she must be a bit older. After all, she has an established and successful business. So has she always been single? Or is she widowed? We really don't know. But for the sake of my alliterative title, "3 W's That Shaped Early Christianity," I'm going with widowed.

Lydia is a *wealthy, widowed Gentile woman* who becomes a follower of Jesus Christ.

Finally, Lydia says to Paul, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home." She opens her home to these missionaries, and we learn later in the scriptures that she does so frequently. This is why Luke wrote about her. Not only did she open her home and share her hospitality repeatedly, but she also financed the mission work that others were doing.

She helped with money, she shared her home, she listened and learned and spoke the story of Jesus Christ herself. She led her entire household, which would have included servants and maybe even some of her customers, to become followers of Jesus and become baptized themselves.

Lydia shared the gifts that she had. As a follower of Jesus Christ, she embraced those gifts, and offered them up. And she's atypical. As a **wealthy widowed woman**, she stands out. I picture her with a purple hijab, standing stately with pride and a strong sense of self. I imagine her moving decisively, with courage, inner strength, curiosity, generosity.

So I ask, how are you like Lydia in your own faith? Are you using your own strengths to further the faith? To grow the church? To open the door to Jesus' love, kindness, and forgiveness for others?

In your own visions and walk with God, do you hear the call to come over, to go outside the walls of expectations? And do you have courage enough to follow through?

Lydia's life could have looked very different. She could have chosen as a single woman, either by not marrying or by becoming a widow, to step back. In her time and place, it would have been far more the norm to be cared for by other family members or friends. She could have chosen to step back into obscurity and certainly less wealth, maybe even poverty.

If she had done life this way, she would *not* have developed and maintained a business or had her own household. She would *not* have gone outside the city gates that Sabbath day to pray and so would *never* have made any sort of difference in expanding the movement of the followers of Jesus. Something about who she was, something in the make-up of her own character was strong, courageous, and determined.

Think about others who have stepped out in faith this way, who have moved across the thresholds of their own city gates and out into the outer walls of their lives to explore, to pray, to listen for the word of God, and to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, making a difference in bringing the light and love of Christ into the world.

There are the obvious folks like Martin Luther King or Sister Teresa. What about William Barber II, one of our own disciples pastors, a black man whose work has a social-justice bent and who co-leads the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival? If you are not familiar with him, look him up.

Or what about Rev. Adam Hamilton, a white male, whose writings and teachings speak to so many across the globe? Many of you have studied from his books. Let me tell you what I've learned about him. He is a nearly 58-year-old pastor serving a United Methodist congregation in Leawood, Kansas. He started that church 31 years ago with 0 members. It is now a congregation of 22,000 members. Huge.

But Hamilton was born to teenage parents who divorced when he was 12. At age 14, he was hanging out at a friend's house when a traveling Pentecostal evangelist came to the door. Adam answered the door and was invited to church by a person who spoke through an electronic voice box. Adam went to church, even as he teased that the man spoke like Darth Vader.

He's not sure why he went to church that first time but confesses that it was probably not for God but for the girls that he might meet. He continued going to church, ended up going to Oral Roberts University and began to question the theology he was studying. He read a United Methodist Book of Discipline and converted to United Methodism. He went to Candler School of Theology, a United Methodist Seminary, where our own Pastor Danny graduated.

Hamilton served for a short time as an associate in a United Methodist church, was supported in his request to start a new congregation in the Kansas City area, and the rest is a tremendously successful piece of church history. God is working through Adam Hamilton, and, it seems obvious to me, Hamilton is happy for the partnership. An unlikely source, at age 12 and 14, for God to plant the seeds of spreading the Love of Christ.

Yeah, I know. These are clergy types who dedicated their work lives to spreading the word and the love. But there are others, too, who are less flashy. What about all the Sunday school teachers and Bible study facilitators through all the years? They are not formally trained clergy. And we have an opportunity right here at Geist Christian right now to be a teacher of children. We need teachers! Want to sign up?

What about all the parents and grandparents who faithfully guide their children with not just a moral compass but with a hand of love and the stories of Jesus?

What about you? Are you like Lydia, using the gifts that God has given you to further expand the faith and/or the church? What about the situation and place that God has put you in? Can you stand independently, acting with courage and resolve, and maybe moving against the flow in order to accomplish and achieve your goals? Can you say that who you are and what you are doing is furthering Christianity in this year 2022?

Think about it. Think about it and make your own difference in the world of today.