

Missio ad Gentes in the Acts of the Apostles

edited by
Fabrizio Meroni



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On the front cover
Portrait of the Evangelists Luke and John,
the frontispiece to St. John's Gospel,
Octateuch, Four Gospels and Synodicon (late 17th century),
Gondar, Ethiopia.

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Preface

Since the outset of his magisterium, Pope Francis has repeatedly called our attention to the necessity to bring about a major missionary awakening based on the “evangelical approach to the Church’s mission in the world”.¹ This calling is in keeping with Pope Benedict XV’s insight in the Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud*, and on the revitalization of the *missio ad gentes* “as engine and horizon of the faith”.² A renewed missionary engagement of all Christians is indeed necessary at a time when mission needs to regain its true significance, life force, and evangelizing drive, “so that the spirit of the *missio ad gentes* may animate the path of the Church”³ today and for the future. An evangelizer by nature, the Church should always begin by evangelizing herself:⁴ this is the only way to ensure that she is able to preserve her freshness and the Apostolic courage to be re-created and reformed with new modes of Christian presence and witness (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 130-132), so as to continue to effectively respond to Jesus’ command “to go forth and preach the Gospel to all: to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance or fear” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 23).

¹ POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*, 1 June 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/june/documents/papa-francesco_20180601_pontificie-opere-missionarie.html/.

² POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*, 3 December 2015, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/december/documents/papa-francesco_20151203_plenaria-propaganda-fide.html/.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Mission is a force capable of transforming the interior of the Church even before the life of peoples and cultures. Therefore, mission must become the paradigm of the life and daily work of the Church, as a permanent state of intimate missionary communion with Christ, of personal encounter with Jesus alive in His Church, as the only way to bring about an authentic missionary and pastoral conversion of the disciples of Jesus and of the structures of the ecclesial community (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 25, 27).

The Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019, announced by the Holy Father to celebrate the 150th anniversary of *Maximum Illud*, is thus a “providential occasion”⁵ to revive in the faithful the missionary “boldness”, “courage”, and “zeal of those who first proclaimed the Gospel”.⁶ The chosen theme for this initiative, *Baptized and Sent: The Church of Christ on Mission in the World*, reveals “the missionary dimension of our Baptism”,⁷ as being sent on mission is a call that comes with Baptism and is for all the baptized. And the “regular book for prayer and meditation”⁸ of the *Baptized and Sent* of all times – Pope Francis highlights – cannot but be the *Acts of the Apostles*. The “community of missionary disciples”⁹ that began evangelization from “Jerusalem [...] to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) is their main source of “inspiration”¹⁰ and guiding star in the mission of evangelization and faith witness they are called to execute as members of the Church.

To meet Pope Francis’ call to awake the missionary awareness, ardor, and engagement, the Pontifical Missionary Union (PMU) has promoted the creation of *Missio ad Gentes in the Acts of the Apostles* (Omnis Terra – PMU CIAM Publications), a collection of essay authored by a group of eminent New Testament scholars from all the continents.¹¹ By examining the extraordinary events and deeds nar-

⁵ POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Pope Francis’ book titled *Go Forth: Toward a Community of Missionary Disciples* published June 2019 by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, within the series American Society of Missiology Series.

¹⁰ POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*.

¹¹ The publication of *Missio ad Gentes in the Acts of the Apostles* is part of the PMU contribution to the engagement of the Pontifical Mission Societies (PMS) in laying the groundwork to the Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019 upon request of Pope Francis himself. On 22 October 2017, the same day of the Angelus Prayer held on the occasion of the World Mission Sunday, Pope Francis sent a letter to Cardinal Fernando Filoni, Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and President of the PMS Supreme Council, entrusting him with “the work of preparing for this event, especially by raising awareness among the particular Churches, the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and among associations, movements, communities, and other

rated in Luke's writing, the chapters that make up this volume allow a thorough understanding of how mission represents not only the very nature of the Church (cf. *Ad Gentes*, 2),¹² but also its origin, purpose, and life, contributing to the reflection on "how to render the work of the *missio ad gentes* more effective".¹³

In the first place, the essays bring out the Trinitarian, Christological, and pneumatological roots of the mission as defined in the *Acts of the Apostles*, which provide the theological context in which the Church should be understood: from the creation in Christ through the redemption accomplished in the Paschal Mystery until its eschatological fulfillment.¹⁴ Hence, the divine universal mandate to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19, Acts 1:6-8) that the Church has derived "from the mission of the Son and from the mission of the Holy Spirit [...], in accordance with the decree of God the Father" (*Ad Gentes*, 2).¹⁵

Along these lines, the authors dispel any doubt about the fact that *missio ad gentes*, as received by the Apostolic Tradition and sealed by the Second Vatican Council, is the ever-valid foundation-

ecclesial bodies". The letter is available at <https://press.vatican.va/content/sala-stampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2017/10/22/0727/01588.html#ing/>.

¹² PMU promotion of this book does not entail the endorsement of all the statements and the exegetical approaches featured in the essays.

¹³ POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*.

¹⁴ The Paschal Mystery and the historical mission of Jesus highlight how the need for love, the need for salvation from evil and death, sin and pain, hatred and division, is constitutive of the human person who, through creation in Christ, longs for divine sonship. Interest in dialogue, peaceful coexistence, social and economic justice, ecology, and otherness, must be profoundly configured and built upon the superabundant offer of salvation the heart of which is the Paschal Mystery (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

¹⁵ The divine nature of the missionary mandate of the Church was reaffirmed also by Pope Benedict XV: "Before He returned to His Father, Our Lord Jesus Christ addressed to His disciples the words: 'Go into the whole world and preach the Gospel to all creation' (Mark 16:15). With these words He committed to them a duty, a momentous and a holy charge, that was not to lapse with the death of the Apostles but would bind their successors, one after another, until the end of the world – as long, that is, as there remained on this earth men whom the truth might set free. Entrusted with this mandate, 'they went forth and preached everywhere' (Mark 16:20) the word of God, so that 'through all the earth their voice resounds, and to the ends of the world, their message' (Psalm 18:5)" (*Maximum Illud*, 1).

al model and paradigm of the evangelizing mission of the Church throughout the whole history of salvation, until the coming of the Kingdom of God. There cannot be replacements for the *missio ad gentes*, which already encloses in the scope of its divine mandate any mode of dynamic presence of proclamation and conversion of nations, cultures, religions, and peoples who encounter and open themselves to the Gospel of Jesus and His Church.

Moreover, the authors make clear that mission does not respond to a human initiative: it is *missio* and *actio Dei*. The principal agent is the Holy Spirit: mission is His project (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 21).¹⁶ The Church is servant of the mission. It is not the Church that makes the mission, but the mission that makes the Church. Mission is not the instrument, but “the point of departure and the goal,”¹⁷ and Church’s mission is to proclaim the Gospel and to witness it among those who have not yet encountered Jesus Christ and the Christian faith is absent. In doing so, the Church opens the way to the divine action of the Holy Spirit in places where women and men still yearn for salvation from sin and death.

Missio ad Gentes in the Acts of the Apostles also highlights the need to rediscover the intrinsic link between mission and salvation, which is one of Luke’s recurring motifs (cf. *Ad Gentes*, 7), through another fundamental theological truth set out in the *Acts of the Apostles: the sacramental logic of the event of Jesus Christ*, of His Incarnation and Passover. Mission has the experiential and theological need to rediscover this logic, in order to determine the nature, life, and structures of the Church, as the “universal sacrament of salvation” (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1, 9, 48; *Ad Gentes*, 1; *Gaudium et Spes*, 45).¹⁸ Mission is the historical and sacramental participation in the

¹⁶ “It is the Holy Spirit who sends us, accompanies us and inspires us. He is the source of our mission. It is he who guides the Church forward, not us. [...] He, the Holy Spirit, does everything; we are simply His servants” (POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*).

¹⁷ POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*.

¹⁸ Mission makes the Church because it designates it to be much more than an instrument for salvation. It constitutes the Church as a community of the saved, since it is truly a family of God, sons and daughters in the only Son – an eschatological design of all creation (Easter, Baptism, and Eucharist). The Church,

missions that God the Father has assigned to the Son and the Holy Spirit in the world. Therefore, limiting mission to proclaiming and witnessing the values of the Kingdom means not only making a true reduction, but also depriving the Word of God and His Kingdom of the concrete historical-eschatological reality of the Incarnation, as well as of the saving and transforming effectiveness of the missionary work of the Church founded on the Passover of Jesus.

The Beatitudes, the precept of love, and the liberation of the poor are theologically concrete and pastorally effective only in the context of the sacramental foundation they all share.¹⁹ What was very clear to the Second Vatican Council – namely, the Church as the “universal sacrament of salvation” and its necessity rooted in the need for theological faith and Baptism for the salvation of all, baptized or not – seems faded in some contemporary missiological reflections. But, without the sacrament, love and mercy remain vague intuitions of fraternity and reconciliation to be shaped by worldly criteria and treated as welfare programs and non-governmental organizations, as often pointed out by Pope Francis.²⁰

Only in the sacrament can one understand the true meaning of the world, of matter, and of the body which, sick in sin, yearns for

the “universal sacrament of salvation” is much more than a means or a sign that will one day be discarded. Cf. F. MERONI (ed.), *Mission Makes the Church*, Aracne Editrice, Canterano (Roma) 2017.

¹⁹ *Baptism and confirmation* as immersion in and pneumatological identification with the Paschal Mystery; the *Eucharist* as the communal form of the true and corporeal unity of God in Christ with our humanity in the order of sacrifice and oblation; *marriage* as a sacramental unity of God with his human creature and of Jesus Christ with his Church; *reconciliation* and the *anointing of the sick* as true liberation from sin and re-creation of full life; the *sacrament of order* as a ministry at the service of the Eucharistic form of the world and of redeemed humanity – these all need to be rediscovered in theological reflection and pastoral activity concerning mission (F. MERONI, *The Mission of the Church and the Missio ad Gentes: Some Initial Observations*, in CEP-PMS, *Baptized and Sent. The Church of Christ on Mission in the World*, EMMS OCT2019, San Paolo, Milan 2019, 78).

²⁰ “The secularized world, in fact, even when it is receptive to the Gospel values of love, justice, peace and sobriety, does not show the same willingness to the person of Jesus: it neither regards Him as Messiah nor as Son of God. At most it considers Him an enlightened man. Therefore, it separates the message from the Messenger and the gift from the Donor” (POPE FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples*).

the Paschal newness of life.²¹ The Church is missionary in nature because it is born and founded in the Passover of Jesus' death and resurrection, the starting point of the *Acts of the Apostles*. The cross, the historical and risen life of Jesus of Nazareth, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, establish the Church in a permanent state of mission (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 25), and characterize its nature as the locus of salvation and the time of reconciliation with God within history and the world.²²

Missio ad Gentes in the Acts of the Apostles, springing from the insistence placed by Pope Francis upon mission and the living example of Peter, Stephen, Paul, and all the other figures portrayed by Luke, also reminds us that Jesus' mission, the heart and motivation of the very Church's mission, is a true communication of divine life, of eternal life, of the life of daughters and sons who have always been loved by God, our creator and Father in Christ. Giving the life of God the Father, offering the life of the Holy Spirit, and sacrificing oneself for life in Christ, represents the origin and purpose of mission, from its original form of the *missio ad gentes* led by the Apostles to its fulfillment in the Jerusalem of Heaven, the dwelling place of God among humanity (cf. Acts 21).²³

²¹ As Pope Benedict XVI reminded us in the Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* 70-71: "Catholic doctrine, in fact, affirms that the Eucharist, as the sacrifice of Christ, is also the sacrifice of the Church, and thus of all the faithful. This insistence on sacrifice – a 'making sacred' – expresses all the existential depth implied in the transformation of our human reality as taken up by Christ (cf. Phil 3:12). Christianity's new worship includes and transfigures every aspect of life".

²² However, salvation and eternal life, the cross and its oblation sacrifice, are somewhat absent from certain pastoral and missionary efforts that are too consumed by the present, by the self-gratification of numbers and exaggerated media exposure. The insistence of Pope Francis on *holiness* in the contemporary world prompts us to focus again on the topic of salvation in Jesus Christ by divine grace, as an experience of new life, conversion from sin, victory over death, and eternal life. See the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (March 19, 2018), and *Placuit Deo*, the document of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith approved by the Holy Father (March 1, 2018).

²³ The mission of Jesus placed in the heart of the Church must be the criterion of spiritual discernment to evaluate the effectiveness of its pastoral structures, the results of its Apostolic work, the fruitfulness of its ministers, and the joy that we are capable of communicating, because without joy we are not able to attract anyone. Every parish should make the style of the *missio ad gentes* its own, so that

Nowadays, there are significant and creative Christian missionary communities in places that are predominantly indifferent or hostile to the faith, where the Christian witness of ecclesial movements, lay associations, missionary institutes, and new ecclesial forms of community life, experience the tragedy of the martyrdom of blood on a daily basis. These communities can refer to the living example of the Apostles to properly understand the *missio ad gentes* in a paradigmatic reconfiguration of the entire mission of the Church sent into the world for its salvation and transformation.²⁴

May this kerygmatic approach to the faith, which animated the Apostolic tradition and continue to be so familiar among the young Churches today, also find space among the Churches of ancient tradition in need for a new evangelization. *Missio ad Gentes in the Acts of the Apostles* is also addressed to them.²⁵

Vatican City
March 24th, 2019
Third Sunday of Lent

Fr. FABRIZIO MERONI
PMU Secretary General
Director of CIAM and Fides

the Holy Spirit will transform habitual faithful into disciples, and dissatisfied disciples into missionaries, drawing them out of fears and closures and propelling them in every direction, to the ends of the earth (cf. POPE FRANCIS, *Meeting with the Executive Committee of CELAM*, Bogota, 7 September 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2017/september/documents/papa-francesco_20170907_viaggioapostolico-colombia-celam.html/).

²⁴ The Christian faith that penetrates this interculturality opens new horizons, transforms relationships and peoples, transfigures matter, bodies, and the world for the glory of God and the full life of man and woman. Dialogue between people, cultures, and religions and the indispensable respect for each person's religious freedom represent the natural and necessary context of carrying out the Church's mission in the world. The peaceful and orderly coexistence of different and mutually respectful religious communities must always include the free possibility of mission, of conversion, and of religious and community membership (F. MERONI, *The Mission of the Church and the Missio ad Gentes: Some Initial Observations*, 77).

²⁵ A significant contribution in coordinating the publication of this volume was given by Mr. Emiliano Stornelli, Chairman of the Religion & Security Council.

Let the Spirit Lead: Missionary Lessons from the *Acts of the Apostles*

❖ KIERAN J. O'MAHONY

Since the Second Vatican Council, it has been clear that the *missio ad gentes*¹ lies at the heart of being the people of God.² The choice is stark: the Church grows or the Church dies. It does not matter whether home missions or foreign missions are intended. In reality, traditional Christian countries in Europe are now mission territories all over again.

For a variety of causes, the Catholic Church is not in an ideal place for mission: the new “evangelical” atheism, the general failure in handing on the faith (already for up to three generations), cultural resistance to absolute claims and life-long commitment, the decline of the ministerial priesthood and, not least, the damage done by the tsunami of child sexual abuse.

There is another issue that many shy away from naming: the breath-taking implausibility of the Christian proclamation. For believers – usually cradle Catholics at home in the faith – it can be hard to appreciate what a leap of faith and courage it is to believe in Jesus Christ and his teaching, in his death and resurrection. Why should God disclose himself in a backwater of the Roman Empire, 2000 years ago, in a single human life? Furthermore, it has become increas-

¹ Decree *Ad Gentes on the Mission Activity of the Church* (1965), *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), *Christifideles Laici* (1988), *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), *Porta Fidei* (2011), *Evangelii Gaudium* (2012).

² See P. HEGY, *Wake Up, Lazarus!*, iUniverse, Bloomington, IN 2011; M. WHITE – T. CORCORAN, *Rebuilt. The Story of a Catholic Parish*, Ave Maria Press, Notre Dame, IN 2013; I. LINDEN, *Global Catholicism. Diversity and Change since Vatican II*, Hurst & Company, London 2009. More recently: J. HARTL – K. WALLNER – B. MEUSER (Hrsgs.), *Mission Manifest. Die Thesen für das Comeback der Kirche*, Herder, Freiburg 2018.

ingly difficult today for Christians to proclaim “what happened for us” in “the great events of salvation”, given the intellectual collapse of the Anselmian model of redemption.³ If we cannot speak in a culturally resonant way of what lies at the heart of the matter, then evangelisation and *missio ad gentes* are correspondingly compromised and undermined.

In brief, mission has become more urgent, more complex. One part of the task must be to open our foundational texts, the Scriptures again. Here, we turn to the *Acts of the Apostles*, seeking inspiration and insight for today. We will take the following steps: the genre of Acts, mapping Acts, the speeches as the “interpretative constant” across the tumultuous tale, the crucial role given to the Holy Spirit, and the dialogue with culture.

1. The Genre of Acts

The Acts is a thrilling read, full of events, people, unexpected twists, and showing a tremendous energy. It encompasses the break with Judaism and the inclusion of the Gentiles, while offering on the way a large biblical theology of history, traced chiefly in the many speeches. In theory and principle, the Acts recounts a history taking us from the ascension of Jesus to the house-arrest of Paul in Rome, roughly from AD 30 to some time around AD 64. The book makes no effort to tell the whole story comprehensively; instead it offers a highly selective reading of those thirty-five years, combining a racy chronicle with narrative repetition and repetitive thematic insistence. Its story really gets underway with the Pentecost *tableau* and ends somewhat suddenly and intriguingly: “Paul lived there two whole years in his own rented quarters and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with complete boldness and without restriction” (Acts 28:30-31).

The last word in Greek is “without restriction”, that is, *unhindered*, surely one of the great open-ended (non-)endings.

³ The traditional Western model of redemption stems chiefly from Anselm of Canterbury (1033/34-1109). The limits of the model have been apparent for a while on biblical, theological, and scientific grounds.

The Acts cannot be history as it has been practiced in the West since the Enlightenment.⁴ According to Paul Ricoeur, there are three kinds of history: documentary, explanatory, and poetic.⁵ These serve different functions and all three are to be found in the Acts. Documentary history is present in the main characters, as well as in the geography, politics, Roman institutions, place names, and so forth. Explanatory history tries to understand the sequence, both over time and in terms of cause and effect. Poetic history is at a different level. It includes regular divine interventions, as well as other “trans-natural” phenomena. There are sudden transportations and disappearances, releases and rescues. Nevertheless, the Acts is not a novel, nor biography, nor history, nor apologetics in the strict sense, although it shows characteristics of all four. It is, rather, a narrative of origins (“histoire de commencement”), broadly historical and strongly apologetic, aimed at instructing the hearers / readers at the time of writing, and shaping the choices of later generations. Perhaps all history is like that to some degree – not simply a recovery of the past but a shaping of perspectives in the present, so as to mould the future.

Many scholars think the Acts is a later New Testament document, from around AD 110-115.⁶ The implied context shares concerns found also in the Pastoral Letters (the presence of “wolves”, the risk of heresy, the tendency towards rejection of the Old Testament, unease with the empire, yet no direct persecution and so forth). In particular, it may reflect a reaction against *incipient* Marcionism, which flourished in the mid-second century AD. It is likely that the first appearance in print of such a blatant rejection of the Jewish roots of Christianity reflects an earlier development. Such a context would account for Luke’s insistence from start to finish on precisely the Jewish matrix of the Christian movement.⁷

⁴ “Wie es eigentlich gewesen” in the phrase of the German historian Leopold von Ranke.

⁵ Cf. D. MARGUERAT, *La Première Histoire du Christianisme. Les Actes des Apôtres*, Cerf/Labor et Fides, Paris-Genève 2007, 20-21.

⁶ Cf. R.I. PERVO, *Dating Acts*, Polebridge Press, Santa Rosa, CA 2006.

⁷ Apart from the works cited in this essay, these were also helpful in gaining an understanding of mission in the *Acts of the Apostles*: A. BOTTINO, “La missione ‘fino all’estremità della terra’”, in G. LEONARDI – F. TROLESE (eds.), *San Luca Evangelista. Testimone della fede che unisce*, Istituto per la Storia Ecclesiastica Padovana, Padova 2002, 335-350; H.J. CADBURY, “The Speeches in Acts”, in F.J.

2. Mapping the Missio ad Gentes in Acts

The Acts is the only history book in the New Testament. Printed Bibles very often guide the reader with maps and in particular maps of the missionary journeys of St. Paul. A *literary* map such as this may help, bearing in mind that the Acts is part of a double volume.

Luke-Acts: A Simple Outline

Preface	Luke 1:1-4
Part I • The Time of Israel Reaches its Climax	Luke 1:5-2:52
Part II • The Time of Jesus	Luke 3:1-Acts 1:26
Part III • The Time of the Church	Acts 2:1-28:31

An expanded “map” can be produced for the Acts alone:

Transition to Part III	Acts 1:1-26
Petrine Christianity: Jewish Mission from Jerusalem to Antioch	Acts 2-12
Pauline Christianity: Gentile Mission from Antioch to Rome	Acts 13-28

Such a neat outline does not quite follow the text. Stories do overlap in such simplistic divisions. For example, “Petrine” Christianity shows the following sequence:

Christian beginnings in Jerusalem	Acts 2:1-8:1
The Church expands to Samaria and beyond	Acts 8:2-40
Conversion of St. Paul	Acts 9:1-31
<i>Key scenes</i> • Peter, the conversion of Cornelius, and the formation of the Antioch Church	Acts 9:32-12:25

FOAKES JACKSON – K. LAKE, *The Beginnings of Christianity: Part I, the Acts of the Apostles*, Macmillan, London 1920-33; G. LEONARDI – F. TROLESE, *San Luca Evangelista. Testimone della fede che unisce*, Istituto per la Storia Ecclesiastica Padovana, Padova 2002; V.T. NGUYEN, “Mission in Acts: An Inspiration for the Pilgrim Church”, *The Bible Today*, vol. 52, n. 3, 2014, 133-139; M. SCHÖNI, “Un modèle centrifuge et un modèle centripète? Jésus et la mission de l’Église selon Luc-Actes et selon Jean”, in M.H. ROBERT – J. MATTHEY – C. VIALLE (eds.), *Figures bibliques de la mission*, Cerf, Paris 2010; D.P. SENIOR – C. STUHLMEUILLER, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*, Orbis Books, New York 1983; M. WHITE – T. CORCORAN, *Rebuilt. The Story of a Catholic Parish*.

Notice that the Paul story is already anticipated within the account of the “Petrine” mission. Finally, “Pauline” Christianity shows these steps:

Gentile mission, promoted from Antioch	Acts 13-14
Gentile mission, confirmed in Jerusalem	Acts 15:1-35
Gentile mission, culminating in Rome and incorporating Paul’s “passion narrative”	Acts 15:36-28:31
Paul’s “passion narrative”	Acts 21:17-28:31

2.1 “Petrine” Christianity: *Acts* 1-12

The *Acts* is never boring because of the layers of stories, long and short, and the intercalation of speeches. This can be disconcerting. For instance, in the section devoted to the “Petrine” Church, we find long narratives, very short self-contained stories, sustained narratives of persecution, and repeated “vignettes” of community life.

Examples of the substantial narratives in *Acts* 2-12 are Pentecost itself (2:1-42), the martyrdom of Stephen (6:8-8:1), the “conversion” of Saul (9:1-29), the conversion of Cornelius and his household (10:1-11:18). Around these large stories, we find shorter scenes, which move the story on: the healing at the Beautiful Gate (3:1-10), the complaint of the Hellenists against the Hebrews (6:1-6) leading to the appointment of the seven to serve at table, while preparing us for the martyrdom of Stephen; Simon Magus (8:9-24); the account of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch (8:26-40); the delightful story of Tabitha (9:36-42). Within that, there are sustained narratives of persecution, echoing in some sense the passion narrative of Jesus himself (3:5-22; 5:17-42; 8:2-3; 12:1-23). Along with that story of persecution is affirmation of the continued well-being of the community and the spreading of the Word (2:43-47; 4:32-37; 5:1-11 [a contrasting tale]; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24-25).

2.2 “Pauline” Christianity: *Acts* 13-28

The second half of *Acts* starts with a new, secondary Pentecost. Again, we find substantial narratives, short stories or anecdotes, sustained narratives of persecution (this time from “the Jews”), repeated vignettes of community life and conversions. Again, these are intriguingly intercalated.

Then we have the first of the missionary journeys (Acts 13-14; Antioch in Syria, Seleucia, Cyprus, Paphos, Perga, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Pisidia, Pamphylia, Attalia, Antioch in Syria). Within that grand story, there are minor tales such as the highly ironic blinding of Elymas, and the healing of the man crippled from birth with the attempt to worship the disciples.

2.3 Grand Narratives

For instance, the first missionary journey (Acts 13-14; Antioch in Syria, Seleucia, Cyprus, Paphos, Perga, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Pisidia, Pamphylia, Attalia, Antioch in Syria). The “Council” of Jerusalem is a major turning point in the narrative because it lays down the minimal conditions for communion between Christ-believing Jews and Gentiles (15:1-35). The second missionary journey shapes the next great arc of story-telling (Acts 15:36-18:22), mainly Syria and Cilicia, taking in Derbe, Lystra, Phrygia, Galatia, Troas, Samothrace, Neapolis, Philippi, Thessalonica, Amphipolis, Appolonia, Thessalonica, Beroea, Athens, Corinth, Chenchrae, Ephesus, Caesarea, Jerusalem, Anthioch in Syria). The third missionary journey also forms a large arc (Acts 18:23-21:22): Galatia, Phrygia, Ephesus, Assos, Chios, Mitylene, Miletus, Cos, Palatra, Tyre, Jerusalem.

2.4 Short Stories

A good example is that of Bar-Jesus / Elymas (13:4-12) – a highly ironic tale, of course. Other vignettes include Lydia (16:14-15); the slave girl (16:15-18). The story of Paul on the Areopagus is one of the great set-scenes of the Acts, where the Gospel preaching takes on the philosophers of Athens on their home territory (17:16-33).

2.5 Opposition / Turning Away from the Synagogue (Pisidian Antioch, 13:44, 48-50; Iconium, 14:2-7)

Opposition is registered among those insisting upon the full observance of the Law (15:1-5). Considerable opposition is experienced at the hand of slave owners and, for the first time, the disciples are put in prison, leading to a miraculous escape (Acts 16:19-40). In Thessalonica, the Jews are not happy with Paul's preaching (17:1-13), and Paul is removed a few times for safety, ending up in Athens. In Corinth, there is further opposition (18:12-17) but no jailing.

We cannot omit the “passion narrative of Paul” (Acts 21:17-28:31) which brings the Acts to such a dramatic, open-ended conclusion.

With all these themes working in counterpoint, does the symphony hold together, is it a coherent composition? A number of “elements” favour synthesis: the agency of the Holy Spirit, the consistency of the proclamation, the proposed vision of salvation history, and the open engagement with new contexts and cultures.

2.6 Pentecost Experienced Again and Again

Pentecost is first of all a Jewish feast, celebrating the wheat harvest. By the first century, this regular agricultural celebration had come to mark the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. In the world of Luke-Acts, it is the beginning of the gathering in – harvest – under the new Law of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the miracle of the languages is a reversal of the tower of Babel story in Genesis. The linguistic miracle is more than the mere overcoming of foreign languages: instead, a message is offered which speaks to every human heart, across all cultural boundaries and divisions. The adjusted citation from Joel tells the reader that something to do with the end of time has taken place, that is, something to do with God’s ultimate plan of salvation for all humanity: “And then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21). The implied inclusion of all this is important because, at least initially, the proclamation is to Jews and proselytes only, and the mission to the Gentiles is not yet in view. This limited audience is clear from the list in Acts 2:5-11, and from the address in 5:14. Throughout, the writer respects the Pauline order, to the Jew first and then to the Greek.

The Pentecost *tableau* is a symbolic synthesis of the many experiences of the Spirit, scattered throughout the Acts. Early in Acts itself, we have a “second” Pentecost, in response to persecution: “When they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the Word of God courageously” (Acts 4:31).

The Spirit descends again in Acts 8, but this time by means of the laying on of hands (Acts 8:14-17).

Before the second part of Acts starts, there is a new Pentecost, on Cornelius and his household (Acts 11:15). Further on, there is another descent of the Holy Spirit, on followers of John the Baptist (Acts 19:1-7). Pentecost is foundational but not at all “once and for all”.

2.7 Consistency of the Proclamation

In his Pentecost sermon, Peter proclaims Jesus, Baptism, and the Holy Spirit, and at the very end Paul is preaching the same Good News: “Therefore, let all the house of Israel know beyond a doubt that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36); “Repent, and each one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far away, as many as the Lord our God will call to himself” (Acts 2:38-39); “From morning until evening he (ed. Paul) explained things to them, testifying about the Kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus from both the law of Moses and the prophets (Acts 28:23)”; “Therefore be advised that this salvation from God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen!” (Acts 28:28).

This echoes the Emmaus story, offering a concentrated summary statement, each element of which merits reflection: “Then Jesus said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled’. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures, and said to them, ‘Thus it stands written that the Christ would suffer and would rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And look, I am sending you what my Father promised. But stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high’ (Lk 24:44-49).

Johannes Nissen provides a useful summary of the points made:⁸

1. The basis of mission: the death and resurrection of Jesus.
2. The *fulfilment of the Scriptures*: the disciples are reminded that the life and death of Jesus must be seen in the light of the Scriptures.
3. The *content* of the mission: this is summarised as *repentance and forgiveness*.

⁸ J. NISSEN, *New Testament and Mission. Historical and Hermeneutical Perspectives*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt-am-Main 2006, 50.

4. The *purpose* of the mission: it is to be “from Jerusalem” but is intended for “*all nations*”.
5. The disciples are called to be witnesses.
6. Mission will be accomplished in the power of the *Holy Spirit*.

These combined threads are woven together throughout Luke-Acts and consistently appear throughout the fabric.

2.8 History of Salvation

Even the casual reader of the Acts must be struck by the sheer quantity of talk throughout the text. The initial impression is backed up by statistics. A full half of the Acts is made up of sermons, discourses, and letters and within that, one third of the text consists of Christian sermons. These speeches “map” the grand narrative of salvation history. The very grandest of these must surely be the speech of Stephen before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7:2-52, offering a vast panorama from Abraham to the crucifixion of Jesus. This great plan of God is noted a few times in the Acts (emphasis added): “This man, who was handed over by the predetermined *plan and foreknowledge of God*, you executed by nailing him to a cross at the hands of Gentiles” (Acts 2:23); “For David, after he had served *God’s purpose* in his own generation, died, was buried with his ancestors, and experienced decay” (Acts 13:36). “For I did not hold back from announcing to you the *whole purpose of God*” (Acts 20:27).

This purpose (*boulē*) of God did not take place simply in Jesus. It existed before the time of Jesus and continues in the time of the Church.⁹ But already in Peter’s Pentecost speech, the grand vision is unfolded, in the light of prophecy and the psalms. The grand vision accounts are: 2:14-26 (Pentecost), 3:12-26 (Solomon’s Portico), 4:8b-12, 19b-20 (before the Council), 7:2-52 (Stephen again), 13:16b-41, 46-47 (Antioch in Pisidia), 17:22-31 (Areopagus), 28:17c-20, 25b-28 (Rome to the Jewish leaders). Even though brief, the final dialogue between Paul and the Jewish leaders takes up, in somewhat compressed fashion, the very same themes of divine plan, fulfilment in Jesus, and the mission of the community of faith.

⁹ M.L. SOARDS, *The Speeches in Acts. Their Context, Context, and Concerns*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY 1994, 187-189.

2.9 Engagement with Cultures

The language of the Acts traces in a subtle way the cultural outreach. At the start, the Greek echoes that of the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint). By the end, Luke writes in an Attic dialect, more suited to the cosmopolitan outreach portrayed.¹⁰ This cultural outreach can be further illustrated by contrasting three speeches of Paul in Antioch, Pisidia, Lystra, and Athens.

1. Antioch in Pisidia (13:13-43)

The speech in Antioch offers another grand vision of salvation history, working this time with the figure of David and the Psalms. The preaching is successful on the first Sabbath but the presence of Gentiles caused upset on the second Sabbath. Nevertheless, Paul speaks appropriately to a mainly Jewish audience, using arguments and tropes that appeal to them.

2. Lystra (14:8-20)

This time, the audience is made up of pagans. Paul must first correct a serious misinterpretation: the Lystrans take Paul and Barnabas to be Hermes and Zeus. For this pagan audience, Paul argues from nature and creation, using examples from farming and the weather. Naturally, it would not have made sense to have argued with them from Scripture, at least to begin with.

3. Athens (17:22-31)

The audience has changed to sophisticated *urban* pagans. Luke sets up a grand “debate”, a gladiatorial contest between philosophy and the Good News. Epicureans and Stoics are named, as is the Areopagus, the place of their disquisitions. The argument cannot be from

¹⁰ “As Acts moves into the Greek world, in its second half, the quality of its Greek improves. When Paul faces a learned or elite audience, as in chapters 17 and 26, his Greek reaches its highest point. These examples also show that, although he can deploy a few optative and Attic idioms, Luke had difficulty when attempting to write good Greek periods. His literary ambition exceeded his ability.” R.I. PERVO, *Acts: A Commentary*, Hermeneia, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 2009, 8.

Scripture or from agriculture. Paul makes us of his inspection of the city and his discovery of an altar to an unknown god. Thus, using philosophy and poetry, he adapts himself to those before him. Paul provides a kind of “secular” salvation history, as follows: “From one man he made every nation of the human race to inhabit the entire earth, determining their set times and the fixed limits of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope around for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. For in him we live and move about and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring’” (Acts 17:26-28).

This constitutes a remarkable adjustment to his audience, their experience and their way of looking at the world. There is still a divine plan, but expressed in a way that non-believers may be encouraged to glimpse it. Antioch, Lystra, and Athens illustrate Luke’s desire to engage respectfully and deeply with his surrounding worlds. Neither Luke (nor Paul, his *porte-parole*) asks his hearers to come into his world: rather he goes out to theirs.

3. Towards Some Conclusions

The *Acts of the Apostles* is a truly unruly account of origins, exhibiting a huge cast of characters, peppered with a vast number of summaries, anecdotes, dramas, conversions, and longer narratives. It *might* be better termed the *Acts of Peter and Paul*. But even they are not the true chief protagonists of the *missio ad gentes*. An even better title would be the *Acts of the Holy Spirit*, given the presence, power and unpredictability of the Spirit throughout.

Luke is calling his generation to trust the Holy Spirit. The protagonists in his story have all to adjust to the agenda of the Spirit. The plan is not *theirs*. On the contrary, the role of the missionary disciple is to listen, in each generation, to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches (Rev 2:7). This hearing and obeying is the highest, perhaps costliest, form of conversion of heart. In the conversion of Cornelius, it is really *Peter* who undergoes the significant change of heart. Both Peter and Paul are effective agents of proclamation because they themselves experience the conversions required.

In the Acts, conversion takes the *form* of attending to and being led by the Spirit. The *content* of that conversion is Jesus, his mes-

sage, cross, and resurrection. The proclamation, taking in an astonishing variety of contexts and cultures, remains the same: God has raised this Jesus from the dead, triggering the final, Jubilee era of God's forgiveness and grace offered to everyone. Authentic proclamation means that the proclaimer has "heard" this for him- or herself. Anything less than that will be second-hand, third person, hearsay (Job 42:5).

In the Acts, there are no "programmes" which will "do the trick". Instead, we have deeply engaged believers doing the hard slog of persuading others of the Good News by means of robust dialogue, sometimes successfully, sometimes not. While the grand narrative does not really change across the Acts, a faithful *relecture* of Acts requires us not simply to repeat but to have the courage to create our own meta-narrative, taking full account of how we view the world today, evolution, human rights, inter-religious dialogue, and care for the earth.

The Acts affirms the rootedness of the Christian project in God's disclosure to the people of Israel. There is continuity and connectedness, even bearing in mind the novelty of the Christian proclamation. The stability of God's continued disclosure is at stake here. The one God – creator, saviour, lover – shows himself in creation, in human experience, in the variety of cultures and cultures, to the first "chosen" people and now to all nations through Jesus' death and resurrection. Our challenge is the same as that faced by Luke: to speak of the continuity and the innovation, the one God speaking to all and yet something new and wonderful took place in Jesus.

The dialogue that Luke illustrates across his text invites us today in the *missio ad gentes* to a dialogue with our surrounding societies, cultures, and religions. As in the Acts, this will mean *robust* dialogue, real conversation, which sometimes will work and other times not. While we know what we hold and proclaim, dialogue means not coming with a package, the deposit in the old language, but with an offer of relationship, which must consider the contexts and contentions of the other earnestly. Paul's experience in Ephesus is instructive: Paul argued in the synagogue *for three months* and then went to the *skolē* of Tyrannus, meaning a lecture hall for public instruction and debate, *for two years!* Clearly, Luke wants his readers and hearers to abandon their comfortable house churches for a real encounter with outsiders.

Luke is convinced that the house church is the basic model, providing that belonging and intimacy which alone can sustain both the individual believers, and the believing community. He is so convinced of it that he chose to place his last dramatic scene in the setting of a house church and chose, presumably with great care, his final words to his readers and hearers. The house arrest of Paul becomes both a house church and a *locus* of final dialogue with the Jews. The author closes his ambitious two-volume project as follows: “Paul lived there two whole years in his own rented quarters and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with complete boldness and without restriction” (Acts 28:30–31).

It is often noted that the very last word in Greek is *akōlutōs*, without hindrance or restriction or unhindered. Paul is *unhindered in himself*. Although under house arrest, he is a truly free man, set free by Christ and free from all self-interest. He welcomes all and proclaims “with boldness”. Paul is *unhindered by the weight of institution* – easier, of course, in his day! But still, what matters to him is not “the Church” but the Gospel. To be of service requires some level of “infrastructure”, as Paul himself knew so well, and yet all these things are only means to an end, that the Gospel may be preached, heard, and lived. Finally, *the Gospel itself is unhindered*. It is clear throughout the Acts that the unruly Holy Spirit inspires faith in unexpected places. There is no way of knowing what the Spirit will do next.

The faith today will be lived and proclaimed by smaller, intentional missionary communities, within which the believers encounter the Risen Lord and know conversion of heart and life. Thus, grounded in their own Pentecost, they will be able to go out as prophets to the world confidently and respectfully proclaiming the Gospel: “For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far away, as many as the Lord our God will call to himself” (Acts 2:39).

The Acts of the Apostles: With the Spirit to the Ends of the Earth

❖ FRANCIS J. MOLONEY

The *Acts of the Apostles* is the “second volume” of a single work known as Luke-Acts. There are those who occasionally suggest that these two New Testament books may be by different hands.¹ But their prologues (Lk 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-2), the shared dedication to Theophilus, the explicit reference to two books in that dedication (Lk 1:3; Acts 1:1-2), and the many literary similarities between the two books make it clear that a single (and very skillful) author wrote a long and unified story.² It recounts God’s saving action from the preparation for the coming of Jesus in the Old Testament (Lk 1-2), to the bold preaching of the Kingdom at the ends of the earth (Acts 28:23-31).³ Across the stories that announce and document Jesus’ birth, Luke presents figures from the Old Testament era who usher in the story of Jesus (Zachariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, Simeon, and Anna). John the Baptist, closely linked to these beginnings, also belongs to that era: “The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the Kingdom of God is proclaimed”

¹ See, for example, M.C. PARSONS – R.I. PERVO, *Rethinking the Unity of Luke and Acts*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 1993.

² I will refer to the author of these biblical books as “Luke”, although we cannot be sure of the identity of the historical author. The name “Luke” was not associated with the Gospel until late in the second century and has been accepted in the Christian tradition ever since. See the concise and helpful discussions on this issue in J.T. CARROLL, *Luke: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library, Westminster John Knox, Louisville, KY, 2012, 1-4; U. SCHNELLE, *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings*, trans. M. E. Boring, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 1998, 238-247 and 239-263.

³ There are hints in Acts that Luke was aware of Paul’s death (see Acts 20:22-25, 37-38; 21:11, 13), but he has chosen to ignore a tragic ending. It did not suit his purpose, as there is no place for pessimism in a story of an unstoppable Spirit-directed march from Jerusalem to Rome, and beyond.

(Lk 16:16).⁴ From those beginnings, the era of Jesus is told, highlighted by Jesus' initial journey from Nazareth (4:16-30) to His transfiguration on a mountain in Galilee, and its aftermath (9:28-50), followed by a further journey from Galilee to Jerusalem (9:51-19:44).

The city of Jerusalem becomes the fulcrum of God's sacred history. Jesus takes possession of its temple, teaches there, and shares His final meal with the disciples. Jesus is arrested, crucified, and raised in Jerusalem.⁵ Unlike the accounts of Mark (16:7), Matthew (26:16-20), and John (21:1-25), the disciples do not return to Galilee. Jesus ascends to heaven from Jerusalem (Lk 19:45-24:52). Before ascending, He commissions his disciples to be witnesses of Jesus' message of repentance and forgiveness "to the ends of the earth". But they are to remain in the city of Jerusalem "until you have been clothed with power from on high" (24:46-49). The Spirit-directed journey of Jesus closes in the city of Jerusalem as He returns to His Father. Already in these concluding moments of the Gospel story of Jesus, however, it becomes clear that another 'era' will open with the *missio ad gentes* of the Apostles.

1. Jesus and the Holy Spirit

Anticipating the theme of the *Acts of the Apostles*, the Spirit-directed journey from Jerusalem "to the ends of the earth", the three eras of the Gospel of Luke depend upon the crucial and creative role the Holy Spirit plays as each era opens.⁶

⁴ I use the traditional expressions "Old Testament" and "New Testament" to indicate their history. One is older than the other, but the expressions do not indicate relative importance. For a Christian, the two Testaments form the community's inspired Sacred Scriptures. On this, see S. BROWN – F.J. MOLONEY, *Interpreting the Gospel of John. An Introduction*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 2017, 3-5. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translation is used throughout, unless I offer my own version, indicated by AT (author's translation).

⁵ On this, and especially the single "day" during which all the Easter events take place, from the discovery of the empty tomb till Jesus' ascension, see F.J. MOLONEY, *The Resurrection of the Messiah. A Narrative Commentary on the Resurrection Accounts in the Four Gospels*, Paulist, New York 2015, 69-99.

⁶ For an assessment of reflection upon the role of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts, see F. BOVON, *Luke the Theologian. Fifty-five Years of Research (1950-2005)*, Baylor University Press, Waco, TX 2006, 225-272.

- *The Spirit's role in preparing for the coming of Jesus.* The Spirit comes upon Mary in the annunciation of the forthcoming birth of Jesus (1:35). The Spirit overcomes Zachariah's dumbness, and he utters the *Benedictus* (1:67). Simeon, "guided by the Spirit" (2:25-27), came to the temple and took the infant Jesus in his arms, announcing that the salvation for all peoples has come (vv. 29-32). John the Baptist announces that, unlike his baptism with water, Jesus will baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire" (3:15-17).
- *The Spirit in Jesus' ministry.* In John's baptism, the Spirit descends upon Jesus (3:31-32) and leads Him into the wilderness (4:1). In 4:14-30 Jesus begins His public ministry "filled with the power of the Spirit" (v. 14), announcing: "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me" (v. 18). The stage has been set for a Spirit-filled and Spirit-driven ministry of Jesus (see 10:20-21; 11:13; 12:10), until He hands over His Spirit to the Father in death (24:46).
- *The Spirit promised to the Apostles.* The closing episodes of the Gospel and the opening passages in the *Acts of the Apostles* indicate a transition from one era to another. The promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit dominates these pages. In the Gospel, before He leaves the disciples on the day of the resurrection, Jesus promises the gift of the Spirit (24:46-49. See also 12:12). The disciples must stay in the city; there can be no return to Galilee for the Lukan view of God's saving presence. As the *Acts of the Apostles* opens, in Jerusalem the risen Jesus instructs His disciples: "You will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5). The audience is aware that the Spirit who had directed Jesus' birth, ministry, and death will be 'handed over' to the 'witnesses'.

2. The Acts of the Apostles

The Book of Acts is a story that continues the journey of Jesus. Although Jesus is no longer physically present to His Apostles, they are not on a "different" journey. The "power from on high" directs their journey, as it directed the journey of Jesus. However, it is another "era", designed by Luke to be open-ended so that the audiences of Luke-Acts can rightly claim that they belong to what might be called a "fourth era" of an ongoing journey beyond Rome

“to the ends of the earth”. That element of the inspired Lukan message on mission is not found *within the text*. For audiences across the Christian centuries it is *implied by the text*. Not active agents within the narrative of Luke-Acts, believing audiences are the fruit of the ongoing Spirit-filled missionary Church, exemplified by Paul as Acts closes: “Proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (28:31).⁷

The narrative of Acts follows the founding Apostles, beginning in Jerusalem, where the earliest community lives the idyllic experience of its first days, united in heart and mind, although not without failures (Acts 1:1-8:3). It gradually moves away from Jerusalem (8:4-40), until the conversion of Saul leads to further journeys that dominate the narrative: the journeys of Paul, establishing the Christian Church, again not without difficulties and failures, across the Mediterranean world (9:1-28:31).⁸ Luke’s literary skills are evident in his description of Saul, the zealous persecutor of Christians in 7:58-8:3, as the Jerusalem section closes. After a brief interlude, during which the Apostles make their first steps out of Jerusalem into Judea and Samaria (8:4-40), Saul, “still breathing threats and murder” returns to centre-stage, only to be “converted” in 9:1-19. An era dominated by his missionary activity begins.⁹

⁷ As Richard Pervo puts it, Acts is “an assurance that ‘the ends of the earth’ is not the arrival at a boundary, but realization of the limitless promises of the dominion of God” (cited by M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI 2008, 367). Written by a third millennium Christian in Australia, the very existence of this essay is proof of a Lukan audience that is fruit of Luke’s spirit directed missionary journey “to the ends of the earth”.

⁸ It is beyond the scope of this study to focus upon the accounts of difficulties and failures encountered across the narrative of Acts, but they are important. They indicate that the power of God manifested in His Spirit eventually to overcome all opposition.

⁹ It is regularly pointed out that Paul did not undergo a ‘conversion experience’ as we nowadays understand that expression. His passionate commitment to love and service of the one true God of Israel remained steadfast, but he ‘changed direction’ once he came to see that this God was no longer made known only in Israel and its Law, but universally in and through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Among many, see the (overly) dramatic presentation of this experience in N.T. WRIGHT, *Paul. A Biography*, HarperOne, San Francisco, CA 2018, 41-59.

The Gospel of Luke and the *Acts of the Apostles* record three sacred “eras”: the period of Old Testament preparation, the time of Jesus, and the time of the Christian Church.¹⁰ As Jesus has travelled from Galilee to Jerusalem, the Church will reach out from Jerusalem to Rome (Acts 1:12-28:31). Only Mary, the mother of Jesus, plays a role in all three: before the birth of Jesus (Lk 1-2), during His ministry (Lk 8:19-21; 11:27-28), and in the early community in Jerusalem, after Jesus’ death, resurrection, and ascension (Acts 1:12-14).¹¹ Many memorable incidents are found in this exciting narrative: earthquakes (16:26), shipwrecks (27:41-44), avenging angels (12:23), harrowing escapes (9:23-25; 21:30-36), riots (19:23-41), murder plots (9:23; 23:12-15; 15:1-3), political intrigue (16:35-39; 22:24-29; 24:26-27), courtroom drama (23:1-10), and much more.¹² But underpinning this ‘story’, so full of journeys, encounters, successes, failures, and temporary setbacks, is a ‘discourse’ about the action of God, through the steady intervention of the Holy Spirit in the life and mission of the Apostles.¹³

¹⁰ The recognition of these ‘eras’ in Lukan thought owes much to the epoch-making study of H. CONZELMANN, *The Theology of St Luke*, trans. G. Buswell, Faber & Faber, London 1960. The title of the original German was *Die Mitte der Zeit*, identifying Jesus as the mid-point of history. His identification of the ‘eras’ is nowadays extensively criticized (see the discussion in F. BOVON, *Luke the Theologian. Fifty-five Years of Research (1950-2005)*, 13-85). Nevertheless, Conzelmann uncovered an important feature of Luke’s theological perspective.

¹¹ For further reflection on this, see F.J. MOLONEY, *Mary: Woman and Mother*, St. Paul Publications, Homebush 1988, 15-29.

¹² M.A. POWELL, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Theological, and Literary Survey*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI 2009, 191. For helpful recent commentaries on Acts, see B.R. GAVENTA, *Acts*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, Abingdon, Nashville, TN 2003; L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina 5, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 2006, and M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*. A fine study that traces Luke’s narrative and theological design across the Gospel and the *Acts of the Apostles* is R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts. A Literary Interpretation*, 2 vols., Foundations & Facets: New Testament, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 1986-1990.

¹³ The “story” is the way a narrative unfolds, moving chronologically from one event to another (with occasional flashbacks and hints of what lies ahead), the interaction among characters, along with all the adventures that mark the experience of the characters as time passes and a satisfactory conclusion emerges. The “discourse” is the author’s motivation in writing the story that s/he wishes to communicate to an audience. In the case of New Testament narratives, authors did not

Luke's dominant theological interest is to share his passionate conviction that the Holy Spirit drove the steady outreach of the 'witnessing' to what God had done in and through Jesus. Those who 'witnessed' Jesus' acts become 'witnesses' of Jesus "to the ends of the earth".¹⁴ It begins in Jerusalem (1:8) and reaches the end of the earth (28:30-31), hinting that it must reach further. Luke wrote the Gospel and Acts to confirm and strengthen the belief of his Christians (see Lk 1:4).¹⁵ This agenda for the narrative of the *Acts of the Apostles* was set as the Gospel closed. Jesus instructed the founding Apostles: "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high" (Lk 24:46-48).¹⁶

3. The Promise of the Spirit

If the Gospel of Luke was a history of the Spirit-directed Jesus, then the *Acts of the Apostles* is a history of the Spirit-directed witness to Jesus by the founding Apostles, especially Peter and Paul. The messenger, Jesus (the central figure in the Gospel), has become the subject of a message of what *must* happen for God's design to be fulfilled.¹⁷

simply wish to tell a story, but to convey a message about the action of God. On this, see S. CHATMAN, *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1978.

¹⁴ For an analysis of the theme of 'witness' in Acts, see A. TRITES, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, Society for New Testament Studies, vol. 31, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1977, 128-153.

¹⁵ Luke states this purpose explicitly in Lk 1:4, using a Greek word (*asphaleia*) to explain to Theophilus that he is writing that we "may have full confidence concerning the words in which you have been instructed" (AT). The word *asphaleia* is not about intellectual "truth", but "a mental state of certainty and security". See L.T. JOHNSON, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina, vol. 3, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 1991, 28.

¹⁶ This promise has already been foreshadowed during the journey of Jesus and the disciples of Jerusalem. He instructed them that in their future difficulties: "The Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you are to say" (Lk 12:12).

¹⁷ One of Luke's favorite words, in both the Gospel and the Acts is the Greek expression *dei* meaning "must" or "it is necessary". It was necessary that Jesus die

For this to happen, however, the Holy Spirit must come upon them (Acts 1:8a). The unstoppable urgency of the Apostles' witness to what God has done in and through Jesus Christ, "to the ends of the earth," is directed by the Holy Spirit.

The command of Jesus in Acts 1:8b drives the structure of the narrative of Acts. The story begins with the disciples in Jerusalem, forging a link between the Apostles and the risen Jesus.¹⁸ He shares with them and promises a baptism with the Holy Spirit "not many days from now" (1:2-5). As they have no notion of their future mission, the Apostles wonder when the end-time will come, and Jesus warns them against such useless thoughts. The periods of sacred history depend upon the Father (vv. 6-7). In v. 8 Jesus sets the agenda:

- a) "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you;
- b) you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Jesus departs, but they ignore the commission that will take them from Jerusalem into all Judea and Samaria, "to the ends of the earth". After the description of Jesus' departure, creating a new situation where he was "out of their sight" (v. 9), the disciples stand dumbfounded, gazing into the clouds (v. 10), until two men in white robes tell them to move on.¹⁹ Gazing into the sky will achieve nothing.

and rise from the dead (Lk 9:22; 13:33; 17:25; 24:7, 26; Acts 17:3), that Judas be replaced (Acts 1:22), that Paul visit Rome (Acts 19:21; 23:11; 25:10; 27:24), for the Gospel to be proclaimed to the Jews first (13:46), for the Christians to suffer tribulation and suffer for Christ's name (14:26; 9:16). On the theme of God's dominant role in Acts, see M.A. POWELL, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Theological, and Literary Survey*, 200-204.

¹⁸ An obvious historical 'tension' exists between the ascension of Jesus reported in Lk 24:50-51, and its timing as after forty days appearing to the Apostles "speaking about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). The number 'forty' is most likely determined by the passing of fifty days between the Jewish feast of Passover (Jesus' death and resurrection) and Pentecost (the gift of the Spirit). This is part of Luke's plan to show the passing of time as God works in and through Jesus and his disciples. See J.A. FITZMYER, "The Ascension of Christ and Pentecost", *Theological Studies*, vol. 45, 1984, 409-440; M.C. PARSONS, *The Departure of Jesus in Luke-Acts: The Ascension Narratives in Context*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, vol. 21, JSOT Press, Sheffield 1987.

¹⁹ The "two men in white robes" in Acts 1:10 repeat the role of the "two men in dazzling clothes" who address the women at the empty tomb in Lk 24:4. On

They have a mission to complete in Jerusalem, all Judea and Samaria, and “to the ends of the earth”. Only when that mission is completed will Jesus return (v. 11).

Before setting out on the mission, however, the group of the Twelve must be reconstituted. Based upon Jesus’ own choice of the Twelve (see 1 Cor 15:5; Mk 3:14) as a symbol of God’s establishment of a new people, this group also serves Luke as the fundamental symbol of the vocation to be apostolic.²⁰ Unlike Mark (3:14) and Matthew (10:1), Luke tells his audience that Jesus appointed Twelve, “whom he also named Apostles” (Lk 6:13).²¹ They are not only “disciples” who learn at the school of Jesus (Mark, Matthew, and John), but also Apostles who will be sent out as witnesses to what they have learnt.

Peter recalls the Spirit-filled inspiration of David’s foretelling of the failure of one of that group (Acts 1:15-20). He asks the remaining eleven to seek the Lord’s guidance so that the fundamental apostolic group to whom the power of the most high has been promised, might be re-constituted: “and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven Apostles” (vv. 21-26). Although not explicitly linked with an action of the Holy Spirit, whose words were uttered through David’s mouth (v. 16), the casting of lots to choose between

that occasion, in a fashion that parallels the instructions given to the Apostles in Acts 1:11, the women are told that they are looking in the wrong place for “the living one”, as they are in a place for the dead.

²⁰ On the historical and theological significance of “the Twelve” as a group and as individuals, see the comprehensive study of J.P. MEIER, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Anchor Yale Reference Library, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT 2016, 125-285.

²¹ See L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 38-40. Only Luke and Paul refer to the Twelve as “Apostles”. On the non-technical use of the expression in Mark 6:30, see F.J. MOLONEY, *The Gospel of Mark. A Commentary*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI 2012, 120-129. Paul regarded himself as an “Apostle”, even though he was not one of the Twelve (see especially 1 Cor 15:3-11; 2 Cor 10-12). The Greek word means “one sent out”. Luke and Paul are especially concerned with the outreach of the Christian message and the Christian community “to the ends of the earth”. The Lukan “Twelve Apostles” has become part of traditional Christian language. For Paul, it was possible to be an “Apostle” without being one of the Twelve. The title the *Acts of the Apostles* was added to this document late in the second century, but the “Apostles” of Luke 6:12-16 are rarely mentioned (1:2; 4:36-37; 5:12; 8:1). The central figures are Peter and Paul, rather than the Twelve.

two fine witnesses to the ministry of Jesus (Barsabbas and Matthias) (v. 26), manifest that the Spirit of the Lord has intervened (see v. 24).

Based upon the promise of the Spirit and the missionary charge of 1:8, the directions of the two men dressed in white in 1:9-11, and the re-constitution of “the Twelve” in 1:12-26, the Spirit-directed mission of the Church unfolds as follows:²²

1. The gift of the Spirit of God and the mission in Jerusalem, under the leadership of Peter. This section closes with the presence of Saul the persecutor of Christians (2:1-8:3. See 1:8).
2. The mission spreads to all Judea and Samaria (8:4-40. See 1:8)
3. After an encounter with the Risen Jesus, the zealot Saul is baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter, experiences the gift of the Spirit to the Gentile Cornelius. He consequently baptizes him, his household and shares his hospitality (9:1-11:18).
4. The Church at Antioch and the initial association between Paul and Barnabas generates what develops into Paul’s mission “to the ends of the earth” (11:19-26:32. See 1:8).
5. The mission arrives at the center of the known world, Rome. This brings the message to the far reaches of the earth. The missionary agenda of 1:8b is achieved because of power of the most high, promised in 1:8a (27:1-28:31).

Each of these unstoppable geographical steps, from Jerusalem, to all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (v. 8b), is a consequence of the repeated direct intervention of God’s Holy Spirit (v. 8a).

4. The Spirit of God and the Mission in Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-8:3)

The promises of Jesus (see 24:46-49) come true in the dramatic events that take place “when the day of Pentecost had come” (Acts

²² The critical role of the Holy Spirit within each literary section determines the following literary structure. Many other criteria are possible. See F. BOVON, *Luke the Theologian. Fifty-five Years of Research (1950-2005)*, 511-515. Luke used sources for his account, and certainly regarded himself as a ‘historian’, but in the sense of his contemporary ‘historians.’ His objective was to record facts from the past in order to ‘persuade’ his audience of values and point of view. A dominant element in his point of view was the Holy Spirit as a major protagonist across the narrative.

2:1). The Spirit, “the promise of the Father” (see Lk 24:49; Acts 1:4), the “power from on high” (Lk 24:49), is given to the infant Church. The Apostles break free of their fears (see Acts 1:12-14). Their transformation from fear to enthusiasm is so impressive that they are thought to be inebriated (see 2:13). They proclaim what God has done in and through Jesus (2:1-36), leading to sorrow, repentance, and conversion of about 3,000 on that first Pentecost day (v. 41). The first action of the Spirit-filled Apostles in Acts fulfils Jesus’ promise in Lk 24:47: “Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed”.

The foundational nature of this event cannot be overestimated. Signs associated with the establishment of an original people of God at Sinai (see Ex 19:16-20: thunder, lightning, and fire) return at this first Christian Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4).²³ The confusion of tongues that began at the Tower of Babel is overcome (see Gn 11:1-9), as many peoples, nations and tongues understand the disciples’ words (Acts 2:5-12). “The parallelism (between the Old Testament episodes and Acts 2:1-4) fits the pattern of Luke’s story: Jesus is the prophet who sums up all the promises and hopes of the people before Him; in His apostolic successors, that promise and hope (now sealed by the Spirit) will be carried to all the nations of the earth.”²⁴ This pattern of preaching that Jesus’ mission, death, and resurrection was part of God’s plan, already foretold in the Old Testament, and the subsequent response of conversion and baptism, already established in Peter’s Pentecost speech and its aftermath (2:14-42), is found across the many long speeches in Acts.²⁵ A community atten-

²³ The Jewish celebration of Pentecost is the commemoration of the gift of the Law and of the establishment of a covenant between God and the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. To this day, it is celebrated fifty days after Passover.

²⁴ L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 47. First parenthesis added, second parenthesis original.

²⁵ Comparisons between the speeches in Acts, no matter who delivers them (Peter, all the Jerusalem believers, Stephen, or Paul) show they are very similar. This does not mean that Luke ‘invented’ everything, but he has certainly shaped all the speeches so that they correspond to his theological idea of Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s will, already manifested in the Old Testament, and the need for everyone to have a change of heart, receive forgiveness and baptism. For a good summary, see R.A. SPIVEY – D. MOODY SMITH – C. CLIFTON BLACK, *Anatomy of the New Testament: A Guide to Its Structure and Meaning*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 2013, 248-250.

tive to the teaching of the disciples, breaking bread and praying together, with one heart and mind, emerges as the founding model of the future missionary community (vv. 42-47).²⁶

The witnessing of the Apostles and the Jerusalem community is related in 3:1-8:3. Highlighted by the power manifested in the Apostles' preaching and healing in the city (3:1-26 [Peter and John at the temple, and another speech from Peter], 4:1-37 [Peter and John before the Council, and the response of the community in another speech]), 5:1-42 [Ananias and Sapphira betray the community; signs and wonders are performed, the Apostles are persecuted, closing with Gamaliel's warning that these men may be doing a work of God]). Luke wants his readers and hearers to recognize that Christianity emerged from the very heart of Israel: Jerusalem and its temple. For Luke, God's design has not changed direction with the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus that climaxed in Jerusalem, nor in the beginnings of the community witness to Jesus, that had its origins in Jerusalem. "Christianity emerged from Israel's very heart and is, therefore, the true expression of that ancient faith."²⁷

A further turning point of the story is the problem of the "Hellenists" that leads to the appointment of seven men to serve them (6:1-7). The existence of Greek-speaking Hellenists, and "the Hebrews" within the community, is a first indication that the Gospel is reaching beyond its origins in the small group of frightened disciples of Jesus (see 1:1-14).²⁸ The step into the choice of seven

²⁶ Luke will regularly insert summary statements about the unity and peace that existed in the Jerusalem community (see 1:14; 2:43-47; 4:32-37). This is Luke's way of indicating the ideal Christian community. His rhetoric suggests to readers: it was like this in the beginning, and thus should always be like this. On the content of the summaries, see R.E. BROWN, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Doubleday, New York 1997, 285-289. However, as remarked above, Luke does not hesitate to report serious failures (Ananias and Sapphira) and opposition (the Apostles are persecuted, executed, and imprisoned), even in Jerusalem.

²⁷ R.A. SPIVEY – D. MOODY SMITH – C. CLIFTON BLACK, *Anatomy of the New Testament: A Guide to Its Structure and Meaning*, 252.

²⁸ Similar to the story of Ananias and Sapphira, this is one of the several indications in Acts that there were divisions in the community. However, Luke makes nothing of this in his story of the unfolding of God's design for the Christian community. See R.E. BROWN, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 293-294, and M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 81-85.

“Deacons”, selected to serve the Hellenists, is necessarily marked by the presence of the Spirit. The whole community of disciples insists that the selection of these “men of good standing” must be based upon their being “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (6:2-3). One of those servants, Stephen, is singled out: “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (v. 5). They are delegated by means of an external sign that indicates the communication of the Spirit: prayer and the laying on of hands (v. 6).

Stephen, already described as full of the Holy Spirit (v. 5), takes center-stage, manifests the power, and signs that accompany God’s presence.²⁹ He may be one of the “servants,” but his ministry of power indicates that he continues the mission of the foundational Apostles. Falsely accused, he is arrested, and he delivers the longest speech in Acts (6:1-7:53). The speech does not deal with the charges against him, but by means of a long reflection on Israel’s history, points to the past disobedience of the chosen people, questions the relevance of the temple (see 7:47-50), and strongly denounces those who have betrayed and murdered Jesus (vv. 51-52). It closes: “You who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it” (v. 53). Whatever of the accusations of 6:11-14, he is condemned to death because of his ‘witness.’³⁰ The theme of the Spirit, and the continuation of Jesus’ ministry in the Spirit mark his death. He prays as Jesus prayed: “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” (7:59; see Lk 23:46), and “Lord, do not hold this sin against them” (Acts 7:60; see Lk 23:34). Those who die for Christ repeat the death of Christ.³¹ As the episode closes, the reader is introduced to the hero of the second half of Acts: “And Saul was consenting to his death” (Acts 8:1a. See

²⁹ The Greek word for “servant” is *diakonos*, and the Catholic tradition has long looked back upon Acts 6 as the beginnings of a sacramental Order called the Diaconate. Stephen is often presented in Christian art in the vestments of an ordained Deacon. Although there were certainly appointed people who had a ministry of ‘service’ in the early Church (see as early as Rom 16:1; Phil 1:1; Eph 6:21; 1 Tim 3:8), the sacramental Order appeared much later.

³⁰ M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 85-108, shows how this speech should be read through the lens of ancient rhetoric, to show that “Stephen is not pitting Christianity over against Judaism; rather he is aligning himself and his group with what he considers to be the ‘best’ in Jewish history” (108).

³¹ See L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 142-144. Here, and throughout his commentary, Johnson rightly points out that the Apostles are not only ‘witnesses’, but continue the ‘prophetic’ presence of Jesus.

7: 58). The hero of the latter parts of the *Acts of the Apostles* has been introduced, however enigmatically.³²

5. The Mission to all Judea and Samaria (8:4-40)

The fruits of martyrdom are reported in 8:4-40. The Christians scatter as Saul persecutes them, proclaiming the Word as they scatter (8:1b-3). Scattering believers leads to an expanding Christian witness.³³ Philip makes converts in Samaria, including “Simon who had previously practised magic” (vv. 4-13. See vv. 9-13), but the report of the wondrous events of Philip’s ministry is interrupted by a description of the mission of Peter and John to those who had already accepted the Word in Samaria. The narrative has reached a turning point, as the Apostles move on from Jerusalem to bear witness in all Judea and Samaria as the risen Jesus had promised in 1:8. As they have already received the Spirit in Jerusalem, Peter and John pray that those Samaritans who were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ might also receive the Holy Spirit (v. 15). God answers their prayer: they lay hands upon the baptized Samaritan, and they receive the Spirit (v. 17). The report of the brief encounter between the Apostles and Simon the magician is not primarily interested in the historical figure of Simon,³⁴ but on the insistence of the Apostles Peter and John that nothing can “purchase” the Spirit. It is “God’s gift” (vv. 18-25. See v. 20). Only tragedy can follow those who think they can control the action of God by their worldly skill and financial means.

An angel of the Lord directs Philip to continue his movement away from Jerusalem “toward the south to the road that goes down

³² R.E. BROWN, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 296, comments: “Just as Jesus’ death was not the end because the Apostles would receive the Spirit to carry on the work, the death of Stephen is not the end, for observing is a young man named Saul (7:58). He consents to the death (8:1a), but in God’s providence he will continue the work of Stephen”.

³³ As early as the *Acts of the Apostles*, Luke testifies to the truth later famously articulated by Tertullian (c. 155-c. 240): “The blood of Christians is seed”. See *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, Brepols, Turnhout 1954, 1:171: “Semen est sanguis Christianorum” (*Apologeticum* 50,13).

³⁴ Over the centuries, there has been much speculation about the relationship between Simon, the magician of Acts 8:9-25, and the figure of the proto-Gnostic Simon Magus. For a summary of this speculation, see J.A. FITZMYER, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The Anchor Bible, Doubleday, New York 1998, 403-404.

from Jerusalem to Gaza” (v. 26). The well-known encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch on that road south takes place through the intervention of the Spirit: “The Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it’” (v. 29). After having the Scriptures explained by the Spirit-directed Philip, the non-Jewish eunuch is baptized (vv. 27-38). “When he came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away” so that he might continue his mission in all Judea, passing through Azotus, all the region and all the towns, until he reached Caesarea (v. 40).³⁵

The section of the narrative that deals with the second stage in Jesus’ promise commissioning his Apostles to bear witness in all Judea and Samaria (1:8) is relatively brief. Their presence in Jerusalem (2:1-8:3), the “Pentecost of the Gentiles” in Peter’s baptism of the Roman Cornelius, and its aftermath (9:1-11:18), Paul’s mission “to the ends of the earth” (11:19-26:30), and his preaching in Rome (26:30-28:31), are longer in the telling. Nevertheless, like other turning points in the fulfilment of the commission of 1:8b, it is dominated by the theme of the gift of the Holy Spirit (1:8a. See vv. 14-17, 19-21, 39).

6. Peter (and Paul) Reach out to the Gentile World (9:1-11:18)

The next stage in God’s plan to take the Gospel “to the ends of the earth” is prepared in the well-known account of Paul’s conversion (9:1-22). The encounter with the risen Jesus on the Damascus road, his encounter with Ananias in Damascus, and his preaching there, which “confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus” (9:22), are recorded on two further occasions in Acts (see 22:3-21; 26:12-18).³⁶ Luke shapes this account around two major encounters. The first is Paul’s dramatic encounter with the risen Jesus (9:1-9). The second is his sojourn with Ananias in Damascus (vv. 10-19). During the latter, the Lord described Paul’s future mission: “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles

³⁵ Philip’s contact points are on the road south, to Gaza, Azotus (further north on the coast), all the towns, finally arriving in the northern port city of Caesarea Maritima. The geography matches the commission of 1:8 (all Judea). Azotus is another name for port city of Ashdod (see 1 Mc 9:15).

³⁶ On the three-fold telling of Paul’s conversion, see L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 170; J.A. FITZMYER, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 141-144.

and kings and before the people of Israel” (v. 15). Before this mission can begin, as with all other major turning points in Luke’s story, Ananias “laid his hands on Saul and said, ‘Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (v. 17).

After being witnessed in Damascus, he is hunted for by some Jewish people, he escapes, and returns to Jerusalem, the cradle of Christianity (vv. 19b-30). From there, he is sent home to Tarsus (v. 30). The Lukan comment of v. 31 indicates that the agenda set by the commission of 1:8 is drawing to a close: “Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria experienced peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.” Paul, who will follow the leadership of Peter to become the hero of the mission “to the ends of the earth” (11:19-26:30), has entered the narrative. He disappears in 9:30, but will return in 13:1-3. In the meantime, Peter takes center-stage in a further Spirit-filled turning point in the earliest Church’s mission (9:32-11:18).

Peter works wonders in the name of Jesus Christ (9:32-35: the healing of Aeneas; vv. 36-42: the raising of Tabitha/Dorcas). Most importantly, for the purposes of this essay, he is the key figure in the explicit acceptance of the mission to the Gentiles through the baptism of the Roman centurion, Cornelius (10:1-11:18). It is a complex, and somewhat repetitious account.³⁷ Cornelius has a vision at Caesarea, at this stage the frontier of the Gospel’s outreach (see 8:40), instructing him to summon Peter from Joppa (10:1-9a). Simultaneously, Peter has a vision insisting that what was once been regarded as “unclean” can no longer be so, as God has made all things clean (vv. 9b-16). The Spirit instructs a puzzled Peter that he must go meet the men from Cornelius, who has had a vision of a holy angel, sending for Peter (vv. 17-23). Cornelius’ servants bring Peter to Caesarea, where they have a moving encounter (vv. 17-29). Cornelius tells Peter of his vision (vv. 30-33).

Peter’s response is a missionary speech (vv. 34-43), dominated by the theme of his opening words: “Truly I perceive that God shows

³⁷ For a more detailed analysis of this complex passage, see chapter 7 of this volume authored by Michael Trainor, and titled “A Pivotal Missionary Moment: The Embrace of the Gentiles (Acts 10-11)”.

no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (vv. 34-35). Luke’s Spirit-filled missionary agenda is stated and Peter tells Cornelius about Jesus, “anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power” (AT), his ministry, death and resurrection, and the role of the Apostles as his witnesses. “We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and Jerusalem. [...] He commanded us to preach to the people” (vv. 41-42). As Peter ends his words, *before* anything else happens, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all who had heard the Word” (v. 44). All are amazed “that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles” (v. 45). The same phenomena that accompanied the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost reappear: “They heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God” (v. 46. See 2:5-11). As a *consequence* of the gift of the Holy Spirit, Peter baptizes Cornelius and his company (vv. 44-48). “The gift of the Holy Spirit has been poured out even on the Gentiles” (v. 45). The speech opened insisting that “God shows no partiality”, and closes asking a question that requires a negative response: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (v. 47).³⁸

Peter returns to Jerusalem where he is criticized by the circumcision party. He should not have gone to an uncircumcised man and eaten with him. In response, Peter retells all the events that took place in Caesarea (11:1-18).³⁹ He repeats the news of the action of the Spirit in the coming of the messengers (v. 12), and the descent of the Spirit as he spoke to Cornelius and his household (v. 15). He concludes by recalling a promise of Jesus: “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (v. 16), insisting that God’s gift of the Spirit to the Jewish disciples is now available to the Gentiles (v. 17). Peter’s report meets no opposition. It is received in silence as they glorify God, saying: “Then to the Gentiles

³⁸ The Greek expression that generates the question (*mēti*) is rhetorical. It demands a negative response. See F.A. BLASS – A. DEBRUNNER – R.W. FUNK, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, IL 1961, 226 § 440.

³⁹ Peter’s retelling of the story in 11:1-18 is not entirely consistent with the earlier report of the events. However, the alterations only serve to emphasize Luke’s message about the inevitability of God’s design to bring the Gospel to the Gentiles, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. See L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 180-202.

also God has granted repentance unto life” (v. 18).⁴⁰ Even though Peter’s Jerusalem speech in 11:1-18 repeats what has happened in Caesarea, it accentuates the theological importance of this moment: “If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that could withstand God” (v. 17). God is the absent, but ever-central character Acts, shaping the lives of people and communities through the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter will return to this moment in his defense of the Gentile mission at the so-called Jerusalem Council (see 15:7-9).

7. The Mission “to the Ends of the Earth” (11:19-26:32)

A series of episodes report the continued spread of the Gospel, as opposition is vanquished (11:19-12:25). Stephen’s mission as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus has produced converts who come to Antioch, preaching the Lord. The field is ripe for harvesting, so Barnabas is introduced, another key figure at a turning point of the narrative. Described as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith” (11:24), he goes from Antioch to Tarsus, seeking out Saul. It is at Antioch that “the disciples were for the first time called Christians” (11:26). Warned in a prophecy in the Spirit from a prophet named Agabus that suffering is near at hand, the disciples are determined to bring goodness to all who are suffering in Judea, through the ministry of Barnabas and Saul (11:27-30). Adventure, misadventure, and God’s presence continues as Herod executes James and puts Peter in prison (12:1-5), but Peter is miraculously released (vv. 6-19). Herod, who has no interest in the sufferings of the people of Tyre and Sidon (contrast the attitude of the Christians to the poor in Judea in 11:27-30), is smitten by “an angel of the Lord” and dies ignominiously (12:20-23). The Word of God “continued to advance” as Barnabas, Saul, and John Mark return to Jerusalem (vv. 24-25).

The scene is set for the fourth major section of the narrative, determined by the commission and the promise of the Spirit in 1:8. In

⁴⁰ This is one of many occasions in Acts where Luke writes an account to show that God’s plan will broach no failure or opposition. We are aware from other early Christian literature, especially Paul’s Letter to the Galatians, that the passage into the Gentile world – especially the question of circumcision – was conflicted, and that even Peter (and Barnabas) were ambiguous about it (see Gal 2:11-14).

the Gospel of Luke, Jesus journeyed from Nazareth in Galilee, through Jerusalem, to his Father. In the *Acts of the Apostles*, the Apostles witness to the Good News about Jesus through Cyprus and Asia Minor (first missionary journey: 13:1-14:28), into Macedonia (second missionary journey: 15:36-18:22), consolidated in Ephesus and Greece (third missionary journey: 18:23-21:14). Jerusalem is not forgotten. The only interruption to this triumphant march, from Jerusalem to Ephesus, Athens and Corinth, is the Council of Jerusalem. After the success of the first formal mission to the Gentiles (13:1-14:28), the Church gathers to assess whether or not this mission is part of God's plan (15:1-35). Jerusalem, the fulcrum of God's saving history, remains an essential point of reference for a movement that has its roots in God's promises to Israel.⁴¹

Before this major journey begins, the Holy Spirit again intervenes. As the Church in Antioch is at prayer, "the Holy Spirit said: 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'" (13:2). "Sent out by the Holy Spirit" (v. 4), the first missionary journey *ad gentes* begins.⁴² At Paphos, in Cyprus, they meet opposition from a Jewish false prophet. "Filled with the Holy Spirit" Paul strikes him blind, and the proconsul, Sergius Paulus believes (vv. 4-12. See v. 9). From Cyprus, they arrive in Asia Minor at Perga. Asked to preach in the Synagogue, Paul speaks as an Israelite to Israelites. Regularly across this section of Acts, Paul tries to show that Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of Jewish hopes (13:16-41). Some hear the message, others reject it (vv. 42-43). Rejection leads him to go to the Gentiles (vv. 44-49). The first stage of the missionary journey, however, fills the disciples "with joy and the Holy Spirit" (v. 52). Similar missionary activities and responses continue in Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and they return to Antioch via Iconium and Pamphilia,

⁴¹ See L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 225-227.

⁴² For an engaging description of the events in Antioch and the first missionary journey, see N.T. WRIGHT, *Paul. A Biography*, 85-131. This interesting book suffers from an acceptance of the Lukan narrative as the backdrop for a presentation of Paul and his thought. It is riddled with questionable historical presuppositions (e.g., the imprisonment in Ephesus – for which there is no evidence – that determines the early dating of Philippians; the Pauline authorship of Colossians and Ephesians and the Pastoral Epistles – 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus). Its value lies in Wright's marriage of the Pauline message with a vivid description of the Lukan "journeys".

Perga at Attalia (14:1-26). Despite the regular rejection and misunderstanding they have experienced, the Apostles are able to relate “all that God had done and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles” (v. 27).

The missionary journeys are put on hold, as a group of Christians from Judea insist that circumcision is essential for admission to their ranks (15:1-5). Another critical moment in the narrative emerges, and it is again dominated by the action of the Holy Spirit. The so-called Council of Jerusalem follows, opening with the intervention of Peter (vv. 6-11). He recalls his initiating role among the Gentiles: “And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith He has made no distinction between them and us” (vv. 8-9). He receives the support of the equally foundational figure of James (vv. 15-21). A decision is made in favor of Paul and Barnabas. A letter is sent insisting that circumcision is not required (vv. 22-29), because “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials” (15:28).⁴³

After a dispute over the role of John, Mark, who had abandoned the first missionary journey (see 13:13), Paul and Barnabas separate. Paul attempts to resume his mission in Asia Minor, taking Silas with him (15:36-16:5). In a strange intervention, the Holy Spirit leads Paul across Asia Minor, into Macedonia. In fact, Paul and his companions are not active as they cross Phrygia and Galatia “having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak a word in Asia” (16:6). His journey takes him further west, to Troas, the sea-port on the western coast of Asia Minor that provides immediate access to Macedonia and Greece. During the night, a vision provides a reason for this prohibition. They are being driven elsewhere by the Spirit: a man of Macedonia appears in a dream saying: “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (v. 9).⁴⁴

Paul arrives in Philippi, via the port of Neapolis, where he is immediately successful in his conversion of Lydia (16:6-15).⁴⁵ But his saving and curing presence of a possessed slave girl leads to his imprisonment, accused by the girl’s angry owners. As is now a familiar

⁴³ Paul also records this meeting in Gal 2:1-10. See the vivid description of these events in N.T. WRIGHT, *Paul. A Biography*, 132-169.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 171-233.

pattern, Paul is miraculously freed; the doors are opened and he baptizes his repentant jailer (vv. 16-34). Subsequent discussion over the treatment of Paul and his companions leads to Paul's first indication to his oppressors that he is a Roman citizen. He receives the apologies of the authorities, visits Lydia, and leaves to continue their mission (vv. 35-40). Passage and preaching in Thessalonica and Bereoa leads to the usual mixed response (17:1-15). From here, Paul journeys to Athens, where he not only uses his initial approach to the Jews, but also confronts the pagan culture and religion of the city. Set in the heart of Greek culture and religion, this passage is highlighted by Paul's speech on the Areopagus, a central point for public speech in Athens. Paul's speech does not use the Hebrew Scriptures, but cites Greek authorities (the poet Aratus) to point them to the unknown God, a man who has been raised from the dead.⁴⁶ As always, the response is mixed: "Some mocked, but others said: 'We will hear you again about this'" (vv. 16-34. See v. 32).

A parallel narrative pattern and theological message shapes Paul's ongoing journey through Corinth, where his rejection by the Jews leads to a definitive choice: "From now on I will go to the Gentiles" (18:7). But even here he meets conflict, and is eventually led to the Roman authorities by his Jewish enemies. Gallio, the Roman Proconsul of Achaia, dismisses them (18:1-17). Paul brings his second missionary journey to an end as he returns, via Cenchræ (the port of Corinth), to Ephesus, from where he sets sail, and Jerusalem, to the community in Antioch. While in Ephesus, he promises the Jews that he will return, if God so wills (vv. 18-22).⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Across Acts there are a number of reports where the author uses 'we'. They begin at Troas, and are regularly (but not always) associated with sea voyages (see 16:10-17; 20:5-15; 21:1-18; 27:1-28:16). For many, this shows the presence of the author of Acts, and thus an indication of a first-hand witness to the events reported, and evidence of the historical reliability of the book. However, not all agree. For a balanced study of the 'we-passages', see R.E. BROWN, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 322-327.

⁴⁶ In Athens the death of Jesus is not mentioned, only Jesus' being raised from the dead.

⁴⁷ The reference to Gallio as the Proconsul of Achaia is one of the fixed points for determining a chronology for Paul. There is archeological evidence (an inscription found in Delphi) that Gallio was the Proconsul some time across 51-52 CE. See J. MURPHY-O'CONNOR, *St. Paul's Corinth. Texts and Archaeology*, Good News Studies, vol. 6, Michael Glazier, Wilmington, NC 1983, 141-152.

The third journey begins immediately.⁴⁸ After initiating the final missionary journey in Galatia and Phrygia (18:23), Paul dedicates himself to a long and trouble-filled experience in Ephesus (18:24-19:41). The enigmatic figure of Apollos appears briefly (18:24-28). See further, 1 Cor 1:12; 3:4-6). Coming to Ephesus this eloquent Alexandrian preaches the “way of the Lord” and “the things concerning Jesus” with skill and passion (v. 6). But “he only knew the baptism of John”. No explicit mention is made of the Spirit, but his baptism is defective. This is corrected by Priscilla and Aquila. He is thus able to travel to Achaia and be welcomed among the brethren in Corinth (see 19:1), showing that “the Messiah is Jesus” (v. 28). Apollos serves as a model for the situation that Paul himself finds in Ephesus while Apollos is in Corinth (19:1-7). Some believers only know of the baptism of John. After due instruction, they are baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. “When Paul laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them” (v. 6). The third missionary journey opens in Ephesus with two visible experiences of the power of the Holy Spirit, transforming Apollos and others in Ephesus who only knew the baptism of John.

In Ephesus, Paul preaches boldly in the face of many obstacles, but his journey to the ends of the earth intrudes. While in Ephesus, “Paul resolved in the Spirit to go through Macedonia and Achaia, and then go on to Jerusalem. He said: ‘After I have gone there I must also see Rome’” (v. 21). The audience, hearing Paul’s Spirit-filled decision, are aware that he will indeed journey to Rome, and Luke’s account of his mission will end there.

Inevitably, Paul’s preaching against false gods leads to the riot initiated by the silversmiths who see that Paul’s preaching brings their trade to an end. After a resounding encounter between the worshippers of Artemis and Paul (vv. 34-41), Paul leaves Ephesus with the problem unresolved. He journeys through some of his earlier mission fields (20:1-6). Returning to Asia Minor he preaches at such great length at Troas that a young man sitting in a window falls to sleep and crashes to his death, but Paul restores him. Nothing can stop the spread of God’s Word (vv. 7-12).

For a fine photograph of the inscription, see R.A. SPIVEY – D. MOODY SMITH – C. CLIFTON BLACK, *Anatomy of the New Testament: A Guide to Its Structure and Meaning*, 277.

⁴⁸ See N.T. WRIGHT, *Paul. A Biography*, 235-349.

In a fashion that matches many ‘farewell speeches’ found in both biblical and classical literature, Paul sails from Troas to Jerusalem, stopping at Miletus so that he could address the leaders of the Church from Ephesus, assembled there (20:1-38). It is a moving speech, full of emotion and affection, and a commissioning that they persevere in their faith mission.⁴⁹ Paul looks back to what has been achieved, and courageously ahead to all that God may have in store for him. At the heart of his discourse, Paul indicates that everything that has happened and will happen is the result of the active presence of the Holy Spirit: “And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me” (20:22-23). He travels directly to Jerusalem (21:1-14). This is the first time that Paul’s journeys have not returned to his home-Church of Antioch. The God-directed cycle of Jerusalem to Rome must be accomplished (see 1:8). As he farewells a dedicated group in Caesarea, before the final leg of his journey to Jerusalem, he tells them, in a way that renders more explicit what he said at Miletus: “For I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus” (21:13). The narrative stage is set for the final journey: the Word of the Lord will make its final journey from Jerusalem to Rome (see 1:8).

The voyage towards Jerusalem is governed by the Spirit who halts Paul’s travels at Tyre for seven days, until the Spirit allows Paul and his company resume the journey through Ptolomais to Caesarea (see 21:4). There the prophet Agabus takes Paul’s belt, binds his feet and hands with it, announcing: “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘This is the way the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles’” (21:11).

On arrival in Jerusalem, Paul visits James, the leader of the Jerusalem community, and shares with him the success of the Gentile mission. He can announce that what was decided at the Jerusalem Council in 15:1-29 has been put into effect among those received into Christianity without circumcision (21:15-26). Immediately following this episode, however, Jews from Asia, aware of Paul’s

⁴⁹ For a study of farewell testaments, see W. KURZ, *Farewell Addresses in the New Testament*, Zacchaeus Studies: New Testament, Michael Glazier, Wilmington, NC 1990. See also L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 359-368.

work among the uncircumcised, create a disturbance in the temple, accusing Paul of “teaching men everywhere against the people and the law and this place; moreover, he has also brought Greeks into the temple, and he has defiled this holy place” (v. 28). Roman authorities arrest Paul (vv. 27-36). From this point on, the narrative is made up of a series of encounters between Paul and Roman authorities where Paul must answer the accusations of his Jewish enemies.⁵⁰

He defends himself in Jerusalem by declaring himself as a “citizen of no mean city” (v. 39), reporting the account of his conversion and his mission to the Gentiles (21:37-33:21). None of this is of interest to the Romans. Discovering he is a Roman citizen, they send him back to the Jewish Council (vv. 22-29). His Jewish credentials impress some, but not others, and that night “the Lord stood by him and said: ‘Take courage, for as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so must you bear witness also at Rome’” (22:30-23:11. See v. 11). As Paul’s opponents concoct a plot to murder him, “the son of Paul’s sister” (v. 16) hears of it, informs Paul, held in the Roman barracks, and he is swept away by the authorities to the Governor Felix in Caesarea, the seat of Roman authority in Palestine (23:12-35).

From now on a series of different trials take place, at Caesarea, before Felix (24:1-27), Porcius Festus (25:1-12), King Agrippa and his wife Bernice (25:13-26:32). Paul fulfils the destiny promised by Jesus to his disciples: “And you will be brought before kings and governors in my name” (Lk 21:12). At each trial Paul’s defence is the same: he has done nothing to discredit the traditions of Israel, as he has been singled out by an act of the God of Israel to proclaim the saving effects of the death and resurrection of Jesus. “To this day I have had the help that comes from God, and so I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass: that the Christ must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead, he would proclaim light both to the people and to the Gentiles” (Acts 26:22-23. See Lk 2:31-32). At each stage across these trials, Paul is declared innocent (23:29; 25:25; 26:31-32). It is as an innocent witness to the truth

⁵⁰ On the Lukan theological and rhetorical agenda across these encounters, see L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 399-400, and N.T. WRIGHT, *Paul. A Biography*, 349-371.

(like Jesus in the Lukan passion narrative, see Lk 23:47), that Paul sails for Rome (Acts 27:1).

8. Rome: The Centre of the Known World (27:1-28:31)

The perilous sea-journey, described as Luke's "literary *tour de force*",⁵¹ is reported in 27:1-28:10. After an initial easy journey at the right time of the year (27:1-8), a decision is made – against Paul's advice – to continue the journey in the winter (vv. 9-12). From that point on every possible peril is faced: storm at sea (vv. 13-20), starvation (vv. 21-25), and possible shipwreck (vv. 26-32). Paul advises correctly in every situation, and even miraculously provides food for everyone as they are starving (vv. 33-38). They come to land in Malta, where they experience dangers (28:3-6: the episode with the viper), again overcome by Paul. They are made welcome by the local people (27:39-28:10). They take a ship in Malta, and finally "came to Rome" (28:11-16. See v. 16). As throughout Acts, the Christian community, Peter, and Paul continually face danger and opposition, but it is overcome by the power of their miraculous activity and the persuasion of their proclamation of the Gospel.

In Rome, Paul tells his story of trial, and is asked to explain himself to the local authorities. As always, some believe, and some reject what Paul has to tell them (vv. 17-25a). Acts closes with Paul's final use of Israel's Scriptures to legitimate his message and his turning away from Israel as the fulfilment of the promise of the Holy Spirit made through the Prophet Isaiah: "The Holy Spirit was right" (v. 25b). "Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen" (v. 28). Paul's mission to the Jews has come to a close, and from Rome the Gospel will be preached to the Gentiles. Luke tells of the relentless and unstoppable proclamation of the message of what God had done in and through Jesus. His second volume closes with the information that Paul remains in Rome for two years, courageously and openly "preaching the Kingdom of and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ" (vv. 30-31). This Spirit-filled Christian witness has not arrived at a boundary, but at a promise of a future.

⁵¹ L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 450. For a colorful description, see N.T. WRIGHT, *Paul. A Biography*, 375-397.

9. The Holy Spirit and the Missio ad Gentes Today

The commissions of Jesus in Luke 24:46-49 and Acts 1:8 have been fulfilled, thanks to the never-failing presence of the Holy Spirit who empowers and directs his Apostles, especially Peter and Paul, to take the Gospel from Jerusalem “to the ends of the earth”. Opposition emerges from the Jews who will not accept an uncircumcised Christian, as well as the Romans, who cannot understand what Paul represents, and do not want to know. Even the elements, storm, starvation, and shipwreck threaten this journey from Jerusalem to Rome. All opposition fails. Accompanied by signs and wonders that manifest the guiding presence of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles’ witness to the Kingdom reaches out to the ends of the earth (see Lk 24:46-49; Acts 1:8). Pope Francis has claimed that the Holy Spirit is the protagonist of the *Acts of the Apostles*.⁵² A close reading of the narrative indicates that he is correct:

- The promise of the Holy Spirit (1:5, 8);
- The Holy Spirit reconstitutes the Twelve (1:15-20);
- The Holy Spirit comes upon the disciples at Pentecost (2:1-36);
- The Holy Spirit inspires the mission dedicated to the Greek-speaking people in Jerusalem (6:1-7);
- Stephen hands over his Spirit in martyrdom (7:59);
- The Holy Spirit directs the Samaritan mission (8:15-25);
- The Holy Spirit leads Philip to instruct and baptize the Ethiopian eunuch (8:29), and snatches him away on further mission (8:40);
- The gift of the Holy Spirit brings Saul’s conversion to conclusion (9:1-17);
- The Holy Spirit descends upon Cornelius and his household (10:1-11:18);
- The Holy Spirit singles out Barnabas and Paul for the Gentile mission (13:1-4; 15:8-9);

⁵² Addressing the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies, Pope Francis advised: “Your regular book for prayer and meditation should be the Acts of the Apostles. Go there to find your inspiration. *And the protagonist of that book is the Holy Spirit*”. Stress mine. See *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to the National Directors of the Pontifical Mission Societies*, 1 June 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/june/documents/papa-francesco_20180601_pontificie-opere-missionarie.html/.

- The Holy Spirit inspires the decisions of the Jerusalem Council (15:8, 28, 29);
- The Holy Spirit directs Paul from Asia to Macedonia (16:6-9);
- Apollos and believers in Ephesus who know Jesus and the baptism of John are baptized into the Holy Spirit (18:24-28; 19:1-6);
- The Holy Spirit reveals Paul’s destiny (19:21; 20:22-23; 21:11,13);
- Paul’s final return to Jerusalem is directed by the Holy Spirit (21:4);
- Finally, in Rome, Paul can declare: “The Spirit is right” (28:25).

God, through the intervention of the Holy Spirit, is in control of history, and guides his “Apostles” of all ages through their difficulties, sinfulness, and rejection. A third generation Christian (see Lk 1:1-4), Luke was aware of ambiguities in his experience of Church. But Luke wants to proclaim to individuals and communities that, guided by the Holy Spirit, miracles *can happen*. God’s outreach “to the ends of the earth” *can be successful*. Our own experience of a fragile Church is an indication that, despite failure, the Gospel reaches out “to the ends of the earth”. Luke asks Christians, witnessing at the ends of the earth, to accept Luke’s view of *how things should be* in God’s Church. The call to mission continues, the Holy Spirit is present, and the saving power of God can be found. Luke’s two volumes call Christians *to be missionaries, witnesses* whose testimony fill the pages of a living *third volume*, telling what God and the Holy Spirit have done for us in and through Jesus Christ.

The Acts of the Apostles and the Mission

❖ NARCIS KATAMBE

This work examines the beginning of the *missio ad gentes* to spread the divine Good News in the *Acts of the Apostles*, and the basics of this beginning. The book of *Acts of the Apostles* is well known for its account of the activities of the early Church. One such activity focuses on the efforts that were made in preaching the Gospel, the mission to save. Since the mission to nations and the subsequent document *Ad Gentes*¹ can easily be traced from *Acts of the Apostles*, it is appropriate then to reread their roots from this very book. Below is a rereading of some of the roots in *Acts of the Apostles*, starting with the mission as the divine plan and the promise of God. This is followed by the Holy Spirit event on Jewish Pentecost, which opened the door to the evangelization of *all*, Jews and non-Jews. This was realized through preaching and a call to repentance that established the new Christian Community of prayer and service.²

1. The Mission

In a religious context, ‘mission’ can simply be said to be an activity of a movement that attempts to win others to a new understanding of a transcendent reality through either active means, that is, preaching

¹ *Ad Gentes* is the abbreviation of *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, which is the Second Vatican Council Decree (7 December 1965) on the Missionary Activity of the Church.

² Besides the works cited in the footnotes throughout this chapter, the following books are also useful to the understanding of the theme in the *Acts of the Apostles*: M. DUMAIS, *Le Lange de l'évangélisation (Actes 13:16-41)*, Bellarmin, Montreal 1976; A. FLANNERY (ed.), *Vatican Council II, Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, St. Paul Publications, Badra 1975; J. JERVELL, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts*, Augsburg, Minneapolis, MN 1972.

and healing, or passive life witness. It is implied in Acts (1:6-8) that the essence of the Church is its mission. The Church and mission are inseparably interrelated. A Church without missionary activity is not a true Church.

1.1 The Mission According to God's Plan

The mission in *Acts of the Apostles* is primarily to be considered within the whole framework of God's plan.³ The Acts' mission to nations is rooted in the overall plan of God. The intent of the divine plan is revealed to the reader in the birth narrative of Jesus: it is to bring light to the Gentiles and glory to Israel (Lk 2:32). And this plan is to be examined in the light of the person of Jesus, the definitive revelation of God, and His ministry. Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God, His offer of new life to the outcasts of society, and His announcement of the Kingdom of God, all possess a 'missionary character'.

The missionaries were aware too that their mission was to bring light to Gentiles and preach them salvation (Acts 13:47), that is, to restore all things to their proper place under the exalted Jesus (cf. Eph 1:22). It is a process that began with the Christ-event and finds its realization in the preaching of the disciples (Lk 24:46-49).

The preaching in Acts is, therefore, part of the overall plan of God. In fact, the activity of the members of the early Church apparently was to bear testimony to God's plan, which was advanced in the name of Jesus Christ; the testimony is part of the ongoing operation of God's plan. The preaching, thus, does not merely serve to report the Christ-event, it plays an integral part in the outreach of the divine plan, and the mission of the Church today should be viewed as an endeavor to enhance this plan.

1.2 The Mission as the Fulfilment of the Promise

The descent of the Spirit on the Jewish Pentecost is interpreted in the book as a fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecy and promise. The message of this prophecy is found among many others in prophet Joel. The prophecy of Joel 2:28-32 about the gift of the Spirit and prophesy has been wonderfully fulfilled on the occasion

³ See *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, 2.

of Pentecost. The fulfilment of the promise is most clearly shown in Acts 2:17-21 where the author alludes directly to Joel 2:28. The Holy Spirit descends upon the whole group of Apostles (Acts 2:4), and prophecy is taken as the gift of the Spirit to the Apostles for bearing witnesses (Acts 2:32). This coming of the Spirit can be interpreted as a prophetic empowering of mission or witness.

Peter interprets the Pentecost event in terms of Joel's message where God promises to pour out His Spirit on all flesh, that is, on whole Israel. The Apostle moves from Joel's passage, with its mention of people calling upon the name of the Lord for salvation (Acts 2:21), to focusing on Jesus' crucifixion (Acts 2:22-23), and then God's raising Him from the dead and exalting Him to be Lord and Messiah (Acts 2:33-36). After His exaltation, Jesus poured out the promised Holy Spirit. The Apostle also picks up the prophetic promise of salvation to all who call upon the name of the Lord (Acts 2:21; Joel 2:32), and urges his hearers to call upon the Lord Jesus by repenting and being baptized for the forgiveness of sins (cf. Lk 24:47). They will receive the gift of the Spirit, since the promise is for them and their children (Acts 2:39). Peter's witness to Israel is that they should hear and embrace this message of renewal and eschatological blessing.

But the coming of the Spirit is not only for Israel. Pentecost also foreshadows the universality of the Church's mission. The Jerusalem residents who appear on the scene turn out to be representatives from every nation under heaven (Acts 2:5). Indeed, the geographical listing that follows in Acts 2:9f is a case in point. Of course, the languages of every nation are uttered at Pentecost (2:5-8) and the anticipated universality can be interpreted as a 'reversal of Babel', pointing to harmony rather than to the confusion of Babel. The text does not mention one new language spoken by the Spirit, but of different foreign languages from different nations being spoken,⁴ thereby symbolizing the unifying force of the Church.

1.3 The Holy Spirit and the Beginning of the Church

The Spirit has a multi-dimensional role in the establishment of the Church and the mission. It is true that the founder of the Church is

⁴ A.T. LINCOLN, "Theology and History in the Interpretation of Luke's Pentecost", *The Expository Times*, vol. 96, n. 7, 1985, 205.

Jesus, but it is also true that the Spirit has a crucial part in the origins of the Church. Just as the Spirit is vital for Jesus' birth and ministry (Lk 1:35; 3:22), so the Spirit is vital for the Church's birth and ministry. For the Church, this is parallel to the virginal conception of Jesus under the power of the Spirit and to the descent of the Spirit at Jesus' baptism. Just as the latter took place in the context of prayer, so does Pentecost (Acts 1:14). The fullness of Spirit that is expressed here is used for the initial and permanent endowment of a person who is to serve God, such as Paul (Acts 9:17). It is especially used where a person is inspired by the Spirit before making some statement under prophetic inspiration or preaching a sermon (Acts 4:8f). Applied to the Church, it means that the Spirit-filled Church is ready for the service of God.

2. Mission to All

2.1 To Jews

The mission in Acts is the new mission with a different criterion from the old covenant.⁵ The Old Testament election was now replaced by election in the Christ-event. Thus, in Acts, the mission to the Jews calls for the mission to non-Jews. It is a single mission in its perpetuation and realization. In addition, it is to be perpetuated and realized among the Jews as well as among non-Jews.

Considering it was a Jewish Pentecost, the Jews could not be absent from the feast. But the Spirit that descended on the Jewish Pentecost brought eschatological renewal to Israel (Acts 3:19-21), along with a call to repentance. In fact, Pentecost focuses on Israel and the miracle it brings leads to the establishment of a repentant and believing Israel. The audience is Jewish (Acts 2:5). The message is to "all the house of Israel" (Acts 2:36) and to "all that are far off", that is, to the Jews in diaspora or to the other nations (Acts 2:39). The "Twelve" are to be taken as the foundation of a renewed Israel (Acts 2:14). It is to be noted here that for many Jews the Feast of Pentecost was important not simply because it celebrated the offering of the first fruits of the wheat harvest but also because of its association

⁵ See *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, 1965, 14.

with the renewal of the covenant made by God with Israel.⁶ It is on this occasion that pneumaphany⁷ takes place. The pneumaphany appears to be undergirding an eschatological covenant renewal at Pentecost. The Spirit is therefore the fulfilment of the covenant promise (Acts 2:39; 3:25).

2.2 To Non-Jews

Although the mission to non-Jews is taking place according to God's plan, it was strongly challenged from many quarters. According to the Jews, the mission of salvation is reserved exclusively to Israel, the people of the law of God, God's elected people. With such limited revelation it was difficult to see how non-Jews could be included in the array of God's elected people. Thus, the legitimacy of the mission among the Gentiles is to be drawn from the very fact that Gentiles are part of those promised to Israel. It is the God of Israel himself who forced the Church to accept Gentiles as its members. This irresistible force of God in accepting Gentiles is exemplified in the story of Cornelius in chapter 10 of the Acts and in other incidents (15:7-10,14): God ordains Peter to proclaim the Gospel to Cornelius and then to baptize him. The whole Gentile mission is for the sake of the name of God (Acts 15:14).⁸ This is what can be read in Acts 10:34-43, which is a speech addressed to the God-fearing among the Gentiles where Peter affirms that God shows no favoritism.

The mission to the non-Jews is a further step in the fulfilment of God's plan. In addressing the Jews, the Apostles point out that the Gentiles are part of the salvation plan. The introductory statement of Peter's speech at the house of the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10:34-43) shows a significant moment in the history of the mission. The message to Israel also includes Gentiles and those who can be reached through Israel, and that the Gospel is for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. In his speech to Jews at Jerusalem, in Acts 2:39, Peter says "the promise is to you and your children and to all that are

⁶ A.T. LINCOLN, "Theology and History in the interpretation of Luke's Pentecost", 205.

⁷ Pneumaphany here means the appearance and the descending of the Holy Spirit.

⁸ J. JERVELL, *Theology of the Acts of Apostles*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, 22-23.

far off”: though “far off” can be interpreted as relating to the diaspora Jews, it can also be read in the light of Luke 24:47 and Acts 1:8, where the passage can be understood as indicating the inclusion of Gentiles in the promises to Israel.

The conversion of Gentiles is the fulfilment of the promises to Israel. It does not mean, however, that the promises made to Israel have been extended to the Gentiles, while excluding Israel, but that Gentiles have gained a share in what has been given to Israel. This fits with Jewish expectation that at the end of time Gentiles will be included in the restored Israel. The conversion and restoration of Israel is the basis for the Gentiles’ seeking the Lord, so that missionaries operate in synagogues with their mixed audiences. Conversion occurs via the synagogue, because here the scattered of the Dispersion are gathered, because the inclusion of the unrepentant must take place here, and because here the Gentiles can be found. God’s chosen people in Acts of Apostles are therefore defined by a response to a call to conversion which does not exclude anyone.⁹

2.3 New Election: Repentance and Faith in Christ

A shift from the old covenant and election demands new terms, i.e. repentance and faith in Christ. This is what is presented in the climax of Peter’s speech in Acts 10:37-40, which is none other than an invitation to repentance, baptism, and reception of the Spirit. Jews are invited to repent as their sin could easily be considered as idolatry, a denial of the law and its first commandment (Acts 7:40-43). Idolatry is ignorance and occurs when God as creator is not acknowledged. All idols are made by “human design and skill” (Acts 7:38; 17:29; 19:26) and are therefore nothing but worthless follies (Acts 14:14-18).

But since many Jews rejected Jesus and the message, Peter called them to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus. In his speech (3:11-26), while aware of God’s promise to them as chosen people, Peter does not hesitate to call the Jews for repentance. Thus, the Christ-event is described as taking place within a Jewish framework: the people to whom the witnesses shall preach (10:42) is Israel and election now occurs by repentance and faith in Christ.

⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 20-21.

Acts of the Apostles also provide an account of the Gentiles' history of idolatry and worship of worthless things (14:14-18). But Peter was brave enough to stand up against the heathens' idolatry in 17:22 ff. and to call them for repentance.

Through repentance and faith in Christ, a new generation seeking the creator came into being not out of circumcision, but out of repentance and baptism. The position upheld by the Jerusalem Church that Gentiles were to be circumcised before admission¹⁰ was no longer tenable.

However, it was not so straightforward since circumcision was not the only issue at stake. The missionaries encountered other cultural problems while dealing with Christian converts, obliging the disciples to come up with a new morality to tackle the problems. While the non-Jewish Christians were free from observance of circumcision, they were obliged to observe the primary and necessary articles of ethics and faith: the first prescription in the Apostolic Decree required them to abstain from pollution of idols, to abstain from meat offered to idols, from blood and things strangled and from fornication (Acts 15:20f).¹¹ To show the gravity of the sin of idolatry, it is believed that when King Herod obliged people to hail him as a divinity was only to be immediately smitten down (Acts 12:22-23).

3. Preaching

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, which of course occurred during Jesus' mission, the preaching of Good News was resumed with Pentecost. The Pentecost event brought about new impetus to the preaching of the Apostles, who had been commanded to do so by Jesus himself¹². Their mission of proclaiming the Gospel started in Jerusalem. Chapters 2-4 of Acts clearly show just how many people Peter and the other Apostles came to faith in Jesus through their preaching. There are plentiful examples in which the disciples are shown preaching the Good News: "after spending some time there, Paul departed and went from one place to the next through the re-

¹⁰ M. GOODMAN, *Mission and Conversion, Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1994, 170.

¹¹ J. JERVELL, *Theology of the Acts of Apostles*, 20-21.

¹² *Dei Verbum*, 7.

gion of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples” (Acts 18:23). At the end of this journey, Paul did not return to Antioch because he seemed to have been pressed for time (Acts 21:4) and planned to be in Jerusalem for Pentecost (Acts 20:16). Paul’s arrest made further visits to Antioch impossible. Yet Paul possibly had planned a further visit there on his way to Rome (Acts 18:22; Rom 15:22-24).¹³ With these good examples one can easily see that the Apostles invested a lot in the mission charged with them by Jesus.

The Apostles’ zeal in spreading the Good News, through their missions and speeches is reported in Acts: “And every day, in the temple and from house to house they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ” (Acts 5:42). They were charged by their opponents with “filling Jerusalem with their teaching” (5:17-28). The resistance of the Jerusalem religious leaders was focused on the Apostles; as the other Christians were not yet targeted.¹⁴

3.1 Preaching, Divine Initiative

The spread of the Gospel is an important theme in Acts and it is signaled by a number of key verses: Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-31. A close examination of these verses and others, of course, shows how dependent the preaching is upon divine initiative. At key moments in the story, it is God who steps in and moves events on, not least in the events of Pentecost. The Pentecost launched the mission, for there God poured out the Spirit (Acts 2:4, 16-17, citing Joel 2:28) and thus enabled the believers to proclaim God’s praise in many languages (Acts 2:4-11). Peter’s speech, which explains how God is acting in the event, led to three-thousand people being added to the community of believers (Acts 2:41).

The sending and the mandate that was given to the missionaries remained as a basic resource in their functionality. In this manner, the Apostle who replaces Judas is chosen by God (Acts 1:24); what happened on the day of Pentecost occurred because of God’s initiative (Acts 2:17-21); and the healing of the lame man (Acts 3:1-10)

¹³ C. STENSCHKE, “Mission in the Book of Acts: Mission of the Church”, *Scriptura: International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa*, vol. 103, 2010, 76.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

is an act of God. When charged to cease speaking in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:17), Peter insisted on the divine necessity of the Apostles' actions (Acts 4:19; 5:29). In declaring that what the Apostles were doing was not a human undertaking (Acts 5:38) but God's (Acts 5:39), Gamaliel advised the Council not to oppose the Apostles, for "you might even be found opposing God" (Acts 5:39). Thus, the divine impetus for the activity of the Apostles is clearly underlined.¹⁵

In most cases, as it is today, speeches were a response to a given situation or need. Acts of the Apostles contains sixteen major speeches;¹⁶ and a striking feature these speeches share is what one may call the 'necessity' of the preaching. The preacher is commanded to preach, as it were, by the activity of God. The preachers do not deliberate whether or not to preach; the situation demands the preaching, for example Peter was compelled to preach at Pentecost (Acts 2), after the healing of the lame man (Acts 3:11), and in response to the accusation of the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:8-11; 5:29-32). The same necessity is found in the preaching of Stephen and Paul. Stephen was forced to give an apology in response to the accusation of the Jerusalem synagogue that he spoke against the temple (Acts 6:8 ff.). Paul was miraculously called and chosen for the specific task of preaching (Acts 9).

In other words, preaching in Acts is initiated by circumstances outside the control of the disciples. Preaching, one may say, is the outcome of God's activities. The Acts, therefore, emphasizes the necessity of the preaching of the Gospel; God's activity in human experience demands the preaching. As the mission in Acts is governed by God, so too is the preaching. Since God's sovereign will and plan determine the mission, it is by no means the initiative and work of the human agents, such as Peter or Paul.

3.2 Preached Message: About God

Preaching in Acts is focused on specific themes. The Apostles and missionaries in general were focused on their preaching. Up to that

¹⁵ J.T. SQUIRES, *Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1993, 58.

¹⁶ Most frequent are the speeches of Peter (six speeches), Paul (eight speeches), Stephen, and James.

moment, the community was heterogeneous and the missionaries had to take into account what was common to all. Thus, the teaching about God is abundant. God is designated as the creator, “maker of heaven and earth and sea and of everything in them” (Acts 4:24; 14:15; 17:24); the designation serves to demonstrate God’s power over creation (Acts 4:24); further, the book condemns each and everything that does not conform with His nature, thus, the book writes off idolatry and “temples made by men” (Acts 7:48; 17:24) and shows God’s power over history.¹⁷

There is yet an invitation in Acts to realize that God is constantly at work in history. History, thus, gives us a comprehensive mode of the action of God, extending throughout the whole span of human history according to the divine and intention.

Yet, the best thing we gather from the book is that God is associated with salvation history (Acts 13:47; 16:17, and 28:28). The mission to save the created, therefore, cannot be excluded from God’s saving power and His initiative to save the created. In the New Testament, it is God who reconciles the world to Himself and it is God who takes the initiative and who directs the accomplishment of this reconciliation.¹⁸ It begins with God Himself sending His only Son (cf. Jn 3:17; Gal 4:4). So, the mission to save avails us an occasion to think about the immense love of God revealed in His only Son.

3.3 About Jesus

Most prominent in the kerygma of apologetic preaching is the resurrection account: that God raised Jesus from the dead. The resurrection is not simply an historical event, it is an event with cosmic dimensions, it ushers in a new age (Acts 2:17-23, 32-36). Indeed, the suffering and resurrection of Jesus are central in the divine plan for the salvation of the world (Acts 2:32). The basic content of the speeches in Acts, therefore, describes how God acted for the salvation of the world. Suffice it to say that in the preaching the conviction that God acted is inseparably linked with how he acted, viz.

¹⁷ J. JERVELL, *Theology of the Acts of Apostles*, 19.

¹⁸ G.W. HULITT, “Ambassadors of Reconciliation: Paul’s Genius in Applying the Gospel in a Multi-Cultural World: 2 Corinthians 5:14-21”, *Review and Expositor*, vol. 104, n. 3, 2007, 594.

through the suffering and resurrection of Jesus, and, one may add, through the preaching of the Gospel. Therefore, the subject of the preaching in the Acts is the divine plan. God acted to restore all things to their proper place; and God acted through the death and resurrection of Jesus, and is now acting through the preaching of the disciples. Therefore, Paul's words in Acts 20:27, that he proclaimed the whole plan of God, should be understood in terms of God's action in salvation-history, and not only in terms of a body of doctrine.

In Jesus Christ, therefore, God's activity in the history of Israel is manifested. The key figure in this history, and so also in Christology, is God himself. God is the saviour, even when salvation is tied to the Christ-event (Acts 4:12). God himself is the very centre of Christology, something demonstrated by the strong reliance on the Scriptures in the Acts of Apostles, which is the revelation of God's will, works and words throughout history, finding meaning in the Christ-event.¹⁹

3.4 Healing and Miracles as a Form of Teaching

The Acts presents us with various events of healing performed by the Apostles. Healing and other miracles can be interpreted as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecy (Isa 35; Jer 31). It is an eschatological prophecy in which the restoration of the original order of things and people bring joy. The healing in Acts not only restores health to the afflicted but also encourages the simple recognition of Christ as a powerful deity, that is, intent on apologetic mission. This, after all, was the most likely effect of the witnessing of miracles and healing, for which there is much evidence.²⁰

It can be said, therefore, that healing and miracles were another form of preaching the Good News. It is important to note here that the God of the people is responsible for the Christian miracles, performing miracles as He once did through Moses (Acts 7:36). The Apostles witnessed the resurrection of Jesus with "great power". And their preaching was sometimes confirmed by miracles and

¹⁹ J. JERVELL, *Theology of the Acts of Apostles*, 30.

²⁰ M. GOODMAN, *Mission and Conversion, Proselytizing in the Religious History of the Roman Empire*, 75.

signs (Acts 15:12).²¹ This is what we read in Acts 8:6f that Philip's preaching effectiveness hinged on deliverance ministry and healing (Acts 8:7).

That it is God who performed miracles remained as the primitive understanding of the people. Even when it is said that the risen Jesus performs miracles, it is God who did them through the name of Jesus (Acts 3:6,16; 4:30). What is decisive is not that miracles happened, but that they were miracles of God. The wonders were always connected to the preaching and served to show the irresistible nature of the Word of God. Miracles performed by others were mentioned in some summaries with a stereotypical and characteristic form: God performed signs and wonders through Apostles etc. (Acts 2:19; 4:30; 14:3,27; 15:4,12; 19:11), or signs and wonders occurred through them (Acts 2:43; 5:12; 8:13; 19:11-12).

The healing of the man at the Beautiful Gate of the Jerusalem temple (Acts 3:1-10) is one of so many cases that can be used to prove the matter. The narrated event calls for the action of God in healing this man. Peter's speech happens "while he clung onto Peter and John" (Acts 3:11), and the healing provides the starting point for his words (Acts 3:12). Indeed, Acts 3:12 suggests that Peter's speech arises from the implicit questions raised by the healing.

3.5 Persecution

It is unfair to reflect about the mission and leave out persecutions which were a blessing in disguise. The success of their mission could not leave the missionaries safe; persecutions came as an answer to the missionary success of the Church.²² It is an undeniable fact that persecutions were meant to hamper further evangelization. Christians had to put up with false accusations and persecutions (Acts 14:22) for the sake of the Gospel. This is testified in Acts 8:1-4 and 11:19f., texts which show clearly the situation of the Church by that time: "And there arose on that day a great persecution against the Church in Jerusalem, and they all were scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the Apostles" (Acts 8:1).

²¹ J. JERVELL, *Theology of the Acts of Apostles*, 50.

²² *Ibid.*, 15.

Though the Apostles, apparently, were made to stay behind their city²³, they continued with the mission of preaching the Good News. The result of the persecution in Jerusalem, thus, is that the scattered Hellenists and others went about preaching the Word (Acts 8:4). Through their ministry many churches came into being (Acts 9:31, 36-41). According to Acts, these churches did not come into being only through the ministry of the Apostles, but also through other devout converts to Christianity.

It can also be read in Acts 11:19-20, which states specifically that after persecution arose in Jerusalem, some of the scattered brethren in Phoenicia and elsewhere preached only to the Jews, but men of Cyprus and Cyrene' on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus'.

3.6 The New Christian Community is Born

The efforts of these missionaries and their preaching of the Gospel resulted in the founding of new churches and communities. In short, from these simple divine beginnings, that is, of sending and praying for the sent (Acts 13:3), the Church began to spread throughout regions and nations.

Just as it is prophesied in Isa 55:10-12, the Word of God bears fruits. Peter's preaching led many to believing, and the number of believers rose to five-thousand (Acts 4:4); only the Sanhedrin demanded believers to stop speaking in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:18). As the story moves on, the believers' prayer led to renewed power from God (Acts 4:29-31). The development of Gospel ministry in Samaria is also greatly dependent on the power of God.

Being aware that the mission was of divine origin, they sought recourse for His power through prayers. There are different incidents of a praying community. In Acts 2:42, the prayers are introduced as the fourth chief article of the summary there given; also in the Pauline epistles, the basis and the sphere of the Christian life are summed up in these four articles (together with Baptism). Again, prompted by the Holy Spirit, Barnabas and Saul were commissioned with fasting, prayer, and the laying on of hands by the Church in Antioch, which itself had been founded and nurtured by

²³ C. STENSCHKE, *Mission in the Book of Acts: Mission of the Church*, 70-71.

Christians from Jerusalem. As missionaries of the Antiochene Church, Barnabas and Saul started what became known as the first missionary journey (Acts 13:1-3), preaching the Good News.

With time, the apostolic era began fading away and new ministers started to emerge. Acts 14:26 recalls that they had been commended in Antioch to the grace of God for the work which they had to fulfil. These statements bracket the account of the journey. The activities that take place in these brackets are activities of the Church of Antioch through its various missionaries, and Acts 11:19-26 testifies this as it says much less about the presence of the Apostles.²⁴ This means that the Church was taking root among persons with courage to embark on the mission; courageous people who could stand on their own and defend God. This is attested in the prayer of Acts 4:24-30, the members of the congregation request God to enable them to speak with boldness, while God causes healings and signs and miracles to happen through the name of Jesus. Thus, the mission in Acts of Apostles was carried out by simple but courageous, determined and devout persons able to venture and break in to different cultures and beliefs.

4. *Missio ad Gentes* in Acts: Conclusive Observations

The *missio ad gentes* which can be deduced from the Acts of Apostles admits the differences of backgrounds, cultures, and races. Despite these differences, there are yet common things people share: creation, the power that realizes and moves this creation, and finally our destiny. Whatever the belief or understanding, creation is an *undeniable reality* that demands us to find the creator; it is now revealed that the creator is God or whatever the name. Again, there is a need to understand how the created is sustained and what is its destiny. Hence, the need for revelation that was given through Jesus and the Holy Spirit, the mover. So, speaking of the mission to all, to Jews as well as non-Jews, one should think of God as the One who took the initiative not only to create, but also to sustain and save mankind and all creation. This is what is known as God's plan. Herein lies the relevance of the mission: that people should know all this.

²⁴ Ibid., 74-75.

While it is true that the mission in the Acts of Apostles is none other than the continuation of God's mission to save the universe in the person of Jesus, it is also true that a lot had to be overcome, including widespread persecutions. Through these unwanted and unexpected persecutions the phenomenon of *imitatio Christi* was glowing; and through this imitation the Apostles and other missionaries carried out God's mission to save wherever they were and acted according to different circumstances. The persecutions did not bar altogether Apostles' efforts to carry out God's mission to save mankind.

However, the recognition of their status as disciples of the Risen Jesus was not enough, this recognition was manifested in their mission and message. Though the mission remained the same the message had to take another orientation. The determining factor was now the Christ-event. The Christ-event, particularly the resurrection, was at the centre of their preaching. Not only did the resurrection of Christ give them new potency offsetting the negative effects of the crucifixion, it became also the subject matter of their preaching. To the resurrection was attached the original message of Jesus: the imminent coming of the Kingdom of God and its demands, that is, a call to repentance and faith in the One sent. Just as it was in the case of Jesus' preaching of the Good News, their preaching was upheld by signs and miracles, which, of course, should not be ignored when preaching the Good News in terms of building hospitals, schools, helping the poor and spiritually stricken persons and through so many other charitable works.

Church's Mission: The Example of the Apostles

❖ MATJAZ CELARC

There is a small country called Slovenia, extending over an area of 20,000 square kilometres home to two million people. Surprisingly, this small country has given many missionaries, and presently there are 46 Slovenians involved in the the *missio ad gentes* around the world. Yet, I have never had the opportunity to visit any of them. How come? Is it a lack of missionary fervour? Not enough courage? Being a priest, working in a seminary and in a parish, I would not say that I am lacking in evangelical fervour; however, studying theology and the Bible in Rome was already quite a challenge for me. Meeting people from all over the world, confronting different colours, different cultures and perspectives in such a motley setting, was indeed a challenge. It is in Rome that my story encounters the story of the *Acts of the Apostles*. Both stories seem to have reached the furthest cross-cultural limit; for me, it is the globalized city and for the Acts the centre of the Roman Empire. Rome represents the meeting point, but there is some similarity also in the hesitation and fear of confronting the cultural-religious boundaries. It is through the Holy Spirit that decisions are made, and bold action taken.

Crossing cultural and religious boundaries is a demanding task for each one of us. However, the present article, shedding light on some phases of this courageous endeavour in the story of Acts, should resonate and encourage both writer and readers. Luke, in his role as the author of the two-volume work Luke-Acts, narrates the story of the mission and development of the first Christian community. He does not write a manual on “How to form a Church mission,” but rather reveals his universal perspective of the mission through a cluster of variegated aims: theological, apologetic, moral, and eschatological. For the purpose of this article, I will try to present Luke’s missionary perspective by examining briefly (1) the composition of the narrative, and (2) the narrative plot, focusing above

all on some episodes, which convey the content of and the decision for the universal mission. The examination of the Luke-Acts narrative, as hinted in Luke's understanding of the mission, allows for the drawing up of some (3) conclusions, and thus stimulate the Church's current *missio ad gentes* of the Church.

1. Composition of the Narrative

Observing the composition and the structural elements in Luke-Acts, a reader might notice how the narrative is interwoven by both some important movements and alterations with regard to (1.1) topography and (1.2) terminology, as well as some repetitions with regard to (1.3) the divine plot and agency. These elements indicate Luke's universal perspective and missionary tendency.

1.1 Topography

Luke composed his two-volume work by combining two movements: (a) centripetal, towards Jerusalem in the Gospel; (b) centrifugal, away from Jerusalem in Acts.

a) For Luke, Jerusalem functions as the centre – the “navel of the earth” – as James Scott asserts.¹ His claim can be sustained both by the number of instances it appears (i.e. 30 times in the Gospel and 58 times in Acts), as well as by the extended narrative of Jesus' journey towards the city (Lk 9:51-19:28). Jerusalem, as Scott points out, plays an important eschatological role within Jewish tradition. Jerusalem embraces both the Jews from Diaspora (i.e. those who are once again assembled in the city from all four corners of the globe: Isa 11:12; 43:5-6), as well as the Gentiles (coming from all directions: Isa 2:2-3; 49:12); or even both, coming as a single movement (Isa 60:3-16).²

b) The geographical movement in Acts, however, is centrifugal, as illustrated in Acts 1:8 and developed in different stages: Jeru-

¹ J. M. SCOTT, “Acts 2:9-11 as an Anticipation of the Mission to the Nations”, in J. ÁDNA – H. KVALBEIN (eds.), *The Mission of the Early Church to Jews and Gentiles*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, vol. 127, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2000, 99.

² Cf. *Ibid.*, 100.

salem (1-7); Judea-Samaria (8-12); Asia minor, Europe (13-28).³ The community's ever stronger commitment to missionary work, which provides the narrative plot of Acts, follows the plan of God, as John Squires indicates.⁴ In other words, Jerusalem plays the role as the initial centre of the universal mission.

1.2 Terminology

Luke composes his two-volume work around two significant socio-religious terms, i.e. places where the community gathers to encounter the divine presence: the *temple* and the *house*, as Daniel Marguerat points out. Underscoring Luke's Gospel is the *temple* theme, as shown in the inaugural scene of Zechariah at the temple service and in the final scenes when the temple veil is torn in the middle at Jesus' death and, after Jesus' ascension, when the Apostles remain therein to pray (Lk 1:9; 23:45; 24:53). In Acts, on the other hand, the community, the place of gathering, is not limited to the *temple* but extended to the *house*. Acts begins with Jesus sharing a meal with His disciples (Acts 1:4) and ends with Paul's house arrest (Acts 28:30-31). The *temple* theme is restated: it is the *sanctuary* in the Gentile world (Acts 19:24), or the *temple compound* (i.e. the place of teaching and prayer: Lk 22:52-53; 24:53; the place of pilgrimage: Lk 2:22-52; Acts 2:5-11; the place of the Sanhedrin: Acts 4-5) or the *house of God* (Lk 6:5; Acts 7:49). The *house*, including the edifice itself and the family, becomes the centre where growth takes place (Acts 2:46), where the Risen Lord is encountered (cf. Lk 24:29; Acts 1:3), where the Holy Spirit is empowered (Acts 2:1) and continuous missionary activity is carried out (cf. Acts 10:22; 28:16).⁵ In brief, by switching from *temple* to *house*, Luke determines not only the passage from the first to the second volume, but also the shift from Jesus' Jewish-oriented activity to the universal mission of the Apostles.

³ Cf. *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴ Cf. J. SQUIRES, "The Plan of God in the Acts of the Apostles", in I. H. MARSHALL – D. PETERSON (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel. The Theology of Acts*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1998, 21-23.

⁵ Cf. D. MARGUERAT, "Du Temple à la maison suivant Luc-Actes", in C. FOCANT (ed.), *Quelle maison pour Dieu?*, Cerf, Paris 2003, 306.

1.3 The Divine Plot and Agency

Luke binds both volumes and guides the events of the growing community through (a) the Holy Spirit. This divine agency is expressed also as (b) the Word of God.

a) The Holy Spirit, as Marguerat observes, is a “constituent part of the birth of the Church.”⁶ In the Gospel, Jesus as the Son of God receives the anointment of the Holy Spirit (Lk 1:35) that empowers His mission (Lk 4:18-19; Isa 61:1-2).⁷ In Acts, Jesus becomes the Lord and the giver of the Spirit (Acts 2:33) that empowers the life and the testimony of the community (cf. Acts 4:31). Luke, as Marguerat aptly emphasizes, “marries two Jewish scriptural traditions without confusion.”⁸ By linking the empowerment of the Spirit both to the Messiah (cf. Isa 11:2; 42:1; 61:1) and to the people (cf. Num 11:29; Joel 3:1), Luke underlines the continuity both in terms of Jesus’ mission and of God’s plan for His people. Moreover, Luke demonstrates the continuity of God’s plan in describing the growth of the community. Despite fierce opposition, the community grows as shown in the summary narratives (cf. Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16); the summary statements at the different geographic stages of the narrative (Acts 1:8)⁹ and the numeric summaries of the growth of the community (cf. Acts 6:1.7; 12:24; 19:20).

b) Key to the community’s growth, as Brian Rosner points out, is the “Word of God” (cf. Lk 3:2-17; Acts 4:29.31; 8:14; 11:1; 12:24; 13:5; 16:32; 17:13; 18:11). This concerns both “the King-

⁶ D. MARGUERAT, “The Work of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts: A Western Perspective”, in P. DRAGUTINOVIC – K.-W. NIEBUHR – J. B. WALLACE – C. KARAKOLIS (eds.), *The Holy Spirit and the Church according to the New Testament. Sixth International East-West Symposium of New Testament Scholars, Belgrade, August 25th to 31st, 2013*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, vol. 354, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2016, 113.

⁷ Cf. Ibid., 114.

⁸ Ibid., 115.

⁹ The Spirit accompanies different stages of the narrative: the Jews in Jerusalem (2:4), the Samaritans (8:14-17), the Gentile proselytes of Judea (10:44-48), and the Gentiles of Asia Minor (19:6). P. ZINGG, *Das Wachsen der Kirche. Beiträge zur Frage der lukanischen Redaktion und Theologie*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, vol. 3, Freiburg 1974, 20-59; A. CHAMBERS, *Exemplary Life. A Theology of Church Life in Acts*, B&H Academic, Nashville, TN 2012, 119-121.

dom of God” (Acts 1:3; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 28:23) and “the salvation of God” (Acts 28:28).¹⁰ Notwithstanding the strife and persecution (9:29), the Church lives in peace¹¹ and consolation¹², and in fear of God¹³ (cf. 9:31), echoing the original experience of the Apostles (5:41) and conveying God’s work in the community as described in the summaries (cf. 4:33). In brief, the repetitive summary statements show that the community is guided by God’s Spirit and Word, and is thus empowered to fulfil the universal mission despite the rejection.

c) Some scholars focus on the narrative function of the Old Testament quotation. For instance, James Meek claims that these quotations characterize the figures at different stages of the narrative so to underline the universal scope of the mission. In this sense, the “light to the nations” of Isa 49:6 is set at three important points of the narrative. At the beginning (Lk 2:32), at the heart of the story in Acts (Acts 13:47) and at the final stage (26:23). Therefore, the Gentile mission is not a result of Paul and Barnabas’ failed mission in Israel, but had been foreseen in Isaiah’s prophecy.¹⁴

2. Narrative Plot

The story of Luke-Acts reveals not only a structural coherence but also a narrative plot, as the universal mission unravels from Jesus to

¹⁰ B.S. ROSNER, “The Progress of the Word”, in I. H. MARSHALL – D. PETERSON (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel. The Theology of Acts*, 224.

¹¹ “Peace” refers to Christ (Acts 10:36), but implies a favourable attitude and release (Acts 15:33; 16:36; 24:2; cf. Isa 52:7).

¹² “Consolation” implies material goods (Lk 6:24; Acts 4:36), words of encouragement (Acts 13:15; 15:31), nuance of healing (Acts 5:14-16 [Isa 57:18]), and salvation (Lk 2:25).

¹³ “Fear” is a prerequisite for the faith of the believers (cf. Acts 2:43-44; 5:11; Isa 8:13).

¹⁴ J.A. MEEK, *The Gentile Mission in Old Testament Citations in Acts. Text, Hermeneutic and Purpose*, Library of New Testament Studies, vol. 385, T&T Clark, London – New York 2008, 4-54. See also Robert Wall, who argues that citation from Joel 3:1-5 in Acts 2:17-21, and from Amos 9:11-12 in Acts 15:16-17, structures the narrative plot of Acts. R. WALL, “Israel and the Gentile Mission in Acts and Paul: A Canonical Approach”, in I. H. MARSHALL – D. PETERSON (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel. The Theology of Acts*, 441.

His community. Here, I introduce (2.1) an overview of the narrative plot concerning the mission theme and (2.2) a close reading of some of the most significant and pertinent narrative episodes.

2.1 An Overview of the Narrative Plot about the Theme of Mission

Luke, in contrast with other evangelists, extends the story of Jesus to His disciples. This enables him to portray narratively the tension between Jewish and Gentile Christianity. While Jesus walks the prophetic path from Galilee towards Jerusalem (Lk 9:51-19:28), His community opens the doors of Jewish tradition, initiating the evangelization mission of the whole world (Acts 1:8). Despite the initial expectations of the universal mission (cf. Lk 4:25-27), Luke's Jesus does not encounter the Gentiles (cf. Mt 8:11; Mk 13:10), but rather remains within the boundaries of the Jewish world (cf. Lk 9:52). Additionally, for Luke's Jesus the temple cannot remain a place of prayer also for the Gentiles, as the redactional omission hints at (cf. Lk 19:46; Mk 11:17 [Isa 56:7]).¹⁵ Nevertheless, he sends His disciples to spread the news of God's Kingdom, initially in Israel (Lk 9:2; 10:1), successively commanding them to evangelize the entire world (Mt 28:19; Lk 24:47; Acts 1:8), after the ascension (i.e. after the revelation of His divine Lordship). Since the Apostles conceive the restoration, i.e. the renewal of the people, in nationalistic terms (Acts 1:6), the Holy Spirit represents a rectification of their mission in universal terms (Acts 1:8).¹⁶

While the universal mission seems to be a consequence of the persecution and dispersion (cf. Acts 8:4; 11:19-20), the universal perspective is already revealed at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (Lk 2:32; 3:38, 4:25-27). Jesus' mission, as the "light for the revelation of the Gentiles" (Lk 2:32; [Isa 49:6]), is confirmed by His lineage that goes back to Noah, Adam and, ultimately, to God (Lk 3:23-28). It is Jesus who ultimately grounds divine sonship of all humanity (cf. Acts 17:28). Jesus interprets His mission as both empowered by the Spirit to bring the Good News of release to the outcasts (Lk 4:18-19 [Isa 61:1-2]), as well as destined to go beyond the borders of Israel like the prophets Elijah and Elisha (Lk 4:25-30).

¹⁵ B.S. ROSNER, "The Progress of the Word", 118.

¹⁶ S.G. WILSON, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, Society for the New Testament Studies Monograph Series, vol. 23, 1973, 90-91.

Luke portrays his approach to the Gentile world gradually. Described as the “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (5:27-39; 7:34; 19:5-7), Jesus also approaches the Samaritans positively (9:55; 10:30-35; 17:11-19).¹⁷ However, Luke’s specific attitude towards the Gentiles is revealed by comparing the accounts of the healing of the centurion’s servant (Lk 7:1-10; Mt 8:5-13; official’s son in John 4:46-54). While John plays with the theme of faith and Matthew allows a direct encounter of Jesus with the centurion, Luke introduces mediators to portray the centurion’s respect and Jesus’ appraisal of his faith which is found nowhere in Israel. Jesus reveals His universal perspective when he describes the eschatological banquet (Lk 13:28-29) and entrusts the mission first to the Apostles (9:1-6) and successively to the seventy-(two) (10:1-12). These two missions coactively prepare the mission to all nations (Lk 24:46-47; Acts 1:8), as signalled with the reference to Israel’s tribes (cf. Lk 22:29-32; Acts 1:26) and to the 72 nations of the known world (Acts 2:5: every nation).¹⁸

Luke portrays the mission to a Gentile world gradually in the narrative of Acts. The initial community in Jerusalem represents Israel re-gathered and restored. Despite the missionary mandate (Acts 1:8) and the universal understanding of the Spirit’s empowerment (cf. 2:39; 3:26), the community first remains in Jerusalem, growing as the multitudes from the surrounding cities gather in Jerusalem (5:16). After Pentecost and the persecution (cf. 8:3ff.), Peter and Philip begin the mission to Samaria and the coastal area; yet, the decisive turning point in the narrative is the account of the conversion of the centurion Cornelius (cf. 10). After this turning point, the mission to the Gentiles is enacted by Paul. The mission proceeds with “ecclesial embeddedness,”¹⁹ and not because of persecutions, but because the mission to the Jews has been accomplished.²⁰ In

¹⁷ B.S. ROSNER, “The Progress of the Word”, 220.

¹⁸ J. M. SCOTT, “Acts 2:9-11 as an Anticipation of the Mission to the Nations”, 89-99.

¹⁹ C. STENSCHKE, “Mission in the Book of Acts: Mission of the Church”, *Scriptura: International Journal of Bible, Religion and Theology in Southern Africa*, vol. 103, 2010, 67-74.

²⁰ Jacob Jervell argues that the mission to the Gentiles is only after the completion of the mission to the Jews. J. JERVELL, *Luke and the People of God*, Augsburg, Minneapolis, MN 1972, 41-66 [previously published as “Das gespaltene Is-

brief, Luke introduces high hopes for the mission of salvation universally spread. These hopes are not denied but developed in stages: first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles.

2.2 A Close Reading of some of the most significant and pertinent Narrative Episodes

Here, I observe some episodes in the narrative of Acts: (A) Acts 2-5: this sequence portrays life at the Jerusalem Church after the bestowal of the Spirit; (B) Acts 10-15: this sequence illustrates the beginning and confirmation of the mission to the Gentiles. A close reading of the sequences should help us better understand both the narrative development of the mission as well as Luke's universal perspective.

A. The bestowal of the Holy Spirit and the growing conflict (Acts 2-5)

Acts 2 represents the fulfilment of the promises regarding the coming of the Spirit (Lk 24:49; Acts 1:4-5.8). The event hints at the mission both to the Jews as well as to the Gentiles. The sequence of the event-speech follows a similar pattern regarding Jesus' mission as presented at the beginning of Luke's Gospel.²¹ In both cases we notice that (1) the coming of the Spirit is related to prayer (Lk 4:18; Acts 2:17-18); (2) the scriptural quotation of both speeches characterizes the mission as a "release" (cf. Lk 4:18) and "release of sins" (Acts 2:38); (3) the speech is followed by rejection (cf. Lk 4; Acts 4-5).

The event is placed within the sequence of Jewish feasts (cf. Lev 23), namely it is associated with the Feast of the Weeks²² and with the experience of both Mosaic and Isaianic Exodus, as the audible-visible elements also indicate.²³ The interpretation of the Pentecost

rael und die Heidenvölker: Zur Motivierung des Heidenmission in der Apostelgeschichte", *Studia Theologica*, vol. 19, 1965, 68-96].

²¹ R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts. A Literary Interpretation. 2. The Acts of the Apostles*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA 1990, 29.

²² The Old Testament shows the correlation of Pentecost with Passover (Lev 23:15-21).

²³ Lexical correlations include: hear/sound (Ex 19:5; Acts 2:6); sound/noise (Ex 19:16; Acts 2:2); fire/smoke (Ex 19:18; Acts 2:3); be amazed (Ex 19:18; Acts 2:7); all the people/all (Ex 19:18; Acts 2:1); multitude of people (Ex 19:21; Acts

in terms of the covenant renewal is attested in the *Book of Jubilees*²⁴ and Qumran (cf. 1QS 1:7-2,19; CD 16:1-4), but also implied in 2Chr 15:10-12. The Spirit, symbolically depicted as water (Isa 44:3) and fire (5:24), empowers prophetic mission (61:1) and witness to the Lord (Lk 4:1; Acts 1:8).²⁵ Since the crowd, consisting of devoted Jews from every nation under heaven (2:5),²⁶ also represents the Gentiles of their homes. Robert Tannehill arrives at the conclusion that this event provides “a hint of the mission’s power to cross ethnic and religious lines.”²⁷ The centripetal and centrifugal movements echo Isaiah when he recounts the return of the exiles (cf. Isa 45:20), the proclamation to the nations (45:22), and the pilgrimage of the nations (cf. 2:1-5). Despite a clear Jerusalem-centred perspective, the universal kingship of Jesus is defended, building up a new identity, empowered by the Spirit.²⁸

Peter explains the bestowal of the Spirit by referring to prophetic words (Acts 2:17-21; LXX Joel 3:1-5). Minor notes in 2:14 (“all those dwelling in Jerusalem”), 2:36 (“the whole house of Israel”) and 2:39 (“all those far off”) refer to all the Jews, both to those who reside in Jerusalem as well as to those, scattered throughout the world, but now present in Jerusalem. However, this is a proleptic anticipation of the universal mission, since the Gospel is first addressed to all Israel, scattered throughout the world, and, second, it addresses also the Gentile inhabitants of the Jewish Diaspora. The bestowal of the

2:6); together/together in one place (Ex 1:8; Acts 2:1). See also S. PARK, *Pentecost and Sinai. The Festival of Weeks as a Celebration of the Sinai Event*, The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, vol. 342, T&T Clark, London 2008, 176-238.

²⁴ R.H. CHARLES, *The Book of Jubilees, or, the Little Genesis*, A. and C. Black, London 1902.

²⁵ Cf. H. BEERS, *The Followers of Jesus as the “Servant.” Luke’s Model from Isaiah for the Disciples in Luke-Acts*, Library of New Testament Studies, vol. 535, Bloomsbury, London 2015, 128-133.

²⁶ With regard to the additional list of nations (2:9-11), James Scott relates it with Gn 10-11, as well as its reformulation in Isa 66:18-19 and Jub 8-9. J. M. SCOTT, “Acts 2:9-11 as an Anticipation of the Mission to the Nations”, 116-119.

²⁷ R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts. A Literary Interpretation. 2. The Acts of the Apostles*, 27.

²⁸ A.J. THOMPSON, *One Lord, One People. The Unity of the Church in Acts in its Literary Setting*, Library of New Testament Studies, vol. 359, T&T Clark, London 2008, 68-70.

Holy Spirit represents the eschatological realisation of Joel's promise. In fact, Peter twice underscores the eschatological tone of the prophecy (LXX Joel 3:1[2]: afterward [those days]; Acts 2:17-18: in the last days). The discourse marked by the "latter days" evokes Isaiah's view, indicating that the Lord's Law and His Word of judgment are valid for both Israel and all the nations (cf. Isa 2:2-4).²⁹ Likewise, the gift of the Spirit bestowed "upon every flesh" (Joel 3:1; Acts 2:17) suggests an eschatological and universal dimension (cf. Lk 3:6; Acts 2:39 [Isa 40:5; 49,26]; Acts 13:47 [Isa 49,6]) and enables universal comprehension.³⁰

Acts 3-5 portray the growing conflict with the official religious authorities on the one hand, while the Apostles continue to enact the Spirit-empowered mission, both inside and outside the community, by teaching and healing. The healing account in Acts 3 is significant, since it both echoes Jesus' healing pattern (Lk 5:17-26) as a realisation of Isaianic hopes (Lk 7:22 [Isa 35:6; 55:12]),³¹ as well as indicating the competence of the Apostles, as it is later confirmed in the mission of Paul (Acts 14:8-13). The nature of the healing, by calling on Jesus' name (3:6), defers from the magic-like incantations and has an important social function as it reintroduces the healed person back into the community.³²

Peter takes the crowd's amazement (3:10ff.) as an opportunity to explain the healing in the light of the history of salvation that climaxes in Christ. A change of mindset as a return to God is necessary for the realization of the eschatological times envisioned in three stages: (1) the remission of sins (3:19), (2) the arrival of the

²⁹ Cf. D.W. PAO, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament II, vol. 130, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2000, 156-159.

³⁰ J. MCWHIRTER, *Rejected Prophets. Jesus and His Witnesses in Luke-Acts*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 2013, 51.

³¹ H.K. NIELSEN, *Heilung und Verkündigung. Das Verständnis der Heilung und ihres Verhältnisses zur Verkündigung bei Jesus und in der ältesten Kirche*, Acta Theologica Danica, vol. 22, Brill, Leiden 1987, 170-172.

³² D. MARGUERAT, "Magic and Miracle in the Acts of the Apostles", in T.E. KLUTZ (ed.), *Magic in the Biblical World. From the Rod of Aaron to the Ring of Solomon*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement, vol. 245, T&T Clark, London 2003, 101-103.

Messiah who refreshes (3:20) and (3) brings restoration to all things (3:21). The future blessing intended as the eschatological restoration in Christ is addressed first to the Jews, as the heirs of the promises, and then to the Gentiles (cf. 3:25-26). This same pattern, i.e. the Word of God addressed first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles, is also echoed in the mission of Paul later in the narrative (13:46; 18:5-6; 28:23-28).³³ In the sequence of the events in Acts 3-4, Peter presents the *kerygma* – i.e. God's plan of salvation in Christ – by explaining Jesus' name. Linking it to other Christological titles such as servant, holy, righteous, leader to life (Acts 3:13-15), Peter evokes the figure of the Isaianic Servant (cf. Isa 43-53).³⁴ Moreover, by applying the Old Testament's "cornerstone" theme to Jesus (cf. Ps 117:22; Isa 8:14-15; 28:16; Acts 4:11), Peter stresses the universal and soteriological meaning of the name (cf. Acts 4:10-11).³⁵ The fact that Jesus represents the fundament of the community's life and salvation is later confirmed when Peter acclaimes Jesus as the "forerunner and saviour", that is, as the one who leads to life and represents a guide towards salvation (Acts 5:31; cf. Hebr 2:10), since God delivered him from the agony of death (Acts 2:24) and made him the first-born from the dead (26:23). Thus, Jesus becomes the judge of the living and the dead (10:42; 17:31), the guide who leads beyond sin and death, and lastly, the life-giving ruler who guarantees entry into the eschatological restoration (cf. 3:21).³⁶ In brief, Peter reveals God's plan of salvation in Christ not for the inculcation of the Jews, but rather as a turning point for conversion and salvation. The theme of salvation having universal repercussions is echoed later in the narrative, as the mission enters the Gentile world first through Peter (10:43) and then through Paul (13:39).

³³ W. G. HANSEN, "The Preaching and Defence of Paul", in I. H. MARSHALL – D. PETERSON (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel. The Theology of Acts*, 299-300.

³⁴ M. D. GOULDER, "The Anointed", in J. L. NORTH – S. MOYISE (eds.), *The Old Testament in the New Testament. Essays in Honour of J.L. North*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 2000, 72-73.

³⁵ Also, Mt 21:42; Mk 12:10-11; Lk 20:17; Rom 9:32-33; 1Pt 2:6.

³⁶ T. ESKOLA, *A Narrative Theology of the New Testament. Exploring the Meta-narrative of Exile and Restoration*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, vol. 350, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2015, 221.

B. The divine intervention and the community's decision for the universal mission (*Acts 10-15*)

Acts 10-11. In the episode of Cornelius' conversion, the reader might notice the specific, Jewish-like characterization of Cornelius as devout (Sir 11:22), God-fearing (Lk 1:50; 2:25), and righteous (Deut 16:20; Lk 1:6); as one who prays at the hour of prayer (Sir 4:5; Lk [2:37]; 5:12; 10:2). Second temple Judaism develops the idea that prayer, alms-giving, and the study of the Torah represent a spiritual sacrifice, equal in value to that performed in the temple (cf. Tob 12:12; 1 QS 8:1-9) so that the offering of the righteous man cannot be disregarded (Sir 35:9). Cornelius resembles Simeon, who is yearning for Israel's consolation and salvation, i.e. the Messiah appointed also to the Gentiles (Lk 2:32). This characterization is a decisive turning point: the heavens, previously closed for the Gentiles, are now opened to allow Cornelius achieve the message of salvation (cf. Acts 10:4). Cornelius "sends" for Peter (10:8) according to the divine command (cf. 10:5[20].32.33) because a new stage of the mission is at stake.³⁷

The narrative shifts to portray Peter, who abides in a setting on the edge of (1) ritual purity, as he resides in the house of "Simon, a tanner" (9:43; 10:6); (2) topographical juxtaposition between earth, sea and heaven, as he abides "by the sea" and stays "on the housetop" (9:43; 10:9). In the minds of people, the sea represents a primordial chaotic force that only God manages to dominate by His divine and creative power (Job 38:8.16; Isa 40:12), the only one capable to place limits on it and control the forceful creatures that abide therein (Job 40:25; Isa 27:1). Therefore, Peter finds himself on the border of human capacities, while contemplating the greatness of God. This initial description already announces to the reader that something is about to happen. However, Peter adheres to tradition, as the temporal setting of the prayer "at the sixth hour" seems to indicate. Peter enters the divine through revelation on two levels:

³⁷ The verb "to send" refers mostly to the divine act in sending His agents (Lk 1:19.26) – Jesus (Lk 4:18.43; Acts 3:26; 10:36), the Holy Spirit (Lk 24:49; Acts 3:20), and Jesus' messengers – to proclaim the Kingdom of God (Lk 9:2; 9:52; 10:1) and salvation to the Gentiles (Acts 26:17; 28:28). P. G. BOLT, "Mission and Witness", *Witness to the Gospel. The Theology of Acts*, in I. H. MARSHALL – D. PETERSON (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel. The Theology of Acts*, 194-195.

(1) *vision* (open heaven: Lk 3:21; Acts 7:56) and (2) *explanation* (Lk 3:22; Acts 7:31). The vision remains unclear – i.e. like a vessel (cf. Acts 9:15) containing all the living beings as in the account of creation and Noah (cf. Gn 1:24.26; 6:20) – and calls for the additional explanation that follows the scheme: (1) command, (2) rejection, and (3) explanation.

The command “kill and eat” (Acts 10:13) implies the ritual sacrifice (Ex 8:25; Deut 12:15); however, it becomes problematic because of the presence of the ritually impure animals that taint all the others (Lev 11). For this same reason, also the encounter with strangers (i.e. Gentiles) who eat impure animals and food sacrificed to the idols, or live immorally, is problematic.³⁸ Although the strangers are to be treated with respect and care (cf. Lev 19:33-34; Deut 27:19), meeting them and sharing meals with them is to be restricted due to idolatry (Deut 18:9-14) and immorality (Deut 20:16).³⁹ Every observant Jew, knowing the list of impure animals (cf. Lev 11-16) would reject such a command, as Peter does; he claims never to have tasted anything “common/unclean” and “impure” (10:14). The word pair “common” and “impure” explain each other, revealing the semantic field that goes from the “ritually impure” to the “common”. The latter, deriving from Hellenistic culture, illustrate the origins of the community when its members hold everything in common and share all goods and break bread together (2:44).

God's answer, “What God has cleansed, no *longer* consider unholy” (Acts 10:15), resolves the situation. Peter, despite the tradition that “nothing impure comes from heaven” (m. *Sanhedrin* 59b), discerns the vision and the voice. Peter applies this vision directly to the encounter with Cornelius by recognising God's impartiality, since God accepts everyone who fears Him and works righteously (cf. Acts 10:34-35). Thus, as Jesus is the judge of the living and the dead, everyone who believes in Jesus receives the remission of sin (Acts 10:42-43).

³⁸ Cf. G. C. LESTER, “Paul and the Mission to the Gentiles: A Study in the History of Scholarship”, Thesis in History, University of Missouri, Kansas City, 1998, 51-52, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.469.5814&rep=rep1&type=pdf>.

³⁹ Cf. R. BAUCKHAM, “James, Peter, and the Gentiles”, in B. CHILTON – C. A. EVANS (eds.), *The Missions of James, Peter, and Paul: Tensions in Early Christianity*, Novum Testamentum Supplements, vol. 115, Brill, Leiden 2005, 111.

Peter's proclamation of "remission of sin in Jesus' name" evokes earlier speeches, but only through the Spirit these become the "words of salvation" (cf. 2:40-41; 11:14; 13:26). The Spirit confirms Peter's words and repeats the initial event (2:4), but also prevails over the condition of the baptism in Jesus' name (2:38). Peter will connect the event to Jesus' promise of the "baptism in the Spirit" (cf. 1:5; Lk 3:16). Thus, if the Spirit is given also to the Gentiles who believe in Christ, it must mean that God has purified these Gentiles of their moral impurity. God once again demonstrates His power (4:31) by giving conversion that leads to life (11:18) and by cleansing hearts through faith (15:9). For this reason, Richard Bauckham concludes that "the distinction between the Holy people of Israel, separated for God, and the profane peoples, separated from God, has been abolished".⁴⁰ However, baptism must follow: both as inclusion in the messianically renewed people of God and as the expression of divine intervention in repentance and forgiveness (10:48). The conversion of Cornelius is decisive for the subsequent Gentile mission, as it is not the work of men, but of God.⁴¹ For this reason, Peter refers to this event twice. First, as he arrives in Jerusalem, he retells the event (11:5-17) by arriving at two conclusions: (1) the faith of the Gentiles and (2) God's intervention that cannot be hindered (10:17). The community recognizes the event as a conversion that leads to life given by God (10:18). Second, on the occasion of the Jerusalem assembly, Peter retells the event concisely by affirming God's intervention in: (1) choosing him so that the Gentiles would hear and believe the words of the Gospel; (2) knowing their hearts, bearing witness for them, and bestowing them the Holy Spirit (15:7-8). Therefore, Peter claims that there is no distinction, as God has purified their hearts through faith (15:9).⁴²

The conversion of the first Gentile is decisive for the narrative plot. For the purpose of the general acceptance, it is Peter, as a prominent figure of the Jerusalem Church, who is witness to this crucial event. The Church has been prepared by God to make a further step into the Gentile world. From Caesarea the narrative shifts to depict the community in Antioch, consisting of both Jewish and

⁴⁰ Ibid., 115.

⁴¹ Cf. S. G. WILSON, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, 177.

⁴² Cf. R. BAUCKHAM, "James, Peter, and the Gentiles", 105.

Gentile disciples, defined as “Christians” (11:26). Since this community has embraced the faith in “the Gospel of the Lord Jesus”, the first during the persecution of the original Jerusalem community, it enjoys a primacy over the other communities of Gentiles (cf. 11:19-21), and is set on the universal mission by the decision of the Spirit in choosing Barnabas and Saul/ Paul (13:2)

Acts 13-14. Here I will try to show how they confronted both the Gentile and Jewish worlds during their first mission by pointing to: (1) the purging of the pagan beliefs and (2) the retelling of the story of salvation.

1. At Paphos, they encountered a Jewish sorcerer, a false prophet Bar-Jesus, who tried to hinder them in their proclamation of the Word of God, by opposing them and seeking to turn his master proconsul Sergius Paulus away from faith (13:7-8). Paul perceives Bar-Jesus as full of deceit and wickedness (13:10). Magical powers, in fact, appear to be related to money, manipulation, and power (cf. 8:9-24; 16:16-19). Therefore, they are in direct contrast to the power of Jesus' name and His Spirit that sets free and leads to life. Paul arrests this kind of activity by blinding Bar-Jesus (13:11). At Lystra, when they heal the lame man who had faith (14:9; cf. the healing in Acts 3) and the people acclaim them as gods, they tear their robes (14:14) and rush to reprimand them by proclaiming the Gospel of the living God, as creator, provider of all goods and joy of heart (14:15-17).

2. At Antioch in Pisidia, going into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, they are invited to proclaim “words of encouragement” (13:15). Paul concisely retells the history of Israel (13:16-41: cf. Stephen's speech Acts 7:2-53) showing how the Davidic promises climax in Jesus: in the resurrection, remission of sins and justification (cf. 13:32-39).⁴³ However, Paul quoting Hab 1:5 hints at the rejection of the message by the Jewish audience. The rejection, caused by envy, introduced the repetitive pattern of Paul's mission. Due to the rejection of the Jews, the Word of God is directed at the Gentiles (13:46). Isaiah's “light to the nations” (Isa 49:6) describing the mission of Jesus, also obtains the same function for Paul (Lk 2:32; Acts 13:47). Thus, Paul addresses

⁴³ W. G. HANSEN, “The Preaching and Defence of Paul”, 301.

first the Jews and then the Gentiles (cf. Acts 13:45-47; 17:1-15; 18:4-7; 19:8-9; 28:23-28). Paul and Barnabas' shift of focus to the Gentiles is seen as a realisation of the prophecies (cf. Acts 13:47; Isa 49:6) and the divine work in opening a door of faith to the Gentiles (Acts 14:27). However, each new step towards the Gentile world requires the confirmation of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 15).

Acts 15. The question of the Gentile mission, i.e. the Gentiles' membership of the people of God, with or without circumcision, demands a decision on the part of the Jerusalem Church (Acts 15:15).

Peter, as a prominent member of the Jerusalem Church, recounts his experience of God's intervention in cleansing hearts through faith and by the gift of the Holy Spirit (15:8-9). His testimony precedes those of Paul and Barnabas (15:12; cf. 2:19)⁴⁴; however, the decisive role is given to James. For him, the Gentiles belong to the messianic people of God, as was foretold by the prophets (Acts 15:14). Introducing the citation Amos 9:11-12, he identifies this situation as a restoration of David's tent with the inclusion of the Gentiles. Using the idiomatic expression "all the nations over whom my name has been invoked" (Acts 15:17; cf. 2:21.39), he argues that now all the nations are the Lord's own people. The four prohibitions included in the apostolic decree, to refrain from sacrificing to idols, blood, things strangled, and sexual immorality, obliged every stranger within Israel (Lev 17-18).⁴⁵ Thus, a new life refraining from moral impurities derives from the purification of hearts.

The decision causes joy and the final stage of the mission to the ends of the world. God's plan to introduce the Gentiles to the messianic people of God (Acts 15:14) is confirmed later in the narrative. First, in Corinth God claims to have "many people" in the city (18:10) and second, Paul, recounting his Damascus' experience, sees it as a divine mandate to open the eyes of the Gentiles in order that they may "receive remission of sins and an inheritance among them that is sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:18). Lastly, in Rome Paul's

⁴⁴ The "signs and wonders" is a catchphrase of 2:19. Cf. R. WALL, "Israel and the Gentile Mission in Acts and Paul: A Canonical Approach", 443.

⁴⁵ Cf. R. BAUCKHAM, "James, Peter, and the Gentiles", 119-120.

mission seemingly comes to an end. Once again, the Jewish audience does not listen (28:25-27; cf. Isa 6:9-10).

The narrative plan on the Church's mission (Acts 1:8) has reached its goal at the centre of the Roman Empire, but neither the Jews nor the Gentiles have listened to the Word of salvation. For this purpose, an open-end of the story (28:28) functions both as a prophetic critique and as such also represents a hope for Israel, as well as an invitation to the reader to listen and to accept the Word of salvation.

3. Concluding Observation on the *Missio ad Gentes* in Acts

The analysis of both the structural markers and the narrative plot has shown how the theme of the *missio ad gentes* is constantly present (cf. Lk 2:32), but it develops gradually first to the outcasts in the Gospel and finally to the Gentiles in Acts (cf. Lk 9:51; Acts 1:8). The conducting agents of the mission represent the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk 1:15; Acts 28:25) and the Word of God (cf. Lk 1:13; Acts 28:28). The kerygma announced is that Jesus is the Christ and Lord. He leads to life in God's Kingdom, i.e. delivering from the bondages of spiritual, social, and physical types. By the power of the Holy Spirit sins are remitted, the magical powers revealed and overturned. Moreover, this Spirit empowering the life of a new, family-like community that shares life. In the power of the Spirit, the sick ones are either cured or cared for. The mission takes into account the way of life of the Gentiles. Firstly, by considering the socio-religious provenance (theology of creation), and secondly by rejecting the bad elements (magic and idol worship) to introduce them to the living and loving God. The mission consists in the openness of the heart, in listening to the Word and living it, despite the daily struggles, no matter where, even in the smallest regions of the earth such as Slovenia or at the farthest outskirts of the globe (cf. Acts 1:8).

The Christian Mission Today: From the Footprints of Saints Peter and Paul

❖ MICHAEL JEGANKUMAR COONGHE

Mission to the Gentiles is one of the primary tasks of the Catholic Civilization. Jesus was born into a Jewish family, and His parents were Jewish by origin. But Jesus was very careful in extending His Kingdom, that is the Kingdom of God, to all the world: “And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the Good News to the whole creation’” (Mk 16:15).¹ Although His prime task was to renew the faith of Israel, Jesus included the whole of creation into the idea of a New Israel, where Jews and non-Jews are a part. Almost all the books of the New Testament contain the interest of Jesus, the Apostles, and the disciples toward Gentiles. Even though, at the beginning of the Gospel’s narratives, Jews were given primacy as the lost sheep of Israel,² it is by no means to make the mission to the Gentiles secondary.

The *Acts of the Apostles* (ΠΡΑΞΕΙΣ ΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΩΝ) is the fifth book of the New Testament and could be considered as the book *ad gentes*.³ It connects the mission starting from the city of Jerusalem, the city of David, to the imperial city of Rome, known as the ‘End of the World.’ Jesus’ resurrection and the working of the Holy Spirit are the book’s main drivers. Luke is considered by tradi-

¹ Also see Matt 24:14.

² Cf. Mt 10:6: “But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”.

³ Suggested readings on the *Acts of the Apostles*, which were consulted to draft this work: M.L. SOARD, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns*, Westminster/Knox, Louisville, KY 1994; R.W. WALL, *The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, The New Interpreter’s Bible, vol. 10, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN 2002; C.K. BARRET, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1994; F.F. BRUCE, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1988.

tion to be the author, and at times he seems to be the narrator, revealing himself as a participant of the same narration. To prove the Lukan authorship of the Acts is no easy task, as his authorship too would have to be disproved. Being a ‘*Dear and Glorious Physician*’ (Col 4,14), Luke was a Greco-Roman and well-educated Gentile Christian who could have had some original sources to the early of the infant Church. Luke dedicates his book to the famous Theophilus (Θεόφιλος), whose identity continues to be elusive, because we are unable to know whether we are dealing with a real person, a community or an idea. While some modern and free thinkers believe that Theophilus could be every reader of the Acts, I believe this is only one of the arguments.

The author himself is the first missionary *ad gentes*. The book is an account of his personal experience of the mission to the Gentiles. He tells us what he believes and experiences. The purpose of Acts could be to unite the discordant faith communities; contrast idolatry, which had widespread standing at that time; make a defense against the persecutors; encourage the ministers in their evangelization process; strengthen faith; and maintain a stance in the theological and historical controversies of the time.

1. The Book of the *Acts of the Apostles*

The *Acts of the Apostles* portrays the beginning of the Christian mission since the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paramount leading figures like Peter and Paul, and their missions, dominate the book’s story line. There are also many secondary characters who are given substantial importance in spreading the Gospel under different and adverse circumstances. The mission activities of prominent characters are deeply embedded in the *missio ad gentes* of various churches. *Acts of the Apostles* deal with the Mission of God (*missio Dei*) and the Mission of the Church (*missio ecclesiae*), where the latter, to avoid failure (Acts 8:39), must always be faithful to the former.

Therefore, the book provides a crucial insight on the events surrounding the early Church. Church fathers like Irenaeus, author of *Adversus Haereses*, and Eusebius, who wrote *Ecclesiastical History*, have drawn heavily from the details provided by the Acts for their arguments. Many Church scholars agree that Luke kept a very truthful record of events, underlining how the early Church’s was very

faithful to the Gentile mission, which was considered to be the Spirit-driven mission of the Church.

While conforming to recurrent patterns emerging in contemporary masterpieces of historical writing, Acts has its own style in the arrangement of the narratives. It starts with the Ascension of Jesus and runs through the development of the early Christian Community, especially in Jerusalem. The martyrdom of Stephen paves the way for the Church to go beyond Israel, providing an opportunity for the Gentiles to come into contact with the first missionaries. Paul's conversion should be seen as a clear intimation of the beginning of Gentile mission (Acts 9), and that is why Paul is one of the most important figures in the Gentile mission itself and in the whole book. The selection of the seven Deacons in chapter six tells us the Church is an inclusive reality very much concerned about the fate of every single member, whether Jew or Gentile. The Cornelius episode in chapters 10 and 11 gives us reason to believe that God is behind the Church's overture to Gentile converts. Paul and Barnabas form a first and truly formidable missionary team (Acts 11-14), and, at this juncture, Peter culminates the decisive recognition of a law-free Gentile mission by the Apostolic commission. Well explained in chapters 15-21, the Pauline mission covers an area covering Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Miletus, Caesarea and Jerusalem. Paul's imprisonment and trial herald the mission's arrival at the capital of the Gentile world.

2. Peter's Interest in the Gentile Mission

The key figure in the first part of Acts, Peter personifies many ideas and beliefs of the early Christian communities. There are some 24 standard speeches in the book, out of which eight are by Peter. A number of important points should be observed in his first speech that shed light on the crucial importance of the *missio ad gentes*. While delivering his speech, the listeners are suddenly filled by the Holy Spirit and begin to speak in other tongues (Acts 2:3): Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, are all filled with the Holy Spirit. The *missio ad gentes* has started with Peter and is approved by the Holy Spirit. (All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit – και ἐπλήσθησαν πάντες

πνεύματος ἁγίου – meaning that most of the earliest converts were certainly Gentiles).

While blaming the Jewish authorities, Peter also includes Gentiles among those who were responsible for the death of Jesus: “For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed” (Acts 4:27).

The election of the seven Deacons established a new identity for the leaders of the Church. The Apostles-oriented Church gradually incorporated Hellenists (Ἑλληνιστῶν), who were believed to be Greek-speaking Jews. Some felt they could turn out to be more open-minded Jewish Christians, compared to their more traditional brethren. Among the Deacons, the proto-martyr Stephen was the first to deliver a long sermon to the Jewish leadership. Offended by the speech, the Jewish leadership punished Stephen for the crime of blasphemy. And this is where history changes. A young man is introduced into the life of the Church as the Apostle par excellence of the Gentiles (Acts 8:1).

The death of Stephen causes the infant Church to spread beyond Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the icon of Judaism, forced the Christian leadership to seek more fertile fields. Samaria became the first Gentile city to hear the Good News of Jesus. It was Deacon Philip who took up the task of bringing the Good News to the Gentiles. Philip’s mission was closely observed by the Jerusalem Church, which later commissioned Peter and John to baptize the Gentile Christians, for it believed that they had been baptized only with water. After baptizing the Samaritan Christian, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching in many Samaritan villages on the way back (Acts 8:25).

The first official convert was an Ethiopian eunuch, a royal court officer of the Queen of Ethiopia. His conversion specifically signals that the Church is becoming increasingly more universal and that the mission is now slowly but steadily expanding towards the Gentile world (Acts 8:32-40).

Cornelius, a Roman centurion, is a well-known figure in the *Acts of the Apostles*, chiefly because he was the first Italian cohort to become a Christian. Initially charged with bringing the Good News to Cornelius, Peter ended up baptizing the centurion’s entire family. Previously, Peter had had a very interesting vision in which he had been commanded to eat untouchable animals contained in a large sheet

(Acts 10). Peter applied the same method of preaching Jesus to the Jews and of instructing Gentile listeners as on Pentecost (Acts 10:34-43). The key points he makes are: God shows no partiality between Jews and Gentiles (vv. 34-35); Jesus Christ is the Lord of all (v. 36); Jesus does good (v. 38); the authorities are responsible for his death but God is responsible for his resurrection on the third day (v. 40).

Just as the Jews had been filled by the Holy Spirit when Peter was preaching to them, the Gentiles too now receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-48). The command to baptize the Gentiles is first given by Peter himself, because they have now received the Holy Spirit. Peter then stays with the Gentile converts for several days (Acts 10:48), highlighting his personal commitment to the Gentile mission.

Peter not only brought the Good News to the Gentiles, but also defended their faith in the Jerusalem Church when it was a highly divisive issue there. He was able to convince them, stating it was the same Holy Spirit with which the Jews are baptized in Jesus (Acts 11:17). In one way, he warned them not to hinder God's work. The Church in Jerusalem had no objections to make and praised God, saying that God had granted repentance that leads to life (ἔθνεσιν ὁ θεὸς τὴν μετάνοιαν εἰς ζωὴν ἔδωκεν, Acts 11:18).

3. Paul's Interest in the Gentile People

Paul is the second principal character in the *Acts of the Apostles*, even though some claim him to be the key figure in the book. Paul's conversion is remarkable, for it occurs when he is on a mission to destroy the Church, which was considered as contrary to the Mosaic covenantal religion of Judaism. He meets the Lord in a Gentile city, Damascus, and realizes he is treading the wrong track. The persecutor becomes the evangelizer. Once Paul was confronted and touched by the risen Lord, he is sent to a local Church leader Ananias, who may have been a Jewish Christian (Acts 9:13). Ananias had to be fortified by the Lord himself, for Paul was a real persecutor. Here Paul gets a new name as the 'Apostle of Gentiles' (Acts 9:15). The Lord reveals to Ananias that Paul is His chosen instrument to proclaim His name to the Gentiles and their kings (ὅτι σκεῦος ἐκλογῆς ἐστίν μοι οὗτος τοῦ βαστάσαι τὸ ὄνομά μου ἐνώπιον ἐθνῶν τε καὶ βασιλέων, Acts 9:15).

Damascus, to which Paul had come to eradicate the Christians, thus became the first city to hear Paul's preaching of Jesus. Paul

spoke forcefully, proclaiming that Jesus ‘is the Son of God’ (Acts 9:20 τὸν Ἰησοῦν ὅτι οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ). As Paul’s fame as preacher spread, the Church in Jerusalem became more concerned for this new Apostle. It was the Jerusalem Church that protected Paul by sending him to Tarsus via Caesarea (Acts 9:30). By doing so, the Jerusalem Church becomes the first established Church to send Paul on a *missio ad gentes*.

Antioch was the first established Jewish-Gentile Church, where Paul and Barnabas toiled hard to bring the message of God. It should be noted that, according to Acts, only here are the believers called, for the first time, “Christians” (πρώτως ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ τοὺς μαθητὰς Χριστιανούς, Acts 11:26). At this time – i.e. at the ‘time of Claudius Caesar’ (Acts 11:28) – a severe famine spread, soliciting the Antiochian Church to provide aid to the Jerusalem Church and the Christians in Judea (Acts 11:30).

The Antiochian Church takes on the responsibility of commissioning Paul and Barnabas on *missio ad gentes*. Carried out in prayer and consecration (Acts 13:1-3), the mission of Paul and Barnabas is not a personal initiative but is specifically commissioned by a Church.

The first missionary journey is the first and clearest sign of the Church’s undertaking of a Gentile mission abroad. It covers the areas of Antioch in Syria, Cyprus, Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and back to Antioch in Syria. In all these places, while Paul’s primary interest was to preach to the Jews, it was the Gentile listeners who heeded his messages. As a clear sign of his commitment to the Gentile mission, Paul in Cyprus gives up his Jewish name Saul, pointing to the fact that a name change in the Bible is never accidental but an indication of greater theological meaning (Gn 17:5; 32:28).

Antioch of Pisidia, where Paul delivered one of his famous missionary speeches, marks a turnaround in the Church’s mission. In it he provides an outline of the history of salvation, from the exodus to the resurrection of Jesus, but it is not well received by the Jewish authorities who reject Paul and Barnabas’ message. They are left with no option but to turn their attention to the Gentiles: “Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles” (ἰδοὺ στρεφόμεθα εἰς τὰ ἔθνη, Acts 13:46). Paul therefore changes his focus, strengthened in this by the Scriptures: “I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may

bring salvation to the ends of the earth” (τέθεικά σε εἰς φῶς ἐθνῶν τοῦ εἶναι σε εἰς σωτηρίαν ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς, Acts 13:47). This claim may be an allusion to Is 46:2 and 49:6. Here Paul, representing the Church, makes it very clear that when earthly Israel rejects its Messiah, no harm is done to the Messiah, but rather a speedy opportunity is provided to go to the Gentiles. This rejection could well represent a lesson for the Gentiles. A similar turn of events occurs in Iconium, too, where the Jews again reject the preaching of Paul, causing division among the Gentiles who split up in opposing factions, some sustaining Paul and others sustaining the Jews.

Paul, being a Jew by birth, was very clear in his monotheistic belief in God, and the same time, as a Greco-Roman citizen, he was aware of the pantheistic ideas of the Gentile world. Paul uses his faith and knowledge to be very careful in his *missio ad gentes*. In Lystra and in Derbe, Paul and Barnabas were deified as Zeus and Hermes, which could have been a common practice in the Gentile world. While Paul was skillful enough to reject this pagan practice, at the end that same crowd started throwing stones at him. Towards the end of the first missionary journey, Paul gathered the Church and reported all the good God had done for the Gentiles (Acts 14:27). Here, two things should be observed: Paul stresses the mission was the Church’s and that it is to the Church he reports to tell how the Lord had sustained the mission, at the end also finding time to stay with the Church, narrating what the Lord had done for this mission.

The Council of Jerusalem discusses for the first time the issue of giving rights to the Gentiles. What makes one a Christian? And what makes one a believer? What place have Mosaic Laws and circumcision? These were just some of the all-encompassing questions that were raised among Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul and Barnabas were given the task to once again go to Jerusalem to speak to the Apostles and elders to discuss the matter (ἀποστόλους καὶ πρεσβυτέρους, Acts 15:2). These elders could have been local leaders other than the ‘Twelve,’ later to evolve as bishops. While there appears in the Jerusalem Church Pharisaic influences (Acts 15:4), the will of God prevails. After much debate, Peter, being the first Apostle, addresses the Council claiming himself as the one “from whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the Good News and become believers” (Acts 15:9). Peter in underlining the importance of the Gentile mission acknowledges it as the Church’s mission. Peter warns not to test God, for he knows that the tempter is always ‘Sa-

tan' (Deut 6:16; Mt 4:7; Lk 4:12). Peter's argument is well received and all keep silent (Ἐσίγησεν δὲ πᾶν τὸ πλῆθος). The decision Peter makes is therefore the Church's. Finally, with the quotation from Amos 9:11-12, James of Jerusalem gives the verdict that no one should trouble the Gentiles who are turning to God (Acts 15:19). This specific James is traditionally believed to be the elder of Jerusalem.

The verdict of James thus coincided with the decision of the Apostles and the elders of the Council, which sent out an official letter to the believers of Gentile origin, observing that the Church will follow only the instruction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28) while, at the same time, rejecting any pagan practice that is contrary to faith. This letter was received with much rejoicing (Acts 15:31) and indicated that the Gentile believers were in full accord with the decision of the Church in Jerusalem.

Missio ad gentes does not depend on one man, it makes many disciples as demonstrated by the division between Paul and Barnabas' groups. When undertaking a Gentile mission, Paul, being a Jewish Christian, is joined by other Gentile Christian leaders like Timothy and Silas. Paul complies very closely with the rules of the Church on the *missio ad gentes*.

Paul, in his second missionary journey, is led not only by the Holy Spirit but also by the 'Spirit of Jesus' (τὸ πνεῦμα Ἰησοῦ, Acts 16:7). Therefore, the Gentile mission is not directed by Paul's will, but by Jesus'. That is why the *missio ad gentes* heads for Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10). The Church's Gentile mission was not always welcomed by the Gentiles. It was welcomed in many places, but in others it was strongly opposed, landing Paul and Silas in prison (Acts 16:19-24).

As usual, Paul and Silas first visited Jewish synagogues both in Thessalonica and in Borea but, in both places, they were met only with rejection, thereby giving an opportunity to Gentiles there to receive the Good News.

The notes on the city of Athens in Acts (17:16) should be examined closely. Athens is the cultural capital of the Greek world, while Rome the political capital of the Roman Empire. Paul follows the system of arguments heard at the market place but also holds debates with Stoic and Epicurean philosophers (Ἐπικουρείων καὶ Στωϊκῶν, Acts 17:18). Paul's arguments at the Areopagus, and his bold speech there with their familiar vocabularies, proclaims the his-

tory of salvation culminating with the passion and resurrection of Jesus. Paul's initial speech to a highly sophisticated Gentile assembly, while not bringing much fruit at first, nevertheless marks a watershed in the Gentile Mission. Paul's clear knowledge about the city of Athens, their philosophy and their belief system heralds the future success of the Gentile mission.

The city of Corinth shares the same story with Gentiles and Jews. It is to the Jews, Paul and his company go first. However, since they reject the Good News, they now address the Gentiles as well. Many are baptized and at one point Paul is fortified by the Lord Himself: "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent" (Acts 17:9). This is another clear sign that the *missio ad gentes* is right on track. Paul's mission is the Church's mission as clearly defined in verse 22, when Paul makes an attempt to go to Jerusalem to report the mission.

4. Paul's Advice to the Gentile People

Paul's Gentile mission was not about establishing his own authority. He was sowing the seed of the local Churches. At the same time, he encouraged Gentile leaders to contribute to the mission.

Apollos was one such Gentile teacher contributing to the *missio ad gentes* with the same zeal as Paul and the Church leaders. Paul, in his third missionary journey, visited Ephesus, Macedonia, Greece, Troas, Miletus before making his traditional returns to Jerusalem. Ephesus, being one of Paul's main destinations, complements the mission of Apollos. Here Gentiles are baptized in the name of Jesus (Acts 19:5). In Ephesus, the *missio ad gentes* is marred by another incident when the sons of the high priest Sceva try to cast out demons by invoking the name of Jesus (Acts 19:15). The humiliation and the beating they get from the evil spirit could be seen as another sign that the *missio ad gentes* cannot be pursued by just anyone for their petty needs (Acts 19:16). The mission was in fact so successful that many of the Gentile magicians burned their books of magical practices.

While very effective, Paul's advice to the Gentiles was at the same time also strongly disputed. One Demetrius, a silversmith and an artisan at the temple of Artemis, takes revenge on Paul and on his mission by stirring up a riot, which nevertheless did not undermine the mission, but actually indirectly helped it.

Paul's advice to the Ephesian Elders contains much to ponder (Acts 20:17-38). Paul makes them realize that the mission is not a marginal affair. Preaching Jesus would clearly lead to persecution, which for Paul comes from the Jews. He makes them realize that he is not taking revenge on the Jews by neglecting them. Rather, he makes it a point to always preach to them first, witnessing to the fact that he never counted his life for any value. Paul conveys his view that a missionary should always be ready to bid 'farewell' as it means allowing the local Church to grow on its own and bring new missionaries. At the same time, Paul warns local leaders to keep a vigilant watch against the fierce wolves of Satanic nature that will come.

5. Paul's Journey to Rome Brings the *Missio ad Gentes* to the End of the World

Rome, the imperial capital of the Romans, was considered to be the 'End of the World'. Paul must have sensed his destiny in the events of his life. The persecution and affliction he underwent simply confirmed his days were numbered. A fact confirmed not only by the visions he had had but also by the prophecies he had heard from Christian prophets as Agabus (Acts 21:10), who predicted his end. Paul had never been afraid of going to Jerusalem where the rift between Jews and Christians ran deep and was increasingly bitter. A missionary has to worry about his mission, not for his safety. This teaching of the Church is well-testified by Paul's activities in Jerusalem.

James and the Church leaders in Rome were concerned for Paul's safety in Jerusalem because of his bold position with regard to circumcision. The riots that ensued was an attack not only on Paul but on the Church's *missio ad gentes*. When Paul was arrested at the Temple, the whole city of Jerusalem was in uproar (Acts 21:31), prompting the Roman soldiers to take charge. While Paul's language skills helped him to speak both in Greek and Hebrew, it ultimately allowed him to control his own history. Paul made use of all the opportunities to recount his own conversion and the election of Jesus to fulfill the salvation history, which had already been foretold in the Old Testament.

Paul relied on his Roman citizenship to demand to be tried by Caesar as was the right of every Roman citizen. Paul explained his innocence before the Jewish Council (Acts 22:30), before Gover-

nor Felix (Acts 23:23-35), finally appealing to the Emperor. Once again Paul had to prove his innocence before king Agrippa (Acts 26:23-27) and made use of the opportunity to try converting him into belief. This makes a mockery at the local Jewish leaders that they should realize the mission of Church will never lose any opportunity.

At last Paul lands in Rome after a harrowing sea journey. He survives a shipwreck and a snake bite in Malta (Acts 28:4), but finally reaches Rome as he had wished. With Paul, the *missio ad gentes* reaches Rome for a new beginning. As usual, Paul preaches the Good News first to the Jews who in Rome appear to be more positive than in the other places where Paul had preached. The author of Acts says Paul preached the Kingdom of God night and day, to convince them about Jesus, from the perspective of the Law of Moses and of the prophets.

6. The Challenges Today

The Church by nature is missionary and inclusive. There is no satisfaction in preaching the Good News in the Church. During the early stages of the nascent Church – the Church intended as a community – it undertook the *missio ad gentes*, which turned out to be highly successful thanks to the unswerving dedication and ardent commitment of men like Paul and Peter, who, while travelling on different routes, were very faithful to the mission to the Gentiles.

Today, the mission to the Gentiles may seem to be an outdated spirituality. In today's world, religion is mostly intended as something one professes rather than as a missionary enterprise. Christianity cannot simply be considered as one of the venerable religions; instead, it is a missionary discipleship and, above all, a culture with many traditions.

The modern philosophies and quest for pleasure that drives atheism bring many Christians to compromise on what they believe. Christ and Christianity are not anyone's private property that can be given up or forsaken. Christianity without Christ is lifeless and the Church without missionary commitment and character is unfitting.

Paul made use of all the possibilities to bring Jesus and His message to the Gentile world, and he was aware that bringing Jesus to the Gentiles was, first of all, a right of the Gentiles. Paul's wealth was Jesus, whom he had encountered after a long quest. Jesus was a treas-

ure he couldn't keep for himself. He shared that gift with all and everyone, always.

Sri Lanka, as many of the Asian lands, is a multi-ethnic country, where all the religions have their own roots and spirituality. The one who has not experienced Jesus personally will not bring this good experience to his friends. For many modern Christians, Jesus is an abstract idea or rather one of many gods. For some, he is a personal experience, while some consider Jesus as one of the outstanding spiritual leaders. Paul and the main characters in Acts did not see Jesus as one of many. For them, Jesus was everything. That is why they sacrificed everything to bring Jesus to the Gentiles.

Every Christian has to be a real follower of his own faith, as Paul was an ardent devotee of Judaism that brought him into contact with Jesus, after which he was a missionary. Every Christian needs to have a Damascus experience, to listen, to believe and to bring Him to the others.

The Path to the Gentiles in the *Acts of the Apostles*

A Challenge and Source of Encouragement for the Church Today

❖ HANNELIESE STEICHELE

*You will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem
but throughout Judaea and Samaria,
and indeed to earth's remotest end*

Acts 1:8

The early Church risked a great deal. It did not remain in the Jewish cultural area but extended its proclamation to many countries and nations in the Mediterranean region. The road it took is graphically retraced in the *Acts of the Apostles*, which records how the courageous preaching of the Christian message and the Spirit of God enabled the young Church to overcome barriers and tread new paths. Now, as then, the Church requires courage in fulfilling its task of the *missio ad gentes* – although today it might be more appropriate to talk of a *missio inter gentes*¹ – in a globally networked world and an age of widespread secularism. A look back at the missionary beginnings of the Church can help to provide guidance.

1. The Universal Orientation of the *Acts of the Apostles* as a Continuation of Jesus' Preaching

For the author of St. Luke's Gospel and the *Acts of the Apostles*, it is clear that Jesus' message is not directed solely to the people of Israel but to all mankind. It is of universal significance. This explains why Luke does not content himself with depicting the life of Jesus but adds a second report to the Acts recounting the spread of Jesus' message from Jerusalem to Rome. He is the only one of the Evangelists

¹J.Y. TAN, "Missio inter gentes: Towards a new paradigm in the mission theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)", *Mission Studies*, vol. 21, n. 1, 2004, 65-95.

to do so. For Luke, the path taken by the Church to reach out to the non-Jewish peoples was the most significant and momentous strategic move made by the early Church, prompting him to put it at the heart of his *Acts of the Apostles*. Despite this universal orientation, it is nonetheless crucial in his view not to lose sight of how deeply rooted the Christian faith is in the belief of the people of Israel. For Luke, this deep-rootedness is a crucial and continuing element of Christian identity. Both aspects – the path to the Gentiles and the close ties with Israel – leave their mark on his portrayal of the early Church in the *Acts of the Apostles*.

We do not know who the author of Acts was. It is beyond dispute that he was a theologian of the second or third early-Christian generation who wrote both St. Luke's Gospel and the *Acts of the Apostles*. From time immemorial, the Church has referred to him as Luke. As is apparent from his linguistic style and his familiarity with Hellenistic culture and philosophy, he was a man of considerable erudition. His excellent knowledge of the Holy Scripture of the Jews, which he used in the Greek translation of the Septuagint, has led some to suspect that he belonged to the group of the "God-fearing". These were non-Jews who were greatly attracted by the monotheism and high ethical standards of the Jewish faith, and maintained close contact with the Jewish synagogue, although they did not accept circumcision. Luke's keen interest in the relationship between Christianity and Israel and Judaism might be an indication that he "was brought up in a Jewish family" and was "socialised in a Jewish milieu".² In Acts, he not only reports in a factual manner on the beginnings of the Church, but also emulates the style of contemporary Hellenistic/Roman historiography in transforming the events into vivid scenes, inserting interpretative speeches he drafted himself and drawing attention to the larger picture, particularly in a theological perspective.³ It is, above all, his intellectual grasp of the material and

² M. WOLTER, *Das Lukasevangelium*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2008, 9 f.; D. RUSAM, "Die Apostelgeschichte", in M. EBNER – S. SCHREIBER (Hrsgs.), *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 2013, 238 f.; U. SCHNELLE, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2017, 315-334.

³ Cf. K. BACKHAUS, "Lukas der Maler", in K. BACKHAUS – G. HÄFNER (Hrsgs.), *Historiographie und fiktionales Erzählen*, Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2009, 30-66; J. SCHRÖTER, "Lukas als Historiograph", in E.M. BECKER, *Die antike*

his identification of the theological significance of the beginnings of the Church that make the *Acts of the Apostles* a significant and fascinating testimony to the early Church.

It is striking that, whenever Acts speaks of those to whom the Christian proclamation is addressed in the non-Jewish cultural area, it almost invariably uses the term “Gentiles” (Greek: *ethne*; Latin: *gentes*). According to Acts 9:15, Paul’s task is to bring the name of Jesus Christ “before Gentiles (*ethne*) and kings and before the people of Israel”. At the Council held by the Apostles (Acts 15:7-12), Peter, Paul, and Barnabas report on the conversion of “Gentiles” (*ethne*). During his last journey to Jerusalem, Paul gives a detailed account to James and the elders “of all that God has done among the Gentiles through his ministry” (Acts 21:19).⁴ In many translations of, and commentaries on, the *Acts of the Apostles*, the term “heathens” is used, rather than “Gentiles”, to highlight the religious differences with respect to the Jews. However, since the term “heathen” sounds derogatory to modern ears, it is pleasing to see that in the original Greek version of the *Acts of the Apostles* the far more neutral term “Gentiles” (*ethne*) is used and not “heathens”.

The path taken by the early Church to the Gentiles, as it is depicted and theologically assessed in the *Acts of the Apostles*, will now be retraced. Reference will be made not only to the obstacles and resistance the early Christian mission had to overcome, but also to the causes and reasons which, in Luke’s eyes, made this path possible and legitimised it.

2. The Geographical Spread of the Early Christian Proclamation “To Earth’s Remotest End”

At the beginning of Acts, the risen Lord sets out for the Apostles the path their proclamation is to take: “[...] you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to earth’s remotest end” (Acts 1:8).⁵ This is the compass Luke’s description follows in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Chapters 1 to 7, for example,

Historiographie und die Anfänge der christlichen Geschichtsschreibung, De Gruyter, Berlin 2005, 237-262.

⁴ Acts 13:46-48; 18:6; 22:21; 26:17-23.

⁵ This and all the following quotations from Scripture are taken from the New Jerusalem Bible: www.catholic.org/bible/book.php?id=51&bible_chapter=1/.

to concentrate on the emergence and growth of the Christian community in Jerusalem. The adherents coming together for supper in house churches but, as a matter of course, they continue to go and pray in the Temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1) and are firmly rooted in Judaism. The preaching of the Gospel is initially directed exclusively to the Jews living in Jerusalem, as well as to the diaspora Jews who had settled outside Israel in the many towns and cities of the Roman Empire and made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for feast days. Not long afterwards, however, the message preached by the Christians that Jesus is the Messiah and the “Prince of Life” (Acts 3:15) leads to conflicts with the Jewish leaders and the first arrests and interrogations of the Apostles. When Stephen, the leader of the Greek-speaking Judaeo-Christians, is stoned for his critical attitude of the Temple, a part of the Jerusalem community is obliged to flee. As a result of their flight the message of Jesus Christ – as reported in Chapters 8 to 11 of Acts – spreads beyond Jerusalem to Judaea, Samaria, and Antioch in Syria, which at that time was the third most important city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria, and had only a small Jewish population. An Ethiopian treasurer is baptised by the early Christian missionary Philip, a God-fearing Roman captain by the name of Cornelius is baptised by Peter in Caesarea and, finally, uncircumcised non-Jews are admitted as full members of the Christian community in Antioch. As a result of this gradual shift in the Christian proclamation towards the non-Jewish “Gentiles” and its entry into non-Jewish regions, tension grew between Jews and believers in Christ as well as between Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Christ. The situation was further exacerbated by the missionary journeys undertaken by Paul and his companions, reported in Acts 13-20, which led to the founding of Christian communities in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece. There was a need to clarify the conditions non-Jews had to fulfil in order to be accepted into the Christian community. This clarification took place at the Council held by the Apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 15:6-21). Agreement was reached there that circumcision was not obligatory for non-Jews but that they had to comply with a few minimum legal requirements, such as abstaining from anything polluted by idols, from illicit marriages, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood (Acts 15:19 f.; 15:28 f.). The final chapters of Acts (21 to 28), revolve around Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem, his trial, his speeches defending his mission to the Gentiles, his appeal to the Roman emperor, and his transfer to Rome,

which Luke depicts in dramatic detail. The *Acts of the Apostles* ends with the words that in Rome Paul is still “proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ with complete fearlessness and without any hindrance from anyone” (Acts 28:31). In Rome, the Good News of Jesus Christ arrived in what was then the centre of the world. From the point of view of Acts, the universal horizon of the Christian proclamation has been shown to best advantage, although it has not yet reached its eschatological fulfilment. It is essential to use the time until the return of Jesus Christ and the eschatological fulfilment of his Kingdom (Acts 1:11; Acts 3:20 f.) in order to bring to all people the saving message of Jesus Christ.⁶ The *Acts of the Apostles* is thus open-ended. The task given by the risen Lord to His disciples to be witnesses “to the earth’s remotest end” continues and still applies to the Church today.

But what was the significance of the fact that, in the course of its early development, Christianity steadily distanced itself from Israel and Judaism and turned its attention to non-Jewish peoples? How was this development to be grasped in theological terms? Was it a mistake? The decision of a few ‘firebrands’ like Paul? Or was it simply the consequence of the resistance and hardening of attitudes on the part of the Jews and the Jewish authorities? Luke addresses these questions in a variety of ways in the *Acts of the Apostles*.

3. The Mission to the Gentiles as an Integral Part of the History of God’s Salvation of Humankind

3.1 Fulfilment of the Promises Given to Israel

To see the path taken by the Gospel to the Gentiles merely as the consequence of the negative attitude of many Jews and their persecution of the Christian communities would, in the eyes of the *Acts of the Apostles*, fall far short of the mark. These factors certainly had an external influence on the course of events and accelerated them, but in Luke’s mind the real reasons for Christianity’s reaching out to the Gentiles go far deeper and are much more radical. Ultimately, they

⁶ M. WOLTER, “Israels Zukunft und die Parusieverzögerung bei Lukas”, in M. EVANG – H. MERKLEIN – M. WOLTER (Hrsgs.), *Eschatologie und Schöpfung, Festschrift für E. Gräßer*, De Gruyter, Berlin – New York 1997, 405-426, esp. 421 ff.

have their origins in the promises made in the Holy Scripture of the Jews, in the Old Testament and, thus, in God's will for salvation itself (Acts 13:32; 26:6). In order to make this quite clear, Luke includes a host of quotations from Scripture and deliberately recalls a number of these promises at important stages in the *Acts of the Apostles*.

When Paul and Barnabas were on their mission journey through Asia Minor and arrived in the Pisidian city of Antioch, they justified the attention they paid to the non-Jews there (Acts 13:46 ff.) by referring to the Book of Isaiah (Is 49:6 LXX): "I shall make you a light to the nations so that my salvation may reach the remotest parts of earth". This quotation was originally addressed to the Deutero-Isaianic "suffering servant" who had been ordered by God to bring Israel back to God. Having failed to do so, he then received the additional and more far-reaching task from God of becoming the "light to the nations" and of bringing salvation to the ends of the earth. Paul and Barnabas see this Word of God as applying to themselves and as justification for their addressing non-Jews.

Another important word from Scripture – Amos 9:11-12 – is cited by James at the meeting of the Apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 15:16-17). It comes at the end of the Book of Amos and was probably inserted there after the period of exile. James cites the word in the Septuagint version, the second part of which deviates considerably from the original text. The latter says that God will "rebuild the tottering hut of David" so that possession can be taken of "what is left of Edom and of all the nations" and Israel's rule extended. In the Septuagint version, however, the rebuilding of the "tottering hut of David" is bound up with the hope that "the remnant of men, and all the Gentiles upon whom my name is called, may earnestly seek me, said the Lord who does all these things". In this Septuagint version, Amos 9:11-12 offers another important biblical reference justifying the extension of the Christian proclamation to non-Jews and Gentiles. It is confirmed that this opening does not constitute a break in the continuity of the history of salvation. On the contrary, it fulfills the aim of salvation history, which is that all nations are to be integrated into the community of God's people.⁷

⁷ Cf. M. NEUBRAND, *Israel, die Völker und die Kirche*, Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart 2006, 215-219; J. ROLOFF, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1988, 232.

Since the image of the “rebuilding of the tottering hut of David” was linked in early Judaism to the expectation of a Davidian Messiah, this word from Scripture also provides confirmation that the message of the Messiah Jesus cannot be limited to Israel but is universal in nature.⁸ Moreover, faith in Jesus Christ means the fulfilment of other promises in Holy Scripture, which Luke also substantiates by means of a series of quotations from the Bible. The resurrection of Jesus, for example, means the fulfilment of the promise given to David that he will not see corruption (Psalms 16:8-11 LXX; Acts 2:25-28) and that his progeny for evermore will occupy his throne (Psalms 132:11; Acts 2:29-33). Even the rejection of Jesus is preordained in Scripture, since in the course of its history Israel repeatedly persecuted and killed its prophets (see Acts 7:52; Acts 4:25-28; Psalms 2:1 f.; Neh 9:26).

Christian faith is thus “Jewish faith brought to fulfilment, even though most Jews do not accept the connection between the two”⁹ This, in a nutshell, is the dilemma confronting the early Church – that Israel rejects the shift to the Gentiles and does not recognise it as part of God’s plan of salvation.

3.2 Israel’s Ongoing Special Role in the History of Salvation

Luke feels that, despite Israel’s negative attitude, its special role in the history of salvation remains unaffected. God concluded a covenant with Israel and gave it the Law of Moses and the prophets. Israel is thus the “first addressee”¹⁰ of the salvation heralded by Jesus. In order to underline this Luke emphasises right at the beginning of Acts that thousands of Jews joined the Christian community after the Pentecostal event (Acts 2:41). The followers of Jesus who had fled Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen initially proclaimed the message “to Jews alone” (Acts 11:19). It was only after resistance on the part of Jews came to increasingly obstruct the Christian preachers, resulting in an open rejection of the Gospel, that the proclamation

⁸ Cf. M. NEUBRAND, *Israel, die Völker und die Kirche*, 133 ff. and 168 ff.

⁹ J. GNILKA, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Verlag Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 1994, 205.

¹⁰ J. SCHRÖTER, “Heil für die Heiden und Israel”, in C. BREYTENBACH – J. SCHRÖTER (Hrsgs.), *Die Apostelgeschichte und die hellenistische Geschichtsschreibung, Festschrift für E. Plümacher*, Brill, Leiden 2004, 304; see also Acts 3:26; 13:46.

of the Christian message addressed God-fearing and non-Jewish Gentiles instead (Acts 13:46; 18:6). But even then Paul and his companions went first ‘as they were accustomed’ to the local synagogue (for example, in Antioch in Pisidia Acts 13:14; in Iconium 14:1; in Thessalonica 17:1 f.; in Corinth 18:4; in Ephesus 19:8). In Rome, too, where Paul arrived as a prisoner, he called leading Jews to him and addressed his final speech to them. Occasionally the talk of stubbornness in Isaiah 6:9 LXX, to which Paul refers in this last speech in the light of Israel’s hardening attitude towards Jesus Christ (Acts 28:26-27), has been construed by interpreters of the *Acts of the Apostles* as the final change in direction of the Christian proclamation away from the Jews. But that is by no means crystal clear. The quotation reads: “Go and say to this people: Listen and listen but never understand! Look and look but never perceive! This people’s heart is torpid, their ears dulled, they have shut their eyes tight, to avoid using their eyes to see, their ears to hear, using their heart to understand, changing their ways and being healed by me” (Acts 28:26-27). Worthy of note, and decisive for the interpretation of these verses, is the change in the subject to God himself right at the end of the quotation: “and being healed by me”. This “aspect of healing at the end”¹¹ is not only in accordance with the remainder of the Septuagint version of the Book of Isaiah, but also with the understanding of Israel set out in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Although Luke repeatedly draws attention to Israel’s negative response and the hardening of its attitude, there is no talk of any final rejection of the whole of Israel or its ceasing to be the people of God.

From the point of view of the *Acts of the Apostles*, it is not therefore possible to talk about a “break” between Israel and the Church. Formulations along the lines that the Church is “the new, true Israel” do not conform to Luke’s intentions. For him, it is important to draw the attention of a Church that is becoming increasingly estranged from Judaism to the remaining ties and deep bond between Israel and the Church.

¹¹ M. KARRER, “‘Und ich werde sie heilen’. Das Verstockungsmotiv aus Jes 6,9 f. in Apg 28,26 f.”, in M. KARRER – W. KRAUS – O. MERK, *Kirche und Volk Gottes. Festschrift für Jürgen Roloff*, Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2000, 260 / 262ff. / 269-271. Similarly, M. NEUBRAND, *Israel, die Völker und die Kirche*, 143; M. WOLTER, “Israels Zukunft und die Parusieverzögerung bei Lukas”, 421.

4. The Mission to the Gentiles Under Close Scrutiny: The Dispute and the Resolution of the Conflict at the Council of the Apostles in Jerusalem

While the mission to the Gentiles was preordained in the Holy Scripture of the Jews – the Old Testament – the practical implementation of this opening up to the Gentiles entailed risks and controversy. The main reason was that down the centuries, a series of rules and patterns of behaviour had been established which distinguished Jews from the neighbouring “Gentiles”. These included dietary and purity laws, as well as associated bans on meal and table fellowship with non-Jews plus, above all, circumcision as a sign of the covenant with God. These hallmarks paved the way for “a clear distinction between Jews and non-Jews”,¹² and thus ensured the cohesion of the Jewish community, especially outside Israel and in the context of Hellenistic/Roman culture. The fact that Peter baptised Cornelius, that he and other Christian preachers were party to table fellowships in the Roman captain’s house and that, in the course of Paul’s mission, uncircumcised males were admitted as full members of the Christian community, constituted a breach of the important restrictions governing Jewish identity. It can come as no surprise, therefore, that there were protests not only from representatives of the Jews, but also from those who had converted from Judaism to Christianity. The conflict was resolved at the meeting in Jerusalem which has come to be known as the “Council of the Apostles” or “Convention of the Apostles” on account of its significance for the Church as a whole. Attended by the Apostles, the elders and members of the mother Church in Jerusalem, the Council decided that non-Jews would not be required to undergo circumcision. They would merely be obliged to abide by a number of rules and regulations that the Mosaic Law had laid down for non-Jews on the grounds of ritual purity (Acts 15:20; see Leviticus 17:10-14; 18:6 to 18:26). This foregoing of compulsory circumcision removed a major obstacle to the mission and integration of non-Jews in the Christian communities. Luke reports on this gathering in the middle of the *Acts of the Apostles* (Acts 15) and conjures up an impressive scene complete with an

¹² S. SCHREIBER, “Streitfall ‘identity markers’”, *Bibel und Kirche*, vol. 71, n. 2, 2016, 96 (also 95-97).

account of the prior events, the many speakers, the passing of resolutions, and the post-council developments. In his detailed account, which differs in some aspects from Paul's report in Galatians 2, Luke makes it clear that the shift to the non-Jewish peoples and the circumcision-free mission to the Gentiles was by no means an independent initiative on the part of a few members of the early Church, but enjoyed the full approval of the Apostles and the mother Church in Jerusalem. As Peter and James emphasised in their speeches at the Council of the Apostles, it was not only in keeping with Holy Scripture, but was also the result of a deeper knowledge of God – that God reads the hearts of men and that these hearts are not purified and saved by the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ and His mercy (Acts 15:8 ff.).

However, the relationship between the Church and Israel remained contentious well after the assembly of the Apostles in Jerusalem and led to dark chapters in the course of Church history. Even today it is a matter of controversy whether and to what extent the Church should or must transgress applicable laws and regulations in order to respond in an appropriate manner to new developments and challenges. At the Council in Jerusalem the day was won by the likes of far-sighted individuals such as Peter, Paul, and James, who could read the signs of the times and were inspired by the Spirit of God.

5. The Fundamental Importance of “Witnesses” in the Spread of the New Church

5.1 The General Understanding of “Witness” in Acts

The success of the Christian proclamation stands and falls with the commitment and credibility of its witnesses. That is true now, as it was in the Church's beginnings. First of all – and Luke deliberately stresses this point – it is the twelve Apostles, led by Peter, who are the most important witnesses. Since they accompanied Jesus from the outset, starting with the baptism by John and ending with Jesus' ascension to heaven (Acts 1:22), they are the witnesses of His life, death, and resurrection. They guarantee the truth and authenticity of the Christian message and, moreover, ensure continuity between the period of Jesus' life and the early Church. In the second half of Acts, the main witness is Paul. It is he, above all, who

takes the message of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, Roman officers and Roman governors, and thus fulfils in a special way the task of the risen Lord to bear witness to the Gospel “to earth’s remotest end” (Acts 1:8).¹³

It is striking that in the case of both Peter and Paul, the two most prominent witnesses of the early Church, Luke reports on a key experience each of them had which was to have considerable consequences, especially for the Christian mission to the Gentiles. These key experiences are not dealt with cursorily by Luke but, as with the Council of the Apostles in Jerusalem, are narrated in considerable detail.

5.2 Peter’s Key Experience Taking Him to the House of the Roman Captain Cornelius

In Peter’s case, the key experience is his meeting with the Roman captain Cornelius. This is the most detailed narrative account of all in Acts. The vision had by the Roman captain that he was to call a man by the name of Simon Peter is followed by Peter’s puzzling vision which touches the very foundations of the Jewish faith he practises. While praying on a housetop in Jaffa, he saw heaven thrown open and a big sheet being let down to earth containing every kind of animal, reptile, and bird. Three times a voice told him to kill and eat. Peter was extremely reluctant to do so, saying “I have never yet eaten anything profane or unclean” (Acts 10:14). But the voice from heaven explains to him: “What God has made clean, you have no right to call profane” (Acts 10:15). Later on, Peter grasps the deeper meaning of this vision, that he should overcome the distinction Jews made between themselves and non-Jews, who were seen as being impure, and that as a witness of Jesus Christ he should turn to non-Jews. He accepts this, sets out to find the house of the non-Jew Cornelius, and is witness there to the filling of those present with the Spirit of God. Peter understands that he cannot refuse to baptise them and that “God has no favourites but that anybody of any nationality who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34 f.).

¹³ A. WEISER, *Die Apostelgeschichte Kapitel 1-12*, Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, Gütersloh und Echter Verlag, Würzburg 1981, 72-75.

5.3 Paul's Experience on the Road to Damascus

Paul's key experience concerns his conversion from a persecutor of Christians to a Christian preacher and missionary to the Gentiles. Whereas Paul himself talks only very briefly and reticently in his letters about this "Damascus experience" (see Gal 1:15; 1 Cor 15:8 f.; 1 Cor 9:1), Luke deals with it three times in the *Acts of the Apostles*: in Acts 9, as well as in Paul's speeches in his defence in Acts 22:4-16 and Acts 26:9-18. In Acts 9, Luke portrays Paul's experience on the road to Damascus in a manner similar to Peter's encounter with Cornelius – in several visions, encounters, and dialogues – and garnishes it with motifs from the Old Testament and popular folklore. First, he recounts how Paul ardently pursued the Christians, and tells of his plans to extend this persecution to the Christians in Damascus. But then a radical change takes place on his journey to Damascus. Suddenly, the account in Acts says, a "light" from heaven shone all around him and he was confronted by a "voice" which questioned the course he had pursued hitherto that he considered to be right. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" It was Jesus who stood in his path. Paul fell to the ground, could see, eat or drink nothing for three days and was then baptised in Damascus by a Christian called Ananias. The outcome of this experience on the road to Damascus is that Paul enters the service of Kyrios Jesus and is prepared, as a missionary to the Gentiles, to bring the name of Jesus Christ "before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15).

Radical experiences thus called into question the previous thoughts and deeds of both the protagonists of the early Church mission to the Gentiles – Peter and Paul. They confronted their respective crises and underwent an inner transformation. Their example shows that, especially where important decisions for the future of the Church have to be made and new terrain explored, there is a need for bold witnesses who have undergone a process of transformation themselves and are therefore open to the Church treading new paths and adopting new methods.¹⁴

¹⁴ Just how important the "witness of life" is for missionary work was emphasised by the Second Vatican Council in Section 36 of the Decree *Ad Gentes* on the Mission Activity of the Church.

6. The Content of the Proclamation and its Focus on Different Addressees

Jesus Christ is at the heart of all early Christian preaching and missionary work. He who “went about doing good and curing all”, who was resurrected by God, and appointed by Him “to judge everyone, alive or dead” (Acts 10:38-42), is “the Lord of all” (Acts 10:36). People are baptised in His name. In Him all Gentiles experience salvation and the forgiveness of their sins. In the *Acts of the Apostles*, these key messages of the Christian proclamation are communicated first and foremost in the speeches that are to be found throughout the book and are incorporated by Luke into his account at the turning points of the Christian mission. If we look more closely at these speeches and compare them with each other, it is clear that they differ markedly, depending on the cultural context and who is being addressed.¹⁵ In Jerusalem a different tone is struck, and the sermons are not the same as in Lystra or Athens. This is made readily apparent by a comparison of the speech Stephen gave to the high Council in Jerusalem (Acts 7) with the speech Paul made on the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:22 ff.).

Stephen’s speech, which is directed at Jewish listeners, begins with a lengthy outline of the history of Israel, commencing with Abraham and continuing, via Isaac, Jacob and Moses, up to David. He mentions the covenant of circumcision, as well as God’s revelation at the burning bush and the exodus from Egypt. But he also talks of the stubbornness and disobedience of Israel, that it rose against Moses and repeatedly persecuted and killed God’s prophets, just as they pursued and killed Jesus. The speech is peppered with quotes from Scripture and highlights the charges made against Israel that come from the Bible, especially from the Deuteronomistic school (see Neh 9:26; Kgs 17:7-13 ff.).¹⁶

What is, however, completely different by comparison is the speech given by Paul to Greece’s intellectual elite on the Areopagus. This is a classic example of the proclamation of the Christian message to the “Gentiles”. In Luke’s eyes, Athens is synonymous with

¹⁵ Cf. U. WILCKENS, *Die Missionsreden der Apostelgeschichte*, Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1974, 190.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 200-204.

the intellectual centre of antiquity. It was here that Socrates taught, and the great philosophical schools of the Stoics and the Epicureans had their teaching centres. Athens marks the entry of the Christian proclamation into the intellectual world of Graeco-Roman culture. Paul begins his speech with a reference to a walk he has taken through Athens, during which he saw an altar dedicated “to an unknown God” amid many other sacred monuments. For Paul, this altar to “an unknown God” was an eloquent symbol of the Gentiles’ search for the one true God. “The unknown God you revere is the one I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23). He follows this up by a number of thoughts that are in line with the biblical belief in creation but are not alien to Greek philosophical concepts, such as God’s creation of all human beings and His closeness to them, but also His rejection of shrines made by human hands. He again underlines God’s closeness to man by quoting the Greek poet Aratus: “We are all His children” (Acts 17:28). At the end of his speech, Paul comes on to the immediate present, saying that the times of ignorance are gone and passed and that everyone everywhere is now called upon to repent. He finishes his speech with a reference to Jesus as the man whom God has resurrected from the dead, and who will fix a day when the whole world will be judged in uprightness. In contrast to Stephen’s address, no outline of Jewish history is given in this Areopagus speech nor is any proof adduced from Scripture. Instead, mention is made of concepts that are familiar to the listeners and enable them to connect with the Christian faith.¹⁷

When we talk today about inculturation, we say that the preaching of the Christian message must take due account of the context and cultural environment of the listeners and addressees. Luke shows in the Areopagus speech how this can be put into practice. The Areopagus speech also demonstrates that, if the Christian proclamation wishes to reach educated people outside the Church, it must take a closer look at their language and way of thinking. According to Martin Dibelius, an Acts specialist, Luke “sensed earlier

¹⁷ On the interpretation of the Areopagus speech, see A. WEISER, *Die Apostelgeschichte Kapitel 13 – 28*, Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, Gütersloh und Echter Verlag, Würzburg 1985, 464-480; R. HOPPE, “Der Philosoph und Theologe – Das Auftreten des Paulus in Athen (Acts 17:22 – 18:1)”, in R. HOPPE – K. KÖHLER, *Das Paulusbild der Apostelgeschichte*, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 2009, 114-128.

than others what the preaching of the Christian message required if educated people were to listen to it”¹⁸

7. The Spirit as the Driving Force

The fact that the early Church was ultimately able to overcome all the internal and external resistance it faced and to open up to the Gentiles was – from Luke’s point of view, that is, through the eyes of the faith and with a focus on the underlying causes – not attributable solely to ‘human endeavour’. The challenges and risks involved were simply too great for that to be the case. On the contrary, God’s Spirit was the driving force. The Spirit was the real “engine”¹⁹ of the mission to the Gentiles and it gave the young Church enormous charisma and confidence. In the Pentecostal scene right at the beginning of Acts, Luke impressively captures, as if with a magnifying glass, the enormous spiritual thrust of the young Church: a roar can be heard as of a violent wind; tongues as of fire appear; a crowd gathers and listens with astonishment to the way in which Peter and the Apostles talk, filled as they are with the Spirit. Many of those present are subsequently “infected” by this Spirit. It fills the Christian communities with exulting and rejoicing and enables them to grow and flourish (Acts 9:31), thus paving the way for the appearance of prophets. Its strength enables miracles to be performed and the message of the crucified and resurrected Jesus to be preached fearlessly to both Jews and non-Jews. Here, it is the Spirit, too, which intervenes time and again as the Good News spreads to the Gentiles and encourages the Christian preachers to transcend boundaries and tread new paths. For instance, it calls on Philip to follow the chariot of the Ethiopian treasurer (Acts 8:29). In the conversion and baptism of the Roman captain Cornelius, which was crucial for the subsequent dissemination of the Good News, the Spirit anticipates Peter’s actions and fills Cornelius’ house with the Pentecostal Spirit before Peter performs the baptism (Acts 10:19, 44-47). For Acts, this Spirit is the eschatological Spirit which has been promised for the “last days” (Acts 2:17),

¹⁸ M. DIBELIUS, *Aufsätze zur Apostelgeschichte*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1961, 75.

¹⁹ U. SCHNELLE, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2007, 460.

and which the risen Christ has given to His Church so that it can continue His work until the Kingdom of God is complete. Notwithstanding this fundamental and outstanding role accorded to the Holy Spirit in the *Acts of the Apostles*, Luke does not advocate any one-sided, Spirit-driven enthusiasm. Along with the Holy Spirit, the sacred ministry played an important part in building up the Church. Originally, it was the twelve Apostles who took all the major decisions, but in the course of Acts, Luke refers to other leading offices such as the Group of “Seven”, who were selected by the Apostles for service at table (Acts 6:1 ff.) and the “elders” who exercised important functions in the Christian communities in Jerusalem and Ephesus (Acts 15:6-22; 20:17-28 ff.). However, as Luke makes clear at many places in Acts, these official representatives of the young Church were not superior to the Holy Spirit, but let themselves be guided by it, acting as its “tools” (cf. Acts 1:5-8; 10:19 f.; 15:28; 20:28).

8. Inspiration for Preaching and Evangelising Today

What consequences arise from the universal orientation of the early Church for the modern-day Church? What can we learn from Luke’s view of the mission to the Gentiles in the *Acts of the Apostles* for the current theology and practice of *missio ad gentes* or *missio inter gentes*?

First of all, the message in the *Acts of the Apostles* that God’s offer of salvation in Jesus Christ applies to every human being is just as topical today as it was in the early period of the Church. In order to spread this message throughout the world, the young Church boldly transcended internal and external boundaries and threw some things overboard. Today, too, the Church will only be able to master the challenges of our time if it is likewise prepared to overcome obstacles and undertake a critical review of many of the existing rules and regulations. Nowadays, of course, we are not talking about the limits of Judaism, circumcision and dietary laws but about dialogue with other religions, modern atheism, and a multicultural society. The focus is on forms of spirituality that are in keeping with the times as well as on specific canonical questions, such as admission to the sacraments and the position of women in the Church. In such matters, it is not enough merely to invoke the past.

Second, personal witness is indispensable if the message of Jesus Christ is to ‘ignite’ and enthuse. Peter and Paul went through a

‘school of faith.’ They were prepared to cast prior concepts aside and to pursue new paths for the sake of the Gospel. They demonstrated courage and an open-minded attitude along with powers of endurance and a deep-seated trust in God. Where are the courageous witnesses to Christ today whose hearts burn for Jesus Christ? The Church needs their charisma to meet the challenges of the future. The success of the Second Vatican Council was due not least to the efforts of such outstanding theologians, such as Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, and Joseph Ratzinger who, putting prior disputes and conflicts to one side, injected their faith and far-sightedness into the Council documents.

Third, as regards its literary and linguistic format, the *Acts of the Apostles* is ‘abreast of the times’ and can stand comparison with profane works of history from antiquity. If the proclamation of the Christian message is to be successful today, it must likewise communicate the message of Jesus Christ in a manner appropriate to the addressees and in accordance with linguistic customs. It is no good just repeating old formulations. On the contrary, the message of Jesus Christ must be transposed in a lively and creative manner to the modern-day context. Good sermons encourage people to think, make it possible to experience something of the depth and breadth of the Christian faith in the course of everyday life, and help to focus on the one true God in Jesus Christ.

Fourth, according to the Acts of the Apostles adherence to the faith of Israel and knowledge of God’s history of salvation for human beings continue to form a part of Christian identity. God is the “God of the fathers” who concluded a covenant with Abraham “for the blessing of all clans on earth” (Gn 12:3; Acts 3:13-25). In order to recognise this wealth, there is an ongoing need for sound knowledge of Holy Scripture, in particular of the Old Testament, and of Church and religious history. There is a need for a Christian-Jewish dialogue, as well as discussions with followers of other religions. Without education and without such dialogue the Christian faith will quickly become shallow and constricted.

Fifth and in conclusion, in Acts it is the Apostles and Paul who are the mainstays of the earliest proclamation of the Christian message. But it is the Holy Spirit which is the real driving force that sets everything in motion. Ministry and the Holy Spirit belong together. Both are important in enabling the Church to fulfil its task in the history of salvation. However, ministry must not place itself above the Spir-

it, for it is the Spirit which softens hardened attitudes and breathes a “fresh wind” into the Church’s sails. According to Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, trust in the Holy Spirit can “cause us to feel dis-oriented”. It is like “being plunged into the deep and not knowing what we will find” (EG 280). The young Church mastered this uncertainty and benefited as a result. “Do not extinguish the Spirit” is therefore an appeal which rings out from the *Acts of the Apostles* and can serve as a source of encouragement for the Church today.

A Pivotal Missionary Moment: The Embrace of the Gentiles (Acts 10-11)

❖ MICHAEL TRAINOR

In the second chapter of this volume, “With the Spirit to the Ends of the Earth”, Francis J. Moloney offers a helpful overview and fine digest of Luke’s narrative in the Book of Acts.¹ The focus, as Moloney indicates, is on the action of the Holy Spirit empowering Jesus’ disciples, especially Peter and later Paul, who, along with others, initiate the *missio ad gentes* to spread the Gospel message from Jerusalem to “the ends of the Earth”. Nothing can stop the Spirit’s action, neither opposition, ambiguities, resistance, failure, and sinfulness. This Spirit empowers Jesus disciples to be missionary, to move beyond their limited cultural and religious horizons. Through Paul they travel into Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, finally, to Rome, to “the ends of the Earth”.² The geographical sweep of the *missio ad gentes* in Acts is breathtaking. The Spirit’s tangible dynamic presence through these disciples assures the movement’s future, despite opposition and tribulations. Nothing will stop its spread as its members continue to reveal the Good News of God’s delight in creation and humanity touched by the message that the Apostles preach and

¹ Also helpful is Moloney’s bibliographic references to important scholarship on Acts, which I shall not repeat here.

² “The ends of the Earth” is often associated with Rome. The Rome association with “Earth’s ends” comes (1) from the geographic termination of Acts in Rome, and (2) the reference to Pompey’s advance on Jerusalem in 63 BCE found in LXX Ps. Sol. 8.15: “[God] brought someone from the end of the Earth. [...] He decreed war against Jerusalem” (Translation from E. EARLE ELLIS, “The End of the Earth” (Acts 1:8), *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, vol. 1, 1991). I also capitalise “Earth”, to elevate, for the contemporary interpreter of Acts, its ecological symbolism, as a network of interrelated and interconnected living realities, rather than only a geographical identifier. I shall explore this theme towards the end of this chapter.

confirmed by the “signs and wonders” (Acts 2:43; 5:12) that accompany the preached Word.

A significant moment comes in Acts 10 when non-Jews become members of the originally Jewish Jesus movement. The events that conclude Acts 9 prepare for this. In Acts 11, the Jerusalem leaders formally accept their inclusion. These two chapters, Acts 10 and 11, reveal the keys to Luke’s missionary conviction. They reveal the elements the evangelist considers necessary for the Jesus movement to move forward and encounter creatively and openly a social and cultural Greco-Roman climate different from the originating impulse of the Galilean Jesus that first shaped it. Writing two to three generations later, what the evangelist offers is a new missionary paradigm, first revealed, as shall be seen, in the Gospel. What we go on to note from our focus on these specific moments in the Gospel and in Acts 10-11 is how Luke’s insights can still speak afresh to the contemporary Church, seeking by the *missio ad gentes* to proclaim the Word of God as it negotiates new cultures and contexts previously unimagined.

Moloney points out that Jesus’ followers in Acts envision that their mission is to “the ends of the earth”. In a concluding section of this chapter, we shall see that “the ends of the Earth” implies a geographical universality inclusive of all humanity; God’s Word can potentially speak to every culture. “Ends of the Earth” is also an *ecological* image. This means that the missionary-oriented ecclesial community must include creation within its ambit of concern. Such attention becomes more pressing given the global ecological crisis that confronts Jesus followers today.

1. The Gospel's Anticipation of Acts

Before moving to highlight what happens in Acts 10-11, it is important to note how Luke prepares for this, first in the Gospel and then in scenes that immediately lead into Acts 10. In the Gospel, Luke employs a vital literary genre, the “commissioning narrative”, to highlight the importance of those who are eye-witnesses to the ministry of the Galilean Jesus and commissioned by God to witness publicly and truthfully about Jesus as “ministers of the Word” (Acts 1:2). These are the faithful and trusted founders of the Lukan household (Lk 1:2). Luke draws upon their witness to formulate a new expres-

sion of the Gospel for Jesus followers living in a different time and place. The commissioning literary form is thus essential for the evangelist, for it confirms the foundational witnesses. In addition, reveals essential missionary elements that will surface later in Acts as the Lukan household seeks to engage the wider Greco-Roman culture.

The commission-genre first appears in the First Testament as God calls prophets and leaders to undertake leadership roles amongst the Israelite people.³ There are two reasons that Luke draws on the genre of these First Testament narratives and it gives theological credibility to those “eye-witnesses and ministers of the Word” (Lk 1:2). More pertinently, it provides a traditional basis for the missiological development which will occur later in Acts, and upon which Acts 10-11 relies. As we shall see, Luke shapes this particular section of Acts along the lines of a commission narrative. The stories in these chapters reveal how those commissioned, especially Peter, are encouraged to let go of the conventional mode of thinking and acting.⁴ This is because they will act to reverse the resistance to change and growth anticipated in those who hold leadership in the Jerusalem household of Jesus’ disciples and have pre-determined those whom God calls. The rupture to conventional order will bring about change, social engagement, and openness within new cultural horizons never envisaged by the Galilean Jesus or His immediate disciples.⁵ All this lies at the heart of Luke’s missionary intent.

What applies to the commissioned agents in the First Testament finds echoes in Luke’s Gospel and later in Acts. There are five elements to the commission narrative: (1) *Dislocation*: The one commissioned experiences something that dislocates him from the usual or ordinary. (2) *Divine Encounter*: The experience of dislocation opens the one called to an encounter with God, either directly or through an agent. The divine encounter results in the commission, to act or perceive in a manner that is outside the usual order of expectation. (3) *Perplexity*: This invitation to act or see leads to con-

³ For example, Ex 3:1-22; Gn 18:1-15; Jgs 6:11-17; Is 6:1-10; Jer 1:4-10; Am 7:15-17. See N. HABEL, “The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives,” *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, vol. 77, 1965, 297-323.

⁴ R. DAVID, “Du but initial au but subjectif : la réponse des appelés dans les textes de la Première Alliance”, *Studies In Religion-Sciences Religieuses*, vol. 34, 2005, 197-211.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 209.

fusion. It requires further investigation or reflection as the one called seeks clarity in the midst of perplexity. (4) *Affirmation and Resolution*: God (or the divine agent) acts to bring about assuredness and confidence in the experience. This affirms the one called to act and perceive what occurs. This resolves the difficulty and perplexity. (5) *Witness*: God's commissioned agent finally lives out the new direction. This happens, though, not without criticism and resistance from others who do not fully understand the agent's action or perception.

This formal pattern is evident in the annunciation stories associated with the angelic call of Zechariah (Lk 1:8-23), and especially Mary (Lk 1:26-38) and Jesus' invitation to Simon Peter and his companions to "become fishers of people" (Lk 5:1-11). The genre's pattern also overlays the approach the evangelist takes in telling the stories in the Gospel's concluding chapter that describes the events that surround Jesus' resurrection. Here the evangelist adopts the commissioning narrative genre to recount the women's discovery of the tomb's emptiness as they come to learn its meaning from two angelic-like characters who commission them to announce the resurrection of Jesus to His disciples (Lk 24:1-12). The genre shapes the way the story unfolds as the Risen Jesus accompanies two disciples travelling away from Jerusalem, the birthplace of their discipleship, to Emmaus (Lk 24:14-35). Discouraged by what had happened there in the execution of Jesus, they learn of His presence with them in the "breaking of bread" and return to Jerusalem to announce what they have experienced. In the Gospel's final scene (Lk 24:36-49), the Risen Jesus comes into the midst of His perplexed and frightened disciples, dispels their doubts, commissions them as His future witnesses as they await to be "clothed with power from on high" (Lk 24:48). Luke's Gospel ends anticipating the next stage in the Jesus story that will unfold in Acts.

The main features of the commission narratives (dislocation / divine encounter / perplexity / affirmation and resolution / witness) become the overarching shape of Luke's Acts. The Jerusalem Jesus members encounter God's presence first in the Risen Jesus who ascends into the heavens, then in the Spirit at Pentecost, and Jesus commissions them explicitly (Acts 1:8). The Spirit's descent at Pentecost empowers them (Acts 2:1-47). As Moloney describes it, this presence pervades Luke's story-line throughout Acts, implicitly or explicitly, gives direction and confidence in times of persecution and

resistance (Acts 3:1-28:16), until finally Paul arrives at Rome (Acts 28:17-31) and the heart of the Roman Empire. In this setting, Paul lives under house arrest “preaching the Kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ most openly and unhindered” (Acts 28:31). On this final note of hope and optimism, Luke concludes the narration of God’s marvellous deeds. God’s ultimate commission, to preach “to the ends of the Earth”, awaits realisation.

2. Acts 10-11: Luke’s Missionary Paradigm

The watershed moment that allows the commissioned disciples to move outside of Jerusalem and Judea, into the non-Jewish Greco-Roman world, comes in Acts 10. This becomes a critical event. Here the evangelist captures something of an authentic historical memory that occurred decades earlier before the writing of Acts: Non-Jews sought membership into what seemed to be an exclusive Jesus Jewish movement. As Luke narrates the event in Acts 10, the evangelist reshapes the First Testament’s commission narrative replicated in the Gospel.

The elements that we find in the Gospel that typify the commission literary genre provide Luke with the framework for recounting this central moment in Acts: Peter, outside the usual place of order, Jerusalem, begins to move to the geographical fringes of Judea (Acts 9:32-43). He experiences a vision, a definitive moment of dislocation that creates perplexity and confusion (Acts 10:9-16). The Spirit’s presence resolves the perplexity, allowing for a new understanding (“commission”) to emerge. This determines a fresh creative moment for the future life of the Jesus movement (Acts 10:23-48). This happens not without its critique by those who initially want to confine the Spirit’s action, but later endorse this new moment and give praise to God (Acts 11:1-18). Luke integrates into it aspects or elements essential for the future mission of the Jesus movement. These suggest seven “experiences” or theological principles, explicated below, paradigmatic for a Church seeking to engage the post-modern world.

Luke offers hints of what will definitively and formally occur in Acts 10 in the chapters that lead up to it. After the Pentecost experience of the empowerment by the Spirit (Acts 2), membership of the Jerusalem Jesus community, despite opposition and suffering, expands under the direction of Peter (Acts 3-5). The Jerusalem leaders

of the community appoint seven members to respond to internal complaints between the Greek and Jewish-speaking members (Acts 6:1-7). One of them, Stephen, is executed (Acts 6:8-8:3). Another, Philip, moves into Samaria (Acts 8:4-25) – an initial indicator of the move outside of Jerusalem and Judea. Further, his baptism of an Ethiopian court official on pilgrimage from Jerusalem and returning home (Acts 8:26-40), alerts Acts’ audience that the expansion of the Jesus movement beyond its originating Jewish setting is not an isolated event. More is yet to come. The change of heart that Saul (“Paul”) undergoes – from persecutor of Jesus’ disciples to membership – reveals that the Spirit’s action is unstoppable (Acts 9:1-25). With the support of Barnabas, the Jerusalem leaders accept the surprising authenticity of Saul’s discipleship who returns to Tarsus (Acts 9:26-30). The peace that comes on Judea, Galilee, and Samaria through the “consolation of the Holy Spirit”, as identified in Acts 9:31, prepares them for the next moment in Luke’s story that establishes the context for the momentous events that will unfold in Acts 10.

2.1 Dislocation

In the next verse, Luke notes: “It happened as Peter travelled among them all, he came down also to the saints residing at Lydda (Acts 9:32).”⁶ With the mention of this explicit geographical marker, Lydda, Luke moves Peter out of Jerusalem and symbolically nearer to the Gentile world. Lydda is geographically closer to the Mediterranean coast than Jerusalem, and more distant from the Jewish world with which Peter is familiar and at ease.⁷ Lydda also symbolises something else. For it is the transitional space between the known and unknown, between the Jewish and Gentile worlds, and becomes the place where Peter heals the bedridden paralytic, Aeneas. The healing occurs in a manner that echoes the actions of Jesus in the Gospel (Lk 5:18-26; 13:11-13). The name of the paralytic, “Aeneas”, occurs only in Acts, nowhere else in the Second Testa-

⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, I offer my own translation of Acts.

⁷ See L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 5, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 1992, 179. Lydda is the city of Lod in the First Testament (1 Chr 8:12). It lies in Judean territory (1 Mc 11:34), but only 17 kilometres from Joppa, the next place in Acts to which Peter moves.

ment. Though common in the Greco-Roman world and attested by Josephus (*Ant* 14.10:22), the name would honour the memory of one of Rome's three founders (Aeneas, Romulus, and Remus).⁸ If this is Luke's intent in this explicit identification of the subject of Peter's healing deed, then Act's audience and Peter have stepped finally into the Gentile world, a move confirmed in the healing scene that immediately follows (Acts 9:36-45).

Luke's scene switches next to the coastal town of Joppa ("Jaffa"), symbolically associated with the Gentile world that surrounds the Mediterranean. Here we learn that a female Jesus disciple named "Tabitha" or "Dorcas" in Greek, which means "gazelle", and known for her generosity, has become ill and died. As John Chrysostom comments, her name matched her character "as active and wakeful was she as an antelope".⁹ The audience alert to this association with Dorcas' name, which Luke prefers rather than Tabitha (Acts 9:39), would know about the prominence of the gazelle in Israel's hill country and on the coastal plains around Joppa.¹⁰ More symbolically, the animal represented marginality. It inhabited the margins, between desert and town, the rural and urban. Considered both wild and tame, some rabbis regarded it with a certain degree of holiness that, when eaten, did not compromise the purity restrictions in Jewish dietary laws.¹¹

All these associations with the name of Dorcas suggest that Peter has moved into an unfamiliar Greco-Roman place occupied by a female Gentile Jesus disciple, perhaps a proselyte. Her resurrection, activated through the agency of this leader of the Jerusalem Jewish Jesus household, moves her from the margins to the centre. In this geographically and culturally unaccustomed place, away from the Jerusalem centre, Peter acts to restore the woman to life and community. Here, his action is reminiscent of the healings of Elijah and Elisha in 1 Kgs 17:17-24 and 2 Kgs 4:32-37, and parallels Jesus' resurrection of the son of the widow of Nain in Luke 7:11-16. Peter is in

⁸ A. ERSKINE, "Rome in the Greek World: The Significance of a Name", in A. POWELL, *The Greek World* (ed.), Routledge, London 1995, 368-382.

⁹ JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homily 21 on Acts of the Apostles*, as quoted by R. STRELAN, "Tabitha: The Gazelle of Joppa (Acts 9:36-41)", *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, vol. 39, 2009, 77-86.

¹⁰ R. STRELAN, "Tabitha: The Gazelle of Joppa (Acts 9:36-41)", 78.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 79.

a marginal situation reinforced by his association, as we learn in the next scene, with a tanner.

Luke next notes that Peter resides “for many days” in Joppa with a leather tanner called Simon (Acts 9:43).¹² Luke’s purpose in giving detail of Peter’s companion and repeating his location, that Simon is a tanner and his house is, as we discover later, “by the seaside” (Acts 10:6), is not to offer an incidental backdrop to the story. The location of this Joppa house (“by the seaside”) was deliberate. The sea breezes would help disperse the unpleasant aroma that came from curing the skins in the tanning process and would have easily penetrated Peter’s clothing. Peter is thus associating with someone, and in a location, that make him quintessentially impure. This compromises his purity status and introduces a major issue about which Peter will be involved in the next scene. The author of Acts will take this matter up a few chapters later: the association of Jews and non-Jews in the Jesus movement. It begins with this experience of the leader of the Jesus movement spatially and culturally *dislocated* in the Greco-Roman world. This becomes reinforced as Luke next moves our attention further up the coast to Caesarea and to a centurion of an Italian cohort named Cornelius (Acts 10:1). We have now moved definitively into the Gentile world.

2.2 Divine Encounter

We note that this Gentile, like Dorcas in the earlier scene, emulates the essential discipleship qualities that Luke’s Jesus affirmed in the Gospel: generosity in spirit and practice (Lk 6:29; 9:3; 10:34-35; 12:22-24, 33-34; 17:33; 18:18-37). “Good works and deeds of charity” (Acts 9:36) typify Dorcas’ life. Material generosity to all without exception (Acts 10:2) characterise Cornelius. Luke also notes Cornelius’ religious sentiment and conviction. These mirror the prayerful practice that permeates Luke’s Christological portrait. Like Jesus, Cornelius “prayed constantly to God” (Acts 10:3). As he prays on one occasion he sees an unobstructed vision of an angel coming to him. A vision, common in Acts, is indicative of God’s participation and initiative in what takes place. There are several aspects

¹² J. McCONNACHIE, “Simon a Tanner (Acts 9:43; 10:6, 32)”, *Expository Times*, vol. 36, 1924-1925, 90.

about this vision. The initiative is from God. What now happens is divinely instituted. The angel addresses him, affirms his piety and generosity (Acts 10:4), and directs him to send messengers to Joppa to bring Peter to Caesarea (Acts 10:1-6). Cornelius' angelic encounter is also typical of the commission-genre structure noted earlier: the encounter with a divine agent that leads to perplexity in the one addressed; a word of affirmation frees the subject to hear the commission and act. Cornelius sends envoys to Peter. The rest unfolds as the angel directs.

With this presence of the angel and the commission addressed to Cornelius, Luke underscores the next important reality that enables the narrative to move forward: God has entered the scene. Cornelius' natural religious disposition prepares for this experience of God. His religious openness to God prepares him for the angelic vision.

Cornelius' experience of God dovetails nicely with the next scene, in which Peter encounters God, but in a very different way (Acts 10:9-23). It happens through his stomach! Like Cornelius in the preceding scene, we note Peter's prayerful disposition that leads him to go up on to Simon's housetop to pray in the middle of the day. Hunger overcomes him, and he falls into a trance. Like Cornelius, Peter sees a vision from heaven. God is present. Unlike Cornelius, though, the vision is not of an angel but of a great sheet let down from the heavens that holds different creatures (Acts 10:12). A heavenly voice instructs Peter to kill and eat them. His reaction is clear: "No, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common [Gk: *koinos*] or unclean [Gk: *akathartos*]" (Acts 10:14). Peter's reaction to the heavenly vision and the instruction, or commission, to eat concerns that which he (and all his Jerusalem colleagues) would regard as "common" and "unclean". While this applies in the first instance to food, it also affects their association with those people considered *koinos* and *akathartos*. The divine declaration that immediately follows Peter's statement, "That which God has cleansed, you are not to declare common [*koinos*]" (Acts 10:15), redefines the boundaries of what and who are judged as *koinos* and *akathartos*. Peter has already begun to blur these separating boundaries through his association at Joppa with the tanner Simon and his resuscitation of Dorcas, and, earlier, in Lydda, his healing of Aeneas. Luke adds, regarding Peter's vision of the heavenly sheet, that "this happened three times" (Acts 10:16). It is not clear to what the "this" refers. Is it the vision? Is it Pe-

ter's reaction to what he is ordered to do? Is it the divine re-evaluation of what is common or unclean? Or all of these?

2.3 Perplexity

Whatever Luke's intent with this phrase, the import of the vision is yet to await its full revelation. In the meantime, Peter is left in a state of deep perplexity, perhaps even anxiety, as to the vision's meaning (Acts 10:17). Again, Luke employs and adapts the commission narrative genre. Peter's divine encounter and the accompanying commission to reconsider what is common and unclean leaves him perplexed. It awaits resolution. This will begin as Cornelius' envoys arrive to invite Peter to go with them to Caesarea the following day (Acts 10:17-24). Importantly, its resolution will require one further thing from Peter – an openness and willingness to reflect on his experience. Luke tells us that Peter continues to “ponder” the vision as his Caesarean entourage arrives. This capacity to ponder upon that which confuses or baffles is characteristic of other Jesus disciples (for example, Mary in Luke 1:29, the women at the tomb in Luke 24:4, and the two on their way to Emmaus in Luke 24:32). Contemplation is the path towards resolution. Further exposure into that which is dislocating, common and unclean will force Peter to ponder the meaning of the heavenly sheet and the divine injunction that went with it; after all, it will open him to a new, radical insight that will define the future of the Jesus movement.

2.4 Affirmation and Resolution

Peter, accompanied with other Jerusalem companions from Joppa (Acts 10:23) – a small detail that will become important later – arrives at the house in which Cornelius, his family and friends gather (Acts 10:24-27). He freely enters a foreign household that exposes him to an unfamiliar situation in which a new perception will emerge. This household is very different – geographically, culturally, and ethnically – from the Jerusalem Jesus gathering most familiar to Peter. His Jerusalem colleagues who accompany him would regard Cornelius and his household as “common” and “unclean”. Peter, however, comes to a different point of view in a declaration that partly resolves his earlier perplexity over the heavenly sheet: “You yourselves understand how unlawful it is for a Jewish male to associ-

ate with or visit any foreigner; but God has shown me that I should not call any human being common or unclean. Therefore, when I was sent for, I came without objection. Therefore, I ask why have you sent for me?" (Acts 10:28-29).

Peter recognises that God has reconfigured what is conventional about who and what is unclean. As Peter understands it, the decision of who is common or unclean does not belong to human beings but God. This awareness allows Peter to go with Cornelius' delegation, come to the Roman port city of Caesarea, and enter into the centurion's house.

However, Peter needs to take one further step before he can articulate the full implications of his presence in this unorthodox Gentile world. This will come as Peter hears Cornelius narrate his encounter with the angel and God's self-communication to him (Acts 10:30-32). With Cornelius' concluding words, "all of us are before God" (Acts 10:33), Peter finally comes to realise that the God of the Jews, the God of his ancestors revealed to him through Jesus and confirmed through the reception of the Spirit at Pentecost, is also the God of this Roman centurion and his Gentile household. The same God has acted in each of them and Peter now offers a full declaration. This will determine the future relationships between Jews and non-Jews within the Jesus household. The pronouncement resolves Peter's perplexity over the animal-bearing heavenly sheet and the divine affirmation not to consider unclean what God declares clean. Having continued to reflect about this as he listens to Cornelius' experience, Peter definitively states: "In truth I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation the one who fears God and does what is right is welcomed by God" (Acts 10:34-35).

Peter confirms that God does not have ethnic or cultural preferences. No ethnic or religious group can act with the presumption that God prefers one over the other. The fundamental criterion for divine acceptance and welcome, according to Peter, is to "fear" God and "do what is right". In other words, a humble sincerity to God's action ("fear") and a commitment to live guided by this disposition (to do "what is right"), are the essential qualities that reveal peoples' openness to God and God's communion with them. Peter knows how these religious qualities have guided his own Jerusalem co-religionists. He now recognises them in Cornelius' Gentile Roman household. The God of the Jews is also the God of the Gentiles.

This leads Peter to offer to Cornelius' household a summary of the Gospel about Jesus that culminates in His death and resurrection, and the command to preach and witness to all people about God's action in Jesus (Acts 10:34-41). Peter concludes his summary affirming that all who believe in Jesus will have "forgiveness of sin" (Acts 10:43). They will experience divine *shalom*, ultimate divine communion.

At this moment, a remarkable event occurs. God's Spirit comes upon all who listen to Peter's words (Acts 10:44). This parallels the first Pentecost with the Spirit's descent on the Jerusalem household in Acts 2. The Gentile-believers are now bearers of the same Spirit that descended first upon their Jerusalem brothers and sisters. This divine action reveals God's impartiality. The Spirit's descent confirms Peter's insight, that God accepts all who are humbly open and receptive to God's action manifest through Jesus. The Spirit's descent upon all those in Cornelius' household implies that God's presence is not culturally, ethnically or even religiously restricted. It is available to all. This surprises his Jerusalemite acquaintances who have come with him from Joppa: "And the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and exalting God" (Acts 10:45-46).

The Jerusalem companions of Peter witness this new moment in the action of the Spirit and offer collegial confirmation. Their presence and witness move the event beyond a private revelation given only to Peter. His declaration, that these Gentiles who have received the Holy Spirit should be baptised, completes the scene and formally incorporates the non-Jewish Gentile believers into the household of Jesus' disciples (Acts 10:47-48).

2.5 Witness

Peter returns to Jerusalem and is at once "criticised" (Gk: *diakrinō*) by "the circumcision party" (Acts 11:2), who would predetermine how God might regard the Gentiles. The *diakrinō* is a discriminatory act of judgement against Peter. They ask him, "Why did you go to the uncircumcised and eat with them?" (Acts 11:3). Peter responds by narrating his experience, of the vision, the heavenly voice and what happened when he entered the Gentile household in Caesarea. Peter affirms that all that happened was under the aegis of the

Holy Spirit (Acts 11:12; 15-16). He adds a further note that confirms the action of God's Spirit amongst the Gentiles: "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them just as on us at the beginning. I remembered the Word of the Lord, how He said 'John baptised with water, but you shall be baptised with the Holy Spirit'. If then God gave the same gift to them as He gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to prevent God?" (Acts 11:15-17).

Peter's witness counteracts the *diakrinō* from the more conservative Jerusalem believers. This witness, in the face of opposition and disbelief, is Peter's attestation to the God who calls him (Lk 5:1-11), the Jerusalem disciples in the Pentecost outpouring of the Spirit in Acts 2, and now the Gentiles. It is this God that Peter could not and cannot resist or "prevent". In other words, Peter witnesses God's action and affirms that what has happened has not come about through his initiative. It is not the result of human inventiveness or ingenuity. What has happened had occurred because of God. God's embrace of the Gentiles, revealed through the descent of the Holy Spirit upon them and their speaking in tongues, and confirmed by the witness of the Jerusalemites who accompanied Peter from Joppa, is ultimately God's act. It is unstoppable, as Peter explains to his Jerusalem colleagues.

Peter's attestation of his experience in Joppa and in Caesarea, of God's initiative amongst the Gentiles, leaves his Jewish co-religionists silent. This is the appropriate response before the revelation of God's action attested by Peter. The final word in this whole drama that will define the course and focus of the future mission of the household of Jesus followers comes not from Peter but from the gathered Jerusalem disciples themselves. Presumably these would also include the "circumcision party": "They glorified God, saying, 'Even then to the Gentiles God has granted repentance unto life'" (Acts 11:18).

This acclamation recognises that God is not only a God for the Jews. The Jewish Jesus disciples now recognise and affirm that the life-bearing gift of the Holy Spirit that comes from communion with God ("repentance"), first experienced by the Jerusalem Jesus followers, includes the Gentiles. This conviction tangibly unfolds in the scenes and chapters that follow, after Herod executes James, one of the central Jerusalem figures (Acts 12:1-5), imprisons Peter (Acts 12:6-19), and himself undergoes an ignominious death (Acts 12:20-23). After this, Luke notes, "The Word of God grew and multiplied"

(Acts 12:24). This growth happens, now until the end of Acts, through Paul. He brings this Word finally to Rome and fulfils Jesus' prediction made at the beginning of Acts, that the disciples will be his witnesses to the "ends of the Earth" (Acts 1:8). But, what did Luke mean by this expression "ends of the Earth"? And what can it mean for us today in the midst of the present global ecological crisis that we now face? It is to these questions that we now turn as we complete this study of Acts 10-11.

3. "The End of the Earth"

In the beginning of Acts, the resurrected and commissioning Jesus affirms the universality of His disciples' witness. They are to be His witnesses "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the Earth" (Acts 1:8). Many scholars allow this statement to define the structure of Acts.¹³ The disciples begin their testimony in Jerusalem and Judea (Acts 1:12-8:3), then witness in Samaria (Acts 8:4-40), finally, with Paul, into the wider Greco-Roman world that surrounds the Mediterranean (Acts 9:1-28:31).¹⁴

In a manner that reveals Luke's dependency on Isaiah, which shapes the evangelist's agenda, Luke's use of "Earth's ends" also echoes Isaiah 49:6.¹⁵ This is part of a second song about God's servant, who acts on God's behalf, suffers and reveals God's salvation to "Earth's end". Isaiah affirms that God's salvation is not reserved to a particular people but is inclusive of all. According to God, Isaiah's prophetic servant will be a "light for all". God says: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the Earth" (Is 49:6).

It is possible, in fact, usual, to understand the focus of the servant's mission primarily in terms of human beings. He is to bring God's light to all the nations. This is a theme in Isaiah, that confirms

¹³ For example, L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 10-11.

¹⁴ See also Francis J. Moloney in chapter 2 of this volume, footnote 7.

¹⁵ On Luke's integration of Isaianic themes in Luke-Acts, and not merely a proof-text approach to Isaiah, see T. MOORE, "'To The End of the Earth': The Geographical and Ethnic Universalism of Acts 1:8 in Light of the Isaianic Influence on Luke", *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society*, vol. 40, 1997, 389-399.

the prophet's eschatological vision of salvation for all people ("nations") who stream to Jerusalem in the final days (Is 2:2; 66:18-20), share God's feast (Is 26:6-7), and worship God (Is 56:7) with righteousness and praise (61:11).

In the opening verse that begins Isaiah's song, though, something further suggests itself. The servant addresses coastlands and those who live in distant lands: "Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away!" (Is 49:1).

The servant invites the non-human world, the lands of the coast, and those who live in distant places to attend to what is going to be revealed about God's servant. The postscript that immediately follows the song celebrates the redemptive power of a God who liberates humanity and creation (Is 49:7-26). It is within this wider ecological setting that God's salvation reaches to "the ends of the Earth". These "ends" imply humanity – all peoples that are "far away". But it also includes all of Earth's creatures and the whole of creation that the servant encourages to exalt and join in song (Is 49:13).

In Luke's world, Earth's "end" implied a defined geography in a cosmos which consisted of an inner land mass surrounded by an outer ocean ("oceanos"). The "end of the Earth" was contiguous to the oceans for it linked land to sea.¹⁶ It was where the inhabited and civilised world stopped. This is clear from the geographer Strabo (64-63 BCE – 24 CE) who writes that the "inhabited world is an island. For wherever it has been possible for humans to reach the ends of the Earth, sea has been found. And this sea we call 'Oceanus'".¹⁷ For Luke, then, the expression "the end of the Earth" is a definitive geographic identifier that locates the connection between land and sea and defines boundaries.

To the ears of the contemporary listener of Acts, sensitive to what is happening on this planet, however, the expression evokes something else. It concerns *Earth*. While Luke would not have consid-

¹⁶ W.C. VAN UNNIK, "Der Ausdruck ΕΩΣ ΕΣΧΑΤΟΥ ΤΗΣ ΓΗΣ (Apostelgeschichte I 8) Und Sein Alttestamentlicher Hintergrund", *Sparsa Collecta*, vol.1, 1973-83, 386-391, as referenced in E. EARLE ELLIS, "The End of the Earth" (Acts 1:8)", 126.

¹⁷ STRABO, *Geography* 1, 1, 8; cf. 1, 2, 31; 1, 4, 6; see, E. EARLE ELLIS, "The End of the Earth" (Acts 1:8)", 126. For a further discussion on "ends of the Earth", see L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 26-27.

ered “Earth’s ends” in ecological terms, today’s audience would be sensitive to the way we treat Earth. In this context, concerned about what happens on this planet, Earth represents more than a land mass linked to the oceans. It is an ecological image of interconnected relationships, a network of organic and non-organic matter and a living organism. From this perspective, Earth is a symbol not determined by human beings, but an interconnected vital system in which humanity lives and expresses its civilized reality. From an explicit environmental viewpoint, this acknowledges that “the ends of the Earth” is more than a specific geographic space defined by human beings and controlled by their presence. We can imagine another boundary, an ecological one, that lies beyond a specific Earth-space demarcated by human occupation.

To venture to the “end of the Earth” is to come to the unknown; fraught with danger, but also with possibility. This “end” can become a space where the new might be revealed in terms of eschatological healing of what has occurred through Earth’s human habitation and abuse of Earth’s goods. In fact, “end of the Earth” might be symbolic of two things. Positively, it might represent the eschatological climax of God’s vision for creation; negatively, it could express the end of the Earth itself caused by destructive forces initiated by human beings. “End of Earth” could be, for the Lukan contemporary listener, a rich symbol of creative possibilities or cautious action for the health of the planet. Jesus’ words to missionary-oriented disciples, to “the ends of the Earth”, can be reinterpreted for today’s Jesus follower as an ecological mission. It is one in which Pope Francis has urged us to engage given the critical ecological situation of Earth. As he writes in the Encyclical Letter *Laudato si’*: “All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, involvements and talents” (LS 14); “[...] social love moves us to devise larger strategies to halt environmental degradation and to encourage a ‘culture of care’ which permeates all of society” (LS 231).

4. Missionary Insights

To return to Luke’s story in Acts 10-11, there are important perceptions that the evangelist offers us today. These speak into one of the central moments of Church development that Karl Rahner (1904-1984) identifies. He speaks of three epochs in the growth of the

Church.¹⁸ The first was as a Jewish “movement”, then it expanded beyond Judaism welcoming Gentiles, finally, at Vatican II, the Church embraced a universal mission. Rahner’s second epoch is what Luke narrates in Acts 10-11. Here, Luke offers us theologically rich insights that help discern the dynamics undergirding this major shift of the Jesus movement away from Judaism to the non-Jewish, Gentile world and beyond. As we have suggested in our reflection upon “to the ends of the Earth”, this “beyond” must also consider an ecological mission that involves care of Earth and all that exists, human and non-human creation, at “Earth’s ends”. This is Rahner’s third epoch, the Church’s embrace of its universal mission to humanity and creation.

In our study of Acts 10-11, we note how Peter begins a new stage in the growth of the Jesus movement, Rahner’s second epoch, as he physically moves away from Jerusalem. Thus begins a transition from the setting of the Gospel’s conclusion and the beginning of the *Acts of the Apostles*. It is the place where Peter experiences the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Next, his contact with those who need healing (Aeneas and “Gazelle”) in Lydda and Joppa, towns on the geographical boundary of Judea closer to the Mediterranean coast, confirms his journey away from the conventional and expected. As he resides a few days in Joppa with a tanner, he becomes more dislocated.

All these images – a boundary town, people in need of healing and his unclean residential companion – reinforce his sense of displacement away from Jerusalem, the original epicentre of the Jesus movement. These prepare him for the cultural and ethnic shifts which he finally comes to realise that the Jesus movement must make. In the household of the centurion, Cornelius, in the Mediterranean coastal town of Caesarea, Peter recognises that God also acts amongst the Gentiles. Cornelius’ narration of his encounter with God’s messenger (Acts 10:30-32) that concludes with the affirmation that “all of us are before God” (Acts 10:33), brings Peter to declare, in Acts 10:34-35, that God is not discriminatory and accepts all who act with reverential openness (“fear”) and integrity (“do what is right”). God acts within Judaism, and Peter’s encounter with the pious Gentiles brings him to realise that God is also amongst the Gentiles.

¹⁸ K. RAHNER, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II”, *Theological Studies*, vol. 40, 1979, 716-727.

Here we come to the essence of Luke's perception about mission. Rather than Peter bringing "God" to the Gentiles, he learns that God is already acting amongst them. The missionary encounter, if one can call it thus, is an encounter with God's self-revelation. The mission becomes one of discovery by the appointed leader of the Jesus movement. Luke, however, provides the stratagem to enable this discovery to occur. We have identified five: dislocation, divine encounter, perplexity, affirmation-resolution, witness. These might be summarised in a way that suggest the essential components of missionary action today.

1. *Dislocation*. Peter moves away from the epicentre of the Jerusalem Jesus movement to a geographical and cultural context that dislocates him, physically and spiritually. He experiences being amongst those regarded as unclean or impure. He enters households others would judge as unworthy of his presence and God's action. Luke would affirm that authentic missionary endeavour begins with a move to the margins and the encounter with the socially unclean and impure. Pope Francis reflects this same attitude when he writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*: "The Church which 'goes forth' is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. [...] An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people's daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the 'smell of the sheep' and the sheep are willing to hear their voice" (EG 24).

This first step to the margins that brings involvement in the lives of others is the most difficult. It allows for an encounter with what Francis names "the suffering flesh of Christ in others" (EG 270). This encounter makes one "take on" the "smell of the sheep". This is more than noticing that the odour is different. It means that missionary-evangelisers absorb the same odour as those among whom they live. This forms an identity. We see this graphically portrayed in Peter's Joppa residence with the tanner Simon. Peter's communion with potential disciples in Cornelius' house also illustrates this, especially after the experience of the Spirit's descent on all who hear his words (Acts 10:44).

2. *Openness to the Sacred*. Peter encounters God first through a perplexing vision that he does not fully understand, then in the pres-

ence of those declared unclean or common. Finally, he comes to learn that God's self-communication continues to occur, despite what seems impossible. This sensitivity to the possibility of the sacred is foundational to the shift that Peter finally makes. Luke notes how he reflects upon and contemplates the vision (Acts 10:19) which confuses him (Acts 10:17). Openness to the sacred, of the immanence of God's presence, within what appears to be confusing or perplexing realities, is central. Luke notes how this contemplative spirit lies at the heart of two of the Gospel's central characters, Mary (Lk 1:29; 2:19) and Jesus who often prays (Lk 3:21; 6:12; 9:28; 22:39-46; 23:34, 46). Pope Francis speaks of the need to look at what is happening around us with a "contemplative gaze": "God's revelation tells us that the fullness of humanity and of history is realized in a city. We need to look at our cities with a contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares. God's presence accompanies the sincere efforts of individuals and groups to find encouragement and meaning in their lives. He dwells among them, fostering solidarity, fraternity, and the desire for goodness, truth and justice. This presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered. God does not hide himself from those who seek him with a sincere heart" (EG 71).

Francis' words echo Peter's experience in Joppa and the house of Cornelius. He "uncovers" God's presence amongst them. It is unhidden and real in the lives of those who live with a "sincere heart". This contemplative spirit, seen in Peter and affirmed by Francis, will recognize God already present in what seems confusing or different. It can guide the contemporary evangeliser.

3. *Affirmation and Witness.* Luke's portrait of Peter in Acts affirms his role as leader and spokesperson of the Jerusalem gathering of Jesus disciples. His leadership is clear in the directions he gives for Judas' replacement to reconstitute the Twelve (Acts 1:15-22), in the events that surround Pentecost (Acts 2:14-42) and its aftermath (Acts 3:1-4:22). His presence is essential for Luke in the move to embrace the Gentiles as full members of the Jesus movement. His experience of God's presence through Cornelius and his household and its confirmation in the descent of the Holy Spirit, in a manner similar to what the disciples had experienced earlier in Jerusalem, confirm for Peter the rightness of the direction in which he pastorally moves. This divine affirmation spills over into Peter's words and actions to his Gentile hosts. He recognises that God embraces them

without bias. They are no longer “common” or “unclean” because of God’s action, unconstrained by human intervention or judgement. The full acceptance of these Gentile householders occurs definitively through their baptism. As Peter reminds his audience, those Jerusalem companions who have travelled with him from Joppa: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptising these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47).

In addition to Peter affirming the action of God he also attests to the presence of God among the Gentiles. He confirms God’s presence and action before his Jerusalem Jewish colleagues, those present with him in Caesarea, and, later, when he meets the leaders in Jerusalem. Despite initial criticism and opposition from the “circumcision party”, Peter continues to witness God’s action amongst the Gentiles. This conviction arises out of his reflection on the experience of what happened, his resolved perplexity over the vision of the heavenly sheet, and his affirmation of the Holy Spirit’s action upon the Gentiles. Luke describes Peter’s witness to his Jerusalem colleagues. This witness occurs, says Luke, “in order” (Acts 11:4) – a word found only one other time, in the Lukan prologue (Lk 1:3), to define an order of narrative recounting in theological rather than chronological terms. Theological meaning shapes Peter’s recount that leads him to state: “If then God gave them the same gift as God gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?” (Acts 11:17).

In reflecting on the qualities of an evangelising community, Pope Francis underscores the primacy of witness despite opposition and criticism, even martyrdom. His words reflect something of Luke’s presentation of Peter. According to Francis in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, the person who witnesses “finds a way to let the word take flesh in a particular situation and bear fruits of new life, however imperfect or incomplete these may appear. The disciple is ready to put his or her whole life on the line, even to accepting martyrdom, in bearing witness to Jesus Christ, yet the goal is not to make enemies but to see God’s Word accepted and its capacity for liberation and renewal revealed” (EG 24).

Though Peter does not, at this stage anyway, undergo martyrdom, he witnesses the action of God in Jesus to the Jerusalem leaders. His witness leads to the acceptance of God’s Word revealed in the liberation and renewal of the Gentiles. This leads us to a fourth consideration.

4. *Christological.* In Peter's address to Cornelius and his household (Acts 10:34-43), two things emerge. The first is the central affirmation of the welcome that God offers all who are reverential ("fear") and live according to "what is right" (Acts 10:34-35). The second comes from this central affirmation. Peter offers a Christocentric Gospel summary that culminates in Jesus' death and resurrection, its apostolic witness and the command to preach to all about Jesus (Acts 10:36-43). Peter repeats this Christological focus later when he justifies his actions to his Jerusalem colleagues, especially the "circumcision party" who question him about his Gentile initiative. He concludes his response to his detractors by acknowledging, as noted above, God's gift shared with the Gentiles who believe in Jesus (Acts 11:17). This Christological assertion convinces his critics. They acknowledge that the Jesus movement would, in future, include Gentiles. Peter's affirmation of Jesus at the heart of his missionary engagement amongst the Gentiles anticipates what Pope St. John Paul II wrote in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*: "There can be no true evangelization without the explicit proclamation of Jesus as Lord. [...] The primacy of the proclamation of Jesus Christ in all evangelizing work" (EA 19).¹⁹

5. *"To the ends of the Earth"*. We can no longer act as missionary agents of the Gospel without serious ecological reflection and action. Pope Francis expresses a similar imperative. In his introduction to *Laudato Si*, Francis writes: "I urgently appeal, then, for a new dialogue about how we are shaping the future of our planet. We need a conversation which includes everyone, since the environmental challenge we are undergoing, and its human roots, concern and affect us all...Regrettably, many efforts to seek concrete solutions to the environmental crisis have proved ineffective, not only because of powerful opposition but also because of a more general lack of interest. Obstructionist attitudes, even on the part of believers, can range from denial of the problem to indifference, nonchalant resignation or blind confidence in technical solutions. We require a new and universal solidarity. As the bishops of Southern Africa have stated: 'Everyone's talents and involvement are needed to redress the damage caused by human abuse of God's creation'" (LG 14).

¹⁹ The words of John Paul II are recalled by Pope Francis in EG 110.

Luke's missionary focus as expressed in Acts 1:8, reflects a geographical agenda. Current Lukan scholarship supports this interpretation. However, as contemporary disciples, we must incorporate an ecological concern into our dialogue with the world and the global ecological crisis that we experience. The mission, to the "ends of the Earth", can no longer endorse a colonialization of cultures. Rather, this expression must adopt the approach of Luke's Peter who allows himself to move into an "unclean" dislocated place and discover God already present. Luke's Peter comes to see this presence in cultures and places that are unusual or different. The consideration of "place", for contemporary interpreters, also implies ecological place. The mission "to the ends of the Earth" must allow for the inclusion of creation. The commission to preach the Good News of Jesus embraces the gift of creation that Jesus of Nazareth affirmed and healed. This becomes the explicit focus of faithful ministers and disciples of Jesus seeking to reveal Good News present in all peoples and the natural world in which people live.

5. Lessons Learned for Today's *Missio ad Gentes*

The narrative strategy that Luke adopts in Acts 10-11 can offer the contemporary Church a renewed understanding and approach to *missio ad gentes*. Luke's story of Peter offers insight into what the evangelist understands by mission and reveals elements necessary for relevant and authentic missionary evangelisation. A discernment of what created the shift in Luke's Peter can continue to offer fresh insight for us. Peter finally came to recognise that discipleship of Jesus was not solely a Jewish prerogative but was open to all Gentiles living in the Greco-Roman world. This spirit of openness, to engage culture and situations that seem different, if not alien, is the same spirit needed for Jesus followers in the post-modern world in a troubled, struggling, and renewing Church and at a time of ecological crisis.

Missio ad Gentes in the *Acts of the Apostles*

❖ MARIA ROWENA M. PASIMIO

The text of the second volume written by Luke has been constantly mined as a compendium of sorts for either the history of the Church, or on how missionary work is conducted. Luke clearly did not have the intention to compose either of the above, and was motivated more for theology than strictly historical reasons.¹ While it may not be ticketed as a missionary document or map for Christian mission,² it does contain wisdom concerning mission work that can serve as a guide for this day and age.

The specific missionary aspect to be considered is *missio ad gentes*, “the task of preaching the Gospel and planting the Church among peoples or groups who do not yet believe in Christ.”³ This kind of work contains three basic components: 1) “Proclaiming Christ and His Gospel; 2) Building up the local Church; 3) Promoting the values of the Kingdom.”⁴ The work surrounding initial proclamation is closely inter-related to other missionary endeavors, with an interdependence among them.⁵ Thus, while attention in this paper is dedicated to *missio ad gentes*, that is not to say that it cannot dialogue in a like manner with other missionary tasks.

¹ See L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 5, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, PA 2006, 7. Johnson further explains that the apology of Luke is “in the broadest sense a theodicy. His purpose is to defend God’s activity in the world”.

² B.R. GAVENTA, “You will Be My Witnesses: Aspects of Mission in the Acts of the Apostles”, *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 10, n. 4, 1982, 424.

³ Vatican II, *Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church “Ad Gentes”*, n. 6, 7 December 1965.

⁴ See Pope John Paul II’s Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 34, 7 December 1990.

⁵ Ibid.

It is noteworthy to mention that words such as mission⁶ or missionary are lacking in the book of the *Acts of the Apostles*. Luke's construct called primarily for the proclamation of the Gospel who is Christ, rendered today, the very subject of mission. For Luke, this proclamation was the basic demand for every disciple. All Christians were thus considered missionary by nature without having necessarily used the label given to it today.

The task confronting contemporary readers of the Acts of the Apostles, with regard to *missio ad gentes*, is to discover basic principles about the continuing mission of the Church in the world, especially to places that have not been captivated by the Gospel. This paper will therefore strive to reflect upon the biblical narrative of Acts to unearth how even today it yields ideas to support and to enrich the Church's *missio ad gentes*.

Given the breadth and length of Acts, focus shall be trained on the conversion stories from Acts 8:4-11:18,⁷ with some treatment on Acts 15, owing to its relation with Acts 10-11:18. Other passages from the book shall be considered in brief. Discussion shall be grouped under three main principles to serve as reflection points for all missionaries to the nations. The concluding section shall summarize the reflections on the *missio ad gentes* in Acts outlined throughout the paper.

⁶ What the New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE) and New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translate as "mission" in Acts 12:25 is *διακονίαν*, which means "service", "office" or "ministry" from B. HORST – G. SCHNEIDER (eds.), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1990, s.v. "διακονία", 304.

⁷ While recent scholarship no longer regards Paul's experience strictly as a conversion, Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Smyth and Helwys Publishing, Inc, Macon, GA 2005, 83, speaks of the narratives of Paul "in three complementary ways: 1) a conversion in which Christ changes an opponent into an ally; 2) as a conquest, in which Christ overpowers his enemy; and 3) as a commissioning, in which Christ chooses an emissary". J.A. FITZMYER, *The Acts of the Apostles, The Anchor Bible*, Doubleday, New York 1998, 420, qualifies that it is a conversion story only in the sense of Paul being transformed "from a persecutor to a witness of the risen Christ", but "not the conversion of a great sinner".

1. A Re-Interpretation of All Things in Christ

One of the most dramatic chronicles of conversion remains that of Saul, the oppressor of Christians turned Paul the Apostle (Acts 9:1-9). The story is retold twice in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 22:6-16 and 26:12-18), indicating its importance in the narratives. While the exact particulars are known only to Paul, the compelling force and impact of the encounter is sufficient to raise astonishment. It was enough to turn the most ardent of persecutors of the early Church to its most stalwart defender. That Paul remained Jewish in his tradition is certain. He neither renounced his Jewishness, nor discounted his heritage (as Acts 16:3; 21:26; 22:3; 24:14 bear witness to). Yet it was under the banner of Christ to which Paul eventually subjected his Jewish faith.

The road to Damascus was the passageway to enlightenment, understanding, and freedom for Paul. The details are sparingly told in the first recounting (Acts 9). He fell to the ground (considered one of the features of a theophany⁸) upon seeing a light⁹ from the sky surround him, presumably saw Jesus (Acts 9:27) and subsequently heard a voice, calling in the double vocative reminiscent of the Old Testament calls. Jesus not only revealed Himself to the fallen man, but identified Himself with the Church¹⁰ that Paul was bent on bearing down upon (Acts 9:4-5). After receiving cryptic instructions, Paul discovers he is blind (Acts 9:8).

Such an encounter with the Lord had a confounding effect upon the future Apostle to the Gentiles. In acknowledging that Jesus was indeed the Lord, he had to resolve what that meant in relation to

⁸ CH. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 86. He offers as other examples: Ezek 1:28; Dan 8:17; Rev 1:17.

⁹ C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, T&T Clark, London 2002, 134, states "for Luke light is a physical representation of the divine glory of Christ". R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, The Acts of the Apostles, vol. 2, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 1994, 120, presupposes "that Paul saw the Messiah, not just the light".

¹⁰ B.R. GAVENTA, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Missionary Conversion*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA 1986, 56, pointedly observes that though *mathetes* is found 28 times in Acts, this is the only one that contains the qualifier *tou kyriou*. Luke hence appears purposeful here as he introduces the chapter, to subtly identify Jesus with His disciples as he will clearly state in the narrative.

everything he had ever known and fought to uphold – his Jewish faith. As to the workings of the Lord on the heart of Paul, one can only imagine. However, the reader of Acts is left with particular clues about what Paul had to grapple with.

Initially, the blindness-causing-light is an irony one cannot fail to notice. It gives emphasis on the need to see, perhaps at this stage of the narration, exteriorly but as one progresses, also apparently interiorly. When one reads how Ananias is told that Paul will be used by the Lord to call Gentiles (Acts 9:15), the image of light then gives reference to Israel being “the light of the Gentiles”¹¹ (the third narration, Acts 26:18 characterizes this light as salvific). His blindness and helplessness result in his having to be guided. Again, the ostensible manner is physical but when one considers the drama unfolding, one cannot help but wonder if there is also an internal guidance taking place.

The rest of Acts will make evident that, because of this encounter with the Lord, Paul is no longer the same man by any measure. The transformation that occurs equates to a “conversion of will, intellect and emotion which dictated the abiding purpose and direction of his subsequent life and activity”.¹² This is the proverbial 180-degree turnaround being effected.

One thing to ponder is that it was Jesus Himself who transformed Paul on the road to Damascus. There was no middle man in this episode, the conversion was wholly to Jesus, by Jesus. Paul *took this direct encounter with Christ*, and prayerfully contemplated what all this meant with regard to all that he had believed all his life. From there, he realized that there was no conflict in any way. Faced with the truth of Christ, Paul re-interpreted his Jewish beliefs in light of what Christ revealed. In this way, Paul saw how his Jewish faith was made complete by and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Christ is the necessary starting point for the missionary task at hand. Those persecuting Christ knew no better and were content to

¹¹ See R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 121-122, for a detailed discussion linking the theme of light to being “the light to the Gentiles” in Acts.

¹² F.F. BRUCE, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, G. FEE (rev. ed., gen. ed.), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1988, 183.

stay with what they had always known, as did Paul initially. But all the “truths” in the world are mere seedbeds – preparatory work for the “Truth” that Christ is. Mission work is *for* Christ, *about* Christ and even *by* Christ. The only way one will ever begin fully to understand the work being asked is to center on Christ. The present world experiences a clouding of Christ owing to a greediness for pleasure, power, money, and other things that are not in consonance with Him. A re-interpretation in Christ equates to everything finding meaning only in the light of Jesus. This takes knowing Jesus, learning about his ways, his mission and his life. It calls for one to look at people, situations, circumstances, contexts and cultures with the eyes of the Messiah. It means that thoughts and words will only find meaning when juxtaposed with Jesus.

Concretely in mission, it means acknowledging that all people have been saved by Him, realizing that all cultures have a share in Him, accepting that all knowledge stems from Him. And then acting accordingly. To be missionary is to measure things and situations and people against what is known about Christ, and looking for points of consonance and congruence, with Christ as the core and center. This re-interpretation dictates that the doors of the eyes, the mind, and the imaginings be kept open for a world-view that revolves around Christ, and the Christ that in fact governs the world-view.

1.1 Preach Christ

The missionary impetus therefore must solely be Christ. A brief look at the figure of Simon in Acts 8 admonishes those who serve for self-glorification.¹³ His character contrasts with that of the evangelist Philip who preached the kingdom of God in Jesus (Acts 8:35),¹⁴ while Simon, in his claims to be someone great (Acts 8:9-

¹³ R.J. KARRIS, *Invitation to Acts: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles with Complete Text from The Jerusalem Bible*, Image Books, Garden City, NY 1978, 95.

¹⁴ M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2008, 114, observes that in contrasting Philip with Simon, Luke also tries to show that the wondrous signs done by the early Christians were NOT magical in nature, thus illustrating the difference between a Christian miracle and pagan magic.

10), preached only himself. Though outwardly devoted to Philip, his request to pay for the power to confer the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:19) exposed the genuine stirrings of his heart. Peter, quite adamant that the service they do for the people on behalf of the Lord is freely given (Acts 3:6),¹⁵ lambasts Simon for daring to desire the manipulation of the Spirit.¹⁶

At the heart of Simon's actions lies the desire for self-aggrandizement, for an increase in stature, for things that do not coincide with what it means to be like Christ. Missionaries and preachers may begin to proclaim Christ in all sincerity at the onset, but end up failing to resist the temptation to bring their own selves to the forefront. Thus, they not only obscure Christ, but use Him as a means and an excuse to extol themselves. Missionaries may consider their own popularity as a gauge of the ministry success. If one reinterprets missionary accomplishments through the eyes of Christ, then one thinks only of *how much of Christ* did the people actually encounter through the endeavors of those proclaiming Him.

On a subtler note, one finds in Acts 15 the crucial decision that has to be made by the early Church: Where does salvation lie? In Christ? Or in circumcision, which is the distinguishing mark of the Jewish faith? A slightly fuller treatment of this shall be tackled below; however, at this point, suffice it to say that Jewish Christians expected their Jewish customs would be completely embedded in their new Christian faith, as though believing in Christ were just an add-on. Paul, as we saw earlier, in no way considered Christ supplemental, but was able to reinterpret the Jewish beliefs with Christ as its very foundation and fulfillment. Given that Christ was now the fulcrum around which everything was hinged on, Paul began to weed out what components of his Jewish belief were not in consonance, or were not necessary for what Christ revealed to him. In Acts 15,

¹⁵ R.I. PERVO, *Acts: A Commentary*, Hermeneia, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 2009, 214.

¹⁶ B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1998, 286; P. HERTIG, "The Magical Mystery Tour: Philip Encounters Magic and Materialism in Samaria", in R.L. GALLAGHER – P. HERTIG (eds.), *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 2004, 106, states that Simon "seeks a power that he may own".

one finds the Jewish Church not imposing on the Gentile Christians their own Jewish obligations¹⁷ especially regarding the need for circumcision. The argument of Peter (Acts 15:7-11) was clearly saying “if God had not been pleased with these converts, if he had wanted more, he would have made this clear, and he would not have given them the signs of salvation, as he had done”.¹⁸

Missionary minds can take a page from the early Church in this regard. When proclaimers bring Christ to the field, they do not realize they are sometimes bringing more than just Christ. They are aided to this end by their own spirituality and expressions of their Catholicity – Carmelite, Franciscan, Dominican, to give some proper names – or, in general terms, their monastic, charismatic, contemplative, or active spirituality among many others. The richness of the Catholic expression ensures that these well support the mission – they are a way of concretizing both the inward and outward codes of the faith. They can also be however, *a hindrance, when they are imposed*. When missionaries of a certain spirituality do not merely introduce but force their own way of living their Christian life on others, Christ somehow gets eclipsed. Believers may even be lost this way, not being able to find Christ in a spirituality that is forced upon them. Conversion is solely to Christ, not to a specific congregation / lay association or specific spirituality.

Preach Christ and nothing more. All else is superfluous. Missionaries can draw inspiration from both Philip and the early Church and resist the temptation to forcibly impress a specific brand of spirituality on others as they herald Christ. Let each individual discover the spirituality the Lord draws one to. Allow the Lord to work His transformation in His people. It is after all, His mission and, again, His people.

¹⁷ In Acts 15:29, there are four abstentions requested by James for the Gentiles. C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 234, discusses the possible origins and backgrounds for these. L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 272, argues admirably that the point of these abstentions was “to provide the basis for table-fellowship and full communion between Jew and Gentile Messianists”. These four would represent the minimum necessary for the Gentile to be welcomed at the table of the Jew since ancient protocol required table-fellowship with people who shared the same values.

¹⁸ J.J. KILGALLEN, *A Brief Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ 1988, 122.

The opposite scenario though, can also occur, that is, the watered-down teaching of Christ. Acts shows how a characteristic of those proclaiming Christ is a particular kind of boldness. Acts 4:29 speaks of a supplication to enable the believers to speak with all boldness, despite impending adversity. Paul and his companions are found arguing incessantly in synagogues (Acts 13:14-41; 14:1-3; 17:1-3, 10-11, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8), unequivocally proclaiming the unpopular message that Jesus is the Messiah. It was not because they were lacking in courage that they shifted to the Gentiles. It was only after the constant insistence of the Jews to reject the proclamation that they resorted to preaching to the Gentiles (Acts 13:44-46; 18:5-6). The two clear facts about Christ which earned them not only derision but physical harm, were that Christ is the Messiah, and that belief in Him is necessary for the forgiveness of sins. Despite the difficulty in proclaiming these, they were not derailed from doing so. The proclamation was kept alive.

When Christ is proclaimed by missionaries, He must not be a reduced Christ, tailored to suit what would be palatable to the people, but must be the very truth of Christ. There is a basic Creed our faith professes that must be clearly declared, without any deviation from it. A watered-down Christ is not Christ at all. Missionaries must be kept aware of this reality, for what is at stake in the proclamation is the salvation of souls. For which, only Christ is the answer.

A word of caution for all missionary endeavors brings one to the next important point: Preaching Christ is not preaching Christ if words are bereft of loving deeds.

1.2 Witness to Christ

The Greek *μάρτυς* is a noun for someone who “witnesses”,¹⁹ which may be achieved by words or deeds. To witness Christ is “the central activity of Acts”.²⁰ The early Church began its witness by preach-

¹⁹ *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, B. HORST – G. SCHNEIDER (eds.), vol. 2, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 2000, s.v. “*μάρτυς*”, 393. In Acts, it takes on a meaning more than just being an “eyewitness”, and is used by Luke exclusively for the Apostles, Paul and Stephen, 395.

²⁰ J.J. KILGALLEN, *A Brief Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 9. A related thought is stressed in RM 32, which situates missionary activity at the center of the life of the Church today, and considers it “a fundamental commitment of the whole people of God”.

ing in synagogues, and when rejected by the Jews, it moved into the market place (Acts 17:17), accompanying its kerygma with signs and wonders. The message of Christ in words is strengthened by Christian deeds, precisely because this is the very pattern of the life of Christ, His words explained His deeds, and His deeds confirmed His words.²¹ Of the ten conversion stories in Acts (2:1-41; 3:1-4:4; 8:4-25; 8:26-40; 9:1-31; 10:1-49; 13:6-12; 13:13-52; 16:11-15; 16:25-34), eight are explicitly connected to signs and wonders²² (2:1-41; 3:1-4:4; 8:4-25; 8:26-40; 9:1-31; 10:1-49; 13:6-12; 16:25-34).

Accompanying these wondrous deeds was a strong testimony to what believing in Christ meant, an authentic witness of life. The connective summaries in Acts show the early Church growing in number,²³ not only through preaching but because of the life they shared:²⁴ “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need” (Acts 2:44-45. See also Acts 4:32-35. Acts 5:1-11 finds the opposite example shown by Ananias and Sapphira).

While the miracles wrought through Christ testify to His authority and power as God, acts of genuine Christian goodness are a

²¹ Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* “*Dei Verbum*”, n. 2, 18th November 1965.

²² M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 115, says signs and wonder were external manifestations of the spoken message.

²³ W. REINHARDT, “The Population Size of Jerusalem and the Numerical Growth of the Jerusalem Church”, in R. BAUCKHAM (ed.), *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting*, *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, vol. 4, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1995, 237-266, argues against the improbability of the growth in numbers based on the size of the Jerusalem population at the time of Jesus.

²⁴ Most scholars agree this is an idyllic description composed by Luke. J.A. FITZMYER, *The Anchor Bible*, 269, affirms that though an ideal, “it highlights the elements that *should be* part of genuine Christian life”. Emphasis added. L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 62, declares that this ideal was not just a literary theme and device used by Luke. He makes mention of evidence of sharing possessions in other biblical texts (Gal 2:10; 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9; Rom 15:25-31; Phil 4:15-20) and other early Christian literature. B. CAPPER, “The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods”, in R. BAUCKHAM (ed.), *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting*, 334-337, shows how based on the practice of the Essene community, the antiquity and historicity of the tradition of Acts 2:44 is actually possible, if not probable.

testimony to His love, to His authority and influence over the life of the believer. In a day and age where miracles are few and far between, it will be the lives of the missionaries that will carry the message of Christ. When others identify the fruit of Christianity – joy, truthfulness, goodness, and the rest of the fruit of the Holy Spirit²⁵ – in the life of the one bearing the good news, they will intuitively be drawn to Christ. As it was then, so it is to the present day, that it is not just power that converts, but the love behind the power. It must be remembered, that it is not always words that lead to conversion.

One key aspect in the authentic witness of life is the embracing of the marginalized. In Acts 8 (which will receive additional treatment below), the convert who Luke focuses on is an Ethiopian eunuch.²⁶ While identified as a man of importance, being the officer of the court of the queen of Ethiopia (Acts 8:27), Luke's emphasizes the fact he is a eunuch,²⁷ that is a physically mutilated man (Dt 23:2 automatically excludes them from assembly); among the most despised in antiquity, and considered an evil people.²⁸ That he is an Ethiopian²⁹ further carries contempt, as they were described as "one of the wicked nations of the world (Is 20:3-5; 43:3; Ezek 30:1-9; Nah 3:9; Zeph 2:11-12)".³⁰ The picture painted in Acts 8 is that of Philip ministering to an outcast, someone reviled in society, and bringing

²⁵ These are charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, and chastity as per the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1832.

²⁶ Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 75, gives both the positive and negative views regarding eunuchs in antiquity but also mentions that "Jewish scriptures were hostile to such people (Lev 21:20; 22:24)". M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 119-120, breaks down the cultural description of both "Ethiopian" and "eunuch" and cites possible reasons for their marginalization.

²⁷ K.H. REEVES, "The Ethiopian Eunuch: A Key Transition from Hellenist to Gentile Mission", in R.L. GALLAGHER – P. HERTIG (eds.), *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, 117, argues that the "dominant trait in the narrative" is that he is a castrated male. See also M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 119-120.

²⁸ M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 120, citing S.F. SPENCER, "The Ethiopian Eunuch and His Bible: A Socio-Science Analysis", *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, vol. 22, 1992, 156.

²⁹ J.A. FITZMYER, *The Anchor Bible*, 412, observes that Ethiopia here is not to be identified with the modern-day country but covers several different regions south of Egypt, primary of which is the present-day Sudan.

³⁰ Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 75.

the likes of him into the fold of the people of God.³¹ The question asked by the eunuch: “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:36) is not a superficial question but one that rhetorically declares that all boundaries are purposefully being broken down.³²

In the short analysis above, it appears that Luke manages to encourage the scrapping of biases and prejudices,³³ which are no more in Christ. Through this narrative and others similar (the Cornelius conversion, for instance), Luke steadily takes the position that judgements based on appearances, exteriors and accidents have no place among the community of God. Reaching out to the people who belong to God requires the inclusion of those shunned by society because of their low social class, physical or psychological handicaps, lack of education, ethnicity, etc. In the establishment of communities, care must be shown that outcasts be seen and treated as equals by those more fortunate than themselves. The Lukan Christ especially favors those excluded by society (the programmatic prophecy in Luke 4:18-19 clearly spells out his ministry to bring the Gospel to the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed³⁴). And the disciple of Christ is called to follow suit. The missionary call is to do what Jesus did. In this case, with purpose, He sought out

³¹ M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 123-124. Some commentators center on the question of his being a proselyte, or God-fearer or Gentile, pointing to the first Gentile conversion but as L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 159, points out, “the enormous effort Luke put into the Cornelius sequence (chapters 10-15) would make no sense at all if Cornelius did not represent a fundamentally new step [...]. Luke clearly wants his readers to see him [the Ethiopian eunuch] as part of the ‘ingathering of scattered people’ of Israel”. Other scholars make mention of the point of the narrative being rather the reaching of “the ends of the earth”, since Ethiopia was thought to be that, B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 290 (although he admits there is no evidence of a first century Church in Ethiopia, 301); and R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 108-109.

³² Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 79-80, touches on this subject at length.

³³ M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 119.

³⁴ L.T. JOHNSON, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 3, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, PA 1991, 81, explains that this character of Jesus’ ministry will be shown throughout the narrative stories of Luke about Jesus. Some examples are the cleansing of the leper (Lk 5: 12-13); the call of Levi the tax collector (Lk 5:27-32); the raising of the widow’s son (Lk 7:11-15); the forgiving of the sinful woman (Lk 7:36-50), among others.

people who were considered of no import, and fully embraced them all into his fold. Acts makes it clear, there should be no distinction among the people of God as “He is the Lord of all” (Acts 10:36).

2. A Re-Orientation Toward the Movement of the Holy Spirit

Following the declaration of the severe persecution that broke out at the beginning of Acts 8, Luke narrates of the missionary exploits of Philip, who may have been one of the “seven reputable men, filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom” in Acts 6.³⁵ In the episode with the Ethiopian eunuch, readers are told, three times within a mere fifteen verses, how the Holy Spirit drove Philip’s activity (Acts 8:26, 29, 39). The narrative is peppered with seemingly fortuitous events that bear the mark of the movement of the Spirit.

Philip is characterized as someone whose role is to fully yield to the Spirit. The first verse in the story finds Philip instructed by an angel of the Lord to go to Gaza, the desert road at noon (Acts 8:26). Two things must be said of this command. The first is that because of the heat of the desert sun, hardly anybody would be found traveling at noon in those days.³⁶ The second is that he was directed to the desert road. The Greek word for “desert”, ἔρημος also means “desolate” or “empty”,³⁷ which could allude to the outcome of the endeavor. Despite the strangeness of the instructions, Philip obeys and is rewarded by coming across an Ethiopian eunuch in a chariot whom the Spirit tells Philip to join (Acts 8:29). This gives the evangelist the opportunity to proclaim Jesus to the eunuch who not only happened to have been reading an Isaiah passage that gave Philip the perfect opening to preach Christ (Acts 8:28-35), but also asked to be baptized when they happened to come across water in that “desolate” desert!³⁸ Instead of coming out *empty*-handed, Philip bore

³⁵ So F.F. BRUCE, *The Book of the Acts*, 164; Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 68; and B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, *Acts-Socio*, 279.

³⁶ B.R. GAVENTA, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Missionary Conversion*, 101; and C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 124.

³⁷ B.R. GAVENTA, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Missionary Conversion*, 102.

³⁸ C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 127, however, claims “this is not surprising: there is good winter rainfall along the coastal strip”.

good fruit in furthering the Gospel. Immediately following the baptism, Philip is snatched away by the Spirit and sent to preach the Gospel to other areas (Acts 8:39-40).

Luke makes glaringly clear how the Holy Spirit was orchestrating the entire affair.³⁹ What is equally evident is that Philip the evangelist matches each instruction of the Spirit with quick obedience, regardless how odd the inspirations may have appeared to him. The narrative shows how this ready obedience yields much fruit for the mission. Philip, it seems, has re-oriented all thought and will to the Holy Spirit. This requires a turning-to, in this case a full turning toward the action of the Spirit. Missionary work is best effected by a complete adjustment and even alignment of life to the Spirit-directed work.⁴⁰

This calls for several self-adjustments, the primary and most difficult of which is the denial of self-will, humbly accepting the fact that one does not know all. Hence, the missionary heart remains open to the promptings of the One who *does* in fact know, and sees all. A certain amount of flexibility is exercised during missionary undertakings. Good missionary people are those able to bend their will easily to that of the Spirit, recognizing full well how they are mere instruments in the work. This in no way precludes the act of planning and organizing, which is also essential to mission, and are also gifts of work of the Spirit. However, it needs to be said that while there are plans made and ideas put on the worktable, these play second fiddle to the way the Spirit marks the path for the proclamation.

There is, however, a peculiar harmony involved in remaining flexible and having resolve. Once the missionary demand is made clear by the Lord, those in the mission field ought to display great tenacity in laboring for the Kingdom. Despite unusual circumstances or commands, the mission progresses with joyful missionary resoluteness, knowing that what the Spirit has begun, will likewise be fulfilled through His power. The recognition that it is the Holy Spirit who calls, guides and finishes the mission, is sufficient to redirect all in purposefully fulfilling His will.⁴¹

³⁹ Barrett practically identifies the angel of the Lord with the Spirit, *Ibid.*, 124.

⁴⁰ RM 21 declares the Holy Spirit as the principal agent of mission.

⁴¹ The essay of Fr. Francis J. Moloney, SDB in this volume gives a comprehensive treatment of this theme in Acts.

2.1 Recognize the Holy Spirit at Work

It must be understood and always highlighted that the mission belongs to the Lord. He is the God who orchestrates, inspires and moves the missionary work forward. On this assumption, if one were to agree that verse 1:8 in Acts – “But you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” – stands both as a mandate and *a promise*,⁴² then one would expect the Holy Spirit to surely propel the Church and all missionary endeavors. His presence would not be lacking. What remains for those continuing the mission is to be able to discern His action.

The obvious and necessary starting point of discernment is prayer. It is in constant keeping with the intimacy of a relationship with God that one will better understand the stirrings of His will. Acts shows how not only the disciples are always in prayer, but that it is at the point of prayer that the mission moves forward and progresses. Pentecost came about as a result of prayer in the upper room (Acts 1:13-14).⁴³ The choosing to complete the Twelve was done in prayer (Acts 1:24-26). The Spirit powerfully manifested Himself and emboldened them as they were praying (Acts 4:31). Tabitha is brought back to life by Peter’s prayer (Acts 9:40). Visions and instructions were received – both that of Ananias and Paul, while Paul was praying (Acts 9:10-12); the vision of Cornelius (Acts 10:3); that of Peter (Acts 10:9-10; 11:5); the setting apart of Paul and Barnabas for mission (Acts 13:2) – in prayer (and fasting). Peter was set free while others were praying (Acts 12:5-12). Prison doors broke open in the face of prayer and praise (Acts 16:25-26). Presbyters were commended to the Lord in prayer and fasting (Acts 14:21). Miracles and healing occurred (Acts 3:1-18; 28:8) through the bending of the knees before God.

⁴² B.R. GAVENTA, “You will Be My Witnesses: Aspects of Mission in the Acts of the Apostles”, 416; R.J. KARRIS, *Invitation to Acts: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles with Complete Text from The Jerusalem Bible*, 22-23; also Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 9, who emphatically says it is a promise or prophecy.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 11. Also implied by B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 114.

The Gospel of Luke places much emphasis on prayer, and on how Jesus prays.⁴⁴ It is no surprise then that the same stress is highlighted in the life of the Apostles and the community in the sequel of Luke. The ideas of praying, praising, glorifying God and thanking God appear at least forty-one times in Acts. For a witness to Christ to be effective, there must be an undisrupted connection with God, that is, the disciple must always be at prayer, must live a life immersed in prayer.

This unbroken flow of communication between God and His missionary should not be understated. It is in prayer that one builds on the relationship that is always being given by the Lord to His people. It is through prayer that one discovers more and more about the goodness the Lord is, and delves deeper to better appreciate His love. It is by prayer that one finds the motivation, the strength, the wisdom, and the love to do anything at all. Jesus Himself was always in prayer, and with good reason. The missionary disciple follows closely the footsteps of the One being proclaimed. The missionary, then as now, is essentially and necessarily one who prays.

2.2 Discern His Movement in Hardship

Mission work to places that either have not heard of the Gospel or have no interest to listen to its proclamation is no easy task. When difficulties emerge, so do, inevitably, discouragement and doubt. That is, unless one can still discern the movement of the Spirit in hardship. Acts speaks of a “severe persecution of the church in Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1),⁴⁵ resulting in the scattering of the believers. Yet this was the very vehicle by which the Gospel was spread. The Spirit made use of humanity cast out of their natural habitats. Though difficult to see at the time one is experiencing it, persecution can give rise to a fruitful by-product.

⁴⁴ L.T. JOHNSON, *The Gospel of Luke*, 69. He mentions that “critical moments of Jesus” ministry are punctuated in prayer (Lk 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28-29; 11:1; 22:41, 44-45; 23:46).

⁴⁵ BRIAN RAPSKE provides a comprehensive read on the persecution and obstructions in Acts in “Opposition to the Plan of God and Persecution”, in J. HOWARD MARSHALL – D. PETERSON (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel: Theology in Acts*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1998, 235-256.

Paul is keen to discern opportunities to proclaim and witness to Jesus during crisis situations and times of discouragement. Evidence for this is Paul's unswerving determination to move the mission forward despite his sufferings. In Acts 9:16 the reader is told that Paul was shown by Christ all that he would have to suffer for His name. A more resolute figure could not have been described by Luke, as Paul was bound (Acts 16:24; 21:33; 22:25), beaten (Acts 16:22; 21:32), willing to face imprisonment (Acts 20:22-24), imprisoned (Acts 16:23; 21:33), and even ready to die in the name of the Lord Jesus⁴⁶ (Acts 21:13). Acts further tells of how, time and again, Paul and his companions were rejected or threatened with bodily harm by one group or another (Acts 13:44-47, 50; 14:2, 4-5, 19; 16:19-24; 17:13; 18:5-6; 19:29-31; 21:27) but how the missionaries were resolute in moving the proclamation from place to place.

When the Spirit prevented the mission in some places, they would persevere in searching out where they would be allowed entry (Acts 16:6-10). While Luke is silent about the mind of Paul, the fact that he perseveres, allowing the Spirit to lead, is at least an indication of determined persistence in spreading the Word of God. While in prison, he even managed to bring the jailer and his family to the point of conversion (Acts 16:27-34). Convinced that the mission needs to be pursued at all cost, Paul never ceases to look for opportunities of grace even in adversity.

Grim moments have a way of obscuring the way the Spirit weaves His story into the work of mission. But time and again the Lord has proven He works amidst adversity and that He make good come out of even the most impossible of situations. The spread of the Gospel of the early Church came naturally as a result of persecution, and not because of any purposeful planning by the Apostles. The closing-off of one mission area by the Spirit leads to the opening-up in other areas, presumably more prepared to receive the proclamation.

⁴⁶ That Luke, however, does not record the death of Paul but ends the book of Acts with Paul fearlessly preaching in Rome, indicates his focus is not on Paul but on the faithfulness of God in carrying out the promise in Acts 1:8 (see the ending comments of L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 474-476) – the message of salvation in Jesus *will* go out boldly and without hindrance, and the life of the messianic community *will* go on, as our present-day experience of Church attests to.

Opposition to the proclamation by segments of society or individual people is to be expected. The Word and its message will not be embraced by all those it is preached to. Yet the missionary moves with a boldness borne of the confidence that the Spirit is ever-present in mission.⁴⁷ Hearts may eventually be won over by the Spirit, and the missionary disciple should press on, despite the seemingly discouraging or slow progress of the work. Missionaries may not know, but apparent delays and hitches in the mission could be part and parcel of the plan of the Lord. Mission should never be judged by the standards of man, but that of God. The book of Acts declares that occasions of grace are never lacking in mission, even when they are hard to identify at the onset. Paul and his companions in Acts give a clear confession that God is in control, and there is never a time that He is not.

2.3 Discern and Overcome Evil

A particular action of the Spirit that makes itself manifest during mission as seen in Acts, is the detection and overpowering of evil spirits. The book of Acts makes mention of the defeat of spirits at the hands of the evangelists or Apostles (Acts 5:16; 8:7; 16:16-18; 19:12). It also describes magicians disparagingly⁴⁸ and views them as those who “represent the powers opposed to the kingdom of God”.⁴⁹

In Acts 8, that Simon the magician comes to believe is a territorial victory for God, not just in overthrowing evil in Samaria but also in claiming the life of someone who used to declare himself like God (Acts 8:9-10).⁵⁰ The descriptive references to Simon (Acts 8:9-11), and the reason given behind his request for a share in the power of the Spirit (Acts 8:19), lend the idea of a highly-conceited man who wishes to control God, or even be revered like Him.

⁴⁷ In Luke’s accounts, the reader will realize that the boldness of the disciples is “not something naturally found within the persecuted witness; it comes through the Holy Spirit’s filling”. Ibid., 250.

⁴⁸ A good treatment on the way magic is perceived during those times is given by C.A. WALZ, “The Cursing Paul: Magical Contests in Acts 13 and the New Testament Apocrypha”, in R.L. GALLAGHER – P. HERTIG (eds.), *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, 167-182.

⁴⁹ L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 152.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 151-152.

The altercation between Paul and Elymas, the magician and false prophet, shows Luke making a distinction between the demonic powers behind magic and the work of the Holy Spirit,⁵¹ with Paul branding the power of Elymas as evil, deceitful and fraudulent (Acts 13:30). That Paul blinds him “for a time” suggests Paul besting the demonic power within,⁵² and giving Elymas a period for repentance. This is also reminiscent of the temporary blinding of Paul and the conversion that occurred in his own life.⁵³

Acts 16 recounts the episode of actual exorcism, that of “a slave girl with an oracular spirit” (Acts 16:16), by Paul who uses the name of Jesus. While little is said of the slave girl after the incident, the exorcism is followed by the anger of the owners of the slave who had been making money from her oracles (Acts 16:19). Beyond the exorcism is the dimension of “a corrupt understanding of money.”⁵⁴

For Paul’s three opponents above, the conversion⁵⁵ and freedom they were meant to experience is not only from demonic powers

⁵¹ C.A. WALZ, “The Cursing Paul: Magical Contests in Acts 13 and the New Testament Apocrypha,” 175.

⁵² B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 402, sees it as a battle between evil and the Spirit.

⁵³ F.F. BRUCE, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1990, 298 (3d rev. and enl. ed.), cites Bede: “The Apostles remembering his own example, knew that from the darkness of the eyes the mind’s darkness might be restored to ‘light’”. His citation details are incomplete. Bruce also mentions a similar observation by JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homily 21 on Acts of the Apostles*, 28. See also B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 402, who gives a three-point parallel between the blindness of Paul, and that of Elymas.

⁵⁴ B.R. GAVENTA, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN 2003, 239.

⁵⁵ In all three cases, the conversions are not explicit, and may only be at best, hoped for. In the case of Simon, B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 288, argues on five points that Simon was not converted. F.F. BRUCE, *The Book of the Acts*, 171-172, observes that later records of his activity show he did not repent. P. HERTIG, “The Magical Mystery Tour: Philip Encounters Magic and Materialism in Samaria”, 107, declares “Peter’s phrase suggests excommunication and implies that Simon does not embrace authentic Christian faith”. No words are spoken about the slave girl after the expulsion of the spirit and most commentators are silent about her conversion or salvation. The exception is R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 197-198, nota 7, who asserts that her salvation is implied by the parallelism of this with the exorcism in Luke 8 explaining “release from

but also from the bondage of sins such as pride (in Simon), deceit (in Elymas), and greed (in the owners of the slave girl). This indicates that the freedom that God brings is meant to touch each individual as a whole. There is no domain of life that God does not want to free from evil influence. Whenever and wherever the work of the Lord begins, evil is bound to crop up, laying obstacles and impediments on the path of ministry. In this power struggle, “missionaries do not search for the devil behind every bush but are prepared when evil manifests itself”.⁵⁶ Whether evil comes in the form of evil spirits or in the weaknesses of humanity, the missionary heart should strive to discern the liberating way of the Holy Spirit, and seek the means to free people from whatever binds them and keeps them away from God.

2.4 Acknowledge that He Lays the Foundational Work

Another quick look at Acts 9, but from the perspective of Ananias, yields interesting findings. The objection of Ananias to the instructions of the Lord for him to assist in healing Paul was tantamount to protesting: “But this one is the enemy”.⁵⁷ Ananias was merely voicing what he had heard about Paul (Acts 9:13-14), and he must have felt himself justified in doing so. Even after the acceptance of Ananias and the subsequent conversion of Paul, the disciples in Jerusalem themselves “were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26). The reaction of Ananias to Paul, as well as that of the disciples, initially shows “a misdirected fear of the persecutor rather than God” (Lk 12:4-5). It also shows the problem that humans have in keeping up with the Lord’s work”.⁵⁸ The basic assumption of Ananias may have been that Paul was beyond reform (surely he did not think that the Lord was not as informed about

demons is one aspect of the salvation that Jesus and his witnesses bring”. The “conversion” of Elymas is open to hope, in light of the same conversion pattern Paul experienced as observed by J. DUNN, *The Acts of the Apostles*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1996, 177. See also footnote 53.

⁵⁶ What is observed by P. HERTIG, “The Magical Mystery Tour: Philip Encounters Magic and Materialism in Samaria”, 106, can also be said for today.

⁵⁷ B.R. GAVENTA, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 151.

⁵⁸ R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 117.

Paul as he himself was!). The conversion was admittedly dramatic,⁵⁹ and thus the fears of Ananias are not unfounded. Nevertheless, as the reader is told God had already started paving the way for Paul (Acts 9:3-9) *even before* commissioning Ananias. Prior to the instructions to Ananias, God was already working on His plan.

Moving to another story, that of the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10 (which shall be further discussed below), it is said that he was “devout and God-fearing along with his whole household, who used to give alms generously to the Jewish people and pray to God constantly” (Acts 10:2). The messengers of Ananias tell Peter about these facts in v. 22, where however Cornelius’ almsgiving is omitted but replaced by his being respected by the whole Jewish nation. Two things are worth pointing out here. First, that God is already present in the life of Cornelius and had been working good things in him for some indefinite time for it appears that God was no stranger to Cornelius. Second, that Peter listened to the messengers, and incorporated the information about Cornelius to the vision he had just had (Acts 10: 9-16) and the instructions from the Holy Spirit he had just received (Acts 10:19-20). Peter further listens to Cornelius himself responding to the question of Peter as to his being summoned (Acts 10:30-33).

For the Church of today, the texts show us that missionary work is fruitful when there is a recognition of the foundation already prepared by the Holy Spirit in the lives of those to be evangelized. Both Ananias and Peter would have accepted on hindsight how the Lord had already laid the groundwork for what He wanted to do. While the Church is tasked with furthering the mission, it is the role of the Holy Spirit to be there long before the missionaries even arrive at those places and meet those people. What remains is for the missionary endeavors to be synchronized with the way the Divine preliminaries have been laid out.

The conversion of Cornelius shows Peter listening carefully to various sources, in order to properly ponder the unusual circumstance he is in. He listened to the Holy Spirit, to the messengers, and

⁵⁹ C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 132 comments on the radicalness of the conversion: “This was a radical change of religious direction, and it was accompanied by as radical a change of action: the active persecutor became an even more active preacher and evangelist”.

to Cornelius himself. It is in that vigilant attention to people and promptings that he is able to properly interpret what the Spirit is saying. Missionary people are people who are willing to first listen and observe. Missionaries can presume to know too much, and fail to see the writings which point to how the Spirit wills the completion of the task He has already started. Worse still, they can judge people and situations too soon and neglect to see how the Lord has already planted the seeds of His saving work in them. Total abandonment to the Spirit requires humble acknowledgement of the role the missionary plays, that is, merely to continue (at times, not even complete) the task that was prepared by the Lord. The missionary mind stands aware that the Holy Spirit has not only gone before, but is always currently at work, and will remain with the communities even long after the missionaries have moved on to establishing other communities in other mission fields.

3. A Re-Examination of Ourselves as Church

The story of Cornelius in Acts 10 is described generally by scholars as the first major breakthrough of the Gospel to the Gentiles,⁶⁰ exposing a parallel Pentecost experience for them.⁶¹ In it we find Cornelius and his household listening and assenting to all that Peter had to say, and consequently receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit and baptism. This story though accounts for two conversions, one of Cornelius to Christ, and one of Peter to a better understanding of

⁶⁰ R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 110 makes an important point with regard to the conversions of the eunuch and Cornelius. He takes both as Gentiles but stresses that the one of the eunuch is a private affair. The importance of the Cornelius event is not that he is the first Gentile convert (because he is not and need not be), but because “through the conversion of Cornelius, Peter learns something that has permanent value for the church and affects the further course of the mission.” He further expounds on 137-138. B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 295, says the picture Luke is painting of the Ethiopian eunuch is to show a favoring of ethnic groups, and that he paves the way for the deliberate mission to the Gentiles, 301. See also the comment of Johnson in footnote 31. Cf. F.F. BRUCE, *The Book of the Acts*, 203-204, who identifies the eunuch as the first Gentile convert.

⁶¹ Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 101; and C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 162.

the Church of Christ.⁶² Emphasis for the discussion on Acts 10 will focalize on the latter conversion, which will be traced in three steps.

The first step to conversion occurs through visions. The narrative in Acts 10 begins with a double vision. The initial one, which comes to Cornelius at prayer (Acts 10:30), commands for Peter to be sent from a city over 30 miles away from Caesarea. He dispatches three men immediately, in his characteristic obedient devoutness to God (Acts 10:2). The second vision comes to Peter who is also at prayer, however not at the usual time.⁶³ His vision which included a command to slaughter⁶⁴ and eat from something that appears to be like a sheet containing “all the earth’s four-legged animals and reptiles and birds of the sky”, is repeated twice more without him understanding what it means (Acts 10:10-17). At this stage, Peter is in the dark and possibly confused since the heavenly command voiced out something that is very much against his Jewish conscience.

Step two, is effected by the Holy Spirit who instructs Peter to go without hesitation and accompany three men whom the Holy Spirit had sent (Acts 10:19-20). With this clear instruction, Peter goes downstairs and listens to what the three men had to say (Acts 10:21-22). At this point, the text is silent about Peter’s thoughts. His consequent actions, however, may indicate that he has been linking the message of the Holy Spirit with the vision. That “he invited them in and showed them hospitality” (Acts 10:23), “was a step in the right

⁶² Some scholars who speak of the conversion of Peter are B.R. GAVENTA, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Missionary Conversion*, 112; and J. DUNN, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 132. B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 361, pointedly observes that while Cornelius’ conversion was Christological, that of Peter was ecclesiological. An entire article on the conversion of Peter is written by Ch. E. VAN ENGEN, “Peter’s Conversion: A Culinary Disaster Launches the Gentile Mission”, in R.L. GALLAGHER – P. HERTIG (eds.), *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, 133-143.

⁶³ F.F. BRUCE, *The Book of Acts*, 205, comments that “noon was not one of the appointed times for public prayer, but pious Jews like Daniel (Dan 6:10) who prayed three times a day probably prayed then”. See also C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 156, who explains that “probably for Luke Apostles were men who prayed more frequently than most”.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 157, interprets this word as having sacrificial overtones, meaning Peter will be called “to perform a religious act, which will be completed by eating”. This may refer to the baptism that will be given to Cornelius later on, and the table fellowship with the newly-baptized that will ensue over the next days.

direction, although it did not expose him to such risk of defilement as would a Jew's acceptance of hospitality in a Gentile's house".⁶⁵ Perhaps Peter has also remembered the similar unitive acts of Jesus in His lifetime (e.g. Lk 5:12-14, 27-32; 7:36-50; 17:11-18; 19:1-10), which caused other Jews to frown upon Him. The next day, he leaves with them and, upon reaching Caesarea, listens in turn to the vision of Cornelius (Acts 10: 23b-33). Again, though the workings of the mind of Peter are unknown, his response is a strong indication of his conclusions. His observation that "in truth, I see God knows no partiality" (Acts 10:34) corroborates that he has rightly drawn the connecting lines in response to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

The last step is a confirmation by the Holy Spirit who enters Cornelius and his household even as Peter is speaking (Acts 10:44-46). With that heavenly validation, Peter orders their baptism in Christ (Acts 10:47-48), after which he is invited to stay with them a few days. These final words of the chapter speak volumes of the totality of the change of heart within Peter. In the first instance when he invited Gentiles to stay with him (Acts 10:23a), he as a Jew would have prepared food proper to a Jewish meal. However, as a guest Peter accepts the possibility to be served food forbidden to Jews,⁶⁶ and it is likely he graciously joins them in table fellowship, having stayed with them some days.

In this three-step process, Peter moves from uncertainty to reasonable certainty to receiving validation. The experience of Peter is not an easy one. It is a turnaround from "traditional and deeply rooted convictions which had completely governed his life until that moment".⁶⁷ It is true that the Holy Spirit clearly has voiced out some instructions, namely to accompany the men that He Himself had

⁶⁵ F.F. BRUCE, *The Book of the Acts*, 210.

⁶⁶ C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 167, opines though that Cornelius "was not the sort of man to insult a Jew by offering forbidden food".

⁶⁷ J. DUNN, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 132. Ch. E. VAN ENGEN, "Peter's Conversion: A Culinary Disaster Launches the Gentile Mission", 136, claims that "the radical transformation and conversion here is ascribed to Peter, not to Cornelius", and that "in the story Peter presents himself as the one who needs changing", 137. This finds agreement with B.R. GAVENTA, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Missionary Conversion*, 109, who observes that the change Peter and company undergo "is more wrenching by far than the change experienced by Cornelius".

sent. In carrying out this final part of the command, Peter however needs to re-examine all that he knows about Jesus, all that he has been taught about his Jewish faith, and discern where the Spirit is leading him in light of all these truths and beliefs.⁶⁸ Upon introspection, Peter could not disregard the voice of the Spirit and the vision he had received. In his speech to the Jerusalem Council, it is clear that he recognizes what the actual basis of salvation is or, rather, who (Acts 15:11). Through this re-examination he also considers the implications this new knowledge has on the community that had come to believe in Christ.⁶⁹ Peter has come to a dawning comprehension of the following: the way God sees people, about what is necessary for salvation, about how this affects the way they are called to understand Jews and Gentiles, and about how this in turn changes the meaning of community. He is then willing to face whatever potential consequences could arise⁷⁰ from this new awareness.

For present-day missionaries, a constant re-examination of the Church is also vital to the proclamation of Christ to people and places outside Her. For the Church and her missionaries, introspection becomes a process of both a looking back and forward. This deeper looking into oneself as the Church recalls the development of Catholic tradition and surveys the contemporary changes and movements of both cultures and peoples. That the Church may be called to implement change in Her deeper understanding of self, is not at all unexpected. The missionary disciple of Christ should be no different and move beyond the fear of losing the Catholic identity of the Church against the backdrop of vast cultures, for it is precisely because of her Catholicity that the Church, when She embraces all, lives out Her identity to the fullest. She is hence all the more Catholic when all peoples, races and cultures are under Her loving fold. For the Church is not an edifice of rigid rules nailing it-

⁶⁸ R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 138, discusses how Peter came to understand the impartiality of God and what this meant for the work of proclamation. R.I. PERVO, *Hermeneia, Acts: A Commentary*, 274, declares that Peter's conversion was a result of his own reflection.

⁶⁹ B.R. GAVENTA, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Missionary Conversion*, 109, states that this conversion required the conversion of the Church as well.

⁷⁰ F.F. BRUCE, *The Book of the Acts*, 210, discusses the laws Peter was violating by his actions. See also C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 159-160.

self to the ground. She is the body of Christ, living and dynamic, constantly reforming as She journeys towards the God who in turn is always approaching Her, meeting Her wherever She is.

3.1 Establish Organic Churches

The missionary duty includes begetting churches.⁷¹ Against the tendency to shape churches with predesigned casts, the communities formed by missionaries are better-established when rooted in the life of people. The book of Acts recounts how Paul himself alters his invitation⁷² to come to the Gospel depending on his audience. When he proclaims in Athens (Acts 17:22-31), he is careful not to speak as if to a Jewish audience, but speaks in a way his Gentile listeners could relate to.⁷³ Here, he challenges the language and concepts of Epicureans and Stoics, uses the Hellenistic form of oratory, outlining ideas that the Athenians would be familiar with.⁷⁴ Paul begins with a god they worship, whom Paul asserts to be proclaiming to them, and weaves his arguments to end up in professing Jesus as the man appointed by God for judgment, confirmed by his resurrection. In this ten-verse speech of Paul to the Athenians, it was only the very last line concerning the resurrection which would have presented something unfamiliar to his listeners.⁷⁵ All in all, it has been said that in this speech by Paul, “Greek notions have been taken up and given new meaning by placing them in a Jewish-Christianity monotheistic context.”⁷⁶ Paul demonstrates not only his skills but the propensity to dialogue with peoples and cultures.

⁷¹ Vatican II, *Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church “Ad Gentes”*, n. 1.

⁷² Note that the only thing Paul altered was *the way* he preached Christ, not the content of and truths about Christ Himself.

⁷³ RM 25 declares that this speech of Paul is one of those acknowledged as a model for evangelization. On the detailed rhetorical resonances Paul makes with his audience in this speech, see M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 245-249; and Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 152-157. An even lengthier treatment is given by B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 511-532.

⁷⁴ M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 245-246.

⁷⁵ Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 157.

⁷⁶ B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary, Acts-Socio*, 524.

The Lukan Paul is depicted as someone who painstakingly looks for points of convergence, well aware that people will be more open when faced with dialogue as opposed to debate. “Luke describes a mission that is willing and able to speak in a language that can be heard.”⁷⁷ The missionary task is to identify and make use of areas of commonality that would not be lacking since Christ is the basis of anything good, beautiful and true in any culture. Missionaries would do well then to assess the area, the traditions and the people, in order to look not only for ways that the Gospel could be properly introduced in a manner and style that will be accepted and understood, but also to assess the best possible way for the community to flourish in Christ in the future.

Mission is not of the one-size fits all variety,⁷⁸ but rather situates itself in the context of the people being witnessed to. Missionary tasks will have to be personalized to be effective, taking into account the customs and way of life of a people. There is a great amount of dialogue that is necessary, for missionaries to better understand contexts of cultures and areas of consonance with the Gospel. On the part of the people proclaimed to, the more they understand how Christ has always been present and alive in their culture, the faster it will be for them to accept Him.

Observing Churches in different parts of the world, one will be able to appreciate how Christ lives in countless ways! It is after all, He who gathers His people to Himself. For missionaries to discover new ways of expressing the faith professed and experiencing life in community openness is necessary. A community that derives its expression of Christ from what it already knows and lives out, will be a richer one for having acknowledged Christ as its center. An organic Church is one that is rooted in the history and culture of the community, but has been transformed by Christ.

There is also a need to be open to learning from the people ministered to for the experience of Church to be true. For in the process of learning from each other, the faith of each one is deepened and

⁷⁷ B.R. GAVENTA, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Missionary Conversion*, 423.

⁷⁸ ID., “Witnessing to the Gospel in the Acts of the Apostles: Beyond the Conversion or Conversation Dilemma”, *Word and World*, vol. 22, n. 3, 2002, 245, actually speaks of “witnessing” in this regard.

strengthened. When the missionary expects to likewise learn from the people as he or she heralds Christ, then a genuine experience of a Church learning together as it journeys together can occur. A missionary will soon find out that it is not easy to proclaim to a culture he does not wish to embrace. An authentic welcoming of people and cultures usually means there is also the clear recognition of souls that need to be won over to Christ.

3.2 Uphold the Unity and Continuity of the Church

Luke structures the Paul stories in Acts along the lines of the Jesus stories in his Gospel,⁷⁹ in an effort to accentuate continuity between Jesus and Paul. He also makes free use of narrative devices to point to the continuity between the work of the evangelizers and that of the Apostles.⁸⁰ The signs accompanying the mission of Philip are, for instance, described in terms that recall Christ's own ministry and that of the Apostles (i.e. the patterns of the healings, the similarity in terminology, the resulting many who were healed, and the subsequent joy).⁸¹

In Acts 14:27, one finds Paul and Barnabas in Antioch where they “called the church together and reported what God had done with them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles”. Such a phenomenal change in understanding had to be shared immediately with the community. They did the same in Jerusalem (Acts 15:4). Paul, in turn, upon arriving in Jerusalem after his second mission, meets James and the elders, and “proceeded to tell them in detail what God had accomplished among the Gentiles through his ministry” (Acts 21:19).

All throughout Acts are indications of Churches being ministered to by the Apostles and evangelizers – care was given to the widows (Acts 6:1-5); communities are re-visited, exhorted, strengthened and taught (Acts 14:21-22, 19:1, 8-9; 20:4-6; 21:3-4, 8); there are elders who are appointed (Acts 14:23). The churches are organized and developed in order to find their flourishing in Christ.

⁷⁹ L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 226, 236-237.

⁸⁰ R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 104 and 115; and L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 151, 199, 226.

⁸¹ R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 104.

The above passages in Acts show both the aspects of unity and continuity within the Church. That the progress of the proclamation is shared with the Churches is an indication of its desire to remain united. The Church is also shown as being one in its efforts to fortify itself up by nurturing all its communities wherever they may be. Returning to Acts 15 where the disciples are portrayed as going through some matter of debate and discernment, Luke shows that these form an integral part of communal life, and how these are actually ways by which the early Church leaders were discerning the activity of God.⁸² He also illustrates how the disciples willingly undergo these moments of doubt together, and emerge with an understanding that is cemented by a united stance.

That Luke painstakingly shows how the missions of the early Church stem from the teachings of the Apostles and therefore of Christ is an indication of how equally vital it is that the missionary endeavors reflect that same link with the Source of all operations. Moreover, as Christ has chosen to continue the work through His Church, the mark of a true missionary disciple is his abiding by the governance of the Church as to Christ Himself. The continuity mentioned here is not only to Christ and the orthodoxy of His teachings, but also specifically to the Church structure established here on earth. Mission work that does not cooperate with the local Churches surrounding the mission areas fail to receive the blessings from the groundwork laid by previous missionary hearts. The work of mission belongs to everyone. It is a shared responsibility assuredly, and yet also a shared gift which no community should be precluded from receiving.

4. Acts' Guiding Principles for Today's *Missio ad Gentes*

Thus far, much has been said to about principles that may be employed in *missio ad gentes* and yet there is a definite richness to how the sequel to the Gospel of Luke speaks to and will continue its dialogue with the Church regarding Her identity and mission. The discussion in this paper has centered on three principles for *missio ad gentes*: 1) the re-interpretation of all things in Christ, 2) the re-orientation toward the movement of the Holy Spirit, and 3) the re-examination of oneself as Church.

⁸² L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 271.

Re-interpreting all things in Christ stems from having a deep relationship with Him, knowing Him, and continuously growing in understanding His mission and life, and thus being able to preach and witness Him faithfully. Missionary hearts who re-orient all movement toward that of the Holy Spirit are those who humbly acknowledge their creaturehood before the One who knows all, directs and loves all. They recognize every mission to be the work of the Holy Spirit and are hopeful even in times of trials. They discern when spirits of contrast are at work, and fully acknowledge that the Spirit has already paved the way, is ever-present and will continue to drive the mission for evermore. To re-examine oneself as the Church calls for a constant looking back and forward, for openness to new ways of experiencing and being Church, mindful of the charge to establish organic Churches, and to uphold unity and continuity within Herself.

The prefix “re” used for all the main principles underscores the fact that these mindsets and movements will necessarily recur over and over again in the course of missionary work and the initial proclamation. This occurs because people have a way of understanding things to suit their own pre-conceived notions; and even the best of folks manage to get lost or derailed despite the pathway and the markers; and because mankind still tends to be fixated on age-old customs and ideas, stubbornly resisting change.

God being God, is fully aware of all that. He knows, and despite this knowledge, continues to invite missionary hearts to participate in His work of spreading His Gospel, of preaching His love, of giving Jesus to all. The Lukan Gospel sequel serves notice to all who accept this holy summons to have courage and move forward boldly, for the Lord of the missions is always in control, is always present in every culture, and is always sending out His Spirit, seeking out His people in love.

Peter's Justification of his Mission to the Gentiles in Acts 11:1-18

❖ MATO ZOVKIĆ

The conversion of the Gentile Cornelius and his household in Acts 10:1-11:18, without observance of Jewish circumcision and dietary laws, was an epoch-changing event as the actual beginning of *missio and gentes* for the early Church. Peter served as an instrument of God's saving action by accepting the invitation from Cornelius, proclaiming to the members of Cornelius's household the risen Jesus as the Lord of all in whom God offers his forgiveness and salvation to all repentant converts, and mandating his followers to baptize them. After he returned to Jerusalem, baptized Jews rebuked him for having practiced commensality with Gentiles despite their moral and ritual impurity. Before we proceed to an exegetic exploration of his justification, we should briefly examine the role of Peter's homilies in Acts, and the conversion of Cornelius as a seminal event in the early Church's evangelization of the Gentiles.

1. Homilies of Peter in Acts

In exploring the genre and subforms of Acts, exegetes note that of the 1,000 verses of its Greek text, about 250, or a third, are comprised of discourses. There are ten Pauline and eight Petrine homilies, one of the risen Christ, one of Stephen, one of James, and so on.¹ Here are the homilies of Peter:

1. At the choosing of Matthias, who would replace Judas in the Council of the Apostles in post-resurrection evangelization (1:16-22);
2. On Pentecost in Jerusalem to Jewish pilgrims from Palestine and the diaspora (2:14b-36, 38-39);

¹ J.A. FITZMYER, *The Acts of the Apostles. A New Translation and Commentary*, Doubleday, New York 1998, 103-113.

3. In the Temple courtyard after curing the lame man in the name of the risen Jesus (3:12b-26);
4. Before the Sanhedrin, whose leaders refused to believe the miracle performed in the name of Jesus (4:8b-12, 19b-20);
5. After the miraculous freeing from prison, before the Sanhedrin, where Gamaliel advised the leaders to have nothing to do with the Jesus movement until it either dies out or is confirmed (5:29b-32);
6. To the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household in Caesarea (10:34b-43);
7. To the baptized Jews in Jerusalem in defense of his mission to the Gentiles in Caesarea (11:5-17);
8. At the Conference in Jerusalem in AD 49, advocating for the commensality of baptized Jews and Gentiles in mixed local Churches (15:7b-11).

Scholars see that Luke used the same phraseology, style, and vocabulary in the narratives and homilies of Acts because he could not collect personal memoirs of the speakers or historical listeners for all 28 discourses in the book. However, in Paul's farewell discourse to the Ephesian elders at Miletus (20:18b-35), they identify elements of direct knowledge by the narrator "and the only speech evocative of Paul's personal style, though simplified for use in an historiographic work."² Numerous articles and monographs have been dedicated to discerning Luke's redaction or creative composition from traditional material of apostolic preaching to the Jews and the Gentiles.³ German commentators on Acts favor this approach to Luke's second volume.⁴ The American Catholic interpreter of Luke and Paul, Joseph A. Fitzmyer (1920-2016), reminds us that in Greek historiography homilies were used as a subform to produce a dramatic effect illustrating the author's purpose. Luke may also have been influenced by the Greek homilies of the author of Maccabees or Josephus Flavius. Fitzmyer points to the common conception that un-

² Ibid., 108.

³ In preparing this contribution, in addition to recent commentaries on Acts, I was able to consult K. HAACKER, "Dibelius und Cornelius. Ein Beispiel formgeschichtlicher Überlieferungskritik", *Biblische Zeitschrift*, vol. 24, 1980, 234-251.

⁴ In my research, I have used G. SCHNEIDER, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Verlag Herder, Freiburg 1980 (vol. 1) and 1982 (vol. 2); J. ZMIJEWSKI, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Pustet, Regensburg 1994.

derlies the speeches in Acts. The German exegete, Josef Zmijewski, sees in the missionary homilies of Acts three fundamental elements:

1. Introduction alluding to concrete situation;
2. Kerygmatic main section about Christ with Old Testament quotations as proofs;
3. Conclusion with warning to repentance and promise of salvation through Christ.

Zmijewski reconstructs seven lines of possible text of the kerygmatic or Christological section.⁵ Luke surely did not create the discourses of his speakers in Acts *ex nihilo*, but he did address them to his contemporary readers, not primarily to the individuals mentioned in the narratives. In this sense, Fitzmyer points out: "In Acts the speeches make up for the lack of the author's psychological analysis or reflections on the meaning of events recorded, because Luke has inserted them at crucial points in his narrative to explain a development in the history of the early Christian community. Thus, Stephen's indictment serves to make the rejection of the Christian Gospel by some Jews intelligible; Paul's speech to the Jerusalem crowd (Acts 22) explains the Christian mission to the Gentiles; Peter's evangelizing sermon at Cornelius's conversion explains that God Himself has ordained the mission to non-Jews; Paul's speech at Areopagus reveals how Christianity adapts itself to Greek culture and ideas".⁶

For an appreciation of Peter's discourses in Acts, we should briefly consider the place of Peter in Jesus's ministry and in the evangelization of Palestine.⁷ Accepting with most exegetes that Mark is the oldest canonical Gospel and that Luke may have used its material as one of his sources, we should note that, in addition to retaining Mark's episodes with Peter, Luke has added three new ones. The first of these is the miraculous haul of fish, where Peter confesses that he is a sinner and Jesus promises to make him *anthrōpous zōgrōn* – a

⁵ J. ZMIJEWSKI, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, 125-128.

⁶ J. A. FITZMYER, *The Acts of the Apostles. A New Translation and Commentary*, 108.

⁷ See the chapters "Peter in the Book of Acts" and "Peter in the Gospel of Luke", in R.E. BROWN – K.P. DONFRIED – J. REUMANN (eds.), *Peter in the New Testament*, Paulist, New York 1973, 39-56, 109-128. This is an ecumenical monograph, the fruit of team research by Catholic and Protestant exegetes in the United States, commissioned by their respective Church leaders.

fisher of men (Lk 5,11). This episode foreshadows the choosing of the Twelve (6:12-16), of whom Simon will be the leader. This is the story of Simon's call.⁸ The verb *zōgraō* comes from *zōos* – alive *and* *agrein* – hunt, to capture alive, to save people's lives. The participle is "used in the periphrastic future construction emphasizing linear or durative action".⁹ This metaphor for gathering in includes the sense that fisherman will catch human beings for God's Kingdom, an agency linked to the ministry of Jesus Himself. In Luke's account of the last supper, Jesus foretells Peter's denial (22:31-34), but commissions Peter the repentant sinner to give support to his brothers after he "turns back" (*pote epistrepsas*). Thanks to the effective prayer of Jesus, Peter will have the task of strengthening the dedication of his brothers to the crucified and risen Jesus. The Swiss Protestant exegete François Bovon (1938-2013) carried out his teaching ministry in the United States. In his commentary on Luke 22:32, he translates: "Mais moi, j'ai prié pour toi afin que ta foi ne fasse pas défaut. Quant à toi, une fois converti, fortifie tes frères". He shows that the verb *stērizō* (to strengthen) marks ecclesiastical ethics because Church leaders are commissioned to console, encourage, and strengthen their fellow Christians. While Paul applies this to the personal discipline of believers, "Luc utilise quatre fois, dans les Actes (Ac 14,22 ; 15,32.41 ; 18,23), le composé *epistērizō* dont l'emploi confirme le sens donné ici. Comme autrefois, la nourriture matérielle, le pain, fortifiait le cœur de l'Israélite et le préparait à l'action (voir Jg 19,5), de même, aujourd'hui, la parole apostolique (Lc 22,32) et le don de l'Esprit (Rm 1,11) soutiennent-ils la foi des chrétiens. Le verbe *stērizō* et le terme *adelphoi*, ainsi que le contexte de Lc 22,31-32, suggèrent une perspective post-pascale. Le leadership de Pierre est admis par Luc, ainsi qu'il l'est par Matthieu dans la fameuse sentence *Tu es Petrus* (Mt 16:18)".¹⁰

Luke concludes his Emmaus episode with the return of the two disciples to Jerusalem, after they had recognized the risen Jesus in the breaking of bread. Only after listening to the testimony of the

⁸ See exegetical exposition of the episode in J. FITZMYER, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, Yale University Press, New York 1980, 559-570.

⁹ F. RIENECKER – C.L. ROGERS, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1982, 151.

¹⁰ F. BOVON, *L'Évangile selon Saint Luc (19,28-24,53)*, Labor et Fides, Genève 2009, 223.

Eleven, “The Lord has been raised and he has appeared to Simon” (Lk 24:34), and they were allowed to tell their story. This part of the Kerygma was preached also by Paul in 1 Cor 15:4-5, using the same verb *egeiromai*, but in the passive perfect tense. Here the form is the aorist passive, *ēgerthē* with the meaning “he has been raised up”, not “he rose”. This apparition to Peter alone is not presented in the third Gospel. “Nothing is said by Luke or in Paul’s use of the kerygmatic fragment about where the appearance took place. But the Lucan tradition would suggest a locale in Jerusalem, which would not be the same as John 21:1-23. This appearance to Simon Peter is the basis on which he will give strength to his brothers (Lk 22:32); it is the grace given by the risen Christ to the one who will play the leading role in the Christian community depicted in Luke’s second volume”.¹¹

American authors of an ecumenical monograph on *Peter in the New Testament* point out that the third evangelist has removed in his portrait of Peter harsh judgements present in Mark and Matthew, so that Peter’s career during the ministry of Jesus fits more smoothly with his role in the early Church described in Acts: “Luke takes pains to remind the reader that these denials were forgiven, for the risen Lord appeared to Simon. It is probably no accident that Peter is the last of the Twelve to be mentioned by name in the Gospel and the first of the Twelve to be mentioned by name in the Acts. If for Luke the Twelve Apostles are the bridge between the historical Jesus and the Church, Simon or Peter plays that role par excellence”.¹²

When we turn to Peter’s ministry in the early Christian community according to Acts, we notice that he is actively present in chapters 1 to 15 as the initiator of preaching to converted Jews and Gentiles. The author of the third Gospel and Acts agrees with other New Testament writings in ascribing to Simon-Peter the role of *Gemeindeleiter* – leader of the community.¹³ The German Catholic exegete, Gerhard Schneider, points out that in Luke’s own material of the third Gospel the name “Simon” is uppermost. In Acts 1-15

¹¹ J. FITZMYER, *The Gospel According to Luke*, 1569.

¹² R.E. BROWN – K.P. DONFRIED – J. REUMANN (eds.), *Peter in the New Testament*, 127-128.

¹³ R. PESCH, “Petros-Petrus”, in *Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 3, Verlag W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 1983, 193-201.

the name “Peter” is mentioned 56 times. On behalf of the Twelve, Peter is witness of the risen Christ and the first evangelizer of the Jews in Jerusalem (2:14-41, *Erst-Apostel, Erstverkünder*).¹⁴

Luke describes Peter’s mission in the early Church as strengthening his brothers, but this mission is performed also by Paul and Barnabas (Acts 14:21-22; 15:32-41; 16:5; 18:23). This would take into account the fact that in the time in which Luke was writing there existed in the Church a ministry of strengthening.¹⁵ The authors of the ecumenical monograph on Peter in the New Testament conclude that the Pauline letters reflect a conviction that Peter had a prominent role in the Jerusalem community, and that he was a leader who inaugurated the mission to the Gentiles. After the Jerusalem Conference in Acts 15, James, the Apostles, and the elders play significant roles, probably because Peter “went off to another place” (Acts 12:17 – Antioch and later to Rome?). At the Jerusalem Conference in Acts 15, “a decisive role is given to James, who enunciates his ‘judgment’ (15:19-20) that while the Gentiles should not be troubled over circumcision, they should be bound by four regulations. A decisive role is given to the Apostles and the elders who send the letter imposing James’s judgement upon the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia (15:23). Peter provides the decisive witness; James provides the decisive judgment or decision; the Apostles and elders provide the sentence or the enforcement of the decision”.¹⁶ Since the Apostles convened in Jerusalem to discuss circumcision for baptized Gentiles (15:2), but the “Decree” speaks only of four regulations concerning commensality of converted Gentiles with converted Jews (15:29), most exegetes suppose that Luke has conflated two conferences of the Apostles and elders of Jerusalem into one, the first in about AD 49, where no ruling was handed down, and another 25 or 30 years later which had the ruling with four regulations. From the fact that Peter disappears after Acts 15,

¹⁴ G. SCHNEIDER, “Exkurs 6: Petrus in der Apostelgeschichte” in his *Die Apostelgeschichte* (vol. 1), 279-283.

¹⁵ “Doch weiss Lukas, dass in der Person des Paulus und anderer Verkündiger fortgeführt wurde, was in seiner Sicht Simon-Petrus grundlegend begonnen hatte. Die Vollmacht und der Auftrag, die dem Petrus von Christus erteilt waren, leben auch in der nachpetrinischen Zeit in der Kirche weiter” (Ibid., 283).

¹⁶ R.E. BROWN – K.P. DONFRIED – J. REUMANN (eds.), *Peter in the New Testament*, 50.

these scholars suppose that “Luke’s primary interest was not to give a description of authoritative structure in the early Church, but to substantiate a *heilsgeschichtlich* claim that would establish a connection between the churches of late first-century Christians (in which Luke lived) and the Jesus of Palestine through the medium of Apostles and missionaries”.¹⁷

Recent researchers of Acts stress the historical and social situation of Luke’s addressees.¹⁸ In his 1973 article on the discourses of Peter in Acts, the Belgian exegete Jacques Dupont (1915-1998) drew attention to the instruction of the risen Christ in Luke 24:48-49, where he mandated the Apostles to be his witnesses before Israel and the Gentiles, and this is the task performed by Peter and Paul in their missionary homilies.¹⁹ While in writing his Gospel Luke significantly depended on existing preached material about Jesus, in the Acts “les discours missionnaires, en particulier, lui fournissaient l’occasion de remettre ses lecteurs en contact direct avec le message apostolique, et de continuer ainsi sa mission d’évangéliste”.²⁰ He calls the pre-Pauline kerygma of 1 Cor 15:3-5 a small Symbol of faith, and he argues that it sums up the missionary discourses in Acts that Luke has elaborated based on traditional material reflecting apostolic preaching in the early Church. Peter was the representative of the Apostles in formulating their sermons, but he was taking the floor together with them (see Acts 2:14; 5:29; 4:13; 8:24; 10:39). “Il est clair que, dans la pensée de Luc, Pierre est inséparable de ses compagnons d’apostolat. Cette observation entraîne une conséquence importante pour l’interprétation des discours. Les lecteurs modernes seraient facilement portés à y chercher des indications sur la manière personnelle dont Pierre prêchait, sur les idées théologiques ou les expressions qui caractérisaient sa prédication : bref, sur ce qui le

¹⁷ Ibid., 55.

¹⁸ T. PENNER, “Madness in the Method? The Acts of the Apostles in Current Study”, *Currents in Biblical Research*, vol. 2, n. 2, 2004, 223-293. He points out that literary analysis has taken over the task of *Redaktionskritik* and would like modern scholars to pay more attention to the title *Hristos* in view of the ruler cult. He cites a list of 453 titles of articles or books he has examined.

¹⁹ J. DUPONT, “Les discours de Pierre dans le Actes et le chapitre XXIV de l’évangile de Luc”, in F. NEIRYNCK (ed.), *L’Évangile de Luc: Problèmes littéraires et théologiques. Memorial Lucien Cerfaux*, Bibl. ETL, Gembloux 1973, 329-374.

²⁰ Ibid., 355.

distinguait des autres apôtres. Il faut bien se rendre compte que ce point de vue ne correspond aucunement à celui de Luc. Ce qu'il veut faire connaître à ses lecteurs en leur présentant les discours de Pierre, c'est la prédication apostolique comme telle, ou 'l'enseignement des Apôtres' (II,42). Qu'on ne s'étonne donc pas en constatant que les textes nous renseignent si peu sur la personnalité du prince des apôtres: ce n'est pas ce qui intéresse Luc, qui veut justement montrer en Pierre le porte-parole du groupe apostolique".²¹

2. Conversion of Cornelius and his Household in Caesarea²² (Acts 10:1-48)

Peter's justification of his mission to the Gentiles in Caesarea is based on his personal experience of this event confirmed by six baptized Jews from Joppa who joined him on his pastoral visit to Cornelius's home. This is why we should have a brief exegetical insight of the event before we proceed to analyzing Peter's apologia to the baptized Jews of Jerusalem. This is a favorite episode among New Testament scholars in the Acts.²³ Dupont, in the section on Peter and Cornelius of essay on the salvation of the Gentiles according to Acts, pointed out: "Luc attribue une importance considérable à cet épisode dans l'économie de son ouvrage : non seulement il lui accorde un développement en apparence presque anormal, mais il s'arrange délibérément pour faire de Corneille le premier gentil reçu dans la communauté chrétienne. De même que l'arrivée de Paul à Rome et sa prédication aux païens de la ville impériale constituent le point d'aboutissement de sa carrière apostolique, on peut dire que, dans l'optique de Luc, le baptême de Corneille constitue, lui aussi, le point d'aboutissement de la carrière apostolique de Pierre, son inter-

²¹ Ibid., 372-373.

²² This is the title given by Fitzmyer to the whole Cornelius section in Acts 10:1-11:18 in his *The Acts of the Apostles*, 446-473. Although aware of other possibilities, he divides the Cornelius episode into five subsections: a) Cornelius's Vision (10:1-8); b) Peter's Vision (10:9-16); c) Welcome for Messengers from Cornelius (10:17-23a); d) Peter's Testimony in Cornelius's House (10:23b-48); e) Peter's Self-Defense at Jerusalem (11:1-18).

²³ C. LUKASZ, *Evangelizzazione e conflitto. Indagine sulla coerenza letteraria e tematica della pericope di Cornelio (Atti 10,1-11,18)*, Engelbert-Humperdinck-Schule, Frankfurt am Main 1993.

vention après laquelle il ne lui reste plus qu'à s'effacer en laissant Paul seul en scène".²⁴

Czeslaw Lukasz proceeds to the Cornelius episode in Acts convinced that Luke presents the evangelization of the first Gentiles as Peter's testimony to the universality of the Gospel, and eliminates obstacles that prevent the full integration of baptized Gentiles in the Christian community.²⁵ Here is the way he sees the literary and theological correlation: "Ciò che concatena in maniera più forte 10:1-48 con 11:1-18 e tutte le parti della Pericopa di Cornelio (PC) fra di loro è il tema dei pagani. Nel corso del nostro studio vedremo che in esso si distinguono due componenti: l'evangelizzazione e la questione dei contatti sociali. L'asse tematica di evangelizzazione unisce soprattutto la parte 10:1-48, mentre l'unità di tutta la PC è data dall'asse tematica delle relazioni sociali tra giudei e pagani. In questa ottica, la sezione 11:1-18 non è una ripetizione di 10:1-48, ma serve per promuovere la commensalità, come ulteriore approfondimento dei rapporti sociali".²⁶

The episode begins with two parallel visions. The Roman military commander Cornelius in Caesarea, who has accepted belief in the unique God of Jewish revelation, sees an angel of God who transfers to him God's message that his prayers have been accepted. The angel tells him that God wants him to bring Simon into his home from Joppa. Simon is the leader of the Jesus movement among the

²⁴ J. DUPONT, "Le salut des gentils et la signification théologique du livre des Actes", *New Testament Studies*, vol. 6, 1959/1960, 132-155 (quotation 146-147). Dupont was translator and interpreter of Acts in *La Bible de Jérusalem. La sainte Bible traduite en français sous la direction de l'école biblique de Jérusalem. Nouvelle édition entièrement revue et augmentée*, Cerf, Paris 1978. He points out: "Aux yeux de Luc la conversion de Corneille n'est pas un simple cas individuel. Sa portée universelle ressort du récit lui-même et de son insistance sur les visions de Pierre et de Corneille, et surtout du lien mis par l'auteur entre cet événement et les décisions du 'Conseil de Jérusalem', cf. 15,7-11,14. Deux leçons distinctes semblent se dégager: 1^o Dieu lui-même a montré que les païens devaient être reçus dans l'Église sans qu'on les astreigne aux prescriptions de la Loi, cf. 10,34-35,44-48 ; 11,1,15-18 ; 15,7-11,14 ; et Ga 2,1-10 ; 2^o Dieu lui-même a montré à Pierre qu'il devait accepter l'hospitalité d'un incirconcis: on sent ici le problème des rapports entre chrétiens issus du judaïsme et chrétiens issus du paganisme, cf 10,10-16,28-29 ; 11,2-14 ; et Ga 2,11-21".

²⁵ C. LUKASZ, *Evangelizzazione e conflitto. Indagine sulla coerenza letteraria e tematica della pericope di Cornelio (Atti 10,1-11,18)*, 27-28.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

Jewish people. Cornelius sends two servants accompanied by a soldier to Joppa (11:1-8). On his tour of Christian communities consisting predominantly of converted Jews, Simon Peter stayed for a time in Joppa, a coastal town 50 km south of Caesarea. He was accommodated in the house of Simon the tanner. While the three delegates from Cornelius are approaching Joppa, Peter sees the heavens open and an object resembling a large sheet bearing unclean animals forbidden for consummation to Jews due to their dietary laws. Three times Peter hears a voice telling him to prepare his meal from the meat of these animals because God has made them clean (10:9-16).

Peter understood this vision as God's sign to welcome the messengers from Cornelius, and go with them to the house of a Gentile who was well-disposed toward asking for instruction about the movement of Jesus in a country controlled by the Romans. Peter took six converted Jews of Joppa to be his traveling companions and later on to give witness to the event among the baptized Jews in Jerusalem (10:17-23). In the meantime, Cornelius called his relatives and close friends to meet Simon Peter on his arrival. Considering him a special envoy of God, Cornelius fell at Peter's feet but the Apostle declined this sign of extraordinary respect, insisting that he was merely a human being. Peter reminded Cornelius and his household members that normally Jews are not allowed to associate with Gentiles, but said that he had been instructed by God not to consider Cornelius's home unclean. When Peter asked Cornelius why he had sent for him, Cornelius recounted his vision from four days earlier. He thanked Peter for coming and declared: "We are all here present in the presence of God to listen to all the instructions that the Lord has given you" (10:24-33). In his introduction to this episode, Luke depicted Cornelius as "a devout and God-fearing man, along with his household, giving alms to Jewish people and praying to God constantly" (10:2). God-fearer (*phoboumenos ton Theon*) is Luke's name for those Gentiles who had accepted the faith in one God and had begun taking part in synagogue worship, but who, for the sake of their cultural identity, could not accept circumcision and dietary laws (Acts 9:31; 10:1,22,35; 13:16,26). Another similar expression is "God worshipers" (*sebomenoi ton Theon*) (13:50; 16:14; 17:4,17; 18:7). In addition to his significant charitable assistance to Jews (*poiōn eleēmosynas pollas to laō*), Cornelius was a regular participant in worship at the local synagogue, but not a proselyte or a Judaized member. Therefore, he was well informed about Jewish non-association with Gentiles and about the dietary laws.

Peter's sermon in Cornelius's house (10:34-43) is a missionary homily of the early preachers of Christianity, which recalls Jesus's original call for conversion and belief because in his preaching and healing ministry the Kingdom of God is at hand (Mk 1:14-15; Mt 4:12-17). It also recalls Jesus' inaugural speech in the synagogue of Nazareth according to Luke (Lk 4:16-30), as well as Jesus' answer to the disciples of the Baptist (Mt 11:4-6; Lk 7:22-23) and the Pauline kerygma (1 Cor 15:1-11). The ministry of Jesus is being continued by the ministry of Peter, Paul, and other authorized evangelizers in the early Church²⁷.

Peter first highlights his new experience that God shows no partiality, he is no respecter of appearances (v. 34). In LXX and in several New Testament writings *prosōpolēmtēs*, *prosōpon lambanein* comes from the Hebrew *naśah panim* ("to lift the face"), and denotes the gracious act of someone who lifts up a person's face by showing them favor. In this context, it means that God does not favor only Jews. God's impartiality in providing eschatological salvation to all humans is a central theological axiom in the New Testament (Rom 2:11; Col 3:25; Eph 6:9; 1 Petr 1:17; Jas 2:1.9). Through the advent of Jesus Christ, God sent peace to all humanity and made Him the Lord of all, in the preaching and healing ministry of Jesus who died a violent death on the cross, but God raised Him up and made Him manifest (vv. 36-40). "The message 'God sent to the children of Israel', Peter now understands, already bore that implicit message of peace and reconciliation between peoples. In principle, therefore, the extension of the mission to the Gentiles is a continuation of Jesus's own words and work".²⁸ The glorified Christ appeared to His historic companions and commissioned them to call repentant Jews and Gentiles to conversion in order "to receive forgiveness of sins through his name". While Peter was speaking, the Holy Spirit came down upon Cornelius and his household confirming the fact that Gentiles can be spiritually reborn, and therefore admitted to bap-

²⁷ F. NEIRYNCK, "Luke 4:16-30 and the Unity of Luke-Acts", in J. VERHEYDEN (ed.), *The Unity of Luke-Acts*, Leuven University Press, Leuven 1999, 357-395. F. WILK, "APG 10,1-11,18 im Licht der lukanischen Erzählung vom Wirken Jesu", *Ibid.*, 605-617; A. DEL AGUA, "The Lucan Narrative of the 'Evangelization of the Kingdom of God'. A Contribution to the Unity of Luke-Acts", in *Ibid.*, 639-661.

²⁸ L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 5, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 1992, 195.

tism without first being circumcised (vv. 41-44). The fundamentals of this sermon correspond to Peter's homily to Jewish pilgrims on Pentecost in Jerusalem (Acts 2:14-36.38-40).

The Croatian Franciscan priest Mario Cifrak, in his dissertation on the Christology of Peter's homilies in Acts, identifies in the Cornelius episode the need for conversion in terms of accepting Jesus as the Lord and universal Judge: "Während des irdischen Lebens Jesu war der Friede zugegen; nach der Auferstehung gewährt sein Name die Vergebung der Sünden. Durch ihn ist Gott am Werk, also ist sein Name Gottes Name. Um dem Gericht am Tag des Herrn zu entkommen und gerettet zu werden muss man jetzt schon den Herrn anrufen (cf. Apg 2, 21-22). Kornelius glaubt an den Herrn, Gott Israels, den Richter. Jetzt weiss er, dass der Herr und der Richter Jesus ist. Jetzt kann er ihn anrufen, um gerettet zu werden".²⁹ Although he was already a believer in the God of Jewish revelation, Cornelius had to change his mentality and conduct as a result of the advent of Jesus (*metanoein*). Peter and the six baptized Jews who came with him to Caesarea "were bewildered because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles too" (v. 45). In a certain way, they too had to convert by admitting Gentiles to the Christian community without circumcision. "Enlightened by the Holy Spirit, Peter understands that he must welcome Cornelius and his friends into the community as they are, without obliging them to undergo conversion to Judaism. God has no favorites, makes no distinction between Jews and Gentiles, and gives the Holy Spirit to both (4:31 and 10:44). For someone to be pleasing to God it is necessary and sufficient to have an upright heart. That Peter would undergo a conversion after which he would 'strengthen' his brothers and sisters had been foretold by Jesus (Lk 22:31-32). As Peter progressively absorbs the truth that Christ is risen and living with the Church in his Holy Spirit, he is able to throw off older habits of thinking and acting – even those with the most respectable authority behind them – and to encourage others as well to live in a new way".³⁰

²⁹ M. CIFRAK, *Die Beziehung zwischen Jesus und Gott nach den Petrusreden der Apostelgeschichte. Ein exegetischer Beitrag zur Christologie der Apostelgeschichte*, Echter, Würzburg 2003, 264.

³⁰ J. TAYLOR, "Acts of the Apostles", *The International Bible Commentary. A Catholic and Ecumenical Commentary for the Twentieth Century*, William R. Farmer, Collegeville, MN 1998, 1524.

3. Peter's Apologia to the Baptized Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 11:1-18)

Through the encounter between Peter and his Jewish critics in the holy city, Luke justifies Peter's action and establishes the link between the Church in Jerusalem and this first Gentile mission. Baptized Jerusalem Jews rebuked Peter for having associated with Gentiles and eaten with them (v. 3). Due to their ethnic and religious background, this would involve giving up their identity. In terms of inclusion in God's covenant, circumcision and observing dietary regulations meant ritual holiness and the separateness of this people, based on the commandments of God. Such ritual separation symbolized rejecting involvement with the idolatry of pagan religions. "Therefore, the question of how meals could be holy yet shared with unclean people is not an easy one. Peter's opponents imply that by being with and willing to eat with Gentiles, he has abandoned his own heritage as a Jew, and has also jeopardized the identity of the messianic community as the people of God".³¹ Since the canonical text is more important than the interpretation of scholars, let us first examine the text as translated by Fitzmyer in his 1998 commentary on Acts:

¹ Now the Apostles and brothers who were in Judea heard that Gentiles had welcomed the Word of God. ²So when Peter came up to Jerusalem, circumcised believers confronted him, ³saying, "You entered the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." ⁴Peter explained it to them step by step from the beginning. ⁵"I was at

³¹ L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 200. Circumcision and dietary regulations are important to the Jews of Luke's time and to modern followers of Judaism. See J. KLAUWANS, "Concepts of Purity in the Bible", in A. BERLIN – M.Z. BRETTLER (eds.), *The Jewish Study Bible*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, 2041-2047; D.M. Freidenreich, "Food and Table Fellowship", in A.-J. LEVINE – M.Z. BRETTLER (eds.), *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011, 521-524. Freidenreich concludes: "The New Testament, however, reflects the degree to which Jesus and his immediate followers conformed to Jewish dietary practices. It highlights, moreover, efforts on the part of the first leaders of the new movement to accommodate both Jewish and Gentile followers within a single community". See also CH. E. FONROBERT, "Judaizers, Jewish Christians and Others", *Ibid.*, 554-557; J.R. ROSENBLUM, *The Jewish Dietary Laws in the Ancient World*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2015.

prayer in the town of Joppa, when in a trance I had a vision. I saw an object resembling a big sheet come down, being lowered from the heavens by its four corners, and it moved up to me. ⁶As I stared at it, I could see and make out four-legged creatures of the earth, wild beasts and reptiles, and birds of the sky. ⁷I also heard a voice say to me ‘Get up, Peter! Slaughter and eat.’ ⁸But I said, ‘Not on your life, sir, for nothing common and unclean has ever entered my mouth!’ ⁹A second time the voice from the heavens spoke out, ‘What God has made clean, you are not to call common.’ ¹⁰Three times this happened, and everything was drawn up again to the heavens. ¹¹Just then three men arrived at the house where we were, sent to me from Caesarea. ¹²The Spirit told me to go with them without hesitation. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered that man’s house. ¹³He informed us how he had seen (the) angel standing in his house and saying, ‘Send someone to Joppa and summon Simon, who is called Peter. ¹⁴He will tell you things by which you and all your household will be saved.’ ¹⁵As I began to address them, the Holy Spirit came down upon them, just as it did on us at the beginning. ¹⁶Then I remembered the Word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with a Holy Spirit.’ ¹⁷So if God gave them the gift he gave us when we came to believe in the Lord Jesus, who was I to be able to stop God? ¹⁸When they heard this, they stopped objecting; instead they began to honor God, saying, “So, God has granted life-giving repentance even to Gentiles.”

Benjamin R. Wilson underscores the geographic markers in the narrative of the Cornelius episode, because Caesarea, Joppa, and Jerusalem represent three markedly different contexts for first-century Jewish-Gentile relations. Caesarea was the seat of the Roman governor, with a majority Gentile population. Joppa was a Jewish fortress in the time of Maccabees and an insurgent city, while Jerusalem was the center of Jewish monotheism with increasingly strained relations with representatives of the Roman authorities after the sudden death of Herod Agrippa I in AD 44. Peter clarifies that his visit to Cornelius’s home occurred through divine intervention, while Jerusalem believers gradually affirm the ethnic and spatial universality of the Christian mission and accept Peter’s experience as divinely commissioned outreach to the nations: “The geographic movements in the story are not extraneous to the develop-

ment of the plot. Rather, they are an integral part of what makes the behavior of Cornelius and Peter remarkable, the intervention of God so necessary, and the conversion of Cornelius so significant for the trajectory of the early Church in Acts³²

In v. 1 “the Word of God” that Gentiles of Caesarea have welcomed (*dehormai* – receive, accept) is Peter’s proclamation of the crucified and risen Christ as Lord and Judge through whom all humans can receive forgiveness of their sins. Luke seems to distinguish the attitude of the Apostles from that of “brothers” in Judea. *Adelphoi* is Luke’s name for baptized members of the Christian community, regardless of their social origin and position (Acts 1:16; 9:30; 10:23b; 11:12,29; 12:17; 14:2; 15:3,22,32,33,40; 17:6,10,14; 18:18,27; 21:7,17,20; 28:14). In these instances, “brothers” are not blood relatives; the term denotes closeness experienced by those bonded together through baptismal faith in Christ. Since in Acts 2:29 and 3:17 Peter addresses Jews assembled in Jerusalem with this title, in the same way as Paul in Pisidian Antioch (13:26,38), in Jerusalem (23:1,5,6), and in Rome (28:17), it is clear that Jewish Christians took over this designation from their fellow Jews, who used it commonly in addressing one another.³³

In v. 2 baptized Jews are called “circumcised believers – *hoi ek peritomēs*, those of circumcision”. These Jewish Christians were scandalized by what they heard about Peter’s conduct in Caesarea and, therefore, they rebuked him: “You entered the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them!” (v. 3). They were concerned for the law and covenant fidelity and for the Jewishness of Jesus’s movement. The general Jewish view was that Gentiles were inherently unclean. Their complaint expressed more a statement than a question; they criticized the leader of the Christian community because of this (*diakrinomai* – to get a decision, contend, dispute). In their belief, if Gentiles were to be admitted to the believing community of baptized followers of Christ they must become like Jews, which included circumcision for men and dietary observation for all.³⁴ In Luke’s

³² B.R. WILSON, “Jew-Gentile Relations and the Geographic Movement of Acts 10:1-11:18”, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 80, n. 1, 2018, 81-96 (quotation from 96).

³³ J.A. FITZMYER, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 222.

³⁴ D.L. BOCK, *Acts*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI 2007, 406-407. He transfers the respective text of *Jubilees* 22:26: “Separate thyself from the nations,

Gospel, Jesus practiced commensality with sinners as a sign that God offers them conversion and forgiveness of sins. He was criticized for this by the scribes and Pharisees. He justified his actions explaining that he has come to call sinners to repentance (*eis metanoian* – 5:32) and that angels rejoice over one sinner who repents (*epi henī hamartōlō metanounti* – 15:7.10). The objection of baptized Jews to Peter's commensality in Caesarea may be based on the question, are uncircumcised men fit for conversion? The question of *metanoia* – repentant conversion – is a connecting thread between the accusations (11:3), Peter's homily (11:4-17), and the final answer (11:18).³⁵

In vv. 4-11, Peter explains, “step by step” (*kathexēs*, successively, in an orderly sequence), the vision that motivated him to associate with Cornelius, baptize him, and share table fellowship with his household members. The adverb *kathexēs* occurs in Lk 1:3 and 8:1 as well as in Acts 3:24 and 18:23. It may contain a chronological aspect, but the real emphasis is on a complete presentation of material, a succession or order.³⁶ Together with “explain” (*ektithēmi*, used again in Acts 18:26 and 28:23), Luke understands it as “recitation in order”, having a peculiarly convincing quality. In vv. 5-7, Peter recounts the basic parts of his vision depicted in 10:11-13. In v. 6 there is a vivid addition: “As I was gazing (*atenisas*), I looked carefully (*katenoun*) and saw (*eidon*)”. Luke's artistic instinct is to make Peter's first-hand report more anecdotal and colorful.³⁷ Peter received a vision three times in a row, during which he tried to reject eating the meat of unclean animals, but a supernatural voice explained: “What God has made clean, you are not to call common!” (vv. 8-9). *Here he hints at his personal need for conversion regarding the association of Jesus's followers with Gentiles* without their being circumcised or observing Jewish food regulations. Interpreters recognize this voice as

and eat not with them: and do not according their works, and become not their associate; for their works are unclean, and all their ways are a pollution and an abomination and uncleanness”. The *Book of Jubilees* is a Jewish apocryphon rewriting the story of Gn 1 and Ex 14, which originated in Hebrew at around 100 BC. See *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* 1990, 67:16-24.

³⁵ C. LUKASZ, *Evangelizzazione e conflitto. Indagine sulla coerenza letteraria e tematica della pericope di Cornelio (Atti 10,1-11,18)*, 183-186.

³⁶ J.A. FITZMYER, *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)*, 298-299.

³⁷ L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 197.

the voice of the risen and glorified Christ: "Der Grund des Hörens auf die Stimme des Herrn ist, dass Gott die Speisen für rein erklärt hat. Der 'himmlische', Jesus kennt diese Tatsache. Petrus soll 'Gemeines' und 'Unreines' essen. Wenn das jetzt rein ist, dann auch die Menschen, die das essen. Die Überwindung der Unreinheit öffnet den Menschen die Möglichkeit, gerettet zu werden".³⁸

In v. 11, with the expression "in the house where we were", Peter implicates his Jewish companions, mentioned in v. 12. Compared to 10:23c in v. 12, there is a new detail stating that there were six brothers from Joppa. Peter must have told them about his vision: they considered it genuine, joined him in his journey to Caesarea, and entered with him into Cornelius's house. In 10:45 they were identified as "circumcised believers" (*hoi ek peritomēs*). Here they are witnesses to the event and supporters in Peter's defense before the Jerusalem community. He made them participants in receiving uncircumcised Gentiles into the Christian community, because they had heard his sermon proclaiming the risen Christ Lord and universal Judge, they saw the result of the Spirit's outpouring and made no objection to the baptism of Gentile converts.

Peter reminds his Jerusalem addressees that the Spirit had told him to go with three envoys of Cornelius "without discriminating" (*mēden diakrinanta*), an expression used also in Acts 10:20: in no way partiality should be exercised against them because they are Gentiles (Acts 10:34; 15:9). In the presence of six Jewish brother witnesses, Peter reports that an angel appeared to Cornelius telling him to call Simon Peter who will "tell him things by which you and your household will be saved" (vv. 13-14). This is a review of Acts 10:30-33, but he does not mention the centurion's name or the complimentary detail of his prayers to the God of Israel and his many alms to the Jewish people (*tō laō* – 10:2). Telling the things by which Cornelius, his friends, servants, and slaves will be saved embraced the sermon of Acts 10:36-43, a summary of Jesus's healing ministry, proclaiming God's reign, and His violent death and vindicating resurrection with a summons to repentance (*metanoia*) and baptism in His name. In the third Gospel, God's Kingdom occurs 38 times and in Acts eight times. It is a *Leitbegriff* in Luke for

³⁸ M. CİFRAK, *Die Beziehung zwischen Jesus und Gott nach den Petrusreden der Apostelgeschichte*, 279.

whom Christian missionaries continue Jesus's preaching ministry, and to preach the Kingdom of God means to teach about the Lord Jesus (Lk 9:60; Acts 28:31). God's reign is the appearance of salvation in the teaching and healing ministry of the Lord Jesus.³⁹ Through Peter's visit and teaching, a group of Gentiles were saved directly by an act of God.

While Peter was proclaiming salvation to Cornelius through the Lord Jesus, the Spirit descended on the whole group "just as it did on us at the beginning" (v. 15). In this allusion to the Pentecost event, "we" signifies the Apostles and the Galilean witnesses to the crucified and risen Jesus but also other believing pilgrims in Jerusalem. Since to Peter and his Jerusalem audience the Spirit was the sign of the *eschaton* promised by John the Baptist in Luke 3:16 and Acts 1:5, Peter understands that God wants him to admit repenting and believing Gentiles into the Christian community without circumcision. Peter's wording in vv. 15-16 is close to Acts 10:44 and 47. He interpreted the descent of the Spirit on members of Cornelius's household as baptism with the Spirit just as Jerusalem Jews were baptized on the first Christian Pentecost. This was the way the Lord had shown that these Gentiles were also a part of the plan of salvation.

In v. 17, Peter asked his baptized fellow Jews in Jerusalem: "So if God gave them the same gift he gave us when we came to believe (*hemin pisteusasín* – aorist participle with inceptive meaning⁴⁰) in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to be able to stop God?" Peter justifies his permission to let them be baptized with water as a confirmation of their faith and admits them to the new community of those who accept the eschatological salvation available in Christ. Peter could not hinder their inclusion in the blessings of the people of God. The Greek expression "*issen dorean*" (identical gift) means that Gentile candidates for baptism were cleansed and indwelt by the divine sacred presence. God has made them capable and suitable and no one should resist their inclusion. Peter's procedure was not the re-

³⁹ Cf. A. WEISER, "Reich Gottes' in der Apostelgeschichte", in C. BUSSMANN – W. RADL (eds.), *Der Treue Gottes trauen. Beiträge zum Werk des Lukas. Für Gerhard Schneider*, Verlag Herder, Freiburg 1991, 127-135.

⁴⁰ Cf. M. ZERWICK – M. GROSVENOR, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, vol. 1, Pontificio Istituto Biblico, Rome 1974, 387.

sult of human calculation but a direct order given by the Spirit. “Peter has begun to think in terms of the gift of God for salvation. It is because the outpouring of the Spirit shows that God has given ‘the same Spirit’ to Gentiles as to Jews that Peter has taken the step of baptizing them. This gift proves in fact that ‘God is no respecter of appearances’ and accepts the righteous from every nation. The experience of the Spirit among Gentiles also deepens Peter’s understanding of Jesus’ Word (11:16). It is when he sees the Gentiles speaking in tongues and praising God that he ‘remembers’ the saying of the risen Lord about the baptism in the Spirit (Acts 1:5). What is most fascinating about this remembrance is that Jesus spoke the words to a small band of Jewish followers. The words of Jesus are given a new understanding because of the continuing work of the Spirit”.⁴¹

Luke concludes the Cornelius episode with the approving remark of Peter’s Jerusalem addressees: “So God has granted life-giving repentance even to Gentiles!” (v. 18). The Greek expression *metanoia eis zoēn*, Fitzmyer translates here as “life-giving repentance”. Luke’s *metanoia*, *metanoein*, *epistrophē*, and *epistrephein* have a basis in the Old Testament Hebrew *šûb*, and mean “to change one’s mind or purpose, return, repentance, conversion”. In Acts 2:38, Peter concluded his discourse to Jewish pilgrims in Jerusalem: “Reform your lives (*metanoēsate*) and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of the Messiah for the forgiveness of your sins”. Exegetes who write in English point out that *metanoia*, *metanoein* are interchangeable with “conversion” or “repentance”.⁴² The verb *metanoein* is a favorite Lukan term and occurs 13 times (Lk 10:13; 11:32; 13:3, 5; 15:7, 10; 16:30; 17:3, 4; Acts 3:19; 8:22; 17:30; 26,20), while the corresponding noun *metanoia* occurs 11 times (Lk 3:3, 8; 5:32; 15:7; 24:47; Acts 5:31; 11:18; 13:24; 19:4; 20:21; 26:20). In New Testament-era Greek philosophy, *metanoia* meant “change of one’s mind” in the sense of discovering new values and harmonizing one’s moral conduct accordingly. Therefore, conversion and repentance are at the heart of the Christian faith, a change of one’s whole stance toward the divine that affects the person in a total way. According to

⁴¹ L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 201.

⁴² K. HUGHES, “Conversion”, in C. STUHLMEYER, *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 1996, 171-175; I. NOWELL – B.E. BOWE – G. OSTDIEK, “Repentance”, *Ibid.*, 830-835.

Mark 1:15 in Jesus' movement, repentance and faith are two dimensions of the same response: "Together they would signal a person's entire response to the invitation of God, given now, once and for all, in the person and ministry of Jesus. All relationships and priorities must be reordered in light of the call to repentance (Lk 14:26-33). Repentance demands a fundamental change of heart and attitude, and it calls us to an ongoing perseverance to 'seek the Kingdom of God'"⁴³ Luke's version of Christ's Easter mandate consists of the permanent assignment of disciples to preach in his name "repentance (*metanoian*) for the forgiveness of sins to all the nations – beginning from Jerusalem" (Lk 24:47).

During his pastoral visit to "dedicated people of God" (*hoi hagioi*) at Lydda, Peter cured the paralyzed Jew with the Greek name Aeneas in the name of Jesus Christ. Many inhabitants of that town and region came to belief "and were converted to the Lord – *epestrepshan epi ton Kyrion*" (Acts 9:32-35). The unique Lord here is the risen Christ in whose name the paralyzed man was healed. The process of coming to belief and conversion is expressed through the positive verb *epistrehpō*, to change or turn to the Lord Jesus, preached by Peter. Luke points out that Hellenists who had to withdraw from Jerusalem after Stephen's martyrdom came to Antioch "and began to address the Greeks preaching to them about the Lord Jesus (*euangelizomenoi ton Kyrion Iēsoun*). The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned to the Lord" (*pisteusas epestrepshen epi ton Kyrion* – Acts 11:20-21). The essence of their mission activity was proclaiming the risen Christ as *euangelion*, good tidings for Jews and Gentiles. In their response, Luke characterizes belief and conversion as positive assent to Christ the Lord. In his conclusion of the Antioch episode, Luke points out that in Antioch the followers of Jesus were given the name *christianoi* (11:26). Besides converting to Christ as their existential Lord, adult candidates in Antioch had also to convert to the Church as a community of Christ's disciples. Conversion in Acts is Christocentric and ecclesial.⁴⁴

⁴³ B.E. BOWE, "Repentance – New Testament", *Ibid.*, 832. See also J. DUPONT, "Repentir et conversion d'après les Actes des Apôtres", in *ID.*, *Études sur les Actes des Apôtres*, Cerf, Paris 1967, 421-457.

⁴⁴ Cf. J. DUPONT, "La conversion dans les Actes des Apôtres", *Ibid.*, 468-475.

In 10:45, Luke pointed out that the six baptized Jews of Joppa, who entered Cornelius's house with Peter and witnessed the descent of the Spirit on believing and repenting Gentiles, "were bewildered because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured on Gentiles too" (*kai epi ta ethnē*). Lukasz points out that: "Luca contrasta in anticipo il futuro atteggiamento di *hoi ek peritomēs* di Gerusalemme, creando un precedente e una sfida. Contro questi 'parenti' di Gerusalemme, *hoi ek peritomēs pistoi* porteranno la testimonianza (11:12). Il loro stupore per l'effusione dello Spirito *kai epi ta ethnē*, sembra prefigurare la lode di Dio per il dono della metanoia *kai tois ethnesin* (11:18). La comparsa del gruppo in questo punto della narrazione evidenzia come Luca sia condizionato nell'attuale presentazione della conversione dal conflitto descritto in 11:1-18"⁴⁵. Lukasz concludes that *metanoia* in Acts has an exclusive and an inclusive meaning of repentance that requires the rejection of sin and the assumption of a new moral conduct. *Eis zōēn* – means eternal life, because "life" in v. 18 is interchangeable with "salvation" in v. 14. Therefore, the *metanoia* of Cornelius and his household members encompassed repentance for their sins, personal faith in Christ as Lord, forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Spirit, acceptance into the Church through baptism and the acknowledgment of circumcised Christians that their conversion leads to salvation and life eternal.⁴⁶ In the Cornelius episode, Luke reminds Jewish fellow Christians that Gentiles do not live in permanent moral impurity, which would prevent them from associating with the believing community of Christ's followers. Therefore, vertical equality of Gentile and Jewish Christians should be expressed by horizontal equality through commensality.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ C. LUKASZ, *Evangelizzazione e conflitto. Indagine sulla coerenza letteraria e tematica della pericope di Cornelio (Atti 10,1-11,18)*, 158.

⁴⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 212-213.

⁴⁷ J.H. ELLIOTT, "Household and Meals vs. Temple Purity: Replication Patterns in Luke-Acts", *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, vol. 21, n. 3, 1991, 102-108. Elliott reads Acts 10:1 and 11:18 as the importance of inclusivity, not eliticism in Jesus's movement. See also A. BARBI, "Cornelio (At 10:1-11:18): percorsi per una piena integrazione dei pagani nella Chiesa", *Ricerche Storico Bibliche*, vol. 1-2, 1996, 277-295. Barbi concludes: "Si sente infatti in questo racconto paradigmatico l'eco di difficoltà che sono state reali nella storia della Chiesa primitiva; vi si nota la riflessione del teologo che vede la storia guidata esemplarmene dall'inizia-

4. Conclusion and Prayer

At the level of Luke's historical addressees, Peter's justification of his socialization and commensality with converted Gentiles was an impetus to Jewish Christians to be open to converts of Gentile origin: "L'accesso alla nuova relazione con Dio, rivelatosi in Gesù Cristo, diventa uguale per tutti gli uomini e deve esprimersi in una nuova qualità di relazioni interpersonali".⁴⁸ Some exegetes see in the Cornelius episode an impulse toward ecumenical contacts and cooperation.⁴⁹ Reading this homily in the light of contemporary *missio ad gentes*, we should look in it for stimulation to missionary activity that is essential to being Christ's disciples in our time and place of witness. This activity makes the Church an apostolic community, a sacrament of salvation in Christ the universal Savior. It is the permanent task of Christian shepherds and all baptized men and women.

I find very inspirational the opening prayer of the Mass for the evangelization of peoples, form B: "O God, you have willed that your Church be the sacrament of salvation for all nations, so that Christ's saving work may continue to the end of the ages; stir up, we pray, the hearts of your faithful and grant that they may feel a more urgent call to work for the salvation of every creature, so that from all the peoples on earth one family and one people of your own may arise and increase".⁵⁰

tiva divina; si avverte la preoccupazione pastorale e missionaria che vuole favorire l'ingresso dei pagani e la loro piena integrazione nella comunità ecclesiale. In tal modo l'episodio di Cornelio si rileva ricco di memoria storica, di riflessione teologica e di ansia pastorale congiunte nella tensione di favorire la pacifica e piena accoglienza degli stranieri-pagani nella Chiesa".

⁴⁸ C. LUKASZ, *Evangelizzazione e conflitto. Indagine sulla coerenza letteraria e tematica della pericope di Cornelio (Atti 10,1-11,18)*, 235.

⁴⁹ T. O'LOUGHLIN, "Sharing Food and Breaking Boundaries: Reading of Acts 10-11:18 as a Key to Luke's Ecumenical Agenda in Acts", *Transformation*, vol. 32, n. 1, 2015, 27-37.

⁵⁰ *The Roman Missal. English Translation According to the Third Typical Edition*, Magnificat 2011, 1278.

Church Mission Today in the Context of the *Acts of the Apostles*

❖ HILARY R. MUNYANEZA

With due respect to the great Divine Commission in Matthew 28:20 – “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” –, the goal of this article is to illustrate that the current mission of the Church can be biblically and catechetically contextualized in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Indeed, in living her missionary life, in evangelizing through the *missio ad gentes* as the Second Vatican Council termed it, the Church can and should read and interpret her missionary endeavors and experiences today under the light of the *Acts of the Apostles*, so as to develop effective response to the variety of challenges facing its mission in the present world.

1. Mission as Viewed by the *Acts of the Apostles*

The role of the Holy Spirit in the catechetical-evangelizing mission of the Church is evident in the *Acts of the Apostles*: “And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Lk 24:49). Thus, in obedience to the Lord’s command, the Apostles stayed in Jerusalem and waited for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. From this, the Church learns that without the Holy Spirit and its action, the best skills and qualifications may be of little or no use in the mission of evangelization.

Mission in the *Acts of the Apostles* is largely viewed as the transmission of the doctrine of the faith. This is fundamental to the Church since the Lord Jesus Christ entrusted to her the saving message of salvation which has been handed on through the centuries to the present day. This quality distinguishes the Church as the sacrament of salvation. The apostolic preaching (kerygma) in the *Acts of the Apostles* focuses on the Lordship of Christ after the Resurrection

(Acts 2:22-36). This historic and ground-breaking event of the resurrection is the basis for the Christian faith as a lived experience and also is the foundation for the formulation of the Christology in *Acts of the Apostles*. In this, Jesus Christ is recognized as the Servant (Acts 3:13-26; 4:27.30; 8:32-33) and Jesus Christ is also seen as the new Moses (Acts 3:22 ff.; 7:20 ff.).

The Church's mission of reaching out to other people is founded in *Acts of the Apostles*. Salvation as presented in the *Acts of the Apostles* is not only for the Israelites but for all people. This universality of salvation is evident in Peter's act of going to the house of Cornelius after having received a vision (Acts 10:1-33). This reaching out, the *missio ad gentes* or even *missio ad extra* was one of the first crucial problems and blessings for the infant Christian community. Paradoxically, it was a problem and a blessing. It was a problem because it was hard for the traditional Jews to accept that even the Gentiles can be and are invited to salvation. This means that the coming of Jesus Christ was not only a restoration of 'the new covenant with Israel' but rather the restoration of all the people of God. The same experience was a blessing because it gave the Christian faith, even in her infant stages, a Catholic, that is a universal outlook.

Geographical expansion of the Christian faith is also a key aspect of mission in *Acts of the Apostles*. The focus is first on Jerusalem (Acts 2-7) and it is a very strong focus to the extent that it forms the reason for the accusation against the Apostles that "they have filled the whole Jerusalem with their teaching" (Acts 5:17-28). Later, after the focus on Jerusalem, the faith spread to other Hellenistic places (Acts 8-11). This expansion is in harmony with the exhortation of Jesus Christ Himself, "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), and also with the teaching of St. Paul, "God wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4). This shows the need for a more vigorous and well-organized missionary activity in the twenty-first century. Furthermore, the expansion was also facilitated by the persecutions that broke out against the Church in her very early stages. Providentially, God brought good out of the persecutions even when the persecutors of the Church aimed at destroying the Christian faith. This was the experience recounted in the *Acts of the Apostles*, and is still the living and lived experience in many other places where the Christian faith is still young. In the early

Church, the persecutions caused the Christians to scatter, and in this “human scattering” the Word of God was also scattered to other places where they fled (Acts 8:1-4). Uganda is a practical example of this Christian experience because the first Christians in Uganda were martyred by Kabaka Mwangi between 1885-1887. In these and other similar persecutions is fulfilled the dictum of Tertullian (a second century author), who stated that “the blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christianity” (*sanguinis martyrum semen Christianorum est*, Apologeticum 50:13).

2. Catechetical Methods that *Acts of the Apostles* Offers the Church

In her evangelizing mission, the Church can learn some methods of catechesis from the *Acts of the Apostles*. The Aeropagus experience of St. Paul in Acts 17:16-34, in which he encountered the Athenian life of worship and led the people in Athens to the worship of the true God, can be used as a model of catechesis and inculturation. In this context, inculturation goes beyond liturgy and embraces other facets of Church life, among which is catechesis. St. Paul did not begin by condemning but by recommending the Athenians for being so religious (Acts 17:22). The Church, most especially in some parts of the world where the Christian faith is still young, should like St. Paul see the positive values in the cultures that she encounters on the face of the earth. It is the responsibility of the Church to study, evaluate, and interpret the values in other cultures in the light of the Gospel. It is after due study and interpretation that the positive values can be accepted as normative for Christian living, while the negative values are discouraged. Some of the positive values that are common in the majority of the African cultures are hospitality, respect for the elders, care for life, and honesty. On the other hand, the negative practices that should be discouraged include but are not limited to female genital mutilation and widow-inheritance.

The spirit of focusing on the communities is fundamental in the evangelizing practices of the *Acts of the Apostles*. The individual person is not forgotten but is also well-catered for as it was in the life of the early Church as we read that “all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-45). In following this example, each person is therefore invited

to bring his or her personal talents and gifts to the evangelizing mission of the Church. In doing so, the varying contexts of time, place, and culture should be taken into consideration, and the Gospel will have an incarnational model in which “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14).

The participation of all people in the evangelizing mission of the Church was present in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Even when there were Apostles who directly received the Divine Commission, the *Acts of the Apostles* shows that there were also other co-workers. This collaboration between all the members of the Christian community has been and still is fundamental to the proclamation of the Gospel and to Catechesis. It is noted of St. Vincent de Paul that he worked greatly with the laity, both men and women in coming to the spiritual and material relief of the destitute in his time. It is the responsibility of the Church to read the signs of the times and identify the ways in which this cooperation and mutual participation of the entire Christian community can be involved and useful in its evangelizing mission. This will be based on the Second Vatican Council perception of the Church as “the people of God”, and thus a paradigm shift from considering the Church as the Pope, Cardinals, Bishops, and Priests, which is a view that has no more place in the present evangelizing mission of the Church.

Pastoral visitations are a key catechetical method that the leaders of the first Christian communities used in *Acts of the Apostles*. In founding the Church in various places, plans were made to visit and strengthen the new converts to the Christian faith in the new way of life that they had embraced. An outstanding example in carrying out pastoral visitations is St. Paul as is well-noted in *Acts of the Apostles* 14:21-22 and 18:23. This model was also applied by the first Catholic missionaries to Uganda. The missionaries often visited the outstations and this was a great help for them to celebrate the sacraments. The pastoral visits ensured more time to share the Word of God, and to consolidate a close and humane contact with the natives of the land. It is the position of this article that even the pastoral agents of our time should emulate and strengthen this evangelizing method.

3. The Evangelizing Mission of the Church Facing the Current Theological Concerns

The evangelizing mission activity in *Acts of the Apostles* shows the foundation for inculturation. In the context of Africa and Asia, there is a growing concern of interpreting and living the Christian message of the Gospel in the setting of the various cultures and other legitimate human institutions. This is in strong harmony with the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that “(Bishops) They should show [...] that earthly goods and human institutions according to the plan of God the Creator are also disposed for man’s salvation and therefore can contribute much to the building up of the body of Christ” (*Christus Dominus*, Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops, No. 12) This Conciliar teaching was very much preceded by the experience of the first Christian community. There was an issue as to whether the Gentiles (all non-Jews) who had become believers in Jesus Christ had to be circumcised in order for them to follow the Mosaic Law together with the faith in Jesus Christ. The Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:6-21) decreed that it was not necessary to burden the Gentiles with the obligations of the Mosaic Law. Consequently, an opening of a new possibility was offered and this possibility was that Gentiles can and indeed should participate in salvation as Gentiles without having to first become Jews. Similarly, for the Church in Africa, Africans can authentically be Africans and Christians at the same time. However, the Church needs to guard against the dangers of syncretism. Therefore, the basic questions for the Church to consider in the context of the *missio ad gentes* in Africa are: “How far can one live his or her Africanity without compromising his or her Christian identity?”, and “What does it mean to be an African-Christian?”

Inclusive perspectives drawn from the *Acts of the Apostles* are essential for the evangelizing mission of the Church. This inclusive aspect has links with ecumenism, which involves focusing on what binds us together as Christians and understanding our differences without prejudices, hatred, and malice. A striking example in the *Acts of the Apostles* is of St. Stephen. He was a Jewish-Christian, and despite his diaspora background was recognized as speaking under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and was appointed to serve as a Deacon (Acts 6:1-6). This ecumenical aspect of the Church from her infant stages was later to form one of its four marks, namely, Catholicity. The other three marks are Unity, Apostolicity, and Holiness.

4. The Early Church as a Model of *Missio ad Gentes*

This article clearly shows that mission is central to the life of the Church. The Church exists insofar as it lives and carries out its mission mandate of proclaiming the Good News to humanity. This has as its example the infant Church in the *Acts of the Apostles* in which the proclamation of the Good News takes priority and this leads to the creation of the office of Deacons in the Church (Acts 6:1-7). The mission being central to the life of the Church further means that the agents of evangelization need to have an ecclesial spirit since their mission starts with, in and for the Church as it was the case in the Acts of the Apostles: “And when they arrived in Antioch, they gathered the people of the Church together and told them about all that God had done with them and how He had opened the way for the Gentiles to believe” (Acts 14:27). This significance of the Church community should not however overshadow the fact that a true and an authentic *missio ad gentes* is both *missio Dei* and *missio ecclesiae*.

Réflexion sur le livre des *Actes des Apôtres* dans la perspective du Décret sur l'activité missionnaire de l'Église *Ad Gentes*

❖ ALEXANDRE KABERA

La réflexion théologique et biblique sur l'activité missionnaire de l'Église s'est toujours inspirée du livre des *Actes des Apôtres*. Dans cette réflexion, nous évoquerons les données du document conciliaire sur la mission, *Ad Gentes*, à la lumière de la parole de Dieu telle que méditée à partir du texte du livre des *Actes des Apôtres*. Nous nous inspirerons des réflexions des papes et des théologiens. Cela nous aidera à découvrir l'actualité de ces écrits. Le livre des *Actes des Apôtres* ne cesse de nous interpeller sur notre responsabilité missionnaire en tant que baptisés et disciples de Jésus Christ. Quant au Décret *Ad Gentes*, il nous engage tous et toutes, que nous soyons proches et éloignés. Nous espérons que cette réflexion nous fera grandir dans notre engagement et surtout dans notre attachement à l'activité missionnaire dans le monde.

1. Le programme pour témoigner du Christ

Après sa résurrection, il ordonna lui-même à ses disciples de rester à Jérusalem, car, dit-il, « vous allez recevoir une force, celle de l'Esprit Saint qui descendra sur vous. Vous serez alors mes témoins à Jérusalem, dans toute la Judée et la Samarie, et jusqu'aux extrémités de la terre » (Ac 1,8). La Pentecôte est, par conséquent, de manière spéciale, le baptême de l'Église qui entreprend sa mission universelle en partant des rues de Jérusalem, avec la prodigieuse prédication des différentes langues de l'humanité. Dans ce baptême d'Esprit Saint, la dimension personnelle et la dimension communautaire, le « moi » du disciple et le « nous » de l'Église, sont inséparables. L'Esprit consacre la personne et fait d'elle, en même temps, un membre vivant du corps mystique du Christ, participant à la mission de témoignage de

son amour. Ce qui se réalise à travers les sacrements de l'initiation chrétienne : le baptême et la confirmation¹.

La notion de témoignage est au cœur de l'activité missionnaire de l'Église, et le livre des Actes reste un lieu privilégié de ressourcement en ce domaine. D'emblée, le Ressuscité présente le témoignage comme le programme que les apôtres devront remplir : « Vous recevrez une puissance, celle du Saint-Esprit qui viendra sur vous, et vous serez mes témoins à Jérusalem, dans toute la Judée et la Samarie, et jusqu'à l'extrémité de la terre » (Ac 1,8).

Les mentions géographiques de ce verset tracent l'itinéraire du livre des Actes. C'est par Paul arrivant à Rome que l'Évangile atteindra l'extrémité de la terre. Néanmoins, Luc considère les apôtres comme les témoins privilégiés. Car, pour lui, le témoignage signifie d'abord une continuité entre le ministère terrestre de Jésus et la mission de l'Église. Il souligne ce fait en imbriquant la fin de son évangile et le début des Actes : même envoi des témoins à qui est promis l'Esprit (cf. Lc 24,48-50), même évocation de l'Ascension (Lc 24,50-53)².

Les mentions géographiques se trouvent prises en tenaille par une formule biblique : « Vous serez mes témoins [...] jusqu'à l'extrémité de la terre ». C'est une allusion au prophète, serviteur de Dieu, qui doit être « lumière des nations » (Is 42,6) « jusqu'à l'extrémité de la terre » (Is 49,6). Or, au I^{er} siècle, c'est la mission de tout Israël que les Juifs voyaient dans ce serviteur. Dans le même livre d'Isaïe, le mot « témoin » désigne aussi la mission d'Israël (cf. Is 43,10.12 ; 44,8). Il s'agissait d'une mission passive : par sa libération de l'exil et par sa fidélité à la loi de Dieu (cf. Sg 18,4), le Peuple élu constituait aux yeux des nations une preuve vivante de la puissance de Dieu. À présent, les envoyés du Christ rendront un témoignage actif : ils iront vers les autres, juifs et païens.

La référence à la figure du serviteur rappelle que la mission de témoignage incombait au peuple de Dieu tout entier. Si des témoins se détachent maintenant, c'est qu'une partie d'Israël s'est fermée à la parole de Jésus et a ainsi failli à sa mission de lumière du monde. Ce re-

¹ BENOÎT XVI, *Solennité de Pentecôte. Regina Caeli*, 11 mai 2008, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/fr/angelus/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_reg_20080511_pentecoste.html/.

² C. TASSIN, *Vous serez mes témoins : le message des Actes des Apôtres*, Mission de l'Église, n° 112, juillet 1996.

fus se dessine avec netteté quand Paul et Barnabé se tournent résolument vers les païens pour accomplir la prophétie du serviteur : « Je t'ai établi lumière des nations, pour que tu sois le salut jusqu'à l'extrémité de la terre » (Is 49,6).

Dans les Actes, l'Esprit apparaît comme l'inspirateur de la Parole, l'animateur de la vie interne de l'Église, le guide de la mission. Inspirateur de la Parole, l'Esprit est donné en vue du témoignage, comme l'affirme le Ressuscité dès le début du livre des Actes (Ac 1,8). Ainsi les Sept doivent être « remplis d'Esprit Saint et de sagesse » (6,3), pour gérer la charité communautaire. Mais, en réalité, ils agiront en tant que témoins de la Parole³.

Par ailleurs, en considérant l'ensemble du livre des Actes, de ce mouvement d'extension de la Parole « jusqu'aux extrémités de la terre », les articulations apparaissent assez clairement : la première partie du récit (1-15), dominée par la figure de Pierre, traite de la première communauté de Jérusalem, jusqu'au « Concile » qui entérine l'ouverture aux païens ; puis sa seconde (15-28) se centre sur la personne de Paul et ses voyages missionnaires. Au sein de la première partie, l'articulation manifeste une tension déjà perceptible : les chapitres 1 à 5 sont centrés sur la communauté primitive, dont les membres sont presque tous d'origine juive, tandis qu'après les dissensions ayant provoqué le choix de sept diacres hellénistes et après la première persécution (6-7), un second temps (8-15) montre déjà l'ouverture de la communauté aux païens et l'extension de la Parole en Samarie et jusqu'à Antioche. Il est remarquable de voir comment les difficultés ou oppositions, bien loin d'arrêter l'action de l'Esprit, conduisent à trouver des solutions nouvelles qui relancent l'activité missionnaire et font croître l'Église⁴.

2. L'activité missionnaire

Dans les principes doctrinaux du Décret sur l'activité missionnaire de l'Église *Ad Gentes* le document conciliaire explique l'activité missionnaire. Cette tâche, c'est par l'ordre des évêques, à la tête duquel se trouve le successeur de Pierre, qu'elle doit être accomplie, avec la

³ Ibid.

⁴ FRATERNITÉS DE JÉRUSALEM, *Lire les Actes des Apôtres*, Atelier biblique en ligne, 10 janvier 2011.

prière et la collaboration de toute l'Église ; elle est unique et la même, partout, en toute situation, bien qu'elle ne soit pas menée de la même manière du fait des circonstances. Par conséquent, les différences qu'il faut reconnaître dans cette activité de l'Église ne découlent pas de la nature intime de la mission, mais des conditions dans lesquelles elle est accomplie. Ces conditions dépendent soit de l'Église, soit même des peuples, des groupes humains ou des hommes à qui s'adresse la mission. En ce qui concerne les hommes, les groupes humains et les peuples, elle ne les atteint et ne les pénètre que progressivement, et les assume ainsi dans la plénitude catholique. Les actes propres, les moyens adaptés doivent s'accorder avec chaque condition ou état (AG 6).

Les initiatives particulières par lesquelles les prédicateurs de l'Évangile envoyés par l'Église et allant dans le monde entier s'acquittent de la tâche d'annoncer l'Évangile et d'implanter l'Église parmi les peuples ou les groupes humains qui ne croient pas encore au Christ, sont communément appelées « missions » ; elles s'accomplissent par l'activité missionnaire et sont menées d'ordinaire dans des territoires particuliers reconnus par le Saint-Siège. La fin propre de cette activité missionnaire est l'évangélisation et l'implantation de l'Église chez les peuples ou les groupes humains dans lesquels elle n'a pas encore été enracinée (AG 16).

En outre, il n'est pas rare que les groupes humains au sein desquels l'Église existe, ne soient complètement transformés pour des raisons diverses ; des situations nouvelles peuvent en résulter. L'Église doit alors examiner si ces situations exigent de nouveau une activité missionnaire. De plus les circonstances sont parfois telles que manque pour un temps la possibilité de proposer directement et immédiatement le message évangélique ; c'est alors que les missionnaires peuvent et doivent donner avec patience et prudence, avec une grande confiance en même temps, au moins le témoignage de la charité et de la bienfaisance du Christ, préparer ainsi les voies au Seigneur et le rendre présent d'une certaine manière.

Ainsi il est clair que l'activité missionnaire découle profondément de la nature même de l'Église ; elle en propage la foi qui sauve, elle en réalise l'unité catholique en la répandant, elle reçoit sa force de son apostolicité, elle met en œuvre le sens collégial de sa hiérarchie, elle en atteste, répand et développe la sainteté. Ainsi l'activité missionnaire parmi les nations diffère tant de l'activité pastorale à déployer à l'égard des fidèles que des initiatives à prendre pour réta-

blir l'unité des chrétiens. Cependant ces deux domaines sont très étroitement liés à l'activité missionnaire de l'Église (AG 17).

3. La mission dans la vie et l'histoire humaine

L'activité missionnaire possède un lien intime avec la nature humaine elle-même et ses aspirations. Car en manifestant le Christ, l'Église révèle aux hommes par le fait même la vérité authentique de leur condition et de leur vocation intégrale, le Christ étant le principe et le modèle de cette humanité renouvelée, pénétrée d'amour fraternel, de sincérité, d'esprit pacifique, à laquelle tous aspirent. Le Christ, et l'Église qui rend témoignage à son sujet par la prédication évangélique, transcendent tout particularisme de race ou de nation, et par conséquent ils ne peuvent jamais être considérés, ni lui ni elle, comme étrangers nulle part ni à l'égard de qui que ce soit (AG 22).

Le Christ lui-même est la vérité et la voie dont la prédication évangélique ouvre l'accès à tous, en portant aux oreilles de tous ces paroles du Christ lui-même : « Faites pénitence et croyez à l'évangile » (Mc 1,15). Puisque celui qui ne croit pas est déjà jugé (cf. Jn 3,18), les paroles du Christ sont des paroles à la fois de jugement et de grâce, de mort et de vie. Car c'est seulement en faisant mourir ce qui est vieux que nous pouvons parvenir à la nouveauté de vie : cela vaut d'abord pour les personnes ; mais cela vaut aussi pour les divers biens de ce monde, qui sont marqués en même temps par le péché de l'homme et la bénédiction de Dieu : « Car tous ont péché et sont privés de la gloire de Dieu » (Rm 3,23). Personne n'est délivré du péché ni élevé au-dessus de lui-même par lui-même et ou par ses propres efforts, personne n'est entièrement libéré de sa faiblesse ni de sa solitude ni de son esclavage, mais tous ont besoin du Christ : le modèle, le maître, le libérateur, le Sauveur, celui qui donne la vie. En toute vérité, dans l'histoire humaine, même au point de vue temporel, l'Évangile a été un ferment de liberté et de progrès, et il se présente toujours comme un ferment de fraternité, d'unité et de paix. Ce n'est donc pas sans raison que le Christ est honoré par les fidèles comme « l'attente des nations et leur Sauveur » (AG 24).

4. La joie de la mission dans les débuts de l'Église

Dans les Actes 2,42-47, nous voyons ce qui caractérisait cette assemblée de croyants dans toute la fraîcheur de leur début et où le Saint-

Esprit agissait avec puissance. Rien ne l'attristait. Il est dit qu'ils « étaient assidus à l'enseignement des apôtres et à la communion fraternelle, à la fraction du pain et aux prières » (Ac 2,42). Après avoir reçu la vérité, il faut y persévérer, car en dehors, tout est en œuvre pour nous en détourner.

Malgré la ruine actuelle, nous pouvons mettre en œuvre toutes les précieuses vérités contenues dans ce passage ; vérités qui demeurent et dont la foi s'empare à toutes les époques. Quand on les a reçues, on doit y persévérer et ne pas écouter toutes les voix qui se font entendre, pour nous détourner de la bénédiction qui découle de l'obéissance à la Parole. Les apôtres communiquaient alors leur doctrine oralement ; aujourd'hui nous la possédons en entier dans la parole de Dieu, à laquelle nous devons une entière soumission, afin de ne pas faire valoir nos propres pensées et nos opinions. Soumis à la Parole, nous réaliserons la communion des apôtres et la communion des uns avec les autres. Avoir communion, c'est avoir une même part en commun. Tous avaient communion avec les apôtres dans les objets de foi qu'ils présentaient. Rien n'est plus grand et précieux, en attendant la gloire, que d'avoir ces objets de foi en commun avec le Père, avec le Fils, et les uns avec les autres, puisque nous possédons la même vie⁵.

Il faut aussi une grande énergie pour persévérer dans la prière, soit individuellement, soit en famille, soit dans l'assemblée. Satan sait que le croyant sera affaibli spirituellement s'il ne persévère pas dans la lecture de la Parole et dans la prière ; ses efforts tendent à le priver de cette source de puissance et de joie. Persévérer dans la doctrine, ce n'est pas seulement s'occuper de la Parole qui renferme la doctrine des apôtres, c'est mettre en pratique ce qu'elle enseigne quant à l'assemblée aussi bien qu'individuellement.

En présence des innombrables et merveilleux effets de la puissance de l'Esprit Saint, toute âme éprouvait de la crainte : « La crainte de Dieu était dans tous les cœurs à la vue des nombreux prodiges et signes accomplis par les apôtres » (Ac 2,43). Cette crainte peut encore se produire, quoique dans une plus faible mesure, chez les témoins de la marche fidèle d'un croyant, car le monde remarque une manifestation quelconque de la vie divine, même s'il ne veut pas toujours en convenir.

⁵ Cf. S. PROD'HOM, « Simples entretiens sur le livre des Actes des Apôtres », Bibliquest, www.bibliquest.net/SProdhom/SP-nt05-Actes.htm/.

Le Seigneur prouve par là que seule la parole de Dieu opère le salut dans les cœurs. La puissance miraculeuse, que l'on réclame tant dans certains milieux, n'est absolument pas nécessaire, ni pour convertir, ni pour édifier les croyants. Tout ce qu'il faut pour opérer de la part de Dieu est demeuré intact dès le commencement, comme nous l'avons vu au v. 42. Le croyant n'a qu'à persévérer dans la vérité, à obéir à la parole de Dieu.

Les versets 44 et 45 nous décrivent les effets merveilleux de la vie divine dans sa fraîcheur première : « Tous les croyants étaient en un même lieu, et ils avaient toutes choses communes ; et ils vendaient leurs possessions et leurs biens, et les distribuaient à tous, selon que quelqu'un pouvait en avoir besoin ». La vie éternelle, vie divine et céleste, manifestait nettement ses caractères propres.

Principalement, c'est l'amour actif, qui se montre par le besoin de se trouver ensemble : « Tous les croyants étaient en un même lieu ». Ce besoin se fait sentir encore aujourd'hui partout où la vie de Dieu est quelque peu libre et active. Dieu est amour et veut rassembler un jour tous ses rachetés autour du Seigneur dans la gloire. Ceux qui possèdent la vie divine désirent donc naturellement se rassembler déjà ici-bas, mais ne sauraient se rencontrer tous en un même lieu, puisque, par la grâce de Dieu, il y a des rachetés dans le monde entier : « en effet, quand deux ou trois sont réunis en mon nom, je suis là, au milieu d'eux », nous dit notre Seigneur (Mt 18,20).

Là ils jouissent de sa présence et peuvent s'entretenir de leurs bénédictions en attendant son retour pour les rassembler tous autour de lui dans la maison du Père.

En outre, ces premiers chrétiens avaient compris que leurs biens étaient célestes et que le Seigneur allait venir ; aussi mettaient-ils leurs biens matériels au service de l'amour ; ils n'avaient de valeur que pour subvenir aux besoins des frères nécessiteux. Ceux qui en possédaient les vendaient. Actuellement on ne peut agir de même ; mais lorsque la vie divine agit, elle s'affiche avec les mêmes caractères. Les croyants dont le cœur est rempli de l'amour de Dieu et qui apprécient à leur valeur leurs bénédictions spirituelles, savent se servir de leurs biens matériels pour aider à leurs frères nécessiteux et pour servir les intérêts du Seigneur. Ils ne les vendent pas, mais les considèrent comme la propriété du Seigneur, dont ils sont les administrateurs.

Ces croyants prenaient aussi leur nourriture avec joie et simplicité de cœur et louaient Dieu. Ils excluaient de leur vie tout avantage charnel. Ils ne trouvaient pas davantage leur plaisir dans la bonne

chère que dans la possession de leurs biens matériels. L'amour, la joie, la louange caractérisaient leur existence ; ils jouissaient de la faveur de tout le peuple, témoin de cette vie merveilleuse.

5. Nous sommes tous des disciples missionnaires

Qu'il nous soit permis de rappeler les propos du pape François dans l'Exhortation Apostolique *Evangelii Gaudium* : « Dans tous les baptisés, du premier au dernier, agit la force sanctificatrice de l'Esprit qui incite à évangéliser. Le Peuple de Dieu est saint à cause de cette onction que le rend *infaillible* "*in credendo*". Cela signifie que quand il croit, il ne se trompe pas, même s'il ne trouve pas les paroles pour exprimer sa foi. L'Esprit le guide dans la vérité et le conduit au salut. Comme faisant partie de son mystère d'amour pour l'humanité, Dieu dote la totalité des fidèles d'un *instinct de la foi* – le *sensus fidei* – qui les aide à discerner ce qui vient réellement de Dieu. La présence de l'Esprit donne aux chrétiens une certaine connaturalité avec les réalités divines et une sagesse qui leur permet de les comprendre de manière intuitive, même s'ils ne disposent pas des moyens appropriés pour les exprimer avec précision » (EG 119).

En vertu du baptême reçu, chaque membre du Peuple de Dieu est devenu disciple missionnaire (cf. Mt 28,19). Chaque baptisé, quels que soient sa fonction dans l'Église et le niveau d'instruction de sa foi, est un sujet actif de l'évangélisation, et il serait inadéquat de penser à un schéma d'évangélisation utilisé pour des acteurs qualifiés, où le reste du peuple fidèle serait seulement destiné à bénéficier de leurs actions. La nouvelle évangélisation doit impliquer que chaque baptisé soit protagoniste d'une façon nouvelle. Cette conviction se transforme en un appel adressé à chaque chrétien, pour que personne ne renonce à son engagement pour l'évangélisation, car s'il a vraiment fait l'expérience de l'amour de Dieu qui le sauve, il n'a pas besoin de beaucoup de temps de préparation pour aller l'annoncer, il ne peut pas attendre d'avoir reçu beaucoup de leçons ou de longues instructions.

Tout chrétien est missionnaire dans la mesure où il a rencontré l'amour de Dieu en Jésus Christ ; nous ne disons plus que nous sommes « disciples » et « missionnaires », mais toujours que nous sommes « disciples-missionnaires ». Si nous n'en sommes pas convaincus, regardons les premiers disciples, qui immédiatement, après avoir reconnu le regard de Jésus, allèrent proclamer, pleins de joie : « Nous

avons trouvé le Messie » (Jn 1,41). La Samaritaine, à peine eut-elle fini son dialogue avec Jésus, devint missionnaire, et beaucoup de Samaritains crurent en Jésus « à cause de la parole de la femme » (Jn 4,39). Saint Paul aussi, à partir de sa rencontre avec Jésus Christ, « aussitôt se mit à prêcher Jésus » (Ac 9,20). « Et nous, qu'attendons-nous ? » (EG 120).

Il est intéressant de souligner le modèle que nous propose le pape François, celui du serviteur humble et doux. Voilà le style de Jésus, et également le style missionnaire des disciples du Christ : annoncer l'Évangile avec douceur et fermeté, sans crier, sans gronder personne, sans arrogance ni imposition. La véritable mission n'est jamais du prosélytisme, mais une attraction à l'égard du Christ. Mais comment ? Comment se fait cette attraction vers le Christ ? Par notre témoignage, à partir de la forte union avec lui dans la prière, dans l'adoration et dans la charité concrète, qui est service de Jésus présent dans le plus petit de nos frères. En imitant Jésus, pasteur bon et miséricordieux, et animés par sa grâce, nous sommes appelés à faire de notre vie un témoignage joyeux qui éclaire le chemin, qui apporte espérance et amour⁶.

Quand le pape Benoît XVI instituait le Conseil pontifical pour la promotion de la nouvelle évangélisation, il a rappelé le devoir missionnaire de l'Église. L'Église a le devoir d'annoncer toujours et partout l'Évangile de Jésus Christ. Premier et suprême évangéliste, le jour de son ascension au Père, il donna ce commandement aux disciples : « Allez donc ! De toutes les nations faites des disciples, baptisez-les au nom du Père, et du Fils, et du Saint-Esprit ; et apprenez-leur à garder tous les commandements que je vous ai donnés » (Mt 28,19-20). Fidèle à ce commandement, l'Église, peuple que Dieu a acquis afin qu'il proclame ses œuvres admirables (cf. 1P 2,9), depuis le jour de la Pentecôte où elle a reçu en don l'Esprit Saint (cf. Ac 2,14), ne s'est jamais lassée de faire connaître au monde entier la beauté de l'Évangile, en annonçant Jésus Christ, vrai Dieu et vrai homme, le même « hier, aujourd'hui et pour toujours » (He 13,8), qui, à travers sa mort et sa résurrection, a réalisé le salut, accomplissant l'antique promesse. C'est pourquoi, la mission évangéliste,

⁶ PAPE FRANÇOIS, *Angélus*. Fête du Baptême du Seigneur, 8 janvier 2017, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/fr/angelus/2017/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20170108.html/.

continuation de l'œuvre voulue par le Seigneur Jésus, est pour l'Église nécessaire et irremplaçable, expression de sa nature même⁷.

6. La coopération à l'activité missionnaire

Le saint pape Jean Paul II, dans son Encyclique *Redemptoris Missio* sur la valeur permanente du précepte missionnaire, évoquait la responsabilité des chrétiens. « Membres de l'Église en vertu de leur baptême, tous les chrétiens sont coresponsables de l'activité missionnaire. La participation des communautés et des fidèles à ce droit et à ce devoir est appelée "coopération missionnaire" » (RM 77).

Cette coopération s'enracine et se vit avant tout dans l'union personnelle au Christ : c'est seulement si l'on est uni à lui comme les sarments à la vigne (cf. Jn 15,5) que l'on peut porter de bons fruits. La sainteté de la vie permet à tout chrétien d'être fécond dans la mission de l'Église : le saint Concile invite « tous les chrétiens à une profonde rénovation intérieure, afin qu'ayant une conscience vive de leur propre responsabilité dans la diffusion de l'Évangile, ils assument leur part dans l'œuvre missionnaire auprès des païens » (RM 77).

La participation à la mission universelle ne se réduit donc pas à quelques activités particulières, mais elle est le signe de la maturité de la foi et d'une vie chrétienne qui porte du fruit. Ainsi, le croyant élargit les dimensions de sa charité, manifestant sa sollicitude pour ceux qui sont loin comme pour ceux qui sont près : il prie pour les missions et pour les vocations missionnaires, il aide les missionnaires, il suit avec intérêt leur activité et, quand ils reviennent, il les accueille avec la même joie que celle avec laquelle les premières communautés chrétiennes écoutaient les apôtres décrire les merveilles que Dieu avait accomplies par leur prédication (cf. Ac 14,27).

Par ailleurs, le baptême chrétien, corroboré par le sacrement de la confirmation, rend tous les croyants, chacun selon les modalités propres à sa vocation spécifique, coresponsables de la grande mission de l'Église. Chacun dans son domaine, avec sa propre identité, en com-

⁷ BENOÎT XVI, *Ubicumque et semper*. Lettre apostolique sous forme de *motu proprio*, 21 septembre 2010, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/fr/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20100921_ubicumque-et-semper.html/.

munion avec les autres et avec l'Église, doit se sentir solidaire de l'unique Rédempteur et du genre humain⁸.

7. Réflexions en guise de conclusion sur les Actes et la Mission ad Gentes

Pour terminer notre réflexion théologique et biblique sur Décret sur l'activité missionnaire de l'Église *Ad Gentes* à la lumière du livre des Actes des Apôtres, nous voulons attirer l'attention sur le concept de déplacement. Nous l'entendons dans les deux dimensions complémentaires suivantes. D'une part, le déplacement géographique rappelle tout le trajet qu'ont fait les missions depuis l'origine jusqu'à nos jours : « À Jérusalem, dans toute la Judée et la Samarie, et jusqu'aux extrémités de la terre » (Ac 1,8). L'activité missionnaire, même de nos jours, garde ce sens de déplacement d'un endroit à un autre, du nord au sud, d'est en ouest et vice versa. D'autre part, le déplacement théologique signifie le cheminement de l'esprit humain à travers les croyances qui aboutissent à la foi en Jésus Christ. C'est l'accueil de la Parole qui fait son chemin dans nos vies pour nous conduire au salut.

Au vu de ces deux dimensions du concept de cheminement, le message du livre des Actes des Apôtres et l'enseignement du Décret conciliaire *Ad Gentes* concerne les hommes et les femmes de notre temps. Ce ne sont pas des écrits destinés aux autres, aux anciens comme aux étrangers. Mais c'est le message destiné à l'Église que nous sommes, que nous formons ici et maintenant.

Que la Vierge Marie, reine des missions, intercède pour nous, pour que la Parole que nous sommes invités à apporter aux autres puisse nous convertir en missionnaires authentiques. Ainsi le salut apporté par Jésus Christ ira jusqu'aux extrémités de la terre en passant par notre propre vie. Ciel et terre pourront alors rendre gloire à Dieu, au nom du Père et du Fils et du Saint-Esprit. Amen.

⁸ JEAN-PAUL II, Homélie à la fête du baptême du Seigneur, 7 janvier 2001, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/fr/homilies/2003/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20030112_baptism-lord.html/.

La Pentecôte samaritaine ou le début de la Mission ad Gentes (Ac 8,14-25)

❖ PAULIN POUCOUTA

Un an après la commémoration de la fin de la première guerre mondiale, l'Église universelle célébrera le 30 novembre 2019 la promulgation par le pape Benoît XV de la Lettre apostolique *Maximum Illud*. Après le terrible carnage de cette guerre, le pape voulait redynamiser la responsabilité missionnaire de l'annonce de la Bonne Nouvelle. La mission devait retrouver son souffle évangélique en se purifiant de toute collusion avec la colonisation et les visées nationalistes et expansionnistes des nations, causes de tant de désastres. De manière prophétique, la mission devait se vivre libre de toute forme d'idéologie, de pouvoir politique ou économique. L'Église doit témoigner de l'universalisme, antidote à toutes sortes d'ethnocentrisme : « L'Église catholique n'est un intrus dans aucun pays ; elle n'est pas étrangère à aucun peuple »¹.

La mission traverse l'ensemble de la Bible, les auteurs insistant tantôt sur son pôle centripète, tantôt sur son pôle centrifuge². Dans le livre des Actes des Apôtres, on retrouve les deux perspectives. Néanmoins, ici « l'évangile prend le large »³. D'ailleurs, la quasi majorité des commentateurs reconnaît la dimension programmatique du mandat du Ressuscité à ses disciples pour le plan du livre des Actes. Les apôtres suivront l'ordre de leur Seigneur : « Vous allez recevoir le don de l'Esprit, alors vous serez mes témoins à Jérusalem et aussi dans toute la Judée et la Samarie et jusqu'aux extrémités de la terre » (Ac 1,8). Cette marche est jalonnée de diverses Pentecôtes qui annoncent l'horizon à atteindre.

¹ BENOÎT XV, Lettre apostolique *Maximum Illud*, 30 novembre 1919, n° 16.

² L. LEGRAND, *Le Dieu qui vient. La mission dans la Bible*, Desclée, Paris 1988, 21-56.

³ D. MARGUERAT, « Les Actes des Apôtres, l'Évangile prend le large », *Le Monde de la Bible*, n° 220, Paris 2017, 16-25.

Dans le cadre de cette contribution, nous avons choisi de nous arrêter sur l'une d'elle, la Pentecôte samaritaine (Ac 8,14-25). En effet, la Samarie est une étape importante dans l'essor missionnaire du livre. D'ailleurs, c'est l'unique borne géographique entre la Judée et les extrémités de la terre, selon le programme missionnaire du Ressuscité.

Notre travail comprendra deux moments. Le premier consistera à présenter le texte en son organisation, ses contextes et son cadre. Le second moment sera consacré à entendre l'appel à la réconciliation qui jaillit de la Pentecôte samaritaine et qui correspond bien au message de Benoît XV, tel qu'il sera prolongé dans le Décret conciliaire *Ad Gentes*, ainsi que dans les exhortations synodales *Ecclesia in Africa et Africae munus*.

1. La présentation du texte

1.1 De Jérusalem à Jérusalem

Écrit dans le style vif de Luc, notre texte est un récit, comme le confirme l'emploi abondant de l'aoriste. Le passage, qui ne comporte pas d'importants problèmes textuels, parle du séjour de Pierre et Jean en Samarie où ils confirment les Samaritains dans leur foi de nouveaux baptisés et se heurtent à Simon le magicien. Ce récit anecdotique débute par l'entrée en scène des principaux acteurs, Pierre et Jean (Ac 8,14), leur action (Ac 8,15-24) et leur sortie de la scène (Ac 8,25).

Ce qui se traduit par l'inclusion antithétique entre les v. 14 et 25 : Jérusalem // Jérusalem, Samarie // Samaritains, parole de Dieu // parole du Seigneur. D'un côté les apôtres quittent Jérusalem et viennent en Samarie ; de l'autre, ils abandonnent progressivement la Samarie et retournent à Jérusalem. D'un côté, entrée en scène, de l'autre sortie de scène.

Des éléments littéraires permettent de percevoir la dynamique du récit qui s'ouvre par une formule chère à Luc, à savoir le participe aoriste et la conjonction de coordination *Akousantès de* (8,14). Elle marque le début du texte. Au v. 18, une formule semblable annonce une autre section avec l'apparition du personnage du magicien. Le récit va être entrecoupé de dialogues entre Pierre et le magicien, dialogues marqués par les verbes *legô* (19,20.24). Dans les paroles de Pierre, on peut noter deux moments : l'invective avec des invectives très dures (20-21), puis l'appel à la conversion avec la formule dépréciative du v. 22 : *metanoèson oun*. Enfin, au v. 25, avec le terme

oun on revient à la mission des deux apôtres auprès des Samaritains : évangéliser et témoigner de la mission *ad gentes*. Cette composition peut se schématiser de la manière suivante :

Introduction : Pierre et Jean envoyés en Samarie : 8,14

Les Samaritains reçoivent l'Esprit Saint : 8,15-17

- Les apôtres prient sur les Samaritains (8,15-16) (grec) ;
- Les apôtres imposent les mains sur les Samaritains (8,17)

L'Esprit Saint est don de Dieu : 8,18-24

- Simon veut acheter le pouvoir de transmettre l'Esprit Saint (8,18-19)
- Réponse de Pierre : l'Esprit est don de Dieu (8,20-21), appel à la conversion (8,22-23).
- Réponse de Simon : demande intéressée (8,24)

Conclusion : retour des apôtres à Jérusalem (8,25).

1.2 D'une Pentecôte à l'autre

Au niveau du contexte large, notre passage se situe au premier tournant du livre. En effet, l'ordre de mission donné en 1,8, d'évangéliser de Jérusalem, de la Judée, et de la Samarie jusqu'aux extrémités de la terre est ici dans sa phase samaritaine. Après sa naissance et son organisation à Jérusalem, l'Église va sortir de la Judée, suite à la mort d'Étienne. Celle-ci oblige les chrétiens hellénistes principalement à se disperser hors de Jérusalem. Ce qui n'aurait pu être qu'une fuite prudente devient évangélisation et mission *ad gentes*.

Notre passage inaugure ainsi l'ouverture aux non-juifs. Il annonce, en effet, l'évangélisation de l'Éthiopien (Ac 8,26-40), celle du centurion Corneille et de sa famille (Ac 10-11). Elle prépare les grandes missions au monde païen. Missions qui amèneront l'Apôtre des gentils d'Antioche de Syrie vers l'Asie Mineure (Ac 11,19-16, 5), en Grèce (Ac 16,6-20, 38), d'Éphèse à Rome, le cœur de l'empire considéré alors comme l'« extrémité de la terre » (Ac 21,1-28.31).

Il n'est pas souvent question de Samaritains et de la Samarie dans le livre, sauf dans le verset 1,8, puis tout au long du chapitre 8. L'Église de Samarie sera évoquée de nouveau en 9,1. En 15,3, il s'agit d'une simple notice évoquant le passage de Paul et de Barnabé. Notre passage est comme une incise dans le livre, mais une incise capitale.

Enfin, le livre des Actes est ponctué d'allusions à l'Esprit Saint. En effet, la première communauté chrétienne naît, vit et grandit sous son souffle. Il est présent à l'œuvre dans le vécu quotidien des missionnaires. On comprend que certains Pères de l'Église appellent l'ouvrage l'« Évangile de l'Esprit ». Nous préférons parler des « Actes de l'Esprit », suivant en cela l'intuition de Saint Jean Chrysostome qui écrivait : « L'Évangile nous rappelle les gestes et discours de Jésus Christ, et les Actes des Apôtres contiennent le récit des opérations diverses du Saint-Esprit »⁴.

Notre texte s'inscrit donc dans la dynamique pneumatologique de l'ensemble du livre. En effet, l'élément essentiel des Ac 8,14-25 est le don de l'Esprit Saint aux baptisés de Samarie sur qui Pierre et Jean imposent les mains (8,17). Nous avons ici la Pentecôte samaritaine, une de celles qui rythment le livre.

1.3 Un texte particulier

L'étude du contexte immédiat nous approche toujours davantage du sens de l'article. Notre passage est précédé du récit du baptême des Samaritains et suivi de la conversion et du baptême de l'Éthiopien.

Les liens entre notre texte et le contexte qui précède (8,4-13) sont si nombreux que pour certains critiques ils constituent les deux actes d'une même pièce⁵.

En effet, sur le plan littéraire, les deux textes sont rattachés par la particule *de*. Au niveau géographique, nous sommes dans les deux cas en Samarie. C'est là que Philippe s'est rendu, venant de Jérusalem, suite à la persécution (8,5*sq.*). Et c'est également là que se rendent les apôtres (8,14) venant eux aussi de Jérusalem.

Au niveau des personnages, c'est curieusement Simon le magicien qui fait le lien entre les deux passages. On le trouve dans le contexte qui précède où il est question de son influence auprès des gens et aussi de sa conversion. Il s'attache à Philippe (8,9-13). Dans notre passage, il est également abondamment question de lui (8,18-24). Dans

⁴ SAINT JEAN CHRYSOSTOME, « Homélie I », in *Homélie sur les Actes des Apôtres*, Œuvres complètes (M. Jeannin traducteur), L. Guérin & Cie, Bar-le-Duc 1864, 5.

⁵ Cf. D. MARGUERAT, *Les Actes des Apôtres (1-12)*, Labor et Fides, Genève 2007, 286.

les deux passages, il est fait allusion au Christ par qui les Samaritains sont baptisés (8,12 et 8,16).

Pourtant, ni l'Esprit Saint, ni les apôtres n'apparaissent dans le contexte qui précède. Dans notre texte, Philippe, le principal acteur de la conversion des Samaritains, n'est même pas cité.

Notre passage est suivi du récit de l'Éthiopien (Ac 8,26-40). Les deux passages sont liés par la particule *de* (8,26). Il s'agit dans les deux cas de la conversion de non-juifs, Samaritains d'un côté, Éthiopien de l'autre. C'est la même dynamique missionnaire qui se dégage des deux passages avec le rôle-clé joué par Philippe.

Pourtant, on note des différences entre les deux passages. En 8,14-25, Pierre et Jean interviennent auprès des nouveaux baptisés, ce qui n'est pas le cas en 8,26-40. Si l'on prend le texte court, il n'est même pas question de descente de l'Esprit Saint sur l'Éthiopien. Certes, le texte long, que nous adoptons⁶, parle de la venue de l'Esprit sur le nouveau baptisé. Mais, même là, les apôtres n'interviennent pas. Le personnage de Philippe, physiquement absent du récit de la Pentecôte samaritaine, réapparaît ici, abondamment. On note également un changement sur le plan géographique. D'un côté, nous sommes en Samarie, de l'autre en Judée, en route vers Gaza et l'Éthiopie.

Comme l'environnement lointain, les contextes précédant et suivant notre passage confirment son unité. Luc entendait donner au texte un cachet tout particulier, qui nous prépare à revisiter l'histoire d'Israël.

1.4 L'histoire d'Israël revisitée

Craignant Dieu, Luc nous renvoie souvent aux Écritures qu'il lit dans la version des Septante. De manière allusive, il évoque ici l'histoire douloureuse de la déchirure d'Israël, paradigme de toutes les tensions humaines.

En effet, d'après l'historiographie biblique, la naissance du peuple élu comme nation fut laborieuse⁷. Israël se donne comme premier

⁶ Cf. P. POUCOUTA, *La Bible en terres d'Afrique. Quelle est la fécondité de la parole de Dieu*, Atelier, Paris 1999, 27-37.

⁷ Cf. V.J. SAMKUTTY, *The Samaritan Mission in Acts*, T&T Clark, London 2006.

roi le benjaminite Saül, auquel succède le judéen David qui réussit à tempérer les susceptibilités, entre les tribus du Nord et celles du Sud. Son successeur Salomon, pourtant bon administrateur et grand bâtisseur, est peu attentif aux relations entre les tribus. À sa mort, le jeune Roboam qui lui succède est encore plus intraitable que son père. Alors, le peuple se déchire : « Quand les Israélites virent que le roi ne les écoutait pas, ils lui répliquèrent : “Quelle part avons-nous sur David ? Nous n’avons pas d’héritage sur le fils de Jessé. À tes tentes Israël ! Et maintenant, pourvois à ta maison, David” » (1R 12,16).

Néanmoins, les prophètes, eux, refusent la déchirure. Ils se veulent les témoins de la mémoire commune d’Israël. Ceux du Sud vont prêcher dans le Nord et vice versa. Les traditions religieuses continuent à s’interpénétrer.

Ainsi, Ézéchiël qui a été conduit en exil en Babylonie, avec une bonne partie de la population du royaume du Sud, se souvient certainement de la déportation, des décennies auparavant, de ses frères du royaume du Nord par les Assyriens. Les deux peuples ressemblent à des ossements desséchés, sans espoir. Le prophète entrevoit la renaissance de l’ensemble d’Israël, tel qu’il était avant la séparation : « Le Seigneur m’adressa la parole : “Quant à toi, l’homme, prends un morceau de bois et écris dessus ces mots : ‘Juda et les Israélites de ce royaume’. Puis prends un autre morceau de bois et écris dessus : ‘Joseph (ou Éphraïm) et les Israélites de ce royaume’. Place ces deux morceaux bout à bout de façon qu’ils n’en forment plus qu’un dans ta main” » (Ez 37,15-28).

Hélas ! ce vœu du prophète ne se réalisera pas. Après l’exil, la déchirure s’agrandit. Les Samaritains se proposent pour reconstruire avec les Juifs le temple de Jérusalem. Mais ils essuient un refus très net. Les Juifs les considèrent comme un peuple impur. Irrités, ceux-ci construisent leur propre temple sur le mont Garizim en Samarie. Il sera rasé par le juif Jean Hyrcan I^{er} vers 107-108 av. J.-C. Cette destruction consacre la rupture définitive entre Juifs et Samaritains, qui se considèrent désormais comme des ennemis héréditaires.

Un énorme fossé s’est donc creusé entre les deux peuples. Les plus optimistes attendaient la réunification pour les temps messianiques. Jésus fera lui-même les frais de cette animosité puisque les Samaritains l’empêchèrent de transiter par la Samarie pour aller à Jérusalem (Lc 9,52-55).

Mais Jésus refuse d’entériner ces antagonismes. Il récuse l’esprit de vengeance de Jean et de Jacques. Mieux, il relève la bonté du Samari-

tain dont la générosité surclasse celle des prêtres et des lévites juifs (Lc 10,25-37). Il reconnaît la gratitude du lépreux samaritain, différente de l'ingratitude des autres lépreux guéris comme lui (Lc 17,15-16). L'épisode johannique de la Samaritaine montre que Jésus entame la réconciliation entre les deux peuples frères : « C'est pourquoi, quand les Samaritains arrivèrent auprès de lui, ils le prièrent de rester avec eux ; et Jésus resta là deux jours » (Jn 4,40). Pour Luc, l'épisode de Ac 8,14-25 entame la réconciliation entre Juifs et Samaritains, réalisant ainsi le projet de Celui qui est « venu rassembler dans l'unité tous les enfants de Dieu séparés » (Jn 11,52).

2. La Mission ad Gentes, chemin de réconciliation

2.1 Baptisés dans l'Esprit

Les apôtres Pierre et Jean viennent en Samarie pour authentifier et confirmer l'œuvre d'évangélisation accomplie par Philippe. Ils sont délégués par le collège des apôtres et des anciens qui siège à Jérusalem. Conjointement, les deux prient sur les Samaritains (8,15), comme le révèle le verbe grec *proseuchomai*. Chez Luc, il est souvent question de prière tant dans le troisième évangile que dans le livre des Actes. La vie de la communauté primitive est soutenue et rythmée par la prière. Mais ici, le verbe va de pair avec l'expression *epithèmi tas cheiras* (8,17), qui signifie « imposer les mains », ou mieux « poser les mains sur ». Il s'agit d'un geste de mise à part, d'élection, de consécration. Les Samaritains sont consacrés au nom de l'Esprit et à l'Esprit. La prière qui accompagne l'imposition des mains signifie que les apôtres s'ouvrent eux-mêmes à l'action de l'Esprit dont ils ne sont que les serviteurs : « La prière préliminaire à l'imposition des mains est importante, car elle montre que Pierre et Jean ne jouissent pas d'un pouvoir à demeure. Prier les place en dépendance du pouvoir de Dieu, qu'ils sollicitent d'agir, tout en maintenant l'inviolable liberté de son Esprit »⁸.

Les Samaritains, évoqués sous le nom de la Samarie (8,14), avaient été évangélisés par Philippe. Ils avaient accueilli la Parole, comme le suggère le verbe *dechomai* (8,14), fréquemment utilisé par Luc au sens de « recevoir, accueillir, prendre ce que l'on vous don-

⁸ D. MARGUERAT, *Les Actes des Apôtres* (1-12), 296.

ne ». Au figuré, le mot évoque l'accueil de l'Évangile. On comprend qu'il soit lié à l'annonce de la parole du Seigneur, *logon tou kyriou*, ou de la parole de Dieu, *logon tou theou* (8,25), selon les variantes textuelles. La bonne nouvelle est une proposition. Elle peut être acceptée ou refusée. Les Samaritains, eux, l'ont accueillie et en vivent.

Les Samaritains avaient été baptisés au nom du Seigneur Jésus (Ac 8,16). Maintenant, à l'imposition des mains des apôtres, ils reçoivent l'Esprit Saint et ils l'accueillent (Ac 8,15.17), comme le suggère le terme *lambanô* signifiant recevoir ou accueillir, ou les deux. Ce qui manifeste, une fois de plus, le double aspect de don et d'accueil.

Mais comment expliquer que le travail de Philippe ait besoin d'être confirmé par les apôtres ? Charles l'Eplattenier traduit bien ce questionnement : « On s'étonne de découvrir que l'action puissante et féconde de Philippe semble nécessiter un complément. Baptême et don du Saint-Esprit intimement liés dans les paroles de Pierre en 2,38 se trouvent dissociés. Il est dit des Samaritains que l'Esprit-Saint "n'était tombé sur aucun d'eux : ils avaient seulement été baptisés au nom du Seigneur Jésus" (8,16) »⁹.

En fait, il ne s'agit pas d'opposer les deux actes. Au contraire. C'est le même Esprit de Dieu qui agit. Comme le notent si bien Bossuyt et Radermakers : « [...] cette dissociation révèle la pédagogie de Luc. Il sait qu'on ne peut ni séparer, ni opposer Jésus à l'Esprit, puisque l'unique mystère du salut divin est constitué par l'action du Ressuscité dans la puissance de l'Esprit Saint. Mais ce mystère est la résultante de deux dynamismes qu'il serait erroné de confondre »¹⁰.

2.2 Israël réuni

Ainsi donc, le lien étroit entre le baptême et la confirmation signifie l'unité de l'action de l'Esprit et des divers ministres de la mission. Il confirme également l'œuvre de réconciliation que les chrétiens sont appelés à poursuivre. Les Samaritains acceptent de partager avec les juifs la même foi en Jésus Christ et en l'Esprit de Dieu. Ils reçoivent

⁹ CH. L'EPLATTENIER, *Les Actes des Apôtres*, Labor et Fides, Genève 1987, 106. Lire aussi ID., *Le livre des Actes des Apôtres*, Centurion, Paris 1994, 98.

¹⁰ P. BOSSUYT ET J. RADERMAKERS, *Témoins de la Parole de la Grâce. Actes des Apôtres*, vol. 2, Institut d'études théologiques, Bruxelles 1995, 289. Voir aussi l'étude de M. QUESNEL, *Baptisés dans l'Esprit. Baptême et Esprit Saint dans les Actes des Apôtres*, Cerf, Paris 1985.

l'Esprit Saint de la main de juifs. Alors, les haines, les rancœurs séculaires laissent la place à la fraternité.

En effet, l'Esprit d'unité réconcilie les apôtres avec leurs frères Samaritains. Jean doit se souvenir du jour où son frère Jacques et lui avaient demandé à Jésus de faire descendre le feu sur les Samaritains qui leur barraient le chemin de Jérusalem ! Pierre devait avoir en mémoire ce jour où les Apôtres furent choqués par l'attitude de leur maître causant avec une femme de Samarie, et surtout acceptant l'hospitalité des Samaritains !

Pour Luc, l'utopie d'Ézéchiël se réalise enfin après six siècles d'attente. Le souffle de l'Esprit relève non seulement les Juifs, mais aussi les Samaritains, et donc l'ensemble d'Israël. Mais il s'agit ici du nouvel Israël, du nouveau peuple de Dieu, rassemblé par l'Esprit de Dieu autour du Seigneur Jésus. En ce sens, nous avons ici l'écclésiologie de l'ensemble du livre des Actes des Apôtres : « L'Église des Actes se comprend non seulement comme une Église universelle appelée à dépasser les barrières religieuses et raciales, mais incarne conjointement Israël recomposé, qui réunit en son sein les ennemis du peuple choisi »¹¹.

Comme à toutes les Pentecôtes, l'Esprit ouvre les portes et renverse les barrières. Ces différentes Pentecôtes révèlent la mission d'unité de l'Esprit¹². Il fait éclater les frontières ethniques, culturelles et religieuses. Ainsi la Pentecôte juive est considérée comme l'anti-babel (Ac 2,1-13). Dans l'épisode de la tour de Babel, la diversité linguistique est source de division du fait de l'orgueil humain (cf. Gn 11,1-9). Avec le don de l'Esprit, la diversité devient source de communion. La Pentecôte éthiopienne marque la réconciliation entre le peuple de la Bible et les descendants de Kush (Ac 8,25-40). De même, l'Esprit réconcilie Corneille, bras armé du colonialisme romain, avec les Juifs, victimes de la colonisation (Ac 10-11). L'Esprit renouvelle les liens entre les anciens disciples de Jean Baptiste (les johannites d'Éphèse) et ceux de son cousin Jésus (Ac 19,1-7). La Pentecôte samaritaine, elle, scelle les retrouvailles entre les deux peuples frères, héréditairement ennemis, les Samaritains et les Juifs.

¹¹ S. BUTTICAZ, *L'Identité de l'Église dans les Actes des Apôtres. De la restauration d'Israël à la conquête universelle*, De Gruyter, Berlin / New York 2011, 213.

¹² Cf. D. MARGUERAT, *La Première Histoire du christianisme. Les Actes des Apôtres*, Cerf / Labor et Fides, Paris / Genève 1999, 165-168.

En somme, l'imposition des mains des apôtres est signe de communion. Les temps messianiques sont réalisés en Jésus qui envoie au monde son Esprit d'unité, unité concrétisée par la réconciliation entre les frères ennemis Juifs et Samaritains. Seules des communautés chrétiennes réconciliées peuvent être signes et ferments de réconciliation. Comme l'écrivent Bossuyt et Radermakers : « Impossible qu'Israël soit envoyé au monde s'il n'est préalablement réunifié ; sinon comment pourrait-il être l'artisan de la réconciliation entre les hommes ? Les apôtres, de Jérusalem, viennent apporter l'esprit d'unité aux Samaritains. L'imposition des mains est un signe de reconnaissance de la communion dans la même mission. C'est l'Esprit Saint, en effet, qui rend témoin et envoie en mission »¹³.

2.3 La mission ad gentes sous le signe de la gratuité

Malheureusement, ces belles retrouvailles sont perturbées par la figure de Simon le magicien. Il occupe une place particulière dans notre passage ainsi que dans le contexte antécédent. Certes, Philippe l'avait aidé à se convertir et il se fait baptiser. Mais les tendances magiques et la volonté de puissance restent encore vivaces en lui¹⁴. Ce qui l'intéresse le plus, ce sont les prodiges que Philippe accomplissait au nom de Jésus, et qu'il souhaitait lui aussi réaliser. Dans notre texte, Simon veut s'approprier l'Esprit de Dieu et le mettre à son service. Pour ce faire, il veut offrir aux apôtres des biens, avoir, richesses, argent (*chémata*) pour acheter « le don » de l'Esprit (8,18). Cette attitude a donné l'expression latine *simonia*, simonie en français : vente ou achat de biens spirituels, toute forme de trafic des biens spirituels, principalement le marchandage financier concernant les sacrements qui a eu cours dans l'histoire de l'Église.

En fait, tout chez Simon est intérêt et fiel, comme le suggère le terme *kaka* (8,22) qui peut être rendu par « mal, malice, mauvaises dispositions morales, vice ». Son cœur est plein d'*adikia*, c'est-à-dire de méchanceté, d'injustice, d'iniquité.

Simon est préoccupé d'*exousia* (Ac 8,17). Le mot désigne le pouvoir politique ou administratif ou spirituel. Simon parle de l'Esprit

¹³ P. BOSSUYT ET J. RADERMAKERS, *Témoins de la Parole de la Grâce Actes des Apôtres*, 295.

¹⁴ Cf. J. CAZEAUX, *Les Actes des Apôtres. L'Église entre le martyr d'Étienne et la mission de Paul*, Cerf, Paris 2008, 136-140.

comme d'un pouvoir que l'on peut acquérir, acheter, maîtriser et mettre à son service. C'est bien une mentalité magique. Pierre lui dit au contraire que l'Esprit nous introduit dans le régime de la *dôrea* c'est-à-dire du don, du présent, de la gratuité. Cet épisode rappelle l'intervention vigoureuse et prophétique de Pierre contre le mensonge mortifère de Saphire (Ac 5,1-11). Dans les deux cas, l'apôtre oppose la logique du don à celle de l'acquisition. Il dénonce le délit comme une offense à Dieu et à son projet. Il se pose comme le garant de l'intégrité de la communauté et de la mission chrétienne.

Certes, après les remontrances de Pierre, Simon renonce à sa conduite¹⁵. Mais en fait, sa conversion est intéressée. Et lorsqu'il demande aux apôtres de prier pour lui, ce n'est point pour qu'il se convertisse. Mais c'est pour qu'il soit protégé du mal que déclencherait sa conduite perfide. Pierre sent bien que Simon n'entre pas dans la dynamique évangélique de la gratuité.

On comprend mieux la vivacité de l'invective de Pierre qui se justifie par le danger qui menace l'évangélisation. Les Samaritains sont certes de fidèles et vertueux serviteurs de la Loi comme Jésus le relève à maintes reprises. Mais, à la lisière du monde païen, ils sont tentés par le syncrétisme, ainsi que le montre l'immense succès du magicien Simon en Samarie. Or, le syncrétisme favorise un amalgame entre pouvoir spirituel et pouvoir financier. De plus, dans certaines religions de l'Antiquité, l'accès au sacerdoce ou aux grades supérieurs de magicien pouvait s'obtenir moyennant de l'argent.

De fait, Simon représente une des formes de la religion populaire que rencontrent les premiers missionnaires. En effet, des mages et astrologues peuplent l'Orient ancien, tels les exorcistes juifs et leurs livres magiques (Ac 19,11-20), ou le voyant extra-lucide de Philippe (Ac 16,6-40). Ceux qui voient les apôtres utiliser avec tant d'efficacité le nom de Jésus les prennent pour des magiciens. Ils pensent trouver dans le nom de Jésus une formule magique concurrente de celles qui circulaient dans les milieux ésotériques de l'époque.

L'attitude de Simon frise donc l'idolâtrie et la mythologie, telle celle de la visite des dieux aux humains. On le voit dans le récit de la

¹⁵ Ce que confirme la version byzantine qui ajoute en Ac 8,24 : « Simon pleurerait de manière incessante et abondante ». Il s'agirait de larmes de repentir. Mais pour Clément, qui reprend cette version, il s'agit de larmes de rage et de déception (Clem. Hom. XX, 21). Avec la plupart des critiques, il convient de conserver le texte court qui ne contient pas cette addition.

guérison de Lystres (Ac 14,8-20). Là, comme dans notre passage, on recherche le miracle. Et celui-ci est accueilli dans l'ambiguïté. On exalte le messager qui devient un médiateur riche en forces surnaturelles. On transforme le héraut de la bonne nouvelle en héros divin. C'est ce à quoi aspire Simon.

Enfin, il convient de rappeler que nous sommes alors dans une société où de nombreux philosophes populaires et des exorcistes orientaux vendent leurs services. Des missionnaires chrétiens sont tentés de les imiter. L'apôtre Paul, lui, résistera à cette tentation comme il en témoigne dans son testament missionnaire qu'il lègue aux anciens d'Éphèse (Ac 20,17-21). Il a certainement suivi les conseils de son ancien maître, le rabbin Hillel, conseils qui valent pour les missionnaires de la Bonne Nouvelle de Jésus : « Peut-être diras-tu : voici que j'apprends la Tora afin de devenir riche, afin d'être appelé rabbi, afin de recevoir un salaire au siècle qui vient (au jugement dernier) : il est enseigné d'aimer ; tout ce que vous faites, ne le faites que par amour » (*Sifri sur le Deutéronome*, 11,41).

2.4 La diaconie de la mission *ad gentes*

À l'inverse de Simon le magicien, Philippe, lui, est un serviteur désintéressé de la mission *ad gentes*¹⁶. Certes, il n'est pas question de lui dans notre passage. Son travail terminé, il s'éclipse, pour laisser la place aux apôtres. Pourtant, une continuité demeure entre eux et Philippe.

Ce dernier est mentionné à seize reprises dans l'ensemble du livre des Actes. Il est cité pour la première fois en Ac 6,5, à la suite d'Étienne qui était probablement le chef de file des hellénistes. Luc dit d'Étienne qu'il est « un homme rempli de foi et de l'Esprit Saint » (Ac 6,5). C'est également vrai pour Philippe, qui semble être le lieutenant d'Étienne. En tout cas, après la mort de ce dernier, Philippe sera le seul des sept à être mentionné. Les cinq autres préposés au service des tables ne sont cités qu'en Ac 6,5 : Procore, Nicanor, Timon, Parménas, Nicolas.

Les sept ont certainement exercé le ministère de redistribution équitable de la nourriture envers les veuves des hellénistes et celles

¹⁶ Cf. P. FABIEN, *Philippe l'« évangeliste » au tournant de la mission dans les Actes des Apôtres*, Cerf, Paris 2010, 75-95.

des Hébreux. Mais Luc ne nous les montre nulle part en train de servir à table. Pourtant, les chrétiens hellénistes se reconnaissent en ces sept personnages. Ceux-ci sont comme les répondants de ce groupe au sein de la grande communauté, principalement auprès des apôtres. Leur position leur donne une mission de dialogue, entre les Hébreux et les hellénistes. Devenus chrétiens, les susceptibilités ou tensions entre les deux groupes ont tendance à se perpétuer au sein de l'Église. Il revenait aux sept de jeter le pont entre les deux communautés. Plus tard, ils devront servir de lien entre les chrétiens d'origine juive et ceux d'origine païenne.

Philippe est dit, à juste titre, « évangeliste » (Ac 21,8). Ce qui traduit bien son dynamisme missionnaire, son sens du dialogue et de la rencontre. Il est au-dessus des préjugés et au service de l'universalité. Il le montre en Samarie. Philippe est le témoin de cette parole sans frontière qui renverse les barrières, de manière si forte qu'elle provoque l'admiration, l'attachement, et des conversions nombreuses. Les miracles qu'il accomplit sont des signes de l'action de Dieu, qui libère des préjugés paralysants et morbides qui rendent inaptes à la rencontre. Ce sont des signes d'un Dieu qui suscite des conversions qui témoignent de la transformation des relations humaines débarrassées de tout ostracisme.

L'évangeliste est l'homme des rencontres audacieuses. Il fréquente ces milieux délicats dont on se méfiait un peu, dont on avait même peur. Il bouscule les certitudes et les peurs de l'autre. Ouvert à d'autres cultures, il est apte à rencontrer les ennemis héréditaires des Juifs.

Philippe annonce un autre helléniste, Joseph. Ce lévite, originaire de Chypre, est un Juif de la diaspora comme Philippe. Les apôtres le surnomment Barnabé, « fils d'encouragement », ou « fils de la consolation ». De par ses origines et sa largesse d'esprit et de cœur, il est lui aussi l'homme des rencontres difficiles. Ainsi, il prend avec lui le nouveau converti Paul pour l'intégrer dans la communauté chrétienne, alors que les autres chrétiens se méfient de cet ancien persécuteur de l'Église. Barnabé, en compagnie de Paul, se rend à Jérusalem plaider en faveur de la tolérance et de l'accueil de la différence entre chrétiens d'origine païenne et ceux d'origine juive.

Mais bien avant Barnabé, Philippe rejoint l'action déroutante de l'Esprit Saint au service de la réconciliation universelle. Il est bien au tournant de la mission. Il préfigure la mission comme diaconie de la réconciliation. Il annonce la mission *ad gentes* de l'Église. On comp-

rend que Luc en fasse le personnage clé de ce chapitre 8 qui nous sort de la Judée. C'est ce que note Michel Quesnel : « Luc, lui-même païen d'origine et visiblement favorable à tout ce qui concerne l'ouverture maximale de la mission, est sans doute plein de sympathie pour cet helléniste jouant un rôle de pionnier par suite des circonstances, et finalement à l'origine des deux principaux éclatements des frontières de l'Église »¹⁷.

Conclusion : L'aujourd'hui de la Pentecôte samaritaine

Ainsi, la Pentecôte samaritaine ouvre à une perspective de la mission *ad gentes* qui se réalise non pas sur le rythme du pouvoir et de la conquête, mais sur celui de la gratuité et de la réconciliation. Même s'il ne s'y réfère pas, *Maximum Illud* rejoint cette optique.

Or, la réflexion missiologique initiée par Benoît XV est si innovante et si stimulante qu'elle se poursuivra lors du Concile Vatican II. D'après l'étude de Laurent Villemain¹⁸, les Actes des Apôtres sont cités 129 fois dans l'ensemble des textes du Concile Vatican II, dont 41 dans le Décret sur la mission, *Ad Gentes* soit environ près du tiers des citations. Il existe donc un lien très fort entre le livre de Luc et le décret.

Même s'il n'est fait qu'une seule fois référence à la Pentecôte samaritaine, le document conciliaire rejoint la perspective de la gratuité de la mission développée dans le texte biblique. La mission doit signifier la gratuité du don de Dieu. C'est pourquoi le Décret *Ad Gentes* parle de la *missio Dei*. Celle-ci s'enracine dans la Trinité et dans l'histoire humaine. Elle a un caractère eschatologique. Certes, le Décret insiste sur le témoignage de l'Église, témoignage de vie et de dialogue, témoignage de charité. Mais il s'agit du témoignage du Christ lui-même que l'Église porte à l'humanité soulignant ainsi l'origine divine de la mission : « L'activité missionnaire, dit *Ad gentes*, n'est rien d'autre, elle n'est rien de moins que la manifestation du dessein de Dieu, son épiphanie et sa réalisation dans le monde et son histo-

¹⁷ M. QUESNEL, *Baptisés dans l'Esprit*, 56.

¹⁸ L. VILLEMINE, « Les Actes des Apôtres dans l'ecclésiologie de Vatican II », in M. BERDER (dir.), *Les Actes des Apôtres. Histoire, récit, théologie*, XX^e Congrès de l'Association catholique française pour l'étude de la Bible (ACFEB), Cerf, Paris 2005, 214.

re, dans laquelle Dieu conduit clairement à son terme, au moyen de la mission, l'histoire du salut » (AG 9).

En 1984, les biblistes africains réunis à Ibadan relèvent l'importance que le livre des Actes accorde à la mission¹⁹. Leurs travaux nourriront la réflexion de la première Assemblée spéciale des évêques pour l'Afrique qui avait voulu se ressourcer au dynamisme missionnaire de l'Église primitive (Ac 1,8b). Certes, l'expérience des premières communautés chrétiennes n'est pas à reproduire. Mais elle inspire et suscite une dynamique qui peut engager l'Église-Famille de Dieu en Afrique à inventer aujourd'hui des modes de témoignage de Jésus Christ libérateur.

Ainsi, même si le texte de la Pentecôte samaritaine n'est pas cité dans *Ecclesia in Africa*, le thème de la réconciliation était bien à l'esprit des Pères synodaux qui, en avril 1994, se réunissaient alors qu'un drame entre frères se déroulait au Rwanda. La nouvelle évangélisation pour l'Église-Famille, c'est le service de la réconciliation : « La nouvelle évangélisation visera donc à *édifier l'Église Famille*, en excluant tout ethnocentrisme et tout particularisme excessif, en prônant la réconciliation et une vraie communion entre les différentes ethnies, en favorisant la solidarité et le partage en ce qui concerne le personnel et les ressources entre Églises particulières, sans considérations indues d'ordre ethnique » (EA 63).

Face aux violences endémiques et aux haines qui déchirent le continent, le deuxième synode africain entendait interpeller la responsabilité de l'Église-Famille de Dieu dans l'avènement de la réconciliation, qui va de pair avec la justice et la paix. Même si elle ne comporte aucune citation d'Ac 8,14-25, l'exhortation post-synodale *Africae munus* est un hymne à l'engagement au service de la réconciliation en Afrique : « L'engagement de l'Afrique pour le Seigneur Jésus-Christ est un trésor précieux que je confie, en ce début de troisième millénaire, aux évêques, aux prêtres, aux diacres permanents, aux personnes consacrées, aux catéchistes et aux laïcs de ce cher continent et des îles voisines. Cette mission porte l'Afrique à approfondir la vocation chrétienne. Elle l'invite à vivre, au nom de Jésus, la réconciliation entre les personnes et les communautés, et à promouvoir pour tous la paix et la justice dans la vérité » (AM 1).

¹⁹ Journées bibliques africaines, *Les Actes des Apôtres et les jeunes Églises*, Facultés catholiques de Kinshasa, Kinshasa 1990.

Ainsi, à la lumière de la Pentecôte samaritaine, à la suite de *Maximum Illud* et d'*Ecclesia in Africa, Africae munus* fait de l'engagement pour la réconciliation la nouvelle évangélisation du continent, la mission *ad gentes* pour l'Église d'Afrique : « Chers frères et sœurs, à la lumière du thème de la deuxième Assemblée spéciale pour l'Afrique, la nouvelle évangélisation concerne, en particulier, le service de l'Église en vue de la réconciliation, de la justice et de la paix. Par conséquent, il est nécessaire d'accueillir la grâce de l'Esprit Saint qui nous invite : "Laissez-vous réconcilier avec Dieu" (2Co 5,20). Les chrétiens sont donc tous invités à se réconcilier avec Dieu. Alors, vous serez en mesure de devenir des artisans de la réconciliation au sein des communautés ecclésiales et sociales dans lesquelles vous vivez et œuvrez. La nouvelle évangélisation suppose la réconciliation des chrétiens avec Dieu et avec eux-mêmes. Elle exige la réconciliation avec le prochain, le dépassement des barrières de toutes sortes comme celles provenant de la langue, de la culture et de la race. Nous sommes tous fils d'un seul Dieu et Père "qui fait lever son soleil sur les méchants et sur les bons, et tomber la pluie sur les justes et sur les injustes" (Mt 5,45) » (AM 169).



La Misión ad Gentes como “testimonio” en los *Hechos de los Apóstoles*

❖ FRANCISCO PÉREZ HERRERO

La resurrección de Jesús de Nazaret, el Crucificado, abre a horizontes ilimitados la misión *ad gentes* encomendada a los discípulos ya en los días de su ministerio público. De tal forma que la Iglesia nace en Pentecostés siendo misionera y universal.

Sin embargo, este hecho no siempre estuvo tan claro. Se da, en realidad, una progresiva toma de conciencia con una praxis variada y pluriforme que se deduce de los diversos escritos del Nuevo Testamento. Entre ellos destaca el libro de los *Hechos de los Apóstoles* (Hch), que “es por excelencia el libro de la misión”¹. Efectivamente, el tema de la misión universal de la Iglesia domina y configura la totalidad de este escrito, presentado como continuación del tercer Evangelio.

El programa misionero enunciado por el Resucitado en Lc 24,46-49 es recordado una vez más en Hch 1,8: “Recibiréis la fuerza del Espíritu Santo que va a venir sobre vosotros y seréis mis testigos en Jerusalén, en toda Judea y Samaría, y hasta el confín de la tierra”.

Los dos textos paralelos coinciden en calificar la misión que han de llevar a cabo los Apóstoles y sus colaboradores como ‘testimonio’. Esta coincidencia, que justifica el título por el que hemos optado, no puede ser una simple casualidad en un escritor tan meticuloso como Lucas. Lo confirma su frecuente recurso a esta terminología (testigo,

¹ S. CIPRIANI, “Il primato della parola nel libro degli Atti degli Apostoli”, *Asprenas* 40, 1993, 483-500. Con esta afirmación comienza el autor un minucioso análisis sobre el papel que juega la palabra (de Dios) a lo largo de este libro, al que algunos comentaristas actuales no dudan en darle por título o subtítulo: “El viaje de la palabra de Dios”. Es, por ejemplo, el caso de M. GRILLI, *L'opera di Luca: 2. Atti degli Apostoli, il viaggio della Parola*, Dehoniane, Bologna 2013, 8: “El protagonista [de Hch] no es Pablo, ni Pedro, ni siquiera la Iglesia. El verdadero protagonista es la palabra de Dios que desde Jerusalén, a través de Judea y Samaría, llega a Roma”. (Todas las traducciones son del autor).

testimonio, testimoniar)². Lucas concibe la misión *ad gentes* de la Iglesia como un ‘testimonio’.

Todos los discípulos de Jesús, no sólo el grupo de los Doce, han de actuar como testigos suyos, es decir, como personas que dan la cara por él, que no temen arriesgar la vida a la hora de proclamar abiertamente sus obras, su enseñanza y su destino. Lejos de contraponerse al anuncio del Evangelio³, el testimonio se lleva a cabo sobre todo a través del anuncio, recibiendo ambos, tanto el testimonio como el anuncio, una tonalidad muy particular. En el primer caso, no se trata de un mero testimonio histórico, o sea la testificación imparcial de un hecho acaecido en el pasado. Tampoco se puede reducir a un testimonio de carácter jurídico, aunque comparta con él el compromiso personal del testigo además del aspecto público y solemne del testimonio. Estamos más bien ante un testimonio específicamente bíblico, cuyo acento recae no tanto en la certificación de un hecho del pasado cuanto en el anuncio de algo que, respondiendo a la voluntad de Dios, concierne sobre todo al futuro. Este era el modo en que los profetas daban testimonio de Dios y de su designio de salvación.

Desde esta acepción bíblica de testimonio, también el anuncio del Evangelio de Jesucristo por parte de sus discípulos adquiere una connotación especial. En palabras de A. Rétif, “el kerygma anuncia hechos pasados, pero que son garantes de una voluntad de Dios en el presente y que es rica de efectos, tanto exteriores como interiores, para el futuro. Al igual que el testimonio bíblico, el kerygma mira decididamente hacia el futuro, no hacia el pasado, e incluso hacia el futuro más alejado, puesto que está impregnado siempre de tonalidad escatológica. Atestigua verdades que interesan al alma, a la vida moral y religiosa, a la salvación”⁴. Efectivamente, no se trata de una palabra muerta en labios del heraldo, sino de una palabra de salvación (Hch 13,26), de un mensaje de gracia (Hch 20,32), de una fe viva cuyos efectos han sido sentidos personalmente por el heraldo. Él grita

² Solamente en Hch, el sustantivo *martyr* es utilizado 13 veces y los verbos *martyrein* y *diamartyresthai*, 11 y 9 veces respectivamente.

³ Cf. A. RÉTIF, “Témoignage et prédication missionnaire dans les Actes des Apôtres”, *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, vol. 73, 1951, 152-165. El autor sale al paso de la propuesta de L. CERFAUX (“Témoins du Christ d’après le Livre des Actes”, *Angelicum*, vol. 20, 1943, 166-183), para quien el testimonio estaría en contraposición al kerygma y sería tarea exclusiva de los Doce.

⁴ A. RÉTIF, “Témoignage et prédication missionnaire”, 159-160.

su propia experiencia de la resurrección de Cristo, y esto no es en absoluto algo cerrado y muerto en el pasado, sino verdades eternas, hechos siempre actuales que manifiestan la perenne misericordia del Dios Salvador. La autoridad propia de este testimonio no se basa en la autoridad o credibilidad del testigo, sino en la autoridad y credibilidad del mismo Dios.

Este testimonio al servicio de la misión *ad gentes* debe seguir un itinerario concreto, con un punto de partida y de llegada bien definidos: Jerusalén y el confín de la tierra. La geografía en la obra de Lucas adquiere siempre una densidad teológica. Detrás de esa geografía se esconde sin duda la idea de que los discípulos de Jesús tienen ante sí una misión universal que les obligará a estar siempre en camino, derribando toda clase de fronteras levantadas por los hombres: geográficas, étnicas, culturales, sociales, religiosas.

El hecho de que esta misión universal tenga que partir de Jerusalén, la ciudad santa en la que ha concluido la obra de Jesús con su muerte, su resurrección y sus apariciones, indica que en Jerusalén tiene y tendrá siempre sus raíces. “Aquí nace la Iglesia, y nace en el interior mismo del pueblo de Dios, de Israel: los Doce representan a Israel; consiguientemente, es una historia de la salvación que ve en Jerusalén la raíces de nuestro ser”⁵.

Por otra parte, el confín de la tierra está simbolizando, en una perspectiva universalista y en actitud de peregrinación permanente, lo nuevo, el futuro: “Los otros, para ser alcanzados, no han de dirigirse ya al templo, no han de emprender el camino e ir a Jerusalén; los otros son alcanzados sobre su propio camino, sobre los caminos del Imperio, sobre los senderos del mundo [...]. La salvación encuentra a la humanidad entera sobre los caminos polvorientos de la historia”⁶.

No es probable que, al usar la expresión “confín de la tierra”, el autor esté pensando en Roma, donde deja a Pablo acogiendo a cuantos acudían a él y “enseñando lo que se refiere al Señor Jesucristo con toda libertad, sin estorbos” (Hch 28,31). Como observa D. Marguerat, sólo una visión polémica puede concebir la capital del Imperio como “confín de la tierra” (Ps Sal 8,15). Los romanos, y Lucas con ellos, la concebían más bien como el centro del mundo habitado. La expresión, conocida en la versión griega de los LXX, apunta hacia todas

⁵ M. GRILLI, *L'opera di Luca: 2. Atti degli Apostoli*, 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

las naciones de la tierra, es decir, hacia la evangelización de los no judíos. Alcanzar Roma era sin duda la mejor garantía de que el Evangelio se difundiera desde allá al mundo entero. Lucas se conforma con hacer llegar la Palabra a Roma por medio de Pablo, pero es consciente de que el programa del testimonio misionero sigue abierto hacia una universalidad sin límites⁷.

En el arco de espacio y de tiempo que abarca el libro de Hch, cuatro rasgos fundamentales caracterizan el testimonio ofrecido por la Iglesia naciente: 1) está impulsado por el Espíritu; 2) se realiza en colaboración jerarquizada y responsable; 3) queda avalado por una vida de comunión; 4) respeta la diversidad cultural y religiosa de los destinatarios. Ante el reto actual de ‘la nueva evangelización’, estos rasgos del primer testimonio cristiano adquieren un interés singular. Para esa ‘nueva evangelización’, el modo en que se lleva a cabo la primera constituirá siempre un punto de referencia obligado e iluminador.

1. Un testimonio bajo el impulso del Espíritu

El Espíritu de Dios no sólo impulsa y guía a Jesús en su misión salvadora⁸. Prometido por éste a sus discípulos, desde su efusión en Pentecostés no dejará de impulsar también el testimonio cristiano sobre él. Hch lo subraya de manera incesante, hasta el punto de que algunos comentaristas han llegado a denominarlo “Evangelio del Espíritu” o “Hechos del Espíritu”⁹. Baste aducir los textos más significativos:

- El mismo día de Pentecostés, Pedro explica lo sucedido como cumplimiento de lo predicho por el profeta Joel para los últi-

⁷ Cf. D. MARGUERAT, *Les Actes des Apôtres (1-12)*, Commentaire du Nouveau Testament V/a, 2^a Série, Genève 2007, 41-42. Otros autores siguen pensando que la alusión a Roma es “la interpretación preferida” de de la expresión. Así J.A. FITZMYER, *Los Hechos de los Apóstoles (Hch 1,1-8,40)*, vol. 1, Biblioteca de Estudios Bíblicos, vol. 112, Sígueme, Salamanca 2003, 276-277.

⁸ Cf. Lc 3,21-22; 4,1.14.18-22; 10,21 etc.

⁹ Esta denominación se inspiran en el modo en que habla de la obra de Lucas un padre de la Iglesia en el siglo VII: OECUMENIUS, *Scholia in Act. Ap.*; PG 118,32: “Aptum est evangelium vocare Actus Christi, librum Actuum autem Actus Spiritus Sancti”. Sobre las reservas que puede suscitar esta denominación véase D. MARGUERAT, *La première histoire du christianisme: Les Actes des Apôtres*, Lectio Divina, vol. 180, Paris – Genève 1999, 173-174.

mos tiempos: “Derramaré mi Espíritu sobre toda carne y vuestros hijos y vuestras hijas profetizarán” (Hch 2,17; cf. Jl 3,1-5).

- Lleno de Espíritu Santo habla Pedro al sanedrín, haciéndole saber que la curación del tullido del templo sólo se debe al “Nombre de Jesucristo el Nazareno” (Hch 4,8,10).
- Llena de Espíritu queda toda la comunidad tras haber elevado a Dios su plegaria y, bajo su impulso, “predicaban con valentía la Palabra de Dios” (Hch 4,31).
- Como “hombre lleno de fe y de Espíritu Santo” es calificado el diácono Esteban (Hch 6,5), que, tras hablar con la sabiduría y la fuerza del Espíritu en la sinagoga de los Libertos (Hch 6,8), será el primero en sellar su palabra con su sangre.
- El Espíritu es el que, fuera de Jerusalén, impulsa a Felipe a acercarse al funcionario etíope para hacerle comprender con su explicación el texto bíblico que leía (Hch 8,29).
- El Espíritu se impone sobre la voluntad y los criterios de Pedro, induciéndole a entrar en casa de Cornelio (Hch 10,19; 11,12) para iniciar con él la evangelización entre los paganos.
- El Espíritu es quien toma la iniciativa en la elección de Pablo y Bernabé para llevar a cabo la evangelización entre los gentiles (Hch 13,2).
- El Espíritu es el que, junto con los Apóstoles, decide en el concilio de Jerusalén el modo de proceder en esa evangelización: “sin imponer más cargas que las indispensables” (Hch 15,28).
- El Espíritu es, finalmente, quien impide por dos veces que Pablo fuera a predicar donde él se proponía (Hch 16,6-7) y quien le conduce a Jerusalén, haciéndole saber que le aguardaban prisiones y muchas tribulaciones (Hch 20,22-23).

A la luz de estos datos¹⁰, una conclusión se impone sin reservas: El Espíritu es el verdadero Señor de la palabra predicada, infundiendo en los predicadores valor, ilusión, gozo y esperanza. Cada paso dado en la primera evangelización está impulsado por el Espíritu, que interviene de manera singular en los momentos más comprome-

¹⁰ Un inventario completo es ofrecido por D. MARGUERAT, *La première histoire du christianisme*, 145-174. El autor extrae de ese inventario cuatro enseñanzas importantes: a) el Espíritu afecta sólo a los creyentes; b) las menciones al Espíritu disminuyen a medida que avanza el relato; c) la efusión comunitaria de carácter extático va dejando paso a la intervención personal; d) la personalización del Espíritu se hace cada vez más marcada.

tidos, como cuando la persecución arrecia o cuando hay que traspasar las barreras étnicas del judaísmo¹¹.

La ‘nueva evangelización’ ha de renovar su confianza en esta acción del Espíritu. Sólo así podrá ser ‘nueva’ en su ardor, en el empuje interior y en la búsqueda de los modos que sean más adecuados a cada tiempo y a cada situación. Siempre convendrá recordar las palabras que pronunciaba en Upsala, el año 1968, el Metropolitano Ignacios Hazim ante la Asamblea del Consejo Mundial de las Iglesias: “Sin el Espíritu Santo, Dios queda lejano, Cristo permanece en el pasado, el Evangelio es letra muerta; la Iglesia, una organización más; la autoridad, tiranía; la misión, propaganda; la liturgia, simple recuerdo; y la vida cristiana, una moral de esclavos. Pero con el Espíritu Santo, el mundo es liberado y gime en el alumbramiento del Reino, el hombre lucha contra el egoísmo, Cristo resucitado está aquí, el Evangelio es una fuerza vivificadora, la Iglesia significa la comunión trinitaria, la autoridad es un servicio liberador, la misión se convierte en un permanente Pentecostés, la liturgia es memorial y anticipación, y la actividad humana queda deificada”¹². En una palabra, el Espíritu Santo ha de seguir siendo el alma de la Iglesia.

2. Un testimonio en colaboración jerarquizada y responsable

El ministerio de la Palabra con el que la Iglesia naciente lleva a cabo su misión de testimonio, misión impulsada en todo momento por el Espíritu, viene presentado en Hch como el ministerio o servicio eclesial por excelencia. No es un ministerio reservado a un grupo concreto. Compete tanto al grupo de los Doce Apóstoles como al grupo de los Siete, al de los profetas y doctores, al de los presbíteros e incluso a personas sin ningún título ministerial¹³.

¹¹ Esta unión entre Espíritu y palabra predicada es el rasgo más característico, aunque no único, de la pneumatología lucana. Entre la abundante bibliografía cabe destacar el estudio de G. BETORI, “Lo Spirito e l’annuncio della Parola negli Atti degli Apostoli”, *Rivista Biblica*, vol. 35, 1987, 399-441.

¹² Una detallada crónica de los diversos actos e intervenciones es ofrecida por J. GARCÍA HERNANDO, “La Asamblea de Upsala 1968”, *Diálogo Ecueménico*, vol. 3, 1968, 337-366.

¹³ Especialmente iluminadores siguen siendo los estudios de J. DUPONT, “Les ministères de l’Église naissante d’après les Actes des Apôtres”, en ID., *Nouvelles étu-*

a) El grupo de los Doce

Como testigos de todo lo que Jesús hizo y enseñó durante su vida terrena y como testigos también de su resurrección (Hch 1,21-22), el grupo de los Doce queda constituido en responsable de la comunidad que nace en Pentecostés. Su responsabilidad es ante todo de carácter magisterial, de acuerdo con la misión recibida (cf. Lc 24,47; Hch 1,8)¹⁴. Nada de extraño tiene que desde el inicio aparezcan predicando y enseñando ante todo el pueblo, ante el sanedrín o incluso ante los miembros de la comunidad creyente.

Dentro del grupo, destaca sin paliativos la figura de Pedro: él es el que inaugura la predicación a los judíos (Hch 2,14-36) y a los paganos (Hch 10,1-11,18); él es el que confirma las tareas evangelizadoras que otros emprenden (Hch 8,14-17); él es el que corrige abusos que deforman o ponen en peligro la comunidad (Hch 5,1-11; 8,18-25). La primacía de Pedro es indiscutible. Pero esa primacía quedaría gravemente falseada si se aislara a Pedro del grupo apostólico. En sus discursos se expresa siempre con un “nosotros” (cf. Hch 2,14), lo cual significa que sus palabras no representan su propia predicación, sino la predicación apostólica en cuanto tal.

b) El grupo de los Siete

Aunque su origen parece responder a la necesidad de atender social y económicamente a un sector de la comunidad cristiana de Jerusalén (los helenistas = de habla griega; cf. Hch 6,1-6), la actuación que de ellos se consigna está en línea de continuidad con la de los Doce Apóstoles. También ellos se dedican al anuncio de la Palabra. Esteban predica en una sinagoga de judíos helenistas (Hch 6,9) y Felipe evangeliza en Samaría (Hch 8,5-40). La imposición de manos que reciben de los Doce es un gesto significativo de comunión, pero también de subordinación¹⁵.

des sur les Actes des Apôtres, Lectio Divina, vol. 118, Cerf, Paris 1984, 132-185; y M. DUMAIS, “Ministères, charismes et Esprit dans l’oeuvre de Luc”, *Église et Théologie*, vol. 9, 1978, 413-453.

¹⁴ Otras responsabilidades del grupo son las de asegurar la oración, procurar una asistencia social a los necesitados (Hch 6,1-4) y mantener la unidad entre las diversas comunidades (Hch 8,14; 15,2).

¹⁵ Cf. J. DUPONT, “Les ministères”, 157; M. DUMAIS, “Ministères, charismes et Esprit”, 419.

c) Los profetas y maestros

Así son designados aquéllos bajo cuya responsabilidad se encuentra la comunidad cristiana de Antioquía (Hch 13,1-3). Aunque no queda especificada su función, ésta ha de girar necesariamente en torno a la predicación. El hecho de que la lista se abra y se cierre con los nombres de Bernabé y de Pablo no deja lugar a dudas. El nombre de Bernabé había sido explicitado en Hch 4,36 como “hijo de la exhortación”, y como “palabra de exhortación” viene presentado un discurso que Pablo pronuncia en la sinagoga de Antioquía (Hch 13,15). Puesto que el término técnico ‘exhortación’ (*paráklēsis*) sirve para hablar de un discurso interpretativo de la Escritura, bien se podría definir la tarea de los profetas y maestros como instrucción y exhortación a partir de las Escrituras¹⁶. Habiendo ejercido esta tarea en el seno de una comunidad local, pasarían después a ser predicadores itinerantes, enviados por la comunidad con el beneplácito y bajo la autoridad de los Doce. De aquí que, ante una cuestión conflictiva – como la de no exigir la circuncisión a los convertidos del paganismo –, deban dirigirse a Jerusalén para encontrar allí la solución (cf. Hch 15,1-35).

d) Los presbíteros de Jerusalén

Dirigida al principio por Pedro y los demás miembros del grupo de los Doce, la comunidad judeo-cristiana de Jerusalén pasará gradualmente a tener otros responsables directos. Son los llamados “presbíteros”, presididos por Santiago, pariente de Jesús (cf. Gál 1,19). Sus funciones son de carácter administrativo y cultural (Hch 11,30; 21,18), pero también de carácter doctrinal, como lo refleja su participación activa en el concilio de Jerusalén (Hch 15). Su relación de dependencia respecto al grupo de los Doce se hace patente en la manera en que es mencionado Santiago por primera vez. El mensaje de Pedro tras su liberación milagrosa de la cárcel, inmediatamente antes de abandonar Jerusalén, es el siguiente: “Informad de esto a Santiago y a los hermanos” (Hch 12,17).

¹⁶ Ibid., 421. Resulta arriesgado hacer distinciones entre ‘profetas’ y ‘maestros’. En la literatura rabínica se otorgan con frecuencia los dos títulos a la misma persona. Se podría decir a lo sumo que unos y otros desempeñan su función de modo diverso. Los primeros, de manera espontánea; los segundos, de manera metódica y sistematizada.

Como observa J. Dupont, “un lazo de continuidad se establece de repente entre el jefe del colegio apostólico, que ha presidido la Iglesia madre, y aquel que en adelante tomará su relevo; no es una casualidad que este lazo se establezca en el momento preciso en que Pedro parte [...]. Introduciéndole él mismo en el relato, Pedro deja entender que Santiago ocupa aquel puesto con su autoridad”¹⁷. Esto es lo que se desprende también de sus intervenciones respectivas en el concilio de Jerusalén (cf. Hch 15,6-21).

e) Los presbíteros de las comunidades paulinas

La competencia doctrinal de los presbíteros de Jerusalén es compartida por los presbíteros que Pablo va estableciendo en las diversas comunidades fundadas por él (Hch 14,23)¹⁸. Despidiéndose de los de Éfeso, les exhortará a tener cuidado de todo el rebaño “sobre el que el Espíritu Santo os ha puesto como guardianes para pastorear la Iglesia de Dios, que él se adquirió con la sangre de su propio Hijo” (Hch 20,28). El contexto obliga a interpretar esa vigilancia recomendada en clave doctrinal. Ante personas que, desde fuera o desde dentro de la comunidad, quieren pervertir la pureza del Evangelio predicado, los presbíteros han de ser los guardianes de la tradición apostólica. Su tarea prolonga de este modo la tarea de los Apóstoles, garantes de la tradición evangélica. A través de su predicación, fiel a la predicación apostólica, es como la Iglesia se podrá mantener fiel a sus orígenes en el correr de los tiempos¹⁹.

f) El caso de Apolo

Es normal que los numerosos colaboradores de Pablo desempeñaran también en ocasiones el ministerio de la predicación, aunque no gozaran de ningún título ministerial. Igual habría que pensar de otras muchas personas que han permanecido en el anonimato (cf. Hch 4,31). Nada, sin embargo, hace sospechar que el servicio de la Pala-

¹⁷ J. DUPONT, “Les ministères”, 159-160.

¹⁸ Llama la atención que Pablo no hable nunca en sus cartas de estos presbíteros. ¿Estamos ante un anacronismo de Lucas, que proyecta sobre el pasado la organización que él conoce en la Iglesia de su tiempo? Es la postura adoptada actualmente por la mayoría de los autores.

¹⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 179-183.

bra estuviera a merced del capricho o fantasía de cada uno. El caso del fervoroso y elocuente Apolo es significativo. Aparece de manera inesperada en Hch 18,24-28 predicando en la sinagoga de Éfeso. Enseñaba con todo esmero lo referente a Jesús, pero su precipitación debe ser corregida. Sólo tras haber completado su formación al lado de Áquila y Priscila, podrá emprender su predicación en Acaya con la aprobación y el apoyo de toda la comunidad de Éfeso.

Una idea se hace patente en la presentación que Lucas nos ofrece del ministerio de la predicación como testimonio: éste es un servicio común al Evangelio, llevado a cabo en *colaboración jerarquizada y responsable*. El grupo de los Doce, auténtica bisagra entre el tiempo de Jesús y el de la Iglesia, es el garante de cuanto Jesús hizo y enseñó. Los responsables posteriores de cada comunidad, con la cooperación de cuantos son considerados aptos, saben que sobre ellos recae el grave deber de transmitir con fidelidad la enseñanza apostólica y de protegerla de toda posible tergiversación.

Fidelidad a la enseñanza apostólica y sintonía por parte de todos los comprometidos en el anuncio del Evangelio, conscientes de estar trabajando todos por una misma causa, serán factores imprescindibles para que la ‘nueva evangelización’ resulte realmente eficaz.

No se trata de coartar el sano pluralismo eclesial con una uniformidad carente de aliento creativo. Se trata más bien de remar al unísono, empujando las velas de la Iglesia en la dirección marcada por la brújula de Cristo.

3. Un testimonio avalado por una vida de comunión

Pocos textos han llamado tanto la atención a lo largo de la historia cristiana como los tres ‘sumarios’ de Hch donde, interrumpiendo el relato de los acontecimientos, se nos presenta la vida comunitaria de los primeros cristianos (Hch 2,42-47; 4,32-35; 5,12-16)²⁰. En esa presentación sumarial no falta nunca una alusión al valor con el que

²⁰ Estos sumarios han sido objeto de numerosos estudios: Cf. P. BOSSUYT – J. RADERMAKERS, *Lettura pastorale degli Atti degli Apostoli*, Dehoniane, Bologna 2007, 237-240; D. MARGUERAT, *Les Actes des Apôtres (1-12)*, 99-110. Ambos comentaristas ofrecen abundante bibliografía. Entre las monografías más recientes cabe destacar la de D.A. HUME, *The Early Christian Community: A Narrative Analysis of Acts 2:41-47 and 4:32-35*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, vol. 298, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2011.

los Apóstoles cumplían su misión evangelizadora y al crecimiento constante de la comunidad. Tales alusiones obligan a pensar que aquella vida comunitaria constituía el mejor aval de la palabra predicada. Dos aspectos fundamentales llegan a percibirse en esa vida de comunión: hay comunión en los bienes, pero hay también, y sobre todo, comunión en el espíritu. Aquélla no es más que la expresión o manifestación de ésta.

a) Comunión de bienes

Los bienes personales se ponen al servicio de todos por generosidad y desprendimiento, no por una especie de expropiación forzada de carácter jurídico. El objetivo perseguido no es otro que el de erradicar la pobreza en el seno de la comunidad: “Entre ellos no había necesitados” (Hch 4,34). De esta manera, como subraya J. Dupont, no sólo se consigue uno de los ideales más nobles entre los griegos –el de la verdadera amistad–, sino que se atestigua a la vez el cumplimiento de una enérgica recomendación bíblica: “No habrá ningún pobre entre los tuyos” (Dt 15,4)²¹.

b) Comunión en el espíritu

La expresión que mejor refleja esta comunión interior, de la que deriva la comunión de bienes, es la que presenta a la comunidad de Jerusalén como “multitud de creyentes con un solo corazón y una sola alma” (Hch 4,32). ‘Una sola alma’ (*mía psyché*) era en la tradición literaria griega la locución más corriente para definir a los amigos. Los cristianos, sin embargo, son algo más que buenos amigos. Además de una sola alma, tienen también ‘un solo corazón’ (*mía kardía*), es decir, concuerdan en el pensamiento y en las disposiciones morales y religiosas²². Dos lenguajes diferentes, el del helenismo y

²¹ Cf. J. DUPONT, “L’union entre les premiers chrétiens dans les Actes des Apôtres”, en ID., *Nouvelles études*, 296-318 (espec. 301-303).

²² Ibid., 304, n.18: “Se ha de tener cuidado en no atribuir a la palabra ‘corazón’ el significado que le dan frecuentemente nuestras lenguas modernas, haciendo del corazón la sede de los sentimientos y de las emociones. Lucas habla de él como sede del pensamiento y de la reflexión (Lc 1,66; 2,19.35.51; 3,15; 5,22; 9,47; 21,14; 24,38; etc.), de las disposiciones morales y religiosas (Lc 1,17.51; 6,45; 8,12.15; Hch 2,46; 5,4; etc.)”.

el de la Biblia, se dan cita para subrayar el aspecto espiritual y profundo de la comunión que reina entre los primeros cristianos. Calificados aquí como “creyentes”, queda especificada la razón última de esa comunión: la fe compartida por todos²³. Consiguientemente, es la relación vertical de apertura a Dios mediante la fe la que explica esa otra relación horizontal de solidaridad, tanto interior como exterior. La fe es la que constituye el verdadero fundamento de la unidad comunitaria, la cual se realiza y se expresa a un doble nivel: espiritual y material.

En la ‘nueva evangelización’ no puede faltar un testimonio fehaciente de esa solidaridad interior y exterior a la que obliga la fe que se proclama. En una época en que los creyentes del norte nadan en la abundancia, mientras que los del sur apenas pueden subsistir, el cristianismo resultará creíble solamente cuando los cristianos ofrezcamos testimonios inequívocos de solidaridad en la vida diaria. La *martyría verbal* debe quedar respaldada siempre por la *martyría vital*.

4. Un testimonio que respeta la diversidad cultural de los destinatarios

Los numerosos discursos misioneros que encontramos en Hch nos ofrecen no sólo el *contenido* de la predicación cristiana primitiva, sino también el *modo* en que los predicadores procedían. Son ‘modelos’ de evangelización. Una lectura seguida de los mismos permite observar con facilidad las afinidades y las divergencias que se dan entre aquellos que van dirigidos a los judíos y los que van dirigidos a los paganos²⁴. A modo de ejemplo, confrontemos brevemente el discurso de Pablo en la sinagoga de Antioquía de Pisidia (Hch 13,16-41) y el del mismo orador en el Areópago de Atenas (Hch 17,22-31).

²³ Es significativo que en los tres sumarios se aplique a los cristianos el calificativo de “creyentes” (Hch 2,44; 4,32; 5,14), no apareciendo más que aquí en los primeros capítulos de Hch.

²⁴ Discursos misioneros que van dirigidos a los judíos –judíos de raza o de fe– son los de Pedro en Hch 2,14-39; 3,12-26; 4,8-12; 5,29-32; 10,34-43 y el de Pablo en Hch 13,16-41. Discursos dirigidos a los paganos son los de Pablo en Listra (Hch 14,15-17) y en Atenas (Hch 17,22-31).

a) En la sinagoga de Antioquía²⁵

En el primer viaje misionero de Pablo, narrado en Hch 13-14, adquiere un relieve especial el discurso que dirige a los judíos en la sinagoga de Antioquía de Pisidia (Hch 13,16-41)²⁶. Llegado a esta ciudad en compañía de Bernabé, los jefes de la sinagoga honran a los visitantes, a quienes consideran “hermanos”, con la invitación a dirigir la palabra. Pablo acepta la invitación y aprovecha la oportunidad para proclamar el cumplimiento en Jesús de las promesas divinas hechas desde antiguo.

El discurso de Pablo hace recordar el pronunciado por Pedro en la ciudad de Jerusalén durante el primer Pentecostés cristiano (Hch 2,14-36), igual que el pronunciado por Esteban ante el sanedrín después de haber sido acusado de hablar contra el templo y contra la ley (Hch 7,1-53). Contiene, sin embargo, sus elementos específicos. El conjunto se presenta articulado en tres partes, iniciadas cada una de ellas con una interpelación directa a los oyentes.

La primera parte (Hch 13,16b-25) es una amplia relación de toda la historia de la salvación, subrayando que Dios ha dirigido el destino de Israel desde Abrahán hasta Jesús. La segunda parte (Hch 13,26-37) es una proclamación de la resurrección de Jesús, en quien se cumplen todas las promesas; tres textos de la Escritura lo corroboran. La tercera parte (Hch 13,38-41) es una exhortación a creer en Jesús como único salvador: “Por medio de él se os anuncia el perdón de los pecados; y de todas las cosas de las que no pudisteis ser justificados por medio de la ley de Moisés, es justificado por medio de él todo el que cree”²⁷.

²⁵ Obra básica para un estudio detallado de este discurso es la de M. DUMAIS, *Le langage de l'évangélisation. L'annonce missionnaire en milieu juif (Actes 13,16-41)*, Tournai, Montréal 1976. Puede consultarse también C. DIONNE, *L'Évangile aux juifs et aux païens. Le premier voyage missionnaire de Paul (Actes 13-14)*, Lectio Divina, vol. 247, Paris 2011.

²⁶ Los cc. 13-14 forman un todo unitario, cuya articulación refleja el principio de “primero a los judíos y después también a los griegos” (Hch 3,26; 13,46; Rom 1,16; 2,10). Cf. Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts. A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Crossroad, New York 1997, 125-136.

²⁷ En los últimos años se percibe un interés creciente por acomodar el discurso a las leyes que rigen la retórica greco-romana, tal como ésta es presentada, por ejemplo, en Cicerón (*De inventione*, *De oratore*) o Quintiliano (*Institutio Oratoria*). Las propuestas se caracterizan sobre todo por sus discrepancias, que son el

En cuanto al lenguaje utilizado, llama la atención el recurso constante al Antiguo Testamento. Teniendo que anunciar la intervención de Dios en Jesucristo a unos hombres que están familiarizados con el Antiguo Testamento, Pablo no duda en utilizar y explotar ese lenguaje. Es el modo más sencillo de conectar con su auditorio. No deja, sin embargo, de introducir en ese lenguaje un significado nuevo, aquel que el Antiguo Testamento ha adquirido a la luz de Cristo resucitado. En una palabra, el orador juega constantemente con la continuidad y la novedad: ¡Vino nuevo en odres viejos! Introduce la novedad del mensaje cristiano en un lenguaje conocido, haciendo ver que, si la Escritura esclarece lo acontecido en Cristo, este acontecimiento esclarece a su vez la Escritura y obliga a leerla de un modo nuevo. Los oyentes podrán integrar así la Buena Nueva de Jesucristo Salvador sin tener que renunciar a su legado cultural y religioso.

b) En el Areópago de Atenas²⁸

Huyendo de Berea, Pablo llega a Atenas en su segundo viaje misionero, emprendido tras la asamblea celebrada en Jerusalén con el fin de dirimir la cuestión de las exigencias que debían imponerse a los paganos para que pudieran entrar a formar parte de la comunidad cristiana. Atenas había perdido ya su antiguo esplendor. En cuanto a población e importancia económica, había quedado ampliamente superada por Corinto. No obstante, seguía siendo en los años 50 un lugar atractivo para quienes deseaban encontrar alguna huella de un Sócrates, un Platón o un Pericles.

mejor indicio de que el discurso no se atiene a ninguna norma preestablecida en el mundo de la oratoria: cf. M. QUESNEL, "Paul prédicateur dans les Actes des Apôtres", *New Testament Studies*, vol. 47, 2001, 469-481; O. FLICHY, *La figure de Paul dans les Actes des Apôtres. Un phénomène de réception de la tradition paulinienne à la fin du premier siècle*, *Lectio Divina*, vol. 214, Paris 2007, 187-190.

²⁸ Estudio imprescindible para la comprensión de este discurso sigue siendo el de J. DUPONT, "Le discours à l'Aréopage (Ac 17,22-31), lieu de rencontre entre christianisme et hellénisme", en ID., *Nouvelles études*, 380-423. De interés son también los estudios más recientes de F. LESTANG, "A la louange du dieu inconnu. Analyse rhétorique de Ac 17:22-31", *New Testament Studies*, vol. 52, 2006, 394-408; A. BUENO, "Discurso de san Pablo en Atenas (Hch 17,22-34). Estudio histórico-filosófico y análisis retórico a la luz de 'Doctrina cristiana'", *Isidorianum*, vol. 18, 2009, 241-266; C.K. ROWE, "The Grammar of Life: Areopagus Speech and Pagan Tradition", *New Testament Studies*, vol. 57, 2011, 31-50.

Pablo no llega a esta ciudad como un turista ávido de curiosidad. Su visita está condicionada por la misión recibida de anunciar el Evangelio “a todas las naciones” (Hch 9,15). Permanece fiel a su costumbre de ir los sábados a predicar en la sinagoga, donde su palabra podía alcanzar a judíos y adeptos, pero los demás días de la semana se va al *ágora* para hacer otro tanto con los que allí se encontraban. No repara en entablar diálogo con los representantes de las distintas escuelas filosóficas. Son mencionados expresamente los filósofos epicúreos y estoicos.

El epicureísmo había conocido épocas mejores. El estoicismo, por el contrario, seguía manteniendo su relevancia, gracias al rigor de sus razonamientos, a la claridad de su doctrina sobre el mundo como un universo ordenado por Dios, a la seriedad de su concepción ética y a la categoría humana de sus maestros más representativos²⁹.

Unos y otros escuchan a Pablo con escepticismo. En un tono claramente despectivo, lo consideran como un propagandista de algún culto oriental, más bien arcano, que giraba en torno a una pareja de dioses: Jesús y Anástasis. A pesar de todo, están dispuestos a conocer más a fondo el mensaje de Pablo. Para ello, lo sacan del bullicio de la plaza y lo llevan al Areópago, situado al noroeste de la Acrópolis, donde se erguía la roca de Ares (= Marte, dios de la guerra). Era un espacio abierto donde peroraban con frecuencia los oradores y donde originariamente se reunía el consejo judicial supremo del mismo nombre (los areopagitas), que en los días de Pablo tenía sus sesiones en la *stoa basileios* o pórtico real.

Con una solemne fórmula introductoria, Lucas presenta al lector la figura de Pablo en actitud de orador, dispuesto a pronunciar un discurso en el lugar más prominente del Areópago: “De pie en medio del Areópago” (Hch 17,22a). Está claro que Pablo no se arredra ante las circunstancias adversas en las que tiene que intervenir y que nada podría impedirle la proclamación valiente y decidida de su mensaje en el intento de entrar en diálogo con sus oyentes. Con esta pretensión, sus primeras palabras no pueden ser más que una *captatio benevolentiae* (Hch 17,22b-23). Tras calificar a los atenienses de “extremadamente religiosos”³⁰, ofrece la motivación del juicio que se

²⁹ Cf. J. ROLOFF, *Hechos de los Apóstoles*, Cristiandad, Madrid 1984, 344.

³⁰ El calificativo que Pablo da a los atenienses es ambivalente. Encierra sin duda una connotación positiva; habla de una auténtica religiosidad. Pero se trata de

ha formado sobre ellos (“encontré incluso un altar con esta inscripción: a un dios desconocido”) y anuncia su propósito (“eso que veneráis sin conocerlo, os lo anuncio yo”).

El discurso propiamente dicho se desarrolla en dos partes complementarias. La *primera* (Hch 17,24-29), de carácter doctrinal, presenta el poder y vitalidad del Dios creador, mostrando la falsedad de las diversas formas de culto pagano. El proceso argumentativo se desarrolla en dos fases paralelas: a) *Dios y el mundo* (vv.24-25): Dios, creador del universo, es Señor absoluto de todas las cosas; por eso no puede habitar en santuarios contruidos por el hombre, ni tiene necesidad de que se le dé culto. b) *Dios y el hombre* (vv.26-29): Dios, creador y conservador de la vida humana, es un ser íntimamente cercano al hombre; por eso, es totalmente absurdo adorarlo en imágenes sin vida.

La *segunda parte* del discurso (Hch 17,29-31) contiene una enumeración sumarial de los elementos habituales en la predicación misionera: la llamada que Dios hace en el momento actual a todos los hombres para que se conviertan (v.30); el día señalado por Dios para juzgar a todo el universo (v.31a); la resurrección de Jesús como garantía del presente y del futuro (v.31b). No falta, pues, una referencia a la resurrección de Jesús, pero el mensaje del discurso es fundamentalmente sobre Dios.

Con la mención de la “resurrección de entre los muertos” Pablo se ve obligado a interrumpir su discurso. No es una interrupción que le haya impedido decir lo que quería. Es más bien un final brusco que resalta con especial eficacia narrativa lo que pretendía decir, ya que “la resurrección es la última palabra de la Buena Noticia”³¹. Después de ella ha de comenzar ya la respuesta de la fe que acepta la llamada a la conversión.

La mayoría de los oyentes se niega a dar ese paso a la fe. Igual que para los judíos (Hch 4,2; 7,54; 13,45), también para los griegos la resurrección es necedad y escándalo. No es de extrañar esta reacción en un público imbuido de la doctrina platónica sobre la muerte como liberación del alma, condenada a vivir en la cárcel del cuerpo. ¿No

una religiosidad con una gran dosis de superstición. Para el lector, que conoce la indignación de Pablo ante los ídolos, no puede menos que convertirse en reproche.

³¹ P. BOSSUYT – J. RADERMAKERS, “Rencontre de l’incroyant et inculturation”, *Nouvelle Revue Théologique*, vol. 117, 1995, 19-43 (cita en p. 37).

supondría la resurrección de entre los muertos una nueva y eterna prisión? En cualquier caso, no fue ésta la única reacción.

Aunque sea a modo de apéndice, Lucas nos informa de que, al abandonar Pablo la reunión, “algunos se le juntaron y creyeron” (Hch 17,34). Se mencionan incluso dos nombres concretos. El primero de ellos, Dionisio el areopagita, acaparó el interés desde los primeros tiempos y ha sido objeto de innumerables especulaciones. Una tradición muy posterior lo presenta como el primer obispo de Atenas. Hoy se le sigue recordando por la calle que en esta ciudad lleva su nombre: *Odos Agútu Dionisiu Areopaguitu*.

Si el discurso de Antioquía atestigua la adaptación de la predicación cristiana a un ambiente judío, el de Atenas atestigua la adaptación de la misma predicación a un ambiente pagano. Desde el principio de la parte argumentativa, que es realmente crítica respecto a la religiosidad pagana, se habla de “cosmos”, término típico del pensamiento griego. La presentación de Dios como “creador del mundo” y “dador de la vida” era bien conocida en las corrientes filosóficas del helenismo. Las afirmaciones sobre la imposibilidad de localizar a Dios o de servirle y satisfacerlo con sacrificios eran características del estoicismo. Al poeta Epiménides recuerda la frase de Hch 17,28: “En él vivimos, nos movemos y existimos”. Del poeta Arato, nacido en Soloi de Cilicia hacia el 315 a.C., es la cita que se aduce: “Somos estirpe suya”.

El Dios que Pablo predica en Atenas no es distinto del predicado en Antioquía. El Apóstol se mantiene fiel a la revelación bíblica³² y desde ella hace ver a sus oyentes la contradicción que se da entre sus deseos más íntimos y sus prácticas idolátricas. Para esto no duda en utilizar su propio lenguaje, consciente de que lo que hay que mantener incólume es el contenido de la fe, no la manera de expresarla. El Evangelio está hecho para todos y ha de transmitirse de tal modo que cada uno pueda comprenderlo y asimilarlo desde su propia tradición cultural y religiosa. Esta convicción no puede faltar en la ‘nueva evangelización’. Difusión y adaptación son dos rasgos que caracterizan por naturaleza, hoy como ayer, la misión *ad gentes* de la Iglesia y el discurso cristiano.

³² No sería difícil encontrar en el Antiguo Testamento una afirmación paralela a cada afirmación del discurso.

5. El libro por excelencia de la misión

La segunda parte de la obra de Lucas (Hch) se presta a abordar el tema transversal de la misión *ad gentes* desde perspectivas muy diversas. Puede hacerse atendiendo al desarrollo histórico y geográfico de la primera evangelización cristiana, interesándose por las personas concretas que la llevan a cabo, explorando los condicionamientos culturales y sociales con los que esas personas se tienen que enfrentar, indagando y poniendo de relieve sus diferencias ideológicas y sus diversos modos de proceder, etc.³³

Mi pretensión en estas páginas ha sido sencillamente la de señalar los aspectos que considero más significativos en la presentación que el autor de Hch nos ofrece sobre la misión cristiana de los orígenes. Esa presentación, aun en el caso de que no siempre responda escrupulosamente a la realidad, no deja de apuntar hacia lo que ha de ser para la Iglesia su ideal, tanto en el presente como en el futuro.

La ‘nueva teología de la misión’ y la ‘nueva evangelización’ son hoy temas de continuos debates y propuestas. Sobre ellos acaba de pronunciarse el profesor G. Colzani en un artículo iluminador³⁴. Las reflexiones de este reconocido especialista en misionología, igual que las directrices marcadas por el Papa Francisco en su exhortación programática *Evangelii Gaudium* (Roma 2013), dan buena prueba de que “el libro por excelencia de la misión” sigue teniendo, como palabra de Dios viva y eficaz, plena actualidad.

³³ Son enfoques asumidos en un buen número de monografías recientes, de las que se ofrece una breve reseña en la interesante e instructiva obra de Santiago GUIJARRO, *La primera evangelización en los orígenes del cristianismo*, Sígueme, Salamanca 2016, 237-244.

³⁴ Cf. G. COLZANI, “Verso una nuova teologia della missione”, *Scuola Cattolica*, vol. 146, 2018, 327-352.

La Iglesia peregrina en los *Hechos de los Apóstoles*: la interpretación del Decreto *Ad Gentes*

❖ DANIEL A. AYUCH

Sin lugar a duda el *Decreto sobre la actividad misionera de la Iglesia "Ad Gentes"* ha producido un cambio fundamental en el entendimiento de la naturaleza misionera de todas las iglesias. Este documento recoge no solo la tradición de la Iglesia católica romana, sino también los estudios y las experiencias de otras iglesias hermanas en la modernidad.

Su promulgación se dio en tiempos en los que como nunca se forjaba la universalidad de la Iglesia, en los que las secuelas de la segunda guerra mundial habían movilizado a las comunidades cristianas al diálogo y al entendimiento, y en los que teólogos como Karl Rahner se despertaban a un mundo cada vez más globalizado en el cual todos los cristianos no eran más que una pequeña diáspora entre mares de pueblos por evangelizar¹.

A partir de entonces la actividad misionera de la Iglesia ha mejorado en muchos aspectos y se ha alejado de prácticas poco acertadas del pasado para dar lugar a una mayor transparencia y a refutar cualquier visión conquistadora. Un cambio emblemático en este sentido fue el que dio el Papa Pablo VI cuando en 1967 decidió dar el nuevo nombre de *Congregación para la evangelización de los pueblos* a la antigua *Propaganda Fide* que por siglos había administrado las obras misioneras en las expansiones colonialistas europeas.

El Decreto *Ad Gentes* ha definido la naturaleza misionera de la Iglesia, ha convocado no sólo al clérigo sino también a los laicos para que participen en este llamado a ser testigos de la resurrección de

¹ Este es el planteo de Karl Rahner, ver por ejemplo K. RAHNER – C. HASTINGS, *The Christian Commitment: Essays in Pastoral Theology*, Sheed and Ward, London 1963.

Cristo a toda la humanidad en los espacios y las realidades accesibles para cada uno (AG 1; 15). En la Biblia y el Nuevo Testamento, portador primordial de la predicación apostólica, destaca particularmente el libro de *Hechos de los Apóstoles* como fuente de inspiración para todos aquellos que estudian la teología misionera y quieren conocer sus orígenes. Este libro presenta profundos relatos teológicos sobre cómo los cristianos de fines del primer siglo evocaban aquel Pentecostés en el que la Iglesia fue instituida y cómo se realizó la fundación de las primeras comunidades en la cuenca este del Mediterráneo hasta llegar con la predicación a Roma.

Muchas veces los libros especializados en interpretación y en teología misionera destacan sobre todo el aspecto de fundar y establecer una comunidad dejando en un segundo plano la importancia del peregrinar, del movimiento itinerante y de estar en camino que tienen estos textos. En el Decreto *Ad Gentes* la exposición de los principios doctrinales abre con la expresión “la Iglesia peregrinante es misionera por su naturaleza” (AG 2). Esta característica tan particular de ser peregrinante es un elemento fundamental en el relato de la conversión de los primeros cristianos en Jerusalén y en la descripción de la obra y la predicación misionera de los Apóstoles y sus acompañantes en el libro de *Hechos*. De aquí que el presente artículo destaque sobre todo el aspecto peregrino de la Iglesia. Una Iglesia en movimiento permanente que acepta los desafíos de conocer nuevos pueblos, de entregarse a lo desconocido y de confiar plenamente en la providencia divina. Estas son algunas de las imágenes relacionadas con la peregrinación que el libro de *Hechos* quiere resaltar.

La Iglesia es una comunidad de vida que palpita y reparte su sabia dentro de sistemas políticos que no necesariamente son justos o favorables a la propagación del Evangelio. Sin embargo, el ferviente deseo de hacer accesible el mensaje de salvación a todo ser humano inspira a los creyentes que se ponen en movimiento inspirados por el llamado del Espíritu Santo: “Y para conseguir esto envió Cristo al Espíritu Santo de parte del Padre, para que realizara interiormente su obra salvífica e impulsara a la Iglesia hacia su propia dilatación” (AG 4).

Desde esta perspectiva, el presente artículo interpreta en *Hechos* aquellos textos, términos y conceptos teológicos que se reflejan nuevamente en el Decreto *Ad Gentes* y que tienen relación directa con las particularidades de la Iglesia peregrinante. El primer título se ocupa de la teología del camino según san Lucas, luego se analizan

los orígenes de los primeros fieles en Jerusalén y se estudia la labor que cumplen los Apóstoles como peregrinos que siembran y como pastores trashumantes. Finalmente, se ofrecen algunas reflexiones que invitan a fortalecer el compromiso con la labor misionera².

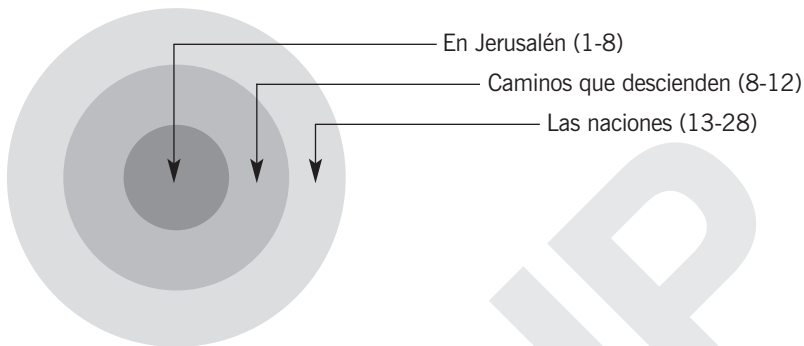
1. El camino como modo de vida

Ambos tomos de la obra lucana y particularmente *Hechos de los Apóstoles* se destaca por su insistencia en mostrar a Jesús y a sus discípulos en territorios remotos y cercanos. Lucas es además el autor del Nuevo Testamento que propone llamar a la fe cristiana “el camino”. Así es que Saulo parte de Jerusalén a Damasco para perseguir a “los seguidores del camino” (Hch 9:2) y Apolo es presentado en *Hechos* 18:25 como una persona instruida en “el camino del Señor”. Allí mismo, en Éfeso se produce un tumulto importante “con motivo del Camino” (19:23), es decir, a causa de lo que se enseñaba y se vivía entre los cristianos.

El Evangelio de Lucas ya presenta a un Jesús itinerante que va de pueblo en pueblo y que peregrina a Jerusalén para las fiestas. Por supuesto, esta idea es común a los demás Evangelios, pero en el de Lucas el tema se desarrolla con mayor profundidad. El viaje a Jerusalén está explícitamente marcado desde 9:50 donde dice: “Sucedió que como se iban cumpliendo los días de su ascensión, él se afirmó en su voluntad de ir a Jerusalén.” Este viaje se extiende claramente hasta que “entró en el Templo” en Lc 19:45. Además, entre ambos momentos, Lucas recuerda al lector en varias oportunidades que Jesús está en camino a la ciudad del Templo, tal como en Lc 13:22: “Atravesaba ciudades y pueblos enseñando, mientras caminaba hacia Jerusalén” (ver también Lc 10:38; 17:11; 18:35; 19:1.11.28). El Evangelio concluye con una prerrogativa bien clara, “que se predicaría en su nombre la conversión para perdón de los pecados a todas las naciones, empezando desde Jerusalén (Lc 24:47)”.

Más interesante aún para nuestro tema es la continuación del relato en *Hechos* donde el movimiento principal del mismo es más centrífugo que centrípeto pues lleva a los discípulos desde Jerusalén a lugares cada vez más alejados hasta llegar al corazón del imperio roma-

² Las citas bíblicas han sido extraídas de la *Biblia de Jerusalén*, Desclee de Brouwer, Bilbao 1998, 3ra edición.

Las etapas de la predicación en *Hechos*

no, a la ciudad de Roma, con un Pablo privado de su libertad, pero completamente libre para predicar.

Desde el inicio del libro, el Cristo Resucitado se reúne con sus discípulos y en sus palabras de envío, anteriores a la ascensión, bosqueja claramente las secciones del relato lucano en tres etapas fundamentales: “[...] y de este modo seréis mis testigos en Jerusalén, en toda Judea y Samaría, y hasta los confines de la tierra” (1:8). Esas etapas son por lo tanto la predicación en la ciudad de Jerusalén primero (1:1 – 8:4), luego las obras de evangelización en los caminos que van descendiendo de Jerusalén (8:5 – 12:25) y finalmente el movimiento fuertemente expansivo de san Pablo que llega a todas las naciones posibles y se instala en la capital del mundo habitado, tal como se lo conocía en la cultura del Mediterráneo (13:1 – 28:31). Se trata de un movimiento que va ganando amplitud de alcance desde el centro mismo de las grandes obras salvíficas de la pasión y la resurrección de Cristo que fueron complementadas con el pentecostés del Espíritu. Todas estas obras sucedieron en Jerusalén y sus inmediaciones.

2. Jerusalén, una Iglesia de peregrinos

Los discípulos están bajo este imperativo de predicar en todo lugar y sin importar los riesgos. En los relatos de *Hechos*, los Apóstoles no dudan en predicar en los lugares públicos de Jerusalén, en el mismo Templo y hasta frente al sanedrín. A causa de esto son detenidos en cárceles y son juzgados por autoridades religiosas y seculares. En esos momentos se destacan sobre todo la valentía y la audacia con que los Apóstoles anuncian su mensaje. Esta valentía y esta audacia se resu-

men en un único término griego, la *parresia*, que en otros contextos puede reflejar una actitud necia y hasta terca, mientras que en el relato de *Hechos* se convierte en una virtud particularmente concedida por el Espíritu Santo (cf. Hch 2:29; 4:31; 28:31).

La primera comunidad de cristianos en Jerusalén no era una comunidad originaria de la misma ciudad ni tampoco pertenecía al grupo de poder de turno. Con algunas excepciones, como la de José de Arimatea quien según Lucas 23:50 fue un miembro del consejo, la Iglesia primitiva de Jerusalén estaba formada casi en su totalidad por aquellos galileos que acompañaron a Jesús desde el norte en su camino de peregrinación a la ciudad, a los que se sumaron un gran número de viajeros peregrinos que también vinieron al Templo para celebrar las fiestas y escucharon el sermón de Pedro el día de Pentecostés. Así lo demuestra claramente el catálogo de las naciones en *Hechos* 2:5.9-11.

Como una prueba más de la naturaleza de los miembros de la Iglesia de Jerusalén cabe destacar que los miembros venidos con Jesús desde Galilea se reunían con el Maestro en el Monte de los olivos, fuera de la ciudad. Además, su lugar habitual de oración era el altillo y no el Templo, aunque todavía acudían con frecuencia a él como hijos de Israel que eran y no como líderes de un nuevo movimiento. Se destaca en la textura de esta pequeña Iglesia el gran poder inclusivo que tenía, tal como se puede observar en la mención del origen chipriota de Bernabé (4:36) y en la escena de “los helenistas contra los hebreos” (6:1).

Un gran punto de inflexión en la narrativa de *Hechos* es el episodio de Esteban puesto que después de su martirio la comunidad cristiana en Jerusalén comienza a bajar de la ciudad. Se destaca en este movimiento el interés del autor en mostrar que los predicadores se dirigen hacia los cuatro puntos cardinales: hacia Damasco que representa el este, hacia Samaria que está en el norte, hacia Azoto en el sur y finalmente hacia la isla de Chipre que es el mayor representante del oeste. Esta misma teología es la que se ve reflejada en el Decreto *Ad Gentes* cuando afirma “la catolicidad (la universalidad) de la fe por la Iglesia de la Nueva Alianza, que en todas las lenguas se expresa, las entiende y abraza en la caridad y supera de esta forma la dispersión de Babel” (AG 4). La Iglesia en su vocación de incluir a todos en su seno hace frente a las diferencias culturales y sociales y se embarca en la aventura de provocar entendimiento y diálogo partiendo del amor y de los dones del Espíritu Santo.

3. Peregrinar sembrando

Hechos 8:4 forma parte del párrafo que cierra el ciclo en Jerusalén y es de fundamental importancia para comprender la vocación peregrina de la Iglesia según la presenta san Lucas: “Los que se habían dispersado fueron por todas partes anunciando la Buena Nueva de la palabra”. En este versículo hay dos verbos que se destacan: dispersarse (*diaspeirô*) y recorrer (*dierchomai*) aquí expresado con “fueron por todas partes.” Del verbo dispersarse deriva el sustantivo dispersión (*diasporá*) que la mayoría de los biblistas lo asocian con la connotación de pérdida de poder puesto que de por sí implica separación, abandono y desapego. Por lo tanto, tienden a ubicarlo en el campo de lexemas relacionados con la derrota. En los léxicos de griego bíblico se puede leer que, en el trasfondo propio de la Septuaginta del Judaísmo primitivo, este término tiene como significado principal “la minoría judía que vivía en medio de personas de otras creencias y, en este caso, en un ambiente griego y pagano”³. Sin embargo, el autor de *Hechos* tiene su propia lectura de este término.

Para comprender mejor el empleo que san Lucas da al verbo dispersarse (*diaspeirô*) es necesario volver a la raíz original de este verbo que es sembrar (*speirô*). Pero no sólo eso, el verbo sembrar (*speirô*) está relacionado a su vez con el sustantivo griego *sperma* que quiere decir simiente. O sea, las raíces de este verbo en griego están intrínsecamente ligadas a la idea de sembrar la simiente. Una idea que como todos sabemos, es frecuentemente empleada en la Biblia como metáfora de la enseñanza y de la predicación de la palabra (Dt 32:2; Is 55:10-11; Lc 8:11). Por otra parte, el prefijo *dia-* tiene la función de acentuar el sentido de dispersión de las semillas por lo que el verbo puede ser traducido en un sentido literal como “distribuir semillas ampliamente”⁴. Teniendo en cuenta toda esta información lingüística que escapa al lector castellano por ser propias del idioma griego original, este verbo pierde en el libro de *Hechos* cualquier connotación negativa que tenga que ver con un pueblo que se separa y que se diluye en un mar de paganismo y de culturas extrañas, para subrayar

³ D. SÄNGER, “διασπορά”, in H. BALZ – G. SCHNEIDER (eds.), *Diccionario Exegetico del Nuevo Testamento*, vol. 1, Sígueme, Salamanca 1996, 940-943.

⁴ Bible Study, “1290 diasporá”, HELPS Word-Studies, <https://biblehub.com/greek/1290.htm/>.

sobre todo la fuerza de la buena semilla que se siembra en nuevas tierras para germinar y dar fruto.

Para continuar, un lector asiduo del Nuevo Testamento no puede dejar de relacionar este relato con la parábola del sembrador: “Salió un sembrador a sembrar su simiente [...]” (Lc 8:5) donde la raíz – *sper* -- se repite tres veces en una misma frase. Aquí es el Señor quien esparce su simiente en toda la tierra que es su propia tierra tal como lo dice el salmo 24:1: “Del Señor es la tierra y cuanto la llena, el orbe y cuantos lo habitan.” Peregrinar por esta tierra es pasearse por los jardines del Señor y conocer más y mejor a su dueño y a quienes le sirven.

El lector también recuerda la parábola del grano de mostaza de Lc 13:18-19 cuya versión en Mateo especifica que su semilla “es ciertamente más pequeña que cualquier semilla” (Mt 13:32) pero que al ser sembrada por el Señor en sus tierras crece tanto que se hace “mayor que las hortalizas” hasta llegar a ser árbol en el que se posan las aves en sus ramas. El relato de san Lucas en *Hechos* dice claramente que la pequeña comunidad de Jerusalén se transformó de esta manera cuando el Señor decidió sembrarla y dispersarla por todas sus tierras. En otras palabras, *Ad Gentes* habla de “modestos comienzos” de la obra misionera que se va desarrollando gradualmente para lograr una “implantación de la Iglesia [...] de suerte que de la semilla de la palabra de Dios crezcan las Iglesias autóctonas particulares en todo el mundo suficientemente organizadas y dotadas de energías propias y de madurez” (AG 6). La fecundidad de la tierra que la recibe es de gran importancia puesto que “la semilla [...] al germinar absorbe el jugo de la tierra buena, regada con el rocío celestial, y lo transforma y lo asimila para dar al fin fruto abundante” (AG 22).

Este primer núcleo de creyentes fue diseminado con una función bien definida que es la de andar entre las naciones, entre los pueblos vecinos y lejanos predicando el poder del Evangelio. Es así que el pueblo que estaba dando testimonio y predicando sin cesar en Jerusalén es ahora expulsado hacia nuevas tierras donde su simiente pueda germinar y dar nueva vida. Por ello, el verbo dispersarse de 8:4 sirve aquí para indicar el movimiento de divulgación del Evangelio. Esta connotación es una característica propia del tercer evangelista, tal como el mismo Sānger en su artículo dice: “Según Lucas, los dispersos son un factor esencial para la difusión del cristianismo primitivo”⁵.

⁵ D. SÄNGER, “*διασπορά*”, 940-943.

4. Pastores peregrinos

Con una mirada ya puesta en la expansión definitiva hacia las naciones, el verbo dispersarse vuelve a aparecer en un relato paralelo a 8:4 en el cual Lucas describe las escenas de cierre para el ciclo de predicación en los caminos que descienden de Jerusalén. Allí podemos leer: “Así pues, los que se habían dispersado por la persecución originada a la muerte de Esteban, llegaron en su recorrido hasta Fenicia, Chipre y Antioquía, sin predicar la palabra a nadie más que a los judíos” (Hch 11:19). Este breve sumario ofrece una retrospectiva a la escena de Esteban y relata como la obra de siembra ha alcanzado territorios aún más lejanos. Ya lejos de Judea y sus alrededores los testigos llegaron con el Evangelio a lugares como Fenicia, Chipre y a la ciudad de Antioquía del Orontes.

En ambas oraciones, aquí y en 8:4 se combinan los verbos dispersarse y recorrer, representado aquí por “llegaron en su recorrido”, formando así un binomio semántico de gran importancia para el tema aquí tratado. Junto a la siembra de los cristianos en nuevas tierras se destaca el verbo recorrer que intensifica el sentido de expansión gracias al prefijo griego *dia-* agregado al verbo ir (*erchomai*). Sin duda alguna, el uso de Lucas de este verbo en *Hechos* es equivalente al del verbo hebreo *hithallek* en el Antiguo Testamento.

Hithallek es un verbo que denota el accionar más importante de los pastores, es decir, el “movimiento continuo y habitual de un pastor y su rebaño por el campo ya sea en el área de pastos donde se quedan por un tiempo o cuando se reubican de un área a otra dentro de los límites de ese mismo campo”⁶. En el Antiguo Testamento hebreo *hithallek* ocurre más de 60 veces. Según el biblista Paul Tarazi, el texto que mejor demuestra la peculiar connotación semántica de este verbo es todo el capítulo de Génesis 13. En este relato, el padre de la fe que todavía se llamaba simplemente Abram retorna de Egipto y camina por tierras extensas donde residen varias naciones.

Su travesía por el desierto como testigo del Dios único es una imitación de cuando el Señor caminaba en el jardín del Edén como un pastor en busca de su oveja perdida: “(Adán y Eva) oyeron luego el ruido de los pasos de Yahvé Dios que se paseaba (*hithallek*) por el jar-

⁶ P.N. TARAZI, *The Rise of Scripture*, OCABS Press, St. Paul 2017, 144. Traducción del autor.

dín a la hora de la brisa [...]” (Gn 3:8). En la Biblia, Dios es el modelo de pastor, él es “el Pastor, la Piedra de Israel” (Gn 49:24) y él es quien camina en medio de su pueblo: “me pasearé (*hithallek*) en medio de vosotros, y seré vuestro Dios, y vosotros seréis mi pueblo” (Lev 26:12). Cabe citar a Ezequiel como el profeta que mejor desarrolla la imagen de Dios como pastor, sobre todo en el capítulo 34 conocido como el capítulo de “los pastores de Israel”.

De este verbo en el Antiguo Testamento se deduce que los heraldos de la palabra se trasladaban de un lugar a otro como si fuesen pastores cuidando sus rebaños. Lucas es un gran defensor del estilo de vida peregrino y lo expresa a través de la narración acudiendo al poder de la parábola semita y oriental que es un verdadero instrumento de formación entre los discípulos.

En combinación con dispersarse este verbo destaca la característica de recorrer tierras indicando el necesario carácter peregrino de los predicadores. Apóstoles y predicadores han de llegar con su simiente de la palabra a cada punto de la tierra para poder sembrarla. Posteriormente deben volver y cuidarla como un pastor cuida de sus ovejas. Es el verbo que señala el paso del pastor. En el Antiguo Testamento Hebreo el verbo *dierchomai* es uno de los más usados para traducir *hithallek*⁷. Lucas conoce esta peculiaridad en textos que de alguna manera evocan la experiencia del pequeño pueblo que sale a predicar en las naciones. Para citar un ejemplo, el Sal 105 que evoca la maravillosa historia de Israel y al mencionar sus inicios como pueblo dice: “Cuando eran poco numerosos, gente de paso y forasteros, vagando (*dierchomai*) de nación en nación, yendo de un reino a otro pueblo [...]” (Sal 105:12-13). Además, también leemos la interesante conexión entre el pastoreo del Señor a su pueblo y el caminar del pueblo en 2 Sam 7:7: “En todo el tiempo que he caminado (*dierchomai*) entre todos los israelitas, ¿he dicho acaso a uno de los jueces de Israel a los que mandé que apacentaran a mi pueblo Israel: ‘¿Por qué no me edificáis una casa de cedro?’”

El evangelista Lucas emplea el verbo recorrer (*dierchomai*) siguiendo este esquema bíblico. En todo el Nuevo Testamento aparece

⁷ La Septuaginta presenta 16 variantes para traducir *hithallek*. Las más frecuentes son *peripateô* con 12 veces y *dierchomai* junto a *euaresteô* que se repiten 9 veces cada uno. El verbo *dierchomai* como traducción de *hithallek* aparece en: Jos 18:4; 1 Sam 2:30.35; 12:2; 30:31; 2 Sam 7:7; 1 Cr 17:6; 21:4; Sal 105:13.

este verbo un total de 41 veces, de las cuales 21 ocurren en *Hechos* y 10 en el Evangelio, por lo que se puede decir que Lucas es el que el autor que más lo utiliza⁸. Los pastores que reciben el anuncio del nacimiento del Mesías, atraviesan distancias para llegar a Belén (2:15). En 4:30 Jesús pasa en medio de su pueblo, tal como el Señor en el Antiguo Testamento, ejecutando así la visitación y a la vez el cuidado del pastor. En este sentido también Zaqueo esperó el paso del pastor en 19:4. En *Hechos* de los Apóstoles, hay muchas citas que resaltan la importancia de este verbo aparte de las dos dadas anteriormente. Una de ellas es, por ejemplo, la de 8:40 donde Felipe recorría “evangelizando” todas las ciudades de la costa de Palestina, desde Azoto a Cesarea. Pedro también “andaba recorriendo todos los lugares” en su labor de evangelización en la zona de Judea (Hch 9:32). Pablo “atravesó” toda la isla de Chipre predicando (Hch 13:6). Pablo siempre recorre territorios para predicar y el intérprete no puede dejar de recordar aquí el *hithallek* de las Escrituras (Hch 13:14; 14:24; 15:3.41). En 18:23 leemos un ejemplo del regreso del pastor que se preocupa por el rebaño y pasa a “fortalecerlo”. La última vez que aparece el término en *Hechos* es en 20:25 donde Pablo en su discurso de despedida resume su obra apostólica como un “pasar predicando el Reino”⁹.

Por supuesto, los términos rebaño y ovejas, junto al verbo pastorear tampoco están ausentes en *Hechos* para hacer alusión al cuidado del pueblo y la Iglesia. Llama la atención la ausencia del término “pastor” (*poimén*) propiamente dicho. Aparece en el Evangelio sólo en la escena de los pastores de Belén (2:8.15.18.20) y nada más. Curiosamente, aunque Cristo cuide de su pueblo como un buen pastor y los Apóstoles hagan lo suyo en *Hechos*, Lucas relata este cuidado sin recurrir al término técnico de pastor (ver Lc 15:4-6). El vocablo rebaño (*poimnion*) sí está representado en Lc 12:32 en ese dicho exclusivo de Lucas de “no temas pequeño rebaño” y en el discurso de des-

⁸ Mt 12:43; 19:24; Mc 4:35; Lc 2:15.35; 4:30; 5:15; 8:22; 9:6; 11:24; 17:11; 19:1.4; Jn 4:4; 8:59; Hch 8:4.40; 9:32.38; 10:38; 11:19.22; 12:10; 13:6.14; 14:24; 15:3.41; 16:6; 17:23; 18:23.27; 19:1.21; 20:2.25; Rom 5:12; 1Cor 10:1; 16:5; 2Cor 1:16; Heb 4:14.

⁹ Los comentaristas modernos se interesan particularmente por comentar la frase “predicando el Reino” y descuidan la importancia del verbo “pasar” en este versículo (ver, por ejemplo, D. MARGUERAT, *Les actes des apôtres* (13-28). *Commentaire du Nouveau Testament*, Labor et Fides, Genève 2015, 236; J.A. FITZMYER, *Los Hechos de los Apóstoles*, Sígueme, Salamanca 2003, 374).

pedida de Pablo. También el verbo “pastorear” (*poimainô*) está en *Hechos* 20 y también en Lc 17:7, aunque en este último con el sentido literal de cuidar un rebaño.

En esta similitud del pastor se entiende que los responsables de la comunidad deben tener cuidado y ser vigilantes para que el rebaño no perezca y que no sólo hay lobos que vienen de afuera sino también hay falsos pastores que intentan desviar el rebaño (v. 30). Finalmente, Pablo recuerda a sus oyentes, los ancianos de Éfeso, que él desempeñó su función de pastor sin escatimar esfuerzos, con lágrimas, con vigilancia y amonestación para que nadie se pierda. Queda claro que los peligros son muchos, pueden ser externos o internos, comunitarios o individuales. Cada uno debe ser atendido si se ha de imitar a Dios como buen pastor.

El Decreto *Ad Gentes* ve en los obispos y clérigos esta función de pastores, mientras que los laicos son sus asistentes en la labor de dar el testimonio de Cristo. El párrafo sobre el apostolado seglar (AG 21) deja bien claro la existencia de una Jerarquía en mayúsculas que coordina, supervisa y forma “el apostolado activo de los laicos.” El documento traduce aquí el rol dirigente de los Apóstoles en *Hechos*, particularmente el de Pablo, en una jerarquía bien organizada que fue institucionalizándose a lo largo de la historia: “Estén preparados los laicos a cumplir la misión especial de anunciar el Evangelio y de comunicar la doctrina cristiana, en una cooperación más inmediata con la Jerarquía para dar vigor a la Iglesia naciente.” En este llamado se reconoce, por lo tanto, la necesidad del compromiso del laico para fortalecer las misiones e implica que su colaboración directa puede mejorar el vigor del mensaje y de la formación de las nuevas comunidades. Después de más de cincuenta años de la promulgación de este decreto, se ha demostrado en la experiencia de las comunidades de base y en las misiones más remotas que el laico es un agente indispensable y un líder que puede sembrar la semilla según los dones del Espíritu y dentro del marco sacramental de la Iglesia.

Pablo es sin duda alguna el mayor modelo de buen pastor en *Hechos*. Así lo dice su legado y lo confirman sus viajes y recorridos para proclamar el kerigma y visitar a los que ya creyeron. Pablo se traslada de un lugar a otro siguiendo la vieja tradición de los pastores del Antiguo Testamento, los que como Enoc o Abraham caminaban delante del Señor. Es un peregrino de la palabra que recorre la tierra para juntar a las ovejas perdidas de Israel y de todas las naciones para cuidar de ellas. Así como Abraham atravesó el desierto sirio entre las na-

ciones que allí residían, Pablo recorre las naciones sin pertenecer a ninguna y hace de todo el Imperio Romano el desierto en el que conduce su rebaño.

Si tomamos como ejemplo la escena de la fundación de la Iglesia de Corinto en Hch 18:1-18, vemos a Pablo como un hombre de viaje que baja desde Atenas y que en poco tiempo de estadía cambia su lugar de predicación, mientras reside como huésped en la morada de un matrimonio de judeocristianos, Aquila y Priscila, que en realidad son también una especie de refugiados obligados a retornar al Ponto por orden del emperador Claudio. Se resalta en esta escena el dato de la profesión de Pablo y sus asistentes como “hacedores de tiendas” (*skênopoioi*, 18:3) una profesión que no es mencionada en ninguna otra parte del Nuevo Testamento.

Dentro del aspecto peregrino de la vida de Pablo y considerando su estado permanente de estar en camino, el hacer tiendas es un claro mensaje del autor a su lector informado sobre el hecho de que Pablo no tiene una vida sedentaria ni tampoco hace un trabajo sedentario, sino que inclusive con su profesión mundana promueve la vida de peregrino. San Pablo Apóstol tuvo el valor de recorrer los más recónditos lugares de Asia Menor y de volver a ellos cuando fue necesario. Según *Hechos*, san Pablo, obedeciendo al Señor, amplió su campo de acción y llevó su predicación al continente europeo cuando en una visión un macedonio que estaba de pie le suplicó: “Pasa a Macedonia y ayúdanos” (Hch 16:9-10).

5. La Iglesia peregrina de hoy y de mañana

Con la propuesta de una Iglesia peregrina se intenta redescubrir la naturaleza misionera e itinerante del pueblo de Dios por el mundo. Los relatos del libro de *Hechos* no son historias de un pasado remoto sino más bien un energético llamado a que sus lectores sigan hoy los pasos de aquellos que se comprometieron a llevar su testimonio de fe entre las naciones. El relato lucano bosqueja una Iglesia desafiante y comprometida con su vocación de ser testigo. Es una Iglesia que se sabe pequeña y débil, pero conoce los retos que implica el subsistir en el inmenso mar de los poderes mundanos. Por esto, con coraje y siguiendo el llamado del Señor sus fieles comprometidos dejan todo y le siguen (ver Lc 5:11).

El Decreto *Ad Gentes* expresa en un idioma contemporáneo y con un discurso de tipo teológico doctrinal su interés por permane-

cer fiel al mensaje del libro de *Hechos*. El documento testimonia la necesidad de trabajar insistentemente el día a día y en las comunidades más remotas y desfavorecidas para que la semilla de la palabra germine y dé su fruto. Ahora bien, la estructuración jerárquica y la imagen de grandeza y esplendor que se tiene de la Iglesia del viejo continente impiden que el lector de hoy pueda descubrir esta relación con facilidad. Sin embargo, si consideramos la amplitud universal del mensaje y la globalización actual, la Iglesia retoma su carácter de “pequeño rebaño” que, con gran valentía y confianza en el Señor, responde al llamado de peregrinar dando testimonio hasta que se cumpla la invocación del Marana tha (ven, Señor).

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Missio ad Gentes in the Acts of the Apostles

To meet Pope Francis' call to revive in the faithful the missionary "boldness", "courage", and "zeal of those who first proclaimed the Gospel", the Pontifical Missionary Union (PMU) has promoted the publication of *Missio ad Gentes in the Acts of the Apostles*, a collection of essays, authored by a group of eminent New Testament scholars from all over the world, examining the extraordinary events and deeds narrated in Luke's writing. The reading of this volume allows a thorough understanding of how mission represents not only the very nature of the Church (*Ad Gentes*, 2), but also its origin, purpose, and life, contributing to the reflection urged by Pope Francis on "how to render the work of the *missio ad gentes* more effective", in the framework of the Extraordinary Missionary Month October 2019.

There are presently significant Christian missionary communities in places that are hostile to the faith, where the Christian witness experiences also the tragedy of martyrdom on a daily basis. They can refer to the living example of the Apostles to properly understand the *missio ad gentes* of the Church sent into the world for its salvation and transformation. *Missio ad Gentes in the Acts of the Apostles* is addressed to these young Churches, as well as to the Churches of older tradition. May the Apostolic approach to the faith find space among them again.

Fr. Fabrizio Meroni, a PIME missionary priest, is Secretary General of the Pontifical Missionary Union (PMU), Director of the International Center for Mission and Formation (CIAM), Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, and Director of Fides, News Agency of the Pontifical Mission Societies.

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