

Good News for All Nations

Mission at the Heart
of the New Testament

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The gospel spreads (Acts of the Apostles)

What a blockbuster! Hollywood would be hard put to rival the drama and excitement of the book of Acts. Tongues of fire and consequent accusations of drunkenness – God judges Ananias and Sapphira and they drop dead – apostles imprisoned, flogged, stoned to death – divine earthquake allows apostles to escape prison mob demonstrations and lynchings – storm at sea and shipwreck – apostle bitten by snake – fearless bold preaching – mass movements to Christ – the extensive spread of the gospel round the Mediterranean and out to Gentiles as well as Jews. What a story! But Luke is not only writing to entertain or even to give accurate history. He wants his readers to learn that his Gospel's account of Jesus is not complete with the cross and resurrection. Jesus is still active by his Spirit, and his purposes for Jews and Gentiles unfold.

While the Gospel declares what 'Jesus began to do and to teach' (Acts 1:1), in Acts Jesus works by his Spirit in and through the apostles and early Church. The miracles the apostles perform in Jesus' name parallel those done by Jesus in the Gospel. Likewise, the early Church enjoyed 'the favour of

all the people' (2:47), reminding us of Jesus' growth (Luke 2:52).

It is Jesus who instructs the apostles to remain in Jerusalem until they receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Jesus who would ascend 'into heaven' (1:11) promises to come 'from heaven' by his Spirit (2:2). And it is to Jesus that they turn with their questions – would he now 'restore the kingdom to Israel' (1:6)? How sad that at such a crucial time the apostles descended into vain theological speculation concerning politics, times and the fulfilment of prophecy concerning the land of Israel. Such mysteries remain in the Father's hands, not ours. But the devil loves to side-track God's people with such idle debates, so preventing them from concentrating on the more vital calling to mission in the name of Jesus Christ.

The risen Jesus brings them back to his primary purpose. Acts 1:8 features as the foundational text, which Luke then expounds. Acts shows Jesus at work in power by his Spirit through the early Church. And the power of the Spirit is inseparably linked to witness not only in Jerusalem, but even 'to the ends of the earth'. 'You will receive power . . . and you will be my witnesses . . .' The interconnecting 'and' is vitally important. We dare not separate the power of Jesus' Spirit from the missionary call to witness worldwide. Sadly, there are some Christians and churches which richly enjoy the power of the Spirit, with all his miraculous gifts and workings, but have no passion for worldwide mission. This failure leads to an ingrown spiritual selfishness. There are equally some who have a deep concern for mission worldwide, but are frightened of the power of the Holy Spirit because they associate this with an extreme charismatic theology which they do not accept. But without the power of the Spirit all mission will be fruitless and frustrating. We need the power of the Spirit *and* passionate involvement in international mission.

Holy Spirit power

Repeatedly throughout Acts, the distinguishing mark and consequence of God's acceptance is the gift of the Holy Spirit. When the Jerusalem Christians doubt whether it is right to accept Samaritans or Gentiles as Christians, they are convinced by the fact that they too received the Holy Spirit just as the first Christians had received him. The evidence was often manifest through the ecstatic gifts of tongues and prophecy. At such controversial turning points in the development of the Christian Church, God delighted to pour out these spectacular gifts of power.

At Pentecost, too, the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the first Jewish and God-fearing Christians was accompanied by an audible 'violent wind' and visible 'tongues of fire'. The Christians then spoke 'in other tongues' so that Jewish pilgrims from many places heard God's word in their own languages.

Throughout Acts the Holy Spirit performs mighty 'signs and wonders' – an expression which comes nine times in Acts. The word 'signs' shows the purpose of the miraculous 'wonders'. The Spirit heals miraculously, delivers people from demons, raises the dead, breaks open prisons to free his apostles, gives visions and dreams, negates a viper's poison, etc. No open-minded reader of Acts can fail to appreciate the reality of the Spirit's power.

Judgment

This power is also manifest in judgment as people sin against the holiness and sovereign glory of God. So, in Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira lie against the Holy Spirit in saying falsely that they had sold all their land and were giving all the proceeds to God's Church. When they fell down dead at Peter's feet, their divine judgment made everyone realise the power of the Holy Spirit and the dreadful seriousness of sin. As a result, 'great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events' (5:11). This leads on naturally in the next verse to the general statement

that 'the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people' – no wonder the Church grew massively!

Again in Acts 12, Herod's arrogant pride is manifest as he sits publicly upon his throne in royal robes receiving the acclamation of the crowds. 'This is the voice of a god, not of a man,' they cried (12:22). Because he evidently received this flattering praise with pleasure, without acknowledging that God is to be praised, an angel struck him down 'and he was eaten by worms and died'. In such a context it is hardly surprising that the next verse declares, 'The word of God continued to increase and spread.'

In Acts 13, Elymas the sorcerer opposed the apostles and tried to prevent the proconsul Sergius Paulus from believing. Paul's words of condemnation (13:10) may sound excessive to mild-mouthed Europeans, but we should not impose our cultural patterns of speech on others. And God supported Paul's words and struck Elymas blind. Once again the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit in judgment brought fruit. When the proconsul 'saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord'. So it was not only the miraculous sign which led him to faith, but also the teaching of the apostle. Sign and word go hand in hand in mission.

Power for holy living

The early chapters of Acts give a vivid description of the early Church in its life together. This was a community which experienced miraculous signs and wonders alongside its bold preaching and witness. This is exemplified in the healing of the crippled beggar (3:1–10), but evidently multitudes of sick and demon-possessed people found healing in the name of Jesus (5:12–16). The early Christians were a people of powerful prayer (4:31) which resulted in their meeting place being shaken. All of them were again filled with the Spirit, with the consequence that they 'spoke the word of God boldly' (4:31).

Chapter 2 verse 42 summarises the close fellowship of these first Christians. They 'devoted themselves to the apostles'

teaching', to *koinonia* fellowship together, to the deeply symbolic act of sharing food together and to prayer. This fellowship was expressed in sharing everything they had. So the Christians 'were one in heart and mind' (4:32).

We may note that fellowship is not only in praying and eating together, but also in the mutual sharing of possessions. In this way fellowship removed all inequalities and the Church became a model of real justice. Is the word 'fellowship', therefore, the New Testament equivalent to the Old Testament 'justice'? In his Gospel Luke shows particular concern for the social dimension of mission in bringing good news to the poor and needy, so it may be expected that in Acts, too, caring for the poor will stand out as a major characteristic of the Church. Moral righteousness in the early Church goes together with a shared life of fellowship/justice. Even the widows are cared for. At one stage there seems to have been some discrimination in Jerusalem against 'Grecian' or Hellenistic widows (6:1), but this was quickly put right. True fellowship broke down the barriers between Grecian and Hebraic Jews. Later, too, Paul organises a collection from diaspora churches with largely Gentile membership and sends this to the Hebraic church in Jerusalem. This may have been for practical purposes in a time of famine and it may also have been a conscious fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy (Isa. 60:5), but it doubtless also reinforced the unity of the churches.

As Christian mission leads to the formation of new churches and fellowships, our preaching and praying need to keep the life of the early Church in mind. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to inspire holiness of living in the Church. And the work of the Holy Spirit of Christ in the life and worship of the Church attracts outsiders. The love of Christ manifest in our relationships together in the Church and the pure holiness of our lives will draw non-Christians to faith in Christ.

Luke also particularly stresses the place of women in the early Church, although at that time in ordinary Jewish society women were rather looked down upon. Luke frequently underlines the

fact that women were present alongside the men, and he names Rhoda, Dorcas, Lydia and Damaris as well as Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary the mother of John Mark. In 17:12 Luke notes the conversion of various 'prominent Greek women' before going on to say that some Greek men also believed. Likewise, Priscilla's name comes before that of her husband, Aquila (18:18, 26). Negatively, Sapphira played a significant role in her and her husband's sin. Felix' wife Drusilla also merits a mention by name. Luke's positive emphasis on the role of women despite his chauvinistic context is surely significant for the role of women in mission and the Church today. Traditional churches and missions need to rethink their male dominance and their neglect of women's gifts.

'You will be my witnesses' (1:8)

The power of the Holy Spirit giving miraculous signs and holy living in the Church must lead to active witness by word and deed. This witness started in Jerusalem among Jewish people, but spread through Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth. In so doing, the gospel reached out to Samaritans and then to Gentiles of all races everywhere. So Holy Spirit power and mission must go inseparably together.

Geographically Luke concentrates considerably on the central role of Jerusalem. Not only do the apostles constantly refer back to the authority of the Jerusalem church leaders, but the outreach of the gospel starts there too. So the first chapters of Acts concentrate on the growth of the Church in Jerusalem; but following Jesus' prophetic word the horizons then widen. At first it is only as far as Judea. Then in Acts 8 persecution rages after the martyrdom of Stephen and the Christians scatter to Samaria, with the result that their witness produces a mass movement of Samaritans to Christ. After the conversion of Paul, mission extends around the northern shores of the Mediterranean and finally reaches to Rome, the heart of the Roman empire. The implication of Acts' inconclusive final chapter is

that the Church's witness must and will develop further until all the world hears the good news of Jesus.

Ethnically, too, Luke was recording the extension of Christian mission, first among Jewish people and then more widely to Gentiles. Located in Jerusalem and Judea, the first seven chapters of Acts describe the large-scale spread of the gospel among Jews and God-fearers or proselytes. Although the latter were ethnically Gentile, they had joined themselves to the people of Israel in submission to the Jewish Law. Even Pentecost, with its apparent reversal of the scattering of the nations at Babel (Genesis 11), was exclusively experienced by Jews and Gentile adherents to the people of Israel. They came from many parts of the Roman empire and spoke a multitude of languages, but they represented only the Jewish diaspora. So the mission of the Church is 'to the Jew first' (Rom. 1:16, RSV). The primacy of Jewish mission is probably not only temporal, with witness to Jews preceding Gentile mission in the history of the New Testament. It may well also signify God's particular concern for his Jewish people and his heartfelt longing that they too should find life through Jesus as their Messiah. Still today, Jewish evangelism must hold a special place in Christians' mission emphasis.

Although some Gentiles had joined themselves to Israel in the Old Testament, the people of Israel continued to be the one people of God. And religious prejudice against Gentiles remained strong in Israel. This may have been exacerbated in New Testament times by the Jews' bitter war with Rome, and climactically by the destruction of Jerusalem by the Gentile Romans. It cannot, therefore, have been easy for the Jewish apostles to start evangelism among Gentiles. And the early Jewish Church was evidently very uncertain whether it was right to accept Gentiles without them abandoning their foreign ways and becoming part of Israel as Christian God-fearers or proselytes. Hence the question arose as to whether Gentile converts needed to be circumcised and follow the Law. This was to become the pressing issue at the first church consultation in Jerusalem (Acts 15).

In his grace the Lord therefore gave the Church two intermediate bridges between Jews and Gentiles to prepare the way for wider mission among all peoples. In Acts 8, Christians flee from persecution to Samaria. As we have seen, the Samaritans stemmed from mixed marriages between Jews and Gentiles and formed a halfway house between Jews and Gentiles.

Jesus had prepared his disciples for a positive approach to Samaritans by his teaching concerning the Good Samaritan. Likewise he healed ten lepers, and the Gospels note that it was only the Samaritan man who returned to say thank you. Jesus also interacted very personally with the Samaritan woman (John 4), with the result that many Samaritans believed. He then purposely went through Samaritan villages en route to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-6). And in Acts 7:16 Stephen underlines that Jacob was buried in the Samaritan Shechem in the tomb which Abraham had bought.

With this preparation for mission to the Samaritans, the Christians needed no special guidance or vision before they began preaching to Samaritans. They needed no special call. They just went down to Samaria and preached Christ there. When the overall mission purpose of God is biblically clear, Jesus' followers should not wait for new guidance or a special call. We have only to obey.

The second bridge to Gentile mission is the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. He was evidently a Gentile, but he was worshipping in the Jewish temple, reading the Hebrew Scriptures and worshipping the God of Israel. Legally he could not have been a proselyte as a eunuch, but he was a God-fearer. He too prepares the way for wider mission among Gentiles.

The eunuch's question, 'How can I... unless someone explains it to me?' (8:31) has major implications for mission practice. Philip had asked him whether he understood the Isaiah passage he was reading. Faceless distribution of Scripture or other Christian literature without some personal relationship can only have limited results.

Philip expounded the passage from Isaiah and told the

Ethiopian about the good news of Jesus (8:35), with the result that he believed and was baptised. This is followed directly by the first account of Paul's conversion. This event is so tremendously important for the history of the Church and its mission that we have three separate accounts of it in Acts (chapters 9, 22 and 26). From the outset of his Christian life, Paul is called to reach out to Gentiles. Nevertheless he starts with Jews only, preaching boldly in the name of Jesus (9:28, 29).

As so often, it is Peter who initiates new movements in the Church. He is the rock on which the Church is established. So it is through Peter that the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household are converted. Luke dedicates almost two whole chapters to this crucial turning point in Christian mission, when the gospel starts to reach out to the Gentile world.

For the Jewish Peter it was not easy to break the Law and consort with Gentiles. He was evidently not rigidly following the Law, for he was staying in the house of a tanner. Dealing with dead bodies made a person ritually unclean, and to stay in a tanner's house goes against rabbinic law. Nevertheless, Peter needed the mind-blowing vision in which he was commanded to kill and eat all sorts of unclean animals – perhaps rats, worms, shellfish, pigs, etc. He needed to learn that he must not call anything unclean which God has cleansed. Only then would he be willing to receive Cornelius' Gentile messengers and go to Cornelius' house to preach.

Luke does not hesitate to note the positive value in God's sight of Cornelius' prayerful and generous godliness before his conversion (10:2). The followers of non-Christian religions may also demonstrate positive goodness and spirituality. God rejoices in all that is good and true. But this godly background does not mean that Cornelius does not need to believe in Jesus Christ and receive forgiveness of sins (10:43). So when Cornelius believed, God bestowed on him the gift of the Holy Spirit to show that Gentiles too are accepted.

After the conversion of Cornelius, Luke notes that most Christians still only preached to Jews, but some 'began to speak

to Greeks also' (11:20). The church in Jerusalem evidently had some uncertainty about the widening of mission to include Gentiles, so they sent Barnabas to investigate. When he saw 'the evidence of the grace of God' he rejoiced and the Church grew tremendously (11:22-4).

Gentile witness

In chapter 13 Peter gives way to Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles. Barnabas and Paul are set apart by the church leaders in Antioch for the Lord's work. These prophets and teachers were a very diverse group, including the black-skinned Simeon and the North African Lucius. So they were perhaps ideally suited to receive the Spirit's commission to separate Barnabas and Paul for wider mission.

At this stage Barnabas is named before Paul, and he was evidently the senior partner. Was this why they started their mission in Cyprus, Barnabas' home island? Perhaps it is good to start one's mission work in situations where one feels at home and knows the people. Then one may branch out into wider mission.

But by the time they reach Pisidian Antioch, Paul has taken the lead. At first he preached in the synagogue, appealing to Jews and Gentile God-fearers to receive the message of forgiveness of sins and justification through Jesus (13:38, 39). Many believed and urged Paul to preach again the following Sabbath.

All seemed to be progressing well. The next Sabbath 'almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord', but the crowd must have included many Gentiles and this angered the Jews. Jealously they abused Paul and Barnabas. Paul and Barnabas reacted with bold words, declaring that the gospel had to be preached first to Jews but they were showing themselves unworthy of eternal life. Then come the key words which would change the face of Christian and indeed of world history – 'we now turn to the Gentiles' (13:46) – and they quote Isaiah 49:6 as justification for this vital change. From now on, Paul's calling

to be the apostle to the Gentiles was paramount in his mind.

Although the Gentiles rejoiced, many Jews reacted with anger and chased the apostles out of the city. It is noteworthy that when they reached Iconium they immediately went first to the synagogue to preach to Jews as well as Gentile God-fearers. Turning to the Gentiles did not mean that the apostles no longer preached to Jews. The gospel of Jesus is for all peoples, both Jews and Gentiles.

There remains some debate concerning the Jewish background to the Church. Does the Church progress in a direct line from its roots in the Old Testament and Jewish faith? Or is the Church a totally new people of God, into which both Jews and Gentiles enter by faith in Jesus? What, therefore, is the position with regard to Jews? As we shall see, Romans 11 clearly indicates the former. God does not plant a new olive tree, but grafts new Gentile branches into the tree of Israel. So although Paul was not bound by rabbinic law, he continued to relate to the synagogue and observe Jewish ritual practices like circumcision (16:3), a vow to cut off his hair (18:18) and the purification rite in which heads were shaved (21:23-4). Evidently Paul's Christian faith did not preclude adherence to the Jewish faith and practices.

Luke particularly emphasises that the apostles did nothing to provoke the fierce opposition of the Jewish crowds or of the Roman authorities. In his declaration of the Christian faith for the sake of Theophilus and other Roman dignitaries, he wants to show that the Christians were innocent of all reprehensible behaviour. All mob violence and social disorder was due to their enemies.

Cross-cultural witness

All the apostolic sermons in Acts are given to Jewish audiences except those to the Lycaonians (14:8-18) and in Athens (17:16-34). In these, the apostles addressed Gentiles who had no background knowledge of the Jewish faith through involvement

in the synagogue. Christians today who work among ethnic minorities or who go overseas in cross-cultural mission will share a real fellow-feeling with Paul as apostle to those with no biblical background.

Paul was highly educated and had studied Greek philosophy, so he could use his knowledge to relate the gospel to his Greek audience. In his sermon in Athens he uses the ideas of Greek philosophical schools and quotes a Greek poet to assist his communication. In this way he creates a bridge into the thinking of his audience. Indeed, his whole address is based on his observation that the Athenians were worshipping an unknown god. So he affirms that the Christian God is actually the one whom they worship as unknown – the unknown has become knowable through Jesus Christ. Thus Paul gives us a model for our cross-cultural mission today. Mission workers need to be so trained that they have a good working knowledge of the faiths and philosophies with which they will be working. And then they need to learn to use that knowledge in making the gospel relevant to the prevalent thinking and belief systems.

Both in Lystra and Athens, the fact of creation forms a central element in the apostolic message. With a Jewish audience this was unnecessary, for they knew that God has created all things and all people. In Lystra the apostles urgently appeal to the people not to worship created idols any more, but to turn to the living God who made all things (14:15). God does not need to be 'served by human hands' and he 'does not live in temples built by hands' (17:24-5).

When working as a missionary with the Karo Batak church in Sumatra, Indonesia, I had to learn this biblical principle. I soon noticed that Indonesian Christians always started with the fact of creation when addressing people of traditional religious background. Local people still worshipped the spirits of the local volcanoes and other geographical phenomena, but Christians proclaimed the supremacy of the God who had made all things. In following the Indonesian Christians' example I had to overcome the prejudice of my own background. In England,

preaching God as creator led to fierce arguments about evolution, so it sidetracked people from hearing the message of Christ. But in Sumatra at that time we were not faced with that particular problem.

Throughout Acts, and particularly in the sermon in Athens, the resurrection of Jesus lies at the heart of the apostolic message. Also, at his trial before the Sanhedrin Paul declares his faith in the resurrection (23:6). Perhaps as Christians we have sometimes overemphasised the saving work of Christ on the cross to the neglect of the message of new life in the resurrection. Of course, the resurrection cannot be separated from the cross, but nevertheless Paul's emphasis was on the life-giving power of God in raising Jesus from the dead.

It would seem, however, that despite all Paul's careful efforts to relate relevantly to his Gentile audience he failed to communicate what he meant by the resurrection. The Athenians thought he was 'advocating foreign gods' (17:18), namely 'Jesus' and 'Resurrection'! And the Lycaonians thought Paul and Barnabas were themselves gods, and they wanted to worship them and offer sacrifices to them.

In our often inadequate efforts to communicate the gospel to people of different cultural or religious backgrounds, it is a comfort to see in Acts that the Holy Spirit gave considerable success to the apostles despite their communication failures. Fellowships of new Christian believers emerged both in Lystra (14:21) and Athens (17:34). As cross-cultural witnesses among ethnic minorities in our own country or as Christian workers overseas, we can easily become discouraged with a deep awareness that our fumbling efforts don't seem to scratch where people itch. How good to know that the Holy Spirit can work effectively through us despite our inadequacies!

The message

The apostolic message underlines the work of God for our salvation as well as the required human response. The underlying

theme of Acts is always what Jesus by his Holy Spirit is doing in continuation of his work and teaching as recorded in Luke's Gospel (Acts 1:1, 2). Luke therefore underlines the powerful work of God in the message of the resurrection. And this goes hand in hand with the work of Jesus Christ in salvation and the forgiveness of sin.

In Acts 2:38, Luke gives his readers a brief synopsis of the apostolic message. In Christian witness today we need to take careful note of the model given to us in Acts. The vital elements are repentance, baptism, forgiveness of sins and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. The call to repentance features prominently in the Acts account of Christian witness. There can be no forgiveness of sins without a preceding repentance which renounces sin and turns from it. With the frequent call to repentance comes also the promise of 'forgiveness' (*aphesis*) with its basic sense of release from the dominion of sin. The word *aphesis* implies that sin holds an enslaving power over people, but Jesus offers release. While repentance and release from sin are the invisible working of the Holy Spirit in the heart of new believers, baptism represents the visible sign of entry into God's covenant and thus entry into the people of Christ. Baptism demonstrates publicly that the believer is now within God's covenant and belongs to Jesus Christ and his Church. This outward sign is further proved by God's gift of his Holy Spirit, which is commonly but not always accompanied by some spiritual gift like tongues.

Even at this very early stage, when the Church was confined to a Jewish and God-fearing membership, Peter already notes that the message of forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit are for *all* whom God calls, even for 'all who are far off' (2:39). The universality of the gospel and therefore of Christian mission is already evident.

In Acts 8:12, Luke summarises the message of Christian witness in different terms. Philip preached good news, which is defined as the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. Christians today may easily use the religious word 'gospel'

without thinking of its real meaning. The gospel is not some rigid series of theological points without reference to the needs of non-Christians. We have always to ask what makes Jesus good news to particular people in their situations. For example, in a conference of East European Christian leaders I was asked to speak on 'What makes the gospel good news in a post-communist context? in an Eastern Orthodox context? in a Roman Catholic context? and in a post-modern context?' Returning from ten years in Asia to a village in England, we had to ask the same question.

In Acts 26:16–18, the resurrected Jesus tells Paul at his conversion that he must witness among both Jews and Gentiles. For both there is a precondition for receiving the forgiveness of sins and entry into the people of God who are sanctified by faith in Jesus. First they must turn from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God. For those who use occult objects like magic books or tarot cards, these will need to be burned (19:19). Conversion is not only from sin to the Lord and his righteousness. It is also from the person of Satan to the person of the Lord. The rule of Satan leads inevitably to sin, while the lordship of Christ brings holiness and righteousness. Conversion means, therefore, a total break from Satan and sin in turning to the Lord and his righteousness. If we fail to teach about Satan in our evangelistic witness, new Christians may have trouble later in their Christian lives.

In the weeks between his resurrection and his ascension, Jesus taught his disciples about the kingdom of God (1:3). It is therefore not surprising that the kingdom of God lies at the heart of the apostles' preaching. This is closely linked to the early Church's baptismal confession 'Jesus is Lord'. God's kingdom is marked by the fact that Jesus reigns. And with Jesus as Lord, his standards of holiness must prevail in individual personal lives of moral holiness, in interpersonal relationships and within society. The reign of Jesus is also demonstrated by signs of God's power in action. When God's kingdom breaks into the world and Jesus is king, we may expect miracles.

In Acts, Luke refers frequently to 'the name' of Jesus Christ. Clearly he is influenced by the Old Testament use of 'the name of the Lord', referring to the overall person and character of God. Thus Israel sings praise to the name of the Lord (e.g. Psalm 7:17; 9:2). Israel trusted in his holy name (e.g. Psalm 33:21), knowing that the name of the Lord is great and holy. So in Acts the apostles preach the name of Jesus, and it is in his name that the power of God is released for healing (e.g. 3:6). Believers are baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus (e.g. 2:38; 19:5) and it is for this name that Christians willingly suffer shame (e.g. 5:41; 9:16). Indeed, it is uniquely by the name of Jesus Christ that people can be saved (4:12).

Acts 4:12 has been much quoted in the heated debate on pluralism and the Christian attitude to other faiths. Together with John 14:6, it has been used as the proof text for the traditional Christian view that salvation is only through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Neither religious piety and zeal nor moral good works can be the means of salvation. The pluralist view that all religious faiths can bring their sincere followers to God for salvation undermines the very roots of evangelistic passion. Such a spirit of open-minded tolerance has led to the criticism that it is arrogant to think that Christians have the truth and should preach it to others. Particularly, evangelism among Jews and Muslims has become very controversial. It is fashionable to be tolerant of anything which seems tolerant, while at the same time being gravely intolerant of everything which appears to be in any way intolerant. The Jewish apostles in the New Testament, however, were firmly convinced of the absolute truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. They did not hesitate to affirm that salvation is only by his name. And they proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ both to their fellow Jews and more widely to the Gentiles.

In modern times, 'dialogue' has become the politically correct approach to mission. This word is, however, generally used without serious reference to its biblical background. As I have explained elsewhere (*What About Other Faiths?*, Hodder &

Stoughton, 1989), in his Gospel Luke only uses *dialogizomai* and *dialogismos*, which express a questioning uncertainty (e.g. 1:29; 5:21, 22), but in Acts he changes to *dialegomai*. In Acts, *dialegomai* ('dialogue') implies the use of discussional debate rather than monologue as the means of proclamation. The apostles, however, no longer reflect uncertainty concerning the message of Christ, but 'dialogue' (e.g. 17:2, 17; 19:9) with the definite aim of convincing and converting.

Acts 1:1 declares that the writings of Luke are 'the word': *logos*, which is translated in the NIV as 'book'. Throughout Acts 'the word' is emphasised. It is the word which the apostles preach, with the result that 'the word of God continued to increase and spread' (e.g. 12:24). In Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders he commits them 'to God and to the word of his grace' (20:32). The modern denigration of words as untrustworthy contradicts the message of Acts. As we shall note again in John 1, God reveals himself and communicates to us by word. Likewise, Christian witnesses are called to communicate the glory of the Lord by means of words.

'Boldness' (parresia)

This word occurs frequently to describe the preaching and witness of the apostles. It has a two-fold meaning. Of course, it signifies a courageous openness of witness which flies in the face of all opposition and refuses to be silenced by the threat of persecution. Then, too, it implies a confident assurance of the truth of the message proclaimed. Courageously open witness requires a firm foundation of assurance of faith, for otherwise no one will dare to risk suffering and misunderstanding. Paul was very sure of his encounter with the risen Christ and therefore the reality of the resurrection. As a result, he was willing to suffer mob violence, beatings, prison and even death. Nothing could prevent him from witnessing boldly.

Of course, boldness must go together with wisdom – wise boldness or bold wisdom. Sadly, Europeans are often in danger of so stressing wisdom that boldness goes out of the

window. Perhaps as Jews we are sometimes in danger of overplaying boldness to the neglect of wisdom. Both are needed together.

The apostles' boldness certainly did lead to fierce opposition. This was not only physical and violent, but was also evident in verbal criticism. Thus the Church was 'called a sect' (24:14). This word could sometimes be used less negatively (e.g. 26:5), but the usual usage was decidedly uncomplimentary (e.g. 28:22). In traditional Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox countries, Protestant churches are often derided as 'sects'. In Jewish societies too, messianic Jews are often called a 'sect'. In this way the enemies of the gospel attempt to make Christian witness sound so unworthy of serious consideration that people will not be drawn to the gospel of Jesus. Words can hurt us just as much as sticks and stones. Mockery and gentle sneers can shut the mouth of Christian witnesses just as effectively as the threat of prison or martyrdom. We need to pray for the Holy Spirit of Christ to inspire a renewed boldness among us.

The means

In a question-and-answer session among church leaders in Algeria a man asked me, 'Does not the history of the early Church in Acts give us a model for our church life and witness today?' A negative answer to such a question sounds unbelieving. But we have to ask how far Acts gives us a blueprint or model. Or is it merely giving us some principles which can then be applied to varying cultures and situations? Thus the early Church evidently based its worship on the model of the synagogue – must all Christian worship today follow that liturgical example exactly? People were healed by merely walking across the shadow of an apostle or touching a handkerchief – should we follow this form of healing ministry? In their witness the apostles majored on cultural centres and major cities – is tribal ministry therefore unbiblical? Unthinking literalism in applying Acts to modern mission may mislead us badly, but on the other hand we must

ensure that our mission is based on the principles of God's word in Acts. Some of these include:

Teams

When Barnabas started on his mission outreach, he sought out Paul to be his companion. He did not go alone. At first it was Paul accompanying Barnabas, but later Paul took over the leadership. When they later clashed concerning whether John Mark should accompany them, two teams emerged with Paul and Barnabas as their respective leaders. At other times it was groups of Christians who went together and witnessed. One-man ministry was not the normal practice in Acts. This is surely a good principle for us. We all need fellow-workers to complement us, for none of us has all the needed gifts or a full-orbed personality.

Group decisions

Western culture tends to stress the individual above the group to which each belongs. So faith and conversion have to be individually experienced and all spiritual decisions are made on an individual basis. In Acts, however, not only are there cases of individual conversions, but also crowds of people came together into the Church of God (2:41; 4:4). Whole households made decisions together to turn to the Lord and be baptised (16:15, 33). As I have described in my life story, *Life's Tapestry* (O.M. Paternoster, 1997), our church in Indonesia experienced group movements to Christ in which a whole battalion of the army turned to Christ and were baptised, as did also a senior school and a hospital ward. Particularly in situations of intense persecution, it may prove almost impossible for one lone individual to become a Christian, but groups together can give greater security as well as mutual encouragement and fellowship. So, for example, in many Muslim societies, where Christian converts could well be murdered, we should be working and praying that whole families might come to faith together.

Mission support

In Corinth Paul stayed in the home of Aquila and Priscilla, who were tent-makers by profession. Although such work was despised because it dealt with the skins of dead animals, it seems that somehow Paul had also learned this skill (18:3) and so he worked with them while seeking to evangelise in the city. It would seem that Paul earned his living by his own hands when there was as yet no local church to support him. But we also know that when he had planted a living church in Macedonia they supported him financially (Phil. 4:10ff.). Is this a useful model for modern mission? Should cross-cultural mission workers support themselves when working in places where there is no local church? Should missionaries normally be supported by the receiving churches rather than by their home sending churches?

The present assumption that missionaries should be supported by their sending church stems from the colonial era, when mission was from the relatively wealthy Christian west to poorer countries overseas. But now the Church has become larger and stronger in many former 'mission fields' than in European countries. They may be poor financially, but they are rich in spiritual vitality, confidence of faith and with growing membership. But because they lack money they often remain recipients of western mission largesse. We rejoice in the tremendous growth of mission involvement from such dynamic churches as those of Latin America, Korea and Singapore. But if mission work overseas did not depend on financial wealth, the large but poorer churches of black Africa, India and the ex-communist countries could contribute even more significantly to worldwide mission.

Any change from the present system of home-church support would need to develop gradually, for otherwise the whole mission movement could be brought into chaos and badly disrupted. Such change needs to be introduced step by step.

Holistic mission

As we have seen, much mission talk today revolves around such jargon terms as 'the 10/40 window', 'adopt-a-people movement' and 'unreached peoples'. In his grace God has used such expressions to motivate people to more active involvement in evangelistic church-planting mission in some of the neediest parts of the world. But in Acts, mission is a much bigger calling than just church-planting evangelism. Paul also engaged in a long-term teaching ministry (e.g. 19:9-10; 20:31). He returned to churches he had planted in order to encourage and strengthen the Christians there. In Acts 20 he ministers to the elders of the church in Ephesus. In the 'Great Commission' in Matthew 28 we noted that mission involves not only basic evangelism among the unreached, but also laying down the external forms of the Church and teaching people to obey everything the Lord has commanded us. And in Luke's Gospel we saw that the task of mission includes not only preaching and teaching, but also social ministries for the poor and oppressed (Luke 4:18-19). So Luke has a broad picture of the task of witness and mission.

Conclusion

The final scene in Acts sees Paul in Rome, his ultimate destination and the heart of the empire. Here in his own home he was able to receive a wide variety of visitors and 'preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ' (28:31). Paul's witness was bold and 'without hindrance'. With his bold testimony, nothing and no one could prevent the spread of the good news of Jesus Christ.

In declaring the gospel to Jewish leaders (28:17-28) he boldly stated that their rejection of the gospel was a fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy (28:26-7). But, he affirmed, 'God's salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen!' These final verses are open-ended and leave the reader with the impression that the story of Acts is only the beginning. Jesus will continue his work by his Holy Spirit throughout the history of the Church in the

ever-widening expansion of the gospel. However, although mission revolved very largely around the Gentile nations, there has always been a remnant of faithful believing Jews – we should never forget that Paul and the other apostles were themselves Jewish.

Even in the early centuries of Christian history the witness of the gospel spread beyond the confines of 'the civilised world' around the shores of the Mediterranean. Following Paul's dream, it reached across to Spain and also along the North African coast. It followed the trade winds to India, moved north to the wild tribes of central and northern Europe, then east to the Caucasus and central Asia. The great wave of Nestorian mission even reached modern China, Indonesia and Japan as well as planting churches right across central Asia along the Silk Road. And so the history of Christian mission has moved on from generation to generation with ever-widening expansion of the Church. Failures, sin and setbacks have besmirched this great history of the ongoing work of the Lord Jesus by his Spirit, but nothing can stop the growth of the kingdom of God. 'Unhindered', Luke's final word in Acts (in the RSV translation), remains true. Now we in our day are called to fulfil our role as fellow-workers with Christ.