

American Society of Missiology Series, No. 27

**MISSION
IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

An Evangelical Approach

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editors

ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

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Published by Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, U.S.A.

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

Manuscript editing and typesetting by Joan Weber Laflamme.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mission in the New Testament : an evangelical approach / William J. Larkin Jr., Joel F. Williams, editors.
p. cm. — (American Society of Missiology series : no. 27)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 1-57075-169-2 (alk. paper) ISBN-13: 978-1-57075-169-1
1. Missions—Biblical teaching. 2. Missions—Theory—Biblical teaching. 3. Evangelization. I. Larkin, William J. II. Williams, Joel F. III. Series.
BV2073.M55 1998
266—dc21

97-38902
CIP

*Mission in Acts***William J. Larkin Jr.**

If the gospel of Luke manifests the traits of a "mission document" (see chapter 9), in what way does its companion volume Acts fulfill the same role? The third gospel evangelizes the Roman Theophilus by giving him assurance concerning the information he has received, that is, the accomplishment of salvation in the Messiah's divinely promised suffering and resurrection (Luke 1:1-4; 24:46). Acts finishes the task by granting assurance of the second half of the gospel message: salvation applied. It shows that repentance unto the forgiveness of sins has indeed been proclaimed in Jesus' name among all the ethnic groups (Luke 24:47).¹ In the process it addresses three important questions for a biblical theology of mission²: (1) What is the relation between the church and mission? (2) What is the relation between the worldwide mission of the church and the unique role the scriptures assign to Israel in God's saving purposes? (3) What is the relation between the Christian claims to a unique and exclusive salvation and the presence of such claims in non-Christian religions?

¹ According to Jacques Dupont ("The Salvation of the Gentiles and the Theological Significance of Acts," in *The Salvation of the Gentiles: Essays on the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. John R. Keating [New York: Paulist Press, 1979], 13), Luke's purpose for adding a second volume to his gospel was to demonstrate that the evangelization of the Gentiles is the fulfillment of messianic prophecy; cf. Lucien Legrand, *Unity and Plurality: Mission in the Bible*, trans. Robert Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 92.

² These questions are treated as part of the unfinished business of a biblical theology of mission in the following works: Ferdinand Hahn, *Mission in the New Testament*, trans. Frank Clarke, SBT, no. 47 (Naperville, Ill.: Alec R. Allenson, 1965), 170; Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), 344-47.

HISTORICAL SETTING

Among scholars who have dealt with the theological theme of mission in Acts there is unanimity that mission is very important, if not central, to Luke's purpose for the writing of Acts. They are equally unanimous in seeing Luke's use of mission as an edifying theme for the church of his generation.³ Yet all of the scenarios concerning such an edifying occasion involve factors that may also be explained as circumstances for an evangelistic setting. Would not Acts' response to the theo-political rhetoric of Roman cultural supremacy also encourage an inquiring Roman to disregard the disdain of fellow Romans for this eastern cult and to embrace the gospel message concerning the reign of the true Lord of all (Acts 10:36)?⁴ Would not any doubts Gentiles might have about the legitimacy of appropriating salvation blessings with Jewish roots make more sense if they came at the point of evangelism?⁵

The contention that Luke wrote Acts, in general, with an evangelistic purpose and, in particular, with a desire to confirm the truth of salvation's effective application to Gentiles is further supported by the rhetoric of characterization found in Acts. Whether the conversion account is of a group or an individual, of Jewish, mixed, or Gentile ethnicity, each highlights the desired response to the gospel and in that way fulfills an evangelistic purpose. For example, through Old Testament promise (2:21/Joel 2:32), through a description of the crowd's internal and external reactions (Acts 2:37, 41), and through Peter's explanation of the correct response to the salvation offer (2:38-40),

³ Stephen G. Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts*, SNTSMS, no. 23 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 95; Robert J. Karris, "Missionary Communities: A New Paradigm for the Study of Luke-Acts," *CBCQ* 41 (1979): 93; David Tiede, "Acts 1:6-8 and the Theological Claims of Christian Witness," *WW* 1 (1981): 41-51; Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "You Will Be My Witnesses: Aspects of Mission in Acts of the Apostles," *Missiology* 10 (1982): 413-25; Senior and Stuhlmueller, *Biblical Foundations*, 276-77; Darrell L. Bock, "The Use of the Old Testament in Luke-Acts: Christology and Mission," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1990 Seminar Papers*, ed. David J. Lull (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 510; Legrand, *Unity and Plurality*, 92.

⁴ Contrast Tiede, "Acts 1:6-8."

⁵ Contrast Wilson, *Gentiles*, 248; Karris, "Missionary Communities," 80; Bock, "Use of the Old Testament," 510. Note that Bock begins his point with the phrase, "Theophilus as a Gentile either considering or more likely has responded to the Christian faith" needs reassurance he belongs in the movement. Bock does not explain why it is more likely Theophilus is already a Christian.

the Pentecost account serves not simply as a model to edify Christian witnesses but as an evangelistic call to non-Christians, in this case a Jewish group. Paul's conversion experience, reported three times throughout Acts (chaps. 9, 22, 26), includes a commissioning to missionary service. This might lead us to place Paul in the category of missionary model and to regard these accounts as oriented to the church's edification.⁶ However, each succeeding account, while not abandoning the theme of Paul's commissioning, does bring out progressively more and more aspects of the gospel's "salvation applied" content (22:14-16; 26:16-18, cf. 26:22-23). By the time Luke arrives at Acts 26:29, Paul stands as a very explicit model of conversion.⁷

The other conversion experience reported multiple times concerns Cornelius, his household, and friends (10:1-11:18; cf. 10:7, 24; 11:14). Through commands in angelic visions and the Spirit's speaking, God takes the initiative in gathering the Cornelius group and bringing the messenger Peter to them (10:4-6, 22, 32; 11:14). Each successive telling of the vision gives more of the "salvation applied" content, including the values and responses worth emulating. The climax of Peter's speech links the Cornelius group to Acts' evangelistic purpose (10:42-43). The Holy Spirit affirms their saving hearing of the message by coming upon them while Peter is still speaking (10:44). Peter's spirited defense of his witness at Caesarea and his use of it to settle the dispute over circumcision also leave in the reader's mind a positive impression of this audience and its response to the gospel (11:1-18; 15:7-11). When these case studies are combined with a survey of the other conversion and witness accounts, particularly of individual Romans in Acts 16 and during the trial scenes (chaps. 24-26), it becomes increasingly apparent that Luke recounts these events in order to evangelize his reader. What is highlighted in each is not the example of the witness but its reception. In other words, each scene provides more detail about Lydia, the Philippian jailer, Felix, Festus, and Agrippa in their responses to the gospel message than about Paul in his method of witness. Luke, then, evangelizes his audience by giving an account that demonstrates the truth of the "salvation applied" portion of the gospel. Repentance and forgiveness of sins have been proclaimed effectively in Christ's name among all the nations. In the process, Luke also presents a model of mission Christians should learn to emulate.

⁶ William S. Kurz, "Narrative Models for Imitation in Luke-Acts," in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians*, ed. David L. Balch, Everett Ferguson, and Wayne A. Meeks (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 171-89.

⁷ Robert L. Brawley, "Paul in Acts: Aspects of Structure and Characterization," in *Society of Biblical Literature 1988 Seminar Papers*, ed. David J. Lull (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 90-105.

THE COMPLETED MISSION OF THE SON

Luke does not neglect the first half of the gospel: salvation accomplished. It is present in the speeches and summary statements about evangelistic work (for example, 2:23-32; 3:13-26; 4:1, 10-11; 10:36-41; 13:23, 27-37; 17:2-3; 18:5, 28; 24:15-21). However, it recedes somewhat into the background. What is to the fore is *mission*—salvation applied. Nevertheless, it is worth noting some of what Acts repeats and contributes concerning Luke's understanding of salvation accomplished.

The Sender: God, Active Fulfiller of Prophetic Promise

In Acts, as in his gospel, Luke highlights the divine necessity of Jesus' mission according to the scriptures (his whole ministry, 13:23, 33; his death, 2:23; 3:18; 4:25; 13:27-29; 17:3; 26:23; his resurrection, 2:31; 13:34-37). He emphasizes God's active fulfillment of prophetic promises in these events (13:33). The ignorant yet culpable Jewish rejection of the Messiah through their crucifixion of him stands in contrast with God's determinant plan that his servant should suffer (2:23; 3:17-18; 13:27-29). Luke presents Old Testament prophetic proof of messianic resurrection as part of God's plan (2:25-32; 13:34-37) and lays out messianic suffering and resurrection as discussion points for Jews and God-fearers who would search the scriptures (17:3; 26:22-23). These emphases are possible only because of the resurrection, exaltation, and ascension of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Easter revelation from the risen Lord in Luke 24 and the Spirit-filled preaching in Acts 2 and thereafter indeed lifted "the veil of mystery that hung over the teaching of the earthly Jesus concerning his destiny."⁸

What is further unveiled about the relation of the sender, God the Father, and the sent one, Jesus, is how active God was in Jesus' ministry. The Father "raises up" Jesus by bringing him onto the stage of human history, just as in the Old Testament he raised up prophets and kings to do his will (3:26, cf. 3:22/Deut. 18:15; Acts 5:30; 13:23, 33; cf. v. 22/1 Sam. 16:12-13).⁹ Further, Luke characterizes Jesus' arrival

⁸ Richard J. Dillon, "Easter Revelation and Mission Program in Luke 24:46-48," in *Sin, Salvation and the Spirit: Commemorating the Fiftieth Year of the Liturgical Press*, ed. Daniel Durken (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1979), 244.

⁹ Because of the use of terminology normally associated with Jesus' resurrection, it is common for commentators to take Acts 5:30 and 13:33 as references to that event. See, for example, I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 119, 226. Contextual considerations, however, point in the direction of a general reference to Jesus' arrival in human history.

as God sending a "word" concerning the good news of peace and a "word" concerning salvation (Acts 10:36; 13:26). God works through Jesus during his earthly ministry in miraculous power as a foretaste of salvation blessings (2:22; 3:26; 10:38). No longer using the circumlocution of a "divine passive," Luke directly declares with reference to the resurrection that God, in contrast to humankind's death-dealing rejection, decisively and powerfully acts to raise Jesus from the dead (2:24, 32; 3:15; 4:10; 10:40; 13:30, 34, 37). In addition, God will send Jesus at his second coming to restore all things (3:20-21).

The Sent One: Jesus, Lord and Christ

Luke describes Jesus' earthly mission—public ministry, death, resurrection, and his second coming—only within the confines of speech material, which are at the least in brief precis or summary form.¹⁰ Therefore, there is little opportunity to develop much more about Jesus' mission beyond what is present in the third gospel. At the climax of the first speech, Peter speaking at Pentecost, Luke clearly trumpets Jesus' identity as "Lord and Christ" (2:36). By way of a new emphasis, Luke's use of christological titles in Acts presents more variety in describing Jesus' messianic role, especially with reference to his suffering and exaltation. He introduces "servant" (*pais*, 3:13, 26; 4:25, 27, 30), "holy and righteous one" (*hagios kai dikaios*, 3:14), and "prince" (*archēgos*, 3:15; 5:31). Though often obscured by its connection with other titles, Luke's use of "Lord" to designate Jesus as divine is consistently present in Acts (for example, 2:21, 36, 47; 4:33; 5:14; 8:25; 10:36; 11:17; 16:31, 32; 20:19, 21, 24, 28, 32, 35; 28:31). As in the gospel of Luke, the speeches of Acts present Jesus' earthly ministry as one of proclamation and miracle working (2:22; 10:36, 38) and its scope as including a Jewish focus but a universal extent (3:25; 5:31; 10:36; 13:23, 32-33; 26:23). But these components of Jesus' mission are clearly overshadowed by his suffering and resurrection, the heart of his saving work.

THE CURRENT MISSION OF THE TRIUNE GOD

It is common to recognize that Luke's presentation of mission in Acts is less about the "Acts of the Apostles" than about the "Acts of the Holy Spirit," less about the mission of the church than about the mission of God.¹¹ Detailed study reveals how true these characterizations are. For Luke's narrative portrays each person of the Godhead as

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, "The Speeches in Acts—Thirty Years After," in *Reconciliation and Hope*, ed. Robert Banks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 53-68.

¹¹ Wilson, *Gentiles*, 242; Gaventa, "You Will Be My Witnesses," 414-16.

a "sending one," both in commissioning and promoting mission. Each person of the Trinity is also a "sent one," a direct agent of mission, as well as a participant working through human agents. Finally, Luke does not hesitate to emphasize that the results of mission are divine results.

Jesus and the Father and the Spirit as the Sending Ones

Luke does not limit commissioning to the direct report of the words of the risen Lord (Luke 24:46-48; Acts 1:8). In fact, neither of these statements is necessarily formulated as a command. The first is a statement of gospel content as the fulfillment of scripture, which includes the declaration: "Beginning from Jerusalem, you are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:48). The latter, with its future tense formulation ("You shall be my witnesses"), could just as well be a prophetic promise.¹² Later, Peter tells Cornelius that divinely chosen eyewitnesses of the resurrection were commanded by the risen Jesus to warn about coming judgment (Acts 10:42; cf. Luke 24:47). Paul and Barnabas boldly announce to the hostile Jews at Antioch that "the Lord has commanded us" to declare good news to the Gentiles and indeed to the ends of the earth (Acts 13:47; cf. Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). Paul, that "untimely born" apostle, is constantly aware of his divine commission (20:24; 26:16, 18). Indeed, the Father and the Spirit were involved in it (13:2, 4; 22:14-15). Peter, too, is aware of a divine commissioning at a key point during his ministry. God had chosen that through his mouth the Gentiles might hear the word of the gospel and believe (15:7). As Luke recounts the divine commissioning, it is the Spirit who tells Peter to go with the emissaries from Cornelius, not asking any questions for he has sent them (10:19-20). The book of Acts climaxes with Paul's declaration through a "divine passive" that "to the Gentiles this word of salvation is sent" (28:28).

The Triune God is the sending one par excellence, enabling and guiding faithful witnesses through adversity, the crossing of cultural thresholds, and any other impediment to the progress of the gospel to the ends of the earth. The Lord Jesus appears to Ananias and sends him to Paul in order to confirm and empower him in his conversion and calling (9:10, 17). By his angel the Lord leads Peter out of prison, so that he may "go to another place," presumably to continue his witness (12:17). Twice when facing adversity Jesus appears to Paul and encourages him to "keep on witnessing" (18:9; 23:11). God the Father declares the ritual purity distinctions null and void and from this Peter learns that God desires to remove any ethnic barrier to the hearing of the gospel (10:15, 28). God also guides in mission onto a

¹² C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 1:79.

new continent, as Paul and his party interpret the vision of the Macedonians' call for help as "God summoning us to evangelize them" (16:10). Indeed, God the Holy Spirit is most active in guiding the church across cultural and geographical boundaries (8:29, 39; 16:6-7; 19:21).¹³ The Spirit also promotes "unstoppable mission" in the face of impending adversity by preparatory testing of the witness's resolve (20:22-24; 21:4, 11, 13-14). Divine messengers also promote mission through guidance and comfort (8:26; 10:3; 27:23-25) and liberation for further witness (5:19-20; cf. 12:7, 11).

Divine and Human Sent Ones

Luke lets his readers know from the very first verses of Acts that the agents of mission will be both divine and human. Describing the gospel of Luke as the first work about "all that Jesus began to do and to teach" (1:1) creates the expectation that he will continue to be on mission in this second volume. Luke almost immediately introduces human agents (1:2) and often describes a divine-human synergism in the prosecution of mission (for example, 2:4; 4:8, 29-31; 13:9; 19:11). Yet as the narrator unfolds the advance of the church in mission, the Triune God is consistently present, directly applying salvation blessings.

It is the exalted Lord who grants repentance and forgiveness to Israel (5:31) and pours out the Spirit (2:33). Luke describes conversion as the Lord opening an individual's heart (16:14), as the Lord's hand being with his witnesses (11:21), and as the Lord adding daily those being saved (2:47). The "divine passive" occurs in descriptions concerning large numbers of people "being added to the Lord" (5:14; 11:24). Jesus validates the "word of his grace" with miracles (14:3). So directly is he involved with these salvation blessings that the human agent will say to the sick: "Jesus Christ heals you!" (9:43). Moreover, Jesus is there in judgment, as the hand of the Lord is against those who oppose the progress of the mission (13:11).

The apostolic preaching sees the Father in mission as he "commands all men everywhere to repent" (17:30) and "calls" Jew and Gentile to himself (2:39). Salvation blessings come directly from him, whether repentance or the Holy Spirit or the miraculous (3:13; 11:17-18; 15:8; 19:11). Of particular interest to Luke is the Father's involvement in the Gentile mission. Using Old Testament salvific terminology, James tells how God first "visited" to take a people from among the Gentiles (15:14). Luke never tires of celebrating what God had done for the

¹³ On the ambiguity of the reference to "spirit" (Paul's spirit or the Holy Spirit) in Acts 19:21, see William J. Larkin Jr., *Acts*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), 279.

"apostles" on the first missionary journey and beyond, opening a door of faith for the Gentiles (14:27; 15:4, 12; 21:19).

The work of the Holy Spirit is normally presented synergistically as witnesses filled with the Spirit speak the saving message and the response, whether positive or negative, manifests that God is at work (2:4, 37-41; 4:8, 13; 6:5, 10; 7:54, 57). One time, however, through Peter's proclamation, the claim is made that when the gospel is preached the Spirit is bearing direct parallel witness (5:32). Though angels often promote mission through supernatural guidance, there is only one instance when they are directly involved in mission. In that case it is a mission of judgment: Herod's death (12:23).

A final divine agent of mission is "the word of the Lord." Luke characterizes the advance of mission as the word of the Lord growing, especially in the context of human opposition (6:7; 12:24; 13:48-49; 19:20). This image does not simply describe the spread of the Word. It points to the life-giving power of the Word of the gospel. Legrand notes, "The church is animated by this Word living within it. The latter impels it to the fore. It finds its identity and cohesion in this Word, and this continual new beginning to the point that Luke unconsciously interchanges the terms . . . church . . . and . . . the Word."¹⁴

In his commission/promise, Jesus identifies the human agents by the second person ("You are witnesses," Luke 24:48; "You shall be my witnesses," Acts 1:8). The immediate context identifies the audience addressed as the apostles but also those with them who were witnesses of appearances of the risen Christ and therefore eyewitnesses of the resurrection (Luke 24:33; Acts 1:2, 6). In the book of Acts these two groups, but especially the apostles, are featured as on mission, bearing witness to salvation accomplished and applied in the suffering, risen, and exalted Christ (2:32, 37; 3:15; 4:2, 33; 5:20-21, 32, 42; 8:25; 10:42-43; 13:31). Yet this does not circumscribe the circle of witnesses, since Luke's very wording of the gospel message transforms all who embrace that message into witnesses (Luke 24:46-48). For it stands written that the way salvation is to be applied is that repentance and the forgiveness of sins are to be preached in Christ's name among all the nations. After receiving this message, each believer is compelled to ask, How may I be a part of this promise becoming true? The answer is by becoming a witness. Acts bears out this perspective, since the human agents of mission also include evangelists and missionaries (Philip, Acts 8:5, 12, 35, 40; Barnabas and Paul, 13:2; 14:4, 14; but quintessentially Paul, 9:20; 20:25; 28:31). Beyond this, ordinary Christians are on mission, even when scattered by persecution (8:4; 11:20).

Scholars often point to the anomalies that Luke seems to have created concerning the human agents of mission. With reference to their

¹⁴ Legrand, *Unity and Plurality*, 92.

seeming lack of prompt obedience to the risen Lord's last commission/promise, Peter's "conversion" to a direct Gentile mission points up the strongly ingrained Jewish antagonism to the Gentiles, which probably caused the delay in the Gentile mission.¹⁵ Another difficulty concerns Paul's apparent role as a mainly "non-apostolic" missionary, which is anomalous with his apostolic self-understanding in his epistles. It would be wrong to conclude with Hahn that Paul has been transformed into a prototype for the post-apostolic church's missionary activity.¹⁶ Rather, Luke does present Paul's unique position as an apostle who was distinct from the twelve but who indeed received his commission from the risen Lord, albeit from heaven (9:1-19; 22:6-16; 26:12-18).

The Task of Mission

As might be expected in a work that focuses on "salvation applied," Acts presents a constellation of themes which expound the activity of mission. Again, they derive their distinctive emphases from Luke's expression of the risen Lord's commission/promise (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). The preaching of the gospel in the power of the Spirit is the primary activity and character of the missionary task.

Activity

Luke 24:47-48 gives the twin themes of proclamation and witness. Whether presented as "proclamation" (*kērussō*) or "announcement of good news" (*euangelizomai*, cf. *katangellō*) or "witness" (*martureō* and cognates), the missionary's primary activity is to tell "the truth to the world about God's action in Christ."¹⁷ This includes a declaration of the Messiah and the saving events of his mission, especially his death and victorious resurrection (2:32; 3:15; 4:2, 33; 5:32, 42; 10:41; 13:34). Also present is the announcement of proffered salvation blessings, sometimes summed up in the phrase "kingdom of God" (8:12; 20:25; 28:31), sometimes identified as "forgiveness of sins" (10:43; 13:38; 26:18).

Some would see Luke's understanding of salvation blessings as encompassing the total person (*aphesis* as both forgiveness and release

¹⁵ Harold Dollar, *St. Luke's Missiology: A Cross-Cultural Challenge* (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1996), 170. The suggestion of Legrand (*Unity and Plurality*, 99-101) that there was a priority commanded for a Jewish mission in Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria, which explains the "delay," has merit. The solution of Wilson (*Gentiles*, 93) that the problem arises because Acts 1:8 is a Lukan creation seems to rest on the assumption that the apostles would have immediately obeyed the command if it had been given. Dollar and Legrand give sufficient explanations for why they did not.

¹⁶ Hahn, *Mission*, 134; cf. Senior and Stuhlmüller's more nuanced statement in *Biblical Foundations*, 271.

¹⁷ Gaventa, "You Will Be My Witnesses," 417.

or liberation).¹⁸ However, it is spiritual salvation that is Luke's consistent focus throughout Acts. Certainly there are miracles of "release" or healing, and indeed they point to the fullness of final salvation, which Jesus' death and resurrection assure (2:43; 3:1-10; 5:12-16; 9:32-42; 14:3, 8-10; 16:16-19; 19:11-12). Yet it is an "over-realized eschatology" that goes beyond Luke's understanding of the role of the miraculous in mission to insist that Acts teaches a type of "power evangelism" in which signs and wonders and healings are an essential component of the missionary's activity in effective witness.¹⁹ For Luke, salvation may be applied with (9:35, 42; 14:3) or without (11:21; 13:43) extraordinary miraculous manifestations, and miracles may result in positive (8:5-8; 9:35, 42) or negative (14:8-20; 16:16-24) responses on the part of those who observe them. The miraculous is all at God's initiative according to his purposes, whether as a sign of his superior power (19:11-20) or a validation of the verbal witness (14:3) or a glorification of Jesus (3:13) or an evidence of the wholeness of salvation received by faith (3:16). Luke records the miraculous in cultural, especially animistic religious contexts, often where the gospel is entering for the first time (Samaria, 8:5-8; Lystra, 14:8-20; Philippi, 16:16-18; Ephesus, 19:11-20).

The preaching of Acts lacks an equal focus on salvation as liberation in socio-economic circumstances. For Luke, socio-economic liberation is a consequence of conversion. Those who enter the kingdom of God, the church, know its unity in the Spirit, which issues in the proper care of each other in all aspects of life (2:42-47; 4:32-37; 11:27-30; 16:15, 33-34; 20:34-35; 24:17).

When witness is born, not only to the facts of the saving events, but to their saving consequences and to the "prophetic argument" that elucidates the facts (2:32; 3:15; 10:42-43),²⁰ then believers other than the first apostles and eyewitnesses of those saving events may properly qualify as witnesses. Indeed, as Bosch points out, Luke's description of the church's mission activity in terms of witness is crucial for his "paradigm for mission."²¹ For Luke, a call to witness is not a call to accomplish anything but simply to give testimony to what God has already done and is doing (salvation accomplished and applied). Furthermore, since Luke specifies that this can only be undertaken in the power of

¹⁸ See, for example, David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series, no. 16 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 107.

¹⁹ Contrast C. Peter Wagner, *Lighting the World: A New Look at Acts, God's Handbook for World Evangelism* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1995), 2:177-78.

²⁰ Dillon, "Easter Revelation," 254.

²¹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 116.

the Spirit, each succeeding generation of Christians can give witness with the same validity and power.

Two other descriptions of mission activity take into account the non-Christian audience's stance toward the gospel. First, complementing the bright motif of announcing "good news" is the dark theme of warning concerning the judgment to come or the cost of discipleship (*diamarturomai*, 2:40; 10:42; 20:21, 24; cf. 17:30). This is often given in contexts where opposition to the good news has arisen. Second, for Luke, the process of verbal witness also includes reasoning, discussion, dialogue, persuasion (for example, 17:2-4, 17; 18:4; 24:25). For the Jews, it is a matter of reasoning from the scriptures about the saving role of the Messiah in his death and resurrection (17:1-4); for the Gentiles, it may be matters foundational to that saving work: the reality of resurrection, morality, the coming judgment (17:17-18, 30-31; 24:25). The presence of this aspect of witness, together with the diverse examples of missionary preaching each adapted to its audience's level of understanding and needs,²² manifests that Luke sees mission as a witness adaptable to culture with the message taking on different forms in different contexts.²³ This does not mean that Luke is assigning positive value to the audience's religious past so that Paul becomes the "pioneer of enculturation."²⁴ Rather, dialogue is always supportive of a proclamation function, which has at its heart a call to repentance from the ignorance and rebellion against the truth of God that non-Christian religions embody (14:15; 17:23, 29-30). Luke does not simply present the sharing of religious opinions in dialogue. Instead, the book of Acts shows respectful contact with integrity and the "give and take" of constructive and corrective engagement with non-Christian religions or world views, in which Christian witnesses reason in order to persuade others that their proclamation is true and should be embraced.²⁵

²² Contrast, for example, the proof from the Old Testament scriptures approach to Jews and God-fearers in chapters 2, 10, 13 with the argument from creation addressed to pagan Gentiles in chapters 14, 17.

²³ Gaventa, "You Will Be My Witnesses," 422.

²⁴ Contrast Legrand, *Unity and Plurality*, 111. Nor is this an indication of a liberal and magnanimous assessment of Gentiles pre-Christian religiosity. Contrast Wilson, *Gentiles*, 217.

²⁵ William J. Larkin Jr., "The Contribution of the Gospels and Acts to a Biblical Theology of Religions," in *Christianity and the Religions: A Biblical Theology of World Religions*, ed. Edward Rommen and Harold Netland, EMS Series, no. 2 (Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey, 1995), 84-87; Cf. I. Howard Marshall, "Dialogue with Non-Christians in the New Testament," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 16 (1992): 28-47.

Character

It is not an overstatement to say, "The intimate linking of pneumatology and mission is Luke's distinctive contribution to the early church's missionary paradigm."²⁶ This occurs not only as the risen Lord consistently makes the coming of the Spirit a necessary precondition for the engagement in mission (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4), but it is also explicit (1:8) or implied (Luke 24:47) in the commission/promise.

Luke highlights three aspects of the role of the Holy Spirit in mission: initiator, guide, and empowerer. The discussion of the divine sender in mission has dealt with the first two roles. With reference to empowerment, Acts is the occasion for much interpretational debate over the purpose of the Spirit's coming at Pentecost. Is it for empowerment for witness only?²⁷ Is it for the bestowal of salvation blessings indiscriminately now that Jesus is ascended to God's right hand? Is it some combination of the two?²⁸ Luke consistently ties together conversion, baptism, and the coming of the Spirit (Acts 2:38; 9:17-18; 10:44-48; 19:2-6). The separation of conversion and the Spirit's coming (8:12, 15-18; 9:6, 17-19; 19:2-6) does not point to a necessary second experience of empowerment for witness. The accounts in Acts have no set pattern (cf. 8:12, 15-18 and 10:44-48) and manifest different purposes. Paul, called to faith directly from heaven without human agency, needs Ananias to address him (9:1-19). Ethnically prejudiced believers (Jews) may need to know that regeneration has actually happened to the "out group" (Samaritans, 8:4-17). Believers with partial gospel understanding (disciples of John the Baptist knowing only his baptism) need to understand the Holy Spirit has actually come (19:1-7). The coming of the Spirit, according to Luke, was an all-embracing gift of salvation. Special empowerment for witness, often described as "being filled with the Spirit," is a part of the blessings of salvation and Luke sees it as normative for the church (2:4; 4:8, 31; 6:3, 10; 7:55; 13:9). What he points out about the empowerment is its

²⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 114.

²⁷ This is the main Pentecostal and charismatic view. See, for example, Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendricksen, 1984), 63-68.

²⁸ Max Turner ("Empowerment for Mission"? Pneumatology of Luke-Acts: An Appreciation and Critique of James B. Shelton's *Mighty in Word and Deed*," *Vox Evangelica* 24 [1994]: 113) gives a helpful taxonomy of the options: (1) a charismatic gift exclusively for empowerment for mission, (2) a charismatic gift to mature the Christian, edify the church, as well as empower for mission, (3) an all-embracing gift of salvation and special empowerment for mission, both are normative for the church, (4) primarily the gift of salvation with special empowering as a more occasional and specific charisma within the more general saving gift.

universality in the church. Regardless of gender, age, or socio-economic status, those who call upon the name of the Lord for salvation can have, in fulfillment of Joel 2, the Spirit poured out on them to speak God's message (Acts 2:16-21). The empowerment manifests itself in effectiveness in witness, which brings positive results (2:37-41), though not always. God can be so at work through Stephen, who is full of the Spirit, that his hearers are not able to counter his wisdom (6:5, 10). Yet instead of embracing the message they eliminate the messenger (7:54, 57).

The witness context is often a context of opposition and adversity (4:1-7, 29; 9:23-25; 13:45; 14:2; 19:9). Indeed, the gospel's call to repentance assumes potential opposition. Hence, Luke often describes the manifestation of the power of the Holy Spirit in witness as a boldness (4:13, 29, 31; 9:27, 28; 13:46; 14:3; 19:8; 28:31). Heedless of the consequences, the witness speaks with candor the plain and whole truth of the gospel (20:20-21, 26-27).

The Scope of Mission

For Luke, the gospel's most crucial component for his evangelistic purpose is its scope. He writes Acts to prove to Theophilus that the salvation the gospel offers is really for him. No wonder Hahn calls it Luke's "dominating theme" and Dupont traces through what Wilson calls programmatic texts about the Gentile mission and consistently finds them to be the fulfillment of messianic prophecy (1:8; 2:39; 3:25-26; 13:46-47; 15:14-17; 18:6; 28:25-28).²⁹ From Jesus' final promise (1:8), which sets the structure for Acts, to the last words of Paul (28:25-28), the momentum for mission is consistently directed outward toward all nations (for example, 10:1-11:18; 13:2-3; 14:27; 16:9-10). Even when the church deals with internal matters, often the issue is the Gentile mission and its effects on its Jewish-Christian component (11:1-18; 15:1-35; 21:17-26).

Luke's presentation of the universal scope of the mission, however, also raises questions about Luke's views concerning the finality of Jewish rejection and its relation to the Gentile mission and the proper treatment of Judaism in any generation. Some say that the rejection is final and that Luke sees no continuing mission to the Jews.³⁰ Others argue that Luke declares the mission a success according to God's purposes and views the church of Jewish remnant and Gentiles according

²⁹ Hahn, *Mission*, 136; Wilson, *Gentiles*, chap. 9; Dupont, "Salvation of the Gentiles," 33.

³⁰ See, for example, Joseph B. Tyson, "The Problem of Jewish Rejection in Acts," in *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People: Eight Critical Perspectives*, ed. Joseph B. Tyson (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 137.

to a "restoration-exclusion" model.³¹ Others would say that Luke in a qualified way does see a Jewish final rejection by distinguishing between the official or corporate Jewish rejection of the gospel and the continuing possibility of reception of the good news by individual Jews.³² Given the way Luke presents Paul, after Jewish rejection, repeatedly beginning his witness in a new place with the Jews, and given the open-ended nature of Luke's description of Paul's stance at the very last rejection (28:30, "receiving all who came to him"), interpreters should probably conclude that, for Luke, though the rejection of Jewish "officialdom" is final, the mission to Jews is not. This "rejection" is not the trigger for the Gentile mission. Rather, Luke seems to see them as two parallel missions in fulfilling the design of God's saving purposes to apply salvation to all the nations.³³

With reference to the scope of mission, Acts also addresses the issue of religious pluralism. As previously noted, Acts presents the cultural adaptability of the Christian witness through respectful contact, yet with integrity, and through constructive and corrective engagement with non-Christian religions (14:8-20; 17:16-31; 19:23-40).³⁴ Luke's assessment of non-Christian religions, however, is negative. God has left a witness to humans in every culture that a beneficent creator God exists, one upon whom humans are dependent for their physical life (14:15-17; 17:24-28). Yet, the beliefs and practices of non-Christian religions reveal that they are the product of blind ignorance (17:23, 27) and foolish rebellion (14:14-15; 17:25-29). As Acts assesses it, "religion represents a rebellious response to God whose glory is arrayed before them in nature, history and conscience."³⁵ Humans are culpable for this wrong response to God's witness and need to repent now (14:16-17; 17:30). It should also be noted that Luke links, though tangentially, the demonic and non-Christian religions (26:18; cf. 8:7, 9-13; 13:6-12; 16:16-18; 19:13-16). Whether by coopting the Spirit's power (8:18-20; 19:13-16), discrediting the Christian witness (16:16-

³¹ See, for example, Jacob Jervell, "The Divided People of God: The Restoration of Israel and Salvation for the Gentiles," in *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 41-74.

³² John B. Polhill, *Acts*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 544-45; cf. David P. Moessner, "Paul in Acts: Preacher of Eschatological Repentance to Israel," *NTS* 34 (1988): 101-3.

³³ In support of this point, note the past tense of Acts 28:28: "this salvation has been sent to the Gentiles."

³⁴ As Lucien Legrand ("The Unknown God of Athens: Acts 17 and the Religion of the Gentiles," *Indian Journal of Theology* 30 [1981]: 166) observes, Acts avoids two extremes: initial direct critical confrontation with the particulars of a religion, and treating the religion as fulfilled in Christianity.

³⁵ Mark Shaw, "Is There Salvation outside the Christian Faith?" *East Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* 2, no. 2 (1983): 55.

17), or promoting direct opposition (13:8, 10; 16:19-22; 19:23-27), the demonically inspired and the practitioners of non-Christian religions resist the advance of the gospel.

The Results of Mission

Luke portrays the advance of the church's mission both in terms of quantitative and qualitative results. There is quantitative response, growth in numbers, which is consistently noted throughout Acts (2:41, 47; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1, 7; 9:31; 13:43; 14:1; 17:4, 12; 18:10; 19:26; 21:20). Though the response is never 100 percent, there is a continuing positive response, so that what Luke says of the Jerusalem church in the early days, he deems a true description of the church in any day: "and the Lord was adding to their number daily, those who were being saved" (2:47).

Equally important was the qualitative growth. Not only was there a solid response to the gospel of faith and endurance (2:47; 4:4; 8:12; 9:42; 14:27; 16:34; 18:8; cf. 11:23; 13:43; 14:23), but there was also a fruitfulness in the lives of the repentant leading to holiness (11:18; 19:18-19; 26:20), joy (8:8, 39; 13:48; 16:34), unity (2:46; 4:24, 32; 5:12), and mutual care (2:42-47; 4:32-37; 11:27-30; 16:15, 33-34). As is often pointed out, though conversion may be personal, a convert is enfolded into the Christian community, which results in consequences that are corporate as well.³⁶

Salvation History Framework

Luke sets salvation accomplished and applied within a "promise and fulfillment" salvation history framework as he introduces the gospel message with the simple phrase: "Thus it is written" (Luke 24:46). Proof from prophecy that substantiates the Gentile mission is such a widespread phenomena in Acts that Luke's readers can hardly miss the point. This offer of salvation to them is according to God's plan (Acts 2:16; 3:25; 13:47; 15:17; cf. also the allusions at 1:8; 2:39; 10:34; 15:14; 26:17; 28:28).³⁷

If the salvation history framework can bring assurance concerning the desire of God for the salvation of people from all nations by linking past and present, it can bring a sense of urgency by linking the present time of proclamation to the future. Sometimes the urgency and decisiveness of the present moment of proclamation spring from

³⁶ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 117.

³⁷ Wilson, *Gentiles*, 243; cf. Bock's ("Use of the Old Testament," 506-9) analysis of the way Christology is made the foundation for mission in the "proof from prophecy" portions.

the good news that God is now pouring out his Spirit on all flesh in this time of refreshing (2:17; 3:20). Most often, the future end of history is portrayed as a time of reckoning, the last judgment. This message is especially addressed to Gentiles, whom God has let go their own way and overlooked their past sinful ignorance (14:16; 17:30). Now, however, the risen Christ has commanded his eyewitnesses to warn others about this coming judgment and to call those in all cultures to repent (10:42). In fact, his resurrection is the proof that he will return as judge (17:31). Thus, the missionary will speak to the resistant pagan of "sin, righteousness, and coming judgment" in the hope that fear might issue in faith and repentance (24:25).

Finally, for the Christian on mission the salvation history framework gives significance to a life of witness. For scripture prophesied this mission in the same way that it foretold the Messiah's death and resurrection (Luke 24:44-47). Thus, a person on mission is "making history," as the immediate context of Acts 1:8 also implies (1:6-7).

CONCLUSION

In writing Acts Luke evangelizes Roman Theophilus concerning the truth of the "salvation applied" portion of his gospel message. In the process of demonstrating that the proclamation of repentance and forgiveness in Jesus' name among all the nations is according to God's prophetic plan and has indeed occurred, Luke also teaches about God's desires for the church concerning mission. Luke does not neglect the "salvation accomplished" portion of the gospel: the Messiah must suffer and rise from the dead. However, the main focus is on "salvation applied"—the church in mission taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. Luke constantly reminds us that this is the mission of the Triune God. Not only does he send and guide his missionaries (apostles, witnesses to the resurrection, evangelists, believers), but he is directly calling people to himself as his word grows and the number of his people increases. The activity of mission is bold proclamation and witness by the power of the Spirit to salvation accomplished and offered. The scope of mission will take the witnesses to all nations. This includes the Jews and adherents of non-Christian religions. The Jewish mission continues. Non-Christian religions evidence sinful humanity's blind ignorance and foolish rebellion. The result of mission will be the quantitative increase of the people of God manifesting a quality of life by the power of the Spirit, a life in community, a life of faith, endurance, joy, unity, and mutual care. Since all this is according to God's plan, those who hear the message must embrace it urgently, since it is decisive for their eternal destiny, and those who proclaim it know they are engaged in the most significant work in history.

What is the application of Luke's teaching on mission in Acts to today? Many of the distinctive features of his teaching are relevant to the prosecution of witness in the present time: the necessary empowerment with the Spirit, the appropriate qualities of a witness, the importance of boldness in the midst of adversity, and the contextualized preaching of the gospel to non-Christian philosophies and religions. One theme particularly stands out: the theocentric nature of the mission in its commissioning, agency, and results. Luke would remind us when our attention is so focused on human stratagems for what we are going to do for God in mission, that, first to last, Christian mission is the mission of God. God calls and sends his servants on mission. He himself is on mission, opening individual hearts and the door of faith to various ethnic groups. If Luke can help the late-twentieth-century church to recapture that understanding, then he will have enabled the church to engage in mission authentically. In this way the truth will once again be demonstrated that it is "in Christ's name," by his power, that repentance and forgiveness of sins are proclaimed and salvation is effectively applied to all the nations.