

CHURCH GROWTH AND EVANGELISM IN THE BOOK OF ACTS

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With the exception of M. Green's *Evangelism in the Early Church*,¹ the subjects of evangelism and church growth in the Book of Acts have been unaccountably neglected in recent years. Church growth writers refer to Acts rather consistently to support their theology and practice, but no detailed work has come from the movement.² Most evangelistic works approach Acts from a theological perspective, building a biblical apologia for the mandate of evangelism: "Evangelism. . . must find [its] orientation in the Bible. A return to the principles and practices unfolded in the Book of Acts is the only reliable answer."³

It would appear that evangelism in Acts has been viewed as one of several facets to be studied. In other words, evangelism and church growth are only two out of many areas which comprise the sum total of the book. Such a perspective, however, seems to ignore the primary motivation for the writing of the book. Luke the theologian is first Luke the evangelist.

¹ See M. Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970). This book covers the period from the ascension of Christ to the middle of the 3rd century. Its focus on the early church in Acts in particular is exhaustive. Green's use of both primary and secondary sources makes this book must reading for any scholar of evangelism.

² It cannot be denied that church growth writers focus on Acts more than any other book of the Bible. To my knowledge, however, no church growth book with a complete focus on Acts has been written. For an example of one church growth writer's use of Acts, see C. P. Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1987) 47-49.

³ G. W. Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 25. Peters focuses on Acts as much as any church growth writers although he does not identify himself with the "Fuller" Church Growth Movement.

The value of redaction criticism is that it presents Luke as an author who intentionally arranged his material in a precise order to communicate a specific message, i.e., the evangelistic mandate. German scholars such as M. Debelius, H. Conzelmann, and E. Haenchen first applied redaction criticism to Acts in the 1950s. These men, unfortunately, approached the Bible with a skepticism that doubted the accuracy of parts of Luke's historical narrative. The author, they say sacrificed historical truthfulness for the sake of theological intent. We must not, however, set accuracy in opposition to intent:

Luke is both historian and theologian. . . . The best term to describe him is "evangelist," a term which, we believe, includes both of the others. . . . As a theologian Luke was concerned that his message about Jesus and the early church should be based upon reliable history. . . .⁴

Luke is first concerned to communicate the message of salvation. Evangelism and the resulting church growth are a priori concerns. Salvation can be found in no one other than Jesus (4:12); salvation is offered to everyone--the Spirit of God is poured out on $\pi\acute{\alpha}\sigma\alpha \sigma\acute{\alpha}\rho\chi\iota$, "all Hesh" (2:17); and salvation requires a response to Christ of repentance/faith (Acts 2:38). Whereas the OT depicts "evangelism" as people coming to God, the Lucan perspective demonstrates that God's people (and indeed God himself) will seek and will go to the people. J. Blauw's central thesis in *The Missionary Nature of the Church* is that "a centripetal missionary consciousness" becomes in Acts a "centrifugal missionary activity. . . the great turning point is the Resurrection, after which Jesus gives his people a universal commission to go and disciple the nations."⁵

Indeed Luke begins his narrative with an early mention of the ascension. The apostles are found gazing skyward by two angels (lit. "two men dressed in white," 9:11) who rebuke the men from Galilee for focusing their attention on the empty skies that moments earlier had framed the ascending Christ. Now, the angels imply, the apostle's mission is "earthward," to proclaim this Savior to the world, to go to the world rather than to expect the world to come to them. Such is the essence of the entire book: outward-moving evangelism that results in the growth of the church.

4 See I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980) 18-19.

5 J. Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 34, 54, 66, 83-84.

The Terms Defined

At this point it is necessary to define the two words used to describe the central activity of Acts: evangelism and church growth. Evangelism in Acts is the communication of the good news of Jesus Christ through verbal proclamation and lifestyle witness, with the intent of leading a person or group to salvation in Christ. It is also vitally interested in the postconversion activity commonly known as discipleship.⁶ Church growth is the building of the church primarily through evangelism. While church growth writers of our era speak of other kinds of growth (e.g., transfer growth and biological growth), Luke is concerned with the growth of the church that comes from the making of new disciples.⁷

The term "mission" is not used here to describe the thesis of Acts since the word often refers to any ministry done for others in the name of Christ. Evangelism and the resulting church growth, in that sense, would be a subactivity of the total mission of the early church. It is upon that arena of evangelism and church growth that Luke would have us focus.

The Normative Versus the Exception

Much debate has transpired in recent years over certain events in the Book of Acts. Is the tongues-speaking miracle of Pentecost an event for Christians to expect today? Should the "signs and wonders" prevalent in Acts accompany our modern-day evangelistic efforts? Is Christian initiation a two-stage event, with conversion and water baptism followed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit?⁸ Rather than elucidate the arguments for and against such phenomena as being normative for today, it is of greater value to focus on the areas of *agreement* which were integral to the evangelism and church growth of the early church. These principles are areas that virtually all evangelicals would agree are normative for today. Indeed, contemporary evangelism and church

⁶ See Wagner, *Strategies for Church Growth*, 49-55, for a good discussion on church growth and discipleship.

⁷ For a thorough discussion of the definition of church growth and its relationship to evangelism, see C. P. Wagner, "Evangelism and the Church Growth Movement," *Evangelism in the Twenty-First Century* (ed. by T. S. Rainer; Wheaton, IL: Shaw, 1989).

⁸ The best contemporary commentary on Acts, John Stott, *The Spirit, The Church and the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), addresses most of the issues on the normative and non-normative events in Acts. Stott's commentary is balanced yet uncompromising in its faithfulness to the text.

growth would be less than complete without these basic precepts established by the early church.

The Principle of Prayer

Though church growth writers undoubtedly recognize that prayer is indispensable to the growth of the church, many of the contemporary writings fail to give prayer the prominent place it deserves.⁹ Luke would not have us miss the priority of prayer in the growth and expansion of the early church. J. Stott comments that following Jesus' ascension, the prayers of the disciples had two characteristics which "are two essentials of true prayer, namely that they persevered, and were of one mind."¹⁰

The principle of unified prayer, or prayer with one mind and purpose, is a thread that runs throughout Acts. Luke's initial description of the 120 (1:15) shows that they followed Christ's command to wait for the Holy Spirit by obediently praying as a group with one mind. The power of "prayer in agreement" again is established when the Sanhedrin threatened the followers with punitive action if they continued to speak about the "name" (4:18). The impulse to share was too great, however, and a meeting of unified prayer sent the early church if to new levels of boldness (4:31). "Having been bold in witness, they were equally bold in prayer."¹¹

Again, when Herod plots to destroy the evangelistic impetus through persecution, the church unites in prayer (12:5):

Here then were two communities, the world and the church, arranged against one another, each wielding an appropriate weapon. On the one side was the authority of Herod, the power of the sword and the security of the prison. On the other side, the church turned to prayer, which is the only power which the powerless possess.¹²

The prayers of the "powerless" defeat all the weapons of the world. Peter is rescued from prison by an angel, and the gospel continues to spread (11:11). Herod is struck down by the Lord and dies a gruesome death (11:23). The oppressing action against the church is permitted; only for a brief season. The gospel, because of the power of prayer, spreads unhindered.

⁹ Notable exceptions to this statement must be recognized. For a concise summary of the issue see E. C. Lyrene, Jr., "Prayer and Evangelism," *Evangelism in the Twenty-First Century* (ed. by T. S. Rainer; Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1989), 89-102.

¹⁰ Stott, 52.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹² *Ibid.*

The Principle of Spiritual Warfare

Prayer was the primary weapon of the early church because the followers knew their battle was "not against flesh and blood but. . . against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."¹³ Luke would have his readers open their spiritual eyes to see the ongoing conflicts between the Holy Spirit and Satan. One such confrontation is stated explicitly in 5:3 when Peter accuses Ananias: "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?" Stott finds the symbolism of the dragon's three allies in Revelation to correspond to Satan's three weapons in the first chapters of Acts: persecution, moral compromise, and distraction.¹⁴

Satan first attempts to destroy the church with persecution by means of the Sanhedrin when the apostles are arrested, jailed, tried, flogged, and forbidden to preach (4:1-22 and 5:17-42).¹⁵ The second ploy of the devil is to ruin the Christian fellowship with the moral compromise of Ananias and Sapphira. Satan is explicitly identified as the source of the evil in this passage. The third weapon of Satan in Acts is the subtle ploy of distraction. He attempts to divert the apostles from their calling of prayer and preaching by creating a problem of social administration (6:1-7). At each point when Satan attacks and the church overcomes, a new wave of revival floods the church: "So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly. . ." (6:7).

Why is Luke concerned with his readers' understanding the principles of spiritual warfare? The evangelist would have us understand that such battle is normative for today, and must be fought and won in order for God's word to spread and for disciples to increase in number. Stott states the case well:

Now I claim no very close or intimate familiarity with the devil. But I am persuaded that he exists, and that he is utterly unscrupulous. Something else I have learned about him is that he is peculiarly lacking in imagination. Over the years he has changed neither his strategy, nor his tactics, nor his weapons: he is still in the same old rut. So a study of his campaign against the early church should alert us to his probable strategy today. If we are taken by surprise, we shall have no excuse.¹⁶

¹³ Eph 6:12.

¹⁴ See Stott, 89-90, for a full discussion of this theme.

¹⁵ Ibid., 89.

¹⁶ Ibid., 105.

The Principle of God's Sovereignty

Despite the abundance of conflicts and setbacks to the early church, Luke communicates clearly that God is the final victor. The reader indeed anticipates each battle lost by the early church eventually to be reversed by the followers of the Way. God is in total control.

The martyrdom of Stephen (7:54-60) does not reduce the church to a level of frightened ineffectiveness. To the contrary, the persecution that broke out against the disciples scattered the church throughout Judea and Samaria. The defeated church then became the proclaiming church as the dispersion spread the gospel to new areas. God in his sovereignty turned defeat into a larger victory (8:4).

M. Green is correct in his assessment that Stephen's death led to the beginning of a massive lay movement which spread the gospel.¹⁷ The "amateur missionaries," those evicted from Jerusalem following Stephen's martyrdom, eventually became the leaders who changed the face of the movement by preaching to the Greeks and initiating the Gentile mission at Antioch.¹⁸

If the murder of Stephen was an external factor that led to the growth of the church, Luke would have us note that numerous internal problems were also turned into divine victories. One such example is the Ananias and Sapphira incident of Acts 5. In his typical pattern of conflict/surprise/victory, Luke relates what seems to be an overwhelming internal problem: deceit within the fellowship.¹⁹ The surprise factor; is the death of the two perpetrators at the hands of God. The victory is noted in a rapid-fire sequence of events: all who heard about the incident were seized with fear (5:11); the "outside world" highly regarded the church (5:11); and "more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number" (5:14).

Acts, in one perspective, is a narrative of the sovereign work of God in the midst of external and internal forces that would thwart any "normal" movement. Luke's message is clear. Though we are the vehicles to communicate the gospel, our strength and power is from God. Even in the throes of seemingly insurmountable opposition, God's work will not be deterred. The hero of the second portion of Acts, the

¹⁷ See Green, 172-73. Green contrasts the apostles as the "professional" ministers, to the men evicted from Jerusalem as the "amateur" missionaries. The analogy, of course, is to our lay/clergy labeling of today.

¹⁸ Green, 173.

¹⁹ See Stott, 110, especially for his comment that Peter here assumes the deity of the Holy Spirit.

apostle Paul, would relate that same message to the church at Rome: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."²⁰

Principle of Strategy

While the sovereignty of God provides us with the comfort that an all-knowing, all-powerful God is in control, Luke still emphasizes the vital necessity of human cooperation. With specific instructions from the Savior, the apostles established a strategy of evangelism to reach Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth (1:8). Such evangelistic strategy should not be set in opposition to a sovereign God, but seen as a mandated action to fulfill the perfect purpose of God. An evangelism that requires no work of the believers usually results in few, if any, new believers.

The ministry of Paul provides a clear example of an evangelistic strategy that he followed with only few exceptions. In an urban area, the apostle would typically go first to the synagogue where he proclaimed the gospel to Jews and God-fearers. After his time at the synagogue, Paul would then take his message to other Gentiles (i.e., other than the God-fearers), obediently following the command to take the gospel first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles. Paul was not haphazard in his strategy in proclaiming the gospel. The reader can often predict the next move of the apostle because he remains so deliberately faithful to his plans.

In Athens, for example (17:16-34), Paul goes to the synagogue to "reason" through the gospel (17:17).²¹ Though the synagogue would be his first stop, he would then go to the *agora* to proclaim the message day by day to whomever "happened to be there" (17:17). The *agora* provided an area ripe for the gospel because it was both the "market-place and centre of public life."²² Finally, Paul debated with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers at the Areopagus. Thus the apostle delivered the good news to the Jews, to the common person "on the streets," and to the intellectual powers of the area. In each situation, he strategically communicated the gospel on a level that would be best received by the hearers.²³

²⁰ Rom 8:28.

²¹ In Acts 17, the "reasoning" takes place at the synagogue in Thessalonica as well as in Athens.

²² See Stott, 280-81, for a description of the *agora*.

²³ Stott argues that a different methodology must accompany each different target group for evangelism. The message remains constant, but the methodology adapts to the situation. *Ibid.*, 281.

More than one scholar has noted that Paul had a specific strategy for urban evangelism. Stott notes that the apostle would move to a neutral site after first proclaiming the gospel in the Jewish synagogue. Such a strategy may often be normative for today. "If religious people can be reached in religious buildings, secular people have to be reached in secular buildings."²⁴

Paul's strategy not only included a definitive place and plan, but also an extended period for ministry. As a church planter, the apostle's tenure at each location was significant. The ministry at Corinth would have lasted at least two years, while Paul's time at Ephesus reached three years.²⁵ Church growth writers understand the importance of leadership longevity, citing pastoral tenure as one of the highest correlative factors in growing churches.²⁶ If a church planter would stay two or three years, how long then should pastoral leaders commit themselves to a local church? The principles of leadership longevity and tenacity in Acts are certainly normative for our churches today.

The Principle of Indigenization

R. Allen wrote two books early in this century that elucidated principles of indigenization which are still discussed today. His two main books, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* and *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the Causes Which Hinder It*, focused on the theme that Paul founded churches rather than missions. In little more than ten years St. Paul established the Church in four provinces of the Empire, Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia. Before A.D. 47 there were no churches in these provinces; in A.D. 57 St. Paul could speak as if his work there was done.²⁷

Allen's primary thesis, that Paul founded churches, is well supported by Luke's record of the apostle's missionary journeys in Acts. He did not, however, leave them without resources upon which they could build their churches. When Barnabas and Paul returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, for example, the believers were encouraged "to

²⁴ Ibid., 312.

²⁵ See *ibid.*, 313-14 for a discussion of Paul's tenure.

²⁶ See J. N. Vaughan, "Trends among the World's Twenty Largest Churches," *Church Growth: State of the Art* (ed. by C. P. Wagner; Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1986), especially 131, where Vaughan states that average tenure among pastors of the world's fastest-growing churches is 20 years, and none of the pastorates have been less than ten years.

²⁷ R. Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* (6th ed; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 3.

remain true to the faith" (14:22). "The faith" must have been some basic apostolic doctrine that formed much of our NT.²⁸

Paul and Barnabas also left the indigenous churches with leadership that would provide the direction after the apostles departed. Though the forms of church government vary in the NT, at several of the churches Paul and Barnabas appointed elders to continue their leadership roles. The elders were within the church ("in each church," 14:23), so the indigenization policy was complete.

While the evangelistic "policy" of Paul included doctrinal teaching and leadership appointment, the apostle ultimately left the churches under the divine care of the Holy Spirit. Seeking God's direction, "with prayer and fasting, [he] committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust" (14:23).

Such was the indigenization process of the early church. Doctrinal guidelines and local leadership were provided, but the true step of faith came when the church founders could walk away and leave the church in the care of God. From a human perspective such a venture is risky. It would seem that a new church left to fend for itself would be an easy prey for doctrinal aberration, church schisms, outside heresies, and moral failures. But God, throughout the history of the church age, has proved his faithfulness. R. Allen's thesis, then, is largely true. Christ was able, indeed desiring, to keep that which had been committed to him. The indigenous churches became the growing, evangelistic churches.

The Principle of the Open Gospel

The apostles most likely were unaware of the radical implications of Jesus' command to be witnesses "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). The gospel would spread unhindered by the wiles of Satan, the obstacles of geography, or the prejudices against race. But the church would not always accept the unstoppable momentum of the gospel with ease.

Philip took the bold step of preaching to the Samaritans. The hostility between the Jews and Samaritans had existed for hundreds of years when the gospel came to Samaria. Luke seems to relish his recall of this major turning point: Philip's first going to Samaria, then evangelizing the Ethiopian eunuch (8:1-40). The gospel was breaking down the barriers of both geography and race. The kingdom was larger than Israel.

²⁸ See Stott, 235-36.

Gentiles began to be accepted and welcomed into the church following the conversion of Cornelius (10:1-46). After initial objections, the Jewish church "praised God, saying, 'So then, God has even granted the Gentiles repentance unto life'" (11:18). Then the Gentile mission gathered momentum when the scattered church began spreading the gospel to Greeks (11:20).

The tranquillity, if not euphoria, of the church was greatly disturbed by a new policy that seemed to be developing among the Gentile converts. They were becoming believers without becoming Jews. They became a part of the Messianic community while retaining their own cultural and national identity. Objections were raised, particularly by the Judaizers: "Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved" (15:1).

The Jerusalem Council became a pivotal point in the history of the early church. The assembly concluded that the Gentiles would be accepted as bona fide members of the Christian community. Neither circumcision nor adaptation to the Jewish community would be a requisite. Green pleads that Christians today discover that same attitude toward the unbelieving world. "Not to remove the scandal of the gospel, but go to present their message in terms acceptable to their hearers, that the real scandal of the gospel could be perceived and its challenge faced."²⁹

How many potential converts do we lose today because we make the gospel something in addition to the grace of Jesus Christ? Is our gospel open today, or does it carry the baggage of cultural expectations, idolatry of tradition, or denominational conversion? Green catches the spirit of the post-Jerusalem Council early church, a church that overcame the barriers of cultural conversion: "It would be good to be able to feel confident that the churches of our own day were. . . displaying anything like the same courage, singleness of aim, Christocentredness and adaptability as those men and women of the first Christian century."³⁰

Conclusion

In a world that is becoming increasingly more complex, secular-minded, and technologically advanced, Christians of our era should be encouraged that many of the evangelistic principles of the early church in Acts are normative for our churches today. The failure of many churches to grow today is often a failure to realize and to practice these

²⁹ Green, 142.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 143.

basic principles. A recent survey of several Southern Baptist churches indicated that none of the churches had an established prayer ministry.³¹ In response to the question, "Why not?" one pastor responded that "We don't have to have a prayer ministry to pray at our church." By that same logic Sunday school would not be necessary since most church members read the Bible.

Churches today must place a priority on prayer which will be evident in their programs, budget, and calendar. The early church viewed prayer as the very life source of everything they did. Prayer was not the leader in a series of programs; it was the foundation upon which all other ministry was built.

Prayer was vitally important because the believers in Acts realized that their battles were to be fought in the spiritual realm. Time after time the early disciples are caught in "hopeless" situations. Luke would have us see these dire situations so that the early church victories would be clearly deemed miraculous, beyond the boundaries of the natural realm.

We learn too from Acts that we can pursue the evangelistic mandate while resting in the assurance that a sovereign God is in total control. Hopelessness and helplessness are not options for Christians who serve a God who will work his purpose for his glory. Yet the secure reign of God should not be set in opposition to our purposefully and strategically working as his collaborators. Luke writes Acts in rapid-fire sequences, demonstrating that believers were persistently active in prayer, evangelism, and service. The growth of the early church was a direct consequence of the obedient collaborating of the Christians.

Finally, the history of the early church demonstrates that the gospel is a message for all the people, and that the church is an institution best left in the hands of its people. Colonialistic and paternalistic attitudes are contrary to the spirit of Acts.

How then can the principles of evangelism and church growth in Acts be applied to our churches today? Perhaps the points below could be a starting point for discussion.

1. Begin a prayer ministry which demonstrates commitments of time, money, and people resources to the priority of prayer.
2. Lead the church to a commitment to give evangelism priority. Evangelism was a way of life for the early Christian. Most Christians today have to refocus their efforts on evangelism to demonstrate that priority.

³¹ This survey was conducted by me at the beginning of my ministry at Azalea Baptist Church in St. Petersburg, FL, in order to obtain information regarding a prayer ministry for our church. Approximately 30 churches were included in the survey.

3. Plan the outreach and evangelism of the church thoughtfully. The churches and evangelists in Acts had a well-planned evangelistic and missionary strategy. We have no excuse today to be ill-equipped, ill-informed, and unprepared in our evangelistic endeavors.
4. Start new churches. The foundational evangelistic strategy of the early church is still our best approach. And the mother church should, as soon as possible, leave the new church to the sole care and guidance of God.

In the churches in Acts, we see an evangelistic zeal and endeavor to bring the community outside the church to salvation in Jesus Christ. We cannot help but discern that evangelism was the church's highest priority. Because evangelism was the final command issued by the risen Lord, it became the very source of life for the churches in Acts. Consequently, "The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved." It could happen again today. Such is the desire of our Lord. He waits for our response.

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