

Acts, the Missionary Enterprise

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Acts is a pivotal book in the New Testament. The middle chapter of Acts is within a few pages of the middle of the entire New Testament. It resides physically between the gospels which were the fulfillment of God's law and the epistles which explain God's grace applied to the entire world.

Acts is very different from other New Testament books. There are various views concerning Acts. Fernando documents three ways to view Acts. Some commentators view Acts as a theological document, not necessarily a historical document. Some view Acts as an entertaining drama and adventure document, not necessarily historical nor theological. Others view Acts as both an historical and a theological document.

(Fernando 22-27)

This paper will examine the development of the missionary enterprise by viewing Acts as a document in which God develops important theology in the context of an historical mission of evangelism and discipleship. Key doctrines developed over time in the book of Acts are doctrines of ecclesiology and soteriology. This missionary enterprise is often called the Great Commission.

THE GREAT COMMISSION

What is "the Great Commission?"

The phrase "the Great Commission" is Christ's charge given to his followers to engage in a worldwide missionary task of evangelism and discipleship. This charge is documented four times in the gospels and Acts (Nyquist).

- Matthew 28:18-20¹
- Mark 16:15
- Luke 24
- John 20:21
- Acts 1:8

What did the apostles hear?

Missions is about culture. Missions is about communication. So, one wonders, what did the apostles understand Jesus to be saying when he spoke about being his witness in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth?

In their cultural context, it's quite likely they heard that Jesus wanted them to evangelize Jews wherever they were found. There was a plan of expanding geographic range, but it appears that the disciples understood the target audience to be Jews. Their question, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?", comes out of their worldview that limited the scope and plan of Jesus.

Having heard Jesus instructions to not go to the Gentiles (Matthew 10:5-6) and Jesus' initial hesitancy to heal the Syrophenician woman's son (Mark 7: 24-30), they quite likely heard his Great Commission in the context of reaching Jews and the occasional God-fearing Gentile. This is borne out by observing how they went about the evangelistic task.

It appears they understood followers of Jesus to be something like completed Jews. They appear to see Christianity as *Judaism plus Jesus*.

¹ All references are from the New International Version Bible unless otherwise noted. (New International Version Bible).

Fernando points out that ethno-centrism can still affect the missionary enterprise today.

And when Jesus is thinking about “the kingdom of God” (v. 3) and “the ends of the earth” (v. 8), [the apostles] are thinking about their own nation. Twenty centuries later these ... errors are still seen in the church (Fernando 56).

God revealing his plan over time to qualified people

The record of Acts is a record of God *revealing over time* the breadth of his salvation. God was willing to start with men who had a parochial understanding of his salvation and an imperfect view of the new entity he was creating, called his church. Nyquist labels Acts 15 the *pinnacle* of the document where the question “Can Gentiles be a part of the church, or must they first become practicing Jews?” was answered clearly and decisively at the Jerusalem Council (Nyquist).

However, this was OK with Jesus. He planned to reveal his plan over time. The disciples just needed to get started with the basic qualifications:

- Engaged in the evangelistic mission
- Empowered through the Holy Spirit
- Prayerfully dependent on Christ
- Unafraid of sacrificial suffering

This has powerful implications for the missionary enterprise. Jesus was not afraid to entrust his commission to these 11 apostles. He had great confidence in what the Holy Spirit could do through them. As Fernando says, “More urgent than the mission at this time was having the right equipment to carry out the mission.” (Fernando 56)

CENTRALITY OF EVANGELISM

Fernando writes

From Chapter 1, where the Great Commission is recorded (1:8), right up to the end of the book, the great activity that dominates this book is evangelism. ... The two major methods used in evangelism in Acts were winning of attention through miracle and apologetics. All messages recorded in Acts had a strong apologetic content. The evangelists sought to show that Christianity withstood the questions that the people were asking, and the records of the speeches indicate that their evangelism was strongly content-oriented (Fernando 30).

Evangelism is the heartbeat of the events in Acts. Acts records the expansion of the mission through evangelistic activities. The expansion of the church was not done through Christian education. It was not done through medicine (or even healings alone). It was not done through social services. The expansion of the church was done through evangelism coupled with powerful apologetics using the worldview of the target audience as the starting point in presenting Christ.

CENTRALITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The centrality of the Holy Spirit in the missionary enterprise is a recurring theme of Acts. The Holy Spirit is promised in Chapter 1. The Holy Spirit comes in Chapter 2.

The believers are never the same after the coming of the Holy Spirit. Fernando says

Many have felt that Acts should be called “The Acts of the Holy Spirit.” The first chapter records the promise of the Holy Spirit (1:4-5, 8), the second his descent, and the rest of the book his work in and through the church (Fernando 30).

Empowered, not just Trained

Nyquist reminds us that the expansion of the church cannot be explained as “Jesus trained them well and turned over his mission to competent, trained people.” (Nyquist) Something happened at Pentecost that changed the disciples forever. That “something” is the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had promised his Holy Spirit. The believers obeyed his instructions to “stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” (Luke 24:49)

The phrase “Holy Spirit” appears 42 times in Acts (Holy Spirit). “Holy Spirit” occurs in thirteen of the first sixteen chapters of Acts² and many times in subsequent chapters. This is particularly significant since the Holy Spirit rarely draws attention to himself, rather his focus is to bring glory to Jesus (John 16:14). Luke appears to emphasize the centrality of the Holy Spirit as an important qualification for the work of bringing glory to Jesus through the missionary enterprise.

Holy Spirit confirms God’s acceptance of new believer groups

The giving of the Holy Spirit was a major factor in the apostles understanding of the growing diversity of the doctrine of salvation and inclusion in the church. Nyquist identifies four “pentecosts,” or times the Holy Spirit came on a group of people (Nyquist):

- The Jewish pentecost in Acts 2
- The Samaritan pentecost in Acts 8
- The Gentile pentecost in Acts 10

² “Holy Spirit” not mentioned in chapters 3, 12, and 14.

- The Ephesian/Asian pentecost in Acts 19

In each of these “pentecosts,” the Holy Spirit is given to a new group of believers representing yet others included in the good news of God’s salvation through Jesus Christ. Over time, God was growing the believers’ understanding of the scope of his missionary enterprise. “To the ends of the earth” was not just a geographical scope, but also a cultural scope and a linguistic scope. The giving of the Holy Spirit to diverse groups of new believers was God’s primary instrument in growing their understanding of his scope.

CENTRALITY OF PRAYER

Prayer is another central theme of Acts. Variations of the English word “pray” (pray, prayed, prayer, praying) are mentioned 34 times in Acts (Prayer). Fernando says

Fourteen of the first fifteen chapters of Acts (Ch. 5 excerpted) and many of the later chapters mention prayer; in Acts, as in Luke’s Gospel, prayer is a key theme (Fernando 30).

When the believers waited in obedience, they prayed (Acts 1:12). When they needed a new leader to replace Judas, they prayed (Acts 1:24). When they fellowshiped together, they prayed (Acts 2:42). When they were told to cease their missionary endeavor, they prayed (Acts 4:24). When the second generation of leaders was selected, they prayed (Acts 6:6). When being persecuted and killed, they prayed (Acts 7:59). When visiting new believers, they prayed for them (Acts 8:15). When seeking what the Lord had for them, they prayed (Acts 9:11). At regular times of personal devotion to the Lord, they prayed (Acts 10:9). When imprisoned, they prayed (Acts 12:5; Acts 12:12; Acts 16:25). When commissioning missionaries, they prayed (Acts 13:3). When installing the

third generation of church leaders, they prayed for them (Acts 14:23). When saying goodbye to close friends and ministry partners, they prayed (Acts 20:36; Acts 21:5). When witnessing before kings and rulers, they prayed (Acts 26:29). When healing the sick, they prayed (Acts 28:8).

Prayer was not just an activity for their times of corporate worship. Prayer was not only an arrow shot to heaven when facing persecution or difficulties. Prayer was a central part of the daily missionary enterprise as they sought God's power and God's wisdom and God's direction in their daily activities.

CENTRALITY OF SUFFERING

The expansion of God's mission went hand-in-hand with the suffering of his missionaries. Fernando writes

... there is much reflection on suffering in Acts. Here the suffering faced by the church is mostly on account of opposition to the gospel. ... Allied to the emphasis on suffering is the underlying theme that God is working out his sovereign purposes even through suffering. This is the dominant theme of the passage that describes the church's reaction to the first experience of suffering (4:23-31) (Fernando 31).

John Piper develops this understanding of the role of suffering in the missionary enterprise in his landmark message *Doing Missions When Dying Is Gain*. Piper says that in the missionary enterprise, there will be martyrs. There must be suffering. In fact, he goes so far as to say that suffering is the *means*, not just the price, of missions.

Colossians 1:24 [says] "Now I rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh, I do my share on behalf of his body in *filling up* what is *lacking* in the afflictions of Christ."

...What does he mean by “filling up what is lacking?” ... He does not mean ...he improves upon the merit and the atoning work of Jesus’ blood. ... What does he mean?

...These two words only occur one other place. It’s in Philippians 2:30 ... “[Epaphroditus] came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to *complete* what is *lacking* in your service for me.”

...I opened up Vincent’s commentary on Philippians and read an explanation of [Philippians 2:30] which I think is a perfect interpretation of Colossians 1:24: “The gift to Paul was a gift of the church as a body. It was a sacrificial offering of love. What was lacking was the church’s presentation of this offering in person. This was impossible and Paul represents Epaphroditus as supplying this lack by his affectionate zealous ministry.”

...Paul’s self-understanding of his mission is that there is one thing lacking in the sufferings of Jesus. The love offering is to be presented in person in the body of Christ through missionaries to the peoples for whom he died. And he says I [Paul] do this “in my sufferings”.

...Christ intends for the Great Commission to be a presentation to the nations of the sufferings of his cross in the sufferings of his people. That’s the way the Commission will be finished ... that’s what [a missionary] signs up for. That’s the way it will get done. (Piper)

As some of Jesus’ disciples had earlier said, “This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?” (John 6:60). The first century believers accepted it. Commissioned by the Lord of Lords and King of Kings, empowered by the Holy Spirit, communing with the sovereign God through prayer, these men and women embraced suffering with great joy.

Their prayer was for boldness, not relief (Acts 4:29). Their disposition was rejoicing, not grumbling (Acts 5:41). Their words to their persecutors were forgiveness, not accusation (Acts 7:60). Their activities continued to be evangelistic, not withdrawal (Acts 8:1, 4).

They understood and embraced their role in “filling *up* what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.”

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE MISSIONARY ENTERPRISE TODAY?

Focus on these basics, not just training or methods

There seems to be a tendency to reduce the missionary enterprise to training, to strategies, to tactics, to methodologies. Acts is a reminder that at the core of the missionary enterprise is the commissioning of God to go, the empowering of the Holy Spirit for supernatural effectiveness, the communing of prayer for wisdom and direction in daily decisions, and the role of suffering in the “presentation to the nations of the sufferings of his cross in the sufferings of his people” (Piper).

Amazing Opportunities Today

Once we have these basics working in our lives today, those of us engaged in the global missionary enterprise have tremendous communication opportunities that the early disciples never had. The early missionaries were limited by space and time (except in the amazing instance of Philip disappearing from Gaza and reappearing in Samaria in Acts 8:39-40). Today, through modern communication technologies, we have opportunities to proclaim Christ, to apologetically assist diverse peoples in understanding the claims of Christ through their own worldviews, and to interact personally, one-on-one with interested people.

The early disciples learned that Jesus’ commission to go “to the ends of the earth” was not just geographic (reaching all the Jews wherever they lived) but was also cultural

(so that in the last book written, John saw in Revelations 7:9 “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language”).

Virtual, not only Geographic

Today, we are seeing that the Great Commission is not just geographic, but virtual. Spiritually-sensitive people gather, not just at the synagogue³, but also in chat rooms, discussion forums, and social networking Web sites like Facebook and MySpace. God-fearers gather, not just “outside the city gate at the river where we expected to find a place of prayer” (Acts 16:13), but around blogs and issues-based Web sites.

To this end, Campus Crusade for Christ endeavors to use all modern communications means, in addition to sending hundreds of missionaries every year. In the virtual world, we have over 400 Web sites in 25 languages from 50 countries providing over 300,000 documents.

Many of these Web sites are intentionally evangelistic. These evangelistic Web sites tend to be issues-based and apologetical in nature, seeking to engage diverse peoples in their worldview around felt needs and communicate the supremacy of Christ. Almost every Web site has a mechanism to allow interested seekers to engage in conversation with a trained believer⁴.

Many missionaries engage spiritually-sensitive seekers in public blogs, chat rooms, discussion forums, and social networking Web sites. Sometimes, they are persecuted through public ridicule. This presents an opportunity to “fill up what is

³ Meeting spiritually-sensitive people in the local synagogues appears to be Paul’s primary strategy. See Acts 9:20, 13:5, 13:14, 13:15, 13:42, 14:1, 17:1, 17:2, 17:10, 17:17, 18:4, 18:19, 18:26, 19:8 (Synagogue).

⁴ Almost 1,000 lay people volunteer to interact with spiritually-sensitive seekers on Campus Crusade for Christ’s evangelistic Web sites.

lacking in the afflictions of Christ” as they display graciousness while rejoicing over the privilege of suffering for Christ.

This study of Acts has helped me personally to re-focus on the basics of Christ’s commission, the Spirit’s power, the centrality of prayer, and the role of suffering and to apply them in my leadership role in the Internet-based ministries of Campus Crusade for Christ.

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