

Acts and the Mission of the Church

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If you ask the average Christian where the biblical basis and guidelines for the task of missions can be found, the answer that you are most likely to get is that you should turn to the book of Acts. It is easy to see why this would be the case. You cannot read the book of Acts without immediately being impressed by the evangelistic zeal of the first Christians and the rapid expansion of the church. It is, furthermore, clear that this expansion was not due to some random historical fluke but that it was explicitly based on the promise and command of the Lord Jesus at the beginning of the book: “...*you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” (Acts 1:8) To state it bluntly: It is impossible to understand Acts apart from the call to mission and the response of the church to this call.⁷⁰

The point that the book of Acts contains a picture of the early church engaging in missions will probably be fairly uncontroversial. The question is, however, how the historical leap from the time of Acts to our own should be made. In other words, how should we interpret and apply the Book of Acts when we consider the mission mandate of the church at the beginning of the 21st century? Can we preach about missions from Acts and, if so, how should we do it?

These questions are difficult to answer because they are closely related to the old conundrum surrounding the normativity of Acts. This issue flows from the recognition that we are separated from the events described in the Book of Acts by:

- Language
- Culture
- Geography

⁷⁰ Many scholars make the point that Acts 1:8 provides us with the structure of the Book of Acts as it details the expansion of the church in ‘Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth’ (see, for example: Dennis Johnson, *Let’s Study Acts*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003, p. xx-xxii). This means that mission sits at the very heart of the narrative.

- Place in salvation history, etc.⁷¹

An appreciation of the distance that exists between our world and the world of the New Testament means that virtually all interpreters of the text approach it with the conviction that not everything that we read can simply be applied ‘as is’ when we preach the truths of the text to a 21st century audience.⁷² How can we get around this dilemma, especially when we preach on missions from Acts? Before I attempt to answer this question it might be good to briefly consider two approaches that, although very popular, miss the mark in my opinion.

Acts as a ‘Pick and Mix’ sourcebook: I have been involved in missions for about two decades. This means that I have attended numerous mission conferences and presentations over the years. One of the texts that is most frequently quoted at these events is Acts 1:8. This text is often presented as the marching orders of the church and people would be sent home with the stirring call to be witnesses to the ends of the earth still ringing in their ears. There is obviously nothing wrong with, or unbiblical about, making this appeal but what is often lacking is any link with the rest of the book of Acts or a further unfolding of the story within its pages. It is as if Acts 1:8 is simply lifted out of the book and dropped into the ‘pick and mix’ bag of classic mission texts.

Acts as a Detailed Mission Blueprint: This is obviously at the other end of the spectrum to selecting a few ‘missions slogans’ and then ignoring the rest of the book. This view of the importance of Acts to the modern missionary enterprise states that every single detail in the book should be applied to our times, not only in terms of motivating us to missions but also in terms of providing a point by point strategy for effective missions. This approach reminds me of something that I once read about the famous Muslim philosopher Al Ghazali. It is said that he never ate watermelon since there was no tradition available that detailed how Mohammed ate watermelons!

⁷¹ See Barend Wolvaardt’s book *How to Interpret the Bible* (London: Veritas College, 1999) p. 27-31 for a fuller description of the issues involved.

⁷² Space does not allow for a detailed description of an exegetical approach to the Book of Acts. For a discussion of such an approach see the chapter entitled *Acts – The problem of historical precedent* in Gordon Fee’s book *How to Read the Bible for all it’s worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) p. 87-102

Some in the world mission movement seem to believe that we should treat the book of Acts in the same way. They claim that everything they do is based on the book of Acts and that if something cannot be supported from Acts it should simply not be part of any modern mission strategy.⁷³ Needless to say those taking this view of necessity still have to be very selective in terms of what they regard as the absolutely normative aspects of the detailed missions blueprint that they claim to find in Acts. The problem with this approach is that it very quickly runs into trouble. Saying that everything is normative may sound very commendable (in terms of honouring the authority of Scripture). There are, however, simply too many incidents, responses and approaches in Acts that force us to make decisions about normativity. I could pile up examples but one will have to suffice. Going straight to the local synagogue of every new city seems to have been a core aspect of Paul's *modus operandi*. Does this mean that all modern mission organisations should have detailed address lists of the world's synagogues? If you cannot answer this question in the affirmative straightaway you are right back to making decisions about normativity!

So how do we preach about missions from Acts while at the same time avoiding the temptation to either use it as a source for stirring slogans (while ignoring its actual content) or as a detailed blueprint that we attempt to apply to every single modern situation?

The work done by my colleague Steve Voorwinde on the normativity of Acts can go some way to help us to answer this question.⁷⁴ He states that there are some **minor principles** (*the principle of non-contradiction, command versus description, and reinforcement in the rest of the New Testament*) and a **major principle** (emphasis on the core theological points that Luke wanted to convey). The rest of this article grew from my attempt to apply these principles on the issue of mission preaching from the Book of Acts.

⁷³ This is often part of a much broader claim, namely that everything in Acts should be seen as absolutely normative for the modern church. This claim was first advanced by proponents of the so-called 'Restoration Movement' (sometimes known as the Stone-Campbell movement) and the result was that Acts was almost elevated to the status of a 'canon within the canon' in these circles. Restorationism finds its modern expression in the Churches of Christ, Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) and in some parts of the Charismatic movement.

⁷⁴ See the article *How Normative is Acts?* by Steve Voorwinde in this issue of *Vox Reformata*.

It must be stated, right here at the outset, that even scholars using the same tools and guidelines will often come to different conclusions. This is perhaps only to be expected since we all bring our own background and subjective understanding to the passage. An acknowledgement of this fact does not mean that we should simply place the interpretation of Acts in the ‘too hard basket’ since I do believe that there are some clear missions priorities that will shine through as we wrestle with the text.

Before I focus on what I believe these mission priorities to be, allow me to say a few words on why preaching on mission from the book of Acts can be such an effective way of stirring God's people to action in the cause of sharing the gospel with the nations:

1. **Acts reminds us that mission is an integral part of what it means to be church.** In many churches mission is regarded as the exclusive preserve of a few super-committed enthusiasts. There can be no more effective antidote to this view than paging through the book of Acts, even if we allow for the fact that not everything that we read should necessarily be regarded as normative. Acts leaves the reader with the inescapable impression that the preaching of the Gospel was right at the centre of how the early Christians understood themselves and their role in the world.
2. **Acts is part of our story.** As modern Christians we should not merely view Acts as a series of historical events that are completely unconnected to our daily reality. Acts is, in a very real sense, also *our history* as it tells the story of the early years of the Christian church. The fact that we are here today is due to the faithfulness of God who, in his infinite mercy, ensured that the story continued beyond the book of Acts. We are building our lives and ministries on the foundations that were laid in those very early years. In preaching missions from Acts we can therefore lead believers to understand a bit of their own history and show them how the gospel transformed lives and communities.
3. **Acts provides us with an inspirational example to follow.** There are some things in life that are best learned from observing skilled practitioners and then putting those observations into practice. Acts provides us with a grandstand view of believers going about the

difficult and daunting task of sharing the gospel and planting churches under the direction of the Holy Spirit. Not everything that they do will perhaps be normative and relevant for our times (Some things should, in fact, be actively avoided; the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-10 springs to mind!) There are, however, some shining examples to inspire and inform us. The early church can teach us a lot about perseverance, steadfastness under persecution, dependence on the Holy Spirit and zeal for sharing the truth of the Gospel.

Mission emphases in Acts

I stated above that it is my conviction that there are certain mission emphases that can be clearly discerned in the Book of Acts. The purpose of this section is to present these emphases, followed by a brief contemporary application. I believe that they reflect the main thrust of obedience to the missionary call in Acts. These are therefore the areas that should, in my opinion, be emphasised when preaching on missions from Acts. This will help the preacher to steer clear of the extremes that were discussed earlier.

Emphasis 1: Mission is Initiated, Empowered and Directed by the Holy Spirit. It has often been stated that Acts should properly be called the '*Acts of the Holy Spirit*', rather than the Acts of the Apostles. Nowhere is this comment more appropriate than when we consider the way in which the outward mission of the church is portrayed in Acts. It is clear that mission would be impossible without the role of the Holy Spirit. The Lord Jesus makes it clear in Acts 1:8 that the disciples should wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit for they will receive power when the Spirit comes on them. It is only after this event that they will in the fullest and most proper sense become His witnesses. Mission is therefore inextricably linked to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit's involvement does not end with the initiation of the missionary enterprise. He also empowers and directs it, even to the point of leading churches to set aside missionaries (Acts 13:1-3) and directing missionaries as to where they should go (Acts 16:7). As they go it is He who gives the ability and the boldness to witness fearlessly to the truth of the resurrection (Acts 4:8).

Being reminded of the central role of the Holy Spirit in mission can serve as a much-needed corrective to some current conceptions of the missionary enterprise. It is, sadly, often the case today that mission is presented as an essentially human activity as if the salvation of the nations depended solely on our activities. This can lead to despondency ('The task is too big so why bother with it?') or frenetic activity as we attempt to carry the weight of the world on our shoulders. Remembering that we do not carry the burden of world mission on our own, and that we are in fact junior partners in this enterprise, will liberate us from both these extremes and will allow us to focus on the task at hand with the knowledge that we are participating in a mission that is much greater than we can even begin to understand.⁷⁵

Emphasis 2: Called to be Witnesses of the Resurrected Christ. There is one word that clearly defines the missionary task in the book of Acts. It is, of course, *witnesses* (μαρτυρες in Greek). We hear it for the first time in Acts 1:8 and then encounter it for another twelve times throughout the book. Luke uses the word in two ways. In the first instance it refers to those who were actual witnesses of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We can, however, also see the term applied to other Christians as they are sent into the world (e.g. Paul, Acts 22:15 and Stephen, Acts 22:20). On reading the accounts of the way in which early believers responded to the call to witness it becomes clear almost at once what the content and focus of their witness was: The risen Christ! (cf. Acts 2:32, 5:30, 10:40 and 13:30)

It is, furthermore, instructive to note that witnessing in Acts is not described as merely a cold and calculated laying out of the facts. The presentation of the Gospel demands a specific response, namely repentance and turning to Christ. (cf. Acts 2:37-40) It is, therefore, often the case that the preaching in Acts ends with a strong appeal. Following Him is more important than

⁷⁵ This emphasis on the importance of the role of the Holy Spirit in mission links in quite well with the concept of *Missio Dei* (Mission as God's Mission). A renewed emphasis on *Missio Dei* has provided a much needed corrective to human centred understandings of mission over the past three decades. David Bosch described the importance of this insight as follows in his book *Transforming Mission* (New York: Orbis 1990 p. 390): "... mission is not primarily an activity of the church but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God. It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit, through the Father that includes the church. Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission."

everything else and witnessing to the truth of this defines the missionary enterprise.

This emphasis on the risen Christ can, once again, serve as a much-needed corrective to the way in which we do mission in the 21st-century. When we analyse the history of missions it becomes clear that ‘missional drift’ is a major problem. This is where a secondary purpose displaces the primary purpose of mission. Examples of this trend abound: The world is full of schools and hospitals with beautiful biblical names that have left their spiritual purposes behind. Also, just about every large city in the Western world plays host to a YMCA that is not particularly young, male or Christian! In highlighting this issue I am not denying the value of education, medical treatment or social justice. It is to be lamented, however, when organisations that started out with a zeal for God’s mission deliver these services in ways that deny the centrality of the resurrected Christ. The book of Acts shows us that mission that sidelines the message of Jesus Christ is not mission at all.

Emphasis 3: Mission as the Crossing of Borders. One of the key points of tension in the book of Acts is the question on how far the church should go with the message of Jesus. Most of the very early believers came from a Jewish background and would have had no problem with sharing the gospel with their fellow Jews. This is, in fact, what happened on a large scale during the first few chapters of the book. At least some of the Jewish-background believers were, however, very uneasy with the idea of sharing the gospel with those from gentile backgrounds (cf. Acts 11:1-3). As the story of Acts unfolds under the guidance of the Holy Spirit it becomes increasingly clear that those who held this view did not fully grasp all of the implications of the gospel of Christ (Acts 10:9-23). It is emphasised again and again that the message of the risen Jesus should be preached to all people, including those who had previously lived their lives outside of the covenant community. The gospel should be presented to them in ways that they can understand and respond to (cf. Acts 17:16-34). Those who came to Christ from the Gentile community should, furthermore, be willingly and enthusiastically accepted as brothers and sisters in Christ.

This emphasis must have been revolutionary (and in some cases more than a little troubling) for believers from a Jewish background but it serves as a

clear reminder that the Christian church has a calling as wide as the world: a calling that should be pursued with diligence and complete dependence on the Holy Spirit.⁷⁶

We may think that this particular emphasis is not really relevant to modern Christians since we are not constantly dealing with Jewish/Gentile issues anymore. There is, however, an important contemporary application. There were obviously many different reasons why Jewish Christians found the very idea of Gentile Christians so hard to swallow. Certain historical and theological convictions certainly shaped their response. It might also be that there were reasons based on fallen human nature. Could it not be that they so enjoyed their status as being part of the chosen people of God that they felt that anybody else sharing this relationship with God might somehow reduce their 'specialness'? It is easy to react in the same way today by attempting to put a 'full stop' after the gospel. The emphasis on a border-crossing Gospel (in terms of geography, ethnicity, language, social standing etc.) can act as a powerful antidote to any attempt to hold onto all God's blessings for ourselves. In Acts the Spirit constantly leads the church to share 'the whole Gospel to the whole world'⁷⁷. May He find us faithful as he calls us to do the same.

Emphasis 4: The church as 'point of departure' and destination of mission. One of the key activities of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts is to bring the church into existence. This is such an important priority that we simply cannot read Acts without coming away with a strong impression that the church is an integral part of God's plan in this world. From the very start new believers are formed into fellowships where they can gather around the preaching of the Gospel, mutual encouragement and worship (Acts 2:42-47). These churches then act as springboards from where further evangelistic efforts are undertaken. Nowhere is this dynamic expressed more clearly than in Acts 13:1-3 where the Holy Spirit calls upon the church in Antioch to set apart Saul and Barnabas for a mission to the Gentiles. This so-called first

⁷⁶ For an excellent description of the ground breaking and cross cultural nature of the mission of the early church see the chapter on Luke/Acts Daniel Hays's book *From Every People and Nation* (Downers Grove: Apollos 2003) p. 157-180

⁷⁷ This phrase is found in the Lausanne Covenant (first drafted in 1974), a thought provoking and comprehensive restatement of the call to world mission. The full text of the covenant can be accessed at: <http://www.lausanne.org/covenant>

missionary journey of Paul is, therefore, not merely based on a sudden whim of Paul but has its origins in the prompting of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of a local church. It is instructive that his journey comes full circle in the sense that he goes back to the church in Antioch after the journey to report on what had happened (Acts 14:26-28).

As we continue to trace the progress of the Gospel in Acts we realize that the emphasis is not only on the church as the ‘point of departure’ for missions, but also as the destination. It is clear, for example, that Paul regarded the establishing and strengthening of churches as a key part of his calling (cf. Acts 14:23, 15:41). Whole chapters towards the end of Acts are devoted to telling the story of how churches were established and grew. The welfare and growth of these churches is regarded as being of huge importance not only for the sake of the spiritual health of members but also because they are regarded as vital to the spread of the Gospel (Acts 20:28)⁷⁸. I am convinced that it would not be an exaggeration to say that the book of Acts shows us that it would be impossible to divorce the task of missions from the role of the local church.

What should be the implications of this emphasis on the way in which we think about mission today? Does it mean that church planting is the only legitimate response to the call to missions? I would not go that far. There are certainly some legitimate specialized mission related activities that range beyond church planting (Bible translation, missionary aviation, broadcasting and training ministries spring to mind). It can, however, be argued that these ministries play a vital supporting role in the establishment of churches.

There are, however, also many other ways of ‘doing mission’ that does not honour the role of the local church. There may be good historical reasons for this. Lack of interest among established churches at the beginning of the Protestant missionary revival meant that the default vehicle for mission among Protestants became the missionary society⁷⁹. I recognise that many

⁷⁸ In his book *Planting Churches Cross Culturally* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000, p. 42-51) David Hesselgrave identifies a ‘Pauline Cycle’ that clearly show the links between Paul’s activities and the establishment, strengthening and commissioning of local churches.

⁷⁹ One famous example of the attitude of some 18th century church leaders towards mission was the answer that the missionary pioneer William Carey received when he proposed a mission to India: “*Young man, sit down: when God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do*

missionary societies have done sterling work through the centuries. It should, therefore, be noted that the comments that follow do not amount to a questioning of their right to exist. Societies certainly have their place and a legitimate role to fulfil, especially as they are able to pool resources and bring practical skills to bear on the task of mission. It is, however, sadly often the case that the societies took the task out of the hands of the church to such an extent that many local churches believe that they can simply ‘outsource’ their missions responsibility to missions societies. Another problem is that there are some societies that hinder rather than help the local church in the mission field. They do this by doing things that are properly the task of the local church or by binding the local church so closely to foreign cultures, support and leaders that it cannot exist apart from outside help.

The problems associated with keeping the local church at the heart of missions are clear. How are we to respond to this? In my opinion a good starting point would be to ask a simple question at the start of any mission project: *Will what we propose to do build up the local church?*⁸⁰ This is obviously a question to which there are no ready-made answers. One way to help us to answer it is to make use of the classic formulation of the attributes that must be in place for a mission church to be regarded as standing on its own feet (in terms of not being trapped in a cycle of dependency). This was formulated by Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson⁸¹. They stated that mission churches should be led to eventually become:

- Self governing
- Self supporting
- Self propagating⁸²

it without your aid or mine." (see Ruth Tucker's work *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 1983, p115)

⁸⁰ Or where a local church does not exist (i.e. in a completely unreached area): *Will what we propose to do contribute to the planting of a local church?*

⁸¹ For an example of Henry Venn's writings on this subject, see Norman Thomas (ed.) *Classic Texts in Mission and World Christianity* (New York: Orbis 1995), p. 207-208

⁸² This formulation is sometimes known as the 'three selves'. One well known usage of the term was when the 'official church' in China incorporated it into its name (The Three Selves Patriotic Movement) in order to signify its distance from Western churches. It is, however, debatable whether this church truly displays any of the 'selves' (given its links with, and dependence on, the Chinese state).

I am convinced that this ideal is still as important and relevant as it was when Venn and Anderson formulated it. It also reflects, in my view, clear Biblical priorities and as such provides us with a template that we can use to bring our response to the call to mission into line with the emphasis on the role of the church that we find in Acts.

Emphasis 5: Mission Requires Faith and Courage in the face of Adversity. One of the things that immediately strike you upon reading Acts is the very rapid spread of the Gospel and the church. It is, however, important to note that rapid spread does not mean ‘spread without resistance’. Nothing could be further from the truth! The narrative of the spread of the Gospel is lit by the fires of persecution. Acts tells us about the first Christian martyr (Acts 6:8-7:60), of Christians having to flee for their lives before murderous authorities (Acts 8:1), of sermons ending in riots (Acts 17:5). Nothing about the establishment of the early church was plain sailing. I do not think that we are to take from this that missions will always be accompanied by persecution and resistance (although there are very few examples in church history where the coming of the Gospel did not generate at least some resistance). Where persecution does come, however, Acts clearly shows us the best possible response: steadfast faith in God, prayer and perseverance under all circumstances (Acts 4:23-31, 16:25).

How are we to respond to this emphasis today? I believe that we should draw inspiration and strength from it. It is so easy to survey our task, to anticipate resistance and then to use this as an excuse to do as little as possible.⁸³ However, Acts shows us that persecution and resistance cannot snuff out the light of the Gospel. Obedience to God’s call may lead us into

⁸³ In his *Article Acts of Obedience* (in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, Pasadena: William Carey Center, 1999, p. 123) Steven Hawthorne argues that passivity and the desire to remain invisible will, in the long run, prove counter-productive. He states: *Witnessing is not so much personal sharing of the Gospel as it is the establishing of the church. It will take more than slick communication to plant churches where there are none. The drama of Acts may be a portrait of the way any new church is planted. There may be exceptions, but for the most part, the record shows that thriving movements for Jesus must emerge into public view. Secret movements grow weak and often disappear entirely. Movements that endure bear Christ’s name boldly and at the same time display much that is recognized as the finest ideals of their people. How does this happen? By men and women who are falsely accused and brought into a setting of open testimony. At that moment, the value of following Christ is established.*

difficult situations and may even cost us everything but this call also comes with the promise that God will work out his purposes and that the ‘gates of hell’ will not stand against the truth of the Gospel.

It should also be remembered that suffering for the sake of the Gospel is not merely a theoretical possibility for many Christians in the world. It is part of their daily reality. As members of the worldwide church we should be willing to share in that suffering and should be doing everything in our power to shoulder some of that burden. As Western Christians we will do well to heed the exhortation found in Hebrews 13:3: “*Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.*”

Conclusion

There are, of course, many other mission emphases that can be found in the book of Acts. I am convinced, however, that those discussed above are some of the most important ones. Studying and responding to these emphases will go some way towards restoring mission to its primary role in the life of the church as we strive to respond to God’s call to share the Good News to the ends of the earth.