

Preaching Luke Acts from a Worldview Perspective

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Looking at preaching Luke-Acts from a worldview perspective involves us in two discussions. The first centres on the question: how does an understanding of first century Jewish and non-Jewish worldviews help us in understanding the biblical text? The second asks: how do the narratives and teaching of Luke-Acts help us in preaching a Christian worldview?

One of the biggest obstacles to understanding Bible narratives correctly can be our Christian worldview. Because we base our Christian worldview on the Bible's teachings we tend to think that stories in the Bible reflect a biblical worldview. But to identify the worldview found in the Bible as "the biblical worldview" or "the Christian worldview" is confusing at best. The Bible both **describes** and **prescribes** worldview realities, and these two do not always line up. Thus the first century Jewish worldview, though extensively shaped and influenced by divine revelation, remained open to criticism. This will become clear as we study the Gospel of Luke, where we find that Christ frequently denounced worldview features of first century Judaism.

Obedience to biblical teaching will lead us to a worldview different from what we meet in the biblical narratives, and that for two reasons. First, we want our worldview to be shaped by the teachings of Christ, and at best the biblical narratives only show the beginnings of such a worldview. Second, we shall see that there is room for our own cultural and time bound variations within a biblical worldview. Our study of the book of Acts will show that the formation of a first century Christian worldview took place among people strongly coloured by Hellenistic culture and worldview concepts. These, in turn, influenced the formation of the early Christian worldview, as evidenced, for example, in the extensive use of Plato's teachings in the Alexandrian school and in the shaping of Augustinianism. In the same way our own attempts to work out a Christian worldview cannot help but have a 21st century flavour with local cultural and ethnic overtones.

We should also note that we are not to study the Bible in order to confirm our own worldview, but in order to challenge it and refine it under the leading of

God's Spirit. Orthodox Christianity is always in danger of submitting to traditionalism. However, it is one thing to recognise that God has led former generations by his Word and Spirit, but quite another thing to conclude that their ways are still the best for us today. As our context changes and places new challenges in our way, worldview realities may need new formulations and applications. Post-Reformation changes in perception on the relationship between church and state provide a good example of how Christians adapted their thinking to new situations.⁴⁵

We will use the two questions posed at the opening of this article to set the outline for our study of worldview perspectives in preaching from Luke and Acts. First we will study some worldview features of first century Judaism, to see where and how this can help us to understand the Gospel of Luke. Next we will look at the reception of Christianity among Hellenists, representing the larger part of early Christianity, to see how this affected their worldview. These two perspectives will alert us to the importance of considering worldview issues in preaching the Gospel.

1. The First Century Jewish Worldview in Luke

It is clear that by the first century there was much variety within the Jewish worldview. These differences followed regions, social classes and ideologies. Jerusalem and Galilee, where most of the events recounted in Luke took place, respectively represented the centre and fringes of Israel's cultural influence. These regions had different administrations and population mixes, with Roman garrisons at Jerusalem and a large Hellenist presence in the Gerasenes (Lk. 3:1; 23:5-78:26ff.). Class differences ranged from the ruling rich to the poorer people representing the oppressed and dispossessed.⁴⁶

Obedience to the Word of God, with its laws of charity and prescribed Years of Jubilee, would no doubt have created a more equitable society. However, Israel was far from this biblical ideal. The land was ruled by Rome and, apart from the rich who retained their position by collaborating with the Romans,

⁴⁵ Where 16th and 17th century confessions have made pronouncements on these issues the church has usually found it necessary to make revisions; e.g. Belgic Confession art. 36.

⁴⁶ See James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999, pp. 110-141.

most people were taxed so heavily that they had difficulty making ends meet. Besides the Romans, the regional rulers, temple and Levites also made claims to people's goods and income. As a result many had been forced to sell their land to pay their debts. All these realities in turn contributed to Israel's ideological divisions, with groups like the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes and Zealots.⁴⁷

Despite this variety there were some worldview convictions shared by all first century Jews. These included their belief in:

- One God in heaven,
- Israel's covenant identity, which embraced:
 - Salvation for the Jews
 - A call to holiness
 - Blessings, including:
 - The family
 - The Land
 - The Torah
 - The Temple, with its feasts
 - The promise of a Messianic reign

Jesus severely challenged the Jews on every one of these basic worldview tenets. In this Jesus did not contradict or alter the teachings of the OT, rather he showed the Jews that they were in error in their understanding of God's Word: "he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (Lk. 24:45). This led to a paradigm shift in worldview for all who followed him. Let us look at some examples, especially with respect of the relevance this has for our understanding of the text.

Christ's challenge to the Jewish perception of God came in his own claims to be the Son of God (Lk. 22:70), who would sit at the right hand of God until his return "in the glory of the Father" (Lk. 20:41-44; 9:26; 21:27; cf. Jn. 14:9). His declarations to be the *Lord of the Sabbath* could only be seen against the background of the Jewish practice to identify Yahweh as *Lord* (*Adonai* or *Kurios*, Lk. 6:5; cf. Jn. 20:28). Though the church was built on the

⁴⁷ See Frederick J. Murphy, *The Religious World of Jesus, An Introduction to Second Temple Palestinian Judaism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), pp. 277-282.

recognition of the Lordship of Christ (Mt. 16:16-18; Acts 2:36; Acts 9:5-17, 42; 10:36; 15:11; etc.) it took several centuries to work out the full implications of these claims and integrate them into the Christian worldview. There was no Jewish precedent for an understanding of God as Trinity and the worldview implications of this new theistic understanding of God are still being explored today.⁴⁸

Israel's covenant identity as a people who were to receive the promises of God was challenged by Christ's warnings that the Kingdom would be taken away from them. The Jews regarded the divine covenant as strictly for Israel, though they were open to others joining them through proselyte baptism and circumcision. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus appears to share this understanding when he defines his mission as embracing the children of Abraham (Lk. 19:9, 10). Yet there are hints of a wider scope in Luke's Gospel, though not so much in the words and deeds of Jesus himself. It is Simeon who identifies Christ as God's salvation prepared before "all people" (*laōn*) and "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (*ethnōn*, Lk. 2:30-32). And John the Baptist warns that Israel may lose its favoured position if it does not bear fruit, pointing out that God can raise up children of Abraham out of stones (Lk. 3:8). While Jesus occasionally ministers to Romans and Samaritans (Lk. 7:9; 10:30ff.), and warns Israel that the Kingdom may be given to "others" (20:16), the only clear indication that his salvation is to embrace non-Jews comes in the Great Commission (24:27).

It is in Luke's second book, the Acts of the Apostles, that we are shown how the Spirit of Christ leads the church into Gentile territory. The real turning point comes in Acts 8, 10 and 13 with the conversion of the Samaritans and Cornelius, and Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. By bringing the change as a climax it is as if Luke seeks to stress the wonder of God's gift of salvation to his non-Jewish readers.⁴⁹ It is important that in our preaching we capture this demonstration of the marvellous richness of God's grace. Too often we preach the salvation of the Gentiles as if it were a given that God intended to bless all the nations alongside Israel. While the account of the election of

⁴⁸ The doctrine of the Trinity is central to new studies questioning the concept of the impassibility of God and to debates about the uniqueness of the Christian religion in a postmodern, multicultural society.

⁴⁹ See the article "Luke-Acts: One Story in Two Parts" by Steve Voorwinde in this issue.

Abraham shows this to be theologically correct (Gen. 12:3), to preach it this way would be to miss something Luke's first audience must have felt, the wonder of a radically new perspective on God's grace.

This broadening in covenant perspective led to changes in how the Jewish Christians regarded the family (Lk. 12:52; 14:26), the Torah (Lk. 10:25; 16:16), the Temple with its feasts (21:5; 23:45) and the promises. Concerning the latter we should note that the Jews were well aware that many of the promises prophesied before and during the exile, by Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and others, had not yet been fulfilled. Specifically this concerned the promise of peace and prosperity with the coming of a Messiah. Hence it was commonly believed that on the Messiah would come at the "last day" to establish a Kingdom on earth to fulfil all the remaining promises.⁵⁰ Christ's announcements that the Kingdom was near (Lk. 10:9, 11) and had in fact arrived (Lk. 11:20), fitted in with these hopes. However, Jewish expectations pictured the coming of the Kingdom as a sudden political event rather than a slow historical process. They presumed this event would begin with the overthrow of Roman occupation forces, allowing for the Kingdom to be set up without further delay (Lk. 19:11).

Though Christ had made it clear that his Kingdom was not to be of this world (Jn. 18:36; cf. Lk. 19:11ff.; 21:31; 22:16-18), we still find this expectation among Christ's disciples even after his death and resurrection. The disciples ask him: "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). Similar hopes for an earthly Kingdom continued strong among early Jewish Christians, especially after the destruction of Jerusalem. Today we still find them among Christians who hold such millennial expectations.⁵¹

We do not have the time here to examine how Christ challenged each of these postulates of the Jewish worldview. Rather we will look at some examples of how a proper understanding of this worldview is necessary for a full understanding of the Lucan text. The first example concerns Christ's

⁵⁰ See N.T. Wright, "The Historical Jesus and Christian Theology" in *Sewanee Theological Review* 39, 1996.

⁵¹ Many Jews believed that this earthly Kingdom would last a thousand years was based on Dan. 9 and Ps. 90:4. However, some held the time would equal 450 years, the time of Israel's sojourn in Egypt. See B. Berends, "The Fulfilment of End-time Prophecy" in *Vox Reformata* #74, 2009.

preaching on blessings and misfortunes. The Jewish worldview held that among God's people sins and good deeds came with punishment and rewards in this life on earth. The poor lacked because of their wickedness, and the wealthy were blessed because of their piety. As a result blessings and misfortunes were widely accepted as indicators of people's spiritual standing before God.

Jesus counters this perception at various occasions. When news came that Pilate had murdered certain Galilean worshippers he asks whether these people, and the eighteen who died with the collapse of a tower at Siloam, were greater sinners than those who escaped (Lk. 13:1-5; cf. Jn. 9:1ff.). At another time he attacks the Pharisees for thinking their wealth "justified" them (see Lk. 16:14, 15), pointing out that this justification only occurs "in the eyes of man". However, the view that God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous in this life was a basic tenet of the Jewish worldview, despite the fact that the book of Job and some Psalms suggest otherwise (Ps. 49; 73; 82; 94). No doubt this faulty perception is one reason for the strong condemnations of the rich by Jesus, and later by his apostles (Lk. 6:24; 12:16ff.; 16:19ff.; Jas. 5:1).

A story that highlights this is that of the Rich Young Ruler who asked what he must do to inherit eternal life (Lk. 18:1ff.). In dealing with this story many preachers change the words or shorten the story in an effort to make sense of it. Such preachers rightly point to rich young ruler's lack of faith, but struggle with the seeming implication that no rich people can be saved. A regular approach to avoid this implication is for the camel and needle's eye to be reinterpreted, so that the camel becomes a "cable", or the needle's eye a "narrow passage" in the city wall.⁵² In this way the salvation of the rich, though difficult, becomes a possibility (especially if they are generous to the church). After all, the Bible lists many rich among its saints, including Abraham, David and Joseph of Arimathea.

However, this approach does not account for the disciples' response: "Who can then be saved?" The reason such preachers and most interpreters go wrong is in their failure to see is that the rich young ruler was the Jewish

⁵²See Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1950), p. 461.

paradigm of a saint. He observed the Torah scrupulously, and his wealth and high social position showed God was pleased with him. So how could this rich young ruler miss out on salvation? How could he be asked to give up his wealth? How could he be asked to surrender what God had given him? People would conclude God had cursed him.

That this is the correct interpretation is demonstrated in that this has been the perception of wealth in Judaism until today. It can be found in the tenth century Talmudist Saadiah Gaon, who taught that the righteous “have been blessed by God to prove to their fellow human beings their worthiness in having been selected for divine favour.”⁵³ And more recently Rabbi Moses L. Pava observed: “In Judaism, it is nearly universally recognized that wealth is one of the important ingredients that goes into living a rich and meaningful life.”⁵⁴ The Jewish worldview held: “Blessed are the rich, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”.⁵⁵ But Jesus turns this around, and states "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Lk. 18:24, 25). In other words, even “saints” cannot attain salvation by their own efforts.

That this is the correct interpretation is demonstrated in the reaction of his disciples. They are stunned and ask, "Who then can be saved?" (v. 26). If a

⁵³ Robert Eisen, *The book of Job in medieval Jewish philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.18.

⁵⁴ Moses L. Pava, “Wealth and the ‘Will to Enter into Relation’: A Jewish Perspective”, April 2007, Yeshiva University, NY, NY. <http://www.nd.edu/~ethics/wcConference/presentations/Pava/pava%20on%20wealth.doc>.

⁵⁵ See Hershey H. Friedman, “Ideal Occupations: The Talmudic Perspective.” Friedman writes “The attitude of Judaism towards wealth is quite positive since it enables one to help others. Those that use their wealth to help the poor will be blessed by God (Deuteronomy 15:10; Isaiah 1:17-19; Proverbs 19:17). Wealth, peace, and/or long life are rewards from God for obeying God’s laws (Leviticus 26: 3-13; Deuteronomy 11: 13-16; Deuteronomy 25:15; Proverbs 22:4). The Talmud (Babylonian Talmud, Taanis 9a) also sees wealth as a reward from God. In a wordplay on the verse (Deuteronomy 14: 22): “You shall surely tithe,” the Talmud advises that one should tithe in order to become rich (the Hebrew word that means to tithe is very similar to the word that means to become rich). The verse (Proverbs 11:24), “There is one who scatters and yet is given more” is interpreted by many of the commentators (e.g., Rashi and Ibn Ezra) as referring to one who spends his money on the needy. Wealth is seen as “comely to the righteous and comely to the world” (Babylonian Talmud, Avot 6:8), and affluent people who used their possessions to help others were respected by the Talmudic sages (Babylonian Talmud, Erubin 86a).” At www.jlaw.com/Articles/idealoccupa.html.
<http://www.jlaw.com/Articles/idealoccupa.html>

demonstrated saint like the rich young ruler can't make it, what chance is there for ordinary folks and sinners? Jesus gives the answer: God can do what man cannot do. The rich young ruler had asked what **he** must do to inherit eternal life. The answer is that he can do nothing, because salvation is by grace alone and all God's blessings come by grace alone.

Anthony Saldarini rightly observes: "Luke's presentation of the Pharisees and other Jewish leaders is part of a theologically motivated, literary inversion of ordinary society".⁵⁶ Christ's Kingdom has topsy-turvy values that challenge the existing worldview wisdom: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God (Lk. 6:20); "he who is least among you all – he is the greatest" (Lk. 9:48); "the last ... will be first, and first ... will be last" (Luke 13:30); "the kingdom of God belongs to such as these (children)" (Lk 18:16).

Another story that illustrates Jesus' rejection of the common Jewish worldview is his interaction with Mary and Martha (Lk. 10:38ff.). We miss the point if we preach on this passage without clarifying that all the Jews present would have agreed with Martha. She was a model of Jewish womanhood, prepared to serve quietly in the background while the men handled the important issues, like religious matters. She expected her sister to behave the same way. But Jesus points out that such conventions do not reflect Kingdom values. The Gospel of the Kingdom is for everyone, male and female, rich and poor, young and old. Christ's inclusion of women was a radical departure from the Jewish norms. Joachim Jeremias, the acknowledged expert on NT Israel, characterises Jesus' acceptance of women as "unprecedented". Other scholars comment: "The sources of Jesus' practice of calling female as well as male followers remains a historical puzzle" because it clashed with the dominant worldview.⁵⁷

As a final example we will look at the Jewish understanding of holiness. For the Jews holiness had become a matter of ritual correctness: following the purification ceremonies and observing the temple rituals and sacrifices.

⁵⁶ Anthony Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), p.175.

⁵⁷ John E. Stambauch & David L. Bach, *The New Testament in Its Social Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), p. 104

Saldarini observes: The Pharisees' use of purity regulations to maintain social order leads to unjust relationships. In response Luke defines true uncleanness as a moral, not ritual, deficiency and thus opens Christianity's group boundaries to outcasts, Gentiles and sinners".⁵⁸ While Jesus followed authentic OT rituals (Lk. 5:14; 11:42), he placed the emphasis on what these signified: a moral purity that showed itself in love. Jesus therefore castigates the Pharisees and teachers of the law, who operate the laws to "neglect justice and the love of God" (Lk. 11:42). For preaching the application is clear. It is not the observation of hallowed church traditions that reveal the state of our hearts, rather it is how we practice what these traditions are meant to convey. Our Christian worldview must be open to change where shifts in meaning or significance may call for the abandonment of our traditions.

2. Worldview Preaching in Acts

If Luke's Gospel highlights the challenges that can come in understanding the biblical text from a biblically based worldview, his Book of Acts shows how non-biblical worldviews can both challenge and enrich our Christian understandings. Christianity had an enormous impact on worldview development in the Roman empire, but it never triumphed. Here we can use the analogy of Israel's conquest of the promised land. In this conquest Israel was much enriched by the culture of the Canaanites, incorporating many of its features, such as agricultural and building practices, into its own cultural patterns.⁵⁹ But the conquest left pockets of paganism that continued to tempt and influence God's people in a destructive way. In a similar manner Christianity's "conquest" of the Graeco-Roman world, which represented a rich mosaic of cultures, greatly enriched Christian worldview development. However, a residue of non-biblical conceptions and values continued to exercise a negative influence.

Most of us are well aware of influence of the Greek philosophy on early Christian worldview development. It was the Greek dualistic worldview,

⁵⁸ *Idem*, p. 176

⁵⁹ See Deut. 6:10. The Israelites would have employed very different building techniques in Egypt, where bricks were used instead of stone, and agriculture in the plains of Goshen was very different to that practiced in Canaan (indeed the generation that entered the promised land would have had little training in agricultural skills).

glorifying the realm of ideas at the expense of the physical world, that gave rise to heresies like Gnosticism, Monarchianism and Arianism. The same Greek influence brought asceticism, monasticism and clerical celibacy into the church. But it also stimulated Christianity in the development of the Alexandrian, Augustinian and Thomistic schools, leading to worldviews that carried the Church up to and into the Reformation. While it is easy to criticise many features of these worldviews from a post-reformational perspective, they did contribute to the development Christian scholarship and in time encouraged the Renaissance and development of Christian Humanism.

High points in Christian worldview development tended to parallel great Christian spiritual awakenings: the Reformation (bringing the rise of representative government), Puritanism (with contributions to the natural sciences), Methodism (and its moral influence on issues like slavery) and Free Church movements (leading to religious and social reforms).⁶⁰ Such movements have served to stimulate the development of learning, science, technology, morality, the market economy and other cultural domains. However, during this same period we also witness a trend away from the Christian worldview, first under deism, rationalism and modernism, and more recently under postmodernism. Here we can mention the attacks on Scripture and the supernatural from the earlier movements, and on truth and the uniqueness of Christianity from the latter. These assaults have come with a rejection of Christian moral values, often not so much by the generation that left the faith, but certainly with their children. Their repudiation of the Christian worldview can be witnessed in all areas of life, especially in their attacks on a social structure based on marriage and families.

As a result of these influences and upheavals we find that even many Christians fail to hold a consistently Christian worldview. Today those of older generations, which had to cope with modernism, often horizontalise the faith, holding an almost deistic position on miracles, as something belonging to the past.⁶¹ With this, their view of salvation often centres on overcoming the outcomes of sin, as displayed in war, political oppression, abuse and

⁶⁰ The Reforms in the Netherlands under the leadership of the pastor and statesman, Abraham Kuyper are an example.

⁶¹ Deists limited the miraculous during the time of divine creation, many Christians of a modernistic mindset limit it to the time of, and prior to, the life of Christ and the apostles.

poverty, rather than on victory over sin itself. While the younger, postmodernism, generations are more prepared to embrace the supernatural, they often place more emphasis on mystic experiences than on Scripture in developing their spirituality. Here the fact that phenomena similar to the “Toronto blessing” and glossolalia are shared by other religions is not interpreted as a warning that these may not be helpful in shaping a Christian identity, but rather as an affirmation that there is more than one road to salvation.

On a number of issues moderns and postmoderns think alike, despite their differing worldviews. Thus the acceptance of non-Christian religions as vehicles of salvation was also present among Christians with a naturalistic worldview. However, they based it on “scientific” grounds, like the principle of cultural relativity, and on the common morality found within religions. Similarly adherents of both worldviews have expressed doubts on whether God was in charge in times of earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, bush fires and similar catastrophes. From their own perspectives, both have challenged the biblical view of a future in conformity to God’s fixed decree.⁶²

Other indications that the Christian worldview is eroding among God’s people can be seen in the new meanings given to traditional Christian terms. The understanding of God’s Kingdom has changed from a hierarchical realm, where all God’s people have their God-appointed place under Christ, to an egalitarian democracy where you follow those with whom you are in agreement. Hence “Mission Statements” have replaced Creeds and Confessions in defining church identity, and where people think these no longer represent their goals and aspirations they feel free to change to a church more in tune with their expectations. The Church itself is often viewed as a community where one goes to go to feel good, with mood music and homilies promising health and wealth. Here spirituality is understood as something displayed in worship rather than a dimension of life as a whole.

There are many other Christian worldview aberrations we could mention, including: the appeal to Human Rights rather than human duties with

⁶² Modernists often see chance and human free will as operative principles in directing the future, while Postmodern pantheism tends to view the divine itself as developing. In Christianity this view is found in Process Theology goes and the Openness of God theology.

privileges bestowed by divine grace; concern about political correctness rather than scriptural correctness; and self-esteem as something that can be found apart from a new identity in Christ. And many Christians continue to champion a free market capitalism, a system based on greed, as the model best suited for the practice of Christian stewardship.

The question that arises is, how can Christian leaders counter these non-Christian influences on the formation of the worldviews of the people in their care? Where are new converts going to learn a Christian way of perceiving the world? Where are the young to be corrected on numerous misguided teachings received at school and university? How do we encourage the more mature to continue in, promote and build on the worldview of their heritage? I believe one primary way to achieve these goals is through the preaching of the Word of God. And here the Book of Acts is particularly helpful, as it provides us with insights on how this was achieved in the early church.

It has often been observed that the world in which the events described in Acts took place was not unlike our world today. There was a relatively stable world order exhibiting cultural, moral and religious pluriformity. Most things were tolerated as long as they were politically correct; for example, you could worship whatever gods you pleased as long as these included Caesar. There was a wide range of worldviews, with Stoics and Epicureans representing two dominant schools of thought (Acts 17:18). While these two approaches have some parallels to the pantheistic and naturalistic divide of our time (modernism and postmodernism), both schools tended to fatalism and dualism. They also had a cyclic rather than linear idea of time and were without the perception of a transcendent God.

There are several scenes in Acts that show us how Paul preached the Gospel in this context. An unavoidable aspect of his message concerned the identity of his God and Christ. There was no accepted divinity Paul could appeal to, a transcendent God who made the heavens and the earth and everything in it. Instead Paul appeals to the shrine to the “Unknown God” (Acts 17:18), and builds on that, with references to earlier Greek sages, to point to a God who is above creation.⁶³ Some years later John describes the divine Christ with

⁶³ It is interesting to speculate whether the shrine to the Unknown God represented an earlier phase of Greek religious development that stood closer to the God revealed to Adam and Noah

reference to the Logos, understood by Stoics and others as a pantheistic force that governed nature (Jn. 1:1f.). However, both John and Paul find it necessary to explain that this God created and ruled creation without being a part of creation. In this way both John and Paul introduce a transcendent God, who is the Father of Jesus Christ. Paul also challenges the notion of cyclic time, presenting Christ as the one appointed by God to judge the world at the eschaton.⁶⁴

While some of these concepts were new, they were not seen as a threat. What did invoke a protest was Paul's reference to Christ as one resurrected from the dead. The idea of entering the life beyond with a physical body was met with disbelief by many listeners: "When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered ..." (Acts 17:32). Here it was not an objection to the miracle of the resurrection, but to the idea that one would want to return to a physical body at all. The Greek dualistic worldview had always looked upon death as a glorious liberation from corruptible flesh. The concept of a physical resurrection was a major stumbling block, even to Greeks who believed in Christ (see 1 Cor. 15).

Another area of worldview tension surrounds the Graeco-Roman world's objects of worship. In his preaching Paul encouraged people to do away with their false gods and superstitions (Acts 14:15; 19:26; cf. 1 Cor. 10:7). Christianity would probably have been tolerated, even welcomed, if it had not been seen as a threat to other religions and especially the industries associated with them. Thus we find that it is the silversmith, Demetrius, who leads the uprising against Paul's party in Ephesus. Ostensibly he does so to defend the honour of the goddess Artemis, or Diana. But Luke makes it clear that Demetrius was motivated by fear of economic loss (Acts 19:23ff.). If the wholesale destruction of magical scrolls and implements in Ephesus was anything to go by (Acts 19:19), it is clear that his fears were not unfounded.

and their children. Don Richardson, in his book *Eternity in their Hearts* (1091), argues that Epimenides, who directed the building of the shrine many centuries earlier and who is cited by Paul in v. 28, was a Greek sage who worshipped the true God c.600 BC.

⁶⁴ "Gk. thought has no developed eschatological understanding of time, i.e. one directed towards a future goal or end of the historical process." H.G. Link, in Colin Brown (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of the New Testament Vol. 2*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, Regency House, 1976), p. 55.

Another worldview aspect Paul and other early preachers had to deal with was fatalism. Well documented in such Greek tragedies as *Oedipus Rex* and *Electra*, the Greek tragedies portrayed the will of a god as a destiny that could not be avoided. How different is the approach of Luke, and that of the Christians he writes about. While they upheld the sovereignty of the one true God in all of life, with that they accepted that humans were accountable for their fate. We see this in Peter's sermon on Pentecost, where he holds the Jews responsible for the death of Christ, even though they had acted in the outworking of God's plan (Acts 2:38; cf. 3:17-20).

The recognition that both God and humans play a part in historical events, a doctrine known as *concurrency*, also comes to the fore in Luke's description of the growing church. Sometimes he pictures this as the outcome of human effort (Acts 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 11:24; 16:5; 18:8; 19:20), at other times he describes it as the work of God's Spirit (Acts. 2:47; 11:18; 13:48; 16:14; 21:19). But perhaps the story that most clearly shows the working of concurrency is that of Paul's shipwreck at Malta. When things look dire, Paul encourages the crew and fellow passengers with a revelation from God that none of them would perish in the storm (Acts 27:22). But not long afterwards he gives the warning that, unless they prevent the crew from abandoning the ship in the lifeboat, the passengers will perish (Acts 27:31). Unlike the worldview of the Greeks, that of Christians does not encourage fatalism. Rather divine promises and threats are reasons for Christian action and the shouldering responsibility.

While the above examples should encourage today's preachers similarly to promote the Christian worldview in their preaching, the question arises as to how this ought to be done. Can we use the sermons recorded in Acts as models for preachers today? Elsewhere in this journal it has been demonstrated that Acts is more descriptive than prescriptive, and that we cannot simply presume the methodology of Peter and Paul is the right one for our present day situation.⁶⁵ Nevertheless I do want to stress that their strategy of tailoring the message to the audience is one we need to take for our example. Peter's messages to the Jews (Acts 2:14ff.; 3:12ff.) is quite different from his Gospel presentation to the God-fearing Roman, Cornelius (Acts

⁶⁵ See Stephen Voorwinde, "How Normative is Acts."

10:34f.). Similarly Paul's messages to the Lycaonians at Lystra and Greeks at Athens differ greatly from his messages to the Jews at Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:16ff.; 22:1ff.).

No doubt one reason for these different approaches was that the Jews were acquainted with the OT Scriptures. But a further reason would have been that in preaching to non-Jews Peter and Paul could not avoid addressing worldview issues, such as the identity and nature of God. If this is correct then one thing we can learn from these preachers is that in worldview preaching it is necessary to identify where the people are at. Paul, especially, looks for points of contact with his audience, like the shrine to the Unknown God, and is prepared to quote their own authorities, like Epimenides (Acts 17:23; 28). In fact, Paul was quite prepared to modify his own behaviour to fit in with the worldview of his audience where he could do so without compromise (1 Cor. 9:20f.).

In the evangelistic setting pictured in Acts, worldview issues are preached in order to prepare people for an understanding of the Gospel. We have to go to the epistles to see how worldview issues are dealt with in the context of Christian congregations. First Corinthians contains some good examples of Greek worldview influences, raising issues like the status of pagan gods and idols, and the nature of the resurrection body (1 Cor. 8; 15). Galatians deals with the Jewish issue of living by the law (Gal. 3:1ff.). To dismiss these as theological and ethical issues is to miss the point. People held these errant views because at times they were still operating on non-Christian worldview principles.⁶⁶

In Acts one aspect that clearly distinguishes the evangelistic preaching to unbelievers from the preaching to Jews and Christians is the use of Scripture. Once it has been accepted that God speaks through the Word (2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Pet. 1:21) this becomes the main source and authority for the sermon. But when preaching to the unconverted it becomes necessary to find points of contact within their worldview in order to built on that to where the Gospel

⁶⁶ Paul identifies some of the broader worldview principles when he contrasts Jews and Greeks as seeking signs and wisdom respectively; i.e., the Jews trusted their senses and followed an empirical epistemology, while the Greeks trusted their minds and followed an idealist epistemology (1 Cor. 1:22; cf. Jn. 20:25; 1 Jn. 1:1; Acts 17:17; 18:4).

can be meaningfully introduced. Don Richardson would go even further, arguing that missionaries must study worldviews and cultures for any “redemptive analogies” that may provide vehicles for the presentation of the Gospel.⁶⁷ In our culture such redemptive analogies are often found in literature and movies, which may in fact have been inspired by Christian thinking.⁶⁸ However, such aids must always be used as tools and not as authorities. From the beginning it must be clear that Christians find their authority in the Word of God.

One question that arises in evangelistic and worldview preaching is whether this is best served with an expository preaching style. Of course all true preaching is “expository” in the sense that it serves to explain God’s will for mankind as revealed in his Word. But the term is often restricted for preaching on a specific Scripture passage, or more commonly, a series of passages, in a manner that seeks to exhaust the meaning of the biblical text. While there are some passages that invite a “worldviewish” approach, such as Ps. 24:1,2 and Rom. 12:2; there are two problems associated with such an approach to worldview preaching. The first is that in worldview preaching such passages might easily be used without reference to their context, which determines the primary meaning of the text. The second is that it is not always possible to find single passages on which one can base important biblical themes (try finding a passage that speaks of the need for every Christian to regard their work as a Christian calling or vocation).⁶⁹

By its very nature the presentation of a Christian worldview needs “Big Picture” preaching. It needs to explore recurring themes and emphases that are found throughout the Scriptures, but often in passing, without these being the sole emphasis of the text. Thus an entire Bible book may be expressive of a worldview reality – such as the providential care of God over his people in Ruth and Esther, or the sin, salvation and service paradigm that marks the book of Romans. It is doubtful that full justice can be done to such a theme

⁶⁷ See Don Richardson, *Peace Child and Eternity in Their Hearts* (Ventura: Regal books, 1975 & 1981)

⁶⁸ C.S. Lewis *Narnia Tales* is an example. For a movie consider *Omega Man*, with its concluding scene of a fountain filled with life-giving blood. It was based on a book by Richard Matheson entitled *I am Legend* (1954).

⁶⁹ Luther based it on 1 Cor. 7:20, but few commentators follow him there.

by the preacher confining himself to one particular passage from one of these books.

Worldview scholar Mike Goheen observes that much of our preaching today is the reverse of the “Big Picture” approach. He points out that this is the outcome of the modernist analytical method in teaching and learning:

Scholars thought that if they could break down the Bible into little bits and understand those little bits using the methods of the natural sciences, then somehow they could understand the Bible better. (*Presbyterian*, August 2010)

There is a place for the analytical approach, but it must not become the preachers only preaching style. The details can only fall into place where the big picture is established and regularly reviewed. Let me illustrate this. If one of my former neighbours from Nigeria were to visit me to learn about Australian house-building techniques some trips to builders’ supply and hardware stores would not satisfy his need. While it would help to show different components, like windows, doors, hinges and plaster sheets, I would need to alternate such excursions with visits to show homes, display kitchens and the like to show where these fit in. Similarly our preaching must introduce the bigger picture as well bring out the details of the Christian faith.

To sum up, our study of the two books of Luke, his Gospel and the Acts, has shown us that worldview realities must be accepted as an important aspect of our preaching. Firstly, a good understanding of the worldview context of the passages we preach on will help ensure that we interpret the text correctly. Secondly, in our preaching we must address worldview issues that will help our listeners lead a Christian life in the context of worldly philosophies that are indifferent, if not inimical, to the Gospel. In these ways our listeners will be better informed and better prepared to face life where God has placed them.