"You Will Be My Witnesses": Aspects of Mission in the Acts of the Apostles

BEVERLY ROBERTS GAVEN'TA

Concerned that mission scholars are not approaching Acts wholistically, Professor Gaventa here gives us a helpful literary study of mission as portrayed in Acts, shedding new light on familiar passages.

During the summer of 1981 I read a great many works in the social sciences on the topic of religious conversion. At the end of that time I discussed my findings with an anthropologist, expressing disappointment because I had not discovered the kind of study I expected or wanted to see. The anthropologist responded sympathetically, observing that the problem with reading in other people's disciplines is that one always feels they are not dealing with the crucial issues or the interesting questions.

Certainly those of us who are in biblical studies hear that complaint about our own work. To those who peek over into our furrow, it appears that we want to know too much. We not only want to know what the text says but why and for what community and in response to what problem and on and on. Ernst Käsemann once wrote that New Testament scholars seem to others to claim that they are able to "hear the grass grow and bedbugs cough" (1968:75). Although I participate in this search and know the reasons for it, I understand why our colleagues become impatient from time to time.

Complaints of this sort run on a two-way street. If biblical scholars want to know too much about the text and its origins,
perhaps missiologists want to know too little. My impression is that studies of the biblical views of mission operate with a very large brush. The “Great Commission” of Matthew 28 and the opening lines of Acts serve as justification for missionary endeavors. Those who argue for the priority of personal salvation lean on certain texts; those who plead for holistic conversion turn to others. The danger is that the Bible may function as a collection of slogans to be drawn upon as necessary. (I do not intend to suggest that only missiologists are guilty of this practice, or that biblical scholars are not.)

What we need to do, instead of following either of these approaches, is to read the text as inductively as possible, to read it “from the inside”. Rather than rushing into the task of reconstructing the various Christian communities of the first century, or seeking only isolated sayings regarding mission, we need to ask what the dynamics of the text are. That is, what does the text wish to say, and how is that conveyed?

My concern here is to ask just these sorts of questions of the book of Acts and its understanding of mission, limiting this inquiry to one New Testament text in order to make the task more specific and manageable and because that particular text is an easy target for the practices I have referred to. New Testament scholars have tended to read Acts not as a whole but as a collection of information (accurate or inaccurate) about the development of the church (van Unnik 1973:348). Missiologists may see it as a missionary document or a map for contemporary mission. In neither case is it read on its own terms.

A preliminary explanation is needed concerning the definition of the term “mission” that is being employed here. I am using it in its general sense to refer to the act and result of sending — in this case the sending of believers. The investigation that follows will give more precision to the term from Luke’s perspective. There is considerable debate regarding the term in missiological circles which prompts all of us to clarify our use of the term. For the purpose of this inquiry, however, it is also important not to define mission in a way that determines in advance what will emerge from a rereading of Acts.¹

**Mission Is of God, Not of Church**

Surely the first thing we notice in Acts is that mission does not belong to the church. It is not the church who sends, but God
who sends. That is not to deny or denigrate the role played in Acts by the Holy Spirit, whose coming at Pentecost prompts the first of Peter's sermons and the first mass conversion. The reception of the Spirit by Cornelius and his household convinces Peter that baptism cannot be denied them. At a number of points Paul and his colleagues receive explicit and specific guidance from the Spirit.

The risen Lord also takes part in the sending of believers. This is indicated in the pre-Ascension dialogue with the disciples, but it becomes more direct in the narratives of Paul's conversion. In the third account, Jesus himself not only confronts Paul but announces to him the nature of the work he is to do (26:16-18).

While it is important that we keep in mind the particular actions ascribed to God, to the Spirit and to the risen Lord, for Luke these are all ways of saying that God is in control of the mission. Luke is less interested in a systematic doctrine of the Trinity than he is in making it perfectly clear who is in charge.

Luke establishes at the outset of Acts that the mission is from God. Just prior to the Ascension, he writes:

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority" (1:6-7).

Notice that Jesus not only tells them that the answer to that question is none of their business, but establishes that God is the one who designates "times and seasons". (For a more thorough discussion of this text see Gaventa 1982:34-37).

At the outset of his Pentecost sermon, Peter quotes from Joel to explain what is occurring. He follows the Septuagint of Joel closely, with a couple of significant exceptions. One is at the very beginning. The text of Joel reads, "And after these things it shall be, that I shall pour out my Spirit . . ." Luke, however, has altered Joel to read: "And it shall be in the last days God says, that I shall pour out my Spirit . . ." Luke's slight change interprets the coming of the Spirit as an eschatological act which God had initiated.

The evidence I have given thus far might allow us to think that Luke is simply acknowledging God's role in mission in a perfunctory way. Luke tips his hat, so to speak, to the one who announced that there would be a mission and later turned that mission over to the church. On the contrary, God's action is emphasized by contrast to the relative inaction of the church.
In the Ascension narrative Jesus tells the apostles, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." Although we sometimes read this statement as a command, it is actually a promise. The verb is indicative rather than imperative; more important, the statement occurs in a context where other promises are found (the coming of the Holy Spirit, the return of Jesus). Certainly the apostles do not appear to regard this as a command. Nowhere in Acts does anyone appeal to this statement to justify an aspect of the church's proclamation. Instead, it stands at the beginning of Luke's narrative as a summary of what follows.

Not only does the church not appeal to this statement, it seems to feel no urgency about moving beyond Jerusalem. Believers stay in Jerusalem until forced out. Even then, the apostles stay behind and others carry the word to Judea and Samaria. Philip receives a direct order to seek out the Ethiopian eunuch. Ananias protests a similar order regarding Paul. Peter righteously refuses to see the handwriting on the wall (or in the sheet!) concerning the Gentiles. Even after that, Paul and his fellow workers seek out Gentiles only following Jewish rejection of the gospel.

Jürgen Moltmann has written that the church does not have a mission, the mission has a church (1977:10). While that statement moves in the right direction, it does not go far enough. Mission as described by Luke is certainly not a function of the church, it almost develops in spite of the church! But there is also not an independent mission that gives birth to the church. Rather in Acts, God has a mission for the church, or as David Bosch says, "Mission is the action of God in which the church shares and which belongs to the essential nature and character of the church" (1982:26).

**Mission as Witness**

While it is accurate to say that God has a mission for the church, that is not Lukian language. For Luke, the appropriate term would be "witness" rather than "mission". Both at the end of the Gospel of Luke and at the beginning of Acts, the risen Lord designates the apostles by this term, and "witness" is the term that dominates Luke's understanding of the proclaimer's role.

_Martus_, the Greek noun for someone who witnesses or gives
testimony, figures prominently in descriptions of the apostles' work. Judas' replacement is to become, with the others, a witness to Jesus' resurrection (1:22). When Peter's early sermons announce the resurrection of Jesus, they are punctuated with the remark that "we are witnesses" of these things (2:32; 3:15; 5:32; cf. 10:39; 10:41). Later Paul refers to the apostles in the same way (13:31) and is himself designated a witness of Jesus (22:15; 26:16).

Luke's use of martus draws on the legal meaning of the term. In one sense, then, the apostles and Paul are giving evidence for their claims about God. The judicial content of martus does not exhaust Luke's use of the term, however. For Luke, witnessing is the prime activity of mission.

What the witness does is to tell the truth to the world about God's action in Jesus Christ. "Telling the truth" involves both word and deed. Those frequent and lengthy sermons should not mislead us. The inclusion of speeches in ancient writings was a common method of conveying one's point. That Luke employs the method does not mean that he thought the gospel could only be conveyed through words. He also frequently mentions the "signs and wonders" that occurred among believers.

Although both the words and the deeds of the witnesses are described by Luke as being powerful, they are by no means always "successful". Sometimes the mass conversions of the early chapters of Acts lead us to miss his point. But those mass conversions soon fall away, and the response to the witness is at best mixed. By the time Paul preaches in Athens, even those who respond positively to his sermon say only that they will listen to him again (17:32). Luke often comments that the "Word of the Lord" grew and multiplied, but that is not always true of the witness or the church.

In Adversity and With Boldness

Connected with the rejection of the witness is a factor that Luke portrays as shaping the mission — adversity. This theme emerges early in Acts and becomes more important as the narrative progresses. It is not too much to say that for Luke one characteristic of mission is that it operates in adversity and with parresia, with boldness.

This characteristic first appears in Acts 4. Following the healing of the lame person, Peter preaches and the officials
arrest both Peter and John. In response to the question of how this healing took place, Peter announces to the rulers that it could happen only through Jesus (4:5-12). Then we read this: "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common people, they wondered; and they recognized that they had been with Jesus" (4:13).

The Greek noun translated "boldness" in the RSV is *parresia* and this referred to the political right of the citizen to speak freely, even when opposed. It also referred to outspokenness or forthrightness. Here in Acts *parresia* surely describes what we would call the boldness of Peter and the power with which he communicated. His hearers are amazed at his *parresia* because they see that he is an ordinary, uneducated person without rhetorical skills to adorn his argument.

Peter and John have so stunned their captors that they are soon released, although with threats. They return to the believers who together utter a prayer beginning with the praise of God's sovereignty. The prayer then quotes from Psalm 2 concerning the rulers of the earth and their vain resistance to God. The prayer continues:

> for truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats, and grant to thy servants to speak thy word with all boldness, while thou stretchest out thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of thy holy servant Jesus (4:27-30).

Contrary to what might be expected, there is no request that the opponents of the gospel be struck down or even hindered in their course. There is, instead a prayer for *parresia*. The answer to that prayer comes quickly for the next verse reads, "And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness."

Commentators sometimes call this a second Pentecost, yet aside from the technical questions here, a functional parallel appears between the two. In the first Pentecost narrative, the coming of the Spirit inaugurates the preaching of the gospel. This second inaugurates another major theme in Acts — the
adversity which surrounds the mission and the *parresia* which God grants the messengers facing that trial.

These two elements appear together throughout Acts. When Paul returns to Jerusalem after his conversion, Barnabas testifies to the apostles that Paul has spoken boldly at Damascus (9:27). Paul is then welcomed in Jerusalem where he speaks boldly in the Lord's name. The same verse describing this preaching adds that Paul debated with the Hellenists "and they tried to kill him" (9:29).

Paul's first sermon described by Luke is at Pisidian Antioch where Paul and Barnabas gain an initial hearing, only to find that certain Jews become resentful and jealous. In face of this opposition Luke says, "Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly", announcing they would go to the Gentiles. The Gentiles receive them gladly, but the Jews force them out of the city (ch. 13).

This pattern recurs at Iconium (14:1-7) and Corinth (19:8-10). Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, opposition arises, and still the proclaimers assert the truth in an open and fearless way. When Paul makes his final defense before Agrippa and Festus, he asserts that he is speaking the truth boldly. This juxtaposition of adversity and *parresia* is not accidental but integral to what Luke wishes to say.

The closing comments in Luke's two-volume work indicate the importance of this theme. Having been rejected by the Jewish community at Rome, Paul announces for the last time that salvation has been sent to the Gentiles. Luke concludes that Paul lived at Rome "preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered." That is the translation of the RSV, which obscures the fact that the word *parresia* appears here also. Literally translated, what Luke says is that Paul was preaching and teaching "with all boldness without hindrance", which echoes the prayer of believers in chapter 4 and reminds the reader that despite persistent adversity Peter and Paul and others constantly speak with a God-given forthrightness.

Frequently Lukan theology is characterized as triumphalist. This picture of the mission as beleaguered yet bold makes that characterization appear simplistic. Without denying or covering up the difficulties faced by those who preach the gospel, Luke insists that they are not alone. The Lord's assurance to Paul in
Corinth seems to convey Luke's message: "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city" (18:9b-10).

From Darkness to Light

If the proclaimers of the gospel encounter hostility and rejection, they also meet those eager to hear the word and receive it. The multitudes who repent and believe in the early chapters of Acts attest to that, but what does Luke understand as the character of those conversions?

Studies of conversion in the New Testament most often emphasize the words *metanoia* (repentance) and *epistrophe/epistrophei* (turning, to turn) which occur more frequently in Luke-Acts than elsewhere in the New Testament. However frequency in itself tells us little, since they appear in similar contexts in Hellenistic-Jewish missionary literature, so Luke's use of these terms appears to be rather conventional and a study of the words in isolation yields little information.

Another approach to Luke's understanding of conversion is to study conversion narratives in Acts rather than conversion language. At first glance that approach looks unprofitable, for Luke includes few stories about individual conversions and those he tells do not conform to a consistent pattern.

But these conversion stories should not be skipped over too quickly. In chapters 8-10 there are three conversion narratives, each more dramatic and complicated than the one before, and they do shed some light on Luke's notion of conversion.²

One aspect of Luke's treatment of conversions immediately apparent is that conversion is not an end in itself. He never reports a conversion to glorify the convert or to praise a religious experience. Indeed one difficulty we have with Luke's treatment of Paul comes from attempting to answer questions about Paul's religious experience that did not concern Luke.

Luke includes conversion stories only when they have significance far beyond themselves. The Ethiopian eunuch may represent the fulfillment of Isaiah 56:3f, in which foreigners and eunuchs are promised inclusion among God's people. Paul's conversion from persecutor to proclaimer not only sets the stage for his later work but indicates that the word of the Lord is powerful even over the enemies of believers. Cornelius, of
course, represents all Gentiles. His conversion produces what we could call the conversion of Peter, who must open his eyes to see that "God shows no partiality" (10:34). Thus conversions are important, not in themselves, but because of what they represent or the changes they produce.

A second constant in Luke's conversion narratives is that conversion comes from God. Having already elaborated on the totality of mission being from God, it may be that this seems redundant, yet Luke himself is redundant at this point. In the cycle of the eunuch, Paul, and Cornelius, this theme is pronounced. An angel directs Philip to a specific road and chariot. Following the eunuch's baptism, Philip is whisked away by the Spirit. That Paul's conversion is God's doing hardly needs to be said. As Flannery O'Connor wrote, "I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse" (1979:355). Luke does not mention the legendary horse, but he does bring Paul into direct encounter with the risen Lord who in turn commands Ananias to help Paul regain his sight. The Cornelius episode doubles this element with a vision for Cornelius, one for Peter and the climactic gift of the Holy Spirit.

But emphasizing these three individual conversions is not to suggest that conversion in Acts is a private matter. While Luke does describe individual conversions, he does not describe individualistic conversions. The early chapters constantly link those who repent and believe with the community that already existed. At the conclusion of the Pentecost narrative Luke comments that 3,000 were baptized, adding that "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42). This is underscored by Luke's following summary describing the power of the community and its common faith and practice (2:43-47).

Even the stories of individual converts link these to the larger community in some way. Although the Ethiopian eunuch disappears from our sight after his baptism, he is brought to that baptism by means of Philip — a respected member of the Jerusalem community. Ananias — described as a disciple — has to be convinced that Paul is not a threat to believers, yet he eventually welcomes Paul who then joins with disciples at Damascus (9:19) and later at Jerusalem (9:26f), although there Barnabas must assist him. What we normally refer to as
Cornelius' conversion in fact involves his family and friends as well. Their connection to the larger church could scarcely be more firmly asserted than it is through the medium of Peter.

Taken together these conversions belong, for Luke, squarely within God's mission, not just because preaching leads to growth, but because conversion is an aspect of God's action in the world by which people are called to faithfulness in life together and in proclaiming the word. As Paul describes his commission in his final defense speech: "they . . . turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sin and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in [Jesus]" (Acts 26:18).

The Mission and the Cultures

In order for people to turn "from darkness to light", they must hear a word that truly communicates. Even as Luke understood mission to be God-given and God-directed so that its messengers spoke with boldness even in the face of adversity, the question now is how the message itself is conveyed. Luke portrays a mission that is adaptable to culture, and the mission takes on different forms in different contexts.

The early sermons of Acts, set in Jerusalem and before a thoroughly Jewish audience, interpret Jesus by means of the history and the scripture of Israel. Jesus is greater than David by virtue of God's having raised him from the dead (2:24-36), and he is described as the servant of "the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob" (3:13). While these sermons clearly blame the people of Jerusalem for Jesus' crucifixion, they also claim that their treatment of Jesus took place in accordance with God's will and plan (2:23; 3:14-18), so that these sermons place Jesus within the messianic expectations of the people.

Preaching to the Diaspora alters this pattern slightly. At Pisidian Antioch Paul elaborates on the guilt of "those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers" (13:27), admitting that the people were fulfilling what had been written concerning the Messiah, but this is a slight concession (13:29). The burden of the sermon is that the Diaspora Jews should not act as had their coreligionists in Jerusalem.

Paul's preaching at Athens contrasts dramatically with both Peter's early sermons in Jerusalem and Paul's sermon at Pisidian Antioch. He begins, not with the history of Israel or with the
prophecies regarding the Messiah, but with the beliefs of the Athenians: “I perceive that in every way you are very religious” (17:22), thus starting with a point that the Athenians accept and employing philosophical language in order to introduce his understanding of God. Paul does not announce that the Messiah has come, for such a proclamation has power only when its hearers know what that title means and wait for that coming. Instead he declares that the unknown God is God.

In all these instances, Luke describes a mission that is willing and able to speak in a language that can be heard. The message does not exist in one language or in a single cultural system. It is equally clear, however, that there are limits to this “adaptability”. Paul and Barnabas quickly repudiate those at Lystra who take them to be divine because they heal a cripple (14:8-18). Demetrius, the silversmith who leads the riot at Ephesus, rightly is hostile to the Christian proclamation (19:23ff). Paul and his colleagues would not present Jesus as another God any more than they would make themselves God; thus they constitute a threat to any who claim to create God.

Conclusions

So the first step in understanding the biblical views of mission is to attempt to read the text “from the inside”. Detailed examination of Luke’s description of the early mission makes certain aspects of his perspective stand out. Mission is, first of all, God’s action, initiated and directed by God, in some cases over against the church. Mission occurs through witnesses who proclaim to the world, by word and deed, the truth about Jesus Christ, and although rejected and persecuted, they remain faithful to their task of telling the truth to the world in language that the world can hear.

There are both negative and positive lessons here. One vital negative lesson has to do with our idealization and romanticism regarding primitive Christianity — the “early days” when church growth was easy and Christian unity was plentiful. A careful reading of Acts indicates that things were not that simple. Not only does Luke describe rejection of the gospel, but as an apologist for the church, he occasionally portrays believers as obstinate and immovable. Only the first two chapters of Acts portray the early church enjoying bliss internally and approval externally!
What positive lessons come from this reading of Acts? Luke did not write this as a guide for Christian mission, so it cannot become that 20 centuries later. There are, however, provocative issues raised here.

**Personal salvation and social justice.** Much conversation in the church today presupposes a distinction between personal salvation and social justice, thus the discussions of holistic conversion and holistic mission. This dichotomy is of course a false one. Luke is so comfortable with the personal and corporate dimensions of Christian proclamation that I wonder how and why we have introduced the dichotomy. Luke understands, as do all New Testament writers, that belief and action are two parts of one entity, and his clarity causes me to be amazed at our attempt to divide the indivisible.

**The necessity of growth.** Much is being said these days about the necessity of church growth both at the national and international level. One danger is that too much stress will be placed on numbers alone, so that the health of a community is understood to be quantifiable. At the other extreme, however, is the danger of complacency. A church that never grows may be a church that has decided, perhaps unconsciously, that things are quite nice just as they are. Once again, Luke prompts a question: Is church growth the point— or faithfulness? If the witness of Luke-Acts is evaluated by means of numbers, then it begins to decline rather early on. If instead this witness is evaluated by means of parresia and faithfulness, then “the word of God grows and multiplies.”

**The power of the word of hope.** Luke could not have foreseen what would happen to the witness he described, both its tremendous growth and its distortion. It may be that Luke wrote, not to a community that was celebrating its past and its present, but to a community that was discouraged by defeat and rejection. To them, and to us, Luke writes a reminder that the power of God’s word is greater than its enemies; it is also greater than the weakness of the vessels of witness.

Notes

1. There is no claim that what follows is “presuppositionless exegesis”. It is simply my attempt to understand the task of the church as portrayed in Acts and is offered for critical conversation.

2. It is often argued that the narratives of Paul’s encounter with Jesus are commissioning narratives rather than conversion narratives. The two later accounts of Paul’s conversion (chs. 22 and 26) do emphasize the call of Paul as a witness; however in
chapter 9 that is only a minor element — the major point is that the enemy of the community has been overthrown and turned into a disciple.

References Cited
Bosch, David
1982 "Theological Education in Missionary Perspective" Missiology X:1 January
Gaventa, Beverly R.
Käsemann, Ernst
Moltmann, Jurgen
O'Connor, Flannery
van Unnik, W. C.

GRATIS

In order to clear our warehouse of back issues, and hoping that these can be of service to our missiological community, we are offering free a random selection of back issues of Missiology to any who are interested and are willing to pay the postage. For those who would prefer more than a single copy of an individual issue for classroom purposes or making available to your missionaries for discussion purposes, indicate how many duplicate copies are wanted.

Merely fill in the blank below and mail it with 50 cents for each copy desired to:

Missiology
696 South Madison Avenue
Pasadena, California 91106

Name ____________________________________________

Address _________________________________________

Copies desired: ____________
Copyright and Use:

As an ATLAS user, you may print, download, or send articles for individual use according to fair use as defined by U.S. and international copyright law and as otherwise authorized under your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement.

No content may be copied or emailed to multiple sites or publicly posted without the copyright holder(s)’ express written permission. Any use, decompiling, reproduction, or distribution of this journal in excess of fair use provisions may be a violation of copyright law.

This journal is made available to you through the ATLAS collection with permission from the copyright holder(s). The copyright holder for an entire issue of a journal typically is the journal owner, who also may own the copyright in each article. However, for certain articles, the author of the article may maintain the copyright in the article. Please contact the copyright holder(s) to request permission to use an article or specific work for any use not covered by the fair use provisions of the copyright laws or covered by your respective ATLAS subscriber agreement. For information regarding the copyright holder(s), please refer to the copyright information in the journal, if available, or contact ATLA to request contact information for the copyright holder(s).

About ATLAS:

The ATLA Serials (ATLAS®) collection contains electronic versions of previously published religion and theology journals reproduced with permission. The ATLAS collection is owned and managed by the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) and received initial funding from Lilly Endowment Inc.

The design and final form of this electronic document is the property of the American Theological Library Association.