

# Evangelism in the Acts of the Apostles

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To cover the subject of evangelism in the book of Acts is a tall order for a brief article. In a discussion of early-Christian evangelism, David Lim gives the following definition: “[Evangelism] is the verbal proclamation of the good news of salvation with a view of leading people to a right relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup> Measured by this definition, all of Acts would qualify as dealing with evangelism.

Acts begins with a command to the disciples to evangelize the nations (1:8). Even earlier, the theme of preaching the word of salvation appears—when Jesus teaches his disciples concerning the Kingdom of God (1:3). In Jesus’ teaching, the message of the Kingdom is the message of salvation. With this reference to the Kingdom, Acts 1:3 forms a bracket with the last verse of the book (28:31), which also refers to preaching the Kingdom. Everything in between these two verses deals with the spread of the message of salvation, the good news of God’s Kingdom, into which all who commit themselves to Jesus Christ enter.

Almost every aspect of the church’s outreach is addressed in Acts. In this article, I will not attempt a complete treatment of evangelism in Acts but will focus only on selected examples illustrative of the primary principles that are particularly relevant today.<sup>2</sup> These will be grouped under the following headings: (1) the mandate to be witnesses, (2) the power for witness: the Holy Spirit, (3) the audience targeted to receive the witness,

(4) the message, i.e., the content of the witness, and (5) the methods, i.e., the strategy of witness.

## The Mandate

Acts 1:8 serves as the thematic verse for all of Acts. It consists of Jesus’ mandate to his disciples to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem and all Judea and Samaria and as far as the end of the earth.”<sup>3</sup> Usually the phrase “end of the earth” has been interpreted as the utter extent of the world’s boundaries. Some have questioned this, however. One viewpoint would limit Jesus’ mandate to Palestine, noting that the circle of apostles to whom the mandate was given are not shown in Acts as working outside Palestine. Others see Ethiopia as the “end of the earth,” noting that Roman writers often described that area as the limits of the inhabited world. For them the commission would already be fulfilled with Philip’s conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch. A larger group of scholars opt for Rome, since Acts ends with Paul reaching that destination.

If one considers that the phrase “end of the earth” probably derives from Isaiah 49:6, the common “limitless” view is probably correct, since that seems to be the meaning in Isaiah. This becomes even more likely in light of Acts 13:47, where Paul quotes the full text of Isaiah 49:6 as justification for his turning to the Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch. The “end of the earth” would thus refer to all the peoples of the earth in all places.<sup>4</sup>

Acts 1:8 provides a rough outline of the

book: chapters 1-5 are confined to Jerusalem, chapters 6-12 to Judea and Samaria, and chapters 13-28 to Paul's ministry to the "end of the earth." The progress of the gospel is charted not only in geographical, but also in ethnic terms. The twelve apostles concentrate on the Jews of Jerusalem. A group of Greek-speaking Christian "Hellenists" are the first to reach out beyond the city, spurred by the missionary vision of one of their own, the martyred Stephen. One of them, Philip, evangelizes the Samaritans (8:4-25) and an Ethiopian (8:26-40). The newly-converted Paul witnesses in Damascus and its environs (9:1-30). Peter joins the wider Palestinian outreach, preaching in the towns of the coastal plain (9:32-43) and to the "God-fearing" Gentile Cornelius (10:1-11:18). Ethnically, the most dramatic new undertaking was that of the Antioch church, which began a concerted witness to the Greeks of their city (11:19-30).

The lion's share of Acts is devoted to the mission of Paul in what is today Turkey, Greece, and Rome (chapters 13-28). The outreach of the first-century church must have been much broader than what is related in Acts, however. For example, we know that very early a large Christian community was established around Alexandria in Egypt, about which Acts is silent. Someone took Christianity to Rome before Paul, for when he arrived he found an already established church (28:14-15). Luke chose Paul as his exemplary missionary; but there were doubtless many others ministering in many other places.<sup>5</sup>

The question naturally arises: Why did the early Christians take so long in carrying out the full mandate? Why did they confine their witness at first to Jerusalem? Perhaps the answer is found in the disciples' question that prompted Jesus to

give them the mandate. They asked, "Are you at this time restoring the Kingdom to Israel?" (1:6). Their question was not inappropriate, for it recognized the Messianic status of Jesus. Jesus reminded them, however, that the Messianic hope as expressed in prophets like Isaiah involved fulfilling Israel's missionary mandate to be a light to the nations and to take the word of salvation "to the end of the earth."<sup>6</sup>

In all fairness to the Jerusalem church, they did eventually support the wider outreach begun by others. When Philip evangelized the Samaritans, Jerusalem sent Peter and John, who assisted in the effort (8:14). Even the more conservative wing of the Jerusalem congregation eventually recognized the hand of God and approved the acceptance of Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles (11:18). Through Barnabas the Jerusalem Christians participated in Antioch's outreach to the Gentiles (11:22). Likewise, they took part indirectly in Paul's mission through his traveling companions Barnabas and Silas, both of whom originally came from the Jerusalem church. Most significant of all was Jerusalem's recognition of the ministry of Paul and Barnabas and their agreement that Gentile converts would not have to be circumcised or live by the ceremonial aspects of the Jewish law (Acts 15:1-35).

The geographical dimension of Jesus' mandate in Acts 1:8 has often been noted. Equally important is the first clause of the verse: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and [then] you are to be my witnesses...." In Acts witness always begins with the Spirit's empowerment.

## The Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is, in many ways, the central figure in Acts's treatment of Christian evangelism. So evident is this that some would entitle the book "the Acts of the Holy Spirit." It is true that the Spirit is not mentioned in eleven chapters of Acts, but even in those chapters the Spirit's presence can be detected through phrases such as "speaking with boldness" (*parrēsia*) and the like.<sup>7</sup>

The Spirit is present in every new undertaking of the church in Acts. The disciples do not even begin their witness until the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. In fact, Christ explicitly enjoins them to wait in Jerusalem until they receive the Spirit (1:4-5). One could cite many examples where the Spirit is instrumental in guiding the Christian outreach at crucial turning points. An instance is Luke's emphasis on Stephen's speaking "with the Spirit" (6:10). Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin spoke of a God without borders, a God who could not be tied down to any one people or place. This Spirit-directed vision of Stephen served as a theological base for the entire mission of the church that unfolded after his martyrdom.

Another example of the Spirit leading to a new dimension in the Christian outreach is that of Philip's witness to the eunuch (8:26-39). The Spirit is explicitly mentioned in two places (8:29, 39). The Spirit's activity is implicit in many more details of the story: the angel's directive for Philip to go to the desert locale, the eunuch's reading the perfect prophetic passage to prepare one for hearing the gospel, and their arrival at a rare watering spot in the desert at the moment the eunuch seeks baptism. Such details point to the unmistakable conclusion that this

missionary breakthrough was not due to man's effort but to the work of the divine Spirit. Furthermore, it *was* a breakthrough, a witness to a non-Jew, a Gentile God-fearer from a distant land.

When the Antioch church sent Paul and Barnabas on what could accurately be described as the first "foreign" mission, it was not their own idea but God's, a direct calling from the Holy Spirit (13:2, 4). Likewise, when Paul began his first work on European soil, it was not by his own will. In fact, it was almost in spite of Paul that the work took place (16:6-10). Paul was travelling during his second missionary journey, revisiting the churches of his first mission and heading for the Aegean coast with its populous cities like Ephesus. Nevertheless, the Spirit prevented him from carrying out his plans (v. 6). So Paul headed north toward the province of Bithynia with its prosperous settlements along the Black Sea. Again, "the Spirit of Jesus" prevented him (v. 7). Perplexed, Paul headed toward the northern coast of Asia, finally arriving in Troas, the main port for sea traffic to Macedonia. There, by means of a vision of a Macedonian calling him to serve his people, Paul finally understood God's intention. God was calling him to a new field of service—to Macedonia and to Greece. The narrative of 16:6-10 emphasizes the divine leading. Note the trinitarian emphasis: the "Spirit" in verse 6, the "Spirit of Jesus" in verse 7, and "God" in verse 10. It was divine leading that directed Paul to Macedonia.

Not only does the Spirit lead Christians to new fields and empower their witness, he has other functions as well. First, the Spirit validates and prepares for the witness of the Christians. This is accomplished especially through "signs and

wonders.” The miracle-working function of the Spirit is highlighted in the last of the “summaries” of Acts (5:12-16). The Spirit engendered both fear and respect from the masses (5:13) and attracted many to faith in the Lord (5:14). An example of the miracles working together with the Christian witness is the healing of the lame man in Acts 3:1-8. The healing attracted a large number of people (3:9-11), affording Peter an excellent opportunity to share the gospel (3:12-16). The most important means by which the Spirit validates the truth of the Christian message is through his internal witness in the heart of individuals, leading them to faith (5:32).

Another function of the Spirit is to *legitimize* a new field of witness. This is evident in three particular instances in Acts. All three instances involve both a new type of target group and an ecstatic manifestation of the Spirit’s presence demonstrating God’s acceptance of the group. The first is the Samaritan witness in 8:17. Up to this point, Christians had witnessed exclusively to Jews. Now Philip reached out to the Samaritan “half-Jews.” It was bound to cause controversy. But, when Peter and John saw the obvious presence of the Spirit in the new believers, they were convinced that God was calling this new group into the Christian fold. The same was true of Cornelius (10:1-11:18). He was a “God-fearing” Gentile, one who believed in God, attended the synagogue, and practiced Jewish piety. Still, he was uncircumcised; he was not a convert to Judaism. Once again, to reach out to a Gentile, even a God-fearing one, was a radical move and bound to evoke controversy. It surely did so among the conservative Jewish-Christian brothers in Jerusalem, but what won them over, what they could not deny, was the

demonstration of the Spirit’s presence and thus of God’s acceptance of Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles (10:44-48; 11:18). The final “legitimizing” incident was the acceptance of the disciples of John the Baptist into the Christian fold through the witness of Paul (19:6). They too were a new type of target group, and they too were included with a special manifestation of the Spirit.

Two other observations can be made about the Spirit’s activity in Acts. First, as we observed in the case of Paul’s Macedonian call, the work of the Spirit is inseparable from the work of God. Acts strongly emphasizes the sovereignty of God. In every respect God controls the outreach of the church. He directs its evangelists; he convicts those who respond. The divine leading is depicted through several characteristic expressions. One is that of a “necessity” (Greek, *dei*) brought about by the purposes of God. The expression runs through Acts: since God inspired the Scripture, it must be (*dei*) fulfilled (Acts 1:16); the Messiah had to suffer, for Scripture points in that direction (17:3). Likewise, Paul *had to* suffer for the sake of the gospel, for it was a part of his divine calling (9:16). The same emphasis on the divine sovereignty is found in a number of passages that speak of God’s purpose or foreknowledge. An example is the passage where Peter refers to Christ being handed over to death through God’s ordained purpose and foreknowledge (2:23; cf. 4:28). Likewise, God stands behind the growth of the church; *he* adds to its numbers (2:47).

The second additional observation about the work of the Spirit in Acts is illustrated by 9:16 (already cited above): the witness of Christians often involves suffering.<sup>8</sup> For example, Peter’s sermon

after the healing of the lame man leads to Peter's and John's arrest (4:1-2). Stephen's witness before the Sanhedrin leads to his martyrdom and to the persecution of his fellow Hellenists (8:1-3). Paul certainly fulfilled the Lord's prediction that he would suffer for his name. He is driven out of Pisidian Antioch (13:50), stoned at Lystra (14:19), scourged and imprisoned at Philippi (16:23). On his final trip to Jerusalem, he is assaulted by a Jewish mob and taken into Roman custody (21:30-33). From that point to the end of Acts, Paul is a prisoner of the Romans. Paul's Christian friends warned him not to go to Jerusalem (21:4, 10-12). The Spirit, however, was directing Paul to go to Jerusalem, and Paul was well aware that he would probably suffer as a result (20:22-23). Paul had already experienced the reality of suffering for the sake of his Christian witness. He had learned that suffering often results from witness and that suffering can provide a context for witness. This certainly became the case with his Roman custody.

Acts provides little support for a triumphalist theology. Acts does say much about the work of the Spirit and the triumph of the gospel. The Spirit triumphs in Acts. His witnesses rarely do. The Spirit's success is almost in direct proportion to the Christians' willingness to suffer for the name of Christ (cf. 5:41).

### **The Target Audience**

Luke expressed considerable interest in the growth of the church. He often furnished "membership numbers." The band of disciples gathered in the upper room awaiting empowering by the Spirit numbered 120 (1:15). Three thousand more were added in response to Peter's invitation at Pentecost (2:41). As a result of

Peter's sermon in the Temple square, the total membership swelled to about 5,000 (4:5). Luke provides no precise figures for later Gentile conversions, but James does tell Paul upon his final visit to Jerusalem that the Jewish Christian congregation has added thousands ("myriads") of new believers (21:20).

In addition to explicit numbers, Luke often furnishes summaries that speak of the church's growth. For instance, he notes that after Pentecost the Lord continued to add to the church (2:47). Through the witness of the apostles' words and deeds, "multitudes" were added to the congregation (5:14). After the church's internal problem with the neglected widows was solved, the church experienced dramatic growth, even adding some of the priests (6:7). After the conversion of the persecutor Paul, the Judean church found peace and multiplied greatly (9:31). Likewise, after the death of another persecutor, Herod Agrippa I, the church was at peace and grew (12:24). The same sort of growth summaries occur frequently throughout the narrative of the Pauline mission (e.g., 16:5; 19:20).<sup>9</sup>

Not only did the gospel grow, it was inclusive in its outreach. This is an emphasis found throughout Luke's two volumes. It begins as early as Luke 2:30-32 with Simeon's prediction that the child Jesus would become a light to the nations bringing salvation to all peoples.<sup>10</sup> It continues to the very end of Acts with Paul preaching without distinction to "all" who came to him (28:30-31).

At the heart of the inclusive message of Acts is the Jew-Gentile question.<sup>11</sup> In his two volumes, Luke devotes considerable attention to this matter. He begins in the infancy narratives by showing how Jesus was born in the heart of Judaism of

parents who scrupulously observed the Jewish law (Luke 1-2). Gradually the story unfolds with the growing rejection of Jesus by his fellow Jews and his increasing acceptance by the Gentiles. The story ends with Paul's mission in the heart of the Gentile world, Rome, capital city of the Empire (Acts 28). The narrative of Luke's two volumes pivots around the Jewish capital of Jerusalem. The Gospel of Luke moves from Galilee to Jerusalem and ends in that city. Acts moves from Jerusalem to the "end of the earth."

In Acts, throughout the ministry of Paul there is a constant interplay between his appeal to his fellow Jews and his appeal to the Gentiles. This interplay is most vividly depicted in the account of his ministry at Pisidian Antioch (13:13-52). According to his custom, Paul began his witness in the Jewish synagogue. So successful was his first sermon that he was invited to preach again on the next Sabbath. When it arrived, practically the whole town showed up to hear him (v. 44). This would have included a large group of Gentiles, who had probably been invited by the God-fearers who had been present for his first synagogue sermon. The Jews were provoked to jealousy and resisted Paul's witness. Paul then stated that he was turning to the Gentiles, quoting Isaiah 49:6 as justification (vv. 46-47). One would expect that Paul's turning to the Gentiles would be a definitive step. Such was not the case. In the very next town, Iconium, Paul began his ministry once again in the synagogue. The pattern is repeated throughout Acts—beginning in the synagogue, being driven from the synagogue, turning to the Gentiles, but always starting back in the synagogue in each new place of witness. The book of Acts ends in the same fashion. In Rome,

Paul, under arrest, could not attend the synagogue. Instead, he had the Jewish community come to him (28:17-29). After a mixed response, Paul quoted Isaiah 6:9-10 with reference to the Jews' failure to believe. For a final time in the narrative of Acts he referred to the openness of the Gentiles to hear the word of salvation (v. 29).

How should one understand this conclusion of Acts? Was Paul suggesting that God was finished with the Jews? Was Luke stating that Christianity had reached its final destiny as a primarily Gentile phenomenon? Some would answer "yes" to these questions.<sup>12</sup> Still, the pattern of Paul's turning to the Gentiles in one community only to begin anew in the synagogue in the next is so well established in Acts that Luke most likely implies the same for the Roman situation. Paul had begun with the Jews, but because of a largely negative response, he turned to the more receptive Gentiles. That does not mean that he had given up altogether on his fellow Jews. Surely he continued to witness to those Jews who were willing to listen; they too were included in the "all" whom Paul welcomed to hear his teaching and preaching under his Roman house arrest (28:30-31).

Acts depicts two types of Christianity that existed alongside each other. The Jewish Christians, centered in Jerusalem, seem to have consisted almost exclusively of Jews, who continued to live faithfully by their Jewish laws and customs. Congregations like Antioch and Paul's mission churches seem to have been more heterogeneous, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. From an early stage, most likely beginning in Antioch, Gentile converts were not required to live by the more "ethnic" aspects of the Jewish law, such

as circumcision and the food laws. This created problems when Jewish and Gentile Christians mingled together, especially when they shared meals. For the more traditionally-oriented Jewish Christians, the seeming laxity toward Gentile converts was perplexing. Was not Jesus a *Jewish* Messiah and Christianity a movement originating from within Judaism? Had not Gentile converts to Judaism always been required to undergo circumcision and submit to all the Jewish law? As a result of these questions, a meeting was held in Jerusalem to consider the matter of Gentile admission. It is usually referred to as the Jerusalem Conference (Acts 15:1-35). The decision reached at the conference was a watershed for the Christian mission to the Gentiles. The principle was adopted that Gentiles would not have to be circumcised or live by every aspect of the Jewish law. In short, they would not have to become Jews in order to be Christians. By this precedent, an even broader principle was established for the church: the willingness to adapt to new situations where no central tenet of the faith would be compromised.<sup>13</sup> Rainer calls this the principle of the “open gospel.”<sup>14</sup>

In Acts, the inclusiveness of the gospel is all-embracing, extending over all boundaries that humans might erect.<sup>15</sup> It includes “half-breed” Samaritans as well as Jews. It extends to those on the periphery of the synagogue, to God-fearers like Cornelius and Lydia. It reaches out to those with physical limitations that would have excluded them from full participation in Jewish worship, people like the lame man at the Beautiful Gate and the Ethiopian eunuch. The latter’s situation was particularly ironic. He had come to Jerusalem to worship, but would have been excluded from full access to the

Temple because of his physical condition. In Acts, the gospel is *fully* accepting of those from every racial, physical, religious, and cultural background: the simple Lystrans who would have sacrificed to Paul and Barnabas, the sophisticated philosophers of the Areopagus, the Ephesians with their expensive collections of magical incantations, and the superstitious natives of Cyprus who waited for the snake-bitten Paul to swell up and die.<sup>16</sup> The message of the early Christians was a universal message that knew no borders. The work of the Holy Spirit ensured that it would be so.

In Acts individual churches are often found engaged in multiple levels of outreach. A case in point is Antioch. Founded by Greek-speaking Jewish Christians (“Hellenists”) like Stephen and Philip, it began its ministry among its own, the Jewish community (11:19). Then it reached out to the Gentile Greeks of the city (11:20). Finally, it launched the first “foreign” mission, sending forth Paul and Barnabas to Cyprus and the territory that is today southern Turkey. It continued to support Paul in his missions to Asia, Macedonia, and Greece. It engaged in an outreach without limits to match a gospel without limits.

### **The Message**

We know more about early-Christian preaching from Acts than from any other New Testament writing. Often referred to as the “speeches” of Acts, nearly one-third of the entire text of the book is devoted to what are really proclamations of the gospel in various contexts. Ten of these are fairly extensive. Of these, three are delivered by Peter: to the Jews at Pentecost (2:14-40), to the Jews in the Temple square after the healing of the lame man (3:11-

26), and to the God-fearing Gentile Cornelius and his family and friends (10:34-43). The fourth is the longest speech in Acts, Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin (7:2-53). The remaining six are by Paul. Of these, three are delivered in the course of his missionary activity, one on each mission, and each of these to a different type of audience. On the first mission he addresses the *Jews* of Pisidian Antioch (13:16-41). On the second mission he preaches to the *Gentile* philosophers in Athens (17:22-31). On the third he exhorts the Ephesian *Christian* elders at Miletus (20:18-35). Paul's remaining three speeches are all delivered during the period of his Roman custody: first to the Jewish mob at the time of his arrest (22:1-21), then in hearings before the Roman governor Felix (24:10-21) and the Jewish King Agrippa 2 (26:2-29). The Acts speeches all exemplify the proclamation of the gospel. Even the words spoken in trial scenes are more exemplary of Christian witness to Christ than of legal defense.

Noting the evangelistic element in the speeches, C. H. Dodd argued that they were examples of the early Christian preaching (*kerygma*). In particular, he noted several recurrent types of statements in the early speeches of Acts: (1) The age of fulfillment has dawned (with citation of texts from the prophets); (2) This fulfillment has taken place in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ (with a brief summary of these events); (3) By virtue of his resurrection, Christ has been exalted to God's right hand as Messiah and Savior; (4) The Holy Spirit's presence in the church affords proof of Christ's power and glory; (5) The Messianic age will soon be brought to its completion by the return of Christ; (6) Therefore, in light

of these facts, repent and turn to Christ (the invitation).<sup>17</sup>

Dodd's reconstruction is too restricted. It is most descriptive of the speeches to the Jews, less so for those to Gentiles, particularly in the emphasis on Old Testament prophecy and Messianic fulfillment. In fact, the sermons of Acts are excellent examples of the contextualization of the gospel. Take, for instance, the two addresses of Paul to Gentiles. The first is to the simple pagan farmers of Lystra. Paul quoted no scripture; it would have had little meaning for them. Instead, he sought to introduce them to the one true God by pointing to the divine providence and beneficence as exemplified in regular seasons and bountiful crops (14:15-17). The sermon was cut short by the enthusiasm of the crowd, but enough is given to compare it with Paul's address on the Areopagus in Acts 17:22-31. To the more erudite philosophers, Paul referred to basic philosophical assumptions, such as the all-sufficiency of deity, even quoting from one of the Stoic poets. He drew the line, however, by pointing to the errors of idolatry, the certainty of the coming judgment, and the centrality of Christ's resurrection. It is important to contextualize the gospel; it must not, however, be compromised.<sup>18</sup>

Paul's contextualization continues with the Miletus address in 20:18-35. This address to the Ephesian elders is unique among the sermons of Acts: it is the only example of preaching to a *Christian* audience. Paul challenges the Christian leaders to follow his own example of servant ministry: preaching repentance and faith in Christ without distinction to all who will listen, serving even in the face of persecution, holding to sound doctrine, and ministering generously without an eye to



personal profit. It is a good model for anyone who would be an evangelist of Jesus Christ.

The goal of preaching is conversion. Commitment to Christ is central. In the Miletus address, Paul spoke of “repentance to God and faith in Jesus our Lord” (20:21). Salvation can take place in no other name than that of Jesus, as Peter made clear to the Sanhedrin (4:12).

In Acts, conversion is described as involving three main steps: (1) placing one’s faith in Christ, which necessarily involves repentance if the faith is genuine, (2) undergoing water baptism, and (3) receiving the gift of the Spirit. Dunn refers to these three elements as “conversion-initiation.”<sup>19</sup> A good example is Peter’s invitation at Pentecost, where all three elements are found (2:38). One must not press the three into a rigid pattern. The order may differ from one instance to the next. For example, Cornelius received the Spirit in a dramatic external manifestation even before he made any expression of faith or repentance (10:44-48). Though the order may differ, the presence of all three is normative.

Conversion produces results, the outward manifestation of changed lives. For instance, the Philippian jailer washed the wounds of his former prisoners and fed them at his own table (16:33-34). The Ephesian converts made significant monetary sacrifices, bringing their expensive collections of magical incantations to a massive book-burning (19:18-19). Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that those who are truly committed to Christ will help the needy, seeking opportunity to give rather than to receive (20:35).

Those who responded to the gospel were gathered into communities of believers. Paul consistently followed through on

the evangelistic task, not only leading people to the Lord and establishing congregations, but also continuing to nurture the new communities as they grew in the faith. Acts 14:21-23 furnishes a good summary of Paul’s nurturing ministry: he revisited Lystra, Derbe, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch—churches he had established earlier, teaching them, encouraging them, establishing good leadership for them, and praying for their growth in the Lord.<sup>20</sup> Paul continued to minister to the congregations he had established, revisiting them as often as possible (cf. 16:5; 18:23) as well as maintaining contact through his letters.

### The Methods

The methods of evangelizing are varied in Acts. For convenience we have grouped them into five categories.

First, the early Christians shared the gospel by *preaching*. Preaching took place in many contexts. First were regular gatherings for worship, particularly synagogues. This could be an informal sabbath prayer observance, such as the gathering of the God-fearing women at the river outside Philippi, where there evidently was no regularly-constituted synagogue (16:13). Preaching also took place in Christian gatherings, such as Paul’s long address to the congregation at Troas (20:7). The Christians of Troas probably met in a house, which seems to have been the usual practice for the earliest Christian congregations (cf. 2:42, 46).

Often preaching took place in more public settings. The Jerusalem Christians particularly shared the gospel in the precincts of the Jewish Temple. Peter’s sermon at Pentecost took place there (2:14-40), as did his sermon following the healing of the lame man (3:12-26). A favorite

setting was the open-air colonnade on the inner side of the Temple wall known as Solomon's Porch (3:11; 5:12). Paul also addressed the Jews in the Temple area (22:1-21). In Gentile territory, he preached in such varied settings as marketplaces (17:17), a public lecture hall (19:9), and the Areopagus, a hillside below the Athenian Acropolis that was the venerable setting of an ancient court (17:22). Even the trial scenes in Acts have a way of turning into preaching for both Paul and the Twelve. The basic principle seems to have been to share the gospel in every context and at every opportunity that presented itself. Above all, the Christians went where the largest gatherings of people would be. For Jerusalem, this was the Temple. For Paul, it was the large urban centers like Corinth and Ephesus.

A second major means of sharing the gospel was by *individual witnessing* as contrasted with the more public nature of preaching. In Acts, witnesses often go out in pairs, such as Peter and John, Paul and Barnabas, Paul and Silas. Sometimes the team is larger; Mark accompanies Paul and Barnabas, Timothy goes with Paul and Silas. These witnessing pairs seem to be a part of a larger pairing motif in Acts, which is based on the Old Testament principle that to be valid all legal evidence must be established on the basis of at least two witnesses (Deut 19:15).<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the evangelistic teams were likely based on other considerations as well. They afforded protection, mutual support and accountability, and increased effectiveness through a multiplicity of individual gifts and witness.<sup>22</sup>

Not only the apostles but lay persons also served as witnesses. Noteworthy among these were Priscilla and Aquila, who worked with Paul in Corinth and

carried on the work in Ephesus in his absence (18:18, 24-28). Luke does not tell us who started the churches in Italy, but they were already in existence when Paul first arrived there (28:14-15). How did the gospel get there? The most likely answer is through normal avenues of travel and commerce, from lay witnesses like Priscilla and Aquila or military personnel such as Cornelius. The mention of Priscilla and Aquila raises another possible setting for Paul's personal witness. In Corinth he worked with that couple at their mutual tent-making trade and lodged with them (18:1-3). In ancient cities, people's living quarters were often located on the second floor of the same building as their shops. Paul may have worked in the shop of Priscilla and Aquila and stayed with them in their lodging on the second floor. The shop would have provided an excellent place for one-on-one witness as customers came in and out of the shop.

A third method of sharing the gospel was by *ministering to people's needs*. This accounts for the emphasis on "signs and wonders" throughout Acts. Healings were a means of evangelism. They were "signs," pointing to the power and authority of the one through whose name they were accomplished. They were "wonders," attracting the attention of those who observed them. We have already noted how the healing of the lame man opened the way for Peter's sermon in the Temple square (Acts 3). The sermon was evidently quite effective; the number of believers increased to 5,000 (4:4). Paul also healed a lame man, at Lystra. It likewise attracted much attention and afforded him an opportunity to witness (14:8-18).

A fourth method of evangelism was through *teaching*. An unfortunate

dichotomy is sometimes made between preaching and teaching. Actually the two belong together. Both are forms of sharing the gospel.<sup>23</sup> Paul often used teaching to introduce people to the message of salvation in Christ. This was particularly true of his work among Jews. He would engage them in study of the Old Testament texts that point to Christ. Especially noteworthy among Paul's "Bible students" were the Jews of Berea (17:11; cf. the Thessalonian Jews in 17:2-3).

A fifth category of observations about the early Christian evangelistic practice relates to the heavy *involvement of the churches*. Most evangelism started with congregations. Ultimately the whole Christian mission came from the Jerusalem church. Its Hellenist component began the missionary work among the Samaritans and the Gentiles of Antioch, as we have seen. Likewise, its representatives assisted these missions: Peter and John in Samaria (8:14), and Barnabas at Antioch (11:22). The Jerusalem "mother church" supported Paul's work as well. Not only did they formally recognize the legitimacy of his "law-free" Gentile mission, but they also furnished co-workers for his efforts in the persons of Barnabas and Silas.

The Antioch church was the real sponsoring church for Paul's three missions. They sent him forth on each of his journeys (13:3; 15:35-41; 18:22-23). Paul relied heavily on church sponsorship. One of his reasons for wanting to visit the churches of Rome was to enlist their support for his anticipated mission to Spain (Rom 15:24).

The churches supported the evangelists in various ways. First, they furnished personnel. As we have seen, Barnabas and Silas came from the Jerusalem church. Timothy came from Lystra (16:1), Erastus

from Corinth (19:22), Tychicus from Ephesus (20:4), to name but a few.

A second means of support from the churches was through material gifts. This is more explicit in Paul's letters than in Acts. In his epistles, Paul often referred to the support sent by congregations such as Philippi (e.g., Phil 4:15-16; 2 Cor 11:8-9). A subtle hint of this may appear in the account of Paul's Corinthian ministry (Acts 18:5). There we are told that Paul evidently let up on his tentmaking and went to more full-time preaching upon the arrival of Timothy and Silas from Macedonia. The pair may well have brought with them one of those Philippian gifts. Paul's procedure seems to have been to support himself when establishing a new work. This was the case at Thessalonica (1 Thess 2:9), Corinth (1 Cor 9:1-18), and Ephesus (Acts 20:34-35). As Paul explained to the Corinthians, his refusal to take support from the local church while with them was probably to avoid any misunderstanding of his motives and to place no obstacle in the way of the gospel (1 Cor 9:12, 15). It was probably also to avoid any sort of social obligation toward any would-be patrons. On the other hand, when away from them, Paul seems to have welcomed his congregations' material support for his missionary activity.

A final manner in which the church supported its evangelists was through prayer. Prayer is central in Acts. The very first of Luke's "summaries" in Acts focuses on the Christians in the upper room praying for the promised coming of the Spirit (1:12-15). The second Acts summary again mentions prayer as a central element in the life of the church (2:42). Paul's first mission was established by the Spirit and sealed by the prayer of the

church (13:3). In times of crisis, the church would pray, as when Peter and John were dragged before the Sanhedrin for preaching in the name of Christ. When the pair were warned and released, the church prayed all the more, not only thanking God for their deliverance but asking for power to proclaim Christ's name even more boldly (4:24-31). When Agrippa killed James and placed Peter in prison, the church prayed for Peter's deliverance (12:5). Prayer could itself be a form of witness, as when the other prisoners listened to the songs and prayers of Paul and Silas in the Philippian jail (16:25). The early Christians were aware that the success of their witness depended entirely on the sovereignty of God, and they did not hesitate to entrust their efforts to God in every circumstance.

## Conclusion

The evangelistic principles of Acts remain remarkably relevant for the contemporary church. We continue to depend on the Spirit for all our witness. The central message has not changed, though it must be contextualized to appeal to each new generation and setting. The target group is still unlimited, still "to the end of the earth." Even much of the early church's method of sharing the gospel remains the same.

Above all, the *mandate* to evangelize is still in full force. Luke makes this clear in the manner with which he ends Acts. He does not "close" his story by telling the outcome of Paul's trial, as we might wish.<sup>24</sup> Instead, he leaves the story "open," with Paul still preaching to "all" who came to him in Rome (28:30-31). Perhaps Luke did this to remind us that the story continues on for us as well. Like Paul in Rome, we too are to fulfill the

Lord's mandate, preaching the gospel to everyone, at every opportunity, and in every circumstance.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> D. S. Lim, "Evangelism in the Early Church," *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. R. P. Martin and P. R. Davids (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997) 353.

<sup>2</sup> For fuller treatments, see M. Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970); A. Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, trans. and ed. J. Moffatt (New York: Harper Torchbook edition, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> All translations throughout this article are the writer's.

<sup>4</sup> T. S. Moore, "'To the End of the Earth': the Geographical and Ethnic Universalism of Acts 1:8 in Light of Isaianic Influence on Luke," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40 (1997) 389-399.

<sup>5</sup> For a fuller treatment of the expanding mission in Acts, see M. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 71-126.

<sup>6</sup> For the eschatological basis of Jesus' missionary mandate, see J. Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, trans. S. H. Hooke, *Studies in Biblical Theology* 24 (London: SCM, 1958).

<sup>7</sup> J. B. Polhill, *Acts*, *New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 64-65.

<sup>8</sup> P. R. House, "Suffering and the Purpose of Acts," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33 (1990) 317-330.

<sup>9</sup> A. A. Trites, "Church Growth in the Acts of the Apostles," *McMaster Journal of Theology* 1 (1990) 1-18.

<sup>10</sup> F. Hahn, *Mission in the New Testament*,

- trans. F. Clarke, *Studies in Biblical Theology* 47 (London: SCM, 1965) 128-136.
- <sup>11</sup>S. McKnight, "Gentiles, Gentile Mission," *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments*, ed. R. P. Martin and P. R. Davids (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997) 388-394.
- <sup>12</sup>For the debate among scholars over the final place of the Jews in Acts, see J. B. Tyson, ed., *Luke-Acts and the Jewish People* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988).
- <sup>13</sup>J. Nolland, "Acts 15: Discerning the Will of God in Changing Circumstances," *Crux* 27 (1991) 30-34.
- <sup>14</sup>T. S. Rainer, "Church Growth and Evangelism in the Book of Acts," *Criswell Theological Review* 5 (1990) 66.
- <sup>15</sup>F. Stagg has made this point well in his treating Acts under the theme of the "unhindered" gospel: *The Book of Acts: The Early Struggle for an Unhindered Gospel* (Nashville: Broadman, 1955).
- <sup>16</sup>For the emphasis in Acts on overcoming religious and cultural boundaries, see H. C. Kee, *Good News to the Ends of the Earth: The Theology of Acts* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990) 42-69.
- <sup>17</sup>C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1936) 21-23.
- <sup>18</sup>D. E. Johnson, "Jesus Against the Idols: The Use of Isaianic Servant Songs in the Missiology of Acts," *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990) 343-353.
- <sup>19</sup>J. D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) 91.
- <sup>20</sup>D. F. Detwiler, "Paul's Approach to the Great Commission in Acts 14:21-23," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (1995) 33-41.
- <sup>21</sup>A. A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 31 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 128-153.
- <sup>22</sup>G. W. Murray, "Paul's Corporate Evangelism in the Book of Acts," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155 (1998) 189-200.
- <sup>23</sup>J. B. Polhill, "Kerygma and Didache," *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Developments*, ed. R. P. Martin and P. H. Davids (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997) 626-629.
- <sup>24</sup>For the "open" ending of Acts, see D. Marguerat, "'Et quand nous sommes entres dans Rome,' L'enigme de la fin du livre des Actes (28,16-31)" *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 73 (1993) 1-21.