The Theology of Mission in Acts 1:8

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Introduction

The book of Acts belongs to that biblical genre called theological narrative. It has a story, with a plot, events, and main characters. Of course, it is not just any story. Unlike fictional accounts, theological narrative conveys truths about God’s interaction with humanity. Still, these truths are conveyed by means of a narrative framework. Without a proper understanding of this framework we risk missing the whole point of the narrative.

Luke begins the book of Acts with a review of the main points of what he said in his first account: “In the first book, Theophilis, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until he was taken up to heaven” (vss. 1-2). As Larkin points out, in the gospel account Luke stresses salvation accomplished. In Acts, while this aspect of salvation is clearly present in the summary statements and speeches, what comes to the fore is mission—or salvation applied.1 In other words, Luke’s gospel tells us about God’s salvation through Christ. The book of Acts tells us about God’s mission through the Church. This emphasis in Acts is conveyed in Luke’s well-known summary statement:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (vs. 1:8).

How does Luke characterize this witness? As one reads the book of Acts it becomes apparent that what the church does and says in the world is necessarily connected to what it is as a community of believers. As the true remnant of the people of God spoken of in the Old Testament, the church is not just a neutral bearer of a message. It is a witness to that message by its very nature and existence. This means that Luke (and the New Testament as a whole) sees the social nature as well as the message of the church is a vital and integral part of the mission of God in the world.2 As Michael Green argues, Luke portrays the early church as an incarnational community of the kingdom:

The word was not only announced but seen in the community of those who were giving it flesh. The message of the kingdom became more than a mere idea. A new community had sprung up and looked very much like the new order to which the evangelist had pointed. Here love was given daily expression; reconciliation was actually occurring, people were no longer divided into Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, male and female. People were healed, the poor and dispossessed were cared for and found justice. Everything was shared. Joy abounded and ordinary lives were filled with praise.3

The identity of the early Christian movement and its mission were not shaped in a theological vacuum. Pre-eminently, they were a product of its interaction with and experience of salvation through the risen Christ. But, in a very real sense, the early believers also interpreted their identity and experience with God through the Holy Spirit as a mirror reflection of Old Testament prophecies regarding the restoration of Israel. On the one hand, they saw their experience as a direct though partial fulfillment of God’s promises to the faithful remnant of Israel. At the same time, they interpreted Old Testament prophecies in light of that experience.

My purpose in this paper will be to show how this theme of “promise and fulfillment” is foundational to Luke’s theology of the church’s mission, particularly

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3. Ibid.

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as it is summarized in Acts 1:8. First we will look at the Old Testament background. Then, we will look Luke’s theology of mission. Finally, we will draw some implications for the church today based on a “narrative theological hermeneutic.”

The Old Testament Background
The story of the book of Acts is not just a narrative of what happened in the first chapter of the Church’s history; it is a theological interpretation of the Church’s mission as summed up in the command of Acts 1:8: “you shall be my witnesses...” (cf. 3:15; 5:32; 10:39, 41-43; 13:31; 22:15; 23:11; 26:16). This concept of witness is rooted in the Old Testament understanding of Israel’s mission as a “people of God.” So, if we want to understand its importance in Acts we have to first see its connections to the Old Testament, beginning with the call of Abraham.

The Call of Abraham
In one of the pivotal passages in the Bible God makes a promise to Abraham:

I will make you into a great nation
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing...
all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.
(Gen. 12: 2-3b)

How would Abraham and his descendants be a blessing to all of humanity? Ultimately, of course, it would be through Christ, the promised messiah. This is why Paul describes this passage as the “gospel in advance.” (Gal. 3:8). But, Abraham and his descendants were also to be a blessing in the sense that they would be an example, or witness—religiously, morally, and ethically—to all the peoples of the earth. Abraham was chosen to be a teacher of righteousness and justice, a role that was to be passed on to his descendants. In this sense, he was a model of God’s mission.

This is brought out most forcefully in Genesis 18:9 where Abraham is contrasted with the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah. These twin cities are the prototype of a fallen and sinful world that stands under God’s judgment. But, contrary to popular perceptions, the sin of Sodom was not limited to sexual immorality. As Ezekiel clearly states, its people were “arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and the needy.” (Ezekiel 18:49). The suffering of some people in or near Sodom was so great that they cried out in pain against its oppression and cruelty (Gen. 18:20–21). In this context, God describes his covenant with Abraham:

For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised for him. (Gen. 18:19)

The Hebrew word for “just” in this passage means in the broadest sense to intervene in a situation that is wrong, oppressive or out of control, and fix it. In the midst of a world characterized by evil and suffering God therefore wanted at nation distinguished by God’s own ethical and religious priorities—in this way it would fulfill God’s promise of being a blessing to the nations.

Israel as a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation
As Walter Kaiser points out, the whole purpose of God was “that He would make a nation, give them a ‘name,’ bless them so that they might be light to the nations and thereby be a blessing to all the nations as Abraham’s seed... Israel was to be God’s missionary to the world...” This is evident from Exodus 19:5-6 where God reaffirms his covenant with Israel:

Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

The phrase “kingdom of priests” points to Israel’s missionary role as a whole community. In Old Testament Israel the priest was someone who stood as a mediator between God and the rest of the people. So, this passage makes it clear that the whole nation was to function as a mediator of God’s will, moral and ethical demands, and saving purpose to the surrounding nations. The additional description of Israel as a “holy nation” further highlights Israel’s call to service and its ethical distinctiveness. Holiness basically means “wholeness.” For the Israelites, it did not just mean correctness in religious ritual. It also meant living lives of integrity, justice, and compassion in every area of life. This is brought out most clearly in Leviticus 19 where “being holy as God is holy” (19:2) is described
in terms of ethical principles of sharing of economic resources (9-10); just treatment of employees (13); social compassion for the disabled (14); integrity in the legal system (12, 15); sexual purity (16-22); fairness in treatment of ethnic minorities (33-34); and honesty in trade and business dealings (35-36).11

The “New Israel” as a Light to the Nations in Isaiah

Israel, of course, failed miserably in its mission, and became an object of God’s judgment rather than blessing. This judgment is highlighted in chapters 1-39 of Isaiah. Beginning in chapter 40, however, the prophet depicts the restoration of the people and the formation of a new community. Isaiah 40-55 announces the coming of a new era for the remnant people of God who will be a light to the nations:

I the Lord have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand,
I will keep you and make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles
(Isaiah 42: 6-7)

The prophets therefore looked forward to a restored or reconstituted Israel that would be the agent of God’s saving purposes:

It is too small a thing for you to be my servant
to restore the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back those of Israel I have kept.
I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,
that you may bring my salvation to
the ends of the earth.
(Isaiah 49:6)

The call of the “true Israel” to be a “witness” is made explicit in Isaiah 44:8 where the Israelites are told “Do not tremble, do not be afraid. Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago? You are to be my witnesses.” And again in Isaiah 43:10–12 the prophet states:

You are my witnesses, declares the Lord
and my servant who I have chosen,
so that you may know and believe me
and understand that I am he.
Before me no god was formed
nor will there be one after me.
I, even I, am the Lord,
and apart from me there is no savior.

I have revealed and saved and proclaimed—
I, and not some foreign god among you.
“You are my witnesses” declares the Lord “that I am God.”

In these passages the designation of Israel as a “witness” becomes a link between its election as a particular people and its mission to declare God’s saving purpose, which is universal in scope.12

The Theology of Acts: Church Growth or Kingdom Growth?

One of the ongoing debates in mission has been whether our focus ought to be “church growth” or “kingdom growth.” But, based on Luke’s description of the church’s witness in Acts, our concern ought not be either church growth or kingdom growth but both church growth (rightly understood) and kingdom growth. Acts is clear that God’s chosen vehicle for the expansion of His kingdom is the Church.

Three Dimensions of Witness in Acts 1:8

I. Howard Marshall has argued that the theology of the New Testament springs out of the missionary movement of the early church. Theology, in turn, shapes the continuing mission of the church.13 Moreover, the New Testament writers saw themselves as heirs of the religion expressed in the Old Testament and in continuity with the people who worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.14 The book of Acts most clearly shows this relationship of the theology of the early church to its mission, which is summarized in the words of Jesus in Acts 1:8. This passage shows the connection between the witness of the first Christians and the expansion of the early Christian movement through the power of the Holy Spirit. Figure 1 depicts the three levels of “witness” in Acts 1:8: 1.) geographic; 2.) theopolitical; and 3.) eschatological. Each of these levels highlights three types of growth which characterized the mission of the early church.

Figure 1: “Witness” in Acts 1:8
**The Geographic Dimension**

At one level, of course, Acts 1:8 is a summary account of how the early Christian witnesses to Jesus began their task in Jerusalem and then spread out into Judea and Samaria and ultimately the wider Gentile world. This geographic dimension of witness corresponds with Luke's concern with the physical and numeric expansion of the church. As one reads this narrative it becomes apparent that numerical increase is an important element in the book of Acts. Luke uses it to describe the universal dimensions of the Gospel and the fulfillment of Christ's mandate to proclaim the Gospel of repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations. (Luke 24:47; Acts 8:12; 11:21). That God wants His (1) the dawn of salvation on Jerusalem; (2) the reunification of the two kingdoms of Judah and Israel as fulfillment of the ancient promise of the restoration of the whole house of Israel (e.g., Ezek., 37:15-22); and (3) the inclusion of the Gentiles within the people of God.\(^\text{17}\) This is indicated, in part, by the terms Luke uses to describe the growth of the church, which connect the story of the Church with the redemptive-historical story of God from creation and throughout the history of Israel.\(^\text{18}\) Luke uses these terms in his description of the three critical junctures in the growth of the Church. Figure 2 shows the relationship between these growth summaries and the overall structure of the Acts account.

**Figure 2. Luke's Growth Summaries and the Basic Outline of Acts.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section in Acts</th>
<th>Geography</th>
<th>Theopolitical Significance</th>
<th>Growth Summary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acts 1-7</td>
<td>Jerusalem</td>
<td>The dawn of salvation in Jerusalem</td>
<td>“So the word of God grew. The number of disciples in Jerusalem was greatly multiplied.” (Acts 6:7)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Church to grow numerically and multiply and gives that growth blessing undergirds and gives legitimacy to the role that “numerical growth” has played in the church growth movement, as well as aggressive and urgent evangelism.\(^\text{15}\) However, if we look at Acts as simply giving an account of the geographic expansion of the church from one center we will miss the wider significance of this commission of Jesus to his disciples.

**The Theopolitical Dimension**

Acts 1:8 should be interpreted, not only geographically, but also theopolically in terms of the reconstitution of Israel through the Church as the true “people of God.” The phrase “to the ends of the earth” in this passage is a clear reference to Isa 49:6 which, as we have seen, depicts the “new Israel” as the agent of God’s universal plan of salvation.\(^\text{16}\) In this verse Luke is outlining three stages in God’s program of salvation in terms of: The Greek words for “grow,” “increase,” and “multiply” that Luke uses in these summaries are connected with the power and conquest of “the word,” a theme that is emphasized in the Exodus-Conquest and Isaianic traditions to underscore the eventual success of God’s people. In these thematic emphases, then, Luke portrays the early Christian community as the continuation of the covenant people of the ancient Israelite traditions.\(^\text{19}\) The early church therefore saw itself as the people among whom God’s reign had begun. Luke’s theology of mission and church growth simply cannot be understood apart from this conception of the Church as a messianic community and a continuation of God’s plan to bless the nations.

**The Eschatological Dimension**

Luke’s theology of mission and church growth is thus informed by a “kingdom vision” which sees the body
of Christ as a community of God’s reign. Growth is a result of God’s blessing on his people who are corporately a “sign,” however imperfectly, of the reality and promise of His future reign. This brings us to the eschatological dimensions of the witness of the early church. Here, we need to begin by looking at the immediate context of Jesus’ words in Acts 1:8. In the exchange between Jesus and his disciples immediately preceding this Great Commission (vss. 6-7) the disciples ask if this is the time when he would restore the kingdom to Israel. What they undoubtedly had in mind was the establishment of the Davidic kingdom, which the prophet Isaiah predicted will be characterized by righteousness and justice (Isa. 9:7), peace (9:6-7) and prosperity (11:6-9). Jesus’ response to the disciples indicates that, while the final and complete fulfillment of the Old Testament promise belongs to an undetermined future (“It is not for you to know the times or dates. . .”) the kingdom is present (“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. . .”) (kingdom is present).

This “already” and “not yet” nature of the kingdom is featured in Peter’s speeches in chapters 1 and 3 of Acts, as illustrated by figure 3. Following the dramatic events of Pentecost Peter addresses the large group of Jews, which Luke describes as “from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem”—a clear reference to Isaiah’s prediction of the ingathering of the exiles as the reconstituted nation of Israel (Isa 43:5-7). He begins by quoting the messianic prophecy of Joel, which places the gift of the Spirit in the “last days” (2:17), a term used in the Old Testament to refer to the time of the eschatological Kingdom of God when Israel would be blessed (Isa 2:2; Hos. 3:4). To further make his point, Peter presents the resurrection and ascension of Christ to God’s right hand as the initial fulfillment of the Davidic covenant promised in Psalm 110:1 (2:33-35).

But while Peter’s speech in Acts 2 highlights the present or “already” aspect of the kingdom his speech in Acts 3 brings out its future or “not yet” features. In his second speech Peter distinguishes between a current period of “refreshing” which people can enjoy if they repent and the final restoration of things promised by

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**Figure 3: The Already and Not Yet of the Kingdom in Acts 1-3.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jesus’ Words to the Disciples (Acts 1:6-7)</th>
<th>Peter’s Two Speeches (Acts 2-3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disciples’ question: “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”</td>
<td><strong>Speech 1: Already of the Kingdom (2:14-36)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus’ ascension and coming of Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:9; 2:1-4)</td>
<td>Quote of Joel’s messianic prophecy (2:17-21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus’s response: “It is not for you to know the times or dates. . .” (kingdom is future)</td>
<td>Resurrection and ascension of Christ to God’s right hand as initial fulfillment of Davidic covenant (2:21-25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. . .” (kingdom is present)</td>
<td><strong>Speech 2: “Not Yet” of the Kingdom (3:12-26)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christ will remain in heaven until the time of restoration of everything promised by the prophets (3:21)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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the Old Testament prophets. Perhaps recalling Jesus’
words to the disciples prior to his ascension, Peter as-
serts unequivocally that Christ will remain in heaven
until the time when there will be a restoration of
everything promised by the prophets (3:11). Evidently,
then, Peter sees the kingdom as coming in two phases.
In the first phase the new community of believers gives
a “preview” of the coming kingdom in which all people
will be subject to Christ’s rule of justice and righteous-
ness. With the second phase, all of the promises to Is-
rael as a nation will be completed when Christ returns
and establishes his earthly kingdom.22

The Multidimensional Nature of Growth in Acts
As we have already intimated, Luke speaks of growth
that is qualitative as well as quantitative in nature.
This includes “reflective growth,” or growth in the
understanding of the faith through intensive teaching
and discipleship (Acts 2:42; 11:25; 19:9-10); “spiri-
tual growth” through worship, discipline, and prayer
(12:24 cf. 13:2); “organic growth,” which takes place
in a system of caring relationships that is produced by
faith and repentance (2:46; 11:29); and growth across
barriers of religion, race, class, gender and prejudice.
In this respect, the Church is presented as “model”
both spiritually and ethically of God’s desires for all
of humanity.

Some have speculated that the early Apostolic Church
grew to 100-200 small congregations meeting in
homes throughout the Jerusalem area, with each apost-
tle responsible for the oversight of a cluster of 10-20 of
these cell groups.23 But, whatever the organizational
structure of the early Christian community, the Acts
account makes it clear that this growth was the direct
result of the eight characteristics of regular fellow-
ship, witness and evangelism, discipline, love and joy,
worship, prayer, compassionate sharing, and instruction
in apostolic doctrine. All of this took place under the
influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The ethical as well as spiritual dimensions of the early
church’s witness as the “new Israel” is particular evident
in the very close connection that Luke makes be-
tween the descent of the Holy Spirit and the explosive
growth of the Church (Acts 2:41) and the radical shar-
ing with the needy (2:44-45). Later, after the ministry
of thedeacons (diaconia) is more firmly established to
meet the needs of widows in the church and free the
apostles for the “ministry of the word,” Luke adds “so
the word of God spread” to indicate the close connec-
tion between the preaching of the apostles (“service
of the word”) and the activity of those appointed to
organize the distribution of food to the poor (“service
of tables”) in the spread of the Gospel and growth of
the church (6:7).

Luke then describes the outward spread of the gos-
pel in terms of an ever-widening circle of recipients
from the nucleus of believers in Jerusalem: 1. devout
Aramaic-speaking Jews (2:5); 2. Greek-speaking Jews
(6:1); 3. those on the fringes of Judaism—the Samari-
tans (8:24) and the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26-40); and
of Philip’s ministry to the Samaritans and then to the
eunuch indicates that geography and physical growth
is not his only, or even primary, focus. Luke’s purpose
is to show that, with the incorporation of Samaritans
into the new people of God, the old division between
the northern and southern kingdoms was healed and
the Old Testament promise of a reunited and re-
stored Israel had been realized.24 The reference to the
eunuch is significant because, like the Samaritans, he
was considered as belonging to a despised minority. In
narrating the story of his conversion Luke probably
has in mind the Isaiah’s prediction (56:3) that outcasts
(foreigners and eunuchs) would have a place in the
reconstituted people of God.25

Luke’s description of the growth of the church in
Antioch is almost identical to that used to describe
the early Jerusalem church (12:24). Growth, again, is
described as occurring as the result of:

(1) the lay witness of exiled Greek-speaking Jewish
Christians (11:19-21);
(2) intensive instruction and discipling of the new
believers (11:22-23, 25-27);
(3) transcultural fellowship and spiritual vitality as they
worshipped, fasted, prayed, and were sensitive to the
leading of the Spirit (13:1-2);26
(4) evangelistic zeal, with the church (which some
scholars think grew to include 500,000 believers) send-
ing Paul and Barnabas north into Central Asia, and
missionaries into Persia and Mesopotamia;27 and
(5) social concern, involving a substantial collection
for the Jewish brethren in Judea hundreds of miles
away (11:27-29), which may have been the origin of all
subsequent relief and development efforts.28
Hermeneutics and Current Mission Praxis

One of the challenges for contemporary missiological praxis is how to move from the missionary practice of the church of the first century as portrayed in the book of Acts to contemporary missiological praxis. There are several inadequate responses to this issue. One response is to simply ignore the example of Jesus and the early church, an approach that disregards the authority of Scripture not only for faith but also for practice as it pertains to the life of the church as a whole as well as the private life of the individual Christian. At the same time, evangelicals anxious to cull “lessons” or “principles” from the Acts account may do so in a way that naively romanticizes the early church, fails to account for differences between the first and twenty-first centuries, and does not distinguish hermeneutically between what is descriptive and what is (possibly) prescriptive.

A Narrative Theological Hermeneutic

Charles VanEngen has suggested an approach to Scriptural narrative that goes beyond a purely historically-oriented re-telling of the story and an exclusively grammatical, lexical study of the text but avoids a totally subjective approach that ascribes to the narrative whatever meaning we want to see. As he describes this approach:

We want, rather, to see the theological insights and orientations of the original compilers of the text, in their contexts, as they incorporated those meanings in the narrative, within the narrative’s particular time, place and culture. As we see these word-deed meanings of the text, within the social, cultural, religious, relational, and personal issues of the original context, we may allow those meanings to illumine our understanding and word-deed missiological praxis today and tomorrow.

This “narrative theological hermeneutic” acknowledges that the biblical narrative is itself shaped by the original faith community. Therefore, one should not interpret the biblical text apart from the experience of the faith community in which it was born, shaped, transmitted, and explained. Narrative theology studies the Bible as the narrative of the pilgrimage of God’s people over time and it recognizes that Scripture portrays a deepening understanding from Israel to the church of God’s self-revelation in the midst of human history. Thus, God’s self-disclosure is seen as taking place in the midst of a faith-journey, or the walk of God’s people with God.

Grant Osborne likewise affirms that biblical history and theology are brought together in a story format. He states that “narrative at the heart is the contextualization of the significance of the life of Israel (Old Testament), and Jesus (the Gospels) or of the early church (Acts) for the community of God. . . In every sense biblical narrative is theology seen in living relationships and enacted in story form.” And he has developed what he describes as a “hermeneutical spiral,” or process of moving from text to context and back to text. He proposes a six-step process of contextualization, or the means by which we move from the biblical text to the modern context, and from the original meaning to its contemporary significance. This method blends theory and praxis and has the goal of “enabling the church in diverse cultures to affirm and live out biblical truths with the same dynamic power as did the early church.”

Figure 4: The Six-Stage Process of Contextualization.
is critical in distinguishing what is cultural and from what is supercultural.

3. **Note the original situation.** One must understand the situation behind the text before he/she can determine its relevance for our world. There are two types of historical situations—the one depicted in the text or story itself and the situation or circumstances in the life of Israel or the church (the *Sitz im Leben*) that determined why the author chose the particular aspect to stress in the surface message. Osborne notes that it is not always easy to determine the original situation (*Sitz im Leben*) and that understanding the situation in the story may actually be more valuable.

4. **Discover the parallel situation in the modern context.** A text should be applied in the same way it was used in the original setting. In other words, we need to contextualize the text in a parallel situation in our current context. “Proper contextualization is just as important as proper exegesis.”

5. **Decide whether to contextualize at the general or specific level.** There are some issues which make it difficult for contextualizers to remain true to Scripture while also producing a relevant, dynamic Christianity in diverse cultural settings around the world. For example, missionaries must decide whether to retain a specific image or message (such as the “lamb” in cultures that know nothing of sheep) or substitute a dynamic equivalent.

One of the advantages of the hermeneutical approach outlined by VanEngen and Osborne is that it allows us to investigate various “motifs” or themes and subthemes of God’s action in the world and then determine their significance for the church today. There must be an interaction between the self-definition of the early church and the self-definition of today’s believers who wish to be inspired and guided by the early witnesses.35

**Some Applications to Current Mission Praxis**

My purpose in this section is not to discuss in great detail the significance of Luke’s theology of mission for current mission praxis. However, using the narrative theological hermeneutic outlined above, we can see how the missional practice of the early church as described by Luke is a corrective to some tendencies in the church and mission today.

First, an adequate understanding of Acts helps us to correct our tendency to separate doctrine and belief from lifestyle. As Bob Roberts States: “In the West, we have allowed ourselves to separate believing from its impacting the way that we live. . . [But] until our beliefs, our lifestyle, our character and our behavior come together, it will never, never work.”36

This is evident, for example, in Luke’s account in chapters 2 and 4 of the sharing of possessions following the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. A careful exegesis of this passage reveals that the statement in 4:23 that “there were no needy persons among them” is virtually an exact quotation of Deuteronomy 15:4, which specified that the purpose of the sabbatical year was that “there should be no poor among you.” This law specified that every seven years slaves had to be liberated, debts were to be cancelled, and land should remain fallow for the benefit of the poor. Luke therefore portrays the church after Pentecost as a fulfillment of the Deuteronomic ideal of the covenant community.37 Luke also wants to show the church’s common life of economic sharing (along with spiritual rebirth and fellowship) as the “first fruits” of the mission announced by Jesus in Luke 4:16-21 to bring “good news” to the poor. The community’s practice of distributing goods to meet the needs of the poor is portrayed as a response of obedience to Jesus’ teaching throughout Luke’s Gospel (cf. Luke 6:20-21; 12:13-21; 16:19-31).

At a deeper theological level Luke wants to show that the eschatological era of the Spirit foretold by the Old Testament prophets has begun. The economic sharing is “sign” of a future hope. In the words of Christopher J. H. Wright: “The church by its internal practice was erecting a sign-post to the reality of the future. The new age of life in the Messiah and in the Spirit is described in terms that echo the jubilee and its related sabbatical institutions.”38 The “glad and generous hearts” (Acts 2:46) of the Jerusalem community is evidence of the presence of God’s spirit. As we have previously pointed out, Luke deliberately connects the power of the apostles’ testimony to the resurrection of Christ with the community’s practice of economic sharing (Acts 4:32-35) to show that the verbal testimony of these first witnesses was made credible by an attractive lifestyle of love and generosity.

It is likely that the practice of economic sharing described in Acts was a local and temporary response to a specific economic crisis. In contextualizing this text, therefore, we should emphasize that it has particular relevance for similar situations of deep physical need.
that churches and missionaries may encounter around the world. This does not mean that there should be a rigid application or imitation of the Jerusalem model today. Even within the early church, the methods of practical caring and sharing took on different forms. Rather, the account of the early Jerusalem community provides a “positive paradigm” for how the economic practices in our communities ought to powerfully bear witness to the resurrection and manifest sacrificial giving for those in economic need in a way that unsettles our “commonsense” view of economic reality.39

An understanding of the Acts account is also a corrective in that it guards against an over reliance on programs and, what I would call, an “edifice complex” to the exclusion of reliance on the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit. One of the most stirring accounts in the book of Acts is the stoning of Stephen following his bold assertion before the Sanhedrin that “the Most High does not live in houses made by men (7:48) and his stern rebuke of the Jewish leaders for resisting the Holy Spirit. To the Jews of his day, who regarded the Temple as central for Jewish worship and Jewish identity, Stephen’s words (like those of Jesus before him) were blasphemous, and worthy of death. The incident dramatically highlighted the differences between the movement of the Kingdom of God through the early church and the Temple-centered worship of mid-first century Judaism.

Luke’s description of what happened immediately following the death of Stephen and the ensuing persecution of the church in Jerusalem is also instructive: Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went (8:4). This was the beginning of the missionary expansion of the early church beyond Jerusalem. In addition to the travels of Paul and his missionary companions, much of this missional outreach took place through ordinary lay persons and house churches. Indeed, the extraordinary expansion of the early church could not have happened apart from the spontaneous witness in word and deed of ordinary believers through the power of the Holy Spirit as they came into daily contact with people in their neighborhoods and workplaces.

While there is a danger of uncritically copying the practice of the early Christians without taking into consideration the differences between the twenty-first century and first century contexts, it is hard to dismiss the remarkable similarities between the missionary outreach and expansion of the early church and the profile of a growing number of Church Planting Movements that we see springing up around the world today. As David Garrison defines it, a Church Planting Movement (CPM) is “a rapid and multiplicative increase of indigenous churches planting churches within a given people group or population segment.”42 According to Garrison, these movements share a number of characteristics, including:43

- Prayer, in both personal and corporate life.
- Abundant gospel sowing through personal witness, as well as mass media evangelism.
- Intentional church planting.
- Scriptural authority.
- Local leadership, with missionaries mentoring church planters rather than doing the job of church planting themselves.
- Lay leaders, many of them bi-vocational church leaders and church planters without formal seminary training.
- Reproduceable cell or house churches, linked together in some type of structured network.
- Churches planting churches. While the first churches were often planted by missionaries or missionary-trained church planters, the movement enters a multiplicative phase of reproduction, with the churches themselves planting new churches.
- Rapid reproduction, with laity fully empowered to participate in the work of God.
Healthy churches characterized by worship, evangelistic and missionary outreach, education and discipleship; ministry, and fellowship.

I do not mean to suggest that all mission’s strategies should incorporate all of these elements. The house-church model, for example, may be appropriate in some circumstances but not in others. There is no “one size fits all” approach to church planting. At the same time, we should not underestimate the value of house churches and other cell-group formats as an effective low-cost missional-strategic alternative to large church facilities, especially in poor third-world countries and even in some industrialized countries where missionaries are located.

This brings me to the final way in which the example of the early church is instructive for the church today—and that is that it prevents us from over reliance on Western missionary paradigms. For hundreds of years the church has been influenced by a mission paradigm that has conceived of church growth as occurring from one common territorial center—a model bolstered by the common interpretation of Acts 1:8 which views the expansion of the early church as radiating from one center, Jerusalem. In practical terms, the resulting distinction between home and foreign mission perpetuates “a patronizing view of the rest of the world as always being on the receiving end of our missionary largesse” that fails to recognize the maturity of churches in many other parts of the world.

This western-oriented mindset not only misrepresents the reality of mission today—given the fact that 50 percent of all Protestant missionaries come from the non-western world. It also misses the fact that the early church spread out from multiple centers. Its mission was polycentric. Jerusalem was simply one center among many that included the major metropolitan areas of Antioch, Thessalonica, Ephesus, and Rome. The innovative element in Paul’s missionary methodology is what has been referred to as a “center mission” strategy—the establishment of young congregations in key cities that served as “centers” or bases of operation for missional outreach. Paul’s missionary approach emphasized the networking and multiplication of independent missional congregations from which outreach and church planting in outlying areas would take place.

This center-mission model is evident in from Paul’s activity in Ephesus. Aquila and Priscilla, who had used their home as the hub of church planting in Corinth, accompanied Paul on his trip to Ephesus to repeat the process in that city (18:18-19). We are told that Aquila and Priscilla took the gifted Alexandrian Apollos into their home and discipled him (18:24-26). Apollos turned out to be one of the most important Christian teachers of the apostolic age. It is likely that there was a plurality of house churches in the city. Paul began his ministry in Ephesus by preaching in the Synagogue. But because of resistance to the gospel he moved to the lecture hall of Tyrannus, where he taught his disciples for two years. Paul’s disciples probably accompanied him in his ministries of healing and exorcism (Acts 19:11-13) and engaged in evangelism and church planting in nearby cities (Col. 1:6-7). Ephesus may well have been a strategic center from which other churches were planted in Colosse, Hierapolis and Laodicea.

The Pauline approach gives credence to what some have described as a “synergistic” approach to mission. Instead of simply helping to support and fund missionary “professionals” to impact the world, local churches operating out of this mission model are more likely to adopt a multi-pronged strategy. As “cells of the kingdom” they empower members of the congregation to utilize the diversity of gifts for the accomplishment of the missionary mandate locally as well as globally. Moreover, they recognized the importance of the global Christian community and the fact that the North American Church does not have the sole responsibility for mission outreach. Rather than trying to do everything on its own, a local church will focus on several things it does well and partner with other churches and mission agencies both at home and abroad to realize common objectives.

Conclusion

I have argued that the church in Acts practiced (and Luke espoused) a holistic mission rooted in a theology of the Kingdom of God, which was largely in continuity with Old Testament prophecies and Jesus’ own mission as a witness to God’s mission in the world. In this “holistic mission” the message of the gospel was not separated from the social nature of the church as the body of Christ; and works of compassion were integrated with evangelism, discipleship and church planting. Some have described church growth and church planting patterned after that of the early church as a “renewal movement,” to indicate that mis-
sion can never be divorced from church renewal and its resulting social impact. Likewise, Viv Grigg utilizes the concept of “web movements” to describe Acts in terms of the transmission of the power of the Spirit and exponential spread of the Gospel through webs of relational ties—first, in the Jerusalem Jewish community; then into transitional Gentile communities (the Ethiopian eunuch, Samaritans, Cornelius the Roman, and Antioch); and finally in trade centers throughout the Roman Empire with the missionary activity of Paul and his missionary companions and co-workers. These movements of renewal and revival in Acts were generated by an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, private and public repentance, and divine empowerment for love, unity, and proclamation. And they usually consisted of four elements or phases—personal revival, then small group renewal and structural change, followed by social and cultural engagement. This should be the basic pattern for mission today. Indeed, similar movements of God’s Spirit are present throughout the world today, indicating that He works the same way today as He worked in the church of the First Century.

Endnotes


3 Quoted in Tom Sine, Mustard Seed Versus McWorld: Reinventing Life and Faith for the Future (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), p. 205

4 Darrek K. Guder, Be My Witnesses (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 35.


6 Ibid. p. 359.

7 Ibid., p 366.


14 Ibid., p. 37.


18 Hicks, op. cit.

19 Pao, op. cit., pp. 147-80

20 Ibid. p. 95.

21 The apostle Paul makes a similar argument regarding the rebuilding of the Davidic Kingdom (Acts 13:34).


24 Kostenberger and O’Brien, op.cit., p. 140


27 Shenk and Stutzman, op. cit., p. 110


The Theology of Mission in Acts 1:8

30 Charles VanEngen, "Importance of Narrative Theology for Biblical Theology of Mission"

31 Ibid.


34 This six-fold process is outlined by Osborne, Ibid., pp. 432-33 and discussed in Kim, op.cit.

35 Dae Ryeong Kim, “Toward Missiological Approach to Hermeneutics.”


40 David Pao, op. cit., pp. 206-7. Pao points out that the expression "made with human hands" (vs. 48) is always used in connection with acts of idolatry.


43 Ibid., pp. 29-31.


46 Ibid.

47 Gehring, op. cit., p. 181.


49 Green, op. cit., p. 159.

50 See Bruce Camp, “Major paradigm Shifts in World Evangelization,” International Journal of Frontier Missions (July/August, 1994).


53 These phases are present, for example, in Acts 2:42-47; 6:1-7; 11:19-30; 16:11-40; and 19:1-41.
Missional Community (Acts 1:6). Bible Commentary / Produced by TOW Project. In the book of Acts, Jesus’ mission to restore the world as God intended it to be is transformed into the mission of the community of Jesus’ followers. Acts traces the life of the community of Jesus’ followers as the Spirit forms them into a group of people who work and use work-related power and wealth differently from the world around them. The work begins with the creation of the unique community called the church. The material in Theology of Mission shows he was a profound missiologist as well. Working from a believers or free church perspective, Yoder effortlessly weaves together biblical, theological, practical and interreligious reflections to think about mission beyond Christendom. Along the way he traces the developments in the theology of mission and argues for an understanding of the church that is not merely a corrective but a genuine alternative. Yoder's essays have been a staple of missional theological discourse for decades. To have these lectures on the theology of mission now available will strengthen every syllabus in the field, stimulate research and foster incisive missional inquiry in the response to the challenges of the end of Christendom." Mission theology relates to other theological aspects in many ways. A look into Gods plan as revealed in His blessed Word shows the relationships between mission theology and other aspects of theology. Mission is an extension and amplification of God's very being. Jesus said in Acts 1:8 (KJV) 8But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. So Jesus gave us the Holy Spirit, the third person in the Trinity to comfort, guide, direct and so forth in all things as it relates to missions.10 The Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity makes it possible for men to carry out the mission of God.