

The Christian Mission Today: From the Footprints of Saints Peter and Paul

❖ MICHAEL JEGANKUMAR COONGHE

Mission to the Gentiles is one of the primary tasks of the Catholic Civilization. Jesus was born into a Jewish family, and His parents were Jewish by origin. But Jesus was very careful in extending His Kingdom, that is the Kingdom of God, to all the world: “And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the Good News to the whole creation’” (Mk 16:15).¹ Although His prime task was to renew the faith of Israel, Jesus included the whole of creation into the idea of a New Israel, where Jews and non-Jews are a part. Almost all the books of the New Testament contain the interest of Jesus, the Apostles, and the disciples toward Gentiles. Even though, at the beginning of the Gospel’s narratives, Jews were given primacy as the lost sheep of Israel,² it is by no means to make the mission to the Gentiles secondary.

The *Acts of the Apostles* (ΠΡΑΞΕΙΣ ΑΠΟΣΤΟΛΩΝ) is the fifth book of the New Testament and could be considered as the book *ad gentes*.³ It connects the mission starting from the city of Jerusalem, the city of David, to the imperial city of Rome, known as the ‘End of the World.’ Jesus’ resurrection and the working of the Holy Spirit are the book’s main drivers. Luke is considered by tradi-

¹ Also see Matt 24:14.

² Cf. Mt 10:6: “But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”.

³ Suggested readings on the *Acts of the Apostles*, which were consulted to draft this work: M.L. SOARD, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns*, Westminster/Knox, Louisville, KY 1994; R.W. WALL, *The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, The New Interpreter’s Bible, vol. 10, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN 2002; C.K. BARRET, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh 1994; F.F. BRUCE, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1988.

tion to be the author, and at times he seems to be the narrator, revealing himself as a participant of the same narration. To prove the Lukan authorship of the Acts is no easy task, as his authorship too would have to be disproved. Being a ‘*Dear and Glorious Physician*’ (Col 4,14), Luke was a Greco-Roman and well-educated Gentile Christian who could have had some original sources to the early of the infant Church. Luke dedicates his book to the famous Theophilus (Θεόφιλος), whose identity continues to be elusive, because we are unable to know whether we are dealing with a real person, a community or an idea. While some modern and free thinkers believe that Theophilus could be every reader of the Acts, I believe this is only one of the arguments.

The author himself is the first missionary *ad gentes*. The book is an account of his personal experience of the mission to the Gentiles. He tells us what he believes and experiences. The purpose of Acts could be to unite the discordant faith communities; contrast idolatry, which had widespread standing at that time; make a defense against the persecutors; encourage the ministers in their evangelization process; strengthen faith; and maintain a stance in the theological and historical controversies of the time.

1. The Book of the *Acts of the Apostles*

The *Acts of the Apostles* portrays the beginning of the Christian mission since the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paramount leading figures like Peter and Paul, and their missions, dominate the book’s story line. There are also many secondary characters who are given substantial importance in spreading the Gospel under different and adverse circumstances. The mission activities of prominent characters are deeply embedded in the *missio ad gentes* of various churches. *Acts of the Apostles* deal with the Mission of God (*missio Dei*) and the Mission of the Church (*missio ecclesiae*), where the latter, to avoid failure (Acts 8:39), must always be faithful to the former.

Therefore, the book provides a crucial insight on the events surrounding the early Church. Church fathers like Irenaeus, author of *Adversus Haereses*, and Eusebius, who wrote *Ecclesiastical History*, have drawn heavily from the details provided by the Acts for their arguments. Many Church scholars agree that Luke kept a very truthful record of events, underlining how the early Church’s was very

faithful to the Gentile mission, which was considered to be the Spirit-driven mission of the Church.

While conforming to recurrent patterns emerging in contemporary masterpieces of historical writing, Acts has its own style in the arrangement of the narratives. It starts with the Ascension of Jesus and runs through the development of the early Christian Community, especially in Jerusalem. The martyrdom of Stephen paves the way for the Church to go beyond Israel, providing an opportunity for the Gentiles to come into contact with the first missionaries. Paul's conversion should be seen as a clear intimation of the beginning of Gentile mission (Acts 9), and that is why Paul is one of the most important figures in the Gentile mission itself and in the whole book. The selection of the seven Deacons in chapter six tells us the Church is an inclusive reality very much concerned about the fate of every single member, whether Jew or Gentile. The Cornelius episode in chapters 10 and 11 gives us reason to believe that God is behind the Church's overture to Gentile converts. Paul and Barnabas form a first and truly formidable missionary team (Acts 11-14), and, at this juncture, Peter culminates the decisive recognition of a law-free Gentile mission by the Apostolic commission. Well explained in chapters 15-21, the Pauline mission covers an area covering Philippi, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Miletus, Caesarea and Jerusalem. Paul's imprisonment and trial herald the mission's arrival at the capital of the Gentile world.

2. Peter's Interest in the Gentile Mission

The key figure in the first part of Acts, Peter personifies many ideas and beliefs of the early Christian communities. There are some 24 standard speeches in the book, out of which eight are by Peter. A number of important points should be observed in his first speech that shed light on the crucial importance of the *missio ad gentes*. While delivering his speech, the listeners are suddenly filled by the Holy Spirit and begin to speak in other tongues (Acts 2:3): Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, are all filled with the Holy Spirit. The *missio ad gentes* has started with Peter and is approved by the Holy Spirit. (All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit – και ἐπλήσθησαν πάντες

πνεύματος ἁγίου – meaning that most of the earliest converts were certainly Gentiles).

While blaming the Jewish authorities, Peter also includes Gentiles among those who were responsible for the death of Jesus: “For in this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed” (Acts 4:27).

The election of the seven Deacons established a new identity for the leaders of the Church. The Apostles-oriented Church gradually incorporated Hellenists (Ἑλληνιστῶν), who were believed to be Greek-speaking Jews. Some felt they could turn out to be more open-minded Jewish Christians, compared to their more traditional brethren. Among the Deacons, the proto-martyr Stephen was the first to deliver a long sermon to the Jewish leadership. Offended by the speech, the Jewish leadership punished Stephen for the crime of blasphemy. And this is where history changes. A young man is introduced into the life of the Church as the Apostle par excellence of the Gentiles (Acts 8:1).

The death of Stephen causes the infant Church to spread beyond Jerusalem. Jerusalem, the icon of Judaism, forced the Christian leadership to seek more fertile fields. Samaria became the first Gentile city to hear the Good News of Jesus. It was Deacon Philip who took up the task of bringing the Good News to the Gentiles. Philip’s mission was closely observed by the Jerusalem Church, which later commissioned Peter and John to baptize the Gentile Christians, for it believed that they had been baptized only with water. After baptizing the Samaritan Christian, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching in many Samaritan villages on the way back (Acts 8:25).

The first official convert was an Ethiopian eunuch, a royal court officer of the Queen of Ethiopia. His conversion specifically signals that the Church is becoming increasingly more universal and that the mission is now slowly but steadily expanding towards the Gentile world (Acts 8:32-40).

Cornelius, a Roman centurion, is a well-known figure in the *Acts of the Apostles*, chiefly because he was the first Italian cohort to become a Christian. Initially charged with bringing the Good News to Cornelius, Peter ended up baptizing the centurion’s entire family. Previously, Peter had had a very interesting vision in which he had been commanded to eat untouchable animals contained in a large sheet

(Acts 10). Peter applied the same method of preaching Jesus to the Jews and of instructing Gentile listeners as on Pentecost (Acts 10:34-43). The key points he makes are: God shows no partiality between Jews and Gentiles (vv. 34-35); Jesus Christ is the Lord of all (v. 36); Jesus does good (v. 38); the authorities are responsible for his death but God is responsible for his resurrection on the third day (v. 40).

Just as the Jews had been filled by the Holy Spirit when Peter was preaching to them, the Gentiles too now receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-48). The command to baptize the Gentiles is first given by Peter himself, because they have now received the Holy Spirit. Peter then stays with the Gentile converts for several days (Acts 10:48), highlighting his personal commitment to the Gentile mission.

Peter not only brought the Good News to the Gentiles, but also defended their faith in the Jerusalem Church when it was a highly divisive issue there. He was able to convince them, stating it was the same Holy Spirit with which the Jews are baptized in Jesus (Acts 11:17). In one way, he warned them not to hinder God's work. The Church in Jerusalem had no objections to make and praised God, saying that God had granted repentance that leads to life (ἔθνεσιν ὁ θεὸς τὴν μετάνοιαν εἰς ζωὴν ἔδωκεν, Acts 11:18).

3. Paul's Interest in the Gentile People

Paul is the second principal character in the *Acts of the Apostles*, even though some claim him to be the key figure in the book. Paul's conversion is remarkable, for it occurs when he is on a mission to destroy the Church, which was considered as contrary to the Mosaic covenantal religion of Judaism. He meets the Lord in a Gentile city, Damascus, and realizes he is treading the wrong track. The persecutor becomes the evangelizer. Once Paul was confronted and touched by the risen Lord, he is sent to a local Church leader Ananias, who may have been a Jewish Christian (Acts 9:13). Ananias had to be fortified by the Lord himself, for Paul was a real persecutor. Here Paul gets a new name as the 'Apostle of Gentiles' (Acts 9:15). The Lord reveals to Ananias that Paul is His chosen instrument to proclaim His name to the Gentiles and their kings (ὅτι σκεῦος ἐκλογῆς ἐστίν μοι οὗτος τοῦ βαστάσαι τὸ ὄνομά μου ἐνώπιον ἐθνῶν τε καὶ βασιλέων, Acts 9:15).

Damascus, to which Paul had come to eradicate the Christians, thus became the first city to hear Paul's preaching of Jesus. Paul

spoke forcefully, proclaiming that Jesus ‘is the Son of God’ (Acts 9:20 τὸν Ἰησοῦν ὅτι οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ). As Paul’s fame as preacher spread, the Church in Jerusalem became more concerned for this new Apostle. It was the Jerusalem Church that protected Paul by sending him to Tarsus via Caesarea (Acts 9:30). By doing so, the Jerusalem Church becomes the first established Church to send Paul on a *missio ad gentes*.

Antioch was the first established Jewish-Gentile Church, where Paul and Barnabas toiled hard to bring the message of God. It should be noted that, according to Acts, only here are the believers called, for the first time, “Christians” (πρώτως ἐν Ἀντιοχείᾳ τοὺς μαθητὰς Χριστιανούς, Acts 11:26). At this time – i.e. at the ‘time of Claudius Caesar’ (Acts 11:28) – a severe famine spread, soliciting the Antiochian Church to provide aid to the Jerusalem Church and the Christians in Judea (Acts 11:30).

The Antiochian Church takes on the responsibility of commissioning Paul and Barnabas on *missio ad gentes*. Carried out in prayer and consecration (Acts 13:1-3), the mission of Paul and Barnabas is not a personal initiative but is specifically commissioned by a Church.

The first missionary journey is the first and clearest sign of the Church’s undertaking of a Gentile mission abroad. It covers the areas of Antioch in Syria, Cyprus, Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and back to Antioch in Syria. In all these places, while Paul’s primary interest was to preach to the Jews, it was the Gentile listeners who heeded his messages. As a clear sign of his commitment to the Gentile mission, Paul in Cyprus gives up his Jewish name Saul, pointing to the fact that a name change in the Bible is never accidental but an indication of greater theological meaning (Gn 17:5; 32:28).

Antioch of Pisidia, where Paul delivered one of his famous missionary speeches, marks a turnaround in the Church’s mission. In it he provides an outline of the history of salvation, from the exodus to the resurrection of Jesus, but it is not well received by the Jewish authorities who reject Paul and Barnabas’ message. They are left with no option but to turn their attention to the Gentiles: “Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles” (ἰδοὺ στρεφόμεθα εἰς τὰ ἔθνη, Acts 13:46). Paul therefore changes his focus, strengthened in this by the Scriptures: “I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may

bring salvation to the ends of the earth” (τέθεικά σε εἰς φῶς ἐθνῶν τοῦ εἶναι σε εἰς σωτηρίαν ἕως ἐσχάτου τῆς γῆς, Acts 13:47). This claim may be an allusion to Is 46:2 and 49:6. Here Paul, representing the Church, makes it very clear that when earthly Israel rejects its Messiah, no harm is done to the Messiah, but rather a speedy opportunity is provided to go to the Gentiles. This rejection could well represent a lesson for the Gentiles. A similar turn of events occurs in Iconium, too, where the Jews again reject the preaching of Paul, causing division among the Gentiles who split up in opposing factions, some sustaining Paul and others sustaining the Jews.

Paul, being a Jew by birth, was very clear in his monotheistic belief in God, and the same time, as a Greco-Roman citizen, he was aware of the pantheistic ideas of the Gentile world. Paul uses his faith and knowledge to be very careful in his *missio ad gentes*. In Lystra and in Derbe, Paul and Barnabas were deified as Zeus and Hermes, which could have been a common practice in the Gentile world. While Paul was skillful enough to reject this pagan practice, at the end that same crowd started throwing stones at him. Towards the end of the first missionary journey, Paul gathered the Church and reported all the good God had done for the Gentiles (Acts 14:27). Here, two things should be observed: Paul stresses the mission was the Church’s and that it is to the Church he reports to tell how the Lord had sustained the mission, at the end also finding time to stay with the Church, narrating what the Lord had done for this mission.

The Council of Jerusalem discusses for the first time the issue of giving rights to the Gentiles. What makes one a Christian? And what makes one a believer? What place have Mosaic Laws and circumcision? These were just some of the all-encompassing questions that were raised among Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul and Barnabas were given the task to once again go to Jerusalem to speak to the Apostles and elders to discuss the matter (ἀποστόλους καὶ πρεσβυτέρους, Acts 15:2). These elders could have been local leaders other than the ‘Twelve,’ later to evolve as bishops. While there appears in the Jerusalem Church Pharisaic influences (Acts 15:4), the will of God prevails. After much debate, Peter, being the first Apostle, addresses the Council claiming himself as the one “from whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the Good News and become believers” (Acts 15:9). Peter in underlining the importance of the Gentile mission acknowledges it as the Church’s mission. Peter warns not to test God, for he knows that the tempter is always ‘Sa-

tan' (Deut 6:16; Mt 4:7; Lk 4:12). Peter's argument is well received and all keep silent (Ἐσίγησεν δὲ πᾶν τὸ πλῆθος). The decision Peter makes is therefore the Church's. Finally, with the quotation from Amos 9:11-12, James of Jerusalem gives the verdict that no one should trouble the Gentiles who are turning to God (Acts 15:19). This specific James is traditionally believed to be the elder of Jerusalem.

The verdict of James thus coincided with the decision of the Apostles and the elders of the Council, which sent out an official letter to the believers of Gentile origin, observing that the Church will follow only the instruction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28) while, at the same time, rejecting any pagan practice that is contrary to faith. This letter was received with much rejoicing (Acts 15:31) and indicated that the Gentile believers were in full accord with the decision of the Church in Jerusalem.

Missio ad gentes does not depend on one man, it makes many disciples as demonstrated by the division between Paul and Barnabas' groups. When undertaking a Gentile mission, Paul, being a Jewish Christian, is joined by other Gentile Christian leaders like Timothy and Silas. Paul complies very closely with the rules of the Church on the *missio ad gentes*.

Paul, in his second missionary journey, is led not only by the Holy Spirit but also by the 'Spirit of Jesus' (τὸ πνεῦμα Ἰησοῦ, Acts 16:7). Therefore, the Gentile mission is not directed by Paul's will, but by Jesus'. That is why the *missio ad gentes* heads for Macedonia (Acts 16:9-10). The Church's Gentile mission was not always welcomed by the Gentiles. It was welcomed in many places, but in others it was strongly opposed, landing Paul and Silas in prison (Acts 16:19-24).

As usual, Paul and Silas first visited Jewish synagogues both in Thessalonica and in Borea but, in both places, they were met only with rejection, thereby giving an opportunity to Gentiles there to receive the Good News.

The notes on the city of Athens in Acts (17:16) should be examined closely. Athens is the cultural capital of the Greek world, while Rome the political capital of the Roman Empire. Paul follows the system of arguments heard at the market place but also holds debates with Stoic and Epicurean philosophers (Ἐπικουρείων καὶ Στωϊκῶν, Acts 17:18). Paul's arguments at the Areopagus, and his bold speech there with their familiar vocabularies, proclaims the his-

tory of salvation culminating with the passion and resurrection of Jesus. Paul's initial speech to a highly sophisticated Gentile assembly, while not bringing much fruit at first, nevertheless marks a watershed in the Gentile Mission. Paul's clear knowledge about the city of Athens, their philosophy and their belief system heralds the future success of the Gentile mission.

The city of Corinth shares the same story with Gentiles and Jews. It is to the Jews, Paul and his company go first. However, since they reject the Good News, they now address the Gentiles as well. Many are baptized and at one point Paul is fortified by the Lord Himself: "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent" (Acts 17:9). This is another clear sign that the *missio ad gentes* is right on track. Paul's mission is the Church's mission as clearly defined in verse 22, when Paul makes an attempt to go to Jerusalem to report the mission.

4. Paul's Advice to the Gentile People

Paul's Gentile mission was not about establishing his own authority. He was sowing the seed of the local Churches. At the same time, he encouraged Gentile leaders to contribute to the mission.

Apollos was one such Gentile teacher contributing to the *missio ad gentes* with the same zeal as Paul and the Church leaders. Paul, in his third missionary journey, visited Ephesus, Macedonia, Greece, Troas, Miletus before making his traditional returns to Jerusalem. Ephesus, being one of Paul's main destinations, complements the mission of Apollos. Here Gentiles are baptized in the name of Jesus (Acts 19:5). In Ephesus, the *missio ad gentes* is marred by another incident when the sons of the high priest Sceva try to cast out demons by invoking the name of Jesus (Acts 19:15). The humiliation and the beating they get from the evil spirit could be seen as another sign that the *missio ad gentes* cannot be pursued by just anyone for their petty needs (Acts 19:16). The mission was in fact so successful that many of the Gentile magicians burned their books of magical practices.

While very effective, Paul's advice to the Gentiles was at the same time also strongly disputed. One Demetrius, a silversmith and an artisan at the temple of Artemis, takes revenge on Paul and on his mission by stirring up a riot, which nevertheless did not undermine the mission, but actually indirectly helped it.

Paul's advice to the Ephesian Elders contains much to ponder (Acts 20:17-38). Paul makes them realize that the mission is not a marginal affair. Preaching Jesus would clearly lead to persecution, which for Paul comes from the Jews. He makes them realize that he is not taking revenge on the Jews by neglecting them. Rather, he makes it a point to always preach to them first, witnessing to the fact that he never counted his life for any value. Paul conveys his view that a missionary should always be ready to bid 'farewell' as it means allowing the local Church to grow on its own and bring new missionaries. At the same time, Paul warns local leaders to keep a vigilant watch against the fierce wolves of Satanic nature that will come.

5. Paul's Journey to Rome Brings the *Missio ad Gentes* to the End of the World

Rome, the imperial capital of the Romans, was considered to be the 'End of the World'. Paul must have sensed his destiny in the events of his life. The persecution and affliction he underwent simply confirmed his days were numbered. A fact confirmed not only by the visions he had had but also by the prophecies he had heard from Christian prophets as Agabus (Acts 21:10), who predicted his end. Paul had never been afraid of going to Jerusalem where the rift between Jews and Christians ran deep and was increasingly bitter. A missionary has to worry about his mission, not for his safety. This teaching of the Church is well-testified by Paul's activities in Jerusalem.

James and the Church leaders in Rome were concerned for Paul's safety in Jerusalem because of his bold position with regard to circumcision. The riots that ensued was an attack not only on Paul but on the Church's *missio ad gentes*. When Paul was arrested at the Temple, the whole city of Jerusalem was in uproar (Acts 21:31), prompting the Roman soldiers to take charge. While Paul's language skills helped him to speak both in Greek and Hebrew, it ultimately allowed him to control his own history. Paul made use of all the opportunities to recount his own conversion and the election of Jesus to fulfill the salvation history, which had already been foretold in the Old Testament.

Paul relied on his Roman citizenship to demand to be tried by Caesar as was the right of every Roman citizen. Paul explained his innocence before the Jewish Council (Acts 22:30), before Gover-

nor Felix (Acts 23:23-35), finally appealing to the Emperor. Once again Paul had to prove his innocence before king Agrippa (Acts 26:23-27) and made use of the opportunity to try converting him into belief. This makes a mockery at the local Jewish leaders that they should realize the mission of Church will never lose any opportunity.

At last Paul lands in Rome after a harrowing sea journey. He survives a shipwreck and a snake bite in Malta (Acts 28:4), but finally reaches Rome as he had wished. With Paul, the *missio ad gentes* reaches Rome for a new beginning. As usual, Paul preaches the Good News first to the Jews who in Rome appear to be more positive than in the other places where Paul had preached. The author of Acts says Paul preached the Kingdom of God night and day, to convince them about Jesus, from the perspective of the Law of Moses and of the prophets.

6. The Challenges Today

The Church by nature is missionary and inclusive. There is no satisfaction in preaching the Good News in the Church. During the early stages of the nascent Church – the Church intended as a community – it undertook the *missio ad gentes*, which turned out to be highly successful thanks to the unswerving dedication and ardent commitment of men like Paul and Peter, who, while travelling on different routes, were very faithful to the mission to the Gentiles.

Today, the mission to the Gentiles may seem to be an outdated spirituality. In today's world, religion is mostly intended as something one professes rather than as a missionary enterprise. Christianity cannot simply be considered as one of the venerable religions; instead, it is a missionary discipleship and, above all, a culture with many traditions.

The modern philosophies and quest for pleasure that drives atheism bring many Christians to compromise on what they believe. Christ and Christianity are not anyone's private property that can be given up or forsaken. Christianity without Christ is lifeless and the Church without missionary commitment and character is unfitting.

Paul made use of all the possibilities to bring Jesus and His message to the Gentile world, and he was aware that bringing Jesus to the Gentiles was, first of all, a right of the Gentiles. Paul's wealth was Jesus, whom he had encountered after a long quest. Jesus was a treas-

ure he couldn't keep for himself. He shared that gift with all and everyone, always.

Sri Lanka, as many of the Asian lands, is a multi-ethnic country, where all the religions have their own roots and spirituality. The one who has not experienced Jesus personally will not bring this good experience to his friends. For many modern Christians, Jesus is an abstract idea or rather one of many gods. For some, he is a personal experience, while some consider Jesus as one of the outstanding spiritual leaders. Paul and the main characters in Acts did not see Jesus as one of many. For them, Jesus was everything. That is why they sacrificed everything to bring Jesus to the Gentiles.

Every Christian has to be a real follower of his own faith, as Paul was an ardent devotee of Judaism that brought him into contact with Jesus, after which he was a missionary. Every Christian needs to have a Damascus experience, to listen, to believe and to bring Him to the others.