

Missio ad Gentes in the *Acts of the Apostles*

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The text of the second volume written by Luke has been constantly mined as a compendium of sorts for either the history of the Church, or on how missionary work is conducted. Luke clearly did not have the intention to compose either of the above, and was motivated more for theology than strictly historical reasons.¹ While it may not be ticketed as a missionary document or map for Christian mission,² it does contain wisdom concerning mission work that can serve as a guide for this day and age.

The specific missionary aspect to be considered is *missio ad gentes*, “the task of preaching the Gospel and planting the Church among peoples or groups who do not yet believe in Christ.”³ This kind of work contains three basic components: 1) “Proclaiming Christ and His Gospel; 2) Building up the local Church; 3) Promoting the values of the Kingdom.”⁴ The work surrounding initial proclamation is closely inter-related to other missionary endeavors, with an interdependence among them.⁵ Thus, while attention in this paper is dedicated to *missio ad gentes*, that is not to say that it cannot dialogue in a like manner with other missionary tasks.

¹ See L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 5, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, PA 2006, 7. Johnson further explains that the apology of Luke is “in the broadest sense a theodicy. His purpose is to defend God’s activity in the world”.

² B.R. GAVENTA, “You will Be My Witnesses: Aspects of Mission in the Acts of the Apostles”, *Missiology: An International Review*, vol. 10, n. 4, 1982, 424.

³ Vatican II, *Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church “Ad Gentes”*, n. 6, 7 December 1965.

⁴ See Pope John Paul II’s Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 34, 7 December 1990.

⁵ *Ibid.*

It is noteworthy to mention that words such as mission⁶ or missionary are lacking in the book of the *Acts of the Apostles*. Luke's construct called primarily for the proclamation of the Gospel who is Christ, rendered today, the very subject of mission. For Luke, this proclamation was the basic demand for every disciple. All Christians were thus considered missionary by nature without having necessarily used the label given to it today.

The task confronting contemporary readers of the Acts of the Apostles, with regard to *missio ad gentes*, is to discover basic principles about the continuing mission of the Church in the world, especially to places that have not been captivated by the Gospel. This paper will therefore strive to reflect upon the biblical narrative of Acts to unearth how even today it yields ideas to support and to enrich the Church's *missio ad gentes*.

Given the breadth and length of Acts, focus shall be trained on the conversion stories from Acts 8:4-11:18,⁷ with some treatment on Acts 15, owing to its relation with Acts 10-11:18. Other passages from the book shall be considered in brief. Discussion shall be grouped under three main principles to serve as reflection points for all missionaries to the nations. The concluding section shall summarize the reflections on the *missio ad gentes* in Acts outlined throughout the paper.

⁶ What the New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE) and New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) translate as "mission" in Acts 12:25 is *διακονίαν*, which means "service", "office" or "ministry" from B. HORST – G. SCHNEIDER (eds.), *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1990, s.v. "διακονία", 304.

⁷ While recent scholarship no longer regards Paul's experience strictly as a conversion, Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Smyth and Helwys Publishing, Inc, Macon, GA 2005, 83, speaks of the narratives of Paul "in three complementary ways: 1) a conversion in which Christ changes an opponent into an ally; 2) as a conquest, in which Christ overpowers his enemy; and 3) as a commissioning, in which Christ chooses an emissary". J.A. FITZMYER, *The Acts of the Apostles, The Anchor Bible*, Doubleday, New York 1998, 420, qualifies that it is a conversion story only in the sense of Paul being transformed "from a persecutor to a witness of the risen Christ", but "not the conversion of a great sinner".

1. A Re-Interpretation of All Things in Christ

One of the most dramatic chronicles of conversion remains that of Saul, the oppressor of Christians turned Paul the Apostle (Acts 9:1-9). The story is retold twice in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 22:6-16 and 26:12-18), indicating its importance in the narratives. While the exact particulars are known only to Paul, the compelling force and impact of the encounter is sufficient to raise astonishment. It was enough to turn the most ardent of persecutors of the early Church to its most stalwart defender. That Paul remained Jewish in his tradition is certain. He neither renounced his Jewishness, nor discounted his heritage (as Acts 16:3; 21:26; 22:3; 24:14 bear witness to). Yet it was under the banner of Christ to which Paul eventually subjected his Jewish faith.

The road to Damascus was the passageway to enlightenment, understanding, and freedom for Paul. The details are sparingly told in the first recounting (Acts 9). He fell to the ground (considered one of the features of a theophany⁸) upon seeing a light⁹ from the sky surround him, presumably saw Jesus (Acts 9:27) and subsequently heard a voice, calling in the double vocative reminiscent of the Old Testament calls. Jesus not only revealed Himself to the fallen man, but identified Himself with the Church¹⁰ that Paul was bent on bearing down upon (Acts 9:4-5). After receiving cryptic instructions, Paul discovers he is blind (Acts 9:8).

Such an encounter with the Lord had a confounding effect upon the future Apostle to the Gentiles. In acknowledging that Jesus was indeed the Lord, he had to resolve what that meant in relation to

⁸ CH. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 86. He offers as other examples: Ezek 1:28; Dan 8:17; Rev 1:17.

⁹ C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, T&T Clark, London 2002, 134, states "for Luke light is a physical representation of the divine glory of Christ". R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, The Acts of the Apostles, vol. 2, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 1994, 120, presupposes "that Paul saw the Messiah, not just the light".

¹⁰ B.R. GAVENTA, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Missionary Conversion*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, PA 1986, 56, pointedly observes that though *mathetes* is found 28 times in Acts, this is the only one that contains the qualifier *tou kyriou*. Luke hence appears purposeful here as he introduces the chapter, to subtly identify Jesus with His disciples as he will clearly state in the narrative.

everything he had ever known and fought to uphold – his Jewish faith. As to the workings of the Lord on the heart of Paul, one can only imagine. However, the reader of Acts is left with particular clues about what Paul had to grapple with.

Initially, the blindness-causing-light is an irony one cannot fail to notice. It gives emphasis on the need to see, perhaps at this stage of the narration, exteriorly but as one progresses, also apparently interiorly. When one reads how Ananias is told that Paul will be used by the Lord to call Gentiles (Acts 9:15), the image of light then gives reference to Israel being “the light of the Gentiles”¹¹ (the third narration, Acts 26:18 characterizes this light as salvific). His blindness and helplessness result in his having to be guided. Again, the ostensible manner is physical but when one considers the drama unfolding, one cannot help but wonder if there is also an internal guidance taking place.

The rest of Acts will make evident that, because of this encounter with the Lord, Paul is no longer the same man by any measure. The transformation that occurs equates to a “conversion of will, intellect and emotion which dictated the abiding purpose and direction of his subsequent life and activity”.¹² This is the proverbial 180-degree turnaround being effected.

One thing to ponder is that it was Jesus Himself who transformed Paul on the road to Damascus. There was no middle man in this episode, the conversion was wholly to Jesus, by Jesus. Paul *took this direct encounter with Christ*, and prayerfully contemplated what all this meant with regard to all that he had believed all his life. From there, he realized that there was no conflict in any way. Faced with the truth of Christ, Paul re-interpreted his Jewish beliefs in light of what Christ revealed. In this way, Paul saw how his Jewish faith was made complete by and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Christ is the necessary starting point for the missionary task at hand. Those persecuting Christ knew no better and were content to

¹¹ See R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 121-122, for a detailed discussion linking the theme of light to being “the light to the Gentiles” in Acts.

¹² F.F. BRUCE, *The Book of the Acts*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, G. FEE (rev. ed., gen. ed.), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1988, 183.

stay with what they had always known, as did Paul initially. But all the “truths” in the world are mere seedbeds – preparatory work for the “Truth” that Christ is. Mission work is *for* Christ, *about* Christ and even *by* Christ. The only way one will ever begin fully to understand the work being asked is to center on Christ. The present world experiences a clouding of Christ owing to a greediness for pleasure, power, money, and other things that are not in consonance with Him. A re-interpretation in Christ equates to everything finding meaning only in the light of Jesus. This takes knowing Jesus, learning about his ways, his mission and his life. It calls for one to look at people, situations, circumstances, contexts and cultures with the eyes of the Messiah. It means that thoughts and words will only find meaning when juxtaposed with Jesus.

Concretely in mission, it means acknowledging that all people have been saved by Him, realizing that all cultures have a share in Him, accepting that all knowledge stems from Him. And then acting accordingly. To be missionary is to measure things and situations and people against what is known about Christ, and looking for points of consonance and congruence, with Christ as the core and center. This re-interpretation dictates that the doors of the eyes, the mind, and the imaginings be kept open for a world-view that revolves around Christ, and the Christ that in fact governs the world-view.

1.1 Preach Christ

The missionary impetus therefore must solely be Christ. A brief look at the figure of Simon in Acts 8 admonishes those who serve for self-glorification.¹³ His character contrasts with that of the evangelist Philip who preached the kingdom of God in Jesus (Acts 8:35),¹⁴ while Simon, in his claims to be someone great (Acts 8:9-

¹³ R.J. KARRIS, *Invitation to Acts: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles with Complete Text from The Jerusalem Bible*, Image Books, Garden City, NY 1978, 95.

¹⁴ M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2008, 114, observes that in contrasting Philip with Simon, Luke also tries to show that the wondrous signs done by the early Christians were NOT magical in nature, thus illustrating the difference between a Christian miracle and pagan magic.

10), preached only himself. Though outwardly devoted to Philip, his request to pay for the power to confer the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:19) exposed the genuine stirrings of his heart. Peter, quite adamant that the service they do for the people on behalf of the Lord is freely given (Acts 3:6),¹⁵ lambasts Simon for daring to desire the manipulation of the Spirit.¹⁶

At the heart of Simon's actions lies the desire for self-aggrandizement, for an increase in stature, for things that do not coincide with what it means to be like Christ. Missionaries and preachers may begin to proclaim Christ in all sincerity at the onset, but end up failing to resist the temptation to bring their own selves to the forefront. Thus, they not only obscure Christ, but use Him as a means and an excuse to extol themselves. Missionaries may consider their own popularity as a gauge of the ministry success. If one reinterprets missionary accomplishments through the eyes of Christ, then one thinks only of *how much of Christ* did the people actually encounter through the endeavors of those proclaiming Him.

On a subtler note, one finds in Acts 15 the crucial decision that has to be made by the early Church: Where does salvation lie? In Christ? Or in circumcision, which is the distinguishing mark of the Jewish faith? A slightly fuller treatment of this shall be tackled below; however, at this point, suffice it to say that Jewish Christians expected their Jewish customs would be completely embedded in their new Christian faith, as though believing in Christ were just an add-on. Paul, as we saw earlier, in no way considered Christ supplemental, but was able to reinterpret the Jewish beliefs with Christ as its very foundation and fulfillment. Given that Christ was now the fulcrum around which everything was hinged on, Paul began to weed out what components of his Jewish belief were not in consonance, or were not necessary for what Christ revealed to him. In Acts 15,

¹⁵ R.I. PERVO, *Acts: A Commentary*, Hermeneia, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN 2009, 214.

¹⁶ B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1998, 286; P. HERTIG, "The Magical Mystery Tour: Philip Encounters Magic and Materialism in Samaria", in R.L. GALLAGHER – P. HERTIG (eds.), *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY 2004, 106, states that Simon "seeks a power that he may own".

one finds the Jewish Church not imposing on the Gentile Christians their own Jewish obligations¹⁷ especially regarding the need for circumcision. The argument of Peter (Acts 15:7-11) was clearly saying “if God had not been pleased with these converts, if he had wanted more, he would have made this clear, and he would not have given them the signs of salvation, as he had done”.¹⁸

Missionary minds can take a page from the early Church in this regard. When proclaimers bring Christ to the field, they do not realize they are sometimes bringing more than just Christ. They are aided to this end by their own spirituality and expressions of their Catholicity – Carmelite, Franciscan, Dominican, to give some proper names – or, in general terms, their monastic, charismatic, contemplative, or active spirituality among many others. The richness of the Catholic expression ensures that these well support the mission – they are a way of concretizing both the inward and outward codes of the faith. They can also be however, *a hindrance, when they are imposed*. When missionaries of a certain spirituality do not merely introduce but force their own way of living their Christian life on others, Christ somehow gets eclipsed. Believers may even be lost this way, not being able to find Christ in a spirituality that is forced upon them. Conversion is solely to Christ, not to a specific congregation / lay association or specific spirituality.

Preach Christ and nothing more. All else is superfluous. Missionaries can draw inspiration from both Philip and the early Church and resist the temptation to forcibly impress a specific brand of spirituality on others as they herald Christ. Let each individual discover the spirituality the Lord draws one to. Allow the Lord to work His transformation in His people. It is after all, His mission and, again, His people.

¹⁷ In Acts 15:29, there are four abstentions requested by James for the Gentiles. C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 234, discusses the possible origins and backgrounds for these. L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 272, argues admirably that the point of these abstentions was “to provide the basis for table-fellowship and full communion between Jew and Gentile Messianists”. These four would represent the minimum necessary for the Gentile to be welcomed at the table of the Jew since ancient protocol required table-fellowship with people who shared the same values.

¹⁸ J.J. KILGALLEN, *A Brief Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, Paulist Press, Mahwah, NJ 1988, 122.

The opposite scenario though, can also occur, that is, the watered-down teaching of Christ. Acts shows how a characteristic of those proclaiming Christ is a particular kind of boldness. Acts 4:29 speaks of a supplication to enable the believers to speak with all boldness, despite impending adversity. Paul and his companions are found arguing incessantly in synagogues (Acts 13:14-41; 14:1-3; 17:1-3, 10-11, 17; 18:4, 19; 19:8), unequivocally proclaiming the unpopular message that Jesus is the Messiah. It was not because they were lacking in courage that they shifted to the Gentiles. It was only after the constant insistence of the Jews to reject the proclamation that they resorted to preaching to the Gentiles (Acts 13:44-46; 18:5-6). The two clear facts about Christ which earned them not only derision but physical harm, were that Christ is the Messiah, and that belief in Him is necessary for the forgiveness of sins. Despite the difficulty in proclaiming these, they were not derailed from doing so. The proclamation was kept alive.

When Christ is proclaimed by missionaries, He must not be a reduced Christ, tailored to suit what would be palatable to the people, but must be the very truth of Christ. There is a basic Creed our faith professes that must be clearly declared, without any deviation from it. A watered-down Christ is not Christ at all. Missionaries must be kept aware of this reality, for what is at stake in the proclamation is the salvation of souls. For which, only Christ is the answer.

A word of caution for all missionary endeavors brings one to the next important point: Preaching Christ is not preaching Christ if words are bereft of loving deeds.

1.2 Witness to Christ

The Greek *μάρτυς* is a noun for someone who “witnesses”,¹⁹ which may be achieved by words or deeds. To witness Christ is “the central activity of Acts”.²⁰ The early Church began its witness by preach-

¹⁹ *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, B. HORST – G. SCHNEIDER (eds.), vol. 2, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 2000, s.v. “*μάρτυς*”, 393. In Acts, it takes on a meaning more than just being an “eyewitness”, and is used by Luke exclusively for the Apostles, Paul and Stephen, 395.

²⁰ J.J. KILGALLEN, *A Brief Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 9. A related thought is stressed in RM 32, which situates missionary activity at the center of the life of the Church today, and considers it “a fundamental commitment of the whole people of God”.

ing in synagogues, and when rejected by the Jews, it moved into the market place (Acts 17:17), accompanying its kerygma with signs and wonders. The message of Christ in words is strengthened by Christian deeds, precisely because this is the very pattern of the life of Christ, His words explained His deeds, and His deeds confirmed His words.²¹ Of the ten conversion stories in Acts (2:1-41; 3:1-4:4; 8:4-25; 8:26-40; 9:1-31; 10:1-49; 13:6-12; 13:13-52; 16:11-15; 16:25-34), eight are explicitly connected to signs and wonders²² (2:1-41; 3:1-4:4; 8:4-25; 8:26-40; 9:1-31; 10:1-49; 13:6-12; 16:25-34).

Accompanying these wondrous deeds was a strong testimony to what believing in Christ meant, an authentic witness of life. The connective summaries in Acts show the early Church growing in number,²³ not only through preaching but because of the life they shared:²⁴ “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need” (Acts 2:44-45. See also Acts 4:32-35. Acts 5:1-11 finds the opposite example shown by Ananias and Sapphira).

While the miracles wrought through Christ testify to His authority and power as God, acts of genuine Christian goodness are a

²¹ Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* “*Dei Verbum*”, n. 2, 18th November 1965.

²² M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 115, says signs and wonder were external manifestations of the spoken message.

²³ W. REINHARDT, “The Population Size of Jerusalem and the Numerical Growth of the Jerusalem Church”, in R. BAUCKHAM (ed.), *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting*, *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting*, vol. 4, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1995, 237-266, argues against the improbability of the growth in numbers based on the size of the Jerusalem population at the time of Jesus.

²⁴ Most scholars agree this is an idyllic description composed by Luke. J.A. FITZMYER, *The Anchor Bible*, 269, affirms that though an ideal, “it highlights the elements that *should be* part of genuine Christian life”. Emphasis added. L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 62, declares that this ideal was not just a literary theme and device used by Luke. He makes mention of evidence of sharing possessions in other biblical texts (Gal 2:10; 1 Cor 16:1-4; 2 Cor 8-9; Rom 15:25-31; Phil 4:15-20) and other early Christian literature. B. CAPPER, “The Palestinian Cultural Context of Earliest Christian Community of Goods”, in R. BAUCKHAM (ed.), *The Book of Acts in its Palestinian Setting*, 334-337, shows how based on the practice of the Essene community, the antiquity and historicity of the tradition of Acts 2:44 is actually possible, if not probable.

testimony to His love, to His authority and influence over the life of the believer. In a day and age where miracles are few and far between, it will be the lives of the missionaries that will carry the message of Christ. When others identify the fruit of Christianity – joy, truthfulness, goodness, and the rest of the fruit of the Holy Spirit²⁵ – in the life of the one bearing the good news, they will intuitively be drawn to Christ. As it was then, so it is to the present day, that it is not just power that converts, but the love behind the power. It must be remembered, that it is not always words that lead to conversion.

One key aspect in the authentic witness of life is the embracing of the marginalized. In Acts 8 (which will receive additional treatment below), the convert who Luke focuses on is an Ethiopian eunuch.²⁶ While identified as a man of importance, being the officer of the court of the queen of Ethiopia (Acts 8:27), Luke's emphasizes the fact he is a eunuch,²⁷ that is a physically mutilated man (Dt 23:2 automatically excludes them from assembly); among the most despised in antiquity, and considered an evil people.²⁸ That he is an Ethiopian²⁹ further carries contempt, as they were described as "one of the wicked nations of the world (Is 20:3-5; 43:3; Ezek 30:1-9; Nah 3:9; Zeph 2:11-12)".³⁰ The picture painted in Acts 8 is that of Philip ministering to an outcast, someone reviled in society, and bringing

²⁵ These are charity, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control, and chastity as per the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1832.

²⁶ Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 75, gives both the positive and negative views regarding eunuchs in antiquity but also mentions that "Jewish scriptures were hostile to such people (Lev 21:20; 22:24)". M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 119-120, breaks down the cultural description of both "Ethiopian" and "eunuch" and cites possible reasons for their marginalization.

²⁷ K.H. REEVES, "The Ethiopian Eunuch: A Key Transition from Hellenist to Gentile Mission", in R.L. GALLAGHER – P. HERTIG (eds.), *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, 117, argues that the "dominant trait in the narrative" is that he is a castrated male. See also M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 119-120.

²⁸ M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 120, citing S.F. SPENCER, "The Ethiopian Eunuch and His Bible: A Socio-Science Analysis", *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, vol. 22, 1992, 156.

²⁹ J.A. FITZMYER, *The Anchor Bible*, 412, observes that Ethiopia here is not to be identified with the modern-day country but covers several different regions south of Egypt, primary of which is the present-day Sudan.

³⁰ Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 75.

the likes of him into the fold of the people of God.³¹ The question asked by the eunuch: “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:36) is not a superficial question but one that rhetorically declares that all boundaries are purposefully being broken down.³²

In the short analysis above, it appears that Luke manages to encourage the scrapping of biases and prejudices,³³ which are no more in Christ. Through this narrative and others similar (the Cornelius conversion, for instance), Luke steadily takes the position that judgements based on appearances, exteriors and accidents have no place among the community of God. Reaching out to the people who belong to God requires the inclusion of those shunned by society because of their low social class, physical or psychological handicaps, lack of education, ethnicity, etc. In the establishment of communities, care must be shown that outcasts be seen and treated as equals by those more fortunate than themselves. The Lukan Christ especially favors those excluded by society (the programmatic prophecy in Luke 4:18-19 clearly spells out his ministry to bring the Gospel to the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed³⁴). And the disciple of Christ is called to follow suit. The missionary call is to do what Jesus did. In this case, with purpose, He sought out

³¹ M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 123-124. Some commentators center on the question of his being a proselyte, or God-fearer or Gentile, pointing to the first Gentile conversion but as L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 159, points out, “the enormous effort Luke put into the Cornelius sequence (chapters 10-15) would make no sense at all if Cornelius did not represent a fundamentally new step [...]. Luke clearly wants his readers to see him [the Ethiopian eunuch] as part of the ‘ingathering of scattered people’ of Israel”. Other scholars make mention of the point of the narrative being rather the reaching of “the ends of the earth”, since Ethiopia was thought to be that, B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 290 (although he admits there is no evidence of a first century Church in Ethiopia, 301); and R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 108-109.

³² Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 79-80, touches on this subject at length.

³³ M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 119.

³⁴ L.T. JOHNSON, *The Gospel of Luke*, Sacra Pagina Series, vol. 3, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, PA 1991, 81, explains that this character of Jesus’ ministry will be shown throughout the narrative stories of Luke about Jesus. Some examples are the cleansing of the leper (Lk 5: 12-13); the call of Levi the tax collector (Lk 5:27-32); the raising of the widow’s son (Lk 7:11-15); the forgiving of the sinful woman (Lk 7:36-50), among others.

people who were considered of no import, and fully embraced them all into his fold. Acts makes it clear, there should be no distinction among the people of God as “He is the Lord of all” (Acts 10:36).

2. A Re-Orientation Toward the Movement of the Holy Spirit

Following the declaration of the severe persecution that broke out at the beginning of Acts 8, Luke narrates of the missionary exploits of Philip, who may have been one of the “seven reputable men, filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom” in Acts 6.³⁵ In the episode with the Ethiopian eunuch, readers are told, three times within a mere fifteen verses, how the Holy Spirit drove Philip’s activity (Acts 8:26, 29, 39). The narrative is peppered with seemingly fortuitous events that bear the mark of the movement of the Spirit.

Philip is characterized as someone whose role is to fully yield to the Spirit. The first verse in the story finds Philip instructed by an angel of the Lord to go to Gaza, the desert road at noon (Acts 8:26). Two things must be said of this command. The first is that because of the heat of the desert sun, hardly anybody would be found traveling at noon in those days.³⁶ The second is that he was directed to the desert road. The Greek word for “desert”, ἔρημος also means “desolate” or “empty”,³⁷ which could allude to the outcome of the endeavor. Despite the strangeness of the instructions, Philip obeys and is rewarded by coming across an Ethiopian eunuch in a chariot whom the Spirit tells Philip to join (Acts 8:29). This gives the evangelist the opportunity to proclaim Jesus to the eunuch who not only happened to have been reading an Isaiah passage that gave Philip the perfect opening to preach Christ (Acts 8:28-35), but also asked to be baptized when they happened to come across water in that “desolate” desert!³⁸ Instead of coming out *empty*-handed, Philip bore

³⁵ So F.F. BRUCE, *The Book of the Acts*, 164; Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 68; and B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, *Acts-Socio*, 279.

³⁶ B.R. GAVENTA, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Missionary Conversion*, 101; and C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 124.

³⁷ B.R. GAVENTA, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Missionary Conversion*, 102.

³⁸ C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 127, however, claims “this is not surprising: there is good winter rainfall along the coastal strip”.

good fruit in furthering the Gospel. Immediately following the baptism, Philip is snatched away by the Spirit and sent to preach the Gospel to other areas (Acts 8:39-40).

Luke makes glaringly clear how the Holy Spirit was orchestrating the entire affair.³⁹ What is equally evident is that Philip the evangelist matches each instruction of the Spirit with quick obedience, regardless how odd the inspirations may have appeared to him. The narrative shows how this ready obedience yields much fruit for the mission. Philip, it seems, has re-oriented all thought and will to the Holy Spirit. This requires a turning-to, in this case a full turning toward the action of the Spirit. Missionary work is best effected by a complete adjustment and even alignment of life to the Spirit-directed work.⁴⁰

This calls for several self-adjustments, the primary and most difficult of which is the denial of self-will, humbly accepting the fact that one does not know all. Hence, the missionary heart remains open to the promptings of the One who *does* in fact know, and sees all. A certain amount of flexibility is exercised during missionary undertakings. Good missionary people are those able to bend their will easily to that of the Spirit, recognizing full well how they are mere instruments in the work. This in no way precludes the act of planning and organizing, which is also essential to mission, and are also gifts of work of the Spirit. However, it needs to be said that while there are plans made and ideas put on the worktable, these play second fiddle to the way the Spirit marks the path for the proclamation.

There is, however, a peculiar harmony involved in remaining flexible and having resolve. Once the missionary demand is made clear by the Lord, those in the mission field ought to display great tenacity in laboring for the Kingdom. Despite unusual circumstances or commands, the mission progresses with joyful missionary resoluteness, knowing that what the Spirit has begun, will likewise be fulfilled through His power. The recognition that it is the Holy Spirit who calls, guides and finishes the mission, is sufficient to redirect all in purposefully fulfilling His will.⁴¹

³⁹ Barrett practically identifies the angel of the Lord with the Spirit, *Ibid.*, 124.

⁴⁰ RM 21 declares the Holy Spirit as the principal agent of mission.

⁴¹ The essay of Fr. Francis J. Moloney, SDB in this volume gives a comprehensive treatment of this theme in Acts.

2.1 Recognize the Holy Spirit at Work

It must be understood and always highlighted that the mission belongs to the Lord. He is the God who orchestrates, inspires and moves the missionary work forward. On this assumption, if one were to agree that verse 1:8 in Acts – “But you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” – stands both as a mandate and *a promise*,⁴² then one would expect the Holy Spirit to surely propel the Church and all missionary endeavors. His presence would not be lacking. What remains for those continuing the mission is to be able to discern His action.

The obvious and necessary starting point of discernment is prayer. It is in constant keeping with the intimacy of a relationship with God that one will better understand the stirrings of His will. Acts shows how not only the disciples are always in prayer, but that it is at the point of prayer that the mission moves forward and progresses. Pentecost came about as a result of prayer in the upper room (Acts 1:13-14).⁴³ The choosing to complete the Twelve was done in prayer (Acts 1:24-26). The Spirit powerfully manifested Himself and emboldened them as they were praying (Acts 4:31). Tabitha is brought back to life by Peter’s prayer (Acts 9:40). Visions and instructions were received – both that of Ananias and Paul, while Paul was praying (Acts 9:10-12); the vision of Cornelius (Acts 10:3); that of Peter (Acts 10:9-10; 11:5); the setting apart of Paul and Barnabas for mission (Acts 13:2) – in prayer (and fasting). Peter was set free while others were praying (Acts 12:5-12). Prison doors broke open in the face of prayer and praise (Acts 16:25-26). Presbyters were commended to the Lord in prayer and fasting (Acts 14:21). Miracles and healing occurred (Acts 3:1-18; 28:8) through the bending of the knees before God.

⁴² B.R. GAVENTA, “You will Be My Witnesses: Aspects of Mission in the Acts of the Apostles”, 416; R.J. KARRIS, *Invitation to Acts: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles with Complete Text from The Jerusalem Bible*, 22-23; also Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 9, who emphatically says it is a promise or prophecy.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 11. Also implied by B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 114.

The Gospel of Luke places much emphasis on prayer, and on how Jesus prays.⁴⁴ It is no surprise then that the same stress is highlighted in the life of the Apostles and the community in the sequel of Luke. The ideas of praying, praising, glorifying God and thanking God appear at least forty-one times in Acts. For a witness to Christ to be effective, there must be an undisrupted connection with God, that is, the disciple must always be at prayer, must live a life immersed in prayer.

This unbroken flow of communication between God and His missionary should not be understated. It is in prayer that one builds on the relationship that is always being given by the Lord to His people. It is through prayer that one discovers more and more about the goodness the Lord is, and delves deeper to better appreciate His love. It is by prayer that one finds the motivation, the strength, the wisdom, and the love to do anything at all. Jesus Himself was always in prayer, and with good reason. The missionary disciple follows closely the footsteps of the One being proclaimed. The missionary, then as now, is essentially and necessarily one who prays.

2.2 Discern His Movement in Hardship

Mission work to places that either have not heard of the Gospel or have no interest to listen to its proclamation is no easy task. When difficulties emerge, so do, inevitably, discouragement and doubt. That is, unless one can still discern the movement of the Spirit in hardship. Acts speaks of a “severe persecution of the church in Jerusalem” (Acts 8:1),⁴⁵ resulting in the scattering of the believers. Yet this was the very vehicle by which the Gospel was spread. The Spirit made use of humanity cast out of their natural habitats. Though difficult to see at the time one is experiencing it, persecution can give rise to a fruitful by-product.

⁴⁴ L.T. JOHNSON, *The Gospel of Luke*, 69. He mentions that “critical moments of Jesus” ministry are punctuated in prayer (Lk 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28-29; 11:1; 22:41, 44-45; 23:46).

⁴⁵ BRIAN RAPSKE provides a comprehensive read on the persecution and obstructions in Acts in “Opposition to the Plan of God and Persecution”, in J. HOWARD MARSHALL – D. PETERSON (eds.), *Witness to the Gospel: Theology in Acts*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1998, 235-256.

Paul is keen to discern opportunities to proclaim and witness to Jesus during crisis situations and times of discouragement. Evidence for this is Paul's unswerving determination to move the mission forward despite his sufferings. In Acts 9:16 the reader is told that Paul was shown by Christ all that he would have to suffer for His name. A more resolute figure could not have been described by Luke, as Paul was bound (Acts 16:24; 21:33; 22:25), beaten (Acts 16:22; 21:32), willing to face imprisonment (Acts 20:22-24), imprisoned (Acts 16:23; 21:33), and even ready to die in the name of the Lord Jesus⁴⁶ (Acts 21:13). Acts further tells of how, time and again, Paul and his companions were rejected or threatened with bodily harm by one group or another (Acts 13:44-47, 50; 14:2, 4-5, 19; 16:19-24; 17:13; 18:5-6; 19:29-31; 21:27) but how the missionaries were resolute in moving the proclamation from place to place.

When the Spirit prevented the mission in some places, they would persevere in searching out where they would be allowed entry (Acts 16:6-10). While Luke is silent about the mind of Paul, the fact that he perseveres, allowing the Spirit to lead, is at least an indication of determined persistence in spreading the Word of God. While in prison, he even managed to bring the jailer and his family to the point of conversion (Acts 16:27-34). Convinced that the mission needs to be pursued at all cost, Paul never ceases to look for opportunities of grace even in adversity.

Grim moments have a way of obscuring the way the Spirit weaves His story into the work of mission. But time and again the Lord has proven He works amidst adversity and that He make good come out of even the most impossible of situations. The spread of the Gospel of the early Church came naturally as a result of persecution, and not because of any purposeful planning by the Apostles. The closing-off of one mission area by the Spirit leads to the opening-up in other areas, presumably more prepared to receive the proclamation.

⁴⁶ That Luke, however, does not record the death of Paul but ends the book of Acts with Paul fearlessly preaching in Rome, indicates his focus is not on Paul but on the faithfulness of God in carrying out the promise in Acts 1:8 (see the ending comments of L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 474-476) – the message of salvation in Jesus *will* go out boldly and without hindrance, and the life of the messianic community *will* go on, as our present-day experience of Church attests to.

Opposition to the proclamation by segments of society or individual people is to be expected. The Word and its message will not be embraced by all those it is preached to. Yet the missionary moves with a boldness borne of the confidence that the Spirit is ever-present in mission.⁴⁷ Hearts may eventually be won over by the Spirit, and the missionary disciple should press on, despite the seemingly discouraging or slow progress of the work. Missionaries may not know, but apparent delays and hitches in the mission could be part and parcel of the plan of the Lord. Mission should never be judged by the standards of man, but that of God. The book of Acts declares that occasions of grace are never lacking in mission, even when they are hard to identify at the onset. Paul and his companions in Acts give a clear confession that God is in control, and there is never a time that He is not.

2.3 Discern and Overcome Evil

A particular action of the Spirit that makes itself manifest during mission as seen in Acts, is the detection and overpowering of evil spirits. The book of Acts makes mention of the defeat of spirits at the hands of the evangelists or Apostles (Acts 5:16; 8:7; 16:16-18; 19:12). It also describes magicians disparagingly⁴⁸ and views them as those who “represent the powers opposed to the kingdom of God”.⁴⁹

In Acts 8, that Simon the magician comes to believe is a territorial victory for God, not just in overthrowing evil in Samaria but also in claiming the life of someone who used to declare himself like God (Acts 8:9-10).⁵⁰ The descriptive references to Simon (Acts 8:9-11), and the reason given behind his request for a share in the power of the Spirit (Acts 8:19), lend the idea of a highly-conceited man who wishes to control God, or even be revered like Him.

⁴⁷ In Luke’s accounts, the reader will realize that the boldness of the disciples is “not something naturally found within the persecuted witness; it comes through the Holy Spirit’s filling”. Ibid., 250.

⁴⁸ A good treatment on the way magic is perceived during those times is given by C.A. WALZ, “The Cursing Paul: Magical Contests in Acts 13 and the New Testament Apocrypha”, in R.L. GALLAGHER – P. HERTIG (eds.), *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, 167-182.

⁴⁹ L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 152.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 151-152.

The altercation between Paul and Elymas, the magician and false prophet, shows Luke making a distinction between the demonic powers behind magic and the work of the Holy Spirit,⁵¹ with Paul branding the power of Elymas as evil, deceitful and fraudulent (Acts 13:30). That Paul blinds him “for a time” suggests Paul besting the demonic power within,⁵² and giving Elymas a period for repentance. This is also reminiscent of the temporary blinding of Paul and the conversion that occurred in his own life.⁵³

Acts 16 recounts the episode of actual exorcism, that of “a slave girl with an oracular spirit” (Acts 16:16), by Paul who uses the name of Jesus. While little is said of the slave girl after the incident, the exorcism is followed by the anger of the owners of the slave who had been making money from her oracles (Acts 16:19). Beyond the exorcism is the dimension of “a corrupt understanding of money.”⁵⁴

For Paul’s three opponents above, the conversion⁵⁵ and freedom they were meant to experience is not only from demonic powers

⁵¹ C.A. WALZ, “The Cursing Paul: Magical Contests in Acts 13 and the New Testament Apocrypha,” 175.

⁵² B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 402, sees it as a battle between evil and the Spirit.

⁵³ F.F. BRUCE, *The Acts of the Apostles: Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1990, 298 (3d rev. and enl. ed.), cites Bede: “The Apostles remembering his own example, knew that from the darkness of the eyes the mind’s darkness might be restored to ‘light’”. His citation details are incomplete. Bruce also mentions a similar observation by JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homily 21 on Acts of the Apostles*, 28. See also B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 402, who gives a three-point parallel between the blindness of Paul, and that of Elymas.

⁵⁴ B.R. GAVENTA, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries, Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN 2003, 239.

⁵⁵ In all three cases, the conversions are not explicit, and may only be at best, hoped for. In the case of Simon, B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 288, argues on five points that Simon was not converted. F.F. BRUCE, *The Book of the Acts*, 171-172, observes that later records of his activity show he did not repent. P. HERTIG, “The Magical Mystery Tour: Philip Encounters Magic and Materialism in Samaria”, 107, declares “Peter’s phrase suggests excommunication and implies that Simon does not embrace authentic Christian faith”. No words are spoken about the slave girl after the expulsion of the spirit and most commentators are silent about her conversion or salvation. The exception is R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 197-198, nota 7, who asserts that her salvation is implied by the parallelism of this with the exorcism in Luke 8 explaining “release from

but also from the bondage of sins such as pride (in Simon), deceit (in Elymas), and greed (in the owners of the slave girl). This indicates that the freedom that God brings is meant to touch each individual as a whole. There is no domain of life that God does not want to free from evil influence. Whenever and wherever the work of the Lord begins, evil is bound to crop up, laying obstacles and impediments on the path of ministry. In this power struggle, “missionaries do not search for the devil behind every bush but are prepared when evil manifests itself”.⁵⁶ Whether evil comes in the form of evil spirits or in the weaknesses of humanity, the missionary heart should strive to discern the liberating way of the Holy Spirit, and seek the means to free people from whatever binds them and keeps them away from God.

2.4 Acknowledge that He Lays the Foundational Work

Another quick look at Acts 9, but from the perspective of Ananias, yields interesting findings. The objection of Ananias to the instructions of the Lord for him to assist in healing Paul was tantamount to protesting: “But this one is the enemy”.⁵⁷ Ananias was merely voicing what he had heard about Paul (Acts 9:13-14), and he must have felt himself justified in doing so. Even after the acceptance of Ananias and the subsequent conversion of Paul, the disciples in Jerusalem themselves “were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26). The reaction of Ananias to Paul, as well as that of the disciples, initially shows “a misdirected fear of the persecutor rather than God” (Lk 12:4-5). It also shows the problem that humans have in keeping up with the Lord’s work”.⁵⁸ The basic assumption of Ananias may have been that Paul was beyond reform (surely he did not think that the Lord was not as informed about

demons is one aspect of the salvation that Jesus and his witnesses bring”. The “conversion” of Elymas is open to hope, in light of the same conversion pattern Paul experienced as observed by J. DUNN, *The Acts of the Apostles*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI 1996, 177. See also footnote 53.

⁵⁶ What is observed by P. HERTIG, “The Magical Mystery Tour: Philip Encounters Magic and Materialism in Samaria”, 106, can also be said for today.

⁵⁷ B.R. GAVENTA, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 151.

⁵⁸ R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 117.

Paul as he himself was!). The conversion was admittedly dramatic,⁵⁹ and thus the fears of Ananias are not unfounded. Nevertheless, as the reader is told God had already started paving the way for Paul (Acts 9:3-9) *even before* commissioning Ananias. Prior to the instructions to Ananias, God was already working on His plan.

Moving to another story, that of the conversion of Cornelius in Acts 10 (which shall be further discussed below), it is said that he was “devout and God-fearing along with his whole household, who used to give alms generously to the Jewish people and pray to God constantly” (Acts 10:2). The messengers of Ananias tell Peter about these facts in v. 22, where however Cornelius’ almsgiving is omitted but replaced by his being respected by the whole Jewish nation. Two things are worth pointing out here. First, that God is already present in the life of Cornelius and had been working good things in him for some indefinite time for it appears that God was no stranger to Cornelius. Second, that Peter listened to the messengers, and incorporated the information about Cornelius to the vision he had just had (Acts 10: 9-16) and the instructions from the Holy Spirit he had just received (Acts 10:19-20). Peter further listens to Cornelius himself responding to the question of Peter as to his being summoned (Acts 10:30-33).

For the Church of today, the texts show us that missionary work is fruitful when there is a recognition of the foundation already prepared by the Holy Spirit in the lives of those to be evangelized. Both Ananias and Peter would have accepted on hindsight how the Lord had already laid the groundwork for what He wanted to do. While the Church is tasked with furthering the mission, it is the role of the Holy Spirit to be there long before the missionaries even arrive at those places and meet those people. What remains is for the missionary endeavors to be synchronized with the way the Divine preliminaries have been laid out.

The conversion of Cornelius shows Peter listening carefully to various sources, in order to properly ponder the unusual circumstance he is in. He listened to the Holy Spirit, to the messengers, and

⁵⁹ C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 132 comments on the radicalness of the conversion: “This was a radical change of religious direction, and it was accompanied by as radical a change of action: the active persecutor became an even more active preacher and evangelist”.

to Cornelius himself. It is in that vigilant attention to people and promptings that he is able to properly interpret what the Spirit is saying. Missionary people are people who are willing to first listen and observe. Missionaries can presume to know too much, and fail to see the writings which point to how the Spirit wills the completion of the task He has already started. Worse still, they can judge people and situations too soon and neglect to see how the Lord has already planted the seeds of His saving work in them. Total abandonment to the Spirit requires humble acknowledgement of the role the missionary plays, that is, merely to continue (at times, not even complete) the task that was prepared by the Lord. The missionary mind stands aware that the Holy Spirit has not only gone before, but is always currently at work, and will remain with the communities even long after the missionaries have moved on to establishing other communities in other mission fields.

3. A Re-Examination of Ourselves as Church

The story of Cornelius in Acts 10 is described generally by scholars as the first major breakthrough of the Gospel to the Gentiles,⁶⁰ exposing a parallel Pentecost experience for them.⁶¹ In it we find Cornelius and his household listening and assenting to all that Peter had to say, and consequently receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit and baptism. This story though accounts for two conversions, one of Cornelius to Christ, and one of Peter to a better understanding of

⁶⁰ R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 110 makes an important point with regard to the conversions of the eunuch and Cornelius. He takes both as Gentiles but stresses that the one of the eunuch is a private affair. The importance of the Cornelius event is not that he is the first Gentile convert (because he is not and need not be), but because “through the conversion of Cornelius, Peter learns something that has permanent value for the church and affects the further course of the mission.” He further expounds on 137-138. B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 295, says the picture Luke is painting of the Ethiopian eunuch is to show a favoring of ethnic groups, and that he paves the way for the deliberate mission to the Gentiles, 301. See also the comment of Johnson in footnote 31. Cf. F.F. BRUCE, *The Book of the Acts*, 203-204, who identifies the eunuch as the first Gentile convert.

⁶¹ Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 101; and C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 162.

the Church of Christ.⁶² Emphasis for the discussion on Acts 10 will focalize on the latter conversion, which will be traced in three steps.

The first step to conversion occurs through visions. The narrative in Acts 10 begins with a double vision. The initial one, which comes to Cornelius at prayer (Acts 10:30), commands for Peter to be sent from a city over 30 miles away from Caesarea. He dispatches three men immediately, in his characteristic obedient devoutness to God (Acts 10:2). The second vision comes to Peter who is also at prayer, however not at the usual time.⁶³ His vision which included a command to slaughter⁶⁴ and eat from something that appears to be like a sheet containing “all the earth’s four-legged animals and reptiles and birds of the sky”, is repeated twice more without him understanding what it means (Acts 10:10-17). At this stage, Peter is in the dark and possibly confused since the heavenly command voiced out something that is very much against his Jewish conscience.

Step two, is effected by the Holy Spirit who instructs Peter to go without hesitation and accompany three men whom the Holy Spirit had sent (Acts 10:19-20). With this clear instruction, Peter goes downstairs and listens to what the three men had to say (Acts 10:21-22). At this point, the text is silent about Peter’s thoughts. His consequent actions, however, may indicate that he has been linking the message of the Holy Spirit with the vision. That “he invited them in and showed them hospitality” (Acts 10:23), “was a step in the right

⁶² Some scholars who speak of the conversion of Peter are B.R. GAVENTA, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Missionary Conversion*, 112; and J. DUNN, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 132. B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 361, pointedly observes that while Cornelius’ conversion was Christological, that of Peter was ecclesiastical. An entire article on the conversion of Peter is written by Ch. E. VAN ENGEN, “Peter’s Conversion: A Culinary Disaster Launches the Gentile Mission”, in R.L. GALLAGHER – P. HERTIG (eds.), *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, 133-143.

⁶³ F.F. BRUCE, *The Book of Acts*, 205, comments that “noon was not one of the appointed times for public prayer, but pious Jews like Daniel (Dan 6:10) who prayed three times a day probably prayed then”. See also C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 156, who explains that “probably for Luke Apostles were men who prayed more frequently than most”.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 157, interprets this word as having sacrificial overtones, meaning Peter will be called “to perform a religious act, which will be completed by eating”. This may refer to the baptism that will be given to Cornelius later on, and the table fellowship with the newly-baptized that will ensue over the next days.

direction, although it did not expose him to such risk of defilement as would a Jew's acceptance of hospitality in a Gentile's house".⁶⁵ Perhaps Peter has also remembered the similar unitive acts of Jesus in His lifetime (e.g. Lk 5:12-14, 27-32; 7:36-50; 17:11-18; 19:1-10), which caused other Jews to frown upon Him. The next day, he leaves with them and, upon reaching Caesarea, listens in turn to the vision of Cornelius (Acts 10: 23b-33). Again, though the workings of the mind of Peter are unknown, his response is a strong indication of his conclusions. His observation that "in truth, I see God knows no partiality" (Acts 10:34) corroborates that he has rightly drawn the connecting lines in response to the movement of the Holy Spirit.

The last step is a confirmation by the Holy Spirit who enters Cornelius and his household even as Peter is speaking (Acts 10:44-46). With that heavenly validation, Peter orders their baptism in Christ (Acts 10:47-48), after which he is invited to stay with them a few days. These final words of the chapter speak volumes of the totality of the change of heart within Peter. In the first instance when he invited Gentiles to stay with him (Acts 10:23a), he as a Jew would have prepared food proper to a Jewish meal. However, as a guest Peter accepts the possibility to be served food forbidden to Jews,⁶⁶ and it is likely he graciously joins them in table fellowship, having stayed with them some days.

In this three-step process, Peter moves from uncertainty to reasonable certainty to receiving validation. The experience of Peter is not an easy one. It is a turnaround from "traditional and deeply rooted convictions which had completely governed his life until that moment".⁶⁷ It is true that the Holy Spirit clearly has voiced out some instructions, namely to accompany the men that He Himself had

⁶⁵ F.F. BRUCE, *The Book of the Acts*, 210.

⁶⁶ C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 167, opines though that Cornelius "was not the sort of man to insult a Jew by offering forbidden food".

⁶⁷ J. DUNN, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 132. Ch. E. VAN ENGEN, "Peter's Conversion: A Culinary Disaster Launches the Gentile Mission", 136, claims that "the radical transformation and conversion here is ascribed to Peter, not to Cornelius", and that "in the story Peter presents himself as the one who needs changing", 137. This finds agreement with B.R. GAVENTA, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Missionary Conversion*, 109, who observes that the change Peter and company undergo "is more wrenching by far than the change experienced by Cornelius".

sent. In carrying out this final part of the command, Peter however needs to re-examine all that he knows about Jesus, all that he has been taught about his Jewish faith, and discern where the Spirit is leading him in light of all these truths and beliefs.⁶⁸ Upon introspection, Peter could not disregard the voice of the Spirit and the vision he had received. In his speech to the Jerusalem Council, it is clear that he recognizes what the actual basis of salvation is or, rather, who (Acts 15:11). Through this re-examination he also considers the implications this new knowledge has on the community that had come to believe in Christ.⁶⁹ Peter has come to a dawning comprehension of the following: the way God sees people, about what is necessary for salvation, about how this affects the way they are called to understand Jews and Gentiles, and about how this in turn changes the meaning of community. He is then willing to face whatever potential consequences could arise⁷⁰ from this new awareness.

For present-day missionaries, a constant re-examination of the Church is also vital to the proclamation of Christ to people and places outside Her. For the Church and her missionaries, introspection becomes a process of both a looking back and forward. This deeper looking into oneself as the Church recalls the development of Catholic tradition and surveys the contemporary changes and movements of both cultures and peoples. That the Church may be called to implement change in Her deeper understanding of self, is not at all unexpected. The missionary disciple of Christ should be no different and move beyond the fear of losing the Catholic identity of the Church against the backdrop of vast cultures, for it is precisely because of her Catholicity that the Church, when She embraces all, lives out Her identity to the fullest. She is hence all the more Catholic when all peoples, races and cultures are under Her loving fold. For the Church is not an edifice of rigid rules nailing it-

⁶⁸ R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 138, discusses how Peter came to understand the impartiality of God and what this meant for the work of proclamation. R.I. PERVO, *Hermeneia, Acts: A Commentary*, 274, declares that Peter's conversion was a result of his own reflection.

⁶⁹ B.R. GAVENTA, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Missionary Conversion*, 109, states that this conversion required the conversion of the Church as well.

⁷⁰ F.F. BRUCE, *The Book of the Acts*, 210, discusses the laws Peter was violating by his actions. See also C.K. BARRETT, *Acts of the Apostles: A Shorter Commentary*, 159-160.

self to the ground. She is the body of Christ, living and dynamic, constantly reforming as She journeys towards the God who in turn is always approaching Her, meeting Her wherever She is.

3.1 Establish Organic Churches

The missionary duty includes begetting churches.⁷¹ Against the tendency to shape churches with predesigned casts, the communities formed by missionaries are better-established when rooted in the life of people. The book of Acts recounts how Paul himself alters his invitation⁷² to come to the Gospel depending on his audience. When he proclaims in Athens (Acts 17:22-31), he is careful not to speak as if to a Jewish audience, but speaks in a way his Gentile listeners could relate to.⁷³ Here, he challenges the language and concepts of Epicureans and Stoics, uses the Hellenistic form of oratory, outlining ideas that the Athenians would be familiar with.⁷⁴ Paul begins with a god they worship, whom Paul asserts to be proclaiming to them, and weaves his arguments to end up in professing Jesus as the man appointed by God for judgment, confirmed by his resurrection. In this ten-verse speech of Paul to the Athenians, it was only the very last line concerning the resurrection which would have presented something unfamiliar to his listeners.⁷⁵ All in all, it has been said that in this speech by Paul, “Greek notions have been taken up and given new meaning by placing them in a Jewish-Christianity monotheistic context.”⁷⁶ Paul demonstrates not only his skills but the propensity to dialogue with peoples and cultures.

⁷¹ Vatican II, *Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church “Ad Gentes”*, n. 1.

⁷² Note that the only thing Paul altered was *the way* he preached Christ, not the content of and truths about Christ Himself.

⁷³ RM 25 declares that this speech of Paul is one of those acknowledged as a model for evangelization. On the detailed rhetorical resonances Paul makes with his audience in this speech, see M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 245-249; and Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 152-157. An even lengthier treatment is given by B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, 511-532.

⁷⁴ M.C. PARSONS, *Acts*, 245-246.

⁷⁵ Ch. H. TALBERT, *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 157.

⁷⁶ B. WITHERINGTON III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary, Acts-Socio*, 524.

The Lukan Paul is depicted as someone who painstakingly looks for points of convergence, well aware that people will be more open when faced with dialogue as opposed to debate. “Luke describes a mission that is willing and able to speak in a language that can be heard.”⁷⁷ The missionary task is to identify and make use of areas of commonality that would not be lacking since Christ is the basis of anything good, beautiful and true in any culture. Missionaries would do well then to assess the area, the traditions and the people, in order to look not only for ways that the Gospel could be properly introduced in a manner and style that will be accepted and understood, but also to assess the best possible way for the community to flourish in Christ in the future.

Mission is not of the one-size fits all variety,⁷⁸ but rather situates itself in the context of the people being witnessed to. Missionary tasks will have to be personalized to be effective, taking into account the customs and way of life of a people. There is a great amount of dialogue that is necessary, for missionaries to better understand contexts of cultures and areas of consonance with the Gospel. On the part of the people proclaimed to, the more they understand how Christ has always been present and alive in their culture, the faster it will be for them to accept Him.

Observing Churches in different parts of the world, one will be able to appreciate how Christ lives in countless ways! It is after all, He who gathers His people to Himself. For missionaries to discover new ways of expressing the faith professed and experiencing life in community openness is necessary. A community that derives its expression of Christ from what it already knows and lives out, will be a richer one for having acknowledged Christ as its center. An organic Church is one that is rooted in the history and culture of the community, but has been transformed by Christ.

There is also a need to be open to learning from the people ministered to for the experience of Church to be true. For in the process of learning from each other, the faith of each one is deepened and

⁷⁷ B.R. GAVENTA, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Missionary Conversion*, 423.

⁷⁸ ID., “Witnessing to the Gospel in the Acts of the Apostles: Beyond the Conversion or Conversation Dilemma”, *Word and World*, vol. 22, n. 3, 2002, 245, actually speaks of “witnessing” in this regard.

strengthened. When the missionary expects to likewise learn from the people as he or she heralds Christ, then a genuine experience of a Church learning together as it journeys together can occur. A missionary will soon find out that it is not easy to proclaim to a culture he does not wish to embrace. An authentic welcoming of people and cultures usually means there is also the clear recognition of souls that need to be won over to Christ.

3.2 Uphold the Unity and Continuity of the Church

Luke structures the Paul stories in Acts along the lines of the Jesus stories in his Gospel,⁷⁹ in an effort to accentuate continuity between Jesus and Paul. He also makes free use of narrative devices to point to the continuity between the work of the evangelizers and that of the Apostles.⁸⁰ The signs accompanying the mission of Philip are, for instance, described in terms that recall Christ's own ministry and that of the Apostles (i.e. the patterns of the healings, the similarity in terminology, the resulting many who were healed, and the subsequent joy).⁸¹

In Acts 14:27, one finds Paul and Barnabas in Antioch where they “called the church together and reported what God had done with them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles”. Such a phenomenal change in understanding had to be shared immediately with the community. They did the same in Jerusalem (Acts 15:4). Paul, in turn, upon arriving in Jerusalem after his second mission, meets James and the elders, and “proceeded to tell them in detail what God had accomplished among the Gentiles through his ministry” (Acts 21:19).

All throughout Acts are indications of Churches being ministered to by the Apostles and evangelizers – care was given to the widows (Acts 6:1-5); communities are re-visited, exhorted, strengthened and taught (Acts 14:21-22, 19:1, 8-9; 20:4-6; 21:3-4, 8); there are elders who are appointed (Acts 14:23). The churches are organized and developed in order to find their flourishing in Christ.

⁷⁹ L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 226, 236-237.

⁸⁰ R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 104 and 115; and L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 151, 199, 226.

⁸¹ R.C. TANNEHILL, *The Narrative Unity of Luke and Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, 104.

The above passages in Acts show both the aspects of unity and continuity within the Church. That the progress of the proclamation is shared with the Churches is an indication of its desire to remain united. The Church is also shown as being one in its efforts to fortify itself up by nurturing all its communities wherever they may be. Returning to Acts 15 where the disciples are portrayed as going through some matter of debate and discernment, Luke shows that these form an integral part of communal life, and how these are actually ways by which the early Church leaders were discerning the activity of God.⁸² He also illustrates how the disciples willingly undergo these moments of doubt together, and emerge with an understanding that is cemented by a united stance.

That Luke painstakingly shows how the missions of the early Church stem from the teachings of the Apostles and therefore of Christ is an indication of how equally vital it is that the missionary endeavors reflect that same link with the Source of all operations. Moreover, as Christ has chosen to continue the work through His Church, the mark of a true missionary disciple is his abiding by the governance of the Church as to Christ Himself. The continuity mentioned here is not only to Christ and the orthodoxy of His teachings, but also specifically to the Church structure established here on earth. Mission work that does not cooperate with the local Churches surrounding the mission areas fail to receive the blessings from the groundwork laid by previous missionary hearts. The work of mission belongs to everyone. It is a shared responsibility assuredly, and yet also a shared gift which no community should be precluded from receiving.

4. Acts' Guiding Principles for Today's *Missio ad Gentes*

Thus far, much has been said to about principles that may be employed in *missio ad gentes* and yet there is a definite richness to how the sequel to the Gospel of Luke speaks to and will continue its dialogue with the Church regarding Her identity and mission. The discussion in this paper has centered on three principles for *missio ad gentes*: 1) the re-interpretation of all things in Christ, 2) the re-orientation toward the movement of the Holy Spirit, and 3) the re-examination of oneself as Church.

⁸² L.T. JOHNSON, *The Acts of the Apostles*, 271.

Re-interpreting all things in Christ stems from having a deep relationship with Him, knowing Him, and continuously growing in understanding His mission and life, and thus being able to preach and witness Him faithfully. Missionary hearts who re-orient all movement toward that of the Holy Spirit are those who humbly acknowledge their creaturehood before the One who knows all, directs and loves all. They recognize every mission to be the work of the Holy Spirit and are hopeful even in times of trials. They discern when spirits of contrast are at work, and fully acknowledge that the Spirit has already paved the way, is ever-present and will continue to drive the mission for evermore. To re-examine oneself as the Church calls for a constant looking back and forward, for openness to new ways of experiencing and being Church, mindful of the charge to establish organic Churches, and to uphold unity and continuity within Herself.

The prefix “re” used for all the main principles underscores the fact that these mindsets and movements will necessarily recur over and over again in the course of missionary work and the initial proclamation. This occurs because people have a way of understanding things to suit their own pre-conceived notions; and even the best of folks manage to get lost or derailed despite the pathway and the markers; and because mankind still tends to be fixated on age-old customs and ideas, stubbornly resisting change.

God being God, is fully aware of all that. He knows, and despite this knowledge, continues to invite missionary hearts to participate in His work of spreading His Gospel, of preaching His love, of giving Jesus to all. The Lukan Gospel sequel serves notice to all who accept this holy summons to have courage and move forward boldly, for the Lord of the missions is always in control, is always present in every culture, and is always sending out His Spirit, seeking out His people in love.