

# The Path to the Gentiles in the *Acts of the Apostles*

## A Challenge and Source of Encouragement for the Church Today

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*You will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem  
but throughout Judaea and Samaria,  
and indeed to earth's remotest end*

Acts 1:8

The early Church risked a great deal. It did not remain in the Jewish cultural area but extended its proclamation to many countries and nations in the Mediterranean region. The road it took is graphically retraced in the *Acts of the Apostles*, which records how the courageous preaching of the Christian message and the Spirit of God enabled the young Church to overcome barriers and tread new paths. Now, as then, the Church requires courage in fulfilling its task of the *missio ad gentes* – although today it might be more appropriate to talk of a *missio inter gentes*<sup>1</sup> – in a globally networked world and an age of widespread secularism. A look back at the missionary beginnings of the Church can help to provide guidance.

### 1. The Universal Orientation of the *Acts of the Apostles* as a Continuation of Jesus' Preaching

For the author of St. Luke's Gospel and the *Acts of the Apostles*, it is clear that Jesus' message is not directed solely to the people of Israel but to all mankind. It is of universal significance. This explains why Luke does not content himself with depicting the life of Jesus but adds a second report to the Acts recounting the spread of Jesus' message from Jerusalem to Rome. He is the only one of the Evangelists

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<sup>1</sup>J.Y. TAN, "Missio inter gentes: Towards a new paradigm in the mission theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)", *Mission Studies*, vol. 21, n. 1, 2004, 65-95.

to do so. For Luke, the path taken by the Church to reach out to the non-Jewish peoples was the most significant and momentous strategic move made by the early Church, prompting him to put it at the heart of his *Acts of the Apostles*. Despite this universal orientation, it is nonetheless crucial in his view not to lose sight of how deeply rooted the Christian faith is in the belief of the people of Israel. For Luke, this deep-rootedness is a crucial and continuing element of Christian identity. Both aspects – the path to the Gentiles and the close ties with Israel – leave their mark on his portrayal of the early Church in the *Acts of the Apostles*.

We do not know who the author of Acts was. It is beyond dispute that he was a theologian of the second or third early-Christian generation who wrote both St. Luke's Gospel and the *Acts of the Apostles*. From time immemorial, the Church has referred to him as Luke. As is apparent from his linguistic style and his familiarity with Hellenistic culture and philosophy, he was a man of considerable erudition. His excellent knowledge of the Holy Scripture of the Jews, which he used in the Greek translation of the Septuagint, has led some to suspect that he belonged to the group of the "God-fearing". These were non-Jews who were greatly attracted by the monotheism and high ethical standards of the Jewish faith, and maintained close contact with the Jewish synagogue, although they did not accept circumcision. Luke's keen interest in the relationship between Christianity and Israel and Judaism might be an indication that he "was brought up in a Jewish family" and was "socialised in a Jewish milieu".<sup>2</sup> In Acts, he not only reports in a factual manner on the beginnings of the Church, but also emulates the style of contemporary Hellenistic/Roman historiography in transforming the events into vivid scenes, inserting interpretative speeches he drafted himself and drawing attention to the larger picture, particularly in a theological perspective.<sup>3</sup> It is, above all, his intellectual grasp of the material and

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<sup>2</sup> M. WOLTER, *Das Lukasevangelium*, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2008, 9 f.; D. RUSAM, "Die Apostelgeschichte", in M. EBNER – S. SCHREIBER (Hrsgs.), *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 2013, 238 f.; U. SCHNELLE, *Einleitung in das Neue Testament*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2017, 315-334.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. K. BACKHAUS, "Lukas der Maler", in K. BACKHAUS – G. HÄFNER (Hrsgs.), *Historiographie und fiktionales Erzählen*, Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2009, 30-66; J. SCHRÖTER, "Lukas als Historiograph", in E.M. BECKER, *Die antike*

his identification of the theological significance of the beginnings of the Church that make the *Acts of the Apostles* a significant and fascinating testimony to the early Church.

It is striking that, whenever Acts speaks of those to whom the Christian proclamation is addressed in the non-Jewish cultural area, it almost invariably uses the term “Gentiles” (Greek: *ethne*; Latin: *gentes*). According to Acts 9:15, Paul’s task is to bring the name of Jesus Christ “before Gentiles (*ethne*) and kings and before the people of Israel”. At the Council held by the Apostles (Acts 15:7-12), Peter, Paul, and Barnabas report on the conversion of “Gentiles” (*ethne*). During his last journey to Jerusalem, Paul gives a detailed account to James and the elders “of all that God has done among the Gentiles through his ministry” (Acts 21:19).<sup>4</sup> In many translations of, and commentaries on, the *Acts of the Apostles*, the term “heathens” is used, rather than “Gentiles”, to highlight the religious differences with respect to the Jews. However, since the term “heathen” sounds derogatory to modern ears, it is pleasing to see that in the original Greek version of the *Acts of the Apostles* the far more neutral term “Gentiles” (*ethne*) is used and not “heathens”.

The path taken by the early Church to the Gentiles, as it is depicted and theologically assessed in the *Acts of the Apostles*, will now be retraced. Reference will be made not only to the obstacles and resistance the early Christian mission had to overcome, but also to the causes and reasons which, in Luke’s eyes, made this path possible and legitimised it.

## 2. The Geographical Spread of the Early Christian Proclamation “To Earth’s Remotest End”

At the beginning of Acts, the risen Lord sets out for the Apostles the path their proclamation is to take: “[...] you will be my witnesses not only in Jerusalem but throughout Judaea and Samaria, and indeed to earth’s remotest end” (Acts 1:8).<sup>5</sup> This is the compass Luke’s description follows in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Chapters 1 to 7, for example,

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*Historiographie und die Anfänge der christlichen Geschichtsschreibung*, De Gruyter, Berlin 2005, 237-262.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 13:46-48; 18:6; 22:21; 26:17-23.

<sup>5</sup> This and all the following quotations from Scripture are taken from the New Jerusalem Bible: [www.catholic.org/bible/book.php?id=51&bible\\_chapter=1/](http://www.catholic.org/bible/book.php?id=51&bible_chapter=1/).

to concentrate on the emergence and growth of the Christian community in Jerusalem. The adherents coming together for supper in house churches but, as a matter of course, they continue to go and pray in the Temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1) and are firmly rooted in Judaism. The preaching of the Gospel is initially directed exclusively to the Jews living in Jerusalem, as well as to the diaspora Jews who had settled outside Israel in the many towns and cities of the Roman Empire and made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for feast days. Not long afterwards, however, the message preached by the Christians that Jesus is the Messiah and the “Prince of Life” (Acts 3:15) leads to conflicts with the Jewish leaders and the first arrests and interrogations of the Apostles. When Stephen, the leader of the Greek-speaking Judaeo-Christians, is stoned for his critical attitude of the Temple, a part of the Jerusalem community is obliged to flee. As a result of their flight the message of Jesus Christ – as reported in Chapters 8 to 11 of Acts – spreads beyond Jerusalem to Judaea, Samaria, and Antioch in Syria, which at that time was the third most important city in the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria, and had only a small Jewish population. An Ethiopian treasurer is baptised by the early Christian missionary Philip, a God-fearing Roman captain by the name of Cornelius is baptised by Peter in Caesarea and, finally, uncircumcised non-Jews are admitted as full members of the Christian community in Antioch. As a result of this gradual shift in the Christian proclamation towards the non-Jewish “Gentiles” and its entry into non-Jewish regions, tension grew between Jews and believers in Christ as well as between Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Christ. The situation was further exacerbated by the missionary journeys undertaken by Paul and his companions, reported in Acts 13-20, which led to the founding of Christian communities in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Greece. There was a need to clarify the conditions non-Jews had to fulfil in order to be accepted into the Christian community. This clarification took place at the Council held by the Apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 15:6-21). Agreement was reached there that circumcision was not obligatory for non-Jews but that they had to comply with a few minimum legal requirements, such as abstaining from anything polluted by idols, from illicit marriages, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood (Acts 15:19 f.; 15:28 f.). The final chapters of Acts (21 to 28), revolve around Paul’s arrest in Jerusalem, his trial, his speeches defending his mission to the Gentiles, his appeal to the Roman emperor, and his transfer to Rome,

which Luke depicts in dramatic detail. The *Acts of the Apostles* ends with the words that in Rome Paul is still “proclaiming the Kingdom of God and teaching the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ with complete fearlessness and without any hindrance from anyone” (Acts 28:31). In Rome, the Good News of Jesus Christ arrived in what was then the centre of the world. From the point of view of Acts, the universal horizon of the Christian proclamation has been shown to best advantage, although it has not yet reached its eschatological fulfilment. It is essential to use the time until the return of Jesus Christ and the eschatological fulfilment of his Kingdom (Acts 1:11; Acts 3:20 f.) in order to bring to all people the saving message of Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup> The *Acts of the Apostles* is thus open-ended. The task given by the risen Lord to His disciples to be witnesses “to the earth’s remotest end” continues and still applies to the Church today.

But what was the significance of the fact that, in the course of its early development, Christianity steadily distanced itself from Israel and Judaism and turned its attention to non-Jewish peoples? How was this development to be grasped in theological terms? Was it a mistake? The decision of a few ‘firebrands’ like Paul? Or was it simply the consequence of the resistance and hardening of attitudes on the part of the Jews and the Jewish authorities? Luke addresses these questions in a variety of ways in the *Acts of the Apostles*.

### 3. The Mission to the Gentiles as an Integral Part of the History of God’s Salvation of Humankind

#### 3.1 Fulfilment of the Promises Given to Israel

To see the path taken by the Gospel to the Gentiles merely as the consequence of the negative attitude of many Jews and their persecution of the Christian communities would, in the eyes of the *Acts of the Apostles*, fall far short of the mark. These factors certainly had an external influence on the course of events and accelerated them, but in Luke’s mind the real reasons for Christianity’s reaching out to the Gentiles go far deeper and are much more radical. Ultimately, they

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<sup>6</sup> M. WOLTER, “Israels Zukunft und die Parusieverzögerung bei Lukas”, in M. EVANG – H. MERKLEIN – M. WOLTER (Hrsgs.), *Eschatologie und Schöpfung, Festschrift für E. Gräßer*, De Gruyter, Berlin – New York 1997, 405-426, esp. 421 ff.

have their origins in the promises made in the Holy Scripture of the Jews, in the Old Testament and, thus, in God's will for salvation itself (Acts 13:32; 26:6). In order to make this quite clear, Luke includes a host of quotations from Scripture and deliberately recalls a number of these promises at important stages in the *Acts of the Apostles*.

When Paul and Barnabas were on their mission journey through Asia Minor and arrived in the Pisidian city of Antioch, they justified the attention they paid to the non-Jews there (Acts 13:46 ff.) by referring to the Book of Isaiah (Is 49:6 LXX): "I shall make you a light to the nations so that my salvation may reach the remotest parts of earth". This quotation was originally addressed to the Deutero-Isaianic "suffering servant" who had been ordered by God to bring Israel back to God. Having failed to do so, he then received the additional and more far-reaching task from God of becoming the "light to the nations" and of bringing salvation to the ends of the earth. Paul and Barnabas see this Word of God as applying to themselves and as justification for their addressing non-Jews.

Another important word from Scripture – Amos 9:11-12 – is cited by James at the meeting of the Apostles in Jerusalem (Acts 15:16-17). It comes at the end of the Book of Amos and was probably inserted there after the period of exile. James cites the word in the Septuagint version, the second part of which deviates considerably from the original text. The latter says that God will "rebuild the tottering hut of David" so that possession can be taken of "what is left of Edom and of all the nations" and Israel's rule extended. In the Septuagint version, however, the rebuilding of the "tottering hut of David" is bound up with the hope that "the remnant of men, and all the Gentiles upon whom my name is called, may earnestly seek me, said the Lord who does all these things". In this Septuagint version, Amos 9:11-12 offers another important biblical reference justifying the extension of the Christian proclamation to non-Jews and Gentiles. It is confirmed that this opening does not constitute a break in the continuity of the history of salvation. On the contrary, it fulfills the aim of salvation history, which is that all nations are to be integrated into the community of God's people.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. M. NEUBRAND, *Israel, die Völker und die Kirche*, Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart 2006, 215-219; J. ROLOFF, *Die Apostelgeschichte*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1988, 232.



Since the image of the “rebuilding of the tottering hut of David” was linked in early Judaism to the expectation of a Davidian Messiah, this word from Scripture also provides confirmation that the message of the Messiah Jesus cannot be limited to Israel but is universal in nature.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, faith in Jesus Christ means the fulfilment of other promises in Holy Scripture, which Luke also substantiates by means of a series of quotations from the Bible. The resurrection of Jesus, for example, means the fulfilment of the promise given to David that he will not see corruption (Psalms 16:8-11 LXX; Acts 2:25-28) and that his progeny for evermore will occupy his throne (Psalms 132:11; Acts 2:29-33). Even the rejection of Jesus is preordained in Scripture, since in the course of its history Israel repeatedly persecuted and killed its prophets (see Acts 7:52; Acts 4:25-28; Psalms 2:1 f.; Neh 9:26).

Christian faith is thus “Jewish faith brought to fulfilment, even though most Jews do not accept the connection between the two”<sup>9</sup> This, in a nutshell, is the dilemma confronting the early Church – that Israel rejects the shift to the Gentiles and does not recognise it as part of God’s plan of salvation.

### 3.2 Israel’s Ongoing Special Role in the History of Salvation

Luke feels that, despite Israel’s negative attitude, its special role in the history of salvation remains unaffected. God concluded a covenant with Israel and gave it the Law of Moses and the prophets. Israel is thus the “first addressee”<sup>10</sup> of the salvation heralded by Jesus. In order to underline this Luke emphasises right at the beginning of Acts that thousands of Jews joined the Christian community after the Pentecostal event (Acts 2:41). The followers of Jesus who had fled Jerusalem after the stoning of Stephen initially proclaimed the message “to Jews alone” (Acts 11:19). It was only after resistance on the part of Jews came to increasingly obstruct the Christian preachers, resulting in an open rejection of the Gospel, that the proclamation

<sup>8</sup> Cf. M. NEUBRAND, *Israel, die Völker und die Kirche*, 133 ff. and 168 ff.

<sup>9</sup> J. GNILKA, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Verlag Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 1994, 205.

<sup>10</sup> J. SCHRÖTER, “Heil für die Heiden und Israel”, in C. BREYTENBACH – J. SCHRÖTER (Hrsgs.), *Die Apostelgeschichte und die hellenistische Geschichtsschreibung, Festschrift für E. Plümacher*, Brill, Leiden 2004, 304; see also Acts 3:26; 13:46.

of the Christian message addressed God-fearing and non-Jewish Gentiles instead (Acts 13:46; 18:6). But even then Paul and his companions went first ‘as they were accustomed’ to the local synagogue (for example, in Antioch in Pisidia Acts 13:14; in Iconium 14:1; in Thessalonica 17:1 f.; in Corinth 18:4; in Ephesus 19:8). In Rome, too, where Paul arrived as a prisoner, he called leading Jews to him and addressed his final speech to them. Occasionally the talk of stubbornness in Isaiah 6:9 LXX, to which Paul refers in this last speech in the light of Israel’s hardening attitude towards Jesus Christ (Acts 28:26-27), has been construed by interpreters of the *Acts of the Apostles* as the final change in direction of the Christian proclamation away from the Jews. But that is by no means crystal clear. The quotation reads: “Go and say to this people: Listen and listen but never understand! Look and look but never perceive! This people’s heart is torpid, their ears dulled, they have shut their eyes tight, to avoid using their eyes to see, their ears to hear, using their heart to understand, changing their ways and being healed by me” (Acts 28:26-27). Worthy of note, and decisive for the interpretation of these verses, is the change in the subject to God himself right at the end of the quotation: “and being healed by me”. This “aspect of healing at the end”<sup>11</sup> is not only in accordance with the remainder of the Septuagint version of the Book of Isaiah, but also with the understanding of Israel set out in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Although Luke repeatedly draws attention to Israel’s negative response and the hardening of its attitude, there is no talk of any final rejection of the whole of Israel or its ceasing to be the people of God.

From the point of view of the *Acts of the Apostles*, it is not therefore possible to talk about a “break” between Israel and the Church. Formulations along the lines that the Church is “the new, true Israel” do not conform to Luke’s intentions. For him, it is important to draw the attention of a Church that is becoming increasingly estranged from Judaism to the remaining ties and deep bond between Israel and the Church.

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<sup>11</sup> M. KARRER, “‘Und ich werde sie heilen’. Das Verstockungsmotiv aus Jes 6,9 f. in Apg 28,26 f.”, in M. KARRER – W. KRAUS – O. MERK, *Kirche und Volk Gottes. Festschrift für Jürgen Roloff*, Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn 2000, 260 / 262ff. / 269-271. Similarly, M. NEUBRAND, *Israel, die Völker und die Kirche*, 143; M. WOLTER, “Israels Zukunft und die Parusieverzögerung bei Lukas”, 421.



#### 4. The Mission to the Gentiles Under Close Scrutiny: The Dispute and the Resolution of the Conflict at the Council of the Apostles in Jerusalem

While the mission to the Gentiles was preordained in the Holy Scripture of the Jews – the Old Testament – the practical implementation of this opening up to the Gentiles entailed risks and controversy. The main reason was that down the centuries, a series of rules and patterns of behaviour had been established which distinguished Jews from the neighbouring “Gentiles”. These included dietary and purity laws, as well as associated bans on meal and table fellowship with non-Jews plus, above all, circumcision as a sign of the covenant with God. These hallmarks paved the way for “a clear distinction between Jews and non-Jews”,<sup>12</sup> and thus ensured the cohesion of the Jewish community, especially outside Israel and in the context of Hellenistic/Roman culture. The fact that Peter baptised Cornelius, that he and other Christian preachers were party to table fellowships in the Roman captain’s house and that, in the course of Paul’s mission, uncircumcised males were admitted as full members of the Christian community, constituted a breach of the important restrictions governing Jewish identity. It can come as no surprise, therefore, that there were protests not only from representatives of the Jews, but also from those who had converted from Judaism to Christianity. The conflict was resolved at the meeting in Jerusalem which has come to be known as the “Council of the Apostles” or “Convention of the Apostles” on account of its significance for the Church as a whole. Attended by the Apostles, the elders and members of the mother Church in Jerusalem, the Council decided that non-Jews would not be required to undergo circumcision. They would merely be obliged to abide by a number of rules and regulations that the Mosaic Law had laid down for non-Jews on the grounds of ritual purity (Acts 15:20; see Leviticus 17:10-14; 18:6 to 18:26). This foregoing of compulsory circumcision removed a major obstacle to the mission and integration of non-Jews in the Christian communities. Luke reports on this gathering in the middle of the *Acts of the Apostles* (Acts 15) and conjures up an impressive scene complete with an

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<sup>12</sup> S. SCHREIBER, “Streitfall ‘identity markers’”, *Bibel und Kirche*, vol. 71, n. 2, 2016, 96 (also 95-97).

account of the prior events, the many speakers, the passing of resolutions, and the post-council developments. In his detailed account, which differs in some aspects from Paul's report in Galatians 2, Luke makes it clear that the shift to the non-Jewish peoples and the circumcision-free mission to the Gentiles was by no means an independent initiative on the part of a few members of the early Church, but enjoyed the full approval of the Apostles and the mother Church in Jerusalem. As Peter and James emphasised in their speeches at the Council of the Apostles, it was not only in keeping with Holy Scripture, but was also the result of a deeper knowledge of God – that God reads the hearts of men and that these hearts are not purified and saved by the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ and His mercy (Acts 15:8 ff.).

However, the relationship between the Church and Israel remained contentious well after the assembly of the Apostles in Jerusalem and led to dark chapters in the course of Church history. Even today it is a matter of controversy whether and to what extent the Church should or must transgress applicable laws and regulations in order to respond in an appropriate manner to new developments and challenges. At the Council in Jerusalem the day was won by the likes of far-sighted individuals such as Peter, Paul, and James, who could read the signs of the times and were inspired by the Spirit of God.

## **5. The Fundamental Importance of “Witnesses” in the Spread of the New Church**

### **5.1 The General Understanding of “Witness” in Acts**

The success of the Christian proclamation stands and falls with the commitment and credibility of its witnesses. That is true now, as it was in the Church's beginnings. First of all – and Luke deliberately stresses this point – it is the twelve Apostles, led by Peter, who are the most important witnesses. Since they accompanied Jesus from the outset, starting with the baptism by John and ending with Jesus' ascension to heaven (Acts 1:22), they are the witnesses of His life, death, and resurrection. They guarantee the truth and authenticity of the Christian message and, moreover, ensure continuity between the period of Jesus' life and the early Church. In the second half of Acts, the main witness is Paul. It is he, above all, who

takes the message of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, Roman officers and Roman governors, and thus fulfils in a special way the task of the risen Lord to bear witness to the Gospel “to earth’s remotest end” (Acts 1:8).<sup>13</sup>

It is striking that in the case of both Peter and Paul, the two most prominent witnesses of the early Church, Luke reports on a key experience each of them had which was to have considerable consequences, especially for the Christian mission to the Gentiles. These key experiences are not dealt with cursorily by Luke but, as with the Council of the Apostles in Jerusalem, are narrated in considerable detail.

## 5.2 Peter’s Key Experience Taking Him to the House of the Roman Captain Cornelius

In Peter’s case, the key experience is his meeting with the Roman captain Cornelius. This is the most detailed narrative account of all in Acts. The vision had by the Roman captain that he was to call a man by the name of Simon Peter is followed by Peter’s puzzling vision which touches the very foundations of the Jewish faith he practises. While praying on a housetop in Jaffa, he saw heaven thrown open and a big sheet being let down to earth containing every kind of animal, reptile, and bird. Three times a voice told him to kill and eat. Peter was extremely reluctant to do so, saying “I have never yet eaten anything profane or unclean” (Acts 10:14). But the voice from heaven explains to him: “What God has made clean, you have no right to call profane” (Acts 10:15). Later on, Peter grasps the deeper meaning of this vision, that he should overcome the distinction Jews made between themselves and non-Jews, who were seen as being impure, and that as a witness of Jesus Christ he should turn to non-Jews. He accepts this, sets out to find the house of the non-Jew Cornelius, and is witness there to the filling of those present with the Spirit of God. Peter understands that he cannot refuse to baptise them and that “God has no favourites but that anybody of any nationality who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34 f.).

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<sup>13</sup> A. WEISER, *Die Apostelgeschichte Kapitel 1-12*, Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, Gütersloh und Echter Verlag, Würzburg 1981, 72-75.

### 5.3 Paul's Experience on the Road to Damascus

Paul's key experience concerns his conversion from a persecutor of Christians to a Christian preacher and missionary to the Gentiles. Whereas Paul himself talks only very briefly and reticently in his letters about this "Damascus experience" (see Gal 1:15; 1 Cor 15:8 f.; 1 Cor 9:1), Luke deals with it three times in the *Acts of the Apostles*: in Acts 9, as well as in Paul's speeches in his defence in Acts 22:4-16 and Acts 26:9-18. In Acts 9, Luke portrays Paul's experience on the road to Damascus in a manner similar to Peter's encounter with Cornelius – in several visions, encounters, and dialogues – and garnishes it with motifs from the Old Testament and popular folklore. First, he recounts how Paul ardently pursued the Christians, and tells of his plans to extend this persecution to the Christians in Damascus. But then a radical change takes place on his journey to Damascus. Suddenly, the account in Acts says, a "light" from heaven shone all around him and he was confronted by a "voice" which questioned the course he had pursued hitherto that he considered to be right. "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" It was Jesus who stood in his path. Paul fell to the ground, could see, eat or drink nothing for three days and was then baptised in Damascus by a Christian called Ananias. The outcome of this experience on the road to Damascus is that Paul enters the service of Kyrios Jesus and is prepared, as a missionary to the Gentiles, to bring the name of Jesus Christ "before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15).

Radical experiences thus called into question the previous thoughts and deeds of both the protagonists of the early Church mission to the Gentiles – Peter and Paul. They confronted their respective crises and underwent an inner transformation. Their example shows that, especially where important decisions for the future of the Church have to be made and new terrain explored, there is a need for bold witnesses who have undergone a process of transformation themselves and are therefore open to the Church treading new paths and adopting new methods.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Just how important the "witness of life" is for missionary work was emphasised by the Second Vatican Council in Section 36 of the Decree *Ad Gentes* on the Mission Activity of the Church.

## 6. The Content of the Proclamation and its Focus on Different Addressees

Jesus Christ is at the heart of all early Christian preaching and missionary work. He who “went about doing good and curing all”, who was resurrected by God, and appointed by Him “to judge everyone, alive or dead” (Acts 10:38-42), is “the Lord of all” (Acts 10:36). People are baptised in His name. In Him all Gentiles experience salvation and the forgiveness of their sins. In the *Acts of the Apostles*, these key messages of the Christian proclamation are communicated first and foremost in the speeches that are to be found throughout the book and are incorporated by Luke into his account at the turning points of the Christian mission. If we look more closely at these speeches and compare them with each other, it is clear that they differ markedly, depending on the cultural context and who is being addressed.<sup>15</sup> In Jerusalem a different tone is struck, and the sermons are not the same as in Lystra or Athens. This is made readily apparent by a comparison of the speech Stephen gave to the high Council in Jerusalem (Acts 7) with the speech Paul made on the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:22 ff.).

Stephen’s speech, which is directed at Jewish listeners, begins with a lengthy outline of the history of Israel, commencing with Abraham and continuing, via Isaac, Jacob and Moses, up to David. He mentions the covenant of circumcision, as well as God’s revelation at the burning bush and the exodus from Egypt. But he also talks of the stubbornness and disobedience of Israel, that it rose against Moses and repeatedly persecuted and killed God’s prophets, just as they pursued and killed Jesus. The speech is peppered with quotes from Scripture and highlights the charges made against Israel that come from the Bible, especially from the Deuteronomistic school (see Neh 9:26; Kgs 17:7-13 ff.).<sup>16</sup>

What is, however, completely different by comparison is the speech given by Paul to Greece’s intellectual elite on the Areopagus. This is a classic example of the proclamation of the Christian message to the “Gentiles”. In Luke’s eyes, Athens is synonymous with

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. U. WILCKENS, *Die Missionsreden der Apostelgeschichte*, Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1974, 190.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 200-204.

the intellectual centre of antiquity. It was here that Socrates taught, and the great philosophical schools of the Stoics and the Epicureans had their teaching centres. Athens marks the entry of the Christian proclamation into the intellectual world of Graeco-Roman culture. Paul begins his speech with a reference to a walk he has taken through Athens, during which he saw an altar dedicated “to an unknown God” amid many other sacred monuments. For Paul, this altar to “an unknown God” was an eloquent symbol of the Gentiles’ search for the one true God. “The unknown God you revere is the one I proclaim to you” (Acts 17:23). He follows this up by a number of thoughts that are in line with the biblical belief in creation but are not alien to Greek philosophical concepts, such as God’s creation of all human beings and His closeness to them, but also His rejection of shrines made by human hands. He again underlines God’s closeness to man by quoting the Greek poet Aratus: “We are all His children” (Acts 17:28). At the end of his speech, Paul comes on to the immediate present, saying that the times of ignorance are gone and passed and that everyone everywhere is now called upon to repent. He finishes his speech with a reference to Jesus as the man whom God has resurrected from the dead, and who will fix a day when the whole world will be judged in uprightness. In contrast to Stephen’s address, no outline of Jewish history is given in this Areopagus speech nor is any proof adduced from Scripture. Instead, mention is made of concepts that are familiar to the listeners and enable them to connect with the Christian faith.<sup>17</sup>

When we talk today about inculturation, we say that the preaching of the Christian message must take due account of the context and cultural environment of the listeners and addressees. Luke shows in the Areopagus speech how this can be put into practice. The Areopagus speech also demonstrates that, if the Christian proclamation wishes to reach educated people outside the Church, it must take a closer look at their language and way of thinking. According to Martin Dibelius, an Acts specialist, Luke “sensed earlier

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<sup>17</sup> On the interpretation of the Areopagus speech, see A. WEISER, *Die Apostelgeschichte Kapitel 13 – 28*, Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, Gütersloh und Echter Verlag, Würzburg 1985, 464-480; R. HOPPE, “Der Philosoph und Theologe – Das Auftreten des Paulus in Athen (Acts 17:22 – 18:1)”, in R. HOPPE – K. KÖHLER, *Das Paulusbild der Apostelgeschichte*, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart 2009, 114-128.



than others what the preaching of the Christian message required if educated people were to listen to it”<sup>18</sup>

## 7. The Spirit as the Driving Force

The fact that the early Church was ultimately able to overcome all the internal and external resistance it faced and to open up to the Gentiles was – from Luke’s point of view, that is, through the eyes of the faith and with a focus on the underlying causes – not attributable solely to ‘human endeavour’. The challenges and risks involved were simply too great for that to be the case. On the contrary, God’s Spirit was the driving force. The Spirit was the real “engine”<sup>19</sup> of the mission to the Gentiles and it gave the young Church enormous charisma and confidence. In the Pentecostal scene right at the beginning of Acts, Luke impressively captures, as if with a magnifying glass, the enormous spiritual thrust of the young Church: a roar can be heard as of a violent wind; tongues as of fire appear; a crowd gathers and listens with astonishment to the way in which Peter and the Apostles talk, filled as they are with the Spirit. Many of those present are subsequently “infected” by this Spirit. It fills the Christian communities with exulting and rejoicing and enables them to grow and flourish (Acts 9:31), thus paving the way for the appearance of prophets. Its strength enables miracles to be performed and the message of the crucified and resurrected Jesus to be preached fearlessly to both Jews and non-Jews. Here, it is the Spirit, too, which intervenes time and again as the Good News spreads to the Gentiles and encourages the Christian preachers to transcend boundaries and tread new paths. For instance, it calls on Philip to follow the chariot of the Ethiopian treasurer (Acts 8:29). In the conversion and baptism of the Roman captain Cornelius, which was crucial for the subsequent dissemination of the Good News, the Spirit anticipates Peter’s actions and fills Cornelius’ house with the Pentecostal Spirit before Peter performs the baptism (Acts 10:19, 44-47). For Acts, this Spirit is the eschatological Spirit which has been promised for the “last days” (Acts 2:17),

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<sup>18</sup> M. DIBELIUS, *Aufsätze zur Apostelgeschichte*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1961, 75.

<sup>19</sup> U. SCHNELLE, *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2007, 460.

and which the risen Christ has given to His Church so that it can continue His work until the Kingdom of God is complete. Notwithstanding this fundamental and outstanding role accorded to the Holy Spirit in the *Acts of the Apostles*, Luke does not advocate any one-sided, Spirit-driven enthusiasm. Along with the Holy Spirit, the sacred ministry played an important part in building up the Church. Originally, it was the twelve Apostles who took all the major decisions, but in the course of Acts, Luke refers to other leading offices such as the Group of “Seven”, who were selected by the Apostles for service at table (Acts 6:1 ff.) and the “elders” who exercised important functions in the Christian communities in Jerusalem and Ephesus (Acts 15:6-22; 20:17-28 ff.). However, as Luke makes clear at many places in Acts, these official representatives of the young Church were not superior to the Holy Spirit, but let themselves be guided by it, acting as its “tools” (cf. Acts 1:5-8; 10:19 f.; 15:28; 20:28).

## 8. Inspiration for Preaching and Evangelising Today

What consequences arise from the universal orientation of the early Church for the modern-day Church? What can we learn from Luke’s view of the mission to the Gentiles in the *Acts of the Apostles* for the current theology and practice of *missio ad gentes* or *missio inter gentes*?

First of all, the message in the *Acts of the Apostles* that God’s offer of salvation in Jesus Christ applies to every human being is just as topical today as it was in the early period of the Church. In order to spread this message throughout the world, the young Church boldly transcended internal and external boundaries and threw some things overboard. Today, too, the Church will only be able to master the challenges of our time if it is likewise prepared to overcome obstacles and undertake a critical review of many of the existing rules and regulations. Nowadays, of course, we are not talking about the limits of Judaism, circumcision and dietary laws but about dialogue with other religions, modern atheism, and a multicultural society. The focus is on forms of spirituality that are in keeping with the times as well as on specific canonical questions, such as admission to the sacraments and the position of women in the Church. In such matters, it is not enough merely to invoke the past.

Second, personal witness is indispensable if the message of Jesus Christ is to ‘ignite’ and enthuse. Peter and Paul went through a

‘school of faith.’ They were prepared to cast prior concepts aside and to pursue new paths for the sake of the Gospel. They demonstrated courage and an open-minded attitude along with powers of endurance and a deep-seated trust in God. Where are the courageous witnesses to Christ today whose hearts burn for Jesus Christ? The Church needs their charisma to meet the challenges of the future. The success of the Second Vatican Council was due not least to the efforts of such outstanding theologians, such as Karl Rahner, Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac, and Joseph Ratzinger who, putting prior disputes and conflicts to one side, injected their faith and far-sightedness into the Council documents.

Third, as regards its literary and linguistic format, the *Acts of the Apostles* is ‘abreast of the times’ and can stand comparison with profane works of history from antiquity. If the proclamation of the Christian message is to be successful today, it must likewise communicate the message of Jesus Christ in a manner appropriate to the addressees and in accordance with linguistic customs. It is no good just repeating old formulations. On the contrary, the message of Jesus Christ must be transposed in a lively and creative manner to the modern-day context. Good sermons encourage people to think, make it possible to experience something of the depth and breadth of the Christian faith in the course of everyday life, and help to focus on the one true God in Jesus Christ.

Fourth, according to the Acts of the Apostles adherence to the faith of Israel and knowledge of God’s history of salvation for human beings continue to form a part of Christian identity. God is the “God of the fathers” who concluded a covenant with Abraham “for the blessing of all clans on earth” (Gn 12:3; Acts 3:13-25). In order to recognise this wealth, there is an ongoing need for sound knowledge of Holy Scripture, in particular of the Old Testament, and of Church and religious history. There is a need for a Christian-Jewish dialogue, as well as discussions with followers of other religions. Without education and without such dialogue the Christian faith will quickly become shallow and constricted.

Fifth and in conclusion, in Acts it is the Apostles and Paul who are the mainstays of the earliest proclamation of the Christian message. But it is the Holy Spirit which is the real driving force that sets everything in motion. Ministry and the Holy Spirit belong together. Both are important in enabling the Church to fulfil its task in the history of salvation. However, ministry must not place itself above the Spir-

it, for it is the Spirit which softens hardened attitudes and breathes a “fresh wind” into the Church’s sails. According to Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, trust in the Holy Spirit can “cause us to feel dis-oriented”. It is like “being plunged into the deep and not knowing what we will find” (EG 280). The young Church mastered this uncertainty and benefited as a result. “Do not extinguish the Spirit” is therefore an appeal which rings out from the *Acts of the Apostles* and can serve as a source of encouragement for the Church today.