


“This was not done in a corner”

Lessons on proclamation from the book of Acts

Mary H. Schertz

In Acts 26, Paul is defending himself before King Agrippa. He is arguing for his freedom, his life, and his mission. He starts with his biography, describing his earlier violence against the saints and then his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, which changed his trajectory conclusively. As Paul is telling this story, Festus interrupts with a scathing charge:



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Paul’s great learning has made him lose his mind. Paul’s retort to “most excellent Festus” asserts that he is indeed rational and that news of these events cannot have escaped the notice of the great King Agrippa, “for this was not done in a corner.”

For Paul, evangelism begins with biography—and ends in the courts of empire. It begins with the personal, with experience, with an encounter with Jesus. It ends with the public, with proclamation, with the good news of God’s love for the world. Following in Paul’s footsteps—modestly, as befits one reared as a Mennonite Christian—I also begin

with biography. I make no predictions about the ending, although I know well where that ending needs to go.

The quality of a vision

My great-grandfather stowed away in a ship to get to Chicago. He was escaping the draft in Germany not because of pacifist convictions—according to my grandmother, who refused to let us think of him as a hero—but because he didn’t want to go to war. At this distance, I can wonder with more sympathy about what was going on in his head and heart, imagining many reasons besides pacifist convictions why a young German man—a

boy really, living at the turn of the twentieth century—might not want to be drafted. But for my grandmother, the moral edges were clear. She was the one who experienced the drunk and the sober man, the abusive one and the woodworker who lovingly crafted for her a small doll dresser with a little mirror that is now among my keepsakes.

Life was difficult for the young family who lived at the corner of 18th and Morgan. Alcohol played too large a role in their lives. There were too many children too soon, and food was in short supply. Baby Grace died. Pregnant with yet another child, my great-grandmother sought a back-alley abortion and died in consequence. My great-grandfather married again, and the new stepmother did her best for the surviving little ones. But Lena (my grandmother) had to leave school after third grade to become a housemaid in one of the rich homes along the lake. Only on Sunday afternoons was she given time off to see her family. Her sister Elsie, a year or so older, went to work in a department store.

In 1893 Mennonites in Illinois founded the Chicago Home Mission at 639 West 18th Street. It made the difference. My step great-grandmother became one of the mission’s early converts. The kind people at the mission also found a way to help my great-grandfather stop drinking. It took some time. Lena remembered how she and Elsie would hold hands and run through the dark, dangerous streets singing songs they had learned at the mission, on their way to fetch their father from the bar. But over time, and with patience, the family was saved, in a spiritual and a physical sense. My grandmother invariably ended her Chicago stories with the question “Where would this family be without the Chicago Home Mission?”

Robert Tannehill, a Methodist scholar specializing in Luke-Acts, contends that “the quality of the vision that a missionary group serves will finally determine whether it is a blessing or a curse in human history.”¹ The holistic ministry with which the Chicago Home Mission served my family was good news for the souls and the bodies of my people. It was a blessing and not a curse in our family’s history.

Proclaiming Christ in a multicultural world

The Chicago Home Mission wasn’t just a holistic ministry; it was also an example of proclaiming Christ in a multicultural world. According to the

1 Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 2: *The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 18.

Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online, by 1956 people of twenty nationalities were participating in the Sunday school.²

The Christian church began in a multicultural context. As Walter Sawatsky observes in his article in this issue, we often think of the world of the early church in New Testament terms as Jewish and Greek. In terms of Western history, we often refer to it as Greco-Roman. In reality, the cultures of the early church as depicted in Acts were more complex. In Acts 2:9-11, Luke identifies people of more than a dozen language groups who after the descent of the Holy Spirit heard the gospel in their native tongues. Moreover, this crowd was just made up of pious Jews from “every nation under heaven” who were living in the city of Jerusalem (Acts 2:5).

No doubt the language and people groupings on the Greek side were just as complex, if not more so. In this multicultural environment that Luke describes, the gospel takes shape in a distinctive way. In this milieu, the gospel takes form in three ways that both support and challenge our contemporary sense of God’s mission in the world. First, the mission emerges from experience, from an encounter with God that may be less dramatic than Paul’s conversion but that is no less real. Second, the mission takes on the human dilemma holistically. People who respond to the mission of God in Acts don’t just respond with their heads. Nor do they just respond with their hearts. The mission in Acts addresses people, embodied people, people in their daily lives and commitments, whole people. Third, God’s mission deals with power. It grows and spreads throughout the disciples’ known world in part because the early missionaries speak to power, its uses and abuses. They do so both within the body of believers and in the world in which they move. They do so with courage; they do not let fear stop them from speaking the truth to power. Furthermore, the missionaries speak boldly to power through the power of the Holy Spirit. They are speaking not only to power but also with power, the power of the unpredictable, values-reorienting Holy Spirit. These things did not happen in a corner, Paul says. King Agrippa has heard of them.

The mission of God begins with an encounter with God

The first time evangelism as a concept began to make sense for me was in a classroom at Goshen College when professor of religion C. Norman Kraus asked quite simply: “If you know about something good, why

2 Earl Lehman, “Mennonite Home Mission (Chicago, Illinois, USA),” *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1957, [http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Home_Mission_\(Chicago,_Illinois,_USA\)](http://gameo.org/index.php?title=Mennonite_Home_Mission_(Chicago,_Illinois,_USA)).

wouldn't you want to tell your friends about it?" It was the moment when my notions swiveled from associating evangelism with awkwardly handing out tracts on Sunday afternoon to people who didn't really want them. I began to understand evangelism as telling stories like my grandmother's.

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And although I didn't recognize it at the time, that moment was a turning point for me in claiming my own faith in the risen Lord. It was a faith handed down to me, yes, but it was also my salvation. Evangelism began to take root in me as the conviction that trust in Jesus matters.

In Acts, all the missionaries had encounters with Jesus. These experiences were the root of their acts of bold proclamation in the intensely multicultural world in which they found themselves. Of the two main characters Luke develops most fully, Paul's was the most dramatic encounter. Peter's encounter with Jesus extended over a longer period of time, with a more gradual learning

curve. It certainly had its dramatic moments—think of walking on water—but it also entailed the more mundane reality of living with Jesus and the other disciples over the course of Jesus's ministry.

Then there are the minor characters who encountered Jesus through the work of healing and proclamation undertaken by Peter and Paul as well as Philip and the other disciples. Luke's point is that telling people about Jesus starts with knowing Jesus and experiencing his power for oneself in transformation of one's body and soul. Proclamation begins in praise and thanksgiving that arises from meeting Jesus.

The mission of God is holistic

As Luke tells the story of how the church came into existence after Jesus died, it is clear that the group of believers was made up of those whose lives had been changed. It wasn't just that they now believed. Their actions and their daily routines took on newness as well. In Acts 2, after Peter had preached the good news, those who were persuaded—pierced to the heart—asked him what they should do. Peter told them to repent,

be baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit. About three thousand people accepted Peter’s challenge that day.

But the following paragraph is even more interesting, because these three thousand people did not return to their lives as usual the next day. Instead they spent their time learning from the apostles and sharing fellowship, food, and prayer. What is more, they began pooling their resources, selling off property and distributing the profits so that all the people had what they needed.

Christians are saved sinners, of course, and very human. Within a few chapters of Luke’s narrative, this impulse toward common sharing runs into trouble, with the duplicity of Ananias and Sapphira (chapter 5) and unfair treatment of Greek-speaking widows (chapter 6). But it is worthy of note that the religious rituals of repentance, baptism, and reception of



In Acts, the religious rituals of repentance, baptism, and reception of the Spirit erupt first and most decisively in the impulse to care for one another.

the Spirit erupt first and most decisively in the impulse to care for one another. Paul may have owned the most dramatic conversion story of the early Christians, but all the people who joined the church changed their behavior.

Having their goods in common is only one way the early church cared for body as well as the soul. In Acts 3:1–10, the apostles continue Jesus’s ministry of healing. A lame man approaches Peter

and John asking for money. The apostles tell him they have no money but instruct him in the name of Jesus to stand up and walk. Philip, in addition to effectively breaking down the social barriers isolating eunuchs, also healed people, intervening not only in behalf of those with mental illnesses and those oppressed by evil spirits but also for those suffering from lameness and paralysis (Acts 8:4–8). Peter heals again in Lydda, and also raises Tabitha from the dead (Acts 9:32–43). And, at the end of chapter 11, the believers in Antioch send famine relief to the Jerusalem church by way of Barnabas and Paul.

The book of Acts provides ample evidence that repentance, baptism, and the reception of the Holy Spirit bore fruit in acts of healing and compassion. Compassion is not only the great need of the lost souls of the world; it is also one of the best bases for ecumenical friendship, service, and dialogue. In her book *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong has made the point that compassion is at the heart of the three great religions of

the book.³ What better way to proclaim the good news in a multicultural world than to act together in extending compassion to people in need?

The mission of God speaks to power with power

We rarely speak of power and evangelism in the same breath. We sometimes describe evangelists as powerful speakers, but that barely gets at the breadth of the issues of power evangelism we encounter in the early church. The early believers recognized power and forthrightly contested abuses of power. That was part of their message. In that sense, the apostles demonstrated the old feminist maxim that the personal is political. The story of Jesus and his love could not be told without putting into bold relief the difference between human uses and abuses of power and the power of the Holy Spirit. Importantly, this confrontation took place both within the new community and in the interactions between the new community and the world.

Acts 8:9–24 is a story about confronting a misuse of power within the community of believers. Simon, a practitioner of magic, had enjoyed

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the attention—even provoked the awe—of the people in Samaria, until Philip arrived, forced into the region by the persecution that followed the execution of Stephen. With many of his fellow townspeople, Simon got caught up in Philip’s teaching and healing ministry, and he believed and was baptized. But then his old values reappeared. When they heard the news that so many in Samaria had been baptized, Peter and John came from Jerusalem to lay hands on the

believers so that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Simon, when he saw what was happening, wanted to buy the power to do what the apostles were doing.

Simon’s request was a problem for several reasons. He was wrong to think the laying on of hands was the way the disciples bestowed the Spirit. The laying on of hands invoked the Spirit’s coming, but the Spirit was not a magical power Peter and John controlled. Sometimes in Acts, the de-

3 See Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1993).

scent of the Spirit was invited by the laying on of hands. But by no means was that true in all instances. The disciples never held the power of the Spirit in their hands in that sense. But Simon's real offense was trying to buy this power. To reduce the power of the Spirit to a sum of money, any sum, was unacceptable, and Peter let Simon know that in no uncertain terms. To his credit, Simon asked for prayer.

In Acts 16:16–21, Luke presents a story that parallels the story of Simon the magician. This kind of pairing is typical of Luke's narrative style. The second story has a female lead, and it is a story of worldly exploitation rather than skewed values within the community. Paul and Silas are in Philippi in Macedonia. As they make their way to the place of their daily prayer, they are bothered by a slave girl who is possessed by a spirit that enables her to tell the future. This "gift" makes a nice profit for

The stories of Simon and the slave girl give Luke's readers a sense of how abuses of power—within the community and in the relations between the community and the world—are a natural arena for evangelism. The disciples don't avoid confronting abuse of power; they turn these occasions into opportunities to introduce the gospel.

her owners. She doesn't tell the apostles' fortune; in fact, she advertises for them—"These men are servants of the Most High God!" she hollers. But her outburst is inauthentic, and in a moment of pique Paul commands the spirit to come out of her. It does, and the girl's angry owners come after Paul and Silas in a confrontation that leads to the story of the Philippian jailor. This story, in Luke's hands, has a touch of humor, but it is nevertheless a story of the gospel confronting the power of economic exploitation, and the consequences for the disciples are dire.

The two stories, taken together, give Luke's readers a sense of how abuses of power—within the community and in the relations between the community and the world—are a natural arena for

evangelism. Confronting abuses of power is not something the disciples try to avoid. Indeed, they turn these occasions into opportunities to introduce the gospel and clarify what it's about.

Finally, the disciples in Acts do not confront abuses of power with powerlessness. We sometimes make the mistake of thinking we should respond to misuse of power by renouncing the use of power. But the good

news is not advanced with a show of powerlessness; it is advanced with the show of a very different kind of power. This power is not the power of money, nor is it power over others. Rather it is the unpredictable and volatile power of the Holy Spirit. It is a power that can possess but not be possessed. It is a power that can be invoked but is not biddable. It is not powerlessness. It changes lives and circumstances.

The proclamation of Christ in a multicultural world

Sorting through the values of gospel and culture is never easy. It is never problem free. But it is always necessary, because the gospel is not the gospel if it is hoarded for ourselves and those like us. Peter and the rest of the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem understood that. Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles, understood that. The people at the Chicago Home Mission understood that.

But sorting through the values of gospel and culture, even multiculturalism, can be guided by what we learn from Acts. What matters in our sorting are stories: stories of transformation, both personal and structural; stories from our faith and culture of origin; other peoples' stories of transformation.

What matters, in our sorting, is the whole person. Whether the person in question is a person who has lost her way, a person of another faith, a neighbor, or a stranger, the whole person matters. The gospel ministers to body and soul. Evangelism and justice cannot be separated.

What matters in our sorting is that we attend to issues of power. Uses and misuses of power are the very stuff of the mission. The human dilemma is bound up with lust for power. The gospel confronts that lust and provides a very different way to think about, experience, and use power. It is, after all, the power of the Holy Spirit that brings us out of the corner to proclaim Christ to slave girls and kings alike.

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