

## Preface

‘**W**hen the day of Pentecost had fully come...suddenly a sound came from heaven ...’ So read the opening words of Acts chapter two, and there can be few Christians anywhere whose hearts do not quicken when they hear them. The Book of Acts is of course about a great deal more than the Pentecostal happening in Jerusalem, but the associations of that unforgettable day are inefaceable. For Acts is the story of nothing less than God’s invasion of human history in the birth and subsequent spread of the Christian church; the story of what God did through a group of highly unlikely and, for the main part, quite ordinary people, in the first century of our era. It is also, as we dare to believe, the story of what our unchanging God can do again, in this twenty-first century, and in the twenty-second, and the twenty-third, or however long until the Lord Jesus Christ returns in glory.

Like each of the biblical writings, Acts has gathered about it a series of interpretative issues, such as questions of authorship and historical accuracy, which over the centuries have challenged and occupied scholarly minds within the church, and beyond it. Commentaries on specific biblical books typically devote extended introductions to addressing these issues. Having spent major periods of my life in both theological teaching and pastoral ministry I can readily appreciate how diverse an audience the Christian community is, in terms of its keen appetite for, or alternatively its frank disinterest in, these largely academic discussions. My mode in this volume is

a mainly pastoral one, and hence I have decided to make a few assumptions as we set out, concerning issues such as the authorship and dating of Acts, and its general historical reliability. Proceeding in this way will allow us to enter immediately upon the text and begin our dialogue with it, and hence a dialogue also with the living God who continues to speak through its pages. The relevant academic issues will certainly not be ignored as we move along, but they will be given the more responsible discussion which they of course merit, in a series of appendices at the end of the volume. In view of this *modus operandi*, I will confine myself in this introduction to three brief considerations.

First, an issue which has been regularly debated is *the purpose of the Acts*. *Why did Luke write it?* We will revisit this question as we grapple with the text, not least its opening section. However it will be appropriate to offer a brief response before setting out on that journey. Obviously Luke has an historical-narrative function in mind: Acts tells the story of the rise and spread of the church. Here we uncover answers to questions such as: how did the church get started? What was the secret of its astonishing impact? What problems did it encounter in the early period, and how did it handle them? What happened to the apostles after Easter? What did Peter do? Where did Paul come from, and how did he become one of its primary leaders and propagators? Clearly Luke is writing history.

But were there other purposes which also influenced him? Bearing in mind the amount of text Luke gives to legal challenges to the Christian movement, especially from the Roman authorities, some interpreters have seen Luke's purpose as an extended apology for Christianity's political harmlessness as far as Rome is concerned, and hence for the church's right to the state protection already afforded to Judaism in the early part of the first century. Some even see the book as a defence brief for Paul's impending trial before the emperor, with Theophilus even cast as a person of possible influence with the Emperor. Others have raised the thought of an additional apologetic purpose, with respect to Judaism, in that the ministry of Jesus is consistently presented in Acts as a fulfilment of Old

Testament promises, and Paul is clearly willing at certain points to accord with Jewish traditions and scruples. Yet another school sees the book as expressing a theological purpose on the part of the author, to present Christianity as essentially a divine movement, created and directed by God the Holy Spirit. None of these positions have proved generally persuasive, though each may have some degree of pertinence.

But is there not something beyond all these? Did the Holy Spirit, in giving us the Book of Acts, not have a further purpose? The centre of the book is the story of the church as it is born, its first months and years (it covers the thirty-year period from Pentecost A.D. 30 or 33 through to A.D. 60–62, and Paul's initial 'prison ministry' in Rome), as well as Christianity's expanding geographical reach. This is surely a clue to the correct answer to Luke's primary purpose in writing. It is not just a historical record, a *description* of the earliest Christian witness. It is also *prescriptive* – telling us what the church is, why God called it into being, what are its resources, and how its ministry role fits in with the ministry role of Jesus and His mighty acts of redemption. In particular Acts is first and foremost *a book of mission*, and essentially focuses the missional role which the church is called to major on through the course of its life until the return of its Lord. Acts is not just about what the church did, but about what it exists to do, today and every day. From this perspective Luke's introduction in 1:1-11 is critical. We will see this clarified as we proceed.

A second introductory issue is *the time-line of Acts*. Many of us are used to reading the book as though one incident followed another in immediate succession, which can generate a misleading triumphalistic perspective, especially when compared with the relatively modest attainments of our churches today. Acts can then become remote from our immediate Christian lives and witness. In fact Acts covers no less a period than thirty years, from the resurrection of Jesus to the Roman imprisonment of Paul; Luke is extremely selective in the material he includes. In other words, the story

of the birth of the church and its progressively expanding witness, from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and 'to the ends of the earth', was not a matter of all-conquering, instantly successful, Christian ministry. True, there were high moments of outpoured blessing, as we will see, and the eventual extent of the spread of the faith in these first decades is an astonishing one by any account. But the story as a whole is in essence not altogether different from that which we commonly experience in our own time – of faithful, persevering service for Christ in the face of great odds and numerous setbacks. To enable that reality to go with us into our exposition I have appended a provisional date-line of Acts (on p. 16), as well as a possible Chronology of Paul's Life (in ch. 5).

The third introductory consideration is to underline *how relevant the Book of Acts is for the church of the twenty-first century*. If we are conscious today of bearing witness to Jesus Christ in an environment where the mass of the surrounding population, in all age groups, are largely ignorant of, and insulated from, our convictions; where a huge diversity of religious opinions, or their vehement denial, meet us on every hand; where the population is increasingly diverse by every standard of reference; where life is largely lived in, and shaped by, dominating urban centres; where the people of God are frequently internally divided and sometimes barely recognizable as the people of God at all; where absolute values are an ancient memory; and where faithfulness to Christ can prove extremely costly, even life-threatening – then we will find ourselves very much at home in the pages of this ancient book. Christendom is no more, and the Western Church is slowly and painfully learning to live without its protective shelter. The good news of the Book of Acts is that God is more than a match for such conditions, and that authentic Christianity can survive and even flourish in precisely this context.

With these provisos behind us, let us move forward, prayerfully dependent on the same Holy Spirit who inspired Luke in the first century, to unlock this great text and be allowed to uncover, through its paragraphs

and chapters, the living Word of God to our hearts, our churches, and our generation.

On a personal level I greatly appreciate the invitation of Christian Focus to provide this further commentary for their widely appreciated *Focus on the Bible* series. Although I had expounded through large parts of Acts during my pastorates, the request to provide this 'full meal deal overview' proved in the event both regularly inspiring and deeply challenging. I am thankful to Regent College, Vancouver, for the opportunity to teach the entire book of Acts during their Spring School in 2008, and to the directors of the Slavic Gospel Association for the invitation to teach major sections of Acts during their annual conference at Torquay in August of the same year. I continue to be deeply indebted to my wife Valerie who put in many hours correcting early drafts of the text. My heart-prayer is that God may be pleased to use these pages to further His mission, through His people, to our desperately needy world; a world which remains 'ripe for harvest'.

Vancouver

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