

The “Grace Commission” Intercultural Witness According to Luke

by Colin H. Yuckman

In studies of Bible and mission, most often the focus turns to Matthew 28:18–20, Jesus’ so-called “Great Commission.” Jesus’ mandate has exerted inestimable influence on modern, Protestant mission, at least since the days of William Carey and his treatise on Christian missionary obligations (1792). Carey offered the decisive interpretation of Matthew 28:18–20 for the emerging Protestant missionary age. In the Great Commission, modern Christians have found solid biblical warrant, especially for the practice of foreign missions.

Focus on the final three verses of Matthew’s gospel has seemingly led to a corresponding neglect of Luke’s “Commission” text(s). This oversight is all the more surprising since the Lukan Commission (Luke 24:46–48; cf. Acts 1:8) provides the linchpin of a two-volume work, Luke–Acts, that comprises about twenty-eight per cent of the whole New Testament. A significant portion of the New Testament, therefore, remains underappreciated for its contributions to a vision of intercultural witness¹ today. By studying the Lukan Commission, and the narrative portrait of its fulfillment in Acts, we can recover Luke’s important voice in the study of biblical mission. The Lukan vision, moreover, offers fresh insights into questions of human agency and participation in the proclamation of salvation to all nations. Luke’s perspective on intercultural witness counters some of the colonialist tendencies characteristic of the Protestant missionary age, which traditionally conceived of mission as evangelistic outreach from the West to the rest. A robust understanding of Luke’s vision of witness affirms the contemporary importance of intercultural witness while also challenging the historical excesses of Christian mission that occasionally reappear in practice today.

My analysis of the Lukan vision of intercultural witness will broadly follow the study of Acts as a narrative portrait of the fulfillment of the Lukan Commission (Luke 24:46–48). While I obviously cannot attend to every passage of Acts in detail, analysis of representative passages (e.g., Acts 2, 6–8, 9, 10–11, and 15) will supply the backdrop against which the rest of Acts can come into focus.

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The necessarily brief treatment here may at least provoke further reflection and study. One way to narrow the focus is to pay special attention to the Lukan motif of apostolic agency, since the question of how Luke-Acts might inform mission practices today hangs on the assumption that what the risen Lord expected of the earliest apostles applies *mutatis mutandis* to modern Christians.

The Lukan Commission (Luke 24:46–49)

As he was talking with his disciples, Jesus told them,

This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and repentance and/for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. (Luke 24:46-49)

vision of mission, our findings must be anchored, inexorably, in what the narrative of Acts depicts.

A closer examination of Luke 24:46–49 as a commission and preface to Acts will show Luke's distinctive vision of participation in the spread of salvation to all nations. As a framework for understanding the Lukan vision, three interrelated aspects of the Lukan Commission deserve special attention: (1) the ambiguous characterization of the apostles as agents of fulfillment, (2) the christological accent of the commission, and (3) the bookend formed by Luke's near-exact repetition of Luke 24:46–48 in Paul's final major speech in Acts (26:22–23).

Ambiguous Apostles

Syntactically, the grand scriptural vision of the Messiah's death, resurrection, and proclamation in his name assigns the apostles a passive role. In Luke 24:46–49, the apostles are never the

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It is most natural to begin an investigation of a biblical book's vision of mission by turning to the commission text(s) that anchor(s) that vision. In Luke's case, that passage is Luke 24:46–49 (cf. Acts 1:8) in which the risen Jesus makes a final statement in anticipation of his ascension to heaven (24:50–51; cf. Acts 1:9–11). Taken in isolation, such a commission could be compared with equivalent passages in Matthew, John, and Mark. Yet Luke's commissioning passage stands out, if for no other reason than it is followed by a whole book narrating what those who are commissioned actually do—hence the title "acts of the apostles." The other evangelists, by virtue of concluding their respective works with Jesus' parting words, lend their commissions a certain tone of finality. Luke's unique second volume hermeneutically alters the complexion of the Lukan Commission. That is, the book of Acts turns the commission appearing at the end of Luke's gospel into a kind of introductory frame for what follows.² In this respect, the Lukan Commission comes closer to prophecy than Jesus' "last will and testament," in part because Luke reiterates the commission at the beginning of Acts (1:8) and in part because the exalted Lord continues to speak and appear (cf. Acts 1:1) throughout the book.³ Readers are led to expect that the book of Acts will be a *narrative representation* of the fulfillment of the Lukan commission. In the quest to understand the Lukan

nominal agents of active verbs. Instead they are positioned as the object of verbs or subject of *passive* verbs: ("you are witnesses of . . .," "I am going to send you . . .," and "until you have been clothed with power . . ."). Even the promise that "repentance and forgiveness will be preached to all nations" is ambiguous. While the statement is often taken as a direct command to the apostles—i.e. "*you* are to do the proclaiming"—Jesus technically does not say that in Luke 24. It may be the influence of the more direct Matthean Commission that tends to inject clarity into Luke's ambiguous sentence structure.⁴ Without Matthew's influence, however, "repentance and forgiveness to be preached to all nations" (v. 47) cannot be equated entirely with "you are witnesses of these things" (v. 48). In fact, it is grammatically possible, likely even, that the task assigned to the apostles to be witnesses refers to the more passive (*eye*)/witnessing of another's proclamation to all nations. As we will see, the narrative of Acts bears out this initial observation.

Many have noted, for instance, that while the apostles achieve many "conversions" in Jerusalem (Acts 1–5), it is Philip who first evangelizes Samaria (8), the exiles from Jerusalem who reach non-Jews in the Diaspora (11, 13), and Paul and his co-workers who do most of the proclamation of the gospel among Gentiles (13–21). While Luke greatly emphasizes the Peter and Cornelius incident as the beginning of Gentile outreach (Acts 10–11, 15), even this event comes as a great surprise to

the apostle Peter who was supposedly commissioned to do this very thing. Moreover, after Peter's initial encounter with Cornelius' Gentile household—and his repeated testimony about the incident to his fellow Jewish believers—Luke does not relate any further outreach by apostles to non-Jews. A tension that should not be too quickly overlooked: the Lukan Commission is given to the apostles and yet in the ensuing narrative the apostles play a surprisingly limited role in its fulfillment.

There have been two primary ways of explaining this tension. The first view holds that Acts is a triumphalist narrative in which characters march unerringly toward the ends of the earth, like puppets on a string.⁵ On this view, Luke's accent on divine superintendence empties the question of human agency of any real significance. But the second view—that the apostles and witnesses are poor models who must be chided and goaded every step of the way⁶—is no better. It overlooks the important fact that nowhere does Luke characterize the apostles in a negative light. A more precise account of the agency of human witnesses in Acts notes both the triumphs and moments of incomprehension, great acts of courage paired with incomplete understanding. How are readers to understand a vision of participation in universal witness that oscillates between the triumphal spread of the word and a partial comprehension of the manner by which that spread occurs?

Jesus the Primary Witness

In light of the preceding analysis of the Lukan Commission and the general portrayal of the apostles in Acts, the question arises: who is to do the preaching to all nations “in his name” (Luke 24:47)? One way to answer this question, and bring us to the second major point, is to note that Luke pairs the ambiguity of the apostles' role with an accent on the Messiah's role. That is, throughout this commissioning scene Jesus remains in charge, serving as the nominal agent of verbs and issuing a prophecy in which his own identity remains central. By implication, universal outreach after his ascension remains about Jesus—carried out *by him* even (cf. Acts 26:23)—rather than simply about what others do in his absence, as is traditionally assumed. The Lukan Commission disrupts conventional definitions of “commission” as one person (e.g., Jesus) designating others (e.g., apostles) for a special task. In addition, Jesus' parting words in Luke's gospel convey an overriding sense of promise (“you are/will be witnesses”), de-emphasizing its imperative force. Stronger than the sense of what Jesus' followers *should do* is the motif of what *Jesus* has done and will do. To summarize, in a statement in which one might expect to find a strong directive to act (“Go, make disciples . . .”) one finds instead an emphasis on Jesus'

scriptural identity, the task of universal proclamation given without an explicit agent of fulfillment, and the ambiguous commission of the apostles: “you are/will be witnesses of me/these things” (Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8).

Without recognizing the ambiguous agency of the apostles in Luke 24:46–48—how it privileges the role and identity of Jesus—it is easy to misunderstand the beginning of Acts. For example, a common translation of Acts 1:1 refers to “all that Jesus did and taught *from the beginning* [περὶ πάντων . . . ὧν ἤρξατο ὁ Ἰησοῦς ποιεῖν τε καὶ διδάσκειν]” (NRSV, NJB; cf. NAB). Yet the syntax is more straightforward: the gospel was written “concerning all . . . that Jesus *began* to do and teach” (NIV, KJV). Differences in translation in this instance hang on a larger view of Luke–Acts, specifically how one conceives of the role of the exalted Lord after his ascension. That is, if one supposes that Jesus' ascension to heaven removes him entirely from the narrative foreground, then it follows that Jesus' deeds and teachings conclude with Luke's gospel (or Acts 1:9). But, if one notices Luke's clues about the ongoing agency of the Messiah and Lord in Acts, straightforward statements like Acts 1:1 anticipate all that follows. If this were correct, we would expect to see Jesus continuing to act and teach in Acts.

But where in Acts does Jesus preach salvation to Jews and Gentiles? Is it merely a figure of speech, ascribing to Jesus what is surely the responsibilities of those orphaned by his ascension? Isn't Acts really a “succession narrative”? Indeed, a long tradition of interpretation⁷ holds that after Acts 1:10, Jesus effectively departs from Acts. On this view, the Christology of Acts can be labeled “absentee” or “diastatic.” While it is true that Luke emphasizes Jesus' departure from the earth (1:11) and that universal restoration awaits his return (3:21), Luke does not characterize the ascension of the earthly Jesus at the expense of any implicit or explicit claims about his ongoing activity. The common judgment that Luke's narrative assumes a “delay” in the *Parousia* often presumes that Jesus' earthly absence *in* the narrative effectively requires his total absence *from* the narrative. This presumption confuses the historical and literary dimensions of Acts.

It is beyond the limits of this paper to lay out all the evidence, but several basic observations attest Luke's emphasis on Jesus' abiding presence in Acts:

1. In Acts, Jesus speaks—and even appears—more often *after* his ascension than before,⁸ a phenomenon anticipated already by Luke's gospel (see the “Spirit-Christ Doublet” in Luke 12:11–12; 21:12–15).⁹

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2. Peter’s Pentecost speech (Acts 2:14–36) connects the giving of the Spirit (Joel 3) with Jesus’ exaltation to God’s right hand (Acts 2:33), thereby ascribing to the exalted “Lord” Jesus responsibility for the outpouring of the Spirit throughout Acts.
3. Repeated narration of Paul’s Damascus experience (9:1–20; 22:6–16 [17–21]; 26:12–18) and various direct appearances to Stephen (7:55–56) and Paul (22:17–21; 23:11) further the impression of Jesus’ ubiquity.
4. Most notably, Luke emphasizes the “activity” of the exalted Lord and the Holy Spirit *after* Acts 8 (8:29, 39; 9:31; 10:19; 11:12; 13:2, 4; 16:6–7; 20:22–23; 21:4, 11) as the Christian movement spreads beyond Jerusalem and beyond Jewish communities. The increase in movement by Lord and Spirit coincides with the apostles *remaining* in Jerusalem while all others are exiled (8:1). This characteristic reflects what has been called “the Spirit-izing of the Christ and the Christ-ifying of the Spirit,”¹⁰ culminating in the use of the phrase “the Spirit of Jesus” in Acts 16:7.

The cumulative evidence suggests that Jesus is hardly an “absentee” Lord in Acts. Rather, precisely *by means of* his exaltation to heaven Jesus assumes the role of giver of the Spirit, able to appear virtually anywhere to anyone, his activity identified with that of the Holy Spirit.

Luke 24:46–48 and Acts 26:22–23

Thirdly, Luke confirms this account, when Paul concludes his final major speech with essentially a summary of all of Acts. Paul ends his defense speech before Agrippa (Acts 26:2–23) with a statement paralleling Jesus’ words in Luke 24:44–48. See the table below.

Acts 26:22–23 reiterates the “Lukan Commission,” echoing Jesus’ claims from Luke 24:46–47—that the Messiah must die and be raised from the dead (Luke 24:46a; Acts 26:23a) and that salvation is destined to reach all peoples (Luke 24:47; Acts 26:23). Luke frames both passages as the fulfillment of scriptural promise (Luke 24:46a: “Thus it is written . . .” [and v. 44]; Acts 26:22: “saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place . . .”). By restating the “Lukan Commission,” essentially at book’s end, Luke indicates its importance for understanding Acts as a whole. And because only these two passages in Luke–Acts include this threefold scriptural claim with such specificity, Luke implies that they face each other. Jesus’ framing words in Luke 24 anticipate Paul’s retrospective words in Acts 26. In this way, Luke concludes both Jesus’ and Paul’s parting words with a summary claim about the identity of the Messiah and his relationship to universal salvation.¹²

On the one hand, as already noted, Luke 24:47 leaves ambiguous who will do the proclaiming of salvation to all nations; on the other hand, Acts 26:23 makes it clear that *Jesus himself* “would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.” That is, in a speech summarizing *Paul’s* participation in events, Paul emphasizes how it has been the Messiah Jesus who has carried out the responsibility Luke 24:47 had earlier left ambiguous. Paul’s statement in Acts 26:22–23 effectively clarifies the christological thrust of Luke–Acts: *Acts is as much about the fulfillment of the Messiah’s mission to bring salvation to the ends of the earth as it is about the witnesses who participate in that mission and interpret its unfolding.* Of course, the mission of Jesus and that of his witnesses cannot be entirely extricated, but the traditional reading of Acts as *what human witnesses do in Jesus’ absence* is, in view of our findings, largely inaccurate.¹³

Table 1: Parallel Statements in Luke 24 and Acts 26

Luke 24:44–48 ¹¹	Acts 26:22–23
<p>⁴⁴ Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that <i>everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.</i>”</p> <p>⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,</p> <p>⁴⁶ and he said to them, “Thus it is written, <i>that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,</i></p> <p>⁴⁷ and that <u>repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations</u>, beginning from Jerusalem.</p> <p>⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.” (NRSV)</p>	<p>²² “To this day I have had help from God, and so I stand here, testifying to both small and great, saying <i>nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would take place:</i></p> <p>²³ <i>that the Messiah must suffer, and that, by being the first to rise from the dead,</i> he would <u>proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles.</u>” (NRSV)</p>

Apostolic Participation in the Fulfillment of the Lukan Commission

The tension identified by the preceding sections—between the ambiguous role played by the apostles in Acts and Luke’s accent on Jesus’ identity unfolding in universal proclamation—invites further explanation. If Luke intends neither to denigrate the apostles nor assign them total responsibility for fulfilling Jesus’ commission, then how are we to understand their role in the unfolding of universal salvation? The remainder of this essay will show how this tension allows Luke to make a missiological point, namely that through the act of (intercultural) witness, followers of Jesus (especially the apostles) can discover the fuller identity of Jesus as Lord of all by recognizing his work beyond their limited horizons. Traditionally, Jesus’ mandate has been the focus of studies on biblical mission; but an important part of the fuller picture is Luke’s emphasis on the necessity of intercultural witness for the formation of those witnesses.

The exegetical case for this can be made with respect to representative examples (Acts 2, 6–8, 9, 10–11, and 15). It has often been taken as a matter of great obviousness that Acts, prefaced by Acts 1:8, unfolds in lockstep with Jesus’ final words: “in Jerusalem” (chs. 1–7), “in all Judea and Samaria” (8–15), and “to the ends of the earth” (chs. 16–28). But the tidy “table of contents” is, upon further examination, less obvious in its governance of the book’s plot. More than one scholar has noted that much that happens in Acts is not explicitly anticipated by Jesus’ parting earthly words in 1:8.¹⁴ Luke the storyteller further disrupts expectations with the election of Matthias (1:12–26). Even though great care is taken to tell the story of Matthias’ selection (over Joseph and his three names!) to replace Judas—thereby reconstituting the Twelve—readers never hear from either figure again. In the only event Luke narrates between Ascension and Pentecost, Luke subverts expectations about what is to come and the role these Twelve play in it.

Acts 2: Spirit of the Lord, Lord of the Spirit

While the push towards “all nations” (Jews and non-Jews) first occurs in Acts 2, when “Jews from every nation under heaven” (2:5) witness the Spirit’s gifts upon the early disciples, the universal scope of salvation is only declared, not yet realized. As Peter’s speech makes clear, his audience is comprised of Jews or, at most, “Jews and proselytes” (2:10). The “ends of the earth” are present in Jerusalem in only a representative sense. Nevertheless, Peter’s speech makes it clear that the core of the gospel is the intercultural announcement of God’s deeds in Jesus Christ. By citing (LXX) Joel 3:1–5a (Acts 2:17–21) to interpret the arrival of the Spirit as the fulfillment of prophecy, Peter indicates that the outpouring of the Spirit is integrally related to the identity of Jesus as “Lord.” With the recognition

of Jesus’ exaltation to God’s side, Peter concludes, Jesus has received the Father’s promise (cf. Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4–5) and now pours out the Spirit, the very action which Joel had assigned to Yahweh (Acts 2:33; 2:17–18; LXX 3:1–2). Luke effectively transfers the title of Yahweh from the OT (“Lord”) to Jesus. Jesus’ name, therefore, is the “name of the Lord” upon whom *everyone* must call to be saved (Acts 2:21, 38).

On yet another level, Luke associates the emergence of Jesus’ identity as Lord (of Israel) with the bringing together of different ethnic and cultural identities (“everyone”), even if

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of Jesus as Lord.**

Gentile inclusion as Gentiles is chapters/years away at this point. Jesus is both “Lord and Messiah” (Acts 2:39) in that people from every nation (including Israel) are called to submit to his Lordship through repentance, baptism, and reception of forgiveness and the Spirit that he bestows (2:39). The oneness of the Lord of all people and Messiah of Israel echoes in the promise of the unity of Jew and Gentile under his Lordship.

Acts 6–8: Apostles Who Don’t Preach, Deacons Who Don’t Serve

The intercultural portrait develops with the description of early Christians as *ὁμοθυμαδόν* (“of one mind”; Acts 1:14; 2:46; 4:24; 5:12; cf. 15:25), so unified in mind and spirit without being uniform. Luke reinforces this picture by showing how the church was immediately confronted, in its diversity, with the question of cultural difference. Acts 6 begins by saying that with growth, and a growing diversity of peoples, some Greek-speaking widows (despite the Pentecostal miracle) were being neglected in the distribution of food (6:1). This major cultural disturbance went to the heart of the identity of Jesus. If, as Peter had indicated by appealing to Joel 3, Jesus was to be identified with the “Lord” of the OT, then the universality of his Lordship was both affirmed by a diversifying of the composition of God’s people (“all *nations*”) and also thrown into question when these differing peoples received uneven treatment in the community (“*all nations*”). Luke adds a twist to this story. Even though the apostles arrange for the election of the Seven so that, specifically, they do not have to “neglect” the word in order to “wait on tables,” ironically it is the Seven who proclaim the word (the apostles’ *diakonia*) while

not—according to Luke—actually waiting on tables! Among these Seven with Greek names, Stephen bears witness most prominently by delivering the longest speech in Acts (cf. Luke 12:11–12; 21:12–15), and Philip evangelizes all of Samaria (8:5–14; cf. 1:8) as well as the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26–40).

Though apostles reappear in Acts 8:15–25—in the form of Peter and John—they do so, notably, only as confirmers of the outreach already being conducted there. As Joel Green notes, the presence of Peter and John in Samaria is arguably part of their "conversion" to the new thing God is doing in the world and doing through the medium of other witnesses.¹⁵ Apostolic recognition of the conversion of Samaria also recalls Jesus' own promise: "you will be my witnesses . . . in all Judea and Samaria" (1:8). Very likely, the conversion of Samaria symbolized for Luke's audience the restoration of the historical Northern (Samaria/Israel) and Southern (Judah/Judea) kingdoms. Israel's restoration and the salvation of all nations went hand in hand. In addition, Peter's witnessing God's acts in Samaria prefaces his experience of the Spirit at work in Caesarea two chapters later, where he is again a passive witness, at least in part.

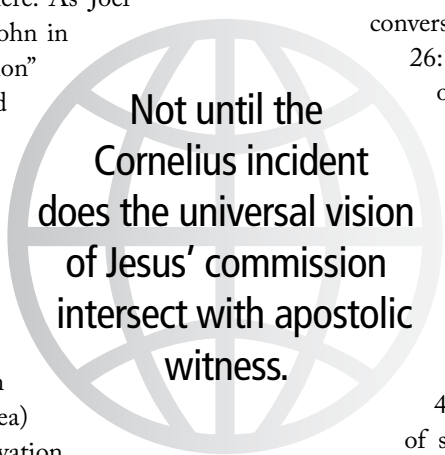
The Greek-speaking believers first named in Acts 6 are—according to Luke—at the heart of the group expelled from Jerusalem in Acts 8 and begin proclaiming the word abroad while the apostles, Luke emphasizes, are the only ones that stay behind (8:1). The storyline of these believers, interrupted in a way by the Cornelius incident (10:1–48; 11:5–17), is picked up again immediately afterwards (11:19).¹⁶ This group preaches the gospel to Greek-speaking Jews but also to Gentiles, preaching the "Lord Jesus." Crucially, it is not the apostles but this band of Greek-speaking Jewish exiles whom Luke identifies with the founding of the Antioch community and the recognition of Paul's leadership. Paul's ministry is therefore rooted in an intercultural fellowship centered on the "Lord" Jesus, while the Jerusalem apostles, it would seem, must wait to discover the link between Gentile salvation and Jesus' identity. The common life of Jews and Gentiles together in effect expresses socially the universal Lordship of Jesus. To be able to recognize this ministry and community is to be able to recognize that the Lord Jesus is the Messiah of Israel. Specifically the apostles must learn this lesson, according to Luke—in a small and symbolic way in Jerusalem at Pentecost, in another way among the Greek-speaking widows, in their receptivity toward the Samaritans, and finally in recognizing the preeminence of the Spirit's work in Caesarea and in Paul's ministry in Acts 15.

Acts 9 (13, 22, and 26)

Paul is Acts' preeminent protagonist. Some comment is needed about Paul's "conversion-commission" in Acts 9, which proves so consequential for Acts. Not only does Luke tell the story of Paul's Damascus road experience three times (Acts 22:6–16; 26:12–18), like Peter's Cornelius encounter, but he introduces Saul-Paul in a way that depicts the fulfillment of his Jewish identity in outreach to and the conversion of Gentiles (9:15–16; 22:14–15, 21; 26:17–18, 20). Paul himself becomes a leader of the intercultural community formed in the wake of the persecution he instigated (13:1–3). Indeed, Paul's commission—framed in the language of Isaiah 49:6—is to bring salvation "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 13:47), with a special emphasis on reaching Gentiles. Paul's appeal to Isaiah makes it clear that Jesus is Israel's Servant (Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30), commissioned to bring the light of salvation to Jews and Gentiles (cf. Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47; 22:21; 26:23). Paul (along with Barnabas) plays the role of the Servant's servant (13:47) and witness (20:21; 22:15; 23:11; 26:16, 22),¹⁷ especially in extending that light to Gentiles. On no less than three occasions Paul confirms the appropriateness of "turning" to the Gentiles by pointing out the resistance of the Jews toward his message (13:46; 18:6; 28:28). In a remarkable twist, Paul points to the receptivity of Gentiles to the gospel as a kind of model for Jews to obey. The conversion of Gentiles helps underscore the identity of Jesus as Messiah and Lord of all. Gentile receptivity to Jesus, therefore, does not contradict the claim that he is Messiah; it confirms it (Isa. 49:6).

Acts 10–11

Not until the Cornelius incident (Acts 10:1–11:18) does the universal vision of Jesus' commission (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8) intersect with apostolic witness, which is why Luke gives the episode almost unparalleled emphasis (cf. 11:5–17; 15:7–11). With this event Luke climactically connects christological identity and universal witness, culminating in Peter's declaration that Jesus is πάντων κύριος, "Lord of all" (10:36).¹⁸ Luke situates this exclamatory recognition in a detailed account of the giving and receiving of witness between Peter and Cornelius' household, an account in which Peter's transformation is the primary focus. Peter is paradigmatic of the notion that Jesus' identity is learned through participation in witness and specifically in the context of an encounter with the (ethnically) "other" (ἄλλόφυλος, v. 28). The Cornelius incident instructs Peter in God's impartiality, in Jesus' claim to be Lord of all nations, confirmed by the Spirit baptism of



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the Gentiles. Not quite the image of an apostle boldly going, discipling, baptizing, teaching—Peter hesitates, is instructed by the work of the Spirit, ends up ordering Gentile baptism only *after* the Spirit has already come, and *learns* as much as anyone else in the story about God in Christ (Cornelius' characterization is, in contrast, remarkably static). The very encounter we might call a clear-cut case of “mission”—Peter bearing witness to Cornelius' household—subtly but suggestively focuses on the transformation that the *witness* himself must undergo. It is no exaggeration to say that until Peter's Cornelius encounter, he could not grasp fully what God was doing among “the nations” and therefore what “all” in “Lord of all” meant.

That Peter is in the process of “catching up” with God is plainly evident in the fact that the Spirit falls on Cornelius' household before Peter is able to order their baptism (10:44–48). Without the witness of the Spirit in Cornelius' life,¹⁹ Peter's own sense of who Jesus is remains narrow. This theological breakthrough lies behind Paul's outreach in the Diaspora and finds expression in the makeup of the Syrian Antioch community (11:19–26; 13:1–3), itself the basis for Paul's outreach to Jews and Gentiles everywhere. The Cornelius incident is indispensable to our understanding of how mission unfolds in Acts, especially under Paul's leadership.

Acts 15

Luke frames the Jerusalem meeting as a way to unify the fronts of the church around the question of the salvation of the Gentiles apart from full Torah observance. Acts 15 crucially shows apostolic affirmation of Paul's outreach and Peter's experience. Of course, it is pivotal from the perspective of church unity, but it is much more than that—it is a question of who Jesus is. Is Jesus truly Lord of all (Jews and Gentiles equally) or not really Lord of all (Messiah for some, but not for others)? The answer to this question comes in the form of an agreement about who is to be admitted into God's people and on what conditions. Jesus' Lordship is very much at stake in who God's people are. Christology and missiology are mutual coefficients, so to speak. If this study has shown that Acts does not always make that connection explicit, it is nevertheless true that Luke assumes such a connection and periodically brings that assumption to the surface of the narrative. The importance of this recognition is also indicated, perhaps, in the fact that after the apostles have reached this agreement about Gentiles in Acts 15, they all but depart from the story. It was the conversion of their imagination that was needed to recognize Paul's ministry as the future of Christ's work. Until this “conversion,” their work had been incomplete;

missing had been the recognition of both the significance of Peter's experience for who Jesus is and who God's people are.

Taken as a whole, Acts 1–15 appears to portray the experience of the apostles as a form of learning or discovery of the new things God is doing. In Jerusalem, Samaria, and Caesarea, especially Peter—the book's representative apostle—must “catch up” to how salvation in Jesus' name unexpectedly reaches all nations. Participation in witness, at least according to the first half of Acts, is dependent on the prevenient work of the exalted Lord Jesus. In a way, Paul's encounter with the exalted Jesus is a discovery, for himself and for readers, of the close ties between universal outreach and Jesus' identity as universal Lord. So tightly bound are the two—from Luke 24:46–48 to Acts 26:22–23—that one undergirds the other. To accept one is to accept the other; to reject one is to reject both. Just as Peter understands God's purposes with a retrospective glance at his Cornelius encounter (15:7–11) so Paul recognizes the scope of Jesus' Lordship as he reviews the scope of his own ministry (Acts 26:19–23).

Implications for Intercultural Witness

In attempting to hear the unique voice of Luke within the harmonious sounds of the biblical canon and free from the sometimes sharp dissonant notes of interpretation history, this study has disclosed several implications for how we approach the question of intercultural witness:

First, the overall portrayal of apostolic witness in Acts is less a triumphant tale of world-beating personalities than a story in which, sometimes subtly, God in Christ and by the Spirit directs the spread of the word with and without the help of the first generation of witnesses. This is an important observation in light of the way in which Christian missionaries have been characterized over the last several centuries—as lone, intrepid explorers blazing trails for Christ. And because mission history has been read onto the pages of Acts,²⁰ the standard by which readers have recognized “mission” in Acts has generally conformed to the model of missionary work that evolved over the last three centuries.

Luke sets up the apostles as those who will go “to the ends of the earth,” only to have them (only Peter really) reach one Gentile household (cf. Acts 10), and even then in exceptional circumstances.²¹ Their supposedly exclusive task falls almost entirely to others who were not originally or expressly so commissioned. As a result, readers are led to the retrospective conclusion that Jesus' charge, “you will be my witnesses,” may very well mean “you will *become* witnesses to what *I* will do in the future” as much as it means, traditionally, “you will bear witness on my behalf when I am gone.” The implications for frontier outreach should be fairly straightforward.

Jesus himself is the primary missionary who goes ahead of his followers, and the task of “witness” is as much about discovering new frontiers of his present activity as it is about introducing him in places where he is allegedly absent.

Second, and following from the first: participation in the mission of the Messiah regularly affords an opportunity to discover the full(er) identity of Jesus as universal Lord. This conclusion finds confirmation throughout the first half of Acts and, in a different way, in the ministry of Paul. The inclusion of Gentiles in outreach in Acts is more than a turn to unreached peoples; it is the crucial issue in response to which the church and Jesus’ witnesses are transformed. While it is not inaccurate to assert, as is commonly done, that “the ‘conversion’ of the messenger must precede the conversion of those who are lost,”²² the preceding reading of Acts goes further. It underscores the capacity of the apostles and Paul to learn from Gentile conversion about who Jesus is: messianic Lord of all. The revelation of Jesus’ identity to his witnesses comes about because of intercultural contact among Gentiles reached by the “Spirit of Jesus.”²³

Third, and following from the second point, the Lukan vision undermines to an extent the binaries associated with the history of modern mission (and the history of interpretation of Matt. 28). Protestant mission since William Carey’s day has largely been unidirectional, characterized by fairly static binaries—missionary/missionized, saved/lost, knowledgeable/ignorant, haves/have-nots. Undeniably, Luke still thinks in terms of those who have repented, been baptized into Christ, and received the Holy Spirit, and those who have not. Nevertheless, the Lukan portrait at least complicates the traditional binaries by showing how the great apostles must “catch up” to what God is doing at nearly

every turn. The traditional ways in which mission practice over the centuries has divided peoples into discrete categories faces resistance in Acts, where Jesus proclaims salvation, Peter receives testimony from Gentiles, and Paul confirms the Messiah’s identity by the fact that pagans embrace him before most Jews. By showcasing the transformation required of Jesus’ witnesses, Luke suggests that an exclusive focus on the “conversion of the nations” misses the point.

These initial observations—and they are little more than that—suggest that modern intercultural outreach should not be governed by a single conception of mission, but rooted in the complementarity of Jesus’ words from Matthew and Luke (and John, etc.). In fact, the Lukan vision of mission—in good canonical fashion—restores the clarity of the Matthean commission. Namely, Jesus remains the active subject of universal salvation even when his disciples participate in witness. Luke’s can reasonably be called the “Grace Commission,” in which Jesus himself (by and with the Spirit) is the primary witness—himself the commissioned Servant of Israel—and the apostles the ones who are transformed in the process of participating in that witness as his co-workers. It is precisely in the effort to reach unreached peoples that new discoveries about Jesus are made rather than that static truths are simply disseminated.²⁴ Moreover, the impetus for contacting unreached peoples may have less to do with the conventional question—“how will they be saved if we don’t tell them?”—than with the question this essay has framed: “how will we, or anyone, know Jesus and his fullness unless we bear witness to and receive the witness of those among whom the exalted Lord is already at work?” As a biblical warrant for mission, this question makes intercultural encounter crucial to being a Christian disciple. It is also what makes such encounters so urgent for our time. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹ See the important caveats about “mission” language in Michael Stroope’s recent article, “Reimagining Witness beyond Our Modern Mission Paradigm,” *IJFM* 36:4 (Winter 2019): 163–168. His essay builds on his larger argument in *Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017). For this reason, wherever possible my argument employs Luke’s own language of “witness” rather than the extra-biblical terminology of “mission.” I add the modifier “intercultural”—used in lieu of “mission” in some circles (see Fuller’s “School of Intercultural Studies”)—as a way to name the inescapable context of witness. See, e.g., Henning Wrogemann, *Intercultural Hermeneutics*, 3 vols. (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016–2019). While “intercultural” helpfully names the process or method of “witness,” it does not indicate the theological foundations (“missio Dei”) and therefore remains in itself an insufficient replacement for “mission.”

² Cf. Christopher J. H. Wright, “Truth with a Mission: Reading Scripture Missiologically,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 15.2 (2011): 6: “Luke shapes his two volume work in such a way that the missionary mandate to the disciples to be Christ’s witnesses to the nations comes as the climax to the gospel of Luke and the introduction to the book of Acts.”

³ Curiously, in Acts Jesus “speaks” four times as many words *after* his Ascension than before. Of these roughly 285 post-Ascension words, about half (135) are recalled by the narrator (half spoken to Paul in 9:4–6; 18:9–10; 23:11; and half spoken to Ananias in 9:10–12, 15–16) and just as many Paul recounts as the Lord’s direct speech to him (22:7, 8, 10, 18, 21; 26:14–18). Of a slightly different sort are (presumably) pre-Easter sayings of Jesus recalled by Peter (11:16) and Paul (20:35).

⁴ We can draw out the contrast between commissions by noticing that whereas Matthew’s Jesus says, “go,” Luke’s Jesus says “stay”!

⁵ Ernst Haenchen, *Apostelgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956): 315.

- ⁶ Martin H. Franzmann, “Word of the Lord Grew: The Historical Character of the New Testament Word,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 30.8 (August 1959): 563–581.
- ⁷ Hans Conzelmann is rightly recognized as the originator of the idea of an “absentee christology,” in the sense that his work is most responsible for its popularity. Cf. *Theology of Luke*, 186: Jesus is “a figure from the past by means of the picture of him presented by tradition.” His broader thesis holds that the crisis in the delay of the *Parousia* has prompted Luke to “periodize” history and portray the gift of the Holy Spirit as the assurance of salvation which believers require in Jesus’ absence. Yet, when the term “absentee” is cited, it is usually C. F. D. Moule who is associated with the term’s popular usage (“The Christology of Acts,” 165)—e.g., MacRae, “Whom Heaven Must Receive,” 158. Jervell merely echoes these earlier claims (*Theology of Acts*, 33): “In Acts, the exalted Christ is a remarkably passive figure and it is hard to see that he has any real function.” Bo Reicke has alternatively called the same general idea Luke’s “diastatic christology.” Cf. “The Risen Lord,” 161–162: “. . . Luke has a certain tendency toward diastatic Christology so that Christ is not very often represented as being personally active, but mostly supposed to act through his Spirit or his Angel. For in this context the Spirit or the Angel are nothing but the representatives of the risen Lord himself.”
- ⁸ The emphasis on Jesus’ presence-via-speech is confirmed by a simple quantitative analysis of Jesus’ spoken words in Acts. Naturally, the most obvious place his words of direct address appear in Acts is in the introductory verses (1:4–8), prior to his ascension. The risen Lord speaks about sixty-two words to his apostles in anticipation of his departure. As much as we are right to emphasize the peculiar weight of Jesus’ last earthly words (Acts 1:4–5, 7–8), it should be remembered that these words represent, statistically, less than a quarter of the recorded speech of Jesus in Acts. Moreover, the majority of the speech attributed to the ascended Jesus concerns Paul’s commission (about 70%, if we include the thrice-narrated Damascus encounter as separate instances). I take the repeated accounts of Paul’s Damascus road encounter as separate, statistically, because each contributes to the overall impression of Jesus’ continued presence in Acts. In addition, Luke’s attention to Jesus’ words sets Jesus’ pre-ascension commission to his apostles in parallel with Paul’s reception of a commission directly from the Lord. Jesus’ speech, in other words, helps establish continuity between the apostles and Paul with respect to the one universal mission. But speech is not the same thing as action or narrative presence, it might be argued. His words may be recalled but they are no substitute for Jesus’ active presence itself. And yet, except for two (presumably) pre-ascension sayings of Jesus later recalled by Peter (11:16) and Paul (20:35), all the cited speech of Jesus after Acts 1:11 is purportedly delivered by *the ascended Jesus himself*. Past statements of Jesus are recalled, but most often as statements earlier spoken *in Acts*. Perhaps it is even a testimony to the strength of Luke’s conviction that Jesus remains active that he recalls in Acts very few of Jesus’ words from the third gospel. Based on this view, Luke need not quote the pre-Easter Jesus because the post-ascension Lord is *still* narratively speaking (cf. Acts 1:1).
- ⁹ Unique among the evangelists in this respect, Luke includes *two* statements by Jesus about divine guidance for his disciples experiencing persecution after he is gone (Luke 12:11–12 and 21:12–15). Though Jesus’ statements are nearly identical, one difference between them is especially illuminating. In the first saying, Jesus says “the Holy Spirit will teach you . . . what you ought to say” (12:12). In the second, Jesus says, “I will give you words and a wisdom” (21:15). Because the passages essentially say the same thing—about how disciples persecuted in the future will receive divine inspiration—we can understand “Holy Spirit” and “the (ascended) Lord Jesus” as acting in concert, according to Luke. Moreover, following the logic of this “doublet,” if we understand the speeches by disciples in Acts delivered before “rulers and authorities” (12:11) and before “kings and governors” (21:12), it would follow that most of the speeches recorded in Acts are, at least indirectly, words given by the Lord Jesus himself (cf. Acts 6:56–60)!
- ¹⁰ Moule, *Origin of Christology*, 105: “die Vergeistigung Christi und die Christifizierung des Geistes.” H. Douglas Buckwalter, *The Character and Purpose of Luke’s Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 202: “Because Luke at times so closely parallels the work of the Spirit and Jesus in the church’s mission, τὸ πνεῦμα Ἰησοῦ can rightly refer to the combined activity of both.”
- ¹¹ In table 1, concepts shared between Luke 24 and Acts 26 are underlined while linguistic matches between Luke 24:47 and Acts 26:23 are italicized.
- ¹² For this point, and its initial development, see Jacques Dupont, “La portée christologique de l’évangélisation des nations d’après Luc 24.47.” Pages 125–143 in *Neues Testament und Kirche: für Rudolf Schnackenburg* (J. Gnllka, ed. Freiburg [im Breisgau]; Basel, Wien: Herder, 1974).
- ¹³ If Acts narrates the continuation of Jesus’ deeds and teachings (Acts 1:1), then it can reasonably be claimed that Luke and Acts *together* unfold the identity of Jesus (Luke 24:46–48; Acts 26:22–23). Too much weight should not be placed on the traditional title associated with Luke’s second volume: “the Acts of the Apostles.” If Jesus’ initial commission is left ambiguous, the Twelve are absent for the whole second half, and Paul’s retrospective summary concerns the work of *Jesus* to fulfill the prophetic commission, then the story is hardly a straightforward depiction of the “acts of the apostles.” Though the end of Luke’s gospel appears to assign the apostles responsibility for proclaiming universal salvation, the end of Acts clarifies—in the explicit absence of the apostles—that Jesus himself proclaims the light of salvation to all people (cf. Luke 2:39).
- ¹⁴ J. Bradley Chance, “Divine Prognostications and the Movement of Story: An Intertextual Exploration of Xenophon’s Ephesian Tale and the Acts of the Apostles,” in Ronald F. Hock, J. Bradley Chance, and Judith Perkins (eds.), *Ancient Fiction and Early Christian Narrative* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998): 219–234. Cf. 231–232: “But while this broad outline is helpful, readers who attempt to squeeze the outline of Acts into rigid conformity with the outline of Acts 1:8 inevitably experience frustration. . . . For example, is the prophecy of the coming of the Holy Spirit really to be understood as referring quite narrowly to Pentecost? Or are we not to see the consistent reports of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in such texts as 8:15–17 (Samaritans), 9:17 (Paul in Damascus), 10:44 (gentiles of Caesarea), 13:52 (disciples of Antioch of Pisidia), and 19:6 (disciples of Ephesus) as linked to this prophecy? Are we required to conclude that the Ethiopian is not a gentile, that he is in some sense Jewish or Samaritan, since the witness to him takes place during the Judean/Samaritan mission and before the “real” gentile phase begins with the preaching to Cornelius? And where in Jesus’ prophetic outline of 1:8 do we fit Paul’s

preaching to the Jews of Damascus in Acts 9? And what do we make of the fact that when we are now in the “ends of the earth” phase of the outline in the last part of Acts, Paul regularly preaches to Jews and even returns to Jerusalem where, we are told by a revelation of the risen Jesus, Paul has offered testimony for Jesus (Acts 23:11), supposedly long after “the Jerusalem phase” of the story should have ended?”

- ¹⁵ Joel B. Green, *Conversion in Luke-Acts: Divine Action, Human Cognition, and the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 154: “Another, more helpful way to make sense of this puzzle [the delay of the Spirit’s advent in Samaria] is to focus on the apostles who for the first time journey from Jerusalem to Samaria—in spite of the clear mandate in 1:8 to witness to Jesus “in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” as well as Luke’s testimony that Stephen’s execution resulted in the scattering of the church throughout Judea and Samaria (8:1). From this vantage point, the apparent delay in the outpouring of the Spirit in Samaria serves to assist in the ongoing conversion of Peter and John, so that they finally engage in a ministry among the Samaritans (8:25), and to prepare for the Jerusalem Council, where those gathered come to recognize that the chasm between Jews and Gentiles (and thus also between Jews and Samaritans) is bridged ultimately by God (15:8–9).”
- ¹⁶ See Craig Ott, “Diaspora and Relocation as Divine Impetus for Witness in the Early Church.” Pages 87–108 in Wan E (ed.), *Diaspora Missiology: Theory, Methodology, and Practice* (Portland, OR: Institute of Diaspora Studies).
- ¹⁷ See Dennis Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997): 32–52.
- ¹⁸ There is some debate whether Peter’s name for Jesus (Lord of all) comes in a parenthetical comment or as an emphatic exclamation. The disruptive syntax draws attention to the phrase, making it appear more like a climactic statement than an aside.
- ¹⁹ In Acts 10:5, the angel tells Cornelius to send men to Caesarea (cf. 10:10), yet in 10:20 the narrator tells us it is the Spirit who says “I sent them...” It is easy to miss how shocking it would have been, at this point in the story, for an unbaptized (unrepentant?) Gentile to be a vehicle for the Spirit and accomplishment of God’s will, but the Lukan narrator goes further and *identifies* Cornelius’ action (sending the men) with that of the Spirit!
- ²⁰ The many scholars of mission who have appended the book of Acts to the end of Matthew’s gospel (rather than Luke’s) include William Carey himself (*An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* [1792], 14–28), Lamin Sanneh (“Should Christianity Be Missionary? An Appraisal and an Agenda,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 40.2 (Summer 2001): 86), and even Gustav Warneck (“Zum Jubiläumsjahr der evangelischen Mission,” *Allgemeine Missions-Zeitschrift* 19 (1982): 3–4).
- ²¹ I am well aware of later texts attributing the spread of Christianity to other apostles—for example, Thomas and Bartholomew evangelized India and Matthew Ethiopia (Acts of Thomas, Rufinus, Hist. Eccl. 1.9–10), etc.—but these traditions lie outside the book of Acts and therefore outside the sweep of the present argument about Luke’s vision.”
- ²² Harold Dollar, “A Biblical-Missiological Exploration of the Cross-Cultural Dimensions in Luke-Acts.” PhD Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1990, 147.
- ²³ This has the effect of both reinforcing the importance of intercultural encounter and tempering our habits of imagining mission in unidirectional terms—i.e., what we do to others with the gospel. I have elsewhere called this aspect of the Lukan vision a “Christology of intercultural interdependence.” See “Mission and the Book of Acts in a Pluralist Society,” *Missiology: An International Review* 47.2 (April 2019): 104–120.
- ²⁴ This is to say nothing about the uniqueness of the Christian religion. It is simply an assumption in this discussion, as it was surely for Luke, that “there is salvation in no other name” and the book of Acts both reflects this conviction and narrates the implications of this conviction for Jews and Gentiles alike. Jewish unbelievers, in fact, were newly thrust into the position by apostolic preaching of needing to repent and essentially convert, not unlike the pagan Gentiles whom they judged to be at the other end of the spectrum of piety. The shocking undertone of Luke’s story is that not only is repentance and forgiveness only possible through the Messiah Jesus, but that Gentiles are given new access AND even Jews must—on the model of Gentiles!—enter in by a receptive faith and the gift of the Spirit.