

When All God's People Are Prophets: Acts and the Task of Missional Preaching

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...For we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard. (Acts 4:18b)

The small groups are strategically placed at the main intersections of the city, and at the appointed time each group begins to sing lively Christian songs, accompanied by guitars. They all follow the same basic format: singing interspersed with testimonies and prayers. In a short time, all over the city crowds of people will gather to watch and listen.

After an hour of singing and testifying, the groups begin to march toward an appointed point of meeting. Bystanders are encouraged to come along. Many of them do so, and soon the streets of Santiago, Chile, are filled with thousands of people as all of the dispersed groups converge together at the Jotebeche Methodist Pentecostal Templo for several more hours of lively worship.

But that is Latin America; we live in North America. These are poor working class people, whose lives revolve around worship and street witnessing. Our lives are full of many interests and activities, church being only one of them. To make ourselves feel even better let's label the activities described above as proselytism. After all, Chile is predominately Roman Catholic.

I must admit that I have visited the Jotebeche church and participated in one of their famous street services. The members of my group were not content with my going along as an observer. Instead, they encouraged me to testify before the gathered bystanders. I recall standing on a busy street corner, wishing I were anywhere else. But I forced myself to speak. As I attempted to relate to total strangers my knowledge of Christ, it seemed that I was empowered by a strength beyond myself to give a bold and public witness.

My visit to Chile was many years ago and life today is quite different than it was then. Gone is the naivete of a college sophomore, who on her first visit to a socialist country, discovered a vibrant and living faith that transformed her understanding of Christianity. Now, as a seminary professor, my time is taken up by such things as the Association for Theological Schools project for developing a public theology,¹ dialogue between Pentecostals and Roman Catholics or dialogue between Pentecostals and the World Council of Churches.

Yet, I will confess that at times I long to be standing on a busy street corner singing and testifying of the saving power of Christ. And there have been a few close calls. Several months ago, while shopping for groceries, I began to reflect upon Exodus 34, the account of Moses' desire to see the Lord's glory. Suddenly, I was overwhelmed with a desire to shout aloud the words of Yahweh :

The Lord, the Lord
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,

and abounding in steadfast love
and faithfulness...

Instead, I gripped the shopping cart and bit my lip. Had I given in to my urge, my reputation in this small town of being a somewhat stable person would have been ruined.

We are all faced with the daunting task of doing mission in North America, and it is becoming increasingly apparent that our culture is a pagan culture of death. What form of mission is called for in such a context? Perhaps we would be well served by a fresh reading of the book of Acts. Walter Brueggemann's observation that "what text we read makes a huge difference about the model of mission we embrace,"² is an important one. I believe that most of us in North America are uncomfortable with the text of Acts. It is too intrusive and disruptive in its witness and it portrays Christians actually suffering for the cause of Christ. The text of our current mission in North America and the text of the book of Acts are at odds.

You would think that I, as a card carrying Pentecostal, would find it easy to write about Acts. After all, my tradition derives its identity from its narrative. However, Pentecostalism in North America has gone a long way down the road toward institutionalization and accommodation to the dominant culture. It is now even appropriate in some circles to use the terms "mainline Pentecostalism." For many middle class North American Pentecostals Acts is a manual for speaking in tongues or gaining some form of power for a better spiritual life. We are in need of giving renewed attention to this text as much as anyone else.

Acts and the Prophethood of Believers

Given the brevity of this essay, I have chosen to focus my remarks on Acts around a long-neglected theme of the book, namely the prophetic calling given to all believers in Christ. I concur with Roger Stronstad's assessment of Luke-Acts as giving a portrait of the people of God who, "by virtue of having the Holy Spirit poured forth upon them, have become the eschatological community of prophets upon whom Jesus, himself the eschatological prophet, has poured forth the Spirit of prophecy."³

The concept of the prophethood of believers is rooted in the redemptive history of Israel as a nation. Numbers 11 narrates an intriguing story of a crisis which took place under the leadership of Moses, Israel's primal prophet-leader. As a result of the crisis, God instructs Moses to gather the seventy elders of Israel around the Tent of Meeting where they would receive some of the same spirit that rested on him. When the spirit came upon the seventy elders they prophesied. However, two of the elders, Eldad and Medad, remained in the camp, and they too prophesied. When Moses was informed of the event and encouraged to put a stop to the two prophesying in the camp, he replied, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!"

In Luke's account of Pentecost the outpouring of the Spirit is neither the birth of the Church, nor just a blessing for God's people. Rather, Luke interprets the event through the lens of the prophet Joel, who stresses the Spirit coming upon all people in order that "they shall prophesy." "The gift of the Spirit to the disciples on the day of Pentecost, as seen through the eyes of the prophet Joel, fulfills Moses's earnest desire and with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, the age of the

prophethood of all believers has dawned.”⁴ These believers are empowered to witness about the arrival of the Messiah and the new age which his arrival inaugurated.

In Acts 4 Luke re-weaves this theme of the prophetic mission of the believers around the arrest and trial of Peter and John, which is the first incident of persecution of the church. The Council warns the apostles against further proclamation and releases them. They return to the community and give an account of the events which occurred (4:23). In response to Peter and John’s report, the community “lifted their voices together to God.” This amazing prayer reflects upon the execution of Jesus and then turns to their present situation...“and now, Lord look at their threats, and grant to your servants to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.”

In her analysis of Acts 4, Beverly Roberts Gaventa makes the following observation:

Instead of asking for revenge on their oppressors, or even simply for deliverance from persecution, the community prays,...‘grant to thy servants to speak thy word with boldness.’ In Luke-Acts, ‘to speak thy word’ consistently refers to proclamation of the gospel....but here Luke specifies that proclamation is to occur ‘with boldness.’ The word ‘boldness’ (*parresia*) he has already connected with apostolic witness in 4:13, when the Jewish leaders interrogate Paul and John and they ‘see the boldness’ (*parresia*) of Paul and John. The prayer for bold or forthright speech thus refers to the preceding incident in which the apostles’ boldness elicited consternation from the authorities.⁵

Verse 31 of this chapter gives indication of God’s response. The place where they were meeting was shaken; “and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness.” While this incident marks the beginning of the church’s response to persecution, “The response to persecution here continues throughout Acts even to the last enigmatic line.”⁶

Acts 4 reveals that the believers understood that their witness and its resulting persecution mirrored the prophetic witness of Christ. God, who anointed the “holy servant Jesus,” was recognized as the source of disciples’ strength and power. Just as Jesus had suffered the fate of a prophet, the prophetic community upon whom came the same Spirit that rested upon Christ, would also receive the wages of a prophet.

The Lukan paradigm of the people of God as the eschatological community of prophets has been overshadowed by the Pauline metaphor of the body of Christ and by the Protestant paradigm of the priesthood of believers. However, as we muse over the task of mission in North America, we would be well served to appropriate Luke’s distinctive vision. What follows are four possible implications of the Lukan paradigm of the prophethood of believers for our corporate witness. This list is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, it is intended to supply food for thought as we contemplate the viability of our missionary efforts.

1. *When all the people of God are prophets, the church sees itself as a missionary fellowship.* Stanley Hauerwas makes the point that the church does not have a social strategy, rather it is a social strategy.⁷ It could be said that Luke makes the point that

the church does not have a missions strategy, rather it is a missions strategy. In Luke-Acts Israel's vocation as a missionary community, existing in order for God to bless all the nations, is continued and enlarged.

Australian scholar John Penney points out that the Abrahamic promises are central to the missionary emphasis of Lukan pneumatology. "The Holy Spirit sums up the arrival of Abrahamic blessing for the nations through his prophetically endowed spiritual descendants. The outpoured Holy Spirit is the sign that these blessings have begun to flow in the new age."⁸

It appears to me that Luke fuses the priestly power to bless with the prophetic power to disrupt. The result is a priestly-prophetic community whose vocation is mission. The concentration of God's "life force" present on the day of Pentecost and which continues to reside in the church, is clearly a gift intended for all nations. The believers are not allowed to hold a monopoly on the abundance they have received.⁹ This means that we have to stop viewing ourselves as the end and humbly acknowledge that we are only the means to a greater end.

It is my contention that in order for us to have a viable mission in North America we will need to undergo a transformation of our identity into that of a people whose vocation and calling is mission.

2. When all the people of God are prophets, the task of preaching is not a solitary experience. What would our preaching be like if we understood that we spoke from the context of a community of prophets?

Luke's account of individual leaders is framed within the context of a people who corporately pray that they might speak the word with boldness and be able to endure persecution. Acts 8:4 narrates the scattering of the believers after severe persecution broke out, observing that "those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word." Clearly, in Acts there are no solitary prophetic voices.

Acts portrays the missionary task of proclaiming the word as the task of the whole people of God. In order for us to do effective mission today we must cultivate the proclaiming of the word by all believers. Indeed, some of the most powerful proclamation can come from laity who "have a word from the Lord."

Also, preaching to a community of prophets is no solitary affair. When the congregation is a community of prophets, it actively participates in the sermon. The congregation is to share in the same "anointing of the Spirit" as the preacher. The effect is that the sermon becomes a field of communication which surrounds the whole congregation. A fusion of Spirit and Word occurs as well as a fusion of minister and congregation.

3. When all the people of God are prophets, the voiceless are enabled to speak. "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus." (Acts 4:13). It is the delight of the Spirit to accomplish the missionary task among the ordinary and the powerless. I believe that the future of our mission in North America resides in the marginal people of our society. If we are to have a viable mission the rest of us must go there.

A few weeks ago I heard one of the leaders of my denomination bemoan the fact that Pentecostals are not growing rapidly in middle class America. Offhandedly he remarked that "most of our growth is in the Hispanic population." The clear message that came across was that the people who count are white middle class folk. This leader

went on to speculate that unless the trends are reversed we may face a future of decline and even death. He could not bring himself to imagine the future in which the face of our denomination in North America will most likely match the face of Pentecostalism in the rest of the world. This face is young, female and nonwhite.

The future of mission in North America is a scandalous future for most of us. It calls for us to receive the prophetic witness of the marginalized. By that I mean becoming part of their communities of faith, rather than vice versa. In doing so we may learn what it means to live and give witness in a world in which our God is not worshiped by the dominant culture.

4. *When all God's people are prophets, the church shares an apocalyptic vision of worship and witness in light of the end.* It is impossible to be filled with the Spirit and remain passive. For within the Spirit there is the divine longing that all might be reconciled to God through Christ. We are therefore driven to participate in the Spirit's mission of reconciliation.

Steven Land observes that at Pentecost "space and time are fused in the prophetic reckoning created and sustained by the Spirit of the end."¹⁰ In this move, everyday time becomes *kairos* for those upon whom the end of the ages has already come. But "every fulfillment, every 'already,' has an overplus of not yet or promise."¹¹

Because of the fusion of time and space, there is a corresponding fusion of witness and worship. Worship spills into the streets and draws a crowd. Witness may lead to worship. In light of the end the people of God worship. In light of the end the people of God witness.

In reflecting upon our witness in North America, it seems that the missing central ingredient is an apocalyptic vision of the end. Most of us are so trapped in the now that it is hard for us to express the Spirit's longing for the coming future. As Thomas Long points out "our cultural expectations have faded for divine intervention on the large scale, and our spirituality has turned inward and psychological."¹²

How amazing it is to note that a true vision of the end, such as the one experienced on the Day of Pentecost, makes the present more fully alive. Jurgen Moltmann states that eternal life is full-filled time.¹³ In Pentecost we experience an inbreaking of fulfilled time in which the efficacy of *chronos* is disturbed and we taste of the presence of eternity.

To do mission in North America requires a good dose of eternity, for the lure of the present in our culture is strong. However, once we have tasted of the end, we are compelled toward both doxology and witness. "We cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard."

Notes

¹ Will Willimon's critique of "public theology" as a theological fad which "bows to what the dominant culture says can be uttered to gain a hearing," is a valid one. As a Pentecostal I feel that once again the mainline tradition is setting the parameters for acceptable witness. The choice between public theology or sectarian theology is not a valid one. See W. Willimon, "Preaching as Mission Encounter with North American Paganism," *Journal for Preachers*, 22:3, 1999.

² Walter Brueggemann, "Ministry Among: the Power of Blessing," *Journal for Preachers*, 22.3 (Easter 1999).

³ Roger Stronstad, "Affirming Diversity: God's People as a Community of Prophets" *Pneuma* 17.2 (Fall 1995).

⁴ Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson

Press, 1984) 59.

⁵ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "To Speak Thy Word With Boldness Acts 4:23-31," *Faith and Mission*, 3.2 (Spring 1986).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 43.

⁸ John M. Penney, *The Missionary Emphasis of Lukan Pneumatology*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, JPTS: 12, 1997), 122.

⁹ I am clearly dialoguing here with Walter Brueggemann's recent article, "Ministry Among: The Power of Blessing," *Journal for Preachers*, 22.3 (Easter 1999). I would concur with his main point that "mission among" is the vocation of the people of God. Perhaps Acts portrays for us what happens when the life force of God comes in such a manner that the community is overwhelmed by its energy and power. In the resulting figure-ground reversal, the gift becomes the subject and the community the object. The community no longer has the gift, rather the gift has the community.

¹⁰ Steven J. Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, JPTD: 1, 1993), 98.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Thomas G. Long, "When Half Spent Was the Night: Preaching Hope in the New Millennium," *Journal for Preachers*, 22.3 (Easter 1999).

¹³ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God*, trans. by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 291.