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Creative Crises of Leadership in the Acts of the Apostles

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I am afraid the title of this paper is misleading. How can crises be creative? Any form of crisis is said to carry with it an aspect of danger, as are the 'crisis of faith' 'crisis of authority' and the 'crisis of discipline', all characteristic of our times. But equally important for us to note is that every crisis is also a turning-point and a moment of decision, and it is in the latter sense that I use the word 'crisis' in this paper. The scope of this paper is, therefore, to analyse the critical role played by people in the early Church, by which the Church at last became the Church as willed and planned by Christ.¹

1. The Author who Thought and Wrote Differently

A cursory reading of the concluding verses of the Synoptic Gospels would give us the idea that the mission of the disciples to preach the Gospel to the entire human race was immediately put into action without further ado.² The Longer Ending in Mark has this pertinent statement: 'They went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it' (Mk. 16:20). The Shorter Ending has almost the same idea: 'After this, Jesus himself sent out by means of them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.' In spite of these clear statements, it is more than certain that the universal mission was something which was accomplished after much hesitation

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¹ Cf. J. Pathrapankal, 'The Hellenists and their missionary dynamism in the early Church and its message for our times' *Bible Bhashyam*, Vol. 8, 1982, 216-226.

² Cf. Mt. 28:16-20; Lk. 24:44-49; Mk. 16:9-20. Though Mt. 10:5 has a negative tone in it, the mission given by the risen Lord is always positive.

and discussion. Luke knew this very well and consequently he has also given us a complete picture of the real situation.³

Before we proceed any further it is important to note that Luke did not write a history of the early Church ; rather he wrote a theological history of the origin and growth of the Church. The summary of this theological history is given in Acts 1 : 8 wherein we are clearly told about the vertical and horizontal dimensions of this process. Already in Luke 24 : 49 Jesus had hinted at this : ' I send the promise (*epaggelia*) of my Father upon you ; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power (*dunamis*) from on high.' The emphasis here is more on the vertical aspect, the source of the activity of the disciples. In Acts 1 : 8 this power is identified with the Holy Spirit and it is given in view of enabling the disciples to be witnesses (*martures*) in Jerusalem, in Judea, and in Samaria till the end (*eschaton*) of the earth. Luke is probably the only Gentile writer of the New Testament and it is therefore quite natural for him to analyse those aspects of the Church which favour his universalistic view. But more than that, it is his critical sense of theological interpretation which enabled him to remain committed to a profound analysis of the various events which constituted the history of the early Church.

Important among these events was the leadership assumed by several individuals who had the courage to think differently and act with determination. In fact, the divine power promised by Christ could become effective and operative only through the bold steps taken by these charismatic leaders. The disciples of Jesus considered the new religious movement inaugurated by Jesus more as a sectarian reality than as a radically new reality transcending Judaism.⁴ They considered themselves members of a messianic community waiting for the parousia, when the members of this community would enter into the apocalyptic blessings and the Twelve would sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel (cf. Mt. 19 : 28).

The apostles continued to go to the Temple for the regular prayers (Acts 3 : 1). Even the 'ministry of the Word' (*diakonia tou logou*) (Acts 6 : 2, 4) exercised by the apostles is interpreted by some New Testament scholars more as a sedentary and sedulous

³ Cf. J. Pathrapankal, 'The early Church, far from being a ready-made agency for the Gentile mission and the universality of the Christian message, was to learn from her own experience and trials as well as from the problems created by the various groups that she was to go out of her narrow outlook to bring the Good News of salvation to the nations'. *Good News and Witness*, Bangalore, 1973, p. 82.

⁴ This sect-mentality is evinced by the fact that even the Jews considered Christianity as a sect, known as the 'sect of the Nazarenes' (Acts 24 : 5), something similar to the sect of the Sadducees (Acts 5 : 17 ; cf. 24 : 14 ; 28 : 22).

exercise of studying the Old Testament as fulfilled in Jesus Christ than as an actual preaching ministry. In fact, hardly anyone else besides Peter is said to have preached the Gospel. Following the practice of Jewish Rabbis, the apostles might have spent their time studying the Old Testament and developing *testimonia* to prove that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah. Moreover, it is likely that the Twelve also spent their time pondering over the teaching of Jesus, his unique and provoking ideas which they had listened to during his public ministry.

The Acts of the Apostles describe how the Jerusalem Christians led a common life, having one heart and one soul (Acts 2 : 42-47 ; 4 : 32-35). It is true that the new life was a challenging one and it is also probable that in this they were inspired by the Qumran community, which had styled itself to be the eschatological community of the New Covenant. But as such, the Christian community of Jerusalem had a rather limited horizon. It seems that its immediate objective was to have as many Jews as possible converted to their group. The only condition was that everyone should embrace it in full sincerity and honesty. The story of Ananias and Sapphira is precisely to illustrate this point (Acts 5 : 1-11). It was already the beginning of destructive crisis in the community and the author has taken a very bold stand in eliminating all such unhealthy elements from the Christian community.

2. The Emergence of Creative Crises

But gradually the problems in the community became deep-rooted. The first of these was the co-existence of Christian widows of Palestinian and Hellenistic Judaism. Though we do not know much about the function of these widows in the early Church,⁵ their presence in several Christian communities is beyond doubt (Acts 9 : 39). The early Church leaders such as Ignatius and Polycarp also attest to this fact. In Jerusalem the presence of widows belonging to two culturally different groups created problems. The Hellenistic Jewish widows complained that they were neglected in the daily distribution of funds. In itself a minor affair, it was the starting-point of major developments in the history of the early Church. Luke narrates the story in such a way that he can indicate a new centre of gravity in the Jerusalem Church. The seven 'servants of the table,' chosen for taking care of the daily distribution of funds, were noted for being men full of the Spirit and Wisdom (v. 3). Moreover, all these seven men were Hellenists, as their names suggest, and consequently it was a victory for a humiliated group.

⁵ 1 Tim. 5 : 3-16 gives a full-scale description of widows and how 'real widows' are to be distinguished from apparent ones.

3. Stephen⁷ the Authorized Transgressor

For Luke, this incident was only a transition and the starting-point for major developments to take place in the Church in the immediate future. Stephen, the leader of the group, was a man richly blessed by God and full of power, and he performed great miracles among the people. But more than that, he became a new focus of attention for the Church. His wisdom and faith were such that nobody could refute him. In short, he became a controversial person. As the first witness (*martus*) of Christ, it was his fate to undergo all that Jesus himself had to face: false accusation and finally death. More than that, his witnessing to Christ was a reproducing of the same attitude Jesus had towards the Law and the Temple. He was accused of speaking against the Torah and the Temple. He was charged with the crime of taking sides with Jesus of Nazareth in his attack on the Temple, the very same Temple Peter, John and others were visiting several times during the day for official prayers (cf. Acts 2:46). Stephen had to defend himself. In the longest speech recorded in the Acts, Stephen narrates the whole history of salvation and the divinely guided process of this history, with its climax in the coming of the Servant Christ. For the first time there emerged a polarity between the Church and Judaism; for the first time the Church had to define her inner nature and establish her identity. Stephen had the courage to do that, of course, at the cost of his life. His bearing witness to Christ meant reproducing in his own life the very ideals for which Jesus stood, both in his critical attitude towards Judaism and in his forgiving attitude towards his enemies (cf. Acts 7:59-60).

4. Philip the Unauthorized Missionary

The Stephen episode sparked off a new wave of hostility towards Christians. We are told that the Church in Jerusalem soon began to suffer cruel persecution. Was the entire Church persecuted? It is doubtful; for we read that the apostles were spared (8:1). Why were the apostles not persecuted? The intention of the author seems to be that he wanted to safeguard the existence and continuation of the Jerusalem Church. At the same time it also seems that the persecutors did not consider the apostles to be a dangerous element at all. They were, in fact, a pro-Judaism group, as was explained earlier.

This persecution constituted another creative crisis in the early Church. It was a moment of the releasing of the power of the Spirit which started operating through Stephen. The Hellenistic group, characterized by their centrifugal force, began to take advantage of this situation. Though unauthorized by the official

Church in Jerusalem, Philip, one of the seven, went and preached the Gospel among the Samaritans, the bitter enemies of the Jews.⁶ The mission of Philip was a success, as is shown by the progress of the story: 'The crowd paid close attention to what Philip said, as they listened to him and saw the miracles that he performed' (8 : 6). Even Simon Magus was converted (8 : 13), though his conversion had to be further deepened (8 : 24).⁷

What is important to note here is the positive reaction of the Jerusalem Church. Though the preaching of the Gospel to the Samaritans was part of Christ's mission given to the apostles (Acts 1 : 8), the initiative taken by Philip was not as such authorized by the official body of the Jerusalem Church. However, the Jerusalem Church did not pronounce a moratorium on Philip's mission ; instead, two of the apostles, Peter and John,—and they were of the 'pillars' too—went down to Samaria to pray for the converts and place their hands on them and thus to approve of the mission of Philip. Philip was not one of the Twelve ; he was appointed only to serve at the table. He was only a layman ! But this layman was responsible for taking the Gospel out of the Jewish territory and making it available to the non-Jews. It would even appear that the bold step taken by Philip prompted the apostles, Peter and John, also to preach to the non-Jews. We read : 'Peter and John went back to Jerusalem and on their way they preached the Good News in many villages of Samaria' (8 : 25).

Though persecution apparently created a set-back for the Jerusalem Church, in a more mysterious way it was preparing the growth of the Church and the spread of the Gospel. Later on we read that the Church in Antioch, the second major Church in the first century, was founded by some of those who were persecuted and dispersed during the martyrdom of Stephen (of Acts 11 : 19-26). It was in this Church that the believers were first of all called 'Christians', (11 : 26), and it was this Church which later took the bold step of sending out Barnabas and Saul to preach the Gospel among the Gentiles (Acts 13 : 1-3).

The crisis initiated by Philip did not stop with the conversion of the Samaritans. The Spirit prompted Philip to go and meet an Ethiopian official, a Gentile, and to supervise his conversion and to baptize him (Acts 8 : 26-39). This event prompted Philip to preach the Gospel also to other Gentiles, and we are told that he went on to Ashdod and Caesarea and other villages of the Gentiles, preaching the Good News in every town (8 : 40). We

⁶ Cf. F. F. Bruce, *Men and Movements in the Early Church*, Exeter : The Paternoster Press, 1979, *passim*.

⁷ O. Cullmann, 'Samaritanen und Anfänge der christlichen Mission' in *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 1925-1962, 1966, pp. 232-240.

do not know whether the Jerusalem Church was informed about it or not, but Luke wants us to know that even this stage of preaching the Gospel to the Gentiles was initiated by a layman, and that too an unauthorized missionary !

5. The Cornelius Episode

The story of the conversion of Cornelius, the longest single story in the Acts (66 verses), is narrated in full details, often with unnecessary repetitions, because of its crucial theological significance for the entire theology of the Acts.⁸ On the one hand the author is convinced that the Gospel is for everyone ; but on the other hand he tries to convince the readers that this universalistic approach was not anything characteristic of the official Church, rather it was developed by the lower strata of the Christian community, as happened when Philip converted the Ethiopian official. However, such an important dimension of mission had to receive its official approval before it became the normal activity of the Church in Antioch, which we shall discuss below. This official approval is described in the Cornelius story.

The characteristic note of this story is its divine compulsion. Peter is the least prepared to admit Cornelius into the Christian community. Twice we are told about Peter's refusal to accept Cornelius, 'I have never eaten anything ritually unclean or defiled' (10 : 14, 11 : 8). But God looks at things very differently : 'Do not consider anything unclean that God has declared clean' (10 : 15; 11 : 9). This happened three times (10 : 16 ; 11 : 10). The narration of the story is such that God takes complete responsibility for the conversion of Cornelius. He is only critical of human resistance. Peter was to be converted before he could convert Cornelius.

The outcome of this event was far more than the conversion of one Gentile. Not only was Cornelius converted, but also others as well who listened to Peter's message (Acts 10 : 44-48). There was a second Pentecost, the Pentecost of the Gentiles. Peter realized that God's gifts are not anybody's exclusive privilege and therefore he ordered that the listeners should be given their full share in the blessings of the Gospel. Peter said : 'These people have received the Holy Spirit, just as we also did. Can anyone, then, stop them from being baptized with water ?' (10 : 47). So Peter ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and he stayed with them for a few days, thus expressing his fellowship with the Gentile Christians.

⁸ Cf. H. Schlier, 'Die Entscheidung fuer die Heidenmission in der Urchristenheit' in *Die Zeit der Kirche*, Freiburg, 1956, pp. 90-107.

It was not the end of the story. Luke is conscious of the problem created by this event. Peter is the leader of the Jerusalem community ; so his actions have far-reaching consequences. So when he went back to Jerusalem, the apostles and those who were in favour of circumcising the Gentile Christians, came forward to criticize him. He was criticized for his ecumenical approach. To be sure, Peter was converted to this new position only after an inner struggle and so he had his arguments ready. He asked them : ' Who was I to try to stop God ? ' (11 : 17). When Peter's adversaries saw the firmness with which Peter proceeded in the matter, they stopped their criticism and started praising God : ' Then God has given to the Gentiles also the opportunity to be converted in order to attain life ' (Acts 11 : 18).

6. The Church in Antioch : The Power-House of a New Missionary Thrust

What had happened in the Jerusalem Church was only preparing the way for a major development in the Church of Antioch. The Church in Antioch was founded by the Hellenistic Christians who were scattered during the persecution after the death of Stephen (Acts 11 : 19-26). This Church was, as such, on good terms with the Jerusalem Church. We are told that during a famine that affected the Jerusalem Church, the disciples in Antioch collected money and sent it to the Church elders in Jerusalem through Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11 : 27-30).

But at an important stage in its history, the Church in Antioch did not even consult the Jerusalem Church, let alone get its permission. It was not necessary either, because it was the Holy Spirit who took the initiative in the matter. The Church in Antioch was asked to spare two of their best men for the mission among the Gentiles. They were Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13 : 1-3). The community fasted and prayed ; they placed their hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them off.

This first missionary journey of Paul was a great success, as can be inferred from the description in the Acts (cf. 13 : 4-14 : 28). It is important to note that this first missionary journey also prepares the background for the rationale of the Gentile mission, because the ' turning to the Gentiles ' was necessitated by the obstinacy of the Jews (13 : 46-48). Thus the various events starting with the Stephen episode paved the way for the Gospel to be a free reality open to all. The crisis for which Stephen was responsible proved to be the correct way of liberating the Gospel from its Jewish moorings.

7. The Final Crisis : The Jerusalem Council

Luke has guided his readers through a whole complexity of events, assuring every time that the Gospel was safe and that it was prospering. The so-called summaries of the Acts confirm this.⁹ But the author wants to expose the seriousness of the crisis that began with the Stephen episode. Three times he had introduced the topic of the admission of the Gentiles into the Church, all of them as being willed by God and his spirit.¹⁰ Now at last the problem takes on a new seriousness. 'Some men from Judea came to Antioch and started teaching the believers. You cannot be saved unless you are circumcised as the law of Moses requires' (15:1). Now that Paul and Barnabas had returned from their successful Gentile mission,¹¹ they fell into a fierce argument with them about this. The conclusion of this debate was that the matter should be settled in Jerusalem. Consequently Paul and Barnabas, together with others, were deputed to go to Jerusalem and see the apostles and elders about this matter.

It is beyond the scope of this study to enter into the historical character of this story, namely, whether the Jerusalem Council took place exactly the way it is described here. The difficulty is all the more so because of the probability of Gal. 2:1-10 being a duplicate description of the Jerusalem Council. The two narratives have an entirely different atmosphere and the details are also at variance. But the conclusions reached in both these narratives are the same. The problem of the admission of the Gentiles to the Church was once and for all settled. According to the account of the Acts, Peter and James played the important role, whereas according to Gal. 2:1-10, Paul took the bold step to convince the 'pillars' about their division of labour. Thanks to this decision, the future mission of Paul, Silas and Timothy could be carried out without any major problem (cf. Acts 16:1-21:15). The crises that began with the quarrel of the widows in Jerusalem have at last disappeared, though the pro-Jewish tendencies in the Jerusalem Church always remained a fact and a problem (cf. Acts 21:17-25).

Conclusion

The above analysis has shown how the Church had to pass thr-

⁹ Cf. Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30-31. These summaries establish how the Church grew in spite of tensions, problems and difficulties.

¹⁰ They are: (1) the conversion of the Ethiopian official, (2) the conversion of Cornelius and (3) the conversion of the Gentiles during the first missionary journey.

¹¹ Here we do not enter into the discussion whether the account in chapters 13 and 14 took place before or after the concordat at Jerusalem. Cf. E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1971, pp. 440-472.

ough a series of crises before it could become the Church as willed by Christ. As we have said in the beginning of this paper, here we are not dealing with the history of the early Church. Luke did not want to write such a history. He was more interested in a theological approach. In this Luke wanted to establish the fact that the Church grew up not only in spite of the crises but also because of these crises. Allowing for the fact that the administration of the Church was taken care of by fallible human agencies, the fact always remained clear that the 'power from above' was there to guide the process of her growth.

In this growth Stephen, Philip and Paul played their significant roles. In fact, they were responsible for initiating a series of crises which were apparently disturbing the unity of the Church. At the same time, the very same crises made the Church grow and the Gospel reach fresh groups of listeners. In the eyes of many these men were trouble-makers and heretics. They would have them silenced and removed from the main stream of the Church's life. In fact, Stephen was stoned to death in the hope that the 'heresy' advocated by him would also come to an end. But it did not. Luke is fully aware of this polarisation and he handles this delicate reality in all seriousness. He know only too well how the prophets of the Old Testament were trouble makers and 'heretics' to the official circles, such as Kings and priests. He also knew how Jesus of Nazareth never made compromises. His teaching on the Torah, the Temple and the Sabbath was all disturbing, his keeping company with sinners and publicans was more than a scandal. For Luke, the religious movement which bears the name of this great revolutionary should be characterized by creative crises and he picked on such leaders to demonstrate their critical actions.

More than ever, the Church of today passes through a series of crises, and it is true of all Churches. What is important is that we should develop a positive approach in evaluating these crises, because they belong to the very dynamics of growth. It is all the more so because the Church is at the same time divine and human, and it could happen that the human very often obscures the divine, even to the extent of extinguishing it. But as happened in the early Church, the 'power from above' is powerful enough to keep the Church growing. What we very much need today are dynamic leaders, men and women characterized by wisdom and endowed with the Spirit of God, who will not only initiate creative crises but also lead them to resolution and make the Church the Servant of the Kingdom of God. Stephen, Philip and Paul were marked by this dynamism of the Spirit and they invite us to do the same.
