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THE SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH'S WITNESS : OBSERVATIONS ON ACTS 1 : 6 - 8

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Of Acts 1:6-8 the Jerome Biblical Commentary says, 'The verses strike the keynote of the Acts of the Apostles'. /1 It is the purpose of this essay to show that at the outset of his second volume Luke formulated in these three verses the main themes of his theology and, secondly, that this theology continues to have vital significance for the Church of today. This we shall attempt to do, first, by offering an exegesis of the text, and then by situating the results of that exegesis in the context of Luke's theology.

I EXEGESIS

*v.6 : Lord, will you at this time restore
the kingship to Israel?*

This question of the disciples comes between two statements of the risen Lord which promise the coming of the Holy Spirit (vs. 5 and 8). It is an example of a literary device which is fairly common in the New Testament. It is a kind of paedagogical question intended to call for definition or precision by pointing out possible misunderstandings: the device is found frequently in John's gospel (3:4; 6:60; 8:22,33; 11:12; 13:36) and occurs also in Luke's work (Lk.1:34; 7:23; cf.22:24; Acts 2:37; 7:1; 17:19). As formulated, the disciples' question in Acts 1:6 calls for a substantial amount of restatement. In point of fact, each of its terms refers to a specific misunderstanding which will be cleared up in Jesus' reply. The words 'at this time' imply the illusion of an imminent eschatology, to which Jesus responds with 'It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority'. 'To restore the kingship, or the kingdom (tēn basileian)' expresses the political misconception by which the entire cause of Jesus is reduced to a matter of zealotism, of struggle against the Roman occupying forces. Jesus will reply: 'You will receive the Holy Spirit': his promise and that of the Father did not envisage the mere restoration of a certain political set-up, but the radical newness of the Spirit in action and in experience. The words 'to Israel' imply a viewpoint which remains closed within the narrow confines of exclusivism: Israel is regarded as the only object of messianic salvation. This exclusivism will be countered by the perspectives opened up in v.8: not only Jerusalem and Judea, but Samaria and the very ends of the earth.

The three-fold misunderstanding which receives expression in v.6 corresponded to existing currents of thought in the Christian community as Luke knew it. The eschatological illusion, for instance, is witnessed to in 1 Thessalonians in which, interestingly, the same words appear as in Acts 1:7 ('times and seasons', kairous kai chronous) to designate a major concern among the Thessalonian believers ('as to the times and seasons, brethren, you have no need to have anything written to you', Thess.5:1). These words had become a standard phrase to express the anxiety of the early Christians, eagerly waiting for the return of the Lord, analysing the possible signs, computing delays and trying to work out a time-table for the second advent.

The restoration of kingship was an important focus for the aspirations of the Judeo-Christians, one which they shared with their Jewish brothers. If, with many commentators, we accept that the Acts of the Apostles was written in the eighties of the first Christian century, then we may perceive here a reaction to the traumatic events which reached their climax in 70 A.D. - the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple and the termination of Temple-worship. This raises the interesting question as to what might have been the attitude of Luke to the Judeo-Christians. Though traditionally Luke is known as a Gentile, he shows in his work an unashamed sympathy for, almost a bias towards, the people of Israel. /2 Whatever may have been the form and extent of Luke's contacts with Judeo-Christians, Acts 1:6 implies a nationalistic and eschatological fervour, an apocalyptic stance, which is also evidenced in such texts as the Magnificat (Lk.1:46-55) and the Benedictus (Lk.1:68-79) and which constitutes part of the background of the book of the Revelation.

v.7: *It is not for you to know the times and the seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority.*

The connotation of the phrase 'times and seasons' has already been indicated above. When comparing Acts 1:7 with 1 Thess.5:1f. another observation comes to mind. Both texts put the same question in the same terms, i.e. when is the End to come. But the answers given differ. 1 Thessalonians warns that early Christian community not to be lulled to sleep and inactivity by the delay of the expected Parousia. The day of the Lord is coming, they are told: indeed, it is here already, dawning upon them. They are already 'sons of the day, not of the night'(5:5). The answer in Acts 1 is different. The problem of computing times and seasons is to be set aside: the matter is in the hands of the Lord.

What concerns the believers is to realise that, in the meantime, a mission remains to be accomplished: 'you shall be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth'. The standpoint of 1 Thessalonians remains eschatological: it is that of an expectation turned towards the future. The viewpoint of Acts is ecclesiological: it is turned towards the present and the task incumbent on the Church during the present period: the future is another matter, escaping, even defying human reckoning.

*v.8: You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit
is come upon you*

The time between the first and the second coming of the Lord is marked by the activity of the Holy Spirit coming upon and working through the disciples. If the previous period was the period of Jesus, the present one is that of the Spirit, and the Spirit is a power (dunamis) energizing the disciples. The Church is not at all caught within the perspectives of idle expectation. The time of the Church is a time loaded with power, given for mission. In God's plan of salvation, the time of Jesus was not the end: much remains to be done after his departure.

On the other hand, the time of the Church or the time of the Spirit does not represent something discontinuous with what went before. There is a significant parallelism between Acts 1:7, introducing the force at work in the Church, and Luke 1:35, describing the Christ who is to be born.

Luke 1 : 35

Acts 1 : 7

The Holy Spirit
will come upon thee (epeleusetai)
and the power (dunamis)
of the Most High will overshadow thee:
that holy thing to be born will be
(the) son of God.

the Holy Spirit
coming upon you (epelthontos)...
You shall receive power(dunamis)
and you shall be my
witnesses...

called

The parallelism is striking and can hardly be coincidental or casual. It is reinforced by the fact that in these two verses only is the verb 'to come upon' (eperchesthai) used of the Holy Spirit: elsewhere the Spirit is said to 'come down', 'fill', 'be poured out', 'be sent', 'be given' or 'be received'. The significance of the parallelism is clear: whether it be in the case of Jesus, to make him son of God, or of the disciples to make them witnesses, the same dynamism of the same Spirit is at work, the same divine purpose drives the human actors towards and in their divinely-given role.

You shall be my witnesses

'Witness' is a favourite term of Luke. He uses it nine times (twice in the Gospel and seven times in Acts) in the nominal agent form (martus: the one who gives witness), five times in the nominal passive form (twice in Acts and three times in the Gospel), marturion, witness given to a fact or event; once in the form marturia, with the same meaning, and fourteen times (all but one in Acts) in the verbal form (martureo and marturesthai). The significance of the word becomes clear when we compare the Lucan form of the missionary command with that of Mark and Matthew.

Mark says, 'Go into the world and proclaim the good news to all creatures' (Mark 16:15) /3. The evangelical activity given to the disciples is described by the verb kerusso, 'to announce, proclaim, lit. to herald'. What is envisaged in the Marcan missionary command is a 'heralding' or 'kerygmatic' activity. The grace of God at work in the life and resurrection of Jesus Christ is good news. And good news needs no further demonstration: it simply has to be communicated. The missionary activity of the disciples has only to release, by proclamation the power of the Good News: the rest will follow of itself.

Matthew has the command in the form, 'Make disciples ...' (matheteusate), 28:19. There is an implicit but clearly perceptible allusion to the process of training disciples, of initiating them into a deeper understanding of the truth - a mental attitude and a corresponding style of life. Jewish tradition knew well the slow process by which the rabbi trained his disciples (talmidim), a process which had much in common with the guru relationship in Indian tradition. The form of the missionary command in Matthew betrays the awareness that mission has to be pursued beyond the initial act of faith. If the 'kerygma' leads to the acceptance of faith, a long process follows in the making of a true disciple.

Luke's choice of the word 'witness' suggests another aspect of the communication of the Christian message. The communication will be through words and deeds. In Acts 2 the action of the Spirit makes Peter speak, but it also brings into existence a community whose 'grace-full' manner of life attracts others. If the speech of Peter brings to faith three thousand souls (v.41), the life and example of the early community draws many 'day by day' (v.47). The word 'witness' expresses all the varied forms of the communication of the Christian message through words and deeds.

While there is agreement between the evangelists that the resurrection experience gave the disciples a missionary awareness, the way in which that awareness is described by the Synoptists reflects the growth of missionary experience itself and also the growth of a theology of mission.

in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

We have here a broad plan for the programme of the book of Acts as a whole.

- | | |
|----------------|--|
| Chapters 1 - 7 | narrate the Jerusalem ministry; |
| " 8 - 12 | show the Good News taken to Judea and Samaria through Philip and Peter; |
| " 13 - 28 | follow Paul, going to the extremities of the earth, indeed up even to Rome. /4 |

The coming of the Spirit opens up new perspectives which are not only geographical areas, but new human and cultural horizons for mission.

II ACTS 1 : 6 - 8 AS A THEOLOGICAL PROGRAMME

The preceding analysis of Acts 1:6-8 shows that the short dialogue in these three verses is filled with rich theological overtones. In fact, this short passage contains a synthesis of Luke's basic theological insights. An exposition of these insights will therefore constitute a general delineation of Luke's theology.

1. A Time for the Church

We pointed out the difference between the viewpoint of Paul in 1 Thess. 5 and that of Luke. Whereas Paul still turns the eyes of the readers towards the return of Christ, Luke is reconciled to the prospect of a long time-gap. The End is not imminent. To use the phraseology of H. Conzelmann, for Luke Jesus is not the end, but the mid-point of time. /5 The time of Jesus is still to be followed by the time of the Church (as it was preceded by the time of Israel). This time is no mere time of expectation, a time that would contain nothing but the emptiness of absence; rather, it is a time inhabited by a purpose, a programme and the responsibility of action to be accomplished. Like the time of promise and the time of Jesus, the time of the Church brings a positive element to the fulfilment of God's purpose and plan. Whereas Paul, and many in the early Church, viewed their present situation as an eschatological period in which the grace of God had broken into the human condition, breaking the hold of evil forces, dissipating darkness and bringing about a new man, a new earth and new heavens in the once-for-allness of an irreversible action, Luke introduces again the perspectives of history, of an on-going process of human action and becoming. The death and resurrection of Christ did not usher in the End, but a new stage in salvation history. And that is precisely why Luke wrote the Acts of the Apostles. It was not just a matter of historical thoroughness, of completing the account of the origins of the Christian movement. The Acts of the Apostles has a theological purpose. It illustrates Luke's conviction that the cause of Christ is now to be carried forward in a time-bound history.

2. A Time for Witnessing

The main activity to be carried out during the period of the Church is witness to the resurrection. In this respect Luke is in fundamental agreement with Mark (13:10), Matthew (28:19) and Paul (Rom. 15: 16-21), but he is more fully aware that this is an activity which is likely to be spread over a long period, since it has already been carried out by the apostolic generation (the Twelve: Acts 1-12) and the sub-apostolic successors (represented by Paul: Acts 13-28). /6

Luke would not share Paul's confidence that 'their voice has (already) gone out to all the earth' (Rom. 10:18): the ends of the earth are, for Luke, still far distant, it would appear. That is why the book of Acts remains unfinished. This has been the subject of much

discussion among the commentators and many hypotheses have been put forward to account for it. /7 But the main point of the abrupt conclusion is precisely that it is not an ending. The story continues. The nations will listen. Paul speaks freely in Rome (Acts 28: 28-31). But more is to follow. A complete period is still to come, with its own tasks, its own troubles implied in Paul's farewell speech in Acts 20 : 18-36 which, in a way, might be considered as a kind of historical conclusion to the report of Acts.

As well as making it clear that the power of the Good News is at work in this period, Luke also shows that it enters into all the various aspects of the life of a community (Acts 2: 42-47). The word of the Good News takes flesh and bone in the diverse activities of those who relay the message and bear witness to it. The 'word of God' is so identified with its embodiment in the life and witness of the community that the 'word' is said to 'grow' (6:7; 12:24; 19:20) like a body, like a people (cf. Acts 7:7). On this point we could contrast Luke with Paul for whom the word of the Gospel is 'power' (Rom. 1: 16), like a powder keg: it can be carried, it is not expected to grow. Or, again, it is a reality coming down from heaven and given to be either accepted or rejected (Rom. 10:6-13). In Luke, on the contrary, the 'word' assumes the rhythms and the risks of human existence.

3. The Time of the Church

Although he uses the word ekklēsia frequently, Luke is not much concerned about the structures of the Church: the churches he describes have different forms of structure. /8 Yet he has a clearly delineated theology of the Church. For him God's plan revealed in Jesus Christ is to be furthered through a process of historical mediation, /9 and through the exercise of human responsibilities. And that is precisely what the Church is about. For this reason Luke has been accused of Frühkatholizismus, of early catholicising tendencies. /10 While it may be true that Luke's theology of salvation-history opens the way for the growth of early catholicism, his own writing does not lay stress on the church as an institution developing rigid forms of organisation and alone dispensing salvation. /11 Throughout the book of Acts the Church remains a Church under the word, a community of believers called by God to proclaim salvation in the name of Jesus. This point has been recently stated well by J.A.Fitzmyer:

He [Luke] sees the Church as the locus in which the Word of God is rightly preached and in which salvation in the name of Jesus is offered to human beings. ... If, in the Lucan view of things, salvation comes to human beings through the Church, through the organised Christian community, that is because in it the Word of God is rightly preached and baptism is conferred 'in the name of the Lord Jesus'. /12

True, Luke is not afraid of seeing the Church embarking upon the ambiguities of human history - that is indeed the meaning of the Acts of the Apostles - but that is far from entailing the formalism of early catholicism. The Church, for Luke, is the human locus of evangelism and mission.

4. The Time of the Spirit

But, for Luke, the Church is not left alone to face the vicissitudes and risks of human history. The Church is in and lives by the power of the Spirit. This does not mean only that the Church receives the help of the Holy Spirit: the implication is rather that the Spirit is the main hero of the story. In terms of structuralist analysis of the story, it is not the apostles who are the 'actors', while the Holy Spirit is the 'adjuvant', but rather the opposite. The apostles, the co-workers and successors are energised and directed by the Spirit. We might almost say that they were manipulated by the Spirit when we read how Paul is led to exercise his ministry in Europe in Acts 16:6-10. The very beginning of Paul's missionary undertaking is traced back to an intervention of the Holy Spirit: 'The Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them"', 13:2. Indeed the whole movement that took the apostles out of the Upper Room into the streets of Jerusalem and, later on, to the roads of Judea and Samaria, finally to reach the ends of the earth, originated in the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost (2:1-13).

The time of the Church is, first and last, the time of the Spirit. Now, to say that the present age is the time of the Spirit is another way of saying that it is not the time of Jesus. Whereas Matthew concludes his gospel with the dominical promise 'I am with you always, to the close of the age' - which implies that Jesus' presence merges into history, so to speak, into the lives of the commissioned - Luke's account ends with a description of the departure of Jesus: 'he parted

from them and was carried up into heaven' (Lk.24:51) /13. Luke never says in the book of Acts that Christ is at work in the Church. This does not mean that Jesus has simply disappeared: his influence is still exercised through his name (Acts 3: 6,16; 4:10,18; 8:12; 16:18), his power (4:7) and his Spirit (16:7). But the Spirit of Jesus is not simply Jesus. It is both less and more than Jesus. The Spirit is less than Jesus since, in the present period, the physicality of contact with the Lord is lost: even Paul, who met the risen Christ on the way to Damascus, does not enjoy the same kind of unmistakable experience as was given to the Twelve (contrast Acts 9:3-5 and Lk.24:39-43). Yet the Spirit is at the same time more than Jesus in the sense that in and by the power and presence of the Spirit the Church - the community of Jesus - is able to reach to the ends of the earth where it meets the culture of Athens (Acts 17:22-31) and the formidable power of the Pax Romana (Acts 28:30-31). In a sense Luke's conception is close to John's impressive statement: 'He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father. ... And I will pray the Father and he will give you another Paraclete/Counsellor to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth' (Jn.14:12,16-17). The Spirit is the power and presence of Jesus released from the constrictions of place and time to be with and among his followers everywhere and always.

CONCLUSION

At the outset, then, of his second volume, Luke gives us the basic co-ordinates of the position we are in - the Spirit, the mission, the Church. We are given, straight away, the vigorous outlines of a theology of the Spirit, of mission and of the Church, all three converging into one theology of history.

For Luke, the Church is the milieu in which the encounter of the Spirit with human history chiefly takes place. On the one hand, the Church cannot claim immunity from the risks and ambiguities of human history, but, on the other hand, the Church, in time and space, is also energised by the power of the living Spirit of God. Secondly, the Church finds her identity and unity in that march forward in which the people of God is continuously called to go beyond itself, to shake off all its securities, and ever to start again 'towards the ends of the earth'. And, thirdly, the Church is mission, and the mission is nothing but the dynamism of the Spirit at work through the mediation of a

pneumatic community. And if, unlike John, Luke - who speaks so often of the Spirit - never gives a description or a definition of what the Spirit is, it is because the Church in Acts presents a living image of the dynamism and the newness of life which the Spirit signifies.

The message of Luke is that the Spirit has entered upon the arena of human history and activity and has made it, at least potentially, a sphere of salvation. Human witness and work, whether it be in the form of proclaiming the Good News, praying, or exercising the diakonia for the poor, becomes the work of the Spirit. And, just as in the life of Israel, according to the Old Testament, God accepts the risks of sharing in human affairs, so now, through the Church in the power of the Spirit, he continues to entrust himself, his purpose and its realisation, to the hearts and hands of men.

NOTES

1. R.J.Dillon and J.A.Fitzmyer, 'The Acts of the Apostles' in The Jerome Biblical Commentary (London; Chapman, 1968), p.169 of N.T. section.
2. Cf.J.Jervell, Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts (Minneapolis; Augsburg Press, 1972). In the introduction to his recent commentary on The Gospel of Luke I-IX (Anchor Bible series, vol.23: New York; Doubleday and Co., 1981) J.A.Fitzmyer argues that Luke was a gentile Christian, but not a Greek: rather he was a native Syrian inhabitant of Antioch, a non-Jew from a Semitic cultural background (pp 42-47). For Fitzmyer's comments on Jervell's work, see ibid., p.191.
3. This passage belongs to the so-called 'long ending' of Mark, which is of doubtful authenticity. But commentators do observe that, even though the text is not Markan, it is remarkably faithful to the perspectives of Mark. In The Last Twelve Verses of Mark (SNTS Monograph series, Vol.25: Cambridge Press, 1974) W.R.Farmer observes that to euangelion is used here, as in Paul, in an absolute way (cf.Mk.1:15; 8:35; 10:29; 13:10; 14:9) and goes on to say, 'This is distinctive of Mark among the evangelists... Matthew never uses the expression, nor does John. Luke never uses it though it occurs once in Acts 15:7. The presence here of to euangelion, used absolutely, constitutes a strong linguistic tie between Mk.1:1 - 16:8 and 16:9-20' (p.94).

4. Cf. W.C. van Unnik, 'Der Ausdruck hēos escch_hatou tēs qēs (Apg.i.8) und sein alttestamentlicher Hintergrund', in Studia Biblica et Semitica (Festschrift for T.C.Vriezen; Wageningen, 1966) pp 335-349.
5. According to the title of the famous study by Conzelmann, Die Mitte der Zeit (Tübingen; Mohr, 5th ed. 1964), translated into English under the less impressive title The Theology of St. Luke (Faber and Faber, 1960).
6. Cf. C. H. Talbert, Literary Patterns, Theological Themes and the Genre of Luke-Acts (SBL Monograph series, vol.20: Missoula, Scholars Press, 1974), pp 99-107.
7. See the summary of opinions in The Jerome Biblical Commentary, p.214 of N.T. section.
8. Cf. F.Bovon, Luc le Théologien (Neuchâtel: Delachaux - Niestlé, 1976) pp 362-403.
9. See F.Bovon, 'L'Importance des Médiations dans le projet théologique de Luc', NTS 21 (1974-75), pp 23-39.
10. Cf. E.Käsemann, Essays on New Testament Themes (London; SCM Press, 1964) pp 136-148.
11. 'If there is no salvation extra ecclesiam it is not because the church possesses the gospel, but because salvation is through Christ, and His word is committed to the apostles': I.H.Marshall, Luke: Historian and Theologian (Exeter, Devon; Paternoster Press, 1970), p.214.
12. J.A.Fitzmyer, The Gospel of Luke I-IX, pp 256, 257.
13. The second clause of this verse is of doubtful authenticity. The United Bible Societies edition of the Greek New Testament has given it only a 'D' rating (i.e. 'a very high degree of doubt'). It was omitted in previous editions of the Nestle text but reinstated in the latest (26th) edition by K.Aland. See the discussion of the evidence in A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament by B.M.Metzger (London and New York: UBS, 1971) pp 189-90. If we accept the short reading, Luke's Gospel ends with the stark statement that Jesus has gone. In Acts 1:9 the account of the ascension makes it also a departure rather than a glorious exaltation: 'a cloud took him away from their sight'.