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## CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP IN THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

*Benjamin Sargent*

The recent Clergy Terms of Service within the Church of England witness to a growing sense that Church pastors and leaders are *professionals*. A professional has a clearly defined role and work aims as well as an identifiable scope to his or her work. At the same time, a professional has a protected right to a clear division between their life and their work. Their personal time, morality, views and lifestyle choices are free to be purely private with no relation to their work. Professionalism is a popular approach to work. It assumes and expects certain standards of behaviour in the workplace and it defines very clearly what a ‘working relationship’ to other people in the workplace consists of. Those who deviate from the expected norms of this approach to work are deemed ‘unprofessional.’ Clergy Terms of Service exist to support the various rights of clergy to set working hours and conditions. They represent an attempt to make the work of the various categories of minister within the Church of England to which they relate more clear cut, laying out the mutual expectations and commitments of both employees and employers. Whilst they do not go so far as to encourage a disjuncture between private life and ministry, nor do they necessarily represent a trend towards this, it must be noted that they belong to an increasing culture of professionalism. Yet to what extent does this reflect the way in which Christian leadership is portrayed in the New Testament? Is it possible to identify descriptions of ministry in the New Testament which equate to notions of professionalism, offering clear descriptions of roles and their scopes? Whilst there is a great of material in the New Testament concerning leadership, a brief examination of the Acts of the Apostles suggests that leadership must be seen within the context of God’s sovereign plan, that it corresponds to roles which are not easily defined, and that it requires not privacy, but an observably godly and Spirit-filled heart.

The book of Acts is not about the leadership of the Church. In a way, it is not really about the Church either. Luke begins his sequel to his Gospel by relating it to his previous work. By beginning Acts by describing the last moments of the Lord Jesus’ earthly ministry he makes it clear that this is a continuation of the same writing project with the same concerns. These concerns are expressed in the first sentence of the Gospel.

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very

first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.<sup>1</sup>

Luke writes so that Theophilus and any other reader might know for sure that what they have been told about Jesus Christ is reliable. Two things are worth noting in relation to leadership in Acts. Firstly, Luke understands the events about which he writes to be ‘fulfilment,’ a term he uses most often to refer to the accomplishment of the promises of Scripture.<sup>2</sup> For Luke, the events about which he writes have an eternal significance: he writes about the fulfilment of the glorious plan of God. This is what drives Luke’s narrative, both of the life of the Lord Jesus, on whom the eternal plan pivots, and of the early Church, whose leaders play a part in the continuing fulfilment of the plan. God’s sovereign plan is being fulfilled. All other themes are subordinated to this dominant theme of God’s promises kept and need to be seen in the light of this theme. It is no coincidence, then, that Acts begins with a promise made by Jesus to the apostles in 1:8, ‘you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’ This promise sets up the particular plan of Acts which is kept against all the odds stacked against the Church.

Secondly, Luke in his introduction to his writing project, insists that these events of fulfilment are known through the testimony of

<sup>1</sup> This article originated as a lecture given to Church of England Curates as part of a diocesan post-ordination training programme. Hence quotations from Scripture are taken from the New Revised Standard Version. On the historiographical quality of Luke 1:1-4, see Loveday Alexander, *The Preface to Luke’s Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context in Luke 1.1-4 and Acts 1.1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) pp. 102–146 and Loveday Alexander, *Acts in its Ancient Literary Context* (London, T & T Clark, 2005) pp. 4–5 in which she argues that the sentence ought to be compared to Hellenistic *Fachprosa*, or scientific writings. Cf. Daniel Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the “Acts of the Apostles”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) pp. 5–25 and John Moles, ‘Luke’s Preface: The Greek Decree, Classical Historiography and Christian Redefinitions,’ *New Testament Studies* 57:4, 2011, pp. 461–482

<sup>2</sup> As John Nolland, *Luke 1-9:20* (WBC 35a; Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1989) p. 6 points out, ‘πληροφορεῖν is not used elsewhere by Luke but is almost certainly a more impressive synonym for his usual πληροῦν.’ See, for example, forms of the verb in Luke 4:21, 24:44, Acts 1:16, 3:18 and 13:33 which emphasise the fulfilment of scriptural promises. Cf. David Peterson, ‘The Motif of Fulfillment and the Purpose of Luke-Acts,’ in *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting Vol I: Ancient Literary Setting* (eds. Bruce W. Winter & Andrew D. Clarke; Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993) pp. 83–103. Peterson points out the distinctly Lukan preference for verbs of fulfillment; *plēroō*, *sumplēroō*, *pimplēmi*, *teleō* and *sunteleō*, noting parallels with Josephus and Apuleius, arguing that the motif of fulfilment demonstrates the determination of history by God.

eyewitnesses.<sup>3</sup> This is important because in Acts the Apostles are identified as eyewitnesses of the ministry of Jesus and this status plays a significant role in their teaching and evangelistic ministry.

Since the purpose of Luke-Acts is to tell a much grander narrative than simply one about the Church's leadership, we are going to begin by exploring how leadership is integrated into that grand narrative before zooming in, as it were, to focus on the types of leadership in the Church in Acts and then the role and character of leaders.

## 1. Leadership and the Plan of God

There has been some discussion of how the understanding of salvation history in Luke-Acts works in detail. Principal contributions to the debate have come in the form of Conzelmann's fivefold division of the ages of salvation history and Cadbury's 'Proof from Prophecy' argument.<sup>4</sup> Alongside this has been the debate on how to understand the apparent Semitisms or Septuagintalisms of Acts (phrases like *epi to auto*/'together' which are almost unheard of outside Old Greek translations of Scripture): the fact that it reads as though it were the Old Testament.<sup>5</sup> Jacob Jervell argues that this literary similarity with the Old Testament is deliberate: Luke wants his readers to understand that his subject is a continuation of the narrative of Israel's Scriptures, of the plan of God.<sup>6</sup> What is

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<sup>3</sup> See the argument in Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006) which makes extensive use of the Twelve as eyewitness control over developing Gospel material.

<sup>4</sup> Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St Luke* (trans. Geoffrey Buswell; London: Faber and Faber, 1960), p. 161 suggests that the different epochs of salvation history are united by the enduring witness of the Scriptures and Hans Conzelmann, *Commentary*, p. xlv 'each [epoch] ties up with the preceding and carries it further, whilst also possessing its own additional characteristics.' On 'proof from prophecy' see H.J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts* (Macmillan: NY, 1927) p. 303 and Darrell L. Bock, *Proclamation From Prophecy and Pattern: Lukan Old Testament Christology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987). Cf. Helmut Flender, *St Luke: Theologian of Redemptive History* (trans. Reginald H. & Ilse Fuller; London: SPCK, 1967), E. Earle Ellis, *The Old Testament in Early Christianity: Canon and Interpretation in Light of Modern Research* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991) and David L. Tiede, *Prophecy and History in Luke-Acts* (Fortress: Philadelphia, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> On Semitisms, see Max Wilcox, *The Semitisms of Acts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965). On Septuagintalisms, see B.T. Arnold, 'Luke's Characterising use of the Old Testament in the Book of Acts,' in *History, Literature and Society in the Book of Acts* (ed. Ben Witherington; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 300–323 and Joseph Fitzmyer, 'The Use of the Old Testament in Luke-Acts,' *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers*, 1992, pp. 524–537

<sup>6</sup> Jacob Jervell, 'The Future of the Past: Luke's Vision of Salvation History and its Bearing on his writing of History,' in *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of*

beyond doubt is that Scripture plays a significant role in determining how history develops. This can be seen in how the leadership of the Church works within the plan, just as much as elsewhere. An investigation of the relationship between Church leadership and the plan of God reveals the very limited extent to which roles can be defined. God appears to use people not according to their apparent reason for appointment, but according to his own sovereign purposes.

### 1.1 The Appointment of Matthias

The appointment of Matthias as an Apostle to replace Judas Iscariot in Acts 1:15–26 is an appropriate example of this.

In those days Peter stood up...and said, 'Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus...For it is written in the book of Psalms, "Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it"; and "Let another take his position of overseer."' So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.

Notice that the new Apostle must have first-hand experience of the ministry of Jesus if he is to be, like the others, a witness to his resurrection. Notice, too, the role Scripture plays in the replacement of Judas with Matthias. Peter quotes from two texts which he understands to relate precisely to the particular situation regarding Judas. Judas' betrayal as well as his replacement must happen because Scripture must be fulfilled.<sup>7</sup> This is part of the plan of God: the God who is sovereignly able to bring good out of evil. This idea of God achieving good out of wickedness because of his plan is a significant feature in Peter's understanding of the Cross in the first two sermons in Acts. In 3:17–19, as Peter preaches in Solomon's Portico, he declares to the crowd, 'I know you acted in ignorance, as did your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent, therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.' In the same way, the appointment of Matthias is determined by the plan of God

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*Acts*, p. 110. Cf. Daryl Schmidt, 'The Historiography of Acts: Deuteronomistic or Hellenistic?' *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 24, 1985, pp. 417–426

<sup>7</sup> The unusual use of Scripture here may be due to Luke's use of a 'testimonia collection,' implying that he did not have access to these texts within their literary context. This is argued by I. Howard Marshall, 'Acts,' in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (eds. G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson; Nottingham: Apollos; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), p. 530.

spoken through David many years before.<sup>8</sup> But it is not only the ministry of the Apostles which is governed in this way.

## 1.2 The Appointment of the Seven

At the next leadership appointment in Acts the sovereignty of God is seen in an even more startling way. Acts 6:1 describes a problem within the community: the Greek-speaking believers were complaining because the material needs of their widows were being neglected. When the Apostles gathered the community together they asked them to choose seven men to serve. It is worth noting that the phrase, ‘to wait at tables’ (NRSV) in 6:2 probably does not imply that the seven are to be waiters, but are rather to serve whilst sitting at tables as administrators.<sup>9</sup> It is also worth noting that whilst many see the origins of an ‘order’ of deacons in this passage, Luke does not use the term, though he does use the verb *diakonein*, ‘to serve.’ Whilst the Apostles appoint these seven men to a specific role to deal with a specific problem, God uses two of them to fulfil the promise of the Lord Jesus made in 1:8, that the Gospel would be proclaimed in Jerusalem and then in Judea and Samaria and ultimately to the ends of the earth. Stephen, the administrative leader, turns out to be a provocative biblical preacher. As a result of his sermon in 7:2–53, Stephen is martyred and a persecution begins in Jerusalem, as a result of which many disciples of Jesus flee to the countryside of Judea and Samaria. In these new locations, the disciples spread the good news of Jesus whose promise was being kept as a consequence of the persecution Stephen provoked. Philip, another of the seven administrative leaders, established a new community of believers in (what Luke refers to as) ‘the city of Samaria.’ After this, Philip witnesses to and baptises the first Gentile believer. The Gospel begins to go out to the ends of the earth. Whilst the Seven are appointed with the intention of dealing with a relatively minor problem, in the plan of God in Acts they play a much grander role as the promise of Jesus is kept through them.

At this point it is worth noting the role the Lord Jesus himself plays in the keeping of his promise. Luke understands the continued work of Jesus to be of real importance in the witness of the Church: he is in no sense absent despite his ascension. According to Peter in 2:33, it is Jesus who has ‘poured out’ the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. In chapters three and four, Jesus is seen to be active as the man born lame is healed in the name of Jesus.<sup>10</sup> As Stephen breathes his last in 7:56 he sees Jesus, the Son

<sup>8</sup> On David as a prophet, see the discussion in Joseph Fitzmyer, ‘David, “Being therefore a Prophet...”’ (Acts 2:30),’ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 34:3, 1972.

<sup>9</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale Press, 1953), p. 182.

<sup>10</sup> See also Acts 18:9, 22:8, 23:11 and 26:15. This aspect of the Christology of Acts is noted by C.K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles, Vol II* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T

of Man, standing at the right hand of God. Jesus stands in contravention of the strict Son of Man imagery that has him sitting at the right hand of God. The implication is that Jesus is about to act: he is utterly involved in what is going on with Stephen and the rest of his people. Likewise, Jesus directly intervenes in person in 9:3–19 as he appears to Saul on the road to Damascus and to Ananias in a dream. Jesus himself is seen to have something of a hand on his Church as he acts to see his promise fulfilled.<sup>11</sup>

Luke would want his readers, whoever they are and whenever they are reading Acts to be sure that Jesus Christ is keeping his promise and that the Gospel will go to the very ends of the earth, wherever those ends might be. Regardless of how roles are defined in the Church, God will grow his people, using mere human beings in ways which they may not have entirely planned. One could argue that limited working hours and, particularly, too focused a view of ministry as work fulfilling a certain number of fixed tasks, suggests quite an opposite view of Church leadership. The good news from Acts is that even if leaders do have a very limited job description, God is still sovereign!

## 2. Apostles, Teachers, Elders and Prophets

Now it is time to zoom in, as it were, and consider the various forms leadership takes in Acts. It must be noted that apart from Acts itself and what may be inferred from other New Testament texts, very little is known about the forms leadership took in the earliest decades of the Church. It is often assumed that leadership must have been charismatic and democratic, though Luke paints quite a different picture in Acts in which the Apostles exercise significant control over the Church. For example, when the Church grows into Samaria it only receives the Holy Spirit after supplication is made to the Apostles in Jerusalem and the issue of gentile circumcision is only dealt with when taken to the Apostles at the Jerusalem council. But what is an Apostle?

### 2.1 The Apostolic Ministry

Again, Luke's description of the appointment of Matthias is helpful. One of the scriptural texts Peter cites, Ps 109:8, uses the word *episkope* ('overseer') to describe the position Judas held which must now go to another. This term is not particularly important in Acts but does describe the role of the Apostles very accurately as they 'oversee' the development of the Church. More important is the understanding of the Apostle as an eyewitness, particularly of the resurrection of Jesus. This is emphasised

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Clark, 1988), p. lxxxv.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Matthew Sleeman, *Geography and the Ascension Narrative in Acts* (SNTSMS 146; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

in 1:22, 2:23, 3:15, 4:33 etc. Matthias and Barsabbas are only eligible to be chosen as Apostles because of this. Central, too, to the Apostles' leadership is their teaching role. This is seen in the description of the early community in 2:42, 'they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.' Likewise, the Seven are appointed so that the Apostles can devote themselves to 'prayer and the service of the word' (6:4). As will be seen, the Apostles are not the only teachers in Acts, but it is likely that their teaching function is emphasised due to their status as eyewitnesses. At the same time, the ministry of the Apostles is unique inasmuch as it represents the continuation of Jesus' own ministry. To this end, several of the miracles produced by the Apostles' allude to similar miracles of Jesus himself. For example, the healing of the paralytic Aeneas by Peter in 9:32–35 parallels the similar event in Luke 5:17–25.<sup>12</sup> The Apostles' ministry is a continuation of Jesus' own and it is frequently noted in Acts that the miracles wrought by the Apostles are conducted, in fact, by Jesus himself.

## 2.2 The Appointment of Barnabas

Luke also describes the existence of 'teachers' and 'prophets' in the early Church, though his description probably assumes his readers' knowledge of what differentiates them. Teachers and prophets are mentioned together in 13:1–3 as Barnabas and Saul are set apart for mission to the gentiles.

Now in the Church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

Notice that each of the prophets and teachers is mentioned by name. The implication is that these leaders are people of some importance and perhaps known to Luke who later shared with Paul in some of his ministry. But what do they do? Whilst the ministry of neither type of leader is described in Acts, there is a certain amount of evidence to go on. Teaching is very important in Acts in which a number of sermons are

<sup>12</sup> Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 327 sees this parallelism within Luke-Acts, whereas Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2009), p. 253 suggests that Luke draws upon Mk 2:1–12 instead and that the Tabitha episode following is dependent upon Mk 5:37–43. As Barrett, *Acts*, p. xciv notes, the uniqueness of the Apostolic ministry in Acts implies that it cannot be passed on or replicated.



included.<sup>13</sup> These sermons are always a proclamation of Jesus Christ from the Scriptures, even if no text is directly cited. Paul's first sermon later in this chapter, delivered in Psidian Antioch, is a good example. Paul begins from the election of Israel and tells the story of the people of God up to King David. Paul then cites three scriptural excerpts to prove that Jesus is the fulfilment of God's promises.

But what about the prophets? It is not clear from Acts that these prophets had a predictive function since 'prophecy,' and, in particular the verb 'to prophesy' has a more general character when applied to Christian activity in Acts (the possible exception to this being the role of Agabus in chapter 21). In Acts 19:6 the Ephesian believers are described as speaking in tongues and prophesying, having received the Holy Spirit. This is a common association in Acts: speaking in tongues and some other declaratory activity, all of which are probably synonymous. When Cornelius and his friends receive the Holy Spirit in 10:46, they speak in tongues and extol, or magnify God. When the Holy Spirit first comes at Pentecost, the Apostles speak in tongues and are described in 2:11 as 'speaking about God's deeds of power.' The role of the prophets may have been to declare the good news of the Gospel as preachers.

### 2.3 Paul's Instruction to the Ephesian Elders

As the narrative of Acts develops, another group of leaders is mentioned: the elders. Again no detailed description of their role is given, but Paul's parting instruction to elders in Ephesus in 20:28–31 is informative.

Keep watch over yourselves and over all your flock, of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the Church of God that he obtained with the blood of his own Son. I know that after I have gone, savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Some even from your own group will come distorting the truth in order to entice the disciples to follow them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to warn everyone with tears.

Firstly, notice that Paul describes the elders as overseers. There is not the clear distinction between *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi* that would emerge after the apostolic period.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, Paul appears to hand over the responsibility of oversight to the elders, suggesting that their work is a continuation of his own. Just as the Apostles' ministry is a continuation

<sup>13</sup> For a detailed study of relationship between Scripture and the Speeches in Acts, see Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), pp. 143–156.

<sup>14</sup> Pervo, *Acts*, p. 160. Cf. Barrett, *Acts*, p. xcvi who notes that a strict sense of institutional organisation is lacking when compared to ideas of 'early Catholicism.'

of the Lord Jesus', so the elders' too is derived from it. The responsibility pertains, here, particularly to a shepherd-like guarding of the people of God, purchased by the blood of his own Son. The elders are to guard the people from persuasive distortions of the truth peddled by false teachers soon to appear. This suggests that, to some extent, the elders' ministry is a teaching ministry also.

Whilst it would not be possible to compose a clear job description, as it were, for any of the leadership 'roles' mentioned in Acts, it is clear that there is an expectation of all leaders that they will teach the word of God. Yet this is not the only 'essential' requirement as will now be seen.

### 3. The Character of a Leader

We have seen something of the grand picture of God's purposes in which leaders of the Church play a part in Acts. We have focused in on the more precise question of what types of leaders there are in Acts and what they do. Finally, we will focus in even further into the hearts, as it were, of leaders in Acts, since Luke is concerned not simply to describe the function of leaders but their moral and spiritual quality too.

Remaining with Paul's charge to the Ephesian elders, Paul uses two imperative clauses here to exhort the elders. 'Keep watch over yourselves' (v. 28) and 'be alert' (v. 31). Paul hopes that the elders will watch out, not only for each other, but for themselves, knowing that the false teaching to come might begin with the elders themselves. These elders are to be those capable of examining their own hearts and minds and identifying all that is wrong and needs to be challenged. They are also to be people who are alert and ready with a realistic expectation that not all that comes into the church will be for its good.

Looking back to the appointment of the Seven in 6:3, leaders here are to be 'of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.' By 'good standing,' these leaders are to be those against whom no serious moral charge can be brought.<sup>15</sup> As we saw, the presence of the Spirit is closely connected to the glorifying of God and the uttering of his praise in Acts. By urging that these new leaders be 'full of the Spirit,' Peter asks for those whose words and lives offer a testimony to the grace of God. Finally, these leaders are to be full of wisdom, mature believers, full of the fear of the Lord and gifted in discerning what is good from what is false.

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<sup>15</sup> A parallel can be drawn here with the letter of Aristeas 39 where elders are chosen for their good character (*kal s bebi kotas*).

## Conclusion

Luke offers a challenging picture of Christian leadership as he narrates the fulfilment of God's gracious plan to call those who are far off to himself. The leaders in Acts fulfil a variety of roles, some of which we know little about, but all of which play a role in the sovereign plan of God whose son Jesus Christ will be witnessed to unto the very ends of the earth.

The notion of a professional clergy workforce is very difficult to reconcile with the presentation of leadership in Acts in which God uses leaders according to his own good pleasure in accordance with his own plan. To tightly limit the scope of a leader's time and work is profoundly at odds with this understanding that God is actually the one in charge. At the same time, the lack of definition in the forms of leadership in Acts would make the legal requirement of the job description impossible. Certainly, the reality in local churches is that some clergy are particularly gifted administrators and some evangelists: there is no sense that all are alike in the way that one might hope that different GPs have the same essential competencies. Yet it would be no bad thing if personal godliness and faithful teaching of Christ from the Scriptures (the only two apparently universal requirements of leaders in Acts) were to be written into the job descriptions of all clergy in the Church of England!

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