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# Two Witness Motifs in Acts 1:8 and the Book of Acts

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The opening words of the Acts of the Apostles link it with the Gospel of Luke. In his first volume, Luke reminds Theophilus, he has considered the whole gamut of Jesus' public ministry from the baptism to the ascension (Acts 1:1f., 21f.). In his second volume Luke resumes the story, dealing with the exalted Lord's continuing ministry through his Spirit-filled instruments, the "apostles whom he had chosen" (1:2).

After his passion the risen Lord presented himself alive to his disciples, "appearing to them during forty days, and speaking of the kingdom of God" (1:3). To prepare them for their mission, Christ charged them to remain in Jerusalem until they had received "the promise of the Father" (1:4; cf. Lk. 24:49), namely, the baptism of the Holy Spirit which John the Baptizer had predicted (Mk. 1:8; Mt. 3:11; Lk. 3:16). When the apostles met together, they were naturally curious. Since Christ had been promised "the throne of his father David" (Lk. 1:32), they ventured to ask: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6). His answer reminded them that the *chronoi* and the *kairoi* were in God's hands; in other words, both "the time that must elapse before the final establishment of the Kingdom" and "the critical events accompanying its establishment"<sup>1</sup> lay in the Father's authority (1:7; cf. Deut. 29:29; Mk. 13:32). In effect, he told them "not only that this was not the time, but that the question was irrelevant to their present business and future work."<sup>2</sup>

Then Christ directed them to their task, and pointed to the spiritual means whereby it might be accomplished: "But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." In this epoch-making statement Luke—besides pointing to the Holy Spir-

it's power as the *sine qua non* of effective testimony—has directed our attention to two other themes which are of the greatest importance to his conception of witness. These are: (1) the *eye-witness character* of the apostolic testimony, and (2) the *scope* of the apostolic testimony. Each of these motifs is worthy of detailed study.

## I. THE EYE-WITNESS CHARACTER OF THE APOSTOLIC TESTIMONY

In the preface to Luke's Gospel great prominence is given to "the eye-witnesses and ministers of the word" (Lk. 1:1-4). The eye-witnesses are plainly the apostles who have been with Jesus "from the beginning" (Lk. 1:2; cf. Jn. 15:27). They know the facts of his public ministry, and serve as witnesses when these facts are called into question (cf. Acts 5:32; 10:39-43). The use of *autoptai* (eye-witnesses) in Lk. 1:2 highlights the importance of the apostles as those who can guarantee the major historic events in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>3</sup>

The same stress on the role of the apostles as eye-witnesses of the public ministry of Jesus appears in Acts. The apostles are qualified to bear witness to "all that Jesus began to do and teach" (1:1). They are also competent to bear witness to his resurrection, for they "ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead" (10:41). The apostles are divinely commissioned for their task as Christ's "witnesses to the people" (13:31). This is underscored in 10:41, where the apostles are explicitly described as "witnesses chosen before by God."

Luke's first great witness in the Book of Acts is Peter. Hence it is not surprising to observe Peter's repeated insistence upon the fact that he is a witness of Christ; in particular, he stresses his role as a witness to the resurrection (1:22; 2:32;

3:15; 10:39-41). In this connection the speech in Acts 1 prior to the election of Matthias is of special importance.<sup>4</sup> Here emphasis is placed upon the apostle-witness in words which clarify the reference to eye-witness in Lk. 1:2: "So one of the men who accompanied us during all 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 men must become with us a witness of his resurrection" (1:21f.). In this speech two points become clear: (1) There were others besides the original band of twelve disciples who could serve as witnesses of the events of Christ's ministry since the baptism of John.<sup>5</sup> (2) Nevertheless, the apostolic witness was of special importance and significance. Matthias was chosen in Judas' place to "become" a witness to Christ's resurrection (1:22; cf. 1:26). Here emphasis is placed on having seen Christ as a necessary condition for the apostolic office. This is not to suggest that the apostolic witness is limited to the Twelve, however, because Luke also calls Barnabas and Paul "apostles" (14:4, 14), and several times Paul is referred to as a "witness" (22:15; 26:16).<sup>6</sup>

The eye-witness character of apostolic testimony is important in appreciating the nature and authority of what is said and done in the rest of the Book of Acts. Thus it is no coincidence that this motif is constantly mentioned in the speeches of Acts, particularly those attributed to Peter. In his famous sermon on the day of Pentecost Peter speaks of the resurrection of Jesus and solemnly adds: "and of that we all are witnesses" (2:32). Similarly in addressing the temple crowd in Solomon's portico Peter speaks of Jesus "whom God raised from the dead" and boldly affirms: "To this we are witnesses" (3:15). In the speeches before the Sanhedrin this eye-witness theme ap-

pears again: "we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (4:20) and "we are witnesses to these things" (5:32). In like manner Peter declares in his speech before Cornelius that he and his apostolic colleagues "are witnesses to all that he (Jesus) did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem" (10:39).

What is one to conclude from this emphasis on the eye-witness character of apostolic preaching? With H.N. Ridderbos two salient features may be noted.<sup>7</sup> In the first place, the greatest possible stress is placed on the *factual* content of the apostolic preaching. The testimony rests upon the great acts of God in Jesus Christ, and the resurrection constitutes the very heart of this (2:24; 3:26; 4:2, 10, 33; 5:30; 13:30, 33, 37; 17:3, 18, 31). In Luke's view the apostles were really saying, "We did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eye-witnesses" of his life, death, resurrection and ascension (cf. II Pet. 1:16). To put it another way, the Christian faith rests upon historical facts, and Luke in both his Gospel preface and Acts stresses the importance of the apostolic witness for this reason.

In the second place, the apostles occupy a special place in the history of salvation because of their witness.<sup>8</sup> All that Jesus "began to do and teach" (1:1) is confirmed by their witness. Since they alone have been "chosen" by God and Christ as eye-witnesses (cf. 10:41; 1:2), they alone are authorized to guarantee both the facts of the Christian faith and the authoritative form of its proclamation. Their witness is thus unique and normative, and apostolic succession in the personal sense of the term is both impossible and a contradiction in terms.

This testimony, the apostolic witness, is found in the New Testament—and nowhere else. The

New Testament documents are the only first-hand historical attestations concerning those events which provide the key to the Christian understanding of God and his dealings with our world. All later re-writings of the Gospel-story, and all subsequent re-interpretation of it, are dependent for their historicity and validity upon the witness of the New Testament.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, "it is this apostolicity—the guarantee of the factual content of salvation and of the authoritative form of its proclamation—which comes very emphatically and intentionally to the fore" in the speeches which Luke assigns to Peter in Acts.<sup>10</sup>

The apostles' function in interpreting the message and convincing men of its truthfulness is emphasized in the preface to Luke's Gospel by the use of the word *huperetes*. The apostles were the "servants," divinely commissioned to communicate this "revelation" (note the use of *logos* in this sense in Lk. 1:2). To put it in legal terminology, they were to plead Christ's case before men in order to convince them of his Messiahship and divine Sonship. They were to be Christ's advocates, serving in much the same way that the witnesses for the defendant served in the Old Testament legal assembly.<sup>11</sup>

This interpretation of *huperetes* receives confirmation from the parallel passage in Acts 26:6, where the words *huperetes* and *martus* are linked together as describing Paul's task. Paul is as much concerned with interpreting the message as he is in bearing witness to the resurrection. He is a "witness" in both senses in which the word is used in secular Greek literature<sup>12</sup> and in the Old Testament: he attests the fact that he has seen the risen one, and he also pleads Christ's case, trying to convince men of its truth and power. In other words, the use of *autoptai* and *huperetai* in Lk. 1:1-4 corresponds to the two basic elements in the idea of *martus*, and sheds light both on the eye-witness character of

apostolic testimony and on the juridical manner of its communication.

## II. THE SCOPE OF THE APOSTOLIC TESTIMONY

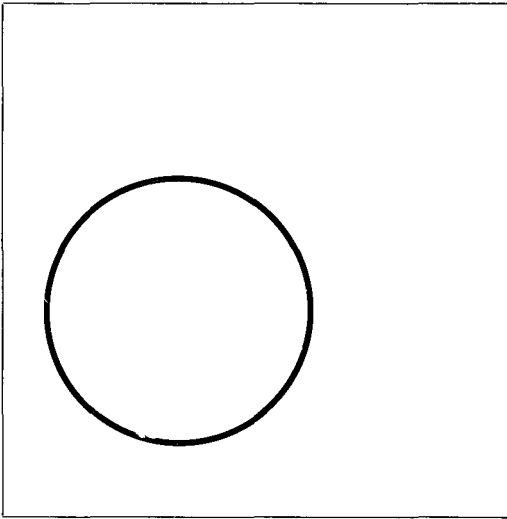
Early in the first chapter, we have noted, Luke outlines what he is going to describe in the rest of his book: "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (1:8). Later, when he introduces the preaching of the gospel beyond Palestine, he presents a more detailed sketch of the further contents of the book as they focus on the Apostle Paul. Ananias is told that the former arch-enemy of the church is now to function as "a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel" (9:15). The contents of the Book of Acts accord with these two statements. The book outlines the development of the witness to Jesus Christ. This witness begins at "Jerusalem" (chapters 2-7), continues into "Judea and Samaria" (chapters 8-11) and finally goes on its way to the "end of the earth" (chapters 13ff.). In this latter stage Paul appears as a witness first among the "Gentiles" (chapters 13-20), then before "kings" (chapters 24-26) and finally to "the sons of Israel" (chapters 22, 28), precisely according to the pattern suggested in 1:8 and 9:15.<sup>13</sup>

Further, it is striking that the position of the great speeches in Acts entirely accords with this scheme. They are held at exactly those places in the progress of the witness to Christ which are indicated in 1:8 and 9:15. The first three speeches are given at Jerusalem where the Gospel begins its course, two by Peter (2:14-40; 3:12-26) and one by Stephen (7:2-53), then one at Caesarea, by Peter (10:34-43), is recorded as evidence of the preach-

ing of the gospel in "Judea and Samaria." Of Paul's speeches three are given among the "Gentiles" (in Antioch of Pisidia, 13:16-41; in Athens, 17:22-31; in Miletus, 20:18-35), two before "kings" (Felix, 24:10-21; Agrippa, 26:2-23) and two before the "sons of Israel" (in Jerusalem, 22:1-21; in Rome, 28:25-28). On the basis of this analysis of the function of the speeches in Acts one may conclude that they are typical, carefully chosen illustrations of the *geographical* outreach of the apostolic witness. They are also indicative of the *diversity* of persons to whom that witness is addressed.<sup>14</sup>

Both of these considerations are important in evaluating the lengthy account of Paul's trials in Jerusalem, Caesarea and Rome (chapters 21-28). While these chapters pay scant attention they do magnify Paul's activity as a witness. His task is to "testify both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (20:21). This he has been commissioned to do, according to the first conversion story (9:15), where he is described as a "chosen vessel," divinely fitted for his task as a witness for him to all men of what you have seen and heard" (22:15); the third account notes the words of Jesus to Paul: "I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you to serve and bear witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you" (26:16).

Paul's testimony is given at Jerusalem in the (22:18) before the Jews (18:5), in the presence of the Roman governors and King Agrippa (Acts 24-26), and before all the people (26:16f.). He is perpetrating no crime, but simply working at the accomplishment of his God-given task: "as I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass" (26:22). He is divinely summoned



to bring this testimony even before the highest court in Rome: "Take courage," the Lord says to Paul, "for as you have testified (*diemarturo*) about me at Jerusalem so you must bear witness (*marturesai*) also at Rome" (23:11). The *dei* here indicates that Paul's witnessing is part of a divinely-ordered plan; indeed, this witnessing is the decisive factor, the theme of the whole story.<sup>15</sup>

In view of Luke's tremendous emphasis upon Paul's testimony it seems incredible that any scholar would challenge Paul's credentials as a *bona fide* witness. Yet this is precisely what Lucien Cerfaux has done.<sup>16</sup> Overworking vocabulary distinctions (e.g., the difference between *martus* and *huperetes* in Acts 26:16), Cerfaux tries to make them the basis for theological distinctions which are not justified by a study of the internal evidence of Luke-Acts.

Now it is true that there is a slight difference between Paul and the Twelve; they had been earthly companions of Jesus throughout his public ministry while Paul had not (cf. Acts 1:21-22; 10:39-41); perhaps this is why Paul refers to himself as "one untimely born" (I Cor. 15:8). Nevertheless, the important

point to note here surely is that Luke presents Paul as a witness to fact as well as a witness to convictions. Paul, like the Twelve, was pre-eminently a witness to the fact of the resurrection (cf. I Cor. 9:1); this point is emphasized by the three-fold telling of Paul's conversion story and encounter with the risen Christ. Paul was to bear witness to all men of the things which he had actually seen and heard (Acts 22:15). With such importance attached to the idea of witness it is fitting that the last words of Acts are words of witness; Paul, whose career is introduced by his presence at the martyrdom of a Christian witness (7:58ff.), is left at the point where he too is witnessing (28:23).

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It would be quite wrong, however, to conclude this essay without saying a word about the witness of other Christians in the Book of Acts.

In Acts, Luke mentions the beginnings of Christian work in such places as Damascus, Phoenicia, Cyprus, Antioch and Rome (Acts 9:2, 10; 11:19; 28:13-14), and does not even refer to the human agencies who did it. Apparently, he was unmoved by any thought of novelty in the way it was done. Similarly even in our day, there are many cases of churches being started by people whose announced purpose for being in that place had no direct relation with religious activity. There are even more cases where Christians travelling or residing in a strange locality have made significant contributions with their witness.<sup>17</sup>

Certainly ordinary men and women were important in Luke's view, for he mentions many of them as Paul's partners in mission (12:12; 16:14-15; 19:29; 20:4). While undoubtedly some of these people were officially commissioned to preach the gospel (e.g., Barnabas and Timothy had hands laid on them according to Acts 13:3 and I Tim. 4:14), it is highly unlikely that all of them held some official capacity in the church:

We gain the impression that an intense role was played in the missionary activity of the early church by many men and women who held no other office than that of believer. To the extent that these lay preachers were on their own, they were in danger of becoming involved in all sorts of confusion, and as a matter of fact this is just what happened. It is, however, the great strength of Paul that he did not suppress this spontaneous spreading of the Gospel, but utilized and organized it instead.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps this is one of the most valuable lessons that the twentieth century church should learn from a study of the early church, namely—the importance of encouraging her lay people to play their full part in the mission of Christ to the world.<sup>19</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Tyndale Press, 1952), p. 70; cf. R.C. Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1871), LVII, 197—200.

<sup>2</sup> R. Jamieson, A.R. Fausset and Dr. Brown, *A Commentary on the Old and New Testament*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), II, 174.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. D.E. Nineham, "Eye-Witness Testimony and the Gospel Tradition, III," *Journal of Theological Studies*, New Series, XI (1960), p. 254. For a thorough exegesis of Lk. 1:1-4 see Ned B. Stonehouse, *The Witness of Luke to Christ* (London: Tyndale Press, 1951), pp. 34ff.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. K.H. Rengstorf, "The Election of Matthias," *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation*, eds. W. Klassen and G.F. Snyder (London: S.C.M. Press, 1962), pp. 178—192.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Vincent Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition* (London: Macmillan, 1952), p. 42: "The hundred and twenty did not go into permanent retreat; for at least a generation they moved among the young Palestinian communities and through preaching and fellowship their recollections were at the disposal of those who sought information."

<sup>6</sup> Cf. K.H. Rengstorf, "Apostleship," ed. and trans. J.R. Coates, *Bible Key Words from Gerhard Kittel's "Theologisches Wörterbuch zum*

*Neuen Testament*," 2 vols. (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1952), II, 27: "The Twelve are 'apostles' for Luke but the circle is not limited to them. Above all Paul belongs to it and the Epistles show that he so regards himself."

<sup>7</sup> H.N. Ridderbos, *The Speeches of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles* (London: Tyndale Press, 1962), p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Oscar Cullmann, *The Early Church*, ed. A.J.B. Higgins (London: S.C.M. 1956), pp. 75—87; Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1963), pp. 26—36; Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1961), pp. 280ff.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Richardson, *Christian Apologetics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1947), p. 209.

<sup>10</sup> Ridderbos, *op. cit.*, p. 19; cf. C.K. Barrett, *Luke the Historian in Recent Study* (London: Epworth Press, 1961), p. 73 and R.P.C. Hanson, *Tradition in the Early Church* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1962), p. 236.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. A.A. Trites, "The New Testament Conception of Witness," unpublished D. Phil. dissertation (1968), deposited in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, pp. 72—109.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19—52.

<sup>13</sup> Ridderbos, *op. cit.*, pp. 5—6.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> See Walter Grundmann, "Dei," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), II, 21—25. Cf. P.H. Menoud, "Le Plan des Actes des Apôtres," *New Testament Studies*, I (1954), pp. 44—51, who, in speaking of Paul's activity as a witness, says that he becomes in the eyes of Luke "l'exécuteur de l'ordre missionnaire donné par le Ressuscité à ses premiers disciples" (p. 47).

<sup>16</sup> Lucien Cerfaux, "Témoins du Christ d'après le Livre des Actes," *Receuil Lucien Cerfaux*, 3 vol. (Gembloux: Duculot, 1954—1962), II, 161—163. Cerfaux's views have been summarized by Adrian Hastings, *Prophet and Witness in Jerusalem* (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1958), p. 28. See also Norman Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus* (London: S.C.M., 1967), pp. 27—28, who discusses Paul's function as an eye-witness.

<sup>17</sup> H.C. McConnell, "The Baptist and Missions," *Review and Expositor*, LXII:1 (Winter, 1965), p. 60.

<sup>18</sup> J.H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, trans. David H. Freeman (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961), p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. A.A. Trites, "Biblical Basis of the Church's Mission," *This Is Tomorrow*, ed. C.A. Armstrong (Brantford, Ontario: Baptist Federation of Canada, 1970), pp. 3—24.