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Acts 1:6-8 and the Theo-Political Claims of Christian Witness

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I

The command is clear enough: "You shall be my witnesses." No great form-critical sophistication is required to recognize that the resurrected Jesus' final words to his followers constitute the church in its mission. Now that his long anticipated departure is about to be accomplished by means of a heavenly assumption (see Luke 9:31, 51), his followers are commissioned as representatives of his dominion throughout the world. The message is inescapable and uncompromising in its claim upon those who acclaim Jesus as Lord and Christ (see Acts 2:36). The business of the church is evangelism, i.e., all of its ministry, program, and mission must testify both to the present dominion of Jesus as Messiah and Lord and to the anticipated consummation of that reign. Jesus has been confirmed as inaugurating God's kingship among his people, and the disciples have been deputized with the single task of proclaiming that message from Jerusalem to the far corners of the world.

The depiction is highly stylized, replete with stock features of the dramatic last appearance of the great leader: the poignant question or leading comment which summarizes the hopes and fears of the followers, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?"; the final oracle which at once corrects and redirects all short-sighted understanding into the service of the mission; the dramatic "departure." On the basis of form, the scene could as well be Moses offering his words of counsel to the elders of Israel before his death as in Deuteronomy or before his assumption into heaven as in the Testament of Moses. It could be an account of the passing of the prophetic mantle from Elijah to Elisha. It could be a stock treatment of Alexander the Great's parting words to his *diadochoi* or "successors." It could be Vespasian's dispatch of Titus to the siege of Jerusalem as he returns to ascend to the principate of the emperor in Rome, or it could be a scene depicting the departure of any of a number of the great sages from the circle of their disciples. In any case, the transmission of authority in a carefully articulated mission is the consistently recognizable subject of such a scene.

Its formal familiarity, however, raises a crucial interpretive issue. Is this sim-

ply another triumphalistic idealization aimed at promoting Jesus as equal to or surpassing all those other heroes, illustrious leaders and persons of more than human proportions? Does it makem a difference to the way this text is used that Luke's Jesus is its central figure? Is there a peculiar content to the commission which qualifies the general force or appeal of the form? Would a more ample historical review of the religious and political realities of Luke's day assist in the identification of the point that was originally scored by this narrative?

The urgency of this inquiry arises from the wild and undifferentiated use of this text for every kind of religious crusade, popular campaign, and zealous promotion. Although such preoccupation with this passage and with the book of Acts in general is largely innocent of the kind of historical and form-critical analysis that has just been suggested, it appears to be all too delighted as a victim of its ignorance. Highly sensitive to the power and appeal of this passage, such usage seizes the image and the words of Jesus' departure as a direct warrant for a host of plans, techniques, and programs, under the assumption that the specific content of the commission is fully in concert with whatever enterprise is being promoted. Efforts to point out similarities between the rhetoric and methods of classic political-imperialistic campaigns and certain evangelistic programs and techniques are quickly disclaimed, and distinctions about *how* God has chosen to exercise his power and dominion are blurred. The net effect may be that Acts is often used to underwrite the same kind of modern theo-political rhetoric and programs that it intended to critique in its own age.

Most modern critical interpreters of Acts have become sharply sensitive to the way this material has been used to sanction diverse views and schemes that can only be called triumphalistic. Yet several of these scholars have concluded that Luke was himself equally oblivious to or enticed by the undifferentiated theological triumphalism of his narrative as his modern popularizers. By comparing Luke's "salvation history" with a well-honed existentialist reading of Paul and Mark's "theology of the cross," such commentators have found Luke to have neglected Paul's fundamental theological discrimination. They concede that Luke-Acts and the commission in Acts 1:6-8 will be grist for the mills of all kinds of religious propaganda and manipulative schemes because, unfortunately, it is a "theology of glory" itself. Ernst Käsemann even ventures to question the canonical status of Luke-Acts on such theological grounds.[1]

But these naive and critical readings of the text have both failed to recognize the profound theo-political statement which the third evangelist made to his church in its world via this narrative account of Jesus' commission. Recent historical research and exegetical study are now providing the basis for fresh insight into Luke's testimony to divine faithfulness which he offered at a time when oppressive social-political realities and imperial rhetoric made the fulfillment of the scriptural promises to Israel far from obvious. In turn, such insight enables renewed appreciation of the specific encouragement and challenge to the church in troubled times that is conveyed by Luke's version of the great commission.

[1]For extensive bibliography on this issue, see W. G. Kümmel, "Current Theological Accusations Against Luke," *Andover Newton Quarterly* 16 (1975) 131-145. David L. Tiede, "Interpreting Luke-Acts in a Lutheran Context," *Luther Theological Seminary Review* 15 (1976), 12-22.

II

If analysis of form raises the theological question forcefully, the consideration of the literary composition of Luke-Acts places the issue at the feet of the editor-compiler-author whom tradition has identified as "Luke" or "The Third Evangelist." Companion, admirer, or (mis-?) interpreter of Paul, gentile physician or well-educated hellenist who was thoroughly at home in the Diaspora synagogue and well trained in certain forms of Jewish scriptural hermeneutics, "Luke" is increasingly credited with this well-constructed narrative in two volumes. He is also held accountable for the theological statement made by the work as much more than a record of

what "really happened" or a compilation of "sources."[2]

Luke was by no means unaware of the religio-political claims implicit in Jesus' inauguration of the reign of God or in his commissioning his disciples as his agents. No neophyte movement in the late first century whose Jewish founder had been executed by Rome on the charge of insurrection and whose leaders were in and out of Roman courts and prisons could afford a political naivité. Yet a few further historical and exegetical observations will help to document the point and fill out the picture.

Israel, Asia Minor, Greece and Egypt had all been under the hegemony of the hellenistic rulers and their Roman successors for over four hundred years by the time Luke's narrative was written. In the annals of subjugated nations, ancient and modern, four hundred years is an exceedingly long time for the preservation of a national, ethnic or religious identity. Highly complex patterns of adaptation, reaction, accommodation and traditionalism developed in each area as the identity of the respective groups was persistently affected and subtly redefined by its interaction with the dominant culture.

Since the time of Alexander the Great, official toleration of local religious traditions had permitted a large measure of national pride and identity to be preserved in religious institutions and traditions, which was further enhanced by the fascination the "oriental" religions held for the Greeks and Romans. The conquered peoples found their religious traditions able to influence and affect their conquerers, as well as being crucial to their self-preservation. Oriental theo-political traditions about the divinity of the pharaoh, high priest, or king were quickly transferred to the successors of Alexander, and their honorific epithets were filled with ascriptions of divine virtue, prowess, and heavenly approval or even semi-divine status. Philopater, Philomater, Euergetes, Theos, Soter, Epiphanes, Kurios and Augustus were all titles ascribed frequently and in various combinations to the Ptolemaic, Seleucid, and later, the Roman rulers. Each local or ethnic tradition, Egyptian, Babylonian, Judean, Samaritan, etc. had its peculiar traditions and nationalistic heroes by which the hellenistic ideal of kingship was influenced and critiqued. But each national heritage was also compelled to articulate its theological views in terms that addressed prevailing political realities. Thus even those groups which rejected the dominant Greco-Oriental culture most emphatically were highly responsive and affected by it.

[2]For example, see Eric Franklin, *Christ the Lord* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), and Luke T. Johnson, *The Literary Function of Possessions in Luke-Acts* (SBLDS 39; Missoula: Scholars, 1977).

The Jews showed great creativity, diversity, and persistence in their adaptation of their cultic and scriptural traditions and in the promotion of their ancient worthies as deserving both the continuing loyalty of Israel and the admiration of other nations. Those Jews whose language was now that of the dominant culture, Greek, could even read in their scriptures that it is the God of Israel who is the Kurios, soter and Euergetes (*Lord*, *Savior* and *Benefactor*) *par excellence*. The kingship of God was proclaimed in the prophets and psalms of the Greek scriptures in the parlance of contemporary theo-political rhetoric.

Thus when Luke's gospel heralded the birth of the Messiah and Kurios Jesus as the nativity of the Soter, such vocabulary was filled with both scriptural overtones and theo-political implications. The observation that those first chapters of Luke seem to be composed in an imitative Septuagintal style does not diminish the political force of the vocabulary , but it does

suggest that the third evangelist was in tune with the critique which those Greek versions of the Jewish scriptures offered with respect to hellenistic-Roman theo-political rhetoric. The rediscovery of the broad currency of such effusive ascriptions on a variety of official monuments in honor of Caesar Augustus has further highlighted the juxtaposition of claims implied in Luke's presentation. For if, as at Priene, plaques on public buildings and markets have long proclaimed the birthday of "Augustus" as the providential appearance of the "Savior" making wars to cease and as the divine nativity that marked the beginning of many more such proclamations of "good tidings" (*euaggelia*), then the angel's announcement (*euaggeliszesthai*) of the birth of God's son and Savior Jesus during the reign of Caesar Augustus in the city of David as the joy to all the people must be recognized as a telling comment and competitive claim.[3] The reader could hardly miss the point that the Messiah of Israel, the son of David and prophet like Moses both fulfilled the hopes of Israel and surpassed the expectations of divine dominion and the dreams of a reign of peace promised through official Roman Imperialism. The point being scored would have been particularly poignant in the era a century after "Augustus" when the theo-political rhetoric of the past had been so abused by the likes of Caligula and Nero. Then even the most ardent defenders of the emperor often found such talk oppressive in its lack of restraint, and in need of redemption.

Any doubt about Luke's awareness of the contrast implied in his terminology is removed by his explicit restatement of Mark's account of Jesus' remarks at the Last Supper on the exercise of authority: "The kings of the gentiles dominate them and those who exercise magisterial authority over them are called 'benefactors.' Yet you must not do so. But let him who becomes greater among you be as the younger and let him who leads do so as in service. For which is greater, the one who reclines at table or the one who serves! The one who reclines, right? Yet I am in your midst as the one who serves!" (Luke 22:25-27: author's translation).

In the sending of the twelve and the seventy, Luke's Jesus had again been featured in the role of the Greco-Oriental ruler sending embassies to cities and towns in advance of his campaign. The scene was thoroughly familiar in Luke's world, with the fate of each community hanging in the balance as the reception or rejection of such announced dominion was pondered. The popular biographies[4]

[3]See Frederick W. Danker, *Luke*: Proclamation Commentaries (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), especially pp. 6-17.

[4]On the similarities with the popular biographies of the era, see Charles H. Talbert, *What is a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

and anecdotal histories of the Caesars and famous generals were also filled with divine signs and portents for those who laid claim to dominion. The return to Rome to assume power was a perilous and prodigious journey, confronting all the intervening towns with the decision as to whether to risk acclaiming this figure or to dare not to join in the acclamation. What would be the fate of those who rejected such a ruler if indeed he did come into his kingdom and then return in judgment? (see also Luke 19:11-27).

In Luke's depiction, however, the content of the herald's message is critically specific. The ambassadors of this advancing ruler traveled light, equipped even less ostentatiously than wandering teachers or philosophers with no staff, no bag, no bread, no money and only one tunic,

living with the people and sharing their food (Luke 9:3, 10:4). Their entire mission was an embassy and announcement of peace, "Peace be to this house!" (Luke 10:5). Their healing of the sick was the sign that divine favor rested on the dominion they proclaimed. Even the dire consequences for resisting or rejecting this divinely approved messiah were restrained, remaining in God's control (see Luke 9:51-56, 10:10-15). Yet whether received or rejected, the approach of the dominion of God had been publicly heralded (Luke 10:9,10).

Within the first century world of competing theo-political claims, the Jewish scriptural heritage offered a distinctive vision of divine kingship. Tried in the fires of a millennium of kings, conquests, defeats, captivities, and restorations of Israel, that vision resisted hasty simplifications about how God would manifest and exercise his rule. The New Testament as heir and commentary on those scriptures also reflects the wealth of images and figures available for communicating this vision. Son of God, son of Man, Messiah, Lord, Savior, King, Immanuel, the Righteous One, the Prophet like Moses, the Chosen One, and the High Priest are all titles that carry peculiar and occasionally conflicting traditional associations. Some of these titles or epithets were used widely outside Jewish circles, and some were more limited to specifically Jewish traditions. But all communicated more than divine sanction for existing or potential political regimes. All were categories or vehicles for speaking of the agency and activity of divine kingship either within history or at its close.

The Third Evangelist not only sets his presentation of Jesus as King, Messiah and Lord in sharp relief against the prevailing political ideology of the "kings of the gentiles," but he is overt in his effort to demonstrate how Jesus marks the fulfillment of "everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44, see also 24:25, 27, 32).[5] The narrative is so thoroughly infused with scriptural allusions, terms, arguments, and Luke's imitative Septuagintal or "scriptural history" style that a context of intense scriptural discussion, debate and regular usage must be assumed. The scriptural traditions concerning God's reign had already served generations as a resource for interpreting Israel's plight under the dominion of the empires. Thus this Christian evangelist takes his stand within the broad chorus of Jewish scriptural interpreters and declares that Jesus is God's agent for establishing his reign and that all of Greek and Roman history is finally instrumental to God's saving purpose in the fulfillment of his promises to Israel and the gentiles.

[5]See Paul Schubert, "The Structure and Significance of Luke 24," *Neutestamentliche Studien für Rudolf Bultmann* (ZNWB 21; Berlin: 1954) 165-186.

III

Proclaiming the triumph of God's purposes in history need not, however, be labeled "triumphalism," nor does it give warrant for self-satisfied or self-justifying claims of divine approval for the victorious or successful. A "Salvation History" that equates the triumph of the prevailing group as due to irresistible fate or Manifest Destiny or the well-deserved favor of Providence is decidedly different from a testimony to divine faithfulness and the assurance to a beleaguered minority of God's faithfulness within history to his promises to his people. The spirited stories of hope and encouragement in Acts never disguise the tragic realities of a divided Israel[6] which endures the distrusting and often disdainful presence of Imperial Rome. And if Jerusalem and the temple have already been ravaged by the Roman legions by the time Luke's

narrative is written, then the vanquished have been further pitted against each other and forced by their scriptural history to probe the carcass of their history for that fatal malignancy of unfaithfulness that brought this upon them. For centuries Israel had yearned for the fulfillment of scriptural promises of "restoration." Unless the "kingdom of God" were regarded as exclusively an eschatological or spiritual reality, Israel had scriptural cause for expecting a theo-political reality. God would prove faithful and establish his reign of grace and peace among his people on earth.

Luke shared this conviction, no doubt in spite of the tragic experiences of the Jewish revolution and the growing conflicts and charges between Jewish groups. In his gospel, faithful Mary, Zechariah, Simeon, Anna, the disciples, Joseph of Arimathea and the followers on the road to Emmaus had all looked to Jesus for God's longstanding assurance of mercy to Israel (Luke 1:54-55), her salvation from her enemies in accord with the promise to the fathers (1:67-79), the consolation of Israel (2:25), the redemption of Jerusalem (2:38), the imminent appearance of the reign of God (19:11, 23:50) and the redemption of Israel (24:21). The problem was not so narrowly that of the "delay of the parousia"[7] as it was that of testifying to the dominion of a Messiah crucified years earlier by foreign occupation forces which have now crushed Israel under the imperial heel. As things had gone from bad to worse and destruction approached, many in Israel had prayed that now God would send "signs of deliverance" or some agent of his salvation.[8] Once the tragedy had occurred, the believers in Jesus the Messiah had to wonder, "Can this be the fulfillment of the promises of God's dominion among his people? Can this truly be the age of the reign of the Messiah?" Assuming that Jesus' tears, anguish, and anger for Jerusalem are genuine in Luke's depiction, the pathos of the unlovely realities of Israel's historical experience was still felt keenly. The question, "Lord will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" can not be dismissed simply as crude nationalism or misinformed eschatology.

The problem for Jewish Christians is developed in even greater detail in Acts where the inclusion of Gentiles without faithful observance of Torah has left the community open to the charge of "apostasy from Moses" (Acts 21:21). While

[6]See Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972).

[7]See Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).

[8]See Josephus, *The Jewish War* 6:285-286, where thousands in besieged Jerusalem are reported to have perished in the flames of the temple because a certain "false prophet" assured them that God would give them "signs of their salvation" at that last moment in the temple.

claiming that Jesus is the true "prophet like Moses" promised in Deuteronomy 18 (see Acts 3:22-26), the inclusion of Gentiles and the question of the continued faithful observance of Torah by Jewish Christians were intimately related issues for many Jewish "believers" including Christian Pharisees and the "myriads among the Jews...who are all zealous for the law" (Acts 15:5, 21:20). If this messianist Jewish movement was now going after the abominable ways of the Gentiles and their idolatry and if they were forsaking Moses and the Torah, then Deuteronomy 13 and 18 could be invoked to convict them of following a false prophet who deserved to die for misleading the people.

The day would come when Luke-Acts would be read as the theological justification of the

triumph of Gentile Christianity at the expense of Judaism. But Luke's concern was the defense of the inclusion of Gentiles along with the faithful in Israel who received the Messiah as joint beneficiaries of the endowment of the Holy Spirit. Much later, Constantine's adoption of Christianity as the Imperial religion would result in an awesome convergence of popular deterministic notions of the invincible destiny of the empire and the scriptural vision of a determined God whose saving plan and purpose in history ultimately decided its course and end. But in the troubled and conflictive times of the last third of the first century Jewish-Christian history, Luke's testimony to the "definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23) must have appeared foolish and presumptuous in its historical, cosmic and eschatological proportions. It certainly had pathetically little external verification.

Incredible as it may have seemed against the backdrop of overwhelming imperial forces and large scale Jewish rejection, such a vision of God's dominion in history was thoroughly conceivable within Jewish scriptural traditions. It was a scenario first envisioned by the classic prophetic tradition, especially as redacted in the exilic wake of the first destruction. It had been preserved in the intertestamental scribal traditions of the suffering prophets and the righteous envoys of wisdom. The apocalyptic strains of this heritage anticipated the cosmic intervention of God to restore Israel and establish his kingdom by the utter defeat of the oppressors. This view was well represented at Qumran and in such books as the Testament of Moses (see chapter 10) where the heavenly kingdom would suddenly be disclosed with the ensuing destruction of Satan and punishment of the Gentiles. The New Testament teachings concerning the apocalyptic return of the Son of Man in judgment also demonstrate the pervasive impact of this scriptural heritage on Christian teaching. More blatantly "political" or nationalistic modes of interpreting these traditions may have died with the defeat of the cause of the Jewish revolutionaries by Rome. Perhaps Josephus' counsel to besieged Jerusalem that God had gone over to the side of Rome was directed toward such an outlook.[9] On the other hand, the crude nationalism that New Testament commentaries are so wont to ascribe to "Jewish expectations" is surprisingly scarce in first century sources. Centuries of scribal efforts[10] to bear witness to the reign of God in the midst of a conquered people had cautioned against attempts that were too simplistic or chauvinistic in their nationalism.

[9]See *Wars* 5:378, 6:98.

[10]See Jonathan Z. Smith, "Wisdom and Apocalyptic," *Map is not Territory* (Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity 23; Leiden: Brill, 1978), 67-87.

Speaking of God's judgment against sinful Israel was by no means unique to Christian interpretations of the times or even unusual in Jewish tradition. It is true that the evangelist did hold Israel accountable for active complicity in the rejection and death of the Messiah and for the continuing obduracy of many "Jews" to Christian scriptural preaching (see especially Luke 19:28-44, 21:20-24, Acts 28:23-28) to the point of responsibility for the destruction of Jerusalem and the temporary hardening of Israel against God's salvation and to the immediate benefit of the Gentiles (see also Romans 9-11). But Luke's Jewish contemporaries, Josephus and the author-redactors of II Baruch and IV Ezra were also capable of confessing Israel's sins. Testifying to God's justice in history by means of indicting Israel's unfaithfulness also has a long history in prophetic and wisdom traditions at least as far back as the "friends" of Job.

What is distinctive is that in Acts the witnesses to God's dominion through his Messiah Jesus are emphatically charged to testify to God's saving purpose and plan for Israel and all the Gentiles in the midst of the times of judgment. The most peculiar and audacious dimension of this "evangelism" is its public pronouncement that the crucified and now departed Jesus is the key not only to the "restoration of the kingdom to Israel" but to the "restoration" or "establishment of all that God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets of old" (Acts 1:6, 3:21).

The irony is not lost on Luke that "God has made him both Christ and Lord, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). The unseemly death of the "righteous one" while the people watch on the verge of remorse (Luke 23:47-48) and the rulers unknowingly speak the truth in their sarcasm at this "Christ of God his chosen One" (Luke 23:34-35) recalls not only the servant songs of Isaiah (see Luke 22:37, Acts 8:32-35)[11] but also reads like a page from Wisdom: "Let us see if his words are true, and let us test what will happen at the end of his life; for if the righteous man is God's son, he will help him and will deliver him from the hand of his adversaries....There was one who pleased God and was loved by him, and while living among sinners he was taken up...the righteous man who has died will condemn the ungodly who are living" (Wisdom of Solomon 2:17-18, 3:10,16).

IV

But the resurrection and assumption of the righteous one and servant of God does not convict Israel or the Gentiles in order to condemn. The servant-Messiah is rather God's intentioned and accomplished means of exercising his gracious salvation, his forgiveness and restoration. This dominion is quite unlike the tyranny of the "kings of the Gentiles" in its benefaction. Whatever dire and tragic consequences Israel and her leaders and the "kings of the earth," namely Herod and Pilate, have produced with their grim complicity "against the Lord and his Anointed" (Acts 3:23-30), the power of healing, forgiveness and restoration has been bestowed by divine initiative.

The message which the witnesses of the exalted Messiah bear unto all the

[11]Luke's frequent dependence on texts from that portion of Isaiah now identified as II Isaiah is significant. His vision of God's salvation in history as being wrought in divine pathos even in judgment was not original with him. See Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper, 1962).

nations "beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47) or "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and unto the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8) is therefore singularly gracious: repentance unto forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus (Luke 24:47). Even this message had its political analogues when newly elevated emperors declared amnesty for all those who had previously rejected their rule but now were willing to declare their fidelity. The Greek Moralist Plutarch also believed that the later years of the first century represented a time of the delay of divine vengeance, a time for Roman repentance.

But Luke regarded "the present time" (Luke 12:54-56) of his community as much more than an interval of delay of apocalyptic wrath. In fact, the present was for Israel a time when wrath was visited upon her and divine vengeance had not yet proceeded to the vindication of God's saving promises and purposes: "for these are the days of vengeance to fulfill all that was written...until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (Luke 21:20-24).[12] Yet even in that dire

present, Jesus had already been exalted by God as ruler and savior in order "to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:31-32, Luke 24:46-47). The witnesses attest to this benefaction of God transmitted with the "promise of the Father," i.e., the confirming presence of the Holy Spirit whom God had bestowed on the believers (Acts 5:31-32, Luke 24:46-49, Acts 1:4, 2:38-39). This gift was no sop for the vanquished or expedient measure to corral potential enemies. It was the first and decisive glimpse of God's saving purpose, essential to the peculiar vision of God's dominion that Jesus' witnesses were enlisted to announce. Thus later in Acts when Peter is depicted as astonished at the unexpected descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentiles, all he could do was testify that "even to the Gentiles God has given repentance unto life." "Who was I that I could withstand God" (Acts 11:17-18).

God's dominion is heralded as a present reality, inaugurated by the sending of the promise of the Father in the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.[13] The power from on high does not constitute the full restoration. That still awaits the Lord's return (Acts 3:21). Yet the present is also the arena for the dominion of God's messiah. God intends to exercise his gracious reign starting now, not merely at the end of history. The eschatological agenda promised in the prophet Joel has commenced with Pentecost (Acts 2:16-21). Far from having forsaken Israel or the promises of old, God's kingdom is even now being employed in its forgiving and saving purpose. Even the tiny fragment of Israel upon whom the Spirit has descended is thus designated as an agency of this dominion, manifesting but not mastering the Spirit's activity {see Acts 11:17,15:28).

The boldness of this scenario is integral to Luke's depiction of Christian preaching and witness in the Jewish and Greco-Roman public forums (see *parresia*/*parresiazesthai* in Acts 2:29, 4:13, 29, 31, 9:27, 13:46, 14:3, 18:26, 19:8, 26:26, 28:31). Christian witness is a testimony to the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, but it is not a "merely spiritual" denial of worldly realities. This salvation does not mean escape from oppressive political and religious structures. Nor is it a guarantee of swift vindication or easy triumph over unjust orders. Paul is still delivered to Rome in chains. But it is when dragged before kings and princes and

[12]See David L. Tiede, *Prophecy and History in Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).
[13]See James D. G. Dunn, "Spirit and Kingdom," *The Expository Times* 82 (1970), 36-40.

handed over to the religious leaders and to prisons that this boldness of the witness is most evident (Luke 21:12-19). The testimony to the faithfulness of God is finally the subject of this witness, not the demonstration of the triumph or escape of the believer. It is when those with the power and clout and overwhelming theo-political rhetoric seem to have all the might and right on their side that the servants of the Servant testify that God's salvation is being wrought in the world by quite another course. Thus the wisdom of Gamaliel provides a clue to the reader concerning how foolish and dangerous are the efforts of the leaders in the synagogues who intimidate and accuse the Christians, and even the Roman officials who believe themselves to be in full control would do well to take notice: "You might even be found opposing God!" (Acts 5:39).

The similarities between Jesus' commission of his disciples and the theo-political rhetoric of the Greco-Roman oriental empires are not merely formal. Acts affirms the classic prophetic scriptural vision of divine sovereignty in the face of the devastating political fortunes of Israel.

Through it all, God is contending with his willful people, and whether those who hold the power among the Jews and in the Roman courts and armies know it or not, they too are instrumental to God's purpose in history, his saving purpose for Israel and the Gentiles. How God exercises this dominion constitutes a fundamental critique of the desperate power politics of the kings of the Gentiles and discloses the power of divine grace that transcends human comprehension and transforms tragic error into a new occasion for the gift of repentance unto forgiveness of sin. In the unlikely and ironic form of a crucified Servant, God has established the reign of One who is the King of the Jews and the *Kurios*. So too the dispatch of this small band of harassed, imprisoned, and unlettered servants of the Servant equipped only with the "promise of the Father" constitutes the inauguration of the restoration of God's rule among his people.

The critique of all coercive, manipulative and overtly imperialist schemes and programs which may be touted as "good news" must not be missed. Those who confidently equate their triumph and vaunted status as due to divine favor may find themselves identified with the oppressors in the story rather with the faithful witnesses. The theo-political claims of Christian witness are made in the face of a broken world whose religious and political rhetoric has become moribund and oppressive. These claims are not made on behalf of the church as a sacral domain. Rather they are claims made for God and his Messiah Jesus, confirmed by the enduring presence of the Holy Spirit.

For the faithful witnesses who accept the commission, such claims also bestow the assurance of divine faithfulness which may be relied upon and claimed, but not presumed, possessed, or coopted. No guarantees of victorious marches from triumph to triumph have been bestowed. On the contrary, God's own gracious dominion, which is the subject of the testimony, has been manifested by means of the suffering and death of his messiah. The witnesses to this dominion are promised no immunity from the whims of the "powers that be"!

But those "powers" with all of their pomp and inflated importance and clout are not truly the forces with whom to contend. They have already been shown up by the true King as frauds and pretenders. The empty claims of their theo-political rhetoric have already been filled with meaning by the true Savior and Lord and Messiah. It is that strange and gracious dominion to which the ap-

parently impotent and insignificant Christian community testifies. In service and healing and the giving of repentance unto forgiveness of sins, the church has been divinely constituted in its vocation of evangelism. Thus all methods, techniques, and campaigns of witness must be tested by the peculiar and gracious standards of this gospel, not by the criteria proffered by the "shakers and movers" of society. The Spirit of God, the promise of the Father, has already been sent by the exalted Messiah and Lord upon his followers. In a broken world where the power of such a dominion continues to appear weak and easily contested, the witnesses of Jesus testify by all they say and do that God's reign is truly immediate, powerful, ultimate and decisively gracious.