

Mission of God: Gospel of Luke

Co-Missioners,

This week we send you the second installment in Pr. Richard Gahl's series on the mission we were baptized into as servants and agents of Christ. Dick focuses here on the gospel account that many of are listening to in church this year. We trust you'll find it very helpful as the listening continues.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossing Community

Mission of God: Gospel of Luke

By Richard Gahl



The first installment in this series about the Mission of God attempted to establish a foundation for reading the scriptures, in part, as instruction for the people of God for carrying out God's mission. The thesis was summarized in the words of N.T.Wright: "The New Testament was written to sustain and direct the mission formation of the church."¹ This article desires to test this premise with a careful reading of the Gospel of Luke.

Four broad themes emerge. 1. The dedication "To Theophilus" indicates that Luke has as one of his main purposes the understanding that God's mission was not just directed to the Jewish nation. All nations are included in Luke's recounting. 2. Three mission trips are described: Jesus and the twelve, the twelve sent out to proclaim Good News, and the seventy (or

seventy-two) deployed to set the stage for Jesus final journey to Jerusalem, 3. The death and resurrection of Jesus is the foundation for proclaiming the good news. 4. The mission of God spreads out from Jerusalem. (Acts 1:8 fills in more of the details with stages in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth.)

Whether Theophilus is a real individual or a device to expand the scope of the Good News to “all people” should not detour the reader of Luke from the main point: The mission of God in Jesus of Nazareth is for all people, Jew and Gentile. It would be wise for the reader of Luke to keep in mind what Theophilus sees and hears in each episode of the story Luke presents in his researched and orderly account.



1. Preparations (1:5- 4:17)

Luke sets the stage for the mission of God in chapter one. We are introduced to a wide range of characters alerting us to what is happening. Gabriel, John the Baptist and his family, Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna lead up to a genealogy that goes back to Adam, the first man, not to Abraham who was first in Israel. The dialog (temptation) with the devil prepares for Jesus' public work to begin.

Luke takes care to place the events of his story into historical settings. In the days of King Herod (1:5), Emperor Augustus

(2:1), and the 15th year of Emperor Tiberius and his contemporaries – Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip and Lysanius (3:1).

Gabriel's announces to Mary that her son will be given the throne of his ancestor David establishing a kingdom of which there will be no end (1:32-33). The character of this kingdom will be marked by a great reversal. The powerful will be brought low while the lowly will be lifted up. The hungry will be filled and the rich will be sent away empty (1:52-53). After the birth of John (the Baptist) his father Zechariah points forward to another who will give light to those who sit in darkness and will guide people into the way of peace (1:79). At the birth of Jesus the angels describe the event as "Good News of great joy for all the people (2:10) – a Savior is born (2:11). At the presentation of Jesus in the temple ancient Simeon takes the child Jesus into his arms and rejoices that he now has seen God's salvation prepared in the presence of all people – a light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for the people of Israel (2:32-33). When John begins his ministry of preparation he picks up Simeon's theme: All flesh shall see the salvation of God (3:6). Three groups are described as present for his announcements: a generic crowd, tax collectors, and soldiers – reflecting both Jewish and Gentile peoples. Interestingly the dialog with the devil at the beginning of chapter 4 restates the broad scope of Jesus ministry to follow. In the second temptation the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world that Jesus would be given if Jesus were to worship him (4:5-6). Jesus rejects that offer. He worships and serves only God (4:7) extending the kingdom of God to all the world.



2. Public Teacher, Proclaimer of Good News (4:14 to 19:27)

Jesus begins to teach in the synagogues (4:15). Luke reports on a teaching event in Nazareth, Jesus' hometown. Here he goes about his Father's business first referenced by the twelve-year old lad in the temple (2:49). A reader might see this teaching as the theme for what is to come – even a “mission” statement.

Anointed with the Spirit of God Jesus unrolls the scroll for the prophet Isaiah. He directs the reader's attention “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor” (4:18-19). In the discussion that follows Jesus points to Elijah's care for the widow of Zeraphath in Sidon. Elisha's healing of Naaman the

Syrian illustrated additional prophetic work outside of Israel. Luke reports that the assembly is enraged at Jesus' mere mention of his scope of ministry as embracing more than Israel.

Later while continuing to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God in many communities in Galilee Jesus was standing next to the lake of Gennesaret (5:1) watching fisherman cleaning up after a futile night's work. Jesus borrowed one of the boats to teach the crowd that had assembled. When he was finished teaching, Jesus encouraged Simon and his crew James and John to head for deep water letting down their nets one more time for a catch. The catch filled both boats to the point of sinking. But the bigger surprise came when Jesus invited them to join him. "From now on you will be catching people (5:10). The standard Greek English lexicon explains this catching not as killing fish but "keeping alive in a protected way:" people to be included in the kingdom of God. The body of water in which Peter and his co-workers were fishing bordered on more than the territory of Israel. There were not Jewish fish or Gadarene fish. There were just fish of many varieties. Included, then, in the metaphor of catching people is a multiethnic understanding.

At the end of chapter 5 Jesus summarized his activities: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance (31)." If we fast forward to the end of this teaching/proclamation section, we find a similar expression. "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost (19:10)."

In Luke's introduction to the Sermon on the Plain he tells us that after a night of prayer on a mountain Jesus encountered a great multitude on a level place. The crowd was composed of people from Judea and Jerusalem and the coast of Tyre and Sidon who had come to hear him and be healed (6:17-28). The

geographical references would remind Theophilus of the multi ethnic roots of those attracted to Jesus. In the next section, the healing of the centurion's slave, his eyes would open wide to read Jesus commendation of the centurion: "not even in Israel have I found such faith (7:9)." However a greater encouragement is given Theophilus in 8:21. Jesus had been confronted with traditional family obligations (8:20). "Your mother and your brothers are outside waiting to see you." Jesus response gave a completely different identification to family. "My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it (8:21)." Theophilus was one who heard the word of God and desired to do it. He was now family, not an outsider.

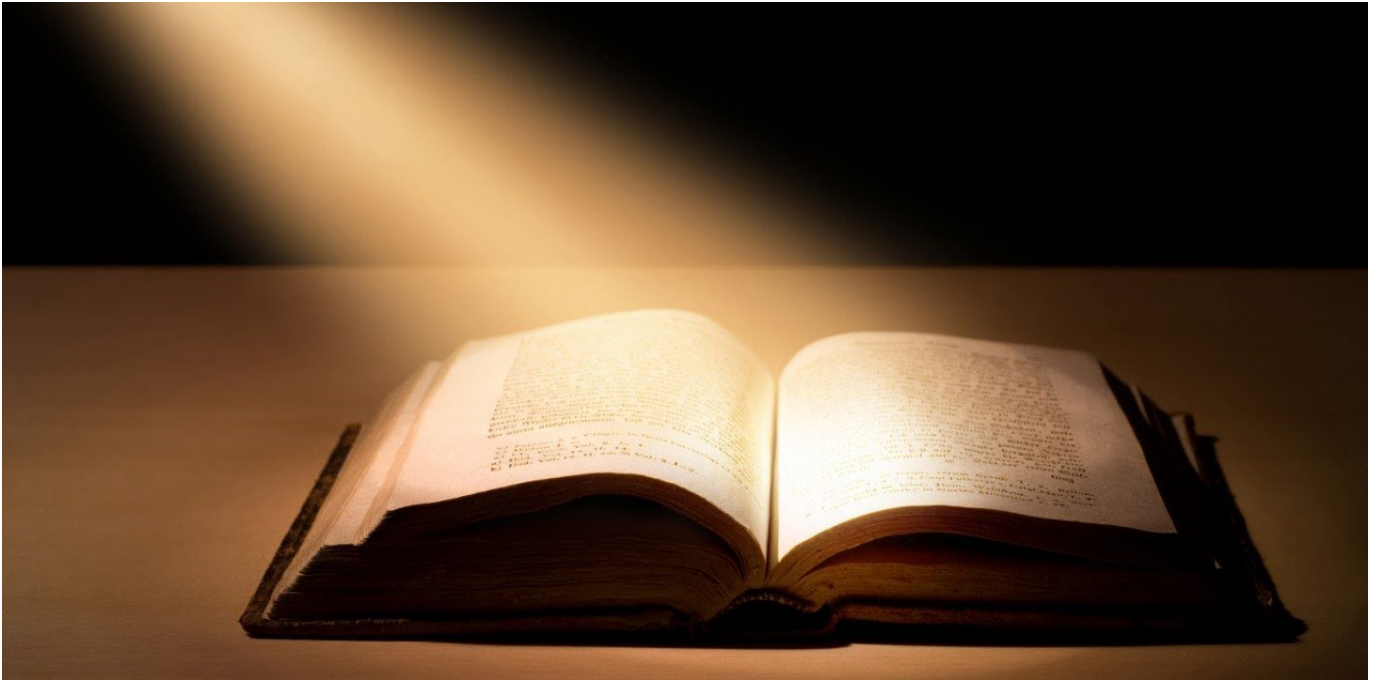
Chapters 8, 9, and 10 report on three tours Jesus undertook to spread his message throughout Galilee. For the first trip proclaiming the Good News of the kingdom of God through cities and villages Jesus took the twelve and three named women, Mary of Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna and many others. Note the report (8:3) that women financed the trip. After a time in Galilee they crossed over the lake to the country of the Gerasenes encountering a young man in a frightful state, bound with chains and shackles. When Jesus had healed the man who was now clothed and in his right mind, the young man begged to travel with Jesus and his friends. Instead Jesus directed him to return home where he was to proclaim how much Jesus had done for him. (8:26-39). It is notable that the "proclaim" task assigned the young man is the same task Jesus is about. In this way the mission of God continued while Jesus went back to Galilee.

For the second trip, chapter 9, Jesus sent out the twelve to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal. The verb "send" is part of the word family "apostle." Eckhard Schnabel speculates that Jesus divided the twelve into six teams of two sending them regionally into the approximately 147 communities of Galilee. This would suggest that 24-25 communities could be assigned each

team on a regional basis. He further speculates that if the teams spend one day at each settlement they could have finished their tour within one month – not counting sabbath days. If they stayed two days in each settlement their mission would have lasted two months.² When they reported back, Jesus took the disciples to Bethsaida for some privacy. But the crowds followed. The crowds suggest the mission tours were successful with the result that about five thousand gathered at Bethsaida for additional teaching. They also needed to be fed.

The third sending is reported in chapter 10. Note that in 9:51 Jesus had set his face toward Jerusalem. Now he “appoints seventy others and sends them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go (10:1).” Jesus follows up with the statement that “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest (10:2).” Again the trip extended God’s mission. Reporting back (10:7) the seventy returned with joy: “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!”

In 13:22 we meet up with Jesus as he went through one town after another where the way had been prepared by the seventy on his way to Jerusalem. In one conversation (13:29) Jesus spoke of people coming to God’s kingdom from the east and the west, from the north and the south—from the four corners of their world signaling a mission well beyond Israel.



3. Death in Jerusalem and the mission expands (19:26 – 24:52)

Of special interest to Theophilus would be the arrest and trial of Jesus. This places Jesus into the hands of the Roman judicial system. Both the local Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and the leader of the crucifixion detail make sure that Theophilus understands that Jesus was not put to death for crimes against the state. Pilate states “I find no basis for an accusation against this man (23:4).” Later Pilate reports to the Jewish religious leaders “I have not found this man guilty of any of your charges against him (23:14).” But under pressure he relented to their demands for crucifixion. When Jesus breathed his last the centurion in charge of the crucifixion detail praised God and stated, “Certainly this man was innocent (23:47).”

After recounting the resurrection and Jesus’ interactions with the disciples during the time before returning to the Father, Jesus summarizes what has gone on and what now is to happen. “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise

on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem (24:46-47).” When Theophilus opened the manuscript to the second book of Luke, we see that, yes, it begins in Jerusalem. But it expands to all Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Of this we, the twelve, Theophilus, and the faithful of every era are witnesses to the Good News.

Endnotes—

1 N. T. Wright, “Reading the New Testament Missionally,” in *Reading the Bible Missionally*, ed. Michael W. Goheen (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), p. 175

2 Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), p. 311

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