


God's acts in *Lukan-Acts*: God's active involvement in the execution of the plan of salvation



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Faced with the difficulty today of executing the church's responsibility to be a witness to Jesus Christ in the world, I researched the way in which the Scriptures speak about the direct involvement of God in the implementation of his plan of salvation. In this research, I particularly focused on what is brought forward by Luke in his gospel and in the Book of Acts. *Lukan-Acts* has been examined for indications that point to the direct involvement of the triune God in the execution of his plan of salvation. I proceeded in a biblical-theological-exegetical manner, looking specifically at those indications that speak of the fulfilment of the Scriptures by God; of the continuing work of Jesus; of what Luke brings forth about the involvement of the Holy Spirit; and of what Luke wrote about the activities of angels, about words that were heard from heaven, and about the miracles that took place. In addition, specific words for *witnessing* and *sending* used by Luke, as well as the summary remarks he noted, particularly in the Book of Acts, were looked at. The aim of the article was to show how the triune God himself is fully involved in the execution of his plan of salvation. From studying the *Lukan-Acts*, it became clear that God himself is indeed the Actor in the execution of his plan of salvation – theologically referred to as the *missio Dei*. It became clear that God is still the Actor when he uses the service and engagement of people. He encouraged them to it in what Luke in his double-work brought forward, using people, guided by the Spirit, as instruments in the hand of Christ. In this, the work of Luke gained extra significance in that it encouraged its first readers, as well as the church today. Being involved in mission makes sense, because God is and will be directly involved in the execution of it.

Contribution: This article was written to show the relevancy of the Book of Acts for the church in relation to its involvement in mission. This shows what is the foundation of all missionary efforts of the church, namely God's own activity and direct involvement.

Keywords: *Luke-Acts*; Plan of salvation; Work of God; Jesus' work; Holy Spirit; Angels; miracles; witnesses; testimony; summary remarks.

Introduction¹

At the Willingen Meeting of the International Missionary Council in 1952, the concept of *missio Dei*-theology was born, although the term was not coined at that meeting (Engelsviken 2003; Flett 2010; Wrogemann 2018:66–70). It was Georg F. Vicedom (1965) who 'developed' (Engelsviken 2003:482) the concept in his study of 1957. He states that '[t]he Mission, and with it the church, is God's very own work'. The mission of the church is not an independent entity, because both the church and its mission are 'instruments through which God carries out His mission' (Vicedom 1965:5–6). In and through the church and its mission, God himself is 'dealing with men'. This dealing with men, God's 'revelation in His *missio*', is always related to God's plan of salvation. God reveals himself 'for the sake of the salvation of mankind'. Thus, mission is 'nothing else than the continuation of the saving activity of God' (Vicedom 1965:8–9). The implication of this is that the church, as instrument through which God executes his mission, cannot decide whether it 'will carry on the mission or not'. The church can 'only decide' if it 'wants to be church'. It 'cannot determine when, where, and how missions will be carried out, for the mission is always divinely guided, as is shown us above all in Acts' (Vicedom 1965:5–6).

This article takes up this last remark of Vicedom. What can be said, and where and how is the divine guiding becoming visible in the work of Luke – in both his gospel and the Book of Acts? To answer this question, two things have been done. In a first section, the focus was on the indications

1. An earlier, shorter version of this article was published in the Festschrift for T.M. Hofman (Van 't Spijker 2015).

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that Luke uses in Lukan-Acts to denote that what is happening is related to God's plan of salvation. He points to the fulfilment of the Scriptures, he shows the ongoing activity of Jesus, he speaks of the involvement of the Spirit, he mentions the activity of angels, voices that come from heaven and miracles that happen. What do these indications show? In a second section, the focus was on the elaboration of the plan of salvation as it manifests in Lukan-Acts. Luke uses the words 'witness', 'testimony', and 'mission' and makes summary remarks. What does this imply regarding the human acts the Book of Acts recounts? In the last section, some conclusions in bringing together the results of the first two sections have been made.

God's plan of salvation in the work of Luke

General

In the work of Luke, several historical indications make it possible to date the events that he recounts. Luke is a historian (cf. Bock 2007:8–12, 2012:43–54; Keener 2012:90–115; Klein 2006:53–54; Versteeg 1980:67), but not in the modern sense of the word. His historical approach can be characterised as theological: He 'provides both historical information and theological perspective', interested as he is in discerning 'God's purposes in history' (Keener 2012:158–159). He wants to show, 'that the message of the gospel is not about a timeless ideology, but about a saving intervention of God at an identifiable place and a datable moment' (Versteeg 1981:29).² Luke is not simply telling history as it happened, but he is telling the story of the unfolding of God's plan of salvation in which God is the 'key player' (Bock 2012:51). He therefore does not merely place the things that happened in historical perspective. In this regard, the indication in Luke 2:1 that it happened in those days (Ἐγένετο δὲ ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις) is noteworthy. It is on first reading often taken in a historical sense, as if it marks the birth of Jesus in the days in which Augustus was ruling the world. It is, however, saying something else. Luke refers to those days (ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκείναις) in which the events, recorded by him in the first chapter, took place. Heinz Schürmann (1982:98) remarks: 'It was in those days so full of apocalyptic promises and fulfilments' (cf. Lk 1:5–80) of which the 'true significance' would become clear through what is 'now to be told'. In those days in which God, after so many ages of silence, had shown his initiative of salvation in announcing the birth of both John the Baptist and of Jesus, an order for registration came from the seat of government of the Roman Empire, forcing Joseph to travel with Mary to Bethlehem. This is how Luke writes it down because he wants to show that the things that happened had everything to do with God's plan of salvation. This fact is important, both in the gospel of Luke and in his second book, the Book of Acts, where he describes the first pages of the missionary history, namely the birth and expansion of the church of Christ. He sets it all 'into the broadest possible theological context: that of the plan of

2.All translations into English were done by the author.

God'. That plan of salvation of God is the deeper layer 'beneath' everything he describes (Squires 1998:20–21).

It is this 'foundational theological motif' (Squires 1998:23) that applies in a specific way also regarding mission, for it is this plan of salvation that determines the content and progress of mission. In an essay on the diverse ways in which the four evangelists describe the missionary commission given by Jesus, J.P. Versteeg (1981) points this out when he discusses the gospel of Luke. It is noteworthy that Luke connects the divine 'it must be done' (δεῖ in Lk 24:44) not only to the suffering and resurrection of Christ as it is written in Scripture, but also to the proclamation of repentance for forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus to all the nations, 'beginning from Jerusalem' (Lk 24:46–47)³:

Just as Jesus' suffering and resurrection are content of the Scriptures, implying that they had to take place, so the proclamation is content of the Scriptures, implying that this proclamation also *has to* take place now. (Versteeg 1981:29–30; cf. Noordegraaf 1983:169–170)

Versteeg (1981) points to another remarkable fact in Luke's description: he does not render a command of Jesus in the proper sense of the word. Whereas Matthew and Mark point to an imperative in the words of Jesus (cf. Mt 28:19–20; Mk 16:15), Luke 24 does not have any words of Jesus telling the disciples what they must do. Luke tells what God is going to do. Because the proclamation of the gospel is content of the Scriptures, it will simply take place. 'God fulfils the Scriptures' (Versteeg 1981:31). Jesus says to his disciples, 'You are witnesses of these things'. There is a noun, μάρτυρες, and no verb in Luke 24:48.

This is an essential element in the work of Luke. He is deeply imbued with the realisation that the things he is describing are ultimately not activities of men and women but of God himself. Both his books witness to the work of God in Jesus Christ. The opening verses of Acts show this unequivocally: Luke mentions his first book in which he has dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day that he was taken up (cf. Ac 1:1). Without indicating it explicitly, this formulation implies that, in this new book, the subject of all things that are happening is the same as in the first book (cf. Bock 2012:79; Keener 2012:652). The Book of Acts is not about human actions. God is in Christ and through the Spirit, the acting Person, using men and women, sending them as instruments in the hand of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. God himself acted in the events recorded in the first book of Luke. Peter indicates this in his sermon on Pentecost. It was God himself who, through Jesus, performed powers, miracles, and signs amid the people of Israel (cf. Ac 2:22). God is also the acting Person in the things Luke describes in his second book. He carries out his plan of salvation.

In this regard, the first chapter of Acts is important for the understanding of the whole book. All the details are present that show that God is at work. All kinds of hints are given

3.Quotes from Scripture are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

that indicate that God is active in the things that are going to be reported, and the Book of Acts bears witness to this: the Scriptures will be fulfilled by God; Jesus will continue his saving work; the Holy Spirit will activate and lead the church; angels will be involved; and miracles will happen. In the following subsections these elements will be dealt with.

God fulfils the Scriptures

The fact that the plan of salvation is the fundamental theological motif in the Book of Acts becomes clear in the frequently recurring indication that the Scriptures are being fulfilled (cf. Keener 2012:483–485). Everything proceeds according to Scripture.

Acts 1 depicts what happens when the disciples discuss the need to fill the vacancy in their midst because of the loss of Judas. Peter then, indicating that what they experience now was written in Scripture beforehand, states: ‘brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled’ (Ac 1:15). He then points to a word, spoken by the Holy Spirit through David, and he applies this word to Judas who led the people that arrested Jesus. In connecting words of Psalm 69 and of Psalm 109, he continues to the process of choosing a person to fill the empty place. When discussing these verses, John van Eck (2003:49–50) notes that Peter, in his speech, quotes from the Old Testament, applying it directly to the current situation: ‘Linking the betrayal and the end of Judas with Scripture, also gives these perplexing events a place in the actions of God’.

In reading on, Luke recounts that the apostles regularly indicate that Scripture is being fulfilled in what is happening. In their speeches and sermons, they frequently refer to words from the Scriptures. Peter’s sermon at Pentecost is a clear example of this. He quotes the prophet Joel at length to clarify what is going on (Ac 2:17–21). The events surrounding Jesus occurred ‘according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God’ (Ac 2:23). He further incorporates words from the Psalms and words of David to show how everything went according to the Scriptures (Ac 2:25–28, 31, 34–35; cf. Ac 3:21, 24 and 4:11 for references to fulfilment of Scripture in speeches of Peter; cf. Squires 1998:24–25).

Paul also indicates that the Scriptures are fulfilled in what happens. He does this specifically when he addresses Jews in his speeches as he seeks to convince them that in Jesus, the promised Messiah of Israel has come. A clear example of this is Paul’s sermon to the Jewish community of Antioch in Pisidia (Ac 13:13–52). Paul assumes a common background in addressing his listeners. He speaks of ‘our fathers’ (Ac 13:17) and he clearly sets the message of Christ’s coming in categories of fulfilment. He states that God gave Jesus ‘as he promised’ from the lineage of David (Ac 13:23). He further states that the leaders at Jerusalem, in all they did with Jesus, ‘carried out all that was written of him’ (Ac 13:29). Thus, Paul uses the Scriptures to add authority to his proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah to his Jewish people (cf. Ac 13:41, 47; 17:2, 3 for references to fulfilment in the sermons and speeches of Paul; cf. Squires 1998:25, 32).

James also uses Scripture to show that what is going on is according to God’s plan of salvation. At the meeting in Jerusalem, the important question of whether believing Gentiles should conform to Jewish precepts and customs is discussed. On that occasion, James expresses agreement with what Peter puts forward. Peter expounds ‘how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name’ (Ac 15:14). James links this to words from the prophet Amos that make it clear to him that what Peter has said is fully scriptural. That the gospel goes to the nations is part of God’s plan of salvation.

Jesus continues his work

The Book of Acts reveals that Jesus himself continues his saving work. In a general sense, this can be said when Luke points to all those things that are set in motion by the guidance of the Holy Spirit (cf. section of The Holy Spirit leads and directs), for the Spirit can never be separated from Jesus Christ. ‘There is an inseparable connection between the Christological and pneumatological’ (Van den Brink & Van der Kooi 2012:455). It is the risen Christ who gives the Spirit and who continues his work through the Spirit.

However, when he refers to the name of Jesus, Luke shows, in a special sense, that Jesus is directly involved and active in applying the salvation (σωτηρία) that he achieved with his death and resurrection in the lives of people.

There is only salvation in the name of Jesus (Ac 4:12 – οὐδὲ γὰρ ὄνομα ἐστὶν ... ἐν ᾧ δεῖ σωθῆναι ἡμᾶς); signs and miracles happened through the name of Jesus (Ac 4:30 – διὰ τοῦ ὀνόματος ... Ἰησοῦ). Luke denotes that the salvation must always be understood in close connection with the person and work of Christ. He is involved, as is unmistakable in the history of the healing of the paralytic. Peter says that he has no gold or silver to give him, but that he will give him what he has, continuing with the command to rise and walk in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth (Ac 3:6 – ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ Ναζωραίου). By mentioning the name of Jesus, ‘Peter places the sick person under the power of salvation emanating from Jesus’ (Roloff 2010:69). In explaining what happened, Peter stresses that neither he nor John did this by their own power or piety (Ac 3:12) but that it was based on faith in the name (Ac 3:16 – καὶ ἐπὶ τῇ πίστει τοῦ ὀνόματος αὐτοῦ) that the paralytic was healed (ἐστερέωσεν τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ). In this last phrase, the name is the subject. Peter repeats this before the Council. When asked by what power or by what name they acted in the healing of the paralytic (Ac 4:7), Peter affirms that the name of Jesus was the efficacious force in the healing. It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth (ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ Ναζωραίου), that is, by him (ἐν τούτῳ) that ‘this man is standing before you well’ (Ac 4:10). The same is reported when Luke recounts that Paul expels a spirit of soothsaying. Paul commands the spirit to come out of the young woman in the name of Jesus Christ (Ac 16:18 – ἐν ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). What this means is obvious: The healing that takes place is not something magical or something wrought by some sort of power of the

apostles. 'It is Jesus Himself who heals' (Bietenhard 1964:277). Undeniably, this is related in the story of the healing of Aeneas, where Peter says: 'Aeneas, Jesus Christ heals you' (Ac 9:34 – Αινέα, ἰᾷταί σε Ἰησοῦς Χριστός).

The name of Jesus 'is to be understood as the presence of Christ' (Bietenhard 1964:277; cf. Ridderbos 1968:34; Schnabel 2012:211, 195). 'Where the name of Jesus is mentioned, he himself is actively present', manifesting his healing power. 'In connection with the name, the command "walk" becomes a creative word, a word that brings about what it pronounces' (Van Eck 2003:93).

Jesus himself is indeed involved in the things that Luke depicts in his second book. He who was sent by the Father is not resting from his work now that he is been taken up in heaven. He continues his work in the execution of the plan of salvation.

The Holy Spirit leads and directs

That God's plan of salvation is decisive is also evidenced by the activity of the Holy Spirit, which is unquestionably guiding and directing. It is announced in the first chapter of Lukan-Acts, where Luke mentions the promise that the disciples 'will be baptised with the Holy Spirit' (Ac 1:5; cf. Lk 24:49). This promise gains additional substance in Acts 1:8: The disciples will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them, and so they will henceforth be witnesses of Jesus. Through the Spirit the testimony of the disciples will start.

The role of the Spirit is programmatic in Lukan-Acts (Squires 1998:23). Although the Spirit works in his own way, hidden, behind the scenes, his ongoing activity is regularly pointed out by Luke. This starts at Pentecost when all were filled with the Spirit. In Peter's explanation of the events that caused so much wonder and amazement at Pentecost, he points to the tremendous breakthrough of the Spirit's coming as the fulfilment of God's promise. Henceforth, the Spirit will no longer activate and inspire only special people called to fulfil special roles, as it was at the time of the Old Testament. Now that the Spirit is poured out on all followers of Christ, all will be engaged. Thus, the promise Joel spoke about comes to its fulfilment: Sons and daughters shall prophesy, young men shall see visions, old men shall dream dreams, and even male servants and female servants shall prophesy (Ac 2:17–21; cf. Jl 2:28). The Spirit is poured out on all, initiating the testimony about God's mighty works in Jesus Christ. This indeed happens. To mention only a few moments: in Acts 4:8, Peter is filled with the Holy Spirit and starts to speak in front of the Council. In Acts 4:31, Luke writes about the believers who are gathered in prayer. They are filled with the Spirit and continue to speak the word of God with boldness. In Acts 9:17, Ananias says to Saul that he will be filled with the Holy Spirit who will engage him in the service of Jesus (cf. Ac 9:15). Acts 7:55 mentions that Stephen, full of the Spirit, sees Jesus standing at the right hand of God in heaven. The Spirit also gives direct orders or other directions. The Spirit instructs Philip to join the chariot of the Ethiopian (Ac 8:29), and he is

brought to Azotus by the Spirit (Ac 8:39). The Spirit orders Peter to go with the messengers of Cornelius (Ac 10:19–20). Barnabas and Saul are sent out by the church at Antioch on an order of the Spirit (Ac 13: 2, 4). The Holy Spirit forbids Paul, Silas, and Timothy to speak the word in Asia (Ac 16:6). The Spirit constrains Paul to go to Jerusalem (Ac 20:22) and is informed by the Spirit that imprisonment and afflictions await him in every city that he will enter (Ac 20:23).

Everything shows the Spirit's guiding and directing activity. He propels the testimony into the world, starting in Jerusalem and going further, crossing borders, and reaching more and more people.

Activity of angels

God's involvement because of his plan of salvation is also apparent in the appearance of angels described. The prominence of the two men in white robes in the opening chapter of Lukan-Acts indicates the significant role these heavenly epiphanies play throughout the book (Squires 1998:23). The role of the angels can indeed be pointed out. In the history of the capture and deliverance of the apostles, it is an angel who opens the doors of the prison at night (Ac 5:19). It is an angel who instructs Philip to go up the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza (Ac 8:26). In a vision, Cornelius sees an angel of God, telling him to send men to Peter (Ac 10:3, 22; 11:13). When Peter is imprisoned, chained to two soldiers, an angel miraculously comes to free him (Ac 12:7–11). Paul is encouraged by an angel who says that all those on board will be saved no matter how much the ship suffers from the storm (Ac 27:23). In a quite different way, an angel is active in what happens to Herod: he is struck by an angel for not giving God the glory and he dies (Ac 12:23).

In addition to the activity of angels, heavenly voices are heard. When Saul is on his way to Damascus, there is a voice from heaven, calling his name (Ac 9:4, 7; 22:7, 9, 14; 26:14–18). It is Jesus himself who puts a stop to his persecutor and engages him (Ac 9:5,6; especially cf. Acts 26:16–18). Later, too, Paul hears the voice of Jesus encouraging him to testify boldly (Ac 18:9–10). Jesus addresses Paul directly to tell him to leave Jerusalem because people there will not accept his testimony about Jesus (Ac 22:18). After Paul is arrested, Jesus encourages him, 'for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome' (Ac 23:11).

Peter hears a voice from heaven several times on the roof of the house in Joppa where he is staying, making it clear to him that what has been declared clean by God is actually clean (Ac 10:13–16; 11:7–10). It prepares him for his visit to Cornelius, the Roman centurion.

Miracles

Finally, there are the miracles that are mentioned in the Book of Acts. They are indications of God's involvement in the events that Luke describes. At the same time, they are signs

that illustrate the plan of salvation of God. They are foreshadowing how it will be when the new heavens and the new earth, promised by God, will be a reality (2 Pt 3:13). There will be no more tears, no more death, no more mourning, no more crying, no more pain. God will make all things new (Rv 21:4, 5). Something of that future is already visible in the miracles and signs that accompany the preaching of the gospel of God's Kingdom. Luke notes several times that 'many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles' (Ac 2:43; cf. also 5:12; 8:7, 13). Luke also reports individual signs. The healing of the paralytic, described in Acts 3:1–10, is not without effect (cf. Ac 3:11–4:31). The healing of Aeneas leads to the conversion of 'all the residents of Lydda and Sharon' (Ac 9:32–25). The same happens when Dorcas is restored to life. Luke notes that many came to faith in the Lord (Ac 9:36–42). All miracles show the hand of God who is leading history toward his goal: the realisation of his kingdom. In a distinct way, this is manifested in the wonderful way in which Jesus engages his enemy Saul. He blinds him and heals him to make him into the instrument 'to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel' (Ac 9:15).

Preliminary conclusion

Considering all this, the conclusion is that Luke is not just describing history in his second book. There is indeed a deeper layer beneath the story (Squires 1998:21). All events are founded in the plan of salvation of God that he himself brings to fruition on its way to completion. In the Scriptures that are fulfilled, in the ongoing activity of Jesus, in the involvement of the Holy Spirit – in everything that happens, in the activity of the angels, in the voices that sound from heaven, in the miracles that accompany the preaching, it becomes clear that the hand of God is behind all the things described. It is his plan of salvation that is being brought to reality, awaiting its grand and final manifestation at the end of time.

The elaboration of God's plan of salvation

General

The fact that everything Luke writes in the Book of Acts is about God's plan of salvation not only means that he is the designer of the described events; it also implies that he accomplishes his plan. As Michael Horton (2011:309) puts it, both God's plan and the execution of it 'in history are accomplished *from* the Father, *in* the Son, *through* the Spirit' (cf. Versteeg 1981:31). This becomes evident in the Book of Acts. God is acting in calling the church to its existence and in its expansion. Luke bears witness to this as is evident in several characteristic lines that can be discovered in the Book of Acts.

Luke's choice of words – 'witness or testimony' and 'mission'

It is important to see that Luke uses the word *witness* and the word *mission* in a specific way (cf. Bolt 1998:191). A brief

glance through Lukan-Acts shows that the noun *witness* (μάρτυρες) in most cases refers to the circle of the 12 disciples (cf. Ac 1:8; cf. Lk 24:48). The disciples will be Jesus' witnesses. When the empty place of Judas is to be filled, Peter states that someone must join the circle of the 11 remaining disciples to 'become with us witness to his (Jesus') resurrection' (Ac 1:22). On Pentecost, Peter states that he and all who are with him are witnesses to the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead (Ac 2:32). Peter states the same in his speech after healing the paralysed man: God raised Jesus from the dead, 'to this we are witnesses' (Ac 3:15). When Peter and the apostles are brought before the Council, Peter reiterates once again that he and the other apostles are witnesses to the things God has done: God has raised Jesus and he has exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, 'to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins' (Ac 5:30–32). In the house of Cornelius, as a final example, Peter repeats that he and the other apostles 'are witnesses of all that he (Jesus) did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem', stating that Jesus commanded them 'to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead' (Ac 10:39–42). Unmistakably, what Peter says in this last event echoes the memory of Jesus' words in Acts 1:8.

Paul, too, is a witness of Jesus. The apostle relates in Acts 22:15 how Ananias came to him to give him the commission: 'you will be a witness for him to everyone of what you have seen and heard'. When Paul gives an account before Agrippa, he reports having received the commission directly from Jesus, who said to him:

I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and a witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you.

Then Paul hears that he will be sent to the Gentiles (Ac 26:16–18).

The noun *testimony* (μαρτύριον) is also almost always associated with the apostles. They give testimony about the resurrection of Jesus (Ac 4:33). Jesus urges Paul to leave Jerusalem because the people there will not accept from him a testimony about Jesus (Ac 22:18).

In all of this, the point is that the apostles bear witness to Jesus. They are bound to him as his witnesses (Ac 1:8; 13:31; 22:15). In that sense, they belong to him (you are my witnesses) as well as in that he is the substance of their testimony (Ac 2:32; 3:15; 22:18; 23:11). In particular, the 12 disciples were witnesses to Jesus' resurrection (Ac 1:22). They experienced everything he had done, culminating in his death and resurrection (Ac 10:39–41). Therefore, they could testify that it was this Jesus who had been raised from the dead by God, in accordance with the prophetic testimony (Ac 26:22, 23). It is this continuous testimony of the apostles that fills the pages of the Book of Acts.

Related to this, the verbs for *send* (ἀποστέλλω, ἐξαποστέλλω and ἐκπέμπω) are used differently in Acts. When people send others to achieve certain things, ἀποστέλλω can be used.

Cornelius sends messengers to Joppa to invite Peter to come to him (Ac 10:8). However, the verb ἀποστέλλω also occurs when it is a matter of God's mission being initiated, continued, and continued despite opposition. The risen Lord sends Ananias to Saul (Ac 9:17 ἀποστέλλω) and he sends out Paul (Ac 22:21 – ἐξαποστέλλω; 26:17 – ἀποστέλλω). The Holy Spirit tells Peter that he sent the messengers of Cornelius to convince him to go to Cornelius (Ac 10:20 – ἀποστέλλω). God himself sends an angel to Peter in prison (Ac 12:11 – ἐξαποστέλλω). The Holy Spirit sends Paul and Barnabas to take up the work of God (Ac 13:4 – ἐκπέμπω). It is unmistakably God himself, as Paul points out in his sermon to the Jews in Antioch, who sent the message of salvation (Ac 13:26 – ἐξαποστέλλω). Beneath this sending action of the triune God lies, as its foundation, the sending of the Son by God the Father. Peter points this out in his speech in Acts 3, when he applies the words of Deuteronomy 18:15 to the resurrection of Jesus who came to Israel as the risen Servant of God (Ac 3:26).

In bringing these data together, it becomes clear what happens. God himself initiates the work of mission by sending people as witnesses. This is truly clear in Acts 13:2: 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'. Responding to this command of God, the people in Antioch fast and pray, lay their hands on Barnabas and Saul, and let them go (Ac 13:3). Through this sending of God, an incredible work is initiated (cf. Ac 13:41). God's mission to make eternal life accessible and attainable to all nations has begun.

Luke's summary remarks

In a remarkable way, Luke gives attention to the growth and expansion of the church of Christ, and thus to the progress of the missionary movement. He frequently interrupts his narrative for a summary message, noting the result of the witnessing of the apostles, and reporting about the growth and expansion of the church (Noordegraaf 1983:12; cf. Rosner 1998:221). It starts in Acts 2:47b: 'And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved'. Then there is Acts 5:14: 'And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women'. Acts 6:7 states: 'And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of priests became obedient to the faith'. Acts 9:31 depicts:

So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.

Acts 11:21 recounts: 'And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord'. In Acts 12:24, Luke notes: 'But the word of God increased and multiplied'. In Acts 13:49, it is observed: 'And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region'. In Acts 16:5, Luke writes: 'So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily'. Luke remarks in

Acts 19:20: 'So the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily'.

What do these remarks say? Firstly, they mark the transition from one 'period of growth to the next'. Secondly, they show that 'the expansion taking place is impressive and far-reaching'. Thirdly, they 'consistently' emphasise that God caused the growth and expansion (Rosner 1998:222, 223). They are a confirmation of Jesus' word in Acts 1:8. The apostles are indeed witnesses of Jesus; of what he is doing through his Spirit. And, in that, of what God is doing.

This last function is essential for Luke. He wants to make it clear that God himself is responsible for the spread of the gospel. However much human activity can be observed, taking all kinds of barriers and boundaries, God is in control. He intervenes and gives Peter a vision that leads him to go to Cornelius. God engages Paul in missionary service and always leads him down the path he needs to take. An angel of God prompts Philip to make contact with the man from Ethiopia. This is what Luke wants to show. It is God, Luke writes, who commanded Paul and Barnabas to be a light for the Gentiles (Ac 13:47), and who opened a door of faith to the Gentiles (Ac 14:27). All these indications show that God is at work by giving power to the church. The credit is 'explicitly given to God' (Rosner 1998:224).

In short, the way the progress of the gospel is depicted in Acts is a powerful testimony that points to the hidden plan behind it all: the unfolding and realisation of God's plan of salvation aimed at reaching the ends of the earth with the gospel of the kingdom of God.

Conclusion

In bringing together the information in the previous sections, the following conclusions surface.

Luke shows in the Book of Acts that God is directly involved in the accomplishment of the plan of salvation. He realises it in history. He acts. The plan of salvation is not a timeless idea but a plan that is realised in the history and the nations. Lukan-Acts witnesses to that realisation and shows that the formation of the church and the proclamation of the gospel are included in those acts of God. In his actions, God uses the service of men and women, who are instruments in the execution of his plan (cf. Noordegraaf 1983:169–170).

The fact that God himself is actively involved in the accomplishing of his plan of salvation frees from convulsiveness (cf. Versteeg 1981:31). The knowledge that everything there is to say about mission ultimately goes back to the plan of salvation of God, and that this grounding of mission in the plan of salvation implies that God himself is the guarantor of its implementation, gives room to do mission. If God himself vouches for it, doing mission makes sense.

It is important to know that Luke's work is more than just historiography. Luke is aware that his readers face the characterisation Jesus gives of his followers in Acts 1:8, namely that they are his witnesses. The words spoken by Jesus to his disciples apply not only to the disciples, but also to the readers of the Book of Acts. They are also called to be witnesses, in the contemporary context in which they live. In that situation, Luke shows them that the events he describes are essentially not acts of men but acts of God. That is the encouragement Luke offers his readers. When God himself takes care of the execution of his plan in which he has destined salvation for Jews and Gentiles, the readers can and may take courage to continue their missionary activities themselves. They may know that, in pursuing those missionary activities if they allow themselves to be led by the Spirit of God, they are part of God's plan. God does not abandon what his hand began.

In the way in which Luke wrote Acts, pointing to and stressing the direct active involvement of God in the execution of his plan of salvation, he wants to encourage and empower the followers of Christ in his days and today in the fulfilment of their being the witnesses of Christ. Lukan-Acts ends with the note that Paul lived 2 whole years in Rome, welcoming all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance (Ac 28:30–31). This ending does not point to the end of the story that Luke recounts but spans the attention of the readers to what is to come. We do not know what happened to Paul after the 2 years mentioned by Luke, but the way in which he points to the ongoing of the preaching of Paul gives his readers the assurance that the work of God will go on. The last sentence of the Book of Acts in fact repeats and stresses again that God is at work, and he will continue with this work until the glorious completion on the day of Christ.

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