

MISSIOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS OF DAVID J. HESSELGRAVE

Apostolic Faith in the Book of Acts

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The Book of Acts is Luke's record of the progress of both the gospel and the church. Be prepared to discover a series of "new beginnings" here. At the same time, be cognizant of a single thread that is divinely woven through the Acts record and into the Epistles. There is an unbroken line of witness from the prophets of the Old Testament to Christ the Messiah and Savior of the Gospels to the apostolic witness in Acts and the Epistles and right down to the Christ the Lord of Lords and King of Kings in the Book of Revelation.

A most important concept to be kept in mind as we proceed with this missionary commentary is that of apostolicity. Jesus himself was the "*apostle* and high priest of our confession" (Heb. 3:1). At the very outset of his Acts record, Luke notes that Jesus had given commandments to his chosen *apostles* through the Holy Spirit (1:2). Then, in rapid succession, the *apostles* are re-commissioned (1:8); a new *apostle*, Matthias, is chosen (1:21-28); all gathered on Pentecost hear "the wonderful works of God" in their own language (2:11) and the *Apostle* Peter explains that this had been prophesied by Joel and David (2:16, 25-28, 34-35). As many as three thousand who "received his word" were baptized (2:41); they continued "in the *apostle's* doctrine and fellowship," and the Lord added to their number daily (2:47).

It's a most remarkable story made possible by the Holy Spirit who was at work first through the apostles and then through "ordinary" believers. And it is only the beginning! Those present on that first Pentecost in Jerusalem represented about fifteen different linguistic and geographical areas across the Roman Empire (2:5-11). Within one generation, the gospel had been proclaimed and believers gathered in churches from Syrian Antioch to Illyricum in the

vicinity of modern Trieste, and from Jerusalem to Rome and beyond. Over fifty place names appear in the Book of Acts!

Now it seems crystal clear that this achievement was possible because, in addition to the miraculous works of the Holy Spirit to which we often draw attention, the Holy Spirit also led those early believers to both maintain and proclaim apostolic teaching or doctrine on the one hand and demonstrate and live out apostolic teaching on the other. This was so in spite of considerable opposition and persecution from without the church and some defections and departures from the faith within it.

Why is this so important? Because subsequent history shows that Christian believers and churches tend to fall between two stools. Some encase apostolic doctrine in their creeds, confessions and statements of faith that are repeated in their worship and enshrined in their archives. But they do little to proclaim the gospel and plant churches among unreached peoples. Watch out! *Faith that is apostolic is faith that is proclaimed!*

Other churches shy away from, and even downgrade creeds and doctrine. They exult in “doing” church and in “outreach”! Watch out! *All Christian activism is not apostolic!*

In 1910 mission leaders met in a great conference in Edinburgh, Scotland. It had much to commend it, but it had no statement of faith and no definition of “mission”. Every participating church and missionary organization was free to determine and define “mission” as they desired. That proved to be a profound mistake. As we shall see in future studies, missions and missionaries that can legitimately lay claim to the word “Christian” must be “apostolic”.