

Acts 1:8—A Paradigm for Mission in West-Central Africa

By Kelvin Onongha

Adventist mission in West Central Africa has been plagued by issues such as dual allegiance and syncretism which in certain ways have resulted in retarded growth (in comparison with other younger Christian denominations) and dwarfed the faith experiences among church members. In contrast, the book of Acts showcases a mission template with unparalleled growth and pristine faith. The task of this paper is to demonstrate how Christ's promise and commission in Acts 1:8 can serve as a mandate and model for modern mission strategy in the sub-Saharan region of West Africa. Evangelization

in this sub-region will be more productive when ministers seek to appropriate the limitless power provided by the Lord, witness in relevant and relational ways, and take the gospel message right into the urban centers of today, as they meet needs where the gospel is preached. These implications are contained in the concise command issued by the Lord in Acts 1:8.

The book of Acts, perhaps more than any other book in the entire Bible, is a book on missions; the mission of God and that of the church. It begins by detailing the background of the birth of the church, showing how Christ before his ascension had given the apostles their commission to take the gospel into the entire world. Jesus did not only tell them *what* to do, but He told them *how* to accomplish the task through the agency of the Holy Spirit, allowing him to lead and direct. Furthermore, Jesus went on to tell his disciples *where* they were to begin their ministry; first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth. Christ did not stop there, for he also described the *when* of their mission; they were



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not to make a move until the Holy Spirit had come upon them.

While the reason or the *why* for the commission is not explicitly stated by Christ, it is evident in the preamble given at the beginning of the chapter when the author Luke states that Jesus, after the resurrection had several meals with the disciples in which he spoke about the kingdom of God. Therefore one can conclude that the commission given the disciples was to bring the kingdom of God to all humanity so that Christ could return to establish his reign upon the earth. Affirmation for this conclusion is given by Ben Witherington, when he states:

The subject of Jesus' messages after the resurrection is stated in verse three to be the dominion of God, which binds the context of Jesus' earthly teaching to that about which the disciples will instruct others to the very end of Acts. (Witherington 1998:109)

There appears to be several parallels between the world of the early church and that of modern Africa. Accordingly, a notable African scholar on African Traditional Religion (ATR), John Mbiti declares,

In reading some parts of the Bible, African Christians find many aspects of ancient Jewish life which are similar to their traditional life. This makes it easy for them to feel that the Bible belongs to them and they belong to the Bible. (Mbiti 1991:190)

As the disciples of Christ

carried the gospel out of Jerusalem they encountered diverse challenges and confronted various cultural issues. First, there was the challenge of heathenism which they dealt with by the means of power encounters (Acts 13:6-12; 16:16-18; 19:11, 12). Second, was the issue of dual allegiance which when resolved produced a feeling of fear in the eyes of the onlookers (Acts 5:1-11; 8:14-24; 19:13-17). Third, there was xenophobia that caused people to view the gospel and its messengers as agents of a new religion that sought to rob them of their culture and identity (Acts 17:5-9; 19:23-41). Fourth, it is also apparent that much of the ministry of the disciples centered on the major cities of the Roman world which then served as bases from which the gospel spread around the world (Acts 10, Caesarea; Acts 11, Antioch; Acts 14, Iconium; Acts 17, Thessalonica and Athens; Acts 18, Corinth; Acts 19, Ephesus). Finally, ministry was carried out in the ancient world against a backdrop of poverty, sickness, suffering, and unequal distribution of wealth which the Christian church tried to redress (Acts 2:44-46; Acts 3:1-10; 4:34-37; 6:1; 11:28).

From the Acts 1:8 passage there are three key phrases which are core concepts for present day mission to the continent of Africa. They are: "you will receive power," "you will be my witnesses," and "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and in Samaria."

These shape the thrust of this paper. In the first section, “you shall receive power,” the exigency for discovering and utilizing the limitless power provided by the Lord to counteract the sway of demonic forces which are a potent reality in the region will be examined.

“You Will Receive Power”

In the first key phrase to be considered is a promise given to the disciples that power would be given to assist in their missionary endeavor. The word power (gr. *dunamis*) is used 118 times

It is held in all African societies that there is power in the universe, and that it comes from God. It is a mystical power, in the sense that it is hidden and mysterious. This power is available to spirits and to certain human beings. People who have access to it are sometimes able to see the departed, hear certain voices, see certain sights (such as fire and light), have visions, communicate at a distance without using physical means, receive premonitions of coming events, foretell certain things before they happen, communicate with the invisible world, and perform “wonders” and “miracles” which other people may not ordinarily be able to do. (Mbiti 1991:41)

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in the New Testament and “suggests the inherent capacity of someone or something to carry something out, whether it be physical, spiritual, military or political” (Betz 1967:601-603). When used in the Synoptic Gospels and the book of Acts it “denotes the power of God . . . and the power which brings salvation to completion” (Betz 1967:603). This word *dunamis* has the same root as used for the English words “dynamo” and “dynamite” (Kisau 2006:1300). For Africans steeped in animism and possessing a magical worldview, the issue of power is of great significance. This is especially so because,

The fear of bad magic, sorcery, and witchcraft which brings maledictions and can generate diseases, sickness, barrenness, accidents, misfortune, suffering, and death is rife in the region. This dread drives the people in their quest for a religion that is powerful enough to afford them protection and security. Christian ministry in Africa, consequently, must appropriate the tremendous power promised and released by Jesus for the proclamation of the gospel and the advancement of the kingdom. Power encounters and demonstrations of the power of the Holy Spirit pervade the book of Acts (3:3-8; 4:23-30; 5:1-12;

6:6-8; 8:4-13; 9:32-41; 12:3-11; 13:6-12). Explanation for these manifestations may be found in the fact that the context in which the gospel message was presented was polytheistic and sometimes animistic; much akin to the sub-Saharan scenario.

Although the Scriptures clearly warn about the powerful phenomena that will attend demonic activities in the last days (Rev 13:13, 14; 16:13, 14), with the height of it being the impersonation of Christ by Satan himself (2 Cor 11:13, 14; 2 Thess 2:7-10), this should not preclude the need today for ministers of the Word to settle for listless, powerless,

and the malevolence of evil spirits, and that his salvation is a real liberation from the power of evil and death” (Lausanne Committee 1978:496).

Another reason why modern Africa needs a gospel of power is to counteract the visible effects of secularization that seeks to relegate Christianity to a “mere intellectual conviction, a religion of words largely devoid of power” (Wagner 1999:538). Such a phenomenon, according to Hiebert, is largely influenced by Western secular education and Western Christian missionaries whose theology excluded the middle level of the supernatural (Hie-

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and emotionless evangelization of the gospel, especially in the African context. Charles Kraft opines that for Christians today a missing element is “genuine New Testament power” which he describes as “the continual experience of the presence of God, who every day does things the world calls miracles” (Kraft 1999:413). The African who knows first hand the reality of evil powers needs a display of Christ’s power “to see that his power is superior to magic and voodoo, the curses and blessings of witch doctors,

bert 1999:418). The result of this powerless proclamation is dual allegiance where Christians worship the God of heaven but still find need for the services of local diviners, witch doctors, or traditional healers to answer the problems of day-to-day living. The other effect is that of syncretism in which the African Christian seeks to control God for his own purposes through chants and formulas (Hiebert 1999:420) and other religious means.

Besides simply demonstrating the power of the gospel over

traditional religion, Christian witness must be relevant and relational to be effective. In the following section, “you shall be my witnesses,” the importance of this is demonstrated against the backdrop of the African context.

“You Shall Be My Witnesses”

The second important phrase in Acts 1:8 that is vital for ministry in the region of West and Central Africa today is the role of witnesses. The Greek word *martureo* means “to bear witness,” or “testify” (Trites 1967:1038). Etymologically, *martus* came from the root *smer*, which meant “to bear in mind,” “to remember,” “to be careful” (Strathmann 1976:475). *Martus* is derived from the word group *martures* which first acquired its specific importance in biblical theology in the New Testament in Acts and the Johannine literature (Trites 1967:1042). Out of its 76 instances in the New Testament, *martureo* occurs in 11 instances in the book of Acts. Although the proper sphere for the word is in the legal area, “it denotes one who can and does speak from personal experience about actions in which he took part and which happened to him, or about persons and relations known to him” (Strathmann 1976:476).

Undoubtedly, among the factors that must have given power and credence to the proclamation of the gospel by the apostles was the fact that for them these were events and incidences that they

had witnessed first-hand (2 Pet 1:16; John 1:14; 1 John 1:1). The missionary charge to the apostolic band is repeated with the phrase “you shall be my witnesses” (*esesthe mou martures*), the primary thought being that they can and will proclaim from first hand knowledge the story of Jesus (Lenski 1964:32).

The implications of this for missions in Africa are significant. Rather than presenting the gospel in a dry, formal, and impersonal manner, the ebullient, gregarious nature of the African demands a different approach. Specially, qualified persons are needed who have experienced personally the power of God’s salvation, those who are first-hand witnesses of his glory, who speak not just about “doctrines, myths, or speculations” but speak in the first person about a God they have truly come to know. One may even recommend that a prerequisite for missions in this region of Africa should involve a profile that displays a personal experience of the power, greatness, mercy, grace, and glory of the Lord in the life of the minister or missionary for their mission to be truly successful.

Also, because the African traditional life is simple, oral, and thrives on story-telling, modern day missionaries in Africa should endeavor to share the message of the gospel in story form. Furthermore, the history of redemption must be seen as a story of God reaching out to human beings. What this suggests is that the

conventional, rational, didactic approach should give way to a more relational way of reaching out to the African audience.

A careful survey of the witnessing methods of the disciples proves instructive: the sermons were simple, light on theology, and heavy on testimonies (see Acts 2:14-36, 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 10:34-42; 13:16-42). Far from being doctrinal treatises, the witness of the disciples of Christ through the book of Acts showed sensitivity to the context and needs of the community in which they found themselves. While the place of theology in missions can not be controverted, there is need for messages and ministry programs that are relevant, wholesome, and engaging for the local community. Mission strategy in West-Central Africa may prove more effective today when the pattern followed by the apostles of Christ in witnessing, by teaching the Word, and healing the people as Jesus did, is imitated. In addition, providing biblical answers to the everyday questions of the people will serve as a counteractive agent against the problem of dual allegiance that leads young Christians to continue visiting shamans and magicians (Hiebert 1999:419).

Another facet of witnessing involves taking the gospel mandate to the present urban settings in the African context. Carrying out this mandate in the local context will involve considering the language of communication as well as the needs of the community.

The next section is concerned with the context of mission in Africa.

“In Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria”

The last phrase in Jesus' commission in Acts 1:8 will be the consideration of this final section. The Lord's injunction to the disciples was for them to begin their witness from Jerusalem, then to Judea, Samaria, and finally to the uttermost parts of the earth. A cursory reading of Acts reveals that just as Jesus had commanded, the gospel of the kingdom began its spread from Jerusalem, from there to Judea, then Samaria, until eventually the entire world in the days of the apostles had an opportunity to hear the gospel of the kingdom personally (Acts 2:5-41; 5:27, 28; 8:1-4; Col 1:6).

Presently, in missiological circles fulfilling the gospel commission is taken to mean preaching in the languages of the local people wherever they are found. This process which entails learning the language and culture of the indigenous peoples may prove a very onerous task. Diversity in the groups is reflected in the languages spoken and “more than 1,000 languages are spoken in Africa south of the Sahara” (Bradshaw, White, and Dymond 2004:365). It is also “not uncommon for more than 20 or more languages to be spoken in one large state” (Rowntree, Lewis, Price, and Wyckoff 2000:211).

One strange twist remaining from the colonial period appears

to have a positive advantage to missions in Africa. European countries used their languages for administrative purposes and for the education of the local people. In the post-colonial period most sub-Saharan countries have continued to use the language of the former colonizers for government and for higher education (Bradshaw, White, and Dymond 2000:234). A major reason for this is because “few of these new states had a clear majority language that they could employ, and picking any minority tongue would have aroused the opposition of other peoples” (Bradshaw, White, and Dymond 2000:234).

2000:219), and today it is considered to be among the mega-cities of the world, which typically have over 20 million people. Fantu Cheru in his article, “Globalization and Uneven Urbanization in Africa: The Limits to Better Urban Governance in the Provision of Basic Services,” reports that by 2010 approximately 55 percent of Africans will be residing in cities (Cheru 2009).

The commission given by Jesus to his disciples implied that cities, which were centers of commerce, learning, and culture, were not to be overlooked in the propagation of the gospel. Disciples today need to realize that

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Besides the language challenge in the West-Central African region, another issue looming on the horizon is that of urbanization. Most of the sub-Saharan cities have been growing at twice the national growth rates resulting in half of the region’s population expected to be living in cities by 2025 (Bradshaw, White, and Dymond 2000:219). Sub-Saharan’s largest city, Lagos, in 1960 was a city of 1 million, but by 2000, 12 million inhabitants was its projected population (Bradshaw, White, and Dymond

there is a vast mission field right at their doorstep in the cities and urban centers. Cities, ancient and modern, have always had a powerful attraction for Africans. Interestingly, “many of the oldest urban landscapes occur in Western Africa,” and these include the trading centers of Timbuktu, Sokoto, and Kano (Bradshaw, White, and Dymond 2004:395). As seats of government, highways of commerce, and places of opportunities, there is constant migration to the cities by those in search of a better life. This movement

comes with its own toll. Cities in the region have certain sections that are characterized by squalor, poverty, crime, and violence. Among the diseases that plague the region are malaria, sleeping sickness, river blindness (Blij and Mueller 1991:395), and recently the monumental scourge of HIV/AIDS. African cities should be the new centers for mission. Viv Grigg in his article, "Sorry . . . The Frontier Has Moved," states that unfortunately "as mission leaders we have failed to foresee both the immensity of urban growth and the fact that most of the urban growth would be in squatter ar-

areas were the kind of places where the people Jesus loved to minister to were found. This is where real ministry in the African context is found.

Conclusion

The passage under study has been considered to be the summary of the events in the entire book of Acts (Kisau 2006:1300), but it also serves as a viable and recommended model for Adventist missions in West-Central Africa. To stem the problems of dual allegiance and stagnation in growth, ministers and missionaries evangelizing in the region need

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reas." He wryly observes, "People are being thrust out to the last frontier, but the last frontier has moved" (Grigg 2009).

In sending the disciples to Jerusalem, surely Jesus must have known a famine was impending and consequently there would be many poor to be fed. In sending the disciples to Judea and Samaria, certainly he must have anticipated the confrontations they would have with evil spirits and magic, but had he not made provision by the promise of power? The inner cities, the squatter dwellings, the tenement

to better appropriate God's power and seek more relevant avenues to minister as they commence intentional programs in urban ministries. The Seventh-day Adventist Church must seek the power of the Holy Spirit, must witness contextually to the people, and must respond to the needs of the populace found in the cities in the region. If it ministers in this way, the experience of the disciples of old will be replicated in the ministries of modern day missionaries who choose to follow this pattern. The result, as then, will be spectacular and praiseworthy.

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