WHAT LUKE DOESN'T TELL US

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Category: Observations

It is often pointed out that the book that we call The Acts of the Apostles might be better titled the Acts of the Holy Spirit or the Acts of the Risen Christ. Whatever you think of these suggestions, the normal title is slightly strange because for over half of the book's length it does not tell us about the Apostles, but about one Apostle; Paul.

From chapter 13 onward, Luke focuses his gaze on Paul and his travels around the Eastern Mediterranean and from then on in, Peter, James, John and the other disciples hardly get a look in. There are a couple of good reasons for this, firstly the text is inspired and this is what God wanted us to know and secondly, Luke was a good researcher and reported on things that he knew about (he travelled with Paul, for some of the time). However, this does mean that there is an awful lot about the very early history of the Church that we do not know. Did Thomas really go to India as tradition suggests? What did John (and was it actually the Apostle John?) do to end up in exile on Patmos? Did Peter get to Rome? What about all of the other followers of Jesus who are mentioned in the Gospels but not in Acts?

Obviously, it is not essential that we know these things otherwise they would have been included in the inspired text. However, as we read the second half of Acts, it is important to remember that we are not hearing the whole story, even if we don't know what the whole story is.

It is commonly said that Paul is the "greatest missionary". Leaving aside the archaism involved in using a modern term to describe what Paul did, this may or may not be true. Paul certainly was remarkable, but if Thomas planted churches as far afield as India and Mark (as some traditions suggest) reached Armenia, then Paul has serious rivals for the top-missionary spot.

We know what Paul was up to, but we don't know much about how the tens, hundreds or even thousands of other Christians were spreading the gospel around the world. Where did the Christians in Rome who welcomed Paul come from? Who shared the good news with them before Paul arrived? Commentators make more or less educated guesses, but we simply don't know.

There is a point to this. Over two thousand years, Christian writers and chroniclers have talked about the spread of the Christian faith, focusing in on well-known people. Patrick, Boniface, Francis, Carey, Hudson-Taylor and so on. But, just as in Paul's day, there are hosts of unnamed believers who have spread the gospel around the world whose names don't appear in the history books. These famous missionaries acted as catalysts, but it is the labours of multitudes of every-day Christians that has led to the spread of the gospel around the world. The growth of the church globally has never been about professional, full-time missionaries - whatever the biographies/hagiographies tell us.

Because we focus on Paul and on the great names in history we forget the role of the vast majority of missionaries whose names are found in the book of life, if not in church history books. Not only that, be we feel that we can safely sub-contract mission to the professionals, forgetting (or perhaps never realising) that is and always has been the domain of the everyday Christian.