ACTS AND MISSION 1: INTRODUCTION

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The book of Acts tells the story of the apostles bearing witness to Jesus in the power of the Spirit by the will of the Father. The book is about people, but behind it all lies the Triune God.
Category: Observations

Over the years, I've written a good number of blog posts based on the book of Acts, you can find most of them here. Over the next few weeks or months, I will be working through the whole of the book in a more or less systematic way, bringing out key themes which relate to mission and to mission experience. To some extent, this will involve recycling old blog posts, but for the most part, I will be writing new material. I will continue to blog on other subjects as well, I'll keep returning to Acts. This won't be a commentary and IÂ have no intention of writing about every verse (I might even skip the odd chapter) as my approach will be thematic more than sequential.

Acts starts off at breakneck speed. The first ten verses cover Luke's introduction to the book, Jesus' interactions with his disciples between the time of his resurrection and ascension and his ascension itself, including his last words to his followers. An awful lot is crammed into a very small space. However, Luke also draws in two themes which recur throughout the whole of the book which need to be highlighted as we will be returning to them repeatedly.

The Triumph of the Triune God

In his introduction, Luke presents Acts as the follow up to his Gospel which told the story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is tempting to see Acts as carrying on in that same theme, presenting the story of what Jesus did after his ascension into heaven; certainly, there is some truth in that approach. However, others have seen the prominence of the Holy Spirit throughout the book of Acts as being key; more than one author has suggested that rather than the Acts of the Apostles, the book should be retitled the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Again, there is some value in that approach, too.

However, I'd like to suggest that both of these approaches stem from a tendency to focus on the individual persons of the Godhead rather than on the Trinity as a whole. There is no need to debate whether Jesus or the Spirit (or indeed the Father) is prominent; there is one God and he is in focus. Let's just take a brief look at a few verses from the introduction:

> *On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: â€˜Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.â€™*
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> *Then they gathered round him and asked him, â€˜Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?â€™*
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> *He said to them: â€˜It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.â€™ (Acts 1:4-8)*

Jesus starts by telling the disciples not to leave Jerusalem until they have received the Holy Spirit from the Father. Then when the disciples ask when he is going to restore Israel, he answers that it is the Father who decides the times for these things and that when the disciples receive the Spirit they will witness to Jesus throughout the world. Father, Son and Spirit are all intimately involved in the work that Jesus is passing on to his disciples. Calling the book the Acts of the Apostles is entirely appropriate, the book is about Peter, Paul, Barnabas and so on; it tells their story. However, the story it tells is about them bearing witness to Jesus in the power of the Spirit by the will of the Father. The book is about people, but behind it all lies the Triune God.

Gentiles Too

The second thing to highlight is that the book of Acts involves the Gospel going out to the Gentiles.

> *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. (Acts 1:8)*

Jesus confined his ministry almost entirely to the Jewish people. He had a brief interaction with a Syro-Phonecian woman and some Greeks, but he was actually quite insistent that he had come to minister to the people of Israel. When he sent his disciples out in small groups, told them to travel around Israel. Now, we have him saying that his disciples would be going to the "ends of the earth". The point to note here is that the ends of the earth were not populated by Jews, but by Gentiles. Jesus was telling his disciples that they would be doing something which he, himself, had not done. When we look at these verses, we tend to focus on the geography of it all, but the anthropology - the people - is just as important, if not more so. It is hard for us to grasp how radical and difficult this was for the disciples. Orthodox Jews did not mix or socialise with Gentiles and yet Jesus is implying that this is exactly what his followers will have to do. Not surprisingly, they found it very difficult. Initially, the disciples stayed firmly in Jerusalem and it wasn't until persecution struck in Acts 8 that the outward movement to Samaria and the ends of the earth got kick-started. Even then, it was far from smooth going and much of the book of Acts and a good slice of Paul's letters (especially Galatians) is concerned with the struggles faced by believers from strict Jewish backgrounds having to get to grips with this new reality.