



“Pray to the Lord of the Harvest”

Prayer and Christian Mission in the Book of Acts

HAROLD L. SENKBEIL

When bedlam breaks loose, it’s essential that Christians not only maintain inner peace and equilibrium, but also find direction and purpose. In times of worldwide pandemic and social upheaval, both are threatened. A fresh look at prayer in the book of Acts may be just what the doctor ordered—Dr. Luke, that is.

Luke, generally regarded as the author of the Gospel that bears his name as well as the book of Acts,¹ was the apostle Paul’s faithful and invaluable assistant, according to Colossians 4:14, where Paul calls him “the beloved physician.” His medical training served him well. Scholars note that Luke alone among the four Gospel writers uses the technical terminology

of the medicine of his time to describe the human ailments Jesus healed in the miracle narratives.

Looking at prayer in Acts, we find a good prescription for stability in an uncertain world of moral chaos and social injustice. Our ancestors in the faith faced threats similar to ours, both political and social. Externally, they were persecuted by governing authorities and an antagonistic pagan culture. Internally, their unity was threatened by racial animosity and social-class distinctions. Our contemporary challenges may seem new to us, but they are not new to the holy Christian church.

CONTEXTUAL MISSION

Faithful and careful study of the biblical text in its historical context charts a course for confident mission in the stormy seas of our present tumult. Text and context are perpetually in dialogue. The eternal

message of the gospel needs to connect with the context of every passing era. Yet we must never adjust that message to accommodate the contextual preferences of our contemporaries. Faithful mission, while culture-sensitive, is never culture-specific.

It does not design separate churches to fit each human cultural context, but rather incorporates every nation, tribe, people, and language into the church's unique culture that transcends time and space—the culture of the word of God. Acts' teaching on prayer is rooted in this text-oriented mission focus.

Christ's ministry as set forth in Luke-Acts pivots around mission. Luke concludes the first volume of his work with Jesus' ascension into heaven (Luke 24:50–53). Likewise, he begins his second volume with the ascension (Acts 1:9–11). Luke's mission framework is more closely tied to Easter and Pentecost than is Matthew's more familiar "great commission" (Matt 28:19–20). The implications are clear: while the apostles are to preach to all nations the message of Jesus crucified and risen—a message of "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Luke 24:47)—they must stay in Jerusalem until Jesus empowers them by his promised Spirit (24:49).

In both volumes of Luke-Acts, mission is Jerusalem-centric. In Luke, Jesus outlines the preaching mission to all nations beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:48). Then in Acts he more explicitly maps out a mission strategy flowing out from Jerusalem in concentric circles: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

The entire book of Acts may be read as the record of how the apostolic church—at first through ministry by the 12 apostles, then in particular through the miraculous conversion and ministry of Paul—fulfilled this mission directive of the Lord Jesus:

- The church in Jerusalem (1:1–8:3)
- The church in Judaea and Samaria (8:4–12:25)
- Paul's missions to the Gentiles (13:1–21:16)
- Paul in Jerusalem (21:17–26:32)
- Paul's journey to Rome (27:1–28:31)²

Clearly the book of Acts is a mission text. It provides remarkable help to us today, because our contemporary neo-pagan context closely parallels the ancient pagan world of the apostolic era. Our challenge is essentially the same as theirs: How will

we connect the text of God's word to a cultural context seemingly impervious to it?

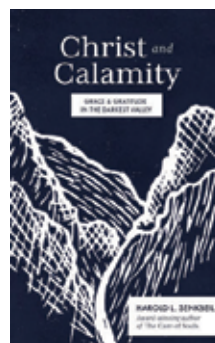
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PRAYER AND MISSION

The remarkable emphasis placed on prayer in Acts is part of the answer. Effective mission is always grounded in a rich and vibrant life of prayer. Prayer is referenced in some form 10 times in Matthew, 12 times in Mark, and five times in John. But Luke mentions prayer no less than 19 times in his Gospel, and 32 times in Acts!

The lesson we need to learn is strikingly clear: the church's mission is always God's mission, never ours. God's kingdom comes all by itself without our prayer, but Jesus invites us to pray that it may come among us and through us: "Pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest" (Luke 10:2).

Throughout Acts we can see that the earliest generation of the church took the mission mandate of Jesus and his prayer invitation equally seriously. In each of the major divisions of the book, prayer features prominently in the evangelization of both Jews and gentiles, as well as their catechesis and incorporation into the one body of the worshiping Christian community.



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THE MISSION IN JERUSALEM

Even prior to Pentecost, the apostles were “devoted” to prayer. (Acts 1:14) They prayed before casting lots to choose one of the two nominees to fill Judas’ position among the Twelve (1:24). On the day of Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, visiting Jews from many nations dwelling in Jerusalem heard the disciples telling the mighty works of God in their own indigenous languages (1:7–11). After Peter’s Pentecost sermon, about 3,000 souls were baptized and added to the church. These new believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (2:42)—likely the customary prayers of God’s people, the psalms prayed in temple worship and synagogue alike.

Yet opposition to the gospel quickly arose in Jerusalem. Peter and John were arrested for preaching the gospel in the temple precincts after they healed a lame beggar in Jesus’ name (4:1–4). Fearing popular protest, the temple rulers released them after prohibiting further preaching of the gospel (4:13–22). When Peter and John reported this threat, the company of believers prayed for their protection and courage:

“And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus.” (4:29–30)

As the Jerusalem church grew despite persecution, the Twelve were overwhelmed with administrative duties, so the church chose seven godly men to assist them. These deacons were put before the apostles, who consecrated them for service by prayer and the laying on of hands (6:6).

THE MISSION IN JUDEA AND SAMARIA

After the stoning of Stephen, one of the seven deacons, the church in Jerusalem came under more intense persecution so that all except the apostles were disbursed throughout Judea and Samaria (8:1–3). Through Philip’s preaching in Samaria, many were converted, healed, baptized, and cleansed, and added to the church. Peter and John were sent from Jerusalem by the apostolic council, who prayed for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon them (8:15). Prayer also features significantly in the raising of Dorcas (9:40), the inauguration of the mission to the gentiles (10:9), and the arrest and subsequent release of Peter from prison (12:5).

PAUL’S GENTILE MISSION

Paul and Barnabas were commissioned as missionaries to the gentiles by the church in Antioch with fasting and prayer (13:1–3). Actively proclaiming the gospel throughout the Macedonian peninsula, Paul and Silas ran afoul of the authorities in Philippi, but even their prison cell was sanctified by word and prayer: “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (16:25). Paul takes his leave of the pastors of Ephesus in a tearful farewell at the port of Miletus, kneeling together dockside in prayer before embarking on his final journey (20:36–38).

The rest, as the saying goes, is history. Paul’s final missionary journey, having begun in Jerusalem, ends in Rome with him under house arrest. But the gospel is never bound, as he reminds Timothy (2 Tim 2:9). Even while awaiting the outcome of his appeal to Caesar, Paul carried on his countercultural mission of proclaiming a transcultural gospel to both

Jews and gentiles (Rom 1:16). The final verses of Luke’s remarkable mission narrative show how God fulfilled his mission despite the formidable obstacles Paul faced in Rome. “He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (28:30–31).

OUR MISSION

All these things were written for our learning (Rom 15:4). What can we learn for our own prayers from this brief study? It seems to me at least four things:

1. God’s mission is uppermost. The private needs of every Christian fit into the corporate life of Christ’s church (Acts 4:26–30).
2. Corporate prayer accompanies the proclamation of God’s word as the church’s public witness to Jesus Christ (Acts 16:25).
3. While signs and wonders (miraculous healings, linguistic miracles, etc.) were done through the apostles as Jesus’ emissaries, we should not

expect them to continue beyond the apostolic age (2 Cor 12:12).

4. However, because no one can confess Jesus as Lord apart from the intervention of the Holy Spirit, we should continually invoke his blessing on every missionary endeavor (1 Cor 12:2; Luke 11:13).

In these chaotic times we too can be bold and confident because of God’s gracious purpose in Christ Jesus—rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, constant in prayer (Rom 12:12). It’s harvest time. Keep on praying to the Lord of the harvest! 🌾

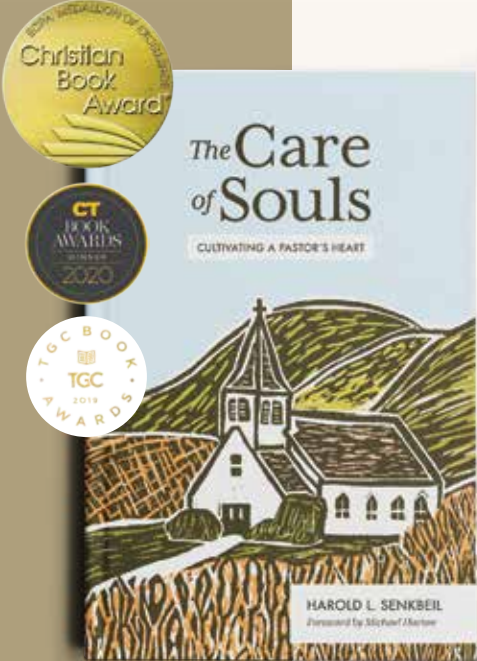
Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version.


¹ Both books are inscribed to the unknown benefactor “Theophilus” (Luke 1:3-4; Acts 1:1-2).

² J. D. Barry, D. Mangum, D. R. Brown, et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).



Harold L. Senkbeil is author of the award-winning book *The Care of Souls: Cultivating a Pastor’s Heart* (Lexham Press, 2019). He is executive director emeritus of Doxology: The Lutheran Center for Spiritual Care. His pastoral experience of nearly five decades includes parish ministry, the seminary classroom, and parachurch leadership.





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