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The Word of the Lord Grew

The Historical Character of the New Testament Word

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EDITORIAL NOTE: This article is the first chapter of the author's forthcoming book in the area of New Testament Introduction.

THE Word of the Lord grew" — three times in the Book of Acts Luke uses this sentence to sum up a period of the history of the first church (Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20). These words are a telling expression of the Biblical conception of the divine Word. Our Lord Himself compared the Word to a seed that is sown and sprouts and grows: "The seed is the Word of God" (Luke 8:11). The Word of the Lord is a power and is active; it "prevails mightily," as Luke puts it in one of the passages just referred to (Acts 19:20). Paul speaks of the Gospel as "bearing fruit and growing" (Col. 1:6), and Peter speaks of the "living and abiding Word of God" as an "imperishable seed." (1 Peter 1:23)

This "living and active" Word (Heb. 4:12) is therefore a force in history; it "speeds on" in the world and "triumphs" there (2 Thess. 3:1), in time and place and among men; it is enmeshed in events, tied up with the world, and it involves people. The Word of God is action; for God is not a lecturer but the God who is "working still," as Jesus said of His Father and of Himself the Son (John 5:17). God is the Lord of all history, reveals Himself by His mighty acts in history, and the Word which He gives His prophets to utter interprets those acts and makes them an enduring force in the world. His Word and His work are so closely connected that both the Old Testament and the New Testament speak of God's great acts simply as the activity of His *Word*. Psalm 107, which praises the LORD as the Deliverer from all evils, describes His act of delivering those who "because of their iniquities suffered affliction . . . and drew near the gates of death" with the words, "He *sent forth His Word* and healed them, and delivered

them from destruction" (Ps. 107:17-22). And Peter in his sermon in the house of Cornelius can sum up the whole story of the sending of the Son of God into the world thus: "You know the *Word* which He [God] sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ." (Acts 10:36)

If, then, we are to hear the divine Word of our New Testament on its own terms (and that is the whole task and function of interpretation), we must study it historically. We must learn to see it as the growing and working divine Word, as God Himself active in history. We must come to know it and comprehend it as a word that has its point of origin (as a divine word) in human history, as a word that gets its form and its contours from history, as a word that is essentially history (a recital of "the mighty works of God," Acts 2:11), and as a word that has history-making power, as a dynamic and creative personal power of God at work among men.

Students of comparative religion tell us that the Book of Acts is unique in the history of religions. Nowhere else in the religious life of man do we find this sober and religious sense of history, this absolute conviction that God is the God of history, who clothes Himself in a garment of mighty deeds in order to reveal Himself to men, the conviction of faith that His Word is a force, is in fact *the* force in history. The Book of Acts is therefore uniquely valuable for our study of the whole New Testament. It is valuable because it provides us with the historical information which is indispensable for reconstructing the historical background of many New Testament books, especially the letters of Paul. But not only for that reason; we appreciate and value the Book of Acts as students of history, of course; but we are never merely historians when we seek to interpret the New Testament—we are always first and foremost theologians and believers, for whom the historical is a means to a higher end, the end, namely, that we hear the New Testament speak to us as the living voice of God *now*. And it is to the theologian and believer that the Book of Acts is really uniquely valuable. Since it is the history of the first church, conceived of and told, not as the history of another religious society but as the history of the growth, the progress, and the triumph of

the divine Word, the Book of Acts can determine not only the method of our study but also the basically religious attitude of our study.

Thus the first twelve chapters of the Book of Acts will provide us with the materials which enable us to reconstruct the historical setting and the original function of the Epistle of James and will give us an insight into the genesis and the background of the mission to the Gentiles which gave rise to the letters of Paul; but we shall do well to use these twelve chapters first as a means of getting a basic, theological insight into the character of the New Testament Word of God. This does not mean that we ignore the historical; it does mean that we see in history the revelation of God, our God. "When my love walks, she treads upon the ground," a poet once said in appreciation of a lady who was less "heavenly" than the lady-loves of more exuberant poets. We might say the same of our God: "When our God walks, He treads upon the ground." He does not remain a remote and shadowy sort of philosopher's God; He condescends to enter history and does His gracious work there, for us men and for our salvation. If we study historically the life of the first church and the nature of the apostolic proclamation which called that first church into being, we shall be enabled to hear God speaking to us now.

I

THE LIFE OF THE FIRST CHURCH

A. *The New People of God Under the Lordship of Jesus Christ*

What sort of life was this life of the first church, that life which was the historical framework of our New Testament, the seedbed in which it sprouted and grew? Its first and most obvious characteristic is that it is a life wholly dominated by the Lord Jesus Christ. Luke makes it very plain that the book of Acts (which is the second book of a two-volume work of which his Gospel is the first) is the direct continuation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ: "In the first book . . . I have dealt with all that Jesus *began* to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). The human figure of Peter may loom large on the stage of history in the first part (chaps. 1—12) and that of Paul

in the second (chaps. 13—28); but they are both dwarfed by, and completely subordinated to, Him who is the real and sole Actor in this Book of Acts, this Jesus who continues to do and to teach. It is His Word that grows and speeds and triumphs here, not Peter's or Paul's, a fact which Peter and Paul are the first to assert.

His Word grows; His will is done. For He is the exalted Lord of invincible majesty, the Lord who has been "taken up" into heaven, to the world of God (Acts 1:2; 1:9; 1:11), "exalted at the right hand of God" (Acts 2:33) as "Leader and Savior" (Acts 5:31), the "Lord of all" (Acts 10:36). The dying Stephen prays to this Lord, just as Jesus Himself had on the cross prayed to His Father. (Acts 7:59, 60; cf. Luke 23:34, 46)

He is the exalted Lord by virtue of His resurrection from the dead: "This Jesus God raised up. . . . Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God. . . . God has made Him both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:32, 33, 36). It is the God who has raised Him from the dead, who has exalted Jesus as Leader and Savior at His right hand (Acts 5:30, 31). "God raised Him on the third day and made Him manifest" (Acts 10:40). The exalted Lord is the Lord risen from the dead; that ties Him firmly and forever to the Lord who was made man for us men and for our salvation, to the Lord Jesus who went in and out among His disciples, whom John the Baptist heralded and proclaimed (Acts 1:21, 22), the *man* Jesus of Nazareth whom God attested to Israel with mighty works done in the midst of the men of Israel (Acts 2:22), the Jesus of Nazareth whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil. (Acts 10:38)

He is Lord because He went that way of gracious ministry to the utmost; He is the Chief Stone of the new temple of God because He was the Stone rejected by the builders (Acts 4:10, 11), because He was betrayed by His own disciple, arrested by His own people (Acts 1:16), and killed and crucified. (Acts 2:23; 3:13-15; 4:10; 7:52)

The new people of God know and proclaim their Lord as the Servant of God; the term "Servant" is used more frequently of Him in these early chapters of Acts than anywhere else in the

New Testament (Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30; cf. 8:32, 33). No other single term could, perhaps, so fully denote His peculiar and all-encompassing Lordship as this one. For with this term Jesus was proclaimed as the fulfillment of those prophecies of Isaiah which fixed the hope of God's people on the Servant of the LORD, that servant whom the LORD endowed with His Spirit for a mission of merciful ministry to all nations in order that He might be "a Covenant to the people" Israel (that is, that He might bring about fully and forever the intent of God's covenant-mercy and covenant-fidelity for God's chosen people), and in order that He might be "a Light to the nations"—that in Him the dawn of God's great day of salvation might break on all men everywhere (Is. 42:1-9). The Servant is described by the prophet as going down into the depths of humiliation and rejection in His ministry (Is. 49:4, 7; 50:6), a ministry whose goal is the restoration of Israel and the salvation of all nations, that the LORD'S "salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Is. 49:6). The Servant is pictured by the prophet as going through ministry and humiliation to a triumphant exaltation:

Behold, My Servant shall prosper,
He shall be exalted and lifted up,
and shall be very high . . .

kings shall shut their mouths because of Him. (Is. 52:13, 15)

But the triumph is not His until He has gone the downward way of ministry to the full, not only "despised and rejected by men" (Is. 53:3) but bruised and put to grief by the LORD Himself (Is. 53:10), who numbers Him with the transgressors (Is. 53:12) and lays upon Him and punishes in Him the iniquity of all (Is. 53:5, 6). Only when the Servant has gone down into a vicarious, penal, atoning death for a sinful people, only when He has borne the sins of many, led like a lamb to the slaughter for their guilt, only then does He rise to new life and triumph (Is. 53:11, 12). With the term "Servant" the apostles and the new people of God after them could sum up the whole glory of their Lord; the glory of the ministering Messiah, the crucified Messiah, the risen Messiah, the exalted Messiah were all comprehended in that term; and the dark mystery of His cross was illumined by it.

The prophet had said of the Servant:

When He makes Himself an offering for sin,
 He shall see His offspring, He shall prolong His days;
 the will of the LORD shall prosper in His hand;
 He shall see the fruit of the travail of His soul and be satisfied.

(Is. 53:10, 11)

The Servant-Messiah of the new people of God is anything but a mere memory for them; He is for them no departed hero, no commemorated martyr. He is their present, living, and actively working Lord. Peter tells the people, "God, having raised up His Servant, sent Him to you first, *to bless you*" (Acts 3:26). We can see this actively-blessing character of the church's Lord clearly in the way in which Luke speaks of His "name" in Acts; for the "name" of God in Biblical language means God turned toward men, God entering into communion with man, God making and shaping man's history; so also the "name" of the Lord Jesus Christ signifies the Lord in action. If a miracle is done "in the name" of the Lord Jesus, if Peter says to the lame man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (Acts 3:6), that means: the Lord who in the days of His flesh went about doing good is still graciously and omnipotently at work in the world; the Author of Life is restoring God's ruined creation to full and whole life (Acts 3:15, 16; 4:10; 9:34). Men must call on the name of Him whom God has made both Lord and Christ if they would be saved (Acts 2:21, 36); they are summoned to repent and to be baptized in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38); for everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name (10:43). In Jesus Christ, through His active grace in Baptism and the Word, men are saved from judgment (Acts 2:40), brought to God, reconciled, forgiven, made members of the new people of God. Salvation is in His name and in His alone (Acts 4:12), for He is God's own royal and lavish grace in person; He is the present kingdom of God; when Luke says of Philip that he "preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" in Samaria (Acts 8:12), he is not implying that Philip's preaching had two themes (Philip had but one theme — "he proclaimed to them Christ," Acts 8:5) but is describing the one theme of his preaching

in two ways. "The name of Jesus Christ" is another way of saying "the kingdom of God." Where the Lord Jesus is at work, there God Himself is at work establishing His royal reign of grace among men.

The exalted Lord works in history, through men. Men are His "instruments" (Acts 9:15), whom He chooses in sovereign grace — the persecutor Saul must bow before that royal grace and carry this Lord's name "before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel" and must suffer for the sake of that name (Acts 9:15, 16). He makes men His apostles, messengers who are determined wholly by the will of the Sender and are completely dependent upon Him, wholly obedient to Him. As such they speak His Word and represent Him and confront men with Him. The apostles' deeds of power are therefore the Lord's deeds; "many wonders and signs were done *through the apostles*" (Acts 2:43; 5:12). Concerning the lame man whom he had healed Peter tells the rulers, elders, and scribes, "By the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, *by Him* this man is standing before you well" (Acts 4:10). Perhaps the most striking expression of the fact that the apostle is the "chosen instrument" of the Lord Jesus Christ (no less than that but also only that) is in the words which Peter spoke at the bedside of the paralytic man at Lydda: "Aeneas, *Jesus Christ heals you*" (Acts 9:34). As instruments of the Lord the apostles are completely selfless: "Why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk?" Peter says to astounded people in Solomon's portico (Acts 3:12). And when Cornelius fell down at Peter's feet, Peter responded with, "Stand up; I, too, am a man" (Acts 10:25, 26). It is because the apostles are the self-effacing, chosen instruments of the Lord, because they are no more and no less than the human vehicles of the Lord's presence, that their word shapes and directs the whole life of the new community: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching." (Acts 2:42)

The apostles are not religious geniuses, whose insights enrich and enlarge the accumulated religious stores of mankind; they are recipients of revelation, witnesses to a Person and an act in history — and this Person and this act completely overshadow and dominate them. They are important, not for themselves but for

what they bear witness to. They receive divine power for one purpose only, for witnessing (Acts 1:8). In fact, the Lord must completely invert their own human thinking before He can use them as chosen instruments. They are curious as to times and seasons, and they think of a reign in Israel: "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6); he turns their thoughts from curiosity as to times and seasons to a sober submission to the sovereign will of the Father, from the idea of reign to the duty of ministry, from the narrow horizon of Israel to the wide world. They are to be His witnesses, not only in the land and among the people they know and love, but also to the Samaritans whom they hated, and to the ends of the earth, the wide world of the Gentiles, about whom they were by nature indifferent (Acts 1:8). The Lord sets them to witnessing to Jew and to Gentile, for He is Lord of all (Acts 10:36) and determines all history. The eighth verse of the first chapter of Acts not only indicates the plan of the Book of Acts; it marks out the course of all history for the church, until the time when the Son of Man returns to end and judge and crown all history.

Thus the life of the new people of God is a life under the Lordship of Jesus Christ; the men upon whom God's new day has dawned behold "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God *in the face of Christ*," as Paul puts it (2 Cor. 4:6). But they behold the glory of God; the Lordship of Jesus does not obscure God but reveals Him; the name of Jesus is the revelation of the kingdom of God (Acts 8:12; cf. 28:31); to be under the Lordship of Jesus is to live a life in communion with God.

The same history which reveals Jesus as Lord and Christ reveals God the King as the gracious and omnipotent Lord of history. God foretold the coming of His Christ, His anointed King, "by the mouth of all His prophets" (Acts 3:18; 4:25, 26). God attested the man Jesus of Nazareth with mighty works and wonders and signs (Acts 2:22); God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power, God "was with Him" (Acts 10:38). When Jesus went down in death at the hands of His enemies, God was still in control; they crucified and killed Him "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23); when they wrought their rebellious will upon God's Servant, they were still doing what

God's hand and God's plan had predestined (Acts 4:27). God, we hear it again and again, raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:24; 3:15; 10:40); God exalted Him on high and glorified His Servant (Acts 2:33; 3:13; 5:31); God has ordained Him to be Judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10:42). The exalted Christ has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, whom He pours out upon His own — and that Spirit moves men to tell of "the mighty acts of *God*" (Acts 2:11). The persecuted and praying church bows before God as the absolute and sovereign Lord of history, whose enemies cannot but do His will. (Acts 4:24-28)

The church which submits itself wholly to God as the Lord of history (4:29, 30) also adores Him as Creator; the church's prayer begins, "Sovereign Lord, who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them" (Acts 4:24). When God sent His Son into the created world, into history, into humanity, He was speaking an unmistakable Yea to His very good creation; and not only the prayer of the church but the whole life of the church is witness to the joyous conviction that "everything created by God is good" (1 Tim. 4:4). The witness of the church does not pass over or seek to minimize the full humanity of Jesus, His very human history, His sufferings, His death. Moreover, the new community did not withdraw to a wilderness asylum but stayed and worked and witnessed where the Creator of the world and the Lord of history had placed them. And there was nothing sequestered or monastic about their fellowship; their fellowship was a table fellowship; "they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God" (Acts 2:46, 47); it was a fellowship of families — they broke bread from house to house (Acts 2:46), a fellowship from which woman was not excluded (Acts 1:14; 6:1; 8:3), a fellowship in which woman played a rich and honorable part, as the example of Tabitha shows (Acts 9:36-41). A common care for the physical needs of the community was an important part of the church's life from the beginning (Acts 2:44, 45; 4:32-35); the apostles did not permit it to encroach upon or overshadow their prime task of prayer and the ministry of the Word, but they did recognize its importance and made provision for it as a work which only the Holy Spirit could enable a man rightly to do. (Acts 6:1-6)

These men knew God the Creator as the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ and therefore as their Father too; they knew Him as men living under the heaven of the forgiveness of sins. This transformed their lives and gave them a remarkable freedom from care and anxiety; it gave them "glad and generous hearts" (Acts 2:46); it enabled them to welcome suffering in their lives as another good gift from the Creator's hand (Acts 5:40, 41). It filled their lives with the music of prayer, which accompanied all that they did and all that befell them (Acts 2:42; 4:24-30; 6:4; 12:5, 12). It set them free for love toward one another, so that "the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own" (Acts 4:32). It was no wonder that people felt a certain awe for them (Acts 2:43; 4:21; 5:13; 5:26); they lived lives which were an enacted doxology to God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The church has rightly called our New Testament, the book which incorporates the Word that grew on this soil, "The New Testament of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"; for it is the book which on every page calls Jesus Lord and gives to men the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. But it is for that very reason the book of the Holy Trinity, for in it Jesus is called Lord to the glory of God the Father. And the New Testament is a book of the Holy Spirit too, an inspired book. This brings us to the second major aspect of the life of the first church.

B. The New People of God Under the Power of the Spirit

The Book of Acts has aptly been called the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. The book opens with the promise of the Spirit (1:5, 8), and the New Testament church is born when the Spirit is given in the fullness and universality which neither the Old Testament people of God nor the disciples of Jesus had as yet experienced (Acts 2:1-42). The disciples knew the Holy Spirit from the Old Testament as the creative personal Presence of God which makes and shapes and interprets history, the Power which moved over the face of the waters at creation (Gen. 1:2); the Power that came upon the judges of Israel (Judg. 6:34; 14:6) and upon Israel's

kings (1 Sam. 16:13, 14) and enabled them to do great things for the LORD and the LORD'S people. They knew the Spirit as the Power that enabled the prophets to say, "Thus says the LORD"—to interpret history as the arm of the LORD laid bare and to foretell what the Lord would yet do for the salvation of His people and all nations (Acts 1:16; 4:25); they knew that when the Children of Israel resisted the leaders and prophets sent to them by God, they were resisting the Holy Spirit (7:51); they knew that the Spirit of the LORD was to rest upon the Messiah-Prince of the line of David and enable Him to establish God's rule of right over His people and to restore God's ruined creation to the peace of Paradise (Is. 11:1-10), that the Spirit of the LORD would come upon the Servant-Messiah and make Him the Covenant of the people and the Light to lighten the Gentiles (Is. 42:1; 61:1); they knew that Jesus of Nazareth had been anointed by God with the Holy Spirit and had thus performed the mighty works which attested Him as Messiah and Savior (Acts 10:38); they knew that it was "through the Holy Spirit" that their risen Lord had given commandment to His chosen apostles (Acts 1:2). They had received the promise of the Spirit for themselves from Him, both in the days of His flesh (Luke 12:12) and in the forty days after the resurrection (Acts 1:5, 8). But it was not until the Day of Pentecost had come that they experienced what their Lord had promised, what the prophet Joel had foretold for the last days (Acts 2:16, 17), the "pouring out" in unprecedented fullness of the Spirit of God upon "all flesh."

The twelve apostles received the Spirit (Acts 2:4; 4:8; 5:32; 10:19; 11:12) and Paul, the apostle "untimely born" (1 Cor. 15:8) received the Spirit, too, in peculiar fullness and strength; but what they received was not given to them to have and to hold as their private possession and prerogative; they were not only recipients of the Spirit; they also became vehicles of the Spirit (cf., e. g., Acts 2:38; 8:18). The Spirit is poured out, not only on apostles but also on prophets like Agabus (Acts 11:28), on the Seven and on evangelists (Acts 6:3, 5, 10; 7:55; 8:29, 39); on great and kindly leaders like Barnabas (Acts 11:24), on all believers (Acts 2:38; 4:31), on Jews, on Samaritans (Acts 8:15-18), and even

(to the amazement of some Jewish Christians) on Gentiles. (Acts 10:44, 45, 47; 11:15)

The Spirit filled the whole church; and the Spirit animated and governed the whole life of the new people of God. It is not only in ecstatic utterance and in enraptured vision that the Spirit's working is manifested, though these are found in the life of the first church too: the men who spoke in other tongues at Pentecost were so far carried beyond the way of normal and ordinary speech that mockers could call them drunken (Acts 2:12); when the Spirit "fell" on the men of Samaria, the results were so striking that Simon the sorcerer wanted to purchase the power of the Spirit from the apostles — it seemed to him a very potent kind of magic (Acts 8:17-19); when the Spirit fell on Cornelius and his friends at Caesarea, they "spoke in tongues," in ecstatic doxology (Acts 10:44-46; 11:15). Stephen "full of the Holy Spirit" saw "the heavens opened and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God." (Acts 7:55, 56)

But Luke's record attributes to the working of the Holy Spirit utterances and actions which our secularized thinking would consider ordinary and normal. Not only the enraptured Peter of Pentecost is filled with the Holy Spirit; the Peter who must speak in sober defense before the Sanhedrin is no less Spirit-filled (Acts 4:8) — as his Lord had promised, the Spirit teaches him in that hour what he ought to say (Luke 12:12). The Spirit is for the apostles functional power, a power which equips them for their task of witnessing to the act of God in Christ, to the fact in history that spells the salvation of mankind (Acts 1:8; 5:32; 9:17, 20). The Spirit is working guidance for the apostle (Acts 10:19) and for the evangelist (Acts 8:29, 39). When the Spirit inspires the prophet Agabus, he produces no startling and exciting apocalyptic novelties to satisfy the religious curiosity of man; he foretells a famine, in order that the church may carefully plan and duly carry out her work of charity (Acts 11:28-30). The Spirit enables men to "serve tables" in the church, to provide for the widow and the fatherless in wise and sober charity; the Seven chosen for this task must be, Peter tells the church, "men . . . full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:1-6). The martyr's vision of the opened heavens is not the only fruit of the Spirit in the life of Stephen,

one of these seven men; the Spirit enabled him to do his work as servant of the church for the poor and to acquit himself well in his disputes with the men of the synagog. (Acts 6:10)

The church prayed in her hour of need (Acts 4:23 ff.), prayed for courage to endure persecution, not for escape from persecution. God manifested His presence among them: "the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 4:31). What is the fruit of the Spirit, what is the result of this inspiration? The result is characteristic of the whole piety of the first church under the power of the Spirit; the aim and goal of its religious life is not self-enrichment or self-fulfillment; there is no trace of egotistical piety here. The result is the will to unity and the will to witness: "They spoke the Word of God with *boldness*" (Acts 4:31). The word which we are forced to translate with "boldness" is the outstanding characteristic of the Spirit-filled church in action. It signifies that free, glad, courageous confidence, that robust health of faith which comes from the assurance of free access to God the Father given in Christ by the Spirit. It is the energetic religious health which makes Peter and John say, "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20); it is that high confidence of faith which makes Saul, when he has received the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:17), proclaim Jesus as Son of God in the synagog "immediately" (Acts 9:20), "preaching boldly" both in Damascus and in Jerusalem. (Acts 9:28, 29)

This boldness is boldness under the Lordship of Jesus; it is the church which walks "in the fear of the Lord" which enjoys the "comfort of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 9:31). It is a boldness under the reign of God, who gives His Spirit "to those who *obey* Him" (Acts 5:32). This disciplined and obedient character of the church's boldness is especially apparent in the church's use of the Old Testament. As Jesus in the days of His flesh was led by the Spirit, not beyond Scripture but into it, so that He repelled Satan with "It is written" (Luke 4:1-13), so the apostles were led into Scripture by the guidance of the Spirit. They used the Old Testament gladly and freely, in the confidence that in it God was by His Spirit speaking to them there and then in their own day; they appropriated it fully as *their* book, the book of the New

Testament people of God. Peter's sermon at Pentecost is typical; "the man is crammed with Scripture" is Luther's comment on it. And when Philip, prompted by the Spirit, joined the Eunuch who was reading from the prophet Isaiah, he "opened his mouth, and *beginning with this Scripture*, he told him the good news of Jesus" (Acts 8:35). The Spirit-filled church under the living Word of the apostles was far from feeling any aversion to the written Word of God's elder revelation; she perceived in the written Old Testament the voice and the operation of the Holy Spirit and gratefully used the inspired book.

The robust religious health of mind and will which the Spirit gave the first church is apparent also in the language of the church. In a sense, the Holy Spirit did create a new language in the last days, as every student of the New Testament learns, a language richly individual, with forces and connotations all its own. But there is nothing strained, farfetched, or esoteric about it, there is no mumbo-jumbo; it is a perfectly natural and open language, rooted in the life and history of the Jew and Greek to whom the church bore witness.

That is the second major aspect of the history which produced our New Testament. It is a history in which the Spirit of God moves creatively upon the waters. To speak of the Word which grew on this soil and sped and triumphed in this history as an *inspired* Word, wholly inspired, is not to impose an alien theory upon the Word; it is simply a recognition of its character as a part of the history of the New Testament people of God. It is inspired because God, the Lord of history, made it so; it is verbally inspired because that God deals with men on person-to-person terms, in terms of converse with men; it is the product of the Spirit of the living God and vehicle of that Spirit still, inspired and inspiring.

C. *The New People of God in the World's Last Days*

The third major aspect of the history which is the seedbed of our New Testament is the fact that the church is conscious of being the eschatological people of God, the people of God in the world's last days. The Spirit is the gift of God given "in the last days" (Acts 2:17). And the gift is given in order that men may bear witness to the fact which decisively ushers in the last

days, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:32-36). That fact means that Jesus is enthroned as Christ and Lord (Acts 2:36), soon to return (Acts 2:20). The "day of the Lord" of which Joel had spoken is full in view (Acts 2:20), and it is for the new people of God "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." The kingdom of God is "at hand" more imminently and more urgently than when John the Baptist cried out in the wilderness (Matt. 3:2) or even when Jesus proclaimed it in Galilee (Matt. 4:17); the risen Lord is proclaiming it; the Word of His messengers is establishing it (Acts 1:3, 6, 8). When the "good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" is being proclaimed (Acts 8:12), the Kingdom is there, the Christ is taking His power and is beginning to reign; it is the beginning of the end. The last days have dawned.

All previous revelation of God has led up to and prepared for this: "All the prophets who have spoken . . . also proclaimed these days" (Acts 3:24); the prophets whom a rebellious Israel persecuted "announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One" (Acts 7:52). All subsequent history is determined by this single, unparalleled, eschatological fact, the fact of the resurrection of Jesus. For this is not merely the fact that Jesus of Nazareth is alive, that "He presented Himself alive after His Passion" to His apostles (Acts 1:3). His resurrection is the great turning point from death to life, for all men and all creation. He is the Author of life (Acts 3:15). The apostles proclaim *the resurrection from the dead "in Jesus"* (Acts 4:2); they proclaim that the man Jesus has crossed the frontier of death into everlasting life for all men. All history is moving with divine inevitability, with the "must" of the will of God (Acts 3:21) toward the goal of all God's ways, toward the return of the Christ, the "time of refreshing from the presence of the Lord," and the restoration of all creation, the establishing of all things that God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old. (Acts 3:19-21)

With the resurrection of Jesus the new life, the real and eternal life of the world to come, has become a present reality, breaking miraculously into the present world of men living under the sign of death. To proclaim and to impart this new life, that is the mission of the apostles. To the apostles, the witnesses of the

resurrection of Jesus (Acts 1:3; 1:22; 10:41) the angel of the Lord says, "Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of this life" (Acts 5:20). The signs and wonders done through them are the enacted proclamation of "this life." They are "the powers of the age to come" active even now, tokens and predictions of the new world of God in which disease and death shall be no more. The "name of Jesus" is strong to save and can restore the lame man to perfect health because God has raised Him from the dead and made Him to be the Author of life. (Acts 3:15, 16)

This consciousness of being the people of God in the world's last days, of being witnesses to the accomplished fact of the resurrection, the fact which is the dawn of the Last Day and the assurance of its perfect coming, fills the church with a joy that nothing can quench, not even death. The dying Stephen is the characteristic representative of the New Testament church; the church sees the heavens opened, the world of God welcoming man, and sees the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God, about to return, that Son of Man who came to seek and to save (Luke 19:10); and the church knows that He will save to the uttermost, that His coming will be the end of the world's agony and the time of eternal refreshing for His people (Acts 3:19, 20). The church is "born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." (1 Peter 1:3)

The church knows, too, that "the Son of Man is to come" in judgment and "will repay every man for what he has done" (Matt. 16:27); and the church lives and works and hopes with a sober sense of responsibility. The church knows that the present is pregnant with the future and has in it the issues of salvation and judgment. The Lord God has in Jesus raised up the Prophet whom Moses had foretold; men must give heed to His Word or be destroyed (Acts 3:22, 23). The apostles' cry is: Repent! Be saved from the judgment now, be saved in Him whose name alone can save (Acts 2:21, 38, 40; 4:12), before He comes to judge the living and the dead. (Acts 10:42)

The New Testament, which grew up amid this history, history interpreted by the Spirit of God and understood by faith as events in time moving surely toward God's goal of ultimate salvation

and final judgment, is a book of buoyant eschatological hope and a book of sober and realistic eschatological responsibility. It is a book of the last days through and through and speaks with the urgency and finality of the last days:

Today, when you hear His voice,
do not harden your hearts.

II

THE APOSTOLIC PROCLAMATION IN THE FIRST CHURCH

The Book of Acts pictures the new people of God as living by the apostles' Word; the church living thus lives in faith and love under the Lordship of Jesus, animated by the Spirit which He has poured out upon all believers, in joyous, active, and responsible expectancy of the return of the Lord in glory. The impress of this first history of God's people is on the whole New Testament, and the first apostolic preaching (often referred to by its Greek name, *kerygma*, "herald's news, proclaimed Gospel") has given all the New Testament writings their characteristic color and contour.

The first twelve chapters of Acts give us the best and fullest examples of that apostolic *kerygma* in their record of the preaching of Peter (Acts 2:14-40; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 10:34-43) and Stephen (Acts 7:2-53); we may round out the record with the sermon of Paul in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch recorded in Acts 13:16-41. The message of these sermons is essentially a reproduction of the basic proclamation of Jesus Himself, now told in the light of His resurrection and exaltation. Jesus had opened His Messianic ministry in Galilee with the words,

The time is fulfilled,
and the kingdom of God is at hand;
repent, and believe in the Gospel. (Mark 1:14)

"The time is fulfilled." Jesus marked His appearance as the fulfillment of the prophet's prediction and of Israel's hope. And the most obvious fact about the apostolic *kerygma* is the assertion that what happened in Jesus of Nazareth happened "according to the Scriptures," the assertion that He is in the whole compass of His history the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Whether it be Peter preaching it to Jews (Acts 2:16, 25; 3:18, 22, 24; 4:11)

or to Gentiles (Acts 10:43), or whether it be Paul (Acts 13:23, 27, 32), or whether it be the Spirit-filled Stephen (Acts 7:52), the apostolic *kerygma* is unanimous in proclaiming: All the voices of the Old Testament, all the hopes of Israel are fulfilled in Him whom we proclaim as Lord and Christ. As Paul put it: "All the promises of God find their Yes in Him." (2 Cor. 1:20)

"The kingdom of God is at hand." When Jesus spoke these words, He meant nothing less than this: "The kingdom of God is present in My person." The whole record of Him in the Gospels says just this, that God is establishing His reign in these last days by making Jesus Lord in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus can say to those who blasphemously reject Him: "But if it is by the *Spirit* of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of *God* has come upon you" (Matt. 12:28). If, then, the apostolic proclamation asserts that Jesus is Lord and Christ, it is proclaiming the kingdom of God, just as Jesus' Word had proclaimed it. If Peter says, "God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36), or if Philip preaches "good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12), that is consentient witness to one great fact, one great act of God. For Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father, the Father who did great works through Jesus, gave Him up into death as the Servant who makes "many to be accounted righteous" (Is. 53:11), exalted Him at His right hand, and gave Him the Spirit to pour out upon His own. To proclaim the kingdom of God and the Lordship of Jesus is therefore necessarily to proclaim the Holy Spirit too, for the Spirit is indissolubly connected with both. The presence of the Spirit in the earthly life of Jesus is the evidence of His Lordship even then (Acts 10:38); the gift of the Spirit is the witness to His exaltation (Acts 2:33-36) and the means whereby the exalted Lord exercises His gracious Lordship for the salvation of men. (Acts 2:28, 38; 5:32)

The kingdom of God, the Lordship of Jesus the Christ, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, all mark the days in which this news is uttered as the last great days, the age of fulfillment, the beginning of the end, the time when the new life of the world to come has broken into the old world of death in the person of Him who is the Author of Life. And this life becomes man's possession

by the Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life. All history now moves from this event with a new and unheard-of urgency toward the end of the end, toward the judgment on all who refuse this new life, toward the consummation of all things, the new heaven and the new earth in which the righteousness of God is forever and fully at home.

“Repent, and believe in the Gospel.” Jesus by His words and deeds demanded a decision of men: “He who is not with Me is against Me” (Matt. 12:30). The apostolic proclamation of Jesus’ words and deeds is news, is history; it is real, vital news; the story of the life, death, and exaltation of Jesus of Nazareth is not a tale that can be told or left untold at will; it does not diminish in immediacy and importance as the passage of days removes it from the present. It is an ever-present reality in the inspired Word that conveys it; it confronts, stirs, shakes, and moves men now. It calls for repentance, and it moves men to repentance and faith. In Jesus the Lord God has laid bare His arm for the last time in history, and man is confronted with the choice, now, of having that almighty arm for Him or against Him. There is no neutral corner where a man may stand, no place where a man may stay and await developments, as Gamaliel hoped to do. (Acts 5:38, 39)

The Word of the Lord grew. The whole New Testament is the rich and various unfolding of this proclamation. The Gospels expand it; the epistles restate, point up, and apply it; the Book of Revelation unfolds its utmost eschatological reach. And nowhere, in any aspect of it does this Word lose its character as history. *It has* a history, being the crown and fulfillment of God’s previous actions and promises; *it is* history — the recital of the mighty works of God which culminate in that epochal history, when God dealt decisively with the sin of man in His Servant Jesus of Nazareth; and *it makes* history — it is the Word of the Lord, and the Spirit of the Lord moves creatively in it; it calls upon men to turn, and turns them, and thus catches men up into God’s last great movement in history toward God’s last goal.

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