

THE GOSPEL OF GOD

Study One

THE GOSPEL SPREADING: ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

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GOD AND HIS WORD

The word of God effects what it says. When God speaks, what He says happens:

God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light (Gen. 1:3).

This word comes into effect not by force of command, but because God Himself is in the word He speaks. God and His word are not separate entities. The word that God speaks is the full and true and effective expression of God Himself in action:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was* God (John 1:1).

Nor is this without or apart from the Spirit of God, by which the word of God comes into effect:

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and all their host by the breath of his mouth (Ps. 33:6).

The Hebrew word for ‘breath’ here is *ruach*, the word that is translated ‘spirit’, the same word used in Genesis 1:2 for the ‘wind’ of God that ‘swept over the face of the waters’ as God spoke the word that brought light. We are here speaking of a great and wonderful mystery: of how God is in Himself, and of how God operates by His Word and His Spirit.

God speaks of the full effectiveness of His word in Isaiah 55:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it (Isa. 55:10–11).

This may have been part of what the psalmist had in mind who prayed to God: ‘All your words are true’—‘The entirety of Your word is truth’ (Ps. 119:160 NIV, NKJV).

When the prophet Isaiah was given a vision of God in His holiness, he became acutely aware of the untruth and falsehood of his own speaking:

Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips (Isa. 6:5).

Psalm 12 makes a distinction between the word of sinful human persons and the word spoken by God. Human sinners ‘utter lies to each other’, and speak ‘with flattering lips and a double heart’ (Ps. 12:2). What we say does not match with reality. There is a discrepancy between who we are and how we present ourselves, between what we say and what we think and do, between how other people and things actually are and how we misrepresent them. We are not the same as our word, and we ourselves are not in it. Consequently our word can never bring about anything that is true or real. Yet, from this false position, we seek to impose what we say by force of personal command:

those who say, ‘With our tongues we will prevail;
our lips are our own—who is our master?’ (Ps. 12:4).

Such a false and untrue word, divided from our true selves, can only bring about harm. So ‘the poor are despoiled’ and ‘the needy groan’ (Ps. 12:5).

When God acts into this dire situation, the contrast of the full reliability of His word over against the false and double-minded word of sinners is striking:

The promises of the LORD are promises that are pure,
silver refined in a furnace on the ground,
purified seven times (Ps. 12:6).

As a consequence, God’s lasting protection is ensured, even while ‘the wicked prowl’ all around and ‘vileness is exalted among humankind’ (Ps. 12:8).

God’s word into a sinful situation is not merely a corrective admonition. Because it is a word of the God who acts in a thorough-going way to redeem us from evil, it comes with destructive and reconstituting force:

The voice of the LORD is over the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
the LORD, over mighty waters.
The voice of the LORD is powerful;
the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.
The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars;
the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
and Sirion like a young wild ox.¹
The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.
The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness;
the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl,
and strips the forest bare

The outcome of this is not, as we might expect, total devastation. Rather, because it is the word of One who acts to redeem, it results in a vast number of those who in His presence acknowledge the true nature and action of God:

... in his temple all say, ‘Glory!’ (Ps. 29:3–9).

¹ Lebanon was a mountainous area forested with tall trees; Sirion was a Sidonian name for Mount Hermon. The picture is of these regions swaying and shuddering in a great earthquake.

This is not the ‘Wow!’ of a spectator crowd watching a fireworks display. It is the praise of ‘many children’ whom God has brought ‘to glory’ (as in Heb. 2:10). God’s saving word of judgement and redemption has brought them to see God in His rule over all things, and to participate in the blessings of His strength and peace:

The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.
May the LORD give strength to his people!
May the LORD bless his people with peace! (Ps. 29:10–11).

Questions for discussion

- *What is it about God’s word that brings about what it says?*
- *How is this in contrast with the word of sinful human persons?*
- *What has been our experience of attempts to impose a word by force of command?*
- *How is that different from the way God speaks?*
- *What would it be like for a human person to speak as God speaks?*
- *What have we glimpsed of the outcome of what God says and does?*

GOD’S WORD IN OUR MOUTHS

It may seem incongruous, given what we have seen of the ineffectual and even harmful effects of sinful human speech, that God would deign to speak His word through the mouths of human persons. Yet, in keeping with God’s saving purpose of bringing us to participate with Him in what He is saying and doing, this is what God does. Peter the apostle wrote to people who had been ‘chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood’ (1 Pet. 1:2). He expected anyone of these who had received the gift of speaking to speak ‘as one speaking the very words of God’ (1 Pet. 4:11). How can this be so, and what is its character when it happens?

Isaiah, who cried in horror and despair, ‘I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips’ (Isa. 6:5), found his lips touched with ‘a live coal that had been taken from the altar’ and heard the words ‘your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out’ (Isa. 6:6–7). This fully qualified him to ‘Go and say to this people’ all that God gave him to say (see Isa. 6:8–13). Similarly God touched the mouth of the timidly protesting Jeremiah and declared:

I have put my words in your mouth (Jer. 1:9).

What Jeremiah now speaks in God’s name will have the same effect as we saw God’s word having in Psalm 29:

See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant (Jer. 1:10).

When Moses was given God's word to speak to Pharaoh, and protested that he was 'slow of speech and slow of tongue', God, who 'gives speech to mortals', promised: 'I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak' (Exod. 4:10–12). When it came out that Moses really wanted God to 'send someone else', God appointed Moses' brother Aaron to speak for him (Exod. 4:13–14). This is instructive as to how God relates with one who is to speak His word:

You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth; and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and will teach you what you shall do. He indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him (Exod. 4:15–16).

Moses will be to Aaron as God is to one who speaks His word.

Jesus' experience as a human being was of only ever saying and doing what came from the Father, through the intimate relationship they had with each other:

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works (John 14:10).

Jesus said that this would become especially evident through the work of the cross, again in the context of their relationship:

When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me. And the one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him (John 8:28–29).

There is indication that the speaking of God's word came through Jesus by the action of the Spirit of God:

He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for he gives the Spirit without measure (John 3:34).

This experience is not confined to Jesus alone. Jesus spoke of situations in which we would know the same thing:

When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say; for what you are to say will be given to you at that time; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you (Matt. 10:19–20).

Human beings will speak the word of God! It could be that we have been made for this.

If God is going to speak His word through sinful human persons whose normal mode of speech is duplicitous untruth and falsehood, clearly something must be done to change their sinful situation. Jesus recognised this, when he spoke of the eternal significance of the words we speak:

Either make the tree good, and its fruit good; or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure. I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned (Matt. 12:33–37).

Jesus is saying that true and wholesome words can come only from a person who has been made good. Until this happens, the words that come out will reflect the 'evil treasure' of a wrongful heart. As he said elsewhere, 'A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree

bear good fruit' (Matt. 7:18). Jesus came to 'make the tree good'—through 'the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit' (Titus 3:5, RSV):

He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds (Titus 2:14).

When Jesus said, 'by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned' (Matt. 12:37), he was not meaning that our eternal salvation or otherwise is determined on the basis of what we have said or done. He had already made the point that good things can be spoken only from a heart that has been made good. True and wholesome words will come from a person who has been 'justified by his grace' (Titus 3:7).

Jesus indicated the nature of such true and wholesome words. They would be like words spoken by God. They would mean what they say, in such a way as to render oaths unnecessary:

I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black (Matt. 5:34–36).

Oaths and vows are necessary where there is an expectation that people may be untruthful. They can even be wrongly used to cover untruthfulness. Those who have been brought into direct relationship with the 'great King' Himself will now be able to speak directly, without any need for bolstering safeguards:

Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one (Matt. 5:37).

James echoes these words of Jesus:

Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation (James 5:12).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer commented:

Only those who follow Jesus and cleave to him are living in complete truthfulness. Such men have nothing to hide from their Lord . . . Complete truthfulness is only possible where sin has been uncovered, and forgiven by Jesus . . . he reveals to us our sin upon the cross. The cross is God's truth about us, and therefore it is the only power which can make us truthful.²

The one who has taken away our sin and brought us into God's truthful righteousness can rightly enjoy this directness of truthful speech upon us. As redeemed persons we are, like God, 'as good as our word'.

This means also that, as in God, there is no disjunction between the word we speak and our very selves. John said: 'the word was God'—God Himself was in the word He spoke, and He Himself came with it. That is what made it effective. So now we also come with the word we speak. We do not hold ourselves back from those we speak to, but give ourselves to them in and with our words. So we hear the apostle Paul saying to the Thessalonians:

So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us (1 Thess. 2:8).

Similarly with the Corinthians—aggravating as they were to Paul:

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, tr. R. H. Fuller, SCM Press, London, 1959, p. 125.

our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections . . . you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together (2 Cor. 6:11–12; 7:3).

Consistent with this, the apostle John tells us that our words must come with practical self-giving action:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action (1 John 3:16–18).

James again concurs:

If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? (James 2:15–16).

Compare this saying from Proverbs:

Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,
when it is in your power to do it.
Do not say to your neighbor, ‘Go, and come again,
tomorrow I will give it’—when you have it with you (Prov. 3:27–28).

Now, like God, when we speak we ourselves, with what we have, come with what we say—we are as good as our word.

Roland Allen gives an example of the setting in which the gospel spreads by what he calls ‘spontaneous expansion’:

Spontaneous expansion begins with the individual effort of the individual Christian to assist his fellow, when common experience, common difficulties, common toil have first brought the two together. It is this equality and community of experience which makes the one deliver his message in terms which the other can understand, and makes the hearer approach the subject with sympathy and confidence—with sympathy because the common experience makes approach easy and natural, with confidence, because the one is accustomed to understand what the other says, and expects to understand him now.³

Jens Christensen says being true to our shared humanity is basic to bringing the gospel to others:

First of all you will want to be *yourself*. . . Only thus are you a real human being among other human beings, for only by being yourself can you make generous allowances for others being themselves. Deeper and more basic than religion, culture, national traditions and all else, is this elemental fact: we are all human beings.⁴

He warns against acting as if the gospel is something we hold in our hand as a means by which we can affect other people:

³ Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and the causes which hinder it*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1971, p. 10. Allen goes on to say that this is effective when the speaking is ‘voluntary and spontaneous’ rather than that of a ‘paid agent’ (see p. 11). Not that sharing the gospel without pay necessarily guarantees its effectiveness either. Paul did both: he preached the gospel without cost to his hearers, sometimes by working to support himself, and he received support from churches. See 2 Cor. 11:7–10; Acts 18: 1–4; 20:33–35; Phil. 4:10–20; 1 Cor. 9:4–18; 1 Tim. 5:17–18. But at no time did Paul proclaim the gospel with a view to making a living out of it: see 2 Cor. 2:17. See further: Roland Allen, ‘The Case for Voluntary Clergy’, in David M. Paton, ed., *The Ministry of the Spirit: Selected Writings of Roland Allen*, World Dominion Press, London, 1960, pp. 135–189.

⁴ Jens Christensen, *Mission to Islam and Beyond* (formerly published as *The Practical Approach to Muslims*), NCPI, Blackwood, 2001, p. 22.

There are no means you can use; because you are God's means . . . you should accept the startling and challenging fact that in God's plan, you yourself are the means, and if you do not throw yourself in, there is no substitute. None whatsoever.⁵

Charles Spurgeon gave a graphic personal illustration of this:

I have often felt just like this when I have been preaching—I have known what it is to use up all my ammunition, and then I have, as it were, rammed myself into the great gospel gun, and I have fired myself at my hearers: all my experience of God's goodness, all my consciousness of sin, and all my sense of the power of the gospel; and there are some people upon whom that kind of preaching tells where nothing else would have done, for they see that then you communicate to them not only the gospel, but yourself also.⁶

The mind-picture is striking—especially when we consider that Spurgeon was a man of no small girth!

All of this is a helpful precursor to considering the action of God's gospel-word, spoken by human persons, as reported in the Acts of the Apostles.

Questions for discussion

- *What has been our experience of hearing God speak to us through the words of another human being?*
- *What needs to happen to enable God's word to come through the lips of a sinful human person?*
- *In what ways does the word then spoken by the human person participate in the quality of God's word?*

THE WORD OF GOD CONTINUED TO SPREAD

There are a number of statements in the Acts of the Apostles which imply the spontaneous expansion of the gospel. After the resolving of the dispute between the Hellenist and Hebrew believers in Jerusalem, we are told:

The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

The judgement on Herod's prideful arrogation of divine status is contrasted with the progress of the gospel:

But the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents (Acts 12:24).

Details are given of Paul's speaking of 'the word of the Lord' in Antioch of Pisidia; of its rejection by some Jews and its glad reception by Gentiles:

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region (Acts 13:48–49).

⁵ Christensen, *Mission to Islam*, pp.18, 22.

⁶ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Soul Winner*, Christian Focus Publications, Tain, 2003, pp. 74–75.

Following Paul's ministry in Ephesus for a period of over two years, there was an incident of a Jewish exorcism that went wrong, after which believers who had practised magic confessed their practices and burned their occult books, we are then told:

So the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed (Acts 19:20).

In each of these references, 'the word of God' or 'the word of the Lord' is the subject of the verb—the active agent. We hear of this word itself spreading, advancing, growing and prevailing. These references may give the impression that the gospel-word of God has its own dynamic, by which it spreads itself. Taken wrongly, this may infer that the gospel-word has a kind of magic power of its own—all we have to do is get the formula right, and it will have the desired effect! Any such 'formula' evades us.⁷ Jens Christensen warns against attempts to use the Bible text in this way:

You hear it said that the Bible can speak for itself by itself, and many people think that in handing out small tracts with a few Bible verses, without any intention of follow up, they have been evangelising . . . Nothing could be further from the truth. Actually that method is akin to superstition and a belief in magic. It is only another way in which the Christian is able to escape from throwing *himself* in, another way in which *he* finds means, instead of being God's means.⁸

Certainly Paul says that the gospel itself is 'the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith'. For this reason Paul says 'I am not ashamed of the gospel' (Rom. 1:16). Deane Meatheringham comments:

The evangel, or the gospel itself is the power of God. It carries the freight of its own dynamic. But this freight is not in sealed containers or books about the gospel. The gospel will not live in boxes or manuals, for it is a living word which not only bursts its bonds, but in its proclamation vitally works salvation in people's lives, causing them to hear, evoking repentance with faith. The hearers know God in his gracious power.

The gospel is the action of God himself—his personal working. From A to Z it is the powerful rhythm of 'the God of all grace' (1 Pet. 5:10) which will all be to 'the praise of his glorious grace' (Eph. 1:6). To be sure of the gospel is to be sure of the reality of God's grace. This means we don't have to be ashamed of the gospel, or need to tamper with it, or, by additions, subtractions or manoeuvrings, try to make it work. Failure to evangelise results from lack of confidence in the gospel itself . . .

The gospel is incandescent. It glows brilliantly by its own heat. An incandescent lamp is one with a white-hot filament which emits warmth as well as light. A lamp is usually dependent upon fuel or power for its combustion. But the gospel cannot be separated from the God of the gospel. It has its own wisdom, its own way, its own genius, its own power. The gospel shows and brings the action and love of God so that people see it, but know its light and heat.⁹

The gospel is indeed 'the power of God for salvation', but it is the power *of God*, not of itself. It is God Himself—Father, Son and Spirit—in action. To understand these references, we need to understand the context in which they occur. The context is the triune action of God.

We also note that a particular set of circumstances, all different from each other, surround each reference to the word of God spreading or growing. More is happening than just the speaking of the word. There is a dispute among the believers, there is a ruler who has overstepped the limits of his authority, there is rejection of the message by Paul's fellow-countrymen, there is an attempted exorcism that goes badly wrong. None of these events, any

⁷ Ian Pennicook tells of searching the New Testament for 'the form of sound words' that Timothy heard from Paul (ὑποτύπωσιν . . . ὑγιαίνοντων λόγων, *hypotupōsin . . . hugiainontōn logōn*, 2 Tim. 1:13 KJV—NRSV translates it 'the standard of sound teaching'). Ian found that, as a formula, there was no such set of words.

⁸ Christensen, *Mission to Islam*, p. 21.

⁹ Deane Meatheringham, *Gospel Incandescent*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1981, pp. 2, 3–4.

See: <www.newcreation.org.au/books/covers/070.html>.

more than the word itself, can be engineered under the control of the speakers of the word, and so cannot be taken to be prescriptive. To give an absurd example, based on Acts 16, such prescription might be tantamount to saying this: To bring a whole family to Christ, first you have to find a girl with a spirit of divination, and you need to make that spirit come out of her. Then you need to get yourself wrongfully arrested, beaten and imprisoned, then you have to sing hymns at midnight, and then there needs to be an earthquake that puts the wind up the jailer, and you need to call out to him, and tell him about Jesus. All of this happened on that occasion, and in it all, wonderfully and mysteriously in ways beyond our knowing or ordering, God was acting to bring that jailer and his family to Himself. Paul and Silas, in ways they could not determine for themselves, were part of that action of God.

Questions for discussion

- *What has been our experience of trying to spread the gospel by needing ‘to tamper with it, or, by additions, subtractions or manoeuvrings, try to make it work’? What does this say about our own relationship with God in the gospel? What have been the outcomes of such attempts?*
- *What has been our experience of the word of God spreading, advancing, growing and prevailing? How would we account for that?*

THE TRIUNE GOD IN ACTION

Let us look at the overall context of the Acts of the Apostles in which these references to the word of God spreading occur, simply by examining the text.

Firstly, there is ‘the kingdom of God’—God’s sovereign rule over all things with a view to the accomplishing of His purposes:

After his suffering [Jesus] presented himself alive to [the apostles] by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3).

Within this kingdom rule and action, there are ‘times or periods’ that the apostles are not privy to, but which nevertheless they are caught up in:

So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority’ (Acts 1:6–7).

Paul later speaks of God’s purpose and goal for these ‘times or periods that the Father has set’. It is for all nations to find and know God as Father:

The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring’ . . . now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:24–28, 30–31, TNIV).

Paul here nominates a crucial stage of the Father's plan and purpose that has now been reached.

So, secondly, Jesus has come, as the Messiah from God, and has brought about salvation, as told already in 'the first book' (Acts 1:1)—Luke's gospel:

Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:46–47).

He has been 'taken up to heaven', with a view to his coming again (Acts 1:2; see 1:6–11). 'God has made him both Lord and Messiah' (Acts 2:36). The time for repentance and the forgiveness of sins has come, not only for Israel, but also for the Gentile nations:

God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:31).

Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life (Acts 11:18).

It is clear from the Acts of the Apostles that the risen, ascended Jesus himself is personally commanding events and operations to this end:

Now as [Saul] was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do' (Acts 9:3–6).

Jesus then appeared in a vision with instructions to Ananias in Damascus (see Acts 9:10–19), and again to Paul with a specific word. Paul relates:

After I had returned to Jerusalem and while I was praying in the temple, I fell into a trance and saw Jesus saying to me, 'Hurry and get out of Jerusalem quickly, because they will not accept your testimony about me.' And I said, 'Lord, they themselves know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. And while the blood of your witness Stephen was shed, I myself was standing by, approving and keeping the coats of those who killed him.' Then he said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles (Acts 22:17–21).

On other occasions, when Paul was facing opposition, Jesus came again. Once in Corinth:

One night the Lord said to Paul in a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no one will lay a hand on you to harm you, for there are many in this city who are my people.' He stayed there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them (Acts 18:9–11).

Again in Jerusalem:

That night the Lord stood near him and said, 'Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome' (Acts 23:11).

Jesus had said to the apostles in the beginning, 'you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth'—and so it was. But none of this was without the Spirit of God to enable this witness: 'you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you' (Acts 1:8).

And so, thirdly, the Holy Spirit came:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability (Acts 2:1–4).

The promised outcome of the outpouring of the Spirit was to be that ‘they shall prophesy’—that is, speak the word of God (Acts 2:17–18). The Spirit applied the work of the cross to those who believed, ‘cleansing their hearts by faith’ (Acts 15:9). And so the great miracle of human beings speaking the word of God, after the manner of God, was able to take place:

in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power (Acts 2:11).

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, ‘Rulers of the people and elders . . .’ (Acts 4:8).

they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness (Acts 4:31).

Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him and said . . . (Acts 13:9).

The apostles were able to say without effrontery: ‘we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him’ (Acts 5:32). No less than the Lord Jesus, the Spirit was in on specifically directing the operation of the Father’s saving purpose:

Then the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go over to this chariot and join it’ (Acts 8:29).

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, ‘Look, three men are searching for you. Now get up, go down, and go with them without hesitation; for I have sent them’ (Acts 10:19–20).

At that time prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them named Agabus stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine over all the world; and this took place during the reign of Claudius. The disciples determined that according to their ability, each would send relief to the believers living in Judea; this they did, sending it to the elders by Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:27–30).

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off (Acts 13:1–3).

it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . . (Acts 15:28).

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them (Acts 16:6–10).

And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me (Acts 20:22–23).

Through the Spirit they told Paul not to go on to Jerusalem (Acts 21:4).

While we were staying there for several days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. He came to us and took Paul’s belt, bound his own feet and hands with it, and said, ‘Thus says the Holy Spirit, “This is the way the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and will hand him over to

the Gentiles.”’ When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, ‘What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.’ Since he would not be persuaded, we remained silent except to say, ‘The Lord’s will be done’ (Acts 21:10–14).

So all-pervasive is the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles that it has been called ‘The Acts of the Holy Spirit’. Roland Allen comments:

This description of the book is indeed one-sided. To entitle the book the ‘Acts of the Holy Spirit’ rather than the ‘Acts of the Apostles’ obscures the human element. The apostles were men. Their acts were their own acts. They were not mere will-less instruments in the hands of another. Nevertheless, the fact that it was possible to call the Acts of the Apostles the ‘Acts of the Holy Spirit’ reveals at once the truth that men have found in this book not merely the record of the acts of men, but the revelation of a Spirit governing, guiding, controlling, directing men in the acts here recorded. And this is no delusion. In this book it is the guidance and government of the Spirit which is constantly recalled to mind. That the men of whom St Luke writes were men liable to the errors and passions of men is clear enough; what is insisted upon is that they were the recipients of a gift of the Holy Spirit sent upon them by Christ, and that all the labours and successes of their lives were due to the influence of that Spirit. In this degree the title ‘The Acts of the Holy Spirit’ is true and useful, and should save us from the error of reading the book merely as the Acts of the Apostles.¹⁰

So the progress of the gospel in the Acts of the Apostles was in the context of the purposeful sovereign saving action of the Father, Son and Spirit, by which human beings came to be ‘speaking the very words of God’ (1 Pet. 4:11). It was not so much that they were taking the gospel. The gospel itself, or rather the God of the gospel, took them where they needed to go, where people would hear God speaking to them. This was not by their own virtue or readiness. They were ‘men liable to the errors and passions of men’. If the disciples at Tyre told Paul ‘through the Spirit . . . not to go on to Jerusalem’, was he being disobedient in still going? We may tend to think that Paul was right and they were wrong, but it could be that Paul was just being fixated and stubborn. There was clearly a struggle between Paul and the rest on this issue. Right or wrong, the gospel the apostles came with, of repentance and the forgiveness of sins, was as much for them as for their hearers. And so, by the grace of God, the word of God was spoken, and the will of God was done.

Questions for discussion

- *What difference does it make to our understanding and practice of evangelising to know it in the context of the purposeful sovereign saving action of the Father, Son and Spirit?*
- *What is the importance of the saving gospel of God for those who speak it, as well as for those who hear?*

Other Resources for Further Reading

Geoffrey Bingham, ‘The Doctrine of the Word of God’, in *For Pastors and the People*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1989, pp. 47–136.

Martin Bleby, *God Speaking: Authority and Interpretation in the Scriptures*, NCPI, Blackwood, 2006.

¹⁰ Paton, ed. *The Ministry of the Spirit*, p. 3.