to Missionary Moves of the Christian Religion
in 21st Century Post-modern Global Context

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William J. Larkin, Ph.D.
Columbia Biblical Seminary and School of Missions
Columbia, SC

Luke-Acts’ distinctive understanding of “liberation” and “approach to non-Christian religions” informs and challenges the “missionary moves” the Christian religion will take in our 21st century post-modern globalized world.

Supplementing the mid-nineties prognostications of trend watchers and futurists such as John Naisbitt and Faith Popcorn, and relying on Christian missiologists, such Robert Schreiter, and historians of Global Christianity, such as Philip Jenkins, and commentators on the subject of globalization and religion, such as José Casanova and Michael Casey, this paper traces the contours of the radically altered turn of the millennium landscape with its socio-economic-political shifts from West to East and North to South and its religio-ideological shifts to increased religious devotion and increased religious conflict.

After profiling the contexts, this paper will apply Luke-Acts to them. How is Luke’s central liberation theme, truly “Good News to the Poor” in the current socio-economic-political context? What does Luke, the one author in the New Testament who explicitly deals with Christianity’s encounter with non-Christian religions, have to say to our Christian religion’s “missionary moves” in our much altered religio-ideological landscape?

The Socio-Economic-Political Context: What is the Good News to the Poor?

The Global Economic Context of the Twenty-first Century

Though the post-9/11 global economic downturn has meant that the United States must resume its role as “the primary engine of globalization” if a recovery is to proceed apace (Kurlantzick and Allen 2002:2), the regional shift in the focus of economic power from the Atlantic to the Pacific basin is still in place (Naisbitt 1996 as reported by Cheek 1997; Schreiter 1990:8-9). Another reality is the increasing severity of the plight of the poor in the southern hemisphere (Schreiter 1990:8-9; Nicholls 1996:373). A consistently recognized feature of a world experiencing globalization (Sorenson 1995:2-3), according to Joel Kovel of Bard College, the gap between the richest and poorest countries has increased from 3-1 at the beginning of the industrial revolution to 30-1 in the mid-twentieth century to 100-1 today (Kovel 2002: 1). As David Barrett in the 2nd edition of The World Christian Encyclopedia (Barrett 2001: 1) chronicles it, this means that some 46% of the world, 2.8 billion people, eke out a living in 26 countries each with a per capita income of under $235 per annum.

The current demographics of the Christian religion worldwide reflect the same shifts. As Philip Jenkins has ably demonstrated, the center of Global Christianity is now the “global south” (Jenkins 2002:2-3). Over a little more than half a century (1970 to 2025) Christianity will have
gone from a majority Western church (56% European and North American) to a two-thirds majority non-Western Church (68% African, Asian and Latin American). Indeed, the shift has already occurred. Barrett’s 2002 Status of Global Mission tables identify the Christian church as currently 38% European, Russian, and North American and 59% African, Asian, and Latin American (Barrett and Johnson 2002:23).

Such a church exists predominantly among the poor. Some 109 million Christians live in the 26 poorest countries. In all developing countries Christians living in absolute poverty number 260 million (24% of the 1.1 billion absolutely poor, and 13% of all Christians). Half of them live in Latin America, a third in Africa, the rest in South and Southeast Asia (Barrett 2001: 1).

The mission that this church must prosecute, if it is reach that third of the world’s population labeled by missiologists as “unevangelized”–those who are unaware of Christianity, Jesus Christ, the Christian message and without adequate opportunity to hear the gospel and respond to it–must be among the poor of the “Global South.” Since 1989, missions strategists and mobilizers have captured this audience geographically with the phrase the “10/40 Window.” Sixty-two countries of Africa, Asia, and a bit of Europe in a swath 10 degrees N Latitude to 40 degrees N Latitude have approximately fifty percent of the world’s population, including 55 of the least evangelized countries (but only 8% of the global missionary force). Eighty-two percent of the world’s poorest live here (23 countries with per capita GNP under $500; 29 countries with the lowest quality of life in terms of life expectancy, infant mortality, and literacy; Guthrie, 2000:58).


**Luke’s Good News to the Poor**

A two-thirds world liberation theology hermeneutic or holistic gospel hermeneutic will almost invariably interpret this text quite literally or concretely. Jesus, and subsequently the church, is sent to bring relief from suffering, economically: he preaches good news to the poor and proclaims the "acceptable year of the Lord."; politically: he proclaims release to the prisoners and sends the oppressed away in freedom; and physically: he proclaims recovery of sight to the blind (see the literature cited by Eben H. Scheffler 1991:281; cf. Craig L. Nessan 1995). Conversely, Western Christianity has historically interpreted many, if not all, of the phrases metaphorically, seeing them as symbols for the spiritual salvation Jesus brings (see, for example, Marshall's [1978:182-184] handling of the passage). Lest we be held hostage to our contemporary context, whether two-thirds world or western, let us return to the text and ask how Luke sees the concrete and the spiritual interacting in God's saving purposes. I believe we will see that, for Luke, the spiritual is primary, at the core; yet, the liberation it brings is holistic in scope.

**Economic: Good news to the poor/jubilee proclaimed.** The last phrase of the quote, "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor," when understood as a Jubilee Year, does involve the economic. J. Massynbaerde Ford explains,

Jesus may have been inaugurating or proclaiming a jubilee year, in which, according to Jewish law, debts were cancelled, slaves (and prisoners) were released, and people
Among Jesus' contemporaries there were messianic pretenders who used the Jubilee Year concept and the Isaiah passage, especially the phrase "the day of vengeance of our God," to call their fellow countrymen to fight against the Gentiles for political and religious freedom (e.g., Simon Bar Giora reported in Josephus, Jewish War, 4.508; cf. 11QMelch). However, as Luke presents it, Jesus consciously concluded his quotation of Isaiah 61 before the declaration of the coming “day of vengeance.” When we combine this fact with the rest of Jesus' sermon in which he uses as illustrations God's saving initiatives to Israel's traditional enemies, we begin to see that the kind of "favorable year" Jesus declares is one of reconciliation, healing, forgiveness (Ford; Bosch [1991:110-11] says this "non-vengeance" understanding is further validated by the crowd's negative response.). Spiritual salvation has necessary implications for the economic sphere but should not be collapsed into a program of political-economic liberation.

The matter may be pressed further with additional study of Luke's use of "poor" (πτῶχος, the Greek term for a person who is destitute, without any visible means of support). In that way, we can discover more precisely what good news Jesus has for them. Three themes become apparent. First, there is the promise of an eschatological reversal of one's present economic fortunes (Luke 1:53-55; 6:20-26 [cf. especially 6:20 and Matt. 5:3]; Luke 16:25); but, for Luke, it is still truly future, i.e. beyond history.

What should give the poor some immediate hope, however, is a second theme: economic repentance. For the rich, knowledge of the coming eschatological reversal means, if they would see the kingdom, they must repent of all values and behaviors which are incompatible with the kingdom. If riches are an idol, they must sell them, give to the poor, and follow Jesus (18:22). If they have gained riches wrongfully, they must make restitution (19:8). They must make involvement with the poor a part of their lifestyle in their social relations (14:13-14). The rich must also use their financial resources for the benefit of the poor (19:8). In these ways, the poor will find themselves empowered and their conditions alleviated, as they participate, with the rich, as valued and cared-for members in the kingdom.

A final theme, economic discipleship, points to the priority which even the poor must give to the spiritual good news. The last poor person we meet in Luke is the destitute widow who gives to God through the temple treasury "all that she had" (21:3). Jesus by the approval of her act relativizes the physical-economic need in favor of the spiritual. In Luke's Gospel, the final word about the poor is not the good news of what they will receive to alleviate their need, but the challenge of what they must give as part of the life of radical discipleship in devotion to Jesus (9:23-25; 14:33).

**Political: Release to the prisoners and the oppressed.** Because neither the term "prisoner" or "oppressed" is used again in Luke, there is not much direct guidance on choosing between a concrete political understanding or a spiritual meaning. Luke portrays Jesus most frequently bringing relief from demonic oppression (4:33-37; 6:18-19; 7:21; 8:2, 26-39; 9:37-43; 11:14-23; 13:10-17; 13:32), which immediately places this second task into the realm of the spiritual. Luke's use of the term "release" (aphesis), elsewhere in his Gospel confirms this. John the Baptist’s ministry is one of giving knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins (1:77), and proclaiming a preparatory baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

**Physical: Recovery of sight to the blind.** Jesus' sermon with its illustrations from a prophet’s healing ministry (4:23-27) and his messages to John the Baptist and Herod which include healing as a significant feature in his ministry (7:21-23; 13:32) show that, for Luke, miraculous deeds of mercy, restoring the whole person, is a sign of the completeness of salvation which the arrival of the kingdom brings.


1. In light of the worsening economic plight of the poor and being true to Scripture, the scope of any evangelism must be wholistic, extending to care for the whole person and every type of need he has. But, the spiritual center of the proclamation, liberation from the guilt, penalty, and power of sin, forgiveness must be maintained. Indeed, this is what is happening among the poor who are responding to Pentecostalism in Latin America according to Richard Shaull and Waldo Cesar. Pentecostalism is so successful in this context because this present globalized economy leaves masses of people uprooted and abandoned on the periphery of ever growing large cities, where they are engaged in a desperate struggle for daily survival. Moreover, all the structures that normally sustain human life in community are breaking down. In this situation they are seeking and finding in Pentecostalism an experience of the Divine which helps them to put their lives together, heals their wounds, and gives them hope for the future . . . Poor Pentecostals often experience a presence and power that turns their lives around and compels them to struggle for a new future . . . a Pentecostal experience focused on day-to-day reality may well become a major force for social change (cited in Miller 2002:4).

2. The good news to the economically poor must be one of reconciliation with God and with his fellow man. The eschatological hope of reversal of fortunes should be held out as “the not yet” in tension with the hope of “the now”: the oppressive rich person’s positive response to the present call to economic repentance, which in faith, the poor look to as a possible source of relief. Amy Chua presents an example of economic repentance when she calls for market dominant minorities (e.g., overseas Chinese) to blunt the hostility to them by majority cultures through correcting objectionable practices: bribery, discriminatory lending, labor exploitation (Chua 2002: 9).

3. The evangelized poor must enter into a life of their own economic discipleship. Such a life of commitment will open the way for God to work powerfully even through their meager resources.

Twenty-first Century Religio-Ideological Context: Increased Religious Devotion; Increased Conflict

Before 9/11, future trends scanners had projected religion as a central issue in both East and West. The religiously motivated violence of 9/11 certainly validated those prognostications. In the West, religion has a decidedly tolerant, eclectic, syncretizing face. Popcorn and Marigold in their description of the “anchoring” trend say,

Whatever it is that Clicks into a deep meaning for your life, one thing is evident: We’re at the start of a Great Awakening. A time of spiritual upheaval and religious revival. . . What’s different about this Awakening is that there’s very little agreement on who or what God is, what constitutes worship, and what this ritualistic outpouring means for the future direction of our civilization (Popcorn and Marigold 1996:143).

Simultaneously, there is a clash among religions as some aggressive proponents of world religions use their economic and political clout, not to mention physical force, to accomplish a conversionist agenda (Schreiter 1990). Persecution of other religionists who will not submit is on the rise. Those of a tolerant, eclectic, syncretizing disposition religiously, in a post 9/11 environment, seem increasingly to view any “missionary moves,” which proactively commend the Christian faith to others as contributing to a climate conducive to “hate crimes” (Christianity Today 2003:32).

In addition to the immediate impact of 9/11, globalization’s effect on religion seems, at the same time to create both problems and opportunities. Globalization deterritorializes cultural systems, threatening the intrinsic link between “sacred time, sacred space, and sacred people”—common to all world religions—and the essential bonds between histories, peoples and territories, which have defined all civilizations (Casanova 2001:9). This deterritorialization occurs as a simultaneous reassertion of the local and the global over the national. What religion may lose at the national level and the fragmentation it faces at the local level is matched by the opportunity for it to break free from the strait jacket of nation-states and regain truly transnational, global dimensions (Casanova [2001:11-13] presents “Global Pentecostalism” as an example of a religion which has made such a move; Jenkins [cited in Miller 2002:1-2] characterizes the new Christendom of the “global south” this way).

Debray (2002:2) sees these twin aspects in a causal nexus: global deculturalization incites local reculturalization. The latter, a mechanism of defensive territorial implantation, necessarily of a sacred nature. “The soil and the sacred” go together. Religion is not the opiate of the people, but the “vitamin of the weak” and among the poorest of the poor, clerical fanaticisms are again prospering. What is needed, says DeBray, is a freely granted “civic religion” with an “agnostic spirituality” and a “credible political and social ethics” annealed to a globalization which currently is a “spiritually empty economism” (Debray 2002:2; cf. Pope John Paul II’s contention in Centesimus Annus [1991:28] that this deficiency in globalization can only be effectively addressed from a transcendent reference point which places market capitalism at the service of human freedom in its totality). John Gray in the New Statesman (reported by Casey [2002:1]) actually sees globalization as a religion, a new “modern” secular one which has replaced Marxism. Globalization seen this way, views “religion of the old-fashioned sort . . . (as) peripheral and destined to disappear, or to shrink into the private sphere, where it can no
longer convulse politics or inflame war.” How shall proponents of the Christian religion make their “missionary moves” in commending their faith to others in an environment such as this? We turn to Luke for help.

**Luke’s Approach to Non-Christian Religions**

Luke from his first century context of religious pluralism gives us the following “missionary moves” for approaching non-Christian religions: 1) make contact with respectful integrity; 2) present a metanarrative which embraces the global and the local in a constructive and corrective engagement; 3) call for facing questions of ultimate destiny grounded in radical particularity.

**Making contact: "respectful integrity."** Luke shows respect, and maintains his integrity, but adopting common humanity as the common ground with the religionist. In the face of worship directed to them at Lystra, Paul and Barnabas cry, "We, too, are only men, human like you" (14:15). This becomes the basis for an appeal to turn from futile idols to the living God. Similarly at Athens, after establishing that humans are "God's offspring," Paul points out how illogical idolatry is in the light of that truth.

Paul shows respect for human religion in initial references which are general and often ambiguous. The Athenians are deisidaimotesterous. This may be translated "very religious" or "very superstitious" (17:22; cf. Aristotle Politics 5:11 p. 1315a; Plutarch Moralia 164E-171F). The Ephesians know that Paul has preached the principle: "Gods made with hands are no gods at all" (19:26). Yet, the town clerk can dismiss the tumultuous assembly saying that the Christian missionaries are neither blasphemous or robbers of temples (19:37).

At the same time, Luke shows Paul preserving the integrity of the gospel. Its incongruence with the non-Christian worldview is most evident at Athens, when Epicureans, atomistic empiricists, mock when they hear of bodily resurrection and pantheistic Stoics think Paul proclaims two deities, Jesus and his consort Anastasis, resurrection (17:18, 32).

**Presenting a Metanarrative which embraces the global and the local in Constructive and Corrective Engagement.** In expounding the one true God’s relation to humankind, Paul presents the Biblical metanarrative which makes the historical assertion that from one human being God made every culture of humans to dwell on the whole face of the earth, i.e., to cover the earth with a harmonious patchwork of diverse cultures (17:26; Gen 1:28; 9:1, 7; 10:5, 20, 31-32). While Stoicism looked at humankind in its diversity and urged it to consider itself one community, “even as a herd that feeds together and shares the pastureage of a common field” (Plutarch Moralia 329B), Paul affirms that unity and diversity are integral to God’s design. And he legitimizes local expression, while at the same time using it to indict the sinful rebellion and its consequent groping after God, which the religions of all local cultures embody since the Fall. To establish the point that God is not very far away from us, that by him we live, move, and are, Paul quotes the fourth-third century B.C. Stoic Aratus, who declares in his Hymn to Zeus, “We are his offspring” (Phenomena 5; Acts 17:27-28).

**Facing Questions of Ultimate Destiny through a Message Grounded in Radical Particularity.** Luke presents final judgment as the rationale for Paul’s ringing call to repentance. “God now commands all humans everywhere to repent, because he has set a day
when he is about to judge the whole inhabited world in righteousness through a man whom he has appointed” (17:30b-31a). The Epicureans denied all the elements of theodicy: the gods do not judge; the soul does not survive death; there is no postmortem judgment (Diogenes Laertes Lives of the Philosophers 10.133, 139). The Stoics affirm all the elements but within a pantheistic, cyclic metaphysic with judgment occurring either within history or immediately after death (Posidonius in Athenaeus, Deipnosophistai 6.266ef; Plutarch Moralia 560F). Though strange then, and strange now, for those who pursue a tolerant, eclectic, syncretizing spirituality or live out a secular civil religion, Paul grounds this message in the radical particularity of an event in space and time open to public scrutiny: the bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth—“having provided proof of this to all humans by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31b).

Implications of Luke’s “Approach to Other Religions” for “Missionary Moves” in the Twenty-first Century

1. In an increasingly hostile environment, the Christian must model a stance of respectful integrity as he seeks to constructively engage the adherent of a non-Christian faith.
2. In a time of globalization’s deterritorializing effect on global and local, the Christian missionary must rehearse the biblical metanarrative which transforms the local through its global message (Casanova [2001:13] see Global Pentecostalism effectively doing this; cf. Dunch [2002:12] on the significance for continuing cultural differentiation (the local) of missionaries’ learning language and culture in order to evangelize).
3. In a day when, the secular globalized mindset has no categories for explaining the 9/11 evil done in the name of religion (cf. Casey [2002:1] reporting The Economist), the Christian raises questions of ultimate destiny within a framework of eschatological justice proven by the radical particularity of Jesus’ resurrection.

Conclusion: Luke-Acts, then, has much guidance for the “missionary moves” of the Christian religion in the twenty-first century. His “Good News to the Poor”—spiritual at the core, but holistic in scope is well suited for mission with and to the poor. His approach to other religions—respectful integrity; a metanarrative embracing global and local; a call to face questions of ultimate destiny, a call grounded in the radical particularity of Jesus’ resurrection, addresses well those issues which show both the threat and the promise that globalization is for religion.
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