

## Luke - A man with a missionary vision

If I asked you to name the most influential people in the spread of the gospel in the New Testament church, who would you include? [Paul, Peter, Barnabas].

One of my favourite chapters in the New Testament is Romans 16 where Paul lists some 27 individuals who he saw as important fellow-workers in the gospel; including those who assisted him, risked their lives for him or went to prison with him.

In fact Romans 16 is the longest of a number of lists of people who Paul acknowledges had a significant influence in the work of the gospel during his own period of missionary work.

This evening I want to encourage you to go away and read two specific missionary books. But first I want to introduce you to the author; someone who appears in some of the other of those lists of Paul's I have just made reference to.

This man is described by William Hendricksen as *"the forerunner of all the medical missionaries whereby the church and mankind have since been abundantly enriched"*.

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His name is Luke and despite word for word writing more of the New Testament than any other man; including Paul we only find his name mentioned three times in the whole of scripture **Col 4:14; 2 Tim 4:11; Phile:23-24**.

Although neither of the books of Luke and Acts mentions his name (incidentally the other gospels don't mention their author); we accept his authorship in the testimony of the title of the gospel account and also through reliable early tradition.

**Readings: Luke 1:1-4; Acts 1:1-3.**

Luke undertakes perhaps the most ambitious task of all the New Testament writers; namely a two-volume work covering the work and teachings of Christ while here on earth and then the history of the spread of the church throughout its first thirty years.

From the point where he starts with the birth of John the Baptist in Luke 1; until Acts 28 where the gospel is being preached in Rome, Luke covers a staggering 60 years of historical narrative.

As we see in **Col 4:14** Luke was a doctor, which explains the amount of medical detail he includes in his account of Jesus' miracles and his unique record concerning the virgin birth.

But we also see here that he was a Gentile. We discover that by comparing the surrounding verses i.e. **Col 4:10-11** and **4:14**. Here we see that Luke was not Jewish.

This makes Luke unique in that he is the only New Testament writer who was a Gentile. His gospel account is primarily directed towards Gentiles which explains why his genealogy of Jesus traces right back through the line to Adam rather than to Abraham as Matthew when writing to the Jews.

He was thought to have been born at Antioch in Syria (Eusebius).

Antioch of course was an important city when we think of the spread of the gospel for it was from there that both the first and third missionary journeys of Paul began (**Acts 13:1-3; 18:23**).

The date of Luke's conversion is uncertain. Certainly the opening verses of Luke reveal that he was not an early follower of Jesus for he does not number himself among the eyewitnesses referred to in Luke 1:2.

Again, in the opening of Acts he implies that he was not on the scene during those early days after the resurrection (Acts 1:3).

Whether as a resident of Antioch he came under the gospel as it spread out of Jerusalem after the great persecution and scattering in Acts 8, or whether he came to faith directly as the result of Paul's first missionary journey, is uncertain.

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However, by the second missionary journey there is no doubt about his faith. It was during this period that Luke linked up with Paul at Troas.

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Up until this point in Luke's record of the early church in the book of Acts he has written in the third person e.g. **Acts 16:6-8**.

Now read **Acts 16:10-11** and note the change to the first person.

We tend to think of Luke as a writer doctor, and indeed the legacy of his gospel account and history of the early church have made a tremendous impact on Christians down the centuries. However, on closer examination we find revealed a major player in the spread of the gospel and the growth of the early church.

Paul in **Phile:24** describes him as a 'fellow worker' in the gospel.

It can be easy to overlook the fact that Luke was a missionary evangelist in his own right and although like so many others remaining in the shadow of Paul, he should still stand out as a faithful servant of Christ.

**Acts 16:10** Luke shared a clear vision of the work to be done - to preach the gospel. Notice his word "us" in that verse!

Furthermore a few verses on in Acts 16:13, we find on the Sabbath in the city of Philippi that "we sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there".

There is no doubt that Luke's commitment to the spread of the gospel is reflected in his narrative in Acts; and indeed his gospel record.

Note for example his attention to detail in the records of the sending out of the disciples to gospel work in Luke 9 and 10; the parables of the lost and found sheep, coin and son in Luke 15; and of course that incredible conversion account of the thief on the cross in **Luke 23:39-43**.

Whilst it is easy to focus on the medical influence in his writing, the preaching of the gospel and the need for a response in faith are a key part of what Luke wants to record of both the life of Jesus and the beginnings of the Christian church.

John Calvin observes that "*Luke is the only Evangelist who makes a preface to his Gospel, for the purpose of explaining briefly the motive which induced him to write*" **Luke 1:4**.

Notice how Luke had spent time doing this pain-staking research, showing that he was a man concerned that believers should have an accurate account of the life of Jesus; so that "*you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.*"

In other words to strengthen young believers in their faith. Things were tough for the first century Christian.

Luke "*wrote for people removed from the ministry of Jesus, both in geography and time, and his task was to provide them with such an account of the story of Jesus as would enable them to see that the story with which they had already become partially acquainted was a reliable basis for their faith*" (I. Howard Marshall).

His commitment to the gospel never wavered for his account of the early church in Acts never really closes completely.

Instead he signs off with the ongoing and unhindered spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ despite the fact that Paul is imprisoned and his life in jeopardy **Acts 28:30-31**.

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Return to Acts 16 and you find Paul and Silas are imprisoned in Philippi; although again Luke shows that this did not hinder the work of the gospel.

The jailor and his whole household were gloriously converted and baptized.

However, when Paul and Silas were released at the end of Acts 16 they have to leave Philippi.

It is at this point that Luke's historical narrative assumes once again the third person **Acts 17:1**.

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It is something like seven more years before Paul returns to Philippi during a tour of churches throughout Macedonia and this is when he and Luke join forces again Acts 20:5.

Of course we cannot be sure of what Luke did during this time, but it is suggested that he spent the time in and around Philippi, preaching the Gospel and looking after the new Christians.

If this is so, then Luke plays a key part in the development of perhaps the most loyal and generous church of that day; described by Paul as his *"joy and crown"* (Phil 4:1).

With the Apostle, Luke now leaves Philippi and returns to Jerusalem via Troas where Eutychus is raised from the dead (Acts 20:7-12); Miletus where Luke is present at the meeting between Paul and the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:13-38; Tyre where there is an impromptu prayer meeting with the believers on the beach (21:5); and Caesarea where the party spends some days with the evangelist Philip and his family (Acts 21:17).

How much he must have learnt during these visits; not only serving but being built up in his own faith.

Don't you find that is the case when you serve Christ? You benefit also?

That tearful farewell to the Ephesian elders must have been an occasion when Luke must have particularly felt the power of fellowship in the gospel.

No wonder in **Acts 21:1** Luke counts himself among those who have to 'tear' themselves away from these dear brothers.

Later we find Luke stood by Paul through his trial in Jerusalem and accompanied him to Caesarea where he faced the Governor Felix and the King Agrippa. In Acts 27:1 we see him boarding a ship with Paul for the long and dangerous trip to Rome.

That vivid description of the storm in which the ship was completely broken up and the ship's company shipwrecked on Malta in Acts 27-28 could only come from someone who was right there e.g. **Acts 27:29-32**.

Even when the narrative of Acts runs out we still know that Luke was there supporting and caring for Paul. As we determined earlier, there are only three references to Luke by name. Each one of those references comes in a letter written by Paul when in prison in Rome and therefore follows events after Luke has signed off his Acts of the Apostles.

Surely he was clearly well-known in the churches for he did not need any introduction in those three letters.

To the Colossians Paul describes Luke as *"the beloved physician,"* (Col 4:14 KJV). It was a term of endearment that these young Christians could immediately identify.

Timothy needs no additional mark of identification in 2 Tim 4; to him the words are *"only Luke is with me"*. To Philemon Luke sends his greetings in common with other *"fellow-labourers"* of Paul.

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The reference to Luke in 2 Timothy 4:11 reveals something else about him.

Luke was not only an accurate historian but a faithful and loyal friend. As Paul writes this letter he is preparing to stand before Caesar and is convinced in his heart that he is approaching the end of his earthly life.

Having spoken in the previous verse with a broken heart concerning those brothers who had either deserted him or had to leave him out of necessity when he most needed them, he writes *"only Luke is with me"*.

Doesn't that speak volumes about fellowship in the gospel?

I don't pretend that this short study even begins to do justice to how the Lord used this man Luke to encourage the church and in particular Paul in his ministry to it.

However there is a legacy that continues today which takes us back to where I began when I said that I wanted to encourage you to go away and read two specific mission books. They are the books of Luke and of Acts.

They follow on from each other and show God's work on earth; through His Son and then by the work of His Spirit in the early church. They are still a blessing today!