



Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship

Study Supplement No. 7

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Something worth thinking about

by Joseph Tkach

Sharing The Gospel

The Worldwide Church of God is committed to living and sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Evangelism is central to our mission, and we sometimes quote Mark 16:15 to describe it: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation." Jesus came to seek the lost (Luke 19:10), and he wants us to continue that mission in his name. Similarly, Matthew 28:19-20 says, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

For apostles only?

However, a few people have wondered: "Since it was the apostles who were commanded to preach the gospel in these verses, how do we know that it applies to us today? Isn't our role just to set a good example, and then give the gospel to people only when they ask about it? The Bible does not actually command us to preach to the public, does it?"

Some might argue that the command is given to the apostles, not to us. True, the command is directed to the apostles. They were commanded to preach the gospel and baptise believers. But there is a bit more to the story.

Let's go back to Matthew 28:19-20. Jesus told his apostles to teach people to obey everything he had commanded them. And one of his commands to them was to preach, and as a result, the apostles taught believers to obey Jesus' command to preach the gospel. In effect, Jesus gave a self-perpetuating command. Future disciples were to carry on the commission. Matthew ended his book with a command that his readers needed to obey.

Verse 20 tells us that Jesus promised, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age." Jesus did not promise merely to be with the apostles, but with the church throughout the centuries. The commission is likewise applicable to all the church, from the earliest apostles even to the end of the age. The New Testament records the results of Christ being with and motivating apostles and many other believers to preach the gospel.

A word about 'preach'

Before we look at examples in the New Testament about the church carrying out the command to preach, let us take a moment to better understand the Greek words usually translated "preach" or "preaching." Some Christians are put off by the idea that all believers are called on to "preach." They understand "preaching" as standing up in a group and speaking convincingly and forcefully about the gospel. Naturally, very few people are equipped to do that kind of "preaching," and do it effectively and responsibly. But "preach" is only one of the possible ways the Greek words can be translated. One of the words commonly translated "preach" is *euaggelizo*, and it means, "to bring or announce good news." Certainly, the common understanding of "preach" is an important way in which the good news is announced. But that common understanding is certainly not the only way to bring the gospel.

Notice, for example, such passages as Luke 1:19 and 2:10, in which *euaggelizo* is translated "show" or "bring" the good news. Our concept of "preach" needs to expand to include the many other ways the gospel can be given to others.

The concept intended with *euaggelizo* is that of a person or persons getting across the message of the good news of the

gospel to other people. There are many ways in which that can be done in addition to preaching.

Another word usually translated "preach" is *kerusso*, and this means to herald, to proclaim, to make known. Public preaching, certainly, can do this but it can be done in other ways too. The word used in Mark 16:15 and translated "preach" is *kerusso*.

Different translations often use different words to translate *kerusso* or *euaggelizo*. For example, in Luke 9:2, the King James Version translates *kerusso* as "preach," while the New American Standard translates it "proclaim." In Luke 1:19, the KJV translates *euaggelizo* as "show thee these glad tidings," while the NAS translates it as "bring you this good news" and the New International Version has it "tell you this good news."

Getting the gospel to others, then, is not limited just to popular notions of preaching. On the contrary, informing others about the grace of God in Jesus Christ can take many, many forms, and all of us are gifted by the Spirit to bring the gospel to others in one way or another.

Evangelism in the early church

Throughout the book of Acts, we see the apostles carrying out Jesus' commission. They declared that Jesus is the Christ, that he was crucified and raised from the dead, and that salvation is available through him. It was a Christ-centred message, an "evangelistic" or "gospel-oriented" message. But was the gospel proclaimed by the apostles alone?

Certainly not! Stephen did great works in the name of Christ, and argued that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 6:8-10). Before the Sanhedrin, he forcefully argued that Jesus is the Righteous One, the Messiah, predicted in the Scriptures (Acts 7:51-52). And his dying words were a testimony to God's forgiveness of sins in Christ (verse 60).

God inspired Stephen, and he inspired many others. "On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered.... Those who had been scattered preached the word (*euaggelizo*) wherever they went" (Acts 8:1, 4). Even at risk of their lives, these lay Christians saw to it that the gospel was given to others.

They were simply doing what Christians do naturally. They felt compelled—led by the Holy Spirit—to tell others the good news that God had blessed them with. Luke presents the story as a good example for us to follow.

Next, Philip went "to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there" (verse 5). God blessed this evangelism by converting some of the Samaritans. The gospel continued to expand.

"Those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord" (Acts 11:19-21). Again, God inspired his people to tell the good news about Jesus, and he blessed the results.

Paul was given a special commission as an apostle to the gentiles. But Luke tells us that Paul was not the only one who shared the good news with them. "Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, where they and many others taught and preached the word of the Lord" (Acts 15:34). Clearly, Luke does not think that the commission applied only to the apostles. His book serves as an example of what future generations of the church should do.

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Also in the book of Acts, we might note the example of Apollos, who "vigorously refuted the Jews in public debate, proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ" (Acts 18:28). Later, Paul rejoiced that even more people were preaching Christ (Philippians 1:15-18; *kerusso* is used in verse 15; *kataggello*, meaning "proclaim," is used in verses 16 and 18).

Paul told Timothy (2 Timothy 4:5) to do the work of an evangelist (*euaggelistes*—a bringer of good news). God gives some of his people a gift for evangelism (Ephesians 4:11). Training can make their gift even more effective. The church could not fulfil its mission if all it ever did was wait for people to come to it. It needs to be intentional about going out in the name of Christ and reaching people with the good news.

Personal evangelism

At one level or another, evangelism involves every member of the church, every disciple of Jesus Christ. As we mature in the faith, each member should become more competent with the Christian message. "By this time you ought to be teachers," Hebrews 5:12 says, implying that anyone who has been a Christian for a while should be able to teach others the good news.

God has given the "message of reconciliation" to all who are reconciled by Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18-19). We are to encourage other people to be reconciled to God through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

As the church obeys the commands of Christ and we conduct ourselves "in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27), people will indeed come to us and ask for help. This is evangelism by example, and it adds to rather than replaces our responsibility to preach. We are to do both. Part of our example should be our willingness to give credit to the One who works within us.

We are a holy people, called to "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). How do we do this? In part, by living "such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (verse 12).

It is in the context of setting a good example that Peter writes, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). Example and evangelism go hand in hand.

In the world today, the Christian way of life stands out. When society is pessimistic and apathetic, the Christian hope and purpose are more noticeable. People need and want the peace of Christ, whether they understand it yet or not. When they ask for help, we can explain in our own words why we have hope in Jesus Christ. A good example and a wise witness to our faith help preach the good news.

Paul encouraged Christians to live "without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe" (Philippians 2:15). But the Christian's role in the community does not stop with avoiding sin. Paul's very next words are "as you hold out the word of life" (verse 16). Their works were combined with their words. Good deeds go with the gospel, and the combination is an effective form of evangelism.

Prepared to give an answer

Each Christian should be able to explain the basics of the faith. Perhaps not in an eloquent way, and certainly not in an argumentative way, but in simple confidence. We know the peace of God in our lives. We know that we will be resurrected. We know that life is worthwhile. We know that our sins are forgiven. We know that God sent his Son to die for us, and that he now lives for us. We know he wants us to stop living for ourselves and start living for him (2 Corinthians 5:15).

Christians can't explain every verse of the Bible, but they can give their own testimony as to why they believe. They can't prove every point argument, and they What makes their believable is their Christ" (1 Peter When we give an hope that lies evidence is in our our words. The two other to make each more effective than they would have been on their own.



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Not every member is equally gifted at explaining eloquently the grace of God, and not every member will do it in the same way. "Evangelism," in the sense of continually approaching others with the gospel, is a spiritual gift, and we cannot expect every Christian to have this particular gift. But all Christians are commanded to be ready to give an answer. All of us should want our neighbours to have the blessing of knowing Christ, rather than living in ignorance. All Christians should be ready to be used by God when appropriate situations arise.

Personal evangelism should not be ignored. The Holy Spirit leads each Christian in behaviour and in word. That means that each of us should be a good example in the community and be a faithful witness of the faith that lies within us. If you are a more reserved person, if religion is not the first subject you want to bring up, that's OK. Be zealous for Christ in the way God has gifted you—but always be ready to give an answer. Being ready includes eagerness, not just having the right words.

Christ's commission to bring the gospel to others is a continuing part of our work. That is why we are committed to the work of evangelism—this is one of the ways in which we obey Jesus Christ. This is part of our commission, part of our responsibility.

Just as Paul prayed for Philemon, I also pray for you: "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ" (Philemon 6).

Joseph Tkach

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Window on the World

By Randal Dick

Superintendent of Missions

Whatever happened to Bangladesh?

You may have wondered what happened to Bangladesh? We used to see articles and updates regularly, and wasn't there even a notice about a

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potential WCG short-term mission opportunity? Whatever happened?

Effects of 9-11

Yes to all of the above. Sept. 11, 2001, changed more than just New York or even the United States. The atmosphere in overwhelmingly Islamic Bangladesh changed decidedly as well. Incidents of violence against Christians increased. Several major Christian churches in the capital, Dhaka, were burned in anti-Christian riots. The Bangladesh constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but that is almost impossible to enforce in the face of the onslaught of fundamentalist Muslim forces at work in the country.

Rod Matthews, regional director, and I postponed returning to Bangladesh this past year not so much out of concern for our safety, but because our presence in the rural areas, where we stand out, and word travels at speed-of-mouth, can cause our brethren to be endangered by our presence. They become targets.

You can appreciate the added difficulty that our brethren face in openly sharing the good news of Christ's kingdom. Even before 9-11 it was difficult. Several of our gospel workers were hospitalised in intensive care, and our main training centre and largest building narrowly escaped being burned to the ground by Muslim extremists.

They came with gasoline in hand, and began to pour it around the foundation when the neighbours rose up and demanded that they leave that building alone! These people, they said, are hurting no one.

Starting over

John Biswas, director of the Bengali Evangelical Association, and his team have had to be creative to look for effective avenues whereby they can bring Christ to their neighbours in a way that can be sustained. Plans have been developing for some time.

I decided to wait until they became a reality before announcing the initiative or recommending the project when people ask about investing effectively in the mission of the church. But now is the time, and in my opinion, it just doesn't get much better than this.

The idea is to connect with Hindu and Muslim Bangladeshis in such a way that they can see for themselves the love of God at work in their midst. Let grace have its work, thereby enabling misinformed people, often hostile to the religion of Christianity, to turn from hostile to peaceful. It is then that the gospel can be heard and understood. We had the goat program. Many of you participated and sponsored one or more goats. That program was helpful and bore good fruit. But situations constantly change. The program had to be curtailed because it started to create jealousy in those who did not receive a goat, and sometimes from the local village headman, who felt that his influence was being diminished. As the negative side began to build, John wisely decided to scale down the program so that the gospel benefit already accrued was not undone.

True religion—pure and undefiled

John sought a better way, and I think God helped him see it. John's wife, Naomi, is a nurse. She realized that there was a huge gap that love could fill. Health care is minimal in rural Bangladesh, which has few hospitals. You either get well or you don't. Statistically, when a sick person is given even basic health care, it increases the survival rate by nearly 30 percent.

John, with Naomi's guidance, developed an outstanding manual on home health care in the Bengali language. It is detailed, simply but profusely illustrated, and professional in every way. John has been working on this manual for more

than a year. We gave John the accumulated funds that many of you generously supplied to cover the costs of the initial printing.

John has set up a training program for home healthcare nurses. I waited until he had actually launched the program before sharing this with you. Check out the photos, if you haven't already. Look at the faces—the joy and the determination. We could use a few of those folks over here! The fruits, obvious from the photos, are good.

The first group of trained workers is now fanning out across that part of the province, going into homes of Muslims and Hindus alike. They will supply initial home healthcare while training family members how to give healthcare to their invalids and infirm.

God has to be smiling on this. It is true religion at its best. In order to make the program truly a part of the fabric of the region, John accepts and trains Muslim, Hindu and Christian healthcare workers. No one can say that this is just a Christian ploy to convert you. In fact the Christian workers are the minority. However, the Christian workers also get help learning to share the gospel in a dignified and thorough manner.

When you're dying of thirst... even a drop tastes great

Bangladesh suffers from oppressive poverty. While this would be considered a good works project in this country, it makes a profound impact in Bangladesh. The simple knowledge of how to change the bedding with someone in the bed, or how to bathe and clean a bedfast person, just isn't available.

A friend of John's, who happens to be a minister of Parliament in Bangladesh, saw a copy of the home healthcare manual. He was so overwhelmed by its contents that he wanted a copy to show in Parliament later that day. A government minister expressed the government's interest in the program. John has the foresight to keep the program out of the limelight until it has a chance to bear more fruit. If you haven't figured it out yet, I am excited about this program. I guess that is because it marries the two critical components of true mission.

First, I cannot think of a more quality way to express the true undefiled love of God than to go into the homes of those who revile you, and supply care for their elderly and infirm. That is pure religion, undefiled. Nothing is gained by the workers. Only Christ is glorified.

Second, by those acts of love, Isaiah 40 happens. Easy pathways are made to God. Chasms that could not be crossed, through lack of comprehension of the love of God, become visible in a family's own home. The obstacles of bigotry and fanaticism are brought low by the humble presence and serving love of the caregiver. While this may still fall short of Mother Teresa, it is definitely in her league.

The work that John has done in Bangladesh has been, in my opinion, one of the most productive and cost-effective efforts that I know. Now, I would say that this gospel effort will possibly eclipse anything previously done. If any individuals or church areas are considering where to invest some of the funds that they have dedicated to the Great Commission, I would, especially at this time, ask that you consider directing them to this effort. It costs several dollars per manual.

We are trying to set up additional training centres to expand the program. They cost several thousand dollars each. A volunteer doctor from the Southern California area has donated her time to be the primary program instructor. John tells me that when it's all said and done, it costs about \$80 to train a nurse. That's four movies with popcorn and drinks for two people.

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I wish that we could ask for volunteers and send some of our own over to work beside them. Unfortunately, the presence of significant numbers of Westerners in the project would cause it to be held at arms length by the Muslim community. I told John that I would tell the brethren about this incredible undertaking, and that I would solicit first and foremost focused prayer for the direction of the program and the protection of the participants. I also told him that I would let the brethren know that this undertaking could use some help getting started. We will keep you posted as this program of love is spread across the physically flooded but spiritually parched place called Bangladesh.

Randal Dick

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Bible Study 1

By Michael Morrison



Two Songs of Praise:

A Study of Luke 1:39-80

After the angel Gabriel told Mary that her relative Elizabeth was pregnant in old age, "Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth" (Luke 1:39-40). Gabriel had told Mary that Elizabeth was pregnant (v. 36), so Mary quickly made the three-day journey to Judea. Elizabeth's pregnancy was evidence that what the angel said about Mary was also true. One miraculous pregnancy was a sign of the other, just as the first son would prepare the way for the work of the second.

"When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (v. 41). Elizabeth was inspired to understand a supernatural significance to this reaction, and even before Mary gave her the news, she knew Mary would have a child: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" (vv. 42-45).

Elizabeth counted it an honour to be visited, for she recognized that Mary's child would be her Lord. It was a joyful occasion, for the Saviour was coming to the people who had waited for so long. Both Elizabeth and Mary are good role models for Christians today. Anyone who believes that the Lord keeps his promises will be blessed.

God inspired Elizabeth to praise and encourage Mary's faith, that her child would, as the angel promised, be the Son of God, ruling over the children of Israel forever (vv. 32-33).

Mary's song of praise

Mary's response is a hymn of praise, arranged with the parallel thoughts that characterize Hebrew poetry, such as Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2. Mary's song is traditionally called the Magnificat (the first word of the Latin translation): "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour" (vv. 46-47).

In this verse, the second line repeats the thought of the first—"my soul" and "my spirit" are similar, and "glorifies" and "rejoices in" are similar ideas. But the second line adds a new thought at the end: Not only is God the Lord, he is also the Saviour. Mary then gives a reason for rejoicing: God has rewarded her humility:

"for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me holy is his name" (vv. 48-49).

Mary, seeing the evidence in Elizabeth, knows that God has already done what he promised to Mary, that she would be the mother of the Messiah. Mary says that God has helped her, and everyone will know of her blessing. She then reverses the flow by saying again that God has helped her, and praising God, returns to the thought that she started her poetry with. (This mirror-like arrangement is called a chiasm.)

Mary then expands her praise to include everyone who trusts in God, contrasting God's blessings for the humble with his opposition to the proud:

"His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts" (vv. 50-51).

To those who worship God, he gives mercy, but those who do not care about God are brushed aside with mighty deeds. A similar contrast is seen in verses 52-53, with another balanced structure—the rich, the poor; the poor, the rich: "He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty."

God works in a great reversal, bringing the mighty down and exalting the poor and the weak. God did not send his Son into the palaces of royalty, but he honoured the working poor of Galilee. Salvation comes not from human power, but must depend on the intervention of God. Mary represents all who trust in God to do what he has promised.

Mary concludes by mentioning God's promise to the ancestors of the nation:

"He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers" (vv. 54-55).

The birth of John

The next significant event in Luke's story is the birth of John. "When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy" (vv. 57-58).

They did not name the baby until the eighth day, when he was circumcised, and there was a community celebration. Although boys were often named after their grandfathers, the neighbours and relatives thought it would be appropriate to name the boy after his elderly father: "On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, 'No! He is to be called John'" (vv. 59-60).

"John" comes from the Hebrew *Yohanan*, which means "God is gracious." The neighbours objected to this name, since it wasn't in the family traditions. Zechariah was apparently deaf as well as mute, so "they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child" (v. 62).

Zechariah "asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, 'His name is John.' Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God" (vv. 63-64). Earlier, Zechariah had been made mute after he asked, "How can I be sure of this?" (v. 18). He now had the evidence he wanted, and as the angel

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promised (v. 20), his speech was restored when God fulfilled his promise.

Luke will soon tell us what Zechariah said, but first he tells us what affect the miracle had on the people: "The neighbours were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, 'What then is this child going to be?' For the Lord's hand was with him" (vv. 65-66).

Rumours were stirring, Luke tells us. Many people knew that God was doing something among his people. Could it be that God would give them the Messiah they hoped for?

Zechariah's praise

"Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied" (v. 67). After nine months of enforced silence, in which he no doubt frequently thought about God's faithfulness, he praises God. His song is called the Benedictus, which is the first word of the Latin version.

"Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David" (vv. 68-69).

Surprisingly, Zechariah (a Levite) is not speaking of his own son—just as Elizabeth did; he focused on Mary's unborn child, predicting the son of David. But John, the Levite baby, is nevertheless part of God's preparation for rescuing the Jewish nation. In Hebrew, "horn" was a symbol of strength (perhaps from the strength of horned animals such as oxen), so Zechariah predicts a mighty salvation. He focuses on the Jewish people; he may not have realized (unlike Luke, who knew more of the story) that the Messiah would rescue the Gentiles as well.

Just as Mary did, Zechariah mentions that salvation was predicted, that it was part of the blessings promised to Abraham (Gen. 22:18), and that God was keeping those promises:

"(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us — to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days" (vv. 70-75).

Zechariah briefly turns his attention to his own son, with an echo of Isaiah 40:3 and Malachi 3:1:

"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation" (Luke 1:76-77).

He then describes the salvation of the Lord—not a military conquest, but a spiritual rescue, bringing light and instruction in the way of peace. In this section, Zechariah uses concepts found in Isaiah 9:2; 60:1-3; and Malachi 4:2: "through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace" (vv. 77-79).

Salvation will come not through force, but through spiritual growth. Through the Lord, the people will be enlightened about salvation, forgiveness, mercy and peace. John's role will be to prepare the way.

Luke now summarizes the next 30 years for John: "The child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel" (v. 80). There is a hint of

greater things yet to come. The promises made to the people have not been forgotten.

Questions for application

1. Do I believe that the Lord will do as he said? (v. 45)
2. Why is it sometimes difficult to trust him?
3. What mighty things has the Lord done for me? (v. 49)
4. When God intervenes in my life, do I respond with songs of praise?
5. How important is the mercy of God to me? (vv. 50, 54, 58, 72, 78)
6. When I praise him, is mercy a frequent theme?
7. Do I serve God "without fear," or am I sometimes embarrassed? (v. 74)
8. Who is "the rising sun ... from heaven"? (v. 78).
9. Has he guided me in the path of peace? (v. 79)

Michael Morrison

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Bible Study 2

By Michael Morrison

Announcing the King:

A study of Luke 1:1-38

Luke begins his book about Jesus with a preface that describes his research methods. His introduction (all one sentence in Greek) is similar to the beginning of Greek historical works:

"Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:1-4). Luke does not say that there is anything wrong with previous accounts, which were written by reliable eyewitnesses, but he wants to add his research to strengthen the faith of his readers. "I have checked it out," he says, "and it is true. I'll give you the details."

Ancient writers sometimes dedicated their books to a patron who paid the cost of making copies of the book. Theophilus may be such a sponsor, a person interested in Christianity. Since his name means "lover of God," any reader who loved God would be invited to read. Luke presents his book as a historically accurate account of "the things that have been fulfilled among us."

An announcement to Zechariah

Just what are those things? Luke hasn't yet told us. He begins by putting us into the flow of history—a story of God's people: "In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron" (v. 5). Luke is writing at least 60 years after these events, but his details suggest that he has done enough research to find the facts. The priests were divided into 24 divisions; each served two one-week periods each year.

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"Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years" (vv. 6-7). Being childless was a disgrace in that society, and some people might assume from it that Zechariah and Elizabeth were not pleasing God. But Luke assures us that they were righteous in every way. Now that he has introduced the characters, he tells the story: "Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear" (vv. 8-12). A priest could offer incense in the temple only once in his lifetime, and some never had that honour at all. Zechariah may have been nervous at his responsibility, and the sudden appearance of the angel frightened him. The angel told him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (vv. 13-17). Zechariah had apparently given up hope for a son, but he probably still prayed for God to rescue his people. So the angel tells him the first step in the salvation of Israel: Zechariah will have a son—not just any son, but one who is "great in the sight of the Lord." As part of his special role set apart for God, he would avoid wine (a rule that Nazarenes also followed, but John was probably not a Nazarite). He would be a great prophet, turning the people back to God, fulfilling the prophecies of Malachi 4:5-6 and Isaiah 40:3. After a gap of several centuries, God would again inspire one of his servants to speak to the nation.

How can I be sure?

But Zechariah was reluctant to believe it. He asked: "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years" (v. 18). The angel then gave him reasons to believe—first, that the message was from God, and second, that a miracle would happen to Zechariah himself: "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time" (vv. 19-20). Zechariah was righteous, but he asked for evidence, so God gave him some he could not deny. God keeps his promises, whether they are to a nation or to an individual. "Meanwhile," Luke tells us, "the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God" (vv. 35-37).

God's Spirit will cause you to be pregnant, he said, which is why your son will be the Son of God. And if you want further evidence of a miraculous pregnancy, go ask your relative Elizabeth. (We do not know how they were related.) If God can cause an elderly woman to become pregnant, he can also cause a young woman, even a virgin, to become pregnant. He will keep his promise.

temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak" (vv. 21-22). The priest who offered incense was also supposed to give a blessing, but Zechariah could not. However, Zechariah kept his commitment, staying in Jerusalem as long as his priestly division was supposed to serve, and then he went home. Elizabeth became pregnant, but kept her pregnancy secret for five months (vv. 23-24). And she rejoiced: "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people." She went from disgrace to favour.

An announcement to Mary

The next event Luke tells us about happened "in the sixth month"—in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. He introduces the characters: "God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary" (vv. 26-27). She was probably a teenager, with a legally binding commitment to marry Joseph. Joseph may have been much older; we do not know. Gabriel went to Mary (we do not know how he appeared) and said: "Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you" (v. 28). This was an odd greeting, Mary thought, and she "was greatly troubled at his words" (v. 29). She was just an ordinary girl; why should she be given this honour? So Gabriel said: "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end" (vv. 30-33).

The angel announced that Mary would have a child, the Son of God, the son of David, a ruler forever, in other words, the Messiah. What a breathtaking announcement! (This is commemorated in March in traditional Christian calendars as the Feast of the Annunciation.) She was to name him Jesus, which means "The Lord is salvation."

This is not a vague prophecy that in some distant future Mary would become pregnant and have a son. That wouldn't be much of a prediction, since almost all women had that experience. Mary understood that she would become pregnant right away. "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" (v. 34).

Mary's question sounds similar to Zechariah's, but Gabriel did not rebuke her for scepticism. Perhaps an old priest was supposed to have more faith than a teenage girl, or perhaps Mary simply had more faith. To answer her question, Gabriel basically repeated his prophecy, and gave Mary a sign by revealing Elizabeth's pregnancy.

Gabriel answered: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren

Mary's response is a model for all of us: "I am the Lord's servant," she said. "May it be to me as you have said" (v. 38). Her attitude is a great example for all of us. She was willing, even though women who became pregnant before marriage were not treated well in that society. She would go from favor to disgrace—and she did not yet know the heartache involved in being the mother of the Messiah.

Questions for application

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1. Have I carefully investigated the facts about Jesus? (v. 1)
2. What prayer would I most like God to answer for me? (v. 13)
3. Is my heart turned toward my children? (v. 17)
4. Do I consider myself "highly favoured" by God? (v. 28)
5. Am I as willing as Mary to let God work in my life? (v. 38)

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