

Authority in the Church According to Luke-Acts¹

Robert F. O' Toole, SJ
Pontifical Biblical Institute, Rome

This investigation considers only passages which bear on authority in the Church, and the methodology employed is composition criticism, a type of redaction criticism. Luke did compose the text we have; and even if we cannot delineate his sources, we can determine his message.

The theme of 'authority in the Church'² belongs within the Lucan framework of the two realms, that of God and that of Satan (Acts 26:18); naturally, the Church belongs to God's realm. Moreover, what Luke says in Acts 1:12-8:1a applies to the whole Church since at the time there is only one christian community. In Luke-Acts, there are a number of expressions for Church³ which help us to understand and to nuance 'authority.' For instance, 'the word grew' reminds us of the creative presence of God; 'brothers and sisters,' a fraternal attitude;

1 The present article is a condensed form of "E Authentia stēn Ekklēsia kata ta Keimema Loukas-Praxeis" which originally appeared in *Delatio Bibaikōn Meletōn* 15 (1996) 10-47.

2 'Church' refers to the whole Christian community; 'church' to a local community or communities.

3 Confer H.J. Cadbury, "Note XXX. Names for Christians and Christianity in Acts," *The Beginnings of Christianity, Vol. 5, Additional Notes to the Commentary* (ed. K. Lake & H.J. Cadbury) (London 1933) 375-392. However, not all of his examples appear valid; *Koinōnia* designates the Christians' sharing of their possessions and so only an aspect of the community. Nor do the following designations seem justified, 'friends,' 'righteous,' 'gospel' and 'faith.' This article suggests a few designations, not mentioned by Cadbury. See also J.B. Tyson, "The Emerging Church and the Problem of Authority in Acts," *Int* 42 (1988) 133.

and '(all) together' stresses unity. 'The Way' suggests companionship and a definite path (direction) to follow. However, more useful for our study are the designations of Church as the continuation of Israel (cf. Acts 1:15-26; 3:22-23);⁴ for they place us within the context of the Jewish community and its exercise of authority. For example, in Acts 'apostle' designates the office held by the Twelve.

For Luke the kingdom of God embraces the Church, but not the latter the former. Michael Wolter contends 'the kingdom of God' in Acts is only future and not present;⁵ but he himself grants that in Luke's Gospel the kingdom is also a present reality and in Acts it refers to the message about Jesus; but what was true about the kingdom in the Gospel remains true in Acts: God's salvation and the victory over Satan continue; Jesus now enthroned as king (Acts 2:33-36) is active among the Christians⁶ as are God and the Spirit; certain Christians imitate Christ and through their preaching and miracles make the kingdom present; and the call for repentance and faith is constant.

Missionary Authority

'Authority' is a broad topic⁷ and can be conveyed in many ways. Christians are authorized to preach, to witness and to teach; the Jerusalem church approves the missionary efforts of others; Christians are conscious of having such authority and, finally, we find summary statements about teaching and 'witness.' Jesus himself sent the apostles to proclaim the reign of God, to work miracles and cast out demons (Lk 9:1-6). Radical poverty characterizes their activity,

4 R.E. Brown, *The Churches the Apostles Left Behind* (New York 1984) 63-68; P.F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts* (SNTSMS 57; Cambridge 1987) 69; G. Lohfink, *Die Sammlung Israels: Eine Untersuchung zur lukanischen Ekklesiologie* (SANT 39; Muenchen 1975); E. Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament* (SBT 32; London 1961) 75-76. S. Zedda, *Teologia della salvezza negli Atti degli Apostoli* (Studi biblici 20; Bologna 1994) 110-123. See also B.S. Easton, *Early Christianity: The Purpose of Acts and Others Papers* (ed. F. Grant) (Greenwich 1954) 43-57; D. Gerber, "Luc et le Judaisme," *Foi et Vie* 92 (1993) 55-66.

5 "M. Wolter, "'Reich Gottes' bei Lukas" *NTS* (1995) 541-563. The possibility of any connection whatever between the kingdom of God and Church creates concern for some Protestant scholars.

6 For a consideration of this topic, see my "Activity of the Risen Christ in Luke-Acts," *Bib* 62 (1981) 471-498.

7 C. Zettner, *Amt, Gemeinde and kirchliche Einheit in der Apostelgeschichte des Lukas* (EurHS XXIII, 423; Frankfurt am Main 1991) appreciates the complexity of the question. See also Tyson, "The Emerging Church," 132-145.

and they are to be open to whatever hospitality is offered. Receiving their message is of utmost importance. Much the same is true of the Seventy(-two); however, there are some specific additions (10:1-12; cf. vv. 16-17). More labourers are needed, and they are worthy of their hire. The Seventy(-two) are 'lambs in the midst of wolves', yet there is even greater stress on accepting their message.

At the end of his Gospel, Luke returns to the proclamation of the message and to 'witness' (cf. Lk 24:47-48; cf. 21:13); the apostles will receive the promise of the Father (the Spirit) and be clothed with power from on high (v.49). These ideas appear again in the programmatic Acts 1:8; and generally the Spirit directs the mission. God picked certain witnesses to preach and to testify about Jesus (Acts 10:41-42; cf. 4:19-20, 23-31; 5:17-21); consequently, Peter and the apostles must obey God rather than any human authority (Acts 5:29a; cf. vv.32, 39; 4:19-20).

Missionary activity can call for approval by the church in Jerusalem; this approval occurs only in matters which had an import for the whole Church and for unity among the communities.⁸ Apparently, Philip's activity in Samaria needs Peter and John's confirmation; for their reception of the Holy Spirit reveals this (8:14-18). Later, when some Christians converted many Hellenists at Antioch, the church of Jerusalem sent Barnabas to review the situation. Barnabas recognized the hand of the Lord and exhorted everyone to remain faithful to the Lord (11:19-24).

Luke reports Paul's 'conversion experience' three times. According to Acts 9:15-16 Paul is Christ's instrument to bring his name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel. Then God has chosen Paul to see and hear the risen Christ and be his witness to everyone (22:14-15). Finally, the risen Christ himself directly appoints Paul to serve and testify to him and explains the nature of Paul's mission (26:16-17; cf. 22:17-21).

At Antioch of Syria while the community is fasting and praying, the Holy Spirit selects Barnabas and Saul for a special mission (Acts 13:2); both have hands⁹ laid on them and are described as sent out by

⁸ See M. Dumais, *Communauté et mission: Une lecture des Actes des Apôtres pour aujourd'hui* (Relais Etudes 10; Paris 1992) 139-149.

⁹ See my "Hands, Laying on of," ABD III, 48-49.

the Holy Spirit (v.4). Later at Antioch of Pisidia they explain their going to the Gentiles as the Lord's command to be a light for the Gentiles and to bring salvation to the ends of the earth (13:47; cf. 1:8). At their return to Antioch of Syria, Luke writes, "Where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed" (14:26); and Paul and Barnabas speak of all that God had done through them in bringing faith to the Gentiles. Consequently, God, Christ, the Spirit and human agency are all involved in this missionary journey.

The Spirit, also designated the Spirit of Jesus, prevents Paul, Silas and Timothy from preaching in Asia, but the nightly vision of the Macedonian proves decisive for their entering modern Europe and they interpret this as a call from God (Acts 16:6-10). In Jerusalem, the risen Lord tells Paul, "Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must (*dei*) bear witness also in Rome" (23:11). This authorization to bear witness in Rome is confirmed during the sea voyage (27:24-25; cf. vv. 21-26).

Other Christians are associated with the proclamation of the Christian message. At Ephesus, Priscilla and Aquila explained 'the Way' of God to Apollos in more detail (Acts 18:24-28). Philip has four daughters who prophesy (21:9), and in the previous verse Philip himself is called 'the evangelist.'

Jesus is many times portrayed as teaching; and Peter and John, the apostles, Paul and Barnabas, and Apollos all teach. In Acts 4:2, 18; 5:21, 25, 28, 42; 18:11 (cf. 20, 20) this teaching is variously authorized.

For Luke, a 'witness' is a technical term. One can witness to something Jesus did or that God achieved through him, but the main object is the resurrection of Jesus. 'Witness' has no territorial or racial boundaries and implies a group. A completely isolated witness is unthinkable (cf. Deut 17:6; 19:15).¹⁰ Moreover, only in Luke does the risen Jesus promise to be with his witnesses (Lk 21:15; cf. vv. 12-21);

10 For a more extensive treatment of 'witness', see my Acts 26, 102-104. Acts 1:21-22 describes the qualifications for an apostle not for a witness. See also A. Barbi, "La missione negli Atti degli Apostoli," *Ricerche Storico Bibliche* 2 (1990) 145-148 and R. Morgenthaler, *Lukas und Quintilian: Rhetorik als Erzaehlkunst* (Zuerich 1993) 363-385, who views 'witness,' used of the disciples, as one of the two major metaphors in Luke-Acts.

and this promise is fulfilled in Acts (e.g., 18:5-10; 26:16-18, 23). 'Witness' also allows Luke to compare Paul favorably with Peter.¹¹

Authority to Work Miracles

The authority to work miracles is not infrequently associated with the proclamation of the gospel message.¹² Peter clarifies that the paralytic was cured in the name of Jesus of Nazareth (cf. 3:6-7, 12-13) and then maintains that Jesus is the cornerstone rejected by the builders and that there is salvation in no one else because there is no other name under heaven by which human beings can be saved (4:10-12; cf. v. 30). Ananias lays hands on Paul; and he recovers his sight and is filled with the Spirit (Acts 9:10-19a); all of this occurs in a context of bringing Jesus' name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel. Paul's exorcism of the slave girl with a spirit of divination connects the miraculous with the gospel message, for she identifies him and his companions as servants of the Most High God who proclaim salvation (16:17). This is also true of Acts 13:4-12. Bar-Jesus is punished with blindness because he opposes the word of God; the miracle also partially motivates the faith of the proconsul Sergius Paulus. In the story, the Holy Spirit authorizes the miracle actualized by God through Paul.

Other miracles are not directly connected with the proclamation of the gospel, but the element of authority is clear. Peter in Lydda says to the paralytic Aeneas, "Jesus Christ heals you; get up and make your bed" (Acts 9:34). Acts 19:11-12 (cf. 5:15-16) presents a summary statement of Paul's miraculous activity: "God did extraordinary miracles through Paul." In Malta, Paul first prays and then lays hand on Publius' father and heals him; then all the people on the island who were sick came and were cured (28:8-9).

11 See Zettner, *Amt, Gemeinde und kirchliche Einheit*, 415 and J. Dupont, *Nouvelles études sur les Actes des Apôtres* (LD 118; Paris 1984) 446-456. The references to Paul and Barnabas as 'apostles' (Acts 14:4, 14) should not be interpreted as identifying them with the twelve apostles.

12 See F. Neiryck, "The Miracle Stories in the Acts of the Apostles," *Les Actes des Apôtres: Traditions, rédaction, théologie* (ed. J. Kremer) (BETL 48; Leuven 1979) 202-205. Luke intentionally places miracles at the beginning of new missionary activity, and parallel miraculous activity relates to Luke's concept of continuity.

Authority to Appoint Successors

Peter claims that it is God's will, manifested through the Holy Spirit in the Psalms (Pss 68:26 LXX; 108:8 LXX), that Judas should have a successor. Peter then presents the qualifications and the two candidates are proposed. The Christians pray to the Lord to indicate Judas' successor. Significantly, Judas' apostolic post is twice described as 'service' (vv. 17, 25); and the community appears to play a part in the appointment (vv. 15-17, 24-26).

The Seven

For the first time we have in Acts 6:1-7 an appointment, not through a call of the incarnate or risen Lord nor through the activity of the Holy Spirit or by means of lots but by the elections of the members of a congregation.¹³ Acts 6:1-6 is a kind of ordination story. Moreover, R.C. Tannehill rightly states, "The echoes of these scriptural stories also strengthen the sense of authorized continuity in the early church, not only between the twelve and the seven but also between the church and the Israel of Scripture..."¹⁴ On the other hand, Luke did add the transitional v. 7 and so place the pericope within a dominant framework of growth of the community and of the word of God. According to 6:1-7, the widows of the Greek-speaking Christians were being neglected in the daily distribution of food; and the Twelve surely exercise authority. They summon the other disciples, define their own task, propose the participation of the community in the selection of the Seven and the criteria for being one of them; the Seven are presented to the Twelve, and after praying they lay hands on them, i.e., appoint them as the Seven.

The second half of Acts centres on Paul. His dispute with Barnabas about John Mark shows that the exercise of authority was not always smooth (Acts 15:36-40). Paul's leadership position among the Christians is well known and recognized; in the hearing before Felix, he is accused of "being a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes" (24:5). Still Paul is respectful of Jewish authority and apologizes for reproaching the high priest (23:5; cf. vv. 2-5).

¹³ H. Beyer, "Episkeptomai," TDNT 2:605.

¹⁴ Tannehill, *The Literary Unity of Luke-Acts*, Vol. 2: *The Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis 1990) 84.

Elders

Christian 'elders' are first spoken about in Acts 11:27-30 and were entrusted with the appropriate distribution of any assistance received (cf. 4:34-5:11). The function of 'elder' was probably based on that of the Jewish religion. Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch; these appointments were accompanied by prayer and fasting and, perhaps, the laying on of hands (14:23). Nothing is said about the appointment of the elders in Jerusalem, but they definitely shared in the authority of the apostles over the Church. When Paul visits James in Jerusalem, all the elders are present (21:18); and reference is made to their decision at the Jerusalem Council; yet there is no reason to view them as being the equals of the apostles. In the whole of Acts, we never hear an elder speak on his own. At Miletus (20:17-35) 'elders' are synonymous with 'overseers'.¹⁵ The Holy Spirit appointed them to watch over the flock, and Paul himself may have been the human agent of these appointments. There were a number of such elders, and so they must have formed a kind of council. They were to protect the flock from opponents and had Paul's example of three years of remarkable dedication, of desiring no personal gain and of working with his own hands to support himself and his companions. The elders have God and the message of his grace to support them.

Very likely Lk 12:41-48 are addressed to later church leaders¹⁶ who, aware of the second coming of the Lord, should be virtuous and examples of Christian love; for their gifts and position mean more responsibility (cf. 19:11-26). If they are faithful, they will surely be rewarded; if not, they will receive just punishment. At the Last Supper, only Luke of the Synoptics repeats the discussion about who is the greatest (Lk 22:24-27; cf. 9:46-48; par.). Pagan kings dominate their subjects, and the powerful are called benefactors; but it cannot be that way with the apostles. The older should be as the younger, and the leader as the servant (cf. 17:10); for although the greater is the one who reclines at table, Jesus himself is among them as he who serves.¹⁷

15 J. Ysebaert, *Die Amtsterminologie im Neuen Testament und in der Alten Kirche: Eine lexikographische Untersuchung* (Breda 1994) 68-69. Do the prophets and teachers in Antioch (13:1-3) function like elders?

16 See P.K. Nelson, *Leadership and Discipleship. A Study of Luke 22:24-30* (SBLDS 138; Atlanta 1994) 47-48.

17 See Nelson, *Leadership and Discipleship*, 49, 171-172, 258-259, 264.

Authority to Make Necessary Community Decisions¹⁸

In the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), which forms a diptych with two panels (vv. 1-6,7-11), the realm of Satan encounters that of God.¹⁹ The deaths of Ananias and Sapphira and their being carried out and buried are striking confirmations of the futility of lying to God and to the leaders of the Christian community and a victory over Satan and his agents' deceptive behaviour. The result is fear (awe), and in the second panel this extends to the whole Church and all those who hear of the event. Through the activity of God and the Holy Spirit of the Lord (Jesus?) in Peter (vv. 3-4, 8ab, 9), the infant Church overcomes Satan's destructive activity in Ananias and Sapphira.

Acts 15:1-35 (cf. 10:1-11:18; 16:4; 21:25)

A very important decision for the early Church was whether Gentile converts should be circumcised or not.²⁰ Acts 15:1-35 may also provide an example of how the Church should solve her problems.²¹ The disciples in Antioch sent Paul, Barnabas and some others to Jerusalem to settle the question. Peter and James play the key roles. Peter speaks of putting a yoke on the Gentile disciples which neither their fathers nor they themselves could bear and concludes, "On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will" (15:11; cf. vv. 6-11). James next maintains what Peter had just said is confirmed by the words of the prophets and cites Amos 9:11-12 LXX which speak of rebuilding the house of David. James' judgment is that they should not create problems for

18 L.T. Johnson, *Decision Making in the Church: A Biblical Model* (Philadelphia 1993) 59-87, lists five decisions (Acts 1:15-26; 4:23-31; 6:1-6; 9:26-30; 10:1-11, 18; 14:26-15:35). He rightly expresses doubts about 4:23-31, for it is rather a prayer to remain faithful to the ministry.

19 See my article, "You Did Not Lie to Us (Human Beings) But to God (Acts 5:4c)," *Bib* 76 (1995) 182-209.

20 J. Jervell ("Das Aposteldekret in der lukanischen Theologie," *Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in Their Textual and Situational Contexts, Essays in Honor of L.Hartman* [ed. T. Fornberg & D. Hellholm] [Oslo 1995] 227-243) provides considerable bibliography.

21 See R. Heiligenthal, "Methodische Erwägungen zur Analyse neutestamentlicher Gemeindegrenzenkonflikte," *ZRGG* 48 (1996) 102-113. For possible sources and how Luke used them, cf. F. R. Pesch, "Das Jerusalem Abkommen und die Lösung des Antiochenischen Konfliktes," *Kontinuität und Einheit, Fs. F. Mussner* (hrsg. P.-G. Mueller & W. Stenger) (Freiburg 1981) 121-122.

the Gentile converts but should write to them "to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from marriages with close relatives and from whatever has been strangled and from blood" (v. 20) because what Moses has taught on this point is well known (v. 21).²² Then the apostles, elders and whole church support James' decision; and the community in Antioch approves and rejoices at the letter (cf. 16:4; 21:25) that these latter send them. All of this is reasonable since the final decision accords with God's will and with the Holy Spirit.

We find another community decision in Acts 21:20-26. James and the elders tell Paul to join the four men, who have made a vow, in their rite of purification and to pay for the shaving of their heads. Thus, everyone will know that Paul observes the law and that he does not teach Jewish converts to give up circumcision or their customs. Paul is close to finishing this religious act, when a riot breaks out in the temple.

Certainly, Peter holds a key position among the apostles.²³ When Jesus predicts Peter's denial, only Luke writes, "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (22:31). In the early chapters of Acts, Peter presides over the election of a successor for Judas, gives the speech before the Sanhedrin concerning in whose power the apostles act. Peter is central to the Ananias and Sapphira story and to the correction of Simon Magus' attempt to buy God's gift of the Spirit. In 12:16b-17 he temporarily moves off the stage, apparently, in favour of James; but the Cornelius story, in which he plays a major role, is a key element in the Jerusalem Council's decision about whether the Gentile converts should be circumcised and observe the Law of Moses.

Luke likewise associates Christian prophets with community decision making. In Antioch Agabus' prediction of a famine leads to the relief sent to those in Judea (Acts 11:27-30).

22 E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia 1971) 450, 469-472, points out that v. 21 can only be an explanation of v. 20.

23 See also P. Perkins, *Peter, Apostle for the Whole Church* (Columbia, S.C. 1994) 35-37, 84-95, 118-119.

Authority to Baptize and to Break Bread

Only once do we find a clear authorization to baptize. The Holy Spirit fell on those who heard Peter's words in Cornelius' house, and Peter concludes that God wants them to be baptized and orders that this be done (Acts 10:44-48; 11:15-18). However, such authorization is implied in the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:36), of Paul (9:17; cf. 22:12-16), of the jailor at Philippi and his household (16:30-34) and of the Ephesian disciples (19:1-7). Apparently, this was the assumption for any Christian baptism.

The apostles' authority to celebrate the breaking of bread (Eucharist) flows from Jesus' instructions after he gave them the bread identified as his body, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk 22:19b; cf. 1 Cor 11:24-25).²⁴ Jesus' words take on all the more weight since the literary form of the Last Supper is that of last will and testament. Although no further authority statement appears on the subject, the latter Church carried out Jesus' instruction. Only Jesus and Paul at Troas are explicitly named as celebrants of the breaking of bread (20:7-11), and the latter on the first day of the week.

Conclusion

This article has employed composition criticism to address the question of Lucan 'Church authority', an integral part of God's kingdom. 'Church authority' was influenced by the Jewish tradition, yet Luke allows for development and has presented an ideal picture of its exercise. Christians exercise authority in their missionary, witnessing and teaching activity, in working miracles, in appointing successors and individuals to various functions, in community decision-making and in baptism and the breaking of bread. The whole Church or a given community can share in the exercise of authority, but is not its source nor decisive in the matter.²⁵ Although the Holy Spirit is much more active in Acts, authority, missionary activity included, is surely not exercised only under his direction; for God, Christ, grace, angels, visions and human agents play important roles. Thus, the need for respect and cooperation; for no authority is

24 See B.M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart 1994) 148-150, for the justification of the longer text.

25 See A. Vanhoye, "Le ministere dans l'Eglise," *NRT* 104 (1982) 722-738.

exercised by chance. The divine and the human work together, but Luke's presentation cannot be described as 'Early Protestantism'.²⁶

The Twelve or the apostles (the Eleven) are Jesus' first agents in all areas of authority; in part their task is unique; in part they serve as models for later Church leaders. James' judgment at the Council of Jerusalem proves important, but Peter and Paul play more important roles. Peter strengthens his brethren; and Paul, who is directly commissioned by the risen Christ, is docile to both divine and Church authority but dominates the second part of Acts. He works miracles, commissions and baptizes others, and celebrates the breaking of bread. Elders are just beginning to appear both in Jerusalem and in Paul's churches, and Luke sees church authority structure as moving in that direction.²⁷ According to Lk 10:1-20, the Seventy(-two) carry on the work of the Twelve; but need financial support, and there is a lack of missionaries. Twice the text speaks of the local community participating in the exercise of authority, but apparently the officials decided (e.g., 11:22; 14:26-27); at other times, the community participation appears a mere formality (e.g., 1:24-26; 15:22, 25).

Prayer and fasting can accompany the exercise of authority, and the laying on of hands relates to the reception of the Spirit, healing, commissioning and ordaining. At the Last Supper, Jesus clarifies that all Christian authority is really a service (Lk 22:24-27). Poverty and the willingness to associate with the poor should mark its exercise. Church leaders may be like lambs in the midst of wolves, but they are to be dedicated and responsible and not abuse their fellow Christians. Those who do so faithfully will receive a just reward; and the acceptance of Christian authority produces good results, rejoicing and unity.

26 Pace K. Giles, "Is Luke an Exponent of 'Early Protestantism'? Church Order in the Lukan Writings," *EvQ* 54 (1982) 193-205 and 55 (1983) 3-20.

27 See Zettner, *Amt, Gemeinde und Kirchliche Einheit*, 416-417, 433-434.