

Inclusion in The Acts of the Apostles

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John D. Davies

Formerly Principal of the College of the Ascension, Selly Oak and Bishop of Shrewsbury

Abstract

The Acts of the Apostles is an example of Practice Interpretation – making connections between the Gospel event and our own situation. Pentecost speaks to the situation of the speakers of minority languages, and of those who struggle for the establishing of justice, exemplified in the life of the church in South Africa under apartheid. Acts is the story of the continual inclusion of new groups of people, and of the problems which such inclusion brings. Pivotal events in Acts supply patterns for corporate decision-making. Practice Interpretation of Acts will remind the church that it is a movement before it is an organisation, and that creativity happens at the edge rather than the centre.

Keywords

'Acts in Practice', Connection, Pentecost, Minority languages, Babel, Jesus, South African struggle, Inclusion, Corporate decision-making

Introduction – the value of 'Practice Interpretation'

'Practice Interpretation' is a valuable new genre in biblical studies. It gives a label to the sort of work which many of us have been trying to do for some years, in our attempts to connect the Scriptures to our discipleship in the here and now. E.M.Forster's phrase '**Only Connect**' might well be an over-arching motto for the whole enterprise. This is the purpose for which the Scriptures were given to their readers in the first place. The stories in the Gospels started life as resources for disciple-groups which needed them to sustain their following of Jesus, in different times, in different places, but with the same motive. That original purpose remains

basic to our handling of the texts today. In his Foreword to a little book of mine about the Nativity stories in the Gospels, Rowan Williams neatly and provocatively summarised its argument: 'Jesus was not born into a different world from our own' (Davies, 1999, ix). It's in our own here-and-now that the Gospel material has to have its currency discovered.

Practice Interpretation is a programme which brings together some of outworking of this

Corresponding author:

John D Davies
Email: khanyajdd@yahoo.co.uk

purpose, in the experiences of contemporary disciple-groups. ‘Practice Interpretation...is a series of attempts to write down some of the “calls” in terms of actions, or ideas, or campaigns, or movements, or understandings which disciples see as being derived from, inspired by, supported in, or coherent with, a particular Gospel passage’ (Vincent, 2011, p. 1). Over the past ten years or so, groups have been coming together to share some of these insights. They have started to publish their work, beginning with ‘Stilling the Storm’ (on Mark 4.35 – 5.1). Their second publication is ‘Acts in Practice’, on The Acts of the Apostles. Although it derives directly from the experiences of today, Practice Interpretation is asking the oldest questions about the texts which we inherit from apostolic times - ‘what’s the use of this story, where does it fit into our discipleship, where are we in it?’ To study the Scriptures without such an intention is like analysing a tennis racket in terms of the chemistry of its materials and the architecture of its structure, without reference to the game for which it is designed, to which it owes its existence.

Practice Interpretation does not attempt to lay down the law as to how the work should be done. The sheer variety of contributions in the two books so far published shows that this cannot be the case; there are as many interpretations as there are interpreters, as many experiences as there are experiencers. Therefore, it is a subjective task, and cannot be value-free. It cannot be limited to a narrowly academic process of impersonal analysis or of textual referencing. If academic objectivity requires that the value of the material for faith-encounters and missionary experience are not allowed, then we have to insist ‘Lo, we turn to the Gentiles’ (Acts 13.46) - to those on the edge who can feel in their bones the claim of what is alive and questioning. In this sense, Practice Interpretation is a discipline which is deeply true to the character of the foundation-documents of the Christian movement - even if its style and story-telling make it unlikely to qualify as material for academic theses!

The Christians of the decades after the resurrection of Jesus had the same task as we have, to remember the activity and word of Jesus and to work out their obedience in their own here-and-now. The text known as ‘The Acts of the Apostles’ is record of the efforts of some of those Christians to do this.

From the start, there is a huge difference between the Gospels and Acts. In the Gospels, the agent of God is one person, located on one pair of feet, operating with one brain. The Gospels only rarely give us any insight into Jesus’ thinking, his internal debating, his motives and feelings. In Acts, Christ has taken a new body, a body with innumerable pairs of feet, brains, and locations. We can follow the thinking, the feelings, the puzzlements of this new agent of God, the body of Christ, led by the Spirit. Much of it is the story not of the first Christians - the people who knew Jesus in the flesh - but of the second Christians, those who were working out the meaning of their discipleship in a new here-and-now, far from the locations of the activities of Jesus. So Acts is a natural subject for exploration in the genre of Practice Interpretation; we can translate the experiences of the people of Acts into our own experience. The recently-published book ‘Acts in Practice’ is the product of this - a series of essays by sixteen very different writers, examining various different elements of Acts in terms of contemporary experience of discipleship.

Acts is the biggest book of the New Testament, and any commentary on the whole text will have to be a big volume. ‘Acts in Practice’ does not claim to cover the whole text in detail; it is a fascinating collection of insights derived from a great variety of background-situations. In what follows, I try to follow one of the big themes of Acts - the theme of inclusion - as a companion essay to support the book.

Including many languages

Sheila and Steve are a profoundly deaf couple who have just moved into a new home in an unfamiliar area. While Steve is clearing things

up outside, Sheila is struggling with the remote, trying to sort out the programme options on the TV. She checks programme after programme; many are of no use for her; some have subtitles, but these tend to move too fast for her, and the news items are often gobbledegook anyway. Then, to her surprise and delight, there on the screen is an interpreter putting everything into sign-language. She runs out to Steve, and tells him, 'Come and see; there's a programme in BSL; it's for US'.

Something like this must have been the experience of those Elamites and Cappadocians on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). To be there in Jerusalem at all, they must have had some knowledge of Greek or Latin or Hebrew/Aramaic. But these were not the languages of their heart and home. When they heard the apostles, they could exclaim with excitement, 'This is for US, it's our programme; we're IN'.

There are several big themes in that big book, *The Acts of the Apostles*. Several of these themes are well displayed as examples of Practice Interpretation in 'Acts in Practice'. One theme which runs right through is the theme of **inclusion**. The first evidence of the gift of the Spirit is the inclusion of all the world in communication, in a very particular way; not by forcing all into one frame but by recognising and celebrating diversity.

The geography is important, and it's worthwhile to identify all the named places on a map, and then overlay this with the names of the corresponding places in our modern world, from Libya to Azerbaijan. Our movement starts in the most persistently troublesome part of the world - if the Spirit of God can get something going there, then she can function anywhere! The effect of the Spirit is seen in the delight of the Parthians and Medes and Libyans and so on - Hey, they're talking to US, in our mother-tongues! Up till now, we have had to depend on Latin for law and Hebrew for holiness, but now our little language is as good as theirs! You don't have to be ventriloquised by the powerful in order to get to God. Through the action of the Spirit, the word comes to each person and

group as they are, affirming their language and culture, incarnating the word in new flesh.

A priest in Tanzania was taking the Communion to an old housebound lady in her hut; as he approached quietly on the dry earth, he heard a voice within, and thought that she must have visitors. But she was just praying aloud, not in the big languages of church and state, Swahili and English, but in **her** language. Her prayer was this: 'Dear God, I don't know if you understand Makua, but Makua is the only language I know, and I want to tell you in Makua that I love you like I love my last-born child'(Stradling 1963, 3). There was someone who knew Pentecost!

45 years ago, the South African Council of Churches set up a Theological Commission. Its mandate was to subject the ideology of apartheid to a biblical critique, and to establish a response in terms of the Christian Gospel. A small team of us had the task of drawing up a statement, which eventually became a public manifesto, entitled 'A Message to the People of South Africa'. I was editor. We were not short of elements of biblical witness which demonstrated the heretical character of apartheid, and the text was in danger of becoming too long to be read in pulpits. But, when I thought we had got it complete, an Afrikaans-speaking member said: 'We haven't got anything in about the Tower of Babel. If we don't refer to the Tower of Babel, the Afrikaans people won't take any notice.' This was important; not only was the Afrikaans-speaking nationalist government the architect of the detailed forms of injustice and cruelty of the system; it was the Afrikaans-medium churches who provided the theological underpinning for the ideology. So we put in a paragraph, quoting the argument that 'racial separation is said to have the authority of an order of creation, divinely confirmed by the confusion of tongues at the Tower of Babel and emphasised again at Pentecost. The fact is, however,' we continued, 'that the event of Pentecost asserts and demonstrates the power of the Holy Spirit to draw people into one community of disciples in spite of differences of

language and culture, and it is thus the way by which the disunity of Babel is healed.' It hadn't occurred to our English-speaking members to bother about Babel. For theologians of the powerful languages, Babel is simply a sign of God's judgement on human hubris. But for people of minority languages, Babel can be seen as an act of God's providence and freedom, delivering humanity from the dominance of a monoglot technopolis. It is a blessing, as traditional Welsh preachers affirm. (In the late 19th century, English educational authorities were using identical classroom techniques in the attempt to destroy both Afrikaans and Welsh in schools). Pentecost does not contradict Babel; it affirms it; but while it affirms distinctiveness it also overcomes separation. There is a powerful defiance in Babel, affirmed by Pentecost, which we need to claim in a modern culture which is dominated by forms of language which are congenial to mass-advertising, congenial to structures which benefit from computer-speak, congenial to educational norms which make people feel that their languages are unfit for proper intercourse.

Later in Acts, we see that Paul, confident though he is in his cosmopolitan competence in Greek and Latin, recognises the need to claim the *mamiaith* (= mother-tongue in Welsh) of both himself and his hearers, because Jesus, that very local unc cosmopolitan character, affirms it (Acts 21.40 and 22.2; and 26.14).

On the far side of this affirmation of each person and group, the apostolic speaker tells about Jesus. All the little languages have their words for holy things, and for God; in South Africa, we could speak of God, Gott, Modimo, uNkulunkulu, Tixo, Dieu, Jumala, and a dozen other words for God; but there is the one name for God's presence, God's witness, God's Son – **Jesus**. When I was a university chaplain in Johannesburg, I often took white students with me (strictly against the law) when I went into African townships on Sundays to celebrate the Eucharist, which I normally did in Zulu; I had to explain that the singing and the prayers would be in at least

four different languages, and they would be anxious about whether they could follow the service, so I told them, 'Just listen for the two sounds, Jesus and Amen, and you will know where you are.' The name of Jesus is the sound that unites and includes. Twice I had responsibility for choosing the name for a church, and each time the congregation was delighted for their church to be known as The Church of the Holy Name. The Name tells the church its task.

Then the apostle expounds God's purpose as foreshadowed in the prophet; he invites his hearers to recognise the invalidity of the powers that crucified Jesus, and to acknowledge that those powers have lost their authority because the risen Jesus has shown that they have failed to destroy him. On the far side of all this, the new community is born. By baptism, a new family is created, and the first evidence of this is that every member is included in shared economic wealth. The new creation is shown in the fulfilment of the mandates of the first creation, in the blessings of Sabbath and Jubilee. Creation is evidenced in justice. Confidence in the sharing of communication and confidence in the sharing of other forms of power are all part of the Creator's design for the world. Pentecost is the model of the outworking of this design.

The whole of Acts 2 is one process, and it needs to be seen as such. This is Pentecost. Some may say that it is myth, and that we have to demythologise it. I remember once discussing this in South Africa. A Pentecostal pastor friend responded very simply: 'If you see the same story happening all around you now, then it stops being myth - it's the real thing'. This is surely the mandate for Practice Interpretation.

Inclusion of the powerful

For Africans the story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 is a particularly precious witness. It is very appropriate for Practice Interpretation. A very big man of power, the Chancellor of

the imperial Queen's Exchequer, meets a little man of power, a deacon called to be a treasurer for a few poor widows. Travelling in his limousine, the big man's attention has been grasped by an apparently unholy figure in the holy text he is reading, the figure of a despised and excluded nobody who somehow might have something to do with God. Figures of wealth and political influence, characters like himself, are all over the place in religious stories, not least in the stories of Judaism. But the figure of someone condemned, treated as rubbish among others who are treated as rubbish - this is either nonsense or something fundamentally and unexpectedly true. The Scripture has brought this traveller in the desert half-way; the deacon-evangelist does the rest. The powerful man is converted by the figure of the crucified. He finds himself included among those nobodies for whom the crucified makes sense.

Newly-baptised, this talented gentleman doesn't find himself drafted into the nearest church fellowship, to be put onto a committee. He continues, joyfully, southward, alone, into what has been called darkest Africa. This eunuch, whom the secular power-system has deprived of his ability to be a father, is now honoured as the spiritual ancestor of millions of black Africans, who see their inclusion as stemming from his inclusion.

The inclusion of the church

In 'Acts in Practice', my own contribution is an exploration of one of the great stories of inclusion, the story of Cornelius and Peter and the Church in Judaea (Acts 10.1 – 11.18). The conversion of the Gentile Cornelius leads to the conversion of the Apostle Peter, and this in turn leads to the conversion of the headquarters church. We can analyse the process into 20 distinct stages, which can all have their counterparts in our contemporary practice. For further detail, see 'Acts in Practice', pp 127 – 135.

The inclusion widens, and eventually includes us

The next big stage in the programme of inclusion is the pivotal event recorded in Acts 15. It is the classic model of corporate decision-making, offered not merely as an event in its own right but also as an exemplar of guidance of the disciple-community by the Spirit of Jesus. We can identify the key features of the process.

1. All parties are genuinely present. The Pharisees are there, and have a voice. They have a legitimate point of view, and it is given proper recognition.
2. The petitioners are at a distance, in Antioch; they are unable to be present, but they have spokespersons on whom they can fully rely.
3. The issue is identified, and the various interests are set forth by those who are qualified to do so, so that nothing is covered-up.
4. Peter, a recognised authority-figure, tells his story. He recalls his own involvement in the process of inclusion of Gentiles which has taken place thus far. This has not been without controversy, but the principle of the inclusion of Gentiles has become part of the accepted policy. The problem now is to work out how far the example of Cornelius should set a precedent. Cornelius could be said to be a 'one-off' – a very nice attractive Gentile. But now the issue has become much wider. The anxiety now is that the traditional core of Jews, with their inheritance of moral seriousness, is going to be swamped by a horde of barbarians from much further afield.
5. Peter's testimony acknowledges that the inclusion of Cornelius and his colleagues has had affect not only on them but upon himself and upon all the Christian community, in that it has clarified the basis of membership for all of them. For all of us equally, it's not our

historic identity or our religious activities or insignia which save us but the grace of the Lord Jesus.

6. The call for a clear establishing of policy is made not on grounds of principle or theory but on the basis of experience. Paul and Barnabas tell their story. Those at the 'centre' are informed about what has been happening 'on the fringe'. New creation has been happening away from the control of the hierarchy.
7. Testimony, or evidence, is heard in silence, without interruption.
8. In the chair, there is an establishment figure, a leader whose authority the conservatives can recognise. He speaks their language, refers to Peter by Peter's Jewish name. He responds to the stories by dealing with the issue as a matter of principle, by quoting authority which both sides can recognise as valid and relevant.
9. The chair senses the mind of the meeting and announces a decision, for which he takes personal responsibility. His behaviour is not that of the chair of a conference, so much as that of a judge in a judicial commission. He issues what might be called 'The James Report'.
10. The decision clearly is that one side has won the debate. But the chair includes a compromise. This should make it clear to the 'conservatives' that moral responsibility is not being abandoned; it also ensures that there is to be a discipline in the community which all members can recognise. The 'winners' should be aware of the valid moral sensitivities of the 'losers', and avoid behaviour which would bring the new movement into disrepute.
11. A careful plan is devised for communicating the report to those who were not present, the petitioners in whose interest the assembly has been called.
12. The communication is to be made both by written text and by personal accountability. Without the written text, the

message would lack verifiable authority; without the personal presentation, it would be merely bureaucratic and would lack the contribution of those who could tell the story and answer questions.

13. The people chosen to communicate the decision include the original representatives of the petitioning group in Antioch. But they also include a representative of each of the main groups of the Jerusalem church, one with a Jewish name and one with a Greek, both of them being eloquent people with communication skills.
14. The communication addresses the Gentile recipients, without qualification, as 'brothers', genuine members of the Christian family.
15. The communication acknowledges the grief which the recipients have experienced though trouble caused by irresponsible and unauthorised members from the headquarters community.
16. Because of the care and thoroughness of the process, the authors of the communication make bold to claim that the decision is what 'has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us'.

This is a process which can be offered to the church as a style of responsible decision-making, and therefore it is explicated in this kind of detail. We can see the same kind of debate going on in Paul's arguments with his colleagues - and with himself - in Galatians chapter 2. I have seen a very varied group of people working through this process in Acts 15, as they found a common mind concerning the place of women in Christian ministry.

If we do not sometimes find that questions of inclusiveness and equality are really difficult, requiring serious searching, it probably means that we have already decided, unconsciously, whom to exclude.

But once the decision is made in principle, it is not necessarily a matter of simple application. The compromise is never referred to again - maybe it

was necessary only as a device to keep some people on board. The Pharisees lost; the tradition which they represented faded out of the Christian spectrum, and we are poorer for the loss of distinctively Jewish elements of identity. The healing of this fragmentation remains part of our ecumenical mandate.

Moving on

The working towards new inclusiveness is hit-and-miss, unpredictable. The Christian disciple-community keeps on journeying, erratically. Paul and Barnabas split up. Paul picks up Silas, the message-bearer for Antioch, and they move on westwards.

Paul's journey after Phrygia and Galatia is worth noting (Acts 16.6–10). This little story is a huge encouragement to earnest disciples who wonder where the hell they're supposed to be going. Dead-end after dead-end; road-block after road-block; the traffic-lights are fixed at red. At last they find themselves with no further road in front of them, nothing but empty sea. Only then do they get the message, 'Come across the water to Macedonia.....' and start this improbable exercise of trying to get Europeans to become Christian. And when they get to Macedonia, they have to hang around and wait for the weekend before anything can happen..... Somewhere in the middle of all this, there is the Spirit of Jesus; but, just where? It's far from obvious at the time.

This little episode grasped me during the most miserable period of my life; without warning, the South African government evicted us, my wife and children and me, from the country that we knew as our only home, and my ministry there was terminated. I was in a world of dead-ends. I was at the end of a road, with nothing in front. In one way or another, this sort of thing happens to people in mission. When I was Principal of a missionary training college, and also when I had some responsibility for potential ordinands, this was one of the passages of Scripture which I most often had to claim. If our

calling was as simple as we would like it to be, and if things never went pear-shaped, there would be no need for a Saviour, a God incarnate would be redundant.

Conclusion

Frequently, in Acts, we are told how the apostles simply went to places, stayed there, and got new churches established; and often, they revisited these places, to help with the organisation and to encourage the leadership. Without stability, there is no fruitfulness, no maturing. But we are not given lengthy stories on this sort of theme. The big stories are the stories of inclusion; they involve new experiences, the bending of definitions, the breaking of boundaries. Our modern church documents, our synod reports, our leaders' pastoral letters, are commonly strong on stability, on maintenance, on nurturing the faithful in the community of the church. Fine. But I have just finished a period of nearly 14 months, trying to serve a small parish in midWales where I was Vicar 25 years ago. I have found that, in some ways, being a Vicar is more difficult than being a Bishop! I have been reminded that, before ever we were a church, the disciple-community was a movement. The church now is a movement before it is an organisation. It's when it is a movement that it starts to be inclusive - and then the new questions start to fire.

Stability is fine, and it can be encouraged by the authorities and administered from a centre. But the breakthroughs of the Spirit happen when someone is willing to lean on the definitions and puncture the boundaries. Inclusive church is not organised from the centre; it normally happens on the edge. It has to be reported to the centre, but the centre is the last to hear about it. This is the pattern in Acts 10 and 11, in Acts 15, and in Galatians 2. In Acts, we see an example of Practice Interpretation which fulfils the pattern of the Gospels. Jesus did not work from the centre to the edge. To have done so would have meant that he merely conformed to the existing patterns of cultural and

organisational dominance. Jesus was a new movement; he started from Galilee and moved towards Jerusalem. Acts starts from Judaea and moves towards Rome. Because of this movement, modern Christians, most of us being Gentiles, can feel that we belong. Acts in Practice means that we remain a movement; and who can tell where we will move to next?

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Leslie Stradling, *The Acts through Modern eyes* (Mowbray 1963), (Bishop Stradling wrote this little book from his experience as Bishop of SouthWest Tangankiya, before he came to us in South Africa as Bishop of Johannesburg. In an apparently simple style, it is in fact a good example of Practice Interpretation).