

ACTS on Freedom

ACTS ON FREEDOM

*Reflections on
language and culture
in the ACTS
of the Apostles*

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Preface

In this book I am searching for a Biblical and theological basis for contextual theology, based on seven selected chapters from the book The Acts of the Apostles. The central theme of the Book of Acts in the New Testament is the transition of the message of the Gospel from its original Jewish context towards a diversity of Gentile (non-Jewish) contexts. More accurately: the shift from a Jewish-Christian context towards a Gentile-Christian context. Jesus and his first disciples were all born and bred in the Jewish religious tradition. The first testimonies about Jesus also developed in that Jewish context. But already in the first half of the first century these testimonies were disseminated among people who had no Jewish origin. And many of these people, originating from a Gentile context (not to use the even more humiliating terminology “pagan context”), wanted to join the Jesus-movement. Consequently, the emerging Jesus-movement needed to cope with this transition and had to find an answer to this diversity of peoples, taking into account their languages and cultures. This answer is sought for, and given, in the book of Acts. Based on seven passages from The Acts of the Apostles that are particularly relevant to this theme, I endeavor to develop a Biblical-theological foundation for Christian reflection and action concerning peoples, languages and cultures.

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The main part of this book consists of the exegesis of the seven essential chapters, or parts of these chapters. In the exegesis the context of origin is of central importance. However, I will not restrict myself to the context of origin in the first century only. I will also reflect on the meaning and importance of these texts in totally different contexts, how these texts may receive meaning in other languages, other cultures and other eras. My love for The Acts of the Apostles was aroused when I was lecturing African Theology at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Kumba, Cameroon. I was intrigued by the fact that African theologians often referred to The Acts of the Apostles when writing about the foundations of an African Theology. At first, I did not understand, but along the way they opened my eyes to the importance of The Acts for African Theology. Actually, not only for African Theology, but for contextual theology in general, be it Black Theology, Latin American Theology, Korean Theology,

Feminist Theology or Native American Theology. The Acts of the Apostles offers a Biblical-theological foundation for any theology that wants to critically reflect on the Christian faith in its own cultural context. In short: In the book of Acts the Gentiles, Christians from all nations and cultures on earth, are given the fundamental right and freedom to be Christian in their own way and to be a church in their very own language setting and cultural context. The message of The Acts of the Apostles is: “Stop harassing the Gentiles!” These words are spoken by the apostle James in Acts 15:19, perhaps the most important words of the entire book of The Acts of the Apostles. For the title of this book I have summarized Luke’s theological project in the acts of the Apostles, into “Acts on Freedom”.

This message implied that I had to reflect on my own cultural context as well. During my studies I focused on what we then, in the second half of the twentieth century, called Third World Theology. I ended up graduating with Prof. James Cone at Union Theological Seminary in New York with a thesis on “Religion and Liberation”. During my ministry as Chaplain to International Students in the Netherlands my focus shifted in the direction to African Theology which resulted in a position as lecturer at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Cameroon. And during all these years, I gradually became aware that I knew very little about my own native context. I had not learned to read and write my own Frisian language, a minority language in the north of the Netherlands. I hardly had any knowledge of the history of the Frisian Lands and of Fryslân, now a province in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. I knew close to nothing about the church history of my own people.

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During these years I became a student of my own native context. Bit by bit I studied the language, culture and history of my ancestors. Along the road, I became convinced that the study of contextual theology in other contexts of the world is important and legitimate, but for me it developed into more than just an intellectual exercise. It became a source of inspiration and knowledge for developing a contextual theology in my own context, for developing a Frisian Theology. African theologians as well as my African students were my teachers for thinking theologically about my own context. That is why the introduction to this book (Chapter 1) contains a comparison between church and theology in Africa and in Fryslân. That is also why African theologians are quoted throughout this book. The seven exegetical chapters on Acts (Chapters 2-9) are followed by two final chapters in which I try to “translate the message” of the exegetical exercise into meaning for contextual theology in the twenty-first century. Chapter 10 is an analysis of “The Acts of Christianity”. Based on the

work of African theologians, we are shown what the “Acts of Christianity” have been in comparison to the intentions of the “Acts of the Apostles”. In the last chapter (Chapter 11), I try to formulate the central features of a contextual theology based on our reading of The Acts of the Apostles. This chapter is meant as a challenge to the reader. You are invited to translate the message into your own context, to try and formulate a contextual theology for the context of your own church and society. The intention of this book is to translate the main message of The Acts of the Apostles on language and culture to the theological discourse of the twenty-first century. And to give tools to anyone who wants to reflect on, and practice, theology in context.

Images often have more impact than words. In this book I present several works of art from around the globe. I am very grateful to the artists and owners for allowing me to use their work. Contextual theology is about the homecoming of the Gospel in a local context. All images in this book are related to The Acts of the Apostles and show the diversity and abundance of artistic reflection and imagination. They support the intention of this book and hopefully improve the readability of this book.

This book is the result of a personal journey, a pilgrimage of sorts. I had to find my own way in the jungle of international theology and found refuge in the jungle of Cameroon. Along the way, however, there have been several moments of choice, as in any pilgrimage. One of the main moments of choice was during my studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York, which I want to share as a conclusion to this preface.

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My wife and fellow pilgrim, Sietske Visser, and I arrived in New York in August 1987. I was born and raised on a dairy farm in the countryside of southern Fryslân. My parents were wise but received little formal education. I did not have much cultural and intellectual baggage when entering university. My proficiency of Dutch was not like that of my fellow students. Due to my cultural background, I had a low self-esteem, and I suffered from a mild inferiority complex. I now know that this is common among people from a minority context, but at the time I felt small and struggled to “become somebody”. I had no other weapons than to fight and beat the others academically. I struggled on and managed to receive a scholarship to study in New York. During those first few weeks, it was like living in a dream. I had beaten them all and was about to conquer the theological world. But that moment of youthful pride was cut short during these very first weeks.

We had our rooms in a dormitory looking out onto Broadway. I sat down to write a letter to my parents to tell them about the miracles of living and studying in New York. And at that very moment I realized that I was not able to write to my parents in the Frisian language, though I had never spoken to them in any other language than Frisian. At that very moment I understood that my struggle for self-esteem, to beat them all, had alienated me from my parents and my own native context. I had been learning several languages in order to achieve this level of academia but could not write in my own language. I had studied Dutch, English, French, German, Latin, Greek and Hebrew, but not my own language! I realized that my struggle for academic achievement implied my downfall at the same time. I understood that my pride and my struggle against a low self-esteem had made me a stranger. A stranger to myself and my family, a stranger in the world and a stranger in the world of theology. From that moment on I became a student of my Frisian language and tradition. I have tried to strike a balance between local and global. And since that year (1987) I have been proudly aware of my own origins and heritage. That is why the first version of this book was published in the Frisian language with the title “Op ús eigen wize”, which in English means something like “Doing it our own way” or “On our own tune”. For me it was not possible to write this specific book in another language than the Frisian language. It was an act of loyalty, a joyful penance. A chance to pay my long due respect to the language and culture of my own people. But I am also very happy indeed that this book, revised for an international audience, is now being published in English in order that readers from around the globe may reflect on and relate to the content of “Acts on Freedom”.



Peter Vassilev, *Fryslân* (2009)

[1]

Introduction

CHURCH AND THEOLOGY IN BETWEEN AFRICA AND FRIESLAND (FRYSLAN)

This book offers an analysis of seven selected chapters from The Acts of the Apostles, the fifth book in the Greek Bible (the New Testament). The Acts of the Apostles was written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke and while the first book of Luke describes Jesus' life until his ascension, the second book covers the period that follows.¹ In other words, it describes the period in which the apostles were on their own and in which they started to shape a movement of Christians that would later be referred to as the "church".² It concerns the acts, the dealings of the apostles, during the earliest period of church history.

One of the most important developments in this period was that the message of Jesus reached out to more than just Jewish people (as Jesus and the apostles themselves were), and that other, non-Jewish, people joined the movement. These people from other nations felt drawn to the person of Jesus and joined his Jewish disciples. This happened not just in and around Jerusalem, but also beyond Israel. The movement literally crossed borders and presented the young, Jewish movement with some considerable questions and challenges. For how were these new gentile followers to be included in the group of Jewish followers? Was it possible for people from outside God's covenant with the Jews to join the movement? Did they not first have to convert to the Jewish religion before they could become a follower of Jesus? I dare to say that this is maybe the main issue in the Acts of the Apostles and in the letters written by the apostle Paul as well.

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In this book, we will look into what the answer is and could be to the question "In what way did the non-Jewish people obtain a place in the Jesus movement?" We will try to identify what the difficulties were and what answers are given in the Bible. The letters of Paul provide good insights into the seriousness of the

1 See Acts of the Apostles 1:1. In this book, I will refer to the English Bible translation of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, 1989).

2 Jesus' disciples are first called "Christians" in Antioch. See Acts of the Apostles 11:26.

difficulties. In all of his letters, he talks about the conflicts between Jewish Christians and non-Jewish Christians, so I will regularly refer to these letters. They are, after all, the first and most original historical sources in terms of Christianity. But they are and remain letters, letters written for a particular group, often as a response to a previous letter or to previous events. We need to chew them over well to be able to extract the pieces of an answer from them. Although that is not an impossible task, the book of Acts is specifically written with the aim of providing us with an answer to our questions. It's clear right from the very first chapter that it's about a movement from Jerusalem to beyond, to the nations, even to the ends of the earth.³ In the book of Acts, it's about how the Gospel moves across borders and reaches the peoples of all nations. The author presents a clear opinion in his book on how the Gospel travelled from Jerusalem to Athens and finally reached Rome. In this book, we will mainly look at those parts in the book of Acts that concern this journey. This is of course selective but the chapters that have been chosen will at least provide good insights into the issues we want to focus on, namely "how people of different nations could be part, and be allowed to be part, of the movement of Jesus-followers." The title of this book suggests the answer: "Acts on Freedom."

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CHURCH AND THEOLOGY IN AFRICA

Questions as to the relevance of language, culture and ethnicity hardly play a role in mainstream theology. I certainly didn't pick up much on the matter during my theology studies at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands. And they were hardly covered when I first started studying the emergence of so-called Liberation Theology in the second half of the twentieth century. Back in those days, Liberation Theology in Latin America, Feminist Theology and Black Theology were mainly concerned with political struggle; the underlying questions of culture and identity hadn't yet surfaced. It wasn't until I started studying Black Theology at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City that a first step towards such questions was made. It was at the seminary that I saw how African theologians argued with Black theologians from the United States of America. The African theologians placed far more emphasis on cultural matters than just political and economic aspects. The words of the Cameroonian theologian Engelbert Mveng hit home like a sledgehammer. He spoke the following famous words at a conference of Third World theologians:

3 Acts of the Apostles 1:8: "And you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

There is a type of poverty that I call “anthropological poverty”. It consists in despoiling human beings not only of what they have, but of everything that constitutes their being and essence — their identity, history, ethnic roots, language, culture, faith, creativity, dignity, pride, ambitions, right to speak... we could go on indefinitely.⁴

Mveng’s words describe the very essence of African Theology. An essence that I’ve since consistently been confronted with, first during my work as chaplain to international students in the Netherlands and later as lecturer in African theology at the Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Kumba, Cameroon. Throughout those missionary years, I was confronted with the pain and passion of African students. The pain of losing their identity (as Mveng had described it) since the beginning of the colonial period, and the passion for their own traditions and rediscovering them. The pain kept resurfacing in particular in my theology students in Cameroon:

Why were missionaries always so negative about our traditions and traditional religion? Why did we have to become like European Christians and dissociate ourselves from our indigenous background? Look at how we, as churches, are caught between Africa and Europe. We don’t even know who we are ourselves. We’re neither African nor European!

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The students in Cameroon were searching for an answer to this question: “How can we be authentically Christian and at the same time be authentically African?” It was a revelation for them to read the work of a theologian such as Kwame Bediako from Ghana who made the question the main theme of his work.⁵

When trying to answer such questions, it’s important to find a foundation in Biblical theology. I knew I was onto something when I realized that various early

- 4 E. Mveng, ‘Third World Theology, What Theology? What Third World? Evaluation by an Africa Delegate’ in: V. Fabella and S. Torres (eds.), *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology: Papers from the 5th International Conference of EATWOT* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1983), 220. See also: E. Mveng, ‘Impoverishment and Liberation’ in R. Gibellini (ed.), *Paths of African Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1994), 154-165.
- 5 K. Bediako, *Jesus in African Culture: A Ghanaian Perspective* (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 1990); *Theology and Identity: The Impact of Culture upon Christian Thought in the Second Century and Modern Africa* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 1992); *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995).

African theologians constantly referred to the book of Acts. I wondered why they quoted from the book of Acts so often and was simultaneously surprised at how little exegesis was given. But my curiosity had been aroused. I had a true lightbulb moment when I came across Lamin Sanneh's book *Translating the Message*. Although the book offered hardly any exegesis on the book of Acts, it gave me a new hermeneutic key, a new way of interpreting the theological questions concerning language and culture.⁶

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According to Sanneh, translatability is one of the most important characteristics of Christianity. In theory, whenever a religion crosses a border, there are two basic ways to proceed. The first one is to make the missionary culture the inseparable carrier of the message. In other words, the religion and culture arrive together as a single "holy" package. The other path considers the receiving culture as the target and carrier of the religion's message, without any sense of cultural rejection. Christianity is typified by taking this second path, according to Sanneh. All cultures have cast upon them "the breath of God's favor", thus cleansing them of all stigma of inferiority and untouchability.⁷ It is therefore not a question of there being a holy language (Hebrew or Aramaic) but of there being a translation into the language of the receiving context. This is presented in the book of Acts and in Paul's theology as relativizing the dominant, in this case Jewish, culture and destigmatizing the receiving, underlying Gentile cultures.⁸ Sanneh argues that this resulted in a radical plurality in Christianity. Paul's teachings on circumcision in both his letters and the book of Acts should therefore not be read as being merely theological issues but more as cultural issues in the struggle between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians.⁹

It is from this perspective that I want to develop a Biblical theological foundation for dealing with the languages and cultures of the Gentiles based on selected passages from the book of Acts that concern the transition of the Gospel from the Jewish-Christian context to a Gentile-Christian context. In so doing, I hope to explore the paths that had been developed within African

6 L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989).

7 L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 47.

8 L. Sanneh, 'Gospel and Culture: Ramifying Effects of Scriptural Translation' in: P.C. Stine (ed.), *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church: The Last 200 Years* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), 1-23.

9 Sanneh, *Translating the Message*, 9-49.

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Ethiopian Bible, *The twelve Apostles* (Ge'ez script, 17th century)