

The Nature of Christian Mission

as described by Luke

in Acts

This is a thematic study of the nature of Christian mission in the Book of Acts¹.

My contention is "*that the Book of Acts contains the Mission Statement of God for extending His Church*".

In the conclusion, the study reviews how the church of today compares with the Missionary activity in the days described by Luke.

Bernie Townsend – August 2008

¹ **Concise Oxford English Dictionary** defines

- *Thematic study* as:—"The Identification and Analysis of Themes and Patterns"
- *nature* as being derived from the Latin word *natura*, meaning "the course of things, natural character."
- *mission* as:- the vocation of a religious organization to spread its faith, or a strongly felt aim or calling. — derived from Latin word *mittere* 'send'

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1. Introduction:

This is a thematic study of the nature of Christian mission in the Book of Acts².

My contention is "that the Book of Acts contains the Mission Statement of God for extending His Church".

The study is developed in three parts;

1. What the intention of mission is, then
2. Who it is presented to and by, and finally
3. How the message is presented.

Firstly the study reviewed the meaning of the word mission, using the English dictionary then Greek, to broaden understanding. Then it established a range of words being representations of the English and Greek meanings and used a concordance to find mission and missionary references specifically for the time of and in the writing of Acts. A bridge is then provided between the word search and the analytical review. From the writings within Acts itself, the study considered the question "was mission, viewed as God's clear intention?" this was necessary to underpin the subsequent review of the natures of mission.

Secondly, the study analysed aspects of mission undertakings. Information was accumulated about who the missionary message was presented to and by whom. For this purpose the five analytical missionary headings suggested by Roland Allen were used.³ These headings provided a good general grouping from which the nature of mission could be developed..

Thirdly, in indicating some ways in which this theme should inform and influence aspects of Christian mission today, 12 months sermons from three local New Zealand churches were reviewed. The results were measured with the topic categories from the speeches and sermons in Acts. The purpose was to inform aspects of Christian thought, life, mission and ministry today – as reflected by church sermons.

² **Concise Oxford English Dictionary** defines

- *Thematic study* as:- "The Identification and Analysis of Themes and Patterns"
- *nature* as being derived from the Latin word *natura*, meaning "the course of things, natural character."
- *mission* as:- the vocation of a religious organization to spread its faith, or a strongly felt aim or calling. — derived from Latin word *mittere* 'send'

³ **Roland Allen** – *Missionary methods – St. Paul or Ours* – (Michigan –Eerdmans -1962)

The five groups Allen uses are outlined and described in Section 3:-

- The position or advantage of the geographical locations/ people groups mentioned – the respondents
- The virtue in the way in which the gospel was presented
- The style/content of teaching provided
- Method of dealing with the organized churches
- Principles which seemed to point to keys to success.

2. Word search for Missions

The English word "mission" only appears once (NIV and NRSV), in 12:25, where it talks about Barnabas and Saul completing their "mission". In fact the Greek term translated "mission" there is *diakonia*, which is usually translated "service" or sometimes "ministry". 12:25 it is not an evangelistic mission but the responsibility Barnabas and Saul were given by the Antioch church to deliver financial help to the needy in Jerusalem.

Some of the relevant Greek terms used by Luke include the following:

Terms associated with **SENDING**

- *apostello*, I send (it's from the Latin equivalent, mitto, that the English term mission is derived)
- *apostolos*, apostle (someone who is sent)
- apostole, apostleship
- *pempo, ekpempo*, I send (out)

Terms associated with **WITNESSING**

- *martys*, witness
- *martyreo*, I witness/testify (from which we get English martyr).⁴

In order to analyse the references to "mission" in Luke's writings, and after reflection of the above definitions and roots, the following group of words were developed. They seemed to be used frequently throughout the writings:-

send, witness, baptize, evangelize, preached, teaching, encouraged.

The concordance⁵ was viewed for all of these words in the group and after editing the actual occurrences to ensure that the meaning was used in the context of "missionary activity", a graph of occurrences by chapter was compiled. The search revealed that Luke uses the broader concept of "mission" in the book of Acts 95 times.

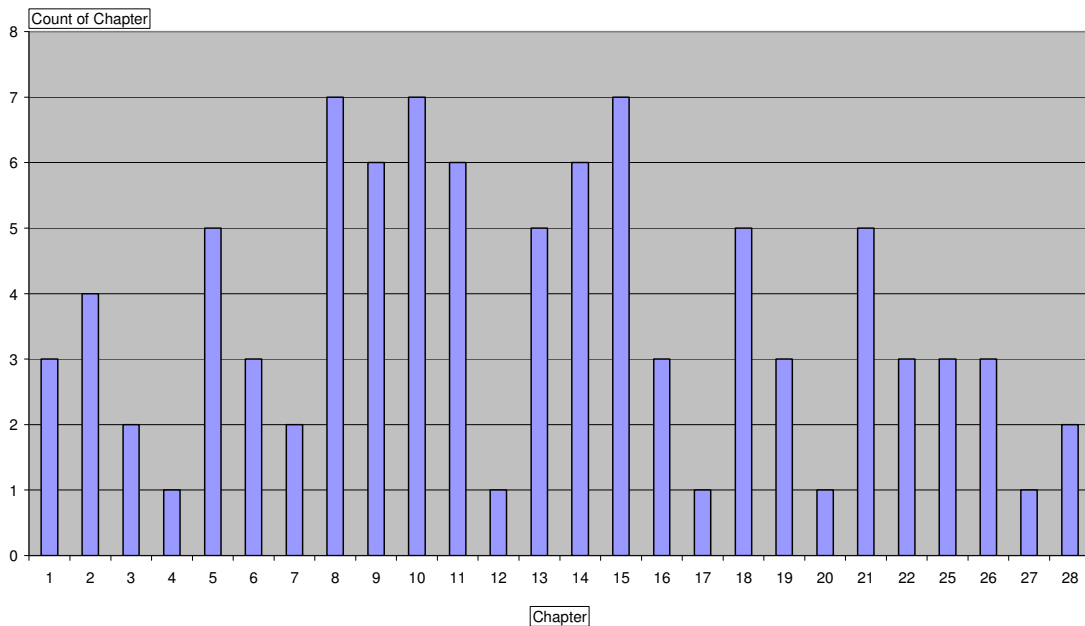
The spread of the words is summarised in the following table⁶ :-

⁴ **George M. Wieland** -Printed with permission of the writer 11 September 2008

⁵ **James Strong** – *Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* – (USA – Abingdon – 1989)

⁶ NIV version of Acts – Analysis was undertaken using Excel Spreadsheet and pivot tables.

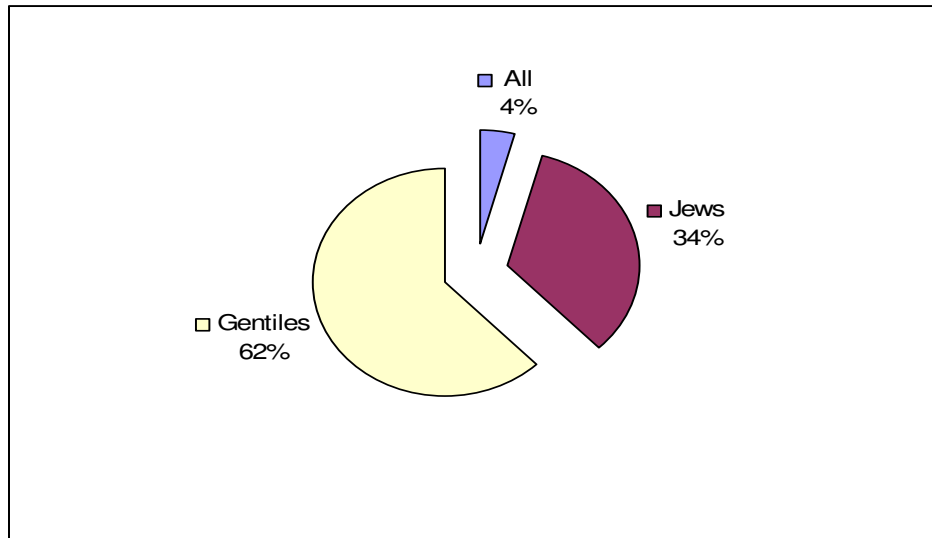
2.1 Table 1: Occurrence of “missionary” activity in chapters in Acts



The table shows that there is a reference to missionary aspects at least once in every chapter of the book. The main concentration of missionary activity is in chapters 8, 10, and 15 (pertaining to references of activity in Samaria, Joppa, and the Jerusalem council). Each of these three high-level activity chapters contains 7 references to missionary activity. The next major concentration is in chapters 9, 11, and 14; here each chapter contains 6 references. Further, 64% of all references reviewed pertain to the exploits of Paul and his companions. 17% of Paul’s references were recorded during his period of imprisonment.

A further analysis of all occurrences in relation to the references for mission to Jews, Gentiles, and “all of the earth” was done to try and establish the main thrust of the missionary activity. The following diagram shows that there are twice as many references to Gentiles as Jews. The reference to mission to the Gentiles is spread fairly evenly throughout the stories in the book, while reference to the Jews is in pockets relating to the Apostles in Jerusalem at the commencement of the book where the activity was focused. The missionary address to Gentiles, is not all the work of Paul, for Peter and Phillip also featured in mission outreach to Gentiles.

2.2 Diagram 1: Spread of “missionary” activity pertaining to focus of activity



The main “missionary thrust” as represented by the largest occurrences is contained in chapters 8 to 15. This represents the start of the outreach to the Gentiles in Samaria by Philip, Peter in Joppa and then by the Hellenist Jews, Barnabas and subsequently Paul in and around Antioch.

2.3 Table 2: The main “missionary” chapters and their activity or thrust.

Chapter	Main contents	Occurrences of “missionary” theme
8	Persecution and disbursement from Jerusalem; Phillip in Samaria, Philip & Ethiopian	7
9	Saul’s conversion	6
10	Peter and Cornelius	7
11	Peter; church in Antioch	6
12	Peter in prison	1
13	Barnabas and Saul	5
14	Paul; Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, and Antioch	6
15	Council at Jerusalem	7

In conclusion, this analysis provides a picture of Luke's use of the term "mission". From the usage and spread aspect alone, it is a significant theme throughout the Book.

3. General overview of missional direction

Before continuing with an examination of the nature of mission, it is necessary to bridge through some scripturally-based material. This is for the purpose of looking at what God said and did, from a missionary perspective. The consideration of the question "was mission God's clear intention" has to be established herewith as a foundation for any subsequent review of the nature of mission.

John W Stott⁷ makes an assertion about God and mission when he writes:
"First – Jesus did it – he added to their number, those who were being saved, on a continual basis. Then as they imitated, their worship, and witness; salvation and increase featured steady and uninterrupted growth."

The usefulness of Stott's statement can be evaluated through the following criteria:-

1. What God said about mission,
2. How He demonstrated the inclusive nature of Mission ,
3. How the apostles and evangelists emulated His instructions, and finally consider
4. How effective the missionary work was.

First, attention is drawn to God's foundational statements about His proposal for a missional, multi-ethnic church in Jerusalem⁸.

From the outset, God stated that mission was a clear objective of His.

At the start, in Jesus last discourse to the disciples, the **Father's** kingly rule remains paramount– where according to Jesus (in response to a question from the apostles) the purpose and timetabling authority for all things pertaining to the cosmos is retained with the Father⁹.

The **Son** meantime, continues with His teaching and work here on earth, revealing Himself alive and active to the Apostles and other followers. He reassures the Apostles that He is the prime focus and He also is the content of

⁷ **John W Stott** – *The Message of Acts* – (USA – InterVarsity Press – 1994) – P86

⁸ Adapted from **John M Hitchen** – *Becoming who we are: the Missional and Multi-ethnic nature of Church* – M.Th Course Notes – Laidlaw College – March 2008

⁹ **Acts 1:6-7** "So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority".

the church's witness to all the earth¹⁰. And a short time later He returns to the Father, who initially had sent Him (to earth, to us).

The role of the **Holy Spirit** is to provide essential teaching, enabling, and guiding to equip believers to share in Christ's missional task as witnesses.¹¹

In the above dialogue between Jesus and his followers, it can be seen that Jesus provides His vision as being the nature and priority of mission for His church. The church members are being sent as witnesses to Jesus, declaring by their life, words and deeds, that they personally know and have experience of Him.

This suggests that God is essentially a sending or missionary God; the church's obligation therefore is to behave likewise and participate in the "Mission of God". In this respect, our Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) calls the church to mission.

Second, God unveils His principle of inclusion at Pentecost when His Church is birthed and grows through mission.

This is best demonstrated by the use of a wide-range of languages or cultures for those who heard the message; it was not solely spoken as Jewish.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the universal relevance and global programme were demonstrated miraculously as the message was announced to representatives from all over the Mediterranean world¹². The Holy Spirit enabled the listeners gathered in Jerusalem for the feast¹³ to hear the Apostles speak in the languages of each of their ethnic group.

The speaking in languages, points to God's intention regarding the global, multi-ethnic nature and mission of the church. The occasion demonstrates that the Gospel message is not only shared in Judaism, but in all languages. One can deduce from this demonstration that the Gospel equally applies to all natures and all cultures, because He said so.

Third, emulating God's desire and prompted by the Holy Spirit, the Church commenced to impact its own community in mission; it was immediately involved in full missionary activity.

¹⁰ **Acts 1:1-3** *"I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God".*

¹¹ **Acts 1:2-8**

¹² **Acts 2:5** Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven

¹³ **Acts 2:6** When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language

The community acted in kindness and mercy, declared the Word, demonstrated God's miraculous power, and showed courageous faith against civil and church authority.

The Church's first preaching on the day of Pentecost was a missionary message, which the apostles understood fulfilled the deepest hopes of their people – the hopes which were reflected in promises made to them in Scripture¹⁴.

Peter offered forgiveness, salvation, and a living relationship with God through the Spirit, to "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord. He said, "... *for the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, for all whom the Lord will call,*"¹⁵

In emulating God's desire and example, the early church took cultural factors seriously - they spoke in the knowledge and expectation of their audience – in a practical way.

The Apostles related their teaching to Jewish audiences – contextualising their message to the cultural background of their hearers. They met with them in the temple, and they always opened their remarks with scriptural references, which were well-known to the Jewish people; and then they re-interpreted the scriptures in terms of what they were now witnessing.

Events like the crucifixion and the resurrection took on new relevance to Jewish experience and understanding – prophecies expounded from Moses, David, and Isaiah all pointed to the Messiah, the suffering servant of God, which was fulfilled in Jesus.¹⁶

The issue of being relevant and presenting the Gospel message in a language which is readily understood by the target audience, also has relevance when considering today's missionary outreach work. This is a very important aspect of mission of that day – and it will be referred to again in Sections 3 and 4.

Finally, the following verses authenticate the progress and success of the missionary activity¹⁷.

1. *"the word of God continued to spread; the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith"*¹⁸.

¹⁴ **Acts 2:21** And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved

¹⁵ **Acts 2:39**

¹⁶ Refer Peter's speech at Pentecost, his speech to the Sanhedrin, and Stephen's speech

¹⁷ These summary statements show the progressive and common-theme effect of obeying the direction given by Jesus in Acts 1:8 to the apostles – the theme for worldwide mission through the power of the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸ **Acts 6:7**

2. *"meanwhile, the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up. Living in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers"¹⁹.*
3. *"But the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents"²⁰.*
4. *"so the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily"²¹.*
5. *"so the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed"²².*
6. *"he lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance"²³.*

Through these statements, Luke shows that the missionary work of the Holy Spirit not only prevailed but valiantly succeeded amid trials and persecutions as the church obeyed and extended its missionary activity to the then known world²⁴ (Refer Section 4 Diagram 1 on the mobility of the early church and the "Ripple effect").

It can be concluded that there is substance in Stott's statement. Acts does demonstrate a clear statement of mission of God and for His church. God stated, He showed, He encouraged and empowered, He directed, and He affirmed the work through successful outcomes.

¹⁹ **Acts 9:31**

²⁰ **Acts 12:24**

²¹ **Acts 16:5**

²² **Acts 19:20**

²³ **Acts 28:30-31**

²⁴ **Robert Gallagher and Paul Hertig (eds) – Mission in Acts –** (New York – Orbis – 2007)

4. Detailed review of the nature of mission

For this detailed review Roland Allen's²⁵ five groups of analysis of the missionary activity²⁶ was used. After classifying facets of mission as reported into Allen's groups, a clear view of the nature of mission is able to be compiled. The points of view of other writers and their interpretations can readily be arranged into Allen's groups to provide a rounded perspective. The group analysis now follows:-

4.1 The position or advantage of the people approached by the early church

A study of this is important to establish the target audience of the Evangelists and Apostles, their background, social and cultural issues, and their response. The question being posed for then as for today, is, "*do we go wherever we feel comfortable, or convenient?*" If we are responding to our hearing of the Word of God, then the people groups will have a need for the Gospel, and in terms of the mission activity in Acts will be born out in terms of results.

There were **situations in existence** at the time, which made **it easier** for Christianity to advance.²⁷ Firstly, the people enjoyed the peace provided by Roman governance²⁸. Politically the people in the locations featured in the approach by the Apostles and then Paul had stable conditions, and enjoyed peace. Furthermore, good communications and transport facilitated movement within the region. This meant that the people functioned around cities, so they were easy to contact, and rural travel and inter-district travel was a common feature. This made it easy to reach wider areas, from a central point. The aim of mission was not to visit every town, but to establish centres of Christian life from which the knowledge would spread.²⁹

²⁵ **Roland Allen** – *Missionary Methods – St. Paul's or ours* – (Michigan – Eerdmans -1962)

²⁶ The five groups Allen suggests are:-

- The position or advantage of the geographical locations/ people groups mentioned – the respondents
- The virtue in the way in which the gospel was presented
- The style/content of teaching provided
- Method of dealing with the organized churches
- Principles which seemed to point to keys to success.

²⁷ **Michael Green** – *Thirty years that changed the world* – (Michigan – Eerdmans – 2004) – P11

²⁸ The Romans had no hard and fast legal rules regarding governing provinces. The power to try and pronounce capital sentence lay with the proconsul in the provinces. The process of prosecution in Roman law favoured the Christians –prosecutions required private prosecution and were regarded as serious matters.

²⁹ **Roland Allen** – *Missionary Methods – St. Paul's or ours* – (Michigan – Eerdmans -1962) –P12

Secondly, the Jews with the practices of their faith were located everywhere throughout the Roman Empire – they had built and frequently congregated in synagogues, they knew and reflected on the Old Testament writings, unlike other cultural groups who had many Gods, they worshipped only one God. They were expecting a Messiah – as promised in Scripture, and had their interest in and appetite for such an event through the teachings of John the Baptist.

Further, the **anthropological characteristics** of the first recipients of the Gospel meant that the Good News would have obvious appeal when it was presented with love and understanding – as an incremental truth, based on what the people already knew and believed. For instance Green³⁰ writes that the people in the region being covered in the time of the early church outreaches operated in a multi-faith environment – in which there were many religions, accompanied by a wide range of observances and beliefs. The people being approached were generally open to things spiritual, and the gospel messages relating to the reality of things of a spiritual nature. There was a prevailing belief in demons – there were reported instances of the Apostles and Evangelists having to deal with witch-doctors and magicians and charms.

There were, however – significant conceptual **and practical difficulties** for those first Christians to overcome³¹. The group of Apostles and Evangelists were almost all un-ordained people. They were not Rabbis, and had received little or no rabbinical training, except for Paul. They were not commissioned by the synagogue. The early disciples went out under God's commission giving witness and testimony, at the direction of the Holy Spirit and under the anointing and affirmation of the Holy Spirit. A very serious consideration was that the Messiah whom the Apostles and Evangelists witnessed, Jesus, was an ordinary carpenter, from Galilee. Jesus was cursed, put to death by the Jewish hierarchy – He was cursed upon a tree.

Further, consider the **characteristics of the messengers**; the Apostles and Evangelists – were they special people, and today would we have some difficulty identifying with them³²?

- Those who spoke and gave witness were utterly unqualified lay people. (*They had no theological college education*)
- They had no backing from the Jewish authorities, no power base, no formal structured organization – their head had been crucified. (*They were not members of an established church and a reputable mission organization*)
- They were international and cross-cultural – Jews, Samaritans, Greeks, Ethiopian, and even Romans; they included men and women, free-men and slaves.

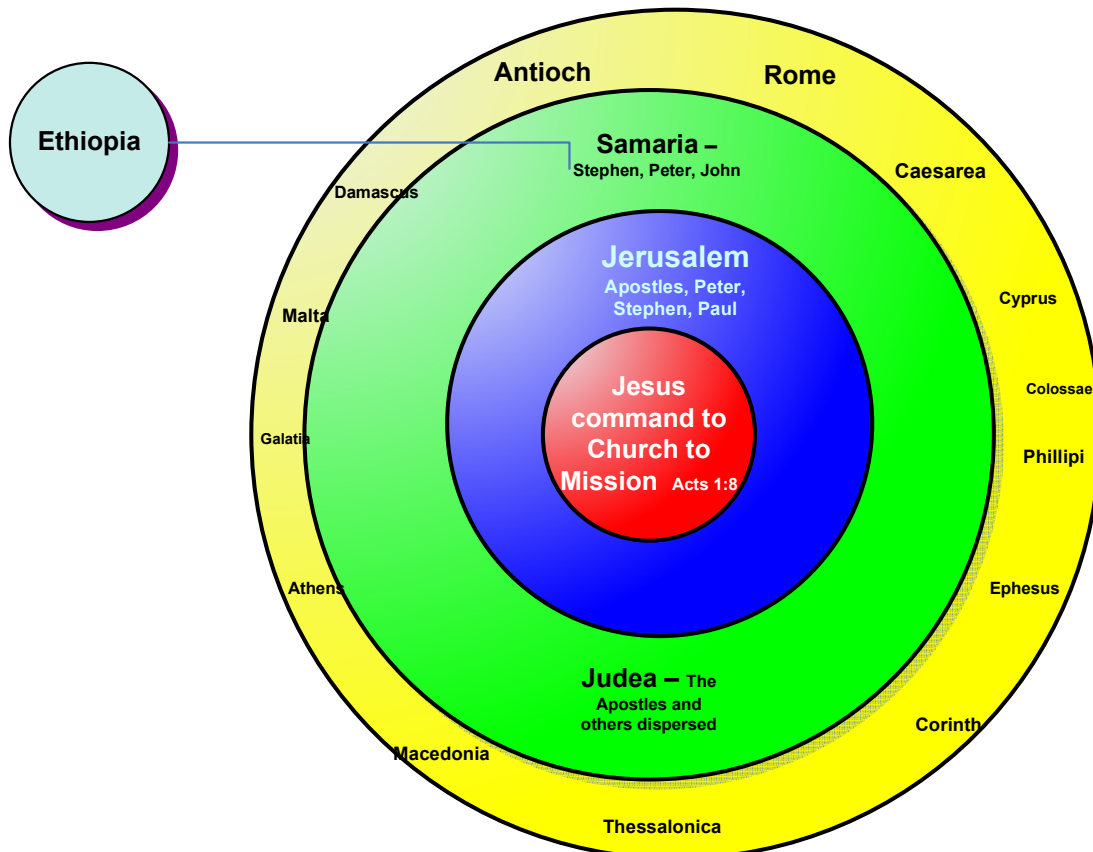
³⁰ **Michael Green** – *Thirty years that changed the world* – (Michigan –Eerdmans – 2004) – P38

³¹ Ibid – P17

³² Ibid – P34

- They were cohesive, and stuck together; they respected the authority and direction of the Apostles and also the base-church in Jerusalem (*They were not from different denominations*).
- They were very mobile.³³

4.1.1 Diagram 2: The “Ripple Effect” of Pentecost - Go out!



- They had a deep assurance of the truth of what they were saying, supremely of the relevance of the living God about whom the pagan philosophers were so oblivious. They held absolute confidence in the power and truth of the message of Jesus.³⁴
- They had a passionate longing, absent from Judaism, to share their own dynamic experience with others of all races and bring them to the same allegiance.
- For the Jew, they were being asked for conversion within the faith they had been nourished, rather than to a new faith.³⁵

³³ Priscilla and Aquila were in Corinth (18:2), Ephesus (18:24) and Rome (Roms 16:3)

³⁴ Roland Allen – *Missionary Methods – St. Paul’s or ours* – (Michigan – Eerdmans -1962) –P63-64

³⁵ Michael Green – *Thirty years that changed the world* – (Michigan –Eerdmans – 2004) – P75

- Paul did not seek financial help for himself, he took no financial help to those to whom he preached, and he did not administer church funds.³⁶
- They met with a wall of rejection and downright hostility.

In summary – The people in the time and places were ready for a “new beginning” and the approaches were made without restriction to any people groups, Jew first then Gentile. There was a sense of preparedness or hunger by the people, which could be and was used to establish a possible connection for the Gospel message.³⁷

An observation is that Jesus came on the earth, at God’s most perfect timing. This is a major consideration for church mission outreach today. The current church might run the risk of being blind to God’s will, and His timing, and pursue with programmes and outreaches, in the “world’s” way – without seeing and reaching those in real need of the Gospel.

4.2 The Gospel was authenticated through supernatural demonstrations.

There is some substance in Michael Green’s³⁸ writing that the events that occurred were regarded as being “*Good News, the joyful announcement of a Messianic salvation – as was proved*”³⁹.

The issue here is dealing with credibility of the messengers and the message itself. From the previous issues raised about the people and their circumstances and beliefs, some external proof or verification was sought by the people before any change could be embraced. So it is not surprising that miracles held an important place in the account of Paul’s preaching –miracles were recorded in five towns in the four provinces. Roland Allen confirms the point being made here when he writes, “*The power which we demonstrate bears witness to the truth of our message*”⁴⁰.

In summary on the question of authentication, the miracles:-

- Attracted hearers
- Challenged them to accept what was being said as proof of Divine assent,
- Illustrated the character of the new religion, and

³⁶ **Roland Allen** – *Missionary Methods – St. Paul’s or ours* –(Michigan – Eerdmans -1962) –P49-61

³⁷ Paul’s attempts to reach the Jews were continual, but in the most part unsuccessful. He suffered violence and generally was his own authority backed up by the Truth of his message and often affirmed by the Holy Spirit. He made no attempt to work with any specific class of people. He went to the Gentile – those “God-fearers” only when he was rejected and where he was welcomed

³⁸ **Michael Green** – *Evangelism in the early Church* – (Michigan – Eerdmans -2003) –P77

³⁹ **Acts 5:42** Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ

⁴⁰ **Roland Allen** – *Missionary Methods – St. Paul’s or ours* –(Michigan – Eerdmans -1962_ –P41

- Illustrated the doctrine of release, of freedom in Christ, through salvation.⁴¹

4.3 The style and content of teaching contributed to the successful outcomes.

Firstly, Roland Allen⁴² suggests that the elements of the main speeches from Peter, Stephen, and Paul included:

"The Jewish audience are reminded of the Old Testament references to the suffering and salvation role of Jesus. This entails an appeal to the past, and is being used to gain empathy with the Jews of the day. From the recent events which have been witnessed, the Apostles and Evangelists give a statement of facts – and put these into perspective in terms of the Old Testament prophecies as things which can be readily understood. The sermons and speeches all provide an answer to the inevitable objection and end up with a grave warning or consequences of not embracing the truth".

The above sentiments are endorsed by both Michael Green⁴³ and John Stott⁴⁴.

The three writers agree that the messages all:-

- touched the conscience of the hearers – especially the Jewish leaders⁴⁵
- illuminated the mind to enquire of the truth⁴⁶
- reached the will, and⁴⁷
- changed their lives⁴⁸

In particular, each of the sermons and speeches recorded include many, if not all, of the following key points⁴⁹:

- Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Christ, sent by God,
 - as promised in the Scriptures, as foretold by the prophets,
 - for the forgiveness of sins, for the salvation of the world;
- He was rejected by the people, condemned by the authorities;
 - he suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried.
- Yet God exalted him on high, raised him up to new life;
 - and he will one day return to us in glory.
- In response, people must repent, believe, be baptized,

⁴¹ Ibid P43-46

⁴² **Roland Allen** – *Missionary Methods – St. Paul's or ours* – (Michigan – Eerdmans -1962) –P63

⁴³ **Michael Green** – *Thirty years that changed the world* – (Michigan –Eerdmans – 2004)

⁴⁴ **John W Stott** – *The Message of Acts* – (USA – InterVarsity Press – 1994) –P100

⁴⁵ **Acts 9:4** – "Saul, why do you persecute me?"

⁴⁶ **Acts 9:5** – "Who are you, Lord – I am Jesus"

⁴⁷ **Acts 9:8** – "He allowed himself to be taken by hand into Damascus"

⁴⁸ **Acts 9:15** – "But the Lord said to Ananias, "Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

⁴⁹ Online: <http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Acts.htm> - Cited: 24 September 2008

- receive the Holy Spirit and join the community of believers.

A further paraphrase of the sermon format outlined in the paragraphs above would include: preaching a person⁵⁰, proclaiming a gift or promise⁵¹, seeking a personal response,⁵² and providing high-quality follow-up, not to mention the inevitable outbreak of persecution.

In summary, the sermons were very focussed and specific. To emulate such sermon preparation and presentation for today, we could do well to consider the elements suggested⁵³. However, the current environment does not necessarily present the same audience with Jewish background, nor is there a fully Apostolic Church. So good preparation of both the target people group, and the means and extent of witnessing must be researched and developed as part of any current missionary outreach. Refer Section 5 for further in-depth analysis, particularly on the current local church's preparation for mission.

4.4 Method of dealing with the organised churches

It is important to consider the aspects of church maintenance, so that questions about durability and sustainability can be answered. It may be possible to adopt those which were proven and thereby add value to the current local church.

Early mission⁵⁴ practice involved meeting in both private homes and in temple grounds. Their overall church life supported and fostered mission outreach. The activities within the spontaneous life of the community of believers featured worship, teaching, prayer, social concern and support (wealth sharing, feeding the poor), communion and fellowship. In that context, not surprisingly, they saw steady numerical growth.⁵⁵

With reference to hands on support for the fledgling churches, Stott⁵⁶ reflects that in Corinth Paul stayed for a year and a half – teaching and supporting the members⁵⁷. At Ephesus he tutored in the hall for two years –if the content and layout of his epistles indicate a pattern, then Paul's teaching was both comprehensive and thorough⁵⁸. Furthermore, Paul, like Christ before him, trained his successors to carry on the work. Examples include not only forming

⁵⁰ **Acts 9:20** Saul spent several days with the disciples in Damascus. At once he began to **preach** in the synagogues that **Jesus** is the Son of God

⁵¹ **Acts 5:20** "Go, stand in the temple courts," he said, "and tell the people the full message of this **new life**."

⁵² **Acts 16:30** He then brought them out and asked, "Sirs, **what must** I do to be saved?"

⁵³ Refer succeeding section for further commentary on the content of sermons and speeches.

⁵⁴ **Michael Green** – *Thirty years that changed the world* – (Michigan –Eerdmans – 2004)

⁵⁵ **Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37; 5:12-16; 6:1-6**

⁵⁶ **John W Stott** – *The Message of Acts* – (USA – InterVarsity Press – 1994) –P313

⁵⁷ **Acts 18:11** So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.

⁵⁸ **Acts 19:8** Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God

companionships with, but also leaving or sending to undertake tasks in localities by themselves. Timothy, Silas⁵⁹, Priscilla and Aquila, Apollos, and even Luke himself⁶⁰ were companions with Paul on his work. He left the people in charge of their own local church, with clear words of support and encouragement on how to continue on living in the Word.⁶¹

Scholars see the following as the main key characteristics of the early Christian communal life⁶²:

Apostolic teaching: not only the explicit preaching and teaching with words, but also through the examples and actions of the apostles.

Community fellowship: sharing of possessions, caring for the needs of the poor, holding all things "in common".

Breaking of the bread: a ritual meal celebrated in their homes to signify their unity and remember Jesus' Last Supper.⁶³

Worship and prayer: continuing the Jewish practices and traditions of public prayer in the Temple and with their families.

In summary – the follow-up practices and the support for the local church was fully committed and available for the long term success of the establishment of the local church as an indigenous entity.

The church maintenance work was related to the needs of the people, not the building. Christ was the continual focus of attention, emulation, and worship. All aspects of succession planning were evident in the developing life of the church.

4.5 Principles which point to keys to success in establishing local churches.

The new church members developed an utterly alternative lifestyle⁶⁴ to that which was previously enjoyed. This included; personal attention, informal fellowship, lively worship, Temple worship. They gave and received regular instruction based on the Old Testament and letters which were to form the New

⁵⁹ **Acts 17:14** The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea.

⁶⁰ **2 Timothy 4:11** Only **Luke** is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry

⁶¹ **Acts 20: 20-38**

⁶² Online: <http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Acts.htm> - Cited: 24 September 2008

⁶³ **Acts 2:42; 2:46; 20:7; and 27:33-36**

⁶⁴ **Acts 2:46** –“They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people”.

Testament, the teaching of Jesus, what one might call a basic catechism and then some further instruction. They also celebrated Holy Communion – in homes and at church.

They baptized their new believers.⁶⁵ They cared for physical needs – hospitality,⁶⁶ famine collection (shared wealth),⁶⁷ shared accommodation,⁶⁸ healed the sick,⁶⁹ protected their leaders,⁷⁰ practically involved,⁷¹ and they demonstrated concern for the weak and defenceless.⁷²

Their methods⁷³ included: synagogue preaching⁷⁴, open-air preaching⁷⁵, prophetic preaching,⁷⁶ teaching evangelism⁷⁷, witness or testimony⁷⁸, and in courtroom appearances.⁷⁹ It featured household evangelism: - meetings in homes⁸⁰, working in or near homes⁸¹, formal house-church meetings⁸², lecture hall⁸³, and even home visitation.⁸⁴

They paid the price for His Kingdom- The work of an early church missionary wasn't all easy going⁸⁵. They suffered hard times; these ranged between; disasters (shipwreck), disease (Malta – fever and dysentery), constraining circumstances (house arrest), outright opposition, political pressure, syncretism

⁶⁵ **Michael Green** – *Thirty years that changed the world* – (Michigan –Eerdmans – 2004) –P165

⁶⁶ **Acts 21:4** Finding the disciples there, we stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem

⁶⁷ **Acts 11:29** The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea.

⁶⁸ **Acts 4:34 and 18:3** (Paul with Priscilla and Aquila)

⁶⁹ **Acts 8:7, 14:8, 5:15, 28:8-9**

⁷⁰ **Acts 9:23** – Paul's life threatened

⁷¹ **Acts 28:2** – Paul's shipwreck

⁷² **Acts 6:1** – The meals for the Greek widows

⁷³ *Types of speaking Proclaiming (17:3b), Testifying (18:5), Speaking Boldly (18:26), Teaching (17:19), Explaining (17:3), Dialoguing (17:2), Refuting (18:28), Persuading (17:4)*

⁷⁴ **Acts 13:5** When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the Jewish **synagogues**. John was with them as their helper.

⁷⁵ **Acts 8:40** Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, **preaching** the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea

⁷⁶ **Acts 15:32** Judas and Silas, who themselves were **prophets**, said much to encourage and strengthen the brothers

⁷⁷ **Acts 21:8** Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the **evangelist**, one of the Seven

⁷⁸ **Acts 5:32** We are **witnesses** of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him."

⁷⁹ **Acts 5:27** Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest.

⁸⁰ **Acts 16:40** After Paul and Silas came out of the prison, they went to **Lydia's** house, where they met with the brothers and encouraged them. Then they left.

⁸¹ **Acts 17:17** So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there

⁸² **Acts 2:46** Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their **homes** and ate together with glad and sincere hearts

⁸³ **Acts 19:9** He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus.

⁸⁴ **Acts 9:17** Then **Ananias** went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit."

⁸⁵ **Michael Green** – *Thirty years that changed the world* – (Michigan –Eerdmans – 2004) –P226

(all things are equal – your God and my god), cynicism, anger, provocation, and sustained opposition, including imprisonment, trials and death.

In summary: - The early Apostles and Evangelists went to places and to people as and when directed by the Holy Spirit. For example, Phillip left a “full scale revival” in Samaria to go into the desert to meet up with a Eunuch from Ethiopia. The driving force and architect for the whole movement of the Gospel in Acts is without doubt God. The Apostles and Evangelist, heard the Word of God, and they obeyed His Word. Not only that, but the conversions were conspired by the Holy Spirit.

This remains a template for all current missionary endeavours.

5. Informing and possibly influencing aspects of Christian praxis

During the course of this writer's review for a previous essay⁸⁶, three local New Zealand churches were contacted to obtain details of their past twelve months' sermons covering the period Feb 2007 to March 2008. The content of each sermon and other issues pertaining to the sermon⁸⁷ were analysed. There were 188 sermons in the sample selected, two churches had one service a week, and the other had two on the Sunday through a morning and an evening service. The three churches each had regular Sunday attendances in the vicinity of 200- 400.

The process of defining sermons into main groupings or categories

The analysis of the sermons was concerned primarily with identifying the similarities between current local church sermon content compared to the content of sermons as Luke outlined in Acts. Material directly pertinent to equipping church members for evangelizing the un-saved and those (spouses and family members) associated with the church – the "God-fearers" to which Luke refers was also sought. The analysis was made of all of the sermons in the sample group into one of five groups, as follows:-

Holy Spirit – this group included explanations about the nine gifts of the Holy Spirit⁸⁸, and their uses within the church and the community. This group also included talks about the lives and works of revivalists and other Holy Spirit (20th Century) revivals.

Jesus life and death –this group included consideration of the birth, life (miracles and teachings), suffering, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Also His role as reigning King – His ascension.

Mission Outreach – This group mainly included talks from returning missionaries, their life and experiences, but provision was made for including teaching on outreach by members to the unsaved world around and beyond.

Social living – this group recorded the role of the church and church members within society. It included teachings on postures towards social

⁸⁶ **Bernard Townsend** - *Some views concerning the local church, working in support of its members in the work place as missionaries* –Laidlaw College New Zealand – (Mth -June 2008)

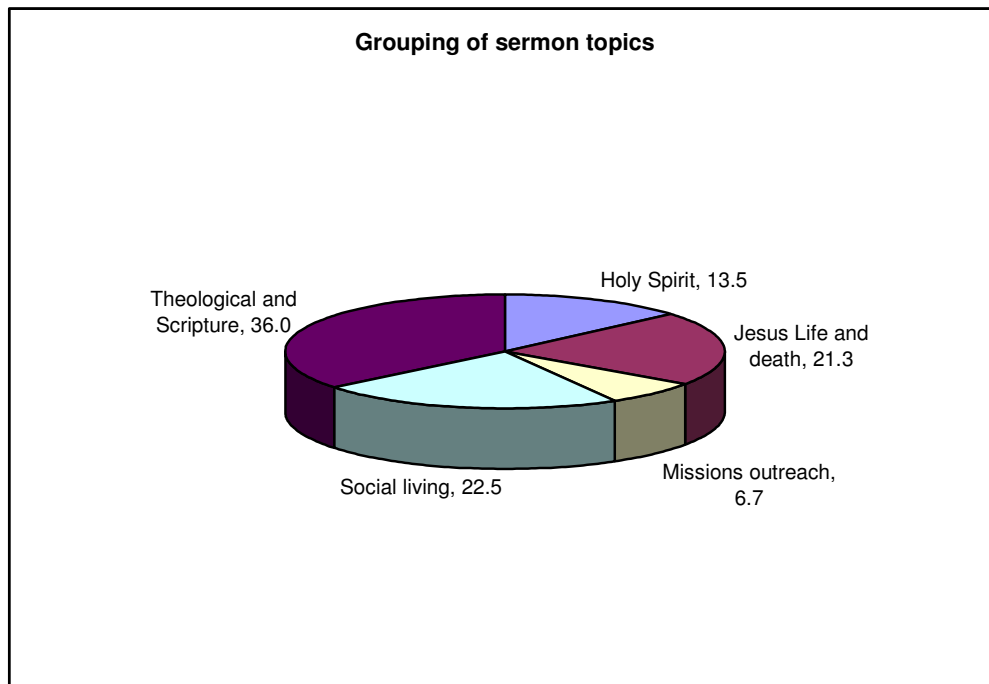
⁸⁷ Church one had a DVD for each sermon, I obtained the list of DVDs and I listened to 80% of the sermons. I personally knew the presenters and I was able to provide that analysis. Church two had a pod cast of the sermons. I listed the title and description of the pod casts, and I downloaded and listened to 10%, the church administrator provided me with the analysis of the subject matter and the presenters. Church three had available a list of sermons with a description and commentary of each, on its web site.

⁸⁸ **1 Cor 12:7-10** "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues and to still another the interpretation of tongues."

issues of the day and on discipleship – being a good Christian as an act of Worship.

Theological and Scripture – this group included Bible studies from both the Old and New Testaments; God’s characteristics, His mercy and His voice.

5.1 Diagram 3: Grouping of sermon topics



The predominant sermon content for the three churches was about equipping its members for life through biblical teachings. This group was dominated by a series of teachings on Esther as a servant in high places and also the Father Heart of God for His people through Song of Songs. These topics accounted for 36%.

The next concentration of teaching effort was concerned with examining church member’s attitudes as Christians and their personal living within the church and the community (22.5%). The group of sermons was concerned with being Christ-like in the world up as measured against scripture, and as perceived by the post-modern world. (Acceptance of divorce, dealing with alcohol, homosexuality, the environment, tattoos, etc).

These two subject groups (theological/scripture, and social living) accounted for over 50% of all sermons delivered.

In the sample, there was little apparent evidence of teaching or equipping followers for mission as you would find within the context of discussions relating to *Missio dei*, the *Great Commission*, or the *Church as Mission* (only 6.7% of all

sermons related to Missions, and most of these were from missionaries returning from overseas assignments).

5.2 Table 4: Showing the sermon content today compared with Acts

Sermons Grouped by Category (Diagram 3 above)	Today's sermons (% of total)	Acts Sermons and speeches (% of total)
Holy Spirit	13.48	0
Jesus Life	21.35	100
Missions outreach	6.74	0
Social living	22.47	0
Theological and Scripture	35.96	0
Total	100	100

This table shows the shift in modern day sermon content, from that which featured in Acts⁸⁹. While it might be good to use this result to have a call " back to basics" most of the differences in sermon treatment is in fact covered in Paul's epistles to the various churches, which did not feature in this research.

The main category of current sermons was then measured against the four main elements of the speeches and teaching which was featured in the reports in Acts

⁸⁹ The four elements are: Jesus is messiah, Jesus is the suffering servant, Jesus raised on High, and repentance, baptism and salvation (the responses offered).

5.3 Table 5: Showing the shift in sermon focus concerning Jesus life

Sermon Content of Acts	Today's sermons (% of total)
Jesus is Messiah	0.0
Jesus - suffering servant	2.2
Jesus raised on high	0.0
Repentance, Baptism, Salvation	7.9
Total content in common	10.1

This table shows that of the four sub-categories that made up the entire sermon content in Acts, only two feature today. Some reasons are obvious⁹⁰, but this is a topic for further research.

What does the comparison of teachings between yesterday and today's local church inform?

It was found that current local sermon content had no direct correspondence with the whole Good-news message containing the four elements which Luke represented in the Early Church. There was no recorded instance where all four elements were covered in a current local church setting. Limited aspects of the four elements were presented; most of these were included in Easter ceremonies. The need for and availability of Salvation featured in a four-part series in one church.

There was no evidence of teaching on Jesus resurrection or ascension and His role in the cosmos, seated beside the Father, enthroned, as the first member of our human race. Sermons dealing with aspects of the life and death of Jesus and of His promised Holy Spirit accounted for 13.5%.

⁹⁰ The target audience is no longer Jewish, and the concept of a Messiah is not necessarily seen as paramount (although this point could be debated), much of the world is dead to the OT scriptures and to messianic vision, much of the world is dead to heaven, Hell, and after life, so Cosmic visions and teaching no longer have relevance. In proffering these thoughts, one could consider that the church itself is also under the malaise of spiritual reality, reducing the reality of a Messiah and His Cosmic reign, which could be reflected in the research results in this table. Church growth, prosperity theory, and organisational governance for power and authority do have a grip on elements of church life, so pure teaching on scripture and the life of Jesus, and mission may not feature high on church agendas.

Personal reflection on these findings

It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss strengths and weaknesses of this finding without a more in-depth analysis through follow-up discussion with the senior pastors to put sermons into the context of the life of the church and perhaps reference to a wider sample.

However, statements can be made and questions formed which would inform and influence aspects of Christian thought today⁹¹. These questions would particularly pertain to the effectiveness of the mix of sermons and the extent of equipping the modern church for its God-given role as missionary, and its measured outcomes in terms of God's will.

Finding the Will of God for today – how today's church measures up.

Writer Gene L. Green⁹² suggests that there is little difficulty in understanding (from the days of the early church as portrayed in Acts) that God was very active in the life and mission of His church.

Green also writes that God is effective in guiding the mission of His church and that He does not make mistakes!

5.4 Table 6: Summary and conclusion

⁹¹ Such questions as: How relevant is the message of Acts for today; How directed are today's messages ; What is God saying about today's mission; Are we spending sufficient time listening, discerning, and obeying? Etc.

⁹² **Robert Gallagher and Paul Hertog (eds)** – *Mission in Acts* – (New York – Orbis – 2007)

Essay review section	Main feature of Review aspect	General conclusion from research material	Does review establish nature of Mission?
1	Word meaning	Mission features throughout the Book	Yes
2	God's statement	God is missional and multi-cultural	Yes
3	Recipients and messengers	Recipients open; messengers Mobile, inspired by Holy Spirit	Yes
3	Authentication of message	Supernatural events; increase in numbers, persecution	Yes
3	Style and content of teaching	Jesus centred - caused a response	Yes
3	Church maintenance	Continued involvement, commitment, succession plan	Yes
3	Keys of success	God directed and focussed on Jesus, alternative lifestyle	Yes
4	Sermon content and style	Current local church not really emulating early church teaching	Yes

Based on the research and evidence summarised in this essay, my contention "*that the Book of Acts contains the Mission Statement of God for extending His Church*" has been developed and evaluated. It can be viewed in the affirmative.

Furthermore, from the research presented here within, a good range of features have surfaced which together form the nature of mission, as it was understood and undertaken in the early church.

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