



THE BEREIA PAGE

“Examining . . . to see if these things are so” ~ Acts 17.11

No “Love” in Acts?

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A passing observation by a brother at a preachers meeting devoted to study and discussion prompted an examination of an important theme in the preaching of Jesus and the early church. He commented that, since the word *love* never appears in Acts, it is possible to evangelize without telling people that God loves them.

I trusted his scholarship, but his statement piqued my curiosity. So, as soon as I could, I opened my Bible software and did a search. The noun ἀγάπη (*agapē*) appears 116 times in the NT; but not in Acts, Mark, or James. The verb ἀγαπάω (*agapaō*) appears 143 times, but not in Acts, Philippians, 1 Timothy, Titus, or Philemon. Acts is thus the only NT book in which neither the noun nor verb appear.¹

Next, I searched for the words in the writings of Peter and Paul, the principal preachers in Acts. *Agapē* is used 75 times in Paul’s writings, and four times in Peter’s; *agapaō* appears 34 times in Paul and five times in Peter. Since they are letters written to build up established churches, we expect to find less of an evangelistic emphasis in them than in Acts. As I worked through the passages where *agapē* and *agapaō* appear, I noted that when they are used, the words refer either to (a) the church’s one-another love, (b) love directed to a person of Deity by a believer, or (c) love directed to a believer by a person of Deity. Even when I attributed an evangelistic meaning in ambiguous texts where I thought one of the above ideas was probably intended, I identified only eight occurrences in Paul, and none in Peter, where the word *love* might have an evangelistic focus (Rom 5.8; 8.37; Gal 2.20; Eph 1.4; 2.24 [2x]; 2 Thess 3.18). All are reminders to believers of what they had already experienced.²

So, if *love* was not the focus of the preaching in Acts, what was? As I investigated more, I found a number of words, but three stood out. The first is εὐαγγελίζω (*euangelizō*), often translated “preach the gospel” (ESV) (5.42; 8.4, 12, 25, 35, 40; 10.36; 11.20; 13.32, 33; 14.7, 15, 21; 15.35; 16.10; 17.18). Second is κηρύσσω (*kēryssō*), to proclaim (as a herald) (8.5; 9.20; 10.37, 42; 15.21; 19.13; 20.25; 28.31). Third are forms of words meaning “witness,” “bear witness,” or “testify” (μαρτυρέω, *martyreō*; διαμαρτύρομαι, *diamartyromai*) (1.8, 22; 2.32; 3.15; 5.31–32; 8.25; 10.39, 42; 18.5; 20.21, 24; 26.16; 28.23) (see studies of these words, [here](#), [here](#), [here](#)).

Those verbs, and others with similar meanings, have multiple objects in Acts, e.g., “preaching that the Christ is Jesus” (5.42) “preaching the word” (8.4), “preached the gospel” (16.10), and so on. But one term appeared eight times as the object of their proclamation, first in a reference to the declarations of the risen Jesus: “He presented himself alive to them after his suffering

by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about [λέγων, *legōn*] *the kingdom of God* [τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ, *tēs basileias tou theou*]” (Acts 1.3). The other seven are:

- 1.6 – the apostles ask Jesus if he is about to restore the kingdom to Israel.
- 8.12 – in Samaria, Philip evangelizes (*euangelizō*) about the kingdom and Jesus’ name.
- 14.22 – Paul and Barnabas prepare some believers for tribulations they will endure “to enter the kingdom of God.”
- 19.8 – in the synagogue in Ephesus, Paul reasons and persuades them about the kingdom of God.
- 20.25 – Paul says he was proclaiming (*kēryssō*) the kingdom to the church in Ephesus.
- 28.23 – to local Jewish leaders who came to hear his message, Paul was “testifying [*diamartyromai*] to the kingdom of God.”
- 28.31 – for two years in Rome, Paul welcomed all and proclaimed (*kēryssō*) the kingdom of God.

As it happened, during the period I was doing the above study, I was also teaching a class on the Sermon on the Mount, a text in which *basileia* is both part of the setting and an important theme. It’s a big idea in the Gospels as a whole, of course, where *basileia* occurs 126 times, 121 of which are in the Synoptics (Matthew, 55; Mark, 20; Luke, 46; John, 5; it occurs only 36 times in the rest of the NT.)

Having been reminded of the importance of *basileia* in the Gospels and seeing its recurrence in Acts, I asked other questions. What are the origins of the idea? What is its meaning and significance in Scripture generally and in the NT in particular? In the ministry of Jesus? In the teaching of the church? What was involved in its proclamation, and what does that suggest for today’s church? Good questions to take up at another time.

For Further Reading

- Ferguson, Everett. 1996. *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. See pp. 18–36.
- Green, Joel B. 1995. *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*. Cambridge University Press. See especially pp. 76–101.
- Ladd, George Eldon. 1959. *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Stassen, Glen H. 2006. *Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance*. Jossey-Bass. See especially pp. 17–37.
- Wright, N. T. 2012. *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*. HarperOne. See chapters 6 and 7, pp. 105–154.

Notes

¹ Note that φιλέω (*phileō*) never occurs in Acts either; φίλος (*philos*) occurs three times, all translated “friends” in the ESV (Acts 10.24; 19.31; 27.3).

² John’s writings, of course, alter the picture, but the point of this exercise was to focus on Acts and the preachers featured there.

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