



The Early Church In Acts of the Apostles

Eduqas A level R.S. C1A Christianity Theme 1E

Key Concepts:

- C.H. Dodd said that the book of Acts contains a unique form of communication called '**kerygma**' from the word '**keryx**' (herald); this form is that of being confronted by a bold **proclamation** leading to a decision.
- The kerygma is a **genre** of communication not to be confused with moral tales, doctrinal teaching, historical accounts or memoirs.
- The **six elements** of the Kerygma can be seen in the speeches of Acts:
 - (i) the age of fulfilment has come
 - (ii) through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus
 - (iii) the ascension confirms Jesus' messiahship
 - (iv) the Spirit of God has been given to the Church
 - (v) Christ will return soon and
 - (vi) everyone should repent and join the Church movement.
- In response to criticism that the Church was mistaken element (v) not having occurred, Dodd said that the return of Jesus was not the sole focus of the Church and that they lived with '**realised eschatology**': they experienced a quality of life in the present usually associated with life after death.
- Rudolph Bultmann believed that modern people could no longer accept Biblical myths. The two main myths in the New Testament were (i) **apocalypticism** (belief in the imminent end of the world and (ii) **Gnosticism** (secret knowledge of a spirit realm). Both of these myths are bound up in the story of Jesus (i.e. the virgin birth and beliefs in the apocalypse).
- What is really important for Bultmann is both to hold beliefs that are compatible with our understanding of scientific **cause & effect** and to have an existential experience of faith, hope and love.
- The earliest converts of the Church had such an experience when they encountered the bold faith of the disciples.
- This **existential moment** is expressed in **Acts 2:37**: 'now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart.' The Kerygma has power today but not because of 'correct beliefs' about what did or did not happen in the past.
- Some say that Bultmann has merely created a new, individualistic mythology which ignores the public nature of the events described in Acts; the Church would not exist unless something supernatural had occurred.
- Some attack the historical credibility of the events in the book of Acts: Luke was a **gentile** Christian, not present at the events recorded - in fact, Acts was likely written some 40-50 years after the events it reports. Furthermore, the themes of Acts differ from Paul's letters and have been carefully arranged (edited).
- Some defend the speeches in Acts as historically reliable: they are not doubted by any early Christian source, Luke would have had access to **eyewitnesses**, Luke was writing to a different audience than Paul and every good writer carefully arranged their material.

Key arguments/debates:

On the one hand, the kerygmatic messages in Acts that are relevant to Christians today are seen in the importance of the feast of Pentecost, evangelistic fervour, and 'miracles' in Pentecostal gatherings.

However, many Christians say that the situation has changed. The Church should fight for a more just society and not seek to convert others. Whether or not to accept Acts as 'historical' has to do both with one's valuation of 'Luke' as a reporter as well as one's assumptions about the occurrence of miracles.

Key questions:

- Should the Kerygma be doubted since Jesus failed to return?
- Do the 'myths' identified by Bultmann make the kerygma irrelevant?
- Do the Acts come from a reliable source?
- Can we reject miracles, but still view Acts as historical? A powerful existential moment in the Early Church?

Key words:

Kerygma | Proclamation | Six Elements | Realised Eschatology | Genre | Keryx | Apocalypticism | Gnosticism | Cause & Effect | Existentialism | Existential Moment | Acts 2:37 | Gentile Eyewitness | Imminent

Key quotes:

"The main burden of the kerygma is that the unprecedented has happened: God has visited and redeemed his people." (C. H. Dodd)

"Theological propositions - even those of the New Testament - can never be the object of faith..." (R. Bultmann)

