

# Christians and Power: According to the Luke-Acts Diptych

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The Gospel of Saint Luke, among the four canonical Gospels, stands out for its interest in outlining the tensions between worldly power and “the little flock” of believers living in this world. Already in the first chapter, Mary’s Magnificat proclaims: “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty” (Lk -1:52-53). And since the book of Acts was written by the same author, the conflict is also clearly reflected there from the very moment of the foundation of the Church at Pentecost: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need” (Acts 4:32-35). Besides, Acts offers a wide variety of stories where the community of believers has to face political-religious powers in different areas and cultural circles of the Roman Empire, as we will see later.

Many contemporary biblical scholars state that the Lucan Diptych was written at the end of the first century from Ephesus, the capital of Asia Minor. Christians led there a life that varied quite a lot from those living in Palestine and the distances between the two regions were enormous considering the means of transportation of that time. Christian communities were establishing and growing in a period around 30 to 40 years after the Apostles. Luke is concerned with the continuity of Christianity and with their fidelity to the Apostolic Deposit (an expression of his great teacher Paul in 1 Tim 6:20 and in 2 Tim 1:12-14). In a turbulent period, when great changes took place, the author cannot forget that those who executed Jesus were the Romans and that they destroyed the Temple of Jerusalem and executed Peter, Paul, Philip, and so many other Christians. At that time Nero’s persecution was already history, and the situation was very

tense between Christians and the Empire in the area of Asia Minor. John’s Book of Revelation is a great testimony at that time.

There was a well-established conflict between the powerful empire in all its forms of government and the “little flock”, the local church of Lk 12:32. Let’s see what characteristics this conflict has in the Lucan work and analyze what solutions he puts forward for his readers. This article proposes to return to one of the primary sources of the New Testament to try to envisage how the author describes the presence of the Church in the world and the role it plays with its message and testimony. For this purpose, five main themes have been chosen that occur again and again in the Lucan work and give form to the very essence of the plot and the narrative. Finally, some conclusions are offered to update the evangelical message in the Church and the world of today.

1) The Commitment to the Poor and the Weakest. Both the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts agree to present Jesus and his disciples as unconditionally committed to the poor, to the weakest and to those who suffer. This can be seen already in the scene of Jesus’s birth. Luke is the only Evangelist who writes a narrative about this topic, and he tells that Jesus was born among the people, in a simple and humble place. He was born as a stranger in a city that was not his parents’ home and was laid in the humblest place of the house, in the manger, which is located in a room where humans live with domestic animals. A few chapters later, Luke’s Jesus does not address his followers from a mountain, as it is told in Matthew’s Gospel (Mt 5:1), but he descends to a plain, to the usual place where the peasants work the land and he stops there to speak to them.

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Luke's Jesus is moved when he sees that a widow's only son has died, and she is left alone in this world and completely exposed to poverty (Lk 17-7:11). Luke also writes about Lazarus and the rich man, in which Lazarus rests in Abraham's bosom while the rich man suffers in tormenting flames (Lk 31-16:19). There are plenty of examples of this topic in both the Gospel and Acts. It should be emphasized that this commitment implies working for the good of those who need, to be available for them, to speak for their sake and to defend their interests. Besides, Jesus and his disciples do not act as political insurgents, they rather preach an inner change of attitude of each human being towards their neighbor. To change the human being from within, from their entrails and their most entrenched concepts is what the Gospel proposes to do because a single change of manners and laws does not lead to the true solution and is nothing more than patching an old dress with pieces of new fabrics.

2) The No-Belonging to the Established Systems of the World. Jesus is the son of David, but he does not claim to ascend to the throne of Jerusalem or to rule the world from above. Jesus does not commit himself to Pilate to obey his laws or to render faithfulness to Caesar. Jesus does not submit to the political authority of the priestly class of Jerusalem that governs under the supervision of the Roman prefect, nor does he obey the habits and customs of the time if they interfere with his public work. That is why he will not stay in his parents' house nor marry or have children; neither will he have a house, nor possessions; finally, he will not work the land nor practice a profession. Jesus will take care of the people, of all those around him, friends and enemies, weak and strong, young and old, men and women. He will teach everyone and heal and visit everyone. Some

with words of admonition and punishment and others with words of comfort and relief. The call to repentance is always announced and Luke makes it very clear that the ultimate obedience is due to the Heavenly Father and his Kingdom. In the book of Acts, the Apostles obey the Lord and the Holy Spirit. They will never follow the orders given by any other authorities, neither civil nor religious ones if they go against the principles of the Kingdom. Thus, Peter and John will continue to preach, although the Sanhedrin has warned them not to do so anymore (Acts 4:18). And Paul will continue the path of evangelization, although the authorities were opposed to him and imprisoned and tortured him (Acts 40-16:37). Even when he is captive for the sake of the Gospel in Rome, he will continue to preach to all those who visit him (Acts 31-28:30). One should not forget the first martyr, Stephen, who did not surrender to the Sanhedrin and perished lapidated (Acts -7:54 60).

3) In a Permanent Pilgrimage State. Both Jesus and the Apostles are in constant motion, without demonstrating any kind of belonging to a city or any particular culture. Luke makes it very clear that when Paul was in Athens for the first time he walked through the city and saw in detail what it had to offer, but not as a tourist would do today, that is with joy and appreciation. On the contrary, the story clearly states: "While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16). Indeed, the attitudes of Jesus and the Apostles often surprise their contemporaries who are alerted by their unconventional behavior. That is why Jesus has no inconvenience in entering the house of pagans and sinners, nor does he have any problems moving around territories outside the Galilee and Judea. Moreover, Jesus dares

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to open the doors of the Temple to the whole world (this is what he does when he casts out those who were selling in 19:45). Peter, a good disciple of Jesus teaching, does not hesitate to go to a pagan's house to preach the Gospel. The Christian community in Jerusalem shows some doubts about this attitude, but after hearing the Apostolic testimony they said: "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18). Hence, in Acts 15 this apostolic decision was proclaimed forever: every human being is welcome in the Church and the Church shall spread throughout the world, just as the Lord Jesus instructed and the Holy Spirit confirmed. This attitude costed many internal and external tensions and the Christian community suffered the hostility of those around them: "See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves" (Lk 10:3).

4) A sharp enmity. This new attitude towards the world and the human beings that Jesus taught, and his Apostles lived out and preached did not always find a positive response from those who exercised power. This is how the Jewish and Roman authorities decided together to sentence the Nazarene to death on the cross and this is what happened to so many martyrs later in the book of Acts, who perished under persecutions and to Paul, the persecuted persecutor, who fell victim to this attitude. In its turn, it is proper to Christianity to resist silently, that is, passively in terms of violence, but actively in terms of conviction and actions for the people. Jesus himself commands "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Lk 28-6:27). Paul will not be silent before any authority and will not hesitate to defend his principles of proclaiming the Gospel. This attitude often implied to put up with hard times within the community and led many to doubt, among whom the clearest

example is without a doubt the Iscariot. But the first Christians were unconditional about the Gospel. Therefore: "No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other" (Lk 16:13). Paul could have saved many sufferings if he had proclaimed his Roman birth citizenship or if he had exposed it with pride. On the contrary, in Acts, he only shows it twice. On the first occasion, he does so to exalt the power and authority of the Gospel over the supreme authority of the empire (16:37) and in the second to obey the plans of the Holy Spirit and be able to go in captivity to Rome (25 :22).

5) The power of the Word. Christians do not have a greater instrument than the Word. The Word communicates, teaches, comforts, promises, heals and brings salvation. The Word is exactly what best defends them against any power and will be the one that demonstrates the truth of their arguments. Jesus and the Apostles did not know any better instrument to perform their work. "When they bring you before the synagogues, the rulers, and the authorities, do not worry about how you are to defend yourselves or what you are to say; for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say" (Lk 12-12:11). Through the Word, Jesus confers the authority to the Apostles to administer the Church, and through the Word, he expels the evil spirits from the hearts of human beings and commits himself to give them salvation. Of course, they do not speak empty words, because they also have a way of life and a daily attitude of commitment and work in the communities. They commit their lives, because they express themselves through the revealed Word and they interpret this revealed Word. It is the power of preaching that opens the eyes of the disciples of Emmaus and makes them go back to Jerusalem to be

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together with the community of brothers and sisters. It is the Word itself that convinces Peter to go to the Centurion's place in Caesarea, and it is the Word that makes Lydia beg the Apostles to stay at her place (Acts 15-16:13 ;8-10:4). The Word has such power that a Macedonian asks Paul in a vision to save them (Acts 10-16:9). A Macedonian, no less. From Macedonia came the invasion of the East by the hands of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. and now a Macedonian asks an Oriental to enter his land to bring salvation with the Gospel. The power of the Word is such that Paul can conquer Rome and stay there preaching for years.

This message today. More than two millennia of Christianity have passed and with them many Christian empires, the age of colonialism, and the institutionalization of Christian worldly power. After all this time Christianity is proud of so many treasures and achievements of the West, proud of its freedom and democracy, of its art and its literature, of its cities and its monuments. Having this enormous heritage in mind, how is it possible to read these texts and understand them today? It is the key question of whoever reads these lines and it seems very difficult to answer. However, it is all very simple and goes through the attitude of detachment that the Evangelist himself refers to in 5:11 when he says: "When they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him." Without falling into casuistic moral arguments that would propose different behaviors depending on the social, economic and political condition of each

individual and their family group, the Gospel message demands to give a primordial place to this new vision of the human being in which neighborly love rules over all things. A vision that calls for a change of attitude towards those who are around and a way of life where worldly things start losing their place to give way to the goods of the Kingdom.

That the established systems are doing wrong, is what we see every day in the news. The injustice in the relations between the powerful North and the weak South is nothing new. How industrialized countries treat animals and play with vegetal genetics led many organizations to blow the whistle throughout the world. Environmental pollution and all the consequences it entails, such as global warming, the extinction of species and the poor health condition of millions, are well known. These are some of the general titles that show that worldly power is doing things wrong. For the Gospel, they will always perform a bad administration because they lack that general principle of neighborly love and absolute accountability for the nature that surrounds us.

That is why Luke's message challenges today's Christians to assume their role and accept the truth of the Gospel message. They are expected to change their attitude in life and to reconsider their priorities in this world in order to leave a testimony that conveys life for future generations, in this world, and in the Kingdom to come.

\*All biblical quotations are from NRS (New Revised Standard Version Bible)