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Household Conversion Narratives in Acts, David Lertis Matson

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Book Reviews
Markus McDowell,
Editor

David Buttrick. *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994) \$12.95.
 Reviewed by Don Kern.

David Buttrick puts his finger on a crucial problem in sermon preparation when he discusses several books on “biblical preaching.” “They have also described a set of homiletic procedures from initial outlining down to a final speaking of the sermon. But in such books there seems to be a gap. There’s something left out in between. The crucial moment between exegesis and homiletic vision is not described. The shift between the study of a text and the conception of a sermon—perhaps if it occurs—is never discussed. So alert readers are left with the odd impression that we move from the Bible to a contemporary sermon by some inexplicable magic!” (89).

Finding a way to shift from the text to make sermons exciting again (99) is urgent, because Buttrick believes human consciousness has changed (86). Nowadays, people think by imaging (99). The film and television industry recognize that we view reality quite differently from different angles (88). Consequently, the angle of vision keeps changing with the movement of the camera. The result is that many points of view are shown. He writes, “Perhaps in the future our sermons will travel through a series of moves, each with a different well-defined point of view. After all, for the sake of the gospel, preachers must attempt to speak a language designed to form-fit the contemporary shape of human consciousness” (88). “We suspect a reason that much

preaching language does not form in consciousness and is not retained is because preachers are careless with points of view. Audiences are ‘triggery’ with respect to perspectives. Thus if an unaware preacher shifts points of view every two or three sentences, an audience, unfocused, will soon drift” (143). “We must find a way to preach in a world that is changing its mind” (79).

Buttrick proposes that the preacher become more aware of the many points of view in our contemporary society and use the Bible to address them. He illustrates this with the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, suggesting that we move from one point of view to another (95–97). This is a different style than we have become familiar with in the Restoration Movement. Many have become uncomfortable with what Buttrick affirms, but I believe he is on to something that can once again capture the attention of our listeners.

Has Buttrick found a way in the twenty-first century to legitimately move from the text to an exciting sermon while remaining biblical? I believe *A Captive Voice* is worth consideration in our cynical times. Here is the dilemma: “One time the preacher got up to preach. He said nothing, and the congregation did not listen; but everyone disagreed!” Better ways of communication are imperative in today’s climate.

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David Lertis Matson. *Household Conversion Narratives in Acts: Pattern and Interpretation* (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield, England, 1996) 224 pages. Reviewed by Markus McDowell.

This recently published book is part of Sheffield Press's *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series*, many of which are doctoral dissertations. This book is no exception; it is the result of Matson's dissertation at Baylor University. He writes, "This study is an exercise in biblical interpretation; more narrowly defined, it is a literary investigation of a noteworthy phenomenon in Luke's story of the early church: the conversion of entire households to the Christian faith" (7). Matson uses narrative-critical methods to compare household conversion accounts in Acts against the established pattern of evangelistic activity to households in the Gospel of Luke. The importance of this study lies in the fact that it is a literary study: previous studies of household conversion narratives have been mostly doctrinal or sociological.

Matson, in a fashion typical of dissertations, begins with an explanation of the justification for the work, the purpose, the methodology used, and an outline. The rest of the book is divided into two parts. Part I is "The Pattern Established: The Household Mission in the Gospel of Luke," which is divided into two chapters entitled "The Household Mission of the Seventy-Two" and "The Household Mission of the Lukan Jesus." Part II is "The Pattern Implemented: Household Conversions in the Acts of the Apostles," with three chapters: "The Household Conversion of Cornelius," "The Household Conversion of Lydia, the Roman Jailer, and Crispus," and a chapter that summarizes and concludes the work. An extensive bibliography, index of references, and index of authors is included.

In chapter one, Matson states that his purpose is to "develop the theme of household salvation from a distinctly literary point of view" (14), which he sees as being centered around proclamation, baptism, and hospitality. More narrowly defined, he examines the form and function in terms of the literary structure of Luke-Acts. This naturally suggests a text-centered methodology. This reviewer would like to have seen some discussion of the use of household narratives from Hellenistic and Jewish literature, but Matson necessarily narrows his methodology and scope.

Chapter two shows how the instructions of Jesus to the Seventy-two (Luke 10:5-7) describe the household method of evangelism. Due to the nature of this study, Matson is able to bring Lukan themes to light that might be missed by an examination of one pericope or section. He notes that it is "primarily by means of the house that the gospel marches

steadily from Jerusalem to Rome" (26). It begins in a house (Acts 1:13 and 2:2), and ends in a house where Paul is under arrest (Acts 28:30). Matson notes that this is not surprising because of the expectations created by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus reigns over a house (Luke 1:33), and the house is the place and venue of church growth, of teaching and proclaiming, of fellowship and hospitality, and of prayer. Matson persuasively shows that the household is an important concept for Luke in the spread of the gospel. He also points out that there is an important role for "economically viable" households which Matson says "presents Luke with a basic tension in his theology of the poor . . . ; elsewhere he condemns the rich. . . ." (42). This is a bit misleading: Luke does not condemn wealth as much as he condemns the improper use of wealth (see Luke Timothy Johnson, *Sharing Possessions: Mandate and Symbol of Faith*, [Fortress Press, 1981]), which actually supports Matson's claims even further.

In similar fashion, the next chapter also examines the household mission in Luke, focusing on the ministry of Jesus. Household settings have long been recognized as important to the Third Evangelist. Matson shows that what has been overlooked is the literary function of these narratives. He shows that the evangelizing method of Jesus in Luke follows a pattern in his life and mission. He does this through a series of examinations of particular household-related texts divided into topics: Healing in the House, Dining in the House, and Teaching in the House. He then treats two unique stories: Zacchaeus—the only household conversion story in the Synoptics—and the breaking of bread at Emmaus. He concludes the chapter with further narratives that concern eating and drinking: with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 7:33-34), in the house of Levi (Luke 5:29-32), and the Last Supper (Luke 22:14-38).

Matson does a fine job in Part I of showing how important the pattern of household evangelism is to the words and actions of the Lukan Jesus. Entering, bringing salvation, and remaining in households are the three elements that come together in the mission of the Seventy-two. "In this way, Jesus 'goes before' those messengers in Acts who succeed in converting entire households to the messianic faith" (82). Thus Matson has laid the groundwork for Part II and the core of this book: household conversions in the book of Acts.

Chapter four begins Part II of the book. Matson explains that his goal here is to "read the stories of household conversions in Acts against the pattern of the seventy-two missionaries in Luke" (87) which he set forth in Part I. He chooses the narratives to examine by an "*oikos*" formula—a common phrase that is found in these stories. To Matson,

John H. Westerhoff. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976) 126 pages. Reviewed by Eleanor A. Daniel.

Will Our Children Have Faith? was first presented as the Robert F. Jones Lectures at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Austin, Texas. Each of the book's five chapters is one of the original lectures. In the preface, Westerhoff says that the book "marks an end and a beginning in my pilgrimage, a journey which began in 1970 . . . to dream of an alternative future for the church's educational ministry" (ix).

The first chapter is entitled, "The Shaking of the Foundations." It lives up to the title. Westerhoff points out that Christian education has been devoted almost entirely to a schooling-instructional model, to the exclusion of careful attention to the powerful influence of the community of faith. He asserts, "Faith is expressed, transformed, and made meaningful by persons sharing their faith in a historical, tradition-bearing community of faith" (23).

Developing this idea of an ecology for Christian education, he points out in chapter 3, "In Search of Community," that education is really the interaction of six environments: (1) community, (2) family, (3) school, (4) church, (5) religious periodicals, and (6) Sunday school. These six institutions at one time intentionally worked together to produce an effective educational context, much of it through intergenerational contact. But the ecology has changed in each one—even in the church and the Sunday school—as has the way they work together.

Westerhoff further critiques the schooling-instructional paradigm by suggesting that the church has taught about religion rather than teaching a faith. The result has been a diminishing of Christian faith. He therefore proposes abolishing the schooling-instructional paradigm and replacing it with what he calls an enculturation model.

The chapter entitled "In Search of Community" outlines the nature of communication: (1) people share a common tradition, life, and purpose, which are shared through story; (2) a community of faith must be small enough to maintain meaningful, purposeful interactions among its members; (3) true community requires the presence of at least three generations; and (4) a true faith community must be composed of persons with diverse gifts. Educational programs must be organized around the rituals of the people (both the regular liturgy and crisis rites followed by a community), the experiences persons have within the community, and the actions members of the community perform both individually and corporately in the world. For Westerhoff, then, worship is at the center of the church's life. The liturgy must become a major aspect of Christian education.

He points out that people learn first enactively through their experience, then by imaging, and last by use of conceptual lan-

guage. People are more than minds: they were also created to act as spiritual beings.

Westerhoff concludes that it is easier to name the context for Christian education than it is to name the means. He is, however, certain that a schooling model is inadequate. In the midst of a brief review of the earlier genius of the Sunday school, he points out that the old Sunday school apparently cared most about creating an environment where people could experience and observe the Christian faith. The old Sunday school, he says, seemed to understand the importance of storytelling and role models—all more important in the overall scheme of things than teaching strategies.

Westerhoff concludes the book with a chapter, "Hope for the Future," in which he outlines how some congregations have adopted alternative models of Christian education. He finishes by stating, "Our children will have faith if we have faith and are faithful. Both we and our children will have Christian faith if we join with others in a worshipping, learning, witnessing Christian community of faith. To evolve this sort of community where persons strive to be Christian together is the challenge of Christian education in the years ahead" (126).

What do we make of Westerhoff's notions, intriguing as they may be? He calls for a complete redesign of the church's educational system, calling for an appeal to affect a spirituality rather than a reasoned faith. I, for one, am not ready to give up entirely the schooling-instructional model. He makes light of memorization and a grasp of chronology and history. But God chose to communicate with us through words. Much about Christianity is cognitive, though Christian discipleship never stops there. Peter told us to be ready to give an answer for the hope that we have (1 Pet 3:15–16).

Yet Westerhoff's ideas are timely for those who have relied almost entirely on reason and the intellect for understanding of faith. They are provocative to churches that believe that children are best neither seen nor heard in worship. They are fundamental for congregations that often believed that instruction is more important than quality relationships. Much of what Westerhoff proposes should be incorporated into the existing models we have. If the Sunday school could once emphasize relationships and caring as well as facts and principles, it surely is possible again if congregations will commit themselves to the task.

It is important to the Christian community to seek quality Christian education. Leaders in every congregation would find it enlightening and challenging to wrestle with the issues Westerhoff raises—not in an effort to eradicate all of the current structures, but as a way to evaluate how his ideas can be implemented in their faith communities.

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this formula performs two important rhetorical functions: it ties all the stories together with what he calls a “moment of recognition,” and it engages the reader by a reminder of the commands of the Lukan Jesus. The proposed method of study for these passages involves three tasks. First, locating the passage in its immediate context as well as its verbal and thematic connections with the rest of the narrative. Second, reading the story against the background of the mission of the Seventy-two in Luke. Third, determining the literary function.

The rest of this chapter is an examination of the first household conversion story in Acts: that of Cornelius (Acts 10:1–11:18). Matson examines the global context in terms of the Gentile Mission, including discussions of the events at Pentecost, Philip’s encounter with the Samaritans, the Ethiopian eunuch, and Paul’s commissioning by Jesus on the road to Damascus. The immediate context is discussed next, showing thematic connections to the martyrdom of Stephen and Peter’s Judean ministry. A lengthy and detailed examination of the Cornelius conversion story makes up the bulk of the chapter. Matson concludes that the rhetorical function of the story is that “the mission to the households, with its unique directive to enter indiscriminately into (gentile) households with the message of salvific peace, becomes the crucial *modus operandi* of the expanding church” (128). In addition, it also serves to underscore the importance of the household pattern: God has removed the barrier of table-fellowship between Jews and Gentiles.

For Matson, this story establishes a pattern that he uses to examine stories in the next chapter: the conversions of Lydia, the Roman jailer, and Crispus. These stories further emphasize the “concrete expression of household salvation” through “their theme of hospitality” (182). Matson shows that the Lydia conversion story function emphasizes that the *oikos* (household) is now the new place of worship for the people of God over the *proseuche* (place of prayer). Yet it is also the first real test of the Gentile Mission after the decisions of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), and it, in fact, expands the issue further because the convert is a female.

Matson sees the story of the Roman jailer as similar in function to the story of Cornelius. It recounts the first true pagan conversion to Christianity and is a “test case of the decision rendered by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem” (165). A related rhetorical function is that Paul and his fellow missionaries share table-fellowship with the Gentile converts. This in turn relates the household of converted Gentiles to the Lord’s Supper.

The final story of the conversion of Crispus, the synagogue president at Corinth, shows the three elements of household evangelism as present by Luke. First, the synagogue rejects the gospel. Second, the household of Crispus (as opposed to the synagogue) hears and responds to the gospel. Finally, the household becomes the place of religious learning and teaching—the house replaces the synagogue. Here Matson notes that although there is no mention of the Christian missionaries sharing table-fellowship, it is implied. A reading of the full text assuredly shows he is correct.

The concluding chapter states that a new side of the authorship of Luke has been elucidated: that of a missiologist. Matson has certainly demonstrated this in his work. He writes that the household mission existed historically, and that Luke uses the stories literarily to function theologically in both his Gospel and in Acts. Matson has linked the words and actions of Jesus in Luke’s first volume to the evangelizing work of the missionaries in his second volume. The last chapter concludes that the function of these stories is twofold: it “inaugurates and expands the gentile mission in Acts” (187) and legitimates “gentiles as equal members of the new salvific community by stressing their full acceptance at table with Jews” (188). There are tensions within Luke’s work between this and the Jerusalem Decree, but tension within the Lukan writings has been noted by many scholars in various areas. Here is another area of complexity.

Matson attains his purpose and goal in this book. Space does not permit discussion of a number of other subjects (such as infant baptism, the unity of Luke-Acts, and the relationship and unity between the Pauline writings and Acts) treated well by Matson. I recommend the book to anyone interested in conversion or evangelism narratives or households in early Christianity, and to those interested in literary criticism. A number of frustrations may be encountered by the casual reader, however, which are due to the nature of dissertations and not the fault of the writer: untransliterated Greek words (although many are translated parenthetically), a vast number of footnotes (a great help to the researcher, but maybe not to another reader), and the narrow scope of the topic. However, given the limitations imposed by the genre, David Matson has done an excellent job in bringing to light a previously unexplored area of Luke-Acts study in a lucid and insightful manner.

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