

Chapter 17

More expert witnesses

In a complicated trial, especially when witnesses disagree or there is reason not to believe them, it is common for one or more expert witnesses to be called in. Many senior doctors have had this experience. Their evidence is made more acceptable if they have conducted relevant research with convincing results, and best of all for their evidence to add to that of others. The biblical record is not without its own research workers and it is now time to hear evidence from one of them. Dr Luke, author of the third Gospel, was especially interested in historical research. He was probably Greek and would be familiar with debate and discussion. As a doctor he was well-trained in thinking about a differential diagnosis.

A trained research worker

It seems that Luke never met Jesus personally, but we know of his careful research about him from the introductions to his Gospel and his second book, *The Acts of the Apostles* (more commonly known simply as *Acts*). He addressed both books to his friend Theophilus, with the assurance that he was reporting reliable eye-witness accounts.^{1,2} We meet up with Luke in person from Acts chapter 16 onwards, where his use of the word ‘we’ instead of ‘they’, suggests the point at which he joined others who were travelling with that great missionary, Paul, during his second long journey. Luke evidently observed and recorded events as they journeyed on together, writing up Paul’s activities and teaching in many different cities.

In his medical practice, Luke had probably encountered a wide cross-section of society. For his times, as is reflected in his choice of reports, he was unusually sensitive towards the needs of women, the poor, and outcasts of various kinds. It is thought that parts of Luke’s Gospel story had been reported to him by Mary, who was best placed to give him details of her own miraculous pregnancy and that of her elderly cousin, Elizabeth (mother of John the Baptist). Only mentioned in

Luke's Gospel are some of the remarkable events that happened before and after each little boy's birth, possibly also told to him by Mary. At the other end of Jesus' life, she would report how the dying Jesus had asked his beloved disciple, John, to take care of her, which he did in his own home. No doubt John then told her more about what he had witnessed during her son's life of caring and teaching. Heart-sore at the crucifixion, Mary was one of the women who first told of the resurrection.

Luke often spoke of the adult Jesus' prayer life. In Luke 11 he records 'the Lord's prayer'; a prayer addressed to the Father, taught by Jesus to his disciples then and still in regular use today. As a Greek, Luke was careful to mention the inclusion of Gentiles as well as Jews in God's plan for humanity, to be underlined during his travels with Paul. Probably converted in adult life, Luke had no doubts about the truth of the good news he had researched and was now reporting.

The book of Acts starts by repeating Luke's credentials. It then goes on to unfold the history of the early church. Pentecost is still rightly celebrated as the church's birthday, for that was when the Holy Spirit came upon the gathered company of disciples in ways that we shall think more about in chapter 19. They were transformed from being a group of deserters to enthusiastic broadcasters of the truth about the life and death, resurrection and ascension of their Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ and demonstrating his continuing work in them through his Spirit.

A very surprising witness

Luke eventually became physician to *Paul*, (formerly Saul) a great traveller, preacher and writer who inspired and encouraged a lively faith in Jesus wherever he went, but also aroused much opposition. His surviving letters make up almost half of the books of the New Testament. Both Luke and Paul serve as expert witnesses for the defence when dealing with challenges about the truth of the gospel. Their motive, though, was not so much to defend the gospel as to present it as life-changing good news.

Paul was a surprising witness because his story began when, named Saul after the first Hebrew king, he was a great enemy of new Christians, known as the ‘followers of the Way’. He was a brilliant man, much respected as an academic expert in Old Testament law and well-known as unable to tolerate the teaching of the young church. Saul had been brought up to believe that the Old Testament sacrifices were still necessary and that the Messiah had not yet come. However, the new Christians believed that by such a costly offering of himself, Jesus had once and for all cancelled out the need for all other sacrifices and that he was, in fact, the Messiah, whom God had raised from the dead. All this was too much for sceptical Saul. He set out to destroy all the believers he could find, ‘being extremely zealous’ to guard the old Jewish traditions.³

Yet once personally convinced of the truth of the resurrection and the Lordship of Jesus, Saul’s well-informed background gave such valuable insight to missionary Paul. He could apply his knowledge of the ancient prophecies about a future Messiah to the ways in which Christ’s life, death, resurrection and ascension fulfilled them. Despite his best efforts, just as they had rejected Jesus, his fellow Jews rarely accepted this teaching and several times nearly killed him. In the end he would turn away from them to teach the Gentiles.⁴ His story is full of drama.

About turn!

Saul’s conversion had been dramatic. He had stood and watched as Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death. His inflamed bloodlust then drove him to hunt down believers in Damascus, but on the way he was given a sudden and astonishing personal revelation of the risen and ascended Jesus. He realised that the Lord was speaking to him, asking why Saul was persecuting him and struck Saul temporarily blind.⁵ This ‘Damascus Road’ experience turned Saul right around to become as eager a Christian believer as he had been an opponent. This term is still applied to someone who undergoes a complete change of mind after sudden illumination.

Although this amazing encounter was never to be repeated, Paul first made friends with those he had tried to hunt down and spent a couple

of weeks getting to know Peter.⁶ It was an act of new humility for the distinguished academic to learn from the old fisherman about Jesus' earthly life and work, his death, resurrection and ascension and his final gift of the Holy Spirit.

We can only imagine the shock to the persecuted church to learn that their chief enemy had now become a believer. Saul's change of loyalty would be as shocking for those early believers as it would be for voters today to find that an enthusiastic party leader had suddenly changed sides, say from Democrat to Republican, and then taken a few tutorials from someone in the former opposition.

From that time on, Saul became better known as Paul, a name more acceptable to Greeks. The pleasure he had previously found in travelling the country to hunt down scattered believers was channelled into adventurous journeys on a very different mission. This demonstrates how God often makes use of natural interests and personalities when they are given over to him. Paul's restlessness and drive were redirected into church planting throughout Asia Minor and parts of Europe. Many of his letters were written to teach and encourage those young churches. When rejected by the Jews, Paul took his message to the Gentiles. After three missionary journeys, his plans to go further westwards were eventually stopped by death threats from the Jewish leaders. At first, for his own safety, he was kept under Roman protection, but later he spent many long years as a prisoner in Rome, with the faithful Dr Luke in attendance.⁷ He used much of this enforced confinement for thinking and writing before, according to tradition, he was finally executed for his faith.

Paul's letters

Many of Paul's letters were written during his years of imprisonment, again showing how something good can come out of what had at first seemed so bad. When free to travel he would never have found time to write down his teaching. The letters he sent to the scattered young churches and their leaders contain teaching we can now share, both as challenge and encouragement. As a well-trained Jewish academic, he could apply his detailed knowledge of the Old Testament to explain

the meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection to many who had perhaps never made the connection before. He had been specially chosen for that job.

The letter Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome is the longest of his surviving epistles. When he wrote it, he had not visited Rome, though he longed to do so – a hope to be fulfilled only as a prisoner. The Christians in Rome were a mix of Jewish and Gentile believers, some of whom had probably arrived when the early church in Jerusalem met with persecution and was widely scattered, a time known as the *diaspora* (dispersion). Unconverted Jews would still observe the Old Testament law, perhaps expecting Jewish believers to do the same. Roman Gentiles would be expected to be completely loyal to Caesar, the emperor, and to support temples for the worship of Roman gods. Many in the city were openly immoral, so among these many ideas there was much to confuse the young believers living there. They urgently needed Paul's clear teaching.

By giving Jesus the title 'Christ', meaning Messiah, Paul reminded Jewish believers that this is exactly who he is. For others, well aware that Caesar was lording it over his people, to say 'Jesus is Lord', with belief in his resurrection, would be unpopular, if not treasonable. Yet it was by acknowledging Jesus as Lord that both Jews and Gentiles alike would be saved – put right with God.⁸ Paul reminded his readers that everyone has sinned, falling well below God's glorious standards, although his grace freely justifies those who have put their trust in the sacrifice of his Son to bring them back to him.⁹ Although the payback for sin is death, Paul immediately goes on to say that instead of death, 'the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord'.¹⁰ Those who accept this gift no longer have the death sentence hanging over them, for there is now no condemnation to dread.¹¹ What an amazing act of grace, no grudges held, or records kept. Instead of spiritual death, believers will know eternal life, defined by Jesus himself as starting now and never ending. Once entered into it is an on-going relationship with the Father and the Son.¹² All who receive this life also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit of Jesus, who offers to overcome their weakness and helps them live in line with God's will.¹³

Reading Paul's great letter to the Romans transformed the spiritual understanding of some famous Christian leaders such as Augustine of Hippo, Martin Luther and John Wesley. In the 20th century the well-known actor, David Suchet, has told how it convinced him of the truth of Christianity after he had searched through other faiths and traditions. It can still do the same for any who study it today and the whole letter deserves our careful and prayerful attention.

All because of God's grace

It is worth studying how often Paul mentions the *grace* of God in his letters. In fact, he makes more mention of God's grace than any other New Testament writer, perhaps being so grateful for God's grace in working such transformation in his own life. We should take note and be thankful ourselves, for we can receive it too.

Grace is the expression of God's unmerited favour in making and fulfilling his great plan to save us, through his Son Christ Jesus. Offenders who repent and believe are freely restored back into relationship with him, their past sins forgiven and forgotten. There is nothing at all that we can do to earn this forgiveness for ourselves. God adds gifts to gifts through his overflowing grace.¹⁴ We must never allow any familiarity with such good news to take away its impact, or suppress our gratitude.

We are reminded that as such grace has been shown to us, we should also be gracious to others when we are tempted to act ungraciously. Examples Paul gives are for us to 'excel in [the] grace of giving'¹⁵ and for our conversation to be 'full of grace'.¹⁶ Paul must have been a very humble and grateful recipient of such favour, forgiven and transformed from would-be murderer to missionary, becoming an ambassador for Christ.¹⁷ He reminds his readers that justification like this is a free gift of grace, made possible through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus.¹⁸ As the message of such amazing grace reaches more and more people, their hearts will overflow with gratitude to the glory of God.¹⁹ This was Paul's own response to the supply of grace promised him to help bear his (unspecified) thorn in the flesh.²⁰

Just as Jesus was full of grace and truth, so should his followers be.²¹ We are told to see to it that no one falls short of the grace of God, for it keeps away the bitterness that troubles and spoils.²² Paul's letters begin and end with a prayer for grace to be with his readers: 'So, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with *you* all.'²³

For further thought

- How much of the Bible have you read? There is a difference between reading it like a textbook and listening to its message. A good beginning would be to read one of the Gospels, then the book of Acts.

Further resources

- Pollock J. *Paul the apostle*. Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1999
- Yancey P. *What's so amazing about grace?* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997

References

- | | |
|----------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Luke 1:1-4 | 13. Romans 8:9, 26-27 |
| 2. Acts 1:1-3 | 14. Romans 12:6-8 |
| 3. Galatians 1:13-14 | 15. 2 Corinthians 8:7 |
| 4. Acts 18:6 | 16. Colossians 4:6 |
| 5. Acts 9:1-22 | 17. 2 Corinthians 5:20 |
| 6. Galatians 1:18 | 18. Romans 3:22-25 |
| 7. 2 Timothy 4:11 | 19. 2 Corinthians 4:13-15 |
| 8. Romans 10:9-13 | 20. 2 Corinthians 12:7-9 |
| 9. Romans 3:23 | 21. John 1:14, 17 |
| 10. Romans 6:23 | 22. Hebrews 12:15 |
| 11. Romans 8:1 | 23. 2 Corinthians 13:14 |
| 12. John 17:2-3 | |

