

The
Young
Church
in
Action

A New Translation of the Acts

B. PHILLIPS

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THE YOUNG CHURCH IN ACTION

*The ACTS of the Apostles
translated into Modern English by*

J. B. PHILLIPS



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THE YOUNG CHURCH IN ACTION

THE TRANSLATIONS OF J. B. PHILLIPS

Uniform with this volume

LETTERS TO YOUNG CHURCHES

(THE NEW TESTAMENT EPISTLES)

THE GOSPELS IN MODERN ENGLISH

THE BOOK OF REVELATION

THE NEW TESTAMENT IN MODERN ENGLISH

(complete volume)

DEDICATION

To the Men's Study Group of St. John's, Redhill,
Surrey, whose uninhibited comments greatly helped
me to translate this remarkable book.

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

It is impossible to spend several months in close study of the remarkable short book, conventionally known as the Acts of the Apostles, without being profoundly stirred and, to be honest, disturbed. The reader is stirred because he is seeing Christianity, the real thing, in action for the first time in human history. The new-born Church, as vulnerable as any human child, having neither money and influence nor power in the ordinary sense, is setting forth joyfully and courageously to win the pagan world for God through Christ. The young Church, like all young creatures, is appealing in its simplicity and single-heartedness. Here we are seeing the Church in its first youth, valiant and unspoiled—a body of ordinary men and women joined in an unconquerable fellowship never before seen on this earth.

Yet we cannot help feeling disturbed as well as moved, for this surely is the Church as it was meant to be. It is vigorous and flexible, for these are the days before it ever became fat and short of breath through prosperity, or muscle-bound by over-organisation. These men did not make "acts of faith", they believed; they did not "say their prayers", they really prayed. They did not hold conferences on psychosomatic medicine, they simply healed the sick. But if they were uncomplicated and naïve by modern standards we have ruefully to admit that they were open on the God-ward side in a way that is almost unknown today.

No one can read this book without being convinced that there is Someone here at work besides mere human beings. Perhaps because of their very simplicity, perhaps because of their readiness to believe, to obey, to give, to suffer, and if need be to die, the Spirit of God found what surely He must always be seeking—a fellowship of men and women so united in love and faith that He can work in them and through them with the minimum of let or hindrance. Consequently it is a matter of sober historical fact that never before has any small body of ordinary people so moved the world that their enemies could say, with tears of rage in their eyes, that these men "have turned the world upside down"! (17: 6).

In the pages of this unpretentious second book, written by

the author of the third Gospel, the fresh air of Heaven is plainly blowing, and to turn from the vitality of these pages to almost any current Christian writing, be it a theological book or a Church periodical, is to bring tears to Christian eyes. Of course the moment one suggests that our tragically-divided and tradition-choked Church might learn from this early unsophistication one is accused of over-simplification of the issues involved in our modern world. But it should be remembered that the ancient world was not without its complex problems also. It is of course possible that the translator has had his head turned by too close a study of these artless and energetic pages, but nevertheless he feels after such study that the Holy Spirit has a way of short-circuiting human problems. Indeed, in exactly the same way as Jesus Christ in the flesh cut right through the matted layers of tradition and exposed the real issue; just as He again and again brought down a theoretical problem to a personal issue, so we find here the Spirit of Jesus dealing not so much with problems as with people. Many problems comparable to modern complexities never arise here because the men and women concerned were of one heart and mind in the Spirit. Many another issue is never allowed to arise because these early Christians were led by the Spirit to the main task of bringing people to God through Christ and were not permitted to enjoy fascinating side-tracks. One can hardly avoid concluding, since God's Holy Spirit cannot conceivably have changed one iota through the centuries, that He is perfectly prepared to short-circuit, by an inflow of love, wisdom and understanding, many human problems today. The trouble is that there is nothing quite so effective as a defence against the invasion of the Spirit as a good knotty modern problem. We need, for instance, do nothing about securing a united Church so long as we have convinced ourselves and our fellows that such a thing is impossible, at any rate within measurable time—which simultaneously "passes the buck" to our children or grandchildren and safeguards the inviolability of our own denomination. If it were not for the strong insulation, so powerfully built up and so tenaciously held by so many people, there can be little doubt but that a new Pentecost would quickly sweep away our differences to the limbo where they belong.

There are two types of people especially who should read and study this book. First those intellectuals who assume

that Christianity was founded on a myth in the first place and is in any case a spent force today. For this book of Luke's, whose authenticity no reputable scholar disputes, takes more than a little explaining away. This is the beginning of the Christian era. This is the beginning of the practice of those virtues which scientific humanists so frequently assume to be natural to all human beings everywhere, despite the evidence of two world wars and the observable values of atheistic Communism.

The second group of people who should certainly study this book with the closest attention are what we might call the churchy-minded. They will find in this honest account of the early Church a corroboration of what Jesus meant when He said, "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." For this is the story of Spirit-directed activities and there is what appears to be from the human point of view an arbitrariness, even a capriciousness, in the operation of the Holy Spirit. Of course from the real point of view God's work is neither arbitrary nor capricious—and this will be plain to us one day. Yet it will often appear to be so in the present human set-up, for God's wisdom is working at a different level from our own. When we compare the strength and vigour of the Spirit-filled early Church with the confused and sometimes feeble performance of the Church today, we might perhaps conclude that when man's rigidity attempts to canalise the free and flexible flow of the Spirit he is left to his own devices.

It is one of the curious phenomena of modern times that it is considered perfectly respectable to be abysmally ignorant of the Christian Faith. Men and women who would be deeply ashamed of having their ignorance exposed in matters of poetry, music, ballet or painting, for example, are not in the least perturbed to be found ignorant of the New Testament. Indeed it is perfectly obvious from the remarks let slip on the radio by intellectuals, and from their own writings, that apart from half-remembered scraps left over from childhood's memory they have no knowledge of the New Testament at all. Very very rarely does a man or woman give honest intelligent adult attention to the writings of the New Testament and then decide that Jesus was merely a misguided man. Even less frequently will he conclude that the

whole Christian religion is founded upon a myth. The plain fact is not that men have given the New Testament their serious attention and found it spurious, but that they have never given it their serious attention at all. Let our intelligent men and women be urged, goaded, even shamed into reading this remarkable collection of early Christian literature for themselves. Let this ignorance of what Christianity teaches and practises be shown up for the intellectual affectation that it really is. Let the ill-informed critic of the Christian religion read particularly the Acts of the Apostles. Here is a simple, unvarnished, conscientious account of the behaviour and actions of quite a small group of people who honestly believed that Jesus was right in His claims. Let the critics put aside for a moment their contempt for (and ignorance of) the Church as it is today, and let them feel afresh the astonishing impact of this tiny group of devoted men and women. Or let them read the letters of this same New Testament and see for themselves the new qualities of living which are taken almost as a matter of course in those human unselfconscious writings. No honest reader can evade the conclusion that something very powerful and very unusual has happened. People are unquestionably being changed at the root of their being: cowards become heroes; sinners are transformed; fear, greed, envy and pride are expelled by a flood of something above and beyond normal human experience. For in the pages of this New Testament the cruel, the wicked, the evil-minded and the Godless become filled with selfless love, with gay and generous courage. The critics of Christianity have got somehow to explain this. Moreover, within a couple of generations, or even less, the Message of Christ was being taken by devoted men and women to a good part of the then known world. The new fellowship of those who knew God through Christ proved highly infectious and groups of "brothers" (which, it must be pointed out, included "sisters") sprang up and flourished in the most unlikely places.

Now let us freely admit that there is much in the Church's history of which all Christians must be bitterly ashamed. No one could be proud of the historical fact of such a thing as the two rival Popes cursing each other from their headquarters in Rome and Constantinople! No one is proud of religious wars or persecutions. No one is proud of that pious hypocrisy which could affect to care for men's souls while not

being in the least concerned for their physical or social welfare. And no one worthy of the name of Christian is proud of a divided and largely ineffectual Church. Yet for all its glaring faults there are not lacking in the Church today thousands of men and women with precisely the same devotion to Christ as the early Christians so powerfully exhibited. Thousands today are being persecuted for their faith, thousands are suffering "the loss of all things" with the same unadvertised courage as did the Christians of the early centuries. Of course this is quite unknown to our intellectual who has most certainly never read of the present-day activities of the world-wide Church. The Church has no trumpet, and unless a missionary is captured by bandits or a Church-leader tortured by Communists, or, what is even better "copy", a minister of the Church "goes wrong", little place in the popular Press is found for the activities of the living agents of the Holy Spirit today. But if the truth were told and a present-day Acts of the Apostles could be written—and read—many people would be astonished to learn of the extent and the effect of the work of today's Christians.

The secular history of the period covered by this book of the New Testament, for example, is of little importance compared with the spiritual history which is recorded, although of course at the time exactly the reverse must have appeared to be the case. (To the average Roman what could be less important than the ups-and-downs of a tiny sect who still followed the dead carpenter-preacher?) Yet the history told by Luke, fragmentary though it is, is the *real* history. The work done by the Holy Spirit through men and women is not only more important in the eyes of Heaven, but actually has a far more lasting influence on human affairs than that of any secular authority. It is perfectly possible that the unpublicised and almost unknown activities of the Spirit through His human agents today are of more permanent importance than all the news recorded in the whole of the popular Press.

Now the words written above must not be taken to mean that the Spirit of God is at work solely through His conscious agents. It can scarcely be emphasised too strongly that to the early Christians who were all Jews (or at least Gentile converts to Judaism) it was a profound shock to discover that God not only included Gentiles in His plan of salvation, but that by His Spirit He was actually at work in the hearts of

Gentiles before the Gospel arrived. Peter's words, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons" (10: 34) were far more revolutionary than they sound to us today. Yet members of the fellowship of the early Church appear to have been the necessary agents between men seeking God and God Himself. The Ethiopian eunuch, for example, was indeed seeking God, but the agency of Philip was necessary before he could find Him (8: 27). Cornelius, to whom we shall refer again later, receives one of the highest commendations ever given in the New Testament to a non-Christian. But it needed the agency of Peter to bring him to a fuller knowledge of the Truth as it is in Christ (10: 25). The men of Macedonia were seeking after God, but it needed the faith and courage of Paul to bring the Gospel across to them in Europe (16: 9). Apollos knew the Old Testament well, but had apparently got no further than the baptism of John (18: 24). It needed the agency of Aquila and Priscilla to lead him on into the Christian knowledge of God. In short, we might fairly say that although this book shows the Holy Spirit to be at work in the hearts of men who are not yet Christians the same Spirit uses members of the living Church to bring them into Christian certainty about God. And this is a situation which has innumerable parallels today.

Now important as the book is for the critic of Christianity to study, it is just as important for the modern Christian, especially, as I have said above, for the churchy-minded. For if "love laughs at locksmiths", divine Love certainly is completely unrestrained by the prejudices and timid rigidities of man. Appropriately enough God comes upon the scene with the sound of "a rushing mighty wind", and it is with the wholesome gustiness of a boisterous wind that the deep-seated prejudices and limited ideas of man are blown sky-high. Humanly speaking the Christian Faith might easily have become a little Jewish sect if it had not been for the powerful Wind of Heaven. As we read we may find that this celestial gale blows away some of our own prejudices and preferences. Indeed we may find that we are far more indoctrinated by the tenets of our own particular denomination than we knew. There are many with us who insist that the Holy Spirit can only be given through the orthodox channels, by which they usually mean the channels of their own particular Church. Doubtless God is a God of order, but at Caesarea, while Peter was still preaching, the Holy

Spirit was given unmistakably to pagans who had not yet been baptised, let alone confirmed! (10: 44) Again, there are those who would hedge around the rite of baptism and only after very careful preparation would they baptise anyone. Yet Paul, apparently with no misgivings, and certainly with little chance of proper preparation, baptises the Philippian jailer *and his whole household* in the small hours of the morning! (16: 33) What are we to conclude? Not of course that God prefers irregularity to order, but that His Spirit is quite capable of dispensing with rules or regulations if the occasion demands it, *and that we must never deny this possibility.*

I would warmly commend to every modern evangelist a study of the actual Message proclaimed by the young Church. The call of the Good News was not the emphasis on man's sinfulness, but that the Man Jesus Whom many of them had known personally was no less than God's Chosen One. Through this Man Jesus God had made Himself personally known; the proof that the Man Jesus was God's Christ was the Resurrection, a shining fact to which many of them were eye-witnesses; the Good News was that if men would turn from their former ways and accept the forgiveness of God through Christ, then the Spirit of God was living and available to enter their hearts and transform them. Those who so accepted the fact that God had become Man in Christ were "followers of the Way", and since they now shared the truest human loyalty they enjoyed the deepest possible fellowship.

Now in much modern evangelism the main plank of the platform is the emphasis, again and again, upon the utter sinfulness of man. "The Bible says, 'all have sinned'," the modern evangelist will shout. "The Bible says, 'There is none righteous, no not one.' The Bible says, 'All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags'." But is not this book a legitimate part of the Bible? Luke, knowing nothing of this emphasis on man's depravity, says quite simply of the unconverted Cornelius that he was "a devout man, and one that feared God . . . which gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God alway" (10: 2). He further records that no less a personage than the angel of the Lord assures him that "thy prayers and thine alms are come up for a memorial before God" (10: 4). (This statement might be compared with Article 13 from the Anglican Prayer Book.) What is

even more surprising is to find Peter, blurting out the truth as he suddenly saw it, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons, *but in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is accepted with Him.*" (10: 34). Indeed, the modern technique of arousing guilt by quoting isolated texts of Scripture is not found in this book at all. Naturally enough when the Truth was proclaimed to the Jews, as on the Day of Pentecost, they were "pricked to the heart", for as a race they were responsible not only for the rejection, but for the public execution of God's Christ. But we do not read of any similar reaction when the Gospel is preached to the Gentiles.

There are other shocks for us. There are those who make much of the Greek word *ekklesia* (from the Greek words *ἐκ* meaning "out of" and *καλεῖν* "to call"), and claim that from the earliest times the Church was conscious of being such, that is, "a called-out people". But Luke is plainly unaware of the word's significance, for though he uses *ekklesia* to describe the early Church he uses precisely the same word when the Town Clerk dismisses the crowd after the riot in Ephesus! (19: 41). If the word had already secured a special meaning we can hardly imagine Luke so far forgetting himself as to use it for an excited crowd of pagans!

There are Christians who make exaggerated claims for the primacy of Peter and even claim, without the slightest historical evidence, that he was the first Bishop of Rome! But here in this book, in spite of Peter's claim that it would be by his mouth that the Gentiles would hear the word of the Gospel and believe (15: 7), it becomes increasingly plain that Paul is God's chosen instrument for this purpose, and that in spite of a highly irregular ordination!

Perhaps we are not supposed to speculate, but one cannot help wondering why there is no mention of the incident which Paul recorded in Galatians 2: 11, and ff., and where it fits into this story. It was indeed a crucial moment for the Church. Peter, it will be recalled, unhappily exhibiting that same fear of other people's opinion which led him to deny his Master, was refusing to eat his meals with the Gentile Christians. Paul immediately saw what was at stake and publicly condemned Peter's action. Since Luke was such a close associate of Paul's it is a remarkable thing that no mention is made of this momentous reprimand. But perhaps by now it did not greatly matter since Paul had most

thoroughly demonstrated that the Gospel, and indeed all the riches of God, were to be shared by all who believed, whether Jew, Gentile, bond or free. We do not know whether it was the tact of Luke or the charity of Paul which led to the omission of this incident in the history of the young Church; nevertheless it must not be lost sight of in the study of these early significant days.

A further point is worth noting. Throughout the book the main enemies of the Church's life, as in the life of Christ Himself, are the entrenched self-righteous—in this case tradition-bound Jews. The persecution by non-Christians was spasmodic and more than once designed to please the Jews. But all the bitter relentless campaign of persecution and misrepresentation, particularly of Paul, must be laid at the door of the orthodox Jews. Christ said that, "Yea, the time cometh when whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service." He knew and foresaw that the bitterest enemies of those who knew God would be those who only thought they did—and that is a situation which has not changed with the centuries. Inside or outside the Church those who feel they have a monopoly of Truth and cannot conceive of God's working in any way to which they themselves are not accustomed have always been the implacable persecutors of those whose minds and hearts are open to the living Spirit of God.

Finally, whatever conclusions our modern conferences may reach, there can be no reasonable doubt but that the early Church possessed the power to heal and even to raise the dead. Luke was a careful writer as well as a medical man himself, and is not likely to have exaggerated such happenings. Even though he may have had to rely on the evidence of others for those early days when, for example, the young Church exercised a healing ministry in the Temple, he himself was actually present with Paul when they were shipwrecked on the island of Malta. Yet he records almost as a matter of routine that, after Paul's initial success with the Governor's father, many other sick people on the island were healed at his hands. That the Church today has very largely lost this power of healing the sick is undeniable, although it is heartening to know that in recent years Christians all over the world are not content to accept this loss as the inevitable price we must pay for the march of Science. But we cannot help looking wistfully at the sheer

spiritual power of the minute young Church, which was expressed not only by healing the body but "by many signs and wonders" which amply demonstrated the fact that these men were in close touch with God.

Of course it is easy to "write off" this little history of the Church's first beginnings as simply an account of an enthusiastic but ill-regulated and unorganised adolescence, to be followed by a well-disciplined maturity in which embarrassing irregularities no longer appear. But that is surely too easy an explanation altogether. We in the modern Church have unquestionably *lost* something. Whether it is due to the atrophy of the quality which the New Testament calls "faith", whether it is due to a stifling churchiness, whether it is due to our sinful complacency over the scandal of a divided Church, or whatever the cause may be, very little of the modern Church could bear comparison with the spiritual drive, the genuine fellowship, and the gay unconquerable courage of the Young Church.

REDHILL, 1954
SWANAGE, 1955

J. B. PHILLIPS.

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