

The Acts of St. Alban's in Strasbourg

By Sarah Hinlicky Wilson

Don Juel looked something like Ichabod Crane and something like the Fish Footman in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, but if ever anyone radiated with the beauty of the gospel, it was him. Presiding over Luke class at Princeton Seminary with ease, humor, and delight, he drew us through the seed parables as we flailed, trying to prove it was possible to make ourselves into good soil. Patiently and Socratically, he led us to the admission that soil is the most inert of things, incapable of making or remaking itself, and what were we going to do about that? And when at last we came to the inescapable conclusion, "nothing," the Holy Spirit moved in and started breathing life into these dead bones. Then we could see that all the "your faith has saved you" stories were not psychological directives for the religiously anxious but the supreme enactment of divine gift, within us and without us at once.

Good times. Don Juel was the one who gave me the Bible back after the contempt of long familiarity, and of course it didn't hurt that he was another of Princeton's small Lutheran minority (or "Lutheran mafia," as I once heard a Presbyterian professor snort). Ecstatic about Luke, ecstatic to see how Luther's profound reorientation of Christian theology was not a selective reading of Romans and Galatians alone but emerged from a much broader biblical narrative, I was equally ecstatic to remember that Luke had a sequel. I had only the vaguest memories of Acts — no surprise, since it was given short shrift in the lectionary of my youth — so with eager anticipation I set out to read volume two.

Oh no.

It was horrible. Where Luke was all mercy for the faltering, the paradoxical glory of the cross, and the transformation of suffering into new life, Acts was the most odious march of triumphalistic conquest. No ambiguity, no complexity, just one damned people after another slain by the Spirit. All those long-winded and pompous speeches.

(Didn't Jesus warn about that? Oh, wait — in Matthew, not Luke.) It depicted a smooth path to success: and that sure didn't resemble any church I knew. And what was this works-righteousness nonsense in 10:35 about how "in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him"? I slammed the book shut and resolved to ignore Acts just as much the lectionary did.

Maybe I would have continued in this willful rejection, had not the Spirit slain me and my eisegetic misunderstandings. In a stroke of narrative genius worthy of Acts, the means by which my Acts-conversion came about perfectly matched the contents of Acts. Unsuspecting soil onto which seeds were flung, I moved to another country to start working in ecumenism.

That country happened to be France, but as such it's incidental to the story, except perhaps as a place that it's hard for outsiders to integrate into. (Is any place easy for outsiders to integrate into?) My husband, Andrew, and son, Zeke, and I tried to make a go of it in a French church. We had delusions of a quick infiltration via linguistic immersion, and we were wrong. Frustrated and lonely, we finally heeded the positive reports coming back from visiting relatives whom we had packed off to St. Alban's, the Anglophone chaplaincy in our lovely city of Strasbourg. Feeling a bit like we were compromising our

high ideals of assimilation, but at that point desperate for the fellowship of the gospel, we gave it a try.

Probably the first thing you are supposed to notice when you visit a church is its theology as enacted in liturgy, hymns, and preaching. But the first thing we noticed was that it was not a monochrome congregation. Since we are an interracial family, that was already thrilling. To be sure, there was the British contingent, as St. Alban's got its start about 40 years ago to tend the flock of diplomats at the European institutions in Strasbourg. For a while the Church of England's representative to the Council of Europe doubled as priest-in-charge of the chaplaincy. But there were other Europeans too, French and Italian and Irish and Lat-

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