

+ + Living in the Season of Pentecost + +

THE SPIRIT LIFE IN ACTS

Lesson Two: What the Church in Acts *Did* through the Spirit

(1) Review

The Spirit Life. We should be careful not to impose our preconceived notions of the “spiritual life” on what is described in Acts as the early church’s experience with the Spirit, what we are calling the Spirit Life. As we explore the book of Acts to discover what it means for God’s people to live with the Holy Spirit, we would do well to keep in mind that the Spirit Life is about...

- A person... not just a personal inner awareness.
- A people... not just the individual.
- Power for a purpose... not just a comforting presence.

The Temple Theme. The book of Acts plays a key role in the biblical narrative in telling how God fulfilled his many promises to return to his people to dwell among them in his Temple. According to the Acts, this has now occurred in the church through the Holy Spirit because of the ministry of Jesus Christ. The church is now God’s dispersed Temple-people, sent out into the world to reconstitute God’s Temple over all creation, as it was in Genesis 1–2, and as it will be in Revelation 21–22.

The Story of Acts. The book of Acts is about the early church empowered by the Holy Spirit to carry on the work Jesus began to do to the ends of the world, starting at Jerusalem and moving through Athens and eventually to Rome.

Our Story. The Season of Pentecost, which begins with the book of Acts, reminds the church today that this is our part in God’s story. We’ve got a job to do. We’ve got a role to play—through the power of the Holy Spirit—in the unfolding of God’s saving acts throughout history.

REVIEW HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT: Read the entire book of Acts in one sitting. As you do, home in on the following passages and write down the top three pressing questions they raise in your mind about the Holy Spirit: Acts 1:8; 2:1–21, 38; 4:29–31; 8:14–24; 10:44–46; 15:8; 19:1–7. Be prepared to discuss.

(2) What Did the Church in Acts *Do* through the Spirit?

The section of Acts that immediately follows the story of Pentecost (Acts 3—4) is centered on the first recorded miracle performed by the early church, the healing of a lame man. It was exactly in line with Jesus' ministry; the early church was starting to do the works of Jesus in the same way and with the same power. And because the healing caused such a stir, Peter was given the opportunity to proclaim the message of Jesus with boldness.

After Peter's and John's arrest, the believers came together in one accord to pray not for relief or deliverance, but for boldness to continue to speak God's word and to perform various signs and wonders. They were then filled by the Holy Spirit, resulting in a shared sense of unity and love.

By way of introduction, then, this passage provides an initial answer to our question in albeit an unsurprising way. What did the church in Acts *do* through the Spirit? Answer: the church in Acts...

- Continued the Work of Jesus
- Empowered by the Spirit
- Working Together in Unity and Love

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION. Did Jesus do his work as deity using his power as God, or did he do his work as a man empowered by the Holy Spirit?

Granted we tread on mysterious ground here—and without denying the deity of Jesus one bit—Paul writes in Philippians 2:5–8 that although Jesus was (and is) God, in the incarnation he voluntarily set aside his rights, privileges, and power as God. He became not a superman, but an ordinary man who depended upon the Spirit to do the work of his ministry, just as his followers are now called to do.

(a) Continued the Work of Jesus

- 1:1—*In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach*, implying that the church would continue doing the things Jesus did and teaching the things Jesus taught.
- 1:3—*appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God*, the primary message of Jesus, which means that if the church is bearing witness to Christ and his teaching, then the kingdom of God will no doubt be a major focus (8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31).

- 2:1—*But Peter, standing with the eleven, raise his voice and addressed them...* the first example of many of the early church proclaiming (and even debating) Jesus as Israel’s Messiah and the world’s Lord (2:14–39; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 10:34–43; 13:16–41; 14:15–17; 17:22–31).
- 2:37—*repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus*, one of various types of summons of the early church to give allegiance to Jesus as Messiah and Lord.
- Various healings, exorcisms, and signs and wonders providing care for God’s people and pointing others to the ministry and message of Jesus (3:1–10; 5:12–16; 6:8; 8:6–8; 9:32–42; 14:3, 8–10; 16:18; 20:7–12).
- *In the name of Jesus*—this phrase is used often to invoke the presence and power of Jesus, making it clear that he is alive and his work is continuing through the lives of his followers (2:38; 3:6, 16; 4:7–10, 16–18, 30; 5:28, 40; 9:27; 16:18).

(b) Empowered by the Spirit

Various Ways of Describing Spirit Experiences. It goes without saying that the Holy Spirit was essential to the life and mission of the early church, his activity saturating the narrative of Acts. But making sense of exactly how the Spirit empowered the church can be too slippery to nail down with confidence. Luke reports quite a wide variety of experiences the church had with the Holy Spirit relating to water baptism, laying on of hands, speaking in tongues, being filled, providing guidance, etc. Here are some examples:

- These four different phrases are each used to refer to the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost: *baptized by the Holy Spirit* (1:5); *the Holy Spirit has come upon you* (1:8); *all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit* (2:4); *I will pour out my Spirit* (2:17–18, 33).
- *you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit* (2:38; cf. 8:15–17)—a promise to the gathered crowd at Pentecost that they could receive what the 120 disciples had just received
- *filled with the Holy Spirit* or *full of the Holy Spirit*—used in a variety of ways: as a general description of someone (6:3–5; 11:24; 13:52); as a description of someone in action being empowered (4:8; 7:55; 13:9); in response to a prayer for more of the Spirit’s power (4:31); a reference to receiving the gift of the Spirit (9:17).

- *the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him* (5:32; cf. 15:8)—describing those who have received the Spirit
- *the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word... the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out* (10:44–45)—another significant “coming” of the Spirit

Major Comings of the Spirit. Luke also describes at least five significant “comings” of the Spirit that, while sharing certain commonalities, diverge in some significant ways.

- **PENTECOST (2:1–4).** Though Luke uses lots of different language to describe what happened, Pentecost marks the initial outpouring of the Spirit upon the gathered group of 120 followers of Jesus. After Peter’s sermon, about 3000 Jews respond and are baptized, but there is no account of what accompanied their baptism.
- **PRAYER FOR COURAGE (4:29–31).** In response to Peter and John being arrested and threatened, a group of believers come together to pray for boldness to continue proclaiming Jesus and doing his work. The Spirit dramatically descends upon the place and fills the entire group, most of which (if not all) had already received the Spirit at Pentecost.
- **SAMARITAN PENTECOST (8:14–17).** Persecution scatters the early church, and Philip ends up ministering in Samaria with great results. Though many believe and are baptized, it isn’t until Peter and John arrive from Jerusalem that they receive the Holy Spirit. Why did the Holy Spirit wait to come upon the Samaritans? Quite possibly in order to make clear to the apostles and to the Samaritans that they shared the same Spirit, the same baptism, and therefore, the same Lord. They were a part of the same church.
- **GENTILE PENTECOST (10:44–46).** The Spirit is working behind the scenes separately in the lives of Peter and a Roman centurion named Cornelius, which leads to them meeting and then Peter preaching the gospel to a group of Gentiles. Before Peter finishes, and preempting any water baptisms, the Holy Spirit falls upon the crowd causing them to speak in tongues. What’s going on here? Accepting Gentiles into the church as Gentiles was such a huge obstacle that it makes sense for the Spirit to assure Peter and his circumcised companions in this unusual fashion. Convinced, Peter orders them to be baptized as fellow members of the community. Though different from the Samaritan Pentecost, in both instances the Spirit seems to seek unity above a consistent experience.

- **DISCIPLES IN EPHESUS (19:1–7).** Paul encounters a small group of disciples of John the Baptist who had yet to hear about the giving of the Spirit (and possibly much about Jesus himself). Paul immediately baptizes them in the name of Jesus, lays hands on them, and they speak in tongues and prophesy.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION. What *careful* conclusions might we draw about how the Holy Spirit empowers and works through the church in Acts to continue the ministry of Jesus?

The descriptions of the Holy Spirit in Acts raise a multitude of questions, many of which don't have answers, and the rest having complex answers. Attempts to systematize "how the Spirit works" are doomed to fail, partly because Acts wasn't written for that purpose, and partly because the Holy Spirit is free to do as he pleases. But is there anything that we can say more than that based on the book of Acts? Can we say...

- That the Holy Spirit is essential to the life and witness of the church, and therefore to being a Christian?
- That the Holy Spirit seeks to give witness to the lordship of Jesus through his followers performing signs and wonders and proclaiming his name?
- That the Holy Spirit's work likely diverges from situation to situation so as to build unity within the church?
- That the Holy Spirit's coming on believers is not something imperceptible, to be accepted only on faith, but observable, sometimes even dramatic?

(c) Working Together in Unity and Love

Throughout Acts, Luke employs summary statements and summary passages to move his story along. The summary statements—typically just one verse—are scattered throughout the book and intended to mark the expansion of the church (2:41; 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20). The summary passages, on the other hand, are confined to the first eight chapters and reveal the nature of the interior life of the early church (2:42–47; 4:32–37; 5:12–16; 8:1b–4). The first two of these, each immediately following a major "coming" of the Spirit, present an inspiring picture of the sense of unity and love shared among believers. The early church saw themselves as a new family, even and especially across ethnic and socio-economic lines, with radical generosity being the norm. This communal life is presented as the fruit of the Spirit's work reconstituting God's Temple over all creation.

(3) Questions for Today's Church

Acts and Its Contemporary Application. It's common to hear expositors of Scripture caution folks not to apply wholesale the book of Acts to contemporary church situations. Often people are encouraged first to determine whether a passage in Acts is intended to be *descriptive* or *prescriptive* before moving toward contemporary application. However, while such an approach is better than nothing, it still creates the impression that portions of the Bible were written *to* us as modern-day readers. It is important to realize that the Bible, though *for* the church of every generation, is not written *to* us.

In that regard, it is wise to view the entire Bible as *descriptive*, not only narrative books like Acts, but also more *prescriptive*-feeling books like Proverbs. Though we live in age of the church, our situation and the situation of the early church are drastically different. So perhaps instead of asking which portions of Acts we are to imitate, we can ask how the story of Acts should inform us as we follow and listen to the Holy Spirit today to continue the work of Jesus in our own unique context.

- What should be the signs of a church in Jackson filled with and empowered by the Holy Spirit?
- If a church today finds the common life of the early church as described in Acts elusive, what might that church do to seek to remedy that?
- Is it fair to assume that the more Christians live a Spirit-filled life, the more we can expect signs and wonders of all kinds to take place among us?
- Should the Holy Spirit's coming on believers today be something observable, even dramatic?
- What are some ways the church today can practice radical generosity?
...can build up unity? ... can proclaim the lordship of Jesus?

For Next Week

Review these notes, and then read the entire book of Acts again, preferably in one sitting. As you do, reflect on the passages below with this question in mind: What did the church in Acts *say* through the Spirit, that is, what was the essence of their message? Be prepared to discuss.

Acts 2:14–39; 3:12–26; 4:8–12; 10:34–43; 13:16–41; 14:15–17; 17:22–31.