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Ministry and the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts

JOHN YORK

At first glance, it is difficult to imagine a more obvious block of Scripture in which to discuss the relationship of ministry to the activity of the Holy Spirit. After all, Acts is often called “Acts of the Holy Spirit.” In our Restoration heritage, Acts is the most read, most authoritative text in the New Testament for prescribing the goals and practices of ministry.

Yet, the reality for many of us in church experience is a profound disconnect between the activity of the Spirit as described in Acts and the prescriptive way of reading and appropriating practical ministry methods and models. For a variety of reasons, we have been capable of describing the activity of the Spirit in Acts, but incapable of bringing the Holy Spirit with us across the hermeneutical bridge from the first century to the twenty-first.

Some of that can be laid at the feet of the overdone rationalism received through our forefathers who could argue by the mid-19th century that any active participation of the Holy Spirit in our world ended with the completion of the New Testament.¹ Thus, whereas we could accurately describe the importance and function of the Holy Spirit in ministry in the earliest days of the Church, such activity was only an ancient artifact for our present setting. Patterns of ministry to be followed had to do with human behaviors, not Godhead activity.

Further compromising an effort to speak of ministry in relation to Luke-Acts, not just Acts, was a covenantal approach to all of Scripture that divided the voice of canonical authority into three sections: Patriarchal, Mosaical, and Christian. This set of judicial divides led many to the conclusion that the relevant body of Scripture for ministry in the Christian community does not begin until the second chapter of Acts at Pentecost. Regardless of the literary connections made by the author of Luke and Acts, there is a covenantal separation that functionally eliminated volume one from ministry appropriation. Thus, there is the great irony of our dependence on the story of Jesus in the Gospels and our complete independence from the story of Jesus for practicing ministry.

This divide is further compounded in obvious ways, both in ancient history and our more recent efforts to teach Scripture. One must face the reality of the order of Scripture that comes to us and the distinct separation of Luke and Acts formed by the position of the Gospel of John. Luke “belongs” with the gospels accounts, particularly the synoptic partners Matthew and Mark. Acts of the Apostles “belongs” with the other teachings of the apostles in the Epistles. For decades, our sister Christian colleges and universities have taught New



Testament survey courses that reflected this obvious division. Even after the guild of biblical scholarship recognized this two-volume work as that of a single author and called it “The Beginnings of Christianity,” commentaries seldom addressed the two works in light of each other.

Thus the task of relating Luke and Acts to each other in terms of the role of the Holy Spirit in relation to practical ministry is less obvious in our current reflection than it is in the two-volume work itself. What immediately becomes evident when the two volumes are read together is that, for our author, each is incomplete without the other. The prologue of Acts begins with the reminder of what Jesus “began to do and to teach” in the first volume. The end of volume one includes a promise from the resurrected Christ that his disciples will soon receive power from on high. Volume two begins with the reiteration of that promise; they will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon them (Acts 1:8).

THE SPIRIT IN LUKE

The linking of those two words, “power” and “Spirit” takes us back to the beginning of Luke’s gospel and the words first spoken to Mary in the annunciation: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you”—obvious parallelism (1:35). In Luke, the birth narratives of John and Jesus are carried along by the voice of the Holy Spirit. The angel announces to Zechariah that his wife will give birth to a son who will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. Proof of that Holy Spirit presence in the womb comes in the form of Mary’s arrival at the home of Elizabeth: “When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the baby leaped in her womb and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit” (1:41). Elizabeth is surprised that “the mother of my Lord” (1:43) should come to visit.

When Zechariah’s unbelief leaves him unable to speak until after the birth of John, he speaks the *Benedictus* only after being filled with the Holy Spirit (1:67-79). Just as the presentation of John is accompanied by a Holy Spirit-filled announcement, so the presentation of Jesus in the temple is accompanied by the Spirit’s presence in the old man, Simeon. Three times in three verses we are told of the Holy Spirit’s presence and guidance in the life of Simeon (2:25-27).

When Luke moves from the birth narratives to the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus in chapter three, John distinguishes his ministry from that of Jesus by speaking of the different modes of baptism practiced by each. “I baptize with water, but he will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” While the explanation that follows (3:17) is shared with Matthew’s gospel (Matt 3:11-12), the larger role of the Holy Spirit in relationship to the ministry of Jesus is unique to Luke’s account. Because of the literary structure of Luke’s story, the ministry of John closes with his imprisonment (3:20) before Jesus is baptized. That creates a scene in which only Jesus, the Spirit, and the voice from Heaven participate.²

The Spirit then drives Jesus into the wilderness where he is tempted by the devil. After the temptations end, Jesus returns to Galilee “in the power of the Spirit” (4:14; cf. 1:41; 24:49; Acts 1:8). Luke’s linking of the terms “power” and “Spirit” suggests that whenever we witness the power of Jesus to heal and cast out demons—for that matter, to preach and be the voice of authority in any setting—it is a direct result of Holy Spirit presence.

Again unique to Luke’s account is the use of Jesus’ visit to the synagogue in Nazareth as the inauguration of his ministry (4:16-30). Jesus quotes

...there is no story . . . in which the ministry of Jesus in Luke is not directly empowered by the Spirit.

Isaiah 61, and for the only time in his ministry states that Scripture has been fulfilled as a self-reference. The Spirit of the Lord is upon him and has anointed him to preach good news to the poor, proclaim freedom to prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind, release to the oppressed (4:18). In other words, the ministry of Jesus is the activity of the Spirit working through him. When Jesus rehearses his ministry for the disciples of John in chapter seven (vv. 21-22), he recites the same activities as signs of his authenticity as Messiah. Luke also reminds us from time to time that he “speaks with power and authority” and that the “power of the Lord is

upon him to heal.” When Jesus sends out the 12 on their short-term mission, Jesus gives them “power and authority” (9:1, cf. Mark and Matthew where only “authority” is mentioned). When the 70 return from their mission in chapter 10, Jesus “rejoices in the Holy Spirit and announces, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.”

The implicit distribution of power as witness to the more permanent gift of the Holy Spirit becomes more explicit in chapters 11 and 12. When Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, he creates the “lesser to greater” comparison between parents giving good gifts to their children and the Heavenly Father giving the Holy Spirit to those who ask (11:13). When he warns the disciples of impending times of distress and persecution, he says they need not worry about appearing before the rulers and authorities because “the Holy Spirit will teach you at that time what you should say.”³

The point of this brief survey is not to give a concordance list of Holy Spirit references in Luke, but to demonstrate that the ministry of Jesus is empowered throughout by the Holy Spirit. In fact, there is no story, from announcement and conception to his exaltation, in which the ministry of Jesus in Luke is not directly empowered by the Spirit.

THE SPIRIT IN ACTS

Volume two, as suggested above, is the continuation of the story of Jesus. The ministry of Jesus, empowered by the Spirit in volume one, continues through the ministry of his disciples who are empowered by the same Spirit. Volume two begins with the resurrected Christ giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles (1:2). They are told that they will be baptized with the Holy Spirit (1:3; cf. Luke 3:16); they will have power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them (1:8).

They begin to make decisions that are revealed through the Holy Spirit/Scripture (1:16). The Holy Spirit descends upon the disciples as tongues of fire (cf. Luke 3:16); they speak as the Spirit gives them utterance (2:4), and Peter is “filled with the Holy Spirit” as he speaks the inaugural sermon (2:17). Peter makes clear in his speech before the gathered crowd that what they are witnessing is not drunken speech but Spirit-empowered speech. The prophecy of Joel is being fulfilled:

In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:17-18)

The inaugural sermon in Acts functions much like the inaugural sermon of Jesus in Luke to summarize the mission of Jesus’ disciples. They are filled with the Spirit to make the prophetic announcement that Messiah has come in the form of Jesus of Nazareth “whom you crucified.” The confessional response of the crowd leads to what often is considered the programmatic exhortation of the gospel: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (2:38).

Although it is clear that baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit are closely linked together in the life of the church—just as they are linked together in the life of Jesus—the narrative rebuffs all efforts to program the order and timing of God’s saving activity. Thus, as the mission of the church prescribed by the resurrected Christ in Acts 1:8 unfolds (“you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth”), baptism and Holy Spirit reception are usually present, but they are not precisely sequenced. That is, sometimes baptism can occur without the reception of the Spirit (8:15-16), or Holy Spirit reception may occur prior to baptism (10:44).⁴ There is even an instance where a believer in Jesus (Apollos) teaches “the things concerning Jesus accurately” and he is “fervent in spirit” (Spirit?) but he knows only John’s baptism (18:25).

The next account in Luke's narrative (19:1-10) describes the Apostle Paul meeting up with "disciples" (a word reserved in Acts for followers of Jesus) who have not even heard of the Holy Spirit and know only John's baptism. In the latter case, Paul immediately baptizes them, but he also lays his hands on them (as Peter and John came and laid hands on the Samaritans, in 8:17), and they testify to their reception of the Spirit by speaking in tongues (cf. 2:4; 10:46).

It is sometimes suggested that it is precisely because the Holy Spirit alone can open up the missional doors to Samaria (8:17) and "the whole world"—as represented by the Gentile Cornelius (10:46-47)—that baptism and the gift of the Spirit are distinguished in these accounts and in the case of the disciples of John (18:24-19:10). It is clear, however, that work of the Spirit is far more inclusive to the life of the church than opening particular missions.⁵ From the day of Pentecost forward, we are to understand that any and all activities of the church are empowered by the Spirit.

There are repeated reminders that when the apostles are called upon to speak or defend their faith (cf. Luke 12:12), they are filled with the Holy Spirit as they speak (4:8; 4:51; 7:51; 13:9). When there is a need for servants to be chosen to resolve the dispute over the treatment of widows, one criterion for those chosen is that they be "full of the Spirit" (6:3). When the ministries of Stephen and Philip are described, the fact is that each is empowered and led by the Spirit to accomplish his respective task. It is the Spirit that convinces Peter to go to the home of a Gentile centurion (10:19). It is the Spirit who speaks to the church in Antioch, telling them to "set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (13:2).

There are repeated references to the voice of the Spirit that gives direction to mission, sometimes even choosing the geographical journey by opening and closing directions (8:29, 39; 13:2; 16:7; 19:21; 20:23). When the council in Jerusalem sets forth directives for the behavior of Gentile converts, the Holy Spirit shares in the authorization: "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials" (15:28). It is the Holy Spirit that appointed the Ephesian overseers to shepherd the flock in their charge (20:28). It is significant that Acts opens with the resurrected Jesus giving instructions "through the Holy Spirit" (1:2). At the beginning and end of Acts, the words of the prophets are announced as words of the Holy Spirit (1:16, 28:25).

The signs and wonders performed by the apostles, particularly Peter and Paul, and others filled with the Spirit (Philip in Samaria) parallel those performed by Jesus and demonstrate the same power of the Holy Spirit that was present in Jesus. There are no longer poor among the disciples (4:34); the lame are healed (3:2; 14:8); the dead are raised back to life (9:36-43; 20:9-12); evil spirits are cast out (5:16; 16:16-18). While references to the Holy Spirit are not found in these instances, it is clear that all such miraculous deeds continue to manifest the presence and power of God at work through the Holy Spirit in the followers of Jesus. Volume two is genuinely the continuation of the life of Jesus on earth after his exaltation to the right hand of God (cf. 1:1). God has now poured out his Spirit on the followers of Jesus just as Jesus himself came in the power of the Holy Spirit for ministry.

Finally, it is not humans who decide when, how, and where the Spirit operates. It is as though Luke goes out of his way to prevent any programmatic human efforts to dictate the ways of the Spirit. Precisely when humans seek that kind of power and authority, they are rebuffed. Ananias and Sapphira have not lied to men but to the Holy Spirit when they contribute only part of the proceeds of a land sale to the faith community (5:3, 9). The about-to-be-martyred Stephen complains that his accusers "are forever opposing the Holy Spirit

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(7:51). When the baptized Simon seeks to buy the power to lay on hands and give out the Holy Spirit, he is sharply rebuked by Peter (8:20).

THE SPIRIT IN TODAY'S CHURCH

As stated in the beginning, our problem is not in being able to recognize that ministry and Holy Spirit presence are directly connected in Acts. Apart from the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, there is no mission in Acts; there are no ministries of service and care-giving among the disciples; there is no boldness to speak or endure persecution. The narrative continues the story of God who now has fulfilled scripture by breaking into human history in the presence of the Son. Jesus is filled with the Holy Spirit and announced from heaven as the beloved Son at his baptism. Empowered by the Spirit, he withstands the temptations of the devil; in the power of the Spirit he ministers while on earth. Upon his resurrection, he announces to his disciples that they too will be filled with the Holy Spirit, with power from on high. It is only when they have received the promised baptism of the Holy Spirit that they go forth to be the continued presence of Jesus, offering the same kingdom message to their hearers that Jesus offered to them.

The implications for mission and ministry today seem both obvious and lost for many of us. By developing a rationalistic understanding of truth that denies spiritual powers and presence (either evil or good), we became a people whose ministries and understandings and missions can only have human directives, human goals, human initiative, and human outcomes. Perhaps it was the early fear of emotionalism at the beginning of the 19th century and similar recurring fears of "Pentecostalism" and various Holy Spirit claims and movements in the 20th century that led us to shy away from all discussion of the Holy Spirit as empowering presence in our lives in our time.

While I am convinced that God and the power of the Spirit are always active—and thus there can even *be* Christians and Christian churches in the 21st century—we must recover an active belief in the real operation and presence of the Holy Spirit at work in us and among God's kingdom people everywhere. For all that is flawed in the "postmodern," "post-Christian" world in which we find ourselves, the good news—no, the GREAT NEWS—is that humans once more are seeking the experience of the Divine in our lives. We long to experience God-presence. We long for precisely what we see in Jesus and his followers: the reign of God among us.

We need to claim the instruction of Jesus to his disciples (Luke 11:13): "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly father gift the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" Would or should the activity of the Spirit in our own mission and ministry look exactly like the stories in Luke-Acts? I hardly think so. Our culture and world are radically different in so many ways. No, rather than expecting the same activities, we should simply expect the faithful activity of God among us.

We minister because we are called, and our calling comes with the equipping power and presence of the Holy Spirit. We go forth to minister, to be Jesus to our world in our time, as they were called to be Jesus (the living body of Christ, to borrow Paul's language) to their world in their time—in the power of the Spirit!

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ENDNOTES

- 1 I am indebted to Leonard Allen for pointing out that this "Spirit operates only through the Word" controversy dates back at least to a journalistic debate between Robert Richardson (*Millennial Harbinger*, 1856-57) and Tolbert Fanning (*Gospel Advocate*, 1856-57). In a series of articles titled "Faith versus Philosophy," Richardson repeatedly expressed his concern that many leaders of the Restoration were so enamored with Lockean philosophy that there was no place for a doctrine

of the indwelling Spirit in the Christian life. Fanning rebutted Richardson's position, favoring the stance that came to be the accepted understanding of the Holy Spirit among Churches of Christ by the early 20th century, namely, that the Holy Spirit operates only through the Word. The controversy led to such tension between Alexander Campbell and Richardson that at one point Richardson resigned his position at Bethany College. See C. Leonard Allen and Danny Gray Swick, *Participating in God's Life: Two Crossroads for Churches of Christ* (Siloam Springs, Arkansas: Leafwood Publishers, 2001) 65-76.

- 2 The baptism of Jesus thus becomes a model that is imitated in Acts when, once more, baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit are linked together, though not always in the same sequence (Acts 2:38, 8:15-18, 10:44-47, 11:16). It should also be noted that baptism can be mentioned without reference to reception of the Spirit (8:38, 16:33) and reception of the Holy Spirit occurs at least once (2:4) without reference to water baptism.
- 3 It should be noted that the citation of the Holy Spirit ends at this point in Luke's account, just as such citations end in Acts in chapter 21 except for a final scripture citation at the end of the story (28:25).
- 4 I often point out to my students that when the initial group of disciples receive the Holy Spirit (2:4), we have no record of them ever receiving water baptism. So many exceptions to a "rule" suggest there may not be a rule at all, other than the call to imitate Jesus in his own act of baptism and Spirit reception.
- 5 I personally must confess that this understanding of the Spirit's work in opening particular missions functioned more as an apologetic for maintaining 2:38 as the normative text for conversion than as a means of understanding Lukan pneumatology.

