

THE EARLY CHURCH

REACHING THE WORLD

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KENNETH SCHENCK

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I dedicate this book to the memory of Ross Hoffman. More than anyone else, it was Ross's eagerness to go to many of the places in the book of Acts that led him, Keith Drury, Dave Ward, and myself to trek across Turkey in the summer of 2013. It was a tremendous trip of learning and friendship that added immensely to my appreciation and understanding of Acts. We all continue to mourn his passing.

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I mentioned in the dedication the great trip to Turkey that Ross Hoffman, Keith Drury, Dave Ward, and I took in the summer of 2013. Some of those pictures have made it into this book. We wouldn't have taken that trip if Keith Drury had not paved the way several times already, and if Ross Hoffman had not urged him to go one more time. Thanks to these great friends for making the book of Acts more than a science project.

Dare I mention that I took a class in the book of Acts with Dr. Kenneth Foutz one summer at what was Central Wesleyan College so long ago? Then I took it again with Dr. David Bauer at Asbury Theological Seminary. Both are fond memories amid many other classes that did not stay so well in my memory.

INTRODUCTION

We should be immensely grateful to the Lord that he not only inspired the Gospels to give us windows into the early ministry of Jesus, but that he also inspired the history of the early church known as the book of Acts. Just think of how much we would not know if we did not have Acts! We would not know of the day of Pentecost. We would not know about the stoning of Stephen. We would probably have a significantly different picture of Paul.

At the same time, imagine how much fuller our picture would be if Matthew, Mark, and John had also written a history of the early church to go along with their biographies of Jesus. Just as each gospel has its own unique perspective, we no doubt realize that there are other ways to look at the events of the early church than the way Acts does.

In the end, though, Acts was not just written to tell us what happened in the early church. No doubt God inspired Acts for more

than one reason. Although it pictures the church of the first century, Acts was surely meant to bring out both good and bad examples for Christians to follow and avoid. We still have to take into account that it was written first to them and then second for us. Acts was not just written for historical curiosity but at least in part to show Christians how to be the church.

It may have served some other purposes as well back when it was written. For example, given the bad reputation Christians had in the first century, Acts was probably written in such a way as to show that Christians were not troublemakers. In fact, Christians then and today are peacemakers when they are living the way they are supposed to.

Acts shares many of the same themes as the gospel of Luke, as they were written by the same author. For example, Acts shows even more fully than Luke that the good news is for the whole world, not only for Jews. Like Luke, Acts emphasizes Jesus' care for the poor and the lost sheep. It highlights the role women played even more than the Gospels. Acts emphasizes prayer and the Holy Spirit, themes we can discern in Luke as well.

Although Acts was not just written to tell us the history of the church, we do have to decide at points what is *description* and what is *prescription*. What parts of Acts are just telling us what happened, and what parts are telling us how it *should* happen? Also, as with all of the Bible, we must pray for the Lord to help us tell the difference between what was for that time and what was for all time. We best face these sorts of questions together, in communities of faith, praying for the Spirit to enlighten our hearts and minds.

1

EARTHLY MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

THE STORY IN PROGRESS

Acts is the second volume of Luke. The gospel of Luke is about the things Jesus *began* to do and teach while he was on earth (Acts 1:1). The book of Acts picks up where Luke left off.

That is not to say that the ending of Luke and the beginning of Acts are exactly the same—more on that later. It is only to say that Acts assumes the story of Jesus as it is told in Luke. The special emphases and themes of Luke are more or less the same emphases and themes in Acts. At the same time, Acts does not necessarily assume the special features of Jesus' story in Matthew, Mark, or John.

How does Luke present Jesus?¹ On the one hand, Luke has the same basic story that is in Mark, just like Matthew does.² Jesus preached the kingdom of God (Luke 4:43). He healed people and

cast out demons. He called twelve disciples and trained them to fish for people. He came into conflict with religious leaders and was eventually crucified before rising from the dead.

Luke also includes a lot of the teaching that appears in Matthew but not in Mark. For example, Luke's Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6) is similar to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7). Luke has some beatitudes and teaching on loving your enemy and not judging, as well as Jesus' teaching that a wise person builds on rock. Luke has a lot of the teaching found in Matthew's other sermons too.

Luke has its own unique Jesus material as well. Luke alone tells us about the parents of John the Baptist and about Gabriel's appearance to Mary before Jesus was born. In fact, one of the special features of Luke and Acts is the greater attention paid to the role women played in Jesus' story. In Luke, we see stories about Mary and Martha and the parable of the persistent widow. In Acts, we will see Lydia and Priscilla, not to mention the way Peter's Pentecost sermon highlights how women will prophesy in the age of the Spirit in addition to men (see Acts 2:17–18).

In Luke, the story of Jesus' ministry begins with him reading Isaiah 61 in his home synagogue (Luke 4:18–19). This is the passage where Jesus connected his earthly mission to his message of good news for the poor. Luke, more than any other gospel, highlights Jesus' ministry to the poor, and it gives his harshest words to the wealthy. Acts will continue this special emphasis with its picture of the early church sharing possessions in common.

Some of the themes of which we only catch a glimpse in Luke become full-blown in Acts. So Luke gives us clear hints that the gospel is for the whole world (see Luke 2:32), but Acts will show this theme to the fullest. In Luke we get a hint that Christians are not truly troublemakers, even if trouble follows them (Luke 23:14).

Acts will make this point over and over again in its presentation of the early church.

Both Luke and Acts feature the centrality of prayer both to Jesus and his followers. Finally, while Luke predicts that the Spirit will come in force after the resurrection, Acts shows the fulfillment of the promise. If Luke gives us all the things Jesus began to do on earth, Acts gives us the things he continues to do through the Holy Spirit.

THE APOSTLES

The story of Acts begins with Jesus' ascension. Jesus had risen from the dead. He had appeared to his apostles for forty days and spoken about the kingdom of God. He had given them some final words before ascending to heaven.

There are many interesting things about these verses at the beginning of Acts (1:3–11). One is that the disciples are called apostles. To be sure, Luke called the twelve disciples apostles several times in the gospel of Luke. In that sense, it is not a new title for them in Luke-Acts, the name we give this two volume series of books in the New Testament. Jesus sent his disciples out even before his death and resurrection (see Luke 9:1–2).

But there is also a sense in which they did not fully become apostles until after Jesus' death and resurrection. An apostle is someone who is sent out as a messenger to represent some greater authority. In Acts, the apostles were especially witnesses to the fact that Jesus did indeed rise from the dead (see Acts 1:8; 3:15). Paul confirmed this understanding of an apostle when he said, "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (1 Cor. 9:1).

So we might say that the disciples—followers and apprentices of Jesus—technically only became “the apostles” after they witnessed Jesus’ resurrection and were commissioned by him to go and proclaim that message throughout the world. In most of Acts, the apostles were twelve specific people, eleven of whom were key followers of Jesus while he was ministering in Galilee. There were Peter, James, John, and Andrew—perhaps apostles the earliest Christians considered to be pillars (see Gal. 2:9).³ Then there were Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot. If these are pairings by twos (see Luke 10:1), then Judas son of James was left without a mission partner.⁴

Judas betrayed Jesus, leaving the twelfth spot vacant. In the first chapter of Acts, Judas’s replacement is chosen. They “cast lots” to decide between two candidates. While we do not know exactly what a “lot” was, the practice was something like drawing straws or rolling dice. While we would consider this sort of practice to be leaving things to chance, there was often a sense that God was directing the outcome (see Prov. 16:33).

Matthias was chosen (Acts 1:26). We sometimes hear the suggestion that the replacement apostle should have really been the apostle Paul. After all, did not God use him to spread the gospel more than any of the first eleven? Are there not thirteen books in the New Testament written by him?

Paul was sent by Jesus to witness the resurrection, but he did not fit the job description for a replacement of one of *the* Twelve, at least not the one that Peter gave in Acts 1:21–22. Judas’s replacement needed to be someone who had followed Jesus from the baptism of John to the time of the ascension. Paul probably did not know Jesus until three years after Jesus ascended to heaven.

This entire line of questioning brings up another very important question: To what extent are the biblical narratives *description* and

to what extent are they *prescription*? Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, suggest in their book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* that stories in the Bible do not tell us how to act unless we can show somehow that their authors intended us to take the stories that way.⁵ For Fee and Stuart, our default sense should be that the biblical stories are simply telling us what happened, not that we should act the same way.

We can see the common sense of what Fee and Stuart are saying. If the purpose of Luke-Acts is to simply tell us how things happened, then the story does not make any claims about whether things *should* have happened that way or not.

This is an important point because there is a very common intuition in the church today that our goal should be to do everything the way the New Testament church did. If they had deacons, then we should have deacons. If they ran churches by a board of elders, then we should. If they didn't eat with Christians who were doing immoral things, then we shouldn't.

The problems with this approach go well beyond the fact that description is not prescription. There is the point Fee and Stuart are making: Just because the stories of the New Testament describe the church acting a certain way doesn't in itself mean that we are being instructed to act that way. They cast lots to choose the highest leadership of that moment. Should we do that at our top church conferences—identify two or three final candidates and then roll the dice? They sold all their extra possessions and redistributed the resources to those in need. Should we do that as well today?

Maybe we should. As we'll see at the end of this chapter, there are often good reasons to think that biblical storytellers meant for us to imitate certain characters and actions in the story and avoid others. Nevertheless, Fee and Stuart's basic point seems valid. We

have to be discerning in which parts of the story are models and which parts are simply the story.

However, there is a more significant reason why we should not just blindly imitate the New Testament church when it comes to how they did things. Even though the Bible is for us, it was not originally written to us. The way the early church structured its leadership, as well as the way they did many other things, had to do with certain underlying goals and principles. But the specifics of how they accomplished those goals and principles had everything to do with the historical and cultural context in which they were playing them out.

Anyone who has spent time in another culture knows that while many underlying principles are the same from one culture to the next, the “how” to accomplish them often differs widely. In that sense, doing today exactly what they did in the early church may not get us to the goal at all. Does men greeting one another with a kiss in church today accomplish the same goal it did in the early church? Does wives submitting to husbands have the same connotation today as it had in the early church?

In the end, it is foolish to think we should structure churches or manage our money with the same specifics as the early church or ancient Israel did. Unless we live in the Third World, most of us live in a dramatically different cultural context than they did. Doing the specifics of what they did doesn’t accomplish the same purpose as it used to accomplish if those specifics do not work the same way today. We might actually end up working in opposition to the biblical purposes.

A great example of this principle is the Jewish practice of not eating meat and cheese at the same meal. This practice is derived from Exodus 23:19, which says “Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk.” We do not know for sure why the law prohibits

this. Perhaps it had something to do with the Canaanite religion that surrounded ancient Israel. What is certain is that it had nothing to do with eating meat and cheese on the same plate.

When Christians try to apply aspects of the Bible today that had everything to do with their ancient context, they end up looking foolish, perhaps even immoral at times. Those who used the Bible to argue against abolishing slavery in the early 1800s were of this sort, as we can see clearly today in hindsight.

You are welcome to meet in house churches or use only the kinds of musical instruments that existed in the first century. Women can cover their heads with a veil. But these actions don't have the same meaning today that they had back then. Such practices come off as awkward at best and work in opposition to the gospel at worst.

So we come back to the question of who the twelfth apostle should have been. As mentioned, some Christians believe the early church got it wrong when they picked Matthias. They take this story in Acts 1 as a description of what happened but not a prescription for what should have happened. They think Paul should have been Judas's replacement.

The temptation to say Paul was the true twelfth apostle comes from our love of Paul and the fact that we have thirteen books in the New Testament written by him. Meanwhile, we have never heard of Matthias before this point in Acts, and we never hear of him again. But we should be cautious. Acts gives us no reason to think that the criteria the early church used was wrong in replacing Judas, that is, picking someone who had been with Jesus since John's baptism.

The purpose of Acts is not merely to tell us what happened. Acts is told with a theology and a point of view. In the thinking of Acts, Paul was not as prominent as we tend to make him in our

circles today. In Acts, Paul was certainly an apostle (for example, 14:4, 14), along with his missionary partner, Barnabas. But he was not one of *the* apostles. He was not one of the Twelve.

So if we want Paul to be the true twelfth apostle, we have to disagree with the thinking of Acts. We could argue that God hinted at this idea by putting thirteen of Paul's letters in the New Testament, while none from Matthias. In fact, we have only two from Peter and one from James. We could argue that by putting Paul's letters in the New Testament, God has shown us who truly won Paul's debates with Jerusalem in the early church. At the time, Paul may have seemed to be on the edges, someone on the periphery of Christianity. But we see him today as he was—at the center of what God was doing.

Paul himself had a broader understanding of what an apostle was than the book of Acts represents. We've already quoted him in 1 Corinthians 9:1, where he implicitly defined an apostle as someone who witnessed Jesus' resurrection. When he recounted the resurrection appearances of Jesus to various people in 1 Corinthians 15, he started his list with the Twelve but then proceeded to mention James (the Lord's brother) and "all the apostles" (15:7). He included himself among this latter group of apostles.

So for Paul, the apostles were a group of individuals to whom Jesus appeared after he rose from the dead and whom Jesus sent (commissioned) to go out as witnesses of the resurrection. He included Jesus' own brother James in this category. He included Barnabas in this category (see 1 Cor. 9:6). Presumably, he included the husband-wife pair Andronicus and Junia in this category, whom he mentioned in Romans 16:7.

Paul considered himself to be the last of this sort of apostle. We find some in the church today who are given the title "apostle" by

others. It is a great honor and recognizes a person's high gifts of charisma and anointed leadership of the highest caliber. The idea probably also draws from passages like 1 Corinthians 12:28, where Paul said that God has placed apostles in the church.

But Paul was not writing 1 Corinthians to us today. He was writing to people who lived in Corinth two thousand years ago, back when there still were some of these apostles around, including himself. Both by the criteria of Paul and of Acts, there are no longer any apostles of this sort living. Paul was the last (1 Cor. 15:8).

That is not to say there could not be individuals who are sent to witness Christ on an entirely different level than your average missionary. Billy Graham comes to mind. And God certainly does raise up individuals from time to time whose spiritual authority is so astounding that it rivals that of whole denominations and church structures. But no matter how great, such individuals will never be an apostle of the sort Peter and Paul were.

THE ASCENSION

Jesus appeared to his followers for forty days after his resurrection before he ascended to heaven. Many churches today celebrate this period in their worship calendars. Some even set aside the Sunday after the forty days as "Ascension Sunday."

We shouldn't think Jesus was with his followers continuously for this forty-day period. Paul gave a more detailed sense of this time in 1 Corinthians 15. Jesus would appear to one person then to another. By Paul's reckoning, Jesus appeared first to Peter, then to the other ten remaining apostles (1 Cor. 15:5).⁶

Paul also mentioned an appearance to over five hundred people at one time (15:6). Was that the day of the ascension? Was that the

Great Commission appearance in Galilee (Matt. 28:16–20)? Many people assume that Matthew’s Great Commission appearance was the same appearance where Jesus ascended, but this is not the case. Matthew’s Great Commission was in Galilee, while the ascension described in Acts was in Jerusalem.

Some of the appearances to apostles like James the Lord’s brother may also have taken place during the forty days before the ascension. Or they may have taken place afterward, like the appearance to Paul. Although it may make us a little uncomfortable, we simply do not have enough information to nail down the precise details for sure.

Then you have the possibility that Luke used some creativity in the way he presented the story. For example, if you look at the ending of Luke, you could easily think that Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven on the same day. Jesus met the two men on the road to Emmaus “that same day” (Luke 24:13). They returned “at once” to Jerusalem (24:33). And while they discussed these things with the disciples, Jesus appeared to the disciples for the first time, as in Matthew and John, seemingly on the evening of his resurrection (24:36).

If all we had was the book of Luke, we would not see forty days inserted between Luke 24:49 and 24:50. In Luke, it sounds like Jesus explained things to them for a while, led them out toward Bethany, and then ascended to the skies. It reminds us that while we would prefer the narratives of the Bible to fit together neatly, it is not always that easy. For example, Luke gave us no hint in his resurrection stories that Jesus appeared to the disciples in Galilee. Meanwhile, the two oldest gospels, Mark and Matthew, seem to indicate that the most central appearances were in Galilee.

Acts is the second volume of Luke, but we do not have second volumes for Matthew, Mark, or John. It is sobering, from a historical perspective, to realize that if the other gospel writers had

written second volumes, they would likely differ from each other as much as Luke differs from the other gospels. If we were to discover a second volume to Mark, it would no doubt change a number of easy assumptions we now have.

The four gospels already affect our assumptions this way. Having Matthew changes our assumptions about Mark, and having John changes our assumptions about all the rest. In the end, we have to get comfortable with some degree of uncertainty about exactly how things happened.

Before Jesus ascended to heaven in Acts 1, the disciples asked a curious question: “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” (v. 6). This is a fascinating question because it gives us a real look into the disciples’ heads and what they were thinking Jesus had come to do.⁷

For example, it reveals something we would know from studying the Jewish literature of the time as well.⁸ The Jews were looking for the Messiah to be a political figure who would restore the nation of Israel to political independence. They were not expecting God to become human and take over the whole world, let alone the whole universe. They were expecting a human individual to become Israel’s king again and free it from Roman domination. Notice that they didn’t say anything about Jesus taking over the world—only returning Israel to its political independence.

In this light, Jesus’ answer was even more striking. He didn’t say, “Good grief, don’t you get it, even after the resurrection?” His answer was, rather, “Not yet.” He said, “It is not for you to know the times or dates” (Acts 1:7). The implication was that there would indeed be a time when Israel would once more have its political kingdom restored.

These sorts of hints help us reconstruct both what the earliest disciples were initially thinking as well as Luke’s theology of the end

times. As we can see from the Gospels, the disciples were not expecting Jesus to die on the cross. That's not what messiahs did. The messiah would be God's anointed king through whom God would free Israel from the Romans and restore its political independence. The disciples would not have expected the Messiah to die—that would actually be an indication that someone wasn't really the Messiah.

So Peter was probably ready to fight to the death for Jesus the Messiah. But he wasn't prepared for Jesus to willingly surrender to the Romans. And he didn't expect Jesus to be crucified. He expected God to kick out the Romans and Jesus to become the earthly king.

We can see Peter's misunderstanding in a nutshell in his well-known conversation over who he thought Jesus was in Mark 8:27–38. Peter understood that Jesus is the Christ (which is Greek for Messiah). But he didn't understand the idea that Jesus would die. The two contradicted each other in his mind and expectations.

So the disciples probably didn't expect Jesus to die. And then after he died, they probably didn't expect him to rise again. Their question in Acts 1 amounted to, “So are we back on for the earthly kingdom?”

Jesus' answer was “Not yet.” What they did not anticipate was what is sometimes called the “church age,” the age we are in right now. Luke called it the “times of the Gentiles” in Luke 21:24. We will return to talk about what Luke possibly thought about this current age in the last chapter of this book.

Jesus then went on to tell his disciples what would come next. It is the great prediction, the prediction that they would do what Jesus commanded them to do in the Great Commission of Matthew 28. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

This prediction is a blueprint for the book of Acts. In Acts 2, the disciples received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. They received the power of the Holy Spirit that John the Baptist foresaw before Jesus was even baptized (Luke 3:16). The rest of the book plays out the rest of the prediction. Acts 2–7 gives us the disciples being witnesses of the resurrection in Jerusalem. Acts 8–12 gives the disciples and others being witnesses in Judea and Samaria. Acts 13–28 gives us primarily Paul going to the ends of the earth.

After Jesus’ prediction, he ascended to the sky, and the angels stated that he would return again in the same way someday. Where did Jesus go? He presumably went to the heaven where God the Father is.⁹ It is interesting to imagine that the disciples probably thought of God’s heaven as straight up through layers of sky (see 2 Cor. 12:2). They did not know that the Earth is round or that our solar system is just one of thousands in one of countless galaxies.

And if God made the world out of nothing, then the heaven where his essence is must not even be in this universe. Is this not another great example of God stooping to our weakness? Jesus ascended according to the view of the cosmos the disciples had.

THEOPHILUS

Before we leave Acts 1, we should take a quick look at Theophilus, the individual to whom both Luke and Acts are addressed (Luke 1:3; Acts 1:1). It is possible, of course, that the name is purely symbolic. The name means “lover of God,” and so both books could simply be addressed to all those who love God.

However, I wonder if Theophilus is actually the patron who supported Luke while he wrote these two books. A look at some of the other literary works from the time reveals that they were commissioned by various wealthy individuals. For example, Virgil,

who wrote the famous *Aeneid*, was commissioned by more than one patron to write his books. A typical event would involve the patron throwing a lavish dinner for friends and inviting the writer not only to eat, but to read the latest bit of his writing.

Now Luke-Acts has some of the strongest warnings about wealth, so it would be intriguing if in fact Theophilus commissioned Luke to write these two books. Together, they constitute a kind of history of the origins of “the Way” (see Acts 9:2), which seems to be what some of the earliest Christian Jews called themselves.¹⁰ As we work through Acts, I’ll suggest that Acts in particular has some of the characteristics of what we might call “apologetic history,” which is when a group’s story is told in such a way as to defend its reputation against some of its outside opponents.

We do not know for sure that the author’s name was Luke. Neither the gospel of Luke nor the book of Acts mention their author’s identity. However, we don’t know of any other author ever being suggested but Luke. There are a number of passages where the story changes from the third person to the first person. This first-person account starts at a place called Troas (Acts 16:11), disappears for several years at a place called Philippi (16:17), then reappears at Philippi again (20:5) and continues until the end of Acts.

So it is reasonable to assume that the author of Luke-Acts was a traveling companion of Paul. Since Acts ends at Rome and since the early Christians thought Colossians was written in Rome, just before Paul died, it is only natural that the tradition would pick someone in the closing greetings of Colossians as the likely author of Luke-Acts. Luke, the doctor’s name, is there. Whether this is good detective work on our part or whether we are simply repeating the research the early church did when it was trying to figure out who wrote Luke-Acts, we do not know.

We can be more certain about when Luke-Acts was written. We sometimes hear people say that Acts must have been written very early, about AD 62, because that is where Acts ends. Some argue that Luke would have told us what happened when Paul appeared before Nero, if he had known. Some even go on to suggest that Luke-Acts might have been written as a kind of “amicus brief” to try to influence Nero’s decision.

A key blind spot in this argument is that Acts was not written to tell *us* anything, at least not in the mind of its author. It was written to an audience that presumably already knew the outcome of Paul’s trial. Indeed, Acts gives us the strongest hints as to what happened. Paul told the Ephesians in Acts 20:25 that none of them would ever see him again (compare 20:38). The final chapters of Acts are full of foreshadowing and foreboding. “Pity,” the ruler Agrippa said after Paul told him his story, “This man could have been set free if he had not appealed to Caesar” (26:32).

The most natural way to read Acts is to conclude that Paul died after he appeared before Nero, which is generally how Christians took Acts until the twentieth century. Luke did not need to tell Theophilus this fact because he and his audience would have already known. Not only would Luke have had to cut out other material to tell about that trial—Acts is about as much as could fit on a large ancient scroll—but it would have ended the story on a negative note. When you consider that one of Luke’s hidden agendas may have been to show that Christians are not troublemakers, how much more effective to end with someone like Agrippa pronouncing Paul’s innocence!

In the end, there are reasons to believe that Luke-Acts was written after Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70. The first has to do with the likelihood that Luke used Mark as a primary source, a position that the vast majority of experts on the Gospels have held for

well over a hundred years. The reason is the great similarity in wording and arrangement between the two.

A subtle hint of this fact is in the way Luke 21:20 paraphrases Mark 13:14, which predicts that an “abomination that causes desolation” would be set up somewhere it shouldn’t be. It is an allusion to Daniel 11:31, where the temple in Jerusalem was defiled by a foreign army. In Mark, the prediction is vaguely worded, and most readers probably would have thought it was talking about the temple being defiled.

But Luke paraphrased the prediction much more specifically and concretely. Instead of the temple, he wrote about Jerusalem being surrounded by armies and the city being defiled. He was virtually painting a picture of what happened in AD 70 when the Roman armies surrounded Jerusalem. Again, the most natural conclusion is that Luke was paraphrasing the prophecy with all the benefit of hindsight. Such a dating fits perfectly with the fact that Luke used Mark, which itself we easily might date to the late 60s or early 70s.¹¹

Luke-Acts is God’s Word for us no matter what our leanings are on these sorts of issues. But that does not mean these issues are insignificant. They affect the meanings and connotations we see in the words. Nevertheless, since we do not have complete certainty, we have to hold them loosely to some extent. It is a reminder that the Spirit is ultimately in control of what he does in us through Scripture, and we must leave a little room for surprise and mystery.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

What aspects of this chapter have most changed the way you read the book of Acts? Are there issues you will investigate further? Are there ideas you are hesitant to accept? If so, seek out some individuals you respect (or who are good at asking questions) and discuss them.

One of the key criteria in the early church for deciding if a writing could belong in the New Testament was whether it was written by or could be closely connected to one of the apostles. In that sense, the early Christians made a direct connection between the authority Jesus gave the apostles and the contents of Scripture. What then are some of the dangers of thinking that someone today might be an apostle of that sort? Can you think of any individuals in recent history whose authority and witness came anywhere near to that of the initial apostles?

To what extent do you think that the descriptions of Acts are *prescriptions* for us to imitate today rather than *descriptions* of life at that time? How can you tell the difference?

2

THE SPIRIT COMES

THE PROMISE

To understand Acts 2 and the coming of the Holy Spirit, we have to go back to the very beginning of Luke-Acts to Luke 3. John the Baptist was baptizing people at the Jordan River. The people were wondering if he might be the Messiah. He assured them he was not. “I baptize you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Luke 3:16).

This verse is the background for the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. It is important to remember that the gospel of John was not printed in-between Luke and Acts when Luke’s audience first listened to Luke-Acts.¹ Luke and Acts were a single literary project, one work, one continuous story. If you stick parts of the story from John into

the flow of Luke-Acts, you're changing the story from how it was originally meant to be read.

Why do I mention this caution here? Because some people insert an incident from John 20:22 into the storyline of Acts. In John 20:22, Jesus breathed on his disciples and told them to receive the Holy Spirit. Some Christians thus like to see Acts 2 as an additional event involving the Holy Spirit.

But Acts does not read this way. The moment in John 20 was not part of the storyline of Luke-Acts. In Luke-Acts, the coming of the Spirit in Acts 2 was *the* fulfillment of John's prediction in Luke 3. In Acts 2, the Spirit had not come yet in the way that John anticipated before the day of Pentecost.²

The event on the day of Pentecost thus represented a kind of full instatement of Jesus as Messiah. John the Baptist said the Messiah would bring a new baptism, a baptism in the Spirit. That prediction was enacted in Acts 2. Jesus then began fully operating as the king—at least as he planned to operate until his return. The day of Pentecost is, in a sense, the birth of the church and the church age. The benefit of Christ's death and resurrection for the world are now fully in play.

The day of Pentecost was one of three feasts in the Old Testament when, in theory, every Jewish male was to go to Jerusalem and present himself before the Lord (see Deut. 16:10, 16). It was also called the Feast of Weeks, because it was seven weeks or fifty days after Passover. It was also called the Feast of Firstfruits, because it celebrated the beginning of the wheat harvest.

The symbolism is clear. The day of Pentecost represents the first harvest of Jesus' followers now that the age of the Spirit has come. It is hard to know if Jews at the time associated the Feast of Pentecost with the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, but later Jewish tradition did, and some Jewish writers of the time saw fire as part of

the giving of the Jewish Law. Is it possible that Luke wanted us to see Pentecost as the enactment of the new covenant (Luke 22:20)?

John the Baptist had predicted that Jesus' baptism would involve fire. The function of fire in this context is to cleanse and purify (Luke 3:17). Yes, this cleansing probably does involve a sifting of people. But Acts 15:9 also tells us that the coming of the Spirit purifies the disciples' own hearts, as well as the hearts of all those who receive the Spirit.

What was happening in the time before this inaugural event of the church? First, they were waiting. Jesus had told them to wait for this promise of the Father, the promise John the Baptist also foretold (Acts 1:4). Will we have to wait for the Spirit ourselves today? Quite possibly. We live in such an instantaneous world. We can text message someone from the other side of the world. We have our phones in our pockets all the time. We are not used to waiting.

The disciples only had to wait ten days, but the coming of the Holy Spirit may not be as quick for us. While it is hard, part of Christian maturity is the patience to wait on God. Sometimes he may come quickly. At other times we may wait years. With God a day is like a thousand years (Ps. 90:4), and we should be prepared for the possibility that some answers may not even come within our lifetimes.

The disciples also prayed while they were waiting (Acts 1:14). There are times to move from praying to acting in faith, but this time was not one of them. Jesus had given them clear instructions. The next event was to be the unique event of Pentecost, the unrepeatable first-time inauguration of the age of the Spirit.

So prayer was the clear order of business while they waited. Pentecost was not the only time in Acts when the Holy Spirit came in the middle of praying. The Spirit came in the middle of preaching

too. In both instances, those who were filled with the Spirit were open and longing for God. They had an earnestness about their waiting, as should we.

THE EVENT

“When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place” (Acts 2:1). About 120 people were in an upstairs room (1:15), quite possibly the room where Jesus ate the Last Supper with his disciples (Luke 22:12). This number included the original eleven disciples, others who had followed Jesus from the beginning (like Matthias and Joseph), and women who had followed Jesus (compare Luke 23:55–56). It also included Jesus’ mother Mary and his brothers James and Jude. They had been praying and waiting on the Holy Spirit to come as Jesus promised.

They heard a violent wind. The word for *spirit* in both Greek and Hebrew is related to the word for *wind*. The Spirit is, in a sense, the breath of God, breathing on his people, giving them life as in Genesis 2:7. The tongues of fire were similar to what traditions say happened when God gave the law on Mount Sinai, except now God was enacting the new covenant, in which he wrote his laws on the hearts of his people through the Holy Spirit (see Jer. 31:31–34; Heb. 8:8–12; Rom. 2:15).

They began to speak in other languages or “tongues” as they are often called. They apparently left the upper room and were telling others of the wonders of God in all sorts of different languages. It was the Feast of Pentecost. Jews were in Jerusalem from all over the known world. Fifteen different areas are mentioned. These were Jews and converts to Judaism who had gathered for the feast. There were more Jews scattered outside Jerusalem at the

time than lived in the home country. These individuals heard the witness of the 120, each in their own language.

Probably the most natural way to take the tongues of Acts 2 is that these individuals were given the ability to speak in these other languages. The only hint of something different would be the fact that some thought they were drunk. The situation in Acts 2 points to something a little different than 1 Corinthians 14:23, when outsiders did not understand what was being said. The tongues-speakers in 1 Corinthians 14:13 also did not seem to know what they were saying, while those in Acts 2 presumably did. The experience in Acts 2 was a tool for witness and mission. In 1 Corinthians 14, it was a personal experience that Paul criticized as not being edifying to the congregation as a whole, unless there was interpretation.

Tongues came in two other places in Acts. In Acts 10:46, Gentiles spoke in tongues when the Spirit first came on them. This was the first time in Acts that the Spirit came on the Gentiles, proving that they could be the people of God without having to convert to Judaism and be circumcised. Speaking in tongues showed that their experience of the Spirit was every bit as authentic as the Spirit-filling experience the Jews had on the day of Pentecost.

But tongues are not mentioned every time someone is filled with the Spirit. For example, tongues are not mentioned in another filling the followers of Jesus experienced in Acts 4:31. Tongues are not mentioned at Samaria when the Spirit came (8:17) or when Paul received the Spirit in 9:17–18.

The only other place tongues are mentioned is in Acts 19:6 at Ephesus. The situation there was that some individuals had only been baptized in the way of John the Baptist. They had not been baptized in the manner of Jesus, which involves receiving the Holy Spirit. So Paul baptized them, and the Holy Spirit came upon them. They spoke in tongues just as the disciples had on the day of Pentecost.

Tongues in these instances seem to be particularly significant as a sign of the new age of the Spirit. In each instance, some important boundary was crossed or was remembered being crossed. There are some groups that insist that anyone who is truly a Christian will speak in tongues. Such groups often put Acts 2 at the center of their understanding of Christian life today. There are at least two key features of their understanding.

The first is that receiving or being filled with the Holy Spirit is part of a person's conversion experience. Are the Spirit-fillings of Acts an *initial* experience that believers have when they first come to believe in Jesus as their Lord? Or is receiving the Holy Spirit a second or later experience a person has sometime after he or she has believed? For that matter, do all Christians receive the Holy Spirit or is it a special experience just for some?

The second assumption is that all those who receive the Holy Spirit in Acts spoke in tongues, even though Acts does not always mention them. Certain Pentecostal groups distinguish between tongues in Acts as the key evidence that a person is a Christian has received the Holy Spirit and tongues is a special gift from God that only some Christians receive. Such groups would say that 1 Corinthians 14 is about the gift of tongues, while Acts 2 tells us about tongues as evidence that a person has truly become a Christian.

There are good reasons to believe that not all Christians will speak in tongues when they first believe. For one thing, the book of Acts does not actually show Christians speaking in tongues every time they receive the Spirit. In each of the three instances, speaking in tongues has a clear symbolic significance. If speaking in tongues was the evidence par excellence of receiving the Holy Spirit, wouldn't the New Testament actually say so explicitly?

When we have to read through the lines of the Bible to infer the key idea a group sees in the Bible, we should be somewhat suspicious

about that idea. There are actually only a minority of Pentecostals who believe that you are not legitimately a Christian if you do not speak in tongues when you become a Christian. These are chiefly groups that arose between 1910 and 1920. It is wise to be suspicious of this popular-level interpretation that has only been around for about a hundred years.

Are the Spirit-fillings in Acts conversions? Before we answer that question, we should probably define what is meant by *conversion* in the first place. In the early chapters of Acts, we are reading about Jews, the people of Israel. According to the Old Testament, they were already the people of God, heirs of God's promises. What do we mean when we say they were "converted," especially since *converted* isn't a word Acts actually uses?

For certain, we don't mean that they changed religions. They didn't switch from the religion of Judaism to the religion of Christianity. This is an anachronistic way of reading the New Testament that comes from the time later in the church when Judaism was a different religion from Christianity. As we'll see in the sermons of Acts, the earliest Christians saw faith in Jesus as true Judaism, as what anyone in true continuity with Israel would believe.

A commonly repeated myth says Saul was Paul's Jewish name and he took the name Paul when he switched religions. This is so obviously wrong that it's fascinating. Paul continued to go by the name Saul in Acts for years after he believed in Jesus. He only switched to the Roman name (or nickname) Paul—a name he may have had since he was a child—when his ministry really began to focus on witnessing to non-Jews.

The only conversions from one religion to another in Acts are when Gentiles, non-Jews, accepted Jesus as king. And they saw themselves as converting to Judaism, or at least a form of Judaism. In fact, many of these Gentile converts were already worshipping

God in synagogues, as we will see later in Acts. They just had not fully converted to Judaism.

So when the Jews of Acts believed in Jesus, they were, in a sense, converting from one sect of Judaism to another, but they would not have seen themselves as changing religions. So perhaps we should use a slightly different word than *conversion* when we ask what the Spirit-fillings of Acts were about. Were the Spirit-fillings of Acts primarily an initial event when a person became a follower of Jesus? Or was it something that happened to a Christian after he or she believed for some time?

When we put the question that way, Acts is pretty clear in its portrayal. Being filled with the Spirit was something that happened at about the time someone believed in Jesus as the Christ.³ Acts 2:38 puts it this way to the crowds in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” The verse seems fairly straightforward. Repent. Be baptized. Receive the Holy Spirit.

So Acts 2:38 seems to present receiving the Holy Spirit as part of the initial process of becoming a follower of Christ. Since Peter was explaining the filling of the Spirit that had just taken place (2:4), we have every reason to believe being “filled” with the Spirit meant the same as “receiving” the Holy Spirit. If we go through the rest of Acts, we’ll see most of the Spirit-fillings happened to people who had just believed in Jesus.

In Acts 8:14–17, some people in Samaria had been baptized, but they had not yet received the Holy Spirit. Arguably, this situation was so unusual that Peter and John went up to Samaria to address the problem. There they laid hands on those believers so they could receive the Holy Spirit. In Acts 9:17–18, Paul received the Holy Spirit and then was baptized.

In Acts 10:44–48, Cornelius and a group of Gentiles were hearing the good news about Jesus when they received the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, they were then baptized. In Acts 19:5–6, some followers of the teaching of John the Baptist had not heard about Jesus. After they heard about Jesus, they were baptized in his name, and then Paul laid his hands on them to receive the Holy Spirit.

In all of these instances, people were filled or received the Holy Spirit around the time they began to follow Jesus and were baptized. Nothing in these stories indicates that receiving the Holy Spirit was an experience Christians normally had at some point in time after believing. Indeed, in several instances people received the Holy Spirit before they were even baptized.

At this point, I should address those from the Wesleyan tradition, since holiness groups have traditionally associated Pentecost with an experience called “entire sanctification.” In the Wesleyan tradition, entire sanctification refers to an experience where God empowers a person to live a Christlike life on a whole new level. For most of the history of the Wesleyan tradition, the idea of being “filled with the Holy Spirit” has served as a powerful image of God’s empowerment to delight in making the right choices when temptation comes.

And why not? In Acts 4, when the apostles were facing opposition, a group of believers came together and prayed for God’s help. In response, God sent the Holy Spirit, and they were filled yet again with power to speak the word of God boldly and to perform miracles in his name.

It is always appropriate to ask the Holy Spirit to fill us when we are facing some challenge or need. Have you ever felt like you were struggling to do what you know God wants you to do? Have you ever discovered areas of your life that you struggle to give to God?

The idea of entire sanctification, if we don't let the lingo get in the way, makes perfect sense. Doesn't Jesus need to be Lord of every area of our lives? Isn't it a problem if we haven't given him everything? Wesleyans believe that the Spirit wants to empower us beyond a life of struggle with the same sins over and over again.

That's not to say new areas won't emerge or that we can't have relapses. It's just to say that the Spirit wants to give us the power to move beyond never-ending struggle. God wants to make us Christlike. What better way to think of God giving us this power than filling us with the Spirit?

If this concept seems foreign to many Christians, is that not a strong indictment of the church today? Could it be that the idea of giving every aspect of your life to God is so remote to most Christians today that this whole discussion seems bizarre? The idea that we might actually orient our entire life around God then seems like a novel suggestion. But this is exactly what it means for someone to be a lord. A lord is a master, someone whom you must serve and obey. We do not have masters today in most contexts.

It seems that few people have a real comprehension of who God is. We take God for granted, almost as if he exists to serve us rather than the other way around. The notion that we would want to give God complete authority over our lives may at times seem foreign even to many who call themselves Christians.

There is nothing wrong with using the idea of being filled with the Spirit for a new sense of purity, power, and authority that comes once we completely surrender to God. Although it is not exactly biblical language, holiness preachers were on to a marvelous image when they talked of the fullness of the Spirit. After all, will God take full control of our lives if we have not given him all of our lives that we know to give?

But this idea, valid though it is, does not seem to be what the book of Acts had in mind.⁴ As we have seen, the coming of the Spirit in Acts primarily had to do with the initial experience of Christians when they first believed in Jesus as Messiah and were baptized. The situation of the disciples was different because the Spirit did not come in this way until the day of Pentecost.

In Luke-Acts, the day of Pentecost was, as we saw earlier, the fulfillment of John the Baptist's prediction that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit.⁵ The disciples could not have been filled with the Spirit in this way until after Jesus died and rose from the dead.

So what was the coming of the Holy Spirit about in Acts? For those who believed in Jesus for the first time, being filled with the Spirit was truly the mechanism of past sins being cleansed. Baptism is the physical act that corresponds to the spiritual act the Spirit does in cleansing our sins. Acts 15:9 tells us that the hearts of the Gentiles had been purified when they received the Spirit. But Acts focuses much more on the power that comes when people receive the Holy Spirit. Isn't this exactly what Jesus predicted in Acts 1:8: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you"? And it is exactly this power that we see on display in the disciples in the chapters that follow the day of Pentecost. They received power to perform miracles, such as the healing of the lame man in Acts 3. They received boldness to witness the resurrection even though they were persecuted for it.

And this power is available for believers today. In Romans 8:9, Paul wrote that a person is not truly a child of God if he or she does not have the Holy Spirit. Most people today do not experience as dramatic an experience as those in Acts, although some do. Most today experience a peace, a calm assurance.

Luke-Acts draws a line to us, as if to tell us that in the power of the Spirit we can do the same miracles today. Luke-Acts shows

Paul doing the same miracles Peter did, which were the same miracles Jesus did. The three points make, as it were, a line that points to today.

HOW TO BE SAVED

Have you ever made a major mistake before, one that really hurt someone? Imagine making a mistake that resulted in someone being killed! It would be easy in that situation to refuse to admit you messed up, especially if clear wrongdoing or wrong motives were involved.

No doubt many of those most responsible for Jesus' death fell into this category. But the crowd in Acts 2 did not have hard hearts. Peter did not specifically say here that they were the ones who had cried for Jesus' crucifixion, but they clearly recognized their past sins and need for God's forgiveness.

Peter gave the bottom line for salvation in Acts 2:38. It is similar to other verses, such as Romans 10:9 or John 1:12, that point to the same basic attitude toward God. Peter said, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

To repent is to recognize that you have wronged God and others in the past and that you need God's grace and forgiveness. Luke-Acts does not focus so much on Jesus' death, but for the apostle Paul, Jesus' death made it possible for believers to get out from under the curse of sin (see Gal. 3:13). Acts focuses much more on Jesus' resurrection and the fact that it opened the door for the Spirit to cleanse our hearts.

Although Peter's sermon does not mention faith, it is clear from elsewhere in Acts that "believing" or "having faith" in the message

was an essential element in the process of getting right with God. Although the words *believe* and *faith* look quite different in English, they are actually the same root in Greek (*pisteuo* and *pistis*). Both words can focus on “head belief” and lean more toward “trusting in” someone or something.

In this context, to believe the message is more than just agreeing. Believing in the message implied repentance from previous behavior and a turn to embrace a new direction and a new way of living. Faith inferred commitment to everything the message implied as far as how to live and, more importantly, whom to serve.

Repentance and faith were key elements of the response of the crowd. They also were baptized in water to symbolize the washing away of their past sins. It arguably was not the baptism itself that saved them from the judgment to come, but it was an important action nonetheless. Symbolic actions are powerful, usually far more powerful than mere words or ideas.

We can get right with God without baptism—it happened to the Gentiles in Acts 10. They received the Holy Spirit before they got to the baptism part. But why would we want to skip the power of such a sacred moment, a “sacrament,” where God uses ordinary water to meet us in an extraordinary way?

Up to this point, the process of getting right with God had not differed from the process John the Baptist had brought to Israel at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. The baptism of the earliest Christians in Acts differed in one incredibly significant way. It involved receiving the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit sealed the deal.

The single determining factor in the New Testament that shows you are part of the people of God in this age is the Holy Spirit (see Rom. 8:9). The Spirit can come whether a person is baptized or not. The Spirit can come on a child long before he or she has the presence of mind to repent or have faith. But if a person has not received

or been filled with the Spirit, the person is not part of the people of God in this final age.

The Spirit is God's "seal of ownership" on us (see 2 Cor. 1:22), the stamp or brand that says we belong to God. The Spirit is a down payment of the kingdom that guarantees us a place in it (2 Cor. 5:5; Eph. 1:14). Earlier in the chapter, we recognized that not everyone will have a deeply dramatic experience of the Holy Spirit. Most do not speak in tongues, but many experience a boldness to witness to Christ's power in their lives.

Most will have a sense of peace, but even here some need the body of Christ to speak God's love directly to them in ways they have difficulty feeling. Most will have a clear sense that God has washed away their past and cleaned up their lives. Most will have a new sense of the possibilities of the future, a future filled with goodness, love, and a life devoted to God.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

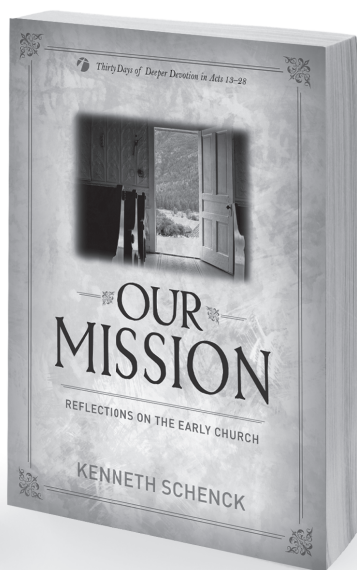
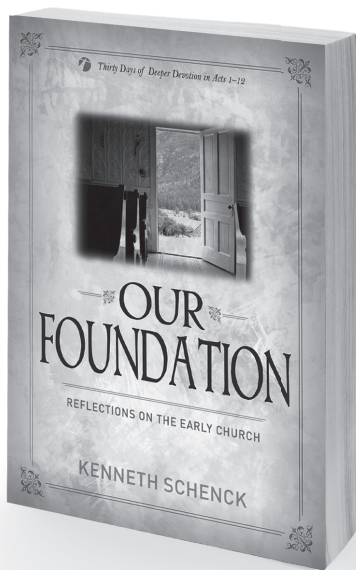
What do you think the day of Pentecost was about? Was it the beginning of the church? Was it when the disciples became entirely sanctified? Was it when the gift of tongues was initiated?

What do you make of the prediction in Acts 2:17 that men *and women* will prophesy as a consequence of the Spirit? What do you think is included in prophesying? Is this prediction an endorsement of women preachers today?

Have you ever experienced a filling of the Holy Spirit? What seemed different about how you were afterward? Did you sense more spiritual power? Did you sense greater spiritual purity?

If someone asked you how to get right with God, what would you answer?

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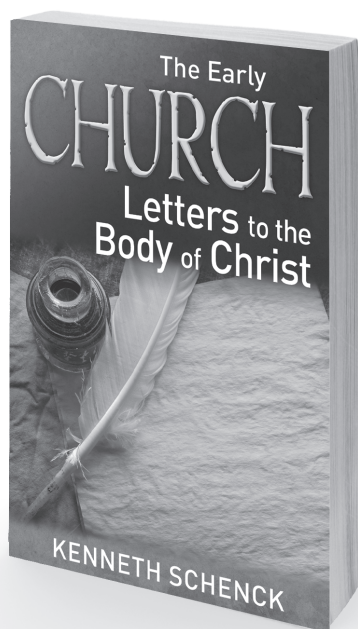
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