

THE THEOLOGY OF ACTS

DAVID S. DOCKERY
Broadman Press
Nashville, TN 37234

The Book of Acts claims to provide a historical picture of the early church from its beginnings in Jerusalem to the arrival of Paul in Rome. Luke, the recognized author of this important work, painted a portrait of the life and preaching of the primitive church in Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria, and unto the remotest parts of the world (Acts 1:8). In reporting the advancement of the gospel mission, Luke theologized on the sermons and deeds of Peter, Stephen, Philip, and Paul. Prominent among the issues in the study of Acts is the relation of theology and history. While this critical issue is not our primary concern, we cannot ignore the question while discussing Luke's theology of the Spirit, Christ and salvation, and the Church and eschatology.

I. *The Critical Questions*

F. C. Baur, from an extreme, one-sided perspective, established a milestone for the position that the church in the Book of Acts was not historical, but the product of a theological tendency.¹ Baur, the leading figure of the 19th-century Tubingen school, contended that Luke's theological intention was to harmonize the apostles and the primitive church into the unity of the *Una Sancta*. He maintained that the history reflected in Acts and the history in Paul was not unity, but contrast. Baur's position was advanced in the beginning of the 20th century by H. J. Holtzmann,² and countered by A. Schlatter.³

¹ The course of research is traced in W. W. Gasque, *A History of the Criticism of the Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) and W. G. Kummel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of Its Problems* (London: SCM, 1973); idem, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1975) 125-88.

² H. J. Holtzmann, *Lehrbuch der neutestamentlichen Theologie* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1911).

³ A. Schlatter, *Neutestamentliche Theologie* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1922-1923).

In the past 40 years the question has been reopened and vigorously debated. The Bultmann school extended Baur's thesis suggesting that Luke's Christology was pre-Pauline and his natural theology, eschatology, and view of the law were post-Pauline. Thus, the theology of Luke did not represent the primitive church, but an emerging early catholicism.⁴ E. Kasemann emphasized that Luke legitimized his view of the church in relation to heretical views on the basis of its continuity with the early apostolate and its sanctified realm in the world. He claimed Luke was the first advocate of an early catholicism.⁵

Lukan scholarship entered a mature phase with the work of H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (1960). Modifying the research of Holtzmann, Klein, Bultmann, and Kasemann, Conzelmann advocated a salvation-history approach outlined around four themes: (1) the center of time for Luke was the time of Jesus, not the time of the church; (2) the theology of Luke must not be compared with that of Paul since it was faced with a problem that was not existent for Paul: the delay of the *parousia* and the church's existence in secular history; (3) characteristic for the historical composition through which Luke solved this problem was the compartmentalization of three salvation-history epochs: (a) the time of Israel, (b) the center of time identified as the time of Jesus, the intrinsic time of salvation, (c) the time of the church as a time of struggle with doubt and of patience; and (4) through this periodization Luke wanted to make clear to the church of his time that the forms of the church may change, but the fundamental structure should be maintained.⁶

Throughout, Conzelmann rejected the historical accuracy of Acts and viewed Luke's thought as a distortion of Pauline and Johannine thought. O. Cullmann contested Conzelmann's conception of Lukan salvation history as a distortion of Paul and John.⁷ I. H. Marshall, building on the work of W. Ramsay⁸ and A. N. Sherwin-White,⁹ in addition to his own fresh research, argued that Luke was a faithful historian and theologian.¹⁰ It therefore should not be surprising that

⁴ See J. D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 341-67.

⁵ E. Kasemann, *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM, 1960) 88-94.

⁶ H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (London: Faber, 1960) 14-17.

⁷ O. Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (London: SCM, 1967).

⁸ W. M. Ramsay, based on geographical and archaeological studies, argued Luke's history was amazingly accurate. See Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915).

⁹ A classical scholar, A. N. Sherwin-White, has concluded that for Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming. See Sherwin-White, *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament* (London: Oxford, 1963) 189-00.

¹⁰ I. H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

many good, critical scholars believe that Luke has given us a trustworthy picture of the life and thought of the early church. Therefore, it is possible to understand Acts as a reliable source for the theology of the young church.

The most recent approaches to Acts see the book in light of its place in the NT canon, apart from historical considerations.¹¹ Our approach in this article will merge these positions. We shall examine the theology of Acts within its canonical setting, yet accepting the portraits of the church as adequate history.¹² Yet, whatever merits the work has for historical investigation, Luke's work is nevertheless primarily theological, no matter how much he has put us in his debt for the historical information he has conveyed to us. As J. C. Beker has said, "Luke is a master theologian."¹³ Luke does not profess to write a work of theology, but what he writes is theologically informed and significantly contributes to our overall understanding of NT theology.¹⁴ With this understanding let us turn our attention to Luke's view of the Holy Spirit, Christ, salvation, the Church, and eschatology.

II. *The Holy Spirit*

The activity of the Spirit in Acts universalized the mission of Jesus.¹⁵ What the apostles did, in fact whatever was done by the church, was seen to be the work of the Spirit. Initially Luke indicates that his book was the result of the Spirit's teaching from the resurrected

¹¹ See M. Parsons, "Canonical Criticism," in *New Testament Criticism and Interpretation* (eds. D. A. Black and D. S. Dockery; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, forthcoming 1991). Canonical hermeneutics does not reject the historical issue, it brackets the question to deal with other concerns; also see Parsons, "The Sense of a Beginning in Acts 1-5," *RevExp* 87 (Summer, 1990) 403-22.

¹² As G. Ladd has noted, "This does not require us to believe that the sermons Luke reports are verbatim accounts; they are altogether too short for that. Nor do we demur that Luke is the author of these speeches in their present form. We may, however, accept the conclusion that they are brief but accurate summaries of the earliest preaching of the apostles. It is also clear that Luke is not a critical historian in the modern sense of the word; . . . all real historical writing must involve selection and interpretation, and Luke selects from the sources of information available to him, both written and oral, what to him are the most important events in tracing the extension of the church from a small Jewish community in Jerusalem to Gentile congregation in the capital city of the Roman empire." See Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 314; cf. D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1981) 42-48; also see D. Dockery, "Acts 6-12: The Advancement of the Christian Mission Beyond Jerusalem," *RevExp* 87 (Summer, 1990) 423-38; J. Polhill, "Acts 6-12: The Hellenist Breakthrough," *RevExp* 71 (1974) 475-86. .

¹³ J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 162.

¹⁴ L. Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 144-45.

¹⁵ See M. Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

Lord to the apostles (Acts 1:2). The apostles were reminded to wait for the Spirit's coming; thus the Spirit's coming at Pentecost did not come to the apostles unprepared.¹⁶ The Spirit is not to be dissociated from Jesus. As F. D. Bruner observes, "the Spirit is Jesus at work in continuation of his ministry."¹⁷

It is the promise of Christ that the Spirit will direct the expanding ministry of the church (Acts 1:8). Luke prohibited apocalyptic speculation regarding times and seasons. The attentive look of the apostles should focus not on the *Parousia*, but on where and how the Spirit would establish them as witnesses. Through the direction and power of the Spirit, the gospel would be heard in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.

The Spirit's special manifestation at Pentecost was the event which began the church age. As the giving of the Law at Sinai served as the birth of the nation Israel, so the Pentecost story serves as a theological construction of the church's birth. Pentecost is best understood as the reverse of the curse of Babel (Gen 11:9). Pentecost was the concluding act of the ascension (cf. John 7:39; 16:7). It was accompanied by unusual physical phenomena: a sound like a mighty wind and tongues like fire (Acts 2:2-3). These extraordinary signs must be regarded as singular to this initial experience, since they are not regularly repeated elsewhere. Although the Spirit would continually be outpoured, the outpouring would never again signify the inauguration of a new era. The relationship between fire and Spirit obviously links Pentecost to John the Baptist's proclamation at Jesus' baptism (Matt 3:11). It is noteworthy that the coming of the Spirit was also associated with the inauguration of the new age in the Qumran community (1 QS 1:20).¹⁸

Luke indicates that all the believers were filled with the Spirit (Acts 2:4), emphasizing the corporate nature of the Spirit's work. The little group of believers was sealed by the Spirit. There is no suggestion that anyone who believed was either not filled or partially filled.

The filling of the Spirit enabled them to speak in other (ἑτεροαῖς) tongues. What amazed the people was not the sudden phenomenon of people speaking in unintelligible tongues, but they heard Galileans speaking in their own language (Acts 2:6). Whether the miracle was one

¹⁶ I. H. Marshall, "The Significance of Pentecost" *SJT* 30 (1977) 347-69.

¹⁷ F. D. Bruner, *A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 156-57.

¹⁸ F. F. Bruce, "The Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles," *Int* 27 (1973) 172-73. The structure of Acts compared with Luke's Gospel also indicates that the birth of Jesus (Luke 1:1-2:40) parallels the birth of the church (Acts 1:1-2:47). See R. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles," *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (12 vols.; ed. F. E. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) 9:233-34.

of speaking, or hearing, or both, is not clear. What is clear is that the Spirit was active and responsible.

The tongues here are often identified with ecstatic utterances similar to those at Corinth (cf. 1 Cor 12-14). But the words uttered at Pentecost were immediately recognized by those who heard them as current languages, while at Corinth an interpreter was needed for understanding. Therefore, "the tongues in 2:4 are best understood as 'languages' and should be taken in accord with Philo's reference to understandable language as one of the three signs of God's presence in the giving of the law at Mount Sinai (*De decalogo* 33)."¹⁹

D. Guthrie suggests that it does not seem unreasonable to regard the Pentecost manifestation of tongues as exceptional. In only two other places in Acts is speaking in tongues mentioned, in both cases as an accompaniment of the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 10:46; 19:6).²⁰ In neither case is there mention made of the hearers being able to understand, and these occurrences may perhaps be more similar to the Corinthian experience than to Pentecost.²¹ Yet, all three experiences described in Acts were for confirmation while the Corinthian experiences were for edification.

The Spirit's activity at Pentecost was interpreted as a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy which refers to "the last days" and to the inauguration of "the great and manifest day of the Lord."²² The pouring out of the Holy Spirit was for the apostles an evidence that Jesus had been exalted.

The Spirit was given in order to create in individuals and in the church a quality of life that would otherwise be beyond their ability. Also the Spirit was given to unite believers into a fellowship that could not be paralleled in any other group. The Spirit's coming was not so much to allow men and women to be comfortable, even though the Spirit is the Comforter (John 16:13), but to make them missionaries and proclaimers of the good news (Acts 1:8).²³

¹⁹ Longenecker, "Acts," 271. A dissenting opinion can be found in R. J. Banks and Moon, "Speaking in Tongues: A Survey of the NT Evidence," *Churchman* 80 (1966) 278-94. They favor the interpretation that glossolalia is the ability to speak in a spiritual language which might be a language of humans or angels.

²⁰ Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 538-39.

²¹ Helpful distinctions are clarified by A. Hoekema, *Holy Spirit Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 48-50.

²² R. N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 79; cf. G. Luedemann, *Early Christianity According to the Tradition in Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

²³ Cf. J. R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990) 29-45.

The Spirit is present and promised in the Gospels, but not fully given until after the events of the Gospels. It is true that the Gospels were written after the giving of the Spirit, but they do not concentrate on that event. Instead they focus on the Spirit's equipping Jesus for his ministry.²⁴ As the Spirit equipped Jesus for his ministry (Luke 1, 2, 4), so the Spirit equipped the people of Jesus for ministry (Acts 1, 2).

The central theme at Pentecost was not the Spirit; rather it was Jesus Christ and the cross event. Luke found the point of the giving of the Spirit not in the pouring out of the Spirit per se, but in the universal promise of salvation for which the Spirit was poured out.²⁵ The ministry of the Spirit was Christocentric. The purpose of the Spirit was to spread the news of (missiological) Christ and to exalt the name of (doxological) Christ.

After Pentecost the Spirit was active in many aspects of the Christian community. The Spirit's power was specifically noticed in preaching, in prophecy, in witness, in joy, and in the making of decisions. Yet the primary emphasis of the work of the Spirit in Luke's second volume was mission. His theological emphasis demonstrated that the Spirit who dwelt in the Messiah of Israel now was available to the citizens of Rome. The greatness of Luke's view lies in showing more impressively than anyone else that the church can live only by evangelizing and by following whatever new paths the Spirit indicates.²⁶

The Spirit used various means to carry out the church's mission. Primarily the Spirit employed testimony, story, and the proclaimed word (e.g., Acts 2:14, 36; 3:12-26; 5:32; 7:2-53; 8:4; 13:16-41; 18:5; 19:10). Unpredictably, the Spirit worked through trances (Acts 10:19), prophets (Acts 11:28), worship services (Acts 13:2), church councils (Acts 15:28), and inner constraint (Acts 16:6, 7). Through these means the Spirit universalized and advanced the Christian mission. Yet, always the Spirit remained the mysterious, sovereign Spirit of God. The apostolic mission energized by the Holy Spirit proclaimed that salvation was available for Jews and Gentiles alike as proclaimed in the apostolic message.

²⁴ This observation is good evidence for the historical reliability of the gospels. Many today want to tell us that the Gospels are only the words of the Church placed on the lips of Jesus. In reality, the Gospels are the words of Jesus placed on the lips of the Church.

²⁵ Longenecker, "Acts," 212-14.

²⁶ Cf. Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*; idem, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).

III. *Christ and Salvation*

What was this apostolic message? The consistent aspects of this message have been articulated by C. H. Dodd. This salvific message stressed that the age of fulfillment has dawned. It has taken place through the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. By virtue of the resurrection, Jesus has been raised to the right hand of God as messianic head of the Israel of God. The Holy Spirit in the church is the sign of Christ's present power and glory. The Messianic age will shortly reach its culmination in the return of Christ. The apostles proclaimed that the hearers needed to repent, believe in Christ, receive God's offer of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit, and be baptized into the believing community.²⁷

As the message of salvation spread, a number of misconceptions attended the birth and growth of the Christian movement. One concerned the relationship between the new faith and Judaism since Jesus was proclaimed as Savior of the world. Peter's interpretation of Joel at Pentecost (Acts 2), Stephen's defense before the Jewish council (Acts 7), Peter's experience in Joppa with Cornelius (Acts 10), and Paul's discourse on Mars Hill (Acts 17) all demonstrated that Christianity was not merely a Jewish sect, some narrow messianic movement, but rather a universal faith.²⁸ Another difficulty was the popular misidentification of the Christian faith with the cults and mystery religions of the day.²⁹ The encounter with Simon the magician (Acts 8) and the apostles' refusal to receive worship at Lystra (Acts 14) undermined the charge that Christianity was another type of superstition. Instead the Christian message of salvation rested on Jesus Christ, the Lord who belonged to history, who lived in Palestine, and who was crucified and raised from the dead.

Luke's entire story is built on the centrality of Jesus' resurrection. Obvious is the author's conviction that apart from the resurrection of Jesus there was no genuine Christian faith (cf. 1 Cor 15:1-20). God placed his approval on Jesus' life and work by the resurrection, verifying the truth claims of the apostolic message. Thus the replacement

²⁷ Cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936).

²⁸ L. Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament* (trans. J. Alsup; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 2:14-16.

²⁹ C. R. Holladay, "Acts," in *Harper's Bible Commentary* (ed. J. L. Mays; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 1078-79.

apostle selected in Acts 1 had to have been a witness to Jesus' resurrection. The sermons and speeches point to the importance of the resurrection as the "great reversal" executed by God (cf. Acts 2:22-24, 36; 3:14-15; 5:30-31; 10:39-42). Likewise, Christ's resurrection served as the basis for the promise of believers' resurrection, the foundation of their hope (cf. Acts 4:2; 13:32-33; 17:18,29-32; 23:6; 24:21; 26:23).³⁰

Certainly it is the resurrection of Jesus that best explains the transformation of the shattered followers of Jesus. These disciples became people who were convinced that Jesus was alive and this message would transform the world. As Guthrie observes, "their fearlessness in proclaiming the gospel demands an adequate explanation and no approach to the resurrection is tenable which does not account for this transformation."³¹ Regarding the apostolic understanding of the reality of the resurrection, W. Pannenberg claims that as long as historiography does not begin with a narrow concept of reality which maintains that dead people do not rise, there is absolutely no reason why it should not be possible to speak of the resurrection of Jesus as the best explanation of the disciples' experiences of the appearances and the discovery of the empty tomb.³²

The resurrection and ascension were events that inaugurated his lordship over the church and the world. The use of the title Lord applied to Jesus was immediate. The employment of **Κύριος** (Lord) was equated with deity. Where it is used in Acts, it often is located in OT quotations or allusions, thus implying that the lordship of Christ carried with it the essence of Godhood. From Peter's Pentecost sermon throughout the advancement of the Christian mission, it was natural for the Christian church to refer to Jesus in this exalted way. Further when Peter declared Jesus is "Lord of all" (Acts 10:36), he pointed to Jesus' lordship over both Jews and Gentiles.³³

The Christ event, death and resurrection, was interpreted as part of the divine purpose (Acts 2:23). Yet, Luke also recorded Peter's words that Jesus was killed by the hands of lawless men. The tension involved in this juxtaposition is characteristic of Luke's soteriology. The significance of such a claim was to establish that neither the salvation provided by Jesus nor the salvation offered to men and women happened accidentally.

³⁰ M. Tenney, *The Reality of the Resurrection* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 49-55.

³¹ Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 377.

³² W. Pannenberg, *Jesus, God and Man* (London: SaM, 1968) 109.

³³ E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles* (trans. R. McL. Wilson; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) 352.

In line with the divine purpose and the fulfillment of Scripture (Acts 3:17-21; 10:42), Luke described Jesus' crosswork by picturing Jesus as servant (Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27, 30) as well as Savior (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 10:43; 13:23, 38). The servant themes find their background with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah.³⁴ The meaning of savior is directly related to the truth that a releasing of sin has taken place, a forgiveness has been provided, only in Christ (Acts 4:12).³⁵

The emphasis on forgiveness of sin was prominent in both of Luke's volumes. In Acts 2:37, Peter told the Pentecost audience that forgiveness of sins and the experience of the Spirit's presence were promised to those who repented and were baptized (also cf. Acts 3:19, 26; 5:31). Luke also associated forgiveness with the response of faith in Acts 10:43; 13:38, 39; 15:9.³⁶ In Paul's defense before Agrippa, faith and repentance were brought together with the forgiveness of sins.³⁷ For Luke, the act of faith and the act of repentance were seemingly synonymous.

Faith involved turning to Jesus Christ in trust and commitment, thus entering into the new life (Acts 16:31). Repentance also involved a turning about so that one's life was focused on a new direction (Acts 5:31). On the basis of repentance and faith one was baptized and initiated into the new community, thus experiencing the reality of forgiveness of sins.³⁸ For Luke the new community, the church, was the sphere in which the forgiving and re-creating presence of God was experienced.³⁹

³⁴ Though this identification is not always recognized. See M. D. Hooker, *Jesus and the Servant* (London: SPCK, 1959) 107-16.

³⁵ Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 462, contends that Luke needs the epistles to supplement his theology of the work of Christ. F. Stagg, however, in *New Testament Theology* (Nashville: Broadman, 1962) 146-48, constructs a gift and demand model of the cross. Also see Stagg, *The Book of Acts* (Nashville: Broadman, 1955) 28-34.

³⁶ Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, passim.

³⁷ The association of repentance and faith in Luke's thought is virtually unnoticed by C. Ryrie and Z. Hodges in the current "lordship salvation" controversy. This does not imply that J. MacArthur is entirely correct, but does note a major gap in the methodology and content by one side of the discussion.

³⁸ In early Christianity the baptism event was understood primarily as an act of initiation into the believing community. The phrase "be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins." (Acts 2:38) does not mean that something magically happens in the baptismal waters. Cf. D. J. Williams, *Acts* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) 37-42. For a detailed study of baptism in Acts, see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 93-12.5.

³⁹ The distinctions of number in the Greek verbs are significant in this connection. The call to repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38) is in the singular, but the promise to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit is in the plural, for the Spirit was given to the

IV. *Church and Eschatology*

As we have noted the critical event in the launching of the Christian community was undoubtedly Pentecost.⁴⁰ Acts leaves no doubt that the new church was essentially a community of the Holy Spirit. Immediately following the Spirit's descent on the community, it grew significantly in an astonishing manner (Acts 2:41).

The shape and mission of the church developed over time. The Christian community initially maintained its Jewish roots and associations. They continued to worship in the temple (Acts 3:1) and viewed themselves as representatives of the true Israel.⁴¹

The Spirit-led community exemplified authentic and spontaneous community (Acts 2:42-41; 4:32). The key element in this community was its voluntary nature, so it cannot be seen as a type of communism. A common fund was established from which needs were supplied. The voluntary pattern of concern developed as the church grew and expanded (cf. Acts 6:1; 11:21; 1 Cor 16:1; 2 Cor 8-9).⁴²

The picture of the early church presented in Acts 2:42-41 combined worship, fellowship, proclamation, and concern for physical and social needs. These regular meetings took place in the temple and appear to have centered around the breaking of bread (the Lord's supper) and corporate prayer. The importance of prayer and its relation to mission is well developed in Luke's story (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:42; 3:1; 4:24; 12:12; and 13:3).

The new community empowered by the Spirit and dependent on divine resources available through prayer understood its primary task to be witness and mission (Acts 1:8). This was accomplished through the community's lifestyle, its proclamation, signs and wonders, and the specific tasks and speeches of the apostles and leaders. Those who responded to the witness were incorporated into the community through baptism (2:38-41; 8:12, 36; 16:15; 19:5; 22:16). Believers were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Luke wanted to distinguish Christian baptism from John's baptism and therefore emphasized the

community of which the individual became a part. Cf. L. Morris, *Spirit of the Living God* (London: InterVarsity, 1960) 54-57.

⁴⁰ Marshall, "Significance of Pentecost," 350-56; also cf. J. D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975) 144-46. i

⁴¹ H. Kung, *The Church* (London: Search, 1968) 115-16, warns against equally transferring the term Israel to the NT ἐκκλησία, though he rightly admits a close link between the two. Also cf. B. Reicke, "The Constitution of the Primitive Church in the Light of Jewish Documents," *Scrolls and the New Testament* (ed. K. Stendahl; London: SCM, 1958) 143-56.

⁴² See K. F. Nickle, *The Collection* (London: SCM, 1966).

Christological meaning of the experience.⁴³ Some have suggested that water baptism was required for receiving the Holy Spirit, but this seems extremely doubtful.

There are examples of household baptisms in Acts (11:14; 16:15, 31; 18:8). It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to believe that such passages mean that the faith of the head of the household was sufficient for the children, relatives, or household slaves.⁴⁴ The household references most likely designate only those of mature age who confessed their faith in Christ.⁴⁵ Baptism served as an initiatory rite incorporating the followers of Christ into the new community and identifying them with their Lord and his people.

Almost immediately the church adopted the practice of the Lord's Supper. Luke indicates that this practice helped to bind believers together so as to recognize their essential oneness with the Lord Jesus. Little indication is given as to how the supper was observed, but it obviously was regularly practiced. Initially it appears to have been observed daily (Acts 2:46), and later it became a weekly observance (Acts 20:7). Clearly the purpose clause in this last passage indicates that the supper was the focal point of the church's worship.⁴⁶

In the beginning the church's only leaders were the apostles. There was little organization, and the importance of the twelve derived from the fact that Jesus had specifically appointed them. Matthias was elected to replace Judas. Luke also refers to Paul and Barnabas as apostles (14:4, 14).

Other leadership roles developed including elders, prophets, evangelists, and a functioning role akin to deacons. Elders arose from Jewish synagogue models. No explanation is given concerning the function of these elders, but they most likely carried out administrative tasks. On their return trip, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in the newly established churches on their first mission journey (Acts 14:23). During the farewell discourse to the Ephesian elders/bishops (Acts 20:17, 28; cf. Titus 1:5, 7), Paul exhorted them to feed the flock (cf. 1 Pet 5:1-5).

In addition to apostles and elders, prophets exercised leadership roles by bringing words of revelation for the edification of the church. Occasionally they would prophesy future events (Acts 11:28; 21:10).

⁴³ See L. Hartman, "Baptism into the Name of Jesus' and Early Christology: Some Tentative Considerations," *ST* 28 (1974) 21-48.

⁴⁴ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 350.

⁴⁵ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 93-126; 312-20; also see P. K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 47-50.

⁴⁶ Cf. R. Martin, *Worship in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964).

The prophet played no administrative role in the churches. Agabus is mentioned twice (Acts 11:28; 21:10) and the daughters of Philip also carried out this ecstatic function.⁴⁷ There may have been a separate class of leaders known as evangelists. Philip is the only one known by that term (Acts 8; 21:8). He was one of the first table waiters prior to his work as an evangelist.

The first formal leadership was chosen when an internal problem arose within the church. Greek-speaking Jews who had returned to live in Jerusalem from the Diaspora began to complain because the Hebrew-speaking widows apparently were favored in the daily distribution of the food. The apostles' task had grown so large they had become open to the charges of insensitivity and partiality. To solve the problem seven were chosen to take care of the widows. Probably this is the source of the office of deacon that developed almost three decades later (cf. Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:7). As the apostles had their spiritual authority symbolized by their function of feeding the people (Acts 4:32-37), so the seven gained their spiritual authority for the Hellenistic mission signified by their charge to feed the Hellenistic widows.⁴⁸

The women played a prominent role in the early church. They apparently were involved in the election of Matthias (Acts 1:15-26). They too received the power and gifts of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-18). Women were among the first believers (Acts 5:14; 12:12; 16:14-15; 17:4,34). In Acts 18, Priscilla took the lead with her husband Aquilla in teaching the eloquent Apollos. Acts 21:8-9 indicates that Philip's daughters had the gift of prophecy.

The churches generally were bound by no ecclesiastical ties or formal authority. They nevertheless evidenced a profound oneness. "Church" was usually used of local congregations. Occasionally the plural (churches) was used to designate all the churches in an area (Acts 15:41; 16:5). The singular can, however, be used to include all the believers in a given city (Acts 5:11; 8:1) and can designate the church at large (Acts 9:31). Regardless, Luke's theology clearly teaches that the community of faith is "the church of God" (Acts 20:28). The Book of Acts demonstrates⁴⁹ that the church gradually broke with the synagogue and became an independent movement. The early church that was

⁴⁷ E. E. Ellis, "The Role of the Christian Prophet in Acts" in *Apostolic History and the Gospel* (ed. W. W. Gasque and R. P. Martin; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970) 55-67; cf. Wayne Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today* (Westchester, IL: Crossway, 100B) 89-102.

⁴⁸ L. T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 227; also cf. M. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

⁴⁹ Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, 353.

hardly distinguishable from its Jewish milieu at its birth is pictured at the conclusion of Luke's story as a predominantly Gentile fellowship in Rome freed from Jewish associations and practices.⁵⁰

Finally, we must look at how Luke approached the consummation of the new age. The theme of the return of Christ was introduced early in the story (Acts 1:6-11). Significant is the point made by the two heavenly beings that the return of Christ will be in "the same manner" as the ascension. This description rules out any suggestion that the second coming took place spiritually at Pentecost, at the time of regeneration among believers, or at the death of believers.⁵¹ These words clearly support a futurist interpretation of the second coming.⁵² A "realized eschatology" is inconsistent with such a promise.

Peter's Pentecost sermon pointed not only to the coming of the Spirit as proclaimed by the prophet Joel, but also to the Day of the Lord and its accompanying signs. The Day of the Lord was present; yet it remained for the future. They were now in the last days (Acts 2:17), though they awaited a time when God would "send Jesus. . . for he must remain in heaven until the time comes for all things to be made new" (Acts 3:20-21). Underpinning Luke's theology was the idea that the eschaton has been inaugurated, but it awaits a future consummation. At that time, Jesus, whom God has raised from the dead, will judge the whole world with justice (Acts 17:31).

The gospel proclamation, the oneness of the community, the call to repentance, and the urgency of the Christian mission were presented in light of the return of Christ and the future fixed day of judgment. Luke's theology focused on the work of the Spirit in the new community that was established on the death and resurrection of the church's Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. This new community, born within Judaism, obeying the missionary imperative, advanced the gospel by the Spirit's enablement throughout the Mediterranean world. The church at the end of the 20th century must likewise be faithful to the Spirit's leadership in worship, fellowship, proclamation, and mission.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 355-56.

⁵¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, rev. 1988) 41.

⁵² Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 802.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:
 The Criswell College;
 4010 Gaston Ave.
 Dallas, TX 75246
 www.criswell.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu