

Lectures for St. Luke's 200th Fall Series 2020



The Acts of the Apostles: St. Luke's Gospel of the Holy Spirit The first in a series of talks about Luke's second volume V.K. McCarty

As with the other presentations in this series, it has been fascinating being on the lookout for Luke, the Patron Saint of the parish on this the 200th Anniversary of Saint Luke in the Fields. And now, moving on from a focus on the Gospel of Luke to an exploration of the Acts of the Apostles, we find ourselves again engaging with an admirable author, one worthy of our veneration and praise.

Since the story Luke crafts for us in Acts begins with the Ascension of Christ and extends until Paul's second year of house-arrest in Rome, a little less than 30 years: "We have only to compare our knowledge of the first 30 years of the Church's life with our ignorance of the next 30 years—or indeed, the next 130 years—to realize something of our indebtedness to him."¹ Above all, Luke's second volume is a masterpiece of storytelling.

¹ F.F. Bruce, *The Pauline Circle* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 1985), pg. 42.



The Acts of the Apostles is not really a history of the Early Church, though. Clearly, Luke’s intention was not to construct a factual chronology, even though it is easy to receive it that way. Rather, Luke’s goal appears to be the crafting of a narrative about God working out the plan of Salvation in Jesus Christ—first in the life of Jesus in the Gospel, and now in the responding actions of his followers in faith and all those who came after, and that includes us.

We are fortunate that the Acts of the Apostles was crafted relatively soon after the events it describes, probably near the turn of the first century C.E., and toward the end of the second generation of Jesus-followers, which certainly enhances its integrity. While it is a story involving a whole panorama of Luke’s remembered characters and beloved episodes contributing to the seeding and growth of the Primitive Church, it is the action of God—the divine vitality of God the Holy Spirit—which is most urgently, most excellently portrayed here. “It is no exaggeration to conclude that Early Christians looked upon the Holy Spirit as the chief external witness to the presence of Christ’s reign.”² In fact, Acts might better be titled “The Gospel of the Holy Spirit.”

Perhaps questions were arising among the followers of Jesus, even with the popularity of the Gospels and Epistles of St. Paul circulating throughout the Early Church: “Year after year is going by, and the end of the world hasn’t come yet. The sense of the Resurrected Christ is strong, and community is growing; but, perhaps these times are not only apocalyptic, but also actually sustainable for several years to come. But how, then, can we know the long-term meaning of the Way of followers of Jesus?” For Luke, the Holy Spirit is the answer.

Today, you and I have the luxury, here in this community of believers, to be able to discern in Luke’s narrative the living action of faith in Christ. As praying members of this part of the Body of Christ, you can recognize in Acts “the fact of faith as part of the historical data.”³ You can see that faith is integral to the fabric of the story of the Early Church in the Acts of the Apostles. So, in the early days of the birth of the emerging Church, as the movement was spreading toward

² John Koenig, *Charismata: God’s Gifts for God’s People* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1978), pg. 73.

³ James D.G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem; Christianity in the Making*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), pg. xiii.

Antioch (Acts 11:26), even before the word “Christian” came to characterize followers of Jesus, Luke reminds us again and again that they were called “believers”—for their faith.⁴ Therefore, an important facet of Luke’s contribution to Scripture in this the Birth Narrative of the Church is his magisterial portrayal of the Holy Spirit.

Luke’s use of eyewitness testimony in the writing of Acts enriches the text with both fascinating details and a powerful sense of authority. This takes several forms, but one of the most compelling is the four “We Sections,” where we can ask the tantalizing question: Was Luke there? We will investigate that provocative question later in this series. The promise and strength of the Holy Spirit are previewed in the very first verses of Acts (1:2, 1:5) and described many times throughout the entire book. Depending on the translation, there are about 60 references to the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles; so, the centrality of the Spirit is evident on every page, especially in the first half of the book. Just to show you the difference, there are less than 35 citations of the Holy Spirit in all the Synoptic Gospels combined.

The Holy Spirit is the living presence, the spiritual strength of Jesus Christ in the lives of those who believe. So, Luke speaks of believers being “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:4, 4:8, 4:31, 6:3, 7:55, 9:17, 11:24, 13:9, 13:52); and these references recognize the overwhelming and dynamic life of the Spirit in each believer’s experience. Followers are “baptized in the Holy Spirit.” Ministry is the “gift of the Holy Spirit.” People encounter the Holy Spirit in Acts, especially as they meet together in fellowship with one another and call on Jesus in prayer, and become gratefully aware of the presence of the Lord and his spiritual guidance (1:24-26).

Not only that, the Holy Spirit “testifies” (20:23), it “speaks” (1:16, 4:25, 28:25), and “teaches” (13:12), it even “forbids” (16:6-7). It literally transports Philip, whisking him away to another city before the very eyes of a new believer (8:39-40)—we will come back to him. And there is a persuasive connection between the Spirit and the inner lives of the disciples: for the Spirit is responsible for the satisfaction of “joy” (13:52), for the spiritual “boldness” (4:31), and for the “fear of God” (9:31). The Holy Spirit guides significant decisions (16:6-7, 19:21, 20:22-23), and the formation of Christian community (2:43-47, 4:32-33). It is “the mode of God’s activity in dealing with mankind and the power in which God is active among his people.”⁵

Even during the daunting challenges of fulfilling apostolic ministry in Acts, faithfulness is rewarded with “joy and with the Holy Spirit” (13:50-52). Invoking in prayer the presence of Jesus and the presence of the Holy Spirit go hand in hand. It is the Holy Spirit which is the personal presence of the Lord to the disciples. When the Apostles are recorded in Acts performing miracles, they are done by the power of the Holy Spirit in the name of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Early examples in the Acts of the Apostles of followers of the Way of Jesus called “believers” include: Acts 2:44, 4:32, 10:45.

⁵ William H. Shepherd, *The Narrative Function of the Holy Spirit as a Character in Luke-Acts* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994), pg. 4.



(3:6; 4:10; 9:34) “The Apostles, the co-workers, and successors are energized and directed by the Spirit.”⁶ Thus, the action of God in the Holy Spirit keeps the Resurrected Christ at the center of the Redemption story throughout the healings and the ministry growth of the emerging Church.

Indeed, the Holy Spirit is clearly in charge of the Early Church as it expands. The Deacon Stephen testifies, filled with the Holy Spirit, in the moments before being martyred, declaring that he sees Jesus participating in glory at the right hand of God on high (7:56). The Spirit guides the early missionaries, raising up St. Paul to Baptism and ministry (9:17) after striking him blind for several days. The Spirit fills Barnabas with faith (11:24), and he is sent off to validate the spread of Christianity into Antioch.

The missionaries are protected from missteps by the warning of the Spirit (16:7). The examples go on and on—any place believers gather in the Acts of the Apostles and draw near to Jesus in prayer fairly vibrates with the power of the Spirit in holy fellowship (4:31).

Let us look at the disciple Philip, shown above, as an example of how the Holy Spirit works. Now, here is an interesting thing to learn: we might wish that Philip was one of the Twelve, and galvanized by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost—it appears that Eusebius and other early historians thought so. But in fact, Philip the Evangelist is a different man; Philip the Apostle and Philip the Evangelist have different feast-days: May 1 and June 6, respectfully. The Evangelist Philip, a Hellenist believer, was among those chosen to serve as a Deacon (6:5-6), and his preaching successfully converted the Samaritans in the region north of Jerusalem.

During that ministry, Philip is directed by angelic vision to go and encounter an Ethiopian Eunuch who was a court financial official in charge of the Queen’s treasury, as he is being carried home from worshipping in Jerusalem in his ample chariot. The Holy Spirit clearly electrifies the scene with the appearance of an angel of the Lord, charging him to this missionary assignment. Then, dramatically, he is snatched away when it is fulfilled, just like the Prophets Elijah (I Kgs. 18:12, 2 Kgs. 2:11-12) and Ezekiel (Ezek. 3:12-14, 8:3, 43:5). The Evangelist

⁶ David Hill, “The Spirit and the Church’s Witness: Observations on Acts 1:6-8,” *Irish Biblical Studies* 6 (1984), pg. 23.

Philip teaches the Eunuch a divinely authorized interpretation of Scripture book he is reading—the Prophet Isaiah—and how it bespeaks “the good news about Jesus Christ” (Acts 8:29-35).

The outcome of his ministry is so effective that the Ethiopian officer asks to be baptized by Philip the very next time they see water along the road. And think of this: since Ethiopia was imagined in the first-century mind as an exotic, even mythic, foreign land; then, by converting and baptizing the Ethiopian Eunuch, Philip is not only initiating the Gentile mission, but fulfilling the initiative of Jesus and his prophecy that, filled with the Holy Spirit, the disciples will preach “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8, Lk. 24:47).⁷

So, is this the same Baptismal ministry as that of John the Baptist which Luke describes in the Gospel? (Luke 3:1-17) In some ways it is; but, it is appropriated and transformed for the mission of Jesus Christ. The connection which remains between the Baptist’s ritual and that of the Early Church is repentance and forgiveness of sins. And now, in the Acts of the Apostles, Baptism is done “in the name of Jesus Christ,” in his authority, through the power of the Holy Spirit.” So, countless Baptisms (8:12, 19:5, 10:47-48, 22:16) and healings (3:16, 4:10, 16:18, 19:13) throughout the narrative highlight the joy and shared thanksgiving of the new believers. One other thing is clear: God the Holy Spirit was calling all people to Christ, not just Jewish people in Jerusalem; so, much of the Acts of the Apostles describes the original followers coming to grips with the controversial universality of the advance of the Gospel inspired by God.

The experience of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost must have been so dazzling that I have saved it for last. This first extraordinary experience of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in collective Christian memory in Luke’s telling is one of the most celebrated and influential narrative descriptions in all of the New Testament. “With a few deft strokes he paints a riveting scene.”⁸ Now, I tell you, it may be especially helpful to hear these astonishing words in a creatively meditative and fluid manner, not locked at all into a literal cinematic picture. The text describes different kinds of people present in Jerusalem, a cosmopolitan crowd coming from far and wide to participate in the Jewish Festival of Weeks, which comes fifty days after Passover.

And they are “astonished” by what they hear and by what they see. They witness the Holy Spirit sweeping in among the disciples of Jesus; so that outwardly, it fills “the entire house where they were sitting,” just as inwardly it fills them to the depths of their souls. There is a tremendous storm sound, “like the rush of a violent wind” (2:2). And a flame-like vision. And inspired words being pronounced are understood by all in a divine gift of familiarity.

⁷ Note how this “single incident is expanded by means of geographical references and the imperfect tense [in the Greek], to a larger missionary enterprise.” Luke T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1992), pg. 157.

⁸ James D.G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem; Christianity in the Making, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), pg. 157.



Luke, the master story-teller, is describing a profoundly spiritual, certainly even mystical phenomenon,⁹ an action of God on earth in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And we have come to know that Luke is very good at what he does—as was the master Spanish Renaissance painter, El Greco, in his portrayal of Pentecost, shown above. Luke is describing some marvelous experience his sources remembered about the action of God. And people who were there witnessing it, remembered it in different ways. But something life-changing definitely happened, and we can be inspired as well by hearing about it in Scripture.

Many remembered the sound of a vast wind blowing, Luke says. And some saw something like fire licking up in flames near each disciple, as if they were on fire. The Holy Spirit was, in fact, igniting and strengthening faith, sweeping across people like a wild fire in its dynamic power.

⁹ Even Gibbon grudgingly remarks that “the primitive Church perpetually trod on mystic ground.” *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (New York: Collier, 1900), Book I.323.555.



Now, remember that earlier in the Gospel, among Luke's treasury of quoted memories of John the Baptist was his Messianic outcry while preaching, that the One who was to come, he would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. So, the tongues of flame they witness at Pentecost signified for them the divine presence and surely fulfilled the prophecy for them.

The rushing sound of the wind, too, spoke of the power of the divine Spirit which blows where it wishes. Remember, too, that when Ezekiel was commanded by the voice of God to "Prophecy to the wind!" and charge it to blow down on the dried-up bodies in his desert vision (Ezek. 37:9-14), we all knew it was the Breath of God breathing into those dry bones and filling them with new life. So, here it is at Pentecost.

Luke records people remembering that the wind sound was so tremendous that the disciples knew it came from Heaven, as in the Medieval manuscript illumination above, and so loud that it immediately drew a crowd all around the house there in Jerusalem. Now, this gathered multitude did not understand the heavenly sign at first, and were bewildered. But it was indeed the special presence of the Lord, the Lord who can "ride on the wings of the wind," as in Psalm 104:3.

And what of speaking in tongues? Much has been made of this curious aspect of the Pentecost experience over the years, hasn't it? So, it may be helpful to look at this from a different camera angle to better understand it. Again, some amazing inner experience is being remembered and again, it is being described as an outward and visible phenomenon.



Indeed, what may be most amazing about it is, not that foreign tongues were spoken, but that the message was heard as familiar to people from different language traditions and different faiths. Non-Jewish believers heard it as well.

So, the Pentecost message from the Lord, in the midst of the wind and fire, as here hauntingly depicted by the Early Italian

Renaissance painter, Duccio, was miraculous because it was heard and understood as familiar. The word of God sounded like our own fathers, like our own grandmas, whether that means Spanish or Korean, or Greek or Hebrew, or Cappadocian dialect.

The miracle of the Holy Spirit was not only that the disciples spoke strangely, but that visitors of different tongues and dialects heard and understood. And if them, then you. You could have heard and understood the Holy Spirit on that day. And it was “amazing.” The experience of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was reported to be noisy like a storm in some spiritual way, and fiery in some mystical flaming way—and most of all, it was received as familiar.¹⁰

The most important aspect, then, of speaking in tongues is not so much its strangeness, but its message. All the words of divine ecstasy were immediately recognizable to many of the international pilgrims. And what was the message? The people heard and recognized the mighty deeds of the Lord. The Medes and the Parthians and the Cappadocians, even the Egyptians and the Arabs, all heard “God’s deeds of power” in Jesus Christ proclaimed (2:11). In the Acts of the Apostles, God the Holy Spirit “provides continuity among Jesus, the Church, and their biblical predecessors...the same Spirit which was at work in Moses, Elijah and Elisha is at work in Jesus, Peter, and Paul.”¹¹

¹⁰ “The range of the languages in which they were proclaimed suggests that Luke thought of the coming of the Spirit more particularly as a preparation for the worldwide proclamation of the Gospel.” Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), pg. 53.

¹¹ Shepherd, *Narrative Function of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts*, pg. 15.

Our own early Anglican divine, the Venerable Bede, says of this miracle of the Spirit, at this, the Pentecost moment: “The Church in its humility recovers the unity of languages that Babylon in its arrogance had dispersed. At the spiritual level, the variety of languages points to the gifts of different forms of grace.”¹²

But some of those gathered still doubted, and in response to a joking remark from the crowd of pilgrims, Peter rises up as the spokesperson for the Apostles and preaches the first Christian sermon. And in it, the Holy Spirit enables all who are present to hear a new meaning in the Hebrew Scripture, and to see new signs in it about Jesus Christ as the Messiah. And they receive guidance from the Spirit to carry on, and they find themselves divinely energized to repent and be baptized. So, the Holy Spirit works “to witness to Christ by empowering and inspiring the preaching of the Gospel and by reproducing Jesus’ own works of power.”¹³

But why isn’t every Pentecost like this? Are we missing something? Commentator Richard Rackham offers this wise observation about our Christian experience as it has developed and matured over the centuries:

Every new beginning in thought or life is inevitably accompanied by disturbance. There is the struggle with the old, and the re-adjustment to the new, environment. So, the coming of the Spirit is followed by irregular and abnormal phenomena. Like the Jordan, the full and plenteous flood of the Spirit ‘overflows all its banks’ (Josh. 3:15). At first the old worn-out vessels of humanity cannot contain it; and there is a flood of strange and novel spiritual experiences. But when it has worn for itself a deep channel in the Church, when the law of the new spiritual life are learned and understood, then some of the irregular phenomena disappear, others become normal, and what was thought to be miraculous is found to be a natural endowment of the Christian life.¹⁴

Now, when you hear readings in church from the Acts of the Apostles, listen for the Holy Spirit. Hear St. Luke revealing to you how the Spirit of the Lord inspires and guides the Church¹⁵. The Spirit successfully planted the seeds of faith in the hearts of the community of new believers throughout the world. And now, if you are sensitive and receptive to the Holy Spirit in your prayer life, you can expect it to charge and assign you to all different types of ministry. Who can but praise the continuing presence in the Church “of the living Spirit of Jesus Christ, who alone, ultimately, must account for the growth of the Mystical Body to which He gave birth by His death on the cross?”¹⁶ If you listen for the Spirit, it may send you out to do the work of God.

¹² Bede, *Super Acta Apostolorum Expositio*, MPL 92.945.2; trans., Pervo, *Acts*, pg. 62.

¹³ G.W.H. Lampe, *God as Spirit*, The Bampton Lectures, 1976 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pg. 65.

¹⁴ Richard B. Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Exposition* (London: Methuen, 1901), pp. 15-16.

¹⁵ Remember that “first-generation Christianity understood itself as quintessentially a movement of the Spirit of God, as the fulfillment of the ancient prophetic hope of a people (God’s people Israel) renewed by the Spirit, and on whom the Spirit has been outpoured, to inspire praise and prophecy and witness and conduct.” James D.G. Dunn, *Beginning from Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), pg. 171.

¹⁶ John A. Hardon, “The Miracle Narratives in the Acts of the Apostles,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 16:3 (July 1954), pg. 316.

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