

TONGUES IN ACTS

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Introduction

The salvation-historical structure of the book of Acts is too often overlooked. This problem is clearly seen in the many interpretations and applications of *baptism in* or *filling with* the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts recounts four occasions on which the Holy Spirit came to people in a spectacular manner. Each of these instances represents the introduction of the Holy Spirit to a different class of people. The basic principle of hermeneutics, namely that Scripture interprets Scripture, seems to be lacking in many of the interpretations of these accounts (Acts 2; 8; 10-11; 19).

How can the passages in Acts correspond to the rest of the Bible and remain coherent? How much of Acts (primarily chapters 2; 8; 10-11; 19) is descriptive or normative? To what extent? In what aspect?

D.A. Carson offers an answer and describes the problem when the salvation-historical structure of Acts is neglected:

“Charismatics have erred in trying to read an individualizing paradigm into material not concerned to provide one. But noncharismatics have often been content to delineate the function of tongues where they appear in Acts, without adequate reflection on the fact that for Luke the Spirit does not simply inaugurate the new age and then disappear; rather, he *characterizes* the new age.”¹

One side of the debate tells us tongues attested to the inception of the new age and covenant, and that they are now obsolete. The other side believes that tongues are the criterion for the reality of a second definitive endowment of the Spirit. Luke does not say this, and Paul denies it.² In the meantime, we have lost the centrality of the Spirit as the guarantee of the full inheritance yet come, the first fruits of the harvest we are yet to enjoy, the way in which and by which we are to walk.

The salvation-historical or redemptive-historical view is characteristic of the writings of Ridderbos and Vos. They offer a Biblical and beneficial paradigm for Acts. It is easy to integrate the four dramatic displays of the Spirit's outpouring with the salvation-historical theme. It is not easy to relate them to anything else.

¹D. A. Carson, *Showing the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1987), p. 151.

²Of interest is: Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of Luke* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1984). Stronstad agrees that Paul does not allow second-blessing theology; but he says that Luke does.

Acts 2

The experience of the Spirit on Pentecost is a fulfillment of the prophecy of John the Baptist concerning the one who would baptize in the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:6; Luke 3:16; John 1:33). This promise is also stated by Jesus Christ in Acts 1:5. The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost is thus tightly tied to a redemptive-historical motif.

Acts 1:4-5 is not an injunction to justify contemporary, post-conversion "waiting" experiences for a personal Pentecost. Rather, Pentecost in Luke's perspective is "first of all a climactic salvation-historical event."³ Peter's explanation of the eschatological pouring out of the Spirit on all people attests to this position (Acts 2 and Joel 2).

As J.I. Packer mentions, the salvation-historical argument that seeks to explain Pentecost in terms of what the prophets said (identifying Jesus as the Messiah) receives the major emphasis or stress.⁴ Luke's emphasis in Acts 2 is on the fulfillment of prophecy, not on paradigms for personal experience.

If this is the case, then Acts 2 raises some questions for charismatics and noncharismatics. Many charismatics use this passage to affirm that all who are filled with the Holy Spirit should, as a normative practice, speak in tongues. The noncharismatics attempt to make the evangelistic use of tongues (Acts 2) the normative and exclusive purpose of tongues. A study of 1 Corinthians 12-14 will show that not all speak in tongues, and that the tongues of Acts and 1 Corinthians are different. Luke is not concerned to establish a proper order among baptism, faith, and baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Acts 8

This chapter states that the Samaritans believed the gospel that Philip preached, and then they were baptized; yet they did not receive the Holy Spirit until Peter and John laid their hands on them. The debate, in the arena of charismatic and noncharismatic thought, is whether the Samaritans were really believers before this. If they were believers, the charismatics make a case for reception of the Holy Spirit as a second stage experience. Some noncharismatics, possibly because of these implications, urge that the Samaritans were not true believers. If this were true, the reception of the Holy Spirit is only salvation. This debate does not seem to be Luke's point or purpose. As Carson writes:

"The problem in part is that the debate has been cast in simple antithesis: either the charismatic insistence that the Samaritans were converted immediately upon hearing is correct, or the noncharismatic insistence that the Samaritans were not converted until after they had received the Spirit

³Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, p. 140.

⁴J. I. Packer, *Keeping in Step with the Spirit* (Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1984), pp. 205ff.

is correct. But we are not limited to those alternatives. It is far from clear, judging from the diversity of his approaches (see Acts 2:38; 8:12; 10:44-48) that Luke is particularly interested in the question of normative order of faith, water rite, experience of the Holy Spirit, and the like."⁵

The Samaritans were considered "half-breeds" racially and were operating from the Pentateuch of the Jerusalem Canon. In Acts 8, it appears as if the Spirit is withheld to draw a connection between the Jerusalem church and the Samaritans. If the Spirit had not been withheld, the Samaritans might have assumed autonomy from Jerusalem, or Jerusalem might not have accepted them as full brothers and sisters in the family of God.⁶

Throughout Acts, there is a struggle to understand the relationship of the early church and the Mosaic Law. The struggle is attested to in Acts 15. The more the church understood the atonement of Christ and the eschatological significance of his resurrection, the less the church held onto the law in exactly the same way. This point is also seen in the "now-not yet" mentality of Paul's theology in reference to the Galatians and the Corinthians.

Acts 10-11

In Acts 10, the Spirit falls on Gentiles while Peter is speaking. This experience with the Holy Spirit is attested to by tongues and followed by water baptism. Again, note the lack of a particular sequence. It is no more normative than Acts 2 or Acts 8.

The Jewish believers with Peter are shocked that the Holy Spirit is poured out even on the Gentiles (Acts 10:45). They probably thought that Gentiles should become Jewish proselytes first. They knew the Holy Spirit had fallen on the Gentiles when they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God (Acts 10:46). Therefore, there was nothing to prevent the Gentiles from being baptized as Christians. Acts 10:47 quotes the Jewish believers, "They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." Peter uses this incident (Acts 11:15-17) to answer the challenge of the Jerusalem church concerning the necessity for a believer in Jesus to be a Jewish proselyte.

The reference to Acts 2 is obvious. The same Holy Spirit who had been poured out on Jews had also been poured out on Gentiles. God can make all things clean. The conclusion, embraced by Peter and by the Jerusalem church, was that these Gentiles

⁵Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, p. 144.

⁶Hunter, Harold. *Spirit-Baptism: A Pentecostal Alternative* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1983, pp. 93-84. Harold Hunter disagrees that the bestowal of the Spirit had anything to do with Jerusalem authentication since no similar authentication appears to be necessary for the eunuch in Acts 8:26-39. This misses the point. The eunuch was an individual and was no threat of corporate division. Moreover, since he had gone up to Jerusalem to worship he was most likely a proselyte.

were fellow believers. Repentance unto life had been granted even to those who had not come under the Mosaic covenant.⁷

The tongues of Acts 10-11 do not serve to communicate God's glory to nonbelievers. They do, however, serve as authentication to Jewish believers that Gentiles are members of the messianic community apart from the institution of the law of Moses.

Acts 19

Apollos and some Ephesians became followers of John the Baptist and received his baptism. They knew that John pointed beyond himself to Jesus. They probably knew not only of Jesus' life and ministry, but also about his death and resurrection. Carson continues:

“But apparently they knew nothing of Pentecost and what it signified of eschatological transformation. This ignorance could have developed because they (or the people who taught them) left Jerusalem (like tens of thousands of other diaspora Jews) shortly after the Passover feast – that is, they learned of Jesus' death and resurrection, but not of the coming of the Spirit.”⁸

These people were in a salvation-historical warp. They were in the same situation as the believers of Acts 1, living in the section of time before the unfolding of redemption-historical reality.

This is a unique experience because it is rather abnormal to find someone who follows John the Baptist's teaching of Jesus, accepts Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as true, and yet is ignorant of Pentecost.

The tongues of Acts 19 do not serve as communication of glorious praise as in Acts 2, and they are not to authenticate a new group to the Jerusalem church. Rather, they serve as the attestation to the Ephesian believers themselves of the gift of the Spirit that transfers them as a group from the old era to the one in which they should be living.⁹

Conclusion

It is easy to see how charismatics and cessationists can read Acts through their paradigmatic lenses to interpret certain events to fit their assumptions. This is exactly

⁷Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, p. 148.

⁸Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, p. 149.

⁹Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, p. 150.

what is done when Acts is not read through the redemptive-historical grid. As stated earlier, it is easier to integrate the four dramatic displays of the Spirit with the salvation-historical theme in mind.

Fee comments on the exegesis of Acts in most charismatic circles as being hermeneutically uncontrolled.¹⁰ This is because Luke is not offering a paradigm for personal or individual experience. Luke is occupied in accounting for the gospel's movement geographically, racially, and theologically.

On the other end of the spectrum are the cessationists. They neglect the eschatological significance of the "prophetic Spirit" of the "last days" (Joel 2). This is tightly fit with not only the dawning of a new age, but with its presence. This includes the entire period from Pentecost to the return of Jesus.¹¹

It seems to be this point that some theologians¹² overlook. The cessationist argument stands only if miraculous gifts are theologically tied exclusively to a role of attestation. However, the healing and other miracles of Jesus are explicitly connected not only with the person of Jesus, but also with the new age he is inaugurating.

Acts records an exciting period in the life of the church. It is obvious that Luke saw the Spirit as living and active. His presence illuminated and inspired the church. To blur or overlook this reality and the salvation-historical aspect is to miss that which enables the church of God to do the work to which it is called.

¹⁰Gordon D. Fee, "Hermeneutic and Historical Precedent-A Major Problem in Pentecostal Hermeneutics," *Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism*, ed. Russell P. Spittler (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), pp. 118-132.

¹¹M.M.B. Turner, "Luke and the Spirit: Studies in the Significance of Receiving the Spirit in Luke-Acts" (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 1980), p. 161.

¹²B.B. Warfield, *Counterfeit Miracles* (1918; reprint ed., London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1972). John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Charismatics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978). John F. Walvoord, *The Holy Spirit* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1958).