

THE ACTS-AS-HISTORY ARGUMENT AGAINST THE LUKAN THEME OF SPIRIT BAPTISM

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“Primitive historical Christianity must always be essentially normative, and if later types of religion so diverge from the primitive type as to find the New Testament rather an embarrassment than an inspiration, the question they raise is whether they can any longer be recognized as Christian.”

—James Denny, *Jesus and the Gospel*, pp. 26–27

If the entire two-thousand years of the Christian era were reduced to a span of one week, where the resurrection occurs one second past midnight Sunday (the first day of the week), the modern Pentecostal movement would have begun at approximately 4:23 p.m. the following Saturday (the last day of the week). There would remain only seven hours and thirty-seven minutes in the week. In this short span of its life, the Pentecostal movement simultaneously experienced *exponential growth* (600 million and growing) and *uncurtailed criticism*. That this growth and criticism could mutually exist suggests that the latter was unfounded or, at least, unconvincing. That many of the criticisms were unfounded is also suggested by the retiring of them by later polemicists. Of the early arguments aimed at the Pentecostal movement, only a handful has survived to become a part of the contemporary anti-Pentecostal polemic.

Dispensationalism, one of the more popular and lasting arguments, has, for non-dispensationalists, found its functional equivalent in the more refined Acts-as-history argument, which rightly accuses Pentecostals of treating historical passages of Scripture as didactic revelation, but wrongly concludes that this is bad hermeneutics.¹ Dispensationalism teaches that the “pentecostal” accounts in Acts were unique and once-for-all. Instead of viewing the history of the church as an on-going mural, dispensationalists have hammered frames upon the mural. These frames restrict the original fervor and flavor of the early church to the first century. The Acts-as-history argument, while not necessarily interacting with Luke’s message, also relegates the “pentecostal” accounts in Acts to history only, thus attaining the conclusion of dispensationalism but through a different and more sophisticated approach.

Briefly, the Acts-as-history argument states that inscripturated, divine revelation (the Bible) is composed of different kinds (genre) of literature.² Some of it is of a historical nature (e.g., Acts); some of a didactic nature (the epistles). We must glean doctrine, the argument goes, only from revelation that falls into the didactic category. The Pentecostal doctrine of Spirit-baptism is based upon the data of Acts, thus it must be rejected as inconclusive and, in view of the epistles, erroneous. Author and Church of England pastor John R. W. Stott set the argument in popular terms, writing that “revelation of the purpose of God in Scripture should be sought primarily in its *didactic* rather than its *descriptive* parts. . . . What I *am* saying is that what is descriptive is valuable only in so far as it is interpreted by what is didactic. . . . [A] doctrine of the Holy Spirit must not be constructed from purely descriptive passages in Acts.”³ New Testament scholar Gordon D. Fee has argued that because the Pentecostal doctrine of Spirit-baptism is derived by inference from historical precedents [in Acts] and is not intentionally taught [as in the epistles], the doctrine is of a secondary and thus unbinding nature.⁴ However, the integrity of this

¹ This is not to say that the dispensational argument and the Acts-as-history argument are mutually exclusive. Some dispensationalists make use of the Acts-as-history argument also.

² This is true; attention must be given to the genre of the literature, since hermeneutical principles may vary from genre to genre.

³ *Baptism and Fullness: The Work of the Holy Spirit Today* (2nd ed.; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1977), pp. 15, 30.

⁴ Gordon D. Fee, “Hermeneutics and Historical Precedent—A Major Problem in Pentecostal Hermeneutics,” in *Perspectives on the New Pentecostalism*, ed. Russell P. Spittler (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), pp. 118–32. *Contra* Jesus, who used the historical precedent of David to

argument is contingent upon the validity of applying the *same* hermeneutical principle to *different* genres of literature. It is a methodology that is assumed valid but never proven.

This thesis leans heavily upon the hermeneutical principle of *authorial intent*. But though this may be an excellent principle for interpreting epistolary literature, its validity for interpreting historical-narrative literature is not as sure. Briefly, the reactive nature of epistolary literature dictates a very targeted and conspicuous intent; the intent of the historian-theologian, on the other hand, is more broad and inconspicuous. This difference serves to weaken the validity of the authorial intent thesis. In the end, expositions of the Acts-as-history thesis suggest that the authorial intent principle reveals the *overt* didactic nature of epistolary literature and the *covert* didactic nature of historical literature. But its defenders do not recognize and explore the latter, and they formulate a conclusion based on what the authorial intent principle does not reveal when applied to a different genre. In other words, by pushing the principle beyond its limitations and demanding more than it can reveal, they end up essentially arguing from silence. *We simply cannot assume that one hermeneutical principle works equally well when applied to different genres of literature.*

The Acts-as-history argument is more credible than Scofieldian dispensationalism, which almost arbitrarily relegates the Pentecostal baptism to the first century. At least the Acts-as-history doctrinaires have constructed a hermeneutical principle which is speciously logical (because partially correct). But though it may seem more plausible, it is unacceptable for several reasons.

1. In as much as inscripturated church history *illustrates* church doctrine, it is possible to deduce doctrine from historical-narrative literature. This, of course, raises the question of *how* we know the historical incidents are illustrative of church doctrine. By looking at the epistles, the Acts-as-history advocates answer. But this answer is incomplete, and this truncated hermeneutic serves up a truncated doctrine of Spirit-baptism. A better hermeneutic allows that the context of an historical account reflects the attitude of the church, and the attitude of the church reflects its doctrine. For example, the “pentecostal” accounts of the 120 disciples at Jerusalem, the believers at Samaria, the twelve at Ephesus, and the household of Cornelius were, in addition to glorious descriptions, vivid and plausible examples; Luke was not describing heretical experiences to be avoided or genuine experiences for a special few.⁵

Likewise, it is clear that Luke was describing heresy in his account of Simon the sorcerer (Acts 8). Can we not from this one historical incident safely formulate a doctrine which holds that spiritual instrumentality is not purchased with silver and gold? Similarly, does not Acts 15 teach us that salvation is by grace through faith? Even if we did not have Romans 8 and Ephesians 2, is not this doctrine clearly established in the divinely inspired words of Luke the theologian? As Jim McNair has observed, “It is impossible to believe that the Holy Spirit would record in the Acts only examples of Spirit baptisms which were *not* to be used for future guidance, and, conversely, that He has failed to record any examples which could in fact guide us today.”⁶ Graham Twelftree believes that “given that biographies [in Luke’s day] were to be taken as model lives for readers to follow, it is likely that Luke’s descriptions of his heroes are intended to become prescriptions for his readers.”⁷ So Luke is “prescribing as much as

defend his disciples’ actions of picking and eating grain on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23–28).

⁵ Incidentally, it is a mistake to see only three or four instances of “pentecostal” baptisms in these accounts when in fact there are no fewer than 162 (allowing ten for Cornelius’ household and twenty for the Samaritan “pentecost”). This number makes for an undeniable pattern. As much as some third-wavers and charismatics (especially those influenced by postmodernism) may like to compromise, there is not a single exception to the rule. Of the 162 Spirit-baptisms described in scripture, the only common immediate, external evidence is not wind or fire or love or joy or prophecy but singularly and invariably glossolalia.

⁶ *Experiencing the Holy Spirit* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1977), p. 119.

⁷ *People of the Spirit: Exploring Luke’s View of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), p. 10. Likewise, Craig Keener: “When Jesus’ followers were writing the New Testament, everyone understood that narrative conveyed moral principles. Ancient biographers and historians expected readers to draw lessons from their examples, whether positive or negative. Students regularly recited such stories in elementary school exercises, and in more advanced levels of education they learned how to apply these examples to drive home moral points” (*Gift and Giver: The Holy Spirit for Today* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2001], p. 212; see also p. 158).

describing”⁸

Furthermore, with no didactic expositions of Spirit-baptism in the epistles, one has to ask what the epistles would add to the discussion. This is precisely the point, we are told. The Pentecostal doctrine of Spirit-baptism cannot be formulated for lacking epistolary data. But this conclusion is faulty on two counts: (1) non-Pentecostals have failed to produce epistolary data supporting a powerless, phenomenonless, non-experiential doctrine of Spirit-baptism,⁹ and (2) non-Pentecostals have failed to take into account the value of Acts as a product of Greco-Roman narrative-rhetorical principles.

Luke is believed by many scholars to be the most eloquent, articulate, intentional, and educated writer of scripture. For that reason, we should not expect him to write in a coarse, unreflective, or tedious style. Roger Stronstad writes, “Arguably, Luke-Acts is the most carefully designed book in all of biblical literature, certainly in the New Testament.”¹⁰ According to Lukan scholar Paul Elbert, the writings of Luke exemplify the highly developed, conventional Greco-Roman narrative tradition, as illustrated in the teachings of Theon of Alexandria, a rhetorician and contemporary of Luke’s:

Luke is in accord with the instruction of Theon on this expected method of narrative persuasion via plausible examples and precedents serving to provide Christian expectation. Clarity, understandability, and vividness of examples and precedents are the narrative tools deemed important by Theon; it is unsurprising then that Luke employs such contemporary narrative technique. Lukan portrayal of interaction with, and of Christian expectation of, the divine is quite harmonious with Theonic characterization and personification.¹¹

Rob Starnier expressed similar findings:

Narratologists have long noted that repeated narrative segments—from individual words to entire self-contained episodes—frequently reveal an author’s intended themes or concerns. Likewise, biblical scholars have long regarded and utilized repetition as an interpretive cue. In fact, the narrative function is well noticed to have paradigmatic overtones as a recurrent theme in [Earl] Richard’s treatment of the Spirit-reception episodes in the book of Acts. Repetition in the book of Acts is an interpretive clue, suggesting that Luke understands a certain doctrine or practice to be normative for Christians. When something is reported multiple times and in varied contexts in this narrative, it is likely that there is something of eternal relevance being communicated.¹²

Starnier concludes that “careful attention to the rhetorical features [of] Luke-Acts does in fact corroborate Lukan intentionality. . . .”¹³

⁸ Ibid, p. 83.

⁹ Furthermore, unless Acts is given didactic status, neither can a *non*-Pentecostal doctrine of Spirit-baptism be formulated.

¹⁰ *The Prophethood of All Believers: A Study in Luke’s Charismatic Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p. 14.

¹¹ Paul Elbert, “Paul of the Miletus Speech and 1 Thessalonians: Critique and Considerations,” *ZNW* 95/3–4 (2004): p. 265, footnote 34. Elbert also writes, “Perhaps . . . Luke sees his own task, in part, as being to improve on the inherent deficiencies of illustration in Paul’s previous style of discursive communication to exclusively in-house audiences. Lukan narrative thus serves as a pastoral remedy in providing urgently needed vivid examples and precedents in order to make commonly used descriptive Christian experiential language (employed discursively by Paul) more widely understandable” (p. 265); *contra* Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts in the New Testament Church and Today* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), pp. 155–56. For information about Aelius Theon of Alexandria and his potential narrative-rhetorical influence on the composition of narratives, see the “Introduction” in James R. Butts, *The ‘Progymnasmata’ of Theon: A New Text with Translation and Commentary* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilm International, 1987), pp. 1–95.

¹² “Luke and Paul: Co-Laborers . . . and Collaborators?” in *Trajectories in the Book of Acts*, ed. Paul Alexander et al. (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf & Stock, 2010), p. 236.

¹³ Ibid., p. 239.

On this issue of intentionality as it relates to Spirit-baptism, Robert Menzies writes, “The question of Luke’s intent, which looms so large in Fee’s argument, is clearly subordinate to the more fundamental question outlined above [i.e., the prophetic-empowerment rather than soteriological character of Spirit-baptism, and its universal character]. For if my description of Luke’s ‘distinctive’ pneumatology is accurate, then Luke’s intent to teach a Spirit-baptism distinct from conversion for empowering is easily demonstrated. One need only establish that Luke’s narrative was designed to encourage every Christian to receive the Pentecostal gift. And, since Luke highlights Pentecost as a fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy concerning an outpouring of the Spirit upon ‘all flesh’ (Acts 2.17–21), this appears to be self-evident.”¹⁴

Donald Johns writes, “It is difficult to deny that speaking in tongues *did* accompany being baptized in the Spirit in three texts in Acts. It is a common storytelling technique the world over to tell things in groups of threes: three times should be enough to tell anything. The paradigmatic effect of these stories *should lead us to expect the same things in our own experience with the Spirit*. Actually, as we are drawn into the story, we should experience the Spirit along with Peter, Cornelius, and all the rest. By telling these stories, Luke shows that this is the way his world works.”¹⁵

Whereas the foregoing contributions to the discussion address the issue of Luke’s intention by examining the genre in which Luke wrote and thus have discerned a strong intentionality on Luke’s part to present tongues as a signification of Spirit-baptism, others have questioned the presupposition within the *authorial intent* argument itself. Menzies writes the following regarding intent and the early Pentecostals’ use of “naïve appeals to historical precedent” and Fee’s argument:

The reason is clearly articulated by Fee, who suggests that normative theology at this point must be grounded in Luke’s ‘primary intent’ or ‘intention to teach’. But surely this is overly restrictive. *Not all questions of normative teaching are rooted directly in the intention of the author*. [Larry] Hurtado [in *Initial Evidence* 191-192] notes the oft-cited illustration of the doctrine of the Trinity, which is not taught explicitly in the New Testament but developed on the basis of inferences from biblical teaching. Is it not valid to inquire about the character of Luke’s pneumatology, and then to wrestle with the implications which emerge from his pneumatology for our contemporary questions? . . .

An exclusive focus on an author’s ‘primary intent’ or ‘intention to teach’ too often leads to a form of tunnel vision which ignores the implications of an individual text for the theological perspective of the author. . . . *[T]he value of a passage for assessing the theological perspective of a given author cannot be reduced to its ‘primary intent’*. A passage must be understood in terms of its original setting and intention, but *the theological freight it carries may transcend its ‘primary intent’*. Each piece of evidence must be taken seriously as we seek to reconstruct the theological perspective of the biblical author. . . .

. . . This task of reconstruction cannot be limited to a survey of the ‘primary intent’ of isolated passages; rather, it calls for a careful analysis of the theological significance of the author’s entire work.¹⁶

Stronstad echoes Menzies’ sentiments:

¹⁴ *Empowered for Witness: The Spirit in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), p. 239.

¹⁵ “Some New Directions in the Hermeneutics of Classical Pentecostalism’s Doctrine of Initial Evidence,” in *Initial Evidence: Historical and Biblical Perspectives on the Pentecostal Doctrine of Spirit Baptism*, ed. Gary B. McGee (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), p. 163, see also pp. 153–56.

¹⁶ *Empowered* pp. 246–48; italics added.

It was once commonplace among interpreters to affirm that authorial intentionality, that is, the author's purpose for writing a document, is the essential criterion which governs the reader's understanding of the text. But the question of authorial intentionality is complicated by a variety of factors. These include whether the purpose is explicit or implicit and whether it is simple or complex—that is, whether there is one primary purpose, or a combination of primary, secondary and even tertiary purposes. Consequently, several dangers attend the search to determine authorial intention. One danger is the all-too-common tendency toward reductionism, putting forward the claims of one purpose to the exclusion of all others. Another danger is to confuse the use to which the document, in whole or in part, might be put with the purpose of the document. The most insidious danger is to identify the interests and agenda of the interpreter as those of the author.

. . . The most satisfactory answer to the question of Luke's purpose lies in the recognition that it is multiplex. This multiplex purpose not only has a historical dimension, as the reader would expect since the genre of Luke-Acts is historical narrative, but it also has both a didactic or instructional dimension and a theological dimension.¹⁷

Bill Griffin believes that Fee has wrongly "equated historical genre with purely historical purpose," which Griffin believes is "a very near-sighted approach to the book [of Acts] and ignores much of the other value contained therein." He agrees with Fee that incidental elements in Luke's story should be used with caution, but he disagrees in that the baptism in the Holy Spirit "is not merely incidental to the text, but intricately structured into it."¹⁸ He also notes that

. . . each example of abuse of historical precedent which Fee mentions concerns actions done by men. Man baptizes Man gives the Eucharist. Man sells his possessions. Man handles snakes. But the Baptism of the Holy Spirit is far different than the Church at Jerusalem selling their possessions or Paul offering sacrifice. All of the preceding, with the exception of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, are things which man, as he wills, can do. But man cannot by his will baptize in the Holy Spirit. Jesus, the Son of God . . . baptizes in the Holy Spirit¹⁹

Griffin continues,

Even if one does accept that the Epistles are "didactic" and Acts is "history," placing a higher value on the Epistles over Acts for doctrine is an unjustified move. The discussion of theology involves who God is and how He acts. If we want to know the ways that God involves Himself in the space-time continuum, is it not wise to observe how He has acted historically? Does not history reveal normative aspects of theology? . . . Is not Acts as good of a reflection of apostolic theology as the Epistles? What better way to present the theology of the first century Church than to relate it in a historical format? It must be kept in mind that we are not dealing with acts of man, but of God. The one who rejects the consistent manner in which God baptized His people in the Holy Spirit as recorded in Acts will be hard pressed to demonstrate just what it was that John the Baptist and Jesus were talking about. Luke was

¹⁷ *Prophethood*, pp. 22–23.

¹⁸ William P. Griffin, "Acts, Pentecostalism, and Normativity—Reconsidering the Classical Position" (unpublished paper, 1983, rev. 1985).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

drawing from real history to show how the real God operates in real life, and this historical presentation of the actions of God is indeed normative for doctrine.²⁰

So, it would seem that the *authorial intent* argument is not impervious to rebuttal, having been found to be vulnerable on at least three critical fronts: (1) its deficiency in narrative-rhetorical technique recognition, (2) its assumed but undefended presuppositions, and (3) its assumed imperiousness, which subjects it to neutralization by *reductio ad absurdum*, i.e., if doctrine must be based on authorial intention, then the virgin birth and the trinity are out the window.²¹

It is, therefore, safe to conclude with William W. Menzies that “Luke intended to teach theology by what he *described*. Acts is both history and theology. Luke is both historian and theologian. We can reasonably expect to find theological emphases based on his own understanding *and* also theological resources in the activity of God which he describes.”²² Furthermore, as Keener observes, “Given that ancient writers normally expected readers to draw morals from their narratives, the burden of proof rests on those who contend that Luke’s history does not teach theology, rather than on those who contend that it does.”²³

2. The epistles themselves are chock-full of history. Pure theory and meditation did not give rise to the epistles; historical incidents in the lives of the various churches and Christians gave rise to the contents of the epistles. I. Howard Marshall has said that the entire Bible “is a historical record, not a systematic tabulation of doctrine.” He admonishes us to “balance our teaching from the various parts of the Bible,” and thus avoid concentrating, say, “wholly on the teaching in the epistles about spiritual union with Christ, . . . [lest we] forget what the Gospels say about the very practical commands Jesus gave to his disciples during his earthly life.”²⁴ Or, the Pentecostal would add, lest we forget the exemplary charismatic lives of our Lord, his disciples, and their disciples as described in the gospels and Acts. (I should note that the epistles, though unclear on the specifics of Spirit-baptism, yield clear evidence that the “pentecostal” phenomena of Spirit-fillings, tongues, prophecy, and the like continued long after Pentecost.)

Theologians rightly cull and formulate spiritual principles and doctrine from the historical epistles on the basis that what was good for, say, the Corinthians is good for any church with the same problems and needs. But to be logically consistent, should not the Acts-as-history thinkers restrict the epistolary injunctions and advice to the churches and individuals to whom they were addressed?

Along these lines, Jim McNair writes that

It is illogical and arbitrary to teach that epistles addressed to specific congregations in the past reveal God’s mind not only for them but for all future generations as well, while the history of God’s activity within Acts reveals His mind solely for the people who were first involved. Logically, either both are valuable for doctrine, or both must be rejected. . . . If anyone drives a wedge between biblical theology and biblical experience on any subject, he separates what God has joined together. Apostolic doctrine and action were not at variance but complementary. Christian theology today must reflect the activities of the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The discerning reader will not perceive these reasons as contradictory but complementary. While narrative principles provide intentionality, intentionality is not necessary to establish doctrine.

²² “The Methodology of Pentecostal Theology: An Essay on Hermeneutics,” in *Essays on Apostolic Themes*, ed. Paul Elbert (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1985), p. 6.

²³ *Gift and Giver*, p. 162.

²⁴ “The Bible and Christian Doctrine,” in *Eerdmans’ Handbook to the Bible*, eds. David Alexander and Pat Alexander (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 66.

apostles as well as their teaching, for the apostles guided the Church by inspired example as well as the inspired Word.²⁵

3. Paul the epistle writer told Timothy that “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). Only one question is necessary: Is Acts scripture? If it is, we can paraphrase Paul in this way: “Acts is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” With this verse in mind, Jim McNair writes the following in response to Stott:

Since the “purely descriptive passages in the Acts” are part of Scripture, they are profitable for teaching right doctrine, reproving false doctrine and correcting inadequate doctrine. It also means that Acts 2, 8, 9, 10 and 19, like other parts of Scripture, are given to make us all righteous, complete, and equipped for serving God and men. . . . There are simply no purely descriptive passages in the Acts.²⁶

4. A survey of theological treatises from Augustine to Calvin to Barth would reveal numerous references to the gospels and Acts. Acts-as-history theorists should observe the use of non-epistolary scriptures by these theologians. Tellingly, the epistle writers themselves used history to construct doctrine (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:12–22; Jms. 2:21–26).

Conclusion

For these reasons the Pentecostal should reject the thesis which denies the didactic dimension of the historical passages of scripture.²⁷ Because Acts is of a different genre than the epistles is not sufficient reason for robbing it of its pedagogic properties. Instead of shelving the historical literature of Scripture, the Acts-as-history school should be experimenting with hermeneutical principles which will extract doctrine in its purest form.²⁸ And since the Acts-as-history thesis appears to have been manufactured solely to debunk the Pentecostal doctrine of Spirit-baptism and thus fortify the non-Pentecostal position, its adherents should give greater scrutiny to the deficiencies of this hermeneutic and to the merits of a hermeneutic that recognizes Luke as a theologian working within the Greco-Roman narrative-rhetorical tradition.

²⁵ *Experiencing the Holy Spirit* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1977), p. 118.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ See William W. Menzies, “The Methodology of Pentecostal Theology: An Essay on Hermeneutics,” in *Essays on Apostolic Themes*, pp. 6–14.

²⁸ See Keener’s similar remarks on this issue: “The fact that our traditional method of extracting doctrine from Scripture does not work well on narrative does not mean that Bible stories do not send clear messages. Instead, it suggests that the way we apply our traditional method of interpretation is inadequate because we are ignoring too much of ‘God’s Word’” (*Gift and Giver*, p. 212).