

Acts

The Church the Trinity Built

by George Robertson
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How to Use This Study

Almost all good Bible studies have some combination of study questions and commentary. Often the authors will comment on the passage to be read and then ask questions based on the passage and their comments. Ours is a variation of that, and this study of Acts is a bit different from our previous studies.

This Bible study is designed so that the students' first steps into a passage of Scripture are taken by themselves with the help of the Holy Spirit. That is why the first thing you will find, after a brief introduction, is not commentary but questions that are designed to help the students to read, search, discover, think about, and apply the great truths of the Scriptures for themselves before they are influenced by notes, lecture, or commentary from others

After immersing themselves in the passage, pondering it, and answering what questions they can, we then suggest that the students read the notes to reinforce, enhance, and clarify learning. At the end of the notes, students will have opportunity to think about the "big ideas" from the passage studied and record their thoughts with the "Questions for Further Reflection."

You will notice that some of the study questions are marked with asterisks (*). These are the questions we recommend that leaders use for group discussion, including the "Questions for Further Reflection." Students should answer all of the questions in the lesson; otherwise the questions with asterisks will not make sense. But we have found that some groups do not enjoy discussing questions that are for the purpose of discovering basic information, as the answers are just that—basic content—and do not necessarily promote rich discussion. Of course, other groups do enjoy that sort of thing, so we encourage you to handle the questions with your group in a way that works best for you. We do hope that the questions for discussion will foster good thinking, lively conversation, and practical application.

George Robertson and I developed our studies while teaching the men's and women's Bible studies, respectively, at The Covenant Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Missouri. We had both morning (women's) and evening (men's and women's) classes. Our format was fairly simple. The morning schedule looked like this:

9:30-10:05	Small group discussion of lesson questions led by trained group leader
10:05-10:20	Small group sharing of prayer requests and praying together
10:20-10:30	Travel time to assembly of all groups together
10:30-11:00	Lecture over the passage just discussed

The evening schedule was basically the same but began at 6:30 p.m.

We have heard of other groups that have utilized our studies using a similar schedule but with many variations. With the format of this Acts study, including a lecture in the schedule is optional as reading the notes is included in the students' preparation before the discussion. If you choose not to include a lecture in your schedule, you might want to discuss all of the study questions, or have a longer discussion of the questions with asterisks, and/or take more time for prayer.

I have been using one of our studies with a small group of women with a very relaxed format, leading them through their answers of the questions and then giving them a brief teaching wrap-up to explain, summarize and apply the passage at the end of our discussion. We follow that with a time of prayer for each other.

The material may be used for individual study as well as for groups. We do recommend, however, that you grapple with the Bible passage and the study questions and try to answer as many as you can before you go to the notes, commentaries, or other study helps. We tend to learn best what we dig out for ourselves. If you miss the mark on a question, count that as an opportunity for learning; we tend to learn best from our mistakes!

We pray that this study will help you know God in Jesus Christ through the study of his Word

Mary Beth McGreevy
St. Louis, Missouri

1

Created by Grace

Acts 1:1-2:13

Introducing the Book of Acts

Luke's Gospel and his Acts of the Apostles may be thought of as one book with two parts. Together they cover 66 years of history: Luke's Gospel records the 33 years of Jesus' life and Acts relates the 33 years following Jesus' ascension.¹ By means of this symmetry Luke communicates that Acts is just as much about Christ as his Gospel is. The only difference is that Jesus' work after his ascension was accomplished through the Holy Spirit. That has moved one to rename Acts "The Continuing Words and Deeds of Jesus by His Spirit through His Apostles."² Thus, our focus in this study will be on Christ's work of building his Church through the Spirit.

Both Luke and Acts are addressed to the same man, Theophilus, meaning "friend of God." Perhaps his name indicates that he was a Gentile convert to Judaism. Maybe the more abbreviated way he is addressed in Acts indicates that he was converted to Christ upon reading Luke's account of Jesus' life. In Luke's Gospel, Theophilus is addressed as "most excellent" (the same manner in which Felix and Festus are addressed later on (23:26; 24:3; 26:25), indicating that he might have been a member of the ruling class.

Luke alone describes the ascension both in his Gospel (24:50-53) and in these early verses of Acts (1:2, 9-11). The Ascension makes two important statements. First, it is the consummation of Jesus' proven divinity. In the 40 days between his resurrection and ascension, Jesus appeared in the flesh ten times to well over five hundred people leaving a large group of eyewitnesses who would go to their death testifying that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Second, it marks the inauguration of the process by which the Spirit of Jesus would come to the Church. When Luke says in v.2 that Jesus taught through the Spirit, he implies that Christ's whole ministry was conducted by and through the Spirit. That dependence upon the Holy Spirit was one of the most important aspects of Jesus' earthly ministry because it provides the paradigm for how a Christian is to live. By his example, Christ teaches us that we only live the Christian life by means of the Spirit. That is, if we are going to succeed in the Christian life, we must live entirely in dependence upon the Spirit to bring all of the resources of Christ to us.

Finally, Luke's introduction reminds us that the core of Jesus' teaching was the "kingdom of God." That phrase occurs over thirty times in Luke's Gospel and seven times in Acts. In Matthew, it occurs around fifty times. The import of the phrase is that Jesus will reign over all reality. While it has always been true that God is King over the cosmos (Ex. 15:18; Ps. 103:19; Ps. 147:20), the worldwide recognition of

¹ This dating assumes Jesus' ascension to be around A.D. 30 and Paul's release from house arrest to be around A.D. 63.

² copy missing???

9. Read **Acts 2:1-13**. What two images are used to describe the Holy Spirit? How is this similar to other descriptions of the Holy Spirit? (See **Genesis 1:1-2; 2:7; 15:17-20; 19:23-25; Exodus 3:2-5; 19:16-19; 1 Kings 18:38; John 3:5-8**.)

10. How was this the fulfillment of Jesus' words in **John 14:15-26** and **16:5-15**?

11. Compare and contrast this scene with what happened in **Genesis 10:32-11:9**.

12. When the Holy Spirit "gives them utterance," about what do the gathered believers speak?

13. When the devout Jews gathered from the nations hear the believers speaking in their own languages, how do they respond? How does this compare with the responses to the message of Christ that you observe in our day?

14. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in this passage?

The Church That Grace Builds (1:1-11)

A sign beside a steam locomotive in a museum at Greenfield Village, Michigan, lists some interesting statistics including its boiler pressure, size and number of wheels, horsepower, length, and weight. The last line of the sign reports that 96 percent of the power generated was used to move the locomotive itself. That means only four percent was left to pull the load.

Many organizations are like that. Some local churches are like that. But the Church of Jesus Christ throughout history and throughout the world is not like that. Though it may not always seem so efficient in the accomplishment of its work from our finite perspective, the truth is that the message of Jesus which creates the Church is a rapidly spreading flame that no one can stop. By the second century Tertullian could say, “We are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods.”³

What explains that dramatic and ubiquitous expansion of Christianity? Luke explains it in this book from the very beginning. It is the power of Christ coming to and through the Church by means of the Holy Spirit. And that same Holy Spirit lives in you if you belong to Jesus.

In the early verses (1:1-11), Jesus tells his Church corporately and individually to do three things in order to make manifest the power of the Spirit they possess: wait, go, and hope.

Wait (1:1-3)

To realize Christ’s power instead of relying on some counterfeit and impotent force, we must learn to wait on the Spirit of Jesus. The resurrected Christ imparted that important message to his disciples on one occasion when he was eating with them.⁴

However, before that gift would be imparted to the Church an important commission would precede it. Prior to the command to tarry in Jerusalem was Jesus’ instruction to his disciples to return to Galilee. On the day of his resurrection, Jesus told his disciples to go to Galilee because he would meet them there. They would have been eager to go to that small town and escape the scrutiny and perhaps persecution awaiting them in Jerusalem. But Jesus did not invite them there for respite. Rather, in Galilee Jesus gave his disciples the Great Commission to go into all the world and make disciples. Therefore, this command to wait in Jerusalem followed that meeting in Galilee because it would be impossible for frail, ordinary people to carry out such a task. So Jesus tells them to go to Jerusalem, right into the heart of enemy territory, and wait for the gift of the power of the Holy Spirit.

That Spirit’s empowerment would be so great as to transform weak-kneed disciples into powerfully brave apostles who would begin preaching the good news in Jerusalem itself. Today, you, as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ are given that same commission and you are also given that same power.

³ F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953).

⁴ Jesus eating was and is an important verification that his was a real, physical resurrection—not just an invention of the apostles’ imagination. Peter would later appeal directly to Jesus’ eating as proof of the resurrection (Acts 10:40,41; cf. Lk. 24:36-43).

Specifically, it is the power to share the gospel. It is absolutely impossible under your own power to evangelize someone in the devil's camp. It is terrifying to the bravest men when they are relying on their own strength. I have a friend who is a retired Air Force Colonel. He once told me that though he had commanded a base in the heart of militant Arab territory, nothing caused him more fear than his first evangelistic attempt in America! In fact, he got so sick on the way he had to pull off the road. However, he learned to trust in the Spirit and God made him an effective evangelist.

But more broadly, it is the promise of power for the whole of the Christian life. There is nothing that a Christian can do without the empowering of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, with the Spirit there is nothing you cannot do. By definition, there is no sin that cannot be put down, no enemy of Christ who cannot be approached with the gospel, no duty that cannot be practiced, no disappointing relationship that cannot be endured, no suffering which can cause you to deny Christ. The Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. In you lives the one who raised Jesus from the dead (Ro. 8); therefore, there is nothing of God's will you cannot accomplish.

You must see in this promise the Father's and the Son's intention to bless you for the Kingdom's sake. Jesus told his disciples that it would be the Father who would give them the Spirit. You are not a beggarly child; you are a King's kid given everything and more than you need. Remember Jesus said, "Trust in God; trust also in me." In other words, to look at Jesus' disposition toward you is to see the Father's. And the indwelling Spirit enables you to believe what you see.

Go (1:4-8)

We have already begun to address what must happen after you have waited. You must of course go forward. But these verses help us to see more clearly just what our forward direction must be. We are not called to do just anything; we are called to advance Christ's Kingdom.

The Greek verb translated "to ask" indicates repetition. So Luke says that the apostles kept asking Jesus if he was going to restore the kingdom at the present time. No matter how many times Jesus had emphasized the spiritual nature of his Kingdom, they were still focused on a political one liberated from Roman oppression. The requests for favor in a political kingdom were not new. James and John's mother had made one for her sons shortly before Jesus entered Jerusalem (Mt. 20:21). Even the apostles were prone to put their hope in politics instead of Christ! We all do. Remember the reason Israel wanted a king was so that they could be like other nations which in the end meant putting their trust in earthly leaders rather than God. It is against our nature to trust in what we cannot see. Invisible realities like God, like the true power of his Kingdom, and like the secret purposes of his will are not as attractive to us as things we can objectify. So we prefer political intrigue and personalities and power because we think that those forces really get us somewhere. But God's strategy is to work powerfully in ways no one in the world recognizes as powerful, wise, or truly practical.

In his book, *The Political Illusion*, Jacques Ellul argues that the modern politicians have created the illusion that they have power to change or reform society. While it is true that they have power to maintain a justice system and protect citizens from internal and external threat, they have no power to change

society because they cannot change people. In fact, Ellul argues, the politician's lack of power to do any more than maintain government is revealed in his great concern for public opinion. In other words, the very people who think the politician has so much power are the ones the politician is most afraid of. So if real power to change society is not found in the political realm, where is it found? It is found in the Holy Spirit which enables the Church corporately and individually to preach, teach and share the gospel which transforms people who can transform society.⁵

The Lord must constantly correct this insistence we have to get things objectified before we can trust. He told his Old Testament people, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children" (Dt. 29:29). Earlier in Jesus' ministry he told his disciples, "But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mt. 24:36). Of course Jesus' point was not that his knowledge was limited; in his divinity he knew all things. His point rather was that in his role as Son, in that role in which he was living as our pattern in total dependence on the Father through the Spirit, his focus was on present faithfulness not future dates. Likewise, he calls his disciples to the same in Acts 1. The things the Lord has revealed to us are more than sufficient to occupy us for the rest of our lives. It is our place to know God's revealed Word and put it into practice as we live under his kingly rule, not to know the future so that we will not have to trust him as much.

The focus of our lives then is to live as witnesses. That was the great commission. We are to give the best of our energies and focus to that. That calling is both responsive and proactive. You are constantly to ready yourself through study and training to give an answer for the hope that is in you. And proactively you are to make the most of every opportunity and create more opportunities to testify to Christ.

The call for most of us is not to leave our jobs and become missionaries. But the call for each of us is to invest ourselves in people for the sake of the gospel. Yes, we seek to worship God by bringing glory to him in our work. But the end of every labor is ultimately to win people to Christ and nurture them in the faith. No, we are not to presume on our employer's time by using his resources to fund our witnessing. But neither is it true that our work is an end unto itself. We have been placed there by God to do our best but more importantly, within the proper parameters, to make an impact on people. Your paycheck provides for the discipling ministry of the people in your home. A portion of that paycheck is given to the Lord's work which wins to and disciples people in Christ. The calling of your life is to take the message of the gospel in a myriad of creative ways to people. Wait on the Spirit to enable you to go to people for the sake of the Kingdom.

Hope (1:9-11)

We also engage in this calling not only with the assurance that we have all of the power we need to accomplish it but with the sure and certain hope that the mission cannot fail. Jesus has promised to come back when the last elect person is saved and then restore the entire cosmos to what it was supposed to be as well as to rectify all wrongs.

⁵ See anecdote in Boice, *Acts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 26 as well as Robert Nisbet's review in *Commentary* (August 1970).

The cloud is significant in redemptive history denoting the location of God's glory (*Shekinah*). It is a sign of divinity. When Christ is taken into the cloud it is testified that he indeed is the Son of God (Ex. 40:34-35; Da. 7:13; Mt. 17:5; 2 Pt. 1:17). Jesus was taken up into heaven by the Father because the Father has much work for Christ yet to accomplish. He must constantly intercede for us and secure from the Father all that we need. He must constantly bear witness of our atonement and tend to our salvation. And he must rule every atom of the universe while conforming all things to God's plan. In other words, he ascended to heaven not to be farther from his people but so as to be even more effective in his ministry to them (Ep. 4:10). As one theologian has put it, in his ascended glory there remains much for Christ to do (Bavinck).

In a parallel to the angelic appearances at the tomb, the angels minister to the disciples at Christ's ascension. There are two in order to certify their witness. They are dressed in white as a symbol of purity, but especially joy. And they interrupt a situation which could turn sad in order to turn it to rapturous joy. They address the disciples as "men of Galilee." Perhaps all of them were citizens of Galilee but addressing them this way would remind them of the noble commission they received there soon after the resurrection.

Galilee is where Jesus began his ministry. It symbolizes inauguration. The Mt. of Olives symbolizes the finish to Jesus' ministry. It was his last location before the arrest and crucifixion and it was the site of his ascension. It was not time for the disciples to be there. The angels sent them back in their minds to Galilee, to the place where Jesus was inaugurating the continuation of his earthly ministry through them. Galilee represents the Church Militant and the Mt. of Olives represents the Church Triumphant. We are always tempted to quit before we are finished. We are always tempted to live in the Church Triumphant, rather than engage in the battle of the Church Militant until we are finished. Like the disciples we want to flee to the mountains, build dwelling places, and stay where it is cozy and the air is spiritually clearer. But Christ constantly sends us back to Galilee to remember our commissioning. What is your Mt. of Olives, your place of escapism? In your retirement do you think your work is over? Go back to Galilee and renew your commissioning! Are you weary from battling a particular sin or disappointment so you think you may rest on Mt. Olive until something good comes along? Get back to Galilee where you were first commissioned and live nobly under those orders until the King releases you.

How can you do that? Because you know it will not be forever. You only have a little while to live nobly for your Savior. The end of your life is coming. The end of the world is coming. Christ is coming "in a cloud and great glory" (Lk. 21:27). That explains how the disciples in the Gospel account were able to return to Jerusalem of all places with "great joy" (Lk. 24:52). They returned to the heat of the battle with joy because they were confident that Christ would win the battle. Which battle of the Christian life are you avoiding out of fear? There is no small battle in the Christian life. Every one, whether it is the defeat of a temptation, talking to a co-worker about Christ, or building a great institution, adds up to Christ's ultimate victory over all enemies. Whatever it is, go for it, realizing there is nothing you can lose that will not be made up many times over when Christ returns.

Servant-Leadership (1:12-26)

The primary purpose of the next section is to demonstrate the Spirit's readying the Church to invade the world. The Spirit is hovering over the Church like creation bringing order out of chaos, shoring up the troops, encouraging and nurturing to ready her for her mission. It is a very exciting time.

There are only a few books in my library that I find myself returning to again and again. One of them is Francis Schaeffer's early book, *No Little People*. The book is about leadership, and the biblical principles he elucidates about spiritual leadership are encouraging, rebuking, and refreshing all at the same time. It is not a book only for vocational ministers—it is a book for every Christian who is called to lead wherever he or she is.

The most basic principle of Schaeffer's perspective on leadership is the one I want to highlight in this text. Schaeffer says by means of Jesus' teaching that a Christian must seek the lowest place of service in every situation and every organization (Lk. 14:7-11). If God wants to call him up to a higher station then so be it, but it is not for the Christian to assume the highest place from the beginning.

This insight was first expressed in a sermon Schaeffer preached early in his ministry called "God So Used a Stick of Wood," about the mighty things God did through Moses' staff. The stick in Moses' hand became the rod of God (Ex. 4:20). Through that stick God judged the Egyptians, supplied for his people's needs, and conquered military enemies. Schaeffer's point is that a dead stick of wood became powerful because it was consecrated to God. Likewise, no matter how little you think you are in God's hand you will be used to accomplish his will in eternally significant ways. There are no little people and no big people, Schaeffer says, only consecrated or unconsecrated. The call on every Christian's life is to seek the lowest place of service to God which he will then transform into consecrated leadership.⁶

In this passage, we see three categories of leaders: dignified, distinguished, and delegated. Each category contains "sticks of wood" made to be leaders by God's grace even as they sought the lowest place of service in grateful response to salvation.

Dignified Leadership (1:12-14)

The first category of leaders we observe in this passage is those dignified by God's magnanimous grace. After the ascension, the apostles returned to Jerusalem as they were commanded in order to await the gift of the Spirit. They were not alone, however. A large number of other disciples were also there bringing the total to one hundred and twenty (15). By naming the participants, the Spirit dignifies them. The apostles are specifically named to remind that there are only eleven. In other words, Judas' shame is highlighted by his exclusion. Two other groups are significantly included—the women and Jesus' brothers.

Think of the categories represented. First, there are the apostles. These were previously unknown men catapulted to revelatory, authoritative, and foundational leadership in Christ's Church. This group

⁶ Francis A. Schaeffer, *No Little People in Complete Works*, v. 3 (Wheaton: Crossway, 1982), 11-12.

includes some who were poor, others who were working class, thieves, and a few troublemakers. These were found by Jesus, transformed by the Good News, and made his leaders. A good or significant reputation is not a prerequisite to coming to Christ and being used by him.

The second category of people dignified by grace is the women. A typical Jewish man regularly prayed, "Thank you for not making me a Gentile or a woman." Women were little more than chattel in large segments of the near eastern world. But they were always dignified by Jesus and they are dignified by the Scriptures. Surely Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Susanna are included besides Jesus' mother. Women figured prominently in Jesus' life and ministry. Some supported him financially (Lk. 8:2,3). The women were the only ones not to abandon him in his death (Lk. 23:49,55-56; 24:1; Jn. 19:25). They were first to his tomb to care for the body and the first to witness his resurrection (Lk. 24:9, 10). The women in the Church are equally significant disciples of and leaders for Christ.

The third category is the unconvinced. This is the first we learn in the Scriptures that Jesus' brothers were eventually converted. Jesus' brothers had refused to believe in him during his earthly ministry (Jn. 7:5). However, during the period between his death and resurrection Jesus appeared to his brother James (1 Co. 15:7) which led apparently not only to James' conversion (Ja. 1:1) but also Jude's (Jude 1) as well as Joseph and Simon's. Jesus turned mockers into ministers!

These sticks of wood, Christ turned into leaders of his Church. And what is their first commission? To return to Jerusalem, God's city, which had been overtaken by man-centered religion. Christ is turning these unknown, insignificant, unconvinced people into conquerors. God, through the power of the Spirit, would use them as he desires to use us to conquer the world by means of the spread of the gospel.

And what are the weapons? While other weapons in the Church's arsenal will be delineated as we study this book, the very first one mentioned is prayer (14). The whole church must live in dependence upon grace as evidenced by devotion to prayer. There must be no self-trust. The necessity of dependence on prayer is a theme that runs throughout apostolic teaching and example (2:42; 6:4; 1 Th. 5:17).

If you are going to be the leader God wants you to be in any organization but especially the Church, you must become a person of prayer. No special training is required, anybody can do it, and everyone must. Of course, prayer is always at your disposal throughout the day and there are endless opportunities for concerted prayer alone or in groups. The call is simply to put it into your life.

Distinguished Leadership (1:23-26)

The second group of leaders is the apostles. They were distinguished by Christ to be the fathers of the church, humbly but authoritatively leading the church family.

It is important to remind ourselves that power is not the sole possession of the apostles or their successors, the elders. The whole Church is empowered by the Spirit—every man, woman, and child. By that power, the people of the Church entrust authority to their elders. Here we see how it plays out in the early Church.

The first item of business facing the New Testament Church was to select a replacement for Judas. There were 12—as there were 12 tribes—a number in the Bible representing the completeness of God’s plan. In Revelation 7:4-8, John says that number of those to be saved will be 144,000. Obviously that is not a literal number because many more than that have professed Christ. It is rather a symbol of entire completeness as the square of twelve. One of the candidates is Joseph Barsabbas, perhaps the brother of Judas Barsabbas mentioned in 15:22. His name means either that his father’s name was Sabbas or that he was born on the Sabbath. Matthias is the abbreviated form of Mattathias which means “gift of Yahweh.”

The qualification for apostleship was that the man had to be an eyewitness of the resurrection because that is the central tenet of the gospel, the doctrine for which Paul would stand to his death before Caesar in Rome. Even though that was a highly distinctive qualification, notice that the apostles did not have sole authority for picking their successor. It was the group of gathered people who cast the lots. Christ’s power is passed to the people who entrust authority to their leaders. As they were in Old Testament times, elders are to be “elders of the people” (Mt. 21:23; 26:3, 47; 27:1). It is Church members who must nominate and elect leaders who in turn serve the people. They also have the power to remove them.

It is important to realize that such authority is entrusted to a plurality of men, not individuals. An elder has no authority until he is seated with his fellow elders. That is why we refer to the ruling body of a local church as the Session.

So how does one seeking the lowest place of service in the Church come to be a distinguished leader? It is by means of what Schaeffer called “extrusion.” He imagines a piece of soft metal being forced into the shape of a die by the pressure of a giant press.⁷ One is made a distinguished leader in the Church, not by seeking it but by being extruded into it. While the Bible says that one who “aspires” to the office of elder desires a noble thing, it does not pronounce blessing on the one who lobbies for such position. Every man in the church should aspire to be an elder, the qualifications for which are little more than the basic duties of a faithful Christian life. But that aspiration should take the form of a prayer something like this, “Lord, so dominate my actions, emotions, and speech that I would be recognized as possessing the qualities of a consistently gracious Christian life whether or not I ever occupy an elected position.”

But distinguished service does not mean more dignity—it means more responsibility and more responsibility means more suffering. The officers of the Church are the gatekeepers of the sheep. They are the ones who put their lives across the threshold as an ancient shepherd did to guard the sheep from wandering out into danger as well as to keep the wolves from entering to destroy. As a result the officers of the Church receive the first blows of the enemy. Your elders and deacons suffer in ways you will never know in order to shepherd you as the flock of God. The elders of our church pray for our people in a concerted way. There are times when I look up at the faces of those men who are praying and take stock of the sufferings each one is going through. Often one does not know the suffering of another, but I know it. And at times it is crushing affliction. It is a moving picture to see a man who is being pummeled by the devil pouring his heart out in intercession for others. That is the noble but costly service of a distinguished leader.

⁷ Schaeffer, *No Little People*, 12,13.

Delegated Leadership (1:15-26)

Finally, Peter is an example of a delegated leader. He is the symbol of a minister of the Word. Peter is delegated by the Spirit to be the leading spokesman among his apostolic equals. Luke gives a revised list of the apostles which excludes Judas Iscariot and has Peter at the beginning. He is separated from his brother Andrew's name by the two brothers James and John. Luke surely intends to denote that Peter is the apostolic spokesman.

Notice, Peter does not speak from his own authority but rather points his listeners immediately to the Word of God. A minister may prescribe no more and no less than what the Word prescribes explicitly and implicitly. Peter quotes from two psalms (Ps. 69:25; 109:8). Only Psalm 22 is referred to in the New Testament more than Psalm 69 as a messianic prophecy.⁸ It is quotations like these which move some to refer to the Psalms as the prayers of Jesus representing the full spectrum of human experience he lived in our place. How could Peter apply these relatively obscure portions of Scripture to this situation? Of course the Spirit enabled but not *ex nihilo*. Peter, under his Savior, had become skilled in his use of Scripture. That is the minister's primary task; it does not matter how well he manages or administrates if he does that well.

The Majestic Testimony (2:1-13)

In chapter one we saw that Christ ascended to heaven to become an even more effective Redeemer for his people. Specifically he went to heaven to secure from the Father the promised Holy Spirit which was poured out on the Church to make her more powerfully effective than she had ever been in redemptive history. Pentecost marked the transition from the Old Testament to the New Testament. It marked the inauguration of what is new in the new covenant. It marked an intensifying of the movement to Christ's triumphant consummation of the ages (1 Co. 10:11; 2 Co. 6:2). And now we live in that era! What does that imply? By means of the gift of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son, we possess a majestic testimony which has the power to conform lives and societies to the Bible. This great gift from the Father and the Son demands a bold and courageous response.

The Father's Gift (2:1)

The Greek sentence in v.1 begins with the word "and" indicating that Christ's ascension and Pentecost are to be linked (Kistemaker 75). As mentioned earlier, Christ ascended to receive the gift of the Spirit promised to him. The Father is ultimately to be credited with the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4,5) just as he is the one who gave his Son for us (Jn. 3:16). But the Father did not wait until Pentecost to give the Spirit. He gave the Spirit to his Son in order to accomplish our full redemption.

From the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, it is obvious that the Spirit is directing and enabling that ministry. John said that Jesus' baptism would be of the Spirit and of fire. In the Bible, baptism marks

⁸ The parenthetical comment in v.18 appears to be contradictory with Matthew's account. Luke says that Judas bought the field even though Matthew explains that the chief priests and elders did (Mt. 27:3-10). There is no conflict because the religious leaders refused to receive back the "blood money" they had given Judas. It remained his so that they viewed the money they gave for the field still to belong to him.

joining to or identifying with. Jesus' baptism of the Spirit meant that he was joined to the work of the Spirit such that everything he did and said was through the Spirit's power providing a paradigm for how we must live the Christian life. Furthermore, it would be by the Spirit's empowerment that Christ would undergo the most impossible baptism of fire, meaning his entire course of redemption concluding with the cross. Jesus was "distressed" until that was completed and in his humanity he could not have engaged in it had the Spirit not led him (Lk. 4:1). John expected that baptism of fire to be judgment that Christ would bring on the world (Lk. 7:18-23). He was not prepared for the fact that the fire Jesus would bring would be upon himself.

When Jesus tells the disciples that the Father would baptize them with the Spirit as he had been baptized, he did not say they would also be baptized with *fire*. The fire which came with their baptism by the Spirit was not the fire of *judgment* on them; that judgment had already been borne by Jesus. The fire with which they were baptized was a gracious message to them and for the world. It was in the form of tongues to symbolize that they were given a message empowered by the Spirit, which would bring life to those who believed it and judgment to those who rejected it.

We must never allow ourselves to think that there is one person of the Godhead kinder and more gracious than another. Specifically, we must never think that the Father was the angry one whom the Son saved us from. Jesus gives us a peek behind the curtain of their pre-historical plan to save the world. The Father had promised the Spirit to Christ for the good of his Church upon the completion of his redemptive task. That promise was first historically revealed in the Old Testament (Ez. 36:27; Is. 52:15; 53:12; Ps. 2:8), described by Jesus in the Gospels (Lk. 24:49; Jn. 14:16) and obviously fulfilled in Acts. The Father is for you. He is for you to be saved, to be conformed to his will, and to be a witness to the world.

The Son's Gift (2:2-4)

Upon receiving the gift of the Spirit from the Father, the Son gave the Spirit to the Church in order to create a new community.

After Luke records that each person heard the gospel in his own language (2:4), he provides a table of nations indicating that the gospel spread far beyond the rather localized focus of the book of Acts (2:8-12).⁹ The diversifying of languages followed by a table of nations is reminiscent of Babel (Gn. 10:1-32). The indication is that the curse of Babel is reversed. Babel, of course, marked the scattering of a rebellious community while Pentecost marks the reconciliation of a new community. Howard Marshall says that one hundred and twenty men were required for the founding of a new community with its own council. Therefore, the 120 in Acts one are the founding members of a new community united by the Spirit.

This new community is characterized by love for one another. In the Church, Jesus begins to rebuild the world the way it was supposed to be. The whole world was supposed to be not for itself, but for each

⁹ Acts focuses on the development of the Church to the north and west of Jerusalem. This table represents a representation surrounding Jerusalem in every direction.

other. The whole world was supposed to be like fathers and brothers and sisters and mothers. In the Church, we begin to realize that, not perfectly, but more so than in any other society on earth.

At the same time, the gift of foreign tongues is a warning of judgment. In 1 Corinthians Paul says that tongues are a sign of judgment on unbelievers, a mark of covenant rejection as when men of a foreign tongue conquered God's rebellious people in the Old Testament (Is. 23:11-12; 1 Co. 14:21,22). At Pentecost God began the partial hardening of his covenant people Israel who had rejected their Messiah and begins to turn the focus to the Gentiles. But Paul informs that such is only God's strategy for a great work of salvation among the Jews (Ro. 11:25). The warning is that if you reject the gospel, you reject the family God is building and you will be left all alone into all of eternity.

This new community is also characterized by new lives. The New Testament draws a parallel between Pentecost and Sinai where the law was first given through Moses. The giving of the law at Sinai was similarly accompanied by wind, fire, and divine tongue. Moses ascended the mountain and returned with the law which no one could keep. Christ now ascends to heaven and returns with his Spirit to enable the keeping of that same law (He. 12:18-21). He thus fulfills the Old Testament promise to write the law on his people's hearts (Je. 31:31-34; Ro. 8:3,4; 2 Co. 3:7-11).¹⁰

The Son is *for you*. By giving his Spirit to you the Church, the Son reveals that he is *for you* to become who you were created to be by living for others rather than yourself. He is *for you* to experience true love by living in a community of true unconditional love. He is *for you* to be restored to the image in which you were originally created by being conformed to his gracious law. And he is *for you* to bear witness to the world of those abundant blessings.

The Spirit's Gift (2:5-13)

The Father and the Son give the Spirit for the Church's good and the Spirit gives himself specifically to empower us to reach the world with this same gospel which transforms lives and communities to the Word of God. There is no mistaking that the Spirit's descent on the Church was mind-boggling in the power of its manifestation. Look at the descriptions of the people's response, "bewilderment" (6), "utterly amazed" (7), "amazed and perplexed" (12). Almost equally amazing is the power of unbelief when some casually dismissed the whole seen as an act of public drunkenness (13).

Two images are used of the Spirit which help us grasp just how powerful his arrival was.

The first image is wind. The words for wind and spirit in Hebrew, Greek and Latin were interchangeable. They were even spoken in onomatopoeia so that the word itself sounded like wind (*ruach*, *pneuma*, and *spiritus* respectively).

Wind is a significant redemptive-historical motif in the Bible. The first occurrence is the Spirit's (the *ruach*, or "God's breath") hovering over the waters assisting in bringing form and order to the newly birthed creation (Ge. 1:1-2). The next occurrence is God's breathing into Adam's nostrils to give him life (Ge. 2:7). Wind figures prominently in the giving of the law for the first time at Sinai (Ex. 19:16-

¹⁰ Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 57-68

19).¹¹ Then in the New Testament, besides Pentecost, the most prominent mention of wind is in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus in which he says that Nicodemus must be born from above by the Holy Spirit's regenerating him. To impress on Nicodemus the Spirit's sovereignty in this work, he compares him to the wind saying that he blows where he wills; no one controls him (Jn. 3:5-8).

Together these images convey the unparalleled power to create out of nothing. The wind of God created worlds out of nothing, life out of death, law-keepers out of stony hearts, thousands of new believers out of a dead religion, and evangelists who would turn the world upside down out of cowardly disciples. The Spirit has come to the Church with the same amount of power used to create the world and raise the dead, and that power lives in you!

The other image used to indicate the Spirit's arrival is fire. In the Old Testament, fire represented the holy, just, gracious and merciful presence of God. God's holy presence is represented in the burning bush (Ex. 3:2-5). God's justice is represented by the fire that consumed Elijah's sacrifice (1 Kg. 18:38). Furthermore, fire symbolizes cleansing judgment in the Old Testament as was the case at Sodom (Ge. 19). And Abraham experienced God's gracious presence in his vision of God as a firepot moving between the halves of the offering implying a curse on himself if he were ever untrue to his covenant (Ge. 15). His merciful presence is expressed in the pillar which accompanied the Israelites in the desert. That pillar of fire also protected them from danger and warmed them at night. It was a symbol of God's merciful presence.

His presence is making people holy. He is in the process of justly cleansing the world of sin. His showing up has put the devil and his minions on the run. And his people are being more and more overwhelmed with the realization of his mercy and grace which will eventually explode into a never-ending chorus of praise to the Savior. And that transforming presence is with you!

The Spirit empowers the Church against all odds to live boldly and courageously in conformity to the Bible. The Bible, expressing God's will for his people, often cuts across the grain of what we want or what is comfortable. Sometimes living in conformity to it can mean death. But the Spirit which brings the power of the presence of Christ to his people enables them to live and die with utterly amazing courage, as we shall see in the lives of the apostles in our study of Acts.

¹¹ Perhaps the reason God was not in the wind when his word came to Elijah was that he was not doing a new work through Elijah. The emphasis was on the fact that he had been doing a mighty work proven by 7000 who had not bowed the knee to Baal (1 Kg. 19:10-18).

Questions for Further Reflection

1. *What are the things you want to remember from this lesson?
2. *How does this lesson inform your thinking about how Christ builds his Church?
3. Knowing that “the Spirit empowers the Church against all odds to live boldly and courageously in conformity to the Bible,” what will you ask God to help you with this week by Christ’s enabling grace and Holy Spirit?