

RECONSIDERING THE PENTECOST MATERIALS IN ACTS ECCLESIOLOGICALLY

Richard P. Thompson
Northwest Nazarene University

Introduction

The Wesleyan-Holiness tradition has often gravitated toward selected theological images from Acts, particularly the Pentecost event and references to the Spirit, over others. When it comes to ecclesiology, Pauline considerations of the Church dominate most conversations about biblical teachings of the subject. Considerations of Acts in such discussions typically center on its ideal descriptions of the Church¹ (e.g., summary statements: 2:42-47, 4:32-37) and pneumatological images of power, being “filled with the Spirit,” “signs and wonders,” etc., not as theological contributions to the discussion but historical description from the “golden age of the Church.” These Acts materials tend to be interpreted largely as historical precedents for subsequent centuries of the Church to emulate. Yet such readings often *misread* these passages within the Acts narrative and minimize Lukan *theological* contributions to ecclesiology. Because of the central place of Pentecost in Acts, this essay seeks to articulate a distinctly *Lukan* voice to ecclesiological conversations by contending that a reading of Acts 2 within the broader narrative framework of Acts reveals a distinctly theological redefinition of the concept “people of God” that is more *theocentric* and *christocentric* than *pneumacentric* in orientation.

1. A Consideration of Pentecost and Peter’s Explanatory Speech (2:1-41)

The placement of the extraordinary events on Pentecost early in Acts indicates this to be *the* dramatic turning point for the Jesus movement and the book. Note that the narrator gives little attention to the dramatic scene itself (2:1-13). Although Luke provides some preliminary instructions from Jesus (1:5, 8) to assist in interpreting the Spirit-activity (2:4), the subsequent Petrine explanatory speech receives the primary attention in Acts 2. Whereas most attention in church circles and commentaries focuses on the extraordinary activities associated with the Spirit’s outpouring, the chapter is mostly devoted to *explanation*, not *description*. Its major topics lay the theological foundation for Acts, including its ecclesiology.

¹ Cf. Alan J. Thompson, “*One Lord, One People: The Unity of the Church in Acts in Its Literary Setting* (London/New York: T.&T. Clark, 2008).

a. The fulfillment of God's promises and purposes for Israel as the people of God

The citation from Joel (2:17-21), which was a promise to Israel, explains the phenomenon regarding the Spirit's coming upon Jesus' followers as indicative that God fulfilled that promise as part of God's eschatological acts of salvation on their behalf. The speech draws attention *from* the extraordinary nature of the Pentecost event and toward the fact God acted as God promised.

Although persons often identify this event as the birth of the church, the Lukan perspective through Peter's speech points instead to what God has done on behalf of *all Israel* as the people of God. I.e., the Lukan ecclesiology has a broader perspective from the outset, based on the Septuagint's use of *ekklēsia* as the assembly of God's people.² This was entirely a *Jewish* event: during their festival, at their temple, with all Jewish participants and bystanders, with the God of the Jewish people initiating what happened and implementing what *their* God vowed centuries before. Its significance is in what God did to fulfill God's promises/purposes among the called people of God. Other appearances of the Spirit, at Cornelius's house (10:44-46) and Ephesus with the twelve disciples (19:1-6) allude back to this same Pentecost scene. However, other images of persons filled by the Spirit or receiving messages from the Spirit convey them as God's prophets and reveal God at work.³

b. The role of God in the resurrection of Jesus

Closely related to the divine fulfillment of God's promises/purposes for Israel is the role of God regarding Jesus' crucifixion and death. Although Peter's speech explains that the Jewish response to Jesus was the rejection of God's purposes, Peter also repeatedly underscores God's response, first by undoing their murder of Jesus (see 2:23-24, 33) and then by honoring him: God exalted Jesus by placing him in the position of divine honor and authority (2:33, 36). I.e., *God's*

² See 7:38, which uses *ekklēsia* in this Septuagintal sense; cf. also Deut 4:10; 9:10; 18:16; 23:2-4, 9; 31:30; Josh 9:2; Judg 20:2; 21:5, 8; 1 Sam 17:47; 1 Kgs 8:14, 22, 55, 65; Mic 2:5; Joel 2:16.

³ E.g., 2:2-4 appropriates images from the OT and from other Jewish and Greco-Roman writings that connote prophet inspiration. See William H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Narrative Function of the Holy Spirit as a Character in Luke-Acts* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1994), esp. 245-50.

approval, not human rejection, had the final say. The speech does not explain the salvific importance of Jesus' death and resurrection (e.g., atonement), although these are later linked to repentance, baptism, and the forgiveness of sins (2:38).⁴ Nonetheless, the Lukan focus on God's reversal of the rejection of Jesus by God's chosen people affirms the constancy and reliability of God's plans and purposes.

c. The Christological "twist" to this divine fulfillment

A third emphasis of this speech is the role of Jesus in God's fulfillment of the divine promises and purposes for Israel. Luke depicts Pentecost in Jewish terms, and the Joel citation (2:17-21) maintains a similar orientation. But the repeated emphasis on the resurrected and exalted Jesus coaxes readers to see this divine fulfillment in terms of *Christology* rather than *pneumatology*, although the narrative itself often uses *Spirit*-language to describe the believers.⁵

The speech demands a radical change in perspective. Although God accomplished what God promised, the agent who accomplished this among the Jewish people was *Jesus*, the same one whom they were responsible for murdering. The crucial role of Jesus in this divine fulfillment is *the* distinctive aspect of Peter's message and the gospel as later proclaimed. The gospel message declared to God's people how God kept and accomplished those promises to them ... through Jesus as Lord and Christ/Messiah (2:36).⁶ That is, God raised and exalted Jesus as Lord and Christ/Messiah, thereby giving the promised Spirit to Jesus (2:33). Thus, Jesus received the Spirit and was the agent who "poured out the Spirit." Without this distinctively *Christological* emphasis regarding Pentecost, nothing about this event related to the Christian gospel. Thus, the Pentecost experience of the Jesus movement did not signify divine actions *apart* from the Jewish people but *within* her. The Spirit's outpouring through Jesus as Lord and Christ/Messiah signifies how God fulfilled God's purposes/promises within the people of God.

⁴ Cf. H. Douglas Buckwalter, "The Divine Saviour," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (ed. I. H. Marshall and D. Peterson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 107-20.

⁵ See Max Turner, "The 'Spirit of Prophecy' as the Power of Israel's Restoration and Witness," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, 332-33.

⁶ See C. Kavin Rowe, "Acts 2.36 and the Continuity of Lukan Christology," *New Testament Studies* 53 (2007): 37-56.

But this is where the common Lukan description of members of this movement as “believers” and the importance of “believing” or “faith” come into the picture. In most instances in Acts, believing is left undefined. In a few cases believing is qualified: “in the Lord” (9:42), “in him” (i.e., Jesus; 10:43), “on the Lord Jesus” (16:31). Or, this faith is described as “in our Lord Jesus” (20:21) or “in Jesus” (26:18). *Every* qualification comes later after the initial period of the Jesus movement in Jerusalem, as the gospel/church spreads throughout the Mediterranean world. There is little mention of such faith after chapter 21 (except for 22:19; 24:24; 26:18), once Paul has returned to Jerusalem after the conclusion of his ministry in Acts.

d. The inclusive dimension of that salvific promise

The last portion of the Joel passage is widely recognized as programmatic for Acts as a whole: “And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (2:21). In this Pentecost context, this passage has a double meaning, as Peter says more than he knew or meant. On the one hand, his later consternation over the vision with the unclean animals in Caesarea (10:9-19) indicates that he only understood this as a reference to the people of Israel. Similarly, this idea was not embraced by the church in Jerusalem, as the spread of the Christian movement outside Jerusalem did not occur as an intentional response to Jesus’ call (1:8) but as a result of opposition after Stephen’s death (8:1-3). On the other hand, the broader context of Acts indicates the salvific implications of this promise beyond the Jewish people. This inclusive aspect of the Christian message continually echoes throughout Acts in its use of the terms *sōzō* and *sōtēria* (salvation terminology), especially in Peter’s two explanations about what happened with Cornelius (11:14; 15:14). However, evidence of the concept is apparent wherever both Jews and Gentiles respond to the Christian message, whether the text explicitly mentions this or not.

2. A Correlation of the Pentecost Materials to the Broader Context of Acts

As the first major speech in Acts, Peter’s explanatory speech at Pentecost provides the theological trajectories for the narrative holistically as well as more specifically for the ecclesiology of Acts.⁷ These theological trajectories may be identified in several ways. For

⁷ Speeches in Greco-Roman historiography and Acts functioned as implicit commentary: interpreting what happened through a reliable character and offering insight for upcoming materials. See, e.g., Robert C. Tannehill, “The Functions of Peter’s Mission Speeches in the

instance, the pivotal points of chapters 10–11 and chapter 15, which narrate and then twice interpret the Cornelius event in light of Pentecost and its explanatory speech, indicate the importance of the theological/Christological connections that Luke appropriates throughout this broader section. Of similar note are numerous references to Jesus as the Christ/Messiah⁸ and to his resurrection,⁹ which allude back to the emphases of the Pentecost speech (as well as the supplemental Christological materials in the speeches in Acts 3–4).

Of particular importance for this project are the themes from Peter’s Pentecost speech that are echoed later in Paul’s Miletus speech (20:18-35). This is Paul’s final speech in Acts and the only one addressed to disciples. It provides the opposite bookend of the Pentecost materials, as it comes at the end not only of Paul’s ministry but of the church’s ministry portion church in Acts.¹⁰ The literary placement of these two speeches around the depiction of the early church’s development is noteworthy in considering aspects of a Lukan ecclesiology. Consider some of the following theological/thematic similarities between the two speeches. In Peter’s Pentecost speech, God fulfilled divine promises to Israel as God’s people that were first articulated by the prophet Joel (2:17-21). In Paul’s Miletus speech, God was responsible for bringing the church into being (20:28).¹¹ In Peter’s speech, the emphasis is on Jesus as both Lord and Christ/Messiah (2:36), who serves as God’s agent in restoring Israel and calls the people to repent (2:38). In Paul’s speech, he refers to repentance and “faith in our Lord Jesus” (20:21). In Peter’s speech, the reminder in mission is that “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”

Narrative of Acts,” *New Testament Studies* 37 (1991): 400-414; Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

⁸ See 8:5, 12; 9:22; 10:36, 48; 11:17; 17:3; 18:5, 28; 28:31. Note theological themes, especially the inclusive aspect of salvation, associated with this Christological message as the church spread.

⁹ See 13:30-37; 17:3, 18, 31-32; 25:19; 26:23.

¹⁰ Since 19:20 signals the end of Paul’s ministry (with 19:21-41, since Paul remains briefly in Ephesus), 20:1–21:17 appears as a unified section. Paul’s Miletus speech is at its center, with ecclesiological issues among its major themes. See Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “Theology and Ecclesiology in the Miletus Speech: Reflections on Content and Context,” *New Testament Studies* 50 (2004): 36-52.

¹¹ Cf. Gaventa, “Theology and Ecclesiology in the Miletus Speech,” 48-49.

(2:21). In Paul's speech, he reminded the Ephesians that he declared the gospel to both Jews and Greeks (20:21).

The broader context shared with Paul's Miletus speech also draws from prior Lukan images of the church related to Pentecost. Within the four brief travel reports that frame the Miletus speech (20:1–21:17), the reader is encouraged to look retrospectively into Acts from an ecclesiological perspective. The narrator offers scenes of different local churches reminiscent of “the good old days” in Jerusalem, including fellowship and teaching (20:7-12, 18-35; cf. 2:42-47) as well as prophecy (21:7-14; cf. 2:17-21).¹² In addition, Paul's speech underscores (albeit with considerable ambiguity in details) the divine origins of the church (20:28, 32), a prominent point throughout the entire preceding narrative. However, this broader context with its positive ecclesiological perspectives appears immediately before Paul's final visit to Jerusalem and the church there, an episode that comparatively fares rather poorly, as it quickly deteriorates because persons raised serious allegations against Paul that ultimately led to Paul's near execution outside the temple (21:18-36). This problematic episode prompts serious questions about the relationship between the Jerusalem church and Paul and even about the church's responses to him.¹³ However, the literary placement of this episode also prompts important ecclesiological questions in the later Jerusalem situation, given this episode's narrative appearance after the Miletus speech, where the last mention of *ekklēsia* (20:28) occurs in Acts, a term that Luke often uses to depict the Jerusalem believers (5:11; 8:1-3; 11:22; 12:1, 5; 15:4, 22).

3. Reading Acts Narratively and Ecclesologically in Light of Pentecost and Peter's Speech

Beginning with Pentecost and Peter's explanatory speech in Acts, one should not be surprised by the suggestion that this book, canonically entitled “The Acts of the Apostles”, may be better understood differently, since *divine* rather than *apostolic* activity takes center stage. More evidence supports the *former* view, since the apostles disappear after chapter 15. It is also

¹² Gaventa, “Theology and Ecclesiology in the Miletus Speech,” 37-40.

¹³ Because of Luke's silence about any believers in Jerusalem coming to Paul's aid, especially after their suspicions about him (21:20-22), Luke's hyperbolic description of the “entire city” seeking to kill him (21:30) may include them. See my “‘Say it ain't so, Paul!’ The Accusations against Paul (Acts 21) in Light of His Ministry in Acts,” *Biblical Research* 45 (2000): 34-50; and Stanley E. Porter, *Paul in Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 172-86.

not accurate to suggest that this work be called “The Acts of the Holy Spirit,” as though the Holy Spirit takes center stage as the story’s primary character.¹⁴ The narrator consistently depicts God as the mover behind the Christian movement. In a manner not dissimilar to the Septuagint (the language which Acts repeatedly mirrors), God’s activity occurs on behalf of and in the midst of those depicted as “the people of God.”

So how does this Lukan account of Pentecost and Peter’s speech contribute to a reading of Acts that takes seriously its portrayal of the church in those earliest years? Although there are multiple possibilities to consider, this study gives attention to three contributions. First, Acts focuses on *the doxological nature of the church*. One early example is found in the summary following Pentecost. Whereas 2:42 is commonly interpreted as listing four essential practices of the church, a imperfect periphrastic construction emphasizes the believers’ constant devotion to *two* parallel sets of practices:

. . . to the teaching of the apostles and to the fellowship,
to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.

These pairs of practices refer to two general corporate activities that are linked together: those related to *the worship of God*, and those related to *social practices among believers*.¹⁵ Rather than describing four distinct practices,¹⁶ Luke suggests social practices affirming the believers’ unity and oneness were linked to their worshiping or doxological context (cf. 2:47; 10:46; 19:17). In turn, evidence of God’s blessing was described narratively in terms of extraordinary growth (2:41, 47; 4:4; 6:7; 12:24). To extract these descriptions of practices or growth from the narrative as normative indicators of what the church should look like in contemporary times misinterprets their function within Acts: to indicate that the church, as the people of God, should first be about the worship of the One who calls and shapes her to be a holy people.

¹⁴ See, e.g., the title of Graham H. Twelftree’s work, *People of the Spirit: Exploring Luke’s View of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), which illustrates this kind of focus on the Spirit.

¹⁵ Cf. Gerhard Schneider, *Die Apostelgeschichte* (2 vols.; Freiburg: Herder, 1980-82), 1:286.

¹⁶ See, e.g., I. Howard Marshall, “Holiness in the Book of Acts,” in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament* (ed. K. E. Brower and A. Johnson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 125-26.

Second, Acts focuses on *the missional nature of the church*. As Luke tells the story, the power of the Spirit was given not for personal experience but for mission and witness (1:8). Persons were “filled with the Spirit” so that they may have boldness to offer their witness about Jesus as the Christ/Messiah (see, e.g., 2:4; 4:8). After the scattering of the believers from Jerusalem, the role of the Spirit changes, with greater emphasis on persons “receiving the Spirit” (e.g., 8:15, 17) in ways that linked their experience with those in Jerusalem (2:38). But the Spirit also functions as Acts unfolds more as divine guide and messenger, typically with an emphasis on mission.¹⁷ Noteworthy are descriptions of select individuals—usually apostles, one of the Seven, or Paul—as doing “signs and wonders” (2:43; 5:12; 6:8; 14:3; 15:12), not as merely the accomplishment of extraordinary deeds but as *signs* of divine blessing as these set out to fulfill the divine mission as God called them. Such narrative descriptions were reminiscent of Jesus (2:22), for Peter explained that God confirmed Jesus’ identity in this way, which echoes OT descriptions of God’s actions on behalf of Israel in Egypt (e.g., Deut 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 34:11; Ps 135:9; Jer 32:20-21). Whereas these are often extracted from Acts as normative descriptions for contemporary believers, such readings minimize their narrative role *within* Acts. Such descriptions function to link the mission of the church to God’s broader mission and story.

Third, Acts focuses on *the inclusive nature of the church*. The progressive movement of the Acts plot depicts the church taking the gospel into the world as God leads her into increasing diverse contexts: from Jerusalem to Samaria, then to Cornelius and the Gentiles, then the beginning of Paul’s ministry among both Jews and Gentiles in what is now modern-day Turkey, and then into Europe. What began as the fulfillment of God’s promises among only Jewish believers in Jerusalem became a movement extending God’s grace to both Jews and Gentiles (15:8-9; cf. 11:19-30). The tension that Paul faced in Jewish synagogues (e.g., 13:43-48; 17:1-15; 18:1-17; 19:8-11) and his final visit to Jerusalem (21:18-36) was likely over the inclusiveness of salvation to which Peter alluded as a result of God’s fulfilled promise to Israel. Although that tension indicates opposition to God’s divine plan and division among the Jewish people over it, Luke also uses these images to depict a different—albeit inclusive—image of the “people of God” in continuity with God’s salvific purposes and activity among that historic people all

¹⁷ See, e.g., 8:29, 39; 9:17; 10:19; 11:12; 13:2-4.

along.¹⁸ Like other contributions to the Acts narrative, how such inclusiveness with regard to the church may “play out” in contemporary contexts must first consider more specifically its nature and role in relation to God and God’s purposes of salvation.

Conclusion

The narrative nature of Acts does not lend itself to a systematic treatment of subjects such as ecclesiology.¹⁹ But one may still propose that “the church,” if understood in general terms, functions as both a prominent character and theological thread within Acts.²⁰ Many passages—some mere glimpses,²¹ others prolonged stares²² into activities and dynamics of local churches—cumulatively provide insights into a general Lukan perspective regarding the church and ecclesiology.²³ Whereas other biblical voices are often given preference in conversations about ecclesiology, such distinctive canonical voices must also be heard. But equally important is making sure that all canonical voices are interpreted appropriately, including Acts, by assessing those materials through their own internal theological lens. And so the interpretation of descriptions of the church in Acts must consider the themes of the Pentecost event and Peter’s explanatory speech in chapter 2.

¹⁸ See Jacob Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 41-74.

¹⁹ Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “Toward a Theology of Acts: Reading and Rereading,” *Interpretation* 42 (1988): 146-57.

²⁰ See Richard P. Thompson, *Keeping the Church in Its Place: The Church as Narrative Character in Acts* (London/New York: T.&T. Clark, 2006); cf. David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 47-48.

²¹ E.g., 14:20; 16:40; 17:4, 34.

²² E.g., 4:32–5:16; 6:1-7; 11:1-18, 19-30; 20:17-38.

²³ Cf. Karl Ludwig Schmidt, “*ekklēsia*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (10 vols.; ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76), 3:504-5.