

The Acts of the Non-apostles

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The Acts of the Apostles, it is often said, would be more appropriately titled *The Acts of the Holy Spirit*. The Holy Spirit is the main character, “an almost tangible force, visible if not in itself, certainly in its effects” (*New Intl Dictionary of NT Theology*, p. 698) in this story of the movement of God’s word. Luke tells this story primarily through the ministries of Peter and Paul, yet a great many other believers also populate the pages of Acts. This paper will focus on the non-apostolic people--people other than the 12 apostles and Paul--in the first 15 chapters of Acts, through the pivotal Jerusalem Council. While looking at the work of the Holy Spirit through these people, implications for the Spirit’s work through the people of today’s church will also be suggested.

Non-apostolic believers in Acts encompass a wide variety of individuals. The church as a whole is frequently mentioned, as in 2:44, “All the believers were together and had everything in common” and 12:5, “the church was earnestly praying.” Luke’s periodic progress reports often reference believers, as in 6:7, “The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly,” and 9:31, “the church . . . grew in numbers.” Many non-apostolic believers are named, including the lowly and women, such as Jesus’ mother Mary (1:14), the paralytic Aeneas (9:33-35), and the servant Rhoda (12:13-15). Other individuals are key figures, such as James, the leader of the Jerusalem church; Ananias, who was used to give Paul his sight and his commission; Stephen, the first martyr; Barnabas, partner in Paul’s first missionary journey; and Mark, the Gospel writer. Groups of believers also played important roles, including the six men from Joppa who



accompanied Peter to Cornelius's home (10:23b) and later supported Peter in Jerusalem (11:12) when he was criticized; the elders in Jerusalem (15:4); and Saul's early followers who lowered him in a basket through an opening in the Damascus city wall (9:25) to help him escape death. Luke also includes believers who paint a negative picture; for example, Ananias and Sapphira, who lied (5:1-10); the Grecian Jews who complained against the Hebraic Jews (6:1); the circumcised believers who criticized Peter (11:2).

What can we learn from such a disparate group of characters? Fee and Stuart would have us first note the main points of the text before we move to hermeneutics and apply the text to today. "The only proper control for hermeneutics is to be found *in the original intent of the biblical text* (2003, p. 29, emphasis theirs). "A text cannot mean what it never meant" (p. 30). We must therefore look first at the role of non-apostolic believers in the main points made by the Holy Spirit through Luke.

What We Learn From Luke's Major Points

1. The Holy Spirit creates and leads the church--God's people.

Luke's first sentence, "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus *began* [emphasis added] to do and to teach . . .," ties this work and its purpose to his prior work, his Gospel. Acts therefore shows what Jesus *continued* to do and to teach, after his ascension, through the Holy Spirit. Acts 1:8 outlines the path Jesus' word will take—"in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." Though many people are involved in carrying the word, Luke is clear that it is all done by the Spirit. Again and again, people are "filled with the Spirit" and "led by the Spirit," including such non-apostles as Stephen (6:5, 10;



7:55), Philip (8:29), Barnabas (11:24), Agabus (11:28), and the Psidian Antioch disciples (13:52).

The role of the Spirit is emphasized in Acts 2:17-21, a quote from Joel 2:28-32. The passage occupies an important position, at the beginning of Peter's (and the church's) first public proclamation of the faith, on Pentecost, to the crowd that was drawn when the Holy Spirit came in wind and fire to the small band of 120 believers. The passage emphasizes that the Spirit comes to "all people . . . sons and daughters . . . young men . . . old men . . . my servants, both men and women" (v. 17-18). The result of receiving the Spirit is that God's people will "prophesy," a result emphasized by its repetition in verse 17 and 18. Luther (Vol. 18; p. 106) notes that the outpouring of the Spirit predicted by Joel and occurring on Pentecost marks a change: "There will not be some order—as there was in that old people [the Israelites]—of those who alone had the power of priestly function. Instead, the Holy Spirit will be poured out on all flesh. All will be teachers and priests of God." Balge (2005, p. 27) notes the relevance of this passage both for the rest of the book of Acts and also for the church today:

God promised through Joel that all people, male and female, old and young, would receive the Spirit. All would proclaim God's message to others after receiving his revelation. . . . This outpouring, which began on Pentecost, continues today wherever the gospel is preached.

With Pentecost, "the church is now equipped for the task of witness and mission, and proceeds straightaway to undertake it" (Marshall 1980, p. 67). The continuing work of the Spirit is seen in most detail in the ministries of Peter and Paul, but it is also seen through the many non-apostles who spread the word. In the persecution that accompanied Stephen's death "all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria" and "those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went" (8:1,4). Philip "proclaimed the Christ" in Samaria (8:5),



“told . . . the good news” to an Ethiopian eunuch (8:35), and then “appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea” (8:40). Other non-apostles who brought the gospel specifically to Gentiles are mentioned in item number 2 below.

The church today continues to rely on the Spirit’s presence and guiding. Yet many churches also have a natural caution to avoid the pitfalls associated with an overemphasis on charismatic gifts and worship. Perhaps that caution at times leads us away from an awareness of, and reliance upon, the Spirit comparable to the awareness of and reliance on the Spirit by believers in Acts. An increased reliance on the Spirit today would likely be demonstrated by increased prayer. Our planning, working and fellowship together would be infused with prayer, rather than simply (and sometimes perfunctorily) begun with prayer. Believers in Acts “all joined together constantly in prayer” (1:14), “devoted themselves . . . to prayer” (2:42), and, when Peter was imprisoned, was “earnestly praying to God for him” (12:5). An increased reliance on the Holy Spirit would also result in increased alertness for his activity in our lives and the lives of others, believers and unbelievers alike, with heightened anticipation and expectation of the Spirit’s action. Perhaps here is an instance where we would not aim to imitate the church in Acts. Despite their earnest prayers for Peter, when he was led from the jail by an angel and came to the place where they were praying, they at first didn’t believe it was possible (12:15)! An increased reliance on the Holy Spirit would certainly also bring with it two other qualities: increased joy, so that we might be like the disciples in Psidian Antioch, “filled with joy and the Holy Spirit” (13:52) and increased boldness, as in 4:31 where “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly.” Of this last verse, Franzmann (1964, p. 13) says: “The word



which we are forced to translate with ‘boldness’ is the outstanding characteristic of the Spirit-filled church in action. It signifies that free, glad, courageous confidence, that robust health of faith which comes from the assurance of free access to God the Father given in Christ by the Spirit.”

2. God wants all people to be saved.

As itemized above, non-apostles were an integral part of the Spirit’s work in carrying Jesus and his teaching to the known world. They were also involved in the challenge of the inclusion of the Gentiles. The story of Cornelius, a key non-apostle, is given in detail and with repetition. In chapter 10, the appearance of the angel to Cornelius is detailed twice. Peter’s speech in chapter 11 repeats both his vision and the events at Cornelius’s house which were in chapter 10. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit “on all [in Cornelius’ home] who heard the message” (10:44), “astonished” (10:45) Peter’s Jewish companions and confirmed to Peter that this was God’s will. When questioned in Jerusalem, he said, “If God gave them the same gift as he gave us . . . who was I to think that I could oppose God?” (11:17)

It was unnamed men from Cyprus and Cyrene who “went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks [Gentiles] also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (11:20-21). Barnabas was a key to Paul’s extensive ministry to the Gentiles in several ways. When the Jerusalem disciples were understandably afraid of Paul on his first visit there after his conversion, Barnabas “brought [Paul] to the apostles” (9:27) and spoke for his authenticity. Later, when Barnabas was sent by Jerusalem leaders to investigate the reports of Gentile believers in Antioch, Barnabas



deliberately sought out Paul and brought him to Antioch (11:25-26), to the church from which his missionary travels originated. Barnabas partnered Paul on the first journey, sharing in the proclamations (13:5; 14:1, 21, 25), miracles (14:3), and persecution (13:50).

The Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 addressed the crucial question of whether or not the Gentiles must adhere to Jewish ceremonial law, particularly circumcision. “The apostles and the elders met to consider this question” (15:6). Those elders, and James, who as head of the Jerusalem church gives his judgment in 15:19, were non-apostles who deliberated alongside the apostles on this pivotal issue. Two “leaders among the brothers” (15:22), Judas called Barsabbas and Silas, were sent to Antioch to convey the Council’s decision.

Luke does not try to disguise the fact that God’s desire for all to be saved caused controversy and made many uncomfortable in the early church. “God moves ahead of the other characters. But at the human level, Luke shows how difficult and intricate is the effort of the Church to keep up with God’s action, follow God’s initiatives, understand the precedents being established.” (Johnson 1992, p. 15) Although the particular issue of Gentile inclusion is no longer an issue today, we too need reminders that God desires all to be saved. We too may experience discomfort and conflict regarding how to respond. As the society and culture of the United States has changed in recent decades from a Christian society, at least nominally so, to a blatantly secular, pluralistic society, Christian belief and culture is increasingly different than societal belief and culture. In addition, as the world shrinks with increased travel, immigration and communication, our local communities encompass many cultures. We often must step outside our comfort zones, as did the believers in Acts, to reach the people around us. We too must carefully distinguish between God’s unchanging word, and our own particular ceremonies



and customs, to effectively follow where the Holy Spirit is working, and share our faith to “the ends of the earth” in our own backyards.

3. God’s word impacts people. It also brings opposition, rejection and conflict.

The conflict in the church regarding the inclusion of Gentiles and their submission to Jewish law was noted above. Another incidence of conflict, complaints of inequity in food distribution, is included in chapter 6. Although its primary reason for inclusion is most likely to introduce Stephen and Philip, the major figures in chapters 7 and 8, it also indicates that the church is not immune from human failings. The apostles could be said to have used sanctified common sense in asking the whole group to select seven men “full of the Spirit and wisdom” (6:3) to handle the distribution.

More seriously, as the Spirit works and God’s word is spread, there is also physical danger, rejection and outright opposition. The apostles, as leading figures, may have born the brunt of these trials, but non-apostles were not spared. Stephen was stoned to death (7:60). In his early persecution, “going from house to house, [Saul] dragged off men and women and put them in prison” (8:3). He went to Damascus “so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem” (9:2). As noted above, Barnabas shared some of Paul’s persecution (13:50). At times, as indicated in 9:31, the church “enjoyed a time of peace,” yet we are wise to keep in mind that there always will be those who oppose God’s word. However, the words Paul heard on the Damascus road: “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (9:5) comfort persecuted believers with the reality of “the organic and indissoluble unity that exists between Christ and his own. For although [Saul] believed he was



only persecuting the followers of Jesus, the heavenly interpretation of his action was that he was persecuting the risen Christ himself” (*NIV Bible Commentary*, p. 432).

Yet for all those who violently opposed God’s word, more were impacted by it for good. The world notices the words and deeds of the followers of Christ. Although some of the attention was due to signs and miracles, Luke is clear that the believers themselves were “enjoying the favor of all the people” (2:27) and “they were highly regarded by the people” (5:13). But the primary impact of the word of God is on those who believed. Luke records that impact through his reports of those who responded to the word in faith, including: “a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord” (11:21); “but the word of God continued to increase and spread” (12:24); “[the Gentiles] were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed” (13:48); “They preached the word in [Derbe] and won a large number of disciples” (14:21). We would do well to remember today that God’s word has a life-changing impact. The impact is due to God’s word itself, and the Spirit that works through it, not our own communication efforts. This truth frees us to be frequent, bold and confident in sharing the word in every opportunity.

Incidental Gleanings

While stressing that “God’s Word *for us* . . . is primarily related to what it was *intended* to teach [emphasis theirs both times],” Fee and Stuart (2003, pg. 121) acknowledge that believers tend to look at the details in Acts for guidance in matters of today’s church. They grant this as a valid use of the text, as long as “what is incidental must not become primary” (p. 121) and details are not considered prescriptive unless it can be determined that the Holy Spirit, through Luke,



meant it in that way. The following items of learning are presented as having less weight than the first group of items, which flow from Luke's intent for the book. Yet they, too, can be helpful.

1. Non-apostolic people in Acts played key roles.

Although the precise definition of an apostle varies, most would agree that a primary task of the apostles was to proclaim and to teach Christ, as they certainly did. As noted above in both the first and second items from Luke's main points, non-apostles also proclaimed the word. In addition, non-apostles did other things in Acts usually identified with the apostles. Philip did "miraculous signs," casting out evil spirits and healing many paralytics and cripples (8:7). Barnabas also did "miraculous signs and wonders" (14:3). Philip baptized (8:12, 38). With Paul, Barnabas appointed elders (14:23) and reported back to the Antioch church "all that God had done through them" (14:27). Ananias of Damascus was given a major role in the conversion of Saul, and Bruce (1976, p. 200) comments on the implications of that fact:

The apostolic commission of Saul, and the part played by Ananias in it, must now, in NT times, remain a stumbling block in the path of those whose conception of the apostolic ministry is too rigidly formal. If the risen Christ then commissioned his most illustrious apostle in such an "irregular" way, may He not have done so again; may He not yet do so again, when the occasion requires it?

As Luke relates the events in Iconium in chapter 14, an interesting detail is noted. In verses 4 and 14, he calls Barnabas an apostle. Not only is this the only time he uses this title for Barnabas, this is also the only time he uses that title for Paul. Commentators approached this detail from a variety of viewpoints. Johnson (1992, p. 248) refers to one of the manuscripts of Acts to note the unusualness of the title: "So striking is this occurrence that Codex D, which ordinarily tends to expansion, omits the designation." Balge (2005, p. 155) makes a point to



qualify Barnabas as an apostle, according to Acts 1:21-22: “In what sense was Barnabas an apostle? Since he is coupled with Paul here, he must have qualified by seeing the risen Savior during those 40 days between Easter and the Lord’s Ascension.” Bruce (1976, p. 287) says “this is a more general use of the term than that found elsewhere in Acts. . . . But that Barnabas was an apostle like himself seems to be implied by Paul in 1 Cor. 9:6; Gal. 2:9f.” Marshall (1980, p. 234) goes into depth on the various theories, noting that “It is possible that Luke uses the word here in a very general sense to mean ‘the missionaries sent out by the church at Antioch.’” Stott (1990, p. 229) sums it up with an explanation well supported by the text. “The word is used in the NT in two senses . . . the ‘apostles of Christ,’ who included the Twelve, Paul and probably James . . . [and] the ‘apostles of the churches,’ sent out by a church or churches on particular missions.”¹ Acts does use the term apostle in both these ways.

Questions about Luke’s use of the term apostle need not detract from the authority today’s pastoral office derives from the apostolic office. It also does not detract from the primary responsibility of that office to proclaim the word of God. The church, however, is harmed if emphasis on the authority and responsibilities of the pastoral office detract from the fact that all God’s people are called by him and used by him to share his Word in ways ordinary and normal, and sometimes spectacular and unusual. Acts pictures all God’s people spreading the word and following through on the results of their actions, as they are guided by the Spirit, who works through all of them. Acts supports a picture of today’s church as one in which the pastor encourages, teaches, equips the people for this sharing, and supports them in their carrying it out.

¹ Stott’s inclusion of James as an apostle with the Twelve, however, opens up additional doors for inquiry.



2. Non-apostles gave key support to the ministries of Peter and Paul.

Even when Peter and Paul are the main characters in the events of Acts, Luke shows non-apostles involved in and supportive of their ministries in important ways. Believers accompanied the apostles in their travels. Six “brothers from Joppa” accompanied Peter to Cornelius’ home (10:23,45) and later to Jerusalem (11:12). “Some other believers” from Antioch were “appointed” (15:2), with Paul and Barnabas, to attend the Jerusalem Council. John Mark was a helper on the first part of Barnabas and Saul’s missionary journey (13:5). The later chapters of Acts, and Paul’s letters, show that the pattern of having helpers and companions on the journey continued.

Believers were continually providing hospitality and assistance. Peter stayed with Simon the Tanner in Joppa (9:43). Immediately after his conversion, Saul “spent several days with the disciples in Damascus” (9:19). Doing him a further service, when Jews in Damascus “conspired to kill him, . . . [Saul’s] followers took him by night and lowered him in a basket through an opening in the wall” (9:23,25). Other groups of believers also appear to be involved in helping Paul when it’s time for him to move on. When threatened in Jerusalem by the Grecian Jews, “the brothers . . . took him down to Caesarea and sent him off to Tarsus.” Throughout Acts, Paul’s departures at times use terms such as “he left/departed” (as in 114:20) and other times are described in terms such as “the church/brothers sent him...” (as in 9:29). Although the details of such “sending” are not given, it certainly indicates an involvement of believers in Paul’s continued mission.

The church was involved in “sending” in a more official way at Antioch. Five people are named in 13:1 as prophets and teachers in Antioch. Commentators differ as to whether the



“they” in verse 2 who were worshipping and received a message from the Holy Spirit, and the “they” in verse 3 who “sent them off,” refers to the group of five men or to the whole church, both of whom who are referenced in verse 1. Upon their return (14:27), Paul and Barnabas report to the whole church, which supports the idea that it was the church who sent them off. The five may be named because one or more of them, as prophets, relayed the Spirit’s message. Marshall (1980, p. 214) sees the event as significant. This passage, he says:

. . . describes the first piece of planned ‘overseas mission’ carried out by representatives of a particular church, rather than by solitary individuals, and begun by a deliberate church decision, inspired by the Spirit, rather than somewhat more casually as a result of persecution. . . . [Luke] is well aware that he is describing a crucial event in the history of the church.

These pictures in Acts run counter to an image common in many churches, an image in which the ‘ordinary’ member provides no more than prayers and money for the highly gifted individuals who do the public ministry. The believers in Acts certainly did provide prayers and financial resources, but also provided support in more personal ways, including companionship and personal involvement. Peter and Paul seem to have welcomed and encouraged such involvement. There are no Lone Rangers in Acts.

3. The apostles and non-apostles were together.

The church in Acts is highly corporate. From the initial 120, who “all joined together constantly in prayer” (1:14), and the group immediately after Pentecost who, in such a beautiful and amazing way, “were together and had everything in common . . . Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts . . . they broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts” (2:44-46), Luke continues to describe believers as people who met



together (5:12) and prayed together (12:5, 12). They were generous, sharing with each other locally (2:44-45; 4:32-36) and with believers in other areas (11:27-30). In all, they “were one in heart and mind” (4:32).

The apostles seem to have been deliberate in including large groups of believers in decision-making. It was such a group who nominated two men to take Judas’s place among the apostles (1:23), and another such a group who selected seven men to solve the food distribution problem (6:3-5). In deliberations, prayer, and resources, apostles and non-apostles shared--one people in Jesus Christ their Lord. In an American culture which glorifies the individual, our churches have a greater challenge to build and maintain a “together” culture.

This unity of the body in the Holy Spirit returns us to the main thrust of Acts. It is the Holy Spirit, sent by Jesus, who unites all God’s people, involving them in his purpose, the rescue of all people from the bondage of sin. As believers today grow in their understanding of, reliance upon and discernment of the Holy Spirit, the church grows in its ability to be used by the Spirit towards its goal. In a lengthy quote, Stott (1990, p. 218), includes important advice for the church of today, as it seeks to carry out the Spirit’s work. He is discussing whether it was the Antioch church or the Holy Spirit who commissioned/sent Barnabas and Saul on their journey in 13:1-4.

Would it not be true to say both that the Spirit sent them out, by instructing the church to do so, and that the church sent them out, having been directed by the Spirit to do so? This balance will be a healthy corrective to opposite extremes. The first is the tendency to individualism, by which a Christian claims direct personal guidance by the Spirit without any reference to the church. The second is the tendency to institutionalism, by which all decision-making is done by the church without any reference to the Spirit. Although we have no liberty to deny the validity of personal choice, it is safe and healthy only in relation to the Spirit and the church. There is no evidence that Barnabas and Saul ‘volunteered’ for missionary service; they were ‘sent’ by the Spirit through the church. Still today it is the responsibility of every



local church (especially of its leaders) to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit, in order to discover whom he may be gifting and calling.

Such gifting and calling is given by the Spirit not only to those being sent out to new mission fields, but to all believers for all aspects of local congregational ministry. May the Spirit grant each of us the grace to hear and follow his guiding. May he give our churches the grace to discern, support and affirm all the people he calls.

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