

‘LUKE WAS THE FIRST PENTECOSTALIST’. DISCUSS THIS VERDICT ON LUKE’S UNDERSTANDING OF RECEIVING THE GIFT OF THE SPIRIT.

## INTRODUCTION

The book of Acts has been called the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. It is literally the second volume, which Luke had sent to Theophilus. In the first volume, which was his Gospel, Luke had told the story of the life of Jesus upon earth, and now he goes on to tell the story of the Christian Church. Luke addresses Theophilus, a man otherwise unknown to us, as an official of high rank. At the time books intended for the general public were dedicated to a single person, who might be able to contribute to the costly dissemination of an otherwise unknown work or who perhaps had some connection with the purpose of the work. At any rate, Luke records that he undertook the writing so that Theophilus might realise that what had hitherto been known only to him was true and certain. In this account, I would try to explain Pentecost, as it was understood from the Jewish history and how it is connected with the gift of Holy Spirit. I would also examine what the gift of Holy Spirit means to Luke by giving a reappraisal of various illustrations in Luke’s narrative. By this, I would be able to prove that it is correct to consider Luke as the first Pentecostalist.

## THE PENTECOST

Pentecost was the second great feast of the Jewish year, a harvest festival, when the first fruits of the wheat harvest were presented to Yahweh. It was celebrated seven weeks after the beginning of the barley harvest (hence “Feast of Weeks”), fifty days after the Passover (hence “Pentecost”). The accounts of this could be seen in Exd. 23:16, 34:22; Lev. 23:15-21; Num. 28:26-31; Deut 16:9-12. In Acts 2:1,

Luke dates the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. Some scholars believe that Luke's account of the first Christian Pentecost has been influenced by these Jewish traditions. Such traditions play a primary role in shaping the narrative of Acts 2:1-13. However, the thesis cannot be sustained. Pentecost means first and foremost the outpouring of the Spirit promised by God for the end-time.

That the first Christian Pentecost was an ecstatic experience involving vision (sound like wind, tongues as of fire) and glossolalia i.e. the gift of tongues are clearly indicated by the tradition in Acts 2:1-13. In addition, the impression that the glossolalia included recognisable languages may well stem from those whose conversion to the new sect dated from that occasion (similar claims in modern Pentecostalism).

This first Pentecost resulted in an enthusiastic community, bound together by common loyalty to the risen and soon coming Jesus and by their common experience of the Spirit (Acts 3:19-20) the resurrection of Jesus and the gift of the Spirit both constituting the beginning of the end-time harvest of final resurrection (Rom. 8:23; I Cor. 15:20, 23). Otherwise hardly distinct from the rest of Judaism, they doubtless regarded themselves as constituting eschatological Israel (Matt. 16:18-19; 19:28; Acts 1:6, 21-22). The Spirit was experienced primarily as the prophetic Spirit, in accordance with Jewish expectation (thus explicitly, Joel 2:28). This was seen as the privilege of all and not the prerogative of a few (Acts 2:17-18)

The already established link between Pentecost, covenant renewal, and the giving of the Law probably prompted the first believers to interpret their experience of

the Spirit as the fulfilment of the promise of a new covenant, as the Law written in their hearts (Deut. 30:6; Jer. 31:31-34; Eze. 36:26-27; 37:14; Acts 2:38-39; 3:25; I Cor 11:25; Heb.10:15-16, 29). But the implications of this insight for continuing faith and conduct were not recognised and elaborated until Paul (Rom. 2:28-29; 2 Corinthians 3; Gal. 3:1-4, 7; Phil. 3:3; Col. 2:11; I Thess. 4:8).

### LUKE'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

In his narrative, Luke emphasises some of the above points. It is important for Luke that Pentecost is the fulfilment of the divine promise (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4; 2:33, 38-39; 2:1). Thus it is also the fulfilment of the covenant promise (2:38, 41-47). And for Luke the Spirit of Pentecost is pre-eminently the prophetic Spirit, the inspirer of speech (Acts 2:4, 18). Luke presents Pentecost as the beginning of world mission. The implementation of the program of Acts 1:8 awaits Pentecost. Those who bear witness to the effects of the Spirit's outpouring and hear the gospel proclaimed by Peter represent "every nation under heaven" (2:5), while the appended list of nationalities embraces a wide sweep of the eastern Mediterranean, though with some odd omissions (2:9-11). The glossolalia is explicitly identified as the languages spoken by these foreign Jews (2:4, 6, 8, 11; I Cor. 13:1; but contrast I Cor. 14:2). Finally, Peter's sermon ends with an open invitation and offer of the promised Spirit to "all that are far off" (2:39).

Luke plays down the eschatological dimension of Pentecost-engendered enthusiasm. Whereas for the earliest Christians Pentecost was seen as the precursor of the end, Luke strives to present Pentecost as the beginning of a whole new epoch of salvation-history. This motif is already implicit in the fact that

Pentecost begins a second volume rather than rounding off the first (compare Acts 1:1-5 with Luke 1:1-4). But it becomes most explicit in the sharp distinction that Luke draws between the epoch of Jesus, ended by resurrection appearances and ascension, and Pentecost, the beginning of the epoch of the Spirit. The two are clearly separated by the ten-day 'interregnum' when neither the risen Jesus nor the inspiring Spirit is in evidence and the election of Matthias has to revert to the old epoch's use of lots (Acts 1:26). The 'last days' of the Spirit (Acts 2:17) seem to stretch over Luke's horizon.

Furthermore, the question that has posed the greatest puzzles for successive generations of commentators is the relation between faith, baptism, and the gift of the Spirit in Acts 8. "The Samaritans believed Philip preaching concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ and were baptised". But by the time of Peter and John's visit the Spirit "had not yet fallen on any one of them, they had only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 8:12, 16). Three factors have become increasingly clear to me:

- (a) Luke clearly thought that the Spirit had not been given to the Samaritans before Peter and John laid their hands on them. It cannot successfully be argued that Luke thought of the (already received) Spirit now merely making his presence known in visible manifestations, for it is clear enough from the rest of Luke's writings that this is the way he conceptualised the Spirit – as a tangible power whose impact on an individual or group is as much physical as anything else.

Indeed, he never thinks of the Spirit being given in any other terms – whether to Jesus (descending in bodily form as a dove” – Luke 3:22), or to the first disciples (“a sound like the roar of a mighty wind... tongues like fire... they began to speak in other tongues” – Acts 2:2-4), to Cornelius and his friends (Peter and the others knew that the Spirit had been poured out on them “for they heard them speaking in tongues and magnifying God” – Acts 10:45-46, and to the Ephesians “disciples” (“They spoke in tongues and prophesied” – Acts 19:6). The question in Acts 19:2, “Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?” obviously presumes that those who received the Spirit would know it, and not just as a deduction drawn from the fact that they had believed (whether they had experienced anything or not). So it is not surprising when we read Acts 2:33 – Jesus “having been exalted to the right hand of God received the promise of the Holy Spirit from the Father and poured out this which you see and hear” – where the gift or the Spirit is actually described as the ecstatic behaviour and glossolalia of the disciples on the day of Pentecost.

So too in Acts 8:18 – Simon saw what happened to the Samaritans when Peter and John laid hands on them; that is, ‘he saw that the Spirit was being given through the laying on of the apostles’ hands.’ In other words, Luke’s presentation of the gift of the Spirit in Acts 8 is wholly of a piece with his understanding of what was involved elsewhere in his writings. In his mind the Spirit had not come to the Samaritan believers before Peter and John’s visit. And it was his intention to convey precisely this fact – ‘the Spirit had not yet fallen on any of them, they had only been baptised...’

- (b) Luke shared the regular view among the major New Testament writers that it is the gift of the Spirit, which constitutes a Christian. In some ways this is a more controversial claim, but I think it can be sustained. For other writers, we need think merely of Rom 8:9 – “If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his”; I Cor 12:13 – “in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body... and we were all drenched with one Spirit, Gal. 3:6-14 – “the promise of the Spirit is “the blessing of Abraham” is “justification by faith”; John 7:37-39 – “Jesus said, “if anyone thirsts, let him come to me; and let him drink, he who believes in me as the Scripture said, rivers of living water will flow from him.” This he said concerning the Spirit which those who believed in him would receive” I John 4:13 – “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us to share in his Spirit.”

For Acts the same viewpoint emerges from a consideration of the other two of Luke’s conversion narratives where the gift of the Spirit is specifically recorded. According to Acts 10:43-47 and 11:14-18, the Spirit fell upon Cornelius and his friends just at the point where Peter had explained God’s offer of forgiveness and salvation. Peter concludes from seeing the Spirit thus given that God has thereby accepted them – “If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could withstand God?” (11:17). Clearly here the gift of the Spirit is synonymous with, or the Spirit is the bearer of, forgiveness, salvation, and life (11:18); the gift of the Spirit was understood to have embodied that acceptance by God, to have established that relationship with God which is what conversion, justification, etc., are all about. So too Acts 19:2. When

Paul met a group who evidently claimed to be “believers,” but just as clearly were lacking in that visibly manifested Spirit, the question he put was the decisive one, which would tell whether they were indeed believers in Christ or not – “Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?” Or as we might justly paraphrase, “You say you are believers, but did you receive the Spirit when you made this commitment that you speak of?” We could even include the only other episode where Luke describes the gift of the Spirit to a group – Pentecost itself; for Acts 11:17 describes that too in terms of conversion – Cornelius has received the Spirit just as we received the Spirit “when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ”. In short, in every other case (leaving aside Acts 8) it is clear enough that the gift of the Spirit was for Luke what marked out those who believed in Christ. Like Paul and John, Luke was firmly of the view that it is the gift of the Spirit whereby God accepts a person, the Spirit thus given which makes a person a Christian.

- (c) Luke also shared the regular view among New Testament writers that the Spirit was given to faith. When a person believed in Christ he received the Spirit from God through Christ. Again, so far as the other major New Testament writers are concerned, we need simply think of Gal. 3:2-3 – “Did you receive the Spirit by works of law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?” As for John, we need simply recall John 7:39 – “This he said concerning the Spirit which those who believed in him would receive.” Acts is, if anything, clearer on this point. I have already quoted 11:17 – the Spirit is the gift given by God to individuals when they believe in, commit themselves to, the

Lord Jesus Christ – said with reference both to Cornelius and his friends and to the first disciples at Pentecost.

In the other reference to the conversion of Cornelius, Peter describes it thus – “God gave the Holy Spirit to them as he had to us, and made no discrimination between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith” (15:8-9) – where the gift of the Spirit and “cleansing their hearts by faith” are clearly alternative descriptions of the same event (cf. 11:15-18). Paul’s question to the Ephesians ‘disciples’ in 19:2 reveals the same association in Luke’s mind (and Paul’s) between the gift of the Spirit and that step of commitment by which Luke regularly denotes conversion – “Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?” – the implication being that if they had believed, taken the step of commitment, they would have received the Spirit.

Thus three things seem to be clear when we try to reconstruct the context of Luke’s thought and understanding within which we must seek after the meaning he intended to convey in his narrative in Acts 8:4-24. He believed that the gift of the Spirit was the central element in conversion-initiation. Without the Spirit the individual could not be said to be accepted by God, to have received God’s forgiveness and salvation. Luke’s understanding was that the Spirit was given when the individual believed, committed himself to Jesus as Lord. But so far as the Samaritans were concerned, they did not receive the Spirit until a lengthy period had elapsed after their baptism of water.

According to Luke, the gift of the spirit is the most fundamental aspect of the event or process of becoming a Christian, the climax of conversion-initiation. The

Spirit itself is the breath of divine life within the believer, the divine action within the human which links and bonds the human to the divine, the dynamic reality of spiritual sonship, without which no one can be said to belong to Christ. It must refer to the beginning of the Christian experience, the action by which God draws the individual into the sphere of the Spirit, into the community of those 'being saved,' and thus makes a decisive beginning of the work of saving grace in that individual. The Spirit is here the first instalment in the life-long process of salvation (as in Rom. 8:23).

Luke characteristically thinks of the Spirit as making a tangible, visible impact on a human life, and characteristically in terms of inspired speech. But to recognise this is simply to acknowledge what we might call Luke's psychological insight, that when the Spirit enters into a life, one of the most immediate and frequent effects is liberation from restraint on the direct expression of an instinct. The effects of Peter's speech were dramatic and far-reaching. Many were cut to the heart and asked the apostles: Friends, what are we to do? Peter told them to repent and be baptised ... in the name of Jesus the Messiah. They would then receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, some three thousand were added to their number. Christian worship began to take shape, with the teaching, the common life or fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers. Believers held their possessions in common. They sold their property and gave to the poor. The Spirit worked signs and wonders through the apostles, as evidence of the new age.

Furthermore, Luke established the fact that, to experience the heavenly gift is to receive a share in the Holy Spirit; the heavenly gift is the Holy Spirit and all the

blessings, which he bring with him. He rightly notes that the reason for remaining in Jerusalem is that it is there that the disciples are to await the gift of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, emphasis upon Jerusalem as the holy place, the scene of crucifixion, resurrection (and appearances), ascension, and the gift of the Spirit is characteristically Lucan.

Putting these facts together, I conclude that gift was well known in the early Church as a standard expression for the gift of the Holy Spirit, which constituted a person as Christian.

It is certainly used as such by Luke, and the way in which it appears in the cases of the Samaritans, Cornelius, and the Ephesians demonstrates his familiarity with this technical sense. Thus, it is correct to say that Luke is the first Pentecostalist.

