

THEOLOGICAL ESSAY: **Mission And The Spirit In The Book Of Acts** (NIV based)
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The Book of Acts chronicles the growth of Christianity from a small Jewish sect to an expansive, all-inclusive religion that covered nations, languages, and cultures. A key character in this mission is the Holy Spirit. He initiated, inaugurated, empowered, directed, and confirmed the spread of the Gospel, beginning in Jerusalem then going to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. Jesus initiated the coming and mission of the Holy Spirit.

Immediately preceding His ascension into heaven, Jesus gives a final exhortation and promise to his disciples, ““But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”” (Acts 1:8). Jesus makes three points clear. First, He sets the plan for the spreading of the Gospel. Second, He introduces one of the works of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts: empowerment. Finally, He makes it clear that the Holy Spirit is going to be the catalyst for the spreading of the Gospel.

The first explosion of the Gospel happened on Pentecost in Acts chapter 3. The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples and empowered them to preach the Gospel. This is the first use of the Gift of Tongues, which allowed people that spoke different languages to understand what the disciples were saying. It sets the precedent for the spreading of the Gospel and inclusion of non-Jews into the people of God in the Book of Acts. Peter links the coming of the Holy Spirit with salvation by commanding the people to ““Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”” (Acts 2:38).

Even though those converted on Pentecost were mainly Jews in Jerusalem, the Gift of the Holy Spirit begins the emphasis in the Book of Acts of the one people of God, both Jew and Gentile, that are united by the Holy Spirit. “The outpouring of the spirit upon all flesh was accomplished for the benefit of Jew and Gentile alike (Acts 10:45; 11:15-17)” (Caulley 569). Salvation has come to the Jew and Gentile in the Book of Acts.

The Holy Spirit was also evidence for the inauguration of the kingdom, in Acts chapter 3. Peter quotes Joel 2:28-32 to explain the coming of the Holy Spirit and connects that verse with Isaiah 2:2-4. This shows that the kingdom had been inaugurated, however it was still to be fully completed by the coming of Christ. ““He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets”” (Acts 3:21).

The mission of spreading the Gospel was empowered by the Holy Spirit. He did this in two ways. First, He empowered the apostles, or those who were appointed by the apostles, to perform miracles that testified to the credibility of the Gospel. This is in parallel to the miracles performed by Jesus. Peter said in Acts 2:22, ““...Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him ...””. Jesus performed signs and wonders to affirm that He was indeed the Son of God and the Messiah. In the same way, God attested that the message of the Apostles was indeed true and from Him through the wonders and signs He did through them.

The Holy Spirit also empowered the apostles by giving them power of speech. “The Spirit fills the apostles who utter God’s message. The effect of the filling is apparently to

give courage to them to stand up in the midst of threatening audiences, as Jesus had promised, but also in more encouraging situations” (Marshall 161). When Peter defended himself before the religious leaders in Acts chapter 4, the religious leaders were amazed by the power and manner in which he spoke because Peter was a simple fisherman. The Holy Spirit empowered him in speech.

The empowerment of the apostles by the Holy Spirit for the preaching of the Gospel is similar to the ministry of Jesus. Jesus was empowered by the Holy Spirit to proclaim truth directly from the Father about Himself and the Father. The apostles’ ministry was slightly different in that they proclaimed the truth about Jesus but they were empowered by the same Spirit and in a similar way as Jesus. “It is clear from the introductory framework that it is the Spirit working through disciples that carries on the activity that the Spirit had also empowered Jesus to do” (Keener 678).

As the Gospel spread out from Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit guided the apostles in where they should go next to minister. A good example is Acts 16:6-9. Paul and his companions were forbidden to preach the Gospel in Asia in verse 16:6. An interesting statement is made in verse 16:7 wherein the Holy Spirit once again redirects Paul to another area to preach the Gospel, “When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to” (Acts 16:7). The Greek phrase used in verse 16:7 correctly translates as “the Spirit”. David Peterson explains in his commentary that “the Holy Spirit is more narrowly defined here, suggesting that the exalted Christ continued to direct the progress of the gospel through the Spirit which He ‘received from the Father’ and ‘poured out’ on His disciples at Pentecost” (Peterson 455).

The final and most important work of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts is the confirmation of people being included into the kingdom of God as the Gospel moved out from Jerusalem and Jews. This first happened in Samaria in Acts chapter 8. Phillip was preaching in Samaria and people were coming to faith in Christ. Peter and John came to investigate and the Holy Spirit fell upon the Samaritans. Peter and John never expressly say, “Oh, this makes them one of us!” Rather it is implied and stated explicitly three times later in association with Gentiles. The first two were involved with the conversion of Cornelius the Centurion.

In Acts chapter 10, Peter received a vision from God to teach him that Gentiles were now acceptable, to prepare him for preaching to Cornelius who was a Gentile. Peter presented the Gospel to the centurion and the Holy Spirit fell on them when they believed. He then exclaims, ““Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have”” (Acts 10:47). The Gift of the Holy Spirit proved to Peter that Gentiles could now be included in the people of God.

After this incident, in Acts chapter 11 Peter is questioned accusingly by the “circumcision party” in Jerusalem about associating with Gentiles. Peter relates the story of his dream and the circumstances surrounding the event and then presses the point that they received the Holy Spirit. He explains that ““So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?”” (Acts 11:17). The Holy Spirit united Jewish and Gentile believers into one body of Christ and confirmed their salvation.

The final and definitive time that the apostles stated that the Holy Spirit confirmed the salvation of non-Jewish believers was at the Jerusalem Council in Acts chapter 15. The

Jerusalem council was called because some Jews wanted the Gentiles to convert to Judaism and be circumcised in order to be a true believer. Peter argued strongly against that and his main argument was the gift of the Holy Spirit. ““God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith”” (Acts 15:8-9). Peter clearly states that the Holy Spirit was given as evidence that non-Jewish believers were members of the body of Christ and did not need to be saved through any other means. In other words, “The primary purpose of the more spectacular evidence was authentication, affirmation, and confirmation directed primarily at the Jews,... these signs confirm to the Jewish apostles the validity of the Gentile experience as equal to that of the Jews” (Couch 145).

In conclusion, the Holy Spirit played an instrumental role in the Book of Acts. Otherwise, non-Jews might have been required to be circumcised before being considered true believers or there might have been a separate Gentile church. But, all believers are connected as the body of Christ through the Holy Spirit and He publicly confirmed this in the Book of Acts. The Holy Spirit also initiated, inaugurated, empowered, and directed the mission and presentation of the Gospel. He continued the work of Christ through the apostles.

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