

### C. Structural and Thematic Features

Luke opens his second account (Acts) by repeating the content by which he closed his gospel record (cf. again Luke 24:44-52; Acts 1:1-12). This repetition serves to bind the two volumes together and show their sequential relationship, but it also highlights the framework for the narrative structure in Acts. Luke's gospel reaches its crescendo with Jesus' promise of the coming of His Spirit and the resulting global gospel mission, and Acts opens on that same high note. From that point forward, the entire narrative presumes Christ's departing promise and carefully documents its fulfillment, consequences, and implications. In that sense, one may say that the entire book of Acts is the record of the unfolding fulfillment of Jesus' words in 1:3-8.

1. Thus the flow of the narrative – which follows the promised historical progress of the gospel and the growth of the kingdom – begins with the commencement of the new creational kingdom (in the Church) at *Jerusalem* and then out into *Judea* (1:12-7:60). From there Luke recorded the outward movement of the gospel north from Judea into the region of *Samaria* (8:1-25) and south and west toward Gaza and Caesarea (8:26-40). Then, using the conversion of Paul – God's apostle to the Gentiles – as a springboard, Luke turned his attention to the gospel witness going out to the *remotest part of the earth*.
  - a. Global witness means Gentile mission, and Luke grasped the meaning and importance of this development. And so, after introducing the Gentile mission with the conversion of the Ethiopian (8:26-40), Luke moved immediately to the conversion of the apostle to the Gentiles and then to the episode that most directly and powerfully revealed the monumental salvation-historical shift represented by Gentile outreach and their ingathering into God's household. That episode was Peter's encounter with Cornelius and his household (10:1-48) – an encounter that saw, as it were, the completion of Pentecost with the duplication among the Gentiles of the same phenomena of the Spirit (10:1-48). And, lest this significance be lost on his readers, Luke addressed it explicitly with his account of Peter's subsequent explanation to the Jewish believers in Jerusalem (11:1-18).
  - b. Jesus had declared that His gospel of the kingdom would go into all the earth, and, through His Spirit, His power would be manifest everywhere, first in renewing and reconciling men to His Father, but also in purifying, protecting, and securing His own (cf. 4:1-7:60, 12:1-25, 18:1-11, etc.). As the prophets had proclaimed, once the everlasting kingdom of heaven was ushered in, it would continue to grow and flourish despite the fiercest and most unified opposition. The enthronement of the King and the outpouring of His Spirit meant that, in fact, though not yet in consummate fullness, the "*kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ*" (Revelation 11:15; cf. 12:10).
  - c. Though earthly forces would oppose Christ's Spirit and the advance of His kingdom, the gospel would bear its fruit just as He promised (Matthew 28:18-20; cf. 16:18). So Luke devoted more than half of his Acts account to the expanding Gentile mission and its fruitfulness in securing for the Lord a people from every tribe, nation, and tongue (chaps. 13-20; cf. also 9:15 with 23:1-26:32).

2. Woven together with the theme of ever-expanding mission is a second equally important motif. Hinted at above, it concerns the instrument by which this mission was to be initiated and energized, namely the ardent and unrelenting Jewish opposition to the gospel and the newly inaugurated kingdom. On the night of His betrayal Jesus warned His disciples that those who hated and persecuted Him would likewise hate and persecute them (John 15:18-25), and this is precisely what transpired. But the Lord's declaration in the Upper Room was more than merely His own prediction; the Scriptures attested that God's messianic King and kingdom would meet with opposition from its apparent heirs.
  - a. From the outset the covenant nation had been divided between a faithful remnant and an unbelieving and defiant majority. This truth was perhaps most powerfully attested in Elijah's confrontation on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), but it so saturated Israel's historical consciousness (and the scriptural record) that no Jew of Jesus' day could deny it. Instead, they convinced themselves that they were part of faithful few, distancing themselves from and scorning their forefathers who had opposed and killed God's prophets. But Jesus afforded them no such delusion; they were indeed sons of their fathers, and even worse than them, for they sought to destroy the preeminent Prophet of whom all the preceding ones testified. In this way, the guilt of all the shed righteous blood of past generations was to be placed upon their heads (Matthew 23:29-36).
  - b. Jewish opposition to God and His kingdom didn't end with the execution of the Righteous One (3:13-15); rather it intensified as the Jews perceived a growing and indomitable threat in a community of Christians comprised of apparently traitorous Jews as well as Gentiles. But by God's design, this opposition and persecution didn't hinder or overthrow the kingdom of His Son. Instead, it served the kingdom's furtherance and triumph, even as it had done in the case of the Son Himself. Jewish unbelief and opposition drove the Gentile witness (6:1-8:6), including the ever-widening witness of the epitomizing Israelite who had formerly stood together with the opposers (9:1-31, 13:1-14:20, 17:1-15, 18:1-22, etc.).

Luke recognized the *historical fact* that Jewish hostility to Christ and His gospel was the driving instrument of the Gentile mission in early decades of the Church, but, more than that, he understood that hostility to be a matter of *salvation-historical fulfillment*. Luke didn't focus so thoroughly on Israel's unbelief because of a commitment to an historically accurate record; he did so because that unbelief constituted a crucial component of fulfillment, both with respect to the Scriptures and Jesus' own words.

Luke had given much attention to this outcome in his gospel account, documenting repeatedly and in various ways the crucial gospel truth that Jewish unbelief would find the kingdom being taken from the apparent heirs and given to Abraham's authentic sons – Jew and Gentile – who share his faith in the promised Seed. These would take their place at the table at the consummation of the age alongside the patriarchs and the prophets, while the “sons of the kingdom” would find themselves cast out and condemned (ref. 13:22-30). He introduced this theme in Simeon's prophecy (2:34), only to build on it from that point forward (3:7-9, 4:16-30, 5:17-39, 6:1-11, 7:1-9, 24-35, etc.).

The Jews' unbelieving opposition to the King and His kingdom was willful and fully culpable, yet Luke recognized that God had ordained it to serve the fulfillment of His promise to Abraham that, through His Seed, the divine blessing of renewal and restored intimacy would extend to all the earth's peoples. Luke laid this foundation in his Gospel account and then reaffirmed it over and over again through historical fulfillment and commentary in the book of Acts as the gospel went forth from Jerusalem into Judea, Samaria, and the vast Gentile world (ref. 3:1-26, 4:1-28, 6:9-7:53, 13:14-14:20, 17:1-15, 25:1-12), finally arriving in Rome itself. There, in the midst of the greatest Gentile enclave on earth, Luke ended his account on the very same note (28:16-28).

Israel would indeed bring God's salvation to the Gentile world through its unbelief, and Luke saw in Stephen's stoning in Jerusalem the providential catalyst for initiating that dynamic. This is the reason he devoted two chapters to it (6:1-7:53).

- Prior to Steven's death, the Church was almost entirely Jewish and was localized in Jerusalem and the area immediately surrounding it. But Steven's public stoning struck a spark into the tinderbox of Jewish-Christian tensions and set ablaze a severe persecution against the Church in Jerusalem.
- The result was that most of the Christian community fled from Jerusalem and dispersed into the surrounding regions of Judea and Samaria (8:1-2). The global mission to which Jesus had called His disciples had begun, and, as it was at the outset, it would continue to be driven by Jewish hostility and persecution.

This theme of the kingdom's growth through Israel's hardened unbelief is fundamental to the narrative structure of the book of Acts and crucial to its salvation-historical importance. It is the central premise in Luke's recounting of Peter's words of warning at Pentecost (2:37-40) and to the multitude when he healed the crippled man (3:12-26), and it comes to a focal point in Stephen's rebuke which resulted in his murder (7:51-60). But despite its great importance to the book, this theme is often given minimal consideration and sometimes is overlooked entirely. The most probable reason is that the majority of Christians have no real understanding of the larger biblical storyline in which this motif is presented and developed. (So it is that Paul's interaction with Israel's unbelief as a matter of salvation-historical fulfillment (Romans 9-11) is commonly reduced to a sterile treatise on the doctrine of election.)

3. A final structural and thematic key to the book of Acts is the person and work of the Holy Spirit. As noted previously, the Spirit's outpouring and subsequent renewing work is at the very heart of the Old Testament's promise of the messianic kingdom. The reason is that this kingdom represents the realization of the ancient promise of the creation's liberation, renewal, and reconciliation to its Creator. And as the Spirit was the creative agent of the kingdom of the first creation (Genesis 1:1-2), so He is of the eschatological, new creational kingdom. The Spirit of creation is the Spirit of re-creation.

*Thus Luke has the Spirit as the focal point of his consideration of the kingdom throughout the full scope of his two-volume narrative.*

- a. Luke began his first account by showing Theophilus that the conception and birth of Jesus of Nazareth indicated the “fullness of the times” and heralded the in-breaking of the long-awaited kingdom. But such could not be the case unless Jesus was the Spirit-filled Servant of Yahweh preceded and prepared for by the Spirit-led forerunner (cf. Isaiah 40:1-5, 42:1-4 with Luke 1:26-37, 76-79, 3:1-6, 21-22). Moreover, the Spirit Himself announced this time of fulfillment through the mouths of other human witnesses (Luke 1:67ff, 2:25-35).
- b. But the coming of the messianic kingdom meant that the eschatological age of the Spirit was also at hand, and the Spirit testified to this by His manifest power in supernatural works of deliverance and renewal (cf. Luke 4:14-44, 11:14-20).
- c. Finally, Jesus Himself promised His disciples that His suffering and glorification would yield the global outpouring of the Spirit promised by the prophets. He would ascend to the Father’s right hand, and from His place of supreme authority and dominion He would send the Spirit whom He was to receive from the Father (cf. Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:7-8 with John 14:12-26, 15:26-27, 16:5-16, 20:19-22).
- d. Now the Son had been taken up and glorified and His disciples were obligated to wait for the promise of the Spirit. That endowment came at Pentecost (Acts 2:1ff) and, from that point forward until the end of the age, the indwelling Spirit is the presence and power of Christ in His Church and in the world.

And so Luke’s account in Acts, intended not as a mere historical record of the first decades of the Church, but a purposeful recounting of the inauguration and early progress of Christ’s kingdom, is necessarily and conspicuously preoccupied with the Spirit. Indeed, Luke mentioned the Holy Spirit more than fifty times in twenty-eight chapters. Three related themes, then, are central to the book of Acts:

- 1) The first is that the kingdom Jesus proclaimed and promised has been inaugurated as the fruit of His self-offering, enthronement and bestowal of His Spirit.
- 2) The second is that this kingdom is the everlasting kingdom spoken of in all the Scriptures. This being so, it has its life and power in the eschatological outpouring of the Spirit and His work of creational renewal and transformation. That work of re-creation now operates spiritually in the sons of the kingdom; at the King’s return, it will extend to the whole of the created order.
- 3) Finally, this eschatological kingdom has fulfilled and so supplanted its Israelite predecessor. The preparatory Old Covenant theocracy has served its purpose in salvation history, with the result that those who refuse to acknowledge and accept its passing in fulfillment render themselves enemies of God and His kingdom.

When these themes are considered together, one would expect Luke to treat Israel’s (and others’) hostility and unbelief as opposition to the Spirit Himself, and this is exactly the case (ref. 5:1-9, 27-33, 7:51-53, 8:9-23, 15:1-29, etc.).

## D. Interpretive Approaches

It is universally recognized that discerning the true meaning and significance of something depends upon discerning the substance and nature of that thing. So, for instance, a member of a primitive, isolated tribe who has no knowledge of electronics or digital recording technology or devices stumbling on an iPod would have no way of knowing what he had found. He could spend weeks tearing it apart and studiously examining all of its physical components, but would still be no closer to understanding what it is.

So it is with the Scripture: Multitudes have been led to believe that the way to understand it in part and in whole is to dissect the passage of concern and scrutinize its details. They analyze its various linguistic and contextual features, foolishly optimistic that this alone will lead them to its meaning. But for all their confidence, this approach cannot succeed. Like the tribesman with the iPod, they need a broader knowledge base through which to consider what lies in front of them, and in the end, they will draw upon one, whether the one the Bible provides or their own. So all who come to the book of Acts (or any scriptural context) find their interpretive approach – and consequently the outcome of their examination – driven by the things they already believe.

1. Thus there are those in the Christian community who view Acts as providing the *direct paradigm* for understanding and living the Christian life: Charismatics largely look to this book (along with a handful of other New Testament contexts) to biblically substantiate and legitimize their views on spiritual gifts and their function in the present day Church. Similarly, Pentecostals take both their name and biblical support for their doctrine of tongues and the “second blessing” from the Pentecost context in Acts. So other Christian groups look to the first-century Church as portrayed in Luke’s account to provide the biblical paradigm for the form and structure of the contemporary Church.
2. Still others – arguably often as a reaction to Pentecostal and Charismatic excesses – take the opposite approach to the book of Acts, regarding it as documenting a *unique time and circumstance* in Church history that cannot be drawn upon to establish normative practice in the contemporary Church. These would include *cessationists* who argue for the uniqueness of the Pentecost event and the cessation of all sign gifts in the first century.
3. But, like the tribesman who must have the right frame of reference to discern the meaning and use of what he’s holding, interpreting and applying the book of Acts begins with understanding its salvation-historical and canonical significance. *Its content becomes coherent only when viewed within the overall book and its place in and contribution to God’s disclosure and accomplishment of His saving/restoring purpose in Christ.* Far from rendering the details irrelevant, taking a salvation-historical and canonical approach to the book of Acts enables the reader to discover their true meaning and import.

What this means in practice is that Acts first must be read in the light of Luke’s purpose as he disclosed it literarily as well as by direct statement. This consideration reveals that it is to be read in terms of the Old Testament storyline as it predicted and prepared for the kingdom Luke sought to substantiate in his accounts. Read in this way, it becomes evident how Acts contributes and functions in relation to the Gospels and the Epistles.