

The book of Acts, full title, The Acts of the Apostles, is Luke's second contribution to the Biblical collection. Like the Gospel of Luke it is written in the form of a letter. Like the Gospel of Luke, it is written to Theophilus, in the salutation of the Gospel, he is referred to as “Most Excellent Theophilus, a Gentile, and an official of some sort in the Roman System of Government of an Empire whose reach was the boundaries of the known world of that 1<sup>st</sup> century time.

It is not a theoretical book. What I mean by that is that it is not a doctrinal thesis. It is a narrative, the story, the history of what happened following the crucifixion and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is clear from the more familiar address to Theophilus that their relationship has grown. The official has become a friend, perhaps even a brother in Christ. This is clear. Luke wanted Theophilus to know the resurrection of Jesus was not a myth, or wishful thinking, and that the Christian story did not end there. That a totally unexpected, unanticipated, (for some) unbelievable development has taken place! This faith in God, this experience of the risen Christ fostered through the Holy Spirit has jumped a huge barrier and become the faith of Gentiles. And of all things, the leader in this mission to the Gentiles is the former Jew, former Pharisee, former persecutor of Christians, the apostle now called Paul.

Luke never puts himself in the same category as Paul, the greatest evangelist the Christian faith has ever known. Nonetheless, it is obvious the Spirit of God is strong in Luke, in that he is trying, working very hard to pass the faith on to, or develop it in, Theophilus, the Gentile, Roman official, who has indeed become

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a friend.

For me there are key verses in this opening portion of Luke's history of the early Church or if you prefer, the early Christian movement. One of them is verse 5. “John (that is John the Baptist) baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” The disciples who became the apostles, the followers of Jesus who graduated

into leadership and ministry wherever they went in the Lord's name were specifically instructed to wait for this baptism to happen. They were literally told to sit. To stay in Jerusalem until the Spirit of God was poured out on them and it would become obvious what to do next.

And here is an exceptional and all too often overlooked doctrinal point. It has to do with church life. It has to do with our experience of the church. Our journey shared with other Christians. Luke is writing in an era when denominational labels are irrelevant. You are either Christian or you are not. There are no options in terms of choices of what “kind” of Christian you will be. And Luke is saying that from those earliest days, when meaningful things occurred in the community of faith focused on Jesus, it was and forever after would always be an experience of the presence of God, whom we label The Holy Spirit.

There are marvelous implications in that theological and therefore doctrinal concept. If you attend a worship service and you find the music meaningful...that you enjoy it; if you find the ministry of the word speaks to you; if you learn something about the Biblical Word you did not know before; if you find the food and fellowship enjoyable when the church gathers to eat; if you enjoy the company of those who come together over coffee and muffins, or at

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the clatter of knitting needles; it's not just that the people you are with are marvelous or even perfect...in fact it is never about their perfection....because they are all sinners saved by the grace of God....including the minister! No it is this other reality, dare I say this other dimension. God was there and in the midst of the gathering. The reality of the Holy Spirit.

I love the worship chorus, it only has 5 lines, but it makes this very point. “Surely, the presence of the Lord is in this place, I can feel His mighty power and His grace, I can hear the brush of angel's wings, I see glory on each face....Surely the presence of the Lord, is in this place.” The writer has not gone crazy, or weird, and is not on some controlled substance. Lanny Wolfe wrote that chorus based on the Old Testament verse Genesis 28:16. Jacob slept using a stone for a pillow at Bethel. And as he slept he dreamed a dream of a stairway to heaven, the angels of God ascending and descending to minister to him. And when Jacob awoke he said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” He's not on

drugs and he has not been smoking marijuana. He has been touched by God, his eyes have been opened to something he did not know or even suspect. What Luke tells us, is the ministry of the Holy Spirit of God. He is the agent by which we receive the power and sometimes it is just the sensitivity to the presence of God. The most basic element of faith...when we just know, that we know God is with us and Jesus saves....and has work for us to do.

When we can discern that God is with us, and especially when HE is with us in a gathering with others, we can be sure...and I mean certain...the Spirit of the Lord is in that place. We are not alone. In fact if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we are never alone.

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I said there are what I regard as two key verses in this opening portion...actually three. Verses 8 and 9 should really be taken together and never subdivided. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. After He (Jesus) said this, He was taken up before their eyes and a cloud hid him from their sight.”

The first part is very clear. And for most of us a little bit scary. Scary because most of us feel we are not equipped to be missionaries, and this sounds like missionary work doesn't it. We don't have the training, or the degrees, and we would like to leave this work to the ministers. Permit me to share a secret with you. Most ministers feel the very same way. You can have a doctorate in theology and still feel that mission work is scary, that you are not trained for it, that you do not have all the answers, that you are unprepared to share your little bit of faith with...other people.

The irony (and I have had to live to be 70 years old to see this, this clearly) [which is a confession that the Holy Spirit is still working on me...I am a work in progress, not a finished product] the irony is what this pair of verses is doing is describing our condition and our situation. First of all we are absolutely correct to feel unqualified to share with anyone that we believe in God, believe in Jesus, believe that God interacts with us...the Holy Spirit. What's more we will never be “qualified”. It is not about being an expert. About being trained. About having a knowledge

base from which to work to convince other people.

It means we have been touched. Not in the head, as in

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crazy. Touched in the heart, as in reborn. Born of God. Born from above. It means the Holy Spirit is with us and in us. And it means (and this is where and why we get uncomfortable with the idea) it means we are dependant...not qualified, qualifications have nothing to do with it; it means we are dependant. Dependant on the Holy Spirit to find the right words. Dependant on the Holy Spirit to neither say too much nor too little. Dependant on the Holy Spirit to not offend. Dependant on God's Spirit to let what happens next, happen, for good or ill. And believe me I understand that that is hard for some of us, if not many of us to do.

And before you agree with me and assure me you will never try this consider. Consider this. You bought a car. And it has proved dependable. It gets the job done. You have paid for it and it still runs. Would you hesitate to tell anyone it was a (looking back from where you stand today) a wise investment? A brand name you would trust, if you had to buy again? I suspect your comment might be...it is not the same. In fact it is. You are into something good here, I presume, or you would not come back. You are into something you value here, even treasure, or you would not continue. I mean you have put money into this venture, and the ventures of this church family beyond our perimeters. I am certain you do not do that, lightly. If the church brings you any kind of pleasure...an experience of love shared...of hope...maybe peace....is that not worth sharing with others. These commodities....pleasure, hope, love, peace are not in such abundance as to be found everywhere, dare I say anywhere else.

One last thing. Jesus said we would be witnesses "In Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth. Let me translate, because translation makes things a whole lot more clear.

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At home, in Hastings County, Southern Ontario, and wherever else God leads you to live or have influence or contact with people who value you and what you find meaningful. You see Luke witnessed all of that with his colleague Paul. Luke was Paul's personal physician. He travelled with

Paul, among other things trying to keep him healthy and alive. Their journey started out at home in Jerusalem, and moved on to the neighbouring region, and took them across borders and to distant places, even the capital of the Empire. And everywhere they went God opened doors and windows of opportunity to tell the story of Jesus. The Spirit of God led them. Accompanied them. Comforted them. And prospered the work.

One really final thought. We know Luke tried to share his faith in Jesus with Theophilus. He wrote the man two long (some would say very long) letters. There is no other data to suggest that Luke every tried to share his faith with anyone else, except that he travelled with Paul. We do not even know what the outcome of this correspondence was. Did it take? We do not know. But millions and generations after generations of people have read this letter. And the other one, Luke's Gospel. Not bad eh? Touched by the Holy Spirit of God and willing to be dependant.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, Lord of our lives, Sweet Spirit. Be with us. Be in us. In Jesus name make use of us, even when we cannot see you are using us significantly. Help us to depend on you, when we dare not share. Help us to depend on you when we fear what the outcome of saying something that shows we believe. Help us to remember that even if we were unaware, we have arrived at this point in our journey because You are with us. Amen