
A Spirituality of Acts

BY STEVE WALTON

The book of Acts is focused on God's mission, as God draws people into his orbit and brings them into his community, and so its spirituality is missional. God takes the initiative using a variety of creative means, and people respond in community to the awesome God who makes himself known in Jesus and by the Spirit.

The word "spirituality" – now there's a vague and imprecise term! Some use it as an opposite of "religion," as in "I'm spiritual but not religious"; others use it as a way of speaking of their inner life – for instance, many people meditate on a regular basis and regard this as a "spiritual" practice. So to speak of spirituality in Acts requires some clarity over what we are seeking; otherwise it is a term which means nothing because it includes everything.

This dimension is vital to understanding earliest Christianity: it is all too easy to treat the Christian faith as either a set of intellectual beliefs or a series of ethical demands, and thus miss its crucial dimension of engagement with and experience of God as known in Jesus and by the Spirit.¹ The content of Christian belief is important, of course, and so is the lifestyle that goes with following Jesus, but both of these flow from and articulate the reality of Christian encounter with God – and the book of Acts is full of such encounters. So that is where we shall focus, on what Stephen Barton calls "the sense of the divine presence and living in the light of that presence."²

To read Acts is to read a book whose focus is outward, not inward. We find little description or discussion of believers' inner lives here – Acts is

concerned with God's mission in and to the world, to restore and renew creation, individuals, the nation of Israel, and the whole world. Mission theologians speak of *missio Dei*, "the mission of God," as the key way to think about mission. This means putting the accent on what *God* is doing: humans are to look for what God is doing and to join in, rather than to drive "mission" using their own ideas and wisdom. This approach is right in tune with Acts. Again and again, we read in Acts of God taking the initiative and moving to meet and engage with individuals and groups. Often these are not the kinds of people the earliest (Jewish) believers would naturally associate with, for God loves and reaches out to hated Samaritans (Acts 8:4-25), an Ethiopian (8:26-40), a "god-fearing" Roman centurion and his household (10:1-11:18), and even worshippers of pagan gods in Lystra (14:11-18).

The spirituality of Acts, then, is a *missional* spirituality. It is spirituality for those following God and engaging in the mission that God initiates and drives. It is spirituality for the journey, rather than for the settled life. So we shall study Acts first for the ways God moves towards humans, and then for the ways that we humans respond to God's initiatives.

HOW GOD MOVES FIRST

God uses a variety of agents and means to engage with people in Acts, but always with the drive toward reaching out to others who are not yet part of the believing community.

God is God's own agent much of the time in Acts, specifically in the persons of the exalted Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Consider, first, Jesus himself. Some claim that Jesus disappears from the scene when he ascends to the Father (Acts 1:9-11), and that the Holy Spirit is his *alter ego* who acts in Jesus' place – something like Batman acting for Bruce Wayne.³ This misunderstands both the present place of Jesus and the narrative of Acts. Jesus' present location is in heaven, in the seat of power in the universe, where he now reigns at God's right hand (2:33): in the ancient world, the right hand of a king is the place for his most trusted adviser and helper. Thus Peter identifies Jesus following his exaltation as "Lord," the Greek form of the name for the God of Israel in the Old Testament (2:36). "Lord" is not the same as "Messiah," Jesus' other title in 2:36. Jesus is Messiah by virtue of his resurrection, for this is how God has vindicated him from the mistaken human verdict of crucifixion (2:23-24); but Jesus is "Lord" by virtue of his exaltation to heaven (1:10-11), to the place of power and rule. He now pours out the Spirit (2:33), something that Yahweh, and Yahweh alone, does in previous times; in other words, Jesus functions and acts as Yahweh alone can.⁴ To encounter Jesus is to encounter the God of Israel.

Because Jesus is exalted in this way, he directs and leads the mission of the believing community at key times. When the Spirit comes at Pentecost, it is striking that Peter's speech, after a short explanation of the day's remarkable events (Acts 2:14-21), focuses on Jesus (2:22-36), the one who

gives the Spirit. The first martyr, Stephen, has a vision of the exalted Jesus, and Stephen's announcing it to the examining council leads them to stone him to death (7:55-58). Jesus stands to welcome his faithful servant (7:55). When Saul of Tarsus's life is turned around on the Damascus road, it is the exalted Jesus who meets Saul (9:4-5). Saul quickly recognizes Jesus' authority, asks his identity, and then does as Jesus tells him (9:5-6). Jesus, "the Lord," prepares for Saul's integration into the believing community by appearing from heaven to call Ananias to help Saul by baptizing him and laying hands on him for healing (9:10-16). The exalted Jesus heals the bedridden Aeneas (9:34), and in other healing stories Jesus' *name* stands for his person and signals his activity (e.g., in 3:6, 16; 4:7, 17, 30). As Douglas Buckwalter explains, "What believers do in Jesus' name is in effect being done by Jesus himself."⁵ The power of Jesus' name is also effective in throwing out evil spirits (16:18; cf., comically, 19:11-17). By Jesus' name alone are people "saved" (4:12) – here is the divine initiative to reach out and draw people into God's ways and purposes for planet Earth.

Consider now the Holy Spirit. Some regard Acts as a narrative of the Spirit's work, an "Acts of the Holy Spirit." This is not the whole story, for (as we have just seen) the exalted Jesus is deeply involved in the mission of God. However, the Spirit is highly significant as an agent of God reaching out. In Acts, the Holy Spirit acts as the organ of God's communication with humans, in five principal ways: revelatory visions and dreams (e.g., Acts 7:55; cf. 2:17); revelatory instruction or guidance (e.g., 8:29, 39; 10:19-20; 11:28); charismatic wisdom and discernment (e.g., 6:3, 5); charismatic praise (e.g., 2:4, 11b); and charismatic preaching and teaching (e.g., 2:14-36; 4:8-12, 29-31).⁶ The Spirit drives and enables the divine outreach, and provides evidence that it really is God at work. Hence Peter defends his visit

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to the Gentile centurion Cornelius by pointing to the Spirit's falling on this Gentile gathering, and this convinces his critics (11:15-18; cf. 15:8). The Spirit in Acts is primarily (but not exclusively) the *missionary* Spirit, empowering God's people to draw others into the circle of faith, and engaging with those outsiders directly (e.g., the Lystran man's faith may come from the Spirit, 14:9).

Consider finally *the appearances of divine messengers whom Luke calls "angels."* In similar ways to the Spirit, they act as God's mouthpieces, communicating God's purpose and will. An angel sends Philip into the desert to meet the Ethiopian eunuch and lead him to faith in Jesus (Acts 8:26). Cornelius sees an angel who tells him to send for Peter, who is instrumental in the household's conversion (10:3-6). Paul receives angelic reassurance that God will keep him safe amidst a great sea storm, in order to bear witness before Caesar (27:23-24). Through these messages God directs the *missio Dei*. Angels also *act* in space and time: Peter is freed from prison twice through angelic intervention (5:19; 12:7-11), and his freedom enables him to continue his mission work.

What, then, are *the means of God's engagement* with his people? Four are striking, and each resonates with Christian experience through the centuries, including today.

God engages with people through *visions and dreams*. Recall that Peter interprets Pentecost through the lens of Joel's prophecy which includes the Spirit causing "your young men [to] see visions and your old men [to] dream dreams" (Acts 2:17, quoting Joel 2:28). Luke portrays such events as ways God speaks. Ananias encounters "the Lord" (Jesus) in a vision, telling him to go to Saul, a very surprising event (9:10-12) — and Saul will become a key missionary. Cornelius's experience of the angel is "in a vision distinctly" (10:17) — and through responding, he comes to faith in Jesus. Paul has a vision of a man from Macedonia (16:9), which leads to the mission in Philippi. In this case, Luke writes that "a dream...*was seen* by Paul," and the passive verb suggests this is a "divine passive" signaling that God is the vision's source. Such visual experiences need interpretation: the group with Paul conclude from the Macedonian man's message that God calls them to go there (16:10; cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:20-21).⁷

Secondly, *Scripture interpreted in light of Jesus* is a key means of encounter with God. "Scripture" here means the Old Testament, of course. Peter models such interpretation in his exposition of Joel 2:28-32 and Psalms 16:8-11; 132:11; and 110:1 in the Pentecost speech (Acts 2:14-36). Through Peter's exposition, the crowd hear God and realize they need to respond. Guided by Peter's answer to their question, "What must we do?" (2:37), they repent and are baptized into Jesus' name and join the renewed, Spirit-filled people of God (2:38-39). Similarly, believers interpret their experience through the lens of Scripture and Jesus as suffering Messiah. Their response to Peter and John being forbidden by the Jewish Council to speak in Jesus' name (4:18, 21) is to pray guided by Scripture, as they interpret recent events using Psalm 2:1-2 (4:25-28). God responds to their request for boldness and power in abundance (4:29-31); through Scripture interpreted in the light of Jesus, God meets his people and equips them for outreach.

Luke designates a third, linked, means, as "*the word of the Lord*" or "*the word of God.*" This phrase denotes the gospel message, which Luke portrays

as active in the world. The word regularly transforms lives (e.g., the summaries in Acts 6:7; 12:24; 13:49). The word is also the preaching of the eye- and ear-witnesses of Jesus, through which people encounter God seeking and finding them.

A fourth means of God encountering people is *the name of Jesus*: through it comes healing (Acts 3:6, 16; 4:10), signs and wonders (4:30; 8:12), forgiveness (10:43), deliverance from demonic power (16:18), and salvation (4:12). Water baptism is into Jesus' name (2:38; 8:12, 16; 10:48; 19:5; 22:16),⁸ which suggests that baptizands called on Jesus, or the baptizer(s) invoked Jesus' name, as they were baptized – either way, baptized people met the living and exalted Jesus through the waters of baptism.

In sum, Acts portrays God – Father, Son, and Spirit – as actively engaged in the world, seeking humans to join in their mission. God is the initiator and driver of this mission, and its key end – for it is through the mission that people encounter God-in-Christ by the Spirit, and are being transformed into the people God calls them to be.

HOW HUMANS RESPOND TO GOD

If this is how God engages with humans, what does human response to God in Acts look like? We focus primarily on “direct” engagement with God, rather than how people relate to others as a result of encountering God. Notice five major features of people's response.

First, *human response is frequently slow and partial.*

People do not always grasp what God is saying or what God desires. A key example is the development of the mission among people who are not Jewish. Luke portrays the progress of Gentile admission to the believing communities as very gradual, even though (with hindsight) it is driven by God.

Philip is an “early adopter” of the Gentile mission, but must accept that God is

sending him to a strange place (the desert road, Acts 8:26), and even then has to be prompted by the Spirit to approach the Ethiopian eunuch (8:29). It is only when Philip hears the eunuch reading Scripture (aloud, for all ancient reading was aloud) that Philip realizes this is a divine appointment and he must speak about Jesus to this high-ranking Ethiopian civil

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servant (8:30). It takes several means by which God takes the initiative before Philip responds appropriately.

Peter is another of the first Jewish believers to connect with Gentiles, as he goes to meet the Roman centurion Cornelius and his household. Again there is a divine appointment, for an angel appears to the Roman (Acts 10:3-6), and Peter has a baffling vision (10:9-17a) which he only “gets” after the Spirit prompts him to welcome Cornelius’s slaves and soldier (10:19-20) – such a prompt persuades Peter the Jew to allow Gentiles (presumed unclean) to eat with him.

The issue rumbles on as (Jewish) believers in Jerusalem criticize Peter for eating with Gentiles (Acts 11:3). Peter’s telling of God’s initiative in sending him to Cornelius (in 11:4-17 telling the story from Peter’s perspective), and particularly in pouring the Spirit on Gentiles, convinces the Jerusalem believers. Even so, the surprise in their voices is evident: “*even to the Gentiles*” (11:18, my italics).

The Cornelius story does not close the debate, for Paul and Barnabas later debate with Jewish, Pharisaic believers who regard circumcision and keeping the Jewish torah as necessary for salvation (Acts 15:1-2, 5). Luke reports the Jerusalem gathering which resolves the issue by setting out conditions for fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers, conditions which exclude circumcision (15:19-20, 28-29).

Even then, when Paul visits Jerusalem, false rumors about his stance on circumcision abound, and Paul agrees to participate in a Jewish ceremony to demonstrate that he is not abandoning his Jewishness (Acts 21:20-26). Paul’s going the extra mile leads to a riot (21:27-36), which initiates the chain of events that finally takes him to Rome.

Luke’s realistic portrayal of the slowness of religious people to change – realistic to those of us involved in congregations today! – highlights that Acts presents no picture of unhindered progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, but rather believers’ mixed response to God, warts and all.

Secondly, believers’ response to God is *corporate and community-centered*. Acts 2:42-47 is rightly seen as “programmatic” for the community’s life, for it lists features of the church’s life that recur in later sections about believers’ meetings. All these activities flow from the Spirit’s pentecostal coming, and are expressed using plural verbs: the apostles’ teaching (2:42, concerning Jesus and rooted, presumably, in Scripture); fellowship (shared life which involved sharing goods, 2:44-45); the prayers (2:42, including the temple prayers, 2:46; 3:1, and praise of God, 2:47); and breaking bread (2:42, notably in shared meals in the temple and in homes, 2:46, and including sharing the Lord’s supper, cf. Luke 22:19; 24:30-31, 35). Acts 2:38 must be read with 2:39, for the commitment to community that 2:39 expresses – involving “you and your children” as well as “all who are far away” – is a crucial part of responding to God, for God engages with his people *together*.

Thirdly, encountering God leads to a response of *prayer*. Indeed, one key means by which believers meet God is in prayer – most often in a corporate

setting. The community members pray as they wait in response to Jesus' instruction (Acts 1:14, cf. 1:4-5). They pray for guidance over Judas' replacement (1:24). They pray when commissioning those God calls to particular tasks – the Spirit's call to Barnabas and Saul both comes in the setting of prayer (13:2) and issues in prayer for them (13:3; cf. 6:6; 14:23).

Individual prayer is less common, but clearly present. Peter is praying on the rooftop when he sees the sheet full of animals that opens his mind to visiting Cornelius (Acts 10:4) – and so is Cornelius (10:2). Saul is praying when God sends Ananias to pray for his healing and to baptize him (9:11). Joel Green observes that as believers pray, they “get in sync with and participate in what God is doing.”⁹

Fourthly, believers encounter God in *suffering*. They do not see persecution as showing that they are getting things wrong, but as a call to seek God's power and boldness. As we noted, they pray when Peter and John are forbidden to speak in Jesus' name: they do not pray for deliverance *from* persecution, but for God's strength and grace *in* persecution (Acts 4:29-30). Acts encourages suffering believers to pray similarly by noting God's positive answer (4:31).

Luke does not suggest that James dies because believers do not pray (Acts 12:2), but he does present God's deliverance of Peter as an answer to prayer. Luke presents this humorously, as the praying group are amazed when Peter shows up (12:12-16); the resemblance to Christians' surprise today when God answers our prayers is considerable!

Finally, the believers' response to God is characterized by *fear*, a response seen in four key places. The early community is marked by fear (“awe,” Acts 2:43) – not abject terror, but right recognition that God is great and powerful, and not to be trifled with. The community is “seized” by fear after the Ananias and Sapphira incident (5:5, 11). Luke summarizes the growth of the

churches as “walking in the fear of the Lord” (9:31), echoing the Old Testament phrase “the fear of the Lord.”¹⁰ The people of Ephesus are fearful (“awe-struck,” 19:17) following the comical episode of the Jewish sons of Sceva seeking to throw out a demon by third-hand use of Jesus' name (19:13-16). The praise of Jesus' name which follows implies that “fear” entails respect for Jesus' power when rightly invoked.

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CONCLUSION

We have found patterns both of God's actions to draw people to himself, and of appropriate human response. Both sides are important: the Christian life in Acts is about responding to God's initiative, rather than humans driving events and setting the agenda, *and* the Christian life is about human response—it is not about God alone. Christians are to walk with God in company with others.

Christians today must beware setting their minds on the things of this world, and the ways they like and prefer. Rather, they must maintain openness to God, to encountering God in surprising and fresh ways through these amazing stories, in the Spirit, and in response to the risen and exalted Jesus.

NOTES

1 See Luke Timothy Johnson, *Religious Experience in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1998).

2 Stephen C. Barton, *The Spirituality of the Gospels* (London, UK: SPCK, 1992), 1. The whole book is an excellent discussion of the Gospels' contribution to Christian spirituality.

3 Notably Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (London, UK: Faber & Faber, 1960), e.g. 204.

4 Hence at the ascension, the disciples *worship* him (Luke 24:52), and Stephen prays to Jesus (Acts 7:59).

5 Douglas Buckwalter, *The Character and Purpose of Luke's Christology*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 89 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 184.

6 See Max Turner, "The 'Spirit of Prophecy' as the Power of Israel's Restoration and Witness" in I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, eds., *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 327-348, especially 334.

7 See John B. F. Miller, *Convinced That God Had Called Us: Dreams, Visions, and the Perception of God's Will in Luke-Acts*, Biblical Interpretation Series 85 (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2007).

8 Three Greek prepositions for "in" are used (*en*, *eis*, and *epi*), with no discernible difference in meaning.

9 Joel B. Green, "Persevering Together in Prayer: The Significance of Prayer in the Acts of the Apostles" in Richard N. Longenecker, ed., *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, McMaster New Testament Studies (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 183-202, here citing 194.

10 See, for example, Psalms 34:11 and 111:10; Proverbs 1:7, 29; 2:5. The one anointed by the Spirit in Isaiah 11:2-3 displays the fear of the Lord.



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