



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 A Spirituality of Acts
(*The Book of Acts*, pp. 11-18)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Repeition for a Reason
(*The Book of Acts*, pp. 73-77)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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A Spirituality of Acts

The book of Acts focuses 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.

Prayer

Lord you have laid down your life for us, and call us to lay down our lives for one another.

Grant us eyes to see the needs of those around us, discipline to restrain our own greed for time or possessions so that we can share with our neighbors, and joy as we serve alongside one another as your Church.

Prosper the work of our hands Lord, and let your kingdom come.
Amen

Scripture Reading: Acts 1:1-8

Reflection

In Acts, the human encounter with God, which is the heart of what Steve Walton means by "spirituality," is turned outward, not inward. "We find little description or discussion of believers' inner lives," Walton notes. Rather, "the accent is on what God is doing: humans are to look for what God is doing and to join in."

He traces the contours of spirituality in Acts, beginning with the agents and means that God uses to move toward humans.

- ▶ *God engages humans directly through the persons of the exalted Jesus and the Holy Spirit.* Jesus does not disappear from Acts after he ascends to the Father (Acts 1:9-11); rather he reigns at God's right hand and is rightfully called "Lord" (2:33, 36). Walton notes, "He now pours out the Spirit, something that Yahweh, and Yahweh alone, does in previous times. To encounter Jesus is to encounter the God of Israel." Jesus leads the believing community at key moments: he appears to the martyr Stephen in a vision (7:55-58), confronts Saul (9:4-5), guides Ananias to baptize and heal Saul (9:10-16), heals Aeneas (9:34; cf. 3:6, 16; 4:7, 17, 30) and, as disciples call on his name, drives out evil spirits (16:18; cf. comically, 19:11-17).

Through the Holy Spirit, God engages humans through visions and dreams (e.g., Acts 7:55; cf. 2:17), direct instruction (e.g., 8:29, 39; 10:19-20; 11:28), charismatic 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).

- ▶ *God guides humans through divine messengers, whom Luke calls "angels."* Through the word of an angel, God sends Philip to lead the Ethiopian eunuch to faith (Acts 8:26), instructs Cornelius to send for Peter who will lead his household to faith (10:3-6), and assures Paul that he will survive the sea storm in order to bear witness before Caesar (27:23-24). "Angels also *act* in space and time," Walton observes. "Peter is freed from prison twice through angelic intervention (5:19; 12:7-11)...to continue his mission work."
- ▶ *God employs various means to engage people in the book of Acts, but four are striking: visions and dreams, Scripture interpreted in light*



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of Jesus, the “word of the Lord [or God],” and the name of Jesus. Though the instances of their use in Acts may be dramatic, Walton says each means “resonates with Christian experience through the centuries, including today.”

So, if this is how God engages with humans, how do they respond to the divine initiatives? The human response tends to be:

- ▶ *slow and partial*. For example, even Philip and Peter must be nudged to approach Gentiles (Acts 8:29, 10:19-20). Other believers must be convinced (11:3-18) and their leaders debate how to proceed (15:1-29). Years later, false rumors of Paul’s stance toward Gentiles start the events leading to his imprisonment (21:20-36). “Luke’s realistic portrayal of the slowness of religious people to change...presents no picture of unhindered progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, but rather believers’ mixed response to God, warts and all.”
- ▶ *community-centered*. All of the activities of the believers’ meetings – the apostles’ teaching, fellowship and sharing goods, prayers, and breaking bread – are expressed with plural verbs in Acts 2:42-47.
- ▶ *saturated with prayer* – usually in community (Acts 1:14 [cf. 1:4-5]; 1:24; 13:2-3), but also in individual piety (10:2, 4; 9:11).
- ▶ *in the context of human suffering*. Believers “do not see persecution as showing that they are getting things wrong, but as a call to seek God’s power and boldness,” Walton writes. “They do not pray for deliverance from persecution, but for God’s strength and grace in persecution (Acts 4:29-31).
- ▶ *characterized by fear*, or awe, whenever believers recognize God’s greatness (Acts 2:43; cf. 5:5, 11; 9:31; and 19:17).

Walton concludes, “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.”

Study Questions

1. Through what *agents* does God engage humans in the book of Acts? Does God continue to engage people today through these agents?
2. Discuss the four *means* that God employs to engage humans in Acts. How, and to what degree, are each of these evident within your congregation and in your experience?
3. Consider the five major features of people’s *response* to God in the book of Acts. In your experience, how do these characterize the response of believers today?
4. In the three versions of Paul’s encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road (9:1-9; 22:3-11; 26:4-20), what elements of the spirituality outlined here are prominent?
5. How do the three versions of the Damascus road experience differ? Why, according to Timothy Churchill, does Luke draw attention to this event with such repetition?

Departing Hymn: ‘As Christ and Church and Congregation’

A Spirituality of Acts

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Acts 1:1-8	Acts 9:1-9
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Survey major features of spirituality in Acts	Relate those features to three versions of Paul's Damascus road event
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions 4 and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To outline three key elements of the spirituality of Acts: the agents and means of God's approach to humans, and the major features of people's response to those initiatives.
2. To examine the spirituality of our congregations for these three key elements.
3. To trace these three key elements of spirituality in the story of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Book of Acts (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Question

What comes to mind when you hear the word 'spirituality'?

Steve Walton admits it is 'a vague and imprecise term.' Today, some use 'spirituality' to mean the opposite of (organized) religion, as when they say 'I'm spiritual, but not religious.' A wide range of experiences, practices, and beliefs have been called 'spiritual.'

Walton does not dismiss the term because it is vague, but defines it carefully to point to an important dimension of the book of Acts. He explains, '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. 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.'" (*The Book of Acts*, p. 11)

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by inviting members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 8:1-8 from a modern translation.

Reflection

How we experience God and engage with God's work today is what Steve Walton means by our "spirituality." In this study we follow his lead in tracing the spirituality of the book of Acts, and use its elements—the agents and means that God uses to approach humans, and the response they make—to examine our own spirituality.

If the group would like to extend this study, schedule a second session to examine the story of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus. In that story most of the key elements of the spirituality of Acts are highlighted and integrated with one another.

Study Questions

1. The *agents* through whom God engages humans in the book of Acts are the exalted Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and angels. In the first two cases, Steve Walton notes, God is acting as his own agent; in the latter case, God uses the divine messengers whom Luke calls "angels." The agency of the Holy Spirit in Acts is better known, but readers may overlook the agency of the exalted Jesus. Walton explains, "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. This misunderstands both the present place of Jesus and the narrative of Acts."

Create three small groups to review how each of these agents advances God's mission in Acts, and to look for parallels in their experience and the Church today. So, the first group might discuss whether Jesus appears to people today, or heals people through his name; the second group might explore the range of charismatic activity attributed to the Holy Spirit today; and the third group will need to discuss the appearance of divine messengers.

2. Walton identifies these four *means*: visions and dreams, Scripture interpreted in light of Jesus, the "word of the Lord (or God)" [which is the gospel message], and the name of Jesus. Assign small groups to research some of the scripture passages that Walton cites for each means. Encourage them to look for parallels in their experience and the Church today. Are all of the means evident today? Which ones have been most prominent in their experience? Are there other important means of God's activity?
3. Walton notes that people's *response* to God in the book of Acts is slow and partial (as illustrated by their adjusting to God's work among Gentiles), community-centered, saturated by prayer, characterized by recognizing suffering to be endured, and filled with fear and awe. Compare this to people's response to God today. Is this how members would describe their own response, or the response of other Christians they know? If not, are there other patterns of response today that seem to be missing in Acts? How do members explain the difference?
4. Briefly summarize the *agents* and *means* of God's approach to humans, and the patterns of human *response* in the book of Acts. (This summary is especially important if you have extended the discussion to a second session.) Form three small groups to map these elements of spirituality onto each version of Paul's encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road (9:1-9; 22:3-11; 26:4-20).
5. Form three small groups to trace each of these three changes across the versions of the Damascus road event: (1) the accounts of Paul's pre-encounter persecution of believers grows in detail and intensity; (2) the accounts of the heavenly light say it is more bright, is seen by more people, and elicits more response from them; and (3) the reports of Jesus' message to Paul become increasingly detailed. These enlargements of the story, as well as the increasing frequency with which it is repeated near the end of the narrative, indicate it is very significant for Luke.

Timothy Churchill suggests Luke is highlighting Jesus' message, which (1) establishes that Paul's apostolic authority comes straight from Jesus, (2) expresses the gospel in kernel form ("to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me"), and (3) reflects a high Christology that identifies Jesus with God.

Departing Hymn

"As Christ and Church and Congregation" is on pp. 35-37 of *The Book of Acts*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.