

Apostolic Handbook Series

Handbook
on the
Book of Acts



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Contents

Foreword.....	ix
Author's Preface.....	xiii
Acknowledgments	xix
Unit I Introductory Matters	1
1 Pentecostals and the Book of Acts	3
2 Author, Date, and Audience	11
3 The Genre of Acts	17
4 Acts and Narrative Theology	23
5 The Purposes of Acts	31
6 Speeches in Acts	37
7 Paul and Acts	45
8 Structure and Summary of Acts.....	51
Unit II Theological Themes in Luke-Acts	59
9 The Revelation of Jesus Christ.....	61
10 The Work of the Holy Spirit	71
11 Salvation in Luke-Acts.....	77
12 Women, the Poor, and Inclusion in Luke-Acts	83
13 A First-Century Church: A Developing Ecclesiology... 93	
Unit III Selected Commentary	101
14 Transitions (Acts 1).....	103
15 Pentecost (Acts 2).....	115
16 Sign and Sermon (Acts 3)	133
17 And with Many Other Words	145
18 Concluding Remarks on the Book of Acts	157
For Further Reading	159
Notes	163
Glossary	169
Bibliography.....	173

1 | *Pentecostals and the Book of Acts*

The modern Pentecostal movement is the most significant revival in the history of Christianity. From its humble birth in Topeka, Kansas, at the dawn of the twentieth century, it has grown into an unprecedented global movement with as many as 500 million adherents. Although a number of factors led to the emergence of Pentecostalism, many scholars agree that the restoration impulse was the dominant factor. The restoration impulse, or restorationism, is defined as an attempt to restore the church to the doctrine and praxis (practice) of the earliest Christians—those found in the Book of Acts—free from the accretions of church history and tradition.¹ It follows then that Pentecostals have a special relationship with Acts. For many Pentecostals, it functions almost as a veritable canon within the Canon. In other words, Pentecostals not only look to Acts as a model of how church should be done, but they also see it as a window on a world where biblical doctrines were correctly understood and lived out. Even though many evangelical scholars insist that narrative sections of the Bible such as Acts only illustrate doctrine, Pentecostals maintain that Acts is a source book for Apostolic doctrine. (Later in this handbook we will look at how narrative sections of the

Bible not only illustrate doctrine, but also at how they teach doctrine.)

The earliest Pentecostals certainly understood the Book of Acts in this light. In fact, Charles Parham, who many would suggest was the founder of the movement, called his fledgling movement the Apostolic Faith movement, principally because he was trying to take the church back to the Book of Acts. Parham's radical restorationism can be seen in how he conducted his Bible school in Topeka. The students, many with roots in the Holiness movement, used the Bible as their only textbook. Parham was concerned that theological texts and Bible commentaries might obscure his student's ability to get at the plain meaning of the biblical text. Just before Christmas 1900, Parham instructed his students to search the Scriptures for any sign that would indicate that a person had received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. His students, using a number of passages from Acts, concluded that speaking in tongues was the initial sign of Holy Spirit baptism. Shortly after they reached this conclusion one of the students, Agnes Ozman, received the baptism of the Holy Ghost. The rest, as they say, is history.

When the seminal revival of the movement broke out a few years later in Los Angeles, its leader, William Seymour, shared these same theological convictions concerning the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It was not surprising that he called the now-famous Azusa Street Mission, the Pacific Apostolic Faith Mission.

So central was Acts to the fledgling movement that Seymour's lead story in the inaugural issue (September 1906) of *The Apostolic Faith* (the official periodical of the Azusa Street Mission) was "Pentecost Has Come." It was subtitled "Los Angeles Being Visited by a Revival of Bible Salvation and Pentecost as Recorded in the Book of Acts." Participants in the revival embraced Seymour's understanding. Almost two decades later when Azusa participant Frank Bartleman wrote

his eyewitness account of the revival, he titled it *How 'Pentecost' Came to Los Angeles*.

The Pentecostal movement spread rapidly from Azusa in a similar way as its Book of Acts predecessor quickly branched out from Jerusalem. The modern Pentecostal movement, like the Book of Acts church, is organically missional. For Pentecostals, the church is commissioned to carry the gospel message to the four corners of the globe.

It was this same focus on the Book of Acts and the desire to restore its teaching that led to the “New Issue.” But before we get to that, a little background may be necessary. The earliest Pentecostals held a three-stage soteriology—a person was saved, sanctified, and then Spirit-baptized. The first significant doctrinal controversy to hit the young Pentecostal movement had to do with the second stage, sanctification. This doctrinal controversy took its name from William Durham’s classic sermon on the subject, “The Finished Work of Calvary.” Finished Work advocates, as they became known, insisted that sanctification was not obtained in a separate experience subsequent to salvation, but rather it began at conversion and continued throughout the life of a believer. It collapsed the three-step soteriology to two steps.

As early Pentecostals examined the praxis of the early church as recorded in the Book of Acts, they discovered that without exception all water baptisms were done in the name of Jesus. The earliest Pentecostals had followed the long-standing tradition of baptizing adherents in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost. But their focus on Acts challenged this practice. Those holding most tightly to the restoration impulse decided to throw off tradition and baptize as the apostles had baptized. This became known as the New Issue because it emerged shortly after the Finished Work controversy. New Issue proponents insisted that not only should new believers be baptized in the name of Jesus, but anyone not baptized in His name should also be rebaptized.

Additionally, as they (Oneness Pentecostals or Apostolic Pentecostals) reflected on the significance of Jesus Name baptism, they began to rethink the nature of God. Understanding that Jesus was the saving name of God (Acts 4:12), they came to believe that all the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in Jesus (Colossians 2:9) and therefore they rejected the long-held Trinitarian understanding of the Godhead. Further they looked afresh at the relationship between salvation, sanctification, and the baptism of the Spirit. According to Douglas Jacobsen, “In the end, most Oneness Pentecostals would theologically collapse these three activities into one another, assuming that a person should be saved, sanctified, and baptized in the Spirit all at the same time.”² The Book of Acts was central to a restoration of biblical truth.

EARLY PERIODICALS AND BOOKS

When the Oneness movement emerged from the Assemblies of God in 1916, a number of leading Oneness advocates published periodicals. Frank Ewart published “Meat in Due Season” from Los Angeles. From Christ Temple in Indianapolis, G. T. Haywood published “The Voice Crying in the Wilderness.” Itinerant Bible teacher D. C. O. Opperman published “The Blessed Truth.” As Oneness Pentecostal organizations developed, they too had periodicals that gave field reports as well as doctrinal teaching. While obviously not commentaries on Acts, the apostolic hermeneutic (that is, a method of interpreting the Bible modeled on the practice of the apostles) found in these was nevertheless firmly rooted in Acts.

These periodicals and early doctrinal books such as G. T. Haywood’s, *The Birth of the Spirit in the Days of the Apostles* (circa 1922), used what Kenneth Archer has called a pre-critical Bible Reading Method. “Early Pentecostals were not attempting to produce a systematic theology or exegetical commentaries. They were much more concerned with

simply ‘living the Christian life’ and defending their understanding of the ‘Apostolic Faith.’ Thus, they attempted to retrieve from the New Testament, a praxis-driven ‘Jesus-centrism’ Christianity.”³ Given that Spirit baptism and Jesus Name baptism were central concerns, Acts was critical to this hermeneutic.

In addition to periodicals and Sunday school curriculum, two book-length treatments, both by first-generation Pentecostals, were published by Pentecostal Publishing House, the publishing arm of the United Pentecostal Church International. In 1972 Jet Witherspoon, who spent many years as a faculty member of a Bible college, wrote *Acts: The Amazing History of the Early Church*, a commentary on Acts designed to be a Bible college text. In 1988 Fred Kinzie wrote *Salvation in the Book of Acts*, which, as the title suggests, looked at the way salvation was understood and practiced in the Book of Acts. Both were shaped significantly by what Archer has called the Bible Reading Method.

In the early nineties, M. D. Treece released his two-volume commentary, *The Literal Word: Acts I & II*. Like most Pentecostals, he held that Acts was critical to properly understanding and applying the rest of the Bible. In his introduction to volume one he wrote, “The book of Acts is said to be the centerpiece of the entire Bible. All of the other books in scripture either anticipate its activity or utilize its record as a measure for acceptable practices. . . . So, for many reasons, the book of Acts is the most important book in the entire Bible.”⁴ With these volumes, Treece increased the sophistication of Oneness scholarship. He not only translated Acts into English from its original Greek, but he also included discussions about variant manuscripts. However, with the exception of Greek language experts, he rarely, if ever, interfaced with other biblical scholars who wrote about Acts.

THE NEXT LEVEL OF SCHOLARSHIP

The scholarship in the wider Pentecostal movement entered a new phase in 1970 with the publication of James Dunn's doctoral thesis entitled *Baptism in the Spirit*. Dunn, an evangelical who developed a well-deserved reputation as a scholar, challenged the widely held Trinitarian Pentecostal idea that Spirit baptism was *separate from and subsequent to* salvation. Trinitarian Pentecostals and a few Oneness Pentecostals held that a person received the Spirit when he or she believed on Jesus. They further believed that in addition to being born of the Spirit—which they felt happened when a person believed on Jesus—a person could and should receive the baptism or the gift of the Spirit. Spirit-baptism would be evidenced by speaking in tongues; hence the language of “separate from and subsequent to.” In this context, the baptism of the Spirit is sometimes referred to as an extra gift, or a *donum superadditum*.

Instead of the idea of “separate from and subsequent to,” Dunn insisted that the experience of Spirit baptism be understood both as conversion to Christ and initiation into the kingdom of God.⁵ In other words, Spirit-baptism was a critical component of the act of salvation. Trinitarian Pentecostals such as Roger Stronstad insisted that Dunn was confusing Lukan pneumatology with Pauline pneumatology.⁶ Reflecting the views of the emerging Lukan scholars, Stronstad noted that Luke should be seen not just as a historian but also as a theologian and that Luke's theology could have a different emphasis than Paul's. For Stronstad, as with many Trinitarian Pentecostals, Spirit baptism was not about conversion-initiation, rather it was about empowerment for mission and the performance of miracles. He further suggested that instead of emphasizing the Reformation doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (which had to do with salvation), Luke in fact emphasized the prophethood of all believers (which has to do with mission and miracles). For Stronstad, the baptism of the Spirit equipped New Testament believers to be prophets.

Assemblies of God scholar Robert Menzies attempted to refute Dunn point by point.⁷ He also claimed that Lukan pneumatology was different than Pauline pneumatology. For Menzies, the limited function of the baptism of the Spirit was to empower believers for witnessing or inspired speech. According to Menzies, Paul was the first writer to associate the Spirit with salvation. Over against Stronstad, he maintained that the function of Spirit baptism was exclusively for vocational witnessing and had little to do with the working of miracles. In the decades following the publication of Dunn's dissertation, a lively scholarly conversation ensued, primarily in *Pneuma*, the journal of the Society of Pentecostal Studies.

David K. Bernard, whose significant corpus of writings arguably makes him the leading Oneness theologian, joined the conversation initiated by Dunn's *Baptism of the Spirit*. Although his 1984 book, *The New Birth*, did not interact with Dunn, it did provide the most complete understanding of the Oneness view of salvation. As would be expected, much of the book is centered in the Book of Acts. The publication of *The New Birth* and its wide acceptance demonstrated that Oneness Pentecostals rejected the idea that Spirit-baptism was subsequent to and separate from salvation. In three subsequent books, *The Oneness View of Jesus Christ*, *A History of Christian Doctrine, Volume 3*, and *Justification and the Holy Spirit*, Bernard briefly alluded to Dunn's understanding of the conversion-initiation process and hinted that this language could be helpful to explaining the Oneness position. In *I AM: A Oneness Pentecostal Theology*, David S. Norris engaged in a much more extensive conversation with Dunn and his Trinitarian Pentecostal dialogue partners. Norris affirmed Dunn's language of conversion-initiation but then modified it. "While not altogether agreeing with all of Dunn's conclusions, Oneness Pentecostals also understand the baptism of the Holy Spirit as a part of initiation into covenant. While we would agree with Dunn as to the importance of faith and repentance, contrary to Dunn, for example we would

see a much greater importance for baptism.”⁸ Both Bernard and Norris appropriate Dunn’s language of conversion-initiation and then redefine the term to show alignment between Lukan and Pauline pneumatologies. Neither would find any difference between receiving the Spirit and being baptized in the Spirit. Further, they would insist that Spirit-baptism is accompanied by the sign of speaking in tongues.

To date I am unaware of a scholarly commentary on the Book of Acts written by a Oneness Pentecostal. Given the significance of Acts to the Oneness Pentecostal hermeneutic, this deficit needs to be remedied. While this volume will at times interact with scholarly literature on Acts, it is not intended to be a scholarly commentary.