

TITLE:

'Luke was the first Pentecostalist'. Discuss this verdict on Luke's understanding of receiving the gift of the Spirit.

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1 Introduction – defining ‘Pentecostal’

Pentecostalism arose from nineteenth century *holiness* teaching, which in turn owed its origins to Wesleyan *perfectionist* doctrine. Pentecostalism carried over the Wesleyan idea of a second work of grace in sanctification (which did not depend on Luke), but transferred the purpose of the ‘*second blessing*’ to ‘*empowerment for service or mission*’ rather than holiness¹. These ideas (and vocabulary) were therefore grafted on to Luke’s teaching on the Holy Spirit rather than arising from it, and so coloured Pentecostalist interpretation of *Acts*.

So we must be careful to define what we mean by Luke as a Pentecostalist, for it is certain *he* was not influenced by Wesley. The current debate is not about whether Luke holds all the distinctives of the modern movement, but about its central teaching. This is that baptism with the Holy Spirit is an experiential event distinct from conversion, to equip believers for witness and service². This doctrine is certainly attributed to Luke by some writers.

2 Pentecostalist arguments

Modern scholars defending this position, of whom Robert Menzies is perhaps the most notable, tend to dichotomise the teaching of Luke and other NT writers, particularly Paul:

Luke’s perspective stands in sharp contrast to Paul... who clearly attributes soteriological functions (as well as miracles) to the Spirit...³

At the heart of this view is the idea that Luke sees the Spirit very narrowly as the *Spirit of Prophecy* promised in Joel 2 (quoted in Acts 2) and perhaps Isa. 32.15. Menzies' position is based on several arguments:

- Contemporary Judaism saw the Spirit as purely concerned with prophetic utterance ('*with the realm of the "intelligible" rather than with the realm of the "tangible"*⁴).
- Luke attributes miracles to *δυναμις*, a substantial power from God (derived from Greek ideas) rather than to *πνευμα του θεου*.
- Luke never links conversion, healing or exorcism to the Spirit.
- Redactionally, Luke changes his sources to avoid any dilution of the *Spirit of Prophecy* theme (or according to Menzies, to deny any other role for the Spirit). For example he changes the quotation from Isaiah in Luke 4, omitting the reference to *binding up the broken-hearted* which might suggest that the Spirit is involved in release from sin other than by inspired proclamation. Similarly he separates the sin against the Holy Spirit (Luke 12) from its original context of exorcism, attributing the latter (against Matthew) to 'the finger of God'.

Other writers make the difference from Paul one of emphasis rather than doctrine. But as far as the meaning of Pentecost is concerned this makes little difference, so that Marshall is able to say:

There is little stress in Acts 2 and elsewhere in Acts on the ethical effects of the gift of the Spirit... the Pentecost story is concerned solely with mission, and stresses the importance of this aspect of the Spirit's work.⁵

3 *Non-Pentecostal arguments*

Writers such as James Dunn attempt to relieve the tension between Paul (*etc.*) and Luke by assimilating the latter's emphasis to the former. The first plank in his argument is that the Pentecost event reflects, in addition to the *Spirit of Prophecy* theme, a parallel to the covenant of Sinai. Against Menzies he argues that, by this time at least some Jews had linked the harvest festival of Pentecost with a renewal of Noah's covenant (*Jubilees 6*)⁶, and probably with the Mosaic covenant too. This had certainly happened by the second century, and may have been earlier in view of the timing of the Sinai events in Exod.19 on the third new moon after Pentecost, and a possible allusion in 1 Chron. 15.10-12⁷.

Then again, Luke four times refers to the gift of the Spirit as *ἡ παραγγελία*, a word used by both Paul and Luke of the covenant promise of God to his people, and so linked with New Covenant passages (mentioning the Spirit) such as Ezek. 36.27 and Jer. 31.33⁸. So although verbal referents and other signs of the Covenant concept moulding the Pentecost account are lacking,

...it is fairly safe to conclude that the thought of Sinai is present.^{9,10}

A second argument is to consider Jesus' own experience at his baptism. Since he was already Son of God by birth through the Spirit, the change wrought by the Spirit was not an alteration in Jesus' nature, but a change in God's covenant economy, into which Jesus was introduced. So Jesus was living under the Old Covenant until his baptism, when he himself

entered the age of the New Covenant through the Spirit. Pentecost achieved the same for his followers, inaugurating the age of the Church:

What Jordan was to Jesus, Pentecost was to the disciples. As Jesus entered the new age and covenant by being baptized in the Spirit at Jordan, so the disciples followed him in like manner at Pentecost.¹¹

A corollary of this is that ‘true conversion’ was impossible before Pentecost, since reception of the Spirit was ‘*the chief element in conversion-initiation*’¹². Thus Dunn denies that Luke considered Spirit baptism to be a post-conversion experience. But in doing so he expresses the useful concept of *conversion-initiation* as a process, not an event, involving repentance, faith, Spirit-baptism as the renewing work of God, and water baptism as ‘*the expression of the faith that receives the Spirit*’¹³. This enables him to account for instances like the Samaritans, the Ephesian twelve and even the 120 at Pentecost themselves as anomalous deviations from the normal pattern of conversion, rather than paradigmatic norms.

But Dunn does also affirm the Pentecostals’ insistence that the gift of the Spirit is ‘*a very definite and often dramatic experience, the decisive and climactic experience in conversion-initiation*’¹⁴.

4 Other alternatives

A very few writers have taken the opposite path from Dunn in resolving the differences between Luke and the other NT writers. So David Pawson¹⁵, writing from an Arminian charismatic position, seeks to assimilate *Paul’s* theology to Luke’s by re-interpreting key passages. Adopting Dunn’s scheme of conversion-initiation, he makes Spirit-baptism an event of

empowerment both for service and sanctification, in response to an act of human will in turning to God in faith and repentance, followed by water-baptism. Though he is forced to admit the activity of the Spirit at all stages¹⁶, his scheme fails to explain adequately *how* the Spirit is active before he fills the believer, and finally falls down on the tenuity of its Pauline exegesis.

5 Critique

The strength of Menzies' approach is that it forces us to address Luke's clear emphasis on the Spirit of Prophecy. It is hard to deny that empowerment for mission is his *main* theme not only in *Acts* but in the Gospel, and Dunn's arguments for a covenantal element to Pentecost, even if valid, do not overturn this conclusion. The proposition that Luke deliberately controverted the more Pauline understanding of his synoptic sources seems very much less likely, as Turner has adequately shown¹⁷. And the attribution of healing and miracles to a separate inanimate principle, *δυναμις*, is frankly esoteric, and it is a relief to be reminded that:

...the exorcisms were accomplished by authoritative words of command, not the transfer of fluids.¹⁸

In any case the separation of *δυναμις* from *πνευμα* is scarcely watertight, since the same *δυναμις* Jesus gave his disciples to work miracles also enabled them to preach with authority (Luke 9.1f.).

However, these aspects are less central to the discussion than the first. Menzies appears to have established the absolute necessity, for Luke, of a missionary Church consisting of those visibly and palpably empowered by a distinctive experience of the Spirit as the Spirit of Prophecy.

Dunn, on the other hand, is right in his refusal to separate this empowerment from 'conversion-initiation'. The fact that Luke lays such stress on the aspect of the universal promise of the Spirit makes Pentecostal 'second blessing' teaching implausible. However one interprets the 'anomalies' in Acts, the unique circumstances of the early apostolic age renders it dangerous to consider these events normative: they are exceptions which prove the rule.

On the other hand, Dunn's attempts to show that these incidents refer to those who are not believers at all are not entirely convincing. The case of the Ephesian twelve is equivocal, though the objection that Paul's question '*Did you receive the Spirit when you believed?*' implies a possible negative answer carries some weight. That the Samaritans would have come to a genuine faith in Christ through Philip seems probable. If the Spirit was initially withheld for the more likely reason that they were non-Jews rather than unbelievers, then at least *theologically* it is in Luke's understanding possible to come to faith before the gift of the Spirit. The same applies to Paul, whose experience on the Damascus road always seems to be described as conversion except when his reception of the Spirit three days later through Ananias is under consideration!

This point comes into highest relief not, as Dunn's writing suggests, in the question of those actually present at Pentecost, but in the question of the saints of the Old Testament. He says, '*the Church, properly conceived, did not come into existence until Pentecost.*'¹⁹ But this ignores the Septuagintal derivation of *ἐκκλησία* from the assembly in the Sinai desert: saving faith was not absent amongst the OT people of God, even though its distinctive features

were not spelt out. As the Puritan John Owen argues exhaustively in his magisterial study on the Holy Spirit,

Although the work of *regeneration* by the Holy Spirit was wrought under the Old Testament, even from the foundation of the world, and the doctrine of it was recorded in the Scriptures, yet the revelation of it was but obscure in comparison of that *light* and evidence which it is brought forth into by the gospel.²⁰

Part of the problem lies in the semantics of the salvation process. Neither Luke nor the other evangelists are very concerned to say whether the disciples were ‘Christians’ or even ‘converted’ before Pentecost, for their experience was transitional, as Dunn’s own three-epoch scheme affirms. It makes good sense to see Luke’s ‘gift of the Spirit’ (in the Pentecostal sense of ‘power for service’) as an integral part of ‘conversion-initiation’ (as Dunn and Pawson), but only in the new covenant age of the gospel of Christ. Luke may have seen fit to ignore the Spirit’s work in engendering repentance and faith simply *because* he knew it to be part of the faith of Israel too.

The biggest danger in rejecting the Pentecostal model, and making the gift of the Spirit more or less synonymous with saving faith, lies in the realm of daily experience. It is agreed on all hands that Luke presents, in his experiential description of the Spirit’s indwelling, a norm for Christians. Dunn in his conclusion bemoans *‘the poverty of our own immediate experience of the Spirit’*²¹, apparently forgetting that earlier he has made such experience the distinguishing mark of true faith²². Luke would appear to be excluding many present-day believers from the kingdom in the manner of the most hard-line Pentecostal. This was, perhaps, what caused Puritans like Owen to modify

Calvin's very experiential definition of saving faith as '*revealed to our minds, and sealed on our hearts, by the Holy Spirit*'²³. Owen distinguished the work of the Spirit²⁴ as *sanctifier* (covering what we have seen as the Pauline emphasis) from the Spirit as *Comforter* (encompassing the experiential empowering we have seen in *Acts*).

If Luke's interest is predominantly on the second, we do not need to deny his implicit acceptance of the first. If, like Pawson, we distinguish the two aspects without separating either from conversion-initiation, we avoid the Pentecostal 'second blessing' idea that seems alien to *Acts*. Furthermore we are able to accept an experiential work of the Spirit in the believer as not only normative but essential (without dictating the exact nature of that experience too closely), and yet allow for the reality that some who genuinely believe lack that experience of the Spirit.

6 Conclusions

There is little to be gained from reaching a conclusion about Luke's views on the Holy Spirit if we find him irreconcilably opposed to other Biblical witnesses on the matter – it is too central to Christian life for that. Equally, to discover his mind is of little value if it bears no relation to the real experience of Christians.

Dunn (and Marshall even more so) seems to present sufficient evidence to refute the first, despite Menzies' doubts. However, at last he signally fails to extricate sacramentalists and 'textualists'²⁵ from the charge of being no Christians at all. Nevertheless his concept of a *complex* of events comprising conversion-initiation paves the way for accounting for 'sub-

Lukan' experience of the Holy Spirit, without needing to postulate an optional Pentecostal 'post-conversion' crisis.

This, however, necessitates the recourse to older concepts of two different ministries of the Holy Spirit; one intangible and internal, bringing about regeneration; the other experiential, giving both a Lukan joy, and a Lukan power to witness. Such a twofold concept of the Spirit's work enables us to affirm the Spirit's activity under the Old Covenant (*contra* Dunn²⁶ and Menzies²⁷) whilst maintaining Luke's emphasis on the radical change Pentecost brought. It also accounts for Luke's divergence from the other NT writers on this matter: not only is his subject matter in Acts primarily that of mission rather than regeneration, but he is also familiar with the role of the Spirit under the Old Covenant, and therefore is mainly silent about it.

So Luke cannot be said to be a Pentecostalist in teaching a doctrine of second blessing. However, he is quite clearly committed to a doctrine of *first* blessing, in that every Christian ought to be in conscious receipt of the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit of Prophecy promised in Joel. By this they ought to be empowered to witness boldly and effectively for the Gospel. Since Menzies' exclusion of miracles, healings and exorcisms from the endowment appears unjustified, the way is also open to an expectation of a greater or lesser degree of such supernatural activity in the life of the Church.

The challenge of Luke's theology is thus the practical one of bringing such a quality of Christian life to every Christian, and to every church. §§§

2416 words

References

- ¹ Ferguson & Wright, 1988, p.502.
- ² Dunn, 1970, p.2.
- ³ Menzies, 1993, p.12.
- ⁴ G R Haya-Prats, *L'Ésprit Force de l'Église* (Paris, 1975), quoted in Turner, 1991, p.124.
- ⁵ Marshall, 1977, p.368.
- ⁶ 'For this reason it is ordained and written on the heavenly tablets, that they should celebrate the feast of weeks in this month once a year, to renew the covenant every year.'
- ⁷ Marshall, *op. cit.*, p.348.
- ⁸ Dunn, *op. cit.*, p.47.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.49.
- ¹⁰ One might add the possible significance of 3,000 people being saved during Pentecost, as contrasted with 3,000 *dying* at Sinai under the Old Covenant in Exod. 32.28.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.40.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, p.4.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p.5.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.4.
- ¹⁵ Pawson, 1989.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.87.
- ¹⁷ *op.cit.*
- ¹⁸ Turner, *op. cit.*, p.145.
- ¹⁹ Dunn, *op. cit.*, p.51.
- ²⁰ Owen, 1674, p.210.
- ²¹ Dunn, *op. cit.*, p.226.
- ²² *Ibid.*, p.4.
- ²³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.7.
- ²⁴ Owen, *op. cit.*, p.154.
- ²⁵ Tozer, 1983, p.20.
- ²⁶ Dunn, *op.cit.*, p.45.
- ²⁷ Menzies, *op. cit.* p.12.

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