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The Holy
Spirit
gave the early
church power
to turn the
world
upside down.



JOHN STEEL, ARTIST, © PPA

POWER OF THE SPIRIT



Ours is a post-Christian world. Every 40 years the proportion of professing Christians around the globe is 10 percent less.

Yet Christ predicted that in the last generation "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come." Matthew 24:14. How can this be? How will the weakness of the present church become strength, its whisper a clarion call, the apathy of worldlings stirred into conscious, clamoring need? One entire book of Scripture is devoted to the answer. In the slim volume called *The Acts of the Apostles* lies the dynamite which will yet blast the doddering inefficiency of the church and shake the spiritual languor of the world.

The book begins with a promise and a program. "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." Acts 1:8, R.S.V.

This verse not only comprehends a table of contents for the book of Acts—which opens with the gospel being proclaimed at Jerusalem and closes with its announcement in Rome—it is also the evangelistic charter for the Christian church. The book itself is the church's missionary manual. The book of Acts is the only unfinished book of Scripture. Read the last verses and note how they leave the reader dangling in the air. Why? Because the task discussed in its pages is not yet completed. The real conclu-

sion to Acts will be written in our day in letters of fire—the fire of the Holy Spirit igniting again the gospel flame He lighted at Pentecost.

John's Gospel—which immediately precedes Acts—closed with the story of the apostles fishing all night unsuccessfully. In the morning Christ, standing on the shore and half hidden by the mists, turned their failure into unprecedented success. The empty net was suddenly filled to the breaking point. The whole glorious event is a fitting introduction to Acts. Henceforth, Christ would be no longer visible in the fishing vessel of the church. He would stand on heaven's shore, and His voice would be conveyed by the wind of the Spirit. But as His followers would obey His instructions, success would surely come; the

gospel commission would be fulfilled, the gospel net filled to overflowing.

Luke, the Gentile physician, was God's chosen scribe for the account of Pentecost and of the early Christian church. The introduction to Luke's earlier book, the Gospel, had spoken "of all that Jesus began both to do and teach." Acts 1:1. Now the chronicle is continued, and we are told of all Jesus continued to do by the operation of His Spirit in the first believers. What a fitting introduction to the rest of the New Testament is this second book by Luke! It describes the formation of the churches to which the epistles were to be written, and it introduces the chief author of the remaining part of the New Testament. It is this book which describes the conversion and missionary labors of Paul. By showing that it was the Spirit of Christ which directed the acts of the early leaders of the church, the book prepares us to acknowledge the guidance of that same Spirit in the subsequent teaching that these same men wrote in the epistles that follow Acts.

A famous Greek play by Aeschylus gives a magnificent description of the fire signals by which the hero made known to his queen the capture of distant Troy. The victory flame flashed from mountaintop to mountaintop, leaping over the seas and plains till its radiance lighted the city of Argos. Even so does Luke portray beacon lights of Christianity flashing from Jerusalem to Antioch—from Antioch to Ephesus and Troas and Philippi—from thence to Athens and Corinth, until finally the holy flame was kindled in the very palace of the Caesars. The Light of the world had dawned in a tiny Judean village and brightened in the hills of Galilee. Then apparently it had been eclipsed at Calvary. Now Acts shows that it hadn't gone out at all, as its friends had feared. Instead it flickers and flares

and flashes till its brilliance gleams across the Aegean and fills Asia and Greece and Italy with such a light as had never shone before on land or sea.

Message and Method

Both the message and the method by which the early church "turned the world upside down" in a single generation is presented clearly by Luke in Acts. Both comprise together the pattern which, when copied, will enable the church to complete its task, and put an end to the scandal of sin, sorrow, and death. The message is repeatedly said to be the gospel of Jesus Christ. Not psychology, not politics, not ethics, not good advice, but the good news that God conquered sin through the ministry and death of His Son Jesus. This is the theme that set the world alight. The apostles "ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ." Acts 5:42.

But what was this preaching of Christ? Did the apostles proclaim merely the demands of the Sermon on the Mount? Did they present only Christ's holy character and matchless life? If this had been the case, then Christ Himself, in the days of His Judean ministry, should have gathered His followers by the thousands. His later preachers would have gathered only hundreds, inasmuch as the reality should have been more powerful than the mere report. But the opposite is true. The disciples won the thousands, not Jesus. Why? Because the apostles preached the significance of Christ's life and death in a way that had not been possible before Calvary. They told of the forgiveness of sins, of the resurrection of the body, and of the life everlasting—all made possible by the atoning death of God's Son. Listen to their words, words which when proclaimed afresh will recover for the church her ancient power.

"God exalted him . . . as Leader and

Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins." Acts 5:31, R.S.V.

"Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." 2:38, R.S.V.

"Repent therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out." 3:19, R.S.V.

"Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses." 13:38, 39, R.S.V.

"To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins." 10:43, R.S.V.

Attained or Obtained?

The apostles saw that, objectively, Christ is all, and that subjectively, faith is all. Man's salvation and acceptance with God is not something we attain but something we obtain. It is a gift to be received because of the infinite sacrifice of God on our behalf. "One has died for all." 2 Corinthians 5:14, R.S.V. Because Christ represented all men as the second Adam, His death is counted as our death—we are free from guilt and condemnation in Him. We are "complete in Him," "accepted in the beloved," because "when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son." Colossians 2:10; Ephesians 1:6; Romans 5:10. Therefore Paul wrote, "May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." Colossians 1:11-14, R.S.V.

The church will be powerful again when it is imbued with the same Spirit.



This was the message of the conquering church of apostolic times. God has delivered man. Sin has been atoned for. Our acceptance of so great salvation by the empty hand of faith brings a perfect standing with heaven, and a new heart and life.

What about the method by which the church spread the good news? The answer is given seventy-one times in this book, for that is the number of times the Holy Spirit is referred to. Acts is the record of One who could not be given fully to the church till Christ was glorified. See John 7:37-39. What someone has called "the irresistible might of weakness" is possible only through the ministry of God's Spirit. "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts." Zechariah 4:6, R.S.V. This ascension gift of Christ, this promise of the Father, this power of the resurrection, is the secret of the progress of the Christian church.

As Dr. Scroggie says: "The Acts is essentially a record of the activities of the Holy Spirit, and here He is seen related to every aspect of the believer's and the Church's life and work. He is the Spirit of Promise (ch. 1), of Power (ch. 2), of Healing (ch. 3), of Boldness (ch. 4), of Judgment (ch. 8), of Comfort (ch. 9), of Guidance (ch. 10), of Prophecy (ch. 11), of Deliverance (ch. 12), of Missions (ch. 13), of Protection (ch. 14), of Councils (ch. 15), of Restraint and Constraint (ch. 16), of Opportunity (ch. 17), of Revelation (ch. 18), of Purpose (ch. 19); indeed, the Spirit dominates the whole story. The ACTS is the record of a Spirit-begotten, Spirit-filled, and Spirit-guided Church."—*Know Your Bible*, vol. 2, p. 76.

Thus "the key is hanging on the door" when we read at the very commencement of Acts the significant expression, "through the Holy Spirit." 1:2, R.S.V. All so-called Christian

work which is not "through the Holy Spirit" falls barren and lifeless to the ground.

How did believers in the first century receive the Holy Spirit? What did they have to do? The second question reminds us of the natural error of the sinful heart, thinking that the gift of God can be bought. See Acts 8:20. The Gospels warn us against this dead-end route by the following brief record: "Then said they unto him, What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent." John 6:28, 29.

The teaching of Acts echoes Jesus' teaching in the Gospels. After Peter had preached Christ in the power of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, multitudes were convicted and cried out "What shall we do?" 2:37. It was the same emphasis on human works which tragically reverberates throughout Scripture—ever since the time Adam and Eve sought to hide their nakedness before their Maker by their own tailoring. Peter's counsel rebuked the human tendency to earn righteousness. "Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off.'" Verses 38, 39, R.S.V.

Word and Spirit

Only perfect obedience to God's immutable law could earn the priceless treasure of the indwelling God, but such obedience is possible only to one in whom God already dwells. Thus Adam, made to be the temple of the Spirit, could fulfill the law so long as he looked to God. But not so the sinner. He must receive the Spirit as a gift from Christ, who has kept the law

perfectly on behalf of the guilty race. Those who believe (receive) the truth concerning Christ's atoning death are endued with the Spirit as they assent to the Word of God. For example, Acts 10:44, R.S.V., declares: "The Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word." From the time of Creation on (see Genesis 1:2, 3) the Spirit and the Word have worked together, and let not man separate what God has joined together. Would you be filled with Heaven's presence and power? Study, believe, and practice the Scriptures. This is the only way to victory for individuals and for the church as a whole.

An old legend tells of a boy who was assured by a supernatural visitor that if he would thereupon make one wish he should have it. The account relates that the lad responded, "My one wish is that all my later wishes might be granted." A comparison of Matthew 7:11 and Luke 11:13 shows that the gift of the Spirit is the richest treasure of heaven, bringing all other treasures in its train.

Are we surprised at the riches of the grace of God who confers upon us one unspeakable gift after another? He has given us His Son as our Substitute and Representative. He has given us His Spirit as our Advocate and Comforter. All of us who accept Christ have the Son of God as our righteousness in heaven, and the Spirit as the continual presence of God beside us on earth, sufficient for every situation we find ourselves in. Since Pentecost, the Spirit has been as truly present on earth in every believer as Christ was physically present in the days of His earthly ministry. When the church awakens to this glorious truth, the conquest of the world for Christ will be speedily accomplished.

Blessed is that Christian and that church which learns from the book of Acts the only effectual message and method for evangelizing the world. ◇