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# The Theology of Acts

by F.F. Bruce

Some reviewers of the earlier edition of Prof. Bruce's commentary critiqued the lack of attention paid to the theology of Acts. Dr. Bruce writes, "The commentary remains primarily historical and linguistic, but at least some awareness is shown (it is hoped) in the new edition that there is a theological dimension to the work of Luke."

Among the theologians of the NT Luke does not rank with Paul, John or the writer to the Hebrews, but he is a theologian in his own right, bearing witness to the common faith of the church of his day with emphases which are distinguishable from those of the other NT writers.

1. *The doctrine of God.* God is the creator of the universe (Ac. 4:24; 14:15; 17:24), the sustainer of his creatures (14:17; 17:25b), the disposer of time and space (14:16; 17:26 f.), and the judge of all (17:31). He must not be thought of as inhabiting material structures (7:48-50; 17:24b). He manifested his saving power in the history of Israel (13:17-22) and declared his will and purpose through Moses and the prophets (2:17-21, 25-28, 34 f.; 3:21-25; 4:25 f.; 13:33-35, 40 f., 47; 15:15-18; 26:22 f., 27; 28:25-27), and in due course fulfilled both these lines of revelation by sending Jesus (3:26; 13:32 f.).

2. *The doctrine of Christ.* Jesus, the one sent by God, is the expected Messiah of Israel (Ac. 2:36; 3:20; 5:42; 8:5; 17:3b; 18:5), the son of David (2:30 f.; 13:23; cf. Rom. 1:3). He is Lord (Ac. 2:36; 10:36), the Son of God (9:20), the prophet like Moses (3:22 f.; 7:37), the Servant of the Lord (3:13, 26; 4:30; 8:32 f.), and (once) the Son of man (7:52). It is doubtful if we should think of distinct "christologies" associated with these various titles. Some oscillation between one and another was as natural in the apostolic age as in later generations, since these titles, whatever their origin, were all applied now to one and the same historical person.<sup>1</sup> Jesus is also called the holy and righteous one (Ac. 3:14; cf. 7:52; 22:14), the author of life (3:15), leader and savior (5:31). As the Christ, he was destined to suffer (Ac. 3:18; 17:3a; 26:23), a statement dependent on the identification of the Christ with the suffering servant (cf. the quotation of Isa. 53:7 f. in Ac. 8:32 f.). He was rejected by the leaders of his people and handed over to the Gentiles, by whom he was crucified (Ac. 2:23 f.; 3:13-15; 13:28)—is the absence of any mention of Gentiles in 10:39 a tactful omission before an audience consisting of a Roman centurion and his household? He was buried (Ac. 13:29), but raised from death by God and seen by his disciples (Ac. 2:32; 3:15; 10:40 f.; 13:30 f., etc.), and exalted to God's right hand (2:34-36; 5:31; 7:55 f.). The name of Jesus is sometimes given almost hypostatic status (3:16; 4:30; 26:9), like the name of Yahweh in the deuteronomic writings of the OT (e.g. Dt. 12:5, 11), especially when Jesus is represented as still powerfully at work with and through his witnesses: "there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Ac. 4:12).

He is to return (Ac. 3:20) as God's agent in the judgment of the living and the dead (10:42; 17:31a). He is the true object of faith which brings forgiveness and salvation (2:38; 10:43; 13:38 f.; 16:31; 19:4). He is a proper recipient of prayer; cf. 7:59, where the dying Stephen commits his spirit to the "Lord Jesus" in almost the same terms as Jesus used on the cross when he committed his spirit to God his Father (Lk. 23:46, quoting Ps. 31:5).<sup>2</sup>

3. *The doctrine of the Spirit.*<sup>3</sup> The Holy Spirit was promised by God in advance through the prophets (Ac. 2:16-21); hence he is called "the promise of the Father" (1:4). He was promised afresh by Jesus in resurrection (1:4 f., 8; 11:16); he was received by the ascended Jesus to pour out on his followers, who received him accordingly at the first Christian Pentecost (2:4, 33), as also their converts did when they responded to their witness in repentance, faith and baptism (2:38 f.). He was imparted not only to believing Jews but also, in due course, to believing Gentiles (10:44-47; 11:15), purifying both inwardly by faith (15:8 f.) He was variously received at baptism (2:38), at baptism accompanied by the imposition of hands (19:5 f.), by the imposition of apostolic hands some time after baptism (8:17), before baptism, without warning (10:44; 11:15). His reception might be evidenced by speaking in tongues and inspired utterances in praise of God (2:4, 11; 10:46; 19:6).<sup>4</sup> He is the witnessing Spirit, bearing his witness (to the crucified and exalted Christ) with and through the witness of the apostles (5:32; cf. Jn. 15:26 f.). The Spirit in the church speaks through prophets, foretelling the great famine, for example, so that the Christians of Antioch may take timely steps to provide for their brothers and sisters in Jerusalem (Ac. 11:28-30). His is the primary authority invoked in the apostolic decree (Ac. 15:28). He directs the course of missionary activity, selecting Barnabas and Saul for a special work (Ac. 13:2) and prescribing the route to be taken (16:6-10). So completely is the church the organ of his vitality that an attempt to deceive the church is an attempt to deceive the Spirit—in other words, to deceive God himself (Ac. 5:3 f.).<sup>5</sup>

4. *The church and its Ordinances.* The church (*ekklèsia*), as has just been said, is the organ of the Spirit of the world. It is he who animates, empowers and directs this society of the disciplines of Jesus.

At first the church is restricted to Jerusalem: the church of Jerusalem remains "the church" *par excellence* (Ac. 5:11; 18:22, etc.). But after the death of Stephen and the ensuing dispersion it expands "throughout all Judaea and Galilee and Samaria" (Ac. 9:31). Luke does not speak, as Paul does, of "the churches of Christ in Judaea" (Gal. 1:22; cf. 1 Th. 2:14) in the plural. But when the gospel is taken to Antioch on the Orontes and accepted by many of its inhabitants (especially by its Gentile inhabitants), the church of Antioch (Ac. 11:26; 13:1; 14:27; 15:3) is established as a distinct body. When the gospel spread out from Antioch, the "churches" of Syria and Cilicia came into existence (Ac. 15:41). Later, with the evangelization of South Galatia, churches were established in Pisidian, Antioch, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (Ac. 14:23, *kat' ekklèsia*), as later still in cities west and east of the Aegean, e.g. Ephesus (20:17, 28).

The *ekklèsia* of a city is also called the *plèthos* (Ac. 6:5;

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15:30), or is referred to in terms of its members, the "disciples" (6:1; 9:19, 38; 11:26; 14:22; 18:23, 27; 20:1, etc.), the "believers" (2:44; 4:32), the "brothers" (15:1, 3, 32 f., 36, 40; 16:2, 40, etc.).

The condition for membership of the church is faith in Jesus (as Messiah, Lord or Son of God); entry into it is marked by baptism (in water) in the name of Jesus. The church of Jerusalem was formed at Pentecost of those who repented, were baptized and received the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ac. 2:38, 41). The time relation between being baptized and receiving the Spirit might vary (see p. above). The Gentile Cornelius and his household would probably not have been baptized had they not first manifestly received the Spirit (Ac. 10:44). The belated baptism of the twelve disciples of Ephesus, who previously knew only John's baptism and had not heard of the Holy Spirit, is recorded as an anomaly (Ac. 19:1-7). In baptism the convert, invoking the name of the Lord, had his sins washed away (Ac. 22:16).

The church adhered to the apostolic teaching and fellowship (Ac. 2:42). The apostolic teaching, as maintained at Jerusalem (with the practice which gave expression to it) was the norm to which deviations elsewhere were made to conform, as is shown in the incidents of Apollos (Ac. 18:26) and the twelve disciples of Ephesus (19:1-7).<sup>6</sup> The apostolic fellowship was manifested, *inter alia*, in the breaking of bread, the united prayers, and (in the primitive church of Jerusalem) the community of goods. The breaking of bread was probably a fellowship meal in the course of which the eucharistic or memorial bread might be taken. (It may be accidental that wine is nowhere mentioned in Acts, whether in this context or in any other). In the primitive church of Jerusalem the believers evidently shared such meals in their homes every day (*kath' hēmeran . . . kat' oikon*, 2:46); in the church of Troas, at a later date, they appear to have met for this purpose on the first day of the week (20:7). There may also be a eucharist element in the meal aboard the doomed ship recorded in Ac. 27:33-37 (obviously not in a church context); but it is in the light of passages outside Acts (notably Lk. 22:14-19a) that this suggestion commends itself. No eucharistic doctrine can be inferred from Acts itself.

The administration of the church of Jerusalem was at first in the hands of the apostles (the twelve), then of apostles and elders (Ac. 15:2-16:4), then of elders without apostles (11:30; 21:18), James the Just being *primus inter pares* among those elders (12:17; 21:18). The seven men with Greek names appointed to supervise the distribution of charity from the church's communal fund (6:1-6) do not seem to have functioned in that capacity after the death of Stephen and the dispersal of the Hellenists. Elders are appointed to guide the affairs of Gentile churches—e.g. in South Galatia (14:23) and Ephesus (20:17).<sup>7</sup> "Elders" (*presbuteroi*) is Luke's term for them; in Ac. 20:28 Paul refers to those in the Ephesian church as "guardians" (*episkopoi*), whose main responsibility is to "be shepherds" (*poimainein*) to the "flock" (*poimnion*) of God.

Outside Jerusalem the church comprises Jewish and Gentile believers; the churches outside Judaea are predominantly Gentile in composition. The "decrees" issued by the Council of Jerusalem (15:6-16:4; 21:25;) were designed for acceptance by Gentile believers in order to facilitate regular fellowship (especially table-fellowship) between them and Jewish believers. They are not viewed by Luke as imposing any limitation on the liberty of Gentile Christians but rather as a token of their acceptance as full members of the believing fellowship.<sup>8</sup>

5. *The Gentile mission.* Luke is especially interested in the Gentile mission: naturally so, if he was a Gentile Christian himself.<sup>9</sup>

The Gentile mission is part of the divine purpose for the salvation of the world: it was foretold in prophecy (cf. Ac. 13:47, quoting Isa. 42:6; Ac. 15:16-18, quoting Am. 9:11 f.) and inaugurated in history under the direct guidance and indeed compelling pressure of God (Ac. 10:1-48; cf. Peter's question in 11:17, "who was I that I could withstand God?"). The detail in which Luke narrates and repeats the story of Cornelius (10:1-48; 11:1-18; cf. 15:7-9) reflects the importance which he attaches to this break-through—not only Gentile evangelization in itself but the acceptance of the principle of Gentile evangelization by the apostles.

The gospel was rightly and necessarily presented to the people of Israel first (*hymn prōton*), 3:26; 13:46), and in every place some of them believed it, but in most places the majority refused it, with the result that it was then presented directly to Gentiles (13:46; 18:6; 19:8-10). Rome provides the setting for the definitive instance of this recurring pattern (28:28): henceforth, Luke implies, the gospel is for the Gentiles.

The Gentile mission was adumbrated in the history of Israel, as was indicated in Jesus' inaugural preaching at Nazareth by his references to the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian (Lk. 4:25-27); it was given effect in the new age by the ministry of Philip (Ac. 8:26-39), Peter (10:1-11:18) and the unnamed disciples of Cyprus and Cyrene who first preached to Gentiles in Antioch (11:19-21), and pre-eminently in the missionary activity of Paul (see pp. ).

6. *Biblical theology.* Luke is a biblical theologian: he sees the worldwide extension of the gospel as the fulfillment of God's self-revelation progressively imparted in earlier days through mighty work and prophetic word, as recorded in the Hebrew scriptures. He himself relies on the pre-Christian Greek version of those scriptures commonly called the Septuagint. His understanding of the on-going process and its climax is frequently summed up in the term "salvation history" (Ger. *Heilsgeschichte*).<sup>10</sup>

God's saving purpose was declared to Abraham: "In your posterity shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Ac. 3:25, quoting Gen. 12:3; 22:18; cf. Lk. 1:55). It was not impeded by the migration of Abraham's descendants to Egypt and their bondage there (Ac. 7:9-22); their departure from Egypt supplied the setting for an unprecedented manifestation of God's saving power (Ac. 7:30-38; 13:17), which was further displayed in Israel's ensuing history, especially in the raising of David to the kingship (13:22). The maintenance of the kingship in David's family was confirmed to him by a succession of promises, "the sure mercies of David" (Isa. 55:3), which were fulfilled in the sending of Jesus and in his resurrection and exaltation to be Lord and Messiah (Lk. 1:32 f.; Ac. 2:25-36; 13:23, 34-37). The testimony of the prophets, from Moses onward (Ac. 3:22-24), also pointed forward to the climax of salvation-history in the Christ-event and the acceptance of the gospel in the Gentile world (see above). Over the whole record of gospel progress, in fact, might be written Peter's words at the pentecostal fulfillment of the oracle of Joel 2:28-32, but now with reference to the whole corpus of OT prophecy: "This is what was spoken by the prophet" (Ac. 2:16). Christ is the one to whom "all the prophets bear witness" (Ac. 10:43).

7. *Soteriology.* Salvation (*sōtēria*) is a key-word in Acts. It is the blessing offered by the gospel; it has a variety of aspects, and it is not always said explicitly what the persons who accept it are saved *from*. Since salvation includes forgiveness of sins (Ac. 2:38; 3:19; 10:43; 13:38 f.; 26:18; cf. Lk. 1:77), it implies (*inter alia*) deliverance from the guilt of sin. In Ac. 2:40 Peter's Jewish hearers are urged to save themselves from "this crooked generation"—the implication being that that generation had

shown its perversity by rejecting Jesus, but that by accepting the gospel they could save themselves from the nemesis which such perversity must inevitably incur. The conditions necessary for obtaining salvation are repentance and faith—a forsaking of old attitudes and an embracing of new attitudes: “repentance to God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ac. 20:21). Faith in Jesus as Christ is so essential that “the believers” and “the saved” are interchangeable terms.

Even when the salvation consists mainly of bodily healing, this faith is necessary: it was so with the cripple in the temple court (Ac. 3:16) and with the cripple of Lystra, who had “faith to be made well” (*pistin tou sôthênai*, Ac. 14:9). Whatever form the salvation takes, it depends exclusively on Jesus: “there is salvation in no one else” (Ac. 4:12).

How Jesus has procured this salvation for believers is rarely spelled out in Acts. According to the prophets, whose words were fulfilled in the gospel, it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead (26:23; cf. Lk. 24:46 f.); it is, then, as the crucified and risen Christ that Jesus saves. Passages from the Isaianic Servant Songs are sometimes quoted as gospel *testimonia* (cf. Ac. 3:13), but even when the passage quoted portrays the Servant’s suffering (cf. Ac. 8:32 f., quoting Isa. 53:7 f.), the words which bring out the vicarious efficacy of that suffering are not reproduced. Whether such words are deliberately not reproduced—cf. the absence of “to give his life a ransom for many” (Mk. 10:45) from Lk. 22:25-27<sup>11</sup>—or the words actually reproduced carry their vicarious context with them by implication,<sup>12</sup> cannot be affirmed with certainty. The one place where the redemptive power of the death of Christ finds clearest expression—the reference to “the church of God, which he has purchased with the blood of his own one” (Ac. 20:28)—comes, significantly enough, in a speech ascribed to Paul, and should be recognized as an authentic representation of Paul’s teaching.

8. *Eschatology*. The end of the age does not appear to be imminent in Ac., nor yet in Lk. According to Lk. 21:24, after the Jewish War “Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled”—but there is no indication how long the times of the Gentiles will last. The disciples are simply commanded to keep on the alert, so that they may survive the great distress which precedes the manifestation of the kingdom of God and so “stand before the Son of man” (Lk. 21:36).

In Ac. 1:11 the parousia of Christ will take place as his ascension did (but in the opposite direction)—visibly, in a cloud. It is foretold in Ac. 3:20 f. in terms which probably survive from a more primitive eschatology than Luke’s own.

The end of the age will be marked by the resurrection of the just and the unjust (Ac. 24:15) and by the judgment of the living and the dead, to be carried out by Christ as the agent of God (Ac. 10:42; cf. 17:31). But the present age is the age of the Spirit, the gospel age, and there is no suggestion that it has reached its consummation at the end of the book, with Paul’s preaching in Rome. If that marks the conclusion of one phase of gospel expansion, it also marks the beginning of a new phase. No eschatological note is struck here, as is struck in Rom. 11:13-16, 25-27, where Paul sees the conversion of Israel, achieved indirectly through his own Gentile apostleship, as the prelude to the parousia. Luke no doubt thinks of the parousia as the goal towards which the gospel age is moving but, as he writes, the gospel age is still going on.

<sup>1</sup> M. Hengel argues that the crucial phase of christological development coincided with the first five years after the death and resurrection of Christ: “the multiplicity of christological titles does not mean a multiplicity of exclusive ‘christologies’ but an accumulative glorification of Jesus” (*Between Jesus and Paul*, E.T. [London, 1983], p. 41).

<sup>2</sup> See C.F.D. Moule, “The Christology of Acts,” in *Studies in Luke-Acts*, ed. L.E. Keck and J.L. Martyn (Nashville/New York, 1966), pp. 159-185; S.S. Smalley, “The Christology of Acts,” *ExT* 73 (1961-62), pp. 358-362, and “The Christology of Acts Again,” in *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, ed. B. Lindars and S.S. Smalley (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 79-93.

<sup>3</sup> So thoroughly does the Spirit pervade Acts that Chrysostom called this book “the Gospel of the Holy Spirit”: “the Gospels are a history of what Christ did and said; but the Acts, of what that ‘other Paraclete’ said and did” (*Hom.* 1.5). Cf. the title of A.T. Pierson, *The Acts of the Holy Spirit* (London, 1913); so also J.A. Bengel, *Gnomon*, on Ac. 1:1.

<sup>4</sup> According to Schuyler Brown, in Lk.-Ac. “the gift of the spirit, and the enthusiastic phenomena which accompany it, are restricted to the apostolic age” (*The Origins of Christianity* [Oxford, 1984], p. 146). This is said to be Luke’s attempt to resolve “the conflict between the witness of the Spirit to the individual and the decisions of apostolic authority,” but the argument is unconvincing.

<sup>5</sup> See P. Loyd, *The Holy Spirit in the Acts* (London, 1952); G.W. H. Lampe, “The Holy Spirit in the Writings of St. Luke,” in *Studies in the Gospels*, ed. D.E. Nineham (Oxford, 1966), pp. 159-201. J.H.E. Hull, *The Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles* (London, 1967).

<sup>6</sup> See A.A. T. Ehrhardt, *The Framework of the NT Stories* (Manchester, 1964), pp. 94 f., 158-160.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. C.K. Barrett, *Church, Ministry and Sacraments in the NT* (Exeter, 1985), pp. 49-53.

<sup>8</sup> See F.J.A. Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia* (London, 1897).

<sup>9</sup> See S.G. Wilson, *The Gentiles and the Gentile Mission in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge, 1973).

<sup>10</sup> See E. Lohse, “Lukas als Theologe der Heilsgeschichte,” *EvT* 14 (1954), pp. 256-275; H. Flender, *St. Luke: Theologian of Redemptive History*, E.T. (London/Philadelphia, 1967); O. Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, E.T. (London, 1967).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of Saint Luke*, E.T. (London/New York, 1960), pp. 200 f. Over against J.M. Creed, who denies that there is any *theologia crucis* in Lk.-Ac. (*The Gospel According to St. Luke* [London, 1930], p. lxxii), see C.K. Barrett, “Theologia Crucis—in Acts,” in *Theologia Crucis—Signum Crucis: Festschrift für E. Dinkler*, ed. C. Andresen and G. Klein (Tübingen, 1979), pp. 73-84.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. C.H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures* (London, 1952), p. 132 *et passim*, for the “governing intention” in the NT use of *testimonia* as being “to exploit whole contexts selected as the varying expression of certain fundamental and permanent elements in the biblical revelation.”

# Bibliography on Aging for Pastors and Other Church Leaders

by David O. Moberg

NOTE: Bibliographical references are found in most of the below resources. They can lead readers to additional publications, organizations, audiovisual materials, and other reference materials. I have not attempted to list the numerous textbooks in gerontology which are valuable aids to understanding, serving, and working with the aging even though most of them ignore or minimize the role of religious faith in the lives of older people and the services provided by religious institutions. *Journals* in geriatrics and gerontology also are very

useful; these include *Aging and Human Development*, *Clinical Gerontologist*, *Generations*, *Geriatrics*, *The Gerontologist*, *Gerontology and Geriatrics Education*, *Journal of Gerontology*, *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, *Journal of Housing for the Elderly*, *Journal of Nutrition for the Elderly*, *Journal of Religion and Aging*, and many other highly specialized publications.

(Some of these are now available only in libraries; they are marked OP [out of print] only if I know they are unavailable from publishers.)

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