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“It Has Seemed Good to the Holy Spirit and to Us”: Mission and Ecumenism in the Power of the Holy Spirit

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"It Has Seemed Good to the Holy Spirit and to Us": Mission and Ecumenism in the Power of the Holy Spirit

LOIS MALCOLM

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you — that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Luke 24:44-49

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Acts 1:8

For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials. . . .

Acts 15:28
"It Has Seemed Good to the Holy Spirit and to Us"

The Edinburgh Conference of 1910, which is seen by many as a precursor to the World Council of Churches and the contemporary ecumenical movement, was essentially a missionary conference. Ecumenism and missionary activity were intrinsically linked at that event. This stands in sharp contrast to much of the situation in the world today. Those churches that place a strong emphasis on evangelism often tend not to be very enthusiastic about ecumenical activity. Indeed, much of the growth in conversions to Christianity throughout the world occurs in churches that are independent of official denominational affiliation or have only loose affiliations with a denomination, but have much evidence of spiritual activity— healings, speaking in tongues, radical conversions of life, and so on. Moreover, many have noted that missionary activity and church growth tend to be aligned with the kind of explicitly delineated belief often seen to be incompatible with the sort of consensus required in ecumenical agreements. Evangelical Protestant churches, which traditionally placed a strong emphasis on holding particular beliefs and living a certain lifestyle, have eschewed ecumenism but have been noted for their focus on evangelism. Indeed, some very interesting ecumenical discussions and agreements have emerged between evangelicals and Roman Catholics, focusing specifically on questions related to the meaning of evangelism and salvation—questions that take very seriously the differences between them.


the Roman Catholic Church has recently placed a great emphasis on “evangelization” and catechesis (that is, basic instruction in the Christian faith). At the same time, however, it has increasingly called attention to her differences with her “separated” brothers and sisters. Furthermore, those within the mainline church who call for a renewal of interest in missionary activity often call for ecumenical activity that is more focused on strategic tasks and goals rather than, say, a sacramental understanding of the church’s unity. By contrast, those who tend to affirm ecumenism often tend to eschew aggressive evangelistic efforts. Indeed, churches affiliated with the World Council tend to emphasize either social justice concerns or ecumenical agreements over doctrinal matters — but not explicit missionary activity. In many cases, there are good reasons for this, given inappropriate forms of evangelistic activity especially in contexts where there already is an established church.

These observations raise a number of pertinent questions for mainline churches and those interested in ecumenism: What value do they place on missionary activity? And given the diverse ways “mission” can be defined, how should “mission” be defined in the first place? And, how is such activity to be related to ecumenical endeavor? What is the ratio-


10. For treatments of this question, see, e.g., Ecumenism and Mission: SEDOS
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nale for either missionary or ecumenical work? Are the two even related in any organic sense? Finally, since "reception" and "authority" have been such central themes in the discussion of the appropriation of ecumenical documents, is there any link between these themes and the missionary and catechetical tasks of the church? The pertinence of these questions in the United States is intensified by the numerical decline of mainline denominations and the observation that many have made that we are now in a "post-Constantinian" world in which a Protestant establishment no longer exists in the United States. 11

An Interpretation of Acts 15

It is in relation to this context that we examine what Acts 15:28 might have to say to us today. 12 This verse is part of a letter sent by the Jerusalem church to the church in Antioch to address the specific question of whether new Gentile converts needed to be circumcised and follow Mosaic Law. The issue had been of "no small discussion and debate" in the Antioch church (v. 2; cf. 12:18-19). The missionaries who had started the church, Paul and Barnabas, were therefore sent, along with other congregational leaders, to Jerusalem for some guidance on the matter. After much deliberation, the Jerusalem church sends back a group — including Paul, Barnabas, and leaders from Jerusalem — with the decision found in v. 28 that the Gentile converts are to have no further burden imposed upon them "than these essentials." What is most interesting for our pur-


poses is that this verse is found right at the heart of Acts, in the middle of the book itself. It signifies the shift that the church takes from being centered in Jerusalem to being flung across “the ends of the earth” (1:8). After this, Paul is the central hero of Acts, with his missionary activity at the heart of its narrative. The Jerusalem apostles are last mentioned in 16:4; after this, they disappear from Luke’s story in Acts.

This verse, on the one hand, is part of a missionary story. But it also depicts a decision made by a church council, which many identify as the first “Apostolic” council that would be a precedent for later ecumenical councils. We have an incident that is both missionary and ecumenical. How does Luke depict both types of activity? What is their purpose? And how are they related to each other? What is most intriguing is that the focal point of the story is centered elsewhere — in the activity of the Spirit. And while mission and ecumenism are central parts of this story — and they indeed are intrinsically related — they are, in Acts, simply a part of a much larger, and we could add grander, vision of the “promise of the Father” that Jesus speaks of at the end of Luke: that the disciples would receive the “Holy Spirit with power” and that this Spirit would enable them to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8).

As Beverly Gaventa has pointed out, the chief character — the chief agent — in the book of Acts is God. And the God Luke presents is not some abstract numinous power only indirectly perceived. The drama of Acts revolves precisely around what happens when people — as communities and individuals — receive and experience this “Holy Spirit with power” and what happens when they try to manipulate or resist it. Indeed, the first thing Paul, Barnabas, and the others do when they arrive in


Jerusalem is to report “all that God had done with them” (15:4). But they receive in Jerusalem a very different reception from the one they received in Phoenicia and Samaria; there the believers responded to their report about the “conversion of the Gentiles” with “great joy” (v. 3). By contrast, in Jerusalem they are greeted with a challenge from believers “who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees.” The challenge is this: that the new Gentile converts in Antioch must be “circumcised and ordered to keep the Law of Moses” (v. 5). This challenge creates a stir, and the apostles and elders of the church meet together to consider the matter (v. 6).

After some debate, Peter stands and gives a speech in defense of the new converts. He begins by appealing to the fact that God had chosen him to be the one to bring good news to the Gentiles. Whether or not this is historically accurate, the point in Luke's account is to connect Peter's speech in this incident to his early speeches in Cornelius’s household and later to the Jerusalem church justifying his eating with Gentile converts in that household.

Recall that Acts 10 depicts how Cornelius receives a vision to invite Peter to his household and Peter receives a vision in which he is told to eat what is ritually unclean for him to eat as a Jew. What ensues is the conversion of Cornelius's household after a speech by Peter in which he tells them about Jesus of Nazareth and the message that “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (10:43). After the speech, the members of Cornelius's household receive the gift of the Holy Spirit even before they are baptized. Peter later has to justify to the Jerusalem church why he stayed and ate with the members of that household, even though they were uncircumcised (11:1-18). His key warrants justifying his behavior are the vision itself in which he is told three times to eat what is unclean (11:5-10) and then told by the Spirit not to “make a distinction between them and us” (11:12), and the fact that God gave the members of Cornelius's household the same gift of the Holy Spirit given to the Jewish Christians on the day of Pentecost (11:15-17).

Peter's speech with regard to the church in Antioch draws on warrants similar to those he used to defend his actions in the Cornelius event. As with his defense of his actions in the Cornelius household, he focuses on what God has done. Echoing his argument, he observes that God “[gave] them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us” (15:8). This God “made no distinction between them and us” (v. 9) — a warrant that is key not only to defending actions with Cornelius in Jerusalem but in the very
speech he gave in Cornelius’s household in which he claimed that “God shows no partiality, but in every nation any who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (10:34, 35). Indeed, he asks his hearers — in a fashion very similar to his query in 11:17 (“who was I that I could hinder God?”) — why are you putting God “to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?” (v. 10). Note that to put God to the “test” means to mistrust God. Peter then concludes with a final warrant: the appeal that “we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will” (v. 11). Although this is not quite Paul’s distinction between faith and works, it is an assertion that salvation for humanity resides solely in the “grace of the Lord Jesus” (dia tes charitos tou Kyriou Iesou) and not in any works of the law.

When Peter finishes speaking, the assembly grows silent. Then Barnabas and Paul stand up to report “the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles” (v. 12). This appeal to “signs and wonders” is especially significant in Luke and Acts where divine sanction comes primarily from the miracles that either Jesus or — after his ascension — the new believers enacted.

When they finish, James stands up to give a speech. If Peter was an important authority for the early Jewish Christians to have speak on behalf of the new Gentile converts, then James is probably an even more im-

15. Cf. Romans 2:10-11 where “partiality” is used as an abstract noun (prosopolempsis). The LXX phrase prosopon lambanein translates the Hebrew panim nasa‘, “lift up, raise the face (of someone).” Cf. Leviticus 19:15: “you shall not lift up the face of (the) poor,” i.e., you shall not show partiality to the poor. See also Deuteronomy 10:17; 2 Chronicles 19:7; Sirach 35:12-13. “According to ancient Near Eastern customs the greeting to a superior would include the bowing of the head, if not full prostration; and lifting up the face would mean full acceptance of such obedience. As used by Peter, it means that God does not favor only Jews, but also respects Gentiles who call upon him.” Joseph Fitzmeyer, Acts of the Apostles. pp. 462-63.

16. On “testing” God, see Exodus 15:22-27; 17:2, 7; Numbers 14:22; Isaiah 7:12; Psalm 77; Wisdom 1:2.

17. Cf. Romans 3:24; 4:16; 5:21. Note that the timeless aorist infinitive is used (soterian) to express “salvation” in an eschatological sense.

18. Note the importance of “signs and wonders” in Acts. See also 2:22: “with mighty deeds, wonders, and signs, which God wrought through him in your midst” and 19:21 where reference is made to “portents and signs.” See also 2:43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 7:36; 14:3; 15:11. The phrase is used to describe Jesus’ miracles (e.g., in Luke 10:13; 19:37). In the LXX, it often describes God’s mighty acts on behalf of Israel (e.g., Exod. 7:3; Deut. 4:14; 28:46; 43:11; Ps. 135:9; Isa. 8:18).
portant authority — identified even by Paul as "the brother of the Lord" (Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12). He begins by referring to how Peter (called Simon here) has related how "God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name" (v. 14). James uses the phrase "a people for his name," a term reserved for Israel (cf. 3:11), to include the Gentiles. He then quotes Amos 9:11-12 to demonstrate that God's plan has always included the Gentiles. God, he contends, will rebuild the fallen "dwelling of David" so that "all other peoples may seek the Lord—even all the Gentiles" (vv. 16, 17). To reinforce the point he adds that the Lord "has been making these things known from long ago" (vv. 17b, 18). A comparison of James's appropriation of Amos with either the Septuagint or the original Hebrew suggests that he has revised both originals — the latter even more than the former — but his intent in doing so is clear: to demonstrate that Amos had already foreshadowed how God would incorporate the Gentiles into Israel.

Having given this defense, he concludes by stating that he has decided that "we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God" (v. 19); "turning" here refers to their conversion. He then introduces the four things the new converts are to abstain from: idols, fornication, whatever has been strangled, and blood. These are what according to Jewish law all people should abstain from, and not only the Jews (vv. 20-21).

When he finishes his speech there is more deliberation. Then the leaders of the Jerusalem church choose two representatives to go with Paul and Barnabas to the church in Antioch (Judas called Barsabbas and Silas) with a letter that gives the same decision James arrived at in his speech: that the new converts are to have "no further burden than these essentials," that is, the four restrictions listed in James's speech. The letter states that the representatives were "unanimously" chosen (v. 25), and it
introduces the final decision with the phrase "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (v. 28).

This latter phrase is very important for our understanding of the Holy Spirit's role in this event. Luke does not want to present this simply as a political decision or consensus reached by the Jerusalem leaders but rather as something that, in Luke Timothy Johnson's words, interweaves "elements of divine intervention and human discernment so that the decision of the church appears finally neither as an abject submission to the divine impetus by politically motivated leaders, but as a dialectical synergism of God's intrusions and human faith." The phrase "it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" suggests this synergism: not that the Holy Spirit and the church leaders are equal partners. Rather, "the church's decision is one that has finally caught up with and therefore confirmed a decision made already by God."22

This chapter may be combining two original events in the Jerusalem church, one having to do with the question of whether Gentile converts needed to be circumcised and keep Mosaic law (cf. the issue reported by Paul in Gal. 2:1-10) and the other having to do with a decision regarding diet and marital unions for local churches in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia.23 But that must not detract from seeing the role this event plays in the book of Acts. As we have noted, this incident occurs at the center of Acts. It is found after the accounts of the movement of Philip into Judea and Samaria (8:5-40), Saul's conversion (9:1-31), Peter's encounter with Cornelius (10:1-11:18), and Paul's first missionary journey in Asia Minor (13:1-14:28), and before the rest of Paul's missionary journeys culminating with his arrest and trial in Jerusalem. What this decision makes official is the fulfillment of the Holy Spirit's promise that the believers would be


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witnesses not only in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria but to “the ends of the earth” (1:8).

But this movement from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth is not merely a human event. The promise is precisely the promise that the new believers would receive “power” when the Holy Spirit came upon them (1:8). And that power is defined in very specific ways. When the Holy Spirit first descends upon the believers in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost it comes with a “sound like the rush of a violent wind” and tongues of fire descend upon them. Filled with the Holy Spirit, they speak in many languages; Jews from other nations hear them speaking in their own languages. According to Peter, this fulfills Joel’s prophecy that God’s Spirit would be poured out on “all flesh” — sons and daughters, young and old, and even slaves, male and female (Joel 2:28-32). After the Pentecost event Peter gives a speech that tells the story of Jesus of Nazareth and urges his hearers “to repent and be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven” (2:38). Luke informs us that three thousand persons are added to the group of new believers. This new community shares “all things in common” (2:44), selling their possessions and distributing to all as they have need (2:45; 4:32-35). Miracles also happen in this new community—a man who was lame from birth is healed (3:2-10) along with many other healings and exorcisms (5:16).

At the heart of all this activity is the Holy Spirit. Though not always followed in the same sequence, the pattern for becoming Christian entails repenting, being forgiven, being baptized, and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (2:38; cf. 8:5). And the Spirit received actually encourages the new communities and individuals within them to move in the directions outlined in 1:8: from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria to the ends of the earth. Note that the rest of Acts follows the pattern outlined in 1:8: from the community’s experience of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (2:1-13) to the preaching and ministry of Peter and others among the emerging community of believers in Jerusalem (2:14–8:3) to the movement of missionaries into Judea and then Samaria (8:4-25), and finally the move out into the “ends of the earth” starting with the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26-40) and the conversion of Cornelius and his household (10:1–11:18) and ending with Paul’s arrival in Rome after many missionary adventures (28:14). At each point, it is the Spirit who propels the churches’ expansion — and not only in a general way, but with concrete, specific directives. The Spirit tells Philip to go to the Ethiopian eunuch’s chariot (8:29) and respond to
his questions. The Spirit tells the church to set Paul and Barnabas apart as missionaries (13:2). And the Spirit even forbids Paul to go in certain directions (16:6; 7:21:4). Finally, in Acts 15, Peter appeals to his experience of seeing Gentile converts receive the Holy Spirit just as Jewish Christians had. In turn, the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church, with the consent of the whole church, appeal to the Holy Spirit’s participation in their deliberation.

This drama of the Spirit’s activity in Acts is heightened by various attempts to manipulate or resist it.24 All attempts to manipulate the Spirit’s power for personal gain are eschewed. In fact, Ananias and Sapphira both die because they keep back part of the proceeds of property they have sold for the community (5:1-11). Simon the sorcerer is rebuked for wanting to manipulate the power given by the Holy Spirit in the laying on of hands (8:20-23). But perhaps the greater blasphemy is that of resisting or opposing the movement of the Holy Spirit — of being “uncircumcised in heart and ears” (7:51), having hearts that are dull, ears that are hard of hearing, and eyes that are shut, as Paul quotes Isaiah (Isa. 6:9-10 in Acts 28:26-27). Indeed, Acts is full of stories of arrest, persecution, and imprisonment because of resistance to Jesus’ name (e.g., Acts 4:1-22; 5:17-41; 22-26; cf. Luke 6:22).

The phrase “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” is found at the heart of the Spirit’s movement in Acts. The Spirit of Jesus that fell upon the first Jewish-Christian community is the same Spirit that is now moving among Gentiles, causing them to become believers. This fulfills the Father’s promise that the Spirit would come upon the disciples giving them power to “proclaim” to the “ends of the earth” that “repentance and forgiveness of sins” is given in the name of Jesus.25 At issue is


25. Note these themes in Luke: (1) Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection fulfill “the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms” (Luke 24:44). (2) “Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem” (v. 47). (3) Jesus appears to the disciples for forty days “speaking about the kingdom of God” (Acts 13). (4) Before he is “lifted up” and “a cloud” takes him out of the disciples’ sight he promises them that (5) they will “receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them as the Father promised (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:7) so that (6) they could be his “witnesses” in Jerusalem, in Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8).
simply the question of whether Christian believers will "test" God and hinder this movement, or whether they will participate in the Spirit's power.26

What Does Acts 15:28 Have to Say to Us?

In the middle of the century, Rudolf Bultmann made much of the chasm between the worldview of the biblical texts and that of the contemporary world.27 Indeed, much has been written about how we might bridge that chasm with hermeneutic insights and strategies.28 The question of how to appropriate biblical texts — and their depiction of God's presence and activity — is not insignificant especially if one wants to understand what the Bible has to say about how God is present and active in the world today, a world greatly informed, for example, by a scientific worldview.29

But when one observes the actual experiences of God most Christians have in the world today — and not only Christians but adherents of other forms of religious or spiritual practice — one discovers that we may, in fact, have more in common with the world depicted in the biblical texts than initially meets the eye. Harvey Cox, who wrote The Secular City in the 1960s, has recently written a book on Pentecostalism in which he writes:

Even before I started my journey through the world of Pentecostalism it had become obvious that instead of the "death of God" some theologians pronounced not many years ago, or the waning of religion that sociologists had extrapolated, something quite different has taken

26. See Galatians 2:1-10 for Paul's version of this story. Although there are evident differences in the detail of the accounts they essentially arrive at a similar conclusion. Nonetheless, much more could be developed about the similarities and differences in the theology that informs these two accounts. For a discussion of Paul's position on this, see J. Louis Martyn, Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (New York: Doubleday, 1997).


place. . . . Instead before the academic forecasters could even begin to
draw their pensions, a religious renaissance of sorts is under way all
over the globe. Religions that some theologians thought had been
stunted by western materialism or suffocated by totalitarian repression
have regained a whole new vigor. Buddhism and Hinduism, Christiani-
ity and Judaism, Islam and Shinto, and many smaller sects are once
again alive and well. . . . We may or may not be entering a new “age of
the Spirit” as some more sanguine observers hope. But we are definitely
in a period of renewed religious vitality, another “great awakening” if
you will but on a grander scale.30

The very theological and sociological prognosticators who predicted that
ours would be a highly secularized world at the turn of this century are
now observing something very different. It is true that secularizing forces
remain very powerful indeed. The mobility entailed by a global market
economy, and the ways cultures are influenced by an international mass
media often lead to the decline of traditional beliefs and practices. None-
theless, these very forces are often also correlated not only with the rise of
various forms of spiritual practice — often highly individualistic in their
orientation — but with the rise of highly conservative forms of religious
community as well.31

Perhaps we have more in common with the early believers in Acts
than initially might meet the eye. Like Paul at the Areopagus in Athens,
we too are surrounded by the “extremely religious” (17:22), who are inter-
ested in spending their time “in nothing but telling or hearing something
new” (17:21). Like Peter in the household of Cornelius or before the Jew-
ish community, we too have to grapple with both our own and our com-
unities’ understandings of what is right belief and practice as we en-
counter the way the Spirit works in the lives of people from around the
world who are very different from us. We have not escaped the problems
of idolatry and blasphemy. Recall that Paul’s distress over the idolatry in

30. Harvey Cox, Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Re-
shaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1995).
31. Note that sociologists are rethinking the “secularization” hypothesis. See Peter
Berger, ed., The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics (Grand
Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Contrast this with his earlier work: The Noise of Solemn Assem-
bles: Christian Commitment and the Religious Establishment (Garden City, N.Y.:
Athens compelled him to give his speech at the Areopagus. But if pagan idolaters are rejected for wanting to manipulate divine power for their own personal interest, then so are the Sadducees and Pharisees — and even the early Jewish Christians — who “test” God by opposing the new things the Holy Spirit is doing among them. Whether or not they believe in the resurrection, angels, or the Spirit (see, e.g., Acts 23:8) the issue remains the same. As Karl Barth noted, contrary to Bultmann: the distance separating us from hearing what the biblical texts have to say is neither temporal nor spatial but our own inability to accept God’s judgment and mercy, or in Luke’s terms the call for repentance and forgiveness that comes with the story of Jesus of Nazareth.32

So we return to the questions we raised at the beginning of the paper. Acts 15:28 pertains to both missionary and ecumenical matters. It is a missionary decision having to do with whether new converts should keep Mosaic Law or not, along with other rules about diet and sexual conduct. It is also an ecumenical decision reached unanimously, which has — at least informally — been seen as a precursor to later councils. But this verse is missionary and ecumenical in an even deeper way. It pertains to the way the Holy Spirit propels the movement of the church in Acts outward — from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. The character and goal (telos) of this movement are ecumenical, pertaining to the whole oikoumene, the inhabited region of the world. But if the Spirit propels the missionary nature of this movement, then the Spirit also warrants its ecumenical character and goal. The Spirit is present not only in the languages of those present at Pentecost but in the households and congregations where new Gentile converts receive the Holy Spirit just as the early Jewish Christians did. Further, this presence of the Spirit among both Jews and Gentiles — and young and old, men and women, slaves and free persons — merely fulfills the prophetic promises in the Old Testament that God would “pour out my Spirit on all flesh,” that God makes “no distinction” and shows “no partiality.” Finally, perhaps the most central warrant is that only Jesus’ name brings salvation — we are saved only by the “grace of the Lord Jesus” as Peter stated in his speech — and that no other criteria will suffice.33


33. Note that these three warrants are deeply Lukan: (1) the presence of the Spirit in the church; (2) the fulfillment of OT promises; and (3) the centrality of the message of repentance and forgiveness in Jesus’ name.
In other words, the focus of all missionary and ecumenical activity in Acts is not the actions of key individuals or even communities in deliberation, but the activity of the Spirit promised after Jesus’ ascension. It is this Spirit of Jesus who unifies, and the unity the Spirit brings is neither a rigid conformity nor a bland homogenization. When the Spirit descends at Pentecost, everyone speaks in a different language, and although hearers perceive the same “tongues of fire,” what they hear is their own language. Linguistic and cultural differences occur at the heart of the Pentecost experience. And throughout Acts, there clearly is a place for deliberation and resolve and colorful personalities. Peter reflects upon and justifies his responses to the Spirit’s activity among Gentile converts, offering arguments based on OT tradition, his experiences with these new converts, and his developing understanding of what Jesus’ message of repentance and forgiveness entails. James also thinks through arguments for how to deal with new Gentile converts drawing on the OT tradition and coming to his own resolve on the matter. The congregation in Jerusalem clearly undergoes an explicit process of deliberation, and Paul and Barnabas clearly have strong missionary personalities that can, indeed, conflict. But throughout all of this drama, it is God and the Spirit who nudge and guide this reflection and activity, and whatever “unanimity” is reached in community decision-making. This Spirit does not efface individual or communal deliberation but enables it to do what it could not do without its power.

This Spirit is obviously linked with “signs and wonders” — gushes of wind, tongues of fire, miraculous healing and exorcisms. We have already noted that the Spirit urges people to do things — to go places and meet people. The power the Spirit enacts is not ethereal or ephemeral but concrete, specific, and definite. It is the same kind of power that was clearly evident in Jesus’ ministry. Recall that Peter describes in his speech before Cornelius’ household that Jesus of Nazareth was anointed by God “with the Holy Spirit and with power” to go about “doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil” (Acts 10:38). The disciples are promised this same power, and throughout Acts there is clear evidence

34. For a recent argument on the importance of the ascended Spirit of Jesus for the church, see Douglas Farrow, Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
35. For a theological account of the presence of the Spirit, see Michael Welker, God the Spirit, trans. John Hoffmeyer (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).
36. Welker makes this point throughout God the Spirit.
“It Has Seemed Good to the Holy Spirit and to Us”

that they are able to heal and exorcise demons in the same way Jesus did in his ministry. In fact, even magicians and sorcerers want to get a hold of this power. But in the same way that Jesus’ power was always linked with his teaching about the reign of God — a reign that brought good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed (Luke 4:18, 19; cf. Isa. 61:1-2; 58:6) — so the presence of the Holy Spirit’s power in the new communities of Christian believers is linked with sharing all in common and caring for the needy, as well as healing people and releasing their demons (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16). If the mighty acts of God in the OT were linked with God’s justice and merciful reign over all people, then the Spirit’s “signs and wonders” are also linked with the common good and not personal interest or gain. Indeed, Paul himself eventually dies the death of a martyr, despite the obvious presence of the Spirit’s power throughout his missionary work.

And yet this power truly does lead missionaries like Paul and Silas to “[turn] the world upside down” (17:6). The Holy Spirit’s life and energy truly enable individuals and communities to do what they could not on their own. Thinking patterns, ways of being and acting, are radically transformed and reshaped. Peter is told to eat what he had previously thought was unclean; deep, deep patterns — even attitudes and feelings of revulsion toward certain kinds of food — are redefined. Jewish-Christian believers see before their eyes the Spirit fall upon uncircumcised Gentile converts the same way he had among them; people who were previously thought to be profoundly unholry are now temples of the Holy Spirit. And even James, a venerable leader of the Jerusalem church, and the congregation in Jerusalem itself, reach after much deliberation a new understanding of how Gentile converts are to be initiated into the faith. As new converts are added to the Christian community, believers have to think again, and think hard, about what is essential and non-essential in Christian belief and practice. And yet this transforming power is not merely a vague or nebulous “openness” to what is new. It is not merely a formal pattern for change and transformation that in itself has no core or substance. The very capacity for transformative thinking and living that the Spirit empowers is rooted in a very concrete story and message: the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, and the message of repentance and forgiveness that is available for all people “in Jesus’ name.”

37. For a Jewish perspective, note Jon Levenson’s very intriguing statement at the
rate as Paul does on how Christians are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection (Rom. 6), he does, throughout Acts, make clear that the story of Jesus’ life, death, and being raised from the dead is explicitly linked with a message about repentance and forgiveness — both of which entail radical transformation at the deepest level.

We arrive now at the basis for all authority for missionary and ecumenical activity, and the possibility for its reception. Authority resides precisely in the Spirit’s power and its witness to Jesus, the one who was crucified and raised from the dead. The issue of reception revolves around whether or not believers and new or potential converts will resist or oppose — or seek to manipulate — this power, or whether they will respond with repentance. In other words, the only mode of reception is repentance (*metanoia*), and that is only made possible by the forgiveness of sins.38

As for the early Jewish Christians,39 the challenge for mainline churches is precisely to discern when and how the Spirit may be saying “repent and eat” so that we may perceive where the same Holy Spirit we have received is acting elsewhere in the world. And like the early Jewish Christians, we too have correctives to offer. Marcionite and Gnostic conceptions of spirituality in the early church were resisted by Christians steeped in the Hebrew scriptures. The palpable experiences new Gentile converts had of the Spirit were interpreted against the backdrop of early

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end of *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993): “In light of the *universalistic* dimension of that legacy (e.g., Gen. 9:1-17) [that is, the legacy Jews and Christians share with the Hebrew Bible], it is not surprising that both Judaism and Christianity have proven able to affirm the spiritual dignity of those who stand outside their own communities. But the two traditions lose definition and fade when that *universalistic* affirmation overwhelms that *ancient*, *protest*, and *strangely resilient* story of the death and resurrection of the beloved son” (p. 232, emphasis mine).

38. See David Tiede’s address on the Lutheran and Episcopal Agreement (*Called to Common Mission*) entitled “Paths as Yet Untrodden,” given in St. Louis, Missouri, November 3, 2000, in which he situates that ecumenical agreement within the context of a joint missionary challenge. Note the importance of *metanoia* to his argument.

39. Unfortunately, Christians have often interpreted the conflict within the early church over whether Gentile converts needed to follow Mosaic Law in highly anti-Semitic ways; the same can be said of interpretations of Jesus’ conflicts with authorities in the Gospels. A more fruitful line of interpretation would be to see what these may have to say about analogous difficulties within the Christian church. A recent attempt to rethink this legacy historically is Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews: A Jewish Life and the Beginning of Christianity* (New York: Knopf, 1999).
Christian teaching about Jesus of Nazareth’s life, death, and resurrection and his preaching about the reign of God — both of which, in turn, were interpreted against the backdrop of OT law, prophets, and psalms. But to offer these correctives in a fashion that is truly fruitful, mainline churches must heed the call to repentance that comes with the forgiveness of sins so that they do not “test” God by resisting the Holy Spirit’s movement “to the ends of the earth.”

Ours is an age of concrete expressions of spiritual power. Perhaps a market economy, which relies on belief and wagers, lends itself to the intensification and proliferation of forms of activity that could be called “spiritual.” The challenge we face may be very similar to the one the early church faced in Acts. Luke gives us clear guidelines for discerning when and how the Spirit’s power is present, guidelines that impel us to move beyond our preconceived categories and limits precisely because they are rooted in the “proclaiming of the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:31). May we, like Paul, not hinder this power but immerse ourselves boldly in its healing joy.