

“Acting on Acts”

‘Breakfast and the Bible’/‘Supper with the Scriptures’

Acts 2

The Acts of the Apostles is unique in the Bible. It’s an account of the exciting events which followed the resurrection of Jesus and the genesis of the first communities of his followers. Acts starts with the return of Jesus to heaven (the Ascension), continues with the coming of God’s Holy Spirit (Pentecost) upon the first believers, and goes on to describe how those first followers of Jesus were equipped to continue his work on earth and to take that message far away from Jerusalem and into Europe.

The author of Acts is widely thought to be St. Luke, who also wrote the Gospel that bears his name. Although he probably never met Jesus face-to-face, Luke gathered together the eyewitness accounts of those who did and has faithfully passed them on to us. But he did witness the miraculous growth and work of the first Christians and this too we can read, thanks to his hard work.

So far in Acts 1, we have learned that Jesus taught his disciples for forty days after his resurrection, told them to wait for the coming of his Holy Spirit, and then was ‘taken up to heaven’ – what we call ‘The Ascension’.

In obedience to Jesus’ command to wait in Jerusalem for the promised Holy Spirit, the disciples undertake a ten-day prayer meeting. At the end of this time, Jerusalem is filling up with people who have come for the Jewish feast of Weeks, also known as Pentecost.

The Gift of the Holy Spirit (1-13)

The Feast of Weeks is one of the three principal feasts in the Jewish calendar and falls fifty days after the Passover. In the New Testament, it is known as Pentecost – meaning ‘fiftieth’. In the Old Testament, God had commanded the Israelites to offer special sacrifices to him for the first-fruits of their harvest. But it also became associated with the renewal of the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai when Moses received the ten commandments. So God’s choice of Pentecost for the coming of the Holy Spirit is potent with meaning. The giving of the Holy Spirit was the coming in full of the New Covenant which Christ had inaugurated the night before he died when he broke bread and shared the cup of wine. But also the gift of the Holy Spirit was to be but a first outpouring of the Spirit on all flesh, which has continued to this day, bringing a rich harvest of lives committed to Jesus Christ.

The Spirit is likened to wind – the Greek word is *pneuma*, from which we get our word ‘pneumatic’. In the Old Testament, the wind was sometimes used as a symbol of God’s Spirit where the picture was of God’s breath bringing judgement. The second symbol of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost is fire and, again, we find this in the OT when Moses ascends Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments.

The sense of being filled with the Holy Spirit (4) is a direct fulfilment of the words of John the Baptist at Jesus’ baptism: “The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit” (John 1:33). Jesus also stated that anyone who believes in him will have the Spirit flowing from him (John 7:38-39). The immediate evidence of this on the Day of Pentecost was the disciples manifesting the miraculous gift of being able to speak in languages unknown to them, but which were intelligible to the people gathered there from many different nations. This is probably a

different gift from that referred to by Paul as 'speaking in tongues' (1 Cor. 12:10 and 14:1-25). In the Corinthian case the 'tongue' is a language not intelligible to anyone unless given the miraculous gift of the interpretation of tongues.

The reactions from the assembled crowd to this amazing event were varied! Some were bewildered (6); others were utterly amazed (7); others were amazed and perplexed (12) and yet others made fun of the disciples, suggesting that they were drunk (13). (It serves as a reminder that not everyone will leap to praise God when he does something awesome!)

An incredible sermon (14-36)

This must rate as one of the most astonishing sermons of all time! Peter, the fisherman, the one who only a couple of months before had denied even knowing Jesus, now stands up and proclaims to the crowd what is going on. He addresses the people as 'fellow Jews' – he is not trying to start a new religion but seeks to draw his own people to the truth.

He starts by quoting from the prophet Joel (Joel 2:28-32). In the OT original, the prophecy begins "And afterwards, I will pour out my Spirit on all people." Peter changes that to "In the last days...I will pour out my Spirit on all people." Peter clearly sees that what is happening is a fulfilment of Joel. And what an exciting and significant prophecy it is! In the OT, God's Spirit had only been poured out upon specific people (mostly prophets, kings and priests) but now the Spirit would baptise everyone! Commentators have debated as to what is meant by the signs and wonders in verses 19 and 20. The "signs on the earth below" may include the gift of tongues and the healings which will soon be performed by the apostles – see, for example Acts 2:43 and 5:12. And/or they may refer to those things which will happen as a precursor to Christ's return in glory on the Day of the Lord. Jesus himself had referred to this when speaking to the disciples in Luke 21:25-27.

Peter's reference to Jesus (22-24) is unambiguous, however! And he reminds his hearers of the events of the Passover festival when Jesus was crucified by the Jews, "with the help of wicked men" – ie the Romans. In a significant pair of words, he then adds "But God...." to indicate that, despite the most heinous actions of humans, God's purposes would not be thwarted. To back up the amazing claim that God raised Jesus from the dead, Peter again looks to the Jewish scriptures that refer to David, the great King. David, of course, was greatly revered by all the Jewish people. He was regarded as the greatest of all their monarchs and the one who ruled Israel at the height of her powers (c. 11th century BC) as well as being a spiritual giant too. But Peter, in a dramatic move, reminds the people that, for all his greatness, David died! But Jesus, who David foresaw (30), is now alive – which makes him greater even than David! Not only that, but the wonders they have just witnessed are because of the Spirit of the living and exalted Jesus (33) – powerful stuff!

An incredible reaction (37-41)

The crowd has got the message! "What shall we do?" This is the authentic response of anyone who hears the message of the gospel with a truly open heart. The story that Peter has laid before them deserves action. Some would have probably scoffed, and others turned away indifferently, but for many this was not good enough. In a strong echo of the ministry of John the Baptist (Luke 3:1-22), many come to the apostles to indicate repentance and to be baptised. Only this time, they (significantly) receive not only water baptism but Holy Spirit baptism too (38).

The response to Peter's words is another of the wonders of the Day of Pentecost. From being a group of some 120, the fledgling church now numbers well over 3000! Not a bad day's work by God! Some have questioned whether this figure is reliable but, since Luke is a careful historian in so many other places, there is no need to doubt his figure. Peter could have easily been heard by 3000 people – one thinks of the preaching of John Wesley, for example. And a response on this scale has been witnessed by the church since – for example, at some of Billy Graham's rallies.

The Church is born (42-47)

The New Testament only gives us glimpses of what the first believers actually did. But this is one of the most significant. The four essential elements of this, and indeed of any church, are set out in verse 42:

- Teaching: the apostles built on Peter's sermon and pointed people to many other OT scriptures now fulfilled in Jesus. No doubt they were able to draw upon the excellent teaching which they had received from Jesus for the forty days prior to his Ascension.
- Fellowship: the word in Greek (*koinonia*) literally means 'sharing' – probably in this context a meal and/or times of corporate worship.
- Breaking of Bread: this is the way Luke refers to what Paul describes as the 'Lord's Supper' (1 Cor. 11:20ff). It resonated with the opening of a Jewish meal and with the Passover celebration that Jesus had celebrated on the night before his death.
- Prayer: the Jews would already have observed their set daily prayers, so it would seem natural to adapt this to their new context.

To this, Luke adds other features that were to be seen in amongst the first followers of Jesus: awe, wonders and signs; everything held in common; daily meetings – including common meals; and worshipping God. Whether they sold everything or, more likely, expressed a willingness to sell possessions to release funds to help the poor, we do not know. In Acts 4:32-37, it appears that assets were sold voluntarily in order to contribute to the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable.

We gain a strong sense from these brief words that the first Church was a vibrant new community whose life-style was, in itself, a witness to the people outside. The actions of the first followers of 'The Way' clearly drew general approval (47) and attracted yet more people to join them.

*Breathe on me, Breath of God,
fill me with life anew,
that I may love what thou dost love,
and do what thou wouldst do.*

*Breathe on me, Breath of God,
until my heart is pure;
until with thee I will one will,
to do and to endure.*

*Breathe on me, Breath of God,
till I am wholly thine;
until this earthly part of me
glows with thy fire divine.*

*Breathe on me, Breath of God:
so shall I never die,
but live with thee the perfect life
of thine eternity.*