

The Role of The Holy Spirit in the Acts Narrative

BIBD5302

Professor: Dr. Peter Gräbe

Student: Jason Fey

Due: 7/10/26

Submitted: 7/10/26

Word Count: 2610

I. Introduction

The book of Acts is not simply the story of the early church; according to Luke, it is the continuation of Jesus' ministry through the Holy Spirit. Luke reminds his readers that his Gospel recorded what Jesus "*began* to do and teach" (Acts 1:1, emphasis added). As the narrative unfolds, the Holy Spirit consistently appears at pivotal moments in the expansion of the gospel, the formation of the community of Jesus' followers, and the inclusion of new people into the people of God.

At the same time, Luke portrays the activity of the Holy Spirit in diverse ways. The timing of the spirit's reception, if or when believers are baptized, if there is the action of laying of hands associated with receiving the spirit, or any miraculous signs at all very significantly through the narrative of Acts. These variations have prompted centuries of theological discussions.

Instead of beginning with those theological questions, this paper attempts to begin with the narrative of the book of Acts and identify major events in which the Holy Spirit plays a significant role and compare them side by side and uncover patterns. While some circumstances surrounding the Holy Spirit's activity differ, the purpose of the Spirit's activity is surprisingly consistent.

This paper argues that Luke consistently presents the Holy Spirit as God's empowering presence for the advancement of the gospel, guidance of the assembly's (ekklesia) mission, the formation and growth of the people of God, and the inclusion of new people groups into that community. The procedural details surrounding the Holy Spirit's activity vary throughout Acts. But by recognizing this distinction between the procedural details and what the spirit accomplishes we are able to also acknowledge patterns and important implications for how the assembly should understand the work of the Holy Spirit today.

II. Scope and Methodology

As mentioned, this paper focuses on the major narrative events in which the Holy Spirit plays an active role in the progression of Luke's narrative (organized in Appendix A). These include events in which the Spirit is promised, received, poured out, fills individuals or groups for a significant purpose, directs the mission, commissions leaders, guides important decisions, or otherwise alters the course of the narrative. References that simply describe an individual's character, summarize the Spirit's ongoing work, or provide explanatory or theological commentary were considered during the research process but were not analyzed individually (Appendix B).

Each of the major narrative events was examined using the same set of observations in order to allow meaningful comparison across the book of Acts. Particular attention was given to the narrative setting, the recipients of the Spirit's activity, the relationship between Spirit reception and baptism, whether the laying on of hands was involved, the presence of any accompanying signs, the immediate outcome of the event, and the role the Spirit played within the narrative. These observations were recorded descriptively before any broader conclusions were drawn.

By comparing these major Spirit narratives side by side, recurring themes and notable differences began to emerge (Appendix C). This approach allows the narrative of Acts to serve as the primary framework for interpreting the Holy Spirit's activity before engaging later theological questions.

III. Patterns and Apparent Inconsistencies

Comparing the major Holy Spirit narratives in Acts reveals that circumstances surrounding the Holy Spirit's activity varies considerably throughout the narrative. But despite these procedural differences, the Holy Spirit consistently fulfills the same overarching purposes within the Acts story. Distinguishing between this procedural diversity and narrative consistency provides a helpful framework for understanding the Spirit's role in Acts.

A) Procedural Diversity

Perhaps the most obvious observation is that Luke does not present a single, consistent sequence by which the Holy Spirit is received or experienced. The first inconsistency is found in the relationship between the Spirit's reception and water baptism throughout the narrative. At Pentecost (Acts 2), the Spirit is poured out upon the disciples *before* Peter's invitation to be baptized. In Samaria (Acts 8), believers receive the Holy Spirit through the laying of hands *after* being baptized. Saul receives the Holy Spirit through Ananias *before* immediately being baptized (Acts 9) and Cornelius and his household receive the Holy Spirit *before* baptism (Acts 10). Finally, the disciples at Ephesus are first baptized in the name of Jesus and received the Spirit *after* through Paul's laying on of hands (Acts 19). In these major narrative events we see a tie between the personal reception of the Holy Spirit and the act of baptism in the name of Jesus. But there is significant inconsistency throughout the Acts narrative.

This same diversity appears in the relationship between the laying of hands and receiving the Holy Spirit or commissioning by the spirit. In Samaria (Acts 8), Saul's commissioning (Acts 9), and the Ephesian disciples (Acts 19) the act of laying of hands is accompanied by the reception of the Holy Spirit. However, the Spirit comes without the laying on of hands at both Pentecost (Acts 2) and in the household of Cornelius (Acts 10). The laying on of hands was already a familiar Jewish practice associated with blessing, healing, commissioning, and the conferring of authority, making it a meaningful act of communal identification, and we also see it appears in these contexts in the book of Acts, such as the commissioning of the Seven (Acts 6) and the sending of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 13).¹ These observations suggest that Luke does not portray the laying on of hands as a universal prerequisite for the Holy Spirit's activity but rather as one practice among several that accompany significant moments in the life of the believing community.

¹ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), discussion of Acts 8:14–17; see also comments on Acts 19:1–7.

Likewise, miraculous signs are not presented consistently in unison with the Spirit. Tongues accompany the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), Cornelius' household (Acts 10), and the Ephesian disciples (Acts 19), yet they are absent from other major Spirit narratives. Some accounts include prophecy, others bold proclamation (Acts 2 & 4), while still others emphasize guidance, wisdom (Acts 6:10 & 15:7-11), or perseverance in suffering (Acts 20 & 21). The outward manifestations vary, but Luke offers no indication that any one sign should be expected in every circumstance.

These observations demonstrate that Luke does not establish a fixed procedure for the Holy Spirit's activity. The timing of Spirit reception, the relationship to baptism, the laying on of hands, and accompanying signs all differ across the narrative. While these variations have often become the center of later theological discussion, Luke himself does not appear to pause to explain or reconcile them. Instead, the narrative consistently moves forward.

B) Narrative Consistency

While procedures surrounding the Holy Spirit's activity may vary throughout the book of Acts, the Spirit's purpose remains fairly consistent and is seen in patterns throughout the narrative. The most prominent pattern is the Spirit's role in advancing the mission of God. Jesus introduces this theme before his ascension, promising that the disciples will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon them so that they will be His witnesses from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Every major movement of the narrative follows this same pattern. At Pentecost the Spirit empowers public proclamation (Acts 2). The Spirit then directs Philip toward the Ethiopian official (Acts 8), sends Peter to Cornelius (Acts 10), commissions Barnabas and Saul for missionary work (Act 13), redirects Paul's journeys (Acts 16), and prepares him for suffering (Acts 20 & 21). Throughout Acts, the Spirit is consistently portrayed as moving God's mission forward.

A second recurring pattern is the Spirit's role in forming and expanding the people of God. The major reception narratives occur at significant moments when new groups are publicly recognized as participants in God's covenant community. We see the Spirit involved in the Jewish believers receiving the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), Samaritans receiving the Spirit (Acts 8), Gentiles receiving the Spirit (Acts 10), and the disciples of John being incorporated into the community (Acts 19). While the circumstances surrounding each event differ, the Spirit repeatedly serves as God's confirmation that these groups belong within the growing community of Messiah.

Another pattern is found in how the Spirit guides and strengthens the believing community. Beyond empowering individual believers, the Spirit directs the church's decisions (Acts 15:7-11), commissions leaders (Acts 13:1-4), appoints overseers (Acts 20:28), and encourages believers for hardship (Acts 13:52). Even in moments of persecution, such as Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 7:55) or Paul's final journey to Jerusalem (Acts 20:22), the Spirit equips God's people to remain faithful rather than removing them from suffering. The Spirit's activity is therefore not limited to individual spiritual experience or commissioning, but also to the whole community.

Throughout Acts, the Holy Spirit repeatedly empowers witness, advances the gospel, guides God's people, forms the believing community, and confirms the inclusion of those whom God is gathering into His kingdom. Luke's diversity in narratives surrounding the spirit highlights God's freedom to work in different ways while accomplishing the same redemptive purposes.

IV. The Holy Spirit and the People of God

The patterns and inconsistencies of the Spirit observed throughout Acts suggest that Luke's primary concern is not to establish a universal procedure for receiving the Holy Spirit but to demonstrate how the Spirit forms, empowers, and guides the people of God both individually and corporately. This

shifts the reader's attention away from asking *how* the Spirit is received and toward asking *why* the Spirit is given.

One of the clearest examples of this emphasis is found in the Spirit's role in the inclusion of new groups into the people of God. The major reception narratives in Acts 2, 8, 10, and 19 are not randomly distributed throughout the book but occur as the gospel crosses significant ethnic, religious, and geographical boundaries. The inclusion of Samaritans in Acts 8 would have been a very significant boundary to cross for Luke's first-century audience because centuries of religious and ethnic hostility had separated Jews and Samaritans, despite their shared claim to Israel's heritage.² Likewise, the outpouring of the Spirit upon Cornelius and his household publicly demonstrated that Gentiles could be welcomed into God's people without first becoming Jews.³ When this issue is formally debated at the Jerusalem Council, Peter does not appeal to a theological argument or a new interpretation of Torah. Instead, he appeals to God's own action, reminding the assembly that God "gave them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us" (Acts 15:8). The Spirit's activity therefore becomes the decisive evidence that God Himself has accepted the Gentiles.⁴

Recognizing this narrative purpose also helps explain the procedural diversity identified in the previous section. If Luke intended to establish a normative sequence for receiving the Holy Spirit, the differing relationships between baptism, the laying on of hands, miraculous signs, and Spirit reception would be difficult to reconcile. Instead, Luke presents these events as pivotal moments in the unfolding expansion of God's people rather than as identical models to be repeated in every generation.⁵ Rather

² Magnar Kartveit, "Samaritans," in *Behind the Scenes of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker, Elizabeth E. Shively, and Todd D. Still (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024), 222–32.

³ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), discussion of Acts 10.

⁴ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), commentary on Acts 15.

⁵ Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 2, comments on Acts 8–10 (discussion of the Samaritan and Cornelius narratives as salvation-historical events rather than normative conversion sequences).

than functioning merely as a source of personal spiritual experience, the Holy Spirit repeatedly enables God's people to participate in the continuing mission of the risen Messiah.

Finally, these narratives should also be understood against the backdrop of Israel's prophetic hope. Peter explicitly interprets Pentecost through the lens of Joel 2, announcing that God's promised outpouring of the Spirit had begun.⁶ Within the world of Second Temple Judaism, the gift of the Spirit signified not simply individual renewal but the inauguration of God's long-awaited work of restoration among His covenant people.⁷ Luke portrays that restoration unfolding progressively as Jews, Samaritans, Gentiles, and other believers are united into one Spirit-empowered community.

In Acts we see individuals transformed by the Spirit, but those transformations are almost always directed beyond the individual toward God's larger purposes. The Holy Spirit empowers witness, confirms the inclusion into the people of God, strengthens the believing community, and guides the mission of the gospel. In this way, Acts presents the Spirit not merely as a gift given *to* believers but as the means by which God continues His work *through* His people.

V. Implications for the Ekklesia Today

Reading Acts through the lens of the major Holy Spirit narratives invites the modern church to reconsider how it speaks about and responds to the work of the Holy Spirit. Contemporary discussions often emphasize the individual's experience of receiving the Spirit, sometimes focusing on the sequence of events, accompanying signs, or particular spiritual experiences. While Acts certainly records profound personal encounters with the Holy Spirit, those experiences are almost always situated within the larger

⁶ John J. Collins, "Apocalyptic Thought," in *Behind the Scenes of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Bruce W. Longenecker, Elizabeth E. Shively, and Todd D. Still (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024), 19–24.

⁷ James C. VanderKam, *An Introduction to Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 60–61, 113, 135.

mission of God and the life of His people. In Acts the Spirit is given to individuals, but never for merely individual purposes.

Throughout Acts we see the Spirit repeatedly breaking down barriers that separated people from one another. Jews and Samaritans, Jews and Gentiles, and even documenting the inclusion of the followers of John the Baptist being incorporated into one Spirit-filled community. The Spirit consistently testifies that those whom God has accepted should also be welcomed by His people. The church therefore honors the work of the Spirit not only by seeking personal transformation but also by cultivating communities marked by unity, hospitality, and faithfulness to God's mission. This remains a significant challenge for the modern church in the twenty first century.

Finally, Acts reminds believers that the primary evidence of the Spirit's work is not found in a uniform religious experience but in a community that faithfully bears witness to the risen Messiah. Throughout the narrative, the Holy Spirit empowers proclamation, guides difficult decisions, strengthens believers in suffering, and continually advances the gospel into new places and among new people. In many denominations today we encounter churches that are very concerned by spirit filled extraordinary occurrences or experiences, but instead we should be asking whether the spirit is producing faithful witness, forming a unified holy people, and leading the community into participation of God's mission.

The book of Acts therefore presents a compelling vision of the Holy Spirit's work that is personal but also profoundly communal. Individual believers are transformed by the Spirit, yet those transformations always contribute to God's larger redemptive purposes. Luke's narrative ultimately directs the reader's attention beyond the experience of receiving the Spirit or experiencing it personally to the ongoing work that the Spirit accomplishes through the people of God corporately.

As in the first century, the Holy Spirit continues to empower God's people to participate in the work that Jesus "began to do and teach," calling the ekklesia not simply to seek the Spirit's presence, but to faithfully join the Spirit's ongoing mission in the world.

Bibliography:

Keener, Craig S. *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*. Vol. 2. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013.

Longenecker, Bruce W., Elizabeth E. Shively, and Todd D. Still, eds. *Behind the Scenes of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2024.

The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016.

VanderKam, James C. *An Introduction to Early Judaism*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018.

Appendix A: Major Narrative Events Involving the Holy Spirit in Acts

#	Acts	Narrative Event	Who is Involved?	What the Holy Spirit Does	Laying on of Hands?	Baptism Mentioned?	Immediate Result	Why It Matters in the Story
1	1:4–8	Jesus promises the Spirit	Jesus and the apostles	Promises power for witness	No	John's baptism contrasted	Apostles wait in Jerusalem	Introduces the Spirit as essential for the mission that follows.
2	2:1–13	Pentecost	Jewish believers	Spirit is poured out	No	No	Tongues, proclamation, crowd gathers	Marks the beginning of the church's public witness.
3	2:38–39	Peter's invitation	Jerusalem crowd, <u>Jews</u>	Promise of the Spirit extended to believers	No	Baptism commanded after	Thousands respond	Shows the promise of the Spirit extends beyond the apostles.
4	4:8–12	Peter before the Sanhedrin	Peter	Peter is filled with the Spirit	No	No	Bold testimony before Jewish leaders	Spirit empowers witness under opposition.
5	4:23–31	Prayer of the church	Jerusalem believers	Spirit fills believers again	No	No	Bold proclamation continues	Demonstrates that Spirit-filling is ongoing rather than a one-time event.
6	5:1–11	Ananias and Sapphira	Church	Spirit exposes deception and brings judgment	No	No	Fear comes upon the church	Highlights the holiness of the Spirit within the covenant community.
7	6:1–6	Seven servants appointed	Apostles and Seven	Spirit-filled men are recognized for service	Yes	No	Seven commissioned	Spirit shapes leadership and community organization.
8	7:54–60	Stephen's martyrdom	Stephen	Spirit strengthens Stephen and grants a vision	No	No	Faithful witness unto death	Spirit sustains believers during persecution.
9	8:14–17	Samaritans receive the Spirit	<u>Samaritans</u>	Spirit is received	Yes	Yes (before)	Samaritans receive the Spirit	Publicly confirms Samaritan inclusion among God's people.
10	8:26–40	Philip and the Ethiopian	Philip	Spirit directs Philip's ministry	No	Ethiopian baptized	Gospel reaches Ethiopian official	Spirit guides the spread of the gospel beyond Judea.
11	9:10–20	Saul's conversion completed	Saul and Ananias	Saul receives the Spirit	Yes	Baptized	Saul immediately preaches Jesus	Spirit transforms an opponent into a witness.
12	10:19–48	Cornelius and his household	Peter, Cornelius, <u>Gentiles</u>	Spirit falls on Gentiles	No	Baptism follows	Tongues, praise, baptism	Confirms Gentile inclusion apart from becoming Jewish first.
13	11:15–18	Peter explains Cornelius' conversion	Jerusalem believers	Spirit's work interpreted	No	No	Church accepts Gentiles	Spirit becomes the evidence supporting Gentile inclusion.
14	13:1–4	Antioch church commissions missionaries	Barnabas, Saul, Antioch church	Spirit calls and sends missionaries	Yes	No	First missionary journey begins	Spirit initiates intentional mission to the nations.
15	13:9–12	Elymas opposed	Paul	Paul is filled with the Spirit	No	No	Elymas blinded; proconsul believes	Spirit authenticates the gospel through divine power.
16	13:52	Pisidian Antioch	Disciples	Filled with joy and the Holy Spirit	No	No	Church continues despite persecution	Spirit strengthens believers during hardship.

17	15:6–29	Jerusalem Council	Apostles and elders	Spirit guides communal discernment	No	No	Gentile requirements clarified	Spirit marks God's inclusion and preserves unity within the expanding church.
18	16:6–10	Second missionary journey	Paul and companions	Spirit redirects missionary travel	No	No	Gospel moves toward Macedonia	Spirit directs where the gospel advances.
19	19:1–7	Ephesian disciples	<u>John's disciples</u>	Spirit received after instruction	Yes	Baptized in Jesus' name	Tongues and prophecy	Completes disciples of John into the Messiah's community.
20	20:22–24	Paul's journey to Jerusalem	Paul	Spirit compels Paul forward	No	No	Paul continues despite danger	Spirit prepares believers for suffering.
21	20:28	Farewell to Ephesian elders	Elders	Spirit appoints overseers	No	No	Charge to shepherd the church	Spirit establishes and sustains church leadership.
22	21:4–14	Warnings about Jerusalem	Disciples, Agabus, Paul	Spirit warns of suffering	No	No	Paul continues journey	Spirit prepares rather than prevents suffering.
23	28:25–28	Paul's final address in Rome	Jewish leaders	Spirit speaks through Isaiah	No	No	Gospel turns increasingly toward Gentiles	Ends Acts by connecting the Spirit with God's continuing purpose.
				Total "No":	18	16		
				% No:	75%	67%		

Appendix B: Other References to the Holy Spirit in Acts

The following passages contain references to the Holy Spirit but were not included as separate entries in Appendix A because they do not constitute independent narrative events. Instead, they function primarily as descriptive statements, explanatory comments, summaries, or references contained within larger narrative episodes already included in this study.

Acts 1:2	Acts 6:3	Acts 10:38
Acts 1:16	Acts 6:5	Acts 11:12
Acts 2:17–18	Acts 6:10	Acts 11:16
Acts 2:33	Acts 7:51	Acts 11:24
Acts 4:25	Acts 8:18	Acts 15:8
Acts 5:32	Acts 9:31	Acts 19:2
		Acts 20:23

Appendix C: Summary of Observed Patterns in the Holy Spirit Narratives

The following themes emerged from comparing the major narrative events involving the Holy Spirit in Acts (Appendix A). These observations are based on repeated patterns within the narrative and serve as the foundation for the discussion in this paper. Since many events reflect multiple themes, categories overlap and the counts are not mutually exclusive.

Theme	Major Narrative Events	Count
Mission / Witness	Acts 1, 2, 4, 9, 13, 16	6
Divine Guidance	Acts 8, 10, 13, 16, 20, 21	6

Formation and Growth of God's People	Acts 2, 4, 6, 15, 20	5
Faithfulness in Opposition	Acts 4, 7, 13, 21	4
Inclusion of New People Groups	Acts 8, 10, 19	3
Leadership and Commissioning	Acts 6, 13, 20	3