

The Work of the Spirit in Acts Looking for Patterns

Theme

The theme of Acts is intrinsically bound up with its purpose. The theme is “The Beginnings of the Church and the Expansion of the Gentile Mission.”

Interpretive Process

By and large, most sectors of evangelical Protestantism have a “restoration movement” mentality. We regularly look back to the church and Christian experience in the first century either as the norm to be restored or the ideal to be approximated.

If it can be demonstrated that Luke’s intent in Acts was to lay down a pattern for the church at all times, then that pattern surely becomes normative, that is, it is what God requires of all Christians under any conditions. But if his intent is something else, then we need to ask the interpretative questions in a different way.

How do we interpret the book of Acts? How do the individual narratives in Acts, or any other biblical narrative for that matter, function as precedents for the later church, or do they? That is, does the book of Acts have a word that not only describes the primitive church but speaks as a norm to the church at all times? In short, just exactly what role does historical precedent play in Christian doctrine or in the understanding of Christian experience?

Our assumption, shared by many others, is that *unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is only narrated or described does not function in a normative way---unless it can be demonstrated on other grounds that the author intended it to function in this way.* There are good reasons for making this assumption.

It is one thing for the historian to include an event because it serves the greater purpose of his work and yet another thing for the interpreter to take that incident as having teaching value apart from the historian’s larger intent. Does history also serve as normative model? We think not, basically because most such details are incidental to the main point of the narrative and because of the ambiguity of details from narrative to narrative.

General Principles for Interpreting Acts

1. Recognize the intent of the natural of narrative writing.
 - a. Luke is striving to be a reliable and careful narrator of the material he is conveying, not only because he is a good historian but also because he believes that this material can and should be used for instruction in his own day.
 - b. Distinguishing normative/prescriptive from descriptive/unique:
 - i. Look for positive repeated patterns in the text
 - ii. Look for there to be only one pattern
 - iii. Look for divine approval or disapproval
 - iv. Look for cultural conditioning
 - v. Look for support from the epistles
 - c. Not all of the above may be found, but a preponderance of evidence must exist for a narrative pattern to be considered normative.
2. Recognize the narrow selection of the narrative.
 - a. The book of Acts covers almost 30 years of early church history. Luke is not describing the everyday life of the early church and its mission. Rather he is narrating the exception events and their unique context.

- b. The normal life of the church is to be understood as outside the boundaries of the abnormal events of Acts.
- 3. Remember that Acts is the second volume of a Luke's narrative.
 - a. Look for continuing themes between the two volumes.
 - b. Distinguish the difference between preaching individual passages in Acts and preaching the message of Acts.
- 4. Focus on the overall message of Acts
 - a. Christians of all ages need to know where they come from: how they are related to God's people of Israel and the promises given to them, and how it came about that the Jew Jesus of Nazareth came to be the universal Savior and Lord.
 - b. Acts places the church in the *real* history of the world. It provides roots for the believing community.
 - c. Luke provides certainty about the origins of our salvation.
- 5. Focus of the God-centeredness of Acts
 - a. Acts tells the story of men who act on behalf of God, yet it primarily tells the story of God who uses men. Don't highlight the protagonist without relating the power source.
 - b. God is seen working through the Holy Spirit in Acts more so than any other book in the NT.

Case Study:

The Charismatic Movement uses the book of Acts as a paradigm for all NT ministries. They state that the contemporary church should be identical to the NT church. They argue from Acts 2, 8, 10, and 19. Key questions:

- 1. Was Luke intending to teach the church on speaking in tongues?
- 2. Is there a repeatable pattern that is established in these chapters?
- 3. Are the events of Acts identical to the work of the contemporary church?

Evaluate each event: **What happened?**

Observations	Acts 2:1-13	Acts 4:31	Acts 8:5-25	Acts 10:44-48	Acts 19:1-7

What was being spoken? Key Words:

1. *Glossa* – occurs 50 times in the NT
 - a. 15 times it speaks of the human organ
 - b. 25 times of speaking in tongues (Acts 2:4, 2:11)
 - c. 7 times of people groups in Revelation (5:9, 7:9, 10:11, 11:9, 13:7, 14:6, 17:5)
 - d. 3 times figuratively

Lexical meanings:

- a. The human organ
- b. Foreign languages
- c. Ecstatic speech

2. *Idia Dialekto* –

- a. Acts 1:19 – “proper tongue”
- b. Acts 2:6 – “we hear in our own language”
- c. Acts 2:8 – “in our own tongue”

Lexical meaning:

1. Foreign language

Conclusion: Tongues in Acts was intelligent speech in known dialects whose content was spiritual truth.

Who was doing the speaking?

The best position is that only the twelve apostles spoke in tongues when the Holy Spirit came upon them in this unusual way.

1. First, the closest antecedent of “they” (2:1) is the group of apostles (1:26).
2. Second, it need not be thought that the apostles spent all of their time with the 120 nor that the selection of Matthias immediately preceded the descent of the Holy Spirit.
3. Third, Christ only gave the promise of the Spirit to the apostles. He said: “...I send the promise of my Father upon *you*, but tarry *ye* in the city of Jerusalem, until *ye* be endued with power from on high” (Luke 24:49; cf. Acts 1:2-4). Speaking to the apostles only, He predicted: “...*ye* shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence.... But *ye* shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon *you*, and *ye* shall be witnesses...” (Acts 1:5,8). There is no indication that all of the believers were to receive the Holy Spirit in this unusual way.
4. Fourth, the observers of the phenomenon “marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilaeans?” (Acts 2:7). Can it be proved that all 120 were Galileans? The apostles were called “Ye men of Galilee” by the angels (Acts 1:11). Peter’s speaking had a definite Galilean accent (cf. Mark 14:70).
5. Fifth, would a charge of drunkenness have been hurled at women (Acts 2:13; cf. 1:14)?
6. Sixth, there is no mention of the 120 in Acts 2, but there are references to the apostles (2:14, 37).
7. Seventh, the mention of “daughters” in Joel’s prophecy (Acts 2:17) does not mean that women received the experience of Pentecost. To be consistent, one would have to say that sons, daughters, young men, old men, servants, and handmaidens had to be present. Can it be demonstrated that all six of these classes were included in the 120?

Conclusions:

1. There is no pattern of speaking in tongues established in Acts for the early church.
2. There are no instances in which people are instructed to speak in tongues in Acts.
3. There is a consistency in known languages being the evidence of tongue speaking.
4. The pattern in Acts is the presence of Jews and apostles, the salvation of people, and the speaking of known languages.