

The Spirit in Luke-Acts

The Spirit is often the forgotten, even marginalised, member of the Trinity (see, for example, the ‘Gloria’ and the ‘Nicene Creed’ at Mass/Eucharist). And yet, God’s Plan for Salvation will not be completed without the Key Role of the Spirit – in fact, it couldn’t even have begun without the Spirit!

Luke didn’t write an Essay on the role of the Spirit. So, we must examine where and why he mentions the Spirit in order to understand the Spirit’s Role. So, we look at the Spirit in 1) the Old Testament, 2) Luke-Acts, and 3) in Our Lives.

The Spirit of God in the Old Testament:

Luke didn’t write the Old Testament, but he was very well versed in it and he was acutely aware of what had been said in the Old Testament about the Spirit of God.

- 1) The Spirit of God was **the pervading and prevailing presence of God in all his creation**, e.g. Haggai 2:5 (“When you came out of Egypt, I promised that I would always be with you. I am still with you, so do not be afraid”). Haggai lived around 500 B.C.
- 2) The ‘spirit of God’ is often given the meaning ‘breath of God,’ or the God-given ‘principle of life,’ or ‘the principle of vital activity’ (McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 840).
- 3) Throughout the Old Testament, the ‘Spirit of Yahweh’ is given to individual kings (e.g., In 2 Samuel 23:2, King David said, “The Spirit of the Lord speaks through me; his message is on my lips”), judges, and those especially tasked by God (e.g. In the building of the Tent of God’s Presence, the Spirit gives those cooperating in accomplishing His Plan the understanding and the skills to enable them to fulfil God’s Plan – Exodus 31:1-11).
- 4) The Spirit was especially important to the Prophets:

Amos 7:15f, who lived around 750 B.C., wrote (“The Lord took me from my work as a shepherd and ordered me to come and prophesy to his people”): Amos stressed “**God’s moral rule over the entire world and [His] demands for justice and a concern for the outcast and oppressed**” (Boadt, 316).

Ezekiel 1:28f. shows God calling Ezekiel (597 B.C.) to a prophetic vocation (“Then I heard a voice saying..... While the voice was speaking, **God’s spirit** entered me and raised me to my feet.... And I heard the voice continue, ‘Mortal man, I am sending you to my people’”).

In 520-400 B.C., **Isaiah (61:1)** wrote “**The Sovereign Lord has filled me with his Spirit.** He has chosen me and sent me to bring good news to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted.... He has sent me to proclaim that the time has come when the Lord will save his people”).

- 5) **The Spirit gives courage** to the downtrodden (Haggai 2:4-5), **brings new life** out of death (Ezekiel 37:1-14), **will restore hope** (Joel 2:28-29), and **will promote justice** (Isaiah 11:1f, 42:1-4a, 61:1-4).
- 6) In Isaiah 61:1f, God had promised that his **Messiah** would bring “the good news to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, and proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord.”

Jesus “returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit” and went to the synagogue at Nazareth and fulfilled that promise (there are examples of Jesus’ miracles throughout Luke’s Gospel and also in the Acts).

In Joel 3:1-2 there is the assertion that, in the Messianic or Final Age, the ‘spirit of prophetic insight’ will be given to all. In Ezekiel 39:29 this promise is repeated (“I will pour out my spirit on the people and never turn away from them. I, the Lord, have spoken”). In Acts 2 this promise is fulfilled (see, later).

Very often the meaning is that ‘the spirit of Yahweh’ is empowering or preparing these individuals for their task/calling in life.

The Spirit of God in Luke’s Gospel-Acts:

The Spirit receives more attention/prominence in Luke’s Gospel and Acts of the Apostles (for short, Luke-Acts) than in any of the other New Testament writings.

These are just some examples:

In Lk 1:15-17 we are told that the promised child (Jesus) will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb and “he will turn many of the children of Israel to their Lord and God and **will prepare a people fit for the Lord.**”

In Lk 1:35 we hear that the Holy Spirit will come upon **Mary** – “and the angel said to her in reply, ‘the Holy Spirit will come upon you.....’” and will **empower** her to conceive Jesus: and in that way participate in fulfilling God’s Plan.

Elizabeth is “filled with the Holy Spirit and she calls out: “Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me that the mother of my Lord/God should come to me.” **Elizabeth is enabled/‘inspired’ to recognise Mary as the “mother of my Lord”** (Lk 1:41).

Simeon (Lk 2:25-27) is **led by the Holy Spirit** to come into the Temple and the Holy Spirit **reveals to him** that he will not die until he has seen the “Messiah of the Lord.”

John the Baptist prophesies that Jesus will “**baptise with the Holy Spirit** and with fire” (Lk 3:16). **The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus** at his baptism (Lk 3:22) “in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son: with you I am well pleased.’”

In the following chapter, Luke tells us that Jesus, “**Filled with the Holy Spirit**, is led out into the desert” (Lk 4:1). Later, in that same chapter (Lk 4:14) Jesus “returned to Galilee and the **Holy Spirit was with him.**” Jesus takes up the mantle of the Old Testament prophets (Lk

4:18) and is seen by his disciples as “a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and his people” (Lk 24:19).

When the seventy two disciples (“in great joy,” Lk 10:17) return from their preaching and/or teaching in “every town and place where he himself was to visit” (Lk 10:1), **Jesus “was filled with joy by the Holy Spirit** and said ‘Father, Lord of heaven and earth! I thank you.....’

The Spirit is given in answer to prayer (Lk 11:13 – “How much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?”).

The Spirit **teaches** the disciples what to say (Lk 12:12 – “when they take you before synagogues and before rulers and authorities, do not worry about what you are to say. For the Holy Spirit will teach you at that moment what you should say”).

In Luke 24:49 and Acts 2:33, it is clearly stated that **Jesus will send the Spirit** – (“I will send upon you what my Father has promised, but you must wait in the city until the **power** from on high comes down upon you”). Jesus “gave them [his disciples] this order: ‘wait for the gift I told you about, the gift my Father promised. John baptised with water, but in a few days you will be baptised with **the Holy Spirit**’” (Acts 1:4-5).

In Lk 1:8 Jesus promises that “when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with **power**, and you will be **witnesses for me in Jerusalem**, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” And, when the Spirit comes upon them they are **transformed, courageous people** – and “all are filled with the Holy Spirit. They begin to speak in other languages, as the Spirit enabled them to speak” (Acts 2:4).

The ‘real event’ of Pentecost Sunday, for Luke, is not the pyrotechnics (‘tongues of fire’), or the ‘mass conversions’ (of the ‘3,000 Jews’), but the “**empowerment of [all] the disciples by the Holy Spirit**” (L. T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles, Sacra Pagina Series*, Collegeville MI, Liturgical Press, 1992, p. 45). **Empowerment for their calling.**

Peter, in his Speech on Pentecost Sunday, called on the crowd to “**Repent,..... and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.** For the promise is for you and for your children, and all those far off, whomsoever the Lord our God calls” (Acts 2:38-39). In Acts 4:8, Peter, “**full of the Holy Spirit,**” addressed the chief priests and the elders. Later, when Peter and John are released by the Sanhedrin and they return to the gathering of believers. “As they were praying the place where they were gathered was shaken. **They were all filled with the Holy Spirit** and were speaking the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31).

Stephen finished his Speech, and “**filled with the Holy Spirit,** he gazed into heaven. He saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55; see also 6:8, 9:17, 13:52, 19:2).

The Spirit sometimes shows externally in the gift of tongues and prophecy which at the same time witness to the presence of God in the Church (Acts 2:3f, 10:47, 11:17, 15:8). The Spirit reveals the mysteries of God (e.g. Lk 1:41, 1:67, Acts 11:28, 13:9) and inspires prophecy, fulfilling the words of Joel 2 (e.g. Acts 2:18).

When the disciples gather to select 7 deacons the requirement is that they be “**full of the Spirit and of wisdom**” (Acts 2:3).

Luke asserts that the Spirit's essential work is in helping the disciples achieve/fulfil their vocations as Christians, and in that way to achieve God's Plan for creation (Talbert, *Reading Acts*, pages xv and xvi, and Bovon, *Luke the Theologian*, p. 228-272). **This help was in two principal ways – 1) their/our individual, personal transformation** (the disciples' personal transformation on Pentecost Sunday, Cornelius's family), **and 2) their communal transformation** (e.g. The Pentecost Conversion of the 3,000, the conversion of the Samaritans, and Paul's conversion of the Gentiles as told in Acts 9ff.).

[Discussion on Luke 4:16-30]

In his inaugural preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth Jesus proclaimed that **“the Spirit of the Lord is upon me and ... he has anointed me and sent me to bring the Good News to the poor”** (Lk 4:18, Isaiah 61:1-2, see Mullins, *The Gospel of Luke*, 48-49). **This reads as a programmatic or vocational statement.**

It's a Spirit of wisdom (Acts 6:3), of faith (Acts 6:5), of encouragement (Acts 9:31), of joy (Acts 13:52), and enables, directs or guides the individual church member and the local churches in important decisions (Acts 13:2, 15:28, 20:28).

We can say that throughout Luke-Acts the Spirit is presented as the One who gives the disciples the wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and the reverence of the Lord – to transform oneself and others – and to bring about/achieve God's Plan/Will.

The Spirit is conferred upon every believer in baptism (Acts 2:38f, 8:16-18, 9:17, 10:44, 11:16f, 19:2, 19:6, 15:8f). In Luke's 'Acts of the Apostles,' the 'torch of the faith' is handed on to Jesus' followers who, empowered by the Spirit, carry the Gospel to the four corners of the Roman Empire and the world.

The fulfilment of God's Plan/Will is being empowered or brought about by the involvement/operation/participation/empowerment of the 'Spirit of God.'

“I have loved you with an everlasting love” (Jeremiah 31:3).

“The Lord says, ‘I am making a new earth and a new heaven Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating” (Isaiah 65:17-25).

Conclusion:

Luke recognises that

1) God the Creator/Initiator – **‘Our Father’**- has a Plan for us/creation, (to share His Unconditional Love with us individually and collectively), and wants a personal, loving relationship with us.

2) This Plan is being fulfilled by the Spirit ‘as we speak.’

3) **Our response, therefore, should be one of ‘marvel,’ ‘wonder,’ ‘amazement’** – as it was for Mary, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna...., to thank/praise Him for being who He is, and

4) **to ask for His Spirit in following our vocation** of sharing this plan with all nations (Acts 1:8). So, 4) we need to understand and accept His Plan of Unconditional Love - and Trust Him.

In his Gospel and Acts he gives dozens of examples of God's promises now being fulfilled 'before our eyes.' In all of these Luke is saying to his fledgling church and to us – **'Can you not see God's Plan/Will being revealed, progressed, fulfilled, and achieved before our very eyes?????' And, what's your response?**

For Luke, then, the Spirit is the Teacher, Enabler, Encourager, Guide, and Transformer (on a personal and communal level), assisting all baptised believers to Witness to God's Plan/Will for Universal Salvation, that is, Unconditional Love.

McKenzie says that "the Spirit is the divine dynamic force that moves the disciples to preach and witness Jesus and **empowers them to feats of courage and eloquence**, which are entirely beyond their personal capacities... The Spirit is not restricted to the leaders only, **but is given with the messianic fullness to the entire body of believers**" (McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, Chapman Publishers, London, 1968, p. 843).

Books:

M. Patella, *The Gospel according to Luke*, Liturgical Press, 2005, and,
D. Hamm, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Liturgical Press, 2005.