Luke’s Understanding of the Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Pentecostal Perspective

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Not long ago a Chinese house church leader commented, “When Chinese believers read the book of Acts, we see in it our own experience; when foreign Christians read the book of Acts, they see in it inspiring stories.” My Chinese friend’s point was clear: their experience of opposition and persecution impacts how they read Luke’s narrative. Chinese believers tend to read Luke-Acts with a sense of urgency and desperation, a sense of hunger generated by their need. So, they easily identify with the struggles of Peter and John, of Stephen and Paul. And so also they readily accept the promise of the Spirit’s enabling to persevere and bear bold witness to Jesus in the face of opposition. Implicit in my friend’s comment was also the belief that Christians who live in stable and affluent countries, Christians who live in contexts where the Church has a long and storied history, may have a difficult time reading the book of Acts in this way. He was suggesting that many of these Christians may find it hard to identify with the struggles and needs of the early disciples, and thus they do not read with the same sense of solidarity or with the same sense of urgency.

I believe that this conversation touches on perhaps the greatest
contribution the Pentecostal movement is making to the larger church world: The Pentecostal movement is calling the church universal to take a fresh look at Luke’s two-volume work. And in the process, it is encouraging the church to consider once again its own understanding and its own need of the Holy Spirit’s power. It is precisely here, in Luke-Acts, where we find the central and distinctive message of the Pentecostal movement. From the earliest days of the modern Pentecostal revival, Pentecostals have proclaimed that all Christians may, and indeed should, experience a baptism in the Holy Spirit “distinct from and subsequent to the experience of new birth.”¹ This understanding of Spirit baptism flows naturally from the conviction that the Spirit came upon the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2), not as the source of new covenant existence, but rather as the source of power for effective witness. This understanding of Spirit baptism has given the modern Pentecostal movement its identity, its unifying experience, and its missiological focus.

The rapid growth of Pentecostal churches around the world, particularly in the Two-Thirds World, makes it difficult for the global Church to ignore this movement and its theology. Indeed, Pentecostal churches around the world have been growing with such rapidity that “some historians refer to the 20th century as the ‘Pentecostal Century’.”² So, today, let us heed the call and turn once again to the pages of Luke-Acts. More specifically, let us examine Luke’s understanding of Spirit baptism and its significance for Pentecostal theology. We will begin by looking at the manner in which non-Pentecostal Protestant scholars have understood this New Testament metaphor, baptism in the Spirit. We shall

¹ Minutes of the 44th Session of the General Council of the Assemblies of God (Portland, Ore.; August 6-11, 1991), 129.