

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

The Spirit: our spiritual GPS.

Early in the Book of Acts, which is the story of the rapid spread of the faith from Jerusalem to almost all their known world, the Apostles, in Jerusalem, choose seven people to assist them in their evangelical work. One of them is Stephen. He doesn't survive for very long after being appointed. Here is a very highly compacted version of what happened to Stephen – the man who is considered the first Christian martyr. This is taken from Acts, Chapters 6 and 7:

6⁸ And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹ Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue rose up and disputed with Stephen. ¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking. ¹¹ Then they secretly instigated men who said, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." ¹² And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, ¹³ and they set up false witnesses who said, "This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, ¹⁴ for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us." ¹⁵ And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like the face of an angel.

7² And Stephen said:

⁵¹ "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, ⁵³ you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.

Two of the three major themes of Acts are seen in this composite passage. First, the Apostles, along with other select people, are amazingly successful at evangelizing. And second, the Holy Spirit plays a prominent role throughout the Book of Acts, and indeed, the reason for the dramatic success of the early evangelists is that they were being inspired and directed by the Holy Spirit, who is often simply called "the Spirit". The third theme, which is hinted at in this passage and is the focus of most of the Book of Acts is this: the Jewish people of Israel, who already had a covenant with God, are for the most part not receptive to the Gospel, the "Good News", and so the evangelists turn to the Gentiles.

The Book of Acts begins with the Apostles organizing themselves, in Jerusalem, after Jesus has been crucified and risen. Judas is dead, and so, to keep the number at twelve, they choose Matthias to be an Apostle. The Holy Spirit then comes upon the Apostles in Chapter 2:

² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with

the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

In Chapters 3 to 5, we hear about the establishment and organization of the Church in Jerusalem; these are Jewish people who do accept Jesus as the promised Messiah. The first signs of danger appear, and we get a taste of what will happen to the Apostles and especially to Paul, over and over, as they spread the Word. The Apostles are arrested, but they are freed. The religious authorities do not believe that God will be behind their movement, and so they will certainly fail.

Beginning in Chapter 6, and for the remainder of the 28 chapters, we see the faith spread to Gentiles. This is a calculated move on the part of the Apostles, as they see Jews as not being receptive. Paul joins them in this effort. At first, they do not trust Paul, because he used to be Saul, the man who hunted down the followers of Christ. But Paul, in Chapter 9, is visited by Jesus on the Road to Damascus and he has become a man who will dedicate the rest of his life to far-flung travels and intense suffering, all so that he can bring the news of Christ to the world. Paul almost immediately runs into trouble with the religious authorities, but he manages to escape. Peter is in truth the first to evangelize Gentiles, but he does this in the Jerusalem area. Very rapidly, we see churches develop in surrounding areas. We are told this by the author, Luke, the author of a Gospel and of the Book of Acts: *the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out even on the Gentiles.*

Although the organization is a bit contrived, we break Paul's evangelical journeys into three trips, with successive trips making larger and larger loops around much of their known world. The third trip goes all the way to Italy, to Rome, where Paul is imprisoned, and the story of Acts ends. In Paul's travels, he is accompanied by various people. We meet Luke, the author, in his second journey, and Luke accompanies him for much of Paul's third journey. We see Paul and his associates, who tend to be men a generation younger than him, have amazing success due to the Holy Spirit acting within them and empowering them. We also see them running into trouble over and over, but escaping somehow, often through miraculous events. It's believed the Paul traveled at least 10,000 miles over thirty years and did it mostly on foot and by often-dangerous trips across the eastern and northern Mediterranean Sea. He goes from east of the Mediterranean, including Syria, north of Israel, to Asia Minor (now Turkey), then west to Greece, and further west to Italy. During his last trip, when he is a prisoner, he is ship-wrecked on the Island of Malta, just south of Sicily, and yes, he converts the people who live there. All the while, we see the Spirit always with him: the Holy Spirit is an active partner.

There has long been a theory that the Book of Acts, which is the accepted title that has been passed down through history, is very misleading. That's because the longer title is The Acts of the Apostles – but the earliest known use of that title

is attributed to Irenaeus, a Greek Bishop, who died in the year 202. We have no idea what Luke himself might have called his work, written in a highly literate Greek. The abbreviated title that we tend to use is translated from the Greek title for the book, *Praxeis*. The word is roughly translated as “Acts”, but *Praxeis*, is in truth a somewhat stronger word. A better translation is “Deeds”. The more intriguing issue is that Irenaeus’ title caught on at all, because although the Apostles are highly present in the beginning of the book, the book focuses mostly on Paul, who is not one of the twelve. Some have suggested that a better title is The Acts of the Spirit, because the Holy Spirit is far more active in the book than the Apostles.

In fact, in Chapter 12, we hear of Herod Agrippa as he begins to persecute the followers of Jesus. Peter is imprisoned. The Apostles and Paul have decided that the Word should be spread to the Gentiles. It is Paul and his assistant Barnabas who are going to be sent out. But it is not the Apostles who commission them. It is not Paul himself. It is the Holy Spirit directing this activity:

13 *Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch (teh-tark), and Saul. ² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.*

Antioch is in modern day Turkey, Asia Minor back then. *Niger* is the Latin word for black, and so we assume Simeon was of African descent. “Herod the tetrarch” (*tetrark*) apparently means that Herod was one of four rulers. A very intriguing fact, but one that is not explained in the Bible, is that Manaen apparently grew up with Herod, and was a friend of his, but had decided that he would become one of the people that Herod was trying to hunt down and kill. So, here is the scene: Barnabas, Simeon, Manaen, and Saul – who is about to officially become Paul – are in prayer and fasting, when the Holy Spirit speaks out loud and says: “*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*” Paul’s entire missionary effort, which did so much to establish the faith, and which took up the rest of his life, was directly commanded and initiated by the Holy Spirit.

I meet many people who say they are of the Faith. Sometimes, they say they are Christian, sometimes they say they are Lutheran or Methodist or Episcopalian or are of some other denomination or that they are a non-denominational believer. In truth, when people say they are Christians, the ones who are Catholic, Mormon, or Evangelical are more likely to be truly active believers. But all in all, only a fraction of these people attend church on a regular basis, and only a very small fraction of these “believers” seems to be aware of the presence of the Holy Spirit within them. They do believe in God. They are sincere. The vast majority strike

me as truly good people who wish only the best for all people. They despise the violence in the world, they do believe in prayer although they don't actively pray on a regular basis, and they firmly believe that God created them and God loves them, and that they will be with God one day for all of eternity. But they do not talk about the Holy Spirit. I believe that this aspect of our Trinity, God the Holy Spirit, has been largely forgotten. The Holy Spirit is that part of God who is ours, who is given to us, who lives within us and connects us to the entire Trinity. The Holy Spirit is our energy source and our life source. The Holy Spirit is the part of God who is our guide, our Google maps, our spiritual GPS.

A while back, I did find someone with a powerful sense of the Spirit in his life. He was recuperating from a rather invasive procedure to take a biopsy from him. We'll call him Arthur. He asked me to bring him a Bible. We first chatted for a few minutes. He told me that he was on powerful pain killers, and so he was feeling fine, if a little "loopy". He was, of course, worried about the result of the biopsy, which he wouldn't get until he was out of the hospital and back home for a couple of days. I went and got the Bible, and I asked him if he would like me to read to him. He said that he had been in the middle of a Bible Study at his church, and that he was missing the lesson, and that the lesson was about the Acts of the Apostles. He said that as he read it, he connected with Acts very strongly. He discovered that

it is about the Spirit sending people to spread the faith. We read a few passages from Acts and talked about the Book. We then started talking about his anxiety over his pending test result. He said something that struck me. Arthur said that he might have cancer inside of him. But, he said, he also has the Holy Spirit inside him. No matter how powerful that cancer turned out to be, the Holy Spirit is infinitely stronger. Arthur put his hand on his chest and said that he could feel the Spirit.

I don't know what came of Arthur's biopsy. But I do know that what Arthur said to me carried me through that day and is still very warm inside me. Indeed, no matter what evil invades us, no matter what energy it possesses, evil, sickness is powerless in the face of the Holy Spirit.

The context of the Book of Acts, and just for fun, let's call it the Acts of the Spirit, is that Jesus has not, for the most part, been successful with his own people. Jews already have a covenant with God. They know who God is and they have God in their lives. But Gentiles, non-Jews, do not have God in their lives. When the Apostles, and then Paul offer them a connection to God, they are receptive. They don't know it, but God's grace is already within them, active, making them receptive to the Word of God. The Holy Spirit then energizes, inspires, and empowers people to bring the Word to them, to people who up until this point, have no relationship with the God who created them in his image. The Book of

Acts, of the deeds performed by various evangelists who are wildly successful and spread the faith at an enormous rate because the Holy Spirit is driving them, is all about those who are in desperate need of God. It's easy to understand why Jews are not interested in the message of Jesus. They aren't empty spiritually. But the Holy Spirit knew that there is fertile ground among the Gentiles. Two thousand years have gone by since then, and we have seen the Church grow and shrink and grow over the centuries. Right now, the ground is almost as fertile as it was when the Holy Spirit sent Paul and Barnabas into the field. We need the Spirit today.

The story of Acts is genuinely stunning. We don't know much about what the Apostles did with their lives after Jesus left the Earth. But there is evidence from outside the Bible that, like Paul, the Apostles were active evangelists. There are ancient letters and other documents that tell of Peter making it all the way to Rome and being crucified – upside down. It is said that he felt unworthy to die the way that Christ died and so asked to have his head pointed downward. Acts just happens to be the one written document that has survived to tell us about the spread of the faith and that made its way into the official Bible. The Book Acts is our story. It is the story of the Holy Spirit going to work for our sake. Remember as you walk through the world that you do have the Spirit within you. Listen and let the Spirit guide you. The Holy Spirit can give you a joyful, vibrant life.

Please pray with me.

God, we thank you for making sure that The Book of Acts, The Deeds of the Spirit, has survived intact and that we are blessed to read it. May we be equally empowered by the Spirit, so that like the Apostles, like Paul, we can live the Faith, spread the Word, and always feel the Spirit living vibrantly within us. Amen.