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In Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience, William and Robert Menzies call for an “Evangelical Dialogue” on distinctive Pentecostal doctrines and practices. They present the theological differences between Pentecostal and Evangelical scholars with clarity and depth. Spirit and Power makes clear that the heart of the issue is the unique Pentecostal understanding of the phrase “the baptism in the Holy Spirit” and its relationship to spiritual empowerment for missions. As Pentecostals use the phrase, it refers to a subsequent-to-conversion reception of the Holy Spirit given to believers to empower them for missions. Evangelicals, on the other hand, tend to treat the phrase as a synonym for the gift of the Spirit received automatically by all believers. This essay is an attempt to participate in this dialogue by subtly shifting the focus of the debate. Typically, the debate has been carried on in terms of whether or not the baptism in the Holy Spirit should be seen in terms of conversion-initiation or a charismatic-prophetic empowerment for mission. According to the authors of Spirit and Power and the important study that informs much of their exegesis, Roger Stronstad’s The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke, Evangelical scholars, following James Dunn, have tended to interpret Luke’s narratives through a Pauline grid. Contemporary Pentecostals contrast Paul’s soteriological pneumatology with the charismatic perspective found in Luke’s narratives.2

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1 This is not to imply that Pentecostals are not Evangelicals but to distinguish them, for purposes of discussion, from non-Pentecostals. See the Menzies comment in this regard, William W. Menzies and Robert P. Menzies, Spirit and Power: Foundations of Pentecostal Experience (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 11n2.

The difficulty with this debate is that it fails to appreciate fully Luke’s own soteriological categories. Two points may help us recast the debate within Luke’s own framework. First, Luke’s view of salvation does not involve regeneration or new birth. While neither side in this debate explicitly state that Luke does have such a theology, both seem to be thinking of salvation in Pauline or Johannine categories when they speak of conversion-initiation. The Menzies are correct to point out that Luke does not characterize the work of the Spirit as “the source of cleansing, righteousness, intimate fellowship,” or “moral transformation.” Yet, those terms do not quite describe Luke’s soteriology either. Second, the term *baptism* and its cognates are part of a New Testament language of inclusion and identity that emerged out of an existing Jewish debate over the identity of the true people of God. Thus, Luke is less concerned with *when* the inner spiritual dynamics of conversion or initiation take place than with *who* belongs to the new covenant community.


These points become important when we reflect on Luke’s agenda in Acts. While debate over this agenda will undoubtedly continue, recent studies have raised some important issues. In his *The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles*, Jacob Jervell sees in Acts an apologia for Paul and his mission. Part of Luke’s design was to make Paul and his mission palatable to Jewish Christian disciples who, in the words of James, were “zealous for the law” and who thought that Paul encouraged “all the Jews living among the Gentiles to forsake Moses” (Acts 21:20-21). This observation is compatible with John Mauck’s suggestion that Acts functions as a legal defense of Paul, who, in the last chapter of Acts, is still awaiting trial. The dilemma facing the Christian community was that “the Roman Empire and the non-Messianic Jewish leadership” was seeking to “[push] them out of Judaism.” To be successful for either audience Luke needed to demonstrate that Christianity and the Pauline mission were legitimately Jewish.

These concerns reflect a wider phenomenon within first-century Judaism. N.T. Wright, one of the leading participants in current discussions

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