

CHRIST OF THE CONSUMMATION

A NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

VOLUME 2
THE TESTIMONY
of
ACTS AND PAUL

O. PALMER ROBERTSON


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CHRIST OF THE CONSUMMATION

A SERIES BY O. PALMER ROBERTSON

Volume 1: The Testimony of the Four Gospels

Volume 2: The Testimony of Acts and Paul

Volume 3: The Testimony of the General Epistles and Revelation

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Dedicated to all future generations of my sons and daughters.

This is the commandment, and these are the decrees and laws the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may observe them in the land you are crossing over to possess. You, your children and your children's children are to fear the LORD your God, by keeping all his decrees and his commandments that I command you, all the days of your life, so that your days may be prolonged.

Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to obey, so that it may go well with you, and you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised.

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is One. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These words that I command you today shall be on your heart. Teach them diligently to your children. Talk about them when you sit at home, when you walk along the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.

—Deuteronomy 6:1–7

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FOREWORD

Many readers will come to this second part of O. Palmer Robertson's trilogy, *Christ of the Consummation: A New Testament Biblical Theology: Volume 2: The Testimony of Acts and Paul*, for the simple reason that whatever he publishes they want to read, having a confidence based on experience that this further volume will be characterized by an exposition of biblical theology that is genuinely *biblical*.

These readers need only the assurance that these pages will not disappoint them. For this volume too has all the hallmarks of its author's work: careful attention to the text of Scripture, an unremitting focus on Jesus Christ as the revelation of God, scholarly exposition that both expresses and encourages devotion to the Lord—all expressed with fresh insights communicated in an enviably easy style.

To most readers in this category, a foreword is superfluous. But even some within it, and others for whom this book is their first encounter with Palmer Robertson's work, may appreciate being able to read these pages in the light of a few personal reflections introducing the author and his character.

Although I do not belong to the inner circle of Palmer Robertson's family and friends, or even colleagues, we have known each other for some four decades. I am sure I am not the only person to whom the words *Southern gentleman* instinctively come to mind when his name is mentioned. He is that in the best sense—firm in grace, measured in speech, not given to vacuous enthusiasm, and both careful and thoughtful in his writings, whether scholarly (as here) or popular.

It is in his books that Palmer Robertson is best known and most widely appreciated. But there is much more to him than a pen (or a computer keyboard). For surrounding his private life as a husband and father—the context in which his writing is accomplished—his curriculum vitae includes decades of distinguished teaching as a seminary professor molding the

thinking of younger scholars and shaping the ministries of an entire generation of pastors. And contributing to the atmosphere and the integrity that pervade his writing are his years of experience as a local-church pastor in the United States and as a seminary planter in Uganda.

Dr. Robertson also belongs to a guild of whole-Bible scholars who have graced the church over the centuries—men who, recognizing the unity of God’s Word, have been equally comfortable in the pages of both the Old and the New Testaments. In this he has proved to be a worthy successor of John Calvin (Old Testament professor and author of New Testament commentaries during the working week, and preacher of the New Testament twice each Sunday); J. A. Alexander of Princeton (author of substantial commentaries on books of both Testaments); and of course Geerhardus Vos, whose *Biblical Theology* has functioned as a forerunner of and catalyst for this *Christ of the Consummation*, as well as for the volumes that have preceded it.

In addition, and like these predecessors, Dr. Robertson is a *biblical* theologian who is appreciative of and sensitive to the value of the work of *systematic* theologians. In this respect, Dr. Robertson embodies some of the characteristics that we associate with the “Lion of Princeton”: B. B. Warfield (a professor of New Testament before serving as a systematic theologian). Thus in these pages there is no sense of any underlying tension between (or irritation because of!) the church’s confession of faith and the reading of Scripture, and at the same time a recognition (with John Robinson, the Puritan pastor) that “there is yet more truth and light to break forth from God’s holy word.”¹

In fact, if I may add a personal reflection, not only does a Warfield-like atmosphere of piety suffuse these expositions of biblical theology, but some of the features of Warfield’s preaching seem (at least to me) to be evident in Palmer Robertson’s spoken ministry. Having heard him preach over the years, I think I can understand what one of Warfield’s colleagues meant when he said, after the latter’s death, that when he preached “his words proceeded out of his mouth as if they walked on velvet”!²

Of course, while the voice is not unimportant in preaching, the matter is more so. And here again I have personally sensed an echo of Warfield’s

1. The common paraphrase for Robinson’s “I am verily persuaded the Lord hath more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word.” Stephen Tomkins, *The Journey to the Mayflower: God’s Outlaws and the Invention of Freedom* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2020), 330.

2. Francis L. Patton, “Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, D.D., LL.D., Litt.D.: A Memorial Address,” *Princeton Theological Review* 19, no. 3 (July 1921): 370.

preaching; a refined scholarly ability to interpret Scripture without obscuring its truth with that scholarship; a rich simplicity that (as was said of William Perkins) leaves the lambs of the flock well fed and the more mature and intellectually able sheep satisfied. This is a great gift; but it is also a well-honed skill that is motivated by a desire to *serve* the people of God—not to either impress or dominate them with a self-aggrandizing display of ability. It bears the hallmarks of what was central to the ministry of the apostle Paul, surely the greatest biblical theologian (apart from the Lord Jesus): “We do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves *your bondslaves* for Jesus’ sake” (2 Cor. 4:5).

Again, if further proof of this spirit were needed, it lies in the fact that in what might once have been described as the “latter phase” of his ministry, Palmer Robertson founded and led a theological seminary in Uganda. But now, thankfully for us readers, that latter phase has extended to enable him to provide the further legacy of these pages in which he leads us by the hand into a fuller understanding of our Lord Jesus Christ, and a richer appreciation of the whole structure of biblical theology and of a theology that is thoroughly biblical.

It is, I think, unnecessary—and might well prove to strain the author’s friendship—to say more; but in encouraging you to turn now to the pages that really matter, I hope these paragraphs whet your appetite for what you will find in them. To change the metaphor, I believe you will discover that there is gold to be found in these hills—and will be eager for Dr. Robertson to open the next vein in the final volume of this splendid trilogy.

Sinclair B. Ferguson
 Chancellor's Professor of Systematic Theology
 Reformed Theological Seminary

A FURTHER WORD

This volume, the second with a third planned, continues Dr. Robertson's project of providing a comprehensive New Testament biblical theology that, as the preface to volume 1 on the Gospels makes clear, seeks to build on and expand the groundbreaking work of Geerhardus Vos.

In this volume, Robertson structures his treatment of the testimony of Paul by following the history of inscripturation, by showing the progress of revelation that takes place, including the development he sees, moving from the earliest to the latest letters. This treatment provides readers with an edifying wealth of insights. My comments here are offered to complement this valuable treatment of the apostle's teaching.

In the Preface to his *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (second paragraph), Vos notes that the term *biblical theology*, subject as it is to being misconstrued, is "really unsatisfactory"; the "more suitable" designation for the discipline he has in view is "History of Special Revelation." This revelation-historical understanding of biblical theology, its "Nature and Method," is then clarified and discussed at length in the book's introductory chapter.¹

Among the points made in this discussion, *biblical theology* is further defined as "the study of *the actual self-disclosures* of God in time and space which *lie in back of* even the first committal to writing of any Biblical document," it also being the case that "for a long time" (Old Testament revelation primarily is apparently in view) these actual divine self-disclosures paralleled "the inscripturation of revealed material."² Today, Vos is clear, our only access to and knowledge of this history of special revelation is the

1. In the following discussion, I have provided page numbers to both the Eerdmans and the Banner of Truth editions of *Biblical Theology*, e.g., "(E 13; B 5)." The Eerdmans edition was published in 1948, the Banner of Truth edition in 2014.

2. E 13; B 5 (emphasis added).

closed canon of God-breathed Scripture as the infallibly reliable revelatory record of that history. Yet that history (the focus of biblical theology) and the history of inscripturation are not identical; the two, the history of special revelation and the history of inscripturation, while intertwined, are to be distinguished. Apparently, then, Vos would distinguish treating the inscripturated testimony of Paul in terms of the progress of revelation it displays (while integrally and necessarily related) from what Vos considers a biblical-theological treatment.

A key aspect of Vos's understanding of biblical theology sheds light on this distinction between inscripturation and the history of special revelation: "Revelation is the interpretation of redemption."³ Implicit in this statement but plain enough is the distinction between revelation as verbal ("interpretation") and revelation as nonverbal ("redemption"). Further, verbal revelation does not exist for its own sake, as an end in itself. Rather, verbal revelation is derivative in the sense of the interpretive function that it always has; it presupposes and is dependent on the existence of nonverbal deed revelation as its interpretive focus; minus redemptive act, revelatory word is left with nothing to say. This point is subsequently made all the more emphatic: "Revelation is so interwoven with redemption that, unless allowed to consider the latter, it would be suspended in the air."⁴

This reference to redemption, in turn, requires taking into account "an important distinction." Redemption is "partly objective and central, partly subjective and individual."⁵ This in other words, as Vos's clarifying explanation makes clear, expresses the classical distinction between redemption accomplished and redemption applied. It amounts, I take it, to the distinction later introduced by Herman Ridderbos between *historia salutis* and *ordo salutis*, the history of salvation and the order of salvation.

With this distinction maintained, the focus of biblical theology is "objective and central" redemption, *historia salutis*, the history of the once-for-all accomplishment of redemption. This history, against the background of the originally good creation and subsequent fall and curse on human sin and largely incorporating along the way in its unfolding the provisional, preparatory, typology-laden Old Testament history of Israel, has reached its consummation in the person and work of Christ. The application of redemption, matters that concern its "subjective and individual" appropriation, is equally essential but comes into view only as it is given as part of

3. E 14; B 6.

4. E 24; B 15.

5. E 14; B 6.

the accompanying history of verbal revelation with its primary explanatory focus on the redemption accomplished by and in Christ.

In light of the preceding observations, Vos's understanding of biblical theology as the history of special revelation may be focused as follows: The defining and grounding interest of biblical theology is the history of *nonverbal* special revelation as redemptive deed, the actual accomplishment of redemption. Within that history verbal special revelation is essential as an accompanying strand that attests and interprets the accomplished redemption. This explanatory interpretation, eventually inscripturated, brings out the manifold implications and consequences of that accomplished redemption and its application for the life and mission of God's people in the world. But the distinguishing focus of biblical theology, its primary concern as the history of special revelation, is the history of "objective," accomplished redemption; in that sense, the defining interest of biblical theology is fundamentally redemptive-historical.

New Testament biblical theology, then, following Vos, is to be occupied with the crowning "actual self-disclosures of God in time and space"—that is, with the climactic and unique divine self-disclosure that has taken place in Christ in "the fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4).⁶ Its controlling focus is the history of redemption not as ongoing, still in progress and developing, but as completed, since it has in fact already reached its consummation in the finality of God's speech, his nothing-less-than-"last days" speech, in the Son (Heb. 1:1-2a; this revelatory "Son-speech" consists of both his redemption-accomplishing nonverbal and his attesting foundational verbal special revelation, with the latter including the revelation of the apostles and others authorized by Christ, Heb. 2:3; Eph. 2:20). The New Testament writers together provide diverse yet unified, what from a postresurrection redemptive-historical perspective amounts to essentially *synchronic*, interpretive testimony: testimony that concerns the eschatological fulfillment realized in Christ's earthly ministry culminating in his death and the consequent event complex of his resurrection, ascension, and heavenly session, and the Spirit-poured apostolic foundation of the church on Pentecost (Acts 2:32-33; Eph. 2:20). In this history—at the level of redemptive, deed-revelation accomplishment—only one event remains unrealized, still future: the return of Christ and events accompanying it.

In the case of Paul specifically, "the actual self-disclosures of God" consummately and finally realized in the person and work of Christ underlie

6. All Scripture quotations in this essay are from the ESV.

and give rise to the attesting and interpreting revelatory contents of his letters. Concerning Paul, Vos has said, his is “the genius of the greatest constructive mind ever at work on the data of Christianity.”⁷ While his letters are that, genuine letters, and not systematic-theological treatises (this includes Romans), they undeniably evidence, each in its own way, a reflective, coherent, and unified structure of profound theological thought.

How are we to apprise the theological thinking of the apostle? In its diverse epistolary expressions, what in Vos’s view gives it coherence and unifies it as a whole? With such questions in mind, it is noteworthy and a source of some surprise that the New Testament part of his *Biblical Theology* ends with the public ministry of Jesus and leaves the rest of the New Testament untreated. As a plausible proposal, however, as far as Paul is concerned, what is missing in the *Biblical Theology* is provided by *The Pauline Eschatology*; the latter presents an instance of a biblical-theological treatment of Paul.

The title of this book can be misleading to someone who understands “eschatology” in the traditional or conventional sense and will therefore be expecting a more or less specialized study limited to Paul’s teaching about “the last things” concerning Christ’s future return and directly related matters. But the reader does not have to progress very far into the volume before recognizing that Vos intends something much more, that he is working with a broadened understanding of eschatology, one that encompasses the past as well as the future coming of Christ.

Of the book, he says, “It will appear throughout that to unfold the Apostle’s eschatology means to set forth *his theology as a whole*.”⁸ Further: “We hope presently to show that, as a matter of fact, not only the Christology but also the Soteriology of the Apostle’s teaching is so closely interwoven with the Eschatology that, were the question put, which of the strands is more central, which more peripheral, eschatology would have as good a claim to the central place as the others. In reality, however, there is no alternative here; there is backward and forward movement in the order of thought in both directions.”⁹ For Vos, then, an interwoven reciprocity between Christology, soteriology, and eschatology is a fundamental mark of Paul’s theology that shapes the varied contents of his letters.

The second chapter provides an instructive instance of this reciprocity. Titled “The Interaction between Eschatology and Soteriology,” the thesis developed is that fundamental benefits of salvation presently experienced by

7. Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1979), 149.

8. Vos, 11 (emphasis added).

9. Vos, 28–29.

the believer in the application of salvation—namely, regeneration, justification, and the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification—are eschatological realities. These benefits, Vos shows in detail, are eschatologically grounded and are themselves eschatological anticipations presently realized.

These fundamental structures of Paul's theology can be validated and reinforced by briefly considering the much-mooted question whether his theology has a center. Despite the reservations of some about affirming that it does, the concept seems difficult to deny, particularly if the notion of a center is not maintained rigidly or too narrowly.

By a "center," I mean that in Paul's letters an overall set of issues and concerns are identifiable, in which some matters are plainly more important for him than others. Certainly, the teaching of Paul may be approached from a variety of perspectives, and it is valuable to do so, but each of his various concerns is not equally important or controlling. Recognizing this points to a circle of interests, in which each is more or less central or peripheral, with room for debate in some instances as to relative centrality.

Assuming, then, that in this sense Paul's theology has a center, what is it? What is the locus of his centering concerns, and more importantly, how do we go about identifying that center?

In answering this question, it seems that we proceed most safely and usefully by identifying passages in Paul that have a summarizing or synoptic function. Our interest, in other words, is in statements that express, more or less clearly, his core concerns.

Of a number of passages that could be cited in this regard (to limit ourselves here to just one), 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 is perhaps most helpful and forthcoming: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, [and] that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures."

Within the overall context of Paul's teaching, this statement prompts several observations: First, in the prepositional phrase, literally "among first things," "first" almost certainly has a qualitative, not a temporal, sense, and is rendered properly by most English translations "of first importance." So, Paul tells us explicitly, paramount concerns for him have their focus, their "center," in Christ's death and resurrection.

Further, in light of 1 Corinthians 15:1-2 ("Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you"), this center is in view as the center of Paul's gospel. That, in turn, prompts an even broader observation: In 15:1-11, Paul is reflecting on his ministry as a whole among the Corinthians

(as he did earlier in 1:18-3:23). In view, then, is not just a part or aspect of his proclamation but that preaching and teaching in its wholeness. The essence of Paul's theology, we may say, is his gospel; his is a "gospel-theology." Or, viewed in terms of expanding concentric circles, the center of Paul's theology is the gospel, and at the center of that gospel are the death and resurrection of Christ. The focus of the whole of his teaching, its gospel-center, is Christ's death and resurrection.

Second, the death and resurrection are not in view as bare, isolated, and uninterpreted facts. In that regard, two things are stipulated. For one, their occurrence is "in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3). That is, they have their significance as they involve fulfillment of the Old Testament, a fulfillment that, as the rest of chapter 15, for one, shows, is nothing less than eschatological.

Also, the death is said to be "for our sins." At the center of Paul's gospel-theology, Christ's death, together with his resurrection, as the fulfillment of Scripture, has its significance in relation to human ("our") sin and remediating its consequences. This points to their applicatory, *ordo salutis* significance. That *ordo* is rooted in and flows from the *historia* centered climactically in Christ's death and resurrection. Its center, as Paul makes clear elsewhere (Rom. 6:1-11; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 2:5-6; Col. 3:1-4), is union with Christ as crucified and resurrected with the saving benefits that flow from that union

This brings us to this baseline conclusion, following from this passage and reinforced by others that could be cited (Rom. 1:1-4; 1 Cor. 2:2; Gal. 6:14; 2 Tim. 2:8): At the center of Paul's theology, constituting that center as much as anything, are Christ's death and resurrection—or, more broadly, messianic suffering and glory, his humiliation and exaltation, in their Scripture-fulfilling, saving-from-sin eschatological significance. The center of Paul's theology is determined by the "triangulation" of his Christology, soteriology, and eschatology. This substantiates the observation of Vos, quoted above, concerning the centering reciprocity of these three factors for Paul's theology as a whole.

As we work through the letters of Paul, giving due attention to the distinctive emphases and particular concerns of each, as Dr. Robertson serves us so well in doing in this volume, a controlling constant throughout the letters is a common context. This is the context that has been created by and results from "the actual self-disclosure of God" in Christ, the context bracketed by his exaltation and return. This redemptive-historical context not only situates but is also determinative for the contents of every one of

the letters, from the first to the last. So already in the earliest, the Thessalonian Christians, who “turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,” did not do so in the abstract but, as in all the details of that service, they were waiting “for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:9–10). And finally, in the last of his letters, Paul, with the end of his ministry imminent, enjoins Timothy to “remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead” (2 Tim. 2:8), as they “wait” together with Titus and the church in Crete “for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

As Christ “has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself . . . , so Christ . . . will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Heb. 9:26, 28). This summation by the writer of Hebrews captures the Christ-centered redemptive-historical outlook that permeates Paul’s letters and is essential for giving them the enduring relevance, concrete and practical, they have for the church—for its worship, life, and mission.

Richard B. Gaffin Jr.
Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus
Westminster Theological Seminary

PREFACE

Reliving redemptive history will inevitably enrich the appreciation of the sovereign Lord's wondrous working that moves this universe toward the restoration of a corrupted creation's original perfections. In volume 1 of this series, the testimony of the four Gospels has progressed through the supernatural annunciations heralding the re-beginning of God's gracious work of redemptive intervention. Early prophetic fulfillments connected with the incarnation, the voice crying in the wilderness, the gradual unfolding of truth regarding the King with his kingdom, the murderous oppositions of a subtle Satan, the ransoming sacrifice of the Son of God, his resurrectional triumph over death and hell, his commissioning command, his promise of the Spirit, and his ascension to heaven represent the high points of an accomplished redemption. Four distinctive Gospels offer a unified as well as an individualized testimony to this revelational progression of redemptive history.

But what next?

Next come the ongoing redemptive realities that stretch beyond "all that Jesus *began* to do and teach" (Acts 1:1), as witnessed through the testimony of Acts, conjoined with the writings of Paul and the other New Testament authors. Fifty days after his crucifixion at Passover, the resurrected and ascended Christ's outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost inaugurates a new age clearly marked on the ongoing time clock of redemptive history.

Acts lays out the progression of redemptive revelation in perfect accordance with its own opening programmatic statement. According to the last recorded words of the resurrected Messiah in Acts 1:8, "You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem [Acts 1:8–8:1a]; in all Judea and Samaria [8:1b–12:25]; and to the uttermost parts of the world [13:1–28:31]."

The genius and distinctive contribution of biblical theology to the comprehension of Scripture reside in the concept of progression, of reliving the historical process of redemptive revelation. But are we now going to speak

of progression in Paul? How could it be? Was not Paul from the moment of his dramatic conversion the theologian *par excellence* of the new covenant era? Once he was called by the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ to be uniquely the Apostle to the Nations, did not the whole frame of his being resonate with profound comprehension of the knowledge of God in Christ?

Yes, we must speak of progression in Paul, which actually should not be surprising. Scripture says of Jesus that as a young person he “grew.” Our Lord not only grew in physical stature, but also grew “in wisdom . . . and favor with God and man” (Luke 2:52; cf. v. 40).

While in midstream of his ministerial life, Paul himself indicates that he has not yet arrived. He has not yet been made perfect, but he presses on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of him (Phil. 3:12). His whole being existed for one purpose: to know Christ, the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings (v. 10). As Paul progresses in his own personal knowledge of Christ, the truths that he transmits to others clearly reflect that progression. By paying close attention to the apostle’s own written, revelatory words, the modern reader may by God’s grace experience a similar expansion of the knowledge of Christ, whom to know is life itself.

Contemplating Paul, not according to theological categories but according to the progressive movement of redemptive history, will provide a stimulating freshness through experiencing his unique testimony to Jesus as the fulfilling Christ. This “progression” in Paul must never be viewed in terms of progressing according to a negatively critical perspective in which new “enlightenments” contradict Paul’s earlier perspectives or that groundlessly truncate his witness by cutting out whole chunks of his choicest compositions. Instead, Paul should be seen as a person whose comprehension of the Christ expands as the Spirit transforms the man himself “from glory to glory,” exactly as he himself describes the process of Christian maturing (2 Cor. 3:18).

In Paul’s writings, three distinctive phases accord with historical developments: (1) “Early Paul,” in which he writes while in the midst of his three missionary outreaches (Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians, Romans); (2) “Middle Paul,” in which he writes from his imprisonment in Rome after the conclusion of his three missionary journeys (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon); and (3) “Later Paul,” in which he writes to prepare the church regarding its ongoing faith and order in anticipation of the conclusion of the age of the apostles (Timothy, Titus).¹

1. For further elaboration on this threefold aspect of Paul’s writing ministry, see pages 73–77 below.

So now the framework is set for this critical phase in the progression of redemptive history. By reliving this process of God's revelation of redemptive truth, we may gain fresh insights even as older truths receive reinforcement. May the Lord through his Spirit enlighten our hearts with the knowledge of his Word in all the glory of its unity and diversity.

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Let me first express great appreciation for the patience and perfecting work of John Hughes and Karen Magnuson of P&R Publishing throughout the long process of editing this work. Their skill in word-crafting and their kindness in communication have repeatedly blessed me throughout the process.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
LXX	Septuagint
NAB	New American Bible
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NEB	New English Bible
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NKJV	New King James Version
par.	parallel Scripture accounts
RSV	Revised Standard Version
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith

PART 1

THE TESTIMONY OF ACTS

Progression in redemptive history clearly defines the major function of the book of Acts in its canonical role in the New Testament. The movement of history, after all, provides the framework for this book. Beginning with the final words of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, through the initial decades of Christianity's unprecedented spread across the broadest expanses of the known world, to the arrival of the one and only Apostle to the Nations at the capital city of the vast Roman Empire, the book of Acts traces the step-by-step expansion of the Christian gospel and the Christian church. But it is not merely territorial expansion that marks this period. It is the enlargement of the experience of redemption that requires repeated redefinition of the fuller meaning of "progression" in Acts. Whether you consider the consummating role of the Holy Spirit in Acts, or themes from Luke's Gospel expanded in Acts, or the defining moments of the speeches in Acts, or the crescendo of gospel expansion in Acts, progression in God's redeeming work characterizes each of these various aspects of the book of Acts.

Contemplate the wonder of redemptive-historical progression in Acts. Recapture for today the dynamism inherent in the unfolding of God's

outworking of his glorious redeeming purposes across the three decades covered in the book of Acts and at work even until today.¹ Consider:

1. The Inauguration of the Age of the Spirit
2. Themes from Luke's Gospel Expanded in the Book of Acts
3. Apostolic Preaching in Acts: A Formative Period in Earliest Christianity
4. The Historical Progression of Redemption Through the Book of Acts

1. Highly commended are two fairly recent works that are essentially in accord with the overall intent of the present work: Dennis E. Johnson, *The Message of Acts in the History of Redemption* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997); and Guy Prentiss Waters, *A Study Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Welwyn Garden City, England: EP Books, 2015). Johnson places the various messages of Acts solidly in the overall frame of biblical theology. Waters is unique in regularly introducing "Application" observations throughout his treatment. An older work that provides balanced exegetical treatment of Acts is Joseph Addison Alexander, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (1875; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956). Alexander represents the older school in producing substantial commentaries on both Old Testament and New Testament books: Psalms, Isaiah, Mark, and Acts.

THE INAUGURATION OF THE AGE OF THE SPIRIT

What now?

For forty days, almost a month and a half from the day of his resurrection, the Lord Jesus Christ kept making bodily appearances to different people in various circumstances. For forty days, “by decisive proofs,”¹ he gave visible testimony to the fact that he, the crucified Jesus, had been raised from the dead in body and spirit (Acts 1:3). To Mary Magdalene, and to the other women at the tomb. To ten of the apostles on the first day of the week in the locked upper room without Thomas. Then the very next Sunday with Thomas present so that he could explore for himself, as well as for us, all the telltale wounds in Jesus’ hands and side. Next personally, as a one-on-one encounter, to Peter and also to James, Jesus’ own brother, oldest natural-born son of Mary and Joseph. Then to over five hundred assembled brothers, quite possibly while they were worshiping on a first day of the week.

For the forty days after his Sunday resurrection until approximately a Thursday of the next month, the resurrected Jesus Christ continued to make personal appearances to “witnesses previously handpicked by God,” though not to all the people (Acts 10:41). Then at the end of the forty days, he led the disciples to the Mount of Olives, across the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem. There he pronounced his “Great Declaration”: “You *shall* be my witnesses” (1:8). And there they witnessed his “going up,” his ascension to heaven (vv. 9, 11).

1. David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 104n19: “The word *tekmerion* occurs only here in the NT. Luke could not have chosen a stronger term to convey the sense of proof beyond doubt.”

But what now?

Jesus said, “*Wait*” (Acts 1:4). But for how long? He did not specify. He just said, “*Wait* for the promise of the Father,” which was the baptism of the Holy Spirit (v. 5).

But would they ever see him again? Would he make any further appearances? They may have had some expectations. If he ascended on the fortieth day after Sunday’s resurrection, which most likely would have been on a Thursday in the middle of the week, then perhaps he would appear again when they gathered for worship on the next Sunday.

But no. The resurrected Christ did not appear that next Sunday as they worshiped together. He made no further appearances.

Then came *Pentecost*, the festival coming fifty days after Passover, celebrating the ingathering of the harvest, the perfect time for the fulfillment of God’s promise. All those years of symbolic harvesting now consummate far beyond anything the disciples could have expected. A new age in redemptive history begins.

A dramatic change occurs in the progress of redemptive history that distinguishes the period following the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost from the days of the earthly ministry of the incarnate Son of God. This new era may be appropriately designated “the age of the Spirit.”² A look at statistics in terms of references to the Holy Spirit in the Gospels when compared to references to the Holy Spirit in Acts will confirm this transition into a new epoch of redemptive history:

- Matthew: 12 references to the Holy Spirit
- Mark: 6 references to the Holy Spirit
- Luke: 17 references to the Holy Spirit
- John: 15 references to the Holy Spirit
- Acts: 54 references to the Holy Spirit

The book of Acts contains over three times more references to the Holy Spirit than any one of the four Gospels. But of course, more significant than the statistics is the role played by the Holy Spirit as depicted in Acts.³

2. “*The Gospel of the Holy Spirit*” was John Chrysostom’s apt description of Acts. Quoted in F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 61n3.

3. Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 1, *Introduction and 1:1–2:47* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 519–28, may be consulted for a thorough and insightful overview of the role of the Holy Spirit in Acts.

Indeed, some actions of the Spirit as described in the Gospels compare closely to the activity of the Spirit in Acts. Yet most dramatically as well as programmatically, the Spirit appears consistently “at every plot-stage” of the book.⁴ Note the developing role of the Holy Spirit in Acts as the history of redemption progresses throughout this new epoch.

The Coming of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–47)

The dramatic event of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit fulfills prophecy recorded long before Pentecost. Peter quotes the book of Joel:

In the last days it shall be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams;
even on my male servants and female servants
in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. (Acts
2:17–18 ESV)

The initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit fills all the assembled disciples with the Spirit, enabling them to joyfully declare the good news of the gospel in multiple foreign languages (Acts 2:4). Exalted to the right hand of God, the Son has received from the Father and then poured out the promised Holy Spirit (v. 33). By repenting, believing, and receiving baptism as the sign of the covenant, any person can receive this same gift of the Holy Spirit (v. 38). In the redemptive-historical moment of Pentecost, about 120 people, including men and women, young and old, receive this climactic gift from the Father (1:15; 2:1). At the conclusion of Peter’s proclamation, no fewer than three thousand people experience this transformational gift of God (2:41).

This outpouring of God the Holy Spirit was indeed a culminating event.⁵ From one perspective, it was an unrepeatable moment. Just as the death of Christ, his resurrection, and his ascension to heaven could occur only once,

4. Ju Hur, *A Dynamic Reading of the Holy Spirit in Luke-Acts*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement* 211 (2001), 274, as quoted in Keener, *Acts*, 1:524n209.

5. Note the repeated emphasis of Richard B. Gaffin Jr., *In the Fullness of Time: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Acts and Paul* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 120–21: “Pentecost . . . ought to receive its fundamental assessment as an epochal or climactic event in the history of redemption. . . . Pentecost always has to be considered . . . in terms of its pivotal place in the flow of redemptive history. . . . Unquestionably, Pentecost is the highpoint, the pivotal event of the entire apostolic history that Luke surveys in Acts.”

so this inaugural outpouring of the Holy Spirit would occur only once in the process of God's working redemption for his people. At the same time, this initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit anticipated the many "fillings" of the Spirit experienced by multiple people across the ages (cf. Eph. 5:18).

Further Manifestations of the Spirit in Jerusalem (Acts 3:1–8:1a)

Closely following the structure laid out in the opening commission of Acts 1:8, further manifestations of the Spirit multiply as the key factor in the advancement of this new messianic community of faith. Note these subsequent manifestations of the Spirit throughout Acts:

The original promise of "empowerment" in the initial commission of Acts 1:8 becomes an obvious reality through multiple instances of the "fullness of the Spirit" in the experience of the early believers. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter addresses the austere assembly of religious leaders with a boldness that amazes them (Acts 4:8, 13). After communal prayer, the place where the believers were meeting was shaken, and they were *all filled with the Holy Spirit* and spoke the Word of God with boldness (v. 31).

The fullness of the Spirit equips God's people for responsible tasks. When the moment comes for the establishment of the office of deacon, the believing community in Jerusalem is instructed to choose seven men from among them who are known to be *full of the Spirit* and wisdom (Acts 6:3). Based on this apostolic direction, their first choice was Stephen, a man "*full of faith and of the Holy Spirit*" (v. 5). Even this practical task of distributing funds in a way that would keep the peace among the brothers required the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. The testimony of Stephen, the first martyr among the early believers, further manifests the fullness of the Holy Spirit in the midst of adversity. His opponents "could not stand up against his wisdom or *the Spirit by whom he spoke*" (6:10; cf. 7:55).

The newly constituted people of God in Jerusalem learn very early that lying to and resisting the Holy Spirit brings serious consequences. The sin of Ananias and Sapphira was to allow Satan to fill their hearts so that they *lied to the Holy Spirit*, testing the Spirit of the Lord (Acts 5:3, 9). In a subsequent situation, Stephen's charge against the Israelites is that as a stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears, they were always setting themselves *in opposition to the Holy Spirit* (7:51).

At the same time, the coming of the Holy Spirit on the early believers becomes manifest first in Jerusalem as they *witness to the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus* as leader and Savior who graciously grants repentance

and forgiveness. These witnesses are never alone when they testify, since *the Holy Spirit witnesses along with them* (Acts 5:32). Otherwise, their testimony would never result in the changed hearts of their hearers.

So “in Jerusalem,” various manifestations indicate the dawning of the new age, the age of the Holy Spirit. Everything associated with the advancement of this new covenant era finds its empowerment located “in the Spirit.” Bold preaching of the Word, ability to declare God’s inerrant Word in previously unlearned foreign languages, healing of the lame, and caring for needy widows all occur as manifestations of the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit in Samaria and Surrounding Areas (Acts 8:1b–12:25)

At significant transition points in the extension of the gospel according to the Acts record of redemptive history, the coming of the Holy Spirit takes on increased prominence. Note the following:

Specific references attest to *the coming of the Spirit in Samaria*, just as the programmatic statement of Acts 1:8 anticipated. When Peter and John arrive, they pray for the converted Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit, for the Spirit had not yet come on any of them. They had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Peter and John place their hands on them, they receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15–17). A dramatic confrontation with Simon the magician clarifies the fact that God alone can actualize the baptism of the Spirit. Peter vigorously rebukes Simon for attempting to “buy” the Holy Spirit (vv. 18–21).

At this stage in the advancement of the gospel, the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria is strengthened and comforted *by the Holy Spirit*, while enjoying the blessings of peace. As a consequence, the church multiplies (Acts 9:31).

The Spirit provides guidance to Christ’s servants as their various ministries expand into areas surrounding Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria:

- To North Africa: An angel of the Lord commissions Philip to head to the desert road that goes from Jerusalem to Gaza. The *Spirit then directs Philip*, “Go, join that chariot.” With the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, the gospel travels for the first time to North Africa (Acts 8:26–29, 39).
- To Caesarea: The *Spirit of the Lord transports Philip* to Azotus, and from there he preaches the gospel in all the nearby towns until he arrives at Caesarea (8:39–40).

- To Damascus of Syria: A special *filling of the Spirit* accompanies Paul's commissioning. Ananias places his hands on Saul, indicating that he had been sent specifically by Jesus so that Paul could see again and be *filled with the Holy Spirit* (9:17). Immediately in the various synagogues of Damascus, Paul preaches that Jesus is the Son of God (vv. 19–20).
- In Caesarea once more: The *Spirit comes dramatically* in Caesarea on an uncircumcised Roman centurion along with his family and friends as representatives of all nations of the world (10:44–45). Since they had experienced the actual baptism of the Spirit, how could anyone refuse them the more symbolic baptism of water (v. 47)? This redemptive-historical event has such significance that Acts repeats Peter's reporting of this scenario on two subsequent occasions. In response to criticism of the "circumcision party" in Jerusalem (11:2–18), Peter's report introduces a key phrase. *The Spirit fell on these peoples descended from other ethnic communities "exactly as [he had fallen] on us at the beginning"* (v. 15). Peter subsequently offers the identical testimony at the first "general assembly" of the church in Jerusalem: "The heart-knowing God bore witness concerning them *by giving the Holy Spirit just exactly as he did to us*" (15:8).
- At this critical moment, redemptive history crosses the chasm separating Israelites from the nations. Though it will take several steps to complete this transition, the door has been flung open to the "farthest extremity of the earth" (1:8). From this moment of God's taking the initiative in the *outpouring of his Holy Spirit* on people representing the various nations of the world, there can be no turning back. Note well that it is God's initiative in giving his Spirit to other peoples of the world that clearly marks the transition.
- To Antioch of Syria: Men of Cyprus and Cyrene come to Antioch and break new ground by preaching to Greeks, identified as Hellenists (11:19–20). Hearing of the great number who believed, the church of Jerusalem commissions Barnabas, who was also from Cyprus. He was a good man, "*full of the Holy Spirit and faith*" (11:20–24; cf. 4:36–37). By his particular ministry, a "significant crowd" is brought to the Lord (11:24c). Having then traveled to Tarsus in search of Paul, he brings him back to Antioch, where the two of them instruct a number of disciples for a full year (vv. 25–26). In Antioch the disciples are first called "Christians," appropriate in view of the multiethnic character of the church's membership (v. 26c).

The far-reaching significance of this “new name” for God’s chosen and redeemed people must be fully appreciated. Only time and the worldwide expansion of Christianity will make its full import evident. Not “Judeans” or “Israelites” but “Christians” is the only appropriate term capable of equally embracing believers descended from Abraham as well as believers coming from all the other varied, multitudinous nations of the world. By the undeniable working of the Holy Spirit, all these different peoples become the redeemed community of God’s people.

In this second major phase of the expansion of Christianity, it is the Holy Spirit who causes the number of disciples to expand rapidly in every direction: in Samaria to the near north of Jerusalem, to Ethiopia in the south, to Caesarea in the west, and to Damascus and Antioch of Syria in the east and the farther northeast. This spectacular expansion to all the areas surrounding Jerusalem must receive appropriate recognition. Yet to properly grasp the significance of this crucial phase in redemptive history, one should note well the presence and work of the Holy Spirit in every advancement. The Christian faith advances only because of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers.

In your particular ministry, whatever it might be, you must rely totally on the work of the Holy Spirit sent by the resurrected and reigning Lord Jesus Christ. Otherwise, your ministry cannot prosper as it could and should.

To the Extremity of the Earth (Acts 13–28)

The Holy Spirit is the moving force who launches the great missionary endeavor across Asia and Europe that focuses on Paul’s three missionary outreaches, along with his government-sponsored trip to Rome. While the church in Antioch of Syria was worshipping the Lord and fasting, *the Holy Spirit said*, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” The two of them, “sent on their way *by the Holy Spirit*,” sailed for Cyprus (Acts 13:2, 4). Though the church of Antioch is fully involved in this ministry, more specifically it is the Holy Spirit who both commissions and accompanies these two men in their first missionary outreach. In Cyprus, Paul is *filled with the Holy Spirit* as he invokes a curse of blindness on Elymas the opposing magician, describing him as being “*full of all deceit and recklessness, a son of the devil*” (vv. 9–10), in starkest contrast with true believers, who are filled with the Spirit. Despite stern opposition to the believers’ early presentations of the gospel in Antioch of Pisidia in Asia, the *fullness of the Spirit* produces its special fruit of joy in them (v. 52). Throughout the serious debates at the first general assembly

of the church in Jerusalem, *the Holy Spirit* guides the church in its epoch-making ecclesiastical decisions. The communication to all the churches by this ecclesiastical assembly affirms that “it seemed best *to the Holy Spirit* and to us” not to burden the church beyond certain specifics related to this critical matter of happily receiving peoples from all nations into the community of the church (15:28). Quite remarkably, the conclusions of this ecclesiastical body are perceived as utterances of God’s Holy Spirit.

In Paul’s subsequent missionary outreaches, the Holy Spirit continues to maintain control. During his second missionary journey, Paul and his companions travel throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been *kept by the Holy Spirit* from preaching the Word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but *the Spirit of Jesus* would not allow them (Acts 16:6–7). Even closed doors in missionary efforts are attributed to the work of the Spirit.

When Paul arrives in Ephesus on his third missionary journey, he asks the believers, “Did you receive the *Holy Spirit* when you believed?” They respond to him: “By no means. We have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit” (Acts 19:2). It is not likely that the disciples have no understanding that a Holy Spirit exists. Instead, they are expressing total unawareness regarding the focal role of the Holy Spirit in this new epoch of redemptive history. When Paul places his hands on them, *the Holy Spirit* comes on them, and they begin speaking in other languages and prophesying (v. 6). As will be discussed later, this “coming” of the Holy Spirit in Ephesus represents the final phase of a programmatic picture regarding the coming of the Holy Spirit that follows the exact scheme laid out in Acts 1:8: first in Jerusalem (2:4), then in Samaria (8:17), and finally to the uttermost parts of the earth, represented by Ephesus of Asia (19:6). In this manner, the pattern depicted in Acts 1:8 receives deliberate fulfillment in the redemptive-historical process of the book of Acts.

After completing his third missionary outreach that had taken him as far as Corinth in Europe, the apostle offers further testimony to the Ephesian elders concerning the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, both in his life and ministry and in the shepherding responsibility of themselves in Ephesus. Paul is *compelled by the Spirit* to go to Jerusalem, not knowing the specifics of his future. At the same time, he knows that “in every city *the Holy Spirit warns me* that prison and hardships are facing me” (Acts 20:22–23). He bases his admonition to the elders of Ephesus on the fact that *the Holy Spirit* has made them overseers. As a consequence, they must not fail to keep watch over themselves as well as all the flock, consisting of the church of

God that Christ bought with his blood (v. 28). A final word regarding the Spirit in Acts finds him being the instrument warning Paul of the dangers that await him. *Through the Spirit*, the disciples urge Paul not to go on to Jerusalem (21:4).

After this final reference to the Spirit in Acts, nothing further is said of his role in the life of the apostle. Through riots, arrests, life-threatening circumstances, appearances before Roman and Israelite courts, perilous journeys at sea, and lengthy imprisonments, nothing more is said of the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of Paul as recorded in Acts. Why is that?

It may well be that the author of Acts is preparing the future church for the kind of life that its missionaries will be required to live: by faith, and by faith alone. Though the Spirit will be present and constantly strengthening and supporting, he will not be directing his servants quite as dramatically as in the earliest days of the establishment of the new covenant people of God. The Spirit will always be with his people, but not with as many external evidences as in the earliest days of the birth of the church.

Summary

By these multiple references to the work of the Holy Spirit through these three basic phases in Acts, this critical era of redemptive history receives its defining focus. At every moment of the advancement of the gospel, the role of the Holy Spirit manifests his prominence. By prophetic predictions, through the emboldening of the apostles, through the transition from an Israelite gospel to a world-embracing gospel, the Spirit displays his power in sustaining his witnesses to the truth of the gospel.

How should you respond? Trust that the Holy Spirit will be with you in all your efforts, large and small, to extend the gospel to next-door secularists as well as to distant nations. Rely on the Spirit in you to encourage you, to even press you, to empower you, to be a witness for Christ. Find your comfort in the Comforter whenever your challenges seem too great. For he is indeed with you.