

Theological Characteristics of Acts & Flow of Thought

In this lecture we will look at something that I call the “flow of thought.” This may look like a summary survey of the content of Acts chapters one through nine. But actually, flow of thought is a little different than just summarizing the content because you could do that yourself very easily. Flow of thought is an exercise of acting a little dumb and talking to yourself—reading through the text and saying, “Why is the description of Pentecost, of the outpouring of the Spirit, here? Why does this speech fit here? Why is it being said in this way here?” You are challenging yourself to explain everything that is happening in the text, and I think the results of this sort of exercise are amazing.

When you read through Acts in this way, you discover what you do not understand. You realize what you usually simply gloss over, saying, “Sure, that is normal. Pentecost in Acts two, everybody knows about that,” and continue reading. But when you do that you have not really answered the question of “Why?” How does the speech in Acts three relate to the healing of the lame person? If you attempt to give an explanation to somebody who may not know anything about that, you will actually teach yourself. I would recommend that if you teach a bible study, preach, counsel, or whatever you do with a scriptural text, that you go through the flow-of-thought exercise. For instance, if you are reading Colossians or Philippians, you should look through the text and explain to yourself why *this* follows *that*.

The Book of Romans is a special case because it is such a well-built argument. I have been told that it has been used by lawyers because it is such a stringent legal argument. One point builds on the next very systematically. You can explain the flow of thought more easily, but even so you are greatly challenged to give an account and an explanation as to why this part is added here and that part is added there. You are not criticizing the text; you are simply explaining how it hangs together. It is an exercise in which you are trying to find out how much you really understand the text rather than just flippantly reading over it, which I find myself doing. I sometimes switch between reading German or English Bibles because of the surprise effect of slightly different sounds that catch my ear—this causes me to listen again. Whatever we can do to really observe and listen to the text is good, and this is one of the exercises that I believe is helpful.

I will try to present to you the flow of thought for Acts chapters one through nine, but I am only doing it in small chunks. I cannot do the whole thing, going verse by verse or sentence by sentence. I am going chunk by chunk, and even so I will only suggest here and there how that explanation would work. But I think it is a discipline of self-explanation; if you can explain the flow of thought as you have broken it down, then I think you have better understood how the message hangs together.

If I had to summarize the flow of thought all the way through Chapter 28, I would put “internal growth and tension, external growth and opposition” down as the “extract” of the flow of thought. This is happening over and over again; you see this variation between internal growth and tension and external growth and opposition. When I say “internal growth,” I mean maturing in Christ. What does it mean to live out a Christian life with the given challenges? Tension means that there are difficulties arising in this process that obstruct living. We find that in Acts six, for instance. By “external growth” I mean numeric growth, new converts being added. External opposition, we will find out rather soon, refers to the reality that, where God's work moves forward, there is opposition—in the same way that darkness is always opposing the light. We can count on this opposition, both spiritually and also in terms of world powers. So there is this sense that where there is external growth, there is also opposition.

I will begin with Acts chapter one. What I have said in the second lecture of this series would be a good introduction to a flow-of-thought explanation. What is happening here is a long awaited event. The coming of the Spirit of God upon those who have been called by Christ to be disciples, to be drawn into the salvation process out of the glory/misery dilemma (that I have described in the previous lecture), is a long awaited occurrence. The promise of the Spirit is a culmination point where God comes close to the people that He is calling back to Himself. The Spirit of God is a seal of familiarity, closeness, and intimacy. But perhaps even before all of those things, He is a seal of purity. Theologically, the atonement of Christ, the death of Christ that took away the sin that separates man from God, is a necessary condition for this intimate fellowship with the Holy Spirit.

I am not saying that the Holy Spirit did not dwell on people in the Old Testament or that the Spirit of God did not formerly work in the hearts of people. All I am positively affirming is that there is an indiscriminate, intimate dwelling of the Spirit that is deep, lasting, and powerful being described here. I do not mean to be speaking about the experience of Old Testament Christians; I would rather like to leave that for Old Testament scholars to describe in more detail. But I want to affirm that the Spirit of God in Acts one is anticipated and in Acts two is actually resting indiscriminately on rich and poor and on man and woman, regardless of their ethnicity.

There is the commonality of receiving the seal of God's blessing, presence, and purity, and it is powerful. That sets the stage for a commonality before God and obviously this echoes John the Baptist, who said, "Someone is coming and He will baptize you with the Spirit." So what is announced in the beginning of Luke chapter two is echoed now in chapter one of Acts. Jesus repeats John the Baptist's sermon and says, "Wait in Jerusalem, anticipate this." So the promise of the Spirit in chapter one of Acts is really the fruit of Jesus' work. He can present a first group to God, purified in His Blood, to receive the seal of the Spirit of God and all that goes with that—power for witness, power for overcoming sin, power for victory. Chapter one of Acts prepares for chapter two, which connects with the proclamation and the work of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke.

There is a promise and fulfillment pattern all through Luke and Acts. In some ways, what John says in the beginning of Luke is a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy that the Spirit of God would rest indiscriminately upon His people. Acts one repeats that promise and Acts two actually demonstrates and describes the fulfillment of the promise; so you have various types of promise and fulfillment patterns in Luke and Acts. These patterns converge very strongly on chapter two as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. Now, something unusual and phenomenal happens in Chapter two. The Spirit of God rested on this first fruit of the messianic, covenant people. When Peter stood up, he had a big job in his first speech—to link Old Testament prophecy with the event that was happening and to describe how Jesus figured into all of this. You could, for the sake of argument, leave out Jesus and simply say, "What you now see is the fulfillment of what you know from Joel: God has poured out His Spirit." How does Jesus figure into this whole equation? I have given you a little theological reflection already, having told you that the purity that Jesus provides is a condition for that lovely seal of the presence of the Spirit. But if you ignore that theological insight, what is the connection between Jesus and this phenomenon in Acts two, this fulfillment of Joel? This is what is being explained in the first Petrine speech in Jerusalem in Acts two.

Acts 2:33 describes Jesus as the agent of the Spirit. "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, [Jesus] has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing." That is amazing. It is not the Father who has poured out the Spirit, but it is actually the Son. The Son is the author, communicator, and mediator of the outpouring of the Spirit. All throughout scripture Jesus, as the Son of God within the Godhead, communicates, mediates,

and brings over—in the atonement, the creation, the redemption, and the outpouring of the Spirit. Wherever there is communication and mediation, the Son is active. It is a significant purpose of the Son within the Trinity to communicate, to mediate, to bring across. Thus it is quite within the “work assignments” of the Godhead that it would be the Son who has the privilege of pouring out the Spirit upon those He has called, those He has worked with: His disciples.

Acts continues to show what Jesus does. There is a reference to this in Acts 1:1: “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach. . .” With the implied continuity, “And now I am telling you how He is continuing it.” So actually the pneumatology, the teaching on the work of the Holy Spirit, in Acts is originating in the ministry of the exalted Jesus. He is the originator; He is the communicator. He is the one who pours this out. There is a continuous, caring work of the Lord with His disciples—now equipping them for ministry in His absence by the presence of the Spirit. It is wonderful how there is an orchestration of the Godhead working together to bring about salvation: The Father in His will, His purpose; the Son in His willingness to die, to communicate, and to bring; the Spirit in His willingness to fill and to live within in order to bring about that purpose of salvation that is intended for centuries.

Also, the outpouring of the Spirit is described in Acts chapter two as an end-time event, an event that happens in the end of times. Quite clearly, if you read Joel the way Peter preaches about Joel, this is a fact that is scripturally attested to. Many people tell me that for about the last year, we have begun to live in the end-times. Well, that sounds well and good, except that if you read books on the history of the interpretation of Revelation, you will notice that for the last 2,000 years people have honestly, seriously, and sincerely believed that that year, that decade, that time slot in which they lived, because of traumatic experiences that were seen and heard and felt, was definitely the end time. So I would say, biblically, ever since the resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Spirit, we have been living in the end times.

I would also suggest to you that many of us are conditioned by a Greco-Roman understanding of time. We think in time schedules, time lines, and time sequences. I believe the biblical understanding is in event sequences, rather than time sequences. Time is a factor; it is part of God's wonderful creation. But it is the fifth wheel on the wagon and not the first one. Thus the preaching in Acts two and three, when we see the development of that thought borne out, is “Watch it! We are in the end times.” God has moved massively forward in all the deeds that He has intended to bring about for salvation; with the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ we have come close to the final stage of what God is doing to bring a people unto Himself. With the outpouring of the Spirit of God we have moved massively forward. However many years that took, that is not the significant thing. The event sequence is so massive that we are in a renewed sense of urgency. Some people have misread, understanding that the early church did not want to plant any trees anymore and anticipated within weeks, months, or years at the most, the speedy return of Christ and the end of all things known to man. I am not so sure. I hope you are familiar with the passage in 2 Peter where he says, “With the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” There is a sense of relativizing, but we already see in Acts that there is much more concern about the deeds of God and less concern about time. We will pick up this theme when we look at 1 and 2 Thessalonians because I believe there are some elements in the Thessalonian church that are caught up in a Greco-Roman sense of time. They calculate years and they say, “Jesus will return any time now!” The lazy ones among them say, “That sounds great to me—no more work. Let's sit back; it will happen any time.” “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat,” Paul says in a very simple and rather direct way.

So we see here the Spirit's outpouring as a sign, as an inauguration of the end times. Then in chapter two there is this whole explanation of how Jesus is linked to this event. We also see in chapter two that the outpouring of the Spirit leads to a call to repentance. The call to repentance seems like a new evangelistic invention of Peter unless you know that the main "red thread" of prophetic preaching all throughout the ages has always been repentance speech. Repentance speech meaning not, "Please come and believe in God," but, "You stubborn people, God loves you. He has called you to be His own, turn back to Him." That is the pattern of prophetic repentance speech in the Old Testament— in Nehemiah chapter nine and throughout. It is an amazing, long history of repentance calls and so Peter is preaching like an Old Testament repentance preacher when he says this. Even if the Israelites had forgotten all the good deeds of God throughout the ages, God had so massively worked in the recent months and years in their midst. He had moved his purposes forward so amazingly that it penetrated their hearts. They said to Peter, "What shall we do?" That is the context of this speech. It is the context of a repentance speech to the Jews, the people who call themselves godly people, who call on the name of the Lord, who worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. "Come back, return." God has provided salvation, the opportunity to return and be involved with Him intimately and personally. The fruit of that repentance call is fellowship, and that is the line of the argument of chapter two of Acts.

This speech in Acts two is an explanation of how Jesus figures into the outpouring of the Spirit, a call to repentance (like a repentance preacher of old), and the issue is the fruit and the consequence of fellowship. There is a re-congregation, a fellowship that has to be painfully expanded to include Gentiles. At this point here in chapter two it is still a Jewish phenomenon, albeit including Hellenistic Jews and Palestinian Jews, those who speak Hebrew or Aramaic and those who speak Greek, those who have been out in the Hellenistic world (the Diaspora Jews) and those who have been more closeted in Palestine. But it is still a Jewish phenomenon at this point. A restoration of covenantal fellowship is the conclusion of chapter two. The age-old desire that God would be their God and that they would be His people is encapsulated in a wonderful way in Chapter two. It is amazing how the long lines, the long shadows of God's anticipation, are brought to bear here on chapter two.

Chapter three then moves on and shows how the Spirit of God acts in specific ways. Here the healing of the lame, crippled beggar is described. Following this example of God's intervention and refreshment, this moment of refreshment and mercy is the second Petrine speech in which more of Jesus' deeds are explained. More of Jesus' functions are explained within the total continuum of God's work, namely, faith in Christ. The word "faith" in Acts 3:16 is, in an unusual way, used here to mean "trusting," "believing," "coming close to." What is so touching in Chapter three, in this development of the thought in Acts, is that Peter goes to great lengths to show that what he is preaching is nothing different than, nothing separate from, the God they worship. It is amazing how careful Peter is to say, "This Jesus, who has poured out the Spirit, who has touched this lame man, is authenticated and vindicated by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." That is so significant in the chapter three sermon— the second Petrine speech. It is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who stands behind the testimony and the witness concerning the great deeds of Jesus.

Let us contrast this briefly with Islam. I have had occasion to briefly study Islam and it is fascinating to see that Muhammad claims to build on the shoulders of Judaism and Christianity. This claim is made, but when you look at actual indicators of continuity from the Old Testament and the New Testament to Muhammad, there is no continuity. There is no anticipation. The only claim that you *might* see as transferring is the claim that Muhammad is the Paraclete: The comforter, adviser, and helper. But in Acts two we see that the Paraclete has already come, for the Paraclete is the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. One author, having studied Islam extensively, says, "It is an amazing phenomenon that the founder of Islam, who claims to build on the shoulders of Judaism and Christianity, has never himself

shown that connection or let his followers explore that connection of actually continuing in the lines of Judaism and Christianity.” It is amazing how disjointed that claim actually is when you look at it. Absolutely contrary to that is the testimony of the Gospels and Acts that shows how the events of Pentecost are so deeply embedded in the very heart-center of Judaism: The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Peter and the other disciples are not preaching some new god from the Hellenistic world. Their preaching is right in the center of monotheism, right in the center of Jerusalem, right where God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, shows faithfulness to His people. His servant has been verified—the leader of life, the prince of life, has been killed, but it was the purpose of God to verify? Him.

Chapter three further explains the crucial role that Jesus plays in God's salvation work. The life and work of Jesus is not disjointed from the belief of Israel, but completely connected. A painful process begins to happen in the hearts of the Jews. “If I want to continue to worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and if He truly stands behind this Jesus and I reject this Jesus, then I am actually rejecting the God that I worship.” Everything hinges on the truth of that verification of Jesus from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If that is not true, I can easily accuse Jesus of blasphemy. I can persecute the Christians as blasphemous, as Saul did; I can force them to blaspheme Jesus to come back to the Jewish fold. That all follows if it is true that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob verified His son, His servant. I must watch whom I am fighting against. That is the point that is brought a little deeper in chapter three. It was already announced in chapter two as this early group of witnesses testified to a predominantly Jewish audience.

Chapter four shows us that this testimony we have heard of in chapter three leads to opposition. Chapter four is our first indication that Peter and John are called to give an account before the Sanhedrin concerning their healing of the lame person. There is a pattern inaugurated here that is followed through the rest of Acts: Opposition, questioning, and persecution—attempts to silence the disciples—follow times of growth for the church. We will soon look at who the characters of that persecution are.

Fellowship is a wonderful haven of refreshment at the end of chapter four, which concludes this description. There is external persecution and internal fellowship and encouragement. I find it very moving that Christians in great need are so concerned about the simple fellowship of intercessory prayer for them. I have just yesterday heard that about our brothers and sisters in Sudan as well; they do not desire the financial and political support as much as the fellowship concern for their oppression and external opposition. How beautiful to be bound together and to live out that fellowship of closeness. Here this closeness is described in a wonderful way as an internal strengthening.

Chapter five shows internal tension. Some of the sections of these chapters touch upon different stories as examples of what was happening in the church, and chapter five has this horrendous and troubling story of Ananias and Sapphira. It shows their dishonesty, not that they were bound to sell everything, but that they were dishonest about giving all their gain to the church. They reaped what they sowed. This is a clear word of warning, for they died on the spot. This is not repeated in Acts, so I want to tread carefully here. But certainly it does show, in this instance, that where association with the Spirit of God is testified to and lived out, you cannot live as a hypocrite. There is a movement of the Spirit of God to make things clear. What is believed inside must be lived out; what is lived out must be a reality inside.

We all have to admit that it is a process and that is why I find this passage hard; there is no second chance. I have to admit to still struggling with being real and transparent, with being fully identical, as some people say, in what I appear to be and what I truly am. I find that to be a process of sanctification, and I am very thankful for the mercy and grace of God that I get to stumble along and slowly come to

the beauty of being identical, of having that clarity. So I find this a very stark warning here. But I have to be careful in terms of interpreting this particular event.

In Acts 5:17 we also see an example of external opposition. The main word in this verse is “jealousy.” This is the first time in Acts that we see that word, and I want to make a few comments about it. I do not believe that “jealousy” is being used here simply to mean a superficial feeling of, “They are successful; we will go against them.” I want to briefly give you the background understanding of the Jewish situation. For centuries, they had worked to present the truth of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the applicability of the Mosaic Law, to Gentile people. They had been striving to present Gentiles with the truth and the Synagogue work had grown slowly and painfully. There were some proselytized Gentiles—Gentiles who had come in to the Jewish faith. And now this flimsy new group of Christians comes by, sweeps across and gathers many, particularly the proselytized converts and the Hellenistic Jews, into their movement. Thousands have become believers, many of them recent converts to Judaism. We could compare it to having worked as a church through personal evangelization for twenty years and having this little fellowship of 25 people worshipping together. Then one day an Islamic group comes and converts all the people you have worked so hard to bring into your church. I think that is a little like the situation of the Jews as they understood it. I believe that is part of their jealousy. It is deeper, it is more painful. It is a confounded sense of, “Have we not served God all our lives, and here comes this movement.” But it is the purpose of God to move these people from jealousy to surrender, and to bring this fellowship together. I am not excusing their jealousy, but I want to give you a little sympathy before we judge them too quickly.

In chapter six, there is quite an interesting internal tension between Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews, the Jewish Christians. It is still an internal Jewish tension, but it is amazing how the little problems arise. There is one group that is a little better than the other. The Palestinian Jews consider themselves to be a little better than the Diaspora Jews, and so the widows of the Diaspora Jews are overlooked. There is sociological discrepancy, and it creeps in and threatens the life of the church. It has to be dealt with, so there is an internal tension that arises as this Gospel brings people together. Sometimes you avoid problems by staying apart, but the Gospel calls you together and then you suddenly have a problem, and you have to deal with that. It appears that tension is one outgrowth of being called together as a fellowship. Thus the brand new church has to deal with the problem of the societal difference between Palestinian and Diaspora Jews.

Chapter seven, Steven's speech, is an amazing presentation that shows those who oppose the Gospel have not just recently arisen; there is a long history of opposition to God's purposes. There is the salvation historical line and there is a rebellion historical line, and the question is, “Which side are you on? Are you following in the train of the salvation historical work of God, or are you associating with the rebellion historical line that has gone on as long as the fall of Adam and Eve?”

Chapter eight then shows a scattering of the believers. This is an amazing chapter when you look at the phenomenon of opposition advancing growth. Is not that a paradox? Opposition gives rise to growth, persecution gives rise to blessing. That does not make sense at all. Why would God not protect a young, gifted man like Stephen? Why would He not keep His protective hands on those young Christians in Jerusalem? Why does He allow their opponents to persecute them? We do not understand fully, but we do know that the scattering brought an enormous evangelistic expansion and actually lead to the spread of the Gospel into Gentile territory. As a result of this scattering, Antioch became the second most important base of early Christianity after Jerusalem. The flow of thought in Chapter eight then turns to descriptions of north and south. The references of the early church have spread and you see how that is being illustrated here in chapter eight, how this gathering is moving about. Scattering leads to blessing

and the chief opposition leader crosses the line. Now that is odd. God blurs the line. He shakes up the lines that are drawn and you do not know what is happening except that the power of this Gospel knows no limits. It cuts across all boundaries, and so the chief opponent—Saul—crosses the line and becomes the chief fighter for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I have skipped much and I am aware of that, as you may be too, but this is part of the work of explaining the flow of thought, and I appreciate your careful listening.