

Book Review

Reading Luke-Acts in the Pentecostal Tradition

Martin William Mittelstadt

(Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2010) 216 pages

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Since their inception, Pentecostals have found themselves drawn to Luke-Acts to understand, explain, and defend their experience. From Azusa Street's proclamation heralding a revival "like that recorded in the Book of Acts," to the African Assemblies of God 2010 Decade theme of "Empowered as Witnesses—Acts 1:8,"¹ the Lukan perspective has held a privileged position. Of course, historians have written voluminously on the development of Pentecostal belief and practice, but they have not focused on Pentecostal engagement with Luke-Acts in particular. By the same token, biblical scholars have produced thoroughgoing surveys of the literature on Luke-Acts, but due to either ignorance or limitations in scope, Pentecostal contributors have received little attention. But now, Martin William Mittelstadt, who teaches courses in both New Testament literature and Pentecostal theology and history at Evangel University, has married these interests as he guides readers through the last century to highlight the unique contributions of Pentecostals and Charismatics to Luke-Acts research.

As he surveys the literature, Mittelstadt suggests four stages in the development of Pentecostal inquiry into the Lukan texts. First comes the initial seventy years of the movement which Mittelstadt dubs "the pre-critical era." During this period, Pentecostals

have very little engagement with the larger academic world, but they find in Acts a standard for establishing belief and practice, resolving doctrinal controversy, and ensuring the preservation of the faith.

In the second stage, Pentecostals begin to interact in the larger academic arena as they react to the publication of James Dunn's *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*.² Mittelstadt cautions readers against underestimating the significance of Dunn's 1970 work and his conclusion that Spirit baptism represents an initiatory experience. Although they generally take a defensive posture during the 1970s and 1980s, Pentecostal scholars respond to Dunn by emphasizing Luke as a distinctive theologian who presents Spirit baptism as divine empowerment in contrast to Paul's accentuation of the Spirit's conversion role.

The debate with Dunn gives rise to Mittelstadt's third stage as academicians move beyond Spirit baptism to research other Pentecostal concerns during the final years of the twentieth century. Emboldened by the rise of narrative criticism, Pentecostals cull Luke-Acts to present their insights to the larger academy in areas such as missions, healing, spiritual formation, and Oneness theology.

In his fourth stage, Mittelstadt posits that Pentecostal scholarship moves beyond its traditional pursuits in order to engage the

broader world. As they enter the twenty-first century, Pentecostals return to Luke-Acts to address topics including social justice, pacifism, suffering, ecumenism, globalization, and postmodernism.

Mittelstadt's approach is not without its drawbacks. As he acknowledges, categorization presents its own set of problems. For one, Pentecostal research does not fall into stages as neatly as Mittelstadt's phases would make readers think. Even in the current milieu, some Pentecostal "scholarship" suggests a pre-critical stage; others still respond to Dunn's concerns. Moreover, authorial bias inevitability guides the categories included. For example, readers familiar with Mittelstadt's work will not find themselves surprised that he devotes sections to peace and persecution. The reading sometimes provides a challenge as the text moves quickly from one scholar to the next, but avoiding such a criticism would prove difficult in a survey of this magnitude. Finally, Mittelstadt could have dedicated more attention to I. Howard Marshall's influence upon the Spirit baptism debate. While he correctly identifies Dunn's thesis as a turning point, Marshall's contention that Luke is *both* historian *and* theologian provides the foundation for Pentecostal rebuttal of Dunn.³

With these small quibbles aside, however, Mittelstadt's work provides a valuable addition to both Pentecostal and Luke-Acts research. Mittelstadt introduces the reader to a wide array of Pentecostal Lukan literature. He succinctly appraises not only books and monographs, but also journals, conference papers, and *festschriften*. The trajectories he utilizes to guide the various stages of development help keep the larger picture in view. The organization and structure help as the book's chapters coincide with

Mittelstadt's four stages and include numbered section headings.

In delineating what Pentecostals have already written, the author plots the way forward for future Lukan inquiry. In vintage Pentecostal fashion, Mittelstadt takes the opportunity to challenge readers pastorally. As just one example, he concludes his discussion on women by suggesting, "The cumulative effect of these writers should compel Pentecostal scholars and practitioners to adhere to Luke's desire for general and specific ministerial enablement of women."⁴ Like the researchers he analyzes, Mittelstadt implies that Luke-Acts provides a model for how Pentecostals should live today.

In light of these strengths, several types of readers will benefit from Mittelstadt's work. Because of the book's structure, pastors could find an accessible introduction to what Pentecostal scholars have written on a particular topic. Luke-Acts researchers, both inside and outside the Pentecostal tradition, will discover a launching pad for their explorations. Apart from the text itself, the 35-page bibliography, organized to correspond to the book's sections, offers an invaluable resource. Likewise, the book would serve well as a supplemental text in both undergraduate and graduate courses on Luke-Acts.

Despite the plethora of current material on Luke-Acts, Pentecostal scholars will undoubtedly continue to delve into these biblical texts. Not only do untapped possibilities exist, but, as Mittelstadt notes, Pentecostals have not yet written the final word on the topics he explicates. Readers can only hope that, as Luke-Acts scholarship multiplies, Mittelstadt will continue to guide them through future revisions of *Reading Luke-Acts in the Pentecostal Tradition*.

¹“Pentecost Has Come,” *The Apostolic Faith*, September 1906, 1; “10 Million Spirit Empowered Witnesses,” Decade of Pentecost, <http://decadeofpentecost.org/> (accessed May 28, 2010).

²James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today* (London: SCM Press, 1970).

³I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1970). For an example of Marshall’s influence, see Roger Stronstad, *The Charismatic Theology of St. Luke* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984), 1-12. Also note that Marshall served as Robert P. Menzies’s doctoral advisor. In fairness, Mittelstadt does give brief mention of Marshall and his influence on Pentecostals in a footnote on page 8.

⁴Mittelstadt, 106.