

A Night at the Burlesque: Wanderings Through the Pentecost Narrative

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Preachers, who are among the major consumers of biblical commentaries, are well aware that all commentaries are not created equal. Those who have consulted the volumes in the prestigious *Hermeneia* series have become accustomed to finding in them a solid, cautious, well-researched, brand of biblical scholarship. In the lineup of biblical commentary series, *Hermeneia* bats clean-up, and those who have produced this series have hewed with care to the biblical text, buttressing their precise analyses with streams of footnotes in multiple languages. Let others experiment with novelty or flirt with “sermon suggestions” and other homiletical ploys, but not the *Hermeneia* crowd. Let others provide ornament and gingerbread; the *Hermeneia* writers are into structural steel.

All of which makes it something of a surprise when Hans Conzelmann, in his incisive *Hermeneia* commentary on Acts, risks a snicker by comparing the sublime Pentecost story in Acts to burlesque. *Burlesque*? What he actually says is that Luke has fashioned the narrative of Pentecost “into its present form as an episode with burlesque impact, a mixture of themes which lead to reflection.”¹ Conzelmann does not elaborate on this intriguing and somewhat cryptic remark, but the term “burlesque” implies rowdy and earthy mockery, one of wilder forms of exaggeration. We can assume that by burlesque Conzelmann means not the raucous stage version (snare drum, feather boa, and so on) but its relatively milder literary cousin—namely a text that seeks to achieve its effect through gross comic exaggeration. Even so, burlesque is an unusual term to link with Luke, and by doing so Conzelmann has implied a fascinating experiment for the preacher preparing for Pentecost. What can we see if we read the Pentecost story with an eye to its “burlesque impact”? In other words, what can we discern if we look for places where Luke has employed hyperbole in order to tell a deeper truth?

In terms of the historical event that lay behind Pentecost that is, what “really” happened—all we can know for certain, claims Conzelmann, “is that there were appearances of the Spirit in the Jerusalem congregation.”² Now, every pastor of a living and active Christian congregation could say the same thing. Whether one is in Jerusalem, Detroit, or Middletown, one can truly say, “There have been appearances of the Spirit here.” If pressed to describe them, however, language breaks down. We can name moments when people have grown in grace, or been comforted, or been stretched to new understandings of mission, or when a relationship has been healed, when an act of justice has been done, or when the hungry have been fed. That’s what appearances of the Spirit look like, but as in all encounters with God, they are ambiguous. They

could be something else, could be explained in some other way, and they inevitably seem smaller when we try to express them in words than they are in actual experience.

So, how could Luke talk about appearances of the Spirit in the Jerusalem congregation in such a way that their genuine import could be perceived? If I read Conzelmann correctly, he is suggesting that Luke became a writer of burlesque, that he reached for more than a recital of the flat facts and instead turned up the color knob on the set until the screen glowed with exaggerated oranges and reds. He redrew the lines of the story with a certain sort of comic theological intent, not because experiences of the Spirit are themselves impoverished and need exaggeration, but rather because language is impoverished and needs to be stretched out of its usual shape in order to witness to the true power and theological meaning of experiences so rare as those of the Spirit.

Let us explore the Pentecost narrative, then, with a ticket to the burlesque:

Twin Peaks. . .and a Valley

The event of Pentecost is the second of a pair of dramatic events that dominate the opening section of Acts, the first being, of course, the narrative of the Ascension of Jesus (1:3-11). Forty days after Easter, Jesus departs into the heavens; fifty days after Easter, the Spirit arrives from the heavens - twin peaks. It is ironic, however, that sandwiched between these two lofty experiences is a valley, an event so seemingly mundane as a congregational meeting called to select a replacement officer (1:15-26).

The situation is this: Judas has fallen away and thus the complement of apostles is down to eleven. Since twelve as the number of apostles is of divine arrangement and symbolic of a full witness to the new Israel, an additional apostle must be chosen. Peter stands up among the approximately 120 believers (a number also symbolic of community wholeness) and make a speech to this effect, calling for the selection of a substitute for Judas. The will of God and the fulfillment of Scripture, claimed Peter, must be accomplished.

No amount of talk about symbolic numbers and the insistent will of God, though, can totally obscure the fact that what takes place as a result of this speech is a good, old-fashioned election of church officers—members of a church trying the best they can to discern who can most faithfully lead them into mission. There this story stands, plugged in the gap between Ascension and Pentecost like a ukelele player sent onstage to entertain the audience between the New York Philharmonic and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Anyone familiar with the way officers elections tend to proceed in local congregations can well read between the lines in the text and imagine how it went. The floor was opened for nominations and two names were presented: Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias. Probably someone in the back of the crowd, when they heard the name Barsabbas, shouted, “Who?” but nodded with recognition when someone shouted back his more familiar Latin name, “You know. . .Justus” (1:23).

Then, after prayer, they cast lots, actually a first-century version of a coin

toss. "Anybody got a coin? OK, thanks. All right now—heads, Barsabbas; tails, Matthias. Everybody got it? Here we go. Stand back. . . . Tails it is!" Astonishingly, this rough-hewn combination of polity and roulette is the bridge that spans the church's route from the vision of Ascension to the power of Pentecost.

Recent students of biblical narrative have suggested that biblical stories are fashioned out of the literary tension between divine knowledge and power on the one hand and human limitation on the other. The resulting texts are literary-theological obstacle course, winding pathways where the quest for God can be pursued only along poorly marked trails pocked with gaps and fraught with ambiguities. As Meir Sternberg puts it:

With the narrative become an obstacle course, its reading turns into a drama of understanding—conflict between inferences, seesawing, reversal, discovery and all. The only knowledge perfectly acquired is the knowledge of our limitations. It is by a sustained effort alone that the reader can attain at the end to something of the vision that God has possessed all along: to make sense of the discourse is to gain a sense of being human.³

We can feel something of this in this text about the choosing of Matthias. Every time we pass a milepost in this text, Luke assures us that this whole process is under divine control. Between the mileposts, however, things appear shakily human. On the one hand, Matthias gets to be an apostle because this is "according to the Scriptures" and he is "chosen by God." Nothing chancy about that. But we realize that Luke's unwavering confidence at this point is a part of his burlesque act because, on the other hand, we know good and well that Matthias gets to be an apostle because some member of the church thought he would be good and voiced his name instead of someone else's in the meeting and because the dice rolled his way instead of the other way. An extra rattle of the bones, one more shake of the hand that cast the lots, and Joseph Barsabbas would have been slipping on jersey number twelve and not Matthias. It's almost as if Luke were saying, "They had this election, see. Peter gave a speech; they called for suggestions and nobody said anything for a while. Then they came up with a couple of names, and they rolled the dice and (wink, halfbeat pause, ta-ta-tum) Matthias was chosen according to the immutable will of God."

The reason for Luke's burlesque here, of course, is because in the deepest sense he is telling the truth about the church's life. This *is* the way the church experiences the will of God, the means by which we move from Ascension to Pentecost, from vision to mission. We hold elections, try to balance budgets, order curriculum, set up service programs, recruit volunteers, and, in general, bounce erratically along the path, crawling half-blind across the gaps feeling our way across the ambiguities, praying and hoping and believing that we have not been left to our own devices, that this is all somehow part of the will of God. We witness to the same ambiguous reality whenever we say things like, "By the grace of God we were led to build this new educational wing" (knowing that the vote to build was 135 to 133 and that four families left over the

color of the carpet). Or when we say, "The fall retreat was a spiritual mountaintop, a real gift from God" (only the whole thing almost collapsed because of poor planning and wouldn't have happened had not Dorothy Elwood gotten on the phone at the last minute and drummed up support). In other words our own burlesque act includes the one-liner: "We are the church and this is our life (wink, halfbeat pause, ta-ta-tum), an expression of the will of God."

Recently the officers of a congregation near where I live voted to take a genuinely courageous and redemptive stand on a controversial public issue, namely the inclusion of homosexuals in the full life of the church. The final action was written up in the congressional newsletter, and, judging from that account, one would have thought that the decision was the result of a directive from God as sharp as the images of a laser printer. Actually, the decision came through anguished debate, sometimes angry confrontation, compromise motions, outright political maneuvering, and the skillful navigation by a few shrewd leaders of the church's polity. A misstep here or there, a different shake of bones, and the decision could well have gone the other way. Such are the ambiguities of church life, and nevertheless we dare to say, "This was done to fulfill the will of God." It is, of course, theological burlesque and also—we pray—the gospel truth.

Back to the Future

Once we move into the Pentecost narrative itself, we find several other evidences of Luke's burlesque imagination. Take, for example, that list of ethnic types gathered around to witness the Pentecostal event: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, and so on (2:9-11). Customarily the presence of this lengthy list is thought simply to say, "Jews were in Jerusalem from all over the world—east and west, north and south." That's true, as far as it goes, but it doesn't go nearly far enough. This conglomeration of peoples is not only a diverse and pluralistic gathering of tourists, it is also an historically impossible collection of folks, save in the sort of burlesque narrative Luke's eschatology evokes. Consider the Medes, for instance. They must have had a rather difficult journey to Jerusalem since they would not only have had to travel several hundred miles, but several hundred years as well, Medes having already disappeared from the canvas of history. The same is true evidently of Elamites, who seemed to have wandered over to this Pentecost story not from the Tigris River, where Elamites once lived, but rather from the annals of history and particularly the pages of the Old Testament (see especially Ezra 2:7). Like the communion scene in the movie "Places in the Heart," this convocation of nations in Luke's narrative represents not only east and west, but the ancient and the contemporary, the living and the dead, the new and reconstituted Israel. Luke's list of nations present at Pentecost is, then, the equivalent of the statement, "You should have been in church Pentecost Sunday. We had huge number of visitors, some from Montana, others from Arizona and Michigan, not to mention the vanload of Assyrians and the nice little Hittite couple who signed the friendship pad."

3000 Baptisms at the 9:00 O'Clock Service

Luke tells us that those who were filled with the Spirit on Pentecost were given the ability to speak the gospel in a way that the crowd heard what they said in their own languages (2:4,6,11). Certain journalistic questions creep into view. Does Luke mean that the believers got divided up into language groups—some of the speakers speaking this language and others speaking that one—or did they speak one ecstatic language that was somehow heard in translation by each hearer? And, come to think of it, how did the hearers know that the speakers were all Galileans? Did the Spirit allow them to keep their Galilean accent? One can surely speculate about the answers to such questions, but one commentator, Gerhard Krodel, has probably made the better suggestion: Don't ask. Luke, he claims, "did not reflect on these aspects of his narrative. Only one point was important to him. God's mighty acts must be praised and proclaimed in understandable language, and such proclamation was the first manifestation of the Spirit-filled community."⁴ Luke, in other words, was like an architect who draws a blueprint of a fantastic structure with little regard for the mechanical details. Luke's blueprint is of the missional life of the church: praising God in every dialect, extending the gospel of God's gracious presence in Jesus Christ into every human arena, obliterating the word "foreign" from its vocabulary. That's the wonderful and burlesque houseplan Luke produced, and if anybody from engineering calls up to complain that the mechanical stuff isn't worked out and that this house is impossible to build, they miss the point of the Spirit.

Peter stands up to address the crowd as to the meaning of the event, and though one might expect him, fresh from the astonishment of it all, to stammer a bit, he does not. To the contrary, Luke rolls the drums and has Peter preach an exceedingly lucid sermon, complete with illustrations, full of lengthy and difficult Old Testament quotations, and structured in flawless chiasmic form⁵—all at nine o'clock in the morning. Peter's sermon is, of course, a bit of burlesque, but Luke wants us to know that the Spirit does not leave the church with only an experience. This experience of the Spirit has a continuity with prophecy and promises a continuing presence of Christ, about which the church must always speak clearly and boldly.

Perhaps the chief example of Lukan burlesque is reserved, however, for the results of Peter's sermon: 3000 baptized into the congregation on the first day, everybody deeply involved in Christian education and worship, the whole of society speaking well of them, faith growing by leaps and bounds, no one in need since they shared all their possessions in common, and the church rolls expanding geometrically (2:41-47).

One day I was pondering this text with a class of seminary seniors. They were saying all the right things about it: how impressive it was that the early church had such faith and wild-fire growth, how the willingness to share their goods with each other embodied the early Christians' radical freedom from worldly values, a freedom possible in Christian community. There was, however, a note of discouragement in the discussion. These students were soon to graduate and some were to accept calls to churches where in many cases three baptisms a year, not 3000 a day, would be startling. They were headed for

churches where, to put it politely, people often give less than electric enthusiasm "to the apostles' teachings and fellowship." In fact, it was more likely that they were in line for a church where Sunday school had been on a respirator for twenty years, where most of the homes have a Bible "around here somewhere," and congregational fellowship is restricted to twenty minutes of coffee drinking after the morning service and a potluck supper now and then. Comparisons were inevitable, and the real churches where they would soon serve were coming up short over against this spiritual dynamo of a church described in Acts.

Then one student hit paydirt. She said, "This text reminds me of the little mimeographed booklet that one of the old saints in my home church wrote. It was on the history of our congregation, and reading what she wrote you'd think that our church was the most loyal and faithful congregation in the world. Every minister was wonderful, and there was never a troubled moment."

Exactly! We had been making a genre mistake in reading Acts. We had been reading this Pentecost narrative as if it were written by some modern university-styled historian, somebody like Williston Walker or Sydney Ahlstrom. But what if this passage in Acts is another genre, namely a *local church history*? Sometime in the life of almost every congregation some member with a long memory, a grateful heart, a little time, and a typewriter will put together a hand-stapled booklet with some title like "Providence Church: A Century of Faith and Service." If one reads such a local history one will characteristically encounter paragraphs like this:

In 1938 Providence Church called Emerson Langley to be the new pastor. His first week in his new charge, he preached a weeklong series of revival services at the church, and the whole town was present. Never had the people of Centerville heard such powerful preaching. Everyone was impressed, all were spiritually renewed, many joined the church, and the whole community was buzzing with admiration for Providence's new minister and his wife Irene, a constant helpmate.

Really? The *whole town* present? *All* were renewed spiritually? What is this? Sheer nostalgia? No, something happened to create the memory of such an event, but the event is remembered by the historian not with journalistic precision but with . . . with what? One is tempted to say, cynically, that it is remembered through rose-colored glasses, but it's different than that, more than that. Local church historians are usually people of faith, love, and, most of all, of theological hope. That is to say, local church history tends to be a description of a church's past in terms of its best hopes for the future. The local church historian describes a church's past not in terms of the cold, hard facts, but in terms of where the church trusts that its ministry and its Lord are taking it.

To be even more directly theological, local church historians, whether they realize it or not, see the life of the church eschatologically. That is, when they are doing their best to provide descriptions of what happened in the history of such and such a congregation, they can't help seeing it in terms of a greater understanding of the church, a view of the church as a model of the kingdom.

So they tell the story of the church—dates and ministers and Sunday schools and buildings and worship services and cemeteries and people—as it was, yes, but also as the church hopes and trusts it will one day be. Unmitigated devotion all around, awe upon everyone, the freedom to share all possessions, unbounded goodwill and the church embracing more and more people—this is the way Luke describes the early Church at Pentecost.

If Luke is a scientific historian, then the only thing we can say is the sad news that the Church has gone downhill ever since the first Pentecost. If he's a nostalgic romantic, then he has simply exaggerated the church's history needlessly, giving us little realistic comfort in a hard world. If, however, he is a radical theologian and a local historian, then he has looked at the life of the church as it was then through the lens of the Spirit's promise of where it surely shall be. As such, he knows that because the Spirit is with the church there is always more to the life of the church than meets the naked eye. The Spirit makes the promise of a community of peace and justice felt even today and in the almost laughable locales of real Christian congregations. Luke has seen in the ongoing life of the community signs and wonders of the Age to Come.

To put it another way, stand in the pulpit and look out at the congregation. There they are, people who are struggling, sometimes in nearly slapstick ways, to be the Church of Jesus Christ. Keep looking because Luke is claiming that if we look carefully and faithfully we can, from time to time, see resting on them the tongues of the Pentecostal fire. Such an insight pushes the language of preaching to the limits, perhaps even to the burlesque.

NOTES

¹ Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* [Hermeneia Series] (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 15.

² Conzelmann, 16.

³ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1985), 47.

⁴ Gerhard A. Krodel, *Acts* [Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament] (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 77.

⁵ Krodel, 83.