

“The Spirit of Acts”

(Growing the Glory & Glorifiers of God)

Acts Survey

July 31, 2016

INTRO: Let's start this morning by connecting some dots...

Q: Why do you think the Lord recorded and preserved what we know as the Book of Acts?

NOTE: ...not why did Luke record it...
...not why did God “DO” Acts...

Why did He record & preserve Acts?

What's the Book of Act's purpose & point?

A: To grow the glory & glorifiers of God!

NOTE: ...Acts is a “map” for us to follow
...Acts is a “model” for us BE-come

Acts is BOTH descriptive AND prescriptive!

The Spirit of Acts is to grow the glory and glorifiers of Almighty God!

T/S: If ever there were an example of trying to do too much with too little... that's me here & now trying to teach & preach the heart of Acts, somewhat comprehensively, in one hour this morning...

Let's try by laying out a plan for our time together:

- A. Let's embrace it *"BIBLICALLY"*
- B. Let's explain it *"THEOLOGICALLY"*
- C. Let's unfold it *"CHRONOLOGICALLY"*
- D. Let's mirror it *"MISSIOLOGICALLY"*
- E. Let's press into it *"PERSONALY"*

I. ACTS BIBLICALLY

- A. Genesis 1 & 3
- B. John 1 & 3
- C. *"I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." - Matthew 16:18*
- D. Transitional book... between Gospel & Letters
- E. *"Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done." - Rev. 22:12*

II. ACTS THEOLOGICALLY

- | | | |
|----|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| A. | Doctrine of God | HE births & builds Church |
| B. | Doctrine of Word | Biblical blueprint of Church |
| C. | Doctrine of Man | Believers become Church |
| D. | Doctrine of Sin | Big & bad enemy of Church |
| E. | Doctrine of Church | BE-ing & Bringing Church |

III. ACTS CHRONOLOGICALLY

- Continuation of Luke's Gospel...
- Approximately 30 years after Christ's resurrection
- Acts 1:8 lays out the framework for the chronology

Acts 1:1-11

- | | |
|--------------|---------|
| 1. VISION | vv.1-2 |
| 2. FUSION | vv.3-7 |
| 3. MISSION | v.8 |
| 4. ASCENSION | v.9 |
| 5. TENSION | v.10-11 |

¹ *In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus **began** to do and teach,*

² *until the day when he was taken up, after he had given*

commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen.

³ *He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.*

⁴ *And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me;*

⁵ *for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”*

⁶ *So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”*

⁷ *He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.*

⁸ *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”*

⁹ *And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.*

¹⁰ *And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes,*

¹¹ *and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”*

LOCALLY – Jerusalem

B. Act 2:4, 14, 41-47

Holy Spirit comes as Jesus promised!

⁴ *And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.*

Spirit empower proclamation begins!

¹⁴ *But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: "Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words.*

Spirit empowered people form the Church!

⁴¹ *So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.*

⁴² *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

⁴³ *And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.*

⁴⁴ *And all who believed were together and had all things in common.*

⁴⁵ *And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.*

⁴⁶ *And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts,*

⁴⁷ *praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

C. Acts 3:13

Holy Spirit empowered confrontation...

¹³ *The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him.*

D. Acts 4:12-13, & 20

Spirit empowered clarity in proclamation!

¹² *And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."*

Spirit empowered contrast to the cultural church...

¹³ *Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they were astonished. And they recognized that they had been with Jesus.*

²⁰ *for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."*

E. Acts 5:1-10, & 11

Holy Spirit protected purity!

¹ *But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property,*

- ² *and with his wife's knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles' feet.*
- ³ *But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?*
- ⁴ *While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God."*
- ⁵ *When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.*
- ⁶ *The young men rose and wrapped him up and carried him out and buried him.*
- ⁷ *After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened.*
- ⁸ *And Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much." And she said, "Yes, for so much."*
- ⁹ *But Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out."*
- ¹⁰ *Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.*

Holy Spirit prioritized paradigm shift!

- ¹¹ ***And great fear came upon the whole church and upon all who heard of these things.***

F. Acts 6:2-4

Holy Spirit sets personnel priorities!

² *And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.*

³ *Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.*

⁴ *But **we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.**"*

G. Acts 7: (Stephen) 54-56

Holy Spirit empowered martyrdom!

⁵⁴ *Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him.*

⁵⁵ *But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.*

⁵⁶ *And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."*

REGIONALLY – Judea & Samaria

- A. Acts 8:1 – Persecution leads to Acts 1:8 obedience!
 - 1. Philip in Samaria & with Eunuch
 - 2. Eunuch is first “Person of Peace”
 - 3. Gospel goes to the gentiles

- B. Acts 9
 - 1. Saul meets Jesus on Damascus Rd.
 - 2. Ananias: “God’s Great ‘Yes’ Man”

- C. Acts 10 - Peter is called to Cornelius (“P.o.P.”)

- D. Acts 11 - Church at Antioch established

- E. Acts 12 - Peter in & out of jail per prayer...

Globally – “ends of the earth”

- A. Acts 13-14 Paul’s 1st missionary journey (Lystra)

- B. Acts 14:26-15:1

Spirit defined & differentiated “church-men”

²⁶ *and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled.*²⁷ *And when they arrived and **gathered the church together**, they*

declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.²⁸ And they remained no little time with the disciples.

¹ *But **some men** came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”*

C. Acts 15 Jerusalem Council & 2nd m-journey

D. Acts 16:5-6

Spirit empowered missionaries & mission!

⁵ *So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.*

Holy Spirit led living & loving!

⁶ *And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.*

1. Macedonian Call
2. Persons of Peace: Lydia & Jailer
3. Paul & Silas = worshipping witnesses

E. Acts 17 Paul at Mars Hill in Athens

E. Acts 18 Priscilla & Aquilla... Start 3rd journey

F Acts 19:1-2... Paul spends 3 years in Ephesus

Holy Spirit litmus test...

*¹ And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. ² And he said to them, **“Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”** And they said, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.”*

G. Acts 20 Paul's farewell to Ephesus
1. Loving, tearful goodbye
2. Warning for wolves from within

H. Acts 21 Paul returns to Jerusalem
1. Paul makes a mistake...
2. Paul taken captive in the Temple
3. Paul demonstrates Christ-like love...

I. Acts 22-26 3 Trials...
1. Felix
2. Festus
3. Agrippa

J. **Acts 23:11**

Holy Spirit power & the person of Jesus Christ

¹¹ *The following night the Lord stood by him and said, "Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome."*

- K. Acts 27 Paul is sent to Rome
1. **Sent-off**
 2. **Shipped-out**
 3. **Storm-tossed**
 4. **Ship-wrecked**
 5. **See Rome!**

IV. ACTS MISSIOLOGICALLY

The Spirit's "top 10" Means of
Missional & Methodological Multiplication
(a.k.a. "Church Growth")

- **Prayer** - started in John 17, never stops
- **Promise (faith)** - truly walking by faith vs. sight
- **Power** - miraculous ministry abounds
- **People** - the "TRUE" Christian Church
- **Personnel** - biblically committed leaders
- **Proclamation** - words, walk, worship, witness!
- **Persecution** - consequences of no corners cut
- **Perseverance** - "No matter what!"
- **Purity** - ambassadors & aroma 24/7
- **Passion** - inspires either riots or revival

V. ACTS PERSONALY

Acts 28

1. Arrival & ministry in Rome
2. What about you...
3. Acts 28:30-31:

³⁰ *He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹ proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.*

- C Cherished (welcomed)
- H Help & Hope (ALL)
- R Repent & Receive (came)
- I Inform, Inspect, Inspire (P)
- S Surrender (kingdom of God)
- T Teach, Tell, Transfer Truth
- I I AM (Lord)
- A Always Almighty (Jesus)
- N No longer slaves! (Christ)
- S Spirit-filled (all boldness)

Let's Pray!

Introduction Outline

I. Introduction

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12. The Structure of Acts

Our knowledge of early Christianity would be greatly impoverished had Luke not conceived of his “second book to Theophilus,” which tradition has designated “The Acts of the Apostles.” Acts is unique among the New Testament writings that deal with the life and mission of the Christian community in the age of the apostles. The Gospels, of course, were written during this period; and Luke contributed his own. The Gospels, however, deal with the ministry and teaching of Jesus and are only at best an indirect witness to the life of the churches during the period of their writing.

Likewise, the epistolary literature of the New Testament comes in large part from this period; but it too provides no real framework for reconstructing the life and growth of the church. Constantly one is driven back to Acts. Take Paul, for instance. Although it has sometimes been advocated, no one has ever succeeded in producing a convincing portrait of the apostle and his missionary activity on the basis of his epistles alone, not to mention the early Jewish Christian church. What would we know about the Jerusalem church without Acts? But Acts is far more than mere history. It contains much solid theology. This is particularly to be found in the speeches, which comprise nearly one-third of its total text. The many episodes from the lives of the apostles present more than a bare chronicling of events. They are rich testimonies in narrative form of the faith of the community and the driving force behind its mission.

In the following introduction, the first six sections are provided to orient the user of the commentary to the “external” matters that assist in interpreting the text, such as traditions about

authorship, date, and the like. The final six sections take a more “internal” look at the book and treat such matters as Luke’s characteristics as a writer and the main themes recurring throughout his writing.

1. Acts in the Early Tradition

Our earliest witnesses to the Book of Acts are for the most part fairly late, dating from the latter part of the second century. These are of two types: (1) works that appear to be aware of Acts and draw from its content and (2) specific references to the book in the writings of the early church fathers.

(1) Earliest Use of Acts

Echoes of Acts possibly are in the Apostolic Fathers. For instance, Clement of Rome, writing ca. A.D. 95–100, spoke of “giving more gladly than receiving” (1 Clem 2:1), which may be an allusion to [Acts 20:35](#) but is more likely an independent quote from the oral tradition of Jesus’ sayings. The same can be said of his reference to the “pouring out of the Spirit” in the very next verse (1 Clem 2:2). This could reflect an awareness of [Acts 2:17](#), but more likely it is an independent quote from Joel. Ignatius, whose writings date from the first decades of the second century, used the phrase “to go to his own place” (Ign. *Magn.* 5:1), which recalls Peter’s words about Judas in [Acts 1:25](#). The phrase is a common Greek idiom, however, and probably reflects no use of Acts. The phrase “you shall not say anything is your own” is found in Barnabas 19:8 and Didache 4:8, both from the early second century. The phrase is reminiscent of [Acts 4:32](#) but is again a common Greek expression and may simply reflect an independent tradition of

the early Christian practice. Other examples could be cited from the Apostolic Fathers, but they are all too sporadic, brief, and too “traditional” in nature to establish dependence on Acts. One seems to be on firmer ground with Justin Martyr (ca. A.D. 130–150). In his *First Apology* (39:3) he referred to the apostles as “illiterate, of no ability in speaking” (cf. [Acts 4:13](#)). In his *Second Apology* 10 he seems to have reflected an acquaintance with Paul’s Areopagus speech in referring to “the unknown God” (cf. [Acts 17:23](#)). Clearest of all, however, is the following statement from his *First Apology* 50:12:

And afterwards, when he had risen from the dead and appeared to them, and had taught them to read the prophecies in which all these things were foretold as coming to pass, and when they had seen him ascending into heaven, and had believed, and had received power sent by him upon them, and went to every race of men, they taught these things, and were called apostles.

This is basically a precis of [Acts 1](#) as well as a general summary of the remainder of the book. It thus seems that by the middle of the second century, Acts was known and being used.

(2) *Explicit References to Acts*

From the end of the second century come the first explicit references to the Book of Acts and its Lukan authorship. In his book *Against Heresies* (3.14.1) Irenaeus, bishop of the church of Lyons in Gaul, discussed the authorship of both the third Gospel and Acts, stating that both were by Luke, the physician, the traveling companion of Paul. He went into detail in describing those passages beginning at [Acts 16:10](#), where the first-person plural appears in the narrative of Acts, thus establishing the

writer as Paul's associate. He further cited [2 Tim 4:10f.](#) and [Col 4:14](#), which point to Luke as Paul's companion.

Dating from the same period, the Muratorian canon, an early canonical list generally believed to have come from the church at Rome, also gives testimony to the common authorship of Luke and Acts. Like Irenaeus, it depicts the author as Luke the physician, the traveling companion of Paul, and adds the note that Acts does not relate the deaths of Peter and Paul because Luke restricted his account only to those matters where he was himself present. It also gives the rather strange detail that Luke served as Paul's legal counsel, something attested nowhere else in the early tradition. Later witnesses confirm the basic testimony of Irenaeus and the Muratorian canon to Luke-Acts being by Luke, Paul's traveling companion. An occasional additional detail is added, and these tend to become more fanciful with time. Thus Origen (ca. A.D. 230) suggested that Luke was the "brother who is praised by all the churches" Paul mentioned in [2 Cor 8:18](#). Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 3.4.6), writing in the early fourth century, is the earliest extant witness to the tradition that Luke came from Antioch. In the latter half of the fourth century, Jerome repeated the view of Luke's Antiochene origin and added that Luke was with Paul during his two-year house arrest in Rome and wrote Acts from that city. He likewise stated that Luke's tomb was located in Constantinople (*De Vir. Ill.* 6). Generally reputed as the best Christian linguist of his day, it is significant that he commended Luke's grammar for its eloquence and considered it to be the most educated Greek of the four Evangelists' (*Comm. on Isa* 3:6). In the preface to his commentary on Matthew, he discussed the Gospel of Luke and

cited a tradition that it was written in the districts of Boetia and Achaia.

Still later traditions add further details, all of which seem to be primarily speculative. For example, the Monarchianist Prologue to Luke claims that Luke had no wife or son, that he lived to age seventy-four, and that he died in Bithynia. Adamantius, seeking to give him more direct apostolic status, maintained that he was one of the seventy disciples of [Luke 10:1](#); and a marginal note found in several ancient manuscripts identified him as the companion of Clopas and the one who walked with the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus ([Luke 24:13–35](#)).

In summary, the information listed in the earliest witness (Irenaeus) has the most claim to reliability—that Luke the physician of [Col 4:14](#), the traveling companion of Paul, was the author of the third Gospel and Acts. Some credence can perhaps be given to the tradition that links Luke with Antioch, but that could well have come about as an attempt to find some explicit mention of Luke in his writings (note the Lucius of Cyrene found among the leaders in Antioch in [Acts 13:1](#)).

Before leaving the early witnesses, a word should be said about the traditional title “Acts of the Apostles.” Whatever its original title, if any, the work seems to have had no fixed name in the second-century's earliest witnesses. Irenaeus described it as “Luke's witness to the apostles” (*Lucae de apostolis testificatio*). Tertullian referred to it as “Luke's Commentary” (*Commentarius Lucae; de jejuniis* 10). Perhaps closest to our present title is that of the Muratorian canon—*The Acts of All the Apostles (Acta omnium apostolorum)*. Although of disputed date, the “anti-Marcionite” Prologue to Luke may be our earliest Greek witness

to the familiar name “Acts of the Apostles” (*praxeis apostolōn*). In any event, by the third century that title seems to have become fixed in the tradition.

2. The Author of Acts

Scholars of all persuasions are in agreement that the third Gospel and the Book of Acts are by the same author. There are always a few dissenting voices on any issue, and some would argue for separate authorship of the two volumes. The evidence is decidedly against them. Not only is there the unanimous voice of the tradition from Irenaeus on, but the internal evidence of the two books points to their common authorship.

(1) Relationship to Gospel of Luke

For one, a common style and vocabulary run throughout the two books. Many common themes also bind the two volumes together (cf. section 11). Above all is the claim of the author himself as reflected in the prefaces to each of the books. Both Luke and Acts are dedicated to the same person, Theophilus ([Luke 1:3](#); [Acts 1:1](#)); and [Acts 1:1](#) refers to his “former book,” which dealt with “all that Jesus began to do and to teach” — namely, the Gospel of Luke.

Finally, the conclusion to Luke’s Gospel provides an introduction to the Book of Acts. Jesus’ final words to his disciples are a virtual summary of the main themes of the first chapters of Acts — the waiting in Jerusalem until clothed with the power of the Spirit, the preaching to all the nations beginning with Jerusalem, and the fulfillment of the Scriptures in the death and resurrection of the Messiah, which is the central

topic of Peter's sermons in Jerusalem ([Luke 24:44–49](#)). Then there is the ascension. In all the New Testament the ascension narrative is related only in Luke and Acts, though several passages in the epistles refer to Jesus seated at God's right hand (e.g., [Heb 1:3](#)). It closes the Gospel of Luke and opens the Acts of the Apostles, binding Luke's two volumes together.

(2) "We" Narratives

Beginning with Irenaeus, the tradition has maintained that this single author, whose two volumes comprise nearly 27 percent of the entire New Testament, was Luke. For Irenaeus the occurrence of the first-person plural in the later chapters of Acts pointed to the author of the book as having been a traveling companion of Paul. Often referred to as the "we" narrative, the passages involved are [16:10–17](#), which relates Paul's voyage from Troas to Philippi; then [20:5–21:18](#), covering Paul's journey from Philippi to Jerusalem; and finally [27:1–28:16](#), involving the journey from Caesarea to Rome. This "we" has always been a crux in the debate over Lukan authorship. Those who follow the traditional view concur with Irenaeus in seeing it as an indication that the author of Luke-Acts was present with Paul on these occasions. Others argue that the "we" is an indication only that the author of Luke-Acts used a source from a traveling associate of Paul (see section 5).

(3) Medical Theory

Who was Luke? Very little is said about him in the New Testament. He is mentioned three times, all in the "greetings" sections of Paul's epistles. In [Col 4:14](#) Paul sent greetings from Demas and "our dear friend Luke, the doctor." In Philemon he is

again linked with Demas in the sending of greetings. In [2 Tim 4:11](#), in something of a despondent mood, Paul lamented that everyone had either deserted him or gone to minister elsewhere and noted that “only Luke is with me.” All the direct New Testament testimony to Luke yields but scant information. He was an associate of Paul. He was with him when Colossians, Philemon, and 2 Timothy were written—periods of imprisonment for Paul. Finally, he was a physician, which would indicate a person of some education and social standing.

Luke’s status as a physician became the basis for an elaborate argument which was first proposed by W. Hobart in the late nineteenth century. The subtitle to his volume is perhaps the best commentary on the purpose of his work: “A proof from internal evidence that the Gospel according to St. Luke and the Acts of the Apostles were written by the same person and that the writer was a medical man.” Drawing from the Greek medical writers, particularly Galen and Hippocrates, Hobart sought to demonstrate that the author of Luke-Acts used the same “technical” medical terminology and was thus a doctor. In this way he sought to undergird the traditional authorship of Luke and Acts. His work was taken up and refined by one of the leading German scholars of the day, A. Harnack. In this country the “medical theory” was strongly advocated by A. T. Robertson. The argument, however, was flawed. Hobart and Harnack had failed to examine the frequency of the alleged “medical” terminology in the nonmedical Greek writers. H. J. Cadbury undertook such a comparison and found that all these terms occur in nonmedical writers, such as Josephus, Plutarch, Lucian, and even in the Septuagint. In a close investigation of portions of Lucian, he found the frequency of the “medical”

words to be twice that found in Luke-Acts. His conclusion was that Luke used the language of the best Hellenistic writers, not the technical vocabulary of a physician. He was quick to point out that this in no way disproved that Luke was a physician. It might be added that for one who assumes the traditional Lukan authorship, it perhaps also demonstrates that Luke was more concerned with communicating his message to as wide a circle as possible than with impressing through his expertise.

A large group of German and American scholars do not find the traditional authorship of Luke-Acts tenable, generally on the grounds that the Paul of Acts is so different from the Paul of the epistles that a companion of the apostles could not possibly have written it. These scholars point out (1) that the Paul of Acts is presented as a miracle worker and a skilled orator, contrary to Paul's epistles; (2) that the theology of Acts is lacking the central tenets of Paul's theology, such as justification and the atoning death of Christ; and (3) that the title of "apostle" is denied Paul in Acts, the title he clearly preferred to use for himself. Some also argue that the "law-abiding" Paul of Acts who circumcised Timothy and took Nazirite vows was totally incompatible with the grace-centered Paul of the epistles. Likewise, specific incidents recounted in Acts such as the Jerusalem Conference of [Acts 15](#) are seen to be in conflict with Paul's allusions to the same events in his epistles. (Each of these arguments is treated in the commentary at the appropriate places where the issues arise.)

Two things need to be noted in the discussion, however. One is simply that Luke was not Paul, nor was he addressing the same issues Paul treated in his epistles. One would hardly expect

Luke's view of Paul to be the same as Paul's or Luke's theological emphases to be the same as those of the apostle. Not even Paul's own epistles reflect the same emphases one from another—the particular situation directs the emphases. One would never guess Paul's emphasis on justification as found in Galatians from reading 1 Corinthians. The second point is that those who point to the differences between Acts and Paul's epistles rarely note the many remarkable coincidences between the two. Again this is pointed out regularly in the commentary.

Traditional Lukan authorship is assumed throughout this commentary. Having said this, can we know more about the author than the bare bones that he was a physician and a traveling companion of Paul by the name of Luke? The answer is “not much.” A good guess is that he was a Gentile, judging from the quality of his Greek. It has sometimes been suggested that he may have been a freedman, since physicians were often drawn from the slave class; and the name Luke (*Loukanos/Lucius*) was a common name among slaves. From the time of Jerome on, the tradition that he came from Antioch has been strong. The Western reading of [Acts 11:28](#) introduces “we” into the narrative, which, if genuine, would place Luke in Antioch at the beginning of Paul's missionary career and would link up quite nicely with the Lucius in the Antioch church at [Acts 13:1](#). But a weakly attested Western reading and a Cyrenian by the Latin name of Lucius are a rather slim basis for elaboration of the tradition surrounding Paul's Greek-named associate Luke. Further, judging from the “we” narrative, the evidence seems to point to Luke's joining Paul somewhere in the vicinity of Troas ([Acts 16:10](#)). A better case could perhaps be made for Luke's coming from Pisidian Antioch (Rackham) or

Macedonia (Ramsay). Judging from the external evidence, not much can be said about Luke apart from shaky later tradition and the realm of pure speculation. Internally, a great deal can be known about him because he revealed much about himself, his community, and his faith in the legacy of his writings. (Cf. section 7.)

3. The Date of Acts

The opinion among scholars about the date when Acts was written varies greatly, ranging all the way from as early as A.D. 57/59 to A.D. 150. Though someone represents nearly every point on this ninety-year spectrum, there are in general three distinct viewpoints. First, a large group of scholars date Acts before A.D. 64. This view is always combined with the traditional Lukan authorship and is primarily advanced in an attempt to explain the ending of Acts, which mentions a two-year house arrest of Paul in Rome but says nothing about the outcome of Paul's arrest ([Acts 28:30f.](#)). The abrupt ending would be explained if Luke wrote Acts at precisely this point—two years after Paul's arrival in Rome and before his case came to trial. All this fits quite well, since the “we” narrative has brought Luke to Rome (cf. [27:1–28:16](#)); and the epistles to Colosse and Philemon, which have traditionally been ascribed to Paul's Roman imprisonment, both mention Luke as being present with Paul during this period. Luke is thus seen to have written Acts at precisely this point and concluded his story after “two whole years” in Rome.

Advocates of this view appeal to other features of Acts, such as the primitive theology of Peter's speeches, the fact that the Neronian persecution (A.D. midsixties) is nowhere alluded to,

and that Luke showed no acquaintance with Paul's epistles. None of these would preclude a later date, however, and the most attractive feature of the early dating remains its giving an explanation for the ending of Acts. This, however, should not be the determining factor in deciding on the date of Acts. Perhaps Luke ended Acts as he did because he had fulfilled his purposes.

The relationship to the Gospel of Luke has led many scholars to opt for a later dating of Acts. These can be described as those advocating a "middle-dating" position. The spectrum runs from A.D. 70 to A.D. 90, with most falling about midway. Luke wrote his two volumes in sequence, which is the most natural assumption and certainly the indication of the preface to Acts ("my former book" means the Gospel of Luke, [Acts 1:1](#)). It follows that Acts must be dated subsequent to Luke. Two problems exist with dating the Gospel as early as A.D. 62. First, Luke's Gospel quite possibly reflects an awareness of the fall of Jerusalem, which took place in A.D. 70. In the Gospel of Luke are three predictions of the judgment that was to befall Jerusalem ([19:41-44](#); [21:20-24](#); [23:28-31](#)). That Jesus predicted the destruction of the city is related in the other Gospels as well (cf. [Mark 13:14](#)), so it is not a question of Luke having introduced something "after the event," as has often been maintained. It is a matter of an emphasis unparalleled in the other Gospels. Luke chose to include in his Gospel a sizable body of oracles against Jerusalem from the tradition of Jesus' words. The stress they are given lends the impression that Luke had a vivid recollection of the fall of the city and how tragically true the Lord's predictions had proved to be. This remains a matter of impression and in no way could stand on its own as a decisive argument for a date after A.D. 70.

The second consideration that speaks against an early date for the Gospel of Luke is the likelihood that Luke used the Gospel of Mark as one of his sources. In his preface ([Luke 1:1](#)), Luke referred to many who had undertaken to compile a gospel narrative before him. Since nearly all of Mark is paralleled in Luke's Gospel, Mark was likely one of those to whom Luke was referring. Irenaeus indicated that Mark wrote his Gospel based on the memoirs of Peter and after the death of Peter. Tradition links Peter and Paul together as martyrs during the Neronian persecution in Rome in the mid-sixties. This thus places the Gospel of Mark sometime after A.D. 65. It is possible that Luke had immediate access to Mark and composed his Gospel shortly after Mark. More likely some time elapsed between the two Gospels. Combining this consideration with the first possibility that the Jerusalem oracles point to a date after the destruction of Jerusalem, the Gospel of Luke seems best dated after A.D. 70. There is no reason to believe that Acts did not follow shortly after it. Of those who advocate a "middle date," scholars who follow traditional authorship generally date the book toward the earlier end of the spectrum, during the decade of A.D. 70–80.

Those who would opt for a "late" dating of Acts are in a decided minority. These fall into two groups. First are those who date the book around 95–100. Usually these scholars believe that Luke was dependent on the *Antiquities* of the Jewish historian Josephus published in A.D. 93. Acts is believed to show dependence on Josephus mainly in the speech of Gamaliel in [5:35–39](#), the story of Herod's death in [12:20–23](#), and Lysias's reference to the "Egyptian" in [21:38](#). None of these passages, however, shows the least literary dependence on Josephus; and at most they reflect commonly known Jewish events. It has also

been argued that the apologetic emphasis in Acts reflects a situation of persecution such as that of Domitian in the nineties. In fact, the picture of the favorable relationship between Christians and the Roman authorities would point in the opposite direction—to an earlier period before imperial persecutions had begun. Other proponents of a late date tend to place Acts between A.D. 125 and 150. These scholars are impressed by language that Acts has in common with the Apostolic Fathers, or they see its emphasis on the Jewish roots of Christianity as a polemic against Marcion.

In Acts too many evidences exist of an earlier period to be convinced by those who would date it later—the primitive Jewish-Christian Christology of Peter’s sermons, the simple organization of the churches, the concern with Christianity’s relationship to Judaism. Of course, it can always be argued that Luke had access to good early sources. More likely the freshness of Luke’s account is due to his own involvement in and proximity to the matters he related in his account of the early Christian witness. There are solid reasons for dating the book after A.D. 70 but no convincing reason for dating it later than sometime during that decade.

4. The Provenance and Destination of Acts

Where did Luke write from, and to whom did he write? These questions probably are unanswerable. Luke dedicated the book to Theophilus, and Theophilus is a Greek name. Did Luke then write primarily to Gentiles? If so, why did he concern himself so much with Jewish questions? Why the elaborate messianic proofs of Peter’s sermons in [Acts 2](#) and [3](#) if not to provide his readers with a pattern for witness to Jews? The most likely

answer is that Luke intended his work for Christian communities that included both Jews and Gentiles—mixed congregations such as those we encounter frequently in Paul’s epistles.

Can we be more specific and pinpoint an area? Late tradition links Luke with Antioch. Eusebius, writing in the early fourth century A.D., was the first to attest it. As noted under the section “The Author of Acts,” it has much going for it. The remarkable information Acts provides on the Antioch church would be understandable if Luke had roots there. But for whom did Luke write? Did he write for the churches in the area of Syrian Antioch? J. Jervell thinks he did, pointing to the strong emphasis in Acts on Jewish Christians and noting that Jewish Christianity was strong in Syria in the period of A.D. 70–80 when Luke most likely wrote Acts.

Other scholars see Acts as intended for the Christians of Rome. After all, the book ends with Paul preaching in that city. From [19:21](#) on, the whole narrative of Acts focuses on Paul’s being led to witness in the imperial capital. F. J. Foakes-Jackson and K. Lake show how much the ideas of the Roman apostles’ creed are reflected in the speeches of Acts, and they suggest that this might point to a Roman provenance for Acts.

Antioch and Rome have been the two usual suggestions for the provenance of Acts. Recently, however, P. Esler has taken an entirely different approach, seeking to determine from the recurring emphases in Acts the sort of social setting for which it seems designed. He concludes that Luke was written for mixed Jewish-Gentile churches in the Roman east in a primarily urban setting. “Roman east” is a rather sweeping designation and could refer to anywhere from the Aegean to Syro-Palestine. But

perhaps we need not get more specific than that. For the later church Acts has been without boundary in its appeal. Perhaps Luke wanted it so from the beginning. Esler's suggestions of an "urban" destination for Acts is worthy of consideration. We have been so accustomed to focusing on Paul's "journeying" in Acts that we perhaps get the picture his main mission thrust was in the highways and hedges. Not so the picture of Acts. Most of Paul's time was devoted to the large urban centers like Corinth, Ephesus, and Rome—where the masses were.

5. The Sources of Acts

Where did Luke gather his materials for Acts? Did he have available to him written sources, or was he primarily dependent on oral reports for matters he himself did not witness? The history of investigation in Acts has often preoccupied itself with elaborate source theories. Only the main lines of research and the evidence for Luke's use of sources will be noted here.

Source theories have been of four types: (1) the search for written sources, mainly in chaps. [1–15](#); (2) the specific question of whether an Aramaic original stands behind chaps. [1–15](#); (3) theories connected with the "we" narrative of chaps. [16–28](#); and (4) the possibility that Luke used primarily oral sources and isolated bits of local tradition.

(1) Written Sources

Around the turn of the twentieth century extensive scholarly attention was given to the question of whether written sources could be detected within the text of Acts. It was a natural assumption since Luke seems to have indicated his use of the writings of predecessors in the preface to his Gospel and since

source criticism had been carried on for some time in the first three Gospels. But source criticism in the Gospels is an altogether different matter. The first three (“Synoptic”) Gospels all have extensive material in common, and a comparative analysis can be made between them to see if one can detect any sort of source relationship in their use of common material. This is simply not possible for Acts. With no parallels available for comparative study, Acts is unique among the New Testament narratives. Those who undertook a source analysis of Acts were consequently forced to postulate a more subjective methodology for the detection of Luke’s possible sources. Various criteria were established. The centrality of certain places in the narrative was seen as possibly indicative of a source originating in that locale. Another possible pointer to a source was the recurrence of the same character. Sometimes differences in the theological emphases in various portions of Acts were seen as indicative that Luke was using sources. For some scholars, however, the most certain hint of a source is the occurrence of supposed “doublets,” or duplicated material, in the text.

Exemplary of the heyday of source criticism in Acts is A. Harnack’s elaborate theory of the sources Luke used in the composition of [Acts 1–15](#). Harnack was a strong defender of the traditional authorship of Luke-Acts and argued that as Paul’s traveling companion Luke had his own participation to draw from in the events covered in [Acts 16–28](#). Since the “we” narrative would indicate that Luke did not participate in the events prior to Troas ([Acts 16:10](#)), Harnack assumed Luke would have been forced to use sources for all the prior material of Acts.

Using a combination of criteria involving places, characters, and “doublets,” Harnack detected several strands of sources behind [Acts 1–15](#). First, he saw an “Antioch” source behind the material related to that city that came from written records of the Antioch church. This included the traditions about Stephen ([6:1–8:4](#)) and the narratives centering in Antioch and its mission ([11:19–30](#); [12:25](#); [13:1–15:35](#)). A second source is the account of Paul’s conversion ([9:1–28](#)), which Harnack saw as based on a separate written tradition. A third source is Harnack’s “Jerusalem Caesarean” tradition, representing the accounts of the Christian mission in Judea and possibly stemming from the Caesarean church. It included the work of Philip ([8:5–40](#)), Peter’s witness in the plain of Sharon and the conversion of Cornelius ([9:29–11:18](#)), and Peter’s escape from prison ([12:1–23](#)).

Harnack’s most controversial source was his “Jerusalem source,” which he divided into two parts, postulating two sources from the Jerusalem church that covered the same events. One he considered reliable, the other legendary and unreliable. It was here that his “doublet” theory came into play. The “unreliable” source, which he called Jerusalem B, contained the account of Pentecost ([Acts 2](#)) and the apostles’ second trial before the Sanhedrin ([Acts 5:17–42](#)). The reliable Jerusalem A source was seen to cover the events of [Acts 3:1–5:16](#). Harnack considered these two sources to be duplicative of the same events. The outpouring of the Spirit narrated in [Acts 4:23–31](#) (source A) was seen as a doublet of Pentecost (source B). The appearance of the apostles before the Sanhedrin in [Acts 5:17–42](#) (which involves a miraculous escape from prison) was relegated to the unreliable source B and seen as a duplication of the

Sanhedrin appearance narrated in [4:5–22](#) (the historically valuable source A). Frankly one is at a loss to see how [Acts 4:23–31](#) could ever be seen as a doublet of [Acts 2](#). All the passages have in common is the outpouring of the Spirit, and the Spirit “comes” in special outpourings often in Acts. Likewise the two appearances before the Sanhedrin are altogether likely on historical grounds and not “doublets,” as J. Jeremias has shown.

Harnack’s source-critical reconstruction of Luke’s “sources” in [Acts 1–15](#) has been given at some length to illustrate the basically subjective nature of such attempted reconstructions. A hidden agenda is clearly notable in his two Jerusalem sources. The “doublet” theory betrays his rationalist presuppositions, allowing him to excise the miraculous elements of the Pentecost narrative and the apostles’ escape in [Acts 5:17–23](#). Beyond that, even the sources he considered reliable are not convincing. Such criteria as the centrality of places and characters are simply not adequate for postulating written sources. Luke’s information could as well have come to him through oral tradition. To establish written sources behind the text, one would have to indicate differences in vocabulary and style in portions in Acts, and this has not been done convincingly in any source-critical investigation. A uniformity of Lukan style runs throughout Luke-Acts. If Luke used sources in Acts, he reworked them into his own style so skillfully that it is no longer possible for us to detect them.

One of Harnack’s sources, however, continues to have a sizeable following—his Antioch source. It was picked up by Jeremias in an article of 1937; and in his summary of source-critical

research in Acts, J. Dupont judged it as the most viable of Harnack's suggested sources. Perhaps the most surprising advocacy has been that of R. Bultmann, who suggested that it might have been quite a bit more extensive than Harnack suggested and that the author of Acts may have obtained it from the written archives of the Antioch church. The centrality of Antioch, however, could be explained on grounds other than a written source—the tradition that connects Luke himself with Antioch or the possibility that Luke received oral reports from that congregation. That there existed a written document from Antioch would have to be established on stylistic grounds, and that has yet to be demonstrated.

In summary, the quest for written sources in Acts has been basically a dead-end. Luke followed the usual practice of Hellenistic historiographers by never explicitly citing any sources he used in Acts. He may well have had access to some, but he so incorporated them into his narrative that it is unlikely they could be recovered. Still, in two specific areas scholars tend to argue for Luke's use of sources—the possibility of a Semitic source in [Acts 1–15](#) and of a source behind the “we” passages of chaps. [16–28](#).

(2) Semitic Source Theory

A more substantial basis for delineating sources in Acts was suggested by C. C. Torrey, who argued that an Aramaic source lay behind [Acts 1–15](#). Torrey pointed to a number of difficult Greek constructions in Acts, which he argued were most readily explainable as mistranslations from Aramaic. Others, he reasoned, are best seen as overly literal translations from an Aramaic original. He saw this Aramaic substratum as running

homogeneously throughout chaps. [1–15](#) of Acts but to be totally absent in chaps. [16–28](#). His conclusion: an original Aramaic document lay behind the first fifteen chapters of Acts. The response to Torrey's theory has generally not been favorable. H. J. Cadbury pointed out that the Semitic style of the early portions of Acts is probably due to Luke's skill as a writer, to his deliberate imitation of Palestinian style. Others have noted that many of Torrey's alleged Aramaisms are really Septuagintalisms and that the overall style in chaps. [1–15](#) is the same uniform Lukan style that runs throughout Luke-Acts.

Many of the Semiticisms may reflect the language of the Christian churches, a sort of "synagogue Greek" deriving from their Jewish roots. In his thorough study of the Semiticisms in Acts, M. Wilcox concludes that there is simply no evidence for an Aramaic source in Acts. Small "knots" of Semiticisms are found in the Old Testament material in Acts that do not seem derivative from the Septuagint. These are particularly found in Stephen's speech and Paul's address in Pisidian Antioch. They may reflect the Aramaic Targumic traditions. In short, room remains for further examination of the Scripture materials found in the speeches of Acts. The theory of an Aramaic source in Acts, however, has been largely abandoned.

(3) "We" Source Theory

In general, there are four views relative to the passages in [Acts 16–28](#) where the first-person plural occurs. Those who assume the traditional authorship of Acts view the "we" as indicative of Luke's presence with Paul at the points where it occurs (cf. section 2.2). Some, who do not maintain that the final author of Acts was a traveling companion of Paul, argue that the author

incorporated a source that was from such a traveling companion and from which the “we” derives. A third group believes that the author of Acts utilized a diary or an itinerary from a Pauline traveling associate but rejects the idea of a “we” source. A fourth group accepts neither a source nor a diary and maintains that the “we” is merely a literary device of the author of Acts.

The idea of a “we source” in Acts is not new. Scholars of the “Tübingen school,” who argued that Acts was written in the second century and was as a whole historically tendentious and unreliable, nevertheless appealed to the “we passages” to argue that the later author of Acts utilized in these places a reliable historical source from a traveling companion of Paul. This “we-source” theory continued long after the excesses of the Tübingen hypothesis were dead. A. Harnack, however, pointed out that the style of the “we passages” is the same style that runs throughout all of Luke-Acts, and it is more natural to conclude that the author of the “we passages” is the same author as the final author of Luke-Acts. Harnack was defending the traditional view of Luke as both Paul’s traveling companion and the author of Luke-Acts. The same was true of Cadbury, who argued that Luke’s reference to having “carefully investigated everything” in the preface to his Gospel ([Luke 1:3](#)) is best seen as his indication that he participated in some of the events he was narrating, namely, those where the “we” occurs.

A modification of the “we-source” theory holds that the author of Acts incorporated a diary from a travel companion of Paul, not an extensive source. Various persons have been suggested for the diarist, Timothy being the most popular. Silas and Epaphroditus have also been proposed. M. Dibelius advocated a

modified version of the “diary” view, maintaining that it was in no sense a connected narrative but only an “itinerary,” a collection of travel notes on length of journeys, places visited, ports of call, and the like. The diary view is open to the same objections raised by Harnack with regard to the full “we-source” view; namely, that regarding the unity of style of Acts, it would be more natural to assume that the author of the whole book was including himself in the “we”—not incorporating a source.

Those who argue that the “we” is a literary device would agree with the last statement—only they would not see it as an indication of the author’s presence with Paul. Some see it as a literary device used by Greek historians to lend an appearance of veracity to their accounts. Others point to the fact that the narrative first-person plural is found primarily in the voyage narratives of chaps. [16](#); [20–21](#); and [27–28](#). It is noted that the “we” style is commonplace in Greco-Roman voyage accounts and that Luke seems to have been following this literary convention in Acts.

Some of the conclusions drawn in these studies are open to serious question. For instance, for many Greek historians the first-person style is not employed as a convention but is only used when the writer was actually present. Likewise, ancient sea narratives occur in third person as frequently as they do in first person. Further, the first person is not used with regularity in the sea narratives of Acts, which would seem to be the case where it is merely a stylistic convention. The studies in the literary use of the first-person plural in Greek literature may, however, prove of value ultimately even for those who advocate traditional Lukan authorship. If Luke’s use of “we” is to some extent

influenced by literary considerations, such as its frequency in his travel narratives, then it follows that one cannot rigidly assume he was present only where the “we” occurs. He clearly prefers the narrative third person and only shifts to first-person plural in those contexts where “comradery” is an element, such as the “community” aspect of travel narratives. Given that observation, he may well have been present on many occasions in Paul’s missionary activity where third-person narrative occurs.

(4) Oral Sources and Local Tradition

If written sources for Acts cannot be established, what sources are left for Luke’s work? Even if he were present on a large part of Paul’s missionary activity, what was the basis of his account for the history of the early Jerusalem church, the mission of Philip, the conversion of Cornelius, the apostolic conference in Jerusalem, and the many other events of [Acts 1–15](#)? The answer must surely be that he had access to the local traditions of the Christian communities, perhaps eyewitness reports and reminiscences that were cherished and passed down in the churches. As an example, a “we” passage in [Acts 21:8](#) relates that Paul and his fellow travelers stayed in Caesarea with Philip the evangelist. On such an occasion Luke could have heard the story of Philip’s work among the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch. From the Caesarean Christians he may have heard of Cornelius’s conversion. If one assumes that Luke was the traveling companion of Paul who accompanied the apostle to Jerusalem ([21:1–18](#), “we” narrative) and two years later from Caesarea to Rome ([27:1–28:16](#), “we” narrative), he would have had ample opportunity for exposure to all the traditions recorded in Acts.

In considering Luke's information base, one question remains as yet untreated. Did Luke have access to Paul's letters? Did he use them at all in Acts? The answer to this question seems to be no. No quotes from Paul's epistles occur in Acts. There is an undeniable overlap in material— Paul's conversion, his churches in Macedonia and Achaia, his desire to visit Rome. Paul's speeches in Acts are often reminiscent of elements in Paul's epistles, particularly the "farewell address" of [Acts 20](#). But there is no indication that Luke derived any of this information from Paul's epistles. Perhaps Paul's epistles had not yet been collected together and were still at the churches to which he sent them. As Paul's associate, Luke would surely have been aware of Paul's letter-writing activity. He evidently either did not have immediate access to them or did not consider them germane to his purposes. Paul's epistles were mainly occasional letters, addressed to specific problems within individual congregations. Luke had a broader purpose—to tell the story of Paul to the church at large. In any event, Acts and Paul's epistles are independent witnesses to the apostle. The commentary regularly notes the points at which the two overlap.

6. The Text of Acts

In the history of the text of the New Testament, Acts poses a special problem. The early witnesses for the text of Acts diverge more than those of any other New Testament writing. Basically, we have two ancient texts for Acts that are generally referred to as the Alexandrian (or "Egyptian") text and the "Western" text. The "Western" text of Acts differs significantly from the Alexandrian, being almost 10 percent longer. The differences are not apparent in the English translations of Acts. Modern

translations of Acts are all based on the Alexandrian witnesses. Likewise, earlier English translations such as the KJV were based on the “majority” (or “Byzantine”) textual tradition, which also tended to follow the Alexandrian text. One would never guess the radically different readings found in the Western text from reading modern versions of Acts. The ancient witnesses, however, provide ample evidence for the longer Western text of Acts from a very early date. The most important witness to the Western text is a major uncial, codex Bezae (designated by text critics as D), a diglot manuscript containing both the Greek text and a Latin translation of the New Testament in parallel columns. Both the Greek and Latin texts in Bezae follow the Western tradition in Acts. A number of other Greek witnesses also reflect Western readings. Some are early papyri (**P**³⁸, **P**⁴⁸); others are later minuscules (33, 81, 1175). Among the early versions the Old Syriac and Old Latin are the most significant Western witnesses. Early church fathers show familiarity with the Western tradition, among them Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine. In short, the Western tradition is well-attested in very early witnesses, some of which date back to the second century. In fact, based on the date of its witnesses, the Western text has as much claim to antiquity as the Alexandrian.

There are good reasons, however, for seeing the Western text as secondary and derivative from the shorter Alexandrian tradition. Apart from the time-honored text-critical principle that the shorter text is more likely to be the original, the Western text shows many evidences of being an “improved” or harmonizing text. Gaps in the narrative are filled in. Thus in chap. [3](#), when the setting jumps from the temple (v. [8](#)) to Solomon’s

Colonnade (v. [11](#)), the Western text provides the missing link, adding that they “exited [the Temple].” Sometimes one’s curiosity is satisfied by the Western text. If one should wonder what happened to the other prisoners at Philippi, the Western text adds to [16:30](#) that the jailer secured them before exiting with Paul and Silas. Sometimes the Western text reflects a greater emphasis on God’s leading. An example is [19:1](#), where it refers to the Holy Spirit directing Paul to Ephesus, an emphasis lacking in the Alexandrian reading. Finally, the Western text tends to introduce certain biases to the text, among which are a pronounced anti-Semitic element and a tendency to downplay the role of women in the narrative. When all such things are taken into account, however, there still remain a number of Western readings that are not obvious harmonizings or indicative of any bias but only the provision of additional details not found in the Alexandrian text. Such, for instance, is the additional note in the Western reading of [28:16](#) that the centurion turned Paul over to the “stratopedarch” in Rome. In such cases there is the distinct possibility that such details might have dropped out in the Alexandrian tradition through scribal error with the Western preserving the original reading.

The general consensus among text critics today is that the Alexandrian text is the more reliable text. In some instances the Western witnesses may preserve an original reading. For this reason an “eclectic” method is recommended, calling for an examination of each variant on its own merits and not making a blanket *a priori* decision to go with any one text. Since the unique Western readings are not available in any English translation, the commentary regularly points to the more significant of these at the appropriate places or in the footnotes.

7. Luke as a Writer

One of the most significant emphases in research into Luke-Acts over the past half century has been a focus on Luke's own contribution in his two-volume work. One of the pioneers in this area was H. J. Cadbury, who, in his *Making of Luke-Acts* (1927), set the pattern of study by comparing Luke's writings with those of his contemporaries and noting the idiosyncrasies of Luke's style and interests in both Luke and Acts. The emphasis was furthered by the work of H. Conzelmann, who in 1953 emphasized the theological emphases in Luke's work and started a whole spate of work on "Luke the theologian." Cadbury portrayed Luke as a conscious writer with a deliberate literary purpose. Conzelmann engendered consideration of Luke as a theologian, a person of faith. Both emphases are important for obtaining the full benefit from Luke and Acts. The first will preoccupy our attention in this section; the latter, in the next.

(1) Genre of Acts

Luke obviously set out to produce a two-volume work. His dual prefaces amply testify to this ([Luke 1:1–4](#); [Acts 1:1](#)). The Gospel genre had already been established. Luke had his predecessors like Mark and referred to them in his preface ([Luke 1:1](#)). But what was his pattern for Acts? For his story of the early Christian mission, he had no predecessor as far as we know. In a real sense his work was without parallel; yet characteristics of his writing link him with other literary currents.

Acts has much in common with other Greek forms of literature. The device of a literary preface with a formal dedication is

without precedent in biblical literature; it is a formality of Greek literature. There is certainly a biographical interest in Luke's Gospel, and to a certain extent this has been carried over into Acts in the treatment of Peter and Paul. Most who have studied the genre of Luke-Acts feel that it has more in common with Greek historiography. The use of formal speeches, of voyages, and the episodic style all link Acts with the Hellenistic historical monograph.

Greek literature, however, was not the only influence on the form of Acts. The Old Testament seems to have had an even more profound impact. Not only does Acts quote the Old Testament extensively, but the form of much of the Acts narrative is based on Old Testament precedents, like the call of the prophets and the divine commissioning narratives. The overall perspective of the book is not that of the Hellenistic histories with their concepts of fate and destiny but the biblical view that all of history is ultimately under the direction of a sovereign God.

A final form that likely influenced Luke in his conception of Acts was the Gospel form itself. The parallels between the life of Jesus as pictured in Luke's Gospel and the careers of Peter and Paul in Acts have often been noted. Sometimes they are quite striking—parallel miracles, parallel defenses, parallel sufferings. In some sense Luke saw a continuation of the story of Jesus in the lives of the apostles. What Jesus began to do and teach is continued by his faithful witnesses ([Acts 1:1](#)). For Luke the Gospel and Acts represent two stages of the same story.

(2) Language and Style of Acts

Luke has been described as “the most Greek of the New Testament writers.” Certainly the vocabulary of Luke-Acts would indicate his proficiency in the language. His vocabulary is the largest of any New Testament writer and one that exceeds some secular Greek writings, such as those of Xenophon. He wrote in good Hellenistic Greek and often employed constructions from the classical writers, those “Atticisms” so prized by first-century writers, like an occasional use of the optative mode, of the future infinitive, and of the future participle. He used Greek figures of speech, having an especial love for litotes. Still his language is not that of the neoclassicists, but it is instead good literary koine Greek.

Luke’s writings are steeped in the language of the Old Testament. A full 90 percent of his vocabulary is found also in the Septuagint. There are, in addition, a number of Semiticisms not found in the Greek Old Testament. N. Turner suggests that these may be “Jewish Greek,” expressions that would have been common in the Jewish Diaspora. Most frequent in the infancy narratives of [Luke 1–2](#) and in the “Jewish” portions of Acts, chaps. [1–15](#), these probably indicate Luke’s skill as a writer. Throughout Acts there is a verisimilitude in the narrative. Jews speak with a Jewish accent, Athenian philosophers speak in Atticisms, and Roman officials speak and write in the customary legal style. Luke showed not only a familiarity with such linguistic idiosyncrasies but also the ability to depict them through his style of writing.

(3) Speeches of Acts

One of the most characteristic features of Acts is the presence of many speeches interspersed throughout the narrative. Altogether these comprise nearly a third of the text of Acts, about 300 of its approximately 1,000 verses. In all there are twenty-four of these—eight coming from Peter, nine from Paul, and seven from various others. Of the twenty-four, ten can be described as “major” addresses: three “missionary” sermons of Peter (chaps. [2](#); [3](#); [10](#)); a trilogy of speeches from Paul in the course of his mission (chaps. [13](#); [17](#); [20](#)), three “defense speeches” of Paul (chaps. [22](#); [24](#); [26](#)), and Stephen’s address before the Sanhedrin (chap. [7](#)).

The trilogy of Pauline mission speeches is particularly striking, with one major address for each phase of the mission, each addressed to a different group. On the first journey Paul addressed the Jews in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch (chap. 13). On the second he addressed the pagans in his famous Areopagus speech (chap. 20). On the third he spoke to the Christian leaders of the Ephesian congregation in the address at Miletus (chap. [20](#)). Luke presented a balanced variety of speeches with regard to both occasion and listeners.

In recent years a major scholarly debate over the speeches of Acts has focused primarily over the question of whether they are wholly Lukan compositions or whether they are based on historically reliable traditions. One consideration involves the manner in which speeches were employed by Hellenistic historiographers. For his Gospel, Luke had the oral tradition and

predecessors like Mark for the words of Jesus, which existed primarily in the form of short sayings. There was likely no such “sayings of the apostles” tradition available to Luke; and for Acts he presented their teachings in the form of extended discourses or speeches. This speech form links him with the convention of Greek historiographers, who often depicted their characters making major addresses at crucial junctures, such as the eve of a battle. If Luke followed this precedent in his account of the early Christian mission, it is natural to inquire about how the historiographers went about gathering the material for their speeches. Did they employ sources? Did they compose their speeches totally from their own judgment about what might be appropriate to the occasion?

Actually, the evidence from Greek historiography is quite mixed. Speech composition was a major element in ancient rhetorical training. For some historiographers the correctness of form and elegance of the speech was more important than its basis in accurate historical reminiscence; for others, however, this practice was roundly condemned. Polybius, for instance, strongly criticized his predecessors for freely inventing speeches; and in his treatise on history writing, Lucian insisted on facts, fidelity, and accurate reporting. Perhaps the most relevant statement is that of Thucydides, who described his procedure in providing speeches in his historical narrative. He remarked that he was unable to reproduce exactly the words delivered on a given occasion either from his own memory when he had been present or from the reports given him from eyewitnesses but that he had endeavored as closely as possible “to give the general purport of what was actually said.” It has often been suggested that Luke may have followed the same

procedure, gathering information from eyewitnesses, relying on his own memory where possible, and providing as accurately as he could the “gist” of what was said.

It would be hard to deny that Luke provided the speech material in his own words. Even for the longest of them, the Acts speeches are quite short, taking only a few minutes to read aloud. This is one of the ways they differ from those of the Greek historiographers. The latter are generally quite long, many times longer than the speech of Stephen, the longest speech in Acts. The speeches in Acts are a summary, an example of the things said, not a full report of the address. For example, Peter’s speech in the temple square evidently began around three in the afternoon ([3:1](#)) and lasted until sundown ([4:3](#)); but Luke provided only a seventeen-verse précis of the sermon.

Another indication of Luke’s literary contribution in the speeches is that the basic vocabulary and style of the speeches is the same uniform style that runs throughout Acts. Likewise, the speeches all tend to follow a common outline and structure. Then there is an interdependence among the speeches. Peter’s remarks at the Apostolic Conference refer to the account of the conversion of Cornelius; Paul alluded to texts in his Pisidian Antioch address that are only fully expounded in Peter’s sermon at Pentecost. Luke assumed the reader is familiar with the earlier accounts and felt no need to give a fuller treatment. As the author of Acts, Luke provided the speeches—in his words, in his selection of material. But does this mean that he created them and that they are not reliable reports of what was actually said?

Is there evidence that the speeches in Acts are based on reliable traditions? A number of indications point in that direction. One

is the sheer variety of the speeches themselves. One can indeed detect a common structure in many of the speeches, but the content and argument often run in quite different directions. The three missionary speeches to Jews have the most in common (chaps. [2](#); [3](#); [13](#))—Jesus as Messiah, the extensive Old Testament citations, the emphasis on the resurrection. Peter’s speech to the God-fearer Cornelius (chap. [10](#)) follows the same basic pattern. C. H. Dodd long ago argued that the common structure of these sermons reflects the early preaching or “kerygma” of the church. Within Peter’s speeches in [Acts 2–3](#) are elements of a very early Christology—unusual titles for Jesus, such as “servant,” “Righteous One,” “prophet like Moses,” and the concept of Jesus as being “designated” by God as Messiah. Such concepts reflect Jewish-Christian thought and testify to the primitiveness of these speeches.

Stephen’s speech is unique. His emphasis on God’s revelation outside the Holy Land and his temple critique are totally unparalleled in any other speech of Acts. His unusual Scripture traditions are equally without parallel. Such considerations may indicate that Luke was using some sort of Hellenist source—if not a written source, at least an accurate account of their thought gleaned from Hellenist circles. The Areopagus speech of [Acts 17](#) and the words to the pagans at Lystra ([14:15–17](#)) with their “natural theology” and appeal to Greek philosophical thought are altogether different from the sermons to Jews. The Miletus address is strongly reminiscent of the Pauline Epistles, having particularly much in common with the Pastorals. Suffice it to say, the speeches in Acts are suited to their various contexts; and one need not doubt that Luke based them on reliable traditions

and indeed succeeded in giving the “general purport of what was actually said.”

(4) Other Forms in Acts

Luke utilized other forms of material in his narrative of the early Christian witness. **One form Acts has in common with the Gospels is that of the miracle story. In Acts the apostles continued the work of Jesus in performing the same kinds of miracles— healings of the lame, exorcisms, raising the dead. A major difference was that Jesus healed by his own authority; the apostles healed through the power of the Spirit “in the name of Jesus.” Unique to Acts are the so-called “punitive” miracles, where someone suffers punishment for resisting, lying to, or attempting to manipulate the Spirit. The tremendous power of the Holy Spirit behind the advance of the Christian witness has its negative side: one simply does not tamper with the divine Spirit. On the positive side the miracles in Acts are always shown serving God’s word.** Whether it be the tongues of Pentecost or the healing of a lame man in the temple compound, the miracle prepares the way for the preaching of the word and the “greater miracle” of commitment to Christ.

Another type of material found throughout Acts is the travel narrative. Jesus is often depicted as traveling in the Gospels, but the travelogues are of a different nature in Acts with their extensive notes of cities visited, stopping places, and locations sighted from a ship. On the surface many of these “travel notes”

seem almost superfluous, adding no content to the story. This is particularly true of those found in the account of Paul's mission. The notes, however, play their role in the story of Acts. For one, they are quite accurate and give a certain stamp of reliability, as from one who was actually a participant in the events being related. Second, they picture movement and progress. Many of the travel notes are a form of summary depicting how the gospel first reached a new area, whether it be Azotus and Caesarea (8:40), or the cities such as Lydda (9:32) or Joppa (9:36) on the Plain of Sharon (9:32), or the cities of the Phoenician coast (11:19). The constant note of travel enhances the impression of movement as the Christian mission reached out in ever-widening circles.

A third type of material found throughout Acts is the edifying story. Much of the text consists of short episodes. In fact, a great deal of the account of the progress of the Christian witness is told by means of stories. Chapter 19 might serve as an example. We are told that Paul's ministry in Ephesus lasted for three years (20:31), and yet only the briefest account is given of Paul's actual witness in the synagogue and lecture hall (19:8–10). The major portion of the chapter is devoted to a series of episodes, individual encounters with some disciples of John the Baptist (vv. 1–7), some itinerant Jewish exorcists (vv. 13–16), those who had practiced magical arts (vv. 17–19), and the shrine-makers' guild of Ephesus (vv. 23–41).

One might ask what sort of account this is of a major three-year mission. The answer is that it is a rather full account. Luke chose to illustrate the success of Paul's mission through these episodes. There are first disciples of John the Baptist—those

with an incomplete and inadequate understanding of Christ. Paul led them to a full commitment. Then there were the charlatans and the magical papyri—the marks of pagan superstition. The charlatans were exposed, and the charm books were burned. And finally even those with economic interests in town were thwarted in their effort to overturn Paul’s witness.

Luke has taught us quite a bit about Paul’s work in Ephesus and about Christian witness in general—in its encounter with inadequate understanding, fraudulence, popular religion, and powerful forces in society. The theme in all instances is that truth prevails, and the gospel triumphs; Paul only had to remain true to his witness. Throughout Acts, Luke used this episodic style to portray the dynamic of the Christian witness. He conveyed the inner force of the Christian mission through the medium of these stories. Acts does not chronicle mere events; it is “narrative theology” at its best.

A final form that characterizes Acts is the summary. Sometimes these summaries are quite brief and point only to the growth of the Christian community (cf. [6:7](#); [9:31](#); [12:24](#)). Others point to the inner life of the community—its prayer life ([1:14](#)), the hallmarks of its fellowship ([2:42–47](#)), its community of sharing ([4:32–35](#)), and the healing ministry of the apostles ([5:12–16](#)). In form these might be described as the antitheses of the episodes. The episodes teach by means of specific incidents. The summaries generalize, giving a broad impression of the main characteristics of the Christian community. The long summaries

are the three found in chaps. [2](#); [4](#); [5](#). They thus belong to the first days of Christianity after the burst of the Spirit at Pentecost. They portray a community marked by mutual prayer and devotion, a total sharing of selves and substance, complete trust in one another, a passion for witness, a sense of the Spirit's power among them, and a unity of commitment and purpose. They portray an ideal Christian community—the “roots” of the fellowship. These summaries are some of the most valuable material Luke provided in his story of the early church.

(5) Luke's Personal Interests

Before leaving the consideration of Luke as a writer, note a few characteristics of his personality reflected in his writing. Obviously Luke was a good storyteller. The account of Peter's escape from prison (chap. [12](#)) with little Rhoda leaving him at the gate is a masterpiece of suspense and irony. The same can be said of Philip's conversion of the eunuch (chap. [8](#)), of Eutychus's fall from the window (chap. [20](#)), and the narrow escape from the storm at sea (chap. [27](#)).

The latter account illustrates another trait of Luke—his eye for detail. In the storm scene every nautical procedure is carefully described, but this very detail only serves to heighten the suspense of the story. Some of Luke's details can only be attributed to his own personal idiosyncrasies. He must have traveled a great deal because he showed a decided interest in lodging, whether it be Peter with Simon the tanner ([9:43](#)) or Paul with Lydia ([16:15](#)), Priscilla and Aquila ([18:2](#)), Philip ([21:8](#)), Mnason ([21:16](#)), or Publius ([28:7](#)).

Another Lukan interest seems to have been shared meals. Note how often Jesus is shown at meals in Luke's Gospel, and the same continues in Acts. The story begins with Jesus eating with the apostles in the upper room (1:4) and continues right on to the end, with Paul sharing a meal with his pagan shipmates in the storm at sea (27:33f.). One of the hallmarks of the early Christians is described as their breaking bread together and doing so with "glad and sincere hearts" (2:46). And Peter's acceptance of Cornelius is illustrated by his sharing at table with him (11:3). Perhaps this is the key to Luke's emphasis. He knew that one of the surest marks of one's acceptance of fellow human beings is the willingness to share with them at table. This indeed was one of the central issues at the conference in Jerusalem (chap. 15)—making it possible for Jewish and Gentile Christians to express their unity in Christ in table fellowship.

Luke had other interests as well. In general he had a concern for people who are oppressed and downtrodden—people like Samaritans and eunuchs. He likely made it a special point to include Philip's activity as he selected his material for Acts. He cared about the poor also, and that interest is amply exemplified in his Gospel. It too carries over into Acts. Part of his portrait of the ideal early community is one in which those who have share with those who have not, where "there were no needy persons among them" (4:34). There is a concern for women also in Acts. True, Luke was a child of his day and often spoke in "male" language, but he did not fail to show the prominence of women in the early church—the women in the upper room who participated in Pentecost (1:14); Sapphira, who was on "equal terms" in receiving her judgment; Lydia, Priscilla, and the "noble women" of Macedonia (17:4, 12). One of Luke's main

concerns in Acts was to portray a church without human barriers, a community where the gospel is unhindered and truly inclusive.

8. Luke the Historian

It has often been argued that Acts is not a reliable historical document. This opinion seems to have first flowered with the so-called Tübingen school in the midnineteenth century. Its name derives from the German university where F. C. Baur, the leader of this school of thought, taught. Baur attempted a full-scale historical reconstruction of early Christianity in which he argued that the first Christian century was marked by a sharp conflict between Jewish and Gentile Christian factions. The Jewish Christians rallied around Peter as their leader and were legalists, maintaining that Christians should live in strict accordance with the Jewish law. The other faction considered Paul their leader and advocated his law-free, grace-centered gospel.

Obviously, if Baur's reconstruction was at all accurate, Acts could not qualify as a document from this period. Throughout Acts, Peter and Paul are shown to be on good terms. In fact, Peter was the staunchest defender of Paul's law-free Gentile mission at the Jerusalem Conference ([15:7–11](#)). In Acts, Paul is depicted as a law-abiding Jew and well received by the Jerusalem church. This simply does not fit Baur's reconstruction. Baur and his disciples concluded that Acts could not have come from the early Christian period but was rather an eirenicon, a text concerned with resolving differences in the church, and thus a tendentious document coming from the second-century church when the struggle was long over. The

second-century church was labeled the “early catholic” church and was seen as being concerned with unity, peace, and conformity of doctrine. Baur maintained that this second-century Christianity produced Acts—to give the impression that the unity and harmony of its own day had existed in the earlier apostolic period. Acts was thus historically invalid as a document for early Christianity.

The Tübingen hypothesis was eventually discredited. The British scholar J. B. Lightfoot, more than any other, was responsible for this. He demonstrated the late date of the pseudo-Clementine literature, the main documents Baur had used in support of this thesis of the Jewish-Gentile Christian battle in the first century. About the same time another British scholar, Sir Wm. Ramsay, began to rehabilitate the historical credibility of Acts. Ramsay had himself been inclined toward the Tübingen reconstruction of early Christian history and had originally advocated a second-century dating for Acts. However, as a result of his extensive archaeological excavations in Asia Minor, he became increasingly impressed with the accuracy of detail in the Acts account—the names of local officials, place names, and the like. He became convinced that Acts was so accurate in such details that the whole had to be historically trustworthy. The more recent work of W. Gasque and C. Hemer has continued to support historical reliability of Luke’s account through careful scholarship. Of special note is the judgment from the German scholar M. Hengel that Luke measures up well to the best canons of reliable Hellenistic historiography.

Luke seems to have seen himself as something of a historian. His use of the prefaces and the speech form link him with

Hellenistic historiography. Of all the Gospel writers he is the only one who consciously connected the story of Jesus with *world* history (cf. [2:1f.](#); [3:1f.](#)). This interest continues in the Book of Acts. An occasional note connects the story of the church with the Roman emperor and events of the empire (cf. [11:28](#); [18:2](#)). Lesser rulers have an important role, like Herod Agrippa I, Agrippa II, and Gallio, the procurator of Achaia. At the end of the story line Paul was set in Rome for his appearance before no lesser figure than the emperor himself. Luke surely was not interested in history for its own sake, but he was interested in world events where they intersected the young Christian movement. He was above all interested in showing that Christianity is of worldwide significance, that the events which transpired in Jesus Christ had not been done “in a corner” ([26:26](#)). They are worthy of the note of Gentiles, kings, even emperors; for Christ is Savior of all. Surely something of the historian’s interest is in this; but more than that, the Evangelist was concerned to share the Savior of the world *with* the world.

9. Luke the Theologian

If Luke can be called a historian, he is equally qualified for the designation of theologian. **All good historians are interpreters of the events they treat. Through selection, emphasis, and analysis they seek meaning in the events. Luke was no exception. He viewed early Christian history through the eyes of faith and saw constant traces of the divine providence that guided those events.** In this respect he was also a theologian. He wrote from the perspective of faith. This in no way detracts from his stature as a historian. He wrote his history

“from within,” from the viewpoint of faith, and was thus both historian and theologian.

Since the release of H. Conzelmann’s book on Lukan theology in the early fifties, extensive scholarly investigation of the Lukan theological perspective has been underway. The following treatment is designed as a bare introduction to that discussion and is divided into two subsections. The first will deal with two special areas that have dominated the discussion. The second will give an overview of some of the theological distinctives of Acts.

(1) "Salvation History" and "Early Catholicism"

In his seminal work Conzelmann suggested that Luke’s main theological emphasis was that of portraying a divine history of salvation. Taking Luke-Acts together, he saw Luke as dividing holy history into three distinct epochs—that of Israel (the old people of God), that of Christ (the center of all history), and that of the church (the new people of God). He maintained that Luke wrote in a time when the original eschatological expectation of the imminent return of Christ had waned, when Christians were settling down to a long wait and needed to come to terms with their existence in the world. Appealing to [Acts 1:6–8](#), Conzelmann saw Luke as replacing the original eschatological fervor with the agenda of the mission of the church. The Spirit then became tied to the history of the church. In all of this are the seeds of institutionalism and a fall from the immediacy of the individual experience of justification through grace in the Spirit which marked Paul’s theology. Justification has been replaced by salvation history.

Many of Conzelmann's conclusions are questionable. First, the idea of the "delayed Parousia" has been greatly overplayed. Acts often evidences that the original eschatological fervor of the Christian community had not waned. The mission of the church was itself born out of the conviction that Christians were the people of God of the end time and were to be the "light to the nations" who bore the message of God's decisive redemptive act in Christ. Second, it is simply not true that the Spirit is tied to the church in Acts. The Spirit is always transcendent in Acts. The true salvation-historical perspective of Luke-Acts is not that of a three-part periodization of *earthly* history but a two-part scheme where God in his Spirit continues *from transcendence* to work among his people on the earthly, historical level.

Finally, Conzelmann set up an unnecessary either/or. The church exists in the world, in history, and it must come to terms with that reality. Yet the church mediates the living, convicting word of God. The church only fails when it is no longer open to the *living* word, to the convicting, judging, leading Spirit of God but instead ties both word and Spirit to its own dogma and institutions. There is no evidence that this was true of the Christians in Acts. The opposite was the case—their assumptions were constantly challenged anew by their openness to the Spirit at work among them.

E. Käsemann would disagree with that last statement. He sees strong marks of the institutionalized church in Acts. Somewhat reminiscent of the old Tübingen hypothesis, he labels this "early catholicism," meaning by this the early manifestations of tendencies that eventually developed into the full-blown "Catholic" church with its elaborate hierarchy and dogma. The

“catholic” tendencies Käsemann saw as being present in Acts include such things as the formation of hardened dogma; apostolic succession and transmitted authority; a distinction between clergy and laity; an authoritative tradition of scriptural interpretation; sacramentalism; a concern for unity and consolidation; and a historical, institutional perspective. Käsemann's “early Catholic” thesis has generally not been well received by the scholarly community. There simply is no evidence for dogmatism, successionism, sacramentalism, traditionalism, and institutionalism in Acts.

(2) Theological Aspects of Acts

To speak of a “theology” in Acts in any systematic sense probably would not be proper. If one assumes that Luke’s speeches reflect their actual settings, one would expect a certain theological diversity. This does seem to be the case—the primitive Christology in Peter’s speeches to Jews, the “natural theology” in Paul’s addresses to pagans, the cultic-reform element in Stephen’s speech.

Two observations with regard to treatments of the theology of Acts are noteworthy. First, it might be well to drop the hyphen in Luke-Acts and concentrate on each of Luke’s two writings separately in dealing with Luke’s theology, as M. Parsons has suggested. A common procedure has been to run an analysis of the theological themes in the Gospel of Luke and then search for confirmation of these in Acts. The result has often been a lopsided picture that omits many of the major emphases in Acts. Acts has a different historical setting from Luke and utilizes different literary genres. It should stand on its own. The second observation relates closely to the first: a theology of Acts should

derive primarily from its narrative movement. Acts is basically narrative, and its “theology” is to be found primarily there. What are the recurrent themes in the episodes? What motifs dominate in the movement of the story line? This is where the “theology” of Acts really lies. It is a “narrative theology.” As such, it will be primarily considered in section 11 under the themes of Acts.

A few theological distinctives in the more traditional sense, however, have often been observed in Acts and should be considered. The Christology of Acts might best be described as a “messianic Christology.” Most of the Christological statements occur in the speeches to Jews where the emphasis is on convincing them from the Old Testament Scriptures that Jesus is the promised Messiah. Closely tied to this is the emphasis on the resurrection. Throughout Acts the decisive act of Christ is described in terms of his resurrection. The resurrection is the event that demonstrates Christ is Messiah. The messianic emphasis likely explains why atonement is not a major emphasis in Acts. By the resurrection God con-firmed the messianic status of Jesus. Less emphasis falls on the death of Jesus. The atonement is present to a limited extent in Acts—in Paul’s reference to Christ’s death according to the Scriptures ([13:27–29](#)) and in his description of the church as being “purchased through his own blood” ([20:28](#)). It is probably implicit in the “servant” terminology of Peter’s sermon in the temple square as well as in the strong stress on repentance found throughout Acts (cf. [2:38](#); [26:20](#)).

Luke is often faulted for not including the idea of justification in the Pauline portions of Acts. The idea is not wholly missing (cf. [13:38f.](#)), and it should be noted that the terminology of

justification does not occur in all of Paul's own epistles, including the Corinthian letters. Still, Acts reveals much in common with Paul's thought with respect to receiving salvation. It is never through works. Peter's words about the yoke of the law and his insistence on salvation through God's grace (15:10f.) could hardly be closer to the thought of Paul. Luke was no systematic theologian, and nowhere in Acts is a clear soteriology worked out; but throughout there is a simple gospel that salvation comes by no other name than Jesus (cf. 2:38f.; 4:12; 16:31), a salvation brought by the work of God and solely as a gift.

10. **The Purpose of Acts**

In any consideration of an author's purpose, the logical starting point would be his own statement on the matter. Luke did in fact provide such a statement in the preface to his Gospel. If the preface was intended to introduce both volumes, as is likely the case, then **v. 4 provides Luke's intent**. The preface is very general: **“that you may know the certainty (*asphaleian*) of the things you have been taught”** (Luke 1:4). The preceding verses have described how he went about reaching this goal—by closely following the events as they had come down to him through eyewitnesses and servants of the word and by arranging them in an orderly fashion. The emphasis on literary predecessors, eyewitnesses, and careful investigation would indicate a historian's interest—to present the events in an accurate and well-arranged manner. The emphasis on “certainty” (literally “firm foundation”) would point to his “theologian's” interest—to give a solid grounding in the faith. His reference to **“the things you have been taught” would indicate that**

he was writing to someone who had already received some instruction (discipleship) in the Christian traditions. To give “Theophilus” a solid grounding in the faith by means of an orderly account was Luke’s stated purpose. Can we know more?

Some have seen a clue to a more specific purpose in Luke’s “addressee,” Theophilus. The name is a well-established Greek name. Since **its etymology yields “lover of God,”** it has often been concluded that Luke intended the name symbolically, perhaps referring to those “God-fearers” who were associated with the synagogues, Gentiles who shared with the Jews their faith in God but who had not undergone full proselyte procedure and converted to Judaism. E. Goodspeed suggested that Theophilus may have been Luke’s publisher and that the inclusion of his name would indicate that Luke intended his work for the secular book market. **B. H. Streeter postulated that Theophilus must have been an influential Roman official since the title “most excellent” is reserved elsewhere in Acts for high-ranking officials.** He suggested that Theophilus may have been Flavius Clemens, the cousin of the emperor Domitian, who may have been a secret Christian. Recently Agrippa II has been suggested. Perhaps **the most popular “Theophilus Theory” has been that he was Paul’s legal counsel in Rome, and Luke-Acts was written as a brief for the preparation of his case.**

Of all these theories, **the God-fearer suggestion has the most to commend it.** Luke's reference to the things Theophilus had been taught as well as the specifically Christian detail of Luke and Acts was surely intended for those who had significant acquaintance with Christianity and were either strongly inclined toward it or were already (as seems most likely) Christian. It is difficult to conceive of a Roman official or Gentile pagan sorting through all of Luke-Acts for the material of interest.

Some have argued that Luke-Acts was written to counter a particular false teaching. Most often suggested has been Gnosticism. Any evidence for Luke fighting Gnosticism in his books is indirect at best. In Acts the threat to the church is not from within the fellowship but always from without. The same can be said for Marcion. The emphasis on Christianity's roots in Judaism can be better explained on other grounds than as a polemic against Marcionism. We are thus finally left with Luke's general statement of purpose. Does Acts offer any more specific indication of Luke's purpose through its recurring themes? The evidence points to an affirmative answer and to a multiplicity of "purposes."

11. **The Themes of Acts**

In speaking of an author's "purpose," two problems arise. One is that this assumes we can pick the author's brain. I am not sure that we can. We only know him through his works and can ultimately only speak of the emphases that seem to stand out in

his writings. The second problem is that attempts to delineate a single purpose of a writing tend to become overly focused and to omit other significant motifs. **It seems better to speak of themes and to acknowledge a multiplicity of them in Acts.** None of them is distinct. **They all interweave and overlap with one another to furnish together the rich tapestry that is the story of Acts.**

(1) World Mission

If Luke gave an explicit clue to his purpose anywhere in Acts, it would **be the thematic 1:8. In answer to the disciples' question about the restoration of the kingdom, Jesus set before them a mission to the world.** They were to be witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. This verse presents **a rough geographical outline of the spread of the Christian mission** as depicted in Acts. It began in Jerusalem (chaps. **1–5**), then it started moving out from Jerusalem into all Judea and Samaria (chaps. **6–8**), and finally with Paul went “to the ends of the earth” (chaps. **13–28**). Since the term “ends of the earth” was used of Rome in *Pss. Sol.* 8:16, it generally has been assumed that the mission reached its goal with Paul’s arrival in Rome.

Such may not be the case. The term “ends of the earth” is an Old Testament phrase for the ultimate limits of civilization and appears in Greco-Roman literature with the same connotation. In some literature it is used of Ethiopia. In a real sense Philip, with his Samaritan mission and witness to the Ethiopian eunuch,

could be described as having fulfilled Jesus' commission. The mission in Acts tends to move in circles—not in a straight line. The Gentile mission, for instance, actually began with Philip. Then it was initiated anew by Peter with Cornelius (chap. [10](#)). Finally, it was taken up fully by the Antioch church ([11:20](#)). The same is true geographically. There was an apparent ever-increasing circle of witness from Jerusalem outward, but it had a way of doubling back. Paul's third mission was spent mainly in Ephesus. There was no new geographical expansion, no territory he visited that he had not already visited on his second journey. And Rome was not the final goal of Acts in a geographical sense. The mission had reached there already—long before Paul (cf. [18:2](#); [28:14f.](#)).

That Luke was not concerned with giving a complete history of the mission and expansion of the early church is amply evidenced also by consulting Paul's epistles. There was a Pauline congregation at Colosse as we know from that epistle, but Luke did not mention Paul's work there. Paul spoke of his having preached in Illyricum ([Rom 15:19](#)). Acts is silent on this. There was a strong Christian community in North Africa by the early second century, and Apollos seems to have learned of Christ there ([Acts 18:24f.](#)). Luke said nothing about it, nor did he relate the missionary activity of any of the Twelve apostles outside Judea, not even that of Peter. He gave only one line of the mission thrust—that of Paul. And **through his picture of Paul he presented a paradigm of Christian mission for all time.**

The ends of the earth are never reached in Acts. The mission goal is never completed. It remains open, yet to be fulfilled.

Paul continued bearing his witness in Rome. **The abrupt ending of the book is open-ended.** There are many “completed” missions in Acts. Each of Paul’s has a sort of closure with his return to Antioch or Jerusalem. But **each ending is the starting point for a new beginning.**

Perhaps that is the missionary message of Acts. The story remains open. There must always be new beginnings. The “ends of the earth” are still out there to receive the witness to Christ.

(2) Providence of God

That **the mission of the church is under the direct control of God is perhaps the strongest single theme in the theology of Acts.**

One of the primary ways in which it is set is through **the use of Scripture in a promise-fulfillment pattern.** Acts makes

extensive use of Old Testament Scripture, particularly the prophets and psalms. The quotations are often presented with the formula **“the Scripture had to be fulfilled”** (cf. [1:16](#)). These **Old Testament quotations occur at almost every juncture of the church’s life**. They establish the necessity for replacing Judas ([1:16–21](#)), provide the basis for the miracle at Pentecost ([2:16–21](#)), and prove the necessity of the death ([2:25–28](#)) and resurrection of Jesus ([2:34–35](#)). Scripture establishes the Gentile witness ([13:47](#)) and the Gentile inclusion in the people of God ([15:16–18](#)). The examples could be multiplied. **Acts 26:22 summarizes this emphasis. All is according to Scripture, and all is in the divine purpose.** The point is that the Scriptures legitimate the entire activity of the Christian community—its faith in Christ and its witness. The Scriptures establish that these things *must be* fulfilled. They attest to the divine purpose, and their **fulfillment is a certain sign that God is behind the events.**

It is not only with regard to Scripture that one finds this emphasis on the “divine necessity” (Greek, *dei*) in Acts. The suffering of Paul as Christ’s faithful witness was part of the divine purpose ([9:16](#)), as was his destiny to appear before Caesar ([19:21](#); [23:11](#); [27:24](#)). The miracles likewise attest to the divine providence behind the entire life and witness of the Christian community in Acts. This aspect of God’s providence is most apparent in the activity of the Spirit.

(3) Power of the Spirit

The role of the Holy Spirit is part of the emphasis on God's providence in Acts. It is primarily through God's Spirit that the community was aware of the divine power at work among them. **So central was the work of the Spirit in Acts that some have suggested that a more appropriate title for the book would be "The Acts of the Holy Spirit."** The Spirit is not even mentioned in eleven chapters of Acts, but the Spirit does not have to be named to have been present in Acts. Luke gave enough clues in the earlier chapters of Acts for readers to realize that references to the **Christians speaking "boldly" and the like indicate that the Spirit was with them. Such indications occur to the last verse of Acts.**

In a real sense, the church was born of the Spirit at Pentecost (chap. [2](#)) just as the infancy narrative of Luke's Gospel shows how Jesus was born of the Holy Spirit. The parallel does not end there. Just as the Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism ([Luke 3:22](#)) and continued to abide with him throughout his ministry ([Luke 4:18](#)), so the Spirit was the constant companion in the life of the young church. The Holy Spirit is a gift to every believer ([Acts 2:38](#)) and comes as a special endowment of power in times of crisis to enable a bold witness (cf. [4:8](#)). The Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptures that the Christian community saw being fulfilled in its own time (cf. [4:25](#)).

As the divine power at work in the community, **the Spirit also possesses an awesome capacity of judgment, as Ananias and Sapphira experienced** when they were guilty of lying to the Spirit ([5:1–11](#)). It is striking that the Spirit is not linked directly to the healing narratives in Acts. Generally healings are performed “in the name of Jesus.” The name of Jesus, however, represents his presence and his power, and the presence of Jesus is experienced in the church through the Spirit. **The Spirit is the abiding presence of Jesus; the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus** (cf. “Holy Spirit” and “Spirit of Jesus” in [16:6–7](#)).

The most characteristic role of the Spirit in Acts is his activity in the Christian mission. **Every major breakthrough in mission occurs through the guidance of the Spirit. Sometimes this is explicitly stated, as when the Spirit called the church at Antioch to set apart Paul and Barnabas for a mission (13:3f.) and when the Spirit prevented Paul from working in Bithynia and Asia and literally forced him to the first mission on European soil at Philippi (16:6–10). Sometimes the Spirit’s activity is more subtly depicted in story form. Philip’s pioneering witness to the Ethiopian eunuch is a good example.** The Spirit is explicitly mentioned in [8:29](#), [39](#); but his presence is felt at every point of the narrative, directing Philip’s every step and providentially setting the stage with every possible “coincidence” (the perfect Scripture, a pool of water at just the right time) for the conversion of the Ethiopian. An important activity of the Spirit is his

“legitimation” of new groups in the Christian outreach—the Samaritans ([8:17–25](#)), Cornelius and his fellow Gentiles ([10:44–48](#)), the disciples of John the Baptist at Ephesus ([19:6f.](#)). Each of these events marked a new breakthrough, a new level of outreach in the Christian mission; and each was accompanied by a special, outwardly demonstrable evidence that the Spirit had come upon them and God had accepted them.

Scripture, miracles, angelic visions, the activity of the Spirit: such are the constant accompaniment of the Christian mission in Acts. Such were the sure evidences to the young community that their endeavors were within the purposes and under the direction of God.

(4) Restored Israel

Much of Acts concerns the Christian witness to the Jews. The first five chapters center in Jerusalem and are preoccupied with the preaching to the Jews of the city. Four of the major speeches of Acts are addressed to Jewish audiences (chaps. [2](#); [3](#); [7](#); [13](#)). **Paul always began his witness in a new locality by entering the synagogue.** A mixed picture of the Jewish response to the gospel, however, emerges. Growing success—3,000 converts at Pentecost ([2:41](#)), a total of 5,000 in the Jerusalem church only shortly thereafter ([4:4](#)), the conversion of priests ([6:7](#)), and “many thousands” of believers in the Jerusalem church by the time of Paul’s last visit there ([21:20](#))—paralleled a growing rejection of the Christian message by the Jews. This began with the Jewish officials, particularly the Sanhedrin, who arrested and tried the apostles twice (chaps. [4–5](#)), whipped them on the latter occasion ([5:40](#)),

and eventually killed Stephen ([7:57–60](#)). A massive persecution followed, led by the Jewish Zealot Saul ([8:3](#)); but **even Saul’s conversion did not end the Jewish resistance. Paul became the persecuted.**

The pattern of his rejection by the Diaspora synagogues is set in Pisidian Antioch ([13:44–47](#)) and continued throughout his ministry all the way to the Jews of Rome ([28:23–28](#)). Yet even there some Jews believed Paul’s witness to Christ ([28:24](#)). Still, the Jewish resistance to Paul was fairly complete by the end of Acts. Beginning with the mob scene in the temple square ([21:27](#)), the “whole crowd” of Jews attempted to lynch the apostle; and this strong Jewish opposition kept Paul confined under Roman custody and forced his appeal to Caesar. It stands behind the remainder of the story of Acts.

What is one to make out of this picture of the mixed response of the Jews to the Christian message? The positive response should not be overlooked. A successful witness in Jerusalem resulted in a Jewish Christian community containing thousands of converts. But the picture is one of only limited success. **Most of the Jews did not accept Christ.** There was no question of Judaism becoming Christian in any official sense. **The Sanhedrin and the synagogues rejected and even persecuted the messengers of Christ.**

Stephen’s speech in [Acts 7](#) is programmatic in this whole development. It **has two major themes, and both point to the Jewish rejection of the Christian message.** Stephen’s first theme showed from Israel’s history that the people had

always rejected their divinely appointed leaders. What was true in the past should only be expected in their rejection of Christ at that time. Second, Stephen showed that the official Jewish manner of worship had likewise failed. **The temple should have been a place of genuine worship. It had instead become a man-made institution, tying God down to a particular people and place. It could no longer remain the worship center for the true people of God.** Stephen's speech thus set down the theological agenda for the Jewish rejection of Christ. **The temple could no longer remain in the center for the worship of God, nor could Jerusalem continue as the "holy city."**

At the beginning of Acts, Jerusalem was at the center. Everything radiated from Jerusalem—the first witnesses went out from there; Paul always returned there after each mission. All this changed with Paul's final journey to Jerusalem. In the temple, the center of official Jewish worship, Paul was mobbed by the crowd. The gates of the temple were shut (21:30), and they never again are reopened in the narrative of Acts. From this point on, the movement was away from Jerusalem and toward Rome, the center of the Gentile world.

Clearly Judaism as a whole, Judaism in any “official” sense, did not accept Christ; Luke underlined this reality in Paul’s concluding quote from Isaiah to the Jews of Rome, a prophetic text that pointed to precisely this “calloused” heart on the part of Israel (28:27). **In Romans 9–11 Paul pointed to the same experience of the Jewish rejection of the gospel.** But this is not the whole story. It is a question of who at that point constituted the true people of God. **Throughout Acts, Christians are clearly the people of God, the true or “restored” Israel.** Acts begins with the disciples’ question about when the kingdom would be restored to Israel (1:6). Jesus rejected their question of time, but he did not reject the question of Israel’s restoration. Indeed, the mission he gave the disciples was closely related to the question of God’s people. **God’s people are now the people of the Messiah, i.e., a people on mission, a light to the nations (13:47).** **The extensive use of the Old Testament in the early speeches of Acts points to this. They establish that God has fulfilled his promises in his final decisive act of “raising up” Christ as the Messiah. The people of the Messiah are the true people of God, the “restored” Israel.** This reality is depicted in the language used throughout Acts for Christians. They are described as “brothers,” the favorite self-designation among Jews. They are “believers” — those who believe in God’s Messiah, the promised Messiah *to Israel*. **They are “the way,” the true way within the people of God.** The true people of God are not coterminous with the historical, ethnic Jewish nation. They are in direct continuity with the people of God of the old covenant, the Israel

of the Messiah, the people of the promises. **In Acts the church is not Israel but a new, restored Israel not confined to one people or place.**

(5) Inclusive Gospel

If Acts gives a picture of massive Jewish rejection of the gospel and their resulting exclusion from the people of God, it also gives the other side as well—**the inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God.** It is not a matter of the exclusion of one, inclusion of the other. As we have seen, Acts depicts great success among the Jews and a sizable Jewish-Christian congregation. It is rather the story of how these early Jewish-Christians were led by God to the vision of a more inclusive people of God, **a church that transcended all barriers of human discrimination and prejudice.** As **F. Stagg pointed out, it is a question of the struggle for an “unhindered gospel.”** For Jewish Christians the idea of accepting Gentiles into the people of God would not have come easy, particularly accepting Gentiles without first requiring that they convert to Judaism. Judaism already had a procedure for admitting Gentile proselytes, and it involved circumcision and agreeing to live by the Jewish Torah. It is nothing short of remarkable that the early Jewish Christians were able to overcome this understanding and conclude that only belief in Jesus as the Messiah qualifies for membership in the people of God.

Chapters 6–15 largely concern this story of the inclusion of the Gentiles. Beginning with Stephen’s vision

of a God not tied to locale or cult, the first steps were taken by Philip in his outreach to the “half-Jewish” Samaritans and the Gentile Ethiopian (chap. [8](#)). The central place is occupied by Peter’s being led through divine vision to preach to the God-fearing Cornelius and his Gentile friends (chap. [10](#)). The gift of the Spirit to the Gentiles convinced Peter that God accepted them with no further qualifications, and the basic principle was established. A witness to Gentiles was undertaken by the Antioch church ([11:20](#)), and it was that congregation that sent Paul and Barnabas forth on mission.

In the course of this mission, Paul turned from the Jews to the Gentiles at Antioch of Pisidia. He pointed to the words of Isaiah, which provide the scriptural base for the witness to the Gentiles ([13:47](#)). The great success among the Gentiles both in Antioch and on Paul and Barnabas’s mission prompted the major conference in Jerusalem over the matter of Gentile inclusion (chap. [15](#)). There the issue was settled: Gentiles were to be accepted into God’s people without the requirements of the Torah. The restored people of God were to be an inclusive community—Jew *and* Gentile.

The inclusive message of Acts goes far beyond racial inclusiveness. It extends to economic levels, as is evidenced by the early church’s practice of sharing so as not to permit any needy person among them. It extends to physical barriers: the lame beggar at the temple gate and the Ethiopian eunuch were no longer excluded from full participation in the people of God. Women like Lydia and Priscilla were given a leading role in the young Christian fellowship, which is quite remarkable for that time and culture.

The inclusiveness extends in every direction—the gospel was preached to governors, kings, perhaps even the emperor. It has no bounds but is an *inclusive* gospel.

Another side to inclusiveness is unity. Honest inclusiveness implies genuine acceptance. The “Apostolic Decrees” of chap. [15](#) probably are to be seen in this light, as cultic provisions designed to enable table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians. F. C. Baur notwithstanding, the issue of **Christian fellowship and unity was central for the early church, since many of the congregations undoubtedly consisted of a mix of Jewish and Gentile members. The issue of mutual acceptance and genuine unity was vital.**

An expanding mission and a truly inclusive gospel demand a unity of fellowship where no barriers exist.

(6) Faithful Witnesses

The concept of “witness” is the term that links the two halves of Acts together. For the most part, Luke reserved the title “apostle” for the Twelve, indicating by it their unique role as witnesses to the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus ([1:21f.](#)). **The term “witness” (martyrs) links the work of the Twelve ([1:8](#)) with Stephen ([22:20](#)) and with Paul ([10:39–41](#); [13:31](#); [22:15](#); [26:16](#)).** All in their own way were

witnesses to the risen Lord (26:16), but their primary role was to bear their faithful testimony (martyria) to his word.

In Acts the role of witness is closely linked to that of discipleship. A true disciple is a faithful witness, not only willing to bear testimony to Christ but even to suffer for him. The word “witness” came in the later church to have just that connotation: a true witness is one who carries his or her testimony to the death. Our word “martyr” derives from this later usage of the Greek word for “witness” (*martys*). Whether the word carries such a connotation in Acts is doubtful, though its application to Stephen (22:20) comes close. That a faithful witness must be willing to suffer is expressed throughout Acts, particularly in the parallels drawn between the experiences of Jesus, Peter, Stephen, and Paul. These have often been noted, and the more striking of them are regularly pointed out in the commentary. Peter’s healings parallel those of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Stephen’s martyrdom bears striking resemblance to the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. Paul’s final journey to Jerusalem, the mob in the temple square, the charges brought against him, and the trial scenes all have their counterparts in the passion narrative of Luke’s Gospel. The careers of Peter and Paul even share links within Acts—similar miracles, escapes from prison, and the like. Luke seems to have brought his

materials together and emphasized them in such a fashion as to highlight the correspondences— to present a sort of discipleship succession narrative. An overarching theme binds them all together: **The true prophet, the faithful witness can expect suffering and rejection**. Stephen experienced firsthand the truth of this theme of his speech. But so did Peter and Paul, the other faithful witnesses in Acts. Perhaps this was Luke’s way of illustrating the truth of Jesus’ words: “A student ... will be like his teacher” ([Luke 6:40](#)).

(7) Relationship to the World

The last half of Acts emphasizes the relationship of Christians to the Roman political authorities by two recurring patterns. First, the constant note that Paul was innocent of breaking any law is acknowledged by the magistrates of Philippi, declared by Gallio in Corinth, Lysias in Jerusalem, and in turn by Felix, Festus, and Agrippa II. The latter sums up the matter: Paul could have been released had he not appealed to Caesar ([26:32](#)). All the officials agreed that Paul had not broken any Roman law, and any charges the Jews had brought against him were solely a matter of internal Jewish religious disputes (cf. [18:15](#); [23:29](#); [25:19](#)). **Second, in many instances Roman officials stepped in to deliver Paul from Jewish threats to his life**—Gallio at Corinth, Lysias from the temple mob and the plot of the forty zealots to ambush Paul, eventually Caesar himself with the right of appeal, which rescued Paul from the prospect of an unjust trial in Jerusalem. Many interpreters have seen in these emphases an apologetic motive—an appeal to the Roman authorities to acknowledge

Christian innocence of any political crimes and to secure their tolerance and protection. It has sometimes been argued that the Romans had a list of legal and illegal religions and that this apologetic motif was designed to secure Christian recognition as a sect of Judaism and protection under Judaism's status as a legal religion (*religio licita*). There are serious problems with this view. For one, no evidence demonstrates that the Romans had such a list. Second, it is doubtful that this emphasis in Acts was directed to Roman officials. The Romans are simply not depicted in an altogether favorable light. Felix was controlled by his avarice. Festus could not live by his own standards of justice but was willing to compromise them out of favoritism to the Jews. If Luke had really wanted to appeal to the Romans, he would scarcely have pictured them in so unflattering a light.

More likely this emphasis in Acts is directed to Christian readers as a realistic assessment of the political situation. **Paul exemplified how to relate to the system. He experienced considerable injustice at the hands of Roman justice, being held in prison for an undue length of time by officials who had already acknowledged his innocence. But Paul never gave up. He made use of the legal rights he possessed—using his citizenship rights, appealing to Caesar. And Paul was careful not to transgress a law.** Clearly whatever he suffered at the hands of the political authorities was not due to any civil crime on his part but solely to his witness for Christ (cf. [1 Pet 4:15f.](#)). Another side to the “Roman” emphasis is the favorable action of the Roman officials toward the Christians, which showed them as possible candidates for witness. It was

not by accident that Paul witnessed to Roman officials like Sergius Paulus and Felix. Through Paul's example Luke set forth a realistic political agenda for his Christian readers: give no grounds for charges against you, use what legal rights you have, be willing to suffer for your faith, and **bear your witness where you can. Even Rome could be won to Christ.**

(8) Triumph of the Gospel

The story of Acts can perhaps be summarized in the single phrase “the triumph of the gospel.”

QUOTE: It is a triumphant story of how the early Christian community in the power of the Spirit saturated their world with the message of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. It was not an easy path. There were obstacles from within. Old assumptions were challenged. Opinions had to be revised and prejudices overcome as the Spirit led to an ever more inclusive people of God. There were abundant obstacles from without—

imprisonments, beatings, martyrdoms, storms at sea and angry mobs on land. But the faithful witnesses continued their testimony. The word of God grew, bearing ever more fruit among both Jews and Gentiles. The Spirit of God was behind it all, and the gospel triumphed.

**A danger in such triumph is the arrogance of a lopsided
*“theology of glory.”***

The picture of the faithful witnesses in Acts must be placed alongside that of the triumphant word. There is no arrogance there—only persecution, suffering, even death. The witnesses do not triumph—the *word* triumphs, and the word only triumphs when the witnesses are faithful servants.

Only in being open to the Spirit of God were the witnesses of Acts able to fulfill the divine commission.

Often the Spirit almost had to override their will, as in Peter’s struggle to understand how God could include Cornelius and his

fellow Gentiles. **There is no room for arrogance here**—only humility and openness to God’s direction.

QUOTE:

The Book of Acts is in a real sense a book for renewal. It calls the church back to its roots—to the early church in the upper room in its undivided devotion to prayer, to its missionary fervor, its fellowship and sharing, its mutual trust and unity. It sets a pattern for faithful discipleship, for a witness that walks in the footsteps of the Master, a wholehearted commitment with a willingness to sacrifice and even to suffer. It speaks to us when discouraged, reminding us that all time is in God’s hands, reassuring us of the reality of his Spirit in our lives and witness. It challenges us to open our hearts to the power of the Spirit that we might be

faithful witnesses to the word and come to experience anew its triumph in our own time.

12. The Structure of Acts

Acts falls naturally into two divisions: the mission of the Jerusalem church (chaps. [1–12](#)) and the mission of Paul (chaps. [13–28](#)). Each of these may be subdivided into two main parts. In the Jerusalem portion chaps. [1–5](#) treat the early church in Jerusalem; chaps. [6–12](#), the outreach beyond Jerusalem. In the Pauline portion [13:1–21:16](#) relates the three major missions of Paul; [21:27–28:31](#) deals with Paul's defense of his ministry.

- New American Commentary

Introduction To The Acts of the Apostles

Acts is unique among the NT writings, in that its main purpose is to record a selective history of the early church following the resurrection of Christ. **It is the second part of a two-volume work, with the Gospel of Luke being the first volume.** Both books are dedicated to a person named Theophilus, and [Acts 1:1](#) explicitly refers back to Luke's Gospel.

Author

Both the Gospel of Luke and Acts are anonymous, but the earliest discussions attribute them to Luke. The name “Luke” appears only three times in the NT: [Colossians 4:14](#); [2 Timothy 4:11](#); [Philemon 24](#). All three references are in epistles written by Paul from prison, and all three mention Luke’s presence with Paul.

The earliest discussion of the authorship of Luke and Acts is from Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons in Gaul, writing in the late second century. He attributes the books to Luke, the coworker of Paul, and notes that the occurrence of the first-person narrative (“we”) throughout the later chapters of Acts (starting at [16:10](#)) indicates that the author of Acts was a companion of Paul and present with him on these occasions. These “we” passages in Acts are the key to the authorship of both Acts and the Gospel of Luke.

[Colossians 4:14](#) indicates that Luke was a physician, and attempts have been made to bolster Lukan authorship by arguing that Luke and Acts use technical medical language. This does not seem to be the case, as Luke seems to have avoided technical language in order to communicate plainly to his readers, but his detailed description of illnesses perhaps reflects his interests as a physician (cf. [Acts 28:8](#)). In addition, all the external evidence refers to Luke as the author.

Other than the three NT references, nothing certain is known of Luke. Early traditions link him with Antioch, but that is probably based on the reference in [Acts 13:1](#) to “Lucius,” which is a Latin name. “Luke” is a Greek name, and both books are

written in excellent Greek. His thorough acquaintance with the OT may reflect that Luke was a converted God-fearer (a Gentile who attended the Jewish synagogue) or Jewish proselyte (convert), though he could have gained his biblical knowledge after becoming a Christian.

Date

Some scholars date Acts c. A.D. 70. This assumes that Acts was written *after* the Gospel of Luke ([Acts 1:1](#)) and that Luke used the Gospel of Mark as one of his sources ([Luke 1:1-2](#)). (Early tradition has Mark's Gospel written after Peter's death, which most likely occurred in the mid-60s.) Others date Acts in the 70s or 80s. They hold that the primary purpose of Acts was to give an account of how and where the gospel spread, rather than to be a defense of Paul's ministry (thus accounting for the omission of the events at the end of his life). Thus the gospel spread to "the end of the earth" ([1:9](#))—that is, to Rome, which represented the end of the earth as the center of world power. But a number of scholars date Acts as early as A.D. 62, basing their view primarily on the abrupt ending of the book. Since Acts ends with Paul in Rome under house arrest, awaiting his trial before Caesar ([28:30-31](#)), it would seem strange if Luke knew about Paul's release (a proof of his innocence), possibly about his defense before Caesar (fulfilling [27:24](#)), and about his preaching the gospel as far as Spain (cf. note on [28:30-31](#)), but then did not mention these events at the end of Acts. It seems most likely, then, that the abrupt ending is an indication that Luke wrote Acts c. A.D. 62, before these events occurred.

Theme

In Acts, **believers are empowered by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ among both Jews and Gentiles, and in doing this they establish the church**. In addition to this, Acts explains how Christianity, although it is new, is in reality the one true religion, rooted in God's promises from the beginning of time. In the ancient world it was important that a religion be shown to have stood the test of time. Thus Luke presents the church as the fulfillment and extension of God's promises.

Text

The early manuscripts of Acts have a greater variety of readings than any other NT book. This is reflected in the ESV footnotes that provide alternative readings, as well as the absence of whole verses in some instances ([8:37](#); [15:34](#); [24:7](#); [28:29](#)). The greatest diversity is shown by a group of manuscripts that scholars refer to as the "Western text," an early version of Acts that is about ten percent longer than the other texts. Its main difference from the others is in providing additional detail and smoothing out the narrative. No standard English translation follows the Western text. Some of its more interesting readings are provided in the ESV footnotes, such as the note about the hours when Paul preached in the hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus ([19:9](#)).

Distinctive Features

Though Acts has much in common with the Gospels, it has a number of unique features. One of these is its genre: it is the only NT book that tells about the ministry of the apostles, hence

its traditional name, “The Acts of the Apostles.” It deals primarily with two of them, Peter and Paul. Often Luke shows how events in their ministries parallel each other and the ministry of Jesus as well.

Among the unique features of Acts are the frequent *summaries*, where Luke provides a broad generalization about the life of the church at a particular time or place, such as the common life after Pentecost ([2:42-47](#)), the early Christian sharing of goods ([4:32-35](#)), and the apostolic miracles ([5:12-16](#)). Sometimes the summaries are much briefer, such as the single verse that sums up Paul’s ministry of more than two years in Ephesus ([19:10](#)). Luke’s usual method of presenting the Christians’ ministry is more “episodic,” highlighting individual incidents that illustrate their work, giving it greater liveliness and interest. For instance, at Ephesus this includes the conversion of some disciples of John the Baptist ([19:1-7](#)), the “backfiring” exorcism of the sons of Sceva ([19:13-16](#)), and the riot occasioned by the silversmith Demetrius ([19:23-41](#)).

The most distinctive feature in Acts is the speeches or sermons, constituting nearly a third of the total text of Acts (see [chart](#)). Ten of these are major: three by Peter ([2:14-36](#); [3:11-26](#); [10:34-43](#)), one by Stephen ([7:1-53](#)), and six by Paul. Three of Paul’s are defense speeches in Jerusalem and Caesarea ([22:1-21](#); [24:10-21](#); [26:1-29](#)). The other three consist of one speech on each of Paul’s missionary journeys, each to a different type of assembly: to Jews on his first journey ([13:16-47](#)), to Gentiles on his second

([17:22-31](#)), and to Christians on his third ([20:18-35](#)). Many shorter testimonies run throughout Acts (e.g., [5:29-32](#); [14:15-17](#)). **All are primarily a witness to Christ in one form or another.** Much of the theological material of Acts is to be found in these speeches.

Another distinctive feature of Acts is its *journey narratives*. Often these are only **lists of stopping places** or ports that are passed by (e.g., [16:6-8](#); [20:14-15](#); [21:2-3](#)). These give the impression of the Christian missionaries being constantly on the move and are **the main reason for giving Paul's ministry the label of "journeys."** In fact, that label best applies to the first of Paul's missions ([chs. 13-14](#)). The others **consisted mainly of more lengthy stays in the major cities (e.g., Corinth, Ephesus).**

Key Themes

The major themes of Acts can be placed under the general category of "witness," as set forth in the thematic verse ([Acts 1:8](#)).

1. The witness is worldwide—
Judea, Samaria, the "end of the earth."

[1:8](#)

2. The witness is inclusive of ALL kinds of people: Jews, Gentiles, Samaritans, the physically

[chs. 2-5](#); [8:4-40](#);
[10:1-11:18](#); [14:8-18](#);
[16:11-15](#), [25-34](#);
[17:22-31](#); [24:24-27](#);

handicapped, pagan mountain people, a prominent merchant woman, a jailer and his family, Greek philosophers, governors, and kings.

[26:1-29](#)

3. The witness is guided by the providence of God, who preserves his witnesses for their testimony through all sorts of threats: murderous plots, angry mobs, storms at sea, and constant trials before the authorities, to name only a few.

[4:5-22](#); [18:12-16](#);
[19:23-41](#); [23:12-22](#);
[24:1-23](#); [27:21-26](#)

4. On the other hand, faithful witnesses must be prepared to suffer, even to die for their testimony to Christ.

[5:41-42](#); [7:54-60](#)

5. The power behind the witness is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is granted to all believers, both male and female, whom he empowers for witness. The Spirit guides witnesses in moments of special inspiration and is behind every advance in the Christian mission.

[1:8](#); [2:1-13](#), [18](#), [38](#);
[4:8](#); [7:55](#); [8:17](#);
[10:44](#); [13:2-12](#); [19:6](#),
[21](#)

6. In the early days, the witness was often accompanied by “signs and wonders,” the “wonders” being the miracles worked by the apostles, which served as “signs” pointing to the truth of the gospel. **Miracles usually**

e.g., [ch. 3](#)

opened a door for witness.

7. Effective witness demands the unity of the church. [2:42-47](#); [4:32-37](#); [5:12-14](#)

8. A key component of the witness is the resurrection of

Jesus. For the Jews the resurrection demonstrated that Jesus was the promised Messiah. For the Gentiles it pointed to his role as judge and established their need to repent. [1:22](#); [2:22-36](#); [17:30-31](#)

9. Acceptance of the message borne by the witnesses depends both on **human response and on the divine sovereignty** behind the response. e.g., [2:47](#); [11:18](#); [13:48](#)

10. The OT Scriptures point to the death and resurrection of Christ, and the prophecies that point to Christ and to his followers must be fulfilled ([1:16](#)).

(The numerous OT citations in the sermons of Acts illustrate this point.)

11. The witness to the gospel calls for a response. Most speeches in Acts end with some sort of invitation. Representative of this is Paul's exchange with Agrippa II.

[26:27-29](#)

12. The response called for is e.g., [2:38](#)

repentance of one's sins in the name of Christ, bringing forgiveness of sins.

13. Witnesses must always maintain integrity before the

world. In Acts this is illustrated by the many remarks from the authorities about the Christians giving no evidence of any wrongdoing.

[18:12-15](#); [23:29](#);
[25:18](#); [26:31-32](#)

14. Christian witnesses continue the ministry that Christ

“began” (1:1). This is **illustrated throughout Acts with the many implicit parallels between the experiences of the apostles and**

those of Christ: his miracles, the forebodings of his journey to Jerusalem, the cry of the angry Jewish mob for his death, and his trial before the governor and the king.

[20:36-21:16](#) (cf. [Luke 9:22](#); [13:31-34](#); [18:31-34](#)); [21:36](#);
[22:21](#) (cf. [Luke 23:18](#)); [24:1-26:32](#)
(cf. [Luke 23:1-25](#))

15. Faithful witness brings great results. Acts is all about the

victory of the Christian gospel.

The witness brings results among both Jews and Gentiles. **The book ends on this note, with Paul bearing his faithful witness to “all” who came to him in Rome.**

[4:4](#); [11:20-21](#); [13:48-49](#); [17:4](#); [18:6-11](#);
[21:20](#); [28:30-31](#)

Purpose, Occasion, and Background

Luke's stated purpose for both of his books is provided at the beginning of the first ([Luke 1:1-4](#)). He had a historian's interest in providing an "orderly account" of "the things that have been accomplished among us." One would assume the latter statement applied both to the ministry of Jesus (the gospel) and to that of the early church (Acts). Dedicating the work to Theophilus, he wanted him to have "certainty" (a firm foundation) for what he had been taught. The exact nature of Luke's purpose depends on how one identifies Theophilus. He evidently had already been instructed in the Christian way and may have been a new convert or a seeker on the verge of commitment. Since "Theophilus" means "lover of God," it is also possible that Luke is challenging the devotion of his readers rather than addressing his book to just one of them.

Luke probably had a number of purposes for writing Acts. These are best determined through the emphases or themes found throughout the book.

History of Salvation Summary

After his ascension ([1:9](#); cf. [Ps. 68:18](#); [Eph. 4:9-10](#)) Jesus sends the Holy Spirit ([Joel 2:28-32](#)) to empower the apostles as witnesses ([Acts 1:8](#)), to spread the message of the gospel ([Isa. 52:7](#)), and to draw to himself people from the nations ([Matt. 28:19](#)). (For an explanation of the "History of Salvation," see the [Overview of the Bible](#).)

Literary Features

The book of Acts is a small anthology of individual literary genres. The list includes hero story, adventure story, travel story, conversion story, and miracle story. Drama also figures prominently: there are 32 speeches in Acts.

Following the story line becomes easy when one realizes that the book of Acts is structured on a cyclic principle in which a common pattern keeps getting repeated: (1) Christian leaders arise and preach the gospel; (2) listeners are converted and added to the church; (3) opponents (often Jewish but sometimes Gentile) begin to persecute the Christian leaders; and (4) God intervenes to rescue the leaders or otherwise protect the church. While this pattern is most obvious in the first half of the book, it extends in modified form to the journeys of Paul, whose repeated buffetings are followed by the expansion of the church.

The book of Acts is noteworthy for its narrative qualities. It is the report of an adventure, replete with arrests, imprisonments, beatings, riots, narrow escapes, a resurrection from death, a shipwreck, trial scenes, and rescues.

Places play a key role in Acts. The places that matter most are the great cities of the Mediterranean region in the first century. Geography assumes a symbolic as well as literal importance, as Jerusalem, where the story begins, symbolizes the Jewish religion from which Christianity emerged, and Rome, where the story ends, symbolizes the Gentile world to which Christianity gravitates as the early history of the church unfolds.

Out of a large body of available data, storytellers select the details that fit their design and purpose. It is a plausible premise that sometimes Luke chose to give *representative examples* of categories of experiences: examples of miraculous healings that were no doubt duplicated many times (e.g., [3:1-10](#); [19:11-12](#)), a specimen of preaching in the temple ([3:11-26](#)) and preaching to Greek intellectuals ([17:16-34](#)), an example of a martyrdom ([ch. 7](#)), and instances of individuals being converted (e.g., a Jew in [9:1-19](#) and an Ethiopian in [8:26-38](#)) and of groups being converted (e.g., in Jerusalem in [2:37-41](#) and in Greek Ephesus in [19:17-20](#)).

The Setting of Acts

c. A.D. 30-60

The book of Acts records the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, thus fulfilling the risen Christ's words to his apostles in [Acts 1:8](#).

Outline

1. Preparation for Witness ([1:1-2:13](#))
 1. Jesus prepares the disciples ([1:1-5](#))
 2. Jesus ascends ([1:6-11](#))
 3. Matthias replaces Judas ([1:12-26](#))
 4. The Spirit descends at Pentecost ([2:1-13](#))
2. The Witness in Jerusalem ([2:14-5:42](#))
 1. Peter preaches at Pentecost ([2:14-41](#))

2. The Christian community shares a life in common ([2:42-47](#))
3. Peter heals a lame man ([3:1-10](#))
4. Peter preaches in the temple square ([3:11-26](#))
5. Peter and John witness before the Jewish council ([4:1-22](#))
6. The Christian community prays for boldness in witness ([4:23-31](#))
7. The community shares together ([4:32-5:16](#))
8. The apostles appear before the council ([5:17-42](#))
3. The Witness beyond Jerusalem ([6:1-12:25](#))
 1. Seven chosen to serve the Hellenist widows ([6:1-7](#))
 2. Stephen bears the ultimate witness ([6:8-8:3](#))
 1. The arrest of Stephen ([6:8-15](#))
 2. Stephen's address before the Sanhedrin ([7:1-53](#))
 3. The martyrdom of Stephen ([7:54-8:3](#))
 3. Philip witnesses beyond Jerusalem ([8:4-40](#))
 1. Witness to the Samaritans ([8:4-25](#))
 2. Witness to an Ethiopian eunuch ([8:26-40](#))
 4. The conversion of Saul ([9:1-31](#))
 1. Saul's encounter with Christ ([9:1-9](#))
 2. Saul's encounter with Ananias ([9:10-19a](#))
 3. Saul's witness in Damascus and Jerusalem ([9:19b-31](#))
 5. Peter preaches in the coastal towns ([9:32-11:18](#))
 1. Healing of Aeneas and Dorcas ([9:32-43](#))
 2. Conversion of Cornelius ([10:1-48](#))
 3. Peter's testimony in Jerusalem ([11:1-18](#))
 6. The Antioch church witnesses to Gentiles ([11:19-26](#))
 7. The offering for Jerusalem ([11:27-30](#))
 8. The Jerusalem church is persecuted ([12:1-25](#))

1. The death of James ([12:1-5](#))
2. Peter's deliverance from prison ([12:6-19](#))
3. The death of Herod Agrippa I ([12:20-25](#))
4. The Witness in Cyprus and Southern Galatia ([13:1-14:28](#))
 1. The Antioch church commissions Paul and Barnabas ([13:1-3](#))
 2. Paul and Barnabas witness on Cyprus ([13:4-12](#))
 3. Paul preaches in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch ([13:13-41](#))
 4. Paul turns to the Gentiles ([13:42-52](#))
 5. Paul and Barnabas are rejected at Iconium ([14:1-7](#))
 6. The two missionaries witness in Lystra ([14:8-23](#))
 7. Paul and Barnabas return to Antioch ([14:24-28](#))
5. The Jerusalem Council ([15:1-35](#))
 1. The circumcision party criticizes the Gentile mission ([15:1-5](#))
 2. Peter defends Paul ([15:6-11](#))
 3. James proposes a solution ([15:12-21](#))
 4. A letter is sent to Antioch ([15:22-35](#))
6. The Witness in Greece ([15:36-18:22](#))
 1. Paul and Barnabas differ over Mark ([15:36-41](#))
 2. Timothy joins Paul and is circumcised ([16:1-5](#))
 3. Paul is called to Macedonia ([16:6-10](#))
 4. Paul witnesses in Philippi ([16:11-40](#))
 1. Conversion of Lydia ([16:11-15](#))
 2. Imprisonment of Paul and Silas ([16:16-24](#))
 3. Conversion of the jailer ([16:25-34](#))
 4. Release of Paul and Silas ([16:35-40](#))
 5. Paul witnesses in Thessalonica ([17:1-9](#))
 6. Paul witnesses in Berea ([17:10-15](#))
 7. Paul witnesses in Athens ([17:16-34](#))

1. Witness in the marketplace ([17:16-21](#))
 2. Witness before the Areopagus ([17:22-34](#))
8. Paul witnesses in Corinth ([18:1-22](#))
7. The Witness in Ephesus ([18:23-21:16](#))
 1. Priscilla and Aquila instruct Apollos ([18:23-28](#))
 2. Paul encounters disciples of John ([19:1-10](#))
 3. Paul encounters false religion at Ephesus ([19:11-22](#))
 4. Paul experiences violent opposition at Ephesus ([19:23-41](#))
 5. Paul completes his ministry in Greece ([20:1-6](#))
 6. Paul travels to Miletus ([20:7-16](#))
 7. Paul addresses the Ephesian elders at Miletus ([20:17-35](#))
 8. Paul journeys to Jerusalem ([20:36-21:16](#))
8. The Arrest in Jerusalem ([21:17-23:35](#))
 1. Paul participates in a Nazirite ceremony ([21:17-26](#))
 2. An angry mob attacks Paul ([21:27-39](#))
 3. Paul addresses the Jewish crowd ([21:40-22:21](#))
 4. Paul reveals his Roman citizenship ([22:22-29](#))
 5. Paul appears before the Sanhedrin ([22:30-23:11](#))
 6. Zealous Jews plot against Paul ([23:12-22](#))
 7. Paul is delivered to the governor Felix ([23:23-35](#))
9. The Witness in Caesarea ([24:1-26:32](#))
 1. Paul appears before Felix ([24:1-27](#))
 2. Paul appeals to Caesar ([25:1-12](#))
 3. Festus presents the case to King Agrippa II ([25:13-22](#))
 4. Paul witnesses to Agrippa II ([25:23-26:32](#))
10. The Witness in Rome ([27:1-28:31](#))
 1. Paul journeys to Rome by sea ([27:1-44](#))
 2. Paul witnesses on Malta ([28:1-10](#))
 3. Paul arrives in Rome ([28:11-16](#))

4. Paul witnesses to the Jews in Rome ([28:17-31](#))

- ESV Study Bible

Acts

Introduction

The book of **Acts provides a glimpse into the first three decades of the early church (ca A.D. 30-63) as it spread and multiplied after the ascension of Jesus Christ.** It is not a detailed or comprehensive history. Rather, it focuses on the role played by apostles such as Peter, who ministered primarily to Jews, and Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Circumstances of Writing

Author: The book of Acts is formally anonymous. The traditional view is that the author was the same person who wrote the Gospel of Luke—Luke the physician and traveling companion of Paul ([Col 4:14](#); [2Tim 4:11](#); [Phm 24](#)). As early as the second century A.D., church leaders such as Irenaeus wrote that Luke was the author of Acts. Irenaeus based his view on the "we" passages in Acts, five sections where the author changed from the third person ("he/she" and "they") to first-person plural ("we") as he narrated the action ([16:10-17](#); [20:5-15](#); [21:1-18](#); [27:1-29](#); [28:1-16](#)). Irenaeus and many scholars since his time have interpreted these passages to mean that the author of Acts

was one of the eyewitness companions of Paul. Luke fits this description better than any other candidate, especially given the similar themes between the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

Background: The date of composition of the book of Acts is to a large extent directly tied to the issue of authorship. A number of scholars have argued that Acts should be dated to the early 60s (at the time of Paul's imprisonment). Acts closes with Paul still in prison in Rome ([28:30-31](#)). Although it is possible that Luke wrote at a later date, a time when Paul had been released, it is more plausible to think that he completed this book while Paul was still in prison. Otherwise he would have ended the book by telling about Paul's release.

Message and Purpose

The book of Acts emphasizes the work of God through the Holy Spirit in the lives of people who devoted themselves to Jesus Christ, especially Paul as he led the Gentile missionary endeavor. It is no exaggeration to say that **the Christian church was built through the dynamic power of the Spirit working through chosen vessels**.

Another important concept is the radial spread of the gospel from Jews to Gentiles, from Jerusalem to Judea, from Samaria and on to the rest of the world ([1:8](#)). Thus Christianity transformed from being a sect within Judaism to a world religion that eventually gained welcome everywhere, even in the heart of the pagan Roman Empire: Rome itself.

At the heart of the Christian movement was the work of the apostle Paul, a former skeptic who became Christianity's most vocal advocate. From his first appearance at the stoning of Stephen (where he concurred in the decision to stone Stephen for his Christian preaching), to his final appearance while imprisoned in his own rented house at Rome (where he was active in spreading the gospel even as he faced a death sentence), Paul's work on behalf of the gospel is evident at almost every turn as he proclaimed the good news before "Gentiles, kings, and the Israelites" ([9:15](#)).

The book of Acts provides biographical glimpses of a few of the early apostles as they spread the gospel first in Jerusalem and then on to the rest of the world. Peter, Philip, and a few others were responsible for the spread of the gospel to Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. Paul was responsible for much of the rest of the world.

Paul's typical missionary strategy was to go to a familiar place in each city he visited, usually a synagogue, and proclaim the gospel first to local Jews. The speed with which he shifted his focus to Gentiles outside the synagogue depended on how Jews received him within the synagogue.
Before leaving town, **Paul united Jewish and Gentile converts alike to form a local church.**

The early apostles are distinguished by their being filled by the Holy Spirit and empowered to proclaim the gospel under a variety of trying circumstances. These circumstances included theological, political, and physical oppression or a combination of these as they were marginalized, imprisoned, and stoned.

Nevertheless, **through the power of the Holy Spirit they refused to stop proclaiming the message that the OT prophesied about a coming Savior which was fulfilled in the person and works of Jesus** of Nazareth.

As a result, many thousands of people in Jerusalem and abroad came to believe that the Lord Jesus was the Messiah, their one hope for salvation from their sins.

Contribution to the Bible

The book of Acts ties the other books of the NT together. It does so by first providing "the rest of the story" to the Gospels. The gospel and the message of the kingdom of God did not end with Jesus' ascension to heaven forty days after His resurrection, but continued on in the lives of His followers. **Acts shows us how the words and promises of Jesus were carried out by the apostles and other believers through the power of the Holy Spirit.** Second, the book of **Acts gives us the context for much of the rest of the NT,** especially the letters Paul wrote to the churches he had helped establish during his missionary journeys.

Structure

So far as literary form is concerned, the book of Acts is an ancient biography that focuses on several central characters, especially Peter and Paul. Ancient biography was not concerned simply with narrating events but with displaying the character of the people involved, especially their ethical behavior. Other features included genealogies and rhetorical elements such as

speeches. Ancient biographies also commonly drew from both written and oral sources for information.

Acts 1:8 provides the introduction and outline for the book.

Once empowered by the Holy Spirit, the disciples proclaimed the gospel boldly in Jerusalem. As the book progresses, the gospel spread further into Judea and Samaria, and then finally into the outer reaches of the known world through the missionary work of Paul.

Outline

- I. Empowerment for the Church ([1:1-2:47](#))
 - A. Waiting for power ([1:1-26](#))
 - B. The source of power ([2:1-13](#))
 - C. Pentecostal witness to the dispersion ([2:14-47](#))
- II. Early Days of the Church ([3:1-12:25](#))
 - A. In Jerusalem ([3:1-7:60](#))
 - B. In Samaria: the Samaritan Pentecost ([8:1-25](#))
 - C. To the ends of the earth: Philip's witness ([8:26-40](#))
 - D. Conversion and preparation of Paul ([9:1-31](#))
 - E. In Judea: Peter in Caesarea ([9:32-11:18](#))
 - F. To the ends of the earth ([11:19-12:25](#))
- III. Paul's First Missionary Journey ([13:1-14:28](#))
 - A. Cyprus ([13:1-12](#))
 - B. Pisidian Antioch ([13:13-52](#))
 - C. Iconium ([14:1-7](#))
 - D. Lystra, Derbe; return to Antioch ([14:8-28](#))
- IV. The Jerusalem Council ([15:1-35](#))

- V. Paul's Second Missionary Journey ([15:36-18:22](#))
 - A. Antioch to Troas ([15:36-16:10](#))
 - B. Troas to Athens ([16:11-17:34](#))
 - C. Corinth ([18:1-22](#))
- VI. Paul's Third Missionary Journey ([18:23-21:16](#))
 - A. The Ephesian Pentecost ([18:23-19:41](#))
 - B. Macedonia to Troas, Athens, Corinth, and return ([20:1-21:16](#))
- VII. Paul en Route to and in Rome ([21:17-28:31](#))
 - A. In Jerusalem ([21:17-23:35](#))
 - B. In Caesarea ([24:1-26:32](#))
 - C. Voyage to Rome ([27:1-28:15](#))
 - D. Ministry at Rome ([28:16-31](#))

Timeline

A.D. 33-37	A.D. 37-41	A.D. 41-49	A.D. 49-62
Jesus' trials, death, resurrection, and ascension Nisan 14-16 or April 3-5, 33	Paul returns to his native Tarsus. Summer 37-40	Claudius, Emperor of Rome 41-54	Paul and Silas take second missionary journey. 49-52
Pentecost 33	Caligula, Emperor of Rome 37-41	Believers respond to famine prophesied by Agabus. 44-47	Paul's third missionary journey 53-57
Saul's conversion on the Damascus Road October	Barnabas travels from Antioch of Syria to find	Martyrdom of James, son of Zebedee 44	Paul's arrest in Jerusalem (57) and imprisonment at

34	Paul. Summer	Caesarea 58-59
Paul's years in Arabia 34-37	40	Death of Herod Agrippa Paul's journey to Rome late 59
Paul's first visit to Jerusalem following his conversion 37?	Conversion of Cornelius and his family 40	Paul's house arrest in Rome 60-62
	Barnabas and Saul serve together in Antioch. 41	Paul, Barnabas, and John Mark make first missionary journey. 47-49

- HCSB Study Bible.

Acts

WITH a flick of a match, friction occurs and a spark leaps from match to tinder. A small flame burns the edges and grows, fueled by wood and air. Heat builds, and soon the kindling is licked by reddish orange tongues. Higher and wider it spreads, consuming the wood. The flame has become a fire.

Nearly 2,000 years ago, a match was struck in Palestine. At first, just a few in that corner of the world were touched and warmed, but the fire spread beyond Jerusalem and Judea out to the world and to all people. Acts provides an eyewitness account of the flame and fire—the birth and spread of the church. Beginning in Jerusalem with a small group of disciples, the message traveled across the Roman Empire. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, this courageous band preached, taught, healed, and demonstrated love in synagogues, schools, homes, marketplaces, and courtrooms, and on streets, hills, ships, and desert roads—wherever God sent them, lives and history were changed.

Written by Luke as a sequel to his Gospel, Acts is an accurate historical record of the early church. But Acts is also a theological book, with lessons and living examples of the work of the Holy Spirit, church relationships and organization, the implications of grace, and the law of love. And Acts is an apologetic work, building a strong case for the validity of Christ's claims and promises.

The book of Acts begins with the outpouring of the promised Holy Spirit and the commencement of the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This Spirit-inspired evangelism began in Jerusalem and eventually spread to Rome, covering most of the Roman Empire. The gospel first went to the Jews, but they, as a nation, rejected it. A remnant of Jews, of course, gladly received the Good News. But the continual rejection of the gospel by the vast majority of the Jews led to the ever-increasing proclamation of the gospel to the Gentiles. This was according to Jesus' plan: The gospel was to go from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria, and to the ends of the earth ([1:8](#)). This, in fact, is the pattern that the

Acts narrative follows. The glorious proclamation began in Jerusalem ([chapters 1-7](#)), went to Judea and Samaria ([chapters 8](#) and following), and to the countries beyond Judea ([11:19](#); [13:4](#) and on to the end of Acts). The second half of Acts is focused primarily on Paul's missionary journeys to many countries north of the Mediterranean Sea. He, with his companions, took the gospel first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. Some of the Jews believed, and many of the Gentiles received the Good News with joy. New churches were started, and new believers began to grow in the Christian life.

As you read Acts, put yourself in the place of the disciples: Identify with them as they are filled with the Holy Spirit, and experience the thrill of seeing thousands respond to the gospel message. Sense their commitment as they give every ounce of talent and treasure to Christ. And as you read, watch the Spirit-led boldness of these first-century believers, who through suffering and in the face of death take every opportunity to tell of their crucified and risen Lord. Then decide to be a twenty-first-century version of those men and women of God.

Vital Statistics

Purpose:

To give an accurate account of the birth and growth of the Christian church

Author:

Luke (a Gentile physician)

Original Audience:

Theophilus

Date Written:

Between A.D. 63 and 70

Setting:

Acts is the connecting link between Christ's life and the life of the church, between the Gospels and the Letters.

Key Verse:

"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" ([1:8](#)).

Key People:

Peter, John, James, Stephen, Philip, Paul, Barnabas, Cornelius, James (Jesus' brother), Timothy, Lydia, Silas, Titus, Apollos, Agabus, Ananias, Felix, Festus, Agrippa, Luke

Key Places:

Jerusalem, Samaria, Lydda, Joppa, Antioch, Cyprus, Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Caesarea, Malta, Rome

Special Features:

Acts is a sequel to the Gospel of Luke. Because Acts ends so abruptly, Luke may have planned to write a third book, continuing the story.

Key Places in Acts

Modern Names and Boundaries Are Shown in Gray.

The apostle Paul, whose missionary journeys fill much of this book, traveled tremendous distances as he tirelessly spread the gospel across much of the Roman Empire. His combined trips, by land and sea, equal more than 13,000 air miles.

1. **Judea** Jesus ascended to heaven from the Mount of Olives, outside Jerusalem, and his followers returned to the city to await the infilling of the Holy Spirit, which occurred at Pentecost. Peter gave a powerful sermon that was heard by Jews from across the empire. The Jerusalem church grew, but Stephen was martyred for his faith by Jewish leaders who did not believe in Jesus ([1:1-7:60](#)).
2. **Samaria** After Stephen's death, persecution of Christians intensified, but it caused the believers to leave Jerusalem and spread the gospel to other cities in the empire. Philip took the gospel into Samaria, and even to a man from Ethiopia ([8:1-40](#)).
3. **Syria** Paul (Saul) began his story as a persecutor of Christians, only to be met by Jesus himself on the road to Damascus. He became a believer, but his new faith

caused opposition, so he returned to Tarsus, his home, for safety. Barnabas sought out Paul in Tarsus and brought him to the church in Antioch of Syria, where they worked together. Meanwhile, Peter had received a vision that led him to Caesarea, where he presented the gospel to a Gentile family, who became believers ([9:1-12:25](#)).

4. **Cyprus and Galatia** Paul and Barnabas were dedicated by the church in Antioch of Syria for God's work of spreading the gospel to other cities. They set off on their first missionary journey through Cyprus and Galatia ([13:1-14:28](#)).
5. **Jerusalem** Controversy between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians over the matter of keeping the law led to a special council, with delegates from the churches in Antioch and Jerusalem meeting in Jerusalem. Together, they resolved the conflict and the news was taken back to Antioch ([15:1-35](#)).
6. **Macedonia** Barnabas traveled to Cyprus while Paul took a second missionary journey. He revisited the churches in Galatia and headed toward Ephesus, but the Holy Spirit said no. So he turned north toward Bithynia and Pontus but again was told not to go. He then received the "Macedonian call," and followed the Spirit's direction into the cities of Macedonia ([15:36-17:14](#)).
7. **Achaia** Paul traveled from Macedonia to Athens and Corinth in Achaia, then traveled by ship to Ephesus before returning to Caesarea, Jerusalem, and finally back to Antioch ([17:15-18:22](#)).

8. **Ephesus** Paul's third missionary journey took him back through Cilicia and Galatia, this time straight to Ephesus in Asia. He visited other cities in Asia before going back to Macedonia and Achaia. He returned to Jerusalem by ship, despite his knowledge that arrest awaited him there ([18:23-23:30](#)).
9. **Caesarea** Paul was arrested in Jerusalem and taken to Antipatris, then on to Caesarea under Roman guard. Paul always took advantage of any opportunity to share the gospel, and he did so before many Gentile leaders. Because Paul appealed his case to Caesar, he began the long journey to Rome ([23:31-26:32](#)).
10. **Rome** After storms, layovers in Crete, and shipwreck on the island of Malta, Paul arrived in Sicily and finally in Italy, where he traveled by land, under guard, to his long-awaited destination: Rome, the capital of the empire ([27:1-28:31](#)).

The Blueprint

A. PETER'S MINISTRY ([1:1-12:25](#))

1. Establishment of the church
2. Expansion of the church

After the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Peter preached boldly and performed many miracles. Peter's actions demonstrate vividly the source and effects of Christian power. Because of the Holy Spirit, God's people were empowered so they could accomplish their tasks. The Holy Spirit is still available to empower believers today.

We should turn to the Holy Spirit to give us the strength, courage, and insight to accomplish our work for God.

B. PAUL'S MINISTRY (13:1-28:31)

1. First missionary journey
2. The council at Jerusalem
3. Second missionary journey
4. Third missionary journey
5. Paul on trial

Paul's missionary adventures show us the progress of Christianity. The gospel could not be confined to one corner of the world. This was a faith that offered hope to all humanity. We, too, should venture forth and share in this heroic task to witness for Christ in all the world.

MEGATHEMES		
THEME	EXPLANATION	IMPORTANCE
<i>Church Beginnings</i>	Acts is the history of how Christianity was founded and organized and solved its problems. The community of believers began by faith in the risen Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, who enabled them to witness, to love,	New churches are continually being founded. By faith in Jesus Christ and through the power of the Holy Spirit, the church can be a vibrant agent for change. As we face new problems, Acts gives important

and to serve.

remedies for solving them.

Holy Spirit

The church did not start or grow by its own power or enthusiasm. The disciples were empowered by God's Holy Spirit. He was the promised Advocate and Guide sent when Jesus went to heaven.

The Holy Spirit's work demonstrated that Christianity was supernatural. Thus, the church became more Holy Spirit conscious than problem conscious. By faith, any believer can claim the Holy Spirit's power to do Christ's work.

Church Growth

Acts presents the history of a dynamic, growing community of believers from Jerusalem to Syria, Africa, Asia, and Europe. In the first century, Christianity spread from believing Jews to non-Jews in 39 cities and 30 countries, islands, or provinces.

When the Holy Spirit works, there is movement, excitement, and growth. He gives us the motivation, energy, and ability to get the gospel to the whole world. How are you fitting into God's plan for spreading Christianity? What is your place in this movement?

Witnessing

Peter, John, Philip, Paul, Barnabas, and thousands more witnessed to their new faith in Christ. By personal testimony, preaching, or defense before authorities, they told the story with boldness and courage to groups of all sizes.

We are God's people, chosen to be part of his plan to reach the world. In love and by faith, we can have the Holy Spirit's help as we witness or preach. Witnessing is also beneficial to us because it strengthens our faith as we confront those who challenge it.

Opposition

Through imprisonment, beatings, plots, and riots, Christians were persecuted by both Jews and Gentiles. But the opposition became a catalyst for the spread of Christianity. Growth during times of oppression showed that Christianity was not the work of humans, but of God.

God can work through any opposition. When persecution from hostile unbelievers comes, realize that it has come because you have been a faithful witness and you have looked for the opportunity to present the Good News about Christ. Seize the opportunities that opposition brings.

Life Application Study Bible.

Introduction

The book of Acts is the first volume of church history. It records the story of the church from its explosive beginning on the Day of Pentecost to the imprisonment at Rome of its greatest missionary. During those three decades, the church expanded from a small group of Jewish believers gathered in Jerusalem to embrace thousands in dozens of congregations throughout the Roman world. Acts describes how the Spirit of God superintended, controlled, and empowered the expansion of the church. Indeed, the book could well be called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit Through the Apostles."

Acts is a significant book for several reasons. With the epistles, but without Acts, we would have much difficulty understanding the flow of the early history of the church. With it, we have a core history around which to assemble the data in the epistles, enriching our comprehension of them. The book follows first the ministry of Peter, then of Paul. From it we learn principles for discipling believers, building the church, and evangelizing the world.

Although a work of history, not theology, Acts nevertheless emphasizes the doctrinal truths concerning salvation. Jesus of Nazareth is boldly proclaimed as Israel's long-awaited Messiah, and that truth is ably defended from the Old Testament ([2:22ff.](#); [3:12ff.](#); [4:10ff.](#); [7:1ff.](#); [8:26ff.](#); [13:14ff.](#); cf. [9:22](#); [18:5](#), [24-28](#); [28:23](#)).

The book of Acts also teaches much about the Holy Spirit, who is mentioned more than fifty times. He regenerates, baptizes, fills, and sanctifies believers. The Holy Spirit is seen choosing missionaries ([13:2](#)) and directing their operations ([8:29](#)). He presided at the first church council ([15:28](#)) and, in short, directed and controlled all operations of the church.

The doctrinal importance of Acts is not limited, however, to its teaching on Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. While it does not flow around doctrinal issues, but historical events, it nevertheless touches many theological truths. Donald Guthrie aptly summarizes the theological significance of Acts: "The importance of the book of Acts is in its preservation of the main doctrinal themes presented in apostolic preaching, even if there is no evidence of an attempt to develop a systematized theology" (*New Testament Introduction* [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1978], 338).

Author

The unanimous testimony of the early church was that Luke, author of the gospel bearing his name, and the traveling companion and close friend of Paul, wrote Acts. In the second century, the anti-Marcionite prologue to Luke's gospel, the Muratorian Fragment (the earliest extant list of New Testament

books), Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian all attest to Luke's authorship of Acts. Other church Fathers, such as Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome also attribute Acts to Luke.

The internal evidence for Luke's authorship is equally impressive. That the author of Acts was a traveling companion of the apostle Paul is clear from the so-called "we passages" ([16:10-17](#); [20:5-21:18](#); [27:1-28:16](#)). In those passages, the writer switches to the first person plural, showing he was present. D. Edmond Hiebert summarizes the significance of that as it relates to the authorship of Acts:

References to various companions of Paul in these we-sections at once distinguish the author from other of Paul's close companions. Other well-known companions appearing in the Pauline epistles do not fit into the pattern set by these we-sections and can be located elsewhere at one time or another. Of the known close companions of Paul only Titus and Luke are never named in Acts. That Titus is not named is strange, but no one has ever seriously suggested that Titus was the author of Luke-Acts. This leaves only Luke as the probable author, and he is strongly supported by the external evidence. (*An Introduction to the New Testament: Volume 1: The Gospels and Acts* [Chicago: Moody, 1979], p. 121)

It should be noted too that "although Titus accompanied Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem and worked in the churches of Corinth, Crete, and Dalmatia, he appears not to have been one of Paul's companions whom the apostle mentions in the greetings of his epistles" (Simon J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Acts* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990], p. 21). By

process of elimination, then, we are left with Luke as author of the "we passages," and therefore of the entire book.

It is also unlikely anyone would have forged a work in Luke's name. If someone were going to attribute a forgery to one of Paul's companions, why would he choose the relatively obscure Luke, mentioned only three times in the New Testament? Would he not choose a more prominent figure?

Date

There are two schools of thought among evangelical scholars as to when Luke wrote Acts. Some hold he wrote while Paul was still living, probably near the end of his first imprisonment ([Acts 28](#)). Others date Acts between the fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) and Luke's death (ca. A.D. 85).

The main argument for the later date is Luke's alleged use of Mark as a source for the gospel of Luke. Advocates of this view follow this line of reasoning: Mark was written after Peter's death during Nero's persecution. Luke's gospel could not have been written until after that. And since Acts was written after Luke, it must be dated later still.

Although a discussion of the so-called Synoptic Problem is beyond the scope of this introduction, it should be noted that the priority of Mark has never been established. Serious objections to Luke's dependence on Mark have been raised by competent scholars (cf. Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, eds., *A Harmony of the Gospels* [Chicago: Moody, 1979], 274-79; Eta Linnemann, *Is There a Synoptic Problem?* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992]). Unless this theory of Luke's dependence on Mark

can be established, the chief argument for a later date for Acts collapses.

There are good reasons for believing Luke wrote Acts during Paul's first Roman imprisonment. They may be summarized as follows:

First, that view best explains the abrupt ending of Acts. Luke stopped writing because he had brought events to the present, and he had no more to relate. Also, Acts ends on a note of triumph, with Paul proclaiming the gospel in Rome unhindered by the Roman authorities. That triumphant ending is difficult to comprehend if Acts were written following Paul's death and the outbreak of the Neronian persecution (F. F. Bruce, "The Acts of the Apostles," in D. Guthrie and J. A. Motyer, eds., *The New Bible Commentary: Revised* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], 968).

Second, the Roman officials in Acts are tolerant of, if not favorable to, Christianity. That was certainly not the case after the outbreak of the Neronian persecution in A.D. 64. Further,

the only time when the picture of the Roman state's originally friendly attitude toward the Christians would have been worth recalling to people's minds was the time when it was still valid but in danger of being lost. And this means that it was the time of Paul's trial, after he had made an appeal to the court of Caesar. (Johannes Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1973], lii)

Third, Luke does not mention the persecution initiated by Nero. Kistemaker remarks, "If Luke had written Acts in the seventies,

he would have done violence to his sense of historical integrity by not reflecting these cruel persecutions instigated by Nero" (*Acts*, 23).

Fourth, there is no mention in Acts of the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Luke's silence is puzzling if that momentous event had already taken place, especially since "Luke in his gospel centres more attention on Jerusalem than do his fellow synoptists" (Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 340). Similarly, his failure to mention the martyrdom of James, the brother of the Lord (A.D. 62 according to Josephus [[Antiquities XX, ix, 1](#)]) is strange if he wrote afterward. Luke certainly viewed the martyrdoms of the apostle James and Stephen as worthy of mention. Why not the head of the Jerusalem church?

Fifth, the subject matter of Acts reflects the situation in the early days of the church. Such topics as the conflict between Jews and Gentiles, the inclusion of Gentiles in the church, and the Jewish dietary regulations ([Acts 15](#)) lost their urgency after the fall of Jerusalem. Similarly, Acts does not reflect the theological concerns of the latter decades of the first century (Kistemaker, *Acts*, 23).

Sixth, Luke reflects no familiarity with Paul's epistles. That argues that Acts was written before the collection of Pauline epistles was widely circulated in the church.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Luke is silent about the further career of Paul. No mention is made in Acts of Paul's travels after his release, his second imprisonment (though Luke was with him then [[2 Tim. 4:11](#)]), or his death. Yet Luke devotes more than half of Acts to Paul's ministry. Why would he

not carry that theme through to its triumphant completion if he knew more about the great apostle? These omissions are best explained by the assumption that these events had not yet taken place when Luke wrote.

Purpose

Luke states his purpose for writing his two-volume work in the prologue to Luke: "It seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus" ([Luke 1:3](#)). Acts was also addressed to Theophilus, continuing where Luke's gospel left off.

Theophilus is unknown, though Luke's address of him as "most excellent" ([Luke 1:3](#)) suggests he was a Roman official (cf. [Acts 24:3](#); [26:25](#)). Whether he was a Christian Luke was instructing, or a pagan he was trying to persuade, is also not known. Some have argued that he was Paul's lawyer for his hearing before the emperor, though that also is speculation.

Luke did not write a complete account of the first three decades of the church. He selectively chose those events and persons that suited his inspired purpose. Nevertheless, he was a remarkably accurate historian. Acts shows familiarity with Roman law and the privileges of Roman citizens, gives the correct titles of various provincial rulers, and accurately describes various geographical locations. Such accuracy convinced the nineteenth-century British archaeologist Sir William Ramsay that his earlier doubts about Acts were wrong. He writes,

I may fairly claim to have entered on this investigation without any prejudice in favour of the conclusion which I shall now attempt to justify to the reader. On the contrary, I began with a mind unfavourable to it, for the ingenuity and apparent completeness of the Tübingen theory [which dated Acts in the second century] had at one time quite convinced me. It did not lie then in my line of life to investigate the subject minutely; but more recently I found myself often brought in contact with the book of *Acts* as an authority for the topography, antiquities, and society of Asia Minor. It was gradually borne in upon me that in various details the narrative showed marvelous truth. (*St. Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* [reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975], 7-8. Italics in original.)

More recent scholars have confirmed Ramsay's view of the historical reliability of Acts (cf. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 354-55).

Luke wrote in part to commend Christianity to the Roman world. He directs attention to the high character of the Christians and to the fact that they were law-abiding people. He also relates the favorable treatment given Christians by Roman officials (cf. [18:12ff.](#); [19:31](#), [37](#); [25:25](#); [26:32](#); [27:3](#)).

He also makes clear to the Jewish people that the gospel was not their exclusive possession. It was for all people. Nor did the Gentiles first have to become Jews before becoming Christians ([Acts 15](#)).

But Luke's primary purpose is to show the spread of Christianity, empowered and energized by the Holy Spirit, throughout the Roman world ([1:8](#)).

Outline

- I. Jerusalem ([1:1-8:4](#))
 - A. The beginning of the church ([1:1-2:47](#))
 - B. The expansion of the church ([3:1-8:4](#))
- II. Judea and Samaria ([8:5-12:25](#))
 - A. The witness to the Samaritans ([8:5-25](#))
 - B. The conversion of a Gentile ([8:26-40](#))
 - C. The conversion of the apostle to the Gentiles ([9:1-31](#))
 - D. The witness to the Gentiles ([9:32-12:25](#))
- III. The remotest part of the earth ([13:1-28:31](#))
 - A. The first missionary journey ([13:1-14:28](#))
 - B. The Jerusalem council ([15:1-35](#))
 - C. The second missionary journey ([15:36-18:22](#))
 - D. The third missionary journey ([18:23-21:16](#))
 - E. The journey to Rome ([21:17-28:31](#))

MacArthur New Testament Commentary, The - MacArthur New Testament Commentary – Acts 1-12.

Introduction

SOME SCHOLARS HAVE REGARDED ACTS as the most important book in the New Testament, or at least as its pivotal book,

coming as it does between the Gospels and the letters. It records the origin and growth of the Christian movement, telling us how the first believers lived out Christianity. It describes its message and ministry, and its life—including its triumphs and trials, the passions that drove it, and the source of the power that energized it. Any Christian wanting to know how to be a disciple of Christ in this world should turn to Acts to know how the first Christians lived. A recent topical study of Acts was therefore appropriately entitled *The Master Plan of Discipleship*. Furthermore, Acts is a deeply inspiring book. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who calls it "that most lyrical of books," writes: "Live in that book, I exhort you: it is a tonic, the greatest tonic I know in the realm of the Spirit."

This introduction to Acts will concentrate on issues I have deemed as important to a commentary on Acts that focuses on application. For more detailed discussions on topics that usually appear in introductions, the reader is directed to the many excellent commentaries available (cf. the bibliography).

Authorship and Date of Writing

THE EXTERNAL EVIDENCE available for the authorship of Acts, gleaned from the writings of the church in the first few centuries, is unanimous that the author was Luke. When we look for internal evidence (found in Scripture itself), we note that Acts is linked closely with the third Gospel, which indicates common authorship. Both are addressed to the same person, Theophilus ([Luke 1:3](#); [Acts 1:1](#)). Acts begins by summarizing the contents of a "first book," whose contents correspond with the Gospel of Luke. Longenecker says, "Stylistically and structurally the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles are

so closely related that they have to be assigned to the same author."

However, both Acts and the third Gospel have been written anonymously. But Acts is unique in that it contains ninety-seven verses during Paul's journeys where the third person is replaced by the first person plural—the so-called "we passages," which claim to be the observations of an eyewitness. Claims that this was a literary device used for effect—especially that the first person plural was commonly used for accounts of sea travel—have been adequately countered elsewhere. Note, for example, how several other sea voyages are narrated in Acts in the third person. We know from Paul's letters that Luke was his companion in Rome ([Col. 4:14](#); [2 Tim. 4:11](#); [Philem. 24](#)). When we realize that the tradition that Luke wrote the third Gospel and Acts goes at least as far back as the early second century and that the church in the early centuries was unanimous about the fact Luke wrote the two books, we are inclined to accept the traditional interpretation. As Ward Gasque says, "If Luke did not write the Third Gospel and Acts, it is difficult to explain how the tradition connecting his name with these documents ever arose, since he is otherwise an insignificant figure in the early Church."

Luke writes in good literary Greek, which has led to the conclusion that he must have been well educated. He was probably a Gentile, though this claim has been challenged. While there is no unanimity about where he came from, a strong early tradition connects him with Antioch of Pisidia.

Paul refers to him as "our dear friend Luke, the doctor" ([Col. 4:14](#)) and shows Luke as faithfully sticking with him at a time

when most other Christians had shunned him, that is, during his second imprisonment in Rome ([2 Tim. 4:11](#)).

Scholars have placed the date of writing of Acts from early to mid-60s of the first century to much later in the century (some estimates go as far as the late second century). The most evident point used in support of an earlier date is the fact that the book ends so abruptly with events that should be dated around the early 60s.

Acts As Historical Document

WE HAVE COMPARATIVELY longer discussions on historical issues than would be expected in a commentary of this type. This is because the pluralistic mood that is prevalent today, with its radically new understanding of the gospel as being on equal footing with other ideologies, can be sustained by "Christians" only if they deny the historical reliability of the New Testament records. As this seems to be common in some circles today, I felt that it was relevant on occasion to occupy myself with historical matters. I wish for my readers to sense that the book of Acts is rooted in concrete history, as I believe that influences the way we approach the study and application of the truths contained in Scripture.

The prologue of the Gospel of Luke, which applies to Acts as well, indicates that Luke intended to write an account that was historically accurate ([Luke 1:1-4](#)). Yet from the end of the nineteenth century, the "Tübingen school" associated with F. C. Bauer, which was skeptical of the historical value of the biblical documents and dominated biblical scholarship, viewed Acts as a late second-century document that contained an idealized

fictional account of the early church. This was the heyday of the liberal movement, which was antisupernatural and discounted the historicity of records of miraculous events in the New Testament. Today, while there is no consensus on the dating of Acts, it is generally placed much earlier than the late second century. There are three basic ways of looking at the historicity of Acts among scholars today.

Theology, Not History

THERE HAS BEEN a welcome emphasis on the theology of Luke in recent times, especially because many commentaries of an earlier era focused so much on the history that they paid little attention to the theology of Acts. It is clear that Luke had a theological aim along with a historical one in his choice of material. For example, though the ministry in Derbe yielded "a large number of disciples" ([14:21](#)), there is only a single sentence about Paul's ministry there. The ministry in Athens yields a correspondingly less number of converts—only "a few" ([17:34](#))—but it occupies nineteen verses ([17:16-34](#)). This contrast suggests that Luke chose the material he stressed in his account depending on the subject matter rather than merely using earthly indicators of success. He selected certain events because of the value they had in communicating the truths he wanted to emphasize.

Unfortunately, some of those who have focused on the theology of Acts, such as Ernst Haenchen and Hans Conzelmann, deny the historical value of Acts. They have pointed to the supposed contradictions among the Gospels and between Paul's letters and Acts, as well as to alleged historical inaccuracies, in stating their case for rejecting the trustworthiness of Acts.

History and Theology

WE CAN BE thankful that many recent studies have focused on the theological message of Acts without denying its historical value. Works with this emphasis include the commentaries emphasizing structure by David Gooding and Robert Tannehill, and the studies of the theology of Luke-Acts by Howard Marshall, Roger Stronstad, and Harold Dollar. This approach to Acts can be called "theological history" — a narrative of interrelated events from a given place and time, chosen to communicate theological truths. This commentary likewise does not place false dichotomies between theology and history. It views God as acting in the arena of history and through that revealing his ways and his will to his people.

The Scottish scholar Sir William Ramsay (1851-1939) did much to shift scholarly thinking in the direction of a positive view of the historical trustworthiness of Acts. Ramsay was a lecturer in classical art and archaeology at Oxford University when he went to Asia Minor for archaeological work. While there, he went through a remarkable change of convictions, which he chronicles in his book *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament*.

Ramsay found no trustworthy maps of the New Testament era, so he had to make his own. This forced him to read the original sources, such as Christian inscriptions and "the Acts of the Apostles [which] had to be read anew." He reported that he "began to do so without expecting any information of value regarding the condition of Asia Minor at the time when Paul was living." This was because he had accepted the current view that Acts "was written during the second half of the second century

by an author who wished to influence the minds of the people in his own time by a highly wrought and imaginative description of the early church."

When Ramsay came to [Acts 14:6](#), he thought he had found a predictable error by the author. It read, "They ... fled [from Iconium] to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country." The common view among scholars at the time, based on material by Cicero and Pliny the Elder from about a century before the New Testament era, was that Iconium was a city in Lycaonia. Ramsay thought that the author of Acts had used Xenophon to obtain the idea that Iconium was in Phrygia (from his popular *Anabasis*, written four hundred years before the events recorded in Acts). Ramsay assumed that Luke, not knowing about the region, took this information and transposed it to the first century, by which time the boundaries had shifted so that it was no longer true. It was, says Ramsay, like "speaking of going from Richmond to Virginia or from London to England. The expression does not ring true."

But as Ramsay investigated the matter further, he found out that Acts was entirely correct. In the first century Iconium was indeed a city in Phrygia, not Lycaonia. He notes too that the author of Acts mentioned that the people of Lystra spoke "in the Lycaonian language" ([14:11](#)), which would have meant a change from the language spoken in Iconium. Inscriptions demonstrated that Phrygian was spoken in Iconium until the end of the second century. Ramsay realized that this historical comment had been inserted into Acts because the contrast had struck Paul, who had undoubtedly mentioned it to Luke. Ramsay goes on to note the description of the gods of the people of Lystra as Zeus and

Hermes ([14:12](#)), and through his research realized that "Zeus and Hermes were commonly regarded in that region as associated gods."

Ramsay was impressed! He began to realize that Acts might be a valuable source of historical information. He titles the chapter describing what happened to him through this study of [Acts 14](#), "The First Change of Judgment."

In a subsequent chapter entitled "General Impression of Trustworthiness in the Acts," Ramsay writes:

The more I have studied the narrative of Acts and the more I have learned year after year about Graeco-Roman society and thoughts and fashions, and organization in those provinces, the more I admire and the better I understand. I set out to look for truth in the border-land where Greece and Asia meet, and found it here. You may press the words of Luke in a degree beyond any other historian's, and they stand the keenest scrutiny and the hardest treatment, provided always that the critic knows the subject and does not go beyond the limits of science and justice.

Between 1893 and 1915 Ramsay wrote ten books on Paul and Luke. The most famous of these was his *magnum opus*, entitled *St. Paul: Traveller and Roman Citizen* (published first in 1895), which charted the entire life of the apostle.

Scot McKnight says of this book, "Here the real Paul seems to grab the reader and takes the reader with him throughout his journeys." One should note that the historicity of Acts has been defended throughout the twentieth century in books written by classicists or historians who have achieved fame in the field of New Testament studies. The following names come to mind: classics lecturer turned New Testament scholar, F. F. Bruce; classics professor from New Zealand, E. M. Blaiklock; Oxford historian A. N. Sherwin-White; and classics schoolteacher turned New Testament researcher from England, Colin Hemer. The latest to join this distinguished list is a brilliant historian from Russia, Irina Levinskaya.

Drama and Adventure

THE THIRD SIGNIFICANT approach to Acts, represented by R. I. Prevo, claims that Acts is like a popular novel or a historical romance. It is said to aim at edification in an entertaining form; many features are there simply to enhance the readers enjoyment and delight. The resemblances of Acts to ancient novels has long been noted, and there is no doubt that Luke wrote in a lively and entertaining way. A recent study has observed that "the story of Paul's sea journey and shipwreck in [Acts 27](#) is rich in nautical detail and high adventure that seems to serve no other purpose than to heighten the drama and the suspense." However, that should not cause us to discount the historical trustworthiness of Acts.

Howard Marshall has given four pointed criticisms of this approach. (1) Acts is part of a twofold work, and the Gospel of Luke and Acts follow a similar method and style. But the Gospel is clearly *not* a historical novel. (2) Could Luke have got away

with writing a novel of the early church so soon after the events? Such inventions usually belong to a later generation. (3) Large sections of Acts cannot be considered in the category of historical novel writing; they have different concerns. (4) The features of novels found in Acts also appear in good history too. Having said that, we add that we should not lose sight of the features of delight, drama, and adventure that characterize this book. Even now, whenever I think of Paul's voyage and shipwreck, I get an eerie feeling because of the impact that vivid chapter has had on me.

Paul in Acts and the Epistles

A MAJOR OBJECTION to the view that the author of Acts was a close companion of Paul is the claim that the apostle as portrayed in Acts is very different to the one who emerges from his letters. The letters show him in constant conflict with those who resisted the free admission of the Gentiles to the church, whereas in Acts the problem is largely settled in chapter 15 and not mentioned again. Furthermore, Paul's acceptance of the rules laid down by the Jerusalem Council, his circumcision of Timothy, and his undertaking of a rite of purification in Jerusalem are considered incompatible with themes found in Galatians. Finally, the strong emphasis on the atoning death of Christ and justification by faith that is found in the Paul of the letters is said to be missing in the Paul of Acts.

Let me respond to this briefly by saying that the purposes and occasions of Acts and the letters are different. We usually look at the Paul in the letters as a theologian responding to needs in the churches. In Acts, however, we see him as a missionary, a charismatic founder of Christian communities. Such differences

help explain the different emphases. The apostle did not object to circumcision as a Jewish rite, so he had the half-Jew Timothy circumcised in order to enhance his credibility in ministry. But when circumcision was presented as a means of salvation, he strongly opposed it. His decision to participate in a purificatory rite in the Jerusalem temple is in keeping with his teaching in the letters about becoming a Jew in order to win the Jews ([1 Cor. 9:20](#)).

Paul was indeed uncompromising when it came to the fundamental principles of the faith, such as salvation by faith alone. But where these principles were not affected, he was willing to adapt himself to his audience. While justification by faith in Christ and the message of the cross are not given as much emphasis in the summaries of his speeches that Luke records as they receive in the letters, these teachings are always implied and sometimes explicitly stated.

While we should recognize that the purposes for writing and the theological emphases of Luke and Paul differ, we do not need to imply that they contradict each other. For a complete picture of who Paul was, we must look at both his letters and the historical description of his life in Acts, just as we must do if we want a reliable biography about any famous author. Looking at only one specific type of literature will not serve as comprehensive guide to the life and thinking of an individual.

The Speeches of Acts

SPEECHES PLAYED AN important role in the history books of the period before and during the first century, "often constituting 20 to 35 percent of the narrative." Rhetoric, or the art of persuasion,

was considered primary to education in the first-century Greco-Roman world. As Conrad Gempf explains, "Rhetoric was, to the ancients, *power*, whether for good or for ill. In the Graeco-Roman world, *speaking* was central to success." Thus in ancient history books, "speeches are not mere commentary on events nor accompaniment to events: speeches must be seen *as* events in their own right." In other words, "ancient historians tended to focus on battles *and* speeches as the events that shaped history." So it is not surprising to find that Acts has thirty-two speeches (excluding short statements), which make up 25 percent of the narrative.

The speeches in Acts have been the subject of much study and discussion since the 1920s, when scholars like Henry Cadbury and Martin Dibelius treated them as creations of Luke intended to buttress the "history" that he was presenting. The writings of some early historians, such as Thucydides and Josephus, who clearly invented materials for the speeches they recorded, were taken as typical of Hellenistic historiography—a style that was then projected to Luke. It was in response to this challenge that a young Scottish classics scholar, F. F. Bruce, gave a now-famous lecture, "The Speeches in the Acts of the Apostles," in 1942. It gave him a name as a New Testament scholar, a field he later made his vocation with great distinction.

Responses to the scholarly discounting of the historical value of Acts continued, climaxing in a major work by another classicist turned New Testament scholar, Colin J. Hemer, who died in 1987 (before the last three chapters of his monumental work, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, was completed). His treatment on the speeches of Acts was pieced

together by the editor of this posthumous publication, Conrad Gempf, and included as an appendix. It defends the basic historicity of the speeches while conceding that what we get are not verbatim reports. Hemer said, "The brief summary paragraphs we possess do not purport to reproduce more than perhaps a *précis* of the distinctive highlights."

The editor of Hemer's work, Conrad Gempf, has, in a separate publication, elaborated on the nature of reporting speeches in ancient historiography. He has shown that simply because a speech fits in with the historian's purposes and convictions does not necessarily mean it has been invented by the historian. Historians may report speeches colorfully and rhetorically according to their own style, but that does make them unfaithful records of what took place. Gempf's conclusion is that just as good ancient historians recorded speeches in ways that, according to their standards, were historically appropriate and faithful representations of the events, it is probable that the author of Luke-Acts did the same.

In this commentary we will approach the speeches as recording essentially what was said by those alleged to have given them. They are most certainly summaries and paraphrases of much longer talks, and they faithfully report what was said. Through them we receive an understanding of how the leaders of the church faced their evangelistic, apologetic, pastoral, and theological challenges, and of how the opponents of Christianity and the Jewish and Gentile leaders of the day responded to Christianity.

Major Themes of Acts

JESUS' STATEMENT OF the Great Commission in [Acts 1:8](#) is the key text in this book, highlighting the two main themes of Acts: the Holy Spirit and witness. Jesus' disciples will become witnesses only after the Holy Spirit comes on them. Jesus then gives the geographical sequence in which the task of witness will be carried out—they will begin with Jerusalem, then move to Judea and Samaria, and culminate with witness to the ends of the earth. This sequence provides an outline for the book of Acts (see below).

In this section I will only lightly describe the various themes that gain prominence in the book of Acts. The reader is directed to the Subject Index at the back for a summary of the points highlighted in this commentary.

The priority of evangelism. From chapter 1, where the Great Commission is recorded ([1:8](#)), right up to the end of the book, the great activity that dominates this book is evangelism. An interesting realization dawned on me as I was coming to the end of this commentary: The two major methods used in evangelism in Acts were the winning of attention through miracles and apologetics. All the messages recorded in Acts had a strong apologetic content. The evangelists sought to show that Christianity withstood the questions that the people were asking, and the records of the speeches indicate that their evangelism was strongly content-oriented. The chart on "Evangelistic Preaching in Acts" gives a summary of the methods and message of the first evangelists.

The power of the Holy Spirit. Many have felt that Acts should be called "The Acts of the Holy Spirit." The first chapter records

the promise of the Holy Spirit ([1:4-5](#), [8](#)), the second his descent, and the rest of the book his work in and through the church.

Community life. Acts presents a vibrant community that was passionate about mission, with the members caring for each other, pursuing holiness, and dealing with matters that affected its unity. In the description of community we also see Luke's characteristic concern for the poor (which is more pronounced in his Gospel).

Teaching. Not only is teaching presented as something done with Christians, in Acts it is also part of the evangelistic process.

Prayer. Fourteen of the first fifteen chapters of Acts (ch. 5 excepted) and many of the later chapters mention prayer; in Acts, as in Luke's Gospel, prayer is a key theme.

Breaking human barriers in Christ. In keeping with the geographical order presented in the Great Commission ([1:8](#)), Luke shows how the gospel spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. In this process Gentiles are saved; he describes the way the church handled that witness as well as other social differences among Christians, leaving us with the strong impression that human barriers were broken in the early church and giving us reasons why that is so.

The place of suffering. Like much of the rest of the New Testament, there is much reflection on suffering in Acts. Here the suffering faced by the church is mostly on account of opposition to the gospel.

The sovereignty of God. Allied to the emphasis on suffering is the underlying theme that God is working out his sovereign

purposes even through suffering. This is the dominant theme of the passage that describes the church's reaction to the first experience of suffering ([4:23-31](#)).

The Jewish reaction to the gospel. A surprising amount of space is given to attempts of the church to evangelize the Jews and to Paul's perseverance with this task in spite of many disappointments. Acts begins with the apostles' asking Jesus when he will restore the kingdom to Israel ([1:6](#)) and ends with an affirmation that because of the hardness of the hearts of the Jews, the gospel is being taken to the Gentiles ([28:25-28](#)).

The legal status of Christianity. Luke is eager to give the impression that the Roman authorities did not consider Christianity to be a dangerous or illegal movement. Acts also contains examples of the eloquent defense of the Christians faith before the state.

Applying the Book of Acts Today

WE SAID THAT Luke had both a theological aim and a historical one in writing Acts, and that the events he chose to stress were chosen because of the value they had in presenting truths he wanted to communicate. Our task is to find those truths and to see what abiding principles we can glean from them that we can apply to our thoughts, lives, and ministries today. How do we go about gleaning abiding principles from these stories?

One method that is popular today is allegorizing—seeing consistent spiritual parallels to the incidents presented and looking for what is sometimes called the "deeper meaning" of the text. This was a common method of interpretation in the

early church and is often associated with the church father Origen. For example, the three stages of Lazarus following his death have been taken to be teaching three stages of a Christian's spiritual life (see [John 11](#)). (1) His stage in the tomb as a corpse represents the unregenerate stage. (2) His stage after being raised from the dead but before he is freed from the bondage of his grave clothes represents the carnal stage. (3) The stage after being loosed from the grave clothes represents the spiritual stage.

Though such allegorizing is an effective means of communicating truth, it may not be the intention of the author of the passage. True, sometimes the

author intended the allegorical method of interpreting truth, as in the allegory of the vine and the branches ([John 15:1-8](#)). But usually that intention is clear from the words of the passage itself. If the author does not intend his passage to be used in this way, then, if we use allegorical method, we are simply using it to illustrate some truths. These truths may be valid, but only because they come from somewhere else in Scripture. This method is not the way to get at the teaching intended by the author of Acts.

Others suggest that unless a narrative passage explicitly teaches a principle to follow, we should not use it in a normative way. Gordon Fee helpfully distinguishes between concluding from a passage that "we must do this," when we should be saying that "we may do this." However, out of the belief that "*all* Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" ([2 Tim. 3:16](#)), I believe we can go beyond this general approach to glean normative truth from the narratives of Acts even if a specific proposition is missing. Note, for example, Paul's comments regarding God's judgment on Israel during Old Testament times: "Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did... These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us" ([1 Cor. 10:6, 11](#)). To Paul, Old Testament history was a collection of revelatory happenings, that is, events used by God to reveal his nature and purpose to humanity. In keeping with this principle, in [Romans 4](#) and [Galatians 3](#) Paul used God's dealings with Abraham to construct his theology of justification by faith and not works.

Sometimes what we have in narrative passages are examples to inspire us. [Hebrews 11](#) uses Old Testament figures as inspiring examples of persevering faith for us to follow. Paul specifically asked the readers of his letters to follow his example ([1 Cor. 4:6; 11:1; Phil. 3:17](#)). For example, "Take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you" ([Phil. 3:17](#)). Acts is the place from which to receive that pattern. We believe that through the lives and ministries of the apostles, God acted in ways that reveal his will and his ways to humanity.

We must, of course, be cautious about how we use this principle. We must carefully distinguish principles that are normative and those that are specific to certain situations and therefore not applicable to all situations. Take, for example, Gamaliel's advice to leave the Christians alone because if Christianity is not of God, it will fail; and if it is of God, the Jewish leaders cannot stop it ([Acts 5:38-39](#)). God certainly used this advice to the advantage of the church, but it is not a principle always to be followed. If we did so, we could end up accepting as from God the growth of Islam, Sai Bāba's cult, and the Jehovah's Witnesses!

Or again: Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard point to the different models of church government and organization found in Acts. They show how "Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians all legitimately point to passages in Acts to support their views of church structure and leadership." This should tell us that different styles of leadership and structure are acceptable within the body of Christ and that we should look for the most appropriate one that does not break biblical principles. In doing this, we will look for models as practiced in the early church and recorded in Acts that suit our particular situation.

In other words, we must be careful about how we apply the narratives of Acts. One important key is to look for Luke's purpose for including an event in Acts. If we find a theme given special attention in Acts, then we may be able to find a pattern emerging that can give us normative principles. For this reason we will sometimes go into greater depth in the "Bridging Contexts" sections in order to establish the normativeness of a principle. We will refer to other incidents and statements in

Acts, and perhaps elsewhere in Scripture, to substantiate that normativeness.

Acts as a Radical Challenge to Today's Church

CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIANS WHO read Acts with an open mind will find themselves challenged with pointed applications by what happened in the early church. I will mention only a few here (see the Subject Index for elaboration of these points).

- To a society where individualism reigns and where the church also seems to have adopted a style of community life that "guards the privacy of the individual," the early church presents a radical community where the members held all things in common.
- To a society where selfishness is sometimes admired and each one is left to fend for himself or herself, Acts presents a group of Christians who were so committed to Christ and the cause of the gospel that they were willing to sacrifice their desires for the good of others.
- To a society where pluralism defines truth as something subjective and personal, Acts presents a church that based its life on certain objective facts about God and Christ—facts that were not only personally true but also universally valid and therefore had to be presented to the entire world.
- To a society that denies absolute truth and therefore shuns apologetics and persuasion in evangelism in favor of dialogue, Acts presents a church that persuaded people until they were convinced of the truth of the gospel. Instead of aiming at mutual enrichment as the

main aim of interreligious encounter, as many do today, the early church proclaimed Christ as supreme Lord with conversion in view.

- In an age where specialization has hit evangelism so much that we rarely find churches that emphasize healing also emphasizing apologetics, Acts presents a church where the same individuals performed healings and preached highly reasoned, apologetic messages.
- In an age when many churches spend so much time, money, and energy on self-preservation and improvement, Acts presents churches that released their most capable people for reaching the lost.
- In an age where many churches look to excellence in techniques to bring success, Acts presents a church that depended on the Holy Spirit and gave top priority to prayer and moral purity.
- In an age when many avenues are available to avoid suffering and therefore many Christians have left out suffering from their understanding of the Christian life, Acts presents a church that took on suffering for the cause of Christ and considered it a basic ingredient of discipleship.

NIV Application Commentary, The - NIV Application
Commentary, The – Acts: From biblical text...to
contemporary life.

CHARACTERISTICS AND THEMES

Acts is a careful history of the development of the early church. Luke's descriptions of geographical and provincial details, of governmental officials and their actions, of imperial procedure, of a sea voyage to Italy, replete with accurate nautical terms— all these come from a careful researcher who was himself an eyewitness of many of the events he records.

Luke had several purposes. In [1:1, 2](#) he says that in the Gospel he has explained the life of Jesus until the Ascension. He summarizes the general theme of Acts as follows: the Lord is going to expand his work "in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." Acts is called the "Acts of the Apostles," yet Luke traces only the ministries of Peter (chs. 1-12) and Paul (chs. 13-28). Some have detected an interest in defending Christianity or showing that Christianity was not a threat to Rome. Acts is a map of the progress of the church into the ancient world, showing how the present age began.

OUTLINE OF ACTS

- I. Peter and the Gospel to the Jews in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria ([1:1-12:24](#))
 - A. Instructions from Jesus and the Wait for the Spirit (ch. 1)
 - B. Founding of the Church in Jerusalem (chs. 2-7)
 1. The Outpouring of the Holy Spirit and Peter's First Sermon ([2:1-41](#))
 2. The Fellowship of Believers ([2:42-47](#))

3. The Beggar Healed and Peter's Second Sermon (ch. 3)
 4. Persecution from the Sanhedrin ([4:1-31](#))
 5. The Church: Community and Discipline ([4:32-5:11](#))
 6. Further Persecution from the Sanhedrin ([5:12-42](#))
 7. Choosing of the Seven ([6:1-7](#))
 8. Persecution and Death of Stephen ([6:8-7:60](#))
- C. Scattered by Persecution, the Gospel Spreads to Judea, Samaria, and Beyond ([8:1-12:24](#))
1. Philip Preaches in Samaria and to the Ethiopian Eunuch (ch. 8)
 2. The Conversion of Saul ([9:1-31](#))
 3. Peter's Ministry in Lydda and Joppa ([9:32-43](#))
 4. Peter's Ministry in Caesarea: the Holy Spirit Poured Out on the Gentiles ([10:1-11:18](#))
 5. The Church in Syrian Antioch ([11:19-30](#))
 6. Herod Agrippa I's Persecution of the Church and Death ([12:1-24](#))
- II. Paul and the Gospel to the Gentiles ([12:25-28:31](#))
- A. Paul Extends the Gospel into Asia Minor and Europe ([12:25-21:16](#))
1. Paul's First Missionary Journey—Cyprus and Asia Minor ([12:25-14:28](#))
 2. The Jerusalem Council ([15:1-35](#))
 3. Paul's Second Missionary Journey—Return to Asia Minor and on to Europe ([15:36-18:22](#))
 4. Paul's Third Missionary Journey—Strengthening the Churches of Asia Minor, Macedonia and Greece ([18:23-21:16](#))
- B. Paul Takes the Gospel to Rome ([21:17-28:31](#))

1. Paul's Arrest, Trial, and Imprisonment in Palestine ([21:17-26:32](#))
2. The Voyage to Rome ([27:1-28:16](#))
3. Paul's Two Years of Ministry in Rome ([28:17-31](#))

The Reformation Study Bible.

Introduction to Acts

This book unites the Gospels to the Epistles. It contains many particulars concerning the apostles Peter and Paul, and of the Christian church from the ascension of our Saviour to the arrival of St. Paul at Rome, a space of about thirty years. St. Luke was the writer of this book; he was present at many of the events he relates, and attended Paul to Rome. But the narrative does not afford a complete history of the church during the time to which it refers, nor even of St. Paul's life. The object of the book has been considered to be, 1. To relate in what manner the gifts of the Holy Spirit were communicated on the day of Pentecost, and the miracles performed by the apostles, to confirm the truth of Christianity, as showing that Christ's declarations were really fulfilled. 2. To prove the claim of the Gentiles to be admitted into the church of Christ. This is shown by much of the contents of the book. A large portion of the Acts is occupied by the discourses or sermons of various persons, the language and

manner of which differ, and all of which will be found according to the persons by whom they were delivered, and the occasions on which they were spoken. It seems that most of these discourses are only the substance of what was actually delivered. They relate nevertheless fully to Jesus as the Christ, the anointed Messiah.

Matthew Henry Concise Bible Commentary.