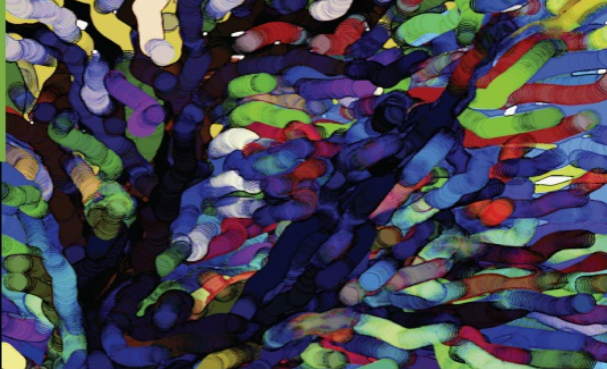


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JOHN R. W. STOTT

The Message of **Acts**

THE NEW TESTAMENT SERIES EDITOR: JOHN R. W. STOTT

The Message of Acts
To the ends of the earth

John Stott

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www.ivpress.com/academic/

InterVarsity Press
P.O. Box 1400
Downers Grove, IL 60515-1426
World Wide Web: www.ivpress.com
E-mail: email@ivpress.com

© John R. W. Stott, 1990

Originally published under the title *The Spirit, the Church and the World*.

Study guide © Inter-Varsity Press 1991

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ISBN 978-0-8308-9785-8 (digital)
ISBN 978-0-8308-1236-3 (print)

General preface

THE BIBLE SPEAKS TODAY describes three series of expositions, based on the books of the Old and New Testaments, and on Bible themes that run through the whole of Scripture. Each series is characterized by a threefold ideal:

- to expound the biblical text with accuracy
- to relate it to contemporary life, and
- to be readable.

These books are, therefore, not ‘commentaries’, for the commentary seeks rather to elucidate the text than to apply it, and tends to be a work rather of reference than of literature. Nor, on the other hand, do they contain the kinds of ‘sermons’ that attempt to be contemporary and readable without taking Scripture seriously enough. The contributors to *The Bible Speaks Today* series are all united in their convictions that God still speaks through what he has spoken, and that nothing is more necessary for the life, health and growth of Christians than that they should hear what the Spirit is saying to them through his ancient—yet ever modern—Word.

ALEC MOTYER
JOHN STOTT
DEREK TIDBALL
Series editors

Author's preface

Thank God for *The Acts of the Apostles!* The New Testament would be greatly impoverished without it. We are given four accounts of Jesus, but only one of the early church. So the Acts occupies an indispensable place in the Bible.

The value of the Acts

It is important, first, for its historical record. Luke begins his story with the outpouring of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost and the honeymoon period of the Spirit-filled community, which was abruptly terminated by the opposition of the Jewish authorities. He goes on to describe the transition stage in which the foundations were laid for the Gentile mission by Stephen's martyrdom and Philip's evangelism, the conversions of Saul and Cornelius, and the founding of the first Greek church in Antioch. From this international city and church the world-wide Christian mission was launched. Paul and Barnabas evangelized Cyprus and Galatia; the Council of Jerusalem acknowledged the legitimacy of Gentile conversion; Europe was reached during the second missionary journey (including Athens and Corinth) and Ephesus on the third. Then Paul was arrested in Jerusalem, and this was followed by a series of court trials, his appeal to Caesar, and the long sea voyage to Rome, the city of his dreams. There Luke leaves him, restricted to his own rented house, but unrestricted in his preaching of the gospel. Without the Acts we could not have reconstructed the course of Paul's intrepid missionary career or known how the gospel spread to the strategic cities of the Roman world.

The Acts is also important, however, for the contemporary inspiration which it brings us. Calvin called it 'a kind of vast treasure'.^[1] Martyn Lloyd-Jones referred to it as 'that most lyrical of books', and added: 'Live in that book, I exhort you: it is a tonic, the greatest tonic I know of in the realm of the Spirit.'^[2] It has, in fact, been a salutary exercise for the Christian church of every century to compare itself with the church of the first, and to seek to recapture something of its confidence, enthusiasm, vision and power. At the same time, we must be realistic. There is a danger lest we romanticize the early church, speaking of it with bated breath as if it had no blemishes. For then we shall miss the rivalries, hypocrisies, immoralities and heresies which troubled the church then as now. Nevertheless, one thing is certain. Christ's church had been overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit, who thrust it out to witness.

The literature of the Acts

Because of its unique importance, the Acts has attracted an enormous literature, and it would be almost impossible for anybody to read it all. I have enjoyed some of the older commentators, who nowadays are often neglected. I am thinking of John Chrysostom's fifty-five homilies on the Acts preached in Constantinople in AD 400 and of John Calvin's two volumes written in sixteenth-century Geneva. I have appreciated the pithy comments of Johann Albrecht Bengel of the eighteenth century, the godly and clear-headed insights of J. A. Alexander, the brilliant Princeton linguist of the nineteenth century, and the archaeological expertise of Sir William Ramsay, who wrote ten books between 1893 and 1915 bearing on Luke and/or Paul, the best-known being *St Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (1895). I have also struggled with the critical postures of liberal works like the five volumes edited by F. J. Foakes-Jackson and Kirsopp Lake under the title *The Beginnings of Christianity* (1920-32) and the 700 pages of Ernst Haenchen's scholarly treatment (1956).

Among contemporary conservative authors I have specially profited from the commentaries by F. F. Bruce (Greek, 1951; English, 1954), Howard Marshall (1980) and Richard Longenecker (1981). I particularly regret that the late Dr Colin Hemer's *magnum opus* entitled *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (1989), ably edited by Conrad Gempf, was published too late for me to study thoroughly; I have been able, as this manuscript is being prepared for the press, to spend only a morning in the perusal of it. This has enabled me to refer the reader to a number of Dr Hemer's discussions. The wealth of recent archaeological discovery (especially from papyri, inscriptions and coins), which he has painstakingly collected and sifted, will make his work a standard reference book for many years to come. Encyclopaedic in knowledge, conscientious in research and cautious in judgment, Colin Hemer has put all students of Acts in his debt.

It is easy to echo the sentiment of Sir William Ramsay, who wrote: 'It is impossible to find anything to say about Acts that has not been said before by somebody.'^[3] Then how on earth can one justify adding yet another volume to the extensive library on Acts? If anything distinctive can be claimed about this book it is that, whereas all commentaries seek to elucidate the original meaning of the text, the *Bible Speaks Today* series is committed also to its contemporary application. I have tried, therefore, to address myself with integrity to some of the main question which the Acts raises for today's Christians, such as the baptism of the Spirit and charismatic gifts, signs and wonders, the economic sharing of the first Christian community in Jerusalem, church discipline, the diversity of ministries, Christian conversion, racial prejudice, missionary principles, the cost of Christian unity, motives and methods in evangelism, the call to suffer for Christ, church and state, and divine providence.

The interpretation of the Acts

But can we leap the gap of nineteen centuries between the apostles and us, apply the Acts text to ourselves without manipulating it to suit our own preconceived opinions? Yes, it is right to affirm that the Word of God is always relevant. But this does not mean that we may simply 'read off' the text as if it was originally addressed to us in our context. We have to recognize the historical particularities of Scripture, especially of the 'salvation-history' which it records. In one sense, for example, the Day of Pentecost was unique and is unrepeatable, because the outpouring of the Spirit on that day was the final act of Jesus following those equally unique and unrepeatable events, his death, resurrection and ascension.

Similarly unique in some respects was the ministry of the apostles, whom Jesus appointed to be the pioneer teachers and the foundation of the church. ⁴ We have no liberty to copy everything they did.

It is in this connection that I need to say something about the difference between didactic and narrative parts of Scripture, and about the importance of allowing the didactic to control our interpretation of the narrative. For what I wrote about this in *Baptism and Fullness* has been misunderstood by some, and I will try to clarify it. ⁵ I am emphatically not saying that biblical narrative has nothing to teach us, for of course 'all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable'. ⁶

Moreover, what happened to others in former times has been recorded for our instruction. ⁷ The question, however, is *how* are we going to interpret these narrative passages? For some of them are not self-interpreting, and contain within themselves few if any clues as to what we are intended to learn from them. Are they necessarily normative? Is the behaviour or experience recorded in them meant to be copied? or perhaps avoided?

I am not referring only to charismatic questions like the gift of the Spirit to the Samaritans (Acts 8). The same query has to be raised in regard to other descriptive passages. For example, are we to make local church elections by drawing lots, because this was what they did when choosing an apostle to replace Judas (1:23–26)? Are we to hold our possessions in common, sell our goods and share the proceeds with the needy, as the members of the early church in Jerusalem did (2:44–45; 4:32ff.)? Again, are we to expect at our conversion to see a bright light and hear an audible voice, as Saul of Tarsus did (9:3ff.)? It should be clear from these examples that not everything that people are recorded in the Acts as having done or experienced is meant to be replicated in our lives. So how shall we decide? It is here that the didactic must guide us in evaluating and interpreting the descriptive. We have to look for teaching on the issue, first in the immediate context (within the narrative itself), then in what the author writes elsewhere, and finally in the broader context of Scripture as a whole. For instance, the apostle Peter's plain statement to Ananias that his property, both before and after its sale, was his own and at his disposal (5:4), will prevent us from regarding all Christian possessions as being necessarily held in common.

The biblical text used throughout this book is that of the New International Version. Sometimes it appears as a block before the exposition. But when the full text is incorporated within the exposition, it has not been thought necessary to include it independently as well.

I am grateful to many people for helping to bring this book to birth. I thank those who over a number of years have patiently listened to my clumsy attempts to expound the Acts and have thus served as a valuable sounding board. I mention the Summer School students at Regent College, Vancouver, in July 1979, and in particular those members of the Evangelical Fellowship of the Church in Wales who stoically submitted to annual instalments which went on for thirteen years. Next, I appreciate the helpfulness of the three official IVP readers of the manuscript—John Marsh, Colin Duriez and especially Conrad Gempf, who is himself extremely knowledgeable in Acts and who combed my manuscript with meticulous thoroughness and made a number of shrewd suggestions, many of which I have adopted. Another reader to whom I am greatly indebted is Todd Shy, my current student assistant. He has worked diligently through the typescript more than once, made perceptive comments, checked the NIV text and the footnotes, and compiled the list of abbreviations and the bibliography. Last but not least, I express my continuing gratitude to my able and tireless secretary of 33 years' standing, Frances Whitehead, whose task of typing and correcting has been made less tedious and more enjoyable by the versatile magic of her Apple Macintosh Plus.

John Stott
Easter 1989

Chief abbreviations

- AV The Authorized (King James') Version of the Bible (1611).
- BAGD Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, translated and adapted by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 2nd edition, revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Bauer's fifth edition, 1958 (University of Chicago Press, 1979).
- BC *The Beginnings of Christianity, Part I: The Acts of the Apostles*, 5 volumes, ed. F. J. Foakes-Jackson and Kirsopp Lake (Macmillan: vol. I, 1920; vol. II, 1922; vol. III, 1926; vols. IV and V, 1932; Baker reprint, 1979).
- GT *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* by C. L. W. Grimm and J. H. Thayer (T. & T. Clark, 1901).
- HDB *A Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. James Hastings, 5 volumes (T. & T. Clark, 1898–1904).
- JB The Jerusalem Bible (1966).
- JBP *The New Testament in Modern English* by J. B. Phillips (Collins, 1958).
- LXX The Old Testament in Greek according to the Septuagint, 3rd century BC.
- NEB The New English Bible (NT 1961, 2nd edition 1970; OT 1970).
- NIV The New International Version of the Bible (1973, 1978, 1984).
- RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT 1946, 2nd edition 1971; OT 1952).
- TDNT *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, translated into English by G. W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Eerdmans, 1964–76).

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A chronological table ^{*}

<i>Acts narrative</i>		<i>Roman Empire</i>	
AD		AD	
30	The crucifixion, resurrection and ascension of Jesus (1:1–11)	14–37	Tiberius, emperor
	Pentecost (2:1–41)	26–36	Pontius Pilate, procurator of Judea
32, 33	Stephen is stoned (7:54–60); Saul is converted (9:1–19)		
35 or 36	Paul's first visit to Jerusalem (9:26–28; Gal. 1:18–20)		
		37–41	Caligula, emperor
43 or 44	James the apostle is executed (12:1–2)	41–44	Herod Agrippa I, king of Judea
46 or 47	Paul's second visit to Jerusalem (11:27–30; Gal. 2:1–10)	41–54 45–47	Claudius, emperor Famine in Judea
47, 48	The first missionary journey (13–14)		
49	The Council of Jerusalem (15:1–30)	49	Claudius expels Jews from Rome
	The second missionary journey begins (15:36ff.)	50–c. 93	Herod Agrippa II, tetrarch of Northern territory
50–52	Paul in Corinth (18:1–18a)	51–52	Gallio, proconsul of Achaia
52	Paul returns to Syrian Antioch via Ephesus and Caesarea (18:18b–22) The third missionary journey begins (18:23ff.)		
52–55	Paul in Ephesus (19:1–20:1a)	52–59	Felix, procurator of Judea
55–56	Paul in Macedonia (20:1b–2a)	54–68	Nero, emperor
56–57	Paul winters in Corinth (20:2b–3a)		
57	The voyage to Jerusalem, via Macedonia, Troas and Miletus (20:3b–21:17) Paul is arrested in Jerusalem (21:27–36) and tried before Felix (24:1–22)		
57–59	Paul's Caesarean imprisonment (23:23–24:27)		
59	Paul is tried before Festus and Agrippa (25:6–26:32)	59–61	Festus, procurator of Judea
59–60	The voyage to Rome (27:1–28:16)		
60–62	Paul's Roman imprisonment (28:16ff.)		
64	The probable martyrdoms of Peter and Paul in Rome	64	Nero begins

			persecution of Christians
		70	Fall of Jerusalem

Introduction

1. Introduction to Luke (Luke 1:1–4)

Before reading any book it is helpful to know the author's purpose in writing it. The biblical books are no exception to this rule. So why did Luke write?

He actually wrote two books. The first was his Gospel, which ancient and unassailed tradition attributes to his authorship and which is almost certainly the 'former book' referred to at the beginning of Acts. So the Acts was his second book. The two form an obvious pair. Both are dedicated to Theophilus and both are written in the same literary Greek style. Further, as Henry J. Cadbury pointed out sixty years ago, Luke regarded the Acts as 'neither an appendix nor an afterthought', but as farming with his gospel 'a single continuous work'. Cadbury went on to suggest that, 'in order to emphasize the historic unity of the two volumes ... the expression "Luke-Acts" is perhaps justifiable'. [1]

Reverting to the question why Luke wrote his two-volume work on the origins of Christianity, at least three answers may be given. He wrote as a Christian historian, as a diploma and as a theologian-evangelist.

a. Luke the historian

It is true that the more destructive critics of the past had little or no confidence in Luke's historical reliability. F. C. Baur, for example, leader of the 'Tübingen School' in the middle of the last century, wrote that certain statements in the Acts 'can only be looked at as intentional deviations from historical truth in the interest of the special tendency which they possess'. [2] And the very unorthodox Adolf Harnack (1851–1930), who could describe the Acts as 'this great historical work', [3] also wrote in the same book that Luke 'affords gross instances of carelessness, and often, of complete confusion in the narrative'. [4]

There are a number of reasons, however, why we should be sceptical of this scepticism. To begin with, Luke claimed in his preface to the Gospel to be writing accurate history, and it is generally agreed that he intended this to cover both volumes. For 'it was the custom in antiquity', whenever a work was divided into more than one volume, 'to prefix to the first a preface for the whole'. In consequence, Luke 1:1–4 'is the real preface to Acts well as to the Gospel'. [5] Here it is:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, ² just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eye-witnesses and servants of the word. ³ Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ so that you may know the certainly the things you have been taught.

In this important statement Luke delineates five successive stages:

First came the historical events. Luke calls them certain 'things that have been fulfilled among us' (1). And if the 'fulfilled' is the right translation, it seems to indicate that these events were neither random nor unexpected, but took place in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy.

Next Luke mentions the contemporary eyewitnesses, for the things 'fulfilled among us' were then 'handed down to us by those who from the were eyewitnesses and servants of the word' (2). Here Luke excludes himself, for although he was an eyewitness of much that he will record in the second part of the Acts, he did not belong to the group who eyewitnesses 'from the first'. These were the apostles, who were witnesses of the historic Jesus and who then handed down (the meaning of 'tradition') to others what they had themselves seen and heard.

The third stage was Luke's own personal researches. Although he belonged to the second generation who had received the 'tradition' about Jesus from the apostolic eyewitnesses, he had not accepted it uncritically. On the contrary, he had 'carefully investigated everything from the beginning' (3).

Fourthly, after the events, the eyewitness traditions and the investigation came the writing. 'Many have undertaken to draw up an account' of these things (1), he says, and now 'it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account' (3). The 'many' authors doubtless included Mark.

Fifthly, the writing would have readers, among them Theophilus whom Luke addresses, 'so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught' (4). Thus the events which had been accomplished, witnessed, transmitted, investigated and written down were (and still are) to be the ground of the Christian faith and assurance.

Moreover, the Luke who claimed to be writing history was well qualified to do so, for he was an educated doctor, [6] a traveling companion of Paul, and had resided in Palestine for at least two years.

Even in those far-off days doctors underwent quite a rigorous training, and Luke's stylish Greek is that of a cultured person. There is also some evidence in Luke-Acts of the vocabulary and powers of observation which one would expect to find in a member of the medical profession. In 1882 the Irish scholar W. K. Hobart wrote his book *The Medical Language of St Luke*, whose aim was to show that Luke was 'well acquainted with the language of the Greek medical schools'. [7] and that 'the prevailing tinge of medical diction' reveals a medical author throughout both Gospel and Acts. [8] Adolf Harnack endorsed this theory. [9] More recent critics have rejected it, however. H. J. Cadbury in several studies, after scrutinizing Hobart's list of supposedly medical words used by Luke, pointed out that they belonged not so much to a technical medical vocabulary as to the repertoire of any educated Greek. The truth probably lies at neither of these extremes. Although Luke's medical background cannot be proved by his vocabulary, yet some residue of medical

interest and terminology does seem to be discernible in his writing. 'Instinctively Luke uses medical words', wrote William Barclay, [10] and proceeded to give examples in both the Gospel [11] and the Acts. [12]

Another reason for crediting Luke's claim to be writing history is that he was a travelling companion of Paul's. It is well known that several times in the Acts narrative Luke changes from the third person plural ('they') to the first person plural ('we'), and that by these 'we-sections' he unobtrusively draws attention to his presence, in each case in the company of Paul. The first took them from Troas to Philippi, where the gospel was planted in European soil (16:10-17); the second from Philippi to Jerusalem after the conclusion of the last missionary journey (20:5-15 and 21:1-18); and the third from Jerusalem to Rome by sea (27:1-28:16). During these periods Luke will have had ample opportunity to hear and absorb Paul's teaching, and to write a personal travelogue of his experiences from which he could later draw.

In addition to being a doctor and friend of Paul's, Luke had a third qualification for writing history, namely his residence in Palestine. It happened like this. Luke arrived in Jerusalem with Paul (21:17) and left with him on their voyage to Rome (27:1). In between was a period of more than two years, during which Paul was held a prisoner in Caesarea (24:27), while Luke was a free man. How did he use this time? It would be reasonable to guess that he travelled the length and breadth of Palestine, gathering material for his Gospel and for the early Jerusalem-based chapters of the Acts. He will have familiarized himself as a Gentile with Jewish history, customs and festivals, and he will have visited the places made sacred by the ministry of Jesus and the birth of the Christian community. Harnack was impressed by his personal knowledge of Nazareth (its hill and synagogue), Capernaum (and the centurion who built its synagogue), Jerusalem (with its nearby Mount of Olives and villages, and its 'Synagogue of the Freedmen'), the temple (its courts, gates and porticoes), Emmaus (sixty stadia distant), Lydda, Joppa, Caesarea and other towns. [13]

Since, for Luke's understanding of the early history, people were even more important than places, he will surely also have interviewed many eyewitnesses. Some of them will have known Jesus, including perhaps the now elderly Virgin Mary herself, since Luke's birth and infancy narrative, including the intimacies of the Annunciation, is told from her viewpoint and must go back ultimately to her. Others will have been associated with the beginnings of the Jerusalem church like John Mark and his mother, Philip, the apostles Peter and John, and James the Lord's brothers; they will have been able to give Luke firsthand information about the Ascension, the Day of Pentecost, the early preaching of the gospel, the opposition of the Sanhedrin, the martyrdom of Stephen, the conversion of Cornelius, the execution of the apostle James and the imprisonment and release of Peter. So it is not surprising that the first half of the Acts has a 'very noticeable Semitic colouring'. [14]

We have good reasons, then, to have confidence in Luke's claim to be writing history, and professional historians and archaeologists have been among the most doughty defenders of his reliability. Sir William Ramsay, for example, who had at first been an admiring student of the radical critic F. C. Baur, was later led by his own researches to change his mind. He tells us in his *St Paul the Traveller and the Roman Citizen* (1895) that he began his investigation 'without any prejudice in favour of the conclusion' which he later reached, but 'on the contrary ... with a mind unfavourable to it'. [15] Yet he was able to give reasons 'for placing the author of Acts among the historians of the first rank'. [16]

Nearly seventy years later A. N. Sherwin-White, who was Readers in ancient history at Oxford University and described himself as 'a professional Graeco-Roman historian', [17] strongly affirmed the accuracy of Luke's background knowledge. He wrote about the Acts:

The historical framework is exact. In terms of time and place the details are precise and correct. One walks the streets and marketplaces, the theatres and assemblies of first-century Ephesus or Thessalonica, Corinth or Philippi, with the author of Acts. The great men of the cities, the magistrates, the mob and mobleader are all there.... It is similar with the narrative of Paul's judicial experiences before the tribunals of Gallio, Felix and Festus. As documents these narratives belongs to the same historical series as the records of provincial and imperial trials in epigraphical and literary sources of the first and early second centuries AD. [18]

Here is his conclusion: 'For Acts the confirmation of historicity is overwhelming.... Any attempt to reject its basic historicity even in matters of detail must now appear absurd. Roman historians have long taken it for granted.' [19]

b. Luke the diplomat

The writing of history cannot have been Luke's only purpose, for the history he gives us is selective and incomplete. He tells us about Peter, John, James the Lord's brothers and Paul, but nothing about the other apostles, except that James the son of Zebedee was beheaded. He describes the spread of the gospel north and west of Jerusalem, but writes nothing about its progress east and south, except for the conversion of the Ethiopian. He portrays the Palestinian church in the early post-Pentecost period, but then follows instead the expansion of the Gentile mission under the leadership of Paul. So Luke is more than a historian. He is, in fact, a sensitive Christian 'diplomat' in relation to both church and state.

First, Luke develops a political apologetic, because he is deeply concerned about the attitude of the Roman authorities towards Christianity. He therefore goes out of his way to defend Christianity against criticism. The authorities, he argues, have nothing to fear from Christians, for they are neither seditious nor subversive, but on the contrary legally innocent and morally harmless. More positively, they exercise a wholesome influence on society.

Perhaps this is why both Luke's volumes are addressed to Theophilus. Although the adjective *theophilēs*, meaning either 'loved by God' or 'loving God' (BAGD), could symbolize every Christian reader, it is more likely to be the name of a specific person. And although the adjective *kraistos* (*most excellent*, Lk. 1:3) could be either just 'a polite form of address with no official connotation', or the 'honorary form of address used to persons who hold a higher official or social

position than the speaker' (BAGD), the latter seems more likely because it occurs later in relation to the procurators Felix (23:26; 24:3) and Festus (26:25). A modern equivalent might be 'Your Excellency' (NEB). Some scholars have gone on to suggest that Theophilus was a specific Roman official who had heard anti-Christian slanders, while B. H. Streeter thought the word was 'a prudential pseudonym', in fact (he guessed) 'the secret name by which Flavius Clemens was known in Roman Church'.²⁰

In any case, Luke repeatedly makes three points of political apologetic. First, Roman officials were consistently friendly to Christianity, and some had even become Christians, like the centurion at the cross, the centurion Cornelius, and Sergius Paulus, proconsul of Cyprus. Secondly, the Roman authorities could find no fault in either Jesus or his apostles. Jesus had been accused of sedition, but neither Herod nor Pilate could discover any basis for the accusation. As for Paul, in Philippi the magistrates apologized to him, in Corinth the proconsul Gallio refused to adjudicate, and in Ephesus the town clerk declared Paul and his friends to be innocent. Then Felix, Festus and Agrippa all failed to convict him of any offence—three acquittals corresponding to the three times Luke says Pilate had declared Jesus innocent.²¹

In the third place, the Roman authorities conceded that Christianity was a *religio licita* (a lawful or licensed religion) because it was not a new religion (which would need to be approved by the state) but rather the purest form of Judaism (which had enjoyed religious freedom under the Romans since the second century BC). The coming of Christ was the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, and the Christian community enjoyed direct continuity with the Old Testament people of God.

This, then, was Luke's political apologetic. He produced evidence to show that Christianity was harmless (because some Roman officials had embraced it themselves), innocent (because Roman judges could find no basis for prosecution) and lawful (because it was the true fulfilment of Judaism). Christians should always be able on similar grounds to claim the protection of the state. I am reminded of a statement made in 1972 by the Baptist believers of Piryatin to Mr. N. V. Podgorny, Chairman of the Praesidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, and Mr L. I. Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Communist Party. Quoting articles of the USSR constitution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, together with particular laws and juridical interpretations, the Evangelical Christian Baptists of Piryatin claimed the right to freedom of conscience and confession, and declared that they did not break the law 'because there is nothing harmful, nothing opposed to the government, nothing fanatical in our activity, but only that which is spiritually useful and healthy, just, honest, peaceful in accordance with the teaching of Jesus Christ'.²²

The second example of Luke's 'diplomacy' is that he was a peacemaker in the church. He wanted to demonstrate by his narrative that the early church was a united church, that the peril of division between Jewish and Samaritan Christians, and between Jewish and Gentile Christians, was providentially avoided, and that the apostles Peter, James and Paul were in fundamental agreement about the gospel.

It was Matthias Schneckenburger in his *Über den Zweck der Apostelgeschichte* (1841) who made 'the first elaborate investigation into the purpose of Acts'.²³ He believed that Luke was defending Paul against Jewish-Christian criticism of his mission to the Gentiles by emphasizing his Jewish practices and his good relations with the Jerusalem church. He was also at pains to demonstrate their 'parallel miracles, visions, sufferings and speeches',²⁴ in order 'to make Paul equal to Peter'.²⁵

F. C. Baur went much further. He saw Acts as having a precise, 'tendentious' purpose. On the rather flimsy foundation of the Corinthian factions ('I follow Paul ... I follow Peter ...', 1 Cor. 1:12) he constructed an elaborate theory that the early church was torn apart by conflict between original Jewish Christianity represented by Peter and later Gentile Christianity represented by Paul. He regarded Acts as a second-century attempt by a 'Paulinist' (a follower and champion of Paul) to minimize, and even deny, the supposed hostility between the two leading apostles and so to reconcile Jewish and Gentile Christians to one another. He portrayed Paul as a faithful Jew, who kept the law and believed the prophets, and Peter as the evangelist through whom the first Gentile was converted. The two apostles are thus seen in harmony, not at loggerheads, with each other. In fact, Luke attempted to reconcile the 'two opposing parties by making Paul appear as Petrine as possible, and, correspondingly, Peter appear as Pauline as possible ...'.²⁶

It is generally agreed that F. C. Baur and his successors in the Tübingen School carried their theory much too far. There is really no evidence that in the early church there were two Christianities (Jewish and Gentile) headed by two apostles (Peter and Paul) in irreconcilable opposition to each other. Baur was probably influenced by Hegel's dialectical understanding of history in terms of a recurring conflict between thesis and antithesis. There certainly was tension between Jewish and Gentile Christians, and because of the activity of the Judaizers a serious split did seem possible until the issue was settled by the Council of Jerusalem. Luke does not hide this. Certainly too, in Antioch, Paul publicly opposed Peter to his face,²⁷ because of his withdrawal from fellowship with Gentile believers. But this confrontation was exceptional and temporary; Paul wrote about it to the Galatians in the past tense. Peter recovered from his momentary lapse. The reconciliation between the two leading apostles was real, not fictitious, and the thrust of Acts, Galatians 1 and 2, and 1 Corinthians 15:11 is on the agreement of the apostles about the gospel.

Luke did not invent this apostolic harmony, as Baur argued: he rather observed it and recorded it. It is evident that he gives prominence in his story to Peter (chapters 1–12) and to Paul (chapters 13–28). It seems very probable as well that he deliberately presents them as exercising parallel rather than divergent ministries. The similarities are remarkable. Thus, both Peter and Paul were filled with the Holy Spirit (4:8 and 9:17; 13:9); both preached the word of God with boldness (4:13, 31 and 9:27, 29); both bore witness before Jewish audiences to Jesus crucified, risen and reigning, in fulfilment of Scripture, as the way of salvation (*e.g.* 2:22ff. and 13:16ff.); both preached to Gentiles as well as Jews (10:34ff. and 13:46ff.); both received visions which gave vital direction to the church's developing mission (10:9ff.; 16:9); both were

imprisoned for their testimony to Jesus and then miraculously set free (12:7ff. and 16:25ff.); both healed a congenital cripple, Peter in Jerusalem and Paul in Lystra (3:2ff. and 14:8ff.); both healed other sick people (9:41 and 28:8); both exorcized evil spirits (5:16 and 16:18); both possessed such extraordinary powers that people were healed by Peter's shadow and by Paul's handkerchiefs and aprons (5:15 and 19:12); both raised the dead, Tabitha in Joppa by Peter and Eutychus in Troas by Paul (9:36ff. and 20:7ff.); both called down God's judgment on a sorcerer/false teacher, Peter on Simon Magus in Samaria and Paul on Elymas in Paphos (8:20ff. and 13:6ff.); and both refused the worship of their fellow human beings, Peter that of Cornelius and Paul that of the Lystrans (10:25–26 and 14:11ff.).

It is true that these parallels are scattered through Acts and are not put in direct juxtaposition to each other. Yet there they are. They can hardly be accidental. Luke surely includes them in his narrative in order to show by his portraiture of Peter and Paul that they were both apostles of Christ, with the same commission, gospel and authentication. It is in this way that he may be called a 'peacemaker', who demonstrated the unity of the apostolic church.

c. *Luke the theologian-evangelist*

The value of 'redaction-criticism' is that it portrays the authors of the Gospels and the Acts not as unimaginative 'scissors and paste' editors, but as theologians in their own right, who conscientiously selected, arranged and presented their material in order to serve their particular pastoral purpose. It was in the 1950s that redaction-criticism began to be applied to the Acts, first by Martin Dibelius (1951), next by Hans Conzelmann (1954) ²⁸ and then by Ernst Haenchen (1956) in his commentary. Unfortunately, these German scholars believed that Luke pursued his theological concerns at the expense of his historical reliability. Professor Howard Marshall, however, who has built on their work (while at the same time subjecting it to a rigorous critique), especially in his fine study *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (1970), urges that we must not set Luke the historian and Luke the theologian in opposition to each other, for he was both, and in fact each emphasis requires the other:

Luke is *both* historian and theologian, and ... the best term to describe him is 'evangelist', a term which, we believe, includes both of the others.... As a theologian Luke was concerned that his message about Jesus and the early church should be based upon reliable history.... He used his history in the service of his theology. ²⁹

Again, Luke was 'both a reliable historian and a good theologian.... We believe that the validity of his theology stands or falls with the reliability of the history on which it is based.... Luke's concern is with the saving significance of the history rather than with the history itself as bare facts' ³⁰

In particular, then Luke was a theologian of salvation. Salvation, wrote Howard Marshall, 'is the central motif in Lucan theology', ³¹ both in the Gospel (in which we see it accomplished) and in the Acts (in which we see it proclaimed). Michael Green had drawn attention to this in his *The Meaning of Salvation*. 'It is hard to overestimate the importance of salvation in the writings of Luke ...', he wrote. 'It is astonishing... that in view of the frequency with which Luke uses salvation terminology, more attention has not been paid to it' ³²

Luke's theology of salvation is already adumbrated in the 'Song of Simeon' or *Nunc Dimittis* which he records in his Gospel. ³³ Three fundamental truths stand out.

First, *salvation has been prepared by God*. In speaking to God, Simeon referred to 'your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people' (Lk. 2:30–31). Far from being an afterthought, it had been planned and promised for centuries. The same emphasis recurs throughout the Acts. In the sermons of Peter and Paul, not to mention Stephen's defence, Jesus' death, resurrection, reign and Spirit-gift are all seen as the culmination of centuries of prophetic promise.

Secondly, *salvation is bestowed by Christ*. When Simeon spoke to God of 'your salvation', which he had seen with his own eyes, he was referring to the baby Jesus whom he held in his arms and who had been 'born a Saviour' (Lk. 2:11). Jesus himself later made the unequivocal statement that he had come 'to seek and to save what was lost' (Lk. 19:10), and he illustrated it by his three famous parables of human lostness (Lk. 15:1–32). Then after his death and resurrection his apostles declared that forgiveness of sins was available to all who would repent and believe in Jesus (Acts 2:38–39; 13:38–39). Indeed, salvation was to be found in no-one else (Acts 4:12). For God had exalted Jesus to his right hand 'as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins ...' (Acts 5:31).

Thirdly, *salvation is offered to all peoples*. As Simeon put it, it has been prepared 'in the presence of all the peoples' (literally), to be both a light to the nations and the glory of Israel (Lk. 2:31–32). Without doubt it is this truth on which Luke lays his major emphasis. In Luke 3:6, in reference to John the Baptist, he continues his quotation from Isaiah 40 beyond where Matthew and Mark stop, in order to include the statement 'all flesh will see God's salvation'. In Acts 2:17 he records Peter's quotation of God's promise through Joel: 'I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh.' These two words *pasa sarx*, 'all flesh' or 'all humankind', stand as a signpost near the beginning of each of Luke's two volumes, in both cases embedded in an Old Testament prophecy, to point to Luke's principal message. Jesus is the Saviour of the world; nobody is beyond the embrace of his love. In his Gospel, Luke shows Jesus' compassion for those sections of the community whom others despised, namely women and children, the poor, the sick, the sinful and the outcast, Samaritans and Gentiles, while in the Acts Luke explains how Paul came to turn to the Gentiles, and describes the gospel's triumphal progress from Jerusalem the capital of Jewry to Rome the capital of the world.

The prominence given to the universal offer of the gospel comes with particular appropriateness from the pen of Luke.

For he is the only Gentile contributor to the New Testament. ³⁴ Well-educated and widely travelled, he is the only Gospel-writer who calls the Sea of Galilee a 'lake', because he is able to compare it with the Great Sea, the Mediterranean. He has the broad horizons of the Graeco-Roman world, its history as well as its geography. So he sets his story of Jesus and of the early church against the background of contemporary secular events. And he uses the word

oikoumenē, ‘the inhabited earth’, more often (eight times) than all the other New Testament writers together.

But Luke the theologian of salvation is essentially the evangelist. For he proclaims the gospel of salvation from God in Christ for all people. Hence his inclusion in the Acts of so many sermons and addresses, especially by Peter and Paul. He not only shows them preaching to their original hearers, but also enables them to preach to us who, centuries later, listen to them. For as Peter said on the Day of Pentecost, the promise of salvation is for us too, and for every generation, indeed ‘for all whom the Lord our God will call’ (Acts 2:39).

2. Introduction to the Acts (Acts 1:1–5)

After our general introduction to Luke, and to his purposes in writing, we come now more particularly to the Acts and to its preface. We need to note carefully the way in which Luke understood both the relation between his two volumes and the foundation role exercised by the apostles.

a. Luke’s two volumes

Here Luke tells us how he thinks of his two-volume work on the origins of Christianity, which constitutes approximately one quarter of the New Testament. He does not regard volume one as the story of *Jesus Christ* from his birth through his sufferings and death to his triumphant resurrection and ascension, and volume two as the story of *the church of Jesus Christ* from its birth in Jerusalem through its sufferings by persecution to its triumphant conquest of Rome some thirty years later. For the contrasting parallel he draws between his two volumes was not between Christ and his church, but between two stages of the ministry of the same Christ. In his *former book* he has written *about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven*, since he was ‘powerful in word and deed before God and all the people’; [35] in this his second book (he implies) he will write about what Jesus continued to do and to teach after his ascension, especially through the apostles whose sermons and authenticating ‘sings and wonders’ Luke will faithfully record. Thus Jesus’ ministry on earth, exercised personally and publicly, was followed by his ministry from heaven, exercised through his Holy Spirit by his apostles. Moreover, the watershed between the two was the ascension. Not only did it conclude Luke’s first book [36] and introduce his second (Acts 1:9), but it terminated Jesus’ earthly ministry and inaugurated his heavenly ministry.

What, then, is the correct title for Luke’s second volume? Its popular name, especially in the United States, is ‘the Book of Acts’, and this is justified by the fourth-century Codex Sinaiticus in which it is headed simply *Praxeis*, ‘Acts’. But this neither tells us whose acts Luke is portraying, nor helps to distinguish his book from the later apocryphal works like the second-century *Acts of John*, *Acts of Paul* and *Acts of Peter*, and the third-century *Acts of Andrew* and *Acts of Thomas*. These were pious romances intended to enhance the reputation of the apostle concerned, especially by legendary miracles, and usually to promote under his patronage some unorthodox tendency. [37]

The traditional title since the second century has been ‘The Acts of (the) Apostles’, with or without the definite article. And certainly it is apostles who occupy the centre of Luke’s stage—first Peter and John (chapters 1–8), then Peter on his own (chapters 10–12), James as chairman of the Jerusalem Council (chapter 15), and especially Paul (chapters 9 and 13–28). Yet this title is too man-centred; it omits the divine power by which the apostles spoke and acted.

Others have proposed the title ‘The Acts of the Holy Spirit’, for example, Johann Albrecht Bengel in the eighteenth century. He wrote that Luke’s second volume ‘describes not so much the Acts of the Apostles as the Acts of the Holy Spirit, even as the former treatise contains the Acts of Jesus Christ’. [38] The concept was popularized by Arthur T. Pierson whose commentary (1895) was published with this title:

This book we may, perhaps, venture to call the *Acts of the Holy Spirit*, for from first to last it is the record of his advent and activity. Here he is seen coming and working.... But (*sc.* only) one true Actor and Agent is here recognized, all other so-called actors or workers being merely his instruments, an agent being one who acts, an instrument being that through which he acts. [39]

Pierson ends his book with a stirring challenge:

Church of Christ! The records of these acts of the Holy Ghost have never reached completeness. This is the one book which has no proper close, because it waits for new chapters to be added so fast and so far as the people of God shall reinstate the blessed Spirit in his holy seat of control. [40]

This, to be sure, is a healthy corrective. Throughout Luke’s narrative there are references to the promise, gift, outpouring, baptism, fullness, power, witness and guidance of the Holy Spirit. It would be impossible to explain the progress of the gospel apart from the work of the Spirit. Nevertheless, if the title ‘the Acts of the Apostles’ over-emphasizes the human element, ‘the Acts of the Holy Spirit’ over-emphasizes the divine, since it overlooks the apostles as the chief characters through whom the Spirit worked. It is also inconsistent with Luke’s first verse which implies that the acts and words he reports are those of the ascended Christ working through the Holy Spirit who, as Luke knows, is ‘the Spirit of Jesus’ (Acts 16:7). The most accurate (though cumbersome) title, then, which does justice to Luke’s own statement in verses 1 and 2, would be something like ‘The Continuing Words and Deeds of Jesus by his Spirit through his Apostles’.

Luke’s first two verses are, therefore, extremely significant. It is no exaggeration to say that they set Christianity apart from all other religions. These regard their founder as having completed his ministry during his lifetime; Luke says Jesus only began his. True, he finished the work of atonement, yet that end was also a beginning. For after his resurrection, ascension and gift of the Spirit he continued his work, first and foremost through the unique foundation ministry of his

chosen apostles and subsequently through the post-apostolic church of every period and place. This, then, is the kind of Jesus Christ we believe in: he is both the historical Jesus who lived and the contemporary Jesus who lives. The Jesus of history began his ministry on earth; the Christ of glory has been active through his Spirit ever since, according to his promise to be with his people ‘always, to the very end of the age’. ⁴¹

b. The foundation ministry of the apostles

We have already noted that the ascension was the watershed between the two phases—earthly and heavenly—of the ministry of Jesus Christ. Now we need to note that he was not *taken up to heaven*, until *after* he had given *instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen*. This is clearly emphasized in the Greek sentence, which reads literally: ‘until the day when, having instructed his chosen apostles through the Holy Spirit, he was taken up.’ Thus, before ending his personal ministry on earth, Jesus deliberately made provision for its continuance, still on earth (through the apostles) but from heaven (through the Holy Spirit). Because the apostles occupied a unique position, they also received a unique equipment. Luke outlines four stages.

(i) Jesus chose them

They were *the apostles he had chosen* (2). Luke has used the same verb *eklegomai* in his account of Jesus’ calling and choice of the Twelve, ‘whom he also designated apostles’, ⁴² and he is about to use it again when two men are proposed to fill the vacancy left by Judas and the believers pray ‘Lord, ... show us which of these two you have chosen’ (24). Significantly, the same verb is also used later in connection with Paul. The risen Lord describes him to Ananias as ‘my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles ...’ (9:15), and Ananias conveys this message to Paul: ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you ... You will be his witness ...’ (22:14–15). It is thus emphasized that all the apostles (the Twelve, Matthias and Paul) were neither self-appointed, nor appointed by any human being, committee, synod or church, but were directly and personally chosen and appointed by Jesus Christ himself.

(ii) Jesus showed himself to them

The other evangelists have indicated that Jesus appointed the Twelve ‘that they might be with him’ and so be uniquely qualified to bear witness to him. ⁴³ The foundation witnesses had to be eyewitnesses. ⁴⁴ Judas’ successor, Peter said, had to be someone who had been with the Twelve ‘the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us’ (1:21–22). And in particular he must be ‘a witness with us of his resurrection’ (1:22, cf. 10:41). So, *after his suffering*, the risen Lord *showed himself to these men* (3). Luke stresses this. Jesus *gave them many convincing proofs* (*tekmērion* is a ‘convincing, decisive proof’—BAGD) *that he was alive*, which continued *over a period of forty days*. During this time *he appeared to them* (becoming visible), *spoke about the kingdom of God* (so that they heard as well as saw him) and *on one occasion* at least *was eating with them*, which indicates that he was no ghost, but could be touched (10:41). ⁴⁵ He thus presented himself to their senses: their eyes, ears and hands. Such an objective experience of the risen Lord was an indispensable qualification of an apostle, which explains why Paul could be one ⁴⁶ and James ⁴⁷ and why there have been no comparable apostles since and can be none today.

(iii) Jesus commanded or commissioned them

In addition to speaking to them about the kingdom of God (3) and the Holy Spirit (4–5), which we shall consider further in the next chapter, he gave them certain *instructions through the Holy Spirit* (who inspired all his teaching ⁴⁸). What were these instructions? It is interesting that the Bezan or Western text ⁴⁹ answers this question by adding ‘the apostles whom he had chosen and commanded to preach the gospel’. If this is correct, then the risen Lord’s instruction was none other than his great commission, which Luke has already recorded at the end of his gospel in terms of preaching repentance and forgiveness in his name to all nations, ⁵⁰ and which Jesus will soon repeat in terms of being his witnesses to the ends of the earth (1:8). This, then, adds a further feature to the portrait of an apostle. *Apostolos* was an envoy, delegate or ambassador, sent out with a message and carrying the authority of the sender. Thus Jesus chose his apostles, and showed himself to them after the resurrection, as preliminaries to sending them out to preach and teach in his name.

(iv) Jesus promised them the Holy Spirit

In the Upper Room, according to John, Jesus had already promised the apostles that the Spirit of truth *would* both remind them of what he had taught them ⁵¹ and supplement it with what he had not been able to teach them. ⁵² Now Jesus commands them to wait in Jerusalem until the promised gift has been received (4). It was his Father’s promise (4a, presumably through such Old Testament prophecies as Joel 2:28ff., Is. 32:15 and Ezk. 36:27), his own (since Jesus had himself repeated it during his ministry, 4b), and John the Baptist’s, who had called the ‘gift’ or ‘promise’ a ‘baptism’ (5). Jesus now echoes John’s words and adds that the thrice-repeated promise (‘the promised Holy Spirit’, 2:33) is to be fulfilled *in a few days*. So they must wait. Not till God has fulfilled his promise and they have been ‘clothed with power from on high’, can they fulfil their commission. ⁵³

Here, then, was the fourfold equipment of the apostles of Christ. Of course in a secondary sense all the disciples of Jesus can claim that he has chosen us, revealed himself to us, commissioned us as his witnesses, and both promised and given us his Spirit. Nevertheless, it is not to these general privileges that Luke is referring here, but to the special qualifications of an apostle—a personal appointment as an apostle by Jesus, an eyewitness experience of the historical Jesus, an authorizing and commissioning by Jesus to speak in his name, and the empowering Spirit of Jesus to inspire their teaching. It was primarily these uniquely qualified men through whom Jesus continued ‘to do and to teach’, and to whom

Luke intends to introduce us in the Acts.

A. In Jerusalem: (Acts 1:6–6:7)

1. Waiting for Pentecost (1:6–26)

The major event of the early chapters of the Acts took place on the Day of Pentecost, when the now-exalted Lord Jesus performed the last work of his saving career (until his coming again) and ‘poured out’ the Holy Spirit on his waiting people. His life, death, resurrection and ascension all culminated in this great gift, which the prophets had foretold and which would be recognized as the chief evidence that God’s kingdom had been inaugurated. For this conclusion of Christ’s work on earth was also a fresh beginning. Just as the Spirit came upon Jesus to equip him for his public ministry, ¹ so now the Spirit was to come upon his people to equip them for theirs. The Holy Spirit would not only apply to them the salvation which Jesus had achieved by his death and resurrection but would impel them to proclaim throughout the world the good news of this salvation. Salvation is given to be shared.

Before the Day of Pentecost, however, there was to be a time of waiting, for forty days between the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus (1:3), and for ten more between Ascension and Pentecost. Jesus’ instructions were quite clear, and Luke repeats them for emphasis, first at the end of his Gospel and then at the beginning of Acts. ‘Stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.’ ² ‘Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about’ (1:4). During the fifty-day waiting period, however, they were not inactive. On the contrary, Luke singles out for comment four important events. First, they received their commission (1:6–8). Secondly, they saw Christ go into heaven (1:9–12). Thirdly, they persevered together in prayer, presumably for the Spirit to come (1:13–14). Fourthly, they replaced Judas with Matthias as the twelfth apostle (1:21–26). Not that we are to think of these as human activities only. For it is Christ who commissioned them, ascended into heaven, promised them the Spirit they prayed for, and chose the new apostle. Dr Richard Longenecker goes further and sees these four factors as comprising what he calls ‘the constitutive elements of the Christian mission’, namely the mandate to witness, the ascended Lord who directs the mission from heaven, the centrality of the apostles in this task, and the coming of the Spirit to empower them. ³ Only when these four elements were in place could the mission begin.

1. They received their commission (1:6–8)

During the forty days in which the risen Lord ‘showed himself’ to the apostles, and ‘gave many convincing proofs that he was alive’ (3), Luke indicates what he taught them. First, he spoke to them ‘about the kingdom of God’ (3), which had been the burden of his message during his public ministry and indeed (judging from the present participle *legōn*, ‘speaking’) continued to be after his resurrection. Secondly, he told them to wait for the gift or baptism of the Spirit, which had been promised by him, the Father and the Baptist, and which they would now receive ‘in a few days’ (4–5).

It appears, then, that Jesus’ two main topics of conversation between his resurrection and his ascension were the kingdom of God and the Spirit of God. It seems probable that he also related them to each other, for certainly the prophets had often associated them. When God establishes the kingdom of the Messiah, they said, he will pour out his Spirit; this generous effusion and universal enjoyment of the Spirit will be one of the major signs and blessings of his rule; and indeed the Spirit of God will make the rule of God a living and present reality to his people. ⁴

So then the question which the apostles put to Jesus when they met together (*Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?*, 6) was not altogether the *non sequitur* it sounds. For if the Spirit was about to come, as he had said, did this not imply that the kingdom was about to come too? The mistake they made was to misunderstand both the nature of the kingdom and the relation between the kingdom and the Spirit. Their question must have filled Jesus with dismay. Were they still so lacking in perception? As Calvin commented, ‘there are as many errors in the question as words’. ⁵ The verb, the noun and the adverb of their sentence all betray doctrinal confusion about the kingdom. For the verb *restore* shows that they were expecting a political and territorial kingdom; the noun *Israel* that they were expecting a national kingdom; and the adverbial clause *at this time* that they were expecting its immediate establishment. In his reply (7–8) Jesus corrected their mistaken notions of the kingdom’s nature, extent and arrival. ⁶

a. The kingdom of God is spiritual in its character

In the English language, of course, a ‘kingdom’ is usually a territorial sphere which can be located on a map, like the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan, the Hindu kingdom of Nepal, the Buddhist kingdom of Thailand, or the United Kingdom. But the kingdom of God is not a territorial concept. It does not—and cannot—figure on any map. Yet this is what the apostles were still envisaging by confusing the kingdom of God with the kingdom of Israel. They were like the members of Israel’s righteous remnant whom Luke mentions in his Gospel as ‘waiting for the kingdom of God’ or ‘the consolation of Israel’. ⁷ And like the Emmaus couple who ‘had hoped that he [Jesus] was the one who was going to redeem Israel’, ⁸ but had become disillusioned because of the cross. The apostles’ hope, however, had evidently been rekindled by the resurrection. They were still dreaming of political dominion, of the re-establishment of the monarchy, of Israel’s liberation from the colonial yoke of Rome.

In his reply Jesus reverted to the topic of the Holy Spirit. He spoke of the Spirit coming upon them and giving them power to be his witnesses (8). In Charles Williams’ notable words, he departed ‘scattering promises of power’. ⁹ It is important to remember that his promise that they would *receive power* was part of his reply to their question about the

kingdom. For the exercise of power is inherent in the concept of a kingdom. But power in God's kingdom is different from power in human kingdoms. The reference to the Holy Spirit defines its nature. The kingdom of God is his rule set up in the lives of his people by the Holy Spirit. It is spread by witness, not by soldiers, through a gospel of peace, not a declaration of war, and by the work of the Spirit, not by force of arms, political intrigue or revolutionary violence. At the same time, in rejecting the politicizing of the kingdom, we must beware of the opposite extreme of super-spiritualizing it, as if God's rule operates only in heaven and not on earth. The fact is that, although it must not be identified with any political ideology or programme, it has radical political and social implications. Kingdom values come into collision with secular values. And the citizens of God's kingdom steadfastly deny to Caesar the supreme loyalty for which he hungers, but which they insist on giving to Jesus alone.

b. The kingdom of God is international in its membership

The apostles still cherished narrow, nationalistic aspirations. They asked Jesus if he was about to restore to Israel her national independence, which the Maccabees had regained in the second century Bv for a brief intoxicating period, only to lose it again.

In his reply Jesus broadened their horizons. He promised that the Holy Spirit would empower them to be his witnesses. They would begin indeed in Jerusalem, the national capital in which he had been condemned and crucified, and which they were not to leave before the Spirit came. They would continue in the immediate environs of Judea. But then the Christian mission would radiate out from that centre, in accordance with the ancient prophecy that 'the law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem', [10] first to despised Samaria, and then far beyond Palestine to the Gentile nations, indeed *to the ends of the earth*. The thesis of Johannes Blauw in his book *The Missionary Nature of the Church* is that the Old Testament perspective was one of concern for the nations (God made them, and they will come and bow down to him), but not of mission to the nations (going out to win them). Even the Old Testament vision of the latter days is of a 'pilgrimage of the nations' to Mount Zion: 'all nations will stream to it.' [11] Only in the New Testament, Blauw adds, is a 'centripetal missionary consciousness' replaced by a 'centrifugal missionary activity', and 'the great turning-point is the Resurrection, after which Jesus receives universal authority and gives his people a universal commission to go and disciple the nations'. [12]

The risen Lord's mandate to mission begins to be fulfilled in the Acts. Indeed, as many commentators have pointed out, Acts 1:8 is a kind of 'Table of Contents' for the book. Chapters 1–7 describe events in Jerusalem, chapter 8 mentions the scattering of the disciples 'throughout Judea and Samaria' (8:1), and goes on to record the evangelization of a Samaritan city by Philip (8:5–24) and of 'many Samaritan villages' by the apostles Peter and John (8:25), while the conversion of Saul in chapter 9 leads on in the rest of the book to his missionary expeditions, and finally to his journey to Rome. For Christ's kingdom, while not incompatible with patriotism, tolerates no narrow nationalisms. He rules over an international community in which race, nation, rank and sex are no barriers to fellowship. And when his kingdom is consummated at the end, the countless redeemed company will be seen to be drawn 'from every nation, tribe, people and language'. [13]

c. The kingdom of God is gradual in its expansion

The apostles' question included a specific reference to time: 'Lord, are you *at this time* going to restore the kingdom to Israel?' (1:6). Or (NEB) 'is this the time when you are to establish once again the sovereignty of Israel?' This had been the expectation of many during Jesus' public ministry, as Luke makes clear in his Gospel. He records a parable which (he explains) Jesus told 'because he was near Jerusalem and the people thought that the kingdom of God was going to appear at once'. [14] So the apostles asked if Jesus would do now after his resurrection what they had hoped he would do in his lifetime; and would he do it immediately?

The Lord's reply was twofold. First, *it is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority* (7). 'Times' (*chronoi*) or 'dates' (*kairoi*) together make up God's plan, 'the *times* or critical moments of its history and the *seasons* or epochs of its orderly development'. [15] The apostles' question betrayed either curiosity or impatience or both. For the Father himself had fixed the times by his own authority, and the Son had confessed that he did not know the day and hour of his return (*parousia*). [16] So they must curb their inquisitiveness and be willing to be left in ignorance. It is not only in relation to the fulfilment of prophecy, but to many other undisclosed truths as well, that Jesus still says to us 'it is not for you to know'. The 'secret things' belong to God, and we should not pry into them; it is the 'revealed things' which belong to us, and with these we should rest content. [17]

Secondly, although they were not to know the times or dates, what they should know was that they would receive power so that, between the Spirit's coming and the Son's coming again, they were to be his witnesses in ever-widening circles. In fact, the whole interim period between Pentecost and the Parousia (however long or short) is to be filled with the worldwide mission of the church in the power of the Spirit. Christ's followers were both to announce what he had achieved at his first coming and to summon people to repent and believe in preparation for his second coming. They were to be his witnesses 'to the ends of the earth' (1:8) and 'to the very end of the age'. [18] This was a major theme of Bishop Lesslie Newbigin in his book *The Household of God*:

The Church is the pilgrim people of God. It is on the move—hastening to the ends of the earth to beseech all men to be reconciled to God, and hastening to the end of time to meet its Lord who will gather all into one.... It cannot be understood rightly except in a perspective which is at once missionary and eschatological. [19]

We have no liberty to stop until both ends have been reached. Indeed the two ends, Jesus taught, would coincide, since

only when the gospel of the kingdom has been preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, only then 'will the end come'. [20]

So this was the substance of the Lord's teaching (as we know also from the Gospels) during the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension: when the spirit came in power, the long promised reign of God, which Jesus had himself inaugurated and proclaimed, would begin to spread. It would be spiritual in its character (transforming the lives and values of its citizens), international in its membership (including Gentiles as well as Jews) and gradual in its expansion (beginning at once in Jerusalem, and then growing until it reaches the end of both time and earthly space). This vision and commission must have given clear direction to the disciples' prayers during their ten days of waiting for Pentecost. But before the Spirit could come, the Son must go. This is Luke's next topic.

2. They saw Jesus go into heaven (1:9–12)

At least three questions form in our minds as we read this story of the 'ascension' of Jesus—literary, historical and theological. First, do not Luke's two accounts of the ascension [21] contradict each other? Secondly, did the ascension of Jesus literally happen? Thirdly, if it did, has it any permanent significance?

a. Did Luke contradict himself?

It is certainly appropriate, as we have already seen, that Luke should conclude his first volume and introduce his second with the same event, the ascension of Jesus, since it was both the end of his earthly ministry and the prelude to his continuing ministry from heaven through the Spirit. It is antecedently improbable, however, that the same author, telling the same story, should contradict himself. Yet this is what some modern scholars assert. Ernst Haenchen writes, for example: 'Two Ascensions—one on Easter Day (Lk. 24:51), the other forty days after (Acts 1:9)—are one too many.' [22] But in fact there are no substantial discrepancies, and a harmonization of the two accounts is possible, without forcing the evidence.

It is true that in his Gospel, Luke makes no mention of the forty days. But it is gratuitous to suggest that he must therefore have forgotten them, or that he thought that the resurrection and the ascension occurred on the same day. No, in the Gospel he is simply giving a condensed account of the resurrection appearances, without feeling the need to note their different times and circumstances. He is indubitably recording one ascension, not two.

It is also true that each account includes details which the other omits, the Acts version being fuller than that in the Gospel. For example, at the end of the Gospel the ascending Christ raised his hands to bless them, and they worshipped him. [23] Luke omits these actions at the beginning of his second volume, but adds there the cloud which hid him from their sight, and the appearance and message of 'the two men dressed in white', presumed to be angels. Yet these features of the story supplement, and do not contradict, each other.

It is true, thirdly, that the Acts account seems to imply that Jesus ascended from the Mount of Olives (1:12), which is correctly said to be 'a Sabbath day's walk from the city', namely (according to the Mishnah) 2,000 cubits or (NIV margin) about three-quarters of mile (about 1,100 metres)', whereas the Gospel account says that Jesus 'led them out to the vicinity of Bethany', [24] the village on the east slope of the mount, which is two or three miles further away from Jerusalem. Conzelmann declares that the latter 'flatly contradicts the geographical reference in Acts 1:12'; [25] and Haenchen assumes that Luke 'did not possess any exact notion of the topography of Jerusalem'. [26] But Luke's Gospel statement may well be intentionally vague. He does not say that Jesus ascended from Bethany, but only that he led the apostles in that direction, *heōs pros* being quite properly rendered by NIV 'to the vicinity of Bethany'.

Having looked at what are said to be the three main discrepancies (regarding date, details and place), we may now note five points which the two accounts affirm in common. (i) Both say that the ascension of Jesus followed his commission to the apostles to be his witnesses. (ii) Both say that it took place outside and east of Jerusalem, somewhere on the Mount of Olives. (iii) Both say that Jesus 'was taken up into heaven', the passive voice indicating that the ascension like the resurrection was an act of the Father, who first raised him from the dead and then exalted him to heaven. As Chrysostom put it, 'the royal chariot (was) sent for him'. [27] (iv) Both say that the apostles 'returned to Jerusalem' afterwards, the Gospel adding 'with great joy'. (v) And both say that they then waited for the Spirit to come, in accordance with the Lord's plain command and promise. Thus the evident agreements are greater than the apparent disagreements. The latter are sufficiently explained by supposing that Luke used his editorial freedom in selecting different details from the account or accounts he had heard, without wishing to repeat himself word for word.

b. Did the ascension really happen?

Many people nowadays, even within the church, deny the historicity of the ascension. Belief in a literal ascension would have been understandable in Luke's day, they say, when people imagined heaven to be 'up there', so that Jesus had to be 'taken up' in order to get there. But that was a pre-scientific age; we have an altogether different cosmology. Must we not therefore 'demythologize' the ascension? Then we can retain the truth that Jesus 'went to the Father', while at the same time stripping it of its 'primitive mythological clothing' which depicts it as a kind of 'lift-off', followed by an ascent into the sky. Besides, Luke is the only Gospel-writer who tells the story of the ascension. The others omit it. In fact the New Testament authors in general hardly distinguish between the resurrection and the ascension; they seem to regard them as the same event, or perhaps two aspects of the same event. So Harnack could write that 'the account of the Ascension is quite useless to the historian'. [28] Even William Neil, who is usually quite conservative in his conclusions, tells his readers (without argument) that Luke, knowing that 'theological truth can often be best conveyed by imaginative word-pictures',

is not to be interpreted literally. 'It would be a grave misunderstanding of Luke's mind and purpose to regard his account of the Ascension of Christ as other than symbolic and poetic.' ²⁹

A number of sound reasons can be given, however, why we should reject this attempt to discredit the ascension as a literal, historical event.

First, miracles do not need precedents to validate them. The classical argument of the eighteenth-century deists was that we can believe strange happenings outside our experience only if we can produce something analogous to them within our experience. This 'principle of analogy', if correct, would be enough in itself to disprove many of the biblical miracles, for we have no experience (for example) of somebody walking on water, multiplying loaves and fishes, rising from the dead or ascending into heaven. An ascension, in particular, would defy the law of gravity, which in our experience operates always and everywhere. The principle of analogy, however, has no relevance to the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, since both were *sui generis*. We are not claiming that people frequently (or even occasionally) rise from the dead and ascend into heaven, but that both events have happened once. The fact that we can produce no analogies before or since confirms their truth, rather than undermining it.

Secondly, the ascension is everywhere assumed in the New Testament. Although Luke is the only evangelist who describes it (Mark 16:19 is not an authentic part of Mark's Gospel, but a later addition to it), it is incorrect to say that it is otherwise unknown. John records the risen Jesus as telling Mary Magdalene to stop clinging to him because he has not yet ascended to the Father. ³⁰ Peter in his Pentecost sermon speaks of Jesus having been 'exalted to the right hand of God's' as something different from and subsequent to his resurrection (Acts 2:31 ff.), and he confirms it in his first letter. ³¹ Paul frequently writes of the exaltation of Jesus to the supreme place of honour and power, and distinguishes it from his resurrection. ³² And in the Epistle to the Hebrews the rising and the reigning of Jesus are not confused. ³³

Thirdly, Luke tells the story of the ascension with simplicity and sobriety. All the extravagances associated with the Apocryphal Gospel are missing. There is no embroidery such as we find in legends. There is no evidence of poetry or symbolism. Even Haenchen admits this: 'the story is unsentimental, almost uncannily austere.' ³⁴ It reads like history, and as if Luke intended us to accept it as history.

Fourthly, Luke emphasizes the presence of eyewitnesses, and repeatedly refers to what they saw with their own eyes: 'he was taken up *before their very eyes*, and a cloud hid him *from their sight*. They were *looking intently* up into the sky as he was going ...'. The two angels then said to them, 'Why do you stand here *looking into the sky*? This same Jesus ... will come back in the same way you have *seen him go into heaven*.' Five times in this extremely brief account it is stressed that the ascension took place visibly. Luke has not piled up these phrases for nothing. He has much to say in his two-volume work about the importance for the verification of the gospel of the apostolic eyewitnesses. And here he plainly includes the ascension of Jesus within the range of historical truths to which the eyewitnesses could (and did) testify. Indeed, when Judas is replaced, Peter will make John's baptism and Jesus' ascension the beginning and end of the public ministry to which the apostles must bear witness (1:22).

Fifthly, no alternative explanation is available of the cessation of the resurrection appearances and of the final disappearance of Jesus from the earth. What happened to him, them, and why did his appearances stop? What was the origin of the tradition that they lasted for precisely forty days? In default of any other answer to these questions, we prefer the explanation for which there is evidence, namely that the forty-day period began with his resurrection and terminated with his ascension.

Sixthly, the visible, historical ascension had a readily intelligible purpose. Jesus had no need to take a journey in space, and it is silly of some critics to ridicule his ascension by representing him as the first cosmonaut. No, in the transition from his earthly to his heavenly state, Jesus could perfectly well have vanished, as on other occasions, and 'gone to the Father' secretly and invisibly. The reason for a public and visible ascension is surely that he wanted them to know that he had gone for good. During the forty days he had kept appearing, disappearing and reappearing. But now this interim period was over. This time his departure was final. So they were not to wait around for his next resurrection appearance. Instead, they were to wait for somebody else, the Holy Spirit (1:4). For he would come only after Jesus had gone, and then they could get on with their mission in the power he would give them.

At all events, the manner of his going (a visible ascension) had its desired effect. The apostles returned to Jerusalem and waited for the Spirit to come.

c. What is the permanent value of the ascension story?

We have seen what the visible ascension did for the apostles; what can it do for us? If we were to give a thorough answer to this question, we would need to bring different strands of teaching together from all the New Testament authors, including the completed sacrifice and continuing intercession of our Great High Priest described in Hebrews, the glorification of the Son of man taught by John, the cosmic lordship emphasized by Paul and the final triumph when his enemies will become his footstool, foretold by Psalm 110:1, and endorsed by those who quote it. But it is not with these truths that Luke is concerned. In order to understand his primary interest as he tells the ascension story, we shall need to pay attention to those *two men dressed in white* (10) who *stood beside them* (the apostles) and spoke to them. Luke calls them 'men' because that is how they appeared, but their shining dress and authoritative tone indicate that they were angels. In his Gospel, Luke has recorded the ministry of angels at several crucial moments in his story. They announced and attended the birth of Jesus. ³⁵ According to some manuscripts an angel appeared in the garden of Gethsemane to strengthen him. ³⁶ And 'two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning', later identified as angels, proclaimed his resurrection to the women. ³⁷ So it was entirely appropriate that angels should now appear to interpret his ascension.

They asked the apostles a searching question: *Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?* (11a). The expression ‘into the sky’ or ‘into heaven’ (AV, RSV) occurs four times in verses 10 and 11; its repetition, especially in the angels’ implied reproof, emphasizes that the apostles were not to be sky-scanners. Two reasons are given.

First, Jesus will come again. *This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven* (11b). The implication seems to be that they will not bring him back by gazing up into the sky. He has gone, and they must let him go; he will return in his own good time, and in the same way. To this angelic assurance of the Parousia we must attach full weight. But we must also be cautious in our interpretation of *houtos* (this same Jesus) and *houtos* (in the same way). We should not press these words into meaning that the Parousia will be like a film of the ascension played backwards, or that he will return to exactly the same spot on the Mount of Olives and will be wearing the same clothes. It is only by letting Scripture interpret Scripture that we shall discern the similarities and dissimilarities between the ascension and the Parousia. ‘This same Jesus’ certainly indicates that his coming will be personal, the Eternal Son still possessing his glorified human nature and body. And ‘in the same way’ indicates that his coming will also be visible and glorious. They had seen him go; they would see him come. Luke recorded Jesus as saying so himself: ‘they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.’ [38] The same cloud which had hidden him from their sight (1:9), which had previously enveloped him and the three intimate apostles on the Mount of Transfiguration, [39] and which throughout the Old Testament was the symbol of Yahweh’s glorious presence, would be the chariot of his coming as it had been of his going.

Yet there will also be important differences between his going and his coming. Although his coming will be personal, it will not be private like his ascension. Only the eleven apostles saw him go, but when he comes ‘every eye will see him’. [40] Instead of returning alone (as when he went), millions of holy ones—both human and angelic—will form his retinue. [41] And in place of a localized coming (‘There he is!’ or ‘Here he is!’), it will be ‘like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other.’ [42]

Secondly, the angels implied, until Christ comes again, the apostles must get on with their witness, for that was their mandate. There was something fundamentally anomalous about their gazing up into the sky when they had been commissioned to go to the ends of the earth. It was the earth not the sky which was to be their preoccupation. Their calling was to be witnesses not stargazers. The vision they were to cultivate was not upwards in nostalgia to the heaven which had received Jesus, but outwards in compassion to a lost world which needed him. It is the same for us. Curiosity about heaven and its occupants, speculation about prophecy and its fulfilment, an obsession with ‘times and seasons’—these are aberrations which distract us from our God-given mission. Christ will come personally, visibly, gloriously. Of that we have been assured. Other details can wait. Meanwhile, we have work to do in the power of the Spirit.

The remedy for unprofitable spiritual stargazing lies in a Christian theology of history, an understanding of the order of events in the divine programme. First, Jesus returned to heaven (Ascension). Secondly, the Holy Spirit came (Pentecost). Thirdly, the church goes out to witness (Mission). Fourthly, Jesus will come back (Parousia). Whenever we forget one of these events, or put them in the wrong sequence, confusion reigns. We need especially to remember that between the ascension and the Parousia, the disappearance and the reappearance of Jesus, there stretches a period of unknown length which is to be filled with the church’s world-wide, Spirit-empowered witness to him. We need to hear the implied message of the angels: ‘You have seen him go. You will see him come. But between that going and coming there must be another. The Spirit must come, and you must go—into the world for Christ.’

Looking back, I think we may say that the apostles committed two opposite errors, which both had to be corrected. First, they were hoping for political power (the restoration of the kingdom to Israel). Secondly, they were gazing up into the sky (preoccupied with the heavenly Jesus). Both were false fantasies. The first is the error of the politician, who dreams of establishing Utopia on earth. The second is the error of the pietist, who dreams only of heavenly bliss. The first vision is too earthy, and the second too heavenly. Is it fanciful to see a parallel here between Luke’s Gospel and the Acts? Just as at the beginning of the Gospel Jesus in the Judean desert turned away from false ends and means, so at the beginning of the Acts the apostles before Pentecost had to turn away from both a false activism and a false pietism. And in their place, as the remedy for them, there was (and is) witness to Jesus in the power of the Spirit, with all that this implies of earthly responsibility and heavenly enabling.

3. They prayed for the Spirit to come (1:12–14)

Their walk back to Jerusalem, being only the kilometre permitted on the sabbath, will not have taken them more than a quarter of an hour. Luke then tells us how they occupied the next ten days before Pentecost. In his Gospel he says ‘they stayed continually at the temple, praising God’, [43] and in the Acts that in the room where they were lodging, ‘they all joined together constantly in prayer’ (14). It was a healthy combination: continuous praise in the temple, and continuous prayer in the home. Luke does not tell us whether the upstairs room was the ‘large upper room, all furnished’, [44] in which Jesus had spent his last evening with the Twelve, or whether it was the house of Mary the mother of John Mark, in which later many members of the Jerusalem church gathered to pray (Acts 12:12), or some other room. What he does tell us is that their prayers had two characteristics which, Calvin comments, are ‘two essentials for true prayer, namely that they persevered, and were of one mind’. [45] I will take them in the opposite order.

a. Their prayer was united

Who were these people who met to pray? Luke says that they were ‘a group numbering about a hundred and twenty’

(15). Professor Howard Marshall suggests that the reason why the number is mentioned is that ‘in Jewish law a minimum of 120 Jewish men was required to establish a community with its own council’; so already the disciples were numerous enough ‘to form a new community’. ⁴⁶ Others have detected symbolism in the number, since the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles make twelve an obvious symbol of the church, and 120 is 12×10 , as the 144,000 of the Book of Revelation is $12 \times 12 \times 1000$. Yet others suggest that the 120 must have been only a percentage of the total believing community, since on one occasion ‘more than 500’ had seen the risen Lord at the same time, ⁴⁷ although, to be sure, this may have been in Galilee. At all events, the 120 included the eleven surviving apostles. Luke lists them (13), as he has done in his Gospel. ⁴⁸ And the list is the same, with only minor variations. For example, the inner circle of four, who had been named in the Gospel as pairs of brothers, ‘Simon and Andrew, James and John’, are now *Peter, John, James and Andrew*, putting first those who were to become the leading apostles, and also separating the natural brothers as if to hint that a new brotherhood in Christ has replaced the old kinship (see verse 16, ‘Brothers ...’). The next two pairs are also rearranged, although no reason is apparent. Instead of ‘Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas’, ⁴⁹ Luke writes *Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Mathew*. The remaining apostles are the same, except that of course the traitor Judas is omitted.

In addition to the eleven apostles are mentioned *the women* (14), presumably meaning Mary Magdalene, Joanna (whose husband managed Herod’s household) and Susanna—the trio Luke has named in the Gospel ⁵⁰ as ‘helping to support them [sc. Jesus and the Twelve] out of their own means’, together perhaps with ‘Mary the mother of James’ and the others who found the tomb empty ⁵¹ and to whom the risen Lord later revealed himself. ⁵² Then, placed separately as occupying a position of particular honour, Luke adds *Mary the mother of Jesus*, whose unique role in the birth of Jesus he has described in the first two chapters of his Gospel, together with *his brothers* (14), who had not believed in him during his earlier ministry, ⁵³ but who now—perhaps because of the private resurrection appearance to one of them, James ⁵⁴—are numbered among the believers.

All these (the apostles, the women, the mother and brothers of Jesus, and the rest who made the number up to 120) *joined together constantly in prayer*. ‘Together’ translates *homothymadon*, a favourite word of Luke’s, which he uses ten times and which occurs only once elsewhere in the New Testament. It could mean simply that the disciples met in the same place, or were doing the same thing, namely praying. But it later describes both united prayer (4:24) and a united decision (15:25), so that the ‘togetherness’ implied seems to go beyond mere assembly and activity to agreement about what they were praying for. They prayed ‘with one mind or purpose or impulse’ (BAGD).

b. Their prayer was persevering

The verb translated *joined ... constantly* (*proskartereō*) means to be ‘busy’ or ‘persistent’ in all activity. Luke uses it later both of the new converts who ‘devoted themselves to’ the apostles’ teaching (2:42) and of the apostles who determined to give priority to prayer and preaching (6:4). Here he uses it of perseverance in prayer, as Paul does several times. ⁵⁵

There can be little doubt that the grounds of this unity and perseverance in prayer were the command and promise of Jesus. He had promised to send them the Spirit soon (1:4, 5, 8). He had commanded them to wait for him to come and then to begin their witness. We learn, therefore, that God’s promises do not render prayer superfluous. On the contrary, it is only his promises which give us the warrant to pray and the confidence that he will hear and answer.

4. They replaced Judas with Matthias as an apostle (1:15–26)

Having recorded the Lord’s commission to witness, his ascension, and the disciples’ persevering prayers, Luke draws our attention to only one further action before Pentecost (*in those days* is vague enough to date it at any point between Ascension and Pentecost), namely the appointment of another apostle in place of Judas. We have to consider the need for such an appointment (the defection and death of Judas), the warrant for it (the fulfilment of Scripture) and the choice which was made (Matthias).

a. The death of Judas (1:18–19)

Verses 18 and 19 do not appear to be part of Peter’s speech, for they interrupt the sequence of his thought. Moreover, as an Aramaic speaker addressing Aramaic speakers, Peter would not have needed to translate the word *Akeldama* (19). But Luke, writing for Gentile readers, would need to explain its meaning. So these two verses are best understood as an editorial parenthesis, in which Luke acquaints his readers with the circumstances of Judas’ death. This is how RSV, NEB and NIV take it.

Luke is outspoken in calling Judas’ betrayal of Jesus an act of *wickedness* (*adikia*, 18), ‘infamy’ (JBP) or ‘villainy’ (NEB), or a ‘crime’ (JB). Yet some people express their sympathy for him because his role was predicted and therefore (it is thought) foreordained. But this is not so. Calvin himself, for all his emphasis on the sovereignty of God, wrote: ‘Judas may not be excused on the ground that what befell him was prophesied, since he fell away not through the compulsion of the prophecy but through the wickedness of his own heart.’ ⁵⁶

In the Gospels only Matthew records what happened to Judas, ⁵⁷ and he and Luke appear to be drawing on independent traditions. But their accounts are not as divergent as some argue, and it is certainly not necessary to say with R. P. C. Hanson that ‘they cannot both be true’. ⁵⁸ Both say that Judas died a miserable death, that a field was bought with the money paid him (thirty silver coins), and that it was called ‘The Field of Blood’. The apparent discrepancies concern how he died, who bought the field and why it was called ‘Blood Field’.

First, the manner of Judas' death. Matthew writes that he committed suicide: 'he went away and hanged himself.'⁵⁹ Luke writes that *he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out* (18b). Attempts to harmonize these statements go back at least to Augustine. It is perfectly possible to suppose that after he had hanged himself, his dead body either fell headlong (the usual meaning of *prēnēs*), assuming that the rope or tree branch broke, or 'swelled up' (following a different derivation of *prēnēs*, which BAGD declares 'linguistically possible', cf. RSV margin, JBP), and in either case ruptured.

Secondly, there is the question who bought the field. Matthew says that Judas, filled with remorse, tried to return the money to the priests and (when they refused to accept it) threw it into the temple and left. He adds that later the priests picked up the money and with it bought the potter's field. Luke, on the other hand, says that *with the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field* (18a). So did the priests purchase the field, or did Judas? It is reasonable to answer that both did, the priests entering into the transaction, but with money which belonged to Judas. For, as Edersheim wrote, 'by a fiction of law the money was still considered to be Judas', and to have been applied by him in the purchase of the well-known "potter's field".⁶⁰

Thirdly, why did the field purchased come to be known as 'The Field of Blood'? Matthew's answer is that it had been bought with 'blood money';⁶¹ Luke gives no explicit reason, but implies that it was because Judas' blood had been spilled there. Evidently different traditions developed (as so often happens) as to how the field got its name, so that different people called it 'Blood Field' for different reasons.

It is fair to conclude that these independent accounts of Judas' death are not incompatible, and to agree with J. A. Alexander: 'there is scarcely an American or English jury that would scruple to receive these two accounts as perfectly consistent.'⁶²

b. The fulfilment of Scripture (1:15–17, 20)

The warrant for replacing Judas was Old Testament Scripture. This was Peter's conviction, which he expressed to the believers: *Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas* (16). We need to recall that, according to Luke, the risen Lord had both opened the Scriptures to his disciples and opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.⁶³ In consequence, since the resurrection they had begun to have a new grasp of how the Old Testament foretold the sufferings and glory, rejection and reign of the Messiah. And, stimulated by Jesus' explanations, they will during the fifty days of waiting have searched the Scriptures for further light. We know that various lists of Old Testament 'testimonies' to the Messiah were later compiled and circulated. But the process will have begun immediately after the resurrection.

Peter goes on to quote from two Psalms (Pss. 69 and 109), the first explaining what had happened (Judas' defection and death) and the second what they should do about it (replace him). Psalm 69 is applied to Jesus five times in the New Testament. In it an innocent sufferer describes how his enemies hate and insult him without cause (Ps. 69:4), and how he is consumed with zeal for God's house (Ps. 69:9). These verses are both quoted in John's Gospel, verse 4 by Jesus himself⁶⁴ and verse 9 by his disciples,⁶⁵ while Paul twice refers this psalm to Jesus.⁶⁶ Towards its end (Ps. 69:24) the psalmist utters a prayer that God's judgment will fall on these wicked and impenitent people. Peter individualizes this text and applies it to Judas on whom indeed God's judgment had fallen: *May his place be deserted; let there be no-one to dwell in it* (20a). Psalm 109 is similar. It concerns 'wicked and deceitful men' who without justification hate, slander and attack the writer. Then one particular person is singled out, perhaps the ringleader, and God's judgment on him is requested (Ps. 109:8): *May another take his place of leadership* (20b). This verse too, on what Dr Longenecker calls 'the commonly accepted exegetical principle of analogous subject',⁶⁷ Peter applies to Judas.

These two scriptures seemed to Peter and the believers adequate general guidance on the need to replace Judas.

Perhaps there was an additional factor, which Luke mentions in his Gospel,⁶⁸ namely that Jesus drew a parallel between the twelve apostles and the twelve tribes of Israel. If the early church was to be accepted as enjoying direct continuity with, indeed as being the fulfilment of, Old Testament Israel, the number of its founders must not be depleted. A few years later it was not deemed necessary to replace James, for he had not defected, but had been faithful unto death (12:1–2).

c. The choice of Matthias (1:21–26)

Peter's proposal that a twelfth apostle be chosen to replace Judas (21–22) throws light on his understanding of apostleship, to which reference was made in the previous chapter.

First, the apostolic ministry (25, *this apostolic ministry*, as NIV renders *diakonia* and *apostolē*) was to be 'a witness to his resurrection' (22b, RSV). His resurrection was early recognized as the divine vindication of both his person and his work, and Luke describes how with great power 'the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus' (Acts 4:33; cf. 13:30–31).

Secondly, the apostolic qualification was therefore to have been a witness of the resurrection to which they were called to bear witness (e.g. 2:32; 3:15; 10:40–42). It was indispensable to have seen the risen Lord, which is why Paul was later added to the apostolic band.⁶⁹ But Judas' replacement as a member of the foundation Twelve, whose responsibility was to safeguard the true tradition about Jesus, needed a fuller qualification than this. He must, Peter explained, *have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us* (21–22; cf. 10:39; 13:31). This is why I cannot agree with Campbell Morgan who (following others) wrote: 'The election of Matthias was wrong.... He was a good man, but the wrong man for this position.... I am not

prepared to omit Paul from the twelve, believing that he was God's man for the filling of the gap.' [70] But Luke gives no hint at all that a mistake was made, in spite of the fact that Paul was obviously his hero. Besides, Paul did not have the fuller qualification which Peter laid down.

Thirdly, the apostolic appointment was by the Lord Jesus himself. It had been he who chose the original Twelve. [71] So he must choose Judas' replacement. True, the 120 believers were told to do the choosing (21). But what they did was to sift possible candidates and from them nominate two, namely Joseph (whose other name was Barsabbas in Hebrew and Justus in Latin) and Matthias, of neither of whom do we know anything, although Eusebius says that both were members of the Seventy. Then they prayed to Jesus as Lord, calling him (literally) everybody's 'heart-knower', *kardiagnōstēs*, a word Luke later uses of God, [72] and asked him to show them which of the two he had already chosen (24). *Then they drew lots* (26), a method of discerning God's will which was sanctioned in the Old Testament, [73] but which does not appear to have been used after the Spirit had come. [74] Matthias was chosen; *so he was added to the eleven apostles*.

It is instructive to note the cluster of factors which contributed to the discovery of God's will in this matter. First came the general leading of Scripture that a replacement should be made (16–21). Next, they used their common sense that if Judas' substitute was to have the same apostolic ministry he must also have the same qualifications, including an eyewitness experience of Jesus and a personal appointment by him. This sound deductive reasoning led to the nomination of Joseph and Matthias. Thirdly, they prayed. For though Jesus had gone, he was still accessible to them by prayer and was acknowledged as having a knowledge of hearts which they lacked. Finally, they drew lots, by which they trusted Jesus to make his choice known. Leaving aside this fourth factor, because the Spirit has now been given us, the remaining three (Scripture, common sense and prayer) constitute a wholesome combination through which God may be trusted to guide us today.

The stage is now set for the Day of Pentecost. The apostles have received Christ's commission and seen his ascension. The apostolic team is complete again, ready to be his chosen witnesses. Only one thing is missing: the Spirit has not yet come. Though the place left vacant by Judas has been filled by Matthias, the place left vacant by Jesus has not yet been filled by the Spirit. So we leave Luke's first chapter of the Acts with the 120 waiting in Jerusalem, persevering in prayer with one heart and mind, poised ready to fulfil Christ's command just as soon as he has fulfilled his promise.

2. The Day of Pentecost (2:1–47)

Without the Holy Spirit, Christian discipleship would be inconceivable, even impossible. There can be no life without the life-giver, no understanding without the Spirit of truth, no fellowship without the unity of the Spirit, no Christlikeness of character apart from his fruit, and no effective witness without his power. As a body without breath is a corpse, so the church without the Spirit is dead.

Luke is well aware of this. Of the four evangelists it is he who lays the heaviest emphasis on the Spirit. Near the beginning of each part of his two-volume work he demonstrates the indispensability of the Holy Spirit's enabling. Just as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus when John baptized him, so that he entered his public ministry 'full of the Holy Spirit', 'led by the Spirit', 'in the power of the Spirit' and 'anointed' by the Spirit (Lk. 3:21–22; 4:1, 14, 18), so now the same Spirit came upon the disciples of Jesus to equip them for their mission in the world (Acts 1:5, 8; 2:33). In the early chapters of the Acts Luke refers to the promise, the gift, the baptism, the power and the fullness of the Spirit in the experience of God's people. The terms are many and interchangeable; the reality is one, and there is no substitute for it.

Yet this reality is multi-faceted, and there are at least four ways in which we may think of the Day of Pentecost. First, it was the final act of the saving ministry of Jesus before the Parousia. He who was born into our humanity, lived our life, died for our sins, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, now sent his Spirit to his people to constitute them his body and to work out in them what he had won for them. In this sense the Day of Pentecost is unrepeatable. Christmas Day, Good Friday, Easter Day, Ascension Day and Whit Sunday are annual celebrations, but the birth, death, resurrection, ascension and Spirit-gift they commemorate happened once and for all. Secondly, Pentecost brought to the apostles the equipment they needed for their special role. Christ had appointed them to be his primary and authoritative witnesses, and had promised them the reminding and teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 14–16). Pentecost was the fulfilment of that promise. Thirdly, Pentecost was the inauguration of the new era of the Spirit. Although his coming was a unique and unrepeatable historical event, all the people of God can now always and everywhere benefit from his ministry. Although he equipped the apostles to be the primary witnesses, he also equips us to be secondary witnesses. Although the inspiration of the Spirit was given to the apostles alone, the fullness of the Spirit is for us all. Fourthly, Pentecost has been called—and rightly—the first 'revival', using this word to denote one of those altogether unusual visitations of God, in which a whole community becomes vividly aware of his immediate, overpowering presence. It may be, therefore, that not only the physical phenomena (2ff.), but the deep conviction of sin (37), the 3,000 conversions (41) and the widespread sense of awe (43) were signs of 'revival'. We must be careful, however, not to use this possibility as an excuse to lower our expectations, or to relegate to the category of the exceptional what God may intend to be the church's normal experience. The wind and the fire were abnormal, and probably the languages too; the new life and joy, fellowship and worship, freedom, boldness and power were not. [1]

Acts 2 has three sections. It begins with Luke's description of the Pentecost event itself (1–13), continues with the explanation of the event which Peter gives in his sermon (14–41), and ends with its effects in the life of the Jerusalem church (42–47).