

The
MESSAGE *of* ACTS
in the
HISTORY *of* REDEMPTION

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Dennis E. Johnson

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P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Composition by Colophon Typesetting

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Johnson, Dennis E. (Dennis Edward)

The message of Acts in the history of redemption / Dennis E. Johnson.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-87552-235-1 (pbk.)

1. Bible. N.T. Acts—Criticism, interpretation, etc. I. Title.

BS2625.2.J6 1997

226.6'06—dc21

96-48100

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ABBREVIATIONS

A	Codex Alexandrinus
Ⲛ	Codex Sinaiticus
B	Codex Vaticanus
BAG	W. Bauer, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, eds., <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957
BC	<i>The Beginnings of Christianity, Part I: The Acts of the Apostles</i> . Edited by F. J. Foakes-Jackson and K. Lake. London: Macmillan, 1920
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library</i>
C	Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus
ExpTim	<i>Expository Times</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
KJV	King James Version
LN	J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida, eds., <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains</i> . 2d ed., 2 vols. New York: United Bible Societies, 1989
LS	H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 8th ed. New York: American Book Co., 1882
LXX	Septuagint
NAC	New American Commentary
NCB	New Century Bible
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament

NIDNTT	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> , ed. C. Brown. 3 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975–78
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTG	Eb. Nestle, Er. Nestle, K. Aland, and B. Aland, eds., <i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> . 26th ed. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1979
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
SNTS	Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, tr. G. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76
UBS	K. Aland, M. Black, C. M. Martini, B. M. Metzger, and A. Wikgren, eds., <i>The Greek New Testament</i> . 3d ed. (corrected). Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1983
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

PREFACE

Bridges are simple but wonderful devices. Imagine a river flowing through an unexplored meadow or forest. One day a few rugged explorers, weary from fighting the current, find a resting place on the riverbank. Time passes. Settlers follow: some build simple shelters on the east bank, while others put down roots on the west bank. As the community grows, its needs for connection between east and west outgrow the capacities of the shallow ford or the makeshift ferry. What the town needs is a bridge, a link between pieces of land that would otherwise remain unconnected, a span that brings people together.

At its most basic, a bridge is a connection that overcomes distance and separation, a span that links diverse or divided regions, creating new possibilities for human contact, commerce, and culture. The building of a bridge does not evaporate the bay or river, nor fill in the canyon that makes the two pieces of land distinct. But the bridge makes it possible to travel back and forth across that otherwise uncrossable divide. Bridges are the arteries, the essential connections in the circulatory systems that unify and vivify many of the world's great cities—London, New York, Paris—whose various neighborhoods grew up on opposite banks of well-traveled waterways.

God is a bridge builder. This metaphor could well sum up a diverse but consistent set of themes that run through the book of Acts. This study arises out of a conviction that attention to bridges of various kinds will enrich our reception of the powerful message of Acts.

Consider, in the first place, the bridge between God's *word of promise* to Israel, which Christians call the Old Testament, and his *word of fulfillment* to Israel and the nations in Jesus Christ, who is proclaimed by the apostles

at the dawn of the New Covenant (which we also refer to as the New Testament). Although he was a Gentile concerned with the Gentiles' inclusion among the people of God, the author of Luke-Acts nevertheless manifests marvelous understanding of the Scriptures given to Israel. He shows us the bridges by which we can walk across from the monumental redemptive events, actors, and anticipations of ancient times into the fulfilled reality of the Redeemer himself, Jesus Christ. At the start of his two-volume work, Luke states that he is transmitting the good news that was announced by eyewitnesses of Jesus' ministry (Luke 1:1-4). At the end of that volume, he describes the way in which Jesus opened up for those eyewitnesses the true meaning of the Old Testament Scriptures: the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms (and by implication the other Writings) (Luke 24:44). Then, as he writes the second volume (Acts), he shows us the unfolding of that Old Covenant word of promise, not only through the preaching of the eyewitnesses, but also in the way in which he himself (under the Spirit's control) frames his narrative of the church's early years. Luke invites us again and again to walk back and forth across the bridge linking Old Covenant promise with New Covenant fulfillment in Christ—to see, compare, and discover afresh the manifold wisdom of God in his plan of redemption, glimpsed in many parts and ways in the words of the prophets, but now blazing from the glorious face of the Son.

Second, Luke invites us to reflect on the bridge between *Jew* and *Gentile* in the saving plan of God. Like the other New Testament writers, Luke takes pains to emphasize that the word of salvation that has now come in Jesus and is being spread through his messengers among the Gentiles, is not a repudiation of the faithful words that God spoke to Israel of old. Although Luke's words differ from Paul's, he nevertheless joins the Apostle to the Gentiles in giving a resounding *no!* to the question "Has God rejected his people?" (Rom. 11:1). A central theme to be explored, then, in the apostolic history recorded in Acts, is the unity of the church as the one people of God, a unity that bridges the division that once excluded Gentiles from the community of God's covenant and brings them into the salvation achieved by the Messiah.

Finally, there is a bridge that lies just outside the purview of Luke's narrative, but is implied in the theology of the New Testament. It is the bridge between the *apostolic events* narrated by Luke and *our own day*, as we continue to see how the risen Jesus builds his church on the foundation of the apostolic word proclaimed by his eyewitnesses in Acts. This bridge is foreshadowed in Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:24-30), which suggests a period of delay before the final judgment and separa-

ration of the redeemed from the rebellious. Jesus' commission to his servants to proclaim his salvation "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8; 13:47) likewise implies a worldwide mission for the church that reaches beyond the geographical and temporal boundaries of the apostles' personal ministry, down through the centuries and around the world—a mission that includes the challenges facing Jesus' people today. Likewise, the promises in Acts that Jesus will return at the end of the age, bringing times of refreshing and restoration, unite Christians today with the apostles and other believers of long ago as together we eagerly await that blessed hope (Acts 1:11; 3:19–21).

As the following chapters will show, there are some important differences between our day and that foundational period, in which eyewitnesses, who had lived with Jesus and had heard his teaching and seen his miracles, bore their testimony to the fact that he was alive forevermore. Today we hear their testimony not through their physical presence, but rather through the words of Scripture. Nevertheless, a bridge connects these two phases in the life of the New Covenant church. The same Spirit who pierced hardened hearts as Peter and others preached long ago is still present in the church to drive home his convicting and life-giving message today. The purpose for the church, as revealed by her Savior and Lord in Acts, must continue to be her goal today. The shape of the church in those early days continues to set the contours for the church's growth and service to her Lord until that day when Jesus returns in the clouds of divine glory. With this third bridge in mind, I have tried to show the connection between the identity of the church as defined in the pages of Acts, on the one hand, and the issues confronting the church in our own day, on the other.

This book is itself a kind of bridge, spanning the gap between the disciplined study of Acts and its application to the church today. It is neither a full commentary nor a specialist's work of technical exegesis. No attempt is made to expound every passage or to resolve every exegetical difficulty in Acts. Much that would be of interest to professional scholars is bypassed without comment. Then again, this book is not intended to be "popular," if that implies a sacrifice of thought to entertaining imagination, so that readers relax, expecting to be carried along on a feather bed of pleasant impressions, their minds in neutral. I am convinced that Christians who have not had the opportunity for formal theological study nevertheless are keenly interested in understanding the Bible and are willing to reflect seriously on the intricate connections by which God's word manifests its splendid unity and variety, always pointing us to the Lord Jesus.

In addition to enriching the appreciation of thoughtful Christians in

general as they read Acts, I hope that this book will also help pastors, Bible study teachers, and others directly involved in teaching and preaching the Bible to the church, by pointing out the *major thematic threads* woven through Acts, the patterns that tie passages and events together, the landmarks that signal major intersections in the route taken by Christ's Spirit and his servants to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. Our focus will be on seeing individual passages in *context*: the context of the whole of Acts, of Luke-Acts, and of other pertinent Scriptures. As a preacher and a trainer of preachers, I pray that we will see afresh in Acts the mighty work of our risen Lord through the Spirit; that seeing it, we will preach it; and that as his saving lordship is preached, Jesus will demonstrate his holy and gracious presence in his church, reaching out to the nations with his sovereign summons: "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other" (Isa. 45:22 NIV).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am thankful:

(1) to Professor Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., of Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia), whose introductory lectures on the theology of the Spirit in Acts during my Master of Divinity program sparked my interest in the Acts of the Apostles, and who wisely supervised my thesis, *Conversion and the Gift of the Spirit in Acts 2:38*, which was accepted by Westminster Seminary for the Master of Theology degree in 1977;

(2) to Westminster Theological Seminary in California for a study leave in 1988, during which this manuscript was begun, and for the privilege of teaching the New Testament to Christians preparing to serve and lead the church;

(3) to New Life Presbyterian Church in Escondido and my fellow elders for the opportunity to live in the midst of an attempt (imperfect but joyfully serious) to implement the New Testament portrait of the church;

(4) to my colleagues in the teaching of the New Testament at Westminster, especially Allen Mawhinney (now of Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando campus), who read some early chapters and offered helpful exegetical comments, and Steven Baugh, who read chapters 10 and 11, and whose expertise in Hellenistic culture rescued me from repeating some oft-cited “truisms” that are unsupported by evidence;

(5) for my mother, who entered the presence of Christ as I was completing this manuscript, and to my father, whose example of Christian faith, hope, and love, even in sorrow, continues to encourage me;

(6) to Eric, Christina, Peter, and Laurie, young men and women whose growing maturity in Christ gives their mother and me great joy;

(7) to my wife, Jane—friend, encourager, soul mate—who not only

kept me believing that this book could be finished, but also proofread drafts of each chapter, and whose editorial expertise has made the book more user-friendly; and, preeminently,

(8) to the One who is the Light to the Gentiles, who even today is bringing salvation to us and through us at the ends of the earth.

O N E

LISTENING TO LUKE

WHO NEEDS ACTS?

Scenario One: Churches drift off to sleep. Small groups turn in on themselves. Bible studies and Sunday school classes tread predictable, timeworn paths. Worship becomes routine. Witnessing becomes the work of specialists. And compassion? “Let’s see . . . I have an hour open next Thursday.”

When familiarity breeds contentment and complacency, when good order calcifies into rigid regularity, then people who love Jesus sense that something is amiss. They know that it was not always this way, and they turn to the Book to see again what is truly normal for Christ’s church. In particular, when our zeal flags and our focus blurs, we need to listen to Luke, apostolic associate and documenter of the deeds of the Lord, as he recounts the Spirit’s acts in the Spirit’s words. We need the Acts of the Apostles.

Scenario Two: Emotions run at a feverish pitch, expressing the joy of restoration to God’s friendship. The birthrate of God’s daughters and sons soars, and the infants cry out for food and care. Churches spring up faster than gardeners can fertilize, train, and trim them. False shepherds slip in among the newborn lambs to cut them off from the flock. “Living stones,” newly hewn from pagan quarries, with all sharp edges, rub on each other in Christ’s new spiritual house, and the friction generates heat. The Spirit’s life-breath blows with such force that everyone is thrown off balance.

When the fires of revival set the church alight, when the earth quakes at the holy and gracious presence of God, when the glad message of Christ’s merciful power embraces people who have abandoned hope, then too we need to turn to Acts. Sadly, the joy of salvation can be faked—there can be an empty “high” without lowliness of heart; passion can be fixated on

itself, rather than focused on the One worthy of all adoration. Spirit-filled authority can be counterfeited for personal profit, harming Jesus' little ones and his name. Seedlings of faith must be fed from the Word, nurtured in the truth, if they are to bear lasting fruit. God's toddlers need to hear from him what family life in Christ is all about. When the Spirit shakes us up, no less than when we need shaking, we must go to the touchstone of the Spirit's word. We need the Acts of the Apostles.

Whatever our condition as the church of Jesus Christ may be, and wherever we may be scattered among the nations, Luke's second volume, which we call "Acts" or "The Acts of the Apostles," is God's call to remember and reflect on his design for his church, and reconsider how our fellowship fits—or fails to fit—the blueprint.¹ As we return to those thrilling days of yesteryear, we see the New Testament epistles' instructions for living fleshed out in real history. The history in Acts is, after all, real. It is full of people who don't get along, who don't catch on, and who don't always rise eagerly to the challenge of discipleship. On the other hand, this history is also real in demonstrating the powerful impact of Jesus, risen and enthroned, at work among these flawed people by his Spirit's quiet but invincible strength.²

HOW SHOULD WE READ ACTS?

Two Crucial Questions

It is obvious that we need light from the church's early days to shine on our churches today. To learn from Acts what God wants us to learn, however, is not an obvious and easy matter. God's Spirit speaks in Acts not in the form of explicit instructions or answers tailored to twentieth-century questions, but in the form of historical narrative. Whenever in God's word we find accounts of events that transpired in the past, we face two crucial questions: (1) What is *God's verdict* on those events? (2) What does God intend us to learn *here and now* from what happened *there and then*?

(1) *What is God's moral verdict on the events narrated?* It is clear that God does not approve of every action and event that he caused to be recorded in his word. Biblical narratives teem with accounts of the sordid, sensual, foolish, and violent acts of human beings—all of which God severely condemns (as the biblical narrators signal the reader in various ways). Old Testament history is intimately bound up with the Torah, the law for the covenant people of Israel. As the structure of the Hebrew Scriptures shows, the faithfulness of God and the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of his servants are set down in *prophetic* history as a solemn testimony and warning to com-

ing generations.³ So it is in Acts. Actions are recorded, of which the Lord of the church clearly disapproves. For example, we read about the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira, the Samaritan Simon's quest for power, the greed of Ephesian silversmiths, and jealousy of Jewish leaders. In such cases, we have little difficulty seeing that God does not want the church today to duplicate everything we read in the pages of Acts.

(2) *What is normative for the whole church in all ages?* This second question raises a more difficult issue: When we read about an event or a practice in biblical history of which God does approve, should we assume that he wants that feature reproduced by us today? Abraham, for example, is commended by God for his willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac. Should we, then, imitate Abraham? Or, more precisely, if we should imitate Abraham, how should we do so? Should we imitate his *action* by offering our child in sacrifice, or should we imitate his *attitude* of unwavering faith and absolute loyalty to the Lord? Likewise, when we read in Acts that in the early church "no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had" (4:32 NIV), what lesson should we learn for our life together today? Should we take this commendation of the early church's readiness to share as God's hint that he desires radical economic communalism in today's church? Or does the culture-transcending lesson of this text demand a deeper response than simple imitation, namely, a heartfelt and radical commitment to costly fellowship—whatever it may cost to express our unity in Jesus?

Two Extreme Answers

Our dilemma has been called "the problem of historical precedent."⁴ How is the historical portrait of the early church in Acts a normative precedent for the church today? Two extreme answers might be given to this question:

(1) *Everything* in Acts that the Lord approves should be reproduced in the church today. Some Pentecostal and charismatic portions of the church have talked as if everything that is good in Acts would be seen in today's church, if only we would take the Bible seriously. Some conclude from Acts 2 that "the baptism of the Spirit" comes to believers long after we come to trust in Jesus. Others believe that church leaders must be chosen by lot (chap. 1), or that those who are "in the Spirit" can handle snakes safely (chap. 28). However, I know of no one who applies this answer consistently. If we did, we would have to conclude that all of the following should be found in every church: (a) apostles who had walked Galilean trails with Jesus, bearing eyewitness testimony to his resurrection; (b) the Spirit coming in an earthquake and the roar of wind; (c) angels leading preachers out

of prison; and (d) church discipline by instantaneous, divinely administered capital punishment.

But the real problem with this extreme answer is not our pragmatic inconsistency. The real difficulty is that the “everything” answer is itself inconsistent with the theology of the New Testament. Acts, along with the rest of the New Testament, indicates that there is something *special* about the apostles who were chosen by Jesus to give evidence that he had been raised (Acts 1:2–3, 22; 2:32; etc.). Together with the prophets, the apostles formed the church’s foundation (Eph. 2:20). Therefore, their testimony was confirmed by God himself through signs and wonders (Heb. 2:3–4; 2 Cor. 12:12). We should expect, then, to find some of the marvelous events associated with the apostles to be unique. They are visible “signs,” which, like the miracles of Jesus’ earthly ministry, unveil a salvation that goes deeper and farther than the eye can see. These acts of power in the visible world illustrate the hidden healing of the heart and provide a preview of the cosmic renewal that will accompany Jesus’ return. Therefore, a church today that does not exhibit these foundational power-signs that we see in Acts is not defective or unspiritual. Rather, it may be a church that focuses on the uniqueness of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and respects the special role of the apostles as witnesses to that redemptive turning point.

On the other hand, the uniqueness of the apostolic period should not be stressed to the point that Acts is denied any role at all in forming our life today as Jesus’ disciples, as in the error at the opposite extreme:

(2) *Nothing* in Acts is normative for the church today. Again, it is doubtful that anyone holds this extreme view consistently. But when the vitality of the early church’s life challenges our own status quo, we may be tempted to argue that, although Acts accurately describes the church’s infancy, this description is not supposed to guide our lives today. Some, for example, would attribute the early Christians’ pooling of resources exclusively to the unusual circumstances of the days just following Pentecost, when pilgrims who had believed Peter’s sermon stayed on after the feast for instruction—thus, no challenge here to Americans’ infatuation with their private property! Others have critiqued Paul’s apologetic strategy at Athens as a misguided use of intellectual argument, even though Luke and God’s Spirit include Paul’s speech on Mars Hill as a positive example of gospel proclamation.

This extreme answer, invoked to let us off the hook when something in Acts makes us uncomfortable, violates the purpose that emerges from Luke’s writings. Luke is concerned to write history, to be sure, but he is not writing to satisfy dispassionate historical curiosity. He writes to Theophilus

and those like him, who have been catechized in the message of Jesus, but who need a thorough and orderly written account to confirm the life-changing message they have heard. Among the New Testament Evangelists, Luke alone has written a sequel to the earthly career of Jesus. This may be because he is writing for people who lacked person-to-person contact with the apostolic eyewitnesses themselves.

At any rate, Luke takes his stand in the tradition of biblical narrative—that is, prophetically interpreted history. He writes history that *must make a difference to our faith and life*, just as his mentor, Paul, described the purpose of Old Testament history as ethical instruction (1 Cor. 10:11) and teaching (Rom. 15:4; see also 2 Tim. 3:16). Certainly the foundational, apostolic period may have some unique features about it, just because it is foundational, but the foundation also determines the contours of the building to be constructed on it.

GUIDELINES FOR DISCOVERING AND APPLYING THE MESSAGE OF ACTS

If neither the “all” nor the “nothing” answer is a reliable guide to the normative impact of Acts on the church today, how can we understand and apply the Spirit’s message correctly?

1. Read Acts in the Light of Luke’s Purpose

Luke is writing about the climax of God’s redemptive acts in history. As in Old Testament history and the Gospels, *what God has done* occupies center stage in Acts. God’s saving acts always have implications for our response, of course. But in Scripture the starting point of instruction on right behavior is not a list of our duties, but a declaration of God’s saving achievement, bringing us into a relationship of favor with him. Although Acts contains information on the early church’s life and outreach, the book may frustrate us if we try to turn it into a manual of church polity or mission policies. Its purpose is more profoundly practical (and cross-cultural) than so many of our questions about procedures and strategy. Here God’s Spirit unveils the identity of the church between Jesus’ two comings, the divine power at work in this church, the results of that powerful Presence, and the environment in which we are to pursue our mission until “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” (1:11 NIV).

2. Read Acts in the Light of the New Testament Epistles

Luke is both a historian and a theologian. As he records “the things that have been fulfilled among us” (Luke 1:1 NIV), he also makes sense of these events, indicating their significance as an interpreter guided by the Spirit of Christ. Nevertheless, the very fact that he communicates this significance through the genre of historical narrative (rather than in a theological essay, for example) has both advantages and limitations.

One advantage is that as Luke demonstrates the interface between God’s salvation and the details of Hellenistic history (Luke 1:5; 2:1; 3:1–2), he shows how different the Christian faith is from religions rooted in mysticism, mythology, or speculation. The gospel of Christ is not abstract theory or poetic symbol. It is the account, attested by witnesses, of the personal God’s intervention in history to rescue human beings.

One limitation, on the other hand, is that the genre of historical narrative itself permits theological explanation only indirectly, through the placement of material, the recounting of sermons, and verbal allusions to Old Testament texts and themes. To stay true to his historical aim, Luke the narrator cannot jump into the story with extensive commentary or theological essays to clear up all possible misunderstandings.

The epistle is the ideal genre for direct address and straightforward exposition of the gospel’s meaning and its behavioral implications for those who believe it. Therefore, the New Testament epistles, written expressly to direct and correct the church’s faith and life, provide a necessary check on the applications that we may draw from Acts for the church today. Without minimizing the special contribution of Acts to the teaching of the New Testament as a whole, once we recognize the purpose of Acts, we will be cautious about accepting as normative today any element of its narrative that is not confirmed in the exhortation of the epistles.

3. Read Acts in the Light of the Old Testament⁵

The prominence of the Old Testament in the speeches and sermons of Acts is obvious to any reader of the Bible. Especially where their hearers acknowledged the Scriptures’ divine authority, the witnesses of Jesus quoted and interpreted the Scriptures in the light of the Messiah’s coming, demonstrating how his ministry, death, resurrection, and pouring out of the Spirit fulfilled these prophetic writings.

Luke’s debt to the Old Testament goes deeper than the citation of passages in sermons. He has embedded in his own narrative style echoes of Hebrew ways of speaking, quietly but pervasively reinforcing the message that he is writing in the tradition of Hebrew prophetic history, bearing wit-

ness to the climax of that tradition in the work of the Messiah.⁶ Moreover, the connection between Acts and the Old Testament is more than a matter of words and grammar. Repeatedly we will see Old Testament themes (the Spirit, the servant, holy judgment, dispersion, persecution of the prophets) brought to new realization through the presence of the risen Lord in his church.

4. Read Acts in the Light of Luke's First Volume

The brief prologue of Acts (1:1–3) draws together Luke's two volumes, summing up the content of the Third Gospel even as it turns our vision toward what is to come.⁷ Likewise, the Gospel closes with Jesus' prophetic interpretation of the Scriptures, a statement that anticipates the drama that unfolds in Acts:

Thus it stands written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance leading to forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations/Gentiles,⁸ beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And note this: I myself am sending upon you what my Father promised, but you must stay in the city until you have been clothed from on high with power. (Luke 24:46–49)

Parallels between Luke's gospel and Acts abound. In the Gospel, Jesus receives the Spirit when anointed in his baptism to proclaim good news; in Acts, the church receives the Spirit from the glorified Jesus and declares the wonders of God. In the Gospel, Jesus is the servant of Isaiah's Servant Songs; in Acts, the church is the servant-witness foreseen by Isaiah (but so also is Jesus, Acts 3:13!). In the Gospel, Jesus is repeatedly referred to as "the Lord"; in Acts, his glory and authority as Lord are displayed by his resurrection from the dead. The centrality of the word, the welcoming of the Gentiles, the arrival of salvation (a central theme in Luke-Acts), and many other themes bind Acts closely to Luke's gospel, demanding that we explore both volumes together in order to understand either.

5. Read Acts in the Light of Its Structure

Luke writes Greek well. He is at home with the written word, and his skill in the use of language is evident. In order to get his message—God's message through him—we must pay attention to the way in which this craftsman has put his books together. Are there overarching themes to guide us through the flow of incidents that we find in Acts? Is there a framework,

a structure, to help us see how one section leads to the next? We do well to note four structural signals by which Luke points our way through his account.

STRUCTURAL SIGNPOSTS IN THE NARRATIVE OF ACTS

1. Acts 1:8 and 9:15

It is often observed that Acts 1:8, containing Jesus' promise of the Spirit and of the apostles' role as his witnesses, provides a preview of the phases of the gospel's spread: in Jerusalem (chaps. 1–7), through Judea and Samaria (chaps. 8–12), to the last part of the earth (chaps. 13–28). This of course involves geographical expansion, but there is more afoot here than miles. Things begin in Jerusalem, “the city of the great King” (Ps. 48:2), the site of the sanctuary, the center of Israel's worship of the living God. By the close of Acts, Paul, bearer of the Lord's word, has reached Rome, the city of the Caesars, the center of Gentile world power.⁹ The word has crossed not only spatial distance, but also religious, ethnic, and cultural distance. The “word of this salvation” (Acts 13:26) has come not only to Jewish people within the Holy Land, but also to those dispersed throughout the Roman Empire—moreover, not only to Jews descended from “the fathers,” but also to Samaritans (whose religious and ethnic heritage, though related to the Jews, was tainted by intermarriage and pagan syncretism), to Gentile proselytes,¹⁰ to Gentile God-fearers,¹¹ and even to Gentiles enmeshed in idolatry.

In taking Jesus' word of promise for his outline, then, Luke highlights the powerful force of God's Spirit, propelling divine vitality, purity, and grace out from the ancient holy place to bring the nations under the redemptive rule of the Lord and his Christ.

In Acts 9:15, another statement of Jesus' complements the promise of Acts 1:8, suggesting in more detail the contents of the third major section of the book, the apostolic witness “to the ends of the earth.” That statement describes Saul of Tarsus, the witness whose mission dominates chapters 13–28: “But the Lord said to [Ananias], ‘Go! This man is a select vessel belonging to me, to carry my name in the presence both of Gentiles and of kings and of Israel's sons’ ” (Acts 9:15). As in Acts 1:8, we see here three spheres of witness: (1) Gentiles, (2) kings, and (3) sons of Israel.¹² This threefold description nicely sums up the targets of Paul's preaching as Luke has recorded it: his primary focus on the Gentiles (chaps. 13–20), his speeches before kings/rulers (chaps. 24–26), and also his testimony to his

own people, the sons of Israel (chaps. 22, 28). Thus, Paul's final words of witness in Acts contain a rebuke to Israel, reminiscent of Stephen's prophetic testimony against stiffness of neck and hardness of heart and hearing (see 7:51–53), and an expression of hopeful expectation that the gospel will be welcomed by the Gentiles (28:25–29).

These two promises of Jesus trace out for us the overarching framework for the twenty-eight chapters of Acts, in which Luke chronicles the spread of the word of salvation:

- 1–7 Jerusalem (Peter/Stephen/[Saul approves Stephen's death])
- 8–12 Judea and Samaria ([Saul initiates dispersion]/Philip to Samaria, Ethiopian/[Saul converted]/Peter initiates Gentile mission)
- 13–28 The last part of the earth (Paul/[Peter confirms Gentile mission])
 - 13–20 Before Gentiles
 - 24–26 Before kings
 - 22, 28 Before Israel's sons

2. Summary Statements

Within the larger sections, Luke's method is to give us snapshots or vignettes of the development of the church's life and witness, samples of the Spirit's work, which are then joined to one another by summary statements.¹³ These statements, though perhaps lacking the dramatic appeal of the action narratives, are vital to the purpose of Acts.¹⁴ They show us the ongoing results of each incident, and they set the scene for the next event that Luke intends to recount. As they perform these tasks, the summaries quietly but constantly set the tone for our perception of the Spirit's presence and activity in the church: *the word of the Lord grew powerfully*.¹⁵ Early in Acts, several extended summaries place Pentecost, the healing of the lame man in the temple, and the judgment on Ananias and Sapphira in the context of the continuing manifestations of the Spirit's power in the church: bold and effective evangelism, mutual compassion expressed in practical help, joy mingled with a healthy fear (2:42–47; 4:32–35; 5:12–16; see also 9:31; 16:5). Then, after the appointment of the Seven Servers, Luke introduces a theme on which he will present variations in the rest of his narrative: "So the word of God was growing and the number of the disciples in Jerusalem was multiplying exceedingly, and a large crowd of priests were obeying the faith" (Acts 6:7). As Luke's narrative expands to embrace Judea and Samaria, "the word of God was growing and being multiplied" (12:24). In Pisidia "the word of the Lord was permeating through the whole

region” (13:49). Likewise, at Ephesus “the word of the Lord was growing powerfully and exerting strength” (19:20).¹⁶

Luke introduced his two-volume narrative by referring to “those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word” (Luke 1:2 NIV), signaling from the outset the importance that he attached to the powerful word about Jesus. Now in Acts his repeated reference to the dynamic growth of the word underscores the theme that the Holy Spirit’s power is focused in the glad announcement of salvation in Jesus the Christ.

3. *Repeated Accounts*

A third feature of Luke’s structure is a device borrowed from those who told the story of Israel in the Old Testament Scriptures. Although modern readers have little patience for what seems to us to be needless duplication, biblical narrators preferred to underscore an event’s importance by repeating the story with slight variations, like the repetition and development of a musical motif in a symphony.¹⁷ If we compare, for example, Genesis 24:1–27 with Genesis 24:34–49 (as we should, since they belong to the same story), we find that the narrator leads us, step by step, through Abraham’s servant’s successful search for Isaac’s bride not once, but twice. Why the “wasted” words? Because Isaac is the son of promise, through whose descendants God will keep his promises to Abraham, and therefore because Isaac’s marriage is crucial to the fulfillment of the divine promises. We are invited to marvel—yes, and marvel again!—at the astounding guidance and provision of God in giving the bride of his own choosing to the covenant heir.

Similarly, Luke uses repetition to underscore the importance of three pivotal events: (1) the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, (2) the conversion of Cornelius and his associates, and (3) the conversion of Saul of Tarsus.

(1) The Spirit’s coming at Pentecost is described in chapter 2, but it is also recalled by Peter in his report to the Jerusalem church regarding Cornelius, together with a specific reminder of the words of Jesus quoted by Luke prior to Pentecost: “Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit’” (Acts 11:16 NIV; see 1:5). Again, at the Jerusalem council, Peter recalls the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost (15:8). By these references, Luke reminds us that reception of the Spirit is the touchstone of Christian experience.

(2) The conversion of the Gentiles at Cornelius’s house is described not only by Luke as the narrator in chapter 10, but also by Peter upon his return to the church in Jerusalem (including the details of Peter’s preparatory vision—again!) (11:4–17). Peter refers again to the turning point in Cornelius’s home when he speaks at the council of apostles and

elders in Jerusalem: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe” (15:7 NIV). Why belabor the point? Because the pouring out of the Spirit, God’s gift of welcome, on the Gentiles in Peter’s presence makes him the witness who can testify that God’s salvation has burst the boundaries of Israel’s cultic and cultural distinctiveness. The risen Lord summons the ends of the earth to turn to him for salvation, and as they come, he sweeps from their path the ruins of the walls that had kept un-Law-ful aliens out of Israel’s covenant privilege. Circumcision, sanctuary, calendar, diet—all are bypassed as the God of glory lavishes *himself* on outsiders.

(3) Finally, we read three times of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus: first from the narrator (9:1–30), then twice in Paul’s own speeches (22:1–16; 26:2–18). Although intriguing differences in detail puzzle us, the account of the awesome Christophany on the road to Damascus is essentially the same in all three accounts. We may find it odd that Luke did not economize papyrus by inserting a terse summary in chapters 22 and 26, such as: “Then Paul told them about his conversion.” But Luke’s extravagant repetition is the better way: he will not let us forget the world-changing significance of the call of the Apostle to the Gentiles. He will have us listen to that call again and again, and with each repetition he adds details that increase the luster of this conquest of grace: persecutor turned into propagator, paragon of self-righteousness reduced to penitent dependence on Another’s righteousness, aloof zealot for Israel’s purity sent to mingle with polluted pagans as the preeminent exhibit of God’s cleansing mercy (see 1 Tim. 1:12–16).

4. *The Prominence of Preaching*

Luke illustrates his persistent reminders that “the word was growing” by preserving a substantial sample of Christian preaching. At least thirty percent of the text of Acts consists of apostolic preaching, either in fairly full form or in summary.¹⁸ Many miracles recorded in Acts are pretexts for preaching, introducing sermons that interpret the miracles’ true significance. The preaching, in fact, receives more extended treatment than the related signs of power. For example, although the events associated with the Spirit’s coming at Pentecost are recorded in thirteen verses, Peter’s sermon explaining the events takes up twenty-three (chap. 2). Similarly, the healing of a lame man in the temple is described in ten verses; it is followed by two speeches of Peter’s, totaling twenty-two verses, to explain its implications (chaps. 3, 4).

Luke has selected speeches strategically, including samples of how the gospel was addressed to various audiences in its expansion from Jerusalem, through Judea and Samaria, to the ends of the earth.

In *Jerusalem*, Peter's speech at Pentecost shows the connection between the Spirit's coming and Jesus' exaltation (chap. 2). Peter's speech in Solomon's Colonnade (chap. 3) and its follow-up before the Sanhedrin (4:8–12) focus on the power of Jesus' name to bring the blessings of the last days. Stephen's speech is a prophetic indictment of Israel's rebellion against the deliverers sent by God (chap. 7), leading to the spread of the gospel beyond Jerusalem.

The next phase in the expansion of the gospel—in *Judea and Samaria*—is transitional. We have brief summaries of Philip's preaching to Samaritans and an Ethiopian (8:12, 32–35), but the major speeches center on the conversion of Cornelius and his friends through the proclamation of Peter (chaps. 10, 11).

As the word moves to *the ends of the earth*, we hear it preached in a synagogue of the Dispersion (13:16–41, 46–48), among superstitious pagans (17:22–31; see 14:14–18), to elders of the church in deliberation (15:13–21) and in farewell (20:17–35), and in circumstances of legal defense (chaps. 22, 26). At the close of Acts, Luke leaves us, in a sense, with Paul's preaching ringing in our ears: "He was explaining, solemnly testifying concerning the kingdom of God and persuading them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning until evening" (28:23). "He was preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance" (28:31).

If we are to understand Acts and its message for the church today, we must certainly pay careful attention to the sermons of Acts, those divinely given, apostolic commentaries on the stirring events that marked the church's entrance into the age of the Spirit's power.

CONCLUSION

Our study of Acts will be enriched as we pay attention to the bridges that link God's mighty work through the apostles with other dimensions of his redeeming work and revealing word: the bridge to Old Testament words of promise and deeds of anticipated deliverance; the bridge to the ministry of Jesus, recounted in Luke's gospel; the bridge to the epistles of Paul and other apostles, through whom the Spirit set his works in theological context and clear focus; and the bridges within the narrative of Acts itself, which sig-

nal turning points and interwoven strands of continuity as the message of salvation in Jesus Christ bridges chasms and breaks down barriers to extend God's grace to Jew and Gentile alike.

Notes

¹ The author of the Third Gospel is also the author of Acts, as the introductions to the two documents (Luke 1:1–4; Acts 1:1–2), as well as their style, make clear. The author never identifies himself by name. The most natural understanding of certain sections of Acts (16:10–17; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16), in which the narrator uses the first person pronoun “we,” is that the author accompanied Paul during those portions of his travels. From the second century onward, the Third Gospel and Acts were associated with Luke, a physician whom Paul praised highly in Col. 4:14 and mentioned in Philem. 24 and 2 Tim. 4:11. No evidence from the books themselves refutes this ancient tradition, although influential modern scholars have argued that Acts could not have come from an associate of Paul's, either because the portrait of Paul in Acts seems to them to contradict the impression gained from his epistles, or because Acts seems to reflect a church situation that did not arise until after the apostolic period. See, e.g., Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971). Persuasive answers to Haenchen's argument that the Paul of Acts is irreconcilable with the Paul of the epistles are found in Jacob Jervell, *The Unknown Paul: Essays on Luke-Acts and Early Christian History* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), and W. Ward Gasque, *A History of the Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1989), 235–47.

² Some scholars in the historical-critical tradition, such as Martin Dibelius (*Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* [London: SCM, 1956]), Ernst Haenchen (*Acts*), and Hans Conzelmann (*The Theology of St. Luke* [New York: Harper and Row, 1961], and *Acts of the Apostles*, ed. E. J. Epp, trans. J. Limburg, A. T. Kraabel, and D. H. Juell [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987]) have argued that the author of Acts was not concerned to recount history as it actually occurred, but rather was propounding his own theology through the form of historical narrative. Their extreme separation of theology from history has been answered by I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian*, enlarged ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 21–76; Martin Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 35–49; and others. See also F. F. Bruce, *New Testament History* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1972); D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, 4th rev. ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990), 365–82. More recently, the posthumously published study by Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic Historiography*, ed. Conrad J. Gempf (WUNT, 49; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1989), develops a nuanced defense, meticulously documented in light of current archaeological knowledge, not only of Luke's intention to report historical events reliably, but also of his effectiveness in achieving this purpose.

³ In the Hebrew Scriptures, unlike our English versions, the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings are regarded as the Former *Prophets*, and therefore grouped with the Latter Prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc. The history in the Pentateuch is all prologue or epilogue to the covenant made with Israel at Sinai, and the Former Prophets and Latter Prophets then go on to bear witness concerning Israel's response to the covenant and the consequences that would follow. Biblical history is narrated not to satisfy readers' curiosity

about the past, but to summon us to covenant faithfulness. For a sensitive discussion of the blending of historical, theological, and literary-artistic purposes in biblical history, see V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

⁴ For a good discussion, see the chapter bearing this title (chap. 6) in Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 87–102.

⁵ On this point and the next, see Carey C. Newman, “Acts,” in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 438–39: “Generic riddles can be solved, in part, by reading Acts within its two primary literary contexts—the Jewish Scriptures and the gospel of Luke” (p. 438).

⁶ A few examples here will illustrate the point: (1) “and he lifted up his voice” (Acts 2:14; 14:11; 22:22; see Judg. 9:7); (2) “pierced to the heart” (Acts 2:37; see Ps. 109:16); (3) the report “was heard into the ears” of the church (Acts 11:22; see Isa. 5:9). See Max Wilcox, *The Semitisms of Acts* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1965).

⁷ The first-century Jewish historian Josephus’s two-part defense *Against Apion* is unified by a similar introduction to the second book: “In the former book, most excellent Epaphroditus, I have demonstrated our antiquity and confirmed the truth of what I have said.”

⁸ The Greek word *ἔθνη* (a plural form) refers to “nations” in the sense of “ethnic groups,” but often specifically those ethnic groups that are not the “people” (*λαός*) of Israel—namely, the Gentiles.

⁹ Reading Luke’s gospel and Acts together, we observe that the Gospel traces Jesus’ movement toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51; 13:22; 17:11; 19:11), while Acts traces the gospel’s spread away from Jerusalem (Acts 8:1, 26, 40; 9:19, 32; 10:1; 11:19; 13:4).

¹⁰ Proselytes were full converts to Judaism, who submitted to circumcision and “shouldered the yoke of the Torah,” obligating themselves to keep the ceremonial as well as the moral instructions of the Mosaic law.

¹¹ God-fearers (*οἱ σεβόμενοι τὸν θεὸν* or *οἱ φοβούμενοι τὸν θεὸν*) were attracted to Judaism’s monotheism and high ethical ideals, but balked at submitting to the cultural distinctives of Judaism: circumcision, kosher diet, and observance of the Levitical calendar.

¹² H. N. Ridderbos, *The Speeches of Peter in the Acts of the Apostles* (London: Tyndale Press, 1962), 6.

¹³ Since the summaries describe circumstances and activities that took place consistently over a period of time, they stand out clearly in the Greek text as Luke shifts between verbs in the aorist tense, describing specific acts in the “vignette” sections, to verbs in the imperfect tense, describing continuing conditions or customary behaviors in the summaries. For example, every verb in the summary of Acts 4:32–35 is in the imperfect tense, but in 4:36 Luke shifts back to the aorist tense—a signal that Barnabas’s gift is both a specific example of the general trend sketched in the summary and the immediate introduction (instigation) to the hypocritical generosity of Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11). In 5:12–16—another summary—the characteristic verb tense is the imperfect.

¹⁴ Luke used this method at several points in his Gospel as well: 1:80 (John grew); 2:40, 52 (Jesus grew). Luke’s gospel, like the other Synoptic Gospels, Matthew and Mark, also comments on the spread of the news about Jesus after some of his miracles: Luke 4:14–15, 37; 5:15; 7:17; Mark 1:28; 7:36–37; Matt. 4:24; 9:26, 31.

¹⁵ H. Alan Brehm, “The Significance of the Summaries for Interpreting Acts,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 33 (1990): 29–40.

¹⁶ Luke uses metaphors of organic growth to express both the expansion of the word's sphere of influence and the vitality of the message itself: *αυξανω* ("grow") in 6:7; 12:24 (with *πληθυνω*, "multiply"); 19:20 (with *ισχυω*, "be strong"). In 13:49 the verb is *διαφερω* (in the passive voice: "be carried through" a region).

¹⁷ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 88–113. This is a stimulating study of narrative conventions in the Hebrew Scriptures, but it also (despite Alter's judgment on p. ix) is relevant to the study of the Gospels and Acts, inasmuch as they were significantly influenced by the style of earlier historical writing in the Bible.

¹⁸ This figure excludes normal conversation and the narrative introductions to sermons.