INTRODUCTION

The Acts of the Apostles, the traditional title of this originally untitled and anonymous book, inadequately expresses the book’s content and theological message. As a literary summary of a narrative that spans twenty-eight chapters, the title obscures that the full range of Acts is really quite unconcerned with the activities of the twelve apostles. For one thing, only one apostle, Peter, plays a prominent role. The lack of attention given to the remaining eleven is about the only thing that makes them conspicuous. Although Acts occasionally notes the apostles’ collective importance, especially in the first half of the book, their specific individual deeds remain shielded from readers. As for Paul, the other human character who receives sustained attention, the narrative regularly refrains from ascribing the title apostle to him (the only exceptions are Acts 14:4, 14). Moreover, many additional nonapostles make significant appearances in the narrative’s spotlight, creating the impression that the stories of people such as Barnabas or Priscilla are somehow more worthy of notice than those of such virtually invisible apostles as Bartholomew or Matthew.

A theological analysis of the Acts of the Apostles further reveals the book’s title to be inadequate, for the story’s predominant focus falls upon the God who empowers believers to continue the ministry that bears witness to God’s plan of salvation in Christ, not upon any of the people who proclaim Jesus Christ. The actions and words of God’s people in Acts consistently point toward God and identify God’s involvement in all periods of human history. Acts presents its account of the genesis and expansion of the church as a thoroughly theological story. The deeds and speech of believers stem from and point back toward the God who acts, the God who initiates and guides the adventures of the earliest Christians.

God hardly speaks without intermediaries in Acts, but many authorized representatives (including human beings, angels, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit) consistently speak for God and interpret Jesus’ and the church’s stories as part of God’s plan. Acts emphatically declares the reality and certainty of God’s intentions for the world’s salvation, but it makes this point in ways that acknowledge subtle and elusive aspects of God’s interactions with the world. This is a complex narrative, full of twists, turns, and redirected expectations, resulting in a complex, broad, and multifaceted testimony about God and God’s involvement in the work of the church. Such complexity prohibits interpretations that offer either simplistic
characterizations of God or reductionistic paradigms that claim to extrapolate normative models for humanity's encounters with God. Acts does not present a template for the church's structure, mission, or leadership in any age. Nevertheless, in characters' varied attempts to understand and respond faithfully to God's initiatives, readers of Acts find a story of God purposefully engaged with the world. In Acts, God fulfills promises insofar as Jesus' followers participate in God's work by offering inspired testimony as divinely empowered witnesses (e.g., Luke 12:11-12; 21:12-15; 24:45-49; Acts 13).

Many commentators characterize Acts as a book about journeys, observing that the narrative describes people on the move in a story of crossing borders and entering new terrains. Twists in the plot ferry characters and readers into new and sometimes unexpected locations (geopolitical, ethnic, cultural, and theological locations) in which believers both proclaim and discover the Christian gospel's implications for the world. While individual characters enter and exit the narrative stage with few hints about their origins or ultimate destinations, the principal journey traced in Acts belongs to the word of God, the message of the gospel. The story traces the impact of the word of God on the world once it becomes unleashed through the power of the Holy Spirit, beginning in Acts 2. From that point forward, the servants of the word journey to keep pace with the world's movements, responding to God's impulses and proclaiming God's fidelity. Human social networks serve as channels for the word to travel, and through these channels it finds a hearing in all sorts of venues. Not surprisingly, such adventures provoke and encounter risks, for the first generation of Jesus' followers bears witness to Christ even in the face of great opposition. God's involvement in the endeavors of Jesus' followers does not safeguard them from all hardship. The word of God travels difficult routes.

The centrality of God, the efforts of believers to interpret and proclaim theological realities, and the persistent movement of the gospel message into new cultural contexts most deeply shape the book's theological outlook. These themes converge to assert that Acts is first and foremost a story about the ongoing proclamation of the kingdom of God, which was inaugurated by Jesus Christ and confirmed through his resurrection from the dead. Acts tells a story about the perseverance of the word of God.

The expression word of God (also word of the Lord) appears frequently in Acts to denote the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ (e.g., 13:44-49), which extends and delivers salvation to its hearers, and the proclamation of this message. Because this "word" unites and guides people of faith, the expression word of God also refers to the society or communities created by the gospel (e.g., 12:24). Continually God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, empowers these communities to proclaim and minister on behalf of the word despite all manner of opposition, setbacks, and challenges that arise as the word journeys across an array of cultural boundaries. Obstacles occasionally take serious tolls on the people who proclaim the message. Sometimes hardships appear to render the word ineffective. But they do not finally derail the word's ability to find an audience. This manner of determined perseverance is hardly synchronous with unchecked progress or guaranteed, triumphal enlargement; the word's perseverance reflects the book's conviction that God has an unwavering commitment to enable means of communicating the gospel to the world, despite opposition or rejection. Even when the word does not attract new converts, still it perseveres when Christians are able to function as Christ's witnesses because of the world's capacity to infiltrate any social or cultural context. This perseverance reconfirms that God has vindicated Jesus Christ and that God's plan of salvation is operative.

Authorship, Date, and the Gospel of Luke

Because there is no doubt that the same author is responsible for both the Gospel of Luke and Acts, it has become conventional to use the name Luke to indicate the author of both. Neither the Gospel nor Acts, however, includes any mention of who wrote them. Traditions ascribe authorship of Luke—Acts to one of Paul's travel companions, but discrepancies between Paul's story in Acts and the details gleaned from Paul's own letters cast strong doubt on this supposition. The first-person narration sprinkled throughout Acts 16, 20-21, and 27-28 reflects ancient literary conventions and by itself does not require the conclusion that these passages came directly from someone who was an eyewitness to the events described. The rhetoric of Luke—Acts suggests that its author was well educated, a Christian, and very familiar with Jewish biblical writings.

Acts was almost certainly composed after the publication of the Gospel of Luke, during the decades following the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE. The most reasonable hypothesis date Acts in the late 80s. A number of the book's theological concerns—especially those that relate to Jewish rejection of the gospel, Gentiles' acceptance into the church, and the potentially volatile status of Christians navigating the Roman political climate—speak to that historical context.

Those who read Luke and Acts as a coherent two-volume work discover the theological perspectives of both books relating to one another in a dynamic, mutually informing way. Each strongly emphasizes that, in Christ, God unfolds a plan of salvation prefigured in the Jewish Scriptures. Believers in Acts proclaim the kingdom of God, just as Jesus does in Luke. Each book likewise understands Jesus' ministry as rooted in God's prior commitments to Israel; in Acts this same ministry continues, present now in the work of Jesus' followers, his "witnesses" (18). While the books share significant continuity, Acts also exhibits its own theological concerns that do not duplicate the message of the Gospel. These concerns, many of which are described in the commentary below, reflect the demands posed by the social, political, and religious context in which the word of God is proclaimed in Acts. For example, several speeches of Peter, Paul, and others devote attention to the status of the resurrected and exalted Lord Jesus Christ and to the legitimacy of the church's evangelization of Gentiles. While concerns like these are hardly odd with the theology of Luke's Gospel, their prominence in Acts reflects that first-century Christians encountered new theological questions and opportunities as their devotion to the word propelled them into new circumstances for proclamation and discernment. (For additional reflection on the relationship between Luke and Acts, see the entry on Luke in this volume.)

Acts as a Theological History

The two-volume work of Luke—Acts offers itself as a project of pastoral theology (see Luke 1:1-5; Acts 1:1-2), endeavoring to nurture faith by highlighting God's role and fidelity in the stories it tells. Acts presents a history that is interpreted through a theological lens, amplifying the theological significance of the lives and witness of certain figures in the early church. Such theological concerns shape the entire drama of the narrative, making themselves known in the episodes it recounts and in the general architecture of the plot. On one hand, this theological outlook requires readers to make nuanced assessments of the historical claims of Acts and to put Luke's account into conversation with other sources when reconstructing the history of the first decades of Christianity. Indeed, acute differences between the particular theological perspectives of Paul's Epistles and those communicated by Paul in Acts make it very difficult to
reconcile these two portraits and histories of Paul.) On the other hand, the relentless theological focus of Acts makes it a provocative source for Christian theological reflection, as a first-century expression—and an enduring expression—of God’s commitment to create, commission, and sustain communities of faith through the consistent proclamation of the word throughout human history.

**COMMENTARY**

The theological vision articulated in Acts presents God as thoroughly involved in human history and in the events or forces that directly affect nations, people, and the dissemination of the gospel. This active theological emphasis comes to light especially through the book’s depiction of the perseverance of the word of God; through assertions and suggestions about God and God’s activity in the world; and through material describing Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, humanity’s conditions, and the life and work of Christian communities.

**The Word That Perseveres**

Although Acts does not identify Jesus Christ himself as "the Word," as does the prologue of John’s Gospel, nevertheless it does locate the salvific power of "the word of God" in Jesus. The narrative is less interested in delineating the precise content of "the word of God" in the message that believers proclaim, but much more interested in depicting the effects of this divine word as the message that accomplishes salvation. "The word" encompasses the preaching and ministry of Jesus and, by extension, the witness made by the communities of the risen Christ’s followers whom the Spirit empowers. **Word-language in Acts includes both propositional speech and effective action, depicting God addressing humanity in the story of Jesus Christ with a message of peace** (10:36), **salvation** (13:26), and **grace** (14:3).

The word perseveres in Acts, not because it automatically or always draws new members into Christian communities (which, in fact, it does not), but because it propels the church to extend its witness across the Roman world, claiming new cultural landscapes in which it can be proclaimed. Geographical expansion and cultural extension do not necessarily ensure an appreciable increase in the numbers of believers. Although Acts offers periodic summaries about the word gaining adherents (e.g., 6:7; 12:24; 19:20), and the church does spread at least as far as Rome, the narrative scarcely guarantees consistent additions to church membership. While the story begins with accounts of massive growth in the church (2:41; 4:4), later in Acts rejection becomes more common than acceptance. The last clear report of a conversion comes in 19:17-20 (although 28:24 may indicate another positive response). What does increase as the narrative progresses is persecution against believers and opposition from various populations and their leaders. Nevertheless, believers continue to find opportunities to proclaim the word.

Even as the final quarter of Acts depicts Paul held in Roman custody, still he bears witness (see 25:11) as he defends his faithfulness to God’s calling. In Acts 21-28 Paul the prisoner is still Paul the missionary; only the word he speaks has now found new locations to gain a hearing.

The proclamation of the word perseveres despite apparent setbacks because it is God’s word, not because of charisma or resourceful preachers (see 4:29). Believers are the word’s "servants" (see Luke 1:2) and so any instance of the word’s persistence through either favorable or adverse circumstances points to God’s ongoing influence. Although it may be tempting to view the primary human protagonists in Acts (especially Paul, Peter, and Stephen) as clever and heroic, the narrative regularly counters such perceptions with indications that the gifts, status, or energies of individual human witnesses are not vital to the ongoing journey of the word. For example, immediately after a summary announcing increased church membership (6:7) Luke reveals that the heretofore predominant apostles are not the only ones "serving the word"; Stephen leaves off his assigned task of waiting on tables and ministers in public. Of course, his death likewise eliminates any implication that the word’s future requires his particular efforts. Likewise, the final verses of Acts (28:30-31) do not dwell on what happens to Paul, but are concerned with the ongoing proclamation that emanates from his dwelling. Acts concludes with the message, not the messenger, still at center stage.

Luke’s portrayal of the perseverance of the word, therefore, glorifies neither church growth nor "successful" evangelism as much as the indestructibility of the good news and the fact that God will ensure that the word will infiltrate human society. Acts celebrates the witnessing church as God’s instrument to promulgate the word, and through the steadfastly confident depiction of the perseverance of the word Acts also reinforces and celebrates God’s comprehensive plan for salvation.

**God and the Plan of God**

Luke’s theological vision describes more than groups of believers experiencing God’s empowerment of their ministry and communal life. Acts also affirms God’s involvement with humanity on a much greater scale. The God of Acts is the God of Israel, the same God who played an active role throughout the history of the ancestors and the nation (see, e.g., Stephen’s speech in Acts 7:2-53 and Paul’s in 13:16-23). The connections between Luke and Acts also assert that this continuance to be a force in the world, affecting the course of human history and committed to the redemption of Israel and the salvation of all (cf. Lk 1:16-55, 68-79; 2:29-32). God remains in Acts the "Father" of Jesus, yet with the exception of Acts 2:33, no one but Jesus calls God by this name (see 1:4, 7). Likewise, only rarely does Acts refer to Jesus as God’s "Son" (9:20, 13:35). Nevertheless God’s intimate connection to Jesus is reaffirmed through the deep extent that Jesus stands as the full expression of God’s commitment to accomplish salvation (4:12; 53:13:23). That God has engineered this plan of salvation is a particular accent of the book of Acts.

Acts presents the whole scope of God’s salvific action as unfolding according to God’s own purposes, from the promises recorded in the Jewish Scriptures, to God’s activity wrought through the deeds of Jesus Christ (2:22; 10:38), to God’s momentous act of raising Jesus from the dead, and into the narrated events describing the witness of Jesus’ followers. Luke views Jesus’ death and resurrection as part of a divine "plan" (or "purpose"), known to God in advance (2:23; 3:18; 17:23). God controls overarching elements of human history and destiny (5:36-39; 10:42; 14:38; 14:16-17; 17:26, 31). God’s will likewise impacts a necessity to certain situations or developments (1:16-22; 19:21; 23:1; 27:24); occasionally Acts implies God’s intentions with the words must or necessary. At the same time, such affirmations of divine sovereignty do not negate all traces of human agency or accountability. Frequently, especially in discussions of Jesus’ passion, statements about God’s resolute plan and human culpability sit side-by-side. A prominent example comes when the apostles pray to God, “In this city, in fact, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predetermined to take place” (4:27-28; see other instances in 3:13-18; 13:27). Human beings conspired to kill Jesus, but this too was part of God’s design. On another occasion, Peter’s Pentecost sermon contrasts the human deed of killing Jesus...
with the divine deed of his resurrection, all “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (2:22–24). God’s foreknowledge does not eliminate human guilt, as seen when Peter condemns his listeners and exorts them to repent (2:36–38). Acts also pairs statements of divine initiative and human agency in contexts describing the witness of believers. For example, Paul and Barnabas declare, “the Lord has commanded us, saying, ‘I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth’” (13:47; emphasis mine; see also 20:22–23; 23:11; 26:16–23). God creates opportunities for the church to act, but still people must themselves participate by giving testimony in those opportunities.

What modern readers might encounter in Acts as a tension—perhaps even a contradiction—where divine causality intersects with human agency does not seem to create a problem for Luke. The narrative never attempts a precise explanation of the interaction between divine and human acts; it affirms both while placing primary emphasis on God as the Lord of history. The theological implications of this portrait of God are strongly informed by the way in which Acts reads as a work of pastoral theology. The author’s stated purpose in writing Luke—Acts—to build up readers’ faith (Luke 1:4) and perhaps to encourage the late-first-century church’s ongoing mission—discloses that the narrative makes its theological claims as a means of offering pastoral support, encouragement, and maybe even amusement to Christian readers. Various theological statements and storytelling conventions support Luke’s pastoral efforts insofar as they proclaim God’s sure control over all kinds of apparent obstacles or setbacks (such as imprisonments, storms at sea, and even death). Direct claims make a celebratory or doxological statement that God and the dissemination of God’s word are not at the mercy of history or countervailing forces. God’s salvific intentions will be vindicated. The book of Acts insists that some will resist the word of God, authorities will persecute the church, evil spiritual powers will attempt to thwart the gospel (5:1–11; 8:4–5; 13:4–12), and the Jewish people will respond to the gospel in various ways. Yet the theological claims of Acts also insist that history is not out of control, and no powers or circumstances can ultimately thwart God’s overarching intentions (see 5:38–39).

The means by which Acts relates the unfolding work of God in human history also have implications for the narrative’s comprehensive theological outlook. When Acts declares God’s interventions in human affairs, usually these declarations come from characters enmeshed in the story who interpret events in which they participate as directly influenced by God (e.g., 2:14–21; 11:18; 12:11; 14:27; 15:16–10, 14, 28; 27:24). The primary mode by which Acts makes its theological claims, then, is the interpretation offered by God’s people. Naming God’s presence in and influence upon the church’s and world’s affairs is a constitutive aspect of what it means for believers to bear witness. Acts thereby offers its readers a model of theological discourse, that they themselves might interpret events in their own experience with eyes that identify God’s influence and with the confidence that God accomplishes God’s purposes through the efforts and witness of the people of God.

Jesus Christ

Many interpreters have rightly observed that Acts does not offer a uniform or static depiction of Jesus’ nature and significance. The book does not aim to give an exhaustive or systematic account of how Jesus accomplishes God’s purposes, yet it insists that he does. Various sermons delivered in Acts speak about Jesus’ importance in ways that fit the demands of preachers’ particular contexts. The consistent centerpiece in Luke’s overall portrait is that Jesus is the Christ, Israel’s promised Messiah. What exactly it means for Jesus to be Christ is much less explicit. Acts discusses the Christ from various perspectives, including his identity as the prophet like Moses (3:22; 7:37; see Deut. 18:15); his fulfillment of divine promises about a descendant of David (Acts 2:30; 13:23, 32–37); the necessity of his suffering (3:18); and his identity as “Lord” (see especially 10:36), a title used frequently in Acts for both God and Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus represents a particular high point in Acts, because it was a moment of vindication and recognition that prompts Jesus’ followers to declare his exalted status, accomplished by God. Acts regards the resurrection as an act of God that declares who Jesus is: the Christ (2:25–32), one more powerful than death (2:24), the source of salvation and forgiveness of sins (4:10–12; 5:30–31; 10:43; 13:32–39), judge (10:42; 17:30–31), and the pledge of humanity’s future resurrection (23:6). Salvation comes through Jesus—his life, death, resurrection, and exaltation—but Acts does not understand the crucifixion as the central locus of divine redemption or revelation, as do John’s Gospel, Paul’s Epistles, or the book of Hebrews.

Although Jesus ascends out of the physical realm of human history in Acts 1:9, his direct influence persists throughout the narrative. Stephen glimpses the ascended Lord in 7:55, and Jesus speaks to Saul/Paul on at least three occasions: in 9:4–6 (which is followed by Jesus’ communication with Ananias in 9:10–16), in 18:3–10, and in 23:11. Luke also suggests a close though unspecifiable connection between the ascended Jesus and the activity of the Holy Spirit by mentioning Jesus’ role in pouring out the Spirit (2:33; see also Luke 24:49) and by once referring to the Spirit as “the Spirit of Jesus” (16:7).

Jesus’ ongoing relationship to believers also emerges in passages that mention “the name of Jesus” (or “the name of the Lord”). In Jesus’ name people are baptized (2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5), experience healing (5:6; 4:30; 16:18), and receive salvation and forgiveness (2:21; 4:12; 10:43; 22:16). The name of Jesus relates to the church’s proclamation of the word. To speak or act in Jesus’ name is to operate as Christ’s representative, one who bears the power to declare boldly (4:17–18; 5:28; 8:12; 9:15, 27–28; see also Luke 24:47). Finally, part of the church’s witness is to suffer hardship for the sake of this name (Acts 5:41; 9:16, 21:13). These potent associations with Jesus’ name underscore believers’ identification with Jesus and their membership in a community defined by him. As people bound to and empowered by his name, they operate in close relationship to him and continue in the ministry he began during his life. The church’s ministry is Christ’s ministry.

Jesus serves as a model for believers’ ministries in an additional way. Luke describes the public deeds of Peter and Paul in ways that recall aspects of Jesus’ activity in the Gospel of Luke. These literary parallels forge strong associations among these three major figures, suggesting that Peter and Paul’s experiences echo and imitate Jesus’. For example, all three raise people from the dead (Luke 7:11–17; 8:40–56; Acts 9:36–43; 20:27–12) and perform healings that bear similarities in both general terms (Luke 6:17–19; Acts 5:12–16; 19:8–12) and specific details (Luke 5:17–26; Acts 5:1–10; 14:8–19). Likewise, each of them is seized by and encounters rejection from certain Jewish groups (Luke 22:54–71; Acts 4:1–18; 21:27–22:29). This repetition unites Peter’s and Paul’s ministries to Jesus, suggesting that their work is a direct outgrowth or continuation of his, and that God empowers the witness of Jesus’ followers just as God previously empowered Jesus (Acts 10:38).

The Holy Spirit

The activity of the Holy Spirit forms a central piece in the theology of Acts, for people receive divine power through the filling of the Holy Spirit (see the connections between “Spirit” and “power” in Acts 1:8; 10:38; also Luke 1:35; 4:14; 24:49). This power exercises itself in believers’ acts of ministry, enabling them to speak the word of God with boldness (4:31) and wisdom (6:10). The Holy Spirit places people into circumstances that allow
them to bear witness—sometimes suddenly (e.g., 8:29, 39), sometimes as a result of calls issued to communities of believers (e.g., 13:1-4). In this the Spirit repeatedly inaugurates new or renewed opportunities for Christian ministry and community. Both the Gospel of Luke and Acts emphasize that the Spirit serves as the source and effective power of Christians’ spoken and embodied witness (Luke 12:11-12; Acts 4:8, 31). Acts frequently portrays the Spirit clearly leading through communication with people (e.g., 10:19; 16:6-7; 20:23; 21:11), but the narrative does not dwell on precisely how believers experience these messages.

Acts includes strong expressions of the Spirit operating to nurture Christians, as seen in the conclusion of the Pentecost story, where the Spirit’s coming and the sudden increase of believers creates a community of impressive fellowship, unity, and charity (2:41-47). The Spirit’s presence fuels the worship of Jesus’ followers (2:47; 10:46). The Spirit benefits the communal life of the church also in 6:1-6, when the Jerusalem believers address shortcomings in hospitality and justice through the help of people who are “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (compare also the Spirit’s role in accompanying church leaders in 20:28). In a startling passage that implies the Spirit’s vigilant guardianship of the church, Ananias and Sapphira’s corrupt attempt to deceive fellow believers is described as lying to the Spirit and triggers severe consequences (5:3-11). When Peter equates their lying to the church as lying to the Spirit, he suggests that the community of faith mediates the Spirit’s actual presence, and that the Spirit defines the community. Additionally, other close connections between the Spirit and the corporate life of believers come to light when Christians receive and interpret divine leading. Luke describes these occasions of discernment as the church acting in concert with the Spirit (see 13:1-4; 15:28). In one passage (21:3-6), apparently unresolved disagreements about how to interpret the Spirit’s leading still conclude with a moving expression of unity.

Acts regards the Holy Spirit as the same spirit that spoke through Israel’s prophets (4:25; 7:51; 28:25), that accomplished Jesus’ conception through Mary (Luke 1:35), and that empowered Jesus ministry (Luke 3:21-22; 4:1, 14, 18; Acts 10:38). The coming of the Holy Spirit to believers is the result of God’s promise (3:33, 39; also Luke 24:49); it is described as a gift (Acts 2:38; 5:32; 10:48; also Luke 11:13) that is conferred through a spiritual “baptism” (Acts 1:5; 11:16; also Luke 3:16), which decisively signals a person’s entrance into the community of faith. Jesus’ followers sometimes participate in these inaugural bestowals of the Spirit through laying hands upon people (Acts 8:14-17; 9:17; 19:6). Other times, however, the Spirit comes without warning, leaving observers to interpret the occasion as a divine act (10:44-47; 11:15-18; 15:8-9).

In all this the Spirit remains beyond humanity’s ability to contain or exploit, as Simon the magician discovers when he attempts to purchase the power to bestow the Spirit (8:9-24).

The Pentecost narrative of chap. 2 is a foundational depiction of the Spirit in Acts. While the Spirit gives its recipients a newfound ability to manifest miraculous signs (2:2-11), these displays are not the focus of Peter’s Pentecost sermon. The startling ability to speak in various languages permits believers to offer their witness on the Pentecost, but Peter concentrates instead on the Spirit’s role as the source of Christian prophecy, or as the means by which believers can name God’s intervention in the world (2:17-18; see also 19:6).

Drawing from and slightly refashioning the oracle of Joel 2:28-32, Peter proclaims the coming of the Spirit as a new development, as God’s gift to people of all ages, both men and women (10:38; 20:28). The coming of the Spirit—at this point in time, which Peter defines as “in the last days” (Acts 2:17)—heralds the commencement of an era in which salvation is near at hand and the people of God are spiritually empowered to “prophesy,” meaning that they announce this impending salvation as God’s doing. Peter’s sermon provides an example of prophetic speech, as he draws upon the living promises of Scripture to interpret God’s hand at work in the events of the day. From this introductory explanation, Peter moves to speak about Jesus. His proclamation is also prophecy—not in the sense of foretelling future events, but in apprehending God’s involvement in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

The gift and enduring presence of the Holy Spirit, therefore, hardly serve as merely ends in and of themselves. Believers emerge as utterly dependent upon the Spirit for their ability to perform their work as Christ’s witnesses through spoken proclamation and corporate life. Through the ways in which Luke correlates the activity of the Spirit with the activity of God (e.g., 5:3-4, 32), the Spirit stands as a means by which God directly supports and guides Christian life and ministry. The Holy Spirit’s presence and activity are God’s presence and activity.

Acts repeatedly establishes intertwined relationships among the activities of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit (e.g., 2:23; 5:32; 7:55; 10:38; 20:28; cf. Luke 24:49). The book does not delineate these threefold associations with enough detail or precision to suggest an understanding of the Trinity that approximates the terminology and distinctions that Christians would formulate in later centuries. Still the close connections that Acts does posit contributed substantially to the material from which Trinitarian theology would eventually arise.

Eschatology

Characters in Acts understand their location in God’s design as within “the last days” (2:17), insofar as they stand in the period between Jesus’ exaltation and his return. This period, evidenced by the gift of the Spirit and the prophetic proclamation it empowers, permits and calls for repentance prior to the time when God will consummate all things, as reflected in this statement by Peter: “Repent there-fore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah appointed for you, that is, Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through his holy prophets” (3:19-21; see also 5:31). Compared to the Gospel of Luke, Acts mentions events associated with the end of history; nevertheless the Spirit’s active involvement through the course of the narrative steadily reaffirms the Pentecost message that the eschatological age is at hand. Although eschatological convictions hardly dominate the content of Christian preaching in Acts, they are always the assumed precondition of that preaching, the basis of believers’ urgent appeals to turn to God.

When questioned by his followers about the restoration of Israel, Jesus responds, before being taken up into heaven, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority” (1:7). Just after Jesus disappears from their sight, two angels interrupt the onlookers’ idle and speculative staring into space by repeating the promise that Jesus will return (1:10-11). This scene lays a foundation concerning future expectations: Jesus will return at an unknown time. Proclamation in Acts recalls that basic eschatological tenet when preachers describe Jesus’ return as involving humanity’s judgment (10:42; 17:30-31; 24:25; also implied in 2:20-21, 40; 24:15). Acts declares the certainty of Jesus’ return, with no hints about the details or timing of this event. Nothing indicates that this return is either particularly close at hand or substantially delayed. Instead, the perseverance of the word intimates that God’s promises about the future are reliable and securely kept in God’s hands.

Turning to God

Acts employs numerous terms to describe or call for a positive response to
the proclamation of the word, including "repentance," "turning to God" (or to "the Lord"), "belief," and "welcoming [or accepting] the word." Some audiences are moved by proclamation (e.g., 8:12), some by miracle (e.g., 9:35, 42), and some receive the Spirit apparently before they can will themselves to respond (10:44). Varied accounts of conversion or transformation (physical and spiritual) imply that there is no single normative order or experience by which a person's salvation and incorporation into the church occurs.

Acts consistently states that salvation comes through Jesus (see 4:32). While this salvation includes forgiveness of sins, healing, and belonging in the community of faith, the book ultimately refrains from offering an exhaustive definition of salvation. Correspondingly, Jesus' followers exhort different hearers to embrace God's salvific intentions in different ways.

Proclamation to Jewish audiences in Jerusalem throughout Acts 2-7 highlights their complicity in Jesus' rejection and execution. These people are exhorted to recognize their error and acknowledge Jesus as the Christ and Savior sent by God. Other Jews hear that Jesus brings a freedom from sins that the law could not accomplish (13:38-39). Later in Acts the gospel seeks to move Gentiles from their idolatry (14:11-18), ignorance (17:29-31), or bondage to Satan (26:17-18) toward recognition of God's work in Christ. When the imprisoned Paul speaks to Jewish assemblies in Acts 22-26, he contends that, through the gospel, God has brought salvation to Gentiles and reaffirmed the Jewish hope of resurrection from the dead. No uniform vocabulary or manner of appeal encompasses the whole range of salvation and its benefits, as Acts presents it.

Gentiles, Israel, and the Promises of God

The status of Gentiles in Christian communities—both the possibility and the conditions of these people's inclusion—constitutes a major concern of Acts. The importance of this topic is clearly sig-
naled by the long description of Peter's encounter with Cornelius (10:1-11:18), the decision reached in Jerusalem about not impeding Gentiles converts (15:1-35), Paul's repeated frustrations with unresponsive Jewish audiences (13:36-47; 18:5-6; 28:25-28), and Paul's attempts to convince Jewish audiences of his call to evangelize Gentiles (22:21; 26:14-18).

Paul's commission by Jesus to "bring my [i.e. Jesus'] name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel" (9:15) and Peter's recognition that "God shows no partiality" (10:34; cf. 15:9)—a truth that James locates in Scripture (15:14-19)—are pivotal landmarks in the theological cartography of Acts, even as they recall an older promise made early in Luke's Gospel, that Jesus will be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your [i.e., God's] people Israel" (Luke 2:32).

The enthusiasm for this new direction in the journey, however, is offset by anxieties concerning the results of missionary efforts to Gentiles (e.g., 21:20-22) and by diminishing returns from the word's ongoing proclamation to Jewish audiences. Although incredible numbers of Jews respond to the gospel in 2:41 and 4:4 (and they remain part of the church, as seen in 21:20), momentous scenes such as these quickly become exceptions to a familiar pattern of rejection. When Paul inducts a group of Roman Jews, he ignores their resistance to his message as a reiteration of the recall of the Israelite forefathers (28:25-27, cited Isa. 6:9-10). This idea of a proclamation of good news that is in continuity with Judaism yet manages to divide Israel recalls the foreboding statement from the beginning of Jesus' life, that Jesus "is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed" (Luke 2:34). The story of Acts represents one way in which first-century Christians sought to make sense of the painful and potentially embarrassing gradual cleaving of Christianity and Judaism. From Luke's perspective, some Jews' disaffection refusal to embrace the gospel must be part of God's plan; at the same time, other Jews do respond positively, and God never gives up on Israel.

The Church and Its Leaders

The structure and activity of the church in Acts is dynamic, insofar as energy and variation characterize the communities that God's word creates and empowers in its service. Groups of believers organize themselves and make decisions in numerous ways, usually as circumstances require. The church does not act or insist upon its own authority, but exists to participate in the journeys led by God's word.

A measure of ambivalence accompanies Luke's treatment of the twelve apostles. The replacement of Judas (1:12-26) reaffirms that the constituting of the Twelve signifies God's intentions concerning Israel's place in God's kingdom (see Luke 22:28-30). More obvious, these men provide noteworthy yet still un differentiated leadership to the church in the first half of Acts, which connotes their high degree of authority (see 2:42-43; 4:33; 5:12; 6:1-6; 8:14-17; 9:26-27; 15:1-6, 22-23). But other parts of Acts attenuate the sense of the apostles' uniqueness, thereby suggesting that the Twelve's early prominence implies neither their centrality nor their indispensability. For example, although Peter emerges as the chief apostolic figure in Acts 1-12, his sudden disappearance from the story in 12:17, followed only by a brief cameo in 15:7-12, reminds readers that his efforts are not essential for the word to "gain adherents" (12:24). Moreover, when other characters arise and participate in the ministry of the word in ways that resemble the apostles' work (e.g., Stephen's and Philip's Spirit-led deeds in Acts 6-8; Ananias's call to lay hands on Saul in 9:10-19; Paul's ministry in chaps. 13-28; elders appointed to oversee new churches in 14:23 and 20:17, 28; Priscilla and Aquila's ability to instruct in 18:26), they reveal that the apostles do not necessarily exercise exclusive leadership functions. The apostles' primary role is to serve as Jesus' appointed emissaries, just like other believers in Acts.

Earlier in Acts readers find subtle acknowledgment of and support for women involved in the leadership of the early churches. Jesus' mother and additional women huddle with the apostles and other followers just after Jesus' ascension (1:14; cf. Luke 8:1-3; 23:49, 55-56), and the Joel citation in Peter's Pentecost address prominently notes that God gives the Spirit to men and women (Acts 2:18). As the story progresses, however, little more is said about women's roles. Although a handful of snapshots of potentially influential churchwomen does the narrative (e.g., Tabitha/Dorcas in 9:36-41; Priscilla in 18:2-3, 18-19, 24-26; Lydia in 16:13-15, 40; Damaris in 17:34; Philip's four daughters in 21:8-9), Acts discloses very little about them or the countless other women who—as other historical sources, including Paul's Letters, reveal—exercised public leadership among the first generations of Christians. Because of this relative silence, Acts falls short of clearly commending women's ecclesiastical leadership. At the same time, the statement of Acts 2:18, the work of Priscilla, the pattern in Luke—Acts of God empowering various people for prophecy and service, and the assertion that "God shows no partiality" (10:34), all create an ingrained, weighty counterclaim to an otherwise persistent focus on men and their activities. Since the word of God perseveres, and since the Holy Spirit empowers both men and women to announce this word of salvation, one well concludes that the bold witness and effective leadership of Christian women should also rightly persevere, despite the unbalanced presentation of Acts.

The Witness and Life of the Church

The structure and leadership of Christian communities are only incidental concerns in Acts. The narrative speaks with a much louder voice about the identity and role of believers: they are witnesses to Jesus and his resurrection. In a programmatic
statement in Acts 1:8, Jesus declares that his followers will receive power from the Holy Spirit and will be his witnesses. Language of witness, bear witness, and testify appears frequently in Acts, stressing that the church is to make public affirmation about its experiences concerning Jesus Christ. The focus of this witnessing activity consistently is Christ, and the forensic character of the notion of testimony implies that Christian witness involves identifying and confirming truths that have already been manifested, not possessing secret knowledge or specialized abilities. The prophetic dimensions of the Holy Spirit’s work, reiterated by Peter in 2:16–21, empower this kind of witness.

The witness of Christian communities assumes many forms in Acts, as believers engage in evangelism, healing, worship, prayer, table fellowship, compassion, and generous sharing of resources. Even prior to Pentecost the company of Jesus’ followers prays together (1:14), and right after the arrival of the Spirit the narrative depicts a corporate life marked by numerous practices (2:42–47). Although the hyperbole in this and another (4:32–37) sketch of the believing community borders on unrealistic idealism, still Acts refuses to insinuate that the church forms a perfect community. The tale of Ananias and Sapphira’s deception in 5:1–11 counterbalances the immediately preceding episode of 4:32–37 and declares that the “church” (the first appearance of this term in Luke–Acts comes in 5:11, directly in the wake of Ananias and Sapphira’s deaths) should not expect to be without faults (see other potentially embarrassing behavior in 6:1; 15:38–40). Taken as a whole, 4:32–5:11 reveals the best and worst of the church’s potential—charity and justice on one hand, hypocrisy and corruption on the other. Likewise, even though Christians exist as God’s agents, they are often slow to discern God’s work in their midst (see 10:9–17; 12:11–15).

The Church in the Roman Empire
As the word of God journeys and impacts human societies from Jerusalem, into surrounding lands, and ultimately into Rome, several scenes make suggestions about the cultural implications of the gospel. Episodes involving various members of the Jewish and Roman cultural elites (e.g., the council of Jewish elders and chief priests, Gamaliel, Sergius Paulus, magistrates in Philippi, Gallo of Achaia, officials in Ephesus, Claudius Lysias, Felix, Festus, and Agrippa) and related controversies permit Acts to address the matter of Christianity’s relationship to institutions of political authority and the wider Roman imperial atmosphere. Acts sets the stage for a precarious relationship, for almost all of the narrated encounters between Christians and these high-ranking figures come as a result of serious accusations leveled against the believers. The proclamation of the word does not leave a cultural system untouched or unchallenged, and guardians of a culture often retaliate (e.g., 9:1–2; 13:50; 16:19–21; 17:9–10; 18:12–13; 19:19–20; 26:30–32; 28:17–19). At the same time, the book scarcely suggests that the gospel is harmless to the Roman order. Human political authority is far from absolute in light of this gospel (see 5:29; 12:21–23; 16:35–39), and the word of God, by persevering despite frequent and concentrated attempts to restrict those who proclaim it, refuses to acquiesce ultimately to the dictates and priorities of the world’s sociopolitical structures. While Acts comes across as much less aggressive toward the imperial order than the book of Revelation does, nevertheless it insists that the word of God will not yield to constraints of political power that attempt to obstruct it. Instead, the word can manipulate those structures to serve its own purposes.

Paul’s extended detention under the Romans in chaps. 21–28 subtly demonstrates that the physical and social restrictions of Roman incarceration actually open up possibilities for him to speak about the gospel to new, sometimes influential audiences (e.g., 23:1–10; 24:10–26; 26:1–29) and to minister to others (e.g., 28:7–10, 13b–14a), as long as God continues to guide his steps (see 23:11). Paul’s ability to continue his efforts as a witness to Christ, even while held captive under imperial authority, intimates that God is able to manipulate and incapacitate Rome’s ostensibly powerful to limit the ministry of the word. The final verse of Acts, underscoring Paul’s freedom to proclaim the kingdom of God “with all boldness and without hindrance,” even while captive, likewise suggests that the word of God is capable of making use of or overcoming mechanisms of sociopolitical control. Acts does not depict an outright revolutionary gospel, but a gospel that will find venues for its proclamation despite any forces—political or otherwise—that threaten to restrict it.

Bibliography
Theological Bible Commentary

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