



TEACH THE TEXT
COMMENTARY SERIES

Acts

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David E. Garland, *Acts*
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To my beloved wife, Diana R. Garland
1950–2015

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Welcome to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

Why another commentary series? That was the question the general editors posed when Baker Books asked us to produce this series. Is there something that we can offer to pastors and teachers that is not currently being offered by other commentary series, or that can be offered in a more helpful way? After carefully researching the needs of pastors who teach the text on a weekly basis, we concluded that yes, more can be done; the Teach the Text Commentary Series (TTCS) is carefully designed to fill an important gap.

The technicality of modern commentaries often overwhelms readers with details that are tangential to the main purpose of the text. Discussions of source and redaction criticism, as well as detailed surveys of secondary literature, seem far removed from preaching and teaching the Word. Rather than wade through technical discussions, pastors often turn to devotional commentaries, which may contain exegetical weaknesses, misuse the Greek and Hebrew languages, and lack hermeneutical sophistication. There is a need for a commentary that utilizes the best of biblical scholarship but also presents the material in a clear, concise, attractive, and user-friendly format.

This commentary is designed for that purpose—to provide a ready reference for the exposition of the biblical text, giving easy access to information that a pastor needs to communicate the text effectively. To that end, the commentary

is divided into carefully selected preaching units (with carefully regulated word counts both in the passage as a whole and in each subsection). Pastors and teachers engaged in weekly preparation thus know that they will be reading approximately the same amount of material on a week-by-week basis.

Each passage begins with a concise summary of the central message, or “Big Idea,” of the passage and a list of its main themes. This is followed by a more detailed interpretation of the text, including the literary context of the passage, historical background material, and interpretive insights. While drawing on the best of biblical scholarship, this material is clear, concise, and to the point. Technical material is kept to a minimum, with endnotes pointing the reader to more detailed discussion and additional resources.

A second major focus of this commentary is on the preaching and teaching process itself. Few commentaries today help the pastor/teacher move from the meaning of the text to its effective communication. Our goal is to bridge this gap. In addition to interpreting the text in the “Understanding the Text” section, each unit contains a “Teaching the Text” section and an “Illustrating the Text” section. The teaching section points to the key theological themes of the passage and ways to communicate these themes to today’s audiences. The illustration section provides ideas and examples for retaining the interest of hearers and connecting the message to daily life.

The creative format of this commentary arises from our belief that the Bible is not just a record of God’s dealings in the past but is the living Word of God, “alive and active” and “sharper than any double-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12). Our prayer is that this commentary will help to unleash that transforming power for the glory of God.

The General Editors

Introduction to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

This series is designed to provide a ready reference for teaching the biblical text, giving easy access to information that is needed to communicate a passage effectively. To that end, the commentary is carefully divided into units that are faithful to the biblical authors' ideas and of an appropriate length for teaching or preaching.

The following standard sections are offered in each unit.

1. *Big Idea*. For each unit the commentary identifies the primary theme, or “Big Idea,” that drives both the passage and the commentary.
2. *Key Themes*. Together with the Big Idea, the commentary addresses in bullet-point fashion the key ideas presented in the passage.
3. *Understanding the Text*. This section focuses on the exegesis of the text and includes several sections.
 - a. *The Text in Context*. Here the author gives a brief explanation of how the unit fits into the flow of the text around it, including reference to the rhetorical strategy of the book and the unit's contribution to the purpose of the book.

- b. *Outline/Structure*. For some literary genres (e.g., epistles), a brief exegetical outline may be provided to guide the reader through the structure and flow of the passage.
 - c. *Historical and Cultural Background*. This section addresses historical and cultural background information that may illuminate a verse or passage.
 - d. *Interpretive Insights*. This section provides information needed for a clear understanding of the passage. The intention of the author is to be highly selective and concise rather than exhaustive and expansive.
 - e. *Theological Insights*. In this very brief section the commentary identifies a few carefully selected theological insights about the passage.
4. *Teaching the Text*. Under this second main heading the commentary offers guidance for teaching the text. In this section the author lays out the main themes and applications of the passage. These are linked carefully to the Big Idea and are represented in the Key Themes.
 5. *Illustrating the Text*. At this point in the commentary the writers partner with a team of pastor/teachers to provide suggestions for relevant and contemporary illustrations from current culture, entertainment, history, the Bible, news, literature, ethics, biography, daily life, medicine, and over forty other categories. They are designed to spark creative thinking for preachers and teachers and to help them design illustrations that bring alive the passage's key themes and message.

Acknowledgments

The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ as recorded in the Gospels have epochal consequence for the salvation of the world, but only Luke of the four evangelists decided that it was also significant to cover the continuation of Christ's work in the Spirit's guiding of the growth of the early church. Studying Acts is not simply an academic, historical exercise so that one can trace the stops of Paul's various journeys on an ancient map. It informs the present life and tasks of the church that continues to carry out Christ's commission to be his witnesses in a world that is often hostile to the gospel. The study of Scripture is always spiritually edifying and challenging, but this project was especially so for me because it was written during my wife's valiant battle with cancer, which she lost. It was also written while I served as interim provost of Baylor University. I am grateful to all who walked alongside us during this time, whose names are too many to mention. I am also grateful to the Regents of Baylor University who, before she died, named the Baylor School of Social Work, of which she was founding dean, in her honor as The Diana R. Garland School of Social Work.

I appreciate the editing of James Korsmo of Baker Books. I am very indebted to my research assistant, Tia Kim, for her invaluable assistance and proofing skill in the production of this volume. She was particularly indispensable in the final editing when I served as interim president of Baylor University. I would also like to thank Mia Casey for her great help during this time. Reading the manifold trials of the various figures in Acts reinforced my view that we are all "interim" in this life and that God always has others ready to take up the baton for the next lap in God's story.

Abbreviations

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	2 Chron.	2 Chronicles	Dan.	Daniel
Exod.	Exodus	Ezra	Ezra	Hosea	Hosea
Lev.	Leviticus	Neh.	Nehemiah	Joel	Joel
Num.	Numbers	Esther	Esther	Amos	Amos
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Job	Job	Obad.	Obadiah
Josh.	Joshua	Ps(s).	Psalm(s)	Jon.	Jonah
Judg.	Judges	Prov.	Proverbs	Mic.	Micah
Ruth	Ruth	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Nah.	Nahum
1 Sam.	1 Samuel	Song	Song of Songs	Hab.	Habakkuk
2 Sam.	2 Samuel	Isa.	Isaiah	Zeph.	Zephaniah
1 Kings	1 Kings	Jer.	Jeremiah	Hag.	Haggai
2 Kings	2 Kings	Lam.	Lamentations	Zech.	Zechariah
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles	Ezek.	Ezekiel	Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	Eph.	Ephesians	Heb.	Hebrews
Mark	Mark	Phil.	Philippians	James	James
Luke	Luke	Col.	Colossians	1 Pet.	1 Peter
John	John	1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians	2 Pet.	2 Peter
Acts	Acts	2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians	1 John	1 John
Rom.	Romans	1 Tim.	1 Timothy	2 John	2 John
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians	2 Tim.	2 Timothy	3 John	3 John
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians	Titus	Titus	Jude	Jude
Gal.	Galatians	Philem.	Philemon	Rev.	Revelation

General

cf. confer, compare v(v). verse(s)

Ancient Texts and Versions

LXX Septuagint

Modern Versions

ASV	American Standard Version	NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
ESV	English Standard Version		Version
NIV	New International Version	RSV	Revised Standard Version

Apocrypha and Septuagint

2 Esd.	2 Esdras	Jdt.	Judith
1 Macc.	1 Maccabees	Tob.	Tobit
2 Macc.	2 Maccabees		

Old Testament Pseudepigrapha

2 Bar.	2 Baruch	Jub.	Jubilees
1 En.	1 Enoch (Ethiopic Apocalypse)		

Dead Sea Scrolls

1QS Rule of the Community

Mishnah and Talmud

<i>b.</i>	Babylonian Talmud	<i>Nid.</i>	<i>Niddah</i>
<i>m.</i>	Mishnah	<i>Pesab.</i>	<i>Pesahim</i>
<i>'Abot</i>	<i>'Abot</i>	<i>Shabb.</i>	<i>Shabbat</i>
<i>Naz.</i>	<i>Nazir</i>	<i>Sanh.</i>	<i>Sanhedrin</i>

Other Rabbinic Works

Exod. Rab. *Exodus Rabbah*

Apostolic Fathers

1 Clem.	1 Clement	Did.	Didache
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New Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

<i>Acts Paul</i>	<i>Acts of Paul</i>	<i>Acts Pet.</i>	<i>Acts of Peter</i>
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Greek and Latin Works

Apuleius		Lucian	
<i>Metam.</i>	<i>Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass)</i>	<i>Eunuch.</i>	<i>The Eunuch</i>
Aristotle		Ovid	
<i>Eth. nic.</i>	<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i>	<i>Metam.</i>	<i>Metamorphoses</i>
Cicero		Pausanias	
<i>Div.</i>	<i>De divinatione</i>	<i>Descr.</i>	<i>Description of Greece</i>
<i>Leg.</i>	<i>De legibus</i>	Philo	
Demosthenes		<i>Decal.</i>	<i>On the Decalogue</i>
<i>Con.</i>	<i>Against Conon</i>	<i>Drunkenness</i>	<i>On Drunkenness</i>
Eusebius		Plato	
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	<i>Ecclesiastical History</i>	<i>Apol.</i>	<i>Apology of Socrates</i>
Homer		Suetonius	
<i>Od.</i>	<i>Odyssey</i>	<i>Claud.</i>	<i>Claudius</i>
Irenaeus		<i>Nero</i>	<i>Nero</i>
<i>Haer.</i>	<i>Against Heresies</i>	<i>Tit.</i>	<i>Titus</i>
John Chrysostom		Tacitus	
<i>Hom. Act.</i>	<i>Homilies on Acts</i>	<i>Ann.</i>	<i>Annals</i>
Josephus		<i>Hist.</i>	<i>Histories</i>
<i>Ant.</i>	<i>Jewish Antiquities</i>	Tertullian	
<i>J.W.</i>	<i>Jewish War</i>	<i>Apol.</i>	<i>Apology</i>
Justin Martyr		<i>Mart.</i>	<i>To the Martyrs</i>
<i>1 Apol.</i>	<i>First Apology</i>	<i>Praescr.</i>	<i>Prescription against Heretics</i>
<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogue with Trypho</i>	Xenophon	
Juvenal		<i>Mem.</i>	<i>Memorabilia</i>
<i>Sat.</i>	<i>Satires</i>		

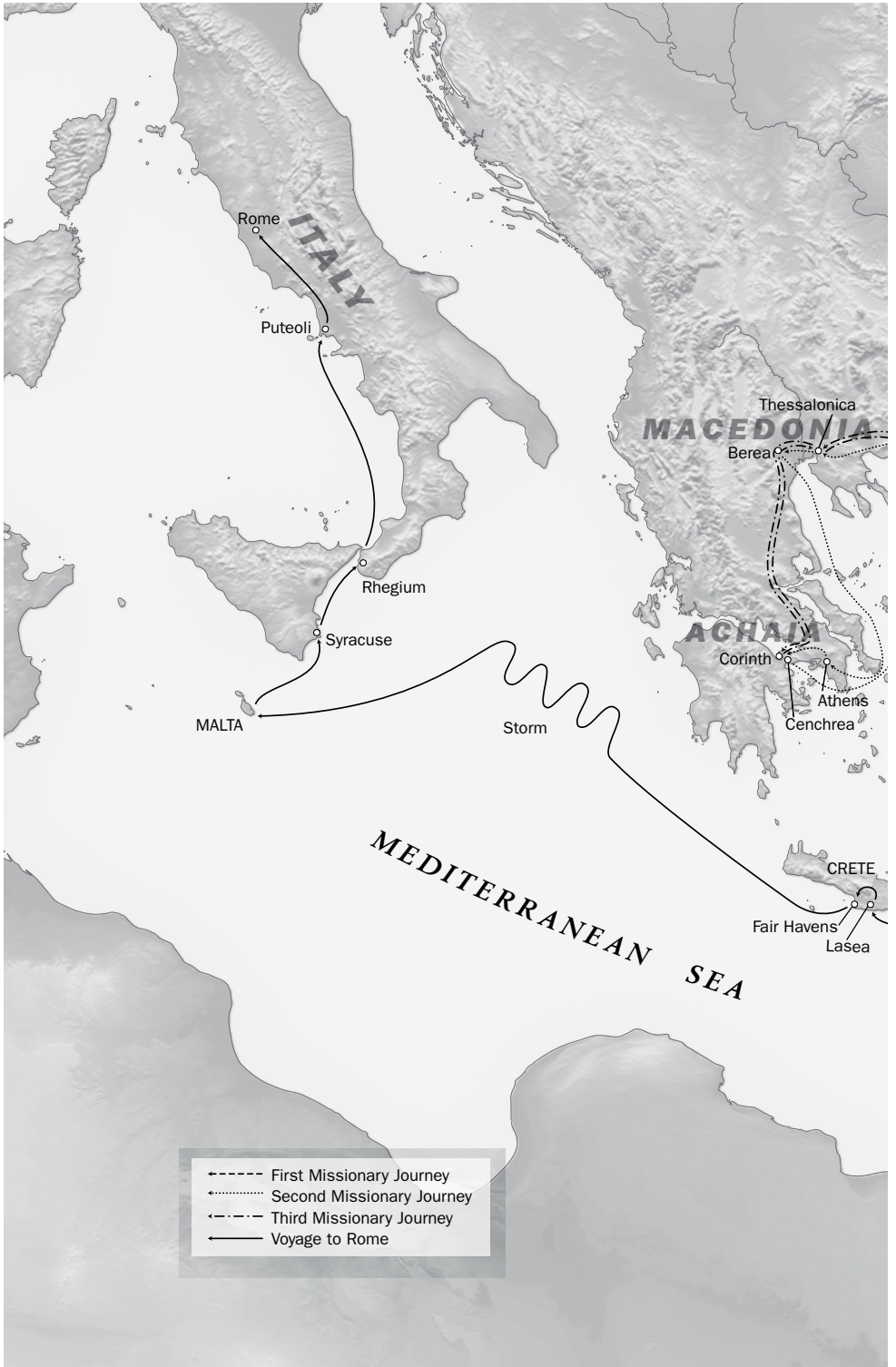
Papyri and Inscriptions

<i>CIG</i>	<i>Corpus Inscriptionum Graecarum</i> . Edited by August Boeckh. 4 vols. Berlin, 1828–77
<i>IG</i>	<i>Inscriptiones Graecae</i> . Berlin: Reimer, 1871–
<i>P.Oxy.</i>	<i>Oxyrhynchus papyri</i>
<i>SIG</i>	<i>Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum</i> . Edited by Wilhelm Dittenberger. 4 vols. 3rd ed. Leipzig: Hirzel, 1915–24

Maps



Early Travels of Philip, Peter, and Paul



Paul's Missionary Journeys and Trip to Rome

David E. Garland, Acts

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Introduction to Acts

Luke recounts in his second volume the development of the early church after Jesus's ascension. The connection between the Gospel of Luke and Acts easily can be overlooked because, in the order of the canon, Acts falls between the cracks of the Four Gospels and Paul's Letters. The Gospel and Acts can be read with profit quite independently of each other, but it is best to read them in tandem to see the full theological picture that Luke intends to present. Luke is not intent on merely chronicling the past. He recounts and sorts out the past events, "the things that have been fulfilled among us" (Luke 1:1), so that they can inform the present. Acts most often is mined by those seeking models of authentic and vibrant Christianity. But Luke does not intend to provide models of leadership organization, for example, to be duplicated undeviatingly by contemporary churches. He intends to show how God worked in and through the early church to accomplish his will so that Christians, who are often quite powerless according to the world's standards, may understand better that God will continue to work in the world in ways that are mysterious and paradoxical but always powerful.

Luke's purpose in writing, then, is primarily theological, and this historical narrative is undergirded by a theological vision that intends to demonstrate how the epochal significance of Jesus's crucifixion and resurrection and ascension is manifested in the life and preaching of the church. Luke clothes his theological purpose with a history so entertaining that readers sometimes neglect the theology. Acts is not a humdrum registry of events. The story of the gospel's spread throughout the Mediterranean world, beginning in Jerusalem, bristles with enthralling action:

Where within eighty pages will be found such a varied series of exciting events—trials, riots, persecutions, escapes, martyrdoms, voyages, shipwrecks,

rescues—set in that amazing panorama of the ancient world—Jerusalem, Antioch, Philippi, Corinth, Athens, Ephesus, Rome? And with such scenery and settings—temples, courts, prisons, deserts, ships, seas, barracks, theaters? Has any opera such variety? A bewildering range of scenes and actions passes before the eye of the historian. And in them all he sees the providential hand that has made and guided this great movement for the salvation of mankind.¹

The history is not intended to be exhaustive. Every event and every character that contributed to the remarkable growth of the Way cannot be covered. The narrator reports, “Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles” (2:43). But besides the miracle at Pentecost, only one other miracle, the healing of the lame man (3:1–11), is narrated during these first days of the dramatic Christian advance. Luke intends to show what typically happened. The same is true for the speeches that pepper the text. They vary according to the different occasions but are intended to provide typical examples of the preaching to Jews and gentiles and unveil the scriptural and theological foundations of Christian preaching. The upshot of Luke’s selection of events is that his audience should be able to see where and how they fit in the panorama of God’s actions to bring salvation to the world through Jesus Christ.

Authorship

The prologues to Luke and Acts indicate a connection between the two works and that they derive from the same author writing with the same purpose. The ending of the Gospel also looks ahead to what happens in Acts. Jesus tells the disciples that the Scriptures foretell that “repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47 [cf. Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31]). The Gospel ends with the disciples staying “continually at the temple, praising God” (Luke 24:53), but they cannot stay there indefinitely if they are to be witnesses to the ends of the earth (Luke 24:48; Acts 1:8). They obey Jesus’s command to stay in the city until they are “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). That promise is fulfilled in the opening narrative of Acts, and the Holy Spirit thrusts them out into the world. Acts recounts the ascension of Jesus (Acts 1:9–11) from a new and different perspective from what appears at the end of Luke (Luke 24:50–53) to emphasize that it launches a new epoch as the gospel will mushroom from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth until Christ returns.

I have used “Luke” to refer to the author of these two works in accordance with the tradition that has long associated this double work with Luke, a companion of Paul (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24). But the author does not identify himself. The switch from third-person narration to the first-person plural in Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–21:18; 27:1–28:16, now commonly dubbed the

“we sections,” emerges and then vanishes in such a random manner that it is unlikely that these sections were added simply to make the sea voyages more exciting. Contrary to the argument of some, these sections are not simply a conventional literary device used in travel narratives. They are meant to convey the author’s personal experience as one of Paul’s occasional fellow travelers.² The narrator of the “we sections” is differentiated from Paul’s other traveling companions who are specifically mentioned: Silas/Silvanus, Timothy, Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius (of Derbe), Tychicus, and Trophimus. Luke is therefore the most likely candidate and would have been known by Theophilus and his original audience so that he did not need to identify himself.³

We know little more about Luke. From his works we can discern that he is thoroughly versed in the Scriptures. In the opening chapters of the Gospel he adopts the style of the Greek Old Testament. He is also at home in the Greco-Roman culture. The preface to Luke “indicates that he was aware of literary customs and self-consciously intended to enter the world of letters.”⁴ In my view, he was probably a Jew, which would have given him greater authority as an interpreter of the traditions of Jesus, Paul, and Christian history for the wider church.⁵ It is possible that he was the unnamed brother famous for proclaiming the gospel in all the churches (2 Cor. 8:18).

Date

Dating a work like Luke-Acts is a highly speculative endeavor. Acts would have been written sometime after the appointment of Festus as procurator (AD 59/60) and before the work is cited by others in the second century. Three viable options for its dating have been proposed: (1) before AD 64, which might explain the abrupt ending; (2) between AD 70 and 94, assuming Luke’s dependence on Mark as a source for his Gospel; and (3) between AD 95 and 100, assuming Luke’s dependence on Josephus. It is widely held that Luke used Mark as one of the sources he mentions in his prologue (Luke 1:1–3). Mark was written probably in the late 60s or early 70s, near the end or immediately after the Jewish revolt against Rome. Luke-Acts would have been written after Mark’s Gospel had circulated, so the second option is most commonly argued. It is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down the timing more precisely. The same applies to where this work was written and its intended audience. Solid evidence for identifying its provenance is wanting.

Purpose

If one believes that Luke-Acts is a unified whole, then it follows that Luke considered the story of Jesus to be incomplete without the story of his church. The second volume follows up on Jesus’s ministry, death, and resurrection with

the story of the witness to the gospel after Jesus was taken up into heaven. But why does Luke, writing in the 70s or later, end his account in the 60s? Numerous proposals have attempted to ascertain Luke's purpose in writing this history. Only a few will be mentioned here.⁶

1. The promise of the extension of the gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (1:8) suggests that Luke is concerned with the geographical progress of the gospel. Acts is *not* the story of how the gospel got to Rome. Luke only tells us how Paul got to Rome, since Christians are already in the city and come to greet him (28:14–15). Rome is not “the ends of the earth;” it is the heart of the Roman Empire as Jerusalem is the heart of Judaism. The open-ended nature of the conclusion of Acts suggests that Luke envisions the gospel expanding well beyond Rome. The story, therefore, does not ultimately conclude in Rome but remains open-ended.

2. Luke may be trying to make the case that Christianity should have legal protection from Roman authorities. In Paul's various trial scenes he is found innocent of all the charges brought against him by his malicious opponents (25:8, 18–20, 25; 26:30–32). These scenes make it clear that Christianity is not the latest contrivance of mischief from the East or an aberrant sect of antisocial troublemakers. Christians are law-abiding citizens like Paul, and Christianity is the true fulfillment of Israel's hopes.

The last quarter of Acts deals with Paul's arrest, defense, and arrival in Rome. Even though Paul's defense before Roman officials dominates, Acts was not written to be Paul's defense before official Rome, nor is it written primarily to local authorities as a defense of Christianity. Acts is intended for the church, not the outside world. Vast amounts of Luke-Acts would be totally unintelligible and uninteresting to a non-Christian trying to determine if the Christian faith deserved the same tolerance and legal freedom as that proffered to official Judaism (cf. Gallio's and Festus's reactions to the disputes between Jews and Christians [18:14–15; 26:24]). Theophilus, to whom Luke-Acts is dedicated, is not a high Roman official; he is a Christian, since Luke states his intention to confirm the certainty of the things that Theophilus already “[has] been taught” (Luke 1:4), expressed with a Greek verb (*katēcheō*) that is used in Christian literature only in reference to theological issues. It is most likely that Theophilus is the benefactor who provided the support for the publication of this double work.

Luke primarily has Christian readers like Theophilus in mind. The account of the various trials that Paul endures reveals to these readers the truth of Paul's statement “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (14:22). They also show that even the powerful Roman Empire and the antagonistic power brokers in the various cities that Paul visits are powerless to stop the progress of the gospel.

3. Luke notes that Jesus told the parable of the minas to correct the mistaken belief that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately (Luke 19:11 [cf. 17:20–21; 21:8]). Some suggest that this concern is the primary one that Luke seeks to address. In Acts, after Jesus’s resurrection, the disciples ask whether it is now that he is going to restore the kingdom to Israel. Jesus tells them that it is not for them to know the times or seasons (1:6–7). After Jesus’s ascension, angels scold the disciples for gazing into the heavens when they needed to be obeying Jesus’s command and preparing to bear witness to the gospel (1:10–11). Since Luke writes a history of the early church with a commission to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, he expects the church to be around for a while. But he is not seeking to encourage a church disappointed by the delay of the end-time (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13–5:11; 2 Pet. 3:2–13). The narrative teaches Christians that they are obligated to proclaim Christ to the ends of the earth, wherever the Spirit leads them, until the end of time, whenever that might be.

4. In my view, Luke is primarily interested in showing that Christ’s church embodies the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises and the hopes of Israel.⁷ His purpose is not so much to encourage Jews to become Christians as to explain to those who are already Christians why so many Jews have not become believers. Luke conveys his view of Israel’s status through narrative and speeches, while Paul states his view more directly in a letter, the Letter to the Romans. Paul reminds his readers, “Theirs is the adoption to sonship; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah” (Rom. 9:4–5). Luke underscores this great heritage in the beginning of his Gospel by asserting that promises God made to Israel concerning the Messiah have been realized in the coming of Jesus and his forerunner John the Baptist (Luke 1:67–79; 2:29–35).⁸ In writing his history, Luke answers the same questions that Paul raises in Romans 9–11: If the promises were intended for Israel and Jesus was the Jews’ Messiah, why do so many Jews not believe and why is the church now dominated by gentiles? If ethnic Jews have not become Christians, what does that mean about the identity of Israel? Do nonbelieving Jews still constitute “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16)?

Paul’s response is that not all Israelites belong to Israel (Rom. 9:6). Only a remnant that has not persisted in unbelief will be saved (Rom. 9:27). Peter says essentially the same thing in his speech when he reminds his Jewish audience of Moses’s prophecy, “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from their people” (Acts 3:22–23). Paul issues a similar warning to worshipers in the synagogue: “Take

care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you” (Acts 13:40). But every time the gospel is preached to Jews, it creates a divided response. Jesus experienced a similar response to his ministry, a situation that he elaborated on in the parable of the sower (Luke 8:4–8, 11–15). In Acts, the preaching of the gospel meets with neither wholesale repentance nor wholesale rejection. At key points (13:46–47; 18:6; 28:25–28), however, Paul announces that the rejection of the gospel by the Jews entails that he will turn to the gentiles, who will respond. The Acts narrative pictures what Paul states had already happened when he wrote Romans. The Jews’ stumbling has resulted in salvation being offered to the gentiles and their acceptance of it (Rom. 11:11). This situation does not mean that God has now abandoned Israel and moved on to a new people. In the Acts narrative, Paul continues to return to the synagogue to preach the gospel, but he soberly recognizes that those Jews who reject it do not consider themselves “worthy of eternal life” (13:46).

When Luke writes, Christianity has separated from Judaism and from the temple, which already has been destroyed by the Romans after the Jewish revolt. Christians are now even more clearly distinguished from Judaism as members of “the Way” (9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). Luke’s purpose in Acts is to show that those Jews and gentiles who believe in Jesus are the real people of God who follow the way of God (18:24–26). The response of faith to what God has done in Christ is what now characterizes God’s people, not their ethnic birthright or obedience to Jewish traditions.

Luke does not present the church as a new, replacement Israel composed of gentiles who now supplant the old people of God in salvation history. It is important to recognize that Acts does not depict Jews as a whole rejecting the gospel. The gospel meets with success among many Jews (5:14; 6:7; 13:47; 18:8; 21:20; 28:24 [cf. 4:21; 5:26]). For Luke, this success is vital if the prophecy of Scripture that Israel was to be a light to the nations (Gen. 12:3; Isa. 12:4; 42:6; 49:6; Ezek. 47:22–23) was to be fulfilled. Two Old Testament passages are central for Luke’s theological purpose. Paul cites Isaiah 49:6, “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth” (13:47 [cf. Luke 2:32; Acts 26:23]). This quotation cites the reason God chose and made Israel—namely, for a special task, not for a special status. James cites Amos 9:11–12: “‘After this I will return and rebuild David’s fallen tent. Its ruins I will rebuild, and I will restore it, that the rest of mankind may seek the Lord, even all the Gentiles who bear my name, says the Lord, who does these things’—things known from long ago” (15:16–18). This quotation implies that Israel will be restored first, and through a restored Israel the gospel will be taken to the gentiles.

Luke portrays the Christian faith as the reconstruction of David’s fallen tent, Israel’s restoration. It begins as a popular grassroots movement in Jerusalem.

Many Jews are won to the Lord at Pentecost and return to their homelands with the gospel. Even many priests become believers (6:7). Early resistance comes from the temple hierarchy, who, in collusion with the Romans, killed Jesus, the Messiah, but the faith continues to grow among Jews. Persecution in Jerusalem after Stephen's stoning leads to the gospel moving out to and being accepted by Samaritans, regarded by Jews as half Jews at best. Then, it includes an Ethiopian eunuch, someone disqualified by temple Judaism. Through the preaching of Peter, Cornelius and his household, gentile God-worshippers on the fringe of Judaism, believe and receive the Holy Spirit. Through the witness of Paul, the gospel draws in pagans such as the Philippian jailer and his household, who had no interest whatsoever in Judaism.

The obliteration of national, ethnic, and ritual boundaries meets with resistance from both some Christian Jews in Jerusalem and many nonbelieving Jews throughout the Diaspora. The issue is settled for Christians at the Jerusalem Council: gentiles do not need to become Jews in order to be saved, but they cannot remain idolaters (15:5–32). The narrative also shows that Jews do not need to abandon their Jewish heritage when they become Christians. The continued negative Jewish reaction to the gospel and the inclusion of gentiles, however, is part of a long story, which Stephen's speech spotlights (7:2–53): rebellious Jews have consistently resisted God's purposes throughout their history.

The narrative trajectory shows that only after Israel has heard and responded to the gospel is the way fully open to gentiles. This understanding of Luke's purpose in Acts best explains why the narrative ends where it does. After Paul's arrest and the riot at his defense before the Sanhedrin, the Lord reveals to him that as "you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome" (23:11). When the hearings are over and Paul is shipped off to Rome, it may surprise readers that Luke does not describe the outcome of Paul's appeal to Caesar. The officials in Rome are never mentioned. Instead, Luke only reports Paul's encounter with a gathering of the local Jewish leaders (28:16–28). Some respond; others remain skeptical. But Luke's story can end. The gospel has been preached to the Jews throughout the Roman Empire. They have been given a chance to respond (Rom. 10:18), to become what God intends for Israel to be, a light to the nations. Those who reject it are cut off from the people. Those who accept the gospel become the true expression of Israel as part of Christ's church, which now also includes Samaritan and gentile believers.

Luke's Gospel foreshadows this divided response. The angel tells Zechariah that many, not *all*, of the sons of Israel will turn back to the Lord their God (Luke 1:16). Simeon tells Mary that her son Jesus is set for the rise and fall of many in Israel (Luke 2:34). Even one of Jesus's chosen disciples turns away to

go to his own place (Luke 22:3–6; Acts 1:25). These do not represent all Israel, and Acts does not recount God’s repudiation of Israel for being disobedient. Instead, it shows many Jews repudiating Israel’s hope and calling.⁹ As a consequence, they cut themselves off from Israel and become merely what Paul calls his “kindred according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:3 NRSV). Their rejection of the gospel explains why the church in Luke’s day is increasingly dominated by gentiles who, like wild olive shoots, have been grafted into the rich root of the Israel olive tree (Rom. 11:17–24). Christian Jews are not apostates. They are the remnant of Israel that forms the church that is faithful to the Law and the Prophets and to God and engages in mission to the world. As Paul represents the true Pharisee who believes in the resurrection and believes in Jesus (Acts 26:4–8, 22–23, 29), the church represents the true continuation of Israel that is obedient to God.

This view of Luke’s purpose helps us recognize that the promises to Israel were fulfilled. We do not need to resort to views that claim that the promises to Israel are still in reserve or that God has two chosen peoples, the church and a dormant Israel. Israel according to the flesh does not have special status with God as a most favored nation. What became known as Christianity is the fulfillment of Israel’s hope and purpose. Christians of whatever ethnic or national stripe should be cautioned by this narrative. If any church is found wanting in its calling to be a light to the nations, it will become Christ’s church in name only and will face a similar fate of being cut off (cf. Rom. 11:17–22).

Key Themes

1. Luke’s second volume would be more aptly titled the “Acts of God.” This theme is most apparent in Peter’s sermon in 3:13–26, in which God’s actions are highlighted. God made a covenant with Abraham (3:25 [cf. 7:8]). God promised Moses that he would raise up a prophet like him (3:22). God overruled the wickedness of those who put Jesus to death by raising him from the dead (3:15, 26) and glorified him so that healing is done through his name and power (3:16). God will forgive sins (3:19), bless people and turn them from their wickedness (3:26), send times of refreshing (3:19), and restore all things (3:21). This early speech sets the tone. God operates behind the scenes to control the events that are narrated.

In Paul’s ministry, the Lord enables him and his companions to perform signs and wonders (14:3; 15:12; 19:11), opens “a door of faith to the Gentiles” (14:27 [cf. 15:3–4, 8; 21:19]), and opens hearts to respond to the message (16:14). Paul and his team routinely preach wherever they go (14:1, 3, 7, 9, 15, 21, 25; 15:35, 36; 16:10, 13, 32), and the report of what happens in each place emphasizes what God has done: how the Lord “confirmed the message of his grace by enabling them to perform signs and wonders” (14:3 [cf. 15:12]); “all

that God had done through them and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles” (14:27 [cf. 15:4, 8]); how “the Lord opened [Lydia’s] heart to respond to Paul’s message” (16:14).

Elsewhere in Acts, other preachers affirm that God created all things (4:24; 14:15; 17:24–28). God directs the course of events and faithfully fulfills the promises (7:17; 13:23, 32–33) to assure the fulfillment of his salvific plan for all people. God anointed Jesus with power to do mighty works (10:38). By God’s deliberate plan Jesus was handed over to suffer and die (2:23; 3:18; 17:3; 26:22–23). God then raised him from the dead (2:24, 32; 3:15, 26; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30, 33, 37), made him Lord and glorified him (2:36; 3:13; 5:31), and ordained him to be the judge of the living and dead (10:42). God pours out the Holy Spirit (2:17; 5:32; 11:16–17; 15:8), opens hearts and grants repentance (11:18; 16:14), and chooses and calls witnesses and leaders to spread the word (1:8; 2:32; 10:41; 13:17; 15:7; 16:10; 22:14; 26:16). God shows no favoritism (10:34) and looks favorably on the gentiles to include them as part of Israel (15:14). This initiative is authenticated by the mighty works that the missionaries perform among the gentiles (14:27; 15:4, 12; 19:11; 21:19) and their reception of the Holy Spirit (10:47). This list of what God is noted as doing in Acts is not comprehensive. It only indicates how central God is to the plot of Acts.

2. As a corollary to God’s dominant role in directing what happens in the story, Acts also emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit coming at decisive moments in the life of the church. Peter declares that the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost is a sign of “the last days” (2:17) and a fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy (Joel 2:28–32). It inaugurates a new age when “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Acts 2:21). Acts does not spell out the fruit of the Spirit in the lives of individual believers (Gal. 5:22–23). Instead, the narrative shows the effects of the Spirit repeatedly filling individuals and the community to accomplish special tasks. The Spirit comes as power to a seemingly powerless community that has gathered together in prayer and unity (2:1). Wind and fire now represent the coming of the Spirit (2:2–3) rather than the gentle descent like a dove (Luke 3:22). The Spirit brings the power to bear witness (2:4; 4:33; 6:8) and to heal (3:12; 4:7; 8:13). The Spirit directs individuals in their mission (8:29; 10:19–20; 11:12; 16:6–7, 9), presides over the church in its decisions (15:28), and guides the church in taking concrete measures on behalf of the poor (4:31–32). The gift of the Spirit is poured out to disciples in such assorted ways that it is evident that the Spirit cannot be controlled or systematized by humans.

3. The apostles, including Philip, Ananias, and Paul, consistently work miracles or “signs and wonders” that are undeniable, visible manifestations of the truth of the gospel. This power is given to them by God and is never

under their control. The purpose and the effect of the miracles are to bring others to faith or to preserve the lives of witnesses so that they can continue their mission to bring others to faith.

4. Jesus chided the disciples on the Emmaus road for being “foolish” and “slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken” (Luke 24:25). Understanding what God has accomplished in Jesus’s suffering, death, resurrection, and exaltation and what God is doing in the present (Luke 24:27, 45–48) require knowing the Scriptures. The Ethiopian eunuch expresses it well: “How can I [understand what I am reading] . . . unless someone explains it to me?” (Acts 8:31). The failure of the Jews to recognize Jesus as the Messiah is rooted in their failure to understand the Scriptures or to believe the explanations of the Christian preachers.

The Scriptures figure prominently in the narrative and particularly in the speeches. They unfold the identity of Jesus as the Messiah, show that God had foreordained Jesus’s death and resurrection, and reveal that God had ordained the admission of gentiles into the people of God. That is why “the appeal to Scripture was central to the church’s apologetic and evangelism and also to the establishment and confirmation of its own identity.”¹⁰ Luke is not always specific in citing the Scriptures that validate a point in a speech, and readers are often left to search the Scriptures to discover the references on their own.¹¹

Throughout Acts, God also guides believers by means of visions and dreams (9:10–16; 10:9–16, 27–28; 11:5–10; 16:6–10; 22:17–21; 26:13–18). These visions are examined in community, and the Scriptures help to authenticate them.

5. “Word” occurs thirty-three times in Acts, referring to the Old Testament, the word of God, what Jesus has said, or what is said about him. The emphasis on giving witness appears throughout the narrative (1:8, 22; 2:32; 3:15; 4:33; 5:32; 10:39, 41; 13:31; 22:20; 26:16). The church and its message are based on the word of God. It is the church’s task to continue to spread the word of God. Christians are not to be stargazing, marking their end-time calendars to calculate the timing of the advent of the end. They are instead to be busy in their mission to the ends of the earth. Persecution against the church always fails to have its intended effect. Rejection leads to the widening of the mission and the spread of the word of God.

6. Acts continues a theme prominent in the Gospel by providing positive and negative examples of the stewardship of money and the right and wrong use of possessions. Judas’s reward for his iniquity in betraying Jesus for payment is a gruesome death and going down in infamy as a betrayer (1:18). The perfidy of Ananias and Sapphira, who wanted to keep back a portion of the money that they publicly dedicated to God, results in both of them being struck dead (5:1–11). Simon’s offer to buy the rights to the Holy Spirit from the apostles (8:18–20) is met with a sharp rebuke. Human traffickers

who bemoan the loss of money when Paul casts out the spirit from their slave girl (16:16, 19), Ephesian silversmiths who lament the loss of business for their idols (19:24–27), and the governor Felix who expects a bribe from Paul (24:26) serve as negative examples of the obsession with money. These examples contrast with Barnabas, who sold a field and donated the proceeds to help the poor (4:36–37), and with Paul, who did not covet “anyone’s silver or gold or clothing” but wholly gave himself over to fulfilling his divine calling (20:33–35). The early church’s benevolence toward the poor (2:44–45; 4:32; 9:36) sets the standard for the Christian church.

Jesus's Resurrection and Ascension

The Continuation of the Story

Big Idea

Jesus's resurrection and ascension restore not Israel's kingdom but Israel's vocation to be a light to the nations. The disciples' witness will be empowered by the Holy Spirit and reach to the ends of the earth.

Key Themes

- Jesus does not abandon the disciples to visions and rumors but provides them with evidence that his resurrection is real as he continues to teach them before he is taken up into the divine realm.
- Jesus's resurrection and ascension pave the way for the coming of the Holy Spirit on the disciples, launching a worldwide mission.
- The disciples are powerless on their own and must wait for the Holy Spirit to clothe them with power.

Understanding the Text

The Text in Context

In what Luke calls his first book, the Gospel of Luke, he relates what Jesus “began to do and to teach” (Acts 1:1). This second book is the continuation of that story. In this next phase of salvation history, Luke narrates what Jesus continued to do and teach through the Holy Spirit.¹ The downward thrust of God breaking into human history through the incarnation results in the outward thrust of the gospel, when God's Spirit breaks into the lives of believers. After Jesus ascends into heaven, the Spirit leads the disciples to mission breakthroughs in the world.

Interpretive Insights

1:1–5 *After his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive.* Luke links the life and work of Jesus, recounted in his first volume, to the story of the church and its mission by recalling the dedication to Theophilus (Luke 1:1–4). Theophilus likely was a prominent Christian, and he may have financed the production and dissemination of the two works.

Jesus’s forty-day sojourn with the disciples recalls his forty days in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry (Luke 4:2). “Forty” is a biblical round number used in Jewish writings to refer to a timeframe in which instruction occurs for the work ahead.² “Giving instructions” to the apostles “he had chosen” reminds the reader that Jesus chose the apostles; they did not volunteer. He now gives them the mandate to witness (cf. Luke 9:1–2; Acts 9:15). The kingdom of God was the core of Jesus’s preaching, and the story in Acts is about the proclamation of the kingdom of God advancing throughout the world (8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25). Proclamation of the kingdom of God brackets the book (1:3; 28:23, 31).

Recalling the water baptism of John the Baptist should also recall his prophecy that one more powerful than he would come to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Luke 3:16). That prophecy will soon be fulfilled.

Jesus’s continued table fellowship with his disciples provides irrefutable evidence of his bodily resurrection (Luke 24:38–43). They do not experience mystical visions. It is during this time that he would have appeared “to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters” and to James, his brother (1 Cor. 15:6–7; Acts 13:30–31), but Luke does not narrate these events. He zeroes in on the disciples’ preparation for their mission.

1:6–7 *Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?* The disciples’ question about restoring the kingdom to Israel puts forward this notion at the very beginning. Perhaps they remember Jesus’s promise that they would “sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Luke 22:30), and now they assume that this new role is imminent. Or they may think that the coming of the Spirit would be accompanied by the coming of the kingdom (Luke 19:11). Since Jesus does not reprimand the disciples for their question as he did in Luke 22:51 (“No more of this!”) or for their lack of understanding as he did in Luke 24:25–27 (“How foolish you are, and how slow to believe”), Luke uses their question to raise an important issue and not to reintroduce their spiritual dullness. The fulfillment of the promises cited in Luke 1:32–33; 2:25, 29–32, 38 is taking place. But they will not be fulfilled in ways that the disciples might expect or prefer. The kingdom of God has nothing to do with establishing Israel as a mighty kingdom that will rule the world with an iron fist as Rome does.

What is most important for Luke is that their query highlights an Old Testament promise: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Isa. 49:6). The coming of the Holy Spirit will restore Israel’s primary vocation to be a light to the nations as the disciples spread the good news of *God’s kingdom* (Acts 3:25; 13:47).

The question also gives Jesus the opportunity to remind them that they cannot know the times and seasons when God will restore all things (1:7 [cf. 3:21]). They are not to be concerned about the schedule of history but to be busy about their tasks. God’s purposes will be accomplished according to God’s timing, which pays no attention to human calendars.

1:8 *But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.* Jesus makes two promises: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses.” The disciples are not to go off on their own steam, because earlier Jesus had instructed them to wait in Jerusalem “until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). The success of their witness will be due not to their own strength but to the power of God, because it is God’s mission, not theirs.

“Witness” is applied almost exclusively to the Twelve.³ As eyewitnesses who were with Jesus throughout his ministry, they ensure the certainty of the tradition “handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word” (Luke 1:2).

The power they will receive from the Holy Spirit is not a power that enables them to conquer and dominate others. Jesus commissions them not to build empires but to confront empires with the truth of the gospel that God is king. They will receive power only to spread the gospel throughout the world. This

“To the Ends of the Earth”

The phrase “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) does not refer to Rome, where Luke’s account ends. The mission will not end there. Rome, in Luke’s day, is the center of the empire, and all roads lead from it to the ends of the earth.^a In its westward

extent, “the ends of the earth” referred generally to Spain and specifically to the region around Gades, west of Gibraltar.^b For Luke, however, it signifies the proclamation of the gospel to all people, wherever they may be.^c

^a Krodel, Acts, 60.

^b Ellis, “The End of the Earth.”

^c Moore, “To the End of the Earth,” 399.

power does not bring a swift victory over the evil kingdoms. Victory will be won through seeming defeat.

1:9–11 *he was taken up before their very eyes.* Jesus’s ascension marks the point when the physically resurrected Jesus leaves the disciples. It is the culmination of the resurrection appearances and the prelude to the sending of the Spirit. They are not left in the lurch, having to strike out on their own. If that were the case, they would always fail. Jesus’s departure results in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (2:33), and Jesus can be nearer to them than before because he is no longer limited by a physical body. He goes with each disciple to the ends of the earth until the end of time.

The “cloud” represents the divine presence (cf. Luke 9:34–35), and being taken up into heaven recalls the commencement of Jesus’s mission. When Jesus prays at his baptism, the heavens open, the Spirit descends on him, and God declares, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:21–22). His ascent in a cloud now confirms his exaltation and his present lordship. The ascension also foreshadows the return of Jesus from heaven to earth (cf. Luke 21:27; 1 Thess. 1:10), when God will restore all things.

“Heaven” may not simply refer to the sky. Luke can use “heaven” as a circumlocution for God (Luke 15:18, 21) or being in association with God (Luke 11:13) or his realm (Luke 15:7; 19:38).⁴ It should not be taken so literally that one thinks of Jesus sailing through space to heaven, but it is not simply a symbolic depiction.⁵ It is the only language these earthbound eyewitnesses had for describing Jesus’s departure to another realm and returning to his Father.⁶

The disciples seem to be rooted to the spot, indulging in a reverie of stargazing, when two men arrayed in white robes call them back to earth to get ready for the task that awaits them. The men’s question, “Why?” echoes the question asked of the frightened women at the tomb, except that the women’s faces were bowed down to the ground (Luke 24:5). The “two men” are interpreting angels who can explain from a divine perspective what the disciples have witnessed (Luke 24:4–7, 23; Acts 10:30–32). Disciples need to stop looking down or looking up and start looking ahead.

Theological Insights

1. God does not intend to spread the message of salvation through his Son by sending out angels to proclaim it or by writing heavenly messages in the clouds. God chooses to use those chosen by Jesus despite their demonstrable weaknesses. “God’s kingdom will be restored to God’s people as promised, not at an apocalyptic coming from heaven but rather through the church’s Spirit-led mission on earth.”⁷

2. The disciples first must be assured of the reality of the resurrection before they can be effective in proclaiming that God indeed reigns.

3. In worldly kingdoms, the ones who do the killing seem to get the power. God's power works in a totally different way and is seemingly powerless. Most of the witnesses in Acts are beaten or killed for proclaiming the gospel, but they possess an unconquerable spiritual power.

Teaching the Text

1. *The disciples have to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit before they can do anything that will be effective.* Therefore, they must wait patiently in prayer. In the modern world, many people hate waiting as a wasteful pause between important things. Instead, waiting can be valued as a time for prayer, reflection, and preparation.

Nevertheless, the disciples are not to sit on their hands waiting forever. When the Holy Spirit comes on them, they must be ready to act. The task of witnessing to a resistant world qualifies as hazardous duty. Acts will narrate their witness to the world in powerful word, in miraculous deeds, and in their caring for one another. It is not surprising, however, that after the disciples have been told what to do, we find them staring up into the heavens. Many Christians today still have their heads in the clouds rather than being engaged in their calling to mission. Mission is not a budget item that the church can outsource. Mission is to the church like air is to fire. Without it, the church fizzles out.

2. *Many Christians today may shy away from evangelism because they think they do not know enough.* One hears excuses such as “I don't know the Bible that well” or “I don't have a theology degree” or “What if they ask me some deep theological question?” God does not call all Christians to be scholars or pastors. It does not take an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible or a theology degree to tell people—like a witness in court—what you have seen Jesus do for you and for others. It takes openness to the Spirit's leading to speak to others and to communicate the gospel in credible ways.

3. *Jesus's ascension is vital as visible proof of his vindication by God.* The ascension may be confusing to modern readers. The bodily resurrection requires a bodily ascension, and the ascension explains the disappearance of Jesus's physical body. The ascension marks the return of Christ to his Father, provides confirmation of his promised exaltation by God (Luke 22:69; Acts 2:32–35; 7:56), and validates his present lordship in glory.⁸ It also assures us of his promised return. Jesus's question, “Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” (Luke 24:26), implies that he had already crossed the threshold of God's glory and has returned to his disciples from glory. His temporary appearances to his disciples after his resurrection will be replaced by his permanent spiritual presence through the Holy Spirit. He

is no longer physically with them, but he will be spiritually within them.⁹ His promised return “means that salvation was initiated by the historical Jesus and will be consummated by him at the End.”¹⁰

Illustrating the Text

Waiting demands patience.

Quote: Henri J. M. Nouwen. Nouwen writes, “The word *patience* means the willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full in the belief that something hidden there will manifest itself to us. Impatient people are always expecting the real thing to happen somewhere else and therefore want to go elsewhere. The moment is empty. But the patient dare to stay where they are. Patient living means to live actively in the present and wait there. Waiting, then, is not passive. It involves nurturing the moment, as a mother nurtures the child that is growing in her.”¹¹

It can be important to tarry before going.

Quote: A. W. Tozer. Tozer writes, “The popular notion that the first obligation of the church is to spread the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth is false. *Her first obligation is to be spiritually worthy to spread it.* Our Lord said ‘Go ye,’ but He also said, ‘Tarry ye,’ and the tarrying had to come before the going. Had the disciples gone forth as missionaries before the day of Pentecost it would have been an overwhelming spiritual disaster, for they could have done no more than make after their likeness, and this would have altered for the worse the whole history of the Western world and had consequences throughout the ages to come.”¹²

Witnesses first must be indwelled with the Holy Spirit.

Christian Biography: John Wesley. In 1735, John Wesley went to Savanna, Georgia, to serve as a missionary. During that time, he later acknowledged, he did not yet know what it meant to have a personal relationship with God or to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. He served only out of obligation and duty. He stayed in Savanna for two years; but at the end of that time, his ministry amounted to nothing, and he exited with a romantic scandal. In 1738, back in England, he attended a public reading of Romans and experienced “God [working] in the heart through faith in Christ.” He wrote, “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me. . . . I then testified openly to all there what I now felt in my heart.”¹³ Without the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, John Wesley was an ineffective and powerless witness.