

# The Dynamic Nature of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God

## How Acts Lays a Sure Foundation for the Mission of the Church

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It is not uncommon to be at an IMB training and hear the speaker encourage the listeners to open their Bibles to the book of Acts. However, it is at this point, when we open our Bibles to the book of Acts, that we need to stop and ask the same hermeneutical questions of Acts that we ask of other narrative portions of Scripture.

In this article, I will argue that Luke's narrative in Acts serves as an orderly account of the dynamic nature of the gospel of the Kingdom of God, in which the church rejoices and has confidence because the gospel is divinely effective. The "dynamic nature of the gospel" is described by Robert Plummer as, "an 'effective force' which inevitably goes forth and accomplishes God's will."<sup>1</sup> I will highlight Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart's hermeneutical principles for historical narrative to draw conclusions about Luke's original intention for Acts. I will then engage with an *apostolic hermeneutic* of Acts

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Lewis Plummer, "The Church's Missionary Nature: The Apostle Paul and His Churches," (PhD diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001). 72.

before giving concluding thoughts on how Acts leads to the church's confident rejoicing in the power of the gospel handed down from the prophets and apostles.

## **Hermeneutical Principles for Historical Narrative**

Sound hermeneutical principles help the reader to understand the author's original, Holy Spirit-inspired intent. Before drawing missiological implications from the book of Acts, the reader must ask and answer the question, what was Luke's original intent for writing Acts? This is important because, as Fee and Stuart write, "If it can be demonstrated that Luke's intent in Acts had been to lay down a pattern for the church at all times, then that pattern surely becomes normative, that is, it is what God requires of all Christians under any and all conditions. But if his intent is something else, then we need to ask the hermeneutical questions in a different way."<sup>2</sup>

Fee and Stuart go on to give a general principle to help the reader determine if Luke's description of what happened in the early church should be considered a norm for the church in all places and times. They write, "Unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is only narrated or described does not function in a normative way - unless it can be demonstrated on other ground that the author intended it to function in this way."<sup>3</sup> The authors then give three specific principles for determining if biblical narrative is to be considered normative for today:

1. "It is probably never valid to use an analogy based on biblical precedent as giving biblical authority for present-day actions."

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), Electronic Publication, "Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent."

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

2. “Although it may not have been the author’s primary purpose, biblical narratives do have illustrative and (sometimes) ‘pattern’ value.”
3. “In matters of Christian experience, and even more so of Christian practice, biblical precedents may sometimes be regarded as *repeatable patterns*—even if they are not understood to be normative.” They go on to write that, “the strongest possible case can be made when only one pattern is found (although one must be careful not to make too much of silence)...”<sup>4</sup>

The reader’s task then is to exegete the book of Acts to determine Luke’s original intent and to find in that intent God’s word for the church today.

## **Luke’s Original Intent in Six Acts**

The view that Luke’s gospel and Acts were intended to be a two-volume work is summarized well by H.J. Cadbury’s statement that “Acts is neither an appendix nor an afterthought. It is probably an integral part of the author’s original plan and purpose.”<sup>5</sup> With that in mind, it can be said that in his gospel and Acts, Luke intended to write an orderly account of God’s action to establish and grow His Kingdom by creating a new people from among both Jews and Gentiles, through the person and work of Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit. In Acts, Luke’s focus is on the spread of the dynamic gospel of the Kingdom of God, from its Jewish roots in Jerusalem to Gentiles in Rome, and everywhere in between. Luke shows that the gospel of the Kingdom of God is the fulfillment, in Christ, of Old Testament covenant

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Fee and Stuart elaborate on each one of these principles, providing cautions and exceptions.

<sup>5</sup> H.J. Cadbury quoted in I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, ed., *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 15.

promises. God's people can now include all the families of the earth gathered in God's place, which is the Church, and under God's rule and blessing.<sup>6</sup>

The dynamic nature of the gospel of the kingdom of God is Luke's focus in Acts. Luke does not allow the reader to conclude human agency as being the primary cause of the diffusion of the gospel in Acts, preferring to stress the activity of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, who accomplishes God's will through the proclamation of God's Word, is the source of power that makes the proclamation of the gospel effective. Michael Green points out that, "Every initiative in evangelism recorded in Acts is the initiative of the Spirit of God."<sup>7</sup>

Luke's focus on divine agency is most clearly seen in his summary statements that divide his narrative into six acts.<sup>8</sup> The summary verses in Acts 6:7, 12:24, and 19:20 highlight the *word of God* increasing, and Acts 9:31 and 16:5 highlight the gospel's work to *build up* and *strengthen* the church. When Luke writes in the closing lines of his narrative that Paul lived in Rome for two years, welcomed all who came to him, proclaimed the kingdom of God, and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ, the reader understands that for Paul to proclaim the kingdom of God was for him to proclaim how through Christ, all peoples could be adopted into God's family, gathered in His place, and continuously live under His rule and blessing. It is the diffusion of this comprehensive message that Luke shows to be divinely effective. It is divinely effective to save sinners, establish the church, and build up the church.

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<sup>6</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom*. (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 1981), 53-54. Goldsworthy defines *Kingdom of God* and later argues that the pattern of the kingdom being God's people, in God's place, under his rule and blessing is established in the garden of Eden. (58-66). For this promise-fulfillment theme in Acts, see Darrell Bock, "Scripture and the Realisation in God's Promises" in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, eds. I Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 41-62.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*. (London: Hodder and Stoughton; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970). Quoted in Plummer, "The Church's Missionary Nature." 72.

<sup>8</sup> The six divisions are Acts 1:1-6:7; 6:8-9:31; 9:32-12:24; 12:25-16:5; 16:6-19:20; 19:21-28:31.

In reflecting on the dynamic nature of the gospel observed in Acts and in Paul's writings, Plummer concludes, "Because God's Spirit is a missionary spirit (i.e., revealing himself to humans and enabling their God-glorifying response) and God's word is dynamic and effective, the abiding presence of Spirit and word with the elect community guarantees its active missionary role."<sup>9</sup> Any effort to draw normative missiological principles from Acts that does not first take into account Luke's original intent will more often than not reveal the reader's pragmatic biases; but, when Luke's intent is properly understood, the church is left with great cause to rejoice.

## Engaging with an Apostolic Hermeneutic

Jesse Snodgrass critiques Fee and Stuart's principle that biblical narrative is only normative where it "explicitly tells us we must do something."<sup>10</sup> Snodgrass concludes that *paradigms* can be observed in Scripture that can serve as an example for the "apostolic work" that should be normative for missionaries today.<sup>11</sup> He admits, however, "not every piece of Acts narrative is equally relevant in determining the apostolic work."<sup>12</sup> The question he then asks is how can one, "determine which aspects of the narrative are exemplary instances of the apostolic work and which were truly 'incidental' to the purposes of the author?"<sup>13</sup>

The solution he proposes is an *apostolic hermeneutic* that looks for "Scriptural guideposts that direct the reader toward the proper interpretation and application."<sup>14</sup> The first guidepost is where Paul's recorded works in Acts

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<sup>9</sup> Plummer, "The Church's Missionary Nature," 100.

<sup>10</sup> Jesse Snodgrass, "To Teach Others Also: An Apostolic Approach to Theological Education in Pioneer Missions," (PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2017), 30.

<sup>11</sup> Snodgrass, "To Teach Others Also," 34-35.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 34.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 34-35.

and his epistolary statements about his works *coalesce*. The second is where there is a *recurrence* of practices evident in multiple contexts.<sup>15</sup> The proposed two guideposts focus exclusively on the apostle Paul, which is problematic, but space does not allow for critique of the interpretation that Paul is the prototype of the modern-day church planting missionary.<sup>16</sup>

In the end, Snodgrass' conclusions regarding Paul's apostolic work do not require additional interpretive principles, such as an *apostolic hermeneutic*, to what Fee and Stuart have given. I will list below Snodgrass' four conclusions about Paul's apostolic work and then for each one I will attempt to show how it supports Luke's main intent in writing Acts, which was to demonstrate the dynamic nature of the gospel. Paul's "apostolic work" included:<sup>17</sup>

1. "Proclaiming the gospel." This is a pattern of believers in Acts, but Paul also commanded others to imitate him in this pattern of doing all things to the glory of God, which would include proclaiming the gospel, so that both Jews and Greeks might be saved (1 Cor 10:31-11:1). Therefore, the reader understands this pattern to be normative for all believers today. Luke's concern in Acts does not seem to be with who is proclaiming the gospel, but rather that the gospel is being spread.
2. "'Laying the foundation' of new churches." We see Paul, and others, establish new churches in places where there were no churches, and he

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. 35.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 39. Snodgrass' rationale for focusing exclusively on Paul can be found under "Paul's Definitive 'Work'" beginning on page 39. For further study on the ongoing role of the apostle, see Don Dent, *The Ongoing Role of Apostles in Missions: The Forgotten Foundation* (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2019). For an argument against the ongoing role of the apostle, see Ricky Wilhelm, "A Biblical Investigation of the Work of an Evangelist and Its Implications for International Mission Board Team Leaders in Established-Church Locations," (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2022).

<sup>17</sup> Snodgrass, "To Teach Others Also," 43. The author lists his concluding elements of Paul's apostolic work and then writes, "While this does not, perhaps, exhaust the potential elements of the apostolic work, it does address the most prominent aspects following the exegetical guidelines of coalescence and recurrence."

does so by establishing the foundational teaching that had been passed down to him (1 Cor 11:23; 15:3; Eph 2:19-22). Theophilus could be, and the Church today can be, confident that the teaching handed down by the prophets and the apostles is authoritative, and Luke shows that it is this authoritative Word of God that has the power to establish and build the church. The reader should not draw normative patterns from Acts about where churches should be planted. That was not Luke's intention, and a modern-day missionary going to a location that is less than 2% evangelical should not consider himself to be church planting in a pioneer context like Paul was when he went to a location with absolutely no churches.<sup>18</sup> The reader should rather understand Luke's intention to demonstrate that the dynamic gospel is the foundational teaching that establishes and grows the church.

3. "Itinerating by moving from place to place." Luke shows in Acts that Paul's church planting work was an itinerant work, although no clear pattern for the length of time in each place is established. Paul seems to have expected the same from his team, commanding Timothy to "do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry" (2 Tim 4:5). Once his ministry as an evangelist was fulfilled, Paul requested that Timothy "make every effort to come to me soon" (2 Tim 4:9). No normative patterns can be drawn regarding the length of a missionary church planter's itineracy, but Luke, and the epistles, do make clear the goal of the itineracy. The goal is to teach the foundational message passed down from the prophets and apostles (2 Tim 1:13-14). Luke's focus in Acts is on the spread of the dynamic gospel and its effective nature to establish and build churches.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 19. Snodgrass writes that, "A 'pioneer' environment is one in which Christianity is a fledgling enterprise, an environment that fits the missiological definition of an 'unreached' population as 2% or less evangelical." He then includes in a footnote that according to the Joshua Project website, "The original Joshua Project editorial committee selected the criteria [for "Unreached"] less than 2% Evangelical Christian."

4. “‘Entrusting’ the work to the new communities.” This element of the work is closely connected to the itinerating element. Luke’s intent in Acts is to show that the gospel proclaimed by Paul, and every other believer, is divinely effective to make disciples, establish the local church, and then spread. The gospel has that power, not the apostle. Therefore, Paul instructed Timothy and Titus, itinerant missionary pastors in local churches, to appoint and entrust other qualified pastors who could teach sound doctrine and defend against false teaching. Paul’s trust was not so much in the new communities but in the dynamic nature of the gospel.

## **A Sure Foundation**

The church can rejoice because the word of God is dynamic and divinely powerful to establish and build up the church! This is the message proclaimed by Jesus in Luke’s gospel, from Galilee to Jerusalem, and by the church in Acts, from Jerusalem to Rome. It is in this dynamic nature of the gospel that the church and her missionaries need to trust. The Spirit of God is powerful to cause the comprehensive message of the kingdom of God to diffuse, to be effective to save sinners, and to build and strengthen the church. Paul trusted in the Holy Spirit to do just that when he wrote that he had “fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ” (Rom 15:19) in the area from Jerusalem around to Illyricum. The work of the apostles was fulfilled.

Now, there remains a great need for an ever-increasing missionary force of sent out ones who know the dynamic nature of the gospel, follow the pattern of the sound message taught by the apostles, and guard the good deposit entrusted to them by the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells in them (2 Tim 1:13-14).

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