Acts

An Interpretation Bible Commentary

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CONTENTS

The division of Acts into six major parts and their discrete scenes, as delineated in this table of contents and in the structure of the commentary, is grounded in and expands an outline proposed by F. Scott Spencer (2004a) and later elaborated by John J. Pilch (2004).

SERIES FOREWORD

The work of biblical interpretation is ever-changing because the art of reading and understanding is profoundly shaped by the lives of interpreters and their communities. The original Interpretation series was designed to meet the needs of clergy, teachers, and students as a resource that integrates literary, historical, theological, and pastoral insights. The decision to extend and reframe that series as the Interpretation Bible Commentary reflects awareness of the vast historical, cultural, and ecclesial changes that have occurred since the last volume of the previous series was published in 2005. These new volumes reflect the major changes in interpretative strategies as well as a keen awareness of a dramatically changing contemporary context.

Prominent among the significant changes in the interpretive landscape is the expanded range of voices in biblical scholarship. Biblical interpretation has always been a diverse, vibrant undertaking, but that breadth has not been reflected in publications. The diversity of contributors in this renewed series reflects respect and appreciation for a broad array of witnesses.

The primary focus of the Interpretation Bible Commentary series remains unchanged from its predecessor: to invite its readers into the lively work of careful biblical interpretation for the purpose of faithful exposition. Preachers and teachers seeking reflective guidance from the biblical texts will find these volumes an illuminating and highly accessible resource. This Interpretation Bible Commentary series will tend to the needs of its twenty-first-century audience while maintaining the priorities of its creators. The words of the original editors—James Mays, Patrick Miller, and Paul Achtemeier—still ring true: "What is in mind is the work of an interpreter who brings theological and pastoral sensitivity to the task and creates an interpretation which does not stop short with judgments about the text but is engaged in a dialogue of seeing and hearing with it as a contemporary believer."

Emphasizing both sound critical exegesis and strong theological sensibilities, these new volumes employ innovative approaches that allow for fresh readings of biblical texts, including difficult passages.

The series empowers readers to engage God's creation and our place in it with fresh eyes. Through their engagement with Scripture, the commentaries illumine our relationship with God, each other, and creation so that readers are propelled with new understanding and energy for fulfilling God's claims upon us in our rapidly changing global context.

Using several interpretive methodologies that are appropriate for the varying biblical texts, these volumes promise a compelling interpretation for the church and world today. Each exposition will situate the respective biblical books historically, theologically, literarily, and socially, providing a rich resource for unleashing the homiletical and formational potential of the text.

The text on which the commentary is based is the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue). Because this translation is widely available, the printing of a text in the commentary itself is unnecessary. Each commentary is divided into sections appropriate to the particular book. Instead of offering a verse-by-verse interpretation, the commentary deals with passages as a whole. Thematic topics that are especially pertinent or have great bearing on the biblical book are addressed in excursuses. A "For Further Reading" section provides resources that are instructive for broadening the reader's hermeneutical horizons and diversifying the reader's understanding of how to approach the text.

The writers and editors hope these volumes will explain and apply the meaning and significance of the biblical texts while addressing key contemporary issues. The Interpretation Bible Commentary series is intended to draw the reader into an interpretative community where, collegially, reader and interpreter can more fruitfully engage these ancient texts for present living.

The Editors

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My long journey with the Acts of the Apostles began when I was a seminary student looking for an interesting New Testament elective. It did not take long for the book to hook me. Its theological point of view was not the main source of attraction. Rather, its ways of communicating theologically were. Like any other biblical narrative, this peculiar story takes readers to certain theological vistas, thereby inviting readers to *theologize* for themselves. I presume Acts led ancient audiences to ponder the ways God accompanies the church and is encountered in human experience. I know that such theologizing often occurs when Acts is read, reread, and interpreted today. Acts depicts the early decades of the church's existence as a time bursting with new possibilities to discover and embrace. The story that Acts tells marvels at the array of surprises God discloses in a post-Easter world. Its exuberance tickles imaginations, ushering readers from joy to shock to gravity and back to joy again, often on a single page.

While writing this commentary, I was repeatedly struck by how much I owe to other interpreters. I think of people whose insights about Acts once set me on certain paths that over time steered me toward new trails to explore on my own—not just in terms of the specific ways that I understand Acts but also in practicing what it means to think theologically in conversation with a biblical narrative. I cannot list all of those interpreters. The bibliographies at the other end of this book acknowledge many of them. For some, like Paul Minear, it is a single essay that I return to over and over to ruminate what makes a theological interpretation of Acts credible for modern readers. I consider Willie James Jennings's masterful commentary the most stimulating book on Acts published in the last two decades. His analysis of Acts has helped me consider how a theologically oriented commentary can respect the narrative's theological poetics, stir up a theological vision through a contemporary conversation with the Bible's old stories, and avoid reducing the energy in Acts to either tired analyses of ancient ecclesiology or rallying cries for renewed church growth. There are additional scholars who have been so interesting to me that I have read—and will continue to read—anything

they write about Acts. They include Loveday Alexander, Margaret Aymer, Luke Timothy Johnson, Daniel Marguerat, Ivoni Richter Reimer, and Scott Spencer. I have no doubt that more of their ideas reside in my head, and likewise in this commentary, than I realize. Even though I do not always agree with them, I regularly go back to their work. None of us reads alone.

When I look at my bookshelves I am reminded that volumes in the original Interpretation series (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching) played a formative role in my development as a scholar. A number of those commentaries remain companions when I prepare classes and sermons. I take joy in Westminster John Knox Press's ongoing commitment to teachers and preachers with this new Interpretation series (Interpretation Bible Commentary). I am honored by the opportunity to contribute a commentary specifically composed to foster the work of educators, students, and preachers who live out their callings in congregations, theological schools, and other venues of ministry and study. The contexts for those callings are diverse and change rapidly, I realize. If this commentary speaks meaningfully within a range of those contemporary contexts effectively and provides insight into Acts also for readers who experience themselves, their societies, and God differently than I do, I will be more than content.

I wrote most of this commentary while on a research leave from Luther Seminary during the 2022–23 academic year. Fortunately I had excellent helpers; Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Monica Burt read drafts and offered invaluable editorial advice along the way. I remain deeply in their debt. I am also grateful to Luther Seminary's board of directors for granting me the sabbatical year. It is a gift to be part of a seminary that understands the tremendous contribution that research leaves make toward ensuring the future of theological scholarship and supplying today's church leaders with resources to stimulate their creativity. May this resource I have written prove useful for doing precisely that. As Acts leads me to believe, there are still new possibilities out there for all of us to discover in the world that God loves, as well as some old ones worth reembracing.

Introduction

During the final decade or two of the first century CE, more than fifty years after the ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus, many churches were thriving, even as most of them were navigating fresh and conceivably worrisome challenges.

All or nearly all of the people who knew Jesus of Nazareth or witnessed his resurrection had passed away. Leadership in communities composed of his followers had turned over several times, likely eliciting questions about criteria for selecting new leaders. Not all believers articulated or practiced their faith in the same way, leading to divergent understandings about how communities committed to Jesus Christ should define themselves and negotiate differences of conscience and opinion. Roman soldiers had destroyed the Jerusalem temple while quashing an uprising by Judean Jews in 70 CE, raising concerns for certain Christ-followers about the right ways and places to worship God and perhaps leaving those who pledged themselves to a crucified Savior ostracized or worried about ostracism by their neighbors. By and large, the church had become mostly a gentile phenomenon. Jews were largely unpersuaded by its messianic preaching, and in some settings strains and even contempt were intensifying between this emerging movement with Jewish origins and Jews who did not embrace Jesus as the Christ. Finally, Jesus had not returned in glory, despite traditions that taught believers to expect he would soon. The perceived delay might have stoked

confusion, disillusionment, or attrition. Just one of those dynamics carried, at the very least, a potential to undermine the convictions and outlooks held by people committed to following Jesus.

In that environment of change, discernment, and possible instability, the author of the Gospel according to Luke wrote a second narrative that might bolster the faith of his fellow believers, just as he expected his previous Gospel would (Luke 1:1–4; cf. Acts 1:1–2). Eventually the wider church came to call this second narrative the Acts of the Apostles.

Instead of writing a theological treatise, an extended prayer, a manual for leading healthy congregations, a rousing sermon on the merits of evangelism, or a list of practical instructions, the author opted to tell a story about the early years of the church's existence. Perhaps he had a sense of how people look to stories about their history to assist them in making their way in the world, as they navigate everything that makes life at turns routine, exhilarating, and disappointing. We write, read, cherish, and argue over stories about our past because they help us express who we are.

One of the principal ways Acts offers its audiences a basis for renewed confidence and hope is its depiction of the ascended Jesus Christ as still active and powerful. If the author of any of the other three canonical Gospels wrote a sequel, we do not know about it. Those books conclude with Jesus's resurrection and, in some of them, a commissioning to his followers. When we read Acts after Luke, however, the story of the ascended Jesus continues beyond those events. It extends into the activity, words, and discoveries of his followers. Jesus's followers, collectively and individually, provide a living expression of God's salvation and God's faithfulness. Empowered by the heaven-sent Holy Spirit, the first generation of believers continues the ministry Jesus launched. They begin in Jerusalem, expand into nearby regions, and finally reach the imperial capital of Rome.

Acts recounts selected stories, although certainly not the entire story, involving a handful of prominent church leaders during the period from roughly 30 to the early 60s CE. As those leaders boldly bear witness to what God has done and continues to accomplish through Jesus Christ, they announce the fulfillment of the salvation God previously promised, form new communities of believers, challenge familiar religious assumptions, suffer chastisement from various authorities, and even provoke the accusation that they are

disrupting Roman norms and "turning the world upside down" (17:6). From start to finish, Acts tells a story of divinely aided adventure, discovery, risk, and perseverance. Missteps occur at times, too. The church's experience falls far short of utopian.

Acts is not a dispassionate, comprehensive chronicle of actual events written by an unprejudiced researcher. It is, like much ancient historiography was, an exciting and imaginative retelling of an era in a style meant to call attention to God's influence in the emergence of the church. It pulls its audiences into experiencing a story replete with exploits, dangers, delights, head-scratching coincidences, and narrow escapes. Written with the perspectival benefit and theological confidence that hindsight provides when decades pass, the narrative ushers its audiences back through time. It does so with the assurance that God was guiding the people of the nascent church in the right directions and accompanying them in all their setbacks and discoveries. The story implicitly prompts believers to remember where they came from and how they got to where they are. Along the way, Acts zeroes in on a few prominent believers, featuring Peter and Paul while leaving eleven apostles and countless other men and women mostly out of the picture. The limited scope of the narrative makes it unwise for anyone to refer to the book as *the* history of *the* early church.

Acts also nudges audiences to remember who their God is. Consistently the book casts its adventures as evidence of God's presence and power manifested in, through, around, and beyond the church. In the episodes Acts describes, as well as in how it describes them, the narrative urges readers to perceive divine faithfulness on display in the church's early years. As Paul S. Minear puts it, scenes in Acts

> were designed not alone as illustrations of Christian virtues, but as testimonies to the resilient powers of the Holy Spirit. Each hazard that was overcome provided its own confirmation of the hope of Israel. Each episode added its evidence that the very conditions which fueled anxiety could fuel confidence. (1973, 139)

The basic outlook in Acts, given the historical setting in which it originated, is this: God, who proved faithful to the people of Israel through Jesus Christ and faithful to the first generations of believers through the Holy Spirit, remains faithful still, even as the church finds itself confronted by new challenges and opportunities. Acts

prompts its readers to regard themselves as members of a dynamic, inclusive, and prophetic community that was from its beginning called into being by God's Spirit and sustained by God's faithfulness. The community is therefore well positioned to manage any changes or complications that come its way.

There are, of course, many ways for commentaries to examine Acts. Some aspire to establish whether the individual episodes in Acts really occurred as described or not. Some comb Acts for evidence to help reconstruct the nuances of Christian self-definition after the apostolic era. Some attempt to shine more light on the history that Acts does not recount, putting the book in conversation with ancient writings such as other New Testament texts, additional Christian literature, and contemporary historians. This commentary, while it travels along those avenues of inquiry, mostly seeks to inhabit the story Acts relates. The commentary aims to illuminate and scrutinize the theological outlook of Acts to consider how our interaction with the narrative might still bolster Christian faith and make it more informed, imaginative, and critical. The intention is not to supply an apology for Acts and its theological points of view, but to help preachers and teachers engage the story in ways that help them celebrate, seek out, and proclaim God's faithfulness in similar ways.

THE ORIGINS OF ACTS

The preponderance of evidence from Luke and Acts indicates that the same person wrote both books. The person's identity remains a mystery, however. Even though other Christian literature from the latter half of the second century refers to the author as someone named Luke, there is no compelling reason to identify that person with a man named Luke who is mentioned in passing elsewhere in the New Testament (Col 4:14; 2 Tim 4:11; Phlm 24). The author was probably a man, given how the perspective of both books appears ensconced in the privileges, concerns, and outlook of educated free males in Greco-Roman society. He writes in a relatively refined but not particularly elegant style of Greek. His narratives employ Greco-Roman rhetorical conventions and refer to the Septuagint (a Greek translation of Scriptures created when most Jews were becoming less conversant in Hebrew and Aramaic). Nothing about the rhetoric, vocabulary, and

perspective of Luke or Acts gives reason to assume the author was a physician. His comments in Luke 1:2 reveal that he came to faith in Jesus sometime after the first generation or two of Christ-followers. The significant differences between his depiction of Paul in Acts and Paul's own presentation of himself in his epistles cast serious doubt on any supposition that the author accompanied Paul or knew him well (see the excurses "The Life of Paul, according to Acts," pp. 132–33, and "First-Person-Plural Narration," pp. 214–15).

The question of when the author wrote Acts generates significant scholarly debate, more than a commentary of this scope can enumerate. The most durable hypotheses assume a composition date around 80–90 CE. Those hypotheses stand up well to challenges from proposals that contend for a date in the early second century.

Surviving Greek manuscripts evince a lively history of editing the book of Acts. One family of manuscripts preserves what scholars call the "D-text" (once referred to as the "Western text") of Acts, a version of the story about 10 percent longer than the canonical one. Material in the D-text was added around 150 CE by one or more authors who inserted details, enhanced several connections between scenes, and exacerbated a sense of blame and criticism toward Jews outside the church. The differences among the extant versions of Acts remind us that textual transmission was often a lively, creative process and that tensions between church and synagogue continued to stretch and fray into the second century. This commentary treats only the canonical version of Acts.

Acts is the sequel to Luke, and the same author is responsible for both books, but those claims do not imply a seamless sense of uniformity between the two, especially in their narrative style and theological claims. Nevertheless, Luke includes themes and emphases that appear to anticipate stories subsequently told in Acts, such as the importance of worship and prayer and the promise of divine support to believers who have to provide testimony about their faith to authorities. Likewise, Acts occasionally takes its bearings from signposts Luke erects, most explicitly in the opening verses of Acts but also in the attention the narrative gives to the prophetic character of Christian witness and to the resurrection and ascension of Jesus.

The convention of referring to both books together as Luke-Acts is useful, for it invites readers to appreciate the complexity of a two-part narrative that is not utterly consistent but is meaningfully

coherent. By keeping Luke on the table while analyzing Acts, as this commentary often seeks to do, readers keep past and present in a dynamic conversation (Marguerat 2002, 43–64). Being mindful of the sequential and theological connections between Luke and Acts respects the outlook of both books well, since they insist on rooting Jesus and his good news in God's faithfulness in the past while also proclaiming something new about Jesus and the church that continues his ministry in his name.

STORY AND HISTORY

Many of the events Acts describes stir up amazement. They also have a way of generating skepticism, at least in modern contexts. Jesus's followers perform "signs and wonders," as he does in the Gospels, when they heal ailments, cast out unclean spirits, and restore dead people to life. Three times God delivers them from incarceration when chains and locked doors fail to do their jobs. People see visions, with some of those experiences guiding them into divinely orchestrated meetings with others. Paul survives a harrowing shipwreck and shakes off a bite from a venomous snake while experiencing no harm. The Spirit of the Lord even snatches Philip from a wilderness road and deposits him miles away in the town of Azotus. Events less patently miraculous but still extraordinary also occur, such as when Paul easily quiets an angry mob so they can hear him calmly explain himself and when others spirit Paul to safety just in the nick of time before crowds succeed in killing him.

The narrative occasionally thrills (and potentially frightens) readers with its liking for tales of divine intervention, dangerous conflicts, humorous retribution, courtroom showdowns, and massive crowds eager to express faith in Jesus Christ. In all of its narrative pageantry and focus on divine guidance Acts resembles numerous kinds of ancient literature, including stories from the Old Testament, nonbiblical historiography written by Jews, other Greco-Roman historiography, epic poems in the lineage of Homer's and Virgil's classics, and popular novels. Even as Luke-Acts introduces itself with a preface that prepares readers to encounter a report of researched events (Luke 1:1–4), that does not rule out rhetorical flourishes.

Those who wrote history in the Greco-Roman world were expected to write entertaining stories meant to help audiences experience the events, movements, and persons who made history. Historians composed speeches they thought would fit a historical moment. They embellished details to heighten drama. The lines we draw to divide fact and fiction in modern cultures would have been lost on the people who first read or heard Acts (L. Alexander 2005, 133–63).

Ancient audiences also expected historiography to help them probe the causes of events. Few if any ancient people thought that causality could be limited to what we today would categorize as political calculations, economic pressures, or sociological dynamics. Suprahuman forces, whether fate, deities, or other powers, played a part in everything. For the book of Acts, of course, the God of Israel and Jesus Christ is that primary power. A main concern of Acts is to help its readers find their place in that world, a world in which Jesus is Lord. Acts urges them to know that the church experiences its joys and disappointments in a world in which God can be trusted to be working out God's purposes. A more detailed analysis of the particular ways that Acts goes about relating a theological historical narrative that would resonate with ancient audiences exceeds the scope of this commentary, but Scott Shauf (2015) and Daniel Marguerat (2002, 1–42) provide useful introductions.

None of this means to imply that the story Acts tells is entirely a product of the author's imagination. Understanding Acts in its ancient literary milieu nevertheless frees us from the burden of repeatedly asking and venturing answers to questions like these: Did it really happen just like that? Is that exactly the itinerary they followed? Is that a sermon someone actually preached in the first century? Interpreters will continue to debate the plausibility of particular claims, scenes, and details in Acts. Some of those, such as Paul residing and preaching in Ephesus over an extended period, are not only plausible but are attested by other New Testament literature. Many other elements, such as the thrilling account of a near riot in the theater of Ephesus, are likely the product of imagination or exaggeration. That does not mean they do not convey an account of what the early church's "history" was like. It is not necessary to defend Acts as a precise record of events to appreciate its story and the theological points it seeks to make about the church's early years.

ANCIENT CONCERNS THAT ANIMATE ACTS

Some of the general concerns that occupied Jesus-followers during the late first century CE have already been named. Acts does not tell its story amid those concerns to create a record for posterity or to generate nostalgia for the past. The creation of Acts was a pastorally minded effort to reinforce audiences' faith in Jesus Christ, but there are more specific motives that play a part in how the narrative might have accomplished that aim. Seven themes point to some of the book's key concerns and the theological perspectives it offered—and still offers—the church. Surveying these topics helps prepare us to encounter Acts with insights that acknowledge the circumstances in which the book first circulated.

The Church's History and Future as Testimony to God's Fidelity

A passing remark from the German New Testament scholar Ernst Käsemann has become nearly axiomatic in Acts scholarship: "You do not write the history of the Church, if you are expecting the end of the world to come any day" (1982, 28). His basic point is that the sheer composition of Acts indicates a significant development in the early church: ancient believers were coming to terms with the reality that Jesus might not return as quickly as first expected and thus the church could have a long life span ahead of it. To prepare for its future, the church needs to know who it is. Acts looks backward in time so it might equip its audiences with the theological insights they need to go forward.

Acts emphasizes the power of the church's originating events—not only discrete instances such as Jesus's ascension, Pentecost, and the establishment of Christian communities in major cities, but also the overriding perseverance of the word of God, which finds ever-expanding audiences in a broad spectrum of regions and cultural settings. The narrative spotlights heroic individuals who perform brave deeds, but the focus returns again and again to God's consistent accompaniment and empowerment. Acts is a story about divine faithfulness, not an encomium about founding figures. A basic theological assertion implied in the narrative is that the church's mere existence and resilience through its earliest decades testifies to God's explicit and implicit fidelity. As communities of Christ-followers

ponder their future, therefore, Acts spurs them to recognize that their existence and faithful living project a similar theological confidence.

Old and New Aspects of God's Salvation

God's faithfulness can be glimpsed in the experiences of the early church, yet Acts also locates it earlier, especially in the life, ministry, execution, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, as well as in his outpouring of the Holy Spirit. When addressing Jewish audiences and when defending themselves against accusations brought by opponents who are Jewish, the main protagonists in Acts—who are all Jewish themselves—repeatedly insist that their faith in Jesus does not entail a departure from Jewish beliefs and hopes. The salvation God provides through Jesus Christ fulfills promises previously made in Scripture. Acts takes great effort to remind its audiences that their faith in Jesus anchors them in the history of both the God and the people of Israel.

At the same time, the narrative keeps attention on new discoveries that arise in the aftermath of Jesus's resurrection and the arrival of the Holy Spirit. The most stunning and far-reaching discovery involves the decision not to require gentiles who embrace Christ to adhere to Jewish legal requirements, such as circumcision and all of Torah's dietary laws. Additional surprises include Samaritans' positive response to the good news about Jesus and Jesus's dramatic revelations to both Saul the archpersecutor and a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The narrative conditions readers to expand their imaginations for what is possible in a world in which death's power has been overwhelmed and the Spirit is empowering new expressions of connection and care among people. Acts frustrates readers who seek predictability and uniformity in their theology. Ancient readers might have been left with the impression that there are still plenty more implications to Jesus's resurrection that they have yet to discover, especially when it comes to the question of the range of humanity who find belonging in the church. Modern readers might come to expect similar discoveries.

The Church and the Ministry of Jesus

Acts characterizes believers as responders instead of innovators. God leads and empowers the church. In the opening scene, Jesus commissions his followers to bear witness to what they have experienced, but

only after they wait for the Holy Spirit's arrival. When a new opportunity or discovery arises, usually some kind of divine intrusion is behind it. The church in Acts, seeking to be responsive to God's leading, endeavors to keep pace with new developments. Sometimes people outside the church's mainstream or its expected decision-making apparatus offer a prophetic insight or recount an experience that upends expectations.

The church does not conduct its own ministry in Acts. It continues the ministry Jesus began. The commentary explains specific details, but one general way the narrative positions Jesus's followers as his representatives in ministry involves parallels between Jesus and the book's two most prominent characters, Peter and Paul. All three of them perform similar deeds in Luke (Jesus) and Acts (Peter and Paul): they heal people who cannot walk, restore people who touch things such as their clothes or shadows, resuscitate people who have died, prevail in contests with satanic adversaries, and are arrested by authorities with bad intentions. The parallels go beyond narrative aesthetics. They intimate the continuation of Jesus's ministry. The church's public work, therefore, involves more than imitation, filling a gap left by Jesus's departure, or obedience to instructions. Jesus himself remains present to the world, in part through the compassion, preaching, and common life of his followers.

A Wide Range of Culture

The whole Roman Empire figures in Acts, and the narrative leads readers into many of its regions. No other New Testament writing covers so much physical and cultural geography. Acts assures its readers that Christian faith can take root in any social context. At the same time, the church tends to look different in different places. Various speeches take note of distinctive local cultural assumptions. Paul's words to the leaders of sophisticated Athens would sound out of place in rustic Lystra, and vice versa, even though he appeals to similar topics in both locales. Moreover, we observe different ways of discerning God's prompting and different leadership structures in communities of believers across the pages of Acts. Even while the narrative keeps prominent the expanding church's links to Jerusalem and its origins there, Acts also depicts congregations that grow in new settings. Acts does not promote an ecclesiology of assimilation,

in which people must surrender their ethnic particularities or even their Roman identities and conform to some sort of singular norm.

Authorities and Empire

People in Acts give testimony about Jesus Christ to elites in the Roman imperial apparatus. Early on, Peter and other apostles find themselves defending their actions and public statements before the high priest and other members of the Jerusalem-based religious aristocracy. Later, Paul has access to procurators, a client king, and other powerful Roman officials. Those scenes, as well as episodes in which Paul and his associates respond to public accusations against them in some of the most prominent cities in the empire, allow Acts to explore questions about whether the church and the good news pose threats to Roman values and prerogatives.

The narrative resists easy solutions, if our desire is to label Acts either pro-Roman or anti-Roman, conciliatory or defiant. None of those labels does justice to the complexity and ambivalence of the narrative. On one hand, people outside the church protest the ways in which they perceive believers' words and actions subverting elements of the status quo. On the other hand, Paul repeatedly insists he can be a Christ-follower without canceling his identity as a Roman and a Jew. Acts acknowledges that suspicions surround the church and that embracing Jesus Christ changes how people use their wealth and engage the wider religious context. God's oversight also occasionally frustrates authorities' attempts to obstruct the church's ministry and common life. Christ's followers implicitly challenge assumptions about Roman supremacy while nevertheless finding ways for the word of God to avail itself of the opportunities that the empire puts before it. Acts does not encourage its audiences to denounce the empire in any way, but it does imply that they should be prepared to fit uncomfortably and sometimes a little abrasively in the Roman world.

Celebration and Doxology

In its most entertaining scenes, Acts tells a story that sometimes appears overly idealized or too good to be true. People who obstruct or pervert the good news find themselves served an ignominious comeuppance.

Debates among believers over divisive issues conclude with easy consensus. Paul gets a hearing from the intellectual elites in Athens and the highest-ranking Roman officials in Judea and Cyprus. Tensions between Peter and Paul that we know about from other sources (e.g., Gal 2:1–14) go unmentioned in Acts. The rollicking character of the story issues a tacit invitation to praise, worship, and wonder. Acts does not deny the hardships the church faces, and so Acts does not discount the struggles and discouragements its ancient readers certainly experienced from time to time. Acts calls a church that needs a boost or renewal to find it in doxology, by delighting in a God who refuses to abandon the church and the world in which it dwells.

Paying attention to when Acts was written and acknowledging its occasionally playful style is crucial, lest interpreters conclude the narrative offers either models for success or justifications for arrogant triumphalism. There is a difference between encouraging a discouraged church to persevere and fomenting a privileged church to pursue dominance. In recent centuries, and still today, specific episodes and general trends in Acts have been made to serve and legitimate colonial enterprises conducted by Christians who twist the good news into a license for missionary imperium, either because they love power or because they fear the contemporary church's loss of cultural influence. Reading Acts with attention to its ancient setting might call us back to a more humble reliance on the word of God and to greater trust in the Holy Spirit as the impetus to cultivate communities of mutual care.

The Church's Uneasy Relationship with Judaism

Almost all of the New Testament writings reveal aspects of the early church's relationship to Judaism. They directly address or indirectly provide evidence about how believers during the church's first generations were understanding their connections to the testimony of the Scriptures we now call the Old Testament as well as their connections to and disconnections from Jewish communities that did not follow Jesus as the Messiah. Acts generates significant controversy about these matters, because it devotes so much effort to describing strife between members of the church and representatives of the wider Jewish population. As a result, the narrative's portrayal of Jews inside and outside the church deserves careful attention.

By the latter decades of the first century, Christian communities were reckoning with the reality that most Jews remained unconvinced by the church's proclamation about Jesus Christ. Decades prior to the writing of Acts, in Romans 9–11 Paul offers an impassioned argument to refute the idea that God might have abandoned Jews as a consequence to their being unpersuaded about salvation provided through Jesus Christ. Acts appears to express a similar concern, but in narrative form, for it defends God's fidelity to covenantal pledges and Jewish hopes. Yet the narrative also adopts a prophetic posture toward the people of the world, including Jews, in the ways that Peter, Stephen, and Paul address their hearers. In other words, they exhort people to turn from their ignorance and recognize God's salvation in Jesus Christ. Those exhortations resemble the appeals of ancient Israel's and Judah's own prophets who saw restoration waiting on the other side of their stern entreaties.

The tensions that pulse through the narrative's prophetic admonitions and depictions of willful opposition give voice to some of the struggle, confusion, disappointment, and even resentment that likely characterized the circumstances in which Acts was written. For example, the Jerusalem priestly elite in Acts show no interest in paying attention to the apostles and the power at work in them. They are flat characters, depicted polemically as leaders uninterested in theological discussion but prone to violence. Other Jewish characters in Acts appear determined to discredit Paul at every turn. Scholars debate whether Acts reflects a time in history when Christ-followers were still urging Jews to embrace Jesus as the Christ or a time when the church had largely given up on actively evangelizing Jewish communities. The latter seems to be the case, although it is crucial to note that Acts does not imply that the door is shut or that decisions about the church's outreach are somehow final or a sign of God's rejection of Jews.

As the commentary demonstrates, Acts is often problematically unspecific when it labels opponents in certain scenes as "the Jews." The excursus "Paul's Jewish Opponents" (pp. 187–89) offers additional advice for interpreting those passages. In many scenes featuring Paul, he defends himself from insinuations that he has become an apostate to Judaism or has expressed hostility toward Judaism due to his embrace of Jesus as the Messiah. During most of Acts, Jewish leaders in the church intentionally reach out to other Jews, seeking

to persuade them that Jesus is the Messiah, while on three occasions Paul grows exasperated with Jewish audiences and announces his desire to preach instead to gentiles. We misread Acts if we equate Jewish groups that Acts sometimes keeps separate, such as Jewish authorities and "the people" in Jerusalem. It is vital that interpreters be as clear as possible about exactly who is upset at whom and why, when Acts provides enough details to make those distinctions in a given episode.

A way for Christian leaders to counter anti-Jewish ideas in Christian circles is to teach about the historical circumstances out of which the New Testament's polemic arose. Christian leaders also serve their congregations well when they model biblical interpretation that is critical, loving, reparative, and charitable. To assist those endeavors, the commentary often notes aspects of particular scenes in Acts that have a history of being weaponized.

INSIGHTS FROM READING ACTS TODAY

There probably has never been a time when church leadership was easy or comfortable. It is not today. Congregations struggle with unity. Often without knowing it, Christians absorb popular theological half-truths that undergird nationalist or neocolonial movements. Modern culture's fascination with efficiency and metrics makes it difficult to cut through the noise and discern faithful ways forward. We could make a long list. There are a number of ways the contemporary church might benefit from reading Acts, especially when we consider how Acts can empower congregations to understand their multifaceted witness to Christ as an expression of God's active commitment to transform the world.

First, the incarnational nature of the church and its ministry provides congregations with a powerful perspective on their identity and purpose. As discussed, Acts depicts the church's ministry as a continuation of Jesus's. The church's origins are an expression of its calling to bear witness to Jesus in its words, actions, and common life. A faithful reading of Acts will not direct attention to the past for sentimentality's sake but for summoning the church into the future aware of its intimate connection to Jesus. This does not mean the

church replaces Jesus or the church is infallible in any way. It means the church always carries in itself the vulnerability of Jesus's embodied ministry and the hope and power of his embodied resurrection and ascension.

Second, Acts reminds us of the plurality at the heart of Christianity, whether that resides in a story about a multilingual Pentecost experience or in the persistent movement of God's salvation across a variety of cultural horizons. This narrative full of travel and geographic expansion does not promote a theology of domination or homogeneity. It invites Jesus's followers to pass through thresholds with confidence in God's accompaniment and with a willingness to be surprised by who else belongs within their company.

Third, because Acts depicts believers responding to God with no blueprint but only a basic commission (1:8) and hope for the future, the narrative affirms the importance of interpreting our experiences through a theological lens. Coincidences happen in Acts, or people have experiences that appear unprecedented. Instead of dismissing those occurrences, the church gathers and discusses them. The church's people do not always agree, and sometimes they have to go back and reaffirm decisions previously made. Acts implicitly urges its readers to seek and then interpret signs of God's salvation occurring in their midst and beyond their sphere of familiarity. There is no guarantee that we will always get it right, and certainly no promise that people can reliably discern God's activity as it occurs; remember that Acts looks back on the church's earliest history with the benefit and creativity gained by decades of hindsight. Nevertheless, believers undertake their work in a posture of openness and responsiveness.

Finally, the narrative's penchant for wonder, adventure, and delight can lead congregations to expect more from God. Acts dares us to dream and to expect amazement. It insists that an ascended Jesus remains somehow active and will not be reduced to either a chummy personal deity stripped of mystery, an amorphous spiritual abstraction, or a moral exemplar. In settings where the church's common life has grown stale, cautious, or insular, the narrative might encourage us to take risks and be more alert for signs of the reign of God manifesting itself in our communities and world. Reading Acts might dare us to believe that God still can be involved in "turning the world upside down" (17:6) and coax us to get in on the action ourselves.

PREACHING AND TEACHING ON ACTS

This commentary addresses readers who inhabit theological communities, whether you are a preacher, teacher, student, or disciple who wonders how exploring Acts might prompt you and others in your orbit toward beneficial action, advocacy, community engagement, compassion, forgiveness, generosity, outreach, repair, repentance, solidarity, understanding, wonder, and worship. By offering historical, literary, rhetorical, and theological analysis of Acts, the commentary explores how our encounters with the narrative impel us to think about who God is and what a life of communal faith looks like for us who dwell in a diverse world marked by countless commercial pressures and various forms of religious devotion. Acts offers preachers and teachers much to consider as they ponder their vocations of nourishing theological imaginations centered around a God whose mercy and power to transform exceed our limited ability to comprehend.

Toward those ends, I have devoted myself to studying Acts, of course, but also to studying other scholars and paying careful attention to the longings and joys I encounter in congregations. My reflections on Acts aspire to speak into contemporary theological topics and contexts. I say this while knowing that contemporary theological topics and contexts are numerous and diverse, so no one can speak to or from all of them. I have tried to listen widely and write in ways that leave space for people from a range of Christian traditions and social locations to find the conversation generative and a route to additional discussions and discoveries. My own theological biases—as well as my particular identity, context, and privileges—surely manifest themselves in what I have to say and what I fail to say. No commentary can account for every detail in Acts and the interpretive debates that swirl around the narrative. I trust that other commentaries, both current and future, cover what I bypass.

Obviously there are many ways one might go about preaching and teaching on Acts, depending on the season, setting, liturgical norms, and biblical texts that we have in front of us. As often as space allows, the commentary highlights opportunities for preachers and teachers to make meaningful connections. It also notes specifically when the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) assigns a passage from Acts. I do this not to diminish traditions that use different or

no lectionaries but to equip preachers and teachers to face the distinctive challenges that come from the RCL's assignments. Each year, the RCL makes a passage from Acts the first reading every Sunday during Eastertide. That can disorient a preacher and a congregation, since all but the first chapter of Acts takes place during and after the original Pentecost event, fifty days *after* the first Easter. Acts nevertheless has a certain resonance with the church's annual celebration of Christ's resurrection, for its story depicts Jesus's followers in a posture of ongoing discovery as they consider Jesus's death, resurrection, ascension, and gift of the Holy Spirit as evidence of God's faithfulness. Acts delights in recounting the collective wonder and courage that arise from encountering a risen Savior and the prophetic initiative of God's Spirit. A key premise to the entire narrative of Acts is that Easter is just a beginning. It sets in motion all sorts of divine disruptions to the status quo.

THE FORMAT AND NOMENCLATURE OF THE COMMENTARY

Any attempt to organize and outline Acts makes implicit claims about what the story is about and what holds it together. I find that framing Acts according to a geographical scheme makes the most sense. The table of contents offers an outline of Acts that construes the book as an unfolding journey, following certain representatives of the ancient church as they travel into various lands, social settings, cultural contexts, and political dynamics. The specific way this commentary arranges Acts and gives titles to sections and scenes builds off of an outline created by F. Scott Spencer (2004a) and subsequently enlarged by John J. Pilch (2004). Appealing to the itinerant and expansionist motifs of Acts in this way allows readers to remain consistently cognizant of Jesus's final statement to his followers before his ascension: "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (1:8). At the same time, the outline also highlights the movement, vivacity, adventurousness, and unexpectedness that weave through the entire story.

Acts usually offers readers very little insight into the specific organization and activities of groups of Christ-followers. We know those groups are there, usually beyond the narrative stage, but we do

not see them in action very often. The commentary refers often to these groups as Christian "communities," but that term should not be taken to imply that Acts depicts a given group of believers as eager to separate themselves from other social circles. The people who affiliated with the early church did not necessarily disaffiliate from a local synagogue, extended family, or professional guild. Belonging in a Christian community is a significant thing, as Acts tells the story, for it locates a person in an inclusive alternative society. But the use of "community" should not imply that Acts has a sectarian outlook, as if being part of the church entails an exclusive or isolationist marker of someone's identity.

Although the same author undoubtedly was responsible for both the Gospel of Luke and Acts, I refrain from the common practice of saying, "Luke says . . ." when I describe something the narrator of Acts reveals or a point that the narrative implies. I prefer "Acts says . . . ," not because I want to make a statement about the identity of the ancient author of Luke-Acts, but because I wish to avoid confusing the message of Acts with the message of the Gospel of Luke. I am not implying that Acts (the narrative) somehow speaks with a clear, singular voice that readers must decode, as if interpretation entails being instructed by a text or as if Acts *contains* a message. Nor do I dispute the basic narrative unity that Luke and Acts share. Rather, I aim to keep attention on how we might interact with the narrative dynamics we encounter specifically in Acts and explore the particular theological landscape that those dynamics evoke.

To avoid implying that there was a firm and exclusive distinction between first-century people who followed Jesus and the wider Jewish populations who did not embrace Jesus as the Christ, I avoid using the noun *Christian(s)* to name the former. Likewise, the term *Christianity* generates confusion if used to talk about a first-century movement, because it erroneously implies that a fully formed religious system existed entirely apart from Judaism during the period of history Acts describes. In two places Acts uses the noun *Christian(s)* to name some people, but the term appears to be employed pejoratively in those settings, as a term others use to scoff at members of the church (11:26; 26:28).

When this commentary does occasionally use the word *Christian,* it is employed in one of two ways. Frequently it appears as an adjective to indicate something in Acts in terms of its connection

to Jesus Christ, such as "Christian preaching" or "Christian community." Second, as a reference to people in the modern world, the nouns *Christian(s)* and *Christianity* are of course acceptable.

When referring to people in Acts and in the ancient world, I use the nouns *believer(s)* and *Christ-follower(s),* even though I acknowledge that both of them have their shortcomings. "Believers" (a term Acts uses in 10:45; 11:21; 18:27; 19:18; 21:20) risks being too vague, since it doesn't describe what or whom someone believes, and it can intimate that people outside the church do not "believe" or "trust" in anything valid. "Christ-followers" does not align well with the theological rhetoric of Acts, since the narrative does not explicitly describe discipleship as an act of "following." A different term Acts uses rather frequently, *brothers,* is overdue for retirement, although replacing it with *siblings* is generally a good idea when talking about believers in general. Nevertheless I steer clear from familial language in this commentary when describing the church.

Part One: Beginning the Journey in the Power of the Spirit

The Holy Spirit Inaugurates "the Last Days," Declaring the Fullness of God's Salvation

Acts 1–2

Acts commences with world-changing events. Even before the Holy Spirit arrives with grand spectacle at the festival of Pentecost, as described in the second chapter, the narrative opens with explicit and implicit forecasts about the Spirit's vital role in all that follows. Before ascending into the sky, Jesus commissions his followers with an assurance that the Holy Spirit will empower them, recalling parts of the Gospel of Luke (Luke 3:16; 24:49). The focus on the Holy Spirit might prompt readers to hark back to Luke 1–2 and those chapters' indications of the Holy Spirit's agency in the experiences and prophetic insights of Elizabeth, Zechariah, John, Mary, and Simeon. In that Gospel, the Spirit announces and initiates the coming of Jesus. In Acts, the Spirit launches and then accompanies Jesus's followers as they continue the ministry he began. Acts begins by recalling hopes raising expectations.

This initial part of the narrative offers much for theological reflection on Jesus's ascension and the events of Pentecost, which are the two primary events in these chapters. The rest of Acts picks up and amplifies many of the themes that appear around those events, especially as Jesus, angelic figures, and the apostle Peter describe the significance of what is happening: the departure of Jesus and the arrival of the Holy Spirit signal the dawning of a new era in the unfolding of God's salvation. The accent on divine salvation (2:21, 40, 47) resumes a theme present also in Jesus's ministry (e.g., Luke 1:69,

77; 2:11; 3:6; 19:10). In Acts, the offer of this salvation, attested by the power of the Holy Spirit, indicates that a new, ultimate chapter in human history ("the last days"; 2:17) has begun. At last, through Jesus Christ, God is fulfilling a long-awaited promise (2:33, 38–39). Interpreters benefit from tending carefully to the theological themes in these passages, for they prepare us to encounter the forthcoming deeds and preaching of Jesus's followers as descriptions and embodiments of an anticipated and emerging era.

Jesus's followers proclaim God's salvation by bearing witness (1:8, 22; 2:32) to Jesus, specifically to their experience of his resurrection. According to their Spirit-inspired words, Jesus's resurrection, which culminates in his ascension to an authoritative position at God's "right hand" (2:25, 33–34), demonstrates his identity as the Christ (or Messiah; the titles are synonyms, as both mean the divinely "Anointed One"). Part of the believers' witness is spoken, as in the public sermon Peter preaches on Pentecost, and part of it is enacted, as manifested in a community of mutual care and commitment that springs into existence when the Spirit comes. In Acts, references to receiving the message of salvation, undergoing baptism, and receiving the Holy Spirit almost always include a sense of belonging; believers, without regard to their identity, advantages, or background, find a place in a community composed of people who, together, are being "saved" (2:47). Community is more than a benefit of salvation through Jesus Christ; it is a living, breathing, and loving expression of it.

ACTS 1:1–26
Days of Learning, Commissioning, and Preparing

Acts introduces itself as a continuation of the Gospel according to Luke. The first scenes renarrate and expand Luke's final verses, telling of Jesus's ascension and the reaction of his followers. Although the risen Christ remains physically present for only a few verses, Acts indicates he will remain involved in the activity that follows. Luke, "the first book," describes "all that Jesus began to do and to teach," according to verse 1. The inceptive sense of "began" matters for the story Acts tells. It implies Jesus does not stop acting and instructing after being taken into the sky. He will not be idle and absent from the world in the pages to come but present or influential in new ways.

In addition, Jesus's disciples learn their primary role before he physically departs: to bear witness to him as people empowered by the Holy Spirit. They respond by waiting. Approximately 120 of his followers obediently remain in Jerusalem, where they spend ten days praying and trusting God to determine a substitute twelfth apostle. Anticipation becomes the foundational characteristic of the post-ascension community. Believers await the fulfillment of Jesus's promise about their new identity as witnesses. The promise will tie them together in new ways and eventually propel them outward, beyond Jerusalem.

1:1–11. Jesus's Followers Witness His Ascension

Like the Gospel of Luke, Acts is addressed to Theophilus, a name that means "Lover of God" or "Loved by God." The name could be a generic attempt to address any and all Christian readers, or it could indicate an actual but otherwise unknown historical figure. Several parts of "the first book" to Theophilus anticipate that the resurrection and ascension are hardly the end of the story for Jesus and his followers. In Luke, Jesus signals that his apostles and others will play significant parts in what will come (e.g., Luke 21:12–19; 22:28–30; 24:46–49). He makes explicit promises about the Holy Spirit aiding them (e.g., Luke 11:13; 12:11–12; cf. 4:14–19), as well as an implicit one in Luke 24:49, when he tells them to remain in Jerusalem until they are "clothed with power from on high."

Establishing an additional narrative connection between the two books, Acts resumes the narration to Theophilus by offering a new account of Jesus's ascension, an event that also appears at the end of the Gospel (Luke 24:50–52). With the ascension, the beginning of Acts and the conclusion of Luke overlap, although Acts offers a different point of view on Jesus's departure, which reminds readers that the two books occasionally differ in their perspectives. In this case, the incongruity concerns the timing of the ascension in relation to Easter. In Luke, all the events of the Gospel's final chapter—from empty tomb to ascension—appear to occur on a single day. In Acts, a passing reference to "forty days" of the apostles' encountering and learning from Jesus tells a different story. "Forty days" is a figure of speech, a common biblical approximation (e.g., Gen 7:12; Exod 24:18; Luke 4:2), but it nevertheless denotes a period much longer

than one day. Acts does not address the discrepancy; the book's purposes do not include documenting precise timelines. Neither does Acts have anything to say about what exactly Jesus teaches the apostles concerning "the kingdom of God," but apparently the time they share equips the apostles for prominent roles later in the story.

Jesus's ascension occurs on the Mount of Olives, just east of Jerusalem (v. 12). It happens after "they had come together" (v. 6), which could indicate that his audience now includes more than the apostles (see v. 15). Before he departs, they ask a question that stems from their conviction that they are in the presence of the Messiah: whether Jesus will now "restore the kingdom to Israel." They hope the people of Israel will finally be restored to eminence and political autonomy. They anticipate deliverance from Roman occupation. They speak like people who take the prophetic canticles of Luke 1–2 seriously and want to know whether Gabriel means it when the angel tells Mary that her son will occupy "the throne of his ancestor David" and rule "forever" (Luke 1:32–33). Jesus, however, deflects the question; the topic is a matter of God's authority. He does not treat the question as misguided, just not appropriate for the current time. Not all promises find their fulfillment in the book of Acts. Calendars and schedules will not help believers in the work that lies before them in this narrative. As they are about to learn, maps might prove more useful.

Jesus's followers ask a reasonable question about Israel's restoration. Nothing in this scene indicates that they crave power for themselves or desire Israel to become a new Rome. As Jews, they speak as representatives of oppressed and disappointed people who long for liberation from the powers that occupy and tax the land that God promised to Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants. They believe that Jesus will be the one to "restore" what is lacking. Christian theology, at least as the New Testament imagines it, tends to be uninterested in land and restored political autonomy as a component of God's salvation. As a result, Christian interpreters sometimes have dismissive inclinations toward the disciples' question and its appreciation for the spiritual importance of physical places. It is worth reiterating, then, that Jesus does not belittle or correct the question. Instead, he points his followers toward their roles in the ongoing inbreaking of "the kingdom" that he embodies, implying that their grand expectations are about to be recalibrated, not invalidated. The scope of God's kingdom is wider than they imagine at this point.

They also will discover that borders and the imperial arteries that connect disparate locations are more passable than they realize. "The kingdom" is going everywhere. Jesus's followers are unknowingly perched on the brink of a massive conceptional and theological shift about the geographical dimensions of God's promised salvation.

Jesus moves on to commission his followers. They have work to do, which relates in some ways to "the kingdom" (vv. 3, 6) that they desire and that Jesus has inaugurated. He frames his commission as a declaration, not a command or a hope. He asserts: those who receive the Holy Spirit "will be my witnesses" (v. 8). He also speaks of the Spirit as a source of "power" (recalling Luke 24:49). Beginning "not many days from now," the Spirit will empower them to give testimony in a variety of ways. The Spirit provides boldness, prompts prophetic insight, and is a sign of God's salvation (see 2:17–18; 4:8, 29–31; 5:32; 7:55; 19:6; Luke 12:11–12). Testimony is the central, if not sole, purpose of the ministry that Jesus's followers conduct in the Spirit's power. Faithful responses to that testimony, if they occur, will be God's responsibility to generate. Jesus commissions his "witnesses" simply to declare what they know to be true, which is the job of a witness in legal venues as well as in everyday life. Jesus does not encourage them to see themselves as learned theologians, gifted rhetoricians, heroic conquerors, aggressive polemicists, savvy strategists, or heaven-sent colonizers. They should report what they themselves have experienced. As Acts rolls on, they will do so, in word and deed, as individuals and in communities. Although the Greek word translated "witnesses" is also the source of the English word *martyr,* Acts does not use the term with martyrdom in view (as happens in Rev 1:5; 2:13; 17:6).

Jesus's commission also provides a geographical framework for laying out what is to come in Acts. Believers' testimony begins where they are, in Jerusalem. In time it will spread to the surrounding region (Judea) and to the north (Samaria). The thought of linking Judea and Samaria might sound odd to some of Jesus's contemporaries (and maybe delightful to others), given the tensions and rivalries between ancient Judeans' and Samaritans' religious convictions and ethnic identities. Finally, Jesus's followers will bear witness "to the ends of the earth." He does not define where those ends reside. From a Roman point of view, the city of Rome, where the narrative eventually concludes, would not qualify as "the ends of the earth."

Probably the expression refers to places on the edges of the Roman cultural mainstream—places that most people in the empire would consider "out of the way" or quaintly exotic, such as Ethiopia (8:26–40), Lystra (14:8–18), and Malta (28:1–10).

Most of all, the reference to "the ends of the earth" is evocative; it injects a sense of mystery and adventure into the story's itinerary. It also instills faith that Jesus will accompany his followers as they offer testimony in lands both familiar and strange. "The kingdom" will encompass more than the people of Israel alone. Acts situates the grand vision for the church's geographic expansion and wide-ranging cultural inclusivity in Jesus's parting words to his ambassadors, not in any judicious calculations they might make. In that regard, verse 8 functions as a thematic thesis for the whole narrative and a theological catchword for understanding the church's calling.

The description of Jesus's ascension is straightforward, although the significance of the event remains more indistinct. Jesus is "lifted up" in verse 9 (cf. a similar verb in vv. 2, 11; Luke 24:51 employs a different verb). He does not ascend on his own. A cloud, indicating God's presence (e.g., Exod 13:21; 1 Kgs 8:10–11; Luke 9:34–35; 21:27), obscures him from sight until he arrives "in heaven." One understands why the witnesses keep staring skyward, apparently dumbfounded.

The sudden appearance of "two men in white robes," maybe the same heavenly messengers who speak to the women inside Jesus's empty tomb (Luke 24:4), brings a gentle admonishment. Just as the women in the tomb should not "look for the living among the dead" (Luke 24:5), Jesus's witnesses need not "stand looking up toward heaven." Jesus will come back "in the same way" that they saw him go. In other words, he will return as the resurrected (and therefore still embodied) being they just saw, once again bathed with the power of God represented by a cloud. The two messengers recall Jesus's words in Luke 21:25–28 (cf. Dan 7:13), in which he speaks of his coming "with power and great glory" on a day of "redemption." Their words provide additional assurance that Jesus's followers' earlier question about when "the kingdom" will come is not misguided, just mistimed.

Within and beyond ancient Judaism there exist many stories about assumptions, heavenly journeys, and apotheoses. Esteemed figures such as Enoch, Moses, Elijah, Romulus, and assorted Roman emperors feature in those stories, but the account of Jesus's ascension

is too brief to support conclusions that Acts is responding to or modeling itself after one or more specific texts. Clearly, however, Acts presents the event as an embodied ascension; Jesus does not enter heaven as a spirit. Upcoming passages characterize the ascended Jesus as exalted (2:33), enthroned in power (2:30, 34–35), and glorified (3:13). Acts does not draw fine points of distinction between those descriptions. None of them suggests that Jesus ceases to be embodied once he leaves his followers.

This passage is of course fitting for teaching and preaching each year when the church celebrates the Ascension of the Lord on the fortieth day of Eastertide. Since many congregations do not gather on Thursday, however, there is good reason to explore these verses on the subsequent Sunday. In fact, once every three years the Revised Common Lectionary does precisely that when it assigns 1:6–14 to Easter 7A.

As Peter's Pentecost sermon in chapter 2 confirms, Acts presents the ascension as a very significant event, an integral part of God's salvific work through Jesus Christ. Jesus's incarnation, public ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and bestowal of the Holy Spirit all participate in establishing him as the Christ. Those events depend on each other. It is vital to note that the ascension is not a story primarily about Jesus moving to a new location, now alongside God and unseen. Rather, as a story of Jesus's exaltation to God's "right hand" (2:25, 33–34; 5:31; Luke 20:42; 22:69), the ascension declares Jesus as the new recipient of authority within (and for the sake of) the whole world. His movement "into heaven" informs the narrative's sense of how to understand not only Jesus but also the earth and its peoples. The ascension does not remove Jesus from human experience. The ascension allows his presence to infuse all of human experience, all creation, and all earthly affairs. The boundaries between him and this world remain forever permeable.

Teaching and preaching about the ascension can help people better embrace the realities of Easter. Jesus's resurrection is not a resuscitation or a second chance at finishing a life. He emerges from the empty tomb transformed into a new kind of embodied existence. His ascension, then, means more than a reward bestowed upon him for his faithful service. It establishes the resurrected and still embodied Christ as Lord of all. At his ascension, Jesus becomes differently embodied, but still a crucified body (see Luke 24:39–43). In his

embodied ascension, we therefore perceive him as a Lord still shaped by his human vulnerability and commitment to liberation. Christian faith rightly responds to the ascension with praise and wonder.

The ascension narrative spurs the church to encounter the ascended Christ present among us *today*. Pondering this scene and its relevance for the present might move congregations during Eastertide beyond romanticizing the festival as an annual occasion for imaginatively transporting themselves back in time, as if Easter's goal is to meet Jesus walking to Emmaus, loitering in the garden outside his tomb, or levitating above a mountaintop. Nor is ascension faith preoccupied with escaping the world and leaving it behind. Finding the resurrected and ascended Jesus, serving him, and enjoying his benefits do not come from gazing up into the clouds but from carrying on the work he initiates.

1:12–26. Matthias Selected to Replace Judas

In 1:4–5 Jesus gives only a vague timeline for the Holy Spirit's arrival, but after the ascension his apostles and the larger group of remaining disciples appear to know that their only option is to wait. Although Acts provides no insight into their thoughts or emotions, they devote the transitional days to preparing themselves to respond to the Holy Spirit's initiative. It is enough. They remain together. They pray, both corporately and "constantly" (recalling Jesus in Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:28; 11:1; 18:1; 21:36). They tend the wound created by Judas's treachery (see Luke 22:3–6, 47–48).

Acts reminds us of the eleven remaining apostles' names (see Luke 6:13–16), even though most of them remain in the background, indistinguishable, as the narrative progresses. Ultimately, the story foregrounds God's work, not theirs. The others, approximately 120 more, are literally and functionally anonymous, except for Mary, Jesus's mother. The presence of women in this group should not be a surprise, given that Luke's Gospel introduces some of them (Luke 8:1–3; 23:55). This is, however, the first (and final) mention of Mary since Luke 8:19–21. We can conclude that her faithfulness, boldness, sagacity, and sense of wonder carry her forward (Luke 1:38, 45–55; 2:19, 51) into and through this waiting period, even after all she has endured. The simple mention of her name recalls the first two chapters of Luke, which tell stories of devout people who wait

for grand promises growing in Elizabeth's and Mary's bodies to reach fulfillment. Something similar is happening as Jesus's mother and his many disciples pray for days in a room upstairs (cf. Luke 22:12), waiting for the Holy Spirit's time to come. This is a different kind of infancy narrative. Now the church is undergoing a gestation of sorts.

When Peter speaks, he takes the position he will hold for most of the first twelve chapters of Acts: he is the most prominent figure in the Jerusalem church and the de facto spokesperson for the apostles. Jesus previously promised that Peter will have a leadership role after the crucifixion (Luke 22:31–32), so we can infer that his restoration occurs off the narrative stage sometime after his threefold denial (cf. Luke 22:54–62; 24:12, 34).

Peter instructs the others about the need to choose a replacement for Judas, to restore the number of apostles to twelve. The number corresponds to the twelve tribes of ancient Israel (see 26:7; Luke 22:30), for reasons that go unexplained. The narrative will not support an assumption that the apostles represent a replacement of Israel or that the church becomes an entirely new and different expression of Israel in God's eyes. More likely, the twelve apostles evoke a sense of completion and regathering. Their number offers a statement about God's historic commitment to ancient Israel and the Jews of the postexilic period, a commitment reaffirmed through Jesus Christ and what he sets in motion. In salvation through Jesus, God makes good on old promises, as Peter will soon explain in his Pentecost sermon (2:14–36). By determining a replacement for Judas, Jesus's followers do much more than fill an empty office. They declare that even Judas's sinfulness and the power of Satan, which drives Judas's malice (Luke 22:3, 53), cannot derail God's intentions.

Acts sheds no tears for Judas. At least, Peter does not. Judas's portrayal in the Gospel of Matthew may arouse sympathy in readers through his attempt to correct his error (Matt 27:3–10), but in Acts, Peter (whose own résumé of faithfulness is far from spotless) treats him as a scoundrel. Willie James Jennings responds to Peter with a vital reminder, lest any of us imitate the apostle by writing off the villains in our own lives: "The last word on Judas will not come from Peter. It will come from Jesus" (2017, 25). Judgment belongs to Jesus, not us (see also 10:42; 17:31).

The narrator interrupts Peter's instructions about the replacement process to explain the negative assessment of Judas (vv. 18–19).

The financial dimension of Judas's actions against Jesus is key to understanding him. Judas uses the price of his betrayal to buy a field. Purchasing land was a relatively secure way to preserve large sums of money, but in Judas's case his property somehow kills him. He falls and apparently disembowels himself on impact with the ground he bought. It is a gruesome image, probably an attempt to portray a comeuppance with morbid humor (see the excursus "Humor and Violent Retribution," pp. 78–80). Acts repeatedly signals that greed goes hand in hand with impure motives or a longing for power (see also 5:1–11; 8:18–24; 19:11–19). Soon we will encounter scenes that illustrate the opposite, when virtuous believers cash in their property and hand over their money to help others (2:44–45; 4:32–37). Acts implies, with a revised citation of Psalm 69:25, that Judas's "Field of Blood" becomes uninhabitable upon his death. Judas, spoiled by a greed that exposes his capitulation to Satan's corrupting power, spreads pollution. No wonder the surviving apostles desire to find a substitute as soon as possible.

Peter looks to Scripture to guide the group in discerning what they should do. He claims the Holy Spirit spoke through two psalms ascribed to David (Pss 69:25; 109:8), insofar as Peter finds in those psalms encouragement to determine a new apostle. In other words, the need to replace Judas is not an idea Peter generates on his own. He also proposes criteria for the replacement, not explicitly based on Scripture but resembling the other apostles' histories of having been with Jesus, for the most part, during the full extent of his public ministry and culminating in his resurrection. Acts does not divulge why the group nominates only two people or why they choose only men. Evidently some of the women among them satisfy all the other criteria (see Luke 8:1–3; 23:55; see also the excursus "Leadership and Decision Making," pp. 32–33).

Neither Barsabbas nor Matthias speaks, and neither is mentioned by name anywhere else in the New Testament. Everyone proceeds as though God is in control of the selection, for they cast lots to decide and pray for God's choice to be known through the process.

Lots had many uses in the ancient world, including gambling and divining the will of a god. "Lots" could refer to dice, colored markers, or other objects. In the Old Testament, lots are used to make choices about things such as temple officials, sacrificial animals, and selecting Saul as Israel's first king (1 Sam 10:20–21). The

method fits the moment, as the narrative conveys it, for the same Greek word denotes both Judas's forfeited "share" (v. 17) and the "lot" (v. 26) that indicates Matthias. This is the only occasion in which Acts describes lots as a means of decision making. The narrative prescribes no single method for discerning God's desires (see the excursus "Leadership and Decision Making," pp. 32–33). Acts is more concerned with depicting decisions as opportunities to interpret where God might be active in and around believers' experience. The repeated need for discernment in Acts highlights the ways in which the narrative portrays Jesus's followers as responsive to God's leading. They have to navigate unexpected developments by interpreting what God would have them do.

Only parts of this peculiar story appear in the Revised Common Lectionary. Probably to protect congregations from the unpleasantness of Judas's demise, the lectionary assigns 1:15–17, 21–26 for Easter 7B, nestled between the church's observances of the Ascension of the Lord and the Day of Pentecost. That liturgical timing is, indeed, also the setting of the story in Acts. The passage, especially if a teacher or preacher includes verses 12–14, nevertheless provides opportunities to explore questions about the church, no matter what the season. Those questions include: What does it mean for a congregation to wait for God's initiative? What is the church's purpose? In what ways do Jesus's resurrection and ascension compel us to perceive new possibilities coming into view?

When believers wait in chapter 1, they do not do so out of resignation, fear, or uselessness. Their decision to devote themselves to prayer and preparation reflects their confidence, not necessarily in themselves but in God. Their waiting is active, not passive. Repeatedly Acts characterizes Jesus's followers as people who respond to (or try to catch up with) God's leading rather than initiating a plan on their own. Congregations often need help in fostering that kind of disposition. Almost paradoxically, active, expectant waiting offers opportunities to learn responsiveness. This is particularly true in times of leadership transition, and especially among people who have been conditioned to think that productivity, speed, and efficiency are somehow marks of faithfulness or virtue.

The believers who populate Acts are neither puppets held captive by an elusive divine will nor slackers who would rather stay inside behind closed doors. There are occasions in Acts when believers must

respond quickly, especially when people's well-being is at risk or God disrupts the status quo in surprising and expansive ways. Acts gives the impression that an attentive, prayerful church usually can tell what a given moment demands of it. The challenge for many congregations in today's high-speed culture is practicing attentiveness and prayerfulness. Even so, the Pentecost story and Acts as a whole affirm that the church can learn to spring into action when waiting together and when prompted together, like what the old spiritual exhorts the church to do: "Move when the Spirit says move."

EXCURSUS

Leadership and Decision Making

Acts provides no clear patterns or consistent norms for how Christian communities organize themselves and make consequential decisions. We usually do not learn exactly what it takes for a person in the narrative to claim a leadership role or to be recognized as a leader. Nor do we receive tidy descriptions of what responsibilities certain leaders possess (6:1–6 is a notable exception). In Luke 22:32 Jesus indicates that Peter will have an influential role after the crucifixion, and Acts likewise presents him and the other eleven apostles as vital to the church's identity and witness, especially in the narrative's early chapters and other scenes in Jerusalem (1:12–15, 21–26; 2:42–43; 4:32–37; 5:12–13, 17–18; 6:1–6; 8:14–17; 9:26–27; 15:6, 22). Other people perform ministry that resembles the Twelve's, however, which suggests that the apostles are not unique or indispensable as leaders (e.g., 6:8–10; 8:5–7; 14:3). James, one of Jesus's brothers, becomes the leading figure in the Jerusalem church for unexplained reasons (15:13–21; 21:18). In some settings, "elders" represent and lead communities of believers (e.g., 14:23; 15:6; 20:17–38). Various women exhibit gifts for leadership, even if their contributions remain more secluded in the narrative (e.g., 9:39; 18:26; 21:9).

When someone names specific criteria for leadership positions, as when Judas's replacement is chosen (1:21–22) and people are appointed to aid in distributing food (6:3), the criteria's rationale remains unexplained. The narrative creates the assumption that those criteria somehow apply only to men in the ancient patriarchal culture. Acts does not elaborate why even the women who participate in Jesus's movement

since its origins (e.g., Luke 8:1–3; 23:55; Acts 1:14) do not qualify. Still, Acts provides us no reasonable basis for preserving that prejudice from the church's procrustean patriarchal past.

Similarly, the criteria and processes for decision making change from chapter to chapter. People cast lots only in 1:26. Sometimes communal consensus decides a question (e.g., 6:5). At other times a leader makes a decision after weighing deliberations (e.g., 15:19; 21:10–14). Occasionally the Holy Spirit leaves no room for human participation in a decision; all people can do in those situations is interpret the significance of a spiritual intrusion or respond to it (e.g., 10:44–11:18; 13:1–3). Typically Acts frames decision making as discernment, an attempt to determine where God might be leading, based on people's experiences, their understanding of Scripture, and their sense of what coheres with the good news about Jesus Christ. In other words, decision making is more about responding to God than it is about determining best practices or strategic advantages.

In no way does the variety paint leadership and decision making as arbitrary or capricious aspects of the churches in Acts. Rather, with the variety Acts refrains from enshrining one kind of structure, process, or polity as the correct way. To interpret Acts as a template for ministry, leadership, and organization is to disregard the book's preference for practicality and adaptability when it comes to responding to the Holy Spirit and embodying the alternative society the Spirit creates. Such practicality can lend a sense of freedom to Christian communities. Establishing narrow rules and rigid restrictions risks hindering our capacity to be surprised by God.

ACTS 2:1–47
The Day of Pentecost

From beginning to end, the Pentecost narrative recounts a story of divine initiative and divine fidelity. Without the emphatic attention this chapter devotes to theology, we might mistake the salvation that Acts describes as something cultivated by the exploits of heroic individuals and remarkably earnest communities of Christ-followers.

Liturgies often highlight only select details of the Pentecost narrative, especially signs of divine presence: a loud noise, flames shaped

like extended tongues, and the strange commotion of numerous languages all extolling "God's deeds of power" to a crowd gathered together from many homelands. As stunning as those details may be, they capture only the narrative's opening movement. All of chapter 2 recounts the events of the day, inviting readers to perceive the Holy Spirit's influence in everything that happens. The full chapter therefore introduces several aspects of the Spirit and the reasons why the Spirit comes. All of it shapes our expectations for what we will encounter as Acts continues.

The Spirit evidently plays a part in the persuasive quality of Peter's first sermon, which identifies the events of the day and the inexplicable power of the Spirit as demonstrations of the authority of the crucified, raised, and exalted Christ. The massive positive response to Peter's words has an immediate outcome: thousands of new believers become part of an inclusive community with shared commitments to learning, fellowship, common meals, generosity, prayer, and praise. This community situates its activities and its identity both in the Jerusalem temple and in people's dwellings. The coming of the Spirit results in an alternative society, not simply a group of individuals who affiliate with Jesus. The multifaceted and collective "witness" (1:8) of Jesus's followers is off and running—and expanding.

2:1–13. The Spirit Poured Out on Believers in Jerusalem

Even before Acts turns our attention toward a specific sermon and allows us to eavesdrop on the apostle Peter's explanation of what is happening, the chaotic opening verses of the Pentecost story disclose elements of the book's larger perspectives on geography, Jewish identity and hope, community, and the significance of the Holy Spirit as an eschatological "gift" (2:38). As in other scenes in Acts, the narrative action and the phenomena of "wonders and signs" (2:43) speak as loudly as any exposition an evangelist delivers to a crowd.

The number of people "all together in one place" at the beginning of the chapter remains ambiguous. Two details nevertheless imply that the whole group of approximately 120 believers (1:15), not just the apostles, are there and receive the Spirit: first, the significant size and diversity of the crowd that gathers a few verses later to listen to everyone speak; second, the wide range of people to whom Scripture promises God's Spirit will come (2:17–18).

"Suddenly" it begins. As happens often in Acts, God initiates something new and pulls Jesus's witnesses along for the ride. It starts with a sound filling the place where the believers gather. The description of the clamor probably sparks concern in any readers who have experienced the awful roar of extreme winds. Power fills the room, likely creating the sensation that the walls may burst open. The power comes from God, as signaled both in the noise of a strong wind (cf. Ezek 37:9) and in the "tongues" people see. The syntax describing the "divided tongues, as of fire" is unclear. It elicits more questions than answers, but we should not imagine anything small or gentle.

Fire symbolizes many things in the Bible. Luke's Gospel accents its use in purifying and refining (Luke 3:16–17; 12:49). Accordingly, fire can indicate the presence of a holy and powerful God (e.g., Exod 14:24; 19:18; Isa 30:27). In this passage, the word *tongue* creates visual ambiguity, because it denotes—in the word's Greek equivalents like in English—either the shape of a single flame or a language (vv. 3, 4, 11; note that vv. 6, 8 use a different but roughly synonymous word for "language"). That semantic and symbolic connection, despite the trouble it creates for our ability to visualize what is happening, nevertheless clarifies what kind of power God brings upon the believers in the fire of Pentecost. They receive power to communicate and therefore power to connect, declare, and convince (cf. Jer 23:29). This is not power to dominate.

The sights and sounds occur indoors, where believers are sheltering. Once they start speaking in other languages, readers reasonably assume that the action shifts outdoors. Jesus's followers begin bearing witness about him in public. Nothing indicates that the windy howl and the fiery tongues follow them outside. What pulls the crowd to them in the open air is the sound of their spoken words, for the people from Galilee speak a wide range of languages, languages they apparently did not previously know. The first public phenomenon of the Holy Spirit's arrival defies ordinary explanation, but the purpose proves to be much simpler: the Spirit makes interpersonal connection and ingathering possible. Through the miracle of transcending any possible linguistic barriers, the Spirit allows Jesus's followers to become situated deeply within the experiences and identities of their neighbors.

The abundance of languages proves especially helpful at this particular moment because it is Pentecost, the fiftieth day after

Passover. The day is a Jewish harvest festival also known as the Feast of Weeks (*Shavuot* in Hebrew) and the Day of the First Fruits (see Lev 23:15–21; Deut 16:9–10). As one of the three main pilgrim festivals, along with Passover and Sukkoth, Pentecost drew to Jerusalem large numbers of Jews and converts to Judaism (see "proselytes" in v. 10). Jews in the first century were dispersed throughout and beyond the Roman Empire; Judaism was multicultural. Jews at that time described themselves in a variety of ways and with reference to a number of categories we might loosely call "ethnic" or cultural, including linguistic, regional, and genealogical criteria. There was no single way to be Jewish or to express one's Jewish beliefs, practices, and hopes. It is hyperbole to say that the Jews in Jerusalem during Pentecost represent "every people under heaven," but together those visitors and residents represent a panoramic array of identities and distinctions that fit under the umbrella of Judaism.

Acts illustrates the diversity of the gathered Jews and their many "native language[s]" by naming fifteen regions located on three different continents. The list raises a number of questions, for it does not correspond to other ancient lists of nations and Jewish communities. It also omits places known for vibrant Jewish populations, such as Macedonia and Greece. The list does not follow a strict or obvious sequence of directions from Jerusalem. Interpreters have not been able to reach consensus about what specific significance or sources we might detect from the list. None of those unresolved questions, however, occludes the fact that the catalog of locations has a representative effect: the collection of regions emphasizes diversity within Judaism, not as a defect but as a reality. Acts acknowledges what many except for the most fervently sectarian Jews in the first century probably affirmed, that Judaism is spacious enough to include and connect people from all over the world.

The Pentecost narrative implies that the emerging Christian movement likewise has room for Jews and proselytes of many cultural expressions and ethnic identities. Instead of calling the diverse and multilingual crowd to a singular expression of Christian faith, and instead of instilling a monocultural vision of what it means to express faith in Jesus Christ, the proclamation at Pentecost meets people where they are.

Acts will eventually lead readers into a large number of distinctive cultural landscapes and thus take us deeper into the narrative's vision

for God's salvation finding expression in diverse contexts. At this point in the story, however, during the festival, the focus remains limited to Jerusalem as a gathering place for Jews and proselytes from faraway places. The salvation Acts proclaims begins there, among them. The energy that Pentecost sets in motion will eventually expand to include Samaritans and gentiles as well. For the time being, however, Acts is a Jewish story, and the people changed at Pentecost will remain situated within Judaism and its practices (see 2:46–3:1).

The Holy Spirit empowers communication and connection that allows everyone present to hear Jesus's followers speak "in the native language of each." The story would be different if the Spirit made it possible for all of those gathered to understand a single preacher speaking in Aramaic or Greek. Instead, at Pentecost all the relocated listeners hear Jesus's witnesses in terms they already understand, with all the local accents and idioms that make them feel at home even as their senses of place and boundaries are being upended. From the outset of Acts, the Spirit propels Jesus's followers to create a community that allows those who join to inhabit it and belong to it with their full selves, without surrendering their distinctiveness. The Spirit endows the church with a kind of gravitational energy, seeking to forge connections by inviting people into communities that live out and celebrate God's salvation, knowing and being transformed by the benefits that stem from "God's deeds of power" as manifested through Jesus Christ (as Peter will explain in the coming verses). However, the Spirit supplies the church with that gravitational vigor only after first propelling its people outward, driving them beyond their walls and impressing on them the importance of honoring the wide spectrum of cultural realities in which others dwell.

Nothing is that obvious yet to the people in the narrative, however, until Peter comes forward on the narrative stage and addresses the crowd, beginning in 2:14. Up to that point, bewilderment controls the scene. The crowd expresses surprise about hearing their own languages spoken. In part, the astonishment arises because they do not expect to hear what they hear from these particular speakers. The question *Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?* expresses contemptuous amazement that people from a reputedly uncultivated region like Galilee—of all places!—might possess the linguistic knowledge and cultural sophistication required to do what they are doing. Some scoff and accuse the believers of public drunkenness—a

dismissive response that does not even try to take the linguistic phenomenon seriously. Others, however, ask, "What does this mean?" That is the question Peter's sermon attempts to answer: not "How do so many presumedly ignorant Galileans appear to know so many languages so well?" but "What is the significance of what we are experiencing here?" Peter will seize the question as an opportunity to declare that the exalted Jesus Christ has poured out the Holy Spirit, demonstrating his authority as the Christ and fulfilling promises made in Scripture long ago.

Exploring the Pentecost narrative is necessary for any preachers and teachers who are eager to help people encounter the whole book of Acts. Of course this narrative is likewise vital when celebrating Pentecost in the Christian calendar, as the fiftieth and final day of Eastertide, and for teaching and preaching about the Holy Spirit in general. For those who adhere to the Revised Common Lectionary, every year on the Day of Pentecost 2:1–21 is one of the assignments. That lection extends into the first movement of Peter's sermon (2:14–21), which will be discussed below.

Once every three years (during Year C), the lectionary also assigns the Tower of Babel story (Gen 11:1–9) to the Day of Pentecost. This pairing raises questions about whether the linguistic miracle of the Pentecost narrative somehow interacts with, reiterates, or reverses the Babel tale. Both accounts involve acts of God, multiple languages, and confusion, and both include a table of "nations" or peoples (Gen 10). It distorts the Pentecost narrative to claim that it describes a reversal of what happens at Babel, however. As mentioned, the Spirit's arrival at Pentecost does not mean the reestablishment of a linguistic and cultural uniformity. The various dialects and identities that the Jews in the narrative bring with them to Jerusalem at Pentecost do not present problems that need to be rectified. The Pentecost audience does not discard those aspects of who they are when they come together—at the end of Peter's sermon—to join Jesus Christ's other followers in embracing salvation through him. The unity Acts has in view, established by the Holy Spirit, does not entail the elimination of distinctions among different people or a return to an imagined primeval homogenous humanity (Green 2008; González 2001, 39). To assert that Pentecost reverses Babel is to characterize ethnic diversity as a distortion of authentic humanity or as something from which we need to be saved. The way the Pentecost narrative describes

differences coming together without being dissolved can help congregations better understand what it means to foster a community in which all who participate in God's gifts experience complete inclusion and belonging.

The Pentecost narrative presents Christian communities with opportunities to explore what unity in the Holy Spirit looks like in practice. This passage does not imply that ancient Judaism lacked community and connection among its dispersed and varied members before Peter starts preaching. Rather, the passage insists that God's salvation in Christ refuses to pass Judaism by, even as that salvation insists on taking account of the diversity that exists within Judaism. In other words, God's salvation begins by encompassing Judaism without giving pride of place to one particular expression of Jewish identity. The scene sets a foundation for the story to follow in Acts, when additional Christian communities spring into being and find ways to honor the mutual belonging shared by Jews, Samaritans, and gentiles from various settings.

At Pentecost, divisions fall apart without dissolving people's identities. In the ancient context, in which the Roman Empire frequently publicized its own capacity for cultural assimilation, a church that offered unity without uniformity could have raised suspicions among its neighbors. Such a community of faith could also have empowered all of its members. The Holy Spirit's activity at Pentecost might call the modern church to confess and repair its sins of assimilationism and of participating in the erasure of "foreign" cultures. This passage likewise urges Christians toward expressions of community that deliberately pursue and celebrate a multiethnic identity. Admittedly, this narrative about language and understanding does not delve deeply into other distinctive aspects of people's identities, such as gender, economic influence, age, sexual orientation, and social status. It can, however, prompt constructive reflection in our congregations about theological imperatives for embracing wide ranges of differences concerning those distinctive characteristics without diminishing any of them.

2:14–36. Peter's Pentecost Sermon

Many readers find the first sermon Peter preaches difficult to follow and underwhelming from an inspirational point of view. He does not

address questions modern audiences are prone to ask about topics such as convincing evidence for believing in Jesus's resurrection or the trustworthiness of the apostles' testimony about what they experienced. Even though the sermon springs from a question—"What does this mean?" (2:12)—asked in response to the Pentecost phenomenon of Galileans empowered to be understood in languages they presumably did not previously know, the sermon offers very little in terms of pneumatology. Instead, Peter seeks to persuade a Jewish audience that familiar Scriptures testify to Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ. Peter, like others in Acts, does not turn to Scripture to prove an irrefutable point but to show coherence between his claims and the witness of those scriptural texts. His methods might not strike modern audiences as cogent, but they resemble other patterns of Jewish scriptural interpretation from antiquity.

In this Pentecost sermon, references to Scripture help Peter explain that Jesus is God's anointed and exalted ruler, who now pours out the Holy Spirit. The unleashing of the Holy Spirit indicates something new, that "the last days" have dawned. The Spirit's arrival nevertheless points to Christology, insofar as the event demonstrates—according to this sermon, at least—that Jesus is the Christ, one whom God would not allow to succumb to death's power. The sermon links together Jesus's ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and giving of the Spirit. All of those connect. Because of them all, Peter implies, God's salvation has been made complete.

Peter stands "with the eleven," speaking on behalf of all the apostles and the larger company of Jesus's followers. We receive no details about what language he speaks or how everyone understands him. From this moment onward in the Pentecost narrative, the point is the message, not how it is expressed. The message Peter proclaims, like all the other speeches in Acts, probably is the author's composition and not a transcript of an actual sermon. That does not mean the sermon bears no resemblance to the church's actual preaching during its earliest years, in terms of the theological topics and the kinds of scriptural interpretation those sermons likely included. In common with other ancient historical writing, Acts devotes itself more to staging a compelling scene and highlighting certain theological convictions than to passing along definitive chronicles of events or notes taken at speeches.

Peter quickly writes off the dismissive suggestion that drunkenness or some kind of mantic experience explains what is happening (see 2:13). Rather, the phenomenon that draws the crowd together and creates astonishment (that is, the "this" mentioned in 2:12, 16) is something that the prophet Joel foresaw. The source of the marvels is God's Spirit. Peter refers to the Septuagint version of Joel 2:28–32a (in the LXX, Joel 3:1–5a), part of Joel's larger oracle about God's promise to bring restoration after a calamity. Peter does not precisely quote any known version of the Septuagint, which leads us to infer that Acts makes gentle edits to the Septuagint to emphasize certain details. Most significant of those edits is Peter's claim about God's Spirit coming "in the last days," a claim that does not appear in Joel. Joel foresees judgment and restoration coming in future but unspecified "days" (Joel 3:1, 18), but the prophet does not explicitly regard the advent of the divine Spirit as an indication of finality and consummation, as Peter does. Furthermore, in the context of Pentecost, Peter links the Holy Spirit specifically to the Christ and his authority, which Joel does not. For Peter, the coming of the Holy Spirit inaugurates a new and ultimate act in the salvation God provides. The arrival of the Spirit means God has accomplished something and offers salvation to "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord."

The Spirit's arrival has effects on people, and those effects link the experience of Pentecost to the Joel text. First, the Spirit comes "upon all flesh," making no distinctions among people's gender, age, and status as enslaved or free persons. God's Spirit makes appearances in the Old Testament, but never in such a widespread or seemingly permanent way as what Joel and Peter describe. God does not hold back at Pentecost, and also God's Spirit dwells communally, injecting an inclusive sense of unity into the people who receive the Spirit.

Another effect of the Spirit is that people "shall prophesy." Acts repeats that promise in verses 17, 18, although it appears only once in Joel. Whether the repetition owes itself to a careless copyist or is an intentional addition by the author of Acts, in the finished product of Peter's sermon the repetition highlights the importance of prophecy. The Holy Spirit, according to Acts, is a Spirit of prophecy. Not only are some characters in Acts described as prophets (e.g., 11:27; 13:1; 15:32; 19:6; 21:9–10; cf. 3:22; 7:37), but in general the church carries out a prophetic ministry. Considered in conjunction

with Joel's references to "visions" and "dreams," the prophetic Spirit leads people to adopt new perceptions. Pentecost announces that Jesus's followers will discover new outlooks on what is real and what is possible in these new days of salvation. Prophetic insight therefore involves much more than seeing into the future; in Acts it predominantly involves preaching, interpreting Scripture, urging others toward repentance, and embodying mutual care in how people live, eat, and worship. Peter himself exemplifies much of what it means to "prophesy" in this sermon.

The coming of God's Spirit also affects the natural world in "portents" and "signs" (a word Acts adds to Joel). The Holy Spirit cannot sneak in unnoticed, for the cosmos itself will experience disruption with this new development. The emphasis here falls not on a pledge that God will destroy the world but on the cosmos itself as a magnificent tableau for expressing the awesome transformative power of God. The manifestation of divine power disrupts other powers that regulate human experience, such as the sun and moon. All creation, not just humanity, undergoes change (cf. Luke 17:24, 28–30; 21:25–28; 23:44–45) as it nears "the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day." The language is symbolic and not an invitation to yearn for chaos or to respond to climate crisis with lethargy. Peter implies that that anticipated "day" refers to the return of Christ (see 1:11).

As mentioned above, in the discussion of 2:1–13, each year the Revised Common Lectionary includes verses 14–21 in the larger assignment for the Day of Pentecost (2:1–21). The emphasis on "all flesh" in both Joel and Acts calls out for preachers' and teachers' attention on Pentecost. That is especially clear when we consider that the Spirit empowers all kinds of people to "prophesy" and bear witness to Jesus (see 1:8) in ways that speak meaningfully in all contexts and circumstances, whether favorable or painful. Acts does not follow through on illuminating the wide-ranging scope of this promise as thoroughly as it might have, for the narrative shows us very little with respect to specific "daughters" and "young" people contributing to the church's public witness.

Likewise, 2:18 changes older language about "male and female slaves" (Joel 2:29) to "my slaves, both men and women," altering Joel's promise about enslaved people as an actual segment of the population into a characterization of all of Jesus's followers as people enslaved to God (see also 4:29; 16:17; 20:19). In other words, actual

enslaved people get overshadowed in the shuffle. Acts has precious little to say about what happens when the Holy Spirit gives power and presumably greater dignity to enslaved people. There may be an egalitarian sense about Peter's reference to Joel's oracle, but we are denied the chance to see egalitarian consequences in the narrative of Acts. Where our standards lead us to experience Acts as falling short in emphasizing the transformative power of the Holy Spirit for "all flesh," preachers and teachers can help their congregations imagine ways in which everyone contributes—or is expected to contribute—to the church's prophetic ministry. Pentecost propels the church throughout history into a journey of continual growth and discovery. Acts can lead us to recognize that the same Holy Spirit who empowers the early church's ministry still energizes the church today.

The Pentecost narrative, while it has much to say about the Holy Spirit's power, focuses in particular on how the Spirit participates in making God's salvation known. References to "the last days" and the arrival of "the Lord's great and glorious day" do not need to impart a sense of careless urgency to congregations, but preachers and teachers can highlight that language to remind us that Christians always dwell in a gap between promise and fulfillment. The Spirit urges the church to find meaning in that sense of incompleteness, honoring the struggles that come with it, naming the injustices that hamper our testimony, and holding onto hope regardless. Celebrating Pentecost should not be primarily an act of remembering the past with nostalgia; it calls us forward into the Spirit's ongoing and still expanding work. The Spirit of Pentecost has not finished propelling Jesus's followers into new opportunities to learn, declare, and embody the salvation God provides.

A new movement in the sermon begins in verse 22, as Peter addresses why the Holy Spirit has arrived now. His explanation focuses squarely on Jesus Christ, mentioning the Spirit again only in verse 33, where he claims Jesus "poured out" the Spirit. The attention to Jesus also leads Peter to highlight God's agency, as seen in several places where "God" is the explicit or implicit subject of a verb. The now-exalted Jesus is, Peter insists, God's "Holy One," a new king in the lineage of David, "Lord," and the Messiah sent by God.

The syntax of verses 22–24 is elaborate. Those verses consist of a single sentence in which "Jesus of Nazareth" is the sentence's direct object, grammatically speaking, and the object of several actions. He

was "attested to you by God" through all that God did through him during his public ministry and "handed over to you" according to God's plan at his arrest. Moving deeper into the story of Jesus's passion, the sermon's audience "crucified and killed" him through the actions of the Roman authorities (that is, "those outside the law"). God, however, brought Jesus back from "the agony of death."

Peter's short summary of Jesus's life, arrest, death, and resurrection maintains a juxtaposition between the audience of Jews in Jerusalem ("you") and God. The rhetorical and theological thrust of the entire sentence might be distilled to this: you killed Jesus, *but* God raised him. Additionally, the juxtaposition sharpens Peter's efforts to indict the audience for ignoring God's power at work in Jesus's ministry and for crucifying him via the Romans' authority. At the same time, God plays a part in the whole short story, since even the betrayal of Jesus corresponds to God's "definite plan and foreknowledge." Acts does not explain that claim, but multiple passages make opaque assertions that Jewish Scripture anticipates a suffering and risen Messiah (e.g., 3:18–24; 7:52; 8:32–35; 13:26–37; 17:2–3; 18:28; 26:22–23; 28:23; Luke 18:31; 24:25–27, 44–47). If God's plan or foreknowledge somehow creates a logical or causal inconsistency with the audience's culpability for Jesus's death, Acts does not name it, and neither does the sermon's audience (see also 3:17–18; 4:27–28). Questions about how to relate divine and human agency often prove to be more pressing for modern audiences to resolve than for ancient ones.

Peter's indictment of his audience does not imply that he considers all Jews guilty of crucifying Jesus. He makes his "you crucified" claim only to audiences in Jerusalem (see also 2:36; 3:14–15; 4:10, 27; cf. 5:30; 7:52; 13:27). He does not assume that everyone listening to him at Pentecost was part of the crowd Pilate assembles in Luke 23:13–25. Rather, in Luke, as well as in the early chapters of Acts, Jerusalem itself bears a kind of collective responsibility for rejecting Jesus. Parts of both books speak as if common people, generally speaking, bear the authority to see Jesus crucified, which we know to be untrue. The two volumes stage a collective indictment and a collective repentance to spread the blame and the restoration more widely, advancing the characterization of Jerusalem as "the city that kills the prophets" (Luke 13:34; cf. 19:41–44). At the same time, and with more realism with respect to the historical conditions

under Roman rule, each book also recognizes that ordinary people do not share the culpability of their leaders in the violence against Jesus (Luke 23:27, 35; 24:20; Acts 5:28, 30). It is historically, exegetically, and morally reckless to misappropriate Peter's indictment as a blanket denunciation of Jews as people responsible for crucifying Jesus.

This sentence that spans verses 22–24 ends by noting that "it was impossible" for death to hold Jesus. God does not raise Jesus from the dead as a gesture of goodwill or to make his executioners look bad. The grounds of Jesus's resurrection have to do primarily with who Jesus is. His identity overrules death's finality. More accurately, his identity spurs God to resurrect him.

To explain, in verses 25–28 Peter looks to Psalm 16:8–11, whose authorship he attributes to King David. The psalm refers to one whose "soul" God will not "abandon," a "Holy One" who does not suffer "corruption." Peter deduces that the speaker in the psalm cannot be David himself, since David's body remains dead and decayed in a tomb whose traditional location outside Jerusalem was known in the first century. The speaker, Peter reasons, is the Messiah whom God will enthrone (see also Ps 132:11). David must have written the psalm, therefore, speaking like a prophet disclosing information about someone coming after him. As a result, Peter concludes, the psalm carries a promise that God will rescue the Messiah, not just anyone, from any "corruption" caused by the grave (see also 13:35). God will not allow death to overwhelm the Messiah, meaning that God refuses to permit death to obstruct God's purposes.

Peter offers no argument to make believing in Jesus's resurrection easier. He merely points to testimony about God's commitment to resurrection—to the Messiah's resurrection, at least—in Scripture, and then Peter baldly declares that he and the rest of his companions are "witnesses" of Jesus's resurrection. Peter neither explains why the resurrected Jesus is no longer physically present to speak for himself nor gives testimony about the details of Jesus's ascension. He asserts that the Messiah, raised and now exalted, has the authority to pour out the Spirit that Joel described centuries earlier.

One more appeal to Scripture, in verses 34–35, expresses Peter's unspoken premise that the resurrected Messiah now occupies a place of power at God's "right hand." Peter again assumes David writes about the Messiah in Psalm 110:1, but this time it is David's own voice speaking in a psalm. Here "the Lord" (that is, God) tells "my

Lord" (that is, the Messiah, David's coming "Lord") to take his place at God's right hand. Peter implies that David could not be speaking about himself as the one who possesses the authority of a person at God's "right hand," since the psalm stages David speaking about *his* "Lord" (see the similar messianic interpretation of Ps 110:1 in Luke 20:41–44). Jesus is, therefore, "Lord" and the one empowered by God to pour out the Holy Spirit.

Peter thus answers the original question of 2:12 ("What does this mean?") by proclaiming the crucified, raised, and exalted Jesus as the Messiah whom God previously spoke about to Israel through the prophetic insights of David, among others. The events of Pentecost, Peter declares, are the first act of the glorified Christ in the dawning of the new messianic age.

Analysis of Peter's sermon does well to avoid speculating about why it might be so convincing to an ancient audience of Pentecost pilgrims. His sermon does not need to have rhetorical flair to do its job, however, since its main purpose in the narrative is to begin the process of informing us, the book's readers, of what Jesus's resurrection and ascension mean for the world. The sermon makes a case for who Jesus is. The sermon avoids the task of asking people to believe in the resurrection for reasons beyond the reports of Jesus's friends (vv. 24, 32). The narrative treats Peter's and their testimony as unimpeachable, even though everyone knows that believing in a resurrection does not necessarily come easily to anyone (see Luke 24:11, 16, 25, 36–41).

The rhetoric and approach of this first sermon implies that people—particularly, in this instance, Jews—who refuse to embrace Jesus as the Christ are not stumbling over the incredibility of resurrection. Rather, they refuse to acknowledge Jesus for who he is, and they should know better, according to verse 22. Christian interpreters can tread carefully here by avoiding imputing a sort of willful or inherent stubbornness to the Jews in Acts who remain unconvinced by believers' testimony. The church's history of anti-Jewish attitudes and actions intensifies our obligation to speak differently and more graciously about Jewish characters in Acts who have explicit or implicit objections to the good news.

This passage presents challenges to preachers and teachers because the persuasiveness of Peter's appeals to Davidic psalms is hardly obvious. More important than making Peter's exegesis fit modern exegetical criteria is communicating Peter's emphasis on Jesus's resurrection

and exaltation as evidence of Jesus's identity as the Messiah. That matters for appreciating the narrative's perspective on Pentecost and for the contemporary church's understanding of the Easter season. In other words, it is vital to note that Peter names the resurrected Jesus's exaltation as the impetus behind the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (v. 33). It is problematic, therefore, that the Revised Common Lectionary assigns 2:14a (to set the scene) and verses 22–32 for Easter 2A while leaving aside verses 33–36. For one thing, the lectionary's scissors separate what can be read in Greek as a single sentence spanning verses 32–33. More significant, verses 33–36 resituate the sermon as proclamation about Jesus's ascension and the coming of the Spirit, thereby reminding us that those two events cannot be understood in isolation from Jesus's resurrection, and vice versa. Preachers and teachers have good reason to include the part of the sermon that the lectionary omits.

Acts depicts Peter's sermon making its case to ancient people using methods of scriptural interpretation they would recognize, but the sermon does not give modern preachers an exegetical or homiletical framework we would be wise to imitate in our time. Peter's focus on the power of resurrection, stated especially in verse 24, nevertheless deserves regular attention from preachers and teachers. If Easter celebrates a release from death's clutches and agonies, that declares good news for Jesus and also the rest of the world. The imagery of that verse helps us consider what God sets in motion by the display of power unleashed on the first Easter Sunday. Indeed the entire book of Acts is, in part, a narrative about Christ-followers discovering more and more about what God makes possible through Jesus's resurrection and ascension. Acts never suggests that the church reaches the end of this road that leads into fresh discoveries. Preachers and teachers help us take more steps along the way.

Preachers and teachers might also dwell in the focus that Peter's sermon places on God's agency. For one thing, Peter names God's activity in nearly all dimensions of the story about Jesus. One assumes Peter could have included the incarnation, as well. In any case, all facets of Jesus Christ—everything he is and does—declare God's commitment to accomplishing the salvation that God prepares for the world. A second, related point about God's activity concerns the ways in which that activity demonstrates divine faithfulness. By steering his sermon into two psalms and an oracle from Joel, Peter

characterizes the resurrection, the ascension, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as the fulfillment of old promises. The importance of a promise-keeping God exceeds establishing a perfect record on a theological scorecard. What Peter describes invites people to trust this God. In his remaining words to the crowd in Jerusalem, after the sermon, Peter explicitly underscores the notion that the God of Jesus Christ is a reliable God who keeps promises (2:39). He notes that the promise of salvation potentially benefits everyone. That universal appeal is a ramification of the resurrection. Here at the outset, Acts urges its readers to recognize salvation's wide reach. Its width becomes more pronounced with the turn of each page.

2:37–47. The Spirit Creates a Community of Fellowship, Unity, and Charity

Bystanders who hear Jesus's followers speaking in many languages before Peter preaches ask, "What does this mean?" (2:12). After the sermon their question is "What should we do?" (cf. Luke 3:10). Most of the public speeches in Acts end with an interruption. Here, the crowd's second question indicates Peter has made his point persuasively and does not need to continue, at least not for readers' benefit (although v. 40 indicates he has more to say). The narrative now describes what Jesus's followers hope will happen whenever they bear witness: people embrace Jesus as the resurrected and reigning Christ.

Contrary to some assumptions, Peter's call to "repent" does not mean "show remorse," "travel a different direction," or "behave differently." Recalling 2:17, we might liken repentance to what happens when Spirit-empowered prophecies, visions, and dreams take hold in a person or community (see 11:18). "Repentance" refers primarily to adopting a new way of thinking or a new perception of reality. A changed mind might eventually lead to reformed behavior, but Peter instructs the crowd to follow his sermon's argument and therefore understand Jesus differently than they did previously. He is the expected Christ who has been exalted to God's "right hand" and thus possesses authority to pour out the Holy Spirit. Peter tells the crowd of Jews and proselytes to embrace Jesus's role in the salvation God brings to the world. He invites them to experience Jesus as welcoming and forgiving (cf. Luke 24:47). Peter describes this opportunity as something available to all sorts of people, all "whom the Lord our

God calls," although he will not begin to realize the wider implications of that statement until later in the narrative.

Peter does not explain what makes baptism "in the name of Jesus Christ" different from John's baptism, but it clearly is (see Luke 3:3; Acts 18:24–19:7). For one thing, the new ritual involves identifying oneself with Jesus as God's designated Savior. In addition, an appeal to someone's "name" refers to their authority, so this baptism expresses a confidence in Jesus as the one granted power from God to bestow the Holy Spirit (1:5; 2:33; Luke 3:16).

The Revised Common Lectionary assigns verses 36–41 during Easter 3A, which gives preachers and teachers an opportunity to explore how Jesus's resurrection can jolt people into a new understanding of God, God's ways, and our place in God's salvation. The story of Jesus Christ does not end at Easter and the ascension; it continues in the new identity that believers inhabit through their connection to the exalted Christ and the Holy Spirit. Recognizing that fact is a means toward finding liberation from a "corrupt" (literally, "crooked") world that inhibits our ability to perceive how faithful God is to the divine desire to establish a just world (see Deut 32:4–5). God's faithfulness is a key theme in Acts. Not only does Jesus demonstrate God's fidelity, but also Acts insists that God proves dependable to the first generations of Christ-followers. The church, whether in Easter or any season, relies on God to keep it discovering and proclaiming the implications of that divine faithfulness.

The number of new believers (three thousand) in this scene may strain credulity, but Acts does not focus on it as much as on the kind of life they adopt together. As mentioned previously, the story of Pentecost and the newfound power of the Spirit extends to the end of chapter 2. The community that springs into being in verses 42–47 becomes an organic, cooperative expression and vehicle of God's salvation. It cares for its vulnerable members and becomes a beacon to others.

The willingness to give up personal resources and share assets, along with the reference to holding "all things in common," might have reminded ancient audiences of numerous authors who envision a utopian state of affairs (e.g., Plato, *Republic* 5.462A–E; Cicero, *On Duties* 1.51; Strabo, *Geography* 7.3.9; Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 8.1.10; cf. Deut 15:4). For some of those authors, that kind of social arrangement is a mark of an ancient golden age; for others, it

is a tangible manifestation of the interpersonal mutuality that true friendships create. As Acts sees it, such a society becomes possible through Jesus Christ and becomes transformative through the unifying power of the Holy Spirit.

Preachers and teachers often field inquiries about this passage and whether the ethos it describes really existed (see also 4:32–37). When the Revised Common Lectionary puts verses 42–47 before congregations during Easter 4A, questions may arise about how this passage connects to Jesus's resurrection and the church's Easter preaching. This passage often encounters resistance. It triggers many reflexes among those of us who realize how much it would cost us to be part of such a community. Innumerable interpreters within Western Christianity during the modern era have tried to get us off the hook in concluding that the practices described here are merely an idealized symbol, a unique and isolated case, or impossible to attain (Finger 2007, 12–47). To be fair, Acts does not present this particular vision of Christian community as normal. After 4:32–37 there is no mention of it. At the same time, many passages describe communities of believers that are dedicated to mutual care and concern, even if not in such radical ways. That deep care and concern are unavoidable fruit of Easter faith.

This passage's idealistic tenor does not need to prevent it from appealing to our longings for a better world and reorienting our tepid expectations about our common life and pursuit of justice. The passage's description of the believers in Jerusalem might redirect congregations' energy away from partisan deliberations about the common good and more toward attempts to shape their common life in ways that consider the church as an extension of Jesus's commitment to bring a holistic salvation to all.

Focusing attention on the quality of the church's common life does not imply that congregations should retreat from public life in societies where they enjoy the privilege and comfort to do so. Neither does it imply that the church should dedicate itself solely to otherworldly "salvation." Instead it is a recognition that the church necessarily participates and advocates *in public* insofar as the church commits itself to integrated expressions of worship, economic justice, and mutual care. Acts sets before readers a description of the church of Easter and Pentecost not as a collection of individuals who agree to meet together but as an alternative society of people who

recognize that indeed they share everything "in common" because of Christ's resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Those realities are the foundation of the church's existence, and thus they ought to imbue all of a congregation's collective activity with a resurrection hope that refuses to dismiss idealistic visions as just the stuff of dreamers. People who have great confidence in the resurrection of the body are not escapists. Their beliefs equip them with a tremendous capacity to make sure that everybody, and every body, receives care and dignity in this life.