

How Normative Is Acts?

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Introduction

Does Acts simply record the history of the early church or does it also provide a blueprint for the church today? Do we read Acts as an interesting true story of how Christianity began, a story that gives us our roots and our identity, or is it still normative for today? For the purposes of this article we will consider a passage or precept to be *normative* if it can be regarded as both *applicable to us and required of us*. Yet it is this very definition of ‘normative’ that raises what is probably the central hermeneutical question for the Book of Acts.¹⁹ Are we to read the book as though it were mainly prescriptive or purely descriptive? In other words, how relevant is Acts for the life of the 21st century church?

A. The Problem

A quick guided tour of Acts will soon reveal what a huge question this is. The problem of normativeness stares the reader in the face on almost every page.

¹⁹ William J. Larkin, Jr., “The Recovery of Luke-Acts as ‘Grand Narrative’ for the Church’s Evangelistic and Edification Tasks in a Postmodern Age,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (2000): 408-409, has noted a distinct shift in emphasis in the way evangelical scholarship has tackled this question: “Before the recent crop of evangelical hermeneutics texts in the nineties, there was little explicit instruction on how to derive normative teaching from Biblical historical narrative. The post-World War II classic treatments of Ramm and Mickelson do not deal with the issue in this form. . . . The newer evangelical hermeneutics texts, on the other hand, approach historical narrative as literary narrative devoting whole chapters to narrative criticism within whole sections on genre analysis. Although the appropriate caution about finding more normative content in Biblical narrative than the Biblical writer intended is still present, evangelicals now appear to be quite comfortable with an understanding that Biblical narrative does contain normative theological teaching.” For all the renewed interest in biblical narrative, however, relatively little specific attention has been paid to the Acts of the Apostles. It is therefore the purpose of this article to stimulate some much needed discussion on this vitally important topic.

1. In chapter 1 the apostles are keen to fill the empty place left by Judas. The names of Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias are put forward, and the choice is made by drawing lots for them (v. 26). Is that how we are to select church leaders today?
2. Chapter 2 opens in dramatic fashion. There was a sound like the blowing of a violent wind. Tongues of fire came to rest on all those who were present, and they began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. Can these phenomena be expected wherever the gospel breaks new ground as it does in chapters 8, 10 and 19? Can they still be expected to happen whenever revival takes place?
3. Later in the same chapter Peter preaches a very effective sermon, his sermon at Pentecost. Does this sermon lay the groundwork for apostolic preaching? Is it the paradigm for all future preaching? Or was Peter addressing a unique situation?
4. Later in Acts 2 we are told that the three thousand who were converted by Peter's sermon "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (v. 42). Are these intended to be the basics of Christian worship and are they valid for all time?
5. These believers also had everything in common and sold their possessions and goods to give to anyone in need (vv. 44-45). Does that mean that the sharing of property is mandatory for believers today?
6. We are also told that the original church at Jerusalem met both "in the temple courts" and "from house to house" (v. 46). Does that mean that the church today should have both larger worship services and home groups? Is that the biblical pattern?
7. In chapter 3 Peter and John heal a cripple sitting outside the temple. Throughout Acts you have many such healings and miracles. Should we still expect the same in the church today?

8. In chapter 4 the apostles Peter and John are threatened by the Sanhedrin, and so the church calls for a time of prayer. Is calling a prayer meeting at a time of need normative?
9. At the end of the chapter the believers are again selling property and sharing goods (as they did in Acts 2). Is a pattern developing here?
10. In the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira we have an instance of church discipline of the most drastic kind. Does the Holy Spirit still take such a dim view of lying to a church leader and might he still act in the same way?
11. Later in chapter 5 the apostles are arrested and put in the public gaol, but during the night an angel of the Lord opens the doors of the gaol and brings them out (vv. 18-19). Could God still give gospel-preachers miraculous gaol breaks in our own time?
12. In chapter 6 the apostles vow to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word (v. 4). Should the same priority apply to ministers and elders today?
13. At the same time the apostles also told the church to choose seven men who were known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom to take care of the daily distribution of food. When these men had been chosen the apostles prayed and laid their hands on them. Is this a good way to appoint deacons and other church leaders?
14. In chapter 8 the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit *after* they believed and were baptised. Could this also happen today?
15. In v. 29 the Spirit said to Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” Can we still expect such direct revelation?
16. The Ethiopian eunuch was baptised immediately after Jesus was preached to him. Should we follow this example and baptise people as soon as they respond to the gospel?

17. Chapter 9 starts with the conversion of the apostle Paul. Should we still expect “Damascus Road” conversions today? Or should we look for factors here that are essential to every conversion?
18. The way that Peter came to preach at the house of Cornelius was “a masterpiece of divine choreography.” Does God still make special arrangements like this for the sake of the propagation of the gospel?
19. At the end of chapter 11 the disciples at Antioch provided help for their brothers in Judea during a time of famine, and they sent their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul. Is this a good precedent to follow?
20. Does God still deal with rulers as he did with Herod Agrippa I who did not give praise to God and was eaten by worms and died (Acts 12:23)?
21. For Paul’s first missionary journey Antioch served as the “sending church.” Is this just a good policy or should it be normative?
22. Do miracles of judgment, like the blinding of Elymas the magician in Acts 13, still occur today?
23. Paul’s first recorded sermon was preached in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. It is studded with OT quotations and works its way through the redemptive history of Israel. Could this be a model for today’s preachers?
24. In his missionary work Paul made the synagogue his first port of call in every town that had one. Would this be a helpful strategy for mission agencies to follow?
25. Towards the end of the first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church with prayer and fasting. Should that also be the pattern for us?
26. Does the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 provide a biblical rationale for our synods, general assemblies and other church councils?

27. Does the decision of the Council still apply to Gentile believers: “You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29)? Should Christians today avoid all of these things all of the time, some of these things all of the time, or some of these things some of the time?
28. The Jerusalem Council conveyed its decision to the Gentile believers by way of a letter. Is that still the best way to convey synodical decisions?
29. Does God always overrule disputes between Christian leaders so that the church benefits as much as it did in the case of Barnabas and Paul (Acts 15:36-41)?
30. The contrast between Lydia’s conversion (Acts 16:14) and the Philippian gaoler’s (Acts 16:27-34) is quite marked. Is this a tacit warning against stereotyping conversion experiences?
31. In Ephesus Paul placed his hands on twelve former disciples of John the Baptist. The Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied (Acts 19:6). Does this mean that tongues and prophecy are a “second blessing” experience after conversion?
32. At Troas the church came together on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7). Does this mean that public worship should always be on the first day of the week?
33. Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders is perhaps the closest that Acts comes to recording a sermon addressed specifically to believers, as we do in our worship services. To what extent should this be a paradigm for our own preaching? Or does the point lie elsewhere, e.g. in the way a pastor is to care for his flock?
34. In Acts 25 Paul appealed to Caesar (vv. 10-12, 25). Nowadays should Christians appeal to a higher court if they cannot get justice or satisfaction from a lower court?

35. At the height of the storm at sea in Acts 27 Paul gets a message from an angel to the effect that all the passengers and crew will be saved, but that the ship and its cargo will be lost (vv. 22-26). Can we still expect to receive such accurate angelic messages?
36. In the last chapter of Acts , on the island of Malta, a snake fastened itself on Paul's hand, but he shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects (Acts 28:3-5). So should Christians today be expected to deal with serpents in the same way? The snake handling cults would certainly want us to think so!

It would be beyond the scope of this article to answer all these questions. Its purpose is not to give exhaustive solutions to the problems raised but rather to provide readers with principles they can use to answer these questions for themselves. The aim is to give the reader a good handle on the issue of normativeness in Acts. I would like to do this in two ways: (a) by giving three minor principles that will be helpful in specific cases, and (b) by giving a major principle that can be divided into three parts and that applies to Acts as a whole.

B. Minor Principles

1. The Principle of Non-Contradiction:

We cannot claim to have discovered an absolute in Acts if it leads to a contradiction in either doctrine or practice. For example, how does the church select its leaders? To replace Judas the apostles cast lots (Acts 1:26). To discover the Seven who should wait at tables they handed the matter over to the church and then they let the church make the decision, which they then ratified (Acts 6:1-6). Towards the end of the first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas appointed elders after prayer and fasting (Acts 14:23). These are all very different approaches and they are also mutually exclusive. You can't cast lots, delegate and appoint all at the same time! Therefore none of these should be elevated to an absolute.

This principle of non-contradiction applies not only to practice but to doctrine as well. When Peter had finished preaching his Pentecost sermon, the crowd responded in a way that would be the envy of every preacher. They said, “What shall we do?” Peter answered, “Repent and be baptised . . . and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). It sounds very straightforward. First you repent and are baptised, and then you receive the Holy Spirit. In other words, repentance and baptism come *before* the receiving of the Holy Spirit. But before you elevate this into a dogma, it would be wise to check it out in the light of the unfolding story of Acts.

You get to chapter 8 and there you read about the conversion of the Samaritans. And sure enough, the hypothesis holds. At the preaching of Philip they believe and are baptised (Acts 8:12). Only after the apostles Peter and John arrive do they receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17).

Before we think we have proved our point, however, we need to keep reading. In Acts 10, in the case of Cornelius and his household, the Holy Spirit came on all of them while Peter was still preaching (Acts 10:44). As a result they broke out in tongues and started praising God. Only then did Peter order them to be baptised (Acts 10:48).

In Acts 19 we meet a dozen or so disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus. They too were baptised and received the Holy Spirit, and it seems that in this case the two events were almost simultaneous (vv. 5-6). At least there does not seem to have been an interval between their water baptism and the giving of the Holy Spirit.

All four instances are therefore different enough that we need to be cautious. You can't take Peter's words, “Repent and be baptised . . . and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,” as the basis of some kind of *ordo salutis*, an order of salvation experiences that is relevant to every believer.²⁰ It's always dangerous to base a doctrine on isolated proof-texts from Acts.

²⁰ Cf. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 92: “Luke's interest does not seem to be on standardizing things, bringing everything into uniformity. When he records individual conversions there are usually two elements included: water baptism and the gift of the Spirit. But these can be in reverse order, with or without the laying on of hands, with or without the mention of tongues, and scarcely ever with a specific mention of repentance, even after what

2. Command versus Description

When an action is commanded, it is far more likely to be normative than when it is merely described.²¹ For example, it is simply there for the record that Paul made the synagogue his first stop in every town that had one. Nowhere does he command others to do so. In a similar vein we are told that at Pentecost believers sold their possessions and goods so that they could alleviate the needs of others. Nowhere are they told to do so.

Compare these examples to Peter's call to the Jerusalem crowd to repent (Acts 2:38). This command occurs again and again in Acts:

- He issues the same command in his sermon in chapter 3: “*Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out and that times of refreshing may come from the Lord*” (v. 19).
- In Samaria he challenges Simon Magus: “*Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart*” (Acts 8:22).
- At Athens Paul declared: “God now commands all men everywhere to *repent*” (Acts 17:30).
- In his defence before King Agrippa Paul gave a summary of his ministry to both Jews and Gentiles: “I preached that they should *repent* and turn to God and prove their *repentance* by their deeds” (Acts 26:20).

So when Peter tells the crowd at Pentecost to repent this is a universal command. He is not just telling Jews in Jerusalem to repent of their involvement in the death of Jesus. This is a command to all people everywhere. It is as normative as you could possibly wish it to be. The same goes for the command to be baptised which he issues in the same breath.

Peter says in 2:38-39. . . . Such diversity probably means that no specific example is being set forth as *the* model Christian experience.”

²¹ Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 97, state the matter even more strongly – perhaps too strongly. They operate on the assumption that “*unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is merely narrated or described can never function in a normative way*” [italics theirs].

Throughout Acts people are baptised, Jews and Gentiles alike. “Repent and be baptised” is therefore a universal command that should be proclaimed as much by us as it was by Peter at Pentecost.

Take another command that occurs more than once. It is addressed specifically to Gentile believers, but does this still imply that it is addressed to us as Gentile believers today? The decision that was made by the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 was addressed specifically to Gentile Christians: “You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29). For good measure this prohibition is stated on three separate occasions (cf. Acts 15:20; 21:25). So it must be very important, but is it normative in the same way that Peter’s command to repent and be baptised is normative? In other words, should pastors be telling their congregations to abstain from the same things as those Gentile believers in Acts 15? Are there really certain deli meats, like black pudding, which Christians shouldn’t be eating today?

We can keep on reading in Acts, but that will not answer our question. We need to cast our eyes further afield and that will also bring us to our next principle.

3. Reinforcement in Other Parts of the New Testament

A command (or even a practice) in Acts carries more weight if it is repeated elsewhere in the New Testament. Here we need to think particularly of the teaching of Jesus and the Epistles. This is where we are more likely to come across timeless truths and normative commands.²² So let’s put the Jerusalem decree through this grid and see what the outcome might be.

²² Thus John R. W. Stott, *Baptism and Fullness: The Work of the Holy Spirit Today* (2nd ed.; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 15: “[T]he purpose of God in Scripture should be sought primarily in its *didactic* rather than its *descriptive* parts. More precisely, we should look for it in the teaching of Jesus, and in the sermons and writings of the apostles, rather than in the purely narrative portions of the Acts. What is described in Scripture as having happened to others is not necessarily intended for us . . . What is descriptive is valuable only in so far as it is interpreted by what is didactic.”

- We begin with the simplest example – the warning to abstain from sexual immorality.²³ Outside of the Jerusalem decree Acts never again refers to immorality, but this warning is repeated time and again in the New Testament – in the teaching of Jesus (Matt 5:32; 15:19; 19:9), in the Epistles (Rom 1:29; 1 Cor 6:13, 18; 7:2; Gal 5:19; Eph 5:3; Col 3:3; 1 Thess 4:3) and even in the Book of Revelation (2:21; 9:21). Throughout the New Testament both Jesus and the apostles take a dim view of immorality and speak against it consistently. So we can rest assured that this part of the Jerusalem decree was intended to apply to all believers at all times and in all places. It applies to us and it is required of us. It is normative.
- After this it begins to get more difficult. There are no more references to abstaining from blood and the meat of strangled animals either in Acts or anywhere else in the New Testament. This abstention is confined entirely to the Jerusalem decree. So what do we do with it? Can you buy any meats in the deli or do you have to be selective? Or should you perhaps be asking the shop assistant whether the meat you are buying is from a strangled animal?²⁴
- That brings us to the last requirement of the Jerusalem Council. The Gentile believers were also to abstain from food sacrificed to idols. Now this is an issue that definitely comes up again in the New Testament. Paul has an extensive discussion on it in 1 Cor 8-10. It's a question that the Corinthians have raised in a letter to Paul. The significant point here is that they raised this with him well after the

²³ As the other requirements in the Decree are non-ethical, the same could be true here. The term *porneia* ('sexual immorality') could be used in a more restricted sense. F. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Free Spirit* (rev. ed.; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), 185, explains as follows: "The most elementary teaching given to converts from paganism almost certainly made it clear that fornication and similar practices were incompatible with the Christian way. Even so, the Jerusalem leaders may have felt that no harm would be done by underlining this in the decree. But fornication could bear a more technical sense of marital union within the prohibited degrees of consanguinity or affinity laid down in the Hebrew 'law of holiness' (Leviticus 18:6-18)."

²⁴ In the early church context the eating of such foods would be particularly grating on Jewish sensibilities. "Eating with blood was absolutely tabu for Jews: it is expressly forbidden in Leviticus 17:10-14 and even earlier, in the commandments enjoined on Noah and his family (Genesis 9:4). People who had been brought up in the Jewish way of life could not be expected to accept such food at Gentile tables" (Bruce, *Paul*, 185-86).

decision that was reached by the Jerusalem Council, probably by as much as six, seven or eight years later. Yet Paul does not quote the Jerusalem decree to the church at Corinth, even though he was present when the decision was taken and was one of those who conveyed it the church at Antioch. What Paul does is very enlightening. He doesn't appeal to the decision made at Jerusalem. Rather he takes a very pastoral approach and he asks the Corinthians to remember those with weaker consciences. Then there follows a very nuanced discussion where he shows how they are to take account of their weaker brothers. Essentially he makes three points: (a) Never eat in an idol temple – that could be spiritually catastrophic for your weaker brother; (b) if you buy meat at the meat market don't ask any questions – what you don't know won't hurt you and it won't hurt anyone else, and (c) if an unbeliever invites you to dinner, again don't ask any questions. But if he tells you that this is meat that has been sacrificed to an idol, don't eat it. It could hurt another person's conscience.

Paul's directions have therefore clearly gone beyond the Jerusalem decree. But why does he feel free that he can ignore or at least modify what the Council agreed on? Does he take matters into his own hands? Not really. The Jerusalem decree was not intended to be binding forever and a day. It was a temporary measure designed to appease the Jewish believers who had lost the debate over Gentile circumcision. The letter that contained the decree was addressed to "the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia" (Acts 21:23). It had only limited application and was designed to be temporary. The Gospel had now moved on. The Jerusalem decree did not apply in the same way to the Corinthians as it had to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. It had permanent aspects like the warning against sexual immorality, but it was not intended to be binding in perpetuity. So you can relax and buy anything at the deli that you want, but you might need to be sensitive if you're having lunch with a young Jewish believer!

In the example of the Jerusalem decree we have identified a very important principle. A command or a practice in Acts can only be considered normative if it is reinforced elsewhere in the New Testament. Therefore the command to abstain from sexual immorality is permanently valid, as it is repeated again

and again. The command to abstain from meat offered to idols is modified in the light of the different situation in Corinth. The commands to abstain from blood²⁵ and the meat of strangled animals are never mentioned again and will only be relevant in situations that are very similar to the situation in Acts 15 – if you are working among Jewish people who eat only kosher foods, for example.

If we take this principle a little further we can see that it applies not only to commands but also practices that are mentioned in Acts. Think of those first believers at Pentecost. Luke reports that “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). This is a purely descriptive statement. There is nothing prescriptive about it. There is no imperative, no warning, no prohibition. It is just a description pure and simple. It is an observation made by Luke the historian. It’s part of his narrative. And yet I have preachers say that here you have all the fundamentals of a worship service – teaching, the Lord’s Supper, fellowship and prayer. They take all of this out of just one verse of narrative – and they are right! And why are they right? Because all of these elements can be found again in the Epistles. Here we have in seed form what comes to full flower elsewhere in the New Testament, especially in 1 Corinthians.

Luke continues by adding further details. He reports that “all the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need” (Acts 2:44-45). This seems to have become standard practice in the Jerusalem church because we read about it again at the end of chapter 4: “No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had . . . There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the

²⁵ Although the command, “you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it” (Gen 9:4), was given to Noah and therefore predates the laws of Moses, it cannot be argued that it therefore has universal validity. This is another food law that, because of the completed work of Christ, is no longer binding. In his own ministry Jesus “declared all foods clean” (Mark 7:19). For this reason Peter could be told to “kill and eat” (Acts 10:13) and not to “call anything impure that God has made clean” (Acts 10:15). For the same reason Paul could say, “I am fully convinced that no food is unclean of itself” (Rom 14:14). The death of Jesus radically altered all the OT food laws. Although concessions still needed to be made to those who had tender consciences on the issue (Rom 14:1-8), none of the dietary laws remains absolutely binding on Christians today.

apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need" (Acts 4:32, 34, 35). This is how things began in the early church. Is this a model for us to follow in the same way that their worship practices are a model to follow? Should we be into communal living and abolish the right of private property? If we follow the early believers when it comes to worship should we not also follow their example when it comes to possessions? These are not easy questions.

What happens when we read the rest of Acts and the rest of the New Testament? Strangely this idyllic situation that we have in Jerusalem is never repeated, neither in Acts nor anywhere else. Some have suggested that it was an experiment gone wrong and that later the church in Jerusalem had to be bailed out first by the church at Antioch and later by the churches that Paul established in Greece and Asia Minor.²⁶ But that view is not only uncharitable, it also misses the point. In later years the church in Jerusalem was poor not because of financial mismanagement but because of famine and persecution. Paul writes very eloquently about this to the Corinthians. The classic chapters on this are 2 Corinthians 8 & 9. There he tells the Christians at Corinth to give systematically, generously and cheerfully. He doesn't tell them to sell private property. To be as generous as they wanted to be perhaps some of them did so, but we are never told.

To the Ephesians Paul gives this command: "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need" (Eph 4:28).

In 1 Timothy he has some direct challenges to the rich: "Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share" (1 Tim 6:17-18). Notice that here too there is nothing about selling property. He's not saying, "Let's go back to the paradigm of the early Jerusalem church," but he is telling them to be generous and to be willing to share. That's what is

²⁶ See, for example, E. M. Blaiklock, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Historical Commentary* (London: Tyndale, 1959), 69: ". . . the poverty of the Jerusalem church, which later called for world-wide charity, may have been occasioned by this over-hasty dissipation of capital."

normative for Christians today. That's what is applicable to us and required from us. In the affluent church of the West we are to be generous and willing to share. If that means selling property, so be it. But that's not part of the command even though it is modelled by the early Jerusalem church. The basic principle is generosity and a willingness to share.²⁷

Now let's come back for a moment to what Luke said about worship in the Jerusalem church after Pentecost. Not only does he report that "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42), he also adds later that they met together in the temple courts and in their homes (Acts 2:46). Now is this also to be a model for us? Like those early believers, should we meet in larger gatherings at church on Sundays and in smaller groups in people's homes during the week? I remember seizing on this distinction as a young pastor when I was trying to introduce what was called "The Little Church Program." The basic principle underlying this program was that if you wanted a healthy church life then people should meet not only in church on Sundays but also in home groups during the week. So to launch the program, in my great enthusiasm, I preached from this passage in Acts 2 and really laid it on the line. This was the biblical model to follow. So join the program. I'm not sure I went so far as to tell people that they were sinning if they didn't, but if they only attended church on Sundays and didn't attend one of these "little churches" during the week, they would not have felt at ease. I imagine that their conscience would have troubled them. But was it right for me to preach like this on this passage? In hindsight I don't think so. Back in the early church in Jerusalem they may have met together in the temple courts and broken bread in their homes, but it does not seem to be a pattern that is repeated anywhere else. For a start, only Jerusalem had the temple and in many situations the only place where the church could meet was in people's homes. So the biblical principle that I thought I had uncovered was perhaps not a principle after all. You would be hard pressed to find examples of it elsewhere in the New

²⁷ Cf. Stott, *Baptism and Fullness*, 16: "Certainly the generosity and mutual care of those early Christians are to be followed, for the New Testament commands us many times to love and serve one another, and to be generous (even sacrificial) in our giving. But to argue from the practice of the early Jerusalem church that all private ownership is abolished among Christians not only cannot be maintained from Scripture but is plainly contradicted by the apostle Peter in the same context (Acts 5:4) and by the apostle Paul elsewhere (e.g. I Tim. 6:17)."

Testament. I honestly think it was a mistake for me to have sought to bind people's consciences in that way.

Preachers therefore need to be very careful in the way they handle Acts. Before we proclaim some command or practice to be normative, let's first apply these three hermeneutical principles that we have discovered so far: (a) We need to consider the principle of non-contradiction. Does the practice or doctrine we think we have discovered contradict another teaching or practice in Acts? (b) We need to ask whether we are dealing with a command or a description. A command is more likely to be normative but not necessarily so, in the light of the third principle which is really weightier than the other two. (c) Is the command or practice we are considering in Acts reinforced in other parts of the New Testament? This is by far the most important principle we have discovered so far because it is not the nature of narrative to be normative. And Acts is narrative. It's a story and although a story may have a moral not every detail implies a command to obey or an example to follow. That's far more likely to happen in the teachings of Jesus and the letters of the apostles. So when it comes to Acts we need to learn to compare Scripture with Scripture in the most rigorous and painstaking way.

But having said all that, these are just the minor principles that we are to keep in mind. The major one is still to come.

C. The Major Principle

What is the major principle that should guide in deciding which parts of Acts are normative for us today? Let me begin by answering that question with another question. Is Acts history or theology? In New Testament scholarship this has been a fascinating question and the answers have traditionally fallen out along party lines. Liberals have generally insisted that Acts is theology and that Luke played fast and loose with historical facts. In response to this, conservatives have insisted on the historicity of Acts and have come up with some wonderful archaeological, geographical and literary evidence to support their case. But in exalting Luke as a historian we run the risk of playing down

his significance as a theologian.²⁸ There is really only one answer to our question as to whether Acts is history or theology. It is of course both. Luke conveys his theology through the vehicle of history. Acts is at the same time accurate history and profound theology.

This leads to another question. What is the theology that Luke is so eager to teach in Acts? At the end of the day what is the theology that he wants us to go home with? Again it's those three points highlighted in my previous article – the baptism of the Spirit, the Great Commission and the resurrection. Luke lays it all out for us in the opening verses of Acts. The risen Jesus will baptise his apostles with the Holy Spirit. This will enable them to be his witnesses and the central feature of their testimony is that they are witnesses of his resurrection. So these are the primary features of Acts, and they are all related. Jesus baptises his church with the Holy Spirit so that it is empowered to carry out the Great Commission which in turn means the proclamation of the resurrection – and the one who makes it all happen is the risen Jesus! So this is the primary message of Acts, and because it is primary it is also foundational and normative. It is of first importance to the church today. The Great Commission has not yet been fully carried out. The resurrection still needs to be proclaimed. For all this the Church needs to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. This is primary. Everything else is secondary. What is primary is normative. What is secondary may not be.

1. The Baptism with the Holy Spirit

Before we look into this primary feature of Acts, it is important to point out that Jesus was baptised with the Holy Spirit and we too, all of us, have been baptised with the Holy Spirit. As Paul tells the Corinthians, “For we were *all* baptised by one Spirit into one body – whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free – and we were *all* given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Cor 12:13). So whether it's Jesus or the Corinthians or ourselves – we have all been baptised with the

²⁸ Cf. William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 1993), “. . . conservative students of Acts have been preoccupied with archaeology and other kinds of research, hoping to substantiate the historical trustworthiness of Acts. But in successfully doing so, they have often lost sight of the theological emphasis foremost in Luke's mind. Liberal scholars have often proved more sensitive to Luke's theological insights, but in so doing they have unnecessarily alleged that he contradicts the other evangelists, the epistles of Paul, and historical facts.”

Holy Spirit. This is for everybody. It is not a “second blessing” experience for some, but an initial experience for all. It happens to all Christians at the beginning of the Christian life. It doesn’t just happen to elite Christians at some later time in the Christian life. This is precisely the pattern that we see in Acts.

- At Pentecost in Jerusalem, Jews became believers in Jesus and they were baptised with the Holy Spirit.
- In Acts 8 we have an extension of Pentecost in Samaria. Samaritans had come to believe in Jesus and they were baptised with the Holy Spirit.
- In Acts 10 we have a further extension of Pentecost, this time to the house of Cornelius in Caesarea. There Gentiles believed in Jesus and they were baptised with the Holy Spirit.
- In Acts 19 we have yet a further extension of Pentecost. This time former disciples of John the Baptist believe in Jesus and they are baptised with the Holy Spirit.

For each group we would have to insist that this was an initial experience. The baptism of the Holy Spirit did not come at some later point in their Christian lives but when they first believed in Jesus. Prior to that, they had been Jews, Samaritans, Gentile God-fearers or disciples of John the Baptist. In each case it was an integral part of their conversion experience. Through the baptism of the Spirit they were incorporated into the church. They became members of the body of Christ. This was a corporate experience for all, not an individual experience for some. It was the corporate dimension of their regeneration. They had now been born into the family of God. On each occasion it happened in a very dramatic way:

- In Jerusalem there was “a sound like the blowing of a violent wind.” Tongues of fire came to rest on each of them and “they began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them” (Acts 2:2-4).
- In Samaria there is no record of any of these phenomena, but it does say that Simon Magus “saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on

of the apostles' hands" (Acts 8:18). Something visible occurred, but we don't know what it was.

- When the Holy Spirit came on the Gentile believers in Caesarea, the Jewish Christians "*heard* them speaking in tongues and praising God" (Acts 10:46). Simon saw; these people heard.
- In Ephesus in Acts 19 there were a dozen or so former disciples of John the Baptist. When the Holy Spirit came on them "they spoke in tongues and prophesied" (Acts 19:6).

For all these groups it was all the one experience, the one baptism of the Holy Spirit. But again we cannot absolutise the form of the experience. In Samaria it was something that could be *seen*. In Caesarea and Ephesus it was something that could be *heard*, and in Jerusalem it could be both *seen and heard*. So even in the book of Acts the baptism of the Spirit is manifested in different ways. The fact of Spirit baptism is primary. The form it takes is secondary. When you get to 1 Corinthians, nothing is said about the form. All that Paul mentions is the fact that all of them have been baptised by the Holy Spirit. So when it comes to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the fact that it happens is primary, the way that it happens is secondary.

If we can say this about Spirit baptism, could we perhaps say something similar about water baptism? Because water baptism is the physical counterpart to Spirit baptism, it should be regarded as primary. "Repent and be baptised," said Peter, and we have seen that new converts are baptised throughout Acts. Water baptism is the outward sign or symbol of Spirit baptism. Just as Spirit baptism incorporates you into the universal, invisible church, so water baptism incorporates you into the visible, local church. To put it differently, when you are baptised with water you become a member of the church as a physical organisation; when you are baptised by the Holy Spirit you become a member of the church as a spiritual organism.

Because water baptism is so closely linked to Spirit baptism it is primary. But just as the phenomena attending Spirit baptism are secondary, so the mode and subjects of water baptism are also secondary. You cannot argue from Acts to prove either infant baptism or the baptism of adults. From Acts you cannot prove baptism by sprinkling or baptism by immersion or baptism by

pouring. On a given occasion it may look more like immersion and on another occasion it may look more like sprinkling or pouring. Sometimes individuals are baptised, while at other times households are baptised. But did these households contain infants? Maybe, maybe not. We simply aren't told. In Acts we just don't have sufficient evidence to argue one way or the other. But there's a more principal reason. In Acts baptism as such is primary. Its mode and subjects are secondary. If you want to argue for infant baptism or baptism by immersion you'll have to go elsewhere. You'll never prove your point from Acts for the simple reason that that's not why Acts was written.²⁹

Another example will illustrate the point. When our family lived in Tasmania we had neighbours who were United Pentecostals. Now the United Pentecostals are regarded as a sect even within Pentecostalism because of their modalistic views of the Trinity. By Modalism is meant that the three members of the Trinity are not three persons but three modes or expressions of the same Being.³⁰ Our neighbour lady explained it to my wife like this. She said, "Just as you are a mother, a wife and a daughter, so God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit." Because the United Pentecostals have a modalistic understanding of the Trinity, they do not baptise in the triune name. They baptise in the name of Jesus only. When I challenged our neighbour by saying that Jesus told his disciples to baptise in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, her reply surprised me. She said, "Yes, but they didn't do it. In the book of Acts they only ever baptised in the name of

²⁹ At this point Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, demonstrate how difficult it can be to consistently put good hermeneutical principles into practice. Their chapter on Acts is excellent. In it they strongly distinguish what is primary from what is secondary. At the end of the chapter, however, they argue on the basis of Acts 8:38-39, where Philip baptizes the Ethiopian eunuch, that "one can make a very strong case for immersion as the mode of baptism" (p. 102). But these verses prove too much. They state that "both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and . . . came up out of the water" (NIV). On their reading Fee and Stuart would have to conclude that Philip was immersed along with the eunuch. This is possible, but highly unlikely.

³⁰ The United Pentecostal Church's Articles of Faith state this matter as follows: "This one true God has revealed Himself as Father; through His Son in redemption; and as the Holy Spirit by emanation (I Corinthians 8:6; Ephesians 4:6; II Corinthians 5:19; Joel 2:28) . . . Before the incarnation, this one true God manifested Himself in divers ways. In the incarnation, He manifested Himself in the Son, who walked among men. As He works in the lives of believers, He manifests Himself in the Holy Spirit."

Jesus.”³¹ I hope that illustrates my point. You can’t go to the book of Acts to establish a doctrine or practice that contradicts more normative teaching elsewhere. You can’t take a secondary feature from Acts and turn it into an absolute. It can be a dangerous thing to do.

2. The Great Commission

With some justification Acts 1:8 has been called the ‘contents page’ of the book of Acts: “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” What we need to realise here is that Jesus lists three geographical areas, not four. He does not say “in all Judea and in *all* Samaria” but “in all Judea and Samaria.” For the purposes of the Great Commission they are regarded as the one region (and they were in fact territories of the one Roman province). So the three geographical areas that Jesus has in mind are Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth. That gives us a very basic outline of the book. For the first seven chapters the story is confined to Jerusalem. Then in chapters 8 & 9 it moves out into Judea and Samaria. The “ends of the earth” are reached as early as chapter 10 when Peter preaches in the house of Cornelius in Caesarea. For a practising Jew to go and eat in the house of a Gentile was, at least religiously, like going to the ends of the earth.

You will also notice that the baptism of the Holy Spirit and the Great Commission work in tandem. The baptism of the Holy Spirit keeps up with the Great Commission, and the Great Commission is empowered by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Each region is blessed by its own version of Pentecost:

- There was the Jewish Pentecost at Jerusalem in Acts 2;
- There was the Samaritan Pentecost in Acts 8;
- And there was the Gentile Pentecost in Caesarea in Acts 10.

³¹ The UPC Articles of Faith state that baptism is to be “administered . . . in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to the Acts of the Apostles 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5; thus obeying and fulfilling Matthew 28:19.”

Throughout Acts we see the apostles carrying out the Great Commission. That's one of the primary features of the book. But once again the *how* is secondary. The way they carry out the Great Commission varies from person to person, from time to time and from place to place. For the first seven chapters they witness very faithfully and powerfully in Jerusalem, but they seem to have no vision for the outside world. They don't move out of Jerusalem till they are driven out following the stoning of Stephen. That's how the gospel gets into Samaria, not by a decision from the Jerusalem missions committee. Likewise, when it comes to the next step, Peter does not follow a well developed strategy to get a preaching invitation to the house of Cornelius. By a precisely co-ordinated series of dreams, visions and meetings the Holy Spirit coaxes him to go. Peter proves to be a very reluctant pioneer missionary indeed.

The only one who seems to have a strategy is the apostle Paul. He has a sending church. He targets commercial and urban centres. He uses synagogues as stepping-stones into the Gentile world. But again we should not see any of this as normative. In Corinth we read that he was in a tent-making ministry with Aquila and Priscilla, but he stopped that as soon as Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia (Acts 18:5), no doubt with a financial gift from the Macedonian churches (cf. Phil 4:15). But why did he not want financial support from the Corinthian church when he seems to have welcomed it everywhere else? Even if we could figure out Paul's financial strategy down to fairly precise detail, Acts contains no suggestions that we should adopt it.

3. The Resurrection

The content of the Great Commission was the resurrection of Jesus. This was primarily what the apostles were to bear witness to. The apostles were very faithful to this Commission. Especially in the evangelistic and apologetic messages of Peter and Paul the resurrection was their focal point (Acts 2:24-32; 3:15; 4:2, 10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30-37; 17:3, 31; 24: 15, 21; 26:8, 23). We must now ask the hermeneutical question – what does this mean for the church today? How are we to be witnesses to the resurrection since we were not there as the apostles were? And what are the implications for preaching

today? Should the resurrection have the same central place in our preaching as it did in the sermons of Peter and Paul?

The basic issue here is whether it is valid to speak of witnesses today when it has to do with testifying to an event that occurred nearly two thousand years ago. At this point we need to make a significant distinction: (a) The apostles were witnesses in the original sense of that term. They were there when it happened. They saw the risen Christ. (b) Our witness depends on theirs and therefore we can be witnesses in a derived sense. The believing proclamation of the apostolic witness is itself a witness. In our witnessing, whether that be in private conversation or in public evangelism, we should therefore strive to make the resurrection our focal point.

For preachers of the gospel the sermons of Peter and Paul pose further questions. Should we model ourselves on the apostles' preaching? Is the measure of our preaching how closely it conforms to these biblical examples? Or can we differ radically from them and still be preaching biblically? In answering these questions we can identify seven essential elements of the preaching in Acts:

- (i) the kingdom concept,
- (ii) salvation in Christ alone,
- (iii) the resurrection/exaltation event,
- (iv) the fulfilment of the Scriptures,
- (v) application,
- (vi) the Spirit,
- (vii) response.

To what extent should these elements feature in contemporary preaching? Should every sermon contain all of these elements, for example? Murray Capill once put it like this: “These seven elements, whilst not binding on the present-day preacher, are the central characteristics of apostolic preaching,

and so, in order for preaching to claim for itself the description 'biblical', it should generally reflect these emphases and perspectives."³²

Therefore the apostles' repeated emphasis on the resurrection should not be lost on us. This should be especially the case if our preaching is evangelistic. So my challenge to preachers would be this: Preach the resurrection! And don't just do it on Easter Sunday. Preach the resurrection regularly throughout the year. Preach it evangelistically. Preach it compellingly. Preach it winsomely. This is how Peter caught men. This is how Paul caught men. This is how you can catch men. This is the message of hope that people most need to hear in the 21st century.

Sometimes we think that our preaching is Christ-centred when it is cross-centred. It should be at least equally resurrection-centred. Just as much as it is cross-centred, it should be empty-tomb-centred. The apostles were primarily witnesses of the resurrection. We should do the same. This is primary. This is normative. This is the heart of the Great Commission that we have been called to carry out. With the apostles we are witnesses of the resurrection.

Conclusion

So how normative is Acts? Is it prescriptive or descriptive? It remains a difficult question and I don't claim to have given the last word. But by way of a preliminary conclusion I should perhaps say this. Have we done ourselves any favours by framing the debate as we have? Is it right to speak of "prescriptive" and "descriptive" as absolute and opposite categories? We run the danger of impaling the debate on the horns of an impossible dilemma. Should we be speaking in such absolute terms when it comes to Acts? Are some parts of Acts prescriptive in the sense of being normative for all time, and is the rest of the book therefore merely descriptive and of historical interest only, and hence irrelevant to the life of the church today?

Between "prescriptive" and "descriptive" should we perhaps introduce some more nuanced categories, such as "instructive," "suggestive" and

³² Murray Capill, "The Speeches in Acts" (Reformed Theological College, Geelong: Bachelor of Divinity thesis, 1989), 75.

“reflective”? Perhaps this could be a very helpful way forward, also in our preaching:

- When the apostles arranged for the appointment of the Seven, how pastorally wise they were in the way they handled that situation.
- The letter that was sent following the Jerusalem Council is not a document that we might ever want to adopt in its totality, but for encouragement it was second to none. We would be foolish not to learn from it.
- There were also aspects of Paul’s missionary strategy that were just so sensible. The support, the accountability and the co-operation built into it were simply brilliant. We would be wise to be aware of it and take some of it on board.

So by all means preach Acts. It will be as much of an adventure as the book itself. But preach it in a nuanced way. Not only are there commands to be obeyed and examples to be followed. There are also stories to be enjoyed, decisions to be admired and, above all, testimony to a sovereign God who is greatly to be praised!