



1. CONTEXTUALIZATION IN ACTS

Bridging Cultural Boundaries



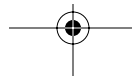
I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

ACTS 10:34-35

Contextualizing the gospel is inherent to the mission of the church. The book of Acts tells the story of a church whose very identity involved expressing the good news about Jesus in multiple settings and among new groups of people. It is little wonder, then, that interpreters of the New Testament and missiologists alike have begun to ask whether the experience of the early church in Acts might serve as a crucial paradigm for the process of contextualization.¹ This chapter and the next will probe the extent to which we can uncover precedents for rearticulating the gospel in Luke's narrative.

There is more than one way to get at this task. One approach would be simply to focus on the events recorded in Acts, as well as the sermons of the apostles to different audiences, as examples of the gospel's encounter with Jewish and Greco-Roman culture. Another angle, however, would be to ask how Luke's way of telling the church's story is itself a fresh translation of the gospel for his audience and cultural setting. There is no need to choose between the two. I will begin by briefly considering Acts as a contextual document in its own right.

¹See e.g., M. Dumais, "The Church of the Acts of the Apostles: a Model of Inculturation?" in *Inculturation: Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures*, ed. A. A. R. Crollius (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1987), 10:3-24; Mbachu Hilary, *Inculturation Theology of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15: An Inspiration for the Igbo Church Today* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995); David K. Strong, "The Jerusalem Council: Some Implications for Contextualization: Acts 15," in *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Context*, ed. R. L. Gallagher and P. Hertig (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004), pp. 196-208. Cf. Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004). pp. 10-31.





The major part of the chapter will then focus on patterns of incarnating the gospel that emerge from Luke's story.

ACTS AS A CONTEXTUAL DOCUMENT

Like all New Testament writings, Acts is a "cultural product" in that it participates in the particular first-century cultural and literary world that Luke shares with his readers.² This is nowhere more apparent than when we view Acts in light of the typical forms of literature of the ancient world. Although the debate over the specific literary genre of Acts goes on, it is likely that Luke's readers would have recognized this book as an example of ancient Hellenistic historical writing.³ There is now widespread agreement that the prologue to Luke's gospel (Lk 1:1-4) functions as an introduction to a two-volume work, Luke-Acts. Not only does this preface follow the convention of Greek historical works, but in calling what he wrote a "narrative" (Lk 1:1), Luke "identifies his project as a long narrative account of many events, for which the chief prototypes were the early Greek histories of Herodotus and Thucydides."⁴ What is more, a number of other literary features of Luke-Acts—travel narratives, speeches, letters, dramatic episodes such as Paul's shipwreck story (Acts 27:13-44)—would have reminded its audience of other Greco-Roman histories.⁵

In addition, Acts shows ample influence from the conventions and patterns of ancient rhetoric, the art of persuasion.⁶ This is hardly surprising since Greco-Roman historical writing was intended not simply to inform but to *persuade* an audience. It was history with a message and a goal. Furthermore, ancient literary works, including histories, were meant in the first place to be read aloud and

²On the notion of a "cultural product," see Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 11-12.

³See e.g., David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987), pp. 77-140; Darryl W. Palmer, "Acts and the Ancient Historical Monograph," in *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting*, ed. Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke, *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 1:1-29.

⁴Green, *Gospel of Luke*, p. 5.

⁵Joel B. Green, "Acts of the Apostles," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), pp. 8-9. This does not mean that Luke-Acts shares all of the formal and content features of Greco-Roman historiography. Luke's work shows certain similarities to Old Testament and Hellenistic Jewish historical writings as well. See Brian S. Rosner, "Acts and Biblical History," in *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting*, ed. Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke, *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 1:65-82.

⁶See Philip E. Satterthwaite, "Acts Against the Background of Classical Rhetoric," in *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting*, ed. Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke, *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), 1:337-79; W. S. Kurz, "Hellenistic Rhetoric in the Christological Proof of Luke-Acts," *CBQ* 42 (1980): 171-95.





heard by an audience. Historians like Luke would have well understood the power of rhetoric to convince people to “give ear” to the case they were making.⁷ In a valuable study of the rhetorical background of Acts, classics scholar Philip E. Satterthwaite argues that Luke seems to write as someone trained in Greek rhetoric, using familiar techniques of persuasion in his selecting and arranging of material as well as in his style of writing. “At point after point,” Satterthwaite concludes, “Acts can be shown to operate according to conventions similar to those outlined in classical rhetorical treatises. There are some aspects which it is hard to explain other than by concluding that Luke was aware of rhetorical conventions: the preface; the layout of some of the speeches; and the presentation of legal proceedings in chapters 24—26.”⁸ We will have more to say in the next chapter about the evidence of rhetoric in the speeches of Acts, where Luke’s persuasive skills are particularly on display. In addition, Luke follows the ancient practice of “writing in character” (*prosopopoiia*), in which he varies his style of writing to fit the specific subject and occasion. For instance, Luke seems to deliberately imitate the biblical rhythms of the Greek translation of the Old Testament (Septuagint) when the subject matter demands it (especially Acts 1—12; cf. Luke 1—2), in contrast with his more Greek style as the gospel moves out into the Gentile world (e.g., Acts 17:16-34).⁹ Familiar literary and rhetorical forms become vehicles for communicating Luke’s message in a way that would have a maximum impact upon his audience.

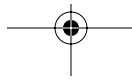
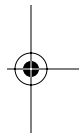
Acts also reflects the historical and cultural circumstances of the first century Mediterranean world. Chronological markers, such as the reference to a popular revolt led by an Egyptian during the rule of the Roman governor Felix (Acts 21:38; cf. Acts 5:36-37), anchor the narrative in a specific time and place. In other ways, too, Luke’s book represents the social and cultural realities of his time. Thus, when a Roman tribune tells Paul that he has bought his Roman citizenship (Acts 22:22-29), it would have been common knowledge for people of the Greco-Roman world that this involved paying a bribe, since citizenship could not be legally purchased. Cultural insiders would also know that, according to the honor code of the day, if this tribune mistreated a more “honorable” Roman citizen like Paul—a citizen by birth—it would involve a serious breach of social norms.¹⁰ At the same time Luke’s narrative can subvert the conventions and values of the Jewish and

⁷Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 41-42.

⁸Satterthwaite, “Acts Against the Background,” p. 378.

⁹See Johnson, “Luke-Acts, Book of,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:408-9; Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 44.

¹⁰Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 680-81.





Greco-Roman worlds. For example, Acts' description of the earliest Christian community's sharing property and food in order to care for all those in need (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37) tacks against the wind of the dominant culture. In the Roman world, extreme social inequalities, status hierarchies and giving in order to get a return benefit were the norm. Luke not only roots his narrative in the cultural context he and his readers share; he challenges it as well.

THE AUDIENCE AND PURPOSE OF ACTS

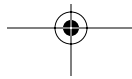
To ask how Luke contextualized his presentation of the Christian message in Acts inevitably raises the question of his intended audience. We have no good reason to doubt that Luke's addressee, Theophilus (Acts 1:1; cf. Lk 1:3), was a real person and that he represented the kind of reader whom Luke was particularly addressing.¹¹ The language and content of Acts suggest that Luke's primary target audience would have been Greek-speaking Gentiles, especially those familiar enough with the Septuagint to appreciate Luke's frequent allusions to the Scriptures and their fulfillment.¹² Most likely, Theophilus was already a believer but not yet fully integrated into the Christian way, someone who needed further understanding of the saving events that had taken place (Lk 1:1-4).

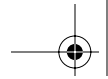
What, then, is Luke's contextual purpose in writing to Theophilus and his fellow Gentile believers? It is difficult to pinpoint a single answer to this question, and there is no reason that we must limit Acts to any one, exclusive aim. Clearly Theophilus has some knowledge of "the events that have been fulfilled among us" (Lk 1:1), that is, God's unfolding purpose in the history of Jesus and the early church. However, the "assurance" (Lk 1:4) that Luke wants to give Theophilus has to do not so much with confirming the historical truth of those events as in their *interpretation* for his audience.¹³ In other words, Luke-Acts relates *theological* history from which its readers are intended to learn and to be "convinced."

¹¹Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 195. While it is possible to distinguish between Luke's actual narratee, Theophilus, and the portrait of his "implied reader" that can be discovered within the narrative text of Acts, in practice the two cohere to a large extent.

¹²Johnson, "Luke-Acts," pp. 405, 408. Does this mean that all of Luke's Gentile readers would have been able to grasp the Old Testament nuances of Luke-Acts? This is highly unlikely. I like the suggestion of Max Turner that presumably "most Christian communities contained Jews and God-fearers who would contribute to the interpretive reading" ("Historical Criticism and Theological Hermeneutics of the New Testament," in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, ed. J. B. Green and M. Turner [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000], p. 63 n. 36).

¹³Joel B. Green, "Internal Repetition in Luke-Acts: Contemporary Narratology and Lucan Historiography," in *History, Literature and Society in the Book of Acts*, ed. Ben Witherington III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 287-88.





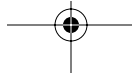
Acts is therefore targeted in the first place to the church. Only in a secondary sense is it meant to evangelize unbelievers or to offer a defense of Christianity to those outside the movement. It seeks primarily to build up an increasingly Gentile Christian community by showing them through the story of God's working in the past what it means to be the church and how they are to live in light of that pattern.¹⁴ Given this aim, Luke spotlights the theme of God's plan to bring salvation in its fullness to all people, both Jews and Gentiles. Gentile readers of Acts would have been well aware of the Jewish heritage of the Christian movement as well as the largely Gentile context in which the gospel had spread. No doubt they wanted to know how a movement that centered around a Jew and began as a reform movement within Judaism became a church in which Gentiles far outnumbered Jews. According to John Squires, these Gentile Christians needed a cultural "translation" of a largely "Jewish" story for a new setting. Consequently, Luke-Acts attempts to explain and defend God's saving project to Hellenized Christians in a way that would speak to their needs and thought world. Squires shows that, in particular, Luke's emphasis on the unfolding plan of God allows him to contextualize the gospel for a Gentile world whose writings were already deeply concerned with the role of divine guidance in human affairs.¹⁵ Acts could also provide the Gentile church with theological legitimacy by proclaiming that, in spite of Jewish rejection of the gospel, it stands in continuity with Israel and the ministry of Jesus as the fulfillment of God's plan promised in Scripture. In important ways, then, Acts is an intercultural document. It transposes a story that is grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures, as well as the Jewish identity of Jesus and the early Jerusalem church, into a Greco-Roman cultural setting.

At the same time, Acts would have offered encouragement and strength to Christians who were facing opposition, both by reminding them of the progress of the gospel in the midst of suffering in the past and by calling them to ongoing involvement in God's plan to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.¹⁶ Through the stories of the preaching of the apostles and the church's Spirit-led witness to both Jews and Gentiles, Luke provides models for his readers as they explore

¹⁴I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 33; cf. John T. Squires, "The Plan of God in the Acts of the Apostles," in *Witness to the Gospel*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 38-39.

¹⁵John T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 190-94.

¹⁶See Green, "Acts of the Apostles," p. 17; David Peterson, "Luke's Theological Enterprise: Integration and Intent," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 540-44.





how to live out God's saving mission in their own contexts. Acts is therefore intended to be more than simply a description of the gospel's progress between Jerusalem and Rome. It is also an invitation. It beckons its readers to embrace God's saving purpose for the world. It calls them to enter into the story that continues beyond the open ending of the narrative in Acts 28:31. In short, Luke tells the story in such a way that it could build up and fortify the largely Gentile church of his day (including Theophilus), helping it to understand who it is, where it stands in God's plan for the ages and what it must do to fulfill its calling as a missionary community. The particular theological themes that Luke features—salvation, God's plan, the risen and exalted Christ, the Holy Spirit, the witness of the church in the face of opposition, the people of God comprised of Jews and Gentiles, and the like—contextualize God's good news for his audience in light of these aims. In this way, Acts becomes a "word on target"¹⁷ for educated Gentile Christians in the Mediterranean world.

STORIES OF BRIDGING BARRIERS: ACTS 1—8

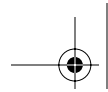
Part of Luke's reason for writing Acts, then, was not only to encourage Theophilus and other Gentile Christians to participate in God's universal mission but also to give them programmatic examples of the church's Spirit-empowered witness to various groups of people. If this is true, the patterns of contextualizing the gospel that emerge from Acts could be of particular value to the church, both in Luke's time and our own. We will consider a series of critical moments in the story of the church's mission which offers precedents for how the gospel speaks afresh to new audiences and circumstances.

First to the Jews. In line with the promise of Acts 1:8, Luke tells the story of the unfolding progress of the gospel from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth by way of Judea and Samaria. Like the rippling effect of a stone dropped into a pool of water, the witness of Jesus' disciples extends to ever-wider geographical areas and new people groups. In this account the church does not intentionally set out to contextualize its message. The focus in Acts is on *witnessing* to God's salvation in Jesus Christ, among Aramaic and Greek-speaking Jews, Samaritans, God-fearing Gentiles and finally pagans. The result is that fresh "translations" of the gospel occur under the guidance of the Spirit as the word of God spans cultural, linguistic and religious boundaries.

At the beginning of the story, however, the inclusive and transcultural dimensions of the gospel are far from obvious. In spite of Jesus' promise of a

¹⁷This is the apt phrase of J. Christiaan Beker (*The Triumph of God: The Essence of Paul's Thought* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990], p. x).





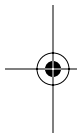
universal witness by his followers in Acts 1:8, chapters 1—5 describe a Christian movement that operates within the ethnic and religious borders of the Jewish people. The original articulation of God's new revelation in Christ was tailored for the Jews in the framework of their history, Scriptures, culture and religious experience. The gospel cannot exist apart from a concrete historical and cultural home. Luke portrays the Christian message in these chapters exclusively within the thought forms and images of the Judaism from which it emerges. Jesus is the Jewish Messiah who will restore the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6; cf. 5:31). Perhaps we could say that the Jerusalem believers unconsciously "inculturate" the newness of the gospel into their own Jewish heritage.¹⁸

Nevertheless, there are signs that the gospel is overcoming obstacles even during this early stage of close identification with Jewish culture. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is accompanied by the miracle of languages, in which Jews and proselytes who represent "every nation under heaven" hear the apostles declare the mighty acts of God in their own vernacular languages (Acts 2:4-11). The miracle would not have been simply for the purpose of communication, since this audience of Jews apparently would have understood either Aramaic or Greek.¹⁹ It also symbolizes that the good news is not confined to any single nation or to the Hebrew tongue. From the beginning, the gospel is translated into the various languages of people from all nations. Although the Acts 2 crowd is made up entirely of Jews and Jewish proselytes who have come to Jerusalem to worship, Pentecost foreshadows the church's universal witness that moves out from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth ("all flesh," Acts 2:17; "everyone," Acts 2:21; "all who are far away," Acts 2:39). The Spirit's bridging of the communication barrier caused by the diversity of languages signals that the word is able to address *all* people in the particularity of their own "language of the heart."

Stephen and the Hellenists. It is in Acts 6—15 that we see the actualization of the boundary-shattering work of the Spirit, as the gospel moves incrementally from a singularly Jewish to a multicultural sphere of influence. Harold E. Dollar observes that Luke deliberately highlights events that show the gospel's journey

¹⁸Francesco Rossi de Gasperis, "Continuity and Newness in the Faith of the Mother Church of Jerusalem," in *Bible and Inculturation*, ed. A. A. R. Crollius (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1983), pp. 63-64.

¹⁹Anthony T. Lincoln, "Pentecost," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 905. This is supported by the clear impression given by Luke that the entire crowd understood Peter's sermon, which was likely delivered in Aramaic (Acts 2:14ff.).





from Jewish particularism to inclusivism. Consequently, “[e]ach episode in these chapters, with the exception of chapter twelve, advances this movement in the direction of the Gentiles until the leadership explicitly announces this accomplishment in chapter fifteen.”²⁰

In chapter six, Luke introduces the Jerusalem “Hellenists.” This group is vital to the narrative, not least because they play a key role in the progress of the word to the non-Jewish world. There is a growing consensus that the term “Hellenists” (Acts 6:1) referred to Greek-speaking Jews from the diaspora, in contrast with the “Hebrews,” whose primary language was Aramaic. Language, however, is a basic vehicle of culture, and the Hellenists appear to be a Jewish subculture within Jerusalem who had adopted at least some elements of Greek culture as well.²¹ The response of a significant number of Hellenists to the earliest preaching of the church implies that the gospel message had already been translated into Greek for their benefit.²² In addition, the Hellenists who spoke only Greek probably worshiped separately in Greek-speaking homes, with the Seven emerging as their functional leaders (Acts 6:5-6). From its infancy the Jerusalem church was characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity. Such differences no doubt contributed to the tensions between the Hellenists and Hebrews over the distribution of food (Acts 6:1-6).²³

Did the Hellenists develop a distinctive interpretation of the Christian message, as well? Although the theological differences between the Hebrews and Hellenists have often been overblown, Luke’s account of the preaching of Stephen, the leading Hellenist (Acts 6:8—7:60), suggests an advancement in the church’s understanding of the implications of God’s revelation in Christ, one which helps ultimately to open the door to the Gentile mission.²⁴ Indeed, Stephen’s sermon in Acts 7 is a compelling example of doing contextual theology for a new situation.

In the narrative, Stephen’s speech before the Jewish council is prompted by charges from other Hellenistic Jews that he blasphemes Moses and God and that

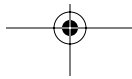
²⁰Harold E. Dollar, *A Biblical-Missiological Exploration of the Cross-Cultural Dimensions in Luke-Acts* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1993), p. 115.

²¹James D. G. Dunn, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Valley Forge, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 1996), p. 81; G. R. Stanton, “Hellenism,” in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), pp. 468-70.

²²Dunn, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 82.

²³Ibid., pp. 83-84.

²⁴Heinz-Werner Neudorfer, “The Speech of Stephen,” in *Witness to the Gospel*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 279-80; Bevans and Schroeder, *Constants in Context*, pp. 18-20.



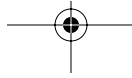
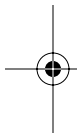


he is constantly attacking the Jerusalem temple and the law (Acts 6:11, 13). In response, Stephen appeals to a shared story of God's dealings with Israel and the testimony of Scripture in order to call his Jewish audience to account. On one hand, Stephen's narrative shows his accusers that his message stands in continuity with Moses (Acts 7:35, 39, 44) and the law (Acts 7:38, 44). On the other, he gives Israel's history and traditions a messianic makeover. Retelling Israel's story allows Stephen to establish common ground with his listeners, drawing them into the narrative with repeated first person references (e.g., "our ancestor[s]," Acts 7:2, 11-12, 19, 38-39, 44-45; "our people," 7:17). At the same time, the sermon reconfigures the story of God's people in order to reshape his hearers' understanding and identity.²⁵

Stephen's speech develops two main themes, both of which advance this contextual purpose. First, the Jews have over and over rejected God's agents of deliverance who intervened on their behalf. This grim pattern of rejection has continued even to the present in their opposition to Jesus, the "Righteous One" (Acts 7:52), and his servants. Second, God's presence is not tied to the Jerusalem temple. Throughout his retelling of the Jewish story, Stephen demonstrates that God was with his people *outside* of the Promised Land (Acts 7:1-38). As such, the speech gives short shrift to the settlement of Canaan and the Jerusalem-based monarchy. It focuses rather on the sojournings of the patriarchs and the wilderness wanderings, where the people encountered God in a mobile tabernacle. What is more, Stephen describes the temple "made with human hands" (Acts 7:48) in language daringly similar to that used previously for the golden calf (Acts 7:41). The implication is clear: his opponents' attitude toward the temple is tantamount to a form of idolatry. Stephen's targeted speech thus not only addresses the charge laid against him of criticizing the temple (Acts 6:13-14), but, more importantly, it challenges Jewish exclusivism. By freeing the Christian movement from the centrality of Jerusalem and the temple, Stephen the Hellenist cultivates the theological soil for the church's universal witness.

Bridges to peripheral people. The scattering of the Jerusalem disciples following Stephen's martyrdom allows the gospel to cross new cultural and geographical thresholds through the ministry of Philip, the Hellenist evangelist. First, he preaches to a group of people who were social, political and religious rivals of the Jews, the Samaritans (Acts 8:4-25). For Luke they were not Jews in the strict sense, although they remained on the fringes of Judaism. Rather, the Samaritans "stood as a halfway house between the Jewish and Gentile worlds

²⁵See Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990), 2:88.





leading to a transition to the Gentile mission.²⁶ It is surely no coincidence that it was a Hellenist Christian, someone who would probably be more open to contact with outsiders, who becomes the catalyst for the church's initial mission to non-Jews. Philip proclaims "the Messiah" to this crowd (Acts 8:5), which may have been a calculated but courageous strategy since the Samaritans had a different messianic expectation from the Jews (later called the "Taheb" = "Restorer") based on Deuteronomy 18:18.²⁷ The link between the Jewish hope for a messiah and that of the Samaritans provides an evangelistic bridge for Philip. Yet that expectation must still be reframed in terms of Jesus as the Messiah. The Evangelist proclaims "the good news about the kingdom of God [cf. Acts 1:3] and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12; cf. 4:17, 18; 5:28, 40), which underscores that Philip's ministry of the word stands in continuity with Jesus and the apostles.²⁸

Luke's introduction of Simon the magician within the story of the Samaritan mission signals an early encounter between the gospel and syncretism (Acts 8:9-13, 18-23). Simon tries to incorporate Christianity into his already syncretistic concoction of heretical Samaritan Judaism and popular Greco-Roman magic. For Simon, religion is a fountain of power and self-promotion (Acts 8:10-11, 19). Initially, Luke describes the interaction between Simon and Philip as a kind of "power encounter," in which Simon's sorcery is bested by the authentic miracle-working power of the Spirit (Acts 8:6-7, 9, 11, 13). Impressed by Peter and John's access to the gift of the Spirit, Simon regards God's power as a form of magic to be manipulated for selfish ends. He looks at the Holy Spirit as a commodity that can be bought and sold (Acts 8:18-19). Luke, however, unequivocally denies that Christianity can be viewed through the lens of a magical worldview.²⁹ Peter condemns Simon with a curse formula threatening eternal destruction (Acts 8:20-23). The passage serves as a strong warning to Luke's readers against the dangers of syncretizing the Christian faith. This is a theme that would have had critical relevance within the religiously plural Greco-Roman world.

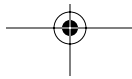
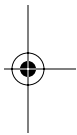
The account of Philip's divinely orchestrated encounter with an Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26-39) enables the gospel to bridge further boundaries. The high-

²⁶P. U. Maynard-Reid, "Samaria," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 1076.

²⁷Dunn, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 108.

²⁸Tannehill, *Luke-Acts*, 2:104.

²⁹Clinton E. Arnold, "Syncretism," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 1148.





status official whom Philip discovers on a desert road cuts an intriguing and somewhat mysterious figure. On one hand, he represents an outsider from a Jewish perspective. He is a dark-skinned African, a castrated male, probably a Gentile,³⁰ whose homeland was considered to be at “the end of the earth”³¹ (cf. Acts 1:8). On the other hand, he is a pious Jewish sympathizer, returning from worship of the God of Israel in Jerusalem and avidly reading Isaiah the prophet. For Luke, this episode signals another step in the gospel’s steady advance to peripheral people. In this Ethiopian’s embrace of faith in the Messiah, the gospel overcomes racial, physical, cultural and geographical barriers and upends human power structures. The Spirit brings the word to someone from the world’s outer borders, anticipating the fulfillment of the promise of Acts 1:8.

Philip tailors his evangelistic witness to the royal official’s circumstances and spiritual need. Using the Scripture passage in Isaiah 53 that the Ethiopian is already reading as a bridgehead, the Evangelist interprets it as a prophetic testimony about Jesus the Messiah (Acts 8:35). Given that a eunuch would have a marginalized status within Judaism as someone dishonored and excluded from God’s assembly due to his physical defect (Lev 21:18-20; Deut 23:1), the identification of Jesus with the humiliated and suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 would have been particularly relevant.³² Philip uses the text at hand and the Ethiopian’s sincere searchings as a point of departure for a fuller exposition of the “good news about Jesus” (Acts 8:35). This becomes a saving word for the eunuch, as his eagerness to be baptized confirms (Acts 8:36).

A TALE OF TWO CONVERSIONS

A critical moment in the gospel’s initial movement from the domain of ethnic Judaism into the Gentile arena comes in the story of Cornelius and Peter (Acts

³⁰Scholars are divided over whether Luke considers the eunuch to be a Jew or a Gentile. The main argument for viewing him as a Jew or a Jewish proselyte is that to introduce a Gentile at this point in the narrative would upstage the conversion of Cornelius in chapter 10, which Luke portrays as the start of the Gentile mission. The official’s identification as an Ethiopian, however, who came from one of the remotest regions of the world, makes it unlikely he was a Jew, and eunuchs were prohibited by Jewish law from becoming proselytes (Deut 23:1). Apparently Luke intends this scene to be anticipatory. The conversion of a single Ethiopian Gentile who religiously is still attached to Israel foreshadows the church’s *deliberate* Gentile mission initiated in chapters 10–15. See C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 1:420-21.

³¹Homer *Odyssey* 1.22-24; Strabo *Geography* 17.2.1; Herodotus *History* 3.25.114; cf. Beverly R. Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light: Aspects of Conversion in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), p. 103.

³²F. S. Spencer, “Philip the Evangelist,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 930.





10:1—11:18). The importance of this narrative for Luke can hardly be overstated. Its sheer length, Luke's repeated telling of the story, and its numerous references to visions and miraculous elements all testify that, for Luke, it is a crucial test case for the acceptance of Gentiles as Gentiles into the people of God. Without this forward leap in the life of the church the translation of the gospel into new cultures and milieus would not be possible.

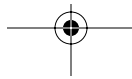
Acts 10—11 tell a story of *two* complementary conversions. One involves the Roman centurion Cornelius, who symbolically represents the inclusion of Gentiles into the Christian community (11:1, 18). Yet if Cornelius is a *representative* Gentile, he is hardly a *typical* Gentile. Luke goes to no small effort to paint him as a pious, God-fearing³³ adherent of the Jewish synagogue. The angel sent by God addresses him like a Jew (Acts 10:4), and his prayers, faith and alms reveal an openness to divine grace.³⁴ God's grace has been at work in the life of this sincere Gentile long before his encounter with Peter, preparing the centurion for acceptance of the gospel when he hears it. Cornelius is no pagan, but neither is he a proselyte, since he is not circumcised and does not keep Jewish food laws. Cornelius and his company thus function as a natural "bridge group" for the progress of the gospel into the Gentile arena.³⁵

The second "conversion" is that of Peter, the spokesman and representative of the Jerusalem apostles and the Jewish Christian church. It is not a conversion to faith in Jesus Christ as it is for the Cornelius group, but rather a *theological* and *cultural* transformation. Peter must be converted to a new vision of what constitutes the people of God, one that includes uncircumcised and "unclean" Gentiles as well as Jews. This is perhaps the more difficult and dramatic change of the two, because it challenges deep-seated cultural values and Jewish ethnocentrism. Luke underscores this through his dual emphasis on God's persistent initiative in these events on the one hand and the repeated resistance of Jewish Christians to what God is doing on the other. It takes interlocking visions (Acts 10:3-16; 11:5-

³³There has been considerable scholarly debate about whether or not there was an actual category of "God-fearers," i.e., Gentiles who worshiped the God of Israel and were attached to the synagogue but did not submit to circumcision or observe the Torah in its entirety. See the valuable discussions in Jack T. Sanders, "Who Is a Jew and Who Is a Gentile in the Book of Acts?" *NTS* 37 (1991): 439-43 and Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 341-44. The evidence points to the conclusion that even if "God-fearers" is something less than a technical term, there *were* non-Jewish synagogue adherents in antiquity like Cornelius.

³⁴Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 448.

³⁵Luke's characterization of Cornelius as a boundary-bridging figure is not only cultural and religious, but geographical as well. He lives in a Roman, thoroughly Hellenized city, but one that is still within the territory of Palestine. Like the God-fearing Gentiles, bridge groups that participate in more than one culture (e.g., overseas students or multilingual city dwellers) are often highly instrumental in the advance of the church's mission yet today.





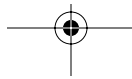
10), angels (Acts 10:3-8), trances (Acts 10:10), three distinct hearings of God's command (Acts 10:16; 11:10), and finally the unexpected outpouring of the Spirit, resulting in the conversion of the Cornelius household (Acts 10:44-48; 11:15-17), before Peter and his compatriots are convinced. Dollar captures this dynamic well: "Luke shows that the theological challenge of the Gentile mission is not the reluctance of the Gentiles to respond to the gospel but the reluctance of the Jews to preach to them." Consequently, "the 'conversion' of the messenger" must come before the conversion of those who need the message.³⁶

Overcoming barriers of exclusion. The Cornelius story highlights two major obstacles that must be cleared away for the gospel to be liberated from an exclusive Jewish ethnic and cultural identity. The first is a *soteriological* barrier. Peter and his fellow Jewish Christians need to understand that God has granted salvation to Gentiles *as Gentiles*. This is the point of Peter's vision. God's command not to call profane what God has made clean applies to people as well as to food (Acts 10:15; 11:9; cf. 10:28).³⁷ Peter's perceptual breakthrough comes in Acts 10:34-35 as he interprets the events that have taken place: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." The notion of divine impartiality had Old Testament precedence (Deut 10:17; 2 Chron 19:7), but here the emphasis falls on the fresh realization that God's love and favor is independent of a person's nationality, culture or ethnic identity. God does not "play favorites" between Jews and Gentiles. What counts is whether they reverence him and practice righteousness.³⁸ Peter discovers that God accepts people as they are, within their concrete national and cultural homes, yet on a basis that transcends any single ethnic identity or practice. This is a foundational theological insight for a New Testament perspective on contextualization.

³⁶Dollar, *Luke-Acts*, pp. 184-85.

³⁷Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light*, pp. 114-15; Jerome H. Neyrey, "Ceremonies in Luke-Acts: The Case of Meals and Table Fellowship," in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), p. 381.

³⁸This does not mean that God accepts all people as "believers" on the basis of their sincere righteous deeds. Cornelius is sometimes depicted as the leading New Testament example of a "non-Christian believer." E.g., John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 64-67, 222-24; Clark H. Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religious Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 95-96, 165-66. On the contrary, Luke underscores that in spite of all of his preparation and piety, Cornelius still needs to hear the gospel and respond in faith. It is only upon hearing the message of Christ from Peter that Cornelius receives forgiveness (Acts 10:43), salvation (Acts 11:14) and life (Acts 11:18). See further, Dean Flemming, "Foundations for Responding to Religious Pluralism," *WesIJ* 31 (1996): 70-71.





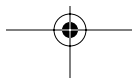
Peter's preaching leads uncircumcised Cornelius and friends to experience forgiveness of their sins (Acts 10:43; cf. 11:14), which is divinely validated when the Gentiles receive the same gift of the Holy Spirit as the Jews did at Pentecost (Acts 10:45; 11:15-17). In the end, once-skeptical Jewish Christians come to the inescapable theological conclusion that God has graciously "given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18) without requiring them first to follow the prescriptions of the Jewish law.

But along with the soteriological hurdle, there was the equally significant *social* barricade of table fellowship. Food laws involved maintaining purity and functioned as distinctive boundary markers for the Jews, separating them from other peoples.³⁹ As long as Jewish dietary rules that blocked social interaction between Jews and Gentiles (cf. Acts 10:28) were in effect, the church could never become a multicultural community. For Jewish Christians like Peter, the problem focused on how they could maintain their purity and distinctiveness and at the same time eat with unclean Gentiles. Luke painstakingly describes each step in the process of breaking down social and ritual walls: Peter has a vision of a "nonkosher picnic"⁴⁰ that announces the divine decontaminating of unclean foods (Acts 10:9-16; 11:5-12); he decides to offer hospitality to Gentiles (Acts 10:23) and then to receive it from Cornelius (Acts 10:27-28, 48); Peter's Jerusalem critics level a charge that he had eaten with Gentiles (Acts 11:1-3); and finally, Peter offers the defense that he had received the Spirit's instruction to make no distinction between Jews and Gentiles in his behavior (Acts 11:12).

It is striking that at each stage of the story the primary adjustment needed for the gospel to bridge social and religious boundaries comes not from the Gentile "outsiders" but from Jewish "insiders," who must let go of their ethnocentric attitudes and practices. This demands acknowledging that the food laws they once considered nonnegotiable were in reality culturally specific impediments to God's plan for a unified church. The old exclusionary system of purity has to be dismantled and replaced by a new order of inclusion. In addition, since dietary laws that reinforced separateness were at the heart of Jewish self-identity, what is ultimately at stake is a reconfiguring of identity from an ethnic Jewish

³⁹See Philip F. Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 57 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), for a historical and sociological study of Jewish food regulations and table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles as these affect social relations in Luke-Acts.

⁴⁰David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 285.





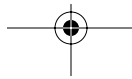
movement to a universal Christian community.⁴¹ In the new “world” created by the death and resurrection of Christ, the gospel demands cultural transformation at a bedrock level. In the end, Peter’s critics are silenced (Acts 11:17). Christian identity is redefined. Barriers to full intercultural fellowship come down.

With both the theological and sociological obstructions removed, the path is cleared for the gospel to be preached to the Gentiles as cultural Gentiles. Although foreshadowed in the conversion of a solitary Ethiopian Gentile in an isolated setting in chapter 8, for Luke the events in Caesarea constitute the decisive missional and cultural breakthrough for the church. This impression is heightened by the confirmation of both the Spirit and the community. The Holy Spirit’s unforeseen descent upon a Gentile household in parallel fashion to the experience of Jewish believers in the upper room in Jerusalem signals God’s acceptance of the Gentiles and changes their status. Significantly, Peter recontextualizes Jesus’ promise of the baptism with the Spirit originally delivered to Jewish followers (Acts 1:5), applying it to the new work of the Spirit among non-Jews (Acts 11:16). Furthermore, Luke’s retelling of the tale in Acts 11:1-18 allows the Jerusalem community to catch up with what God is doing. As a result, they embrace the unconditional inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God. Peter’s “conversion” becomes, in effect, the transformation of the church (cf. Acts 11:18).

Doing narrative theology in a “God-fearing” context. What, then, can we learn about the theological process by which Peter and the Jewish Christian church rethink their understanding of the faith in light of new circumstances? First, Luke stresses that the church’s fresh grasp of its identity and mission comes about through *God’s design and initiative*. The Spirit is the divine choreographer of the encounters and events that lead to Peter’s theological conversion.⁴² Second, narratives of the *experience* of the Spirit’s working play a pivotal role in the church’s theological reflection. Peter only comes to fully realize the meaning of his own vision regarding God’s full acceptance of Gentiles after Cornelius relates his story of receiving God’s direction (Acts 10:29-34). This insight into God’s surprising grace is confirmed when Peter witnesses the Gentiles’ experience of the gift of the Spirit in a similar way to his own (Acts 10:44-48). Later, when Peter is challenged by the Jerusalem believers, he narrates his own experience of God’s action “step by step” (Acts 11:4; cf. 11:1-17), which persuades them to accept his new inclusive interpretation of God’s offer of salvation (Acts

⁴¹Dunn, *Acts*, pp. 137-38; Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, Minn.: Michael Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 200.

⁴²Green, “Acts,” pp. 17-18.





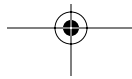
11:18). Third, the theological journey Luke describes has a notable *communal* character. When Peter goes to meet Cornelius, he is accompanied by fellow Jewish believers from Joppa, who recognize and interpret what God is doing among the Gentiles (Acts 10:38, 45-46); Cornelius gathers his friends and relatives to hear God's word, and the Holy Spirit descends on the whole company (Acts 10:24, 44, 48); Peter's home church in Jerusalem questions this theological innovation (Acts 11:2-3), but in the end they declare the saving implications of God's activity (Acts 11:18). The community is vital to each stage in the process of doing theology. Fourth, *intercultural encounter* contributes to new theological insight. On one hand, the witness of Jewish Christians enables Cornelius and the other Roman Gentiles to hear and embrace the saving word. On the other, through Peter's interaction with Gentile outsiders his own grasp of the gospel is stretched and enriched.

Fifth, Peter's proclamation of the good news to the Cornelius circle is the centerpiece of the story. This "narrative sermon"—the first speech to a group of Gentiles in Acts—functions in the story as a model of evangelistic contextualization:

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace through Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." (Acts 10:34-43)

Despite Martin Dibelius's conclusion that Luke composed the speech on a stereotypical pattern that had little relevance to its narrative context,⁴³ I would argue that Peter's sermon is highly appropriate for an audience of Gentile God-fearers. Most commentators note that its narrative of what God has done in Christ has significant parallels with Peter's earlier missionary preaching to Jews

⁴³Martin Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*, ed. Heinrich Greeven (London: SCM Press, 1956), pp. 110-11.





(see especially Acts 2:17-36 and 3:12-26). Luke is keen to demonstrate throughout Acts that the apostolic gospel is rooted in the story of Jesus as the fulfillment of God's saving plan.⁴⁴ A number of aspects, however, speak either directly or indirectly to the context at hand: (1) the opening statement of God's impartiality toward all people (Acts 10:34-35; cf. v. 28) and the closing assurance of forgiveness of sins to "everyone who believes in him" (Acts 10:43) frame the speech with the keynote of God's acceptance of non-Jews for salvation; (2) Peter interjects into his narrative about Jesus Christ the affirmation that "he is Lord of all" (Acts 10:36), which speaks to the inclusion of the Gentiles;⁴⁵ (3) the command to preach and bear witness (Acts 10:42; cf. v. 41) links Jesus' commissioning of his disciples to begin a worldwide mission (Lk 24:47-48; cf. Acts 1:8) to Peter's preaching to Gentiles;⁴⁶ (4) the theme of Christ as "judge of the living and the dead" (Acts 10:42) is an extension of his universal lordship and is taken up again in Paul's address to Gentiles in Athens (Acts 17:31); (5) the more detailed narrative of Jesus' earthly life and ministry than we find in Peter's earlier Jerusalem sermons fits a non-Jewish audience, which presumably would not be as familiar with those events; (6) Luke recruits the language of benefaction in Acts 10:38 when Jesus is described as one who went about "doing good" (*euergetōn*). This term, which was often applied to mighty rulers or emperors who conferred benefits on others, might speak with particular force to a Roman Gentile;⁴⁷ (7) Peter's unique reference to witnesses who "ate and drank" with Jesus "is especially appropriate for a story that concerns itself with hospitality for Gentiles"⁴⁸ (Acts 10:41; cf. 11:3); (8) in contrast to Peter's earlier sermons to Jews, there are no explicit quotations from the Old Testament, although a number of scriptural echoes are woven into the text (e.g., Ps 107:20 and Is 52:7 in Acts 10:36).

Considering this impressive evidence of contextualization for a Gentile audience, it might seem odd to find so much emphasis on the *Jewishness* of Jesus in the sermon. For example, Peter presses home that God sent his message "to the people of Israel," preaching peace through "Jesus Messiah" (Acts 10:36; cf. v.

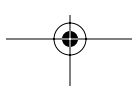
⁴⁴See Marion L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts: Their Content, Context, and Concerns* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), pp. 184-89; Hans F. Bayer, "The Preaching of Peter in Acts," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 269-72.

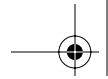
⁴⁵Robert C. Tannehill, "The Functions of Peter's Mission Speeches in the Narrative of Acts," *NTS* 37 (1991): 410-11. The phrase "Lord of all" is found in both Jewish and Greek writings, which makes it particularly appropriate to its context.

⁴⁶Tannehill, "Mission Speeches," p. 412.

⁴⁷Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 358 n. 127.

⁴⁸Gaventa, *From Darkness to Light*, p. 119.





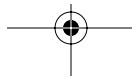
42), and that “all the prophets” witness to him (Acts 10:43). Rather than missing the mark, however, the telling of the Jesus story in its Jewish context is appropriate for Peter’s audience for two reasons. First, it underscores that the universal gospel for the Gentiles is rooted in concrete events that took place in space and time and within the framework of God’s dealings with a particular nation, the people of Israel. For Luke, the heart of the gospel lies not in a series of christological propositions but in the story of Jesus of Nazareth. Robert Tannehill shows that Peter summarizes the Jesus narrative presented in Luke’s gospel, from his birth announcement (Acts 10:36) to the commission of his followers as risen Lord (Acts 10:42): “By telling this story to Cornelius and his company and by placing it in a frame that affirms Jesus’ universal significance, Peter is affirming that the story of the Jewish Messiah also has relevance for Gentiles.”⁴⁹ Second, the presentation of the gospel as the fulfillment of God’s promises to Israel that had now been offered to the Gentiles would be especially important for synagogue adherents like Cornelius, in a way that it would not to a purely pagan audience (cf. Acts 17:22-31). What we find, therefore, is a sermon that is carefully crafted to persuade an audience of Gentiles living on the fringes of Judaism to embrace the call to faith in Jesus Christ.

The conversion of the God-fearer Cornelius does not mean that the gospel has fully traveled from its strictly Jewish beginnings to the heartland of pagan culture and religion. That will come later. Nor are the issues it raises finally resolved, as the looming crisis of the Jerusalem Council makes all too clear. Nevertheless, Luke views the Cornelius story as a decisive catalyst that alters the identity and direction of the church and sounds the death knell to cultural exclusiveness. The Cornelius episode thus carries paradigmatic significance, both for Luke’s readers and for the church today in its various cultural manifestations. Churches still struggle with ethnocentric perspectives, which resist acceptance of contextualized expressions of Christian theology and practice that are different from their own. Chan-Hie Kim, for example, finds arresting parallels between the attitude of the Jerusalem church toward the Gentiles in the Cornelius episode and that of the dominant church culture in North America regarding Asian immigrant Christians today.⁵⁰

Peter’s acceptance of Cornelius establishes a critical precedent for the inclusive character of the new Christian movement and the gospel’s ability to tran-

⁴⁹Tannehill, *Luke-Acts*, 2:140-42.

⁵⁰Chan-Hie Kim, “Reading the Cornelius Story from an Asian Immigrant Perspective,” in *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States*, ed. F. F. Segovia and M. A. Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 1:171-74.





scend humanly constructed barriers. But the contentious issue of the relationship of Gentiles to the Jewish heritage of that movement and to the law of Moses is yet to be resolved. Luke addresses that question in chapter 15.

THEOLOGIZING BY THE CHURCH: THE JERUSALEM COUNCIL

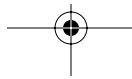
The Council of Jerusalem is the watershed event in Luke's narrative of the gospel's progress from a Jewish to a universal context. As Brian Rosner aptly pictures it, "The book of Acts without chapter 15 would be like a wedding ceremony without the crucial pronouncement. Everything that happens in chapter 1—14 leads up to this high point and what follows merely traces the implications of the decision."⁵¹ Acts 15 is also vital to our study of patterns of contextualization in the New Testament church. In the first place, it describes a decisive moment in the encounter between faith in Christ and culture within the life of the early church, which helps to give the task of incarnating the gospel a historical and theological basis. Second, it offers perhaps the fullest and most significant narrative in the New Testament of the *process* of doing contextual theology by the church. This makes Acts 15 worthy of our careful attention.⁵²

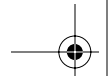
Resolving an intercultural conflict. The need for the Jerusalem Council is grounded in the progress of the Gentile mission. Having laid a theological foundation for the legitimacy of that mission in the story of Peter and Cornelius, Luke relates how a group of Jewish Hellenists evangelize Gentile "Greeks"⁵³ in Antioch and establish the first truly multicultural church (Acts 11:19-26). This "model" community in Luke's story reflects an ethos of innovation, evidenced by several notable characteristics. First, it shows a willingness to embrace uncircumcised non-Jewish converts and, apparently, partake in table fellowship (including the Lord's Supper) across cultural lines. The ability to transcend ethnic and social barriers is also evident in Antioch's "leadership team" (Acts 13:1), which probably includes two Africans, one of whom is black (Niger), and a well-placed person with close connections to Herod's court. Second, the Syrian community grows out of a mission that preached Jesus as Lord (Acts 11:20), "a

⁵¹Brian S. Rosner, "The Progress of the Word," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and D. Peterson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 227.

⁵²Acts 15 raises a number of historical questions, including the historical accuracy of the account, the relationship between Acts 15 and Galatians 2, and possible sources behind Luke's narrative. These are important issues, but they lie beyond the scope of this study. For a discussion of historical concerns related to Acts 15, see Martin Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 111-26.

⁵³Whether the correct textual reading for Acts 11:20 is *Hellenistas* ("Hellenists") or *Hellenas* ("Greeks"), the context clearly indicates they are Gentiles (cf. "Jews," Acts 11:19). Luke does not identify these Gentiles more precisely.





message better suited to a Gentile audience than the proclamation of Jesus as the Christ or Son of Man.”⁵⁴ Third, it is at Antioch that followers of the Way are first called “Christians” (Acts 11:26). This new name communicates a new status based not on ethnic or prior religious distinctions, but on faith in Christ.⁵⁵ Fourth, under the inspiration of the Spirit, the Antioch fellowship launches the first planned “overseas” mission to Gentiles as well as Jews (Acts 13:1-3). Finally, the Christians at Antioch maintain an ongoing link to the Jewish Christian mother church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30; 15:1-35). This relationship, as Dean S. Gilliland points out, ensures “continuity with history and tradition while breaking new ground.”⁵⁶ Luke further describes how on their missionary journey Paul and Barnabas respond to Jewish rejection by intentionally turning to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46-47). This strategic decision results in an influx of Gentile believers into the church (Acts 13:48; 14:1, 21). The two then report back to the home church in Antioch that God had “opened a door of faith for the Gentiles” (Acts 14:27). The situation has rapidly advanced from a test case involving the God-fearer Cornelius to the entry in mass of uncircumcised Gentiles into the community of faith.

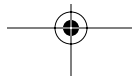
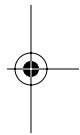
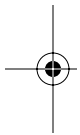
Dissension (Acts 15:1-5). This sets the stage for a major test of the legitimacy of a culturally diverse fellowship. F. Scott Spencer helpfully observes that the dramatic narrative of the Jerusalem Council unfolds in four acts or stages: (1) Dissension (Acts 15:1-5); (2) Discussion (Acts 15:6-18); (3) Decision (Acts 15:19-29); (4) Dissemination (Acts 15:30-35).⁵⁷ Jewish Christians from Judea provoke a crisis in Antioch when they teach that circumcision is essential for salvation (Acts 15:1). When Paul and Barnabas arrive in Jerusalem to clarify the issue with the leadership there, certain believers who were still Pharisees demand that Gentile converts be circumcised and placed under obligation to keep the Jewish law (Acts 15:5). What precipitates the Jerusalem Council is not simply that Gentiles were being evangelized, but more importantly the *conditions* of their membership in the messianic community. Must Gentiles become “naturalized Jews,” that is, Jewish proselytes, and live like Jews in order to have a place in the peo-

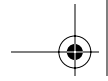
⁵⁴Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 369.

⁵⁵Philip H. Towner, “Mission Practice and Theology Under Construction (Acts 18-20),” in *Witness to the Gospel*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 422.

⁵⁶Dean S. Gilliland, “New Testament Contextualization: Continuity and Particularity in Paul’s Theology,” in *The Word Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Today*, ed. Dean S. Gilliland (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), p. 55.

⁵⁷F. Scott Spencer, *Journeying Through Acts: A Literary-Cultural Reading* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004), pp. 162-64. Although Spencer extends the last stage of dissemination through Acts 16:5, I have limited it to the account of the Jerusalem Council itself.





ple of God? Today we might put the question in terms of whether Gentile believers had to become culturally Jewish as a condition of their salvation and as part of their obedience to Christ, or whether they could be accepted in all their “Gentile-ness.” Luke’s narrative exposes genuine theological disagreement within the young church, centered around two competing interpretations of the gospel. The Pharisees could appeal to both Scripture (e.g., Gen 17:9-14) and a long precedent of tradition in support of their theological position. For them, circumcision was not simply an optional cultural form; it was a matter of religious life and death—the indispensable symbol of the covenant relationship. If Jewish cultural distinctives, including law observance and the Jewish way of life, were divinely sanctioned, how could they possibly be negotiable?

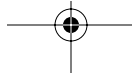
Discussion (Acts 15:6-18). The question becomes the subject of extensive debate in Jerusalem (Acts 15:6-7). The stakes are high. If the Pharisaic position prevails, not only would it place a massive stumbling block in the path of the gospel’s future progress to non-Jewish peoples, but it would effectively invalidate the current Christian status of uncircumcised Gentile converts (Acts 15:1).⁵⁸ Theologically, it would declare that God’s grace and the gift of the Spirit were not fully sufficient for salvation.

In Luke’s narrative, the theological crisis is resolved by three speeches that together present a unified case for God’s purpose in accepting uncircumcised Gentiles.⁵⁹ Peter’s “farewell address” in Acts 15:7-11 begins by rehearsing once again the precedent story (“in the early days,” Acts 15:7) of Cornelius. But unlike Acts 11:5-17, where Peter narrates the events in some detail, here he draws out the theological implications of the experience in light of the problem at hand. The speech is bristling with references to God’s initiative and action. Peter has now concluded that his vision about unclean foods means that God has purified the hearts of Gentiles by faith, not through circumcision or law observance, making no distinction between races (Acts 15:9). Acts 15:10-11 directly addresses the issues raised by the protestors—the Gentiles’ obligation to the law and what is necessary to be saved. The speech climaxes with the central theological insight that the sole basis of salvation for the Jews (“we”), as well as the Gentiles (“they”), is “the grace of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 15:11). Peter’s articulation of the nature of the gospel effectively brands the culturally bound theology of his opponents as a false message: they are guilty of “testing God” (Acts 15:10).

Next Paul and Barnabas talk about their experience of the miraculous evi-

⁵⁸David Seccombe, “The New People of God,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 365.

⁵⁹Tannehill, *Luke-Acts*, p. 184.



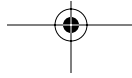
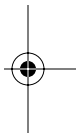


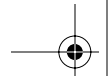
dences of God's working through them (Acts 15:12), providing further evidence for God's acceptance of the Gentiles. The turning point comes when James, the spokesperson for the mother church, gives the definitive response to the testimonies of the three previous witnesses (Acts 15:13-21). Recalling Peter's narrative, he interprets it to mean that God has acquired from the Gentiles "a people for his name" (Acts 15:14). This is remarkable, since previously in Acts (e.g., Acts 2:47; 3:23; 4:10) as well as in the Old Testament the term "people" (*laos*) refers to *Israel*. Here James redefines the notion of the "people of God" to include non-Jews. He then clinches the argument with an appeal to Scripture, a critical step for his Jewish Christian audience. He chooses Amos 9:11-12 because it supports Peter's testimony of what God is doing in the church ("the words of the prophets agree with this," Acts 15:14). Sharply put, God's present activity among the Gentiles becomes the hermeneutical key for understanding the biblical text.⁶⁰ James opts to follow the Greek translation (LXX), which announces the building of the eschatological Temple ("David's tent," Acts 15:16) and the conversion of the nations to the God of Israel in the messianic age. Amos's prophecy is read in light of the specific issue at hand to mean that "all the Gentiles" (Acts 15:17) will be incorporated into the eschatological temple of the new people of God (the Christian community) without having to surrender their Gentile identity.⁶¹ Amos, rightly interpreted, gives Scripture's grounding for the theological principle of salvation for the Gentiles by faith apart from circumcision.

Decision (Acts 15:19-29) and dissemination (Acts 15:30-35). On the basis of both what God has done and the evidence of Scripture, James expresses the decision of the Council. First, Gentile converts should not be further "troubled" by requiring them to be circumcised and to keep the Mosaic law (Acts 15:19). Second, four concessions are made to Jewish believers. Gentiles should abstain from "things polluted by idols," sexual immorality, meat that has been strangled, and blood (Acts 15:20; cf. v. 29). The so-called decree seems to be based on the holiness code in Leviticus 17 and 18, where corresponding taboos are laid out for aliens living in the midst of Israel. Yet after stating the principle that Gentile Christians should not be burdened by keeping the Mosaic law, why immediately set forth specific aspects of the law that they must follow? Acts 15:28 tells the Gentiles that these regulations are "necessary" ("essentials," NRSV). But necessary for what? Has the Council confused "essentials" with "nonessentials," after all?

⁶⁰Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 271.

⁶¹Richard Bauckham, "James and the Gentiles (Acts 15:13-21)," in *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts*, ed. Ben Witherington III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 165-69.



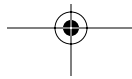


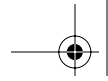
In a fascinating example of doing contextual theology, James is apparently drawing out the pragmatic *social* implications of the *soteriological* decision of the church. The inclusion of uncircumcised Gentiles meant that the church was faced with the challenge of maintaining fellowship within a culturally diverse community. As J. Julius Scott reflects, “A framework was needed to permit Jewish Christians to accept and associate with Gentile believers while, at the same time, maintaining the regulations which would make possible their continued participation in at least parts of Jewish culture and their association with non-Christian, practicing Jews.”⁶² The decree provides such a framework. Three of the four taboos deal with food laws, and the other, “sexual immorality” (*porneia*) was closely linked to the issue of full social association (cf. 1 Cor 5:9-11). In a reversal of the original function of Jewish purity rules to *separate* peoples, James appropriates these requirements precisely to provide a basis for table fellowship and a shared identity between two culturally distinct communities within the church.⁶³ Gentile believers “will do well” (Acts 15:29) to abstain from these practices, but not because they are under obligation to the law or because these pollution taboos are essential for salvation. Rather, they do so out of respect for the cultural sensitivities of others in the Christian fellowship. This would also allow Jewish Christians to associate across cultural lines without hindering the Jewish mission by making themselves impure and thereby unacceptable to their fellow Jews, who heard Moses read every sabbath (Acts 15:21).

Finally, the entire Jerusalem church sends a letter, along with a personal delegation, to communicate the Council’s decision to the Gentiles in Antioch (Acts 15:22-23). This letter is more than an edict from above. It is an act of intercultural fellowship which exudes a spirit of warmth and mutual respect. The Jerusalem leaders address the letter to “the Gentile brothers” (Acts 15:23 my translation), highlighting both their acceptance by the mother church and their distinctive cultural identity. By the end of the narrative, the church has said “no” to cultural imperialism by Jewish Christians on one hand, and to “ecclesial apartheid” on

⁶²J. Julius Scott Jr., “The Jerusalem Council: The Cross-Cultural Challenge in the First Century,” unpublished paper presented to the National Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Francisco, November 20, 1992, pp. 12-13. The issues surrounding the precise background and function of the apostolic decree (Acts 15:20, 29) are complex and much-debated. See e.g., Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, pp. 556-58.

⁶³Jerome H. Neyrey, “Ceremonies in Luke-Acts: The Case of Meals and Table Fellowship,” in *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation*, ed. Jerome H. Neyrey (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1991), p. 382. Luke Timothy Johnson is likely correct that the kinds of elemental purity taboos found in Leviticus 17 and 18 reflected in the decree would have been a particular stumbling block to fellowship between Jews and Gentiles, since they are associated with “defiling” the land and the people, and breaking them results in “being cut off from the people” (Lev 17:7, 9,10,14; 18:21, 24-25, 28-30; *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 273).





the other. The delegates return “in peace” (Acts 15:33).

A story of contextual theologizing. For Luke, the story of the Jerusalem Council is a paradigmatic narrative. In it we see a pattern of God’s people articulating their faith within an intercultural context, which carries implications for the church in any generation.⁶⁴ Luke is interested not only in the theological outcomes of the Council, but especially the theological *process* within his story. A number of aspects of that process—some of which parallel what we discovered in the narrative of Cornelius and Peter—are important for understanding Luke’s perspective on how the gospel can speak a fresh word to new and challenging circumstances within the life of the church.

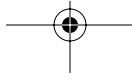
1. *The work of the Spirit in the community as the context for creative theologizing.* The narrative teems with references to the action of God or the Holy Spirit. God’s activity in the recent past in bringing the Gentiles into the messianic community guides the church in rethinking its theology and discerning God’s will for the present circumstances. The basis of the church’s decision is that “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). This conveys both divine and human participation in the theologizing process. However, the order in which the two are mentioned leaves no doubt that the church is subordinate to the will of the Spirit.⁶⁵ Because the community has been open to the Spirit’s work, it is able to resolve its conflict and come to a new awareness of how to live out its identity as the people of God within a multicultural setting.

2. *The appeal to the church’s experience of God’s activity.* It is the experience of Gentile conversion that creates the need for the Council to settle the issue that liberates the church for a full-fledged mission to the Gentiles. In Antioch and Jerusalem alike, the experience of God’s activity by God’s people and the narrative of that experience become the catalyst for both theological crisis and for the theological reflection that follows (Acts 14:27—15:1; 15:4-5).⁶⁶ When the Council meets to decide the issue, it listens to the testimonies of the key players and weighs them in order to come to a responsible theological understanding. Peter retells the tale of the breakthrough in Caesarea and interprets it theologically (Acts 15:7-11). Paul and Barnabas rehearse the mighty acts of God and the assembly is silenced (Acts 15:12). James appeals to Peter’s story and builds a

⁶⁴See Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983), pp. 78-79; cf. Hilary, *Inculturation Theology*, pp. 73-75.

⁶⁵Brian Rapske, “Opposition to the Plan of God and Persecution,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 243.

⁶⁶See Robert Wall, “Israel and the Gentile Mission in Acts and Paul: A Canonical Approach,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 449.



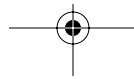
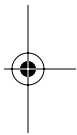


new understanding of the people of God (Acts 15:13-19). These individual stories eventually become the community's story. The church responds to its new intercultural challenge not simply on the basis of *a priori* theological principles or traditional practices, but by reflecting on their experience of God's work among them. Such an experiential component to doing theology might be particularly significant for today's churches ministering in postmodern contexts, where living narratives of faith and transformed lives tend to have far greater impact than tightly reasoned arguments.

3. *The role of Scripture in guiding the community.* Scripture plays a critical role in the process of the Council's theological reflection. Pivotal to James' argument is that the multicultural character of the new people of God was prophesied long ago (Acts 15:17). Yet the way James frames his appeal to Scripture is somewhat surprising. Instead of saying that the church's experience of God's inclusion of the Gentiles is confirmed by the words of Scripture, he maintains that the Scripture is confirmed by "this" action of God (Acts 15:15).⁶⁷ James comes to a deeper understanding of the meaning of Amos's prophecy as a result of what God is doing in the community. In turn, this fresh interpretation of Scripture helps him to make sense of what has taken place. It leads him to the conclusion that Gentiles should be free from the obligations of circumcision and Torah observance (Acts 15:19). In this case, the hermeneutical process moves from context to text and then back to context. Scripture also apparently provides the basis for the minimal requirements imposed on Gentile converts to ensure table fellowship with Jewish believers within a specific intercultural setting (Acts 15:20, 29). In Acts 15 the authoritative role of Scripture is intertwined with the experience and concrete needs of the community.

4. *Contending for the truth of the gospel.* Despite his interest in maintaining the unity of the church, Luke shows that the truth of the gospel cannot be compromised. He treats the Pharisaic group as false teachers whose improper contextualization of the gospel among the Gentiles threatens to undermine the entire Gentile mission and God's redemptive plan (cf. Acts 15:1, 5, 10, 24). Their interpretation of the basis for membership in the people of God may be sincere, but it exceeds the bounds of acceptable theological diversity in the church. Peter articulates the transcultural principle that salvation is by grace through faith for Jews and Gentiles alike (Acts 15:9, 11). Consequently, the church emphatically rejects the added requirements of circumcision and Torah keeping for Gentiles. The gospel affirms that all peoples and cultures come to God on an equal basis.

⁶⁷Unfortunately, the NRSV completely reverses the Greek text of Acts 15:15: "This agrees with the words of the prophets."





Christian theology has no place for national, cultural or ethnic “add-ons.” It is a striking feature of the narrative that Luke shows no embarrassment whatsoever in exposing sharp disagreement and open debate within the church’s process of doing theology (Acts 15:2, 7). The gospel is worth contending for, and the false teaching and ensuing debate actually serve a positive role. They force the church to face issues that lead it to a clearer understanding of God’s work and of its own inclusive identity.⁶⁸

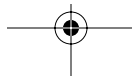
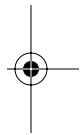
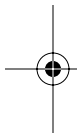
5. *Compromise on nonessential issues for the sake of unity and fellowship.* Bruce Chilton is right that the Jerusalem Council needed to address two distinct but related questions: (1) whether Gentiles could be baptized without being circumcised and (2) whether they could be included in a single fellowship with believing Jews.⁶⁹ On the first count, no compromise was possible. The second matter, however, required a different approach. The decrees of the Council (Acts 15:20, 29; 21:25) are evidence of the church’s effort to creatively grapple with the challenge of a culturally mixed community. Although these prohibitions have scriptural precedent, it seems best to view them as temporary and context-specific measures designed to avoid unnecessarily offending the Jews, thereby opening the door to full fellowship between Jewish and Gentile Christians.⁷⁰ Paul’s own missionary practice appears to bear this out. When he is mainly dealing with Gentile Christians who live in an intensely pagan environment in Corinth, he can take a more liberal position than the Jerusalem Council: under certain conditions he allows Christians to eat food that has been offered to idols (e.g., 1 Cor 10:25-27). In such a context, the Council’s outright ban on eating food sacrificed to idols is apparently not binding on Gentile converts.

But if the Council’s policy regarding food regulations is not universally valid, the unity of the church surely is. Consequently, the decree is a “necessary” (Acts 15:28) compromise on the part of Gentiles for their particular ethnically diverse setting. On the other side, Jewish Christians also had to compromise by being

⁶⁸Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 271.

⁶⁹Bruce Chilton, “Purity and Impurity,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 993.

⁷⁰The one apparent exception to this is the prohibition of sexual immorality (*porneia*), which is consistently treated as a nonnegotiable ethical issue in Scripture. This purity taboo is often limited to the question of marriage within prohibited degrees of kinship, based on Leviticus 18:13 (Fitzmyer, *Acts of the Apostles*, p. 558). Although this is possible, it seems unlikely that Luke would restrict *porneia* in this way without any further explanation. More likely, because sexual immorality was a widespread practice in Greco-Roman culture and a particular stumbling block to association between Jews and Gentiles, the Council felt the need to single it out. See Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1998), pp. 419, 421.





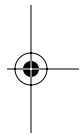
willing to relax the traditional interpretation of purity laws that would have ruled out table fellowship with non-Jews altogether. Believers of different backgrounds must exercise their Christian freedom in a spirit of love and of sensitivity to the traditions and scruples of others, for the greater good of full communion in Christ. Today such issues of contextualization surface again and again. For example, Christians in the Philippines might need to abstain from eating popular dishes made from pork blood when they live in close contact with Muslims or recent converts from Islam who have strong scruples against it.⁷¹ Or consider the current “wars” over worship styles in the West—contemporary or traditional, praise choruses backed up by bands or hymns accompanied by organs. The spirit of the Jerusalem Council suggests that Christians in both camps need to be willing to surrender their personal freedom and preferences for the sake of unity in Christ.

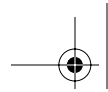
6. *The role of the community and its leadership.* Both the leaders of the church and the community as a whole are key players in the process of theological reflection and discerning God’s will for the situation. The full range of leadership from both mother and daughter churches is involved and comes to agreement. The “apostles and elders” in Jerusalem ultimately debate (Acts 15:7), decide (Acts 15:25), and dispatch representatives with an authoritative letter, to Antioch (Acts 15:22-23). James, who represents continuity with Jesus and the church’s Jewish Christian roots, plays the lead part. At the same time, it is not simply an individual or a “top-down” decision. Luke goes out of his way to report the participation of the wider church in the whole process.⁷² It is the community that first sends delegates from Antioch to resolve the theological crisis (Acts 15:3) and the community that gathers in Jerusalem to receive them (Acts 15:4). It is the community that listens to and evaluates the testimonies of God’s activity in the lives of its members (Acts 15:12), and the community that confirms the decision of its leaders (Acts 15:22). Likewise, the gathered community in Antioch receives and endorses the exhortation of the Council (Acts 15:31) and affirms its unity with the mother church (Acts 15:33). The collective mind of the church recognizes the Spirit’s leading into creative conflict resolution: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit *and to us*” (Acts 15:28). The church as a whole is indispensable to the theological process.

7. *The church’s contextualizing of the gospel is missional, ecclesial and trans-*

⁷¹David K. Strong, “The Jerusalem Council: Some Implications for Contextualization,” in *Mission in Acts: Ancient Narratives in Contemporary Contextualization. Act 15:1-35*, ed. R. L. Gallagher and P. Hertig (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2004), p. 205.

⁷²See John Christopher Thomas, “Women, Pentecostals and the Bible: An Experiment in Pentecostal Hermeneutics,” *JPT* 5 (1994): 49.



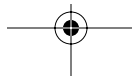


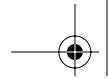
formational. First, the theological reflection we find in Acts 15 has as its goal the advancement of the church's mission. The community's spokespeople argue that both experience (Acts 15:7) and Scripture (Acts 15:15-19) testify that God has already sanctioned a law-free Gentile mission. In Luke's story, the Jerusalem Council decisively settles the question for the church that Gentiles could be evangelized without prior conditions and within their own culture. What began with an Ethiopian eunuch, what was symbolized by the centurion Cornelius, is now formalized by the church. At the same time, the Jewish mission is not discarded and Jews can continue to be evangelized as Jews. The missional impact of the Council's interpretation of the gospel in Acts is unmistakable. Immediately, it spurs further proclamation of the word of God in Antioch (Acts 15:35). More importantly, Jerusalem's official stamp of approval clears the path for Paul's ever widening horizon of mission that becomes Luke's dominant focus in the second half of Acts. David Seccombe is quite right that "[o]ne of the great strengths of Christianity . . . in every age has been its adaptability to any culture, the basis of which was hammered out at the Jerusalem Council."⁷³

Second, not only is the location of the church's theological reflection in Acts 15 the faith community, but the process of doing theology serves to shape and redefine that community. The Jerusalem Council refuses to see the church as an exclusive sect, nor even as an enlarged Israel. Instead, Acts 15 describes a church on a journey to a deeper understanding of its identity as the one people of God comprised of two distinct cultural groups who believe in Jesus. Neither group must surrender its cultural identity, and Jews may continue to observe their ancestral traditions. Unity does not mean uniformity. The resolution of the Council allows for theological diversity regarding the way of life and approach to missionary outreach of the two cultural groups. By the same token, not even the original, divinely sanctioned culture of God's elect nation has the right to universalize its particular expression of Christianity. Acts 15 promotes a vision of a new people of God potentially inclusive of all peoples, in which every nation and culture can stand on equal footing before the cross. Such a vision is no less a touchstone for the church's theological identity in our time.

Because it is *one* people of God and not two, the church cannot be allowed to split into ethnically and religiously separate factions. Emerging out of the theological process described in Luke's narrative is a beautiful picture of a unified body earmarked by mutual respect. The mother church in Jerusalem shows remarkable pastoral concern for the Gentile believers who have been offended (cf. Acts 15:24), and its representatives remain in Antioch to encourage and

⁷³Seccombe, "New People," p. 366.





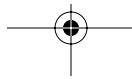
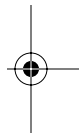
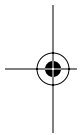
strengthen them (Acts 15:32). At the same time, the multicultural “mission church” in Antioch accepts the Council’s decision and maintains continuity with its heritage in the Jewish Christian community. Jewish traditional ways and sensitivities are taken seriously. The fellowship that characterized the early days in Jerusalem (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-35) is restored, at least for the time being, on an intercultural level (Acts 15:23-29, 32-33).⁷⁴ Likewise today, any contextualized theology that leads to the dividing of the church along cultural or ethnic lines is in tension with the gospel of Christ. It may be pragmatically the case that people prefer to worship and fellowship with others who are like them. But intentionally homogeneous churches, where everybody is basically of one culture, one race, or one socioeconomic background, must not be the dominant model for the people of God. We must learn, however painfully, to sing the gospel in all the rich harmonies that enhance the beauty of the song.

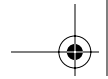
Third, the result of the church’s adapting the gospel to new circumstances is the transformation of individuals and of the community. The stories of faith that provide the raw materials for the church’s theologizing highlight God’s transforming power at work among the Gentiles through the preaching of the word (Acts 15:7-9, 11, 12, 14, 19). The apostles’ testimony confronts and capsizes the ethnocentric worldview of those who thought God’s election had endowed them with a permanent “most-favored-nation” status. Luke’s attention to the unanimity of the decision (Acts 15:22, 25) implies a change among the believing Pharisees. In the end, the Council’s work brings joy (Acts 15:31) and a reconciled community (Acts 15:33).

CONCLUSION

The book of Acts presents the church in Luke’s day and ours with significant resources for the task of contextualizing the gospel. On one hand, Luke’s work is itself an example of articulating the Christian faith within the cultural landscape of the ancient Mediterranean world. He draws upon the literary forms, rhetorical conventions and stories of the setting he shares with his readers, targeting the gospel for an audience of Gentile Christians who need to know who they are and how to live out their calling within their life circumstances. Plainly put, Luke does narrative theology first-century style. He engages his world and beckons his readers to be transformed by the story of God’s activity in the life of the church. This is the task of the church in every culture and age—to enable the gospel to address its world in transforming ways even as it utilizes the stories and cultural resources at hand.

⁷⁴Hilary, *Inculturation Theology*, pp. 266-67.

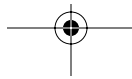


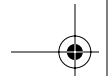


At the same time, the individual stories within the larger narrative of God's purpose in the first half of Acts have an exemplary function for the church. In the first place, they provide theological foundations for the task of contextualization. They reveal a gospel that by its very nature crosses barriers, transcends any single, normative cultural expression, and accepts all peoples as they are, within their concrete circumstances. Beyond this, these events offer models of Spirit-guided theological reflection for new situations. Luke lets us discover step by step how the one apostolic gospel that centers on the saving events in Christ can be expressed in a variety of context-sensitive ways to different groups of people, whether to Jews in the beginning, to peoples on the periphery of Judaism like the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch, to a bridge figure like the God-fearer Cornelius, or to the wider circle of Gentiles as in the decision of the Jerusalem Council. Each time the missional church crosses another cultural, social or religious barrier, the church's ministry of the word must be tailored to fit the new context.

The final two accounts of Cornelius and the Jerusalem Council in particular serve as case studies for doing contextual theology. In the Cornelius narrative, Peter is dragged "kicking and screaming" by the Spirit into a new understanding of the wideness of God's mercy. The messenger and his church must undergo a conversion every bit as profound as those who receive the message. Later in Acts 15 Luke lets us peer in on a multicultural church in conflict, a church that is struggling with the extent to which the old ways of perceiving and living out the faith need to be transformed in light of a new situation fashioned by the Spirit. These narratives carry powerful implications for churches and intercultural communicators of all generations. At times we must be willing to allow our own culture-bound theologies and practices to be confronted and renewed. Only then can the gospel hope to address new challenges and constituencies with Spirit-graced authenticity. Those of us who are a part of dominant cultures and "mother" churches especially need to confess that we, like the Jerusalem Jews, have too often tried to impose our "superior" interpretations and cultural expressions of the faith upon Christians in other settings.

The church's theological task that Acts portrays is far from simple. It is clearly a *process* in which a whole array of elements come into play: the leading of the Spirit, the witness of Scripture and the words of Jesus, the audience-sensitive proclamation of the word, the church's experience of God and the stories that testify to what God is doing, the corporate insight of the community and its leadership, respect for traditional ways and a willingness to compromise on nonessentials for the sake of Christian unity, and a firm commitment to the truth of the gospel. The result is a church that allows diversity in theological understand-





ing and mission praxis yet is united in its enriched understanding of the gospel of Christ and in its commitment to a boundary-free mission. Acts invites us to inscribe ourselves into these paradigmatic stories. It bids us learn from the journey they describe. There are still barriers that must be hurdled—sociocultural, theological, linguistic, generational—as we attempt to articulate and embody the gospel within our various cultures and circumstances today. Yet we can draw hope from the knowledge that the same God who discloses himself in unexpected ways to Philip, Peter, James, and the Jerusalem church encounters us, as well, in the midst of our diverse contexts. Luke’s narrative of God’s plan to bring salvation to the world through the church’s witness to the gospel is an unfinished story, one that is still being lived out in London and Lagos and Lima and a myriad of other concrete settings that extend “to the ends of the earth.”

