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The Word of God and the Church: On the Theological Implications of Three Summary Statements in the Acts of the Apostles

Matthew L. Skinner

[T]he church [in Acts] exists as evidence of God's plan and God's activity in the world. The church draws its existence from God's intervention, rather than from its own initiative.¹

When it comes to its theology — its depiction of God and how God is known and operates — the book of Acts can hardly be credited with providing precision. While certain theological themes, terms, and assertions recur and figure prominently in the book, they usually resist easy categorization or systematization. The most charitable and probably accurate explanation for this involves acknowledging that Luke, the name we ascribe to the book's author, was not driven by the same impulses at work in modern readers who seek such conceptual clarity in their theology. The narrative of Acts seems more determined to convey a conviction *that* God has been active or present within the world than to chart the precise means by which divine activity manifests itself.²

1. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *The Acts of the Apostles*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), p. 39.

2. For a prime example, consider the variety of ways the Holy Spirit works throughout Acts. See Eric Franklin, *Christ the Lord: A Study in the Purpose and Theology of Luke-Acts* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), pp. 133-34. As Daniel Marguerat puts it, with regard to the Holy Spirit, Luke "offers his readers a pragmatic of the Spirit," in contrast to a discursive theology of the Spirit, insofar as Acts devotes itself to "telling the work of the Spirit, rather than talking about him" (*The First Christian Historian: Writing the 'Acts of the Apostles,'* trans. Ken McKinney, Gregory J. Laughery, and Richard Bauckham, SNTSMS 121 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], p. 128, emphasis original; see also p. 125). The same holds true

We might easily chalk this up to the nature of the biblical documents; their character as testimony, passed along to us across generations, means we continually encounter in them assertions, remembrances, and persuasive methods that do not always align with how we were taught to do theology. But the narrative character of Acts also plays a part, and opacity always accompanies narrativity. Narratives can suggest a wide variety of possible connections and causalities at work among characters and events, but never can readers either definitively map all of these or expect utter consistency.³ Just as real life usually resists thematic coherence, narrative follows suit. A narrative's power thus resides in its ability to draw audiences into imagining the possibilities giving shape to the world it narrates. When a story like Acts purports to say, or even faintly implies, something about God's influence upon the action involving other characters, it encourages readers to consider the nature of God's activity — to engage in conversations about what this activity is like and how they might apprehend it in their own lives.

Beverly Roberts Gaventa's scholarship on Acts contributes to these kinds of conversations. Her writings take the narrative character of Acts seriously and discover God's prominence throughout the story Luke narrates. Acts may make or imply theological claims that remain ambiguous, but it is itself unrelenting in advancing a perspective that God plays a part in the history of the church and the world.

Some of Gaventa's early writings about Acts attempt to cut through methodological confusion about what it means even to speak about "the theology of Acts"; in an often-cited article she proposes that narrative analysis must be a necessary piece of describing the theological contributions of Luke's second volume.⁴ Her article's purpose goes far beyond endorsing narrative criticism's value for theologically oriented exegesis; it reiterates earlier scholars' insistence that the complexity of Acts as a whole defies reductionistic theological proposals. Accordingly, Gaventa takes aim at the hypothesis, associated most prominently with Hans Conzelmann, that the "theology" of Acts is essentially a theology of glory meant to buttress a church faced with the daunting task of surviving in the Roman

for most if not all of the theological topics in Acts, whether God, the church, conversion, and so on.

3. Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 23-47; Marguerat, *Historian*, p. 46.

4. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "Toward a Theology of Acts: Reading and Rereading," *Int* 42 (1988): 146-57.

world with decreased if not disappointed eschatological expectations.⁵ Luke's interest in writing Acts, so the hypothesis went, was to provide ancient Christians with an upbuilding account of the church's history, not with much of a theology. This hypothesis tended to find little in Acts that addresses who God is or how God operates. In focusing on the narrative character of Acts, Gaventa points out other possibilities; she finds complexity and articulates a way of reading Acts as a story about God, and not primarily about the church, its people, its successes, or its struggles.⁶

The current essay examines a facet of the theological ecclesiology in Acts — or, to put it in a way that better respects the narrative character of Acts, a facet of the book's depiction of the church and God's role in the church's existence and activity. The essay emerges from my ongoing ruminations about how the portrayal of the church in Acts stems from an understanding of God, a God whose activity does more than *affect* or *guide* the church.⁷ I embark on this investigation attentive to the narrative dynamics of Acts and appreciative of Gaventa's characterization of Acts as a theological story, a story as much about God as about the people or events in which God takes interest. I will explore three relatively obscure verses: Acts 6:7; 12:24; and 19:20. In each of these, the narrator offers a summary and describes "the word of God" or "the word of the Lord" increasing or growing (αὐξάνω). These verses appear at important junctures in the story, and the choice of words is peculiar enough to demand special attention. While many commentators take these verses as simple statements of the church's expansion in geographical and numerical terms, I will argue that Luke's statements also allow us to inquire after deeper theological implications, relevant for understanding the God made manifest through this

5. See, most notably, Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1961); *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987). Conzelmann's views represented a larger constellation of opinion about Luke-Acts given momentum especially by Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Käsemann.

6. She advances this perspective most forcefully in her commentary, *Acts*. Perhaps most important, Gaventa avoids the temptation to assume that Acts must advance *either* a theological depiction of God *or* a historical account of the church and its people.

7. In speaking about "the church," I do not imply that Acts operates with a sense of a universal, fully unified, or institutionalized church. I use the term as a shorthand expression to describe various yet kindred communities composed of Jesus' followers, or "Christians" (Acts 11:26). Of course Acts recognizes vital affinities and connections among these communities, but I do not want my use of the term to distract attention from the communities' discrete identities.

church, as well as for understanding the church itself. Although Luke does not provide much to support a precise definition of the relationship between “the word of God” and “the church,” the repetition of language in the three summaries and their surrounding narrative contexts together encourage us to put the summaries in conversation with the rest of Acts and this book’s depiction of a God whose activity connects to human affairs.

“The Word” That “Grows”

Summary statements appear frequently in Acts.⁸ They lend a hand where the narrative takes stock of developments or turns in new directions, providing positive reports about the church’s continuing and enlarging influence. Three of these statements, those on which this essay focuses, attract particular attention because of their similar use of peculiar language:

Acts 6:7

Καὶ ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ ἤρξανεν καὶ ἐπληθύνετο ὁ ἀριθμὸς τῶν μαθητῶν ἐν Ἱερουσαλήμ σφόδρα, πολὺς τε ὄχλος τῶν ἱερέων ὑπήκουον τῇ πίστει.

The word of God kept on growing, the number of disciples in Jerusalem kept on increasing greatly, and a large group of the priests became obedient to the faith.⁹

Acts 12:24

Ὁ δὲ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ ἤρξανεν καὶ ἐπληθύνετο.

But the word of God kept on growing and increasing in number.

Acts 19:20

Οὕτως κατὰ κράτος τοῦ κυρίου ὁ λόγος ἤρξανεν καὶ ἴσχυεν.

In such a manner, forcefully the word of the Lord kept on growing and demonstrating strength.¹⁰

8. Most interpreters agree on this list of the summary statements: Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:30–31. Some include Acts 2:47; 4:4; 5:16; 11:24; 18:11 (Brian S. Rosner, “The Progress of the Word,” in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], p. 222 n. 32).

9. All translations in this essay are my own.

10. Some commentators connect τοῦ κυρίου to κράτος instead of το ὁ λόγος, thus rendering the verse: “. . . with the power of the Lord, the word . . .” (e.g., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles*, AB 31 [New York: Doubleday, 1998], p. 652). Such a translation

In addition to their language, which I will discuss shortly, these three verses, as summaries, attract attention because of how they interact with their wider narrative contexts. These contexts imply that vitality, resilience, and perseverance are part of what it means for “the word” to keep on growing. In each case, these statements of growth defuse a sense of imminent crisis, for they follow closely on the heels of events threatening to weaken the church’s influence: the controversy concerning the neglect of Hellenist widows (Acts 6:1-6), vain Herod Agrippa I’s execution of James and near-execution of Peter (12:1-23), and widespread use of magic and hypocritical exorcism techniques in Ephesus (19:13-19). The growth that Luke announces in these settings has an effect of one-upmanship in the face of danger, even as the growth makes a statement about perseverance.¹¹ Threats will not ultimately weaken “the word”; the community of the faithful will survive and even find greater stability, thanks to God.¹² Part of this stability, as these three one-verse summaries tell the story, involves new members joining a community of believers.

What Is the Word of God?

Each of these verses speaks about “the word of God” or “the word of the Lord.”¹³ Each uses the verb ἀυξάνω and an additional verb to describe

might be more warranted if κατὰ κράτος was not such a common adverbial expression (Richard I. Pervo, *Acts: A Commentary*, Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009], p. 481), the argument of Richard P. Thompson notwithstanding (*Keeping the Church in Its Place: The Church as Narrative Character in Acts* [New York: T. & T. Clark, 2006], p. 215 n. 278). The debate finally does not affect the argument put forward in this essay.

11. The God of Acts appears determined to have the word permeate all pockets of human society, whether or not conversions occur. See Matthew L. Skinner, “Acts,” in *Theological Bible Commentary*, ed. Gail R. O’Day and David L. Petersen (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), p. 363.

12. With regard to the community’s reinforced stability, note John B. Weaver’s comments about Acts 12:24 and the importance Acts places on preserving the community of faith in Jerusalem (*Plots of Epiphany: Prison-Escape in Acts of the Apostles*, BZBW 131 [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2004], p. 213). Likewise, display of “strength” accompanies the growth in Acts 19:20, echoing the same verb (ισχύω) used in 19:16 to describe a demon-possessed man’s power to overwhelm, injure, and shame seven would-be exorcists.

13. Obviously the language in the three summaries is not identical, only similar. These similarities are strong, however, as explained below in my discussion of the verses’ salient terms. The point is that each of the three expresses a sense of “the word” expanding in terms of its membership or population. (And I take “the word of God” as essentially equivalent to

the word's growth or expansion. What does it mean that "the word of God" grows? I begin by considering what ὁ λόγος might indicate in these instances.

I will argue that in these verses Acts suggests a very close association between "the word of God" / "the word of the Lord" and the church or the company of Jesus' followers; yet, the book never explicitly identifies them with one another, as if "church" and "word" become plainly synonymous. Complicating the issue, throughout Luke's writings there is no univocal understanding of what "the word of God" (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ) is. This is not to deny a clearly dominant use of this expression in Luke-Acts: in most cases it refers to the message the apostles (and others) preach (e.g., Acts 4:31; 11:1; 13:5, 7, 46; 17:13; 18:11).¹⁴ Likewise, "the word of the Lord" (ὁ λόγος τοῦ κυρίου) usually means exactly the same thing (e.g., Acts 8:25; 13:44; 15:35-36; 16:32; 19:10), as do numerous instances of "the word" (ὁ λόγος) used either alone or paired with other genitive nouns (e.g., Acts 11:19; 13:26; 14:3; 15:7; 17:11; 18:5; 20:32).¹⁵

Luke-Acts also includes, however, noteworthy exceptions to this dominant usage — or, rather, Luke-Acts intimates an expanded significance about this usage — indicating a broader reservoir of meaning for λόγος. At least three additional Lukan texts speak about "the word" in ways that point attention beyond just a message from God or about Jesus. In these texts, "the word" takes on a more dynamic sense as something made manifest. First, when the Twelve state in Acts 6:4 their intention to persist in prayer and in "service" or "ministry" of the λόγος, they bring into view more than preaching alone. The rest of their apostolic activity showcased up to this point in Acts at least implies that their διακονία τοῦ λόγου also consists of performing signs and wonders. In that case, "ministry of the word" acknowledges a participation in the power or potential that God makes available alongside or through preaching, a dynamic very much on display thus far in the story, throughout Acts 2–5. Second, in Acts 8:21,

"the word of the Lord"; see, e.g., their use in Acts 13:44, 46.) This numerical increase is different from saying that *preaching activity* increases in frequency or geographic extent.

14. This list and the ones in the following sentence (concerning "the word of the Lord" and other appearances of "the word") are not exhaustive; they include only the clearest instances of λόγος as the "message" of/about Jesus. Note, too, that the expression "the word of God" appears more frequently in Acts than in Luke, but the consistent usage in the Third Gospel indicates a proclaimed message as well. See, e.g., Luke 5:1; 8:11-15, 21; 11:28.

15. In addition, twice Luke speaks of a (or the) ῥῆμα "of God" or "of the Lord," in Luke 3:2; Acts 11:16. See also Luke 2:29; Acts 10:37.

when Peter scolds Simon the magician and tells him he has “no share in this word,” the apostle bars him from more than opportunities to proclaim a message. The context of their confrontation suggests that “this word” connects to the ability to impart the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands, the phenomenon that gets Simon so excited in the first place (8:18-19).¹⁶ Simon disqualifies himself from a “word” that appears to promise the ability to be part of an activity, the giving of the Spirit, ascribed ultimately to God.¹⁷ Third, in the Gospel’s prologue, Luke refers to “eyewitnesses and servants of the word” (Luke 1:2). The syntax suggests this phrase refers to a single group, namely, the apostles, who were original *witnesses* of the word and later became its *servants*.¹⁸ “The word” they witnessed in the Gospel and now serve in Acts subtly suggests itself with more nuance than merely a message; it *is* a message, but it was rooted or originally manifested in the actual presence and activity of Jesus, the one who was the means by which God’s “word” came to be known (cf. Acts 10:36, which refers to the word God sent, announced through Jesus Christ).¹⁹ The Jesus of Luke-Acts is not the incarnate word as he is in the christology of John’s Gospel. Nevertheless, Luke-Acts occasionally alludes to the word as something connected to the flesh-and-blood Jesus and his (and God’s) ongoing activity. This word was expressed in Jesus’ activity as much as in his speech, and likewise as something articulated in the actions of Jesus’ apostles, who themselves continue Jesus’ own ministry in the book of Acts as they preach and perform signs.²⁰

16. I grant that “this word” in 8:21 may point to a different notion of λόγος than the other verses discussed thus far. The translations “this enterprise” (Pervo, *Acts*, p. 215 n. 23) or “this matter” (Fitzmyer, *Acts*, pp. 406-7) are plausible in 8:21 and may caution against ascribing too much theological significance to this ambiguous occurrence of λόγος (but cf. C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vols., ICC [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994-1998], 1:414-15). Regardless of questions about the possible terminological relevance of this verse, the larger point still stands: Acts occasionally describes apostolic ministry in ways acknowledging the integral connections among people’s proclamation of the gospel, performance of signs and powers, and participation in work animated by God.

17. See Acts 5:32; 15:8. In Acts 2:33, Peter names Jesus as the one who pours out the Holy Spirit (cf. Luke 24:49).

18. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke I-IX*, AB 28 (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 294.

19. See Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p. 42.

20. Or, in François Bovon’s words, “For Luke, the word of God was made flesh in Jesus, but not in John’s manner: it is the word of God, in the past addressed *to the prophets* and not

These three examples are subtle, although their implications remain suggestive: “the word of God” in Luke-Acts, or “the word of the Lord” or “the word,” may at times indicate or include more than a disembodied message or report. The word, in Luke’s outlook, points sometimes to more than content, propositions, or an announcement. It has theological valence, in terms of the report it communicates to potential converts and also the effective performance or manifestation of that report. Some usage reminds readers to consider this “message’s” origin — not simply communication *from* God or *from* Jesus, but actually an expression of God’s activity through Jesus and the ongoing presence of the Holy Spirit. Although the term λόγος may never be utterly identical with “the church,” or rarely suggestive of it, in Acts it can evoke the church’s *raison d’être* and activity. It occasionally invites readers to notice the theological dimensions of God’s own presence at work when the Christian message is preached and heard. When Acts 6:7; 12:24; and 19:20 speak of the word *growing*, then, we should inquire after what this means for our understanding of both the word and the people who are added to its membership.

What Does It Mean to Grow?

The recurrence of the verb αὐξάνω, along with the noun λόγος, invites us to consider Acts 6:7; 12:24; and 19:20 as a trio. The semantic range of this verb resembles that of “to grow” in English; on its own, it can indicate an increase in something’s extension, significance, or membership. In Luke 1:80 and 2:40, for example, it describes the childhood development of both John and Jesus: they grow more mature, capable, and — we assume — taller. Later in the Gospel it expresses the notable growth of lilies and a “tree” produced by a mustard seed (Luke 12:27; 13:19). When Stephen addresses the hostile mob in Acts 7:17, the word describes the increase, in population and

preexistent in heaven, which took a body in Jesus (Acts 10.36f.)” (*Luke the Theologian: Thirty-three Years of Research [1950-1983]*, trans. Ken McKinney, Princeton Theological Monograph Series 12 [Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1987], p. 197, emphasis original; quoted in Marguerat, *Historian*, p. 37). Bovon’s description of a prophetic word of God may render the idea of that word as something fixed in the past; I suggest, however, that Jesus in Luke-Acts does not reanimate an old word but brings the word of God first expressed through the prophets into a fulfillment (see Luke 4:21) in which Jesus’ speech and activity express something old and new. That is, God continues to speak and act through Jesus and his delegates, bringing old promises to new realizations.

prominence, of the Hebrew people during their time in Egypt after the famine.²¹ While it may refer to something other than a gain in numbers or membership alone, nevertheless a sense of a numerical increase is common when the verb's subject is a collection of people (and perhaps also lilies). When a sentence includes both αὐξάνω and the verb πληθύνω, as in Acts 7:17 (and also in two of the three summaries being examined: 6:7; 12:24), a sense of numerical increase is undeniable. This pairing also makes it difficult to miss an echo of the “be fruitful and multiply” theme from Genesis and Jeremiah, a theme sustained by those same two verbs in the Septuagint.²² It is possible, then, that the three summary statements about “the word of God”/“the word of the Lord” indicate the word's membership growing more numerous. This new phenomenon — the gospel, the word, this movement centered in Jesus himself — is gaining adherents.

Taken as a whole, the book of Acts describes the gradual movement and occasional increase of the church as a spreading out across lands, a theme of spatial and cultural expansion much in line with the geographical tenor of Acts. When Acts highlights this kind of extensive growth, Luke employs varied vocabulary. In 13:49, for example, “the word of the Lord” continued to *spread* (διαφέρω) throughout a region.²³ Also, in Acts 6:1 “the disciples” in Jerusalem increase in number (πληθύνω), and in Acts 9:31 “the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria” does the same thing (again, πληθύνω).²⁴ It is, therefore, striking to encounter verses that state (as in Acts 6:7; 12:24) or imply (as in Acts 19:20) that *the word of God* “grows” (αὐξάνω) as it increases its membership.²⁵ I say striking, because

21. The language of Acts 7:17 recalls Exod. 1:7, which also employs αὐξάνω and πληθύνω as a compound predicate (as does the summary verse Acts 12:24).

22. Septuagint readers find αὐξάνω and πληθύνω paired in Gen. 1:22, 28; 8:17; 9:1, 7; 17:20; 28:3; 35:11; 47:27; 48:4; Jer. 3:16; 23:3. See also Lev. 26:9. All these instances refer to numerical increases of groups of people or animals.

23. Acts can also describe numerical increase in ways less ambiguous and perhaps less theologically charged than what we encounter in 6:7; 12:24; and 19:20. In 16:5, for example, “the churches” (αἱ ἐκκλησίαι) “grow in number” (περισσεύω τῷ ἀριθμῷ).

24. Indeed, nearly all of the verses identified as summaries in note 8, above, make explicit mention of an increase in the number of believers (except Acts 5:16; 18:11; 28:30-31). It is significant to note the absence of growth reports after Paul announces his plans to return to Jerusalem in Acts 19:21. At the same time, Luke hardly presents Paul's return to Jerusalem and his resultant custody and legal travails as failures or insurmountable setbacks.

25. I do not claim that the verb αὐξάνω on its own *requires* a sense of numerical increase. Its pairing with πληθύνω in 6:7 and 12:24 (and elsewhere) encourages that interpretation. Since πληθύνω does not appear in 19:20, the sense of numerical growth in that verse

Luke-Acts does not otherwise indicate that “the word” is something that has membership. Even if Luke imagines the gospel message in such a way, its growth in membership obviously indicates growth of the community of believers. And Luke certainly understands the church as an entity capable of growing in number. These summaries invite readers to consider a close association implied between the church and the word of God as Luke speaks of a word that expands geographically, in terms of its influence and significance, and also *numerically*.²⁶ So deeply rooted is the church in this message of good news, that to join one is to join the other. The growth of one means the growth of the other. The word is not inert.

We thus encounter in these summaries a close, almost confused, and unexplained association between the word and the group of people elsewhere called the church, an association formed by the idea of the word expanding and adding new members. What theological implications arise from this evocative association? What connections might these verses imagine for the relationship between, on one hand, the word of God as a message embedded in the life, activity, words, and accomplishments of Jesus and, on the other hand, the church’s existence, vitality, membership, and work in connection to this message?

Perspectives on the Three Summaries

Other interpreters have likewise considered the syntax of these summaries, taken seriously the association I have identified, and inquired after the association’s theological implications.²⁷ Considering three different propos-

owes to Luke’s use of ἀριθμῶν in the previous two summaries about “the word.” It is doubtful that, were it not for 6:7 and 12:24, we would see a focus on numerical growth, as distinct from geographical extension, in 19:20.

26. The geographical expansion refers to more than drawing lines on a map. The word enters new regions and also new cultural pockets, such as the priestly class named in Acts 6:7. This verse’s mention of “a large group of the priests” creates a bit of a surprise, in light of how the priests have been characterized in Acts 4–5. These new disciples need not come from the elite ranks of the Jerusalem priesthood, however, for the priestly rank-and-file held relatively low status, not at all near the echelons of power occupied by the chief priests. See Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, SP 5 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), p. 107; Robert W. Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), p. 114.

27. Not all have pursued the theological implications. Michael W. Pahl, for example, recognizes that Acts 6:7; 12:24; and 19:20 describe the word’s growth “as if it is a living thing,”

als will demonstrate the difficulties posed by these verses and set a foundation for expanding my own inquiry. The first two proposals attempt to describe the connection Luke intimates between the word of God and the church that proclaims it.

The Association between the Word and the Church

In 1974, Jerome Kodell published an article expounding what he calls “the ecclesial tendency” of ὁ λόγος at work in Acts 6:7; 12:24; and 19:20.²⁸ Quickly dismissing assumptions that the verb αὐξάνω means only that the gospel message *migrated* into new regions, Kodell takes seriously the idea of the word itself *gaining* new members, based mostly on passages in the Septuagint where αὐξάνω and πληθύνω appear together in a “be fruitful and multiply” sense.²⁹ He notes that Luke might have written about “the church” or “the people,” instead of “the word,” gaining members. Kodell proposes, then, that these verses reflect “a materialization of λόγος,” in which the covenant community manifests or becomes the word of God.³⁰ The community exists as both the bearers and the expression of the word, the message about Jesus.

Kodell describes well the terminological evidence that provokes his — and my — investigation of these three summaries, rightly refusing to read over the verses too quickly as insignificant peculiarities. Yet his discussion of their theological ramifications leaves questions unanswered, and his notion of “a materialization of λόγος” finally overemphasizes ecclesiology at the ex-

but he does not delve into the significance of this observation, blunting it instead with a blanket statement that Luke’s notion of λόγος consistently is essentially synonymous with the notion of εὐαγγέλιον in Paul’s writings (*Discerning the ‘Word of the Lord’: The ‘Word of the Lord’ in 1 Thessalonians 4:15*, LNTS 389 [London: T. & T. Clark, 2009], pp. 134, 128-29).

28. Jerome Kodell, “The Word of God Grew’: The Ecclesial Tendency of Λόγος in Acts 6,7; 12,24; 19,20,” *Bib* 55 (1974): 505-19.

29. For these passages, see my note 22, above. Kodell also calls attention to Luke 8:4-15, the Parable of the Sower, in which “the word of God” promises to bear much fruit in certain soil. Other interpreters read Acts 6:7; 12:24; and 19:20 in light of this parable and take the word of God to signify more than a message but “an active force in the world” (Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 2: *The Acts of the Apostles* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990], p. 82; see also Rosner, “Progress,” p. 223). A significant problem with appealing to Luke 8 in this way, however, is the absence of the verb αὐξάνω in Luke’s version of the parable, a verb the author might have been expected to retain, since it appears in Mark’s version (Mark 4:8).

30. Kodell, “Word,” p. 509.

pense of a deeper understanding of the λόγος. The word of God is “ecclesial,” claims Kodell, because salvation in the book of Acts means coming to belong to the community of the saved, a community possessing authority in itself as the company of those who bear witness to Jesus. “The life of believers” in Acts “is now bound up with the progress of the word, so much so that it can become a part of the preaching itself.”³¹ Witnesses, Kodell continues, are not fully separable from the message nor from the Christ about whom their message testifies; to accept the word requires accepting the community, for the word itself “is embedded in the Christian community.”³²

The problem with Kodell’s proposal is that, while it respects Luke’s efforts to associate “the word” and “the community,” it cannot fully make sense of how or why it is *the word* that increases in number. Something “embedded” retains a distinction and remains separate; it is unclear how an embedded word might affect or participate in the thing or setting in which it is embedded, namely, the Christian community. Luke’s wording in the summaries could imply a more dynamic understanding of the λόγος. For Kodell, “the word of God” remains a message, but a message whose validity or credibility becomes couched within a body of people.³³ Why Luke would then speak of the message *itself* growing in membership is not entirely clear. Thus Kodell’s conclusions concerning these verses say more about the church than about the word. He privileges the church, as a collection of powerful witnesses who organically manifest the truth or fulfillment of God’s word, over any sense that the message itself — or the God whose activity the message expresses and exhibits — exercises agency or actualizes God’s own presence. Such a move is not fully consonant with the language in the three summaries, which subtly ascribes an organic, collective character to the word of God itself.

A second interpreter, David W. Pao, likewise finds the peculiar expression ὁ λόγος ἠύξανε worthy of investigation. The three verses under consideration lead him to describe a “hypostatization” of the word of God and

31. Kodell, “Word,” p. 516.

32. Kodell, “Word,” p. 518.

33. Leo O’Reilly advances a similar argument, that these verses show the community of faith to have “a word dimension,” because in the church “the word of God reaches down through the ages from one generation to the next” (*Word and Sign in the Acts of the Apostles: A Study in Lucan Theology*; Analecta Gregoriana 243, Series Facultatis Theologiae, Sectio B, 82 [Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1987], p. 83). O’Reilly’s understanding of the nature of the relationship among the word, the church, and Jesus himself never comes to a clear expression, however.

the power it possesses.³⁴ For him, the pairing of *ὁ λόγος* with *αὐξάνω* means Acts regards the word as a living being. This explains why Acts 13:48 can speak about Gentiles in Pisidian Antioch praising (*δοξάζω*) the word of the Lord, for in Luke-Acts nothing but God or Jesus deserves to receive praise.³⁵ The *λόγος* is not a synonym for God; it is God's "agent," which "accomplishes" or "represents" God's "will." The hypostatized word is a force, not a report or message, recalling to Pao the claim in Isaiah 55:11 that God's "word" (which the LXX renders as *ῥῆμα*, not *λόγος*!) will complete the task God desires, because God remains present in it, acting through it.

Pao's discussion comes as part of a larger argument devoted to establishing Luke's reliance on Isaianic themes for expressing the theology conveyed in Acts. Pao's proposal about hypostatization stems more from dynamics he sees in Isaiah than from a philosophical conception of hypostasis. His analysis makes a strong case for seeing divine activity implied in the three summaries' references to "the word," reaffirming that Acts tells the story of a God who operates in the midst of — or, in the form of — the church's efforts. He explains the theological significance of instances where *ὁ λόγος* serves as the subject of an active verb. Yet, for all his attention to the subject (*ὁ λόγος*), the relevant verbs used in the summaries (*αὐξάνω* and *πληθύνω*) receive little attention. The question remains: How does this hypostatic, living "word" increase in population? What exactly does this hypostasis indicate about the nature of the church, as servants of this active God, who somehow manifest or participate in God's will? Pao appears to imply that God, with the word as the medium, adds to the church's membership as the church preaches the message of the gospel. But it remains unclear how or why this must be a reasonable conclusion drawn from Acts 6:7; 12:24; and 19:20. Pao's theological claims contribute much, insofar as he recognizes in these verses the organic character, the living and growing character, of the word of God. Yet it remains unclear how his theological assertions connect to the enlarging community of faith in Acts or become actualized or even glimpsed in the community's particular endeavors.³⁶ How do God and the community

34. David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, WUNT 2/130 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000; repr.: Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), pp. 160-67.

35. Pao, *Exodus*, p. 161.

36. By my assessment, Pao too greatly reduces the significance of the community of faith and its own growth when he claims God and the word's shared "goal is to create a new community" and the word serves as "a tool" to identify this community's "true identity" (*Exodus*, p. 167).

interact? Or, is Luke depicting a church whose own agency is fully subsumed by God's?

Kodell and Pao, then, each in his own way, illustrate the challenge of making theological sense of Acts 6:7; 12:24; and 19:20. These verses invite investigation into their theological significance, but neither syntactical analysis nor comparisons to other biblical texts finally provide enough to support reasonable, adequately substantive conclusions about what these summaries indicate concerning the connection between the word of God and the church. While Kodell and Pao offer valuable insights, they also demonstrate that Luke gives little material to assist us in moving beyond an ambiguous notion of an integrally related church and divine agent. Attempts to describe the nature of this relationship appear to ask questions Acts will not answer. This leaves room for interpreters to speculate, of course, but questions about the proper scope of that speculation remain. I will revisit this topic later, and offer some speculation of my own, in the essay's concluding section.

Does Growth Mean Conquest?

A third interpreter deserves attention at this point; for not only do Acts 6:7; 12:24; and 19:20 prompt questions about the nature of the word and the church, they also invite us to consider the purpose or the meaning of the growth that occurs at three points in the plot of Acts. Alan J. Thompson, in a relatively recent study of the church in Acts, offers such an analysis, although he treats these three summary verses in a much less concentrated manner than Kodell or Pao.³⁷ Thompson considers the dynamics of "the word" in the summaries as part of his survey exploring how this word conquers opposition throughout all of Acts.³⁸ His analysis reiterates a basic claim: expressions of the church's unity in Acts regularly serve to indicate triumph over forces threatening to harm or undo the church. For example, the proximity of Acts 6:7 to the account of unity rescued from the jaws of disunity in 6:1-6 leads Thompson to regard the word's subsequent growth as an announcement of the word's conquest of Jerusalem.³⁹ Likewise,

37. Alan J. Thompson, *One Lord, One People: The Unity of the Church in Acts in Its Literary Setting*, LNTS 359 (London: T. & T. Clark, 2008).

38. The word's conquest is also a major focus of Pao's reading of Acts in his *Exodus*. Thompson picks up and advances his teacher's understanding of this theme.

39. Thompson, *One Lord*, p. 140.

Thompson finds themes of unity and disunity in the tale of Herod's downfall in Acts 12, making the summary in 12:24 a statement of progress specifically to declare victory over opposition that threatened to inflict turmoil upon the church.⁴⁰ Similarly, Acts 19:20 intimates the word's ongoing conquest within "the Gentile world."⁴¹

Thompson's theological inquiries differ from mine, given that his focus is on establishing unity as one of the church's chief, defining characteristics in Acts. I cite his book mostly to raise the issue of what we may learn from the surrounding narrative contexts when we consider Acts 6:7; 12:24; and 19:20. As mentioned previously, these three summary verses all follow descriptions of threats to the church and its ability to preserve a reliable, strong witness to Jesus Christ. In each case, those threats are neutralized, and Luke immediately announces that the word kept on growing. No doubt, then, the summaries strike a doxological tone, announcing, "Crisis averted." But they also have a competitive sound to them. To be more specific, Acts 6:7 speaks a word of provocation, for it mentions the priests who become obedient to the faith just after the heightened antagonism from the chief priests in Acts 4–5 and just prior to Stephen's so-called trial before the high priest, his council, and a mob.⁴² The juxtaposition between the celebration of "the word of God" in Acts 12:24 and the preceding verse, in which Herod fails to give glory to God and dies gruesomely, is humorous in its stark contrast between the word's perseverance and a blasphemous king's demise. In Acts 19:20, the doxology has violent overtones, given the sense of *κατὰ κράτος* as "forcefully" or "with violence."⁴³ Richard Pervo sees a sharp display of power in that statement, wherein "Paul crushes the opposition" embodied in the sons of Sceva.⁴⁴

Later I will return briefly to the question of whether conquest or triumphalism plays a part in the summaries, but for now two observations suffice. First, it is possible these passages are not especially interested in describing a God who consistently out-muscles any development or any person that stands in the church's way. They appear more interested in cele-

40. Thompson, *One Lord*, pp. 141–43.

41. Thompson, *One Lord*, p. 151.

42. Gaventa, *Acts*, p. 116.

43. See Barrett, *Acts*, 2:914.

44. Pervo, *Acts*, p. 482. It is not clear to me, however, that Acts implies *Paul's* agency in the humiliation and beating of Sceva's sons. More defensible is Pervo's more general assertion concerning the expression *ὁ λόγος ἠῤῥῆσεν*: "The phrase describes the conquest of the world by the Gospel" (p. 163 n. 93).

brating the ongoing survival and increased influence of communities of faith and their witness.⁴⁵ We should not split the difference between these possibilities too neatly, of course, since the latter appears to require the former, at least when legitimate threats (particularly Herod!) are involved. Still, the question is, How much does the word's growth in the face of adversity accentuate God's unmatched power, and how much does it point to God's protective presence among, or enfleshed within, an otherwise vulnerable community?

Second, one of the theological implications of Luke's descriptions of the word of God increasing in number may be a focus on the theological nature of what dwells *outside* the church — the true character of the things that threaten God's people and their witness. For God to side with and preserve the church says more than "God is stronger than whatever would inhibit the church." It also says, "The church's antagonists are also God's antagonists, and God's chief antagonist stands behind the things that threaten the church's vitality. In obstructing God's people, that antagonist opposes God." A satanic impulse imbues opposition to the gospel throughout Luke-Acts, even in places where the narrative does not give explicit attention to the diabolical.⁴⁶ What may look like political struggle, or conflict among differing groups within a society, is often to Luke a showdown between God and Satan. The growth of the word of God may therefore imply a defeat of Satan; but also, to put it another way, the summaries make statements about the preservation of the church threatened by an enemy its members cannot defeat alone. And this enemy targets the vulnerable church as a means of targeting God. The summaries therefore connect to narrative contexts that raise questions about how the people of this church, especially its leaders, will be able to secure its vitality and continuing existence. It is therefore worthwhile to ask, What more can we learn about the summaries by exploring their surrounding narrative contexts? What more can we glimpse, in particular, about the people who make up the church and who seek to be responsive to God?

45. Cf. again Weaver's interpretation of Acts 12:24 (*Plots*, p. 213).

46. Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Gospel of Luke*, New Testament Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 34.

Acts 6, 12, and 19 in Light of the Wider Narrative

It is not enough to examine the language of Acts 6:7; 12:24; and 19:20. Exploring these summaries' theological implications and pondering the nature of their subtle association of the word and the church also benefit from our considering the surrounding narrative contexts. Attending to narrative development is not methodological garnish; it allows us to respect the character of Acts and Luke's manner of giving voice to theology through storytelling.

As I have mentioned, the three verses in question follow some description of circumstances that threaten to undermine or disempower the church's work, but this is not the whole story. All three also appear in contexts that raise questions about what should be expected from key, visible figures in the church's leadership.⁴⁷

The first summary, Acts 6:7, appears just after complaints about food distribution threaten the harmony of the community in Jerusalem. A large part of the concern, too, is whether the twelve apostles will be able to continue devoting themselves to prayer and "serving the word"; this leads them to appoint others to oversee the food distribution. The apostles' centrality to proclaiming the gospel appears imperiled by the crisis; the summary then reaffirms the importance and the influence of their preaching. Immediately following this, however, Stephen, one of the seven chosen to wait on tables, distinguishes himself through his performance of signs and wonders, his wisdom, and his speaking (6:8-10) — very "apostolic" activities, based on what Acts has shown up to this point. Do the apostles correctly discern what they should be doing, in serving the word rather than tables?⁴⁸ It matters little, once the narrative brings Stephen's deeds to light; the continuation of the word's growth hardly depends on the Twelve alone. Stephen comes across as just as capable.

47. As others have noted, there is also a geographical dimension to these verses' placement in the narrative (e.g., Meinert H. Grumm, "Another Look at Acts," *ExpTim* 96 [1985]: 335). Soon after 6:7, believers are propelled out of Jerusalem into wider Judea and Samaria. Almost immediately after 12:24, the narrator's focus turns to Barnabas and Saul when the Spirit sends them to Cyprus and beyond. In the verse following 19:20, Paul announces his Spirit-inspired intention to return to Jerusalem and eventually wind up in Rome, a trip that begins with the start of Acts 20.

48. The potential for irony is great, if the apostles actually misjudge their role and derogate table service, since Jesus describes himself in Luke 22:27 as "one who serves" his followers as they sit at a table.

Peter is the most central human figure in Acts 1–11; whoever comes in second place hardly approaches Peter in importance, as far as narrated action is concerned. His signs, wonders, preaching, and boldness in Acts 1–5, his importance in Cornelius’s conversion — these make him a significant, strategic catch for Herod in Acts 12. But Peter’s escape and Herod’s death do not return Peter to the same kind of public ministry, according to what the narrator allows readers to see; instead, according to Acts 12:17, Peter “departed and went to another place.” After chapter 12, Acts speaks of him only once again, when he makes his cameo appearance at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. He virtually vanishes from the narrative’s spotlight. But, before that, Acts implies in 12:24 that the church grows after Peter gains his freedom from Herod. If readers are tempted to assume from this summary that the ongoing success or growth of the church depends upon Peter and his freedom, the following chapters quickly disabuse them of that assumption by turning attention to Barnabas and Saul right after the summary statement of Acts 12:24. Peter’s removal from the stage and the narrative’s turning toward new missionaries are, as Gaventa correctly observes, hardly a succession narrative, in which new people step into Peter’s role.⁴⁹ But Peter’s departure and the reintroduction of Barnabas and Saul do make for a relativization narrative, at once underscoring Peter’s role in advancing the word of God even while diminishing any sense of his ongoing importance or indispensability.

The narrative context of Acts 19:20 differs significantly from the contexts of the other two summaries. The threats detailed in 19:13–19 seem directed not explicitly at a community of faith or its ability to perform effective ministry. Others who misuse magical or spiritual powers are exposed previously in Acts, without suggestion that their deeds pose unusual or unique peril to the wider church (see Simon in 8:9–24; Elymas in 13:6–12). Further, Paul does not disappear from the narrative after 19:20; rather, the locations and audiences for his witness to Christ change dramatically in Acts 21–28. Nevertheless, the summary does closely follow a description of Paul performing very impressive wonders (19:11–12), and it concludes a long series of public accusations against Paul, who comes across as impressive in all of them (Acts 16–19).⁵⁰ The narrative has dedicated much effort to establishing Paul’s gifts and importance, yet immediately after Acts 19:20 Paul

49. Gaventa, *Acts*, p. 188.

50. See Tannehill’s description of a “public accusation type-scene” recurring in Acts 16–19 (*Unity*, pp. 201–3).

begins his journey toward eventual martyrdom, a trek he undertakes mostly in isolation from other church leaders. It is correct to say, “The narrator is not simply glorifying Paul” in 19:20, because of Luke’s explicit and overriding focus in this context on “the word of the Lord” (19:10, 20).⁵¹ Yet Paul’s contributions are undoubtedly celebrated by the summary and all that precedes it. Still, again, because it leans into the part of the story that will result in Paul being sequestered and later executed, the summary statement about “the word” participates in de-emphasizing a celebrated church leader’s centrality, or the centrality of his dramatic, visible contributions.⁵²

On one hand, these three summary verses, in connection with their wider narrative contexts, confirm the importance of various key figures: the Twelve as a whole, Peter, and Paul. These people’s faithfulness and obedience contribute to the church’s numerical growth and vitality. On the other hand, these verses serve as hinges into new narrative developments, reminding readers that the perseverance of the word hardly depends on these particular people. Narrative developments cause the summaries to say more than that God continues to increase the numbers of those touched by the gospel and brought into Christian communities. These passages, in context, also counter any expectations the narrative may otherwise promote about certain characters’ irreplaceability. They call into question any putative centrality of these men and open the door to new developments, when others come forward in the narrative to fulfill God’s purposes. The word in Acts is not a force entirely separate from the efforts of people. But it is always about more than specific individuals within the church, and it is hardly dependent on these persons.

The three summaries also redirect attention away from certain forms of ministry or ways of bearing witness to Christ. Stephen comes to prominence after Acts 6:7 as the Twelve fade; his ministry resembles theirs at first, but martyrdom will end his story. Peter disappears from the narrative spotlight after Acts 12, but readers assume his move to “another place” is not relocation to a retirement home; he will certainly contribute in other ways in other venues. Paul’s ministry continues after his return to Jerusalem, but the mode and contexts of that ministry become very different once his incarceration begins. The word — or the ministry of the word —

51. Tannehill, *Unity*, p. 238.

52. Grumm notes that the second half of Acts 19 and the first half of Acts 20 together mention ten of Paul’s companions (“Another,” p. 335). This highlighting of Paul’s associates further attenuates his centrality and erodes any presumption that he is an irreplaceable piece of God’s plan concerning the spread of the gospel.

does not fit a single mold. These three summaries, again in connection to their narrative contexts, keep that reality in readers' eyes, simultaneously celebrating and undermining the particular leaders and forms of ministry that readers encounter in the narrative. The theological significance of this, and its importance for understanding the three summary statements, will become clearer in this essay's conclusion.

Conclusions

I have argued that the summary statements in Acts 6:7; 12:24; and 19:20 invite readers to consider a very close association between the word of God and the church, a close association forged by statements indicating the word's increase in membership, when the clear sense is that it is the community of believers that gains members. But the nature of this association remains frustratingly difficult to ascertain; Luke gives us little to work with, beyond these verses' repeated impetus to take the association seriously. Pao's notion of a hypostatized word offers a helpful way of imagining a "word" that is more than a message, something hardly inert.⁵³ But his explanation tells us little about what it means for communities of faith to embody or express this divine agency. I submit that it must mean something other than an assertion that the church and its people will always win or come through every threat somehow intact. What might we make of Luke's suggestion that the church is the dwelling place of God's word, the actual organic expression of God's purposes? I conclude with my modest proposals.

Expansion and infiltration occur throughout Acts. Witnesses travel from Jerusalem into much of the wider Roman world. The gospel is preached and lived out in diverse cultural settings. Members of the priesthood, a Roman proconsul, an Ethiopian official, former magicians, a jailer, soldiers, and other exceptional members of society respond positively to the word of God. People bear witness to Jesus before those occupying the highest echelons of political power as well as to slaves and prisoners. Luke portrays the word of God as something other than a message that finds creative expression in different social and physical places, and as some-

53. Cf. Graham H. Twelftree, who describes the increasing church membership in Acts as involving "the realization of the activity or presence of God" (*People of the Spirit: Exploring Luke's View of the Church* [London: SPCK, 2009; repr.: Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009], p. 40).

thing other than a power that strong-arms its way through cultural boundaries to obliterate opposition and confront new audiences. Associated with a growing, nurturing community of people, the word operates as an activity that creates, inhabits, and energizes an arena where God's intentions become actualized in the existence and efforts of the church. The word grows, not simply because converts increase the church's rolls, but because they are brought into the arena of divine action, a place where they apprehend God and exist within God's purposes as those are expressed in the gospel message of and about Jesus Christ.

It is, then, incomplete to speak of God as the source of the church's vitality in Acts. The church is also more than "evidence" (to recall this essay's epigraph) of God's plan and activity; although the church *is* this evidence, and in Acts the church is certainly born of God's "intervention," in addition it is the lived reality of God's plan and activity, a living embodiment of God's own presence and agency. This means there can be no talk of "ecclesiology in Acts" without accounting for "theology in Acts." Patterns of living, religious practices, church organization, and similar topics cannot constitute the substance of Lukan ecclesiology. The church expresses the reality of the gospel, and God becomes present to the world through a real identification with the church's experiences and witness. Acts might sometimes acknowledge a God who exists separate from the church's existence, but Acts devotes much more attention to asserting an observable reality of this God's activity integrated with the witnessing church's life, successes, and failures.

Such a close connection between God and church cannot help but arouse concerns among theologically minded readers of Acts, especially those who themselves spend time in communities of faith and know well these communities' shortcomings and hubristic tendencies. Can this be a God worth following? Can any church live up to such a billing?

Those questions, as well as the risk of allowing ecclesiology to *replace* theology, underscore the importance of attending to the three summaries' surrounding narrative contexts, which I summarized in the preceding section. Even as Luke in the summaries brings the word and the church very close — perhaps uncomfortably close — in their identification and description, the broader narrative destabilizes any assumption that the church deserves confidence as the flawless expression of God's presence or the full array of God's activity. Bringing this essay now to its end, I explain how the wider Acts narrative helps qualify the close association the summaries posit between the word and the church.

First, just as Acts presents an idealized history of the church's early years, it also proposes in the summaries a highly idealized understanding of the church itself. Such an understanding exists in tension, however, with depictions of church members like Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11) and those in Jerusalem who appear to leave Paul in the lurch after his arrest beginning in Acts 21.⁵⁴ The idealism must answer to the modulating criticisms found in the same narrative.

Second, Acts does not understand the church as constituting the exclusive setting where God's agency or purposes are actualized. To take the story of Cornelius and Peter (10:1-11:18) as an example, prompts toward accomplishing God's purposes come from outside the church's existing understanding, even *through* a person outside the church (namely, Cornelius). God occasionally reroutes the church and its work. The ability of those in the church to express in themselves the reality of the gospel does not mean they are beyond correction or unable to expand their grasp of their identity and roles. The church does not identify with God's word so closely that *on its own* it proposes or discovers new dimensions of God's intentions.

Finally, Luke's vision of who constitutes "the church" is wider than what some of his readers may realize. It is not merely a community (or communities) defined by the apostles or its most prominent leaders. Yet, this is easy to miss, given all the attention Acts pays to those who lead in ministry. In reality, Acts presents the entire church as a kind of tangible demonstration of God's presence and concern. One of Daniel Marguerat's observations is helpful here. He considers Acts 5:38-39, where Gamaliel warns his colleagues against opposing the "plan or activity" expressed in the apostles' ministry, lest the ministry succeed and thus validate its divine character. Marguerat proposes that, for Luke's readers, Acts itself performs a related function: *the narrative of Acts allows readers to receive verification that "the work of the apostles is indeed 'of God,'" and so the act of reading becomes "the place to perceive the ways of God."*⁵⁵ The book's story fulfills Gamaliel's criteria for latter-day observers, those in Luke's audience who wonder whether the Christian movement can be trusted as an expression of God's purposes. Still, to build on Marguerat's understand-

54. There is something appropriate about the fact that the word ἐκκλησία does not appear in Luke-Acts until Acts 5:11. "The church" does not receive its name until readers have seen both the best and the worst of its potential expressed side by side in Acts 4:32-5:10.

55. Marguerat, *Historian*, pp. 93, 94.

ing, the church might do a similar thing. For these ancient readers, who would easily perceive historical continuity between the church portrayed in the story of Acts and communities of faith in their midst, the narrative encourages them to look also beyond itself to those communities persevering in bearing witness to Jesus Christ. Those communities' existence, life, and work, according to Luke, provide additional means of verifying the ongoing presence of God's plan or activity.⁵⁶ But in Luke's time, of course, there were no apostles left guiding those communities. The narrative contexts surrounding the three summaries we have explored thus reveal their importance: for all of the church's significance as an embodiment of the word of God in Acts, its leaders and forms of ministry remain remarkably fluid and disposable. As the church — and the word — continues to grow, its members simultaneously see that its ability to manifest the ways of God depends less on inspired leadership or the heroic deeds of a few and more on its simple existence and its commitment to bear witness. The result is not a story promising ongoing victory and conquest over threats; it is a story more temperately celebrating both God's promise to be present and the church's stamina to persevere as a manifest expression of that presence.

56. These communities, Luke might say, also validate the presence of God's promises through their connections to the covenantal community of God's people in the Jewish Scriptures, connections that Acts asserts in its depiction of the church. See, e.g., Arie W. Zwiep, *Christ, the Spirit and the Community of God: Essays on the Acts of the Apostles*, WUNT 2/293 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), p. 132.