

CHAPTER 6

Acts: The Question of Historical Precedent

In one sense a separate chapter on the Acts of the Apostles is a bit redundant, for almost everything that was said in the last chapter applies here as well. However, for a very practical hermeneutical reason, Acts requires a chapter of its own. The reason is simple: most Christians do not read Acts in the same way they read Judges or 2 Samuel, even if they are not fully aware of it.

When we read the Old Testament narratives, we tend to do the things mentioned in the last chapter — moralize, allegorize, personalize, and so on. Seldom do we think of these narratives as serving as patterns for Christian behavior or church life. Even in the case of those few we do treat this way — for example, putting out a fleece to find God’s will — we never do exactly what they did. That is, we never put out an actual fleece for God to make wet or dry. Rather we “fleece” God by setting up a set, or sets, of circumstances. “If someone from California

calls us this week, then we'll let that be God's way of telling us that the move to California is the one he wants us to make." And never once in using this "pattern" do we consider that Gideon's action was really not a good one inasmuch as it first of all demonstrated his lack of trust in God's word that had already been given to him.

Thus we seldom think of the Old Testament histories as setting biblical precedents for our own lives. On the other hand, this has been a normal way for Christians to read Acts. It not only tells us the history of the early church, but it also serves as the normative model for the church of all times. And this is precisely our hermeneutical difficulty.

Many sectors of evangelical Protestantism have a "restoration" mentality. We regularly look back to the church and Christian experience in the first century either as the norm to be restored or the ideal to be approximated. Thus we often say things like, "Acts plainly teaches us that . . ." However, it seems obvious that not all of the "plain teaching" is equally plain to all.

In fact it is our lack of hermeneutical precision as to what Acts is trying to teach that has led to a lot of the division one finds in the church. Such diverse practices as the baptism of infants or of believers only, congregational and episcopalian church polity, the necessity of observing the Lord's Supper every Sunday, the choice of deacons by congregational vote, the selling of possessions and having all things in common, and even ritual snake handling (!) have been supported in whole or in part on the basis of Acts.

The main purpose of this chapter is to offer some hermeneutical suggestions for the problem of biblical

precedent. What is said here, therefore, will also apply to all the historical narratives in Scripture, including some of the material in the Gospels. Before that, however, we need to address how to read and study Acts itself.

In the discussion that follows, we will have occasion regularly to refer to Luke's intention or purpose in writing Acts. It must be emphasized that we always mean that the Holy Spirit lies behind Luke's intention. In the same way that "God works in [us]" as we "continue to work out [our] salvation" (Phil 2:12 – 13), so Luke had certain interests and concerns in writing Luke-Acts. Yet behind it all, we believe, was the special superintending work of the Holy Spirit.

THE EXEGESIS OF ACTS

Although Acts is a readable book, it is also a difficult book for group Bible study. The reason is that people come to the book, and thus to its study, for a whole variety of reasons. Some are greatly interested in historical details, that is, what Acts can furnish about the history of the primitive church. The interest of others in the history is apologetic, proving the Bible to be true by showing Luke's accuracy as a historian. Most people, however, come to the book for purely religious or devotional reasons, wanting to know what the early Christians were like so that they may inspire us or serve as models.

The interest that brings people to Acts, therefore, causes a great deal of selectivity to take place as they read or study. For the person coming with devotional interests, for example, Gamaliel's speech (Acts 5:35 – 39) holds far less interest than

Paul's conversion somewhat later (9:1 – 19) or Peter's miraculous escape from prison (12:1 – 19). Such reading or study usually causes people to skip over the chronological or historical questions. As you read the first eleven chapters, for example, it is difficult to imagine that what Luke has included there had in fact taken place during a time span of ten to fifteen years.

Our present interest, therefore, is to help you read and study the book alertly, to help you to look at the book in terms of *Luke's* interests, and to spur you to ask some new kinds of questions as you read.

Acts as History

Most of the exegetical suggestions given in the preceding chapter hold true for Acts. What is important here is that Luke was a Gentile, whose inspired narrative is at the same time an excellent example of Hellenistic historiography, a kind of history writing that had its roots in Thucydides (ca. 460 – 400 BC) and flourished during the Hellenistic period (ca. 300 BC – AD 200). Such history was not written simply to keep records or to chronicle the past. Rather, it was written both to encourage and/or entertain (i.e., to be good reading) and to inform, moralize, or offer an apologetic. At the same time, of course, Luke had been greatly influenced by his reading of, and living with, the Old Testament narratives, so that this kind of divinely inspired, religiously motivated history is also evident in his telling of the early Christian story.

Thus Luke's two volumes (Luke and Acts) fit both of these kinds of history well. On the one hand, they are especially good reading; on the other hand, in keeping with both the Old Testament histories and the best of Hellenistic historiography,

Luke at the same time has interests that go far beyond simply informing or entertaining. There is a divine activity going on in this story, and Luke is especially concerned that his readers understand this. For him, the divine activity that began with Jesus and continues through the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church is a continuation of God's story that began in the Old Testament. Therefore, making note of Luke's own theological interests is of special importance as you read or study Acts. Exegesis of Acts, therefore, includes not only the purely historical questions like what happened but also the theological ones such as, what was Luke's purpose in selecting and shaping the material in this way?

The question of Luke's intent is at once the most important and the most difficult. It is the most important because it is crucial to our hermeneutics. If it can be demonstrated that Luke's intent in Acts had been to lay down a pattern for the church at all times, then that pattern surely becomes normative, that is, it is what God requires of all Christians under any and all conditions. But if his intent is something else, then we need to ask the hermeneutical questions in a different way. To find Luke's intent, however, can also be difficult, partly because we do not know who Theophilus was or why Luke would have written to him, and partly because Luke himself seems to have so many different interests.

However, because of the significance of Luke's purpose for hermeneutics, it is especially important that you keep this question before you as you read or study at the exegetical level. In a way, this is much like thinking paragraphs when exegeting the Epistles. But in this case it moves beyond paragraphs to whole narratives and sections of the book.

Our exegetical interest, therefore, is both in *what* and *why*.

As we have already learned, one must begin with *what* before asking *why*.

The First Step

As always, the first step one does is to read, preferably the whole book in one sitting. And as you read, learn to make observations and ask questions. The problem with making observations and asking questions as you read Acts, of course, is that the narrative is so engrossing that one frequently simply forgets to ask the exegetical questions.

So as before, if we were to give you an assignment here, it would look like this: (1) Read Acts all the way through in one or two sittings. (2) As you read, make mental notes of such things as key people and places, recurring motifs (what really interests Luke?), and natural divisions of the book. (3) Now go back and skim read, and jot down with references your previous observations. (4) Ask yourself, why did Luke write this book? And consider why *this* particular narrative has been included.

Since Acts is the only one of its kind in the New Testament, we will be more specific here in guiding your reading and study.

Acts: An Overview

Let us begin our quest of *what* by noting the natural divisions as Luke himself gives them to us. Acts has frequently been divided on the basis of Luke's interest in Peter (chs. 1 – 12) and Paul (chs. 13 – 28), or in the geographical expansion of the gospel suggested at the beginning (1:8 = chs. 1 – 7, Jerusalem; 8 – 10, Samaria and Judea; 11 – 28, to the ends of the earth). Although both of these divisions are recognizable in terms of

actual content, there is another clue, given by Luke himself, that seems to tie everything together much better.

As you read, notice the several brief summary statements, whose first example reads: “So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith” (6:7; cf. 9:31; 12:24; 16:4; and 19:20). In each case the narrative seems to pause momentarily before it takes off in a new direction of some kind. On the basis of this clue, Acts can be seen to be composed of six sections (or panels) that give the narrative a continual forward movement from its Jewish setting based in Jerusalem, with Peter as its leading figure, toward a predominantly Gentile church, with Paul as the leading figure, and with Rome, the capital of the Gentile world, as the goal. Once Paul reaches Rome, where he once again turns to the Gentiles because they will listen (28:28), the narrative comes to an end.

You should notice, then, as you read, how each section contributes to this “movement.” You may wish, in your own words, to describe each panel, both as to its content and its contribution to the forward movement. What seems to be the key to each new forward thrust? Here is our own attempt to do this:

1:1 – 6:7. A description of the primitive church in Jerusalem, its early preaching, its common life, its spread, and its initial opposition. What is especially noteworthy is how Jewish everything is, including the sermons, the opposition, and the fact that the early believers continue to have associations with the temple and the synagogues. This introductory panel concludes with a narrative indicating that a division had begun between Greek-speaking and Aramaic-

speaking believers.

6:8 – 9:31. A description of the first geographical expansion, carried out by the “Hellenists” (Greek-speaking Jewish Christians), to Greek-speaking Jews in the Diaspora or “nearly Jews” (Samaritans and a proselyte). Luke also includes the conversion of Paul, who was (1) a Hellenist, (2) a Jewish opponent of the gospel, and (3) the one who was going to be used to set in motion the specifically Gentile expansion. Stephen’s martyrdom is the key to this initial expansion.

9:32 – 12:24. A description of the first expansion to the Gentiles. The key moment here is the conversion of Cornelius, made clear because his story is told twice, once by way of Peter’s vision and then followed by a full explanation. The significance of Cornelius is that his conversion was a direct act from God, who carried it out through Peter, the acknowledged leader of the Jewish-Christian mission (had God used the Hellenists, the event would have been even more suspect in Jerusalem). Also included is the story of the church in Antioch, whose significance is that Gentile conversion is now carried out by the Hellenists in a purposeful way.

12:25 – 16:5. A description of the first geographical expansion into the Gentile world, with Paul now as the lead character in the narrative. Jews now regularly reject the gospel because it includes Gentiles. The church meets in council and does not reject its Gentile converts, nor does it lay Jewish religious requirements on them. The latter serves as the key to full expansion into the Gentile world.

16:6 – 19:20. A description of the further, ever westward, expansion into the Gentile world, now into Europe. The singularly repeated motif is that the Diaspora Jews reject and

the Gentiles welcome the gospel.

19:21 – 28:30. A description of the events that move Paul and the gospel on to Rome, with a great deal of interest in Paul's trials, in which three times he is declared innocent of any wrongdoing.

Once you try reading Acts with this outline in view, this sense of movement, you will be able to see for yourself that this seems to capture what is going on. As you read you should also notice that our description of the content omits one crucial factor — indeed *the* crucial factor — namely, the role of the Holy Spirit in all of this. You will notice as you read that at every key juncture, in every key person, the Holy Spirit plays the absolutely leading role. According to Luke, all of this forward movement did not happen by human design; it happened because God willed it and the Holy Spirit carried it out.

Luke's Purpose

We must be careful that we do not move too glibly from this overview of what Luke did to an easy or dogmatic expression of what his inspired purpose in all of this was. But a few observations are in order in this case, partly based also on what Luke did *not* do.

1. The key to understanding Acts seems to be in Luke's interest in this movement of the gospel, orchestrated by the Holy Spirit, from its Jerusalem-based, Judaism-oriented beginnings to its becoming a worldwide, Gentile-predominant phenomenon. Once the primary advocate of Gentile conversion arrives at the capital of the Gentile world (Rome itself), Luke quickly brings his narrative to conclusion. Thus on the basis of structure and content alone, any statement of purpose that

does not include the Gentile mission and the Holy Spirit's role in that mission will surely have missed the point of the book.

2. This interest in "movement" is further substantiated by what Luke does *not* tell us. First, he has no interest in the "lives," that is, biographies, of the apostles. Indeed, James (the son of Zebedee) is the only one about whose death we know (12:2). Once the movement to the Gentiles gets underway, Peter drops from sight except in chapter 15, where he certifies the Gentile mission. Apart from John, the other apostles are not even mentioned, and Luke's interest in Paul is almost completely in terms of the Gentile mission.

Second, he has little or no interest in church organization or polity. The "seven" in chapter 6 are not called deacons, and in any case they soon leave Jerusalem. Luke never tells us why or how it happened that the church in Jerusalem passed from the leadership of Peter and the apostles to James, the brother of Jesus (12:17; 15:13; 21:18); nor does he ever explain how any local church was organized in terms of polity or leadership, except to say that elders were appointed (14:23).

Third, there is no word about other geographical expansion except in the one direct line from Jerusalem to Rome. There is no mention of Crete (Titus 1:5), Illyricum (Rom 15:19 — modern Croatia and Yugoslavia), or Pontus, Cappadocia, and Bithynia (1 Pet 1:1), not to mention the church's expansion eastward toward Mesopotamia or southward toward Egypt.

All of this together indicates that church history per se was simply not Luke's primary reason for writing.

3. Luke's interest also does not seem to be in standardizing things, bringing everything into uniformity. When he records individual conversions there are usually two elements

included: the gift of the Spirit and water baptism. But these can be noted in reverse order, with or without the laying on of hands, with or without the mention of tongues, and scarcely ever with a specific mention of repentance, even after what Peter says in his opening address in the book (2:38 – 39). Similarly, Luke neither says nor implies that the Gentile churches experienced a communal life similar to that in Jerusalem, which he mentions twice (2:42 – 47 and 4:32 – 35). Such diversity should almost certainly be understood to say that no specific example is being set forth as *the* model of Christian experience or of church life.

But is this to say that Luke is not trying to tell us something by these various specific narratives? Not necessarily. The real question is, then, what was he trying to tell his first readers?

4. Nonetheless, we believe that much of Acts is intended by Luke to serve as a model. But the model is not so much in the specifics as in the overall picture. By the very way the Holy Spirit has moved him to structure and narrate this history it seems probable that we are to view this triumphant, joyful, forward-moving expansion of the gospel into the Gentile world, empowered by the Holy Spirit and resulting in changed lives and local communities, as God's intent for the continuing church. And precisely because this is God's intent for the church, nothing can hinder it, neither Sanhedrin nor synagogue, dissension nor narrow-mindedness, prison nor plot. Luke, therefore, probably intended that the ongoing church should be "like them," but in the larger sense of proclaiming the good news to the entire world, not by modeling itself on any specific example.

An Exegetical Sampling

With this overview of content and a provisional look at intent before us, let us examine two narratives (6:1 – 7 and 8:1 – 25) and note the kinds of exegetical questions one needs to learn to ask of the text of Acts.

As always, one begins by reading over and over the selected portion and its immediate context. As with the Epistles, the contextual questions one must repeatedly ask in Acts include: What is the point of this narrative or speech? How does it function in Luke's total narrative? Why has he included it here? You can usually answer these questions provisionally after one or two careful readings. Sometimes, however, especially in Acts, you will need to do some outside reading to answer some of the *content* questions before you can feel confident you are on the right track.

Let us begin with the narrative about the choosing of the seven (6:1 – 7). How does this section function in the overall picture? Two things can be said right away. First, it serves to conclude the first panel (1:1 – 6:7); second, it also serves as a transition to the second panel (6:8 – 9:31). Note how Luke does this. His interest at the outset (1:1 – 6:7) is to give us a picture both of the life of the primitive community and of its expansion *within Jerusalem*. The concluding moment of this narrative (6:1 – 7) includes both of these features. At the same time it also hints of the first tension within the community itself, a tension based on traditional lines within Judaism between Jerusalem (or Aramaic-speaking) Jews and the Diaspora (Greek-speaking) Jews. In the church this tension was overcome by an official recognition of the leadership that had begun to emerge among the Greek-speaking Jewish Christians.

We have put the last sentence in that particular way because at this point one should also do some outside work on the historical context. By a little digging (articles in Bible dictionaries on “deacons” and “Hellenists,” commentaries, and background books like Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969]), you can discover the following important facts:

1. The Hellenists were almost certainly Greek-speaking Jews, that is, Jews from the Diaspora (descendants of the exiles noted in the Old Testament) who had returned to live in Jerusalem.

2. Many such Hellenists returned to Jerusalem in their later years to die there and thus be buried near Mount Zion. Since they were not native to Jerusalem, when a man died, his widow had no regular means of sustenance.

3. These widows were thus cared for by daily subsidies — care that caused a considerable economic strain in Jerusalem.

4. It is clear from the Stephen narrative (6:8 – 15) that the Hellenists had their own Greek-speaking synagogue of which both Stephen and Saul, who was from Tarsus (located in Greek-speaking Cilicia, v. 9), were members.

5. The evidence of the narrative in Acts 6 is that the early church had made considerable inroads into the synagogue — note the mention of “their widows” (v. 1), the fact that all seven chosen to handle this matter have Greek names, and the fact that the intense opposition to the church comes from the Diaspora synagogue.

6. Finally, it is also important to note that the seven men are never called deacons. They are simply “the Seven” (21:8), who, to be sure, are to oversee the daily food subsidies for the

Greek-speaking widows; but who are also clearly ministers of the Word (Stephen, Philip).

This knowledge of content will especially help to make sense of what follows. For in the succeeding narrative (6:8 – 8:1) Luke focuses on one of the seven men as the key figure in the first expansion outside Jerusalem. He explicitly tells us that Stephen's martyrdom has this result (8:1 – 4). You should note also from this latter passage how important this Greek-speaking community of Christians in Jerusalem is to God's larger plan. They are forced to leave Jerusalem because of persecution; but since they were not native there anyway, they simply go out and share the Word "throughout Judea and Samaria" (8:1).

The opening narrative (6:1 – 7), therefore, is not given to tell us about the first organization of the church, and especially not about clergy and lay deacons. It functions to set the scene for the first expansion of the church outside its Jerusalem base.

The following narrative (8:5 – 25) is of a different kind. Here we have the actual story of the first known spread of the early church. This narrative is especially important for our present concerns because (1) it contains several exegetical difficulties and (2) it has frequently served as something of a hermeneutical battleground in the later church.

As always, we must begin by trying to do our exegesis with care, and again, there is no substitute for reading the text over and over, making observations and notes. In this case, to get at the *what* of the narrative, you might try to set it out in your own words. Our summary observations are as follows:

The story is straightforward enough. It tells us of Philip's initial ministry in Samaria, which was accompanied by healings and deliverances from demons (8:5 – 7). Many Samaritans

apparently became “people of the way,” inasmuch as they believed and were baptized. Indeed, the miracles were so powerful that even Simon, a notorious purveyor of black magic, came to believe (8:9 – 13). When the Jerusalem church heard of this phenomenon, they sent Peter and John, and only then did the Samaritans receive the Holy Spirit (8:14 – 17). Simon then wanted to have this power by buying what Peter and John had. Peter rebuked Simon, but it is not clear from his final response (8:24) whether he was repentant or was to be the recipient of the judgment Peter spoke over him (8:20 – 23).

The way Luke has woven this narrative together makes it clear that two interests clearly predominate: the conversion of the Samaritans and the Simon matter. Most of our later exegetical problems with these two matters basically stem from one’s prior knowledge and convictions. We tend to think that things are just not supposed to happen this way. Since Paul has said in his letter to the believers in Rome (ch. 8) that without the Spirit one cannot be a Christian, how is it that these believers had not yet received the Spirit? And, what about Simon? Was he really a believer who “fell away,” or did he merely profess without having saving faith?

But most likely the real problem for readers of a much later time stems from the fact that Luke himself makes no attempt to harmonize everything for us. It is difficult to listen to a passage like this without our prior biases getting in the way, and the authors of this book are not immune. Nonetheless, we shall try to hear it from Luke’s point of view. What interests *him* in presenting this story? How does it function in *his* overall concern?

First, about the Samaritan conversions, two matters seem to be significant for him: (1) The mission to Samaria, which was

the first geographical expansion of the gospel, was carried out by one of the seven men, a Hellenist, quite apart from any design or program on the part of the apostles in Jerusalem. (2) Nonetheless, it is important for Luke's readers to know that the mission had both divine and apostolic approval, as evidenced by the withholding of the Spirit until the laying on of the apostles' hands. It is in keeping with Luke's overall concern to show that the missionary work of the Hellenists was not a maverick movement, although it happened quite apart from any apostolic conference on church growth.

Second, although we cannot prove this — because the text does not tell us and it lies apart from Luke's concerns — it is likely that what was withheld until the coming of Peter and John was the visible, charismatic evidence of the Spirit's presence. Our reasons for suggesting this are three: (1) All of what is said about the Samaritans before the coming of Peter and John are said elsewhere in Acts to describe genuine Christian experience. Therefore, they must have, in fact, begun the Christian life. (2) Elsewhere in Acts the presence of the Spirit — as here — is the crucial element in the Christian life. How then could they have begun Christian life without the crucial element? (3) For Luke, in Acts, the presence of the Spirit means power (1:8; 6:8; 10:38), which is usually manifested by some visible evidence. Therefore it is probably this powerful, visible manifestation of the Spirit's presence that had not yet occurred in Samaria and that Luke equates with the "coming" or "receiving" of the Spirit.

The role of Simon in this narrative is equally complex. However, there is plenty of outside evidence that this Simon became a well-known opponent of the early Christians. Luke probably includes this material, therefore, to explain Simon's

tenuous relationship with the Christian community and to indicate to his readers that Simon did not have divine or apostolic approval. Simon's final word seems ambiguous only if one is interested in early conversion stories. The whole of Luke's narrative, in fact, has a negative attitude toward Simon. Whether he was really saved or not is of no ultimate interest to the account. That he had a short time of contact with the church, at least as a professing believer, is of interest. But Peter's speech seems to reflect Luke's own judgment on Simon's Christianity — it was false!

We grant that exegesis of this kind, which pursues the *what* and *why* of Luke's narrative, is not necessarily devotionally exciting, but we would argue that it is the mandatory first step to the proper hearing of Acts as God's Word. Not every sentence in every narrative or speech is necessarily trying to tell *us* something. But every sentence in every narrative or speech contributes to what God is trying to say as a whole through Acts. In the process we can learn from the individual narratives about the variety of ways and people God uses to get his task accomplished.

THE HERMENEUTICS OF ACTS

As noted previously, our concern here is with one question: How do the individual narratives in Acts, or any other biblical narrative for that matter, function as precedents for the later church, or do they? Or to put it another way, does the book of

Acts provide information that not only *describes* the primitive church but *speaks as a norm* to the church at all times? If so, how does one discover it or set up principles to aid in understanding it? If not, then what do we do with the concept of precedent? In short, just exactly what role does historical precedent play in Christian doctrine or in the understanding of Christian experience?

It must be noted at the outset that almost all biblical Christians tend to treat precedent as having normative authority to some degree or another. But it is seldom done with consistency. On the one hand, people tend to follow some narratives as establishing obligatory patterns while neglecting others; on the other hand, they sometimes tend to make one pattern mandatory when there is a complexity of patterns in Acts itself.

The following suggestions are not proposed as something absolute, but we hope they will help you come to grips with this hermeneutical problem.

Some General Principles

The crucial hermeneutical question here is whether biblical narratives that describe *what happened* in the early church also function as norms intended to delineate *what should or must happen* in the ongoing church. Are there instances from Acts of which one may appropriately say, “We *must* do this,” or should one merely say, “We *may* do this”?

Our assumption, shared by many others, is this: *Unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is only narrated or described does not function in a normative (i.e. obligatory) way — unless it can be demonstrated on other grounds that the author intended it to function in this*

way. There are good reasons for making this assumption.

In general, doctrinal statements derived from Scripture fall into three (or four) categories: (1) Christian theology (what Christians *believe*), (2) Christian ethics (how Christians ought to *live* in relation to God and others), (3) Christian experience and Christian practice (what Christians *do* as religious/spiritual people). Within these categories one might further distinguish two levels of statements, which we will call primary and secondary. At the primary level are those doctrinal statements derived from the explicit propositions or imperatives of Scripture (i.e., what Scripture *intends* to teach). At the secondary level are those statements derived only incidentally, by implication or by precedent.

For example, in the category of Christian theology, such statements as God is one, God is love, all have sinned, Christ died for our sins, salvation is by grace, and Jesus Christ is divine are derived from passages where they are taught by intent and are therefore primary. At the secondary level are those statements that are the logical outflow of the primary statements or are derived by implication from Scripture. Thus the fact of the deity of Christ is primary; *how* the two natures (deity and humanity) concur in unity is secondary.

A similar distinction may be made with regard to the doctrine of Scripture. That it is the inspired Word of God is primary, based on a variety of affirmations within Scripture itself; the precise nature of this inspiration is secondary. This is not to say that the secondary statements are unimportant. Often they will have significant bearing on one's faith with regard to the primary statements. In fact, their ultimate theological value may be related to how well they preserve the integrity of the primary statements.

What is important to note here is that almost everything Christians derive from Scripture by way of precedent is in our third category — Christian experience or practice — and always at the secondary level. For example, that the Lord’s Supper should be a continuing practice in the church is a primary-level statement. Jesus himself commands it; the Epistles and Acts bear witness to it. But the frequency of its observance — a place where Christians differ — is based on tradition and precedent; surely it is not binding. Scripture itself simply does not speak directly to this question. This also, we would argue, is the case with the necessity of baptism (primary) and its mode (secondary), or the practice of Christians “meeting together” (primary) and the frequency or the day of the week (secondary). Again, this is not to say that the secondary statements are unimportant. For example, one is surely hardpressed to prove whether the day Christians meet to worship must be Saturday or Sunday, but in either case one is saying something of theological significance by one’s practice.

Closely related to this discussion is the concept of intentionality. It is common among us to say, “Scripture teaches us that . . .” Ordinarily people mean by this to say that something is “taught” by explicit statements. Problems with this arise when people move to the area of biblical history. Is something taught simply because it is recorded — even when it is recorded in what appears to be a favorable way?

It is a general maxim of hermeneutics that God’s word is to be found in the *intent* of the Scripture. This is an especially crucial matter to the hermeneutics of the historical narratives. It is one thing for the historian to include an event because it serves the greater purpose of his work, and yet another thing

for the interpreter to take that incident as having teaching value apart from the historian's larger intent.

Although Luke's inspired broader intent may be a moot point for some, it is our hypothesis, based on the preceding exegesis, that he was trying to show how the church emerged as a chiefly Gentile, worldwide phenomenon from its origins as a Jerusalem-based, Judaism-oriented sect of Jewish believers, and how the Holy Spirit was directly responsible for this phenomenon of universal salvation based on grace alone. The recurring motif that nothing can hinder this forward movement of the church empowered by the Holy Spirit makes us think that Luke also intended his readers to see this as a model for their existence. And the fact that Acts is in the canon further makes us think that surely this is the way the church was always intended to be — evangelistic, communal, joyful, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

But what of the specific details in these narratives, which only when taken all together help us to see Luke's larger intent? Do these details have the same teaching value? Do they also serve as normative models? We think not, basically because most such details are *incidental* to the main point of the narrative and because of the *ambiguity* of details from narrative to narrative.

Thus when we examined the narrative in Acts 6:1 – 7, we saw how it functioned in Luke's overall plan as a conclusion to his first major section, which at the same time served to introduce the Hellenists. It might also have been a part of his intent to show the amicable resolution of the first tension within the Christian community; in any case it is easy for us to read it in that way.

From this narrative we may also incidentally learn several other things. For example, one may learn that a good way to help a minority group in the church is to let that group have its own leadership, selected within. This is in fact what they did. *Must* we do it? Not necessarily, since Luke does not tell us so, nor is there any reason to believe that he had this in mind when he recorded the narrative. On the other hand, such a procedure makes such good sense one wonders why anyone would fight it.

Our point is that whatever else anyone gleans from such a story, such gleanings are incidental to Luke's intent. This does not mean that what is incidental has no theological value; it does mean that God's word *for us* in that narrative is primarily related to what it was *intended* to teach.

On the basis of this discussion the following principles emerge with regard to the hermeneutics of historical narrative:

1. The word of God in Acts that may be regarded as normative for Christians is related primarily to what any given narrative was *intended* to teach.

2. What is incidental to the primary intent of the narrative may indeed reflect an inspired authorial understanding, but it does not have the same teaching value as what the narrative was intended to teach. This does not negate what is incidental or imply that it has no relevance for us. What it does suggest is that what is incidental must not become primary, although it may always serve as additional support to what is unequivocally taught elsewhere.

3. Historical precedent, to have normative value, must be related to intent. That is, if it can be shown that the purpose of a given narrative is to *establish* precedent, then such

precedent should be regarded as normative. For example, if it were to be demonstrated on exegetical grounds that Luke's intent in Acts 6:1 – 7 was to give the church a precedent for selecting its leaders, then such a selection process should be followed by later Christians. But if the establishing of precedent was not the intent of the narrative, then its value as a precedent for later Christians should be treated according to the specific principles suggested in our next section.

The problem with all of this, of course, is that it tends to leave us with little that is normative for two broad areas of concern — Christian experience and Christian practice. There is no express teaching on such matters as the *mode* of baptism, the *age* of those who are to be baptized, which charismatic phenomenon is to be in evidence when one receives the Spirit, or the frequency of the Lord's Supper, to cite but a few examples. Yet these are precisely the areas where there is so much division among Christians. Invariably, in such cases people argue that this is what *the earliest believers* did, whether such practices are merely described in the narratives of Acts or found by implication from what is said in the Epistles.

Scripture simply does not expressly command that baptism must be by immersion, or that infants are to be baptized, or that all genuine conversions must be as dramatic as Paul's, or that Christians are to be baptized in the Spirit evidenced by tongues as a second work of grace, or that the Lord's Supper is to be celebrated every Sunday. What do we do, then, with something like baptism by immersion? What *does* Scripture say? In this case it can be argued from the meaning of the word itself, from the one description of baptism in Acts of going "down into the water" and coming "up out of the water" (8:38 – 39), and from

Paul's analogy of baptism as death, *burial*, and resurrection (Rom 6:1 – 3) that immersion was the *presupposition* of baptism in the early church. It was nowhere commanded precisely because it was presupposed.

On the other hand, it can be pointed out that without a baptismal tank in the local church in Samaria (!), the people who were baptized there would have had great difficulty being immersed. Geographically, there simply is no known supply of water there to have made immersion a viable option. Did they pour water over them, as an early church manual, the *Didache* (ca. AD 100), suggests should be done where there is not enough cold, running water or tepid, still water for immersion? We simply do not know, of course. The *Didache* makes it abundantly clear that immersion was the norm, but it also makes it clear that the act itself is far more important than the mode. Even though the *Didache* is not a biblical document, it is a very early, orthodox Christian document, and it may help us by showing how the early church made pragmatic adjustments in this area where Scripture is not explicit. The normal (regular) practice served as the norm. But because it was only *normal*, it did not become *normative*. We would probably do well to follow this lead and not confuse normalcy with normativeness in the sense that all Christians must do a given thing or else they are disobedient to God's Word.

Some Specific Principles

With these general observations and principles in view, we offer the following suggestions as to the hermeneutics of biblical precedents:

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

actions. For example, Gideon's fleece has repeatedly been used as an analogy for finding God's will. Since God graciously condescended to Gideon's lack of trust, he may to others' as well, but there is no biblical authority or encouragement for such actions.

Likewise, on the basis of the narrative of Jesus' reception of the Spirit at his baptism, two different analogies have been drawn that move in quite different directions. Some see this as evidence for the believer's reception of the Spirit at baptism and thus as support by way of analogy for baptismal regeneration; by contrast, others see it as evidence for a baptism of the Holy Spirit subsequent to salvation (since Jesus had been earlier born of the Spirit).

There can be little question that Luke himself saw the event as the moment of empowering for Jesus' public ministry (cf. Luke 4:1, 14, 18; with Acts 10:38). But it is doubtful whether the narrative also functions well as an analogy for either of the later theological positions, especially when it is taken beyond mere analogy to become biblical support for either doctrine. Although Jesus' life is in many ways exemplary for later believers, not everything in his life can be normative for us. Thus while we are expected to live by taking up a cross, we are not expected to die by crucifixion and be raised three days later.

2. Although it may not have been the author's primary purpose, biblical narratives do have illustrative and (sometimes) "pattern" value. In fact, this is how the New Testament people occasionally used certain historical precedents from the Old Testament. Paul, for example, used some Old Testament examples as warnings to those who had a false security in their divine election (1 Cor 10:1 – 13), and Jesus used the example of David as an historical precedent to

justify his disciples' Sabbath actions (Matt 12:1 – 8 // Mark 2:23 – 28 // Luke 6:1 – 5).

But none of us have God's authority to reproduce the sort of exegesis and analogical analyses that the New Testament authors occasionally applied to the Old Testament. It should be noted, especially in cases where the precedent justifies a present action, that *the precedent does not establish a norm for specific action*. People are not to eat regularly of the showbread or to pluck grain on the Sabbath to show that the Sabbath was made for people. Rather, the precedent illustrates a principle with regard to the Sabbath.

A warning is in order here. If one wishes to use a biblical precedent to justify some present action, one is on safer ground if the principle of the action is taught elsewhere, where it is the primary intent so to teach. For example, to use Jesus' cleansing of the temple to justify one's so-called righteous indignation — usually a euphemism for selfish anger — is to abuse this principle. On the other hand, one may properly base the present-day experience of speaking in tongues not only on the precedent of repeated occurrences (in Acts) but also on the teaching about spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 – 14.

3. In matters of Christian experience, and even more so of Christian practice, biblical precedents may sometimes be regarded as *repeatable patterns* — even if they are not understood to be normative. That is, for many practices there seems to be full justification for the later church's repeating of biblical patterns; but it is moot to argue that all Christians in every place and every time *must* repeat the pattern or they are disobedient to God's Word. This is especially true when the practice itself is mandatory but the mode is not. (It should be noted that not all Christians would be fully in agreement with

this way of stating things. Some movements and denominations were founded partly on the premise that virtually all New Testament patterns should be restored as fully as possible in modern times; over the years they have developed a considerable hermeneutic of the mandatory nature of much that is only narrated in Acts. Others, similarly, would argue that Luke himself intended, for example, for the reception of the Spirit to be evidenced by the accompanying gift of tongues. But in both these cases the question rests finally not so much on the rightness or wrongness of the present principle but on the interpretation of Acts and of Luke's overall — as well as specific — intent in his telling of the story.)

The decision as to whether certain practices or patterns are repeatable should be guided by the following considerations. First, the strongest possible case can be made when only one pattern is found (although one must be careful not to make too much of silence), and when this pattern is repeated within the New Testament itself. Second, when there is an ambiguity of patterns or when a pattern occurs but once, it is repeatable for later Christians only if it appears to have divine approbation or is in harmony with what is taught elsewhere in Scripture. Third, what is culturally conditioned is either not repeatable at all or must be translated into the new or differing culture.

Thus, on the basis of these principles, one can make a very strong case for immersion as the mode of baptism, a weaker case for the observance of the Lord's Supper each Sunday, but almost no case at all for infant baptism (this may, of course, be argued from historical precedent in the church but not so easily from biblical precedent, which is the issue here). By the same token, the Christian minister's function as a priest (on the basis of Old Testament analogy!) fails on all counts in terms of its

biblical base.

We do not imagine ourselves hereby to have solved all the problems, but we think these are workable suggestions, and we hope they will cause you to think exegetically and with greater hermeneutical precision as you read the biblical narratives.