



Acts of the Apostles and Ethics

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Abstract

Acts provides ethical guidance through narrating the actions of persons who are models of good (or bad) behavior. Four topics are discussed from this perspective: ethics of witness, ethics of leadership, the mission and governing authorities, and ethics of possessions.

Keywords

Acts, Luke, Ethics, Witness, Leadership, Mission, Possessions, Paul, Peter

Introduction

The Acts of the Apostles contains remarkably little direct ethical teaching.¹ In contrast, the ethical teaching of Jesus in Luke is extensive. In comparison with Luke's Gospel, Acts focuses tightly on the early mission as represented by the work of Peter and Paul, with some attention to Stephen and Philip. Two observations, however, modify the initial impression that Acts has little importance for ethics.

First, the narrative of Acts is linked to the Gospel of Luke in a way that underscores the continuing importance of Jesus, his actions and teaching, for the church. Acts 1:1 begins with a reminder that "the first book" was about "all that Jesus did and taught." Furthermore, Jesus continues his teaching for 40 days, "speaking about the kingdom of God" (1:3), a summary phrase for the teaching extensively developed in Luke. Also, candidates to replace Judas as apostle must have accompanied Jesus "during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us" (1:21), so that they can testify to Jesus' acts and teaching. Jesus remains the Lord of the church in Acts, and his teaching remains authoritative. The ethics of Acts should not be divorced from the ethics of Luke, where Jesus teaches his disciples. This is true even though some aspects of Jesus' teaching are not reinforced and developed in Acts.

Second, ancient authors were aware that narratives concerning outstanding persons were vehicles for ethical teaching, for these persons, if presented positively, were models to be imitated, and

1 The maxims in Acts 14:22 and 20:35 may be exceptions.

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if presented negatively, were models of behavior to be avoided.² Lucian, for instance, explains his purpose in writing a life of Demonax. Lucian writes in order that

young men of good instincts who aspire to philosophy may not have to shape themselves by ancient precedents alone, but may be able to set themselves a pattern from our modern world and to copy that man, the best of all the philosophers whom I know about.³

The way in which Peter, Stephen, and Paul are presented in Acts implies strong positive evaluation. They are faithful witnesses of the Lord Jesus, who is God's Chosen One to bring salvation to all people. Even though their roles in history may in some ways be unique, the qualities they exhibit may be exemplary, giving their stories continuing ethical significance.

This is ethical teaching by indirection, and it allows the reader considerable freedom in making applications. The actual effect in ethical awareness and action will depend, in part, on literary features of the text, which present certain actions in a prominent and attractive way, and will depend, in part, on the needs and desires of the reader (and on personal and cultural blind spots that may prevent ethical perception). Furthermore, ethical action portrayed in narrative can always be evaluated in light of the particular circumstances. Later readers may have to decide whether circumstances have changed sufficiently to require a change in action.

The literary aspect of this interchange can be analyzed in terms of narrative rhetoric. It is appropriate to speak of narrative rhetoric because New Testament narratives are constructed to influence their readers and because particular literary techniques are used for this purpose. Making Lukan *theology* the primary goal of research tends to reduce the potential impact of the narratives. A richer picture emerges if we approach Luke-Acts as a system of influence that may be analyzed in literary terms. As I stated elsewhere,

The message of Luke-Acts is not a set of theological propositions but the complex reshaping of human life, in its many dimensions, which it can cause. Study of Luke-Acts as a literary system of influence should help to make that message clear.⁴

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- 2 For extended discussion of comments by Greco-Roman authors about the "usefulness" of their writings because they provide models for imitation, see William S. Kurz, "Narrative Models for Imitation in Luke-Acts," in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians* (ed. David L. Balch et al.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 171–85.
 - 3 Lucian, *Demonax* 2, in *Lucian* 1 (trans. A. M. Harmon; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1953), 143. Similarly, Philo in his treatise on Abraham states that particular laws that guide behavior are only copies of the originals, who are "such men as lived good and blameless lives, whose virtues stand permanently recorded in the most holy scriptures, not merely to sound their praises but for the instruction of the reader and as an inducement to him to aspire to the same; for in these men we have laws endowed with life and reason." Philo, *On Abraham* 3–5, in *Philo* VI (trans. F. H. Colson; LCL; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1959), 5–7.
 - 4 Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation Vol. 1* (2 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986), 8. This work is an attempt to interpret Luke-Acts as a carefully structured narrative with attention to its value system and potential influence on readers.

Ethics of Witness

At the beginning of Acts, Jesus designates the apostles as “my witnesses” (Acts 1:8; cf. Luke 24:48). In the mission speeches in Acts, there are repeated references to witnessing or to Jesus’ witnesses (2:32; 3:15; 5:32; 10:39, 41; 13:31). The story first focuses on the twelve apostles (represented primarily by Peter). Although the apostles are uniquely qualified to witness to the full Jesus story, having accompanied him throughout his ministry (cf. 1:21–22), Paul is also a witness of Jesus Christ on the basis of his vision and calling (22:15, 18; 23:11; 26:16, 22). Stephen, too, is called Jesus’ witness (22:20).

The Pentecost scene (Acts 2) presents in dramatic form what it means to be a witness of the Lord Jesus Christ. Peter, as witness, is empowered by the Holy Spirit. By means of Scripture, he is able to interpret both the immediate event of Spirit-inspired speaking and the whole story of Jesus as part of God’s purpose, and he boldly proclaims Jesus as both Lord and Messiah. Peter’s speech is the first public disclosure of Jesus’ resurrection. Peter also proclaims Jesus’ installation as ruling Messiah at the right hand of God. This message is a shock to the inhabitants of Jerusalem (2:37), for Peter accuses them of having crucified their own Messiah (2:23—“you crucified and killed”; 2:36—“this Jesus whom you crucified”). Peter is interpreting recent events, events in which his audience was involved, putting them in an intolerable situation. This leads to a call to repentance and offer of forgiveness (2:38), to which many respond (2:41).

This speech sets the pattern for one more long (relatively speaking; none of Peter’s speeches are very long) and two short speeches. The temple speech (3:12–26) is complementary to the Pentecost speech. It has the same purpose of calling the people of Jerusalem to repentance and forgiveness but adds details and additional scriptural citations, now primarily from the Pentateuch. The two short speeches are addressed to the Sanhedrin after the apostles have been arrested (4:8–12; 5:29–32).

In this series of scenes, two outstanding qualities appear that we may fairly regard as exemplary. First, Peter demonstrates the ability to interpret both the Jesus events and the immediate circumstances in which he speaks as the work of God illuminated by the prophecies and precedents of Scripture. Jesus’ followers previously lacked this ability until their minds were opened by the risen Messiah (Luke 24:25–27, 32, 44–49). Second, the apostles demonstrate a surprising “boldness (*parrēsia*).” Peter demonstrates this already in his speeches in Acts 2–3 to the Jerusalem crowds, which include blunt accusations. This quality is emphasized as Peter and John are arrested and threatened by the Sanhedrin (4:13). Then the community prays for the strength to speak God’s word “with all boldness” (4:29) and is given that power (4:31). The Peter who speaks with boldness has been transformed from the Peter who wilted under pressure when accused of being one of Jesus’ companions (Luke 22:55–62). Paul, also, will speak with boldness, and this characteristic is emphasized in the very last words of Acts (28:31; the verb form of *parrēsia* is applied to Paul in 9:27, 28; 13:46; 14:3; 19:8; 26:26).

In speaking God’s word with boldness, even under threat, the apostles and Paul are obeying the instructions of Jesus recorded in Luke, which have continuing significance for Jesus’ followers. In

Luke 12:1–12 and 21:12–19, Jesus gives his disciples instructions and warnings concerning the resistance and persecution that they will face in the future. Acts narrates scenes in which the apostles, Stephen, and Paul encounter resistance and persecution, and some of the details, including the wording, match Jesus' warnings and show his witnesses in Acts faithfully fulfilling Jesus' instructions. These sections of Luke, along with other passages such as the commissioning in Luke 24:46–49, establish an ethics of witness, which is supported in Acts by dramatic scenes in which Jesus' chosen witnesses demonstrate what this means in specific situations.

In Luke 12:4, Jesus says, "Do not fear those who kill the body." Some in the Sanhedrin want to kill the apostles after they refuse to keep silent (5:28–33). They escape this fate only through the intervention of Gamaliel. However, this is only stage two in a three-stage narrative of increasingly powerful and determined resistance that does lead to death when Stephen is stoned (7:54–60). The narrative uses a repetitive pattern that is especially apparent when we compare the arrest and interrogation scene in Acts 4 with the one in Acts 5. Stephen's arrest and interrogation is a third scene in this sequence.⁵ At each stage, the situation becomes more critical, and the final result is the death of Jesus' witness.

As Stephen is about to be dragged off for stoning, he has a vision of "the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (7:56). This recalls Jesus' promise in Luke 12:8 that "everyone who acknowledges me before others, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God" (see also Jesus' words before the Sanhedrin in Luke 22:69). In Luke 12:11–12, Jesus tells the disciples not to be anxious about what they should say when brought before rulers and authorities, "for the Holy Spirit will teach you at that very hour what you ought to say." When Peter and John are interrogated by the Sanhedrin, Peter replies "filled with the Holy Spirit," and the Sanhedrin is amazed at the "boldness" of Peter and John, who are "uneducated" men (Acts 4:8, 13). Jesus' instructions in Luke 12:11–12 are repeated in other words in Luke 21:12–15. There Jesus promises not the Holy Spirit but the gift of "a wisdom that none of your opponents will be able to withstand or contradict." In Acts 6:10, we are told that Stephen's opponents "could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he spoke." In Luke 21:12–13, the disciples are told that they "will be brought before kings and governors," but this will be an opportunity for witnessing. The grand scene in Acts 26 in which Paul speaks before King Agrippa and Governor Festus is a fulfillment of this prophecy, for Paul's speech begins as a defense speech but ends with a missionary appeal (26:22–29). The scenes in Acts of bold witness under threat do not simply glorify heroes of the past but narrate a first fulfillment of the instructions and promises in the ethic of witness expressed by Jesus in Luke.⁶

Paul appears as a model witness in his farewell address to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:18–35). As in other farewell addresses, the leader or patriarch reviews his past life and gives warnings and exhortations to those he is leaving behind. There are several suggestions that Paul's past ministry

5 On the literary aspects of this narrative sequence, see Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, 2:63–65.

6 For further comparison of the teaching of Jesus in Luke with the narrative of Acts, see Robert C. Tannehill, "Do the Ethics of Acts Include the Ethical Teaching in Luke?" in *Acts and Ethics* (ed. Thomas E. Phillips; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2005), 109–22.

is an example for church leaders. In 20:31, Paul says to the elders, “Be alert, remembering” his own devoted ministry, which can be an example for them (see also 20:20). In 20:35, he says, “In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak.”⁷

What is emphasized in this farewell address that would be exemplary for church leaders? Paul emphasizes his complete devotion to his task of preaching and teaching (20:18–21, 27, 31). This was Paul’s way of “serving the Lord with all humility” (20:19). Paul has had to endure “trials” in the past (20:19), and he knows that he must face “imprisonment and persecutions” as he journeys to Jerusalem (20:23). Indeed, he is willing to die in order to complete his ministry (20:24; cf. 21:13). Paul also presents himself as an example for church leaders in his refusal to accept money or clothing from others. Instead, he labored with his own hands to supply his own needs, those of his companions, and to help those who could not support themselves (20:33–35).

Paul also emphasizes that “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God” (20:27). Other descriptions of Paul’s message in the farewell address indicate that “the whole purpose of God” declared by Paul is “the good news of God’s grace” (20:24) for “both Jews and Greeks” (20:21), that is, the message of God’s grace for all. In spite of pressure, Paul did not pull back from announcing and defending this inclusive good news.⁸

These strokes in a portrait of Paul present him as an exemplary witness of Jesus. To this portrait the last two verses of Acts also contribute. Paul is still a Roman prisoner, awaiting his final trial, but he finds a way to continue his ministry. Even in such circumstances he is a faithful witness. He welcomes “all who came to him,” and he continues “proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance” (28:30–31).

The heroic view of Paul in these scenes is largely the byproduct of the desire to present him as a model of what Jesus’ witnesses should be.

Ethics of Leadership

The twelve apostles are not only the first witnesses but also have leadership authority. This is apparent from the fact that the proceeds from property sold is laid “at the apostles’ feet” for

7 So NRSV. More literally, the Greek says, “I have shown you that, laboring thus [in this way], it is necessary to help the weak.”

8 For further discussion of Paul’s farewell address, see Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, 2:252–61. On the disputed question of whether Acts implies that Jews opposing the gospel have had their chance and are excluded from salvation, see my three essays in my collected essays, *The Shape of Luke’s Story* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2005), 105–65. I argue that the salvation promises emphasized in Luke-Acts, promises that first of all apply to the Jewish people, make elimination of the majority of Jews from salvation an unacceptable conclusion within the Lukan theological framework. The narrative of Acts ends in unresolved tension between God’s saving purpose, revealed in Scripture, and Jewish resistance. Isaiah provides a statement of prophetic pathos that highlights the (temporary?) tragedy of this situation.

distribution to the needy (Acts 4:35) and from the intervention of the twelve when “the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews” (6:1–2). In Luke, Jesus’ disciples engage in rivalry over rank, and Jesus rebukes such behavior (Luke 9:46–48). The importance of this issue is shown by its reappearance at the Last Supper as Jesus confers on the apostles a share of his ruling power (Luke 22:24–30). Luke is the only gospel that places the dispute about greatness in this significant location. Jesus models the opposite of rulers’ claims to greatness. He takes the role of the servant, like the servants who wait on tables (22:25–27). The apostles will be leaders, but Jesus warns against the common assumption that leaders deserve special honor in the community.⁹

How does this fit the portrait of the twelve and Paul in Acts? Some details indicate continuing awareness of the danger of self-inflation and community adulation for those given leadership responsibility. Three times Peter and Paul reject inappropriate honors that groups offer, or might offer (Acts 3:12; 10:25–26; 14:11–15). In Acts, the function of the apostles and Paul is called *diakonia* (“service”). While this word can be used to describe the activity of an agent in the service of someone else, the cognate verb (*diakoneō*; “serve”) is given a sharp sense in Luke 22:26–27. The “one who serves” is placed in sharp contrast to those who are regarded as great and is like a table waiter (frequently the function of a slave or a woman, a person of inferior rank in that society). All of the rest of the occurrences of *diakoneō* and *diakonia* in Luke seem to refer to serving food (4:39; 8:3; 10:40; 12:37; 17:8).

These words are used more broadly in Acts, for apostleship and Paul’s mission are called *diakonia* (1:17, 25; 20:24; 21:19; NRSV “ministry”), and there is a distinctive *diakonia* of the word (6:4). The narrative continuity between Luke and Acts encourages readers to understand “ministry” in Acts as a servant role that renounces claims to superior status. As leadership roles become fixed and “ministry” becomes a respectable role in society, it is easy to forget this nuance. We are reminded of it, however, in Paul’s farewell address, where we find special emphasis on ministry as humble service (20:19 “doing slave-service [*douleuōn*] to the Lord with all humility” [my translation], and see the reference to hand labor in 20:34, something avoided by aristocrats).

The portraits of Peter and Paul also contain details that warn leaders against the temptation to enrich themselves. Paul’s reference to working with his own hands follows his assertion that he did not seek money or clothing from anyone (20:33), and Peter sharply rebukes Simon Magus when he offers Peter money (8:18–20). These are part of a larger series of warnings against the corrupting influence of a desire for money (see below on “Ethics of Possessions”).

The narrative of Acts is sometimes faulted because it seems to whitewash the serious disputes that are reflected in other NT writings. Some disputes do surface in Acts, but the community’s leaders act with good will to resolve the problems in a satisfying way. In this respect also, they serve as models for others.

9 Luke 22:24–27 should be understood in the context of ancient cultural concerns with status and honor. See Robert C. Tannehill, *Luke* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 317–18. See also Peter K. Nelson, *Leadership and Discipleship: A Study of Luke 22:24–30* (SBLDS; Atlanta: Scholars, 1994).

In Acts 6:1, the Hellenists complain that their widows are being neglected. The twelve assemble the whole community and propose a solution: the appointment of seven well-qualified men to care for this need. This solution pleases the community, and the seven are appointed. The apostles do not try to keep all power in their own hands. From the seven, Stephen and Philip will go on to assume the role of missionary preachers.

Acts 10:1–11:18 narrates how Peter is persuaded, through a series of visions and a new manifestation of the Spirit, to baptize Gentiles (Cornelius and his household). When Peter returns to Jerusalem, he is criticized for what he has done (11:1–3). He explains by reviewing the process of divine guidance that led to his actions. The critics are satisfied. They praise God and say, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life” (11:18).

A further dispute surfaces in Acts 15. Some claim that Gentile converts must be circumcised and obey the law of Moses, a view that Paul and Barnabas reject (15:1–2, 5). When Paul and Barnabas arrive in Jerusalem, there is “much debate” about these issues (15:7), but a resolution is reached through the intervention of Peter and James. Peter, arguing from experience, and James, arguing from Scripture, basically affirm the right of Gentiles to be free of circumcision and the Mosaic law. James, however, indicates that they should abstain from certain things especially offensive to Jewish believers (15:20). This solution is accepted by the apostles, the elders, and the whole church (15:22). This narrative models a process of dispute resolution that allows vigorous debate but expects leaders sensitive to divine guidance to lead the church toward solutions that will preserve the church’s openness to mission and also its harmony.¹⁰

In light of Jesus’ teaching of forgiveness and love of enemies, Stephen’s prayer of forgiveness for his killers (7:60; parallel to Jesus’ prayer of forgiveness from the cross¹¹) and Paul’s intervention to save his jailer’s life (16:27–28) may also be regarded as exemplary actions.

Women are not included among the missionary witnesses that are the focus of the Acts narrative, in spite of the extensive quotation from Joel in the Pentecost speech proclaiming that “your sons and your daughters” and God’s male and female slaves “will prophesy” (2:17–18). In 21:8–9, there is a brief reference to Philip’s four daughters who were prophesying. Otherwise there is no attention to women prophets, nor are we told of any women who, like Peter, preach filled with the Holy Spirit (for Peter, see 4:8). Nevertheless, there are stories of significant women: Tabitha and her good works (9:36–43); Lydia, who provides a home base for the church at Philippi (16:13–15, 40); and Priscilla, who teaches the preacher Apollos (18:1–3, 18–19, 24–28).¹²

10 See Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture & Discernment: Decision-Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

11 Luke 23:34 is textually uncertain. For an argument supporting its inclusion in Luke, see Tannehill, *Narrative Unity*, 1:272, n. 126.

12 See Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles* (trans. Linda Maloney; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); James M. Arlandson, *Women, Class, and Society in Early Christianity: Models from Luke-Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997); and Amy-Jill Levine, ed., *A Feminist Companion to the Acts of the Apostles* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2004).

The Mission and Ruling Authorities

As Jesus' witnesses encounter ruling authorities, certain issues surface and a complex picture of the way these authorities may react emerges. Here, we are dealing with the area of Christian ethics that is sometimes labeled church and state, but only insofar as particular narratives in Acts relate to this subject.¹³

When Peter and John, and then all the apostles, are interrogated before the Sanhedrin, a basic principle is stated and then repeated. A contrast is drawn between the authority of "you" (the Sanhedrin) and God (4:19–20) or between "humans" and God (5:29; literally, "It is necessary to obey God rather than humans"). This does not mean that there is always a conflict between obedience to human authorities and obedience to God, but when human authorities demand something contrary to what God requires, allegiance to God must be maintained. This principle is stated before the Sanhedrin, but the general nature of the statement in 5:29 and the narratives of faithful witness under pressure in the rest of Acts suggest that it applies whenever human authorities counter the requirements of God.

The result, of course, may be persecution. Preaching in Jerusalem leads to the death of Stephen, followed by a persecution that scatters most of the Jerusalem church (8:1). Later, Paul the persecutor becomes Paul the persecuted. The initial statement of Paul's commission as a witness includes a prophecy of suffering (9:16). Ordinary disciples must also endure persecutions, as Paul tells new converts in 14:22. Thus the narrative has a threatening background of conflict with external society and its rulers.

However, the depiction of particular kings, governors, and local authorities is actually quite varied. On the one hand, King Herod (Herod Agrippa I) is presented as an evil tyrant in Acts 12. He executes James and plans to execute Peter (12:1–4), and he permits the blasphemous claim that he is divine (12:20–23). However, other authorities do not fit this pattern, and the stories do not encourage accused Christians to think that they will inevitably be condemned when brought before them.

Acts claims that one Roman proconsul becomes a believer (13:12). The characterization of Roman military men is actually quite positive. Cornelius is initially described in a very favorable way (10:2); then, he welcomes Peter and receives the Holy Spirit and baptism. The narrator takes note of a second centurion, Julius; he "treated Paul kindly" (27:3). When the ship was breaking up in the storm and the soldiers planned to kill the prisoners, Julius prevents them, "wishing to save Paul" (27:43). The military tribune Claudius Lysias captures Paul and was about to have him flogged, but stops when he learns that he is a Roman citizen (22:24–29). Later, he rescues Paul from assassination by sending him to Caesarea (23:12–35).

13 On this topic, see C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York: Oxford University, 2009) and Richard J. Cassidy, *Society and Politics in the Acts of the Apostles* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).

Besides Julius and Lysias, there are other authority figures, none of them Christians, who intervene to rescue the apostles or Paul. These include Gamaliel, a respected Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin (5:33–39), the proconsul Gallio (18:12–17), and the Ephesian “town clerk” (19:35–41). The portrait of Gallio is not necessarily favorable. He seems to have dismissed the case out of disdain for Jews. Furthermore, the town clerk of Ephesus may in his speech underestimate the threat of the gospel to pagan temples. Nevertheless, the actions of Gallio and the town clerk result in the rescue of Paul or some of his companions. The picture of governing authorities is not entirely negative. Whatever their motives, the authorities are not depicted as consistently siding with opponents of the gospel.¹⁴

Paul is a Roman prisoner from Acts 21:33 to the end of Acts. This long section highlights a series of defense scenes in which Paul speaks before the mob in the temple, before the Sanhedrin, Governor Felix, Governor Festus, and finally, King Agrippa (Herod Agrippa II).¹⁵ These scenes present a continuous developing defense that finally turns into active witness in 26:19–29.¹⁶ The portraits of the two governors are complex. Festus and Agrippa indicate to each other that Paul is innocent and could have been released if he had not appealed to Caesar (26:31–32). But Festus did not act on this conviction when Paul’s case was before him. Instead, he proposed to move the trial to Jerusalem, “wishing to do the Jews a favor” (25:9). Festus is acting out of political considerations, which puts Paul in danger. (He was brought from Jerusalem to Caesarea to prevent an assassination plot.) Therefore, Paul appeals to Caesar. Previously, Felix lightened Paul’s custody and was somewhat interested in Paul’s message, but false motives cloud this picture. Felix “hoped that money would be given him by Paul,” and when he is replaced by Festus, Felix left Paul in prison “since he wanted to grant the Jews a favor” (24:23–27). The descriptions of Felix and Festus suggest that the two governors are impressed by Paul, but their actions are controlled by false motives, which prevent justice being done.

In Acts 16–19, there is a series of public accusation type-scenes, scenes that are similar in narrating that Christians are forcefully brought before officials or a public assembly, an accusation is made (highlighted by direct quotation), and we are told the result of this action.¹⁷ The accusations deserve special attention, for they show awareness of possible areas of conflict between the mission and the dominant culture—awareness by the narrator as well as the accusers. Since the accusations come from opponents, their credibility is in doubt. (Within the value system of Acts, *who* says something is important.) Nevertheless, the larger narrative makes claims that suggest that real issues are surfacing in the narrative through the accusations of outsiders.

14 Note also that Paul has friends among the “Asiarchs” (NRSV: “officials of the province of Asia”) who try to keep him safe (19:31).

15 See also Paul’s summary statement to the Roman Jews in 28:17–20.

16 On the developing theme of the fulfillment of the Jewish hope of resurrection, see Robert C. Tannehill, “The Narrator’s Strategy in the Scenes of Paul’s Defense,” in *The Shape of Luke’s Story*, 238–53.

17 On the public accusation type-scene, see Robert C. Tannehill, “Paul outside the Christian Ghetto: Intercultural Conflict and Cooperation in Acts,” *The Shape of Luke’s Story*, 222–28.

In Philippi, Paul and Silas are dragged before the magistrates with this accusation: “These men are disturbing our city; they are Jews and are advocating customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to adopt or observe” (16:20–21). Vague as this is, it hints at significant conflict, for Christians will share the Jewish insistence on worshipping only one God and refusing to honor the emperor as divine. The second accusation, in Thessalonica, broadens the claim that Christians are upsetting society and focuses on a christological issue: “These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also. . . . They are all acting contrary to the decrees of the emperor, saying that there is another king named Jesus” (17:6–7). Here, the issue sharpens. Peter previously proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah whom God promised to put on David’s throne, i.e., a royal Messiah (2:30–31; echoing Luke 1:32–33 and echoed by Paul in Acts 13:22–23), and later, Peter proclaimed Jesus “Lord of all” (10:36).¹⁸ There will be conflicts between the claims of Christ and the “decrees” of Caesar, making Christians vulnerable.

The riot in Ephesus points to another source of conflict with the dominant culture. The protest is started by makers of silver shrines who are afraid of losing their business, but it grows because of the charge that Paul’s gospel is damaging the reputation of the temple of Artemis and depriving this goddess of “her majesty” (19:27). This charge causes an angry outburst from the crowd, who defend their goddess, perhaps from religious fervor, perhaps from local pride (19:28, 34). This persists until the town clerk rebukes the crowd while insisting that the reputation of the city and of Artemis’ temple is quite secure.

No doubt this is true in the short run. However, when we compare these charges with Paul’s speech to the Athenians, the fears of the Ephesian silversmiths and masses appear to be justified. In 19:26, Demetrius warns that Paul has been persuading people “that gods made with hands are not gods.” Speaking in Athens, Paul insisted that God does not dwell in temples made by hands, is not served by human hands, and is not like images created by human craft (17:24–25, 29). Earlier, Paul rebuked people of Lystra who were about to sacrifice to him and Barnabas as Greek gods, saying that they “should turn from these worthless things to the living God” (14:15). In the long run, there is a real threat to Artemis and her temple from Paul’s gospel. The riot at Ephesus highlights a conflict between the gospel and the dominant religious culture, a conflict that will grow as the mission expands.

The charges brought against Christians in Acts 16–19 are not initiated by governing authorities. The authorities respond to the charges—in various ways—but the charges are initiated by an offended party from the general public, perhaps backed by a mob. Paul is also attacked by a mob in Jerusalem, and they voice their angry accusation: Paul is teaching “against our people, our law, and this place” (the temple), and has defiled the temple (21:28). Paul’s defense speeches are to a considerable extent a reply to this Jewish charge, even though he is held in Roman custody.

The narrative of Acts is full of conflict. The gospel disturbs the status quo. Specific issues of cultural and religious conflict appear in the accusations directed against Jesus’ witnesses. Opponents

18 On the conflict between this confession and claims for Caesar, see Rowe, *World Upside Down*, 103–16.

try to persuade governing authorities to punish the Christians. These authorities are not a monolithic block of opponents themselves. They vary in their response, making the outcome uncertain. But Jesus' witnesses remain outwardly vulnerable because of the opposition aroused by the gospel from both Jews and Gentiles. These narratives enlarge awareness of the cultural conflicts that the model witnesses of Acts faced, thereby helping to prepare those who will follow in their footsteps. In these conflicts, Acts encourages Christian readers to "obey God rather than any human authority" (5:29). It also offers the example of Paul's adroit faithfulness to his calling while a Roman prisoner.¹⁹

Ethics of Possessions

The ethics of possessions is a major theme in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus announces that he has come to "preach good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). In the Lukan beatitudes and woes, Jesus speaks prophetically, blessing the poor and condemning the rich (6:20–26). Luke contains extensive sections of teaching that warn against greed, condemn the rich who ignore the poor, and call disciples to leave their possessions (12:13–34; 16:1–31; 18:18–30; 19:1–10). In Luke 14:33, Jesus makes abandoning one's possessions a general requirement for discipleship.

This radical teaching is not cited in Acts. Nor do we find there the same fiery critique of the callous rich and the demand to serve the poor. We should not quickly conclude, however, that the ethics of possessions is not a concern in Acts. We must again consider the positive and negative models of behavior in the narrative.

We are twice told that in the earliest Jerusalem church all things were held in common (*hapanta koina*; Acts 2:44; 4:32). This benefited the needy, for property was sold and the proceeds used for their care (2:45; 4:34–35). In assessing the ethics of Acts, we should not pass over these passages lightly. There is very little attention to the internal life of the church in Acts, which focuses instead on the spread of the gospel through a few leading missionaries. The feature of the church's internal life that receives the most attention is the sharing of possessions in the Jerusalem church. It is immediately described in Acts 2:42–47, following the reference to the first converts. Repetition of this description in 4:32–35 gives it additional emphasis, which is then strengthened through a positive example (Barnabas) and a negative example (Ananias and Sapphira; Acts 4:36–5:11).

The story of Ananias and Sapphira may seem more troubling than edifying, since it portrays a harsh divine judgment. It does, however, underline the seriousness with which the Holy Spirit and Peter take any corruption of the unity of heart and soul that the community demonstrates through sacrificial sharing of possessions. Ananias is accused of lying to the Holy Spirit and to God (5:3, 4). Selling the property and contributing the proceeds was meant to be a generous act of free will (5:4). The accusation of lying implies that a promise (implicit or spoken) was made to contribute

19 I say "adroit faithfulness" because Paul, unlike Jesus, takes advantage of opportunities to protect and defend himself. He reveals his Roman citizenship (22:25), he speaks in his own defense when given opportunity, and he appeals to Caesar when Festus plans to send Paul back to Jerusalem.

the whole amount, and the couple was deceptively retaining part for themselves, in violation of their promise.

Having “all things in common” could mean communal ownership of property. The additional description suggests a different meaning. The references to selling possessions and distributing the proceeds are expressed by the Greek imperfect tense, indicating a repeated process as needs arise (2:45; 4:34–35). Furthermore, the selling is done by the multiple owners of property, not by the community or by the apostles as administrators (4:34). The property was not being held as communal property. Also, the second half of 4:32 reads (in my fairly literal translation): “No one was claiming any of his possessions to be his own.” This implies that they are, in legal terms, “his possessions,” but the owner chooses not to regard them as such. Instead, owners offer their possessions as resources to care for the needy.

Christopher Hays, in a recent study, *Luke's Wealth Ethics*, argues that this practice “faithfully adapts Jesus’ teachings to an urban and localized ministry.”²⁰ It is possible, indeed, to understand the stress on “all things in common” (2:44) as an adaptation and application of the model of discipleship in Luke, where the disciples leave “everything” (literally, “all things”; 5:11, 28; cf. 14:33; 18:22).²¹ The repeated practice narrated in Acts fits well with Jesus’ command to “sell” possessions and “distribute” proceeds to the poor (Luke 18:22 and Acts 4:34–35 use the same Greek verbs for this process).

It was a commonplace in Greek and Roman thought that the possessions of friends are held in common.²² Against this background, the early Jerusalem church would appear as a community fully realizing the ideal of friendship. Alan Mitchell, however, makes a distinction between the Jerusalem community in Acts and Greco-Roman friendship traditions. Friends should share their things, according to the traditional maxim, but this maxim was not used as a formula for social leveling. It was assumed that “friends” are members of the same social class. In Acts, the sharing reaches across social and economic classes, for persons with lands and houses are asked to share with the poor.²³ The sharing in Acts oversteps the limits of the common reciprocity ethic that was previously rejected by Jesus in Luke 6:32–36 and 14:12–14.

The Jerusalem church provides one model for an ethics of possessions. In Paul’s address to the Ephesian elders we find another. There Paul cites his own practice as an example to the elders. He “coveted no one’s” money or clothing. Rather than accepting financial support, he worked with his own hands, not only to support himself but also “those with me” (NRSV: “my companions”). Furthermore, “by such work we must support the weak,” in line with Jesus’ maxim “It is more

20 Christopher M. Hays, *Luke's Wealth Ethics* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 262.

21 This is a Lukan emphasis. The references to “all things” are not in the Synoptic parallels.

22 For references, see C. K. Barrett, *Acts* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), 1:168–69.

23 Alan Mitchell, “The Social Function of Friendship in Acts 2:44–47 and 4:32–37,” *JBL* 111 (1992): 255–72.

blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:33–35). This example and instruction may be aimed especially at church leaders, who might seek support from the church. However, it has broader relevance. Not everyone has property to sell in order to provide for the needy, as Barnabas did (4:36–37). Most can work so that they can support themselves and share with others, including the “weak.” (Some, however, are “weak” and need the support of others.) Thus labor that provides resources for helping others is also presented as a valid response to Jesus’ teaching.

Even though Acts 4:34 reports that owners of “lands and houses” sold them and contributed the proceeds, Acts is probably not suggesting that the majority became homeless, for it also reports that the Jerusalem believers were sharing food in homes (2:46), and later we learn of “the house of Mary,” the mother of John Mark, in Jerusalem (12:12). It was a gathering place for the church. Lydia shares her home with visiting missionaries, and her home probably serves as a meeting place for the church (16:14–15, 40). Paul and his party also stayed at “the house of Philip” (21:8). Believers offer their homes in a ministry of hospitality, which was honored in the early church. There are multiple patterns of positive response to Jesus’ teachings about possessions.

On the negative side, there are repeated references to the corrupting effect of money in Acts. Money is a corrupting influence in the stories of Judas (Luke 22:5; Acts 1:18), Ananias and Sapphira (5:1–11), Simon Magus (8:18–24), the owners of the soothsaying girl (16:16–19), the Ephesian shrine makers (19:23–27), and Governor Felix (24:26). On the positive side, there are scenes (in addition to passages already discussed) that portray Jesus’ followers engaged in acts of charity—through improving the care of neglected widows (6:1–6), making garments for widows (9:36–39), and sending relief to believers in Judea during a time of famine (11:27–30). All of these stories can have an ethical effect, warning against negative behavior and encouraging acts of charity similar to those practiced by early believers.

Conclusion

What about us? Since Acts presents various models of believers contributing from their possessions, we may be tempted to follow whichever model seems easiest. That might allow us to contribute to charity without significant sacrifice. Yet, there are more radical examples of giving in Acts, and when we look back at Jesus’ teaching in Luke, the easy way is exposed as a copout.

The vast difference in cultural setting may also seem to make the challenge to “obey God rather than humans” less relevant to us. We are not being persecuted. However, the proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus in Luke-Acts still contains a challenge—the challenge to proclaim Jesus’ Lordship by lives that creatively adapt the teaching of Jesus presented in Luke (and partly exemplified in Acts). This is still a challenge in our present context, where life is largely guided by other goals and values.



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