“Can Acts teach us about modern church life? Andy Chambers says, ‘Yes indeed,’ and shows us how its portrait can enliven the church. It is a book worth reading with ideas worth implementing.”

**Darrell Bock**, Research Professor of New Testament Studies, Professor of Spiritual Development and Culture, Dallas Theological Seminary

“Today pastors spend a great deal of time scanning the shelves of Amazon or brick-and-mortar bookstores for the next church-growth or missional ‘magic bullet,’ longing for help in building their communities of faith. Yet a rich repository of insights on church life, health, and mission lies, often untapped, in the pages of the Book of Books itself. As Andy Chambers demonstrates, in the summary narratives of Acts Luke—theologian, historian, and churchman—teaches us how the first followers of Jesus lived life together as the church in the first century and, consequently, how Christian community can be lived out today. In Chambers’s *Exemplary Life* you can find help for building the modern church on an ancient and rock-solid foundation.”

**George H. Guthrie**, Benjamin W. Perry Professor of Bible, Union University

“Far too many approaches to the book of Acts treat it merely as authoritative church history. Andy Chambers firmly believes that the book of Acts is deeply relevant to the church and to the Christian life in our contemporary age. His thorough study of Acts will be of great benefit to the church, and I warmly welcome the publication of this book.”

**R. Albert Mohler Jr.**, President, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Andy Chambers puts forward a persuasive thesis that a major purpose of Acts was to portray the ideal church. This has often been maintained for the ‘summaries’ of church life in chapters 1–5, but Chambers shows how the same characteristics of the earliest Jerusalem churches are consistently shown in both Jewish and Gentiles churches throughout Acts. Academics will find his research on the Lukan summaries particularly informative. Pastors seeking help in rejuvenating their churches will find quite useful his full summaries of the main traits of life in the churches of Acts.”

**John Polhill**, Senior Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“There are a lot of great exegetical books on the Acts of the Apostles and plenty of books on contemporary church life that utilize Acts. However, far too few books bridge the gap between scholarship and the needs of the church today. Andy Chambers in his book *Exemplary Life* seeks to close that gap by showing how Luke embedded a vision for exemplary church life within his narrative. He demonstrates how Luke was deeply concerned to show Christ’s followers a portrait of what life together could be like and how they could shape their own churches after the apostolic pattern. This volume helps us hear Luke’s distinctive voice on the church alongside other Bible authors. I highly recommend it.”

**Thom Rainer**, president and CEO, LifeWay Christian Resources

“Andy Chambers argues that the three ‘summary narratives’ that describe the life of the early church in Acts are more than mere summary. Against earlier approaches that have tended to create and enforce a distance between text and life, Chambers invites us to a view of these passages through the lens of narrative technique in a rhetorical strategy that closes that distance. The summaries describe and recommend. Chambers has done readers of Acts
a great service. His work provides a strong and welcome encouragement and guidance for theologically mindful and energetic contemporary expressions of church life today.”

Brian Rapske, Professor of New Testament Studies at ACTS Seminaries/Trinity Western University

“Andy Chambers believes we have underemphasized Luke’s voice in our efforts to think biblically about church life in the twenty-first century. He reminds us that Luke was more than a church historian when he wrote the book of Acts. Luke partnered with Paul in the ministry of planting and strengthening churches. Chambers argues that Acts is about going and gathering as well as going and telling, because Luke shows gospel preaching resulting in local churches. Luke’s missiology cannot be separated from his ecclesiology. In a day of tremendous upheaval and debate over what church life should look like, we need a book that brings Luke’s voice back into the conversation. Chambers’s volume does just that.”

Ed Stetzer, author, Subversive Kingdom, www.edstetzer.com

“Andy Chambers’s Exemplary Life aims to help churches recoup from Acts a first-century fervor and model for church life today. The book is well researched, insists on the historicity of Acts, and makes use of current literary approaches to Acts. The book’s 20 points of application are fundamentally practical and helpful. To those churches that are already practicing these essentials, I would exclaim, ‘Press on!’ To those churches that are not doing these things, I would ask, ‘Why not?’ This book is worth your while.”

Terry L. Wilder, Professor of New Testament, Chair of the Biblical Studies Division, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Andy Chambers profoundly furthers the recovery of theological interpretation within evangelicalism. Surpassing problematic modernist, historicist readings of Scripture, he treats the book of Acts as the work of a theologian, even while remaining fully conversant with the best scholarship. In lucid language, Chambers provides a compelling argument that Luke’s rhetorical strategy is to illuminate a model for the church’s life before God and the world. I highly recommend this volume for pastors and academics, as well as their students.”

Malcolm B. Yarnell III, Professor of Systematic Theology and Director of the Center for Theological Research, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“There are a host of books about the book of Acts that fail to capture the essence of ‘why’ the church (and its mission) is important to New Testament disciples. In many works, there exists too much proof-texting for preconceived systems about contemporary church life. The missing ingredient is the historical perspective that demonstrates an exemplary church in Acts that is the fertile soil for proclaiming the gospel and making disciples in every culture, race, and nation. Dr. Chambers’s twenty characteristics of the exemplary church are a unique contribution to the theology of the church and provide a measurement for a local church’s fulfillment of purpose. Exemplary Life is a must read for the genuine church statesman/woman who wants to be engaged in God’s movement for these times.”

John L. Yeats, Executive Director of the Missouri Baptist Convention Recording Secretary of the Southern Baptist Convention
Exemplary Life
A Theology of Church Life in Acts

Andy Chambers

B&H Academic
Nashville, Tennessee
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Bible Translation Abbreviations

CEV . . . . . . Contemporary English Version
ESV . . . . . . English Standard Version
GNT . . . . . . Good News Translation
HCSB . . . . Holman Christian Standard Bible
KJV . . . . . . King James Version
LXX . . . . . . Septuagint
MSG . . . . . . The Message
NAB . . . . . . New American Bible
NASB . . . . New American Standard Bible
NCV . . . . . . New Century Version
NIV . . . . . . New International Version
NJB . . . . . . New Jerusalem Bible
NKJV . . . . New King James Version
NLT . . . . . . New Living Translation
NRSV . . . . New Revised Standard Version
RSV . . . . . . Revised Standard Version

Bible Book Abbreviations

Gen. . . . . . . . Genesis
Exod . . . . . . Exodus
Lev . . . . . . Leviticus
Num . . . . . . Numbers
Deut . . . . . Deuteronomy
Josh . . . . . . Joshua
Judg . . . . . Judges
Ruth . . . . . Ruth
1 Sam . . . . . 1 Samuel
2 Sam . . . . . 2 Samuel
1 Kgs . . . . . 1 Kings
2 Kgs . . . . . 2 Kings
1 Chr . . . . . 1 Chronicles
2 Chr . . . . . 2 Chronicles
Ezra . . . . . . Ezra
Neh . . . . . . Nehemiah
Esth . . . . . . Esther
Job . . . . . . Job
Ps(s) . . . . . . Psalms
Prov . . . . . . Proverbs
Eccl . . . . . . Ecclesiastes
Song . . . . . . Song of Songs
Isa . . . . . . Isaiah
Jer . . . . . . Jeremiah
Lam . . . . . Lamentations
Ezek . . . . . Ezekiel
Dan . . . . . . Daniel
Hos . . . . . . Hosea
Joel . . . . . . Joel
Amos . . . . . Amos
Obad . . . . . Obadiah
Jonah . . . . . Jonah
Mic . . . . . . Micah
Nah . . . . . . Nahum
Hab . . . . . . Habakkuk
Zeph . . . . . Zephaniah
Hag . . . . . . Haggai
Zech . . . . . Zechariah
Mal . . . . . Malachi
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<td>Rev . . . . . . Revelation</td>
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<td>1 Thess . . . . . 1 Thessalonians</td>
<td>OT . . . . . . Old Testament</td>
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<td>2 Thess . . . . . 2 Thessalonians</td>
<td>NT . . . . . . New Testament</td>
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**Publication Abbreviations**

AB . . . . . . Anchor Bible


AJP . . . . . . American Journal of Philology

ANF . . . . . . Ante-Nicene Fathers

ANTC . . . . . Abingdon New Testament Commentaries


BSac . . . . . Bibliotheca sacra

BBR . . . . . . Bulletin for Biblical Research

Bib . . . . . . Biblica

BJRL . . . . . . Bulletin of the John Rylands Library

BTB . . . . . . Biblical Theology Bulletin

BTCB . . . . . Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible
Biblische Zeitschrift
Cornerstone Biblical Commentary
Catholic Biblical Quarterly
Classical Philology
Classical Quarterly
Collectanea theologica
Criswell Theological Review
Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, ed. Joel Green and Scot McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992)
Downside Review
Expositor’s Bible Commentary
Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses
Evangelical Journal
Evangelical Quarterly
Expository Times
Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies
Harper’s New Testament Commentaries
Horizons
Harvard Theological Review
Hebrew Union College Annual
International Critical Commentary
Interpretation
Journal of the American Academy of Religion
Journal of Biblical Literature
Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society
Journal of Hellenic Studies
Journal of Roman Studies
Journal of Religious Thought
Journal for the Study of Judaism
Journal for the Study of the New Testament
Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
Journal of Theological Studies
Lexington Theological Quarterly
New American Commentary
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NCBC</td>
<td>New Century Bible Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>NICNT</td>
<td>New International Commentary on the New Testament</td>
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<tr>
<td>NovT</td>
<td><em>Novum Testamentum</em></td>
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<td>NTS</td>
<td>New Testament Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>PIBA</td>
<td>Proceedings of the Irish Biblical Association</td>
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<td>PNTC</td>
<td>Pillar New Testament Commentary</td>
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<td>PRSt</td>
<td><em>Perspectives in Religious Studies</em></td>
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<td>RCT</td>
<td><em>Revista catalana de teología</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>ResQ</td>
<td>Restoration Quarterly</td>
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<tr>
<td>RevExp</td>
<td>Review and Expositor</td>
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<td>SBLSP</td>
<td>Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers</td>
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<td>SBLSymS</td>
<td>Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series</td>
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<tr>
<td>ScrB</td>
<td><em>Scripture Bulletin</em></td>
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<td>SE</td>
<td><em>Studia evangelica</em></td>
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<td>SHBC</td>
<td>Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary</td>
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<td>SK</td>
<td><em>Skrif en kerk</em></td>
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<td>SNTSMS</td>
<td>Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series</td>
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<td>SP</td>
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<td>Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah</td>
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<td>SwJT</td>
<td><em>Southwestern Journal of Theology</em></td>
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<td>TBT</td>
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<td>TNTC</td>
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<td>TZ</td>
<td>Theologische Zeitschrift</td>
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<tr>
<td>WUNT</td>
<td>Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament</td>
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<td>WW</td>
<td><em>Word and World</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>ZNW</td>
<td>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</td>
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<td>ZTK</td>
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CHAPTER ONE

HOW WE LOST LUKE’S THEOLOGY OF CHURCH LIFE

Research into the summary narratives in the twentieth century followed traditional lines of application of source, form, and redaction criticism to the book of Acts. These interpretive methods have their roots in the historical-critical method, which developed in the nineteenth century as a product of the Enlightenment. To understand how Luke’s theology of church life in Acts was lost, we need to grasp how the historical-critical method cast its shadow over the way Acts is read.

ACTS AND THE RISE OF THE HISTORICAL-CRITICAL METHOD

The Enlightenment brought about three profound shifts in the way people approached historical knowledge and documents like Acts that purported to tell about the past. First, a methodological skepticism led people away from accepting the authority of the church on the nature of Scripture
toward treating the Bible like any other human document.¹ In one sense, reading the Bible as a historical document affirms that God revealed Himself in history and that the early church produced written documents in order to preserve the knowledge of God’s deeds in the world. Asking questions of a historical nature about things like authorship, date, occasion, genre, and purpose affirms that God’s self-disclosure did not occur in a historical vacuum. I. Howard Marshall correctly observes that anyone who tries to “understand the New Testament or defend its historicity against skeptics by any kind of reasonable argument is already practicing the historical method.”² The difference between a historical perspective and that of the Enlightenment, however, is that the latter argued that purely historical questions should be asked about Scripture without reference to doctrine or any dogmatic position of the church on the nature and authority of Scripture.³

Second, the rise of the scientific method led to the naive assumption that a dispassionate objectivity in every area of knowledge is possible. This led to the belief that history writing was a science that could recreate the past in a purely unbiased way.⁴ Of course, the Bible’s historical documents are anything but unbiased. The Gospels and Acts were written by passionately devoted followers of the resurrected Jesus. They were committed, without apology, to persuading readers to follow Jesus too. As Daniel Marguerat points out, “Luke does not display a historian’s intellectual autonomy; his reading of history is a believer’s reading.”⁵ From the perspective of nineteenth-century scientific historiography, this perceived lack of objectivity in the New Testament raised serious doubts about the reliability of biblical accounts of history like the kind seen in Acts.

Third, the scientific method also demanded that claims about truth and knowledge be verifiable through empirical testing and that explanations for all extraordinary phenomena be sought strictly in terms of causes and effects observable in nature. Thus, the fact that the Bible reports a

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miracle no longer warranted the conclusion that the laws of nature had been suspended and a miracle had actually occurred. A rational explanation was now to be preferred. This created a tremendous crisis for people who wanted to remain intellectually relevant in society and hold on to the divine inspiration and authority of the Bible, because Scripture, especially the book of Acts, is driven throughout by the miraculous.6 As a result of these shifts, the historical reliability of the Bible came under a withering assault in the universities of Europe in the nineteenth century. The methodology for interpreting the Bible that arose out of this new mindset is called the historical-critical method.

Acts in the Shadow of F. C. Baur

F. C. Baur and the Tübingen school in Germany that he represents epitomized the application of the historical-critical method to the text of Acts. Baur contributed an important insight when he recognized that the New Testament itself is part of church history. By that he meant that the history of doctrine did not begin when the last book of the Bible was written. The New Testament introduces us to people of different cultural and religious backgrounds all striving, sometimes against each other (see Acts 15:1–2; Gal 2:11–14), to come to grips with the meaning of Jesus Christ.7 Early in his career Baur adopted the dialectical philosophy of Friedrich Hegel as his lens for understanding the conflict he saw in the New Testament. Hegel viewed the movement of history in terms of a thesis, an antithesis, and a resulting synthesis. An idea or thesis emerges in history and grows in influence until it provokes an opposing point of view or antithesis. At some point the conflict between the opposing viewpoints resolves itself in a new reality or synthesis.

For Baur, the Hegelian thesis was the emergence of a thoroughly Jewish Christianity represented by Peter and the church in Jerusalem.

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6 Luke began Acts with a reference to Jesus presenting Himself alive “by many convincing proofs” after His suffering (Acts 1:3), and he showed God regularly verifying the preaching of the apostles and Stephen with miraculous signs and wonders (2:43; 5:12; 6:8). Also see 2:19,22,43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 7:36; 8:6,13; 14:3; 15:12; 19:11–12; 28:6–9 for examples of Luke’s emphasis on miracles characterizing God’s activity in Acts.

As the gospel moved beyond the borders of Judaism, a culturally Gentile Christianity emerged, an antithesis that was represented by Paul and the church in Antioch. The earliest decades of Christian history, as Baur saw them, were marked by conflict between these two factions. The application of Hegel’s dialectic so magnified the discord between Jewish and Gentile Christianity that Baur only accepted as authentic those New Testament books that evidenced the strife between them, like Galatians and 1 Corinthians. The book of Acts, on the other hand, has a more conciliatory tone. Acts displays a united church, as the summary narratives show (see Acts 2:44; 4:32). Acts also shows the Jewish and Gentile factions resolving their differences (15:1–35) and the emergence of a synthesis in the form of an “early catholicism.” Baur believed that this synthesis did not emerge until at least the mid to late second century AD. Therefore, in Baur’s view, Acts could not have been written any earlier than the middle of the second century and so was of little historical value to him. This does not mean Baur did not study Acts from a historical perspective. Rather, he sought, with the historical-critical method he helped develop, to go behind the text of Acts (which for him represented the situation of the late second-century church) in order to get at the actual history of the first-century church.8

Baur left a permanent mark on subsequent Acts scholarship among those who followed his presuppositions. Nearly a century later, Rudolf Bultmann would argue in his Theology of the New Testament that the New Testament contains two strata, the first embodying the early church’s kerygma (or preaching) and the second representing an early catholic falling away from the truth. For Bultmann, Luke’s writings belonged to the early catholic distortion of the gospel message. He did not see them as normative for the church’s faith as he thought Paul’s letters and John’s Gospel should be.9


Not everyone was persuaded by Baur’s conclusions. J. B. Lightfoot of Cambridge University challenged Baur’s late date for Acts. Lightfoot published commentaries on several New Testament books that are still in print today. He also wrote extensively on postapostolic literature, especially the late first- and early second-century letters of Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch. Lightfoot demonstrated convincingly that 1 Clement and the seven letters of Ignatius were genuine and written near the turn of the first century. Their writings do not reveal the disunity between Peter and Paul and between Jewish and Gentile Christianity that Baur was convinced dominated the first-century church. Lightfoot’s response significantly discredited Baur’s position on the late date of Acts and its lack of reliability as a historical resource for knowledge of early Christianity. Lightfoot desired to write a commentary on Acts but was not able, and we are poorer for it. However, he did publish several extensive critiques of Baur’s conclusions.

With regard to the summary narratives, an affirmation and a basic criticism of Baur can be made. He correctly observed the conciliatory nature of Acts. Luke portrays the Gentile and Jewish wings of the church resolving their differences (see especially Acts 15 in re the Jerusalem Council). I would go farther than Baur and argue that Luke does more. Luke commends their faith and churches to each other. He especially commends his portraits of exemplary church life drawn from the Jewish mother church in Jerusalem to his Gentile readers in churches scattered throughout the Empire, and he shows Gentile churches adopting many of the practices of the Jerusalem church. Baur’s observation of the tendency of Acts toward conciliation is an enduring contribution. However, he wrongly assumed that the display of unity in Acts between factions in the church demands that we believe Luke misrepresented the facts as he knew them. Baur’s radically historicist approach unnecessarily pits historical and theological concerns in Acts against each other. This led to the assumption that the

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10 Bray, Biblical Interpretation, 344. The author of Acts, Luke, according to the earliest witnesses in church history, was a contemporary of Paul, because he traveled with Paul during part of his missionary journeys as evidenced by the famous “we” passages (Acts 16:10–17; 20:5–21:26; 27:1–28:16). Depending on Luke’s age when he was with Paul in Rome during the early 60s Acts could have been written up to several decades after that time.

more theologically-oriented Luke was, the less reliable a historian he had to be—or worse, the more willing he was to write falsehoods in order to advance his own theological agenda.

The longer view of reading Acts through church history reveals a more basic principle animating reflection on tendencies in Acts and in Scripture generally. It is that Christianity is at heart a historical religion. This is reinforced from the call of Abraham and the formation and preservation of Israel to the ministry of Jesus and beyond. The Bible continually speaks of a God who reigns over and intervenes in history to accomplish His purposes. The death and resurrection of Jesus are presented as historical events on which the faith itself was said to hang (1 Cor 15:12–19) and which a person must believe happened if they want to be saved (Rom 10:9). Reading Acts in view of the Bible’s habit of presenting Christianity as a historical faith should lead one to resist pitting theological concerns against the historical concerns in the study of Acts. Baur is a case study on how presuppositions can affect the direction and even the outcome of research and how interpreters can be swayed by the influence of their own presuppositions.

The Summary Narratives in the Shadow of Historical Criticism

The tendency of the Tübingen school to separate the actual history of the early church from what they saw as the theological tendencies of Acts profoundly impacted the interpretation of the summary narratives in the twentieth century, as they were read through the lenses of source, form, and redaction criticism. These tools continued the historical-critical quest to go behind what were seen as the theologically biased and therefore historically unreliable statements of Acts to the supposedly real history of the early church.

Source and Form Criticism. Source and form criticism developed first as tools for analyzing the Synoptic Gospels and then were applied to Acts. Source criticism sought to identify the sources used by the writers of the


Gospels and Acts. Form criticism treated these sources as the end stage of a process of handing down traditions of the teachings and deeds of Jesus until they were codified in recognizable literary forms. Form critics saw in these forms evidence of the sources utilized by the authors of the Gospels and Acts in their compositions.

Martin Dibelius in 1923 pioneered the application of form criticism of the Gospels to Acts in his *Aufsätze zur Apostelgeschichte* (*Studies in the Acts of the Apostles*) through a method he called “style criticism.” He made a distinction between the style of Luke’s sources (like the episodes and speeches) and the editorial summaries that tie the episodes together. Dibelius argued that Luke’s sources were older and therefore closer to the actual historical circumstances of the early church. He believed that Luke creatively composed the summaries as generalizations that made individual scenes appear as particular instances of typical circumstances. Dibelius identified Acts 1:13–14; 2:42,43–47; 4:4,32–35; 5:12–16,42; 6:7; 9:31; and 12:24 as examples of Luke’s generalizing tendency. These texts summarize in an ideal way the ongoing life and growth of the Jerusalem church, but because Dibelius saw them as later Lukan contributions, he believed they were deliberate departures from the older tradition and therefore historically suspect.

Henry J. Cadbury based his form-critical analysis of the summaries in Acts on his study of summarization in the Synoptic Gospels. He believed that the summaries in Mark were the latest addition to his Gospel, which he distilled from the episodes in order to provide generalizations and fill

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18 Ibid., 125–29.

voids between detached scenes. He also argued that Luke utilized Mark’s summaries in his Gospel as evidenced by his tendency to repeat and multiply them, while still adhering closely to their content. In Acts, Cadbury argued that the summaries were derived from a date later than the episodes they joined and, like the Synoptics, were designed to fill voids between detached scenes with generalizations that indicated “single events of the type described were multiplied at other times and places.” Cadbury adopted a more moderate posture than Dibelius regarding the historical reliability of Acts, stating that Luke was limited by the accuracy or inaccuracy of his sources.

Joachim Jeremias, Lucien Cerfaux, and Pierre Benoit turned their attention to analyzing the internal development of the summary narratives in an effort to distinguish between sources and Luke’s contribution to their composition. All three held that the disjointed construction of the summaries showed some parts came from earlier sources and others from the author or a later editor, but they came to different conclusions about which parts were early and which were late. The lack of a consensus between them illustrates how efforts to separate Luke’s sources for the summary narratives from his own contribution really are speculative at best. In their quest for the history behind texts, form critics ended up isolating those texts from their literary and theological contexts in the final canonical form of the book. Form criticism does raise an important question about whether the summary narratives should be considered a distinct literary form within Acts or a narrative technique used by Luke in his rhetorical strategy in Acts. I will say more on this in chapter 2.

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Redaction Criticism. Redaction critics saw the writers of the Gospels and Acts as theologians in their own right, who modified their sources to achieve their own theological goals in their writings. In their view, source and form criticism’s emphasis on seeking the history behind the Bible led interpreters to dissect and atomize individual texts to the point where they overlooked the theology of the book’s final redactor (or editor). They believed his theology could be identified in the editorial seams that connect the sources he used in his composition.25

In 1956 Ernst Haenchen applied redaction criticism in his commentary on Acts. He spent considerable energy analyzing Luke’s theological tendencies in the summary narratives. He also argued that Luke inserted them in order to separate Peter’s speeches in chapters 2 and 3 by a “representation of the life of the community.” Rather than emphasize their disjointed construction, which form criticism tended toward, Haenchen sought to identify a basic order in the progression of subjects in the summaries.26 Heinrich Zimmermann in 1961 also sought to identify possible strategies in the way the summaries were constructed by Luke to advance his theological agenda.27

In 1963 Hans Conzelmann argued for Lukan authorship of the summaries. However, he attributed their apparent lack of organization to Luke’s understanding of history, saying, “Luke does not think in terms of causal connections, but rather finds the meaning of the whole in individual parts.”28 For Conzelmann, Luke’s portrait of church life in the summary narratives, especially the sharing of property, is idealized and should not be taken as historical. He also did not think Luke intended to present them as normative for the church in his time. Rather, Luke is associating

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the earliest days of the church with Greek utopian ideals in the minds of his readers. Conzelmann reiterated his position on the historicity of the summary narratives in his 1979 book on New Testament interpretation, coauthored with Andreas Lindemann:

> As sources, the summaries in Acts (see 2:42–47; 4:32–35; 5:12–16) have as little immediate value as the speeches. They do not permit a glance into the actual conditions of the early church; rather they present the ideal picture of the church desired by the author. . . . The picture of the church that is drawn in the summaries is not historically authentic but represents an idealization of the early period of the kind frequently observed in classical historiography (“golden era”).

Conzelmann assumed that Luke made up his ideal portrait of the church, because he thought Luke wanted readers to have one. The mere existence of an idealized utopian tradition in Greek literature was evidence enough to conclude that Luke must have done the same thing with his ideal portraits. Conzelmann does not appear to have even entertained the possibility that Luke had access to accurate information about the Jerusalem church through eyewitnesses he could have interviewed. Jews from all over the Roman Empire were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Paul said that most of the eyewitnesses to the resurrected Jesus were still living when he wrote 1 Corinthians. Surely they and others who experienced church life in Jerusalem in the early days were still alive and available for Luke to consult. Instead, for Conzelmann, Luke’s decision to present an ideal portrait of the Jerusalem church excluded the possibility that his statements were rooted in what actually happened.

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29 Ibid., 24.
The Loss of Luke’s Theology of Church Life

At this point a few observations can be made about the impact of the historical-critical method on the interpretation of the summary narratives. A general consensus exists on two points. First, scholars have continued to agree with Dibelius’s basic literary insight that the summary narratives do appear to generalize on specific events in order to show them as typical occurrences in the early church. Second, regardless of where an interpreter stands on the historicity of the summary narratives, Conzelmann’s view that Luke wanted readers to have a portrait of ideal church life when he wrote the summary narratives is generally agreed upon too.

However, F. C. Baur and the historical-critical method have cast a shadow over the modern study of Acts and the summary narratives with two unfortunate results. First, a basic presupposition has persisted that the theological tendency of Acts means that Luke’s purpose did not include accurately relating the facts of early church history. Scholars of this mindset have emphasized the wideness of the gap they believe exists between the final canonical form of Acts and the history behind it. Thus, they spent all their energy trying to get behind the text to the kernel of history referred to by them. The canonical form of Acts lost its “pride of place” among historical critics looking for primary source evidence for reconstruction of the history of the earliest churches. Ironically, the supposed history obtained by historical critics bears a striking resemblance to the anti-supernatural bias of nineteenth-century Enlightenment scholarship led by Baur and the Tübingen school. Because the summary narratives do have the appearance of editorial seams that link episodes together, under the historical-critical paradigm they were seen as the latest parts of Acts to be written. To form and redaction critics, therefore, they represented Luke’s

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33 Although the focus of this book is not on establishing the historical reliability of Acts, another trajectory in modern Acts scholarship was virtually ignored by adherents of the historical-critical method. Scholars like J. B. Lightfoot, William Ramsay, Eduard Meyer, and others near the end of the nineteenth century rejected Baur and the Tübingen school’s radically negative assessment of Acts. Their heirs include scholars like F. F. Bruce, Colin Hemer, Everett Harrison, I. Howard Marshall, Richard Longenecker, Darrell L. Bock, and others in the twentieth century and today who, while not monolithic in their conclusions, nevertheless see Acts as historically reliable. See the discussion in Gasque, History of the Interpretation, 136–63, 258–83; and the brief but illuminating comparative study by Andrew Southwell, “German and British Approaches to Acts Research: A Comparative Study of F. C. Baur, Ernst Troeltsch, and William Ramsay,” Th.M. thesis (St. Louis, MO: Covenant Theological Seminary, 1994), 55–63.
theological bias and were dismissed as sources of reliable information on the Jerusalem church.

Second, so much effort has gone into analyzing the sources and composition of the summary narratives that scholars have neglected their literary context and theological role in the final canonical form of Acts. The contribution of Maria Anicia Co illustrates this tendency. Co completed her lengthy two-volume dissertation at Louvain University in 1990 (420 pages!) and published an article on the composition of the summary narratives in 1992. Her extensive analysis of the linguistic interrelationships between the summary narratives concludes that they are from Luke’s hand.34 Co put an end to speculation about which parts are Lukan and which are from his sources. However, Co also epitomizes the tendency of historical-critical scholarship to drill so deeply into the composition of the summary narratives that little energy is left to consider broader concerns, such as what they contribute to Luke’s theological vision as a whole.35

Interpretive methodologies and their presuppositions inevitably impact exegesis and theology. Form criticism’s focus on the history behind the summary narratives and redaction criticism’s tendency to isolate Luke’s theology in them from the rest of Acts distracted interpreters from considering their role in the final canonical form of Acts. Because the summary narratives focus on church life, the result has been an underemphasis on church life in the study of the theology of Acts.

A survey of forty mainly English-language commentaries on Acts written over the last fifty or so years illustrates this imbalance. Under

discussions of major themes in introductory sections, only nine commentaries (23%) identify the church or church life as important enough to be treated as a distinct theme.  

Under discussions of literary features, seven commentaries (18%) single out summarization for comment in separate sections.  

Four commentaries (10%) bring specific verses from the summary narratives into their discussions of the church. However, only three commentaries (8%) mention the summary narratives, or at least a significant portion of them, in their discussions of church life. None of the forty commentaries surveyed identified Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–35; and 5:12–16 specifically as core texts for articulating Luke’s theology of church life.

Even otherwise outstanding New Testament theologies published in recent years tend to overlook Luke’s emphasis on church life in the summary narratives when they discuss the doctrine of the church in Acts.  

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40 By “specifically” I mean with these particular verses as boundaries. Opinions vary widely as to which verses should form their proper boundaries. In chapter 2 I will argue that Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–35; and 5:12–16 contain the boundaries Luke intended for readers/hearers to recognize.

Books focused more narrowly on the doctrine of the church in the Bible do the same. Church life, especially life in the Jerusalem church and church life as a general theological emphasis in Acts, has been emphasized much less than I believe Luke intended it to be.

I want to be careful not to overstate my contention here. Church life in Acts has been underemphasized, not ignored. However, an approach to the summary narratives is needed that will address their relationship to the whole text of Acts. To do this, the helpful perspective of more recent literary approaches will be utilized, especially narrative and rhetorical criticism. These two methodologies developed along somewhat different trajectories, but their emergence is part of a larger literary turn in New Testament studies.

**The Literary Turn in New Testament Studies**

After more than a century of domination by the historical-critical method, scholars began to seek a way beyond its atomizing tendencies toward a greater appreciation of the literary dimensions of Scripture. This development was needed, because every part of Scripture is in some sense literature, making interaction with literary theory unavoidable in interpretation. For many this turn represented a retreat from the quest for sources behind texts and, unfortunately, away from an interest in the historical world behind the sources. Their focus turned to the final form of the biblical books and the recognition that biblical narratives also create their own narrative worlds through the stories they tell. The literary turn has been compared to shifting from viewing the Bible as a window to seeing it as

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a mirror. Rather than looking through biblical narrative, as through a window, at events referred to by it, interpreters began to focus on the inner workings of the biblical text, like looking at a mirror, and the narrative world it depicts as a source of meaning in itself.

**The Influence of Literary Criticism**

In America, the heritage of church-state separation tended to separate English faculties, where literary studies were pursued, from New Testament faculties in divinity schools, which remained mired in the historical-critical paradigm. However, several developments in modern literary criticism became influential in biblical studies in the later decades of the twentieth century. English critics were turning their attention to the formal features of narrative texts and to developing methodologies for analyzing the connections between these features and the meaning they communicate. Literary critics were abandoning such historical questions as the pursuit of an author’s intended meaning in favor of seeing texts as entities independent from their authors and capable of creating their own meaning as they encounter readers. Called literary formalism and New Criticism early on, the discipline of narratology represents the full flowering of this text-centered methodology.

**Narratology.** The definitions of narratology are as diverse as the perspectives of the scholars who employ the word, and the discipline is constantly in flux. I am especially interested in the earlier efforts of narrative theorists toward developing a systematic approach to the interpretation of narrative. Narratology studies the nature, form, and function of narrative

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45 S. Scott Bartchy, “Narrative Criticism,” in *DLNT*, 788.
50 Paul Cobley, “Narratology,” in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism,*
texts with a threefold goal of (1) examining the formal aspects that various narratives have in common with each other (i.e., all narratives have a narrator, characters, a setting, plot, point of view, and an implied worldview, etc.); (2) accounting for what makes them different from each other; and, (3) understanding how the various parts of a narrative function together to convey meaning to readers. It is important to avoid the same error that historical critics made of reducing interpretation to a mere science of the mechanics of narratives. On the other hand, most narrative texts do have in common basic attributes that impact the reading process and can be recognized and comprehended across languages, cultures, even generations, no matter the genre. Narratology provides helpful tools for examining these attributes, which Bible scholars have taken advantage of through the discipline of narrative criticism.

Narrative Criticism. Narrative criticism focuses on the formal features of narrative discourse and how they work together to convey meaning. David Rhoads and Donald Michie originally developed narrative criticism as an application of the principles of narratology to reading the Gospel of Mark as narrative. Studies of the other Gospel narratives and of Acts soon followed.
Although narratology and narrative criticism are closely related, they differ at an important point. Both seek to understand narrative texts, but narratology is more concerned with developing theories of how narratives work, while narrative criticism uses the theories of narratologists in the work of exegesis. Meir Sternberg’s magisterial *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* develops what he calls a “discourse-oriented analysis” of a narrative text as a pattern of meaning. He asks questions about the rules governing the relationship between the biblical author and his readers, such as: Is this text prose or verse, parable or chronicle, fiction or history? What image of the world does the narrator project for readers? What is the role played by the characters, by the varying settings, and by the movement of time in the narrative? How does the work hang together? How do the individual parts of the narrative relate to the whole?56

Sternberg’s last two questions are of particular importance for our study of summarization in Acts. We have seen that most modern commentators on Acts agree that Luke makes his narrative hang together with numerous brief summaries that connect major episodes. Building on the insights of narrative criticism, I want to argue that, through their subject matter, Luke also skillfully emphasizes important aspects of the unfolding drama of the church for readers, all the while remaining in the narrative mode. Luke’s narrator is the key to his literary accomplishment and to the persuasive effect he seeks to have on readers, which is a primary concern of rhetorical-criticism.

Rhetorical Criticism. Narrative criticism and rhetorical criticism have been linked as two sides of the same coin in the interpretive task. Whereas narrative criticism considers how the formal features of narrative discourse work together to convey meaning, rhetorical criticism focuses on the persuasive effect an author sought to have on readers through his discourse. Contemporary approaches to the rhetorical analysis of the New Testament are diverse and flourishing, ranging from more traditional historical methods to modern and even postmodern approaches. The historical approach, exemplified in the work of George A. Kennedy, compares biblical texts to other ancient texts or to commonly accepted guidelines in ancient rhetorical handbooks in order to understand the kinds of techniques and patterns of persuasion Bible authors might have employed in their writings. More recent approaches, exemplified by Vernon K. Robbins’s socio-rhetorical perspective, deliberately combine traditional tools with multiple contemporary methodologies arising out of modern language theory and hermeneutics.

When rhetoric is mentioned, public speaking usually comes to mind. Luke was educated in an oral culture that valued skillful argumentation and the ability to persuade through speech making. Rhetorical-critical analysis of Acts has focused on the speeches of Acts, rather than narrative sections. However, an education that included rhetoric would surely have impacted not just a student’s thinking and speaking, but his writing as

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well. Luke’s education most likely included training in the progymnasmata, which were collections of speaking and writing exercises for students of rhetoric. Several manuals of progymnasmata survive, including that of Aelius Theon, who was quite possibly a first-century contemporary of Luke. Theon believed that the practice of the exercises was valuable not just for students who wished to become orators, but also for those “who wish to practice the art of the poets or historians.” He also said that the student who learns to express himself well and in a variety of ways in a narrative or a fable “will also compose a history well.” To be sure, Luke’s narrative style in Acts and his message are also deeply influenced by the Old Testament history of God’s people. Yet, Luke also seems to be aware of the kind of narrative conventions one would expect to see in the writings of someone who cut his teeth on the rhetorical manuals and the historians that were part of the standard curriculum of his day. Therefore, as we study the narrative style of the summaries, it will be helpful to ask how Luke uses his narrator to call for a particular response from readers and what situation might have called for Luke to address his readers the


65 Aelius Theon, Progymnasmata 70. Theon instructed students to begin with Herodotus, because of his stylistic simplicity. Then, he encouraged them to go on to Theopompus, Xenophon, Philistus, Ephorus, and Thucydides. See the excellent study of the relevance of the progymnasmata for training in history writing in Craig A. Gibson, “Learning Greek History in the Ancient Classroom: The Evidence of the Treatises on Progymnasmata,” CP 99, no. 2 (2004): 103–29, esp. 116.


way he does. Narrative and rhetorical criticism are well suited for inquiry into these questions.

**A Word about Method**

Before I turn to specific rhetorical features of summarization in chapter 2, a few words about method are in order. First, although narrative criticism has its critics, I believe the qualified use of contemporary narrative theory can greatly aid the exegesis and interpretation of biblical narratives. It would be naive to reject the insights of narrative criticism simply because it arose as a response to an exhausted historical criticism that is still unwilling to abandon its negative assessment of Acts as history. We should study the literary dimensions of Acts, not because it is currently fashionable to do so, but because Acts is great literature. If a contemporary literary term or category helps interpreters see more clearly what is actually present in the text, its qualified use can promote greater accuracy in exegesis.

Second, although I borrow freely from modern literary categories, my approach could arguably still be categorized as historical with regard to authorial intention and historical concerns. I have argued for a more text-focused approach that seeks to understand the way the narrator of Acts interacted with the story he was telling in order to achieve certain effects on readers. Nevertheless, I believe Luke had specific intentions in mind with his narrative and that seeking to understand them is still a worthy goal.

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in interpretation.\textsuperscript{71} I will not bracket out historical concerns either, because I do not share the assumption of the historical-critical method that a theological tendency in Acts of necessity implies an intentional fictionalization of history. Nor do I share the assumption of many narrative critics that a literary approach to Acts requires one to bracket out historical concerns.\textsuperscript{72} I want to understand both the historical situation of the early church and \textit{how} Luke tells his story in order to guide readers toward aspects of the early church’s story he wants to emphasize.

Third, my approach is confessionally rooted in the Christian faith and aimed at strengthening the church. It is important to acknowledge the role of faith in interpretation. I resist the demand for a strictly nonconfessional approach to the Bible as a document of religious history, which often dominates university religion departments.\textsuperscript{73} Much can be learned from diverse perspectives, including those who do not share the Christian worldview. However, Christians need not leave their faith in Christ and their confidence in the trustworthiness of Scripture at the door when they wrestle with Acts from a literary perspective. Reading Acts historically, theologically, and as literature conflicts with reading Acts as Scripture only if we decide in advance that it will.

\textbf{Summary}

The introduction proposed the thesis that Luke intended his descriptions of life in the Jerusalem church in the summary narratives as exemplary portraits for readers. Chapter 1 demonstrated that the summary narratives were overshadowed in twentieth-century scholarship on Acts


by the historical-critical method, which undermined confidence in their historical reliability and cut them off from their surrounding context in Acts. Thus, their contribution to the overall theological vision of Acts, especially Luke’s theology of church life, has not been emphasized sufficiently. Chapter 2 will demonstrate that the summary narratives are at the heart of Luke’s vision for life together in the local church.