

THE RECOVERY OF LUKE-ACTS AS “GRAND NARRATIVE” FOR THE CHURCH’S EVANGELISTIC AND EDIFICATION TASKS IN A POSTMODERN AGE

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I. INTRODUCTION

One of the marks of postmodernism is the awareness of the loss of modernity’s meta-narrative which gave western culture its coherence and sense of purpose.¹ One of the marks of classic evangelical hermeneutics is the loss of Biblical narrative as the source of normative teaching.² One of the marks of evangelical revisioning of the Biblical grand narrative is to concentrate on the sweep of salvation history from creation to Jesus’ resurrection–ascension–session and then skip to the consummation at his return.³ Yet a key component in Biblical narrative, namely Acts, is more often than not overlooked. Since Jesus’ ministry and teaching are usually viewed synthetically, the distinctive contributions of the individual Gospel narratives are lost, in our case the Gospel of Luke. Yet, Luke-Acts’ genre, occasion, and purpose, and content and themes reveal that it is eminently qualified to aid the church in its edification, and particularly its evangelistic tasks, in the postmodern age. This paper will overview the postmodern approach to meta-narrative, assess the current evangelical hermeneutical approach to normativity in narrative, and note Luke-Acts’ role, or lack thereof, in evangelicals’ proposals of Biblical meta-narrative to the postmodern. In the light of the current state of the discussion in each of these arenas, this article will argue for Luke-Acts as a “grand narrative” which the church should use, not only for its own edification, but also for evangelism in the postmodern context.

II. POSTMODERN APPROACHES

Postmodern approaches define meta-narrative as “a story we tell ourselves, about what we do, and what is expected; it is a story that links our smaller stories together and gives us unity, social, psychological and intellectual.”⁴

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¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Vol. 10: *Theory and History of Literature* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) xxiv.

² J. R. W. Stott, *The Baptism and Fullness of the Holy Spirit* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1964) 8.

³ K. H. Kwok, “Postmodernism and Christianity,” available from <http://www.vlsi.uwaterloo.ca/~khwok/postmodern/postmodernism.html>; J. R. Middleton and B. J. Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995) chap. 5.

⁴ J. E. Faulconer, “Term Definitions: ‘Definitions’ of Some Terms in Postmodernism,” accessed 9/5/98; available from <http://jamesfaulconer.byu.edu>.

It is the grand overarching narrative which is regarded as “really true,” for it legitimates some knowledge, beliefs, and practices that explain our culture in terms of origin and destiny and the power that sustains us. At the same time it marginalizes other knowledge, beliefs, and practices. Bruce Janz gives these characteristics of meta-narrative, some of which may be peculiar to modernity’s meta-narrative. It totalizes reality (explains everything); is based on the rational self (instead of tradition); is the principle of legitimation; is abstract; and is emancipatory.⁵

According to Jean-François Lyotard, the modern grand narrative contained the themes: progressive emancipation of reason and freedom; progressive emancipation of labor; improvement of all humanity through progress of capitalist techno-science; and the salvation of humanity through the conversion of souls to the Christian meta-narrative of martyred love.⁶ As Lyotard viewed the history of the last half of the twentieth century, he became convinced that one should adopt “an incredulity toward metanarratives.”⁷ Modernist grand narratives had blown themselves up: Hegel/Nietzsche at Auschwitz (World War II); Marx at Budapest (1956); Liberal capitalism in Paris (1968). In these violent, oppressive, even inhumane events, meta-narratives revealed both their epistemological and moral bankruptcy.

Morally, grand narratives interpret reality in a “totalizing” manner, so that they marginalize any individuals or groups that are different from the ideals of the narrative. The meta-narrative often promulgates the ideals embodied by the cultural elite. In fact, the meta-narrative can legitimize the “totalizing violence” that its adherents, those in power, may exercise against those “at the margins.” In the case of Auschwitz, Budapest, and Paris, the marginalized were the Jews, the freedom fighters, and the students. Lyotard concluded, “We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one . . . The answer is: let us wage a war on totality, let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name.”⁸ Lyotard does not exempt the “Christian meta-narrative” from such an indictment. In describing the modern missionary movement he says, “The Christian West colonized the rest of the world and raped their land, their labor, and their women in the name of martyred love.”⁹ Indeed, Walsh and Middleton point out that any commending of the Biblical meta-narrative to the postmodern must address the “accusation of totalization and violence.”¹⁰

Lyotard also critiqued the coercive effects of a particular theme of modernity’s meta-narrative: progress fueling ever-advancing information technology.

⁵ Bruce Janz, “RE: Modernity,” <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-ideas&month=9503&week=c&msg=62P61f%2b/2FJwQPeL%2bQJVDQ&user=&pw=>

⁶ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence, 1982–1985* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993) 17.

⁷ Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition* xxiv.

⁸ *Ibid.* 81–82.

⁹ Lyotard, *Postmodern Explained* 17.

¹⁰ J. R. Middleton and B. J. Walsh, “Facing the Postmodern Scapel: Can the Christian Faith Withstand Deconstruction?” *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World* (ed. T. R. Phillips and D. L. Okholm; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995) 154.

He finds technology fully complicit with narrativity and warns about the dangers of a generalized computerization of society: ". . . the growth of power is taking the route of data storage accessibility, and the operativity of information."¹¹ Mark Poster wonders whether the "explosion of narrativity" on the Internet, with many individuals telling their stories, will result in Lyotard's best dream—the promotion of a proliferation of the "little narratives" of post-modern culture—or his worst nightmare: the invigoration of a developing authoritarian technocracy.

Meta-narratives are morally suspect, because they are epistemologically suspect. For the postmodern, no meta-narrative is large and open enough to include the experiences and realities of all people.¹² Meta-narratives invariably serve to legitimate the power structures of some, and that is why the trivialization and marginalization of the experiences of others occur.

More foundationally, the postmodern with his understanding of the social construction of knowledge sees a meta-narrative as simply the extension of metaphysical systems discredited for their "realist" claims. In the postmodern approach, the articulation of knowledge about reality via language is representation which "now self-consciously acknowledges its existence as representation—that is, as interpreting (indeed creating) its referent, not as offering direct and immediate access to it."¹³ As one notice over the Internet from the University of Georgia put it: "Modernism asks: 'How do I live in this world?' Postmodernism asks: 'Who am I, and what world is it?'"¹⁴

The postmodern, then, questions the stability, even independent status, of knowing subject and referent, the two components which are essential if a text, let alone a meta-narrative, is to communicate and be properly interpreted. Technology appears to further the instability through the phenomena of internet cyberspace and virtual reality, while at the same time exposing meta-narrative's culturally-conditioned foundations. So Katherine Hayles defines the "revolutionary potential" of virtual reality as the ability to "expose the presuppositions underlying the social formations of late capitalism and to open new fields of play where the dynamics have not yet rigidified and new kinds of moves are possible."¹⁵ Mark Poster proposes, "Virtual reality machines should be able to allow the participant to enter imagined worlds with convincing verisimilitude, releasing immense potentials for fantasy, self-discovery and self-construction. . . . From the club that extends and replaces the arm to virtual reality in cyberspace, technology has evolved to mime and to multiply, to multiplex and to improve upon the real."¹⁶

This article has linked the philosophical critique of meta-narrative to the implications of information technology because, although some Americans through their university experience will meet critiques of meta-narrative, either assumed or expressed, many more will be impacted by the phenomena

¹¹ Cited in M. Poster, *The Second Media Age* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) 37.

¹² Middleton and Walsh, "Facing the Postmodern Scapel" 139.

¹³ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger* 165.

¹⁴ "Postmodernism," <http://virtual.park.uga.edu-caudle/postmodern.html>.

¹⁵ Poster, *Second Media Age* 38.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 39–40.

of cyberspace and virtual reality. This technology can (unconsciously) so reshape their thinking that it will make doubly difficult the embracing of the Biblical meta-narrative. The foundational issues of the independent, as well as the interdependent, status of the knowing subject and referent (reality) must be consciously faced. In fact, if this impact is not thought through, churches, as Van Gelder contends, will continue to find themselves trapped in its "third disestablishment" in American history, still mired in the collapse of Christian culture which took place about a generation ago in the 1960s and 1970s. In this condition, churches have little or no ability to speak to the not so newly emerged secularity with its pluralism of worldviews and of paradigms for truth. Their role will remain reduced to having minimal influence on individuals who are "making decisions from the new epistemology of self and situation."¹⁷

III. EVANGELICAL APPROACHES

Before the recent crop of evangelical hermeneutics texts in the nineties, there was little explicit instruction on how to derive normative teaching from Biblical historical narrative. The post-World War II classic treatments of Ramm and Mickelsen do not deal with the issue in this form.¹⁸ Stott denied the possibility of recovering normative teaching from Biblical narrative with the following guideline: "The revelation of the purpose of God in Scripture should be sought in its *didactic*, rather than its *historical* parts."¹⁹ Stott's guideline seems to have appeared in response to Pentecostal normative use of the historical narrative of Acts. Since non-Pentecostal evangelical scholars approached Biblical historical narrative as, by and large, uninterpreted reports of historical events, they saw no need to develop very far the tools for discriminating between what an author intended as normative and what he did not. McQuilkin, however, does address the issue with this qualifier: "If an event is not interpreted in Scripture, it may not be used to derive a doctrine or principle of conduct."²⁰

The newer evangelical hermeneutics texts, on the other hand, approach historical narrative as literary narrative devoting whole chapters to narrative criticism within whole sections on genre analysis.²¹ Although the appropriate caution about finding more normative content in Biblical narrative than the Biblical writer intended is still present, evangelicals now appear to be quite comfortable with an understanding that Biblical narrative does con-

¹⁷ C. Van Gelder, "A Great New Fact of Our Day: America as a Mission Field," *Missiology* 19 (1991) 415.

¹⁸ B. Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics for Conservative Protestants* (Boston: Wilde, 1950) 97–113; A. B. Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963) 344.

¹⁹ Stott, *Baptism and Fullness* 8.

²⁰ J. Robertson McQuilkin, *Understanding and Applying the Bible* (Chicago: Moody, 1983) 259.

²¹ G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991); W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg, R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993).

tain normative theological teaching.²² Notice that, in their hermeneutical discussions, progressive dispensationalists label Biblical narrative "theological narrative"; those practicing a covenant hermeneutic call it "theological history."²³

Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton have been the most aggressive in commending the entire Biblical narrative to the postmodern as a healing, transforming meta-narrative able to rescue him from his anxious disorientation in a world from which he has banished all grand narratives. Both chapter five of *Truth Is Stranger than It Used to Be* and their contribution to *Christian Apologetics in the Post Modern World* develop the grand sweep of the redemptive history of the Creator/Liberator God from Creation to Christ's death and resurrection.²⁴ When they deal with the Gospels' content, they do so on the synthetic level of Jesus' teaching. The distinctive contribution of the Third Gospel receives no attention. They then skip Acts [except to mention how its speeches model such a grand narrative] and move on to the consummation—the coming of the king and his final kingdom. K. H. Kwok shows a similar approach when he outlines the Biblical meta-narrative and under the last heading, "Climax," records "the New Testament through Jesus, the Messiah, a descendant of David, who died on the cross and got resurrected by God to redeem man from sin; the second coming of Jesus Christ (the consummation)."²⁵ To be fair, when Brian Walsh appropriates N. T. Wright's presentation of Scripture as an unfinished drama, he does call Act V scene 1 (the story of the early church), presumably Acts.²⁶ Walsh and Middleton do a good job in tracing out the main themes in the teaching of Jesus (the Gospels), which relevantly address postmodern concerns. At the same time, given the lack of particular focus on either Luke or Acts, they leave room for expounding Luke-Acts' content to display its value for evangelizing the postmodern and edifying Christians living in such a context.

The genre of Luke-Acts accommodates the role of meta-narrative, especially for the postmodern. David Aune classifies Luke-Acts' literary genre as "general history" analogous to general and antiquarian histories which "focused on the history of a particular people (typically the Greeks or Romans) from its mythical beginnings to a point in the recent past, including contacts (usually conflicts) with other national groups in various geographical theaters."²⁷ Sterling argues for it as "apologetic historiography," which functions

²² Klein, Blomberg, Hubbard, *Introduction* 348; G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993) chap. 6.

²³ D. L. Bock and C. A. Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1993) 86; D. McCartney and C. Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1994) 210; cf. B. R. Gaventa, "Towards a Theology of Acts: Reading and Re-reading," *Int* 42 (1988) 146–157.

²⁴ Middleton and Walsh, *Truth is Stranger* chap. 5; "Facing the Postmodern Scapel" 131–154.

²⁵ Kwok, "Postmodernism and Christianity."

²⁶ B. J. Walsh, "Reimagining Biblical Authority," *Christian Scholar's Review* 26 (1996) 215; cf. N. T. Wright, "How can the Bible be Authoritative?" *Vox Evangelica* 21 (1991) 7–32.

²⁷ D. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 139.

to define a people, or better to redefine them in reaction to Greek ethnography.²⁸ Witherington further nuances this definition by pointing out that Luke presents Christianity as a cross-cultural social movement that “crosses ethnic boundaries, indeed is a universal religion, inclusive of all ethnic groups.”²⁹

Focusing on Acts, Douglas Edwards compares it with Chariton of Aphrodisias’s promotion of the Aphrodite cult in the romance *Chaereas and Callirhoe*.³⁰ In the process he shows how both “communicate to audiences in the Greek East that power represented in political figures or historical events operates under the aegis of their group’s deity—reassuring news to marginal persons who sought to operate within a ‘web of power’ that bound local groups in the Greek East to an outside power, Imperial Rome.”³¹

Such characterizations of Luke-Acts’ genre clearly speak to the postmodern’s moral and epistemological concerns about meta-narrative. Any narrative which gives the history of a people, which, as Witherington contends, is a multi-ethnic, universal movement, is certainly large enough to function as a meta-narrative for all peoples. Any narrative written, as Edwards contends, to enable a marginalized people to cope with the external “web of power” can hardly be rightly employed to marginalize others and legitimate “totalizing violence” against them. Indeed, Luke’s concern for the poor, women, and the religio-social outcast, especially in his Gospel, is well documented.³²

IV. THE PURPOSE OF LUKE-ACTS

Given the length and complexity of Luke-Acts (it accounts for twenty-five percent of the NT), it has been difficult to achieve scholarly consensus on its occasion and purpose. The majority view sees it as a church document written to edify Christians, who, under pressures of internal doubts and external persecution, are questioning the church’s universal character and mission. Theophilus and the Roman upper middle class reading public he represents have been instructed and have embraced the Christian faith, but need reassurance (Luke 1:4). If the overall narrative aim of Luke-Acts is to demonstrate that God’s salvific purpose involves a universal scope in the application of salvation, then, Luke’s audience needs to be reassured either that this saving good news is indeed for them. They need to know that, as Gentiles, their involvement in what began as a Jewish movement is not a mistake and/or that they must faithfully participate in witnessing to others as part of God’s salvific project.³³ Judaizing pressures from within (cf. Luke 18:19; Acts 15:1–2; 21:20–21) and persecution from without, especially

²⁸ G. Sterling, “Luke-Acts and Apologetic Historiography” (SBLSP 1989; ed. D. J. Lull; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989) 326–342.

²⁹ Ben Witherington III, “Finding Its Niche: The Historical and Rhetorical Species of Acts” (SBLSP 1996; Atlanta: Scholars, 1996) 81.

³⁰ D. R. Edwards, “Acts of the Apostles and the Graeco-Roman World: Narrative Communication in Social Contexts” (SBLSP 1989; ed. D. J. Lull; Atlanta: Scholars, 1989) 362–377.

³¹ *Ibid.* 377.

³² D. L. Bock, “Luke, Gospel of,” *DJG* 495–510; J. B. Green, “Acts of the Apostles,” *DLNTD* 7–24.

³³ Bock, “Luke” 498; Green, “Acts” 14, 17.

opposition from Jews (cf. Luke 12:11–12; 21:12; Acts 17:5–9; 18:13; 21:28–31; 23:14; 24:4–5; 28:19, 22), created an environment which could readily raise such doubts. Romans and Philippians, written to and in the Roman context of the late fifties and early sixties, provide corroborating evidence of such internal and external opposition (Rom 10:1–21; 14:1–6; Phil 3:1–16; Rom 15:31; 16:20; Phil 1:28–30). Why stay in, let alone invite others into, such a mixed-race group in which your standing is constantly called into question by a segment of the “founding race” (the Jews) and you are severely persecuted by hostile, unbelieving members of that same race?

Such a narrative aim and occasion for Luke-Acts, however, also fits reading it as a missions document with an evangelistic purpose. If the Roman upper middle class reading public has simply been informed of Christianity, then, it must deal with the many voices contesting Christianity’s value. Their initial natural reaction would be, at the least, to dismiss this foreign eastern cult and, at the most, to despise it (Acts 16:20–21; 25:18–20; Rom 1:13–17). When Tacitus and Suetonius describe the persecution of Christians under Nero in the mid-sixties, they term Christianity “a pernicious superstition . . . a disease . . . horrible or shameful; a new and mischievous superstition” (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.44; Suetonius, *Nero* 16.2). Moberly judges that Luke’s work would have seemed “subversive, anti-social and foolish” to most men of the equestrian class.³⁴ This accords well with Edwards’ estimate of the function of Luke-Acts’ genre in its social context.

To add to the confusion, as these Roman inquirers became more familiar with the Christian community, they would be drawn into the intramural debate over the nature of salvation by grace through faith. They would have encountered Judaizers questioning the legitimacy of a salvation for Gentiles by grace apart from Jewish regulations and would have been treated as “second-class” citizens unless they embraced Judaism.

Finally, the Jewish community in Rome actively persecuted Christians branding them as members of a heretical, disorderly sect, not loyal to Judaism and hardly innocent before the state. Such a movement was unworthy of the allegiance of traditional, law-abiding Romans.

Another look at Luke’s explicit statement of purpose, “to reassure you of the truth of all you were taught,” also opens up the possibility of an evangelistic purpose for Luke-Acts (Luke 1:4). Although *katēcheō* eventually became a technical term in the church for the instruction of new believers, in Biblical usage it can also refer simply to informing someone about something. Luke uses it both ways in Acts (instructing, Acts 18:25; informing, 21:21, 24). The phrasing of Luke 1:4 parallels Acts 21:21, 24 where *katēcheō* means “to inform.” Such a reading of the preface supports an evangelistic purpose.

If the informing points to an initial exposure to Christianity, then the “all” (literally, *logōn* “of the things”) probably refers to the content of the gospel. That gospel, summarized in Luke 24:46–48, has two parts: “salvation accomplished”—Jesus said, “It was written long ago that the Messiah must suffer and die and rise again from the dead on the third day”; and

³⁴ R. B. Moberly, “When was Acts Planned and Shaped?” *EvQ* 65 (1993) 23.

“salvation applied”—“With my authority, take this message of repentance to all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem: ‘There is forgiveness of sins for all who turn to me.’ You are witnesses of all these things.” The Gospel of Luke is written to confirm the truth of “salvation accomplished.” Luke pens Acts to provide a basis for certainty that the “salvation applied” portion of the gospel is true and is for his contemporaries. Understanding Luke 1:4 in this way, then, requires that we see Theophilus as the object of evangelism, not catechesis. Luke’s work does, indeed, also answer the question: Why join such a mixed-race group where a segment of Jews are pressuring you to adopt their lifestyle, while there unbelieving compatriots are targeting you with severe persecution?

V. LUKE-ACTS AS “GRAND NARRATIVE”

Luke-Acts’ occasion and purpose, whether viewed as evangelism or edification, do qualify it as meta-narrative. A meta-narrative’s purpose/function is to address “questions of ultimacy.”³⁵ And the “questions of ultimacy” Luke-Acts addresses actually speak to the particular concerns of the postmodern. Is the gospel really for me? Do I want to stay with this new identity? They wrestle with the question, “Who am I?” Can I be sure that the “reality” of participating in God’s saving grace and his reign is reality indeed, and one which I will want to invite others to share? In other words, has the Christian Good News correctly answered the question, “What world is it?”

The content and themes of Luke-Acts, the way it answers “questions of ultimacy,” provides a meta-narrative which is morally and epistemologically satisfying to the postmodern. Luke-Acts is morally satisfying, because, as elsewhere in Scripture, it presents the kingdom people of God as a marginalized, suffering people. Their king and savior, Jesus, begins his life as a displaced person, as his parents answer the imperial order for tax registration (Luke 2:1–7). He ends it in a severe miscarriage of justice, crucified by Roman authorities yielding to mob hysteria (23:13–25). Luke’s portrayal in his Gospel lets us know the one through whom God accomplished salvation suffered at the margins. Whether it be the Jewish Sanhedrin power structure confronting “unschooled and uncredentialed” Christian witnesses (Acts 4:13) or the might of Rome treating Paul detained in the temple as just another provincial messianic pretender fit only for scourging as part of interrogation (21:37–40; 22:24–25), Acts presents Christians living at the margins and suffering for it.

Luke-Acts excludes the legitimation of “totalizing violence” of the majority against the minority through modeling a multi-ethnic diversity within the church, the restored people of God, which embraces both Jew and Gentile. In Luke’s Gospel, although there is a Jewish center to Jesus’ saving mission, it is not particularist, to the Jew only. Not only does Luke himself highlight the universal scope of Jesus’ saving work, as he introduces Jesus

³⁵ Walsh, “Reimagining Biblical Authority” 211.

and John the Baptist (Luke 2:32; 3:6/Isa 40:5; Luke 3:38), he presents it in Jesus' words and deeds. Jesus receives Gentiles who come to him and commends their receptivity (e.g. Luke 7:1–10; 8:26–39; 10:12–16, 33; 11:30–32; 17:11–19). He implicitly or explicitly makes universalist statements about his mission (4:25–27; 13:27–29; 14:21–24; 21:24). In Acts, in the "salvation applied" phase of the Lord's saving mission, the church embodies this multi-ethnic diversity as it lives out what it professes: God's will is to take, not only from the Jews, but also from the Gentiles, "a people for his name" (Acts 15:14; cf. 2:39; 10:34–36). As the Jerusalem Council deliberations and decree, as well as Paul's actions on his final Jerusalem visit, show, such multi-ethnic diversity will respect cultural differences and promote unity in the one people of God (15:23–29; 21:23–27).

Luke-Acts addresses "authoritarian technocracy" through presenting "release"—freedom from the bondage to sin and the authority of Satan—as a central way to understand salvation blessings. In his Gospel, Luke, through setting Isa 61:1–2/Luke 4:16–31 as the programmatic text for Jesus' saving mission during his earthly life, places "release" (*aphesis*) for the captives as a central task. And his spiritual interpretation of "release" as "forgiveness of sins" in the rest of his Gospel (1:77; 3:3; 5:23–24; 7:47–49; 24:47) sets the foundation for this most basic of salvation blessings in the "salvation applied" phase. Consequently, in Acts, the reception of forgiveness of sins is central to the Good News (Acts 2:38; 5:31; 10:43; 13:38; 26:18–20). At the same time, Luke does not hesitate to show us how this saving "release" extends to breaking Satan's authority. Not only does Jesus bring relief from demonic oppression during his earthly ministry (Luke 4:33–37; 6:18–19; 7:21; 8:2, 26–39; 9:37–43; 11:14–23; 13:10–17, 32), but as his disciples apply this salvation message in his name during his life-time and after his ascension-exaltation, Satan's authority in individual lives is broken (10:17–20; Acts 5:16; 8:7; 16:18; 19:12).

Luke-Acts also relativizes all human authority, no matter how authoritarian, by showing that at every turn God is sovereignly on mission, working with, against, in spite of the powers that be to accomplish his saving purposes. In Jesus' mission, the relativization manifests itself, less in terms of triumphs in particular events, for Jesus' path is a path of suffering and death at the hands of sinful human authorities. The relativization is present more in Jesus' and Luke's interpretation of that path. In his temptation, Jesus refuses to bow to Satan's real, though derived and limited, authority expressed through the political powers (Luke 4:6–8). As Jesus moves to Jerusalem, human authority holds no real threat for him, since he is under divine necessity (13:31–33). Even when he speaks of his suffering and death, it is divine appointment which works in the betrayer's moves (22:21–23); it is the fulfillment of Isa 53:12, which occurs in his "being numbered with transgressors" in crucifixion (22:35–38). At the same time, Luke is very much aware of the way that human authority is a willing tool of Satanic spiritual forces as he traces the Devil's involvement in Jesus' betrayal, arrest, and subsequent suffering and death (22:3, 53; 23:23–25).

In Acts, God's continuous advance in mission leaves the Sanhedrin and Herod thwarted at every turn from fully accomplishing their purposes (Acts 4:19–20, 31; 5:19–21, 41–42; 12:6–19). Rome becomes the protector of Paul providing him with safe passage to Rome, where, as all along the way, he fulfills God's destiny for him as witness to the gospel (19:21; 23:11; 28:31; cf. the role of Romans officials, 21:32–28:30).

Luke-Acts is epistemologically satisfying, because it provides a narrative large enough for the postmodern. This is true, not only in terms of its genre, occasion, and purpose, but also from the explicit space-time framework in which Luke sets his narrative. The universalist scope of Jesus' saving mission, embracing all cultures, has already been duly noted (Luke 2:31–32; 3:6, 38). Luke matches this with time markers placing the narrative within empire-wide first-century history (2:1–2; 3:1–2). In Acts, too, the church's mission of applying salvation has a universalist scope (Acts 1:6–8; 2:39; 10:42–43; 13:46–47; 15:7–11; 28:28). It progresses within the framework of the "whole inhabited world" (*oikoumenē*), as Luke makes us aware of empire-wide events (Acts 11:28; cf. 17:6; 24:5). In time, Luke brackets this period of mission with the central event in human history: the Lord's resurrection and ascension/exaltation at the Father's right hand and that same Lord's return (1:6–11; 3:21).

Luke-Acts' momentum and "open-ended" character creates a dynamic which not only assures that its narrative will never be eclipsed as meta-narrative but winsomely invites its readers to participate in its message. In Luke's Gospel, the writer prepares for this momentum not only by Jesus' predictions of witness to the nations until their times are complete (Luke 21:13, 24), but especially by the risen Lord's declaration of promise that the disciples would proclaim repentance unto the forgiveness of sins in his name among all the nations (24:46–48). In Acts, the promise is reiterated and fulfilled as, by the Spirit's power, the gospel progresses to the ends of the earth and crosses all cultural thresholds to Hebrew-speaking and Greek-speaking Jews, to Samaritans, to God-fearing Gentiles, and to pagan Gentiles (Acts 1:8; 2:1–41; 8:4–8; 10:1–11:18; 11:20–22). As the summaries at the end of many of Acts' panels underscore, the momentum is centrifugal, and, one might add, one of growth (2:47; 6:7; 9:31; 12:25; 19:20).

Moreover, the Luke-Acts narrative is open-ended. At the conclusion of the first volume, the reader, along with the disciples, has his marching orders, but is instructed to wait for the Spirit (Luke 24:44–48). Acts (Acts 28:31) concludes with the adverb "unhindered." It truly models the application of salvation as an "unfinished drama" to be lived out in each spiritual generation.³⁶ It calls the postmodern to embrace this gospel message and to pass it on.

Luke-Acts also provides "epistemological satisfaction" for the postmodern's project—the "social construction of knowledge." It has answers that projects central questions: "Who am I? What world is this?"

³⁶ Ibid. 215–218; cf. C. Cook, "Travellers' Tales and After Dinner Speeches: the Shape of the Acts of the Apostles," *New Blackfriars* 74 (1993) 441–457.

Acts, when it interacts with animistic, materialist, and pantheistic world views, through an appeal to our common humanity, most directly and helpfully speaks to these questions (Acts 14 and 17). These speeches offer the themes of the givenness of creation (17:24–25); the witness of general revelation (14:15–17); humans created by God, accountable to him, yet fallen (17:26–29); Christ's death and resurrection as both proof of humankind's ultimate accountability to God and the basis for the good news of release from sin, ignorance, and spiritual blindness through repentance (17:30–31; 26:16–23). All are the building blocks from which one may construct answers which will both challenge and, if embraced, liberate the postmodern.

Luke's Gospel provides the postmodern with a radical concept, the "kingdom of God," which will deconstruct his very understanding of the "social construction of knowledge" project. When he permits the present inbreaking of the "reign of God" to answer for him the question "What world is this?" (Luke 16:16; 10:9, 11; 17:21); when he accepts that "Who am I?" can be answered in no other terms than of coming under God's reign (6:20; 7:28; 10:20), then he will be in a position to live life freely and wholly. As Luke would put it, he will know what it means to be "saved" (19:20; Acts 4:12; 16:31).

VI. CONCLUSION

If Luke-Acts is serviceable as meta-narrative for the postmodern context, how should the church use it? Preaching Luke-Acts evangelistically is one way. Using Acts as a framework for understanding the other books of the NT, representing a propositional epistle within the context of narrative, is another. What about a series of evangelistic Bible studies or businesspersons' luncheons entitled, "How It All Began . . . Origins of the Christian Faith—Studies in Luke-Acts"? Each session title begins with the stem: "It began with" and is completed as follows:

It began with:

- "The Great Invasion" (Luke 1–2)
- "A Word that Liberates" (Luke 6–8)
- "Kingdom Values and Perspectives" (Luke 16–18)
- "Marginalized Suffering on Purpose" (Luke 22–23)
- "The Risen and Ascended Lord and the Spirit" (Luke 24; Acts 1–4)
- "A Caring and Racially Reconciled Community" (Acts 4:32–5:11; 10–11; 15)
- "Good News of Grace" (Acts 13–14, Paul's First Missionary Journey)
- "The Risen Christ's Challenge to Culture" (Acts 15:36–18:23, Paul's Second Missionary Journey)
- "Power for Everyday Living" (Acts 18:23–21:17, Paul's Third Missionary Journey)
- "Mission under God's Hand" (Acts 21:18–28:31)