

UNITY IN ACTS: IDEALIZATION OR REALITY?

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This article will respond to the tendency in some Lukan studies to assume that the presence of the theme of unity in Acts necessarily entails an unrealistic idealization of the unity of the church.¹ Following a summary of the material in Acts that highlights the theme of unity, this article will briefly note those studies that regard this material as evidence of unrealistic idealization, then several assumptions about the nature of historicity relevant to the theme of unity in Acts will be clarified. The article will then argue that the evidence of ancient discussions of unity and the narrative of Acts itself indicate that it is misreading Luke to assume his portrait of the unity of the Christian community is simply unrealistic idealization.²

I. SUMMARY OF REFERENCES TO UNITY IN ACTS

With regard to the unity of the church, Acts draws attention to the “togetherness” of the early Christian community (frequently using terminology such as ὁμοθυμαδόν, πᾶς, and ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό): praying together (Acts 1:14; 2:42; 4:24), being together (Acts 1:15; 2:1, 44, 47; 5:12), holding everything in common (Acts 2:44), being of one heart and mind in agreement (Acts 4:32; 15:25), and sharing possessions (Acts 2:45; 4:32, 34).³ Furthermore, disputes are resolved. The Ananias and Sapphira incident (Acts 5:1–11) is surrounded by summary passages that highlight the unity of the people of God and the continuing spread of the gospel (Acts 4:32–37; 5:12–16). Similarly, the complaint of the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews (Acts 6:1–7) is resolved and surrounded by statements that highlight the continuing spread of the word (Acts 6:1, 7; note that in 6:5 Luke points out that the proposal pleased the whole group, παντὸς τοῦ πλήθους). Likewise, the Cornelius incident

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¹ The terminology of “Idealization or Reality” used in the title of this article reflects that used in S. S. Bartchy, “Community of Goods in Acts: Idealization or Social Reality?” in *The Future of Christianity: Essays in Honor of Helmut Koester* (ed. B. A. Pearson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 309–18.

² For further discussion of the themes of unity and disunity in the context of ancient literature and the narrative of Acts see the author’s forthcoming monograph *The Unity of the Church in Acts in Its Literary Setting*, published by T & T Clark.

³ J. Dupont, “L’union entre les premiers chrétiens dans les Actes des Apôtres,” *NRTh* 91 (1969) 897–915, draws attention to, among other things, Luke’s use of κοινωνία, κοινός, ἅπαντα κοινά, and μία ψυχή.

and subsequent criticism from the circumcised believers in Jerusalem (Acts 10:1–11:18) is resolved (Acts 11:18, ἀκούσαντες δὲ ταῦτα ἠσούχασαν καὶ ἐδόξασαν τὸν θεόν), as is the disagreement recorded in chapter 15 (Luke notes in Acts 15:22 the unity after the council of the apostles and elders and also “the whole church,” σὺν ὅλῃ τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ). In 15:15 James is also reported as drawing attention to the “harmony” (συμφωνέω) between the report of Peter (and that of Barnabas and Paul) concerning God’s inclusion of the Gentiles and “the words of the prophets.” The agreement between the apostolic message and “all the law and the prophets” continues to be a recurring theme throughout the narrative (Acts 24:14; 25:8; 26:22; cf. Acts 10:43; Luke 24:44) culminating in the remarkable agreement between Paul, Isaiah, and the Holy Spirit at the conclusion of the narrative (Acts 28:25).⁴ These examples indicate that for Luke the unity of the Christian community is important.

II. EVIDENCE OF IDEALIZATION?

Discussions of the historical reliability of Acts quickly turn to, among other things, an examination of issues such as:⁵ the Paul of Acts and the Paul of the letters,⁶ the historicity of the Jerusalem Council and its relationship to Galatians 2,⁷ the nature of the speeches in Acts (in relation to historians such as Thucydides),⁸ the historical details that describe the persons, places, and travels in Acts,⁹ the “we-sections,”¹⁰ and the genre of

⁴ Cf. F. Bovon, “How Well the Holy Spirit Spoke through the Prophet Isaiah to Your Ancestors!” (Acts 28:25),” in *New Testament Traditions and Apocryphal Narratives* (PTMS 36; Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1995) 43–50; D. Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian: Writing the Acts of the Apostles* (SNTSMS 121; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 149, 224; D. W. Pao, “Disagreement Among the Jews in Acts 28,” in *Early Christian Voices in Texts, Traditions, and Symbols: Essays in Honor of François Bovon* (ed. D. H. Warren, A. G. Brock, and D. W. Pao; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 109–18.

⁵ Cf. the general summaries of issues in C. Talbert, “What Is Meant by the Historicity of Acts?” in *Reading Acts: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 1997) 237–54; reprinted in idem, *Reading Luke-Acts in Its Mediterranean Milieu* (NovTSup 107; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 197–217; C. K. Barrett, “The Historicity of Acts,” *JTS* 50 (1999) 515–34.

⁶ Cf. F. F. Bruce, “Is the Paul of Acts the Real Paul?” *BJRL* 58 (1975–76) 282–305; cf. the summary of literature and common arguments in chapter nine of S. E. Porter, *The Paul of Acts: Essays in Literary Criticism, Rhetoric, and Theology* (WUNT 115; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999) 187–206 (“The Paul of Acts and the Paul of the Letters: Some Common Conceptions and Misconceptions”).

⁷ Cf. C. K. Barrett, “How History Should be Written,” in *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts* (ed. B. Witherington III; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 33–57, for a comparison of Baur and Lightfoot; Cf. C. J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (WUNT 49; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989) 277–307.

⁸ Cf. W. J. McCoy, “In the Shadow of Thucydides,” in *History, Literature, and Society* 3–32; S. E. Porter, “Thucydides 1.22.1 and Speeches in Acts: Is There a Thucydidean View?” *NovT* 32 (1990) 121–42.

⁹ Cf. Hemer, *Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, especially 101–243; *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting* (5 vols; ed. B. W. Winter, I. H. Marshall, and D. W. Gill; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993–1996).

¹⁰ Cf. C.-J. Thornton, *Der Zeuge des Zeugen. Lukas als Historiker der Paulusreisen* (WUNT 56; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1991) 83–197.

Acts.¹¹ With respect to the theme of the unity of the church, many have argued that Luke's portrait of the unity of the church in Acts is due to an idealization unrelated to historical reality. This idealization is primarily said to be (1) an attempted cover up for deep division;¹² (2) a nostalgic (and uninformed) look back to the past;¹³ or (3) a creative (and unrealistic) portrait of a Golden Age beginning.¹⁴ The frequent assumption in these claims is that Luke's emphasis on the theme of unity must therefore mean that he is engaging in unrealistic idealization. Thus, first, Tyson observes the theme of harmony in Acts and the use of the term ὁμοθυμαδόν and then merely assumes that "these themes would tend to confirm Baur's judgment that Acts was written as a consensus document" and furthermore that "they also show that behind the text there lurks the menace of fragmentation."¹⁵ Similarly, second, Barrett notes the supposed absence of the controversies found in Paul's letters that he thinks *should* be recorded in Acts and therefore suggests that this must be due to a combination of the following options.

Was Luke deliberately concealing disreputable features of the Christian past, consciously deceiving his readers with a view to presenting an acceptable picture of the apostolic age? Was his motive the more positive one of minimizing past differences with a view to bringing into being an agreed version of the Christian faith shorn of possibly offensive elements? Was he concerned simply to produce an edifying story, telling only the good features of the past so that his contemporaries might learn from them how to live and how to preach as Christians? Was his intention apologetic, an attempt to show the public and

¹¹ Cf. L. C. A. Alexander, "Fact, Fiction and the Genre of Acts," *NTS* 44 (1998) 380–99; cf. Hemer, *Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* 33–43, 63–100.

¹² J. Kremer, "Konflikte und Konfliktlösung in der Urkirche und frühen Christenheit." *Wort und Antwort* 34 (1993) 12–18; J. Roloff, "Konflikte und Konfliktlösungen nach der Apostelgeschichte," in *Der Treue Gottes trauen: Beiträge zum Werk des Lukas* (ed. C. Bussmann and W. Radl; Freiburg: Herder, 1991) 111–25; A. Rakotoharintsifa, "Luke and the Internal Divisions in the Early Church," in *Luke's Literary Achievement: Collected Essays* (ed. C. M. Tuckett; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 176; O. Cullmann, "Dissensions Within the Early Church," *USQR* 22 (1967) 83–92; M. Goulder, *St. Paul versus St. Peter: A Tale of Two Missions* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995) 15; J. B. Tyson, "The Legacy of F. C. Baur and Recent Studies of Acts," *Forum* 4 (2001) 125–44, especially 140, 142.

¹³ C. K. Barrett, "Acts and Christian Consensus," in *Context: Essays in Honour of Peder Johan Borgen* (ed. P. W. Bøckman and R. E. Kristiansen; Trondheim: Tapir, 1987) 19–33, especially 33; idem, *The Acts of the Apostles* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998) 2.xl–xlii, lxiii.

¹⁴ H. Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* (trans. James Limburg, A. Thomas Kraabel, and Donald H. Juel; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 24; R. I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 69–70. Although B. J. Capper, "Reciprocity and the Ethic of Acts," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (ed. I. H. Marshall and D. Peterson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 500, states that the community of goods in the early chapters of Acts "has a demonstrable historical reference to events of formal property-sharing within a sector of the earliest Jerusalem community," he elsewhere argues that, based on the supposed prominence of the theme as an ideal in accounts of Golden Age beginnings, "The interpreter of Acts must acknowledge the tension between the theoretical and the practical in this strand of ancient thought. The ancient readers of Acts would anticipate that an account of community of goods might be in some sense *withdrawn from everyday reality*" (p. 508; emphasis added).

¹⁵ Tyson, "Legacy of F. C. Baur" 140. As will be shown below, this neglects the use of the term ὁμοθυμαδόν in descriptions of those *opposed* to the Christian community.

especially the magistracy how inoffensive and innocent, and indeed how beneficent the Christians were?¹⁶

Barrett adds that “these possible motivations overlap one another, and it would probably be a mistake to exclude any of them.”¹⁷ As indicated above, however, Barrett himself thinks that the supposed absence of controversies from Paul’s letters is not a deliberate misrepresentation by Luke but merely a product of his own late and harmonious church setting. The assumption, however, is that because these (supposed) controversies are absent in Acts, the historical reality of Luke’s portrait of the unity of the church must be called into question. Third, the similarity in language between Luke’s account of the early Christian community of goods and supposed utopian ideals has also been assumed to indicate the unrealistic portrait of the unity of the early Christian community.¹⁸

III. ACTS AND HISTORICITY

This article will argue that an emphasis on the theme of unity does not necessarily mean that Luke’s portrait of the unity of the Christian community is unrealistic. Several assumptions, however, about the nature of historicity relevant to the theme of unity in Acts need to be clarified. First, although this discussion assumes that Acts falls under the broad genre category of ancient historiography,¹⁹ it is understood that the debate over the genre of Acts does not solve the issue of its historicity.²⁰ It should not be assumed, however, that historical truthfulness is unlikely merely because Luke was writing in antiquity—there was much discussion concerning the issue of truthfulness in ancient literature.²¹ Wiseman has identified “the different

¹⁶ Barrett, “The Historicity of Acts” 533.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* 24; Pervo, *Profit with Delight* 69–70. Further discussion of these similarities is given in chapter three of the author’s forthcoming monograph, *The Unity of the Church in Acts*. It may be noted here though that there are indications within the narrative itself that the account is historically plausible. Luke’s account of the sharing of possessions, for example, although commonly said to be “idealized,” highlights the voluntary and occasional nature of the practice (contra Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* 24, and the literature cited by him in note 10). It is possible, then, that Luke has written about historical realities in such a way as to point out his claims for the church in language that not only resonates with his anticipated diversity of readership but also indicates historical plausibility (a practice that is also historically probable in light of the studies of Qumran practice).

¹⁹ Cf. D. E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987) 77–115; L. C. A. Alexander, *The Preface to Luke’s Gospel: Literary Convention and Social Context in Luke 1.1–4 and Acts 1.1* (SNTSMS 78; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); G. E. Sterling, *Historiography and Self-Definition: Josephos, Luke-Acts and Apologetic Historiography* (Leiden: Brill, 1992); Darryl W. Palmer, “Acts and the Ancient Monograph,” in *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting* (ed. B. W. Winter and A. D. Clarke; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 1–29; B. S. Rosner, “Acts and Biblical History,” in *Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting* 65–82.

²⁰ Alexander, “Fact, Fiction and the Genre of Acts” 381–82 (cf. p. 394), corrects the assumption that “‘accurate reporting of past events’ is co-extensive with the ancient literary genre ‘history,’ as if each entails the other.”

²¹ Cf. Lucian, *How to Write History*, “history cannot admit a lie” (7), “history has one task and one end—what is useful—and that comes from truth alone” (9), “Where then is the pleasure in

definitions of 'lying' that are implied by the various criticisms of historians in the Hellenistic and Roman world."²² It is difficult to use any of the criteria for material that is unhistorical listed by Wiseman as evidence that Luke idealizes the theme of unity in Acts.²³ Second, descriptions of Luke's portrait of the Christian community in Acts as "'accurate,' 'trustworthy,' or 'reliable'" do not require "mechanical exactitude of transcription" of every detail of Luke's sources or matters of grammatical style.²⁴ Third, and related to the previous point, selectivity is not evidence of unreliability; every historian must choose what material to include or exclude.²⁵ In the case of Acts, Luke should be examined on his own terms rather than perceived omissions of what others think he ought to have included. It may be objected that omissions of conflicts that other accounts record is still misleading. However, it is reasonable to insist that Luke's own arguments should be taken on their own terms rather than filtered through the concerns of another author writing for different audiences, especially if the possibility exists that the accounts are not

this, unless a man is so utterly stupid as to enjoy praise that can be proved groundless there and then?" (13), "there are other refinements of style that combine pleasure with truth" (13) (Kilburn, LCL). Cf. Josephus, *Ag. Ap.* 1.15–27 (his criticisms of the Greek historians for their contradictions), *Ant.* 20.154–6 (his claim to write truthfully in contrast to others who have lied about Nero). See also J. L. Moles, "Truth and Untruth in Herodotus and Thucydides," in *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* (ed. C. Gill and T. P. Wiseman; Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993) 88–121; and the criticisms of historians by Seneca (i.e. *Quaestiones Naturales* 7.16.1–2) as discussed by T. P. Wiseman, "Lying Historians: Seven Types of Mendacity," in *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* (ed. C. Gill and T. P. Wiseman; Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993) 122–46, especially 122–23. Cited by Alexander, "Fact, Fiction and the Genre of Acts" 383, 386.

²² Wiseman, "Lying Historians: Seven Types of Mendacity" 125. Cf. Alexander, "Fact, Fiction and the Genre of Acts" 380–99; and Marguerat, *The First Christian Historian* 7–8, who refers to criteria of "the character of reality" as that which distinguishes history from "a purely imaginary reproduction of the past" and refers to the "textual presence of realities (topographical, cultural, socio-political, economic) of the world described by the narrator." Contra Pervo, *Profit with Delight* 115–35.

²³ His criteria include (1) excessive flattery; (2) wonders/myths (i.e. things against nature such as dragon-drawn chariots, "poisonous creatures born from the blood of the Titans"); (3) travelers tales from exotic lands (as Alexander, "Fact, Fiction and the Genre of Acts" 396, notes, "Travel takes place [in Acts] not in the archaic fantasy landscape of Greek romance but in the real, contemporary world of the Roman empire"); (4) use of rhetoric and drama (as Wiseman says, "a more dramatically effective version of the facts"; Cicero, *Brutus* 42–43, calls it "lies . . . in order to make a point more neatly"; Polybius 2.56.10–12 writes against the practice. As Wiseman describes this element, however, it is not complete fabrication but dramatic effect that is meant); (5) blaming sources (the author is merely reporting a source that he does not believe (again, Alexander, "Fact, Fiction and the Genre of Acts" 395, notes, apart from the preface "the authorial voice never returns: Acts contains no authorial comment, no 'they say' or 'it is said' to bracket its many reports of miraculous events and divine guidance"); (6) too many unnecessary details (Plutarch, *Theseus* 27.3–4, 19.4, refers to "excessive" details); and (7) the complete absence of elaboration (which indicated writing in a brief and careless manner). I am indebted to David W. Pao for drawing my attention to Wiseman's "seven types of mendacity."

²⁴ Hemer, *Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History*, 48. Hemer is criticizing Harnack's attack on matters of grammatical style in this context.

²⁵ Cf. Lucian, *How to Write History* 53, the historian will "give his audience what will interest and instruct them" (Kilburn, LCL). Cf. also 51, the task of the historian is "to give a fine arrangement to events and illuminate them as vividly as possible" (LCL, Kilburn). Hemer, *Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* 48, also makes this point (though without the references in this context to Lucian).

recording the same events and that the accounts are therefore dealing with different issues.²⁶ Fourth, theological purpose is not evidence of unreliability. As Hemer notes, "All sophisticated history is in its degree interpretive, and history and theology may not necessarily conflict, but run on parallel lines. The simplistic use of the argument against historicity on this score is a radical *non sequitur*."²⁷

Thus, rather than merely assume that an emphasis on the theme of unity in Acts must be due to unrealistic idealization, the narrative of Acts must be studied on its own terms in the setting of its ancient literary context to determine Luke's purposes in highlighting the themes of unity and disunity.²⁸ Further evidence that it is misreading Luke to assume his portrait of the unity of the Christian community is unrealistic harmonizing is seen in the way that many ancient discussions of unity draw on historical reality²⁹ and in the evidence of Acts itself where Luke describes opposition to the Christian community as "united" and shows no concern to hide disagreements among believers.³⁰

IV. UNITY AND IDEALIZATION IN ANCIENT LITERATURE

The claim that the Lukan emphasis on the unity of the Christian community must be an unrealistic idealization wrongly assumes that an emphasis on the theme of unity must necessarily be due to idealization and neglects the fact that much discussion of the themes of unity and disunity in ancient literature draws on historical realities. This may be seen in (1) accounts of Golden Age beginnings that were not idealistic; (2) the mere observation that the theme of unity is widespread rather than only the concern of accounts of idealistic "beginnings"; (3) the discussions of unity that clarify the distinction between ideal and actual states and that discuss at length actual states; (4) debates over the "best constitution" that discuss

²⁶ See the discussion below on Acts 15:36–41.

²⁷ Hemer, *Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* 49.

²⁸ See the author's forthcoming monograph, *The Unity of the Church in Acts*, for an examination of the themes of unity and disunity in an attempt to understand Luke's emphases in the context of other ancient discussions of unity and disunity and the narrative of Acts itself. In the context of Lukan themes related to Christology, ecclesiology, the law, and conquest, Luke highlights the common submission of believers to the lordship of Jesus as evidence of the kingship of Jesus and the church as the true people of God.

²⁹ This may be related to Alexander's discussion of reliability based on "the reader's experience of other texts." Cf. Alexander, "Fact, Fiction and the Genre of Acts" 381. Alexander distinguishes between judgments concerning "the intrinsic probability (plausibility) of what is related" that draw on "the reader's wider experience of the world" and "certain literary phenomena as indicators of reliability" that draw on "the reader's experience of other texts."

³⁰ Again, this is because it is not Luke's primary concern to idealize these relationships. His concern is to show that the Christian community is united in common allegiance to the Lord Jesus and how relational unity is able to be maintained because of that common submission to Christ's lordship. This discussion, however, should be read in the context of discussions concerning the audience, authorial and temporal contexts, and the limitations of a purely literary approach (cf. Alexander, "Fact, Fiction and the Genre of Acts" 398–99) which are beyond the purposes of this article.

the various merits of these constitutions in terms of the concerns for unity and disunity in historical reality; and (5) the claims concerning the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of the goal of unity that are tied to historical persons and events.

First, with regard to supposed Golden Age beginnings, it may be noted that not all such accounts of the age of beginnings were idealistic.³¹ Thus an emphasis on the unity of the early Christian community is not necessarily an allusion to the theme of an ideal Golden Age of beginnings. The Epicurean poet, Lucretius (approx. 94–55 BC), for example, in his *De Rerum Natura* describes life at the beginning as a life of isolation in that humanity did not “look to the common good” and “did not know how to govern their relationships by custom and law” (5.958–9 [Rouse and Smith, LCL]). “Concord could not altogether be produced, but a good part, indeed the most, kept the covenant unblemished, or else the race of mankind would have been even then wholly destroyed” (5.1019–26). After a discussion of the development of language and the evils of envy and ambition, Lucretius states that the rule of law was accepted because “mankind, tired of living in violence, was fainting from its feuds, and so they were readier of their own will to submit to statutes and strict rules of law . . . , men were utterly weary of living in violence” (5.1145–50). Similarly, Diodorus of Sicily writes in his *Library of History* (ca. 36 BC) that the first generation “led an undisciplined and bestial life” and only came together to help one another out of expediency in the face of attacks from wild beasts. Gradually recognizing their mutual characteristics, they overcame the barriers of language with symbols. In contrast to accounts of abundant provisions, Diodorus states that the first generation “led a wretched existence.” They had no clothing and due to their neglect of harvesting wild food and storing its fruits “for their needs” (εἰς τὰς ἐνδεδείας), “large numbers of them perished in the winters because of the cold and the lack of food” (1.8.1–7).

Second, the theme of unity is not merely an ideal limited to utopian dreams of distant lands, a distant past, or a distant future, or merely philosophical ideals. The contrasting effects of unity and disunity were also a common feature of historian’s accounts—Greek, Roman, and Jewish.³² These observations are confirmed by the (later) statements of Dio Chrysostom and Aelius Aristides on concord. Thus Dio Chrysostom (*Or.* 38.10) states that

concord has been lauded by all men always in both speech and writing. Not only are the works of poets and philosophers alike full of its praises, *but also all who have published their histories to provide a pattern for practical application have shown concord to be the greatest of human blessings* . . . therefore, not only for those who now desire to sing its praises, but also for those who at any time would do so, the material for their use is abundant, and it will ever be possible to say more and finer things about it. (emphasis added)

³¹ I.e. contra the assumptions of Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* 24; Pervo, *Profit with Delight* 69–70.

³² See the author’s forthcoming monograph, *The Unity of the Church in Acts*, for a discussion of these emphases in Herodotus, Thucydides, Dionysius, Lucan, Joshua, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Josephus.

Similarly, Aelius Aristides, in his Oration 24, *To the Rhodians: Concerning Concord* (AD 149), written to put an end to conflict which had broken out in Rhodes, emphasized the universal acknowledgment that concord is the greatest good for cities and that faction brings the greatest injury. According to Aristides, this has been seen throughout Greek history such that “no other Greek or barbarian should properly be in ignorance of” these things (24.4) as they are “found in innumerable writers” (24.41). Thus, in making what Aristides claims is an “old argument” for concord (24.4), he appeals to Homer (24.7), Hesiod (24.13), Solon (24.14), Herodotus (24.19), Plato (24.20), and the examples of the Lacedaemonians (24.23–24), the Athenians (24.25–26), the Argives (24.27), and even “the common history of the Greeks and all the Greek cities” (24.29). Indeed, “no one has ever thought it possible for a constitution to be formed at all or to abide through faction . . . we could not discover any people who was not destroyed by faction” (24.20–21). Although these statements do not guarantee the historicity of any particular recorded incident, they highlight the location of the theme of unity in the accounts of historical realities. The widespread recognition that these realities are reflected in the accounts of people’s histories lends plausibility to the reality of the Lukan account.

Third, even discussions more commonly associated with utopian ideals refer to historical realities in their discussions of the theme of unity. Thus Plato’s discussion of the state where citizens “honour with all their heart those laws which render the State as unified as possible” (*Laws* 739d) is followed by the assertion that “one should not look elsewhere for a model constitution, but hold fast to this one, and with all one’s power seek the constitution that is as like it as possible” (*Laws* 739e). Plato’s discussion in this context does not describe a mere abstract ideal but a reality which may be attained.

More specifically, Aristotle’s discussion of his own view of “the best constitution” in the context of a critique of other’s ideals³³ begins by distinguishing between ideal states and actual states. Then, following his evaluation of ideals (Plato, Phaleas, Hippodamus),³⁴ he evaluates actual states (Sparta, Crete, Carthage).³⁵

Aristotle’s evaluation of actual states includes the following:³⁶ (1) Sparta is criticized, among other things, for its “unequal distribution of wealth”

³³ Aristotle is not known as a utopian writer and has even been called anti-utopian. Cf. J. Ferguson, *Utopias of the Classical World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975) 80.

³⁴ Note that after criticizing Plato’s ideal, Aristotle praises Phaleas’ ideal as one of those that comes closer to existing constitutions (2.4.1). In particular, Phaleas is one of those who proposed the regulation of possessions because the issue of possessions is always the cause of party strife (στάσις). Phaleas is said to be the first to propose that the property of citizens should be equal and claimed that this should be done at the very foundation of a state as “this would not be difficult to secure at the outset for cities in process of foundation” but more difficult in states already set up (2.4.2). See chapter two of the author’s *Unity of the Church in Acts* for further discussion.

³⁵ M. Davis, *The Politics of Philosophy: A Commentary on Aristotle’s Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996) 44, notes that in book two of his *Politics*, Aristotle is seeking to make “philosophy political.” That is, he goes “out of his way to confuse the distinction between theory and practice with which he had begun Book 2” (43).

³⁶ Aristotle notes that these states will be evaluated “in comparison with the best system” (2.6.1) so that faults or criticisms are called “deviations” or “defects” from Aristotle’s own ideal (2.8.3).

(2.6.10), its view that “the safety of the state depended on division between the kings” (σωτηρίαν ἐνόμιζον τῇ πόλει εἶναι τὸ στασιάζειν τοὺς βασιλεῖς, 2.6.20), and its system of Naval Commanders as it is a cause of faction (στάσεως γὰρ γίνεται αἴτιος, 2.6.22). (2) Crete is primarily criticized for its system of appointing Cosmoi (who, like the Ephors in the Spartan constitution, were elected officials with governing responsibilities) from certain families only. According to Aristotle, this leads to “power politics” and groups that “frequently form parties among the common people and among their friends and so bring about a suspension of government, and form factions and engage in war with one another” (2.7.7–8). (3) Carthage is said to have managed their constitution successfully because the people are content and “neither has civil strife arisen in any degree worth mentioning” (2.8.1). However, in concluding his evaluation of Carthage, Aristotle states that although they have successfully escaped faction and have kept their constitution stable, in their case, this has been more to do with good luck than good management. That is, their lack of faction has been due to fortune, “whereas freedom from civil strife ought to be secured by the lawgiver; but as it is, suppose some misfortune occurs and the multitude of the subject class revolts, there is no remedy provided by the laws to restore tranquility” (2.8.9).

Thus, for Aristotle, it is not enough for unity to be merely part of an unrealistic ideal; it must be practically attainable as well.³⁷ In his criticism of Plato’s *Republic*, Aristotle considers his own proposal as more than merely an ideal (2.1.9). He notes that “such a system exists even now in outline in some states, so it is not deemed impracticable, and especially in the ones that are well-administered parts of it are realized already and parts might be realized” (2.2.5; cf. 2.3.3).

Fourth, further evidence of the relationship between the ideal of unity and historical reality may be seen in evaluations of the different forms of constitution. Herodotus’ account of Darius’ speech that praises the rule of “one best man” because it does not bring discord (3.82) comes in the context of Darius’ criticism of oligarchy because in an oligarchy “violent enmity is the outcome, enmity brings faction and faction bloodshed” (ἐξ ὧν στάσεις ἐγγίνονται, ἐκ δὲ τῶν στασιῶν φόνος). Similarly, Aristotle’s primary discussion on the causes and dangers of civil strife and discord comes in book five of his *Politics* where he is above all concerned with the issue of the stability of a constitution and constitutional change. Change from one constitution to another (i.e. from aristocracy to oligarchy, oligarchy to democracy, etc) is to be avoided, and since (according to Aristotle) constitutional change essentially results in inequality that leads to discontent and faction, Aristotle spends much time analyzing the causes of faction or discord (στάσις) in various kinds of constitutions. Thus, for instance, he notes that “democracy is safer and more free from civil strife than oligarchy; for in oligarchies two kinds of strife spring up, faction between different members of the oligarchy and also faction between the oligarchs and the people, whereas in democracies only

³⁷ As Ferguson, *Utopias of the Classical World* 82, notes, “The evaluation of actual evidence, not a *priori* theory, is the groundwork of Aristotle’s thought.”

strife between the people and the oligarchical party occurs, but party strife between different sections of the people itself does not occur to any degree worth mentioning" (5.1.9). Although Aristotle acknowledges three instances in which changes of constitution may take place without factious strife (election intrigue, lack of vigilance, and alteration by small changes), the other nine items are all said to lead to inequality and faction which causes constitutional change (profit, honor, ill-treatment, fear, preponderance, contemptuous attitudes, disproportionate increase, difference of race, and geography). An interesting observation for the context of Acts (which highlights the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers under the lordship of Christ) is the fact that Aristotle develops the eleventh cause, difference of race, more fully than any of the others. Aristotle argues that difference of race is a cause of faction "until harmony of spirit is reached." Thus, most of the states that have admitted those of a different race, whether at the foundation of the state or later, "have split into factions." Aristotle then adds eight specific examples to prove his point (5.2.10–11).

After emphasizing the need to deal with factions at the beginning, Aristotle then examines the causes of factions peculiar to particular constitutions (5.4–6). Thus democracies are overthrown because of evil demagogues that cause faction, oligarchies are overthrown because of internal faction—either among the oligarchs or when others form factions against them (however, a "harmonious oligarchy does not easily cause its own destruction," 5.5.7), and the chief cause of factions in aristocracies is said to be inequality in the share of honors (i.e. due to differences in virtue, wealth, power, etc). Aristotle then essentially spends the rest of book five outlining his views on how constitutions may be preserved—that is, he sets forth proposals on how to avoid what leads to faction and thus his proposals for the preservation of constitutions amount to the opposite of how they are destroyed.³⁸ Thus, the goal of unity and the destructive effects of discord are here set forth in the midst of an extended discussion of the realities of actual states and the realities of actual political constitutions. The theme of unity is far from being merely a topic of unrealistic idealization.

Fifth, the assumption that the mere presence of the theme of unity means unrealistic idealization neglects the frequent claims concerning the fulfillment of the ideals of unity that are tied to historical persons and events. Plutarch's reference to Zeno's ideal for "one community and one polity . . . a common life and an order common to us all" in his *Alex. fort.* 329a–b³⁹ is placed in a context that states that Alexander's conquests have given effect to the ideal or dream of Zeno for the unity of humanity in historical reality.⁴⁰

³⁸ *Pol.* 5.7.1: "if we know the causes by which constitutions are destroyed we also know the causes by which they are preserved; for opposites create opposites, and destruction is the opposite of security (ἄπορὰ δὲ σωτηρίᾳ ἐναντίον)."

³⁹ Referring to Zeno's "one main principle" in his *Politeia* (335–263 BC) as discussed in chapter two of *The Unity of the Church in Acts*. Cf. *Moralia* 653e; Cicero, *Leg.* 1.7–11 (21–32); *Off.* 1.7 (22).

⁴⁰ Cf. the literature cited in chapter two of *The Unity of the Church in Acts* and the debate concerning whether or not Alexander consciously pursued Zeno's ideal. However, these discussions

In contrast to Aristotle's advice to treat Greeks better than Barbarians ("to do so would have been to cumber his leadership with numerous battles and banishments and festering seditions [καὶ στάσεων ὑπούλων]), Plutarch argues that "those whom he could not persuade to unite with him, he conquered by force of arms, and he brought together into one body (εἰς τὸ αὐτό) all men everywhere."⁴¹

The connection between claims concerning the fulfillment of the ideals of unity and historical persons and events is particularly seen in the significant qualification to claims of a return of the Golden Age in the Augustan era by later Roman writers. The claim that an emphasis on the theme of unity merely reflects Golden Age themes neglects the disillusionment that writers contemporary with Luke were expressing in the Golden Age claims of the Roman emperors—a disillusionment that directly related to the failed realization of these ideals in historical reality. In this regard, the presence of the disillusionment that followed the events of the later years of Nero's reign and the civil wars that followed his death as indicated in Lucan's *Civil War* may be noted. In contrast to Virgil's description of the victorious Roman race, Lucan explains that "Of war I sing, war worse than civil, waged over the plains of Emathia, and of legality conferred on crime; I tell how an imperial people turned their victorious right hands against their own vitals; how kindred fought against kindred" (1.1–3; cf. 4.196–8).⁴² Similarly, Statius's *Thebaid* (especially 1.214–47, 241–3) indicates that the appropriation of the *aureum saeculum* theme, under Flavian propaganda, played down the finality

do not negate the combination here of Zeno's ideal and Alexander's actual record of conquests in this context. Cf. M. Lapidge, "Stoic Cosmology," in *The Stoics* (ed. J. M. Rist; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978) 161–85, 172–9; H. C. Baldry, *The Unity of Mankind in Greek Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965) 158–63; M. Schofield, *The Stoic Idea of the City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 104–11; R. Stoneman, "The Legacy of Alexander in Ancient Philosophy," in *Brill's Companion to Alexander the Great* (ed. J. Roisman; Leiden: Brill, 2003) 340–41. Contra A. Erskine, *The Hellenistic Stoa: Political Thought and Action* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990) 27–33.

⁴¹ See chapter two of *The Unity of the Church in Acts* for further references. See also Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander* 7.11.9; Strabo, *Geog.* 1.2.1; 1.4.9; Plutarch, *Alex. fort.* 330d and 330e, for further claims concerning the unifying work of Alexander.

⁴² Cf. F. Ahl, "Form Empowered: Lucan's *Pharsalia*," in *Roman Epic* (ed. A. J. Boyle; London: Routledge, 1993) 126, who notes that writers such as Lucan in the first century AD "rarely act as propagandists for an idealized Rome . . . [or for] . . . state propaganda of a 'golden age.'" J. Masters, *Poetry and Civil War in Lucan's Bellum Civile* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 90, the world of Lucan's *Civil War* "is a world where what should be one is many, where the unity of the Roman state is painfully divided, and where, until the final victory is won by one side or the other, there will be many potential authorities each vying for supremacy." Elsewhere, Masters notes that in Lucan's universe "things have reached such a pitch of perversity that conflict is replacing concord as the true binding force" (p. 72). See also P. Hardie, *The Epic Successors of Virgil: A Study in the Dynamics of a Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 67–68, who draws attention to the "heaven to hell" sequence in historical reality as "an emperor who starts off well, living up to the inaugural imagery of the Golden Age returned, but who at some point goes bad." Hardie notes that "Lucan's epic was written during the later years of Nero's reign; the surviving Flavian epics were all begun within twenty years of the civil wars that erupted on the death of Nero."

of the Augustan achievements.⁴³ Thus “the dawn of the fabled Golden Age, which is the hope and the promise of the *Aeneid*, is transformed retrospectively in the *Thebaid* into the dawn of an era of venality and corruption.”⁴⁴

The above observations indicate that it is unwarranted to assume that the mere presence of an emphasis on the theme of unity must therefore mean that the author is engaged in unrealistic idealizing. Ancient discussions of unity were not limited to idealistic philosophical discussions (as some discussions of the theme in Acts assume). The themes of unity and disunity were frequently tied to historical realities in contexts that evaluated actual states/forms of government/constitutions and contemporary rulers. Further evidence that the Lukan portrait of the unity of the church is not mere unrealistic idealization, however, comes from the narrative of Acts itself.

V. IDEALIZATION OF UNITY IN ACTS?

In addition to the widespread recognition in ancient literature that the themes of unity and disunity were tied to historical realities,⁴⁵ the narrative of Acts itself indicates that Luke was not idealizing the unity of the church. This may be noted first in Luke’s description of the unity of those opposed to the Christian community in which he uses similar terminology to that which is used to describe the Christian community. Second, Luke records disagreements between believers that would spoil a supposed idealization of their unity. Thus in addition to nuancing the portrait of unity summarized in the first section of this article,⁴⁶ these references to unity opposition and disagreements among believers further suggest that Luke does not regard unity as an ideal in and of itself and argue against a supposed unrealistic idealization of the theme of unity in Acts.

1. *United opposition.* References to “united opposition” to the Christian community are found in Acts 5:1–11; 7:57; 18:12; and 19:29. This section will argue that the unity described in these passages (with similar terminology used to describe the Christian community) indicates that Luke is not merely idealizing the theme of unity.

Acts 5:1–11 is placed between two summary passages that highlight the unity of the Christian community. In Acts 5:1–11, however, the unity of

⁴³ M. P. Bonz, *The Past as Legacy: Luke-Acts and Ancient Epic* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 70, 73, 77, 78. Bonz (page 73) cites *Silvae* 4.1.5–8; 4.2.1–2; 4.3.114–17 as instances where Statius evokes Virgil’s prophecy regarding Augustus in *Aen.* 6.792–3. J. Henderson, “Form Remade: Statius’ *Thebaid*,” in *Roman Epic* (ed. A. J. Boyle; London: Routledge, 1993) 188, suggests that Statius “has *undone* the master-text [Virgil’s *Aeneid*] by taking over the original, redirected it towards quite other ends” (emphasis original).

⁴⁴ Bonz, *Past as Legacy* 78.

⁴⁵ As reflected, for example, in the comments of Dio Chrysostom and Aelius Aristides mentioned in section IV above.

⁴⁶ Cf. the author’s *Unity of the Church in Acts* for further development of the argument that the unity Luke draws attention to is common allegiance to the one Lord Jesus and his authorized delegates, the apostles.

Ananias and Sapphira is particularly highlighted: (1) they are said to have “agreed together” (συμφωνέω) to test “the Spirit of the Lord” (5:9);⁴⁷ and (2) there are three occurrences of σύν in this account (5:1, 2, 9), two of which are used with verbs emphasizing the “togetherness” of Ananias and Sapphira (σύννοια, 5:2; συμφωνέω, 5:9). In this account a nuance is introduced into Luke’s portrait of unity—not all unity is good. The unity of Ananias and Sapphira was against the unity of the church, was of Satanic origin, and was overcome in judgment. In addition to indicating that the narrative of Acts will nuance the theme of unity, this description of the unity of Ananias and Sapphira indicates that Luke is not interested in the theme of unity as an abstract ideal. Unlike some ancient literary discussions that praise the benefits of unity, Luke is not interested in the theme of unity in and of itself.⁴⁸ Luke does not think that mere unity is a sign of blessing or a guarantee for victory. If the description of the failed opposition to the Christian community includes a description of their unity, it appears that Luke’s interest in the theme of the unity of the Christian community is not to be located in unrealistic idealization.

Luke indicates in 7:57 that his use of the term ὁμοθυμαδόν to describe the unity of the Christian community (particularly in the early chapters of Acts, cf. 1:14; 2:46; 4:24; 5:12; 15:25; cf. 12:20) is also not meant to be understood as part of an idealization of the church.⁴⁹ As will be indicated below (i.e. in the discussions of the contexts of 18:12 and 19:29), Luke uses this term in his description of the unity of those opposed to the Christian community. In doing so, however, Luke notes the failure of this “united opposition.” In this context, those who rush “together” (ὁμοθυμαδόν) to stone Stephen have already been described as “stiff-necked with uncircumcised hearts and ears” who “always resist the Holy Spirit,” have “betrayed and murdered” the Righteous One, and have not obeyed the law. Furthermore, their “united opposition” is seen to be a failure in that the “scattering” of the believers that resulted from their opposition⁵⁰ led to the continued spread of “the word.”⁵¹ Thus, Luke’s description of those united in opposition to the Christian community in this context is a further indication that his use of terminology such as ὁμοθυμαδόν to describe the unity of the Christian community cannot be reduced to the mere idealization of the Christian community.

⁴⁷ Cf. also the use of the verb συμφωνέω in Acts 15:15 and the use of the adjective ἀσύμφωνος in 28:25 where the themes of unity and disunity are again prominent.

⁴⁸ Cf. especially Herodotus, *Histories*, 3.82; 5.3; 6.98; 7.145; 8.86; 9.2; Polybius, *Historiae* 23.11.6–7 (a kingdom becomes “inferior to none simply by concord and agreement” ὁμόνοιαν καὶ συμφωνίαν), and the texts discussed in chapter five of the author’s *Unity of the Church in Acts*.

⁴⁹ I.e. contra Tyson, “Legacy of F. C. Baur” 140, who argues that the frequent use of the term ὁμοθυμαδόν indicates a Lukan unrealistic idealization of the Christian community.

⁵⁰ Acts 8:1 refers to the persecution and scattering that came “on that day” (ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρῃ) and 11:19 explicitly notes that the persecution and scattering was “in connection with Stephen” (ἐπι Στεφάνῳ).

⁵¹ Acts 8:4 notes that “those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went,” and 11:19 also highlights the spread of “the word” (to Jews) by “those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen.”

Others are also “united.” The narrative of Acts, however, highlights the failure of those (even if united) opposed to the Lord Jesus and his people.

In light of Luke’s use of the term ὁμοθυμαδόν to describe the unity of the Christian community (as noted above), his use of the term ὁμοθυμαδόν in 18:12 also alerts the reader to Luke’s tendency to nuance his emphasis on the theme of unity.⁵² In this context it is the Jewish opposition to Paul that is said to be “united” (ὁμοθυμαδόν). The failure of the Jewish opposition, the conquest of the word, and the subsequent emphasis on the division of the Jews in this context, however, indicate that Luke does not argue for the blessing of unity by itself (cf. 18:11, 15, 17).⁵³ Thus, once again, it appears that Luke does not merely use terminology such as ὁμοθυμαδόν to idealize his portrait of the church.

In the midst of the confusion in Ephesus (Acts 19:23–41) Luke notes again that there was a “unity” among those opposed to the Christian community. In 19:29 Luke notes that the people rushed “together” (ὁμοθυμαδόν) into the theater and in 19:34 that the crowd shouted “all in unison” (μία ἐκ πάντων) “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians.”⁵⁴ In light of the near reference to the crowd shouting “all in unison” (19:34, which picks up the chant from 19:28),⁵⁵ Luke’s use of the term ὁμοθυμαδόν in 19:29 probably suggests “unanimity” rather than mere physical association.⁵⁶ The supposed unity of those in opposition to Christ must be seen here in the wider context of their confusion and conquest. Thus it must be noted again that Luke does not draw attention to unity as merely an unrealistic ideal.

⁵² S. Walton, “Ὁμοθυμαδόν in Acts: Co-location, Common Action or ‘Of One Heart and Mind?’” in *The New Testament in Its First Century Setting: Essays on Context and Background in Honour of B. W. Winter on His 65th Birthday* (ed. P. J. Williams, A. D. Clarke, P. M. Head, and D. Instone-Brewer; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 100, argues that the use of the term ὁμοθυμαδόν in this context “pictures more than these people appearing in the same place at the same time. They have a shared commitment to get rid of Paul and this finds expression in their united legal proceedings before the proconsul.” See also N. P. Estrada, *From Followers to Leaders: The Apostles in the Ritual of Status Transformation in Acts 1–2* (JSNTSS 255; London: T & T Clark, 2004) 136–50. Failure to notice the Lukan usage of the term ὁμοθυμαδόν elsewhere in Acts leads S. Cunningham, *Through Many Tribulations’: The Theology of Persecution in Luke-Acts* (JSNTSS 142; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997) 256, to merely observe that “Luke’s use of ὁμοθυμαδόν shows the scope of the alienation between Paul and the Corinthian Jews (18.12).” Similarly, H. W. Tajra, *The Trial of St. Paul* (WUNT 2/35; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989) 55 (“Luke’s use of the word ὁμοθυμαδόν shows how complete the alienation was between Paul and the Corinthian Jews”).

⁵³ I.e. as noted above, in contrast to claims found, among others, in Herodotus, Polybius, Dio Chrysostom. See chapter five of the author’s *Unity of the Church in Acts* for further discussion of the context of Acts 18.

⁵⁴ R. Strelan, *Paul, Artemis, and the Jews in Ephesus* (BZNW 80; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1996) 144–45, 150, in an otherwise detailed phrase by phrase study of these verses, neglects these phrases entirely.

⁵⁵ J. H. Stiefel, “Dragged Before the Authorities: A Rhetorical and Social Reading of Christians, Paul, and the Roman Empire in Acts 16–19” (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 2000) 204, notes this “inclusio” to the scene’s beginning.

⁵⁶ Walton, “Ὁμοθυμαδόν in Acts” 101, correctly states that “there is certainly more here than shared time and place; this is united action, perhaps stemming from united concern.” Cf. Barrett, *Acts of the Apostles* 2.928.

The above section has drawn attention to the references to “united opposition” that are found in Acts in addition to the theme of the unity of the people of God. When placed in the context of the Lukan interest in the theme of unity (as noted in the first section of this article), the description of the unity of failed opposition serves to indicate that in Acts unity is not regarded as an ideal in and of itself irrespective of what constitutes that unity.⁵⁷ This nuance to the Lukan interest in the theme of unity indicates that in Acts unity is not idealized. When the same terminology (i.e. ὁμοθυμαδόν) is used to describe the unity of the Christian community as well as the unity of those opposed to the Christian community it appears unlikely that Luke’s aim in using this terminology to describe the unity of the Christian community is one of unrealistic idealization. This suggestion is further supported by accounts of disagreements among believers in Acts.

2. *Disagreements among believers in Acts.* This section will argue that in addition to descriptions of those opposed to the Christian community as “united,” the accounts of disagreements among believers in Acts also indicate that Luke is not interested in the theme of unity as an abstract ideal. These disagreements, as with the descriptions of “united opposition,” serve to further clarify the Lukan emphasis on the nature of true unity in Acts. That is, Luke highlights the unity that comes from common submission to the lordship of Jesus rather than uniformity in matters of personal opinion. This section, however, will draw attention to the disagreements found in 19:30–31; 21:1–14; and 15:36–41 in light of the charge that Luke idealizes the unity of the Christian community. Acts 15:36–41 will be examined last, as it will be argued below that the disagreement found there can be better understood in light of the disagreements found in 19:30–31 and 21:1–14.

In the midst of the disturbance (τάραχος, 19:23) and uproar (σύγχυσις, 19:29) in Ephesus, there appears also to be a disagreement in 19:30–31 between Paul and “the disciples” and the Asiarchs.⁵⁸ In 19:30 Paul is said to want to appear before the crowd but the disciples would not let him (οὐκ εἶπον αὐτὸν οἱ μαθηταί). In 19:31 the Asiarchs, described as Paul’s friends (ὄντες αὐτῷ φίλοι), also urge him not to go into the theater. Although Paul does not appear before the crowd, in the following narrative the focus turns again to the confusion (19:32, συγγέω) of the crowd, and this minor disagreement is left unresolved. However, the fact that the next mention of “the

⁵⁷ It may be that Luke would consider such a unity in the way Thucydides did: “Such associations are not entered into for the public good in conformity with the prescribed laws, but for selfish aggrandisement contrary to the established laws. Their pledges to one another were confirmed not so much by divine law as by common transgression of the law” (3.82.6).

⁵⁸ The precise status of the Asiarchs is debated. Cf. the discussions in R. A. Kearsley, “The Asiarchs” in *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting* (ed. D. W. J. Gill and C. Gempf; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 363–76, which builds on her earlier work, especially “Asiarchs and Archiereis of Asia: The Inscriptions of Ephesus” (Ph.D. thesis, Macquarie University, 1987); and Stephen J. Friesen, *Twice Neokoros. Ephesus, Asia and the Cult of the Flavian Imperial Family* (Leiden: Brill, 1993) 92–113 (especially pp. 97–98, where he notes the variety of first-century references to Asiarchs).

and (3) despite differences of opinion a breach of fellowship has not occurred and that relational unity remains as demonstrated in the believers' common submission to the Lord.⁶³

In addition to nuancing the nature of true unity as common submission to the lordship of Christ, however, this account also argues against the charge that Luke idealizes his portrait of the Christian community. Witherington correctly observes that "what is striking about the entire section is that Luke is perfectly willing to portray a deep difference of opinion between equally sincere Christian groups (even between 'we' and Paul or more notably between 'we' and God's will) on an important matter. This must count against the view that Luke is portraying the early church in a totally idealistic fashion."⁶⁴

The fact that Luke leaves these differences of opinion unresolved indicates that his concern for the theme of unity does not lie in the idealization of the church or in the attempt to cover up disagreements in the church. It is with this observation of the nuances in the Lukan theme of unity that 15:36–41 may be examined.

Acts 15:36–41 has frequently been a source of difficulty for those who would argue that Luke idealizes the unity of the church. Thus it has been argued that Luke has described a supposed minor disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over taking John-Mark along because that is more palpable than the (covered over) deeper theological division over the Gentile mission that lies behind this account.⁶⁵ Others have demonstrated that this proposal seems unlikely, however, given that (1) Luke could have ignored the dispute altogether; (2) the differences in participants (the focus of the dispute in Gal 2:11, the supposed background to Acts 15:36–41, is between Paul and Peter) and topics lends plausibility to the reasonable proposal that more than one disagreement occurred;⁶⁶ and (3) the narrative of Acts is required to provide evidence that Paul and Barnabas had a close working relationship

⁶³ In 21:5 the believers at Tyre demonstrate their unity (i.e. a relational breach has not occurred) in corporate prayer on their knees (note the plural participles, *καὶ θέντες τὰ γόνατα ἐπὶ τὸν αἰγιαλὸν προσευξάμενοι*). Then the account climaxes in 21:14 (21:15 resumes with "after this, we got ready and went up to Jerusalem") by highlighting the continuing unity of the believers in Caesarea in their common submission to the sovereign lordship of Jesus, not in their personal opinions regarding the safest action for Paul to take. The believers cease pleading with Paul ("when he would not be dissuaded") and submit to "the Lord's will" (*τοῦ κυρίου τὸ θέλημα*).

⁶⁴ Witherington, *Acts of the Apostles* 631.

⁶⁵ Cf. F. C. Baur, *Paul, the Apostle of Jesus Christ: His Life and Work, His Epistles and Teachings: A Contribution to a Critical History of Primitive Christianity* (ed. E. Zeller; trans. A. Menzies; 2 vols; 2d ed.; London: Williams and Norgate, 1875) 1.134–35, argues that Luke changed a theological dispute between Paul and Peter to a "less important quarrel" between Paul and Barnabas (though Baur's rationale that this was because Luke wanted to keep "silence as to all disputes at that period" does not make sense in this context); Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles* 123, suggests that Luke did not "suppress" the account of Paul's clash with Peter because he was far removed from the events of Antioch (cf. Haenchen, *Acts of the Apostles* 477).

⁶⁶ If Paul's visit to Jerusalem in Gal 2:1 is his second visit in keeping with Acts 11, then there would also be an obvious difference in timing. This discussion, however, is not the main focus of the argument in this context. Cf. E. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Paul and the Early Church* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004) 987–1000.

(apart from Galatians 2 and Acts Barnabas is only mentioned in Col 4:10; 1 Cor 9:6) and that they had a serious breach in that relationship so that Luke's account "seems to be required even for its own rebuttal!"⁶⁷

When the focus returns to the narrative of Acts itself, however, there is evidence that, in keeping with the above observations concerning Luke's narrative emphases, Luke's concern is not to idealize the unity of the church. Rather, Luke's interest in the theme of unity is primarily in the common submission of believers to the one Lord; personal differences of opinion over how to serve the same Lord do not affect the kind of unity that Luke is interested in. Thus this "disagreement" in Acts 15:36–41 appears to be of minor consequence to Luke not because it is an attempted "cover up" or that it is not a genuine disagreement, but because Luke's concern in this pericope lies elsewhere. This may be seen primarily in the ambiguities in the narrative itself. It is difficult to know from this account whether Luke favors Paul or Barnabas. That the narrator's approval lies with Paul may be indicated by (1) the use of ἀφίστημι in 15:38 which implies something like "apostasy"; (2) the reference to τὸ ἔργον in 15:38 which implies an abandonment from God's call (as indicated in 13:2; 14:26); (3) the commendation given to Paul in 15:40 (which is not given to Barnabas); and (4) the disappearance of Barnabas from the narrative after this incident.

In response to these arguments, however, (1) there is no evidence that John-Mark "apostacized." The language of "apostasy" may be used in Luke 8:13 where the issue is temporary reception of "the word of God."⁶⁸ However, since Luke merely states that John-Mark departed "from them" (ἀπ' αὐτῶν) and that he had not continued "with them" (μὴ συναλθόντα αὐτοῖς) there is no indication that ἀφίστημι should be translated as "apostasy" or even "deserted" (NIV, NASB) but rather, as in the majority of cases in Luke-Acts, as simply "left" (cf. Luke 2:37; 4:13; 13:27 ["depart"]; Acts 5:37 ["scattered/departed"]; 5:38 ["leave"]; 12:10; 19:9; 22:29 ["withdraw"]).⁶⁹ John Mark's "departure" is twice stated to be merely from Paul and Barnabas rather than "the word" (i.e. Luke 8:13), "the faith" (i.e. 1 Tim 4:1), or "from God" (i.e. Heb 3:12). (2) In 13:2 it is specifically Barnabas and Saul that are called to "the work." In 13:5 Luke notes that John was merely "their helper" and in 13:13 he simply states that John "left them" and returned to Jerusalem. Luke does not describe this "departure" as an apostasy from the Lord. (3) The significance of these observations is seen in the narrative portrayal of Barnabas before this incident. The emphasis in the character portrayal of Barnabas has been on his encouragement and generosity (4:36–37), particularly towards young believers (11:23–24), including Paul (9:27). Thus it may be that Paul is at fault here for not showing the same encouragement as

⁶⁷ L. T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Sacra Pagina 5; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992) 287.

⁶⁸ Cf. 1 Tim 4:1 (ἀποστήσονται τινες τῆς πίστεως) and Heb 3:12 (ἀποστήναι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ζῶντος) where it is clearly a turning away from "the faith" or "the living God."

⁶⁹ Of the 14 occurrences of ἀφίστημι in the NT 10 occur in Luke-Acts. The term appears elsewhere in 2 Cor 12:8; 1 Tim 4:1; 2 Tim 2:19; and Heb 3:12.

was shown to him by Barnabas.⁷⁰ (4) The disappearance of Barnabas from the narrative is not necessarily an indication of disfavor, as numerous characters appear and disappear from the narrative without any judgment concerning their disappearance (i.e. most of the disciples in 1:13–14; Matthias in 1:23–26; Peter in 15:7).

These observations indicate that it is difficult to determine from the account of the disagreement in 15:39 with whom the narrator's favor rests and who is at fault in the dispute. This ambiguity indicates that the disagreement in this account is not Luke's primary concern. The Lukan interest in the unity of the Christian community lies rather in their common submission to the lordship of Christ. As 15:1–35 has demonstrated that unity and as 16:6–10 will further enlarge the geographical scope of the Lord's unifying reign, the disagreement in this account falls under the same category as those described in 19:30–31 and 21:1–14—a disagreement over how to best serve the same Lord.

Each of the passages considered above records varying levels of disagreements among believers. Furthermore, in each instance the dispute appears to remain unresolved in the narrative of Acts. Although Luke indicates a continued common submission to the lordship of Jesus on the part of these believers, he does not portray the unity of the Christian community in an idealized fashion or as uniformity in all matters of personal opinion.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article has shown that although the narrative of Acts does indeed exhibit a Lukan interest in the theme of unity,⁷¹ there is evidence that this is not to be understood as an interest in unity as an abstract ideal in and of itself. This article has primarily argued that the evidence of ancient literature and the narrative of Acts indicate it is unlikely that Luke is idealizing his portrait of the unity of the church. The frequent assumption that the mere presence of the theme of unity must therefore indicate the presence of unrealistic idealization does not adequately account for (1) the prominence of ancient literary discussions of the theme of unity in the context of historical realities; (2) the use of the same language to describe “united” opponents of the Christian community in the narrative of Acts; and (3) the presence of

⁷⁰ F. S. Spencer, *Journeying Through Acts: A Literary-Cultural Reading* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004) 168, makes this same observation and states that “this ministry of encouragement [i.e. by Barnabas] is precisely what Barnabas demonstrates again by affording John Mark a second chance on the mission field. Barnabas plays true to form by standing up to Paul on Mark's behalf. The one who steps out of line, so to speak, is *Paul*, who is not willing to give Mark the same benefit of the doubt as a reformed deserter that he himself received earlier (from Barnabas) as a reformed persecutor. While he may continue to outshine Barnabas as a dynamic missionary to the Gentiles, Paul still has a thing or two to learn from the venerable son of encouragement” (emphasis original).

⁷¹ See the summary in the first section of this article. As indicated in the third section of this article, among other things, selectivity and theological purpose are not necessarily evidence of historical unreliability.

unresolved disagreements among believers in the narrative of Acts. These “indicators of reliability”⁷² provide supporting evidence that the Lukan interest in the theme of unity is to be read in the context of historical realities rather than unrealistic idealization.

⁷² Cf. the reference to Alexander in section three and note 29 above.