

SUFFERING AND THE PURPOSE OF ACTS

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I. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

All literature must be interpreted with its underlying purpose or purposes in mind. Without some grasp of this literary aspect, misinterpretation of texts is inevitable. The book of Acts is no exception to this rule. What Luke intends to convey develops from his core concerns. A brief survey of approaches to the purpose of Acts will help identify a few major motifs.

Various and sometimes quite divergent explanations of the purpose of Acts have been offered. Evangelicals tend to argue that Acts focuses on the spread of the gospel, or that the book serves to legitimate Christianity in the eyes of the Roman empire, or that it demonstrates the soundness of Christianity's foundations. Everett Harrison typifies the first approach:

With reference to Acts alone, the primary objective is doubtless to relate the story of the rise and progress of the early church—its dramatic origin in Jerusalem, the city that rejected and crucified Jesus of Nazareth; its gradual spread into Judaea, impelled in part by persecution; its bold invasion of Samaria with the gospel; and its steady expansion into the Gentile world climaxed by the bringing of the message to Rome, the heart of the Empire.¹

Certainly Luke recounts the spread of the gospel, but how does he indicate that the expansion occurred? What was the catalyst for this missionary activity? How were these new areas breached? These and other questions are left unanswered by the common view of Acts' purpose.

F. F. Bruce believes that Acts legitimates both Christianity and the ministry of Paul. Thus the book offers a two-pronged apologetic. Bruce posits that

Luke may have availed himself of this opportunity to rebut in the Imperial City itself the popular charges brought against Christianity by insisting on its complete and acknowledged innocence before the law of the Empire.²

This position resonates with those who contend that Acts attempts to show Rome that Christians are not revolutionaries.³ By Luke's work the

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¹ E. F. Harrison, *Interpreting Acts: The Expanding Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 20.

² F. F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 31.

³ Cf. R. Maddox, *The Purpose of Luke-Acts* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1982) 20.

ruling authorities would thereby no longer view Christianity with suspicion. In this way the book becomes an evangelistic document that seeks to convince intelligent Romans to accept Christ.

Bruce's second point, that Luke defends Paul's memory, is based on Biblical and early-Church evidence that Paul was attacked on various fronts. He holds that Acts defends Paul in ways not unlike some of Paul's epistles.⁴ As a history, then, Acts presents Paul's life, ministry and theology in an accurate and positive light.

Most of the problems mentioned in connection with Harrison's position reappear in Bruce's work. The means of argumentation Luke uses to defend Paul are not adequately explained. By what method, or by what theological, thematic, or philosophical emphasis, does Luke defend the faith and the apostle? Further, that Acts wants to make Christianity a *religio licita* is questionable. The Romans would have had to process a great deal of Christian jargon to reach the *licita* verdict. As C. K. Barrett cogently asserts:

No Roman official would ever have filtered out so much of what to him would be theological and ecclesiastical rubbish in order to reach so tiny a grain of relevant apology.⁵

Therefore Munck's suggestion that Acts may have been part of Paul's trial defense seems equally questionable.⁶

I. Howard Marshall contends that Acts helps new believers to have confidence in their faith. They can know of the depth and character of the founders of the Church as well as the quality of its witness, zeal and teaching.

On this view of things, the book of Acts was intended as an account of Christian beginnings in order to strengthen faith and give assurance that its foundation is firm. Obviously, a book written with this aim has an evangelistic purpose, but the scope of Luke-Acts stretches beyond material that is purely evangelistic.⁷

Again, how the new believer is linked with the past needs elaboration. Surely the foundation Luke describes continues to have relevance in the reader's situation. What is their common ground?

Other scholars believe theological concerns reveal the purpose of Acts. C. H. Talbert concludes "that Luke-Acts was written for the express purpose of serving as a defense against Gnosticism."⁸ Though Robert Maddox's critique of Talbert's thesis is persuasive,⁹ even if one grants Talbert's conclusion much of the importance of the historical nature of

⁴ Bruce, *Acts* 30.

⁵ C. K. Barrett, *Luke the Historian in Recent Study* (London: Epworth, 1961) 63.

⁶ J. Munck, *The Acts of the Apostles* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1967) LVIII.

⁷ I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 21.

⁸ C. H. Talbert, *Luke and the Gnostics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966) 15. Note the critique of Talbert's position in J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke (I-IX)* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1981) 11.

⁹ Maddox, *Purpose* 21-22.

Luke is neglected. Hans Conzelmann likewise locates a theological basis for Acts' purpose, claiming that Acts helps soften the delay of the *parousia* by teaching the Church how "to endure the time of waiting."¹⁰ Conzelmann's Bultmannian approach to Acts' historical value weakens his argument. Still, both he and Talbert make valuable contributions to the theological side of the purpose of Acts, as will be seen below.

Finally, since F. C. Baur's work in the last century commentators have concluded that, for a variety of reasons, Acts charts Paul's life and ministry. A. J. Mattill sees much valuable information on Paul's life in Acts¹¹ and agrees, at least in part, with Munck's belief that Acts may have been evidence at Paul's trial.¹² Of course Baur himself thought Acts defended Paul against Jewish Christians who sought to defame the apostle.

Certainly other categories of opinion on the purpose of Acts exist, but this brief summary reveals some of the diversity that exists in this area of Acts analysis. More extensive treatments of the subject are offered in Maddox¹³ and Talbert.¹⁴ What emerges from even a cursory look at the issue is that no scholarly consensus exists.¹⁵ What also emerges is that any new look at the book's purpose must take historical, apologetic and theological issues into account.¹⁶

Like most recent studies of Acts, this article assumes that Luke-Acts is a one-volume work. The texts were never meant to be separated. Still, it is legitimate to examine Acts in part in isolation. If Acts' purpose becomes clearer, the whole corpus' aim will be illuminated. Better comparisons can be made and syntheses achieved if Acts is better understood. It is also true that Luke gives a separate introduction to Acts, which does indicate that there is a new or continued intent in his mind. This paper also attempts to link the historical and theological aspects of Acts. There is at least one major motif, if not more, that unifies both of these elements. Finally, a purpose is suggested that will begin to bring together the book's plot, characters and thought.

II. THE PURPOSE OF ACTS

Many writers briefly mention suffering or persecution in Acts. Very few, however, explain its significance at length. Conzelmann includes suffering as part of enduring until Jesus returns. In his discussion of the Church and salvation he notes that

¹⁰ H. Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (New York: Harper, 1961) 209.

¹¹ A. J. Mattill, Jr., "The Value of Acts as a Source for the Study of Paul," in *Perspectives on Luke-Acts* (ed. C. H. Talbert; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1978).

¹² Cf. Maddox, *Purpose* 20.

¹³ *Ibid.* 15-30.

¹⁴ Talbert, *Luke* 98-110.

¹⁵ This conclusion is inevitable, despite efforts to synthesize all these viewpoints. Cf. T. C. Smith, "Acts," in *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman).

¹⁶ Cf. the conclusions of Fitzmyer, *Gospel* 8-11, and of R. N. Longenecker, "Acts," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9. 217-220.

we considered the situation of the Church in the world, and saw that it is a situation conditioned by persecution. The Church is therefore interpreted as having the task of making endurance possible. The development of an ethic of martyrdom forms an essential element in this conception of the Church.¹⁷

Conzelmann's focus on persecution is well stated at first, but unfortunately he loses this thematic thread when he stresses only martyrdom as persecution. He then finds that persecution gives way to peace and divine protection as the book switches from the earliest Church to Paul's life.¹⁸ Though God protects Paul, his existence is far from peaceful unless chains and imprisonment are deemed peaceful. But at least Conzelmann locates suffering at the heart of the first portion of Acts.

Similar to Conzelmann, Maddox downplays the role of suffering in Luke-Acts. Maddox's book is doubtless one of the most significant in Lukan studies, yet he underestimates the pervasive influence of this motif. Maddox summarizes Luke's attitude when he says:

Luke portrays Paul in his persecutions and long imprisonment in such a way as to warn and encourage his contemporary fellow-Christians.

So far Maddox resonates with Acts, but then he adds:

This is what the Christian life is like: "through many afflictions must we enter into the Kingdom of God"—so Barnabas and Paul told the churches in Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe (14:22). But through the Holy Spirit and the Word of God these afflictions are turned into mere annoyances, which a resolute Christian can easily endure.¹⁹

That Paul did not see pain as a mere annoyance is evident in his appeal to his citizenship to escape a beating (22:25) and his appeal to Caesar to escape the Jews (25:11). Even his own savage use of persecution in 8:1-4 refutes Maddox's contention. Clearly God normally protects the disciples, but Stephen and James are exceptions to even that rule.

Other writers use the suffering motif as a means to argue that other purposes dominate Acts. Talbert cites martyrdom in Acts as evidence that Luke refutes gnosticism.²⁰ Again, suffering in Acts extends beyond martyrdom, though faithfulness unto death is part of the suffering emphasis. Comments like Harrison's that the gospel is "impelled in part by persecution"²¹ are not unusual, but a full appreciation of the many functions that suffering fulfills in Acts is missing.

What has been neglected in Acts scholarship is the fact that persecution, hardships, troubles, martyrdom, and disputes between Christians and non-Christians (sometimes even between Christians and Christians) provide the theological and literary framework for Acts. Suffering normally follows ministry. Then quite often suffering provides the opportunity

¹⁷ Conzelmann, *Theology* 210.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 210-211.

¹⁹ Maddox, *Purpose* 82.

²⁰ Talbert, *Luke* 71-82.

²¹ Harrison, *Interpreting Acts* 20.

for more ministry. Through trouble the gospel spreads from Jerusalem to Samaria (8:4-24) and finally to Rome (20:17-28:31). Paul and his coworkers seem to know when to move to other places through the opposition they arouse (cf. 13:48-52; 14-5-6; 14:19-20; 16:25-40; 17:10; 17:13-15; etc.). Indeed it is a rare thing for the first apostles or for Paul to have assurance of safety (e.g. 9:31; 12:1-19; 18:9-11; 19:1-20). Even in Corinth and Ephesus, where Paul has long stints, the gospel eventually receives virulent opposition and Paul leaves the area. Of course chaps. 20-28 demonstrate that God's purposes are served through Paul's problems. Only through imprisonment and unjust accusation does the apostle reach Rome with the gospel.

Suffering has at least five basic functions in Acts. Each function helps define and elaborate the book's purpose. If Acts presents an expanding message and Church, then it is through problems that the gospel was declared. If the book explains the worthiness of Christianity or Paul's ministry, that worthiness is proven by how Christians endured hardship and how Paul withstood personal and legal difficulties. In short, Acts has no purpose, no plot, no structure, and no history without suffering. Therefore proper interpretation of Acts depends in part on the commentator's grasp of suffering's importance in Acts.

1. *Suffering and the expanding gospel.* This initial section is longer than those that follow. Some material here will overlap with other categories. But if the role of suffering is established here then the other sections can be treated more lightly.

After Pentecost the new Church seems to have few problems. There are many new Christians (2:47). The group is doctrinally sound (2:42), prayerful (2:42), generous (2:44-46) and eager to worship (2:46). Of the many summaries in Acts, surely this initial report is one of the most positive.

Chapters 3-4 interrupt this relative bliss and introduce a ministry-persecution pattern that Luke uses throughout his work. Persecution first spreads the gospel in Jerusalem. Peter and John "err" by healing a lame man (3:1-10) and then compound their "mistake" by preaching salvation through Jesus (3:11-26). In their oration they blame the people and their leaders for Christ's death (3:17). Angered by this accusation, the temple officials arrest Peter and John (4:1-4). Therefore the first witness offered under duress is aimed at those who arrested Jesus (4:5-22). Merely threatened, the apostles go free and pray for boldness to keep preaching the gospel (4:23-31).

That chaps. 3-4 target the Jews' need to hear the gospel becomes apparent in chap. 5, where a similar event occurs. Because the apostles' ministry is so effective (5:12-16), the Sadducees are "filled with jealousy" (5:17), a somewhat common cause of persecution in Acts (cf. 13:45; 17:5), so they imprison the apostles (5:18). Miraculously God delivers them all from jail, and they teach the people (5:19-21). Once more the apostles promise to preach at all costs (5:27-32). Gamaliel's resulting speech reveals not only that the religious leaders know that Christianity threatens

their status but also that they are confident of their correctness. After all, they beat the apostles and censor them again (5:40). By Gamaliel's standards the Church "is of God." They are happy "to suffer dishonor for the Name," and nothing can stop their preaching.

Stephen's defense before the Sanhedrin concludes Jerusalem's exclusive opportunity to receive the gospel. Once more, effective ministry—in this case wonders, signs, and incontrovertible argumentation (6:8-10)—causes this deacon to be jailed. Stephen will die for his faith.

Within Stephen's oration itself there is evidence of an emphasis on suffering. First he relates the suffering of Israel in Egypt (7:6). Then he says Joseph's suffering was caused by his brothers' jealousy, which echoes 5:17 and may refer to the charges against Stephen himself. Further references to Israel's suffering appear in 7:11, 19, 21, 34, while 7:39 comments on how Israel disobeyed Moses and 7:52 charges the nation with persecuting and killing the prophets. Of course he intimates that they also persecuted Jesus (7:51). For these comments Stephen is martyred, like Jesus and the prophets. Even in this defense suffering has a major historical and thematic role. One could cast the history of Israel in a different way, but the persecution motif is chosen.

Because of Stephen's death the disciples are scattered from Jerusalem by Saul. Thus persecution expands the gospel beyond its initial boundaries. Now that Christ has been preached in Jerusalem suffering moves the message to Samaria (8:4-25), which partially fulfills Jesus' command in 1:8. Marshall claims:

The scattering of the Christians led to the most significant step forward in the mission of the church. One might say that it required persecution to make them fulfill the implicit command in 1:8.²²

Persecution both spreads the gospel to Damascus and provides Acts' greatest proponent of Christianity in chap. 9. Saul, the tormenter of the Church (8:3), believes that some "followers of the Way" (9:2) have fled to Damascus. He goes to arrest them but joins them instead. His dramatic and unexpected conversion adds an ironic twist to the suffering theme. God causes the source of suffering to suffer blindness and humiliation and makes him a follower of the Way (9:3-9). Further, God adds, "I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (9:16). Saul's (Paul's) ministry is summarized as one of suffering, and later texts second this assessment (cf. 20:22-24; 21:7-14). Thus Paul's activities are cast in the light of suffering from the start. This affliction will characterize and authenticate his work. Indeed his first preaching efforts meet with life-threatening opposition (9:19-30).

Luke's summary in 9:31 deserves careful attention. First, though Galilee is not mentioned in chaps. 1-9 the author claims it as a stronghold of the gospel. Longenecker observes that "Luke's reference to Judea, Galilee, and Samaria probably means all the Jewish homeland of Palestine" has

²² Marshall, *Acts* 152.

been evangelized.²³ Second, this respite is unusual. Rarely does this luxury occur in Acts. Third, the gospel prospers in spite of, or because of, persecution. Nothing can stop the gospel, but its spread still causes grief and loss.

Until 9:31 almost all (cf. 5:1-11 for an exception) the problems the Church faces come from external forces. In 9:32-11:18, however, inner struggles arise. Though the Church is in a period of external peace (9:31), some internal theological problems emerge. After exerting a powerful ministry in Joppa, Peter receives a heavenly mandate to lead Cornelius, a Gentile, to Christ. Indeed the Gentiles now receive Christ and the accompanying gift of the Holy Spirit (10:44-48). Again ministry causes dispute, but this time among believers unaware that God cares for Gentiles (11:3). The dispute ends amiably for now (11:18) and will be revived later.

Meanwhile other victims of persecution preach to Jews and Greeks, ultimately establishing a church in Antioch (11:19-26). Here suffering helps include more non-Jews in the fellowship of Christ. So while peace causes problems in Jerusalem, persecution brings salvation in Antioch.

Chapter 12 begins with violence, martyrdom and imprisonment (12:1-3), yet ends with positive summaries (12:24-25). Many writers stress Peter's deliverance from prison in 12:6-9, which is valid. But though Peter lives, James dies. Peter goes free, but his captors die (12:19). Peter escapes but is mentioned again only in chap. 15. God's power is evident in this section, yet is manifested primarily in a suffering context.

When Paul becomes the book's chief character, persecution's role increases. Even in the early journeys the apostle encounters growing opposition. Paul brushes aside his first opponent, Elymas, with relative ease (13:4-12). At the next few stops, however, persecution drives the missionaries to new places (13:50; 14:6; 14:19). Only at Derbe (14:19-20) and on return trips do they have peace. Concerning the Derbe ministry Munck writes:

It should be noticed that they were not persecuted and that there is no mention of Jews in Derbe. In the other cities also persecution appeared to have spent its force, so that they were able to return to Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch.²⁴

This comment is fine as far as it goes, but how does Paul explain the Christian life to the converts? He asserts "that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (14:22). Luke does not let the motif rest or die. Paul has begun to experience the conditions of his own call (cf. 9:16) and teaches "that tribulation is the normal lot for Christians."²⁵

By now Luke has definitely established the role of outside persecution in the gospel's expansion. Next the author chooses to amplify the prominence of internal struggle in church growth (chap. 15). As in 11:1-18, the Church addresses the "Gentile problem." That Gentiles can be Christians

²³ Longenecker, "Acts" 379.

²⁴ Munck, *Acts* 134.

²⁵ Bruce, *Acts* 296.

without circumcision is the conclusion of the council, but this verdict comes only after much debate. The decision encourages the church at Antioch.

Luke includes one other sad episode of internal dispute in chap. 15. Paul and Barnabas disagree over missionary partners, and because of this "sharp contention . . . they separated from each other" (15:39). Barnabas takes Mark, while Paul chooses Silas and eventually Timothy (16:1-4). Perhaps tired of infighting, Paul circumcises Timothy to avoid controversy (16:3).

Rather than slowing the gospel's expansion, though, the split leads to further growth (16:5). Paul continues to evangelize Gentiles with Jerusalem's blessing. He and Silas move ahead with mission efforts. Still, the reader loses Barnabas, a veteran preacher and teacher. Disputes cause division and separation even at a basic reading level. Pain leads to ministry as usual, but pain still exists.

After a period of waiting for direction, Paul and Silas are led by the Spirit to Macedonia (16:6-10). They are imprisoned in Philippi (16:16-40) and are miraculously spared (16:25-34). Their suffering leads to their jailer's conversion (16:31-34). Later an uproar drives them out of Thessalonica (17:1-9) and Berea (17:14), though Silas and Timothy are palatable to the locals. Only Paul must depart, and while waiting for his associates in Athens he preaches with some success but also with some ridicule (17:32-34). From now on Paul will have a measure of success as he has had all along, yet his success leads to opposition that opens new doors of ministry in other places that could not be reached otherwise. Suffering impels the gospel here as surely as it does in 8:4.

Paul's ministry before his final arrest in Acts focuses on two locations: Corinth and Ephesus. In both places the apostle enjoys unusually long ministries. To reassure him God sends him a vision: "No man shall attack you to harm you; for I have many people in this city" (18:10). Like 9:31, this verse describes an unusual situation. After eighteen months, however, controversy erupts (18:12-17). Eventually Paul goes to Ephesus, enjoys a two-year stint, and directs many miracles and conversions (19:1-20). The Holy Spirit comes to those who know only John's baptism (19:1-7). Finally a riot partially encourages Paul to leave Ephesus (cf. 19:21-20:1). Even in relatively secure, long-term ministry Paul is not totally free from opposition, suffering and pain. He still can gauge his need to expand the gospel by the disputes he arouses. Peace is a fleeting thing for Paul, and all ministry seems to lead to pain, though it is through these problems that the Church grows.

It is fair to say that Acts 20-28 portrays a persecuted hero. That Paul knows "in the Spirit" that he wants to go to Jerusalem and Rome has been established in 19:21. How he will reach those destinations is revealed in 20:22-24: "And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, bound in the Spirit, not knowing what shall befall me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonments and afflictions await me. But I do not count my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I

may accomplish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God." Paul thereby affirms and embodies the call he received in 9:16. He knows he must suffer for Christ, and he knows through experience that this suffering will spread the gospel.

Other passages in chaps. 20–28 stress the suffering/expansion theme. On the way to Jerusalem the Spirit tells Paul not to proceed to Jerusalem (21:4), and the prophet Agabus (cf. 11:28) predicts he will be jailed in Jerusalem (21:10–14). Again Paul expresses his willingness to move ahead at all costs (21:13). The apostle seems to know something the others do not.

Does Paul's "strategy" work? Does this particular bit of suffering spread the gospel? After his arrest Paul, like the earlier disciples, preaches to the Jews and to their leaders (21:40–22:23). As before, the gospel is rejected. Next Paul defends himself before the Sanhedrin. Here he avoids further personal trouble by pitting the Pharisees against the Sadducees (23:1–5). Obviously Paul can handle persecution, but he does not necessarily relish it. Following this episode Paul's life is threatened by a group of Jewish fanatics (23:12–15), and he is saved only by his nephew's overhearing the plot and the tribune's unwillingness to have a prisoner in his custody murdered (23:16–35). Again, this story reveals that Paul does not take all persecution lightly, if indeed he ever does so. Even suffering must be channeled for the purpose of sharing the gospel. It does not happen at random.

Sandwiched between these two accounts of Paul avoiding unnecessary suffering and death is 23:11, which explains these events and foreshadows chaps. 24–28. Luke states: "The following night the Lord stood by him and said, 'Take courage, for as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome.'" From this assurance Paul gains the confidence to endure his suffering and the wisdom to use the suffering to benefit the gospel. Through persecution Paul will reach Rome. This verse also ties together earlier statements on suffering such as 8:4; 9:16; 20:22–24; 21:10–14. In these final chapters, too, Paul retraces the motif of the gospel moving from Jerusalem (Jews) to other regions (Gentiles).

Paul gains several opportunities for ministry through this arrest, even as he used other imprisonments to preach Christ (e.g. 16:19–40). First he defends himself before Felix, who eventually becomes "alarmed," or "afraid," over Paul's witness (24:27). Though Felix really finds no guilt in Paul, he furthers the apostle's unjust suffering by leaving him in jail for two years in hopes of receiving a bribe (24:26). His greed is especially ironic, since the apostle does not want to go free. Paul knows that only imprisonment and suffering will allow him to exercise his chosen ministry.

Before Festus, Felix's successor, Paul uses his predicament to its fullest advantage. Tired of facing the Jews, knowing he could die in Jerusalem, and persuaded that a trial there is not God's will, Paul appeals to Caesar (25:11–12). Thus he guarantees himself more trials, more suffering, and therefore, according to his experience, more ministry. He can now fulfill

God's call. Since 21:40 the Jews and Romans have worked together to persecute the apostle. Now the Roman system will act on its own. Paul's appeal, however, forces the system to do his bidding.

Simply reaching Rome causes Paul a great deal of trouble. After offering his conversion story to the Romans (26:1-23) as he has to the Jews (cf. 21:40-22:21), Paul begins the journey to Rome. Though he presses his belief in Christ before the Romans they, like the Jews, reject the gospel (25:13-26:32). In great detail Luke describes the hastily-organized trip of Paul and his companions and their subsequent shipwreck. God promises Paul he must stand before Caesar, which causes the entire group to be saved (27:24). Apparently not even smooth travel is granted the apostle. He perseveres in the midst of trial because of the promise of God.

Once in Rome all seems well. Paul speaks to the Roman Jews, absorbs their rejection, and enjoys an "unhindered" two years in the capital city (28:11-31). Judging from earlier events, however, the reader should expect Paul to either endure persecution soon or to minister further and thus bring suffering on himself. Another way to view the ending is to assume that Paul has triumphed. He has met suffering, endured it, and even learned to use it to serve the gospel. Seen in this way, Acts gives the reader a theology of suffering that is exemplified by the life and work of Paul.

Clearly suffering is a major force in the gospel's expansion. It is a rare thing for the Way to spread without it. Various summaries in the text point to this conclusion (8:4; 9:16; 14:22; 20:22-24; 21:13; etc.), as does the flow of the book's last nine chapters. Certainly the gospel moves, but never without pain. Thus the Church needs a theological understanding and practical application of how to deal with this everyday reality.

Since much of Acts has been summarized above, the other functions of suffering in Acts will be treated lightly. These concepts deserve more careful treatment, but perhaps a few brief comments can serve as starting points for further discussion.

2. *Suffering and the defense of Christianity.* As has been noted, some commentators still think Acts defends Christianity in some way. Few writers still hold that the book intends to garner *religio licita* status for Christianity—though Haenchen is a notable exception²⁶—since it is difficult to tell if Rome ever had a clear-cut list of "legal" religions.²⁷ Those who argue that Acts is an apology for Christianity now emphasize Roman toleration as the book's aim. Maddox concludes that

the theory of a political apology in Luke-Acts rests on two contentions: first, that Luke emphasizes the political innocence of the Christians, from Jesus himself onwards; second, that Luke always portrays Roman officials in a favourable light, or as friendly to the Christians.²⁸

²⁶ Cf. Maddox, *Purpose* 20.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 91-93.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 93.

If either contention proves untenable the whole notion of Acts as an apology is greatly weakened.

In Acts the Christians pose no political threat to the Romans. But how could such a persecuted movement threaten Rome? To give the Romans such information would hardly startle the authorities.

Though the book does not advocate Rome's downfall, neither does it uniformly portray the Romans in a positive light. After all, the Sadducees, who first arrest the believers, have Rome's support. Herod kills James (12:2) and is so egocentric that God strikes him dead (12:20-23). The Philippian officials beat and jail Paul and Silas without due process (16:37). The proconsul of Achaia does nothing when believers are beaten before his very eyes (18:17). Felix keeps Paul in jail in hopes of receiving a bribe (24:26). At times, of course, the Romans save Paul (e.g. 22:22-29; 23:23-30), but Luke's characterization of them is not always kind.

Therefore it seems unlikely that the purpose of Acts is to provide the Romans with a polite apology for Christianity. Again, suffering provides a means of evaluating this idea. The Romans make Christians suffer in a very capricious fashion. When they help Paul it normally merely preserves their reputation, though there are exceptions to this generalization (cf. 27:43).

3. *Suffering and the defense of Paul.* Since the Tübingen school first forwarded the idea, some scholars have argued that Acts defends Paul in some fashion. F. C. Baur thought that Acts attempts to smooth differences between Petrine and Pauline factions in the early Church, which would help Paul's reputation among Jewish believers. S. G. F. Brandon has mirrored this viewpoint more recently.²⁹

A related idea is that "Luke-Acts attempted to defend Paul against the attacks of Jewish Christians, partisans of James, by presenting him as the sole continuer of the work of the twelve."³⁰ Thus Paul is, as in Baur's view, made more prominent in the eyes of Jewish readers. In this scheme, however, Acts jealously guards Paul's reputation by serving as a résumé of his accomplishments. Pauline Christianity thereby becomes the victor over instead of partner with Petrine Christianity.

Munck's broadly suggestive theory that Acts may have served in some way as a document in Paul's defense before Caesar also falls into this category.³¹ If Theophilus was a member of Caesar's court, as Munck postulates, or if Luke uses this defense to preach the gospel, then the book's protection of Paul has a legal-theological purpose.³² This theory indicates that Luke's intention is to present Paul to Gentiles rather than to believers.

What, if anything, does suffering have to do with these theories? Probably the dominance of Paul's suffering in Acts precludes the first two

²⁹ Talbert, *Luke* 98.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 99.

³¹ Munck, *Acts* LVIII-LIX.

³² *Ibid.* LVIII.

views. Though some writers may exaggerate the differences between Paul and the Jerusalem church, perhaps Acts 21:17-25 demonstrates that Paul never fully earned their trust. Further, their suggestion leads indirectly to his arrest. In nearly every city Jews hound Paul. It seems unlikely therefore that Jewish Christians would appreciate this unflattering picture of Jewish treatment of Paul. He remains a suspicious ally. Maybe Luke's portrayal would cause reflection and repentance, but the book's tone is not sharp enough to support this possibility. Acts presents the relationship between Paul and Jewish Christians in so straightforward a manner that one has to wonder if it plays a huge role in the story.

Rather than serving a polemical purpose, Paul's suffering defends him as a Christian and as a worthy servant of Jesus. Anyone reading the book must be impressed with the apostle's commitment in the midst of pain. Peter and the other disciples suffer, and Paul certainly fits that mold too. But this realization does not necessarily exalt Paul above other sufferers or martyrs in any ecclesiastical sense.

Munck's (and others') contention that Acts may be a defense document remains too speculative to confirm. No evidence really supports the notion. The Romans could easily justify their treatment of Paul as necessitated by the problems he caused in Jerusalem and the demands of the Jewish leaders. Again the theology of Acts would surely tire them, and they would have to wade through much material just to receive the simple gospel.

The greatest defense of Paul's ministry is that he served Christ by embodying the suffering of Jesus. The impact of this statement would most likely escape the Romans.

4. *Suffering and the foundations of Christianity.* Both Marshall and Maddox conclude that Acts in some way strengthens the early Church's theology and practice by asserting that Christianity's foundations are deep and impressive.³³ Marshall thinks that those who know how the Church struggled and survived will have confidence in its present and future survival.³⁴ Similarly Maddox contends that later believers can withstand heresy, persecution and the *parousia*'s delay when they appreciate their heritage.³⁵ Luke's use of suffering, though neither scholar uses the motif extensively to forward his position, supports these ideas.

Just as one of the chief bases of Christianity is the suffering of Christ, so a main characteristic of the early Church is its own suffering. Martyrs and the persecuted spread the gospel. Opposition fuels their efforts, even though the first believers did not enjoy or deserve their suffering. That Peter and Paul can endure and overcome such obstacles proves that human beings can serve Christ in and through problems. How important suffering is to the roots of Christianity was established above, so the idea will not be treated further here.

³³ Thus, though in different ways, both writers posit a theologically-based purpose for Acts.

³⁴ Marshall, *Acts* 21.

³⁵ Maddox, *Purpose* 187.

5. *Suffering and Luke's portrayal of Paul.* So many treatments of Paul's life and ministry have been published that space does not allow even a cursory examination of the major works. What must be noted here, however, is that drawing a sketch of Paul is a main concern of Luke's and that some scholars now consider Paul's suffering a major motif in Acts and the epistles. Maddox argues that Paul "is more important for what he represents than for his own sake," by which he means that Luke uses Paul's life to teach an audience certain lessons.³⁶ Through Paul the Church knows that it can and must evangelize, organize, and endure persecution.³⁷ Most writers agree in part that Maddox is correct. Paul's life does point the way to total Christian service.

Two recent interpreters of Paul's ministry have moved beyond this general recognition of the importance of Paul in Acts to claim that Paul's suffering plays a major role in the epistles. David Alan Black argues that Paul's weakness acts as his self-legitimization as an apostle and his best way of sharing the gospel.³⁸ Scott Hafemann seconds this position and demonstrates through an exhaustive exegesis of 2 Cor 2:14-3:3 and its related passages that Paul defends his ministry on the basis of what he has endured.³⁹ These monographs argue that Paul's self-portrait focuses on how his suffering "proves" his apostleship and defines much of his theology.

If Black and Hafemann are correct, then Acts and the Pauline epistles largely agree about Paul's role in the early Church. Basically Paul first persecutes the Church and then suffers with it. Further, Paul does not shun suffering because his personality and theology do not allow that possibility. Finally, then, Luke's understanding of Paul does not diverge as far from the epistles as some writers think. Therefore Acts teaches later believers how to follow Paul's example by delineating his suffering.

III. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has not attempted to denounce all previous work on the purpose of Acts. Rather it tries to refine these works by showing how suffering undergirds the whole book and therefore how it cannot be separated from its purpose. To postulate a purpose for Acts without considering this principle impoverishes the work's interpretation, while accepting the principle leads to historical and theological conclusions.

Though recognizing the prevalence of suffering in Acts does not establish its date, the theme does illuminate the original audience's situation. Most commentators accept a post-A.D.-70 date for Acts. If this date is correct the suffering theme helps explain such difficult events as the Neronian persecution, the fall of Jerusalem, and the scattering of the

³⁶ Ibid. 70.

³⁷ Ibid. 82.

³⁸ D. A. Black, *Paul, Apostle of Weakness* (New York: Lang, 1984).

³⁹ S. J. Hafemann, *Suffering and the Spirit: An Exegetical Study of II Cor. 2:14-3:3 within the Context of the Corinthian Correspondence* (WUNT 19; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1986).

Church. If F. F. Bruce's pre-A.D.-64 dating⁴⁰ is correct the book prepares the Church for further persecution and comforts them in their present pain. Simply put: Christians suffer, but they use it to glorify God. The suffering motif may help refine which situation best fits the book's material.

Various theological conclusions may be drawn from the suffering theme in Acts. (1) One can assume that this message was needed in the early Church. Problems arise, but they can be overcome and used to promote the gospel. As Maddox concludes:

The church within which Luke writes is under pressure, through theological argument as well as through physical assault and judicial processes: all that cannot be avoided. But the Holy Spirit is working irresistibly on, and that can only give the Christian joy and confidence to take his share in the witness to Christ, to which the whole church is called.⁴¹

(2) Luke teaches that suffering accompanies serious ministry and the expansion of Christianity. Paul agrees with this assessment as well (2 Tim 3:12). Those who kill Christ and the martyrs will always exist. Still, through personal witness and sacrifice the kingdom will triumph.

(3) The greatest defense of the gospel and its representatives is that it is worth dying for. The Christians are not a political threat because they suffer for another kingdom. Paul does not succumb to persecution because it fits into his theology and extends his ministry. These trials are not "mere annoyances"⁴² or slight setbacks. They cost the Church its best people. Yet it is this willingness to sacrifice life and comfort that speaks loudest to second-generation Christians as well as to today's Church.

⁴⁰ Bruce, *Acts* 22.

⁴¹ Maddox, *Purpose* 82.

⁴² Contra *ibid.*