

## THE DEPICTION OF CHURCH GROWTH IN ACTS

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**Abstract:** *While the book of Acts is frequently appropriated as a model for church growth within the Christian community, the theme of church growth within the narrative of Acts has seldom been analyzed in a sustained way. The present article investigates the ways in which the book of Acts depicts the numerical growth of the church and the expansion of the Christian mission, identifying five strands of material in Acts which bear directly upon the literary depiction of church growth within the narrative. The article concludes with some reflections regarding the theme of church growth in Acts and its implications for those who seek to appropriate Acts for the growth of the church today.*

**Key words:** *church growth, Acts, ecclesiology, evangelism, mission, outreach, numerical growth*

The book of Acts tells the story of how Jesus's small, ethnically homogenous group of disciples grew to become a fledgling multi-ethnic movement sweeping across the Mediterranean world, all within the span of a single generation. Acts thus affords the preeminent picture of church growth in the NT, and so it is unsurprising that pastors, church planters, apologists, and evangelists have frequently turned to Acts for inspirational and practical models of ministry.<sup>1</sup>

What is surprising is how seldom the theme of church growth in Acts has been treated in a sustained way within the realm of academic biblical studies.<sup>2</sup> At the historical level, the contours and extent of the early church's growth have surely received a good deal of attention, as sociologists, historians, and exegetes have sought from various angles to assess the historical plausibility of the portrait of exponential numerical growth in Acts.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, a number of works devoted to other considerations have touched tangentially upon facets of the depiction of the

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<sup>1</sup> To cite but a few overt examples, consider the Acts 29 church-planting network, or such titles as G. E. Bontrager and N. D. Showalter, *It Can Happen Today: Principles of Church Growth from the Book of Acts* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1986); J. Iorg, *The Case for Antioch: A Biblical Model for a Transformational Church* (Nashville: B&H, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> For our purposes, the phrase "church growth" will be understood simply to refer to the numerical increase of those who belong to the Christian movement in Acts. The phrase can therefore be used to refer to the growth of a local congregation, yet it may also be applied more broadly to the expansion of the Christian movement within a given region.

<sup>3</sup> The classic treatment is Adolf von Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1908). For a summary of more recent approaches, see W. A. Dreyer, "The Amazing Growth of the Early Church," *HTS Theological Studies* 68 (2012): 1–7. In biblical scholarship, Eckhard Schnabel's work stands as the most comprehensive recent analysis of the growth of the church in the first century (see *Early Christian Mission* [2 vols.; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004]).

quantitative growth of the church in Acts.<sup>4</sup> For the most part, however, the theme of church growth *per se* (e.g. the features of the precise language and literary forms that are used to describe the growth of the church in Acts, the contexts within which reports and examples of growth and expansion occur, the causes to which growth is attributed, the purposes which the varied depictions of growth accomplish within the narrative) still remains largely neglected within Acts scholarship.<sup>5</sup> Hence, while practitioners eagerly appropriate the book of Acts in the hope of supporting church growth in their ministry contexts, much exegetical work remains to be done in order to understand what Acts actually has to say about church growth.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Some authors have focused upon the evangelistic methods of the church in Acts (M. Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970]; R. Maddox, *Witnesses to the End of the Earth: The Pattern of Mission in the Book of Acts* [Enfield, NSW: UTC Publications, 1980]; T. S. Rainer, "Church Growth and Evangelism in Acts," *CTR* 5 [1990]: 57–68; E. J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* [Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2008]). Other interpreters have focused upon the summaries of community life which contain references to numerical growth (D. R. Schwartz, "Non-joining Sympathizers [Acts 5:13–14]," *Bib* 64 [1983]: 550–55; M. A. Co, "The Major Summaries in Acts: Acts 2:42–47; 4:32–35; 5:12–16. Linguistic and Literary Relationship," *ETL* 68 [1992]: 49–85; A. C. Mitchell, "The Social Function of Friendship in Acts 2:44–47 and 4:32–37," *JBL* 111 [1992]: 255–72; G. E. Sterling, "Athletes of Virtue: An Analysis of the Summaries in Acts [2:41–47; 4:32–35; 5:12–16]," *JBL* 113 [1994]: 679–96; U. Wendel, *Gemeinde in Kraft: Das Gemeindeverständnis in den Summarien der Apostelgeschichte* [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1998]; A. Chambers, *Exemplary Life: A Theology of Church Life in Acts* [Nashville: B & H, 2012]), the geographical and/or ethnic expansion of the Christian mission in Acts (see, e.g., B. Rosner, "The Progress of the Word," in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* [ed. I. H. Marshall and D. Peterson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 215–33), or the depiction of a particular figure's mission (see, e.g., I. H. Marshall, "Luke's Portrait of the Pauline Mission," in *The Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul's Mission in Honour of Peter O'Brien* [ed. P. Bolt and M. Thompson; Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000], 99–113).

<sup>5</sup> Occasional works have addressed the theme directly. Hence, P. Zingg relies heavily upon Luke's growth summaries and the speech of Gamaliel to analyze the theological significance of the growth of the church in Acts (*Das Wachsen der Kirche: Beiträge zur Frage der lukanischen Redaktion und Theologie* [Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1974]). W. Reinhardt examines the scriptural resonances within Luke's depiction of church growth, primarily focusing upon the most overt references to growth in the summarizing statements in Acts (*Das Wachstum des Gottesvolkes: Untersuchungen zum Gemeinewachstum im lukanischen Doppelwerk auf dem Hintergrund des Alten Testaments* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995]). Both Zingg and Reinhardt integrate elements of the theme of growth from Luke's Gospel into their analysis, and neither author addresses the conversion accounts of Acts in a sustained way. For a shorter work which nonetheless attempts to speak in general terms about growth over the course of the narrative of Acts, see J. Amstutz, "Beyond Pentecost: A Study of Some Sociological Dimensions of New Testament Church Growth from the Book of Acts," in *Essays on Apostolic Themes: Studies in Honor of Howard M. Ervin* (ed. P. Elbert; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1985), 208–25. A number of authors have focused narrowly upon the growth summaries in Acts (see H. Cadbury, "The Summaries in Acts," in *The Beginnings of Christianity*, part 1: *The Acts of the Apostles* [ed. F. J. Foakes Jackson and K. Lake; London: Macmillan, 1933], 392–402; J. Kodell, "'The Word of God Grew': The Ecclesial Tendency of *λόγος* in Acts 1,7; 12,24; 19,20," *Bib* 55 [1974]: 505–19; H. A. Brehm, "The Significance of the Summaries for Interpreting Acts," *SnJT* 33 [1990]: 29–40; Wendel, *Gemeinde*). On the general neglect of the theme within Lukan scholarship, see Schnabel, *Mission*, 1:6.

<sup>6</sup> I suspect that the neglect of the literary depiction of church growth in Acts scholarship is largely a reflection of two prominent emphases of biblical scholarship in the modern era. First, debates about the historical reliability of Acts have ensured that when the passages which most directly bear upon the topic of church growth in Acts have been analyzed, the discussion has usually been framed in terms of their historical plausibility. Second, and perhaps more significantly, the influence of form-criticism upon

I hope that the present article will provide some preliminary conceptual clarity in this regard by developing a taxonomy of the diverse material in Acts that bears upon the theme of church growth. The numerical increase of the church and the progress of the Christian mission in Acts is depicted through (1) periodic summaries of church growth; (2) occasional numerical references; (3) numerous conversion stories and reports; (4) statements about geographic expansion; and (5) depictions of outsiders expressing anxiety or opposition toward the growth of the church.<sup>7</sup> Most often these strands of data are considered in isolation from one another. However, each of the categories in this proposed taxonomy contributes to the overall picture of growth and expansion in Acts, and each functions in its own distinct way within the narrative. The present article will examine each of these strands of data in turn, highlighting the main features of each class of material and the contexts within which they occur. The article will then conclude with a few general reflections regarding the theme of church growth in Acts and its implications for those who seek to appropriate Acts for the growth of the church today.

### I. SUMMARIES OF CHURCH GROWTH IN ACTS

The passages which most directly convey the growth of the Christian movement in Acts are the numerous statements that refer in general terms to the ongoing numerical growth of the church (Acts 2:47; 5:13–14; 6:1, 7; 9:31; 11:21, 24; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20).<sup>8</sup> These statements are frequently conceived as growth summaries, because with the exception of 6:1, these brief statements consistently follow the detailed narration of particular actions, events, or circumstances, advancing the pace of the narrative and offering a summary of the general conditions which either

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scholarship of Acts has helpfully encouraged the detailed examination of particular literary forms, such as growth summaries. However, as this article attempts to demonstrate, the depiction of the numerical growth and geographic expansion of the church in Acts is accomplished through a number of different literary forms, such that an adequate discussion of the theme must be broader in scope than an analysis of any particular one of the forms.

<sup>7</sup> Certainly some passages in Acts exist in which a given reference can be categorized in multiple ways from the proposed taxonomy. For example, in Acts 2:41, the reference to 3,000 souls being added to the number of the disciples at Pentecost can simultaneously be categorized as a conversion record and as a numerical reference. The categories in the taxonomy are not intended to be mutually exclusive, and the goal of the taxonomy is not to impose a rigid scheme upon the text of Acts. Rather, the taxonomy is simply an attempt to provide a few helpful distinctions to account for the diverse sorts of data related to the growth of the church and the expansion of the Christian mission in Acts.

<sup>8</sup> Rosner also includes Acts 28:30–31 in his list of growth summaries, but since that passage does not explicitly refer to the numerical increase of the Christian movement, it is not included in the above list (see “Progress,” 221). Several interpreters do not include 6:1 in their lists of summary passages, presumably because its reference to numerical increase is not presented as a summary in relation to the preceding passage (see the lists of Kodell, “The Word,” 507; Brehm, “Summaries,” 30). 6:1 has been included in the above list because it does refer in general terms to the numerical increase of disciples without reference to a particular event and therefore qualifies as a summary of church growth, even if it is not summarizing the outcome of a particular episode within the narrative.

accompanied or followed from the specific episode that has just been depicted.<sup>9</sup> For instance, the statement about the growth of the church in the vicinity of Jerusalem in 5:13–14 follows the detailed depiction of the story of Ananias and Sapphira, and the statement about the growth of the churches in Asia Minor in 16:5 follows the account of Paul and Timothy's ministry in the region. These sorts of summaries occur at fairly regular intervals throughout most of the narrative, such that some interpreters have even posited that the growth summaries are important structural markers within the narrative of Acts.<sup>10</sup> At the very least, the regularity of the growth summaries ensures that readers of Acts are constantly reminded of the ongoing growth of the church and progress of the Christian movement. In terms of the contribution of the growth summaries to the overall theme of church growth in Acts, a number of features regarding both the wording and the context of the growth summaries are worthy of mention.

1. *Lexical and grammatical features of the growth summaries.* With regard to the precise language employed in the summaries, one finds upon examination that the statements contain a number of elements which stress the impressive frequency and extent of the growth of the church. Most often the summaries are presented in the imperfect tense, creating the impression of ongoing quantitative increase.<sup>11</sup> The continual nature of the growth is further reinforced in 2:47 and 16:5 by the adverbial καθ' ἡμέραν (“daily”), and in 6:1 the usage of a present tense participle along with the temporal prepositional phrase “in those days” likewise gives the sense that the growth was an ongoing characteristic of the early group of disciples. Similarly, adjectival and adverbial modifiers and prepositional phrases appear at a number of points to underscore the extent of the church's growth. In 5:14, one reads, “all the more (μᾶλλον) those who believed were being added to the Lord, a multitude (πλήθη) of both men and women.” In 6:7, one finds that the number of disciples in Jerusalem was multiplying “exceedingly” (σφόδρα), and “a large crowd” (πολύς ὄχλος) of priests was associating with the movement.<sup>12</sup> In 9:31, the church throughout “the whole of Judea and Galilee and Samaria” (καθ' ὅλης τῆς Ἰουδαίας καὶ Γαλιλαίας καὶ Σαμαρείας) was being multiplied. Further examples would only belabor the point that the growth summaries are replete with constructions which in one way or another stress both the frequency and the extent of the numerical increase of the Christian movement.

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<sup>9</sup> On the generalizing nature of the growth summaries, see M. Dibelius, “Style Criticism of the Book of Acts,” in *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (ed. H. Greeven; trans. Mary Ling; Mifflintown, PA: Sigler, 1999), 9–10.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., D. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 33–34. The structural function of the growth summaries is challenged most aggressively by H. Cadbury, “Summaries,” 392–96.

<sup>11</sup> On the function of the imperfect tense in the summaries, see Chambers, *Exemplary Life*, 48.

<sup>12</sup> Many of these designations overlap with the language employed to describe the growth of God's people in the OT (see Reinhardt, *Wachstum*, 59–61). However, such terminology would also seem to be the most natural available wording for describing numerical growth, so some caution is warranted before reading too much into the verbal parallels.

For the most part, however, the growth summaries lack clear markers of causation which would explicitly identify causes within the narrative for the growth that is depicted in the summaries. Most often the growth summaries are related to the preceding discourse by simple connectives such as *καί*, *δέ*, or *τε*. The summaries in 9:31 and 16:5 are introduced by *μέν οὖν*, which signals close continuity with the preceding discourse and yet does not necessarily mark for causation (cf. Acts 1:18; 8:25; 11:19). In 19:20, the connective *οὕτως* introduces the statement about growth, which in the context of the verse would seem to look back to the preceding discourse and perhaps frame the summary statement as the outcome of what has happened. This text would thus be the closest that the growth summaries come to an explicit statement of causation for the numerical increase of the church. What cannot be found in the growth summaries is any occurrence of an overt marker of causation or instrumentality, such as *διὰ τοῦτο* or an instrumental prepositional phrase of one kind or another. Hence, readers of Acts are for the most part left to infer the causes of growth from the surrounding context of the growth summaries.

At the same time, though lacking in overt markers of causation, the growth summaries do tend to be constructed in such a way as to give the impression that ultimately the growth of the church is closely tied to the Lord's initiative and blessing. Indeed, quite often this focus upon divine involvement is striking. For instance, in 2:47b, following a long series of statements describing the activities of the disciples in 2:44–47a, the narrator switches subjects to "the Lord" in order to describe the growth of the church: "[All those who believed] received food in gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people, and *the Lord* was adding (*ὁ δὲ κύριος προσετίθει*) daily to those who were being saved." Since the preceding passage consistently focuses upon the activities of the believing community, the abrupt shift to divine action in the concluding clause is rather conspicuous.

In the next growth summary (5:13–14), the verb *προστίθῃμι* is employed once more, this time in the passive voice: "The people honored them, and all the more those who believed *were being added* to the Lord" (*ἐμεγάλυνεν αὐτοὺς ὁ λαός, μᾶλλον δὲ προσετίθεντο πιστεύοντες τῷ κυρίῳ*).<sup>13</sup> The shift from active (*ἐμεγάλυνεν*) to passive (*προσετίθεντο*) voice effectively conceals the agency of the action, and the repetition of *προστίθῃμι* from 2:47 leaves the strong impression that the growth being depicted is to be attributed to the Lord. The passive voice occurs in a similar manner to refer to the quantitative increase of the church in 6:7, 9:31, 11:24, and 12:24. Elsewhere, the blessing of God is overtly referenced in connection with church growth (9:31; 11:21).<sup>14</sup> While the statements about church growth in 6:1 and 16:5 are expressed in the active voice and make no reference to divine

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<sup>13</sup> The dative *τῷ κυρίῳ* is probably not instrumental, given the similar construction in 11:24. See Co, "Major Summaries," 77–78; Wendel, *Gemeinde*, 259.

<sup>14</sup> If the ambiguous *κατὰ κράτος τοῦ κυρίου ὁ λόγος ἤρξανεν* in 19:20 is taken to mean that the word grew according to the power of the Lord, then that verse would be another direct reference to God's favor in the context of church growth. Typical Lukan word order would seem to favor such an interpretation, though most English translations instead take *λόγος* rather than *κράτος* to be the head noun of the genitive *τοῦ κυρίου*.

involvement, cumulatively the growth summaries impress upon the reader a strong sense that the progress of the Christian mission depicted in Acts is both willed by God and dependent upon his empowerment and blessing.

This impression may be reinforced by a scriptural resonance which may reverberate through many of the growth summaries: The most frequently used verbs for depicting the growth of the church in the summary statements are *αὐξάνω* and *πληθύνω*.<sup>15</sup> In the LXX, these two verbs are used frequently to refer to the divine directive to “be fruitful and multiply.”<sup>16</sup> Particularly relevant for our purposes are those passages from the Scriptures of Israel which employ these verbs within the context of the hope for future covenantal blessing: In Jer 23:3, for example, the Lord states, “Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply” (*αὐξηθήσονται καὶ πληθυνθήσονται*).<sup>17</sup> In the book of Acts, these two verbs are also paired in a similar fashion in Acts 7:17, where Stephen's speech recounts how the Lord had made the Israelites fruitful and caused them to multiply at the time of Joseph in Egypt, in fulfillment of his promise to Abraham. In light of all of this, the usage of *αὐξάνω* and/or *πληθύνω* in several of the growth summaries of Acts may ring to some degree with notes of eschatological fulfillment, signifying that God's promise of growth to his people is finding its fulfillment in the progress of the Christian movement.

The scriptural resonances may emerge most strongly in Acts 6:7; 12:24; and 19:20, where we find the phrase, “the word of God/the Lord was growing” (*ὁ λόγος ... ἤϋξανεν*).<sup>18</sup> This peculiar expression could theoretically refer to the geographic expansion of the church or to an intensification of Christian proclamation, yet most interpreters understand the phrase to be a unique way of referring to the numerical increase of the Christian movement.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, in the immediate context of Acts 6:7, where the phrase first appears, the ambiguous construction is followed immediately by two statements referring to the numerical increase of the church: “The word of God was growing (*ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ ἤϋξανεν*), and the number of disciples in Jerusalem was being multiplied exceedingly, and a large crowd of priests was becoming obedient to the faith.” In this context, the growth of the word cannot refer to geographic expansion, since the narrative has yet to move beyond Jerusalem. The phrase also does not seem to refer to an intensification of Christian proclamation, since the surrounding context makes no mention of such activity. Rather, the phrase about the growth of the word is most naturally taken as a reference to the quantitative increase of the Christian movement in Jerusalem, with the two clauses regarding the growth of the church clarifying what it means to say that

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<sup>15</sup> *Αὐξάνω* appears in the growth statements in Acts 6:7; 12:24; and 19:20. *Πληθύνω* appears in the growth statements in Acts 6:1, 7; 9:31; and 12:24.

<sup>16</sup> On the Septuagintal usage of these terms, see Zingg, *Wachsen*, 25–26; Reinhardt, *Wachstum*, 59.

<sup>17</sup> See also Gen 35:11; Lev 26:9; Jer 3:16.

<sup>18</sup> The verb *πληθύνω* also appears in 6:7 and 12:24, though not in 19:20.

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed defense of this interpretation, see Kodell, “The Word,” 507–11.

the word of God was growing.<sup>20</sup> In fact, the only other occurrence of *αὐξάνω* in Acts is in 7:17 where, as we have seen, it refers to the numerical increase which God gave to the Israelites at the time of Joseph.<sup>21</sup> This would seem to support the suggested interpretation of the phrase in question. If such an interpretation is correct, then the expression would be another way in which the summary statements in Acts link church growth with divine involvement, and the peculiar phraseology of the expression would seem to convey that the growth of the church is to be understood in some sense as a fulfillment of the word of the Lord.<sup>22</sup>

Hence, in terms of the precise wording of the growth summaries, although the summaries do not contain overt markers of causation, they do leave the reader with the impression that the growth of the church and the progress of the Christian mission are closely tied in Acts to the Lord's volition and blessing. Through direct statements about the Lord's involvement, as well as the artful usage of the passive voice and apparent scriptural echoes in the growth summaries, the narrative conveys that the growth of the church is ultimately a matter of divine initiative.

2. *Narrative context of the growth summaries.* With regard to the context of the growth summaries in Acts, it has already been mentioned that the summaries occur at fairly regular intervals in the first 20 chapters of Acts and tend to function as concluding statements following the detailed narration of particular actions, events, or circumstances. Another feature of the context of the growth summaries is also worth noting: the summaries appear exclusively with reference to settings in which there are established churches, and the statements generally occur within the context of passages that have described facets of the community life of the church and the public witness or reputation of local congregations. Thus, the summary in 2:47b concludes the depiction of the Jerusalem community of disciples in 2:42–47a. The summary in 5:13–14 follows immediately after the contrasting stories of Barnabas and Ananias and Sapphira, and the summaries in 6:1, 7 bracket the account of the appointment of the Seven. The summary in 9:31 follows the account of the inclusion of Saul into the community of believers, and in 11:21, 24, the growth statements appear in the context of the narrator's depiction of the Antioch fellowship. In 16:5, the growth summary follows an account of Paul and Timothy's encouragement of the churches in Asia Minor. In 19:20, the growth of the church is mentioned after the believers in Ephesus have publicly burned their magical books. Hence, with the possible exception of the statement in 12:24, the growth summaries are closely tied to contexts addressed to aspects of the fellowship of the Christian community.

<sup>20</sup> Zingg, *Wachsen*, 172; Wendel, *Gemeinde*, 261–62.

<sup>21</sup> The verb appears at four points in Luke's Gospel (Luke 1:80; 2:40; 12:27; 13:19), referring invariably to physical growth of one kind or another. The usage in Luke 13:19 occurs in the context of the parable of the mustard seed, where the growth of the seed serves as a metaphor for the growth of the kingdom of God, which may furnish a suggestive parallel for the construction in Acts.

<sup>22</sup> Reinhardt also contends that the usage of *προστιθήμι* with reference to the growth of the church is to be understood against a Jewish background (cf. Deut 1:11; 2 Sam 24:3; Ps 113:22 LXX; Isa 14:1), drawing upon parallels with the description of the growth of God's people in Joseph and Asenath (see *Wachstum*, 90–99).

Perhaps for this reason, no growth summaries appear after the summary about the church in Ephesus in 19:20, as the narrative shifts increasingly to Paul's individual experience, and the community life of Christian congregations recedes from focus. Additionally, the growth summaries are confined geographically to Palestine and Asia Minor. Acts offers no comparable references to the ongoing growth of the church in Greece or Rome, though in 18:10 the Lord does assure Paul that there are many people for him in Corinth. This, too, may owe to the fact that the summaries relate consistently to existing congregations, whereas the sections of the narrative which occur in Greece and Rome almost exclusively depict the church-planting efforts of Paul and his traveling companions.

## II. NUMERICAL REFERENCES

While Acts most often depicts the growth of the church in general terms, at a few points in the narrative, specific numerical references occur with regard to the increasing size of the church. In 2:41, the narrator notes that about 3,000 souls (ψυχῆ) were added to the community of disciples at Pentecost. Since the disciples had previously numbered approximately 120 (cf. Acts 1:15), the response to Peter's proclamation at Pentecost represents an exponential expansion of the movement. In 4:4, the number has grown to 5,000 men (ἀνὴρ), a figure which would seem to exclude women and children (cf. 5:13–14).<sup>23</sup> In 19:7, the narrator specifies that about 12 men in Ephesus had been disciples of John and received the Holy Spirit upon encountering Paul. Finally, in 21:20, James the elder informs Paul that among the Judeans there are many myriads who have believed (πόσαι μυριάδες εἰσὶν ἐν τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις τῶν πεπιστευκότων).<sup>24</sup> The impressive total is intended within the context of James's speech as a counterpart to Paul's report of success among the Gentiles. Aside from these few numerical statements, quantitative increase is depicted in more general terms.

As can be seen from the above summary, numerical designations are relatively scarce in the book of Acts, which may indicate that Luke is more concerned with the meaning or exemplary nature of the church's growth than with its precise extent.<sup>25</sup> Aside from the anomalous reference in 19:7, all of the numerical designations are associated with the number of Jewish believers in Jerusalem and Judea, and the number in 19:7 is not a reference to the total population of the church in

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<sup>23</sup> In the broader context, Peter and John heal a lame man at the temple, after which Peter proclaims a message to the crowd that gathers, and then the Jewish leadership arrests and jails Peter and John.

<sup>24</sup> On the interpretation of ἐν τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις as "among the Judeans," as well as the sort of figure envisioned by πόσαι μυριάδες, see C. S. Keener, "The Plausibility of Luke's Growth Figures in Acts 2.41; 4.4; 21.20," *JGRChJ* 7 (2010): 150–51.

<sup>25</sup> One might also question the extent to which precise numerical figures would have been available. On the relative lack of numerical references, see Wendel, *Gemeinde*, 263. The scarcity of numbers ought not to be taken as an indication of a lack of interest in the quantitative growth of the church (pace C. R. Taber, "The New Testament Language of Quantity and Growth in Relation to the Church," *Missiology* 14 [1986]: 392).

Ephesus but rather a note about the number of John's former disciples. Thus, no numerical totals appear for any of the churches with Gentile members.

Surely such a pattern is not coincidental. Rather, within the narrative of Acts, the few numerical totals which occur function specifically to help show the extent of the ongoing success of the Christian mission among Jewish audiences. Without such numerical references, the frequent accounts of conflict between Christian spokespeople and various Jewish opponents throughout the narrative would give the impression that the Christian mission made little progress among Jewish audiences. Though the early growth summaries by themselves would certainly suggest a degree of initial success among Jewish audiences in Jerusalem, without the figures provided in 2:41, 4:4, and 21:20, readers would have little reason to suppose that the Christian mission ever made inroads among more than a very small and isolated group of Jewish believers. Instead, the numerical references are an important means by which the narrator paints a more nuanced picture of the relationship between the Christian movement and Jewish audiences.<sup>26</sup> In this way, the specific numerical totals presented in relation to the growth of the church in Acts do serve an important function, seldom as they may occur.

### III. CONVERSION STORIES AND REPORTS

In addition to its general statements about the growth of the church, Acts also includes numerous conversion stories and shorter reports of conversions which also bear upon the theme of church growth, in so far as they offer particular examples of the Christian movement growing through the addition of new members. No shortage of scholarship exists on the topic of conversion in Acts.<sup>27</sup> Rarely, however, are the conversion stories and reports examined with reference to their contribution to the theme of church growth.<sup>28</sup> Granted, the purposes that the various conversion stories are intended to fulfill within the narrative of Acts are admittedly diverse, and it may well be that any given conversion story is not told solely or even primarily to convey a principle about church growth. Nevertheless, the conversion stories do clearly depict the expansion of the Christian mission, so an analysis of the theme of church growth in Acts should by no means ignore the numerous stories and reports of conversion which occupy such a substantial space within the narrative of Acts.

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<sup>26</sup> On the narrative function of the numerical references, see J. Jervell, *Luke and the People of God: A New Look at Luke-Acts* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972), 45–46.

<sup>27</sup> For an overview of recent scholarly discussion, see J. B. Green, *Conversion in Luke-Acts: Divine Action, Human Cognition, and the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 3–16.

<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the monograph which most directly addresses the theme of church growth in Acts (Reinhardt, *Wachstum*) only incidentally mentions any of the conversion stories or reports. Treatments of the topics of evangelism and mission in Acts of course deal frequently with the material pertaining to conversions in Acts (see, e.g., Green, *Evangelism*, 115–29; H. C. Kee, *Good News to the Ends of the Earth: The Theology of Acts* [London: SCM, 1990], 91–92). However, while evangelism is an important means by which the church grows, it is quite possible to examine the evangelistic methods of the church in Acts without reference to the broader theme of church growth, which is evangelism's result. See Rainer, "Church Growth," 57.

In referring to conversion stories, I have in mind those places in Acts in which the narrator depicts the circumstances by which an individual or group of individuals comes to new belief in Jesus. Often the individuals will be called by a proper name at some point within the story, though occasionally the characters are simply described in terms of some distinctive feature, such as occurs with the Ethiopian eunuch or the Philippian jailer. At some places (cf. 3:1–10; 9:32–34), it can be difficult to determine whether the account of a healing or exorcism or other miracle could also be classified as a conversion story, since the new belief of the affected individual is not explicitly referenced and yet may be implied in the account. Moreover, in addition to the numerous robust accounts of conversions, Acts also contains a number of more abbreviated conversion reports in which no specific individual is mentioned, yet the narrator observes in a more general way that people became believers in response to some event or message (4:4a; 9:35; 9:42; 13:48; 14:1; 14:21; 17:4; 17:12; 28:24). Thus, establishing a definitive list of conversion stories is somewhat challenging.<sup>29</sup>

For the purposes of the present work, I will simply observe that there are nine instances in which specific individuals are explicitly said to have become believers in association with some particular circumstance within the narrative (8:4–13; 8:26–39; 9:1–19; 10:44–48; 13:4–12; 16:13–15; 16:25–34; 17:34; and 18:8).<sup>30</sup> Beyond these clear conversion accounts, there are a number of more general reports and places in which new belief is perhaps implied but either not explicitly mentioned or not clarified in terms of its timing in relation to the events depicted.

At any rate, the conversion stories and reports contain several noteworthy features bearing upon the theme of church growth. First, in marked contrast to the growth summaries, none of the conversion stories or reports involve a description of the community life of local congregations. In fact, more often than not the conversion stories and reports appear in settings in which an established church does not yet exist.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, the individually identified converts in Acts comprise a rather diverse set of characters, ranging from Crispus the synagogue ruler to Dionysius the Areopagite (see Table 1 below). Thus, the conversion stories and reports uniquely highlight the geographic and socio-religious expansion of the Christian mission.

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<sup>29</sup> For examples of the divergent counts of conversion stories in previous scholarship, see Green, *Conversion*, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Certainly, the episode in 8:4–13 is problematic, as by the end of the story the conversion of Simon Magus is questionable. Acts 14:8–10 is hard to classify, as it refers explicitly to the belief of a specific individual and yet does not clarify the timing of that belief. Similarly, 19:1–6 depicts a new religious experience for the former disciples of John at Ephesus, yet whether that experience can be properly labeled as a conversion is an open question.

<sup>31</sup> The clear exceptions to this general rule are 4:4a; 9:35; 9:42; and 28:24.

Table 1: Individually Identified Converts in Acts

8:4–13	Simon the Magician
8:26–39	Ethiopian Eunuch
9:1–19	Saul
10:44–48	Cornelius the Gentile Centurion
13:4–12	Sergius Paulus the Proconsul
16:13–15	Lydia the Macedonian
16:25–34	The Philippian Jailer
17:34	Dionysius the Areopagite and Damaris
18:8	Crispus the Synagogue Ruler

A second feature of the conversion stories in which individual converts are identified is that they tend to involve some element of overt supernatural activity. Often the converts come into contact with Christian representatives on account of dreams, visions, and direct divine directives (8:26, 29; 9:3–17; 10:3–23; 13:4; 16:9–10), and various miraculous activities feature prominently in the conversion accounts of Simon the magician, Saul, Cornelius, Sergius Paulus, and the Philippian jailer. While no miracles are recorded in connection with Lydia's conversion, the narrator does specify that the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message (16:14). Thus, of the instances in which an individual is identified, only the conversions in 17:34 and 18:8 occur outside the context of any overt supernatural activity or reference to divine intervention.

Reference to the miraculous is less frequent in the context of the more general conversion reports in which no individual is named. Aside from the notes in 4:4a, 9:35, and 9:42, most of the short conversion reports do not appear in contexts where overt supernatural activity has been described. Instead, the succinct conversion reports are most often presented in contexts of Christian proclamation, where the conversions are most naturally taken as the outcome of the preaching or teaching or debating (cf. 4:4; 13:48; 14:1; 14:21; 17:4; 17:12; 28:24). Some element of Christian proclamation or instruction also appears in almost all of the fuller conversion stories—the lone exception is the conversion of Saul. On the whole, then, the conversion stories and reports strongly underscore the consistent efficacy of the early church's proclamation and instruction. As such, the message that is proclaimed by Christian spokespeople is shown in Acts to be a crucial factor in the expansion of the Christian movement.

Another noteworthy feature of the conversion stories and reports is that often they occur within contexts in which some element of opposition to the Christian movement has been depicted. The references in 4:4, 13:48, 17:34, and 18:8 all describe the success of the Christian mission directly after the depiction of resistance to Christian spokespeople. Similarly, in the extended conversion stories of Saul (9:1–19) and the Philippian jailer (16:25–34), a prominent theme is the ultimate progress of the Christian movement in spite of opposition that might seem to threaten its success.

Finally, as with many of the growth summaries, some of the conversion stories and reports are presented in such a way as to emphasize the fulfillment of Scripture in the expansion of the Christian movement. In particular, the conversion of Cornelius and his household is interpreted with reference to Amos 9:11 in James's speech in Acts 15:16–18, and the quotation of Isa 49:6 by Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13:47 serves to frame their ensuing missionary successes among the Gentiles as a fulfillment of the Isaianic passage.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the conversion stories and reports further reinforce the impression that the growth of the church and expansion of the Christian movement is an eschatological fulfillment of God's word through the prophets.

#### IV. STATEMENTS OF GEOGRAPHIC EXPANSION

In a fourth strand of data that bears upon the theme of church growth in Acts, there are numerous places in Acts in which the progress of the Christian mission is conveyed in geographic terms. The narrative is obviously replete with references to geographical movement, and most of these references are not particularly relevant to an examination of church growth in Acts. However, at several points, the expansion of the church is depicted geographically with statements that do not explicitly refer to the numerical growth of the Christian movement, and yet the statements may well imply such growth.<sup>33</sup> Consider, for example:

Acts 8:25: So then, after bearing witness and speaking the word of the Lord, [Peter and John] returned to Jerusalem, evangelizing (εὐαγγελίζω) many villages of the Samaritans.

Acts 8:40: And Philip was found in Azotus, and he went and evangelized (εὐαγγελίζω) all the cities until he came to Caesarea.

Acts 11:19–20: So then, those who were scattered from the persecution which happened over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except Jews. But there were some of them, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, who went to Antioch and were speaking also to Greeks, preaching (εὐαγγελίζω) the Lord Jesus.

In light of the strong sense of progress conveyed elsewhere through the growth summaries and conversion stories, it would seem reasonable to surmise that these statements of geographic expansion imply some measure of successful evangelistic activity.

In Acts 8:1, 4 and 11:19–20, the geographic expansion of the Christian movement is caused by hostility against the disciples. However, the majority of the

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<sup>32</sup> Note also the echoes of the Isaianic passage in Paul's own conversion story (Acts 9:15) and account of his ministry (26:17–18). See D. Marguerat, "Saul's Conversion (Acts 9, 22, 26) and the Multiplication of Narrative in Acts," in *Luke's Literary Achievement: Collected Essays* (ed. C. M. Tuckett; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 152; D. Hamm, "Paul's Blindness and Its Healing: Clues to Symbolic Intent (Acts 9; 22 and 26)," *Bib* 71 (1990): 66–67.

<sup>33</sup> See Acts 8:1, 4, 25, 40; 11:19–20; 13:49; 14:24–25; 19:10; 28:30–31.

statements referring to the geographic expansion of the Christian mission occur in contexts in which it is most natural to attribute the geographic progress to the planning and initiative of the disciples (cf. 8:25; 13:49; 14:24–25; 19:10; 28:30–31). In keeping with Jesus’s programmatic directive in Acts 1:8 for his disciples to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and unto the end of the earth, the narrative depicts the disciples proactively advancing the Christian mission to new geographic frontiers. Hence, the popular notion that the disciples only reluctantly advanced the movement geographically, moving beyond Jerusalem only when they were forced by persecution to do so, must be nuanced by an appreciation of the extent to which the geographic progress of the Christian mission most often comes through more proactive measures in Acts.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, of the various strands of data which bear upon the topic of church growth in Acts, the statements concerning geographic expansion stand out by virtue of their general lack of references to divine involvement or other external factors of causation for the progress of the Christian movement.

#### V. STATEMENTS OF OUTSIDE APPREHENSION CONCERNING CHURCH GROWTH

The remarks which give voice to outside apprehension concerning the progress of the Christian mission comprise a fifth category of material bearing upon the theme of church growth in Acts. While Acts depicts resistance to the Christian mission at many points, the passages which relate most directly to our topic are the few texts in which one finds statements from outsiders expressing concern specifically over the growth of the church. These statements are placed on the lips of various opponents of the Christian movement and conveyed through direct speech. The two clearest examples are Acts 4:17, where members of the Sanhedrin fret over the success of the ministry of Peter and John in Jerusalem; and 19:26, where Demetrius the silversmith worries about how the growth of the church in Ephesus will impact the local economy. A third relevant text in this category would be 5:28, 33–39, where the high priest accuses the apostles of filling Jerusalem with their teaching, and then Gamaliel counsels the Sanhedrin concerning the dangers of opposing a movement whose success may be divinely empowered.

Indeed, it is interesting that when one considers the narration of direct speech in Acts, one finds that the majority of the most direct statements concerning church growth by speakers within the narrative come from outsiders to the Christian movement. James in Acts 21:20 does affirm that myriads of Judeans have believed, and in Acts 11 and 15, figures within the Christian movement discuss the inclusion of Gentiles, which certainly entails the growth of the church.<sup>35</sup> Otherwise, non-Christian speakers furnish the most direct statements about the quantitative increase of the church in Acts.

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<sup>34</sup> See Schnabel, *Mission*, 1:395, 436–43.

<sup>35</sup> Perhaps one might also consider Paul’s statement to Festus in Acts 26:26—“For this has not happened in a corner”—to be an allusive reference to the reality of the church’s growth.

The statements of outside apprehension concerning church growth would appear to serve multiple purposes within the narrative. First, the statements offer a glimpse of the attitude of outsiders toward the growth of the church. As such, they also convey the impression that the numerical increase of the church was sufficiently impressive as to have been noticed by at least some people within the broader society. Moreover, these statements of outside apprehension highlight the specific measures by which opponents sought to impede church growth and thereby underscore once again how the growth of the church occurred in spite of resistance. Finally, by placing statements acknowledging church growth even on the lips of outsiders, the narrator is able to present a plurality of voices within the narrative that all acknowledge the reality of the success of the Christian mission. Throughout the story, the narrator, multiple Christian speakers, and multiple non-Christian speakers all affirm that the church is growing. This helps lend coherence to the narrative and establishes the growth of the church as a fact that is not contested at any point within the story.<sup>36</sup>

## VI. CONCLUSION

The present article has attempted to develop a basic taxonomy for the diversity of material that bears upon the theme of church growth in Acts, in the hope that such a framework might offer some conceptual clarity for understanding and applying what Acts has to say about the growth of the church. Given the wide scope and short length of our analysis, our remarks have necessarily been confined to the most obvious features of each class of material in the taxonomy, and much exegetical work surely remains to be done. Still, in light of this preliminary analysis, a few provisional conclusions emerge regarding the theme of church growth in Acts.

First, when considered cumulatively, the various strands of data impressively underscore the centrality of the theme of church growth to the narrative of Acts. The reality of the church's growth is summarized in general terms at regular intervals, illustrated through numerous specific examples over the course of the narrative, and vocalized by both Christian and non-Christian characters within the story of Acts. Moreover, the ongoing expansion of the Christian movement is framed positively within the narrative as a fulfillment of God's promises to his people and of Jesus's words to his disciples in Acts 1:8, and numerous leading Christian characters are depicted as proactively attempting to expand the Christian movement through their own planning and initiative. Quite simply, the narrator of Acts is intensely interested in the quantitative growth of the church through the conversion of new believers, and sympathetic readers of Acts will embrace the numerical growth of the church as an important, God-given objective for their own church contexts.

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<sup>36</sup> On the way in which direct speech often lends coherence to the narrative of Acts, see M. L. Soards, *The Speeches in Acts* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 12; B. R. Wilson, "'Upon a Tree' Again and Again: Redundancy and Deuteronomy 21:23 in Acts," *Neot 47* (2013): 52–53.

Second, the book of Acts is reticent to speak with much detail about the causes of church growth beyond the consistent affirmation that the quantitative increase of the church is ultimately brought by God, whether through powerful demonstrations of miraculous activity or through conspicuous acts of divine providence. Certainly, Acts offers no simplistic formula for growth whereby contemporary readers might simply duplicate a given set of behaviors and reasonably expect that church growth must follow. The growth summaries are expressed in terms which intimate that growth is ultimately God's prerogative, and most of the conversion stories of Acts feature supernatural interventions that cannot be reproduced by human effort.

At the same time, certain general trends do emerge when one considers the contexts within which the references to church growth occur in Acts, such that some practices and circumstances do appear to be positively correlated with church growth over the course of the narrative. In particular, the expansion of the Christian movement appears to be correlated closely with the effective proclamation of Christian spokesperson. Almost all of the developed conversion stories feature references to or examples of Christian teaching, and the shorter conversion reports are typically presented as the outcome of specific instances of Christian proclamation.<sup>37</sup>

Beyond the close correlation between Christian proclamation and church growth, one might also observe that the growth summaries occur consistently in contexts which highlight the quality of the community life and visible actions of Christian congregations (cf. Acts 2:47; 6:7; 9:31; 11:24; 19:20).<sup>38</sup> Additionally, in terms of the circumstances which often accompany growth, the various strands of data pertaining to church growth in Acts often appear in passages in which some powerful demonstration of spiritual power has occurred (e.g. healings, exorcisms, miracles; cf. Acts 4:4; 5:13–14; 8:4–13; 9:32–35; 9:36–42; 19:20). Finally, some element of persecution or opposition often precedes the references to growth in Acts (cf. Acts 4:4; 9:31; 12:24; 13:48; 16:25–34; 17:34; 18:8). Indeed, a key rhetorical function of many of the growth references is to show that the opposition encountered by Christian spokesperson did not inhibit the expansion of the Christian movement. Persecution, it would seem, functions not as an impediment but rather as a platform for church growth in Acts.

Thus, while Acts offers no formulaic approach to church growth, patterns in the material pertaining to church growth in Acts do suggest that certain practices and circumstances were correlated with the growth of the early church. Correlation does not imply causation, yet these behavioral and circumstantial patterns are surely worth recognizing as we seek to appropriate lessons from Acts to our own church contexts. The prerogative of the Lord to grow the church by no means negates the

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<sup>37</sup> In addition, the repeated expression in the growth summaries that “the word grew” may highlight the coextensive nature of the mission’s expansion and the spreading of the apostolic message.

<sup>38</sup> The growing churches are depicted in positive terms as places of unity, coordinated action and organization, generosity, accountability, instruction, endurance in the face of opposition, obedience to divine directives, and mutual support.

necessity of prayerful planning and Spirit-empowered proclamation, and though no set of practices can be applied in a mechanical way to guarantee growth, the witness of Acts does offer suggestive patterns of practice and conviction which ought to inform our efforts toward growth and expansion today.

One final conclusion also emerges from our study which I believe to be of the utmost importance for those seeking to understand and apply what Acts has to say about church growth, and that is simply that Acts has much more to say about church growth than would be apparent from looking only to any one category of our taxonomy in isolation from the others, as has often been the practice of both biblical scholars and church practitioners alike. The growth summaries, for instance, show numerical increase emerging from the context of church community life, whereas the conversion stories and reports show the power of God and of God's word to bring success to the Christian mission even where no community witness presently exists. Our evangelistic models based upon Acts need to incorporate both strands of evidence, for interpreters who focus solely upon the growth summaries will not uncover the correlation between Christian proclamation and church growth, but interpreters who neglect the growth summaries will miss the correlation between the quality of congregational community life and church growth in Acts.

Ultimately all of the strands of data pertaining to church growth in Acts are woven together in a unified narrative, and the different kinds of material make different contributions to the overall picture of church growth in Acts. Therefore, an accurate and balanced understanding of the narrator's perspective toward numerical growth must come from a contextualized understanding of the whole narrative. If we are to draw any lessons from individual passages in Acts regarding the ways in which we might plan for and pursue church growth today, we must do so with an awareness of how the individual passages fit into the broader narrative of which they are a part.