THE TASK OF RESPONSIBLE READING: DEVELOPING AN APPROACH FOR DEALING WITH ISSUES OF NORMATIVE PRACTICE IN ACTS 2:42-47 AND ACTS 4:32-35

by

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A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of McMaster Divinity College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Theological Studies

McMaster Divinity College,
Hamilton, Ontario
2005

Master of Theological Studies

McMASTER UNIVERSITY
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE:	The Task of Responsible Reading: Developing an Approach for Dealing with Issues of Normative Practice in Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35
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SUPERVISOR:	Dr. Stanley E. Porter
NUMBER OF PAGES:	100

McMASTER DIVINITY COLLEGE

Upon the recommendation of an oral examination committee, this thesis-project by

SHERRI TRAUTWEIN

is hereby accepted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Theological Studies

First Reader and Advisor

Second Reader

Dean

Date: March 21, 2005

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DATE: 2005

ABSTRACT: The interpretive question of normativity is a challenge that confronts the reader of the biblical text, particularly as it relates to the book of Acts. The task of reading the biblical text in a way that allows it to speak its message and that enables it to make the transition from the first-century into the twenty-first century is often anything but straightforward and as such requires a responsible approach to reading on the part of the interpreter. Based upon the challenges directly associated with reading the book of Acts, with special attention paid to the contribution of sociological criticism, four principles for reading that are characterized by cultural analysis, narrative structure, theological impact and personal faith have been developed in order to assist the reader in considering essential elements related to the quest for normativity. By holding these principles in balance, the reader will be given the opportunity to construct a meaningful foundation for interpretation that may be followed by application of five guidelines for normativity identified as a subset of the proposed principles. Analyses of Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35 demonstrate the application of the principles for responsible reading and the guidelines for normativity by considering normative versus non-normative practices of the early church in the context of the community of goods. Evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the principles for responsible reading identify the positive contribution of this thesis as well as areas that require further study and development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There were many people involved, both directly and indirectly in the completion of this thesis, and I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude for their encouragement and support along the way.

Thank you to McMaster Divinity College for the opportunity to study and learn under so many wonderful professors and in the presence of so many competent colleagues and friends. Thank you also to the staff at the school for their assistance in so many areas during my time here. It has been a blessing to be a part of this community.

Thank you to Dr. Stanley Porter, my first reader, for his willingness to be involved in my project and for his patience throughout the process. I have appreciated your guidance and the opportunity to develop some of my ideas under your direction. It has been a pleasure to work with you.

Thank you to Dr. Mark Boda, my second reader, for his willingness to be involved in the final stages of this process. Thank you also for your continual encouragement during my time here. It has been instrumental, not only in the completion of this thesis, but in the completion of this degree.

Thank you to the many friends who listened to, inquired about and prayed for this thesis along the way. Special thanks to Alexandra Meek, Leanne Friesen and Bernice King for their input and support. Without discussions about principles over breakfast and over coffee, this project might not have achieved its final form. Thank you also to the other thesis students who shared the burden and the journey of this process. I am blessed to have had the opportunity to learn alongside so many intelligent and interesting people.

Thank you to my family and friends back home for their encouragement and their prayers along the way. Though they are far away, I know that this project was never far from their minds and I am grateful for the prayers that went up on its and my behalf.

Finally, thank you to Jesus for all the days he kept track of when I failed to do so.

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1.1. Introduction

The task of reading is one that may be simultaneously described as discovery, learning, critical evaluation, complexity, elusiveness and at times even frustration. The act of sitting down with a text, readings its content and formulating an opinion is a process accessible to all those who have the capability of engaging in the act, but is also an act that has the potential to result in as many outcomes as there are readers to engage in the process. There may be only one text, and there may even be a definable method of receiving information from that text, but the consequent interpretation of what that text is saying is anything but unanimous and predictable. How the reader goes about gleaning, processing, and applying information has undeniable effects upon the resultant interpretation of the material. One of the major challenges of reading may be summed up in the acknowledgement that reaching a predictable outcome is anything but certain.

The challenges associated with reading the biblical text heighten the pressure of reaching responsible outcomes based upon the seriousness of the material and the weightiness of the matters discussed in Scripture. If one is reading a novel or a text intended merely for entertainment value, the necessity of handling the work with extreme care and caution is less pressing, as there are few consequences in overlooking details or even major themes in such an instance. There are, however, critical and eternally significant ramifications if Scripture is not considered with due diligence. The Word of God requires conscientious reading, and many throughout the ages have attempted to ascribe to it the respect it deserves. This, then, begs the question. If so many people are

committed to reading carefully and to contemplating Scripture in a conscientious manner, why is it that there are so many different interpretations?

One area of ongoing debate is the question of normativity and its presence or absence within the biblical text. Analyzing elements that emerge as practical models, patterns of normative experience for Christians today, and elements that are definable as principles, overarching guidelines for life and godliness, is anything but straightforward. How the interpreter goes about identifying the distinction between prescription and description, practice and principle, what is normative and what is not has profound impact upon how the reader approaches the text and what the reader takes away from the text. Consequently, the question of normativity is one that must be considered by the reader if careful study of the text is to take place.

The book of Acts stands as a text often consulted for its contribution to the discussion of what is normative and what is not when it comes to biblical models of Christian life and experience. Its popularity concerning such matters, however, has not always resulted in fair and responsible treatments of the text. Unfortunately, due to its complex structure and debate over its underlying meaning and motivation, the book of Acts has been the recipient of a wide variety of legitimate as well as illegitimate interpretations, causing amateur and seasoned readers to second guess the content of the book and the heart of its message.

The challenge of reading the biblical text responsibly confronts the interpreter head on and requires effort on the part of the reader if attention to the text is to be truly pursued. It is the goal of this project to consider the book of Acts through a process of responsible reading that seeks to deal with the question of normativity as it relates to

passages concerned with the early church community. Chapter 1 will consider the difficulty attached to reading the book of Acts responsibly, particularly as it relates to issues of normativity, by identifying specific debates and concerns that have characterized scholastic debate concerning this biblical text. Chapter 2 will focus upon the discipline of sociological criticism, reviewing some of the major contributors to the field and evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of their contributions in an effort to build a case for the usefulness of this critical method for studying Acts. Chapter 3 will propose a responsible approach to reading consisting of four principles for reading and five guidelines for normativity intended to aid the reader in the task of interpreting the book of Acts based upon three major categories, namely culture, narrative and theology. These principles and guidelines will then be applied in Chapter 4 to Acts 2:42-47 and Acts 4:32-35, two texts that deal specifically with the early church community and its practice of the community of goods. Chapter 5 will provide concluding remarks and reflection upon the content of this study, reviewing the ground that has been covered and considering questions that require further study and discussion.

1.2. The Difficulty of Reading Acts Responsibly

1.2.1. General Observations

Discussion surrounding the function of the book of Acts within the context of the early church and the function of this biblical text within the church today has contributed to an extensive and often controversial conversation regarding the intention and the application of this Scripture. Some read the passages in Acts as normative expressions and approaches to Christian life and practice. Built upon foundations such as a belief in

the historical precedent set by the early church,[1] a particular understanding of scriptural authority,[2] or the interpretive alignment of personal experience with biblical accounts,[3] these interpreters honor the text by demanding modern day emulation of the practices recorded. Others, however, approach these texts from a different vantage point, regarding the stories of Acts as illustrative theological case studies[4] or entertaining accounts of the early church.[5] As such, they serve only to offer embedded instruction or inspiration as the reader considers the comings and goings of early Christian existence. Thus, the book of Acts finds itself pulled in two very different directions.

The shortcoming of each extreme emerges when viewed in light of the actual text of Acts. It does not take the reader long to encounter passages in Acts that do indeed appear

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[1] Walter J. Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals* (London: SCM Press, 1972), 321.

[2] Jack Cottrell, "The Nature of Biblical Authority: A Conservative Perspective," in *Conservative Moderate Liberal: The Biblical Authority Debate*, (ed.) Charles R. Blaisdell, 21-40 (St. Louis, Missouri: CBP Press, 1990), 23. Cottrell argues for a conservative approach to the debate over biblical authority and asserts, "...the authority of the Bible is its right to compel belief and action (i.e., to establish norms for belief and conduct)...We affirm the Bible's authority in this proper sense when we say that it alone is our rule of faith and practice."

[3] John Christopher Thomas, "Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions: A Pentecostal Hermeneutic as Test Case," in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology,* (eds.) Joel B. Green and Max Turner, 108-122 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 110. In identifying some of the key considerations of the Pentecostal hermeneutic Thomas states, "From early on Pentecostals have insisted upon the importance of experiential presuppositions in interpretation and the role of narrative in the doing of theology." Also see Gordon D. Fee, *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1991), 86-87.

[4] Robert W. Wall, "Reading the Bible from within Our Traditions: The 'Rule of Faith' in Theological Hermeneutics," in *Between Two Horizons,* (eds.) Joel B. Green and Max Turner, 88-107 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000). Once he had proposed that the faithful way for a community to read Scripture theologically rests upon application of the church's Rule of Faith, a "grammar of theological agreements" (88), Wall concludes, "Scripture is accepted as a trustworthy source for Christian formation because its content norms and illustrates what is truly Christian...The objectives of biblical interpretation should be apropos to Scripture's canonical functions; that is, the chief aim of biblical interpretation should be the formation of a faith and life that is truly Christian by either nurturing what believers ought to believe or by assessing what believers believe but should not." Though he does not specifically reference Acts, this type of reading illustrates a move away from merely interaction with the "facts" of the biblical text and relies upon a theological, even traditional framework for interpretation (104).

[5] Richard I. Pervo, *Profit with Delight: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 11.

to be normative (Acts 1:24-25).[6] At the same time, it does not take much longer to come across scenarios that appear for all intents and purposes to fall outside the boundary of normative or normal Christian experience (Acts 1:26).[7] Consequently, unhealthy extremes in interpretation emerge when the tension between normative and abstract is resolved by the reader without adequately considering the strengths and weaknesses of each position. Careless reading results in "textual vandalism,"[8] an act that steals from the text something that it was meant to offer while simultaneously forcing the text to say something that is was not. The complexities of the hermeneutical question and the implications of certain interpretive decisions demand attention, if the reader is committed to the practice of responsible reading.

1.2.2. The Impact of Hermeneutics

Many scholars have weighed in on the hermeneutical issue and have debated what constitutes a proper interpretive approach. The difficulty of how to understand the text in its original setting as well as how to allow it to speak across generations is a problem not easily solved. As a result, a key consideration within biblical interpretation is how one makes appropriate moves from then to now without "abandoning the plain sense of the texts...and...without canonizing first-century culture."[9] Sensitivity to this move and adequate handling of Scripture along the way are crucial and as such, interaction with

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[6] *Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place."* An act of community prayer when seeking direction appears a highly normative approach to decision making. (All Scripture references taken from the NRSV unless otherwise indicated.)

[7] *And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.* Casting lots would not normally be viewed as a precedent setting activity implemented by the early church to be practiced today.

[8] Trevor Hart, "Tradition, Authority, and a Christian Approach to the Bible as Scripture," in *Between Two Horizons,* (eds.) Joel B. Green and Max Turner, 183-204 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 197.

[9] Fee, *Gospel,* 2.

works oriented toward the implementation of a responsible hermeneutical approach will serve to orient this project in its beginning stages.

Grant Osborne argues for the concept of a "spiral" when approaching interpretation of the biblical text in his book, *The Hermeneutical Spiral.* Osborne proposes an "open-ended movement from the horizon of the text to the horizon of the reader," a process that enables the reader to spiral closer and closer to the intended meaning of the text, allowing hypotheses to be refined as the text informs the reader and the reader applies the text.[10] This process allows the reader to get closer to the meaning of the text, though it does not result in a magical formula or a no-fail system. Osborne observes:

> by the very fact that scholars differ so greatly when interpreting the same passage, we know that God does not miraculously reveal the meaning of passages whenever they are read. While gospel truths are simple, the task of uncovering the original meaning of specific texts is complex and demands hard work.[11]

The practice of a responsible hermeneutics enables readers to take on this difficult task.

Gordon Fee, in his book *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics*, responds to the challenge of the hermeneutical task by focusing specifically on what is normative and what is not and what contributes to a normative understanding and what does not when reading the biblical text. Essays on a variety of topics seek to consider various aspects of the hermeneutical venture while at the same time critically and honestly challenging those who have allowed deficiencies or biases to creep in and distort biblical reading and understanding.[12] Some of the topics particularly relevant to the

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[10] Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 6.

[11] Osborne, 7.

[12] For the purposes of discussing normativity, common sense and authorial intent will be treated specifically in this chapter. The issue of historical precedent is also particularly useful in regards to discussion of Acts but will be treated at length in Chapter 3 during a discussion on the influence of narrative when reading Acts responsibly.

question of normativity and the interpretation of Acts will be evaluated for their contribution to the hermeneutical task.

When considering common sense, and the ulterior issue of biblical inerrancy, Fee identifies the problems of hermeneutics to be cultural relativity,[13] comparable context and extended application,[14] and "implication" or "sensus plenior."[15] These obstacles have the potential either to shake the confidence the reader has in the status of the biblical text or to undermine the value the reader places upon the practice of hermeneutics. The extreme that shakes confidence in the inerrancy of Scripture responds to the perception that an investigative hermeneutic allows the interpreter to open up all sorts of new and strange categories for the purposes of understanding what was going on and leads the interpreter to arbitrarily determine how that may or may not have relevance today. This apparent disregard for the actual words of Scripture and the practices prescribed therein has potential to discredit the interpretive venture altogether, leading to another extreme, the extreme of paralyzing suspicion when it comes to hermeneutics. If hermeneutical categories cannot be trusted to treat the text with adequate respect and authority, then perhaps any attempt to uncover shifts or developments between what the text meant and what the text means is inappropriate. Both views characterize legitimate fears but do not need to stand as insurmountable challenges. In response to fears of this nature Fee concludes, "...the first task of the interpreter is to discover what the text meant when it was originally written" and he also goes on to say, "the hermeneutical task is to free the word to speak to our own situation."[16] The contributions of both are necessary.

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[13] Fee, *Gospel,* 11.
[14] Fee, *Gospel,* 14.
[15] Fee, *Gospel,* 16.
[16] Fee, *Gospel,* 20.

Another issue treated by Fee is that of authorial intent. He argues that when it comes to imperatives in the New Testament "the issue is rarely on the meaning of texts in their original context, but on the universality and normativeness of their application."[17] He goes on to point out that authorial intent becomes an important issue when the reader acknowledges that God chose human speech in historical settings as the means of communicating his word and, as such, interpreters are committed to a hermeneutic that listens to the recorded voice for what it was intending to say.[18] Listening to these voices enables the reader to begin to move away from the position that the Bible is meant to be a rule book[19] and to consider the dynamic nature of the gospel and the Spirit within the biblical account.[20] As Scripture becomes less a set of laws to be followed and specifically practiced and more a message of good news to be proclaimed, a shift will begin to take place in how the Bible is read and how it is applied within modern culture. It will take on a timeless nature that does indeed cross cultural and historical boundaries, able to speak a fresh and relevant word to the reader today.

The strength of Fee's contribution is that it holds at the very center an intentional focus upon Scripture as the starting point. Proper exegesis must begin with the text, paying attention to historical and literary considerations, and it is only from this foundation that a responsible reading for today results. The key is that thoughtful hermeneutics must come to pass. It is not enough to read the texts "then" and disregard or simply transplant the message "now." There is more going on than a one-to-one

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[17] Fee, *Gospel,* 37.
[18] Fee, *Gospel,* 43.
[19] Fee, *Gospel,* 44-45. This view tends to lead to three potential positions where: (1) biblical imperatives are considered equal in all situations and the ad hoc nature of texts acknowledged only when subject matter does not easily fit, (2) flawed exegesis and a selective hermeneutic is employed that disregards the author's intent, (3) rules (rather than Scripture) become the measuring stick for what is acceptable and what is not.
[20] Fee, *Gospel,* 45.

correlation of experience and instruction. Fee offers some helpful guidelines for embarking on this process born out of some very practical and personal encounters with traditional methods of exegesis and hermeneutics.[21] The disadvantage of Fee, however, partly grows out of what may be identified as his strength. His work is somewhat haphazard in the sense that it is a collection of writings and lectures that in many ways document his own personal journey of faith and questioning. This, in and of itself, does not nullify the importance or the contribution of his work. In fact, it likely adds passion and interaction. What is does indicate, however, is that the work is largely responsive. The issues chosen are presumably ones that have impacted him directly. As a result, there are likely issues and considerations that have been overlooked in the process.

Thus, both Osborne and Fee offer the reader a basic introduction into the challenge of the hermeneutical task and the question of normativity. They seek to provide insight into the value of coming to the text with interpretive intentions but they also seek to shed light on the challenges associated with producing adequate and increasingly refined interpretations. Their voices are but two among many who have endeavored to engage in the hermeneutical process, looking to draw meaningful conclusions based upon careful study of the text. Chapter 3 will highlight additional scholars who have considered similar issues as they pertain to specific aspects of the interpretive discipline, namely culture, narrative and theology.

1.2.3. Particular Challenges Associated with Reading the Book of Acts

Now that some of the preliminary complications associated with the hermeneutical task have been considered in addition to the diverse interpretations associated with the book of Acts specifically, it is possible to perceive why it is that Acts emerges as a prime

[21] Fee, *Gospel*, x-xiii.

candidate for the challenge of reading in a responsible way. Biblical scholars and pastors, lay people and curious Christians have come to this text and each one is confronted with the same story, the dramatic and supernatural inception of the early church. It emerges as the account of a moment in time typified by apostolic preaching, miraculous healings, overwhelming outpourings of the Holy Spirit, a conscientious and committed community of believers, martyrdom, confrontation with legal authorities and the list goes on and on. These stories appear unbelievable on many levels, but their preservation within the canon and their consequential role within the life of the church require that they not be too quickly dismissed. What exactly is this book trying to say?

In response to this question, specific challenges that have confronted interpreters of the text in the past will be considered for basic categories of controversy and contention. Foundational issues of genre and normativity reveal important aspects of the debates that have characterized Acts scholarship over the years, while issues related to one-sided or deficient readings of this biblical text in terms of cultural, narrative or theological influences highlight potential oversights that would lead to an inadequate approach to reading. By identifying what has been difficult, what has been divisive and what has been at times overlooked, a very basic framework of how Acts has been read and the challenges that accompany it will begin to emerge.

1.2.3.1. Genre

The issue of genre has received an incredible amount of attention when it comes to the book of Acts. Is it a historical account or a literary concoction? Is it fact or fiction? Is it something in between? The scholastic divide on the issue has resulted in a number of highly complex and highly nuanced approaches to the text, some attempting with

complex models to categorize it neatly and succinctly through methods of comparison and observation,[22] others desiring to free the text by granting it theological and artistic expression.[23] A survey of such literature results in the discovery that the debate has not existed in vain. Acts is not easily forced into any ancient[24] or modern day categories.

Shifting of position between the historical versus the theological and eventually even the literary character of Acts denotes the pendulum swing that has typified its generic analysis over the years. Though the historical character of Acts held a prominent and dominant position for many years,[25] the skepticism of German scholarship towards the historical value of Acts began to challenge this assumption[26] and to introduce a reading that questioned Luke's accuracy and sources,[27] focusing rather upon the literary moves he

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[22] See David L. Balch, "Comments on the Genre and a Political Theme of Luke-Acts: A Preliminary Comparison of Two Hellenistic Historians," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 28 (1989): 343-361; Hubert Cancik, "The History of Culture, Religion, and Institutions in Ancient Historiography: Philological Observations Concerning Luke's History," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 116/4 (1997): 673-695; Darryl Palmer, "Acts and the Ancient Historical Monograph," in *The Book of Acts in Its Ancient Literary Setting*, (eds.) Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke, 1-29 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993); Gregory E. Sterling, "Luke-Acts and Apologetic Historiography," *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 28 (1989): 326-342; Kota Yamada, "A Rhetorical History: The Literary Genre of the Acts of the Apostles," in *Rhetoric, Scripture and Theology: Essays form the 1994 Pretoria Conference*, (eds.) Stanley E. Porter and Thomas H. Olbricht, 230-250 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

[23] See Richard I. Pervo, "Israel's Heritage and Claims upon the Genre(s) of Luke and Acts: The Problem of a History," in *Jesus and the Heritage of Israel*, (ed.) David P. Moessner, 127-143 (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1999); Mark Reasoner, "The Theme of Acts: Institutional History or Divine Necessity in History?" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118/4 (1999): 635-659.

[24] Loveday Alexander, "Fact, Fiction and the Genre of Acts," *New Testament Studies* 44 (1998): 380-399, 399.

[25] Ernst Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 14ff.

[26] I.H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1980), 35; Haenchen, 34ff.

[27] The question of Luke's sources when writing Acts has been discussed at length but in truth cannot be adequately resolved due to the lack of evidence. See F.F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1990), 40. This has resulted in a potential set-back for those pursuing a truly historical form for Luke while it has encouraged those leaning toward a literary composition to point to the lack of evidence that Luke referenced while drawing up his historical account. Luke gives no direct information regarding his sources, thus their detection must be based upon indirect criteria of style, variations in viewpoint, contradictions, etc. See Hans Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), xxxvii. That being said, it has also been suggested that Luke's thorough rewriting of his sources renders any sources he does use as beyond detection, while at the same time not denying that there were sources

was making.[28] Scholars began to emerge on either side of the divide, some maintaining the historical value of the text,[29] others opting to embrace the literary essence of the text[30] as definitive in terms of genre.

The scholastic ground covered with regard to genre and the intricacies of the terrain along the way leave the reader with many genre options when approaching the book of Acts but still the presence of only one biblical account. The text itself has not changed. It still tells the same story in the same way and as such it must remain the starting point, the constant variable. One of the challenges of reading responsibly comes in the recognition that elements of both historical significance and literary contribution are present within the text and as such must be acknowledged and dealt with if the text is to be allowed to speak with authenticity and accuracy.

Moving beyond this question of genre, it is also necessary for the reader to grapple with the question of what defines reliability or truth. Often the assumption is made that the adoption of a strictly historical reading is by default the most accurate or the truest reading of the text. It is reliable because it is true and it is true because it is historically accurate. Conversely, the acceptance of a literary reading has often been viewed by default as the identification of Acts as a fictional work, lacking the qualities that convey biblical truth. It emerges as a product of artistic and theological imagination, nothing more. These categorizations are hardly helpful when approaching a text that appears to

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utilized. See Luke T. Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), 3-4.

[28] The question of literary forms is of particular interest to Martin Dibelius, who in many respects takes understanding Acts as literature to a whole new level by claiming that historical reliability varies in different sections and by categorizing the intention of the work as being "the history of literature but also of interpreting the oldest of stories about the apostles"; Martin Dibelius, *Studies in the Acts of the Apostles* (London: SCM Press, 1956), 24-25.

[29] See Bruce and Marshall.

[30] See Conzelmann, Dibelius, and Haenchen.

include elements of both and, more than that, they are unnecessary. Loveday Alexander argues that "'truth' is not a literary quality inhering in the text, but a function of the relationship between the text and the external world it purports to describe."[31] As such, the question of what makes Acts a "true" or a "reliable" account perhaps does not rest solely upon the reader's ability to come to terms with the historical elements of the text in an effort to extract a complete and definitive picture. The pursuit of truth is also a process that takes into account the literary and ultimately theological contributions of the author in recording and relating the earliest days of the Christian community.

1.2.3.2. Normativity: Practice versus Principle

Questions of whether or not the book of Acts is history or literature lead to the pragmatic inquiry of whether it is normative practice or underlying principle. Should the words written down by the author and preserved among the developing Christian community be read as detailed instructions or general ways of being when it comes to the life and faith of the community? These are difficult questions to answer, questions that rest upon critical interpretive considerations such as perspectives on biblical authority, acknowledgement of a theological agenda and the potential contemporization of biblical material.

Discussion of biblical authority in relation to practice versus principle must be carefully defined. Its contribution to the discussion is not so much a matter of whether or not the Bible is *true*, thus authoritative, but rather how it is the Bible as authoritative "*functions as* authority"[32] within the life of the church. A conservative perspective, specifically a perspective that is inclined to preserve a "historical, traditional state of

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[31] Alexander, 380.
[32] William C. Placher, "The Nature of Biblical Authority: Issues and Models from Recent Theology," in *Conservative Moderate Liberal*, (ed.) Charles R. Blaisdell, 1-19 (St. Louis, Missouri: CBP Press, 1990), 5.

things,"[33] would by logical extension lean to the extreme of practical function. Though such leanings do not require that the conservative reader take the text word for word,[34] the tension exists that a reader who holds a particularly high view of "word revelation"[35] would in many cases be required to consider the text at face value. At the opposite extreme, a "liberal"[36] reading of the biblical text in many ways frees it from such strictures though this freedom manifests itself in various forms. For example, when discussing biblical authority Luke Johnson would maintain a rather conservative view of canon and church[37] but a notably open or liberal concept of how that canon is interpreted and applied within the confines of the community, specifically emphasis on a "dialectical relationship between text and reader."[38] The function of the text emerges through the practice of an "ecclesial hermeneutic,"[39] allowing space for principle over practice. Johnson encourages Christian readers to learn to read "not in the search for an essential core or purified canon within the canon, not within the frame of a single abstract principle, but in a living conversation with all the writings in their diversity and divergence."[40] When understood against the broad strokes of conservative and liberal readings, the text is granted less or more movement within the categories of practice and

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[33] Cottrell, 21.
[34] Cottrell, 31. He acknowledges that "historical relativity is a factor in biblical interpretation, not biblical authority," thus adequately separating the two categories.
[35] That God revealed the very words of Scripture to human authors.
[36] Use of the term "liberal" in the context of biblical authority in this case has been defined in the sense that it "presumes and encourages the liberty of the children of God given by the Spirit." Luke T. Johnson, "The Authority of the New Testament in the Church: A Theological Reflection," in *Conservative Moderate Liberal*, (ed.) Charles R. Blaisdell, 87-99 (St. Louis, Missouri: CBP Press, 1990), 87. This should be noted as a very specified understanding of what is often understood to be "liberal" in the discussion of biblical authority, that is, one who disinvests authority from the biblical text. George Tooze, "A Moderate Response," in *Conservative Moderate Liberal*, (ed.) Charles R. Blaisdell, 112-117 (St. Louis, Missouri: CBP Press, 1990), 116.
[37] Johnson, "Authority," 87.
[38] Johnson, "Authority," 88.
[39] Johnson, "Authority," 92. That is, the placement of writings in their canonical context that "involves the entire faith community in the interpretive process."
[40] Johnson, "Authority," 94.

principle based upon convictions of what it means to approach and interpret the text in an appropriate manner.

The theological agenda often attributed to the author of the book of Acts also contributes to the discussion of whether or not the Acts narrative may be viewed as practice or principle. If theological overtones have significantly influenced the shaping of the text to the point of compromising its historical accuracy in favor of theological lessons and implications, the line between practice and principle may once again find itself blurred as the reader seeks to establish criteria for responsible reading. Some of the theological themes identified within the book of Acts such as the continuation of God's purpose in history, the mission and message of the church, the progression of the gospel despite opposition, the inclusion of the Gentiles, and the life and organization of the church[41] offer the reader a framework within which to interact with the biblical text. This framework provides a window onto what was central to Luke's understanding of the gospel and contributes to the reader's modern-day construction of a similar system. However, what is not immediately clear is whether or not this framework offers normative patterns or general ethics of practice. The biblical text, though set within history and guided in content by the occurrence of actual events, is undeniably theological in nature. These Scriptures:

> spur on the faith community which reads them to the disclosure of the truth of faith and the community of readers/hearers must continually ask itself whether it responsibly receives the potential provocation proper to the texts and if it reflects this in the thought which guides its actions.[42]

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[41] Marshall, 23-34. This is merely one example of a list of Lucan theology. A similar list is offered by Bruce that includes the doctrine of: God, Christ, the Spirit, the church and its ordinances, the Gentile mission, biblical theology, soteriology, and eschatology, 60-66.

[42] Werner G. Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 2.

Theological thinking is central to this process of "provocation" and as such has significant implications when considering the question of normativity.

Conversation surrounding the contemporization of biblical material, of "getting from there to here,"[43] considers the hermeneutical task of actually differentiating practice from principle. It is at this stage, once the authority of the text has been established and the theologically significant nature of the text has been taken into account, that the move from then to now may be attempted. It is in light of this move that the conscientious reader must recognize there are a variety of difficulties that arise when attempting a one-to-one correlation between Scripture and modern-day reality. Some of these difficulties include biblical statements without parallel to today, a lack of consideration for issues that are dealt with today, words written to very specific situations, apparent contradictions and conflicts with general revelation.[44] Each of these difficulties challenges the ease with which the reader may identify a particular passage or narrative as strictly normative. Even so, this does not negate or nullify attempts to read the Bible in a manner that is faithful and diligent, preserving the original meaning and gleaning from the text important truths for today. Erickson suggests:

> It is a matter of recognizing the locus of normativity as being the principle that underlies the command, and noting that some principles can only result in one rule regardless of context, whereas the implications, application, or result of other principles may be quite varied.[45]

This is easy to say but difficult to apply responsibly by the average reader. How does one identify which principles result in one rule (practice) and which possess the ability to manifest in a variety of ways (principle)? Erickson argues it is a quest to identify the

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[43] Millard J. Erickson, *Evangelical Interpretation: Perspectives on Hermeneutical Issues* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1993), 56.
[44] Erickson, 58.
[45] Erickson, 64.

"timeless elements of content" by asking the question "why" in an attempt to begin determining the reason for a particular teaching, to observe other appearances of such an action or teaching within the Bible, and to contemplate whether the reason for the teaching continues to be valid.[46] The first two criteria are accessible enough, offering the reader some legitimate categories for contemplation, but the third appears alarmingly subjective. Is there any moment in which the reader is qualified or able to judge those teachings that are no longer valid? It is tension such as this that contributes to the ongoing dilemma associated with normativity.

In the discussion of genre, it was argued that based upon the shape of scholarship it appears that both historical and literary realities are present in the text and as such both must be considered in order to achieve a responsible reading. In like manner, the tension of practice and principle must also be held in balance if the reader is to acknowledge the normative and the overarching values offered within the biblical text. Achtemeier, when speaking of the inspiration and authority of Scripture, writes, "...the intention of the biblical material is to summon the community of faith to a new awareness of its task and to a surer understanding of itself within God's purpose in new and often critical historical situations."[47] He goes on to state that this places the intention of the biblical text under the umbrella of religious rather than historical or scientific material. While this may be the case, his initial definition of biblical intention leaves some room for both practice and principle. Indeed, *how* the community manifests this new awareness of itself and the principles gleaned from the biblical text surely finds some practical advice in the lives of early Christians and Christian communities. The question is, how much.

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[46] Erickson, 69-70.

[47] Paul J. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority: Nature and Function of Christian Scripture* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1999), 132.

1.2.4. Cautions Against Inadequate Reading

1.2.4.1. Temptation to Disregard Important Influences

In light of the many challenges that confront the reader of Acts, it is tempting to consider a simplification of the issue by setting aside all distractions in an attempt to get back to the text in its purest form. The reader may be enticed to leave behind the controversies of the past and encounter the text unhampered and free of the pressure applied by these technical and at times tedious matters. As attractive as this may sound, the difficulties associated with the task of reading and the complexities tied to the book of Acts are not likely to disappear any time soon. Issues of varied interpretation, past academic debate, genre, and normativity identify areas that have caused confusion in the past and the work that has been done provides necessary reference points for the continuation and furtherance of the interpretive process. Inadequate reading occurs when one opts to disregard altogether the contributions of scholars and Christians who have invested themselves in the biblical text. For the text to be treated fairly, the reader must acknowledge that responsible reading requires hard work. To simply ignore or disregard the efforts of others is to disrespect the tradition of discipleship and scholarship and to trivialize the legacy of diligent men and women over time.

The areas of controversy identified within this chapter were intended to help the reader identify internal and external biases, areas of debate that have perplexed readers in the past and continue to cause difficulties today. The various issues identified raise important questions inherent in critical thinking and interpretation but they do not offer specific and coherent criteria for approaching the text. This project seeks to propose three basic elements of cultural, narrative and theological influence as central to the

process of responsible reading. An inadequate approach to reading will be tempted to eliminate any one of these three elements in an effort to simplify the process. However, even though the convergence of the three can be complex and even messy at times, it is the goal of this project to demonstrate that all three, being held in balance, are necessary for responsibly moving the text from the first-century into today.

1.2.4.2. The Impact of Inadequate Reading

Before embarking on this journey toward responsible reading, it is important to ask why the journey is necessary at all. There have been many attempts at interpretation made in the past and many more will come and go. What is the profit of revisiting the issue of attentive interpretation once again, only to uncover the same obstacles and complexities faced by those who have come before? The book of Acts has been on the receiving end of energetic and anxious readers for nearly 2000 years and yet there are still many unanswered questions and areas up for debate. There are still many readers who disregard the discoveries that have been made and who continue to mistreat the text by forcing upon it messages and models that do not belong. The necessity of the journey lies in the desire to offer one more contribution to the task of respectfully and passionately engaging and applying Scripture. It is profitable because it once again accepts the challenge of what it means to treat the text in a fitting manner and perhaps, in the process, learn something new about its meaning and its message.

Chapter 2: The Contribution of Sociological Criticism

2.1 General Introduction

The challenge of responsible reading requires that the interpreter hold a number of elements in balance in an effort to approach the text in an informed and open manner. Interacting with the question of normativity demands careful study on many levels and one of those levels is the social setting out of which the text emerged. The world that surrounded the early Christian community and the writings produced by that community inevitably left their mark and, to one degree or another, influenced the character of the first-century Christians. In an effort to approach the biblical text born out of this first-century context from a fresh and insightful perspective, it is the goal of sociological criticism to open new windows onto the world of the New Testament and as a result engage in an enhanced level of exegesis.[48] That being said, this move toward social or sociological criticism[49] has not always been easy and it has not been without its share of challenges. What it offers in fresh insight may be overshadowed by methodological pitfalls, and what it hopes to authentically infuse into the text may be undone by the perception that its process results in unfair treatment and forced categories.[50]

As a result, this coming together of the biblical and sociological disciplines has been met with varying degrees of acceptance and rejection. Some scholars maintain their

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[48] Osborne, 139.

[49] Philip Richter, "Recent Sociological Approaches to the Study of the New Testament," *Religion* 14 (1984): 77-90, 78. Drawing upon the work of John Gager, "Shall We Marry Our Enemies? Sociology and the New Testament," *Interpretation* 36 (1982): 256-265, 258, Richter affirms and utilizes the distinction between "social" and "sociological". "Social" or "proto-sociological" refers to relevant social data, which result in a base upon which "sociological" explanatory theories and hypotheses may be based. This distinction results in the categories of social description and sociological interpretation to be discussed in this chapter.

[50] Osborne, 141-144. In his consideration of sociological criticism, Osborne has identified nine potential problems relating to the sociological approach: misuse of the models, revisionism, tendency to generalize, paucity of the data, tendency to debunk the system, reductionism, theoretical disarray, determinism, and tendency to disjunctive theories.

skepticism, but it is difficult to deny the impact social-scientific practices have had within the scholarly biblical community.[51] In order to more accurately understand the intentions and limitations of sociological criticism and what it does have to offer the biblical scholar, a brief treatment of the continuum along which varying stages of social and sociological criticism occur, namely the categories of "social description" and "sociological interpretation,"[52] will be undertaken. Key authors within each category will be considered, highlighting what their research offers the broader field of social or sociological criticism, as well as considering questions that remain unanswered based upon the limitations of their work. It is the goal of this survey to consider which aspects of social or sociological criticism emerge as particularly helpful for a responsible reading when approaching the book of Acts as well as identification of potential weaknesses inherent in such an approach.

2.2 Social Description

2.2.1 General Introduction

Social description studies the "what" behind the text.[53] It seeks to uncover social facts, social history, and social organization.[54] Such pursuit results in study that is concerned with the "social aspects of human behavior" but does not require that actual social-scientific methodology be employed.[55] Various scholars have focused on different aspects of this approach, of notable significance Shirley Jackson Case, Abraham

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[51] Gager, "Enemies," 258.
[52] Gager, "Enemies," 259.
[53] Osborne, 139-140.
[54] Jonathan Smith, "The Social Description of Early Christianity," *Religious Studies Review* 1 (1975): 19-25, 19-20. These three criteria comprise the first three possible approaches identified by Smith in his four part examination of a social description of Christianity. The fourth category falls under social interpretation.
[55] Gager, "Enemies," 258.

Malherbe, and E.A. Judge. A brief treatment of their major contributions will provide a foundation for the usefulness of social description for studying the biblical text, and a brief critique of their work will address some of the questions that remain unanswered when considering their respective approaches.

2.2.2 Overview of Key Thinkers

At the turn of the century, significant developments in the socio-critical approach regarding interpretation of biblical texts began to take shape. The importance of grappling with the social context surrounding the communities and subsequently the writings of the New Testament challenged readers to take a step back and consider the impact social environment had upon the literature, and even more fundamentally, the formation of early Christian communities. Though some work had been done in this area,[56] it was largely sweeping and generalized, not allowing adequate attention to be paid to the social factors that influenced the text. The contributions of Shirley Jackson Case,[57] a notable scholar affiliated with the Chicago School, offered fresh direction and perspective regarding the importance of interacting with the text on a social level.

Case in his works, *The Evolution of Early Christianity* and *The Social Origins of Christianity*, brings to the forefront the fundamental importance of recapturing social setting if Scripture is to be adequately and responsibly read by modern day interpreters. In *Evolution*, Case considers the essence of early Christian religion. He asks whether it was static in nature, manifesting itself in purely quantitative forms, or whether it was

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[56] Abraham Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 2.
[57] Another notable scholar often associated with Case is Shailer Matthews, also affiliated with the Chicago School.

developmental and ultimately vital in nature.[58] Consideration of these distinctions based upon scholarly forays into both hypotheses led Case to conclude that Christianity must be developmental and as such "the product of actual persons working out their religious problems in immediate contact with their several worlds of reality."[59] Such a conclusion insists that interaction with the surrounding social world be a key move in the interpretive process and not merely an additional bit of research when opportunity presents itself. Mindful of the pressure to conduct acceptable historical research, Case insisted that interpretation of religion must proceed from close examination of the total surroundings of the adherents.[60] He goes on in his second work, *Social Origins*, to insist further that study of the social conception of the New Testament must begin with the actual experiences of the people.[61]

An example of Case's attention to the social surroundings of the early Christian community is evidenced by his commitment to opening his study of the first-century world with a survey of the Mediterranean world as it was during New Testament times. Case states, "Since historical Christianity of New Testament times is a product of Christians' activity within the Graeco-Roman world as a whole, it becomes necessary to examine the chief characteristics of this civilization as a background for the study of Christian origins."[62] He surveys the impact of Alexander the Great and his successors, the transition to Roman rule and the influence of Hellenistic culture.[63] By touching upon political, cultural, and religious influence, Case constructs a social world within which

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[58] Shirley Jackson Case, *The Evolution of Early Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1914), 2.
[59] Case, *Evolution*, 25.
[60] Case, *Evolution*, 45.
[61] Shirley Jackson Case, *The Social Origins of Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923), 32.
[62] Case, *Evolution*, 51.
[63] Case, *Evolution*, 51-53.

Christianity took root and began to grow.[64] Such perspective allows the reader to enter into the environment of the early church and begin to consider the formative factors that influenced the community.

Case's contribution of an intentional move toward social criticism was necessary in the growth and development of social criticism within biblical interpretation. From the perspective of responsible reading, however, the potential weakness of his work is his susceptibility to depart from the biblical text as the primary source of material when it comes to considering the social realities at work.[65] This is not to say that much cannot be gained from reading the biblical text against what has been preserved from the surrounding culture. Indeed, much of that material is necessary in attempting to fill in the gaps and build from context a more complete portrait of early church interaction. Even so, for the responsible reader, the text itself must remain the primary source if responsible reading is to be accomplished. Case makes a valuable contribution in his opening up of the social categories. His method is limited, however, in its departure from the text as the most valuable point of contact for the interpreter.

Abraham Malherbe has been noted for his attention to social fact and social history. He contends that a clearer view of the early Christian community will result in a better understanding of its Christianity and its literature.[66] He argues that sociological description has the ability to shed valuable light upon the context of the early Christian community and is careful to stress that the reader should study the social circumstance as

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[64] Case, *Evolution,* 53, 64, 71.

[65] Case states in *Evolution,* "Moreover, if complete information regarding Jesus' life and teaching could be obtained this would not fully disclose the origins of Christianity, if the latter is a vital growth rather than a static quality. As a historical movement, it arose out of what early believers made of Jesus and his teaching, not through the mere preservation of a deposit which he committed to them for safe-keeping...In short, its origins must ultimately be read in light of the many determining factors supplied by the entire contemporary life," 41.

[66] Malherbe, 11-12.

accurately as possible before moving towards theoretical description or explanation.[67] By focusing upon literary culture, the phenomenon of the house church and the practice of hospitality versus inhospitality in the early church, Malherbe attempts to draw observable connections between the social world which surrounded the New Testament church and the social world which characterized the New Testament church. In this observation process, he is careful to remind the reader that a potential pitfall of evaluating the early church against existing ancient groups is that the Christian community will never be fully understood for what it is when it is only considered from without. It will be viewed as an appendage of other existing groups and in this way stripped of what sets it apart as a unique entity. It is in light of this potential pitfall that he charges the reader to begin with the New Testament and work outwards rather than begin study by reading culture first before moving into the text.[68]

The usefulness of Malherbe's pursuit of social fact and social history based upon information provided by the New Testament is showcased in his study of the phenomenon of the house church and the difficulties associated with it as it was practiced by the early Christians. He lifts a social element straight out of the text and seeks to observe it against the backdrop of culture. He considers the way in which early Christianity spread,[69] the locations of established churches according to the New Testament,[70] the practice of hospitality within the early Christian community,[71] and the

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[67] Malherbe, 20.
[68] Malherbe, 60.
[69] Malherbe, 62, 64-65. The mobility of the early church and early church leaders was facilitated by the spread of Greek culture and language, as well as by Roman roads, administration and security.
[70] Malherbe, 63. Churches were established along major trade routes, often in important cities.
[71] Malherbe, 66. Malherbe suggests that Christians followed the examples of Jews who would care for their "wandering brethren" rather than utilize inns.

extension of this hospitality into what would come to be known as the "house church."[72] Identification of tensions within these social units, such as variations in social status among believers,[73] reveals that even though social factors worked to facilitate the house church movement, social factors also contributed to difficulty and division. Malherbe's study, based in large part upon the work of Gerd Theissen,[74] encourages the reader to consider the origins and influences of this movement, all the while keeping the information given through the text central.[75]

Critique of his work has drawn attention to his tendency to use social fact and social history to identify the importance of social forces but not to advance his study to the point of providing a suitable mechanism for evaluating the sociological significance of these forces.[76] It is true that the work of Malherbe only advances the reader to a certain point, namely that of identifying connections between the New Testament and culture. The limitation of Malherbe's work is that it is really only helpful in providing some general principles for social criticism that are best understood when read in the specific contexts

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[72] Malherbe, 68-70.
[73] Malherbe, 72-84.
[74] Some would consider the work of Gerd Theissen more significant in its contribution to social history than that of Malherbe (Richter, 79). The comparison of these two scholars, however, is not exactly parallel as the intention of Malherbe is specifically social history. Theissen, on the other hand, explores the world of the first century with a far more complex approach. In his book, *The First Followers of Jesus: A Sociological Analysis of the Earliest Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1978), Theissen identifies the results of constructive conclusions, analytical conclusions and comparative conclusions as the outcome of potential procedures from which sociological information may be extracted (2-3). In another work, Theissen reveals partiality toward models and theories when it comes to investigating the religious world of early Christianity. Gerd Theiseen, *Social Reality and the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics, and the World of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 233, 257. Malherbe was chosen as the focus of this category due to his specific focus on social history. Theissen's work enables and encourages the reader to investigate the social circumstances of the first century world, but it also extends beyond this limited task. As such, Theissen does not emerge as a representative scholar for social history being model driven in many respects, though he remains a scholar who has made notable contributions to the discipline of sociological criticism.
[75] Malherbe, 92. "An awareness of the social dimension of early Christianity may help us in our attempts at historical reconstruction by providing new information and exercising discipline over our efforts. The latter is especially important in view of the tendency to construct vast developmental systems on the basis of very slender evidence, or to fit texts into elaborate reconstructions."
[76] Richter, 78.

offered by the author. The great contribution of his work is the reminder that even though social reconstruction will aid the interpreter in the process of responsible reading, it is necessary to begin with the biblical text and move outward, rather than begin on the outside and work back into the text.

E.A. Judge and his contributions have often been associated with the study of social organization. His work, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century*, has served to identify some of the foundational considerations of this third aspect of the social-critical approach and has emerged as a definitive work within this area of research. In an attempt to discuss the shortfalls of the theory of social stratification in early Christian groups, Judge pursues study of social organization by suggesting that contemporary writers had considered "a series of overlapping but not systematically related circles."[77] Judge describes these circles as the role of the individual in the republic,[78] the role of the household unit,[79] the interaction of unofficial associations with society at large,[80] and the progressive evolutions of social units. He investigates how they offer insight into the internal make-up of Christianity and how Christianity in turn interacted with the empire on a legal level.[81]

Engagement in this level of social criticism challenges the reader to think beyond the basic categories of social facts and history, progressing to consideration of social units and how they interacted, how they resembled one another, how they refined one another and how they were at odds with one another. In this relatively short work, Judge has

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[77] E.A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* (London: Tyndale Press, 1960), iii.
[78] Judge, 18.
[79] Judge, 30.
[80] Judge, 48.
[81] Judge, 49, 62.

identified some major units of Hellenistic social organization and has sought to understand Christianity in terms of these units, while considering how these units interacted with the developing social phenomena of emerging Christianity. What Judge offers scholarship is the encouragement to move away from strict social stratification in favor of a far more organic and interrelated model. However, what one is left wondering in terms of these categories is how far these categories should be taken before they too begin to detract from the information offered the reader by the biblical text. Judge addresses this very concern at the beginning of his book:

> Demythologizing may result in looking for the meaning not primarily in terms of the situation in which the ideas were originally expressed, but in the existential realization of the truth concerned. The eliciting patterns of symbolism may also lead to a neglect of the historical situation. However illuminating these approaches may seem to be, they are misleading if they attract attention away from the original situation. At the very least this ought to be properly explored before it is abandoned in favour of other modes of interpreting the meaning.[82]

The question becomes whether or not Judge has been able to maintain focus upon the original setting. His work is helpful in beginning to bridge the gap between the mere collection of facts and integration of those facts into the practical manifestation of social groupings. The limitation of his work is that in being so specific he runs the risk of distracting the interpreter and is in danger of neglecting to offer a methodology for social organization apart from a few examples of application. That being said, the value of Judge's practical application cannot be overlooked. By reading his interactions with the text the interpreter is given insight into how social organization contributes to a responsible reading. The conclusions of his study of social obligation based upon analysis of social organization state: "The reaction of Christians to their social situation thus varied from occasion to occasion, depending on the conventions of the particular

[82] Judge, 8.

institution involved," and "The idea that gives consistency to their varying social attitudes is the belief which originally marked them out from Israel, that Jesus is the Messiah."[83] Thus, having taken into account the impact of social organization, Judge manages to read his results in light of Jesus' influence upon the community. In so doing, he challenges other readers to do the same.

2.3 Social Interpretation

2.3.1 General Introduction

Now that the three levels of social description identified by Smith have been considered, it is time to discuss the fourth category of sociological criticism utilized by scholars, that of sociological interpretation. This approach seeks to uncover the "why" behind the text,[84] employing current sociological models and methods in an effort to uncover meaning but also, in the process, attempting to re-create the social setting out of which the original text emerged.[85] It is at this point that criticism notably shifts from being merely social to sociological. This analysis of the social world[86] results in the implementation of sociology, anthropology and psychology.[87] Building upon the foundations of modern sociological theory, biblical criticism finds itself introduced to the importance of moving from a merely descriptive to an explanatory phase of interpretation.[88] Significant scholars contributing to this discipline of biblical

[83] Judge, 76-77.
[84] Osborne, 140.
[85] Osborne, 140.
[86] Smith, 21.
[87] Gager, "Enemies," 258.
[88] Gager, "Enemies," 259.

sociological interpretation include modern practitioners such as Bruce Malina and Philip Esler.

2.3.2 Overview of Key Thinkers

Bruce Malina has offered critical contributions to the development of sociological interpretation within biblical studies. He argues that humans "cannot make sense of their experience and their world without making models of it."[89] Based upon this conviction he goes on to argue that the models[90] of social-science help humans to understand the development, structure and function of human groups as they interact and organize as a group.[91] When such conviction is applied to the realm of biblical studies, it results in a method of reading that seeks to provide "testable control on meaning" and "fruitful framework for further study."[92] Malina proposes that three of the main social-science models utilized in understanding social interaction include: the structural functionalist model, the conflict model, and the symbolic model.[93] The pursuit and application of such methods is an identifiable leap from the less interpretive task of social description.

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[89] Bruce Malina, "The Social Sciences and Biblical Interpretation," *Interpretation* 36 (1982): 229-242, 232.
[90] For the sake of clarity, Malina in his article defines a "model" as "an abstract, simplified representation of some real world object, event, or interaction constructed for the purpose of understanding, control, or predication" (231).
[91] Malina, "Social Sciences," 232.
[92] Malina, "Social Sciences," 240.
[93] Malina, "Social Sciences," 233. In his description of each model, Malina acknowledges the intention and the shortfalls of using each in isolation. The structural-functional model provides a potentially helpful "still picture" of a given society but it also presupposes that every society has a relatively stable structure. The conflict model stands as an alternative to the first approach by focusing on the influence of coercion and power rather than consensus and endurance. However, like the first model, this method also assumes a potentially inappropriate level of structure, requiring that a given group is oriented around a common purpose. The final model, a system of symbols, seeks to establish the "long-lasting perceptions and motivations in human beings." However, even in the quest to identify values, there are no symbols that are capable of capturing all possible meaning. Malina concludes by cautioning the reader that appropriate use of models is question-specific, area-specific and depends upon the type of information being generated and sought after (233-237).

Malina bolsters his argument for the necessity of social interpretation by dealing specifically with the concept of becoming a "considerate reader"[94] or, to use the terminology of this project, a responsible reader. He argues that a historical-critical approach to biblical interpretation is not sufficient when taken on its own, as it does not adequately take into account the contribution of the social-sciences, specifically the reader's dependence upon understanding language and communication within the context of a social system.[95] He suggests that "for language to function interpersonally, whether in conversation or in reading, knowledge of social systems is essential."[96] As such, responsible reading requires more than historical or even linguistic research. It demands an understanding of the social system that produces such history and literature.[97] Malina argues that failure to understand the system results in "anachronistic and ethnocentric...interpretation of biblical texts and text segments."[98] In order to read responsibly, social interpretation is required, not recommended, according to Malina.

In light of the weighty nature of these conclusions, the contribution of Malina can hardly be overlooked. His distillation of models and the potential impact of those models upon the interpretive process of the biblical scholar are valuable insights when it comes to understanding and perhaps even implementing social interpretation. His conviction that responsible reading of the biblical text requires a direct correlation to an understanding of the social world out of which it was born challenges the reader to consider the level of interaction necessary to glean sound insight and interpretation.

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[94] Bruce Malina, "Why Interpret the Bible with Social Sciences," *American Baptist Quarterly* 2 (1983): 119-133, 122.
[95] Malina, "Interpret," 120.
[96] Malina, "Interpret," 120.
[97] Malina, "Interpret," 122. Malina goes on in his article to offer four characteristics of an adequate social scientific approach. It must be cross-cultural, historical, focused upon the world depicted in the texts and the original audience, and allow for validation (129-130).
[98] Malina, "Interpret," 122.

However, the difficulty of his challenge lies in the sophistication and the validity of the models necessary to uncover such inner workings and social networks. The initial three stages of social description allow viable access to the responsible reader based upon established methods of historical and narrative criticism. Venturing one step further into social interpretation, however, opens up a new and daunting world that on many levels must be left to sociologists and anthropologists. The level of specialization necessary to appropriately apply such models takes sociological interpretation out of the hands of the average reader on many levels. Beyond this, the validity and the transferability of the models generated must not be blindly accepted, especially by those who are not trained in the social-scientific disciplines. Osborne identifies the "misuse of models" as a notable problem associated with sociological criticism. "It is easy to read historical situations in the light of modern theories without asking whether or not these current models actually fit the ancient data."[99] Difficulties of applying constructed models may lead scholars to become selective in their study of texts, focusing upon those that support the model and ignoring those that do not quite fit the categories identified.[100] Models should not govern reading, rather they should act as conversation partners, shedding light on situations when appropriate, all the while remaining flexible and tentative in light of new evidence. Sociological interpretation demands of the reader a sense of caution and heightened criticism. Though it may offer a more complex and satisfying window onto the world of the biblical text, its potential to misread the culture and force the ancient world into modern day categories is very great.

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[99] Osborne, 141.
[100] Osborne, 141.

One final scholar to be considered within the area of social interpretation is Philip Esler. His research in Luke and Acts has provided an extended example of the practical application of social interpretation, specifically with regards to sectarian strategies and their effect upon relationships within the community and the resultant transmission of theology by the author.[101] In a later work, Esler is careful to make clear that he views the social-sciences as essential and additional, but not as replacements for traditional methods of scholarship. Literary and historical techniques maintain their validity while social methodology must be added to responsibly interact with New Testament society and Gospel.[102] The strengths and weaknesses of Esler's interpretation attract largely the same criticism as Malina. While a reconstruction of ancient society enables and even incites fresh readings of the biblical text, the complexity of the models and the temptation to read modern day notions back onto first-century Christianity is very great. As such, social interpretation must be approached with care and caution.

2.4 The Relevance of Sociological Criticism for Responsible Reading

The journey into social and sociological criticism has the potential to open up new and exciting categories for the responsible reader. The process of assessing the world of the early Christians from the inside out and the outside in uncovers dimensions and shades of community that have been largely overlooked and undervalued. The validity of this approach increases as further work is done and as additional connections are made that enable the society of the first-century to emerge and take shape as never before.

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[101] Philip Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts: The Social and Political Motivations of Lucan Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 222-223.
[102] Philip Esler, *The First Christians in their Social Worlds: Social-scientific Approaches to New Testament Interpretation* (London: Routledge, 1994), 2.

When it comes to conscientious and responsible reading, sociological criticism asserts itself on many levels to be a valuable tool.

Even so, caution must be exercised when coming to the text with such an approach. The text must remain the reader's starting point even when the temptation to read theories and neat categories back onto the text presents itself. There is no question that the Christian community described in the book of Acts finds correlation and connection to the world that surrounded it. The social influences surrounding the biblical narrative are an important factor in interpretation, but they are only one factor. Sociological criticism emerges as a useful means of approaching the biblical text, of engaging in the first-century world and of asking questions of community life and practice that would otherwise be overlooked. The reader must not shy away from this contribution but should exercise caution in the application of this approach.

Now that the strengths, weaknesses and contributions of the above mentioned sociological categories have been considered, it is the category of social description that will be engaged for the purposes of this project, leaving the complexity of social interpretation for another time. Sociological criticism is a continuum upon which the reader moves and, though many of the insights offered by scholars who champion sociological interpretation have the potential to offer reasonable insights, the demands of the discipline fall outside of the bounds of this particular project. One aspect of responsible reading is an awareness of the culture out of which the text is born. Social description will enable the reader to consider this element of a responsible approach.

Chapter 3: Developing a Responsible Approach for Reading the Book of Acts

3.1 General Introduction

In light of the complexity of issues confronting the reader, especially with regards to the question of normativity, it is important to determine those elements that are necessary for a responsible approach to the text and those that fall outside the realm of immediate interest. The process of determining elements that emerge as necessary and effective has the potential to dissuade the reader as the task of distilling central issues will always be subject to debate and it is possible, perhaps even inevitable, that a "better" approach will be discovered. This perception of unavoidable critique and improvement, though valid, should not discourage the reader or result in an abandonment of biblical interpretation. It is important to identify that the goal is not a "conclusive" reading or even the pursuit of an entirely "accurate" reading. The objective should be that of responsible reading, an approach that requires the reader to acknowledge the dynamic nature of the task and develop openness to the application and outcome of the process. As such, a responsible reading is one that takes into account essential elements, freeing the text to speak based upon an informed and open approach to what is being said, both then and now. It does not seek conclusive interpretations that are static and unrelenting in nature, nor should it be perceived as a model seeking to force the text into a limited scope of analysis. Rather, it is intended to allow the text to speak, aided by helpful criteria identified for the process of interpretation.

The book of Acts, as has already been discussed, presents specific challenges when it comes to reading and as such emerges as an excellent candidate for the development and application of principles for responsible reading. The content of Acts raises questions

related to the issue of normativity as it applies to accounts of the early church community and in so doing challenges the reader to grapple with what is intended to remain in the first-century and what transcends the text to speak to the church today. Answering this question is neither simple nor straightforward. There are many elements that must be held in tension and a delicate balance must be maintained if the text is to be considered from all the appropriate angles.

In response to the basic investigative categories of who, what, where, when, why and how,[103] this chapter will propose three overarching categories identified as influential for a responsible reading of Acts, namely culture, narrative and theology. It is the working hypothesis of this thesis that in order to adequately consider a text in a manner that affords the reader legitimate entry into the question of normative practice as it pertains to the first-century and to the present day, the influences of culture, narrative and theology must all be considered and carefully weighed in order to achieve a responsible reading. This chapter will attempt the creation of such a balance by drawing upon the work of a variety of scholars in an effort to develop principles that contribute to a responsible reading of Acts. Within each category, a brief discussion concerning the relevance and the manifestation of that category within the book of Acts itself will serve to offer the reader a preliminary orientation to some of the key issues related to Acts study. Beyond this, five guidelines pertaining to the question of normativity will provide an additional

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[103] Interpretation of what exactly these questions pertain to has the potential to vary, but for the purposes of providing additional structure to this approach they will be understood as follows: (1) *who* – represents the people associated with and surrounding the text (culture), (2) *what* – focuses in upon the content of the narrative conveyed by the text (narrative), (3) *where* – denotes the environment surrounding the text, where it was written (culture) and *where* is was set (narrative), (4) *when* – attempts to get at the approximate time period out of which the text was written and events associated with that time (culture) and *when* the text was set (narrative), (5) *why* – grapples with the motivation and meaning behind the writing of the text (theology), (6) and *how* – deals with the actual composition and transmission of the text across time and space (narrative).

set of questions based upon the preceding four principles by which the text may be further evaluated for possible indications of practice versus principle.

3.2 Cultural Analysis

PRINCIPLE 1 – *Analysis of culture is a valuable element of responsible reading based upon its ability to offer the reader a backdrop against which to read the text.*

3.2.1 How Does Culture Influence the Task of Reading?

The influence of culture is significant when it comes to reading the biblical text responsibly. Particularly helpful questions are those related to *who* was surrounding the text, *where* the text originated and *when* the text came into being.[104] In asking these types of questions, the reader begins to interact with what was going on at the time and how that corresponds to or differs from what is going on today. It is irresponsible to attempt separation between the biblical text and the culture that surrounded it. Scripture is bound to culture by virtue of the fact it was born out of a particular time and a particular set of circumstances. It is in acknowledgment of the intimacy of this connection that culture emerges as the first of three major elements contributing to a responsible approach.

Sociological criticism, as treated extensively in the previous chapter, offers the reader some specific categories for examining the world of the first-century. Social fact, social history, and social organization provide the reader with progressively complex levels of analysis and interaction when it comes to considering and reconstructing the world of the New Testament. As evidenced by the work of Case, Malherbe and Judge, engagement in social description offers the reader an opportunity to unlock particular portions of the

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[104] Additionally, under the category of *where*, the question of where the narrative was set may be asked and under the category of *when*, the question of when the text was set may be helpful. These two nuances overlap with the next major category to be considered, narrative analysis.

narrative otherwise overlooked and underappreciated when cultural elements are not sufficiently taken into account. This critical method challenges the reader to uncover what is lying behind the text as it relates to the social and ultimately cultural climate of the day. With the help of social description, the responsible reader is able to consider the questions of who, where and when by connecting the text with its surroundings and by creating a backdrop against which to read Scripture.

However, this analytical and investigative approach of the text is not enough. Culture is far more complex than the identification of particular groups involved or the city of their residence. Even if every social and cultural factor of the early church community were uncovered and accounted for, that would not solve the difficulties associated with normativity and the application of texts from then to now. There are still questions of how those details influenced the text and in what way they traverse time and space to identify with modern day culture. No doubt there will always be points of genuine contact as human interaction and organization holds some semblance of order from one group to the next. Even so, there will also be inevitable contrast and it is the contrast between cultures, not the similarities that awaken the reader to the presence of culture in the first place.[105] If everything were exactly the same from then to now, then the influence of culture upon reading would be minimal at best. The discipline of social description reveals that this is not the case. As such, cultural analysis as it applies to normativity must be considered.

William Webb, in his book, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis*, asks two questions located at the very heart of

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[105] William Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 21.

biblical interpretation. "Why do some biblical instructions have ongoing significance and force in their entirety, while the continued application of others is limited in some manner?" and "How do I determine which components of the biblical text should apply today and which should not?"[106] Together these two questions expose the tension of normativity and application. How is the text functioning and how should the reader go about engaging in a consistent and fair treatment of Scripture? Webb's interaction with these concerns offers a particular hermeneutical model, one that focuses upon cultural analysis, and seeks to work with the text in such a way that the impact of cultural influences are considered foremost when attempting to approach a text responsibly.[107]

Webb proposes the use of a "redemptive-movement hermeneutic."[108] The intention of this model is to arrive at interpretations that have taken into account the original culture, the record found in Scripture, the particulars of present day culture and the presence of an ultimate ethic.[109] He proposes the text be understood as *moving* toward an ultimate end or ethic rather than assuming that the isolated words of the text convey that ultimate ethic specifically.[110] A key element in this move is the influence of cultural practices and norms, both then and now, asking in what way they come to bear upon the text. According to Webb, it is necessary to establish what is "cultural" and "transcultural," that is what "we leave behind" as opposed to "take with us" in the

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[106] Webb, 16.

[107] It should be acknowledged that Webb's "model" is not the same type of model that was critiqued and passed over in chapter two. He is not pursuing sociological interpretation of what was going on then, but is rather attempting to provide the reader with helpful guidelines when it comes to moving the text from then to now.

[108] Webb, 30. That is, "...the need to engage the redemptive spirit of the text in a way that moves the contemporary appropriation of the text beyond its original-application framing."

[109] Webb, 31-32.

[110] Webb, 55. He acknowledges that this may appear an unfaithful treatment of Scripture, particularly the concern that one is seeking authority outside the text. He counters this by challenging the validity of a static hermeneutic, a method characterized by inconsistency and intentional oversights.

interpretive process.[111] As the reader focuses in upon this distinction and becomes able to identify what stays in the first-century and what transcends, the practices and principles of the text as they relate to cultural and ethical realities will begin to emerge.

An approach such as this has far-reaching implications for the reader's understanding of normativity and the potential elevation of principle over practical application of the biblical account. Webb introduces the "ladder of abstraction"[112] as a way of coming to terms with what the biblical text is saying in light of its ancient context and how the message of that text may be understood to cross time and space for the purposes of today. When elements of culture then and now are particularly far apart, the reader is forced to climb higher up the "ladder," whereas times when cultural elements are more similar, the reader is not required to climb very high at all.[113] Extending the metaphor, Webb suggests that the image of sails on a boat represents the principle gleaned from the text, the ladder of abstraction is the mast and the redemptive spirit applied to the text is the wind that blows the boat along toward the ultimate ethic. The issue of normativity achieves a whole new level when considered in this way. The reader has opportunity to take an incredible amount of leeway, though this requires great diligence and care when treating the text.

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[111] Webb, 24-25. He defines cultural and transcultural under the category of "cultural component": "those aspects of the biblical text that 'we leave behind' as opposed to 'take with us' due to cultural differences between the text's world and the interpreters' world." He offers a list of distinctions to aid the reader in identifying the difference between cultural and transcultural components: cultural values vs. kingdom values, culturally confined vs. beyond cultural limits, time-bound truth vs. timeless truth, culturally relative application vs. transcultural principle, temporal vs. supratemporal, nontransferable form vs. transferable function, local vs. universal, momentary husk vs. enduring kernel, peripheral meaning vs. core meaning, wineskins vs. wine. Webb concedes that not all of these categories will be useful or even acceptable to every reader. They are intended to get the reader thinking about what types of distinctions might help determine cultural and transcultural components.

[112] Webb, 54.

[113] Webb, 54.

As insightful as Webb's model is, particularly as it challenges the reader to consider the prominence of cultural analysis in the interpretative process, the basic challenge of practice versus principle in large part still remains. When speaking of an ultimate ethic, how does the reader decide those issues towards which the text must be moving? Furthermore, what identifies something as cultural or as transcultural? It is this second question that has particular significance for this project and the issue that in large part comprises the subsequent sections of Webb's book. Some of his most relevant criteria[114] will be considered for its usefulness in developing an understanding of what is normative and what is not normative when responsibly reading the book of Acts. This will not occur, however, until the influences of narrative and theology have been explored. Ultimately, the issue of identifying elements that must be left in the first-century and elements that are intended to move beyond the text is not only a concern of the cultural context. The larger question of normativity requires that narrative analysis and theological implications also come to bear upon the reader's ability to make responsible interpretive moves. As such, this discussion will be revisited at the end of the chapter in light of further analysis.

3.2.2 Cultural Components of Acts Specifically

Based upon the significance of culture as it relates to the use of social description and the presentation of a particular hermeneutical model that emphasizes culture in terms of biblical interpretation, the cultural backdrop of Acts will be briefly treated in an effort to illustrate the differences and the similarities between the cultural world of the early church community and the context of the church today. The categories of who, where

[114] Webb, 69-70. Webb offers eighteen criteria altogether based upon intrascriptural and extrascriptural arguments in an effort to assist the reader in identifying what is cultural and what is transcultural. The list is divided into categories of persuasive, moderately persuasive and inconclusive criteria.

and when will be utilized in an effort to create a cultural backdrop against which the book of Acts may be read.

3.2.2.1 Who

When the social context that surrounds the book of Acts has been investigated, it reveals for the reader some significant cultural influences that come to bear upon the text. Ethnic as well as economic divisions begin to paint a picture of the community that was gathering under the banner of the early church, contributing to its diversity as well as its overall character. Jewish culture as well as Hellenistic culture impacted the formation of this gathering, as did economic factors present within both groups. In order to better understand the personality of the first-century church, an attempt needs to be made at understanding the people who made up the community.

At the initial emergence of the early church, "what we now call Christianity was Jewish Christianity."[115] Horrell argues that Jesus was a Jewish prophetic figure, with Jewish followers who largely maintained their loyalty to Judaism after Jesus' resurrection. He goes on to recount that it was not long before non-Jewish people began to accept the message of the risen Christ and soon the community was facing the challenge of diversity and disagreement over what constituted a proper religious lifestyle.[116] The Jewish identification markers of circumcision, Sabbath rest and observance of other religious holy days set the Jewish people apart,[117] causing some controversy as to what was necessary and what was optional when it came to normative

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[115] David G. Horrell, "Early Jewish Christianity," in *The Early Christian World Vol. 1,* (ed.) Philip Esler, 136-167 (New York: Routledge, 2000), 156.
[116] Horrell, 156.
[117] Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1993), 502.

behavior required of a Christian. Their commitment to the Law[118] as well as the significance of the Temple[119] heavily influenced their worship and consequently the developing worship practices of the early church.[120] Those Jewish by birth, even if they converted to Christianity, also enjoyed the protection of the Roman Empire in that Rome did not involve itself in Jewish disputes, allowing them to maintain their ancestral religion. The experience of Gentile converts to Christianity was quite different and exemplifies only one of many differences between these two groups.[121]

Further analysis reveals that the influence of Hellenistic culture upon the early church was just as prevalent as that of Judaism. Though the roots of the earliest Christians found establishment in the Scriptures and traditions of Jewish faith, the cultural climate of the Greco-Roman Empire surrounding this developing community cannot be overlooked. The undercurrent of Hellenistic life and thought had been establishing itself since the

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[118] C.G. Montefiore, " The Spirit of Judaism," in *The Beginnings of Christianity, Part 1, The Acts of the Apostles,* (eds.) F.J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, 35-81 (London: Macmillan, 1920), 59. "The strength of the legal system was due to two influences, closely connected with each other. The first was the love of God, Giver of the Law; the second was the joy in the Commandments. To some extent the very particularism of the Rabbinic religion, which makes it less attractive to us moderns, added strength to its legalism."

[119] Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002). Skarsaune considers the centrality of the temple in Jewish religion. "Access to the temple, the sphere of holiness, was only for Jews." Temple access was an issue of "purity and holiness," shedding light upon the disagreement over Gentiles who sought access even though they had not formally taken on Judaism, 44. Skarsaune goes on to consider the role the apostles understood the temple to play in the life of the early church. "We have already seen that from the very beginning the apostles valued the temple as the place from which the authoritative word of God was to go forth to all Israel and to the nations...they went up to the temple to teach and pray...they treated the temple as if it were the supreme synagogue," 157.

[120] Daniel Falk, "Jewish Prayer Literature and the Jerusalem Church in Acts," in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting Vol. 4,* (ed.) Richard Bauckham, 267-301 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995). Falk examines Acts "as a source for reconstructing the worship of the Jerusalem church in the context of Palestinian Jewish practice," 268. By studying narrative accounts of prayer in Acts as compared to other sources of Jewish worship prior to AD 70, he concludes that there is "substantial agreement" on the following elements. That: (1) the Temple and the home are places of prayer, (2) the Temple is a focus of public prayer, (3) prayer at the time of sacrifices is common, (4) there is silence concerning the synagogue as a place of regular public prayer, (5) and the style of prayer is similar, 298.

[121] Skarsaune, 60. "Jewish believers were basically treated by the Romans on par with other Jews...The situation was different for Gentile converts to Christianity. They could not claim, like the Jews, to be following their ancestral traditions. On the contrary, they broke with the tradition of their fathers in a most provocative way."

reign of Alexander the Great,[122] surviving the Jewish revolt and maintaining its vitality even under Roman rule.[123] Many aspects of Hellenistic life were a part of every day practice, having a significant influence upon the early Christian community. Some of these influences include architectural landscape, the role of women, slavery, patronage, education, philosophical schools, and language.[124] The Hellenistic world enveloped the early church, shaping the worldview of those converting to Christianity and lingering within the confines of the community. The popularity of Hellenistic religion also challenged the first-century church, taking the form of pagan cults, provincial cults, civic cults, local religion, and the imperial cult.[125] Reaction to these pressures and the infiltration of the pagan cult into the Christian community with the conversion of Gentiles no doubt impacted the development of the early church.[126]

There has been much debate over the social and economic stratification of Christians within the early church and the influence of this issue upon the worshipping community. Richter offers an overview of the controversy by summarizing the issues and contenders advocating the "top down" or "bottom up" movement of Christianity.[127] "Top down"

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[122] Ferguson identifies ten features following the conquest of Alexander that fostered Greek superiority: (1) the movement of Greeks abroad, (2) the accelerated speed of the conquest by Greek culture, (3) the emergence of one world economically, (4) the further spread of the Greek language, (5) the acceptance of Greek ideas by a large portion of the population, (6) a higher level of education, (7) the spread of Greek deities and cultus, (8) the emergence of philosophy as representing a way of life, (9) a framework for society surrounding the city, (10) and an increase in individualism, 13-14.

[123] Clifford H. Moore, "Life in the Roman Empire at the Beginning of the Christian Era," in *The Beginnings of Christianity, Part 1, The Acts of the Apostles,* (eds.) F.J. Foakes Jackson and Kirsopp Lake, 218-262 (London: Macmillan, 1920), 221. Though Moore may overstate the issue when he says, "The Romans generally recognized that their civilization was inferior to that of the Greeks, and were ready to learn," he does point out that Greek influence extended most notably to areas of art, literature, religion and philosophy.

[124] G.R. Stanton, "Hellenism," in *Dictionary of New Testament Backgrounds,* (eds.) Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, 464-473 (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 470-472.

[125] David W.J. Gill and Bruce W. Winter, "Acts and Roman Religion," in *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting Vol. 2,* (eds.) David W.J. Gill and Conrad Gempf, 79-103 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994).

[126] Gill and Winter, 92.

[127] Richter, 80-81.

implies that the Christian community was comprised of socially stable, even wealthy individuals whose presence and influence trickled down to the lower levels.[128] A "bottom up" movement suggests that Christianity was most popular at the most disadvantaged levels of the first-century and worked its way up.[129] What is striking about Acts is that, though it says little about "socio-economic class distinctions," it is possible and even legitimate to maintain that "all classes were represented" based upon study of the city of Jerusalem and the characterization of other first-century congregations.[130] Study specifically focused upon Acts reveals that it would appear there are hints of "urban elites" within the early church community.[131] Additionally, the presence of the "lower class" is presented in craftsmen, merchants,[132] as well as the "submerged" class of the impoverished and diseased.[133] Regardless of the majority of one group over the other or even the impact of one particular class upon the ethos of the early community, it is apparent that diversity among early Christians was not confined to ethnic heritage but also extended to a wide range of social and economic distinction.

Thus, even a brief examination of Jewish and Hellenistic influences, as well as social and economic status reveals the presence of diversity and challenge within the early community. The *who* of the first-century church included those who had descended from

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[128] Judge, 60. "Far from being a socially depressed group, then, if the Corinthians are at all typical, the Christians were dominated by a socially pretentious section of the population of the big cities."
[129] John G. Gager, *Kingdom and Community: The Social World of Early Christianity* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), 96. Gager states regarding the social question, "...that for more than two hundred years Christianity was essentially a movement among disprivileged groups in the Empire."
[130] David A. Fiensy, "The Composition of the Jerusalem Church," in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting Vol. 4,* (ed.) Richard Bauckham, 213-236 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 229-230.
[131] David W.J. Gill, "Acts and the Urban Elites," in *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting Vol. 2,* (eds.) David W.J. Gill and Conrad Gempf, 105-118 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), 117-118.
[132] Fiensy, 227.
[133] Fiensy, 228. Fiensy goes on to summarize, "The wealthy are hardly noticed at all except for a few cases of extraordinary generosity...The lower class has the fewest references, although one could speculate that they had the largest representation. The submerged class enters the story only to indicate that the church is caring for them," 229.

a rich religious history, as well as those who had emerged from cultic or pagan practices. The community was shaped by the influence of the rich and the poor, those enjoying social status and those enduring the stigma of poverty and need. Together these people worked to forge a community intent on following Christ in an era dominated by the Roman Empire and shaped by the influence of Greek culture. The *who* of the first-century reveals a cultural contrast between then and now, challenging the reader to consider how this environment shaped the text and its relevance for today.

3.2.2.2 Where

The question of *where* Acts is set is offered to the reader via the text itself (Acts 1:4).[134] Jerusalem serves as the starting point for the narrative and the gospel gradually works itself out toward the ends of the earth as the story progresses.[135] The question of *where* Acts was written from is less obvious and as such less of an aid to the interpreter of Acts. Tradition has connected Luke to Antioch, though other suggestions include Rome or even Ephesus. It is simply not known from where it came.[136]

3.2.2.3 When

The question of when Acts was written is particularly elusive and, again, the evidence is ultimately inconclusive.[137] Colin Hemer has compiled an extensive list including the estimations of sixty-nine scholars ranging from the earliest at AD 57-59 to the latest at AD

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[134] *... he ordered them not to leave **Jerusalem**.*

[135]Some examples of the geographical spread of the gospel: *...scattered throughout the countryside of **Judea** and **Samaria** (8:1); Now those who were scattered ...traveled as far as **Phoenicia**, **Cyprus**, and **Antioch**, (11:19); Now the church at **Antioch** there were prophets and teachers...Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and **sent them off** (13:1-3); They went through the region of **Phrygia** and **Galatia**...passing by **Mysia**, they went down to **Troas**...When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to **Macedonia** (16:6-10).*

[136] Marshall, 48-49.

[137] Mark Allan Powell, *What are they Saying about Acts?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 36.

135.[138] The difficulty in dating Acts is based upon a number of factors, some of the most significant being "the relationship of Luke's writings to other documents," "the relationship between the writing of Acts and the death of Paul," and "the outlook of Acts."[139] These factors which may be expanded and nuanced in a number of ways make it difficult to come to a conclusive position on the question. Considering the question of *when* challenges the reader to contemplate what was going on in the world at the time of the text's composition. In a case such as this, however, it is difficult to build interpretation upon such an unstable foundation.[140]

3.2.3 The Importance of Culture as a Principle

The study of culture is important because it enables the reader to create a backdrop against which the text may be read. If the reader attempts to sever the text from its original setting and read without paying attention to the cultural factors that shaped the text, valuable clues, indicators and elements will be lost in the process of transferring the text from then to now. The environment out of which the text was birthed is essential for understanding the mindset that guided the people surrounding the text and the internal and external pressures that played a part in bringing the text into being. Grappling with the original culture allows the reader to perceive resonance and contrast between the world of the first-century and the world today, ultimately moving toward the difficult question of normativity. While culture is unable on its own to answer the question of normativity in its entirety, it represents a valuable step in the process toward discovering

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[138] Colin J. Hemer, *The Book of Acts in the Setting of Hellenistic History* (J.C.B. Mohr: Tubingen, 1989), 367-370.

[139] Marshall, 46-47.

[140] For the purposes of this project an approximate date around AD 70 appears a reasonable estimate based upon the relationship between Luke and Acts and the author's outlook. The absence of the death of Paul is still difficult to explain but it is possible the author concluded the work when he did for reasons other than strict historical accounting. For support of this date see Marshall, 48.

those elements that remain a practice of the first-century and those elements that can be transferred to today.

3.3 Narrative Analysis

PRINCIPLE 2 – *Literary factors such as structure, technique, and the art of story-telling are essential elements of responsible reading based upon their ability to influence the movement of the story and their tendency to shape the way in which the message is conveyed by the author.*

3.3.1 How Does Narrative Influence the Task of Reading?

A second element that emerges as critical in the development of a responsible approach to the text is that of the narrative structure of the text itself. Understanding the world out of which the text was born is one factor, requiring interaction with the questions of *who*, *when* and *where*. Focusing upon *what* the message of the text is and *how* that message is conveyed by literary devices is quite another.[141] Consequently, literary or narrative criticism calls for a "close reading" of the text, enabling the reader to "detect the flow of the text and therefore to see the hand of God as he has inspired the biblical author to develop his story."[142] Inasmuch as the text cannot be separated from culture, it is even more impossible to separate the text from the conventions that make up its existence. If the reader is committed to reading responsibly, attention to the elements comprising the foundation of the text will be considered essential.

In light of this attention to text, the question of genre reappears and asserts itself as especially significant. The previous discussion of genre in chapter 1 highlighted the traditional difficulty of classifying Acts on account of the debate over history versus

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[141] Osborne, 154. Osborne identifies two aspects that are central to the interpretation of narrative as poetics and meaning. These categories challenge the reader to consider the "artistic dimension" and construction of the text (how) alongside the encapsulated meaning of the text (what).
[142] Osborne, 154.

literature. The cultural analysis above demonstrates that indeed the historical context and events surrounding and infusing the book are essential in arriving at a responsible treatment of what the text meant both then and now. However, acknowledgment that the content of the text is also influenced by the literary form employed to write it is equally important. Ultimately, it is inadequate to consider one aspect of the discussion without holding the other in balance. Acts does indeed appear to be a historical narrative recounting the actions and experiences of the early church community, but it is also a piece of literature, utilizing certain literary conventions of the first-century in an effort to convey that story in an acceptable and recognizable fashion.

David Aune in his book, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*, considers extensively the question of genre and how it applies to the book of Luke-Acts.[143] Though he considers the genres of ancient praxeis,[144] biographical succession narrative,[145] and Greco-Roman novel,[146] he does favor the category of history, specifically historiography, as it finds roots in both the Hellenistic and the Jewish traditions.[147] Within the Greco-Roman context Aune states that history was intended to be "truthful, useful, and entertaining"[148] often explicitly revealing the intended purpose of the narrative through literary conventions.[149] Such characteristics allowed the text to be useful, truthful and enjoyable as well as being clear. Jewish historians, however, rarely revealed their direct

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[143] A significant influence on Aune's conclusions regarding the genre of Acts is his commitment to taking Luke-Acts in combination. The designation Luke-Acts will be used during this portion of the paper to remain accurate to Aune's discussion. David E. Aune, *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 77. Though this issue of the interconnection of the two has not been discussed at length within this thesis, this relationship has also been assumed for the purposes of this project. For discussion regarding this issue see Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Approach* 2 Vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986).
[144] Aune, 78.
[145] Aune, 78.
[146] Aune, 79.
[147] Aune, 80, 96.
[148] Aune, 95.
[149] Aune, 103.

purpose, focusing upon positive and negative behaviors of the past in order to address the group toward which the writing was directed. The goal was hortatory interaction.[150] These types of literary forerunners provide a useful framework for understanding Luke-Acts.

As far as the stylistic components that place Luke-Acts within this category of first-century history, Aune identifies historical prefaces, genealogies, symposia, travel narrative and "we" passages, speeches, letters, dramatic episodes, digressions and summaries as building blocks of this genre.[151] What is useful in Aune's identification of history as genre built upon these various elements is that it preserves the author's intent to offer a historical account but also acknowledges the literary devices utilized to convey that account. As such, Luke-Acts emerges as a composition motivated by the narration of actual events which, in their portrayal, are submissive to accepted literary practices of the day.[152]

As far as an established literary approach for interpreting texts, Osborne identifies elements that contribute to methodological study of narrative texts resulting in a useful guide for the conscientious reader of Acts. He concedes that a blending of literary and historical considerations is necessary to fortify the hermeneutical task and begin to eliminate weaknesses inherit in the nature of each approach.[153] He spends considerable

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[150] Aune, 103.
[151] Aune, 120-131.
[152] Aune highlights the author's use of the prologue in Luke 1:1-4 as an identifiable following of Hellenistic literary convention where the author labels his work, διήγησιν, or "narrative," a term used for both fiction and non-fiction, 116. Additionally, the author is also careful to emphasize his commitment to accuracy (ἀκριβῶς) and careful accounting (παρηκολουθηκότι) in the remainder of his preface (Luke 1:1-4). This combination of style and content in the very beginning reveals the author's commitment to both the endeavor of historical accounting and accepted literary composition.
[153] Osborne, 168. He identifies eight weaknesses of literary criticism: (1) a dehistoricizing tendency, (2) setting aside the author, (3) a denial of intended or referential meaning, (4) reductionistic and disjunctive thinking, (5) the imposition of modern literary categories upon ancient genres, (6) a preoccupation with

time identifying categories by which the modern day reader may understand the author's message as it specifically relates to a literary approach,[154] and then proceeds to establish a larger pattern for interpretation which guides the reader through structural analysis, stylistic analysis, redactional analysis, exegetical analysis, theological analysis, and contextualization.

On the level of application, these various stages of analysis challenge the reader to approach the text as a literary document, calling for attention to be paid to specific details along the way. Consideration of plot,[155] literary techniques,[156] arrangement of material by original and subsequent authors,[157] and close exegetical study of the building blocks of the text[158] require the reader to acknowledge the care taken in composition and the various avenues by which the author has opportunity to convey meaning to the reader. Moving beyond these initial stages of observation to issues of theological analysis[159] and contextualization,[160] the reader is again forced to ask the question of normativity. Positively, Osborne has identified for the reader various stages of literary analysis with which to evaluate the text. Unfortunately, the issue of normativity still resists clarity as no guidance is given regarding what parts of the story, if any, should be applied today and if that application manifests itself in the form of practice or principle. It is here that

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obscure theories, (7) ignoring the understanding of the early church, (8) and a rejection of the sources behind the book, 164-167.

[154] Osborne's eight characteristics are: (1) implied author and narrator, (2) point of view, ideology and narrative world, (3) narrative and story time, (4) plot, (5) characterization, (6) setting, (7) implicit commentary, (8) and the implied reader, 154-163.

[155] Osborne, 168.

[156] Osborne, 169.

[157] Osborne, 169-170.

[158] Osborne, 170-171.

[159] Osborne, 171. This point has been elevated to the third major criteria in the approach being proposed within this chapter.

[160] Osborne, 171.

additional scholarship will need to be consulted in order to aid the development of literary principles.

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart have developed interpretive guidelines for approaching the book of Acts in terms of what may be identified as historical precedent.[161] The interpretive motivation for such a discussion is largely based upon what within the narrative is descriptive and what emerges as normative for the church at any time.[162] Consequently, in terms of literary criticism, is it necessary to consider the impact narrative structure has upon claims of historical precedent, whether what happened then is what is meant to happen now, and how the intention of the writer in writing influences the applicability of the statements made.[163] Fee and Stuart propose some general hermeneutical guidelines to frame their approach,[164] followed by principles regarding the interpretation of historical narrative specifically. They offer the following for determination of historical precedent. The reader must: (1) determine what "any given narrative was *intended* to teach," (2) consider that "what is *incidental* to the primary intent of the narrative may indeed reflect an inspired author's understanding of things, but it does not have the same didactic value as what the narrative was *intended* to teach," (3) and that "historical precedent must be related to *intent*...that the purpose of a given narrative is to *establish* precedent."[165]

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[161] Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1993), 105-112. Fee also includes this discussion in his previously referenced book, *Gospel and Spirit*, 83-104, especially 89-96.
[162] Fee and Stuart, 105.
[163] Fee and Stuart, 105, 108.
[164] Fee and Stuart, 106. They identify that doctrinal statements derived from Scripture fall into three categories: Christian theology (what Christians believe), Christian ethics (how Christians ought to behave), and Christian experience and practice (what Christians do).
[165] Fee and Stuart, 108.

These three criteria challenge the reader to consider difficult issues of transferability and relevant application, taking into consideration the literary dimension of the text.[166] How the narrative is constructed and the aim of that narrative must enter into the discussion of what was being said, both then and now. The difficulty of any such discussion, however, remains the reader's ability to get at what is happening beyond the text. These principles, though they open up appropriate categories for approaching the biblical text in a responsible manner, do not eliminate all difficulties and controversies surrounding historical precedent. Fee and Stuart attempt to offer "workable suggestions" leading to "greater hermeneutical precision."[167] In response to their success in this venture, it is fair to say that their categories are indeed helpful. However, the complexity of the question of normativity within the book of Acts still requires further consideration.

3.3.2 Narrative Structure of Acts Specifically

3.3.2.1 How

Answering the question of *how* the text is presented when it comes to the book of Acts begins with the issue of genre already considered that Acts includes historical as well as literary elements. It is the affirmation that literary elements are present within the text that allows the reader to analyze the text in search of not only social description but also literary devices. These devices shape the way in which the author presents the history and challenges the reader to acknowledge the style and intentionality of the author. Some literary devices particularly significant within the book of Acts include

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[166] Fee and Stuart, 110-111. Additionally, Fee and Stuart specifically deal with the difficulty of analogy based on biblical precedent, the possibility for biblical narrative to possess "pattern" value even though this is not the author's intent, and the possibility there are repeated patterns in the biblical narrative that are not normative. These bring greater precision as well as greater complexity to the interpretive task, specifically in relation to Acts.

[167] Fee and Stuart, 112.

summaries, speeches, and journeys.[168] These give the narrative shape and come to bear upon the issue of normativity when considered by the reader.

The use of summaries within the book of Acts enables the author to extend the narrative. They serve to "generalize details from specific stories, giving the impression of repeated or customary occurrence."[169] Steven Sheeley, in his book *Narrative Asides in Luke-Acts*, considers extensively the characteristics and the impact of this particular literary device,[170] commenting specifically upon the need to read the text attentively. "All too often we, as readers, are so engrossed in the story that we neglect to hear the change in the narrator's tone when he turns aside from the telling of his story to speak directly to us."[171] Narrative asides are merely one tool utilized by the author in an effort to shape the story in a meaningful way.

The speeches found within the book of Acts also play an important role in the interpretation process. The difficulty associated with responsible interpretation of the speeches is quickly discovered, however, in the controversy over whether or not the speeches preserved within the text are actual accountings of the words delivered by the apostles. Some would argue that the speeches recorded in the book of Acts are ultimately connected to an actual message though they have been composed by Luke for the

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[168] Luke T. Johnson, "Book of Luke-Acts," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary Vol.4*, (ed.) David Noel Freedman, 403-420 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 409-410. There are more categories that could be considered. Johnson in his article also suggests "parallelisms" are another narrative device. The three mentioned above have been chosen to offer sufficient entrance into the realm of literary device on behalf of the reader. Additional categories may be added as more extended interpretation occurs.

[169] Johnson, "Book of Luke-Acts," 409.

[170] Steven M. Sheeley, *Narrative Asides in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 37-38. Sheeley identifies four general functions associated with narrative asides: (1) They offer "material which is necessary for the reader to understand the story." (2) They provide "general information for the reader." (3) They provide "an inside view of some person within the story." (4) They include comments on "the narrator's relationship to the story, the narrator's relationship to the reader, or the reader's relationship to the story."

[171] Sheeley, 13.

purposes of preservation,[172] while others would suggest that the inclusion of speeches allows the author an opportunity to provide "what ought to have been said on a particular occasion."[173] Various indicators[174] work to persuade the reader away from a viewpoint that insists the speeches are verbatim recordings and in so doing challenge the reader to consider how it is these major literary inclusions contribute to the *how* of the text's composition and its bearing upon issues of normativity.

Finally, the journeys recorded within the book of Acts provide a dramatic stage upon which the events of the narrative unfold.[175] This attention to travel and movement ultimately provides a structure for the book as a whole and serves to locate the plot. In many ways, this tool is connected to the cultural question of *where* it is this narrative takes place. As the reader considers the movement of the plot as it conveys an expanding mission of the gospel, the story will begin to take shape on a new level.

3.3.2.2 What

Now that the *how* of the narrative has been considered, it is possible for the reader to investigate *what* the text is saying. At this level of interpretation, the reader begins to entertain questions of what the overall message of the book is intended to be and what it is that the author is trying to say. These questions get at the heart of the book of Acts and are very closely associated with the third and final aspect of a responsible approach, the question *why* and its relationship to theology. But first, consideration of what the text

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[172] Marshall, 42.
[173] Johnson, "Book of Acts," 409.
[174] Marshall, 41-42. Marshall offers four points indicating that Luke's recording of the speeches was not intended to be verbatim: (1) If read aloud, the speeches would be very brief and this is improbable (Acts 20:7). (2) Early speakers did not speak from manuscripts so at most a general accounting was all that was passed along to the author. (3) In some places, Luke is not concerned to give a word-for-word account (10:4-6, 31f and 10:22, 33). (4) There are occasions where it is impossible for Luke to know what was said.
[175] Johnson, "Book of Acts," 409.

contains and what the reader can expect to encounter requires an overall reading of the book of Acts.

Based upon the inclusion of summary statements,[176] a literary device mentioned above, Fee and Stuart identify six sections that convey the movement of the narrative and allow the reader to concisely categorize the content of Acts.[177] These sections include a description of the early church in Jerusalem (1:1-6:7), the first geographical expansion of the gospel (6:8-9:31), the first expansion to the Gentiles (9:32-12:24), the first expansion into the Gentile world (12:25-16:5), further expansion into the Gentile world (16:6-19:20), and the events that take Paul and the Gospel to Rome (19:21-28:30).[178] These basic divisions allow the reader to see that the book of Acts is largely interested in the birth of the early church and the spread of the Gospel. As the reader works to construct an overall portrait of the content and the movement of the plot, the motivation and the direction of the author become more apparent. In addition to this, the reader will become increasingly sensitized to the process of placing smaller pericopes within the larger framework of the developing story. When isolated narratives do not appear to coincide with the movement and development of the larger story, it is then that the question of normativity, specifically the impact of literary technique and story telling upon normativity, emerges as important if the reader intends to proceed responsibly.

3.3.3 The Importance of Narrative as a Principle

The influence of narrative structure and literary technique upon the text cannot be dismissed by the reader when approaching the book of Acts. The way in which the message of the text is conveyed influences its style and potentially even its content in an

[176] Fee and Stuart, 98. Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:4; 19:20.
[177] Fee and Stuart, 98.
[178] Fee and Stuart, 98-99.

effort to present the story intended by the author. A responsible reading must consider the techniques being implemented in order to adequately follow the story and must read with careful eyes in order to see the hand of the author throughout the telling of the story. Additionally, it is necessary for the reader to take time to step back from isolated portions of narrative in an attempt to grapple with the movement and development of the story as a whole. Where there are inconsistencies, extra attention must be given to consider the motivation of the inclusion of the story or scene in an effort to respect the unity of the text as a whole. Again, literary analysis in and of itself is inadequate to answer the question of normativity. However, it, like culture, is able to offer another perspective on the text and grant the reader valuable insight into what is practice and what is principle when it comes to interpreting the message of the book of Acts.

3.4 Theological Analysis

PRINCIPLE 3 – *Theology is an essential element in responsible reading based upon its ability to consider the ultimate intention of the text in its original setting and possible ways in which that intention transfers to today.*

PRINCIPLE 4 – *It is important for the reader to be aware that personal faith, community and theology have an impact upon reading and must be evaluated throughout the interpretive process to determine the legitimacy of their influence upon the task of reading.*

3.4.1 How Does Theology Influence the Task of Reading?

From a theological standpoint, the pursuit of responsible reading moves from analysis of the setting out of which the text was born and interaction with the form in which the text has been transmitted, to the particularly deep waters of theological significance and interpretation both then and now. Whereas the investigation of culture and narrative draws the reader's attention to influences and nuances that may be studied and critiqued

based upon historical and textual evidence, the introduction of theological sensibilities and ultimately the task of a "theological hermeneutic" seeks to respond to the challenge of "understanding this universe as God's universe."[179] That is, how it is that God is acting in his world. The theological aspect of responsible reading and the impact of theology upon the message of the text require the interpreter to climb one level higher in the process of reading, holding in balance not only culture and literature, but also the abstract and applied significance of the theological task.[180] This move may not come naturally and the transition from largely biblical to theological concerns may not be altogether smooth, but the disciplines must be held in balance in order to grant the text an opportunity to speak with power and authority the message it was designed to convey from the very beginning.[181]

The connection between the biblical text and theology, and in the case of Acts the connection between a narrative text and theology, is inseparable. John Goldingay argues that any reader who approaches the biblical narrative and fails to take into account

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[179] Werner G. Jeanrond, *Theological Hermeneutics: Development and Significance* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 8.

[180] There have been various convictions as to where theology itself, ultimately a theological hermeneutic, fits into the process of interpretation. Donald Wood identifies three of these approaches: (1) Theological hermeneutics is a special application of general hermeneutics. (2) Theological hermeneutics is a movement from general to special. (3) Theological hermeneutics is characterized by a move from special to general. The first requires a foundation is laid before theology is pursued, the second focuses largely upon the role of the community in reading the Scripture, and the third requires that theology be employed from the very beginning of the process. Donald Wood, "The Place of Theology in Theological Hermeneutics," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4/2 (July 2002): 156-171, 160-161. The development of this chapter is structured according to the convictions of the first approach but in that process, seeks to be mindful that the text itself contains an inherently theological element. "NT materials, then, are not simply or primarily 'sources' for theological data, but are themselves already exemplars of the theological task, of representing the implications and working out the ramifications of the gospel." Joel B. Green, "Scripture and Theology: Uniting the Two So Long Divided," in *Between Two Horizons,* (eds.) Joel B. Green and Max Turner, 23-43 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 40. Thus, the role of theology is considered based upon and in conversation with culture and narrative.

[181] Max Turner and Joel B. Green, "New Testament Commentary and Systematic Theology: Strangers or Friends?" in *Between Two Horizons,* (eds.) Joel B. Green and Max Turner, 1-22 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 12.

theological issues "has not left the starting line as an exegete."[182] In an attempt to respond to this temptation, Goldingay identifies four ways of "doing theology" based upon four principles of biblical narrative. The first requires "teasing out the theological implications of individual stories within the larger narrative."[183] This is based upon the principle that there are insights to be gleaned from "individual moments" in the narrative.[184] The reader must approach each story theologically and reflect upon its possible significance. The second involves "standing back and giving an account of the distinctive plot of the story...so as to show what is the gospel according to this Gospel."[185] Theological interaction on this level is based upon the principle that narratives have plots, and theological significance will be conveyed by plot.[186] This second step widens the angle of focus, taking into account the flow and development of the story being told by the author. The third identifies and interacts with main characters found within the story.[187] Narratives include characters, and the interaction of major players with each other and with their surroundings reveals to the reader possible theological significance lying behind the situation.[188] Characters are not obstacles to theological interpretation. Rather, they provide vehicles for deeper principles. Finally, attention paid to the "narrative's various insights on its own specific theme(s)"[189] offers a means of uncovering theological aspects of the text. This is based upon the belief that narratives do discuss themes, making theological statements and raising theological

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[182] John Goldingay, "Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology," in *Between Two Horizons,* (eds.) Joel B. Green and Max Turner, 123-142 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 127.
[183] Goldingay, 127.
[184] Goldingay, 124.
[185] Goldingay, 127.
[186] Goldingay, 125.
[187] Goldingay, 127.
[188] Goldingay, 125-126.
[189] Goldingay, 127.

questions throughout their duration.[190] These four principles offer the reader specified as well as general entry points into the world of narrative and theological convergence.

The strength of Goldingay's approach is that it allows the narrative to remain a narrative in addition to acknowledging and facilitating the theological process. The elements of isolated stories, an overarching plot, characters and intentional themes combine to give the narrative shape and substance. By basing guiding principles for theological interaction upon these realities, Goldingay transitions the reader from the text as merely story to the text as theologically significant and able to speak to theological concerns. The weakness of Goldingay's approach is that it opens the possibility for inappropriate theological application, especially on the level of "individual moments." One of the greatest difficulties when approaching narrative is deciding how to deal with the isolated stories that do not appear to attach themselves to the larger narrative or the rest of Scripture as a whole. Goldingay's approach does not address this issue adequately. Instead, it almost encourages the reader to attach whatever theological significance comes to mind based upon the portrayal of that one moment. The big picture must be maintained if theological interpretation is to be insightfully and appropriately applied.

The theological influence upon the text also requires the reader to consider the role of faith and ultimately the impact of the Holy Spirit upon the interpretive process. Up until now, the applications of culture, narrative and even the initial stage of theology have forced the reader to investigate the text on a predominantly objective level. It is crucial, however, to take into account the role of faith in the process of responsible reading if the meaning of the text is to truly transcend time and space and speak not only to the church

[190] Goldingay, 126.

of the first-century but also to the church today. Anthony Thiselton responds to this concern by considering it from the perspective of challenges to the legitimacy of the hermeneutical process based upon the role of the Holy Spirit, faith, timeless truth, and the compelling force of Scripture.

Some would argue that the role of these four factors negates the need for an interpretive method. Alone they are enough to reveal the truth of Scripture apart from constructed categories or well-defined approaches. Thiselton argues that these four considerations, "serve in the end only to underline the importance of the hermeneutical task,"[191] not negate it. The Spirit may be understood as working "*through* human understanding," and in so doing not often in ways that bypass the considerations of hermeneutics.[192] The role of the Spirit does not need to nullify the interpretive endeavor but rather infuses it and heightens its effectiveness. Faith, though it is sometimes argued that Scripture is closed to those without it and already intelligible to those who do, does not negate hermeneutics on the principle that Scripture plays a role within the living community as well taking on the "capacity to *create* faith."[193] The faith connection offers the interpreter additional resources for responsible reading, but it does not totally exclude those who do not have it. The power of Scripture to nurture and develop faith must not be underestimated. The "timeless" or "changeless" truth of God comprises a third challenge to hermeneutics and has particular implications for the question of normativity. If this point is taken at face value there is no need to consider the transfer of the biblical message from one time to another. Thiselton argues that "in point of fact, the

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[191] Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1980), 103.
[192] Thiselton, 92.
[193] Thiselton, 95.

more closely we examine claims about 'timeless truth,' the clearer it becomes that the biblical material itself points in the other direction."[194] Drawing upon the work of Helmut Thielicke, he affirms that Scripture is not historical merely because it is grounded in history, but also because it addresses the processes of history. As such, the reader must be careful not to detach the message from one setting in order to apply it to another.[195] Finally, the compelling nature of the biblical text has been argued to remove the necessity of hermeneutics. Thiselton responds by stating, "it...remains to ask what *kind* of authority or power God is said to exert in the communication of the word."[196] The role of the Spirit's revelation "*through* human understanding" points to a process that is far more fluid and less mechanical. As such, the power of Scripture is not compromised or neglected in the process of interpretation.

So, the process of hermeneutics from a theological perspective acknowledges not only the underlying presence of the Holy Spirit, faith, truth, and power but views them as essential elements of responsible reading. The interpreter who is aware the process is not devoid of spiritual significance gains a considerable advantage over other readers. The theological nature of the text raises relevant questions regarding the context within which it is read. Not only the intellectual but also the spiritual resources of the reader influence the outcome of the reading process.

3.4.2 Theological Themes in Acts Specifically

Some have extracted from Acts a long list of theological themes, while others have boiled the many themes down into more general categories of application. Three of the

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[194] Thiselton, 98.
[195] Thiselton, 98.
[196] Thiselton, 102.

more general motifs identified are simply those of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.[197] For the purposes of this study, these major themes will be considered as well as supplemented with an additional category that is particularly useful regarding the study of the early church in Acts, namely the theme of the church.[198]

The first three themes orient the reader to the role played by each member of the Trinity as they manifest themselves throughout the book of Acts. The author's concept of God focuses upon the conviction that God is in control of history and that he fulfills his promises to his people.[199] The sense of divine necessity is present throughout the text,[200] and the author's use of Old Testament passages reveals that "the Old Testament passages that Luke considers to be fulfilled by New Testament events were not simply predictions – they were promises."[201] There is a divine plan at work and the portrayal of the Acts narrative is governed by this conviction. The role of Jesus in the book of Acts is based upon the conviction that Jesus was the one sent by God whose death and resurrection makes the proclamation of the gospel possible. Jesus was "the first to rise from the dead, therefore the first to receive the new life on the farther side of death and mortality. Through his resurrection he is our hope."[202] Jesus provides the foundation upon which the community is built. Finally, the Spirit represents a particularly prominent theological theme in the book of Acts, which has even been referred to as "the book of the Holy Spirit."[203] The work of the Spirit is essential to the "transformation of human

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[197] Powell, 38-57.
[198] Bruce, 61-63.
[199] Powell, 39-40
[200] Powell, 39-40. Luke's use of δει and other terms expressing divine necessity emphasize this.
[201] Powell, 41.
[202] Haenchen, 92.
[203] Johnson, *Acts,* 14.

identity,"[204] and questions of who the Spirit is, what the Spirit does and how the Spirit is received[205] infuse the text, allowing the reader to come to understand the story in light of the transformational power of the Spirit both then and now.

Additionally, the motif of the church draws the reader's attention to Acts' focus upon community. Some would argue that Acts has no doctrine of the church,[206] and the question of normativity asks whether or not the community portrayed in the book of Acts offers particular practices and models to be emulated today. Nonetheless, the development of a community of believers can hardly be ignored as it develops throughout the pages of the narrative. "The church...is the organ of the Spirit in the world."[207] There is theological significance attached to the existence of this community and as such how it is portrayed theologically is important for responsible reading.

3.4.3 The Importance of Theology as a Principle

The importance of theology in the process of responsible reading must not be overlooked or underestimated. Where cultural and literary analysis set the stage for interpretation, theology goes one step further and pointedly asks the question, "why." Why was this text written and why is the author preserving these particular stories in this particular way? Theology forces the reader to move beyond fact finding and structural analysis. Furthermore, it is essential that readers acknowledge the context from which they are asking those why questions and how their own personal faith influences their reading. The theological implication of Scripture both then and now is a crucial step in

[204] Johnson, *Acts*, 14.
[205] Powell, 50-56.
[206] Haenchen, 93.
[207] Bruce, 61.

reading the text responsibly and in moving toward an understanding of what was intended to guide the church both in the first-century and today.

3.5 The Value of the Principles in this Chapter

3.5.1 A Summary of the Principles

PRINCIPLE 1 – *Analysis of culture is a valuable element of responsible reading based upon its ability to offer the reader a backdrop against which to read the text.*

PRINCIPLE 2 – *Literary factors such as structure, technique, and the art of story-telling are essential elements of responsible reading based upon their ability to influence the movement of the story and their tendency to shape the way in which the message is conveyed by the author.*

PRINCIPLE 3 – *Theology is an essential element in responsible reading based upon its ability to consider the ultimate intention of the text in its original setting and possible ways in which that intention transfers to today.*

PRINCIPLE 4 – *It is important for the reader to be aware that personal faith, community and theology have an impact upon reading and must be evaluated throughout the interpretive process to determine the legitimacy of their influence upon the task of reading.*

3.5.2 The Impact of These Principles Upon the Question of Normativity

Based upon study of culture, narrative and theology, the above mentioned four principles have been offered to guide the reader in the process of responsible reading. Each of these guidelines serves to bring to the forefront the impact of a particular discipline upon the task of interpretation as well as highlight the necessity of holding all three of these aspects in balance if the text is truly to be considered in a responsible manner. There are strengths and weaknesses inherent in each discipline, a reality contributing to this attempt to bring them into conversation and partnership when approaching the text. When considered on their own, there are questions left unanswered and aspects of the text left uninvestigated and, essentially, overlooked. As such, it is

upon the basis of these principles working together that the question of normativity, what is practice and what is principle, may be revisited and considered in a new light.

The partnership of culture, narrative and theology offers the reader three solid tools with which to approach the text and undertake the task of responsible reading. Even so, approaching the text in a conscientious and careful manner, all essential elements considered, does not totally eliminate the difficulty of normativity and the question of practice versus principle. The reader must still be prepared to confront passages that are perplexing and that in large part resist precise interpretation. In light of this, some guidelines for determining normativity that are significantly linked to the information gleaned from the process of applying the principles will be suggested to additionally assist the reader in coming to a responsible reading of even difficult texts.[208] These guidelines are by no means exhaustive, but they do enable the reader to ask more pointed questions regarding the elements of a text that tend to intimate practice and those that lean toward principle.

Those elements that tend to suggest practice: (1) find support in other biblical passages, (2) and/or directly counter the original culture.[209] Regarding the first guideline, reading Scripture in light of Scripture is a helpful and necessary exercise the reader must consider when confronted with difficult passages. Though it is not conclusive in every case, considering the development of ideas in other portions of the Bible as they relate to the text in question provides the reader a greater context within which to place the

[208] Many of these ideas are based upon Webb's criteria for determining cultural and transcultural. His list is lengthy and far more exhaustive than the basic guidelines offered here. These have been selected and developed based upon their connection to the principles suggested in this chapter as they relate to culture as well as narrative and theology.
[209] Webb, 157-158.

isolated pericope.[210] This draws upon principle 2, the importance of considering Scripture as a developing story rather than an unrelated string of episodes, and principle 3, the necessity of considering the intention of the text and what is being conveyed. The reader must consider how a particular text fits in with the story that provides its context, and grapple with the question why conveying the story in a particular way contributes to the intention of the author and the passage. If it fits with other stories and other theological themes and ideas, the more likely the action suggested within the text is normative. The second guideline, which draws upon information related to principle 1, acknowledges that when an author chooses to move the audience away from cultural norms and directly counter common practice, the instruction given is more likely to transcend the original context based upon its already radical nature. Webb argues, "...when Scripture speaks against a particular practice within the ancient setting, the dissonance with the original context generally ensures its transcultural status."[211] Though "ensures" is perhaps an optimistic application of this guideline, it should strike the reader as significant when cultural norms and values are disregarded or openly opposed in favor of a new directive based upon the gospel message. Consequently, elements emerging as particularly inconsistent with original culture are more likely to hold normative value than those that do not.

The tendencies of elements that intend principle: (1) are in some way inconsistent with other biblical material pertaining to similar situations, (2) require a practice that no

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[210] Erickson expands upon this idea of Scripture interpreting Scripture by challenging the reader to consider whether or not a practice/principle "appears in Scripture beyond the limitation of a given time and place," 70.

[211] Webb, 158.

longer fulfills the text's intention,[212] (3) demonstrate departure from the original culture in subtle or significant ways implying a movement toward a more Christ-like ideal.[213] In direct relation to the initial guideline of discerning practical elements and principle 2, those portions of the text that appear inconsistent with other biblical material are less likely to include practical material. If a text appears to fall outside the development of its context, on a small or large scale, it is more likely to include an underlying principle though this is not necessarily the case.[214] There are times when Scripture is unable to interpret itself based upon a lack of discussion of similar material. In such cases, the reader should investigate the text for traces of theological overtones, principle 3, or general ethics for living that are consistent with the message of the gospel. When these are present, it is more likely the text offers general principles than normative practices for Christian living. The second guideline is particularly useful for the reader, drawing upon principle 1 and principle 3. If the practice indicated by the text no longer fulfills its intended purpose, it is more likely that there is an underlying principle than a normative practice to be gleaned by the reader. Uncovering the basic intention of the text provides the reader a framework within which to evaluate the extent to which a particular action will attain the goal of the text. If the action offered by the text is culturally bound and no longer offers a viable method for reaching the intended goal, the text is more likely to contain a principle for living than a normative practice. Finally, the third guideline

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[212] Webb, 105.

[213] Webb, 73-74, 83-84, 91-92.

[214] This aspect of normativity is particularly difficult as it appears a non-normative text does not necessarily result in an overarching principle. Consequently, the reader begins to see that it may not be one or the other, that is practice or principle. Perhaps there are passages of Scripture bound by culture, narrative, or theological development that are outside the categories of practice or principle and inaccessible to the reader on a purely hermeneutical plain. It is at this juncture a theology of Scripture and the reader's acceptance of the limits of interpretation becomes particularly significant. Is the reader willing to allow certain texts to remain obscure based upon insufficient information or the potential for overt influence of culture or narrative? These questions are essential but in many ways beyond the scope of this project.

challenges the reader to observe movement within the text that perhaps does not totally sacrifice the norms of culture, but does require a development in thinking and practice for the original readers. This is different than direct opposition to cultural norms, as such instruction breaks outside of the framework of the reader and requires radical change. Subtle or developing changes are more likely to maintain culturally bound elements, discovered in principle 1, that are moving toward transcultural principles. Webb suggests, "...a component of a text may be culturally bound if Scripture modifies the *original* cultural norms in such a way that suggests further movement is possible and even advantageous in a *subsequent* culture."[215] This focus on the potential, even the benefit of shifting implies there is an underlying principle rather than a blatant practice to be taken from the text. If the reader detects the possibility for change, a non-normative reading is more likely than one that insists upon a definitive practice.

When they work together, these guidelines further the reader's ability to consider the normative value of a text based upon the information afforded by application of the principles considered within this chapter. These principles and their subsequent guidelines will now be applied to two texts found within the book of Acts that deal specifically with the phenomenon of the community of goods in the early church context. Issues related to responsible reading and normative understandings have often been associated with these passages and, as such, they are sure to confront the reader with the types of difficulties and challenges identified throughout this project. Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35 will serve to demonstrate the proposed approach to responsible reading developed within this chapter and offer interpretation based upon the implementation of these principles.

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[215] Webb, 73.

Chapter 4: Analysis of Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35 in Light of Responsible Reading

4.1 General Introduction

Up to this point, the book of Acts has been considered for the difficulty it presents the biblical interpreter and the elements of its make up and message that complicate the issue of responsible reading. It was suggested that the complexities of Acts are precisely the reason this book emerges as a prime candidate for the task of responsible reading and as such these complexities have served as a backdrop throughout the process of developing principles that assist the reader. Acts pushes the boundaries of the interpretive process, constantly challenging the reader to grapple with the difficulties of culture, narrative, and theology, all the while considering the question of normativity and the transferability of the intention of the text from the first-century to today. It is now time to take the principles developed in chapter 3 and apply them specifically to actual texts found within the book of Acts. Two texts connected to the development of the early church, Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35, will be read in light of the four suggested principles and ultimately evaluated for their level of normativity as it relates to the concept of a practicing Christian community.[216]

4.2 Demonstration of Principles

4.2.1 Acts 2:42-47

(42) And they held fast to the teaching of the apostles and the fellowship, the breaking of the bread and the prayers. (43) And there was respect in every person, and there were many wonders and signs by the apostles. (44) And all the believers were together and they had everything in common. (45) And they sold possessions and property and they shared them with all, as each one had need. (46) And daily, with one mind, spending

[216] Consequently, there will be elements of culture, narrative and theology that will be overlooked in the interest of narrowing the focus to practices of the early church and the relevance of those practices for today.

much time in the temple and sharing bread at home, they took food together with gladness and sincerity of heart, (47) praising God and having favor toward all the people. And the Lord added daily to their community those being saved.[217]

4.2.1.1 Principle 1

Analysis of culture is a valuable element of responsible reading based upon its ability to offer the reader a backdrop against which to read the text.

General aspects of cultural analysis related to the book of Acts were briefly considered in chapter 3.[218] Now the influence of culture upon the message of the text must be evaluated as it specifically comes to bear upon a portrait of the practices of the early Christian community in Acts 2:42-47. The contribution of Jewish as well as Greek ideals must be considered regarding the development of this text in conjunction with the social climate that surrounded the first-century church. Deeper examination of the cultural environment of early Christians will shed valuable light upon the motivation of their practices and the normativity of their actions.

Two of the strongest cultural influences upon this text are those of Jewish faith and Greek society. When reading this passage it is possible to identify potential connection points to both perspectives and to see how they shaped the ideals and values of the early Christians. Verses 44-45 are characterized by the concept of sharing goods in common and distributing aid to those in need. Though it is noble and even spiritual to read these verses and assume that this practice of generosity and selflessness was predicated upon the believers' new found attitude in Christ, it is not totally accurate to assume that they

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[217] Translation mine.

[218] Specifically *who* - ethnic and economic categories of Jew and Greek, wealthy and poor, status and non-status; *where* - set within Jerusalem and moving outwards (Jerusalem specifically in these verses); *when* – some time around AD 70.

derived this way of being solely from their spiritual awakening.[219] Jewish communities such as those at Qumran and those created by the Essenes also practiced a common lifestyle and no doubt influenced the values of Jewish members of the early church.[220] Greek society elevated the ideal of friendship and its social function,[221] a proverbial Greek expression stating, "...the belongings of friends are held in common."[222] Though motivated by different convictions,[223] these two groups manifested similar lifestyle choices. Barrett argues, "...at the time of Christian origins various forms of communal rather than private ownership of wealth were being practiced, and it is quite reasonable to conclude that the Christians followed a similar plan."[224] That is, the prior existence of systems for communal living had the potential and the opportunity to influence the values of early Christians and in fact, most likely had some bearing upon their pursuit of such an ideal.

Beyond this, the structure and character of the early church was influenced in style and practice by cultural factors that surrounded it. It appears the religious practices of the Jewish tradition continued to provide a framework for the worshipping community, potentially shaping their meal practices,[225] prayers[226] and their continued presence in the

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[219] This is not intended to in any way undercut or undermine the working of the Spirit among the early Christians. Such a reading is a central and vital aspect of this passage to be considered more extensively under theological influences. It is merely an attempt to orient the reader to the impact of culture upon early church practice, ultimately affecting the question of normativity for the church today.

[220] Marshall, 84. "It may well be that in the first flush of religious enthusiasm the early church lived in this kind of way."

[221] Alan C. Mitchell, "The Social Function of Friendship in Acts 2:44-47 and 4:32-37," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111/2 (1992): 255-272.

[222] Conzelmann, 23.

[223] Johnson, *Acts,* 58-59. Hellenists shared among friends because it was "a feature of a utopian society." At Qumran sharing goods was based, "not in an ideal of friendship but on the demands placed by a strict ritual purity."

[224] C.K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Acts of the Apostles Vol.1* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 168.

[225] The question of whether or not "breaking bread" is in reference to the Eucharist or simply the description of common Christian meals has been widely discussed. Some consider it a practice that has

Temple.[227] Additionally, the early church appears to have adopted the practice of meeting in homes to carry on religious gatherings as indicated by verse 46.[228] This was no doubt in response to the pragmatic needs of a growing movement subject to the scrutiny of the Roman Empire.[229] Outside influences came to bear upon not only what, but how they practiced faith in a first-century context.

Thus, culture had an impact upon the early church as evidenced in these verses. The values promoted by a community of goods were apparent in communities surrounding them, the traditions of the Jewish faith continued to have an impact upon worship practices and the external pressures of Rome coupled with the internal needs associated with expansion and growth influenced their ability to meet together and fellowship around the table in the name of the gospel. The climate in Jerusalem and the social setting within which the early Christians found themselves were contributing factors to the development of this text, influencing its message for practicing communities then and now.

4.2.1.2 Principle 2

Literary factors such as structure, technique, and the art of story-telling are essential elements of responsible reading based upon their ability to influence the movement of the

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significance beyond a mere meal. Johnson, *Acts*, 58. Here he states, "This undoubtedly refers to more than ordinary meals," referring back to Jesus' action in Luke 24:35; Marshall, 83. Marshall argues that to break bread, "...refers to an act with which a Jewish meal opened, and which had gained peculiar significance for Christians in view of Jesus' action at the Last Supper and also when he fed the multitudes." Others contend otherwise. Conzelmann, 23. "Luke is thinking of the ordinary daily meal here, but he does not make a distinction between it and the Eucharist"; Haenchen, 191. He considers the breaking of bread "the name for the Christians' communal meal." As such, it is possible there are Jewish influences in the background but it is difficult to know what the author intended by the specific phrase, "the breaking of the bread."

[226] Barrett, 166. He argues that the use of plural "prayers" in v. 42 indicates "familiar Jewish prayers." Bruce, 132. He understands "prayers" to suggest private meetings as well as participation in the Jewish practice of public prayer.

[227] Bruce, 132-133; Haenchen, 191.

[228] Marshall, 85.

[229] Bradley Blue, "Acts and the House Church," in *The Book of Acts in Its Graeco-Roman Setting Vol. 2,* (eds.) David W.J. Gill and Conrad Gempf, 119-222 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), 120-121.

story and their tendency to shape the way in which the message is conveyed by the author.

The narrative structure of Acts was also briefly considered in chapter 3.[230] Implications associated with the role of summary statements within the text in addition to the impact of the "big picture" upon the developing story of Acts require the reader's attention if elements of a practicing Christian community are to be evaluated and responsibly interpreted. Cultural analysis considered some of the issues surrounding the text in terms of other practicing communities and the impact of their way of being upon the message of Acts. Literary analysis considers how the composition of the text, the placement of the stories within the text and ultimately the point of the story being conveyed by the text affect the message and the normative value associated with it.

Acts 2:42-47 is widely recognized to be composed in the manner of a summary statement.[231] Marshall argues that it is characteristic of Luke to "separate off various incidents...which indicate the situation of the church at the several stages of its progress."[232] Stylistically, this does appear to be the case as will be evidenced further by the second passage to be analyzed within this chapter (4:32-35). In terms of interpretation, however, it is only the first step to identify the presence of a summary statement within the text. The reader must then ask why it is there and how it is functioning.

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[230] The composition of this passage may be identified as a summary statement, a concept to be explored now in greater detail. In terms of the development of the overall story of Acts, this passage falls within the initial panel of composition (1:1-6:7), a depiction of the early church in Jerusalem.

[231] There are various divisions regarding the beginning of this particular summary. Those accepting the Acts 2:42-47 division include Conzelmann, 23; Haenchen, 190; Johnson, *Acts*, 58. Those preferring 2:41-47 include Barrett, 158; Bruce, 131; Gregory Sterling, "'Athletes of Virtue': An Analysis of the Summaries in Acts (2:41-47; 4:32-35; 5:12-16)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 113/4 (1994): 679-696. Those arguing 2:43-47 include Marshall, 83. The division vs. 42-47 has been chosen for the purposes of this analysis.

[232] Marshall, 83.

The summaries themselves are often considered highly idealized or generalized accounts of what was going on in the life of the early church but such a reading of them does not in the least indicate that they are false.[233] It has been argued they encompass everything from a lifestyle worth imitating, to an indication as to the passing of time, to a confirmation that the gospel was spreading in the first-century world, to a commitment by the author to convey the story of the community, not just individuals.[234] It is possible that all of these motivations had some impact upon the inclusion of this text in the broader story but ultimately the motivation behind the summary statement must be identified in order to make significant progress in the interpretive process.[235]

Pulling back to have a look at the bigger picture, the structure at the beginning of Acts is comprised of "five extended narratives and three summaries"[236] all related to the development of the first-century church. It would appear that the extended narratives capture various aspects of specific interaction within the early community,[237] whereas the summaries emerge as snapshots of early Christian experience. Consequently, the descriptive character of summaries enables the author to make particular statements about the developing ethos of the community, no doubt influenced by cultural and theological values, free from the strictures of particular episodes or even specific speeches. Furthermore, Conzelmann suggests that the intent of summary "interrupts the progress of

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[233] Barrett, 166. He rightly observes in verse 42 of this summary, "...Luke gives an idealized picture of the earliest church – idealized but not for that reason necessarily misleading. That it is not misleading appears at once if negatives are inserted: they ignored the teachings of the apostles, neglected the fellowship, never met to take a meal together, and did not say their prayers."

[234] Barrett, 160.

[235] Sheeley, 37-38. Again, Sheeley offers the following four categories as the basic functions of narrative asides: (1) ability to offer additional information that the reader needs to understand the story, (2) provide additional information that is not necessary but is interesting, (3) provide an inside perspective of a character within the story, (4) or allow the author to dialogue with the reader directly by coming outside the story and making specific connections.

[236] Sterling, 679. The narratives according to Sterling are 2:1-40; 3:1-4:31; 4:36-5:11; 5:12-42; 6:1-8:3.

[237] Both good (4:36-37) and bad (5:1-11; 6:1-6).

the account and gives the reader some information about the nature of the earliest church."[238] When viewed in this way, as an interruption and a vehicle for additional information, the summary statement begins to take on characteristics that look more like a literary device to move the story along and add structure, and less like a definitive word upon which to base normative practices. In light of the big picture, the summary statement is not intended to take center stage in the sense that it offers the reader a set of guidelines to be emulated in strict fashion. Rather, it serves to weave a continuing thread of the author's underlying motivations apart from the main events of the story through the use of literary techniques. Acts 2:42-47 closely follows the account related to the day of Pentecost and the speech delivered by Peter, who claims that Jesus is "both Lord and Christ." Response to this message is repentance and baptism. The summary in verses 42-47 allows the author the opportunity to emphasize the fellowship that characterizes the increasingly large and diverse community of believers in a way that does not yet need to deal with challenges, only celebrate the existence of such a community.

4.2.1.3 Principle 3

Theology is an essential element in responsible reading based upon its ability to consider the ultimate intention of the text in its original setting and possible ways in which that intention transfers to today.

Theological themes highlighted in chapter 3 provide the reader some basic lenses through which to view the book of Acts.[239] These serve as an adequate entry point but must be developed further if they are to have any bearing upon a responsible reading of Acts 2:42-47 specifically. In some ways, it is difficult and potentially even dangerous to approach an isolated passage with the intention of identifying theological themes. The

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[238] Conzelmann, 23.

[239] Specifically the themes of God, Jesus, the Spirit and the Church.

risk of losing perspective and as a result reading a doctrine onto a passage that is not present within the text is great and could lead to inappropriate conclusions and forced categories. Thus, it is based upon the careful work done in the cultural and narrative levels of analysis that theology now takes its cue. The reader is faced with the challenge of considering the intention behind the text and what it is the author is trying to say by choosing to tell a particular story and by framing it in a particular way.

Acts 2:42-47 offers an idealized, though not necessarily misleading, account of an early church community that enjoys meeting together and that worships consistently and sacrificially by providing for each other and sharing the mundane tasks of everyday life. It is a portrait that reflects "simplicity and flexibility."[240] Furthermore, it is a passage that focuses upon the importance of the existence of such a community, elevating it to an inspirational status. Gasque observes, "While God and Jesus are the primary actors in the Book of Acts, it is the Christian community that is the locus of this divine activity."[241] The presence of the church on earth and its mission to proclaim the resurrected Christ emerges as a significant, even crucial theological theme developed by the author throughout the text. The community's primary task is to be a witness, even until the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Dockery argues, "This was accomplished through the community's lifestyle, its proclamation, signs and wonders, and the specific tasks and speeches of the apostles and leaders."[242] All of these factors are present in one form or another in Acts 2:42-47. If a major theological theme in Acts is the church's mission to

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[240] W. Ward Gasque, "A Fruitful Field: Recent Study of the Acts of the Apostles," *Interpretation* 32 April (1988): 117-131, 126.
[241] Gasque, 126.
[242] David S. Dockery, "The Theology of Acts," *Criswell Theological Review* 5/1 (1990): 43-55, 52.

personify and proclaim the gospel, this passage captures early believers in a light that truly exemplifies these convictions.

4.2.1.4 Principle 4

It is important for the reader to be aware that personal faith, community and theology have an impact upon reading and must be evaluated throughout the interpretive process to determine the legitimacy of their influence upon the task of reading.

This final principle challenges the reader to remain aware of personal convictions, contexts and sensibilities that inevitably influence every person approaching the text. These personal frameworks are not necessarily detrimental to the reading process but they must be acknowledged for what they are and considered a shaping factor in the interpretive process. The reader's personal faith and relationship with the Bible impact the spiritual resources available throughout the task of reading. Denominational backgrounds influence the reader's prior experience with Scripture, be that positive or negative, literal or dynamic and as discussed in chapter 1, "conservative" versus "liberal" readings of Scripture result in very different assumptions regarding the normative value of texts, guiding the reader one way or the other throughout the interpretive process. This is clearly the most subjective aspect of the process and, as such, the most difficult to demonstrate in the analysis. In order to illustrate some of the factors the reader should consider and in an effort to be fair in the interpretations offered by this reader, a personal example of biases will be offered.[243]

My own personal view of Scripture is very high, believing it to be the inspired Word of God, able to provide the believer with all the instructions necessary to live a vital Christian life. That being said, it is also my skepticism toward the question of

[243] Clearly, the very fact that the elements identified as essential were chosen and developed by this reader results in an entire methodology that speaks to my personal convictions and biases. Even so, this is a moment to demonstrate this principle in a personal manner in an effort to help the reader.

normativity that causes me to approach texts such as Acts 2:42-47 with extreme caution. Churches today do not look this way. Does that mean the text does not intend to say what it appears to say or does it mean churches today are failing miserably? It is my conviction that we abuse the text when we do not approach it carefully and it is my desire to mine from the text that which will shed light upon its intention and its method. A flippant reading of Acts 2:42-47 will not help the believer or edify the church. It will only disillusion and disappoint. It is my desire to search for the meaning that lies behind and around the text. As such, I am prone to concentrate heavily upon an issue such as historical context. Consequently, a potential danger for me is to subtract from the text its transcendence at times in order to create a sufficient category by which to come to terms with the message.

My faith tradition reflects a positive and respectful position regarding the Bible, believing it to be central to the development of the church and the personal life of the believer. This results in a favorable disposition toward the study of Scripture. It also reflects a conservative view regarding interpretation and application. This has resulted in a tension in my own mind regarding how far is too far in the abstraction of biblical principles. Is it acceptable to understand the community of goods as an underlying principle rather than a mandated practice? My practice says yes but my faith background would challenge me to consider what is missing in my practice rather than what should be changed in the text. My experience in academic circles has challenged me to reflect upon the resolution of tensions and inconsistencies such as this and ultimately what it means to read the text with careful eyes.

My personal faith has been deeply influenced by the reading of Scripture, whether it is according to methodology or personal encounter. As such, I bring all of these factors to the text and read with them constantly in the background.

4.2.1.5 The Question of Normativity

The question of normative behavior will now be considered based upon the four principles of responsible reading and the guidelines identified at the end of chapter 3. It is important to note that not every guideline is equally helpful in every situation but they will be considered in turn for their usefulness in coming to interpretive conclusions regarding Acts 2:42-47.

Those elements that tend to suggest practice:

(1) *Find support in other biblical passages* – It is true Acts 2:42-47 finds an almost parallel account in 4:32-35, but the disappearance of a community of goods from the remaining pages of Acts and indeed the remainder of the New Testament indicates that even if a practicing community typified by sharing and communal living did exist at one time, it did not persist. As such, Acts 2:42-47 does not emerge as a passage that requires a practice-driven interpretation based upon this criterion in terms of a consistent Scriptural model of a communal lifestyle. Commitment to teaching, fellowship and prayer, however, find resonance in numerous other biblical passages and as such assert themselves as normative practices established by this text.

(2) *Directly counter the original culture* – There does not appear to be anything within this passage that directly challenges cultural norms. In fact, the values of the communal lifestyle reflect other social groups practicing during the first-century. As a result, Acts 2:42-47 cannot be read as normative based upon an appeal to its counter-cultural flavor.

The tendencies of elements that intend principle:

(1) *Are inconsistent with other biblical material pertaining to similar situations* — As mentioned above, this passage does appear to prioritize a lifestyle that does not persist throughout the New Testament. However, it is not that this passage is inconsistent with other biblical passages in principle. It simply does not appear to possess longevity as far as practice is concerned. As such, it is possible that principles inherent in the text are based upon the unique situation reflected, that are then consistent with values in other portions of Scripture.

(2) *Require a practice that no longer fulfills the text's intention* – While sharing possessions and communal living could fulfill the intention of the text, that the church be a visible witness of the gospel message by the way its members act towards one another and towards the people in the community that surrounds them, it is not the only way of going about it and in fact is probably not the most effective method of bearing visible witness in this day and age. Living in common does not result in the best way of effectively sharing the gospel and as such this description of a lifestyle that is generous and that cares for those in need lends itself more to principle than to practice. There are crucial values of community in this text that must not be disregarded but based upon a criterion that evaluates the normativity of a passage with respect to its effective requirements, Acts 2:42-47 appears to lean toward non-normative in terms of communal living being the best or the only option for sincere Christians.

(3) *Demonstrate departure from the original culture in subtle or significant ways implying a movement toward a more Christ-like ideal* – In many ways, the practices of early Christians were not new or unique. They were still heavily influenced by culture

and this was reflected by their way of being in the world. What separated them from other religious and social systems was their focus upon Christ as their central figure. As such, it is possible that even though the message of their faith has sustainable and practical value for today, that is the message of Christ, their way of being a practicing Christian community is in large part bound by culture based upon its identifiable links with what surrounded it, resulting in principles rather than practices when it comes to sharing everything in common.

4.2.1.6 Summary

Acts 2:42-47 emerges as a passage affording the reader some practices and some principles for Christian living. The application of the four principles and the guidelines for determining normativity reveal the intention of the author to be the depiction of a community that advances the good news of the gospel, a mission that remains relevant for the church today, for the good of those both inside but also those outside of the community. While engagement in this lifestyle of generosity, fellowship and care remains a practical and normative aspect of the Christian experience, the normativity filters utilized in this analysis reveal that a community of goods is not necessarily the practical outworking of that mission in today's church.

4.2.2 Acts 4:32-35

(32) And the community of believers was one heart and soul, and not one claimed belongings for themselves, but all things were in common for them. (33) And with great power the disciples gave witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. (34) For there was not even one poor one among them. For all who were owners of fields or houses, having sold, they brought the value of the sales (35) and they placed it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each one as each one had need.

4.2.2.1 Principle 1

Analysis of culture is a valuable element of responsible reading based upon its ability to offer the reader a backdrop against which to read the text.

Due to the similarity of Acts 4:32-35 to 2:42-47, cultural elements that shed light upon the previous passage apply in this case as well.[244] As such, they will not be restated here. Only significant departures or additions will be considered for the purposes of developing a sufficient backdrop against which to responsibly read this text. These include a restated and extended understanding of common living and a further development of the apostles' role in the community.[245]

The community of goods appears to be the focal point of this passage, as verses 32 and 34-35 all deal with the attitude of the believers and their practices with regards to possessions. The influences of Greek and Jewish values have already been discussed in the previous analysis but some notable portions of this text add to this argument and increase its strength. Johnson argues that the phrase "one heart and soul" found in verse 32 reinforces the Hellenistic ideal of friendship. The connection of "one soul" with common goods "is so frequent in the Hellenistic literature, that there can be no doubt Luke is appropriating that tradition."[246] Evidently this particular passage builds upon the background of Acts 2:42-47, placing an even stronger emphasis on Greek ideals.[247] The presence of Jewish influence, specifically the Old Testament directive found in Deuteronomy 6:5, to love God with "all your heart and all your soul," also adds depth to

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[244] Specifically, the presence of other groups practicing communal living.

[245] The presence of the apostles was also significant in the preceding passage, though it was not dealt with specifically. It will be treated here at greater length as there are other issues that do not demand as much attention.

[246] Johnson, *Acts*, 86. See also Conzelmann, 36.

[247] Brian Capper, "The Palestinian Context of Community of Goods," in *The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting Vol. 4,* (ed.) Richard Bauckham, 323-356 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), 337. Capper notes that, "Acts 2:44 and 47 give instance of more semitic language, but Acts 4:32 and 34 a more stylized version of events."

external values coming to bear on the text. Haenchen draws Deut. 6:5 into the discussion by stating, "...together they [heart and soul] denote the innermost seat of man's personality, from which his conduct is determined."[248] That is, the motivation to love God, denoted in the use of "heart" and "soul," offers a historical precedent for the practicing community when it comes to meeting the needs of others. The motivation to share finds resonance within the values of surrounding first-century culture.

The role of the apostles, not treated in the previous analysis, appears to find expansion in this passage and so will be considered at this time. Whereas 2:42-47 offers reference to common meals among the early Christians, 4:32-35 omits meal material altogether and rather focuses upon the testimony given by the apostles to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.[249] The centrality of the apostles within the early community is becoming more and more established, as the content of their message is highlighted and their role in the collection and distribution of goods is acknowledged.[250] The significance of placing goods at the apostles' feet in verse 35 reveals the position of authority they held among the people. Johnson observes, "To lay something at the feet of another is therefore the body language of self-disposition spelled out by possessions...the apostles are now placed at the center of the community collection."[251] They are being acknowledged by the people as the leaders of the early church.

Thus, central to this passage from a cultural standpoint is a continued and expanded version of the community of goods in addition to a development of the role of the apostles and their contribution to the life of the community. More focused than the

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[248] Haenchen, 231.
[249] Barrett, 251. The content of this message will be treated under the category of theology.
[250] Johnson, *Acts*, 87.
[251] Johnson, *Acts*, 87.

previous passages, Acts 4:32-35 provides the reader with a second portrait of the practicing community, similar to the one found in Acts 2:42-47, but with slightly different detail and emphasis.

4.2.2.2 Principle 2

Literary factors such as structure, technique, and the art of story-telling are essential elements of responsible reading based upon their ability to influence the movement of the story and their tendency to shape the way in which the message is conveyed by the author.

Again, this passage is a summary statement and as such, the preceding analysis offers insight into the characteristics of the summary statement and the importance of its influence upon the structure of the text. These findings will not be restated here. Attention will rather be given to the particular placement of this summary statement within the opening chapters of Acts and its individual influence upon the development of the story. Consideration will also be given to the "big picture" significance of the promise found in Deuteronomy 15:4, that appears to hover in the background of this text.

It is possible to read this summary statement as merely another marker along the way that offers insight into the early church and provides the author an opportunity to express ideals free from the strictures of recounting actual episodes but this would be to detach it from its literary setting and as such, short circuit the process of responsible reading. Bruce argues the author specifically utilizes this summary "as an introduction to the incidents of Barnabas and Ananias" in the sections that follow.[252] That is, this passage is inserted to "describe a pattern of life" illustrated positively and negatively by members of the community.[253] When set within its immediate literary context, the idealistic nature of this passage comes to life in the presence of examples that capture and disregard the

[252] Bruce, 159. See also Marshall, 108.
[253] Marshall, 108.

motivation of living in this way. The author showcases the church at its best and at its worst.[254] This summary prepares the reader to see the contrast between the two and the type of practice that aligns itself with the values of the early church community.

Drawing the lens even further back, the reader finds an Old Testament allusion lurking behind the beginning of verse 34. "For there was not even one poor one among them," marks the fulfillment of God's promise in Deuteronomy 15:4, that "There will, however, be no one in need among you."[255] The church, by its generosity, brings this promise to fulfillment[256] in the context of community ideals, but Johnson cautions the reader to also consider Deuteronomy 15:5 which states that the condition of the blessing is "if only you will obey the Lord your God by diligently observing this entire commandment that I command you today."[257] Obedience results in blessing but disobedience does not. As such, voices from the Old Testament speak into this text and its interpretation, not only in the sense of rejoicing in promises fulfilled, but also in foreshadowing the destiny of those who depart from the values of the community.

4.2.2.3 Principle 3

Theology is an essential element in responsible reading based upon its ability to consider the ultimate intention of the text in its original setting and possible ways in which that intention transfers to today.

The theological overtone of the previous passage was directly related to the mission of the church and the need for it to establish a visible witness within the world. Though this summary is very similar on many levels, it appears that the insertion of verses 33 and the beginning of 34 slightly shift the intention of the passage to speak, not so much to the

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[254] Barrett, 252.
[255] NRSV.
[256] Marshall, 109.
[257] Johnson, *Acts*, 86. Deuteronomy 15:1-18

action of the community as it relates to those outside, but rather the inner workings of the community and their relation to God. "And with great power the disciples gave witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. For there was not even one poor one among them" (4:33-34a). The apostles were proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus and somehow this had a direct link to God's distribution of grace and the creation of a community that cared for the needs of everyone. Taylor argues, "...the central point of the passage is that our experience of God in the resurrected Christ is one of communal solidarity and sharing."[258] That is, the church's connection to God in Christ is manifested in a community that shares and cares for the needs of one another.

In direct response to this, the motivation for the outpouring of God's grace within this passage is also a significant theological concept to consider. The question of whether or not this grace is connected to the proclamation of Christ's resurrection or if grace is poured out based upon the generous actions of the community is a bit of a both/and situation. Drawing upon the backdrop offered by the Deuteronomy 15 text, it is possible to infer connections between obedience and blessing. God is gracious when his people obey. On the other hand, it is also possible that it denotes God's favor with regards to the apostles for God "approves of what the apostles are doing and encourages and helps their work."[259] If both are intended, it implies that the community experiences the abundant grace of God when the message is proclaimed and the needs of people are considered. Based upon the broader context of this passage and the analysis conducted thus far, it does seem possible that both meanings are inherent in the text.

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[258] Mark Kline Taylor, "The Community of the Resurrected Christ," *Princeton Theological Bulletin* 6/3 (1985): 228-230, 228.
[259] Barrett, 254.

4.2.2.4 Principle 4

It is important for the reader to be aware that personal faith, community and theology have an impact upon reading and must be evaluated throughout the interpretive process to determine the legitimacy of their influence upon the task of reading.

The above analysis gives a more extensive discussion of this reader's context (2:42-47). Additional questions of what it means to practice social justice adequately also come into play. I believe in social justice but have not been consistent in practical manifestation of my convictions. As such, I must be careful not to spiritualize the text in an effort to justify ineffectiveness on my part.

4.2.2.5 The Question of Normativity

As in the previous example, the question of normativity will now be considered. Acts 4:32-35, though in many ways similar in content and style to 2:42-47, offers its own unique interpretive challenges and as such must not be flippantly considered identical in application and normativity.

Those elements that tend to suggest practice:

(1) *Find support in other biblical passages* – The support found in other passages tends to be that of Acts 2:42-47 where the community of goods is blatantly described and the role of the apostles is portrayed as central to community life. Beyond this, however, the practice of communal living and common goods does not appear in like manner beyond these verses. The practice, though likely existing at a point and time in early church organization, does not demonstrate its sustainability and fades from the text after 4:32-35. As such, the idea of a community of goods does not result in a normative practice based upon this passage's connection to other like texts. The role of the apostles, however, continues to be developed and practiced among the church as the gospel message takes

root in Jerusalem and beyond. Consequently, the practice of leaders who guide the community and make it their goal to care for the life of the community does result in normative practice based upon this guideline.

(2) *Directly counter the original culture* – Again, there is not a direct counter to culture in the practice of sharing possessions and caring for others. If nothing else, this passage increases the reader's awareness of Hellenistic and Jewish values lying behind the text. Consequently, the community of goods does not result in practice on account of its counter-cultural status. The proclamation of Jesus' resurrection, however, would have been a direct affront on the beliefs and values of first-century culture and based upon its counter-cultural message, the act of preaching Christ resurrected could be considered a normative practice.

The tendencies of elements that intend principle:

(1) *Are inconsistent with other biblical material pertaining to similar situations* — The community of goods is inconsistent with successive biblical passages, not on account of its ethical value, but on account of the practice that it promotes. The intention behind the passage is that God's grace is evident in the community when the resurrection is proclaimed and people are cared for. As such, it is more likely that there are sound principles of obedience to God and providing for the needs of others than there is a strong directive for communal living.

(2) *Require a practice that no longer fulfills the text's intention* – To adequately care for the needs of others in today's world, it is possible, but unlikely, that communal living will offer the best alternative. If the intention of the passage is that people form connections with God and each other based upon an ethic of proclamation, obedience and care, there

are likely more efficient and effective means of discipleship and community building than having all those who wish to be a part of the community move into the local church. As such, it is probable that this passage offers principles of proclamation and sacrificial giving over and above the necessity of forming communes for all those associated with the church.

(3) *Demonstrates departure from the original culture in subtle or significant ways implying a movement toward a more Christ-like ideal* – The practice of common sharing finds a bit of a shift in motivation as it is no longer done out of friendship or ritual obedience. Now it is motivated by a love for God and a desire to serve in obedience the resurrected Christ. As such, it is possible that the cultural practice of common living based upon cultural ideals is shifting towards a principle for living, based upon new motivation.

4.2.2.6 Summary

Acts 4:32-35, though similar to 2:42-47, offers the reader a slightly different perspective on the community of goods and the intention of the author in including this text. The community is portrayed as one that is full of joy and grace predicated upon its commitment to the resurrection message and its willingness to sacrifice in order to meet the needs of one another. The apostles offer guidance and leadership for this community, as they take the lead in proclaiming the gospel and as they care for the resources that are given for the needs of others. This passage provides a portrait of a church that was motivated by the message of the gospel and the importance of caring for others.

Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusion

This project began with the assertion that one of the challenges associated with the task of reading is the difficulty of reaching predictable outcomes even when there is a definable text to interact with and a definable method of receiving information from that text. As a consequence of this unpredictability which at times has been predicated upon a tendency toward incomplete and inadequate approaches to reading, this thesis has endeavored to consider the task of reading as it applies to the book of Acts and what it means for a reader to approach the text responsibly when considering the normative value of biblical passages. Principles for reading followed by guidelines for normativity have been developed and applied in an effort to demonstrate the necessity of holding influences of culture, narrative and theology in balance. If texts are to be understood and interpreted in a way that meaningfully moves them from the first-century into today's modern context, it has been argued that the reader will be careful to approach the text from a variety of angles for the purpose of allowing the text to speak freely rather than force the text to say something that it does not mean.

The process of developing an approach to responsible reading in light of the diversity of the hermeneutical task and in response to the specific challenges posed by the book of Acts has resulted in a collection of principles and guidelines that seek to distill essential elements contributing to adequate interpretation. These principles and guidelines, though not innovative or unique in and of themselves, do work together to create a basic guideline for the reader when it comes to interpretation of Acts and perhaps with further development, biblical material outside the boundaries of the book of Acts. It has been the burden of this thesis to convey the necessity of holding culture, narrative and theology in

tension if the complex question of normativity is to be approached and analyzed in a responsible way. Though the difficulties associated with the debate over practice versus principle are far from being resolved within this brief and at times limited treatment, it has been the goal of this project to revisit the issue of normativity with the value of hermeneutical balance as a guiding premise if texts are to be freed to speak.

The development of the principles associated with responsible reading proved to be a journey clearly marked by reaction to past debate, response to present difficulties and resolution to pursue interpretive integrity in the interest of future discussions surrounding this topic. Each principle as it stands on its own represents the work of a rich history of scholarship and a genuine path of discipleship toward Christ-likeness. On their own, each category of influence answers a particular question for a particular audience and it is the acknowledgment of this project that there has been little if any contribution to any of these endeavors. Rather, it is the interest in calling the three disciplines of cultural, narrative and theological analysis together as conversation partners that marks the positive contribution intended by this thesis. If and when the reader acknowledges that these three voices are crucial for contemplating the Bible in terms of the normative value of the text for today, then the process of responsible reading will have begun.

The analysis of Acts 2:42-47 and 4:32-35 was intended to demonstrate the strength of this approach by illustrating the interpretive benefit of holding all three influences in common. Application of the principles by and large resulted in the conclusions anticipated by this reader, but interestingly enough, not for the reasons expected. The assumption that the community of goods ultimately appears to reflect principles for Christian community rather than practical guidelines based upon idealistic

characterization of early Christians was the bias of this reader at the outset, but careful application of the principles and the guidelines revealed that it was in large part an affinity with first-century culture and not a romanticized or fanciful portrait of the early church as reflected by literature that influenced the presentation of the community and the values held by the early church. The community was not breaking new ground or showcasing a foreign ideal. Rather, they were adapting the values of faith communities and social groups around them in an effort to meet the needs of one another and to care for the people in the surrounding community. What set them apart as a unique community was that they were motivated by their love for God rather than ritual response or social ideals. The community of goods is ideal in the sense that it graphically portrays people responding in obedience to God and the mission of the gospel with a significant amount of self-sacrifice. The theological intentions behind these texts reveal that what the author ultimately wanted to convey was that an appropriate worship response to God requires a visible witness in the surrounding community demonstrated by the care and compassion of God's people and that obedience to God in the form of a supportive community that cares for one another is a place within which the grace of God is sure to be found.

This project has also revealed that there are many more issues to be considered when delving into the question of normativity. How many biblical texts are enough to achieve consistency within the larger context of biblical material? What is to be done with texts that do not have related Scripture for the purposes of internal examination? To what extent do cultural affinities deter the reader from transferring cultural practices from then until now and at what point does the spiritualization of the text detract from its practical

value? All of these are questions that have been touched upon within this study but that also require continued conversation among readers from various disciplines in an effort to spiral closer to refined interpretations of the text.

Responsible reading is an action that must be chosen by the reader and pursued with diligence and care when moving the text from the first-century into the hearts and lives of Christians today. The example of the early church has much to teach us. Let us be careful to read their story in such a way as to honor the work of God in their midst and not detract from the message intended by the text.

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