

CATHOLIC COMMENTARY ON SACRED SCRIPTURE



Acts of the Apostles

William S. Kurz, SJ



Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture

SERIES EDITORS

Peter S. Williamson

Mary Healy

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Kevin Perrotta

CONSULTING EDITORS

Scott Hahn, Franciscan University of Steubenville

Daniel J. Harrington, SJ, Weston Jesuit School of Theology

William S. Kurz, SJ, Marquette University

Francis Martin, Sacred Heart Major Seminary

Frank J. Matera, Catholic University of America

George Montague, SM, St. Mary's University

Terrence Prendergast, SJ, Archbishop of Ottawa

Acts of the Apostles

William S. Kurz, SJ


BakerAcademic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2013 by William S. Kurz, SJ

Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Ebook edition created 2014

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exceptions are brief quotations in printed reviews.

ISBN 978-1-4412-4470-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Nihil obstat:
Dr. Patrick Russell
Censor librorum

Imprimatur:
Most Rev. Jerome E. ListECKI
Archbishop of Milwaukee
May 10, 2013

The nihil obstat and imprimatur are official declarations that a book or pamphlet is free of doctrinal or moral error. There is no implication that those who have granted the nihil obstat or the imprimatur agree with the content, opinions, or statements expressed therein.

Scripture quotations are from the New American Bible, Revised Edition © 1970, 1986, 1991, 2011 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC, and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All rights reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Unless otherwise indicated, all photos, illustrations and maps are copyright © Baker Photo Archive.

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Series Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

[Illustrations](#)

[Editors' Preface](#)

[Abbreviations](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Outline of Acts](#)

[Luke's Introduction to Acts \(Acts 1:1-11\)](#)

[Prayer in the Upper Room \(Acts 1:12-26\)](#)

[The Coming of the Holy Spirit and the Birth of the Church \(Acts 2\)](#)

[Healing Spurs the Growth of the Church \(Acts 3:1-4:4\)](#)

[Bold Testimony and a New Outpouring of the Spirit \(Acts 4:5-31\)](#)

[Sharing of Goods: Two Contrary Examples \(Acts 4:32-5:11\)](#)

[Signs and Wonders and Trials \(Acts 5:12-42\)](#)

[The Ordination of the Seven and the Preaching of Stephen \(Acts 6:1-15\)](#)

[Stephen's Overview of Biblical History \(Acts 7:1-53\)](#)

[Martyrdom, Persecution, and Mission \(Acts 7:54-8:40\)](#)

[Paul's Conversion and Baptism \(Acts 9:1-22\)](#)

[Saul's Escape; Peter's Healing of Aeneas and Tabitha \(Acts 9:23-43\)](#)

[The Conversion of Cornelius \(Acts 10:1-11:18\)](#)

[Church Growth at Antioch; Peter's Escape \(Acts 11:19-12:24\)](#)

[The Mission of Barnabas and Saul \(Acts 12:25-13:52\)](#)

[Paul in Asia Minor: Iconium, Lystra, Derbe \(Acts 14:1-28\)](#)

[The Jerusalem Council \(Acts 15:1-35\)](#)

[The Separation of Paul and Barnabas \(Acts 15:36-16:15\)](#)

[Imprisonment and Release at Philippi \(Acts 16:16-40\)](#)

[Paul in Thessalonica, Beroea, and Athens \(Acts 17:1-34\)](#)

[Paul's Mission in Corinth \(Acts 18:1-28\)](#)

[Ephesus \(Acts 19:1-41\)](#)

[Paul the Itinerant Pastor \(Acts 20:1-16\)](#)

[Paul's Farewell Speech \(Acts 20:17-38\)](#)

[Paul's Journey to Jerusalem \(Acts 21:1-26\)](#)

[Paul's Arrest and Defense \(Acts 21:27-23:35\)](#)

[Trials before Roman Governors \(Acts 24:1-25:12\)](#)

[Paul before Agrippa \(Acts 25:13-26:32\)](#)

[Shipwreck en Route to Rome \(Acts 27:1-44\)](#)

[From Malta to Rome \(Acts 28:1-16\)](#)
[Testimony in Rome \(Acts 28:17-31\)](#)

[Suggested Resources](#)

[Glossary](#)

[Index of Pastoral Topics](#)

[Index of Sidebars](#)

[Notes](#)

[Back Cover](#)

Illustrations

- [Figure 1. Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria \(Acts 1:8\)](#)
- [Figure 2. Pentecost, Rabbula Gospels](#)
- [Figure 3. Nations of Pentecost](#)
- [Figure 4. Temple diagram](#)
- [Figure 5. Solomon's Portico](#)
- [Figure 6. Temple model](#)
- [Figure 7. Isaiah Scroll](#)
- [Figure 8. Mosaic of St. Paul](#)
- [Figure 9. Baptism of Cornelius](#)
- [Figure 10. Roman sailing vessel](#)
- [Figure 11. Paul's first missionary journey](#)
- [Figure 12. Garlanded bull](#)
- [Figure 13. Paul's second missionary journey](#)
- [Figure 14. Jail in Philippi](#)
- [Figure 15. Parthenon](#)
- [Figure 16. Tribunal at Corinth](#)
- [Figure 17. Paul's third missionary journey](#)
- [Figure 18. Artemis of Ephesus](#)
- [Figure 19. Theater at Ephesus](#)
- [Figure 20. First-century mikvah](#)
- [Figure 21. Roman aqueduct](#)
- [Figure 22. Roman emperor Nero](#)
- [Figure 23. Paul's voyage to Rome](#)
- [Figure 24. St. Paul's Bay, Malta](#)

Editors' Preface

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord. . . . All the preaching of the Church should be nourished and governed by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the power and goodness in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons and daughters, the food of the soul, a pure and perennial fountain of spiritual life.

Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 21

Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?

Luke 24:32

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture aims to serve the ministry of the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church. Since Vatican Council II, there has been an increasing hunger among Catholics to study Scripture in depth and in a way that reveals its relationship to liturgy, evangelization, catechesis, theology, and personal and communal life. This series responds to that desire by providing accessible yet substantive commentary on each book of the New Testament, drawn from the best of contemporary biblical scholarship as well as the rich treasury of the Church's tradition. These volumes seek to offer scholarship illumined by faith, in the conviction that the ultimate aim of biblical interpretation is to discover what God has revealed and is still speaking through the sacred text. Central to our approach are the principles taught by Vatican II: first, the use of historical and literary methods to discern what the biblical authors intended to express; second, prayerful theological reflection to understand the sacred text "in accord with the same Spirit by whom it was written"—that is, in light of the content and unity of the whole Scripture, the living tradition of the Church, and the analogy of faith (*Dei Verbum* 12).

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture is written for those engaged in or training for pastoral ministry and others interested in studying Scripture to understand their faith more deeply, to nourish their spiritual life, or to share the good news with others. With this in mind, the authors focus on the meaning of the text for faith and life rather than on the technical questions that occupy scholars, and they explain the Bible in ordinary language that does not require translation for preaching and catechesis. Although this series is written from the perspective of Catholic faith, its authors draw on

the interpretation of Protestant and Orthodox scholars and hope these volumes will serve Christians of other traditions as well.

A variety of features are designed to make the commentary as useful as possible. Each volume includes the biblical text of the New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE), the translation approved for liturgical use in the United States. In order to serve readers who use other translations, the most important differences between the NABRE and other widely used translations (RSV, NRSV, JB, NJB, and NIV) are noted and explained. Each unit of the biblical text is followed by a list of references to relevant Scripture passages, Catechism sections, and uses in the Roman Lectionary. The exegesis that follows aims to explain in a clear and engaging way the meaning of the text in its original historical context as well as its perennial meaning for Christians. Reflection and Application sections help readers apply Scripture to Christian life today by responding to questions that the text raises, offering spiritual interpretations drawn from Christian tradition, or providing suggestions for the use of the biblical text in catechesis, preaching, or other forms of pastoral ministry.

Interspersed throughout the commentary are Biblical Background sidebars that present historical, literary, or theological information, and Living Tradition sidebars that offer pertinent material from the postbiblical Christian tradition, including quotations from Church documents and from the writings of saints and Church Fathers. The Biblical Background sidebars are indicated by a photo of urns that were excavated in Jerusalem, signifying the importance of historical study in understanding the sacred text. The Living Tradition sidebars are indicated by an image of Eadwine, a twelfth-century monk and scribe, signifying the growth in the Church's understanding that comes by the grace of the Holy Spirit as believers study and ponder the Word of God in their hearts (see *Dei Verbum* 8).

A map and a Glossary are located in the back of each volume for easy reference. The glossary explains key terms from the biblical text as well as theological or exegetical terms, which are marked in the commentary with a cross (†). A list of Suggested Resources, an Index of Pastoral Topics, and an Index of Sidebars are included to enhance the usefulness of these volumes. Further resources, including questions for reflection or discussion, can be found at the series website, www.CatholicScriptureCommentary.com.

It is our desire and prayer that these volumes be of service so that more and more “the word of the Lord may speed forward and be glorified” (2 Thess 3:1) in the Church and throughout the world.

Peter S. Williamson
Mary Healy
Kevin Perrotta

Abbreviations

†	indicates that the definition of a term appears in the glossary
ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, vol. 5, Acts, ed. Francis Martin and Evan Smith (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006)
ANF	Ante-Nicene Fathers
Catechism	Catechism of the Catholic Church (2nd ed.)
JB	Jerusalem Bible
Lectionary	The Lectionary for Mass (1988/2000 USA Edition)
LXX	†Septuagint
NABRE	New American Bible Revised Edition (2011)
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
PL	Patrologia latina, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1844-64)
REB	Revised English Bible
RSV	Revised Standard Version
RSVCE	Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition

Books of the Old Testament

Gen	Genesis
Exod	Exodus
Lev	Leviticus
Num	Numbers
Deut	Deuteronomy
Josh	Joshua
Judg	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1 Sam	1 Samuel
2 Sam	2 Samuel
1 Kings	1 Kings
2 Kings	2 Kings
1 Chron	1 Chronicles
2 Chron	2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh	Nehemiah
Tob	Tobit
Jdt	Judith
Esther	Esther
1 Macc	1 Maccabees

2 Macc	2 Maccabees
Job	Job
Ps	Psalms
Prov	Proverbs
Eccles	Ecclesiastes
Song	Song of Songs
Wis	Wisdom
Sir	Sirach
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Lam	Lamentations
Bar	Baruch
Ezek	Ezekiel
Dan	Daniel
Hosea	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad	Obadiah
Jon	Jonah
Mic	Micah
Nah	Nahum
Hab	Habakkuk
Zeph	Zephaniah
Hag	Haggai
Zech	Zechariah
Mal	Malachi

Books of the New Testament

Matt	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Rom	Romans
1 Cor	1 Corinthians
2 Cor	2 Corinthians
Gal	Galatians
Eph	Ephesians
Phil	Philippians
Col	Colossians
1 Thess	1 Thessalonians
2 Thess	2 Thessalonians
1 Tim	1 Timothy
2 Tim	2 Timothy
Titus	Titus

Philem	Philemon
Heb	Hebrews
James	James
1 Pet	1 Peter
2 Pet	2 Peter
1 John	1 John
2 John	2 John
3 John	3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev	Revelation

Introduction

The Acts of the Apostles fulfills a unique role in the New Testament. Written as a sequel to the Gospel of Luke by the same author (Acts 1:1), Acts continues the Gospel by recounting how Jesus' mission was carried on by his disciples after he ascended into heaven. It provides the only narrative link we possess of the transition between Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection to the spread of the Church beyond its Jewish origins to reach other nations. In addition, the canonical placement of Acts between the four Gospels and Paul's Letters enables Acts to introduce and situate those letters. Without Acts we would have no way to reconstruct the historical context of Paul's Letters or to establish some key dates within which his ministry took place.

Luke's second volume builds on what Jesus "began to do and teach" during his earthly ministry (Acts 1:1, literal translation). The Gospel covered all that Jesus began to do and teach. By implication, this sequel treats what Jesus continues to do and teach through his followers, after he was taken up to heaven and poured out his Holy Spirit on them. It describes how Jesus' mission is carried on by his followers, who spoke and acted in his name after they were empowered by the Holy Spirit. But Jesus' saving mission to all nations is not yet fully accomplished even with the apostles' ministry narrated in Acts. The narrative abruptly stops with Paul in house arrest in Rome, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ. The reason why the ending of Acts is deliberately left open-ended is to engage its readers. Inspired by the words and deeds of Paul and other followers of Jesus, Christians today are to carry on Jesus' mission even in the twenty-first century and until Jesus returns.

We disciples, who like the first Christians have been empowered by the Holy Spirit, are called to give ongoing witness to Jesus and his saving message to the ends of the earth. By recounting the climactic events of that story which took place in the first century, Luke's Gospel and Acts update the biblical story of salvation that began in the Old Testament. That story of salvation is to be continued by Jesus through us until he returns at the end of world history.

Who Wrote Luke and Acts?

Although the author is not named within Acts itself, the earliest surviving manuscripts of Luke's Gospel contain the superscription "according to Luke." Church traditions as early as the second century attribute both the Gospel and Acts to Luke, a traveling companion of Paul in his later journeys. Many scholars have debated, doubted, or denied this tradition, often because the theology in Acts does not always clearly correspond to Paul's own theological emphases. The tone of Acts differs especially from the sharpness of Paul's early controversies, as in Galatians, against the necessity of Jewish circumcision and the Mosaic law for salvation.

More recently, there is a growing acceptance that Luke probably was the author. The following conclusions seem reasonable. In the prologue of the Gospel (Luke 1:1-4), the author writes in the first person as "I." He concedes that he is not the first to write a Gospel: "Many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the events that have been fulfilled among us" (Luke 1:1). Nor does he claim that he himself is an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry. Rather, he says that "those who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and ministers of the word have handed them down to us" (v. 2). He then clarifies his own role. "I too have decided, after investigating everything accurately anew, to write it down in an orderly sequence for you, most excellent Theophilus" (v. 3). His purpose for writing to Theophilus is "so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received" (v. 4). His Gospel is to confirm Christian oral traditions about Jesus by providing a carefully structured account of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection.

In the prologue to the Acts of the Apostles, the same author addresses the same Theophilus and refers back to his Gospel: "In the first book, Theophilus, I dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1, literal translation). So far, all the author has told us is that he is a Christian and not one of the original witnesses to Jesus. He makes no claim to have been present at Pentecost or in the earliest days of Paul's mission. Later in Acts, however, he uses the first-person "we" in several passages, implying that he was present at some of the events he is narrating. The first hint that the author was a companion of Paul is in Troas after Paul's vision of a Macedonian asking for help, when he writes that after Paul had seen the vision, "we sought passage to Macedonia at once, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them" (Acts 16:10, italics added). Several times thereafter, he employs first-person-plural pronouns, implying that he was a companion and eyewitness on some of Paul's journeys.

These claims of being present on some of Paul's later missions, beginning especially in Macedonia and Philippi, correspond to the

references to Luke in Paul's Letters (Col 4:14; 2 Tim 4:11; Philem 24) and to the early Christian tradition that Luke was a Gentile companion of Paul. The "we" passages appear only after Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13–14) and the [†]Jerusalem Council (Acts 15), so Luke claims to have been a companion only on Paul's later travels, well after all Paul's heated controversies about faith and circumcision (see Gal 2:1–5:12). This could explain why those early Pauline emphases are less prominent in Acts. It is the later Paul whom Luke knew personally.

Luke implies that although he was with Paul on his later journeys, including his journey to Rome in chains (28:14–15, after which "we" is no longer mentioned), he was not present at Paul's trials or final Roman imprisonment. Luke thus calls attention to similarities between Paul and his Lord Jesus, who was accompanied by his disciples on the journey to Jerusalem, but who faced his actual trials, final imprisonment, and crucifixion alone, without their presence or support.

With most of the Fathers and Church tradition, it makes sense to accept the traditional and simplest interpretation—that the author, Luke, was present at some events in the latter half of Acts. Although some scholars still treat the matter as historically insoluble, Joseph Fitzmyer has dealt with all the positions pro and con and has concluded that the most plausible historical explanation of the "we" passages, beginning with Acts 16:10, is that they are credible indications by the author of Acts that he actually was present on some of Paul's travels.^[1] Although Acts has some theological differences from Paul's Letters, or has details about the [†]Judaizing controversies that are hard to reconcile with Paul's own accounts in Galatians, these can be partially explained if Acts was written at a later time, when the controversies were no longer burning questions.

For Whom Was Acts Written?

Both the Gospel of Luke and Acts are addressed to Theophilus. This common name in Greek means "lover of God," which could be a symbolic reference to all Christians. However, it seems likely that Luke was following the Greek and Roman practice of dedicating his writing to a patron of some sort and that Theophilus was an actual person to whom Luke dedicated his two-volume narrative. If so, Theophilus may have been a wealthy Christian, host of a house church, or a Christian leader who helped Luke get his two volumes copied and distributed (today we would say "published"). It can be presumed that the Gospel and Acts were meant for the Church and

for Christians at large, and that Theophilus was someone who helped Luke to accomplish this goal.

When Was Acts Written?

The narrative ends with Paul's two-year house imprisonment in Rome, without reporting what happened to Paul at the end of those two years. However, Luke would not have known that Paul's imprisonment lasted "two full years" (Acts 28:30) without also knowing what happened to Paul at the end of that time, whether he was condemned and martyred or whether he was set free and continued his travels. (We know from Rom 15:24 that Paul had intended to go to Spain after visiting Rome: "I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain.")

Luke's silence about Paul's fate at the end of Acts, therefore, is probably not because it had not yet befallen him but because the focus of Acts is not on the life of Paul. It is on the spread of the saving message of Jesus "to the ends of the earth." Luke deliberately ends on a high note, showing that the spread of God's word is not held back even by Paul's confinement. The book ends with an affirmation that even under house arrest, Paul continues to proclaim the kingdom and teach about Jesus Christ "with complete assurance and without hindrance" (Acts 28:31).

In Luke's account of Jesus' end-times discourse on the Mount of Olives, Jesus refers to events that would precede the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. He prophesies that there will be false prophets, wars, and natural disasters, "but it will not immediately be the end" (Luke 21:9). He adds, "Before all this happens, however, they will seize and persecute you, they will hand you over to the synagogues and to prisons, and they will have you led before kings and governors because of my name" (Luke 21:12). This period of persecution prophesied in Luke 21:12-19 is fulfilled in Acts when it befalls Stephen, James, Peter, Paul, and others.

Luke 21:20-24 then refers to the destruction of Jerusalem (which occurred in AD 70) as her "time of punishment" (v. 22), when her inhabitants will be slaughtered or taken captive to all the ⁺Gentiles. This period of Jewish captivity after Jerusalem's destruction will last "until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled" (v. 24). The implication is that after the fall of Jerusalem, when the Jews are scattered throughout the Roman world in exile, the Church's evangelization of Gentiles will increase dramatically. After that period will come the final cosmic signs and return of the Son of Man in judgment at the very end of the world (Luke 21:25-27). Most scholars date the death of Paul between AD 64 and 67, shortly before Jerusalem's

destruction in 70. If, as many think, Luke wrote the Gospel and Acts after the destruction of Jerusalem, Luke may thus have regarded himself as living in the post-Jerusalem “times of the Gentiles,” though Acts does not make explicit reference to that period.

Theological Themes

The framework for Luke’s narrative is the biblical story of God’s saving actions for his people, which began in the Old Testament and came to climactic fulfillment in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. The Acts of the Apostles is a decisively new chapter in this story. In Acts the messianic age has dawned, and God is present in the world in a new way through the activity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the Church.

Through summaries, quotations, allusions, and echoes from the Old Testament, Luke places us distinctly within Scripture’s perspective on God’s plan of salvation. We read what happens to Jesus and the apostles within the overall narrative of a God who created all things “good” (Gen 1:31). However, human sin and rebellion infected the good creation with evil, alienating humans from their loving Creator. God initiated his plan to rescue estranged humanity through the people he formed from the seed of Abraham and accomplished this plan through the Messiah and Son of God sprung from their stock. Acts frequently refers back to Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets to ground its narrative in the fulfillment of God’s ancient promises.

One special theme in both Luke and Acts is that first Jesus (Luke 2:32) and then, in imitation of him, his followers such as Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:47) exercise the role of the Servant of the Lord. The theme of the servant is rooted in the biblical depiction of Moses as God’s servant in the exodus (Num 12:7). The prophet Isaiah develops this theme, describing a humble Servant of the Lord to whom God says: “It is too little . . . for you to be my servant, / to raise up the tribes of Jacob, / and restore the survivors of Israel; / I will make you a light to the nations, / that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Isa 49:6). Luke understands this prophecy as fulfilled in both Jesus and his followers, who are to be “a light to the nations, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth” (Acts 13:47, author’s translation). Although Jesus ministered primarily to his fellow Jews, the disciples in Acts specifically reached out to Gentiles (“the nations”) as well as to Jews. As in the book of Isaiah, so also in Acts, this ministry to Gentiles includes a strong proclamation that there is only one God. This theme of †monotheism

is depicted in Paul's occasionally humorous conflicts with idolatry and superstition.

Perhaps the principal theme in Acts is that Jesus' followers are his witnesses, who like him are filled with the Holy Spirit and empowered to speak and act in his name. The risen Jesus prophesies their witness in Acts 1:8, which is a skeleton outline of the plot of Acts: "You will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."^[2]

Reading Acts Today

Today we find Acts to be a fascinating historical account of the beginning and initial spread of the Church through the witness of founding heroes like Peter, Stephen, Philip, Paul, and their coworkers. But Acts is not meant merely to inform us about the ancient church. It provides a paradigm for the life and mission of the Church today. As Pope Paul VI wrote in his apostolic letter on evangelization, Acts "bears witness to a privileged and in a sense exemplary moment of [the Church's] missionary effort which will . . . leave its mark on the whole history of the Church."^[3] In the heroes of the earliest Church, we see models of how the risen Lord acts in and through his people today and of how we can respond to the Spirit's promptings.

Acts depicts the Church as filled with missionary dynamism. Apostles, deacons, prophets, and ordinary believers are all used powerfully by the Spirit to draw others to Christ, and even to do signs and wonders in his name. Luke also portrays the character traits essential for sharing in Christ's mission: love of God and others, willingness to suffer for the sake of the gospel, obedience to the Holy Spirit, courage, faithfulness, endurance, boldness, and fervent intercessory prayer. Acts can thus renew our understanding of the evangelistic vocation of the Church and of our call to evangelize as individual believers in Christ. As Pope Paul VI stated, "Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize."^[4] Saint John Paul II wrote even more strongly in a letter to all the Christian faithful: "We must rekindle in ourselves the impetus of the beginnings and allow ourselves to be filled with the ardor of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost. We must revive in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul, who cried out: 'Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel' (1 Cor 9:16)."^[5]

Another reason that Acts is timely today is that the cultural context in which the Church finds herself is in some ways more like

that of the first-century Church than it has been at any time since. Vast numbers of people in contemporary society are ignorant of Christ and of the biblical worldview. Many are living a pagan, hedonistic lifestyle—not unlike the Gentiles whom Paul encountered in his missionary journeys throughout the Roman Empire. Social patterns often run counter to basic values such as the dignity of the person, the sanctity of life, or the Christian vision of marriage, sexuality, and family. Christians often find themselves subject to state pressure to conform to a secular agenda, and publicly witnessing to Christ sometimes provokes mockery, hostility, or even persecution.

As Christians we believe that Acts, like the entire Bible, is the word of God in human language. To understand what Luke, the inspired human author, intended, we employ historical-critical methods to uncover the meaning of the book in its first-century setting. Understanding the original sense helps us avoid †eisegesis, naively reading our contemporary biases into the Bible. On the other hand, because we recognize God as the ultimate author of the Bible, we understand Acts as God’s word to us and to all Christians. We accept it as authoritative for our own lives and for our witness to the world.

Catholics interpret Acts within the context of the whole of Sacred Scripture as it has been elucidated in the Church’s creeds, dogma, worship, sacraments, and tradition; we take into account the perspective of saints, scholars, and Church teaching, both ancient and modern. Unlike some early practitioners of historical criticism, we do not regard dogma as obstructing our understanding of the Bible, but rather as shedding light on it. Studying this inspired account of the earliest years of the Church increases our faith in the power of God, raises our expectations of what God can do in and through us, and helps us understand how the Spirit and his gifts can operate in the lives of all who commit themselves to the Church’s mission of evangelization.