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TIMOTHY LIM T. N.¹

Regent University School of Divinity

INTRODUCTION

The term “missional ecumenism” has received popularity since its use by Evangelical missiologist John Armstrong at the 2014 National Workshop on Christian Unity.² For Armstrong, the term refers to the vital need of seeking the unity of the churches for the mission of the church; missional ecumenism as a purpose of the Church is a notion shared by the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches and The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches respectively.³ In the spirit of offering a biblical reception of “missional ecumenism” for the contemporary church especially after the centennial year celebration of the 1910 Edinburgh missionary conference in 2010, this paper explores resources from the Acts of the Apostles in search for models of unity to support the pursuit of legitimate, visible unity among churches. Acts records not only the struggles for unity among the earliest Christian communities but also the churches’ experience of unity under one Lord as one people. I see missional ecumenicity in the archives of Acts – churches deal with differences without dividing the communities so as to focus on the outreach and witness of the church to society (although some issues nearly became church-divisive). Thus, the early church’s way of being may be interpreted as embodying a “missional ecumenism” which could be transposed for the contemporary church even as ecclesiological identity and Christian mission then is less complex than the traditioning and visioning of Christianities at our milieu. I proffer from my theological reading of Acts that God desires churches to be united post-Pentecost and prior to the Eschaton: the

¹ Timothy Lim T. N. defended his dissertation in June 2014 and will officially graduate with a PhD in Theological Studies, Regent University School of Divinity, in May 2015. The paper is a substantially revised version of presentation made at the British New Testament Society at the University of Aberdeen. I am grateful for comments by professors Amos Yong, Mark Wilson, Howard I. Marshall, Steve Watson, and Peter Walker. Any blunders remain my responsibility.

² John H. Armstrong, *Your Church Is Too Small* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010); John H. Armstrong, *The Unity Factor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian’s Library Press, 2011).

³ Joint Working Group, *Reception* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2014) 60–61; The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, *Together Towards Life* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2013), 2 para 10.

mission of and for the unity of the churches amid its mission to the world do not have to wait for its full realization at the eschatological assembly.

As a roadmap, I examine church unity and mission in Acts and engage with a recent monograph by Alan J. Thompson. Then I ask, how could Thompson's reading of ecumenism in Acts and scholarships on Acts be applied to a contemporary emphasis on missional church ecumenism. By locating missional church unity as part of God's intention and plan, I argue that the ecumenical examples in Acts could help churches of our time to envision a unity in mission amid diversity.

CHURCH UNITY AND MISSION IN ACTS

The churches in Acts exist in true ecclesiological (and missional) unity, defends New Testament scholar Alan J. Thompson in *One Lord, One People*.⁴ He was responding to the view that the Acts portrait of unity among the people of God represents only an ideal state of conceiving the churches' identity and mission.

Thompson's interlocutors support the supposed idealization of unity in Acts. They show the deep-seated divisions in the early church.⁵ The picture of supposed unity in Acts functions as a tool to stir a "nostalgic" reminiscence of a past unity in the earliest Christian community.⁶ Interlocutors rejected Thompson's view that unity is real among churches in Acts because for them, this unity represents a "creative (and unrealistic) portrait of a Golden Age beginning."⁷ Furthermore, the portrait of Christian missional unity in Acts does not accurately represent the actual state of the churches' relationship. The denial of a realized unity in Acts still has a following.⁸

Thompson disagrees. Unity in the churches of Acts represents for him a realistic account of the churches' relationship with one another and their endeavors toward the fulfillment of the church's soteriological-eschatological mission. He raises four points.

Firstly, Thompson cites approvingly J. Dupont's research to advance a claim: Acts draws attention to the unity of the churches with an emphatic and frequent use of terminologies such as *ὁμοθυμαδόν*, *πάν*, and *ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό* that connote a sense of "togetherness": praying together (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:42; 4:24), being together (Acts 1:15; 2:1, 44, 47; 5:12), holding everything in common (Acts 2:44), being of one heart and mind in

⁴ Alan J. Thompson, "Unity in Acts: Idealization or Reality?" *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 51:3 (September 2008): 523–42; Alan J. Thompson, *One Lord, One People* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2008).

⁵ In Alan Thompson, "Unity in Acts," footnotes 12–14 mention for instance, A. Rakotoharintsifa, "Luke and Internal Divisions in the Early Church," C. M. Tuckett, ed., *Luke's Literary Achievement* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 176; and O. Cullmann, "Dissensions Within the Early Church," *USQR* 22 (1967): 83–92.

⁶ C. K. Barrett, "Acts and Christian Consensus," P. W. Bøckman and R. E. Kristiansen, eds., *Contexts* (Trondheim: Tapir, 1987), 19–33.

⁷ H. Conzelmann, *Acts of the Apostles*, trans. James Linburg, A. Thomas Krabel, and Donald H. Juel (Hermeneia: Philadelphia: Fortress press, 1987), 24; B. J. Capper, "Reciprocity and the Ethic of Acts," I. H. Marshall, and D. Peterson, eds., *Witness to the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 500, 508.

⁸ R. I. Pervo, *Acts* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2009), 93. See also Pervo's *Profit with Delight* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 69–70.

agreement (Acts 4:32; 15:25), sharing possessions (Acts 2:45; 4:32, 34), all of which pertain to the missional identity, outlook and action of the churches.⁹

Secondly, the churches in Acts agree on at least four elements of church life (Acts 2:42–47): teaching, fellowship, eucharist (or Lord's Supper) and prayer—all of which are undergirded by the preliminary actions of personal repentance, and baptism (Acts 2:38–41). The tone of the participation in the mission and life of the church is the worshipful wonder and awe of God after having experienced the grace of redemption (Acts 2:41–43, 47). Fundamental to the concept of worship is “a common submission to the lordship of Christ,”¹⁰ which Thompson explains as the essence of churches' missional unity in Acts.¹¹

Thirdly, the churches in Acts seek consensual submission when they deal with differences. Churches in Acts are not in agreement, at all times, on all matters of faith and practice. Amid disagreements, Thompson observes that the believers' common submission to the lordship of Jesus Christ for the sake of the mission of the church made all the difference. True missional unity seeks not only outward service but also a threefold submission to scripture, openness to the Spirit and circumcision of the heart, such as evident by a baptism in the name of Jesus Christ.¹² He contends that this principle of consensual submission as a method for resolving differences is contrasted with the unity achieved by those who opposed Christians (Acts 7:57).

Thompson also observes how differences are interpreted among the churches in Acts. Differences among the believing communities do not discredit the unity because differences are not regarded as apostasy. Thompson postulates that the early church interprets differences as matters of personal opinions (of how one may best serve their common Lord)¹³ or as indicators of different cultural backgrounds for shaping practice and mission.¹⁴ Differences assist the communities in Acts to search for unity in belief and practices toward fulfilling the mission of the church.

Thompson does not disavow that the early church in Acts use the primary beliefs (the rule of faith) as essential markers for discerning unity in truth. He observes that the churches in Acts adhere to Old Testament teachings and the apostolic message (Acts 24:14; 25:8; 26:22; 10:43; Luke 24:44) as a corollary to the other principles of how the faith community distinguishes truth from falsity. On occasions, churches apply the principle of limited harmony (*συμφωνέω*) when there are fundamental doctrinal differences. Otherwise, abiding by the fundamentals of the faith is a recurring pattern when churches in Acts deal with conflict.

⁹ Thompson, “Unity in Acts,” 523. He cites J. Dupont, “L’union entre les premiers chrétiens dans les Actes des Apôtres,” *NRTh* 91 (1969): 897–915. A similar point has been raised by Richard P. Thompson, “Believers and Religious Leaders in Jerusalem: Contrasting Portraits of Jews in Acts 1–7,” Richard P. Thompson and Thomas E. Phillips, eds., *Literary Studies in Luke-Acts* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1998), 334.

¹⁰ David Peterson, *Engaging with God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 57–58.

¹¹ Thompson, “Unity in Acts,” 528, 537–41, esp. footnotes 28, 30, and 63.

¹² Thompson, 535, 538.

¹³ Thompson, 538–41.

¹⁴ E.g., deliberations and consensual decisions of the Council of Jerusalem on the distinct practice of Christianity in Jerusalem, and for gentile believers on the interface of faith and culture in Acts 15.

Fourthly, Thompson warns against a reductionistic account of a Christian ecumenism from the Acts material. Unity is not necessarily an ideal or a blessing, irrespective of portrayals of unity in Acts.¹⁵ Thompson concludes this warning from a textual, historical, literal and comparative examination of Lukan pericopes (e.g., Acts 5:1–11; 7:57; 18:11–17; and 19:23–41) along with other ancient literatures to show that *συμφωνέω* (agreeing together), *ὁμοθυμαδόν* (togetherness) and *μία ἐκ πάντων* (all in unison) do not necessarily connote a desired unity. Some unity recorded in Acts opposes the Christian cause¹⁶ and “this unity is not good.”¹⁷ It works “against the unity of the church, [and it] was [is] of Satanic origin, and was [or which shall be] overcome in judgment.”¹⁸ Undesirable unity draws believers away from their common master and from the mission of the church.

READING THOMPSON FOR A CONTEMPORARY MISSIONAL CHURCH ECUMENISM

Thompson’s *One Lord, One People* makes a programmatic contribution for the study of Acts on ecclesiology, missions and ecumenism. The monograph fills a lacuna in scholarship on Acts by showing the earliest Christian communities’ understanding of the church, its mission and unity. Recent developments in *Actaforschung* have highlighted the importance of reading *Luke-Acts* with insights from social-sciences, social-rhetorical and linguistic studies.¹⁹ Critical scholarships almost focus primarily on whether to accept or rewrite the historicity of churches in Acts.²⁰ Now Thompson adds to the few focus on ecclesiology in the Acts. But unlike Oscar Cullman and David Moessner, Thompson does not look for salvation history in Luke-Acts.²¹ Thompson also does not follow David Pao and Philip Towner to examine the development of doctrine as the church finds its identity.²² Instead, with *Actaforschung* insights, Thompson investigates ecclesiology, mission and ecumenism in Acts: this confluence of themes is largely lacking in scholarship.²³ Thompson’s account gives readers a glimpse of the salient features of the

¹⁵ Thompson, “Unity in Acts,” 535–37.

¹⁶ R. P. Thompson, like Alan J. Thompson, observes that there is a unity that opposes God and the Christian movement. See R. P. Thompson, “Believers and Religious Leaders in Jerusalem,” 342.

¹⁷ Thompson, “Unity in Acts,” 535.

¹⁸ Thompson, 535.

¹⁹ Jerome H. Neyrey, ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1991); Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts* (London: Routledge, 1996); Vernon K. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse* (London: Routledge, 1996); Richard Bauckham, *The Book of Acts in Its Palestine Setting* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995); Gustavo Martín-Asensio, *Transitivity-Based Foregrounding in the Acts of the Apostles* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

²⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, *On Finding the Lukan Community* (Missoula, Mont: Scholars Press, 1979), 87–100; pace, Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra, “‘Christians’ observing ‘Jewish’ Festivals of Autumn” Peter J. Tomson, and Doris Lambers-Petry, eds., *The Image of the Judaean-Christians in Ancient Jewish and Christian Literature* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 53–73, 61–63.

²¹ Oscar Cullman, *Salvation in History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); David P. Moessner, “The ‘Script’ of the Scriptures in Acts: Suffering as God’s ‘Plan’ (βουλή) for the World for the ‘Release of Sins,’” Ben Witherington III, ed., *History, Literature, and Society in the Book of Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 218–50.

²² David W. Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Siebeck], 2000), 10; Philip H. Towner, “Mission Practice and Theology under Construction (Acts 18–20),” I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, eds., *Witness to the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 417–36.

²³ Richard P. Thompson suggests the plausibility of ecumenism in Acts. He writes, “This image of the ‘divided people of God,’ then becomes something like an oxymoron for Luke, as he uses images of unanimity to depict the people of God (that is, those in whom the presence of God is found. The Lukan concept of God’s people is

identity and practice of church as it concerns mission and unity. In defending the unity of the church in Acts, Thompson has unwittingly provided rationale for understanding how the early church reconciles differences amid real divisions and with mission as its underlying thrust to fidelity and submission. Thompson seems to have taken François Bovon's suggestion that while Acts is not a textbook on ecclesiology, in "the very existence of Acts, ecclesiology [the church's identity, mission, and witness] occupies a high position."²⁴

The early church had to negotiate differences in the fulfilling of the church's mission yet they did not break unity. Unity among churches is not optional: the call to support one another in the gospel mission is an injunction. Unity rests on the redemptive grace of God in Christ. The united Church participates in common activities pertaining to church life (Acts 2:42–47): teaching, fellowship, eucharist (or Lord's Supper) and prayer. When differences occur, the church negotiates differences by submitting to God in three areas: they submit to scripture, to the Spirit and to the conscience of the heart (not only as individuals, but as a corporate body). Differences that are cultural and/or personal opinions ultimately do not and must not become detrimental to the unitive mission of the church so long as the believer/community who thinks/acts differently adhere to Scripture and the apostles' teachings as fundamentals of the faith.

Applying Thompson's insights to the contemporary church raises issues.

- How can anyone read Acts without claiming that Acts speaks prescriptively for churches in the contemporary situation?
- To apply Thompson's observation about the early church's missional ecumenical discernment today, one has to probe how Thompson ranks his principles—core beliefs, threefold submission and limited harmony. When do differences in conviction, belief, and/or practice become legitimately church-dividing? When does "limited harmony" apply? When may one yield to the three-tier foundation of listening to Scripture, the Spirit and conscience while remaining open to differences, especially when these sources do not address contemporary concerns?
- How does Thompson's formulation hold up theologically and historically? Unlike his claim, the church in Acts also encounters sectarianism/division.²⁵ Jewish-Gentile table fellowship, for instance, was intensely debated in the early church (Acts 10; 11:1–18; 16:14–15, 25–34; 18:7–11; 27).²⁶ The house of Chloe's report in Paul's epistles to the Corinthians shows fractions among believers. Is unity amidst diversity an illusive dream? What other sources may support a missional church ecumenism?

incompatible with divisions among that people." See R.P. Thompson, "Believers and Religious Leaders in Jerusalem," 344n75.

²⁴ François Bovon, "The Church," *Luke the Theologian* 2nd rev. ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), 329–462, esp. 348.

²⁵ Bruce J. Malina, and Jerome H. Neyrey, "Conflict in Luke-Acts: Labelling and Deviance Theory," Jerome H. Neyrey, ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 98, 120–122; Philip Francis Esler, "Sectarian Strategies," *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 46–70.

²⁶ Esler, *Community and Gospel in Luke-Acts*, 71.

- How could Acts' conception of missional ecumenism be juxtaposed with concepts of true and false unity in the other epistles (such as 1 Tim. 4:1, Heb. 3:12, and Jude 4, 19)?²⁷ Thompson mentions an undesirable type of unity recorded in Acts. The undesirable unity may be likened to a type of a "wolf in sheep's clothing" activity in the church. Caution is necessary for anyone claiming the pursuit of missional unity to be evidence of the work of the Spirit, because the pursuit may represent the work of "falsehood" by "false teachers" to derail the church from its true mission or vice versa.
- Also, could readers expand the scope of Thompson's proposal to the observable church polities and structures of our time? Thompson did not distinguish between local church and a network of churches but he did register leaders working at a local level, παντὸς τοῦ πλῆθους (Acts 6:5; 15:22) and in a network of participating churches, σὺν ὅλῃ τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ (Acts 15:22).²⁸ The network of participating churches in Acts may also be seen in Paul's attempt to connect the Church of Jerusalem with the Church of Antioch, and with the churches in Derbe, Lystra and Ephesus amid examples of scattered churches (Acts 8:2; 9:32, 36, etc.). Even so, the other churches in other regions develop their "separate corporate identities," with "relatively little control or imposition of authority from Jerusalem" as they expand.²⁹ Do exemplars of missional ecumenism in Acts provide models for churches' relations today, which occur regionally, nationally, internationally, intra-and-inter-denominationally and even post-denominationally in the presently divided expressions of the gospel mission?³⁰ One may paint an even more macro-level application to include trans-regional, trans-geographical, trans-denominational, and trans-traditional levels.

MISSIONAL CHURCH UNITY AS THE INTENTIONALITY AND PLAN OF GOD

I will point out directions for answering some of the questions raised in my earlier appraisal of Thompson's work. I am particularly interested in attempts to appropriate or apply findings for contemporary missional ecumenism. If church unity and church divisions/disunity are both realities in the early church's missional experience, does this paradoxical reality of unity/division tell us anything about the plan of God for the church in the present, temporal age? Is full, visible unity among the churches realizable only at

²⁷ John E. Morgan-Wynne, "Attitudes Towards Erring Brothers and Sisters in Early Christianity as Reflected in the New Testament," Anthony R. Cross, ed., *Ecumenism and History* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), 225-253; Jerry L. Sumney, *'Servants of Satan', 'False Brothers' and Other Opponents of Paul* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999).

²⁸ Thompson, "Unity in Acts," 523-24.

²⁹ F. F. Bruce, "The Church of Jerusalem in the Acts of the Apostles," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 67:2 (Spring 1985): 645, 649, 653, 655.

³⁰ I am not undermining the World Council of Churches' many convergence texts on the church and missions, such as *The Church* (2013) and *Together Towards Life* (2014), which are undergirded by an ecumenical approach: in fact, I celebrated these milestones. See Timothy Lim, "What If We Could?" *Ecclesiology* 11:1 (Jan 2015): 65-83; Timothy Lim, "Together Towards Life: A Pentecostal Assessment," Kenneth R. Ross, Jooseop Keum, Kyriaki Avtzi and Roderick R. Hewitt, eds., *Ecumenical Missiology* (Regnum Books International, 2015), forthcoming.

the Eschaton, which conservative Baptist ecclesiology have claimed since the writing of Clearwater.³¹ Luke-Acts scholar John Squires provides a recourse for me.³²

In *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, Squires demonstrates that frequently and emphatically Luke-Acts refers to God as having definite plans (τῇ ὀρισμένῃ βουλῇ καὶ προγνώσει τοῦ θεοῦ, Acts 2:23), so much so that it is possible to speak with certainty and consistency of the plan of God (ἡ βουλὴ τοῦ θεοῦ, Luke 9:29; 23:51; Acts 4:28; 5:38–39; 13:36; 20:27; 27:12, 42) in the life of Jesus and for the church.³³ Squires, of course, is defending the redemptive plan of God in Luke-Acts. But since redemption in Luke-Acts is articulated as integral to the biblical motif of the People of God and the New Testament motif of the church, it would follow that God is depicted as constantly at work in the early church and for the growth of the community.³⁴ Examining the motif of the People of God intertextually would support the claim that God is active prior to the New Testament era, during the New Testament times and in the post-Pentecostal churches until the Eschaton.³⁵ Squires suggests that God continues to act (contra God's passivity) beyond the passing of the apostolic witnesses just as the Ascension of Christ did not reverse the original intention of God.³⁶

The question is, did God envision a clearly articulated plan for God's church in Acts that could fund a theology of the church and the churches in missional unity beyond the primitive Christian communities' experience of the "things that God has done for them" (cf. Acts 14:27; 15:4,12; 19:11; 21:19)? Squires writes, "Luke-Acts is to be regarded as a kind of cultural 'translation', an attempt to tell a story to people who are in a context somewhat different from the context in which the story originally took place."³⁷ Squires concludes among other things, "Luke is attempting to explain Christianity in such a way that it might be more fully understood by Hellenized Christians."³⁸ In other words, Squires acknowledges the continuity of the early church with the church in different

³¹ Richard V. Clearwaters, *The Local Church of the New Testament* (Clark Street, IL: Conservative Baptist Fellowship, 1954).

³² John T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

³³ A related cognate concept is the will of God, for instance γνῶναι τὸ θέλημα in Acts 22:14. See Squires, *Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, 1996, 23–24. Implicitly, the Lukan narrative is developed with this interest from the start of the first sequel (the prefaces of περὶ τῶν . . . πραγμάτων, πεπληροφορημένων, and περὶ . . . λόγων, both evoking the motif of divine providence). This paper extends Squires's proposal to include ecclesiology. While Squires did not make such a claim, he does not deny the possibility of my extension. Luke-Acts is after all closely related to ecclesiology and redemptive history.

³⁴ Squires, *Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, 37. Some claims God's passivity in history. See the modern debate on God's immanence and transcendence in Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th Century Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997). Squires exegetical work is an important contribution not just to biblical studies but also to theological thinking about divine action and for missional ecumenism.

³⁵ Kenneth Duncan Litwak, *Echoes of Scripture in Luke-Acts* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005); Jens Herzer, "Rearranging the 'House of God' A New Perspective on the Pastoral Epistles," Alberdina Houtman, Albert de Jong, and Magda Misset-van de Weg, eds., *Empsychoi Logi – Religious Innovations in Antiquity* (Liedien, Boston: Brill, 2008), 547–66.

³⁶ Squires, *Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, 58. I am pushing Squires beyond his original claims. Squires explains that God's activity continued in the primitive church even after Christ's Crucifixion and Ascension because of divine providence. God's intent is not reversed with the apostles' and witnesses' death.

³⁷ Squires, *Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, 190.

³⁸ Squires, *Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, 191.

cultures and times, wherein culture shapes the presentation of historical occurrences and the interpretation of beliefs and practices. Reading Squires' thesis ecclesialogically and ecumenical missiologically, I suggest that God indeed intends for the church to be united in identity albeit that the mission may be expressed diversely. The motif of the Church in missional unity is consistent with Jesus's injunction to his followers (cf. John 15–17)³⁹ and as found in the Pauline epistles.⁴⁰ The "vital oneness of the Church" is not a vision but a command—it reveals God's intention for the church.⁴¹

MISSIONAL ECUMENISM: CHURCHES IN UNITY AND MISSION AMID DIVERSITY

After anchoring my premise from Thompson and Squires, I now probe how else Acts could provide perspectives on unity and mission for the contemporary church. I found five "ecumenical postures / attitudes for the evangelical at heart" to maintain unity in their mission amidst diversity: a) evangelical faithfulness; b) pilgrim preparedness for the eschatological union with God, Christ and the People of God; c) openness to God's surprising and unpredictable work; d) exclusive-inclusivity that affirms God's work within one's own Christian tradition while suspending judgments on different Christian tradition(s); and finally, e) wonder, awe and submission to a gracious and judicious God.

Evangelical faithfulness in Acts is fourfold: teaching, fellowship, eucharist (or Lord's Supper), and prayer (Acts 2:42–47). Christian fidelity occurs in the private and public arenas. The Christian life is not pursued individualistically or to satisfy the consumerist or materialist cravings.⁴² Christians live in communion with the Church as testimony on loving God, loving self and loving the neighbor, the needy and the marginalized.⁴³ Dorcas/Tabitha's generosity towards the marginalized expresses not only her personal faith but also her role in the church and wider society (Acts 9:36–43). Spirituality or the quest after God lies at the heart and soul of Christian living and missional witness. As Pauline theologian Michael J. Gordon explains, "spirituality" is "the lived experience of believers" in a community.⁴⁴ The Christian seeks the will of the Spirit who blows where the Spirit wills (Jn 3:6). Sensitivity to the Spirit and the maturing of the Christian Spirit is nurtured through teaching, fellowship, eucharist and prayer of members in the church.⁴⁵ The Church is also united in mission through these practices.⁴⁶

³⁹ David Asonye Ihenacho, *The Community of Eternal Life* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2001); Celestino G. Lingad Jr., *The Problems of Jewish Christians in the Johannine Community* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 2001); Johan Ferreira, *Johannine Ecclesiology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998).

⁴⁰ Stanley E. Porter, ed., *Paul and His Opponents* (Leiden: Brill, 25; Reidar Aasgaard, 'My Beloved Brothers and Sisters!' *Christian Siblingship in Paul* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004); D. A. Carson, "The Unity of the Body and the Diversity of Gifts (12:1–30)" *Showing the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book, 1987), 15–50, etc.

⁴¹ George Eldon Ladd, "The Nature of the Church," and "the Life of the Church," *The Young Church* (London: Lutterworth Press / New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), 53–63, 64–69.

⁴² Individualism (or individualistically) here connotes the pursuit of one's own goals as the most important thing in life, even if it means to contravene one's moral and social responsibilities. Brian Haymes, Ruth Gouldbourne, and Anthony R. Cross suggest how wrongheaded it is to pursue the Christian life and to work out an ecclesiology based on individualism. See *On Being the Church* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2008), 24.

⁴³ Amos Yong, *Who Is the Holy Spirit?* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete, 2011), chs. 15 and 35.

⁴⁴ Michael J. Gordon, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 115–16.

⁴⁵ Robin Greenwood, *Practising Community* (London: SPCK, 1996).

⁴⁶ Steven F. Plymale, *The Prayer Texts of Luke-Acts* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991); and Bovon, "The Church," in *Luke the Theologian*, 450.

Pilgrimage as a posture of the heart is sustained by the missional vision of eternal hope. Unlike the concept of pilgrimage as the veneration of *Sacred Places* or the use of sacred places to enter into the interior life, the pilgrimage of the heart is a way of living.⁴⁷ The ethos and vision is summarized in a gospel song composed by Albert E. Brumley (1905–1977), “this world is not my home, I’m just a passing through...The angels beckon me from heaven’s open door, and I can’t feel at home in this world anymore”⁴⁸ Christians in Acts are conscientious of the imminent return of Christ (Acts 1:11). Unknown to the earliest Christians who have yet to formulate any doctrinal position of Christianity, Christology is the foundation of the early church’s gathering: the disciples participate in the life of the church as Christ’s body in ongoing repentance and in continuing with their baptism as instituted by Christ (Acts 2:38–47). Eschatology is the vision for the early church’s gathering: with hope, the disciples anticipate their eternal union with God/Christ and with the eschatological assembly.⁴⁹ The disciples in Acts gradually, introspectively, retrospectively and speculatively understand this eschatological vision and eventually embrace life as pilgrimage in community.⁵⁰ Historically, some express this posture by joining the monastic orders. Today, pilgrims do not necessarily become monks: they simply express their devotion to God in their respective life, mission, ministry and vocation.⁵¹ As Hans Conzelmann explains, “the delay of the *parousia*” reveals the nature, identity, character and mission of the church.⁵² Or as Anders Nielsen iterates, the unity of the saints completes at the Eschaton.⁵³ The eschatological vision motivates the church to persist in the faith, unity and mission.

Christians in Acts eventually embrace openness to God’s surprising work. The Jewish perspective in Acts holds an exclusive understanding of God’s love for the Jewish race (Acts 10:28a; 11:1–3; cf. Acts 28:25–28). Coming from the cradle of Judaism, the earliest Christians relearn God’s extensive love. At Pentecost, the Spirit unveils the borderless, redemptive vision of God—God’s offer of salvation does not discriminate against the recipients’ ethnicity, race, language, culture, people-group or social-economic-educational affluence (Acts 2:21; cf. Acts 10:28b; 11:15–18; 15:9; 28:28).⁵⁴ However, Jewish Christians then gather only among their own race. At the first epiphany of God’s inclusive love for the gentiles, Peter insists that the true race does not mingle with the profaned/the gentiles (Acts 10:9–17).⁵⁵ He quickly learns that God’s salvific vision is not only for the

⁴⁷ Jean Holm and John Bowker, eds., *Sacred Places* (London: Continuum, 2009).

⁴⁸ William J. Peterson, and Ardythe Peterson, *The Complete Book of Hymns* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2006), 461.

⁴⁹ While O’Brien argues for a “literal” interpretation of the occurrences of ecclesia in the New Testament, Martin Foord shows that O’Brien’s exegesis dovetails a theological interpretation of Pauline ecclesiology. Cullman reinterprets O’Brien to show that there are two gatherings of the saints – one taking place on the “earthly” realm, and the other, the anticipated “heavenly” gathering of the entire people of God. Martin Foord, “Recent Directions in Anglican Ecclesiology,” *Churchman* 115:3 (2001): 316–49.

⁵⁰ Jonathan Edwards, “The Christian Pilgrim or The True Christian’s Journey Toward Heaven,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume Two* Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/edwards/works2.html>, accessed July 5, 2009.

⁵¹ Paul R. Stevens, *Six Other Days* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

⁵² Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (1961; rpr., Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); Pervo, *Acts*, 22.

⁵³ Anders E. Nielsen, *Until It Is Fulfilled* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

⁵⁴ Paul L. Hammer, *Interpreting Luke-Acts for the Local Church* (Lewiston: Mellen Biblical Press, 1993), 129.

⁵⁵ I am not arguing for an inclusive theology of religions’ nomenclature.

Jewish race, but is extended to the Eunuch (Acts 8:26–40), Cornelius’ household and the whole of the gentile race (Acts 10:18–48). He eventually communicates the vision, the message and its implications for Christian life to the Church (Acts 11). At first, Peter’s audience could not conceive that God would elect non-Jews to salvation (Acts 11:1–3). Through persuasion, they mature and accept God’s ways more broadly (Acts 11:18).

The church in Acts continues to learn about God’s surprising plans. In time, the church in Acts faces conflicts that threaten their identity and mission. This time, a reconfiguring of the relationship between the Jewish believers and gentile converts occurs (Acts 15). A Council at Jerusalem is convened to provide resolutions. The result is a motion to embrace God’s inclusive vision for the gentiles by either reinterpreting and/or modifying culture that shapes interpretations and practices (Acts 15). In Acts, Peter’s audience (Acts 11 and Acts 15) is contrasted with Stephen’s audience (Acts 7) who rejects God’s love beyond the Jewish race: while Peter’s audience relents, Stephen’s audience is indignant at the thought that God would accept the gentiles as equals. The writer of Acts notes that Stephen calls the Jewish leaders “stiff-neck and uncircumcised of heart” (Acts 7:51)—the antonym of “the true circumcision,” known also as “the circumcision of the heart” (Rom. 2:25–29; cf. Acts 10:44–48; 15:1,10). At the close of Acts, Paul calls the Jews (who continue to reject that salvation has come to the gentiles) people who are dull of hearing—who hear but do not understand, who see but do not perceive accurately (Acts 28:25–27). On the other hand, Peter’s audience rejoices on discovering God’s intent for the gentiles (Acts 11:18):

A short-sighted vision is perilous to the spirituality of the pilgrim community – members may judge wrongly, oppose God’s will and suffer divine penalty. Ironically in Acts, the Jewish non-Christian leaders make this mistake—they reject God’s message, messenger and method.⁵⁶ Origen’s *Contra Celsus* (p. 57) claims that Gamaliel alone warns the Jewish leaders not to judge the followers of Christ pre-maturely and dogmatically (Acts 5:33–42). Gamaliel is portrayed as “a paragon of open-mindedness and wisdom” who counsel fellow Jews to remain open to God’s possible work through the Christians instead of following human tradition and interpretations (Acts 5:38–39).⁵⁷ The Gamaliel principle of openness is applicable for a church struggling to maintain missional unity—the Gamaliel principle urges a suspension of judgment because God may be behind an unfavorable movement, tradition, and development. As the hymn-writer William Cooper (1781–1800) pens, “God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform.”⁵⁸ Openness is the opposite of reticence, indifference, indecision, timidity and/or cowardliness. To be open is to receive God and God’s surprises courageously.

Openness facilitates hospitality. The host knows what he/she believes and yet listens and learns from those who hold different convictions, beliefs and practices. Gamaliel’s openness displays an exclusive-inclusivism posture that is needed for conflict resolution.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Litwak, *Echoes of Scripture in Luke-Acts*, 187.

⁵⁷ John A. Darr, “Irenic or Ironic? Another Look at Gamaliel before the Sanhedrin (Acts 5:33–42),” Richard P. Thompson, and Thomas E. Phillips, eds., *Literary Studies in Luke-Acts* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 121.

⁵⁸ Peterson and Peterson, *The Complete Book of Hymns*, 391.

⁵⁹ I am using the terms to denote the attitude of excluding those who differ from oneself (as in exclusivism) and the attitude of openness and even embrace of those who hold different viewpoints (as in inclusiveness).

Participants consciously suspend judgment about another so as to listen to dissimilar viewpoints without jettisoning their prior worldview. Similarly, Paul and Barnabas were leading their communities to resolve conflicts with godliness: they maintain fidelity to their tradition while examining opposing views respectfully and positively so as not to make unwarranted, unexamined, and incorrect conclusion, especially about those who claim to speak for God and his ways. Theologically, an exclusive-inclusivism recognizes the archetypal (rather than ectypal) knowledge/understanding in human discourse, and thus, enables discerners to be less dogmatic or rigid in holding a point of view and avoid dismissing alternative perspectives.⁶⁰ Stephen rebukes the Jews for following with rigidity the laws of God so much so that their dogmatism does not help them discern God's providence (Acts 7:48).⁶¹ Exclusive-inclusivism embodies the relational ontology of the Church as communities in communion that is based on the Tri-unity of God. The posture neither allows a tradition to retreat into a cocoon in their interest to preserve the purity of its faith and traditioning, nor welcomes a tradition to discriminate against another as a protective mechanism against differences/otherness. The posture seeks a healthy confluence of being evangelical and ecumenical such as proposed by Donald Bloesch and Gabriel Fackre.⁶²

However, the Acts narrative cautions against a thoroughly inclusive or thoroughly ecumenical missional model of being church. Jerome H. Neyrey, a Luke-Acts scholar, writes, "although Luke indicates that Jesus postulates an inclusive agenda, he nevertheless created and defended boundaries which clearly indicate where people stand in relation to God and who is 'in' or 'out' of the covenant."⁶³ The God of salvation history is portrayed in Luke-Acts as an inclusive God.⁶⁴ The message is also exclusive about limiting inclusion to those who refuse God's salvific call. Between the inclusivity and exclusivity of the gospel mission and message in Acts, the thrust is the emphasis on the sharing of God's vision and mission.

Luke-Acts offers a paradigmatic missional ecclesiology that speaks of a borderless, diverse, and inclusive community without reinterpreting the exclusivity of the Christian faith/message.⁶⁵ The Spirit breaks down barriers and brings unity: the mission includes Jews and gentiles.⁶⁶ The Spirit also unites individuals in community.⁶⁷ The churches in Acts unite amid their plurality and diversity in identity and mission. The corporate identity as a People of God embraces both unity and diversity (i.e., differences and diversity of opinions).⁶⁸ Missional church unity does not seek a uniformity of beliefs,

⁶⁰ Roland Chia, *Revelation and Theology* (Berne: Peter Lang, 1999).

⁶¹ Squires, *Plan of God in Luke-Acts*, 68.

⁶² See Gabriel Fackre, *The Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007); Donald Bloesch, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

⁶³ Jerome H. Neyrey, "The Symbolic Universe of Luke-Acts: They Turn the World Upside Down," Jerome H. Neyrey, ed., *The Social World of Luke-Acts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 299.

⁶⁴ Towner, "Mission Practice and Theology Under Construction," 417–36.

⁶⁵ Hammer, *Interpreting Luke-Acts*, 129.

⁶⁶ Hammer, *Interpreting Luke-Acts*, 12, 75, 122.

⁶⁷ Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke*, 208.

⁶⁸ Elmer A. Martens, "The People of God," Scott J. Hafemann and Paul R. House, eds., *Central Themes in Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 224–53.

practices and convictions among the different churches/Christian traditions—a uniformed-unity completely annuls the uniqueness of the different Christian traditions and is an affront to the actions of the churches in Acts (cf. Acts 15).

Finally, the Christians in Acts practice their faith in wonder, awe, and submission to a gracious and judicious God. The consuming vision of God enables the Christians in Acts to participate faithfully in their evangelical convictions, maintain the posture as pilgrims, remain open and welcoming to those who not only are different from them but who also oppose and persecute them. The Christians in Acts believe in a God who is all-wise, all-knowing, all-gracious, always listening and yet, who is just and who shall both reward the faithful and punish the unfaithful. Thus, they exercise humility, receptivity, trust, attentiveness, perseverance and grace in the conduct of their Christian practices in the company of the churches.⁶⁹ Churches that seek to be a passive observer without a collegial engagement and fellowship with other Christian churches, especially with those outside of their affiliated ecclesial belongings (no doubt based upon various ecclesiological arguments and polity) have traded their universal witness of the churches for remaining in local fidelity. Communion that reinterpret Scripture and Christian ethics in light of contemporary socio-political understandings without considering how their decisions may have deviated from biblical, apostolic, and theological traditions of the church run the risk of pushing the conservative bodies of Christ to initiate a “Reformation” in our generation that will further divide the churches. The unity of the churches and the mission of the churches support each other as vital for the health of the churches.

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⁶⁹ Michael John Cusick, <http://restoringthesoul.com/the-seven-postures-of-the-heart/>, accessed February 5, 2015.

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