Introduction

With the shadow of next Sunday's sermon falling over the study, the preacher using this commentary may be tempted to bypass the Introduction and go directly to the passage that is the starting point for the sermon. However, a commentary does not simply string together discussions of particular passages. A commentary offers a holistic interpretation of the biblical book based on a particular reconstruction of the world to which the biblical book was written, and the purposes and distinctive features of that book. This information not only helps a preacher understand a particular passage but often makes its way into the sermon. Since the central focus of *Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries* is sermon development, I straightforwardly indicate my perspectives on such matters in this Introduction. Preachers who want to delve into details of scholarship can consult more technical commentaries.

The Sermon: The Twenty-Ninth Chapter of Acts

I once heard a preacher announce the title of her sermon as "The Twenty-Ninth Chapter of Acts." The congregation became restive—we knew that Acts contains only 28 chapters. But the preacher made an important point: Luke intended for the congregation to whom Luke wrote to continue the story told in Luke-Acts by witnessing in its own time much as Luke depicted Jesus, the apostles, and the church in their earlier times. The saga begun in Luke-Acts will not be complete until Jesus returns. In the meantime, congregations add new chapters to the story.

The sermon today is not itself the Twenty-Ninth chapter of Acts. That congregation writes that chapter in its life and witness. In the sermon, the preacher urges the congregation to witness faithfully to the presence and coming of the Realm. By the time we reach the end of the Book of Acts, Luke wants readers to ask, "How will we write *our* chapter in the movement toward the Realm? Will we continue faithfully in the line of Jesus, the apostles, and Paul even as we await the end of this age?"

Who Was "Luke?"

Many people in North America today are interested in the personalities and personal lives of public figures. Those who follow the contemporary cult of personality are often disappointed when encountering biblical figures because we can know so little about these ancient personalities and personal stories. In this vein, we do not know the name, the personality, or many other facts about the author of Acts. The earliest records that attach the name "Luke" to the Gospel and Acts do not appear in our records until the second century. To be sure, biblical materials refer to a figure named Luke (Col. 4:14; 2 Tim. 4:11; Philem. 24). But the Bible itself gives no indication that this Luke is the author of the Gospel and Acts. Nevertheless, the church has long used the name Luke when referring to this writer, and I follow this custom.

Because Colossians 4:14 describes someone named Luke as "beloved physician," many Christians have imagined Luke as a medical doctor. However, no major scholars today think Luke was a physician. While the picture of Luke as a "beloved physician" created a warm feeling about Luke-Acts, it added nothing of substance to our understanding of the theological meaning of these materials.

Scholars continue to debate whether Luke was a Jew or a gentile. In my view, Luke has such a profound knowledge of the Septuagint (the translation of the Torah, Prophets, and Writings into Greek), it is difficult to imagine a gentile acquiring such a deep and intuitive resonance. I think Luke was Jewish. This possibility is reinforced when we remember that many Jewish people regarded the primary mission of Judaism as being a "light to the gentiles" (for example, Isa. 40:7; cf. Gen. 12:1-3). For Luke the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus were a light through which God sought to reach out to gentiles in the last days of the present age. Of course, Luke is critical of some Jewish people, which I regard as a family fight.

Who Was Theophilus?

Luke dedicates both the Gospel and Acts (Luke 1:1; Acts 1:1) to Theophilus. Scholars ponder whether Theophilus was an actual person or whether the name is a symbol. If a person, then Theophilus was likely Luke's benefactor or patron—a wealthy person who subsidized Luke writing these materials. Some scholars think this situation accounts for the relative sympathy toward wealthy people in Luke-Acts. At the same time, the name Theophilus could be a theological symbol whose meaning is revealed in the two parts of the name:

"Theo" is from the Greek word for God, and "philus" is from a Greek expression for "one who loves" or "beloved." Thus the name Theophilus could refer to all who love God or to all who are beloved of God.

In either event, Luke 1:4 indicates that Luke's congregation was already acquainted with stories of Jesus and the church. Luke envisions readers whose mindset will be reframed by Luke's retelling of the story. Luke's purpose is similar to that of the preacher today: to help a community already familiar with the broad lines of the story discern more adequately the leading of God.

Date, Place of Composition, and Location of Addressees

Most scholars think Luke wrote between 80 and 90 CE. We do not know either the precise place Luke wrote these materials or the location of the congregation to whom Luke wrote. Yet clues within the materials suggest that Luke wrote to a congregation in an urban environment influenced by Greek culture. For example, Luke modifies some details in the Gospel to appeal to urban residents. In the Markan version of the story of the friends who lower a paralyzed person to Jesus through the roof, the friends dig through roof of a typical Palestinian small-town house, whereas in the Lukan version they remove the tiles on the roof of a more prosperous urban house (Mark 2:4; Luke 5:19). The narrative in Acts moves from city to city and regards Rome as the destination of the story. Luke quotes Greek authors as theological authorities (for example, Acts 17:28; 26:24b).

One Story: The Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts

The Gospel and Acts tell one continuous story. The narrative that begins in Luke 1:1 does not reach its climax until Acts 28:31. To read the two volumes in separation is to rend asunder what Luke intended to join together. When preaching from the Gospel, the preacher should trace the main themes of the passage from the Gospel into Acts. When developing a sermon from Acts, the preacher should explore how themes of the passage emerged in the Gospel. To treat a passage from Luke-Acts in isolation is to violate one of the fundamental axioms of biblical interpretation: the interpreter should always explore a passage in its literary context.

Special Feature: The Chiastic Structure of the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts

In my view, the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts form a giant chiasmus. Chiasm was a commonplace literary structure in antiquity in which an author arranged the elements of a text in inverted parallelism. A chiasm could be as short as one verse or as long as an entire document. The center element of the chiasm reveals the central concern.

In a chiasm, the parallel elements interpret one another. The Gospel tells the story of how Jesus came to ascend to God. The Book of Acts draws out the implications of the ascended Jesus for the witness of the church. The geographical movement of Luke-Acts helps us see the chiastic structure. The story begins in out-of-the-way Jewish settlements of Luke 1–2 with the news that through the ministry of Jesus, God is bringing the Realm of God to its final manifestation. The story moves toward Jerusalem where the central revelatory events occur, especially the center of the chiasm, the ascension of Jesus (Luke 24:44-53 and Acts 1:6-11). The story ends with the news of the Realm going from Jerusalem to Rome, the heart of the power structure of the old age and symbol of the gentile world.

As noted below, Luke's congregation was likely in a season of difficulty. By placing the ascended Jesus at the center of the story, Luke assures the congregation they can continue to witness to the coming of the Realm in the confidence that the promises God made through Jesus are trustworthy.

The chiastic structure is set out in Appendix 1. In connection with each passage from Acts, I briefly discuss how the parallel element from the Gospel enriches our understanding of Acts. The element in the Gospel typically provides background for understanding the element in Acts. The element in Acts typically draws out the implication of the element in the Gospel for the witness of the church. The preacher who wants to make full use of the chiasmus in preaching could print two texts for each sermon—one from the Gospel and one from Acts.

A Companion to Preaching from the Gospel of Luke

Because of the chiastic pattern just discussed, a preacher can use this commentary on the Book of Acts as an immediate companion when developing a sermon from the Gospel of Luke. A preacher working with a text in Luke can use Appendix 1, "The Chiastic Structure of Luke-Acts," to locate the passage in Luke and its parallel in Acts, and then turn to the commentary proper for

exegetical and homiletical discussion. The preacher who is preparing a message from the Revised Common Lectionary can use Appendix 1 in the way just described or can turn to Appendix 2, "Table Correlating Lectionary Readings from Luke withy Chiastic Parallels from Acts." This latter appendix lists passages from the Gospel of Luke and their chiastic parallels from Acts in the order of the days of the Christian Year for lectionary years A, B, and C. In a sense, this work on Acts is really a commentary on two books of the Bible at once.

The End-Time Worldview of Acts: Living through a Delay in the End

Luke shared the main lines of Jewish end-time theology (apocalypticism). This viewpoint is found in nascent form in Isaiah 56–66 and Zechariah 9–12 and is fully developed in Daniel 7–12. It was popular in Jewish circles beginning about 300 BCE. The end-time theologians believed that God created the world as an Eden in which all things manifest God's purposes. However, Eve and Adam accepted the invitation of Satan (the snake) to transgress by eating the forbidden fruit. As punishment, God cursed the human beings and the world. As an act of grace, God did not destroy the world but promised to restore it.

The end-time theologians thought of history from the fall to the restoration as an old age in which existence was broken. Satan and the demons had great power. The old creation was an age of idolatry, injustice, exploitation, enmity with nature, violence, and death. However, at a moment God had predetermined, God would end the old age and replace it with the Realm of God—a time in which God's rule would prevail in every circumstance and which was marked by worship of the living God, love, justice, mutual support, social equality, abundance, health, a relationship of blessing between humankind and nature, peace, and everlasting life. The means of transition from the old to the new would be an apocalypse in which God would invade the world, destroy the old age, and restore all things. The old creation included empires that idolatrously sought ultimate allegiance and demanded subservience. The Roman Empire was a prime example.

Luke modified this end-time theology in three respects. First, Luke interpreted the ministry of Jesus, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the emergence of the church as signals that the last days were underway. Second, Luke believed many characteristics of the coming Realm of God were already at work in the present, initially through the ministry of Jesus but continuing under the power of the Spirit through the church. Indeed, the church was to embody qualities of the Realm while inviting others to prepare for its final arrival. Third,

Luke believed that the apocalypse was delayed. One purpose of the Gospel and Acts is to urge the community to continue their witness during the delay by assuring them that the Holy Spirit continued to empower them even in the face of conflict.

At one time, many preachers and scholars thought Luke-Acts was a political apologetic, a document designed to persuade the Romans that the church had no plans for sedition. Few scholars today follow this line of interpretation. In fact, Luke views the Roman Empire with a jaundiced theological eye: God will destroy Rome at the apocalypse. At the same time, however, Luke mentions individual Romans soldiers and officials who serve the purposes of the Realm. In the same way God used Cyrus the Persian to liberate Israel's leaders from exile in Babylon (for example, Isa. 44:24–28; 45:1–17), so Luke believed God used aspects of Roman machinery to protect Paul long enough for Paul to carry the gospel to Rome.

What Was Happening in the Congregation to which Luke Wrote?

The preacher wants to know what was happening in the congregation to which Luke wrote as well as how Luke sought to address those dynamics. The preacher can then find fitting analogies and points of difference between the ancient and contemporary contexts, and Luke's purposes in them, and can decide whether Luke's purposes are appropriate for today. Here is a simplified summary of major dynamics in Luke's situation.

- The delay in the apocalypse generated doubts and dissipated the congregation's witness. Luke wants the congregation to witness through the delay with confidence and energy.
- Luke's church was in tension with many Jewish people. Luke wants the church to recognize its own roots in Judaism while believing its Jewish critics are not faithful to their own tradition.
- Some gentiles treat Jewish people disrespectfully. Luke reminds gentiles of the Jewish origins of the movement toward the Realm and urges gentiles to respect Judaism.
- The congregation contained both Jewish and gentile members who were themselves in tension. Luke wants both groups to live together in the love, peace, and mutual support of the restored world. The life of the church should prefigure the life of the Realm.
- The wealthy were slow to share their resources with the poor. God seeks to use the sharing of material resources as God's means for

providing for the poor and freeing the rich from the idolatry of wealth. God wants all to experience security.

- The congregation was divided regarding the role of women in leadership. Luke-Acts does not portray women as having equal standing with men, but this literature does contain impulses toward liberation.
- The congregation perceived itself as harassed or in danger of being harassed. Luke uses the martyrdoms of Jesus, Stephen, James, Paul, Jesus's teaching that the disciples would take up their crosses daily, and the suffering of the church to urge the community to continue faithful witness even in the face of threat.
- Luke's community was uncertain how to relate to the Empire and its representatives. Luke wants his congregation to critique the idolatry, injustice, and violence of the Empire while making its way through the world dominated by the Empire, recognizing that individual Romans and even Roman systems can serve the purposes of the Realm.
- Underlying these concerns was a question that vexes the church to the present: authority. Where does the church turn for resources in discerning God's presence and purposes? Luke grounds the story of Jesus and the church in the Septuagint and uses the story of Jesus in the Gospel as authorizing the mission of the church in Acts. The apostles are the authorizing body for the church. The Holy Spirit aligns Jesus, the apostles, and the church with the purposes of God.

We may say generally, then, that the congregation was disheartened in faith and dissipated in mission. The congregation's internal life was conflicted, and the congregation's external witness was dissipated. Luke told the story of the church in Acts to stir the congregation in his day to the level of faithfulness exhibited by the community in Acts.

Continuing the Story of Israel but in Tension with Some Jewish People

Christians have often seen the story of Israel and the stories of Jesus and the church as discontinuous. Indeed, many members of the church regard the religion of Israel and the Old Testament as old, out-of-date, legalistic, repressive, judgmental, and teaching works-righteousness. Those same folk see the religion of Jesus and the New Testament as new, improved, liberating, and based on love and grace. Many in the church believe that Judaism is no longer valid and that Jesus, the New Testament, and the church have replaced the Old

Testament and Judaism. Indeed, in this paradigm, Jesus liberates his followers from Judaism!

A widespread movement in biblical and theological scholarship now regards the preceding paradigm as a horrendous mistake. In its worst forms, it feeds anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. It contributed directly to the murder of six million Jewish people by the Nazis during World War II. Less virulently, it leads to subtle forms of anti-Semitism as well as to Christian smugness. In the last thirty years, however, many Christian scholars and preachers call for Christianity and Judaism to respect the integrity of the other and to express elements of shared identity, values, ethics, and mission.

Luke sees the stories of Jesus and the church growing out of the deeper story of Israel. Indeed, one of Luke's purposes is to explain how a movement centered in Jewish end-time expectation (Jesus) became a movement welcoming both Jewish and gentile peoples and pointing to the renewal of the entire cosmos.

For Luke—as for many of the authors of the Torah, Prophets, and Writings—God intended to bless all peoples through the life of Israel. According to Luke, God used the ministry of Jesus to signal that history was in its final days. Through the church, God welcomed gentiles into the movement toward the Realm. The mission of Jesus and the church, then, are a continuation of the mission of Israel. The church's outreach to gentiles is not a rejection of Judaism but an expression of God's intent to bless gentiles in the last days. For Luke the church is not a separate religion (Christianity) from Judaism but an extension of Judaism. The leading figures—such as Jesus, Peter, and Paul—are almost always faithfully Jewish.

At the same time, Luke-Acts reports considerable conflict between Jesus (and the church) and Jewish people. Scholars agree that the Gospel and Acts are not anti-Semitic (systematic hatred of all things Jewish). Luke-Acts does, however, articulate a bias against many Jewish people. The Gospel and Acts do not reject Judaism as such, but they harshly criticize Jewish people who do not endorse the validity of the mission of Jesus and the church. Indeed, the Gospel and Acts imply that Jewish and gentile people who do not respect the movement to the Realm will be condemned at the apocalypse.

Many scholars today think that the caricatures of Jewish people in Luke-Acts reflect tensions between Luke's congregation and some Jewish leaders of Luke's own time. What prompted this conflict? It was likely not a conflict between legalistic Judaism and liberating Christianity but was a conflict regarding what it meant to be faithfully Jewish. Many Jewish people in Luke's day who were not in the church believed they were living in the last days.

They wanted to be prepared to be saved, that is, welcomed into the Realm. The primary point of tension was the degree to which gentiles needed to be initiated into Judaism to be saved at the last day. Luke agreed with prevailing Jewish opinion that gentiles needed to believe in the one living God, to repent, and to adopt core Jewish attitudes and behaviors (see Acts 15:22-29). With history soon to end, however, Luke did not think that gentiles needed to be fully initiated into Judaism by following the dietary practices and circumcision.

When working with the Gospel and Acts, the preacher needs to handle carefully images of Jewish people and Judaism. A preacher's instinct is often to contrast negative Judaism with positive Jesus, Christianity and church. Instead, the preacher can explain the circumstances that gave rise to the negative caricature of Judaism. The preacher may need to say that Luke was theologically and/or ethically mistaken in regard to elements of some texts. I name these points in the commentary. Indeed, such reflection might help the congregation recognize and repent of its own anti-Judaism. If a preacher cannot find positive points of contact in the text itself, the preacher can nearly always do so in the conversation sparked by the text, a reading of passages that reinforces negative perceptions of Judaism today. By criticizing select texts, the preacher can help today's church break the cycle of anti-Judaism that has been self-perpetuating for two millennia.

Strategies for Moving from Then to Now

The first responsibility of the preacher is to explain what a text in Acts asked its readers to believe and do in antiquity. The second is to help the congregation today consider what it believes and what to do in response.

One of the most common means of moving from then to now is the hermeneutic of analogy. The preacher recognizes differences in culture and world view between antiquity and today, while also identifying similarities in experience. The preacher bridges these differences by making analogies in similar experiences then and now. I often use the language of surface and deeper meanings in this regard: a text has a surface meaning that may or may not be at home in the world view today, while also having a deeper meaning, that is, a significance not limited by the surface meaning but connecting to deeper realms of experience that we share with people in antiquity.

For example, the story of the ascension (Acts 1:1-11) pictures Jesus ascending from the earth to heaven where Jesus is at the right hand of God. At the surface level, Luke presupposes a three story universe (an underworld, the earth, and heaven above), so that Jesus could literally ascend from earth to

heaven. The point of the text is that Jesus is sovereign over all other rulers, authorities, dominions, and powers (including Satan, demons, and Caesar). Today, science tells us we live in an ever-expanding universe in which talk of a three-story universe is out of date. However, from an analogical perspective, the preacher today can affirm the deeper point that God through Jesus has authority over all other forces and powers.

While the hermeneutic of analogy often makes it possible for the sermon to move from then to now in a clear and compelling way, the preacher needs to use theological caution when considering this hermeneutic. Some texts contain elements that are theologically or ethically inappropriate. In such cases, the hermeneutic of analogy would actually misrepresent God's purposes.

For instance, in Acts 5:1-11, Ananias and Sapphira claim to have given the entire price of a piece of property to the church's common treasury. However, when they lied, God struck them dead. This text implies that God is a murderer. To be sure, the deeper function of this passage is to impress upon the congregation the double importance of telling the truth and of contributing to the welfare of the community through sharing goods. But this point comes with what I believe is a misrepresentation of God. In my view, God is a God of unconditional love who wills for all people to live in relationships of love. Such a God would not murder Ananias and Sapphira.

The preacher is called to name the theological difficulties in such a text. Indeed, at times a minister must preach against a text. In the case of Acts 5:1-11, to fail to make such a critique is to leave the impression that God engages in murder. A congregant could then conclude that God sanctions murder in certain settings today.

The most common texts in Acts that raise theological difficulties for the preacher are those that caricature Jewish people. This issue is discussed above in connection with tensions between the church and Judaism.

Rather than think of a simple movement from then to now, I prefer to think of the sermon as a conversation with two parts. (1) The preacher identifies what a text from Acts invited the congregation in antiquity to believe and do. (2) The preacher explores how conversation with the text helps the congregation today clarify what we can believe and do. Our encounter with the text pushes us to clarify our own beliefs and to identify appropriate actions, even when the text itself contains problematic elements. For instance, considering God as murderer in Acts 5:1-11 pushes me to recognize that I do not believe God acts that way. I would not preach the text, but I would preach good news from God arising from conversation with the text.

Cautions about Anachronism

The first rule of biblical exegesis is to respect the integrity and otherness of a text by considering what it asked people to believe and do in its own historical, literary, and theological contexts. However, preachers sometimes bypass this practice and engage in anachronism. Anachronism occurs when preacher and congregation read today's issues, beliefs, assumptions, values and behaviors into the biblical text when those things were not found in the ancient world. We make the text into our own image by treating it as a mirror of our own lives and world.

Preachers and commentators like to think that our own theological and ethical values are confirmed in the Bible because we can then claim to stand on the authority of the Bible when advocating our views and values. However, anachronism greatly reduces the power of our encounter with the otherness of the text. When we read the text as reflections of ourselves, we reduce the power of the passage to offer us fresh ways of thinking about (and responding to) God.

For example, many people in the progressive Christian circles in which I move long for multicultural community. Many Christians believe that God values all cultures and that a central feature of the Realm of God is multiple cultures living alongside one another in mutual respect. I frequently hear preachers read this agenda into Acts. But the church in Acts is not a straightforward prototype of the kind of respect for different cultures that progressives and others hope to find in today's schools, work places, and neighborhoods in which people of different racial and ethnic groups, genders, religions, and sexual orientations live together in mutual respect while celebrating many of their differences. I share this hope for community today. But the community of the church in Acts is constituted by repentance, baptism in the name of Jesus, and by gentiles and Jews living together in covenantal commitment even as gentiles take on select Jewish values and practices. In a conversational mode, a preacher may make theological moves to get from Luke's picture of the church in Acts to the kind of multicultural community described above as one of God's purposes for today. But the preacher does violence to Acts by reading today's hope for multicultural community into the ancient text.

The Book of Acts in the Lectionary

The Revised Common Lectionary assigns readings from Acts each year on the Baptism of Jesus, on the Sundays after Easter, and on Pentecost. These are important Sundays that give Acts a place of honor.

In other respects, however, the Book of Acts is disadvantaged in the lectionary. The Revised Common Lectionary assigns only twenty-four texts from Acts in the entire three-year table of readings. Moreover, the congregation never hears the entire story of Acts in a continuous telling in the way that the congregation hears most of the Gospels and the Epistles. The last reading from Acts in the lectionary is from Acts 19. The congregation never hears Acts 20–28—the story of Paul's arrest, arraignment, and the journey to Rome that reveal Luke's ultimate purpose in the Gospel and Acts. Furthermore, the readings from Acts are always subservient to the readings from the Gospel. Acts never speaks in its own voice, except when the preacher chooses to make Acts the lead text in the sermon.

Beyond these things, Acts is involved in one of the most unfortunate theological moves in the lectionary. On the seven Sundays after Easter, the lectionary excises the main reading from the Torah, Prophets, and Writings and inserts instead a passage from Acts. At the climactic season of the Christian Year—when the church contemplates the demonstration of the Realm through the resurrection—the lectionary leans in an anti-Jewish direction by removing the Torah, Prophets, and Writings, implying they are not necessary to the church's identity and witness. When preparing for worship after Easter, the preacher and worship planners are encouraged to add a reading from the Torah, Prophets, and Writings that coordinates with the other lections. If a passage must be dropped, let it be the Letter or the Gospel.

In my view, the lectionary is to serve the witness to the Realm through church; the church is not called to serve the lectionary. The lectionary sometimes fails to yield a meaningful, mutual, critical correlation between the assigned readings and the local context. When that occurs—and correlation does exist between a non-lectionary reading from Acts and the local situation—ministers should feel free to depart from the lectionary and to preach from the text from Acts. Outside the lectionary, a preacher could develop a series of sermons from Acts. Appendix 3 outlines three same sample sermon series—on key passages, on leading characters, and on themes.

Outside of the service of worship, a minister or other Bible teacher can lead a Bible study series on Acts. Ideally the class could follow the entire narrative of Acts. If time does not permit such an extensive study, the leaders might do part of the book (say, the missionary journeys of Paul). The preacher could broaden

the impact of such a study by using the same texts in the pulpit on Sunday as the study groups are using during the week.

Theological Perspectives of Luke and the Writer of this Commentary

Recent emphasis on preachers becoming aware of our own social locations includes the importance of naming our own theological convictions. By so doing, we can better avoid anachronism by being able to compare and contrast our theological perspectives with those of the biblical text and with other theological voices.

The purpose of this commentary is to point to possibilities for preaching from Acts and not to push my own theological perspective as the norm for moving from text to sermon. But in the commentary I occasionally use my theology as an example of moving from text to sermon.

Influenced by process (relational) theology, my own deepest theological conviction is that God is unconditional love. Indeed, God seeks for all people and all things to live together in love. I believe that while God is more influential than any other entity, God does not have the absolute power to do anything God wants. In my view, God is present in each and every moment to offer all entities—people as well as elements of creation—the optimum experience of love available to them in the circumstances of that moment. God cannot unilaterally change difficult contexts, but God is present as we make our way through them.

I do not believe, as Luke does, that God has divided history into two discontinuous ages or that God is going to (or can) end the present era in a single moment to bring about the Realm. God works in the world through lure rather than through coercion. God's power is limited to what God can accomplish through lure as human beings and other elements of creation choose (consciously or unconsciously) to cooperate with God's purposes of love, peace, justice, and abundance. We can embrace those purposes and facilitate them, or we turn away from God's purposes and frustrate them.

I do not believe that God intentionally causes pain or harm. Hence, I do not endorse Luke's view that God sentences people to temporary or everlasting punishment. Nevertheless, we do sometimes make decisions that go against God's purposes. By doing so, we invite circumstances that bring judgment on ourselves. God does not cause us to suffer, but we suffer the consequences of our own mistakes.

In the broad sense, I regard encounters with passages from the Book of Acts as occasions on which to consider how God seeks to lure us into ever-deeper relationships of love with God and other people. I believe God, through the Holy Spirit, is present with the preacher in the study, with the preacher and the congregation in the moment of preaching, and in the afterglow of the sermon to intensify our experiences of love and our responses of loving God and one another.

In the strict sense, we cannot know what the future holds. But I have experienced enough love and grace in this life to believe that we can trust God to be ever present, luring us toward a world in which unconditional love is all in all.