The Jesus-Shaped Life: The Telos of the Gospels and the Testimony of Acts

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ABSTRACT | Christians generally agree that the aim of sanctification is Christlikeness but disagree about the degree to which Christlikeness is possible in this life. The present study engages in theological interpretation of the Gospels and Acts to address this question, beginning in each case with a scholarly consensus. It first argues that as ancient biographies the Gospels have a mimetic telos—namely, to cultivate a Jesus-shaped (i.e., holy) life. It goes on to show how the numerous parallels between Jesus and his witnesses in Luke-Acts testify that early Christians did indeed live Jesus-shaped lives. Together, the telos of the Gospels and the testimony of Acts indicate that the Jesus-shaped life is not only possible but is the normative Christian life—the way the Christian life is meant to be lived.

KEYWORDS | Acts of the Apostles, ancient biography, Gospels, mimesis, sanctification

Christians generally agree that the aim of sanctification is Christlikeness.[1] But to what degree is Christlikeness possible in this life? Christians differ

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1. The early church fathers give significant attention to holiness as Christlikeness. See Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus*; Tertullian, *De patientia*; Gregory of Nyssa, "On Perfection," in *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan, FC 58 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1967). Other representative theologians from church history who equate holiness with Christlikeness include Augustine, *City of God* 22.16, 18; Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian, 1520: The Annotated Luther Study Edition*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 95–97, 102; Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. Aloysius Croft and Harold Bolton (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2003); John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans.

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significantly in how they answer this question.[2] The present study engages in theological interpretation of the Gospels and Acts to explore to what extent the Jesus-shaped life is possible for Christians. I begin in each case with a scholarly consensus (the Gospels as ancient biographies; the parallels between Jesus and his witnesses in Luke-Acts) and go on to consider its significance for a theology of the Christian life.

The Telos of the Gospels

Ancient Biography and Mimesis

One of the most significant developments in Gospels scholarship over the last fifty years is the emergence of a consensus that the Gospels are ancient biographies (or lives). For much of the twentieth century, the dominant view was that the Gospels were popular folk literature of their own genre (*sui generis*). However, Richard Burridge initiated a paradigm shift with his 1992 book *What Are the Gospels?*[3] Here Burridge identified the generic features of ancient biography and argued compellingly that the Gospels exhibit these features. Scholars since Burridge have tended to affirm that the Gospels are ancient biographies. As Craig Keener states, "Most Gospels scholars today view the Gospels as belonging to the genre of ancient biography. Both supporters and detractors now recognize this general consensus."[4]

Scholars have thus begun to explore further what it means to read the Gospels as ancient biographies, and initial investigations have uncovered a

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Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 1.15.4; 3.6.3; John Wesley, "On Perfection," in *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 6:411–24. For contemporary scholars who discuss holiness as Christlikeness, see J. I. Packer, *Rediscovering Holiness* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1992), 157–200; Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 899; Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Devoted to God: Blueprints for Sanctification* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2016), 213–35; Cornelis van der Kooi and Gijsbert van den Brink, *Christian Dogmatics: An Introduction*, trans. Reinder Bruinsma and James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 686–96. My thanks to Chris Bounds for recommending many of the sources cited above.

2. See, e.g., Melvin E. Dieter, Anthony A. Hoekema, Stanley M. Horton, J. Robertson McQuilkin, and John F. Walvoord, *Five Views on Sanctification*, Counterpoints: Bible and Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987); Donald L. Alexander, *Christian Spirituality: Five Views of Sanctification* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988); Christopher T. Bounds, "What Is the Range of Current Teaching on Sanctification and What Ought a Wesleyan to Believe on This Doctrine?," *Asbury Journal* 62.2 (2007): 33–53.

3. Now see Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

4. Craig S. Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), 27. Keener cites extensive bibliography for both claims.

treasure trove of insights into the literary, historical, and ethical dimensions of the Gospels.[5] One of the key points that has emerged is that ancient biographers often wrote not merely to satisfy their readers' historical curiosity but also to provide them with a paradigm for imitation (or mimesis). Francis Titchener states, "The defining element of ancient biography is that the subject is being illuminated to provide an example for the reader."[6] He argues that Cornelius Nepos, the author of our earliest extant Latin biographies, fits this mold. Nepos makes clear that he does not intend merely to provide a record of his subjects' deeds, saying about one of them, "I fear that if I undertake to tell of his deeds, I shall seem to be writing a history rather than a biography" (*Pel*. 1.1).[7] Nepos is more interested in the internal qualities that produced these great deeds. He says about his subject Datames, "About him I shall give the more details, because the greater number of his exploits are less familiar and because his successes were due, not to the greatness of his forces, but to his strategy, in which he excelled all the men of his day. And unless the true inwardness of these successes be explained, his career cannot be understood" (*Timoth*. 4.6). Nepos does not explicitly state that he is writing to provide a paradigm for imitation, but numerous scholars have found this emphasis in his focus on the character of his subjects. Titchener, for example, speaks of "the scholarly unity that Nepos' purpose in writing ancient biography was to provide good examples."[8] John Alexander Lobur likewise concludes, "Nepos is not trying to produce a compressed yet meticulously accurate compendium of events . . . , but rather a sketch of a general's character for exemplary purposes."[9]

5. On the literary and historical dimensions, see Craig S. Keener and Edward T. Wright, eds., *Biographies and Jesus: What Does It Mean for the Gospels to Be Biographies?* (Lexington, KY: Emeth, 2016); Michael R. Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Keener, *Christobiography*; Helen K. Bond, *The First Biography of Jesus: Genre and Meaning in Mark's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020). On the ethical dimensions, see the sources discussed below.

6. Francis Titchener, "Cornelius Nepos and the Biographical Tradition," *Greece & Rome* 50 (2003): 88. Similarly, see Richard A. Burridge, *Imitating Jesus: An Inclusive Approach to New Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 29–31, 73; Teresa Morgan, "Not the Whole Story? Moralizing Biography and *Imitatio Christi*," in *Fame and Infamy: Essays for Christopher Pelling on Characterization in Greek and Roman Biography*, ed. R. Ash, J. Mossman, and F. B. Titchener (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 353–55; Keener, *Christobiography*, 132–33; Bond, *First Biography*, 46–51.

7. Unless otherwise noted, translations of Nepos are from Cornelius Nepos, *On Great Generals. On Historians*, trans. John C. Rolfe, LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1929).

8. Titchener, "Cornelius Nepos," 85.

9. John Alexander Lobur, *Cornelius Nepos: A Study in the Evidence and Influence* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021), 45. For other examples of the consensus, see Thomas G. McCarty, "The Content of Cornelius Nepos' *De viris illustribus*," *Classical World* 67 (1974): 386–91;

Philo (ca. 20 BC–AD 50), the author of our only extant Jewish biography, writes with a similar mimetic purpose.[10] In his *On the Life of Moses*, he says that Moses

> entered . . . into the darkness where God was. . . . Thus he beheld what is hidden from the sight of mortal nature, and in himself and his life displayed for all to see, he has set before us, like some well-wrought picture, a piece of work beautiful and godlike, a model for those who are willing to copy it. Happy are they who imprint, or strive to imprint, that image in their souls. (*Moses* 1.158–159)[11]

Note the chain of imitation here: Moses has beheld and imitated God, and now the reader can behold and imitate Moses.

Plutarch (ca. AD 46–120) explicitly states that he has written his *Lives* to provide examples for imitation. He addresses his biography of Aratus to a man named Polycrates, saying,

> I have sent to you the life which I have written of your fellow-citizen and forefather, Aratus, to whom you are in no discredit in point either of reputation or of authority, not as though you had not been most diligently careful to inform yourself from the beginning concerning his actions, but that your sons, Polycrates and Pythocles, may both by hearing and reading become familiar with those family examples which it behooves them to follow and imitate. (*Arat*. 1.3–4)[12]

Plutarch explains that he has written not only so that the sons of Polycrates can know more about their ancestor Aratus but also so that they can imitate his example. Plutarch similarly says in his life of Pericles, "Virtuous action

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Joseph Geiger, *Cornelius Nepos and Ancient Political Biography*, Historia: Einzelschriften 47 (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1985), 23–24.

10. I owe the references to Philo, Plutarch, and Lucian below to William S. Kurz, "Narrative Models for Imitation in Luke-Acts," in *Greeks, Romans, and Christians: Essays in Honor of Abraham J. Malherbe*, ed. David L. Balch, Everett Ferguson, and Wayne A. Meeks (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 182–83; David B. Capes, "*Imitatio Christi* and the Gospel Genre," *BBR* 13 (2003): 5–6.

11. Translation from Philo, *On Abraham. On Joseph. On Moses*, trans. F. H. Colson, LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935). Philo is referring to Exod 20:21 LXX (Μωυσῆς δὲ εἰσῆλθεν εἰς τὸν γνόφον, οὗ ἦν ὁ θεός). Philo discusses this episode further in *Names* 7, where he makes clear that Moses sees God's invisible nature.

12. Unless otherwise noted, translations of Plutarch's *Lives* are from Plutarch, *Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, 11 vols., LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914–1926). Perrin's translation of *Arat*. 1.3–4 is unnecessarily archaic, so here I quote from Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives: The Dryden Translation*, ed. Arthur Hugh Clough, 2 vols., Modern Library Classics (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 2:612.

straightway so disposes a man that he no sooner admires the works of virtue than he strives to emulate those who wrought them. . . . For such reasons I have decided to persevere in my writing of Lives" (*Per*. 2.2). Virtue, for Plutarch, inspires those who behold it to imitate it, and this is why he has written.

Plutarch has apparently found virtue to inspire imitation in his own life as well, for he says at the beginning of his life of Aemilius Paulus, "I began the writing of my 'Lives' for the sake of others, but I find that I am continuing the work and delighting in it now for my own sake also, using history as a mirror and endeavouring in a manner to fashion and adorn my life in conformity with the virtues therein depicted" (*Aem*. 1.1).[13] Plutarch occasionally also provides negative examples, contending that we "shall be more eager to observe and imitate the better lives if we are not left without narratives of the blameworthy and the bad" (*Demetr*. 1.6).

Lucian of Samosata (ca. AD 120–180) exhibits a mimetic purpose in his life of Demonax. Toward the beginning of the biography, he says,

> It is now fitting to tell of Demonax for two reasons—that he may be retained in memory by men of culture as far as I can bring it about, and that young men of good instincts who aspire to philosophy may not have to shape themselves by ancient precedents alone, but may be able to set themselves a pattern from our modern world and to copy that man, the best of all the philosophers whom I know about. (*Demon*. 2)[14]

In response, Helen Bond comments, "Interestingly, Demonax's philosophy is not so much contained within a body of teaching—he does not give public lectures or engage in philosophical dialogue—but in his *mode of life*, expressed most clearly in his freedom from ambition and boldness of speech (his *eluther-ia* and *parrēsia*)."[15]

The four biographers above, who span three centuries and represent different cultural backgrounds, highlight how ancient biography was employed to provide a paradigm for imitation. It is also important to note that Nepos, Philo, Plutarch, and Lucian all want to cultivate not mere rote imitation of their subjects' actions but rather imitation of the virtue or character that generated those actions. Nepos wants his reader to note the "true inwardness" that generated the success of Datames. Philo desires to cultivate imitation of the divine

13. This passage appears at the beginning of *Timoleon* in the LCL edition.

14. Translation from Lucian, *Phalaris. Hippias or The Bath. Dionysus. Heracles. Amber or The Swans. The Fly. Nigrinus. Demonax. The Hall. My Native Land. Octogenarians. A True Story. Slander. The Consonants at Law. The Carousal (Symposium) or The Lapiths*, trans. A. M. Harmon, LCL (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1913).

15. Bond, *First Biography*, 49, emphasis original.

nature through the example of Moses. The virtue of great men has captivated and transformed Plutarch, and he wants the same for his reader. Lucian intends for his reader to imitate Demonax's philosophy as expressed in his way of life. Ancient biographies, then, were meant not only to *inform* readers but also to *transform* them to become like their subject with respect to their subject's character.

The Gospels and Mimesis

If the Gospels are ancient biographies, and if ancient biographies were meant to provide a paradigm for imitation, then do the Gospels intend to offer Jesus as a paradigm for imitation? Scholars are increasingly beginning to think so—both because of the mimetic context of early Christianity and because of the explicit witness of the Gospels.

The Mimetic Context of Early Christianity

David Capes argues compellingly that the New Testament authors inherited from Greco-Roman and Jewish culture a strong tradition of mimesis that they in turn employed.[16] The New Testament documents outside the Gospels regularly utilize both negative and positive examples. The author of Hebrews, for instance, exhorts his readers not to be like the wilderness generation (Heb 4:11) but rather to imitate those who lived "by faith" (Heb 11). Paul similarly encourages the Corinthians not to imitate rebellious Israel (1 Cor 10:1–13). Instead, he says, "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (11:1).[17] The imitation of Christ that we see in this last passage appears elsewhere as well. Paul urges the Philippians, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2:5). He similarly exhorts the Ephesians to "live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph 5:2). Peter teaches that one should endure suffering for doing good. He explains,

> For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.
>
> "He committed no sin,
>
> and no deceit was found in his mouth."
>
> When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself

16. Capes, "*Imitatio Christi*," 10.

17. Scripture quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted. I owe this example and the ones below from Paul and Peter to Capes, "*Imitatio Christi*," 11–13.

> bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (1 Pet 2:21–24)

Capes rightly notes that "the suffering of Jesus here moves beyond the abstract statement to presume a sequence of events in which he was abused without retaliation. Again, the example he leaves and the steps believers should follow require a narrative definition. Without that, the passage lacks persuasive power."[18]

The passages above show that New Testament authors (other than the Gospel writers) not only utilized moral examples in general but also specifically called Christians to imitate Jesus. To imitate Jesus, however, one must have some idea of how he lived. The first Christians, of course, proclaimed and taught about Jesus orally. However, as Christianity spread there would have been "a growing need for a biography of Jesus to provide a script for imitation."[19] It seems likely that the Gospels were written at least in part to fill this need.

Mimesis in the Gospels

The Gospels themselves portray Jesus as a paradigm for imitation in various ways. It is not possible to survey all the evidence here, but I would like to highlight three of the most significant ways that the Gospels encourage readers to imitate Jesus.

First, in all four Gospels Jesus repeatedly calls disciples and would-be disciples to "follow me."[20] Jesus is not merely telling disciples to walk behind him in such passages: he is calling them to imitate his way of life. This is particularly clear in the Synoptics, where after a period of training Jesus sends out the twelve apostles to do the sorts of things he has been doing.[21] Luke even recounts a further mission of seventy-two disciples (Luke 10:1–20). One might protest that such imitation is only expected of the twelve (or the seventy-two) rather than all disciples of Jesus. However, Jesus also uses "follow me" in contexts where it clearly involves imitation and applies to all disciples. He declares both to the crowd and to his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let

18. Capes, "*Imitatio Christi*," 13.

19. Capes, "*Imitatio Christi*," 13.

20. Matt 4:19; 8:22; 9:9; 10:38; 16:24; 19:21; Mark 1:17; 2:14; 8:34; 10:21; Luke 5:27; 9:23; 9:59; 14:27; 18:22; John 1:43; 12:26; 21:19, 22 (cf. John 10:27).

21. Matt 10:1–15; Mark 6:7–13, 30; Luke 9:1–6, 10. Dale Allison notes numerous parallels between the disciples in Matthew 10 and Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. See Dale C. Allison, "Matthew: Structure, Biographical Impulse and the *Imitatio Christi*," in *The Four Gospels 1992: Festschrift Frans Neirynck*, ed. Frans van Segbroeck, Christopher M. Tuckett, Gilbert van Belle, and Joseph Verheyden, 3 vols., BETL 100 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 2:1217.

them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). Similarly, he teaches, "Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27; cf. Matt 10:38). In both sayings, Jesus explicitly makes imitating his self-denying act of bearing the cross a condition for discipleship. Jesus's call to "follow me" therefore seems to be an invitation to imitate his life.

Second, the Gospels present Jesus as an example by comparing the life that disciples should live to Jesus's own life. Jesus says in Matthew, "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to be like [ὡς] the teacher, and the slave like [ὡς] the master" (Matt 10:24–25). This saying interestingly occurs in a discourse where Jesus is preparing the disciples to go out and proclaim the good news and heal in imitation of his own ministry, and in context the specific point is that the disciples should expect to be persecuted and slandered as Jesus was. Jesus declares in a different setting in Luke, "A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like [ὡς] his teacher" (Luke 6:40 ESV).

Such passages are not limited to the Synoptics. Cornelis Bennema argues that John communicates mimesis through comparison as well:

> John does not use the typical language of the Graeco-Roman mimetic traditions—the lexeme μιμεῖσθαι ('to imitate'). Instead, he employs his own mimetic language in which the comparative conjunction καθώς (either on its own or with the correlative καί or οὕτως) communicates the concept of mimesis most often. In his Gospel John uses his characteristic mimetic καθώς language with reference to obedience (15:10), unity (17:11, 21–22), existence (17:14, 16), and mission (17:18; 20:21).[22]

Note how the areas of imitation that Bennema highlights—like the Synoptic sayings above—are all-encompassing. Matthew, Luke, and John expect the lives of Jesus's disciples to be like his life not merely in a small number of external actions but in their very existence.

Third, Jesus explicitly refers to himself as an example in John. After washing the disciples' feet, Jesus says,

> Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example [ὑπόδειγμα], that you also should do just as [καθώς] I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, servants are not greater

22. Cornelis Bennema, "How to Live Well: Mimetic Ethics and Civic Education in Graeco-Roman Antiquity and Early Christianity," *TynBul* 74 (2023): 100.

> than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. (John 13:12b–17 ESV)

Here we again find John's mimetic καθώς, but Jesus also calls himself an "example" (ὑπόδειγμα). But what sort of example is Jesus? Bennema argues convincingly that the passage envisions not mindless cloning of Jesus's actions but creative articulation of them.[23] He perceptively notes that Jesus asks the disciples if they have understood what he has done (13:12), which suggests that "it is the meaning, intent and attitude underlying the original act that needs replication or cloning."[24] Bennema concludes that in John 13 "mimesis primarily involves the creative, truthful, bodily articulation of the idea and attitude that lie behind the original act rather than its exact replication."[25]

The Gospels therefore offer Jesus as a paradigm for imitation—not only for the apostles and others in the Gospels but also for disciples who encounter Jesus through the Gospels. When we combine the Gospels' own witness with the exhortations to imitate Jesus elsewhere in the New Testament and the consequent need for a narrative definition of Jesus's life, it seems likely that the Gospels were written at least in part to provide Jesus-followers with a script for imitation.

The Telos of the Gospels and the Christian Life

The Gospels therefore have a mimetic purpose—namely, to cultivate a Jesus-shaped life. The Gospels are meant not only to *inform* their readers about Jesus but also to *transform* them to be like him. Such a purpose implies that living a Jesus-shaped life is possible to some degree. But possible for whom? And to what degree? We will explore these questions below.

First, for whom is the Jesus-shaped life possible? The Gospels suggest an answer that is simultaneously exclusive and inclusive: *the Jesus-shaped life is possible for Christians*. Scholars today generally agree that the Gospels were written primarily for Christians.[26] The reader whom the Gospels aim to transform to be like Jesus, then, is one who has repented of their sins, believed in

23. Cornelis Bennema, "Mimesis in John 13: Cloning or Creative Articulation?," *NovT* 56 (2014): 261–74.

24. Bennema, "Mimesis," 271.

25. Bennema, "Mimesis," 273.

26. Richard Bauckham, "For Whom Were the Gospels Written?," in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 10. Bauckham goes on to say that "if any of the evangelists did envisage reaching non-Christian readers, they would surely have had to envisage reaching them via Christian readers" (10).

Jesus for salvation, been baptized, received the promised Holy Spirit, and so on. Indeed, the reader who simply wants to "become a better person" on their own, apart from Jesus, will leave the Gospels sorely disappointed, for according to the Jesus of the Gospels the first step is, "Follow me." To say that the Jesus-shaped life is possible for Christians, then, is exclusive in the sense that it excludes those who are not Jesus-followers. Yet it is also inclusive in the sense that it encompasses all Christians. The Gospels do not appear to be written for a certain class of Christians (e.g., a spiritual elite) but for Christians in general, and so they appear to assume that the Jesus-shaped life they aim to cultivate is possible for all Christians.

Second, to what extent is the Jesus-shaped life possible? The Gospels again suggest an answer that is simultaneously exclusive and inclusive: *it is possible for Christians to imitate Jesus's character*. On the one hand, the Gospels ascribe an exclusive identity to Jesus: he is *the* Messiah, *the* Son of God, and *the* divine Lord.[27] Christians cannot become so much like Jesus that they trespass on this unique identity.[28] On the other hand, the imitation that the Gospels envision seems to include more than mere rote repetition of Jesus's deeds. Christians are not to simply carry and die on a literal cross; they must "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow [Jesus]" (Mark 8:34), whether that cross be literal or figurative. The Gospels expect believers to imitate neither Jesus's unique identity nor his unique actions but rather his character—the attitudes, ideals, and virtues that he manifests through his actions.

Indeed, if the Gospels are ancient biographies, then the imitation of character is exactly what we should expect them to cultivate. Helen Bond rightly notes that "biographies of great men could hardly expect readers to follow their heroes in all respects; the idea was not that admirers attempted to engage in

27. On divine Christology in the Synoptic Gospels, see C. Kavin Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke*, BZNW 139 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2006); Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 15–280; Richard Bauckham, "Markan Christology according to Richard Hays: Some Addenda," *JTI* 11 (2017): 21–36; John Dennis, "Jesus as the Isaian Stronger One in Mark 1:7: A Contribution to Markan Divine Identity Christology," *TynBul* 73 (2022): 149–69; Caleb T. Friedeman, *The Revelation of the Messiah: The Christological Mystery of Luke 1–2 and Its Unveiling in Luke-Acts*, SNTSMS 181 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023); Friedeman, "Moses, Elijah, and Jesus' Divine Glory," *NTS* 70 (2024): 61–71; Brant Pitre, *Jesus and Divine Christology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2024). Scholars generally agree that John presents Jesus as God (see esp. John 1:1, 14, 18; 8:58; 20:28).

28. Philip Davis, "Christology, Discipleship, and Self-Understanding in the Gospel of Mark," in *Self-Definition and Self-Discovery in Early Christianity: A Study in Changing Horizons; Essays in Appreciation of Ben F. Meyer from Former Students*, ed. David J. Hawkins and Tom Robinson, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 26 (Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 1990), 109.

the same battles or political activities, but rather that the audience distilled the *qualities exhibited by their heroes in these situations* and emulated them."[29] Do the Gospels restrict how much believers can imitate Jesus's character? It is difficult to produce examples where the evangelists impose such limits. Overall, the Gospels emphasize the necessity (and implicitly the possibility) of imitating Jesus's character far more clearly than they set forth the limits of such imitation.

Summary

The scholarly consensus that the Gospels are ancient biographies thus turns out to provide support for the idea that the Jesus-shaped life is possible. Ancient biographers wrote to present their subjects as paradigms for imitation. The Gospel writers composed their biographies of Jesus with a similar purpose: to provide their readers with a script for imitation. The Gospels therefore envision the Jesus-shaped life as a real possibility for believers in the sense that Christians can imitate the character of Jesus.

The Testimony of Acts

The Jesus/Witnesses Parallels in Luke-Acts

If the telos of the Gospels implies that Christians can live a Jesus-shaped life, the testimony of Acts confirms it. Scholars have long observed parallels between Jesus in the Gospel of Luke and his witnesses in Acts.[30] The parallels between Jesus and Paul have received the most attention, but interpreters have also noted parallels between Jesus and Peter, John, Stephen, Philip, and

29. Bond, *First Biography*, 159–60, emphasis original. Cf. Morgan, "Not the Whole Story?," 354–55.

30. Bruno Bauer, *Die Apostelgeschichte: Eine Ausgleichung des Paulinismus und des Judenthums innerhalb der christlichen Kirche* (Berlin: Hempel, 1850), 107–9; Edward Zeller, *The Contents and Origin of the Acts of the Apostles Critically Investigated*, trans. Joseph Dare, 2 vols. (London: Williams & Norgate, 1875–1876), 2:175–76, 230–31; Howard Heber Evans, *St. Paul the Author of the Acts of the Apostles and of the Third Gospel* (London: Wyman & Sons, 1884), 43–45, 117–22; Richard Belward Rackham, *The Acts of the Apostles* (London: Methuen, 1901), xlvii, 401–2, 477–78; Henry J. Cadbury, *The Making of Luke-Acts* (New York: MacMillan, 1927), 231–32; M. D. Goulder, *Type and History in Acts* (London: SPCK, 1964), 34–97; Charles H. Talbert, *Literary Patterns, Theological Themes, and the Genre of Luke-Acts*, SBLMS 20 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 15–33; A. J. Mattill Jr., "The Jesus-Paul Parallels and the Purpose of Luke-Acts: H. H. Evans Reconsidered," *NovT* 17 (1975): 15–46; Walter Radl, *Paulus und Jesus im lukanischen Doppelwerk: Untersuchungen zu Parallelmotiven im Lukasevangelium und in der Apostelgeschichte*, Europäische Hochschulschriften 23/49 (Berlin: Lang, 1975); Robert F. O'Toole, "Parallels Between Jesus and His Disciples in Luke-Acts: A Further Study," *BZ* 27 (1983): 195–212; David P. Moessner, "'The Christ Must Suffer': New Light on the Jesus—Peter, Stephen, Paul Parallels in Luke-Acts," *NovT* 28 (1986): 220–56; James R. Edwards, "Parallels and Patterns between Luke and Acts," *BBR* 27 (2017): 485–501.

the church more broadly, as well as parallels between Peter and Paul. As Keener notes, "Today most scholars recognize the parallelism between Luke and Acts and among their various major characters."[31]

Interpreters disagree, however, about where precisely the parallels occur and what they mean. James Edwards, for example, notes that the "metaparallels" (i.e., thematic similarities) proposed by some scholars "tend toward imprecision, . . . and as imprecision increases, the certainty and significance of the parallel decreases."[32] Edwards charts a way forward by identifying parallels based on "identical words and/or phrases, contextual similarities, and (when possible) sequential agreement of data."[33] In my view, Edwards is correct in thinking that we need controls for weighing the validity of proposed parallels between Luke and Acts. However, I suggest that the controls he recommends should serve to identify a nucleus of well-established parallels against which other proposed parallels can be tested. The parallels that exhibit verbal, contextual, or sequential similarities are thus a starting point for further investigation, rather than an ending point.

The table below (table 1) summarizes verbal parallels and conceptual parallels between Jesus in Luke and his witnesses in Acts that to my mind are beyond question. They are arranged by the witness in question and by order of appearance in Acts. To discuss each parallel in depth would go beyond the bounds of the present study, so I have used footnotes to point to the work of other scholars who have noted these parallels or to provide additional substantiation.[34]

Two key observations emerge from these parallels: First, the parallels involve a wide range of witnesses. Paul by far receives the most parallels, but Luke likens Peter, John, Stephen, and the Christians in Caesarea to Jesus as well. Second, the parallels draw on diverse elements of Jesus's life. Many of them come from the passion narrative or predictions of it, but Luke refers to other parts of Jesus's life too—going into the synagogue as was his custom (Luke 4:16), being driven out of Nazareth (4:29), raising the dead (7:14–15), and so on. Luke thus seems to describe early Christians in general—and not only the apostles—as emulating Jesus's life in a wide range of ways.

The clear parallels noted above suggest that it would not at all be out of character for Luke to draw other parallels between Jesus and the early church.

31. Craig S. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012–2015), 1:556.

32. Edwards, "Parallels," 486 n. 3.

33. Edwards, "Parallels," 486.

34. Bruno Bauer argues that Luke has drawn on Mark for several parallels (*Apostelgeschichte*, 13–21, 28, 31, 33, 106–7). Of the parallels Bauer proposes, the most plausible are Mark 5:40–41 / Acts 9:36, 40; Mark 5:39 / Acts 20:10, 12; Mark 15:1 / Acts 21:11.

Table 1 | Parallels between Jesus and His Witnesses in Luke-Acts

Luke	*Acts*
Jesus-Peter/John[1]	
"One day, as he was teaching the people [διδάσκοντος αὐτοῦ τὸν λαὸν] in the temple [ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ] and telling the good news, the chief priests [οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς] and the scribes came with the elders . . ." (Luke 20:1).	"While Peter and John were speaking to the people, the priests [οἱ ἱερεῖς], the captain of the temple [τοῦ ἱεροῦ], and the Sadducees came to them, much annoyed because they were teaching the people [διὰ τὸ διδάσκειν αὐτοὺς τὸν λαὸν] and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 4:2).
"By what authority are you [Jesus] doing these things?" (ἐν ποίᾳ ἐξουσίᾳ ταῦτα ποιεῖς, Luke 20:2).	"By what power or by what name did you [Peter and John] do this?" (ἐν ποίᾳ δυνάμει ἢ ἐν ποίῳ ὀνόματι ἐποιήσατε τοῦτο ὑμεῖς, Acts 4:7).
Jesus-Stephen	
"They . . . drove him out of the town" (ἐξέβαλον αὐτὸν ἔξω τῆς πόλεως, Luke 4:29).	"They dragged him out of the city" (ἐκβαλόντες ἔξω τῆς πόλεως, Acts 7:58).
"Father, into your hands I commend my spirit [τὸ πνεῦμά μου]" (Luke 23:46).	"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit [τὸ πνεῦμά μου]" (Acts 7:59).
"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).	"Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60).
"Jesus, crying with a loud voice [φωνῇ μεγάλῃ], said, . . . Having said this [τοῦτο . . . εἰπών], he breathed his last" (Luke 23:46).	"He . . . cried out in a loud voice [φωνῇ μεγάλῃ], . . . When he had said this [τοῦτο εἰπών], he died" (Acts 7:60).
Jesus-Peter	
"And [Jesus] said, 'Young man, I say to you, rise [ἐγέρθητι]!' The dead man sat up [ἀνεκάθισεν]" (Luke 7:14–15).	"[Peter] turned to the body and said, 'Tabitha, get up [ἀνάστηθι].' Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up [ἀνεκάθισεν]" (Acts 9:40).[2]
Jesus-Paul	
"The Son of Man must [δεῖ] undergo great suffering [παθεῖν]" (Luke 9:22).	"I myself will show him how much he must [δεῖ] suffer [παθεῖν] for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:16).[3]
"When [the people] came [ἦλθον] to Jesus, they found the man from whom the demons had gone sitting at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid [ἐφοβήθησαν]. . . . Then all the people of the surrounding country of the Gerasenes asked [ἠρώτησεν] Jesus to leave [ἀπελθεῖν] them" (Luke 8:35, 37).	"[The magistrates] were afraid [ἐφοβήθησαν] when they heard that they were Roman citizens; so they came [ἐλθόντες] and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them [ἠρώτων] to leave [ἀπελθεῖν] the city" (Acts 16:39).[4]

(*Continued*)

Table 1 | Parallels between Jesus and His Witnesses in Luke-Acts (*Continued*)

Luke	*Acts*
"He went [εἰσῆλθεν] to the synagogue on the sabbath day [ἐν τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῶν σαββάτων], as was his custom [κατὰ τὸ εἰωθός]" (Luke 4:16).	"They came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in [εἰσῆλθεν], as was his custom [κατὰ . . . τὸ εἰωθός], and on three sabbath days [ἐπὶ σάββατα τρία] . . ." (Acts 17:1–2).[5]
"Then [Jesus] opened [διήνοιξεν] their minds to understand the scriptures [τὰς γραφάς], and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer [παθεῖν τὸν χριστὸν] and to rise from the dead [ἀναστῆναι ἐκ νεκρῶν] . . ." (Luke 24:45–46).	"Paul . . . argued with them from the scriptures [ἀπὸ τῶν γραφῶν], explaining [διανοίγων] and proving that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer [τὸν χριστὸν . . . παθεῖν] and to rise from the dead [ἀναστῆναι ἐκ νεκρῶν]" (Acts 17:2–3).
"When they heard [ἀκούοντες] this [Jesus's words], all in the synagogue were filled with rage [ἐπλήσθησαν . . . θυμοῦ]" (Luke 4:28).	"When they heard [ἀκούσαντες] this [Paul's words], they were filled with rage [γενόμενοι πλήρεις θυμοῦ]" (Acts 19:28)[6]
"For he will be handed over [παραδοθήσεται] to the Gentiles [τοῖς ἔθνεσιν]" (Luke 18:32).	"The Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and will hand him over [παραδώσουσιν] to the Gentiles [εἰς χεῖρας ἐθνῶν]" (Acts 21:11).[7]
"See, we are going up to Jerusalem [ἀναβαίνομεν εἰς Ἰερουσαλήμ]" (Luke 18:31).	"After these days we got ready and started to go up to Jerusalem [ἀνεβαίνομεν εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα]" (Acts 21:15).[8]
"Away with this fellow [Jesus]!" (αἶρε τοῦτον, Luke 23:18).	"Away with him [Paul]!" (αἶρε αὐτόν, Acts 21:36).[9]
Pilate, a governor: "[Jesus] has done nothing to deserve death [ἄξιον θανάτου]" (Luke 23:15).	Festus, a governor: "[Paul] was charged with nothing deserving death [ἄξιον θανάτου]" (Acts 23:29).
"They began to accuse [Jesus], saying . . ." (Ἤρξαντο δὲ κατηγορεῖν αὐτοῦ λέγοντες, Luke 23:2).	"Tertullus began to accuse [Paul], saying . . ." (αὐτοῦ ἤρξατο κατηγορεῖν ὁ Τέρτυλλος λέγων, Acts 24:2).
Jesus is sent (ἀναπέμπω) from Pilate to Herod and back (Luke 23:7, 11, 15).	Paul is sent (ἀναπέμπω) to the emperor (Acts 25:21).[10]
"Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses [Μωϋσέως], the prophets [τοῖς προφήταις], and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer [παθεῖν τὸν χριστόν] and to rise from the	"I stand here, testifying [μαρτυρόμενος] to both small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets [οἱ προφῆται] and Moses [Μωϋσῆς] said would take place: that the Messiah must suffer [εἰ παθητὸς ὁ χριστός], and that, by being the first to rise from the dead [ἐξ ἀναστάσεως νεκρῶν], he would proclaim light both to our people and to the Gentiles [ἔθνεσιν]" (Acts 26:22–24).[11]

Table 1 | Parallels between Jesus and His Witnesses in Luke-Acts (*Continued*)

Luke	*Acts*
dead [ἀναστῆναι ἐκ νεκρῶν] on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed [κηρυχθῆναι] in his name to all nations [ἔθνη], beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses [μάρτυρες] of these things'" (Luke 24:44–48).	
"Not a hair of your head will perish" (θρὶξ ἐκ τῆς κεφαλῆς ὑμῶν οὐ μὴ ἀπόληται, Luke 21:18).	"None of you will lose a hair from your heads" (οὐδενὸς γὰρ ὑμῶν θρὶξ ἀπὸ τῆς κεφαλῆς ἀπολεῖται, Acts 27:34).[12]
"Then [Jesus] took a loaf of bread [λαβὼν ἄρτον], and when he had given thanks [εὐχαριστήσας], he broke it [ἔκλασεν] and gave it to them" (Luke 22:19).	"[Paul] took bread [λαβὼν ἄρτον], and giving thanks [εὐχαρίστησεν] to God in the presence of all he broke it [κλάσας] and began to eat" (Acts 27:35).[13]
	Jesus-Christians in Caesarea
"Not my will but yours be done" (μὴ τὸ θέλημά μου ἀλλὰ τὸ σὸν γινέσθω, Luke 22:42).	"The Lord's will be done" (τοῦ κυρίου τὸ θέλημα γινέσθω, Acts 21:14).[14]

[1] The Jesus-Peter/John and Jesus-Stephen parallels below are largely based on Edwards, "Parallels," 487–90. The Luke 20:1 / Acts 4:2 parallel is my own but complements the Luke 20:2 / Acts 4:7 parallel that Edwards notes.
[2] Talbert, *Literary Patterns*, 16. Luke 7:15 and Acts 9:40 are the only occurrences of ἀνακαθίζω in Luke-Acts.
[3] The phrase δεῖ . . . παθεῖν (or ἔδει παθεῖν) appears in Luke-Acts only with reference to the suffering of Jesus (Luke 9:22; 17:25; Luke 24:26; Acts 17:3) and Paul (Acts 9:16).
[4] Bauer argues that Luke here relies on Mark 5:15, 17 (*Apostelgeschichte*, 28). This is possible, but the only point at which Mark's account is closer to Acts than that of Luke is the use of παρακαλέω (Mark 5:17; Acts 16:39), which is used in very different senses in each passage.
[5] Evans, *St. Paul*, 44; Mattill, "Jesus-Paul Parallels," 23. Luke 4:16 and Acts 17:2 are the only occurrences of the phrase κατὰ τὸ εἰωθός in the New Testament.
[6] NRSV modified. Luke 4:28 and Acts 19:28 are the only occurrences of θύμος in Luke-Acts. See further Edwards, "Parallels," 492–93.
[7] Evans, *St. Paul*, 44. Luke 18:32 and Acts 21:11 are the only instances of someone being handed over (παραδίδωμι) to the Gentiles (ἔθνη) in Luke-Acts.
[8] Edwards, "Parallels," 494.
[9] Talbert, *Literary Patterns*, 18; Edwards, "Parallels," 496. Αἶρε appears elsewhere in the New Testament only in Acts 22:22 (αἶρε ἀπὸ τῆς γῆς τὸν τοιοῦτον), also with reference to Paul.
[10] Edwards, "Parallels," 496. The only other occurrence of ἀναπέμπω in the New Testament is in Phlm 12.
[11] Edwards, "Parallels," 494–95. Edwards refers to both passages as "farewell discourses."
[12] Zeller, *Contents*, 231; Edwards, "Parallels," 497. Edwards notes, "The saying was a Jewish proverb, but the Acts quotation appears to echo Jesus's particular version of the saying, which speaks of a hair 'perishing' (ἀπόλλυμι) rather than 'falling to the ground' (πεσεῖται ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν, 1 Sam 14:45; 2 Sam 14:11; 1 Kgs 1:52)" (497).
[13] Evans, *St. Paul*, 44; Rackham, *Acts*, 477; Edwards, "Parallels," 498. Edwards also notes parallels to Luke 24:30 (λαβὼν τὸν ἄρτον εὐλόγησεν καὶ κλάσας ἐπεδίδου αὐτοῖς).
[14] Rackham, *Acts*, 401. Luke 22:42 and Acts are the only occurrences of the phrase θέλημα γινέσθω in the New Testament (cf. γενηθήτω τὸ θέλημά σου in Matt 6:10; 26:42).

The list below catalogs several further ways in which the early church in Acts mirrors the life of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke.[35]

- Being filled with or full of the Holy Spirit[36]
- Breaking of bread[37]
- Prayer[38]
- Resisting temptation/testing[39]
- Proclaiming the good news[40]
- Healing the sick[41]
- Casting out demons[42]
- Caring for the poor[43]
- Laying hands on people[44]

The actions noted above are unique enough to Jesus in the Gospel of Luke and to his witnesses in Acts to make it seem likely that Luke intends them to appear in parallel. Indeed, to the extent that the parallels noted here and above are valid, it is quite possible that further parallels may exist.[45] Overall, the parallels between Jesus and his witnesses in Luke-Acts suggest that Luke has intentionally described the early Christians in ways that evoke Jesus's own life and ministry.

35. The parallels below are adapted from Matt Ayars, Christopher T. Bounds, and Caleb T. Friedeman, *Holiness: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2023), 96–108; Thomas H. McCall, Caleb T. Friedeman, and Matt Friedeman, *The Doctrine of Good Works: Reclaiming a Neglected Protestant Teaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 62–63, 76–77.

36. Jesus is described as "full of the Holy Spirit" (πλήρης πνεύματος ἁγίου) in Luke 4:1. Luke describes followers of Jesus as "full of the Spirit (πλήρης πνεύματος, Acts 6:3), "full of the Holy Spirit" (πλήρης πνεύματος ἁγίου, Acts 6:5; 7:55; 11:24), and "filled" (πληρόω or πίμπλημι) with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9, 52).

37. Luke 22:14–23; Acts 2:42, 46; 20:7, 11 (cf. 27:35).

38. Luke 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28–29; 10:21; 11:1–4; 22:32, 41–42, 44–45; 23:34, 46; Acts 1:14; 2:42; 3:1; 4:24–31; 6:4, 6; 7:59; 8:15, 24; 9:11, 40; 10:9; 11:5; 12:5, 12; 13:3; 14:23; 16:25; 20:36; 21:5; 22:17; 28:8.

39. Luke 4:1–10; 22:39–46; Acts 4:1–22; 5:17–42; 6:8–7:60; 20:19; and more.

40. Luke 4:18, 43; 7:22; 8:1; 16:16; 20:1; Acts 5:42; 8:4, 12, 25, 35, 40; 10:36; 11:20; 13:32; 14:7, 15, 21; 15:7, 35; 16:10; 17:18; 20:24. These are only the places where εὐαγγελίζω occurs; the concept of proclaiming the good news appears even more frequently.

41. Luke 4:40; 5:15, 17–25; 6:6–10, 17–19; 7:1–10, 21; 8:2; 8:43–48; 9:11; 13:1–14; 14:3; 17:11–19; 22:51; Acts 3:6–8; 5:15–16; 19:11–12; 28:8–9.

42. Luke 4:33–36; 6:18; 8:26–33; 9:42; 11:14; Acts 5:16; 8:6–7; 16:18; 19:11–12.

43. Luke 4:18; 6:20; 7:22; 14:13, 21; 16:20, 22; 18:22; cf. 19:8; Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–37; 6:1–7; 11:29–30.

44. Luke 4:40; 13:13; Acts 6:6; 8:17, 19; 9:12, 17; 13:3; 19:6; 28:8.

45. For possibilities, see O'Toole, "Parallels"; Moessner, "'The Christ Must Suffer'"; Edwards, "Parallels."

The Significance of the Jesus/Witnesses Parallels

Why has Luke included these parallels? Interpreters who have focused on the Jesus-Paul parallels have sometimes argued that they provide a defense of Paul's innocence.[46] The parallels noted above, however, seem to go far beyond merely defending the innocence of Paul or other Christians. Others have suggested that Luke uses the parallels to endow Jesus's witnesses with some of his authority or to give unity to the narrative.[47] Yet neither of these explanations seems like a sufficient cause for the level of detail we observe in the parallels above. A more compelling hypothesis supported by many scholars is that the parallels illustrate or explain Luke 6:40: "A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher" (ESV).[48] It will be recalled that this is one of the passages noted above indicating the mimetic purpose of the Gospels. According to this view, Luke would include the parallels to show that the disciples of Jesus have indeed become like him.

I suggest that this latter view is essentially correct but needs to be strengthened and refined based on a parallel between Jesus and his witnesses that until recently has gone unnoticed:[49]

> The Holy Spirit will come upon [πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἐπελεύσεται] you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. (Luke 1:35 ESV)

> But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you [ἐπελθόντος τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος], and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8 ESV)

The former words are spoken by the angel Gabriel to Jesus's mother Mary; the latter are spoken by Jesus to the disciples. Luke 1:35 and Acts 1:8 are also the only places in the New Testament where the Holy Spirit is said to come upon (ἐπέρχομαι) someone/thing, and so it seems unlikely that the parallel is merely a coincidence.

46. Evans, *St. Paul*, 47; Mattill, "Jesus-Paul Parallels," 37, 46.

47. E.g., Robert C. Tannehill, *The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 of *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 75–76; Keener, *Acts*, 1:556. Neither Tannehill nor Keener argues that these are the only explanations.

48. Rackham, *Acts*, 404; Mattill, "Jesus-Paul Parallels," 40–44; Keener, *Acts*, 1:558; Edwards, "Parallels," 500.

49. I discuss the parallel between Luke 1:35 and Acts 1:8 in Ayars, Bounds, and Friedeman, *Holiness*, 103–4; McCall, Friedeman, and Friedeman, *Doctrine of Good Works*, 74–75. Other studies of the Jesus/witnesses parallels in Luke-Acts, however, seem to have overlooked it.

To understand the meaning of this parallel, we must consider why the Holy Spirit comes upon the people in question. The Holy Spirit comes upon Mary to conceive Jesus, and Luke links the manner of her conception to Jesus's status as Son of God. The next time Luke employs the phrase "son of God" after the annunciation is in the genealogy (Luke 3:23–38), where he traces Jesus's lineage to "Adam, son of God" (3:38).[50] What do Adam and Jesus have in common? They both owe their human existence entirely to God's initiative. The virginal conception, then, signifies that Jesus is a new Adam. Yet if Adam and Jesus are similar in their human origins, they are also different in the lives they go on to live. Whereas Adam doubted God's word when tempted and fell into sin (Gen 3:1–6), Luke shows us in the scene immediately following the genealogy that Jesus not only resists temptation but responds to it by quoting God's word (Luke 4:1–13). Luke further notes that the Holy Spirit is with Jesus both before and after his temptation (4:1, 14), suggesting that Jesus has succeeded by the power of the Spirit where Adam failed. Therefore, when Luke creates a parallel between the conception of Jesus and the origin of the church, the point seems to be that "*just as the Spirit came on Mary to conceive Jesus—a new Adam, the Spirit now comes on Jesus' disciples to conceive the church—a group of people who will (like Jesus) manifest a new way of being human*."[51]

The parallel between Luke 1:35 and Acts 1:8 is not merely one more parallel to add to those noted above. On the contrary, it orients all the other parallels. Three factors support this claim. First, virtually all scholars recognize that Acts 1:8 summarizes the rest of the book of Acts: the Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus's disciples at Pentecost and empowers them to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and toward the end of the earth.[52] It makes sense that a parallel between Jesus and his witnesses in the summary statement of Acts would summarize and explain the other Jesus/witnesses parallels in the book. Second, Acts 1:8 provides a cause that can explain the other parallels: the same Spirit who initiated and empowered Jesus's human life now initiates and empowers the lives of his followers. Third, the parallel in Acts 1:8—unlike the other verbal parallels noted above—applies to *all* Jesus's witnesses.[53] It therefore appears to be a comprehensive parallel that other parallels particularize.

50. The "son" (υἱός) is implied from 3:23.

51. Ayars, Bounds, and Friedeman, *Holiness*, 104, emphasis original.

52. E.g., F. F. Bruce, *Commentary on the Book of the Acts*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 39; C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994–1998), 1:79; David R. Bauer and Robert A. Traina, *Inductive Bible Study: A Comprehensive Guide to the Practice of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 104, 112.

53. While Jesus specifically says, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you" to his disciples before the ascension, the fact that they will be his witnesses "to the end of the earth" (a mission that Luke

Accordingly, in Acts 1:8 Luke indicates that the Holy Spirit will come upon the disciples to transform and empower them to live Jesus-shaped lives in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. He then adds detail and color to this blueprint by showing how the Holy Spirit does indeed come upon Jesus's followers and empower them to live Jesus-shaped lives in myriad ways throughout the rest of Acts. However, in Acts 1:8 Luke also emphasizes that early Christians will emulate Jesus's life not by their own strength but by the power of the Spirit. Therefore, while the parallels between Jesus and his witnesses certainly illustrate and elucidate Jesus's saying about a disciple being like his master, the parallels more specifically show that the same Spirit who initiated and empowered Jesus's human life now gives his disciples new lives and empowers them to live in ways that are Jesus-shaped.[54]

The parallel between Luke 1:35 and Acts 1:8 further suggests that Luke envisions the lives of early Christians as being Jesus-shaped in ways going beyond a rote copying of Jesus's deeds. The Holy Spirit comes upon Mary to conceive Jesus as a new Adam—a new sort of human—and similarly comes upon the disciples to conceive a new humanity modeled on the new Adam. So while the Jesus/witnesses parallels noted above focus on actions, the frame of Acts 1:8 suggests that Jesus-shaped actions flow from a Jesus-shaped character. Indeed, a close reading of the parallels themselves bears this out. Stephen does not pray, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" as Jesus did (Luke 23:46), but "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59), recontextualizing the intent of Jesus's prayer based on Jesus's own ascension and exaltation. Similarly, Stephen does not pray, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34), but "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60), presumably again addressing the Lord Jesus. Paul, like Jesus, goes into the synagogue on the Sabbath as was his custom (Acts 17:1–2; cf. Luke 4:16), but the synagogue is in Thessalonica not Nazareth, Paul goes in not once but three times, and he goes in not to declare himself as the fulfillment of Isa 61:1–2 but to demonstrate from the scriptures that Jesus is the Messiah (Acts 17:2–3). The first Christians, like Jesus, care for the poor, but they do so in ways that go beyond what Jesus (so far as we know) explicitly does: they sell their possessions and share the proceeds (2:44–45; 4:32–37), feed widows (6:1), and even appoint leaders to oversee the feeding of widows (6:2–6). The disciples, following Jesus's example, proclaim the good news, but the good news they proclaim goes beyond Jesus's message about the kingdom of God to include Jesus's death and resurrection, and they declare this message not only to Jews (Jesus's primary audience) but

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probably imagines extending beyond the end of Acts) implies a corporate identity that extends beyond the disciples gathered in Acts 1:8.

54. Cf. O'Toole, "Parallels," 211.

also to Gentiles. These examples—which could be easily multiplied—show that the Holy Spirit empowers the early Christians not merely to mime Jesus's actions but to manifest his character so that they can faithfully imitate Jesus in unprecedented situations.

The Jesus/Witnesses Parallels and the Christian Life

The parallels between Jesus and his witnesses in Acts show that from Luke's perspective the Jesus-shaped life is possible. The Jesus-shaped life is not merely how Christians *should* live; according to Luke it is how the first Christians *did* live. Luke does, of course, give us a glimpse of some Christians who failed to live a Jesus-shaped life—certainly Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11), probably the believers from the circumcision party who necessitate the Jerusalem Council (15:1–5), and perhaps Barnabas or Paul in their disagreement over John Mark (15:37–39).[55] Yet even if one grants that Ananias and Sapphira, the believers from the circumcision party, and Barnabas and Paul all fail to live a Jesus-shaped life in particular moments, this in no way proves that such a life is an impossible ideal or an unsustainable experience for all Christians. Indeed, the numerous parallels between Jesus and Paul (most of which occur after his altercation with Barnabas) suggest that Paul goes on to live a life that is consistently Jesus-shaped.

Alternatively, one might protest that Luke selectively focuses on the early Christians who were particularly Jesus-shaped, and so his portrait of the early church skews positive. This may be true to a degree. However, the fact that Luke recounts sin and conflict in the instances just noted suggests that he has not merely given us a story of early Christianity's silver linings. And regardless of how representative Luke's picture is, the fact remains that he describes a significant number of Christians living a Jesus-shaped life and has gone out of his way to do so. As far as Luke is concerned, the Jesus-shaped life is the normative Christian life—the way the Christian life is meant to be lived.

Summary

The numerous parallels that scholars have noted between Jesus and his witnesses in Acts testify that the Jesus-shaped life is not only possible but also normative for Christians. By creating a parallel between the conceptions of Jesus and the church (Luke 1:35; Acts 1:8), Luke indicates that the same Holy Spirit who initiated and empowered Jesus's holy life will initiate and empower the lives of his witnesses. He goes on to recount the lives of early Christians in

55. It is possible that the sharp disagreement (παροξυσμός) between Barnabas and Paul involves sin of some sort, but this is unclear.

diverse ways that evoke the life of Jesus, showing how Jesus's witnesses live holy lives modeled on his life by the power of the Spirit.

Conclusion

What the telos of the Gospels implies, the testimony of Acts confirms. The Gospels provide Jesus as a paradigm for imitation, implying that their intended audiences—believers who are in Christ and have received the Spirit—not only *should* imitate Jesus but also by God's grace *can* do so. The book of Acts testifies through its numerous parallels between Jesus and his witnesses that the early Christians did indeed live Jesus-shaped lives. The programmatic parallel between the conceptions of Jesus and the church (Luke 1:35; Acts 1:8) indicates that the same Holy Spirit who initiated and empowered Jesus's holy life initiates and empowers the holy lives of Jesus's witnesses. Understood in this way, the Gospels and Acts portray the holy life as the normative Christian life—the way the Christian life is meant to be lived.

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