Assessing the Normative Value of Selected Narratives from the book of Acts Utilising the Five Hermeneutical Principles of the INCUR Model: How Normative is Acts?

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Abstract

Over the centuries, numerous major theological errors, based on a faulty interpretation of the book of Acts, have crept into the teaching of the church. These errors have had and continue to have a detrimental effect on the church. For this reason, when interpreting the book of Acts, it is important for Bible scholars to pose the following key questions: Should the practices of the early church serve as the norm for our church practices today? Should we derive our key doctrines from the early church history alone? After discussing the nature and purpose of biblical narratives and some general guidelines for interpreting the narrative portions of scripture, the article examines Luke's purpose for writing the book of Acts. In this article the author proposes the INCUR model for assessing the normative value of narrative passages in the Bible. The proposed model covers five hermeneutical principles derived

[1] The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

from the work of recognised theologians. When placed together, these hermeneutical principles form an acronym that spells out the word INCUR: (1) Intent: Is the biblical narrative intended to serve as a historical precedent? (2) Non-contradiction: Is the practice or doctrine in the biblical narrative contradicted elsewhere in Scripture? (3) Command: Is the practice or doctrine in the biblical narrative a command or a description? (4) Uniqueness: Does the biblical narrative describe a unique event in church history? and (5) Reinforcement: Is the practice or doctrine in the biblical narrative reinforced elsewhere in scripture? The author chose to use the INCUR model to assess the narratives in the book of Acts, because many false doctrines have arisen during the course of church history, based on the incorrect interpretation of the normative value of certain narratives in this book. However, these hermeneutical principles are equally valid for assessing the normative value of all biblical narratives. After explaining the meaning of each of the five hermeneutical principles of the INCUR model, these principles are then utilised to briefly assess the normative value of selected narratives from the book of Acts. As a result of the assessment, it was concluded that Bible scholars need to be extremely careful when interpreting biblical narratives.

1. Introduction

Jesus warned against false doctrine**.** In Matthew 7:15 he said, 'Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.' Acts 15:1 describes one of the major false doctrines that plagued the early church: 'Certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers: 'Unless you are

circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved'.

The false teachers (sometimes called Judaizers) taught that in order to be saved, Christians also had to observe certain rites of the Jewish Law. They claimed that circumcision and the Law of Moses were still binding on Christians (Williams 2015).

Over the centuries numerous major theological errors, based on the faulty interpretation of the scriptures have crept into the teaching of the church. These errors have had and continue to have a detrimental effect on the church. Since early times false teachers have infiltrated the church, causing divisive and destructive disputes over correct doctrine. In fact, doctrinal disputes have plagued the Christian Church throughout her history (Rogers 2005). In particular, the incorrect interpretation of several narratives from the book of Acts, has led to numerous false teachings. A good example of a false doctrine based on a narrative in the book of Acts is when Paul was bitten by a poisonous snake and he shook it off and did not die (Acts 28:3–5). Wellman indicates that this was a sign that Paul had been sent by Jesus to present the Gospel to others. Those present expected Paul to die (Acts 28:6). However, when he did not die, they knew that he was sent from God. However, nowhere in scripture does it say that Christians should handle snakes and drink poison and not die in order to prove that they are sent by God. Nevertheless, numerous false teachers have taken this verse to build an entire theology around it. In doing so they have erred greatly (Wellman 2014).

In view of such doctrinal errors, the serious Bible scholar needs to ask the following questions: How normative is Acts? Is the book of Acts merely a record of early church history or does it present a model for the church today? Is the book of Acts an interesting narrative of how Christianity began, or can it still be regarded as a normative for today's

church? Should we read the book as 'mainly prescriptive or purely descriptive? 'How relevant is Acts for the life of the 21st century church'? (Voorwinde 2010:33)

According to Osmer, the *normative task* in practical theology asks the question, 'What ought to be going on?' This *normative task* includes 'using theological concepts to interpret particular episodes, situations, contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from "good practice"' (2008:4). Practical theology is *normative,* since it has as its goal the formulation of ethical norms, especially the norms of Christian ethics derived from the Bible. It deals with the 'application of God's revelation [The Bible] to the individual and the church' (Duce and Strange 2001:76, 77).

A cursory survey of the book of Acts reveals to the reader 'the problem of normativeness … on almost every page' (Voorwinde 2010:33–34):

- In chapter 1 the apostles had to choose a replacement for Judas Iscariot. The names of Joseph Barsabbas and Matthias were presented and they selected the replacement by casting lots (v. 26). Is this the way we should choose church leaders today?
- Chapter 2 opens dramatically with the coming of the Holy Spirit accompanied by physical phenomena: a sound like a *violent wind* blowing and what seemed to be *tongues of fire* came to rest on each of them and they 'began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance' (v. 4). Should we still expect these phenomena today wherever the Gospel breaks new ground or whenever a revival takes place?
- In Acts 2 we are told that the believers shared everything they had: 'They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need' (v. 42). Does this imply that sharing our possessions is an obligation for believers today?

- In Acts 5 the severity of Ananias and Sapphira's judgement is disturbing for us today (v. 1–11). Does God still judge those who lie to a church leader today?
- In Acts 19 when Paul visited Ephesus, he found 12 former disciples of John the Baptist. He 'placed his hands on them and the Holy Spirit came on them and they spoke in tongues and prophesied' (v. 6). Does this imply that tongues and prophecy are a typical experience for Christians sometime after conversion?
- In Acts 28 when Paul was on the island of Malta, 'a snake fastened itself on his hand' (v. 3), but he 'shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects' (v. 5). Should today's Christians be expected to handle snakes in the same manner?

Fee and Stuart (2003:113) point out the danger of trying to derive normative practice from narratives in the book of Acts. When attempting to interpret the teachings of Acts we often lack 'hermeneutical precision'. Several diverse practices, which have been supported on the basis of the book of Acts, have led to much division in the Church, such as infant baptism, believer's baptism, congregational and episcopalian church government, observance of the Lord's Supper every Sunday, the selection of deacons by means of congregational vote, and the selling of all one's possessions (Fee and Stuart 2003:113).

Buchanan (2004) claims that if we only had the book of Acts to teach us what the church should be doing today, we would have such little information that it would be 'prone to widely divergent interpretation'. The problem of deriving norms from narratives is largely due to the fact that it is impossible to determine whether something in a narrative is right or wrong, unless the text includes a clear, explanatory statement in this regard. Hence, it can be concluded that 'narrative is the least-best source

for doctrine or practice'. There are better sources for finding normative doctrine and practice, namely, the epistles (Buchanan 2004).

When studying the book of Acts, it is usually with the intention of observing how the Holy Spirit operated in the lives of the early Christians and how the early church operated. In this regard, Wood (2010:14) asserts that 'The best title for Acts may be the Acts of the Holy Spirit', since in the book of Acts Luke refers to the Spirit more than fifty times.

When interpreting the book of Acts, it is important to pose the following key questions: Should the practices of the early church serve as the norm for our church practices today? Should we derive our key doctrines from early church history alone?

It is beyond the scope of this article to respond to all of the above-mentioned questions. Its purpose is not to present comprehensive solutions for all of the problems raised, but rather to provide biblical hermeneutical principles for interpreting the historical narratives and biblical precedents in the book of Acts that can be used by readers to answer these questions for themselves. This in turn should provide guidelines for interpreting the historical narratives in other portions of scripture.

In this article the author has designed the INCUR model for assessing the normative value of narrative passages in the Bible. The proposed model covers a set of five recognised hermeneutical principles derived from the work of recognised theologians. When placed together, these hermeneutical principles form an acronym that spells out the word INCUR: (1) **I**ntent: This principle relates to the question: Is the biblical narrative intended to serve as a historical precedent? (2) **N**on-contradiction: This principle relates to the question: Is the practice or doctrine in the biblical narrative contradicted elsewhere in Scripture? (3) **C**ommand: This principle relates to the question: Is the practice or

doctrine in the biblical narrative a command or a description? (4) **U**niqueness: This principle relates to the question: Does the biblical narrative describe a unique event in church history? and (5) **R**einforcement: This principle relates to the question: Is the practice or doctrine in the biblical narrative reinforced elsewhere in scripture? The author chose to use the INCUR model to assess the narratives in the book of Acts, because many false doctrines have arisen during the course of church history, based on the incorrect interpretation of the normative value of certain narratives in this book. However, these hermeneutical principles are equally valid for assessing the normative value of all biblical narratives.

The aim of this article is to assess the normative value of selected narratives from the book of Acts utilising the INCUR model. After explaining the meaning of each of the five hermeneutical principles of the INCUR model, these principles are then utilised to briefly assess the normative value of selected narratives from the book of Acts.

In the next section, attention will be given to the nature and purpose of biblical narratives.

2. The Nature and Purpose of Biblical Narratives

'Narrative is the most common type of literature or genre in the Bible' (Vlach 2012). Over forty percent of the Old Testament consists of narrative. A large portion of the New Testament is also written in the narrative genre (the gospels and Acts) (Fee and Stuart 2014:93) This has led some people to describe the Bible as 'The Story of God' (Bratcher 2013).

Why is there so much narrative in the Bible? Firstly, narratives are easier to remember than learning individual verses. Secondly, narratives teach us what God is like: 'how He deals with people, how people respond to Him in both positive and negative ways, and the consequences of their responses' (Understanding the genre of the books of the Bible 2016). Thirdly, stories are powerful learning tools. Stories provide much pleasure and inspire imitation. They make a great impact on character and conduct. They encourage greater commitment to God (Habenicht and Burton 2004:122).

What are narratives? 'A narrative is a story told for the purpose of conveying a message through people and their problems and situations' (Zuck 1991:128). Fee and Stuart (2014:94) describe narratives as 'purposeful stories retelling the *historical events* of the past that are intended to give meaning and direction for a given people *in the present*'.

A narrative consists of three basic elements: setting, characters, and plot. These elements are not in themselves the purpose of the narrative (Bratcher 2013); they are simply 'the vehicles chosen to communicate the larger purpose … of a narrative' (Vlach 2012).

Besides reporting on the events that occurred, Fee and Stuart explain that the purpose of biblical narratives is to demonstrate how God works in his creation and among his people. They glorify him, assist us to appreciate him, portray his providence and protection, and teach us many lessons about how we should live (1993:79).

The next section will provide some general guidelines on how to interpret the biblical narratives.

3. General Guidelines for Interpreting the Narrative Portions of Scripture

Vlach (2012) points out that 'narratives often do not teach doctrine directly'. This does not mean that 'one cannot learn doctrine from biblical narratives'. He then explains the proper way to interpret biblical narratives: 'Instead of teaching doctrine explicitly and directly like New Testament epistles often do, biblical narratives often illustrate what is taught clearly in other portions of Scripture' (Vlach 2012).

Perez (2010) indicates that, although biblical narratives do not teach doctrine directly, it does not mean that one cannot learn doctrine from them. Although they do not teach doctrine explicitly and directly like the New Testament epistles, they often provide an illustration of what is clearly taught elsewhere in scripture.

Furthermore, narratives do not necessarily prescribe behaviour. It should be remembered that the people in the biblical narratives did not always set a good example. Sometimes the authors simply reported what happened. With a few rare exceptions, such as Joshua, Daniel, and Jesus, most of the key Bible characters had serious flaws. For example, Samson was carnal; David committed adultery; Elijah retreated as a coward from Jezebel; Abraham lied when he said that his wife was his sister; Jacob deceived his father for the birth-right (Vlach 2012). In view of the poor example set by these Bible characters under adverse circumstances, it is advisable not to apply directly their conduct, unless another biblical passage explicitly instructs us to do so.

Parlett (2003) states that when interpreting Old Testament narratives, one should remember that 'narratives are stories of real people who experienced both mistakes and successes'. While sometimes they set

good examples, at other times they set poor examples. Parlett (2003) provides the following guidelines when making a practical application from a narrative section:

- Where they did well, discern what timeless Biblical principles were practised.
- Where they did not do so well, avoid those attitudes that contributed towards their mistakes.
- Where the narratives and the teaching sections correspond, confidently imitate the example that was set.

Vlach (2012) presents the following examples of how to interpret narratives from the Old Testament:

Example 1: 'When Joseph fled from Potiphar's wife, because she wanted to commit adultery with him, it was illustrating the principle of "flee from idolatry" (1 Cor 10:14).'

Example 2: 'In Daniel 3, when Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to worship the golden image, they were illustrating the principle of "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exod 20:3).'

Vlach (2012) maintains that narratives do not provide answers for all of the theological questions that we might have. It should be remembered that 'biblical narratives are not biographies'. They have a specific purpose; they focus 'what the divinely inspired authors wanted to emphasize', for example:

- 'Genesis 1–11 covers thousands of years, Genesis 12–50 covers a few hundred years.'
- 'The gospels spend a disproportionate amount of space on the passion of Jesus.'

- ‘John freely admits that in his gospel there were “many other things which Jesus did” that were not recorded (see John 21:25).’

The next section will give attention to Luke’s inspired intention for writing the book of Acts.

4. Luke’s Purpose in Writing the Book of Acts

It should be remembered that ‘the biblical narratives were written by divinely inspired authors who had a purpose in writing their narratives’ (Perez 2010). One should therefore avoid interpreting biblical narratives apart from the overall purpose of the authors.

According to Fee and Stuart (2014:115), a comprehensive exegesis of Acts should not only include historical questions such as ‘what happened?’, but also ‘what was Luke’s purpose in selecting and shaping the material?’

When studying the book of Acts, the issue of Luke’s purpose is important. Fee and Stuart explain why. If it can be shown that the intention of Luke in Acts is to provide a pattern for the church, then that pattern would become normative for all times, namely, what God requires under all circumstances. However, if his intention was something else, then it would require us to pose the hermeneutical questions differently (2014:115).

Trying to discover Luke’s intent is particularly difficult, because it is not clear who Theophilus was, and hence we do not know why Luke wrote to him, and secondly because Luke appeared to have varied interests (Fee and Stuart 2014:115).

What was the inspired purpose of Luke for writing the book of Acts? The following observations are important for determining Luke's intention (Fee and Stuart 2014:118–119):

1. The key to understanding Acts revolves around the interest of Luke in the *movement* of the Gospel, 'orchestrated by the Holy Spirit … from its Jerusalem-based, Judaism-oriented beginnings to its becoming a worldwide, Gentile-predominant phenomenon.'
2. Luke's interest in the *movement* is further confirmed by what he leaves out of the book of Acts. It is clear that he does not have any interest in the 'biographies of the apostles'. Furthermore, once the movement to the Gentiles is in progress, Peter drops almost entirely from the scene and 'Luke's interest in Paul is almost completely in terms of the Gentile mission.'
3. 'There is no other geographical expansion except the one from Jerusalem to Rome.' Other geographic areas are simply ignored.
4. It appears that the interest of Luke is not to standardise everything. For example, usually only two elements are included in conversions: 'The gift of the Spirit and water baptism', but without regard to the order. Luke does not provide a specific example as a model for Christian experience.

Zaspel (2016) briefly explains how Luke's purpose for writing the book of Acts directed his style. His purpose was to record how the early church spread from Jerusalem to the 'uttermost part of the earth' (Acts 1:8). The fact that his purpose was not doctrinal but historical explains why he failed to explain the differences that arose in the description of 'patterns' in doctrine and practice in the narratives of the book.

The next section will briefly assess the normative value of selected narratives in the book of Acts using the five hermeneutical principles of the INCUR model.

5. A Brief Assessment of the Normative Value of Selected Narratives from the Book of Acts in Terms of the INCUR Model

In the sections below the meaning of each of the five hermeneutical principles of the INCUR model will first be explained, and then utilised to briefly assess the normative value of at least one selected narrative from the book of Acts.

5.1. Intent: Is the biblical narrative intended to serve as a historical precedent?

The normative value of a biblical narrative as a historical precedent is dependent on its intent. It is therefore important for the intent of a biblical narrative to be established, before it can serve as a historical precedent for Christian practice and doctrine today.

MacArthur points out that Acts was never intended to be the main foundation for teaching doctrine in the church. The main intention of the book of Acts was to record the early history of the church and to demonstrate how the traditional church progressed from the old age into the new (MacArthur 1991).

The question arises: Should the details of all the narratives in Acts serve as normative models? Fee and Stuart (2014:126) explain that this is unlikely, 'because most such details are incidental to the main point of the narrative and because of the ambiguity of details from narrative to narrative.'

For example, if Luke intended Acts 6:1–7 to serve as a precedent for the church in selecting leaders, then this practice should be followed by Christians today. However, if it can be established that precedent was not

the intention of the narrative, then its normative value for Christians today should be treated with caution (Fee and Stuart 2014:127).

5.2. Non-contradiction: is the practice or doctrine in the biblical narrative contradicted elsewhere in scripture?

The Law of non-contradiction is one of the basic laws in classical logic. It states that 'something cannot be both true and not true at the same time when dealing with the same context. For example, the chair in my living room, right now, cannot be made of wood and not made of wood at the same time' (Dictionary of Philosophy 2016).

In terms of this principle one cannot claim to have found an absolute in the book of Acts, if it involves a contradiction (in doctrine or practice) in other passages in the same book or elsewhere in scripture. Voorwinde (2010:38–39) provides the following examples relating to the principle of non-contradiction in the book of Acts:

(1) *How should the church select its leaders?* (practice)

- In order to replace Judas, the apostles cast lots (Acts 1:26).
- The church chose seven deacons. The apostles ratified their choice by laying hands on them (Acts 6:1–6).
- After prayer and fasting, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders (Acts 14:23).
- All of these approaches are 'very different and mutually exclusive'. One cannot cast lots, delegate and appoint leaders simultaneously. Hence, none of these approaches should be 'elevated to an absolute'.

(2) *What shall we do to be saved?* (doctrine)

- After Peter's preaching at Pentecost, the crowd responded, 'What shall we do?' Peter answered, 'Repent and be baptised … and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:38). Peter's instructions are: First repent and be baptised; then receive the Holy Spirit.
- However, in Acts 10 the Holy Spirit came upon Cornelius and his household, 'while Peter was still preaching' (Acts 10:44). Subsequently, 'they broke out in tongues and started praising God'. Only after that did Peter instruct them to be baptised (Acts 10:48).
- Since these two cases are very different one needs to be cautious. 'It's always dangerous to base a doctrine on isolated proof-texts from Acts.'

5.3. Command: Is the practice or doctrine in the biblical narrative a command or a description?

In terms of this principle, Fee and Stuart (2014:124) raise the following crucial hermeneutical question: Do the biblical narratives simply provide a *description* of 'what *happened* in the early church' or do they also serve as *commands* (norms) intended to prescribe 'what *must happen* in the ongoing church'?

For good reasons, therefore, Fee and Stuart (2014:124) make the following assumption that unless the Bible explicitly tells us to do something, 'what is only narrated or described does not function in a normative way', unless it can be proved that the author intended it to function in that way, based on other grounds.

Based on the above assumption it can be argued that: (a) Narratives don't necessarily prescribe behaviour. Sometimes they're just reporting what happened' (Interpreting biblical narratives 2016); and (b) 'When an

action is commanded, it is far more likely to be normative than when it is merely described' (Voorwinde 2010:38–39; Fee and Stuart 2014:124).

There is clearly a need to distinguish between *descriptions* and *commands* in the book of Acts. In this regard, it is appropriate for Bible scholars to pose the question: Are there examples in the book of Acts of which one may aptly either conclude, 'We must do this,' or 'We may do this'? (Fee and Stuart 2014:124).

(1) *Examples in the book of Acts where action is simply described*

Voorwinde (2010:39–40) notes that in the book of Acts it is recorded that:

- In every town Paul visited he made the synagogue his first stop, provided they had one. However, he never commanded others to do the same.
- After Pentecost the believers sold their property and possessions to alleviate the needs of the poor. However, they were never commanded to do so.

(2) *Example in the book of Acts where action is commanded*

There are several examples in the book of Acts in which people are *commanded* to repent (Voorwinde 2010:40–41):

- At Pentecost Peter calls upon the Jerusalem crowd to repent (Acts 2:38).
- In his sermon in Acts 3:19 Peter issues the same command: '*Repent*, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out and that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.'
- In Samaria Peter presents the same challenge to Simon Magus: '*Repent* of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart' (Acts 8:22).

- In Athens Paul declares: 'God now commands all men everywhere to *repent*' (Acts 17:30).
- From the above verses in the book of Acts it is clear that the call to repent is a universal command to all people everywhere. Hence it cannot be denied that the command is 'as normative as you could possibly wish it to be'.

5.4. Uniqueness: Does the biblical narrative describe a unique event in church history?

In the book of Acts, there is a need to establish whether the Pentecost event was a unique event or a pattern for the Church today. Traditional Pentecostalism stated that 'The baptism of the Spirit is subsequent to salvation and is always identified by speaking in tongues.' Some would rather say, 'Often identified by speaking in tongues' (MacArthur 1991). However, upon closer examination of the book of Acts, this pattern of Spirit-baptism does not hold true. In this regard, Zaspel (2016) compares the following two scenarios. (1) Acts 2 records that the apostles were baptised in the Spirit subsequent to their salvation. (2) However, three thousand others were baptised in the Spirit at the same time as their salvation. Hence the following questions arise: Which of these two narratives is normative? Which example should be the pattern for today?

Is it imperative that receiving the Holy Spirit should be accompanied by speaking in tongues? Biblical evidence reveals that this is unlikely, since in the book of Acts, Spirit-baptism is followed by speaking in tongues on three occasions only (Acts 2:4, 10:44–46, and 19:6). It is clear from 1 Corinthians 12:29–31 that not every believer speaks in tongues. Furthermore, Piper points out that there are at least nine conversion stories recorded in the book of Acts, which never mention a two-step sequence with tongues (8:36; 9:17–19; 13:12, 48; 14:1; 16:14; 17:4, 34).

‘This shows how difficult it is to establish a norm from the way things happened back then’ (Piper 1984).

Furthermore, several New Testament passages teach that that ‘all believers in this age have the Holy Spirit and are regenerated, baptized, indwelt, anointed, and sealed as God’s own forever, the moment saving faith is exercised” (Unger 1974:25). In addition, 1 Corinthians 12:13 says, ‘For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves of free and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.’ This verse indicates that all Christians received the baptism of the Spirit, when they believed. ‘There is no indication that it is subsequent to salvation’ (MacArthur 1991).

The book of Acts clearly covers a unique period in the history of the church – a period of historical transition. Acts 2 describes a unique and unrepeatable act of Spirit-baptism. The uniqueness of this event is supported by the manifestation of ‘tongues of fire’ on each believer in the pre-Pentecost church (2:2–3). This miracle was not repeated when the Spirit came upon other groups in Acts 8, 10, and 19 (Ross 2011:15).

Zaspel (2016) confirms that Pentecost was an unrepeatable and unique event for the following reasons:

- It marked the birth of the church: as at the beginning of a new era there can be only one day of birth.
- It marked the Spirit of Christ taking residence in his church.
- By virtue of the uniqueness of the event, what happened at Pentecost cannot be the norm for Christians today.
- This unique event was a necessary part of the transition period. Hence these circumstances can never be repeated.

5.5. Reinforcement: is the practice or doctrine in the biblical narrative reinforced elsewhere in scripture?

There is a need to reinforce commands and practices in the book of Acts by supporting them using other passages from the New Testament. Voorwinde (2010:41) explains this principle as follows: A command or a practice in the book of Acts will carry more weight if it repeats itself in another New Testament passage, such as in Jesus' teachings or in the Epistles. In such cases we are more likely to encounter eternal truths and normative commands.

This principle is confirmed by Stott (2006:21), when he states that we should seek the purpose of God in the Bible mainly in its didactic rather than its descriptive passages. In particular, we should look for it in Jesus' teaching, and in the apostles' sermons and writings, rather than in the pure narratives in the book of Acts.

In his book, *Introduction to the Old Testament historical books*, Howard (1993:50) states that, generally speaking, there is almost no text in the Bible that will contain the whole range of what scripture teaches on a particular topic. 'Scripture must be checked with Scripture'. This applies especially to historical narratives in the Bible, because they usually teach doctrine indirectly. Hence, there is a need to compare what is being taught in individual narratives with the teachings in other portions of scripture.

In terms of this principle, what Scripture describes as having happened to people does not necessarily apply to Christians today. On the one hand, passages that are descriptive are valuable only to the degree that they are interpreted by the didactic passages of the New Testament. On the other hand, it is evident that historical narratives from the Bible are not completely worthless with regard to didactic value.

(1) *An example of where a practice in Acts is reinforced in an Epistle*

The last requirement of the Jerusalem Council was that gentile believers should 'abstain from food sacrificed to idols' (Acts 15:29). This command is raised again by Paul in 1 Corinthians 8:1–13. Rather than appealing to the decision made at the Jerusalem Council, Paul uses a more pastoral approach by asking the Corinthians to consider those with a weaker conscience. This example of the Jerusalem decree reveals a very important principle: 'A command or a practice in Acts can only be considered normative if is reinforced elsewhere in the New Testament' (Voorwinde 2010:43).

(2) *An example of where a practice in Acts is not reinforced in an Epistle*

Luke reports that 'all the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need' (Acts 2:44–45). This appears to have been the standard practice in the Jerusalem church, since in Acts 4:25 we read that 'they distributed to each as anyone had need'. It seems that there were no needy persons among them. Is this a model for the church today? In 2 Corinthians 8:1–7 and 9:6–15 Paul provides clear instructions to the Corinthians about giving. He tells them to give 'systematically, generously and cheerfully'. He does not instruct them to sell private property (Voorwinde 2010:45).

6. Conclusion

In this article an attempt was made to answer the following questions: How normative is Acts? Is it prescriptive or descriptive? Are some passages in Acts prescriptive (being normative for all time) and other passages in the book simply descriptive (of historical interest only; stories to be enjoyed, revealing God's sovereignty), but not relevant to the life of the church today? (Voorwinde 2010:55).

In particular, this article conducted a brief assessment of the normative value of selected narratives from the book of Acts, utilising the five hermeneutical principles of the INCUR model: (1) **I**ntent: Is the biblical narrative intended to serve as a historical precedent? (2) **N**on-contradiction: Is the practice or doctrine in the biblical narrative contradicted elsewhere in Scripture? (3) **C**ommand: Is the practice or doctrine in the biblical narrative a command or a description? (4) **U**niqueness: Does the biblical narrative describe a unique event in church history? and (5*)* **R**einforcement: Is the practice or doctrine in the biblical narrative reinforced elsewhere in scripture?

As a result of the above assessment, it can be concluded that Bible scholars need to be extremely careful when interpreting biblical narratives, especially from the book of Acts. In fact, when interpreting a command or practice from any book in the Bible, it would be helpful if scholars could conduct a thorough assessment of the normative value of the relevant biblical narrative, using recognised hermeneutical principles, such as those included in the INCUR model. Failure to apply these recognised hermeneutical principles, when interpreting biblical narratives, could cause the church to incur some of following consequences: dangerous false doctrines, confusing church practices, and damaging church divisions and splits. Most importantly, it could dishonour the Name of Jesus and grieve the Holy Spirit. The INCUR model has therefore been proposed by the author as a contribution towards countering untruth and disunity in the Church.

It should be noted that even if it can be demonstrated that large portions (the narrative sections) of the book Acts are not prescriptive for doctrine, they are still more than just ‘interesting narratives’. Since the book of Acts is part and parcel of inspired scripture, even if its narratives are not prescriptive for doctrine, they still hold greater value than merely being

interesting. Reading about the exploits of great preachers and missionaries like Billy Graham, Hudson Taylor and William Carey can be interesting, enjoyable and illustrate the sovereignty of God. However, the book of Acts holds far more spiritual benefits for us than this.

In fact, the book of Acts is of great value to the Christian for many reasons. It is a record of early church history, it has a strong missionary emphasis, it contains many biographical details, and it is of great spiritual value. 'To read the book of Acts will send us to our knees. It will give us a deeper love for the Lord, fire us with new zeal, and stir us to be active in the Lord's service' (Dixon 2016).

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