

Praxeis as praxis: Odegeology as practical theology in the book of Acts

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This article introduces the neologism 'odegeology' to encompass theological discussion concerning divine guidance, a significant issue for spiritual formation and discipleship in the church. Jesus' promise of power and his commission to be witnesses in Acts 1:8 establish the theme for the book called Praxeis in the Greek text. Acts is replete with examples of guidance for completing that mission, particularly in the ministries of Peter and Paul. Can Paul's experiences with guidance, whether natural or supernatural, be considered a matter of praxis for Christians today? In answering that question, this study will use Paul's missionary journeys in Acts as a heuristic model for decision-making. The article will discuss the place of divine guidance in publications by Pentecostal/charismatic publishers and whether it is a subject addressed in the faculties of practical theology in their theological schools. The article closes with a discussion whether odegeology as practised in Acts should be normative for Christians today.

Keywords: Odegeology; Paul; Guidance; God's will; Spiritual formation; Practical Theology; Book of Acts; Pentecostal; Charismatics.

Introduction

The neologism 'odegeology' is introduced here to encompass theological discussion concerning the subject of divine guidance for believers, both early and contemporary. Odegeology is derived from the verb ὀδηγέω [to guide]. Osborne (2002:320) writes, 'In the LXX it is often used of God leading his flock for instance in the exodus (Ex 13:17; 14:13) and especially in the pillar of fire and cloud (Dt 1:33)'. The psalmists repeatedly cry out, 'Guide me' (ὀδηγήσόν με) in their desire for guidance for righteousness (Ps 5:9 LXX) and truth (Ps 24:5 LXX; 85:11 LXX). But in three cases, the plea is for guidance along the way (ὁδός; Ps 26:11 LXX; 138:24 LXX) or path of the Lord (τρίβος; Ps 118:35 LXX). Using a neologistic cognate (Lust, Eynikel & Hauspie 2004:297), Jeremiah asked, 'Where is the Lord who brought us up from the land of Egypt, who guided (καθοδηγήσας) us in the wilderness' (Jr 2:6; cf. Ezk 39:2).¹

Though its use is limited in the New Testament, ὀδηγέω is used memorably in two texts.² In John 16:13, Jesus promises that 'when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide (ὀδηγήσει) you into all truth'. And in Revelation 7:14, the martyrs under the throne are promised that the Lamb at the parousia 'will guide (ὀδηγήσει) them to springs of living water' (cf. Rv 21:4). The promise that the Holy Spirit would guide Jesus' disciples individually and corporately is epitomised especially in the book of Acts. For the believers to accomplish the commission given them in Acts 1:8, it was necessary for the Holy Spirit to come at Pentecost as portrayed in chapter 2. From chapter 3 onwards, Luke provides over 30 examples of divine guidance, particularly in the ministries of Peter and Paul, to complete that mission.³ This begs the question, namely, can the experiences of these apostles with guidance, whether natural or supernatural, be considered valid for modern Christians? This article will argue that Paul's ministry journeys in Acts do serve as a heuristic model for decision-making today. It will begin with an account of the role odegeology in the author's own spiritual life, review two scholarly studies, present a survey, and then propose a hermeneutical model showing the relevance of odegeology as a sub-discipline of practical theology for spiritual formation and discipleship, particularly in Pentecostal and charismatic circles.

1. Osmer (2008:88) finds his wisdom-based 'art of guidance' on the Hebrew word הַדְרִיכָה translated in the LXX as κυβερνήσις and used in Proverbs 1:5, 11:14, and 24:6. These words are a nautical metaphor and translate literally as steering or guiding a boat. He notes: 'The art of steering is a beautiful image of wise judgment, central to the interpretative task of practical theology interpretation'.

2. The noun form ὀδηγός is used negatively in the New Testament (Mt 15:14; 23:16, 24; Rm 2:19). Judas was the guide for those who arrested Jesus (Ac 1:16).

3. Green (1997:17–18) puts his discussion of this subject under the heading 'God's Purpose'.

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Odegeology as personal praxis⁴

My interest in odegeology developed early in my Christian life. After my conversion in 1974, I struggled to know how to differentiate God's voice from my own. In those early years, I erred often as I became progressively sanctified in my decision-making. My wife and children can well describe the poor decisions I made in those years and the negative outcomes they had on our family life. While studying at Christ for the Nations in 1979–80, I encountered the writings of the Pentecostal teacher D. Gee, whose books and articles I read eagerly.

Particularly helpful was his small volume, *Studies in Guidance* (1936) released in a revised edition in 1940. His moniker, 'Apostle of Balance', was fitting, and his perspective helped bring more balanced thinking in my attempts to hear God's voice. However, my struggle to find that 'good, pleasing, and perfect will' (Rm 12:2) for each decision often proved agonising and left me wondering if I had made the right choice after all. Then I read G. Friesen's *Decision making and the will of God* (1980), and I came to the realisation that God had given me a free will, and that many decisions were left for me to choose. God did not need to be consulted whether I should purchase a blue or tan car, or whether to eat broccoli or cauliflower. He had given me a brain and placed personal likes and dislikes into my DNA. I felt suddenly released to move forward in everyday life with a new sense of freedom and purpose. Of course, by this time I had grown considerably in my spiritual life, and my will had become increasingly conformed to his.

After completing my doctorate at Unisa in 1997 and while teaching at Oral Roberts University from 1997 to 2001, my interest in divine guidance began to take a more academic turn. It became a component in several of my classes; I gave a sermon on odegeology at our church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Our move to Turkey in 2004 was the ultimate act of dependence on God because I was abandoning career and ministry for an uncertain future. In 2005 I did an initial exploration of the topic in a published article (Wilson, 2005). Opportunities to preach and teach often found me speaking on odegeology. Then in 2015 I was invited to teach for a discipleship programme in Antalya. I taught for a week – 20 h – on the subject for a 3-year period. During that time I published another article on guidance (Wilson 2016b), which paid homage to D. Gee, who started me down this path.

Finally, in the spring of 2017, the Holy Spirit prompted me to take my teaching notes and expand them into chapters for a book. This culminated in the composition of *The Spirit said go: Lessons in guidance from Paul's journeys* published later that fall. The volume consists of 20 lessons on odegeology drawn from the Lukan accounts of Paul's journeys. Starting with Paul's conversion in Acts 9, each pericope is developed through an inductive study drawn from research published

4.Louw (2016:91) notes importantly: 'In the discipline of practical theology, the concept of praxis has become a fundamental category ... [P]ractical theology is deeply involved in praxis matters and how the Christian faith is engaged in life issues by means of the ministry of the gospel and the communication of the word of God'.

in refereed articles combined with reflections gained from personal travels along Pauline routes in the Eastern Mediterranean. After first discussing odegeology related to Paul, my wife Dindy and I recount lessons learned from our own spiritual journeys. This is followed by anecdotes written by friends and colleagues that further illustrate the lesson. Each chapter closes with reflection questions designed to stimulate readers to reflect on how God might have guided them similarly. A final chapter summarises the 20 lessons by placing them into three groups, namely, supernatural, volitional and providential. I write:

The fact that three categories exist shows the diverse and creative ways by which Paul was guided on his journeys. These 20 examples then are only suggestive of the varied approaches that the Spirit can use even today to guide believers as they go. (Wilson 2017:136)

The book concludes with five appendices that further illustrate the 20 lessons.

Odegeology and Pentecostal/charismatic publishers

The book's publication was a conscious effort to counteract the paucity of books on divine guidance, especially among Pentecostals and charismatics who particularly emphasise the Spirit-filled life.⁵ A review of the catalogues on the websites of such American-based denominational publishers – Gospel Publishing House, International Pentecostal Holiness Church Publications, Pentecostal (United) Publishing House,⁶ and the independent publisher Charisma House⁷ – offer no general publications on guidance or how to know God's will.⁸

Two publications by Pentecostals have titles similar to mine. M. Wilkinson (2006) published a volume called *The Spirit said go*; however, the subtitle indicates that its content is vastly different: *Pentecostal immigrants in Canada*.

S.E. Parker's volume, *Led by the Spirit: Toward a practical theology of Pentecostal discernment and decision making* (1996) was reprinted in an expanded edition in 2015. Although the titles and content of our respective books may initially appear similar, their content and approach are very different, for Parker's volume is a revised doctoral dissertation.⁹ As an

5.This lacuna is seen in other sectors of Christendom as well. For example, Baker (1986:23) laments that 'for the most part, Calvinistic theologians have by-passed the subject of doing God's will'. Also, there is no discussion of guidance in any of the articles in the volume edited by Miller-McLemore, *The Wiley Blackwell companion to practical theology* (2012).

6.This publisher does offer a volume by G. Murphy called *The called man: Properly discerning the call of God in your life* (2013). However, its deals only with individuals called to vocational ministry.

7.This publisher offers a specialised volume by G. Gabelmann entitled *When God leads us into ministry* (2013).

8.A search of the websites of two Christian publishers in South Africa – Lux Verbi and Struik Christian Media – showed no titles related to guidance on the former's, while Struik distributes a volume by T. Looper (2019) that promises 'four steps to hearing God and aligning yourself with his will'. A search for 'guidance' on the website of the Christian bookseller, Cum Books, yielded no results.

9.This dissertation was presented to the Department of Theology and Personality Studies at Emory University.

academic treatise, its practical value is limited for laypersons seeking insight into oedeology. In the introduction, Parker discusses practical theology as it relates to Pentecostal discernment and decision-making by defining it as '*critical theological reflection arising out of and giving guidance to the practices of a local faith community*' (2015:5; italics his). Later he affirms the primacy of praxis over theory as a methodology for practical theology (2015:4–46).¹⁰ My research similarly emphasizes praxis as epitomised in the canonical Πράξεις Ἀποστόλων [Acts of the Apostles] as central to the role of oedeology within the field of practical theology.

Parker (1996) describes his project:

No one has specifically focused on discernment and decision making among Pentecostals so as to articulate what is going on and how this is similar to or different from decision making in mainline churches. Articulation of the similarities and differences between Pentecostal discernment and decision making and similar practices in mainline churches may suggest ways to enhance decision making in both traditions. (p. 9)

As promising as the statement is, the study fails to deliver on this promise. The bibliography contains none of the well-known volumes on oedeology such as Friesen's *Decision making and the will of God* (1980) or B. Smith's *Knowing God's Will* (1991). Even the foremost Pentecostal treatise on the subject – Gee's volume mentioned earlier – is strangely missing. Later we learn that his primary dialogue partner is P. Tillich, someone most Pentecostal/charismatics have never heard of, let alone read. Parker notes that his tradition holds Scripture as its authority. Yet there is little connection of his topic to passages in either the Old or the New Testament. Almost half of the brief list of 15 biblical references are found on one page (2015:20) and unrelated to the topic of decision-making.

Parker features case studies, as I do. These are really the heart of his study and presented in a chapter called 'Ethnographic Study of a Local Congregation' (2015:70–130). Five individuals in a fictional congregation discuss examples of 'Spirit leading' in their lives. For example, Gwen describes how she and her husband decided to move to Antioch because they 'felt "led of the Lord" that this was where they should live' (2015:83). How this leading took place is unstated, so it would be difficult to place the example within a specific lesson in my book. But it would surely fall under the category 'Volitional' either as 'Spirit-led decision making' or 'compulsion of the Spirit'. Several interviewees described the practice of using fleeces in decision-making (2015:86–87, 99–100). However, because this was never practised by Paul or mentioned in Acts, this popular Pentecostal oracular practice is not covered in my book.

One example that falls in the 'Supernatural' category is Sheila's account of her need for groceries; however, she had

10. Louw (2016:97) argues similarly that the praxis of ministry is directly connected to the praxis of God 'through the work of the Holy Spirit (the pneumatological dimension of praxis). The praxis of God refers to the will of God (divine intentionality) as focused on the meaning and destiny of life, framed by wisdom thinking and wisdom reasoning'.

no money. Sheila describes how the voice of God spoke to her in an almost audible voice that he would provide for her needs. She was to write a check at the food market, despite having insufficient funds in the bank. The heavenly voice assured her that all would be fine and that the funds would be provided to cover the check. The next day when she opened the mailbox, Sheila discovered a letter with a check for \$800, which validated the divine leading on the previous day. The ethical dimension of such guidance is not discussed, and finding a parallel in Acts for similar guidance is, of course, not possible.

Much discussion in this chapter is directed toward guidance related to manifestations of the Spirit in corporate worship (e.g. tongues, prophecy), but Parker (2015) concludes with a broader statement about Spirit-led decisions reported by his interlocuters:

Others reported the leading of the Spirit in decisions concerning career moves, employment, choice of schools, and buying property. Choice of marriage partner, avoidance of accidents, and provisions for financial needs were also named as Spirit-directed activities as were decisions to talk with someone, to work on the restoration of a marriage, and to adopt children whose mother had died. (p. 115)

However, none of these reports are developed. To those interested in the specifics of these examples, Parker's study unfortunately fails to describe them more fully. In the end, Pentecostal/charismatics looking for a 'practical' guide to oedeology will be disappointed if they purchase Parker's book. In conclusion, Pentecostal/charismatic publishers have yet to offer a practical volume on oedeology for their readership.

Oedeology in recent Pentecostal/charismatic scholarship

K. Warrington in his volume *Pentecostal theology* has a four-page section 'The Spirit guides believers'. He warns readers that to view the Bible 'as the basis for all decision making for all times, even with reference to the life and practices of believers, is not always appropriate' (2008:66). He continues by noting that, although principles may be gleaned and applied, 'care in providing contextually appropriate guidance is always necessary'. In the paragraphs that follow, Warrington argues for a balanced integration of Word and Spirit in the decision-making process. Nevertheless, he argues that the Spirit can provide 'fresh revelation', thus providing a 'canon outside the canon in a relentless river of revelation that includes the vitally important biblical text' (2008:68). Warrington's use of the term 'revelation' here would make many biblical scholars, including myself, nervous because it suggests that the Spirit continues to give canonical-like pronouncements equivalent to inspired Scripture. In usual theological nomenclature, this ongoing role of the Spirit is defined as 'illumination' rather than as 'revelation' (e.g. Ryrie 2001:590–591). Therefore, illumination more accurately describes the Spirit's role in guidance in the church age. The proof texts to which Warrington appeals are drawn mainly from the Gospel of John and Paul's letters.

The only example from Acts is that of the Jerusalem council, following J.C. Thomas (see below). Here the Spirit guided the Christian community to identify God's will regarding the inclusion of Gentiles by appealing to the prophecy of Amos. However, he avers that most examples of Paul's guidance in Acts do not depend on an Old Testament text. Warrington (2008) then suggests that believers can:

[A]ffirm the presence of the Spirit in a contemporary setting without having to locate a text which describes the Spirit so functioning as affirmation of that which is being currently experienced. (p. 68)

But surely Paul's experiences of guidance in a canonical text like Acts are illustrative of ways that the Spirit leads in similar circumstances today. For the needs of life and ministry remain constant, despite being historically conditioned.

A master's thesis written by T. Samuel (2015) directly addresses the topic at hand with its title: 'The early Pentecostals' experience of divine guidance in mission in the light of Luke-Acts'. Samuel introduces his study by recalling that divine guidance was part of his spiritual heritage in the Indian Pentecostal Church of God (IPC). Four fundamental questions undergird his study:

1. What is the significance of divine guidance in the early Pentecostal mission?
2. How did the early Pentecostals read guidance passages in Luke-Acts and apply them to their mission praxis?
3. Are the instances of divine guidance narrated in Luke-Acts normative, or are they historical information or a model to be followed? and
4. What is the theology of divine guidance?

Regarding the first two questions, an expectation is created that the study will incorporate data from Indian believers in the IPC. However, the bulk of the discussion is based on the writings and experiences of North American Pentecostals. This was disappointing given the possibility of exploring the topic of guidance from an Indian perspective. Nevertheless, Samuel's discussion of questions 3 and 4 are particularly instructive for this study.

In chapter 2 Samuel looks at the subject of divine guidance and mission in Luke-Acts. He writes, 'The guidance motif is integral to almost all instances of mission ventures narrated in the book of Acts' (2015:51). He illustrates this with an 1895 sermon from A.N. Pierson that appealed to several examples in Acts where the Spirit guided the church (70). Samuel likewise explores examples of guidance in Acts using prophecy,¹¹ angels, and open/closed doors (78–81). Later he discusses the role of dreams and visions in guidance (83–87) and provides a table (84) showing relevant texts and terminology in Acts, all discussed in my study as well. Later, Samuel notes the significance of guidance in Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus along with Ananias' subsequent ministry. He rightly observes that the repetition of this event in chapters 22 and 26 'evinces its significance' (111) As

11. Shepherd (1994:132) likewise observes, 'The Spirit is indirectly characterized by its own action as a Spirit of prophetic guidance'.

stated earlier, this example begins my book, which I see as paradigmatic for all subsequent guidance that Paul received.¹² In his conclusion, Samuel makes several statements relevant to our inquiry. First, 'the early Pentecostals' perception of these passages as normative for their mission ventures is defensible' (147). The Spirit that guided Jesus and the apostles is still guiding believers today. He concludes with this trenchant observation:

The survey of early Pentecostal literature indicates that their openness and obedience toward divine guidance was a major factor that enabled the fast growth of the movement. Surely, their reading of the Lukan narrative as a normative document for their mission and life has contributed to the growth of the movement. (p. 150)

Odegeology in Pentecostal/charismatic departments of practical theology

Taking this study a step further, we next explore how odegeology is presented and discussed in Pentecostal/charismatic classrooms. A review of the curriculum in their departments of practical theology was conducted. Any mention of odegeology in courses on spiritual formation and discipleship was noted. With my research assistant D. Lowry, we developed a brief survey composed of three questions:

1. In your course dealing with spiritual formation/personal discipleship, do you teach a section on hearing God's voice/learning to know the will of God?
2. If so, how much time in the course is devoted to the subject?
3. What text(s) do students read about knowing God's will (if any)?

We identified 71 professors and instructors at Pentecostal/charismatic institutions, both denominational and independent, who might cover the subject in a class. We purposely attempted to elicit responses from professors outside North America, especially representatives from every continent. An email was sent to these professors, inviting them to participate; however, only nine responded. Of these, eight taught in the United States, namely, five at denominational schools (Southeastern, Evangel, North Central, Vanguard, and Northwest) and three at independent institutions (Oral Roberts, Regent 2x). The only foreign respondent taught at Asia Pacific Theological Seminary.

Regarding question 1 – whether they dealt with hearing God's voice or how to know the will of God – five stated that at least one lesson was devoted to odegeology. Three stated that, although there was not a specific lesson, the topic was interwoven throughout the course on spiritual formation. One respondent made this interesting observation:

The students who take the course are presumed to be vocational ministry students, so the presupposition is that hopefully at this stage they have a good grasp of knowing God's will.

12. Speaking of Luke's narrative, Johnson (1983:82) writes that 'it sometimes shows some interplay between human decision – or indecisiveness – and divine direction. Paul decided to go to Damascus to persecute the Way but is overturned and transformed'.

Depending on the age and spiritual maturity of the student, this presumption is debatable. My perception after teaching theological students for over two decades is that many still lack maturity in the area of oedeology. That these nine professors chose to respond to the survey indicates positively that they deem this topic important for the spiritual life of their students.

Regarding question 2, the amount of class time devoted to the subject ranged from 25% (1x) to a 3-h class (2x) to 6–8 h of class time (1x). Three participants could not identify a specific amount of time because it is interwoven into semester-long lectures and discussions.

Regarding question 3, the majority of assigned or recommended text books were published by evangelical publishers because no Pentecostal publishers have a text available on oedeology. There was a great variety in the choices, reflecting various publications on spiritual formation and discipleship.¹³ K. Boa's *Conformed to his image* (2001) was mentioned twice; works by R. Foster, D. Bonhoeffer, A.W. Tozer, H. Blackaby, G. MacDonald, J. Ortberg, and R. Peace were among the other titles. One respondent, D. McNaughton, had co-authored *Follow: Learning to follow Jesus* (2011), a volume that included material on divine guidance. Of the 21 titles mentioned, only two specifically focused on oedeology – D. Willard, *Hearing God* (1999) and P. Little, *Affirming the will of God* (2001).

Oedeology, Acts and Pentecostal/charismatic hermeneutics

This final section comes full circle to address whether the experiences of believers in Acts, especially Paul, should be considered normative for Christians today.¹⁴ For decades Pentecostal/charismatic scholars have discussed the issue of normativity in Acts by largely focusing on pneumatological issues, particularly glossolalia as the initial physical evidence for the baptism of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ Among recent objectors to making pericopae in Acts normative for today is M. Horton (2018) in his volume on pneumatology:

The book of Acts is less a blueprint than it is the announcement of the acts of Christ by his Spirit through the apostles, of whom there are no living successors. There is no reason to assume that all of the marvelous signs of the Spirit's outpouring in the apostolic era are normative today. (p. 193)

Nevertheless, it is curious that Horton never mentions guidance as an activity of the Spirit in its 300 plus pages. Even Jesus' statement in John 16:13 goes unmentioned.

13. In his select bibliography of books on practical theology, Tim Sensing fails to list a single book on guidance; see <http://blogs.acu.edu/sensingt/files/2010/10/Bibliography-for-Practical-Theology-20122.pdf>.

14. Dames (2014:5) suggests this understanding: 'Grounded normativity works with the rational validation or justification of meta-ethical principles and the specification of appropriate validation procedures, such as critical discourse analysis, to ensure congruence and authenticity in leadership discourse'.

15. The literature on this subject pro and con is extensive and introduced briefly by Spawn and Wright (2012:16–19).

Missiologists have also discussed whether Paul's journeys should have been viewed as normative for missionary outreach.¹⁶ However, M. Parsons has stridently attacked this notion. Parsons (2008) claims mission agencies have propagandised the idea that Paul's so-called missionary journeys:

provide a biblical pattern for missionaries going out from a central location to the 'ends of the earth' and then returning periodically for spiritual renewal, administrative guidance, and financial support. (p. 206)

This improper view of Paul's 'mythical journeys', according to Parsons, has 'provided the biblical foundation necessary to hold a place of prominence in Bible atlases, introductory NT textbooks, and classroom lectures and discussions in both church and academy'. Parsons concedes that Paul's mission to the Gentiles occupies a central place in the second half of Luke's narrative, yet 'it may not fit the familiar pattern of "Paul's missionary journey", no matter how attractive the map' (2008:206). Despite Parsons' denial of such a pattern in Acts, Luke repeatedly shows that Antioch is the point of departure and return for each of Paul's major journeys (Journey 1, 13:1–4, 14:26; Journey 2, 15:35–36, 18:22; Journey 3, 18:23). His return on the third journey was abrogated, however, because of imprisonment in Judea. Parson's critique of a normative pattern for missionary activity in Acts thus founders.

This discussion of oedeology has questioned whether the related pericopae in Acts could also be seen as normative. Should the numerous examples of guidance be emulated and even prayed for by Christians today who are seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit? Pentecostal scholar J.C. Thomas has offered a helpful approach to this discussion by using the deliberations of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 as an oedeological model.¹⁷

The council convened 'to determine if Gentile believers in Jesus must convert to Judaism in order to become full-fledged Christians' (2013:84). The council's decision would determine the future composition of the church, and Paul was in the middle of this controversy. After Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch following the first journey in Galatia, they reported how 'God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles' (Ac 14:27).

Apparently some who heard them were believers with a Pharisaic background who then revisited the Galatian churches with their gospel of circumcision. A Galatian believer apparently brought Paul news of the 'different gospel' (Gal 1:6) being promulgated in his absence. Paul responded by writing the letter of Galatians to draw his audience back to the gospel of grace, not law.¹⁸ Simultaneously, some Judaizers

16. For example, C.R. Little (2016); cf. Stenschke (2010:71–77).

17. Thomas uses the model of the Jerusalem council to argue for the role of women in ministry. In Lesson 9 of *The Spirit said go* (2017:50), the council is mentioned briefly. However, after reading Thomas' extended discussion, I realised that my coverage of the council was inadequate. So I have written a new chapter called 'God uses meetings to guide us', which will appear in a revised edition.

18. For a further discussion of this, see Wilson (2018:357–358).

came to Antioch from Jerusalem with the gospel of circumcision, and so intimidated the Jewish believers that even Peter and Barnabas withdrew from fellowship with Gentile believers (Gal 2:11–14). This sharp debate and dispute (στάσεως καὶ ζητήσεως οὐκ ὀλίγη; Ac 15:2) prompted the believers in Antioch to choose a delegation that included Paul and Barnabas to travel 900 kilometres to Jerusalem to meet with the church there to resolve this dispute.

At the Jerusalem council, Pharisee believers (Ac 15:5), Peter (Ac 15:7–11), and Paul and Barnabas (Ac 15:12–13) presented their positions. Speaking of the signs and wonders worked among the Galatians by the latter two, Thomas writes: ‘That such a statement would stand on its own, says a great deal about the community’s experience of God in their decision-making process’ (2013:85). James next received a word of wisdom based on Amos 9:11–12 and showed that the inclusion of the Gentiles was part of God’s plan for the salvation of the world.¹⁹ Through his interpretation of this scripture, James assumed prophetic authority to ‘judge’ (15:19) this divisive issue so as to reconcile the factions. Thomas writes, ‘That the decision is closely tied to the previous discussions is indicated by the use of therefore (διὸ)’ (2013:88). A letter was then composed to communicate the council’s decision to the churches in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. It also provided instructions to facilitate fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers.

Thomas suggests there is a threefold hermeneutical paradigm for decision-making when we look at how the early church handled this controversy. The first is that ‘the final decision of the Council [is] described as being good to the Holy Spirit’ (2013:89). The second, the collective community was also involved in the interpretative process (τῷ πνεύματι τῷ ἁγίῳ καὶ ἡμῖν; Ac 15:28).²⁰ The final component is the biblical text: ‘the previous activity of the Spirit in the community also spoke very loudly to the group being in part responsible for the text chosen ...’ (2013:89). This threefold interpretative paradigm arguably can be applied to discussions of odegeology within its broader praxis throughout the book of Acts. And such an application has been developed independently in the 20 chapters of *The Spirit said go*.

G.D. Fee has elucidated important observations in this regard: ‘The word of God in Acts which may be regarded as normative for Christians is related primarily to what any given narrative was *intended* to teach’. But was odegeology part of Luke’s intention in these various pericopae? Fee (1991) goes on to observe:

Historical precedent, to have normative value, must be related to *intent*. That is, if it can be shown that the purpose of a given narrative is to *establish* precedent, then such precedent should be regarded as normative. (p. 91)

19.Thomas (2013:85–88) discusses why Amos was an appropriate prophetic text for James to introduce into the debate.

20.Johnson (1983:81–108) has similarly proposed that the council serves as a model for community decision-making. He also presents four passages in Acts that show some type of group decision-making.

Paul’s conversion described in Acts 9:1–19, alluded to in Acts 9:27 (Wilson 2016a) and intentionally repeated in Acts 22:4–16 and Acts 26:12–18 does establish a precedent regarding guidance in Luke’s narrative. Thus odegeology as introduced and experienced in *Praxeis* (Acts), particularly by Paul, should be considered normative praxis for Christians seeking divine guidance today.

Conclusion

This study has suggested that odegeology – guidance in the Christian life – deserves a place within the discipline of practical theology. Osmer and Schweitzer (2003:3) observe: ‘The *normative* task of practical theology focuses on the construction of theological and ethical norms by which to critically assess, guide and reform some dimensions of contemporary religious praxis’. Because learning to discern God’s will is such a vital dimension of Christian faith, this exercise clearly falls within the scope of practical theology. For practical theology is the theological discipline in which Scripture, in this case the book of Acts, intersects with the praxis of Christian living. Louw describes the full quality of praxis as a creative force: ‘It is not simply action based on reflection ... It is the action of people who are free, who are able to act for themselves. Moreover, praxis is always risky’ (2016:424n50).²¹ The book of Acts indeed portrays the apostle Paul behaving like a man of action who is continually taking risks in response to the divine will on his journeys. Similarly, the various testimonies in *The Spirit said go* show Christians today likewise taking risks in response to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Thus odegeology was not just a reality in the book of Acts but can be normative praxis for contemporary believers. Therefore, the need exists for its inclusion as a sub-discipline of spiritual formation in the faculties of practical theology as well as in discipleship programmes in churches.²²

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The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

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Ethical considerations

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21.Louw further defines praxis as ‘the intention within an action that serves as the motivational factor for human behaviour as well as a framework for meaning and the decoding of events’ (2016:424).

22.For further on this topic, see Steyn and Masango (2011:1–7).

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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