

The Church of the Servant King

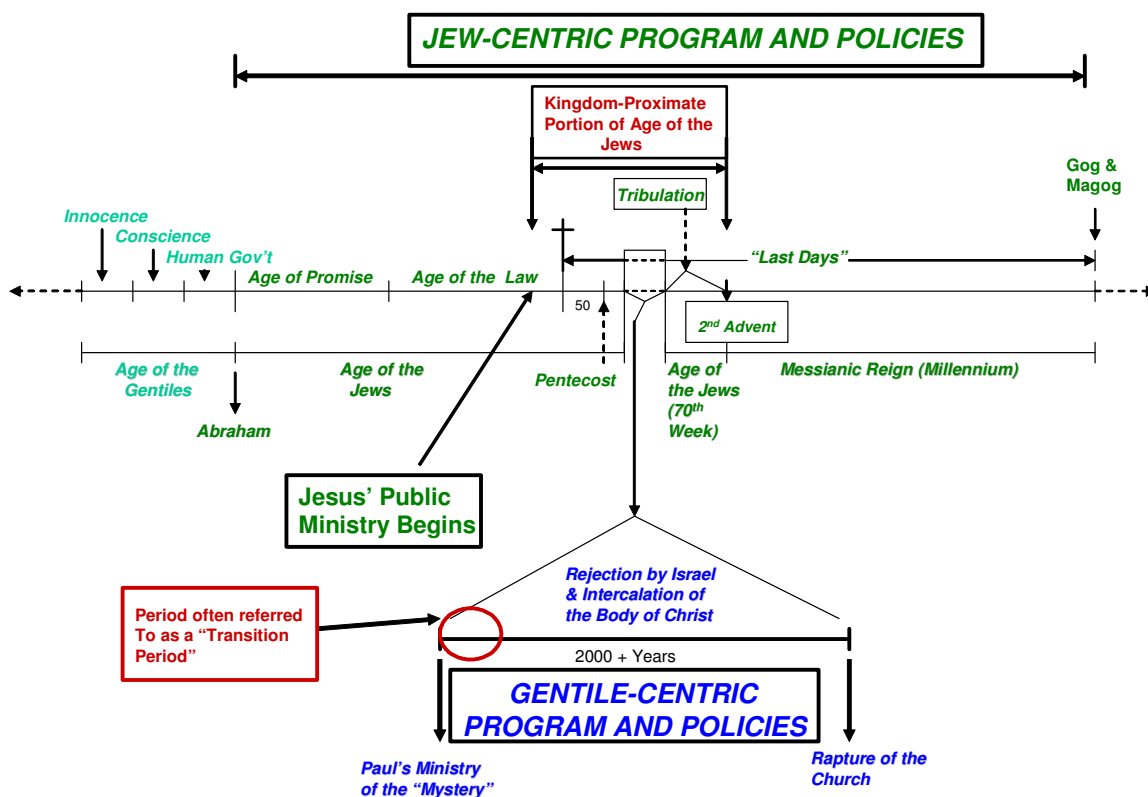
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Survey of the Bible Series – Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

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TEMPORARY VERSUS PERMANENT SPIRITUAL GIFTS

In order to properly understand the subject of spiritual gifts given by the Holy Spirit to believers, we need to address the distinction between temporary and permanent spiritual gifts. By temporary, I am referring to the fact that certain spiritual gifts eventually ceased to function within the *ekklesia* (“assembly” of believers referred to as the “church”) while others have continued to function to this day – and will continue to do so until the Rapture of the church. The foundation for understanding the distinction between the two categories rests in one’s understanding of the transition period – the transition into the new Gentile-centric dispensation from the suspended Jewish-centric program referred to as the Age of the Jews or sometimes, the Age of Israel. (See chart below).



The “Transition Period” Explained

There are varied interpretations and opinions of the timing and nature of what is commonly referred to as the transition period into the present dispensation of the Church Age Body of Christ as we know it to now exist. Since this is not intended to be an apologetic for my position or a seminary paper on the subject, I will limit my comments to an explanation of my

understanding of this “transition” period where we observe the gradual cessation of some spiritual gifts and the carry-forward of other spiritual gifts to the present day and beyond to the Rapture.

First, we need to recognize that we only have the written Scriptural account in the book of Acts and the epistles written by Paul and the Jewish Apostles (i.e. Peter, James, John) from which to construct a chronology. Unfortunately, the earliest written account by Paul is Galatians which was written around A.D. 49 – approximately 16 years after our Lord’s death (assuming A.D. 33 to be the year of His crucifixion). In the Acts narrative, this timing roughly corresponds the watershed chapter of Acts 13 where we make the following observations:

- ✓ In Acts 13, we observe the separation of Barnabas and Saul for the work to which God had specially called them (13:2).
- ✓ We are probably 13 or 14 years removed from Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection and the events of Acts 2.
- ✓ Saul has already been evangelizing in a significant way, but the content of his message as recorded by Luke is very simply a recognition that Jesus was and is the Messiah of Israel.
- ✓ Water baptism is practiced in a manner that is consistent with Jewish traditions and with the ceremonial cleansings required by the Law.
- ✓ Certain rituals required by the Law (e.g. circumcision) were still being observed and practiced by most Jewish believers.
- ✓ Based upon the narrative alone, nothing has been documented that would indicate that God had begun a new age – the age of the Body of Christ.
- ✓ However, the letter to the Galatians (ca. A.D. 49) does indicate Paul held positions that contain truth unique to the Gentile-centric dispensation (e.g. Gal 2:20-21; 3:26-28).
- ✓ It is very likely that Paul had taught these new and unique truths in his evangelism and travels amongst the Gentiles prior to his writing the letter to the Galatians.
- ✓ This leads me to the conclusion that God intercalated the Gentile-centric program and suspended the Jewish-centric program involving Israel at the time of Paul’s conversion (or at least at the time that Paul was set aside to be the Apostle to the Gentiles).
- ✓ However, from the point of Paul’s salvation and the beginning of Paul’s ministry, Jewish believers in particular continue to observe Jewish traditions and practices associated with the Mosaic Law and miraculous spiritual gifts are dispensed to certain members of the Body of Christ for a period of time – the “transition” period.

A couple of very good sources of information for deriving a good understanding of the subject of the transition period that I use include *A Dispensational Theology* by Charles F. Baker and the other source is *Understanding the Book of Acts* by the same author.¹ Some key questions emerge from any study of this subject.

Key Questions Regarding the “Transition” Period

- ✓ Were there two distinct programs and “churches” during the transition period?
- ✓ What was the spiritual status of believers who were saved under Peter’s preaching up to Acts 13?
- ✓ What do we make of the fact that believers in Jerusalem continued to practice circumcision (Acts 15)?
- ✓ Why is the issue of when the new Body of Christ began to be formed even important to us?
- ✓ If one believes that the new dispensation began at a date not specifically identifiable in Acts or in Scripture, yet had a definite beginning, has the distinction between Israel and the new dispensation been blurred or confused?

¹ See Charles F. Baker, *A Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Publications, 1994) with emphasis upon 514-523 and Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Publications, 1981), 75-79.

- ✓ How does an understanding of the *transition* period thus described and defined aid us in our understanding of the distinction between *temporary* and *permanent* spiritual gifts?

Answers

- ✓ *Were there two distinct programs and “churches” during the transition period?*

I think Charles Baker's comments come very close to reflecting what I believe to be the correct understanding of the subject. However, in spite of my agreement with so much of what he writes on so many topics, his wording leaves the door slightly ajar as to the possibility that God may have had two programs working simultaneously. I will provide some additional comments after a reading of these excerpts.

The first half of Acts is a continuation of the same Israelitish Kingdom program which was carried on by our Lord in His earthly ministry. There were developments [e.g. *spread of the gospel to Gentiles, recognition of salvation by grace apart from the Law, no circumcision required for salvation, etc.*] in that program, but not what we would call a transition [Baker's position is that the new Gentile-centric dispensation did not begin until Acts 13 at which time the transition began]. During the latter part of the first half of Acts we can see certain events which were preparatory to the transition. By a transition we do not mean that the Jewish Pentecostal Church gradually changed into the Church which is the Body of Christ. *The Body of Christ is a new creation, and as such had a distinct historical beginning.* The Transition Period may better be described as an overlapping period, a period during which the religious program which accompanied the Israelitish Kingdom ministry overlapped into the beginning of the new dispensation of the Body of Christ. [This sounds like two programs running concurrently]. During this period the Jews who believed continued in their Mosaic customs, whereas the Gentiles who believed were to observe no such things (Acts 21:25).² [Brackets and italicized phrases are mine. Baker's comments are helpful to understanding the book of Hebrews too – not to mention the epistle written by James, the half-brother of Jesus around A.D. 44-46.]

In speaking of the Transition we do not mean that the nation of Israel gradually changed into the Church, the Body of Christ. We believe that the Body of Christ began as a completely new creation of God, and in this sense there was no transition. We do not believe that God was carrying on two, separate dispensations at the same time, one of offering the Kingdom to Israel and the other of forming the Body of Christ, and that one of these gradually died out while the other increased.³ [The comments in this excerpt seem contradictory to the prior excerpt where Baker mentions the overlap between two programs].

God was in business with the nation of Israel with a view to establishing the earthly, Millennial Kingdom from Pentecost to approximately half way through the book of Acts. At a definite point in time, known only to God, He closed out that business; He cast Israel aside (Romans 11:15); He broke off the natural branches (Romans 11:17). [Scripture seems to strongly imply that this occurred with the Apostle Paul]. He then began a brand new business with the Body of Christ under a new dispensation with the Apostle Paul as the chief administrator. According to our definition there was no transition involved in this aspect of the change. Wherein then was there a transition? The transition is involved with the historical continuity of God's spiritual or religious program. There was seemingly

² Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts*, 75.

³ Baker, *A Dispensational Theology*, 515.

no sharp break in this program at all. The Jewish kingdom church which existed at Pentecost continued on throughout the book of Acts. Paul went out to the Gentile world and had as his chief fellow-workers members of the Jerusalem church. Paul and his churches ministered to the Jerusalem saints on various occasions (Acts 11:29, 30; 18:21; 21:17; Romans 15:25-28; 1 Corinthians 16:1-3; 2 Corinthians 1:16). The various sign gifts which characterized the great commission to the Kingdom apostles (Mark 16:17, 18) were also manifested in Paul's ministry and in his churches (1 Corinthians 12-14). It was decided in conference with the apostles at Jerusalem that Paul's Gentile converts did not need to submit to circumcision and other Jewish rites (Acts 15:19-27). This is seemingly the only noticeable difference in Paul's ministry as far as the book of Acts is concerned. But Paul's epistles written during this period indicate some very great differences, and this fact has caused many people to condemn Paul for some of his activities in the book of Acts.⁴

It is apparent from all that has been stated that as far as the outward religious program was concerned, there was not a sharp breaking off of the kingdom program and a sudden beginning of the Body program. Instead there was a period of gradual change over a number of years, and we call that period of change the Transition Period. [*The assumption being made by Baker and others is that what we observe is God's design rather than a progressive understanding (and a consequent change in practice) associated with God's changed program on the part of people steeped in 2000 plus years of Jewish tradition*]. It is both difficult and dangerous to try to establish permanent doctrines on the practices of a period of transition, when everything is in a state of flux. One can go to Paul's experiences in the book of Acts to find support for practicing circumcision, Nazarite vows, animal sacrifices, tongues, healing, visions, baptism, etc., all of which are either forbidden or are to pass away according to his epistles.⁵

I believe the excerpts from Baker's materials are insightful and somewhat helpful. However, while helpful, his observations and analysis on this subject doesn't satisfy me completely.

In short, I believe that the "transition" period that we observe when reading the book of Acts reflects a *progressive understanding* on the part of believers (led by new revelation given to the Apostle Paul) of the Truths associated with the new dispensation. The temporary suspension of God's Jewish-centric program through the nation of Israel occurred at a definite point even though Jewish people who accepted Jesus as the Messiah continued to practice Jewish tradition and even if, on occasion, we see Paul observing a Jewish ritual such as circumcision or the keeping of a Nazarite vow – acts that Paul certainly did not see as required for salvation nor as being demanded by God as a part of the spiritual walk of the believer. Paul viewed them rightly as a non-essential.

Jewish believers in Jesus as the Messiah who became such during the 10 to 14 year period after the Pentecost event anticipated the Kingdom's establishment and continued under certain presumptions about certain aspects of the Law, namely circumcision. Some continued to cling to these strongholds and some who did so opposed the grace being extended to Gentiles apart from the Law – a principle true under Peter's Jewish-centric ministry and under Paul's Gentile-centric ministry. As Paul's ministry grew and his status as an Apostle received validation through the same sign gifts associated with Peter's ministry, Paul and his new insight given to Him directly by God came under attack by those who did not accept his apostleship, his testimony and his "mystery" teaching.

⁴ Ibid, 517.

⁵ Ibid.

The most virulent of these attackers were known as the Judaizers and were in large part responsible for Paul's letter to the Galatians, the first of his epistles written circa A.D. 49. Through progressive revelation given to Paul, the mystery Truths associated with the new dispensation began to be communicated – first verbally during his evangelistic ministry and mission travels, then captured in writing as we discover through his epistles, especially the prison epistles.

The *transition* period is simply a recognition that there was progressive revelation given to Paul and a progressive understanding on the part of new believers of the mystery doctrines of the new dispensation of the Body of Christ. The specific point at which God set aside Israel and intercalated the new Gentile-centric dispensation is definitely associated with the Apostle to the Gentiles – Paul.

What we see reflected in the non-Gospel books of the New Testament is evidence of a clear distinction between Israel and the new dispensation program as well as the struggles that the 1st Century Jewish believers had in understanding, acknowledging and accepting the change in God's program. Some, after having accepted the change, tried to revert to Judaistic practices and reject Pauline revelation. These were the subjects of the exhortations found in the book of Hebrews.

- ✓ *What was the spiritual status of believers who were saved under Peter's preaching up to Acts 13?*

There were thousands of Jewish saints who were alive at the time that God began the Body of Christ. The question naturally arises, what happened to these people who were not members of the Body but who lived into the new dispensation where every one became members of the Body at the time of salvation? Did they remain attached to Israel or did they too become members of the Body? We have pointed out that things were in a state of flux during the transition and that it is therefore difficult to determine accurately everything that was transpiring. For that reason there is a difference of understanding upon this point among dispensationalists who hold the general scheme presented in this book.⁶

I cannot quote the remaining five pages that Baker devotes to a presentation of the different views and arguments. However, for purposes of these notes, I will summarize the different views he analyzes and leave it up to the individual believer to read his excellent analysis in full. Also, I will conclude with my understanding and position and leave each believer to decide for himself or herself.

Position #1 – Believers during the Transition Period belonged to two separate “churches” – a “Kingdom Church” and a “Body of Christ” church.

- ✓ Strengths –
 - ❖ Attempts to preserve the distinction between Israel and the Body of Christ – Christ promised the Twelve Apostles that they would sit as judges in Israel's Kingdom (Matt 19:28), therefore how can the twelve be in the Body and at the same time be a part of Israel's Kingdom program unless there is a distinction made?
 - ❖ It recognizes that the Jewish believers at Jerusalem continued to carry out a different religious program from that practiced by the Gentile believers (see Acts 15:19-21 and 21:25). The Jewish believers continued with circumcision and other Mosaic customs concerning the Law and the temple, whereas Paul taught

⁶ Baker, *A Dispensational Theology*, 518-519.

the Gentiles that Christ would profit them nothing if they engaged in such practices.

- ❖ It acknowledges that there was a distinction between Paul's ministry and gospel focus and that of Peter. Peter had been given the gospel of the Circumcision, whereas Paul had been entrusted the gospel of the Un-circumcision (Galatians 2:7-9). The gospel of the Circumcision was to Jews and was essentially an extension of the Kingdom Gospel – it recognized that the kingdom was near if Jews would accept the resurrected Jesus as their Messiah (see Acts 2:17-26).
 - ❖ It recognizes that none of the other apostles (except Paul) ever mention the Body of Christ or the dispensation of the Mystery. Instead, their epistles are addressed to the twelve tribes scattered abroad (James 1:1) and those of the dispersion (1 Peter 1:1). Other subject matter addressed by the writers of the New Testament books other than Paul is concerned with the prophetic program of Israel (e.g. Revelation).
- ✓ Weaknesses –
- ❖ Fails to satisfactorily address scenarios where believers who acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah and Son of God and who were saved prior to the beginning of the Body became faithful proponents of "Body of Christ" truth and were even co-workers with Paul, e.g. Barnabas, Silas, Apollos, etc. How could they be members of one "Kingdom Church" and proclaim with Paul truth unique to the Body of Christ? Proponents of this position believe that such individuals never became members of the Body of Christ even though they advanced truth related to that unique dispensation.
 - ❖ If the Jews in Jerusalem continued to carry on a different religious program that was sanctioned by God even while the new dispensation under Paul had begun, then the exhortations found in the book of Hebrews for believers (Jewish type) not to return to the rituals and ordinances of Judaism are at odds with this position. (See Heb 6:1-6; 10:26)

Position #2 – The "Kingdom Church" is phased into the "Body of Christ" Church

- ✓ Strengths –
- ❖ Acknowledges Christ's promise to the Twelve recorded in Matthew 19:28; however, also recognizes Paul's statement that members of the Body of Christ will reign with Christ (2 Tim 2:12) – apparently as a reward for faithfulness. We, as members of the Body of Christ, are not told what position we shall hold, but the Twelve were told. Adherents of this view believe that this reward has nothing to do with either Israel's hope or the Body's hope.
 - ❖ Recognizes that even Paul placed himself under the Jewish ordinances and rituals being observed by the Jerusalem church (see Acts 21:24-26); however, just because he took Jewish vows at one point, observed ordinances of the Temple, circumcised Timothy and practiced other Jewish customs does not mean that he did not become a member of the Body of Christ. It just means that even Saul (later Paul) went through a period of progressive understanding of the transition that was underway through his ministry.
 - ❖ The fact that the other writers of Scripture that we call the New Testament did not write about the mystery truths related to the Body of Christ does not mean or prove that they did not become members of the Body. Paul mentions the Body in only four of his fourteen epistles. He speaks of the mystery in only four or five of his epistles. Paul is the only one to whom the mystery was revealed, thus he is the only one commissioned to write about it.
- ✓ Weaknesses –
- ❖ At least based upon Baker's analysis, I do not find that this position addresses those Jewish believers who accepted the gospel to the Circumcision regarding the resurrected Jesus as their Messiah and the Son of God, but who did not accept the mystery doctrines and the Gospel taught by Paul that circumcision was not necessary for salvation. What happened to them once the dispensation

of the Age of the Body of Christ dawned? In Galatians, Paul pronounces a double curse upon them – Gal 1:8-9).

- ❖ Needs to acknowledge that once the mystery doctrines taught by Paul became known to those who had accepted Peter and the other apostles' teaching, they were responsible to respond to the Truth even though today, we can't know with absolute certainty what happened to specific individuals other than those mentioned specifically in Scripture.

Position #3 – All Believers of Paul's Day were members of the Body of Christ

✓ Strengths –

- ❖ Acknowledges Paul's teaching in his epistles (not just the historical narrative of the book of Acts). In both Romans and 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks to all believers (Jews and Gentiles) as if they are a part of one Body (1 Cor 12:13; Rom 12:5).
- ❖ Acknowledges that Paul's two main fellow-workers, Barnabas and Silas, were both men who were saved in the Jerusalem church before the new dispensation of the Body of Christ began. Paul would not choose men who were not members of the Body to become his main leaders in conducting the ministry to the Body.
- ❖ Paul acknowledges that Apollos watered the seed Paul had planted at Corinth (1 Cor 3:6). Apollos was a significant leader and preacher who knew only the baptism of John until Priscilla and Aquilla met him and instructed him more thoroughly in Pauline doctrine. It is clear from Paul that both were eventually engaged in the same ministry.
- ❖ Paul rebuked the Corinthians for being divided between Peter, Apollos, and himself. If there were two different legitimate programs for believers in place, then Paul should have informed them of this fact and not rebuked the followers of Peter for joining him. Obviously, at this point in the 1st Century, there was only one program in place regardless of whether Peter, Apollos or any of the Twelve Apostles fully recognized it.
- ❖ Paul's two Jewish kinsmen, Andronicus and Junia, were saved before he was, and therefore before the Body began (Rom 16:7). These two men were in Rome when Paul wrote his first epistle, yet were included in the Body mentioned by Paul in Romans 12:5.
- ❖ Paul gives a universal classification of the human race in 1 Corinthians 10:32 where he states that believers should "give no offense, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God." Paul did not recognize the existence of two separate churches when he wrote 1 Corinthians (ca. A.D. 56). The Jews and Gentiles here represent all of the unsaved, whereas all of the saved are classified as the church of God.
- ❖ Timothy is another example of a Jewish believer (2 Tim 1:5 cf. 3:15) who later labored with Paul and was a member of the Body of Christ.
- ❖ It would seem strange that members of Paul's home church in Antioch, a church founded by Jewish believers who were scattered by persecution (Acts 11:19, 20) were not members of the Body. How could Paul effectively minister to his home church if they were not members of the Body?
- ❖ There were many local churches which contained people who became believers prior to the dawning of the new dispensation of the Body of Christ. If these people belonged to two separate groups, with separate dispensational programs – some looking forward to the Rapture and some to the Tribulation and the 2nd Advent of Christ to establish the Messianic Kingdom, there would be constant confusion.

✓ Weaknesses –

- ❖ Based upon Baker's presentation, I don't see how this position addresses those who were believers in the gospel preached by Peter and others prior to the dawn of the new dispensation, but who rejected Paul's teaching.

I tend to accept the last position based upon its merits with the understanding that only those who accepted the grace gospel of salvation apart from works of any kind that were associated with the Law were truly saved and members of the Body of Christ. We can't possibly know which specific individuals during this Transition period fall into this category apart from those specifically mentioned in Scripture as associated with Paul and/or the new doctrine.

- ✓ *What do we make of the fact that believers in Jerusalem continued to practice circumcision (Acts 15)?*

This question should have been addressed through the discussion above. However, just to reiterate – I believe that there was a definite point at which God's Jewish-centric program ceased and His Gentile-centric program began. Although the specific year may be debated, it is definitely associated with the Apostle Paul. The change in God's program was progressively revealed through Paul and was progressively understood by 1st Century believers. This accounts for the continued observances of some Jewish rituals.

The practice of any aspects of the Mosaic Law either immediately prior to or after the new dispensation dawned was not required (albeit permitted by God during the transition period) since the Law's requirements were satisfied fully by Christ. Two categories of people practiced elements of the Law both prior to and after the dawn of the new dispensation. Prior to its dawn – believers in Jesus practiced the Law's requirements in ignorance while Jewish unbelievers practiced it as a result of their unbelief. After the dawn of the new dispensation – some practiced it in ignorance and through progressive illumination as a result of Paul's ministry, these Jewish believers began to abandon it as they accepted Paul's teaching. Those who rejected Paul (whoever they might have been), as well as Jews who had never accepted Jesus, continued to practice elements of (e.g. circumcision) or, in some cases, all of the Law due to a rejection of Paul's teaching. In my opinion, the eternal spiritual status of this latter group is ultimately the Lake of Fire.

- ✓ *Why is the issue of when the new Body of Christ began to be formed even important to us?*

It is important that we as believers interpret Scripture through a consistently applied hermeneutic or grid. To the extent that inconsistencies exist, then to that extent, it is quite possible that critical doctrines can become subject to confusion, doubt, uncertainty and made less defensible. The distinction between Israel and the Body of Christ is crucial to one's understanding of Scripture – especially the theological realms of eschatology and soteriology. Distortions such as amillennialism, covenant or reformed theology, a confusion of grace salvation and works-based means of salvation, etc. tend to result from a hermeneutic that doesn't adequately address these issues and tends to not honestly acknowledge those areas where we have limited understanding. There is a fine balance to be had and my comments are not meant to disparage anyone who holds positions different from mine. Most of the Christians I've met who are well-informed in these matters are sincere in their pursuit of the Truth even though their positions may be different than mine. Also, in humility, I am sure that my understanding of these matters will continue to be refined; however, refinement and acceptance of a position that is at odds with some basic issues are two entirely different things.

One passage that plays a role in this discussion and that is commonly distorted is Romans 9-11 – just to name one example. Nothing could have been further from Paul's thinking than to consider as true Israelites those Gentiles who were members of the Body of Christ. Yet, this is what is taught by certain members of the covenant or reformed school of thought.

Similarly, the Body of Christ is not partially, or in any inaugural sense, beginning to fulfill the covenant promises made with Israel – the position of Progressive Dispensationalists and others. What Paul plainly teaches is that Christ's blood is the blood of the New Covenant which

has been shed for the remission of sins, and that as a result of Israel's rejection, God in His grace, not in fulfillment of a covenant promise to Gentiles, has made the Gentiles partakers of the salvation and similar spiritual blessings promised to Israel in His covenant with that nation and people (Rom 15:27). Gentile believers today can be called Abraham's seed, not in a physical sense, nor in any sense related to the nation Israel, but through faith in Abraham's ultimate seed – Jesus Christ (Gal 3:16, 29). Through belief in Christ, we Gentiles inherit the spiritual blessing of salvation that was promised to Abraham. Only because we are in Christ can we be considered Abraham's seed.

- ✓ *If one believes that the new dispensation began at a date not specifically identifiable in Acts or in Scripture, yet had a definite beginning, has the distinction between Israel and the new dispensation been blurred or confused?*

I raise this question because it is a fear that is often expressed by those who see the new dispensation having its beginning at Pentecost in Acts 2. They rightly want to preserve the distinction between Israel and the new Body of Christ. Yet, the Acts 2 position has a number of weaknesses that need to be honestly and un-emotionally acknowledged, else there is a risk of letting tradition and religion dominate the believer's objectivity. I have dealt with some of the weaknesses of the Acts 2 position and will do so in the future; however, suffice it to say for now that I believe that the position I have presented in these notes (and other studies) better support a clear distinction between Israel and the new dispensation while recognizing and not compromising the similarities of some spiritual truths between dispensations.

- ✓ *How does an understanding of the transition period thus described and defined aid us in our understanding of the distinction between temporary and permanent spiritual gifts?*

The death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus were all in fulfillment of prophecy and necessary to make Redemption and its spiritual benefits available to mankind. Therefore, Jesus had to die a sacrificial death – regardless of whether Israel would have responded en masse to His gospel prior to His sacrificial death or not. Scripture is very clear on the point that this response did not occur prior to Jesus' death (nor after His death as we shall see).

Scripture is also very clear on the point that the kingdom offer was extended to Israel after Jesus' death and resurrection. The gospel proclaimed by Peter and others specifically identified Jesus as the long-promised Messiah, a claim that was then validated by the miraculous resurrection of Jesus from the dead and His appearance to so many.

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His Servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he was determined to let Him go. But you denied the Holy One and the Just, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and killed the Prince of life, whom God raised from the dead of which we are witnesses. (Acts 3:13-15)

Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers. But those things which God foretold by the mouth of all His prophets, that the Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled. Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing [a reference to the long-promised Messianic kingdom on earth] may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may send Jesus Christ, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive until the times of restoration of all things [the kingdom and its temporal blessings], which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began. (Acts 3:17-21)

So, for a period after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, Scripture documents that a Transition period from the Age of Israel with a kingdom-centric gospel and the

Age of the Body of Christ with a gentile-centric gospel. Christ's redemptive work was and is the focal point of both gospels, yet signs associated with the kingdom were needed to validate the message of gospel bearers. As the rejection of this gospel by the nation Israel became full-fledged (with wonderful exceptions on the part of some Jewish believers), the transition into the new dispensation occurred.

The signs and miracles documented in the book of Acts were designed to attend the presentation of the kingdom gospel during Israel's "last days" as prophesied in Scripture (Joel 2:28-32 cf. Acts 2:14-43). Eventually, as the rejection by Israel became full (the major theme of the book of Acts) and the gospel of grace was received with gladness by Gentiles, the transition to the new dispensation was completed and the signs and miracles associated with the kingdom-centric gospel ceased. Paul documents this fact in such passages as 1 Corinthians 13:8. Eventually, during this Transition period, even Gentiles who accepted the grace gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ spoke in tongues (foreign languages) which served as a testimony to Jews that God was going directly to the Gentiles with a message of salvation and hope – a message that a repentant Israel should have been the agents to disseminate. Early in the Transition period, the conversion of the Samaritans by Philip (Acts 8: 8:5-7, 13-17) and the conversion of the Gentile Roman Centurion, Cornelius, by Peter (Acts 10: 3, 10-21, 43-48) would have been (and was) interpreted by the Jews as consistent with Gentile participation in the coming kingdom. Later, during the Transition period as the Jewish rejection was becoming fully realized, the sign gifts began to wane based upon Paul's testimony.

QUESTIONS AND ISSUES SURROUNDING THE CESSATION OF THE SIGNS AND MIRACLES

❖ *What are the "Sign" Gifts?*

Of the twenty spiritual gifts named in Scripture, ten were temporary and are no longer functional or valid. These gifts are listed in such passages as Romans 12:6-8; 1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-30; and Ephesians 4:11. They are divided between temporary and permanent as follows:

| <u>Temporary</u> | <u>Permanent</u> |
|---------------------------|------------------|
| Apostle | Pastor-Teacher |
| Prophet | Evangelist |
| Word of Wisdom | Teacher |
| Word of Knowledge | Helps |
| Discerning of spirits | Mercy |
| Faith | Giving |
| Healings | Exhortation |
| Miracles | Governments |
| Tongues | Ruling |
| Interpretation of Tongues | Ministry |

When we speak of the "sign" gifts, we are referring to their more specific purpose as regards the nation of Israel and the purpose that God was promoting through them, i.e. a "sign" to unbelieving Israel. As such, the sign gifts were the temporary spiritual gifts of "healings," "miracles," "tongues," and "interpretation of tongues." It could be argued that the other temporary spiritual gifts could have had a similar affect upon unbelieving Israel and that is certainly true. However, we shall concern ourselves with these four spiritual gifts since they tend to be the most controversial today. In addition, the gift of "Apostle" and "Prophet" continued to a later point in the 1st Century A.D. than did the other temporary spiritual gifts as we shall see.

❖ *Why Do We Believe and Teach that the "Signs" and "Miracles" of the 1st Century A.D. are No Longer Valid?*

The answer to this question should be fairly intuitive based upon the information previously presented; however, in the interest of providing more clarity, more elaboration will be provided. There are other ways of stating this question. If signs were given for the sake of the Jews, why should we find them in manifestation in the church which Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, founded? And if they were in Paul's churches, should they not be in our churches today, if we are supposed to follow Paul? There are various angles from which these questions can be answered.

Answer – Their purpose was directed toward the Jews and Israel even though Gentiles were involved.

While God continued to witness to the nation of Israel throughout the Transition period, the sign gifts (e.g. speaking in tongues, interpretation of tongues, miracles and healing) continued. These sign gifts were performed by Jews and Gentiles alike. The exercise of these gifts by Gentile believers served dual and somewhat simultaneous purposes:

- Initially, it primarily provided evidence of God's acceptance of Gentiles associated with the Messianic Kingdom
- Eventually, as Jewish rejection was becoming final, the sign gifts exercised by Gentiles provided convicting evidence to unbelieving Israel

Eventually, as Paul testifies, these sign gifts began to cease as the "Transition" to a new Gentile-centric dispensation progressed to its conclusion. As Jewish rejection became final during the 1st Century A.D., there was no longer any object or ministry for these signs to accomplish. We believe that at that time God withdrew these gifts.

Answer – God dealt with Jews in signs.

Paul recognizes this principle and relates it to unbelief. He states in 1 Corinthians 1:22 that "Jews request a sign" and in 1 Corinthians 14:22, he states that "tongues are for a sign." In 1 Corinthians 14:20-21, Paul exhorts the Corinthian believers to be mature in their understanding and know that this pattern of Jewish unbelief in the face of convicting evidence presented by the Gentiles was nothing really new. Paul uses the example of the prophet Isaiah who indicated that Jews would not listen to God even though He would speak to the Jews in the languages of Gentiles – specifically the Assyrians in Isaiah's time (Isa 28:11-12). This pattern was repeating itself in Paul's day and will repeat itself during the future Tribulation when some Jews will refuse to believe the "gospel of the kingdom" that will be preached to them by both Jew and Gentile believers.

Other Scriptures show that God has always dealt with Israel in signs. (See especially Exodus 4:8; Deuteronomy 28:46; Joshua 4:6; Matthew 12:38, 39; 24:3, 30).

The word "sign" occurs seventy-three times in Scripture which is dispensationally Israelitish, and only three times in Paul's epistles, and all of Paul's references clearly refer to Israel (Romans 4:11; 1 Corinthians 1:22; 14:22). Israel was born nationally in a cradle of signs when God delivered them from Egypt by mighty signs and wonders. Christ produced many mighty signs in proof of His Messiahship.⁷

Signs were thus a part of Israel's program. Christ wrought many signs, and He promised that His disciples would do even greater signs or works (John 14:12). In the so-called Great Commission of Mark 16:15-18, Christ promised that these signs would follow them that believe:

- Casting out demons.

⁷ Charles F. Baker, *Dispensational Relationships* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Publications, 1989), 82.

- Speaking with new tongues.
- Taking up serpents or drinking poison without hurt.
- Healing of the sick.⁸

We believe the reason signs continued even after the new church, the Body of Christ, began under Paul's ministry is this: God did not in one stroke cut off and cast away His people Israel. That is not His way of doing things. Paul quotes Isaiah to the effect that "all day long" God had stretched forth His hands unto this disobedient and gainsaying people of Israel (Romans 10:21). It was not that God was offering the establishment of the Millennium to Israel after Paul came on the scene, but as Paul says, God was trying to provoke Israel to jealousy by beginning a new dispensation with Paul and by sending salvation to the Gentiles (Romans 10:19; 11:11). Remember that the Body of Christ is a joint body of Jews and Gentiles. Even though God had cast aside the national kingdom promises to Israel for the duration of this dispensation, He still had a purpose in saving some of them before the final blow of judgment would be struck in the desolation of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.⁹

The coming in of this established order awaited the complete judgment of Israel nationally and the completion of the revelation of truth for the Body of Christ.

We are now in a position to answer the question why these signs are not for us today. Not only do we have the fact that they were designed for Israel and that Israel has been cast away (Romans 11:15), but Paul clearly states that these signs are to cease. After speaking about the excellence of love in I Corinthians 13 he says: Whether there be [gifts of] prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be [gifts of] tongues, they shall cease; whether there be [the gift of] knowledge, it shall vanish away. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when *that which is perfect* is come, then that which is in part shall be done away (vv. 8-10). To illustrate this further he likens the existing conditions of the dispensation to childhood and the coming mature condition to manhood. The sign gifts belonged to the childhood stage, but Paul says, "When I became a man, I put away childish things" (v. 11). Therefore, it is very evident that these sign gifts were to cease as soon as the dispensation had grown up. And we believe it did grow up to maturity with the final epistles of Paul. Some people suppose these sign gifts continued right up to Acts 28:28 and then suddenly ceased. There is no more a basis for this supposition than for the one that God cast Israel aside with one sudden stroke. One who has studied the book of Acts is aware these signs seem to gradually diminish. W. E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, states:

There is no record of the continuance of these latter [signs, such as tongues] after the circumstances recorded in Acts 19:1-20.

We do see Paul manifesting the signs of an apostle in Acts 28:5 after the shipwreck. (See also 2 Corinthians 12:12; Romans 15:18, 19.) For a special reason, Paul was not healed of his thorn in the flesh, even during the Acts period. After the Acts period we know of several cases where Paul did not exercise any gift of healing on his most trustworthy co-workers. We may not know exactly

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 83.

when the last divinely wrought sign was manifested, although we do know the final prophecy to be fulfilled upon Israel came as late as 70 A.D.¹⁰

❖ *What About Those Today Who Claim to Speak in Tongues – Isn't Their Experience Valid?*

The crucial question here is what is the source since all that is “real” is not necessarily from God. If the purpose of tongues and the reasons for their cessation as presented in this study are correct, then the “source” of any tongues speaking today is not of God. There are several possible sources of the tongues experience today:

- Emotionalism or emotion produced jibberish
- Self-induced jibberish
- Demonism (only applicable to the unbeliever)

What one may observe in a setting where speaking in tongues is promoted is definitely real; however, all that is “real” is not from God. Ignorant, deceived believers can have a “real” emotional experience that is produced by their sincere desire to do something for the Lord and conform to whatever pseudo-spiritual pattern of behavior may be promoted by misinformed leaders. However, that “real” emotional experience is no more sanctioned by God than is the “real” emotional experience that is associated with sins such as “anger” and “jealousy.” In both cases, the experience is “real,” but not of the Lord.

Modern Pentecostal people put the emphasis upon tongues and even claim that one does not have the Holy Spirit if he has not spoken in tongues. Paul classifies tongues as the least of the gifts, even when it was in God's will, and says that he would rather speak five words in a known tongue than 10,000 words in an unknown one. Modern tongues people tell us that the lack of spirituality is the reason why Christians do not have these miraculous gifts today. Paul tells us that the most carnal church of his day, namely that at Corinth, abounded in the gifts, and further that these gifts were bestowed in a sovereign manner by the Spirit of God.¹¹

We recognize that there are a few sincere Christians who are not Pentecostals who agree in general that what we have said is true but who reason that perhaps under certain conditions today God may exercise His sovereign power and give to one here or there one or more of these gifts. Perhaps such gifts would be given to a missionary opening a new field of work. Such people might seek to exercise the gift of tongues in the privacy of their own room, feeling that it might come as an indication that God was putting His approval upon their spirituality. Such people might shy away from all of the emotionalism and confusion of the more rabid type of Pentecostalism, but the same answer must apply to them as it does to the most radical. We grant that God is sovereign and can do anything He wants to do and no one can stop Him. But we question whether God would go against His revealed will and Word. We know that Jesus Christ has the power to come back to earth and appear here in His glorified body at any time on any day, but although He has the sovereign power to do it, we do not believe He will exercise that sovereignty; for He has revealed that He will not come back to this earth again until the end of the great tribulation. We believe likewise that God has revealed that tongues and similar gifts have been done away for this present dispensation, and therefore we do not expect Him to exercise His sovereignty and contradict His Word in so doing.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 84-85.

¹¹ Charles F. Baker, *What We Believe and Why We Believe It?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Publications, revised edition 1995), 46.

¹² Ibid., 45-46.

❖ *What About Those Who Claim to Have the Gift to Heal People?*

Here again, as in the case of any apparent supernatural phenomenon, we must distinguish as to the source of such phenomenon. Modern-day so-called spiritual “healers” are not consistent with Scripture to put it mildly. The source of such modern-day healing phenomenon is one or a combination of the following:

- Fraud
- Psycho-somatic
- Satanically empowered

As in the case of modern-day tongues speaking, all that is “real” is not necessarily from God. Please note that I am not teaching that God does not heal people today, especially at the behest of the petition of his saints. I am decrying those who claim to be a channel of God’s healing or possess the God-endowed power to heal like the Apostles of the 1st Century A.D.

In the first place, the Scripture reveals that Satan has power to work lying signs (2 Thessalonians 2:9; Revelation 13:14). Since Roman Catholics, Spiritists, Christian Scientists, and others all claim authenticated cases of so-called faith healing, it is evident not all healing miracles are from God. If Satan is energizing in these false cults, may he not also deceive even Christians to get them on the wrong track and away from God’s purpose in this dispensation? Then, of course, there is no doubt many supposedly miraculous hearings are of a psychosomatic nature. Finally, the majority of cases of supposed hearings, when investigated, are proven to be exaggerated or even fraudulent.¹³

While the gift of healing has passed away, as Paul said it would, we do have today what we might call elective healing. God is the sustainer and upholder of all life. We have full confidence in the efficacy of prayer, and we are sure God restores people to health when it is His will. Practically all so-called “divine healers” begin with the false premise that sickness is the result of unfaithfulness or sin, and that it is not the will of God that many of His people should be sick. There are many scriptural proofs to the contrary. Paul’s thorn in the flesh, which he called an infirmity, apparently plagued his body to the end (2 Corinthians 12:5-10). Timothy was Paul’s most faithful co-worker, yet he was often sick (1 Timothy 5:23). Trophimus, another faithful servant, had to be left behind sick (2 Timothy 4:20). Epaphroditus became deathly sick because he labored so fervently for the Lord (Philippians 2:25-27). Healing was just one of the several sign gifts. If one of the gifts is here today, there is no reason why all of them should not be.¹⁴

Generally the only ones we hear about now are healing and tongues. Why can’t these people who claim to have such gifts also cleanse lepers and raise the dead to life? The answer is obvious.¹⁵

We believe in the kind of healing for today that Paul mentions in his prison epistles, but not in the gift of healing. In other words, we believe that God in His sovereign mercy heals His people in answer to prayer when it is His will, but we do not believe in divine healers. Any one who claims to have the gift of healing should read Matt. 10:8: “Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give.” This command of our Lord makes several points very plain. When the gift of healing was given it enabled the

¹³ Baker, *Dispensational Relationships*, 87.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

healers to raise the dead just as easily as to heal the dying. The healers were to bestow their blessing upon all of the sick freely, without price. If nothing more was said than this, modern healers would be proved unscriptural. But there is more. The power of the apostles to heal depended not upon the faith of the sick, but upon the gift of healing. When Peter and John healed the lame man at the Beautiful Gate, they did not ask him for a big offering and tell him if he had faith enough he could be healed. Instead, he was asking money from them, and they bestowed the divinely given gift freely upon him and he was immediately made whole. It would be ridiculous to say that a dead person had to exercise enough faith to be raised up, and yet the divine healers try to cover up and excuse their many failures by saying that the unhealed sick just did not have enough faith to be healed. What a travesty upon the Word of God and the work of the blessed Holy Spirit. There are many, and perhaps they are the majority, who believe that if a person can perform seemingly miraculous healings it is a proof in itself that he is truly sent of God. The great shrines of the Roman Catholic church boast as many as or more authenticated cases of healing as do the Pentecostals. Practically every convert to Christian Science can testify to healing through Mary Baker Eddy's scheme which denies every fundamental of the Christian faith. So-called Spiritualists claim the powers of divine healing. Now if physical healing of the body is a proof of a divine work, then Roman Catholicism and Christian Science are proved to be preeminently divine, and by the same token Protestant Christianity is proved to be spiritually poverty-stricken.¹⁶

❖ *If the Gifts of Speaking in Tongues and Healing are No Longer Valid, When Did They Cease?*

While we cannot know the day, nor the hour when these temporary spiritual gifts ceased, it does appear that at least by A.D. 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, these two supernatural gifts no longer had a purpose and would have no longer been extant. In addition, there is reason to believe that these gifts had ceased several years prior to A.D. 70.

There are two ways of stating when the sign gifts were to cease. In line with what has been said above, they were to cease when Israel was finally given up to judgment by God. We may say this happened judicially at the end of the Acts period, but actually the sentence was not carried out for another ten years. On the other hand, we may say the sign gifts were to cease when "that which is perfect [mature] is come" (I Corinthians 13:10). The coming of that which is complete or mature does not mean our going to heaven, but the bringing in of the mature course of this dispensation of Grace.¹⁷

It is not necessary to suppose that they were withdrawn all at a certain hour or on a certain day, but rather that they gradually diminished and passed away during that immediate era.) After the complete setting aside of Israel and the cessation of the sign-gifts God brought to maturity or perfection the revelation of truth for this present dispensation and we find that filling up of truth in Paul's prison epistles. Therefore when Paul enumerates the gifts in the prison epistle of Ephesians, he makes no reference to the sign gifts. We believe that this is the plain, Scriptural explanation of what happened to the sign gifts, and we further believe that when one seeks to revive them for the church today he manifests his ignorance of the purpose and will of God for this dispensation of the grace of God.¹⁸

¹⁶ Baker, *What We Believe*, 46.

¹⁷ Baker, *Dispensational Relationships*, 53.

¹⁸ Baker, *What We Believe*, 44.

❖ *What About the Other Temporary Spiritual Gifts Such As Prophecy Since We Have Scripture Written After A.D. 70?*

The gift of prophecy was also a temporary spiritual gift. The gift of prophecy, like the gifts of healing and tongues, most likely did cease to be dispensed to believers who were not Apostles by at least A.D. 70. However, the office of Apostle continued to function throughout the remainder of the 1st Century. Prophetic abilities were bestowed upon the Apostle John at the end of the 1st Century in his writing of the book of Revelation. These prophetic abilities which were given to the Apostles were not designed to be “sign” gifts, rather they were consistent with the office of Apostle and given for the purpose of finalizing God’s revelation to man.

It is to be understood that the offices of apostle and of prophet were also to cease, but for a somewhat different reason. All that the apostles or the prophets had to give to the Body of Christ is now written down in the Scripture. At the time Ephesians was written there was still a ministry for the apostles and prophets to perform. That the gift of healing had ceased is evident from the fact that Paul, who before had performed every type of healing miracle, now leaves behind sick one of his most faithful workers (2 Tim. 4:20), and for another he prescribes a remedy for his oft sicknesses. Surely if Paul had the gift of healing at that time he would have exercised it upon these most faithful fellow-workers.¹⁹

❖ *Will There be a Time When Speaking in Tongues and other Such “Signs” and Miracles Ever Be Valid Again?*

Yes. Prophecies regarding Israel’s “last days” (a period that spans the Tribulation, 2nd Advent and Millennium) such as Joel 2:28-32 indicate that there will be an outpouring of the Holy Spirit during Israel’s last days. In context, Joel’s prophecy centers around events leading up to and immediately following the establishment of the Messianic kingdom. When we combine this passage with others that relate to the same period, we know that the preaching of the “gospel of the kingdom” during the Tribulation will be attended by some of the same phenomenon that was witnessed during those early days of the 1st Century A.D. We also know that there will be pseudo-christs and that the dictator of the Revived Roman Empire is called the Anti-christ in Scripture. He and his minions will be capable of performing counterfeit signs and wonders in the power of Satan.

Consideration should be given to the supernatural power of Satan (Rev 13:13-15; cf. Isa 14:12, 16-17). That Satan has power to perform supernatural things is clearly indicated in the Scripture (2 Thess 2:9).²⁰

❖ *What is the “Danger” or “Harm” of Believers Today Seeking to Reproduce the Sign Gifts in Their Lives?*

Believers who seek to reproduce the sign gifts of the 1st Century A.D. are ignorant of God’s purpose in history and the purpose of these gifts. They will be easily manipulated by false teachers and susceptible to deception. They will funnel their money to promote a false understanding of Scripture and what they believe and what they do with their resources will be judged at the Bema Seat – a judgment seat before which all of us shall one day stand as believers. Furthermore, by pursuing and encouraging the pursuit of such invalid phenomenon, they are setting the stage for the deception and confusion of others.

¹⁹ Baker, *What We Believe*, 45.

²⁰ Lewis S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, Texas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), Volume VII, 239.