

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – The Book of Acts

(SB_Acts_Concluding Summary)

In conclusion to this study of the book of Acts, I wanted to highlight some information that we have previously examined. The purpose of this study is to serve as a wrap-up review of some key take-aways from this very important book. I will begin with a recap of some of the material that was previously presented in a lesson entitled “A Strategic & Panoramic Overview.” Then, we will need to deal with some key questions and issues that have surfaced in our study of this book. Some of these (in no particular order) include the following:

- What is the purpose of the book of Acts?
- What was the significance of the martyrdom of Stephen – specifically in regards to the progression of the spread of the Gospel?
- What was the purpose of the sign gifts, e.g. tongues, healings, and miracles?
- How would the Jews of the 1st Century have interpreted the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in supernatural ways such as occurred on the day of Pentecost?
- How would the Jews of the 1st Century have interpreted the conversion of Gentiles who experienced the same phenomenon in association with their conversion as did Cornelius (Acts 10)? What other meaning is associated with Cornelius’ conversion?
- How does our understanding of this transition period impact our understanding of water baptism and the passages in Acts that relate thereto?
- Summarize the essential points of the Jerusalem Decree. How did unbelieving Jews misunderstand and distort it later in Paul’s ministry?
- How does the book of Acts help us understand some of the heresies and erroneous interpretations which arose in the early church during the 2nd, 3rd and 4th Centuries?

Recap of A Strategic & Panoramic Overview

One major purpose of the book of Acts is to document the historical chronology of events surrounding the spread of the gospel from Jerusalem to the uttermost reaches of civilization. The key to the book of Acts seems to be found in Acts 1:8 – “**But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**” The geographical development of the entire book is anticipated. Note the similarity to the “Great Commission” recorded in Matthew 28:16-18; Mark 16:14-18; Luke 24:47-49 cf. Acts 1:8.

- ✓ Chapters 2-7 – the witness is centered in and around Jerusalem
- ✓ Chapters 8-12 – the witness is extended throughout Judea and Samaria
- ✓ Chapters 13 forward – the witness extends to the uttermost part of the earth

Another key to understanding (or purpose of) the book of Acts is the recurring emphasis upon the continuing and progressive rejection of Jesus as the Messiah/Redeemer by Jews of the 1st Century A.D. contrasted with the acceptance of Jesus as the Messiah/Redeemer by Gentiles. This is a very important point to grasp for it is the backdrop for important concepts such as:

- ✓ The fact that a “Transition Period” existed during the approximately 40 year interval between Jesus’ death and the destruction of Jerusalem.¹

¹ I do not connect the destruction of Jerusalem with the inauguration of the new dispensation of the Body of Christ. Rather, I believe that the destruction of Jerusalem was the finalization of God’s dealings with Israel until the future seven-year Tribulation period. (The recognition that the majority of the book of Acts is set during this transition period is in contrast to the traditional concept that the Book of Acts begins with the casting away of the Jewish nation and the establishment of the Church Age church.

- ✓ The importance of the concept of progressive revelation in our understanding of the evolution of 1st Century A.D. doctrine – specially the distinction in emphasis between Pauline writings and non-Pauline New Testament books.

Two Main Movements in the Book of Acts

There are two main parts or divisions to the book of Acts. The first part consists of chapters 1-12 and the second part consists of chapters 13 to the end.

Item	Part One	Part Two
Center of Activity	Jerusalem	Antioch
Prominent Figure	Peter	Paul
Expansion from	Jerusalem through Judea and Samaria	Antioch through the Roman empire and Rome itself
Witness	Palestinian-centric & witness to Jews of the homeland, then Jews and Gentiles alike	Empire-wide and witness to the Jews of the Dispersion then to Jews and Gentiles alike
End is rejection	Rejection of the Gospel by the Jews of the homeland	General rejection of the Gospel by the Jews of the Dispersion
End is imprisonment	Ends with the imprisonment of Peter	Ends with the imprisonment of Paul

Three Pivotal Events in the Book of Acts

There are three pivot points in the book of Acts: 1) the murder of Stephen; 2) the outbreak against Paul; and 3) the outgoing to the Gentiles.

Pivot Point #1 – The Murder of Stephen (7:57-60)

Everything in the first part of the book of Acts either leads to or results from the outbreak against Stephen. In each of the chapters of this first section, we see a pattern of miracle, then witness (e.g. 2:1-13 cf. 2:14-39; 3:1-10 cf. 3:11-26; 4:1-31; 5:1-11 cf. 5:12, 16-18). The miracles were supernatural evidences, consistent with Hebrew prophecies such as Joel's, that the long-promised kingdom was at hand (2:14-39). The message that they served to validate was that if the nation would repent, accept Jesus as their Messiah and King, then He would return (e.g. 3:17-21 cf. 4:9-12; 5:29-32; 7:51-53). In each case where the message is presented in this section (preceded by a miracle), there is opposition and rejection by the Jewish leadership. The stoning of Stephen was the first officially incited outbreak against these believers.

The martyrdom of Stephen started the first outward movement of evangelism from Jerusalem (8:1, 4, 5, 25). Through the martyrdom of Stephen and the persecution that followed, Jewish believers carried the Gospel throughout Judea and Samaria. All of the remaining chapters in this first part of the book of Acts deals with this subject – the spread of the Gospel throughout Judea and Samaria.

- ✓ Chapter 8 – Samaria – the Ethiopian chancellor
- ✓ Chapter 9 – Damascus – Saul, the future Paul
- ✓ Chapter 10 – Caesarea – Cornelius the centurion
- ✓ Chapter 11 – Antioch – the ministry to the Gentiles

God used the persecution of these believers to accomplish His will expressed in the “Great Commission” (Matt 28:16-18; Mk 16:14-18; Lk 24:47-49 cf. Acts 1:8). The martyrdom of Stephen and the persecution of believers which followed resulted in the transfer of the hub of evangelistic missionary activity to Antioch. This transfer highlighted the rejection of the offer of the kingdom within the Jewish capital in Jerusalem.

Pivot Point #2 – The Outbreak Against Paul (22:22)

Paul is the “apostle to the Gentiles” and was made so by divine appointment. However, in the practical day-to-day events, God used the constraint imposed by the circumstances of Jewish rejection to channel Paul in that direction. Everywhere Paul went, he went to the Jew first and it was only when his own “kinsmen” rejected the message that he turned to the Gentiles. Paul’s missionary journeys and the response of the Jews and Gentiles is seen in the following table.

The First Missionary Journey of Paul (chps. 13-14)				
Place	Method & Message		Reaction & Result	
Salamis – the principle city on the East coast of Cyprus (13:5)	To the “Jew first”	General message: The “faith” and the “Kingdom”	Nothing said	Nothing said
Paphos – a city on the western end of Cyprus; the capital and residence of the Roman governor (13:6)			Opposed by Jew, Elymas	Received by Gentiles
Perga – in Pamphylia (13:13)			A stop en route – John Mark departs	Nothing said
Antioch in Psidia (13:14)			Some respond, Jews oppose	Turn to the Gentiles
Iconium (13:51)			Some respond, Jews oppose	Flight to Lystra
Lystra and Derbe (14:6. 20)			Persecution from Jews of Antioch and Iconium	Many Gentile disciples
Return (14:21-22)				

Salamis and **Paphos** were both cities on the island of Cyprus and are the first cities to which Paul journeyed on his first missionary journey. With regard to *Salamis*, we are specifically told that Paul went to the “synagogues” of the Jews. There is a limited record of his preaching in *Paphos*; however, Luke did document Paul’s encounter with Elymas, a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet. Paul and Barnabas probably began with the island of Cyprus due to the very large Jewish population that was located there. The number of Jews was so great on the island that in A.D. 115-116, the Jews rose up against the native inhabitants and killed 240,000 of them.² Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that in *Paphos* as well as *Salamis*, Paul and Barnabas went to the Jews first.

² See www.fsmitha.com/h1/ch19.htm for a history of Cyprus where the following comment is located – “In 115, the emperor Trajan moved against the Parthians and overran Mesopotamia. Jews in Mesopotamia preferred Parthian rule to Roman rule, and military plans by the Parthian Empire against Rome included sending discontented Jews from Mesopotamia to encourage revolt by Jewish communities within the Roman Empire. And it worked: numerous Jewish communities rose against the Romans. In Cyprus and Cyrene, Jews massacred gentiles in great numbers.” Also, see Baxter, *Strategic Grasp*, 278.

It seems that **Perga** is only mentioned because it is the place from which John Mark departed and returned to Jerusalem. The next two places mentioned are **Antioch** in Pisidia and **Iconium** where Paul and Barnabas again go into the synagogue – to the Jew first.

The last two places mentioned are **Lystra** and **Derbe** – cities of Lycaonia. It is doubtful that there were many Jews in these two cities for they were heathen Gentile centers. They were forced to flee to these cities due to the opposition of the Jews in Iconium. The people in Lystra and Derbe initially viewed Paul and Barnabas as gods and tried to worship them (14:11-13); however, Jews from Antioch and Iconium followed them to these cities and persuaded the people to stone Paul so that he was dragged out of the city after presuming him to be dead.

So, the theme of the first missionary journey by Paul and Barnabas was a presentation of the Gospel to the Jew first, rejection and persecution from the Jews, and acceptance by the Gentiles. The message was focused upon Jesus as the Messiah-King and personal savior. As the Jews rejected and even opposed the message, we begin to see a transition taking place FROM the Jew *exclusively* TO the Jew *primarily* and the Gentile *secondarily*.

The Second Missionary Journey of Paul (chps. 15:36-18:22)				
Place	Method & Message		Reaction & Result	
Philippi (16:12-40)	To the "Jew first"	(1) The promised Messiah is a Sinbearer	Unrecorded, but Lydia is converted	On to Thessalonica
Thessalonica (17:1-9)			Some accept, but opposition in general	Flight to Berea
Berea (17:10-14)		(2) Jesus is the Messiah crucified, but risen	Many accept, but opposition	Flight to Athens
Athens (17:15-34)			No Jewish response	Out to the Gentiles
Corinth (18:1-18)			Bitter opposition	To the Gentiles
Ephesus (18:19-21)		(3) Jesus, as Messiah is offered as King, Messiah and Savior	Not recorded until later	Return to home base in Antioch

After a short period of time following the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas discussed a return trip to re-visit the cities to which they had traveled on their first journey. They decided to travel separately and Paul chose Silas to accompany him while Barnabas went his own way. Timothy joined Paul and Silas (16:1-5). The second journey started with an undetailed tour through Phrygia and Galatia (16:6-8) followed by Paul's vision of the "man of Macedonia" (16:9-11). In verse 12, Paul, Silas and Timothy reach **Philippi** where we see the first preaching of the Gospel message on European soil.

Philippi was a Roman colony which means that it had a population that had a large element of former military personnel. Roman colonies were organized on a model similar to Rome in regards to government, laws and infrastructure. The Sabbath was observed by whatever Jewish population lived in these cities. At Philippi, Paul and his companions went out by the river side – a place where it was legally permissible for the Jews to worship. Evidently, there was no synagogue in the predominately Gentile Philippi. Nevertheless, Paul went to the Jews and God used the force of circumstances to lead Paul to the Gentiles.

Next, Paul visited **Thessalonica** (17:1-3), the capital city of Macedonia. Evidently, the number of Jews was more prevalent in Thessalonica because there was a synagogue. Paul went to the synagogue for three Sabbaths and preached to the Jews first.

Paul journeyed to **Berea** next (17:10). Scripture explicitly states that Paul went to the synagogue so, once again, we see Paul going to the Jew first. Paul then goes to **Athens** where he makes his great address to the Gentiles on Mars Hill. However, prior to making that address, he reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue as well as in the market daily with those who met with him (17:15-17). Again, we see Paul going to the Jew first in Athens.

Next, Paul journeyed to **Corinth** where we are told that the Jews were very numerous. Here, Paul again goes to the Jew first (18:1-5). In Corinth, Paul met Aquila and Priscilla who gave him lodging while he reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue every Sabbath and he persuaded Jews and “Greeks” (i.e. Gentile proselytes).

Paul’s final stop on his second missionary journey was in **Ephesus** in Asia Minor – across the Aegean Sea. He left Aquila and Priscilla there and he again entered the synagogue where he reasoned with the Jews (18:18-21).

On this second missionary journey, we continue to see a definite pattern of presentation of the Gospel to the Jew first, but only in the case of Thessalonica is the message documented – that Jesus was the Christ Who was resurrected. It is also obvious that Paul stressed the offer of the kingdom and the Messianic kingship of Jesus. When the mob rose up against Paul, they were offended that Paul had stated that “there is another King – Jesus” (17:6, 7). Throughout all of the cities visited, “some” of the Jews accept the message, but the majority who accept the message are Gentiles.

The Third Missionary Journey of Paul (18:23 – 21:3)				
Place	Method & Message		Reaction & Result	
Ephesus (19:1)	To the Jew first (19:8)	The kingdom of God (19:8)	Largely unbelief on the part of the Jews (19:9, 13)	A turning to the Gentiles (19:9, 18-20)

Paul travels to Galatia and Phrygia strengthening the believers. After a reference to Apollos and his ministry at Ephesus (18:24-28), Paul is said to arrive at Ephesus (19:1). Ephesus is the only place on the third missionary journey in which Paul’s ministry is described with any detail. All of Chapter 19 is devoted to Paul’s work in Ephesus where it is said that he went into the synagogue for three months and reasoned and taught things pertaining to the kingdom of God. Some were hardened and spoke evil of the Way so that Paul separated from the Jews and began to reason on a daily basis in the school of Tyrannus for about two years. The result was that all those who dwelt in Asia heard the word (19:8-10). Although many of the Jews opposed Paul, it appears that there was great receptivity among the Gentiles (19:19-20).

After traveling to Greece (20:1-3) and Troas in Asia Minor (20:3-6), Paul must pass by Ephesus on the way back to Judea and Jerusalem. Instead of visiting Ephesus, Paul meets with the elders of Ephesus in Miletus, a town further down the coast line. In his farewell address to these men, Paul testifies that he has taught “the kingdom of God” (20:24-25).

Once he is back in Jerusalem, Paul reports of the tremendous response among the Gentiles (21:19). It is the “Jews which were from Asia” (21:27) who instigate a riot against Paul. Acts 22 marked the climax of Jewish hatred against Paul and his message; the official rejection of the Jews of the dispersion; the event which opened the testimony of Paul before the governing officials of Rome (23:11; 25:11-12; 26:32).

Pivot Point #3 – The Outgoing to the Gentiles (28:28)

The final crisis point in the book of Acts is reached in Chapter 28. After a hazardous voyage at sea (27:1-28:15), Paul arrives in Rome (28:16). Paul is placed under a type of house arrest and allowed privileges as a citizen of Rome even though he is fastened by chain to a guard (28:20). He lives in an apartment (28:30). After a few days in Rome, he calls together the Jewish

leadership to explain his presence there and to set a date for an interview. When they came, he explained the “kingdom of God” to them (28:23). Even after all of his discouraging experiences, his approach toward the end of his life is still to the “Jew first” and his subject is still the “Kingdom.” Some Jews believe and some reject Paul’s message, but overall, there was general disagreement among the Jews (28:24-27). The apex of this experience is documented for us in verse 28 where a final turn to the Gentiles is documented. Over a period of thirty years, Jesus has been presented as Messiah/Savior/Redeemer in fulfillment of Hebrew prophecies and rejected by Jews throughout Jerusalem and the regions to which they had been scattered.

What Was the Purpose of the Sign Gifts in the First Century A.D.?

After Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension to heaven, we witness numerous miraculous events surrounding the salvation of unbelievers and the evangelistic efforts of believers during the 1st Century A.D. These are documented in the book of Acts and referenced in Paul’s epistles as well as in non-Pauline epistles. We call this period of the 1st Century A.D. the “Transition” period since there was a transition between the continued offer of the kingdom to Israel and a completely new dispensation which is commonly called the “Church Age” or the “Age of the Body of Christ. The purpose of the miracles during this “Transition” period were as follows:

- to serve as a sign to unbelieving Jews;
- to validate the witness and testimony of those who presented the gospel;
- to fulfill prophecy.

These points require more explanation since they are fairly general, yet correct. Israel’s “last days” had been prophesied to be a period during which Israel and the world would witness an outpouring of the Holy Spirit that would attend the presentation of the Gospel and the eventual establishment of the Messianic Kingdom. Peter makes the connection between the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues that surrounded the Jewish festival of Pentecost and these prophecies (Joel 2:28-32 cf. Acts 2:14-43).

It is *critical* to understand that 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.

How Would Jews of the 1st Century A.D. Have Interpreted the Salvation of Gentiles Attended by Such Supernatural Phenomenon as Speaking in Tongues?

Hebrew Scriptures contained teaching that the Gentiles would share in the benefits of God’s covenant promises made to Israel (Gen. 22:18; 26:4; 28:14; Isa. 49:6; 55:5-7; Zeph. 3:9-10; Zech. 8:22). The Hebrew prophets also described Gentile salvation that would occur during Israel’s “last days” or “latter days” (Isa. 2:2; 11:10; 25:8-9; Zech. 8:23) through the witness of a restored Israel (Isa. 2:3; 60:2-3; Zech. 8:23).

In your [Abraham’s] seed [the Coming One, the Redeemer, the Messiah/Deliverer] all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen 22:18a)

And I will make your descendants multiply as the stars of heaven; I will give to your descendants all these lands; and in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen 26:4)

Also your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth; you shall spread abroad to the west and the east, to the north and the south; and in you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed. (Gen 28:14)

Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, "Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths." For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. (Isa 2:2-4)

And in that day [the Coming of the Redeemer and the establishment of the Kingdom] there shall be a Root of Jesse [a phrase which presents the Messiah to be the source of the Davidic line, not just the product of the Davidic line], Who shall stand as a banner to the people; for the Gentiles shall seek Him, and His resting place shall be glorious. (Isa 11:10)

He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces; the rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth; for the Lord has spoken. And it will be said in that day; "Behold, this is our God; We have waited for Him, and He will save us. This is the Lord; We have waited for Him; We will be glad and rejoice in His salvation." (Isa 25:8-9)

Indeed He [God the Father] says, "It is too small a thing that You [a prophetic reference to the Messiah whom Isaiah portrays in his ministry] should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel [a reference to the believing remnant that will inherit the earthly kingdom of the Messiah]; I will also give You [a Messianic reference] as a light to the Gentiles, that You [the Messiah and even Isaiah as a type in his servant ministry to Israel] should be My salvation to the ends of the earth." Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel, their Holy One, to Him whom man despises, to Him whom the nation abhors, to the Servant of rulers: "Kings shall see and arise, princes also shall worship, because of the Lord who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel; and He [God the Father] has chosen You [His Servant/Redeemer/Deliverer]." (Isa 49:6-7)

Surely you [Israel] shall call a nation you do not know [a reference to Jewish evangelism], and nations who do not know you shall run to you, because of the Lord your God, and the Holy One of Israel; for He has glorified you." Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon. (Isa 55:5-7)

For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and deep darkness the people [references to the troubled times of the "latter days," i.e. the Tribulation period]; but the Lord will arise over you [a reference to the Coming of the Messiah/Redeemer], and His glory will be seen upon you. The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. (Isa 60:2-3)

"Therefore, wait for Me," says the Lord, "until the day I rise up for plunder; My determination is to gather the nations to My assembly of kingdoms, to pour on them My indignation, all My fierce anger; all the earth shall be devoured with the

fire of My jealousy. For then I will restore to the peoples a pure language, that they all may call on the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one accord." (Zeph 3:9-10)

Yes, many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the Lord. "Thus says the Lord of hosts; 'In those days ten men from every language of the nations shall grasp the sleeve of a Jewish man, saying "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you."'" (Zech 8:22-23)

The mindset of the believers during the period covered by the book of Acts had no other Scripture upon which to formulate an interpretive grid or paradigm for these events. Even though the requirements of the Mosaic Law had been satisfied by Jesus through his propitiatory sacrifice, these believers were trying to construct an interpretive grid as they experience the transition of God's plan from one age to another – a transition that is due to the national rejection of Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 3:17-26 cf. 13:46). The conversion of so many Gentiles (including Cornelius) would have been interpreted by Jews as a possible indication that the Messianic Kingdom might be near – a period that would be accompanied by a restoration of Israel to prominence and blessing among the nations.

"It [the revelation contained in such passages as those previously quoted] was the underlying presupposition for Jewish proselytizing (cf. M[ishnah] *Pirke Aboth* 1:12; Matt 23:15) and was implicit in the sermons of Peter at Pentecost (2:39) and in the house of Cornelius (10:35). But the correlative conviction of Judaism was that Israel was God's appointed agent for the administration of these blessings—that only through the nation and its institutions could Gentiles have a part in God's redemption and share in his favor."³ [Brackets and underline are mine]

What Significance Does the Understanding that the 1st Century A.D. Was a Transition Period Have Upon Our Understanding of Water Baptism – Then and Now?

Baptism under the kingdom gospel was a washing or cleansing ritual or ceremony – the same as many baptisms within the Age of Israel (Heb 9:10). Paul never tells his Gentile converts to be baptized in order that their sins might be washed away even though he did practice baptism during the transition period (e.g. Acts 16:15, 33). In 1 Corinthians 1:17, Paul indicates that he was not sent to baptize, but to preach the gospel. After the Transition period and when the new dispensation of the Body of Christ had begun, Paul mentions only one spiritual baptism – that accomplished by the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:5; 1 Cor 12:13).⁴

What Was the Essential Point of the Jerusalem Decree?

The Jerusalem decree that is documented in Acts 15 was at essence an acknowledgement by the church leadership in Jerusalem that Gentiles could be accepted by God (i.e. receive salvation) without having to observe Jewish Law or tradition and become a Jew through the ritual of circumcision. It placed no restrictions upon Jews who wished to continue the observance of Jewish Law and/or traditions. It was silent on the subject of Jewish observance of the Law and Jewish tradition. This silence no doubt led to confusion among Jewish believers

³ Richard N. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles" in John-Acts, Vol. 9, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. 12 vols. edited by Frank E. Gaebelin and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 440-41 quoted in Thomas Constable, "Notes on Acts," www.soniclight.com

⁴ Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts*, 53.

between what was required of Jews for salvation and whether the practice of the Law and Jewish tradition was then just an issue of one's liberty versus a requirement. Any confusion on the part of Jewish believers was exacerbated by the unbelieving Judaizer element who taught that the keeping of the Law was in fact necessary for salvation – Jews and Gentiles alike.

How Does the Book of Acts Help Us Understand Some of the Heretical Views and Erroneous Teachings That Arose During the First Several Centuries of the Church Age?

During the first few centuries of the new dispensation, there were heretical doctrines and erroneous teachings which arose. Some of these errors had begun to arise even during the 1st Century A.D.; however, they did not reach their zenith until the 2nd and 3rd Centuries A.D. Some of these errors involved the understanding and definition of the Person and work of Jesus – heretical teaching in the truest sense of the word. Some of these errors involved the nature of God's kingdom on earth and the church – not necessarily heretical, but distorted and erroneous nevertheless.

The apostle John dealt with heretical teachings that involved the definition of the Person and work of Jesus in his Gospel and his epistles. These heretical teachings had their roots in the 1st Century, but in some cases, they did not reach their fullest manifestation until the 2nd and 3rd Centuries. In his gospel, we see John presenting evidence that refuted false teaching regarding Jesus' deity on the one hand and his humanity on the other hand.

An example of one of the groups that distorted teaching regarding Jesus' deity was the *Ebionites*. This group taught that Jesus was a mere man who through his strict obedience to the Law was justified and thereby became the Messiah. In other words, Jesus was not God, but just a man who kept the Law perfectly and thereby became the Redeemer. John refutes this view with such statements as "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name" (Jn 20:31) not to mention the recording of many of Jesus' claims to His deity – the resurrection and the life (11:25); the way, the truth and the life (14:6) and the use of the "I am" phraseology on numerous occasions, just to name a few.

Gnosticism was present in incipient form in the 1st Century and was addressed by John in his epistles. *Gnosticism* threatened the church in Asia Minor during the 2nd Century A.D. and was a teaching that blended Eastern mysticism with Greek dualism and claimed that the spirit was completely good, but matter was completely evil. By the 2nd Century A.D. this teaching had become a fully developed theological system including Gnostic gospels and epistles. Based upon the concept that matter is evil and spirit is good, some Gnostics had concluded that if God was truly good, He could not have created the material universe. Therefore, some lesser god had to have created it. This lesser god was the God of the Old Testament according to the Gnostics of the 2nd Century. *Gnosticism* gave rise to the prevalent belief that Jesus did not have a true physical body – He only appeared to have a physical body.

A subset or offshoot of Gnostic philosophy was a group called the *Docetics*. They too distorted the Truth regarding Jesus' body. *Docetism* is a name that comes from the Greek word meaning "to seem." According to *Docetics*, Jesus was not really a man – He only seemed to suffer and die on the Cross. John refutes such nonsense with clear evidence that Jesus was a man – His body grew weary (4:6); his soul became troubled (12:27; 13:21).

Another heresy that John confronted at Ephesus was *Cerinthianism*. This heresy taught that Jesus was just a man upon whom the "Christ" spirit descended at his baptism and departed from Him just prior to His crucifixion; therefore, the spiritual Christ did not suffer and die for humanity's sins on the Cross – He only appeared to do so. Therefore, *Cerinthianism* denied Jesus' deity.

John also refuted these heresies in his first epistle with such phrases as "which we have looked upon and our hands have handled" (1 Jn 1:1) and "He who came by water and by blood"

(1 Jn 5:6). In his second epistle, John continues to defend the Truth against these heresies with such statements as “for many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh... this is a deceiver and an antichrist” (2 Jn 7).

Other distortions of Truth eventually arose in these early centuries and these distortions had to more to do with Jesus’ 2nd Advent rather than His 1st Advent. Satan’s distortion of the Truth with the counterfeit is multi-faceted. The book of Acts helps us understand this second front in Satan’s strategy during these early centuries. The book of Acts unveils the historical background for the development of the theology of the new dispensation of the Body of Christ. From the book of Acts, it is evident that apart from later Pauline teaching on the subject (e.g. 1 Thessalonians and 2 Thessalonians), believers would have had a paradigm for interpreting the events that were unfolding that was shaped by the expectation the earthly kingdom was imminent based upon their understanding of Old Testament prophets and even Jesus’ statements (e.g. Matt 24:13 – “he who endure to the end will be saved”). If believers rejected Pauline teaching or did not balance the message of Jesus in the Gospels (particularly Matthew 24) with Pauline teaching, they would become susceptible to distorted understanding of the nature of the kingdom of God.

Until about 190 A.D., no clear advocate of amillennialism can be found. Amillennialism seems to have first emerged in the school of theology at Alexandria, Egypt at this time with Clement of Alexandria who was a teacher there from about 193 to 220.⁵ Clement’s disciple Origen (185 – 254 A.D.) and Dionysius (190 – 265 A.D.) led the amillennial movement in the Third Century.⁶ This trend continued with Augustine (354 – 430 A.D.) who discarded the allegorical method of interpretation and adopted a historical-grammatical method of interpretation except with regards to prophetic passages of Scripture.⁷ Augustine associated the kingdom of God with the hierarchial church of his day and the Roman Catholic Church has clung tenaciously to that identification ever since.⁸ The eschatology of Augustine became the accepted view within Christendom during (and even after) the post-Nicene to Reformation era. While his eschatological views were not precisely defined, they seem to have a greater affinity with Roman Catholic and contemporary postmillennialism than with amillennialism. The Second Advent was spiritualized so that it was continually occurring in the church apparently through the conversion of souls. Thus, in Augustine’s view, the spiritualized millennium was actually taking place in the present age.⁹ No doubt, the impact of the church’s millenarian views as authored by Augustine had incredible ramifications both in the church and in society during this post-Nicene era. “The absence of premillennialism in the Middle Ages is as prominent as the absence of postmillennialism in the ante-Nicene church.”¹⁰

⁵ John F. Walvoord, “Interpreting Prophecy Today – Part 1: Basic Considerations in Interpreting Prophecy,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139:553 (January, 1982): 5.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁸ Earle E. Cairns, “Eschatology and Church History – Part 1,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 115:458 (April, 1958): , “Eschatology,” 142.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.