

## ***The Church of the Servant King***

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### ***Survey of the Bible Series – The Book of Acts***

#### **(SB\_Acts\_Introduction)**

##### **Preface**

Every credible theologian or Biblical scholar of almost any persuasion acknowledges that the book of Acts is a transitional book. As such, it has been interpreted in various ways depending upon one's theological paradigm. In this survey approach, I cannot hope to do justice to all of the various issues, questions, and views that arise from this book. As a matter of fact, there will be some questions for which I am sure that I do not have satisfactory answers at this time. Nevertheless, I encourage you to stay the course in this study and we'll both profit immensely from what we learn. It will serve as a foundation for later refinement as the understanding gained in this study is synthesized with the remainder of Scripture.

It is my sincere desire and prayer that you will find this study illuminating and that it will provide you greater insight into and appreciation of the events of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century as well as the issues with which a believer of that era dealt. Imagine yourself in a situation where the hope and expectation of both Jew and Gentile believer and unbeliever was centered upon a promised deliverer. Believers and unbelievers alike were familiar with the promises and hopes proclaimed by the prophets. Unbelievers either rejected those promises, or at a minimum, did not see them fulfilled in Jesus due to their unrealistic and misplaced Messianic expectations (i.e. focus upon a glorious conqueror vs. a Servant/Deliverer). Even believers were tempted to apostatize (see exhortations in the book of Hebrews) – they wrestled with the seeming paradox between a historical paradigm regarding the Messiah that overlooked the necessity of a propitiatory sacrifice by Him (e.g. Ge 3.15; Psa 22; Isa 52.13-53.12) and focused upon a ruling and reigning Messiah (e.g. Psa 2; 46; Isa 42.1-7) attended by temporal blessings (e.g. Isa 60). Even the apostles manifested an expectation of His imminent return during their lifetimes after His resurrection (e.g. Acts 3.20).

An increased understanding of the book of Acts and the challenges of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century believer should provide us with a greater appreciation of the times in which we live. We have the benefit of two millennia of hindsight during which we can find numerous examples of the practical effects upon a people, a society, and culture which was either influenced by or dominated by theological distortions that at least in part arise from the book of Acts. One example of this is the rise of the Roman Catholic Church with its distorted emphasis upon apostolic succession through Peter with a virtual disregard of the rise of Paul as the more prominent apostolic leader in the latter half of the book of Acts. One can only imagine what several centuries of history would have been like without the "Dark Ages" of intellectual and spiritual repression brought about by the Roman Catholic Church with their claims of papal infallibility. Of course, the alternative mechanisms Satan could have used to blind mankind to the Truth in lieu of the RCC are almost without number and there are plenty of other examples that are derived from distorted theological understanding, some of which also involve the book of Acts, e.g. the charismatic movement.

Another prayer and desire that I have is that you will give careful consideration to the points and issues that I raise in this study. I have the utmost appreciation and respect for many of the theologians to whom I will inevitably refer in this study. Any differences of interpretation that I may present are not intended to be an attack upon their person, their character, their sincerity or their desire to be led of the Spirit in their search of the Truth. It is truly humbling to realize that our Lord Himself is the ultimate judge of our intentions and our respective contributions to the advancement of His purpose in human history. My contributions, I am sure, pale in comparison to many of these men. Nevertheless, I must deal with the controversial issues in this book to the best of my ability and understanding at this point in my spiritual life. My positions, interpretations

and views are derived from a premillennial, pre-Tribulation rapture, dispensational viewpoint. As such, I desire to develop a Biblically-derived interpretive model that, on the one hand, supports the Biblical distinction between the purposes of God through the nation Israel and the Jewish race while, on the other hand, recognizes certain continuities in time as well as in eternity regarding God's plan and purpose for the redeemed of all ages of human history.

### Definitions

This list is not exhaustive and will need to be expanded throughout the study. However, it provides us with a base from which we can at least begin.

- ✓ *Dispensationalist* – one who believes that God has governed and is governing the course of human history through various periods of stewardships or administrative authority. The English word “dispensation” is an anglicized form of the Latin *dispensatio*, which in the Vulgate was used to translate the Greek word *oikonomia*.<sup>1</sup> The Latin verb means to “weigh out or dispense” and the Greek word comes from a verb that means to manage, regulate, administer and plan. “In the papyri the officer (*oikonomos*) who administered a dispensation was referred to as a steward or manager of an estate, or as a treasurer. Thus, the central idea in the word dispensation is that of managing or administering the affairs of a household.”<sup>2</sup> As a theological system, dispensationalism in all of its various facets embodies two Biblical concepts: 1) the distinction between the Church and Israel; and 2) God's overall purpose in human history is to bring glory to Himself (Eph 1.6, 12, 14). Thus, salvation is not the principal purpose of God in human history, rather the salvation of man and nature is the means to an end, i.e. the glorification of God Himself. There are variations of dispensational thought which we shall introduce during the course of this study.
- ✓ *Pre-millennial* – the view that Jesus will return prior to the beginning of His earthly reign in order to establish a kingdom on earth. Among pre-millennialists, there are different views of when the Church, the Body of Christ, will be raptured (see definitions to follow).
- ✓ *Amillennial* – the view that there will be no earthly kingdom over which Jesus will rule and reign for 1000 years. Amillennialists view millennial prophecies to be references to the eternal state. The Second Advent and the rapture of the Church are viewed as part of one coterminous set of prophetic activities. God's promises to Israel are interpreted as being fulfilled in the Church, i.e. the redeemed Israel of the New Covenant. Amillennialists see no specific future for a national Israel.
- ✓ *Post-millennial* – very similar in many respects to amillennialism. The major distinction is probably related to the timing of the Second Advent. In post-millennial thought, this event will occur when Christianity succeeds in conquering unbelief, converting the masses, and in most cases, establish a society governed by Biblical law. Amillennialists see the conflict between Christians and unbelief continuing until the Second Advent. Post-millennial advocates have included Roman Catholics, Puritans, some charismatics, and dominionists who urge believers to take dominion over the earth and its political governments in order to institute the kingdom of God on earth. Roman Catholicism used this theological error to justify all kinds of abuses of freedom.
- ✓ *Pre-Tribulation, mid-Tribulation, and post-Tribulation Rapturists* – the three predominant views of when the Church-Body of Christ will be removed from the earth and translated into eternity.
- ✓ *Progressive Revelation* – the understanding that God's revelation of His plan and purposes to man did not occur all at once. Rather, there is a continual (progressive) unfolding of His plan and purpose over the course of more than two millennia which culminated in the canon of Scripture containing 66 books that we call the Bible.

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<sup>1</sup> Mal Couch, *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1996), 93.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## A Review of Some Basic Principles

As we approach this study of the book of Acts, we need to review some basic principles that we have observed in our survey of the Gospels. Acts is merely a continuation of the story that began to unfold in the Gospels. A review of these basic facts and principles will be helpful in understanding the events in the Book of Acts.<sup>3</sup>

- ✓ The gospel of the kingdom which was preached during John's ministry, Jesus' ministry, and the ministry of the apostles was that the kingdom was near at hand. Some view this gospel of the kingdom as an offer of the Kingdom; however, I believe that to so interpret the gospel of the kingdom during Jesus' public ministry may obscure the necessity for Jesus to die a propitiatory death prior to its establishment.
- ✓ Jesus (at least even if John and the apostles did not) understood that the kingdom could not be legitimately "offered" until He had suffered and paid the penalty of sin (Lk 24.26 cf. 1 Pet 1.11).
- ✓ Until that point, the Kingdom was only "near" in a chronological sense should Israel repent en masse.
- ✓ Even if that repentance had occurred during Jesus' public ministry, there would have been a seven year interval between His resurrection/ascension and His Second Advent. The 70<sup>th</sup> week of Israel's history had yet to be accomplished per Daniel's prophecy in Daniel 9. Jesus taught His disciples to pray that the Kingdom might be established (Matt 4.17; 6.10).
- ✓ The fact that Jesus must not only suffer and die and rise from the dead before the Kingdom could be established, but that He must go back to heaven and receive His Kingdom and then return to earth to establish it is clearly taught in many passages of Scripture. This understanding is essential to the proper interpretation of such parables as the parable of the minas found in Luke 19.11-27.
- ✓ The focus of Jesus' ministry, as well as that of His apostles to Israel, was the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt 10.5, 6; 15.24).
- ✓ This does not mean that Jesus was ruling out Gentile participation in the Kingdom. He was simply being consistent with the provisions of the Abrahamic covenant that Gentiles were ultimately to be blessed through the multiplied seed of Abraham (Gen 22.17-18 cf. Jn 4.22). This required Israel to be blessed in order to be a blessing.
- ✓ Because of the unbelief and rejection by the then present leaders of Israel, Jesus stated that the kingdom would be taken from them and given to a "nation" that produced the proper fruit borne of righteousness (Matt 21.43).
- ✓ This "nation" to which Jesus referred was not the Church-Body of Christ as some believe – a view that is based (in part at least) upon the fact that Peter refers to the Church-Body of Christ as a "nation" in 1 Peter 2.9-10.
- ✓ Rather, the Greek word *ethnos* ("nation" or "people") in Matthew 21.43 is used in the same sense as the term "generation" in Matthew 23.36. This is a reference by Jesus to a future generation of people who would respond to Him in faith (Ro 11.26-27) and experience the physical and spiritual blessings of the kingdom. Jesus had promised His disciples that in that kingdom, the Twelve Apostles would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 19.28).
- ✓ The prevalence of the Kingdom motif throughout the earthly ministry of Jesus as documented in the Gospels made the Kingdom a concept that was predominant in the thinking and expectations of the disciples as evidenced by their question of Jesus at the opening of the book of Acts – "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the Kingdom to Israel?"
- ✓ This question followed a forty day period during which Jesus spoke to His disciples about "things concerning the Kingdom of God" (Acts 1.3).

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<sup>3</sup> This summary was derived for the most part from Charles F. Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Bible College Publications, 1981), 1-5. Where necessary, I modified his list to adjust for my understanding at present based upon my recent study of the Gospels.

- ✓ The Lord did not answer them directly. Evidently, there were certain conditional elements to the Kingdom's establishment that had not yet been met (i.e. repentance by Israel?) Also, it is instructive to note that Jesus had not yet ascended to the Father in His resurrection body.