

The Church of the Servant King

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Survey of the Bible Series – The Book of Acts

(SB_Acts 13A_The Transition Period Begins and Paul's 1st Missionary Journey)

Introduction – Recap of Some Highlights in the Narrative

In **chapter 8**, Luke focuses his narrative on the **pressure** experienced by the growing number of believers in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria due to Saul's persecution. We see the Holy Spirit given to believers in Samaria after Peter and John laid hands on the new believers of that region. Note the gospel message (8:12) was kingdom and messianic oriented. Also, note the sequence of events associated with the conversion experience of the new believers – belief, baptism in water, laying on of hands and receipt of the Holy Spirit (8:14-17).

Also, in **chapter 8**, we see the **conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch** via Philip's ministry. Note the sequence of events associated with his conversion – belief (v. 37) followed by baptism in water (v. 38). The statement of the eunuch is insightful into the essence and focus of the preaching during these early days after Pentecost – “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (8:37). In other words, the focus of the gospel message in these early days was upon an acceptance and recognition of the resurrected Jesus as the Son of God and Messiah of Israel Who had been rejected by Israel (cf. 2:17-26; 5:29-32, 42; 7:51-53).

In **chapter 9**, Luke records the **conversion of Saul**. Saul is struck blind and is spoken to by the Lord while on the road to Damascus to rain terror on new believers. The result – Saul becomes a believer and a tremendous evangelist. The focus of his message – Jesus is the Christ. Saul escapes an attempt by the Jews to kill him in Damascus (9:23) and he travels to Jerusalem.¹ He is feared by many of the believers in Jerusalem, but Barnabas intercedes and partners with Saul. Some of the Hellenistic Jews desire to kill Saul and the Jerusalem church sends Saul to Tarsus via Caesarea (9:30).

At the end of chapter 9 (9:32), Luke records some of the **missionary journeys of Peter**. The narrative of Peter's missionary journeys continues through the middle of chapter 11 (11:18) when Peter reports back to Jerusalem on the results of his journeys.

In **chapter 10**, Cornelius and his household are converted and Luke devotes an entire chapter to this event, thus emphasizing its significance – significant in large part due to the fact that this is the first time in the Acts narrative where we see Gentiles as the primary (rather than secondary) focus of missionary activity. Prior to this event, Gentiles were evangelized in what could be seen as a consequence or tangent to the primary focus of evangelistic attempts. Note the sequence of events associated with the conversion of Cornelius and his household – belief, receipt of the Holy Spirit, then baptism in water (cf. 8:12, 37-38 and 2:38). As noted previously, this change in sequence is of no theological significance other than perhaps serving to highlight the fact that 1) water baptism was and is not a pre-requisite to salvation and 2) water baptism

¹ As noted in a previous study, it is quite possible, even probable, that Saul traveled to the desert of Arabia after his conversion (either before or after the events of 9:20-25 based upon his own testimony in Galatians 1:15-19 – “But when it pleased God...to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but **I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus**. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days. But I saw none of the other apostles, except James, the Lord's brother.”

was not a pre-requisite to the receipt of the Holy Spirit by these new Gentile converts. (Compare to the sequence described earlier in 8:14-17).

In **chapter 11**, Peter reports back to Jerusalem (11:1-18) regarding the receipt of the Holy Spirit by the Gentile believers. The work of Barnabas and Saul for a year in the city of Antioch is described in 11:19-26. Then Luke jumps in his chronological flow at the end of chapter 11 and mentions the efforts of the church at Antioch (which consisted of many Gentiles) to send relief supplies to Jerusalem due to famine in the land.

The last verses of the chapter (chapter 11) are not necessarily chronological relative to Herod's persecution and death. Herod died in A.D. 44 (at the end of chapter 12) and the famine (mentioned in 11:27-30) did not begin until at least a year later, maybe two. It is quite likely that Herod was already dead when Saul and Barnabas left Antioch to travel to Jerusalem on their relief mission. Evidently, Luke wanted to mention the two events of chapter 12 that were related to the Jerusalem church (Peter's miraculous release from prison and Herod's persecution and death) prior to continuing the narrative regarding the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles. Therefore, **chapter 12** represents a break in the chronological flow – an interlude of sorts between chapter 11:27-30 and chapter 13. (It is interesting to note that James, the brother of Jesus, wrote his epistle circa A.D. 46 and Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians in A.D. 48 – both around the time of the famine in the region).

It will be difficult to proceed in our study of the book of Acts without pausing to recognize the fact that **chapter 13** is another watershed event in the book of significant dispensational and theological significance.

- ✓ We see in this chapter 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 consistent with Jewish traditions and with the ceremonial cleansings required by the Law.
- ✓ Certain rituals required by the Law (e.g. circumcision) are still recognized as valid or even required by most Jewish believers.
- ✓ Although many would disagree, nothing has occurred to date in the narrative to indicate that God has begun a new age – the age of the Body of Christ.
- ✓ That is about to change.

The Transition to the Age of the Body of Christ

The Transition period between the Age of Israel and the new age of the Body of Christ (commonly referred to as the Church Age by most dispensational theologians) begins to be documented in Acts 13. Rather than attempting to recapture an analysis of this transition period in these notes, for purposes of this lesson, I will read and comment on excerpts from at least two excellent sources. One is *A Dispensational Theology* by Charles F. Baker and the other source is *Understanding the Book of Acts* by the same author.² This analysis is crucial to our understanding of the remainder of the book of Acts, the activities and practices of Paul on his missionary journeys, and the very noticeable distinction between the content of Paul's epistles and other New Testament books such as Hebrews, James, and the epistles of Peter especially.

² 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.

Key Questions:

- ✓ 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?

Answers:

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

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. 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. 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).³ [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.⁴

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). 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.

³ Baker, *Understanding the Book of Acts*, 75.

⁴ Baker, *A Dispensational Theology*, 515.

There was seemingly 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.⁵

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. 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.⁶

I believe the excerpts from Baker's materials are insightful and extremely helpful. Of course, to benefit from the full context of the argument he makes, one needs to read the entirety of his material, then judge for his or herself. In short, I believe that the Transition Period that we observe when reading the book of Acts is as Baker describes 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. 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. 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. 46. Through progressive revelation given to Paul, the mystery Truths associated with the new dispensation began to be communicated – first verbally, then through the glimpses we see in 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 definite hour, day or year is unknown to us and is not clear from the Scriptural account. 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

⁵ Ibid, 517.

⁶ Ibid.

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.⁷

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 his 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 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

⁷ Baker, *A Dispensational Theology*, 518-519.

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 even 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 the definite point of transition to the new dispensation is unknown. It is unknown to us and it only became progressively recognized by those of the 1st Century. The practice of any aspects of the Mosaic Law either prior to or after the new dispensation dawned was not legitimate 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

and 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 (e.g. circumcision) or 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 critical doctrines become subject to confusion, doubt, uncertainty and 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. result from a hermeneutic that doesn't precisely deal with these issues and honestly acknowledge those areas or points to which we have limited understanding.

One passage that is commonly distorted is Romans 9-11 in this regard – 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 as certain members of the covenant or reformed school of thought teach.

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.