

ACTS DISPENSATIONALLY CONSIDERED

A Bible Study

Considering the Beginnings of Christ's Church And its Blessings During the Book of Acts, and its Blessings Today

1. The Acts of the Apostles begins with the statement that the book is a continuation of the ministry of the Lord Jesus to the nation Israel. Luke's gospel records what the Lord Jesus *began* to do until he ascended into heaven (Acts 1:1). The Acts, also penned by the Holy Spirit through Luke, records what the Lord *continued* to do through his apostles on earth while the Lord was in heaven. In the book of Acts the Lord's message pertains to Israel, and its promises are *conditional* on whether they accept His Messianic claims.
2. The missing apostle (Judas Iscariot) is replaced, restoring the required twelfth apostle to their number (Acts 1:15-26). It is necessary to have twelve apostles because the Lord had promised that in the Messianic kingdom on earth there would be twelve apostles who would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Mat. 19:28). Paul is *not* the twelfth apostle. He is a very special apostle, born out of due time, with God's commission to go to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13; 1 Cor. 15:8).
3. The Lord Jesus ascends into heaven (Acts 1:9), and the Holy Spirit descends upon believers (Acts 1:8 & 2:1-4), thus forming them into a special spiritual body of believers known as the ἐκκλησία, (*ekklesia*, or "called-out-ones"), a word commonly translated "church" or "assembly." This church is not a religious denomination or a building, but a special gathering of people chosen by God as a distinctive spiritual body and marked by His Holy Spirit for His holy purposes. Like the spiritual Body of Christ, a local "church" on earth is not a building, or a religious organization, but is simply a local "gathering of Christians."

But specifically when does Scripture say this church began? In Matthew 16:18 the Lord describes it as future ("**I will build my church**"). Since the church is bought by the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28) it could not come into existence before His precious blood was shed. Moreover, since the Holy Spirit performs a spiritual [not physical] work by baptizing believers into the Church, the body of Christ, (1 Cor. 12:13), it

could not have existed until the Holy Spirit descended from heaven to do that work to believers on earth. Furthermore, before the Holy Spirit could come, Christ said he must go away, i.e., ascend into heaven (John 16:7). All these conditions appear to have been fulfilled on the Jewish Feast of the 50 days, (Pentecost). The sacrifice of Christ had been accomplished, the Lord was in heaven, and the Holy Spirit had made His presence known on the earth, and had come upon believers, baptizing them with fire (Mat. 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16, John 1:33, Acts 1:5, 11:16, see Acts 2:1-4). And on that day of Pentecost the Lord added to their company **“about three thousand souls”** (Acts 2:41). In Acts 2:47 this company is called a “church,” or “assembly.” By Acts 4:4 the number of new believers had grown to about **“five thousand.”**

Some teachers believe that because the early church was composed of Jews only (Acts 2:5), and no Gentiles, and since the revealed "sphere of blessing" of the early church was a millennial sphere and not a hope “in the heavenlies,” that this early church was a *separate* church from that body of Christ described in Paul’s early epistles, and was particularly distinct from the church described in the “prison epistles” (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 2 Timothy). Some also believe there were two churches, two bodies, existing concurrently, one having an earthly kingdom hope, and another with a heavenly calling. Those who hold one of these views tend to place the birthday of the church either at the conversion of Paul (Acts 9), or at the beginning of Paul’s ministry (Acts 13) before he wrote his first epistle, or after the final blinding of Israel (Acts 28:28). There are also a few who place the creation of the present day *ekklesia* at Paul’s second imprisonment.

While we completely agree that all of these events, except for Paul’s second imprisonment, are highly significant, because they represent important dispensational turning points in God’s prophetic program for the Jew versus His non-prophetic program known as **“the mystery,”** there appears to be no combinatory evidence of a new type of church or body beginning at those specific points in time, (I.e., at Acts 9, Acts 13, or Acts 28:28), as was the case for its birthday on the day of Pentecost. The fact that the birthday of the church was Acts 2, not some later time during the book of Acts, in no way disputes the distinctiveness of the present day “heavenly hope” of the church in contrast to the millennial hope of the assembly in the early Acts, nor does it contradict Paul’s ministry to harden Israel’s heart during the second half of Acts. Even after the mystery was fully revealed in the “prison epistles” Paul is careful to connect the saints having this hope and blessing “in the heavenlies” (Eph. 1:3) with

Pentecost by saying that these believers were “**sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise**” (Eph. 1:13). Note that word “*of promise*,” which vitally identifies the church in Ephesians with that in Acts chapter two. Thus, the church of the present dispensation is the same assembly as that which began at Pentecost, although with an entirely different blessed hope.

If the church that existed after Acts 28:28 was a different church than that which began at Pentecost, why did the Holy Spirit through Paul not simply omit the words “**of promise**” to these Ephesian saints who were blessed, not according to prophecy, but by the truth of the mystery? “Promise” and “Prophecy” amount to the same thing, but they are both in sharp contrast to the “Mystery,” which was not revealed in the Prophetic Scriptures. He retains the words “**of promise**” for the same reason the Spirit is careful to stress that we are “**being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets...**” (Eph. 2:20). Christ Himself is, of course, the chief corner stone. [Louis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology, Vol. 1, p. 101, suggests this verse has to do with the flow of authority and doctrine, pointing out that the Church does not appoint apostles and prophets].

And He did it for the same reason the Holy Spirit says that the mystery was revealed through Paul “**to his holy apostles and prophets**” (Eph. 3:5), not just to Paul alone, thus maintaining a connection with that which was from the beginning. We must be careful to make *distinctions*, where *distinctions* exist, but we must also observe *connections* where *connections* exist.

The letter to the Ephesians was one of the “prison epistles”, written after final blindness and hardness of heart was laid upon Israel (Acts 28:25-28). As we have just pointed out, Paul, in that epistle, was careful to connect believers in the present “heavenly” economy with the descent of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Because of this connection, we hold that there is *one church*, not an “early church” and a “church today” which Paul was supposedly instrumental in forming. Furthermore, according to the credentials supplied by Scripture, the “birthday” of that church is on the Jewish feast of Pentecost. Arguments that there was any other “birthday” for a church constituted by God later than Pentecost are not convincing to us, and we see no *Scripturally obvious* point in time when such a new church, or body, was formed.

One should not “invent” birthdays of a church simply because the promises made to Israel at one point in Acts (Acts 2:39) are different from the heavenly blessing that is our portion today. We understand it to be one church, but with specific blessings that varied depending on the condition of Israel at particular points in time. And although many of the gifts and practices of that church on earth differ from the gifts and practices given to us today, it is one and the same spiritual body of Christ in heaven.

4. On the day of Pentecost Peter warns that the terrible “**day of Yahweh**” prophesied by Joel was about to begin (Acts 2:16-21). In Acts 3:19 the Lord, through Peter, heals the lame man in a striking fulfillment of Isaiah 35:6 which looks to the day when the lame man shall “**leap as a hart,**” a prophecy placed in that day when “**The wilderness and the dry land shall be gladdened; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose**” (Isa. 35:1). Peter’s message is:

“Repent therefore and be converted, for the blotting out of your sins, so that times of refreshing may come from [the] presence of the Lord, and he may send Jesus Christ, who was foreordained for you, whom heaven indeed must receive till [the] times of [the] restoring of all things, of which God has spoken by the mouth of his holy prophets since time began” (Acts 3:19-21).

This is a direct, literal, promise of the immediate return of the Lord and of the restoration of the physical kingdom on earth. But, it is *conditional* on Israel's “**repentance**” (Acts 3:19), for denying “**the holy and righteous one,**” and for slaying “**the originator of life**” “**in ignorance**” (Acts 3:14,15,17). It is *conditional* on Israel’s “**conversion**” (Acts 3:19). Again, no Gentiles are mentioned as being present either at Pentecost or at the healing of the lame man. Peter distinctly says “**Ye are the sons of the prophets and of the covenant which God appointed to our fathers...**” (Acts 3:25).

5. When the "great persecution" (Acts 8:1) of the Christians arose after the stoning of Stephen, And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles.the apostles remained at Jerusalem, preaching to the people of Israel. Those who fled Jerusalem after Stephen's stoning preached the Word to "none but the Jews only" (Acts 11:19).

Thus, from Acts 2 through Acts 7 God's message of the kingdom was presented to Israel alone.

But Israel had begun to resist the gospel of the kingdom as soon as Peter finished his message in Acts 3. Acts 4 records this opposition, as do Acts 5:17 and Acts 6:9-15. And so, it is not surprising that, at Acts 8, after the stoning of Stephen, a "great persecution" arose.

"And Saul was consenting unto his death. And at that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles" (Acts 8:1).

God now begins the work of breaking off the natural olive branches (Israel) and grafting into their place "wild" (Gentile) branches (Rom. 11). This was done to provoke Israel to jealousy (Rom. 11:11), because God's prophetic purposes was still in effect at that time (Rom. 11:25-29). According to Scripture, God's prophetic purpose will one day be fulfilled by making Israel God's covenant missionary people for the salvation of Gentiles. But, for now, Israel is embarking on the voyage of unbelief.

Thus, as God begins the process of blinding Israel, Christ is preached to the Samaritans, a people of mixed race (Acts 8:1). Peter and John traveled to Samaria to turn another of the "keys of the kingdom" (Mat. 16:19). The signs and wonders of the millennial kingdom then fell upon this new group of half-Jewish believers (Acts 8:14-17). These signs and wonders were God's stamp of approval upon the message, the messengers, and the people themselves who received the message. They were the Divine credentials, particularly displayed to unbelieving Israel, to provoke them to jealousy. It warned Israel that God was beginning to turn away from them because of their unbelief.

The next step in the process of breaking off the natural olive branches is the salvation of the household of Cornelius the Gentile (Acts 10 & 11). Again, Peter is on hand to turn yet another of the "keys of the kingdom." And, again, the gift of the Holy Spirit fell on the household of Cornelius, fulfilling the signs and wonders promised by the great commission, (Mat. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-18), astonishing even the Jewish believers who had accompanied Peter:

“While Peter was yet speaking these words the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were hearing the word. And the faithful of the circumcision were astonished, as many as came with Peter, that upon the nations also the gift of the Holy Spirit was poured out: for they heard them speaking with tongues and magnifying God. Then Peter answered, Can any one forbid water that these should not be baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit as we also did? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they begged him to stay some days.” (Acts 10:44-48)

At Antioch some disciples who had fled because of Saul’s persecution after Stephen’s stoning even preached to Greeks, although most had been **“speaking the word to no one but to Jews alone”** (Acts 11:19).

In the meantime, the dead, unbelieving heart of this great persecutor, Saul of Tarsus, was quickened by the Lord (Acts 9:1-31), because he was elected and destined to become God’s chosen vessel, a special apostle to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:13, 2 Tim. 1:11).

6. As Saul, (or Paul), ministers throughout the book of Acts he always goes to the Jew first, but each time they reject the message, he turns away from them and goes to Gentiles. Why? Because God is slowly breaking off the natural branches and grafting in wild branches. Throughout this book we observe the millennial miracles and signs of the "great commission" pertaining to the earthly kingdom (Mark 16:17-18), because God's message is still the promises made specifically to Israel.

7. During the period covered by the Acts of the Apostles, God's message continues to be the message of prophecy, (i.e., "the hope of Israel"). As that dispensation drew to a close, brief glimpses of God’s new message, known as the "mystery," were partially revealed. This message had been kept secret from the beginning of time and was about to replace Israel's prophesied earthly kingdom hope.

An Important Dispensational Boundary Line

8. We now reach Acts 28:28, the important dispensational boundary line that separates God’s ‘prophetic’ program to Israel from His program ‘hidden’ from the foundation of the world. This new spiritual blessing would be fully placed in

effect only when His ‘prophetic’ program ends.

At the end of the book of Acts, God completes the process of breaking off the “natural branches.” Israel (temporarily) ceases to be God's vehicle for the salvation of the Gentile world, a commission announced in the prophetic writings. At Acts 28, with an air of finality, Paul quotes the prophecy of Isaiah 6:9-10 pronouncing final blindness upon the nation Israel, thus ending their former position that had required Paul to minister "to the Jew first."

In Acts 28:20 Paul meets with the representatives of Israel and immediately sets the record straight as to the purpose of his ministry thus far in the Acts. He emphasizes that his every endeavor has been to bring about Israel’s blessing in the millennial kingdom under their Messiah, by saying to the Jews, **“For on account of the hope of Israel I have this chain about me.”** For Israel this "hope" was the resurrection, but a resurrection without the One who was resurrected. To Paul the true hope of Israel was the Lord Jesus Christ, and the resurrection from the dead made possible through Him (see Acts 23:6; 24:14-15, 21). In Acts 28:22-23 the Holy Spirit is careful to stress that this is no inconsequential five minute dissertation to a small handful of unimportant Jews. His exposition of the Scriptures is to **“those who were the chief of the Jews,”** it was to a **“great number”** of Jews, and lasted perhaps eight or more hours, **“from morning till evening.”** This is Paul’s final opportunity to present the claims of Israel’s Messiah to them, and it is Israel’s final opportunity to hear it.

“But we desire to hear of thee what thou thinkest: for as concerning this sect, it is known to us that everywhere it is spoken against. And when they had appointed him a day, they came to him into his lodging in great number; to whom he expounded the matter, testifying the kingdom of God, and persuading them concerning Jesus, both from the law of Moses and from the prophets, from morning till evening. And some believed the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved. And when they agreed not among themselves, they departed after that Paul had spoken one word, Well spake the Holy Spirit through Isaiah the prophet unto your fathers, saying,

‘Go thou unto this people, and say, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall in no wise understand; And seeing ye shall see, and shall in no wise perceive:

**For this peoples heart is waxed gross,
And their ears are dull of hearing,
And their eyes they have closed;
Lest, haply they should perceive with their eyes,
And hear with their ears,
And understand with their heart,**

And should turn again, And I should heal them.’

Be it known therefore unto you, that this salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles: they will also hear. [And when he had said these words, the Jews departed, having much disputing among themselves].” (Acts 28:22-29 ASV)

9. The preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom as set out in the “great commission,” (Mat. 28:18-20 and Mark 16:15-18), included the same signs of authentication which had earlier confirmed to John the Baptist that the Lord Jesus was the Anointed One, the Messiah.

“But John, having heard in the prison the *works* of the Christ, sent by his disciples, and said to him, Art thou the coming one? or are we to wait for another? And Jesus answering said to them, Go, report to John what ye hear and see. Blind men see and lame walk; lepers are cleansed, and deaf hear; and dead are raised, and poor have glad tidings preached to them: and blessed is whosoever shall not be offended in me.” (Mat. 11:2-6)

These were physical signs that a believing Nation Israel should recognize as proving that the Lord Jesus was the Divine Messiah. They were the same signs promised in the “great commission” to the twelve apostles and to all who believed the Gospel of the Kingdom:

“And he said to them, Go into all the world, and preach the glad tidings to all the creation. He that believes and is baptized shall be saved, and he that disbelieves shall be condemned. And these signs shall follow those that have believed: in my name they *shall* cast out demons; they *shall* speak with new tongues; they *shall* take up serpents; and if they should drink any deadly

thing it *shall not* injure them; they shall lay hands upon the infirm, and they *shall* be well.

The Lord therefore, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat at the right hand of God. And they, going forth, preached everywhere, the Lord working with them, and *confirming the word by the signs following upon it.*” Mark 16:15-20

With the blinding of Israel, however, all mention of the physical signs of the earthly kingdom cease (tongues, healing, immunity to poison and snake bite, etc.). Gone too are the promised kingdom gifts of the Lord (miraculous powers, gifts of healing, kinds of tongues) since these all had to do with authenticating the kingdom hope which is now in abeyance. (Contrast 1 Cor. 12:28 with Eph. 4:11, particularly noting the absence of the special sign gifts that pertain to the particular Nation that requires a sign).

10. After the book of Acts ends, Israel is no longer the agent of salvation for Gentiles as is prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. Gentiles are now saved *in spite of* Israel's unbelief. Israel's blinded eyes, deaf ears and hardened heart coincide with God's prophetic program being placed on hold and the "mystery" previously hidden in God being now fully revealed. As part of this new program, the Holy Spirit, through Paul, reveals a new *unprophesied* hope for all believers (whether Gentile or Jew, without any distinction or superiority), a hope "in the heavenlies", and blessings completely unheard of in the prophetic writings.

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