

Is the Church of the Acts the Body of Christ?

by Harry Ironside

The Church of the Acts is the same as the Body of Christ, formed through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and there is no transitional period in the book of Acts.

Scripture: Acts 1:5, Acts 11:16

Topics: "Unity in Christ", "The Nature of the Church"

Description

Harry Ironside addresses the debate surrounding the nature of the Church as depicted in the book of Acts, arguing against ultradispensationalist views that suggest a transitional period between the law and grace. He emphasizes that the Church, the Body of Christ, was formed at Pentecost through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and that the apostles were fully aware of their mission to spread the Gospel to both Jews and Gentiles. Ironside asserts that the Church is one and indivisible, and that the teachings of Paul and the other apostles were consistent throughout their ministries, without a significant break in the dispensation of grace. He concludes that the Church of God, purchased by Christ's blood, remains unified and is not divided by differing interpretations of Scripture. The sermon calls for a careful reading of Acts and the epistles to understand the continuity of the Church's mission.

Transcript

HERE is perhaps nothing about which the ultradispensationalists are more certain, according to their own expressions, than that the book of the Acts covers a transitional period, coming in between the age of the law and the present age in which the dispensation of the mystery has been revealed. They do not always agree as to the name of this intervening period. Some call it the Kingdom Church; others the Jewish Church; and there are those who prefer the term Pentecostal Dispensation. The general teaching is about as follows: It is affirmed that the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost and His baptizing the one hundred and twenty and those who afterwards believed, did not have anything to do with the formation of the Church, the Body of Christ. On the contrary, they insist that the Church throughout all of the book of Acts up to Paul's imprisonment was of an altogether lower order than that of the Epistle to the Ephesians. Assemblies in Judea, Samaria, and the various Gentile countries, were simply groups of believers who were waiting for the manifestation of the kingdom, and had not yet come into the full liberty of grace. The ordinances of the Lord's Supper and of baptism were linked with these companies and were to continue only until Israel had definitely and finally refused the Gospel message, after which the full revelation of the mystery is supposed to have been given to the apostle Paul when he was imprisoned at Rome. From that time on a new dispensation began. Surely this is wrongly confounding the Word of Truth.

How any rational and spiritually-minded person could ever come to such a conclusion after a careful reading of the book of Acts, and with it the various epistles addressed to the churches and peoples mentioned in that book, is more than some of us can comprehend. Let us see what the facts actually are.

In the first place, it is perfectly plain that the Church, the Body of Christ, was formed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Very definitely this term is used of that great event which took place at Pentecost and was repeated in measure in Cornelius' household. In each instance the same exact expression is used. Referring to Pentecost, our Lord says, "Ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence" (Acts 1: 5). Referring to the event that took place in Cornelius' household, Peter says:

"Then remembered I the word of the Lord, how that He said, John indeed baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost. Forasmuch then as God gave them the like gift as He did unto us, who believed on the Lord Jesus Christ; what was I, that I could withstand God?" (Acts 11: 16,17).

In 1 Corinthians 12: 12, 13, we read:

"For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."

Here we are distinctly informed as to the way in which the Body has been brought into existence, and this is exactly what took place at Pentecost. Individual believers were that day baptized into one Body, and from then on the Lord added to the Church daily such as were saved. It is a significant fact that if you omit this definite passage in I Corinthians, there is no other verse in any epistle that tells us in plain words just how the Body is formed; although we might deduce this from Ephesians 4: 4, where we read: "There is one Body and one Spirit." Undoubtedly this refers to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, by which the Body is formed, in contradistinction to water baptism in the next verse. But this is simply interpretation, and all might not agree as to it. But there can surely be no question as to the application of the passage in 1 Corinthians 12: 13. Yet, singularly enough, the very people who insist that the Body is formed by the Spirit's baptism, declare that these Corinthians were not members of the Body, nor did that Body come into existence until at least four or five years afterwards.

A careful reading of the book of Acts shows us the gradual manner in which the truth of the new dispensation was introduced, and this is what has led some to speak of this book as covering a transitional period. Personally, I have no objection to the term "transitional period," if it be understood that the transition was in the minds of men and not in the mind of God. According to God, the new dispensation, that in which we now live, the dispensation of the grace of God, otherwise called the dispensation of the mystery, began the moment the Spirit descended at Pentecost. That moment the one Body came into existence, though at the beginning it was composed entirely of believers taken out from the Jewish people. But in the minds even of the disciples, there was a long period before they all fully entered into the special work that God had begun to do. Many of them, in fact, probably never did apprehend the true character of this dispensation, as we shall see further on.

The position is often taken that the twelve apostles were very ignorant of what the Lord was really doing, and that their entire ministry was toward Israel. Have not such teachers forgotten that during the forty days that the Lord appeared to His disciples before ascending to Heaven, He taught them exactly what His program was, and the part they were to have in it? In Acts 1: 3, 4, we read:

"He also showed Himself alive after His passion by many in fallible proofs, being seen of them forty days, and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God: and being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith He, ye have heard of Me."

And it was then that He distinctly told them of the coming baptism of the Holy Spirit. According to the divine plan, the Gospel message was first to be proclaimed in Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria, and then unto the uttermost parts of the earth. This is exactly what we find in the book of Acts. The earlier chapters give us the proclamation in Jerusalem and Judea. Then we have Philip going down to Samaria, followed by John and Peter. Later Peter goes to the house of Cornelius, and he and his household, believing the Gospel, are baptized by the same Spirit into the same Body. The conversion of Saul of Tarsus prepares the way for a world-wide ministry, he being specifically chosen of God for that testimony.

But before Saul's conversion, there were churches of God in many cities, and these churches of God together formed the Church of God; churches signifying local companies, but the Church of God taking in all believers. Years afterwards, Paul writes, "I persecuted the Church of God and wasted it" (Gal. 1: 13). And again, "For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God" (I Cor. 15: 9). The Church of God was to him one whole. It was exactly the same Church of God as that of which he speaks in 1 Timothy 3: 15, when, writing to the younger preacher, he says: "That thou mightest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth." In the meantime he had been cast into prison and had written all the rest of the so-called prison epistles, with the exception, of course, of Titus, which was written while he was at liberty, between his imprisonments, and 2 Timothy, which was written during his second imprisonment.*

(* I make this statement on the supposition that the note at the end of I Timothy is correct, namely that the epistle was written from Laodicea, a place not visited by Paul before his first imprisonment. If written earlier the argument does not apply, except to show that Paul ever recognized the Church of God as one and undivided.)

There is no hint of any difference having come in to distinguish the Church of God which he says he persecuted, from the Church of God in which Timothy was recognized as a minister of the Word. It is one and the same Church throughout.

Going back to Acts then, we notice that after his conversion, Paul is definitely set apart as the apostle to the Gentiles, and yet everywhere he goes, he first seeks out his Jewish brethren after the flesh, because it was God's purpose that the Gospel should be made known to the Jew first, and then to the Gentile. In practically every city, the same results follow. A few of the Jews receive the message; the bulk of them reject it. Then Paul turns from the Jews to the Gentiles, and thus the message goes out to the whole world. Throughout all of this period, covered by the ministries of Peter and Paul particularly, both baptism in water and the breaking of bread have their place. The signs of an apostle follow the ministry, God authenticating His Word as His servants go forth in His Name. However, it is perfectly plain that the nearer we get to the close of the Acts, the less we have in the way of signs and wonders. This is to be expected. In the meantime various books of the New Testament had been written, particularly Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, the Corinthians, and the Romans. In all likelihood, the Epistle of James had also been produced, though we cannot definitely locate the time of its writing. The Epistles of Peter and of John come afterward. They were not part of the earlier written ministry.

Everywhere that Paul goes, he preaches the kingdom as the Lord Himself has commanded, and finally he reached Rome a prisoner. There, following his usual custom, though not having the same liberty as in other places, he gets in touch first with the leaders of the Jewish people, gives them his message, and then tells them that even though they reject it, yet the purpose of God must be carried out, and the salvation of God sent to the Gentiles. This is supposed by many to be a dispensational break, but we have exactly the same thing in the thirteenth chapter of Acts. There we read from verse 44 on, how the Jews in Antioch of Pisidia withstood the Word spoken by Paul, and Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said:

"It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles. For so hath the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set Thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that Thou shouldest be or salvation unto the ends of the earth."

I ask any thoughtful reader: What difference is there between this account of Paul's dealing with the Jews, the proclamation of grace going out to the Gentiles, and that found in chapter 28 of this same book? In the light of these two passages, may we not say that if Paul was given liberty, as we know he was, to preach for several years after his first imprisonment, he undoubtedly still followed exactly the same method of proclaiming the Gospel to the Jew first, and then to the Gentiles? It is passing strange that these ultra-dispensationalists can overlook a passage like Acts 13, and then read so much into the similar portion in chapter 28. According to them, as we have pointed out, the dispensational break occurred at this latter time, after which Paul's ministry, they tell us, took an entirely different form. It was then that the dispensation of the mystery was revealed to him, they say, which he embodied in his prison epistles. He was no longer a preacher of the kingdom, but now a minister of the Body. The theory sounds very plausible until one examines the text of Scripture itself.

Let us look at the last two verses of Acts 28:

"And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him."

Now observe in chapter one, verse three, our Lord is said to have spoken to His disciples during the forty days of "the things pertaining to the kingdom of God." In the very last verse of the book, after Paul's supposed later revelation, he is still "preaching the kingdom of God;" certainly the next phrase, "teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ," implies continuance in exactly the same type of ministry in which he had been engaged before. There is no hint here of something new.

Now let us go back a little. In chapter 20 of the book of Acts, we find the apostle Paul at Miletus on his way to Jerusalem. From there he sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. We have a very touching account of his last interview with them. Among other things, he says to them:

"I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. Take heed unto yourselves and to all the flock over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the Church of God which He hath purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:27,28).

And then he commends these elders in view of the coming apostasy, not to some new revelation yet to be given, but "to God and the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all them that are sanctified." Note particularly the breadth of the statement found in verse 27. "All

the counsel of God" had already been made known through Paul to the Ephesian elders before he went up to Jerusalem for the last time. There is not a hint of a partial revelation, not a hint of a transitional period, but they already had everything they needed to keep them until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I venture to say that the better one is acquainted with the book of Acts, the clearer all this will become. It is truly absurd to attempt to make two Churches out of the redeemed company between Pentecost and the Lord's return. The Church is one and indivisible. It is the Church that Christ built upon the rock, namely the truth that He is the Son of the living God. It is the Church of God which He purchased with the blood of His own Son. That Church of God, Saul in his ignorance, persecuted. Of that same Church of God, he afterwards became a member through the Spirit's baptism. In that Church of God, Timothy was a recognized minister, not only before, but after Paul's imprisonment.

In regard to the statement so frequently made that God was giving Israel a second chance throughout the book of Acts, it is evident that there is no foundation whatever for such a statement. Our Lord definitely declared the setting aside of Israel for this entire age when He said, "Your house is left unto you desolate. Ye shall not see Me again until ye say, Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord!" It was after that house was left desolate that the glorious proclamation at Pentecost was given through the power of the Holy Spirit, offering salvation by grace to any in Israel who repented, and to as many as the Lord our God shall call, which, of course, includes the whole Gentile world. Not once in any of the sermons recorded of Peter and of Paul do we have a hint that the nation of Israel is still on trial, and that God is waiting for that nation to repent in this age. On the contrary, the very fact that believers are called upon to "save themselves from that untoward generation" is evidence of the complete setting aside of Israel nationally, and the calling out of a select company of those who acknowledge the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ. By their baptism, they outwardly severed the link that bound them to the unbelieving nation, and thus came over onto Christian ground. To this company, Gentile believers were later added, and these two together constitute the Body of Christ. It is perfectly true that the Body as such is not mentioned in the book of Acts, and that for a very good reason. In this book, we have the record of the beginning of the evangelization of the world, which involves, of course, not the revelation of the truth of the Body, but the proclamation of the kingdom of God, which none can enter apart from the new birth.

A careful study of the epistles, taking particular note of the times at which, and the persons to whom, they were written. will only serve to make these things clearer.

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