

The Two-Stage Revelation of the Body of Christ

It is important to observe that mid-way through the period of the book of Acts a new purpose of God began to be unfolded. This purpose is revealed in two stages, first, with benefits for Gentiles greater than in Old Testament times,¹ and second, benefits even greater after the period of the Acts.

Stage One

We understand, a company of people, “the Body of Christ,” began to be formed. This is a spiritual Body of people, formed by means of a calling of God which includes Gentiles as well as Jews. It was planned “*afore*” by God, and now is “*made known*.” We find in Romans 9:23,24,

*“That He might **make known** the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy, which He had afore prepared unto glory, even us, whom He hath called, not of the Jews only, but **also of the Gentiles.**” - Romans 9:23,24*

To the Jews and Gentiles who responded to this calling, Paul writes, “*Now you are the Body of Christ and members in particular*” (I Cor. 12:27). He explains:

1 We know that in Old Testament times the Jews were called by God to be His people. “*Hearken unto me, O Jacob and **Israel, my called***” (Isaiah 48:12). Back then, the option for a Gentile was to become a convert to Israel, be circumcised, and abide by the limitations imposed upon strangers among the Jews. See limitations in Ex. 29:33, Num. 1:51, Deut. 14:21, 17:14,15, Lev. 25:45-48. Now, there is a new calling, not of the Jews only but also of the Gentiles, and a new company of people, the Body of Christ. No longer does a Gentile need to become a circumcised convert to Israel. This much was clear in stage one of God’s new purpose.

“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.”

- I Cor. 12:13

This stage of God’s new purpose us very different, especially for Gentiles, compared with Old Testament times. Both Jews and Gentiles are now called of God and those who believe the gospel of Christ are included together in a new Body of people, “the Body of Christ.” This great difference, especially for Gentiles, is that being accepted as Gentiles, there is no longer any need to become circumcised converts to Israel as before when Gentiles were blessed as proselytes of Judaism.

We must understand, however, the Jews still had priority rights. The gospel was preached to the Jew first (Acts 13:46), which means, although included in the new call of God, Gentiles were actually secondary partakers of the gospel. They were better off than Gentiles had been in Old Testament times but Gentile blessings would get even better after the period of the Acts.

Stage Two: Equal is Better than Included

The situation is better yet for Gentiles in stage two of God’s new purpose. We know this because we find in Paul’s post-Acts writings that Gentiles have been elevated to full equality in all respects (Ephesians 2:13,17, 3:1-6, Colossians 1:26-28).

Let us understand, there is a difference between *equal* and *included*. To illustrate, compare the janitor and president of a company. Both are *included* in the company but the janitor is not *equal* to the president. Or consider a team of athletes with second string players. All the players are *included* as members of one team but second string isn’t the same as being first string on the team. Likewise, Gentile believers are *included* as members of the Body but during the period of the book of Acts the Jews still had

priority rights in the preaching of the gospel. Now, Gentiles, having previously been *far off* are *made nigh*, equal to those who *were nigh* (Ephesians 2:13,17). And, all members of the Body of Christ are seen as fully equal members.

The Mystery of Ephesians Three

This is the mystery of Ephesians 3. Paul says,

“Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ, which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit, that the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel” – Ephesians 3:3-6

Clearly, the focus here is upon Gentiles – Gentile members of the Body of Christ. This passage informs us that Gentiles are fellowheirs and the Body of Christ is a joint-Body. Charles Baker explains the terms used in this text, saying,

“When Paul describes the mystery in Ephesians 3:6 he uses three terms, all expressing joint relationship: ‘That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs (*joint-heirs*) and of the same body (*a joint-body*), and partakers (*joint-partakers*) of his promise in Christ by the gospel.’”

- *Dispensational Theology*, pg 433

In particular he explains the term, “*same body*,” saying,

“The King James is misleading at this point by its translation “*of the same body*,” which might be taken to mean the same body that always existed. The second chapter of Ephesians relates the fact that the Jew and Gentile have both been reconciled to God in one Body by

the cross, and that He has made in himself of the twain (Jew and Gentile) one new man.”

- *Dispensational Theology*, pg. 473

I think this is exactly right. This term “*same body*,” is translated from, *sus-soma*, joint-Body, and thus, the true sense in which “same” applies is that all members of the Body are the same in relation to each other, equal in status. Baker says, “After all, this is what Paul describes as the Mystery – God now bringing Gentile believers into a joint-relationship with Jewish believers in one new man.” - *Dispensational Synopsis*, pg. 80.

My judgment is that these are excellent statements by Baker. And, considering these factors, my take is that after the Acts period, Gentiles are higher in status than before, no longer *secondary* partakers and no longer merely *included* in the Body but elevated to *full equality*.

Why the Two-stage Revelation

The two stages are important because the full revelation about Gentiles couldn't be given until the setting aside of national Israel was complete. That is, declaring Gentiles to be equal would conflict with the preaching of the gospel to the Jew first and would generate confusion due to the role Gentiles are to have in Israel's future. We understand, Gentiles are to be in subjection to national Israel in the coming kingdom (see Isaiah 60:3-5, 60:12, 61:6.). Therefore Paul's teaching in Ephesians was held back until the setting aside of national Israel was settled. And now with the elevated status of its Gentile members made known the Body of Christ is manifestly unsuitable for any role of submission to national Israel. We cannot fulfill it but there will be other Gentiles in the future who will. From Revelation 7:9-14 we know many Gentiles will be saved in the latter half of the tribulation. Those Gentiles won't be members of the Body of Christ, will not have our elevated status, and thus, will be

suitable for that role. I think, if thought through, our unsuitability actually confirms a pre-trib rapture. That is, the formation of the Body must be completed in order for other Gentiles to be saved without becoming members of it. They will fulfill the prophesied role of Gentiles in Israel's kingdom.

Romans 11 and the Acts Period Situation

Romans 11 provides insights about Israel during the Acts period. We see that Israel “*stumbled*” and was “*diminishing*” (Rom. 11:11,12) The *fall* of Israel was happening, and Paul says, through their fall, “*salvation is come unto the Gentiles for to provoke them to jealousy*” (v.11). Logically, jealousy would produce a desire for what the Gentiles were getting. But on the other hand, jealousy can cause resentment, which it did. Accompanying that use of Gentile salvation was a miraculous sign to non-believing Jews. Gentile members of the Body were singled out to speak in miraculous languages to “*this people*” as a “*sign*” to them (I Cor. 14:21,22); “*With men of other tongues and other lips will I speak unto this people.*” It would be difficult to see how these details could still apply. A friend once asked, “How many Jews were jealous when you were saved?” None, that I knew of. I wasn't aware of any who even cared. It seems evident that using Gentile salvation that way was temporary.

We read of an olive tree in Romans 11:15-24, an illustration to represent the privilege of serving God. I don't think Israel is the tree but that the Jews were its “*natural branches.*” They had been specified by God as His witnesses (Isaiah 43:1,10). But the “*natural branches,*” most of them, were broken off and “*wild*” branches were now the focus. Still, Israel's leaders might yet repent, and thus, the *natural branches* could be grafted back into the olive tree of God's service.

Then Paul further describes and explains the situation, saying, “*blindness in part is happened to Israel* (the major part, of

course, not every individual) *until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in*" (v.25). Indeed, world government had been in the hands of Gentile nations rather than Israel ever since the days of Nebuchadnezzar and this will continue until the fullness of it under the the man of sin (which could have been quite soon). Then Christ will return, blindness upon Israel will end and "*all Israel shall be saved*" (v.26). "*All Israel,*" yes. Considering that God knows in advance who will believe and who will not, and considering the statement in Acts 3:23 that every Jewish soul who will not believe will be destroyed from among the people, all the Jews remaining at the end of the tribulation will then believe upon Christ, and thus, "*all Israel shall be saved.*" As Jesus said, "*He that shall endure unto the end (of the tribulation) the same shall be saved*" (Matt. 24:13). But the salvation of *all Israel* didn't happen in the book of Acts. That generation lost its opportunity to be the generation of which "*all Israel shall be saved.*" Now, the salvation of *all Israel* must await a future generation.

Paul's Preaching to Israel

It is clear that during the Acts period Paul was preaching to Israel. Three times are recorded when he preached to the Jews, and in that preaching, declared himself to be turning from them to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46, 18:6, 28:15-28). The first of these is at Acts 13:46 where he said to them,

*"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 lie, lo, we turn to the Gentiles."* - Acts 13:46

"Necessary," because the "Jew first" was God's order at that time. Israel's leaders had rejected Jesus as the Christ of God, but astoundingly, Jesus prayed as he hung on the cross, *Father forgive them for they know not what they do* (Luke 23:34).

Further opportunities therefore were extended. So we find in the book of Acts that appeals were continued to Israel. (Acts 2:36-38, 3:19,20, 11:25, 13:46, 18:6, 28:25-28).

We know quite well, of course, Paul's ministry was focused upon Gentiles, but still, priority rights belonged to the Jews. Luke explains that when Paul went into a city he went first to a synagogue and preached there. This was *his manner*, says Luke (Acts 17:2). It is also important to note that our Lord informed Paul that he must testify at Rome. The Jews had leaders there representing the nation. "*Be of good cheer, Paul; for as thou hast testified of me in Jerusalem, so must thou bear witness also at Rome*" (Acts 23:11). Then at the end of the Acts, with Paul at Rome, we come to the last of the three recorded declarations. Paul says to the Jewish leaders,

*"Well spake the Holy Ghost by Isaiah the prophet unto our fathers, saying, Go unto this people and say, Hearing ye shall hear and ye shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see and not perceive. **For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and be converted that I should heal them. Be it known therefore unto you that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it.**" Acts 28:27,28*

That is the story of national Israel in the book of Acts. Going, going, gone! This final declaration refers to the Jews as "*this people*." After this pronouncement no further appeals to Israel as a collective nation of people are recorded in the Bible. As individuals, Jewish people are invited to believe upon Christ the same as individual Gentiles, but the gospel is no longer preached to Israel as a collective nation of people. That will be resumed in the future. Today, the preaching of the gospel is to all people

alike with no category of people having priority rights over any other group of people. This means, therefore, since the end of the Acts, Gentiles are no longer *secondary* partakers, as they had been, but are *joint-partakers* of the gospel, fully equal to the Jews, and, in the Body of Christ Gentile members are fully *equal* in all respects.

The Prospect for Israel During the Acts Period

The restoration of Israel's kingdom was the prospect. It was this that the disciples asked about in Acts chapter one. "*Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?*" (Acts 1:6). Their question couldn't be answered because the answer depended upon what Israel would do. In chapter 3 Peter preached that if Israel would repent Jesus would come back and they would have their times of refreshing (Acts 3:19-20). Then considerably later, but still in the Acts period, about 60 AD, Peter wrote in his first epistle that "*the end of all things is at hand* (4:7), which of course, would include the restoration and run time of Israel's kingdom. I cannot see how Israel's kingdom could not be included in *the end of all things*. My understanding therefore is that this prospect remained throughout that period. Accordingly, agreeing with scholars who date the book of the Revelation early, I think John's statements that the events he described "*must shortly come to pass*" (1:1), that "*the time is at hand*" (1:3, 22:10), and that his quote from Christ, "*Behold I come quickly*" (3:11), easily fit with Israel's kingdom prospect. Additionally, during that time, Paul wrote that "*the ends of the world are come*" (I Cor. 10:11) and "*the time is short*" (I Cor. 7:29). He taught that marriage is good, of course, but seemed to be saying, with the end near and time being short, whatever days may be left might be better put to use without the attentions that married life demands (I Cor. 7:29-33).

That situation passed. In his post-Acts epistles I find nothing saying the time is short. Timothy is to train ministers who will

carry on (II Tim. 2:2); evil men and seducers shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived (3:13); the time will come when hearers will not endure sound doctrine but heap to themselves teachers having itching ears (4:3). All the while, we are to remain faithful and remember that our Savior will come (Phil. 3:20). But will his coming be soon soon? Maybe soon, maybe not.

Thus Peter, when writing his second epistle, is apparently aware of this change. He says people will scoff: “*Where is the promise of his coming, for since the father’s fell asleep all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation*” (3:4). He explains the delay. There is a time of long suffering, nevertheless, the day of the Lord *will* come (v.9,10). God hasn’t forgotten the promise given by His Son. Peter points out that a day with the Lord is as a thousand years (v.8). If the delay should last a long time the promise would still be fresh in the mind of God. A thousand years would be as a day having gone by.

What About a Post-Acts Beginning of the Body?

Seeing differences between the Acts period and afterward, some serious Bible scholars have concluded that Christ’s Body, the Church, didn’t actually begin until the end of the Acts. There is a logic to this and I must confess to having sought explanations that would enable me to hold this view. But to embrace that theory you have to explain the “*one Body*” of Romans 12:5 and I Corinthians 12:13 in such a way as to view that Body as a totally different Body from the “*one Body*” of Ephesians 4:5, which I find awkward to say the least. It’s clear that both during the Acts period as well as afterward believers are referred to as “*the Body of Christ*” (I Cor. 12:27 & Eph. 4:16). Responding to this, one argument points to the lack of a definite article in the Greek text of I Cor 12:27, suggesting the translation should be “*you are a Body of Christ.*” If so, perhaps there was *a* Body of Christ in the Acts period and another Body of Christ afterward. But this isn’t

persuasive to me because “*you are Christ’s Body*” translates the text just fine with no implication of more than one Body of Christ. Additionally, I’m discomfited in seeing that teachers who hold to a post-Acts beginning of the Body forsake the pre-trib rapture and reject the Lord’s Supper. Nor do I see it as truly necessary to distinguish a separate Body after the Acts period. Instead, my understanding is that the one Body of Christ entered the settled order of God’s grace at the end of the Acts period with its Gentile members elevated to full equality. It’s still the Body of Christ but now seen as a joint-Body with its Gentile members elevated to this higher status.

Some Things Changed and Some Things Didn’t

In all of this, one fact to bear in mind is that no matter what a Bible student concludes about the beginning of the Body, all dispensationalists realize there are basic matters in the Bible that remain the same. No one claims everything was changed. “*There is one God and one mediator between God and man*” (1 Tim. 2:4). We worship the same God and have the same Savior as Israel. *There is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved* (Acts 4:12). The blood of Christ is the basis for redemption for all people who have ever been saved. Even in Old Testament times, when people didn’t yet understand it, God looked ahead to the blood of His Son and saved people on this basis (see Romans 3:25,26). There are indeed basic areas of common ground that all believers have.

The Lord’s Supper

The Lord’s Supper is among our matters of common ground, but this is disputed by Bible teachers who hold to a post-Acts beginning of the Body. They don’t believe it should be observed today, whereas others do. All of us understand that when Jesus instituted the Supper, he said, “*this cup is the New Testament in my blood which is shed for you*” (Luke 22:20). But he was

speaking to his Jewish apostles and some students of the word conclude that the Supper is intended only for Israel. Later, however, Paul wrote that the observance of the Supper was given to him directly by our Lord for members of the Body of Christ (I Cor. 11:23) which applies it to both Jews and Gentiles (I Cor. 12:1,13,27).² Admittedly, this teaching by Paul was during the Acts period, and if a post-Acts beginning of the Body is held, then First Corinthians by itself doesn't settle the question. But there is more to consider. In Paul's post-Acts epistles there are no statements saying it was discontinued, and if it *was* discontinued, it seems to me, we should find statements saying so or at least one clear statement specifically addressing the Supper and saying it was discontinued. Instead, Paul wrote this to the saints at Philippi:

“Those things which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do.” - Philippians 4:9

These matters that had been seen and heard in Paul's ministry certainly included the Lord's Supper. Also included, of course, would be any changes the Philippian believers had seen or heard about Paul's teachings. But Paul didn't change everything and the Philippian believers knew this. It was still true that we are baptized by the Spirit of God into union with Christ and his Body, the Church, (I Cor. 12:13, Ephesians 2:22, 4:5, Colossians 2:12), still true that believers are indwelt by the Spirit (I Cor. 6:19, II Tim. 1:14) and still true that the blood shed by Jesus for man's salvation is the *“one sacrifice for sins forever”* (Heb. 10:12-18), and that we today have redemption through his blood

2 An effort to dispute this has claimed two chapters in I Corinthians (10 & 11) digress to the Jews only, no Gentiles included, because Paul says *“all our fathers were under the cloud and all passed through the sea”* (I Cor 10:1). It is assumed that this excludes Gentiles. But that assumption overlooks the strangers who came out of Egypt along with the Jews (see Ex. 12:38, Num. 11:4). So actually, Gentiles had fathers, too, under the cloud and in the sea, and thus, Gentiles aren't excluded from these chapters in First Corinthians.

(Ephesians 1:7). We know there are two New Covenant promises belonging exclusively to Israel which are yet to be fulfilled; their restoration as “*My people*” and “*all shall know Me from the least to the greatest*” (Heb. 8:11). But two other benefits are matters of common ground, the indwelling ministry of the Spirit and perfect forgiveness by the blood of Christ. These two benefits were already in effect when the book of Hebrews was written (see Heb 10:16-20),³ and, others in addition to the Jews, were also having, and do have, these common ground benefits (Ephesians 1:7, II Tim. 1:14).

The Rainbow in the Sky

We also remember that God put a rainbow in the sky as a token of His promise to never again destroy the whole earth by the waters of a flood (Genesis 9:12-16). We think about this when we see a rainbow even though there is nothing in Paul’s epistles to teach it. Also God observes a falling sparrow and knows the number of hairs on a person’s head (Matt. 10:29) even though Paul says nothing about these things. The point here is that we cannot go so far in our dispensational structure as to think Paul must say something in order for it to be true. Rather, his writings are the grid by which we weigh all teachings of the Bible. If there are teachings that still fit, being compatible with the program and purpose of God today, these we must respect. This is a basic principle that simply means we must appreciate things in the Bible that God has *not* changed as well as those that He has.

Numerous Matters Indeed Have Changed

We do understand, Christ commissioned his Jewish apostles and sent them to baptize (Matt. 28:19, Mark 16:16) whereas Paul

³ The New Covenant is quoted in Hebrews 8:8-12 with four benefits included. It is quoted again in Hebrews 10:16-20 but this time with only two of its benefits. This is because believers were “having” these two benefits whereas the other two are yet to be fulfilled.

said, “*Christ sent me not to baptize but to preach the gospel*” (I Cor 1:17). The Jews were instructed to be circumcised (Genesis 17:11-14) whereas Paul said, “*in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision but a new creature*” (Gal. 6:15). The Old Testament said, “*Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them*” (Deut. 27:26) whereas Paul wrote, “*you are not under the Law but under grace*” (Rom. 6:14). So we know quite well, no one can properly understand the Bible without acknowledging changes like these that God has made.

We acknowledge that God changed numerous matters as He began introducing His new purpose. In Acts chapter 9 our Lord reappeared from heaven to confront Saul of Tarsus, also called Paul, and turned him into his chosen apostle for Gentiles. During Paul’s ministry the Body of Christ began to be formed with Gentile believers included along with Jewish believers. Then later, further developments were made known, bringing us to the settled order of God’s grace today.

Reading Through the New Testament

It is very interesting to me that whether we think the order of the books of the New Testament are placed in sequence by happenstance or by God’s providential hand, we do find them in an order very conducive to our learning. We start with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John which give us the story of our Lord’s life and ministry on earth. Then we have the book of Acts telling about the ministry of his apostles. After this we have four books that were written during the Acts period (Romans, I & II Corinthians and Galatians). And then we come Ephesians, the first of Paul’s epistles written by him at and after the end of the Acts. Beginning in Ephesians we find information never before

expressed.⁴ Never before was it written that we are seated together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6) or that Christ, as Head of the Body, is to have preeminence in all things (Col. 1:16). All Body members are presented as “perfect” (full status) in Christ Jesus (Col. 1:26-28). Plus, continued teachings from before are seen with new light. Wonderful knowledge is provided for us to learn and appreciate in the later writings of Paul.

Some Quotes From Two Outstanding Teachers

Two outstanding dispensationalists whose writings I appreciate very much are Charles Baker and J. C. O’Hair. Both these Bible teachers have written extensively about the distinct ministry of Paul, expressing viewpoints very close and similar to the two-stage understanding of the Body of Christ I have discussed in these pages. Following here are several relevant statements quoted from their writings.

Charles Baker:

“The position taken here is, and that which appears to have the least objections and the greatest positive evidence, is that the Body of Christ had its historic beginning with the ministry of Paul before he wrote his first epistle.” - *Dispensational Theology*, pg. 496

“It does appear, for the remainder of the Acts period at least, that God is withholding the infliction of His wrath and through Paul fulfilling some kind of ministry to Israel.” - *Dispensational Synopsis*, pg. 100

4 I’m aware of the few commentators who mistakenly suggest Ephesians was written during the Acts period. I cannot see how that could be possible. They point to Paul having been in prison numerous times and suppose his imprisonment referred to in Ephesians might have been in the Acts period. That isn’t workable because we have teachings in Ephesians about Gentiles that simply cannot fit into the situation and status of Gentiles back then.

“The transition involves two things: the completion of revelation concerning the dispensation, resulting from the writing of Paul’s final epistles, and the passing away of those things which characterized the Pentecostal dispensation which are mentioned in the Corinthian letter.”

- *Dispensational Theology*, pg. 510

“Acts closes out God’s dealings with national Israel. The transition period is ended and the permanent program for this dispensation of grace comes into full force.” - *Dispensational Theology*, pg. 136

“The Prison Epistles, written after the transition period covered by the latter half of the Acts period, contain the settled and final dispensational order for the Body of Christ in this dispensation of the Mystery. - *Dispensational Synopsis*, pg. 93

“One of the distinguishing features of the Body of Christ is that Jew and Gentile believers are brought into a joint-relationship in which there is absolute equality.” - *Dispensational Theology*, pg. 473

“After all, this is what Paul describes as the Mystery – God now bringing Gentile believers into a joint-relationship with the Jewish believers in one new man.” - *Dispensational Synopsis*, pg. 80

J. C. O’Hair:

"The great change came with the Divine judgment announced in Acts 28:25 to 28; and after that the Lord made known His will concerning the period of special Divine favor upon Gentiles."

- *Bible Study for Bereans*, Oct. 1936, pg. 39

"A most significant dispensational change took place with the closing words of the book of Acts. It was then and there that God ushered in the signless dispensation of the mystery, with the Nation Israel set aside." - *Bible Study for Bereans*, Oct. 1936, pg. 52

"A great change! When did it take place? Again, we affirm that the judgment of Acts 28:25-28 marked a crisis in God's dealings with Israel and a change in God's spiritual program. But there is no

scriptural proof that an entirely new and different Body began after the close of the Acts." - *Unsearchable Riches*, pg. 273

"After the judgment of Acts 28:28, 'salvation is sent to the Gentiles,' a new 'times of the Gentiles' began, not politically governmental. This has continued to this day. During these years Israel has had no priority rights or privileges, as expressed in Romans 1:16 and Romans 3:1 to 4. Not a new body began after Acts 28:31, but a new dispensation of the mystery; that is, a new administration no longer under Israelitish apostolic authority, or authority of Jewish believers."

- *Bible Study for Bereans, Feb/Mar, 1937, pg. 102*

"Many men of God have learned from diligently studying the Scriptures that a change in God's spiritual program took place after the close of Acts; that then God sent salvation to the Gentiles as had never been done before." - *Unsearchable Riches*, pg. 277