

Introduction

One of the more interesting, and difficult, books of the Bible to understand is the book of Acts. There seems to be an overabundance of confusing information and seeming contradictions that often drives the sincere Bible student to great frustration. Most of the problems arise, I believe, when people fail to see the dispensational distinctives between Prophecy, given to the nation of Israel, and the Mystery, given to the Body of Christ through the Apostle Paul. The person who understands this distinction will not only be able to understand the book of Acts, but will also be better equipped to understand the entire Bible.

Almost every fundamental Bible believer understands the book of Acts to be a transitional book. Unfortunately, there is much disagreement on exactly what this book is transitioning from and what it is transitioning to. Most understand that Scripture speaks of only one church, and that this church was predominantly Jewish until Gentiles were brought in. They would understand that Paul was raised up in order to preach to the Gentiles the same message that Peter was preaching to the Jews. Many believe that the Kingdom that was being preached in the Gospels is the same Kingdom now composed of all believers. Instead of acknowledging that there will be a literal Kingdom set up on this earth with Jesus Christ sitting on a literal throne in the actual city of Jerusalem, these people spiritualize (allegorize) these promises given to Israel to mean that the Kingdom is spiritual in nature, composed of all believers. They often speak in terms of believers in the Body of Christ being that Kingdom and we are to reach out to the unsaved to bring them into this Kingdom.

Those who acknowledge that God has changed His dealing with mankind throughout the ages (dispensationalists) see a literal Kingdom, but disagree about the timing of the formation of the Church. The vast majority of dispensationalists believe the Church began on the day of Pentecost with the giving of the Holy Spirit. They see no difference between the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost with the giving of the Holy Spirit to believers today upon believing. They fail to see that we are baptized into Christ by the Holy Spirit while those in early Acts were baptized with the Holy Spirit by Christ (Matthew 3:11; Acts 1:5, Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27).

Other dispensationalists see the church beginning with the lifting up of the Apostle Paul (Acts 9), with the Apostle Paul's commissioning on his first missionary journey (Acts 13) or with the pronouncement that salvation is sent unto the Gentiles (Acts 28:18).

One common fallacy, perpetrated by many theologians, is that Acts is a story about the growth of the church. They look at the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and the great number of people who were added to the church, and that the gospel is beginning to go to the Gentiles. When this is combined with a healthy dose of church tradition, most of Christendom unthinkingly runs to these ideas and embraces what they are told.

Luke, the man

The author of the book of Acts is not clearly stated, but it is easy to infer that Luke is the author from the internal evidence of the books of Luke and Acts. The writer of Luke and Acts does not give his name in his writings. He does, however, claim to be a traveling companion of Paul, and his interests and vocabulary suggest that he is a physician. Since Paul tells us that he had a companion named Luke, who was a physician, the conclusion that Luke is the writer seems very reasonable (Colossians 4:14; 2 Timothy 4:11; Philemon 1:24).

We learn much detail about Christ's birth and death from Luke. There is a fair amount of material found in his Gospel and not elsewhere, including much of the account of Jesus' birth, infancy and

some concerning His boyhood. We find exclusively from Luke some of the most moving parables, such as the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. He also is the only one to record three of the sayings of Christ on the cross: “Father, forgive them,” “You will be with me in Paradise,” and “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” He also wrote more of the New Testament than any other author, unless the writing of Hebrews is attributed to the Apostle Paul.

One very common assertion is that Luke was a Gentile. The “proof” of this comes mostly from church tradition bolstered by the fact that Luke is a Gentile name, as is Theophilus, the person to whom Luke was writing. Also, Paul does not list Luke in the list of the circumcision (Colossians 4:10—11). This is extremely weak evidence to confirm his heritage. I believe that if these “scholars” would actually trust their Bibles instead of church tradition, they would realize Luke could not be a Gentile.

Paul makes it clear in Romans 3:1—2 that the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. This is not said of any other people group. All of Scripture came through the Jewish nation. The idea that since the name *Luke* is a Gentile name he is therefore a Gentile is such a bogus argument that it shouldn’t even be considered. The apostle Paul’s name is also a Gentile name. There were many Jews outside of Jerusalem who were Hellenized, Jews living as Greeks. Their names would reflect the culture they grew up in, and many would have non-Jewish names. To see how widely spread the Jews were, map out the countries from which the Jews traveled in Acts 2. So, not only is there no concrete evidence that Luke was a Gentile, there is biblical evidence that he was Jewish. On top of this, Luke seemed to have intimate knowledge about the temple (Luke 1:8—20) and Luke was not held up as evidence that Paul was bringing Gentiles into forbidden temple areas (Acts 21:27—29).

Those who think Luke was a Gentile often believe that he was writing this book to Gentiles. This is often accepted, in spite of the evidence that Jesus came to His own (the Jews)(John 1:11) and His ministry was to the Jews (Matthew 10:6), almost without exception. Jesus was born under the Law and lived under the Law (Galatians 4:4). He also directed the Disciples to avoid the Gentiles (Matthew 10:5). As Romans 15:8 says, Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God to confirm the promises made unto the fathers. This certainly is not a book written to Gentiles.

A continuation of Luke

The book of Acts was written with the assumption that the readers had a good understanding of the events covered in the book of Luke. For instance, knowing that Jesus asked the Father to forgive Israel as He hung on the cross (only found in Luke 23:34) is important in seeing that Israel was forgiven, and God did continue to work with Israel as a nation until the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7. Also see Luke 13:6—8 to see that Israel was given an additional year to repent). If the book of Acts were butted up to the book of Luke with no chapter or verse divisions, the two books would seamlessly meld together. In fact, Luke writes Acts with the assumption that the book of Luke had been read (Acts 1:1). His first account chronicled the life of Jesus from His birth through His ascension. The book of Acts picks things up at the ascension and records events up to (but not including) the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D.

Interestingly, nothing had changed in God’s dealing with mankind between the writings of the Gospels and the book of Acts. Israel was still God’s favored nation and God was still reaching out to them to repent and return to Him (Acts 2:38). Peter was the spokesman for the Disciples and he was preaching the same message, that the Kingdom was at hand. (Compare Matthew 10:7 with the offer of the Kingdom in Acts 3:19—22).

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