

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

“In the Nick of Time”

Occasional Essays
and Other Stuff
for Christian
Students

Presented by the
President of

Central Baptist
Theological
Seminary of
Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs *Christian* leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting today's Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

“...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.”

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Acts as Transition

Biblical narrative is always theological. The purpose of a story is never simply to interest us with the story itself, nor is it merely to furnish us with a source of moral maxims. Without exception, the narratives of the Bible arrange themselves into theological arguments. The story always makes a point beyond itself.

This is particularly true of the book of Acts. Luke uses the stories in Acts to make a significant theological point. He chooses precisely those episodes that walk the reader through the transition from gospels to epistles, from Old Testament ground to New Testament ground, and from Israel to the church. Transition is not merely part of the book of Acts, it is the main point.

The religion of the New Testament epistles is quite different from the religion of the gospels. Worship in the gospels is still patterned on that of the Old Testament. The priests act as mediators between man and God. People are still observing temple sacrifices and other rituals. In the synagogues the Law is being taught as a rule of life. God is dealing with humankind through a single nation, Israel. In the epistles, however, the patterns of the Old Testament have been rendered inoperative. Apostles are preparing elders to teach the people of God. The center of religious life has shifted from temple and synagogue to the local church. The Spirit is now the believer's rule of life. Most significantly, Israel has been set aside for the remainder of the age. God is now working through a new people, the church.

Think of the New Testament as an hourglass. The gospels are one bulb of the glass and the epistles are the other bulb. The book of Acts is the neck of the hourglass; it is the

passageway from one way of administering God's work to another. This is not merely one transition among many, it is the most significant transition in all of salvation history. Even events such as the Flood and the revelation at Mount Sinai cannot compare with it.

The aspect of this transition that most occupies Luke's attention is the move from national Israel to the church. At the beginning of Acts, God is dealing with humanity through national Israel. The church does not even exist. By the end of the book, however, God is dealing with humanity through the church, and national Israel has been (temporarily) set aside. This alteration from Israel to the church, however, does not happen overnight. It takes years, and Luke's purpose is to inform his readers of the stages by which that transition is made.

Stage one occurs in Acts 2. That is where the church comes into existence. We know this because the baptizing work of the Spirit is what constitutes the church, and that work is still future in Acts 1:5. In Acts 11:15-17, however, Peter looks back to the day of Pentecost as the beginning of the Spirit's baptizing work. Pentecost is truly the birthday of the New Testament church.

The church of Acts 2 is entirely contained as a subset of national Israel. While the church has come into existence, it is not yet separate from Israel. The early chapters of Acts are freighted with possibilities. If Israel were to turn to the Messiah, the church could grow to the point of including the entire nation. Alternatively, the church could become the faithful remnant within the nation. Neither of these possibilities, however, is actualized. What does happen is something that no one could possibly have foreseen.

After Pentecost, Luke depicts steadily increasing opposition by the national leadership. This opposition is relieved slightly by the conversion of the Samaritans in Acts 8. Their conversion, however, creates new problems. For centuries they had maintained their own worship over against the temple in Jerusalem, and the Jews had reciprocated with contempt. How, then, would Samaritans relate to Jews in the church? The answer to this question is indicated by the fact that they do not receive the Spirit (most likely a reference to His baptizing work, though this is not spelled out) except by submitting to the Jewish apostles. This emphasizes the oneness of the church and the unique authority of the apostles, both of which are important sub-themes in Luke's argument.

The second major stage in the transition occurs in chapter ten with the conversion of Cornelius the Gentile. This is the real turning point of the book. For the first time, Gentiles are included within the church, which implies that the church is no longer a subset of Israel. Such a development is completely unexpected in Luke's narrative, and it catches everyone by surprise (even Peter). The conversion of Cornelius throws everything into confusion, and Luke requires several chapters to sort things out.

The big problem is to decide whether Gentiles converts need to become Jews in order to be accepted into the church. From a certain point of view, this seems logical. Up until Acts 10, the church has been a subset of Israel. In order for it to retain that status, the Gentiles would have to be circumcised. Thus, circumcision becomes the focal point of the controversy in Acts 15. In the long run, Peter's testimony (given in both Acts 11 and Acts 15) convinces everyone that God has already accepted the Gentiles and made them part of the church without requiring them to become Jews.

From Acts 10 onward, the church is no longer a subset of Israel. On the contrary, Israel and the church are now overlapping categories. The narratives after Acts 13 show the Gentiles membership of the church rapidly outnumbering the Jewish membership: Gentiles keep turning to Christ while Jews keep rejecting Him.

This juxtaposition of Israel and the church creates a tension. What does God intend to do for the duration of the age? Will He be working through two peoples simultaneously? Will His plan proceed along two tracks, something like Track A for Israel and Track B for the church? The answer to this question is given in the unusual case of the Ephesian disciples in Acts 19.

This episode represents the third major stage in the transition from Israel to the church. The Ephesian disciples are believers, but they are believers on Old Testament terms. They have not yet received the Holy Spirit, which for Luke is always a way of referring to the Spirit's baptizing work. They are not part of the church. They have received John's baptism, but they evidently have not heard the details about Jesus' work as Messiah. They are saved people, but they are more like Simeon and Anna in Luke 2 than they are like Cornelius in Acts 10.

The point of Acts 19 is that it is no longer possible to continue as a righteous Jew under the Old Covenant. All Jews must now turn to Jesus as Messiah. Moreover, they must identify with the New Testament people of God, the church. This is what the Ephesian disciples do, identifying themselves with Jesus by submitting to baptism in His name. When Paul lays his hands on them, they receive the Spirit, whose baptizing work unites New Testament believers with the body of Christ.

The episode of the Ephesian disciples implies that the door is being closed (temporarily) closed on national Israel. For the duration of the age, the church alone will be the people through whom God works among humans. While God does not cast Israel off, he does set Israel aside.

The closing chapters of Acts are filled with further and more final rejections of Christ by the national leadership of Israel. The climax of the book occurs when Paul confronts the Jewish leadership in Rome. In the plan of Acts, their rejection of Christ is the final straw. Paul cites Isaiah 6 to pronounce God's judgment upon the nation, closing with the words, "Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it" (Acts 28:28).

At this point, the transition is complete. Whether God's invitation to Israel remains open can be debated, but one thing is clear: for the rest of the age, Israel as a nation will not respond. Individual Jews may, but when they do, they will be united by the Spirit to the church, the body of Christ. They become part of the "one new humanity" of which Paul writes in Ephesians 2. God no longer reckons them as Jews, but as Christians. ✕

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, president of Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

PEACE.
by Henry Vaughan

MY soul, there is a country
Far beyond the stars,
Where stands a wingèd sentry
All skillful in the wars :
There, above noise and danger,
Sweet Peace sits crown'd with smiles,
And One born in a manger
Commands the beauteous files.
He is thy gracious Friend,
And—O my soul awake !—
Did in pure love descend,
To die here for thy sake.
If thou canst get but thither,
There grows the flower of Peace,
The Rose that cannot wither,
Thy fortress, and thy ease.
Leave then thy foolish ranges ;
For none can thee secure,
But One, who never changes,
Thy God, thy life, thy cure. ✕

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