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Two Keys

TO THE BOOK OF ACTS

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The book of Acts is a popular book of contemporary study. In spite of all the attention it is receiving, however, it remains one of the most misunderstood and misused books of the Bible.

Generally it is approached from the perspective of being a history of the founding of the "Christian Church," an example of its first century activity and mission. This, we suggest, is a basic fallacy, one which leads to confusion and frustration for honest students of the Acts record.

The book of Acts itself clearly states that the disciples in its early chapters were *not* Christians! Although this may seem startling to some, Acts 11:26 is very clear:

"And when he [Barnabas] had found him [Paul], he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church, and taught much people. AND THE DISCIPLES WERE CALLED CHRISTIANS *FIRST* AT ANTIOCH."

It was at Antioch that the disciples were *first* "called Christians"-and this was, as Acts 11:26 indicates, a direct result of the ministry of the Apostle Paul. In other words, Christianity is not to be found in the pages of the book of Acts prior to Paul's ministry. What then was going on in the early chapters of Acts? This is an important consideration!

It is generally *assumed* that the events of early Acts set forth a pattern for what God is doing today in the dispensation of grace. Hence repeated attempts are made to "return to Pentecost" with its marvelous miraculous displays of God's power and working. But these attempts are just as repeatedly followed by failure and, not unexpectedly, confusion and frustration on the part of sincere believers. Is there a better answer? We believe there is--and the "keys" are found in the book of Acts itself.

THE FIRST "KEY"

"When they therefore were come together, they asked of him, saying, LORD, WILT THOU AT THIS TIME RESTORE AGAIN THE KINGDOM TO ISRAEL?" (Acts 1:6).

After having been instructed by their Lord for some forty days in "the things pertaining to the kingdom of God" (v.3), only one question remained in the minds of the apostles: *when?* Thus their question is clear and straight forward: "*Wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?*"

It should be noted that they do *not* ask about beginning the Body of Christ; they do *not* ask about beginning something new, something that had not previously been on the scene. Rather they ask, "Wilt thou at this time restore *again* the kingdom to Israel?"

This verse fixes the literal, physical, visible nature of the kingdom they were expecting. That they were not simply asking about a "spiritual kingdom in the hearts of men" is clearly brought out by the use of the word "*again*" in their question: They were asking about a literal, physical, visible earthly kingdom just like the one Israel once possessed--the kingdom the prophets had long promised God would restore to them.

The very *goal* of the prophetic program was the establishment of this kingdom. Dan.2:44 declare:

"And in the days of these kings shall THE GOD OF HEAVEN SET UP A KINGDOM, WHICH SHALL NEVER BE DESTROYED: and the kingdom shall not be left to other people, but IT SHALL BREAK IN PIECES AND CONSUME ALL THESE KINGDOMS, AND IT SHALL STAND FOR EVER."

Looking toward the establishment of this kingdom by the God of heaven, Jeremiah says,

"Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I WILL RAISE UNTO DAVID A RIGHTEOUS BRANCH, AND A SHALL REIGN AND PROSPER, AND SHALL EXECUTE JUDGMENT AND JUSTICE IN THE EARTH" (Jer.23:5).

Their Lord had come proclaiming, "*Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Matt. 4:17). He taught them to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done *in earth*, as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10) and even promised the Twelve:

"...Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matt.19:28).

There can be no doubt they understood that this kingdom was to be established *in the earth*. Christ had, in fact, even told them that Jerusalem was to be its capitol (Matt. 5:35). They were no doubt familiar with the promise of Isaiah,

"And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it.

"And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (Isa. 2:2, 3).

Thus from Jerusalem Israel's kingdom was to be extended to all the earth until "*the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea*" (Isa. 11:9). Psa. 72:11 says of this coming kingdom age:

"Yea, ALL KINGS SHALL FALL DOWN BEFORE HIM: ALL NATIONS SHALL SERVE HIM."

Can you name even *one* that does today? Hardly! Yet Dan. 7: 14 promises that He will be given "dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, *that all people, nations and*

languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed."

This is the kingdom these apostles had been taught to expect. *This* is the kingdom they were asking their Lord about. Failure to actually believe the words on the pages of the Bible has caused great damage at this point.

For those who feel this kingdom is otherwise, that it is a "spiritual rule in the hearts of men" rather than a literal, physical, visible, Davidic kingdom established on the earth with Jerusalem as its capitol; for those who are thus inclined we remind you that our Lord did nothing to counter the expectations held by His apostles at this point. Surely if they had so mistaken the intended meaning of His words, *now* was the time to set the record straight! Hadn't He said to them on the eve of His death, "*In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you*"?

Surely, "*if it were not so*" now; if they were wrong about the very nature of the kingdom they were being sent forth to proclaim, *He would have told them!* No. They were not mistaken. They were correct in their understanding of the nature of the kingdom they expected and announced.

The "promises made unto the fathers" clearly declared that the salvation and blessing of God was to go to the uttermost parts of the earth *through redeemed Israel* (Gen. 22:18, Isa. 60:1-3, Zech. 8:20-23). It was for this very reason that Peter declared to Israel:

"But those things, which God before had shewed by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled.

"Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord;

"And he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you:

"Whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began."

"Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.

"Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you in turning away every one of you from his iniquities" (Acts 3:18-21 ,25,26).

As the pages of Acts begin to unfold, the apostles are pressing that favored nation to repent and receive her salvation so that she in turn could take it out to the nations of the earth. Acts opens with a *renewed opportunity of repentance extended to the nation Israel*. Recognize this and efforts fail to spiritualize the events of these early chapters into something other than what they obviously are. The claims that "Jerusalem" really means your "home town," and "Judaea" is actually your "state," etc.; the suggestion that the Body of Christ had its beginning on the day of Pentecost, even though it was not yet revealed as such; the assertion that the Body is really "spiritual Israel"; all these and more can easily be put to rest simply by recognizing that the nation Israel had *not yet been set aside* as the book of Acts opens. Rather, God was extending to her another opportunity to repent of her rejection of her Messiah and thus be saved and receive her kingdom blessings.

Acts 1:6 is a "key" to the record that follows for it clearly demonstrates the apostles' understanding that in the early chapters of the Acts period the salvation of God was to go to the "uttermost part of the earth" through the kingdom that had long been promised to redeemed, converted Israel.

A SECOND "KEY"

A second "key" is found in the last chapter, where things have changed considerably. The book of Acts concludes with Paul in Rome, a prisoner for proclaiming "the mystery" which had been revealed to him (Eph. 3: 1-3; 6:19, 20). Meeting there with a group of unbelieving Jews, he discussed what God is now doing, declaring to them God's response to their unbelief:

"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).

Admittedly this is quite in contrast to Acts 1:6! As Acts opens, salvation was to go to the nations of the earth through Israel-through her *rise* to kingdom glory. When we reach the conclusion of Acts, Israel is anything but redeemed and converted. Indeed, she is *fallen* (Rom.11:11-15).

The intervening chapters of the Acts record thoroughly document God's gracious offer of repentance and conversion again being extended to Israel, her subsequent fall and His reason for sending salvation to the Gentiles apart from that chosen nation-yea, in *spite* of her continued obstinacy.

Acts 28:28 is the last of a three-fold Pauline declaration concerning this change in God's dealings.Indeed, the record of Acts sets forth a stinging indictment of Israel's blindness and unbelief in the face of every effort to bring them to salvation. We quote all three of Paul's progressive pronouncements for emphasis:

"Then 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 UNWORTFIY OF EVERIASTING LIFE, LO, WE TURN TO THE GENTILES" (Acts13:46).

"AND WHEN THEY OPPOSED THEMSELVES,AND BLASPHEMED, he shook his raiment, and said unto them,YOUR BLOOD BE UPON YOUR OWN HEADS; I AM CLEAN: FROM HENCE FORTH I WILL GO UNTO THE GENTILES" (Acts 18:6)

"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).

With these two "Keys" we can understand that the early portion of Acts does not set forth a pattern for us to emulate today. Rather, the book of Acts is a record of *why* the program so impressively begun in its early chapters has been *set aside*-replaced by a *new* program revealed through a *new* apostle and setting forth a *new* pattern for us today, as Paul declares:

"Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, THAT IN ME FIRST JESUS CHRIST MIGHT SHEW FORTH ALL LONGSUFFERING, FOR A PATTERN TO THEM WHICH SHOULD HEREAFTER BELIEVE ON HIM TO LIFE EVERLASTING" (I Tim. 1 :16).

