

Lesson 7—Act II, Pts. 1-2

Last time, we finally reached the end of Act I, the compilation of Scenes I, II, and III, a portion of the story that spans from Genesis 12 all the way through John 21. We saw that all God had been working towards since he made his promise to Abraham had reached its climax in the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, and his life, death, and resurrection. We saw that this Messiah came through the nation of Israel and provided redemption for the whole world through his sacrificial death on the cross: this was the blessing of Abraham through the line of David. We also noted that, as the climactic event of redemptive history, the coming of Jesus Christ serves as the point of God's work in the past and the basis of his work now and in the future. It is with all of this in mind that we now turn to Act II in the story of what God is doing here on this earth to glorify himself by redeeming his fallen creation.

Now, from back when we first started this series through the Bible, we learned that God never does anything unless he first tells us that he is going to do it; first, he says he will do it, then he does it, and then he tells us he did it the way he said he would do it, and all so that he receives all of the credit for his work. We saw this played out for us as God made a promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 that said God would make Abraham into a great nation and then use that nation to bless the whole world. **Galatians 3:16** tells us that God fulfilled that promise to Abraham in the person and work of Jesus Christ: ¹⁶“Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.” So, we see that Act I is explained by God's promise in Genesis 12:1-3.

Act II, then, is explained by Jesus' promise in **Matthew 16:13-19**: ¹³“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the

Son of Man is?”¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”¹⁶ Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Just like how God said, “I will” make a great nation out of Abraham, Jesus here says, “I will” build my church upon this Rock of Peter, a seed which likely represents the collective 12 apostles due to the record in **Acts 1:6-8** when Jesus commissions them all as his witnesses to the whole world: “⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?”⁷ He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority.⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” This new promise of Jesus’ also shows us a parallel between the nation of Israel and the Church: while Israel was God’s original channel of redemption on this earth through which Jesus, the Messiah, came to bless the world, the Church is now the new channel of redemption on earth with Jesus as its head.

In this shift of redemptive channels from the national entity of Israel to the Church, we see a drastic change in the program of God. Throughout Act I, we saw that God was working to, and did indeed, provide redemption for the whole world. Now, in Act II, Jesus promises to build his Church which will serve as the new channel of redemption from God on this earth as it

proclaims the redemption that God has already provided for the world. This new channel, the Church, is something that has not been seen yet in history, and it took the world, and Israel, in particular, by storm. In **Ephesians 2:11-22**, we read, “¹¹ Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—¹² remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. ¹⁷ And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father.¹⁹ So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, ²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. ²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

So, we see that Jesus’ Church is a ‘new man in the place of two.’ Gentiles, like Jews, have been brought near to God through the blood of Christ in order to make a new people group, not another physical, political nation. The Church is a ‘new structure’ that is being built upon the Apostles and Prophets with Christ himself as the cornerstone. We are likely never to fully appreciate the drastic shift in God’s operation here since none of us, to my knowledge, are

Jewish, and since we are so far separated from the establishment of the Church, chronologically, it sounds very strange to us that it was at a time strange for Gentiles to come near to God; for us, the Church is almost entirely Gentile and it's strange for us to hear of a Jew becoming a Christian. However, I must note that this was a radical paradigm shift made by God as he established the Church and made it his primary channel of redemption on this earth, not national Israel. For the first time in history, anyone can draw near to God and find redemption, and now they can do it anywhere; whereas before, one had to become a Jew and travel to Jerusalem to meet with God and find redemption. But even though there are some big differences between the Church and national Israel, there are also some key similarities that connect the two and show that God is at work through it all.

So, let us explore three key similarities between the Church and Israel and three key differences between them:

Similarities:

1. Where the nation of Israel had distinct parts, or tribes, the Church has distinct parts of one body (1 Corinthians 12).
2. Where the nation of Israel was multiple tribes unified as a single nation (at least for a while), the Church is many distinct parts all part of one body (1 Corinthians 12).
3. Where Israel contained the Temple, which served as the dwelling place for God's presence on earth, the Church is being made into a new Temple as God indwells each individual Christian (Eph.2:21; 3:17; 1 Corinthians 6:19).

Differences:

1. **Acts 14:21-23:** ²¹ When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls

of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. ²³ And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”

- a. We see here that there is a local church, or an individual channel of redemption, found in each place where there are Christians as opposed to the single channel found in Jerusalem.
2. The Church is non-national, allowing it to fit anywhere, as opposed to national Israel.
 3. **Acts 12:5:** ⁵ So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.”
 - a. The Church has no political function in and of itself as opposed to the national politics of Israel. This does not mean that the individual members of the Church cannot engage in political matters, but it does mean that the Church cannot exist on its own apart from a national or political society.

All of these things put together show the genius in God’s plan: in the Church, God has created an institutional organism that is unified and empowered by something that transcends all of its members—God himself in the person of the indwelling Holy Spirit (Tozer’s tuning fork illustration)—and it is not restricted by ethnicity, culture, politics, or geography, and is therefore effective wherever it finds itself, so it’s not limited to any particular location and can therefore spread all over the earth. All of these aspects make the Church the perfect channel through which God is working to proclaim the redemption he provided through Israel.

So, let’s explore the first 12 chapters of the book of Acts to see how the Church came about:

Acts 1:1-14: “In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, ² until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. ⁴ And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, “you heard from me; ⁵ for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now. ⁶ So when they had come together, they asked him, “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” ⁹ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven. ¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away. ¹³ And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot and Judas the son of James. ¹⁴ All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.”

We see here that Jesus gives the Church its mission—to be witnesses of God’s salvation provided through Jesus to the ends of the earth by the power of the Holy Spirit—and then his

apostles find themselves gathered together in one accord and devoted to prayer as they waited for Jesus to fulfill his promise and send the Spirit. This is but a seed of the Church, unified in their devotion to God and waiting on him to do his work.

Acts 2:1-4: “When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

Here, we see, as Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit come upon the Apostles on the day of Pentecost. I believe this to be the conception of the Church within the womb of the nation of Israel. Acts 2:46 reads, “⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts,” indicating that the Church was still in the fetal stage of development at this point.

Then, in Acts 3-7, the pains of childbirth come upon the Church as it's forced to leave the Temple as it multiplied and eventually organized in Acts 6 when they elected deacons. This is reminiscent of how the Israelites were forced out of Egypt after they had grown and made the powers at be too uncomfortable.

Then, in Acts 8:1, we read, “And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.”

The Church is born in Jerusalem, pushed out by the labor pains of great persecution that caused the Church to scatter throughout the greater regions of Judea and Samaria.

Then, in Acts 9:31, we read, “³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.”

Here, we see at least 4 churches that have been established and are growing: Jerusalem, Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. However, as far as we know, the Church was still entirely Jewish, indicating infancy as the Church’s current stage of development. If you remember when we last met, we read a lengthy portion of the second chapter of Paul’s letter to the Ephesians; a shorter clip of that chapter will show why I believe this to be the case: Ephesians 2:13-15 reads, “¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.” In Paul’s description of the Church, he refers to one man made out of the two, but so far, we have not seen any Gentiles brought in.

But then we come to Acts 11:17-26: “¹⁷ If then God gave the same gift to them as he gave to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?” ¹⁸ When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life. ¹⁹ Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to no one except Jews. ²⁰ But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Hellenists also, preaching the Lord Jesus. ²¹ And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number who believed turned to the Lord. ²² The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to

Antioch. ²³ When he came and saw the grace of God, he was glad, and he exhorted them all to remain faithful to the Lord with steadfast purpose, ²⁴ for he was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And a great many people were added to the Lord.²⁵ So Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch. For a whole year they met with the church and taught a great many people. And in Antioch the disciples were first called Christians.”

It is here that we see, for the first time, that Gentiles can come to God without first becoming Jewish (converting to Judaism), and it is at Antioch that both Jews and Gentiles are given a new name: Christians. Now, we see the Church is mature—it is out of Jerusalem, it is growing, and it is unified (one man out of the two).