

CLASS NOTES on ACTS -- APPENDIX # 2

FOUR OUTSTANDING "GOSPELS" (Reference notes at Acts 15:11)

The word translated "gospel" in the New Testament means, basically, "good news." It may be (among other joyful announcements) good news of the birth of the Savior (Luke 2:10, 11), the declaration that the kingdom of the heavens is at hand (Matt. 4:17, 23) or the good news of personal salvation (1 Cor. 15:3, 4; Eph. 1:13). The word often encompasses much more than the basis for salvation however. If Paul's "my gospel" (Rom. 2:16; 16:25; 2 Tim. 2:8) and the "Gospel of the Grace of God" (Acts 20:24) refer only to the gospel of salvation, they would then be limited to information long prophesied in the Old Testament (1 Cor. 15:3, 4). All four usages dealt with in this paper have to do with the program of God, in the area involved, as well as the matter of salvation.

Four of the major descriptive terms used with the word "gospel" in the New Testament are the "Gospel of the Kingdom," the "Gospel of the Circumcision," the "Gospel of the Uncircumcision," and the "Gospel of the Grace of God." What are the interrelationships among these terms? What can they tell us of what God is doing dispensationally in the New Testament?

In the Old Testament there was a great deal of **revelation** concerning the kingdom, but **not** the "Gospel of the Kingdom" -- for its establishment was not "near" at that time.

In the Gospels the good news was that the prophesied kingdom was **near** -- for, even though it was not yet specifically offered to them, the King was in their midst (Matt. 4:17, 23). The message preached by Christ is called the "Gospel of the Kingdom" in Matt. 4:27, and other passages, and in Matt. 4:17 it gives the substance of that preaching. "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, 'Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is at hand!'" This was John the Baptist's message also (Matt. 3:2). "The seventy" were sent out to say, "The kingdom of God is come nigh unto you" (Luke 10:9).

Early in the book of Acts the message was modified to include the, then accomplished, death and resurrection of Christ. There was renewed emphasis on repentance -- due to the fact they had not only rejected their Messiah, they had murdered Him (Acts 2:23; 3:15; 7:52). While the expression "Gospel of the Kingdom" is not used in these chapters it surely applies, for the kingdom was then even nearer. It was specifically offered to them (Acts 3:19 - 21). It was not to be established immediately upon the resurrection of Christ (Acts 1:6 - 8), yet only the repentance of Israel and the prophesied events of the Tribulation had to transpire first (Acts 3:19 - 21). Not one day or event of the Age of Grace is included in the "restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all His Holy prophets since the world began" (Acts 3:21). The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in seventy AD were a prophesied part of the political "times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24) which runs concurrent with this spiritual times of the Gentiles -- the Age of Grace. This prophesied judgment on the unbelieving Jews is not linked directly to the Age of Grace or to the Body of Christ.

After Acts seven the kingdom was no longer "near" for Israel, for they had definitely, formally, and finally rejected the offer made through Peter in Acts 3:19 - 21, and the kingdom had been postponed into the indefinite future. The apostles probably did not realize this at once, but surely God would not have inspired them to make an offer which He had already withdrawn. The text of Acts eight through twenty-eight will be searched in vain for such an offer. By Acts nine (or thirteen) even the program leading up to its establishment had been replaced with another program based on the **fall and setting aside of Israel** (Rom. 11:11 - 15).

The oft repeated refrain in the Psalms, "How long, O Lord, how long?" became the cry of national Israel, as is symbolized today in Jerusalem's "Wailing Wall." A partial answer to this question is found in Psa. 4:2 where it is **GOD** who asks, "How long?" "How long will ye turn my glory into shame? How long will ye love vanity, and seek after leasing [lying]?" The long delays were due to Israel's unbelief and sin. In Isa. 30:18 the prophet says, "And therefore will the Lord wait, that He may be gracious unto you, and therefore will He be exalted, that He may have mercy on you: for the Lord is a God of judgment: blessed are all they that wait for Him." God waits so He can be gracious. See Isa. 25:9; 33:2 and 2 Pet. 3:15.

During this Age of Grace the message is the "Gospel of the Grace of God." It is so named, not only because it offers salvation by pure grace, but also because it represents an exceedingly gracious move, dispensationally, on God's part. When Israel, and the whole world, fully deserved judgment -- a judgment then due to take place according to the chronology of the prophetic program -- God declared an amnesty instead! He opened His arms wide to individual sinners of all nations, with an offer of salvation full and free, apart from the program of prophecy and the Mosaic Covenant.

However, for a limited time, there was still a slowly dwindling group of saints on the earth who, before Israel was set aside, had believed -- on the basis of the kingdom hope and program. Other believers, saved under the same hope but who had died, will one day be raised to realize that hope, and share in that program (Notice the promise that David will be a "Prince" in the millennial kingdom). If the Body of Christ began as late as Acts 13, even James could not be in that Body, and it was promised that he would sit on one of the twelve thrones reigning over one of the tribes of Israel. Did the believers of early Acts who lived on into the Age of Grace lose that hope and fail of enjoying their part in the prophetic program? I think not. It was not **THEIR** fault it was interrupted and the kingdom postponed.¹

¹ It is recognized that there is great difference of opinion here. Many, including highly respected and deeply loved leaders in the grace movement, believe the twelve apostles, and those Jews and proselytes who had been saved under their pre-Pauline ministry, were taken into the Body when it began at Acts nine (or thirteen). Others are convinced those saved before the beginning of the Body of Christ continued as a group of kingdom saints. They are conceived of as being in fellowship with, but apart from, the Body church. There are strong arguments on both sides (and no **clear** Scriptural statement on the topic). While we should not be dogmatic here, the issues cannot be adequately treated without selecting one or the other of the two views. The concept that only those saved during the Age of Grace are in the Body of Christ has been adopted in this presentation.

What message did these early Jewish believers need to hear? The Gospel of Grace? No, for that message involves an economy in which there is **NO difference** between Jew and Gentile (Gal. 3:27, 28). It involves a setting aside of the very seal of their hope (circumcision -- Rom. 4:11). Also the Rapture which, had it taken place during Paul's lifetime (as he at first expected in 1 Thess. 4:17), would have taken them away from earth just before the coming they had waited so long to see. It seems that 1 Pet. 1:5 is promising those kingdom saints who believed before that day of national salvation when all Israel will be saved² will be kept by the power of God until that day and be, in resurrection, a part of the "all Israel" of Rom. 11:26.

What, then? The message of early Acts must be modified to leave out the **offer** of the kingdom, and hence could no longer accurately be called the "gospel of the kingdom." The message must continue to be based on the death and resurrection of Christ, for this was "according to the [Old Testament] Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3, 4). It must reflect the necessity of faith for justification, for this also is found in the Old Testament Scriptures (Gen. 15:6).

While the death and resurrection of Christ has always been the basis for man's redemption **in the mind of God**, and the subject of type and prophecy from Genesis to Malachi, this truth was not given as a "gospel" for men to proclaim until the events had taken place. Further, it was not divested of the instrumental features associated with it in early Acts (Acts 2:38 with Mark 16:16) until Paul. The gospel of salvation needed to be **revealed** to Paul (1 Cor. 15:3, 4), even though it had been prophesied, in order to simplify it down to the essentials, apart from all secondary considerations. It seems this was at least part of what Paul communicated to the twelve in Gal. 2:6, 7. Paul did not learn from them -- they learned from him. "Those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me, but **on the contrary** ... recognizing the grace that had been given to me ... [they] gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship" (Gal. 2:6, 7, 9 NASB). Shortly after this consultation, Peter said before all, "[God] put no difference between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. ... We believe that through the **grace** of the Lord Jesus Christ **we [Jews]** shall be saved **even as they [Gentiles]**" (Acts 15:9, 11).

However, this message had to be preached to **THEM** as it was **adapted to them**, as Jews who had been saved under a previous dispensation -- kingdom saints. It must reflect the kingdom program and the kingdom hope. It must not include those truths that apply only to the Body of Christ and the Age of Grace.

This version of the gospel was called the "Gospel of the Circumcision." During the period when such a group (the "Israel of God" of Gal. 6:16) still lived on (largely in Jerusalem), the Gospel of Grace bore the additional title "the Gospel of the Uncircumcision." This, in spite of the fact that the Jews saved **AFTER** the Body of Christ began (for Paul went to the Jews **FIRST** all through the latter part of the book of Acts) were included in that Body. It was to distinguish the gospel of grace from the **particular message adapted to those remaining kingdom saints**. There is no reference to either the "Gospel of the Circumcision" or the "Gospel of the Uncircumcision" after the Acts period, and none needed elsewhere even during Acts, since only here do we have this direct confrontation between these two messages.

² The **prophesied** grace mentioned in 1 Pet. 1:13 surely refers to the day when "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26). See Zech. 12:10.

Was the message different, in some respects, for those two groups (the "Israel of God" and those who walked according to the rule of Gal. 6:15 -- the Body of Christ)?

Most assuredly!

In the message Paul preached, circumcision was no longer valid (Gal. 5:1 - 4) -- for the gathering of kingdom saints it **WAS** (the agreement about circumcision in Acts fifteen did not affect the **JEWS** gathered there -- Acts 21:20 - 25). **Paul's** message was, "we are not under Law" (Rom. 6:14, 15) -- **THEY** were all "zealous of the Law" (Acts 21:20. Compare James 2:8 - 12, written specifically to the "twelve tribes," and Rev. 12:17; 15:3). **Paul's** message was that the ceremonial law had been superceded by a spiritual program (Gal. 4:9 - 11) -- **THEY** were still offering sacrifices in the temple.

Paul's agreement to go along with the sacrifices (Acts 21:23 - 26) was not intended as a disclaimer or refutation of what he had taught concerning the Gentiles (and Jews saved under his ministry). It was, rather, a recognition that the Gospel of the Circumcision was from God -- **for the Israel of God** -- which was, at first, centered largely in Jerusalem.

It was late in time for such a move, however, for many of the kingdom saints had died, replaced by Jews saved after the Body began (and hence in the Body **for sure**), and the rest would soon be gone also. God tried to prevent this untimely endorsement of a passing program by discouraging Paul from going to Jerusalem. When he went anyway, God intervened and prevented the completion of Paul's participation in the sacrifices, laying the emphasis on Paul's ministry to the **Gentiles!** (Acts 21:28; 22:21, 22).

Galatians addresses itself, initially, to two problems.

First of all, those Jews who were demanding the works of the Law for salvation are dealt with. They were not preaching the "Gospel of the Circumcision," but had a "gospel" which was not a gospel at all. God's curse rests on them. This is the burden of Gal. 1:6 - 9. If these verses are contrasting **God's** message to **Gentiles** with **God's** message to **Jews** -- Paul's message with Peter's -- then the words "unto **you**" should have maximum emphasis, for whether the messenger is blessed or cursed would depend on whom he is addressing. But Rotherham's translation (The Emphasized Bible) indicates they bear but **minimal** emphasis. Would Peter be preaching a message that could, under any circumstances, be termed a **perversion** of the gospel of Christ? Paul's conflict was not primarily with the apostles, but with those who taught "Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses ye **cannot be saved.**" The apostles themselves said of these teachers, "[They] have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, 'Ye must be circumcised, and keep the Law of Moses [for salvation - Acts 15:1],' to whom we gave no such commandment" (Acts 15:24).

The second problem is before us in Galatians two -- the danger of perpetuating the temporary Gospel of the Circumcision after the need for it is past, and bringing it over into the church of this age to modify or replace the Gospel of the Grace of God. In Gal. 2:7 - 9 Peter did not agree that the messages were the **same**, but that each one, **in its proper place**, was of **God**.

Following this, however, he was guilty of bringing the principles of the circumcision

gospel over into a congregation of the Body of Christ. He was not doing this by his teaching, but by actions not in conformity with the teaching. For him, it was not the curse of God he received, but rebuke from Paul (Galatians chapter two).

Peter evidently, in time at least, took it well, for later he spoke of Paul as "our beloved brother." He acknowledged that his writings are Scripture, though admitting he found it hard to understand some things Paul taught. It was not Paul's teachings he deplored, however, but the wresting of them (2 Pet. 3:15, 16).

The "Gospel of the Kingdom" will again be preached during the tribulation period (Matt. 24:14) for, again, and **finally**, the kingdom will be near (Luke 21:31). There will be "**delay no longer**" (Rev. 10:6 - NASB). The kingdom will be (along with the associated return of the King), **at last and for sure**, the next major development in the kingdom program!

--- William P Heath

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