

FOUR OUTSTANDING GOSPELS

The word translated "gospel" in the New Testament means, basically, "good news." It may be good news of the birth of the Savior (Luke 2:10), the announcement 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 gospels dealt with in this paper involve 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 Grace of God," "the Gospel of the Circumcision," and "the Gospel of the Uncircumcision." 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 also 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." The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 a.d. were a prophesied part of the political "Times of the Gentiles" (Luke 21:24). This event is not linked directly to the Age of Grace or to the Body of Christ.¹

¹The Age of Grace may be considered a spiritual "Times of the Gentiles." As such, from its inception in mid-Acts until it closes with the Rapture, it runs concurrent with the political Times of the Gentiles. The former age began centuries after the latter came on the scene, and terminates at least seven years before the political Times of the Gentiles runs its prophesied

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, Himself, had withdrawn. The text of Acts chapters eight through twenty eight will be searched in vain for such an offer. By Acts chapter nine, eleven, or thirteen (depending on when the Body of Christ is thought to have begun) 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 Psalm 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 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, greatly deserved judgment -- a judgment then due to take place according to the chronology of the prophetic program -- God declared an amnesty instead! He interrupted the prophetic program and 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 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 did not begin before Acts nine, Stephen, who died before that time, will surely be raised to take his place in this millennial kingdom. If the Body of Christ began as late as Acts thirteen, 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. Surely the believers of early Acts who lived on into the Age of Grace did not lose that hope and fail of enjoying their part in the prophetic program. It was not their fault it was interrupted and the kingdom postponed ²

course and concludes with the coming of Christ in glory.

²*It is recognized that there is great difference of opinion here. Many 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 9/13. 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*

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 the Jew and the Gentile (Gal. 3:27, 28). A setting aside of the very seal of their hope (circumcision -- Rom. 4:11), and a 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 the earth just before the coming they had waited so long to see. It seems 1 Pet. 1:5 is promising those kingdom saints who believed before that day of national salvation (when all Israel will be saved -- the prophesied grace mentioned in 1 Pet. 1:13) will be kept by the power of God until that day and, in resurrection, be a part of the "all Israel" of Rom. 11:26.

What then? The message valid in early Acts must now be modified to leave out the offer of the kingdom, and hence can no longer accurately be called the "Gospel of the Kingdom." It cannot be called the "Gospel of the Jewish believer," or some similar designation, either for Jews saved after the age of grace began were not under its jurisdiction. 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 men'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 that such a group (the "Israel of God" of Gal. 6:16) still lived (largely in Jerusalem), the "Gospel of Grace" bore the additional title, "the Gospel of the Uncircumcision." This was not because it did not include the Jews saved after the Body of Christ began (for Paul went to the Jews first all

both sides. 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.

through the book of Acts). 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 is there this direct confrontation between these two messages.

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)?

Assuredly!

* In the message Paul preached, circumcision was no longer valid (Gal. 5:1 - 4). For the gathering of kingdom saints it continued as a part of their program (the agreement about circumcision in Acts fifteen did not affect the Jews present -- 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 condone, and even participate in, 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 a recognition that the Gospel of the Circumcision, for these kingdom saints, was from God -- for the Israel of God was, at first, centered largely in Jerusalem.

However it was late in time for Paul to publicly endorse this transitional program, for many of the kingdom saints had died, replaced by Jews saved after the Body began (and hence obviously in the Body of Christ), 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, placing the emphasis on Paul's ministry to the Gentiles! (Acts 21:28; 22:21, 22).

Galatians addresses itself, initially, to two problems: the disaster of demanding compliance with the Law for salvation (compare Acts 15:1), and the serious error of making the Law a source of sanctification (Gal. 3:2, 3).

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. In that case the messenger is blessed or cursed depending on whether he is preaching to Gentiles or to Jews. But Rotherham's translation (the Emphasized Bible) indicates the words "unto you" 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).

Paul's second topic is introduced in Galatians two. It is 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 – 10 Peter did not agree that the messages were the same, but that each one, in its proper place, was of God.

Following this, however, Peter 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).

Evidently Peter 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 (Matt. 24:14) for, again, and finally, the kingdom will be near (Luke 21:31). There will be "delay no longer" (Rev. 10:6 -- Revised Scofield, NKJV, and others). It will be (along with the associated return of the King), at last and for sure, the next major development in the kingdom program!

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