

Peter vs. Paul

Acts 15:1–29

At this point in Acts, Paul and Barnabas have finished their first apostolic journey having ministered to some already established churches and forming others. They have both been working to get the Gospel of Grace out to both Jews and Gentiles. The nation of Israel had rejected the call for them to accept Jesus Christ as Messiah, which happened when they stoned Stephen. It was at that point that God raised up Paul to be the apostle to the Gentiles. He was also commissioned to give individual Jews one more chance to believe by preaching to them the Gospel of Grace (Acts 9:15; Acts 13:46). He made a special effort to reach out to the Jews until the end of the book of Acts. During that time, he was able to cover many areas where the Jews had settled after being scattered, including modern-day Turkey, Greece and Italy.

The transition period from Paul's salvation to the end of Acts has caused a lot of debate and misunderstanding. Those who believe the church began after the end of the book of Acts use much circumstantial evidence to "prove" that Paul was preaching a kingdom gospel. They believe that those who accepted what Paul preached during that time, both Jews and Gentiles, would be given an eternal reward of this earthly kingdom. They look at Paul preaching in the synagogues as proof that he was preaching a different gospel than in his later ministry. The biggest problem with this view is that Paul never even once hinted that those who were saved under his ministry were promised the earthly kingdom. Paul was actually making a special effort to bring the Gospel of Grace to the Jews. Any Jew who believed would have the promise of eternity in heaven, just like Paul.

Another mistake in interpreting the events in Acts is made by many mid-Acts teachers. They misuse Romans 11:11–12 by saying that the diminishing of Israel in verse 12 shows a long, 35-year process of Israel's decline until the Gospel of the Kingdom is no longer preached. They understand that those who heard and believed the Gospel of the Kingdom would be saved into the earthly kingdom. Those who heard and believed the Gospel of Grace would be saved into a heavenly kingdom.

However, the word diminishing would be better understood to mean failure or loss. It was not a slow, drawn-out process of God cutting His dealings with the nation of Israel, it was rather an event. Their diminishing happened when they rejected the ministry of the Holy Spirit through Stephen. This was the blaspheming of the Holy Spirit which they were warned about by Jesus in Luke 12:10. The nation of Israel was immediately cut off as God's chosen nation and they no longer had any opportunity to accept their Messiah and expect the Kingdom to be set up. It was an immediate loss, not a 35-year diminishing. However, for 35 years, Paul made a special effort to reach out to the Jews with the Gospel of Grace. The Greek word translated diminishing comes out of another Greek word meaning to become inferior (used in 2 Corinthians 12:13). This is exactly what happened with Israel when they rejected their Messiah.

Believing that there were two valid gospels being preached during this 35-year period really mucks up the whole idea of what God was doing. Understanding that Paul was the pattern set for salvation for all who would follow him makes Paul's appearance a clean break from the Gospel of the Kingdom, as taught by Jesus and His disciples (1 Timothy 1:16). When Paul calls himself a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on Him to life everlasting, he was not speaking of those who happened to hear and believe Paul's gospel. Paul was saying that he had

become an example for all those who, from that point on, believe (on Christ). This would include Cornelius, who heard the Gospel of the Kingdom from Peter, but would follow in the pattern of salvation set by Paul in his salvation. Notice when Paul was saved that he broke the existing pattern of salvation. The order that believers followed in early Acts was: first believe, then they were water baptized, and finally they were given the Holy Spirit (Repent—Baptism—Holy Spirit). This pattern began with Jesus when He was baptized followed by the Holy Spirit coming upon Him (Matthew 3:16).

This same pattern is maintained when Peter preached the Gospel of the Kingdom in Acts 2:28. Here, Peter tells them to repent and be baptized and then they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Repent—Baptism—Holy Spirit). The promise of the earthly kingdom is in view because in the following chapter Peter promises them the times of refreshing, which is the setting up of the Millennial Kingdom (Acts 3:19).

When Paul becomes saved, the order changes to Believe—Holy Spirit—Baptism. The prophet Ananias was told to seek out Saul and lay his hands on him so that Saul would receive his sight and the Holy Spirit (Acts 9:12, 17). Ananias also baptized Saul, not because the Lord told him to, but because it was his custom under the preaching of the Kingdom. Note: It is not absolutely clear the Paul was water baptized prior to receiving the Holy Spirit. However, we see that the Lord did not command Ananias to water baptize Paul. It is not unreasonable to think that Ananias added water baptism after seeing Paul being baptized by the Holy Spirit.

Peter gives us another example of how God had changed His dealings with mankind. Peter, with objections, was sent to preach to Cornelius, even though he knew nothing about the Gospel of Grace at that time. Even five years after Paul was saved, Peter was preaching the only gospel he knew, the Gospel of the Kingdom. However, Cornelius and his believing household experienced the giving of the Holy Spirit without water baptism. Instead of Peter giving them the Holy Spirit, God did it (Acts 8:14–17). This all points to a new work of God and was done as a teaching lesson to Peter. As soon as Peter saw that the Holy Spirit came upon these Gentile believers, he thought the only proper thing to do was baptize them in water. Not that God told him to baptize these people, but it was what Peter was trained to do, and so he continued with this tradition. God later showed Paul that water baptism was no longer tied to salvation (1 Corinthians 1:17).

While the nation of Israel was cut off as God's favored nation, for the time being, there were still individual Jews who needed to be saved. The Gospel of the Kingdom was very specifically the good news that the earthly kingdom was soon to be set up. Anyone who wanted to gain entrance needed to believe on Jesus as Messiah. Once God stopped dealing with Israel as a nation, the offer of the Millennial Kingdom was removed and it became impossible for Israel to accept (Hebrews 6:4–6). When Israel fell, the offer of the kingdom was no longer a valid offer. We gain this insight by studying the completed word of God and understanding that it took a long time for man to understand the dispensational changes that were being made. From God's point of view, the change was made instantaneously at the fall of Israel. From man's point of view, the change took many decades to complete. It took many years for the leadership in the Hebrew church, led by James, to understand that God was doing a new work through the apostle Paul. It was at the council at Jerusalem that Paul explained what God was doing through him, and it was then that the Holy Spirit gave the leaders of the Hebrew church the insight to know that Paul was a man of God and that God was now doing a new work.

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