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Reading Time

10 Minutes

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How and When

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A brief Bible study demonstrating the importance
of rightly dividing the Word of truth.

In considering some of the most important subjects related to the present “dispensation of the grace of God,” we do well to ask ourselves two important questions: “*How?*” and “*When?*”

Many sincere believers, indeed many Bible teachers suppose that the cross is the great dividing line between law and grace, between the setting aside of Israel and the beginning of the Church, the Body of Christ, between the preaching of “the gospel” to one nation and its proclamation to all the world.

If they would ask themselves “*How?*” and “*When?*” in considering these subjects they would soon see how unscriptural their conclusions have been.

The Law

Let us ask ourselves, for example, *how* the covenant of the law was set aside.

The answer to this is very simple: *By the cross.*

“Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us...” (Gal. 3:13).

“Having abolished in His flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances...” (Eph. 2:15).

“Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to His cross” (Col. 2:14).

This is *how* the covenant of the law was set aside, but surely it was not set aside historically *at the time* when Christ was crucified.

When our risen Lord commissioned His eleven (later restored to twelve) apostles He distinctly instructed them that they should teach their hearers to “*observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you*” (Matt. 28:20). A glance at Matthew 23:1-3 will reveal that He had commanded them to obey not only the law, but those who dispensed it.

A reading of the early chapters of Acts makes it unmistakably clear that during the Pentecostal era the apostles and disciples lived in strict obedience to the law, nor is there any indication of any revelation that now, through the death of Christ they were free from the law.

The man who baptized Saul of Tarsus at Damascus was said, approvingly, to be “*a devout man according to the law, having a good report of all the Jews which dwelt there*” (Acts 22:12).

It was not until the great council at Jerusalem (Acts 15) that it was first agreed that the *Gentiles* were not to be in bondage to the law (Vers. 10,19,24). Very clearly it was assumed that the Jews were still to “be circumcised and keep the law.” This is why, as late as Acts 21:20 we find James and the Jerusalem elders saying to Paul:

“Thou seest, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are which believe; and they are ALL ZEALOUS OF THE LAW.”

When, then, in history, was the law set aside?

We submit that it was Paul, and no one until Paul, who was commissioned to proclaim—and first to the Gentiles:

“BUT NOW the righteousness of God WITHOUT THE LAW is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets” (Rom. 3:21).

It was to Paul that the glorified Lord revealed what the death of the cross had accomplished in relation to the law.

This is why we read so much about the setting aside of the law, first in his epistles to the Gentiles and then in his great Epistle to the Hebrews.

Grace

“For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

Many have concluded from this passage that “the dispensation of the grace of God” was ushered in during our Lord’s earthly ministry. When we ask the questions “*How?*” and “*When?*” however, we shall see that this is an unwarranted assumption.

How did grace come? The answer of Scripture is, “*by Jesus Christ.*” Indeed, it was by the *death* of Christ that God could justly offer the riches of His grace to sinners.

“Being justified freely by His grace *through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*” (Rom. 3:24).

“In whom we have redemption THROUGH HIS BLOOD, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace” (Eph. 1:7).

But now let us ask *when, historically*, God ushered in the dispensation of grace.

We have already seen that the Pentecostal believers rendered strict obedience to the law. Nor do we find any mention in the so-called “great commission” (under which they labored) about salvation by grace through faith alone, on the basis of the all-sufficiency of Christ’s finished work of redemption.

Again, it is Paul, and no one until Paul, who proclaims salvation by grace alone, through faith.

It is he who tells in I Timothy 1:12-15 how “*the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant*” to him, the chief of sinners, adding:

“Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, *that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them that should hereafter believe on Him to life everlasting*” (Ver. 16).

Paul was the living example, as well as the herald of the wonderful declaration with which Romans 5 is brought to a close:

“Moreover the law entered that the offence might abound. *But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound:*

“*That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord.*”

This reign of grace was not ushered in until Paul, indeed, it had never even been prophesied, but was a mystery, “hid in God,” until the glorified Lord commissioned Paul to dispense it. This is clearly stated in Ephesians 3:1-3:

“For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles,

“If ye have heard of *the dispensation of the grace of God*, which is given me to you-ward;

“How that *by revelation He made known unto me the mystery....*”

Israel

Fundamentalist Bible believers in general have taught that God set aside Israel as a nation at the cross and that the Church, the Body of Christ, began at

Pentecost. But they make this mistake because they forget to ask “*How?*” and “*When?*”

True it was because of the cross that God finally set Israel aside, but this did not take place historically at that time. It was on the cross that our Lord prayed:

“Father forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

Thus after our Lord’s ascension to heaven the beloved nation was given another chance. Peter, in his Pentecostal message, addresses only them (Vers. 14,22,36). He calls them “brethren” and reminds them that God’s promise of the Holy Spirit is to them (Ver. 39). In Chapter 5 he tells them that God has raised Christ from the dead:

“...to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Ver. 31).

It was not until Israel had repudiated the *risen, glorified* Christ, that God raised up that *other* apostle, Paul, to proclaim salvation to the Gentiles, not through the “rise,” but through the “*fall*” of Israel (Rom. 11:11,12 cf. Isa. 60:1-3). It was he who was constantly forced to turn from the Jew to the Gentile until that day in Rome when he pronounced the judgment:

“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).

Thus the Jew had been cast out along with the Gentiles. God had concluded them all in unbelief—that *He might have mercy upon all* (Rom. 11:32,33).

The Middle Wall

This brings us to the breaking down of “the middle wall of partition” between Jew and Gentile. Here again we must ask “*How?*” and “*When?*”

It is clear from Ephesians 2:13,14 that this wall was broken down “*by the blood of Christ.*” But surely the “wall of partition” was not broken down historically at the time of Christ’s death.

After our Lord’s resurrection His apostles asked Him:

“Lord, wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:6).

If there were any Gentiles present at Peter’s Pentecostal address they were ignored. He spoke only to “the house of Israel.”

Indeed, in Acts 11:19 we read that before Peter’s visit to Cornelius the disciples had gone:

“...preaching the Word to none but unto the Jews only.”

This was in conformity with their commission, for they had been instructed to begin with Israel (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). According to all covenant and prophecy Israel was first to be brought to Messiah's feet and the Gentiles would then be saved and blessed through her (Gen. 22:17,18; Isa. 60:1-3; Zech. 8:13; Acts 3:25,26; Rom. 15:8,9).

Thus it was not until Acts 10, after the conversion of Paul, that Peter first went to a Gentile household, and this with the following explanation:

“Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company, or come unto one of another nation; but God hath showed me that I should not call any man common or unclean” (Acts 10:28).

It was after this, under Paul's ministry, that “the middle wall of partition” was broken down, brick by brick—at Antioch (Acts 11:27-30), in city after city where Paul ministered, at the great Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) etc., until Paul could write in Ephesians 2 about its *having been* broken down.

Reconciliation

But what about the glorious message of reconciliation which we have been commissioned to proclaim? (II Cor. 5:18-21). Was this not preached at Pentecost under the “great commission”? Let us ask “*How?*” and “*When?*” and see.

To be sure, we who trust in Christ as our Savior were “reconciled to God...*by the cross*” (Eph. 2:16). How the Apostle Paul stresses this fact:

“...when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God *by the death of His Son*” (Rom. 5:10).

“...you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled

“*In the body of His flesh through death...*” (Col. 1:21,22).

But now let us ask *when* God first offered reconciliation to His enemies?

Reconciliation postulates alienation, thus reconciliation could not be preached in early Acts, for at this time God was appealing to Israel as His covenant people and as such she had not yet been alienated from Him.

For this reason Romans 11:15 refers to “the reconciling of the world” in connection with “*the casting away of them.*” It was as God *began* to set the nation Israel aside along with the Gentiles that He *began* to make known the message of reconciliation *through Paul*.

We wonder how many people, even pastors and Bible teachers, know that as atonement is a Mosaic doctrine so reconciliation is a purely Pauline doctrine. Our Lord on earth did not preach the message of reconciliation, Peter at Pentecost did not preach it; none until Paul proclaimed it as it was committed to him by the glorified Lord (II Cor. 5:18-20). It is Paul who first takes us back to the “one man” by whom we were all alienated and then points us to the other “one Man” by whom we may be reconciled and receive “the gift of righteousness” by grace (Rom. 5:12-19).

The Joint Body

Finally, we come to the question of the Church of this dispensation of grace, “the Body of Christ.” The vast majority of believers still suppose that this Church had its historical beginning with Peter and the eleven working under the “great commission” at Pentecost. If only they would ask themselves “*How?*” and “*When?*” in the light of the Scriptures, they would soon see the error of this view.

It is clear from Ephesians 2:16 that God is now reconciling Jews and Gentiles to Himself “in one body, *by the cross.*” This is *how* He is doing it. But *when*, historically, did He begin doing it? Certainly not at that time.

Nor did He begin doing it at Pentecost, for here 1.) Peter did *not* preach the message of reconciliation and 2.) Gentiles were not even included. As we have seen, his message was addressed to “the house of Israel” alone. Indeed, as we have also seen, the disciples preached “to none but unto the Jews only” until Peter went to *one, only one*, Gentile household (Acts 10).

How then could the joint body of believing Jews and Gentiles have been in existence before this time?

Again, it is Paul, and no one until Paul, who tells us that *now* the middle wall is broken down and that all believing Jews and Gentiles are one in Christ:

“For by one Spirit are [were] we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles...” (I Cor. 12:13).

“For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.

“For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

“There is neither Jew nor Greek...” (Gal. 3:26-28).

“For He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us;

“...that He might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby” (Eph. 2:14-16).

To teach that believing Jews were first baptized into the Body at Pentecost and that the Gentiles were baptized into it later is to read into the Scriptures what they do not say and to violate the simplest logic, for Gentiles were still excluded at Pentecost, hence the believing Jews could not have been baptized into a joint body *at that time*.

This truth of the one body also involves the blessed truth of the “one baptism” by which we are baptized into it (I Cor. 12:13 cf. Eph. 4:4-6). This explains why John the Baptist and the twelve *were* sent to baptize (John 1:33; Matt. 28:19), while Paul was not (I Cor. 1:17).