

Jesus or Peter or Paul?

To state that the public, even so-called Christians, are confused regarding the message of Jesus, the message of Peter, and the message of Paul, would be a significant understatement. To grow spiritually, it is of utmost importance to distinguish between the various messages contained in the Bible—particularly the three named above. So follow carefully, as we clarify these Christian truths.

Jesus' Message – The Kingdom Gospel: (Matthew to Acts 2)

First we have the Gospel of the Kingdom that was offered to the Jews in the person of the Heir. *"Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe the Gospel" (Mark 1:14, 15). "And it came to pass afterward, that He went throughout every city and village, preaching and showing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God; and the Twelve were with Him" (Luke 8:1).*

The effect of repenting and believing this Gospel is set forth in the prayer that our Lord taught His disciples, who, as the faithful of that day, had accepted this Gospel. It was good tidings that God was offering men, His kingdom and His Son, the Heir of all. The disciples believed this, and hence our Lord teaches them a prayer expressive of the state of soul which they as believing in this Gospel should have.

The Disciple's Prayer - *"And it came to pass that, as He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, one of His disciples said unto Him, Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught his disciples. And He said unto them, When ye pray, say, Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins; for we also forgive everyone that is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil" (Luke 11:1–4).*

If this prayer is suitable for the disciples at that time, before the Saviour's death, and before the gift of the Holy Spirit, it must be evident that it could not be suitable after they had known the blessings of redemption and their union with the risen Lord.

In this prayer there is a knowledge of the Father, because Christ was declaring Him on earth, but His will had not yet been done. Christ came to do His will, and now He has done it; so that we could not now pray for it to be done, though it was right for the disciples to pray that it might be done. Besides, there is no knowledge of the forgiveness of sins; it is looking for forgiveness on the ground of work rather than rejoicing in it through grace. It is a prayer regarding man in the flesh rather than in the Spirit.

Christ and the Spirit are in no way referred to in this prayer, and this is consistent, for Christ had not yet finished His work, and therefore He does not lead their souls into it; and as the Holy Spirit has not yet come He finds no place in it. The

prayer suited the disciples, and it shows us where they were [in their experience]. If a soul now goes back to their state, then the prayer will suit them; but the soul using it intelligently must feel that he has neither forgiveness of sins nor the life of Christ, in which through the Spirit he is free from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:2).

Instead of growing up in Christ and reaching unto "perfection," this prayer is to get daily bread, to escape from temptation and for deliverance from evil—all necessary in their place, but not occupying the individual with the higher realities of Christianity. If Christianity had a place in their prayer, it would manifestly have been suited to the disciples; and inasmuch as Christianity is left out, it cannot be a suitable prayer for members of the Body of Christ.

Limited Apprehension - And if I go further and note the manner and way of the apostles at this time, I see in them no moral power, no correct idea of the things of God, though they, to the joy and rest of their hearts, were in a surpassing way sheltered by Jesus in person. Would saints in the present day approve of being, or consent to be, no better in hope or intelligence than the apostles before the resurrection, who slept when asked to watch with Him, and who forsook Him and fled?

And *"as yet they knew not the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead."* Now these were believers in the Gospel of the Kingdom, and in the spirit of their minds they were according to this prayer in Luke 11, the so-called Lord's Prayer. Hence, when saints nowadays limit their standing to that prayer, they cannot practically rise above the apostles at that hour of prayer, hope or intelligence, and, sad as it is to say it, they literally do not!

Progression - Now on the resurrection of the Lord Jesus the Gospel obtains a remarkable breadth and fullness not known before that great event. The Lord not only stands in their midst a risen One, assuring them of peace, but He breathes on them and says, *"Receive ye the Holy Spirit"* (John 20:22). Now they are to realize that they not only believe in God, but also in Him.

And they received from Him the Commission, *"Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned"* (Mark 16:15, 16).

Here in precise and unmistakable language is declared to us the Gospel they were now to proclaim. The Gospel at that time was that everyone believing in Jesus risen, and taking his place in accordance with this fact on earth through baptism, should be saved. The Gospel then conveyed salvation and the power of the Spirit on earth, but nothing beyond this.

It is important to notice the nature and character of the Gospel presented, because according to it must be the consequent blessing; and if I, like Apollos, preach only the baptism of John, as he did at Ephesus, is it any wonder that the believers at Ephesus, as we see from Acts 19, knew nothing more and never heard that the Holy Spirit was now on earth? It is of all importance what Gospel is preached,

for though God saves and secures blessing for me according to His love in Christ, still my sense of it, my joy and strength because of the blessing, must be determined by my knowledge and faith in the nature of the blessing.

Now if some have not advanced beyond the Gospel preached during our Lord's life here, many more think they have gained the heights of grace when they proclaim with much energy and faithfulness the truth that salvation follows, and is assured to the soul, on believing in a risen Christ. It is doubtless a truth of unspeakable magnitude that a lost sinner, at a distance from God and under fear of judgment, finds himself now through faith in Jesus Christ fully and finally saved by Him.¹

On any given Sunday, church members will repeatedly hear portions of Scripture lifted from the first three books of the NT—Jesus' words pertaining to Israel's coming *Kingdom*. Is it any wonder why they're confused when they later attempt to understand the messages of Peter or Paul? No one has explained to them the uniqueness of Jesus' message to the nation of Israel.

Peter's Message – The Earthly Gospel: (Acts 2 to Acts 9)

This marks a new and wondrous era in the grace and mercy of God, and on the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2). Peter insists on this blessed truth, showing that the manifestation of the power of the Spirit was indicative of the time when it should be fulfilled—"*It shall come to pass, that whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved*" (Acts 2:21). And further (v. 36), "*Let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ.*"

Progressive Revelation - We can see where the Gospel then preached set souls. Saved was the great leading characteristic of those who had accepted the Gospel. And on earth they were in the unity of Christ's Body by the Holy Spirit, though that truth had not as yet been revealed. This Gospel, as one can see, does not present heaven before the soul, nor does it separate men from the earth.

True, it set men so in the power of the Spirit that selfishness has lost its influence and rule, for they "*had all things in common.*" But a hope apart from and outside earth was not presented, nor were they regarded as no longer connected with men as men on earth. On the contrary, they were a beautiful expression of God's grace to man on earth; individual selfishness set aside in the power of the bond which united them, "*they, continuing daily with one accord in the Temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart*" (Acts 2:46).

The Gospel that these had received was that Jesus was risen, and that He was appointed of God both Lord and Christ. And now in the power of the Holy Spirit they were in unity, but still as yet their hope was not apart from earth, nor did they regard themselves as apart from relation thereto, though they held that relation in view of their risen Lord, whose Return to it they announced.

¹ *Distinctive Gospels*, Miles J. Stanford

Still Kingdom Level - There is a great necessity for thus tracing the history of the Gospel, for it will be found that most souls to the present have not progressed beyond the Gospel of Acts 2, though, alas! without arriving at the blessed results manifested there, which could not really be manifest now because the earthly connection has terminated.

Are there not saints now who, being assured of salvation, meet as saved ones to support an earthly order, which the breaking of bread indicates; who are thinking more of their relation to earth than of their hope and position in heaven; and who regard the coming of the Lord in the light of His Return to the earth, more than in that of their meeting Him in the air? More earthly kingdom, than the heavenly Rapture?

Stephen Juncture - In Acts 3 the lame man was healed through Peter and John, and it was then that Peter preached to the gathered multitude of Israelites that *"the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; and He shall send Jesus Christ, who before was preached unto you, whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the age began."* *"This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen Him go into heaven"* (Acts 3:19–21; 1:11).

They knew their Lord had gone to heaven, but they expected His Return; and they connected all their ideas of the place He went to prepare for them with His Return to earth. His promise to them in John 14 was that He would come again to receive them unto Himself, that where He was they should be also; but however they understood this, it is evident from Peter's sermon, as well as the testimony of the angels, that up to this moment His Return to earth was their great cardinal hope.

But soon the leaders of Israel began to reject the Gospel and persecute the apostles. And in Acts 6 and 7 we are told how both the people and the elders and the scribes came upon Stephen and caught him and brought him to the Council; and then deliberately, they not only rejected but stoned to death the witness of the Holy Spirit, by whom the Word of God appealed to their consciences not to resist Him.

Thus, as before in the death of John the Baptist, they have proclaimed their opposition to Him whom John presented; so now by the stoning of Stephen they openly unmask and expose the hatred and rebellion of their hearts to a glorified Christ. It is now declared that there is no acceptance of Him on earth by His own people, but on the contrary, there is an open avowal, *"We will not have this man to reign over us!"*

Hence it is easy to see that the hope of Christ's Return to earth to set up the kingdom, which was the hope of the Gospel preached by Peter and the apostles up to this time, can no longer be insisted on. Stephen is taken to glory with the Lord Jesus instead of waiting here for His Return to earth as its true and only King.

Disciples To Stephen To Paul - Here we can see the transition, the point of juncture between the earthly Gospel preached by the Apostles and that which, consequent on the death of Stephen, was committed to Saul of Tarsus. Christ coming from heaven to earth has been deliberately, defiantly and outrageously refused. His witness, being stoned, has been taken to be with Him where He is; now comes the call of Saul of Tarsus; and the Gospel which is now revealed and committed to him sets forth how God in His grace and according to Himself will disclose the purpose and fullness of His heart.²

Standard biblical teaching³ identifies the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2) in conjunction with the advent of the *heavenly* Church—its first members being racially Jewish (Semite). Peter's public message was addressed to the "men of Israel," even "God-fearing Jews" from the nations then surrounding Israel. His message focused upon 1) the earthly *Kingdom* promised by OT Prophets and spoken of by Jesus, and 2) Jesus of Nazareth as Israel's promised *Messiah* and *King* also foretold in the OT. The Pentecost crowd, being unfamiliar with both the miraculous and OT prophetic Scripture, are bewildered by the *sign* of tongues—the supernatural ability to speak in a known but unlearned language—i.e., not native to the speaker. Tongues were spoken to God (Acts 2:11) and their purpose was as a sign to unbelieving Jews (Isa. 28:11; I Corinthians 14:21,22) of pending judgment for having rejected the Lord Jesus as their Messiah.

THE GOSPEL OF THE CIRCUMCISION (Gal. 2:7,8) -- It is necessary to draw the line concerning Peter's preaching on this occasion. At Pentecost he was speaking to Israel *only*. This was before the Gentiles were brought into the Church, as recorded in Acts 10:34-38. As we read in Acts 2:14-40, Peter witnessed to them of the risen Lord Jesus Christ whom they had crucified, and the Holy Spirit brought them under conviction of sin. *Then* he instructed them, "*Repent, and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*" There was no waiting or agonizing, praying or fasting, or tongues-speaking.

The conditions upon which the Jews received the gift of the Spirit at that time were: belief in Christ, repentance for sin, and water baptism. This was the Gospel of the circumcision, and involved water baptism before receiving the gift of the Spirit. They were to repent of having (representatively) slain their Messiah, and in a figurative way to wash their hands of the crime by being baptized (water). Then the Spirit would indwell them. Paul was saved on the basis of this Gospel of the circumcision (Acts 9:18; 22:16).⁴

Contrary to the teaching of several errant Christian denominations and sects, water baptism is not a requirement for salvation, except for the initial members of the 1st century church. Related note: Scripture clearly records the historical fact that Jewish religious leaders--"*chief priests, the teachers of the law, and the elders of the people*"--conspired in a plot with the Herodians (Roman government over Judah) to frame Jesus of Nazareth, and then with mob support (Jewish and Gentile), the local Governor

² *Ibid.*

³ From a dispensational perspective.

⁴ *The Line Drawn*, Miles J. Stanford

Pontus Pilate crucified the innocence Christ. The issue of culpability was unique to this period alone.

Paul's Message – The Heavenly Gospel: (Acts 9 to Philemon)

It is subsequently given to the Apostle Paul, not Peter, to explain the unique and complex truths of the heavenly Church--“mystery”—through his Epistles. In fact, Peter learned from Paul, not the other way around! Paul said, *I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from [the Risen and Ascended] Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:11,12).* And later Peter confessed, *Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:15,16).*

The glorified Lord Jesus Christ tells Saul, *"I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in which I will appear unto thee."* And what does Saul see? Not only Christ risen, but also Christ ascended in glory. Stephen has seen Him there, and had consigned his spirit to Him whom he had seen there; but Saul sees Him and is commissioned to be a minister and a witness of the things that he sees.

Here, then, was the introduction of the Gospel of God according to the fullness of His heart and purpose. Can anyone for a moment hesitate to accept the beautiful order of this wondrous Gospel, beginning and consummating in the bright, full circle of the Father's presence and glory?

We have already seen that salvation through a risen Savior could be and was known, and the saints maintained, through the Holy Spirit here on earth, in one mind, one soul, remembering the death of the Lord in the breaking of bread. This was while they were still linked to earth and to the Temple services, and their hope entirely connected with the earth as waiting their Lord's return to establish His kingdom (Acts 1:6).

Church Gospel - But now that this hope could no longer be presented on account of Christ's rejection from the earth, God unfolds through Christ the deep, full counsel of His heart; and the scene where all this can be displayed is the glory into which Saul is now introduced; and seeing the Lord Jesus in the glory is the pivot and center of that Gospel which is now entrusted to him.⁵

Acts 13 represents an unfolding of the truth of the Mystery, not the advent of the Body of Christ as some erroneously teach.

Acts 13 introduces the Spirit's testimony in Paul's mission, beginning formally at Antioch, based on the fact that the church, which is the body of Christ (Eph. 1:22,

⁵ *Distinctive Gospels*, Miles J. Stanford

23), was formed by the baptism in the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13), at Pentecost, once for all. All added since that baptism in the Spirit receive the same "Holy Spirit of promise" (Eph. 1:13; Luke 24:29; Acts 1:4; John 14:16, 26, 16:7). Such are "in Christ" and so there were those "who also were in Christ before me" (Rom. 16:7). Paul's mission included the unfolding of the truth of the mystery of Christ and the church, as well as the gospel of the glory. As the Jews refused the Spirit's testimony to Christ in glory, so they refused the Spirit's testimony of grace to the Gentiles"⁶

THE GOSPEL OF THE UNCIRCUMCISION (Gal. 2:7,8) -- When we come to Cornelius and the Gentiles being brought into the Church through receiving the gift of the Spirit, we shall see the Gospel of the *uncircumcision* in action--the very Gospel by which we were born again and baptized into the Body of Christ. "*But on the contrary, when they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me [Paul], as the gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter*" (Galatians 2:7). In the Gospel of the uncircumcision the order is: belief in Christ, repentance for sin, reception of the Spirit, and then water baptism--the public confession of identification with Christ in His death and resurrection.⁷

The Spirit of God progressively revealed the truth of the Mystery and the nature of the gospel of the uncircumcision to each of the Jewish Apostles.

"Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the ages hath been hidden in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ" (Eph. 3:8, 9).

The nature and scope of this Gospel we shall best ascertain by tracing the lines of truth expounded in Paul's writings, which, like rays emanating from Christ, the Center and Source, lead the heart back to Himself and feed it with His excellence and glory. Saul's first sermon gives us a clear idea of the power and greatness of the Gospel committed to him. "*He preached Christ... that He is the Son of God*" (Acts 9:20).

In the Epistle to the Romans, where Paul calls the Gospel "*the Gospel of God*" (Rom. 1:1), "*the Gospel of His Son*" (v. 9), and "*my Gospel*" (Rom. 16:25), the first characteristic we find of it is justification through faith, because God's righteousness is revealed in Christ. The righteousness of God is thus characteristic of Paul's Gospel.

Now the righteousness of God is established in the Cross of Christ—He bearing in Himself the judgment on man, so that there is an end of that which offended God. He was made to be sin for us, that we should be made the righteousness of God in Him. There is an end of man as man was (in the First Adam); the old man was crucified with Christ. Hence, with the righteousness of God there is another characteristic, namely, the end of man in the flesh.

⁶ *Dispensational Truth, Volume I*, R. A. Huebner

⁷ *The Line Drawn*, Miles J. Stanford

Then comes eternal life: grace reigns *"through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"* (Rom. 5:21). A further characteristic is that *"ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit"* (8:9). It is *"the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus"* which has *"made me free from the law of sin and death"* (8:2), and *"if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His"* (8:9).

Let the soul endeavor to embrace all that is conferred on it in this epistle by Paul's Gospel: righteousness—the righteousness of God established by Christ; the judicial ending of the old man; the gift of eternal life; the Spirit of Christ; so that Christ in me is the summing up, as well as the fullness, of blessing.

Paul's Gospel - Paul's Gospel produces, for those who believe, a new order of existence after another order of man. Christ lives in me. It is not that the old man has received additions and advantages as in a legal religion—a former Gospel—but that I am made anew of Him who is the Son of God, and that the old man has been superseded and judicially put an end to in His Cross. Being crucified with Christ, it has no longer any recognized existence before God; while I, in my new creation, am in Christ before the Father, and He lives in me. This is the very kernel of Paul's Gospel.

Thus we see how the *"Gospel of His Son"* positions the believer before God in relation to Him, and also in relation to the old Adamic man. This is very partially presented in the Gospel preached by Peter. He preached salvation, perfect and final, through a risen Savior, and the present indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Great elements, it must be admitted; but they did not set aside man as entirely and judicially ended in the Cross of Christ, nor connect the individual with Christ as his Life and Head (as in the truth revealed to Paul), though the saints possessed it through the Holy Spirit. They [early saints] did not know who they were, and where they were, *"hidden with Christ in God"* (Col. 3:3).

William Kelly stated, "The evangelical 'revival,' whether of Wesley or Whitfield, was a pious reaction which insisted on the new birth and earnestness on behalf of lost souls, from the cold ethics and formality, if not deism, of the century before.

"But the heavenly calling and the inheritance of the saints, the purpose of God for His glory in Christ, never really dawned upon evangelical hearts, any more than of the Puritans, or even the Reformers who preceded."⁸

Hopefully, these explanations have given you much to think about. Over time, the Holy Spirit will bring these distinctions into clearer focus and you will no longer confound the *"things which differ."*

Dan R. Smedra
November 2006

⁸*Distinctive Gospels*, Miles J. Stanford