

Rightly Dividing Paul's Epistles

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THE DISTINCTIVE MESSAGES OF THE PRISON AND PRE-PRISON EPISTLES

*M*ost instructed believers today know that present truth – the truth for the church, which is the Body of Christ – is to be found only in Paul's epistles, from Romans to Philemon. The rest of the Word of God is for us, and is rich in instruction to us, but only in these church epistles do we find the direct doctrines and principles for the present age of grace. Paul plainly states that to him was given this special revelation “*of the dispensation of the grace of God*” (Ephesians 3:2-3).

Yet is every statement in Paul's epistles for us today? Are there some things, even in these epistles, that were Jewish and have passed away? Most believers have not been able to give a very good answer to the first question, and though they believe the second should be answered in the affirmative, they are hard pressed for scriptural proof.

For instance, in I Corinthians 12:28-30 there are certain gifts listed, including the gifts of healing, speaking in tongues and “workers of miracles.” In 14:13 Paul writes, “*Wherefore let him that speaketh in an unknown tongue pray that he may interpret.*” Anyone with a correct understanding of dispensational truth knows that all these special wonders and miracles were Kingdom signs (Isaiah 35:5-6), and belong with the nation Israel, who always requires a sign (I Corinthians 1:22). He knows also that these signs simply do not work today, in spite of all the fantastic claims of modern cults. Further, it is stated in 13:8 that one of these, (*i.e.*, tongues) shall cease.

Again, in Romans 12:6, as well as in I Corinthians, we find the gift of prophecy. This gift also was to cease, as we read in I Corinthians 13:8. It apparently was a gift given by the Holy Spirit in the early church for “*edification, exhortation and comfort*” of the believers (I Corinthians 14:3), while the Word of God was in the making. After the Word was completed there was no longer any need for any New Testament prophet.

The fact remains that these passages are in Paul's epistles, which we insist are present day truth. If they are for us today, then the Pentecostals are right. If they are *not* for us today, then we have some explaining to do beyond the fact that things changed, and these sign gifts

ceased, for then we must answer the question, *When* did the change of order come in, and *why* did it come in?

The Numerical Structure

Paul wrote thirteen epistles to the church the Body of Christ. This number itself is significant, and shows the amazing perfection of God's Word. Had Paul left out even that small epistle to Philemon, the number would have been twelve, which is the number of Israel throughout the Bible; but the number thirteen goes on beyond to the Gentiles. Paul himself was not one of the twelve apostles. He did not take the place of Judas, as some teach. He was an added apostle, a special apostle, the thirteenth apostle, the apostle to the Gentiles.

Before he went to prison, Paul wrote six epistles, and during his imprisonment he wrote seven others. Six is man's number, the number of weakness, and so it is that in these first six epistles we find the *human side* of the church, with all its faults and failures. The book of Romans opens with the wickedness of this poor, fallen race out of which we have been called. In I Corinthians we find carnality, greed, selfishness and even fornication among those who named the name of Christ, and in Galatians we find backsliding and legalism – all human weakness.

Seven, however, is the number of perfection and completeness. So in the seven Prison Epistles we find the *heavenly side* of the church, seated in the heavenlies in Ephesians, looking at its heavenly Head in Colossians, looking for heaven itself and the coming of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, in Philippians.

The Order of the Epistles

The order in which Paul wrote his epistles is generally believed by competent scholars to be as follows: I & II Thessalonians, Galatians, I Corinthians, Romans, II Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon, Philippians, I Timothy, Titus and II Timothy. The first six of these are the Pre-prison Epistles, and the last seven are the Prison Epistles.

The Dividing Line

There is a three or four year gap between the last of the Pre-prison Epistles and the first of the Prison Epistles. During the gap the nation Israel rejected God's final offer of His risen Son as their Lord and Messiah, and a tremendous statement was made in Acts 28:28. It reads as follows:

Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it.

This Scripture is the great pillar of demarcation that stands between these two groups of epistles. The Pre-prison Epistles (those written during the period covered by the book of Acts) on one side, and the Prison Epistles (those written after the Acts period) on the other, with Acts 28:28 between them.

Although Luke wrote the book of Acts in A.D. 65, the setting aside of Israel in Acts 28:28 seems to have taken place a year earlier, sometime in A.D. 64. In God's mind it was already the beginning of the end of Israel's occupancy of the land. In a few years, A.D. 70, He permitted the Romans to completely remove them.

The Pre-prison Epistles, then, were written during the period of time covered by the book of Acts. Throughout the book of Acts God was still dealing with the nation Israel. In the Old Testament they had rejected the Father. In the four Gospels they had rejected the Son, and in the book of Acts they rejected the ministry of God's Spirit, even though He displayed before them great power and the Kingdom signs of healing, miracles, etc.

Yet it is quite evident that God was also bringing in the church, that He was, for a little while, engaged in a two-fold program. He was offering Israel her Messianic hope, though in His foreknowledge God knew this offer would be rejected, and He would visit the Gentiles "*to take out of them a people for His name*" (Acts 15:14).

So in the Pre-prison Epistles we find some things that are Jewish, and must cease when Israel is set aside. This took place in Acts 28:28, and then we have the Prison Epistles, in which we find the full revelation of the mystery. In these nothing is of Jewish character, nothing temporary, nothing to cease, no signs and no miracles.

The Word does not tell us when Paul received all the revelations of the mystery, though there is considerable conjecture about it. It seems most probable that the Spirit gave him these revelations as he went along.

We know that he received the gospel by special revelation (Galatians 1:12). Perhaps he received his final and complete revelation of the mystery in prison at Rome, from whence came those high pinnacles of church truth – Ephesians, Colossians and Philippians.

Some may ask, "Why did there have to be Jewish truth at all in the early church epistles?" One reason is that the early assemblies were composed of both Jews and Gentiles. In fact, much of the work began with meetings in synagogues; but the main reason is that since God was not yet through dealing with Israel, the Holy Spirit was still working through the apostles in signs and miracles. Paul himself healed and did other miracles during his Acts period ministry (see Acts 14:8-10; 19:11-12). It was needful that some of these things be taken up in his early epistles.

The whole picture changed after Acts 28:28: no more sending handkerchiefs to heal; one brother is sick nigh unto death; Paul had to leave another "*at Miletum sick*" (II Timothy 4:20), and he could only prescribe a certain tonic for Timothy's sick stomach (I Timothy 5:23).

Yet only the things that were distinctly church revelations in the Pre-prison Epistles continue on. Healings, tongues and other miracles, for instance, were not Pauline revelations. Nor was water baptism. All these things began before Paul came on the scene, and they are related to Israel and the coming earthly Kingdom.

On the other hand, the things that are distinct church truths, and not brought in until the Spirit revealed them through Paul, these things all continue on into the Prison Epistles; but other things did change, and Acts 28:28 was the big turning point.

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