

Mid-Acts Dispensationalism: The Dispensation of the Grace of God

By Ben Webb

Based on II Timothy 2:15 and "rightly dividing the word of truth."

Many Dispensationalists do not believe this present dispensation of grace (Eph. 3:2) began until Acts 28, or shortly thereafter. Even though this is a belief held mainly by Acts 28 Dispensationalists, it is also shared by a few Mid-Acts Dispensationalists. But contrary to the Acts 28 "camp", these mid-Acts Brothers hold the common mid-Acts belief that the present church began during the Mid-Acts period (sometime between Acts 9 and Acts 15); they just don't believe the dispensation of grace was in effect at that time.

But the problem with this teaching is that it only seems to be based upon imagined doctrinal differences between Paul's earlier epistles and his later ones, and appears to be a stretch of several established facts. For example, it is certainly a fact that Paul's "manner" was to preach first in the Jewish synagogues (see Acts 17:1-4). But advocates of this teaching seem to assume that Paul always preached to the Jew first prior to Acts 28, thereby reading their own understanding of the words "to the Jew first" into passages such as Romans 1:16. These passages, though, never state that Paul always preached the gospel to the Jew first before going to a Gentile. Nor does any other passage.

Likewise, advocates of this teaching also make too much of the fact that in the book of Acts, when Paul preached in the Jewish synagogues, there were often Gentiles present, worshipping along with those Jews (see Acts 13:42-48; Acts 14:1-2; Acts 18:4-6). In effect, those Gentiles would be seen as "blessing" the nation of Israel, because they came to the Jewish synagogues in order to worship the God of Israel, prior to Israel's "fall". This fact is then contrasted to the circumstances surrounding Paul's prison epistles (written after Acts 28), when he wrote only to believers who had already placed their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. As a result, it is theorized that the six epistles Paul wrote during the Acts period (Romans, Galatians, both Corinthian epistles, and both Thessalonian epistles) were written exclusively to Gentiles who were allied with Israel, while Paul's prison epistles (written after Acts 28) were all written to believers like us, who have never been allied with Israel.

So, because believers today did not hear the gospel for the first time in a Jewish synagogue, we never "blessed" Israel, as those during the book of Acts did. The conclusion is therefore drawn that none of those six epistles Paul wrote during the Acts period are written directly to us today. Since we no longer need to be allied with Israel in order to hear the gospel (unlike those Gentiles to whom Paul preached in the Jewish synagogues), this would mean that only Paul's prison epistles would be written directly to us today.

In short, an overall summary of this teaching would be to say that its advocates believe Paul actually changed his doctrine after he wrote his Acts epistles.

But again, this teaching seems to be based upon imagined doctrinal differences between Paul's Acts epistles and his prison epistles, rather than real differences. Like most teachings that are open to question, this one is far too dependent upon a few select facts, and requires its advocates to make far too many assumptions.

Yes, most of the Gentiles to whom Paul preached during the book of Acts were indeed allied with the Jewish religion. But in order to fully accept the above teaching, one needs to assume that all these Gentiles who believed were exclusively allied with Israel during that time; and this simply cannot be proven. Just because Paul preached to Gentiles who were following the Jewish religion in Acts 13 and Acts 18, this still does not mean he did so during the entire Acts period.

For example, when Paul healed a man at Lystra in Acts 14, those idolaters who tried to sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas were probably Gentiles who had never been allied with the Jewish religion in their life. Likewise, when Paul disputed in Athens "in the market daily with them that met with him" (Acts 17:17), he could have also been preaching to Gentiles like us, who had never been allied with the Jewish religion. So, those who believe that Paul only preached to Gentiles that blessed Israel during the book of Acts must assume that the Lystrans of Acts 14 and the Athenians of Acts 17 were all Jews; and this simply cannot be proven.

Finally, though, after writing epistles to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, and Thessalonians, Paul arrived in Rome as a prisoner in Acts 28. When the Jewish leaders in Rome came to his lodging, he reasoned with them "both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening" (verse 23). But after some of them failed to believe the things he spoke, he reprimanded these Jews, and stated that the salvation of God was "sent unto the Gentiles", according to Acts 28:23-31 -

"And when they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging; to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening. And some believed the things which were spoken, and some believed not. And when they agreed not among

themselves, they departed, after that Paul had spoken one word, Well spake the Holy Ghost by Esaias the prophet unto our fathers, Saying, Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive: For the heart of this people is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes have they closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it. And when he had said these words, the Jews departed, and had great reasoning among themselves. And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, Preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him."

Consequently, those who hold the above-mentioned viewpoint conclude that because Paul preached to Gentiles who were worshipping in the Jewish synagogues in Acts 13 and 18, the salvation of God was never "sent unto the Gentiles" until Acts 28:28 (see above), partly because Paul never used this exact phraseology prior to Acts 28:28. Even though he specifically told the unbelieving Jews in Acts 13:46, "...we turn to the Gentiles", and stated in Acts 18:6, "...from henceforth I will go unto the Gentiles", he never stated that the salvation of God was "sent" to the Gentiles prior to Acts 28:28. This would mean that any Gentile in the book of Acts who was NOT allied with Israel had no hope of hearing the gospel until after Acts 28, when Paul changed his doctrine to include everyone.

As mentioned earlier, further support of this teaching is also drawn from the fact that during the time period covered by the book of Acts, Paul stated in Romans 1:16 (an Acts-period epistle) that the gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; "to the Jew first" and also to the Greek; and he states in Romans 2:9-10 that God will render tribulation and anguish upon every soul of man that doeth evil, "of the Jew first", and also of the Gentile; But glory, honour, and peace, to every man that worketh good, "to the Jew first", and also to the Gentile. Great emphasis is placed upon the fact that Paul uses the phrase "the Jew first" in these passages.

So, the above passages are all used to support the teaching that the epistles Paul wrote during the book of Acts were only written to Gentiles who were allied with Israel, and not to us today. But again, in order to fully accept this teaching, we would need to read Ro.1:16 as if it stated that the gospel of Christ is the power of God unto salvation "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek, but only if the Greek blesses Israel ". Likewise, if Gentiles who did not bless Israel had no hope until the salvation of God was "sent unto the Gentiles" in Acts 28:28, we would need to assume that every Gentile Paul preached to and wrote to during the Acts period was allied with Israel. And such assumptions are neither provable, nor believable, in the view of most mid-Acts

Dispensationalists. Just because it was Paul's "manner" to preach first in the Jewish synagogue (Acts 17:1-4), that doesn't mean he only preached to Gentiles that blessed Israel during the Acts period.

THE DISPENSATION OF THE GRACE OF GOD (EPH. 3:2)

Additionally, many of these mid-Acts brethren who don't believe the dispensation of grace began until Acts 28 also believe that the dispensation of the grace of God (Eph. 3:2) is different from the dispensation of God (Col. 1:25). This teaching, though, is based in part upon the flawed logical reasoning that different terms must always denote different topics. For instance, we know that different "gospels" are identified by using different terms (i.e., the gospel of the kingdom is not the gospel of the grace of God). In like manner, the conclusion is then drawn that each dispensation mentioned in Paul's epistles would also be different, since each is denoted by a different term. In other words, since 1 Cor. 9:17 refers to the dispensation of "the gospel", while Eph. 3:2 refers to the dispensation of "the grace of God", and Col. 1:25 simply refers to the dispensation of "God", the conclusion is drawn that these three are all different dispensations.

But do differing terms always denote different topics? Of course not. For example, Paul also writes concerning "the gospel of your salvation" (Eph. 1:13), "my gospel" (Ro. 2:16 and 16:25; 2 Tim. 2:8), "our gospel" (2 Cor. 4:3; 1 Thess. 1:5; 2 Thess. 2:14), "the gospel of his Son" (Ro. 1:9), "the gospel of Christ" (Ro. 1:16; 15:19 and 15:29; 1 Cor. 9:12 and 9:18), "Christ's gospel" (2 Cor. 2:12), "the glorious gospel of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4), "the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thes. 1:8), and simply "the gospel" (Ro. 1:15; 11:28; 1 Cor. 1:17; 4:15; 9:16-18; 9:23; 15:1; Eph. 3:6; Col. 1:5 and 1:23; 2 Tim. 1:8 and 1:10; etc.). But it would be foolish indeed to conclude that these are all different gospels, just because Paul is using different terms.

Likewise, Paul also stated in the book of Galatians that there were some who would pervert "the gospel of Christ" that he was preaching (Gal. 1:6-7); yet he also stated in the very next chapter that the gospel of the "uncircumcision" was committed to him (Gal. 2:7). But again, it would be silly to conclude that the gospel of the uncircumcision is completely different from the gospel of Christ, just because Paul uses different terms (especially since he also states in Gal. 1:8-9 that any man who preaches another gospel is to be "accursed"). It is therefore also erroneous to conclude that the dispensation of the grace of God (Eph. 3:2) is different from the dispensation of God (Col. 1:25), just because Paul uses different terms in each passage.

Another erroneous aspect of the above teaching is the idea that the "mystery" of Romans 16:25-26 is different from the "mystery" of Eph. 3:1-9. Again, though, this is only another theory, based upon imagined doctrinal differences between Paul's Acts epistles and his prison epistles. The theory is that during Paul's Acts ministry, when he revealed the mystery of

Romans chapter 16 (which is now made known to all nations by the scriptures of the prophets, according to Ro. 16:25-26), he had not yet revealed the mystery of Ephesians chapter 3 (which supposedly can NOT be made known to all nations by the scriptures of the prophets). Instead, it is alleged that the mystery of Ephesians chapter 3 is "unsearchable" in the Old Testament scriptures, and therefore could not have been revealed until after Acts 28 (when the dispensation of the grace of God supposedly began).

But again, this appears to be an erroneous conclusion, because neither one of the above-mentioned passages says any such thing. Paul never states that the mystery of Ephesians chapter 3 cannot be made known by the scriptures of the prophets. Instead, concerning the fellowship of the mystery in Ephesians chapter 3, Paul simply states that it was previously "hid in God", in Eph. 3:1-9 -

"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; (as I wrote afore in few words, Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit; That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel: Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power. 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 world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ:"

According to the above passage, the "mystery" was that "the Gentiles" (that is, UNcircumcised Gentiles) could ever be acceptable to God in the first place, by becoming "fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel" (verse 6). But in contrast to the previously mentioned theory, it is my understanding that this is the same mystery Paul refers to in Romans chapter 16, which the Lord gave to him by revelation. This mystery is now made known "by the scriptures of the prophets", according to Ro. 16:25-26 -

"Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, But now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith:"

There is, however, another explanation of the above passage, which is also plausible. There are other Mid-Acts Dispensationalists who think Paul meant that God is able to "stablish" ("establish") believers according to:

His (Paul's) gospel

The preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest

By the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith

In the end, though, as far as the mystery of Ephesians 3 is concerned, it makes no difference which view we take concerning the mystery of Romans 16. It doesn't matter if we believe the mystery of Romans 16 is established according to the above three items, or if we believe it is now made known by the scriptures of the prophets. Either way, Paul never says the mystery of Ephesians 3 is different from the mystery of Romans 16. Nor does he ever state that the "fellowship of the mystery" in Eph. 3:1-9 cannot be made known by the Scriptures of the prophets. This may be one logical conclusion; but it is not the only logical conclusion. Just because some mystery was previously "hid in God", that does not mean the mystery cannot now be "made known" by the Old Testament Scriptures.

For example, in view of several Old Testament passages requiring every male to be circumcised (Gen. 17:14, Ex. 12:48, Isaiah 52:1, Ezekiel 44:7-9, etc.; compare Acts 10:28 and 11:1-3), another "mystery" which had been previously "hid in God" concerned the fact that the Lord's gifts could ever apply to UNcircumcised Gentiles at all. This would have been unheard of in Old Testament times. Yet Paul now makes this fact clearly known "to all nations" (just as he does the mystery of Ro. 16:25-26) by referring to the scriptures of the prophets, in Eph.4:7-8 -

"But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ. Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men."

As a result, since the above quotation is based upon the "scriptures of the prophets" (Psalms 68:18), Paul is simply showing how this Old Testament passage still applies to the church today. Yet before Paul received this revelation, this fact was indeed "hid in God", as was the "fellowship of the mystery" (Eph. 3:9), as well as the mystery of Ro. 16:25-26. The Old Testament saint had no idea that the Lord's gifts could ever apply to Uncircumcised Gentile believers; but we now have Paul's epistles to tell us they do, because he directly applies the scriptures of the prophets (Psalms 68:18) to all Gentile believers today.

Another questionable teaching concerning the mystery of Ephesians 3 revolves around Paul's statement in verse 8 that he preached the "unsearchable" riches of Christ. This passage is interpreted to mean that the mystery of Ephesians 3 is "unsearchable" in the Old Testament, because it was supposedly "hid in God" (contrary to the mystery of Romans 16). But again, this appears to be an erroneous interpretation, because Paul never states that the mystery itself is "unsearchable". Instead, he plainly states that the "riches of Christ" are "unsearchable", in Eph. 3:8-9 -

"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 world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ:"

Consequently, we should be careful not to read our own thoughts and ideas into the above passage, and simply allow it to say what it says - It is the "riches of Christ" that are "unsearchable", rather than the actual mystery.

But even if Paul did mean the mystery of Ephesians 3 was "unsearchable", the word "unsearchable" still would not necessarily refer to the Old Testament scriptures. For example, Paul also states that God's judgments are "unsearchable" in Ro. 11:33-34; yet the Old Testament is filled with the judgments of God (see, for example, Exodus 21). So, because Paul is not referring to the Old Testament when he uses the word "unsearchable" in Ro. 11:33, then neither is he necessarily referring to the Old Testament in Eph. 3:8. And since he also states in 1 Cor.2:10 that the Spirit searches all things, the term "unsearchable" in Eph. 3:8-9 only means that we ourselves cannot search the riches of Christ that Paul preached, but must rely upon the Holy Spirit to do so.

Accordingly, since it is "the riches of Christ" that are "unsearchable" (Eph. 3:8), and not the mystery itself, this means that when Paul preached "Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began" (Ro.16:25), he was already preaching the same mystery he later wrote about in Eph.3:6 ("that the Gentiles should be fellow heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel").