

BEEFING UP PAUL

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One of my readers suggested to me that my understanding of the apostle Paul's ministry and message needed to be "beefed up"! This correspondent then very kindly posted me a gift designed to address my lack. It was a book by Cornelius R. Stam titled, *Things That Differ: The Fundamentals of Dispensationalism*.¹

Now, for me, the measure of a good book is whether it makes me *think*. A good read is one that sends me to the Scriptures "to see whether these things are so" (see Acts 17: 11). Stam's book on that measure, has been a good read.

THE THESIS

As the title of Stam's book suggests, the subject under discussion is *dispensationalism*. That big word means that throughout earth's history God has revealed His plan of salvation in progressive stages. At every turn, man has progressively failed to respond to God's gracious dealings. Such failure has called forth additional periods of revelation from God, so that His eternal purposes might march on.

Thus, for the dispensationalist, history is divided into administrative eras with each epoch advancing the truth and purposes of God. This exegetical method is described as "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).²

Dispensationalists believe that once it became clear the Jews as a nation were not going to accept Jesus as their Messiah, then God withdrew --- for the time being --- the offer to immediately usher in their long-promised Golden Kingdom Age. Jesus' preaching of "the Gospel of the Kingdom" was, after all, conditional and restricted to Israel. Had not Jesus openly stated that he was only sent to the house of Israel (Matthew 15:24)?

With God's kingdom-offer to Israel now postponed, a new Gospel message for the nations in the interim became necessary. Enter Paul!

According to our dispensationalist friends, Paul apparently was given a "revelation" of "the gospel of grace" which had been hidden in the secret counsels of God from the foundation of the world. Stam explains,

Until we come to the writings of Paul we do not find one single word as to this great mystery or any of its associated mysteries ... the most spiritual believer at Jerusalem could not have known what God would do when Israel rejected His risen, glorified Son, God had a gracious, glorious plan in mind from the beginning. He simply says that it was "KEPT SECRET since the world began" (Rom.16:25), that "in other ages [it] was NOT MADE KNOWN" (Eph. 3:5), that "from the beginning of the world [it] had been hid in God (Eph. 3:9), that it had been "HID from ages and from generations" (Col. 1:26), but in all this He makes it most clear that the whole plan was "According to the eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. 3:11). (pp 207-208, emphases original.)

Dispensationalists thus make the stupendous claim that Paul's gospel was an entirely new revelation, a "mystery" held secret in God's eternal counsel. Indeed, they would have us believe, not even Jesus himself saw nor taught this mystery of the gospel of the reconciliation of Jew and Gentile into one body during this Church age! That is to say,

¹ Stam, Cornelius, R. *Things That Differ: The Fundamentals of Dispensationalism*. Worzalla Publishing Co., WI, USA. Berean Bible Society, Fifteenth Printing, 2008,

² Broadly speaking, Dispensationalists list at least 7 dispensations. These include the Dispensation of Innocence (Adam in the Garden), The Dispensation of Conscience (Man outside the Garden till the Flood), the Dispensation of Human Government (Noahic Covenant post Flood), the Dispensation of Promise (Abraham), the Dispensation of Law (Moses up to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ), the Dispensation of Grace (Paul), and the still future Dispensation of the Messianic Kingdom.

Paul's Gospel of grace was such a radical, unforeseen development, that Paul could term it "my Gospel". Listen to Paul's own explanation of his alleged new Gospel revelation -

The stewardship of God's grace which was given to me for you; that by revelation there was made known to me the mystery ... which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed ... to me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things ... (Ephesians 3:1ff).

Thus, if Peter and the other apostles were sent to preach "the gospel of the circumcision" as an appeal to the Jews to accept Christ and the Kingdom of God, once it became obvious Israel was not going to receive that gospel offer, a new gospel message inviting the nations to be reconciled to God through Christ became necessary. Paul is thus called to preach his new revelation of the mystery locked up in God's counsel till now --- "the gospel of the uncircumcision" (Gal. 2:7).

"MY GOSPEL"

I think there would not be a Bible commentator who would not agree that Paul's apostleship was distinctive from that of the others. He was indeed specially commissioned by the Lord Jesus himself "to be a chosen instrument of mine, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel" (Acts 9: 15). Indeed, Paul's apostolic calling is likened to an "untimely birth", or more literally, "a miscarriage".³

The discussion however, concerns whether the message Paul preached was distinctively different in content from the other apostles or not. Did Paul preach another Gospel because three times he calls his message "my Gospel" (Romans 2:16; 16:25; 2 Timothy 2:8)? Let's take a look to see if this claim is justified. In Romans 16:25 -26 we read;

Now to him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations (i.e. Gentiles), leading to the obedience of faith ...

Paul is making the encouraging claim that God is able to establish Christian believers "according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ ..." First, let's ask, exactly what is "the preaching of Jesus Christ"? Contrary to popular misconception, this does not primarily mean Paul is simply proclaiming the facts about Jesus Christ, vital as they are. No. He is saying more than that.

Paul is claiming his gospel is "the preaching of Jesus Christ", which is to make the stupendous claim that anybody listening to him preach is actually listening to Jesus preaching!⁴ Thus, when Paul says God is able to establish us by "my Gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ", he is not claiming to preach a gospel different to the one proclaimed by Jesus. Not at all. *He is saying that his gospel is the Gospel as preached by Jesus himself!* Let's prove this.

Compare the identical expression, "the preaching of Jesus Christ" with "the preaching of Jonah" in Matthew 12:41, ;

The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment and shall condemn it because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here."⁵

It ought to be obvious that "the preaching of Jonah" means Jonah's preaching, Jonah's message, Jonah's words. Jonah did not preach about himself to the men of Nineveh! And in like manner, Paul's "preaching of Jesus Christ"

³ *Ektroma* ... with the idea of a violent cutting out, even an abortion, if you will.

⁴ The subjective genitive in the Greek (*kai to keerugma Ieesou Christou*) does not mean "preaching about Jesus" but Jesus' own preaching. That is, the teaching of the gospel-word as preached by Jesus Christ.

⁵ "The proclamation of Jonah" (*to keerugma Iona*).

means the message Jesus himself preached, Jesus' words, Jesus' message. *It is Jesus' own preaching that Paul claims is "my gospel"!*⁶

Thus in Romans 16:24-25 Paul defines "my Gospel" as "the preaching of Jesus Christ", which is "according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested". Paul is saying that the content of his Gospel preaching is congruent with the Gospel Jesus himself preached.

OBJECTION!

At this point I can hear somebody objecting. But Greg, what about Paul's definition of the Gospel in 1 CORINTHIANS 15: 1-4;

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures ...
? ⁷

Isn't Paul saying the Gospel is about the great facts of Jesus' death on the cross, his burial, and his resurrection, according to the Scriptures? True enough. But even this verse is not saying the Gospel is only about the facts of the Christ event. You will notice I have underlined the words "of first importance". The reason is that in the original Greek the apostle Paul actually says, "For I delivered to you among the first things".⁸

Critically important as the Gospel facts of the redemption of Jesus' atoning death on the cross and his triumphant resurrection are, these mighty historical facts are not the total Gospel Paul proclaimed. Certainly, without the reconciling work of Jesus Christ on the cross, and definitely without God's raising him again from the dead, we have no salvation.

However, I Corinthians 15: 1-4 is not the whole Gospel. Just read the rest of the chapter! For Paul goes on to tell us that the resurrection of Jesus is the ground and the guarantee that the Kingdom of God will appear when Jesus comes back to finally subject all things under God's Sovereign rule (I Corinthians 15: 24, 28). Paul's gospel concerned the facts of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection as guaranteeing the Kingdom's certainty.

This is what Jesus himself preached and this was Paul's Gospel. No wonder Paul says God is able to establish the faith of the Christians in Rome by this gospel, which he says is "my gospel and the preaching of Jesus". Hearing Paul's gospel, they heard exactly the Kingdom-preaching of Jesus, the words of Jesus himself!

No wonder Paul exhorts young Timothy,

If anyone advocates a different doctrine, and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ ... he is conceited and understands nothing ... (I Timothy 6:3).

Note it well. Paul is giving fair warning. Anybody who does not come along with the "sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ ... understands nothing"! To separate Jesus from his own gospel teaching is suicidal as to one's eternal destiny. So, if Paul is not letting us listen to Jesus himself in his gospel he is admitting his own conceit and ignorance!

Paul wants us to hear "the preaching of Jesus Christ". This, he explains, is "my gospel".

WHAT STAM OMITTS TO SAY IN HIS BOOK

In assessing Stam's dispensationalism and his claim that "the Gospel of grace" Paul preached was a new revelation for the world, I noticed one or two glaring omissions in his exegetical argument that fatally wound his thesis. One of his oft-repeated and favourite appeals is to Paul's words in Acts 20:25;

⁶ Paul says as much in Romans 10:17, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ", which puts the emphasis not on hearing about Jesus so much, but rather hearing Jesus himself preaching his very own gospel word! To hear and obey the word of Christ is to hear Jesus' saving words of the kingdom of God..

⁷ The Greek reads *en protois* which literally translates as, "among the things of first importance".

⁸ *En protois ...* literally among the first things.

But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God.

The context of Paul's words is his farewell address on the beach to the Elders and church leaders from Ephesus. Every Bible commentator acknowledges that the believers in the church at Ephesus were composed of a mixed company of Jews and Gentiles. And knowing this will be the very last time they will see his face, Paul tells both Jewish and Gentile Christians that he "testified solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God" to them.

Ah, there you go! There is no doubt about it. Paul did preach "the gospel of the grace of God". And Stam rams this point home throughout his book a total of no less than 12 times to prove Paul preached a different gospel to the gospel of the kingdom as preached by Jesus. ⁹

However, in no single instance when quoting this verse does Stam quote the very next verse which defines what Paul means by "the gospel of the grace of God". So let's read the verses together ---

But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that all of you, among whom I went about preaching the kingdom, will no longer see my face (Acts 20: 24-25).

Stam fails to say that Paul defines "the gospel of the grace of God" as equivalent to "preaching the kingdom"! Paul says his constant practice was to go about preaching the Kingdom message --- the message Jesus preached! --- which he defines as "the gospel of the grace of God"!

We must agree with Paul. "The gospel of the grace of God" is faithfully portrayed when we preach the kingdom message that was the subject of Jesus' own gospel-word. Which is to say, all men, whether Jews or Gentiles, are invited to enter the salvation that God has prepared for, when Christ Jesus returns to establish His kingdom. What grace it will be to hear his beautiful word to all who have obeyed him, "Enter into the joy of your Lord"!

To repeat: In his book Stam quotes Acts 20: 24 a total of 12 times without once joining it to verse 25! This is surely damning to his case? The Gospel of the grace of God is the Gospel of the kingdom of God.

ANOTHER SERIOUS OMISSION

Stam claims that "the secret of the gospel [was] not revealed before Paul" (p. 72). This idea that Paul preached a new mystery, a new revelation of the Gospel of grace heretofore unknown by Jesus (sic!) and the other apostles, needs deeper investigation.

Let's turn to Matthew chapter 13 --- a chapter replete with Jesus' favourite subject --- the kingdom of God. In fact, there are 7 parables on that theme in this one chapter, six of which begin with Jesus' favourite introduction, "The kingdom of heaven is like ..." Which is to say, the kingdom which originates from God in heaven --- definitely not the kingdom away up in heaven! --- is the kingdom which bears the character and the quality of heaven.

When somebody is obsessed by one subject and is incessantly talking about it, we say they sound like a broken record. Well, the disciples were evidently surprised by Jesus' obsession with parables about the kingdom of God. So they came to him asking, "Why do you speak to them in parables" (v. 10)?

Jesus replied that the purpose of the parables was because, "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted" (v. 11). Evidently Jesus' parables carry encoded messages designed to illuminate the disciples concerning the Kingdom of God. Later in the chapter we read,

All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and he did not speak to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world (v.34-35).

⁹ In the footnote (p. 238) Stam goes so far as to say that Acts 20:24 is "probably the most comprehensive term for the good news which Paul proclaimed ... *the gospel of the grace of God*".

Jesus is declaring “things hidden since the foundation of the world”. Jesus is teaching things about the kingdom of God that nobody else before had seen nor understood. This is exactly what Paul says, how that,

By revelation God made known to me the mystery ... which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit” (Ephesians 3: 3-5).

Both Jesus and Paul claim to be revealing a mystery hitherto hidden from men of all generations, beginning from the foundation of the world. We must therefore ask, are they speaking about the same subject? Are Jesus and Paul referring to the same mystery once hidden but now revealed?

I suggest that even a cursory reading of Matthew 13 gives convincing evidence that the subject of Jesus’ parables concerns not just the gospel of the kingdom as it pertained to Israel, but that his parables of the kingdom of God concern all men whether Jew or Gentile, right up to the time of his future Second Coming. Let’s prove this.

Just scroll down through the parables and ask yourself; Is Jesus only saying the Gospel-word is for the nation of Israel, or for all mankind right up to the end of this present age? It will be clear by a fair reading of Jesus’ explanations of the mystery of the kingdom of heaven that he is talking about the end of the age.

Three times in Matthew 13 Jesus uses the expression, “the end of the age” (v. 39, 40, 49). And the end of the age never means anything other than the future visible arrival of Jesus in power and glory to inaugurate God’s earthly kingdom.

In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus uses universal descriptions about “the kingdom of heaven”. The sower is the Son of man, Jesus. The harvest is “the end of the age”, when “the angels” sort out who are “the sons of kingdom” (v. 38) and who are “the sons of the Evil One” (v. 38).

This end-of-the-age-separation, all will agree, is still future and will happen at the Second Coming of Jesus. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth for those deemed unfit for the Kingdom of God, and “the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father” (v. 40-43). Jesus is revealing the mystery of the kingdom hidden from before the world began --- and his universal descriptions are not therefore limited only to Israel before she disastrously rejected the preaching of the Gospel of the kingdom in the authority of the risen name of Jesus!

Repeat: Jesus is uttering “things hidden since the foundation of the world”!

When dispensationalists claim that Paul’s ministry was distinctive, and that Peter and the other apostles did not preach “the gospel of the grace of God” because they did not know of the revelation of the mystery uniquely given to Paul, one wonders what they make of Matthew chapter 13: 35? Stam does not address this question at all.

Furthermore, have they not read that the apostle Paul testifies that Peter and the other NT apostles and prophets knew of this mystery “by revelation” too? In Ephesians 3: 11 Paul writes that the mystery made known to him,

In other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit.

Contra dispensationalism, the record clearly states that God revealed to all the NT apostles and prophets the mystery of the Kingdom now offered by His grace through Christ. Paul is saying he shares the same revelation that Peter and the others had received “in the Spirit”. The only difference is that whereas the rest of the apostles had directly heard Jesus preaching these things (as per Matthew 13 for instance), Paul received it from the now risen Jesus after he had ascended into heaven. The only difference is that Paul’s revelation of the mystery came after the ascension of Jesus precisely because he was “untimely born”.

Let’s be clear here. All the NT apostles knew God was offering the kingdom to all men by Christ through revelation in the Spirit. Which is to say, all the NT apostles and prophets, including Paul, learned of the revelation of the mystery of the kingdom of God by the words and gospel-teaching of Jesus himself.

As Paul says in the very next verse,

To be specific, that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel ... (Ephesians 3: 6).

It was Jesus who first declared this revelation of the mystery of the kingdom hidden from the sons of men from the beginning of the world! Paul was imitating Christ's message.

PAUL'S LAST WORD AND TESTIMONY

Should there be any doubt as to whether I have correctly understood Paul's gospel of grace as being identical to, and equivalent with, the gospel of the kingdom as preached by Jesus, let's turn to his last recorded words.

Paul will "solemnly charge" Timothy "in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom", to "preach the word ..." (2 Timothy 4:1-2). What word is Timothy to preach? That's right. That when Jesus comes back to earth, when Jesus visibly appears again in his glory, that the kingdom will have arrived. By God's grace through the finished and ongoing mediatorship of Jesus Christ, we shall enter the promised glory of God's Kingdom that so occupied the mind, message and mission of Jesus.

Indeed, all "who have loved his appearing" will be rewarded for their faithful service on "that day" (v. 8). And in the meantime, Paul expresses his confidence that, "the Lord will deliver me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom (i.e. the kingdom whose origin is from God in heaven and which bears all the grandeur of His good and holy character forever).

To the very end, Paul is proclaiming "the gospel of grace" as none other than our promised entrance into the kingdom of God. This is "the word" Timothy must remain loyal to. Paul has passed Jesus' Gospel-word on to Timothy. Now Timothy must faithfully pass on the same preaching from Jesus' own lips.

And Paul followed his own advice, for at the very conclusion of his apostolic ministry the apostle defines "this salvation of God [that] has been sent to the Gentiles" as none other than "preaching the kingdom of God, and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ ..." (Acts 28:28f).

Remember that the title 'Christ' is the Greek word for the Hebrew title 'Messiah'. Paul is preaching to Jew and Gentile right up to his martyrdom, that God's saving message is still inviting Jew and Gentile to enter the Kingdom of God through our Lord Jesus the Messiah. Repeat: The message of God's saving grace is the invitation to enter the kingdom of God as preached by Jesus. ¹⁰

CONCLUSION

A favourite text of our dispensational friends is,

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Tim. 2: 15). ¹¹

One must ask the dispensationalist who would consign Jesus' Gospel of the Kingdom of God to national Israel only, whether s/he is "accurately handling" the words of Jesus and of his apostle Paul. By relegating Jesus' word of the Gospel of God to a past era, the dispensational doctrine abrogates the very foundation of the Gospel preaching of Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ The interested reader might like to look at Matthew 19: 16-30 where Jesus combines the concepts of "eternal life" (vs. 16,17) with "the kingdom of heaven" (v. 23), with "the kingdom of God" (v. 24), with being "saved" (v. 25), with "the regeneration" of all things (v. 28), with "Israel" (v. 28), with "inheriting eternal life" (v. 29). All these are terms of equivalence, expressing the same idea concerning the Kingdom of God. If it be objected that Jesus is just speaking to the apostles of Israel, (for they will judge Israel), then compare Ephesians 2: 11-22 where the Gentiles are now included as citizens in "the commonwealth of Israel" and included as inheritors of all the promises of God in Christ. Gentiles are "fellow citizens" in God's household, "having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone" (v. 20). Thus, "eternal life" = "being saved" = "the regeneration" = "the kingdom of God" according to Jesus, the apostles, and Paul!

¹¹ Literally, *making a straight cut*. The meaning is to "accurately handle", that is, to correctly exegete the Scriptures so as to expound the message of God with proportionate balance.

This is a practice the apostle Paul certainly did not follow. He defines his gospel --- “my gospel” --- as the “preaching of Jesus Christ”, that is, as Jesus’ own preaching. He defines “the gospel of the grace of God” as none other than “preaching the kingdom” (Romans 16:25-26; Acts 20:24-25).

As my very good friend Professor Anthony Buzzard often says, the Devil has one trick --- to separate Jesus from his words. A Jesus divorced from his teaching is not the real Jesus of the Bible. Anthony Buzzard thus succinctly summarises the question;

Note carefully that when Jesus said that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel (Matt. 15:24), he did not mean that his teaching would forever be confined to them. Jesus expressly told us that his teachings were firstly to the house of Israel and then, when Israel had been fully exposed to them, they were to be delivered to the whole world! The Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20) is not just for Jews! Jesus says to us all, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the combined authority [name] of the Father, Son and holy spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.” He then promised to be with those who obeyed his instructions “until the end of the age.” The end of the age does not mean, ever, anything but the future one and only, visible arrival of Jesus in power and glory ... ¹²

After carefully and prayerfully reading *Things That Differ*, I will say the beef steak was a mixture of some nutritious meat, for there were a few nice morsels to be had. Unfortunately though, there was a fair bit of gristle that I could not swallow. Or, if I may again quote from Buzzard’s article this wise warning,

It is therefore a grand falsehood to say that Jesus came to teach the national house of Israel only ... What was Jesus sent to do? To announce the Gospel of the Kingdom of God (Luke 4:43). Please listen carefully to preaching coming at you from various quarters. Is the phrase “Gospel of the Kingdom of God” or “Gospel about the Kingdom of God” prominent and explicit? If not, you may wonder if the speaker has really understood Jesus and is following him. Without the Gospel of the Kingdom, properly defined, how is Jesus being preached? ¹³

¹² See Anthony Buzzard’s excellent article addressing the issue of ‘dispensationalism’ in his 2017 May edition of *Focus on the Kingdom* under the article titled, *Never Ever Separate Jesus From His Teachings!* You can read it online at Restorationfellowship.org

¹³ Op Cit, Anthony Buzzard, bold emphasis original.