

What's the Difference?

Question

“You teach the gospel of the grace of God instead of the gospel of the kingdom as Jesus did, and emphasize the importance and distinctiveness of Paul’s apostleship and message. You go as far as to say that believers should follow Paul as our example for our Christian walk today. Consequently, your teaching is different than what most other Christians believe. What makes you think you are right?”

The Danger of Tradition

This teaching does not conform to traditional Christian doctrine, but does that automatically make it wrong? Think about all of the *Christian* denominations that are present in the world. Why are there so many? If they are all teaching the same things, then why not have just one denomination? Actually, the denominations are not teaching the same things, not even the subgroups within denominations.

The Bible provides ample evidence of the dangers of adhering to traditional beliefs, because traditional beliefs rarely hold true to the actual word of God. Please consider the following examples:

- God sent His prophets to His own people Israel to convey His word to them and to explain God’s future plan for them. In general, what was their response? God’s chosen people persecuted and killed His prophets (Acts 7:52).
- God sent John the Baptist to prepare Israel for their long-promised Messiah and kingdom. Many believed his message (or least professed to believe). But what happened to him? John was despised by the people of Israel who mistrusted him and said he had a demon (Matthew 11:7-18), and was imprisoned and put to death by the King of Judea for telling him the truth (Matthew 14:3-10).
- Jesus Christ was sent by God to His people Israel. Jesus proclaimed the truth about Himself and Israel’s prophesied kingdom (John 14:6). Although some believed Him and followed Him, how did the nation of Israel as a whole respond?
 - They did not receive Him (John 1:9-11).
 - They demanded, and took responsibility for, His crucifixion (Matthew 27:11-26; Acts 2:22-23).

Why did the people of Israel respond this way? Despite all of the miracles of God that they witnessed, the nation as a whole continually rejected God and His word through the prophets; God considered Israel to be obstinate (Exodus 32:9; Acts 7:51-53). Although everything about Jesus during His ministry with His people was in exact fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, He wasn’t what they expected. The religious leaders of Israel had corrupted the word of God and were not teaching the truth—they had instituted their own traditions and interpretations of the Law of Moses and had become hypocrites (Matthew 23). They were also jealous of the attention Jesus was getting and were afraid of losing their self-appointed positions as spiritual leaders.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ. (Colossians 2:8)¹

Continued Rejection of the Truth

At Pentecost, Peter proclaimed to the people of Israel that Jesus was the long-promised Messiah (the Christ) and was the Son of God, and that they were responsible for killing Him (Acts 2:22-36). Although many believed, what was the response of the spiritual leaders of Israel? They rejected Peter's message, imprisoned him, and ordered him not to preach in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:1-18).

Paul was saved by the risen Lord Jesus Christ and was appointed by Him to be His apostle of the Gentiles and to proclaim the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 9:1-17; 20:24; Romans 11:13; Galatians 1:1; I Timothy 1:15-16). In the Gentile cities where he preached, Paul always went to teach at the Jewish synagogues first, partly because they at least worshipped the one true God and knew the Law of Moses. Some believed him when he proclaimed who Jesus was, the purpose of His death, and that the Law of Moses had been superseded by the gospel of grace. In general, however, Paul and his message were rejected by the Jews (Acts 13:44-46; 18:4-6; 28:17-28).

Furthermore, unbelieving Jews contradicted his teaching (Acts 15:1-2; Galatians 2:4) and incited the people against Paul and his coworkers in the cities where they preached (Acts 9:19-24; 13:49-50; 14:1-7; 17:13). Through false accusations (and true accusations about his teaching regarding the setting aside of the Law of Moses and Israel—Romans 6:14; Galatians 3:10-14, 23-25; Colossians 2:13-14; Romans 11:25; II Corinthians 3:14-15), Paul was imprisoned several times, severely persecuted (even stoned and left for dead), and eventually put to death (Acts 14:19-20; 25:7; II Corinthians 11:22-26; II Timothy 4:6-7).

It is our nature, unfortunately, to want to do things our way instead of according to God's way. Paul spent a considerable amount of time with the Corinthian brethren, teaching them what Christ had taught him. Because of their pride, however, they broke up into factions and generally returned to their sinful lifestyle that they had known prior to being saved (I Corinthians 3:1-3). The Galatian believers in the cities of Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium, whom Paul had established in Christ and ministered to on three different trips, were easily swayed by false teaching and lived according to works rather than by faith (Galatians 3:1-3). Brethren, the same things continue today—the traditional religiousness of the church resembles that of the nation of Israel, the Corinthians, and the Galatians.

You foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? (Galatians 3:1-3)

¹ All references are quoted from the *New American Standard Bible* (1996). Words in brackets are either equivalent words from the *King James Version* (KJV) or, if in italics, were added by the author for clarification.

The Gospel of Grace

Our Lord Jesus Christ revealed the gospel of the grace of God to and through the Apostle Paul (Galatians 1:11-17; Ephesians 3:1-11). Brethren, this gospel is different than the gospel of the kingdom proclaimed by the prophets, John the Baptist, Jesus while on earth, and His twelve apostles—we are not looking forward to the restoration of our kingdom on earth (Acts 1:6; 3:18-26). All believers (true children of God—Romans 8:14-17) believe parts of the gospel of grace, even if they don't realize it. For only through the gospel of grace revealed through Paul do we know, among other things:

- All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:21-23);
- The gospel of salvation is believing that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose again (I Corinthians 15:1-4; Ephesians 1:13-14);
- We are saved by grace through faith apart from works (Ephesians 2:8-9); and
- There is no difference between Jew and Gentile and that all who believe the gospel of salvation are equal members of the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:12-14; Galatians 3:28).

Some brethren believe most of the gospel of grace and correctly recognize that God's direct instructions to believers today are found in Paul's letters (Galatians 1:6-12; Ephesians 3:1-12; Philippians 4:9). Although not organized into a denomination, these brethren are involved in independent churches, Bible study groups, and a few organizations throughout the United States and other countries. Like all believers, however, these brethren also have differences of understanding and teaching among themselves. Unfortunately, many believers reject the gospel of grace as a distinct body of truth because it is contrary to traditional church doctrine. Should we rely on, or take our stand on, traditional church teaching or on what the Bible actually says? Are we going to be like the people of Israel and persecute those who teach the truth of God's word?

More Differences

Two subjects that most Christian denominations seem to have common ground are Jesus and baptism. They all teach Jesus, and they all have water baptism. But, how do they teach Jesus, and why are there so many different purposes and methods of water baptism?

How is Jesus Taught?

Most denominations focus on Jesus the man. They primarily teach about Jesus out of the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They teach Him as the Son of God, which is true (Matthew 3:16-17; Mark 1:1). They teach Him as the Messiah, but the Messiah of whom (John 4:25-26; Matthew 15:24)? They teach Him as the King, but the King of whom (Matthew 2:2; 27:11, 37)? They preach obedience to His commands, but don't realize that they aren't actually being obedient (Matthew 10:1; 23:1-3; 28:19-20). They preach that we should follow Him, but don't realize who He came to or why, nor that they aren't actually emulating His life.

Although there is much to learn and apply from what is revealed about Jesus during His earthly ministry, we are instructed to know Him as our risen, glorified Lord Jesus Christ instead of as Jesus in the flesh (II Corinthians 5:14-21). Through the gospel of grace, we learn the full meaning of Christ's work at the cross, and discover that it was the plan of God from the very beginning. Furthermore, the Apostle

Paul instructs us to follow his teaching and to imitate him as he imitated Christ (I Corinthians 4:15-17; 11:1; Philippians 3:17; 4:9; I Thessalonians 4:1; II Thessalonians 2:15; 3:7-9; II Timothy 1:13; 2:2).

To me [Paul], the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable [unsearchable] 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; so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Ephesians 3:8-11)

Be imitators of me [Paul], just as I also am of Christ. (I Corinthians 11:1)

What About Water Baptism?

There is much division regarding how and why people are baptized with water. Each denomination has its own rules, and often does not recognize a person's baptism if it was performed in a different denomination. What does Scripture say about water baptism? It was most definitely an integral part of the gospel of the kingdom proclaimed by John the Baptist, Jesus while on earth, and His twelve apostles (Matthew 3:6; John 3:22; 4:1-2). Water baptism was a requirement for repentance and forgiveness of sins, so it was a requirement to be saved (Mark 16:15-16; Acts 2:38). Additionally, for a time beginning at Pentecost, water baptism was followed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit,² which was a baptism characterized by miraculous signs and wonders by the power of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11; Acts 2:38). In fact, every recorded example of water baptism in Scripture was associated with a miracle, either immediately before, during, or immediately after the baptism. That is not happening today.

What did the Apostle Paul say about baptism? Although Paul baptized a few believers in the early part of his ministry (to prove to the unbelieving Jews that his message was from God—I Corinthians 1:14-17, 21-23), water baptism was not a part of the message of grace that he received from Christ. Instead, Paul taught that, upon believing the gospel of salvation, a person is baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ (I Corinthians 12:12-13), and that this spiritual baptism is the *only* baptism in operation today (Ephesians 4:4-6). This spiritual baptism is a spiritual cleansing that completely identifies each believer with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (Romans 6:3-11; Colossians 2:9-12; Titus 3:4-7). Furthermore, it was never represented or symbolized by water baptism in Scripture. So, Scripture supplies the solution to the many forms of water baptism today—it is not required or expected or accepted by God today.

There are many other differences between the gospel of the kingdom and the gospel of the grace of God, which are addressed in Paul's letters. The gospel of grace is so important that every believer should take the time to read the warnings by Paul regarding rejecting or altering the gospel and his instructions to believers, such as in Galatians 1:6-10; Romans 16:17-18; II Thessalonians 2:15; 3:14-15; II Timothy 1:13-14; 4:1-4; and I Corinthians 3:10-11.

² Beginning at Pentecost (still under the gospel of the kingdom), *Christ baptized the believers with the Holy Spirit* after they had been water baptized for the remission of sins (Matthew 3:11; Acts 2:1-4). In this dispensation of grace, however, *we are baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ* at the moment we believe the gospel of salvation (I Corinthians 12:12-13; Ephesians 1:13-14). This is a significant difference between the two gospels, representing two completely different spiritual baptisms.

Rely on the Word of God

Why isn't the distinctiveness and importance of the gospel of grace revealed through the Apostle Paul taught in Christian denominations today? There are likely many reasons. One reason is that pastors generally teach what they know. Consider Apollos, who was an educated man and was mighty in the Scriptures (Acts 18:24-28). He taught what he knew, and what he knew was the gospel of the kingdom (referred to in this example as the "baptism of John"). However, Priscilla and Aquila, coworkers of Paul, took Apollos aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. Apollos, after believing what was newly revealed to him, became a coworker of Paul and proclaimed the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 19:1; I Corinthians 3:4-6; 4:6). Another reason, unfortunately, is that many people prefer to have pastors and teachers who tell them what they want to hear instead of the truth that they need to hear (II Timothy 4:1-4).

Although many church or Christian traditions are distortions of the truth and, therefore, traditions of men (Colossians 2:8, 16-23), some are perfectly true. Paul instructed the Thessalonian brethren to hold to the traditions they were taught by Paul and his coworkers (II Thessalonians 2:15). Believers should compare what they are being taught with what the word of God actually says (II Timothy 3:16-17; Acts 17:10-12). Furthermore, believers should rely on the Holy Spirit instead of themselves to understand the truths of God's word (Ephesians 1:15-21; I Corinthians 2:6-16).

Be diligent [*endeavor*] to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling [rightly dividing] the word of truth. (II Timothy 2:15)

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