

Dispensational Discussion

Berean Dispensational Site

Opinions differ widely among Dispensationalists as to when the church actually began, so we often distinguish ourselves from other dispensationalists, who hold to a different starting point for the church. The most common method for doing so is to label ourselves according to the chapter of the book of Acts in which we believe the modern church (the body of Christ) began:

1. "Traditional" Dispensationalists: Christians who believe the body of Christ began some time between the birth of Christ and Acts chapter 2 (on the day of Pentecost) are generally referred to as Traditional Dispensationalists, among whom there are also several subcategories. Acts 2 Dispensationalists, for example, believe the church started in Acts chapter 2, on the Day of Pentecost. The Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal organizations all contain Traditional Dispensational churches.

2. Mid Acts Dispensationalists: Christians who believe the body of Christ did not begin until Paul was saved are referred to as Mid Acts Dispensationalists. Since Paul was saved in Acts chapter 9 (considered to be the Mid Acts Period), and his first recorded sermon is in Acts chapter 13 (which is still in the Mid Acts period), these brethren may differ among themselves as to exactly when the body of Christ began (some believe it began in Acts chapter 9; some believe it began in Acts chapter 11; some believe it began in Acts chapter 13). However, Mid Acts Dispensationalists generally believe that Paul was the first member of the body of Christ. As a result, they associate the present body of Christ with the dispensation of grace which was given to the apostle Paul (Eph.3:2; Col.1:25).

So Mid Acts Dispensationalists, in general, also teach that the body of Christ could not have been in existence before this dispensation of grace began (although this is not a required belief). Men such as Charles F. Baker and C. R. Stam are examples of Mid Acts Dispensationalists.

3. Acts 28 Dispensationalists: Christians who believe the present church did not begin until after Paul wrote his Acts epistles (Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, and 1&2 Thessalonians) are referred to as Acts 28 Dispensationalists. Like most Mid Acts Dispensationalists, the Acts 28 Dispensationalists also believe that Paul was the first member of the body of Christ. Consequently, Acts 28 Dispensationalists will also associate the present body of Christ with the dispensation of grace, which was given to the apostle Paul (Eph.3:2; Col.1:25).

However, not only do the Acts 28 Dispensationalists teach that the body of Christ could not have existed before Paul was saved; they also believe that much of Paul's early doctrine (which is found in his Acts epistles) is different from the later doctrine found in his Prison epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians). Consequently, these brethren also believe that Paul's early doctrine was different from the doctrine contained in his Pastoral Epistles (1&2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon).

Dispensational Discussion

Like the Mid Acts Dispensationalists, then, the Acts 28 Dispensationalists also believe the body of Christ could not have begun before the present dispensation of grace. The Acts 28 dispensationalists, though, believe Paul was a minister of the New Covenant during the Acts period, when he wrote his epistles to the Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, and Thessalonians. Based upon this belief, they teach that those Gentiles who believed during the Acts period stand to receive the New Covenant promises of Israel, when she comes into her own inheritance.

Plus, Acts 28 Dispensationalists also teach that the heavenly inheritance of the present church was not revealed until after Paul wrote his Acts epistles. Based upon this teaching, they believe that once the Acts period ended, anyone who believed Paul's revelation stood to receive a heavenly inheritance, even if they were saved during the Acts dispensation. They base this teaching upon their belief that one's calling dictates one's inheritance. Men such as E. W. Bullinger (famous for his Companion Bible) and Charles H. Welch are examples of Acts 28 Dispensationalists.

Although many dispensationalists are stereotyped by our rejection of such practices as water baptism and speaking in tongues, this stereotype is not true of every dispensationalist. Baptists and Methodists, for example, still practice water baptism, and numerous Pentecostals practice both speaking in tongues and water baptism. But within this wide range of believers, those who are dispensational do not believe the church is "Spiritual Israel". However, most Christians who belong to one of these groups (or denominations) would not consider themselves to be dispensationalists. Instead, they would consider themselves to be Baptists, Methodists, etc.

Why, then, are most dispensationalists stereotyped by our rejection of water baptism and speaking in tongues? Usually, this is a distinction that we ascribe to ourselves, since the term "dispensational" most accurately describes our own theological approach to the scriptures. Therefore, not every dispensationalist is going to agree with every statement on this Web Site. However, those who recognize Paul's distinct apostleship to the Gentiles will agree with most of the points we do set forth here.

In addition, there are other distinctions that dispensationalists make among themselves, as well:

4. Pauline Dispensationalists all agree that the body of Christ began with the apostle Paul. Christians who are known as Pauline Dispensationalists comprise both the Acts 28 position and the Mid Acts position. These two groups may disagree among themselves as to exactly when the church began, but both groups believe that Paul was the first member of the body of Christ. (Please Note: This does not mean that the Lord Jesus could not be a member of His Own body, as certain opponents have wrongly concluded. Such an allegation is nothing more than a misrepresentation of Pauline beliefs. Paul himself states that he "laid the foundation", which is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ [1 Cor. 3:10-11]; and others built upon that foundation. Likewise, he states that the Lord Himself is the chief corner stone, being "the foundation of the apostles and prophets" [Eph. 2:20]. This does not mean that Christ was not a member of His Own body; rather, it simply

Dispensational Discussion

means that the body of Christ - which is a spiritual body [1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:4) - could not have existed before Paul laid the foundation.) In any case, Pauline Dispensationalists also associate the present body of Christ with the dispensation of grace which was given to the apostle Paul (Eph.3:2; Col.1:25).

5. Berean Dispensationalists, including the originator of this Web Site, endorse certain aspects contained in all of the above positions. My theology would be considered Mid Acts dispensational in nature, since I still believe that Paul alone is the apostle of the Gentiles, and I also believe that Paul was the first earthly member of the body of Christ.

Yet the Bible never actually states that Paul was the first member of the body of Christ, which is one doctrine that is firmly professed by those who ascribe to the Pauline, Mid Acts, and Acts 28 positions. As a result, while I still ascribe to the Mid-Acts position, I must also allow for the possibility that Peter, James, and John could have also become members of the body of Christ (this is known as the "12 in/out debate"). Indeed, since the scriptures themselves never specifically exclude these believers from the body of Christ, then neither should I.

Now, there has been some confusion as to exactly what I believe; so for the record, I would like to clarify my position:

It is my own personal opinion that the body of Christ actually began with Paul. After all, the Bible clearly states that the dispensation of grace was given to Paul (Eph.3:2, compare 1Cor.9:17; Col.1:25); and he was the only apostle who was ever referred to as "THE" apostle of the Gentiles (Ro.11:11-13; Ro.15:16; Eph.3:1-2; etc., compare Gal.2:7-9). However, none of this actually proves that Paul was the first member of the body of Christ. Rather, this is simply my opinion, based upon my own understanding of the scriptures.

Therefore, even though I realize the dispensation of the grace of God was given to Paul alone, and he was the one in whom Christ first shewed forth "all longsuffering" (1Tim.1:16), I also allow for the possibility that the body of Christ could have existed before this dispensation of grace began. Again, the scriptures never actually exclude such a possibility. And if the scriptures never specifically associate the body of Christ with the dispensation of grace, then I see no need to do so, either (especially since my position does not exclude any other Mid Acts Dispensational beliefs). After all, even though Christ first shewed forth all longsuffering in Paul, that does not automatically make him the first member of the body of Christ.

Some of the earlier members of the body of Christ, then, might have an earthly inheritance (such as Peter, James, and John), while other members (beginning with the apostle Paul, and including all believers today) would have a heavenly inheritance. This difference of opinion, although minor from my viewpoint, is still necessary, since the scriptures never specify exactly when the church (the body of Christ) began.

Dispensational Discussion

As a result, even though I allow for the possibility that the body of Christ may have begun before Paul was saved, that does not mean I believe that it did.

I do, however, wholeheartedly agree with the following quotation, which is taken from Mr. C. R. Stam's Commentary on Galatians, Copyright 1998, by BEREAN BIBLE SOCIETY, Pages 301-302 -

WHAT WE BELIEVE

"We believe that when God ushered in the dispensation of grace and began to form the Body of Christ all believers were included in it, just as all the children of Israel came under the dispensation of law when the law was given at Sinai, even though they had previously lived under another dispensation. God's dispensations are not dependent upon degrees of human understanding, but upon His own sovereign will.

Nevertheless, the truth of 'the mystery' was gradually revealed to and through the Apostle Paul (Acts 26:16; IICor.12:1) so that there was a gradual transition from the old program to the new. The old program did not immediately disappear, to be replaced by the new..."

Thus, I am a Berean Dispensationalist. As a Berean, I have "searched the scriptures" (Acts17:11) from a dispensational standpoint, in order to ascertain whether or not they state that Paul was the first member of the body of Christ. Having done so, I have found that the scriptures never exclude Peter, James, John, or Jude from the body of Christ. And because the scriptures never exclude them, then I have no reason to exclude them, either.

So with the exception of the Traditional Dispensational category, all of the above dispensationalists believe that the Four Gospels, as well as the epistles written by James, Peter, Jude, and John (some also include the epistle to the Hebrews), all contain certain doctrines that were intended for the nation of Israel alone. Since Paul alone proclaimed himself to be "the apostle of the Gentiles" (Ro.11:13), as well as "the minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles" (Ro.15:16), we all believe that only Paul's epistles are written to the church today. Although we firmly believe that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2Tim.3:16), we cannot claim doctrines that were not written to us today.

Yet some people will still misunderstand our definition of a dispensation, since their church used to grant its members a "dispensation" (special permission) to disobey some of its rules. Such a definition, though, is not a scriptural definition; nor is it based upon the scriptural use of the term. From our viewpoint, a dispensation is characterized by the manner in which the Lord looks upon those whom He has chosen. For example, this dispensation of grace is characterized by "the gospel of the grace of God" (Acts20:24).