

Was Paul first in the Body?

Members of the church which is His Body were chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, Eph.1:4. Nevertheless, we shall consider this question despite the fact it is based on incorrect assumptions.

Peter proclaimed the great prophetic Kingdom of Heaven to the Jews in Acts 2. He declared plainly that Jesus of Nazareth was Israel's Messiah who had been raised to sit upon David's throne. See Acts 2:22-36. The "church" did not start with Peter in Acts 2. What about Paul did "the Church" start with him?

The apostle Paul is the only one in Scripture referred to as the apostle of, and teacher for, the Gentiles, see Romans 11:13, Eph.3:1 and 2Tim.1:11. Because of this many assume that "the Church" started when Paul came on the scene at either Acts 9 or 13. We remember however it was Paul who wrote in those days about the ends of the ages, not the beginning of anything. Paul's gospel of Acts 13 was identical to Peter's in its dispensational setting. Paul preached in Acts 13 and Romans 15 that Christ was raised to sit on David's throne.

Drawing the conclusion that the church started with Paul they find comfort in an idea that Paul was the first in the "body of Christ" assumed from a misunderstanding of this passage:

[This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting. 1Ti 1:15-16 \(KJV\).](#)

We notice first of all Paul does not say he was first in the "body of Christ". He tells us God made choice as to the Church which is His Body before the foundation of the world in Eph.1:4. Ephesians was written after the book of Acts. After Israel was put aside at the end of Acts Paul received revelation regarding it but not once does the humble apostle suggest he was first in the Church which is His Body. He certainly could not have been the first in the Church which is His Body in Acts because it had not been revealed at that time.

Paul said he was a pattern of mercy to all those believing thereafter. He contrasts the depravity of his trespasses with the heights of mercy he received from the Lord. He uses the word "first" to emphasize degree, not rank. I doubt such folk would dare suggest Paul was the first sinner since the word "chief" in verse 15 is the same original word "first" in verse 16.

This passage has nothing to do with "Church" membership. Such teaching is out of context. Paul wasn't the first in anything, he was the worst sinner.

Putting aside the protestations of the KJV only believers, modern versions bring out Paul's meaning, further showing the impossibility of the "Paul was first in the body" theory from this passage;

[Faithful is the saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief \(first in degree\): howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me as chief \(first in degree\) might Jesus Christ shew forth all his longsuffering, for an ensample of them](#)

which should hereafter believe on him unto eternal life. 1Ti 1:15-16 (RV).

In the past I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a violent man. But I received mercy because I acted ignorantly in my unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed toward me, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. This saying is trustworthy and deserves complete acceptance: To this world Christ Jesus came, Sinful people to reclaim. I am the worst of them. But for that very reason I received mercy, so that in me, as the worst sinner, Christ Jesus might demonstrate all of his patience as an example for those who would believe in him for eternal life. 1Ti 1:13-16 (ISV).

Paul's object here is not membership of the Church which is His Body but the matter is regarding those who "believe on Him unto eternal life".

We must not assume that because Paul was saved during the Acts period the ends of the ages ceased and a new church age began or was gradually unfolded or progressively revealed. Acts is not a transition book but an ends of the ages book. The Church did not start with Paul in Acts 9 or 13 simply because Paul was converted during Acts.

Others believe that Paul started the church in the Acts period because they fall into the word trap of Galatians chapter 1. They assume that just because Paul received his gospel by revelation that this was "grace" put loosely for the present dispensation of the grace of God, also given by revelation;

And, brothers, I make known to you the gospel which was preached by me, that it is not according to man. For I did not receive it from man, nor was I taught it except by a revelation of Jesus Christ. Gal 1:11-12

Paul received many revelations (2Cor.12:7) and we must not assume all were the same. The gospel given by revelation as per Galatians 1 is not the dispensation of the Grace of God also given by revelation in Ephesians 3. Before seeing exactly what Paul taught during the Acts period, let us examine the theory that the gospel given by "revelation" in Galatians 1 automatically means the Mystery of Ephesians 3.

The word "revelation" in Gals.1:12 is "apocalypses" which means an unveiling, an uncovering; a disclosure, nothing more (Word Study, E-Sword). It does not in any way tell us what was disclosed, except that it was good news. This same word is used of the book of the Revelation and we would be unwise to assume Paul taught all the book of the revelation as his gospel simply because the same word is used. Paul spoke of many mysteries they are not all the same.

In Galatians Paul goes on to say that the Christians were now rejoicing in the glorious change in him and that he was preaching the faith he once destroyed;
But only they were hearing that he who then persecuted us, now preaches the faith which he once ravaged. Gal 1:23

How can Paul be preaching the "faith" (doctrine) he once destroyed if it was completely new and unknown prior to Paul? Paul received his gospel by revelation, but it was preached by others before his conversion.

The revelation given to Paul as described in Galatians was the good news which contained the doctrines he once destroyed, not a new dispensation given to him alone. Let us turn to 1 Corinthians 15 to confirm this:

And, brothers, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you have received, and in which you stand; by which you also are being kept safe, if you hold fast the word which I

preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received, that Christ died for our sins, according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures; 1Co 15:1-4

We notice immediately that the gospel Paul preached was “according to the Scriptures” but of course, the Mystery of Ephesians cannot be found in the Scriptures (Eph.3:8-9). Paul, like the two on the road to Emmaus and the other disciples, knew the O.T. but he did not understand the Scriptures. Just as the Lord opened the minds of the disciples He likewise gave Paul an unveiling, a revelation as well. The disciples were taught by the Lord for 40 days and I wonder how long Paul was in Arabia? It certainly wasn’t three years, please read Galatians 1:17-18 carefully. Paul’s gospel of the Acts period was found in the OT Scriptures and was not the mystery of Ephesians which was also given by revelation. We must distinguish things differing, Phils.1:9-10.

Reading further into 1Cor.15 we find Paul affirming that he did preach the faith he once destroyed;

Therefore whether it was I or they, so we preach, and so you believed 1Co 15:11

Note well friends, “so WE preach” says Paul. It is an easy task to determine who the “they” are from the preceding verses. Others before Paul had taught the “faith” he was now preaching and many had believed. Peter was one Paul mentions who preached before him and folk heard and believed. Perhaps the two apostleships of Galatians 2:7-8 are apostleships of direction rather than evidence of substantially different gospels.

Paul wrote in 1 Cor.4:17 that he was their father, but he acknowledges they had many instructors. Since Paul says they had many other instructors we are again assured that Paul was proclaiming, during the Acts period, the faith he once destroyed.

Righteousness reckoned by grace was certainly more fully written by Paul, but even this wonderful doctrine was “according to the Scriptures” as a reading of Romans and Galatians will show. Peter knew about righteousness reckoned by grace since he had been taught by the Lord as well, see Acts 15:7-9. Peter refers to Cornelius, an event more than likely before Peter had met Paul. It is outside of Scripture to teach that Paul taught Peter “grace”. Peter wrote of the “manifold grace of God” and “the grace of God in which you stand”, see I Peter4:10 and 5:12.

The gospel of Paul during Acts was given by revelation but is not the mystery, the present dispensation of the grace of God of Ephesians 3. It was the “ends of the ages” when he preached that gospel. Paul preached the return of Christ to the earth and the coming kingdom on the earth during Acts.

Paul was the one to whom the present dispensation was given, Paul was the first to know about it after Acts 28. The church which is His Body did not start with Paul in Acts and therefore it is a total confusion to say Paul was the first in the body at either Acts 9 or 13.

Brian R Kelson

brianacts28@gmail.com

www.Acts28.net