

Acts 28 – The Great N.T. dispensational divide

Ephesians 2, by grace are we saved through faith, not of ourselves
Ephesians 1, Paul's prayer for the Ephesians.

Which Believers today are members of the church which is his body?

Tradition sees "the church" from the Gospels and retains much of the Israeli form of worship.

Tradition holds the majority in its sway with little understanding of the dispensational truths for today.

The church which is his body, however, is the called-out company associated with the present dispensation of grace revealed to Paul after Israel was nationally let go at Acts 28.

And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all. Eph.1:22-23.

A minority of Christians come to recognize the dispensational differences in Paul either side of Acts 28, and acknowledge that the present church which is his body did not start in the Gospels and was revealed to Paul alone after Israel was let go for a season.

The common denominator in both positions is faith in Christ as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, but the huge numbers of traditional Christians outwardly oblivious to the present calling of grace calls in question membership of the church which is his body. Once any Christian "sees" today's calling, which is clear and obvious with right division, they are at a loss as to why the majority do not see, and in many cases are ruthlessly opposed to it. Some right dividers have concluded that membership of the church which is his body is based upon understanding and acceptance and the majority who do not understand and reject, are included in another calling not associated with heavenly places.

Those who believe membership is dependent on the believers today receiving from God that wise and revealing spirit of revelation in the knowledge [acknowledgement] of him might turn to this section of Ephesians to support that idea. In other words, they believe only some Christians are given the ability to understand when [by] they acknowledge Christ and thereby become members of this church.

Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: Eph 1:15-17.

Other right dividers believe membership is not dependent on receiving this spiritual wisdom from the Father and is purely by grace and the great love of the God and Father of our Lord Christ Jesus who blessed all believers today with all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places in Christ, not in ourselves. They feel all believers today are members of this calling whether they understand it or not.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them. Eph.2:8-10.

We know that every text has a context, and if we believe that Ephesians is the opening declaration concerning The Mystery, even the present dispensation of the grace of God, then a slow and methodical compilation of Paul's statements in his opening should help us draw an accurate, contextually relevant conclusion to this matter. Let us follow Paul's theme.

He opens this [circular] letter like this.

Paul, apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints who are at Ephesus and to the faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Eph.1:1-2.

Discussion abounds as to whether Paul was referring to two sets of believers here, namely the saints, and the faithful, the thought being not all saints are faithful. Some feel this suggests membership of the body belongs to the faithful group, but I think the following verse makes that argument void.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ; Eph.1:3.

The "us" who have been blessed includes Paul, and the saints and the faithful, indeed some translations have this as faithful saints. Paul includes all the readers as being blessed with all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places in Christ. These blessings are not dependent on any saint being faithful or understanding them, in fact, even today we are not cognizant of these blessings, save that they are all spiritual and in heavenly places. These blessings are ours even though we, who acknowledge the present calling, don't understand them.

This does raise another question often thrown about in dispensational circles, that being, what happened to those saints who crossed the Acts 28 boundary? Did some, like Peter and the other apostles of the Kingdom remained in the earthly Kingdom or were they united into this present company? The answer might be more complex than we first think. We know the 12 were promised 12 thrones judging the 12 tribes, Matt.19, but what about Paul? He was looking for the Jerusalem from above, Gals.4 and Hebs.12. Paul was also anticipating the Law in his heart at the coming in of the New Covenant/Testament, 1Cor.13, 2Cor.3.

The answer is before us in Ephesians. Paul is writing to the saints and faithful who crossed the Acts 28 boundary and included himself and them in the new calling with different blessings and hope. Paul counted his genealogy important in Roms.11, but disregarded it in Phils.3 where he also wrote that he forgot those things behind. Perhaps those who crossed the boundary will inherit all things, but the Lord knows them that are his, 2Tim.2:19. The final answer to this question is best left with the Lord.

Paul continues to make clear statements regarding himself and his readers as he writes of the majestic grace of God poured out in this new dispensation. Notice the "us" and "we" all the way to Eph.1:15. Not once does Paul differentiate between the saints and the faithful, it is everyone embraced in the plural pronouns, "us" or "we." Please open your Bibles to these verses and notice the pronouns.

Eph.1:3. "Us" blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ. Us = the saints and faithful.

Eph.1:4. "Us" chosen in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, "we" should be holy and without blame before him. Us = the saints and faithful.

Eph.1:5. "Us" predestined to the adoption of sons/heirs by/through Christ Jesus according to the good pleasure of his will, [not our will or works]. Us = the saints and faithful.

Eph.1:6. "Us" accepted/highly graced, in the beloved or Son of his love. Praise of his glory. Us = the saints and faithful.

Eph.1:7. "We" redemption through his blood, forgiveness of sins. We = Paul, the saints and faithful.

Eph.1:7-9. "Us" wisdom and prudence [Lk.1:17], made known the mystery of his will, his good pleasure, purposed in himself, riches of grace. We had nothing to do with the revelation of the present calling; it was his good pleasure. Us = the saints and faithful.

Eph.1:11. "We" have obtained/are an inheritance, being predestinated, counsel of his own will. We = Paul, the saints and faithful.

Eph.1:12. "We" praise of his glory. We = Paul, the saints and faithful.

Eph.1:13. "Ye", saints and faithful, sealed by the Holy Spirit. Ye = the saints and faithful.

Eph.1:14. ["Ye"] pledge, redemption of purchased possession, praise of his glory. Ye = the saints and faithful.

It seems impossible to insert any human element into this glorious theme of God's grace. His blessing, choice, appointment, high grace, redemption, forgiveness, unveiling, inheritance, sealing and pledge stem entirely from God alone who works all things according to the good pleasure and counsel of his own will. His own will excludes the will of the individual members who were chosen to benefit from it. Our will or choice or understanding did not choose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. In fact, we contributed nothing for all these glorious benefits to be poured out by the God and father of our Lord Christ Jesus; that is grace.

Paul, having stated these riches of grace given to all and the divine purposes motivated by it, then brings forth his prayer for all who have been so highly favored or graced. His prayer does not ask for anyone to be a member of this wonderful calling, they have already been blessed, chosen, adopted and highly favored in the beloved. Paul is not praying that the saints and faithful will receive these things, God has already made his choice before the foundation of the world, before people were created. We consider Paul's prayer in context, it follows the truths revealed, it does not come before them. This is what Paul prays.

Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, Cease not to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers; That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know

1. what is the hope of his calling, and

2. what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints, And

3. what is the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, Eph 1:15-19.

The prayer is very direct, unambiguous with a clear and precise objective. Paul invokes the father of glory to give something to those who have already been chosen before the foundation of the world, who were already blessed with all spiritual blessings. He seeks the father grant those chosen and blessed a wise and revealing spirit so they might know three things, the hope, the inheritance and the power. His prayer benefits the very same people he addressed in his introduction, the saints and

faithful, they are the “you” and “us.” Paul does not pray they will know to be included or that God grants them this understanding and then includes them.

We might agree that not every believer is granted this spiritual wisdom and revelation for full knowledge or acknowledgment of Christ, but this does not negate what every believer has already received.

It might be helpful if we remember the Acts period. Even Paul opposed the truth, as did the majority of his countrymen, Acts 28:22, but Paul assured the Romans that all Israel would be saved, including those stumbling at the stumbling stone, Roms.11:26. He goes on to write the following,

And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: Rom.11:26.

As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes. For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance. Rom.11:28-29. [Rom.11:33-36.]

Yes, all Israel will be saved, they are an election, and the gifts and calling of God are without change of mind. Ungodliness might be wickedness, but it could also be wrong worship. Israel was a religious nation with the Temple in full operation when Paul wrote Romans, and the nation rejected the truth presented to them, but all Israel will be saved and then they will know as they are known. Yes, Israel rejected Jesus of Nazareth all the way to Acts 28, this did not alter the fact he is Israel's Messiah, and they will be saved and look on the one they pierced.

There is divided opinion that the Gospel of John was sent to the Gentiles after Acts 28 as an alternative hope for believers today who reject the Mystery given through Paul. John, however, was an apostle to the circumcision, and we are better served seeing John as the Gospel proclaiming the very gospel of life that Israel will take to the world when they become the kingdom of priests they were designed to be, Ex.19, Isa.61:6.

Perhaps this mind of God can be found today, just as the majority of believers reject the present truth, they remain in the one calling presented to them. The church which is his body was chosen in Christ, an election without change of mind, we were not chosen in ourselves or by any choice or understanding we may or may not possess.

All believers today are in the only calling revealed through Paul despite the fact many believers are stumbling at the dispensational truths revealed.

When we follow Paul's inspired words after his prayer of Eph.1:15-19a, we see he expands point 3, the exceeding greatness of his to us who believe. He does not limit this power to those who have acknowledged the present truth, the power is to all who have believed. He has directed his letter to the saints and the faithful from the opening introduction, nothing has changed.

He shows this power by referring to the power wrought in Christ and in so doing does take us to the “riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints” or holiest of all. The one thing Paul does not clarify in Eph.1:15-2:10, is point 1, the hope of his calling. Here is Paul following on from his prayer and leading into the power in Christ.

The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know..... what is the exceeding greatness of

his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, Eph.1:18-20.

There, in heavenly places, all things are placed under the feet of Christ, including the church which is his body the fulness, or completeness of him who fills all in all, Eph.1:20-23. Just as Christ returns to Israel and turns away ungodliness, so here, at the appearing, all members of the church which is his body will know as they are known, some will rejoice, some will be ashamed.

Paul continues by assuring his readers, the same saints and faithful he greets in the opening, that they have been made alive with Christ by grace, not by works, neither by any acknowledgment of the truths Paul was revealing.

And you [saints and faithful] *hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins;* Eph.2:1.

But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us [saints and faithful], *Even when we* [saints and faithful] *were dead in sins, hath quickened us* [saints and faithful] *together with Christ, (by grace ye* [saints and faithful] *are saved;)* Eph.2:4-5.

When Paul uses the word “we” in verses 2-3, he includes himself in the actions of “time past.” Like Israel, we Gentiles have lived ungodly lives, yet we have received grace. Not just grace but “accepted in the beloved” or highly graced [Lk.1:28] in the one loved. This grace culminates Paul’s words flowing from his prayer in chapter 1 verse 15.

Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us [saints and faithful] *through Christ Jesus. For by grace are ye* [saints and faithful] *saved through faith; and that not of yourselves* [saints and faithful]: *it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.* Eph.2:5-9.

It seems that Paul does not allow any effort, thought or work to impinge, encroach or in any way project itself into the immeasurable grace that has underpinned this incredible gift of salvation. As we know, the gift does not refer to faith, it refers to the salvation so wonderfully provided after Israel was let go for a time at Acts 28.

If we decide that all believers today have been saved by grace through faith, then what is the difference between those who understand; that have been granted that wise and revealing spirit in the acknowledgment of Christ, and those who reject the present dispensational truth? There is a difference for the believers, but not in membership.

Paul provides things to consider in this very letter. In chapter 4, he writes of the gifts from the ascended Christ, who had descended to reveal the present calling to Paul. These gifts were for the adjusting of the saints until they all came to the unity of the faith. Even when Paul was alive, there were Christians who did not understand the truth revealed to them through Paul. To condemn a believer who rejects this truth gives little space for the journey they are on, and the time it takes for anyone to come to the full knowledge of Christ. We must never judge other Christians for their failure to understand dispensational truth; they are a product of a divided and dysfunctional denominational system.

In chapter 6, Paul encourages the Ephesians and us, to do our service from the heart, as to the Lord knowing that we shall receive from the Lord in that day. Colossians speaks to this as well.

And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men; knowing that from the Lord you shall receive the reward of the inheritance. For you serve the Lord Christ. But he who does wrong shall receive justice for the wrong which he did, and there is no respect of persons. Col.3:23-25 MKJV.

Finally, 2Tim.2 speaks about good soldiers, athletes and framers with the positive results for such labor from the heart. Paul speaks words rich with insight for those who see them in context.

Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee understanding in all things. Remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead according to my gospel: Wherein I suffer trouble, as an evil doer, even unto bonds; but the word of God is not bound. Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us: If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself. 2Tim.2:7-13.

When we compare these scriptures, we might conclude the following.

1. All believers today are members of the church which is his body because this salvation is the gift of God, purposed according to his own good pleasure and based on riches of grace.
2. The gifts of Eph.4 were given to establish the faithful in this new calling. Are they still given today when we have the Scriptures which reveal this new calling? Interesting discussions abound, I believe they are still active.
3. We are to walk worthily of this calling, and everything we do, good or bad is rewarded accordingly.
4. This reward includes salvation with eternal glory or without. All will live with Christ; not all will reign with him. Those who reject this truth, who fail to rightly divide the scriptures will suffer shame and disapproval, 2Tim.2:15, and live lives that are blemished and offensive to Christ, Phils.1:9-10.

All believers are members of our calling, not all believers understand it, even some reject it. Those who do not understand and reject the present truth could be living ungodly lives and will be rewarded accordingly, suffering shame and disapproval in that day.

We who have been granted the wise and revealing spirit to understand these riches of grace in the knowledge of Christ as Head of the church which is his body, rejoice in the Father who has so granted this, and we leave every other believer in Christ in the hands of that same Father of glory who does all things according to the good pleasure of his own will which he has purposed in himself.

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10-03-2025