

CHAPTER 4

“IN CHRIST”

TWO GOSPELS?

The preceding chapter, while primarily concerned with the question of salvation, did digress slightly into what has become a rather big bone of contention among certain dispensationalists. It concerned the internecine debate over whether or not there were two different gospels or just one. It is contended by some that the Lord Jesus and the circumcision apostles, such as Peter, preached one, and Paul preached the other (See, Bob Hill, *The Big Difference Between the Two Gospels*).

The supposed difference between these two gospels is usually distinguished by: (1) a gospel that required good works and law keeping in order to inherit salvation, and (2) a gospel that is not tied with legalism or good works, but rather is a “by-grace-through-faith-alone” gospel. The view that there were two different gospels in the New Testament is based mainly on deductive logic that highlights certain distinctive dispensational characteristics of Paul’s ministry. The logic is compelling and concludes that there is no other alternative but two gospels. Those, like myself, who disagree and who argue for one “common” gospel contend that the existence of dispensational differences do not necessarily support the theory that there were two entirely different gospels. Rather, they contend that while there is development there remains also unity and continuity. Put simply, they are of the opinion that the gospel preached by Christ and the twelve apostles, and even by Paul were essentially the same, for at their core the common gospel called for faith in Jesus Christ, and held forth the hope of an inheritance in God’s kingdom.

I personally agree with this latter view and am convinced that such becomes increasingly evident the more the principle of progressive reve-

lational development is understood and applied. In other words, while there were dispensational differences between the Gospel records and Paul’s epistles, the differences did not mean that an entirely new hope of salvation was being introduced. Believers before Paul were “in Christ” (related to Christ), as were believers after Paul, whether they were Jews or Gentiles. Let my reader ponder the disarming question: Were there two different Christs? Deductive logic has led some dispensationalists to such an outlandish conclusion. Personally, in the words of Professor Dale DeWitt, I prefer to speak of “one common apostolic gospel.” (Unpublished Essay).

Curiously, in passing, there is a sense in which there are shadows of the two gospel theory alive and well in much wider circles than is to be found in limited dispensational thinking. For example, it can be said that the majority of denominational churches, under the umbrella of what is ambiguously called Christendom, are of the opinion that salvation results from faith plus good works. If any one should doubt this let him research what is the authoritative teaching of Roman Catholicism (which lays claim to at least a billion members world-wide), or let him inquire of the average member of any historic denominational church, be it Protestant or Orthodox, and he will soon discover that such generally remains the case.

In trying to appreciate the dispensational setting of the gospel of salvation that was being preached during the days of John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus Christ, it might help if it be kept in mind that the historical scenario was still under the Old Testament administration. The Lord Jesus had even told the multitudes and his disciples that the scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses seat, and because they did they should be obeyed, but their behaviour was another matter, and their pretentiousness, with its counterfeit righteousness, was far from an example that should be emulated (Mat. 23:1-3, 23-27).

A survey of the Synoptic Gospels, and the

early Acts, reveals that Jesus Christ and the coming of the kingdom of God were at the center of the preaching. It was a message that required faith in Christ as the promised Messiah, who as the son of David, would sit on David's throne, and of whose kingdom there would be no end (Lk. 1:32, 33). The need to acknowledge this message and to be pre-pared for this coming kingdom were apparent. It required repentance and submission to water bap-tism, a ritual symbolizing the cleansing from sin (Mk. 1:4, 14,15; Acts 2:38). This was followed by a life of discipleship manifested by fruits worthy of repentance (Lk. 3:8). In other words, the repentance was the beginning and the faith that produced it was then proactive in leading to a life of obedient dedication to the Lord and to his teachings.

A succinct statement of Christ's habitual teachings can be found in what has come to be called the Magna Carta of the Kingdom of God (Mat. 5 & 7. Cf. esp. 7:21-29). Would not his disciples begin to engage in preaching and teaching these same truths. Would it therefore be so surprising if his teaching would contain distinctive dispensational directives? Obviously a passage such as Mark 1:14, 15 would imply this. Would it not be expected that this ministry would be limited to Israel? Also, would it not be expected that there would be new developments in the wake of the revelations connected with Paul's ministry?

THE RICH YOUNG RULER?

Some knowledgeable student will probably balk at what I have just said and will counter with passages such as the one that is found in the Gospels concerning the rich young ruler. This will probably be accompanied by a comment such as, "Paul never preached anything like that hence there must be at least two gospels!" My response would be, "Of course there is a contrast, and such would be expected when one considers the dispensational context in which the episode took place. The record relates how this young ruler

came to the Lord Jesus and wanted to know what he had to do in order to inherit eternal life. It is a passage that, on the surface, seems to be ideal for providing evidence that Jesus and Paul were preaching two entirely different gospels. Certainly, there were differences but is the gospel itself really different? Is it not focused on the hope of a future salvation? A comparison of the Gospel accounts reveals at least four significant facts about this individual who comes with the provocative question: "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*" ""(1) He was rich, (2) He was a ruler, (3) He was young, and (4) He was punctilious in his adherence to the law (Mk.10:17-22; Lk.18:18-23).

What better example could then be found to support the argument that the message in the Gospels was different than what is found in Paul? But I would ask again, is the gospel itself really different, or are the requirements connected with faith different? Need I remind my reader that besides the overall historical context, there is also the need to consider the immediate grammatical context. I read recently the little anecdote of a real estate salesman offering what is generally consider to be very important advice on buying property. It was: "Location! Location! Location!" By way of analogy, the most importand principle in interpreting Holy Scripture is: "Context! Context! Context!"

For example the context that surrounds the dialogue with the rich young ruler is worth considering (Cf. Mat.18:3, 4, 11; 19:14). Here the reader will find the Lord Jesus describing the mind of a child, and also the purpose of his own ministry. I am convinced that there is nothing here about infant baptism, but it can be said that it conveys a lesson concerning the importance of ministry to children. One lesson being that their minds are often more receptive to the gospel than the minds of adults. Children do not have to become adults to be saved, but there is a sense in which adults have to become like children in order to be saved. Having said this, I would remind my reader once again that in the dispensation covering

the Lord's ministry, the law was still in force and was prominent in the thinking of those to whom he was ministering. The Mosaic law was the covenant that was given at Mount Sinai and it was binding on the children of Israel. Moreover, in succinct terms, obedience would bring life, and disobedience death. Such being the case, would not the law feature prominently in the dialogue. Again, I would remind my reader that there was a form of external righteousness that had been introduced by the Rabbis, the Scribes, and the Pharisees. The Lord had tried to bring this fact to the attention of those to whom he ministered, and he did so time and time again. This was evident in the Sermon on the Mount.

What I am trying to say seems to be evident in the Lord's dialogue with the rich young ruler. Did not the Lord expect him to keep the law? Certainly he did, but the thoughtful student will ponder: how could such be, for if strict adherence to the law was a prerequisite for salvation then what does one do with the fact that no one, that is other than the Lord Jesus himself, ever kept the whole law. Even Peter acknowledged that such was the case (Acts 15:10). Paul also wrote that by the deeds of the law no flesh would be justified in the sight of God (Rom. 3:20). James added further testimony when he said that whoever keeps the whole law, yet offends in one point he is guilty of all (Jam. 2:10).

Admittedly, a superficial reading of the passage does appear to teach that the law was the one essential requirement for salvation, but what I have just said would suggest otherwise. Also, whatever presuppositions a student might bring to the passage, the fact remains that the main concern is with salvation, which, as has been noted, is conterminous with inheriting the kingdom of God. This observation should not be derogatorily defamed by an exaggerated supercilious claim that Gentiles now have it much easier for all they have to do is believe. I do not think that Paul ever had such a superficial view of faith, or was ever guilty of such easy believism. The fact that eternal life

was at the crux of the dialogue should in itself provoke serious attention. Could there be a more important subject to demand consideration? John 3:16-18 contains both good news and bad news. As does Romans 6:23. There are only two alternatives: (1) SALVATION, or (2) CONDEMNATION. Such being the case, can it really be true that at one time sinners had to accumulate righteous merit, whereas today this is no longer true, if it ever were true!

As should be obvious, the main issue in the dialogue was prompted by the question concerning what had to be done in order to inherit salvation. The law played a part, but in what sense was it significant? In order to better understand what was really on this young man's mind, the reader might want to take the time to put together the conglomeration of thoughts that are found in Matthew chapter 19, verses 17, 21, 23, 24, and 29. These thoughts and terms all relate to what is meant by 'eternal life.' They are as follows:

"enter into life"

"be perfect"

"enter into the kingdom of heaven"

"enter into the kingdom of God"

"be saved"

"inherit eternal life"

Thus, from this linguistic variation, it is possible to put together a better understanding of the dialogue. The one requirement that is sometimes overlooked is the one dealing with being "perfect." I'll touch further on this in a moment. However, like the Rabbi's of his day, this young ruler was apparently convinced that he had to do something in order to enter into the kingdom of God. This entrance was conterminous with salvation, which, as was just stated was synonymous with the inheritance of eternal life. Many readers will no doubt wonder how entering into the kingdom could be equated with eternal life. A survey of other passages of scripture will help answer the question, as does the final statements in verses 28, and 29. (Cf. also Gen. 13:15; 17:13; Ex.

40:15; Num. 25:13; 2 Chron. 7:16)? Admittedly, the notion of eternal life is one that trips a fuse in my mind, as no doubt it does also in that of my reader's. Eternity is a concept that belongs to the infinite, and cannot therefore be fully grasped by the finite.

Can any finite mind nail it down? I personally cannot think independent of past, present, and future. I can however, to some degree, conceive of "the ages of the ages," and I can grasp the idea of a special quality of life in the kingdom age which is yet to come. However, time, without beginning or ending, is a concept that is beyond my comprehension. As can be seen toward the end of Matthew chapter 19, eternal life is related to the realization of an inheritance which is synonymous with what is described as "*the regeneration*," when "*the Son of Man*," will sit on his glorious throne (Mat. 19:28). In other words, when he does return, those who are in a right relation with him will enjoy the blessings of his reign.

Most commentators seem to be of one mind in concluding that the word, "*regeneration*" (the Greek word is *paliggenesia*) refers to the coming of the kingdom of God and it describes the making of a new social order upon the earth. It is a kingdom which does not come "out from" the present earthly systems of governments, but one which comes "out from" heaven (Jn. 18:36). As has already been mentioned, Daniel the prophet supports this point of view (Dan. 2:44, 45; 7:13-27. The image of the coming of "*the Son of man*," helps to make clear that such will take place in connection with the future establishment of the God's kingdom (Mat.13:41; 16:27, 28; 24: 27-31; 25:31; 26:63, 64). It is not the result of a gradual process like leaven permeating dough, but rather, it will be an event that is sudden, like a large rock falling and striking with powerful devastation.

Coincidental then with "*the regeneration*" will be the inheritance of eternal life. Also, as the conclusion of the passage implies, the arrival of this new world order synchronizes with the

fulfillment of predictive promises related to Israel (Mat. 10:6; 15:24; 19:24; and Rom. 15:8). At the same time, there is to be a separation between those who enter into eternal life, and those who enter into eternal punishment. In the second sermon on the mount, the so-called Olivet Discourse, recorded in Matthew chapters 24 and 25, the Lord Jesus declared:

"Then shall the King say unto those on his right hand, Come ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: . . . And these (those on the left) shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal."

Matthew 25:34, 46

No doubt Paul had the same event in mind when he wrote to the Thessalonian church (1 Thess. 1:10; 5:10; 2 Thess. 1:5-10).

THE CHALLENGE REMAINS

These facts are noteworthy, but there still remains the challenge of explaining the requirement that was placed before the rich young ruler. Did the Lord Jesus, or did he not state that the keeping of the law was required for salvation? It would certainly seem that way. Well, would not this fact alone demonstrate that Paul and Christ were preaching two entirely different messages? Let us be wary of superficial comparisons. For, by the same token, would it not point to the awkward conclusion that no one could be saved since no one could really keep the whole law? Beside, did the Lord really expect this ruler to be "perfect?"

How then can the problem be resolved? Two things are of importance in trying to answer this question (1) The need to allow the principle of progressive revelation to come into play, and (2) The need to understand what the Lord Jesus meant when he called for some quality of perfection. As to the first point, is not progressive revelation intrinsic to understanding the requirement of animal sacrifices during the Old Testament (Cf. Heb. 9:14, 22, 28; 10:4; Rom. 3:21-28). Were not such

sacrifices demanded at that time? Would not faith bring them? Would not the same be true with obedience to the law? Would not faith be motivated to at least try to be obedient to the law? But, as has been admitted, complete obedience, because of the weakness of the flesh, was impossible. So then, was there no one saved during the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus? Who would argue along such lines? How then should the demand for law observance be understood?

Dispensational differences did involve distinctive expressions of faith, but did these differences change the essential gospel of salvation? I wonder if I am stating the question with the right words? Let me try again: Does the entrance of dispensational changes necessarily mean that every change brings a new and different gospel of salvation. As has already been noted, one of the most outstanding changes came in consequence of the revelation given to the Apostle Paul, when God let it be known that Gentiles were now being invited to be co-equal heirs with believing Jews in the kingdom of God. This was a radical change, but did it mean that there was now a new salvation being preached?

Such questions can easily be discounted. However, they are worthy of serious consideration. When ignored, they allow theories such as two future comings of Christ, two future last trumpets, two future first resurrections, two different kingdoms of God, two different churches of God, and even two different Christs of God. Such theories are taught as though they were the inspired authoritative truth of God. There has been progressive revelational development, but it has been consistently related to the one great unified plan of redemption which will be climaxed with the return of Christ and the establishment of God's glorious kingdom upon the earth.

The preceding last sentence lies at the heart of the dialogue with the rich young ruler. Maybe my reader continues to have difficulty with this dialogue. A friend once told me that it is not that

we don't know much, but the problem is more that much of what we know is wrong. Well, how on earth can I say that Paul would never have said what the Lord said in Matthew 19:17? What would he have said? When he was confronted with the question: "*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*" he responded by saying: "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved . . .*" (Acts 16:30, 31). Is this then not a clear contrast and therefore a different gospel? Those answering in the affirmative are courting anachronistic misunderstandings.

The essential element in the answer is one that still calls for faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, but what about Christ's implying that the young ruler needed to keep the law of Moses if he was to be saved? What else could be expected since at the time of the dialogue Israel was under the law? What else then could have been said? That's why I would say that mixing and confusing the various vertical dispensations from God is something akin to a historian making anachronistic judgments. In the dispensational program found in the Synoptic Gospels, obedience to the Mosaic law was expected (Mat. 23:2). Could a Jew living at that time ignore the law and yet expect to be saved? How then would he demonstrate his faith?

The problem here is not only that of mixing dispensations and making anachronistic judgments, but is as I have said, one that springs from a failure to appreciate and apply the principle of progressive revelation. It also reflects a lack of appreciation for the interaction of horizontal and vertical truth. God does not change his standards of holiness and righteousness, but there is the phenomenon of vertical truth where progressive revelation enters the picture.

On the side of horizontal truth the Lord brought into the dialogue the need for perfection. But surely no one can claim to be perfect? Really? Then what about Genesis 6:9, and Job 1:1? Was Noah perfect? Was Job? what about Solomon's

exhortation in 1 Kings 8:61? His words clearly imply that some form of perfection was possible: “*Let your heart therefore be perfect with the LORD our God, to walk in his statutes, and to keep his commandments, as at this day.*” Surely there is no thought of sinless perfection in any of these passages. But there is nonetheless a perfection of motive. Sincere faith does produce this kind of motive. It produced an attitude of heart that motivated David to follow the LORD God of Israel “*with all his heart.*” (1 Kgs. 14:8). Another way of saying this would be to speak of singleness of heart. It was not perfect conduct as such, but rather a positive heart attitude.

Let it be acknowledged that Paul did say, that we are not justified by the works of the law, as he did in Galatians 2:16, but at the same time let it be admitted that he did expect a devotedness of heart that exemplified perfection of motive. He was dogmatic that it is, “*Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us*” (Tit. 3:5). But he also added: “*This is a faithful saying, and these things I will that thou affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works.*” (Tit. 3:8). And incidentally, where would one find an ideal written pattern of good works? I raise this question because I have met Christians who claim, in so many words, that Paul exemplified antinomianism. God forbid! Paul was never at any time an antinomian. Yes, he was dogmatic in declaring that salvation was not by works, but he was just as dogmatic in expecting to see good works as a result of faith (Eph. 2:8-10).

As strange as it might seem, it is possible to profess belief in God, but at the same time, in works to deny him. When Paul wrote these words, he went even further adding, “*being abominable and disobedient, and unto every good work reprobate.*” (Tit. 1:16). What then made the difference? The difference can be seen in the following words that Paul wrote to the Galatian believers: “*But that no man is justified by the law*

in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith: (Gal. 5:11). Apparently, Paul had no qualms about using the Old Testament to prove that men are justified before God, not by their works but by their faith. Those who would pit faith against works reveal a pitiable lack of appreciation for the nature of faith. If I might borrow an ana-logy from horticulture, most people would agree that good roots go a long way to producing good fruit. Liken this to faith and works and the dynamic should be self-evident. This can be seen in a careful exegesis of James 2:14-26. There was never any conflict between Paul and James on the matter of faith leading to good works. It is a rather superficial conclusion to argue in such a manner. In what way can faith be demonstrated before men other than by good works? Faith without works is dead! If it is genuine faith, it will be characterized by obedience to God.

I think therefore that it is safe to assume that with regard to the rich young ruler there was a failure of faith. How can I say this? I can say this on the basis of the following observations: (1) Let my reader note that in the dialogue and in the context there is an emphasis on how difficult it is for a rich man to be saved. The lord himself said: “*It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.*” (Mat. 19:24). Paul expressed similar sentiments when he wrote: “*But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition.*” (1 Tim. 6:9). He also wrote: “*For you see your calling, brethren, how that not many (he did not say, ‘not any’) wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.*” (1 Cor. 1:26).

With these thoughts in mind, there is a need to comprehend the broad picture: (1) The young ruler, “*went away sorrowful for he had great possessions.*” (Mat. 19:21, 22). (2) Notice also that he was a ruler. Again, let me recall that the near context brings to mind the disposition of young children, and the disposition of a servant

(Mat. 19:13-15, 21,22; Mat. 20:26-28; 25:14-30). (3) He claimed to have kept the commandments which were related to that half of the decalogue that dealt with duty to men. One commandment was out of order, namely the one dealing with honoring parents. Had he forgotten his parents? It would appear that it was the riches more than anything that lay at the heart of his failure. Riches can promote feelings of superiority, independence, and selfishness. All are qualities that can easily clash with faith. More than likely, here lay the main problem which was an obstacle to him in becoming a disciple of Christ. While he was storing up treasures on the earth, he could not bring himself to put first the kingdom of God, and to follow Christ by storing up treasures in heaven (Mat. 6:19-21). (4) He was like many of his contemporaries, he was apparently of the opinion that mere external observance of the law was all that was needed to grant entrance into the kingdom of God. How much of the Pharisaical tampering with the law, and the power of traditions had crept into his thinking? What was really needed was a contrite and a single heart that acknowledged Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, and then with such motivation, he could get his list of priorities in the right order, beginning first with the kingdom of God and its righteousness, which would be manifested in a life of obedient discipleship.

For this young ruler it was not to be. Yes, he wanted to share the blessings of the coming kingdom inheritance, but he lacked the faith to possess a pure and single heart. He was somehow or other persuaded that his external observance of the law would be sufficient to guarantee it. But his heart response to the claims of Christ was apparently negative. His "*great possessions*" were allowed to interfere with his becoming a true disciple of the one who was the Messiah-King.

These possible conclusions are based on the statements and implications of the overall historical, or better, the dispensational context of the passage. They reveal that the kingdom was on the horizon of fulfillment and that there was an urgent ethic in force. Something of kingdom characteristics were expected then and there. The hope

of this coming kingdom was to be the motivator in the lives of the disciples, and they were to be walking exemplifications of its righteousness (Mat. 6:19-21, 30-34. Cf. also Lk. 12:22-34; Acts : 44,45;3:2-25,&Isa.65:17-25).

Some reader might hasten to inform me, as some colleagues already have, that we are no longer "disciples." Such a title belonged to the Jewish 'disciples.' And it was included in their commission (Mat. 28:19). I find this objection to be another indication of what I have called disintegrative dispensationalism. Objecting to the application of the word disciple to Gentile members of the church of Christ is indicative of a narrowness of mind that inadvertently is distorting Scripture. Yes, the Jewish apostles were disciples (followers) and were charged to teach (make disciples, followers) of all nations. The word is not a technical word. It simply means 'follower.' A disciple of Jesus Christ is a follower of Jesus Christ. Besides, Paul, on his first missionary journey was want to make disciples of those who were his converts (Acts 14:21). My reader might recall that Paul wanted believers to follow him, but to be his disciples as he was a disciple of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 11:1). And let it also be noted that when Paul returned to these churches and to these converts, on his first missionary journey, he not only ordained elders in the churches, but he also told them that "*we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.*" (Acts 14:22). Are we to assume that this kingdom of God was a different kingdom from the one that the young ruler was desirous of entering? Was it different from the one spoken of in Acts 1:3 and 20:24, 25, and 28:23, 31? How many kingdoms "in Christ" are there? Which comes back to the question: How many gospels "in Christ" are there? Let us remember that being in Christ means being related to him, and being related to him should effect a comprehensive impact on every aspect of the life of every Christian. What was it Paul wrote to the Colossian Church?

And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the father by him. . . . And whatsoever ye

do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not unto men.
(Col. 3:17,23).

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