

In His earthly ministry Jesus Christ said to His disciples, "Follow me" (Matt. 4:19). The only other man in the New Testament that plainly tells believers to follow his example and teaching is the apostle Paul (e.g. 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1). One of the most important truths that a believer can learn is that Paul is the divinely appointed spokesman and pattern for the Body of Christ to follow in this present age. We are not exalting a man or making more out of Paul than the scripture does. We are certainly not putting Christ and Paul on the same level. We know that Paul was the "chief of sinners" saved by grace, while Christ is the holy Son of God and the Savior of sinners. We know that Paul was nothing in himself while Christ is everything for "in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9). But it was to Paul that the glorified Lord committed the revelation of His message and program for this present dispensation (Eph. 3:1-13). It is not the person but the position of Paul that we magnify (Rom. 11:13).

When we compare the books of Matthew through John with Romans through Philemon (Paul's epistles), we realize that on a number of issues we cannot follow Jesus in His earthly ministry and Paul at the same time, because they simply say different things on the same issue! How do we resolve this? We must follow the God-given key to Bible study by "rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

In His earthly ministry to Israel (Rom. 15:8), Christ lived under the law (Gal. 4:4), taught the law (Matt. 5:17), and preached that the prophesied Kingdom (a literal and visible kingdom to be set up on the EARTH, Dan. 2:44) was at hand (Matt. 4:17).

The Jews rejected their King and crucified Him, but He arose from the dead and appeared to His disciples to instruct them and commission them to continue in the kingdom program (Acts 1:1-11). Both Jesus Christ and the apostle Peter said that Israel crucified their King through ignorance (Lk. 23:34; Acts 3:17). Therefore, God gave them another opportunity to accept their King and His kingdom (Acts 3:19-26). Israel fell as a nation when they stubbornly rejected the re-offer of the kingdom in the book of Acts and blasphemed the Holy Ghost (Matt. 12:31-32; Acts 7:54-60). The Lord set them aside as a nation by way of a transition (recorded in Acts 8-28).

In the Old Testament, Israel rejected God the Father when they asked for a human king like the other nations (1 Sam. 8:7) and persecuted the prophets that He sent to them. In the Gospels, they rejected God the Son and crucified Him. In the book of Acts, they rejected the witness of God the Holy Ghost through the apostles (Acts 7:51). Three strikes and you are OUT. Of course, God is not finished with Israel for they will be saved after this age (Rom. 11:25-27).

In Acts 9, Christ appeared to Paul in a heavenly vision while he was on the way to Damascus to persecute the Jewish kingdom church and saved him by exceeding abundant grace (1 Tim. 1:12-16). Christ appeared to him periodically throughout his ministry and revealed mysteries to him concerning a new dispensation (Acts 26:16-18; 2 Cor. 12:1, 7). Paul was not one of the twelve apostles (who were sent to the twelve tribes of Israel), but he was the apostle to the Gentiles. God used him to write thirteen epistles by inspiration to the Body of Christ.

His epistles are "wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Tim. 6:3). He wrote "commandments of the Lord" (1 Cor. 14:37), for Christ was speaking through him (2 Cor. 13:3). Therefore, when we follow Paul, we are following Christ.

The Bible reveals two distinct ministries of Christ. His earthly ministry to Israel concerns that which was "spoken since the world began" (Acts 3:21). His heavenly ministry to the Body of Christ concerns that which was "kept secret since the world began" until it was revealed to the apostle Paul (Rom. 16:25). The moral principles of God never change, but His dealings with man (i.e. dispensations) do change.

Let's consider some subjects concerning which Christ (in His earthly ministry) and the apostle Paul writing by inspiration of God taught something different.

The Law

In His earthly ministry to Israel, the Lord Jesus taught the law (Matt. 5:17-20). This fact stands in stark contrast to the apostle Paul telling the Body of Christ that we are not under the law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14). The moral principles still apply (Rom. 13:8-10), but we are not under the ordinances of the law (such as the sabbath days, Col. 2:14-17). Under the law covenant earthly blessings were conditioned upon obedience and performance (see Deut. 28), but under grace we are blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places because of our position in Christ (Eph. 1:3). Despite what religious people think, being under the law is not necessary to live a righteous life (Gal. 5:18, 22-23).

The Gospel

Many assume there is only one gospel message in the whole Bible. It is true that there is only one gospel by which sinners can be saved in the dispensation of grace (Gal. 1:6-9), but there is certainly more than one gospel in the Bible. The word “gospel” basically means good news. The Lord Jesus preached “the gospel of the kingdom” (Matt. 4:17) and sent His disciples to preach the same message (Matt. 10:17). The gospel of the kingdom was simply the good news that the prophesied kingdom was “at hand.” The apostle Paul clearly says that he received his gospel by “revelation of Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:11-12), which means it was not made known before him. When Christ told His disciples that He was going to die and rise again on the third day, the scripture says that they “understood none of these things: and this saying was hid from them, neither knew they the things which were spoken” (Lk. 18:31-34). In light of the fact that Paul’s gospel is based on the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (1 Cor. 15:1-4), it is clear that “the gospel of the kingdom” and “the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24) are not the same message. The death, burial, and resurrection of Christ was prophesied, but what all it accomplished was not revealed and preached as good news until Paul.

Signs and Wonders

Signs accompany the gospel of the kingdom (Matt. 4:23-24; 10:5-22; Mk. 16:15-20). The Jews require a sign (1 Cor. 1:22). When we are reading about signs in the Bible, we can be sure that Israel is in the context. Even after God postponed the kingdom signs continued in the period recorded in the book of Acts because it was a transition period from Israel to the Body

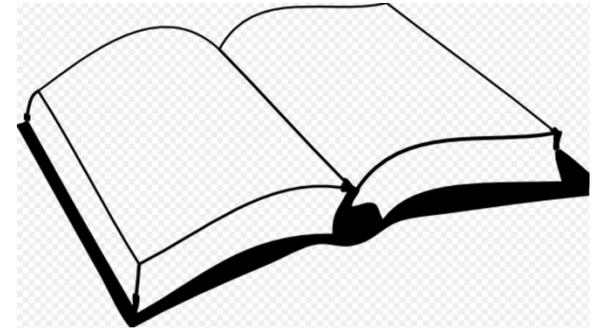
of Christ. Paul had the signs of an apostle (2 Cor. 12:12), but he said during the Acts period that signs would “cease” when “that which is perfect is come” (1 Cor. 13:8-13). The signs ceased with the full revelation of the mystery given in Paul’s thirteen epistles. God used him to “fulfill the word of God” (Col. 1:25-26). During this present age the kingdom of Heaven is not being offered and therefore the signs of it are not being manifested.

Material Possessions

Consider the difference between the teaching of Jesus Christ in His earthly ministry and that of the apostle Paul on the subject of material possessions and provision. The Lord Jesus plainly taught His disciples to sell all and give it to the poor or they could not be His disciple (Luke 12:22-33). This was not a suggestion but a requirement that proved their faith in the kingdom message. Since the kingdom was at hand, they did not need material possessions because in the kingdom they will receive much more (Matt. 19:27-30). They were to take “no thought” for food and clothing because they were to trust God to provide their “daily bread” (Matt. 6:10-11). The kingdom church in the early chapters of Acts took these instructions seriously (Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-35)! The apostle Paul tells the Body of Christ to work with our own hands to provide for our own house, and if we won’t then we shouldn’t eat (1 Thess. 4:11-12; 2 Thess. 3:6-12; 1 Tim. 5:8).

There are more examples we could give concerning the difference between the earthly and heavenly ministries of Christ, but I think these four are sufficient to prove that we must rightly divide the word of truth if we are going to understand the Bible.

Following Paul



Wherefore I beseech you, be ye followers of me.

Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.

1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1

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