

Let's Get Things Started Right

In II Timothy 2:15 Paul the Apostle admonishes to "study" and "rightly divide" the word of truth. To carry out these admonitions we must identify certain starting points in scripture. These starting points and corresponding ending points allow us to make proper divisions in scripture.

Anyone who has ever opened a Bible knows of the division between the Old and New Testaments. While *this* division is the accepted norm for all believers and certainly appropriate for accommodation and uniformity, all true students of the Word must look beyond this simple designation to find God's points of division to get things started right.

The Old Testament

Most probably say that the Old Testament begins in Genesis 1:1. However, on closer examination the Old Testament or *Covenant* is not just a group of books in the Bible. Rather it is an agreement made between God and Israel, which did not even exist in Genesis 1:1.

The book of Hebrews tells us that the New Covenant will be made with the same people with which the Old Covenant was made. Otherwise it would not really be a *New* Covenant but *another* covenant made with a totally different group of people.

For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: Hebrews 8:8

Since the New Covenant will be made with the House of Israel and the House of Judah, the Old Covenant was also made with Israel and Judah.

Hebrews also gives an indication of the *content* of the Old Covenant. The details of the Old Covenant are found in the commandments and ordinances of the law that God gave to Moses.

Then verily the first covenant had also ordinances of divine service, and a worldly sanctuary...Which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation. Hebrews 9:1,10

Understanding with *whom* the Old Covenant was made—Israel, and the *content* of that covenant—the law; the timing of the covenant is very clear. The Law of Moses and its covenant were made with the nation of Israel in the book of Exodus after God had miraculously delivered them out of the land of Egypt.

Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel. Exodus 19:4-6

As Israel kept the law they kept their part of a conditional covenant or agreement with God. God uses the word *covenant* in giving the law to Israel.

Why is all this important? Why does it matter *when* the Old Testament began? Understanding *when* the Old Covenant began helps us understand with *whom* it was made. It was **not** made with Gentiles. It was **not** made with all mankind. It was made **only** with a small group of people, the House of Israel and the House of Judah.

The Old Testament is not just the books of the Bible coming before Matthew. The Old Testament is a specific agreement made between God and Israel in Exodus 19 that defined and governed their relationship. It is wrong and acting in unbelief to take a covenant made with the nation of Israel and apply it to us. We cannot have a relationship with God based on a covenant that He made with Israel.

The New Testament

The New Testament or *Covenant* will be made with the same people with whom the Old Covenant was made. This is the only way it can be truly a *new* covenant.

Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt:...Jeremiah 31:31,32a

In that he saith, A new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away. Hebrews 8:13

As we consider this New Covenant it is reasonable to ask why the need for a new covenant. Was there some problem with the Old Covenant? What could the New Covenant do that the Old Covenant couldn't do? The New Covenant is necessary because Israel failed to keep the Old Covenant.

For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second. For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: Hebrews 8:7,8

The "them" with whom God found fault were not the commandments and ordinances of the law but the people of Israel. Because Israel could not keep their part of the *Old* Covenant there was a need

for a *New Covenant*. The New Covenant is testimony to God's graciousness to Israel. Israel could not receive blessing based on the Old Covenant because they failed to keep the law. In response to that failure God provided a new Covenant. The New Covenant will do for Israel what the Old Covenant couldn't do because the New Covenant is based on better promises.

But now hath he obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises. Hebrews 8:6

They are better promises because they are based on better blood—the blood of Christ. The blood of Christ does what the blood of bulls and goats could not do—take away sins. The blood of Christ is essential to the institution of the New Covenant.

For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins. Hebrews 10:4

How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance. For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. Hebrews 9:14-16

For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins. Matthew 26:28

The New Testament or *Covenant* is based on the blood of Christ. Because of this the New Testament cannot begin in Matthew 1:1. It could not begin until the blood of Christ was shed at the very end of the gospel accounts. Peter's message on the Day of Pentecost just 50 days after the shedding of that blood introduces the New Covenant to Israel, Peter's audience on that day.

Ye men of Israel, hear these words:...Acts 2:22a

Peter offered to Israel the blessing of the New Covenant. Compare the passages below, one a prophecy of the New Covenant from Ezekiel, the other taken from Luke's account of the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2. Highlighted are each of four specific promises to illustrate the giving of the promise by Ezekiel and the beginning of the fulfillment of that promise recorded in Acts 2.

(1) For I will take you from among the heathen, and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. (2) Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. (3) A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, (4) and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. Ezekiel 36:24-27

(1) And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven... (2) Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, (3) and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost... (4) And all that believed were together, and had all things common: And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart. Acts 2:5,38,44-46

Ezekiel spoke of what began on the Day of Pentecost. That day marked the beginning of Israel's New Covenant. After the blood of Christ was shed to ratify the covenant, Israel's promise of a *New Covenant* began to be fulfilled. On that day Peter, the Apostle of the Circumcision began to present the New Covenant to his nation.

Why is all this important? Does it matter that the Day of Pentecost was the beginning of Israel's New Covenant blessings? Understanding *when* the New Covenant began clarifies the Day of Pentecost and the events surrounding it as part of those New Covenant events. As stated previously the New Covenant was **not** made with *all* mankind. It was made **only** with a small group of people, the House of Israel and the House of Judah. Therefore, the Day of Pentecost was also focused on *that* group of people and not on the Gentiles or the Body of Christ.

The New Testament is not just the books of the Bible coming after Malachi. It is a specific agreement made between God and Israel to govern their relationship and blessings in the kingdom. That agreement began on the Day of Pentecost. It is wrong and acting in unbelief to take a covenant made with the nation of Israel and apply it to us. We cannot have a relationship with God based on a covenant that He made with Israel.

The Dispensation of Grace

Both the Old and New Testaments or Covenants deal with Israel and God's relationship to the nation. Where does that leave the Gentiles? If God's covenants were made with Israel, how can we as Gentiles receive salvation and blessing from God? It is only in the writings of Paul the Apostle that we learn of the Church, the Body of Christ and that Gentiles have a special relationship to God. The key element in the formation of the Body of Christ is the *lack of distinction* between Jew and Gentile.

For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. Galatians 3:27,28

And that he might reconcile both [Jew and Gentile] unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: Ephesians 2:16

The Church, the Body of Christ began with the creation of a brand new means of access to God, not the making of another covenant with Israel (or any other nation for that matter). Access to God no longer comes through any specific national group and their covenants, but through a Body of

believers formed without regard to race, nationality, sex, or any other physical distinction.

In the ministry of Paul the Apostle we see this change take place. Paul tells us that *he* is the Apostle of the Gentiles. Paul tells of Israel's blinding and setting aside. It is Paul who tells us that access to God is no longer gained through the nation of Israel but through Jesus Christ and the "one new man" that is His body.

For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office:...For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. Romans 11:13,25

Wherefore remember, that ye being in time past Gentiles in the flesh, who are called Uncircumcision by that which is called the Circumcision in the flesh made by hands; That at that time ye were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world: But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: Ephesians 2:11-16

The Church, the Body of Christ began with Paul and his ministry and we find God's instructions to that Body in his epistles (Romans-Philemon).

Because God offers salvation and blessing to all today apart from any covenants, the Bible calls this time the Dispensation of the Grace of God (Ephesians 3:2). God blesses today totally on the basis of his mercy and grace, not because of any agreement he made with any specific group of people.

And again, why is all this important? Is it necessary to understand *when* the Church of this age began? It helps us to understand that members of the Body of Christ in the Age of Grace are *not* a part of Israel's covenants. We shouldn't try to live under the terms of those covenants. We also realize that the Body of Christ is not limited to a small group of people, such as the House of Israel and the House of Judah. It includes Gentiles and all men without regard to any physical distinction, who by faith become a part of the "one new man." Knowing where the Church, the Body of Christ began teaches us where to look in the Bible for the instructions targeted specifically to us. When we seek direction from the Word for our lives we should not look at the details of Israel's covenants. We look at the books written specifically to and for the Body of Christ, the epistles of Paul the Apostle.

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

We can never obey God's admonition to rightly divide the Word of Truth if we do not get things started right. We must understand the beginning, end, meaning, and purpose of the Old and New Covenants that God made with Israel, and the Dispensation of Grace where He deals with the Gentiles. In this way we are truly workmen approved of God.