One Gospel, Two Apostles

The Dispensational Bifurcation of Peter and Paul Reexamined in Light of the Pauline Corpus and the Witness of Irenaeus of Lyons

A Study in New Testament Theology and Patristics

Abstract. *Certain strands of dispensational theology—most pointedly the so-called "mid-Acts" or hyper-dispensational tradition—hold that the Apostle Peter and the Apostle Paul were not merely commissioned to different audiences but entrusted with materially different gospels: a "gospel of the kingdom" for Israel and a distinct "gospel of the grace of God" for the nations. This paper tests that claim against (1) the explicit self-testimony of the Pauline letters, especially Galatians 1–2; (2) the Greek vocabulary of "gospel" shared across the apostolic witnesses; and (3) the second-century testimony of Irenaeus of Lyons, who depicts Peter and Paul jointly founding and evangelizing the church at Rome with one proclamation. It argues that while a division of* ***labor*** *between the two apostles is firmly attested, a division of* ***gospel*** *is not. The conclusion supports the position that Peter and Paul preached one and the same gospel.*

I. Introduction: The Question Stated

Few questions in the structuring of biblical theology carry as much downstream consequence as the relationship between the apostolic ministries of Peter and Paul. That Paul was preeminently the apostle *to the Gentiles*, and Peter preeminently the apostle *to the circumcised*, is stated plainly in the New Testament and disputed by no one. The contested question is narrower and sharper: did this division of audience entail a division of *message*? A particular dispensational tradition answers yes.[1]

On this reading, the Twelve, with Peter at their head, continued to proclaim the "gospel of the kingdom" rooted in the Abrahamic and Davidic promises to national Israel, while Paul received by direct revelation a separate "gospel of the grace of God" constituting a new and previously hidden administration—"the church, which is his body." In its stronger

[1]The terminology varies. "Hyper-dispensationalism," "mid-Acts dispensationalism," and the "Grace Movement" are the labels most often associated with the position described here, particularly as advanced by E. W. Bullinger, Charles H. Welch, Cornelius R. Stam, and J. C. O'Hair. Mainstream dispensationalism (Scofield, Chafer, Ryrie) does *not* hold that Peter and Paul preached two different gospels; it is the more radical wing that presses the bifurcation to this degree.

forms this view holds that the two messages are not merely two phases of one plan but two distinct evangels, such that conflating them produces confusion about salvation itself.[2]

This article subjects that thesis to three tests in turn: the lexical evidence of the word "gospel" in the Greek New Testament; the autobiographical testimony of Paul in Galatians; and the external, second-century witness of Irenaeus of Lyons, whose account of Peter and Paul at Rome has been curiously underused in this debate. All English Scripture is cited from the ESV; Greek is cited from NA28 and, for the patristic material, from the critical editions.[3]

II. The Vocabulary of "Gospel" in the Greek New Testament

The dispensational argument leans heavily on the observation that the New Testament can speak of "the gospel of the kingdom" (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας, Matt 4:23) and elsewhere of "the gospel of the grace of God" (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ, Acts 20:24). The inference drawn is that two genitive qualifiers signal two gospels. But this inference does not survive contact with the way the genitive functions across the Pauline and Petrine corpora.[4]

The single noun εὐαγγέλιον takes many qualifying genitives in the New Testament without thereby multiplying the gospels. Paul speaks within the space of a few verses of "the gospel of God" (εὐαγγέλιον θεοῦ, Rom 1:1) and "the gospel of his Son" (τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ, Rom 1:9), and of "my gospel" (τὸ εὐαγγέλιόν μου, Rom 2:16). No one supposes these are four different evangels. The qualifier names the source, the content, or the herald—not a separate saving message. The genitive is descriptive, not partitive.

Decisively, when Paul does contemplate a genuinely different gospel, he does not classify it as a legitimate alternative for another audience; he anathematizes it. In Galatians he writes that even if he himself or an angel should preach "a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you" (παρ' ὃ εὐηγγελισάμεθα ὑμῖν), "let him be accursed" (ἀνάθεμα ἔστω, Gal 1:8). And he insists in the same breath that there is not in fact "another" gospel (ὃ οὐκ ἔστιν ἄλλο, Gal 1:7). A theology that posits two distinct, simultaneously valid gospels must reckon with the fact that the apostle most central to the theory denies the very category.

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[2]C. R. Stam, *Things That Differ: The Fundamentals of Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Berean Bible Society, 1959), 23–41, argues that the "gospel of the kingdom" preached by the Twelve and the "gospel of the grace of God" committed to Paul are distinct messages for distinct administrations.

[3]All English Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV), *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001). Greek New Testament citations follow the Nestle-Aland 28th edition (NA28).

[4]On the verb εὐαγγελίζομαι and its cognate noun εὐαγγέλιον, see G. Friedrich, "εὐαγγελίζομαι κτλ.," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:707–737.

III. The Testimony of Paul: Galatians 1–2

A. One Gospel, Independently Received

Galatians is the natural proving ground, because in it Paul both (a) most emphatically distinguishes his own apostolic commission from that of the Jerusalem leaders and (b) most emphatically affirms the singularity of the gospel they share. The dispensational reading seizes on (a); the chapter's logic depends on (b).

Paul affirms that his gospel came not from man but "through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (δι' ἀποκαλύψεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, Gal 1:12). The ESV renders the surrounding claim:

> *For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. (Gal 1:11–12)*

This is the high-water mark for the dispensational case, and it should be granted its full weight: Paul's gospel was not mediated to him by the Twelve. But independence of *reception* is not difference of *content*. Paul's own argument requires that the revealed gospel and the Jerusalem gospel be one, for otherwise his subsequent appeal to Jerusalem's recognition would prove nothing.

B. The Jerusalem Recognition and the Division of Labor

In Galatians 2 Paul recounts laying his gospel before the Jerusalem "pillars" (στῦλοι), "in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain" (Gal 2:2). The outcome is mutual recognition, and here the New Testament gives us the very text the dispensationalist appeals to—read, however, in its own context:

> *On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised (for he who worked through Peter for his apostolic ministry to the circumcised worked also through me for mine to the Gentiles)… they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. (Gal 2:7–9)*

The Greek is precise and, on close inspection, fatal to the two-gospels thesis. Paul writes that he had been entrusted with τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς ἀκροβυστίας ("the gospel of the uncircumcision"), as Peter with τῆς περιτομῆς ("of the circumcision"). Critically, the noun εὐαγγέλιον occurs only *once*; it is governed by a single article and shared by both clauses. The genitives "of the uncircumcision" and "of the circumcision" do not modify two gospels but name two *spheres of mission* for one gospel. The grammar describes a division of *audience*, explicitly not a division of *evangel*. This is confirmed by v. 8, where the same God "worked" (ἐνεργήσας) through both men for the one apostleship.

C. Antioch: The Unity of the Gospel Defended

The Antioch confrontation (Gal 2:11–21) seals the point from the opposite direction. When Peter withdrew from table fellowship with Gentile believers, Paul opposed him "to his face" because Peter's *conduct* "was not in step with the truth of the gospel" (οὐκ ὀρθοποδοῦσιν πρὸς τὴν ἀλήθειαν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, Gal 2:14). The rebuke is unintelligible on the two-gospels model. If Peter operated under a different gospel with different terms for a different people, Paul could have had no standing to correct him by appeal to "the truth of the gospel"—as though it were one shared standard binding on both. Paul's argument presupposes a single gospel that Peter, of all people, was in danger of betraying in practice. The unity Paul defends is precisely the unity the bifurcation theory denies.

IV. The Witness of Irenaeus of Lyons

A. Peter and Paul Together at Rome

If the internal evidence already strains the two-gospels reading, the earliest external testimony breaks decisively against it. Writing around A.D. 180, Irenaeus of Lyons—whose own teacher Polycarp had been a hearer of the apostolic generation—describes the origins of the written Gospels with a now-famous notice about Peter and Paul:

> *Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church.*[5]

The Greek, preserved by Eusebius, reads that this occurred τοῦ Πέτρου καὶ τοῦ Παύλου ἐν ῥώμῃ εὐαγγελιζομένων καὶ θεμελιούντων τὴν ἐκκλησίαν—"while Peter and Paul were evangelizing at Rome and founding the church." Two features deserve emphasis. First, both apostles are the joint subject of a single participle of εὐαγγελίζομαι: they are *co-evangelists* of one and the same proclamation. Second, the church they found at Rome is by every account a *predominantly Gentile* congregation—precisely the field the dispensationalist assigns to Paul alone. Irenaeus places Peter there, evangelizing it, alongside him.

Irenaeus presses the point in his appeal to apostolic succession, where Rome is "the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious apostles, Peter and Paul."[6] He proceeds to trace a single line of bishops—Linus, Anacletus, Clement—transmitting one "faith preached to men" (τὴν …

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[5]Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* (Against Heresies) 3.1.1. The Greek is preserved by Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.8.2–4; the work otherwise survives chiefly in an ancient Latin translation. Text in A. Rousseau and L. Doutreleau, *Irénée de Lyon: Contre les hérésies, Livre III*, Sources chrétiennes 211 (Paris: Cerf, 1974).

[6]Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.3.2. English: A. Roberts and W. H. Rambaut, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Buffalo: Christian Literature, 1885).

πίστιν) through the succession.[7] There is no hint of two parallel deposits, one Petrine-Jewish and one Pauline-Gentile, transmitted side by side. There is one tradition, founded by both apostles together.

B. Irenaeus' Theological Stake in One Gospel

This is no incidental remark. Irenaeus' entire polemic in *Against Heresies* is directed against Gnostic teachers—notably the Marcionites and Valentinians—who *did* drive wedges between apostles and between gospels, exalting a Paul severed from the Twelve and a saving message hidden from the others. Against exactly this, Irenaeus insists that the apostles "did all equally and individually possess the Gospel of God," one undivided εὐαγγέλιον held in common.[8] It is a striking irony that the hyper-dispensational division of Peter from Paul reproduces, in conservative Protestant dress, the very structure of apostolic disunity that the second-century church identified as the hallmark of Marcion's heresy.

C. The Convergent Patristic Voice

Irenaeus does not stand alone. Clement of Rome (c. A.D. 96) already pairs Peter and Paul as the twin "pillars" of the faithful generation who bore witness and went to glory; Tertullian likewise binds them together at Rome as the joint apostolic foundation of that church.[9] The New Testament itself supplies the capstone: the author of 2 Peter calls Paul "our beloved brother" and ranks his letters with "the other Scriptures," conceding only that some matters in them are "hard to understand," never that they constitute a rival gospel.[10]

> *And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him… (2 Pet 3:15)*

Whatever one concludes about the authorship of 2 Peter, the document is incontrovertibly early and self-consciously Petrine in voice; that such a text reaches for Paul as "beloved brother" and "Scripture" rather than as the herald of a separate evangel is itself powerful evidence for how the apostolic relationship was understood in the earliest church.

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[7]Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.3.3.

[8]On Irenaeus' rule of faith and his anti-Gnostic insistence on a single apostolic deposit, see E. Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 117–140.

[9]Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* 36; Clement of Rome, *1 Clement* 5.2–7, links Peter and Paul together as the chief examples (οἱ μέγιστοι καὶ δικαιότατοι στῦλοι) of the faithful generation.

[10]2 Peter 3:15–16. The Greek describes Paul's letters as containing some things δυσνόητα ("hard to understand"), but never as heterodox; Paul is called "our beloved brother" (ἀδελφὸς ἡμῶν).

V. Evaluation: What the Evidence Does and Does Not Support

It is important to grant the dispensational tradition what the texts do grant it. The New Testament unambiguously attests a *division of apostolic labor*: Paul to the Gentiles, Peter to the circumcised (Gal 2:7–9). It attests that Paul's commission and his understanding of the inclusion of the Gentiles came by direct revelation rather than by catechesis from the Twelve (Gal 1:12; Eph 3:3). It attests that the mystery of Jew and Gentile in one body was, in a real sense, "hidden for ages" and newly disclosed (Eph 3:4–6; Col 1:26). A responsible reading must preserve these emphases, and the better dispensational writers are right to highlight them.

What the evidence does ***not*** support is the further step—the leap from a division of labor and a distinctness of *revelatory mode* to a division of *gospel*. On that decisive point three independent lines converge against the thesis: (1) the grammar of Galatians 2:7, where one articular εὐαγγέλιον is shared between the two mission fields; (2) Paul's own denial that any "other" gospel exists, on pain of anathema (Gal 1:6–9), and his rebuke of Peter by appeal to one shared "truth of the gospel" (Gal 2:14); and (3) the unbroken patristic memory, crystallized in Irenaeus, of Peter and Paul *jointly* evangelizing and founding the Gentile church at Rome with a single proclamation.

VI. Conclusion

The dispensational instinct to read the apostolic age as carefully ordered, and to take seriously the distinct shape of Paul's commission, is not without warrant. But the strong claim—that Peter and Paul preached two different gospels to two different peoples—cannot be sustained. The Greek of Galatians 2:7 refuses to multiply the noun; Paul's anathema in Galatians 1 refuses to license a second evangel; his rebuke at Antioch presupposes one gospel binding on Peter and Paul alike; and the earliest external witness, Irenaeus of Lyons, portrays the two apostles standing together in Rome, εὐαγγελιζομένων—evangelizing as one—and laying the foundation of a single church for Jew and Gentile alike.

The conclusion of this study, therefore, is that the evidence supports the historic position: **Peter and Paul preached one and the same gospel.** They differed in the field assigned to them and in the manner by which the message reached them, but not in the message itself. The one God who worked through Peter for the circumcised worked also through Paul for the nations—and the two most glorious apostles, in the memory of the church that knew their students, founded one church upon one gospel of the grace of God.

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