

Sunday, June 3, 2012—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 69 The State of Pauline Truth by 1900

E.W. Bullinger's *The Church Epistles*, 1898

- In 1898, Bullinger wrote a series of articles on the Church Epistles. In 1902, these individual articles were compiled and published as a single volume titled, *The Church Epistles*. (Carey, 237-238) It is important to note that all of the information contained in the 1902 book was originally published in 1898. Consequently, *The Church Epistles* should be viewed as pre-1900 testimony as to the state of Pauline truth.
- Since *The Church Epistles* is quite lengthy, we will only consider those sections that are most important to our overall purpose of assessing the state of Pauline truth before 1900.
- In the introduction, Bullinger contends that there was an order in which Pauline truth was “lost” and “recovered.” Moreover, the reason that Christendom is so confused is because the church has not apprehended Pauline truth as presented in the church epistles.
 - “It was Pauline truth and teaching from which all had “turned away.”

It was this turning away from the truth as taught by the Holy Spirit through Paul, especially as contained in the epistles to the Ephesians, that led necessarily

(1) To the loss of the teaching concerning the Mystery; that truth concerning the one Body of Christ. The effect of this was at once to put everything wrong ecclesiastically, and to make room for all the various and different “Bodies,” so-called, with all the consequent divisions and schisms of the church.

Instead of recognizing “the One Body” which God had made, men set about making their own “Bodies” and Sects and with ecclesiastical confusion came the loss of the truth as to the Christina’s perfect standing in Christ as having died and risen in Him.

(2) Next, after this, went the truth of the Lord’s promised return from heaven; and of resurrection, as the one great and blessed hope of the church. . . Having lost the truth of what God had made Christ to be unto us, and the joy as to our standing thus given, in looking for the blessed hope, preparation for death and judgment was the necessary result, and therefore

(3) The next thing to go was the truth as to what God had made us to be in Christ; and “justification by faith” and by grace was lost. The way was now open for the full tide of error to come in: and it came in, like a flood, with all the corruption and superstition which ended in centuries which have the significant description “the dark ages” . . .

The reformation itself—what was it, but the beginning of a recovery of these great truths? The remarkable fact is that the recovery of these truths has taken place in the inverse order to that in which they were lost.

Justification by grace through faith was the first great truth recovered at the Reformation. This was the truth over which that great battle was fought and won, though the victory was far from complete. For not until the nineteenth century had well begun did the

Lord's return from heaven begin to become again the blessed hope of His church. In later years the subject has become more and more precious to increasing numbers. . .

The truth of the Mystery, as it was the first to go, so, it seems, is the last to be recovered.

It is with the hope of doing something to recover this truth that these papers have been written on the Church Epistles. May the Lord use them to bring back vital truths to their proper place, that their power may be felt in the hearts and seen in the lives of an increasing number of the members of the Body of Christ.

The cause of all the confusion around is that thousands of those who profess to be Christians know little or nothing of these Church Epistles. There is no other profession which they could enter without being able to pass a satisfactory examination in the textbooks set forth for that purpose. There is no position in life that anyone could apply for without being asked how much one knew of its duties and responsibilities. But the Christian "profession" is treated in quite a different manner, and as quite a different matter. Anyone may undertake that, all the while being totally ignorant of these Church Epistles:--"The Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments," are considered sufficient for the Christian position and profession. Hence the almost total neglect of these Epistles. The four Gospels and the Sermon on the Mount are taken as the essence of Christianity, instead of the Epistles specially addressed to Churches. Hence the great ignorance of Christians as to all that God has made Christ to be unto His people, and all that He has made them to be in Him. Not knowing their standing in Christ, and their completeness and perfection in Him, they are easily led into error concerning their state and their walk. Many, who know they are justified by grace, yet seek to be sanctified by works.

Nothing but full knowledge of what is revealed for our instruction in these Church Epistles will effectually deliver us from all the new doctrines and schools of thought which find an entrance into our midst." (1-4)

- In the first chapter titled, "The Seven Church Epistles: The Importance of Their Order," Bullinger contends that the teachings of Christ in the Gospels have been exalted over the teachings of Christ through the pen of Paul as recorded in the Church epistles. Herein lies the reason that Christendom is in such confusion, they have failed to recognize Pauline authority.
 - "It is a serious blow to Inspiration when the importance of one part of Scripture is exalted above another. To do this is to reduce the Bible to the position of any other book, and practically to deny that the whole is made up of "the words which the Holy Ghost teacheth."

This is done in the present day when, according to the new Ritschlian School, *The Teaching of Jesus* is exalted above the Teachings of the Holy Spirit by Paul, as though there were a rivalry between the two.

The words of Christ, and the words of Paul are equal in weight and importance, inasmuch as both are recorded and given to us by the same Holy Spirit; and are therefore equal in authority. That authority is Divine; and no difference can be made between them without jeopardizing the very essence of Inspiration.

That there is a difference is clear. But this difference arises from failing to rightly divide the word of Truth as to the various Dispensations of which it treats.

What He said on earth is necessarily of the highest importance to us dispensationally as showing how, through His rejection by His people Israel, “the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles” (Acts 28:28). But that teaching was given to special persons under special circumstances, and it must be interpreted and applied accordingly. It was not designed as a compendium of instruction for the Church of God, for the Church was not then being formed, and, as a matter of fact, the churches to whom the epistles were addressed did not at that time possess the four Gospels as we have them. . .

Seven churches were addressed as such by the Holy Spirit. Seven being the number of spiritual perfection. . . The seven epistles of the Holy Spirit by Paul had already been written and read, and neglected and practically forsaken, when Christ sent His own seven to those seven churches in Rev. 2 and 3. . . Some would tell us to go back to the first three centuries to find primitive Christianity in its purity. But these Scriptures show that we cannot even go back to the first century. The only successors the Apostles knew of were linked to “grievous wolves” (Acts 20:29).

The seven churches to which the Holy Spirit addressed His epistles by Paul are Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians.” (5-7)

- In 1898, Bullinger is very clear that the truth of the mystery was revealed to Paul during the Acts period. This can be clearly discerned by considering His comments on Romans 16:25-26, an Acts Period epistle.
 - “The importance of thus rightly dividing is seen in the final member (16:25-27) of the Epistle, as in every other. Here we have the mystery in contrast to “God’s Gospel” (in 1:1-6). There are those who willfully close their eyes and perversely refuse to see the difference between these two. But the Word is clear for all who have the eyes of their understanding opened. Eph. 1:18 declares the necessity of this for the understanding of the Mystery which is the great subject of Ephesians, as we shall see. . . It surely must be clear to the simplest honest mind that “God’s Gospel,” which is expressly stated to have been “promised afore by His prophets in the Holy Scriptures,” cannot possibly be the same as “the Mystery which was kept secret since the world began, but is now made manifest by prophetic writings.

If they be the same, then language is useless for the purpose of revelation. If this be “doctrine and instruction”—what is the special instruction conveyed by stating that “promised afore” means “kept secret from times eternal” (R.V.) until now?

What answer could be given to the Infidel, who believing what is taught by some Christians, as to this mistaken identity, exposes such a discrepancy as is thus created?

No: we abide by the teaching here given, that “the Mystery” was a revelation made to Paul (II Cor. 12:1, 7; Gal. 1:12, etc.), after this Divine calling to be an Apostle. . .

So, in like manner, there is “good news” concerning the body of Christ, of which His people now are the members on earth, and He is the great and glorious Head in heaven. This is “good news,” and it is part of the Gospel. Being specially committed to Paul, he sometimes speaks of it as “my” Gospel, as distinguished from that committed to the

twelve. He speaks of it as “my Gospel” here (16:25). And, whether this refers to the Mystery. . . And the preaching, etc. the conclusion is the same: that “the Mystery,” always hitherto hidden, cannot be the same as that which was promised afore.

What the Mystery (or Secret) is, it is not the purpose of the Epistle to the Romans to teach. The subjective, doctrinal foundation for it is laid; and it is merely mentioned at the close in order to complete the beautiful structure of the Epistle, and to prepare the way for it to be taken up in the Ephesians; where it is fully dealt with as the next great lesson to be taught in Roans must first be experientially received and learned, before we can pass to the more advanced lesson of Ephesians. Having learned what it is to have died with Christ, and to have been raised with Christ; we are, in Ephesians, further taught what it is to be now already seated in the Heavenlies in Christ.” (75-77)

- In his comments on “The First Epistle to the Corinthians,” Bullinger is explicitly clear that the revelation of the mystery is the truth about the one body of Christ. Paul could not teach the Corinthians this because they were not spiritually ready to hear but were divided into man-made groups. The main point is this, Paul knew the mystery when he wrote the Corinthians during the Acts Period but could not teach it to the Corinthians because of their immature spiritual state.
 - “We have seen how, in Rom. 16:25-26, “the Mystery” is referred to and stated as a fact. The time was come for it to be made known, that the saints might be established as the Church of God, apart from the earthly hope of Israel as a nation, now, that as a nation Israel was cast-off. The saints were to know a higher and a heavenly calling. But in I Cor. 2 the reasons are given why, when the apostle was at Corinth, he could nor preach “the Mystery” to the saints there. . . Instead of recognizing that they were “one body in Christ” and “members one of another” (Rom. 12:5), they were forming separate “Bodies” on their own, and classing themselves under different teachers, and everyone said, “I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas” (I Cor. 1:12). Instead of reckoning themselves as having died with Christ to sin, since he had died for their sins, they were living in sin. . . This is why he could not preach “the Mystery” to them. . . owing to their division, and their being taken up with their own “Bodies,” they were not in a fit condition, spiritually, to receive the revelation of the Mystery, which is the one body of Christ, of which He is the glorious Head in heaven, and His people the members of it on earth. This is a spiritual Body. This is a spiritual union and a spiritual truth. It can be declared only to spiritual persons. . . The Mystery involves the full truth of this new and heavenly standing. It involves truth far beyond substitution in death; it involves union with Christ in all the value of his death, burial, and resurrection. It embraces the truths connected with His ascension and coming again. It involves not only our present stand in Christ, but the hope of our union with Christ in glory, when He shall come to be glorified in His saints.” (81-84)
- Bullinger clearly states that Paul knew the mystery when he was in Corinth planting the church in that city. “Something of “the Mystery” which he could not announce to them when he first visited them, and planted the church of Christ among them.” (85) It is clear from Bullinger’s own pen, that early in his ministry he did not distinguish between the Acts and post-Acts epistles of Paul, nor did he start the church in Acts 28.
- Bullinger’s discussion of “The Epistle to the Galatians,” another Acts Period epistle, includes a section on baptism. The significance of this section should not be underestimated. The fact that it was originally penned in 1898 makes it quite possibly the earliest known (to this author at this time) explanation of a no water position on baptism.

- “As to baptism, there is the same remarkable reference to “as many as were baptized,” and while in Romans we are taught the dogmatic truth as to our death with Christ, expressed “in the likeness of His death,” the old man being put off having been “crucified with Christ;” here (in Gal. 3:27) the baptism with the Spirit is referred to whereby Christ, the New Man is put on, i.e., that those, who are risen with Christ “in the likeness of His resurrection,” wherein they are to exist (Rom. 6:5) stand covered with Him and His righteousness as with a garment. No longer reckoned as being in the first Adam, but standing before God on new ground, resurrection ground, “in Christ,” having thus “put on Christ” not by baptism in water, but by burial and resurrection with Christ. When the exhortation is given to “put on Christ” it can mean only that we are to reckon ourselves as having died and risen in Christ. How else can it be? Truth, to be practical, must be practicable. In what way can we mortify the flesh? Not by controlling it. Controlling is not killing, and the word rendered “mortify” means to put to death. By what act, then, can we put the flesh to death, except by reckoning ourselves as having died, according to Rom. 6:11, and by knowing that our old man was crucified with Him (Rom. 6:6)? This is the knowledge which is given in Romans and the practical outcome of it is seen in Gal. 2:20.”

Summary of *The Church Epistles* 1898

- An analysis of *The Church Epistles* reveals the following aspects of mid-Acts Pauline dispensationalism. Once again, this evaluation is critical because it does not turn up any hint of the Acts 28 position that dominated Bullinger’s later writings.
 - All the epistles of Paul addressed to the churches (Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians) are for the church of this dispensation.
 - Paul’s words contained in the epistles are equal to those of Christ recorded in the four gospels. The failure to acknowledge and apply this truth has led to the teachings of Jesus being exalted over the teachings of the Holy Spirit through the pen of the Apostle Paul.
 - Romans 16:25 lays the doctrinal foundation for Ephesians where the truth of the mystery is fully developed. Therefore, Paul knew the mystery when he wrote Romans in Acts 20.
 - Furthermore, Paul knew the mystery when he went to Corinth (I Cor. 2:7-8) but did not widely preach it because of the spiritual state of the Corinthians (I Cor. 2:1, 3:1).
 - In his comments on Galatians 3:27, Bullinger is explicitly clear that “the baptism with the Spirit is referred to whereby Christ, the New Man is put on . . . not by baptism in water, but by burial and resurrection with Christ.” Bullinger is clearly teaching a no water position with regard to the issue of Baptism and identification with Christ.

State of Pauline Truth by 1900

- After surveying the works of Darby, Trotter, Holden, Mackintosh, and Bullinger written before 1900 we have clearly demonstrated that the following aspects of Pauline truth were known and in print before the turn of the century. In no particular order:

- Clear distinction between prophecy and mystery.
- Church was a unique Pauline revelation unknown prior to the time of Paul.
- Despite an official Acts 2 stance on the part of Darby and Trotter, the opening chapters of Acts are viewed as being Jewish in the character and content. Acts 7 is viewed by these men as the final tale of Judaism. Meanwhile, Holden, Mackintosh, and Bullinger are all clear that Acts 2 was not the beginning of the body of Christ.
- The Church was in the mind God before the world began. It was thus first in the plan and program of God but last in order of revelation.
- The mystery pertains to the formation of the body of Christ. The truth that Jews and Gentiles would be reconciled to God in one body by the cross was never revealed prior to the ministry and writings of the Apostle Paul.
- The Church's blessings are spiritual in nature and heavenly in position, whereas, Israel's blessings were physical in nature and earthly in position.
- The phrases "time past" and "but now" were in usage to explain dispensational distinctives.
- Principalities and powers in heavenly places are taught the manifold wisdom of God by the church the body of Christ.
- The dispensation of the fullness of times is a future dispensation in which all things in heaven and on earth will be centered in the person of Jesus Christ.
- The source of all the confusion in Israel stems from the failure to rightly divide the word of truth as well as from the general ignorance of the mystery.
- Paul is the divinely appointed instructor for the dispensation of grace just as Moses was during the dispensation of the law.
- The church in the wilderness (Acts 7:35) is different from the church the body of Christ.
- The mystery includes the following three points (Eph. 3:6)
 - That the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs.
 - That they should be one body
 - That they should be partakers or co-partners of God's promise in the Messiah
- The establishment of the kingdom is the subject of prophecy. Therefore, the Old Testament, Four Gospels, as well as early Acts contain a consistent testimony to Israel. The Four Gospels and Acts record the history of Israel's rejection of her king and kingdom.
- John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, and the 12 Apostles present a consistent ministry to Israel during the Gospels and early Acts through the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom. Consequently the parables, i.e., the mysteries of the kingdom in Matthew have nothing to do with the church the body of Christ.

- Satan's actions in bringing about the death of Christ wrought out God's secret purpose concerning the church the body of Christ. The body of Christ will dispossess Satan and his angels from the current positions in the heavenlies and inherit their vacated positions of rank and authority. Through the revelation of the mystery, Satan's entire plan of evil is thwarted.
 - Christendom has degenerated into a form of bastard Jewish because they have failed to rightly divide the word of truth. Israel's program has been mixed with the Body's program which has caused the church to fall short of true understanding.
 - The difference between the believer's standing and state was understood.
 - Pentecost is not the beginning of the body of Christ.
 - The Church is not the bride of Christ but part of the Bridegroom.
 - All the Pauline Epistles, even those written during the Acts period, are for this dispensation.
 - There was a difference between the gospel of the kingdom and the gospel of the grace of God committed to Paul. Failure to understand Paul's gospel articulated in the first 8 chapters of Romans were the source of the church's confusion.
 - The Blessed Hope of the Church was the rapture when the Lord returned to meet the saints in the air. This event was clearly understood to be different and distinct from the Lord's bodily second coming recorded in Revelation 19.
 - The body of Christ is formed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit into Christ. This is not accomplished through the baptism with water.
 - Those standing for Pauline authority can always expect to be in the minority when compared with the professing church.
- There can be little doubt that the real history of the resurgence in Pauline truth is much more edifying, enlightening, and fascinating than the instructional histories that have for too long dominated these historical discussions within the so-called Grace Movement. By the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century there were already strong voices contending for the word of God rightly divided and the revelation of the mystery committed to the Apostle Paul.

Works Cited

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