

Sunday, October 21, 2012—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 76 Rightly Dividing E.W. Bullinger: The Emergence of Acts 28ism, Part 1

Introduction

- In Lessons 67-69 we considered Bullinger’s early testimony concerning Pauline truth by evaluating the following printed works:
 - *Things to Come: A Journal of Biblical Literature*, Volumes 1 and 2 (July, 1894-June, 1896)
 - *The Mystery: Secret Truth Revealed* 1895.
 - *The Church Epistles* originally appeared in serial form in *Things to Come* in 1898 and published as a single volume in 1902.
- For extensive quotations from these works along with our complete dispensational analysis of their contents, interested parties should consult Lessons 67-69. At this point it is important to remember that these early works of E.W.B. are mid-Acts in their dispensational approach and show no signs of the Acts 28 view that came to define his later ministry. *The Grace History Project* does not stand alone in this assessment. Darby scholar R.A. Huebner states the following regarding E.W.B.’s early dispensational position, “E.W. Bullinger seemed to hold a sort of Acts 13 position in his *The Church Epistles*, but under the influence of Charles Welch he switched to the Acts 28 position.” (Huebner, 87)
- Herein lays the goal of this and subsequent lessons on this subject—to trace E.W.B.’s transition from a mid-Acts dispensational viewpoint to an Acts 28 position.

Additional Early Testimony

- Bullinger’s first known lectures outside of his parish were a series of ten sermons titled, “The Second Advent of the Lord Jesus Christ.” These messages were delivered at St. Ebbe’s Church, Oxford, in November 1887. “These sermons became the foundation for his tenets not only on the Second Coming but also on the identification of the three groups of people named in the bible—the Jews, the Gentiles, and the church of God—and differentiation between the “kingdom” and the “church.”” (Carey, 94)
- In the first sermon titled, “The Importance of Prophetic Study,” EWB said the following regarding Baptism and the Lord’s Supper:
 - “If we were asked to name the subjects which are put forward today with the greatest frequency and urgency, we should say, they are Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. But note the place which these occupy, and the position given to them in the Epistles, which were written specially for the instruction of the Church. Baptism is mentioned only nineteen times in seven Epistles (the noun five and the verb fourteen), and it is not once named in fourteen of the twenty-one Epistles; and as for the Lord’s Supper, there are not more than

three or four references to it in the whole of the New Testament. In twenty (out of twenty-one) of the Epistles it is never alluded to!” (Bullinger, *Ten Sermons*, 10-11)

- As of 1887, EWB is already questioning the practices of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Moreover, he shows no inclination toward separating the Pauline Epistles.
- *The Kingdom and the Church* was published in 1892. In it, Bullinger emphasized the differences between Biblical classifications of people.
 - “What God has put asunder, let no man join together! . . . Now this is the duty which we have to perform with regard to these two—“the kingdom,” and “the Church.” Nowhere are they said to be the same; nowhere are the terms used synonymously: God has separated them. . . “The Kingdom” is none other than that which forms the great subject - Old Testament promise and prophecy. The Kingdom which was offered and presented to Israel by the Lord Jesus in the Gospels is the same Kingdom which we see set up with divine judgments and power in the prophecies and visions of the Apocalypse. . . [the Church consists] of these who have been born again by the Holy Spirit and made by Him new creations in Christ Jesus; who belong to God; whom the Father gave to the Son (John xvii), and whom the Son came to save, and did save with an everlasting salvation; who have eternal life, and shall therefore never perish. . .” (quoted in Carey, 109-110)
- In 1893, EWB published *The Witness of the Stars*. The following year (1894), a man named Robert Brown published a booklet titled *A Reply to Dr. Bullinger’s So-Called ‘Witness of the Stars.’* Before arguing his case against the book, Mr. Brown presented his case against EWB.
 - “Dr. Bullinger has lately published several small works, in which he has set forth doctrines which are opposed to the teaching of the Divine Word—as for instance, that “the kingdom” and “the Church of God” are “*totally and altogether distinct*” and that they can “*can never be identified* without a serious loss of sense and truth.” . . . Again, he has taught . . . very erroneous doctrines as the second coming of the Lord, with reference to the Church of Christ—dividing the second coming of Christ in effect into two comings, the one for His Church previous to the Great Tribulation,” and the other to the earth in judgment upon his enemies after the tribulation—statements which are flatly contradicted by the Word itself. . .” (quoted in Carey, 102)
- 1894 saw the publication of *Number in Scripture*, in which EWB alluded to the work of a man who had died a few years before Bullinger was born.
 - “The Church (in the first century) soon became corrupt and, before the Canon of Scripture was complete, it had lost the true teaching concerning: 1) the “Mystery” (or secret) concerning the Body of Christ, the Church of God; 2) Justification on the principle of faith alone; and 3) the work of the Holy Spirit.

At the Reformation, the second of these was partially recovered. Some sixty years ago the first was recovered, but was speedily departed; while the third has never been fully or properly recovered.” (Bullinger, *Number in Scripture*, 88)

- As we have already seen in Lessons 67 and 68, the 1895 publication of *The Mystery: Secret Truth Revealed* advocates for what is now known as the mid-Acts dispensational position. Originally written in serial form for the *Things To Come*, *The Mystery* comes down hard against the prevailing viewpoint that the church began in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost. It is in this book that EWB calls Acts 13 an “important dispensational chapter” and “epoch-making” in reference to Paul’s pronouncement in Acts 13:46 to the Jewish synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia. (Bullinger, *The Mystery*, 50) Lastly, not only does this work not divide the Acts Period Epistles of Paul from the post-Acts period Epistles but it clearly teaches that Paul knew the mystery before the close of the Acts period. For example, in his comments on I Corinthians 2 and 3, clearly written during the Acts Period, Bullinger views the mystery as having been revealed. Regarding Paul’s ministry in Corinth, Bullinger wrote, “While they were putting the members in the place of the head, they were carnal and not spiritual and therefore not in a position to have the truth concerning “God’s Mystery” declared to them.” (Bullinger, *The Mystery*, 45) According to Bullinger, Paul knew the mystery when he wrote I Corinthians but chose not to fully expound it to the saints at Corinth because they were not spiritually mature enough to handle it.
- In Lesson 69 we surveyed *The Church Epistles*, originally written in 1898 for *Things To Come* before it was published as a single volume in 1902. Once again our evaluation of this work did not turn up even a hint of the Acts 28 position that became prevalent in EWB’s later writings. For extensive quotations and a complete dispensational analysis of *The Church Epistles*, interested parties are encouraged to consult Lesson 69.
- Bullinger’s early writings before the year 1900 appear to be mid-Acts in their dispensational view point and show none of the hallmark signs of the Acts 28 position.

The Emergence of the Acts 28 View

- In this section we want to begin tracing, as best we can, the emergence of the Acts 28 position. The goal of this endeavor will be to show how and why Bullinger changed his mind and then ascertain how this change altered his dispensational teaching.

The Role of Sir Robert Anderson

- One of the original trustees of *Things to Come*, Sir Robert Anderson, was a very close friend and confidante of Mr. Bullinger’s. Born in 1841, Anderson served on both the Irish (1863) and English (1870) Bars before he became involved in public service. He rose to be assistant commissioner of police and head of the Criminal Investigation Department in London before retiring in 1901 after a distinguished career. Following his retirement, Sir Robert devoted himself to writing and teaching on biblical subjects with a particular emphasis on prophecy. Anderson was a frequent speaker at Mildmay Conferences and the Prophecy Investigation Society. In

addition, Anderson also chaired and spoke at the Annual Meetings of the Trinitarian Bible Society. (Carey, 142-143)

- EWB once wrote to Anderson regarding one of his books, “I feel I have a fuller, better and deeper knowledge of ‘my Lord and my God,’ and praise Him and bless you for it.” (quoted in Carey, 143)
- Sir Robert and Bullinger also collaborated on some of their literary efforts. In Anderson’s book *The Buddha of Christendom*, written in 1899, he noted that EWB prepared the index and assisted with reading the manuscript proofs. (Carey, 144) Despite their strong friendship and partnership in the ministry, Bullinger and Anderson did not always agree on doctrine, consider the following example:
 - “Dear Bullinger, I am deeply touched by the graciousness and cordiality of your notice of “Forgotten Truths.” I know well how unreservedly you sympathize with very much there is in it, and your praise of that element is not stinted. But I am fully aware that on certain matters respecting which you feel strongly I have gone counter to you. But on whatever side is the truth—yours or mine—there is no doubt on which side is the grace! R. Anderson.” (quoted by Carey, 144)
- In 1897, Sir. Robert Anderson published *The Silence of God*. While this work is not overtly Acts 28, it does contain some viewpoints that later developed into the Acts 28 position. When considering the dispensational paradigm articulated in *The Silence of God*, it is important to realize that Anderson did not believe that the church started in Acts 2.
 - “We need to recognize the intensely Jewish character of the **Pentecostal dispensation**. And in this connection we must also apprehend the two-fold aspect of the death of Christ. . . Imperial Rome decreed it, but it was the favoured people who demanded it. The “wicked hands” by which they murdered their Messiah were those of their heathen masters, but the responsibly for the act was all their own. . . Never was there a clearer case of *national* guilt. Never was there an act for which *a nation* could more justly be summoned to account. . . But here prevailing misconceptions are so fixed that the whole significance of the narrative is lost. The apostles were Divinely guided to declare that if, even then, the “men of Israel” repented, their Messiah would return to fulfill to them all that their own prophets had foretold and promised of spiritual and national blessing. To represent this as *Christian* doctrine, or the institution of “a new religion,” is to betray ignorance alike of Judaism and Christianity. The speakers were Jews—the apostles of One who was Himself “a ministry of the circumcision.” Their hearers were Jews, and as Jews they were addressed. The Pentecostal Church which was based upon the testimony was intensely and altogether Jewish. It was not merely that the converts were Jews, and none but Jews, but that the idea of evangelizing Gentiles never was even mooted. When the first great persecution scattered the disciples, they “went everywhere preaching the Word,” they preached, we are expressly told, “to none but the Jews only (Acts 11:19).” And when, after the lapse of years, Peter entered a Gentile house, he was publically

called to account for conduct that seemed so strange and wrong (Acts 11). In a word, if “To the Jew first” is the character of the Acts of the Apostles as a whole, “To the Jew only” is plainly stamped upon every part of these early chapters, described by theologians as the “Hebraic section” of the book. The fact is clear as light.” (Anderson, 72-76)

- “The Jerusalem Church, then, was Jewish. Their Bible was the Jewish Scriptures. The Jewish temple was their house of prayer and common meeting-place (Acts 2:46, 3:1, 5:42). Their beliefs and hopes and words and acts all marked them out as Jews. Hence the amazing number of converts. On the day of Pentecost alone, three thousand were baptized. . . it is recorded that “the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly, and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7). Nothing can be further from the thought of these men than “founding a new religion.” On the contrary, while hailing the rejected Nazarene as their national Messiah, they clung with passionate devotion to the religion of their fathers. But what bearing has all this upon the question here? The Jews had crucified the Messiah. But now, when vengeance, swift and terrible, might have been expected to fall upon the guilty people, Divine mercy held back the judgment and called them once again to repentance. . . But what was the answer of the men who sat “in Moses’ seat”—the accredited leaders and representatives of the nation? By the murder of Stephen they reenacted, as far as it was in their power to re-enact the supreme tragedy of Calvary. . . Their king they had driven out: Stephen was the messenger sent after Him to declare anew their deliberate purpose to reject Him. This was their answer to the heaven-sent testimony of Pentecost. “All manner of sin” against the Son might be forgiven; they had now committed that deeper sin against the Holy Ghost for which there could be no forgiveness. . . Stephen was the secret crisis of their destiny. Never again was a public miracle witnessed in Jerusalem. Their special Pentecostal proclamation was withdrawn. The Pentecostal Church was scattered. The apostle of the Gentiles forthwith received his commission, and the current of events set steadily, and with continually increasing force, toward the open rejection of the long-favoured people and the public proclamation of the great characteristic truth of Christianity. Within that truth lies concealed the key to the mystery of a silent Heaven.” (Anderson, 77-83)
- In the sections quoted above, Anderson comes out clearly against the notion that anything new or “Christian” began in Acts 2. Rather he sees the early Acts period as a continuation of the ministry of Christ and the twelve as recorded in the gospels.
 - “The Gospels were not written ‘to teach Christianity,’ but to reveal Christ in the different aspects of His person and work as Israel’s Messiah, Jehovah’s servant, Son of Man and Son of God.” (Anderson, 36)
- Careful readers will notice, however, that Anderson stops short of pronouncing judicial blindness upon Israel in Acts 7 with the stoning of Stephen. Rather he views this as an initial step in “the open rejection of the long-favoured people and the public proclamation of the great characteristic truth of Christianity.” (Anderson, 83) Furthermore, Sir Robert makes reference to what he calls

the “Pentecostal Dispensation,” i.e., he viewed the Acts period as its own dispensation. This is one of the hallmarks of the Acts 28 position, the idea that Israel could have repented for their part in the death of Christ all the way up until Acts 28. While this is subtle in *The Silence of God*, it introduces into the dispensational conversation the notion that the book of Acts is its own dispensation and that the dispensational boundary should be drawn in Acts 28:28. Consider Anderson in his own words:

- “The Savior's prayer upon the Cross (Luke 23:34) had secured for the favored nation a respite from judgment. And the forgiveness asked for carried with it a right to priority in the proclamation of the great amnesty. When "the apostle of the circumcision," by express revelation, brought the gospel to Gentiles, they were relegated to a position akin to that formerly held by the "proselytes of the gate." And even "the apostle of the Gentiles" addressed himself first, in every place he visited, to the children of his own people. And this not from prejudice, but by Divine appointment. "It was necessary," he declared at Pisidian Antioch, "that the word of God should first be spoken to you." Even at Rome, deeply though he longed to visit the Christians there (Rom. 1:11), his first care was to summon "the chief of the Jews," and to them "he testified the kingdom of God." **And not until the testimony had been rejected by the favored people did the word go forth,** "The salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and they will hear it" (Acts 28:17,23,28).” (Anderson, 49-50)
- **“The apostle of the circumcision gives place to the apostle to the gentiles as the central figure in the narrative, but yet in every place the Jew is still accorded a priority in the offer of blessing, and it is not until, in every place from Jerusalem round to Rome, that the Blessing has been despised, that the Pentecostal dispensation is brought to a close by the promulgation of the solemn decree, ‘The salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles.’ ”** (Anderson, 56)
- “Having been carried a prisoner to Rome, his first care was to call together—not the Christians, much though he longed to see them (Rom. 1:10-11), but—“the chief of the Jews,” and to them to give the testimony which he had brought to his nation in every place to which his ministry led him. In his introductory address to them, he claimed the place of a Jew among Jews, “I have done nothing (he declared), against the people, or the customs of our fathers” (Acts 28:17); but when these, the Jews of Rome, refused the proffered mercy, his mission to his nation was at an end; and for the first time separating himself from them, he exclaimed, “Well spake the Holy Ghost through Isaiah the prophet unto your fathers”—and he went on to repeat the word which our Lord Himself had used at the kindred crisis of His ministry when the nation had openly rejected Him (Acts 28:25, Matt. 13:13).” (Anderson, 175)
- **“My contention is that the Acts, as a whole, is the record of a temporary and transitional dispensation in which blessing was again offered to the Jew and again rejected. Hence the sustained emphasis with which the testimony to Israel is**

narrated, and the incidental way in which the testimony to Gentiles is treated.”
(Anderson, 175)

- **“As indicated in these pages, it gives the clue to the right understanding of the Acts of the Apostles—a book which is primarily the record, not, as commonly supposed, of the founding of the Christian Church, but of the apostasy of the favoured nation.”** But it also explains much that perplexes Christians in the teaching of the Gospels.”
(Anderson, 177)
- **“. . . the Acts of the Apostles, for, as already seen, the book is the record of a transitory dispensation** marked by abundant displays of the power of God among men. It is clear that if the key to the great secret of the Gentiles’ dispensation can be found at all, it is in the writings of the apostle to the Gentiles that we much make search for it?”
(Anderson, 63)
- **“An appeal to “the Christian miracles,” it has been urged, so from solving the mystery, serves only to intensify it. The purpose of miracles, moreover, was to accredit the Messiah to Israel, and not, as generally supposed, to accredit Christianity to the heathen. And therefore, as Scripture plainly indicates, they continued so long as the testimony was addressed to the Jew, but ceased when, the Jew being set aside, the gospel went out to the Gentile world. (162) . . . So long as the Kingdom was being preached to Jews, miracles abounded. (49) . . . The miracles of Acts 28:8 and 9 are chronologically the last on record, and the later epistles are wholly silent respecting them.”** (Anderson, 162, 49, 177)
- There can be no doubt that Anderson is espousing ideas in *The Silence of God* that are consistent with the Acts 28 viewpoint. That being said, Anderson does not advocate for dividing Paul’s Acts Period Epistles from his post-Acts Epistles. Furthermore, when one compares *The Silence of God* (1897) with Bullinger’s *The Mystery: Secret Truth Revealed* (1895) and *The Church Epistles* (1898) one does not observe in the writings of EWB the notion that the book of Acts comprises its own dispensation.
- As we shall see in our next lesson, by the time EWB published *How to Enjoy the Bible* in 1907 his dispensational thinking bears the marks of having been influenced by the ideas Sir Robert Anderson presented in *The Silence of God*.

Works Cited

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