

Sunday, October 28, 2012—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 77 Rightly Dividing E.W. Bullinger: The Emergence of Acts 28ism, Part 2

Introduction/Review

- At the conclusion of Lesson 76 we made the following observations regarding the dispensational paradigm promoted by Sir Robert Anderson’s 1897 work *The Silence of God*.
 - 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*.
- After analyzing the documents in question and considering the relationship between Bullinger and Anderson, the *Grace History Project* believes that Sir Robert Anderson was instrumental in altering Bullinger’s dispensational views between 1898 and 1907 when *How to Enjoy the Bible* was published. In 1907, Bullinger’s dispensational scheme has more in common with the one Anderson endorsed in *The Silence of God*.

The Emergence of the Acts 28 View, Continued

How to Enjoy the Bible (1907)

- “In September, 1907, Dr. Bullinger published the book that to many has remained his most endearing work: *How to Enjoy the Bible*. . . To Bullinger’s mind, it was the reliance on tradition instead of on the study of the Bible that prevented people from understanding and enjoying it. To assist readers, he introduced an inductive method of study similar to that used in the natural sciences.” (Carey, 156-159) Consider the following quotations from the Preface and Introduction:
 - “The Root of all evils which abound in the spiritual sphere at the present day lies in the fact that the Word of and the words of God are not fed upon, digested, and assimilated, as they ought to be. If we ask the question, why is this the case? The answer is, the bible is not enjoyed because the Bible is not understood. The methods and rules by which alone such an understanding may be gained are not known or followed; hence the bible is a neglected book. . . But our object is to “Open the book;” to let it speak; to hear its voice; to study it from within itself; and have regard to other objects and subjects only from what it teaches about them. The method of “Higher” criticism is to discredit a Book, or a

passage, on internal evidence. Our method is to establish and accredit Holy Scripture on internal evidence also, and thus to derive and provide, from its pharmacopoeia, an antidote to that subtle and malignant poison. This method of study will reveal more convincing and “infallible proof” of inspiration than can be adduced from all the reasoning and arguments of men.” (Bullinger, xii-xxvii)

- In the Preface, Bullinger also argues for the absolute necessity of rightly dividing the word of Truth.
 - “This command to rightly divide being given us in connection with this special title “the Word of truth” spoke to us, if we had ears to hear, and told us that unless we rightly divide the Word of Truth we should not only not get the truth; but, as God’s workmen we should indeed have need to be “ashamed.” It showed that, if we would indeed enjoy the Bible, it was absolutely necessary that we should rightly divide all that it contained, in connection with its subject-matter, as well as in connection with its times and dispensations.” (Bullinger, xix)
- *How to Enjoy the Bible* is an excellent book that contains a host of good dispensational teaching. However, for the purposes of this lesson we must limit our comments to only those sections that apply to the task at hand, demonstrating the emergence of the Acts 28 dispensational view.
- In chapter two, titled “The One Great Subject of the Word”, EWB states, “The one great subject which runs through the whole Word of God is Christ; the promised seed of the women in Gen. 3:15.” (14) The following is Dr. Bullinger’s breakdown of how the counsels and purposes of God all center in Christ.
 - “*In the Old Testament* we have the King and Kingdom in Promise and Prophecy, Illustration and Type.
 - *In the Four Gospels* we have the King and the Kingdom presented and proclaimed by John the Baptizer, and by Christ Himself. And we see the Kingdom rejected, and King crucified.
 - *In the Acts of the Apostles* we have the Transition from the Kingdom to the Church. The Kingdom is once again offered to Israel by Peter; and again it is rejected, Stephen is stoned, and Peter imprisoned (ch. 7). (Sounds very much like the mid-Acts position.)

Then Paul, who had been already chosen and called (ch. 9), is commissioned for his Ministry (ch. 12), **and on the final rejection of his testimony concerning the Kingdom, he pronounces for the third and last time the sentence of judicial blindness in Isaiah 6, and declares that “the salvation of God is sent to the Gentiles” (Acts 28:25-28).** (Sounds very much like the Acts 28 position.)

- *In the Epistles* we have the King exalted, and (while the Kingdom is in abeyance) made the Head over all things to the Church, during this present interval; the dispensation of the grace of God.
- *In the Apocalypse* we have the Revelation of the King in judgment; and we see the Kingdom set up, the King enthroned in power and glory, the promise fulfilled, and prophecy ended.” (14-15)
- Please note the muddled nature of the statements quoted above. Bullinger teaches that Israel fell in Acts 7 with the stoning of Stephen, but was not considered judicially blind until Acts 28. This is almost exactly what Sir Robert Anderson taught in *The Silence of God* some ten years earlier (1897). Furthermore, Bullinger has Paul preaching “the Kingdom” to Israel until Acts 28. Both of these are hallmark teachings of Acts 28 dispensationalism.
- Immediately following the summary quoted above, EWB offers the following structural summary of the entire Bible. In this summary we see for the first time in embryonic form the notion of splitting the Pauline Epistles into two categories. Please consider the following structure.

The One Subject of the Word as a Whole

- The King and the Kingdom in Promise and Prophecy. (*The Old Testament*)
 - The King presented, proclaimed, and rejected. The Mysteries (or Secrets) of the Kingdom revealed. Matt. 13:11, 34-35. (*The Four Gospels*)
 - Transitional (The Acts). The Kingdom again offered and rejected (*The earlier Pauline Epistles*).
 - The King exalted and made Head over all things to the Church, “which is His body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all (Eph. 1:22-23). The Great Mystery revealed (*The later Pauline Epistles*). The Kingdom in abeyance (Heb. 2:8).
- The King and the Kingdom unveiled. The King enthroned, and the Kingdom set up with Divine judgment, power, and glory (Rev. 19; 20). Promise and prophecy fulfilled (*The Apocalypse*). (15)
- According to the structure presented above, it is not clear what exactly EWB is saying regarding the Pauline Epistles. Despite the lack of clarity, the following aspects of the Acts 28 model are observable in EWB’s structure whether they were intended or unintended.
 - The “earlier Pauline Epistles” apply to the transitional dispensation of the book of Acts when the kingdom is being offered to Israel.
 - The Great Mystery concerning the church is not revealed until the later Pauline Epistles.

- The dispensational scheme presented in *How to Enjoy the Bible* is cloudy and hard to follow at times. It shows signs of Acts 28 thinking but does not fully espouse that view. For lack of a better term, *How to Enjoy the Bible* and *The Silence of God* by Sir Robert Anderson appear to be Acts 28ism in an embryonic or undeveloped form.
 - “But in the **New Dispensation of the Acts of the Apostles** the Israelite branches were already being “broken off,” and Gentile branches were already being grafted in. These latter had no greater privileges as Gentiles as to standing than Israelites (as Israelites); Here the word of Rom. 11:18-21 applied to all such; for though the doctrinal foundation of the Mystery had been laid in Rom. 1-8, **the Mystery itself was not revealed until it was committed to writing in the Prison Epistles (Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians)**. The Epistle itself was not written until nearly the end of Acts, and only a short time before Ephesians.” (71)
- The quotation above represents a departure from what EWB said regarding the mystery in *The Mystery: Secret Truth Revealed* (1895) and *The Church Epistles* (1898). In these works, EWB taught that Paul knew the mystery when he wrote I Corinthians (and Romans) but chose not to expound it because of the spiritual condition of the Corinthian church. In 1907, Bullinger explicitly states that “the Mystery itself was not revealed until it was committed to writing in the Prison Epistles.” What exactly does Bullinger mean here? Does he mean that it was not revealed to Paul until he wrote the prison epistles, or does he mean that Paul did not reveal it to anyone else until he wrote the prison epistles? Unfortunately Bullinger is unclear.
- Later in *How to Enjoy the Bible* EWB states:
 - “The Kingdom was again proclaimed in the Acts, and the promise of Christ’s return on their national repentance was repeated (Acts 3:19-21). But the command to repent was unheeded by the nation and its rulers; and so, in the Acts of the Apostles, we see the gradual transition taking place, until **the final pronouncement of God’s rejection of the nation is formally made by Paul in Acts 28: 24-28. . . This dispensation of the “the Church of God” or “the grace of God,” and of the “Spirit of God” commenced outwardly by the ministry of Paul, in the Dispensation or administration committed formally to him; and inwardly by the revelation of the mystery as further set forth in its fullness in those epistles which he wrote from his prison in Rome: Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians.**” (94-95)
- Please note that Israel was not fully rejected by God until Acts 28 according to EWB.
- In the section on not reading the past into the present with respect to baptism, EWB writes,
 - “As long as the Divine offer of the kingdom made by Peter in Acts 3:19-21 was open, baptism with material water was carried on, side by side with the baptism with spiritual water (*pneuma hagion*), which was administered by the laying on of hands (compare Acts

19:6); the one decreasing and the other *increasing*, on the principle of John 3:30. This coming change had been four times foretold (Matt. 3:11, Mark 1:8, Luke 3:16, Acts 1:5), and we see it taking place; **but the change is not complete until the offer of the kingdom made in Acts 3:18-20 was finally and formally closed and withdrawn in Acts 28: 25-26.** Until then, baptism with water was continued, though it was decreasing. And it is mentioned only in those Pauline Epistles written during that period (I Cor. and Rom. 6) but never again afterward. In the Epistles written after that solemn epoch it is never once referred to; but only the “one baptism” with *pneuma hagion*. In Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and the Pastoral Epistles there is no mention of any ordinances; except that emphasize the fact that they no longer exist, but are all done away in the completeness which is ours “in Christ”. . . When the Mystery was revealed to Paul, and by him was “made known to the sons of men,” the Hebrew “doctrine of baptisms” was left behind . . .” (134-135)

- Any doubts or ambiguities contained in the sections quoted earlier seem to be removed here. First, Bullinger is clear, teaching that the offer of repentance to Israel was on the table throughout the book of Acts until it was formally withdrawn in Acts 28. Second, EWB refers to Acts 28 as a “solemn epoch” when he used the same terminology in 1895 to refer to Paul’s statement to the Jews in Antioch of Pisidia in Acts 13: 46 (see Lesson 68). Third, it seems clear in this context that Bullinger no longer thinks that Paul knew the mystery until he wrote the prison epistles, which once again is contrary to what he said in 1895 and 1898.
- In the section about not reading the present into the past, EWB states the following regarding the “Church.”
 - “In the Pauline Epistles the word (*church/ecclesia*) acquires a meaning which it never had before. The meaning which is peculiar to this present Dispensation must not, therefore, be read into the Word when it is used in the Past Dispensation. . . A further development of the usage of the word was caused in the closing or transition period of the Past Dispensation, which affected the meaning of the word as used in the Gospels, and in the Acts of the Apostles: at any rate, in the early portion of the Acts, which is a transitional book. . . In Acts 9:9, he began this work when he “separated the disciples,” and the hardening of Isa. 6 was approaching its “completion.” **When that prophecy was fulfilled in Acts 28, the change of dispensation was completed.** Henceforward the word *Ecclesia* acquires a more restricted meaning, and is used of “the church of God” eleven times in Paul’s Epistles.”
- The preceding quote proves beyond question that as of 1907 EWB viewed Acts 28 as the dispensational boundary between the dispensation of the law and the dispensation of grace. Furthermore, it proves that Bullinger had not yet formally divided Paul’s epistles into two groups.
- This view is essentially the same view purposed by Sir Robert Anderson in *The Silence of God* in 1897. Please recall the following section penned by Anderson:

- “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). 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 Jews 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)
- The dispensationalism presented in *How to Enjoy the Bible* (1907) shares the following key points with *The Silence of God* (1897):
 - The book of Acts comprises its own transitional dispensation. In other words no new dispensation begins during the Acts chronology.
 - Israel is able to repent according to Acts 3:19-20 at any point within the Acts period until Acts 28.
 - When Paul quotes Isaiah 6:9-10 to the Jewish leadership in Rome in Acts 28, Israel is here rendered in unbelief and it is here that that dispensational boundary should be drawn.
- As of 1907, Acts 28ism is in an embryonic state. Many of the ingredients are present but they have not yet fully germinated. Neither Dr. Bullinger nor Sir Robert Anderson as of 1907 has formally suggested that Paul’s epistles need to be divided into two distinct groups. In 1908, during a conversation between Dr. E.W. Bullinger and Mr. Charles Welch, the embryo of Acts 28ism will be fully fertilized by Welch’s suggestion that Paul’s epistles need to be divided between those written before and after Acts 28. Once this suggestion is embraced and applied, the Acts 28 position emerges from its embryonic state into full bloom. The decision to divide Paul’s epistles into two groups is the sine qua non of Acts 28 dispensationalism.

Works Cited

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