

Sunday, December 2, 2012—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 82 The Early Dispensational Witness of H.A. Ironside

### **Who Was Henry Allan Ironside?**

- In 1908, the same year as Welch’s fateful conversation with Dr. Bullinger, and one year before the publication of *The Scofield Reference Bible*, American pastor and Bible teacher H. A. Ironside published *The Mysteries of God*. Aside from Chapter III which is titled “The Mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven,” this work sounds like it was written by a mid-Acts dispensationalist.
- “Canadian born “Harry” Ironside (1876-1951) was one of the most prolific Bible teachers of the past century. Though never ordained, he traveled for well over fifty years as a home missionary, evangelist, and Bible teacher. Self-taught and brilliant of mind, he published over sixty books and pamphlets. For some time he was with the Salvation Army but later joined the Plymouth Brethren. After 1924, he held meetings continually under the auspices of Moody Bible Institute, going often as visiting faculty to Dallas Theological Seminary. He also pastored for eighteen years (1930-1948) at Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. He died while on a preaching tour in New Zealand.” (LaHaye, 182-183)
- “Producing some of the warmest and most cherished devotional commentaries in the history of dispensationalism, the evangelist, teacher and pastor H.A. Ironside encouraged thousands of people across the English-speaking world to understand dispensational truth. . . Ironside did not receive a formal education but was a self-taught student. He received an honorary doctorate (Litt. D.) from Wheaton College in 1930.” (Stallard, 184)
- “The greatest legacy of H.A. Ironside is the voluminous collection of writings that he left. He wrote over sixty books, along with numerous pamphlets and articles. His style is characterized by: 1) devotional exposition; 2) the simple outline of complicated issues; 3) a creative ability to provide fresh wording and illustrations aimed at warming the heart and changing the life, and; 4) a continuation of the heritage of simple Bible readings that were emphasized in the Niagara Bible Conferences of the late nineteenth century.” (Stallard, 184)
- “Ironside’s writings dealt with a wide range of topics. His biblical commentaries covered the entire range of New Testament books, as well as every prophetic book in the Old Testament. In addition, he addressed topical issues such as water baptism, the Second Coming, the rapture of the church, the Holy Spirit, issues of sanctification and prayer. He showed the skills of a historian in *A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement* (1942) which highlighted the development of the movement largely responsible for spreading the dispensationalism of John Nelson Darby which Ironside himself believed.” (Stallard, 184)

### *The Mysteries of God (1908)*

- As stated above, HAI wrote *The Mysteries of God* the same year (1908) that Welch spoke with Bullinger about dividing the Pauline Epistles and one year before the publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. A doctrinal and dispensational analysis of this book reveals that, at the time, Ironside had much in common with what would later be called mid-Acts dispensationalism.

#### *Chapter 1 “The Secret Things”*

- In the first chapter, Ironside sees two major objects that are gradually revealed throughout the Old Testament.
  - “God’s revelation of His purpose has been gradual. In the Old Testament two objects were brought out—the woman’s Seed, and the seed of Abraham. Through the former, the latter were to be blessed, and be a blessing to all the nations of the earth. Beyond this, the testimony of the prophets does not go. As in Moses’ day, so in the days of Malachi, the last of the prophetic line (before the coming of the preparer of Messiah’s way), there were “secret things” which the time had not yet come to make manifest.” (8)
- Ironside sees the New Testament as being the place where God revealed or made known things that previously had been keep secret. When one compares these statements, Ironside appears to have understood some things about the distinction between prophecy and mystery.
  - “Now the New Testament is not only the answer to the Old, though it is that; but it is far more: it is the unfolding of the secret things which God had purposed in His heart before the worlds were made or the ages began to run their course.” (9)
- After summarizing the entire history of the Old Testament and showing how all the prophecies pointed toward the “King of Israel, sitting on David’s throne,” Ironside states:
  - “These things were revealed things. Their sphere of action is the earth. They have to do with an earthly people, not a heavenly one... “the heaven, even the heavens, are the Lord’s: but the earth hath he given to the children of men (Ps. 115:16).” This is the invariable testimony of the Scriptures of the prophets.” (11)
- The next three paragraphs remove any doubt as to whether or not HAI understood the distinction between prophecy and mystery in 1908.
  - “Of the Church, the body of Christ, there is no hint: the long history of Christendom is passed over in silence. Of these things the Old Testament does not treat. Neither was it there made known that man should be in heaven. The translations of Enoch and Elijah were strange portent to the Jew, of which His Scriptures offered no explanation. All these were among “the secret things” which would not be revealed till the coming of the Just One, to be followed by His rejection and ascension of Man to heaven. Thus, one

looks in vain for the distinctive truths of the Christian dispensation in the Old Testament. The things there revealed refer to Israel and the nations as such; not to the Church of which Christ is the glorified Head in heaven. The amazing thing is that in Christendom generally, despite the revelation of the mysteries of God given in the last portion of our Bibles, the vast majority are as ignorant of the once secret things as though they had not been made known. Take the so-called Apostle's Creed for a conclusive example. It is found that for almost every one of its statements the proof texts could be found in the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms... "he ascended into heaven" is perhaps the only clause in it which the Old Testament did not make known; and even that is more than hinted at in the 110<sup>th</sup> Psalm, and the last verse of the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Hosea." (11-12)

### *Chapter II "Stewards of the Mysteries of God"*

- At the very beginning of Chapter II, HAI states, "That the ignorance in the closing paragraphs of the previous chapter is most lamentable, every intelligent Christian must admit. If God has in our day made known things kept secret from the foundation of the world, it is surely to our interest and God's glory to understand and value them." (13)
- Regarding the Greek word "musterion" which is translated "mystery" in English, Ironside writes,
  - "It is not that these in themselves were mysteries and beyond finite comprehension, or even above the range of ordinary minds; but they could never be known at all unless revealed by another. . . As used in the New Testament, the mysteries are those truths which in Old Testament days were kept in silence, but which are now the common property of all believers. They are not special truths for a special class, but every Christian is privileged to enter into the knowledge of these mysteries. More than that, no Christian can properly enter upon the responsibilities flowing from the relationship in which he stands toward God if he remains in ignorance of these same mysteries." (14)
  - "Christ's ministers are to be stewards of the mysteries of God, not merely preachers of what people so often call "the simple gospel." Rome, we know, has attempted to foist on the Church a lot of legendary traditions and sacramental observances as the mysteries, thus emulating the pagan cults, which had their inner secret for the special few. But the Christian mysteries are for every child of God in this dispensation of grace. . . It has often been remarked that every teaching which the apostle prefaces with such an expression as, "I would not have you ignorant, brethren," will be found to be in line of the truth of which, after nearly twenty centuries of Christianity, the bulk of professing believers know little or nothing. . . (quotes Rom. 11:25-26). . . Now, how seldom does one hear any reference to the fullness of the Gentiles or the salvation of Israel as a nation in the pulpit instruction of the day? As a result, the Gentiles are wise in their own conceits, and boasting of the near conversion of the world, and the transference of Jewish promises to the Church of God." (16)

- Ironside believed that by failing to recognize the revelation of the mystery, Israel's teaching has been confounded with the Church's, thereby resulting in the complete misunderstanding of Christianity.
  - "Failing to enter into these things, the Church has lost the sense of her pilgrim character; confusing teaching as to Israel and the nations with divine instruction regarding the Body of Christ. The heavenly calling has been lost sight of, and practically given up for an earthly one. . . Heretical teachers could not flourish for one day if the people did not wish for their ministry. And preachers of Old Testament truths, which they offer in place of New Testament mysteries, would not find it so easy to go on confusing the people of God if there was real exercise of conscience among those who are content to be styled "the laity," and who seldom read their Bible for themselves, and endeavor to rightly divide the word of truth." (17-18)

### *Chapter III "The Mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven"*

- Chapter III is the worst chapter in *The Mysteries of God*, in fact were it not for this chapter, the entire book could have been written by a modern mid-Acts dispensationalist. Despite this unfortunate fact, the chapter starts out strong.
  - "'Unto you,' said the Lord, addressing His disciples, 'it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 13:11)'. Heaven's rule over earth was no new teaching. For centuries the prophets had borne witness to it, and pointed to a coming day when all men should see it. That it was not merely spiritual sway of heaven's Lord to which they referred, but a true world-kingdom destroying and superseding all other dominions, and characterized by the universal dissemination of spiritual teaching and divine authority, is plain from the Scriptures of the Old Testament. Through the elect remnant of Israel, the kingdom is to be administered; the Gentiles coming into blessing in subjection to them. To attempt to give the passages which teach what is here briefly indicated would be to quote the major part of the Psalms and the Prophets. Daniel, perhaps more plainly than any other, unfolds the glories of that coming reign of righteousness. In a vision, Babylon's proud king was given to behold the stone that fell from heaven, shattering the image of Gentile dominion, and becoming a great mountain that filled the whole earth. That it is a far different thing from Christianity is manifest, for Gentile dominion is not yet destroyed, nor is there any likelihood that it shall be the spread of the gospel and the extension of the limits of Christendom." (20-21)
- In addition to seeking to apply some of the parables to the church, Ironside also views the unpardonable sin as having been committed by the leadership of Israel in Matthew 12. HAI applies the parables of the kingdom to the interval between the cutting off of Messiah and His return in glory.
  - "Up to this point we have been going over what the prophets had predicted. They had likewise told of the ultimate reception of the King when Israel shall be born again and

made willing in the day of His power. The interval between the cutting off of Messiah and His return in glory to take the kingdom was vaguely described as a time of sorrow for Israel, but what form the reign of Heaven would take during that undefined period had not been revealed. It is that which the Lord now makes known to His disciples who, refusing the judgment of the nation, had owned His claims upon them. . . In other words, the term “the kingdom of heaven,” as used in Matthew, and in Matthew only, is practically synonymous with Christendom, which simply means Christ’s kingdom. . . Outwardly the kingdom was to assume an aspect of grandeur upon the earth. This has been fulfilled in the history of Christendom. Unquestionably “the Church” is a power to be reckoned with in the world today, and has been since the days of Constantine. . . The four parables we have been looking at were spoken in the open, by the seaside. They show the beginning and the growth of Christendom in its outward aspect and its true character.” (23-30)

#### *Chapter IV The Mystery of the Olive Tree*

- In this chapter Ironside explains some of his basic dispensational thinking. On pages forty two and forty three he demonstrates his affinity for Scofield’s dispensational model by discussing the dispensations of innocence, conscience, human government, and law. (42-43) Ironside offers the following definition of a dispensation.
  - “The word “dispensation” occurs four times in our English version of the epistles of Paul, and a careful consideration of the instances in which it is found will make clear its meaning. Three times he speaks of the dispensation committed to him (I Cor. 9:17, Eph. 3:2, Col. 1:25). As the servant of God he had received instruction concerning the message for the present age, which he shows us clearly was a double one, embracing the truth of the gospel and the Church or Assembly. . . Dispensational truth is distinguishing the teaching of Scripture as to the various dispensations, stewardships, or administration, in which man has been or shall be placed. For this is what is meant by a dispensation. It is a particular order, or administration, for a particular time.” (41)
- In this chapter HAI deals with what he calls the dispensational section of the book of Romans, chapters 9-11. (40) This section of Romans is the direct and succinct answer to the question of what happened to Israel’s hope, according to Ironside.
  - “The dispensational portion of the epistle to the Romans is the succinct and perspicuous answer to the query. In Chapter 9 it is shown that to Israel were the promises made. Messiah was to come through them, and He was to be their Deliverer and their King. But having rejected Him, are the people of the chosen nation all to be cut off? Chapter ten supplies the answer. At this present time there remains an election of grace. All who trust in the One whom the nation abhors find in Him a Savior even now. But this involved breaking their link with the nation as such, and becoming part of the church, the body of Christ. . . What, then become of the promises as to Israel’s earthly power and dominion? Are they ever to be fulfilled? . . . The rejection of Messiah had caused God—

not to cancel His promises made to the father of the Hebrews, but—to bring to light hidden purposes, hitherto unrevealed, of grace for the Gentiles during a period of undefined duration, while the covenant-people are in part blinded. Thus, the apostle goes on to unfold, declaring that God had not forgotten His pledge to Israel, but their present fall is the means of bringing hitherto undreamed of blessing to the nation; while His ancient people are still dear to His heart though disowned for the time being. The Gentiles are like wild olive branches grafted into a good tree, in place of the natural branches who, because of unbelief, have been lopped off. (vers. 16, 17)” (43-46)

- Ironside is also equally clear that this time period where grace is extended to the Gentiles is only temporary.
  - “The argument is clear and consistent throughout. Israel are now rejected because of unbelief. Meantime, super abounding mercy flows out to the Gentiles. God is taking out from them a people for His name (Acts 15:14). But if the Gentiles abuse His grace, as Israel did before them, they shall be, in their turn, rejected; whereas, if the children of the promise be brought to repentance, they shall once more be taken up and blessed according to the promises made throughout the writings of the prophets. . . There is a limit to the present dispensation of grace. When that is reached, the fullness of the nations will have arrived, and God will again turn His hand upon his ancient people.” (47)
- Lastly in Chapter IV, Ironside again reiterates his belief that the failure of believers to distinguish between the earthly purpose and heavenly purpose of God has led to much confusion with the church.
  - “Failing to distinguish between the earthly and the heavenly callings, present-day Christianity has become a sad and wonderful mixture of Judaism, heathenism, and Christianity. The Church’s portion and hope are both lost sight of, and Jewish expectations cherished in their stead.” (48)

#### *Chapter V The Great Mystery of Christ and the Church*

- In 1908 Ironside viewed “the great mystery” of Christ and the church as having been revealed to and through the Apostle Paul. Moreover, HAI sees ignorance of the mystery as the great cause of what he calls the Judaizing of the Church.
  - “Throughout the writings of the apostle Paul, he again and again refers to the wondrous secret, which he designated in a special way as “the mystery,” or “the great mystery.” . . . It occupies much of his ministry, and is clearly the chief gem in the diadem of the truth of Christianity; yet for centuries it was almost entirely lost sight of. In fact, until brought to the fore through the writings and the preaching and teaching of the distinguished ex-clergyman, Mr. J.N. Darby, in the early part of the last century, it is scarcely to be found in a single book or sermon throughout a period of sixteen hundred years! If any

doubt this statement, let them search, as the writer has in measure done, the remarks of the so-called Fathers, both pre- and post-Nicene; the theological treatises of the scholastic divines; Roman Catholic writers of all shades of thought; the literature of the Reformation; the sermons and expositions of the Puritans; and the general theological works of the day. He will find “the mystery” conspicuous by its absence. Of ordinances exalted to the place of mysteries, as in heathen rites, he will find much; but as to the mystery, which to the apostle was so unspeakably precious, rarely a reference! That a doctrine so clearly revealed in the Scriptures could have become so utterly lost is only to be accounted for by the Judaizing of the Church, and the consequent minding of earthly things that beclouded the heavenly ones.” (50-51)

- Ironside viewed the mystery as a unique Pauline revelation.
  - “In the epistle to the Romans the mystery is not developed. We must turn to Ephesians especially for that. But in Romans he refers to what was his special line of ministry without expounding it. He speaks of the unveiling of the mystery which had previously been kept in silence. . . He was the chosen vessel to whom alone it was given to set it forth “for the obedience of faith.” Now if the mystery be for those who have faith to obey, it is certainly of vast importance that every child of God be instructed as to its true character. . . The mystery found no part in the revelation of the previous dispensations. Had it been otherwise, Paul could not rightly have written that it was “kept secret since the world began.” It was part of the good news he was commissioned to publish abroad, but he learned it not from the former Scriptures, but by direct revelation from the Lord Jesus Christ in glory.” (52)
- Regarding the reference to the mystery found in I Corinthians 2:6-7 Ironside wrote,
  - “The crucifixion of the Lord of glory made way for the declaration of this great secret, which had never previously been made known. While Messiah is on the Father’s throne, and people of Israel are rejected because of their refusal of their King, God is displaying the hidden purpose of His heart in the bringing in of “a new thing in the earth,” even the mystical body of His son, to share with Him all the glories He is yet to enter upon, when the regular line of prophecy is again taken up.”
- Mid-Acts dispensationalists would take issue with Ironside regarding his view that the prophetic clock stopped ticking when Christ died upon the cross. What exactly Ironside means by this comment is unclear. Technically it cannot be correct since the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 was the fulfillment of Joel 2.
  - “. . . the prophetic clock stopped at Calvary. Not one tick has been heard since. From the moment Jesus bowed His head and yielded up His Spirit to the Father, all the glories of the kingdom spoken of by Old Testament seers and prophets have been in abeyance.” (54)

- With respect to the mystery, Ironside sees the mystery as being fully developed in the books of Ephesians and Colossians.
  - “It is to the epistles of the Ephesians and Colossians we must turn for the further unfolding of this mystery. . . (quotes Eph. 3:1-10) This is fullest declaration, or unfolding of this precious and wondrous mystery that we have in all the Bible. It is so plain that one would suppose that every spiritual mind must see at once to what it refers. Yet the commentators and expositors generally are content to make it mean that in the present age God is extending to the Gentile the same grace he offers to the Jew, so that the former, by closing with His offer of grace, becomes a sharer in the kingdom promised to Israel. But this is to lose sight altogether of that which Paul was the chosen vessel to make known. Israel’s blessings are earthly, and for time. When they enter upon them, the Gentile world shall bow before the Jew, and own his superior place. He who has been for so long the tail, will become the head. This is the universal testimony of the prophets. The mystery, on the other hand, is spiritual, and belongs to heaven. A break in God’s ways having come in, He now makes known his hidden purpose to take out of Jew and Gentile a people for heaven, who are to be one with Christ for eternity. They are baptized by the Holy Spirit into one body (I Cor. 12:13), and united by the same Spirit to the Head in heaven; thus indissolubly linked up with Himself. Their sphere of blessing is heavenly; hence, during the present time they are pilgrims on earth. When “the dispensation of the fullness of times” has come in, all God’s promises to Israel will be fulfilled. They will be blessed on earth. The Church will be blessed in heaven. Christ will be the centre of the redeemed universe, and His bride the sharer of all His acquired glories.” (53, 56-57)
- It is clear from his comments on Colossians 1 that Ironside believed that the revelation of the mystery completed the word of God.
  - “What is especially insisted on here is that the mystery is the great truth that completes the word of God. It is the capstone of Scripture teaching, as the Cross is the foundation-stone of the gospel. Christ is now working among the Gentiles, while rejected by Israel. This, the Old Testament did not contemplate. That the nations would be to own His sway through Israel, is clearly taught; but that He would be doing a special work among them, while the Jew is set aside, was a secret hid in God. To understand it is to enter into the truth for the present dispensation. Therefore, the Lord’s servant labors devotedly that those already saved might be taught what was of such great importance to all who would be, not dwarfs, but fully developed or perfect men in Christ Jesus.” (59-60)
- Ironside closes this chapter on *the Great Mystery of Christ and the Church* by making the following observations.
  - “The mystery of God is Christ; Christ mystical, Head and Body! As man he sits on God’s throne, the Head of the Church. His members on earth are those redeemed by His blood and baptized by the Holy Spirit into one Body. Thus the great secret has two parts:



one, relating to the Head; the other, to the Body. It was undreamed of in past ages that Man would sit on the throne of the universe. It was unthinkable to a Jew that the middle wall of partition should be broken down, and that the saved of those both inside and outside formed into one new man. But God has brought to pass what to all but Himself would have been impossible. May we more fully enter into what is so precious to His great heart of love!" (60)

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