

Sunday, February 24, 2013—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 94
Rightly Dividing H. A. Ironside: The Publication of *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*

Introduction/Review

- Back in Lessons 82 and 83 we discussed the early dispensational witness of H. A. Ironside by considering two of his works: 1) *The Mysteries of God* (1908); and 2) *Sailing With Paul* (1913). This morning we want to consider Ironside's 1935 publication, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*.
- On our desk lies a third edition of *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* that is dated April 1938. In the preface to this third edition, Ironside makes the following statements:
 - “The fact that two large editions of this booklet have already been sold and that another is called for gives me a sense of real satisfaction indicating, as I had believed, that there is great need for the setting forth of the truth it contains and that it is being used to deliver many from a specious, soul-withering system of teaching that has been spreading . . . Testimonies have come to me from all sides of hope and enlightenment received, for which I am grateful to God. . . On the other hand, my little book has brought me a full share of abuse and invective. Personal attacks have been of such character as to be beneath contempt. . . My attention has been called to a most dishonest effort to set me teaching of the past forty years in apparent opposition to what is herein set forth. I disavow any such change of attitude. The leaflet in question quotes from my books on “Colossians” and “Sailing With Paul,” in which I sought to show that the mystery of the one body is never found in any other New Testament writer save Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, and nowhere in the Old Testament. This I here re-affirm. Paul was distinctly the one to whom this sacred secret was revealed. In apparent contradiction to this, quotations are given from the present booklet to show that I now teach that the mystery of the blessing of Jew and Gentiles on common ground is set forth by others than Paul; as, for instance John in the 10th chapter of his Gospel, when he gives us our Lord's teachings as to the union of His Jewish sheep with “other sheep which are not of this fold”—Gentile believers—in one flock under one Shepherd. The same mystery is opened up in Peter's vision of the sheet let down from heaven. . . I affirm still that Paul alone speaks of the mystery of the Body, but the mystery of the blessing of Jew and Gentiles on the common ground of free grace was revealed to others before it was made known to Paul. . . I send forth this third edition praying that the Lord will use it to deliver many more from the unscriptural and positively harmful teaching of the ultra-dispensationalists who, under the guise of setting forth, “high truth,” are deliberately attempting to rob Christians of the greater part of their Bible.” (Ironside, Preface)
- There is little doubt that the first edition of *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* dates from early 1935. On May 20, 1935, J. C. O'Hair addressed a letter to H. A. Ironside that he titled, *Wrongly Deriding Christian Brethren*. The opening line reads, “I have just finished reading your new

book, “Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth,” the reprint of your “Serving and Waiting” articles, concerning ultra-dispensationalism.” (O’Hair, *Wrongly*)

- In *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth*, Ironside comes out strongly against what he called ultra-dispensationalism and reverses course from some of the statements we studied in *The Mysteries of God* (1908) and *Sailing With Paul* (1913). The purpose of this lesson is to ascertain what comprised ultra-dispensationalism in the mind of Ironside as well as consider how he changed his dispensational thinking.

Chapter One: What is Ultra-Dispensationalism?

- Ironside begins the chapter with a general discussion of dispensationalism, i.e., defining the word dispensation and offering examples and illustrations of its meaning. After presenting this introductory material, Ironside then begins to define what he means by “ultra-dispensationalism.”
 - “Others have swung to an ultra-dispensationalism which is most pernicious in its effect upon one’s own soul and upon testimony for God generally. Of these ultra-dispensational systems, one in particular has come into prominence of late years which, for want of a better name, is generally called “Bullingerism,” owing to the fact that it was first advocated some years ago by Dr. E. W. Bullinger, a clergyman of the Church of England. These views have been widely spread through the notes of “The Companion Bible,” a work partly edited by Dr. Bullinger, though he died before it was completed. This Bible has many valuable features and has been a help in certain respects to God’s servants who have used it conservatively, but it contains interpretations which are utterly subversive of the truth. Some of Dr. Bullinger’s positions are glaringly opposed to what is generally accepted as orthodox teaching as, for instance, the sleep of the soul between death and resurrection; and it is a most significant fact that while he did not apparently fully commit himself to any eschatological position as to the final state of the impenitent, most of his followers in Great Britain have gone off into annihilation, and there is quite a sect in America who began with his teaching who now are restorationists of the broadest type, teaching what they are pleased to call universal reconciliation, which to their minds involves the final salvation not only of all men, but of Satan and all the fallen angels. These two views, diverse as they are, are nevertheless the legitimate offspring of the ultra-dispensational system to which we refer.” (Ironside, 8-9)
- So in the mind of Ironside, “ultra-dispensationalism” equates with “Bullingerism” or those who follow the doctrinal tenants of Dr. E. W. Bullinger. According to Ironside, there are six outstanding positions taken by these teachers:
 - “*First*, inasmuch as our Lord Jesus was “a minister of the circumcision to confirm the promises made to the fathers,” it is insisted that the four Gospels are entirely Jewish and have no real message for the Church, the Body of Christ. All might not put it quite as boldly as this, but certainly their disciples go to the limit in repudiating the authority of the Gospels.

Secondly, it is maintained that the book of Acts covers a transition period between the dispensation of the law and the dispensation of the mystery; that is, that in the book of Acts we do not have the Church, the Body of Christ, but that the word "ekklesia" (church, or assembly), as used in that book, refers to a different Church altogether to that of Paul's prison epistles. This earlier Church is simply an aspect of the kingdom and is not the same as the Body of Christ!

Third, it is contended that Paul did not receive his special revelation of the mystery of the Body until his imprisonment in Rome, and that his prison epistles alone reveal this truth and are, strictly speaking, the only portion of the Holy Scriptures given to members of the Body. All of the other epistles of Paul, save those written during his imprisonment and the general epistles, are relegated to the earlier dispensation of the book of Acts, and have no permanent value for us, but were for the instruction of the so-called Jewish church of that time.

Fourth, the entire book of Revelation has to do with the coming age and has no reference to the Church today. Even the letters to the seven churches in Asia, which are distinctly said to be "the things which are," are, according to this system, to be considered as "the things which are not," and will not be until the Church, the Body of Christ, is removed from this world. Then, it is contended, these seven churches will appear on the earth as Jewish churches in the Great Tribulation.

Fifth, the Body of Christ is altogether a different company, according to these teachers, from the Bride of the Lamb, the latter being supposed to be Jewish.

Sixth, the Christian ordinances, having been given before Paul is supposed to have received his revelation of the mystery in prison, have no real connection with the present economy, and therefore, are relegated to the past, and may again have a place in the future Great Tribulation." (Ironsides, 9-10)

- In the mind of Ironsides, "ultra-dispensationalism" is equal to "Bullingerism" and is dangerous. Chapter one is concluded with an outline of what Ironsides believes to be destructive effects of "ultra-dispensationalism." According to Ironsides, the six doctrines listed above are "an absolutely Satanic perversion of the truth." (Ironsides, 11)
 - "Besides these six points, there are many other unscriptural things which are advocated by various disciples who began with these views and have been rapidly throwing overboard other Scriptural teachings. Many Bullingerites boldly advocate the sleep of the soul between death and resurrection, the annihilation of the wicked, or, as we have seen, universal salvation of all men and demons, the denial of the eternal Sonship of the Lord Jesus Christ, and, gravest of all, the personality of the Holy Spirit. All of these evil doctrines find congenial soil in Bullingerism. Once men take up with this system there is no telling how far they will go, and what their final position will be in regard to the great

fundamental truths of Christianity. It is because of this that one needs to be on his guard, for it is as true of systems as it is of teachers, "By their fruits ye shall know them."

Having had most intimate acquaintance with Bullingerism as taught by many for the last forty years, I have no hesitancy in saying that its fruits are evil. It has produced a tremendous crop of heresies throughout the length and breadth of this and other lands, it has divided Christians and wrecked churches and assemblies without number; it has lifted up its votaries in intellectual and spiritual pride to an appalling extent, so that they look with supreme contempt upon Christians who do not accept their peculiar views; and in most instances where it has been long tolerated, it has absolutely throttled Gospel efforts at home and sown discord on missionary fields abroad. So true are these things of this system that I have no hesitancy in saying it is an absolutely Satanic perversion of the truth. Instead of rightly dividing the Word, I shall seek to show that these teachers wrongly divide the Word, and that their propaganda is anything but conducive to spirituality and enlightenment in divine things." (Ironsides, 11)

Chapter Two: The Four Gospels and Their Relation to the Church

- All ultra-dispensationalists are united in their view that the four Gospels "must be entirely regulated to a past dispensation," according to Ironsides. (12) Consequently, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are not to be considered in any sense as applying to the present age. In addition, Romans 15:8 is used by ultra-dispensationalists to substantiate this claim. In short, Ironsides depicts ultra-dispensationalists as advocating for the "rude severing of the Old Testament or Gospel revelation from that of the present age." (14)
- Matthew 13 is a dispensationally significant passage for Ironsides in his defense against ultra-dispensationalism. According to Ironsides, an altogether new ministry begins in Matthew 13 when Jesus begins to speak of the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.
 - "In chapter thirteen, we have an altogether new ministry beginning. The Lord for the first time opens up the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven, revealing things that had been kept secret from the foundation of the world, namely the strange and unlooked-for form that the kingdom would take here on earth after Israel had rejected the King and He had returned to Heaven. This is set forth in the seven parables of that chapter, and gives us the course of Christendom during all the present age.

As a rule, the ultra-dispensationalists would ignore all this and push these seven parables forward into the tribulation era after the Church, the Body of Christ, has been taken out of this scene. But this is to do violence to the entire Gospel and to ignore utterly the history of the past 1900 years, just as in Revelation 2 and 3 we have an outline of the history of the professing Church presented under the similitude of the seven letters, so in Matthew 13 we have the course of Christendom in perfect harmony with the Church letters, portrayed in such a way as to make clear the distinction between the Church that man builds and that which is truly of God. (14-15)

- In Matthew 16, Ironside takes Christ's declaration that He is going to build His church as a reference to the church the body of Christ.
 - "In chapter sixteen of Matthew's Gospel, the Lord declares for the first time that He is going to build a Church or assembly. This assembly is to be built upon the Rock, the confession of the apostle Peter that Christ is the Son of the living God. How utterly vain it is to try to separate this declaration from the statement in the Ephesian Epistle where we read: (quotes Eph. 2:19-22). Here in the preeminent prison epistle of which so much is made by the Bullingerites, you find that the Church then in existence is the Church our Lord spoke of building when He was here in the days of His flesh. . . In Matthew 16 you have the assembly as a whole, comprising all believers during the present dispensation." (15-16)
- Ironside believes that Israel was completely set aside in Matthew 23:37-39 when Jesus said, "Your house is left unto you desolate." The doctor then proceeds to attack the notion that Israel was given a second chance to repent during the Acts period as well as the idea that the nation was not aside until Acts 28.
 - "In the light of the words, "Your house is left unto you desolate," how amazing the presumption that would lead any to declare, as practically all these extreme dispensationalists do declare, that Israel is being given a second trial throughout all the book of Acts, and that their real setting aside does not take place until Paul's meeting with the elders of the Jews after his imprisonment in Rome, as recorded in the last chapter of Acts." (16)
- The ultra-dispensational idea that the Great Commission is not the church's commission also draws attention from Ironside. Referring to Matthew 28, Ironside states the following:
 - "People who have never investigated Bullingerism and its kindred systems will hardly believe me when I say that even the great commission upon which the Church has acted for 1900 years, and which is still our authority for world-wide missions, is, according to these teachers, a commission with which we have nothing whatever to do, that has no reference to the Church at all, and that the work there predicted will not begin until taken up by the remnant of Israel in the days of the Great Tribulation. Yet such is actually the teaching. In view of this, let us carefully read the closing verses of the Gospel: (quotes Matt. 28:16-20)."
- In order to drive his point home, Ironside offers the following paraphrase of Matthew 28 to help explain to his reader how a Bullingerite interprets that passage.
 - "Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And when they saw Him, they worshipped Him: but some doubted. And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto Me in heaven and earth,

and after two entire dispensations have rolled by, I command that the remnant of Israel who shall be living two thousand or more years later, shall go out and teach the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, teaching them in that day to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you, but from which I absolve all believers between the present hour and that coming age, and lo, I will be with that remnant until the close of Daniel's seventieth week." (17-18)

- Ironside then connects Mark 16's account of the Great Commission with Matthew's account. Ultra-dispensationalists have made Mark 16 a battleground passage and miss the entire point of the passage, according to Ironside.
 - “. . . they insist that the commission given in verses fifteen and eighteen could only apply during the days of the book of Acts, inasmuch as certain signs were to follow them that believe. As the commission in Matthew has been relegated by them to the Great Tribulation after the Christian age has closed, this one is supposed to have had its fulfillment before the present mystery dispensation began, and so has no real force now. They point out, what to them seems conclusive, that in this commission, as of course that in Matthew, water baptism is evidently linked with a profession of faith in Christ. They are perfectly hydrophobic as to this. The very thought of water sets them foaming with indignation. There must on no account be any recognition of water baptism during the present age. It must be gotten rid of at all costs. So here where we read that our Lord said, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature; he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mark 16: 15, 16), which would seem to indicate world-wide evangelism, looking out to the proclamation of the glad glorious Gospel of God to lost men everywhere, this commission must nevertheless be gotten rid of somehow. The way they do it is this: The Lord declares that certain signs shall follow when this Gospel is proclaimed. These signs evidently followed in the days of the Acts. They declare they have never followed since. Therefore, it is evident that water baptism is only to go on so long as the signs follow. If the signs have ceased, then water baptism ceases. The signs are not here now, therefore no water baptism. How amazingly clear (!), though, as we shall see in a moment, absolutely illogical. The signs accompanied preaching the Gospel. Why continue to preach if such signs are not now manifest?" (19-20)
- Finally, in order to make his point regarding the Great Commission, Ironside misrepresented the clear common sense meaning of the passage in Mark 16.
 - “Now what of this commission in Mark? Observe first of all that our Lord is not declaring that the signs shall follow believers in the Gospel which is to be proclaimed by the Lord's messengers. The signs were to follow those of the apostles who believed, and they did. There were some of them who did not believe. . . Now our Lord commissions the eleven, sends them forth to go to the ends of the earth preaching the Gospel to every creature. There is nothing limited here. It is not a Jewish commission. It has nothing to do with the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. It is a world-wide commission to go to all

the Gentiles, and to go forth preaching the Word. Responsibility rests upon those who hear. They are to believe and be baptized. Those who do are recognized among the saved. On the other hand, He does not say, "He that is not baptized shall be damned," because baptism was simply an outward confession of their faith, but He does say, "He that believeth not shall be damned." (20-21)

Chapter Three: The Transition Period Is the Church of The Acts the Body of Christ?

- All ultra-dispensationalists maintain that the book of Acts covers a transitional period between the age of the law and the present age during which the “dispensation of the mystery” was revealed, according to Ironside.
 - “There is perhaps nothing about which the ultra dispensationalists are more certain, according to their own expressions, than that the book of the Acts covers a transitional period, coming in between the age of the law and the present age in which the dispensation of the mystery has been revealed. They do not always agree as to the name of this intervening period. Some call it the Kingdom Church; others the Jewish Church; and there are those who prefer the term Pentecostal Dispensation. The general teaching is about as follows: It is affirmed that the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost and His baptizing the one hundred and twenty and those who afterwards believed, did not have anything to do with the formation of the Church, the Body of Christ. On the contrary, they insist that the Church throughout all of the book of Acts up to Paul's imprisonment was of an altogether lower order than that of the Epistle to the Ephesians. Assemblies in Judea, Samaria, and the various Gentile countries, were simply groups of believers who were waiting for the manifestation of the kingdom, and had not yet come into the full liberty of grace. The ordinances of the Lord's Supper and of baptism were linked with these companies and were to continue only until Israel had definitely and finally refused the Gospel message, after which the full revelation of the mystery is supposed to have been given to the apostle Paul when he was imprisoned at Rome. From that time on a new dispensation began. Surely this is wrongly confounding the Word of Truth. How any rational and spiritually-minded person could ever come to such a conclusion after a careful reading of the book of Acts, and with it the various epistles addressed to the churches and peoples mentioned in that book, is more than some of us can comprehend. Let us see what the facts actually are.” (23-24)
- Ironside counters the Bullingerite viewpoints expressed above with the standard Acts 2 Ecclesiology we have seen many times throughout this class. He states in part:
 - “In the first place, it is perfectly plain that the Church, the Body of Christ, was formed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. . . According to God, the new dispensation, that in which we now live, the dispensation of the grace of God, otherwise called the dispensation of the mystery, began the moment the Spirit descended at Pentecost. That moment the one Body came into existence, though at the beginning it was composed entirely of believers taken out from the Jewish people. But in the minds even of the disciples, there was a long

period before they all fully entered into the special work that God had begun to do. Many of them, in fact, probably never did apprehend the true character of this dispensation, as we shall see further on.” (24-25)

- On pages twenty seven and twenty eight, Ironside presses the ultra-dispensationalist to explain how Paul’s statement about salvation being sent to the gentiles in Acts 13:44 is any different from his statement in Acts 28:28.
 - “I ask any thoughtful reader: What difference is there between this account of Paul’s dealing with the Jews, the proclamation of grace going out to the Gentiles, and that found in chapter 28 of this same book? In the light of these two passages, may we not say that if Paul was given liberty, as we know he was, to preach for several years after his first imprisonment, he undoubtedly still followed exactly the same method of proclaiming the Gospel to the Jew first, and then to the Gentiles? It is passing strange that these ultra-dispensationalists can overlook a passage like Acts 13, and then read so much into the similar portion in chapter 28. According to them, as we have pointed out, the dispensational break occurred at this latter time, after which Paul’s ministry, they tell us, took an entirely different form. It was then that the dispensation of the mystery was revealed to him, they say, which he embodied in his prison epistles. He was no longer a preacher of the kingdom, but now a minister of the Body. The theory sounds very plausible until one examines the text of Scripture itself.” (28)
- In summation, Ironside sees no justification for the notion that Israel was ever given a second chance to repent at any point throughout the book of Acts. For Ironside, Israel was set aside in Matthew when the Lord stated, “Your house is left unto you desolate.”

Works Cited

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