

## **Rightly Dividing E.W. Bullinger: The Most Intriguing Story Never Told**

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By

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There can be little doubt that E.W. Bullinger (EWB) is one of the most polarizing figures in the history of dispensational Bible study. Why does the mere mention of Bullinger's name incite such a visceral reaction in some quarters of the Evangelical world including within the Grace Movement? In the one hundred years since his death in 1913, he has been called a heretic, ultradispensationalist, and a dispensational faddist. Who was this controversial figure? Is all this "hype" surrounding the writings of EWB justified? Besides being able to list such errors as conditional immortality, starting the Church in Acts 28, or dividing Paul's epistles into two different groups with respect to Acts 28, how much is really known about the historical development of EWB's theology? Even amongst mid-Acts Pauline dispensationalists that comprise the Grace Movement and vehemently object to EWB's position on the origin of the church is there any real understanding of the evolution of his thinking? Has anyone ever studied EWB's writings through the prism of historical theology in an attempt to ascertain what EWB taught and WHEN he taught it? As with most men, EWB is remembered for where he ended up and not the journey that led him there.

It is this "journey" that we are interested in here. After reading and analyzing the works of EWB in their chronological order a most fascinating story emerges. As the calendar turned from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, EWB could rightly have been called a mid-Acts dispensationalist according to today's terminology. By the year 1900, EWB had enunciated almost every major doctrinal position upon which the Grace Movement in the United States would be based some forty years later. How then by the end of his life and career, only thirteen years later, does EWB go down in history as the father of Acts 28 dispensationalism? Why did Bullinger change his

mind? What were the factors influencing his thinking? Who else if anyone was involved? The answers to these questions comprise one of the most interesting and intriguing stories never told within the history of dispensational theology.

Beginning to tell this story is the goal of the current essay. In this article we will survey the major dispensational writings of EWB between 1887 and 1892 in an attempt to establish a baseline understanding of his early dispensational thinking. Then in time we will seek to show that by the year 1900, EWB had enunciated all the major tenets of a mid-Acts dispensational position that later came to characterize the Grace Movement. Moving forward from 1900, we will present a narrative that establishes how and why EWB changed his mind theologically and came to articulate the Acts 28 position before his death in 1913.

### **Ten Sermons on the Second Advent (1887)**

In 1877, Bullinger ascended to prominence within the Anglican Church via the publication of his *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament*. A landmark achievement in its own right, the *Lexicon and Concordance* touched off the ministry for which he would be remember most, his writing ministry. Four years later, on August 17, 1881 Bullinger received a letter from the Archbishop of Canterbury notifying him that the Church of England was set to confer upon him the Degree of Doctor of Divinity on account of his work on the *Lexicon and Concordance*. The Doctor of Divinity was conferred August 31, 1881 and followed up by a congratulatory letter from Queen Victoria on September 9. These events propelled Bullinger to national notoriety within Victorian Era Britain.<sup>1</sup>

At the time of his honors, Ethelbert had been serving as Reverend for the Parish of Walthamstow since January, 1875. The degree to which he demanded attention as a speaker outside of his parish on account of his newly found popularity is difficult to determine. What can be said for certain is that the first known sermons he gave outside his Parish occurred in November, 1887 at St. Ebbe's Church in Oxford. Between the dates of November 21-25,

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<sup>1</sup> Juanita Carey. *E.W. Bullinger: A Biography*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 59-62.

Bullinger preached 10 sermons on prophetic subjects.<sup>2</sup> The notes that comprised these messages were published the following year (1888) in a single volume titled, *Ten Sermons on the Second Advent (TSSA)*. It is with these sermons that our investigation into the dispensational teaching and development of EWB begins.

Juanita Carey, Bullinger's chief biographer, notes that this series of sermons became the foundation of his tenants on Biblical prophecy, the Second Coming, the difference between the kingdom and the church, the criteria for identifying the Bible's three main people groups "the Jews, the Gentiles, and the church of God."<sup>3</sup> In the notes for the eighth sermon, "The Second Advent in Relation to The Gentile," Bullinger discusses the need to rightly divide the word of truth in accordance with this three-fold division. Bullinger argues that the Church, by and large, has not rightly divided the word of truth in seeking to join together that which God has put asunder. The failure to rightly divide with respect to these three people groups is the source of the confusion within the church. Seeking to give the Church what God promised Israel, while ignoring her curses, "Practical Religion . . . confused the Church with the world so completely, that one cannot tell the difference between the worldly Church and the religious world; or see where the one begins and the other ends,"<sup>4</sup> according to Bullinger.

In 1887, Dr. Bullinger was teaching that the source of the Church's utter confusion was found in conflating Israel and the Church. It is important to note that he was making this argument for decades before the same subject was taken up by Bultema, O'Hair, Stam, Baker, and the other founders of the Grace Movement in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> The fifth sermon, delivered by Bullinger at Oxford was titled "The Calling and Hope of the Church of God." It argues that the Church was "untrackable" in the Old Testament and that the body of Christ was the subject of the mystery first made known to the Apostle Paul. These "untrackable"

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<sup>2</sup> E.W. Bullinger. *Ten Sermons on the Second Advent*. New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, Preface.

<sup>3</sup> Carey. *Bullinger*. 94.

<sup>4</sup> E.W. Bullinger. *Ten Sermons on the Second Advent*. 124.

<sup>5</sup> See J.C. O'Hair's *The Unsearchable Riches of Christ* from 1941 among other titles.

or unsearchable riches are contrasted with the “searchable” riches that are revealed through the writings of the prophets. Bullinger asserts that Gentile salvation and blessing through Israel is known and spoken of by the Old Testament prophets. However, God’s reconciling Gentiles to himself apart from Israel was heretofore unknown by the prophets and unrevealed in the Scriptures. For purposes of precision and historical documentation, given how often Bullinger has been misrepresented and misunderstood, it is important to consider his early exposition of Ephesians 3 in his own words:

“In our text (Eph. 3) he calls it "the unsearchable riches of Christ" . . . There are riches in Christ which we may call the searchable riches, such as the revealed prophecies and promises concerning Him, which could be searched and understood by the Prophets who wrote them. But there were others which they could not search. They were "unsearchable" . . . (expounds upon the use of the Greek word in the NT). . . So here in our text, the word does not mean that which cannot be understood, if found; but that which cannot be traced, or followed out. These untrackable riches of Christ which the Prophets could not trace out, are not merely the blessing of the Gentiles as such, as might be inferred from verse 6. That was never any secret. It was revealed from the beginning to Abraham that "in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. xii. 3): "All the nations of the earth shall be blessed through him" (Abraham) (Gen. 18:18). Many prophecies reveal this truth of which aged Simeon testified when he spoke of Christ as "a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of Thy people Israel" (Luke 2:32). These untrackable riches of Christ, therefore, were not merely the blessing of Gentiles, as such, by and by, **but the taking out of a people from among them now (Acts xv. 14) to form the one body in Christ, the mystery of the Church. This is what had, until now, been hidden, and what had now been specially revealed to St. Paul.** In testimony of this, note the following Scriptures: (quotes Rom. 16:25-26, Col. 1:24-27, Eph. 3:2-11) . . . Now the Old Testament Prophets knew nothing of all this. They looked as it has been said from the one hilltop of Christ's "sufferings" to the other hill-top of His "glory," but the valley that lay between was unknown. They could not track it, and all its mines of wealth were unexplored. The Spirit, by Peter, refers to this when he says (I Pet. 1. 10-12) . . . But when Christ had been rejected, when atonement had been made, then the message of reconciliation could be sent forth. Then, and not till then, was that which had been "hid in God" and "kept secret from the beginning of the world," made known. Then "the eternal purpose of God" was revealed, and the riches of the valley (this present interval between the sufferings and the glory) were laid bare, that "pilgrims and strangers," who now are passing through it, may trace and search them out. And who are these pilgrims and strangers? They are those who once were dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1), but who have been "quickened together with Christ" (2:5), and saved by grace (2:8), and made fellowheirs with Christ (2:6), "members of His body, of His

flesh, and of His bones" (5:30-32). This is the great mystery concerning Christ and His Church.<sup>6</sup>

While this lengthy quotation is important in establishing a baseline understanding regarding Bullinger's early teaching on the church it makes no assertion as to when the church began. In fact, nowhere within *TSSA* are there any statements regarding the timing of the Church's origin. Whether or not at this point in his career EWB held to the Acts 2 origin of the church there is no evidence; however, it is important to note that J.N. Darby argued forcefully for the notion that the Church was a unique Pauline revelation while still maintaining that the body of Christ came into existence at Pentecost.<sup>7</sup>

Regarding Bullinger's teaching on the church it would be distorting to not comment on his early misgivings regarding the subjects of water baptism and the Lord's Supper. Chapter One on "The Importance of Prophetic Study," puts forth the notion that the neglect of the church to study major Bible doctrines such as the Second Advent in favor of more minor subjects such as baptism and Lord's Supper is evidence that the modern church was departing from the faith. While he does not come out forcibly against the practice of these two ordinances, Bullinger cites statistical information regarding the frequency of their appearance within the text of the New Testament as evidence of the undue stress placed upon them by the organized church.<sup>8</sup> Specifically he states, "From the prominence given to it by man, one would image the New Testament to be filled with it."<sup>9</sup> In time, these early misgivings would develop into the rejection of both these ordinances for the church.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 67-72. Due to the confines of space we have significantly paired down this important quotation. Interested parties are encouraged to read the quotation in its entirety. A free downloadable PDF copy of *Ten Sermons on the Second Advent* is available on the internet. In addition, we changed EWB's Roman Numerals to standard numerals for ease of reading.

<sup>7</sup> See J.N. Darby's *The Rapture of the Saints and the Character of the Jewish Remnant*.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 7. "Baptism is mentioned only 19 times in 7 epistles (the noun 5 and the verb 14), and it is not once named in 14 out of 21 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 20 (out of 21) of the Epistles it is never once alluded to!"

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 7.

Multiple times in *TSSA*, Bullinger addresses the subject of the catching away of the body of Christ, an event that he clearly believed would occur prior to the Tribulation. The fourth chapter, titled “No Millennium Without Christ” offers the fullest treatment of this subject. Arguing that the onset of the tribulation signified the beginning of “the end,” EWB teaches clearly that the Lord will have already “commenced his Descent to gather his Saints unto Himself, and meet them in the air. Before the breaking of a single “Seal” (Rev. 6) . . . The “beginning” of these awful scenes is the moment of the Church’s deliverance.”<sup>10</sup> By making a distinction between Christ coming “FOR his Saints” i.e., the Rapture and Christ coming “WITH his Saints” at the Second Coming, EWB’s explanation have much in common with Plymouth Brethren eschatological teachings popularized by J.N. Darby, William Holden, William Trotter, and C.H. Mackintosh among others.<sup>11</sup>

Despite clearly teaching that the catching away of the church would occur before the tribulation and that this event constituted the hope of the Church,<sup>12</sup> Bullinger’s explanation is a bit confused and inconsistent. Like the Plymouth Brethren expositors before him, Bullinger’s teaching regarding the timing of the Rapture is muddled by his mixing of Pauline texts with passages from the Gospels and the book of Revelation. While he saw the church as a unique Pauline revelation he does not follow through with this principle consistently when expounding upon the end of this dispensation. For example, he equates 1Thessalonians 4:16-17 where Paul speaks of saints being “caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air,” with Luke 21:36 where Christ speaks of people who will be “accounted worthy” to “escape these things that shall

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>11</sup> “The ‘beginning’ of the Tribulation marks the time when the Lord will thus come FOR His Saints; and the height and end of it marks the time when He will appear in glory WITH all His-Saints.” 62-63.

<sup>12</sup> See Chapter 6 “The Churches’ Motive For Service” pages 82-99 for details.

come to pass” upon the earth.<sup>13</sup> There is an underlying tension here that Bullinger was either unaware of in 1887/88 or did not yet know how to solve. In short, Bullinger’s early expositions regarding the timing and details of the church’s catching away lack the clarity and precision of his later treatment. At the time *TSSA* was published, EWB taught that the Apostle John was referring to the Rapture of the church in Revelation 4:1 with his statement, “come up hither.”<sup>14</sup> Later in his ministry when he wrote *The Apocalypse or, The Day of the Lord (Commentary on Revelation new title)*, Bullinger argued that the catching up of the church occurred before even one word of Revelation was fulfilled and that Revelation 4:1 had nothing to do with the church of this dispensation.<sup>15</sup>

Any survey of *TSSA* would be incomplete without out noting Bullinger’s complete advocacy for the premillennial return of Christ. The entirety of Chapter Three, “The Second Advent Pre-Millennial,” is devoted to setting forth this subject. After acknowledging that all Christians generally agree that Christ is coming again and that when he does it will be a time of universal blessedness, he concedes there is not universal agreement regarding the time of his coming. Arguing from the perspective of church history, Bullinger maintains that early Christians knew nothing of the terms “pre” or “post”—millennial. Rather they looked for Christ to come first and did not conceive of a millennial framework apart from the second coming of the Lord. For example, Bullinger states, “They looked for a person not a Millennium without Him.”<sup>16</sup> In attempting to prove his point that “the Pre-millennial Advent of Christ is the truth of the Bible,”<sup>17</sup> EWB assembled and expounded upon thirteen prophetic texts from the Old Testament. After doing so he concluded, “it is in fact impossible to produce a Scripture which speaks of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>15</sup> E.W. Bullinger. *The Apocalypse or, the Day of the Lord*. 1902, 2-3.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 39

Millennial blessing, where the immediate context does not connect it with preceding judgment, or with the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>18</sup>

In summation, *TSSA* comprises Bullinger’s earliest known dispensational teaching and establishes a baseline from which one can measure his theological development over time. Aside from his misgivings regarding baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and lack of clarity on the historic origin of the church Bullinger’s dispensational thinking at this stage in his ministry had much in common with his Plymouth Brethren (Acts 2) forebears and contemporaries. Over time this would change. The following is a listing of the key points in the early dispensational thinking of EWB outlined in this foundational work:

- Clear difference/distinction between the Jews, the Gentiles, and the Church of God.
- Failure by the professing church to rightly divide between these three people groups was responsible for the confusion plaguing Christendom.
- The body of Christ i.e., the Church, was the subject of the mystery revealed to the Apostle Paul and is therefore “untrackable” in the Old Testament prophets.
- Makes no assertion as to the historic origin of the Church.
- Questions the emphasis of the modern church upon baptism and Lord’s Supper arguing these are minor subjects when compared with other larger and neglected topics i.e., the Lord’s Second Advent.
- Clearly teaches the pre-tribulation rapture of the church and distinguishes between the Lord’s coming FOR his saints (catching up) and WITH his saints (Second Advent).
- Demonstrates tension in explaining the nature and timing of the rapture by equating Pauline texts with passages in the Gospels and Revelation.
- Firmly argues for the Premillennial Second Advent of Christ as both the historical view of the Church and the proper interpretation of Scripture.

***The Kingdom and The Church or The Seven Parables of Matthew XIII (1892)***

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 46.



*The Kingdom and The Church (TKTC)* published in 1892 is the next book of dispensational significance to appear from Bullinger's pen. The years between 1888 and 1892 were relatively merger in terms of literary output. During this period Bullinger published no book length works, limiting himself to four pamphlets comprised of notes from public addresses and four collections of hymns. In addition, Bullinger served as the editor for Thomas Boys' *A Key to Psalms* in 1890.<sup>19</sup>

The publication of *TKTC*<sup>20</sup> further developed ideas that first appeared in *TSSA* as well as introduced some new thinking into the thought stream. Dr. Bullinger begins *TKTC* with reiterating more forcefully his comments about man not seeking to "join together" what God has "put asunder," thereby stressing the absolute necessity of "rightly dividing the Word of truth." Expanding upon his initial distinction between the Jews, the Gentiles, and the church of God; Bullinger draws a "line of separation" between priest and presbyter, law and grace, the old and new natures, standing and state, professors and possessors, salvation and rewards, first and second resurrection, Christ' coming forth and unto, and finally between the kingdom and the church. Regarding this last distinction he states, "Nowhere are they said to be the same; nowhere are the terms used synonymously: God has separated them. It is a pure assumption on the part of man (not to say disobedience to God's plain command), which has made him join them together, and has thus led to so much error, and to so many mistakes."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Carey. *E.W. Bullinger: A Biography*. 236. Bullinger's writings between 1888 and 1892 include the following in chronological order: *God's Purpose in Israel: In History, Type and Prophecy* (1889), *The Name of Jehovah in the Book of Esther* (1889), *Fifty Original Hymn-Tunes* (1889), *Hymns for Bible Readings* (1889), *Hymns on the Second Advent* (1889), *The Inspiration and Authority of Holy Scripture* (1890), and *The Spirits in Prison: An Exposition of I Peter 3:17-4:6* (1891)

<sup>20</sup> In addition to *The Kingdom and the Church*, 1892 also witness the publication of three additional pamphlets: *Christ's Prophetic Teaching in Relation to the Divine Order of His Words and Works*, *The Ways of God in Grace, Illustrated by the Ways of God in Creation*, and *The New Creation and the Old: The Ways of God in Grace* taken from a lecture Bullinger gave at the Mildmay Prophecy Conference in London in June, 1892.

<sup>21</sup> E.W. Bullinger. *The Kingdom and The Church or The Seven Parables of Matthew XIII*. 1892, 2.

As the title suggests, the bulk of *TKTC* is taken up with delineating how these two aspects of God's plan are separate from each other. For Bullinger this originates with defining his terminology beginning with "The Kingdom." According to EWB, "The Kingdom is that which forms the great subject of the Old Testament promise and prophecy. The Kingdom that 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."<sup>22</sup> In short, the establishment of God's kingdom on earth through the instrumentality of the nation of Israel is the central theme and goal of prophecy.

In contrast, "the church of God" the chief subject of the New Testament, comprises the "unsearchable riches of Christ" and was "untrackable" by the prophets who searched diligently in vain according to I Peter 1:11, to ascertain the interval of time between "the suffering of Christ and the glory that should follow."<sup>23</sup> The reason being that the Church was a mystery that was "specially revealed to the Apostle Paul, and by him to the Church. He was singled out and chosen to be the medium of this new revelation of what up to that moment had been "kept secret since the world began," "hid in God" . . . that Jews and Gentiles, on being born of the Spirit, should cease to be Jews and Gentiles, as to their standing . . . and form a new hitherto unknown company called "the Church of God," "the Body of Christ."<sup>24</sup> While this technically is not "new" information in EWB's thought stream, it does represent an advancement over earlier definitions of the Church in so far as it is precise in recognizing the church as a unique Pauline revelation, wholly unknown to the sons of men before it was revealed to Paul. In another place Bullinger speaks of the fact that the "parenthetical interval" between the First and Second Advents was kept a secret from the Old Testament prophets. These two

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 3.

entities “the Kingdom” and “the church” are to never be joined together without “serious loss of sense and truth,” according to Bullinger.<sup>25</sup>

In a section titled “The Kingdom and the Church in the New Testament” Bullinger sets forth eleven facts for properly understanding the Kingdom and the Church in the New Testament. Unfortunately, space will not permit an exhaustive discussion of all eleven facts, however, the following concepts were deemed too important in terms of understanding Bullinger’s thought development to omit:

- The Church is spoken of as being “BUILT” rather than “SET UP.” “The word “build” is found twenty-four times in the New Testament, and is never used in connection with the Kingdom. On the other hand, the word used for the Kingdom, “set up,” is never found in connection with the Church of God.”<sup>26</sup>
- Words used by men in common speech in reference to the Kingdom such as “extension” or “advancement” are foreign to the word of God. Likewise, expressions such as “heirs of the kingdom,” “children of the kingdom,” “receiving the kingdom,” or “entering, seeing, and inheriting the kingdom” are never used in relation to the Church.<sup>27</sup>
- “The Kingdom, once it is set up on the earth, will be an “everlasting kingdom;” but the Church will be removed from earth as soon as it is completed.” No Scripture reference is given by EWB to support this curious statement.<sup>28</sup>
- Point nine is another curious statement for which no reference is given: “. . . the privilege of the Church will be to reign with Christ; but the subjects of the kingdom will be reigned over and ruled by Christ and His Church.”
- The Kingdom and the King are the greatest subject of the Bible. In discussing the need to rightly divide between the various phases or stages in the unfolding of the Kingdom he mentions a break in the continuity of the Kingdom found during the present interval or parenthesis covered by the epistles. Most importantly he speaks for the first time about the “Acts of the Apostle being transitional” although he does not elaborate on what this means.<sup>29</sup>

A fair analysis of this section of *TKTC* leaves one sensing much tension in Bullinger’s thinking on these subjects at this point in his career. While he argues for the absolute separation of the Kingdom and the Church, some of his comments demonstrate certain

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 5.

interactions or points of connection between them. It appears, that in 1892 Bullinger had yet to articulate how both the Kingdom and the Church work together in accomplishing the greater singular eternal purpose of God of centering all things in Jesus Christ.<sup>30</sup>

The final and most lengthy section of *TKTC* contains Bullinger's exposition of the parables of Matthew 13. This article's limited space dictates that we limit our comments to only those sections that advance our understanding of EWB's emerging dispensational framework. Unequivocally, Bullinger maintains that the subject of the parables is the Kingdom and not the Church. These seven parables of the Kingdom "must be interpreted by what is written in the Law and Prophets according to the Scriptures and quiet apart from the subsequent revelation in the Epistles addressed to the Church," in Bullinger's thinking. This is because the Church, "which is the subject of the present dispensation," had not yet been revealed while Christ was on earth. Consequently, the seven parables of Matthew 13 reveal aspects of the Kingdom of God that were heretofore unknown or kept secret, and not the Church of this present "dispensation of grace."<sup>31</sup>

It is within this context that Bullinger articulates his clearest dispensational scheme to date:

"All the seven parables must be interpreted of the Kingdom. The period covered by them runs from the first proclamation of the Kingdom by John the Baptist until the formal withdrawal by God in the Acts of the Apostles. After which there is a break while it is in abeyance and the Church is being taken out. Then (after the Church shall have been caught up, according to special revelation in I Thess. 4:14-16) these parables take up the Kingdom again until it is finally established according to the counsels of God."<sup>32</sup>

This quotation contains two significant advances in clarity over what he wrote in *TSSA*.

1) Bullinger notes that the proclamation of the Kingdom that began with John the Baptist was formally withdrawn at some point in Acts. These statements manifest the notion, in

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<sup>30</sup> Ephesians 1:10

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 7-9.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 9.

rudimentary form, that God's dealings with Israel needed to be suspended before the Church could be formed. 2) Unlike in *TSSA*, Bullinger notes specially that the catching up of the Church is "according to special revelation." These statements coupled with ones made in *TKTC* make it reasonable to understand Bullinger to be saying that the "catching up" of the church is part of the special revelation committed to the Apostle Paul. This understanding is further witnessed by the fact the Bullinger never cites passages from the Gospels or Revelation when speaking about the rapture as he did in *TSSA* some four years earlier.

Building upon the notion that the Kingdom testimony ceased at some point during the book of Acts, EWB concludes that water baptism stands in connection with the preaching of the Kingdom of God. On this point Bullinger states, "so long as the "Gospel of the Kingdom" was the subject of testimony, ordinances and signs accompanied it."<sup>33</sup> By following Paul's baptism practices in the book of Acts and applying his principle of strict separation between the Kingdom and the Church, Bullinger concludes that "the public preaching of the Kingdom ends with Acts 19:20. Not until after this (Acts 20:28) are believers spoken of as "the Church of God:" nor is the "the blood of Jesus" mentioned as purchasing that Church."<sup>34</sup> At this point in the narrative it appears as though Bullinger is arguing for an Acts 19/20 origin for the Church the body of Christ, which coincidentally is very similar to the first "mid-Acts" view articulated by J.C. O'Hair in *God's Reign of Grace for the Human Race*.<sup>35</sup> Unfortunately, further matters become complicated when Bullinger writes the following regarding the parenthetical nature of the current dispensation, "the gap or parenthesis

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>35</sup> *God's Reign of Grace for the Human Race* was written during a nine month window after the final issue of *Bible Study for Bereans* in July, 1937 but before the publication of *The Dispensational Razzle Dazzle* in April, 1938. It is in *God's Reign of Grace* that O'Hair first argues that the Church began before Paul wrote Romans i.e., somewhere around Acts 20.

begins towards the close of the Acts, and is marked internally by the solemn and formal repetition of Isaiah 6 in Acts 28.”<sup>36</sup> The statement that “the preaching of the Kingdom ceases there (Acts 28),”<sup>37</sup> is in tension with the comments noted above from page twelve. A possible Acts 28 bent is also observable when one considers Bullinger’s exposition of the Parable of the Great Supper.<sup>38</sup> In expounding this parable Bullinger applies aspects of it to Paul’s ministry during the book of Acts, thereby indicating that the secret of the Church was not revealed until the later portion of Acts.<sup>39</sup> At least three things are clear from these observations: 1) these seemingly contradictory statements made within two pages of each other demonstrate a man whose thinking was in transition as he was reasoning through the implications of his dispensational scheme; 2) while some of the comments are very Acts 28-sounding, particularly on page fourteen, they are far from articulating a mature Acts 28 view; and 3) Bullinger appears to have rejected the standard Acts 2 position articulated by his Plymouth Brethren forebears and contemporaries. In fact, we are aware of no written statements by Bullinger that he ever held that the church began on the day of Pentecost.

Finally, in his explanation of the Parable of the Tares, which he believes “passes over the present interval while the Kingdom is in abeyance, and takes up the harvest at the end of the age,”<sup>40</sup> Bullinger argues that the so-called Great Commission in Matthew 28 does not comprise the Church’s “marching orders” or commission. The good Doctor asserts that the commission of Matthew 28:19-20 applies to the end of the age and therefore was never fully carried out by the twelve Apostles. Moreover, since that age (the Kingdom) was interrupted by the revelation of the mystery concerning the Church,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>38</sup> It is important to note that at this stage in his ministry EWB made no attempt to reconcile events recorded in the book of Acts with statements made in the Pauline Epistles.

<sup>39</sup> See explanation of these two parables on pages 12 and 13.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 14.

the so-called Great Commission awaits a future completion. According to Bullinger, “through not “rightly dividing the Word of Truth,” Christians have misunderstood the terms of the commission as supplying their own marching orders for this present dispensation.”<sup>41</sup>

In the end, *The Kingdom and The Church* (1892) bears witness to important subtle advancements in EWB’s dispensational thinking over *Ten Sermons on the Second Advent* (1887). However, the groundwork laid in 1887 served as the foundation for these steps forward in both thinking and messaging. The following is a summation of advancements observable in *TKTC*:

- The Kingdom is the subject of Old Testament promise and prophecy and is completely distinct from the Church of God - the chief subject of the New Testament.
- More precise wording regarding the Church being a unique Pauline revelation.
- The Kingdom offer to Israel that began with the preaching of John the Baptist is formally withdrawn at some point towards the end of the book of Acts. As noted above there is tension in Bullinger’s comment regarding when this actually happened during the acts chronology.
- The passage on the catching up of the church in I Thessalonians 4 is described as comprising part of the “special revelation” committed to Paul.
- The Great Commission of Matthew 28 does not comprise the commission of the Church of this dispensation.

At this stage in his career it seems fair to characterize Bullinger’s dispensational paradigm as in process. While he never advocates for the traditional Acts 2 position popularized by the Plymouth Brethren, neither can he accurately be described as being mid-Acts or Acts 28. There are however, many ideas present in Bullinger’s early dispensational writings that would later be championed by the founders of the Grace Movement in America.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 15.

***The Mystery: Secret Truth Revealed (1895)***

A few years later, with the publication of *The Mystery: Secret Truth Revealed* in 1895 many of these preliminary ideas came into sharper focus. In this work, EWB forcefully argued that rightly dividing between prophecy and mystery freed the Church from the manmade tradition that the body of Christ began on the day of Pentecost. Arguing that the traditional view on the Church's origin was destitute of Scriptural authority, EWB states that Pentecost had nothing to do with the Church of this dispensation.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, in 1895 Bullinger asserted that Acts 13 was "an important dispensational chapter" arguing that Paul's statement in Acts 13:46, "lo, we turn to the gentiles" was an "epoch making statement."<sup>43</sup> The Old English word "epoch" carries the following meanings according to *Webster's 1828 Dictionary*: 1) In chronology, a fixed point of time, from which succeeding years are numbered; a point from which computation of years begins, 2) Any fixed time or period; the period when anything begins or is remarkably prevalent. In other words, EWB viewed Paul's statement in Acts 13:46 as the time when the church began and a new series of events commenced. *The Mystery* draws the dispensational boundary line in Acts 13 not Acts 2 or Acts 28 which ironically was the exact position adopted by J.C. O'Hair prior to his death in 1958.

By focusing solely on where Bullinger ended up in his career and failing to understand him through the prism of historical theology these points and many more were missed by the founders of the Grace Movement. The writings of O'Hair, Baker, Stam and others all presented EWB as a fixed constellation in terms of his dispensational understanding. In hind sight, understanding the movement exhibited by Bullinger in his dispensational thinking would have been a tremendous aid to the founders of the movement when the charges of Bullingerism began to roll in during the 1930s and 40s.

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<sup>42</sup> E.W. Bullinger. *The Mystery: Secret Truth Revealed*. 1895, 51-52.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.



While it is only speculation, one would hope that insights gained from understanding the historic Bullinger would have aided the founders of the Grace Movement in presenting a more nuanced defense of the Grace Theology against their many critics.

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