

Sunday, May 20, 2012—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 68 When Was the Mystery no Longer a Mystery? Advancements in Pauline Truth 1870-1900, Part 4

E.W. Bullinger's, *The Mystery Secret Truth Revealed, 1895 (Continued)*

- In Chapter Three which is appropriately titled, “Other Passages Relating to the Secret,” Bullinger comments on a number of passages that shed light on the revelation of the Great Secret committed to the Apostle Paul.
 - **Ephesians 1:9-11**—“God has now caused us to abound in all wisdom because He has revealed to us His secret purpose . . . Here we have the great secret and its purpose referred to and in Ephesians 1:22 we are told how the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory “hath put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be Head over all things to the Church, which is His Body, the fullness of Him that filleth all (the members of that body) in all.”” (41-42)
 - **Ephesians 6:19**—“Here the Apostles prays “that utterance may be given unto me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the secret of the gospel,” i.e., the doctrine of Christ Mystical, which is the great secret and the great subject of the gospel. It was specially the good news revealed to and made known by Paul according to what he calls “my gospel” (Rom. 16:25). . . the good news concerning the Body of Christ was kept secret, and then became, and could be called, Paul’s special gospel to be “made known to all nations.” It is the good news of Christ Mystical.” (42)
 - **Colossians 2:2**—“Here it is called “the mystery of God (God’s secret),” i.e., the secret which God purposed, and kept in silence through times eternal and in His own good time made known. Paul prays for these Colossian saints that they “might be comforted” (quotes Col. 2:2-3). That is to say, all the treasures of divine wisdom are contained in the Mystery, i.e., Christ Mystical.” (43)
 - **I Corinthians 2 and 3**—“(I Cor. 2:1-2) Instead of declaring to them the Mystery, he had to confine himself to the simplest truths of the Gospel. He preached only a crucified Savior. He could not declare all the great truths involved in a risen and glorified Savior. . .(regarding I Cor. 2:6-7 Bullinger said) Here again is a reference to the great secret, which had been hidden in God, and ordained by Him before all ages. . . These words have a special reference to the “hidden wisdom,” i.e., the mystery, and what is stated here is that no human being ever dreamed of it. It never entered the head or heart of mortal man, “but God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit.” Then he goes on to explain what is the essence of this secret in I Cor. 2:10-11, and argues that as no one can tell what a man’s secret is, so no one could possibly have known what God’s secret was unless He had been pleased to reveal it. . .(Based upon I Cor. 3:1-4, Bullinger believed that the fundamental problem in Corinth was the believers were “taken up with Bodies of men.” Furthermore, Bullinger believed that these divisions were still a major problem for the church.) While they were putting the members in the place of the Head, they were carnal and not spiritual, and therefore not in a position to have the truth concerning “God’s mystery” declared to them. Hence when the apostle went to Corinth he determined not to go beyond the simplest elementary gospel teaching, to feed them with milk, to proclaim a crucified savior, for they were not in a condition to hear about the glorified Savior . . . and all the glorious things which are freely given to us of God, and which he has prepared

with a view to their glory, the glory of the members of the Body in Christ their glorified Head in heaven. . . Are we taken up with “bodies” and divisions which men have made, and called by their own names, or the names which man has given to them? If so, we too are not, spiritually, in a proper condition to hear or receive “the mystery of God.” No wonder the blessed truth so early dropped out of the creed of the Church of God! No wonder, when, in our day, it has been received, so few are to know it. No wonder that many resent its revival; for it judges our Ecclesiastical position to the very core. It makes nothing of sects and denominations for which the majority are contending; it writes folly upon our most cherished idols.” (43-46)

- Chapter Four is aptly titled, “Practical Conclusions.” In this chapter Bullinger begins to explain the four practical implications of the revelation of the mystery. “When once we have grasped the great secret of God, we have a key to open several other difficult subjects, which have been made difficult and dark through the shutting out of the light that could explain them. Many false notions have sprung up, as the necessary consequence of having lost the truth of the mystery.” (47) We will consider each of these four categories in the order in which Bullinger presents them.
 - **Why Was the Secret Kept?**—“First let us ask, Why was the great doctrine of the “mystery” ever kept secret at all? Why did God hide it in Himself, so that no one could possibly discover it until He chose to reveal it? The reason is clear. Had it not been kept secret, the Jews would have had a reason for their rejection of Christ in the Gospels, and for their rejection of Christ again in the Acts of the Apostles. They could have pleaded that they were only fulfilling the prophecies, and would have lost at once all their responsibility. True, the rejection of Christ was foretold, but there was not a word about their rejection of the renewed offer of the King and Kingdom, which was made authoritatively after the Ascension. In Acts 3:18 the Holy Ghost by Peter reminds the nation of Israel how “those things, which God before shewed by the mouth of all His prophets, that Christ should suffer, He hath so fulfilled.” There was the end of the matter, so far as the Old Testament prophecies were concerned. Christ had suffered, but now, as to His entering into His glory, and fulfilling all the prophecies concerning that glory which was to follow, what of these? What hindered their fulfillment? Why should there be delay in their accomplishment? The condition had been laid down in Leviticus and Deuteronomy and reiterated all through the Prophets that “Repentance”—National Repentance—must precede national blessing. . . Israel was responsible before God for the rejection of that offer; but had the consequence of their rejection of that offer been previously made known, such responsibility would have been impossible. Therefore was the secret purpose of God hidden in Himself. Therefore was it kept secret during times eternal, and not until Israel had definitely refused to repent—and thus rejected the offer to send Jesus Christ from heaven—not until then, was the secret of God revealed.” (47-49)
 - **A Key to Old Testament Interpretation**—“The second consequence which flows from the doctrine of the mystery is this: Had Israel obeyed the call in Acts 3:19-21, and the Lord Jesus had been sent, there is not a prophecy in the Old Testament or in the Gospels which would not have been fulfilled! This is a great truth and an important principle far-reaching in results. It tell us that the Gospels are the conclusion of the Old Testament history, and not the commencement of Church teaching; except of course, so far as Christ crucified is the foundation of all blessing, whether for Creation, for Israel or the Church of God.

The Gospels are a record of the rejection of Christ on the part of Israel, and not a record of the foundation of the Church. This exposes the follies of those who seek to apply the Sermon on the Mount to the Church and the world during this present dispensation, and who would build up “the New Theology” on “the teaching of Jesus,” instead of on teaching peculiar to this dispensation. It reveals to us the mistakes and errors of those who go back to the historic Gospels to preach the “Come-to-Jesus Gospel,” instead of preaching the Gospel from the Pauline Epistles, which are specially given to the Church for Church teaching and Gospel preaching. . . It explains the cause of the difficulties of those who seek to derive from the Acts of the Apostles a system of “Church Government,” while that book records the history of the transitional period between the rejection of Christ by Israel, the rejection of Israel by God, and closes with the solemn recital of Isaiah 6:9 as to Israel’s judicial blindness, and the great declaration, “Be it known therefore unto you, that the salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles, and that they will hear it (Acts 28:28).”

It seems impossible for us to fix the date of the revelation of the mystery to Paul, or to say in what part of the Acts it should be placed. From II Corinthians 12:1-7 it would appear that “the abundance of revelations” was given “above fourteen years ago.” This was written about A.D. 60, and fourteen years before would bring it to A.D., 46, which would synchronize with the important dispensational chapter, Acts 13, where we have the solemn epoch-marking words pronounced to the Jews, “It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46).”

The Gentiles, as such, had been brought in and blessed long before this; but now a special work connected with the Mystery was about to be commenced, as is clear from verse 1, unto which “Barnabas and Saul” had been separated by the Holy Ghost Himself for the work “whereunto I have called them.” There can be no doubt that the Acts of the Apostles records the transitional history between the rejection of the Kingdom, and setting up of the Church.” (49-50)

- **The True Place of Pentecost**—“It also removes another popular tradition that the Church dates from Pentecost! It is only a traditional interpretation on the part of man, and is destitute of any authority unless it can be proved to be so from the Word of God. . . The fact is that then Joel 2 would have been fulfilled, for there Pentecost is distinctly declared to be the ushering in of the day of the Lord. In Acts 2 Joel was therefore fulfilled.

Preliminary events before the Day of the Lord then took place. Everything was in readiness, and hence in Acts 3, as in Matthew 3 the call went forth, “Repent.” When the King had come it was “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand,” but they refused to repent, and rejected the Kingdom. Now, once again, on the ground of Atonement made, the call goes forth in Acts 3, and it is the same as before—“Repent”—that the King may be sent. Again they refuse to repent, and reject the King. Thus the Acts of the Apostles is, like the Gospels, a historical record of the rejection of the King and Kingdom

by Israel, and this explains how it was that God rejected Israel for a season, while He revealed and made known His secret purpose concerning the Church.

Pentecost thus is shown to have nothing whatever to do with the Church; and all the modern talk about “Pentecostal blessings,” and “Pentecostal endowment,” etc., and the awful heresy of the “Pentecost league” are all based on a Scripture which does not refer to the Church of God at all; and those who so base it are those who so greatly neglect the teaching of the Holy Ghost in the Pauline Epistles, which are expressly given for the guidance, teaching, blessing, and building up of the Church. All that Christians need of teaching concerning the work and power of the Holy Spirit is fully contained and revealed in the Epistles, which are written for that purpose.” (51-52)

- **Rightly Dividing the Word**—“. . . Why is there so much confusion in reading the Word? Why are there so many conflicting opinions? Why so many “schools of thought,” and divergent “views?” It is because we do not “rightly divide” the Word of God (II Tim. 2:15).

That Word is “the Word of Truth,” and this is why we are bidden to “rightly divide” it. If therefore we fail thus to divide it, it is impossible for us to have “truth;” and we cannot fail to have error. We must “rightly divide” off the Old Testament, Gospels, the Acts, and the Apocalypse from the teaching concerning the Church of God. We must not read Church truth into the Old Testament. We must not read teaching concerning the “Mystery” into the Gospels and Acts.

If teachers had always thus divided the Word, we should never have confused Israel with the Church, or the Kingdom with the Church. We should never have put the “extension of Christ’s kingdom” for the spread of the Gospel. We should never have taken “the Gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven” as being synonymous with “the Gospel of the Grace of God;” or have supposed that the former is being, or could be, preached now, thus perverting Matthew 24:14. We should never have taken Matthew 24 as referring to the Church of God; or have supposed that the Church would be on the earth during the great Tribulation therein described. We should not have based our Missionary effort on Psalm 2:8 or Matthew 28:19-20, for we should have seen that “the great Commission,” as it has been called, was obeyed, by those to whom it was first given, and will be completely fulfilled in the time of Matthew 24:14.

The commission for the Church’s Missionary effort must be drawn from the Epistles which are specially written for the Church’s guidance and instruction and not from the Gospels or any Scripture prior, at least to Acts 3.

The closing verses of Mark would never have been mutilated by all its various readings had they not been wrongly taken for Church teaching. It was, we believe, the difficulties created by thus interpreting the verses that led to the rejection of the passage rather than to the rejection of the false principles of interpretation. . .

Even Infidels can plainly see (as the majority of Christians cannot) that a judgment based on works can have no connection with a Church whose standing is in grace. The truth, instead of being “rightly divided” dispensationally, is thus made to become a source of error; and things which differ and are each true in their proper place, are robbed of all their meaning by being confounded together. . . We should not have confounded the special revelation of the resurrection which is connected with the Mystery in I Thessalonians 4 and I Corinthians 15, with what is known as “the First Resurrection.” (52-54)

- The Fifth and final chapter of *The Mystery: Secret Truth Revealed* is titled, “The Body and the Bride.” In this chapter Bullinger addresses another error which the doctrine of the Mystery corrects, “the identification of “the Body” with “the Bride.”” (57)
 - “We have already seen that had Israel repented and turned to the Lord (Acts 3:18-19), there is not an Old Testament prophecy which would not have been fulfilled. Furthermore, the “Bride” is the subject of Old Testament prophecy. Therefore, had Israel repented, and there had been no Church of God, there would still have been the Bride according to the prophetic Word (Bullinger makes reference to Isa. 54:5-8, Isa. 62:4-5, Jer. 3:14, Hos. 2:16, 19-20). . .

(Regarding Rev. 21:9-11 Bullinger stated the following) “What are we to understand but that this “city”—which is declared to be the “bride, the Lamb’s Wife”—is the city for which all those who were partakers of the Heavenly Calling looked. . . Here in Revelation 21 we have the Regeneration (the new heaven and the new earth), we have the Twelve Tribes of Israel, and the Twelve Apostles of the Lamb. We ask, what has this to do with the Church the Body of Christ?! And has it not to do only and solely with the Holy city and with the Bride of the Lamb? The promise of Christ to the Twelve Apostles has never been abrogated; and, we ask, what are we to do with it, if the Apostles form part of the Body of Christ? The Church is part of Christ, the Bridegroom; but the Apostles, by a comparison of Matthew 19:28 with Revelation 21:14, form part of the Bride. (This effectually disposes of the figment of “Apostolic Succession,” which would never have been seriously entertained had not the truth connected with the Mystery been lost. Furthermore, we ought to note that while the Twelve Apostles are thus separated from the Church, the Apostle Paul was specially raised up to a singular and different position, and is identified with the Mystery.)

In harmony also with this is the teaching of Ephesians 5:25-33. Christians, in their selfishness, attempt to rob others of their place as the Bride, and thus lose their own still “better” place as part of the Bridegroom . . . it is clear from all the Scriptures relating to the Mystery that the members of Christ’s Body are not the Bride, but part of the Bridegroom Himself, whereas the elect Old Testament saints will form the Bride. . . True, the Apostle might address the saints concerning his desire to present them “as a chaste virgin to Christ (II Cor. 11:2).” Yet this no more declares that the Church is the Bride of Christ than that the Apostle himself was their father (I. Cor. 4:15); or that he was their mother (Gal. 4:19). (57-61)

Summary of *The Mystery: Secret Truth Revealed 1895*

- The following components of the mid-Acts dispensational position are discernible from E.W. Bullinger's 1895 work *The Mystery: Secret Truth Revealed*.
 - Bullinger clearly understood and forcefully articulated the distinction between prophecy and mystery. Moreover, it is because the truth of the mystery was lost that the Church is in its present sorry condition, according to Bullinger.
 - The mysteries of the kingdom expressed in the parables pertain to Israel and her kingdom. Therefore, the mysteries of the kingdom are not to be confused with the Great Mystery (Secret) concerning Christ and the Church. Likewise, the gospels pertain to Israel and not the body of Christ.
 - The mystery was a special revelation made known to and through the Apostle Paul. It was "hid in God," and "hid from ages and from generations" and was therefore completely unknown to the sons of men until it was revealed to Paul. Furthermore, the mystery, according to Bullinger, deals with the formation of the body of Christ. It was not a mystery that the Gentiles were to be blessed through Israel. It was, however, a mystery that God would reconcile both unto himself in one body by the cross.
 - Members of the mystical body of Christ are made one with their head (Jesus Christ) in the heavenly places. Positionally they are seated with Christ now in the heavenly places and blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places. As a result, the body of Christ is a heavenly entity.
 - A secret dispensation necessitates a secret ending (I Cor. 15:51). The blessed hope of the church is to be Raptured and received up into glory.
 - According to Bullinger, the mystery was kept secret so that Israel could/would be held responsible for the death and rejection of her king and kingdom. In the early Acts period Israel was called to a position of National Repentance. In this sense Bullinger argues that the mystery is ultimately the key to interpreting the Old Testament and discerning "what or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified before hand of the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow (I Pet. 1:11)."
 - Bullinger clearly states that the church did not begin in Acts Two on the day of Pentecost. In Bullinger's view, the Acts Two position is one of Christianities greatest myths and is totally false.
 - The so-called Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 is for Israel. The commission for the church is to be drawn from the Epistles written for the church's guidance and instruction i.e., the Pauline Epistles. In Bullinger's view, the real reason the end of Mark 16 was in dispute was not textual as much as doctrinal. The reason there was no doctrinal clarity on the passage was because of the failure of the church to rightly divide the word of truth.

- Lastly, the church is not the Bride of Christ. Rather the church is part of the Bridegroom Jesus Christ. Bullinger is very clear that Christ would have had a bride according to prophecy even if the church had never been revealed. On this point, Bullinger shows clear advancement and refinement over Darby, Trotter, Holden or Mackintosh.
- Most importantly, *The Mystery* does not express any of the hallmark teachings of the Acts 28 position with which Bullinger is typically associated. This work is clearly not Acts 2 nor is it Acts 28 when viewed by the standards of our day. That Bullinger later, toward the end of his ministry, changed his mind is beyond dispute. That fact, however, does not change the views he expressed and recorded in 1895. The *Grace History Project*, for the following reasons, maintains that *The Mystery: Secret Truth Revealed* should be viewed as a mid-Acts document.
 - Bullinger clearly teaches that knowledge of the mystery “removes the popular tradition that the church dates from Pentecost.” Therefore, no honest observer would ever view *The Mystery* as an Acts 2 work.
 - At the time of its composition, Bullinger viewed Acts 13 as an “important dispensational chapter.” (50) Regarding Acts 13, Bullinger wrote, it is “where we have the solemn epoch-marking words pronounced to the Jews, “It was necessary that the word of God should first have been spoken to you: but seeing ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46).”” (50) In 1895, Bullinger viewed Paul’s pronouncement in the synagogue in Antioch in Pisida as an “epoch-marking” statement. What is one to conclude from these statements? In 1895, Bullinger viewed Acts 13 as an announcement to the Jews that a dispensational change was under way. This sounds very much like the modern Acts 13 version of the mid-Acts position. The bottom line is this, through these statements; Bullinger seems to drawing the dispensational boundary in Acts 13 not Acts 28.
 - There is another reason why *The Mystery* should be viewed as articulating the mid-Acts dispensational view. It does not distinguish between the Acts Period and post-Acts Period epistles of Paul. In other words, all the Pauline epistles are viewed as applying to the body of Christ. There are multiple passages in the book that one could cite to substantiate this point. For example, in his comments on I Corinthians 2 and 3, clearly a book written during the Acts Period, Bullinger views the mystery as having already been revealed. Regarding Paul’s ministry in Corinth, Bullinger wrote, “While they were putting the members in the place of the Head, they were carnal and not spiritual, and therefore not in a position to have the truth concerning “God’s mystery” declared to them.” (45) According to Bullinger, Paul knew the mystery when He wrote I Corinthians but chose not to fully expound it to the saints at Corinth because they were not spiritually mature enough to handle it. Bullinger makes many other statements indicating that all the Pauline Epistles were for the Church, “. . . instead of preaching the Gospel from the Pauline Epistles, which are specially given to the Church for Church teaching and Gospel preaching. . . those who so greatly neglect the teaching of the Holy Ghost in the Pauline Epistles, which are expressly given for the guidance, teaching, blessing, and building up of the Church. All the Christians need of teaching concerning the work and power of the Holy Spirit is fully contained and revealed in the Epistles, which are written for that purpose.” (49-52)
- What should we call someone who taught that Pentecost was not the beginning of the church, viewed Acts 13w as dispensationally significant, and does not distinguish between the Acts and

post-Acts epistles of Paul but views them all as containing doctrine and instruction for the body of Christ? I would call such a person a mid-Acts dispensationalist. E.W. Bullinger's *The Mystery: Secret Truth Revealed* stands out as further proof of a process of generational doctrinal refinement in the resurgence of Pauline truth.

Works Cited

Bullinger, E.W. *The Mystery: Secret Truth Revealed*. 1895.

Things to Come Vol. II. July, 1895 through June, 1896.