

A Critique of Dr. Charles C. Ryrie's Analysis of Ultradispensationalism

In a new book by Dr. Charles C. Ryrie of Dallas Theological Seminary, entitled Dispensationalism Today, the doctrinal position of the Grace Gospel Fellowship is discussed. There are fourteen pages used to present, discuss, refute and to expose certain basic weaknesses which he sees in the position. Dr. Ryrie does not go into any detail but he is to be commended for his restraint in using wild, hysterical language which excites the reader and rouses an emotional prejudice. He is factual and gracious when he acknowledges that the GGF position recognizes the clear distinction between Israel and the Church, Christ's Body and interpretes the Bible literally (p 192). These two points are considered by Dr. Ryrie as two of three marks of the "sine qua non" of Dispensationalism (pp 43-47). In spite of this he states "Dispensationalists believe that there are some very basic errors in the ultradispensational system and therefore they reject the system as diverse from their own and REJECT ANY IMPLICATION THAT THE TWO ARE SIMILAR" (p 198) (emphasis mine).

There are four areas where Dr. Ryrie believes there is basic weakness and failure in the GGF position. There are really only two, since the last three all deal with the interpretation of certain passages. In the next few paragraphs the writer of this paper would like to review the statements and conclusions of Dr. Ryrie.

The first "error" which Dr. Ryrie deals with is in the realm of a right concept of a dispensation. He approaches this problem by quoting his own definition of a dispensation. He neither quotes a definition nor even intimates what a member of the GGF might believe about a dispensation. In fact, Dr. Ryrie has taken the position of the covenant theologian, which to him is unfair. He had stated earlier in his book that a single sentence definition of dispensationalism is inadequate. He speaks rather about a complete definition and description of the concept (p 220). He has therefore become inconsistent and unfair thus far in his discussion. Dr. Ryrie has judged us according to his definition and not by a complete "concept" of a dispensation.

He states also in this area that we fail to recognize that the distinguishableness of a dispensation is related to what God is doing, NOT NECESSARILY to what He reveals at the time and LEAST OF ALL to what man UNDERSTANDS of His purposes (p 198). But earlier in his book, Dr. Ryrie gives three primary characteristics of a dispensation and all three were necessary then. Please note these characteristics: 1) a change in God's governmental relationship with man, 2) a resulting change in man's RESPONSIBILITY, 3) corresponding REVELATION necessary to effect the change. Therefore, it DOES matter what God reveals at the time of a change in dispensation. It DOES matter what man understands of His purposes. How could God expect man to obey and be responsive if there was not revelation? How could man be a faithful steward without understanding this new thing God now requires? The answer is obvious. Dr. Ryrie is inconsistent and unfair in his deduction here.

Dr. Ryrie believes that the day of Pentecost was the beginning of the Body of Christ. He states that whether Peter and the others "understood" it then DOES not determine the beginning of the dispensation. But if there are at least two parties involved in a dispensational arrangement- God and His steward or stewarts- it is imperative that God REVEALS His will and that the steward KNOWS and UNDERSTANDS His Lord's delegated duties.

There is a question asked in this section which I would like to answer. Dr. Ryrie asks : Is something distinguishably different being done since Paul came on the scene that was not being done from Pentecost to the time of Paul? (p 198) My answer is yes. Please consider the following points.

- A) There were NO Gentiles saved until after the conversion of Paul. This is true inspite of the interpretations that claim the so-called great commissions found in Matt. 28:19,20; Mk. 16:15,16 ;Lk. 24:46-48; John 20:21; Acts 1:8 with the emphasis on "all nations", "all the world", among all nations" and "unto the uttermost part of the earth" gave Peter and the others a world-wide ministry. There is certainly something distinctive about the fact that they did NOT go to any Gentile until after Paul. They did not go to one Roman soldier stationed in Jerusalem.
- B) Peter states in Acts 15:7 that God chose him to be "the" mouth to speak to the Gentiles. There were not 12 mouths commissioned, only one. This did not happen in Matt. 28:18-20 but after Paul's conversion. James agrees in Acts 15:14 by stating how Peter ministers to Gentiles and it is the FIRST time this has happened.
- C) Until this vision of Peter's in Acts 10, he considered it "unlawful" for him to come to those of another nation. (Acts 10:28) Peter at this time considered himself a "Jew" rather than some other name as believer or disciple. Peter goes to Cornelius on the basis of the vision, NOT any Great commission. Peter receives here no rebuke for not having gone to them before.
- D) Those in Jerusalem who heard of Peter's Gentile ministry rebuked him and became satisfied on the basis of his explanation. It was then, not in Acts 1 that they said "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life".(Acts 11:18) Their conclusion seems to say "and not before".
- E) Those of the persecution were "preaching the word to none but unto the Jews only". (Acts 11:19b) These are strange ways for those who seemingly have had a world-wide ministry from Acts 1.
- F) Paul, in his first missionary journey, is the one who opens a "door" of faith unto the Gentiles.(Acts 14:27) God opened the door of course, but He used Paul as His steward and DOORMAN.

G) As far as the record in Acts goes, Peter's ministry to Cornelius is the First and last ministry of ANY of the Apostles to any Gentile. This is distinctive in relation to the Apostle Paul.

H) Paul alone makes the claim of being an "Apostle of the Gentiles" Acts 14:27 with Romans 11:13, I Tim. 2:7 and II Tim. 1:11 bear this out.

In Dr. Ryrie's final statements in this section he seems to think that we hold a theory of a Gentile-Body of Christ, and our position is wrong because there are Jews in today's church. If this is his logic, then the Body of Christ did not begin before Paul because there were NO Gentiles in the "church" before Paul. It is scriptural and sensible to call the believers before Paul "a Jewish church".

The second area which Dr. Ryrie deals with is "Erroneous Exegesis of Key Passages". It is too bad that there is nothing original given here. If one would read Dr. Ironside's booklet Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth and Erich Sauer's The Triumph of the Crucified, the same material could be read. There is no fresh approach to their problem.

Of all the six passages listed in this group, only Ephesians 3:1-12 could be listed as a "key passage". We are said to be artificial and unnatural in dealing with Gal. 1:13; I Cor. 15:9; and Phil. 3:6 where Paul mentions persecution of the church of God. Two other passages in Acts are mentioned- Acts 5:11,14; 11:24 where believers are said to be added to "the Lord". To Drs. Ryrie and Ironside, this must mean :added to the Body of Christ.

The word "church" is found 24 times in Acts. To say each instance refers to the Body or to a local church which is part of the Body of Christ is foolish. The nation Israel is called a church in Acts 7:38, but they are not the members of the Body of Christ. In Acts 19:32,41 a mob of rioters is called a church. But they are not in the Body of Christ even though Luke calls them a church twice. In Acts 19:39 a governmental body is called a church, but this does not make them part of the Body. A church is mentioned in Psalms 22:22 according to Hebrews 2:12 but this is Israel, not the Body of Christ. The word church cannot automatically make the group named a member of the Body of Christ.

When Paul persecuted the believers in Acts 8 and 9, it does not hold true that they were members of Christ's Body Church just because Christ said "Why persecutest thou me?" (Acts 9:4) If this is true, it proves too much. In Matt. 25:31-46 Jesus gives a parable about the sheep and goat nations and their relation to the ones called "my brethren".

The sheep nations are admitted into the kingdom on the basis of their treatment of Christ. When they fed, gave food, clothed, sheltered, visited and comforted the brethren, Jesus said "ye have done it unto ME". According to Dr. Ryrice, these brethren must be in the Body of Christ because the sheep nations ministered to CHRIST while ministering to the brethren. This is good material for a post-tribulational rapture when dealing in such deductions.

It has already been shown that the believers before Paul were all circumcised disciples. Since there were NO Gentiles saved before Paul, the church then could quite naturally be called a Jewish church. There is more FORCE used in making the Body of Christ exist before Paul than Dr. Ryrice lets on. How could you have the Body of Christ exist before the salvation of Gentiles? By way of definition Paul says the Church is a JOINT-BODY, Jews AND Gentiles having equal blessings in the Gospel. You Cannot have a joint-body in the historical record of Acts until AFTER the conversion of Paul. Remember, only Jews were added to the Lord in Acts 5.

In the second part of this section Dr. Ryrice quotes from Erich Sauer for a statement on Ephesians 3:1-12. Even Sauer says that Paul had a special task of proclaiming the mystery among the nations. But what is so special about Paul if he preaches the same as the 12? If they all had the same commission and calling, what could be special? Sauer also says that Paul is the chief herald of the gospel to the peoples of the world. How could this be if they were all ministers to the world with the same truth? Since Dr. Ryrice has quoted Sauer to speak for his position, let me quote from Dr. Scofield's Bible notes.

"The Epistles of the Apostle Paul have a very distinctive character".
 "Through Paul alone we know that the church is not an organization but an organism, the body of Christ; instinct with His life, and heavenly in calling, promise, and destiny. Through him alone we know the nature, purpose, and form of government of local churches, and the right conduct of such gatherings. Through him alone do we know that 'we shall not all sleep' that 'the dead in Christ shall rise first' and that the living saints shall be 'changed' and caught up to meet the Lord in the air at His return." "Paul converted by the personal ministry of the Lord in glory, is distinctively the witness to a glorified Christ, Head over all things to the church which is His body, as the Eleven were to Christ in the flesh, the Son of Abraham and of David." "In his writings alone we find the doctrine, position, walk, and destiny of the church" (pp 1189,1252)

Four times these notes make reference to the knowledge which Paul knew "alone". These words of course did not come from O'Hair, Stam or Baker but from the Scofield Reference Bible.

In Dr. Ryrie's third section he deals with other passages that speak of the mystery. Two passages are mentioned in the Gospel of John: 10:16 ; 13:-16:33. He says that Jesus taught the truth of the mystery to the Jews in John 10. It was because of this teaching that there was a division among the Jews.(10:19) The Passage has more "sense" to me when we look at it from the standpoint of the kingdom of Christ. Jesus called His people "the lost SHEEP of the house of Israel". (Matt. 10:6; 15:24) Those who trusted Him were called My sheep. Now Jesus tells the crowds(not just disciples) that He has "Other" sheep. Those other sheep are the nations who will share in the Kingdom with Christ and Israel(Matt. 25:31-46) They are the blessed of the Father. The Kingdom was also prepared for THEM.(25:34)

If Jesus taught the mystery in John 13-16, then He had to be teaching it in John 6:56 because the "I in you" and the "Ye in Me" is taught. "He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him". Here the teaching is not restricted to disciples . He taught this in a synagogue.(6:59)

Dr. Ryrie says that the church then started on Pentecost. He further states, "That they may not have understood it we do not question, but the dispensation began when God began to do His distinguishably different work, not when or if ever man understood it."(p 203) Dr. Ryrie again becomes inconsistent with the words of another chapter. In discussing the Law of Moses in chapter two, he states that the law was a new thing introduced at that time. "It also means that the responsibility upon mankind was conformity to that code- again a new responsibility, for prior to the giving of the law man was obviously not held responsible for something that did not exist".(p 37) The revelation of the mystery must be understood in order for God's stewards to carry out His will and Purpose. When God changes relationship, He makes it KNOWN through a revelation. Man is not responsible for something which does not exist. Man's responsibility changes through this revelation which effects the change.

If Jesus taught as much about the mystery as Drs. Ryrie and Ironside and others claim- why all the admission that the Apostles did NOT understand. IF Jesus taught about this age in Matt. 13; about the church in Matt. 16 and 18 ; about the mystery in John 6,10 and 13-16; about the church age during His forty days before ascension and went back to glory after this- why were they still so ignorant? Why would Jesus leave the message of the Gospel in the hands of men who DID NOT UNDERSTAND God's purposes. And Dr. Ryrie says it doesn't matter if they ever did.

NO !! God does not do business like this. Every dispensation started with God's people fully aware that there was a change. Adam knew it when he sinned. Abraham knew when he started for the land of Promise. Moses and Israel knew when they went "under Law". THE reason Dr. Ryrie has Peter all mixed-up is because the revelation was not yet given until Paul. Peter lived, ate, worshipped and preached like a Jew because that was all the revelation he had.

The final point which Dr. Ryrie discusses, is the "baptism 'in' the Spirit". He contends that we give the Scripture an artificial understanding by making two baptisms: one for Pentecost and one for Paul in I Cor. 12:13.

The word 'saint' does not always have the same people of God in view in all the Scriptural references. The word 'gospel' does not mean the same good-news in every occurrence in the Bible. The word 'church' does not mean the Body of Christ in every instance. It should not be shocking to find that the word 'baptism' does not refer to water all the time or that there are more than two baptisms relating to Christ and the Holy Spirit but distinct from each other.

If these two references are identical, then Dr. Ryrie has proved too much. He now has an Old Testament prophet teaching the truth of I Cor. 12:13 and Eph. 3:6. There does not remain any mystery to the mystery in other ages. John the Baptist is now the prophet of the Body of Christ.

Since John preached to the nation Israel only, we also have the problem of robbing Israel of her baptism and giving it to the church. Dispensationalists try to keep the distinct promises and blessings of the church and Israel separate. Dr. Ryrie has given the theme of John's preaching to the church of another dispensation. He leaves the baptism of fire for Israel and gives the baptism of the Spirit to the church. He becomes as guilty in interpretation as the Covenant theologian who takes the blessings for the church and leaves the curses for Israel.

Sound Bible teaching should not make these promises of Israel refer to the Body of Christ. John came on the scene to make way for the Messiah of Israel, not to begin or introduce a new revelation. He came to prepare for the filling up of prophecy, not lay the ground work for a new dispensation, distinct and different from the plans God had to and through the nation Israel. The ministry of Jesus was "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). John's calling and ministry was also to Israel. John baptized that Christ should be made manifest to ISRAEL.

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