

ARE WE ULTRA-DISPENSATIONALISTS?

A Response to a Critique
by Dr. Charles C. Ryrie

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Understanding the Word of God dispensationally is by far the most logical system of interpretation. This allows the Scriptures to be interpreted literally, unless the context clearly demands otherwise. Also, it does away with the need to spiritualize certain passages to arrive at the proper sense. But, not all dispensationalists are agreed as to when God changed His dealings with mankind during the period covered by the Book of Acts. A case in point is the historical beginning of the Church the Body of Christ. Advocates of the Acts 2 position hold that the Church began on the day of Pentecost. On the other hand, those of us who adhere to the Mystery believe that it came into existence with the raising up of the Apostle Paul, before he wrote his first epistle.

Charles Ryrie in his book *Dispensationalism Today* [Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press 1968), Pages 192-205.] tries, we feel unsuccessfully, to discredit the mid-Acts position by charging that we are ultra or extreme dispensationalists. Since those who are in the Acts 2 camp frequently appeal to Dr. Ryrie's work to defend their view, we feel the time has come to answer Mr. Ryrie's criticisms.

AN ILLEGITIMATE ARGUMENT

One of the arguments that Dr. Ryrie uses to dismiss the mid-Acts viewpoint is his observation that we of the Grace Movement are not all of one mind as to when the Church which is Christ's Body did actually begin. Numerous times throughout the chapter on Ultradispensationalism he makes the bold assertion, "In other words, they are sure when the Church did not begin, but not sure when it did begin!" [Ibid., Pg. 195] Are we to conclude a dispensational approach is untrue on the basis that there is disagreement among some of the brethren?

Surely, those in the Acts 2 camp must cringe when we point out that many of their well-known Bible teachers such as: Ironside, Haldeman, Gaebelien, Chafer and Pettingill were far from being in agreement on some of the major doctrines of the faith. [Examples are available for those who question this.]

The precise moment the Body of Christ came into existence in mid-Acts is inconsequential. What must be acknowledged, however, is the fact that the revelation of the Church which is Christ's Body was first committed to the Apostle Paul. On this essential of the faith the Grace Movement does, indeed, speak with a unified voice.

THE CONCEPT OF A DISPENSATION

On page 199 Dr. Ryrie states: ". . . we determine the limits of a dispensation not by what any one person within that dispensation understood but by what we may understand now from the complete revelation of the Word." We wholeheartedly agree with this statement and in a moment will use Dr. Ryrie's own words to prove the impossibility of the Body of Christ having begun on the day of Pentecost. Ryrie goes on to add, "The distinguishable feature of the present

dispensation is the formation of the Church, and since the Church began at Pentecost there has been only one economy from Pentecost to the present."

Dr. Ryrie does not produce one shred of evidence to substantiate the above claim. He merely assumes the Church began at Pentecost. But, what saith the Scripture? For the benefit of our readers let us compare what is generally accepted as Body truth with the narrative found in Acts 2:

Body Truth

- 1) Primary Apostle-Paul (Rom. 11:13; 1Tim. 2:7).
- 2) Gospel of the Grace of God proclaimed (Acts 20:24).
- 3) No observance of the religious days of the Law (Gal. 4:8-11).
- 4) Jews and Gentiles in One Body without distinction (Rom. 10:12; Gal. 3:27,28).
- 5) Christ is presented as the Head of the Body (Col. 1:18).
- 6) The ordinances of the Law have been abolished (Col. 2:14).
- 7) Terms of salvation: Christ died for the forgiveness of our sins (1Cor. 15:3,4).

Pentecost

- 1) Primary Apostle-Peter (Acts 1:15, 2:14).
- 2) Gospel of the Kingdom proclaimed (Matt. 24:14 cf. Acts 1:3,6).
- 3) Observance of the Feast Day of Pentecost according to the Law (Lev. 23:16 cf. Acts 2:1).
- 4) Israel in view: "Let all the House of Israel know assuredly" (Acts 2:14, 22, 36).
- 5) Christ is presented as the Messiah of Israel (Acts 2:36).
- 6) The ordinance of the Law-water baptism is practiced (Acts 2:38).
- 7) Repentance and water baptism required for the remission of sins (Acts 2:38).

The early chapters of the Acts record are clearly a continuation of the earthly ministry of Christ to Israel. Peter is consistent in emphasizing this theme on the day of Pentecost when he warned his kinsmen that they were in the last days preceding the Second Coming of Christ to the earth (Acts 2:14-21). Subsequently, we are not witnessing a new beginning in Acts 2 but rather the closing days of prophecy leading up to the establishment of the Millennial Kingdom. Of course, with the setting aside of Israel, God has turned to the Gentiles, thus making known His secret purpose for "the Church the Body of Christ."

WHICH CHURCH?

Dr. Ryrie, like most Acts 2 dispensationalists, makes a serious blunder when he fails to distinguish between the Kingdom Church and the Church which is Christ's Body. He concludes that these two entities are one in the same, which has caused untold confusion and Christian circles. On page 200 he says, "Paul stated that before his conversion he persecuted the Church of God (Gal. 1:13; 1Cor. 15:9; Phil. 3:6). The natural understanding of these three references to the Church which Paul persecuted is that it was the same Church to which he and the converts won through his preaching were joined."

Since the word "church" (Gr. ecclesia--called-out ones) is a general term one must always inquire which called-out group is being referred to. For example:

- 1) The Old Testament Church (ecclesia) in the wilderness (Acts 7:38).
- 2) The unlawful assembly (ecclesia) of unbelievers at Ephesus (Acts 19:39).
- 3) The Kingdom Church (ecclesia) that is to be built upon Peter's confession (Matt. 16:18).
- 4) The Church (ecclesia) the Body of Christ (Eph. 1:22,23; Col. 1:24).

Considering the context of Galatians Chapter 1 it is obvious the Church of God spoken of in verse 13 is a direct reference to the Kingdom saints whom Paul had persecuted. If we understand that the revelation of the Body of Christ was initially delivered to the Apostle Paul, we are left with the undeniable conclusion that the Church Paul persecuted before his conversion could not have been the Body of which he was a member. This further accentuates the importance of rightly dividing the Word of truth.

Dr. Ryrie further displays his intolerance of Paul's gospel when he declares, "Furthermore, the first mention of the word Church in the book of Acts is explained as being 'added to the Lord' (Acts 5:11,14). This is no Jewish Church that is described in terms of its being added to the Lord." [Ibid., Pg. 200] This type of exegesis takes unwarranted liberty with the Scriptures for believers in any dispensation can surely be said to be added to the Lord. Prayerfully, contemplate the words of Isaiah from the Hebrew Old Testament:

"Neither let the son of the stranger, that hath JOINED himself to the Lord, speak, saying, The Lord hath utterly separated me from His people." [Jewish] (Isa. 56:3).

Consequently, all believers in every age are united to the Lord. However, only believers during the administration of Grace can accurately be said to be joined to the Lord, as far as being members of His Body is concerned (1Cor. 6:17).

Once again, Dr. Ryrie places himself in an awkward position when he writes, "Ultradispensationalists are very fond of using this passage [Eph. 3:1-12] to attempt to prove that to Paul exclusively was revealed the mystery of the Church, the Body of Christ. If this is provable, then the mystery Church, the Body, could not have begun until Paul came on the scene." [Ibid., Pg. 201] He goes on to quote Sauer who states, "... Paul does not assert that he was the first to whom the mystery of the Church had been made known." [Ibid., Pg. 201]

The specific passage in question here is Ephesians 3:5 where Paul says, 'Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit.' Basically the argument being set forth by these authors is that the Mystery was made known to ages and generations past, but not as fully as it is now revealed to his apostles and prophets. In other words, Paul was not the first to receive it.

If it can be proven that the Mystery was originally revealed to Paul, then by Dr. Ryrie's own admission, his entire critique would collapse. The proper exegesis of this passage hinges on the phrase "as it is now revealed." Therefore, we must determine whether the term "as" is used in the comparative or the contrastive sense. Perhaps an illustration will prove to be helpful: I might say, "My golf game is as good as yours." Here the "as" is used in a comparative sense--I am comparing your game with mine. Turning to the contrastive side of our term we might say, "The ancient Egyptians did not have computers as we do today." Applying our illustration to the passage in question we have two possibilities:

- 1) The Mystery was revealed prior to Paul, but not as (comparative) fully as it is today.
- 2) The Mystery was not revealed to ages and generations past as (contrastive) it is today through Paul's gospel.

The Acts 2 dispensationalists, including Mr. Ryrie, opt for number one. Those of us who have come to see Paul's distinctive ministry defend number two. Thus we have two opinions-but who is to say which one is correct? We are reminded at such times of the thought-provoking words of Elijah: "How long halt ye between two opinions?" The solution lies in the answer to the question, "What saith the Lord?" The following passages prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the "as" is used in the contrastive sense in verse 5, which can only mean the revelation of the Mystery was initially committed to Paul.

"If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me [Paul] to you-ward: how that by revelation He made known unto me the Mystery.... And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the Mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been HID In God, who created all things by Jesus Christ" (Eph. 3:2,9).

"Now to Him that is of power to establish you according to my [Paul's] gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the Mystery, which has been KEPT SECRET since the world began" (Rom. 16:25).

"Whereof I [Paul] am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfill the Word of God; even the Mystery which hath been HID from ages and generations, BUT NOW is made manifest to his saints" (Col. 1:25,26).

So then, while Paul received the Mystery by direct revelation from the Lord of glory, the apostles and prophets, and those since, have received it through the illumination of the Spirit (Gal. 1:11,12 cf. Eph 3:5).

TWO BAPTISMS

Finally, Dr. Ryrie attempts to pull out all of the stops with his words on page 203: "In I Corinthians 12:13 Paul explains that being placed into the Body of Christ is accomplished by being baptized en pneumatii. Since the promise of Acts 1:5 was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost (Acts 11:15,16), and if this is the baptism explained in I Corinthians 12:13 as effecting entrance into the Body of Christ, this is an irrefutable argument for the Body Church's beginning on the day of Pentecost."

If it can be established that the baptisms in these portions differ, then the Scriptures themselves put the final nail in the coffin of the Acts 2 position. A compelling argument could be made from the Greek here, but to spare our readers the technicalities, we have chosen to answer this charge with a few simple questions. Ten days before the day of Pentecost our Lord instructed His Hebrew disciples:

"For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized [by Me--Christ: see Mark 1:7,81 with the Holy Ghost not many days hence" (Acts 1:5).

Who is the one doing the baptism in the latter Part of this passage? obviously, it is Christ. And what were they baptized with? Again, the answer is obvious--the Holy Spirit! For what purpose? That they might be empowered from on High with signs, wonders and miracles to bear witness to their Messiah's resurrection. But now consider 1Cor. 12:13: "For by one spirit are we all baptized into one Body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit."

Who is the one doing the baptism in this passage? That's right, there's been a dramatic change. In the age of grace the Holy Spirit is performing the baptism. This is our, spiritual baptism into Christ that saves us and identifies us with the one joint Body. We should add that this is the one baptism of Ephesians 4:5.

A FINAL WORD

There are truly many more matters that are raised in Dr. Ryrie's article that could be easily answered. We believe, though, that the foregoing arguments at least answer the premise of the Acts 2 position, which is forced at best. Unfortunately, tradition has obscured the spiritual sight of many believers from seeing the simplicity of Paul's gospel. May God help us increasingly to be Bereans and study to see if these things be so.