

# **ULTRADISPENSATIONALISM**

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from the book, "Dispensationalism Today.")

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**BACK TO THE BIBLE BROADCAST**  
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## ULTRADISPENSATIONALISM

DISPENSATIONALISM and ultradispensationalism are related in some ways, but there are some very basic differences between the two schools of thought. The primary one is the difference over when the Church, the Body of Christ, began historically. Dispensationalists say that the Church began at Pentecost, while ultradispensationalists believe that it began sometime later. Both groups, however, recognize the clear distinction between Israel and the Church, and both interpret the Bible literally. Nevertheless, this difference over the beginning of the Church carries with it a number of other divergencies of teaching between the two groups. It affects the important matter of the ordinances, the relevance of the epistles, and the interpretation of the Gospels.

There are at least two reasons why a chapter on ultradispensationalism must be included in this book. First, it is necessary to distinguish the mainstream of dispensationalism from ultradispensationalism. Second, the charge that ultradispensationalism is only dispensationalism carried to its logical conclusion must be answered.

The prefix *ultra* is not a very accurate one when used as a theological label. It only means more extreme than the viewpoint held by the one who calls the other man *ultra*! People who hold views all the way from mild Arminianism to thoroughgoing Calvinism have been called *ultra-Calvinists*.

Some who are antidispensational label as ultradispensational what has been set forth as dispensationalism in this book. Anybody who divides Biblical history into various dispensational periods is in their judgment ultradispensational.<sup>1</sup> This is either a confusion due to misapprehension or a deliberate attempt to ridicule by the use of the ultra label. It is usually a successful tactic in these days, for we tend to shy away from anything that is ultra and not in the mainstream of thought or life.

Others insist that ultradispensationalism is only dispensationalism carried to its logical extremes. For instance, Allis declares:

But Bullinger carried this method to such an extreme, a logical extreme we believe, that his teachings have been roundly denounced by what we may call the Scofield party; and Bullingerism has been stigmatized as "ultra" Dispensationalism.<sup>2</sup> Fuller follows the same line.<sup>3</sup>

For these two reasons, then, it is necessary to give some consideration to the subject of ultradispensationalism.

## THE ORIGIN OF ULTRADISPENSATIONALISM

Ultradispensationalism had its origin in the ministry and writings of Ethelbert W. Bullinger (1837-1913). He received his education at King's College, London, and was an ordained Anglican clergyman. He was the author of seventy-seven works, including the *Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the Greek New Testament* and the *Companion Bible*. He was a scholar of repute, editor for nineteen years of a monthly

<sup>1</sup>T. A. Hegre, *The Cross and Sanctification* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1960), p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1945), p. 15.

<sup>3</sup>Daniel P. Fuller, "The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism" (Doctor's dissertation, Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, Chicago, 1957), pp. 201-3.

magazine called *Things to Come*, and an accomplished musician.

His theology was a mixture. He held the heretical doctrine of the extinction of the soul between death and resurrection.<sup>4</sup> He was silent on the final state of the lost, and many of his followers were and are annihilationists. In his sevenfold dispensational scheme Bullinger had two dispensations between Pentecost and the end of the Church age. He placed the Gospels and the book of Acts under the law and commenced the dispensation of the Church with the ministry of Paul after Acts 28:28. The prison epistles, therefore—Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians—set forth the fullness of the revelation of the mystery of this Church age. He also denied that water baptism and the Lord's Supper are for this age.

His dispensational teaching has been the fount of all the ultradispensational extremes from his day to the present. Not all, however, have followed all his extremes, but all, whether of the extreme or of the moderate group, hold tenaciously to the doctrine that the Church did not begin at Pentecost but did begin with Paul.

## THE TYPES OF ULTRADISPENSATIONALISM

### A. THE EXTREME TYPE

In England, the extreme dispensationalism of Bullinger was promulgated by his successor, Charles H. Welch of London. He divided the book of Acts into three sections: (1) restoration, the period when the kingdom was reoffered to Israel in Acts 1–9; (2) reconciliation, the period of Jew and Gentile; and (3) rejection of the nation Israel, which was not actually fulfilled until Acts 28 when Israel was set aside. Such division is typical of this school of dispensationalism.

In America, the extreme type was promoted by A. E. Knoch

<sup>4</sup>Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *The Rich Man and Lazarus or "The Intermediate State"* (London: Eyrie and Spottiswood, 1902).

and Vladimir M. Gelesnoff. Knoch is best known for his *Concordant Version of the Sacred Scriptures* published in Los Angeles in 1926 and completely revised in 1930. Knoch was even more extreme than Bullinger, seeing four dispensations from Christ to Paul's prison ministry. His followers included a number of extremists who boldly advocated annihilation and universal reconciliation. Less radical and more true to the original position of Bullinger was Otis Q. Sellers of Grand Rapids, Michigan. He followed Welch largely in his view of Acts.

#### B. THE MODERATE TYPE

The most widely known and influential ultradispensationalists in America are those who are united in what is known as the Grace Gospel Fellowship or the Worldwide Grace Testimony (originally known as the Berean Bible Society). Cornelius R. Stam, J. C. O'Hair, and Charles F. Baker are perhaps the best-known names connected with this group. The *Berean Searchlight* is their magazine, and Grace Bible College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is their school (formerly the Milwaukee Bible Institute). A number of pamphlets and other writings have come from the pens of men in this movement.

As to doctrine, this group is agreed that the Church, the Body of Christ, began with Paul and did not begin on the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2; however, they are not of one mind as to when the Church did actually begin. O'Hair placed its beginning at Acts 13, while Stam thought it began as early as Acts 9. Because they begin the Church before Acts 28 (in contrast to the extremist school) they do observe the Lord's Supper, but do not believe water baptism is for this Church age. In other words, they are sure when the Church did not begin, but not sure when it did begin!

### C. COMPARISON OF THE TWO TYPES

#### POINTS OF AGREEMENT:

1. The great commission of Matthew and Mark is Jewish and not for the Church.
2. The ministry of the Twelve was a continuation of Christ's ministry.
3. The Church did not begin at Pentecost.
4. Water baptism is not for this Church age.
5. There is a difference between Paul's early and later ministries.
6. Israel, not the Church, is the Bride of Christ.

#### POINTS OF DIFFERENCE:

1. When did the Church begin? (Extreme—Acts 28. Moderate—before Acts 28.)
2. How long is the transition period in the book of Acts? (Extreme—until Acts 28. Moderate—until Acts 9 or 13.)
3. What is the proper place of the Lord's Supper? (Extreme—no place. Moderate—proper to observe in the church.)
4. What Scripture is written to the Church primarily? (Extreme—Prison epistles only. Moderate—other Pauline epistles also.)

### THE DEFINITION OF ULTRADISPENSATIONALISM

When one boils down the points of agreement and differences between the extreme and moderate schools of ultradispensationalists, he finds one outstanding difference remaining between ultradispensationalism and dispensationalism. It concerns the beginning of the Church, the Body of Christ. All ultradispensationalists, of whatever school, agree that it did not begin at Pentecost. All dispensationalists agree that it did. Therefore, ultradispensationalism may be defined, or certainly characterized rather definitively, as the school of

interpretation which places more than one dispensation between Pentecost and the end of the Church age.

## THE BEGINNING OF THE CHURCH IN ULTRADISPENSATIONALISM

As has been stated, the ultradispensationalists are certain that the Church did not begin at Pentecost although they are not sure among themselves when it did begin. The extreme group, which follows Bullinger, think that it began with the revelation of the mystery of the body of Christ to Paul during his first confinement in Rome; that is, it began near or after the close of the record of the book of Acts. As a result, the ordinances are not valid for this age since they are not mentioned in the epistles written from that Roman imprisonment. The moderate group holds that the Church began sometime before Paul wrote his first epistle, but exactly when is debated among those who hold this position. O'Hair evidently believed that the Church began with the pronouncement recorded in Acts 13:46: "We turn to the Gentiles," since after this event "there is no record that Paul or Peter, or any other messenger of the Lord, had divine authority to offer the prophesied kingdom to Israel, if that nation would repent."<sup>5</sup> Stam holds that the Church began before Acts 13, for to a degree the mystery was revealed to Paul at his conversion. "His conversion marked the *beginning* of the new dispensation."<sup>6</sup> In other words, the Church began in Acts 9. This is based on the fact that early in the book of Acts God was dealing with Jews and Peter was the chief spokesman. The Church, they say, could not have begun until God was dealing with Gentiles and primarily through Paul. To be very accurate, one should say that the ultradispensationalist be-

<sup>5</sup>J. C. O'Hair, *Important Facts to Understand Acts* (Chicago: O'Hair, n. d.), p. 22.

<sup>6</sup>Cornelius R. Stam, *Acts Dispensationally Considered* (Chicago: Berean Bible Society, 1954), II, 17.

lieves that the Body Church did not begin until after Paul came on the scene. The Jewish Church did begin at Pentecost, but this is different from the Church, the Body of Christ.

The interpretation of the book of Acts, the relation of the Gospels, the ordinances, the offer of the kingdom are all corollary subjects of the ultradispensationalists' doctrine of the beginning of the Church. While they are germane to the full development of ultradispensationalism, they are not relevant to the purpose of this chapter and reluctantly must be omitted.

## ERRORS OF ULTRADISPENSATIONALISM

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.

### A. ERRONEOUS CONCEPT OF A DISPENSATION

In this book a dispensation has been defined as a distinguishable economy in the outworking of God's purpose. In relation to ultradispensationalism the definition raises this most pertinent question: Is something distinguishably different being done since Paul came on the scene that was not being done from Pentecost to the time of Paul? (It matters little to the answer to this question whether "Paul's coming on the scene" means Acts 9, 13, or 28.) Were there features and characteristics and doctrine of the Body Church before Paul? What the ultradispensationalist fails to recognize is 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. It is certainly true that within the scope of any dispensation there is progressive revelation, and in the present one it is obvious that not all of what God was going to do was revealed on the



day of Pentecost. These are economies of God, not of man, and 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. Actually, we are in a better position to understand than the writers of the New Testament themselves.

Ultradispensationalists fail to recognize the difference between the progress of doctrine as it was during the time of revelation and the representation of it in the writing of the Scripture. On this point Bernard has well observed:

. . . there would be a difference between the actual course of some important enterprise—say of a military campaign, for instance—and the abbreviated narrative, the selected documents, and the well-considered arrangement, by which its conductor might make the plan and execution of it clear to others. In such a case the man who read would have a more perfect understanding of the mind of the actor and the author than the man who saw; he would have the whole course of things mapped out for him on the true principles of order.<sup>7</sup>

The distinguishable feature of this economy is the formation of the Church which is Christ's Body. This is the work of God; therefore, the question which decides the beginning of this dispensation is, When did God begin to do this? not, When did man understand it? Only by consulting the completed revelation can we understand that God began to do this work on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:5; 11:15-16; I Cor. 12:13; Col. 1:18), and therefore whether Peter and the others understood it then does not determine the beginning of the dispensation. 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. The ultradispensationalist can

<sup>7</sup>Thomas Dehany Bernard, *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n. d.), p. 35.

only offer the distinguishing feature of a Jewish Church as over against a Gentile Church which is the Body of Christ, but such a distinction has no validity because there are Jews in today's Gentile Church (even if it did not begin until after Pentecost) and because the baptism of the Spirit occurred in Jerusalem at Pentecost. Thus the same economy has been operative since the day of Pentecost.

## B. ERRONEOUS EXEGESIS OF KEY PASSAGES

1. Passages concerning the Church. Whatever Church is mentioned before Paul is said by the ultradispensationalist to be the Jewish Church and not the Body Church. This forces an artificial and unnatural interpretation of some very basic passages. Paul stated that before his conversion he persecuted the Church of God (Gal. 1:13; 1 Cor. 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.

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 members being added to the Lord. As Ironside said in commenting on this verse: "This was before Paul's conversion. Observe it does not simply say that they were added to the company of believers, nor even to the assembly alone, but they were added to the Lord. This is only by a baptism of the Holy Spirit."<sup>8</sup> The converts in Antioch were also said to have been "added unto the Lord" (Acts 11:24). It is significant to note that Stam has no comment on this phrase. He bases his argument that this Church in Acts 5 was a Jewish one and not the Body Church on the fact that they were gathered in Solomon's porch!<sup>9</sup> Such forced exegesis of these

<sup>8</sup>H. A. Ironside, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (New York: Loizeaux Brothers), p. 33.

<sup>9</sup>Stam, *op. cit.*, I, 184.

passages using and explaining the word Church *before* Paul came on the scene is erroneous exegesis.

2. Ephesians 3:1-12. Ultradispensationalists are very fond of using this passage 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. The most pointed critique of their use of this passage has been written (though unfortunately buried in a footnote) by dispensationalist Sauer. He says:

In Eph. 3:3, Paul does not assert that he was the first to whom the mystery of the church had been made known. He says only that the secret counsel that there is no difference in the church between Jew and Gentile, and the equal rights of believing Gentiles and believing Jews had not been made known in the time (not before him personally but in general) before his generation, as it had now been revealed to "the holy apostles and prophets through the Spirit." The plural "apostles and prophets" is to be noted as implying that the revelation was not to Paul alone, and it was made to them "through the Spirit," not first by the agency of Paul (ver. 5). The "*as* it has *now* been revealed" may indeed suggest that this mystery had been hinted at in the Old Testament, but under veiled forms or types, and only now was properly revealed.

What Paul does declare is that he had received this mystery by "revelation" (ver. 3). But he says no word as to the sequence of these Divine revelations or the question of priority of reception. The emphasis of ver. 3 does not lie on "me" but on "revelation." He does not use here the emphatic Greek *emoi*, but the unemphatic *moi*, and he places it (in the original text), not at the head of the sentence, but appends it as unaccented. On the contrary, to stress the word "revelation" he places it early in the sentence: "according to revelation was made

known to me the mystery." Here (as in Gal. 1:12) he does not wish to declare any priority of time for himself or that the revelation was given to him exclusively, but only that he stood alone in the matter independently of man. Not till Eph. 3:8, does he use the emphatic *emoi* and place it at the head of the sentence. But there he is not dealing with the first *reception* of the mystery but with his *proclamation* of it among the nations. This, of course, was then in fact the special task of Paul. He was the chief herald of the gospel to the peoples of the world.

[If one says: "I received this information [from Mr. Jones himself," this does not assert that Mr. Jones had not formerly mentioned the matter to others. Trans.]<sup>10</sup>

#### C. OTHER PASSAGES CONCERNING THE REVELATION OF THE MYSTERY

The extreme type of ultradispensationalism is easily refuted by several passages in which Paul says that he had been preaching the mystery long before the Roman confinement. In Romans 16:25-27 he makes the plain statement that throughout the years his preaching had been in accordance with the revelation of the mystery. (Bullinger said that these verses were added to the epistle after he reached Rome several years later!) First Corinthians 12 is a detailed revelation of the mystery of the relationships of the Body of Christ. The epistle was written before the Roman imprisonment. The mystery of the Body Church was clearly revealed, known, and proclaimed before Acts 28.

Arguments like these have forced many ultradispensationalists into the school of the moderates. However, certain other considerations make it clear that Paul was not the first or only one to speak of the mystery. The Lord said: "Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must

<sup>10</sup>Erich Sauer, *The Triumph of the Crucified* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), p. 73n.

bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one flock, and one shepherd" (John 10:16). Furthermore, in the upper room just before His crucifixion He revealed the two basic mysteries of this Church age. He told His disciples (Paul was not one of them): "At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you" (John 14:20). The "ye in me" relationship is that of being in the Body of Christ of which He is the Head. The "I in you" relationship is that of His indwelling presence (Col. 1:27). The Body Church relationship was thus revealed by the Lord before His death, and it would be operative "at that day"; i.e., at the day when the Holy Spirit would come to be "in" them (John 14:17). When did this happen? It occurred on the day of Pentecost. On the day of Pentecost, then, they were placed in Him, and the Body Church began. 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.

#### D. BAPTISM "IN" THE SPIRIT

Before His ascension the Lord promised the disciples that they would be baptized *en pneumati* (Acts 1:5). In I Corinthians 12:13 Paul explains that being placed in the Body of Christ is accomplished by being baptized *en pneumati*. 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. The ultradispensationalist realizes the strength of this argument, and he is forced to argue for two baptisms. Acts 1:5, he says, is a baptism "with" the Spirit for miraculous power and "this baptism with the Holy Spirit was not, of course, the baptism of Jews

and Gentiles into one body.”<sup>11</sup> The baptism of I Corinthians 12:13 is “by” the Spirit and this is the one that forms the Body Church.

Such a distinction is quite admissible as far as possible meanings of the same preposition *en* are concerned. The preposition does sometimes mean “with,” “in” and “by.” This is not contested. What is contested is the artificiality of making it mean one thing in Acts and another in I Corinthians *when it is used in exactly the same phrase with the word “Spirit.”* For the sake of argument, let the ultradispensationalist face the possibility that in both instances it does mean the same and refers to the same baptism. Then his entire effort to make a separate dispensation of the early chapters of Acts of an alleged Jewish Church crashes to the ground. It makes little difference how the *en* is translated just as long as it is translated consistently in the verses which refer to baptism. Both the ASV and the RSV do this. The only normal way to understand these references to baptism *en pneumati* leads to the inescapable conclusion that the Body of Christ began at Pentecost and that there was no separate dispensation of a Jewish Church from Pentecost to the time of Paul.

These errors—in basic concept of a dispensation, in exegesis of key passages, in understanding when the mystery was revealed, in the baptizing work of the Spirit—are the reasons dispensationalists reject ultradispensationalism. The argument has been based not on the history or practice of the ultradispensational movement but strictly on Biblical evidence, for this is the evidence on which any school of thought ought to be judged. And on this basis ultradispensationalism is rejected.

It should be clear, too, that on the basis of the evidence presented, dispensationalism and ultradispensationalism have

<sup>11</sup>Stam, *op. cit.*, I, 30.

very basic differences. While it is true that antidispensationalists can level similar charges against both groups, this does not make the teaching of both groups the same. After all, one can level similar charges against liberals and Barthians, but this hardly makes liberalism and neoorthodoxy similar doctrinal systems. The same is true of dispensationalism and ultradispensationalism.

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