

When Was the Revelation of the Mystery of the One Body Given?

by Harry Ironside

Harry Ironside's sermon argues that the revelation of the mystery of the one Body was given to Paul at his conversion, not during his imprisonment, emphasizing the unity of all believers in Christ.

Scripture: Romans 12:4

Topics: "Unity in Christ", "The Mystery of the One Body"

Description

Harry Ironside addresses the misconception that the Apostle Paul received the revelation of the mystery of the one Body only during his imprisonment in Rome. He argues that Paul had been preaching this mystery since his conversion, as evidenced by his earlier letters, particularly Romans, Corinthians, and Galatians, which affirm the unity of believers in Christ. Ironside emphasizes that the mystery was not exclusive to Paul but was revealed to other apostles and prophets, including Peter and John, and that it signifies the abolishment of distinctions between Jews and Gentiles in Christ. He asserts that the Body of Christ was formed through the Holy Spirit's baptism, and this truth was consistently taught throughout Paul's ministry. Ultimately, Ironside defends the integrity of Scripture against those who distort its message to fit their theological frameworks.

Transcript

IT IS contended by Bullingerites, and others of like ilk, that Paul did not receive the revelation of the mystery of the one Body until he was imprisoned in Rome, 63 A. D. Generally, too, the ground is taken that this revelation was given to him alone, and that the twelve knew nothing of it. Let us see if these assertions will stand the test of Holy Scripture.

We shall turn, first of all, directly to the writings of the apostle Paul, and examine the passages in which he refers to this subject. The first one is found in the Epistle to the Romans which was written, according to the best authorities, in the year A. D. 60, at least three years before Paul's imprisonment, and certainly some time before he reached Rome, as in that letter he tells the Romans that he is contemplating the visit to them, and asks them to pray that it might be a prosperous one. It might seem as though his prayer was not answered inasmuch as he reached Rome in chains, a prisoner for the Gospel's sake. But God's ways are not ours, and we can be sure that in the light of eternity, we shall see that this was indeed one of the most prosperous voyages that anyone ever made. Now in closing this epistle to the Romans, the apostle

says in chapter 16, verses 25 to 27:

"Now to Him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began, but now is made manifest, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith: to God only wise, be glory through Jesus Christ for ever. Amen."

Here we have the plain statement that Paul's preaching throughout the years had been in accordance with the revelation of the mystery previously kept secret, but at that time made manifest. Moreover, he intimates that it had been already published abroad in writing, for he says, "It is made manifest (not exactly by the Scriptures of the prophets, as though he referred to Old Testament prophets, but) by prophetic writings," that is, his own and others. And this proclamation of the mystery had been made known to all nations for the obedience of faith.

Does anyone ask, How can any ultra-dispensationalist dare to say in the face of such a Scripture as this, that the mystery had not been made known and had not been previously preached before Paul was imprisoned at Rome? If a simple believing Christian, he will probably be amazed at the answer. Dr. Bullinger and others who follow him suggest that in all likelihood the last three verses of the Epistle to the Romans were not written by Paul when he sent the letter from some distant Gentile city, but that they were appended to the letter after he reached Rome and received the new revelation. Is this unbelievable? Nevertheless, it is exactly what these men teach. It is higher criticism of the worst type and impugns the perfection of the Word of God. For, even supposing their contentions were true, how absurd it would be for Paul to add these words after he reached Rome, to an epistle purporting to be written before he got there! And how senseless it would be for him to speak while he was in prison, of a Gospel and a revelation which he was supposed to have preached in all the world, if he had never yet begun that proclamation. Needless to say, the contention of Dr. Bullinger is an absolute fabrication. It is the special pleading of a hard-driven controversialist, bound to maintain his unscriptural system at all costs, even to destroying the unity of the Word of God.

Error is never consistent, and even the astute Bullinger has overlooked the fact that earlier in this very epistle, Paul declares the truth of the one Body just as clearly and definitely as he does in Ephesians or any later letter. Notice particularly Romans 12: 4, 5:

"For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and everyone members one of another."

Could we have a clearer declaration than this of the truth of the mystery? What ultra-dispensationalist will dare to say that this passage is an interpolation added in after years in order to make Romans fit with Ephesians? God's Word is perfect and always exact. These unspiritual theorists invariably overtook something that completely destroys their unscriptural hypotheses.

When then did Paul get this revelation of the truth of the one Body? He tells us he had been preaching it throughout the world among all nations. The answer clearly is, he received it at the time of his conversion, when he cried in amazement, "Who art Thou, Lord?" and the glorified Saviour answered, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest." This was the revelation of the mystery. In that announcement our Lord declared that every Christian on earth is so indissolubly linked up with Him as the glorified Head in Heaven, that everything done against one of them is felt by the Head. This is, the mystery-members of His Body, of His

flesh, and of His bones.

And moreover, this is in exact accord with certain statements elsewhere made in the book of Acts. For instance, in chapter 5, verse 14, we read:

"And believers were the more added to the Lord, multitudes both of men and women."

This was before Paul's conversion. Observe it does not simply say that they were added to the company of believers, nor even added to the assembly alone, but they were added to the Lord. This is only by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Quite in keeping with this, when we turn to chapter 11: 22-24, we read concerning the character and ministry of Barnabas that,

"He was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost, and of faith: and much people were added unto the Lord."

Now no one was ever added to the Lord in any other way than by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. So that clearly we have the Body of Christ here in the Acts, although the term itself is not used.

When we turn to 1 Corinthians, the only epistle which gives us divine order for the regulation of the affairs of the churches of God here on earth, we have the plain statement of this mystery as we have already seen, in chapter 12: 12-14.

"For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. 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. For the body is not one member, but many."

It is absurd to say, as these ecclesiastical hobby-riders do, that the Body referred to here is not the same thing as the Body of Ephesians and Colossians. It is a Body made up of those who formerly were Jews or Gentiles, bond or free, but are now all one in Christ. And this Body has been formed by the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In no other way was the Body of Christ brought into existence. Objection has been raised that when the apostle goes on to apply practically the truth of our responsibility as members of the Body in our relation to each other, he uses the illustration of the eye and ear as members of the head, which, they tell us, he could not use if he thought of Christ as the Head of the Body, and was thinking of believers as one Body with Him. But he tells us distinctly in the previous chapter that the Head of every man is Christ. This could only be said of those who were linked with Him in this hallowed fellowship and members of this divine organism. The great difference, of course, between the Body as presented in Corinthians and as in Ephesians is this: the Body in Ephesians embraces all saints living or dead as to the flesh, from Pentecost to the Rapture, whereas the Body in Corinthians embraces all saints upon the earth at any given time. Seen thus in the place of responsibility, it is quite in keeping that the apostle should use the illustration that he does. It is in vain for these ultra-dispensationalists to fight against responsibility.

Recently I overheard a leader among them make this statement: "Whenever you get commandments of any kind, you are on Jewish ground, and you have given up grace." Yet in every epistle of the New Testament, we have commandments and exhortations insisting upon the believer's responsibility to recognize the government of God in this way. Grace and government are not opposing principles, but are intimately linked together. He who refuses the truth of responsibility does not thereby magnify grace, but rather is in danger of turning the grace of God into lasciviousness and becomes practically an antinomian, throwing off all restraint, professing to be saved by grace, but refusing to recognize the claims of Christ.

Coming back then to consider the passage in I Corinthians, we have the truth of the Body clearly set forth, and are shown how it was brought into existence in a letter written at least four years before Paul's imprisonment; and he writes that letter to a group of believers who had been brought to a knowledge of Christ through his preaching some years before. To them he says in verses 26, 27:

"And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it, or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the Body of Christ, and members in particular."

Verse 26 only emphasizes what we have referred to above, that here we have the Body in the place of responsibility on earth. Members in Heaven do not suffer. All members on earth do. But it is objected again that in the Greek there is no definite article before the word "body," and therefore the passage should simply read, "Now ye are a Body of Christ," and so we are told this refers only to a local church. This does not touch the question. Every local church in apostolic days was the Body of Christ representatively in that place. It would be so today if it were not for the fact that so many unsaved people have been received into the membership of the local churches. According to the Word of God, there was only the one Body, and in any city where the Gospel had been preached and believed, that Body could be found as a local company.

When we pass on to 2 Corinthians, we find the same precious truth ministered by the apostle long before he was imprisoned at Rome. He tells us, in chapter 5: 16,17:

"Wherefore henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we Him no more. Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature (or literally, this is a new creation): old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

Could words more plainly set forth the truth of the mystery than these? Old relationships ended and every believer brought into a new place altogether before God, and a new condition, so that Christ is now his Head, and he a member of the new creation. And this was part of the preaching that the apostle had been declaring wherever he went during all the years of his ministry.

We turn next to Galatians, a letter written, according to the best authority we have, a year earlier than Corinthians, and the ultra-dispensationalists are very sure that when Paul speaks of being baptized into Christ in this letter, there can be no reference to water baptism, but that he refers solely to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. I am not in agreement with them on this; but allowing for the moment that they are correct, then notice where it puts their theory. Note carefully chapter 3: 26-29:

"For ye are all the children (sons) of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Here again we are distinctly told that all the children of faith, Abraham's seed spiritually, are sons of God, and that all such as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ, and that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, nor any of the other distinctions according to nature, but all are one in Him. Is there anything in the revelation of the mystery as given in Ephesians or Colossians that goes beyond this? It is a clear definite statement of the absolute unity in Christ of those who before their conversion occupied different positions here on earth, some being Jews, some Gentiles, some free men, some slaves, some men, some women, but every distinction now obliterated in the new creation.

If any are foolish enough to object, as some have, that Abraham's seed is altogether different from the Body of Christ, then we turn to Ephesians itself, the epistle which they claim, above all others supports their unscriptural theory, and find their entire position is there completely disallowed. In the first chapter of this glorious epistle, the apostle reminds the Ephesians of things that they have learned through his ministry in days gone by. There is no hint that he is opening up to them something new, but he simply puts down in writing for permanent use, precious things already dear to them. He reminds them that they have been blessed with all spiritual blessings in the heavenlies in Christ; that they have been chosen in Him before the foundation of the world in order that they might be holy and without blame before Him; that in love, He has predestinated them unto the place of sons by Christ Jesus, having taken them into favor in the Beloved. Theirs is redemption through His blood, sins all forgiven according to the riches of His grace, and to them He has abounded in all wisdom and prudence, having made known the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He hath purposed in Himself (see vers. 3-9). He points them on to the full consummation of this mystery when in the administration of the completed seasons, that is, the last dispensation, He will head up in one all things in Christ, both heavenly and earthly, and He reminds them that we have already obtained an inheritance in Him, being predestinated according to the purpose of Him who worketh all things according to the counsel of His own will. We need to notice the pronouns used in verses 12 and 13. He first speaks of converts from Israel, when he says, "That we should be to the praise of His glory, who first trusted in Christ." Then he refers to the Gentiles, such as these Ephesians had been, when in the next verse he says:

"In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of His glory."

Now observe carefully, he is far from intimating that he is at this time unveiling something of which they had never heard before. He carries them back in memory to the hour of their conversion, and declares that these things were true of them then. And, because of this, he prays that they may have deeper understanding, not of new truth about to be revealed, but of blessed and wonderful things already made known. In the second chapter, he deals specifically with the new creation, reminding them in verse 12 that they in time past were Gentiles who were called uncircumcision, and were in themselves without Christ and aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and literally atheists in the world. But now they have been made nigh by the blood of Christ. The result is that they became members of that same Body into which their converted Jewish brethren had already been assimilated. Notice carefully verses 14-18:

"For He is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us: having abolished in His flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments, contained in ordinances; for to make in Himself of twain one new man, so making peace; and that He might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: and came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father."

The distinction between Jew and Gentile was abolished in the cross, not after Paul's imprisonment in Rome. From that time on all who believed were brought into the Body of Christ through the one Spirit of verse 18. What were the means used to effect this? The preaching recorded in the book of Acts, for it is only that to which he can possibly refer, when he says (vers. 16,17):

"That He might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby, and came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh."

It was necessary that the message should first go to them that were nigh, as it did in the early chapters of Acts, and then to those that were afar off; but the result of that preaching was that all who believed were reconciled to God in one Body.

In the last four verses of the chapter he shows the unity of the Church from the beginning. The Church is the household of God. It is also a great building, and he declares:

"Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets (New Testament prophets, of course), Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth (note the tense; it is not yet completed, it is still in process of construction, but it is growing) unto an holy temple in the Lord; in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."

How blind must he be who can see in such a passage as this, disassociation of the Ephesian saints from the work which God began at Pentecost! They are builded into the same temple and rest upon the same foundation.

This is made even clearer in the next chapter, where Paul gives us probably the fullest information concerning the one Body that we have anywhere in the New Testament, and, therefore, we must devote considerable time and space to it. First, he tells us that he was a prisoner of Jesus Christ because of the Gentiles, and he explains that in the next few verses. It was his devotion to the revelation of the mystery which is part of the dispensation of the grace of God, that resulted in his imprisonment. He did not get this dispensation after he was in prison. Then he insists that this revelation was not made in previous ages unto the sons of men, that is, it was not made known in Old Testament times. But he tells us it is "now revealed unto His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit." Now if I believed in over-emphasis as some do, I should like to print these words in very bold type, but to do so would be an insult to the intelligence of my readers. I simply desire to ask their most careful attention to these words. The Bullingerites tell us that the mystery was only made known to the apostle Paul, not to other apostles. The apostle himself tells us here that "it is now revealed unto His holy apostles and prophets." Note not only the plural, but that others besides apostles had this revelation. How utterly absurd would words like these be if he were referring to something that had just been secretly made known to him! But is it true that other apostles and prophets had already known if the mystery? It is. This he declares in these words. What is that mystery? Verse six is the answer.

"That the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs, and of the same Body, and partakers of His promise in Christ by the gospel."

Thus they too become Abraham's seed, because they are children of faith.

The mystery then is not simply centered in the term "Body," but whatever expression may be used, the mystery is that during the present age all distinction between believing Jews and believing Gentiles is done away in Christ. Was this mystery made known by other servants besides the apostle Paul? It was. The apostle John makes it known in his account of our Lord's ministry as given in the tenth chapter of his Gospel. There we read that the Lord Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, entered into the sheepfold of Judaism

to lead His own out into glorious liberty. And cryptically He adds,

"Other sheep I have which are not of this fold. Them also I must bring, and there shall be one flock and one Shepherd."

This is perhaps the earliest intimation of the mystery that we have. It was not committed to writing, of course, until some years after the epistle to the Ephesians was written. But it shows us that John, as an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ, had received the revelation of the mystery even before the apostle Paul did.

Then what of the apostle Peter? We dare to say this same mystery was made known to him on the housetop of Simon's residence in Joppa, when he had the vision of the descending sheet from Heaven and saw in it all manner of beasts and creeping things, and heard the word from Heaven,

"What God hath cleansed call thou not common," or unclean.

This was to him an intimation that in Christ the distinction between Jew and Gentile was henceforth to be done away, and he makes it perfectly clear that this was his conviction when he stood up to preach in the household of Cornelius (Acts 10: 34 to end). Moreover, his epistles emphasize the same fact, though not in the full way that those of the apostle Paul do. John and Peter are apostles. Are there any prophets who give evidence of having in measure at least understood this truth? The greatest of all the New Testament prophets is Luke himself, and in his book of the Acts, the mystery is plainly made known, though not taught doctrinally. We see God working in grace to unite Jew and Gentile into one Body.

Turning back to Ephesians three, we find in verse seven that the apostle tells us that he was made a minister according to the gift of the grace of God for the very purpose of making known this mystery. He says in verses eight and nine,

"Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ; 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."

This had been his great responsibility throughout the years. Because of this, he had suffered bitter persecution, on account of which he was even then in prison, but he is the more concerned that after his death there should be left on record such a full statement of this truth that no one could lose sight of it.

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