

# Further Examination of the Epistles

by Harry Ironside

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*The sermon examines the epistles of Paul and other apostles to argue against the notion of a new revelation following Paul's imprisonment.*

**Scripture:** Ephesians 4:4

**Topics:** "Unity in Christ", "Continuity of the Gospel"

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## Description

Harry Ironside examines the Epistles of Paul, particularly focusing on the prison epistles, to argue that there is no new revelation given after Paul's imprisonment in Rome. He emphasizes that Paul's teachings in Philippians, Colossians, and other letters remain consistent with his earlier messages, rejecting the notion of a 'new dispensation' as proposed by ultra-dispensationalists. Ironside highlights that the essence of Paul's ministry was to preach Christ and the mystery of the Gospel, which he consistently communicated throughout his letters. He also notes that other apostles, including Peter and John, did not introduce any new doctrines, reinforcing the continuity of the Gospel message. Ultimately, Ironside warns against the divisive nature of heretical teachings that deviate from the core truths of Christianity.

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## Transcript

PASSING over for the present the Apostle Paul's presentation of the sevenfold unity of Christianity in Ephesians 4, and his identification of the Body and the Bride in chapter 5, which we shall discuss later, we turn now to others of the prison epistles to see if we can find the slightest intimation of a new revelation given after Paul reached Rome. Unquestionably, Philippians was written during the Roman imprisonment. But we search its four precious chapters in vain for the least suggestion that he has received anything new to unfold. In chapter 1, where he presents Christ as the believer's life, he shows how thoroughly the evangelistic spirit had taken possession of him, so that even in his prison-cell he was rejoicing that Christ was being preached whether in pretence or in truth, and his own desire is that this same Christ may ever be magnified in his body, whether in life or in death. He urges the saints to stand fast in one spirit contending for the very faith which he had already made known to them. There is not a hint that he has now something new to reveal; that is, that the old dispensation to which they had hitherto belonged had come to a close, and that a new one had begun. In chapter 2 he dwells on Christ as our Example, and shows how he himself and Timothy and Epaphroditus during the years had sought to follow in Christ's steps, and this is still before his soul. In the third chapter he recounts his past experiences and self-confidence in the old days before he was saved, and then shows how the change was brought about by a sight of the risen Christ. From that moment on, he counted all things as loss for the One who had won

his heart, and he was pressing on toward the mark for the prize of the calling of God on high in Christ Jesus. He calls upon them whom he designates as "perfect" to be thus minded. "Perfect" here means "mature," or we might even say well-rounded, or well-balanced. Nothing is needed to give them this perfection in addition to what they already had. Surely, if anywhere, this was the place to show them that hitherto they were but babes, and had only received an initial revelation, but that now he had something for them of an altogether new character which would perfect them in Christ. But there is no word of any such added truth. Nor yet in the last chapter where he exhorts to unity and peace among themselves. May we not say that Paul is singularly remiss in not sharing with his old converts at Philippi the new revelation he had received, if such a thing were really true?

But it was not true:-all the reasoning of the ultra-dispensationalists to the contrary notwithstanding;-for when we turn over to Colossians we find him once more reiterating the same truths he had proclaimed for a generation. He shows that two ministries had been committed to him from the first. He had been made a minister of the Gospel. That Gospel has been preached in all the creation which is under heaven. He had also been made a minister of "the mystery which hath been hidden from ages and generations, but now," he says, "is made manifest to His saints: to whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in (or, among) you, the hope of glory: whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus: whereunto I also labor, striving according to His working, which worketh in me mightily" (Col. 1: 26-29).

Let it be carefully observed that he is here covering his entire ministry. He had no such opportunity to preach to multitudes while he was in his Roman, or as some think, his Caesarean prison at the time he wrote this epistle. But he tells us what had characterized his ministry throughout the years. Other saints there were whom he had not met personally, as well as those at Colosse. He thinks of the Laodicean believers, and he longs that they all may be brought into the knowledge of this mystery. But it is not something new. It is that which has ever characterized his teaching.

The Epistle of Titus is not of course a prison epistle at all, but it was written later than any of those that are so designated, excepting Second Timothy. In this letter Paul instructs the younger preacher, Titus, as to the divine order for local churches, the work of a true pastor, and the testimony committed to the servants of God. Surely here, if anywhere, we should expect him to put before Titus the fact that the "transitional period" has now come to an end and Titus must ring the changes as the ultra-dispensationalists do to-day, on "body truth," "closed doors," "Jewish Gospels," "Kingdom Age," etc., etc., ad nauseam. But, no; none of these terms so frequently used and played upon until one is wearied, are suggested to Titus. He is simply to go on preaching and teaching the very same things that have been taught during his earlier association with the Apostle Paul.

The brief letter to Philemon we may pass over, as we would hardly expect to find anything doctrinal in it; and yet even here if Paul's heart were throbbing with the joy of some absolutely new opening up of truth, we would almost wonder how he could help saying a word about it, at least to his friend Philemon.

Hebrews was undoubtedly written very shortly before the apostle's martyrdom, granting that it is from the pen of Paul. That this is so, I have tried to make clear in my book on the Epistle to the Hebrews, and I shall not attempt to go into it now. But in any case, it was undoubtedly written very shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem, and here if anywhere, one might expect these Hebrew believers to be told that the "kingdom age" is now over, "the transition period" has now been finished, and it is for them to accept the new

revelation of "body truth." But we search in vain for anything of the kind. It is simply a normal presentation of the precious things of Christ, showing how completely Old Testament types have had their fulfillment in Him and His finished work, and that all who believe now come under the blessings of the new covenant.

Probably later than Hebrews is the second letter to Timothy. It was penned during Paul's second imprisonment, very shortly before his death. As this occurred in A. D. 66 or 67, we may see how far along we have come and still no mention of any new revelation. So far as the truth that is dealt with is concerned, Second Timothy might have been written any time before the first imprisonment. It is in perfect harmony with all the apostle's previous ministry.

But now there are other Epistles to be considered. We have already seen that Paul makes no claim to being the sole depository of the revelation of the mystery. He says it was made known to Christ's holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit, and so we turn to consider the writings of other apostles and prophets asking, "Have we in them any intimation of a new revelation after Paul went to Rome?"

We may dismiss the Epistle of James as not touching on this question. It is addressed definitely to the twelve tribes scattered abroad, and is God's last word, as it were, to those of Israel who were still more or less linked in spirit to the synagogue. Bullingerites generally tell us that James was the first epistle to be written but this is absurd on the face of it. It is quite evident that James is a corrective epistle. It must have been written after the doctrine of justification by faith, as proclaimed by Paul, had been widely preached, for James writes to check those who were abusing that doctrine and using it as an occasion for the flesh. No one can read chapter 2 thoughtfully without seeing that it is based upon, and has in view throughout, Paul's teaching in Romans 4. James does not contradict Paul in the slightest degree, but he does show that there is another justification than that of which Paul speaks. The great apostle to the Gentiles deals particularly with justification by faith before God. James, the apostle to the twelve tribes, emphasizes justification by works before men.

First Peter was probably written before Paul's second imprisonment. Second Peter was certainly written afterwards, and all of Paul's letters were already in circulation when this epistle was penned. Note Peter's own words: "And account that the long-suffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other Scriptures, unto their own destruction" (2 Pet. 3: 15, 16). It is impossible to understand these verses excepting in the light of the fact that all the Epistles of Paul were already in circulation. Does Peter then tell us that a new dispensation had come in, and that the middle wall between Jew and Gentile having now for the first time been broken down and the one Body formed, the believers to whom he writes, who were of Jewish extraction, are to recognize this new revelation? Not at all. Peter has never heard of any such thing. He puts Paul's writings on the same plane as the other Scriptures, but warns against the danger of misunderstanding, and so wresting them.

Long years after all the other apostles had gone home to heaven, we find the aged John still preserved in life and caring for the churches of God. According to apparently reliable Church History, he made his home in Ephesus, and moved about in old age among the other churches mentioned in the first three chapters of the Book of the Revelation, those churches which the Bullingerites declare never existed in the past but are still to arise as Jewish Assemblies in the Great Tribulation! Could anything be much more grotesque?

John's Epistles were written, according to the very best authority we have, some time in the last decade of the first century of the Christian era. Weigh this well. Paul had been in heaven for nearly thirty years. John was an inspired apostle, and surely would know, if any one did, of the new revelation and its importance. But we search his letters in vain for the least reference to anything of the kind. In fact, we find the very opposite. False teaching had come in, and he writes to garrison the hearts of the saints against it. In order to do this, he refers them back to that which was from the beginning, namely, to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and His apostles, as a careful reading of his first Epistle makes abundantly clear. There is not the slightest basis for the thought that a fuller unfolding of truth had been vouchsafed to Paul and others about thirty years after Christ's ascension. It is the message that they had heard from the beginning which he again commends to them.

Let us imagine the late Dr. Bullinger, or some of his lesser satellites, living, not in the twentieth century, but in the closing days of the first century of the Christian era. Filled with their ideas of a new revelation given to Paul in prison, can you by any stretch of the imagination think of them writing epistles or treatises in which no reference whatever is made to the supposedly new doctrines? The fact of the matter is that these men today can scarcely open their mouths without speaking of these things. No matter what text they begin to expound, they almost invariably wind up with something about their system of rightly dividing the Word of Truth, and the importance of making the fine distinctions which they imagine they see in the Word. Yet inspired men like Peter and John, and without particularly going into it, we may add Jude, can expound and apply the Truth of God in the fullest possible way without any reference to anything of the kind. What is the only legitimate conclusion? It is that this whole ultra-dispensational system is an idle dream unsupported by the testimony of the inspired writings.

Error is never consistent. It always over-emphasizes some point generally unimportant and fails to recognize other things of great importance. Heresy is simply a school of opinion in which something is particularly pressed out of proportion to its logical place. Who would dare to say that this system we have been attempting to refute is not therefore heretical? Mark, I do not mean to class it with what Peter calls "damnable heresies," but it is certainly schismatic, and its votaries constitute a special school of opinion within the professed Church of God, a school that attaches great importance to something which after all is not evident to the vast majority of devoted and godly believers. That the effect of this can only be division and harmful, is not only self-evident, but has been abundantly manifest in many places. The Holy Spirit says, "A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself" (Titus 3: 10, 11). This is as certainly the Word of God as anything else revealed in the Scripture of Truth.

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